The Final Horcrux

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The Final Horcrux

by lyraonyx

Summary

Headmaster Snape is discovered as a spy and stumbles into the Golden Trio's camp injured, and carrying nothing but an old, bloodstained journal, a map of the UK with strange dots on it, and the clothes on his back. Oh, and the Sword of Gryffindor? He demands Sanctuary from Harry, an old wizarding custom that forces Harry to give the man food and shelter for one month while Severus pleads his case. Harry reluctantly agrees, and so begins the maddest month of his life. Between finding out the truth about Severus, translating Voldemort's twisted journal, and discovering even his own life is nothing like he thought, Harry has to rebuild his world from the ground up, all while knocking the pieces from Voldemort's soul one by one.

Harry finds his wings, his mother, his mate, the mentor he believed dead, and his true destiny all in four short weeks.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

I got the inspiration for this from a dream. I thought I'd better write the idea down while I remembered it.

Chapter 1

“Sometimes I don’t know why I agreed to go on this mad goose chase with you, Potter.”

Harry stopped his perusal of an old map of Blackpool long enough to roll his eyes at his surly companion. “Because being tortured as a traitor sounded less fun than traipsing around the country with your favourite student, remember?”

Severus muttered something about poor choices and the dangers of concussions, and Harry broke out into laughter.

“Oh, come on. I admit we snarled at each other for a good little while there, but aren’t you happy with me now?”

Severus sighed as if greatly put off and tapped the edge of Harry’s map. “Yes, but we are here for a purpose, Potter. Have you forgotten already?”

“Yes,” Harry returned.

Severus met his eyes, his expression sharp. “Yes?”

“Yes, I’ve forgotten everything and I won’t remember until you remember to call me Harry, like I’ve asked you now at least a hundred times.”

Severus jabbed the map and snarled, “Potter, stop dawdling! We haven’t the time for your shenanigans!”

Harry snorted. “Shenanigans? That’s a new one.”

“Harry, please. We are out in the open on the full moon, and I have no wish to meet a fully transformed Greyback!”

Harry sighed. “Sev, I was only trying to lighten the tension. It’s okay now. We’re safe. Can’t you feel the wards? The entrance to Godric’s Hollow is just ahead.”

Severus gaped. “What in Merlin’s name gave you the idea that we’re safe simply because we have found the rough location of the entrance? We have perhaps ten minutes before the moon is high and we still must locate the entrance precisely and find lodgings.”

“But once we’re in Godric’s Hollow—”

“We will be in a wizarding village and thus more likely to meet Death Eaters or werewolves, not less. Please, Harry. We have no time.”
Harry paled and jerked the map open. “S-sorry. I thought—I’m sorry.”

Severus nudged his shoulder. “Never mind it. Does the map give us an exact location?”

Harry nodded. “It’s right there.” He pointed to a ramshackle barn, lonely and grey against the backdrop of a starry sea and quiet countryside. He hadn’t seen a house for miles, so the run-down barn seemed like the perfect way to draw in wizards and drive away Muggles, who would likely find themselves forgetting important appointments when they saw it anyway.

Severus stared at the shed, his face twisted into a scowl Harry recognised as a cover for pain and fear. “There.” The sarcasm could have cut steel.

“Mm-hmm. Bit suspicious, isn’t it? An old barn just hanging about when there are no houses here for it to belong to?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. There is a house just … ah, well ….” Severus scanned the seaside cliffs and came up as empty as Harry had. “How exactly did you notice that when I did not?”

“You’re in pain, Sev, and I have the map. It’s okay. Here, lean on me.” Harry freed his hand from Severus’ and braced him up around his waist. “Is your chest—does it hurt like before?”

Severus wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders, leaning on him for support. “No, it is not like before. I am only still recovering and a bit sore. That awful coldness is gone.” He pressed a light kiss to his companion’s hair. “I apologise, Harry. You are right that I’m afraid and suffering. Please, let us hurry, though. I am … not fond of werewolves.”

Harry winced at the thought of Remus and that horrible prank so many years before. “No, I’d say not. Let’s go home then, yeah?”

Severus gave him a wry look as they walked towards the barn. “This was never my home, and I hardly think yours will protect us from the elements, what with the gaping hole in the second storey.”

Harry shuddered. “I’m afraid to see it. Maybe … we can wait until tomorrow? I’m not sure if I can … after Blackpool ….”

Severus nudged Harry closer. “Of course. For now, we will focus on finding lodgings and getting some sleep. It has been a hard day.”

“Yeah.” Harry looked up at Severus and gave him a gentle smile. “But a good one too, at least parts of it.”

Severus leaned his head briefly against Harry’s. “Yes. It would have been much harder had I faced it alone. Thank you for staying by me.”

“Anytime, Sev.”

Harry led Severus to the abandoned barn with warmth in his heart. He so enjoyed this gentle side of Severus the former spy had hidden for so long. Severus had practically become a new person in the three short weeks since the then beaten, miserable mess of a man had cornered Harry, Hermione, and Ron in the Forest of Dean and begged—er, demanded—sanctuary. Since then, Severus had become Harry’s dearest friend, the antagonism of their past forgiven and forgotten in their mutual trust and care for one another.

And to think, if Hermione had not stayed Harry’s hand three weeks before, he might have killed Severus on the spot and thus destroyed his own life.
Harry clutched his wand tight and stared at the bedraggled man who had dared to crawl into their campsite. They glared at each other, the tension between them creating literal sparks in the air. Must have been the force of their hatred, thought Harry as a pink spark ignited next to his ear and forced him to take a step back. The sparks died, but their standoff carried on.

Snape looked like hell. His hair was greasier than ever, probably hadn’t seen a wash in a week judging by the dirt and blood on the git’s face. A clump of white hair had started growth all at once, forming a sort of ghostly finger among his coal-black locks and stretching from his left temple to the top of his ear. His cheekbones cut like knives across his face, and the bags under his eyes had bags. A cold sort of dullness had clouded the once-sharp gaze, and the man’s hands trembled despite his iron-hard stare.

What the hell had happened to him?

Sanctuary. What was that supposed to mean? And why would Snape think Harry would give him anything except a two-fingered salute?

Harry shook himself out of his shock and raised his wand. The git deserved to die, no matter what had happened. He was a murderer.

With a gasp, Hermione grabbed Harry’s wrist and jerked it down. “No! Harry, Sanctuary is an ancient wizarding custom with laws and rules. You can’t attack him now!”

Harry pinned her with a sharp gaze. “And why not? I watched him murder Professor Dumbledore, you know, or have you conveniently forgotten that fact?”

Hermione’s hurt expression had him repenting of his words immediately.

“Sorry, ‘Mione. This, this … git brings out the worst in me.”

She gave him a solemn nod. “And you’re wearing the locket today. Come, give it over.”

Harry shook his head and clutched the locket, pulling it away from his chest. The icy December wind ruffled his hair and snuck under his robes, raising gooseflesh wherever it touched, but somehow the locket was colder.

“No. I’ll be okay. It’s not your turn to wear it yet.” He cast Ron a nervous glance, ignoring the way the redhead’s snit of the day hurt him.

Ron scoffed at Hermione and trudged into the tent, eyes full of indignity and disgust. “No, it’s mine, isn’t it? Oh joy. I’ll just go make up a new bed for our visitor, since we aren’t to be allowed to off the git. Welcome to our humble abode, Headmaster.” Ron’s voice was cold enough to cut Harry from the backlash. Ron cast Snape a hateful glare, muted it somewhat for Harry, and stormed into the tent.

Harry moved as if to go after him, but Hermione laid a quelling hand on his arm. “Let him go. We really will need to make room for Professor Snape, and Ron will only make this more uncomfortable than it has to be right now. He could use a little time-out anyway.”

Harry stared after his friend for a moment, the dull ache in his chest turning sharp, then gave the shaking, dismal-looking Snape a cold look. “I’m still waiting for an explanation as to why we’re
making room for him and why I shouldn’t just off him and be done with it.”

Hermione sighed. “If you had ever bothered to read Hogwarts: a—”

“A History,” Harry finished in a teasing tone. “I’d find every answer to every question ever posed within its pages, if I could only muster up the will to get past dryness that could out-desert the Sahara. Yes, we’ve established that. Often. Now, about the custom?”

“What Miss Granger is trying to tell you, Mister Potter,” said Snape in a less-lofty-than usual voice for its broken-wheeze tone, “is that Sanctuary in wizarding terms is sacrosanct. If you attack me before I end the terms of the contract, your curse will rebound and hit you, and double in intensity. Particularly since you owe me several life debts at this time, I would not advise testing it.”

“He’s telling the truth, Harry,” Hermione murmured in his ear.

Harry growled. “Damn wizarding contracts.” He fixed Snape with a steely glare. “And if I should decide that a wand is too easy a punishment for you and just stab you instead?”

“I would not recommend trying that either, Mister Potter, unless you are even more of a fool than I had become accustomed to expect. Although I might at first find the consequences to yourself amusing, I fear the wizarding world may never forgive me for allowing their dear saviour to meet a rather nasty demise before he could fulfil his grand destiny.”

How the man had the gall to be sardonic when he was bleeding, bruised, and looked like he had seen neither bed nor bath in a solid week astounded Harry. Granted, Harry likely looked little better, what with living off bark and stolen farmers’ eggs the past two months.

“You’re awfully confident for a man who’s begging sanctuary right now,” Harry said with a snarl. “And what’s to say I don’t off you the moment the contract ends, hmm?”

“I am a wizard, Mister Potter,” said a weary-looking Snape. “I defended myself quite well the last time you tried to—how did you say it? Oh yes. The last time you tried to off me. I highly doubt your duelling skills have improved since then. No? I can see that the result would be quite the same.”

Harry growled and clutched his wand. “Shut it, before I decide a rebounded curse or two is worth it and see how fast you can dodge while looking like a dog used you for a chew toy.”

Hermione stepped between them and stared up at Snape, looking dangerous despite being half his height. She crossed her arms over her chest and fixed him with a stern expression. “You aren’t being honest this time, or did you think I wouldn’t know? The terms of Sanctuary are clear. You are the accused, we are the wronged party. You have one month’s time to stay with us, in whatever sort of accommodation we can provide—and that isn’t much, Professor—and at the end of said month, if you have not proven your innocence to us, we have every right to enact justice upon you with no consequences, and with no escape for you.”

She frowned and stepped closer, meeting his eyes with a searching stare. “Why, of all the people you could ask Sanctuary from, would you place yourself in our hands? Harry watched you murder Professor Dumbledore. You are not going to convince us that you somehow … missed your proper target. You know you won’t prove yourself to us, so why would you dare throw your life away like that?”

Snape lowered his head, and for the first time, Harry saw the weariness, the pain behind the man’s ever-present scowl. Harry’s crushing grip on his wand loosened.

“It matters not,” said Snape in a quiet voice. “My life, ultimately, is not important in this war. I ask
Sanctuary from you not to prove my innocence, because I have little hope you would ever believe me even if I told you that the scene Harry witnessed was arranged between Albus and myself beforehand—"

Harry snapped, “Liar! You killed him!”

Snape met Harry’s gaze head on. “Yes. And you saw his hand, did you not? That horcrux you’re wearing—yes, I know what it is—do you think, if it could curse you, that it would stop before you were a lifeless, desiccated husk? Albus was dying, Potter. I did what I could to slow the curse in Gaunt’s ring, but I could not stop the curse entirely. Albus wanted a quick, painless death, rather than to suffer endlessly or be caught and tortured to death at Bellatrix’s hands. He wanted his death to serve the greater good, and he believed that, if I killed him, it would catapult me straight to the top of the Dark Lord’s ranks.”

“Liar,” Harry repeated, but with less force.

Harry still remembered the cursed hand, remembered the pain in Dumbledore’s face after taking the potion. And he had recently learned first-hand exactly how far Dumbledore was willing to go for his machinations. What if, when Snape had arrived that night at the tower, Dumbledore hadn’t been pleading for his life, but for a quick death?

“You’re … you’re lying,” Harry whispered, but it was more plea than honest belief.

Snape went on as if he hadn’t heard. “I was given the post of Headmaster for my act of false loyalty, but ….” He paused and rubbed at his eyes. “I, the cost … no. It matters not.” He stood tall and glared once more. “We are wasting time. I care not whether you let me live at the end of this month or kill me. I have information and tools to pass on to you, and my life is of little consequence in the greater purpose of this godsforsaken war.” He looked away, as if seeing into another time. “Once, I … for Lily … but it is of no purpose now. She is gone, as is everyone I ever ….”

Harry had gone still, his heart frozen against his ribs. “What about my mum?”

Snape rubbed a hand across his eyes and sighed. When he spoke again, his voice had lost its sharp edge. “She was … my only friend once, long ago.” He straightened and met Harry’s eyes. “Mister Potter, all I ask with my request for Sanctuary is that you let me live long enough to speak and listen without prejudice to what I have to say. My role is only to present you with the rest of the story and the tools to act upon it. What you choose to do with my information once I have given it is up to you. If you choose to end my life at the end of the month, then I will not resist.”

Harry only stared, half-furious, half-gobsmacked. His mum had been friends with Snape? Why? What had she seen in the twisted little shite? But gods, Snape’s expression when he had mentioned her—he had looked … lost. Heartsick. And weary to his very soul. Harry had never seen the man wear such a vulnerable expression.

Though Harry didn’t trust the man as far as he could throw him, he knew Snape would never offer his life like this if he were lying. He knew how much Harry hated him. To have a chance to kill the bastard who had made his life miserable for six years … would Harry take it?

Could he resist?

Hermione was right. Of all the people Snape could have requested Sanctuary from, why had he gone to the one most likely to kill him at the end of it? Did he want to die?

A tiny voice whispered in the back of Harry’s mind, if Snape was truly innocent while everyone
believed him to be a monster, it wasn’t so farfetched.

Harry stared at the man, trying to see the truth behind the mask. Snape, the git who had mocked him for six years and murdered his mentor. Or, was he Snape, the lonely man who had lost everyone who meant anything to him and had nothing left to live for? Harry could not puzzle him out.

It was Hermione’s touch that brought him out of his daze.

“Harry,” she said in a soft voice, “I, I think we should listen. I think he’s being honest.”

Harry swallowed his confusion and met Snape’s eyes. “All right. We’ll listen. But I promise you nothing beyond that.”

Snape bowed his head and stepped into the wards. “That is all I require.”

“Good.” Harry motioned him into the tent with a snarl. “After you, sir.”

Snape scowled and limped inside.
Why on earth had Severus gone to Potter of all people? Gods, this was a foolish plan, but with his deceptions laid bare before the Dark Lord, it was all he had left.

He shuddered, the memory of his discovery still fresh in his mind. Should he live long enough to return to the Headmaster’s office, he would make sure that traitorous portrait burned. Merlin, who would have suspected the proud but honourable Armando Dippet to be a secret supporter of the Dark Lord? Severus hadn’t thought the portraits capable of betraying the current Headmaster, and when Dippet himself had reminded Phineas Nigellus of that, he should have done. It should have at least given him cause to verify the portrait’s claim. But Severus was tired, and hadn’t energy to spare for investigating dead Headmasters.

It had cost him his position and nearly his life.

“Headmaster!”

Phineas Nigellus’ nasally voice cut through Severus’ weariness like a knife into his bones. Severus forced himself to lift his head, though between his shame and exhaustion, it felt to weigh a metric tonne, and spared the portrait a glance.

“What is it this time, Black?”

“I heard the mudblood—”

That spurred Severus to action. He shot Phineas a cold glare. “Do not use that term near me.”

Phineas scowled. “Oh, very well. I heard the Granger girl speaking to Potter. It seems they are hiding in—”

A blast at Severus’ door brought the man to his feet. He swayed a bit, but held his ground. He went to investigate, but a cold pain shot from his Dark Mark clear to his heart, and Severus doubled over with the shock of it.

“What in Merlin’s name? Headmaster, are you well?”

Severus gasped, “No. I believe, I have been discovered.”


“My dear Severus,” called the Dark Lord through his door. “You have been keeping secrets from me.”

Phineas slipped out of his portrait, no doubt to scout the other side of the door. Damn. How had the Dark Lord found Severus’ secret? He had always been so careful, so observant. He had never let his guard down for a moment, never allowed himself a moment’s respite … except within his own office. Severus dragged himself to his full height despite his exhaustion and pain, and suddenly saw a room full of liabilities. Dippet had reassured him that the portraits were incapable of betraying the Headmaster, but what had prevented him from lying?

Severus met the portrait’s eyes and encountered a smug, wrinkled grin.
“You,” he gasped. “You did this.”

Dippet showed a mouthful of gnarled teeth. “Never suspected me, did you? More fool you. Who do you think protected him in his youth? Why do you think Hagrid was expelled instead of Riddle? I ensured Tom continued on his path to immortality and cleansed Britain of mudblood filth and blood traitors then, and I have ensured it now.”

Dippet let out a dark, mocking laugh, and Severus might have incinerated the traitorous portrait had a blasting curse not chosen that moment to break his door into a hundred pieces. The concussion blasted the suffering man into the back wall and knocked his head against the stone. Severus blinked stars from his eyes and rubbed the back of his head, unsurprised to pull back a bloody hand.

Severus couldn’t move. The blow had missed knocking him unconscious by millimetres, and between his exhaustion, the pain from the mark, and nausea from a concussion, Severus could not find the strength to rise or even to be afraid. What was the point, anyway? The Dark Lord would only kill him the next moment. Severus wasn’t the ‘chosen one,’ and he could not hope to survive against the Dark Lord’s power, not drained and broken like he was.

“Your gargoyle could not defy the strength of the Dark Lord,” said the evil little shite, “and neither can you, traitor.” Voldemort appeared, picking his way over the shattered bits of door, a feral smile twisting his features. “Ah, I see you are already in your proper place, sprawled at my feet.”

The Dark Lord’s hissing laugh split Severus’ aching skull, and the spy gave himself up for lost. He groaned and drew his knees to his chest. So this was his end. Brought down by a bloody portrait. Lovely.

With a loud clicking noise, Hogwarts’ magic formed a protective shield between him and the Dark Lord. It blocked out sound, sight, and curses with a wall of bright pink light, but it was only a temporary reprieve. The wall would fail eventually, and Severus would die when it did.

Perhaps it was time. Merlin knew he had given everything he had for this never-ending war. He laid his head against the wall and closed his eyes, ignoring the waves of dizziness and pain from his mark. Surely he had atoned long enough, and Lily would be on the other side. Perhaps she might forgive him now.

Behind him, a soft voice urged him to rise.

“Severus,” Albus called. “Come, my boy. All is not lost.”

“I can’t,” Severus choked out. “Hurts.”

“I know,” Albus murmured. “I have asked too much of you, but there is one last thing I must ask of you. Please, Severus. Rise. You are so strong, my boy. I am so proud of you.”

“I’m tired, Albus. Want to sleep.”

“I know. I’m sorry, my boy. Will you try, one last time, for me? For her?”

Severus groaned. “Oh, Albus. Using her memory to spur me on? Your cruelty truly knows no bounds, does it?”

Dippet mocked Severus once more, but had to make a swift exit as every former headmaster except Black turned on him and chased him out of his portrait. Severus hoped they punished the bastard hard.
“Forgive me, child,” said Albus, his voice broken with tears. “I’ve hurt you terribly, and for that, I am deeply sorry. When this is over, you may take all the rest you need, but for now, I still need you. She still needs you, as does her son. Go to him, and ask for Sanctuary. Go to him, and tell him everything you know. It is past time to let Harry truly take his place in the fight.”

Severus laughed bitterly. “Ask Sanctuary of Potter, et al? How fitting. I must choose between death at the Dark Lord’s hand or Potter’s. Well, the boy will at least make it swift. The Dark Lord will no doubt draw my suffering out for as long as he can.”

Albus sighed. “Severus, Harry is more merciful than that. I believe he will spare you, once he knows the truth. Take my pensieve, my boy, and show him our talks. But do it quickly. The shield is beginning to falter.”

Severus cringed as a curse set his floor shuddering. “So I see. But how, Albus? I cannot apparate from here, and even if I could, I know not where to go.”

“I can help there,” said Black. “I was trying to—” The shield shimmered and bowed inwards. “—tell you, the Granger girl said they will be—” Another blow rocked the office and knocked Severus to his knees. “—in the bloody Forest of Dean! Hurry, Headmaster.”

Severus groaned and, with herculean effort, staggered to his feet. “H-how, Albus? How do I—ughn—get to them?”

Albus’ portrait swung forwards, revealing a hidden cache in the wall. The Sword of Gryffindor, an old map, a plain silver ring, and a bloodstained book written in a strange language lay within.

Severus snorted. “Wily to the end, you barmy old coot.”

Albus gave a sad chuckle. “For you, Severus. I did it all for you, and for Harry. Now hurry! Take the ring, put it on, and say—”

The shield failed, and Riddle came bursting in. Severus hastily shrank everything but the ring. As Riddle began his usual monologue, Severus hid both portrait and cache with his body, making it look as though he had slumped against the wall, and discreetly levitated the sword, map, and book into an empty pocket.

“We could have been so great together, Severus,” Riddle said. “But you had to go and ruin it all.”

Severus whispered, “The activation, Albus?”

“Lily of the Valley,” the portrait whispered back.

Severus closed his eyes, ignored a sharp stab of grief, and jammed on the ring. The Dark Lord shifted into Parseltongue, a sure sign of incoming pain, but before his first curse hit, Severus vanished into the night.

Severus had landed in Spinner’s End, but only stayed long enough to choke down a potion for his head. He had apparated blind to the Forest of Dean, knowing the Dark Lord would discover him any moment, and stumbled through the underbrush for three days until he felt the familiar press of Potter’s magic.

And so he found himself at Potter’s mercy, exhausted, starving, and half-frozen. Nothing but sheer force of will kept him upright during the ensuing conversation, and when Potter and Granger showed
him into their tent—worn, travel-stained, and meagre in accommodations but oh-so-warm—Severus feared his relief broke through his iron control for a moment. Gods, he was so tired, and everything in his body hurt. He just wanted to crawl under one of the blankets, threadbare or not, and sleep for a week, but no doubt Potter would demand explanations first. He eyed the nearest blanket longingly, and slumped to the floor with a sigh.

Weasley growled something about worthless traitors and turned into one of the blankets, wrapping it around himself as if to block them out. Severus would rather be anywhere that did not have the most volatile Weasley of the entire lot, but, as miserable as he was, he could not find it within himself to protest. Instead, he just sat cross-legged upon the ground—someone must have cast warming charms on it as his bum didn't freeze to the tent floor—and gave his two unwilling rescuers a weary glare.

“Well? What do you want to know first?”

Granger looked to Potter. “I’ll let you handle this since it’s your battle and Ron’s in a snit again anyway, but don’t just rush in, okay? Listen to him before you make any decisions. And don’t attack him or hurt him. The laws will return any pain you give him twofold. Just be gentle, okay? I know you can be.” She frowned at Potter’s neck. “And, maybe you should give me the locket. You know it tends to make you lose your temper.”

Potter looked toward Weasley, and the pain reflected in his gaze shocked Severus. What had the Weasley brat done this time?

“Yeah,” he said in a low voice and pulled a golden chain from his neck. “I guess I should. I’m sorry.” He passed the chain and a heavy locket rife with dark magic to Granger. “Will you be okay taking it?”

She gave him a brave smile. “Have to be, don’t I?” The girl moved to put the chain on, but Severus called out to her.

“Wait. There is no need to suffer from it any longer. Put it down, here. I, I have ….” He pulled his pocket open and levitated its contents onto the floor. With a whispered counterspell, he unshrunk the sword and lifted it into a shaky hand. “I have the means to destroy it.”


Weasley took an interest in the conversation at this juncture. “Can’t be real, can it? Not if the git has it.”

Severus let slip a dark laugh. “No, I suppose you are correct. Why would the true sword of Godric Gryffindor present itself to the former Head of Slytherin and the ‘greasy bat of the dungeon?’ He could not have faced trials in his life, not like Gryffindors.” To his horror, Severus found his voice breaking. “He could, could not have, have faced the Dark Lord and, and almost died for it, then nearly perished searching for you. P-preposterous.”

Potter laid a hand on his shoulder and said in a sharp tone, “Enough.” His voice softened. “Enough. Whatever happened, we’ll discuss it later. You can rest first, okay? You’ve clearly been through hell and you’re not yourself. This horcrux needs to die first anyway.” He took the locket from Granger, laid it upon the ground near Severus, and knelt as if to take the sword. “I’ll just destroy it now, yeah? Been wanting to burn the damned thing forever.”

Severus stared at Potter, shaken by the boy’s kindness. He had expected a gruelling interrogation regardless of his physical and emotional weariness. “You, you’re not going to—”
His words ended on a sob, and he recoiled and shuttered his emotions. Gods, what had become of him? He was halfway to breaking down in front of a Potter. Had the strain finally broken his sanity? He tried to raise his Occlumentic barriers, but the last few days had taken too much out of him. With a sigh, he settled for forcing his features into a neutral expression and drawing his arms tight around his chest. With his body wrapped in a protective sort of hug, he felt less exposed, anyway. It was a start.

He sneered at Potter, though he feared it lacked force. “Well, take the sword then. We haven’t got all night.”

Weasley scoffed. “Mate,” he said to Harry, “that can’t be the real sword. Not for him.”

Potter shrugged and reached for the hilt. “If it is, we’ll soon find out. I wager that horcrux will put up a nasty fight.” He went to pick up the weapon, but the sword jerked just as he tried to grab the hilt. “What the …?” He reached again, but the sword would not let Potter take it.

“How strange,” said Granger. “You’ve wielded it before.”

Potter nodded. “Yes, when I had won it. It was my loyalty to Dumbledore that brought the sword to me when I fought the basilisk.” He fixed a steely glare on Severus. “You will swear an oath that you arranged Dumbledore’s death between you beforehand?”

Severus glared back. “I see no purpose in it.”

“For one,” Potter spat, “it would prove your honesty. For two, it appears that the sword doesn't want me this time. So if you expect me to trust you to destroy the horcrux, I need some kind of proof that you aren’t the evil bastard you’ve been for the past six years. Or at least not an out-and-out murderer.”

Severus rubbed his left arm and lowered his head. “I do not think I can make that oath. I have never killed someone personally without cause, but I am fully aware the Dark Lord used my poisons to kill when it suited him. I cannot say I am not a killer.”

Potter held his gaze. “I’m aware of your Dark Mark and what it implies. Can you say that you did not murder Professor Dumbledore or not?”

Weasley gasped. “Harry, you can’t possibly believe him, can you?”

Potter shrugged. “Like I said, I want an oath. If he lies, he’ll pay for it.”

Severus frowned. “But I cannot say I did not kill him, Potter. You saw it.”

Potter growled and smacked his forehead. “Oh for Merlin’s sake. Was it murder or prearranged euthanasia, you thick bastard?”

Severus swallowed hard and prayed that magic would understand the difference. “I, I give you, Harry Potter, an oath on my life and my magic, that I did not murder Albus Dumbledore, not according to your stipulations. Though I did kill him, we had arranged it beforehand as a way to avoid a slow, painful death and to cement my position as a spy in the war. This I so swear.”

He closed his eyes and waited for the pain, but it didn’t come. Severus let his breath out in a rush and met Potter’s wide eyes.

“Satisfied?”
Potter sank to his knees and rubbed a hand across his eyes. “He really made you swear to kill him?”

Severus gave a curt nod. “It was, perhaps, the most painful thing I have ever done.”

Potter reached over and took Severus’ hand, stunning him into stillness.

“I believe you.”

“What!”

Weasley’s indignant squawk snapped Severus out of his shock, and he tugged his hand out of Potter’s grip. The young man let him go with a look of understanding.

“You can’t be serious, mate,” Weasley whined. “You believe him? The greasy git?”

Potter sighed and gave Weasley a tired smile. “Yeah, I do. He’d be a dead squib if he’d lied, and he isn’t, as you see.”

Weasley snarled, “I can’t believe you! First you take us out on this mad chase, no fecking idea of what we’re doing or where we’re going or even what we’re hunting for, and then, after we’ve been lost and starving for months, you just let him waltz in here like it’s nothing, what he’s done to us for six damn years? To hell with this. I’m done.”

He grabbed a rucksack and stormed out of the tent. Granger ran after him, a stricken look in her eyes. Potter snatched up the horcrux, put it around his neck, and followed.

Severus stayed out of it. Whatever drama had happened between Weasley and Potter was none of his business.

A tapping on his hip made him jump. He looked down to find the sword hilt hovering beside him and bumping into his waist every so often. A warm feeling of wonder filled his chest and spread to his toes, even if he had no idea why the sword had chosen a worn-down Slytherin over the Gryffindor golden boy.

Severus took the blade and watched the moonlight reflecting on shimmering steel and gold and rubies. The sword seemed to fit in his hand, but why? Why him? Surely Potter would be a better wielder?

He looked up, wishing he could see the sky through the patched fabric of Potter’s tent.

‘Albus, was this your doing?’

Perhaps, given Albus’ ties to Gryffindor, it was.
Chapter 3

Severus held the blade and gazed heavenwards, bemused and out of sorts, until Potter returned—sans Weasley. Severus searched their expressions and suppressed a sigh. Granger looked as if someone had killed her puppy. And Potter … the boy jerked a rough hand across his face, but the red rimming his eyes and sheen on his cheeks revealed his sorrow clear as the day.

So Weasley had truly abandoned his friends. Severus could not ignore the pang in his chest that reminded him of his last day as Lily’s companion. The boy was making a horrible mistake, but Severus could do nothing about it now. Weasley was gone, and Severus had a duty to Potter. He could not leave.

Yet Severus’ presence had hurt them already, and all he had done was confess that Albus had ordered Severus to kill him. He had not meant to damage them so.

“Potter,” he said in a soft voice, “I, whatever you believe of me, however much of it is true, I did not intend to cause a rift between you and your companions.”

Potter stared as if Severus had struck him. Granger looked just as shocked.

Severus drew himself up as much as he could while sitting. “Why are you staring? You have heard someone attempt to make reparations, have you not?”

Potter gaped, then shook himself. “Merlin, what a strange day. First Ron abandons me—again—and now Professor Snape is apologizing—sort of. Hermione, pinch me and tell me if I’ve fallen into nightmares again, yeah?”

She chuckled and rubbed tears away. “You’re awake, Harry. I half wish we weren’t.”

Potter slipped his hand into hers. “I know. I’m sorry, ‘Mione. I never meant to … to do this.”

Granger turned into Potter, weeping with her head on his shoulder. He stared somewhere over Severus’ head, saying nothing, his own grief apparent though his expression stayed stony.

“Professor,” said Potter after Granger’s tears slowed, “if you’re well enough, can you smack this thing with the sword, please? I hate having it around. It makes me miserable. It makes us all miserable, but we don’t dare leave it where it could disappear.” Potter removed the locket from his neck and laid it upon the floor near Severus. “Be careful, okay? It’s damned evil, that thing, and it might fight you.”

Severus gave Potter a withering look. “I am tired, not a fool. Stand back. If the Dark Lord’s soul decides to destroy someone, it will be you. Or perhaps myself, but I am expendable. You are not.”

He staggered to his feet and somehow managed to hold steady. At least he had enough space to stand at his full height, though his knees wobbled.

Potter muttered, “I’m not a bloody hero,” and knelt beside the horcrux.

“What are you doing, you idiot? I told you to move.”

Potter glared. “I have to open the stupid thing before you can destroy it. As that takes Parseltongue, I don’t think you’re going to be able to do it yourself.”

Severus huffed. “Well, hurry along then and get out of the way.”
Potter whispered to the locket, sending chills over Severus’ flesh. Parseltongue always sounded so sinister and dark. Severus tightened his grip on the sword and prayed he could swing the damned thing in the right direction with his head spinning.

Harry glanced at Snape, taking in his pale complexion and shaky stance. He contemplated standing behind the man and holding him up while he swung at the horcrux, but thought better of it. If Snape was as wobbly as he seemed, he might end up taking Harry’s head off by mistake.

The Prophet would have a field day with that, their chosen one—or Undesirable Number one, depending on the day—struck down by a wayward sword. Harry decided not to oblige them and just whispered a hurried ‘open’ to the locket before darting out of range.

In retrospect, that might have been a mistake, thought Harry as a red-eyed smoky figure emerged from the locket, paralysing Snape.

“Kill it, Snape,” Harry cried. “It’s not real! It’s just an illu—”

The thing in the locket spoke over Harry in Voldemort’s sibilant tones. “I sssee you, Sseveruss Ssnape. I know what you have done, traitor.”

Harry and Hermione gasped. *Traitor?*

Snape had frozen, wide-eyed and shaking before Voldemort’s form. The sword hung at his side, his arm limp and useless.

Hermione cried, “Sir, wake up! He’s not really here.”

“Oh, but I am,” the illusion said with a laugh. “You know it, Ssseveruss Ssnape. I know what you have done, traitor.”

Harry whispered to Hermione, “Lonely?”

“Shh!”

The locket-Riddle morphed and changed into a beautiful red-haired woman, with Harry’s green eyes. Ice water poured down Harry’s spine.

“Mum,” he breathed, chest torn wide open and bleeding for the sight of her.

“Sev,” said Locket-Lily, “are you lonely, dear Sev? Do you miss me? I haven’t forgotten what you did. I’ll never forget it. Twenty years of atonement can’t erase the fact that you abandoned me.”

“No,” Snape whispered. “No. I never abandoned you.”

Hermione cried, “Snape, she’s mucking about with your head! She’s not real!”

“Didn’t you?” Locket-Lily let out a cold laugh. “If you had never revealed the Prophecy to the Dark Lord, I would still be here in the flesh, wouldn’t I? It’s your fault I never got to raise my son, Sev. All your fault.”

Snape shivered as if struck through the heart. “I, I tried,” he said in a breaking voice. “I tried my best
to save you, and I, I have spent so long …” He fell to his knees. “I loved you, Lily. You were my best and only real friend. I never meant for you to be hurt.”

“Oh, but you didn’t care about James, now, did you?”

Snape cried, “The man assaulted me, Lily! And he cost me you. You just, left me there. Let him attack me.” He wiped tears away with his free hand. “How could you expect me to care when the man had taken my honour and dignity and my only friend?”

Harry sank to his knees, appalled and shaken to his core. Shite. Snape was right. That scene Harry had seen in the pensieve, it was assault. Harry’s da might as well have raped Snape right in front of the entire student population. And worse, no one did anything to help Snape. Even Harry’s mum had left him to his fate because of one ill-spoken word under extreme duress.

“Oh gods,” Harry breathed.

Hermione laid a hand on his shoulder. “Snape, Harry, please! She’s not real!”

Harry cringed. No, but she was damned accurate nonetheless.

“Oh, Sevvy,” said Locket-Lily with a cruel chuckle. “You didn’t think I would forgive you, did you? I’ve seen how you treated my baby. You were horrid to him, and only because he was James’ son. You’re a monster, Severus, and you know it.”

“I, I will not deny it,” Snape half-sobbed, but then rose to his feet. “But if you knew everything about me as you claim, then you will also know that I never saw Harry as the spawn of his father. He was only a child, and I was a spy caught in between dark and light and two masters. I had no choice but to act the way I did, at least until he learned the Occlumency he never applied himself to.”

Harry winced. Damn. Snape hadn’t pulled that punch.

“Does it truly matter,” said Locket-Lily, “when you still abused a child who was already being abused at home?”

Harry went rigid. Hermione turned to him with a stricken look. “Harry?”

“N-not now,” he muttered.

“No,” Snape said in a quiet voice. “I suppose it doesn’t. And I suppose that, at the end of this month, I shall likely be dead along with you, Lils. But for now, I know better than to believe that this … demon is what my Lily became.”

“You know nothing!” Lily’s eyes glowed red, and her voice hissed.

“Ah, but I do. I know you are not Lily, you are Tom Riddle, and you are desecrating the image of my only friend.” Snape’s face twisted into a bitter scowl. “And, being omniscient as you claim to be, you should know I do not forgive easily.”

With that, he raised the sword and brought it down on the locket. Locket-Lily let out a shrill shriek and a sibilant hiss, and faded back into the melting horcrux with a puff of black smoke.

With the image of his dead mother gone, Harry climbed to shaky feet and rubbed the tears from his face.

“Snape? Are you—”
“Leave me,” he said in a soft voice.

Harry sighed. “All right. Just, is it over? Is it gone?”

Snape kicked the mess of a locket to Harry’s feet and turned his back. He laid the sword down beside him with an almost reverent touch and dropped onto the nearest pallet, jerking the blanket over his shoulders with a heavy sigh.

Harry didn’t mention the pallet was his own. He could sleep in Ron’s for the night, he supposed.

Hermione tugged at his sleeve. “Come on, it’s gone. Let’s give him a moment.”

Harry nodded and followed Hermione out of the tent. The bitter December wind could not compete with the coldness inside his heart. He kicked at the snow and wondered if Ron was safe.

“Hermione, did Ron tell you where he was headed?”

She gave him a wan shake of her head. “It would have to be Shell Cottage, though—Bill and Fleur’s place. He can’t go anywhere else. Appearing at the Burrow when everyone thinks he’s ill with spattergroit would put his family under suspicion. Well, more than they already are.”

Harry sighed and hugged his chest, staring out into the woods. A part of him hoped to see a flash of red hair, but the woods were as still as always.

He slipped his hand into Hermione’s for a moment. “I reckon you ought to go to him.”

Hermione gasped and turned to him. “Harry! I can’t just leave you alone.”

He gave her a sad smile. “Not alone now, am I? And you and I both know Ron got in such a snit because he was tired and hungry and afraid of that damn locket. Snape was just the icing on the cake. When he gets a good meal in his belly and a night of sleep, I reckon he’ll start feeling pretty terrible about it. He’ll need you.”

“But … Harry.”

“I’ll be okay. Between that locket … thing, and Snape’s oath, I can tell he’s honest. It sounds as if he’s as trapped as I am, really.”

Hermione sniffled and wiped her eyes. “But, oh, Harry, you need me! I can’t just leave. It’s so important to the war, and some of these runes in the book are so hard, and, and ….”

“Hermione,” Harry murmured, “I can’t. I can’t let you do this anymore. It was okay when it was all three of us, but now with Ron gone and Snape in pieces and seeing my mum like that, gods, Hermione, I’ve lost everyone I’ve ever loved except you and except Ron. Our friends and family, and even they’re in danger what with Voldemort practically running Britain now. Dean and Luna are missing, Seamus and Lavender are dead, and Mum, Da, Sirius, Dumbledore—they’re all gone.” He turned into her side and half-sobbed, “Please. Go where you’re safe. Find Ron and go hide out in Australia if you must. Don’t make me lose you, too. I need something to hold onto when this is all over.”

Hermione tried, “But Ginny ….”

Harry stood back and gave her a sad smile. “You know why I can’t go back to her, even if Ron will never understand. He wanted us to be brothers, but we already are, and Ginny … I tried to feel it with her, but I just can’t.”
Hermione sighed. “Did you … do you, for Ron?”

Harry cringed. “Did you not just hear me say the man is like my brother?”

Hermione gave a weak laugh and wiped her eyes. “Yeah, I suppose I did.” She sighed and looked toward the tent. “I was just trying to understand. You, you really want me to go?”

“Yes. Not because I don’t love you, but because I do. I need you safe. I can’t fight if I’m always worried about you and Ron, and that locket made it clear to me, it’s time for me to fight.”

Hermione winced. “Harry, we haven’t found any of the other horcruxes. You can’t fight him yet.”

“Oh, I know. I just, I feel like I need to do something different, Hermione. Like hiding out in the forest isn’t enough any longer. I need to do something. And I can’t do it if it risks your life or Ron’s, do you understand?”

She sighed again and lowered her head. “We’re holding you back.”

Harry grabbed her shoulders. “No! I didn’t say that! I just, I want you safe. Please.”

Hermione blinked tears down her cheeks and shook her head. “No, I understand. It’s like with the basilisk and Quirrell and the cup. We’ve gotten you this far. Now you have to go it alone, like you always do in the end.” She slumped onto Harry’s shoulder. “I was just hoping we could be with you this time.”

“I know. I was too.”

“You have to face him alone, don’t you?”

“**One cannot live while the other survives,**” Harry murmured. “I’m sorry, Hermione.”

She nodded and wiped her eyes. “Just, take this, okay?” She handed him her beaded bag. “There are all kinds of resources in there. I know research isn’t your thing, but if you’re going with Snape … he’s an intellectual type. And even if not, even if you do go alone, I know you’re really brilliant under all the attitude.”

Harry laughed and clutched the bag to his chest. “Thank you, Hermione. Thank you for understanding. And the bag, it will remind me of what I’m fighting for.”

“Yes. For us, and, and for your future.” She threw her arms around Harry and hugged him tight. “Promise me if you happen to find a cute guy along the way, you’ll write me and tell me?”

Harry gave a bitter chuckle. “Somehow I don’t think I’ll be falling for anyone on the run, but I do promise that if I should happen to find anyone, you’ll be the first to know. Well, second. After him, you see.” He kissed her cheek. “And you, promise me you’ll stay safe until the end?”

She nodded. “Until the end, Harry. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Now go, before I lose my resolve.”

A light kiss brushed Harry’s cheek, a press of magic washed across him, and Hermione was gone. He stared at the empty spot for a long moment, the absence of his friends forming a giant hole where his heart used to be. Tears blurred the snow-covered leaves under Hermione’s footprints into a soppy grey mess. Gods, he missed her already.

With a sorrowful sigh, Harry clutched Hermione’s bag close to his chest and reset the anti-apparition
wards. While he was working, Snape poked his head out of the tent.

“What is all this magic? Are we under att—” He frowned at the empty clearing. “Where is Granger? I, I did not think she would leave you.”

Harry finished his warding and turned to fix Snape with a hard stare. “I made her go.”

Snape frowned. “Why? I would not have alienated her for staying. I am at your mercy now, under your power. I have no authority to drive her away from your … home, so to speak.”

Harry turned away and hugged his chest, fighting hard against the re-emergence of tears. “It’s safer. I would only get her killed. I’ve known that for a long time, and when Ron went, well, I saw my opportunity to convince her.”

Snape said nothing, and for a moment, Harry listened to the wind rustling the trees. Every so often, he imagined he heard a footfall and wondered if Ron was still close despite knowing better. Harry had spoken the truth—they were safer away from him, but he still felt their absence keenly. Every empty place in his heart ached with their loss. A tear slid down his cheek and was half-frozen before it reached his chin.

Feet crunched in the snow behind him, and Harry tensed, waiting for the verbal blow. After Ron, and Hermione, and seeing his dead mother as a shade of Riddle, Harry thought he would likely explode if Snape said anything unkind at that moment, and he did not look forward to the backlash from the Sanctuary spell on top of everything else.

A sudden brush of fabric and warmth on his left side warned Harry that Snape was standing beside him. Otherwise, the man said nothing, and after a while, Harry relaxed.

Without looking at the man, Harry murmured, “Did you mean it?”

“I cannot answer your question without knowing what you are referring to.”

“When you told Mum—well, that shade of her—that you had to be cold to me until I learned Occlumency. Did you mean that, or was it just a way to shut her up?”

Snape crossed his arms over his chest and stared into the trees. “Potter, I am … not a nice man. I am sarcastic and bitter and sometimes cruel. But even I would not, of my own choice, hurt an already injured child.”

“I’m not a child any longer, and I’m not my father, either.”

“I know.”

They stood silently for many moments.

“I’m sorry, you know?”

Snape turned to Harry, his confusion obvious. “Why are you apologising? You were only reacting to my behaviour. I have never truly held it against you.”

“Not for that.” Harry lowered his eyes and hugged himself tighter. “What you said in there, when fake-Mum asked why you didn’t care about Da …” Snape sucked in a sharp breath and clenched his fists, no doubt expecting an attack. “You were right. What he did to you … after I saw it—and I’m sorry about that, too—I confronted them about it. They tried to pass it off as a prank, but it wasn’t. That was far past a prank. I, it really was assault. Gods. I, I’m sorry. It must mean nothing,
A gentle, shaky hand fell on his shoulder. “Potter. I have never expected you to apologise for an act that happened five years before you were even born.”

Harry scoffed and dragged a hand across his eyes. “Could’ve fooled me.”

Snape’s hand dropped away. “I know.”

After another long moment of silence, the cold finally drove Harry to return to the tent. He dreaded seeing it empty, his friends gone and his only companion a former enemy forced into his mercy. Had they been enemies at all? Was it all truly an act?

Harry’s head throbbed. They could figure it out later. “Come on,” he said. “It’s gone midnight and I’m knackered.” He neglected to mention that after everything, he would likely get little sleep. “And you look . . . erm . . .”

Snape snorted. “Like death warmed over in the hottest fires of hell?”

Harry chuckled in spite of himself. “Er, I wasn’t going to go quite that far. You do look tired, though, and it’s bloody cold out here. Come on.”

Harry held the tent flap open for Snape and followed him inside. He sighed as the warm living space took the ache from his bones. The pain in his heart remained.

He glanced at Snape’s shaking, pale form, and motioned him to the bed the man had taken before. For some reason, Harry didn’t want to take it from Snape despite it being his own pallet.

“Sit down. Are you injured?”

Snape rubbed the back of his head. “Perhaps. I believe my most pressing needs are sleep and food, however.”

Harry winced. “We’ve precious little food. I might have a bit of bread left, but that’s it, and it’s probably stale. Ron wasn’t kidding when he said we’ve all been starving.”

Snape gave Harry a piercing look that swept the entire length of his body and paled. “So I see.” He motioned for Harry to sit with him. “Why? I had thought there was some money left from your parents’ legacy.”

Harry sat cross-legged in front of the man, though he kept a bit of distance. “Well, it’s a bit difficult to make a bank run when your face is plastered on wanted posters all over Britain.”

Snape frowned. “You have nothing in the Muggle world?”

Harry snorted. “I thought you said you realised I was being abused.”

Snape winced. “I hadn’t thought they would go so far as to let you starve.”

“Let me starve? Are you kidding? Why do you think I’m so short?”

Snape went ashen. “They starved you. Intentionally.”

Harry lowered his eyes to his trainers and picked at a loose thread. “It came in handy this winter. This mess wasn’t as hard on me as it was for Hermione, who’d never gone hungry in her life. But Ron, he’d had Molly Weasley and Hogwarts to feed him. It was like his worst nightmare second
only to Aragog and his clan of acromantula. I guess I should’ve warned them. I tried, really. But I thought we’d at least have Grimmauld Place. I never imagined we’d be forced to sleep in a tent in the dead of winter and steal and scavenge for food.”

“Hmm. What happened with Grimmauld?”

Harry picked at his thread in silence for a while. “I guess it was my fault. Umbridge, she had the locket. So we went to the Ministry under Polyjuice to steal it. We knocked out the entire courtroom, including the dementor. But when I realised what she was doing to the Muggleborns and half-bloods, I rounded them up and led them to the floos. We probably could’ve escaped if I’d left them alone, but as it was, Runcorn grabbed hold of Hermione’s ankle as we were apparating out. He landed on Grimmauld’s step with Hermione, and she kicked him off before we apparated away to some place she remembered from her childhood. We didn’t even have time to get our clothes. This is all we have, and most of it’s stolen because we don’t have any money, either.”

Snape gave an exasperated sigh. “Had to save them all, hmm?”

Harry glared and shot back, “Better than standing back and watching them die.”

The man’s expression shuttered, and his eyes filled with a deep, cold pain. “I did what I had to, Potter. Now, if you will excuse me, I am quite tired.”

Snape turned his back and crawled into Harry’s pallet, and Harry realised he had chosen the worst thing possible to say to the displaced spy. With a heavy sigh, he rose and crawled to Hermione’s pallet—Ron’s would have hurt too much—and drew her blanket close around him. It smelled of roses somehow despite their living rough for months at a time. The scent comforted him, but Snape … he was alone, wasn’t he?

Harry hoped the lingering scent on his own bed wasn’t too unpleasant for the man.

“Snape? I, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Snape sighed. “Go to sleep, Potter. It is not the first time someone has used the truth to smite me. I will live.”

Harry curled Hermione’s blanket close. Maybe it wasn’t the first time someone had hurt Snape with the truth, but Harry found himself thinking it should probably be the last.

As soon as Severus curled into the blankets, he realised he had taken one of the teens’ beds by mistake. It smelled of a warm body and faintly of pine needles. Potter hadn’t protested, so he just held the blankets tight and imagined, just for a moment, he wasn’t alone in the world. That he hadn’t isolated himself from everyone who had ever cared for him, and all for the sake of the boy sleeping in the pallet a couple metres away. At least, Severus supposed he was sleeping. Potter hadn’t said anything since his sheepish apology some moments before.

That Potter had felt the need to apologise at all stunned Severus. All anyone had to do was mention Burbage’s name, and Severus remembered exactly how it felt to stand by and do nothing while one of his colleagues was murdered before his eyes. Not only do nothing, but pretend to be the good little Death Eater while, inside, his soul was screaming with the need to help her.
Tears built under his lashes, but Severus blinked them down and swallowed until the nausea passed. For a moment, he resented Potter for his thoughtless remarks, but then realised the boy couldn’t have known. Unless ….

His nausea returned with a vengeance at the idea that Potter might have seen it happen, might have known first-hand what Severus’ inaction had cost.

He took a few calming breaths and tried to remember the swings from long ago. Lily’s wild hair as she had flown high. Her laugh like a babbling brook. But red eyes superimposed green, and a mocking voice cut his last happy memories into ribbons.

“Oh, Sevvy. You didn’t think I would forgive you, did you?”

“Lily,” he breathed. “I’m so sorry.”

Severus buried his head in blankets and cast a silent *Muffliato* to hide the sound of his tears.

Both men woke red-eyed and looking as tired as they had the evening before, but neither seemed inclined to comment on it. Severus, for his part, was glad of their tacit agreement of silence. Really, he would rather just have a few more moments in his pallet. Riddle-Lily and the Dark Lord himself had poisoned his dreams, when the pain from his head and arm let him sleep at all. From the amount of silent tossing and turning he had witnessed, he judged Potter had been similarly tormented and likely employing a silencing charm.

Well, Severus supposed if anyone was entitled to nightmares, it was Potter. Or himself.

Potter made them a pot of store-brand tea and fire-heated toast to wake them. There was no butter, jam, sugar, or cream. Just unevenly-cooked bread and weak, unsweetened tea. Severus would have sneered at the meal if he didn’t know it was all Potter had to offer and that he was sharing it freely despite being half-starved. Instead, he ate and drank graciously, though the pitiful offering barely took the edge off his hunger and the dry toast went down like chalk. At least there was plenty of tea.

After their meagre meal, Severus sighed and washed their dishes with a flick of his wand. “What are your questions?”

“You can answer them while I’m treating that wound on your forehead,” Potter said with a sad sort of smile. “I missed it in the dark last night. Sit down and don’t fight me, all right?”

Severus hesitated. “I am quite capable of carrying on in spi—”

“I know, but we’re both wanted men, Snape. If you get an infection in that, we can’t exactly just pop into St. Mungo’s and get it fixed.” Potter rummaged in a strange beaded bag, burying his arm to the shoulder, and came out with a jar of greenish salve Severus recognised. “I’ve got some dittany here that will take care of it, if you’ll just sit still long enough for me to put it on.”

Severus crossed his arms and grumbled, “I suppose I shall have to endure it, if only to appease your no doubt crippling anxiety as to my welfare.”

Potter chuckled. “Glad to see you’re back to yourself again.”
Severus had a snarky reply ready to go, but it died on his lips at the first touch of Potter’s hands. Severus had been expecting a rough, quick smear of dittany, just enough to seal the worst of his wounds, but Potter was gentle. One hand slipped under Severus’ chin to tip his head up, then moved to cradle the back of his head. With the other, Potter dabbed the salve onto Severus’ injury with gentle fingertips. Severus stared, paralysed with shock.

Potter frowned and lifted his hand. “Am I hurting you?”

Severus swallowed the lump in his throat and forced his shock down. “No. Continue.”

Potter nodded and resumed applying the medicine. “All right. Questions. So last night, I heard you tell fake-Mum that you loved her. Were you in love with her? Is that why you joined Riddle? Because you couldn’t have Mum?”

Severus choked. “Merlin, Potter. You don’t waste any time, do you?”

Potter’s eyes hardened. “Answer the question.”

“Give me a moment to recover. Was I in love with Lily? It is highly unlikely. Someone would have had to dose me with a potion, and I doubt anyone could slip one by me.”

Potter frowned. “But I don’t understand. You said Mum was your only friend. So she couldn’t have been so bad, you’d need a potion to love her.”

“No, but I am not inclined to women, Potter. At all.”

Potter gasped and reeled. “Merlin! You’re gay?”

“Homosexual is the proper term, and yes. I imagine you will have quite the laugh about that with your dearly departed lover once my month is over.”

Potter blinked. “My lover?”

Severus turned to meet Potter’s eyes. “You are not involved with Granger?”

Potter made a strangled sort of choking sound. “Hermione? Gods, no! She’s dating Ron for one thing, and I, well, I was dating Ginny but, um—” His cheeks went bright red. “I’d be a hypocrite if I took the mickey out of you for that anyway.”

Severus steeled the shock from his expression. Potter was gay? The press would go mad when they discovered it.

“I … see,” said Severus. “How ironic that every single witch in Britain is breaking their hearts over a man who … takes his comfort from his own gender.”

“Hard to take much comfort while we’re on the run,” Potter fired back. “So I guess the rest of my questions were pretty far off the mark, then. Why did you join Riddle?”

Severus closed his eyes and turned his face away. “Harry, you must understand that in his early days, he did not act nor look like he does now. When I joined him, he was still human and his goals weren’t so mad. It was never innocent, but when he said he wanted to remove Muggles and those not of pure blood from positions of power, I never imagined he meant to exterminate them like some kind of vermin.”

Potter dabbed at his forehead again. “And when you realised the truth?”
“By then, I was already marked. He would have killed me had I deserted. Besides that, you have seen from our Occlumency lessons that my experiences of Muggles were … not exemplary. The idea of separating our society from theirs entirely, well, I did not oppose it. Not then.”

Potter met his eyes. “And now?”

“Potter, you don’t really believe I would risk my life spying on the Dark Lord for twenty years if I thought he had honourable ideals, do you?”

“No, I suppose not.” Potter’s eyes went steel-hard. “You’ll swear this to me, that what you’ve told me just now is the truth?”

“Of course I swear it.”

“With a magically binding oath, Snape. You really think I’m dumb enough to just take your word when even Dumbledore lied to me over and over again for the past six years? Bah. Swear it, or I’ll guarantee you won’t live beyond a month.”

Cold leached into Severus’ bones and made him tremble despite his Occlumentic barriers. “And if I should speak even one word incorrectly, your promise will not matter and I shall die here.”

Potter did not budge, did not waver in the least. “Your oath.”

Severus sighed and lowered his head. “Very well. It matters little anyway. I would welcome death, should I misstep.” He closed his eyes and gathered his strength and his wits, choosing his words with great care. “I, Severus Snape, swear on … on my life that the story I have just related to Harry Potter about my … defection to the Death Eaters is, to the best of my knowledge, the truth. This I so swear.” Blue light shone and settled in his skin, and Severus let out a shaky sigh when it did not kill him.

Despite his lackadaisical words, he was not ready to die.

“Thank you,” Potter said in a quiet voice.

Severus gave a bitter laugh. “You are welcome. Shall I dance naked for you next, hmm? Sacrifice my dignity as well as risk my life for a song?”

Potter scowled. “I’d rather not see your bits, thanks just the same.” He stopped dabbing at Severus’ head. “There you go. This is all healed now. Do you ha …” He trailed off and stared at his hand, the one that had been cradling Severus’ head during their discussion. “Damn. Look down. There’s another injury back here somewhere.”

Severus ducked his head and guided Potter’s fingers to his injury. Potter whistled.

“Merlin! How did this happen?”

“The Dark Lord does not take kindly to traitors.”

Potter began dabbing at Severus’ wound. “Not at all, I’d wager. Did he curse you here?”

“Not quite. The force of his blasting spell knocked me into the stone wall of my office.”

“Ouch.” Potter slipped a lock of hair out of the way, and Severus shivered at the feel of the young man’s hands in his hair. “It’s okay, Snape. Just trying to get this fixed up.”

Severus swallowed around a sudden tightness in his throat. “Potter?”
“Hmm?”

“Thank you.”

The hands on his head paused. “Oh. Er, you’re welcome.”
I don’t remember if I had specified in the version posted here that the map Severus had was of Blackpool. It’s of the UK now. Had to fix that for plot reasons.

CHAPTER 4

Fresh snow had fallen in the night and covered the footways of Muggle Dublin with white. Harry couldn’t believe their luck when Snape had, right after breakfast, produced his billfold and—thank Merlin—several credit and debit cards in various names. Snape had apparated them to Dublin a short time afterwards and paid them up for a week at a Muggle hotel under the names of Patterson and Sanders.

Snape said it was to recover from his injuries and the stress of living under Riddle’s thumb for the past three years, but Harry suspected it was more to let himself recover from four months with little to no food and nothing but a cold, hard pallet to sleep in. He considered protesting all of about twenty minutes, until room service delivered a tureen of hot stew and a tray of soft buttered bread. Then Harry decided he didn’t give a rat’s arse what had motivated this rare show of charity and grabbed a bowl for himself.

“Pace yourself, Potter,” Snape said after Harry had seated himself and took several hurried bites. “I know you feel hungry, but do not eat so fast or too much. Your digestive system will need time to adjust to food again.”

Harry shot him a dark glare. “I’m familiar with starvation, Snape. This won’t hurt me as long as I don’t take too much.”

Snape said in a subdued tone, “Very well. I only wanted to warn you in case you hadn’t experienced the recovery before.”

“I know full well I’ll be ill for the next three days.” He ate a few more bites and a piece of bread, then sighed and pushed his bowl aside. He’d barely eaten a cupful, but his stomach felt as if it might explode, and Harry knew better than to push it at the moment. “Do you plan to keep us fed or will I need to prepare to be ill often?”

Snape dragged his spoon through his own bowl. “I do not enjoy starving either, Potter.”

“No, I suppose not.” Harry tore the remains of his bread in little pieces while he waited for Snape to finish. “So, since we’re supposed to be establishing whether you deserve to die at the end of this Sanctuary spell or not, I suppose now is as good a time as any to begin.”

Snape sighed. “If I may, might I shower and send for some new clothing for us first?”

Harry nodded. “After you’re finished eating. Until then, will you answer some questions for me?”

“Fair enough.”

“Good. Then tell me this. You’ve explained what drove you to the Death Eaters. What drove you
away? Why did you become a spy?”

Snape paled and almost choked on his bread. He took a bit of water to clear it and hung his head.

“I will tell you, but I ask that you listen until the end and try to remember that the bond will hurt you
if you attack me prior to the end of the month.”

Harry squeezed his next bit of bread to a doughy pulp. “So I’m not going to like this.”

“Not at all.” Snape pushed his bowl aside and stood. “I am as finished as I am going to be, but I will
answer this before I attend to our needs.”

He called for room service to clear the dishes and, while they worked, sat upon a towel on the bed.
Harry sat opposite him, forgoing the towel.

Once room service had finished, Harry fixed Snape with a hard stare. “Well?”

Snape sighed and leaned on his knees, laying his head in his hands. “Nineteen years ago, the Dark
Lord sent me to see if I could acquire a position as the Defence professor at Hogwarts. He believed I
could easily ‘slip’ and curse Muggleborn children that way. I did not mention that I had no intention
of doing so, but dared not disobey the order to at least try for the position.”

“Lovely man,” said Harry with a sneer of disgust.

“Indeed. I had become quite disillusioned with him myself at that point, but saw no way out yet. At
the time, I had gone to the Hog’s Head to meet Albus for an interview, but when I arrived, he was
already interviewing someone else for the post of Divination.”

A chill of recognition ran up and down Harry’s spine. He clenched his fists and hoped he was
wrong.

Snape swallowed and looked up once more. “Potter, I, it was my fault. I heard the prophecy that day,
but only half. And when I went to report, the Dark Lord deci—"

“Bastard!” Harry was up and across the room before Snape had time to draw his wand. Before he
could think better of it, he had punched Snape square in the jaw.

A lorry smacked into his face immediately afterward. A dreadful snap exploded in his ears at the
same time a burst of crippling pain enveloped his face and neck. Gods, his jaw was broken. Had to
be, after a blow like that. Harry was almost certain he’d lost one or two teeth, too.

He dropped to his bed like a stone, unable to move and struggling to breathe. Any moment, he
would throw up what little food he’d managed to eat earlier.

Merlin, he was a moron. Snape had warned him not to attack. Well, he had learned his lesson, hadn’t
he? Not that it would do his broken jaw any good.

A wandtip moved into Harry’s dimming vision field and the young man winced. The small
movement caused an explosion of white-hot agony to burst along his face and throat, and Harry let
slip a muted whimper. Even that much hurt. He prayed Snape would make his revenge quick and
that whatever the man did would knock him the rest of the way unconscious.

“Episkey,” said Snape in a slightly muffled voice.

Harry cried out as his broken jaw mended itself with another deafening snap. Muffled healing
charms diluted his pain until the worst had gone and Harry thought he might manage to sit up without losing his breakfast. He did, but his head swam.

“Are you well, Potter?”

Harry groaned and rubbed his forehead. The room was still spinning.

“W-what do you care?” Even as he said it, he realised that, if the man didn’t care, Snape could have simply left him, or killed him, or done any number of terrible things to Harry while he had lain paralysed with pain.

Snape sighed and returned to his towel. He hadn’t healed himself, and a dark bruise was already spreading up the man’s cheek. Harry refused to acknowledge the twinge of guilt in his chest. The bastard had deserved it for what he had done.

“Harry,” he said, his voice muffled by pain, “I am sorry.”

Some of Harry’s anger deflated, but not all. “Convenient of you to ask me for Sanctuary before you told me this. I imagine you had a good laugh, watching me knocked back by my own punch.”

Snape’s head drooped. “On the contrary, I was terrified I had killed you, too.”

His words muted enough of Harry’s anger to take the edge from the young man’s voice. “You, you’re serious?”

“You saw that shade, Potter. I loved your mother. You cannot truly imagine I wanted her to be killed, can you?”

Harry glared. “I don’t know. Seems to me someone as vindictive as you might have been awfully angry after she abandoned you all those years ago. Maybe it was some sort of twisted revenge, for my da and for her.”

Snape went ashen and lowered his eyes. “Believe what you will. It matters not. Will you hear the rest of my story, or should I send someone out for clothing? Mind, I will need your sizes if I am to shop for you, too.”

The slight quaver in the man’s voice convinced Harry his remarks had wounded Snape. Merlin knew the man gave no other sign, save for his pallor and trembling hands.

With a sigh, Harry stood and took out his wand. He raised it to Snape’s face, and the man cringed.

“Please, Harry. It would hurt you again.”

Harry rolled his eyes and whispered a healing charm against Snape’s cheek. The man gave Harry a bemused look.

“Why? Aren’t you furious with me?”

“Does it matter?” Harry eased the man’s hand away and placed a second charm at the point of contact, where the force of the blow had left fist-shaped bruises against Snape’s jaw. Harry’s own hand was in poor shape too, he noticed suddenly. He had hit Snape hard enough to split his knuckles. Damn. A third healing charm fixed his hand, and Harry sat across from Snape once more.

“Better?”

The man nodded, though he looked at Harry as if he had grown three heads. “I, I do not understand
“You healed me, didn’t you? I have enough decency to take care of you, even if I am angry. I won’t lower myself to their standards.”

Snape bowed his head. “Thank you.”

Harry gave him a terse nod. “You were saying?”

Snape gave Harry a wary look. “Will you swear to not hit me again? I do not know if I can save you if you, for example, were to hit my eye.”

After feeling the kind of force that had snapped his jaw like a twig, Harry could just imagine what a second blow would do to his eyes and the fragile bits of bone behind them. He shuddered and crossed his arms over his chest so as not to be tempted.

“I promise,” Harry said.

“Thank you.” Snape laid his hands on his knees once more, his wand dangling from his fingertips. “I had told you I only heard half of the prophecy. I reported it to Riddle like the fool I was in those times, and it was only then that I learned Lily was pregnant by his intention to kill her along with Alice Longbottom, who was also due at the end of July. I hadn’t realised I had condemned my one friend to death when I spoke, but the moment I did, I fell to my knees and begged him for her life.” Snape shuddered. “He, he tortured me for it. I thought I would be as mad as Bellatrix before he had finished.”

“You didn’t know Mum was pregnant?”

Snape lowered his head. “She … did not speak to me after OWL year, Potter, and she had gone into hiding long before. How was I to know? I lost her trust years ago.”

Harry frowned. “If you didn’t know, then how did Riddle—wait. Damn. It was Pettigrew.”

“Yes. He is the one who truly condemned them to die, though you have no idea how much I regretted not running that night and never mentioning the prophecy.”

Harry met the man’s eyes, pain building in his chest. “But you would have died.”

Snape gave him a bitter smile twisted with grief. “Yes, and who would have mourned me? My mother had long since perished and Lily hadn’t cared for me for years. The world would have celebrated my demise, but your parents, they were loved. My mistakes that night hurt so many people, including myself. But my death, well ….”

Harry pulled his knees to his chest and hugged them tight. “You would have died like Regulus.”

Snape went ashen and rigid. “R-Regulus Black? Why do you say that?”

“He died trying to destroy the locket. You would have died trying to save my mum. It’s the same thing, really. People doing brave things and dying for them, but no one knows or cares because the world’s written them off.” He hugged himself tighter and tried to stifle a sniffle. “I know what it means to have no one in the world. I wouldn’t wish that fate on anyone.”

Snape looked away and said nothing. Colour had striped his cheeks, and his eyes glinted with what Harry suspected were unshed tears. After a long moment of shared silence, Snape sighed and blinked hard.
“That was why I became a spy. I ran to Albus that same night, beaten and bloody and shaking from the Cruciatius. I begged him to save her. Admittedly just her. But Albus demanded my vow and that I work as a spy in return for a place to live and work. He placed Lily and Potter Senior under the Fidelius, and I thought, I thought they would be safe.” He breathed in sharply, a half-step away from a sob, and murmured, “I do not know if Pettigrew was a Death Eater by then. We all wore masks, and I, I hadn’t seen him without it or heard him speak.”

Harry watched Snape struggle to keep tears back, and sudden rage filled him. He had no idea if it was for Pettigrew or Snape or Riddle or even Dumbledore, but the fact that one more secret—Pettigrew’s identity—had cost his parents their lives made Harry bloody furious. He was tired of being led around by the nose, like a racehorse after the carrot, and with secrets withheld from him at every turn. He wanted the truth, and he wanted it now.

“Swear it,” Harry demanded. “Swear an oath to me that what you have told me is the absolute truth, and if you’re hiding anything about this situation, you’d better get it out now.”

Snape swallowed hard. “I, I do not like swearing these oaths. I fear if I misspeak even one word—”

Harry cried, “Do it, or I’ll … well, I don’t know, but I’ll think of something.”

Snape jumped to his feet, ready to fight, but at Harry’s lame finish, broke into snorts and chuckles. “You’ll do something? How utterly terrifying.”

Harry blushed. “Shut it and swear it. Please.”

Snape sighed and fell back to the bed. He was shaking, but he did as Harry asked.

“I, Severus Tobias Snape, hereby swear upon my life that the … information I have given my companion, Harry Potter, is correct, concerning the event of Lily Potter’s death and my desire to be a spy, to the best of my knowledge, and that I am hiding nothing from him that he does not already know about these events. This I so swear.”

Blue light surrounded him and faded into his skin. Snape let out a heavy sigh and gripped the edge of his bed. “Please stop making me swear oaths. I will give you my word to tell you the truth always if only you stop making me risk my life every time I do it.”

Harry looked away. “I’m sorry. When I can trust you, I’ll stop. I need one person I can trust completely.”

Snape froze. “And … you want me to be this person?”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “Well, so far, you’re the only person other than Hermione who could swear an oath to me and not die.”

Snape’s eyes softened a bit. “Weasley could not?”

Harry turned away. “You haven’t sworn enough oaths for that information.”

“Very well. Shall we take care of our clothing then?” Snape tugged a limp lock of hair into his face. “I am in dire need of a bath.”

Harry resisted the temptation to say that he didn’t notice a difference. Barely.

“Yeah. A hot bath would be nice. As would a change of clothes. But I’m paying you back for this once I’ve access to my accounts again, so keep the receipt.”
Snape shook his head. “I do not require repayment, nor do I seek it. Count it as my due for having to hurt you all the years I worked as a spy. And as some atonement for Lily.”

“Snape, I don’t—”

“Please. I know it matters little when your parents are gone from my mistakes, but I feel this is the least I can do to begin making matters right again. Please let me.”

Harry swallowed around a sudden surge of grief. “If it really matters that much to you—”

“It does.”

“All right. I don’t like it, but all right.”

Snape laid a hesitant hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

Harry just nodded, though inside he wondered what had happened to the cruel professor he remembered. As he watched Snape take down Harry’s sizes without a blink and call the hotel help desk about the clothing, Harry mused that perhaps he had never known the true Professor Snape at all.

‘Better late than never, I suppose.’

Harry decided a laundering charm would be good enough for his clothing this time since he would likely throw up on his shirt later anyway and went to shower while Snape talked to the receptionist. He took his wand with him, just in case he was wrong about the man.

He had no need to use it, except to wash and dry his clothing, and he found a Stomach Soother potion on his bed when he reemerged.

Harry picked up the phial with a bemused look. “How? You don’t have your supplies with you, do you?”

Snape gave him a real smile, and the change it rendered to the man’s face was shocking. Gods, he looked ten years younger.

“It is surprising what one can find in the environment, if one is willing to search.”

Harry frowned. “But … your cauldrons?”

“The coffee pot worked well enough. And yes, I washed it afterwards. Thoroughly.”

Harry looked from the phial to Snape and back. “You mixed up a potion for me, using nothing but ingredients from around a Muggle hotel, in the dead of winter, and brewed it in a coffee pot of all things? In what, twenty minutes?”

Snape drew in on himself. “I assure you, it is quite safe to consume.”

Harry grinned. “I knew that. I recognise the potion, but this is brilliant! How the bloody hell did you manage that? Hermione would be quizzing the life out of you if she were here.”

Snape looked appalled. “Let’s be glad she is n….” He hesitated and shook his head. “I apologize. That was insensitive of me.”

Harry almost dropped his potion. “Insensitive? Who are you and what have you done with Professor Severus Snape?”
The man sighed. “This is who I truly am, Harry. Is my true self so terrible that you wish for the cruel man I had to be as a spy back?”

Harry smiled. “No. I don’t think I mind this Professor Snape very much at all.”


Harry laughed and pocketed his phial.
Chapter 5

The next three days for Severus consisted mainly of taking care of Potter. The young man had managed to quiz Severus more on his past and his goals for the future between bouts of nausea, but Potter’s illness left the young man little strength for talking, and so they had no time to set plans.

While Potter was recovering, Severus went through the journal and attempted to at least learn what language it was in if he couldn’t read it, but the lettering made no sense to him. It wasn’t written in Roman, Mandarin, Cyrillic, Greek, or any other alphabet he had ever known. He even tried Ancient Phoenician through a translation at the local library, but nothing he could find matched. He was at his wit’s end by the time Potter had recovered enough to sit beside him and try to help, though Severus had little hope the young man would know more than himself.

“Whatcha reading?”

Severus shot him an annoyed look. “Your diction does not give me confidence that you would be able to comprehend it.”

Potter snorted. “Cut me a little slack. I’m still not feeling my best.”

Severus laid a hand against the young man’s forehead. “You’re not running a fever today, so there is —”

Potter snatched the book out of his hands. “What the bloody hell?” He threw it across the room and whipped out his wand.

“Potter!” Severus grabbed the young man’s shoulder. “What in Merlin’s name has gotten into you?”

“I could ask you the same question!” Potter whirled on Severus, his eyes cold and accusing. “What were you doing reading a journal with Riddle’s name on? Don’t you know the first horcrux I destroyed was one of his journals?”

Severus staggered back with a shudder. “That is Riddle’s journal? Merlin! I did not know, Potter. I have been trying to translate it, but I cannot begin to interpret the language, let alone read it. How is that you are able to?”

“I don’t know.” Potter crept towards the book, wand out and muscles ready to spring into action. “Snape, can you maybe scan this or something to make sure it’s not dangerous?”

Severus frowned. “I have done. Other than having an aura of dark magic, it appears to be nothing more than a book. I would not have touched it with my bare hands otherwise, not after Albus ….”

“Yeah.” Potter closed his eyes and looked away. After a moment, he pulled himself together. With a scowl of disgust, he used a nearby coffee stirrer to flip the journal cover-to-floor and frowned at the pages. “Odd. I could make out Tom’s name, but now this … oh. Huh. That’s strange. It comes to me word by word. I don’t think I could read it like a normal book, but I suppose I could translate it, if I were even remotely interested. Eventually. Ugh.” He knocked the book closed with a shudder. “Why would you even want to read it?”

Severus shook his head. “Such dramatics. I wish to read it because Albus gave that to me along with the Sword of Gryffindor and the portkey to take me out of Hogwarts. He asked me to also bring along his pensieve, but in the fear and confusion, I am afraid I forgot it.”
Potter stared at the book with an expression of utmost disgust. “Dumbledore left you that? Merlin, why would he? It’s foul. Even without reading more than a few words, I can tell that much.” His scowl turned to a look of horror. “Oh gods, is that … blood on the cover?”

“Most likely,” said an equally appalled Severus. “I will agree with you that the book is quite foul. However, translating it is necessary to our mission.”

“I can’t see how.” Potter turned to Severus and frowned. “And what did Dumbledore want you to bring the pensieve for?”

“Proof.” Severus leaned on his knees and sighed. “He expected you would not be able to believe me without it.”

Potter snorted. “I came up with my own way. Memories can be modified. Oaths cannot be fooled.”

Severus gave the boy an appraising look. “That is … actually quite intelligent.”

“Why the tone of surprise? I’m not a total idiot, you know. Once Hermione told me about them, I knew that was how I’d be confirming identities and stories in the future if I had reason to doubt.”

“Very well, Potter, but in the future when demanding your oaths, you might not want to lower your wand until they are completed and the aura vanishes. As long as one doesn’t finish the oath, it does not take effect. It would be rather easy to attack you if an enemy did not want to finish a false oath and die by it.”

Potter’s cheeks reddened. “Noted. Um, thanks, but I’m still making you take oaths until I’m sure of you.”

Severus ignored the twinge of pain in his chest. He had hurt Potter enough to deserve this mistrust.

“Understood.” He nudged a foot towards the journal. “I do believe you should attempt to translate that. This is likely why Albus left it with me, so I could pass it on to you.”

Potter shuddered hard. “Why would I want to?”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Honestly, Potter. Did you not just finish telling me you were not a total idiot?”

“Oi!”

“The horcruxes, Potter. It is possible, indeed likely, he may have kept a record of them. The man is a megalomaniac. It probably galled him to be forbidden to boast of his great horcrux-making prowess in exacting detail, so he has, I hope, recorded that information in there. I am sure he never dreamed you would be a Parselmouth and assumed his secrets would be safe.”

Potter gave the journal a look of utmost loathing and fear.

“Buck up, Potter. It’s only a book.”

“A murderously evil book.” He picked up the journal between his thumb and index finger and held it out at arm’s length as if it would bite him.

Severus rolled his eyes. “Come. Lay it here and see if you can translate a page for me.”

Potter set the book on the table and held his stomach. “Oh, I’m feeling ill. I’m not sure I’m ready to —urgh—translate, Professor.”
Severus raised an eyebrow. “Hmm. Seven out of ten on the bull-shitting scale.”

Potter blinked. “You said bull-shite.”

Severus chuckled. “What, did you think your professors were models of propriety outside of the classroom? I’ll have you know Minerva drinks like a Scot—as well she should—and out-curses the sailors.”

The young man’s eyes went wide. “No. You’re serious?”

“As a coronary.”

Potter laughed and took the seat next to Severus. “What else? What does Flitwick get up to?”

“Humph. Become a Hogwarts professor before he retires, and you’ll find out. Now, do you want to know where you erred?”

Potter grinned and nodded. “Yeah. Teach me, oh great master of bull-shite.”

Severus snorted. “You called me Professor, which immediately told me that you wanted something when you have been calling me by my surname since I came to you in the forest.”

Potter groaned.

Severus smirked. “Well, that, and your fake little grunt was a bit pathetic.”

Potter laughed. “Guess I need some work before I can make it in Slytherin, huh?”

“Hah! Slytherin indeed. You are the quintessential Gryffindor.” Severus tapped the book. “Now, to work.”

Potter muttered something about “Slytherin slave-drivers” and opened the book to a random page. “All right. Let’s see, where to go. Um, I’ll start here.” He pointed to the top of the right-hand page. “Just, let me thi—

“Stop stalling.”

Potter shivered. “It’s just, it’s Riddle’s head. I really don’t want to be in it more than I have to.” He shook himself and squared his shoulders. “But, there is the fact that the sooner we do this, the sooner I never have to see one of those bloody awful visions again.”

Severus nodded. “There is that. Can you read it?”

“Yeah. It just comes slowly. Okay. It starts in the middle of a sentence, so let me go back a bit. Hmm. Right, here we go. ‘My dear, sweet Helena. So easily persuaded, so easily fooled. The second place—oh. I think I got that one wrong. Sorry—the second piece in my collection is coming along quite nicely now. A bit of Fabian’s blood’—” Potter cried out and slid the journal back. “No. No. I can’t.”

Severus recognised the true fear and grief in Potter’s eyes and laid a hand on his forearm. “Potter? What is it?”

“I, I can’t.”

“Why? What about that reading hurt you so much?”
“F-Fabian Prewett, Snape. Molly’s brother. If he made him into a horcrux … I can’t. I just can’t.”

Severus hesitantly laid his hand atop Potter’s. The young man jumped and stared at their hands.

“I am here, Potter. I will … help you, as much as I am able.”

Potter swallowed hard and, with a shaky nod, turned his hand face-up, so his palm met Severus’.

In a small voice, he said, “Hold onto me?”

Severus’ face flamed, but he closed his hand around Potter’s. “If, if it helps. Does it?” He almost groaned at the hopeful, fearful sound of his voice. Merlin forgive him, but he wanted his touch to help Potter.

The young man gave him a shy smile. “Yeah. It does, actually. Don’t let go, okay? Just until I get through this?”

“As you wish. It sounds as if you have happened upon the making of a horcrux. If we are lucky, perhaps it will also say where it is stored.”

Potter glared. “If we were lucky, Fabian wouldn’t have died.”

“We cannot change the past, Potter, but the future isn’t a loss yet. Not if we find these horcruxes. Will you try to read on?”

Potter closed his eyes and nodded. “All right. ‘I wager I am the first person to attempt a twin horcrux in history.’” He gagged and blinked tears down his face. “Gods. He did it. He used them both.”

Severus lowered his head. “So it appears. My apologies, Potter.”

“Bill said that Molly never really recovered after their deaths. Did you know Fred and George were given F and G names to honour them?” Potter sniffled and dragged his free hand across his eyes. “Every time I hear of them, I, see the twins d-dead, bleeding, and, and ….”

Severus squeezed Potter’s hand. “Ssh. The last I heard, the Weasley twin terrors were alive and well and working on a prosthesis for George’s missing ear. The rumour is he wants it to cycle through the ears of various animals.”

Potter snorted and half-choked on tears. “That sounds like them. I can just imagine George going about Diagon Alley, easy as you please, with an elephant ear on the side of his head. Fred would have one of his own so as not to let George have all the fun, maybe a rabbit’s or a big, floppy dog ear.” He chuckled and wiped his eyes. “Merlin, they’re brilliant. Even something terrible like George’s injury, they’re turning into laughter.”

“Yes.” Severus lowered his gaze, afraid to admit it was his fault George had been injured in the first place, lest Potter withdraw his hand and his trust.

“Why did you do it, Snape? George’s ear. Why?”

Snape winced and trembled. “I, I was aiming for Avery. The bastard was going to kill George, and I had hoped my curse would kill him instead. But in dodging Avery’s curse, George leapt into mine.” Severus blinked hard and swallowed through a tight throat. “I am terribly remorseful for it. I never intended to hurt him.”
Potter squeezed Severus’ hand and rubbed over his knuckles. “Will you swear that?”

Severus sighed. “I, Severus Tobias Snape, swear upon my life that what I have just said about George Weasley’s ear is true to the best of my knowledge. This I so swear.” The blue light settled upon him like a lead weight, reminding him that no matter how warm Potter’s hand felt, the young man still did not trust him.

Potter watched him a long time, still holding onto Severus’ hand. “I can’t believe you’re letting me do this.”

Severus frowned and glanced around the room, trying to determine what Potter meant. “Do what, exactly?”

Potter lifted Severus’ hand from the table. “I expected you to withdraw a long time ago.”

Severus blushed and looked away. “You asked me not to let go.”

“Yeah, I did, didn’t I?” Potter smiled. “And you didn’t.”

Severus trembled, afraid of being turned away or found out. Yes, he had stayed because Potter had asked, but mostly it was because the feel of the young man’s gentle, calloused hand in his was the first real human touch he had known in decades. He wasn’t ready for it to end. Who knew how long it would be before he felt a warm hand upon his own once more?

Perhaps, if he was to die at the end of the month, he never would.

He held Potter tighter, hoping with every part of his being that the young man wouldn’t let go. That he would hold on, just a little longer.

In a soft voice, Potter said, “Stay while I try to read this again?”

Severus swallowed a sudden tightness in his throat and squeezed Potter’s palm. Potter hadn’t let him go. Some of the ice frosting his heart melted.

“I am here;” he said, his voice rough with emotion.

“Thank you, Snape.”

Severus rubbed his thumb over Harry’s fingers and smiled. “Surprisingly, I find I do not mind. Are you able to read now?”

“Just don’t let go.”

Severus lowered his eyes to hide his intense need and whispered, “I do not intend to.”

“Good.” Potter took a deep breath and began to translate once more.
Chapter Summary

***AN: This chapter has Sev and Harry pretending to be priests to destroy a horcrux. They do have some misconceptions about the denominations in question and Christianity in general, as neither are religious, but I was trying to portray that their ignorance comes through lack of experience rather than prejudice. They do worry about having to lie to the priests and their well-being, so I hope it's clear I don't mean to offend anyone of faith. If I have, you have my apologies.***

***AN2: I had to edit the date with the priest going mad here because I forgot it has to happen prior to the attack on Harry's parents. Whoops.***

CHAPTER 6

WEEK 2

“The diadem is in Hogwarts?” Harry tapped his chin in thought. “How on earth are we to get it?”

Snape looked up from the map he had been studying over the past few days. “I am not sure. I think we shall have to leave it for last, but come and look at this, Potter.”

Harry moved to stand at Snape’s side and gave the man a glare. “I’m not ten metres tall, Snape. You’ll have to bring that down from the skies if you expect me to look at anything.”

Snape smirked and dropped it to the level of his knees. “Better?”

“Smart-arse.” Harry jerked the map away and held it out, frowning at the lines Snape had added between the dots. “What is this, our travel plans?”

“No. Those dots were on the map when we started, as were the red lines. I’ve thought since I saw it that the dots were in a runic formation, and the rune þurisaz fits the markings, all except this blue dot here. I cannot for the life of me understand how it fits into the rune, or if it is supposed to fit at all.”

Harry turned the map every which way, but discovered nothing beyond the vague shape of Snape’s rune. It looked like a long line with a triangle pointing out of one side in the middle. The blue dot was off to the west of the southernmost point, just north of Blackpool. Dumbledore had written ‘GH-7’ out to the side in translucent lettering.

“Strange setup. What does this rune mean?”

“That fits my theory as well, that the Dark Lord hid a horcrux at every point of the rune. The rune means ‘god’ or ‘godlike,’ so Riddle would love to employ it as a means to ensure his immortality.”
“It does sound like the bastard.”

“Yes. Now look here. The dots are numbered. The first listed is Hogwarts. I imagine Albus intended to destroy that horcrux first, but I know for a fact he has not. The two you have destroyed—the ring and the journal—are scratched off already, here and here.” Snape pointed to a dot on the coast of the Isle of Man with a red line through it and a second lined dot near Galloway Forest. “And I scratched off the locket’s point of origin here.” He tapped a dot near Ayr.

“But that makes no sense. We found the locket in Grimmauld Place, and, while I have no idea where the Riddle mansion actually is, I know it wasn’t in a forest. I thought it was in Leeds somewhere, or close to it.”

“No, no. You misunderstand. These are the points where Riddle created the horcruxes. They may or may not still be stored there.”

Harry winced. “So even with the map ….”

“Finding them will still be a challenge. Yes.”

“Damn.”

“Take courage. With three horcruxes down, we have only two unaccounted for, and I believe the one created in Dumbarton is still there based on tibits I have gleaned from the Dark Lord’s grandstanding. So the only one we may need to search for is this one, near Hearthstane, and I think that one will be close to its point of origin as well for this reason: this is the nexus of his runic creation and the source of its power.”

Harry nodded. “So the good news is that we have a general idea where the last three horcruxes should be.”

“Correct. Everything in my analysis fits, except for this dot in Blackpool. I cannot work out what it is supposed to mean or where it fits in with the horcruxes.”

Harry traced a finger along the map to the dot outside Blackpool. “Hmm. What does ‘GH’ stand for?”

“Oh. I assume it to mean ‘Godric’s Hollow.’ It is rumoured to be near Blackpool.”

“Godric’s Hollow?” A chill ran the length of Harry’s body. “It might not be part of the rune or the horcrux hunt, Snape. It might just be somewhere Dumbledore wants me to go. Look, it’s even marked in a different colour. He must have wanted us to know it was separate.”

Snape frowned and stared at the map. “Merlin. I believe you must be correct. I have been staring at this mess too long for me to have missed something so simple.”

Harry grinned. “Right. Couldn’t be that I caught onto something you didn’t.”

“Blasphemy.”

Harry laughed and patted Snape’s shoulder. “You know, I never imagined I’d say this, but you’re pretty funny. I think I might actually be starting to like you.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “Someone call the Prophet.”

Harry snorted. “Let’s not, considering I’m currently ‘Undesirable Number One’ and you’re sporting
“A wise decision,” said a sober Snape. He tapped the mark near Cashlie. “This will be the most dangerous both because of the proximity of Death Eaters and its inhospitable location. Despite the order Albus intended, I believe we should take the mark in Dumbarton first and work our way southwards to whatever awaits us in Godric’s Hollow before we try for the diadem.”

Harry grabbed a granola bar from the top of their newly-purchased supplies and bit into its nutty, crunchy-sweet goodness. “Wohkth for meh.”

Snape brushed crumbs from his sleeve and scowled. “Charming. Did you not just eat lunch?”

Harry swallowed and gave him a grin. “Growing boy.”

“You are eighteen, not eight. I do not imagine you will grow much more than what you have already done.”

“Oi, don’t stomp on a man’s dreams.” Harry glared up at the man. “Just because you’re tall, dark, and ha—er.” Heat rushed over his face. “Uh, never mind.”

Snape raised an eyebrow and smirked. “And what, Mister Potter?”

“Er, handy. You know. Because of the potions. And the runes.”

“Hmm. And was that what you intended to say?”

Harry looked away. “Of course it was.”

Snape glared. “Potter ….”

“All right, all right. I was going to say ‘handsome.’” Harry blushed to his hairline and rubbed his fringe over his eyes.

Snape wrapped his arms around himself. “Do you truly find me so? I, I cannot understand how. Everything about me is … wrong.”

“Well, you looked a right mess when you first came to the forest, but now that you’ve some proper food in your stomach, a couple of nights’ sleep, and have had a decent shower or two, you’re not so bad.”

“You must need new glasses,” Snape muttered.

Harry snorted. “Probably do. They’ve never been checked.”

Snape’s mouth dropped open. “Never? Not even at the start?”

“Nope. You know how everyone always said I look just like my da? Well, that might just be because these are his glasses. They were in my baby basket for some reason when Dumbledore left me with the Dursleys. Hermione did a spell first year to make them fit what I need, but we weren’t sure if it was fully accurate or how long it would last. She renews it every year, but it might need another go.”

“Merlin. We will be fitting you for glasses before leaving Dumbarton. I shall not have you trying to attack the Dark Lord and hitting me instead simply because you cannot see where the beast is standing.”

Harry rubbed the back of his hair. “I’ve always found him before, but I won’t deny better glasses
could only help. Still, this isn’t important. Do we have everything we need to make it a few days or so in Dumbarton?”

Snape nodded. “Unless the bastard hid the horcrux in the castle. That could present a problem.”

“Well, I’ll just charm my way in, no?”

Snape sighed and smacked his forehead. “Merlin help us. It is a good thing the castle is little more than a highly-guarded tourist destination in recent times. We would be dead before you opened your mouth otherwise.”

“Oi! I can be charming, well, when you’re not being a git.”

“See what I mean? You should let me do the talking.”

“Oh that will work out well. Professor Snape, Dungeon Bat Extraordinaire, attempting to charm the pants off the royals. Er, the guards, rather. And you worry I’ll get us killed.”

“Humph. The guards may leave their clothing on as far as I am concerned.”

Harry laughed and linked his arm through Snape’s, smirking at the man’s sudden jump.

“Just what are you doing, Potter?”

Harry gave him an innocent smile. “Aren’t you going to apparate us, or should we walk?”

Snape groaned. “Gods save me from impertinent little imps. May I remind you that we are in Dublin, Potter? How do you plan to walk across the sea?”

“Swim, of course. And I am not little.” And Harry wasn’t pouting. Much.

Snape patted Harry’s head with a chuckle. “You are to me. Now, hold on tight and take your bag. The featherweight charms are working?”

Harry hefted the bag onto his shoulder and nodded. “It’s not too heavy.”

“Good.” Snape shouldered his own bag and apparated them out.

Severus landed with his shocked companion in a tree-roofed area off the main road. Snow piled past the tops of his feet and sent an icy chill deep into his bones. He liked winter well enough—from inside a cozy parlour, in front of a blazing fireplace, with a mug of hot tea to keep his hands and belly warm. From the outside, freezing his arse off in six inches of snow and ice, Severus would take summer’s blazing heat any day.

Beside him, Potter stumbled and cursed. Severus caught Harry before he could fall upon his face and helped him reorient himself. The young man glared at Severus as soon as he had regained his footing.

Severus said, “What?”

“A little warning next time? I might have broken my neck, you know.”
Severus chuckled. “I caught you, did I not?”

Potter’s cheeks tinted pink. “Er, I guess you did. Thanks. Kind of.” He plucked the map from Severus’ hand and examined it with a frown. “Snape, how are we supposed to find this dot? The mark on the map practically covers the entire—oh!”

Severus frowned at the young man. “Oh what?”

“The map … it just sort of zoomed in when I thought of it. Look. It’s showing High Street now. Looks like the dot is around there somewhere. Pity it can’t pinpoint it further.”

Severus took the map from Harry and fished out the journal instead. Even glamoured to appear like a tourists’ guide, the thing still radiated dark magic. “I will navigate. You work on translating this.”

Potter frowned and glanced around them. “In a Muggle town?”

“Don’t try to pretend you did not learn any silencing spells from my book, Potter. I am fully aware you employ Muffliato every night. Having rather … interesting dreams you do not wish me to overhear, hmm? Your tall, dark, and handsome companion?”

“I said handy,” Potter grumbled and took the journal from Severus. “And yes, if ghastly nightmares count as interesting.” He gave Severus a sly look. “Did you just flirt with me?”

Severus almost swallowed his tongue in shock. “F-flirt! Merlin, no!”

“Mm-hmm. Sounded like a flirt.”

Severus’ face flamed. “Poppycock. I merely intended to bring your teenage hormones to the fore and embarrass the daylights out of you.”

Potter smirked. “Oh, bringing my hormones to the fore, hmm? You know, I can think of other effects that might have on a body besides embarrassment. Poppycock seems a rather … appropriate word for it, actually.”

Severus’ ears caught fire, too. “Potter! Gods. Shut your foul mouth and get to work on that journal.” He turned and buried his face in his map. “Merlin save me from idiotic teenagers. Flirting! Paugh! As if I would even consider it.”

“Methinks he doth protest too much,” Potter teased in a sing-song voice.

Severus turned and gave Potter a piercing look. “Where on earth did you learn to quote Shakespeare?” He frowned. “And properly, for that matter.”

“When your best friend is Hermione, you read a lot of books.” Harry chuckled. “She used that one against Ron, actually, teasing him about his constant sniping about Malfoy.”

“I should have known it was stolen from Granger.” Severus returned to his map and motioned to the street to their left. “Enough games for now. The marking is this way, Potter.”

“All right.” Potter followed Severus down the road. “You’re sure you want me to read this? I could, uh, tell you a joke or something.”

“Potter, we have been joking too much as is. This is war. We must be serious now.”

A gloved hand slipped into the crook of his elbow. “Snape? You’re right, of course, but I’m glad you can laugh and play with me a bit. It’s been … much too dark for far too long.”
Against his better judgment, Severus allowed the contact. Only because Potter was warm, of course.

“I feel much the same, Potter. But do translate that journal now.”

“Can I keep holding your arm?”

Severus swallowed around his tight throat. “Ah, if it gives you the ability to read, then yes.”

“Thanks. I feel a bit less horrid if I’m holding onto someone alive and warm.”

Severus pressed a hand against Potter’s briefly. “I am here, Potter. Now, go on.”

Potter sighed and gave a little shudder. “Merlin, I hate this thing. Well, where were we? Right. *The idea of placing the chalice within the Muggles’ candle—that can’t be right. In their … cat … their catcher … oh!—their cathedral appealed to me. What height of irony that an object once used for holy rounds—no, rites—would taint their rituals, their false worship of false gods. They would hold it and pray to the one they call Christ, but in reality, they would water—oops—worship me. My soul, my greatness. Yes, it seems a perfect place to hide my horcrux.* Ugh. He’s utterly vile.”

“Indeed,” said Severus, “but unless I am mistaken, that is our quarry just ahead.”

Potter looked up and frowned at the massive Anglican church. “How will we ever find it in such a huge building? And how will we take it if we do?”

Severus gave Potter a wicked grin. “*That*, Mister Potter, would be my specialty.”

“I thought your specialty was potions.”

“Well, yes, and Slytherin cunning. I was a spy, if you recall.” Severus frowned at the building and cast a scanning spell he had developed years before. “I believe new garments are in order.”

He tugged them behind a nearby Indian restaurant and cast a *Notice-me-not*. When he had finished casting, he and Potter wore the white robes of Anglican priests. Both outfits had coloured trim, red for Potter and green for Severus, of course.

Potter tugged at his decorated sleeve. “Huh. We’re pretending to be priests? I think you should know I haven’t much idea of Christian religion beyond a few names and basic concepts. The Dursleys were only religious on holidays, and even if they had made more of a practise of it, they would have sooner married the devil himself than brought me along to church.”

“Hmm, seems to me Petunia did marry the devil, but never mind it. I shall do the talking. I have quite a lot of experience with Catholic faith—”

“I hate to break this to you, but they’re *Anglican*, Snape.”

“Yes, yes, I know. The two denominations are not so different, and what I do not know I can easily glean from their minds. Just be quiet and let me do the talking for once.”

“Fair enough.” Potter went to tuck the journal away, but Severus tapped it with a heavy shielding charm first.

“In the event that these Muggle priests are better at sensing evil than I suspect. That book, however innocuous, is still rife with it.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed,” said Potter with a shudder. “I can *feel* it. Whenever I pick it up, it’s as cold as that locket always was.” He hesitated. “You should probably shield your Dark Mark as well, just in
“Yes, I should indeed.” Severus concealed a wince of pain as he shielded the dark magic in his arm from detection. It hadn’t stopped burning since his discovery. On the contrary, the pain seemed to spread a little further every moment.

How much longer could he keep his suffering a secret? Well, at the end of the month, it would not likely matter. Potter’s continued insistence on oaths proved the young man might never trust him.

Severus shook his head and let his sleeve drop. As long as he could help Harry win the war, he didn’t mind dying for his sins. He might at least find some forgiveness in the mother, if he could never convince the son.

When Severus looked up again, Potter had tucked the book away in a fold of his robe and was busy sealing it with his wand. Severus added an extra shield and a featherweight charm to keep the book’s weight from pulling the young man’s garb in odd directions and revealing its presence. Another charm made it appear to be a Bible, just in case the priests discovered it despite all their precautions.

“Thanks.” Potter shook himself out and smoothed his robes, then frowned down his body. “These designs ….” He brought his sleeve to his face and gave Severus a puzzled look. “They’re runic, aren’t they? Well, the crosses are obviously religious, but what about these?” He pointed to the rings surrounding each cross along his hems, made up not of solid red bands, but miniscule lettering.

Severus nodded. “Yes, those are indeed runic.”

“Won’t that give us away?”

“That is a typical design of an Anglican priest’s garb. Much of the Christian way is not quite as Muggle as it seems.”

Potter grinned. “Interesting. How’d you know what their robes looked like?”

“A charm, Potter. Are you going to question me on the robes all afternoon, or might we move along already?”

The young man chuckled and let his arm fall to his side. “By the way you’re foaming at the mouth, I suppose we had best move along.”

Severus squawked. “I am not foaming!”

“It was a joke, Snape.”

“Yes well—” Severus paused. “Bollocks. Our names are too noticeable, mine especially. We shall have to go by aliases. I shall go by Simon. And for you … will Judah do?”

Potter glared. “Isn’t he the disciple who betrayed the others?”

Severus chuckled. “No, that was Judas.”

“Oh. All right then. Judah it is.”

“Good. Now keep in mind that we must appear to be celibate, holy men. No questionable humour, cursing, or touching will be tolerated beyond holding or patting each other’s shoulders. These people are likely to interpret anything more as … well, more.”

Potter winced. “And they’re not fond of gays, are they?”
“Not at all. Especially not among their priests.”

“Understood. I’ll try not to tip them off.”

“Good. Then come along, Father Judah. We must see to the rumours of possession here.”

Potter grinned. “Brilliant. Lead on, Father Simon.”

“Follow me.” Severus led Potter into the church and, though he hadn’t prayed to Muggle gods since puberty, he asked forgiveness of the Christian deity for needing to deceive his priests.

‘Actually, I suppose it isn’t much of a deception. That chalice is indeed possessed, and by a man who is as close to an actual demon as they come. Still, I do not like needing to lie to men of faith.’

Severus jumped as the heavy doors closed behind them with a resounding click. A warm voice called out from the wings.

“Welcome!” A brown-eyed, jovial-looking man in priests’ regalia appeared from behind a column. “Oh, hello brothers. What brings you to our place of worship?”

Severus took a deep breath and gathered his wits close about him. “Greetings, brother. I am Father Simon Wood, and this is Father Judah Inverness. We’ve come from London upon hearing rumours that a certain chalice in this sanctuary is possessed.”

The priest gaped a moment, then clasped his hands together and looked to the skies. “Oh, thank the Lord—an answer to our prayers at last.” He smiled at the two ‘priests’ and motioned them in closer. “Come, come. I’m so glad to have you. We’ve been praying for aid for nigh onto thirty years by now.” His face darkened. “The rumours you have heard are quite true. That horrid chalice twists the faith and the minds of all who have touched it. They have all gone quite insane, speaking of the rise of devils and dark lords.”

Potter shuddered, and Severus laid a hand on his shoulder briefly.

“Be at peace, brother. We shall deal with it presently, if our compatriot here will be good enough to show us the way.” He racked his brains for how priests tended to respond to such situations and added, “And if our Lord is kind enough to look upon our endeavours with his favour.”

‘Ugh. I do not enjoy playing at this. It is wrong to deceive honest men so.’

Potter looked just as uncomfortable with the situation, and Severus realised they needed to keep their interaction with the priest to the bare minimum for the sake of both their cover and their honour.

“Brother,” said Severus, “if you will, please lead us to this accursed chalice. Thirty years is far too long for it to have harmed the Lord’s people.”

“Indeed it is,” said the priest with a solemn nod. “Come, come. Let me show you to the chamber. Twenty-one years ago, the former father of this parish tried to exorcise it and fell to its madness. After that, the deacon locked it away lest someone else be poisoned.”

“Most wise,” said Severus, and followed the man into the wings.
Some hours later, Severus leaned back into his chair in their hotel room, glad to be back in his normal clothes again and with one more horcrux down. Potter sat across him, looking relieved to be away from the church as well. The journal lay between them, still disguised to look like a Bible. The illusion disturbed Severus, and he removed the glamours.

Potter frowned at the book. “That was … easier than I expected.”

“I do not think this horcrux was as well guarded as the others. With Muggles claiming the object as theirs, I believe he thought no wizard would suspect a ‘demon-possessed chalice’ to be a horcrux. His overconfidence is, perhaps, his greatest weakness.”

“Or his tendency to monologue,” Potter said with a smirk.

“‘Monologue’ is a noun, Potter, not a verb.”

“Whatever it is, it’s saved my arse loads of times. As long as I can keep the idiot talking, I’ve got time to run.”

Severus bowed his head. “A fair strategy, but, however efficient it has proved in the past, I am afraid we shall not be able to depend on that tactic in Hearthstane.”

“No.”

A particularly vicious twinge shot up Severus’ arm, and he could not stop himself from rubbing at his mark.

“What is it, Snape?”

The man looked away. “I’m well enough.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

Severus sighed and let his hand drop. “I wish there was a way to rid of it.”

“It might not be impossible.”

Potter, in attempting to comfort Severus, squeezed his mark gently, and electricity raced up the man’s entire arm. With a sharp cry of anguish, Severus folded almost double and rocked his arm into his chest.

“Snape! What in Merlin’s name? I didn’t squeeze *that* hard, did I?” Potter took Severus’ hand from his shoulder and gently eased it down. “What happened? I know I didn’t hurt you or I’d be blasted across the room with a broken arm, but something did. What’s wrong?”

“The D-Dark Lord,” Severus said through gritted teeth. “Cursing me through the mark, s-since he discovered my true loyalties.”

Potter gasped. “Merlin, Snape! Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t … think it mattered. There is nothing … to be done.”

Potter sighed and motioned to Severus’ bed. “Easy. Come and lie down, okay? I’m going to take a look at this and see if I can’t help. You and I both know he likes to keep his secrets in Parseltongue.”

Severus let Potter lead him to the bed. Indeed, in the amount of pain he was in, he could hardly protest. But as Harry gently laid Severus’ arm straight with the mark facing up and lifted his sleeve,
Severus stopped the young man with a hand on his wrist.

“Take care, Potter. I, I do not want to hurt you.”

“I’d also prefer not to end up with a crater in my arm.” Potter gave him a wry smile and carefully eased the man’s sleeve up his arm to the top of his elbow. “Dear Merlin,” he breathed.

Severus lifted his head to see and winced. The snake in his mark had turned crimson, and the skin around its tattooed-on teeth was bruised and blistered. He paled at the sight of red streaks spreading from the mark and nearing the crease of his arm.

“Shite. He’s going to kill me through it,” he said in a broken whisper.

Harry grabbed Severus’ uninjured hand. “What do you mean?”

“Those red streaks are a sign of blood poisoning. I know not if it is an infection or actual poison, but either way, the result is the same. I will die in a few days.”

In his shock, Severus hardly noticed the tears running down his face or the way his entire body trembled. What did it matter now anyway? He would be dead soon. Dignity had no place in the face of impending death.

A gentle hand rubbed his tears away. “Don’t give up, okay? Let me at least try to save you.”

Severus turned to Potter with a tearful sigh. “Why do you care, Harry? You hate me.”

“No. Not anymore. Be still and quiet, okay? I’m going to try to help you.”

Lost in pain and fear as he was, Severus could not reply.

The idea of losing Snape hurt Harry like losing a limb. He could barely breathe for the agony in his chest. Had he time and ability to think, just how much it hurt might have shocked him, but he could focus on nothing beyond Snape’s silvery tears and the snake glowing like hot coals on the man’s arm.

Why had the snake turned red? It used to be black.

Had Voldemort put the curse into the snake itself? If that were the case, perhaps Harry could simply tell the snake to stop. It was worth a try, anyway. The worst that could happen was that Harry ended up looking a bit silly and it did nothing to stop the slow death descending on Snape.

Harry looked to Snape’s face once more, and a fire built in his chest. No. Over the past week, he had come to care about the man under Snape’s mask. Snape the spy had been a bully, but Snape the man was surprisingly gentle. A bit awkward at times. Shy and funny and blindingly brilliant, and dear Merlin, was he ever brave. Despite their antagonistic past, Harry found he cared about the man Snape had become. About the man he had never known until now. About Severus. Against all odds, they had become something like friends.

And damned if Harry would let that vile snake take away one more friend.

“Hold on, Severus,” Harry whispered. “Please.”
A shaking hand slipped into Harry’s and brought a wave of tears to his eyes. Even in his pain and fear, Severus was trying to comfort Harry.

Gods, Severus had changed so much. Was this really the man he had been all along? How lonely it must have been, how sad and cold and terrible.

Harry gathered his courage. Severus had put his faith in him, and Harry would not let him down. Not this time.

He leaned over Severus’ arm and watched the snake, looking for clues. He had only been watching a moment when a small movement startled him.

“Severus, be still. Very still.”

“H-Harry, I am so very afraid.”

“I know.” Harry squeezed Severus’ hand and climbed up to sit beside him. “It’s going to be all right. Just try to be as still as you can, okay? I’m trying to work out how he’s hurting you.”

“I will try.”

Harry slid a hand into Severus’ hair and caught his breath at the feel of it. Merlin, he hadn’t expected locks like satin, soft and warm, silky strands wrapping around his fingers. It was pleasant, for both Harry and Severus judging by the way the man’s expression relaxed.

“All right, Severus?”

The man turned a pale, tear-streaked face towards Harry. “Why call me by my given name?”

“I don’t know. I just wanted to. Should I stop?”

Severus smiled, though his eyes remained haunted. “No. I enjoy hearing it.”

“Good. Focus on my touch, okay, Severus? It might help you stay still and calm.”

“Yes. Thank you for this, Harry. For this one moment before I go.”

Tears blurred Harry’s vision. “Ssh. Don’t say that. I haven’t given up, and neither should you. Fight for me. Please.”

Severus leaned into Harry’s hand. “I will try.”

“Thank you. Now, be as still as you can.”

Severus nodded and relaxed his body, all save for his aching arm. It surprised Harry that Severus could relax even that much.

“Good. Stay just like that.”

With Severus relaxed, Harry leaned over his injured arm again and watched the snake closely.

There! It had moved. Harry leaned closer and—shite! It was biting Severus. No wonder the man was in pain.

Well, if the snake was sentient enough to bite, perhaps it was sentient enough to speak.
“Painted Ssnake,” said Harry in Parseltongue, “why do you bite my friend?”

The snake tattoo jumped, as if startled, and Severus squirmed.

“You are a sssspeaker, Little Dragon?”

Harry resented the little part, but chose not to comment. “Yesss. Why do you bite my friend? He is a good man.”

“The other speaker said he would remove my life if I did not.”

“Your life? He is a liar, Painted One. When did he say this?”

“When the Dark-Souled One met my bearer in the round hall of paintings.”

“The round hall of paintings?” Harry frowned and switched to English. “Severus, did Riddle speak in Parseltongue before you portkeyed out of Hogwarts?”

Severus groaned. “Potter, what are you on about? Why are you talking to the tattoo?” He hesitated. “How are you talking to the tattoo? It’s nothing but ink and some tracing magic.”

“I don’t know, but it can talk to me. It’s biting you. I’m trying to get it to stop. Did Riddle speak in Parseltongue?”

“Y-yes, actually. I believed he was cursing me.”

“Looks like he was threatening your snake instead.”

“Painted One,” said Harry to the tattoo snake, “I think the Dark-Souled One was lying. Other than to call your bearer to him, is he able to speak to you without being near?”

“Not that I have seen.”

Harry nodded. “He is lying then. He cannot remove your life without being near you, and we are avoiding him. Will you please ssstop biting my friend? It is killing him. And when he dies, ssso will you.”

“I am killing my host?”

“Yes. You are poisoning him.”

The snake paused. “I did not know I had venom. I will stop. Is it too late to save him?”

“I do not know. I will try.”

“Thank you, Little Dragon.”

Harry frowned. “Why do you call me dragon?”

“You are dragon kin. I smell it.”

“You can smell me? Merlin. You are like a real snake. How? I thought you were only a tattoo.”

“I do not know, Little Dragon, but I have had life for many years. I suspect I was still before then, but I do not remember anything from that time if so.”

Harry sat back and rubbed his chin. “Interesting. Thank you, Painted One. If I learn anything else
“about you I will let you know.”

“Thank you. I hope you are able to save us, Dragon Kin.”

“I have no idea why you call me that, but I promise I will try.”

Harry sat up and laid a hand on Severus’ injured shoulder. “Does it still hurt?”

Severus shuddered. “The burning is gone, but it still aches. I can almost feel the poison.”

Harry held Severus’ hand in his. “It’ll be okay, Severus. We’ll work it out.”

Severus turned away and let slip a soft sob. “Work what out? Do you know how to remove poison? No? Then there is nothing to work out except where I shall be buried.”

Harry stroked the hair back from Severus’ forehead. “Please, try to hold on. Maybe some rest will help now that the biting has stopped. And I’ll try some dittany. You never know.”

Severus sighed and turned on his uninjured side, cradling his other arm against his chest. Harry took off the man’s shoes and pulled the blanket over him.

“Try to sleep if you can.” Harry sat by the man’s shoulder and stroked his hair. “I’m here, okay? Whatever happens, I’ll be with you.”

Severus turned his head into Harry’s hand and whispered, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”
Harry was dreaming. He stood in a field with reddish grass and a violet sky, with streaks of pinkish-red clouds. There were no stars, and a purple mist swirled at his feet. He frowned and looked around him, but saw nothing but endless grass in any direction.

Harry whispered to the air, “What is this place?”

To his surprise, a heartbeat sounded on his left. It was strained, weak. As if the person it belonged to was sick and possibly dying. Sad acceptance and a soul-deep longing for companionship washed over him as he turned towards the sound.

Harry let slip a shaky sigh. “Severus.”

Though he didn’t understand what was happening, he followed the sound of Severus’ heartbeat across the fields for a hundred kilometres, or what qualified as such in dreams. That longing for another soul called to him, and he followed, hoping his presence eased the bitter pain on Severus’ heart.

“I’m here, Severus. You’re not alone.”

Nothing but Severus’ heartbeat answered him. Harry took comfort in the sound. As long as it beat, even lost in this strange world, he knew Severus still lived.

He continued to follow the sound, walking and searching for some sign of where he was, when the heartbeat weakened. With a gasp of horror, he bolted toward the stuttering sound, tears half-blinding him.

“Severus! Don’t you dare give up!”

Despair and fear flooded him, emotions not Harry’s own, and the young man sobbed.

“No! I won’t, won’t let you die.”

He surged forward, running as fast as his legs would carry him, and with a sudden lurch, the ground fell away from under his feet. He cried out, shaking with terror, until great, black-feathered wings—shiny like a raven’s wing but pointed like a dragon’s—beat the air on either side of him.

He let out a whoop of joy and surprise. “Hah! Dragon kin indeed.”

Harry flapped his wings and took to the air. To his shock, as he gained greater distance from the ground, the clouds of purple mist took on a more sinister form. It glowed and reached towards a flickering white light—Severus! That light had to be Severus’ life, and the horrid tendrils crept ever nearer to its source.

Damned if Harry would let it win. With a cry, he beat his wings against the tide of the creeping mist,
thinking to push it back. Instead, the tendril of mist nearest him glowed white, shrank upon itself, and vanished.

“What in Merlin’s name?”

How on earth had he done that? Harry shook his head and spread his wings once more. Who cared what he had done as long as it saved Severus’ life? With renewed determination, he beat the mist back and vanquished it, listening to Severus’ heartbeat growing stronger and stronger.

The mist curled in on itself until all that was left upon blood-red ground was a tiny ball of purple. Harry cheered and blasted the last of the poison away, then dusted his hands together.

“Well, that’s that. Now, how exactly do I get out o—”

A yawn stretched across his words.

“Oh. Tired all of a sudden. But where do I g—”

Another yawn, and Harry found his wings slowing. He landed upon the grass with a thump, curled into a feathery ball, and soon slept in the strange red world.

Severus woke to something warm and soothing at his back and a complete absence of pain. Merlin! Had the dittany actually worked? No study had ever revealed poison removal as one of the uses of essence of dittany. How had Potter discovered a use for potions that Severus himself had never suspected? He would need to investigate it proper— His thoughts screeched to a halt as the warmth behind him moved.

“Potter?”

“M’n’m’s H’ry.”

“English, if you please.”

A tousled raven head appeared from behind his shoulder, and Severus felt guilty for waking the young man. Red rimmed Harry’s eyes and heavy purple bags draped beneath them.


Severus frowned and started to move to the other bed, but a strong arm around his waist stopped him.

“Well. Don’t leave. Scared. Don’t wanna lose you, too.”

Severus sighed and rubbed Harry’s hand. “But I must go. I cannot help the pois—wait. The poison! The dittany? Did it work?”

Harry sniffled and shook his head. “I tried everything. But I couldn’t get the streaks to go away. I’m sorry, Sev’rus. So sorry.” He buried his head into Severus’ back and wept. “Don’t wanna lose you. Don’t go.”
“But I … Potter ….” Severus lifted his marked arm and frowned. It was still grey outside, but the sun had risen enough to show the curves and colour of his arm. The blisters and bruising had vanished, and something in him told him the streaks would be gone, too. A quick Lumos revealed what he had dared not hope.

The streaks had vanished, and his arm had healed. Somehow, Harry had saved his life.

“Potter! Look!”

The young man jolted up. “Whassamatta?”

Severus held his arm out and pointed the light at it. Harry squinted at it a moment, and when his eyes adjusted enough, let slip a shuddering gasp. “I, it’s gone? The poison?”

Severus nodded and grinned. “It’s gone.”

Tears slipped down Harry’s face. “Then, then you’re okay? You’ll live?”

“Yes. But, why do you cr—oomph!”

Severus toppled backwards with an armful of shaking, weeping Harry.

“So scared. Thought you’d die. Couldn’t save you.”

Severus patted Harry’s back. “Come now. Ssh. I’m well now.”

“Must have done something in my dream.”

“Dream? What dream?”

Harry sat up and wiped his face. “I dreamed I was fighting the poison in your blood and I had wings. I don’t really understand it.”

Severus gaped, chills racing up and down his spine. “You … saved my life in a dream? Merlin. I have never heard of such magic.”

“Neither have I. Could it be the ‘power he knows not?’”

“Perhaps. You have more than one talent which could qualify.”

Harry gave a shaky chuckle.

“What?”

“I finally got you to admit I have talents.”

Severus laughed. “I suppose you did. For now, do you believe you can sleep? Whatever power you used on me appears to have entirely drained you.”

Harry chuckled again. “I could sleep standing up. C’n I stay?”

“Stay?”

“Don’t wanna leave you. Thought I’d lose you. Don’t wanna sleep alone.”

Severus swallowed hard. His pulse fluttered and his stomach flipped. “You, you wish to sleep here? With me?”
“Yeah. D’you mind? Just for tonight?”

Severus trembled as he lay next to Harry. “N-no. You may stay if you are afraid.”

“T-t-thanks,” Harry said around a yawn and curled up right next to Severus’ chest.

‘*Merlin,*’ Severus whispered in his mind. ‘*He’s so … warm.*’ He brushed a tendril of raven hair back from Harry’s face. The young man had already fallen fast asleep. ‘*So sweet.*’

Severus had *not* just used that appalling adjective, had he? Merlin indeed. With a scowl, he stretched his unmarked arm above his head and draped the other across Harry’s shoulders, relief and gratitude filling him anew at his lack of pain.

Within moments, Severus had fallen asleep with his face pressed into Harry’s wild mop and his arm wrapped tightly around the young man’s waist.

Harry awakened to the feel of someone wrapped around him, holding him close in his sleep. He started back, shocked, then relaxed as he realised it was Severus holding him. Merlin, had he really asked the man to let him sleep close last night? Well, Severus hadn’t minded *too* much judging by the way he had wrapped himself around Harry.

Stifling a yawn, Harry attempted to disentangle himself from Severus’ long limbs without waking the man. Gods, the man was like an octopus, clinging this way and that as Harry tried to struggle free.


“Er, you’re welcome, Severus,” said Harry with a wry grin, “but do you think you could let me up? I need the loo.”

Severus laughed and extricated his limbs from Harry’s smaller frame. “If you tell *anyone* about waking like this, I will strangle you in your sleep.” He smirked, letting Harry know it was a joke, and the younger man snorted.

“You’d have to catch me first, old man.”

“Old man! I am only thirty-eight, thank you. Practically a teenager in wizard years.”

A subdued Harry stroked down the shank of white hair at Severus’ temple. “Yeah. The war has taken too much out of you.” He patted the man’s shoulder. “I’m glad you’re not spying any longer.”

With that, he dashed to the loo and, after dealing with his immediate needs, took a few moments to refresh himself. With a freshly washed face and clean teeth, Harry felt more himself and returned to the hotel room.

Severus darted in the loo behind Harry without so much as a word, and Harry snorted.

“So sorry!”

Severus said nothing, perhaps because he felt odd about talking while in the loo. Come to think of it,
so did Harry. He went to the table and frowned at the evil little journal.

“You almost killed him, you bastard,” he muttered, and barely resisted the temptation to dump the evil book in the nearest fireplace. Not that he could in a modern Muggle hotel, but still.

With a grumble, Harry picked up a magazine from the hotel-provided rack and thumbed through it while Severus ran through his own ablutions. He was reading an article about cooking and was more engrossed than he wanted to admit when Severus rejoined him.

“Better?”

The man rolled his eyes. “Get dressed, Potter. We are getting you some proper glasses after breakfast.”

Harry grinned. “Does that mean I don’t need to read that horrid thing today? Maybe we could take a little day trip?”

Severus gave him a stern look. “If you want to delay ending the war.”

All Harry’s mirth vanished like air from a popped balloon. “Spoilsport.” Harry muttered, but he knew Severus was right. They could not afford to put the war off, not even for much needed vacations. He sighed and picked up the journal, though he hated the monstrosity with every fibre of his being.

Severus folded himself into the chair beside Harry’s and gave the young man a piercing look. “What were you hoping to do instead, Potter?”

Harry shook his head and started to rise. “It’s nothing, really. Not im—” A gentle hand on his wrist stopped him and steered him back into the chair.

“What was it, Potter? You saved my life last night. I do not count it as a small favour. If a small delay will give you the strength you need to continue, then I shall not begrudge you a little joy.”

Harry grinned. “Really?”

Severus sighed. “Do you forget that I am no longer your professor and at your mercy? I cannot tell you what to do with your day.”


“I know. But it is the truth. So what did you want to do?”

Harry hesitated, but the idea of a break, however short, did intrigue him. He felt as if he had been fighting for years on end. He’d soon have a grey streak to match Severus’ at this rate.

“Um, I thought—only if you want to, mind—we could see the castle here.”


“That’s okay. I’ve never really been … well, anywhere and I’m just so tired of the war being my whole life. I’m tired of being me. Just this once, I’d like to be a regular Englishman, just out for a sightseeing trip in his neighbouring country.” He hugged his waist and lowered his voice to a whisper. “For one day, I’d like to forget about being the Boy-Who-Lived and just be Harry.”

Severus nodded and motioned him up. “Well then, just-Harry, hurry and dress yourself. We have a long day ahead if we are to get you fitted for glasses and ….” He gave a halfhearted sneer. “Play
Harry laughed and dropped the journal on the table with a whoop. Severus glamoured it to look like a tourist guide again and dropped it into his own pocket.

“Thank you so much,” Harry said with a genuine grin. He took Severus’ hand, true joy and relief washing over him. “I mean it. Thank you.”

Severus’ cheeks pinked. “It is nothing for the gift of my life, Potter. Now, go and dress already, before I change my mind.”

With another laugh, Harry whisked away and rushed to dig a fresh outfit from his bag. He hummed as he showered and dressed, thrilled that for once in his life, he could just be a regular teenage boy with regular teenage worries. This one time, they would have a perfect day, with no war problems to ruin their rare moment of relaxation. Harry would make sure of it.

The idea of riding on crowded buses had not amused Severus, so they had altered their plans to go entirely Muggle for the day with an apparition to the area just outside Dumbarton Castle. As they walked through forested hills and over snowy meadows towards the small, crag-bordered fort, Harry—wearing new silver rectangular frames—peppered Severus with questions about Scotland, about the castle itself, about anything the young man could think of—besides the war. Despite a niggling worry that this was a delay they couldn’t afford, Severus could not begrudge Harry his one request. The young man had faced everything asked of him with aplomb. One day without war worries would not kill them.

At least, Severus hoped it wouldn’t.

He kept his hand in his pocket as they travelled, despite the lingering cold about the book. He would rather deal with chilly fingertips and the sense of evil pervading the journal than risk it being nicked by an adventurous pickpocket. Merlin forbid it should end up in the hands of a Death Eater.

After the castle tour, Severus and a thoroughly excited Harry decided to get lunch at a nearby Italian place. Severus wondered what quality of Italian food one could expect to find in a relatively small Scottish city, but he reckoned it couldn’t be worse than another night of hotel room service. At least they could eat at a proper dining table and not in armchairs about a hastily transfigured desk.

Across from Severus, Harry dipped a breadstick in a pot of herbed oil and bit into it with a moan. “Merlin, those are delicious.”

He went to dip the bread again, but a disgusted Severus growled and stayed his hand.

“I would prefer not to eat your saliva, Potter. If you must dip your bread more than once, use a plate.”

The young man’s cheeks flushed. “Oh. Sorry. I didn’t know it was bad manners.”

Severus’ cheeks heated as well at his faux-pas. Of course Harry wouldn’t know. His dismal relatives had never taught him anything worthwhile and the boy’s best friend was Ronald Weasley, the human garbage disposal. As well, communal dip dishes were rarely served at Hogwarts for fear of causing an outbreak of illness. Where would Harry have learned?
“It is forgivable,” he said in a much gentler tone. “Just tip some of the oil into a dish for yourself, and the issue is no more.”

“All right.” Harry did as he was asked and returned to his bread. “Merlin, I’ve had fun today. Thanks for this, Severus. Really. I didn’t know how much I needed to just be.”

“It is nothing. I have enjoyed the break myself.”

“Hmm, you’ve needed it even longer than I have, haven’t you?”

Severus tipped his head in acknowledgement of Harry’s comment.

Harry took another breadstick. “I hope the priest we met yesterday is okay. He was nice.”

“Yes. I am sure he is, considering the horcrux is no longer there to worry him.”

“True enough.” Harry dragged his bread through his oil. “Seeing the church again made me wonder, though, how did you know so much about their faith, Severus?”

Severus winced. “I, it was not by choice. My father demanded I participate in the Catholic religion, despite being a wizard and homosexual. They would have excommunicated me if they knew the truth about me, so until my father drank himself to death, I had to pretend to be what I am not. It … wore on my soul, but I learned much about Muggle beliefs and how many of them they have gleaned from wizarding sources. In that, I found some focus for my interest. It was enough to appease my father, who after all, only perceived that I was studying Catholic rituals and history. He would have beaten me bloody had he realised what I was truly studying.”

Harry frowned. “Merlin. That’s really the truth?”

Hurt flashed through his chest that even now, Harry would doubt him, but Severus let it go. Harry had done enough in saving his life. Anything else was … a gift, he supposed.

“It is indeed. What do you want to eat, Potter? They will not wait all day for us to chat.”

“It’s Harry, and I’ll try the lamb parmigiana. Sounds good to me.”

“Very well.”

The rest of the day passed in warm companionship. Severus even enjoyed bickering with Harry, as the young man did so in such a way that Severus knew he did not intend his gentle jibes to hurt. Their verbal repartee, carried on without anger or vindictiveness, was refreshing.

The day had been so enjoyable, it was only after they had returned to their room and settled down to relax before bedtime that Severus realised Harry had not asked him to swear an oath about his tale of forced religious study. The thought warmed Severus inside, and the man dared hope that maybe, just maybe, he might live past the end of the month after all.

A soft smile crossed his face. “Potter?”

The young man peered over his magazine and gave Severus a curious look. “Harry, Severus. Is anything wrong?”

“No. I only wanted to thank you for your trust earlier. You did not ask an oath of me. I appreciate it.”

Harry mumbled something about ‘earned it’ and returned to his magazine. Severus was about to return to his reading as well when a silvery form darted into the room and bounded to his
companion’s feet. He paled at the sight of Granger’s otter. Had something happened?

“Hermione?” With a gulp, Harry tapped the otter’s head. “I’m here and it’s safe to speak. What’s your message?”

The otter whirled as if settling itself and spoke in Granger’s voice. “Harry, you need to turn on Potterwatch tonight if you haven’t been listening lately. I, I don’t know what happened. I only know something isn’t right. Bill keeps avoiding us and Fleur looks like she’s seen a ghost. I thought, maybe they might mention it in the show. The password tonight is ‘Gideon.’”

Harry had gone as pale as the otter itself before the argent creature faded. “Oh gods. I’ve been out gallivanting all day, didn’t so much as peek at the journal, and, and if something’s happened ….”

Severus laid his book aside and rushed to pull out their radio. “Potter, ssh. Even if we had been working all day, there is nothing we could have done to end the war so quickly.”

“How do you know that?” Harry jerked the radio away and set it on the table. “It might have been in that journal, the key to end all this, and I, I’ve been playing. I might have found it in time, I might have—”

Severus silenced the young man by tipping his chin up and forcing Harry to meet his eyes. “Ssh. We do not even know if something has truly happened. And if it has, it is not your fault. We both needed a moment to recover, Harry, before we went back to war. There is nothing wrong with taking time to heal.”

Harry blinked hard, but his tears fell anyway. “Please. Turn it on. I, I’m scared.”

“Come and sit near me, yes? We shall listen together.”

Harry nodded and sat on Severus’ bed, close against the man’s side. Severus wrapped his free arm around Harry’s shaking form and tapped the radio dial with his wand.

“Gideon,” he murmured, and the programme buzzed to life.

“—Several injuries reported among the civilians,” one of the Weasley twins was saying, “as of yet, we aren’t sure how many or how serious they are.”

“Yes,” said Lee Jordan, “and let me just reiterate Royal here, unless you are a certified mediwizard or witch, there is nothing you can do to help besides send supplies. I repeat, don’t go to Grimmauld Place thinking you can help unless you’re a trained medical professional. The workers already have too much to deal with what with the entire street being levelled to add well-meaning but unknowledgeable citizens to the mix.”

Harry gasped. “No.”

Severus hugged the young man’s shoulders and listened.

“Exactly right, River,” came Shacklebolt’s low voice. “And I will add that the streets are still dangerous to even the workers, let alone untrained civilians, however good their intentions may be. The Order as well as the few uncorrupted agents in the Ministry urge those who wish to help to send food, clothing, and medical supplies for the survivors to St. Mungo’s, care of the spell damage ward.”

“Thank you, Royal,” said the Weasley boy. “We’ll continue to urge our listeners in the same vein.”

He paused a beat. “And now, I must ask a more personal request. Potterwatch and the Order have
lost one of our own. We don’t know yet whether he’s dead or missing or taken captive, but Romulus —”

Harry let out a stricken cry and gripped at Severus’ shirt. “No. No-no-no!”

Severus pulled Harry’s head into his shoulder and hoped the gesture calmed the young man somewhat, at least enough to allow him to hear the rest of the report.

“—missing since just before the attack on Thursday night. We here at Potterwatch urge our listeners to be on the lookout for our shaggy friend and report any information, anything at all, to our contributor Royal at ….”

The Weasley boy listed an address Severus knew to be that of an old Order safehouse and ended their broadcast with a moment of silent tribute for their missing colleague.

Harry sobbed into Severus’ shoulder, his entire body shaking with the force of his grief, muttering ‘my fault, all my fault’ over and over. Severus wasn’t entirely sure who ‘Romulus’ was, but judging by the history of the name and the power of Harry’s distress, he could make an educated guess.

Gods. Would Harry lose everyone who mattered to him before this nightmare of a war was over?

“How …? Did you know about the show?”

“Not until you first revealed it to me. Romulus, in Roman mythology, was raised by wolves alongside a twin brother by the name of Remus. It was a logical guess.”

“Oh.” Harry sobbed again and buried his head in Severus’ shoulder. “He’s all I have left. The last person to care about me as my own person, besides Ron and Hermione.”

Severus hesitantly hugged the young man. “No. Not the last, Potter.”

Harry gasped. “Thanks.”

Harry gave him a tearful smile. “Thanks.”

He buried his head once more and wept until the wee hours of the morning, when, too weary to hold his head up, he lay where he was and curled up on Severus’ bed. Rather than leave the man alone in his grief, Severus changed into his sleepshirt and trousers and lay beside him.

“I will be here if you need me, Potter.”

“Harry,” the young man muttered and moved closer, burrowing into the covers. “My name is Harry. How many times must I say it?”

Severus gave him a teasing smile. “At least fifty more.” He let his mirth fade. “I am sorry about Lupin, Harry. If you need me, I am here.”

Harry nodded and held onto Severus’ hand with a whisper of thanks. As the younger man drifted into a troubled sleep, a stricken Severus vowed they would end this war soon, before anyone else Harry loved … vanished.
Harry woke with his face buried in Severus’ shoulder and holding the man’s waist. Severus had again tangled their legs together, but this time, Harry didn’t want to escape. He felt as if someone had punched a bargepole through his chest. Remus gone … missing … probably dead. People didn’t just go ‘missing’ with Voldemort running amok all over Britain, as much as Harry wanted to deny it.

The urge to weep overwhelmed him once more, but for Severus’ sake, Harry kept his tears silent this time. The man had held him for hours the night before, reassuring Harry over and over again that Remus’ disappearance and probable death wasn’t his fault. The words had helped at the time, had soothed a horrible pain in his stomach, but in the light of day, Harry would not deny the truth.

While Remus had been missing and maybe dying, Harry had been gallivanting about the Scottish countryside and ignoring his duties. Severus had urged him over and over again to hurry and translate the book, but Harry kept pushing it back, pushing it away.

He had procrastinated Remus to death. It was his fault, no matter that Harry hadn’t killed the man. If he hadn’t pushed off reading the journal yesterday, he might have known by now where the last horcrux was and how to finally end the war. Yet, he had been afraid of the damn thing, and now Remus was gone. It was too late.

Harry held onto Severus and, just for an instant, buried his head in the man’s chest, listening to his heartbeat. Severus’ warmth and the sound of his life, the feel of the man wrapped around him, the scent of his sleep-warmed skin gave Harry the strength he needed to carefully extricate himself and make his way to the table. After grabbing a quilt from the other bed and casting a warming charm on it, he wrapped himself up in an armchair and translated. A nearby notepad and biro provided a handy way to record his oral translation, and the sound of Severus’ breathing kept him anchored through the vile, soul-chilling work.

So help him, no one else would die on his watch. He had had his moment of play. Now it was time to work and fight and end the war before more dear friends perished.

Harry didn’t think he could survive if he lost anyone else he loved. He didn’t know if he would even want to.

Severus woke to chilly blankets and an empty bed, and for one terrifying moment, he feared Harry had left him alone. Had tired of his snark and his awkwardness and left him to perish. But no. Harry had only gone to sit at the table.

From his quiet corner of the bed, Severus observed him unnoticed. Harry shivered in his quilt, muttering to himself and writing something by the light of a dim Lumos. The young man’s expression alternated between intense concentration and utter horror. As Severus watched, the horror again took over Harry’s features and a tear dropped from the edge of his jaw.

The journal. Harry hated translating it, especially alone, but he had apparently laid his fears aside after hearing of Lupin’s disappearance. His death, more likely. Severus knew well that, in this war, people disappeared permanently. He wished he could comfort Harry, but it would be a lie, and Harry
knew it.

Still, he might offer comfort for this, for that moment, when Harry wept while struggling alone to translate the writings of a deranged serial killer, and one who had murdered most of Harry’s own friends and family. Quietly, he rose and padded to Harry’s side. Harry didn’t blink, caught as he was in the horror of whatever appalling crime Tom Riddle Jr. had committed to memory this time. Severus took great care as he eased a warm hand under Harry’s quilt and rubbed the young man’s neck. Even so, Harry nearly leapt from his seat at the gentle touch.

“What the … oh. Good m-morning, Severus. Did I w-wake you?”

Sniffles and breaks punctuated his voice, and Severus simply reached down and caught the young man into a hug.

“You needn’t have worked on that without me,” Severus murmured. “I would have been glad to help.”

Harry buried his face in Severus’ stomach and hugged the man’s waist. “I can’t wait. Can’t let anyone else die because of me.”

Severus’ face flamed at the intimate way Harry held him, but he found he didn’t mind the close contact. He tentatively stroked Harry’s hair and tried not to tremble, for his companion’s sake.

“Ssh. How many times must I tell you, Potter, that it wasn’t your fault?”

Harry lifted his head and gave Severus a wry, tearful smile. “Apparently as many times as I’ll have to remind you to call me by my first name.”

Severus’ face grew hotter. “It is, not that I resist out of a lack of feeling, but I have rarely had the freedom to take such liberties, and it … it frightens me, Pott—H-Harry.”

Harry’s expression softened. “You’re afraid I’ll be angry with you?”

Severus inclined his head. “I am more afraid that you will … withdraw the privilege. I do not want to … overuse it.”

Harry shook his head and smiled. “You can’t overuse it, Severus, unless you stand there calling my name over and over for maybe an hour or so. Then I might tell you to stop for a bit.”

Severus snorted. “Yes, I believe I would tell myself to.” He touched his fingertips to the young man’s shoulder, even after all this time, still afraid to see him recoil, and gave him a little smile when Harry allowed the contact without a flinch. Severus didn’t know why he still feared losing his new companion and ally, but he knew no one had ever touched his heart—or touched him—the way Harry did. Even Lily had never been so tactile with him, and Severus found, to his surprise, that he liked Harry’s gentle hugs and touches, the way he felt wrapped around him at night—even if it did make for some awkward moments.

Severus hadn’t felt so warm and cared for since Regulus.

Cold grief gripped his heart. Even after so long, Regulus Black was still the only man to have truly believed in him. The only one to ever trust him enough to bare his heart and soul, and even his body, while asking only Severus’ trust in return. Gods, Severus missed him. He closed his eyes, and he could almost feel that oceans deep gaze he remembered every night, when he went to sleep alone.

“Hey,” Harry said in soft tones, “where did you go? You’re far away, and it looks like it hurts.”
Severus’ eyes met Harry’s, and he gave the younger man a shy smile. “I was, and it did, but I will be well enough. I was only remembering someone.”

“Mum?”

“Not quite. Did you discover anything helpful in your work?”

Harry shook his head, lowering his eyes as if ashamed. “I tried, I worked as fast as I could, but it only talked about the Death Eaters and who would have what role and why, listed some of their more gruesome crimes and some of Riddle’s own, and of course there was the ever-present monologuing.”

“Again, ‘monologue’ is not a verb.”

“Yeah, it is. Riddle’s made it one with all the grand speeches about his greatness and brilliance and whatnot. Gods, he once went on for ten pages about nothing but how great he was as compared to us lowly half-blood peons. Which is a bit funny, considering he’s a half-blood. The hypocrite.”

Severus smirked. “Only once?”

“The other times were more like seven pages.”

Severus snorted. “He is a megalomaniac, Potter. What did you expect?”

“I dunno, the next horcrux maybe?”

“In time, Potter. That isn’t only a record of horcruxes. For all we know, there may be another journal we never found, or he never had the opportunity to record the others.”

Harry looked so horrified at this, Severus had to modify his blunt statement.

“I do not believe there is, however. Albus must have known about those locations on the map somehow. He cannot read Parseltongue, but perhaps he interpreted the code of it where I had not enough time to.”

Harry stared at the book again, the conflict of need and disgust warring upon his face. “I, I have to read more. It might just be on the next page.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “If you will allow me to use the loo and freshen up a bit, I will stay with you while you work on that. We shall order room service for breakfast in an hour or so, if that is acceptable to you.”

Harry turned away and picked up his biro once more. “I’m not really hungry. I just need to—”

Severus took his pen away. “You need to stop. I can tell by the way you were shivering and how much you have written that you have already been at this for hours. Did you even use the loo yourself this morning? I did not hear anything.”

Harry blushed and shook his head.

“Hmm.” Severus dropped the biro into his trouser pocket. “Rest, Harry. Sit and recover your breath a few moments. I will only be gone long enough to refresh myself. Then you shall refresh yourself. Then, and only then, will I return your biro.”

“You know there are probably others in the desk,” said a grumpy Harry.
“Of course, but I am trusting you not to take them.”

Harry looked to the journal with a fearful expression. “But if I stop—”

“Harry. It is only a moment. We will continue working on it as soon as I am finished. I do not want you reading that monstrosity while you are alone. Promise me you will wait for me.”

Harry sighed and laid the book aside with a shaking hand. “All right, but only because you called me ‘Harry.’”

Severus chuckled. “Had I known I could use it to accomplish my ends, I would have begun utilising it sooner.”

“Humph. Sneaky Slytherin.”

“Indeed.” Severus smiled and patted Harry’s shoulder. “I will be back.”

Harry nodded and let him go, but the way he stared at the book and pinned his arms about his chest as if to force them not to write made Severus nervous. Harry was only keeping his word by the slimmest of threads. Only the day before, the young man couldn’t bear to look at the journal without Severus holding him in some manner. Today he couldn’t stop translating, as if he believed his life depended on it.

Severus sighed and went into the loo. Harry probably did believe that. Lupin’s death had been one loss too many. Harry was broken inside, desperate to save everyone, and Severus hadn’t the slightest idea of how to save him. How to prevent Harry from going down the same path that had destroyed Severus’ own life.

He looked at himself in the mirror, wondering how Harry could touch him. How could Harry look at such a face and call him handsome?

Severus shook his head. Handsome he was not, but he was brave and determined, and he would be damned before he let Harry become another Severus Snape, destroying himself by inches in search of atonement.

No. Severus had lost too many people as well. He could not lose Harry. He would save the young man from himself, somehow.

Three days passed with little change. No news came of Remus, neither good nor bad, and the raids continued in the meantime. Each time Potterwatch or the Muggle news mentioned another death, whether of someone Harry knew or not, the young man curled into himself a little more. He spent every waking moment with that journal, growing paler and weaker by the day, refusing meals, refusing sleep, hardly even stopping to use the loo let alone shower. Severus tried to help, tried to pull him out of his funk, but at each attempt to get him to eat or sleep or shower, he only sneered and pulled further away.

Severus was at a loss. He had no idea how to save someone who didn’t believe himself worth saving.

After all, he had never been able to save himself, had he?
The third evening, as a worried Severus worked on the theory of anti-venom strong enough to protect from Riddle’s beast of a snake and Harry translated beside him, Lee Jordan’s grave voice came through the radio.

“Listeners, forgive me. I’m afraid we have terrible news, and so close on the heels of Romulus’ disappearance, too.”

Beside Severus, Harry stiffened and gripped his biro until his knuckles turned white. Severus murmured, “Come,” and motioned Harry to sit with him on his bed.

Harry hesitated, staring at the journal.

“River’s right,” said Fred Weasley.

“Merlin,” Harry breathed. The tears in Weasley’s voice sent a wide-eyed, shaking Harry rocketing into Severus’ arms.

Weasley continued, “Many medical personnel besides those from St. Mungo’s apparated in to help with the disaster at Grimmauld Place. Among those was, was—” He took a deep breath. “Was Poppy Pomfrey of Hog—”

“No!” Harry sobbed and buried his head in Severus’ chest. “No. Not, not her, too.”

Severus felt much the same. The infirmary nurse was one of the few people who had never seen him as a worthless Slytherin but treated him with the same compassion and motherly nature she did for all her students. Even after Albus, she had kept her unbiased demeanour. He wondered how much of it was an act, or if the woman truly believed there was more to the story and hesitated to dismiss Severus as a traitor, as everyone else had done. Not that he blamed them. It was exactly how they were supposed to see him.

 Unable to speak for his suffocating grief, he hugged Harry tighter and tried to keep his head clear enough to listen.

“—apparated in Friday morning to help with the disaster, but failed to report to the next check-in. Officials searched the area she was last seen, but could find no trace. She has not been seen or heard from since.” Fred’s voice broke. “Madame Pomfrey is—gods, she’s a wonderful woman. Can’t tell you the number of times she patched me up after an, ahem, experiment gone wrong. Hogwarts won’t be the same without her.”

Lee took over. “Rapier, we don’t know that she’s gone forever yet. And to that end, I urge our listeners to keep a lookout for her—and for Romulus—and report any information to Kingsley Shacklebolt at twenty-two Bingham Way or Minerva McGonagall at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizar—” Several sharp taps interrupted Lee. “Cor blimey, is that an owl? Oh no. Rapier!”

Fred broke in, “Listeners, we’re out. Next word is ‘Lily flower.’ Keep faith.”

The broadcast cut to static, and Harry slumped against Severus with a cry. “They, they’ll be okay, won’t they? Won’t they?”

Severus had no answers. He could only pull Harry tighter into his arms and weep along with him.
Harry was in the red field again, only this time the mist curling around his feet was a thick, poisonous green, and it hurt when it touched him. A heartbeat fluttered in the distance, growing weaker by the second, and this time, Harry understood. Another one of his loved ones was dying, and somehow his strange dream power had again called him to intervene. He had no idea who it could be—any number of his friends could have been attacked—but whoever it was would not have to wait as long as Severus had for his cure. Harry knew how to help now.

With a huff of determination, he bolted towards the heartbeat and did not hesitate when his wings spread out. He shot like a rocket into the sky and, when he could see clearly, zipped as fast as he could fly after the white light in the distance. ‘Hurry, hurry, hurry.’ It rang over and over in his head like a mantra. Whether he realised it consciously, somehow he knew this poison was far more dangerous than the kind he had saved Severus from. His own heart pounded like a timpani in time to the dying person’s, and he forced himself to fly faster, flap harder, till it felt his wings might break from the force.

In spite of his best efforts, the white light ahead suddenly dimmed to grey. A surge of terror nearly strangled Harry as the heartbeat stopped. No!

“Fuck!” Harry flattened himself and shot toward the glow like a torpedo. The light went darker every second and his wings ached with the force of his flight, but Harry refused to give up. He would not let anyone else die. Not for him. Not for anything.

The green mist ended just metres away from the flickering dark-grey light. Finally! He had almost come too late. Almost, but not quite. With a primal cry, he turned his back on the dying glow and attacked the poisonous mist with everything he had.

Nothing happened.

“No,” Harry breathed. “No! I won’t let them die!”

He flapped his wings and, on instinct, jerked his arms down in a sort of throwing motion. To his shock, white bolts of lightning followed his fingers on the downstroke.

“What the hell?”

Harry looked down and gasped. The green mist had receded, its ghostly fingers curling in on themselves as if afraid of further pain. He jerked his arms up, then down once more experimentally, and he cheered as the lightning shot towards the mist again.

“Hah!” He charged again, determination and hope renewed, and fought the mist with all his might. Slowly, it backed away, giving an eerie screaming hiss every time the lightning struck. A snake? So some sort of venomous serpent had bitten whoever he had been called to rescue.

Nagini. With the strength of the venom and the way it almost seemed to fight back, it had to be Nagini. Besides that, Harry thought he recognized her stench from his visions.

Harry uttered his next cry in Parseltongue. “Go back to hell where you belong, you demented bitch!”

To his shock, the next time his hands came down, fire shot out with the lightning. With a feral grin, Harry fought and electrocuted and burned until the last of the green mist let out a horrible shriek reminiscent of the dying locket and burned to ashes. He hadn’t meant to send the venom to hell literally, but he’d take it.

With relief and adrenaline-charged joy pumping through his veins, Harry whooped in triumph and
The heartbeat had returned, weak, but present, and the light still flickered grey. Every moment, both heartbeat and life-force grew stronger. After such a fierce battle for his unknown friend’s life, exhaustion weighed on him with the force of a fifty-tonne articulated lorry, but Harry forced himself to stay conscious. Finally, the heartbeat returned to normal and light turned from dark grey to plain grey, to silver, and finally back to full, brilliant white once more.

Harry had saved them, whoever they were.

“Thank Merlin,” he whispered, and curled up on a bed of fluffy red grass.

When Severus awoke, Harry was nose-deep in that horrid journal again. After the broadcast from the night before, Severus couldn’t say he hadn’t been expecting it, but damn. He’d hoped Harry could understand Poppy’s likely death wasn’t his fault.

With a heavy sigh, Severus retreated to the loo for his morning ablutions, and feeling refreshed, returned to Harry’s side. He settled in the chair next to Harry’s and took the biro from his hand.

“Translate out loud, if you must read from that horrid journal at five in the morning.”

Harry gave Severus a wan smile. “All right.”

Severus said nothing else, only took Harry’s hand between both of his and held him tight as he read about Voldemort’s lackeys, the Dark Lord’s plans and grandstanding, and appalling records of heinous crimes. Merlin. Even Severus hadn’t realised the Dark Lord was quite that bloodthirsty. It was putting him off breakfast.

“There’s something here,” Harry muttered. “I can feel it. ‘I thought Abraxas would make an excellent addition to my collection. The father of a loyal servant? Yes, it suited well. So I lured him on pretences of a parley at heart taint—no. Hard tan … hard stain, oh!—Hearthstone, neutral ground for him, and a nexus of power for me. The seven-fold protection was complete by dawn.’ This is it! Severus, we found it! The last horcrux.”

Severus shuddered. “Wonderful, Potter. And after that will be a detailed dissertation on the vile methods Riddle used to murder him in cold blood. Might we take a break for a meal before I become too ill to eat?”

“I don’t want to stop,” Harry muttered. “Just give me my biro back and I’ll translate to myself while you’re eating.”

Severus sighed and moved to kneel before Harry. “You need to rest and eat too. You are pushing yourself too hard.”

Harry’s face screwed up in anger. “Give me my biro, Severus! I can’t stop. I can’t! Don’t you understand? Remus is gone, Pomfrey is gone, Fred and Lee might be gone too, and just last night I had to dream-walk or whatever it is to save someone from that twisted snake. I can’t just sit on my arse and sip tea while they’re out there dying!”
Severus gaped. “Dream-walking seems an adequate term for it, but you saved someone again last night? Who?”

“I don’t know, Severus. When I saved you, all I could see was a field of red grass, purple mist, a reddish-violet sky with no stars. Once I figured out I had wings, I also saw an orb of white light on the horizon. The purple mist was like fingers reaching for it. I heard a heartbeat as well—it sounded sick, and I could feel you, so I knew who it was. With this person, I only saw the world as I described it—only the mist was vivid green and much harder to fight—and I felt nothing. There was only a heartbeat, and then it stopped. It took everything I had to save them, whoever they are. So I can’t give up now. I have to keep going! They’re all depending on me, and—”

“And they are wrong to do so!” With a heavy sigh, Severus knelt before Harry and held his hands. “Harry, the wizarding world is foolish for pinning all their hopes on one man. This is not your war. You are only one soldier, one fighter. And you cannot hope to do it all on your own.” He held Harry’s broken, angry gaze and suppressed a sniffle. “I know you want to save them, and you should do what is within your power—”

“And I was, when you took my biro! Give it here!”

Severus cried, “Harry, stop! You cannot keep doing this! That book is dangerous, and I, you are hurting yourself by reading it constantly.”

“I don’t care!” Harry’s voice broke on a sob, and Severus flinched. “Gods damn it all, I don’t care what happens to me! I can’t, can’t hear of even one more person … gone, just because some bint made a prophecy about me almost twenty years ago! I, I hate it! I hate knowing they’re all dying, and it’s my fault!” He broke into tears. “It’s all my fault.”

Severus conjured a tissue and wiped Harry’s tears with gentle hands. “It is not your fault. You did not kill them. Riddle killed them. It is his fault, and no one else’s save his minions.’” He leaned up and held Harry’s shoulders. ‘Besides that, you may not care for your own life, but others do. How do you think Granger and Weasley will feel if you kill yourself trying to protect them, hmm? How would Poppy or Lupin feel knowing you either died or became as bitter as I was trying to atone for them? How, how do you think I—” Tears choked him, and he buried his head in his hand. “I cannot do this, Harry. I have already lost Lily. I cannot bear to stand by and do nothing. I won’t! I cannot bear to lose you, too.”

Harry was still for a long moment. “S-Severus? It hurts you that much?”

“Yes. It is like watching myself fall apart all over again.”

Harry sighed and pulled him into a tearful, trembling hug. “I, I’m sorry. I just don’t want anyone else to die.”

“I know, Harry. I know. I don’t want the next person listed on Potterwatch to be you.”

Harry sniffled and buried his head in Severus’ shoulder. “All right,” he said between sobs. “All right. I, I’ll try to take better care of myself. But I can’t stop translating. I can’t waste any more time.”

“I will help you gladly if you will only promise me you will eat, sleep, shower, and take some little time to heal your mind after reading that atrocious thing. I cannot understand how you are able to sleep after reading it so close to bedtime.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s no different than the visions.”

“You are still having them? Actively?”
Harry nodded grimly. “I see someone else tortured or killed almost every night since … since Grimmauld.”

“You are speaking of Lupin’s disappearance?”

Harry nodded and lowered his eyes. “I can’t, can’t say it. If I do ….”

Severus heard the rest as if his younger self had been speaking of Lily. “If I do, it will make it real.”

“I … understand, Harry.”

Harry pulled him closer. “Yeah. I suppose you do.”

Ignoring his body’s needs didn’t bother Harry much, not when it only hurt himself. After all, his relatives had starved and neglected him so often, it was almost force of habit to ignore his aching stomach and muscles in the summer. The Dursleys always ‘fattened him up’ a bit before school started so no one would suspect how they treated him at home—which, in his opinion, made their treatment of him even viler—but Harry would never forget Ron’s face when he saw the bars on Harry’s window. How thin and ill his friend was. How sick Harry was after—and even during—the Quidditch World Cup that year. Ron had known then that Harry was suffering, and his face had been a picture of grief and horror.

For the first time ever, Harry found himself thinking that Ron and Severus weren’t so different. Both were stubborn, brilliant strategists, and hot-headed. Both hid their pain behind a veil of anger. And Harry hadn’t had the chance to test him at a game of chess yet, but he was willing to bet that Severus was as hard to beat as Ron.

But the most important similarity lay in their hearts. Fickle and temperamental as Ron was, he would do anything to save Harry. And now that he knew Severus had almost died many times trying to save Harry’s life even when he was still Snape, Harry realised that Severus would protect him in just the same way.

And Severus was trying to that moment. As Harry picked over his dinner and stared at the journal, Severus looked at him as if his friend was dying right before his eyes.

Perhaps, in a way, that was true. And despite Harry’s burning need to end the war before anyone else could die, he could not hurt his friend. Not after watching him weep because Harry cared so little about his own life. With a sigh, he turned from the journal and forced down a few bites of pasta. Hmm. Shrimp alfredo was pretty good, Harry decided, and ate a little more.

Severus reached across the table and caught Harry’s cheek in a gentle hand. Harry gasped and almost choked on his pasta at the warm, tingly sensation the tender touch brought. Merlin! Severus had never touched him so softly, never caressed him openly like this, and Harry thought he would melt in the older man’s hands.

“Thank you.” Severus ran a thumb along Harry’s cheekbone and arrested the younger man’s breathing. “I know you are doing this for my benefit. I am grateful, Potter.”

“H-Harry. My name is Harry.” It came out breathless and shaky.
Severus withdrew his hand, leaving Harry bereft. “Yes, Harry.”

Harry swallowed and gave the man a nod despite his distraction. What in the world was that? He had never felt so … so off kilter in his life. Why had a simple touch almost knocked him to his knees?

Harry’s mind circled around it while he ate mindlessly, not tasting what he put in his mouth. He couldn’t have said what the sides were for his dinner when Severus whisked their empty plates away.

After room service had come and gone to remove the plates, Severus’ voice cut across his thoughts. “It is time to try Potterwatch again, Harry. Are you well enough?”

Harry shook himself. “Yeah. Got to be. Only, stay near me?”

Severus sat upon his bed and held an arm out for Harry to curl into his side. Harry dashed into his arms and pressed his face against Severus’ chest.

“I never imagined you would be so open and affectionate with me two weeks ago.”

Severus trembled as he withdrew his wand. He slipped a hand into Harry’s hair. “I never imagined you would let me.”

“I like it. Right now, I need it.”

Severus only pulled Harry closer. “Yes. So do I.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “I’m here. Turn it on now?”

Severus closed his eyes as if in pain and tapped the radio dial with his wand. “Lily flower,” he murmured, and Harry hugged him tight.

“Good evening and welcome to Potterwatch,” came Lee Jordan’s voice a moment later, and Harry almost sobbed with relief.

“They’re okay,” he breathed into Severus’ chest.

“Yes, so it seems.” Severus ran his hand through Harry’s mop and made the younger man shiver with inexplicable pleasure.

“—Rapier and River reporting to you from a new secure location,” Lee continued. “And boy, do we ever have some good news for you.”

“And about time, too,” Fred replied. “If you’ll remember last night, River and I saw an owl with a letter for us and had to move post-haste. Once we were somewhere safer and could accept the owl, we took his letter, and it was from Minerva at Hogwarts. It read that You-Know-Who had taken it into his head that Poppy Pomfrey gave the light hope, and he didn’t want us to have any hope, so while she was working in the rubble, he sent his snake after her.”

A horrified Harry cried, “That’s not good news!”

“But,” Lee took over, “today, the hospital workers found her—unconscious and injured, but alive! We, er, we don’t honestly understand it. Poppy had been injured the day previous, when a portion of the building she had been working in collapsed and buried her in the rubble. Besides the injuries from that, there were two puncture bites and mysterious burn marks in her shoulder where Nagini had bitten her, and as venomous as that monster is, it should have killed her almost immediately even
if the poor woman had managed to survive a wall falling on her.

We have no idea how she survived everything intact, but the hospital workers are saying she woke up for a bit on the way to St. Mungo’s and was able to answer some questions properly. Because of this, because she woke at all, the prognosis for her making a full recovery is excellent.”

Harry gripped Severus’ waist. “She’s alive. Oh gods, she’s alive!” He buried his head in Severus’ chest and wept in joyous catharsis that he had been able to spare at least one person he loved.

“You are incredible, Potter,” Severus whispered in his ear, and the man’s voice was as broken as Harry’s. “Thank you for her.”

Harry could only hold on tight and weep, such was the power of his relief.

“But that’s not all we have to report from the scene of Madame Pomfrey’s discovery,” said a delighted Fred, startling Harry out of his tears. “The light has finally scored one hell of a blow against You-Know-Who.” He paused and let out a breathy whistle. “Merlin, I can’t even begin to explain it. We … we’re completely blown away. There’s not a clue who or how or even why, but Pomfrey’s mystery saviour did not stop at rescuing her. Oh no. They also burned the head of You-Know-Who’s vicious pet to ashes. Nagini won’t be chomping further innocents anytime soon.”

Harry jerked his head up and went rigid. “What? Merlin! I really sent the bitch to hell?”

Severus was shaking all over. “Potter, what—how?”

Harry shuddered. “I, I don’t know. I told you I had to fight hard to save … Madame Pomfrey. I got frustrated and angry when I realised it was Nagini killing her, and I shouted in Parseltongue at her. Something like, ‘go to hell, you twisted bitch.’ And the next time I pushed the venom back, my magic had white fire in it. Maybe … I was fighting with fire and lightning, so maybe it followed the magic in her venom through Pomfrey and ….” He made an explosion sound with his lips and smacked his hands together. “I can’t think of anything else it could be.”

Severus slumped back, white as a ghost and twice as cold, eyes wide and hands shaking. “Dear Merlin! You saved and ended a life through nothing more than a dream? What kind of power is this?”

Harry moved back and curled around himself, his stomach icy and his chest full of a fiery burning pain. “You think I’m dangerous. You’re scared of me.”

Severus tugged Harry into a fierce hug. “Afraid of you? No!” He gave a relieved, happy burst of a laugh. “I am not afraid, but Riddle had better be! Merlin, Harry. This is it! This odd power of yours, this is how we shall win the war.”

Harry frowned. “I can’t choose who it directs me to, and if I don’t know who the person is I’m working on, how will I know to kill them rather than save them?” He brought his knees up and clutched them to his chest. “Besides that, I’m not sure I can kill anyone in cold blood. Not like Riddle.”

“Like Riddle?” Severus lifted Harry’s head with a hand under the younger man’s chin. Again, Harry froze and stared wide-eyed at Severus.

“Never say that again, Potter.” Severus rubbed a thumb over Harry’s chin, and the young man forgot how to breathe. “You are nothing like that monster. Nothing.”

“S-Severus,” Harry whispered.
“No. Look at me. You are a hero. Do you know how many lives you saved by killing that demon of a snake?” Severus’ eyes filled. “How many you avenged? I have wanted to avenge Charity all this time, and now you have done. I ….” His voice broke, and he dropped his head into his hands. “T-thank you.”

Harry held Severus’ hand. “Professor Burbage?”

Severus flinched as if he’d been shot. “You saw.”

Harry gave him a slow, sad nod.

“Merlin. It is one of my worst memories, and, and you … Potter, I am sorry. So sorry.”

Harry tugged the man into his arms and laid his head upon Severus’. He didn’t question the warm, happy feeling welling inside his chest. Severus needed his help. Harry could worry about his strange emotions later.

“I’m here. It’s okay. The snake is gone now. She can’t hurt anyone else.”

Severus sighed and hugged Harry tight. “Thank Merlin.”

“Yeah.” As Severus scooted back, Harry straightened the man’s long hair and wiped his tears with gentle hands. “You okay?”

“I am … relieved. There is a weight gone from me now.”

Harry smiled and wondered where the blush heating his face had come from. “Good. I’m glad for that much.”

Severus sat tall and wiped his eyes. “Harry, might we set the journal aside for one night? Might we get a drink from room service or visit the pub to celebrate this? I have so rarely had reason, and I, it, it feels as if I need to honour her tonight. Will you come with me? Put that aside long enough to rest your mind?”

Harry stared at the journal a moment, torn, and let out a sigh. “Yeah, I’ll come. I did promise you I’d leave off it for a while every night. Seems like this is a good time to, yeah?”

“Yes. I think so too. Shall we glamour ourselves and go?”

“Let’s do it.” Harry stood and grinned as he offered Severus his hand. “Come, my good sir, and let us get drunk off our arses to celebrate Madame Pomfrey’s life and the death of Professor Burbage’s killer. Let us drink to heroes saved and foes vanquished.”

Severus took the offered hand with a smirk. “Hmm. Glad to see you back to your old self. Also, you should know that you sound like a two-bit fantasy novel.”

Harry laughed and squeezed Severus’ hand. “Yeah, yeah, oh-my-hero and all that rot.”

Severus’ expression turned serious. “I am no hero, but you, Harry, are mine.”

Harry’s face flamed to his hairline. “Oh. Oh, Merlin. Uh ….” He recovered and gave Severus a sly grin. “You’re flirting again.”

A faint blush coloured Severus’ cheeks. “Poppycock.”

“I thought we had already discussed how oddly apropos that word is?”

“See, now that just sounds like more flirting to me.”

Severus rolled his eyes and motioned to the door. “I intend to honour fallen friends tonight, not chase my hormones, but you are free to do as you wish.”

Harry smiled and held out his arm. “We’ll honour them together, okay? Maybe give them a little send-off tonight after the other guests have gone to bed? Perhaps … we could talk to my Mum a bit, since we both loved her.”

Severus blinked hard. He took a shaky breath and slipped his arm into Harry’s. “That is acceptable, Potter.”

“Good. Then let’s go.”

Harry cast the journal one last worried look. Was he a fool to leave it behind and enjoy the evening with a friend? Harry sighed and lowered his head. He had promised Severus. They both needed a moment to heal and celebrate, and Harry wouldn’t let Severus down because of his mental issues. Survivor’s guilt, Severus had called it while trying to pull Harry away from the journal all week. It fit, he supposed. And Severus was right in that he needed to let it go.

This war had never been his fault. Gods, it was hard to think it, but deep down, Harry knew it to be true. Severus had helped him see it. Severus had saved Harry from himself over the past few days, and, for his patience and forbearance, for his gentle care, Harry owed the man this moment of companionable catharsis.

Merlin, he had never imagined Severus would want to share in joy and grief with him in the first place. And yet, Harry couldn’t imagine sharing such a thing with anyone else. He and Severus had been branded together by war. He had no friends left who truly understood what that meant. No one, save Severus.

Severus tugged on Harry’s arm. “Come, Harry. Stop staring at that journal, please. It will still be there in the morning.”

Harry turned his back on the journal deliberately and gave Severus a bright smile. “I was only thinking that I’m glad you’re with me tonight.”

Severus returned his smile. “As am I, Potter,” he murmured. “As am I.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

*** AN1: Phew! Thanks for waiting. My son's 1st birthday was yesterday and between the party and the prep, I couldn't stop to think let alone write! But now I'm going to be down for a few days (I'm chronically ill), so I'll have plenty of time to get reacquainted with my computer. Next chapter, here we go!***

***AN2: Had to fix an error in this where I had mentioned a light in Lily's eyes. I'd said they had read about it in the journal, but they haven't read that far yet. Not to mention, Severus was her friend and would have seen her eyes light up in emotional situations at least once or twice. Whoops!***

CHAPTER 9

Harry led Severus to the hotel bar and found a secluded table, hidden in a dark corner away from most of the other patrons. After the waiter took their orders, Harry slid a hand over Severus’ and squeezed his fingers.

“Sev?”

Severus closed his eyes as if in pain. “Your mother used to call me Sev.”

Harry’s heart clenched. “Oh. I’m sorry. I won’t if it bothers you.”

“It was only the first time I have heard my name shortened so since she stopped speaking with me.”

Harry frowned. “Er … are you saying it’s okay or that I shouldn’t? I don’t understand.”

Severus gave a sad smile. “You may call me Sev if you wish to. I was only recalling how long it has been since I heard her voice.”

Harry rubbed Severus’ fingers. “Well, we are honouring those fallen tonight. Will you … um, tell me about her? How you met? What happened to drive you apart? It’s clear that you loved her, but I don’t really know why. I mean, you know the rivalry between our houses. I don’t know how you became friends with such a war between Gryffindor and Slytherin going on.”

The waiter set their drinks on the table—talisker and ice for Severus and spiced mead for Harry—and went on his way. Severus stirred his drink with a toothpick and watched the ice melt for a long, silent moment. Harry cast a discreet Muffliato for good measure.

“I … met her prior to Hogwarts,” he said in a soft voice heavy with sorrow. “We were, perhaps, nine years old.”

“Nine?” Harry gaped. “How did that happen?”

“We lived perhaps three streets apart, in Cokeworth.”
“Spinner’s End?”

Severus nodded. “It was in the most derelict part of town, so when I needed to escape from my father and his fists—”

“He hit you too?” Harry’s hand tightened on Severus’. “I’m sorry.”

“Ssh. There is no need. The man is long since gone. I only wish the bastard hadn’t taken my mother with him.”

Harry froze, his heart careening to a stop. “He, he killed her?”

“Not directly, no, but those same anti-wizardry views did. His hatred of magic spread to my mother, and while she never hated me, she would never take advantage of her magic again, nor allow others to perform magic on her.” He lowered his head. “Muggle cancer is curable for magical folk by magical means, but for Muggles or without the use of magic ….”

He took a swig of his drink. “I never understood it, but somehow she loved the pathetic bastard. More so even than her own life or her own son.” Severus closed his eyes and gripped his glass. “All the bruises, the cuts he left on me … she pretended not to see them, told me it was just Father’s way, or I should avoid him when he was drunk. Never mind that he gave me above half when he was sober. She could not bear the thought of facing life without him, scum that he was.”

Severus blinked tears down his face. “But even with that, even with her faults, Mother did care about me. She did try to protect me as much as she could. Even knowing she never truly loved me like she should have, even with everything her inaction cost me—cost us both—I still loved her. I miss her terribly.”

“Oh, Severus.” Harry set his drink aside and laid his other hand on his companion’s. “I’m here, if it helps.”

Severus stared at Harry’s hands. “You should … perhaps be careful of that in public, with Muggles about.”

Harry rubbed Severus’ fingers. “You need me right now. I’d come over there and hug you if I didn’t think we’d get attacked for it.”

“Holding my hand alone may indeed be enough to cause such an attack, whether you are actually my partner or not.”

“I don’t care,” Harry said in a dark voice. “I am going to comfort you, Severus, and anyone who takes issue with it can kiss my arse.”

Severus’ cheeks went pink and he gave Harry a shy smile. “I … thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. So … you and my mum lived a few streets apart. How’d you meet?”

“Well, as I was saying, when I needed to escape my father, I went to a little park by the river. The river was in a pathetic state in those days, so few people ever ventured there. I liked the isolation of it. However, on the day I met your mother, she had come to the same park with her ….” Severus scowled and downed some of his drink. “Her sister.”

“Right. We don’t need to discuss Petunia,” Harry said with a similar scowl. “Unless you kicked her or something?” He flashed Severus a hopeful grin.
Severus choked out a laugh. “No, but I did nearly drop a branch on her head with my accidental magic. I hadn’t intended to, but she was such a foul little …” He met Harry’s eyes and swallowed. “… Wench, that I lost control.”

“Bitch,” said Harry. “You can say it. She’s a right bitch. Always was, apparently.”

“Hmm. So she was.” He squeezed Harry’s hand. “I was trying to be considerate. She is your family, and I had no righ—”

“Petunia and Vernon have never been my family,” Harry spat. “Never. I’ve only ever had the Weasleys.”

Severus sighed and rubbed Harry’s fingertips. “And now, because of me, you have lost your one connection even to them.”

“Ron’ll come around eventually,” Harry said, though his voice trembled a bit.

He couldn’t help thinking, ‘What if he doesn’t?’

No. It would be okay. Ron would come around, and even if he didn’t, the Weasleys as a whole would never abandon Harry. As much as losing Ron would hurt, he wouldn’t lose them all.

Harry gave Severus a shaky smile. “Ron isn’t my only connection. Besides him, there’s also Fred and George and Ginny. They wouldn’t let me skive off Weasley family gatherings because Ron’s being a prat.”

Severus met Harry’s eyes. “Are you and Ginevra—will it not be awkward?”

“Probably,” said Harry with a wry laugh. “But she’s a good sort. She’ll understand.”

He hoped she would, anyway. If she didn’t, perhaps Harry would lose the last family he had ever known. Perhaps isolating Ginny too would be one Weasley too many for the family to forgive him.

Gods, he hadn’t intended to hurt either of them. He hadn’t known he was gay when he first started dating Ginny. Only later, when she tried to move on from kissing and Harry found that he couldn’t, did he realise that perhaps his interest did not lie in women. He had to leave for the horcrux hunt soon after beginning to wonder, but his thoughts hadn’t finalised yet. It was only being apart from her that had helped him understand his orientation.

When he left her, Harry hadn’t told her he was gay—he had told her to wait. And now, when he returned, it wouldn’t be to her. Gods, he’d been such a cad, however unintentionally. A right bastard, really.

What if she never forgave him for it? Harry wouldn’t blame her.

‘I’m so sorry, Gin. I never meant for this to happen.’

Some of his fear and loneliness must have shown on his face, because Severus wrapped his other hand around Harry’s.

“If she does not understand, know that … you are not alone.” He trembled and lowered his head, obviously terrified for having revealed so much of himself.

Harry tipped Severus’ chin up with a tender touch. “I’m glad.”

Severus’ smile lit the room. Gods, what a change! The man looked so young, so happy smiling like
that. Harry rubbed his thumb over Severus’ bottom lip and his heart warmed at the man’s gasp and subsequent blush.

“You really should smile more, you know. You look so ha—”

Someone jerked Harry’s hand away and shouted, “Oi! You leave off your foul touching in public, you hear? We’ve no room for your type in respectable establishments.”

The Muggle’s hatred-filled voice brought Severus back to the days when Muggles and Wizards alike reviled him. He shrank into himself to avoid them. He knew he could kill the Muggles with hardly a flick of his wand, but even if he used minimal force, it would draw unwanted attention and might risk Harry’s life, too.

Best just to disengage and Obliviate if necessary.

“Apologies if our conversation offended you,” Severus said in a low voice. “We were only discussing friends we have lost, and my companion here—we are not involved—was only trying to offer comfo—”

“Bullshite,” said the ‘ringleader’ Muggle, a bulky man with a balding head. “I’ve got eyes, you know. I can see the unnaturalness all over your faces.”

“We’re friends, you idiot,” Harry said with a roll of his eyes.

“Friends?” A Muggle who looked a bit like Ronald Weasley gave a derisive laugh. “Why were you touching him, then? Looked as if you might crawl in his lap. Friends—bullshite!”

Harry frowned and turned back to Severus, obviously shaken by the Muggle’s uncanny resemblance to his friend. “Simon,” he said in a quiet voice, “did it look as though I were about to crawl in your lap? I thought I was only touching your face.”

They never used their real names in public, even with Muggles, just in case word should get back to Voldemort or his lackeys.

“To imbeciles like these, Jerry,” said Severus, “that is close enough.”

Harry snorted. “Glad I’m not like them, then.” He returned to his drink as if there weren’t three bulky Muggles staring them down.

“Oi! We’re talking to you, fairy-Jerry!”

Harry turned and glared at the nearest Muggle, the Weasley lookalike. Severus wondered if the anger Harry felt towards Weasley, though he never spoke of it, bled into his irritation at the ignorant people before him.

“Does this look like a conversation for five? It isn’t. As we’re not hurting you by simply talking, don’t let us stop you from going about your business. Now.”

Yes, perhaps it had. Harry’s voice had cut like a sword through butter.

The redhead puffed up and scowled, making him resemble the youngest Weasley boy even more.
“Ach! What makes you think you can tell us what to do, shorty?”

Harry gave them a sneer worthy of the old Severus’ most disdainful mood. “Probably the same thing that made you think you had the right to tell us how we should interact with one another.” He sipped at his ale, green eyes glowing with an eerie teal light in the dim pub. “If you don’t mind, my companion and I would like to get back to discussing those we’ve lost in combat, as soldiers, without your presence.”

The Muggles burst into mocking laughter. Only the danger kept Severus from falling into the past and remembering when it was Lupin, Black, Pettigrew, and Potter jeering at him.

“That runt barely comes to my knee and he wants us to think he’s a soldier,” said a fat, blond Muggle near the bulky balding one. “Didn’t think the corps took children.”

Harry sneered and returned to his ale, but the glow in his eyes shone brighter. Shite. This was not looking good. Severus had often seen a peculiar blue light in Lily’s eyes when she was angry, and it appeared her son had inherited more than just her eye colour. Severus slid a hand under between the folds of his robe, trying to reach his wand without the Muggles noticing.

At the edge of the table, the Muggles were still trying to pick a fight. “Aye,” said the redhead, “he’s too short by half, and look at his mate! Cor, he’s tall enough, but too old and too scrawny, and by God, is he ever ugl—”

Before Severus could stop him, Harry slammed his ale down so hard it splashed over the sides, leapt to his feet, and stood toe-to-toe with the lanky redhead. It left him a good thirty centimetres shorter than the Muggle, yet, with that fierce glow in his eyes and the hardness ten years of war had lent him, Harry was the more threatening man.

“I dare you to finish that sentence,” said Harry in a low voice. “He is not ugly, he’s a goddamned soldier. If he’s gone grey too early, it’s because he gave too much of his life saving the ungrateful lives of utter sods like you. And short or not, I have been in combat for a fucking decade. So go on. I dare you. Finish your sentence.”

“Liar! The corps doesn’t take your ki—” said the fat blond, but the bulky balding Muggle cut him off before he could say anything further.

“Ssh. Cor blimey, look! What’s wrong with his eyes?”

Severus’ fingertips closed upon a welcome length of wood and the man breathed a sigh of relief.

“Obliviate!”

Harry jumped as the spell rushed past him.

Severus said to the Muggles, “You came over to threaten us about our sexuality, but upon discovering that we are soldiers and allies in combat, and only friends besides, you have decided to return to your drinks and leave us alone for the rest of the evening. You saw nothing strange here tonight, and will report nothing to anyone who asks.”

The Muggles shuffled off, blank looks on their faces, and Harry sank into his seat with a pout.

“I could’ve taken him, you know.”

Severus returned to his drink. “All three?”
Harry frowned. “That might have been more of a challenge.”

“I would have had to *Obliviate* them regardless. They saw your eyes.”

“My eyes? What about them?”

“Apparently they glow when you are angry, just like Lil—” Severus frowned and cut himself off. “I am glad we could resolve that without a fight.”

“Sev? What’s goi—”

The waiter appeared beside their table, making Harry jump again. “Gentlemen, are you all right? I’m so sorry I couldn’t come sooner. I’m the only one on shift and I’m not allowed to approach in situations like that when I’m alone. Were those other men disturbing you?”

“We are well,” said Severus with a nod. “They had gotten some idiocy in their heads about us, but we were able to get it sorted without resorting to violence.”

“Ah, thank goodness. They looked like a violent sort.”

“Yes.” Severus pushed his drink away. “After this, I do believe my companion and I will retire for the evening. How much do we owe you?”

“On the house, sir. Least I can do.”

Severus stood and shook the waiter’s hand. “Thank you. Jerry, are you finished?”

Harry knocked back a few swigs. “Yeah. Let’s go.” He nodded to the waiter. “Thanks for trying to help us. And for the drinks. I hope you won’t get in trouble for it.”

The waiter gave him a genial smile. “No. They’ll just be glad the fight stopped without a huge scene. Happens a lot.” He motioned to a Scottish flag over the bar. “Can’t imagine why.”

Harry laughed. “Simon, all Scots aren’t really like that, are they?”

Severus smirked. “Of course they are.”

“Really? What about, er … Minnie?”

“I believe you will find that, while out of the classroom, Minnie is the worst of the lot.”

Harry snorted and shook his head. “No! You’re not serious?”

“Oh, I am indeed.”

Harry chuckled. “Wow. That’s a mental image.” He glanced to the Muggle bullies and frowned. “Um, we should go, Simon. They’re watching us, and I don’t want to cause trouble.” He smiled at the waiter. “Thanks again, um ….”

The waiter shook Harry’s hand. “Ken. And if you’re ever in this part of town again, look me up—we’ll go out for a pint or something.”

“Great. Sounds good. Goodnight.”

Severus bowed in the man’s direction.
“Goodnight, sirs. Have a good evening.”

Harry waved and left the pub, Severus in tow. The young man did not say another word until they were safely ensconced in a corner of the hotel’s courtyard, hidden under impressive wards. Severus wondered where a seventh year had learned them all—then he remembered that Granger was Harry’s best friend.

Severus cast a warming charm on a bench and sat, motioning Harry to join him. The young man sat and wrapped an arm around Severus’ shoulders.

“Hey, what they said in there about you?” Harry hugged Severus’ waist and pulled him close. “I just want you to know it’s a load of bollocks.”

“Well, of course,” said a bemused Severus. “We both know I could have killed them in a second if I so chose. I did not take their uninformed insults to heart.”

Harry nudged him closer. “C’mere. It’s cold.”

“Warming charms do exist.”

“Yeah, but this helps more. We—er, Hermione, Ron, and I—learned that the hard way these past few weeks roughing it in the British countryside.”

Severus sighed and surrendered, wrapping Harry in his arms. Harry rested against Severus’ chest and tipped his head back to look at the older man. “About the pub—yeah, you’re a tough fighter, Sev, but that wasn’t what I meant either.”

Severus closed his eyes at the pang the name caused him and murmured against Harry’s hair, “What did you mean, then?”

Harry slid his hand into Severus’. “About your looks.”

Severus froze, ice filling his heart. “If you find me so repulsive, I can perhaps glamo—”

“Oh, Sev!” Harry turned and held Severus’ cheek, his gentle fingertips rubbing a bit of the older man’s pain away. “That’s not what I was saying. Gods! The fact that you would even offer to hide yourself away under glamours …. ” He closed his eyes and lowered his head. “It’s so sad.”

“I, I do not understand.” Severus couldn’t help but lean into Harry’s hand. “I, it relieves me that you do not wish me to, but why not? If you find me so repellant—”

Harry’s fingertip against Severus’ lips stopped his words cold. Severus shivered against a sudden ache to kiss the skin against his lips, taste it.

He wanted to taste Harry’s fingertips? Merlin! Where had that come from?

“Ssh. Don’t you dare say that.” Harry rubbed his finger over Severus’ lips, and the older man nearly gave in to his desires. He could not help parting his lips slightly and closing his eyes.

“Don’t say that,” Harry repeated in a softer voice. “Don’t say such terrible things about yourself. I was trying to tell you, Severus, that those Muggles are idiots. You have strong features, of course, and the war’s aged you too soon, but so it has done for all of us. And …. ”

Harry’s gentle fingertip traced down Severus’ nose, his closed eyelids, his temples, and Severus couldn’t breathe. Harry’s fingers branded him, brought him to life everywhere they touched.
Harry murmured, “And in spite of it all, or maybe because of it, you’re stunning.”

Severus gasped and reeled back, panting and shocked and drowning in sudden tears. Stunning? Gods, no one had ever seen him as even passable, let alone … wait. No. It couldn’t be real. No one could think a monster like himself to be stunning.

“Potter,” Severus growled, “that is utterly cruel.”

“Harry,” the young man corrected. “And I wasn’t mocking you.”

Severus swayed under the feel of a gentle kiss against his cheek. He gasped and turned into Harry, his heart crying out for this soft, rare affection. Gods, he had never felt something so … pure. So beautiful. It couldn’t be real. Such joy belonged to other men, to lighter, handsomer men. Never to dark, shrivelled, lonely Snivellus.

He turned wide, tearful eyes upon Harry and clutched at the young man’s shirt with shaking hands. He wanted it, needed it to be true, despite knowing he was hoping in vain.

‘Please,’ his soul cried. But outwardly, all he could say was: “But, it cannot be! You must be mocking me. I am not—was never—you could not—”

He had never been so inarticulate in his life.

Harry shushed Severus’ babbling with another fingertip on his lips. Gods, Severus had to fight not to kiss that gentle, calloused pad.

“I’m not my father, Severus. I meant what I said.” He held the older man’s cheeks and gently wiped his tears away. “Ssh. Sev, look at me. Look into my eyes. See? Green, not brown.”

Severus blinked more tears down, wishing he had the strength to stop them.

“Severus, ssh. It’s okay. I really do think you’re handsome. Honestly.”

“How?” His voice was shattered. “How can you p-possibly look at me and see—”


Harry’s gentle words drove the final nail in the coffin of Severus’ control, and he kissed the young man’s fingertip. Harry gasped softly, but did not pull away, so Severus wagered he hadn’t repulsed him. With great care, he touched the chilly pad with just the tip of his tongue.

The taste of salt, Severus had expected, but not cherries. Had either of them touched cherries? No. Where had it come from?

Gods, Severus loved cherries.

He wanted to taste more, but no. It was only a small kiss of gratitude. Harry had never expressed a wish to be his partner, and Severus would never push him. With a sigh, Severus rested his head against Harry’s chest and wrapped his arms around the younger man’s waist.

“T-thank you, Harry.”

Trembling, tender fingertips sorted through his hair. “Nothing to thank me for.”

“Nevertheless, I am grateful. No one has ever said a kind word to me about my looks. Nor for …
much of anything, to be honest.”

Harry’s voice was soft. “I meant it, Sev. Really.”

Severus tugged him closer. “I know.”

Harry was still reeling when they finished their private ceremony to honour Professor Burbage and their mums. Severus’ innocent kiss had revealed what Harry hadn’t understood through sheer lack of experience.

Beyond all the obstacles, against all the odds, he had fallen completely and irrevocably in love with Severus Snape.

Gods, how had this happened? Two weeks ago, the man had been the lowest of the low, on the same tier as Bellatrix the mad bitch. Now that Harry knew the truth of him, Severus had earned a place all his own, the place dearest to Harry’s heart.

Harry had to have a masochistic streak to fall for such a closed-off man. For the one who had tortured him during his six previous years of schooling. For his professor, and a man who had attended school with his parents. Who had been his parents’ enemy.

He remembered the wreath of fire lilies Severus had conjured in honour of Harry’s mum and amended his thought. Not the enemy of both of his parents. At least, not at first.

He couldn’t understand it. Why had his mum just … abandoned Sev like that, and made him think it was his fault for so long? Why had she ignored every apology, every attempt at atonement the man had made? After hearing the entire story, Harry thought it clear that his mum was the one at fault, the one who needed to apologise for abandoning Severus, but she never had. Nor had she ever accepted Sev’s attempts to make reparations, either.

The knowledge left Harry cold inside. Not only had his father sexually abused Severus, but his mother had left the man to it. Abandoned him to be tortured and humiliated in front of the entire school because of one—admittedly cruel—word spoken in a moment of terror. The boy Severus had been, one who had never had anyone but Lily to trust, had probably felt like a caged animal. He had lashed out at anyone who came too close out of sheer, mindless terror. And though he had been in the wrong to call his then friend such a horrible name, he had apologised and tried to explain. Over and over and over. But it was never good enough, Severus had never been good enough, and that broke Harry’s heart into little pieces.

Harry’s family hated the man he loved, and certainly would hate him more so now. They would never approve of his choice. Gods, that knowledge hurt.

Even worse, it was likely his parents’ abuse and betrayal that had led Severus down the dark path he chose in the first place. If his father had never attacked Severus, the terrified young man would never have lashed out at Lily, and thus might not have lost her friendship. If his mum had only forgiven Severus, he might not have ever fallen in with the Death Eaters. If Severus had had even one person to turn to in those days, he might not have gone with Lucius Malfoy after the last time Harry’s mum rejected him, when he felt he had no one else left in the entire world.

Harry blinked a mist of tears from his eyes. He didn’t know if Severus would ever return his love,
could return it after what Harry’s parents had done to him—though that tender kiss in the courtyard gave him hope—but either way, he would make sure Severus understood that he wasn’t alone any longer.

Even if Severus never considered Harry as a potential partner, Harry would never let him be lonely again.

Harry checked that the hallway was empty and slipped his hand into Severus’ just a few metres from their door. Severus turned and gave Harry a concerned look.

“Are you well, Potter?”

“Yeah.” His face flamed and he looked away. “I just … wanted you to know I’m here.”

Severus smiled and squeezed Harry’s fingers. “I … do.”

Harry let go of Severus’ hand to slide their key-card through the lock. He opened the door and would have gone through, only someone was blocking their way.

A cat Patronus sat perched on their doorstep in the shape of a bespectacled tabby.

Severus gasped out, “Minerva?”

Harry grabbed Severus’ arm and pulled him into the hotel room before any Muggles saw the silver tabby awaiting them. Merlin, what did McGonagall want with them? Harry shuddered. Whatever news the tabby brought from Hogwarts—where Voldemort had taken control—it couldn’t be good.

Utterly gobsmacked, Severus stared at the silver tabby and trembled. He jumped at the sound of the door shutting behind him.

Merlin, what did Minerva want? He hoped … no one else at Hogwarts had died, but if they had, it wasn’t beyond her to send a message to Potter so he wouldn’t need to hear it on the radio. Still, Severus wished with all of his being that the cat might have come for him. That one person among his former colleagues might have seen the truth and realised he couldn’t have been the bastard they all thought if Voldemort wanted him dead nearly as much as Harry.

He wished, but he daren’t hope. He had played his part far too well.

Harry knelt before the Patronus and went to tap its head, but the beast hissed and turned its eyes toward Severus.

“She … wants you, Sev.” Harry got to his feet and guided the shaking, heartsick man to the couch and helped him to sit. “Come on. Lean against me. I’ll hold you together no matter what she has to say, okay? It’s going to be all right.”

Severus swallowed hard and sat tall. He could bear this, whatever it said. He had borne worse. He lifted a tentative hand toward the cat and let slip a shaky sigh when the beast purred and rubbed its back into his palm.

“H-hello, Minerva,” he murmured. “I am here with Harry Potter. It is safe to speak in front of him. Indeed, I cannot leave his side for long. What is your message?”
The cat sat on its haunches and flicked back its ears. “Severus Snape, as much as I cannot stand the sight of you, Hogwarts and its students need your help. I would not dare ask, but You-Know-Who’s recent campaign against you—and Granger’s campaign in support of you—makes me question what I know. If you are indeed on the side of the light and Albus’ murder was not a murder as Hermione insists, then I beg you come to Hogwarts tonight and help us.

“Riddle is furious that Poppy escaped and killed his vile pet into the bargain. He has been taking it out on the professors, including myself. We are not dead—yet—but we are all injured and there is no doubt he will kill us if given enough time. What’s worse, he has decided he wants it mandatory that all British children of Hogwarts age come to be educated at this school. He wants to ban home schooling and private tutoring, and whether you are truly our ally or not, you know full well what he truly intends to do when those children arrive.”

The cat growled and arched its back a bit.

“I will not allow our beloved school to be turned into a concentration camp! I will not let him use the Sorting Hat as a method to determine who dies and who is given a seat of questionable honour beside the madman himself. I will die defending them sooner! And so will we all.”

The cat sat once more, looking terribly sad.

“But if we die, then there is no one left to teach the children when this is all over. When it becomes safe once more. As much as, as it hurts, the other teachers and I have met in secret and agreed that we want to … to close Hogwarts to all students until the war is over. As much as I hate it, the school we all know and love is a school no longer. It is a warzone, and no longer safe for anyone, neither student nor teacher.

“If I must, if we must leave the school open despite Riddle’s terrible plans, I will fight for the students with everything I have, but I will not last long. I am an injured Gryffindor—I will be the first targeted for execution. I may not survive long enough to defend anyone, and without us, without the true teachers, there is no one left to protect the children. We must close the school, for all of our sakes.

“There is a rite Albus insisted I learn long ago, just in case something like this should ever happen.”

The Patronus gave a bitter laugh in Minerva’s voice, which looked odd coming from a cat. “Perhaps he knew, as he knew everything else. It would not surprise me.”

The cat flicked its tail and shook its head. “I digress. The rite I have mentioned requires as many of the current professors as possible, the headmaster, and at least three students of varying houses to venture to the school’s nexus and plead with Hogwarts to shut the school down. Did you know the school is sentient? It is. But the rite, if we perform it correctly, will lock Hogwarts up tight, eject any current residents besides the rite casters—of which there are only Death Eaters—and block entry to anyone but the rite’s participants until the true Headmaster sits in the Great Hall once again. It takes all the magic from Hogwarts and concentrates it into creating impenetrable wards around the building. It would remove Riddle from his headquarters and prevent him forcing children to come and be sorted for death.

“But there is one problem: we cannot do it without the true Headmaster, and that is you, Severus Snape.” The cat sighed. “We need you. I, we don’t know if you can be trusted, but we have no other choice but to ask for your help. If you are truly with the light, please meet us in the secret staff room as soon as you possibly can. One of us will be there at all times.

“I am trusting you, Severus, against my better judgment. Please, do not let me down.”

Severus was weeping long before the cat finished her message and vanished. “She will never forgive
me, will she?"

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’ and laced their fingers together. “If it helps, Sev, I forgive you. Completely. And I’ll speak to them in your favour, okay? It’s going to be all right. I’ll make sure they understand.”

Severus stood and wiped his eyes. “Thank you, Potter, but there isn’t time. Minerva took a great risk sending that Patronus to me. Riddle could discover their plans at any moment and kill them all. We must hurry.”

Harry stood and grabbed Granger’s bag. Severus helped gather their belongings and pile them into the handy satchel, keeping Harry’s cloak, a pair of daggers bought in Dublin, and a second invisibility cloak Severus had bought for himself as well. It wasn’t as good as Harry’s, but with a disillusionment charm and a *Muffliato*, it would do.

As Severus slipped the cloak over his head, a warm hand found his.

“So we don’t lose each other,” Harry said in a soft voice.

Severus couldn’t resist twining their fingers together. “Come, Potter. We must hurry.”

“What about the charge for the hotel?”

“It is already paid. I set it up so if something like this should happen, we might just leave without problems.”

Harry squeezed his hand. “Then I’m ready.”

“Good. Hold on.”

Severus closed his eyes, held the destination of Hogsmeade in his mind, and apparated.
Chapter 10

The moment Harry’s feet touched down, a piercing shriek cut the night. He froze, but before he could even determine what had happened, strong hands shoved him further down the street.

“Go, Potter,” a voice called in his ear.

Harry dragged his trembling feet forwards, letting the force at his back guide him. He stayed silent and moved swiftly, even when black-cloaked forms swept from every doorway, searching for the intruders. To Harry’s shock, they searched the sides of the street, the shadows and corners, but left the middle of the road untouched. Of course, they would expect anyone who triggered a Caterwauling charm in a town full of Death Eaters to hide, not prance about in plain sight.

They passed the Hog’s Head, where a grim-looking old man with familiar blue eyes watched the proceedings from the stoop, and the gates of Hogwarts appeared around the bend. Almost there. Once inside the castle, the Marauder’s Map would show any approaching Death Eaters, making avoiding them easy. They just had to make it to the gates ….

A bone-rattling chill sank into Harry’s flesh and tore at his heart. He gasped and tugged his cloak tighter around him, but no winter wind had brought such soul-biting cold. Familiar screams rebounded off his skull—Not Harry! You won’t take him!—before he realised what had found them.

Dementors. Harry stepped back into Severus, shaking and petrified, as the ghostly black forms hovered closer.

“S-S-Sev?”

“I’ll do it.”

Harry leaned into Severus and held him, praying it would give the man the power he needed to call his Patronus. A moment later, an argent form leapt through the streets and Harry could breathe—oh gods, he could breathe again.

Severus whispered, “All right?”

Harry nodded into his shoulder and hugged him. “T-thanks.”

“It is qui—”

“There,” cried a voice on their immediate left. “I saw it! It was a doe.”

Severus pushed Harry again, and they moved towards the gates once more.

“A doe?” Another voice cackled. “Snapey-wapey, where are you hiding?”

Bellatrix. Harry shuddered and moved faster.

The old man at the Hog’s Head called out. “Oi, that wasn’t a doe. It was a goat! My Patronus, you idiots. Expecto Patronum!”

Another silvery form darted through the streets. Harry silently thanked the old man and prayed the
Death Eaters took the bait.

“You’re lying. I swear it was a doe.”

“Idiot! Brains like that, you could be a Death Eater. Didn’t I just prove my Patronus was a goat?”

The voices faded as Harry rounded the bend, Severus’ hand still warm at his back. They said not a word until Severus had disarmed the alarm on the gates and led them through.

Harry tapped his wand against the map in his hand and whispered, “I solemnly swear I am up to no good.”

“Potter!”

“Ssh!”

Severus pushed him forwards, and Harry walked while he scanned the map. Two dots outside the castle perimeter. Ah, there they were. He searched for any other dots around them and, seeing none, grabbed Snape’s hand and pulled him at a run.

“What are you—”

“Ssh!” Harry tugged him forwards again. “I have a map of Hogwarts that shows the people in it and where they are, and no one can hide from it. We’re safe—there’s no one out here right now.”

“You are sure of this?”

“It showed me Pettigrew in my third year, Severus. I thought it was malfunctioning at first ….”

“But then you realised Pettigrew had been masquerading as Weasley’s pet rat. Where is the nearest Death Eater then?”

“Um ….” Harry looked over the map and scowled. “Old Mouldy is in the Great Hall with Dolohov. Reckon we should avoid them.”

“Indeed. There is no one in the small hallway directly to the west of it?”

Harry followed his finger over and frowned. “Oh. That’s not on my map.”

“As it wouldn’t be, if students had created it.”

“What do you mean by—oh. Damn.”

Severus gave a quiet snort. “Parchment that insults people, indeed.”

“How in the bloody hell did you—?”

“Later. We are almost to the doors. Guide me to the hall I just showed you. The door is at the southwest corner of the Great Hall, behind the portrait of Sir Carogan.”

Harry groaned. “Oh no. Not that mad knight.”

“No. Sir Cadogan is his brother.” Warm hands gripped Harry’s waist. “I’m ready.”

Harry swallowed at the heady feeling of having Severus so close. “R-right. This way.” He pulled the heavy entrance doors open as quietly as possible and waited until Severus had moved in behind him.
before easing them shut.

“Right,” he whispered. “Follow me.”

Harry guided Severus this way and that, pausing only for one tense moment when Amycus Carrow passed so close, Harry could smell the tang of blood on the man’s sweat. He suppressed a gag and held his breath until the Death Eater had gone. With a soft sigh, Harry resumed their tandem trek to the unmarked hallway until a portrait of a stern, fair-haired knight halted their progress.

“Invisible or not, I know you are there. None may enter without a password.”

Severus murmured, “Invictus,” and the portrait gasped.

“Headmaster. You have returned?”

“For a time, Carogan. Guard these halls and let no one—not portrait, ghost, nor human—know that I am here.” He paused. “Unless Professor McGonagall has given you instructions?”

“Yes. I know who to notify.”

“Good. Make sure you say nothing to Armando Dippet.”

“Yes, we know of his treachery. The scallywag now lies in tatters in the greenhouses among the Devil’s Snare.”

Harry shuddered. “Merlin.”

Carogan fixed his eyes on Harry. “Students are not allowed within.”

“This is Potter, Carogan. He is with me, and I cannot leave him alone.”

Carogan nodded. “Ah. Then Mister Potter has a question he must answer before I grant him passage into the halls of his superiors.”

Harry sighed. “I am right here, you know. What question?”

“In your first year, you found Quirrell attempting to steal the Philosopher’s stone, but this was a surprise to you. Whom did you suspect at first, and whom did you warn of the attempt before going after it yourself?”

Heat flooded Harry’s cheeks. “Er … gods, I’m sorry, Severus. I suspected P-Professor Snape, and I warned Professor McGonagall. She, she told me that Severus had created one of the traps to keep intruders out and therefore wouldn’t try to steal it. She … she was right. I should have had more faith in him.”

A warm arm wrapped around his shoulders and pulled him close. “Ssh. All is forgiven, Potter,” Severus murmured. “You only believed what I wanted you to.”

Harry hugged him in response.

“Well done, Mister Potter,” said the Knight. “Do take care not to disturb anything, and hurry along before someone else comes.”

“Yes, sir.” Harry led Severus into a stone tunnel lined with torches and dimly lit house banners, watching in awe as the Marauder’s Map added the room to its archives. “Wow.”
A voice by his ear made Harry jump. “I find it hard to believe that the way to our hidden strategy room impresses you.”

Harry blushed. “Er, no. The map is adding this place as we speak.”

“Lovely,” said Severus with a groan. “More generations of troublemakers seeking this place out, only this time with help.”

Harry chuckled. “Mischief managed.” He pocketed the map and gave his companion a hesitant smile. “Sev, about … back there. Your trap, it was utterly brilliant. I’d have poisoned myself for sure if Hermione hadn’t been with me.”

Severus wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders and walked close beside him. “I told you before, all is forgiven. There is no need to make it up to me.”

“Oh. I just … I just wanted you to know I don’t feel that way any longer.”

Severus was quiet for a long moment. “Thank you, Harry. I am glad.”

“So am I.”

They walked in silence down the quiet tunnel, until voices began to filter through the stone. One in particular made Harry’s heart lurch.

“Is that …?” He dashed forwards and listened hard.

“—like tiny cows with purple feathers for horns,” said a dreamy voice Harry knew well.

“Luna!” He tore down his hood and bolted around the bend.

Harry came to a stop in a round, stone-walled room lit by torches and a magical skylight. A u-shaped table sat at the middle of the room surrounded by chairs along the outside and a globe on the inside. The globe currently showed Britain and the surrounding countries with red dots over several countries. The four house banners hung proudly at the compass points of the room, as close as it would ever come to having corners, and each draped behind a section of the table. Professors and students alike milled about, some sitting in the chairs, most huddled in small groups around the room. At one end of the table, Luna sat with several of their professors, telling them about some odd magical creature.

“They like conflict, you see,” she was saying, “and if you can track them, perhaps we would know where—”

“Luna!” Harry forced his legs to move and caught the girl into a hug, lifting her clear into the air and spinning her about. “Oh gods, you’re alive!”

“Harry?” She held Harry’s face and grinned. “Harry! Oh, you’re back! But where’s the Professor? I did try to tell them you would come together, but no one seems to beli—”

“Harry!”

Hermione’s squeal brought a stampede running Harry’s way. Before he knew it, two arms had embraced him, then six, then ten, until a veritable dog-pile had buried Harry in hugs.

“Air,” he croaked, and the dog-pile backed away.

Laughing, Harry stood and looked around. Merlin, so many people had come. Besides the Professors
—Flitwick, McGonagall, and Slughorn—Bill and Fleur were there, Hermione, Ginny, the Weasley twins, and Lee Jordan. Hannah Abbott and Neville were holding hands, and beside them stood Dean, looking thin and worse for the wear, but whole and alive! Then there were the Patil twins, Ernie Macmillan, Terry Boot, Daphne and Astoria Greengrass, and even in a corner, looking ashamed and afraid, was Ron.

After catching Dean in a tight hug, Harry went to Ron, hesitant and trembling. “Are you … still angry with me?”

Ron winced. “No. Are you still angry with me?”

“No.”

With a sigh, Ron grabbed Harry into a hug and muttered, “Thank Merlin. I’m sorry, mate. Should’ve done better by you. Hermione gives me an earful for it ‘least twenty times a day.”

“I do not!” She stamped her foot, then broke into laughter and caught them both up. “Oh, my silly, wonderful men. I do love you so.”

Harry kissed her cheek and hugged them both tight. “I love you as well, and … oh!”

He looked around, but Severus’ lanky form wasn’t yet visible. The man hadn’t taken off his cloak, and Harry didn’t blame him. He wished now he hadn’t left the vulnerable man’s side.

“Se—”

To his surprise, a gentle, invisible hand brushed his cheek before he could finish calling out. Harry smiled and caught the hand in his own, making it look as though he was merely scratching his face.

“Hey guys, listen. I have to tell you something, okay, and I want you to hear me out before you pass judgment. You too, Professors. This is really important.”

The professors came to join them, McGonagall with a pronounced limp. Slughorn helped her to a chair and fanned his face as he sat beside her. Flitwick clambered onto the next seat. The little professor had a black eye.

“Do forgive us, Mister Potter,” said Flitwick with a sad smile. “We are all rather badly injured. Professor McGonagall … well, perhaps I shouldn’t speak of it.”

“Indeed not,” she said with a sniff. “I am not incapacitated.” Her shoulders slumped. “Not for spellwork, at least.” She sighed and motioned the students into chairs around the table. “I take it this is about Severus?”

Harry nodded.

She pointed her wand at the globe and it vanished, leaving only a small, raised dais at the centre of the table’s curve. As the other students and Professor Sinistra, who had come in while Flitwick was speaking, filed into the seats, McGonagall motioned to the dais.

“Well, go on then and tell us what we need to know, Harry. Is he friend or foe?”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand and led him onto the dais.
Severus was thankful for the feel of Harry’s hand in his own, for without it, the fear and shame of standing before colleagues he had hurt would drive him mad. It seemed Harry understood as the young man never ceased caressing Severus—rubbing his fingertips, stroking his palm, lacing their fingers together—every touch grounded and soothed him as Harry pleaded his case.

“A friend,” Harry said in a firm voice. “These past couple of weeks, he’s … he’s ….” His expression softened and his eyes warmed. “Merlin, he’s been so kind to me. Nothing like what we knew before. Never a cross word, unless I’d really said something awful and hurt him by it. And he didn’t hide his emotions from me. Didn’t close himself off half so much. Gods, it’s like I’ve never known the man at all.”

He sighed and looked into Severus’ eyes, though Harry couldn’t see them. “The truth is, we haven’t known him. While he acted as a spy in Riddle’s camp, he had to pretend to be cruel and hateful to anyone of the light—especially me.”

Macmillan called, “And the years in between, when Riddle was still gone and the war was over for a time?”

“The war was never really over,” Harry said with a sad voice. “It just went underground. There were still Death Eaters all around and Severus—”

“Severus!” Minerva shot Harry a sharp look. “You call the … Headmaster by his first name?”

Harry blushed. “He, he lets me. I, I didn’t mean to be disrespectful.”

Severus laid his head against Harry’s, a way of communicating that he enjoyed hearing his name on Harry’s lips, that it was okay. Harry tilted his head a bit and half-closed his eyes.

“I, I think he likes it, actually.”

Severus squeezed his hand by way of reply.

Minerva scoffed. “Poppycock!”

Harry barely controlled his snort.

Severus whispered in his ear, “Behave.”

Harry shivered and tipped his head back a little, then straightened and gave Minerva a sheepish smile. “Um, we’ve actually been having a bit of fun. Well, as much as we can while trying to kill a dark lord and in between hearing about … about ….” Tears welled up in Harry’s eyes, but the words stopped.

Severus sighed and ran his fingers across Harry’s cheek. The young man still could not say Lupin’s name. Harry turned slightly into the touch and closed his eyes.

George Weasley stood, and Severus’ insides froze. He stood straight to watch the others, but found himself missing Harry’s warmth.

“All right, Harry,” said George. “You say he’s been good to you. Bully for him. What about this, eh?” He pointed to the hole on the side of his head, and Severus wished he could melt into the floor. “How do you explain this, if he isn’t a total murdering bastard?”
Harry winced. “George, I, it was an accident. Avery was aiming to kill you, and Severus was trying
to kill him, but when you dodged Avery’s curse, you jumped into Severus’.”

Fred frowned. “And I suppose he told you this?”

“Yes. And I made him swear it on his life.”

“Muggles do that all the time,” said Dean. “Doesn’t make it true.”

“With a magically-binding oath, Dean,” added Harry, his tone revealing his frustration. “It’s not the
same as with Muggles. He would have died if it hadn’t been the truth.”

He held Severus’ hand tighter and squared his shoulders. “The curse to your ear really was an
accident, George. He really did kill Dumbledore under the old man’s orders, too. We’ve been so
wrong about him. Underneath that hard mask he had to wear for Riddle, he really is a … a gentle,
caring man. Kind. Desperately lonely, but gods, so brave.”

Flitwick said, “How do you know this isn’t an act?”

Harry sighed. “Besides instinct? I made him swear magical oaths over and over again until I could
trust him. Every significant thing he told me, I had him swear an oath on his life that it was true.
Obviously, he didn’t die, so he told the truth every time. Then there was the time that, that he told me
… how Riddle found out about the prophecy. Hermione told you he came to me under the
conditions of wizarding Sanctuary, correct?”

The others nodded.

“And you know that if I hurt Severus during this month while we’re under the bond, it hurts me
twice as badly?”

More nods and a wince from Hermione.

“What did you do, Harry?”

Harry chuckled sheepishly and rubbed the back of his neck. “Er, well, when I realised that, um …
that Severus had done something that had caused me a lot of pain in the past, I sort of punched him.
In the face. Hard. I almost broke my hand.”

Hermione groaned. “Harry.”

“I know. The rebound broke my jaw. I thought I was going to die. But Severus didn’t even bother
fixing up his own injury; he just knelt down and healed me. He didn’t even want to let me heal him
when he’d finished and explained himself, because he thought he deserved the pain.”

Severus leaned in and whispered, “I did.”

“Hush,” Harry whispered back out of the corner of his mouth. He raised his voice again. “And you
know, all those oaths I made him swear—I could see that every single one both hurt and terrified
him. But he did it. Every single time. And even warned me that, should I use the method in the future
to make sure someone’s honest, not to drop my wand until the oath had completed in case they
attacked me. Why would he say such a thing if he wasn’t honest? Why would he swear at all?”

Severus leaned into Harry and whispered, “I will do so again, if you ask it of me.”

Harry rubbed his thumb over the inside of Severus’ wrist and the former spy gasped at the jolt of
sensation it sent through him. Harry paused, then rubbed once more, and smiled at the hitch in Severus’ breathing.

Severus shivered. Gods, what was happening to him?

Ronald Weasley said, “What are you smiling about, mate?”

Harry’s cheeks went crimson. “Er, just thinking about something he said earlier. Listen, you guys know me. I’m the most suspicious berk in this school. Don’t you remember when I tailed Malfoy all of sixth year because I knew he was up to something and pretty much no one believed me? Or when I kept telling you Snape was no good and you all tried to get me to see sense? How many times did you tell me I was being a paranoid git, Hermione?”

The woman chuckled. “Too many to count. But do recall I’m on your side in this. I saw the Headmaster’s confession and how the shade of your mum tore him to shreds. I watched him destroy … Riddle’s artefact. I believe you.”

“So do I, Harry,” said Luna.

Harry gave them a relieved smile. “Thank Merlin someone does! But the rest of you lot, think about this. You know how badly Severus had to treat me before. Do you really think I’d be telling you he’s a kind, honest, thoughtful man under the mask if he hadn’t proved himself to me in spades?”

The others shuffled about, looking a bit ashamed of themselves, with only Ronald still wearing a mistrustful expression.

“All right.” Filius climbed upon his chair to put himself at eye level. “If you truly believe he is innocent, Harry, then I will support you.” He lowered his head. “It seems I owe Severus an apology.”

Tears welled in Severus’ eyes at the tiny, but powerful man’s show of good faith. He blinked them back, but more welled up when Minerva stood as well.

“I will give you my support as well,” she said in a sad voice. “It sounds as if we all owe Severus apologies. Sweet Circe, how frightened he must have been this past semester!”

“I can only imagine.” Aurora Sinistra rose from her seat as well. “My support is yours.”

Slughorn heaved himself to his feet and sighed. “I should have been kinder to him. It must have been terribly lonely with no one but his enemies to talk to.”

As others rose and added their support, Hermione stood and gave Harry a piercing look. “You know, Professors, I don’t think the Headmaster is alone any longer.”

Harry’s cheeks went pink again. “No. He’s not.” He lowered his voice to whisper to Severus, “Nor will you ever be again.”

Severus had to bury his head in Harry’s shoulder to hide a sudden exodus of emotion. Gods, Harry’s soft declaration had ripped the heart right out of him, healed it, and put it back in new and free of the holes twenty years of war had wrought. He hadn’t wanted to break down, but he’d been alone for so long, so many interminable years without a soul, and knowing Harry intended to stay by his side flooded him with need and hope and yearning he couldn’t begin to control.

He crushed his face into Harry’s shoulder with a silent sob and wept for all the nights without warmth. For the moments he needed a friend and found only darkness. For the times he had to be
hateful to someone he would rather protect. For Charity. For Lily. For Harry. The tears came on hard, and it was all Severus could do to keep his sobs silent.

Someone called out—Severus was too far gone to know who, “Harry! What is that? On your chest there? Your shirt ….”

Harry sighed. “I want a promise that you won’t shoot curses.”

Minerva said, “It is Severus, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Will you promise not to hurt him?”

Harry’s desire to protect Severus only added to the man’s emotion, and he clutched at Harry like an anchor in a storm. All around him, promises of safety broke through more and more floodgates until Severus was a shattered mess. He just wanted to crawl into Harry’s arms and weep.

And suddenly, Harry was there. Hands gently brushed back his hood, revealing Severus’ tearful face and hair. Warm arms surrounded him and a soft voice murmured in his ear.

“Hey, ssh. It’s okay. They all promised not to hurt you. Even Ron, though he was more stubborn than most. Oh, Severus. Ssh. I’m here.”

Severus held onto Harry and wept. Words spilled from his lips he never imagined he would have the strength to say, especially in a moment of utter weakness.

“I am sorry, so sorry. Don’t want to be alone. Don’t leave me alone. So sorry.”

Harry led Severus somewhere, Severus was too broken to notice where, but the coolness of the air suggested it was somewhere shadowed, a place where he could gather himself in peace, with only Harry to see his pain. They sat on a sofa in the quiet corner, and Severus thought it suited him to have Harry alone with him, soothing him in his hour of need.

Some part of him wanted it to always be like this.

“Harry,” he whispered.

“I’m here, Severus,” he murmured. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Stay. Please. Just … stay.”

Harry hugged him closer and laid his head upon Severus’. “Okay.”

Harry held Severus close and ran tender fingers through the man’s hair, hoping his presence eased his sorrow.


Harry’s words caught in his throat. Tears welling, heart pounding, all he could do was press close and murmur, “Okay.”

He hoped it would be enough, because his tight throat would not allow him to elaborate. It seemed to
help Severus. His sobs slowed and began to even out.

“I’m right here, Sev. You’re going to be okay.”

Severus pressed a light kiss to Harry’s neck as he pulled back, and Harry shivered. Gods, the man only meant to show gratitude, and Harry felt it down to his toes. It took all his self-control not to tip his head back and beg for more. He might have, had there not been thirty other people just beyond a hastily-conjured screen and if he didn’t know Severus didn’t feel the same.

That thought hurt enough that Harry wanted to cry, too, but he held it together. Severus needed him to be strong now. Harry shook off his sudden sorrow and took the older man’s hands.

“Are you okay?”

Severus nodded and freed a hand long enough to conjure a handkerchief and wipe his face. “Forgive me.”

Harry smoothed Severus’ hair and brushed stray tears from his cheeks. “Ssh. Nothing to forgive. Everyone needs help sometimes. But if you can tell me, what brought that on?”

“It was just … I have had no one for so long, that knowing people would support me ….”

More tears slipped down, and Harry gently wiped them away. “Oh. Well, you don’t have to be alone anymore, okay? Even if everyone else abandons you, I won’t.”

Severus gave him a shaky smile and hugged him. “Thank you, Harry. I never expected to find an ally in you, but I am grateful.”

“You’re welcome. Are you okay now?”

“Yes.” Severus stood and took a deep breath. “Come. We should return to the others.”

Harry stood with him and led him back out from behind the Japanese screen. The divider vanished as soon as they reappeared.

Severus looked behind them curiously. “Did you conjure that?”

Harry grinned. “Er, would you believe me if I said yes?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Not at all, not with you looking like that.”

“So if I wasn’t grinning like a fool?”

“I doubt it.”

Harry chuckled and led Severus out of the little cubby he’d rushed them to earlier. “You’d be right. Hermione conjured it, I think.”

Hermione, McGonagall, and Luna were waiting by the exit. McGonagall sat in a red tartan armchair—obviously conjured—and wore an expression of deepest concern and sorrow. Hermione looked much the same, but Luna had her usual dreamy smile. It seemed nothing could ruffle her.

“Excellent transfiguration work with the screen, Miss Granger,” Severus said with a shy smile. “Or do I have you to thank, Minerva?”

McGonagall reached up from her seated position and patted Hermione’s shoulder. “It was indeed
Miss Granger. I am forever telling her she will take my place one day.”

Hermione blushed. “Oh, tosh, Professor.” She took a hesitant step towards Harry and Severus. “Um, Headmaster, are you all right?”

Severus looked stunned for a moment, but recovered quickly. “Ah, I am … better. Thank you.”

Luna gave him a bright smile. “I’m glad you have Harry now, Professor. He’s bringing the colour back to your eyes.”

Hermione gave the girl a piercing look. She raised an eyebrow at Harry and gasped at his blush.

“No. Really?”

Harry’s ears flamed, too, but he ignored her. “Come on. If Severus is well enough, we’ve got to get the rite started soon.”

“Mm-hmm.” She whispered in Harry’s ear. “I expect a letter once you’ve said something. Second to know, remember?”

“Shh! Quit poking, Hermione.”

She moved back and gave the bemused Severus a bright grin. “I’m glad to see this open side of you, Professor, though I wish it hadn’t started with pain.” She hesitated. “Are you okay? Did we say something hurtful? I don’t understand what made you so upset.”

Severus’ cheeks reddened. “It was foolish of me, but, as I told Harry, the show of support overwhelmed me.” He gazed at the young man with a soft smile. “I never expected to find it. I thought I would die alone and friendless, and all I could hope was that my death could serve some purpose for the greater good, so to speak. Harry was hard at first, as cold and mistrusting as everyone I have ever known, but since I have shared my story honestly, he has become a true ally. I think … I will not die alone now.”

“You had better not die at all,” Harry said in a gruff voice. “At least, not anytime soon.”

Severus smiled and blushed a little deeper. “I shall try my best.”

Hermione leaned into Harry’s ear again. “Hmm. Looks like your suit isn’t hopeless.”

“Hermione!” Harry gasped and shoved her away, his face and ears on fire. “Leave off.”

She giggled and went to Luna’s side. “I should give you more credit, you know. How you’re the first person to know everything is completely beyond me.”

Luna smiled. “The creatures tell me.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Sure they do. Come on. Let’s leave those two to Professor McGonagall. I imagine she has a lot to say to Severus.”

“Oh, yes. They have lots of nargles to shoo away.”

Hermione shook her head and led Luna back into the main room.

After the girls left, Severus leaned down to Harry to murmur, “Dare I ask what that was all about?”

Harry groaned and buried his face in his hands. “No, you don’t. Luna’s a mystery.”
“I am aware of that. I was speaking of Granger.”

“She’s a mystery, too.”

Severus chuckled and straightened with a pat to Harry’s shoulder. “I suppose it is a good thing we are both gay men if women are creatures beyond all understanding.”

Harry gasped. “S-Severus, I, I’m not … I haven’t … .”

He paled. “Oh, Merlin. I apologise, Potter. That was insensitive of me.”

Minerva patted Harry’s shoulder. “Not to worry, Harry. I will say nothing. It isn’t my business anyway.” She turned to Severus and gave him an appraising look. “You believed you would die friendless? Does that mean we were never friends?”

Severus lowered his head. “When have you seen the man I truly am, Minerva? I thought of you as a friend, but you have never known me.”

She smiled and offered her hand. “In that case, I look forward to getting to know the man you truly are, Severus Snape. Will you forgive me for doubting you?”

He shook her hand. “It was what you were meant to do, Minerva. You could not in good conscience have done otherwise with the information you had.”

“Perhaps not, but it still must have hurt. My apologies for calling you a coward, Severus. It appears you are the bravest man I have known.”

Severus looked away and dropped her hand. “I, I am not—do not deserve—”

Harry picked up the hand he had let fall and cradled it in his own. “Yes you are, and yes you do. You are brave, Severus. Brave and smart and incredibly strong. I’m proud of you.”

Severus covered his eyes with his free hand. “Please. I cannot.”

Harry rubbed Severus’ fingers. “All right. It’s okay. Just breathe.”

Severus took several deep breaths, and when he emerged, his eyes had gone black and blank.

Harry squeezed his hand. “Your barriers?”

“Yes. Forgive me. It is … too much to bear without Occlumency.”

“It’s all right. Just so you don’t shut us out entirely, okay?”

Severus gave Harry a small smile, all his Occlumency would allow. “You are entirely too forgiving, but you know well these barriers only shut off my emotional response, not my ears. I hear you. I am listening. I merely cannot bear all the emotions without breaking down again.”

McGonagall gave him a motherly smile. “In that case, we shall try to make this easier for you. Come, Severus, if you are able.”

“Yes.”

Harry started to drop Severus’ hand, but Severus clutched him tight.

“Please. I, I fear I cannot hold my barriers steady without help.”
Harry’s face burned, but he nodded and held the Headmaster’s hand as they walked into the room once more, McGonagall leaning on Severus’ shoulder. The situation surprised most people around the table as Harry and Severus returned, but a few more than Harry would have liked had knowing expressions. Fleur, Bill, Hermione, Luna, and Ron all looked as though they were expecting it. Only while the former wore uncertain or encouraging smiles, Ron looked as if he had been betrayed. Harry sighed and squeezed Severus’ fingers. Severus needed him, and he wouldn’t abandon the man for a silly feud Ron seemed determined to carry to his grave.

Bill rushed over to help McGonagall, gave Harry an encouraging smile, and half-led, half-carried the injured Professor to her seat.

“Thank you, William.” McGonagall straightened her robes and said in a stern voice, “Now, with Severus here and able, we will move right on to the ritual. Sir Carogan has alr—”

“Just a moment, Professor,” said Ron, and Harry groaned inwardly. “Is there any reason why Harry and Professor Snape need to be holding hands for this?”

Severus flinched and started to pull his hand away, but Harry tugged him back.

“No,” Harry murmured. “You need me. It’s okay.”

“But Weasley—”

“He’ll get over it.”

Professor McGonagall spoke over their quiet conversation. “As a matter of fact, there is, Mister Weasley. Severus is completely overwhelmed by the support and needs help to keep his Occlumentic barriers steady. Harry is anchoring him.”

“I do not wish to harm your relationships with your friends, Harry,” Severus said.

Harry held Severus’ hand tighter. “If Ron can’t understand that I’ve chosen to support you of my own will and support me in turn, then maybe—” His voice broke. “Maybe he isn’t as good of a friend as I always believed.”

Severus sighed and lowered his head. “Forgive me. I never wanted to hurt you, but I have. Over and over, even when I attempt to avoid it.”

Harry scrubbed a hasty hand across his eyes. “You didn’t hurt me this time.” He sniffled and did his best to hold steady. It helped if he looked at anyone but Ron.

Professor McGonagall spoke again. “As I was saying, Sir Carogan has already inform—”

“Sorry, Professor,” Ron interrupted again, “but I still don’t see why that means Harry needs to hold Snape’s hand. Unless Snape’s a bloody pouf or someth—”

Mc Gonagall barked, “Mister Weasley! If you cannot contain your outbursts and keep a civil tongue in your head, you may leave this gathering, and at once!”

Severus sighed and shook his head. “I am sorry, Harry.”

“Ssh. It’s not your fault. It’s okay.” Harry raised his voice and said with more bravery than he felt, “And what if I am the ‘pouf,’ Ron? What then?”

Ron reeled back and choked. “You, you’re not. You’re joking!”
Harry steeled himself and glared. “Actually, no. I, I’m gay, Ron. Deal with it.”

Ron leapt back so fast, his chair tipped over and fell with a resounding clang. “Ugh! No, I can’t. Gods, I never thought you would turn out to be one of them.”

Them. The blood drained from Harry’s face and his stomach dropped into his feet, full of lead and icy cold. It seemed he had his answer as to whether Ron would accept him or not. And judging by the horror in Ginny’s eyes, he could expect the same from her. Well, perhaps for her it was only the shock of discovering Harry’s orientation would never lean to her when she had thought they would continue dating after the war. Harry supposed it would horrify him, too, if he had to find out in such a way.

‘Gin, I’m sorry.’ He gave her a pleading look and hoped she understood.

She looked away, tears shining in her eyes and her jaw set with obstinate fury, and his heart sank along with his stomach. He pushed his arm into his ribs between them, trying to stem the bleeding no one could see.

Never in his life had he wished more that he had paid attention in Occlumency lessons. Perhaps he might have been able to block the virtual tsunami of pain from his chest now, if he had only given more effort then. Tears flowed down his face and his body trembled, but he refused to voice his grief. Severus needed him. The school needed him. He would not let them down because his surrogate family had turned him away.

Hermione’s sorrowful voice reached his ears over the din of pain screaming in his head.

“Oh, Harry.”

He flinched and turned his face away. At a gentle tug back, he suddenly found himself pressed against black cloth and in strong arms.

“I am here, Potter,” Severus murmured. “Forgive me. I did not mean to bring such pain upon you.”

“You d-didn’t,” he choked out. “Ron did. He c-can’t accept what I can’t help, and, and it h-hurts. Gods, he’s always hurting me.”

“Ssh.” Severus wrapped him up tight and called, “Minerva, perhaps we should delay this until the other professors have arrived. Potter needs a moment.”

“Yes, so I see,” she said in a sad voice. “Severus, take him into the resting nook and help him recover. And as for you, Mister Weasley, you and I are going to have a talk. Now.”

“Oh, I want in on that conversation, too,” said Bill in a fierce tone. “Seems like my dear little brother somehow missed a few clues about his own family.”

“What!” Ron’s squawk reverberated off the walls. Harry hoped they had a damn good silencing charm set.

George glared. “Oh, yes. Or didn’t you know about me, brother?”

“What? You’re not—you’re joking!”

Harry glanced back just in time to see Lee swing an arm around George’s shoulders and pull him in for a tender kiss.
“Nope,” said a devilishly grinning Fred. “Not joking.”

George said something in reply, but Severus led Harry into the cubby and the voices vanished. The room must have had a built-in silencing charm. At the sight of several camp beds surrounding a sofa and coffee table, Harry understood why.

The click of heels on stone told him at least two females had followed. He didn’t care. He just wanted to crawl into Severus and cry.

Once out of sight of the others, Harry buried his head in Severus’ shoulder and wept. Some part of him had believed that Ron would understand. That he would accept Harry’s orientation without issues, but given the man’s rigid stance on everything else, that he rejected it shouldn’t have surprised Harry.

A second set of sobs let him know Hermione had come into the cubby too and was sitting beside him. Harry enclosed her in his arms and hugged her tight.

“Hermione, I’m sorry.”

“Ssh. It’s not your fault. He’s just an idiot. And I’m an idiot for falling in love with such a fool.”

Severus’ low voice rumbled close to Harry’s ear. “Miss Granger, I do not believe we are given the capability to control who we fall in love with. It simply happens, and we are left to sort out the mess afterwards, for good or for ill.”

That he stroked Harry’s hair immediately after saying this gave the young man some little hope amidst the crushing storm of his grief.

Hermione gave a bitter chuckle. “There should be a spell or something.”

“Oh, there are,” said Severus in a grim voice, “but I recommend none of them. They help little and cause great pain. I am afraid no magic exists that can truly speed emotional healing. No magic, save this one.” He held Harry’s hand and hesitated over Hermione’s. “May I?”

She nodded tearfully, and the man caught her hand in his.

“I do apologise that my need caused the both of you such pain.”

“Hush,” said a broken Harry. “You did nothing wrong. It’s Ron who’s got his head stuck so far up his arse he can’t see anything but shite.”

Severus snorted. “Crude as that analogy is, I find it singularly fitting. But it does not comfort you now, does it?”

Harry shook his head and crawled back into Severus’ arms.

Hermione released Severus’ hand and hugged her waist. She gave a little huff of irritation. “I’d like to smack him. Hard.”

“No one is preventing you,” Severus said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Harry burst into laughter. “That’s great. You should do it, ‘Mione. Wait until Bill and Professor McGonagall finish putting him through the wringer, then just march out there and smack him around the head. Might make him think twice before he just spews whatever garbage is hanging around in his brain.”
“It might at that,” Severus agreed.

Hermione gave him a sly look. “Should you be encouraging us to smack around other students?”

“Hmm. Are the three of you currently enrolled?”

Hermione shook her head with a wicked grin.

“Then I see no issue.”

She laughed and brought Severus into a hug. “I’m glad you came to us for help that night, you know. You’re really sweet under that hard mask you had to wear.”

Severus’ cheeks pinked and his eyes widened. “Oh. Merlin, I … thank you.”

Hermione chuckled and pulled back, wiping her eyes. “Sorry. I overwhelmed you again, didn’t I?”

“It is quite all right. I still have my barriers up, or I might have slapped Weasley around the ears for you. Or possibly hexed him.”

“Let’s be glad you didn’t,” said Harry. “Too early for hexing when we just got people to trust you again.”

Severus sighed. “I suppose you have the right of it. Pity. A set of elephant ears would go quite nicely with that swelled head of his.”

Harry chuckled and scrubbed a hand across his face. “Thanks, Sev. I feel better.”

“That was my hope.” He brushed Harry’s fringe away from his face. “Are you well?”

Harry lowered his head. “No. It hurts like hell, but I think I can hold it together now.”

“Perhaps the others will be able to knock some sense into him.”

Harry nodded. “Maybe.”

Hermione squeezed Harry’s hand. “I’ll be here for you regardless, Harry. I don’t care who you like.”

From a dark corner, Luna chirped, “Neither do I.”

Harry jumped at her voice. “Merlin, Luna. Have you been here the entire time?”

“Yes, but I thought I should let you heal each other before I spoke. The nargles were choking you, Harry. Are you better? There are fewer now, but you still look haunted.”

“Better,” he said with a nod, “but not okay. Maybe never okay.”

Severus slid an arm around Harry’s shoulders and nudged him against the older man’s chest. “Ssh. You will heal in time.”

“I hope so.” Harry breathed in Severus’ scent and listened to his heartbeat, gathering strength from the man’s closeness.

“There you are, Harry,” said Luna. “The nargles are flabbergasted now.”

Harry snorted against Severus’ chest, then burst into full-fledged laughter. “Merlin, Luna. What did we ever do without you?”
She smiled and shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. I wasn’t there.”

Harry chuckled and sat up straight. “True. Come on then. I’m okay, I think, or as okay as I’m going to be for a while. ‘Mione?”

“Yeah.” She made a final swipe under her eyes. “I think I can face him now.”

“Right.” Harry offered her and Severus his hands. “Together, then?”

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “That might help.”

Severus took Harry’s hand on one side, Hermione on the other, and together, with Luna traipsing behind, they returned to the main chamber. Harry searched the group’s faces when they passed into the main room once more, but found no one looking disgusted. Ginny still refused to meet his eyes, but he supposed he could expect no better from her. Ron hung his head, eyes red and puffy, and shuffled his feet as Harry looked to him.

“Mate, I’m sorry. I was a right arse.”

McGonagall huffed, but said nothing.

“Yeah, you were.” Hermione glared at him. “What made you think you had the right to decide who or even what Harry likes? You should pay more heed to yourself before you go about judging others, considering how you just mucked up everything.”

Ron cried, “I know, okay! Bill and McGonagall—”

Flitwick cleared his throat.

“—Professor McGonagall boxed my ears already. I don’t need another round.”

“Oh the contrary, Ron, I think you need a good hundred or so more before I’m finished with you.”

He groaned and rubbed his temples. “Going to be a long night then, I guess.” He looked to Harry, but Harry refused to meet his eyes.

“Mate, can you forgive me?”

“S’pose so,” Harry said, but still couldn’t look at him.

“A-are we still friends?”

“Been through too much not to be.”

Yet, even as he said it, Harry knew their relationship had been irrevocably damaged, like an elastic stretched too far that wouldn’t return to its proper shape. They would never fit together the same way again. The trio had broken down the middle, and no amount of apologising would fill the crack. Harry wondered if Hermione felt the same way, and if her relationship with Ron was damaged now, too.

She gave Harry a sad smile, as if she had heard his thoughts. “I’ll try to soften Ginny up a little, okay?”

Harry shook his head. “I owe her a proper apology. Thank you, though.”

She squeezed his hand and went to sit with Luna and Ginny anyway. Perhaps her feelings for Ron
had changed. She hadn’t gone to him, after all. The way Ron stared after her told Harry he wasn’t the only one to suspect it, either.

“I’m sorry,” Harry whispered. “I never meant to ... do this.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s fingers. “Potter, how many times must I tell you that you are not responsible for the mistakes of the world at large?”

“Apparently as many times as I have to tell you to use my first name,” he fired back, but his heart wasn’t in it, and Severus only held his hand tighter.

“Harry? I do understand.”

Harry thought of his mum. “Yeah. I suppose you do.”

Chapter End Notes

Invictus is Latin for 'undefeated' and is the title of a poem by William Ernest Henley. I thought it fit Severus to a t.

"Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul."

Invictus by William Ernest Henley
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Warning for graphic violence in this chapter and a pretty gruesome death. I hadn’t planned this originally, but it worked so I ran with it. Also, side note, I was shocked that "splendiferous" is apparently a real word. Huh. Thought I made it up.

CHAPTER 11

Severus held onto Harry’s cool, trembling hand throughout the entire meeting concerning the ritual, caressing and smoothing the calloused skin, and hoping his touch brought some comfort. Harry returned the slow, soft touches with tender caresses of his own, and each brought new warmth to Severus’ heart. The young man had stood up to his best friend for Severus, and the thought both hurt and healed the headmaster by turns. He wanted to touch Harry’s face, to let him know he understood deep in his soul how much the loss of a friend hurt ….

Cold fear leached into his veins. Soul. Shite. If the rite recognised its casters by the core of their soul and ejected everyone not involved in its casting, then the Hogwarts horcrux would be tossed out along with the Death Eaters. Shite-shite-shite! They couldn’t do the ritual until they had the horcrux and destroyed it.

McGonagall raised her wand to begin the rite, but Severus cried, “Stop!”

She looked at him with a bemused expression. “Severus? Whatever is the matter?”

“Do you know how the ritual recognises who participates in its casting and who does not?”

She frowned. “No. I don’t believe anyone alive does. It is as ancient as Hogwarts herself.”

Severus sighed. “Then I think we must wait. There is an item here, one crucial to the war. It is based on soul magic, and should this ritual work on that principle, then we will lose it when all non-casters are ejected and, with it, all hope of defeating Riddle.”

Harry reeled and clutched at Severus’ arm. “Oh no. The diadem.”

“Yes.”

McGonagall paled. “Sweet Circe! Then we must postpone and seek out this object, as dangerous a task as that will be. Have you any idea where it might be located?”

Severus’ shoulders slumped. “I do not.”

“But I do,” said a triumphant Harry. “I remember it, a tiara on an old bust of a warlock. I can take you to it, Sev. You have to come, as the sword has aligned itself to you. And … well, if we run into trouble ….”

Severus gave him a glare. “Use that map of yours, and we should be able to avoid it.”

Ronald cried, “You told him about the map? Our map?”
Minerva fixed the young man with a steely stare. “What map is that, Mister Weasley?”

“Uh … er ….”

“Nice going, Ronniekins,” said George.

“Splendiferous plan, little brother,” said Fred.

“Couldn’t have ratted you out better ourselves.”

“Well, maybe it’s what comes of keeping a rat—”

“Who’s really a man—”

“Who’s really a rat—”

Both finished, “For a pet!”

“Oi!” Ronald rubbed his forehead and whined, “Can’t we just … get to the plan or whatever?”

“Of course,” said Minerva.

Weasley sighed in relief.

“And when we have finished, then you can tell me about this map.”

Weasley groaned and banged his head on the table.

Harry shook his head at the boy’s antics. “Professor, we should probably tell you about it anyway just in case it should happen to fall into the wrong hands.” He took the parchment from his lapel pocket and tapped the surface with his wand. “I solemnly swear I am up to no good.”

“This is a map of Hogwarts.” Harry held it up so everyone could see. “My father, Re—a-and his friends created this to keep track of all the secret passages within the castle they had ever found. The Room of Requirement—it’s a room on the seventh floor that shifts to meet whatever need you might have at the time—isn’t on it, so I can only guess that either the Marauders never found it, or it’s unplottable. Either way, that’s where Severus and I need to go to destroy this … artefact.”

He laid the map on the table and tapped it with his finger. “The room is about here.”

Minerva slid on her spectacles and peered at the parchment. “Merlin, what are all these dots around the map?”

“That’s the dangerous part about it. It reveals the location of anyone and everyone in the castle and the passages into Hogsmeade, and glamours, polyjuice, animagus transformations—nothing fools it. So if the Death Eaters ever got it and figured out the password or if someone left it open without wiping it—mischief managed—they’d know where every single person was and be able to hunt us a lot more efficiently.” Harry pocketed the map.

“That … would be bad,” said a white-faced Flitwick. “So where is this room and what are you going to do there?”

Harry’s eyes flicked to the Slytherin students and, to Severus’ relief, a couple of the Ravenclaws. “I can’t say too much openly. It’s a dangerous secret that could cost us the war permanently. Just suffice it to say there’s a room of hidden things in the Room of Requirement, where the items everyone has stashed there over the years, whether knowingly or not, have just accumulated into
massive piles of junk. The artefact we need to destroy is there, and I remember about where I found it, though it might still take us awhile to find that place again.”

“There’s a problem,” said a serious and much-changed Longbottom. “Once the Carrows started torturing us, we started using the Room as a hideout. A lot of us have been living there for weeks.”

Harry frowned. “Living there? How? The room doesn’t make food.”

“We know. Aberforth down at the Hog’s Head has a passage through a portrait of his sister, Ariana.”

Harry gasped. “Those are Dumbledore’s siblings!”

“Yeah.”

Harry gave Severus a broken look. “So that old man who saved us ….”

“It was Albus’ brother,” said a saddened Severus. “Merlin. I hope he is well.”

Longbottom went rigid. “What happened?”

“We triggered the alarm on Hogsmeade when we apparated in,” said Harry. “It was going okay for a while, we just walked right up the middle of the street under our invisibility cloaks and no one noticed us. But then … then the dementors had their say, and we had no choice but to release a Patronus. I … I froze. I couldn’t do it this time.”

“Which may be to the better.” Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “Mine is more similar to a goat, which is what Aberforth tried to convince the Death Eaters it was. He said something about letting his cat out.”

“I didn’t hear that,” Harry said with a frown.

“We were quite a ways past them. I have trained myself for years to pick up the slightest whisper, so it may have been too far to hear without training.”

Harry nodded. “Probably. God, I hope he’s okay.”

“When you get into the room,” said Longbottom, “just tell it to show Ariana’s portrait and ask her. She’ll know if … if he didn’t make it out. She doesn’t really talk much, though.”

“We will,” said Harry, “but how do we get to the artefact if there are students living in the Room? It won’t change to the room of hidden things as long as someone inside needs it for something else.”

“I know. We’ll have to evacuate everyone first.”

Severus gave Longbottom a nod. “We shall have to regardless. The rite will evict them, Room or no Room, and they will land in the middle of a group of enraged Death Eaters and a furious Dark Lord.”

Neville gulped. “Er, then let’s get them out. Now. I thought the Room’s magic would protect them, but if not ….”

“I would not wish such a fate on a rat I did not like. But thankfully, there is a way from the seventh floor to here—we can simply floo the remaining students home. Potter, you will need to keep watch with that map of yours.”

Harry nodded. “Right.”
“Bring it out again and I will show you our route.”

Harry did as he was told and together, they planned both the evacuation and mission to destroy the horcrux. Once they had made it to the proper corridor without trouble, Longbottom led the evacuation while Severus and Harry guarded the hall and the door into the strategy room.

Longbottom had just led the last student through and closed the passage door behind them when Harry cried out, “Severus, move!”

Severus paled and darted to Harry’s position, wand out and pointed towards the ceiling as he ran. Purple and red light gushed from his wand and surrounded the immediate area in a field of shimmering violet before it dissipated. He jerked Harry in the direction of the Room as soon as his spells completed. The door had already vanished.

Harry started his pacing, his heart pounding in his throat. “What was that spell?”

“Silencing and anti-dark mark charms and anti-percussive wards. Hurry, Potter!”

“I’m trying. Oh gods, we’re not going to make it.”

Severus cast disillusionment spells and shielding, but had the sickening feeling something would go wrong regardless. “What’s happening?”

“Gods, the staircases! I forgot about them. Alecto Carrow is—”

The vile woman stepped into the corridor before Harry could finish his sentence and whipped her head around at the sound of his cut-off words.

“Who’s there?” She grinned. “Come out, wee little kiddies. I believe a little … detention is in order.”

Severus felt for Harry’s hand and moved him away from their current position as fast as he dared, which was not nearly fast enough.

“Hiding, are we?” She cast an anti-disillusionment charm at the place Severus had been moments before, but the edges of her cast still hit both Harry and Severus. The disillusionment charm faded, revealing the men to the dangerous woman. Damn. Severus had hoped to avoid a confrontation, but there was no hope for it now.

Alecto shouted, “There you—Potter!”

Shite! Severus’ heart leapt into his throat. How the hell had she seen short little Harry before himself? He pushed Harry behind him and stepped forward, wand drawn and a curse on his lips.

“I believe you should be more worried about m—”

“You! Traitor!”

Severus had expected a bit of a taunt or rant, but the woman went straight to cursing. Almost before she had finished her screeching, she threw a fierce blasting curse at Severus, and he barely had time to block. Even with his hastily-conjured shield, the force of the curse caught him directly in the chest and sent him past Harry and flying into a wall.

Pain exploded behind his skull and dimmed his vision to floating red and white dots. Harry’s piercing shriek of his name went through his head like an arrow and agony paralyzed him. Fuck! He was going to vomit. Either that or faint, and he had no time for either. Harry needed him.
He tried to stand, but his body exploded with white hot agony, as if someone had set him on fire, and Severus screamed in sheer anguish. ‘Please, kill me. Let it kill me. Make it stop.’

The Crucius forced him still. Severus could not stand, could barely even breathe. He fought against unconsciousness for a long moment, and was unable to say whether he’d lost the battle or not when his vision finally cleared.

Severus forced his body to sit, panic and shame warring within him, and fought another wave of dizziness and nausea. Another desperate cry of his name jarred the last of his pain fog away and Severus opened his eyes.

Harry crouched against the wall opposite, shooting every curse and spell he knew against the advancing Carrow only to find them ineffective.

“Expelliarmus!” The woman laughed and dodged.

“Really, that one again?”

“Impedimenta! Confringo! S-Sectumsempra! Petrificus Totalus! B-Bombarda!”

The woman either dodged, blocked, or nullified the results of each curse. Harry sobbed and drew into himself “S-Sev! Please!”

The injured man struggled in vain to stand, but each movement left him dizzy and sick. And his wand had gone. Where? Ah. The witch must have taken it.

Terror like he had never before felt sunk into his bones. Harry would die, be captured and killed right before his eyes, and Severus could do nothing to prevent it. He had failed. Unless, if Harry could just focus, his spells might hit.

Severus opened his mouth to call out, but before he could manage it, Harry turned and bolted, crying at the same time, “Accio Sword of Gryfindor!”

Horror shot through Severus even as the blade jerked from his pocket and tore through the air. “Harry, no!”

But it was too late. Between the terror fuelling Harry’s already powerful summoning spells and the strange magic intrinsic to the sword itself, Severus could do nothing. The blade unshrunk mid-air, having responded to the call of a new bearer, and zipped towards Harry at lightning speed. Severus barely had time to register a flash of gold, a sickening thud and tearing sound, and a wet slap as the sword landed hilt-first in Harry’s palm.

Alecto gave a little mewling cry that turned into a gurgle, then her body split in two down the middle, rib-to-rib. Her head and torso dropped first, then her bottom half, and a ghastly scream ripped through Severus’ head. Through his shock, it took a moment before he realised it was Harry screaming.

“Harry!”

Severus forced himself to stand despite the agony and nausea and started the too-long trek to the distraught man’s side.
Harry was screaming. He tried to block out the sight of Alecto Carrow’s body cut clean in half, entrails and blood and bile pooling around her corpse, but the image had burned itself into his eyelids. Fuck! He had killed her. He had taken a human life and crushed it.

His stomach churned and lurched, and his scream turned into a retch. He leaned over to expel the contents of his stomach, but a spell hit him in the belly first and soothed his roiling guts.

“Harry, we … we must … the door.”

Harry looked up to see an injured, white-faced Severus standing over the corpse, wand hand dripping blood and the other wrapped tightly around his waist. Alecto’s curse had ripped or torn the sleeves off Severus’ robe and left his bare arms scratched and burned.

Words left Harry’s lips of their own volition—the man himself was caught in a daze of blind horror.

“Alecto … just wanted the sword—killed her! Didn’t mean to. Didn’t want—”

Severus cut across him. “Harry, I know.” With a wave of his gory wand, he Banished the corpse and evidence.

Harry half-wished he could Banish himself.

“Killed her. Didn’t mean to. Didn’t want this.”

A shaky arm wrapped around Harry’s shoulders and dragged him from his knees. “I know. Come, Harry. I know you are miserable, but we must hurry. I protected this hall as best as I could in such a short time, but there is still a chance that someone heard our confrontation.”

“The map,” Harry sobbed. “She took it. Had it. D-didn’t get a chance to w-wipe it.”

“So it is gone now.” Severus shook his head. “Perhaps it is for the best.”

He helped Harry stagger to the door, though between them, they could hardly take a step for one man. Severus gave a grunt of pain, and the sound snapped Harry out of his daze.

“Sev, you’re hurt.”

“Yes. I cannot fight like this. We must get this door open.”

Harry forced his brain to stop screaming and took over for Severus. “Lean on me, Sev. I’m … okay now.”

Severus sighed and laid his arm across Harry’s shoulders. “No. You are not. But we have no time to heal it now.” He groaned in pain and clutched at his ribs. “This is … our only chance … to destroy the horcrux.”

“Right.” Harry steeled himself and paced before the door. ‘I need the place where all things are hidden. I need the place where all things are hidden. I need the place where all things are hidden.’

A wooden door with an iron-ring pull materialised before them, and Harry let out a sob of relief. “Come on. Hurry, Sev.”

He yanked the door open and pulled the injured man through, Severus dragging the sword at his side. The door closed behind them with a clang.
“Hide the entryway from the outside, please,” Harry asked the room.

The walls shimmered, and a light formed on the door and vanished.

“Thanks.” Harry knelt before Severus and wiped a trail of blood from his forehead. “What can I do? Where are you injured?”

“My head, obviously. And I fear she may have broken my ribs. And my wand is a mess. Please Scourgify it for me. I cannot do so to my own wand without a spare.”

Harry nodded. “All right. Hold still and I’ll patch you up as best as I can until we’re back in the strategy room.”

“I-thank you.”

After cleaning Severus’ wand and arm of blood, Harry sent all the most powerful healing spells he knew into the man—which did not amount to much—and stroked Severus’ cheek as he worked. After a moment of focused casting, colour returned to Severus’ face and his bleeding stopped.

Harry conjured a wet cloth and wiped the dried blood from Severus’ forehead. “Close your eyes.” Severus obeyed, and with a gentle hand, Harry wiped the blood from his eyelids and the creases beside them as well. He Banished the cloth and offered his hands to Severus. “There you are. Better?”

“I believe so.” Severus took Harry’s hands and allowed the younger man to heave him to his feet. “Thank you.”

Harry took Severus’ arm and laid it across his shoulders. “You’re still injured. Lean on me while we hunt this Diadem down. Don’t suppose a Summoning charm would—” The last time he had Summoned something flashed vividly through Harry’s mind and he gagged.

Severus hugged Harry close with the arm over the young man’s shoulders. “Ssh. Don’t think of it. Not now.”

“R-right.”

Harry leaned close and scanned the room for a bust with a wig. After a while of detours and wrong turns around junk piles, he finally spotted it perched among an old birdcage and the broken cabinet Malfoy had mended. Harry wondered if his old potions book was still hidden there.

As Severus carefully levitated the horcrux off the bust and set it on the floor, Harry searched through the cabinet and smiled at the sight of his tattered book. Severus’ book. He held it to his chest for a moment before offering it to the man.

“That was what I was hiding when I found the diadem. I, it’s yours. Here.”

Severus stared at the book for a long moment, but pushed it back towards Harry. “Keep it. I have no need for it, and I believe you do. Horace did like to brag about how much you had improved. Seemed to think your sudden skill proved that he was the better teacher.” He gave the book a wry smile. “I beg to differ.”

Harry hugged the book against him and pressed himself into Severus’ chest. “I’m scared, Sev.”

“I know.” Severus enfolded Harry in a gentle embrace and held the young man’s head against his shoulder. After a long moment, he murmured into Harry’s hair, “Does it help when I hold you,
Harry?”

“Yeah.” Harry buried his head into Severus’ tattered robes. “So much.”

“I am … glad.”

Severus ran his fingers through Harry’s hair and held him close, and for a moment, Harry could almost forget the terror of the night.

“Harry, come. We must destroy this.”

Harry sighed and stepped back, feeling the coldness of horror and shame the moment he moved out of Severus’ arms. “All right. Are you well enough?”

“I think so, but ….” He raised the sword and attempted to bring it down on the Diadem, but the accursed tiara only laughed as the blade glanced off. “But it appears you have won the sword’s loyalty back. It must be you, Potter. Merlin, I am sorry.”

Harry shuddered and stared at the diadem. “I, I don’t think I can. Not now.”

“I know, Potter, but we must. They could discover us at any moment, and we are not safe here. Riddle is overconfident enough to believe that no one else could have worked out the secrets of this room, but if he realises one of his own has been killed directly in front of it, he would be a fool not to check.” Severus Scourgified the blade and held it out to Harry. “Riddle is a pompous, demented megalomaniac, but no fool. Take it, Potter. We are running out of time.”

With a sniffle, Harry laid his book aside and forced his shaking hand to take the sword from Severus. The blade weighed his hand down and still reeked of blood despite its squeaky-clean surface. He tried not to imagine the sword taking in Alecto’s blood, her life, her soul—or what she had left of one—to strengthen itself, but the idea took root in his mind and refused to leave.

“It imbibes what makes it stronger.”

Harry struggled not to vomit and blinked down a wave of tears.

“I’m s-sorry.”

Strong arms held his shoulders from behind. “Harry, ssh. It is not your fault.” Severus stroked Harry’s hair. “Come. I am with you. You can do this.”

With a sniffle, Harry dragged his free hand across his eyes, then took the sword in both and raised it above his head. A cackling laugh and red eyes stopped him cold.

“Murderer.” A shade of Voldemort appeared and laughed again. “Oh, Harry. I am so proud of you this night. You have truly come into your own. I knew you had it in you.”

“Shut it!” Harry swayed and tried to swing the blade, but fear had rooted him to the spot.

Severus cried, “Harry, it’s not real. It is lying. Destroy it!”

“I, I ….”

The shade attempted a look of sympathy. “Oh, I do understand. The first kill is always the hardest. But in time, it becomes easier. You have great potential, Harry Potter.”

“S-shut it.” Tears choked Harry and blinded him. “I am n-not a killer.”
“Oh, but by the very definition of the word, you are. It hurts, doesn’t it? Knowing you will never be like them again? In time, you will see you are their better.”

Ron’s words came back to Harry like a slap in the face. “You’re one of them.”

“No.”

“Oh yes,” the shade said with a chuckle. “You are an unnatural one indeed. Twisted desires for blood and depraved sex and everything you shouldn’t desire as a Gryffindor.” The shade laughed again. “You should have chosen Slytherin, my dear Harry. You are destined to be mine.”

“Never,” Harry shouted, but his heart bled and doubted and wept. Was he twisted inside? Maybe the shade had a point. Maybe he was doomed.

“No,” said a low voice in his ear. “Listen to me, Harry. Nothing about you is unnatural or wrong. You are brave and beautiful and strong.” Severus’ soft lips found Harry’s temple and kissed the sharpest edge of the young man’s grief away. “You are perfect as you are. Do not listen to this foul beast, this dredge of the worst of humanity.” Severus’ long arms wrapped around Harry and held him tight. “I believe in you.”

Red eyes focused on Severus’ mark, bared for all to see. “You. You are like me. Exactly like me. I see you.”

Severus shuddered and moved back. “No.”

“Yes. You are mine.”

The shade lurched as if to claim Severus, and the threat to Harry’s love snapped him into action. With a sharp cry, he raised the sword and slammed it onto the tiara.

“No!” The shade screeched and wailed and melted into a heap of twisted metal.

Harry stood over the ruined diadem, panting and heaving, sword dripping black blood, then dropped the blade and dove into Severus’ arms with a cry.

“I’m not like him. I’m not a murderer. Not evil.”

“No.” Severus caught Harry up and held him tight. “You are not.”

Harry buried his face into Severus’ shoulder. “Neither are you.”

“But I ….”

“No. You’re not like him either.” Harry touched Severus’ neck with his lips lightly. “You’re beautiful, Severus. Perfect as you are, just like you said to me.”

“I ….”

“No. If it’s true for me when I have k-killed, it’s true for you.”

Severus sighed and laid his head atop Harry’s, kissing his hair. “All right. If you believe I am good and, and beautiful, I will try to believe it, too.”

Harry nodded and held him tight, trying to drown his pain in Severus’ arms, but knew they could not stay long. “Thank you.”
Severus brushed Harry’s fringe from his forehead and traced his thumb down Harry’s scar. “You will never be like him, Harry, no matter what he says. You care too much.”

Harry scrubbed his face and caught up his book. “I, I know. Come on. Let’s ask Ariana if Aberforth came through okay and go back. I … I need to get away from here.”

Severus shrunk the sword and put it in his pocket. “Yes, as do I. Lead on, Potter.”

“It’s Harry.”

“I know.”

Severus had to tell their story for a shattered Harry when they returned. The young man could not face the others. He simply turned into Severus’ chest and buried his face in the man’s torn robe.

Minerva looked to the miserable Harry and her lips pinched into a thin line. “I take it the trip to destroy the artefact did not go smoothly.”

Severus shuddered, trying to banish the image of the Carrow woman cut in half … bleeding … limbs twitching uselessly as the life faded from her wide-open eyes.

“What happened, Severus?”

He brought Harry closer and cradled the young man’s head against his chest. “It was … messy. There is one less Death Eater in the world—” Harry sobbed and burrowed deeper. “—but the female Carrow’s death came at a high cost. We have lost the map, and Harry … he will not be the same, I fear.”

Granger rushed forward and, though she dared not pry Harry from Severus’ arms, she took one of the young man’s hands and held it to her heart.

“What? Oh Merlin! Was it … bad?”

Severus shuddered. “It was … one of the most gruesome deaths I have seen. We did not intend for her to die, only to incapacitate her, get the artefact, and run. But I was seriously injured and Harry could not fend her off on his own. There was an accident with the Sword of Gryffindor, and the Carrow woman was … cut down.”

Harry whimpered and a shudder passed down the length of his entire body.

Granger paled. “But if you were injured … then … Harry?”

Severus closed his eyes and hugged the young man tighter, unwilling to answer and expose Harry’s pain. It was enough for the bright girl to deduce nonetheless.

“Mother of Merlin. Oh, Harry. I’m so sorry.”

He burrowed further, hitting one of Severus’ injured ribs with his head and bringing a sharp gasp of pain from the man. Harry jerked back.

“S-Sev?”
“My ribs are still injured, Harry,” he forced out through gritted teeth. A deep breath and a healing charm later, he had recovered his breath. “Forgive me. You may lean against me now if you need to.”

Harry shook his head and moved back. “I don’t … don’t want to hurt you.”


“No,” Harry sobbed, his voice muffled by her clothes. “Nothing is okay. Nothing.”

“I don’t get it,” said Ronald Weasley, causing a hundred eyes to turn his way. The boy gulped. “Look, I’m not going to tear into him again. I just don’t understand. If Harry killed a Death Eater, why’s he so miserable? Shouldn’t we be celebrating?”

Minerva rubbed her forehead. “By Circe, Weasley. Can you not understand that Potter has never killed until tonight? That he mourns the loss of human life, even if it was an enemy?”

“The first kill is always the hardest,” said Filius.

Harry keened and dropped to his knees. Granger knelt with him and helped Harry back to his feet.

Filius gave the broken young man a heartsick look. “Merlin, what did I say?”

“After we found the artefact and Harry took up the sword,” said Severus, “a shade of Riddle appeared and tormented Harry. It said the exact same thing.”

Filius winced. “Oh, heavens. Forgive me, Potter. I didn’t know.”

Harry shook his head. “N-not your fault. Mine.”

Severus ran his fingers through Harry’s hair, hoping to soothe the distraught young man. “Ssh. It is not your fault either. Grief is normal, Potter. You have done nothing wrong by feeling pain. In fact, it is this that proves to us that you are still worthy, still human. That taking a life, even that of your enemy hurts, well, it shows that you are still capable of empathy. Still good.”

“I, I feel evil.”

“I know. Believe me, I know.” Severus eased Harry out of Granger’s arms and back into his own. “But let me ask you something. Do you see me as evil? As terrible and cruel and all the things you feel about yourself at the moment?”

Harry sniffled and shook his head. “You know I don’t. I told you so.”

“Yes. And I have not only killed by accident, but deliberately. And not Death Eaters, either. Innocent people, Harry. People who deserved to live and grow and, and I ….”

Severus’ throat choked with the pain of all the lives he had cut short. Even Lily, his one dear friend, had died because of his foolishness.


Severus gave him a sorrowful smile. “As are you.”

Harry lowered his head and stepped back, wrapping his arms about his chest. “I don’t feel forgiven. I feel … tainted.”
“I know. You feel tarnished down to your very soul, but you are not. None of this is your fault. It is mine for not being quicker on my feet. Her death would have been but one more blot on my already broken conscience, but it has shattered you. I am sorry, Harry. I thought I could handle her on my own, but I failed. I was overconfident. Can you forgive me?”

Harry buried his head in Severus’ chest. “I forgave you weeks ago. That hasn’t changed.”

“Thank you.” Severus held Harry tight. “I am here, Harry. No matter what happens, I am here.”

“So am I,” said Granger.

“Me too, Harry.”

Lovegood’s dreamy voice, coming from behind Severus, startled him half out of his skin. “Dear Merlin!”

“Oh. I didn’t mean to startle you, Professor,” the batty young woman said. “I only didn’t want to disturb the flutterbys.”

Granger gave her a wry look. “Flutterbys? That’s a new one.”

“Oh yes. They come when someone is injured. Inside, I mean. In their soul. They heal by flowing on love shown to the injured person and fluttering their tiny golden wings in the hurt person’s chest. There is magic in their wings, you know, but it takes ever so many to make a difference for such a great wound. You and the Professor were calling quite a lot of them, so I didn’t want to scare them away.”

Granger’s face softened. “You know, Luna, I do believe I like that creature.”

“Yes. They are quite helpful.”

Severus rubbed his knuckles against Harry’s wet cheek and wiped his tears. “Then I suppose we should continue calling them, if they help Harry heal.”

Lovegood nodded. “Stay with the Professor, Harry. His flutterbys are the brightest.”

Severus could not hold back a blush even with his Occlumency. “Thank you.” He ran his fingers through the soft wild locks he so enjoyed petting and turned back to the others, who were watching with looks of pain and wonder in their eyes. “I do not know if such a creature truly exists,” he said in a soft voice, “but perhaps Lovegood has a gift we do not understand. In any case, this is one time I am willing to embrace her unusual beliefs. It does seem to be helping.”

“Whatever heals him,” said Minerva. “Are you able to tell us the rest of the story?”

“Yes. I have already told you a shade of Riddle appeared and tormented Harry.”

Severus shot a dark glare at Ronald Weasley, internally cheering when the fool cowered. He kept his eyes fixed on Weasley as he spoke.

“The shade taunted Harry mercilessly. It pretended to be pleased with him and played upon his fears, using everything from the horrific circumstances of Carrow’s death to the shame he felt for being homosexual.” Weasley cringed. “It even repeated a certain … person’s words, though in reverse. I imagine the insult must have been ringing throughout Potter’s subconscious for it to be so easy for the shade to read.”
Weasley bowed his head in shame. Satisfied, Severus muted his glare and returned his eyes to Minerva’s thin-lipped stare. She gave him an encouraging nod when he hesitated, and he gathered her anger must have been directed at Weasley.

Severus stroked Harry’s cheek. “The shade hurt him terribly, and only when it threatened my life was Potter able to act. He destroyed the artefact then and, after I created a double of it and charmed it to feel dark without having any actual curse or dark magic attached, we left the room and returned here.”

Longbottom called, “Aberforth—were you able to check?”

Severus nodded. “Yes, he is well. The sly old fox convinced the Death Eaters he had triggered the alarm by putting his cat out after curfew. He claimed to have then sent his Patronus out to drive the dementors away from his pet, and they believed him. More fool them.”

Longbottom chuckled. ‘Good ol’ Aberforth. He’s as cunning as they come. Must have been a snake in his years here.”

“That would be my guess as well.” Severus smiled. “I am glad that you have learned not all Slytherins are evil.”

Longbottom nodded. “We’re all human, aren’t we? And Daphne has stood up to the Carrows as much as I have.”

Daphne smiled and leaned into Longbottom’s shoulder. “And he’s saved my life so often, I can’t help but love him for it.”

Longbottom kissed her lightly. “I will save your life as many times as it takes until we’re all safe again. And after, if I need to.”

Had Severus not watched the two grow closer over the past semester, he would never had believed such a coupling would exist. It gave him hope for the future, that perhaps one day Gryffindors and Slytherins could participate in friendly rivalry without trying to murder each other, either figuratively or literally.

Daphne sighed and pulled her little sister into a hug. “I don’t mean to be insensitive, Potter, but thank you. I’m so glad that horrid creature won’t torture me or my sister any longer. She was terrible to us.”

Harry flinched and backed away from Severus. He held his stomach and doubled over as if to retch again, so Severus cast a stomach soothing charm on the young man and helped him to stand.

“Oh, Potter,” Daphne said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean … gods.”

“It’s all right, Greengrass,” said Severus. “You did nothing wrong.” With a gentle hand, Severus tipped Harry’s chin up. “And, Potter, neither have you. Ssh. She meant only to express relief that she would not be hurt any longer. Gratitude that you saved her and those she loves from further pain. Look at me. Up. Open your eyes.” Harry’s green eyes swam with tears and devastation. Severus brushed his tears away and held his face. “You are not a murderer, Harry. You are not evil. Not ruined. You are still good and worthy and lovely.”

“The flutterbys are fading,” Lovegood said in a sad voice. “They were doing such good, too.”

Severus realised what Lovegood was trying to say in her odd way and caught Harry into his arms. “Ssh. It will be all right again, one day. We will make it so.”
“It hurts.” Harry buried his head in Severus’ chest and held on for dear life.

Severus cradled Harry’s head against him and held the young man tight. “I am here, Harry. I will always be here, no matter what happens.”

Harry’s voice was breathless. “Oh, Severus ….”

“Oh! They’re so bright now,” said Lovegood with a smile. “Don’t let go, Professor.”

Severus gave her a wry look. “I did not intend to.” He turned to the others again. “Minerva, I am still injured and Potter is in shock. Besides that, Riddle may discover Carrow’s death at any time, and I do not imagine he will be pleased. We should begin this rite as quickly as possible and evacuate the castle.”

Minerva shook her head. “I will not evacuate. Not I, nor any of Hogwarts’ professors who should choose to stay.”

“You realise that Riddle may find a way to circumvent the rite eventually?”

“I do, but this is my home, Severus. I will defend it, if I must.”

Severus cast Harry a worried look. “Minerva, promise me one thing. If anything should happen, if Riddle should find some way to breach the castle’s defences, you will call in the Order and send a Patronus to Harry and myself. We have already lost too many to this godsforsaken war.”

Minerva hesitated. “I, I will call the Order, but I do not want to endanger students.”

“Potter is a member of the Order, or have you forgotten?”

She winced. Harry held Severus tighter, though he refrained from pressing too hard on the older man’s ribs this time, much to Severus’ relief.

Severus softened his tone. “Minerva … look at him. I fear one more death will be one too many. Please. Please contact us.”

“Can speak for myself,” Harry grumbled, but didn’t remove his face from Severus’ chest.

Severus smoothed his hair. “I know, but I am speaking for you now because you need my help. It does not mean I think you incapable. It means I am concerned for you and am trying to take some of the burden from your shoulders.” He gave Harry a wry smile. “Also, no one can hear you with your face pressed into me like that.”

Harry nodded and wiped his eyes. “You’re right. I’ve got to get it together.” He leaned against Severus a moment longer, taking deep breaths and holding the older man’s waist tight. “All right. I can do this now.” He stood as tall as his small frame would allow and faced the others. “We can discuss all of this later. Right now, Riddle is still prowling about the school unchecked, and he could discover … discover ….”

Severus squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “He could discover Carrow’s death at any moment.”

“Right. So we need to do this rite already. Are we ready?”

Minerva nodded. “Just let me get everyone back into position. And Potter? I will reiterate Severus’ words. Should you need me, I am here.”

“So are we all,” said Granger.
Harry gave Granger a hesitant smile. “T-thanks.”

The rite went as expected, but the expenditure of so much energy left Severus with pitifully low reserves. Injured and weak, he waited with Harry in the rest cubby while two groups of students and teachers used the floo to retrieve all the supplies and potions in the infirmary and Severus’ personal stores. He lay on one of the beds and watched Harry rock beside him, arms crossed over his chest and nearly doubled over with grief.

“I’m … so tired, Sev,” Harry whispered. “Tired of death, tired of war … I just want to rest.”

Severus nodded and rubbed his eyes. “As do I, Potter. Twenty years of war has taken its toll on both of us.”

Harry watched Severus’ face. “It wasn’t your fault either, you know. What happened … upstairs. She caught us both unprepared. It was … an accident.”

Severus gave Harry an appraising look. “How did you know?”

“It’s what I would be feeling in your situation, but it’s not true. I’m just glad you’re okay. I don’t … I can’t lose anyone else.”

Severus took Harry’s hand. “I am here, Potter.”

“Harry. Please. I need to be Harry tonight.”

Severus swallowed hard, his belly fluttering with nervousness. He still feared Harry would withdraw and take Severus’ heart and soul with him if he said one wrong word. He had already hurt Harry so much. How the young man could forgive him so completely was beyond Severus’ comprehension. There had to be a condition he hadn’t yet discovered. And yet, Harry had asked. Pleased.

Severus had long since passed the point where he could deny Harry anything.

“As you wish, Harry.”

The young man gave him a wan smile. “Thank you.”

They waited together in silence, Harry rocking himself, his eyes full of pain Severus didn’t know how to heal. A sudden knock at the doorway made Severus jump and Harry spring to his feet, ready to attack.

“Calm yourself, P—Harry. It is most likely one of your friends.”

Harry sat upon the bed, but didn’t relax. He held his wand in a white-knuckled grip and called, “Who is it?”

“Me,” said a feminine voice that made Harry flinch. “Should I come back after you’ve decided if you’re going to shag him or not?”

“Merlin.” Harry put his wand away and buried his head in his hand. “Ginny! That’s not remotely fair.”
The woman stepped into the room and Severus groaned inwardly. He did not want to be here for this confrontation, but his injuries would not let him leave. And Harry had nowhere else safe to go where he could speak without the entire group overhearing.

He had no choice but to bear up and hope they didn’t kill each other.

Ginevra met Harry’s eyes head on, hers full of tears. “Were you ever going to tell me?”

“No. I, I missed you,” Harry said with a sniffle. “I missed the companionship, being near you, but the idea of … more … I just couldn’t. It … my body, I can’t. Not with any woman. I’m so sorry, Ginny. I’d never have touched you if I’d known.”

She sighed and sat on the bed nearest Harry. “I guess … I can’t hate you too much. This war hasn’t left you any opportunity to figure out what you wanted.”

“No. It really hasn’t.” He hesitantly scooted closer. “Can we still be friends, as terrible as that sounds? I don’t want to lose you, Gin, even if I can’t be what you need.”

She gave him a sad smile. “I need time, Harry. But I don’t imagine I’ll be angry forever.”

“Oh.” He looked away. “All right. I guess I understand. I know it had to hurt.”

“Yeah, it did.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” She gave him a piercing look. “You look positively ill. Is it only because of me?”

He winced and shook his head. “N-no. It’s still … her.”

“Yeah, it did.”

“Just checking!”

Ginevra jumped. “Oh! Damn, I’d forgotten. Here.” She handed him a green bottle. “It’s a general healing potion for Professor Snape. Hermione’s packing you a supply in the other room.”


Severus shot Harry a glare. “I am not decrepit.”

“Just checking!”

Harry passed Severus the bottle. Severus sniffed and tasted before he drank the entire thing in one swig. He shuddered at the sour taste, but sighed in relief as the potion began to work immediately.

“Much better,” he said with a nod and banished the empty phial.

“Good. How long do you think before we can leave? And do you know where we’re going?”
“Talla Linnfoots. It is a small wizarding community near our next destination. It is as close as I can bring us by floo. We will rest and recover and set out for the last artefact as soon as we are able.”

“Sounds good.”

Ginevra stood and gave Harry a sad smile. “I hope you find what you need with him, Harry.” She turned and left, Harry’s eyes tracking her out of the cubby.

Severus’ cheeks burned. “We are not ….” He stopped at the look on Harry’s face, full of such terrible anguish that Severus wondered if the young man was as sure about his orientation as he had said.

Through a strange constriction in his throat, Severus said, “Do you wish to go after her?”

Harry gave him a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “No. That would only give her hope, and I can’t just string her along like that.”

Severus touched Harry’s hand. “You are certain?”


“Your eyes … you look … devastated.”

Harry shrank into himself and turned away. “It wasn’t because of Ginny.”

“Oh.”

So Harry had set his sights on some other man and been hurt. Severus tried to muddle through who might have had the time or opportunity to claim such a busy man’s heart, and he could only think of one. Ronald Weasley.

Merlin. If Harry had loved him, only to be treated like scum just for announcing his orientation, it might explain his somewhat extreme reaction to Weasley’s comments. Of course, Harry might react the same way if he viewed Weasley as a brother, but no, this made sense.

Well, Severus knew what it felt like to care for someone only to be brutally turned away. Perhaps he could help Harry through it, even if he wished … no. He could not allow himself to entertain such thoughts. Men like Severus did not find love. Even friendship was a rare gift he would not allow himself to hope for.

Still, he could comfort the young man and keep him close while he wanted to stay. That would have to be enough.

Severus offered the young man his hand. “Harry? I … I am here.”

Harry gave him another sad smile and squeezed Severus’ hand briefly. “Thank you.”

Just then, Granger came in with the beaded bag. “Here, Harry. I packed it full of all kinds of potions and healing supplies. You should be set no matter what you encounter at the last location. How on earth did you find them all so quickly?”

“A map and Riddle’s journal. He had them listed out.” Harry shuddered. “Including how he made the damned things.”

She frowned. “He wrote them down? Seems a bit foolish.”
“Yes. In Parseltongue.”

“Oh. Well that’s rather a different matter.”

“Yeah. Are we ready to go then?”

“As soon as Professor Snape is healed enough.” She held Harry’s shoulder. “Are you all right? Was it … that bad with Ginny?”

“No. Besides her parting shot, she was actually fairly decent about it.”

Severus frowned. ‘Parting shot?’

Hermione nodded. “Good. Still, I’m worried about you. Are you going to be okay?”

Harry looked away. “Yeah. I’ll manage.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You aren’t giving me a lot of confidence here.”

His shoulders slumped. “Look. It’s been a rough night. I just … I need to get out of this place.”

She hugged him and kissed his cheek. “Okay.” Over his shoulder, she called, “Professor, take care of him for me? This is tearing him into pieces, and he needs help, whether he’ll ask for it or not.”

Severus gave her a hesitant nod. “Yes. I believe I know … most of the situation. I will try to care for him.”

Harry huffed and pushed out of Hermione’s arms. “Oi! I can speak for myself.”

“You can,” said Hermione with a sad smile, “but you don’t. I’m just looking out for you, Harry.”

“I know. Just, I need … I don’t know. Time, I guess.”

She sighed and patted his arm. “Okay. Just … try to keep in touch when you can?”

“Yeah. I will.”

“Okay.”

Hermione hugged Harry once more and, with a few more words of farewell, soon left. After her, several others came in with goodbyes for Harry and, to his surprise, for Severus as well. Weasley did not come, and Severus could not decide if that made him grateful not to have to deal with the aftershocks of another insensitive comment or if it hurt him for Harry.

At Harry’s distant, broken-hearted look, he decided that it hurt.

While Severus’ potion took effect, a much-improved Minerva talked with him for a while until Harry grew restless and paced the room. After a moment, he told Severus he wanted to say goodbye to Dean and Luna, and left them a moment alone. Severus took the opportunity to ask the woman to help him pack a few items he hadn’t felt comfortable speaking of in front of the young man. Though embarrassed and obviously uncertain, she did as he had asked and, by the time she had finished tucking it away, Harry returned, his eyes still haunted with immeasurable grief. Severus wished he could heal the boy.

Minerva straightened her robes and moved to Severus’ side. “Well, if you are ready, Harry, then let us help Severus to the floo and get you boys … home, wherever that is for the moment.”
With a heavy sigh, Harry hefted Severus up and slung the man’s arm over his shoulder. “Come on. This way, Sev.”

Severus leaned on Harry and staggered to his feet. With some concerted effort, they got the man to the floo and safely through to an empty pub. The place only had four stools and a single table in the corner. Besides that, the owner had clearly gone to bed, so there would be no room for them there that evening.

Harry muttered, “Damn. Let’s go and see if there’s an inn near.”

“If not,” said Severus, “we might as well trek on foot to Hearthstane. It is not far, and given that events in Hogwarts have likely caused quite a stir, it might be best to stay out of sight.”

Harry nodded and guided Severus outside.

So much for an inn. Severus looked every direction but saw nothing beyond a few tiny homes and sprawling farms to the south. The way to the north led past an abandoned apothecary and the edge of town. A huge loch shone like glass under the light of a gibbous moon to the west, and a mountain grey with winter grass barred the way in the east.

“Now what?” Harry panted in Severus’ ear. “I can’t, can’t carry you much further and we can’t put up the tent in the middle of town.”

“No.” Severus sighed and slumped onto a snow-covered bench. It was cold, but it made a decent seat with a few warming, drying, and cushioning charms. “Now with that settled, get the map and tell me which way is Hearthstane.”

Harry flopped down beside him and tugged the old map out of his inner coat pocket. A quick Lumos and finger taps later, he looked up and muttered, “North-north-west. Much more north than west.”

“Hmm. Then I shall simply take us due north tonight and we shall work out the west part later. We shall end up in the loch if we go west tonight anyhow.”

Harry gave him a bemused look. “Take us … how?”

“Apparition, Harry. Are you a wizard or not?”

Harry sighed and tucked the map away once more. “Apparently a wizard who was raised too far Muggle. Why aren’t we apparating directly to Hearthstane again?”

“Potter, I am one man. I have not been to every single city on the planet. We could try to apparate to Hearthstane … if you don’t mind being splinched.”

Harry thought of Ron’s leg after apparating from Grimmauld and shuddered. “No thanks. We’ll just take the long way.” He stood and brushed off his jeans. “Come on, then. Hold onto me and take us where we need to go.”

Severus climbed into Harry’s open arms and hugged him tight, focused on a spot he saw near a tributary to the north, and spun on the spot. They landed in a patch of long-dead heather and moor grass. Harry steadied Severus and set the man down on a conjured chair while he set up the tent. It seemed hardly a moment later before Harry had heaved Severus out of the chair and guided him into the warm tent with its three pallets still lying in the corners.

Harry blanched and turned his face away. “Which one do you want?”
Severus pulled Harry closer. “I am here, if it helps.”

“T-thanks. Which one?”

“I suppose this one, since I took it last time.”

Harry gave him a wry smile and led him to the bed. Severus froze the instant he lay upon the blankets and the scent of its former owner made itself known.

“Yours! This one was yours all along.”

Harry’s cheeks reddened. “Er, yeah.”

Severus sighed. “Well, come and share it with me then.”

Harry hesitated and looked away. “Are you … sure?”

Severus frowned. “Why would I not be sure? Harry, come. We shall have a terrible night after all that has happened if we do not stay close.”

Still, Harry hesitated. Severus swallowed a wave of panic. This was it. This was when Harry would pull away and leave him alone forever. He had known the time would come, but he hadn’t imagined it would rip the still beating heart from his chest, leaving a bleeding void.

“Harry … what, what have I done? Did I say something cruel? I do not recall—”

Harry paled and ran to Severus, kneeling beside him. “No. No, you haven’t done a thing. I just …. He sighed and turned to take off his trainers. “I guess you’re right. I’ll probably keep you up all night long if we don’t sleep close and help each other.”

Severus laid a trembling hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Please. It is not that I worry about being awake, but about letting you suffer. And I need … I do not wish to be alone either.”

“It’s okay, Sev. I’ll sleep here tonight.”

Harry kicked his shoes aside and shrugged out of his coat. Severus removed his boots and coat as well and lay under the blanket. Fear and hope fought for dominance within him as he lifted the blanket with a shaking hand and invited Harry in with him. Harry crawled in, lying stiff and distant, and Severus only trembled harder. When Harry said nothing, did nothing but lay beside him without touching, Severus turned away, heart bleeding and raw.

“If it is so unpleasant for you to stay near me, then I will take one of the other pallets.” He started to rise, but strong arms caught him and pulled him back against a shaking body, wrapping him up close.


Severus turned to embrace Harry as well and let relief and the young man’s warmth wash away the coldest edge of his pain.

“As you wish,” he whispered against his hair. “Only as you wish.”

“Stay.”

“Yes.” Severus cradled Harry’s head under his chin and, feeling safe at last, fell asleep to the sound of the young man’s breathing.
CHAPTER 12

Talla Linnfoots, or rather the surrounding countryside, was bloody cold. Harry could barely hold the accursed journal to translate and the icy wind had a mind of its own, one that defied him constantly. They had been walking for three days already, yet because of the weather and Severus’ still-healing injuries, they had barely made it two kilometres.

Gods, Harry missed civilisation. Over the past two weeks, he had gotten used to warmth and soft beds again. Now he felt cold all the time and his feet hurt and his back hurt and, well, everything else. The blistering Scottish wind had once again chapped his face and lips, and his hands always seemed to have a mild case of frostbite even with heavy gloves and warming charms.

Yet, the coldness inside hurt more. Ginny’s last words to him had cut him like the sword had cut through—Harry shuddered and forced his thoughts elsewhere. He saw Carrow’s death enough in his nightmares without reliving it in the daytime, too. Still, Ginny’s parting words, however well-intentioned, had reminded Harry harshly that what he wanted was out of reach.

Harry loved Severus completely, but though the man accepted his touches, welcomed them, even, he had never mentioned anything … more. Surely, with all the clues given at the rite, Severus must have picked up on Harry’s feelings. Everyone had made it obvious, and the man was a bloody spy, for Merlin’s sake. There was no way he didn’t know.

Yet, when Ginny had wished them well, Severus had denied their involvement. Well, it was true that they weren’t partners, but hearing Severus say it out loud had hurt. That he hadn’t said anything since hurt worse. It had become clear to Harry that the man simply didn’t feel the same and was trying to be kind, or at least as kind as he could be in such a terrible situation.

It shattered Harry inside. He couldn’t bear to touch Severus any longer. Every touch felt like fire, and the ache inside his heart burned like a frozen sword in his ribs. He felt as though he was dying.

Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad. He could just finish the war and … and ….

And nothing. Severus needed Harry, and Harry loved Severus. He wouldn’t let the stubborn man suffer for feelings—or the lack of them—that Severus had no control over. Not if he could help it.

He paused in his translation—Voldemort was only talking of Death Eater ranks anyway—and turned
to Severus. The man was clearly in agony, hunched over and shivering with every slow step, yet he looked straight ahead and said nothing to Harry.

Severus was pulling away, too. It seemed Harry’s withdrawal had hurt him.

Harry’s insides squirmed and writhed. He hadn’t meant to hurt Severus. He was only trying to give the man the space he needed and to work on getting his own heart back. Yet, Harry’s heart was slow in returning, and in the meantime, Severus was struggling to go on alone.

“Hey,” Harry called softly, “come here. Don’t push so hard. Lean on me, okay?”

Severus looked away. “I am well enough.”

“Sev, you’re not. You’re freezing and in pain and stumbling. You never stumble. You’re not okay. Come on. Let me support you and we’ll set up camp once we can find a spot of ground flat enough.”

Severus wrapped his arms around his waist and lowered his head. “You have not … wanted me near lately. I do not wish to disturb you.”

Harry winced. “I’m sorry. I’ve just been trying to … trying to ….”

Trying to what? Get over the man? Clearly, that wasn’t happening. Be fair to Severus? Well, Severus obviously didn’t want Harry to be fair.

To avoid that burning fire every time they touched and Harry knew Severus didn’t love him? Yes, but one look at the man convinced Harry that he would just have to endure it. Whether his touch hurt or not, Severus needed Harry. And gods, hadn’t the man sacrificed enough without having to suffer even more?

Harry sighed and braced himself for pain. “I was just trying to cope with everything, I suppose. Come on. Just lean on me.” He slipped a hand around Severus’ waist, endured the burning fire, and braced the man up. “It’s okay. It’s not that you bother me, Sev. I just … I’m hurting now.”

Severus shivered and tugged Harry closer. “I know. Are you able to continue translating like this?”

“Yeah. Just help me turn the pages.”

“Tell me when you need me to. I have no idea where you are.”

“Sure. I’m about halfway down the first side, so we have a bit.” He took a deep breath. “Gods, I hate this thing. Okay. ‘I have noticed Lucius looking at me with hunger—oh, ew! Merlin, that’s a nasty thought. No, it says—’with horror lately, when before he only feared me if he had disobeyed, as well he should. Where is this new attic—woops—attitude coming from? Is he disloyal? No. He is too fixated upon the pureblood code.’” Harry looked up. “Code? There’s actually a code?”

“To fools like Riddle and the Malfoys, yes. It mostly says that purebloods are the only wizards worthy of wands and other such rot. Continue.”

Harry shook his head. “Idiots. I wonder what they’d do if they knew Riddle is a half-blood.”

“Oh they do. They only believe that since Riddle was able to resurrect himself, it means he has overcome the limitations of his birth and, with a new body, is now one of them.”

“He took his blood from me and I’m a half-blood!”

Severus nodded. “I cannot explain their logic, Potter. I fail to understand it mys—agh!” He stumbled
and pitched forward, almost pulling Harry down with him. Harry caught the man with a lightning-
fast wandless levitation charm. It wasn’t strong enough to make him float, but it did keep him from
falling on his face and aggravating his injuries.

Harry helped him to stand and gave him a quick once-over. “Are you okay?”

Severus gave him a wry look. “Wandless magic, Potter? Where was that three nights…?” He paled
and shook his head. “Dear Merlin. Forgive me, Harry. That was cruel.”

Harry shrunk himself and picked at a tear in his coat. “I, I don’t know. I just … you were in
danger and I just … acted. I don’t know where it came from.”

Severus brought Harry close and kissed his temple. “You have no need to defend yourself. I was
wrong to say such a thing. It’s all right. Thank you.”

The tender touch and whispers soothed Harry and hurt him at once, but he couldn’t resist turning his
face into Severus’ cheek. He breathed in the scent of the man and tried to gather his wits.

“Are you okay? You’re not hurt? Well, worse than you already were?”

“No, Potter. I’m well enough, but quite tired. Do you think we might set the tent up here and call it
flat enough?”

Harry looked around and pursed his lips. He saw a relatively level plateau about three metres to the
east and pointed. “There. That will do.”

“Thank Merlin.” Severus rubbed his ribs and sat upon a conjured armchair while Harry got to work
on the tent. “I am sorry I am holding us back. We should have been to Hearthstane on the first day—
it is only a few kilometres—but I cannot walk far like this. I do not understand why it is not healing.”

He lowered his head. “Perhaps the rite broke down the walls around twenty years of damage.”

Harry waited to answer until he had finished with his tent peg. “Maybe, or maybe you need a
stronger healing potion.”

“Possibly, but … Harry, do you think you could heal me through your dreams?”

He shrugged and moved on to the next peg, pulling the tent rope taut. “I’ve never tried to do it on
purpose, so I don’t know. Lately all I’ve been dreaming about is either horrid visions or C-Carrow ….”
Harry’s concentration slipped, and the rope broke free and lashed him hard across the cheek,
peg and all. He sprang back with a cry and slapped a hand over his face. It was wet.

“Harry!” Severus staggered to Harry’s side and eased the young man’s hand away. “Merlin, you’re
bleeding.” He tipped up Harry’s chin and gasped. “Shite, this is deep. Come. I’ll just ….” The man
waved his wand and his armchair turned into a wide, cushy sofa reminiscent of Dumbledore’s plush
creations. “Lie down, Harry. I’ll get some dittany and patch you up.”

Pain had crept into Harry’s face as Severus spoke, so the young man gladly obeyed. Or rather, he
tried to. He limped and staggered as much as Severus, but had nothing to blame except for the fact
that he felt a bit dazed. Maybe he was losing more blood than he thought.

Harry stumbled onto the sofa and lay on the cushions. For a conjured seat, it was comfy. Could
Severus do everything? Gods, Harry felt like an absolute clown around the man sometimes.

Severus brushed a hand over Harry’s forehead, sat beside the injured young man, and summoned his
own pack. After a moment of rummaging, Severus came up with a roll of gauze, a jar of dittany, and
some antiseptic cleaner Harry did not look forward to. Still, it was necessary and he thanked Merlin that they had it, even if it did sting like mad.

Severus conjured a cloth and turned Harry’s face so his wound faced upwards. “This will hurt, Potter. Forgive me. I must make sure your wound is clean, especially since a dirty peg caused it. I do not have the capability to treat blood poisoning on the run.”

“That’s okay,” said Harry, though his inability to open his mouth much muffled him. “I’ll fix it.”

“I’d just as well have you not contract it to start with,” said Severus with a wry smile. “Now, try to hold still.”

Harry winced and closed his eyes.

Severus was furious at himself. How could he have let Harry be so grievously injured? Had he not promised to look after him? Gods, not three days out of Hogwarts, and he had already failed.

He sighed and dabbed the antiseptic onto Harry’s wound. The young man winced and gasped at the pain, but otherwise did not move. Severus ran his fingers through Harry’s hair as he worked, attempting to calm the injured man, but Harry only tensed more. With a deep ache in his heart he understood all too well, Severus stopped touching him and focused on treating his wound.

It hurt, knowing that though his touch had once soothed Harry, now it distressed him. Still, with Harry injured and exhausted, now wasn’t the time to trouble him with Severus’ pain.

Once Severus had Harry’s face treated—only a thin scar remained—Harry returned to putting up the tent. Severus did not speak this time, fearing any distraction might injure the young man again. He breathed a sigh of relief when Harry stood and came to help him inside without a word.

Severus sat on Harry’s pallet, boots off and everything else wrapped tightly around him to ward off the cold. Beside him, Harry had taken one of the others and wrapped himself similarly while he worked on the journal. Yet, even with warming charms, blankets, and coats, Severus was still freezing.

“Harry, I, I thought you told me once that you had learned body heat worked best to ward off the cold.”

The man looked up from the vile book. “Yeah. Why?”

“I am freezing, I know you are too, and yet you sit over there and not with me. Harry, what have I done? Why have you withdrawn from me?”

Harry winced. “Um, it’s not … I mean …. ” He sighed and closed the book. “Well, I’ll just sit close then, yeah?”

Severus’ grief abated, until he realised Harry was as stiff as a board and avoiding his eyes.

“Just go,” he muttered, cut to the heart. “If it truly bothers you to touch me so much, leave me. I suppose I should have expected it, in retrospect. Merlin forbid someone as shadowed as I sit so close to the Gryffindor Golden boy, if even to draw body heat.”
“Oi!” Harry jumped back, eyes flashing, face white with anger. “I’m not anyone’s damn golden boy and you know it!” He turned and stormed from the tent, and Severus’ irritation drowned in a flood of sheer terror.

“Harry! Don’t run off ….” But Harry had only conjured himself a bean bag chair and was translating into his notepad. The young man glowered at him when Severus called.

“Just … don’t leave the wards,” Severus said with a sad sigh.

“I’m not a total idiot, you know.”

Severus turned before Harry could see his pain. “I … know.”

He returned to the tent, broken and desolate. Harry did not follow, but Severus stared at the tent flap, hoping … then waiting without hope … then just staring as the hours went on and Harry refused to come. He was cold to his bones, so cold, his shivering had stopped long ago, but he barely noticed. He had fallen twenty-five years into the past and Lily had abandoned him, left him to suffer and wouldn’t hear him, wouldn’t listen, didn’t care about him any longer ….

The sun set, and still Harry hadn’t returned. His voice still drifted beneath the tent flap, translating some atrocity Severus was glad he couldn’t make out, so the spy knew he was safe. With a broken sigh, Severus lay upon Harry’s blankets, pulled them close around him, tight against his face where the scent of Harry comforted him, and slept. Eventually.

Harry did not return.

Harry watched Severus turn into the tent with a furious glare. Why had the man said such a cruel thing? Wasn’t it enough that Severus would never care, never love him, yet taunted Harry with his soft touches and kisses? Tortured him day and night?

No. Harry had a limit. Severus didn’t get to hold him and touch him and rip the very soul out of Harry with his affection, then turn around and insult him simply because Harry resisted what cut him to shreds.

He curled into his bean bag and cast the most powerful warming charms he knew. He wasn’t going back inside unless he had to, at least until he needed to sleep. He wrapped his coat close around him and went back to translating.

‘There must be something else fuelling Lucius’ sudden horror of me. I wonder …. He did make a trip to Dumbarton last week, presumably to tour the castle with Narcissa and root out the wizarding history buried among the Muggle trash. It seems farfetched that he might have heard about the cup while he was there, unless … if he were near when its powers claimed someone’s mind ….’

Harry swallowed hard and clutched the journal in shaking hands. The Dumbarton priest’s words rang in his ears over and over. “Twenty-one years ago, we lost our former father to its mad curse ….”

Heart pounding in his throat, Harry scanned the pages before him for a date, a year, anything to indicate the time Voldemort had recorded the information. To his horror, the moment he thought it, a number appeared at the top in blood red ink. Knowing the source, it may well have been actual
blood. Harry struggled not to retch and forced himself to read the numbers.

‘23 / 07 / 1977’

Harry gasped. “Shite! He did see it, the bastard! And even if he didn’t see the bloke in person, no doubt the news was all over town given how small it is and that the poor sod was a priest of a huge cathedral. Malfoy must have heard them talking about dark lords and such and figured it out.” He laid the book aside and frowned. “If he had requested to see the chalice himself and saw Riddle rise out of it …. Shit. He had the journal horcrux, too. He knows.”

A small noise nearby had Harry on instant alert, but it was only a rabbit. He listened for anything else and heard … nothing. Severus was absolutely silent. Harry looked to the sky and shook his head. The sun had set. Perhaps Severus had just gone to sleep. He buried a twinge of worry and returned to the journal.

‘It is possible that he knows of my secrets now. And if Lucius knows, then I must walk a fine line with him. I cannot entrust him with too much, yet I must keep him within the fold. This will need careful handling. Besides that, if he knows of the horcruxes, there is the possibility he may try to destroy them. I doubt it—Lucius is too cowardly to risk his life when he does not know every detail—but there is still the chance.

‘Damn it all, this means I will need security even tighter than what I have already built. I will need another horcrux, and this one … perhaps in someone rather than an object. Someone who can defend themselves. Yes. A living final horcrux. Then, when they are close to death, I will use the power of their soul to guard and protect my horcrux and make a permanent container for it in the soul plane. A soul buried within a soul. Perfect! No one will ever find it, and even if they do, they will never be able to destroy it. I will be a god!’

Harry stood and dropped the journal, every hair on his body standing on end. Horror claimed him, and a strangled whimper escaped his lips.

“Fuck-fuck-fuck!”

He grabbed the accursed journal and held it by a corner, sickened beyond belief, banished his chair, and rushed into the tent.

“Severus, we have a huge problem!”

There was no answer. The man lay white-faced and still, fast asleep in Harry’s pallet, blanket wrapped tight around his shoulders and pressed into a tear-stained cheek. Harry’s heart thumped and his stomach turned to ice.

“Severus?” At the man’s lack of response, Harry took a couple hesitant steps forward, and then he noticed the man’s lips. Blue and cold. Ears bloodless. Fingers corpse-white with blue nails.

“Shite!” He rushed to Severus and turned him over, terrified his chest would be still and unmoving, but—thank Merlin—a slow, shallow breath expanded his ribcage, and Harry almost sobbed in relief. He was alive—barely. Harry still had time to save him.

And when he did, if he did, Harry was going to kick his arse for not taking precautions against the cold.

As Harry crawled into the pallet beside Severus—gods, it was freezing!—cast several strong warming charms, and brought the frozen man into his arms, his conscience smote him. He had left Severus in a huff, much like Harry’s mum had long ago. And though Harry hadn’t meant to, he had
also left Severus alone all evening, with the man probably thinking Harry would never forgive him. Severus might have even gone to sleep not caring if he didn’t wake up the next day, since everyone he cared about abandoned him.

Harry didn’t know, but what he could see with his own eyes hurt him. Severus had been in so much emotional pain, he hadn’t even noticed the suffering of his own body. He was almost dead, dying right there in Harry’s arms.

And, once again, it was Harry’s fault.

Tears choked Harry and he buried his face in Severus’ neck. “I love you, you daft sod! I’m not going to leave you forever because of a stupid argument.” He hugged Severus tight and kissed his cold cheek. “I’m not leaving you, period. And you had better not leave me, either. You have to come back to me, Severus. Please. I can’t lose you.”

Harry wept and tugged Severus tight against him, rubbing his back hard and trying to warm him. To his immense relief, it seemed to work. Between Harry’s charms and vigorous rubbing, Severus’ temperature slowly rose back to normal and the colour returned to his cheeks.

“Thank Merlin,” Harry said with a sob. “I thought I was going to lose you.”

Severus groaned and opened his eyes. “H-Harry?”

Harry cried out and clutched Severus into a tight hug. “Sev! You’re alive! Oh, gods, you’re alive.” He buried his head in Severus’ neck and wept.

“Harry? What … I don’t understand what happened. Why are you so frightened?”

Harry jerked back and glared. “Why am I frightened?” He smacked Severus across the head, but lightly so as not to actually hurt him. “You complete idiot! You utterly daft, ridiculous, silly sod of a man. You had better never scare me like that again.”

Severus rubbed his head where Harry had smacked him. “What … have I done now?”

“You went to sleep without so much as casting a single warming charm on this blanket when you’re already injured! Merlin, Sev! It’s ten below outside! You nearly died before I realised you were hypothermic. What the hell is wrong with you?”

Severus shuddered and rubbed his arms over his shoulders. “I, I forgot a charm! But ….”

There’s no way you simply forgot. It’s too bloody cold.” Harry stood and huffed. “You lie there where it’s warm. I’m going to make some hot tea and broth for you, but while I’m working on it, you need to answer some questions, okay? I need to make sure you’re all right and I want to know what the hell you were thinking, going to sleep like that without a charm!”

Harry stomped to the kitchen and slammed an empty saucepan and teapot on the range. He held his hand over the saucepan, still fuming, and muttered, “Aguamenti.” Water surged from his fingertips and into the pan. “What year is it?”

Severus rubbed his head and struggled to sit. “Ah, it is 21 December, 1998.”

“Good. Where are we?”

Severus hesitated. “How long have I been unconscious?”
“Not longer than a couple hours.”

“Then we should still be halfway between Talla Linnfoots and Hearthstane.”

“Good.” Harry shook his hand to cut off the water and opened the teapot. “I don’t get it, Severus. How could you have possibly even fallen asleep in that kind of cold—Aguamenti!—let alone stayed asleep so long as to become dangerously hypothermic? What was going through your mind this afternoon?” Harry cut off the water and put the lid on the teapot. “Incendio.” Low orange flames licked the bottom of each pot and began heating the water. “It makes no sense to me.”

Harry turned his back and dug through a cabinet for some beef flavouring. It didn’t make the best broth, but he hadn’t any actual beef on hand and Severus just needed the heat anyway. With a shake of his head, he tipped a bit of the flavouring into the saucepan and went to stir it, but there wasn’t a spoon in sight.

“Accio wooden spoon. Accio teacup. Accio sugar.” He caught them one by one and laid them on the counter beside the stove, then continued his rant. “Sev, what were you thinking? Do you have any idea how terrified I was when I came in here and saw you all white and blue and freezing to death?”

Severus only gave a little squeaking sound for an answer, so Harry reckoned he wasn’t well enough to speak much yet. With a sigh, he dropped some sugar into the teacup and Summoned a bowl. The broth wasn’t heating fast enough for Harry’s liking, considering that the teapot was already whistling. The stupid stove cooked unevenly even with charms.

He removed the teapot with one hand and held the other over the saucepan. “Calefacio Agua!” The broth boiled instantly, and Harry removed the pot from the heat and cut off the range. With a sigh, he dished out both tea and broth and set them on a tray for Severus. “Wingardium Leviosa.” The tray hovered at waist-height and floated in front of him. Harry turned towards Severus and stopped dead at the man’s bugging eyes and wide-open mouth.

“What? Why are you staring at me like that?”

Severus closed his mouth and shook his head. “Merlin. Do you not realise you did all of that wandless?”

Harry gasped and reached for his wand … it was still in his pocket and still cold.

“Holy shite! I, but I … how?”

Severus gave Harry a wry look. “That is what I would like to know.”

Harry shivered and sat beside Severus. Out of curiosity, he raised a hand and said, “Accio soup spoon.” Nothing happened. “Huh. Guess it only works when I’m hacked off or scared.” He repeated the trick with his wand and the spoon sailed into his hand. “Here you are. Eat that and talk to me while you do.”

“T-thank you, Harry,” Severus murmured around his teacup. “Perhaps we can explore these new powers of yours when I am more up to the task.”

“Yeah. Go ahead and drink, though. You need the warmth, and I’m scared for you.”

Severus sipped at the tea and gave a little sigh. “That is good. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”
He sipped in silence for a moment, then set the tea aside and began on the broth. “Harry? I am glad you are here. I thought … when you left ….”

Harry sighed and brushed Severus’ hair back. “Sev, it was only a little argument.”

“The last time I had an argument with someone I … cared about, they did not come back.”

Harry winced. “My mum.”

“Yes. When you left, I think … I fear I was trapped in the past. I could do nothing but stare at the tent entrance and … and remember. I was waiting, I do not know whether for you or for Lily, but ….”

Harry winced and dug his hands into his pockets. “But I never came back.”

“Yes. And I thought … you never would. I could think of nothing else. I … perhaps I was not in my right mind last night, Harry. I think … I do not know, but the thought of losing you … I cannot bear it.”

Harry held the man’s face and looked deep into his ebony eyes. “I am not leaving you, Severus. Even if we argue, even if we really fight, even if you get cranky and bring out Professor Snape for a while, I won’t leave you.” Tears slipped over his fingertips, and Harry brushed them away. “You’re stuck with me, Sev.”

Severus buried his hand in Harry’s hair and pulled him close so their foreheads touched. “Please.”

“I promise.”

Severus closed his eyes and moved back, shaking from head to toe. Harry sat beside him and held his waist while the man tried to eat despite the tears tracking down his cheeks.

Harry had to fight back tears of his own. So Severus did care about him. Cared so much, the man had almost frozen to death while drowning in terror of losing him.

Harry sniffled and edged closer. If Severus really needed him that much, there had to be some kind of deeper feeling between them. Maybe the man just didn’t understand his own heart yet.

Understand his … wait a moment. Had Severus ever even been in love? Harry had no idea. Perhaps for a man so secluded, so embroiled in the war and caught between both sides, there had never been time.

Did Severus even know what love felt like? Harry doubted it. The man reacted to even the simplest of kindnesses with wonder and soul-deep gratitude. Such a desperately lonely man could not have much experience of love. Perhaps even less than Harry did himself.

It all made sense. If Severus didn’t understand his feelings, even if he did love Harry, he wouldn’t act on it. Wouldn’t understand Harry’s signals or what Harry kept trying to tell him without words.

Without words?

Harry suppressed a sudden urge to smack himself. Of course Severus didn’t know how Harry felt. Harry had been skirting around the issue, never having the courage to speak up and just tell the man.

He laid his head on Severus’ shoulder, holding him close while the healing man drank his broth. Gods, it felt good to be near him. Like coming home. Harry had missed Severus so much.
He wasn’t ready to tell the man yet, not with Severus’ emotions in such a fragile state, but at least touching him didn’t hurt any longer. Harry kissed Severus’ shoulder and sighed in relief.

Severus shivered and set the food down. “Harry? You are … touching me again. Does this mean you do not hate me now?”

Harry sighed. Severus wasn’t ready for a relationship anyway if he believed that a simple disagreement equaled hatred. Their first argument would destroy the man. Still, perhaps a little love and understanding would help him gain some assurance.

“Severus, look at me.” The man turned, shaking all over, and lifted his black eyes to meet Harry’s. “I haven’t hated you or even disliked you since that day I punched you and the spell gave it back.”

And that was another reason to wait: their rocky past was sure to cause issues. They would fight, and when they did, Severus would shatter if he lacked faith in Harry and himself. In their bond. Severus needed time to heal and gain some confidence again.

Despite Harry’s aching need for the man’s trust and love, he would just have to wait until Severus was ready.

Well, he could do that. Harry loved Severus enough to give him time without pressuring him. Besides, if he kept reassuring Severus and building his confidence, the man’s broken heart might soon heal enough to weather a misunderstanding or two.

“I don’t hate you, Severus,” Harry reassured the man. “Not even close. I care about you, so very much.”

Severus looked to the tent flap. “I, I had started to believe it myself, but then you pulled away. Every time these past three days I have tried to touch you, even if I only meant to warm you or reassure you, you have either tensed or pulled away altogether. I do not understand. Before then, my touch seemed welcome, so I thought … but now … I do not understand.”

Harry cursed himself for destroying the man’s hard-earned confidence with his withdrawal. Well, he would just have to work hard and build it up again.

“Sev, it wasn’t your fault.” He kissed Severus’ temple. “Ginny, something she said—though she was just trying to be nice—it still gave me this idea that you didn’t want me too close, and it hurt. It hurt every time you touched me, so I pulled back. But I was just being stupid. You’ve given me so much these past few weeks, so much affection and trust, and I just … I guess I didn’t understand, either.”

Severus frowned. “How could you think I do not care for you?”

“Like I said, it was stupid.” Harry caressed the man’s cheek. “It’s okay. I understand now and I’m really sorry I’ve been such a git these past few days.”

Severus sighed and turned into Harry’s hand. “You … you will not withdraw again?”

Harry sat so he faced the man. “Sev, look at me. You need to understand this, okay?”

Severus winced. “You are leaving.”

“No!” Harry brought him into a tight hug. “No. I was trying to say that I’m not leaving you. Ssh. Get those dark, poisonous thoughts out of your head, Sev. You aren’t going to lose me, okay? I promise. Well, I can’t help it if Old Mouldy kills me but I’ll do my best not to let him, either.”
Severus shuddered. “I cannot lose you, too.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Severus drew his knees to his chest and winced. “Oh. Still cold.”

“Your legs?”

“Yes. It hurt to move them.”

Harry frowned. “I hope it’s not frostbite. Here, lie down and I’ll try to get some warmth into them again.”

Severus pushed his mostly empty tray aside and lay upon the pallet. Harry sent the tray to the portable sink and set it washing itself with a flick of his wand.

“Your nonverbal spells have improved,” Severus murmured.

“Those I could probably do wandless without being in a tiff, we’ve done them so often on this mad trip.” Harry moved down to Severus’ feet and gently removed the man’s cold socks. “Are your chest and stomach warm again?”

Severus nodded. “You have no worries about shock, not now. You may proceed, though I am unsure what you are doing.”

“You’ll see.”

Severus lay back, his foot resting in the dip between Harry’s thighs. The intense vulnerability of the position flooded his face with heat and his belly with strange flutters he didn’t understand. It occurred to him that he had felt something similar once, but too many years had passed since then and he had forgotten what it meant. Bemused and a bit frightened, Severus attempted to pull his foot away, but Harry caught it and shook his head.

“Easy, Sev. We’ve got to get your legs warm or you might lose them.”

Severus shuddered. “In that case, do continue.”

“Yes. Might be hard to hunt horcruxes without legs.” Harry smiled and rubbed his hands together hard. “I learned this from Hermione when I accidentally fell in a snowdrift and got too cold. She had Ron do it for me at the time, but I probably would’ve felt more comfortable about it if she had done it herself. Well, at the time, she hadn’t yet realised I was gay. For you, though, there’s only me. I hope you’re okay with me having to touch you. A lot.”

Severus huffed. “I am considerably less ‘okay’ with losing my legs, so do carry on.”

Harry reached for his hand. “I won’t let that happen. Just lay back and try to relax, all right? You’re safe with me.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s fingers. “Thank you.”

Harry nodded and released his hand, returning instead to the foot in the young man’s lap. Warm
fingers rubbed Severus’ toes with firm, circular strokes, and the older man gasped at the tingly sensation.

“Oh. That does feel a bit strange.”

Harry winced. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how else to help frostbite. We can do a warm water bath later, but I have to get the cold out gradually to avoid hurting you. This is the only way I know how to do it.”

“Ssh. I did not mean that I find your touch odd, only that my toes feel strange. My foot is … not responding to touch well, and the sensation is different than what I am used to. And ….” His face tingled. “And I have never had anyone touch my feet before regardless.”

Harry massaged his toe-tips with gentle strokes. “Yeah. I know what you mean. It’s okay, though. You have nice feet, really. They’re soft. Not calloused like mine.”

Severus’ ears tingled, too. “Oh. T-thank you?”


Severus wiggled his toes and winced at the burn of returning sensation. “Unfortunately, I can feel them, too.”

“Oh, yes. But at least the burn means you shouldn’t lose your feet.”

“How wonderful,” he said, his tone dryer than the Sahara.

Harry snorted. “Don’t look at me. I’m not the one who took a kip without a warming charm on.” He sighed and lowered his head as he rubbed Severus’ instep. “I should have checked on you sooner. I’m sorry.”

Severus couldn’t reach Harry with his hands, so he pressed his still-cold foot into Harry’s side. “It is not your fault. We were … it was a misunderstanding on both sides. I will forgive you, if you will forgive me.”

Harry smiled and resumed rubbing Severus’ foot. “Done. Now, let’s see about getting the blood flowing here again. I’m afraid you’re not going to like having feet soon.”


Harry snorted. “Cheater.”

“Because I do not look forward to the pain of healing frostbite? Then I am indeed a cheat and proudly so.”

Harry laughed and continued his massage. With firm, steady strokes, Harry rubbed the life into Severus’ foot again, and Severus gave a soft yelp when the man’s hands suddenly heated against his half-frozen heel.

“Oh, Merlin, that feels good.”

Harry smiled and rubbed on without a word.

“P-Potter, where is all this wandless magic coming from? It usually takes years of study to do even simple charms.”
Harry blushed and looked away. “I, I don’t know. I just wanted to help you because your heel was so cold, I couldn’t get it warm again, and my magic helped me, I guess. Does it help?”

“Merlin, yes.”

Harry grinned and rubbed his sole, and Severus could not hold back a soft groan.

“Gods. It is not only bringing heat back, but taking away the pain of hard travel. Perhaps we should do this for each other at night.”

Harry went bright red to his ears. “I, I wouldn’t mind.”

Severus leaned up on his elbows and met Harry’s eyes. “Even though I would need to touch you again?”

“Yeah. Sev, I’m sorry I was such a prat. You can touch me again. I won’t pull away.”

Hesitantly, Severus sat and lifted a trembling hand towards Harry’s face. The young man gave him an encouraging smile and, with a deep breath for strength, Severus slowly touched Harry’s cheek and brushed a lock of fluffy black hair back behind his ear. Rather than pulling away, Harry closed his eyes and turned his face into Severus’ hand. A gentle brush of lips against his palm shocked Severus and sent a wave of heat all the way down to the foot still in Harry’s hand.

Well, that was one way to warm him, he supposed.

“It’s okay, Sev,” Harry murmured against Severus’ palm. “Touch me if you need to. I won’t pull away again.”

Severus lay back and brought the hand Harry had kissed to his chest. His skin felt warm despite his hypothermia, as if Harry had branded him. He was shaking, too, and he didn’t think it was from the cold.

Harry touched Severus’ knee. “Ssh. It’s okay. I only wanted to show you I meant it.”

“I do not know why I am trembling so. I am not afraid. Not now.”

Harry gave him a gentle smile, and in his eyes, Severus could have sworn … he looked relieved.

“I think I understand,” said Harry. “Just lay back, okay? I’ll get your legs warm again.”

“Thank you.”

Harry nodded and set to work warming Severus’ legs. “Sev, I think we need to talk about what happened earlier so I don’t find you half-dead again after a simple row.”

Severus swallowed and clutched his hand tighter against him. “Y-yes?”

“Ssh. It’s okay. I’m not angry. I just want to make some things clear to you so you don’t get so hurt again. Severus, people in close proximity have arguments. We’re different, so that means we’re not always going to agree about everything. Merlin knows Ron and I argue enough. But what you have to see is that I’m not going to abandon you because of a simple disagreement.”

Harry leaned forwards and held Severus’ hand. “Do you understand, Sev? Even if we have a blazing row, I am not going to leave you. I’ll still be here for you when it’s over. Probably even during a row, because I care about you and can’t bear to see you hurt. I swear to you, even if we fight, even if you bring out Professor Snape again, though that would sting, I’ll still be here in the morning.”
Severus sat and caught Harry into a rough embrace, burying his head in the young man’s mop. Even with Occlumency, he could barely keep a lid on his churning emotions.

“Sev?”

He sat back and gave the young man a bright smile. “Thank you, Harry. I have longed to hear those words my entire life. I swear to you, that should we fight, I will stay as well.”

Harry nodded and took Severus’ other foot in hand. ‘Good. Now that we’ve gotten this straightened out, lie back and I’ll bring some life back into your legs.”

Severus relaxed on the pallet and smiled at the tent ceiling. “Yes. Thank you.”

Harry called his heat back into his hands and rubbed Severus’ cold skin in slow, deep circles, moving from his feet to his ankles, from his ankles to his calves, then to his knees, and only when Harry hit Severus’ thighs and an intense surge of fire rushed through him, did he remember where he had once felt those butterflies so long before.

‘Regulus.’

His heart skidded to a halt and his breath drew up short. Merlin help him, he was falling in love with Harry Potter, a pure, beautiful man that Severus could never have.

Gods. The fates were cruel to him indeed.

Oblivious to his sudden pain, Harry rubbed the inside of Severus’ thigh, and the man barely stifled a moan. He struggled to control his natural reactions to Harry’s touch, to keep his hips still and his voice silent, but he was losing the battle, watching the light shade Harry’s eyes to teal and the young man’s lips slowly parting, when Harry let out a sudden cry.

“Fuck me, I completely forgot, Sev!”

Severus sat—carefully—and gave Harry a bemused look. “Forgot what?”

“The journal.” Harry jerked up and ran to it, picking the horrid book up from where it fell. “Oh Sev, we have major problems. I should’ve told you last night, but then I came in and you were almost dead and I had to save you and it just slipped—”

“Potter,” Severus said in his former sharp tones, more out of fear than anger. “What in Merlin’s name has happened?”

“Oh, gods, Sev. It’s so awful. Listen.”

And Severus did. By the time Harry had finished the paragraph from that godsforsaken book, every hair on his body stood on end and his soul screamed with terror.

“There is another horcrux. In someone living. And we haven’t the slightest idea who or where.”

Harry nodded, his eyes wide and terrified. “And … and worse, it might be in one of our allies. It’s probably in one of our allies. He knows we wouldn’t want to kill someone we love.”

The blood drained from Severus’ face and he sank back onto the pallet, freezing all over again. “Merlin help us all.”
Severus staggered on through the blistering cold in a numbing daze of terror. A seventh horcrux on the soul plane, in someone living. Severus had never even heard of such dangerous magic. How had the twisted bastard done it? And how, in the name of all things holy, were they to destroy it? Especially if destroying the horcrux meant murdering an innocent.

Gods. Hadn’t they already sacrificed enough for this mad war?

Harry had withdrawn into his own world. He did not reject Severus’ touches any longer, indeed he had his hand on the man in some way or another most times—usually offering support for Severus’ still injured body—but he rarely spoke other than to continue working to translate that horrid journal. Riddle had, for a time, not mentioned the idea of another horcrux. Just long enough to give them hope it had never been completed before a sentence here or there plunged them right back into despair.

Even a Scottish winter had nothing on the icy-cold of knowing one of their dear friends might need to die—and by their own hand—for a war that had already cost them too much.

The last kilometre to Hearthstane had proven the hardest. A blizzard had forced them out of the cold and into their tent. The ungodly temperatures might have killed them even with warming charms had they dared travel in them. Besides, neither could see which way to go even with a *Point-Me* spell. Resigned, they retreated to the relative warmth of their tent and prayed their meagre supplies would hold until they could reach civilisation once more.

While the wind howled outside, Severus stood as near to the hot stove as he dared as he checked the progress of his healing ribs. Why weren’t the blasted things healing? Even with a stronger potion and the enforced rest, he could swear his injuries were getting worse rather than better. He constantly felt as if a bargepole had punched through his chest and lodged there, and nothing seemed to relieve it.

Severus managed to get most of his layers off, but the slim undershirt gave him trouble as he tried to pull it from his chest without aggravating the already intensifying pain in his ribs. A gentle hand slid under the hem against his bare hip, and Severus gasped at the sensation. His ears reddened despite his Occlumency.

“Let me help you with that, Sev,” Harry said in a soft voice. “You’re obviously in pain.”

Severus struggled a bit longer, fearing the fire of Harry’s touch against his bare skin, but soon gave up. The blasted shirt had defeated him. Even breathing hurt.

“It appears I have little other choice,” he gasped out.

Pain flashed in Harry’s beautiful eyes, but he said nothing. With exquisite tenderness, Harry eased
the shirt from Severus’ body and laid it atop the man’s neat stack of shirts. Severus covered himself with his arms, knowing his scrappy, scarred body left much to be desired, but Harry only gave him a soft smile and rubbed his waist with light, calloused hands. Gods, it felt like fire against him. Severus struggled not to pant or rest his head on Harry’s shoulder.

“Don’t hide from me, please,” he murmured. “I only want to help.”

Severus swallowed past a tightness in his throat and whispered, “I am … not much to look at, Harry. I am—”

That same, tender fingertip pressed his lips, and it took everything Severus had not to kiss the calloused pad. Would it still taste of cherries?

“You’re beautiful, Sev.”

Severus snorted. “Beautiful? Hah! Do you think I am a fool, Potter? That I have not heard the whispers behind my back? I am the greasy, ugly, horrible, beak-nosed git of the dungeons, remember? Or do you imagine that I have somehow missed the comments made directly to my face? To Snivellus’ face?”

Harry winced at the horrible nickname.

Severus scowled. “I know what I am. Society will not let me forget it.”

The fingertip returned and lingered. “They aren’t here right now, Sev. It’s only you and me, and I see the beauty in you.”

Severus’ resistance slipped, and he kissed Harry’s cold-roughened finger. With a little gasp, Harry rubbed the pad across Severus’ lips, and the man only resisted chasing it with his tongue by the barest thread. As it was, he couldn’t stop himself from touching Harry’s skin with the tip.

Gods. How could Harry still taste like cherries in the middle of a blizzard and with nothing resembling the fruit anywhere near?

Severus swallowed hard and dropped his head. Those soft lips looked too tempting, and his control was fading fast. The sight of his own disaster of a body brought him crashing back down to reality with a vengeance. Harry could never love him. No one could.

“How can you look at this—” He jerked an arm down and hastily back up. “—and see anything resembling beauty? I am a monst—”

Another fingertip stopped him. “No.” Harry’s firm tone softened. “No. Severus, look at me. Look into my eyes.”

Severus shivered and raised his head slowly. An emerald gaze pinned him and the pain within speared Severus’ heart.

“You are not a monster,” Harry murmured. “Not even close.”

“But I—”

“No. The past doesn’t matter right now. The others don’t matter. In this moment, in our cold-as-hell tent in the middle of nowhere, it’s only you and me, and I don’t give a damn what others have said about you. Not even what I might have said, before I knew who you really are.”
Tears blurred his vision, and Severus strained to control them.

Harry looked at him with understanding and as if he was the most important person in the world. “Look at me, Severus. Ah. Gods, your eyes are so gorgeous.”

“No. There is nothing beautiful about me.” Severus shook his head hard, but Harry steadied him with gentle hands around the older man’s jaw.

“Yes, there is. Did I not just say you have gorgeous eyes? They’re like ebony.”

Severus shuddered hard. “You cannot be serious.”

“Severus, come on! You know better.” Harry sighed and again softened his tone. “I am not my father, Sev. I will not mock you. I will not hurt you.” He laid his forehead against Severus’ cheek. “Whatever happened in the past, you’re beautiful to me, and I care about you, and that’s all that matters right now. Please let me help you. Please. You’re still injured and you need help.”

Disarmed by Harry’s words, captured within that emerald gaze, a trembling Severus slowly let his hands fall to his sides. Harry kept his eyes on Severus’ face until the older man could bear it no more and looked away, tears hot on his lashes.

He snapped, “Well? Still think I’m beautiful when every one of my bones sticks out and my skin is scarred and—”

Harry’s thumb pressed into Severus’ lips, “Yes. I do.”

Severus crumbled into Harry’s arms and buried his head in the man’s hair. “You, you cannot. It’s not … possible.”

“Yet, I do.” Harry wrapped him in warm, strong arms and kissed his shoulder. “I do.”

Gods, Harry’s words had shattered Severus. With a quiet cry, he caught the man tight against him and tried in vain to control his tears. Even Regulus had never said he was beautiful. No one had. Severus knew Harry must be looking past his scars to the person within—though he had never thought himself particularly beautiful inside either—but even so, the idea that Harry could see the best of him broke Severus’ walls into a million tiny pieces and left him a wreck in the young man’s embrace.

“Severus,” Harry whispered in his ear, “ssh. I meant it. It’s okay.”

“I know you meant it, but I … I cannot believe ….”

Harry eased him back a little and kissed a rough, badly-healed scar on Severus’ chest where Riddle had lashed him with a fire-whip two years before. The wound hadn’t responded to normal treatments and, even now, looked as it did three weeks after the treatments had ended. The wound had healed, but the scar hadn’t faded in the least.

“Yes, you’re scarred, all over probably, but you got them fighting for us and enduring Riddle’s madness to save my life. How could I not think you beautiful? Your scars only make you handsomer. You’re so brave, Severus. So strong.”

Harry gently brushed Severus’ ribs, and the man couldn’t help a wince and gasp of pain. Harry withdrew his hand and frowned.

“And yes, you’re thin, but I … I like ….” He tipped his head and stared worriedly at Severus’ chest.
“You’re lithe, and there’s nothing wrong with that, but gods, Sev! Have your ribs healed at all?”

Severus shuddered and lowered his head. “I, I do not believe so.”

Harry conjured a chair—without his wand—and guided Severus into the seat before he realised what he’d done.

“Wandless again? And this ….” He ran a finger over the red and gold brocade. “This is better than I can usually do with a wand.” Harry frowned and met Severus’ eyes. “Do you notice that I can only seem to do this when you’re in danger?”

Severus snorted. “Or you think I am. My ribs are injured, Potter. It is not the end of the world.”

“It might be when they’re not healing despite your potions.” Harry eased Severus’ arm away, just lifting it enough to see. Severus remained stoic, though even the slightest movement hurt.

“It’s okay, Sev,” Harry murmured, still frowning at Severus’ ribs. “You can show your pain with me. I won’t mock you because of it.”

“I … there is no need.”

Harry sighed and conjured one of his odd blue flames in his hand. The light flickered in his eyes and made them glow, a bit like that strange teal light Severus had observed within them sometimes. Harry touched a gentle fingertip to Severus’ ribs, and a gasp escaped the injured man’s control. His muscles flinched without his consent, and Harry’s frown deepened.

“Sev, this seems worse than last week. I, gods. Do you need a healer?”

Severus sighed and covered his chest with the arm he could move. “Probably, but what can I do, Potter? I cannot simply walk into St. Mungo’s, even under a glamour or Polyjuice, and I refuse to risk contacting Poppy and potentially revealing her safehouse. Besides that, we cannot delay our mission for a simple injury. Riddle will be furious now that he is locked out of Hogwarts and may think to check his horcruxes at any moment. We cannot waste time searching for a healer when the fate of the world is at stake.”

He Summoned his bag and held it out to Harry. “Before you … came to help me, I had intended to wrap a pressure bandage with a healing poultice directly upon my injuries. Might you help me with it, please? Caring for myself is more difficult than I had anticipated.”

Harry sighed and rummaged through the bag for Severus’ supplies. “Fine, but as soon as we get to Hearthstane, we’re taking you to a clinic.”

“A clinic?” Severus gave a wry, bitter chuckle. “Hearthstane is hardly more populous than Talla Linnfoots, Potter. What makes you think they will have a clinic?”

Harry came up with the gauze, his eyes full of fear. “But … what can we do then?”

Severus shook his head. “We must carry on through this horcrux. There is surely a clinic in Blackpool, and I am not injured on my wand side, so we do at least have that in our favour. I will still be able to dismantle whatever curses and wards Riddle might have placed upon the accursed thing. Do you know what we are looking for yet?”

Harry sighed. “Not a clue. The journal didn’t list the actual item this time, just said that he had it stored and had completed his ritual. I guess we’re going to have to go into the pub and listen for clues. If it’s hexed and warded, there’s bound to be some kind of myth around it. Muggles who go
missing, or go to a field and come back with no hands, some horrible story like that.”

“Well, let’s hope for the best, shall we?”

“Hope does not find horcruxes, Potter.”

Harry shook his head and laid the gauze aside. “No, but it’s a damn sight better than giving up.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s cheek. “Yes. That it is.”

Harry smiled and dove into the bag after a healing salve.

Someone had turned on the lights too bloody early. Harry groaned and turned into Severus, hiding his face in the man’s neck.

“Go’way,” he muttered when the light remained and shone into his eyes. “S’not mornin’ yet.”


“Mm-hmn.” Harry kissed Severus’ cheek and burrowed deeper into his arms. The man’s embrace tightened around him, and Harry smiled.

Merlin, he loved these moments before Severus was fully awake. In the grey of pre-dawn, before Severus’ defences came into effect, he held Harry as tight as a lover and always used the man’s first name. Harry liked to imagine that, once Severus had some confidence, loving him might feel something like this all the time. He smiled into Severus’ neck and yawned.

Ugh. Beautiful moment or not, it was still too early.

“Mmph. Sev, turn off the light.”

“Harry, we’re in a tent in the bloody wilderness. There isn’t a light. It’s only the sun.”

“Too early.”

“I know.”

Harry snuggled into Severus and pulled the covers over their heads, but a sharp bark right by his ear brought him out of his morning haze with a vengeance.

“What the …?”

He grabbed his wand from his coat pocket and clambered to his feet. Beside him, Severus sat and held his own wand in a fierce grip.

The first thing Harry noticed was the silence. The wind hadn’t stopped howling for two days. The absence of it roared in Harry’s ears. The second thing he noticed was the blinding silver light just beside him. Someone had sent a Patronus. Harry groaned and rubbed his eyes until they adjusted.

It was a terrier. ‘Ron.’
Harry swallowed hard and sat beside Severus once more. He needed Severus’ strength to help him through this. Besides, the tent was too damn cold and Severus was warm.

“Howse Patronus is that, Potter?”

So much for sweet moments without Severus’ defences. Harry sighed, his eyes flicking to the one pallet neither he nor Severus had yet touched. It still lay in the same corner Ron had left it in, unused, but not forgotten. Harry shrunk into himself every time he saw the blasted thing.

Severus must have understood his unspoken message because he wrapped Harry in his arms and held him tight.

“I am here, Harry, whatever he says.”

Harry laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “T-thanks.” He tapped the dog’s head with his wand. “Yeah?”

The dog barked and wagged its tail. “Mate,” it said in Ron’s voice, “listen. ‘Mione and Bill have been raking me over the coals since that night. ‘Specially since I didn’t say goodbye, but it was only that … well, I felt like a right arse and I couldn’t face it yet.” The dog whined and tucked his tail.

“It’s just, it’s Snape, remember? The bastard that made our lives hell for six years?”

Harry glared at the dog, and it whined again.

“Mate, I know I’m mucking this up as usual, but I’m just trying to say I’m sorry, and I miss you. I never should’ve left, and I never should’ve hurt you, and gods. I wish I could take it all back, but I can’t, Harry. I can’t. Anyway, I’m really sorry.”

Harry buried his head into Severus’ shoulder, his emotions in turmoil. On the one hand, Ron had tried to apologise, but he had never admitted his wrongdoing concerning Snape and Harry’s sexuality. For all Harry knew, Ron was apologising for leaving them in the forest and glossing over everything else.

Harry stood and clenched his fists. ‘Not good enough, Ron. Not this time.’

He closed his eyes and remembered how good he had felt that morning in Severus’ arms, the way Severus had struggled to keep from rocking into Harry’s hands when he had rubbed heat into the man’s thighs, the look in his eyes when Harry had called him beautiful and Severus had finally believed it.

“Expecto Patronum Nuntius!”

Harry’s stag appeared and looked at him expectantly.

“Go to Ron,” Harry said in a low voice. “Be careful to be seen by no one except the people at Shell Cottage. Tell him: ‘You can apologise again when you take your head out of your arse concerning gays and Severus, and I might consider it this time. Oh, and do it because you were wrong and an idiot and not because Hermione and Bill dragged it out of you.’” Harry paused. “Oh, and Prongs, prod him a bit with your antlers, yeah?”

The stag bowed to Harry and vanished.
Somehow, Harry doubted he would see the terrier again. The thought filled his chest with a splintering pain, but he ignored it. He had no time to deal with Ron’s wavering loyalty. He had to get the horcrux from Hearthstane and get Severus to a healer as soon as possible. Harry tugged the journal from its blood-warded place next to his pallet with Severus and lit his wand, but Severus took the journal from him and laid it aside.

“You are acting much like you did when Poppy was missing. You cannot kill yourself reading that terrible book at all hours.” Severus lay down and patted the blankets. “Come. It is too early to be up yet.”

“No.” Harry reached for the journal back, but Severus banished it across the room with a flick of his hand. Harry pouted. “Not fair, you know. I can only do that when I’m trying to save your life.”

Severus gave a low chuckle and tugged Harry back into the blankets. “I am a Slytherin, remember? I do not waste my advantages.”

Harry sighed and lay beside Severus. “Yeah. Well then, what do you want, oh great Half-Blood Prince?”

Severus brushed Harry’s hair back from his temple. “I simply want you to talk to me.”

“I’m fine.”

“Don’t try that ‘fine’ shite with a spy, Potter. I know that half-apology hurt you.”

Harry screwed his eyes shut to avoid crying and nodded. “I should’ve expected it. I guess I did expect it. Ron showed his true colours at the rite and he’s always been thick when it comes to communication and relationships, but the stupid part of me keeps hoping for better. Keeps remembering the times when he was loyal no matter what.”

“It is not stupid, Harry. I hoped your mother would forgive me one day right up until the day I found you alone and screaming in a wet nappy, and knew I had failed you both.”

Harry’s eyes bugged. “You changed my nappy?”

Severus barked out a laugh. “Merlin, no! I handed you straight to Minerva and searched for some sign of Lily, but there was none. We found James Potter, but never your mother.” He laid his head against Harry’s. “For a moment, I thought perhaps she had survived, but no. Lily loved you more than she loved life. She never would have left you alone had she lived.”

Harry blinked hard and swallowed a lump in his throat. “Y-yeah.”

“Are you well, Potter?”

“For the love of Merlin, please call me Harry.”

Severus cringed away. “Forgive me. I … I am trying to remember.”

Harry sighed and took the man’s hand. “It’s okay. It’s just annoying when I’m baring my soul and you call me by my surname like we’re still in potions class.” He sighed and sat. “Sev, I really can’t sleep like this, and now that the blizzard has stopped—at least I think it has—we really ought to try to make it to Hearthstane today. We don’t have time to waste on me.”

“Ensuring your well-being is not wasting time, but have it your way. I do not think I can rest now, either, and you are right that we must hurry.” He struggled to stand, but couldn’t rise. “Harry …”
With a frown, Harry hoisted Severus to his feet and helped the man dress. “You, you can’t stand on your own, Sev?”

“Not from the floor, apparently.” He looked just as terrified. “I cannot understand why the medicine is not working. These are my strongest mixes, and nothing. Harry, I begin to think there is nothing even a healer can do.”

“No!” Harry clapped a hand over Severus’ mouth. “No. Don’t you dare say that! I have lost too many bloody people to this war to give you up, too. You’re going to get better.”

When Harry did not remove his hand, Severus licked it.

“Oi!”

The man laughed, then rubbed his lips. “Why do you always taste of …?”

Harry’s ears burned. “Of what?”

Severus’ cheeks went bright pink. “It is of no consequence. But, Harry, I cannot help it if I am … am dying.”

“No-no-no!” Harry grabbed Severus’ hand and marched him to a conjured chair. “I won’t let you die. I’ll figure out how to heal you. I, I’ll go into my dreams again, and, and ….” He paced and chewed on his knuckles, trying to think of a way to save the man he loved. There had to be some way to access his strange powers consciously, but nothing worked.

Severus shook his head. “Harry, it’s all right. At the moment, I am merely in pain. It may be that your powers have not come into play yet because my life is not in immediate danger.”

Harry swallowed his sudden terror and took a deep breath. “Y-yeah. Yeah, you must be right.” He sat beside Severus and Summoned the journal straight into his hand, then gave the book a wary look. “But that doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence.”

“I am well enough, Harry. Come, we should be in Hearthstane by the afternoon, if my health and the weather permits.”

“All right.”

Harry tucked the journal and his terror away. His powers would come to help him before Severus died. They had to. He couldn’t accept the alternative.

Until then, he would try every night to call them again.

To Severus’ immense relief, they made it to Hearthstane that evening and found a tiny tavern beside the main road. Despite the somewhat shabby décor, it was a perfect place to rest and gather intel. Severus knew well from his clandestine affairs in the Death Eater camps that alcohol loosened lips. If there was any strange gossip to be heard about the town, they would hear it where the ale flowed freely. Or whiskey, as the case often was in this part of Scotland.

Harry had his arm around Severus’ waist as they walked inside, but the locals’ scowls quickly faded to looks of concern when Severus allowed a bit of his pain and struggle to show. It would have been
better if they could have come in without attracting notice, but in a Muggle backwater, an injured man would at least garner less negative attention than a gay couple. He hoped Harry had the sense to ask for two beds, for Severus wasn’t sure he could gather the breath when his ribs felt as though they would cave in at any moment.

The barkeep, a bear of a man who put Severus in mind of Hagrid, came around the side of the bar as soon as he saw them and helped Harry guide Severus to a seat. The spy resented the stranger’s touch, but allowed it with a forced smile.

The barkeep said, “Good lord, lads! What happened?”

Harry shook his head and gave Severus a wry smile. “We’re on our way to Edinburgh, or we were, rather. First we got snowed in back in Dumfries, and then our auto broke down about ten kilos back. We’ve had to hoof it here through all the snow. We were doing all right until a few metres back. Then Sam here hit a patch of ice and went down hard. Hit his ribs on a rock or something.”

The barkeep whistled. “Ach. You get your auto taken care of?”

“Yeah, but it won’t be fixed until tomorrow at the soonest. We’re stuck until then.”

“How. The hospital’s forty kilos northwest in Lanark. Called Lockhart Hospital.”

Harry coughed. “Not for a Gilderoy Lockhart by any chance?”

The barkeep shook his shaggy head. “Never heard of ‘im. Want me to see about getting you a way there? Might be able to get a cab from Dumfries, though it’d cost a pretty penny. Or someone about here might be willing to take you.”

Harry shook his head. “It’s just a bump. He’ll be right as rain come morning, or if not, we’ll see about going to hospital then. We do need a room, though, if you’ve any to spare. One room—I need to be on hand to help him, you understand? Bit of a rough fall he’s had.”

The barkeep nodded. “You’re in luck, then. I’ve one double left, though you’ll have to kip in the same bed while you’re here. I’ve nothing else available.”

Harry nodded. “That will have to do, then.”

“You need help getting your da up the stairs?”

Both men fixed looks of horror on the barkeep.

“Oh, I’ve put my foot in it now, haven’t I?” The barkeep laughed and ran a hand through his shaggy hair. “Not your da, then?”

“Good lord, no,” said Harry with a shudder. “We’re … colleagues. Professors, though I do know I look young for it.”

Severus couldn’t suppress his snort. “Indeed.”

Harry smirked.

The barkeep chuckled at them. “Ah. ‘Tis a noble profession.” He took a brass key out from a cabinet behind the bar and laid it on the counter. “It’s twenty pounds sterling for the night. Meals and drinks are extra. Supper is served at six and lasts until eight. Breakfast is from six in the morning until nine and lunch is from noon to two. Between mealtimes, we keep the house soup on and some
sandwiches in the icebox, but that’s all.”

Severus dug a twenty-pound note from his billfold and gave it to the barkeep. “Thank you. We will return for supper.”

Harry took the key from the barkeep and pocketed it. “Are we allowed to take a meal in the room in case Sam’s not quite up to the stairs by then?”

“Long as it doesn’t stain. Sandwiches or something like it. Soup’s okay so long as you keep it in the takeaway cups and leave the lid on—there’s a spout, you know. Anyway, just bring your plates back to the bar when you’ve finished, if you need to eat upstairs that is.”

“Understood.” Harry offered his arm to Severus. “Come on, Sam. Let’s get you to bed.”

“Thank you,” Severus said, and allowed Harry to haul him upstairs.

They found the room tucked away in a corner near the stairs. Harry grinned, to Severus’ bemusement, and led the injured man inside.

The room was quaint, but comfortable. The large bed dominated most of the available space, but there was also a small table with two chairs in front of the window, a wardrobe facing the footboard, and a cozy armchair near the table. A door near the wardrobe led to a small, but serviceable loo, and another door on the opposite side revealed a small closet.

Muggle heat worked wonders on the bitter cold, and Severus settled into the armchair with a sigh. “Merlin, it is good to be in a warm room again.”

Harry perched on the edge of the bed and gave him a nervous look. “Um, did I do all right with the barkeep? I was trying to keep him out of our business without being rude.”

Severus chuckled. “Actually, I was rather impressed. Had I not known you for a lion, I might have thought you came from my house.”

“You’re joking!”

“I do not joke as concerns my snakes.”

Harry chuckled and pulled off his shoes. “That may be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Severus’ smile faded. “Is it truly?”

Harry crossed his legs on the bed and rubbed at his socked feet. “I was only teasing a bit, Sev. It’s okay.”

Severus watched Harry rub his feet with a concerned expression. “Are they hurting?”


Severus stood and moved to sit beside Harry. “Help me get these boots off and I’ll help you with the frostbite.”

Harry hesitated. “I’ll help with the boots, but can you treat me with your arm immobile?”

“Am I required to rub your legs in their entirety?”

Harry’s ears and cheeks went crimson. “Er, no. It’s only that my trainers are a little old, and snow
was getting into the toes. I forgot to check them this morning, and by the time we had really gotten started, I was too worried about you to notice.” He gently touched Severus’ injured side, beneath his ribs. “Is the heat really helping or were you just trying to get the barkeep off our trail?”

Severus couldn’t hold back a little gasp at the feel of Harry’s touch. Harry jerked his hand back.

“So you *were* just tricking the barkeep. Damn.”

“That did not hurt me,” Severus said, his voice a little breathless.

Harry smiled. “Oh.” His cheeks reddened, mystifying Severus.

“Did I say something I shouldn’t have, Potter?”

“*Harry. And no.*”

Severus frowned, wondering why Harry had blushed, but shrugged it off in lieu of more important matters. “Well, then if you’re all right, help me with my boots, please.”

Harry nodded and knelt at Severus’ feet. The older man wanted to pet the messy head before him, to caress Harry’s hair and ears and let him know he was loved, but he refrained. Men like Severus did not deserve love, and Harry deserved better than a broken, injured, wreck of a man. He deserved someone whole.

Harry removed Severus’ boots and set them by the door along with his trainers, then helped the injured man out of his many layers. Severus wished he could return the favour and take Harry’s layers off one-by-one to reveal the gorgeous man underneath. He shivered at the mere thought.

“So?” Harry guided him to sit at the head of the bed and brushed Severus’ hair from his cheek. “Are you cold?”

Severus flushed at being caught out, but Harry had provided him the perfect excuse.

“Perhaps a bit.”

Harry sat beside him and snuggled close. “Better?”

“Yes,” Severus said in a soft voice. ‘*Now that you are near me.*’

Harry smiled. “Good.” He pulled out his wand and flicked it. “*Tempus.*” The spell said it was four-thirty. “You’ve time for a nap before dinner if you want.”

“I do? And what will you be doing while I am resting on my laurels?”

Harry kissed Severus’ cheek. “Not on your laurels. Just healing. But I was going to work at that monster of a journal, of course. We need to know who he … a-altered.”

The soul-deep terror in Harry’s eyes hurt Severus. “Harry, rest with me. You have been at that translation too long.”

“But—”

“No. It will hurt you if you do not set it aside from time to time. Let us rest tonight and instead see if we can learn anything from the patrons.”

“But I’m not sleepy.”
Severus sighed. “Then stay up, but promise me you will not touch that journal when I am not present and aware? I need to be able to ground you from its poison.”

Harry rubbed his arms. “I need to do something useful.”

“Work on your wandless magic then, or perhaps see if you might heal me through your dream powers. But please, do not read that journal without me.”

Harry sighed and gave him a wan smile. “All right. I promise. Just try to sleep, Sev.”

Severus patted his thighs. “Not until I see if your feet need medicine.”

“Really?” Harry grinned. “O-okay.” He hesitantly scooted his feet into the man’s lap, and Severus set about healing them with a gentle touch.

Severus woke to lamplight and the scritch-scritch of a biro. He sat, angry that Harry had broken his promise not to translate. He had prepared a tirade when the sight of the journal still sitting on the nightstand knocked the wind from his sails.

“Problem?” Harry sounded amused.

Severus turned towards the voice and frowned. Harry sat in a conjured chair by the door with a yellow tube leading from his head and a notepad in his lap.

“What in Merlin’s name are you doing?”

Harry chuckled. “Surveillance. They’ve not said anything of interest yet.”

Severus bolted to his feet, anger and pain and fear and shock all running through him at once. “Surveillance! You spied on the Muggles without me?” His voice dropped. “You … you left me alone?”

Harry’s eyes flashed with anger. “Well, I’m glad to know you have such a high opinion of my loyalty.” He stuffed the notebook in his vest pocket and pulled the cord out of his ear. Severus’ stomach dropped at the realisation that it was one of the magic ears the Weasley twins had developed. The cord drew into Harry’s hand, pulling a wriggling pink ear with it.

“Oh. I apologise, Potter. I should have remembered those blasted ears. Merlin knows I saw them every single Order meeting for the past two years.”

Harry frowned and pocketed the ear. “You knew about them?”

“I was a spy, Potter. Of course I knew.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

Severus gave him a pointed look. “As it so happens, I did not approve of Albus’ plan to keep you and your friends completely in the dark. I allowed it because you needed to know, but no one trusted me enough to listen to my suggestions as to your level of inclusion.”

Harry nodded, but didn’t meet Severus’ eyes. “Oh. Er, thanks.” He bent down and slid on his
trainers. “Are you hungry? It’s time to go to supper.”

“You are angry.” Severus hobbled over to Harry and laid a hand on his shoulder, but Harry batted him away.

“Don’t. I need … a moment.”

Severus winced and returned to the bed, his world crashing in once more. He had only been concerned for Harry’s safety, but once again, he had ruined the only beautiful thing in his life. He wanted to curl into a ball and hide, but it would hurt his ribs. Instead, he let his shoulders and head droop and stared at his lap, unable to weep, unable to think, just … frozen.

A tender hand cupped his jaw and lifted his face. “Sev, remember what I told you?”

Severus held his breath, afraid to say anything lest he drive Harry away.

“Ssh. Breathe. It’s okay.”

Severus couldn’t, not with Harry so close yet threatening to break away at any moment.

Harry sighed and slid his other hand around Severus’ cheek. “I’m staying, remember? A little argument isn’t going to make me go. I just needed time to cool down.” He rubbed his thumb along Severus’ cheekbone and gave him a reassuring smile. “A moment doesn’t mean forever, okay? I’m still here, and I’m not leaving you.”

Severus’ breath came out in a shaky sob. “Please. Please don’t leave me.”

He hated himself for his weakness, but he simply couldn’t bear to lose Harry, not now, not ever.

“I won’t, Sev.” Harry stroked his hair softly. “I won’t.”

Severus closed his eyes and turned his head into Harry’s palm. “Harry, I am sorry. I did not mean to hurt you. I was only afraid for your safety and mine.”

“I know. I was only in a little tiff. It’s okay now.”

“You are not angry any longer?”

“No. The moment I saw you curl in on yourself like that, I remembered your doubts don’t really centre upon me.”

“Hmm?”

“You yourself, Severus. You are utterly cruel to yourself. You didn’t think I would abandon you, but that you weren’t worth watching over.” Harry brought him close so the man’s head rested against his ribs. “But that’s a load of poppycock.”

Severus snorted, and at Harry’s answering chuckle, burst into laughter. When he could breathe again, he said, “You chose that word intentionally.”

Harry grinned. “Might have been trying to make you laugh a bit.”

Severus chuckled and brought Harry into a hug. “Thank you. No one has even attempted it in so long, I had almost forgotten what it felt like.”

Harry smiled and scooted back. “I’m glad you feel better, but could we go to dinner? I really am
“Yes, yes. Only, help me with my boots, please.” Severus sighed and bowed his head. “I detest needing help with such simple tasks.”

“It won’t be much longer, I promise. I couldn’t get into my dreams and heal you this time, but I won’t give up. I’ll try every night, okay? And we’ll get you to a healer as soon as we possibly can.”

Severus nodded and took Harry’s hand. “Thank you. For everything you have done and are doing for me, thank you. No one has ever been so kind.”

“Not even my mum?”

“No. Not even Lily.”

Harry shook his head and squeezed Severus’ fingers. “Well, that won’t do. I’ll just have to be kind to you a lot to make up for it.”

“You already are, Harry.”

The young man gave him a brilliant smile and bent to help him put on his boots. A few moments later, Harry was helping him down the stairs and to a shadowed table in a corner of the tavern. He went to the bar and returned with a tray of steaming bowls of lamb stew and thick, crusty bread that had Severus salivating from the smell alone.

“Er, this was the house stew tonight,” Harry said with a hesitant smile. “I kind of forgot to ask you what you wanted and had to wing it. I figured that most everyone likes stew, so it’d be a safe choice.”

Severus took the offered bowl and plate of bread with a nod. “It smells delicious. Thank you.”

Harry beamed and slid into the seat across him, his own bowl of soup in hand. “Gods, it does. It’s been so long since I’ve had a good lamb stew.”

“Bit hard to make it in the woods, hmm?”

“You bet. Takes too long and it’s too hard to cook it without a decent stove.” He dipped a piece of his bread in the liquid and popped it into his mouth. “Oh wow. We’re going to have to come back here one day for the food alone.”

With that ringing endorsement—and because the smell was driving him mad—Severus tasted his own stew and almost melted into the chair.

“Gods, that is the best thing I’ve ever tasted. We shall definitely return one day.”

Harry grinned. “Glad to hear it.”

They set into their meals with gusto, not speaking again until they had devoured two bowls of stew each and a loaf of warm, buttery wheat bread. Replete for possibly the first time in months, Severus sat back in his chair with a groan and adjusted his suddenly snug waistband.

“Well, that was worth the delay.”

Harry chuckled. “Damn straight it was. Want a whiskey or something? Probably would feel pretty good with all that warm stew.”
Severus shook his head. “I cannot possibly imbibe anything more at the moment.”

“Same here.” Harry stretched his legs with a sigh. “This town seems to have such grand stories. Did you happen to hear anything … interesting?”

“Not particularly. Did you?”

“No. Just loads of gossip. Funny gossip, but nothing interesting to us.”

“Hmm. Perhaps we should retire for the evening soon then.”

Harry nodded, and his eyes showed understanding. They couldn’t stay in the pub all day without garnering unwanted attention, and Harry’s Extendable Ear came in handy for discreet eavesdropping. Safe eavesdropping, where in the view of the public, they were in danger all the time.

Severus had just shifted his weight to push himself out of his seat when a murmur from a few tables away caught his ear and made him drop back into it.

“—just don’t go near the old abandoned paddock behind Blair’s feed store, Nessa. It’s dangerous, it is, for all it looks like an empty meadow.”

A couple tables away, a grey-haired Muggle woman was speaking to someone who looked to be her daughter. Severus surreptitiously waved Harry back into his seat. With a bemused frown, Harry obeyed.

“Ssh. I may have found our quarry.”

Harry paled and gave Severus a tight nod. Severus picked at the remainder of their bread so as to keep the barmaid from assuming they’d finished and driving them off. Harry pretended to be eating the last of his stew as well, though from up close, Severus saw him take bites of little more than a bit of broth and the occasional pea.

The daughter had just finished a disbelieving retort, and the older woman spoke again. “I’m serious as the grave, Ness! Strange things happen in that field, and no one seems to remember once it’s done. But I, you know how I see things, Ness, and I’ve seen it. Seen the bairns go into that field to play and never come out again, and no one what should remember them, does.”

Severus shuddered. He did not want to think of what fate those poor children might have met.

The daughter said, “Mum, that’s just an old wives’ tale. Ghosts don’t exist.”

“Ach! I’m telling you, Ness, there’s some kind of evil spirit in that field or something like it. You might think your mum’s gone ‘round the twist, but I’ve seen it, lass. With my own two eyes.” She sighed and set her glass on their table, clinking her ice. “Look, whether you think I’ve gone ‘round the twist or not, just promise me you’ll warn wee Andrew away?”

Severus could practically hear the younger woman rolling her eyes. “All right, all right, Mum. I’ll tell Drew to play on the south side of town. Happy?”

“Well, happier, at any rate. Now, when’s this new wee bairn due? About March?”

Severus listened a bit longer, but the women said nothing more about the paddock.

“I know where we are going tomorrow,” he whispered, then raised his voice. “Are you quite finished nursing that stew, Hank, or should we order another bowl?”
Harry sat back with a groan. “Only if you want to roll me up the stairs.” He stood and helped Severus out of his seat. “Come on. Let’s get to bed. Maybe your ribs will feel better after a good night’s rest.”

From his tone, Severus understood that Harry was bound and determined to dream-walk that evening, if he could help it.

“Perhaps they might. One can only hope. Have you already paid for our meal?”

“Yes. Wasn’t too much, either. We’re definitely keeping this place in mind when next we travel to Edinburgh.”

“Mm. Indeed.” Severus used a false stagger up the stairs as an opportunity to lean a bit closer to Harry. “Do you think there will be a next time?”

His voice rippled with uncertainty, and Severus had no doubt that Harry would hear it. Harry gave him a warm smile and nudged Severus closer.

“Yeah. Definitely.”
Severus sat in the armchair in their room, watching the moon rise and listening to the Weasley boy report on Potterwatch. Harry sat at his feet, staring at the radio with wide eyes, as if the thing would attack him. Severus understood his fear. He, too, feared hearing of another death on their side.

“All right, everyone,” said Weasley, “we’re back. Apologies for the delay. We had been broadcasting from River’s family’s shed, but three nights ago, the River home was raided.”

Harry tensed against Severus’ knees.

“No one got hurt, miraculously—River’s da had the good sense to apparate everyone out at the first sign of damage to the wards—but the Death Eaters levelled the house itself.”

Harry let out a sigh of relief. “Thank Merlin they’re okay.”

Severus ran his fingers through Harry’s mop and smiled when the young man laid his head against Severus’ knee.

“Thanks,” Harry said. “That helps keep me calm.”

“Then I shall continue petting you, like the little green-eyed kitten you are.”

“Oi!”

Severus laughed and petted on. Harry grumbled, but quieted quickly as Lee came on.

“We’ve got a great new location,” said Lee, “though it’s a shame about the house, and those little bastards are going to find these wards a hell of a lot harder to break.”

“And that’s if they get through mine and Rascal’s traps,” said Fred Weasley in an amused tone.

“That’s a big if,” Rapier,” said his twin. “Our skills in that area are legendary—”

“The tops—”

“And anyone who tries to break through without our consent—”
“Is really going to regret it,” finished Fred with a laugh. “But moving on, folks, we’ve got a lot to report on in our absence. First off, you may or may not have already heard from the Prophet, but the teachers gathered together in Hogwarts—including Severus Snape, and blimey, do we ever have a lot to say about him—they all gathered together to perform an ancient wartime rite in Hogwarts and kicked Old Mouldy and his Death Eater minions out of Hogwarts!”

“That’s right, Rapier,” said Lee. “I can hardly believe it all myself.”

Fred continued, “You’re not kidding. It was, for lack of a better word, amazing. First, the decent teachers sent everyone in the Order and DA—that’s Harry Potter’s defence organisation, folks—they sent us all Patronus messages to meet at Hogwarts in secret. So we all flooed into this secret room even Rascal and I didn’t know existed and started planning for this rite.”

George took over. “We were all sitting about discussing the rite and how it worked when the man himself—”

“The great—”

“The brilliant—”

“But rather short—”

“Like Napoleon Bonaparte, only with magic—”

“And a less French empire—”

“And a slightly better hairstyle—”

Harry burst into laughter. Severus smiled and continued stroking his mop.

Lee interrupted. “Come off it, you two. Harry will kill you if you keep that up much longer, no help from Old Mouldy needed.”

The twins laughed.

“Besides that,” said Lee, “our broadcast time is limited. So to get on with it, Harry Potter showed up and … cleared Professor Severus Snape’s name. I could hardly believe it, after everything, but there it is.”

“It is rather astounding, River,” said George, “but before you folks start doubting Harry’s word, think about all those posters we’ve seen naming Headmaster Snape as Undesirable Number Two. Now, we all know Riddle has taken over the Prophet, so why would he turn on his own guy if Snape was still working for the Death Eaters?”

“The short answer, Rascal,” said Fred, “is that he isn’t, and he hasn’t been for decades. The man made a lot of mistakes in his teenage years—bad ones—but he’s spent the past twenty years trying to atone for them.”

“Right, Rapier,” said Lee. “Professor Snape was a spy, feeding information to the Order while pretending to work for Riddle and getting himself Crucioed every other day, all for our sakes.” Lee went quiet. “Whatever he did in his past, he’s suffered enough for it by now.”

“We should have supported the man,” said Fred, his voice sad and regretful. “He … he had no one to help him that entire time. No one at all.”
“I was so angry at him,” George said, “right up until Harry showed the man leaning into Harry’s shoulder and crying—crying!—just because we all agreed not to kill him. That minimal show of good faith all but shattered Professor Severus Snape’s defences, and I think we can all agree his are formidable.” He sniffled. “Snape, he did hurt me. Badly. But it was an accident that happened while he was trying to save my life, and ever since that moment, ever since I saw him broken down in Harry’s arms, I couldn’t hold a grudge. I forgave him then, and rightfully so. The man’s not the monster we all thought he was. He’s, he’s a bloody hero.”

“Hear, hear,” said Fred and Lee at once, as well as a third voice Severus couldn’t hear over the rush of emotion in his ears.

“Gods,” he breathed, shaking and struggling for composure.

He had never meant to curse George Weasley, but the fact remained that Severus had blown off the boy’s ear. He had forever damaged the Weasley boy’s appearance, hearing, balance, and gods knew what else. How could the young prankster feel such pain, such regret for him?

How could George forgive him so thoroughly, when Severus deserved nothing but his antipathy?

Severus closed his eyes to hold back a surge of gratitude and overwhelming emotion. To hear the happy-go-lucky Weasley twins getting weepy for him—it was simply too much. He buried his face in his hand to cover the tears he couldn’t hold back.

Harry stood and walked to stand behind Severus’ chair. He draped his arms around Severus’ shoulders, being careful to put no weight on the older man’s injured side, and kissed his temple.

“It’s okay to cry if you need to, Sev. I’m right here. I’ll pull you through it.”

Severus reached up with the arm he could still move and tugged Harry’s hand into his own. “Thank you. For being with me. For this moment.” His tears flowed fast and hard, and Harry brushed them away with gentle fingertips.

“T’m here, Sev,” Harry murmured. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I cannot believe he forgives me.”

Harry kissed Severus’ hair and held the man as tight as he likely dared. “I know, but he does. It’s okay. It was an accident, Sev, and he knows that now.”

“Harry … thank you.”

Harry kissed his hair. “Nothing to thank me for. Ssh. It’s okay now. It’s over. You’re okay.” He wiped a stream of tears from Severus’ face. “I’m here, Sev. I’m here.”

Severus buried his face into Harry’s hand and tried to get his emotions under control.

In the meantime, Lee continued the broadcast. “—Don’t have time to go into everything Harry said to clear the man, but suffice it to say that Severus Snape is innocent on every count, including Professor Dumbledore’s death. Turns out the man was dying of a terrible curse and had arranged for Snape to kill him beforehand as a form of euthanasia.”

“Harry told us afterwards,” said Fred, “that it tore Snape to pieces. He loved Dumbledore like a father, and he had to kill the man. It shattered him.”

“Right, Rapier,” said George. “Gods, I never imagined I’d see him cry, but Snape cried quite a lot at
the rite when we all stood for him and accepted him into the ranks. Harry had to hold the man together because he’d never experienced forgiveness and loyalty.” George gave a wry laugh. “I never imagined I’d use this word in reference to Professor Snape, but it was … sweet, actually, the way they helped each other.”

“Shocking though,” said Lee. “His previous behaviour was a cover, but we all recall how Professor Snape used to terrorise Harry on a daily basis.”

“Their hatred was legendary, River,” said Fred, “but now … it’s beautiful to see how forgiveness has healed the two of them.”

“That it was, Rapier,” said George. “But we’ve got to move on. After Harry finished clearing Snape’s name and pulling the man back together, they went on to destr—”

Ronald Weasley cut across him. “Don’t!” Harry stiffened at the sound of the red-headed bigot’s voice. “Don’t say a word about that, Rascal! It’s too dangerous. If anyone from the opposite side should have happened upon our password ….”

George gasped. “Merlin. Sorry about that folks. Er, let’s just say they had a mission in the castle, right?”

“Right,” said Ron.

“All right. So, as Rat-face was saying—”

“Oi!”

“Like we said, Rat-face,” said Fred, “you can go by another codename when you take your head out of your arse and apologise to Harry and the Professor properly.”

“Good of him to make Prongs poke you with his antlers,” said George with a snort. “Most amusing sight I’ve had for a long time.”

“Oh, shut it,” said a sulking Ron.

Harry clenched his fist beside Severus’ shoulder. Severus understood. He wanted to throttle the idiot, too.

Severus stroked the hand he was still holding and whispered, “He is a fool. You are beautiful and brave and deserve better than such weak friendship.”

Harry gave him a thin smile. “Thanks, Sev. I know you’re right, but it still hurts.”

“Yes. I do understand.”

Harry nodded. “You do, sadly.” He laid his chin on Severus’ shoulder once more and they returned their attention to the broadcast.

“—But the really great news here, hard as it was on poor Harry,” Fred was saying, “is that Alecto Carrow is dead. Though it was by accident, Harry killed the wicked witch.”

Harry let slip a little cry and burrowed hard into Severus’ neck.

Severus kissed Harry’s hair, as much as the action frightened him. “Ssh. I am here. You did nothing wrong.”
Harry held onto him as an anchor in a storm and listened to the broadcast.

George said, “If you’re listening, Harry, we hate to bring her up, mate—I know you’re still struggling—but we need to let the listeners know she’s dead just in case someone tries to polyjuice into her or something.”

Harry rallied and nodded, though George wasn’t there to see it. “Right. You, you’re right. She was evil, and she deserved what she got. Right.”

Severus squeezed Harry’s hand. “So she did.”

“—So after all this,” said Lee, “poor Harry was a wreck. Professor Snape took him into a side room to recover and then, once Harry was feeling all right, we all pitched in and started the rite. It wasn’t much, really. Professors Snape and McGonagall just stood together and said a few words, then we all said our parts at the same time, and then the school just kind of … locked.”

“There was this great rushing sound,” said Fred, “and then we all looked in a spyglass to check on the Death Eaters. They were all banging around outside Hogsmeade, trying to find a way in, but it seems this old rite closed out Hogsmeade to them, too. Everyone else can still come and go, thank Merlin, but Old Mouldy and his Death Eaters are locked out for good.”

“He’s still trying, though,” said a grim Lee. “And since this is Riddle we’re talking about, he might find a way past the barrier. So if you get a call to come to the school or the village, understand it means the few teachers left in Hogwarts and the Hogsmeade people are trapped there and under threat of battle. It’s our duty to stand by them, just like they stood by us, right?”

“Right,” agreed the other boys and a feminine voice Severus couldn’t identify in the midst of the others.

“It’s awfully suspicious that Riddle’s gone quiet,” said a pensive Ron. “I mean, we all expected him to trash London in retribution or something, but the bastard’s just hidden himself away and, if our intelligence-gathering equipment is to be trusted, the other Death Eaters are as confused by it as we are. Mark my words, he’s up to something—something big—and it’s not going to be pretty when he crawls out of his hole again.”

“So you can say intelligent things from time to time, Rat-face,” said Fred.

“I’m speechless,” said George. “I thought only belches and bigotry came out of that end.”

“Oo! Leave off. You know I … I came here because—damn it! You know why!” Ron sighed and his tone went sombre. “Harry, mate, I’m sorry. Not just about leaving, either. About hurting you, too. I was a right idiot. If you’re listening, Harry, I, I’m really, honestly sorry. You can ….” He gulped. “Love whoever you want to, okay? It’s … not really my business, and I’m sorry I hurt you for it.”

George said, “Hmm. Still feels like you’re missing half of that apology, Rattie-kins.”

Ron groaned. “That’s even worse than Rat-face.”

“Well, if you’re going to leave half the people you hurt out ….”

“Gods! Give a man a minute to catch his breath. I was just trying to tell Harry first because I hurt him worse, okay? Merlin.” He sighed. “Um, Professor Snape, you too. I’m sorry.”

“Heartfelt and touching,” said Fred.
“I felt the sincerity in that all the way over here,” said George.

“Well, you are sitting right beside him,” Lee snarked.

Ron snarled, “Shut it! The man was a right bastard to me for six years. I’m trying, but that’s the best I can do right now.”

Fred said, “Poor Rattie-kins, always getting the regular Gryffindor bashing from the sole Slytherin professor.”

George added, “Not like his other professors ever had much good to say, but no, having Professor Snape repeat exactly the same things Professor McGonagall told you in snarky tones of dark velvet was just traumatising.”

Lee chuckled. “His voice is rather nice, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” Fred said in a low, dangerous tone, making the others laugh. All except Ron, of course.

Severus felt his face had caught fire. “They … are they mocking me, Harry?”

“Not at all, Sev.” Harry whispered against his ear, “Your voice is … is really hot.”

“You … truly think so?”

“Yeah. I do.”

Harry kissed the top of Severus’ ear, and the man struggled not to moan or beg Harry for more.

On the radio show, the others were still poking at Ron, and the redhead had finally had enough. His sudden shout wiped all pleasurable thoughts from Severus’ head.

“Oi! Leave off, you lot! You know he was a right berk to m—”

Lee cut across him. “Yes, a right berk to Gryffindors while he was spying in a Slytherin’s camp. Boo-hoo. He was no crueler to you than he was to the rest of us with red on our robes, and we’ve taken our heads out of our arses, thank you very much. Besides that, he wasn’t unkind to Harry at the rite. On the contrary, he was far kinder to Harry than you were. You know, Harry Potter, your supposed friend?”

“But I care about Harry! I just wanted to—”

A feminine voice Severus recognised well spoke next, “You wanted to what? Abandon him in the middle of the woods in the dead of winter while we were dealing with the darkest magic in existence all because you hadn’t three square meals a day in your bottomless pit of a belly? Or maybe you wanted to insult his sexuality and alienate him and the man he so obviously cares about in front of every friend either of them have? If so, I congratulate you. You did a bang-up job.”

“Hermione,” Harry whispered.

Severus tugged Harry’s hand against his heart and held it there, but it wasn’t enough. He ached to bury the man in his arms and kiss his pain away. Gods, he wished the red-headed idiot would just stop trying to apologise. Every time he tried, it cut Harry deeper.

Said red-headed idiot squawked, “I … that’s not fair! Just because I don’t want to jump up and down and kiss Snape’s arse after he made my life hell for six years, suddenly I’m the berk? You guys are all blinded. He’s brainwashed you or some—”
Fred cut him off. “Accusing him of brainwashing us when he’s been nowhere near for several weeks? Wow. Professor Snape must be really good at mind magic after all.” The man scoffed. “Idiot.”

“Oh! Just because I’m the only one who can see—”

George’s low voice cut Ron’s squawking off dead. “The inside of your own arse and nothing else, apparently. I suppose it’s good you’ve still both your ears. Imagine what rot you might say about the headmaster had you lost one.”

Ron sputtered, “I, uh … I ….”

“Just shut up, Rat-face,” said Fred in a fierce tone. “If you’re determined to bury yourself deeper, just shut it and get off our show. And do Harry a favour and stop with the half-arsed apologies. No doubt you’re only hurting him worse.”

“But … but I only wanted ….”

“Just stop, Rat-face,” said George. “Stop. Prongs this morning proved you’ve cut Harry deeper than an apology is ever going to fix anyway. If I were you, I’d focus on rebuilding from what little you have left rather than trying to get Harry’s forgiveness and pick up where you left off. Again.”

“But—”

“Too right, Rascal,” Fred cut in. “We’ve more important things to discuss than Rat-face’s Hagrid-sized grudge anyway.”

“Wait! I—”

“That we do, Rapier,” said Lee in his radio voice, again speaking over Ronald. “And on that note, it’s time to move on with the show. Three Muggles were killed outside of Derbyshire last night. It doesn’t look like Mouldy himself had anything to do with this one. From the aurors’ reports, it appears that Amycus Carrow was just out for revenge.”

Ron cut in again, “I just want to—”

George bellowed, “Enough! Get out, Rat-face! This is an important show to the light, not a platform for you to air your dirty laundry. If you can’t sit down and shut it, then go.”

A quiet sniffle echoed on the air, but nothing else.

“Phew,” said Fred. “About time. Gods, I feel bad for Harry. Mate, I’m so sorry. If we’d known he was just going to keep being a berk, we’d never have let him on.”

“It’s okay,” Harry whispered, though no one but Severus could hear. “S’not your fault.”

Severus released Harry’s hand and instead reached up to hold the young man’s cheek. Harry wrapped his newly-freed arm around Severus’ neck and buried his face in the older man’s hair.

George said, “We really must move on now, though I’ll echo your apology, Rapier. Those of us with two brain cells to rub together are sorry about Ron’s behaviour, Harry. We still support you—and Headmaster Snape.” He took a deep breath. “All right, back to the show. As for the Muggles killed in Derbyshire, any wizards who want to pay their respects can send Muggle money or flowers to ….”
Harry sighed against Severus’ ear. “I guess Ron will never understand, will he?”

Severus ran his uninjured hand through Harry’s hair. “I do, Harry. I do.”

“Yeah.” Harry took the older man’s hand and kissed his fingertips, sending tender-sharp emotion zinging through Severus’ heart. “Thank you.”

Severus took a shaky breath. “You … you’re welcome.”

Harry sat beside Severus in bed, the sleeping man’s long black hair spilling over Harry’s thighs. Harry caressed the small streak of white at Severus’ temple and gazed at him. Gods, the man was so different when he slept. Softened, somehow. Beautiful. Harry smoothed Severus’ hair with gentle fingertips and wished he knew how to heal the man.

Nothing he had tried worked to call his dream powers, and he had already exhausted all of Severus’ suggestions and many of his own ideas. Fuck. He had no idea what to do now.

He resisted the temptation to dash his own head against the wall, but it was a close thing.

No. He couldn’t give up. He refused to let Severus die. They were going to figure out this mess with the horcruxes, then the mess between their hearts, and one day, they were going to bond and come back to this place for their honeymoon, maybe.

His cheeks flushed. He should probably ask the man on a date before he started planning the honeymoon. Well, maybe they could just come visit later. Of course, they’d have to hide the fact that they were romantically involved from the Muggles, but it sounded like a good place for a meal and a night spent exploring each other under the covers.

Silencing charms worked wonders, after all. The Muggles would never be the wiser.

Harry’s breath caught at the idea of Severus naked, hot, and writhing beneath him, that iron control giving way to thrashes and cries of passion.

Shite. He had better think of something else quick, or his ardour would end up poking Severus right in the ear, and wouldn’t that be awkward?

‘Umbridge in tights, Umbridge in tights.’

The horrid mental image sent his desire running for the hills. Harry returned his attention to Severus and stroked the man’s hair again.

The intimacy of the position made Harry think of how sweet Severus was in his shy exploration of their budding romance. Well, at least Harry thought he was exploring a romantic relationship. It certainly seemed so with Severus sleeping in Harry’s lap. Then again, perhaps Severus didn’t know yet. He might not understand why he wanted to be close to Harry, or he might not feel inclined to Harry at all. It might be simple friendship—close friendship, mind.

The thought left Harry cold inside. He wanted—needed—more from Severus.

Harry shook his head. There was no point in worrying about this now when Severus needed his help and the man hadn’t a clue how Harry felt anyway.
Merlin, he really needed to tell Severus soon.

Harry caressed the man’s cheek and gave him a soft smile. He would as soon as Severus could go two days consecutively without a crisis and they caught a minute on this mad chase. Whichever came first, he supposed.

With a sigh, he pressed his head against the wall and struggled to find that link, whatever part of his core he had accessed when Severus and Pomfrey had been in mortal danger. He searched inside himself, scanned every cranny of his spirit, employed every Occlumentic and Legilimentic practice he knew, meditated, did everything he could think of, but nothing worked. He began to fear that either his powers did not work unless someone was on the brink of death or he could not access them consciously.

Or maybe he just had to be asleep to use them. Harry yawned and thought that tactic sounded good. He was exhausted, and they had a horcrux to find in the morning. He yawned again and carefully eased Severus off his lap so he could lie down with him.

Severus looked up, black eyes blinking in the moonlight. “Harry? S’anything wrong?”

Harry slid into the bed beside Severus and kissed the man’s temple. “No, Sev. Just going to try sleeping with the conscious wish to heal you and see if it lets me access my powers.”

“Nothing else worked?”

“Not a thing.” Harry sighed and wrapped Severus gently into his arms, avoiding the man’s aching ribs. “I don’t understand why. Maybe I’m just not doing it right.”

“S’okay,” Severus muttered into Harry’s shoulder. “Try again tomorrow.”

“Right.” Harry, despite being the shorter man, guided Severus to lay with his head under Harry’s chin. “Rest, Sev. I’ll protect you this time.”

“Mm-hmm. S’nice to be held.”

Harry lowered his head over Severus’. “I’ll hold you whenever you need me. I promise.”

Severus sighed and kissed Harry’s chest. “Yes. Like this. H-hold … you ….” His words ended on a soft snore.

Harry smiled, finding Severus’ sleepy affection adorable. Adorable. That was one word he had never imagined would apply to Severus Snape, but it did. At least, it did in these rare moments when sleep lowered the man’s guards. He was so sweet, so tender, it made Harry’s heart ache.

Harry whispered against Severus’ temple, “I love you, Severus.”

One day soon, he would say it while the man was awake.

Harry woke to the bright light of morning and cursed. He had tried hard to focus on healing Severus as he went to sleep, but no dreams of mist and red grass had visited him. At least, not that he remembered, but there was always the chance ….
“Severus? Are you still hurt?”

Beside him, the man groaned and buried his head in Harry’s shoulder. “Too early.”

“Sev, please. Do your ribs still hurt?”

He tried to move his left arm and winced. “I am afraid so. Did you heal me?”

“I guess not.” Dejected, Harry sat and buried his head in his hand. “I tried everything.”

Severus reached for Harry, but could only move his arm a little. Harry obliged him by moving his hand into Severus’.

“You did everything you could,” Severus murmured. “Perhaps it only responds when someone is on the verge of death.”

“Bloody inconvenient, that.”

Severus chuckled. “Yes.” He squeezed Harry’s fingers. “Thank you for trying so hard. Perhaps we will find the way tonight.”

“I certainly hope not if it means you have to almost die for it.” Harry sighed. “But maybe another way will work this time.” He stretched and climbed out of the bed, thanking Merlin and every deity he could think of for Muggle heat. “Ah, that’s nice. I hope we can find a warm place to sleep in Godric’s Hollow. I hate that bloody tent.”

“Your tent is actually quite pleasant, as tents go, but it is no match for a Scotland winter, I am afraid.” Severus sat, carefully, and held his arm against his chest. “Harry, this seems to have worsened. We shall have to make a sling for me, I fear. The pain has spread into my arm.”

“Damn.” Harry moved to Severus’ side and laid a gentle hand on his uninjured shoulder. “Let me take this shirt off and see if the bruising has spread, too.”

Severus winced. “A-as you wish.”

Harry held his face. “What I said to you in the tent still stands. You’re beautiful to me, Sev. I won’t hurt you.”

Severus shivered, and Harry suspected it wasn’t from fear or cold.

“I, Merlin. Thank you, Harry, though I have no idea how you could find me beautiful.”

Harry gave him a wry smile. “Must we go through all the reasons again?”

“I ….”

“Sev, one day I’ll tell you you’re beautiful, and you’ll be able to just say thank you and believe me.”

Severus sighed and lowered his head. “Forgive me. I have heard nothing but the exact opposite my entire life.”

“I know, but now you’re going to hear how gorgeous you are every day to counteract all that damage.” Harry tipped the man’s chin back up. “It’s okay, Sev. I know you need some help with gaining your confidence back. I don’t mind telling you as many times as it takes until you believe it.” He smiled. “And after, even.”
Severus gave Harry a bright smile that took the younger man’s breath away. “Thank you, Harry. Whether I personally believe I am attractive or not, I am beginning to believe that you think so.”

Harry’s heart soared. “Good.”

‘Maybe I can tell him soon. I really hope so. It’s getting harder and harder not to every single moment.’

The mere thought made Harry shiver with the need to catch Severus into his arms and snog him senseless. ‘Too soon!’ He repeated it in his mind until his control reasserted himself.

“Potter? Are you well?”

Harry shook himself. “Harry, and yes.” He took a deep breath and raised what little mental barriers he could. “Come on then, let’s get this off and see the damage.”

Severus tipped up his chin to allow access to his buttons, and Harry unfastened them quickly so as not to be tempted. He gasped at the sight of Severus’ chest. The entire left side was black and blue, and it had spread down the man’s shoulder and bicep in pointed trails that reminded Harry of the blood poisoning marks. A horrible chill overtook his body.

“S-Sev? Is that blood poisoning again?”

Severus went ashen and conjured a mirror. “Merlin. No, it is not blood poisoning, but this is the oddest pattern of bruising I have ever seen. Something strange is indeed afoot. I think we must hurry to find that healer, Harry, or learn how to activate your powers on our own.”

Terror clanged through Harry’s heart. “I can’t lose you. I can’t.”

Severus took Harry’s hand. “You shan’t. You saved my life the last time, remember? Perhaps there is simply no need this time and it is just an injury resistant to healing potions.”

Harry gave him an uncertain smile, despite the niggling fear that lodged in his chest and refused to leave.

“Y-yeah. Maybe you’re right.”

“Regardless, let us do what we can for it now and hurry to examine that paddock. If we are able to find the horcrux today, we can go to Blackpool tonight and search for a healer.”

Harry nodded. “Right. So what kinds of potions and salves do you want?”

“The strongest I have, and … perhaps an anti-dark magic potion. I did not see Carrow curse me, but she might have slipped one in while I was under the effects of the Cruciatus and a concussion.”

Harry’s heart unclenched. “Oh. It might be that, then. I, I was so busy trying to curse her and failing, that I might have missed one, too.” He sighed as he rummaged through Severus’ bag. “Why didn’t any of my spells work, Sev? Accio healing salve number fifteen.”

“Carrow is … was experienced at dodging and deflecting curses, Potter. You were a student against a fully trained warrior. It is no wonder you had trouble cursing her.” Severus’ expression softened. “Besides that, your heart is too gentle for curses, I think. You cannot call the hatred required to use them.”

Harry shook his head. “I have to learn. I have to kill Riddle. I have to be able to curse him.”
“Not if we can use your powers, Harry.”

“What good will they be if I can’t call them on demand?”

Severus frowned. “We will find the way. I am certain of it. This is the ‘power he knows not.’ I feel it in my bones.”

Harry gave him a wry smile as he applied the salve to Severus’ injuries. “You, listening to your intuition? Hmm. That’s something I never thought I’d see.”

“You have rubbed off on me, Gryffindor sop.”

Harry laughed. “Me? You’re as soppy as I am, oh Prince of Slytherin.”

“Pop—ah, preposterous.”

Harry snickered. “You’re learning.”

“Keep your mind more on my treatment and less on your nether regions, Mister Potter.”


Severus rolled his eyes. “Harry, then. Are you quite finished with that?”

“I still have to wrap up your ribs and make you a sling, as you well know.”

“Then worry about that.”

“Sure thing, as long as you never call me ‘Mister Potter’ again.”

Severus frowned. “I was … I did not mean to hurt you. Are you angry?”

Harry screwed up his courage and laid a kiss on the man’s cheek. “No,” he murmured against Severus’ ear. “Just be still so I can take care of you, okay?”

When Harry pulled away, Severus was pink to his hairline.

“A-as you wish.”

Harry ducked to hide a smile and went to work on the man’s ribs. Merlin, blushing Severus was adorable. Perhaps he would be ready for a deeper relationship soon. Gods, Harry hoped so.

Until Severus was ready, Harry was content like this, happy to see the man tease him a bit without being cold or breaking down in fear of losing him.

“You know, Sev,” Harry murmured as he wrapped the man’s ribs, “you’ve really come far since you came to me that night. Are you happier?”

“Happier with you than when I believed I would die entirely alone and as a perceived traitor?”

Severus slid his hand into Harry’s hair and tugged him close. “Gods, Harry. How could you believe otherwise?”

Harry smiled. “I just wanted to hear you say it. I’m glad you came to me, Sev. Glad for this chance to have come to know the real you.”

Severus laid his head against Harry’s. “So am I.”
Once they had dressed and Severus had restored their glamours, Harry helped him downstairs. Severus winced with every step despite Harry’s attempts to be gentle. Gods, he hoped they could get out of this backwater soon, no matter how good the food was. He needed help.

He had kept his fears quiet from Harry, but with every breath, he could feel his core weakening. His life. Some dark curse was draining the very life from him, and unless they found a damn good healer or a way to activate Harry’s powers soon, he might not live long enough to see the war ended.

Two months ago, such news would have been welcome. He was tired then, so tired of the war and pretending to court the Dark Lord’s favour. Tired of hurting children. Tired of posing as the evil he had worked all his life to stop.

Yet, Harry’s loving words and soft kisses had reminded Severus that now he had something to live for. Whether Harry ever returned his affection or the man never wanted him as anything more than a sometimes companion, the light Harry had breathed back into Severus’ life had given him hope for a better world for the first time ever.

How cruel to have his hope snatched away the moment he dared believe, but so went his life. The fates never wasted a chance to remind him that he was an anomaly. One they would soon pluck from their tapestry, unless Harry could save him.

As they stepped into the pub, he yearned to rest his head on Harry’s shoulder and hold him close, if only to feel the man’s warmth, but he didn’t dare in a room full of bigoted Muggles. Even so, the touch of Harry’s hand on Severus’ shoulder as the younger man helped him to a table chased away some of the encroaching cold, inside and out.

The pub seemed atypically quiet, but then it was a Sunday morning. Most of the usual clientele were probably at home, nursing headaches.

Yet, that didn’t explain the aura of shock and sadness that permeated the air. Something terrible had happened, Severus was sure of it.

Harry guided him to a seat at the bar and ordered breakfast and hot tea for both of them. The bear of a barkeep plopped down two plates of eggs and rashers with bacon and bangers and toast.

“There you are, lads,” he said with a wan smile. “And, if you need a spot of something stronger to help with the pain, Professor, I’ve a bit of good scotch here under the bar, be it Sunday or no. It’ll take the sting right out of that arm.”

Severus shook his head. “The tea will do well enough. I’ll need my wits about me today.”

“Eh? Trying to go home, are you?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. We’ve missed our conference, so with Sam hurt, it might be best just to head back to Blackpool.”

The barkeep paled and stepped back. “Blackpool, you say?”

The hair on Severus’ neck stood on end. “Yes. Our school is there. Why do you ask?”
The barkeep shook his head and laid a hand over his mouth. “Lads, you might do as well to stay another night. Here, I, I’m not good with … I can’t … ach, just look at the telly.”

Harry exchanged a terrified look with Severus and turned to watch the screen tucked away in a corner over the bar counter. A Muggle reporter, her eyes big and full of a sheen she couldn’t blink away, stood in front of what looked like it had been a street once, blonde ponytail blowing in an ash-laden wind. Houses lay in shambles, levelled to their foundations. Rubble covered the road and a reddish-brown substance leaked between the stones. Severus hoped with all of his being that it wasn’t blood, but twenty years as a Death Eater spy had taught him better.

“Oh my god,” Harry breathed, and the Muggle epithet felt appropriate to Severus. The barkeep patted Harry’s shoulder with a meaty paw.

“Officials don’t yet understand what happened at Blackpool last evening,” the newscaster said in a wavering voice. “At the moment, leading theories point to either an atomic bomb or perhaps a missile test gone wrong—”

Severus sucked in a sharp gasp and dug his nails into the counter.

“—But at the moment, they are only theories. Police and the military are sweeping the city for clues as well as survivors, but so far, it looks grim on both fronts. As of yet, we have no answers, no reason why an e-entire city lies dead this morning.” She bowed her head. “I, I can only pray we find the truth soon, for the sake of all the thousands of British citizens mourning their loved ones today.”

“Oh my god,” Harry said once more. “The … the entire city?”

The barkeep patted both their shoulders this time. “Lads, I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“I think I will have that scotch after all,” Severus said, his voice flat and dim.

“Right away.” He ducked into a room behind the bar.

“S-Sam,” Harry said, his voice breaking. “The whole city. All those people.”

Harry couldn’t say anything safely, but Severus understood. He was blaming himself.

Muggle pub or no, Severus caught Harry into his arms and held him against his chest. “This is not your fault, do you understand me? You did not cause this.”

“Should’ve been there. Should’ve done something,” he sobbed. “Can’t … so many, gone.”

“I am sorry,” Severus murmured. “So, so sorry.”

The barkeep watched them with pain in his eyes and a bottle of scotch in his hands. “Lads, ah, I’m thinking you’re not up to breakfast?”

Severus shook his head. “I cannot.”

“Me neither. S-sorry. The food’s really good, but I just … can’t.”

The barkeep waved off his apology. “Think nothing of it. You lads just, anything you need, it’s on the house. Let me top you off.” He tipped out a bit of the strong alcohol into both their teacups. Both Severus and Harry drained theirs in one swig, though Harry spluttered a bit.

“Thank you,” Severus said to the barkeep. “You have been exceedingly kind, Mister …?”
“MacDougal,” he said with a clap on the shoulder reminiscent of Hagrid’s powerful greetings. “Brian MacDougal. Anytime you’re in Hearthstane, you come visit me. I’ll set you up with my best room and Cináed’s best stew.”

Harry sniffled and lifted his head. “C-Cináed?”

The barkeep’s face reddened. “Ah, yes, he’s the one what does all the cooking ‘round here. Fine chef that one is, could make it in the best restaurants in the country, but he chose to stay … um, to stay close to home.”

Severus’ eyes narrowed. “Hmm. This Cináed, he is your …?”

The barkeep swallowed hard and moved back a step. “Ah, family friend. Family friend, think nothing of it.”

Severus looked to Harry and raised an eyebrow. Harry nodded.

“Um, Mister MacDougal?”

The barkeep’s congenial personality returned. “Brian, lad. Mister MacDougal was my da.”

Harry chuckled. ‘I’ve heard that before. But, um, it’s okay.” He motioned the man down to them. Severus cast a silent *Muffliato* just in case, but instead of the barkeep leaning down to hear Harry, the man jerked up and looked around.

“Ach! This is ….” He frowned and touched the air. “You two aren’t professors, are you?”

Harry gasped. “Uh ….”

Severus patted Harry’s back and took a chance. He could always *Obliviate* the man later if necessary.

“Are you a squib or a wizard, Mister MacDougal?”

“Didn’t I just tell you to call me Brian? And … and I’m a squib, but I can feel magic. Same as my … same as Cináed. He’s Coira Anderson’s oldest boy, and she’s a seer, but it didn’t pass onto her kids. None save Cináed. He can’t much use a wand, though, like his Mum.”

Severus rubbed his chin. “Has he a sister called ‘Nessa?’”

The barkeep froze and moved back a step. “You know him?”

Harry reached for him. “Hey, it’s okay. You don’t have to be afraid. We’re both … I mean, me and Se-Sam are … the same.”

“Oh. *Oh.*” Brian pulled up a stool and gave them worried looks. “Best be careful about showing it here.”

“We are aware,” said Severus.

Harry scooted out of his arms and gave the barkeep a commiserating look. Brian patted his shoulder —a bit too hard judging by Harry’s expression.

“Your names aren’t Hanson and Sam, are they?”

Harry winced. “No, but it’s safest that you don’t know who we are. Please, don’t ask.”
“I take it you’re not actually from Blackpool, either.”

“Well, I am,” said Harry with a sniffle. “At least, I’m from the wizarding village near it.”

“Godric’s Hollow.”

“Yes,” said Severus. “That is our next destination. Perhaps … it may have survived. Blackpool did not have wards or many wizards ready to defend the city. Such is not the case in a wizarding village.”

The barkeep stared at Harry. “Godric’s Hollow, eh? And you’re … hmm.” He tugged on his beard. “I think I understand why you’re hiding and I’ll do my best to keep your identity quiet, lad, but if you’re on your way to Godric’s Hollow, what in the world are you doing all the way out here?”

Severus added extra wards and charms, just in case.

“So it’s serious then,” said Brian.

“Yeah,” said Harry with a shudder. “Um, we can’t tell you much. It’s too dangerous both to us and to your town, but … Riddle—”

“You-Know-Who,” Severus explained at the barkeep’s bemused expression.

Brian scowled. “Ach. There’s a demon if one ever existed. What’s that scum to do with our town?”

“Well,” said Severus, “there is … an artefact hidden here. An especially dangerous artefact that is keeping him alive. So we are here to destroy it.”

Brian’s eyes went wide. “Mother of Merlin. Cináed’s been telling me all this time there was sommat dangerous hidden in Blair’s old paddock, but not a one of us believed him.” He frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. “Come to think of it, that’s odd by itself. Cináed is respected in these parts—so long as our … secret stays secret, mind—and the town usually takes his warnings to heart. Same for old Coira, but no one’s been listening to her, either.”

Harry frowned and drummed his fingers on the table. “So that means … there’ll be some sort of Confundus and Obliviation charms in the wards.”

Severus gave Harry a wry look. “You are making great strides, Mister … Perry. You are most likely correct.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, professor.”

The barkeep chuckled softly, then his smile faded. “Listen, you’re injured, Headmaster.”

Severus gasped. “Be quiet!”

“So you are him. So I thought.” He looked to Harry with a frown. “I thought he was on their side, lad. Why are you two … um …?”

Harry held Severus’ uninjured shoulder. “He’s, um … He’s … well, I don’t want to say too much. I can’t give us away—”

Severus sighed and gently moved Harry’s hand away. “Too late for that, Potter. The man already knows.”

Harry crumpled into his seat and hugged his chest. “I, please. Don’t say anything.”
The barkeep sighed. “Lad, the only reason I know it’s you is because of Cináed. He told me that the spy and the avenger would be here soon to cleanse this town of evil and warned me that I needed to trust them when they revealed themselves to me.”

Harry gave Severus a bemused look. “I’m an avenger?”

Severus chuckled. “It does seem to fit. You are the one who will kill him, remember?”

Harry sighed. “Well, it’s better than ‘saviour,’ I suppose.”

Brian laughed. “That it is, lad. Though I reckon you’ll hear plenty of that, too, once this is over.”

Harry groaned and banged his head on the table.

After a little chuckle at Harry’s dramatics, Brian fixed his eyes on Severus. “I take it you’re the spy, then?”

Severus nodded. “For the past twenty years, until the Dark Lord discovered my true loyalties three weeks ago.”

“Ach. I’m amazed you’re still walking.”

“Thank Harry for that. He saved my life.” Severus discreetly caressed the young man’s cheek. “And gave me the courage to fight for it.” Harry leaned into Severus’ hand with a smile.

“Lad, if you’ve been spying on You-Know-Who for twenty years, you’ve enough courage for the entire country.” Brian gave them a soft smile. “But I do understand. Now, what can I do to help you? Cináed said—”

The bell over the door rang, and the click of fashionable heels and a cane followed. Severus froze and chanced a glance into one of the many bottles lining the back wall. A flash of long, white-blond hair and an aristocratic cloak pin sent his heart plummeting into his feet.

“Best thing you can do is cover for us,” Harry was saying. “We’ll be trying to destr—”

Severus discreetly elbowed Harry in the ribs and leaned into him. “Ssh!”

Harry shot him a dirty look. “I wasn’t going t—”

Severus flicked his eyes towards the doorway and back. He dared not make a more overt motion. “I know, but Lucius Malfoy just walked in.”

Harry went ashen. “Oh gods.”
Severus’ heart thundered against his ribs. What in the hell was Malfoy doing here?

“Er, lads?” Brian leaned down to whisper. “Who’s Malfoy?”

Severus whispered back, “A Death Eater. A dangerous one.”

Harry whispered, too. “Sev? What do we do?”

Severus rose and turned to the barkeep. “Stand slowly, Hanson. Brian, is there a back door?”

The barkeep nodded and handed them another brass key from his pocket. “Your room is back around the other side of the staircase. There’s a pot for the key by the door. Have a pleasant day, lads, and thanks for choosing Pig’s Tavern.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “Thank you. We’ll be back one day. I promise.”

“I hope so, lads. And—” He lowered his voice and discreetly touched both of their hands. “And may the might of Merlin guard your souls.”

A peculiar warmth settled in Severus’ chest, but he had no time to consider it. “Hanson, come.”

Harry cast the barkeep one last look and followed Severus out of the bar. Just as they reached the door, they heard the first of Malfoy’s pedantic drawl.

“Good day, sir. What a … lovely establishment this is.”

Severus tugged Harry outside, led them to a dark corner, and covered them in wards. Once he was sure no one would see or hear them, he tapped his ear and pointed to the door. Harry understood and drew his Extendable Ear out of one of his coat pockets. They both leaned close to the receiver and listened as the ear wriggled its way under the door.

“—not interested in a … room, sir,” Malfoy was saying. “I am afraid I am quite the busy man.”

“Yes, so am I,” Brian returned, “and, as you can see, I’ve several grieving customers who need attending to. So if you don’t want food, nor drink, nor a room, what in God’s name are you doing in a pub? Not sure if you quite understood the sign, lad, but that’s all we offer here.”

Harry snickered. “I like him.”

Severus pressed a finger against his own lips. Harry nodded.
“—Quite capable of reading your … sign,” said Malfoy in a sneering tone, “but I am not looking for refreshment. Rather, I’m looking for two … friends of mine who might have come this way. Have you seen them? One is rather short and has messy hair and glasses. Goes by the name of Harry Potter. The other is quite tall and lanky, dark hair, aquiline nose, black eyes. Sharp personality. Goes by the name of Severus Snape. They might have chosen different names or disguised themselves, bless them. Sometimes they like to travel the country and pretend to be other people just for the novelty of it.”

“So,” said Brian in a wry tone, “you’re asking me if I’ve seen two lads who might look like anyone and might be going by any name? Good luck with that.”

Harry snorted. Severus was having trouble keeping his smile back as well.

Malfoy sighed. “I know it is … looking for a needle in a haystack, but I must find them. They left England on one of these trips some weeks ago, but something has come up and I must bring them a message. Harry’s aunt, well, I am afraid she and her family have passed away, and I need to inform him of her wishes.”

Harry gasped and sway into Severus. “You … you don’t think …?”

“It may be a ploy, Harry,” Severus whispered.

“To … to do what?”

“To smoke you out. He will assume, as I pretended to, that your family pampered and adored you. He will assume that, given the knowledge that your family has been attacked, you would run straight back to them without thinking, and that grief and fear would blind you.”

Harry shuddered. “And when I arrived, they’d be ready.”

“Precisely. Potter, I suspect this is merely an attempt to make you lose your temper and reveal your hiding place, but if he is planning something, know that your relatives are still under constant surveillance. The Order would know if they had been hurt.” He took Harry’s hand and rubbed the young man’s trembling fingers. “Nothing has yet been said on the radio, and until it has been, we can afford no detours.”

“Right.” Harry pressed his head into Severus’ uninjured shoulder and hugged the older man’s waist. “T-thank you.”

Severus wrapped his good arm around Harry and held him tight. He listened as Brian told Malfoy that he hadn’t seen anyone matching his descriptions, by their given names or any others, and advised him to try Tweedsmuir to the southwest.

“Bit larger town, you understand. Not by much, but still they might have found better lodgings there and decided to go in for a pint and a kip. Good luck. I’ll be sure to tell them, if I see them, that you’re looking for them.”

Malfoy paused. “Yes. You do that. Thank you, good sir. I will do as you have said.” He paused. “Might you direct me to Blair’s Feed Store before I go? I’ve heard—”

Harry gasped and Severus went rigid.

The young man whispered, “Oh gods, Sev. What do we do?”

“I think we must go to the horcrux and observe what Malfoy does. If he tries to remove it from its
hiding place, we must attack, but otherwise, we should not disturb him. Perhaps he is only checking in on it. It would be foolish to disturb it before he has seen the horcrux is in one piece, if this is the case. Following him may give us valuable information at any rate.”

Harry nodded and withdrew the Extendable Ear. “Come on, then. Should we apparate?”

“I think that would also be an exceedingly foolish idea. Besides not being familiar with the exact location and risking being splinched, we may land directly upon the wards and find ourselves in a far worse state.”

Harry shuddered. “In that case, I could do with a walk.”

“It is not far. We shall simply follow Malfoy.”

“Fair enough.” Harry looked around the doorway and tapped a potted evergreen with his foot. “Think this was what he meant by ‘a pot by the door?’”

“Most likely.”

Harry knelt and tipped the pot back, then slid the key underneath. “I hope he finds it.”

“He will. He’s an intelligent man.”

“Yeah. I really hope he’s okay.”

Severus slid his hand into Harry’s. “So do I, but come. We must hurry if we are to catch Malfoy before he reaches the paddock.”

Harry brushed off his jeans and stood. With an arm wrapped tightly around Severus’ waist, they hobbled to the front of the pub as fast as Severus could move. They had just reached the other side when a harried-looking Malfoy stepped out of the front doors. He frowned and smoothed his hair.

Malfoy muttered to himself, “Merlin, the man could talk the legs off of a mule!” He stood tall and straightened his cloak. “I must hurry. I will be noticed soon.”

Harry gave Severus a bemused look. He mouthed, ‘Noticed?’

Severus shrugged and jerked his head towards Malfoy. Harry got the message and guided Severus forwards, following Malfoy’s brisk stride as close as they dared. The fast pace hurt Severus’ ailing ribs and arm, but he pressed on and kept his expression stoic. They had to hurry.

Whatever purpose Malfoy had for checking the final non-living horcrux, it couldn’t be good.

Harry was glad of his peculiar talent for wandless magic long before they reached the abandoned paddock. Severus was flagging, but it seemed the man would die before he admitted it. Harry sighed, stared at Severus’ feet and his own, and muttered, “Ambulato Aerem.”

They levitated off the ground. Severus flailed a bit and lurched into Harry, stunned. He whispered, “Where in Merlin’s name did you learn that spell?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. It just kind of … came to me.”
Severus gaped. “It came to you? Advanced charms magic even Filius would have difficulty with just came to you?”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “Flitwick can’t do this?”

Severus sighed. “Of course he can, but it is an extremely difficult spell, Harry, and you have just performed it without any prior knowledge, specific training, or even a bloody wand.” He shivered. “What is this strange power of yours?”

“I don’t know, but we’re losing Malfoy.” Harry tugged Severus along. “We can talk about this later.”

“Yes, you are right.”

Severus rallied and allowed Harry to half-carry him to a field full of dead slough and scrub. Snow covered the grass to a circular area near an abandoned well. Malfoy stood a metre or so outside the circle where not even grass dared to grow and stared at the ground with a look of combined terror and revulsion.

“I believe we have found the wardline,” Severus whispered.

Harry answered with a shaky nod.

He watched Malfoy dismantle the wards protecting Riddle’s horcrux with his wand aimed straight at that cocky blond head. He had no idea how Malfoy had learned about the horcrux in Hearthstane or what he intended to do with it, but Harry doubted it was anything good.

He held Severus tighter, cradling him protectively against his side, and stepped ahead of the man. If Malfoy tried anything, Harry wouldn’t let Severus take the brunt of it. Not this time.

Severus gave Harry a wry look, but allowed him to stay where he was. The fact that the man let Harry protect him terrified the younger man. Severus had to know his injuries were worse than he let on if he allowed it without demanding Harry step aside.

He gripped his wand harder and watched as Malfoy dug in his pocket. Harry tensed, expecting a container for the horcrux, but the man pulled out what looked like a long, sharp fang.

“What the hell?”

Severus whispered, “That is a basilisk fang! Merlin, has he come to destroy it?”

Harry gaped. “No. That … can’t be. Can it?”

“I am as stunned as you are, but—oh!”

Severus cut himself off as a shade of Voldemort rose out of an ancient tome and glared at Malfoy.

“I always knew you would betray me one day,” Riddle said with a fierce laugh. “You were never loyal to anyone but yourself.”

“And Draco,” Malfoy hissed. “And my wife. And I cannot let you kill either of them. When Harry Potter faces you, as much as I detest the little half-breed twit, he will defeat you. I am here to ensure it. This is … the last one. Your last horcrux. You will be mortal when Potter finds you. And if he does not kill you then, if he does not finish your madness before it taints all of Britain, I will!”

“Merlin,” Harry breathed.
Severus could only nod.

“I am disappointed in you, Lucius,” said the shade. “What of our pureblood code? What of the might of magic and blood making greater men?”

Malfoy’s lip curled. “Hypocrite. You are only a half-blood!”

The shade’s eyes flashed crimson. “Silence!”

“Paugh! The others may believe that your mad pursuit of immortality has wiped your Muggle ancestry away, but I am not such a fool! I will not bow to a half-blood cretin like you. I have remembered my family creed: a Malfoy never bows. I will not forget it again. I will end you now!”

Malfoy raised the fang to strike, but the shade released a chilling laugh that raised the hairs on Harry’s neck.

“Oh do try, Lucius,” the shade said with a cruel smile. “Do you truly think I wasn’t aware of your treachery? I kept you close to observe you, but I know what you found in Dumbarton. Did you truly believe that, knowing a … slippery man such as yourself was aware of my greatest secret, that I would not take precautions? Go on, Lucius. Do try to ‘end me’ as you say. But this is not over. My final horcrux is not in the realm of the living, do you understand? Even now, I feel ….”

The shade turned to where Harry was standing and fixed blood-red eyes right on them. Harry’s heart turned to ice.

“F-fuck,” he whispered. “Is it … my scar?”

Riddle laughed viciously. “I win, Snape.”

The shade opened its mouth wide as if to scream, but instead sucked in a rasping breath. Beside him, Severus gasped and shuddered as if struck.

“H-Harry, help me.”

Severus sank to his knees, shaken and weak and—and fuck! Bleeding? A stream of black blood dripped from his mouth and hit the floor.

“Sev!” Harry grabbed him up and turned, looking for a place to run, but there was nowhere to hide, and Malfoy would hear any steps he took, if the snow did not reveal him first. He had to get Sev out, away from that horrid shade.

In a moment of desperation, Harry swiped his wand and cancelled the wards, revealing them to Malfoy.

“Kill it, you cowardly bastard,” Harry shrieked.

Malfoy gaped, but a short nod and a deep breath later, had apparently gathered what little courage he possessed. With a sharp cry, he brought the fang down onto the book. The shade shrieked and shuddered, but did not die. A terrified Malfoy pierced the book again, and this time, the shade vanished with a horrible laugh.

Malfoy staggered and sank to his knees. “Is it … done?”


He stood and brushed off his robes. “For Draco, of course. Whatever you may think of me, Potter, I
do love my heir. Someone must carry on the Malfoy line, and as Narcissa is unable to bear more children without risking her life, that must be Draco.”

“Such a touching endorsement of your own bloody son,” said a sneering Harry. “Call me mad, but I don’t believe you.”

Severus whimpered and reached for Harry’s shoulder. “Please. Hurts.”

Harry knelt and lifted the heavier man into his arms. A wandless featherweight charm made him easier to bear. He clutched Severus close and nuzzled his hair.

“Don’t worry. I won’t let that bastard hurt you.” He glared at Malfoy. “What did you do to him?”

“I?” Malfoy looked to Severus, his expression full of honest confusion. “I have done nothing. I was preoccupied with the shade, Potter.”

“Then why is he bleeding?”

“I do not know. Ask a healer, which I am not.” He flipped his hair back and sneered. “I do not have time for this. I did not seek you out to chat but to warn you.”

Harry gave a dark laugh. “Warn me? How kind of you.”

“You know nothing, boy, so you would be wise to listen.”

Severus whispered, “Harry, do as he says. Information.” A trail of blood slipped down his face.

Tearful and shaking, Harry wiped the blood and shook his head. “Don’t talk. You’re hurt too badly. The shade must have made the curse attack you. Just, just be still, okay?”

“Okay.” He buried his face in Harry’s shoulder and held on tight.

Malfoy scowled. “A sight I never thought I would see: Severus Snape, lowering himself to court the favour of the Potter brat. Merlin, what is the world coming to?”

Harry whipped his head back around and snarled at the slimy bastard. This shitehead was blocking his path, dragging out time Harry could be using to save Severus’ life for mere posturing. Rage so intense, it burned coursed through him down to his fingertips. Harry’s mate was in danger, and this man was a threat.

An animalistic snarl escaped Harry’s lips. “This world is going to come to an end for you very quickly unless you get on with your message and get out, Malfoy!”

A teal light shaded his vision and rocks and debris floated behind him, as if caught in a magical field. Malfoy went ashen and stepped back.

“You … you are … so that is what the stories meant. Gods.”

“Malfoy!”

The barked order brought the idiot out of his shock. “Very well. You have heard of Blackpool?”

Harry gave him a terse nod. “What of it?”

“That … was merely a test. The Dark Lord has found some horrible power, and unless he is stopped soon, he will unleash it on Hogwarts. He has been pulling energy from … somewhere, using it to
create some nightmarish magical weapon, and he is close to perfecting it so that wards do not interfere.”

Harry went icy cold. “Fuck. Fuck, you’re lying.”

Malfoy stared at the ruined book. “Your mistrust is understandable, but foolish. We have very different ideas of what makes a great wizarding society, Potter, but in this—” He kicked the book and scowled. “In this goal, we are one and the same. I, as you, wish to see this madman put in the ground. So I am here, giving you valuable information that risks my life and killing his vile horcruxes for you.”

“You’re as Slytherin as they come, Malfoy,” said Harry, piercing the man with his gaze. “What’s in it for you?”

He looked up, and for the first time ever, Harry saw something like human emotion in Malfoy’s eyes. “I ask only one thing of you, Potter. If it should come to battle between our forces, spare my son and wife. Draco was dragged into this life—my own fault—and Narcissa has never been a Death Eater. She is trapped playing the good little housewife to a war she does not support.” He looked away. “I am not a Muggle-loving fool and shall never be, but I do care for my family, Potter. Will you spare their lives?”

Harry scowled. “My fight has never been with your idiot son or your wife. The only person I’m out to kill is what’s left of Tom Riddle.”

Malfoy blinked and frowned. “You are not seeking revenge upon the Death Eaters? But I thought … Carrow ….”

Harry growled and took a step forward. “That was an accident, but if you don’t get the fuck out of my way so I can help Severus right this fucking minute, I might see if I can kill a Death Eater on purpose!”

He levitated a rock and launched it at the man’s feet to illustrate his point. Malfoy leapt back with a little cry.

Harry gave him a vicious grin. “I have no idea where all this wandless magic is coming from, but it sure is handy right now!”

“You … do not know?”

Harry growled. “Get out, Malfoy! I have to save him.”

The man glared and gripped his cane. “I must leave regardless before the Dark Lord discovers what I am about. But may I at least take your words as a show of good faith that you will not harm my son or my wife?”

Harry snarled, but gave the man a tight nod. “Now, go!”

Malfoy turned and vanished on the spot. Harry let slip a sigh of relief when a quick Homenum Revelio showed no other human presence beyond Severus and himself.

“Take me … to Brian,” Severus wheezed.

Harry nodded and clutched the man to his chest. “I had always planned to. Hold on.”

He closed his eyes, held the destination of Brian’s backyard in his mind, and apparated with Severus.
Severus was dying. Whatever horrible thing the shade had done to him in the paddock had sent the curse inside him—if it was a curse—utterly mad. Every movement, every breath, even Harry’s breathing racked Severus with pain that could rival the Cruciatus. His entire body hurt, as if the curse had tried to drain him all at once.

Perhaps it had.

He leaned into Harry and prayed to Merlin, Circe, and even the Muggle Christian God that Harry could save him. Not for his own sake, but for Harry’s. The man’s wild look and raging emotions made it clear that if they couldn’t find a way to activate his powers and save Severus’ life, Harry would shatter into a million pieces.

Severus had no idea how he had become so important to Harry, but knew he would fight as long as he had breath, if only to delay madness from claiming Harry just one moment longer.

And yet, he feared they were running out of moments.

While Harry carried him inside and shouted for help, Severus briefly entertained the notion of telling Harry he loved him before his time ran out.

No. It would be too cruel. Harry was already pressing too close to madness. He might not survive knowing he had let someone who loved him perish, regardless of whether he had any control over the situation or not. Harry would blame himself, possibly to the end of his days. Even if it didn’t drive him mad, he might become as closed off and reclusive as Severus had done himself after losing Lily.

No. Severus couldn’t do that to Harry. Couldn’t add to the man’s already impossible burdens.

Instead, as Harry laid him upon an empty bed upstairs and Severus looked into the terrified faces of the man he loved, the barkeep, and a man he assumed to be the barkeep’s lover, he only whispered his faith in Harry to the man.

“Harry, I, I believe in you. Whatever happens, I … believe in you.”

Tears dripped down Harry’s face. “Severus, stop that! I am not going to let you die.”

Severus cupped Harry’s face and gave him a brave smile. “I … know.”

His chest gave a terrible throb, and the world went dark.

Harry gave a panicked cry as Severus fell back onto the pillows. “Oh, gods! Sev, Sev, please don’t leave me.” He grabbed Severus’ uninjured shoulder and cried, “You can’t die! We still have to … it’s almost over. We just have to find the last … thing and finish him. You can’t leave me now, not when we’re so damn close. Not … not ever. Don’t go!”

A gentle hand tugged Harry away. “Come, lad. Don’t shake him so.”
Harry turned into Brian’s huge chest and wept. “I n-never got to tell him, I l-love him. He doesn’t k-
know. Wasn’t r-ready to know, but now ….”

A lithe redhead—Brian’s Cináed—took Harry’s hand and pulled him away. “Yes, it’s not time yet, 
but soon.”

His voice was soft and ethereal, like he spent his entire life looking at things others couldn’t see. He 
put Harry in mind of Luna, and that made Harry trust him. Luna gave Harry hope, and so did this 
unusual but kind young man.

Cináed laid Harry’s hand on Severus’ chest. “Feel that?”

A thump surged against Harry’s hand, and he nearly melted in relief. “He’s alive!”

“Yes.”

Harry sank to the floor in relief and buried his head in Severus’ belly, his hand still on the man’s 
chest. “Sev, oh, Sev. You have to survive. You have to come back to me.”

“Harry,” Cináed said in a soft voice, “do you feel what else is there besides his heart?”

Harry frowned and lifted his head. “What do you mean?”

“Can you feel the cold?”

Harry looked to the window, shaking all over. “It's cold outside ….”

“No, the cold in his soul. Something is trying to take it.”

“His soul?” Harry leapt up, every hair on his body standing on end and his heart screaming in terror.

“No. No! I won’t let it!”

Cináed sat back and gave Harry a piercing look reminiscent of Luna’s deepest stares. His eyes were 
even the same silvery colour. Perhaps it was common among seers. The shade calmed Harry’s 
crushing terror somehow.

“You have the power to save him,” said Cináed, “but you must unlock it.”

Harry sank to his knees beside Severus and tore at his hair. “I know! I’ve been trying all week, but I 
can’t! I can’t make the powers activate.”

Cináed nodded. “You aren’t aiming for the source, I think.”

“The … source? His chest? I’ve been trying to fix it for days.”

“No, that’s the source of his soul. The coldness starts elsewhere.”

“Elsewhere? Well, his arm is hurt too, but there’s nothing on it to… hu….” Harry gasped and reeled 
back. “Oh dear gods! His mark. It has to be his mark. It was never Carrow—it’s him! It’s fucking 
always him!”

Brian gave Harry a bemused look. “Him?”

“You-Know-Who!” Harry paced and dragged his hands through his hair, setting it in complete 
rebellion. “Riddle’s already tried to kill him twice. He’s still hacked off that Severus lived and he’s 
trying to suck out his soul through the mark! Just like he did in the paddock.”
Harry reeled back, struck cold and sickened with horror. “Oh, oh gods! No …” Malfoy’s words inside the paddock came back to Harry in a rush. “Draining something to create a weapon—oh fuck! It’s Severus! The bastard used Severus’ soul energy to blast Blackpool to bits.” An intense burst of rage gave everything in Harry’s vision field a teal tint. “He will die for this. I will make sure of it.”

Brian froze. “He … used Severus’ soul energy to kill an entire city?”

“That’s what Malfoy said. It’s possible he lied, but this one time, I don’t think he did. He said Riddle plans on turning the soul-bomb thing on Hogwarts once it’s perfected.”

“Jesus.” Brian slumped down the wall and clutched at his heart. “That’s horrific.”

“Yes,” said Cináed, “but Riddle shan’t finish it. He needs all of Severus’ soul—his complete being, and the ritual Brian did protected enough of Severus’ soul that You-Know-Who couldn’t complete his … work.”

Brian and Harry turned identical bemused looks on the man.

Harry said, “Ritual?”

Cináed smiled. “The might of Merlin protected his soul.”

“Oh!” Brian grinned. “That was a ritual, love? I didn’t think we squibs could do them.”

Cináed shrugged. “A pure Muggle couldn’t, but we have cores, Brian. They’re just turned off and can’t be turned on.”

Harry frowned. “Turned off? Maybe there’s a way to—”

Cináed shook his head. “Now isn’t the time. Harry, you must go to your mate. He needs you, and he’s weakening.”

With a little aborted cry, Harry rushed to Severus’ side. He held Severus’ hand and rubbed his fingers. “I’m here, love. Hold on, Sev. I’m here.” He looked up, bemused. “Mate?”

Cináed frowned. “Not now. Time is running short.”

Tears blurred Harry’s vision, but he turned to a pink and red blob he thought was Cináed’s face. “What do I do? How can I save him?”

“You must first identify the source of his illness, I think, and you must be touching it.”

“That’s it?”

“Well, I don’t know for certain, but that’s what the spirits are telling me.”

“Spirits.” Harry looked between Cináed and Severus and gave a dry laugh. “Remind me to introduce you to Luna Lovegood someday.”

Cináed smiled. “I’d be glad to meet your friends. As long as … as they understand ….” His eyes flickered to Brian.

Brian went to Cináed’s side and ran a meaty hand through the willowy man’s hair. “I think his friends wouldn’t judge us, love. They’d have to accept us, if they accept him.”

Harry scowled. “Yes, well one of them I thought would stay by me forever revealed his true loyalties
recently, but …” He smiled. “Luna is wonderful. Your ‘spirits’ talk to you just like her ‘creatures’
talk to her. You even have the same eyes.”

Cináed nodded. “Seers’ eyes. Mum says it’s light reflected on a mirror, for that’s all a seer really is.”

“Maybe more like a conduit,” said Harry, wiping his eyes, “but, well, let’s see if your spirits know
what they’re talking about.”

Harry eased Severus’ arm out of the sling and tugged back his sleeve. He investigated the mark,
searching for something amiss. This time, the snake looked quiet, but as he stared at the skull, its eye
sockets filled with red light.

“Mother of Merlin!” He scrambled back from the bed, terrified.

Brian said, “What is it?”

“R- Riddle,” Harry said in tears. “You-Know-Who. He’s trying to … the tattoo. It’s linked to Riddle
and he’s attacking Severus through it.”

“Then it seems to me,” said Cináed, “you already know what to do. You must cut the link.”

“But how? I can’t access it. I can’t dream-walk consciously.”

Brian gave Harry a shrug. “Dream-walking? Seems to me it would work better if you were
sleeping.”

“But I tried it already. I tried yesterday and nothing.”

Cináed gave him a hesitant smile. “But yesterday you didn’t know where to look. Now that you do,
you might have better luck. The fates are watching over you this time.”

Harry swallowed hard. “You, you’re sure?”

“Seers are never sure of anything—the future is such a messy business, you know—but this outcome
seems quite positive.” He shivered. “The other outcomes … well, none of them are good. I think
dream-walking is your only choice, Harry, if you want the headmaster to live.”

“All right, but … I’m just supposed to sleep while he’s suffering? Dying?” Harry wiped tears off his
face viciously. “I don’t think I can.”

Brian rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, we don’t know so much about it, but isn’t there a spell?”

Harry gasped. “No, not to use on myself, but there is a potion!” He lay beside Severus and held the
man’s waist. “I love you, Sev. I’ll be there soon. I promise.” He closed his eyes and muttered, “Accio
sleeping draught.”

The potion wriggled its way out of Severus’ sack and zoomed into Harry’s palm. He took a sip, just
enough to make him sleep a few minutes if he didn’t start dream-walking right away, and curled up
with his hand over Severus’ mark.

“I’m going to kick you out for good this time, you bastard.”

“Harry,” said Cináed, “when you find the beast draining him, make sure you cut it off at the heart
and not the mouth.”

“Yeah, okay. The heart. Got it.”
Sleep washed over Harry, and he prayed he would open his eyes to red grass and violet skies.

When Harry opened his eyes again, he was under a violet sky, but the grass wasn’t red. Thick fibres of viscous black stretched all over the ground, seething and vibrating around his feet like snakes. Or worms. With a cry of revulsion, he spread his wings and shot into the air.

The black substance had covered the entire ground.

“Merlin,” Harry breathed. “It must be from the mark.”

A soft, strained heartbeat in the distance guided Harry to his destination, and he shot towards the flickering white light on the horizon. To his horror, as he came close, he realised the black fibres and strands had wrapped themselves directly around Severus’ life-force and appeared to be draining it, gathering power to itself.

“It’s the soul-drain,” Harry gasped through shudders, “but how do I get rid of it?”

Somehow, he doubted he could just blow this threat away. This would take harder work and conscious intervention.

Just to test it, he flapped his wings at the fibres. As expected, the black net didn’t budge.

“Fuck. Now what?”

He landed and grabbed a cord of the black stuff, snapping it in half. The fibres shrivelled away from his touch and looked as if they had died, but a grey light surged to the hole from Severus’ core and revived the net the next instant. Harry flew back up, afraid to try again for fear it would put too much of a strain on Severus’ already weakened life-force.

How on earth was he going to clear up this mess?

“I have to find the source. That’s what Cináed said. Well, I know the source is his mark, but where the hell is it? None of this looks like it ought to. How do I find Sev’s arm when I don’t know where I’m standing now?”

After a few moments of fruitless searching, Harry turned to the white light and frowned. He could just cut the fibres off Severus’ life-force, but if his spells should miss, he might just kill Severus instead. And even if he did manage to cut all the fibres without hurting Severus, unless he killed the parasite or curse itself immediately after cutting the link, what was preventing it from reattaching the fibres and sucking Severus’ soul dry?

“Cut it off at the heart, not the mouth,” he muttered.

The strands at the life-force were the mouth then, but where was the heart?

Well, there was only one way to get some perspective in this odd place—flying. Perhaps, if he went as high as he could go, he could see where the fibres connected. They would have two points without a doubt—the link to Severus’ soul and the link to the mark, the draining point. The heart.

With a nod, Harry shot into the sky higher and higher, hoping to find a pattern. To his surprise, the sky was not a sky at all but a ceiling, and a warm, squishy one. Harry jerked back from it with a
shudder. Perhaps this was inside Severus’ body. Just in case, he had better be careful not to injure
the man. He dropped a few metres and scanned the ground.

From such a height, the net had a sinister shape, a bit like a spider web. It covered every surface of
Severus’ land. Harry gritted his teeth and searched for a gathering point. If he could find a snitch in
the rain from a hundred metres, then, by gods, he could find this.

He wasn’t the youngest Hogwarts seeker in a century for nothing.

Harry flew around in wide circles, pacing the air. The source. Where was the source?

There! In the far southeast—at least Harry thought it was southeast—the web came together in a
central point, one glowing with an eerie red light that blended with the grass. He watched the centre
a bit, looking for confirmation before he acted and drained Severus’ life-force further.

Yes. A bead of grey travelled from the light on the horizon and into the red orb. The crimson
monstrosity glowed the smallest bit brighter when grey met red.

Harry growled and shot towards the invader at breakneck speed. He would not allow anything to
drain his love and live to tell about it. He would sever Voldemort’s link to his love once and for all,
damn it, and kill the bastard into the bargain, if he could think of any way to do so without hurting
Severus.

Harry gasped. A severing charm! If he hovered at the centre of the red light and cast Diffindo in a
circle around it, he could cut the soul-stealer’s feeding web off entirely. Cutting them one at a time
would likely drain Severus as the parasite struggled to heal itself, but Riddle would have no ability to
gather life from one strand to revive another if Harry cut them all at once.

There was only one problem—in this strange realm, Harry had no wand. He would have to use
wandless magic to save Severus, but it had never come when he had tried to do it consciously and
directing a severing charm—or any spell—to take the shape of a controlled circle was complex
magic. Still, he had to try. Severus’ life depended on him.

Tentative and terrified that nothing would happen, Harry held out his hand and whispered,
“Lumos.”

A tiny light appeared at his fingertip. Harry sank a few metres in sheer relief. Thank the fates, it had
worked.

His relief faded. It had worked a bit. Such a tiny amount of magic would not be enough to save
Severus’ life. Not even close.

Harry closed his fists. Magic worked on intent, so if his will was weak and wavering … so would his
magic be. Even more so his wandless magic.

He had to be more confident. He could do this. He had called wandless magic a thousand times
before. The power was there. He just had to believe in himself and call it.

Harry screwed up his courage and put all the strength and will he had into his hands.

“Lumos!”

Harry’s heart sank like a stone. It was a brighter light, but nowhere near what he had tried to call. It
wasn’t enough. What was he doing wrong?
Fury and terror flooded him. Shite. He couldn’t do this. He just didn’t have the training.

On the horizon, the light dimmed, and Severus’ heartbeat slowed.

“No, no, no!”

He couldn’t let Severus die. Severus was depending on him, and fuck all if Harry would let him down this time. He loved Severus too much to let him go.

Tears streaked Harry’s face, but he jerked a hand across his cheeks and rubbed them away. “Damn it, Sev. You’re mine. I won’t let that bastard have you! LUMOS!”

Harry’s entire hand vanished within an orb of brilliant white light.

“Oh, thank Merlin!”

He sobbed in relief. That was the answer—at last, he understood. His love for Severus, his anger, his determination—in short, his emotions—were the key. He just had to focus them, and his magic would come.

He hovered over the light and held his hands out beside each other for one final test. If he could call light in the shape of a circle, he could save Severus’ life. He thought of everything he had learned about Occlumency—how to clear his mind, to focus his thoughts—and used it to channel his emotions into an all-encompassing surge of love.

“Sev, whatever happens, know this: I am always, irrevocably, yours.”

He closed his eyes and imagined a circle of light, channelling both love and magic into his hands. “Please,” he whispered, then cast.

“Lumos!”

Harry opened one eye, and then the next, and tears blurred the perfect circle of light he had created. It had worked! Harry’s love would literally save Severus’ soul. The thought only made Harry love him more.

Tears flowing like rain, he turned to the white light and gave Severus’ soul a smile. He had waited long enough, so long, Harry had almost lost Severus before he revealed his feelings. He could wait no longer. As soon as they had a moment to themselves, Harry would tell the man that one person in his cold, lonely life loved him beyond all reason.

“It’s going to be okay, Sev.” Harry said to Severus’ spirit. “I love you, so just hold on a bit longer, my brave angel. I have a demon to kick out of your soul, and then we’re going to have a little talk.”

He closed his eyes and held his love for Severus in his heart and let it grow. It soon became so intense, Harry swore he could touch the feeling, if he only reached hard enough.

“Wait for me, love. I’ll be with you soon.”

With a deep breath for focus and strength, Harry gathered his courage and hovered over the red light. He spread his hands out to either side of the orb and visualised a circle at the bottom, focusing his love for Severus and his magic into the shape he wanted. When Harry could sense the trickle of magic from his spirit to his circle—could even see it shining a little—he focused his power. Love held the shape steady and the purpose true. Fear opened the dampers on every last power reserve Harry had. Determination kept his goal in mind and shielded Severus’ body from the coming attack.
With one last prayer to the fates, Harry focused his energies and concentrated on sending the magic upwards.

“I love you, Sev. Please, let this work.” He closed his eyes and breathed in deep.

“DIFFINDO!”

Harry heard a great tearing sound and a shrieking cry, and was almost afraid to open his eyes for fear he had hurt Severus instead of the vermin. But he gathered his courage to peel one eye open … and horror surged through him when he did.

He had indeed severed all channels to the parasite at once—the web around it had already withered and burned to ash, but within the ring of death, strands were reaching towards each other, trying to bridge the gap.

Harry did not want to think what it would do to Severus’ spirit if the fibres managed to connect. Adrenaline screaming in his veins, he aimed at the red orb and focused his magic into fire and anger and fury.

How dare Voldemort hurt Severus this way?

“Incendio!”

Harry raging emotions called a small inferno and directed the flames right into the heart of the parasite itself. The orb let out an unearthly shriek like the diadem had, then crumpled in on itself. The red glow flickered and died, and the remaining tendrils of black turned to ash and blew away. In half a moment, only a small blue orb remained where the horrid parasite had been.

Harry watched the orb, but it didn’t appear to be hostile. He held a hand over it, feeling for anything off-colour, but it gave off a sort of peaceful aura, and with the threat to Severus’ life gone, he hesitated to attack it in case it was necessary to Severus’ survival.

In any case, he had no strength left. With a yawn, Harry sank to his knees beside the blue orb. On the horizon, Severus’ life-light glowed white and strong. Reassured, Harry curled up and fell asleep to the rhythm of Severus’ heartbeat.

Everything would be okay now. He was certain of it.
Severus woke feeling better than he had in years and with something warm wrapped around him. In the dredges of his mind, some shadow of cold and a battle with darkness remained, but in the light of dawn, he couldn’t remember the fight. He did, however, remember that Harry had carried him into the pub after defeating the horcrux and brought him to Brian.

Where was the young man now?

He struggled to rise, but pain through his chest and a gentle hand on his shoulder stopped him.

“Easy there, lad. You’ve had a rough go of it.”

He managed to turn his head and squint in the grey of pre-dawn. “B-Brian?”

“Yes. I stayed to make sure you both pulled through Harry’s dream-walk all right. Are you okay?”

“I … I believe I am. The coldness is gone from my chest.” He jerked his head around to meet Brian’s eyes and groaned at a sudden rush of pain. “Dream-walk? He was able to do it?”

Brian grinned. “Well, you’re still alive, so I’d say that’s a good sign. We thought … well, we thought if Harry couldn’t use whatever powers he’s got, you’d not wake up again.”

Severus craned his neck a bit more. “Where is Harry?”

“Wrapped around you, where he belongs, I think.”

Severus’ face went bright red. He cast a two-person privacy ward upon himself and Brian and gave the barkeep a pained look. “You … you know of my feelings? I have tried to keep them hidden for his sake.”

“For his sake? Whatever for?”

“He … it is of no matter.”

Brian settled in the chair next to the bed. “Seems to me it’s of a great matter, if it’s causing you to keep quiet when you clearly love him.”
Severus closed his eyes. “Whatever I feel for him, it matters little. Harry is still innocent, still pure, still young. He deserves someone … like him.”

Brian smiled. “Hmm. Cináed told me you’d say something like that. He said to tell you that the taint on you, the darkness you keep blaming yourself for, well, it was never yours. He said to stop punishing yourself for crimes that don’t exist.”

Severus gaped. “For crimes that … but Harry’s parents—my only friend, Lily—they’re dead because of me.”

Brian went to the doorway and shrugged. “Are they? Seems to me that You-Know-Who was the one behind the wand.” He shook his head. “Stop hiding your heart for him, lad. Today proved to us all—twice over—that life is far too short.”

Severus shivered and looked away. “But … he could not love me.”

Brian chuckled. “Hmm. You might be surprised, but ach—it’s gone five and I’ve yet to wake Cináed. We closed the pub last night in honour of Blackpool and to give you two time to heal, but today, it’s back to work for Cináed and me. I’ll let you be.” He gave Severus a warm smile. “I’m glad you’re safe. Cináed told me you’d be okay, but sometimes it’s hard to believe what you don’t understand.”

Severus lifted a hand—his right, as his left was still in a sling—towards the man. Brian took it with a smile.

“Thank you,” Severus whispered. “For everything you have done for us.”

“Ach, no need to thank us. You needed help, lad. We’d have done the same for anyone in need.” He wrinkled his nose. “Well, anyone except You-Know-Who or that Malfoy numpty.”

Severus could not help but snort, though his head protested at the movement.

Brian chuckled. “Thought you might like that.” He clapped Severus’ uninjured shoulder with much more restraint than he had shown the day before. “Now, you go and rest, and I’ll send Cináed up with your breakfast as soon as it’s ready.”

Severus smiled. “Thank you. Please share my gratitude with Cináed as well.”

Brian beamed. “He’ll be chuffed to have it. Not many folks know the truth of us, you know, and like us the same afterwards. But you, you two understand.”

“Yes, we do. Goodnight.”

Brian replied in a like manner and left, shutting the door behind him. Severus sighed when he had gone. The fates had certainly been kind to him as of late, between Harry and finding this jewel of a pub in the middle of nowhere. And Malfoy! Who would have thought that Lucius-bloody-Malfoy, of all people, would end up helping them? Of course, he had been a colossal arse the entire time, but gods! That the man should want to help them at all was a shock. Even Severus had thought Malfoy completely loyal to Riddle.

Merlin, what a strange day.

With a sigh, he turned to wake Harry, but a burst of anguish in his left arm arrested him mid-turn. What in the world? He hadn’t injured his arm yesterday, had he?
Severus tried to turn again and caught a glimpse of a raven mop buried into his neck and slender arms tight around his waist. Harry really was wrapped around him—spooning him, truth be told. Severus’ face flamed and his heart warmed at being so tenderly protected.

Carefully so as not to jar his injured forearm, he cancelled his silencing charm and turned to lay his head against Harry’s.

“I am so glad you are safe.”

“Mmph, you’re one to talk.” Green eyes opened and focused on him. “You almost died yesterday. I had to dream-walk again, intentionally this time.”

“I am sorry, Harry. I did not realise the horcrux would hurt me so. But what happened to my arm?”

Harry gasped and sat up, rubbing his eyes. “Your arm? Shite. Did I hurt it with that severing charm?” He grabbed his glasses from the nightstand and perched them on his nose. “Let me see.”

Harry unfastened the sling and eased Severus’ arm out of the fabric. With slow, tender care, he turned the older man’s inner forearm up and gasped as it revealed a mess of blood, blisters, and charred skin where the mark had once been.

“Bloody hell, Potter! I thought you said you used a severing charm!”

Harry winced. “I did. And … damn it! There’s a circle-shaped wound here, too. Must have cut you though I tried so hard not to. Shite, I’m sorry. As for the burns, I had to use a fire charm to finish the parasite, Severus. There wasn’t much time—I just had to act or it would have killed you.” He paused and swallowed hard, and his voice broke when he spoke again. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I’m so sorry. I was just trying to save your life.”

Severus caressed Harry’s cheek with his uninjured hand. “No matter, Harry. Perhaps the scarring will hide the Dark Mark. There is a supply of number three burn salve in your beaded bag. Please retrieve that and essence of dittany, medical gauze, and the antiseptic spray.”

“All right.”

Harry stood and stuck the top half of his torso into the bag. He emerged a moment later with the supplies. Harry knelt beside Severus and gently took his hand.

“It’s going to be okay, Sev. I promise. I’ll take care of you.”

“Thank you. Tell me what happened after Malfoy left? I wasn’t quite coherent.”

Harry shuddered. “No, you were barely alive. When that horrible shade sucked the air, it hurt you terribly. I didn’t understand what was happening until Cináed told me your soul was damaged. Then, it made sense. Riddle was trying to bleed out your soul through the mark.”

“Fuck!”

Harry gave him a wry look and began cleaning the wound. “Yes. That’s what I said.”

Severus flinched away from the painful spray and bit into his knuckles to keep from crying out.

“S-sorry. I’ll be done in just a mo.” Harry worked fast, quickly covering his wound in antiseptic and rinsing it afterwards with a wandless Aguamenti.

Severus frowned. “More wandless magic? But I’m not in danger, am I?”
Harry shook his head. “Not that I know of, at least not immediately. I just figured out how to access my wandless magic at will while I was dream-walking. I had to, to save your life.”

Severus gaped, his entire body ringing with shock. “You … you can call wandless magic at will?”

“Um, I think so?” He held a hand out and called, “Accio flannel.” A stack of neatly folded flannels zoomed out of the loo and landed willy-nilly on the bed beside Harry. “Whoops. Meant to Summon one. I must have used a bit too much power.” Harry shrugged and grabbed one of the cloths. “Guess it’s not perfect yet.”

“Not perfect.” Severus stared at the cloths with his eyes bugging. “A seventh year student just Summoned an entire stack of flannels on his first try, and he’s concerned because it’s not bloody perfect?”

“Er … yeah?” Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Guess that’s not typical, then?”

“Typical! Merlin, is it too early to start drinking?”

Harry laughed. “Definitely too early.” He raised his hand and muttered, “Accio basin.” A shallow earthenware bowl zoomed out of the loo as well. “Well, at least I only Summoned the one that time. Though, maybe there was only the one to Summon. Unless …” He frowned and cocked his head towards the door. “Well, they aren’t banging at the doors at any rate.” He took the dish and set it on the nightstand, filling it with another wandless water charm.

Severus grinned. “Gods, Harry! That’s incredible!”

Harry chuckled and looked away, but Severus caught the tinge of pink on his cheeks. “It’s just a bowl and a little water. And a whole pile of flannels when I only wanted one.”

“I shall have all I need for my sponge bath then,” said Severus in a dry-as-the-desert tone.

Harry snickered as he dipped one of the flannels in the water. “Hmm. If you really need one, I’ll help you.”

Severus gave him a horrified look. “The day I am unable to bathe myself is the day I hang up my wand for good.”

Harry laughed, then went quiet. “You were injured badly enough yesterday that, had I not been able to dream-walk, you wouldn’t have been able to bathe again.” He sniffled as he dabbed the wet cloth against the edges of Severus’ burn, clearing away the blood. “You’d not have been able to do anything. You’d have been either dead or, or like … like Crouch.”

“Soulless.” Severus shuddered. “Let us be thankful that you spared me that fate.” He caught Harry’s hand and brought it to his chest. “Truly, thank you, Harry. You saved more than merely my life this time.”

Harry squeezed his fingers before returning to treating Severus’ wound. “I’d have gone mad, had I failed.”

Severus remembered the manic, despairing look in Harry’s eyes and shivered. “Then I am glad that you did not fail.”

Harry snorted and laid cloth and basin aside. “So am I.” He held up the burn salve and dittany. “Which first?”
“The dittany. It may heal some of the burns along with the laceration if they have broken skin. The salve will catch what it misses.”

Harry nodded and began applying the sweet-smelling medicine with a clean flannel.

Severus watched him work with questions whirling about in his mind. “How did you save me, Harry? I thought you couldn’t dream-walk consciously.”

Harry shrugged. “So did I, but Cináed said I had only failed before since I didn’t know the proper source of your wounds and I wasn’t touching it.”

Severus frowned. “What about Poppy, then?”

“No idea. I reckon I didn’t need to be touching her because it wasn’t a conscious dream-walk. That’s the best I can come up with anyway.”

Severus nodded, though he disliked having questions he couldn’t find answers to. “I can fathom no other reason as well. So you touched … my mark, then what?”

“I simply took a sip of Sleeping Draught with the intent to heal you. It worked.” Harry shrugged. “I dunno. I don’t even care, really, as long as you’re safe.”

Severus glared. “I care, Potter. This is a valuable skill that could win the war for us. We need to know how to use it.”

Harry sighed and dabbed a section of the wound away. “Yeah. I know you’re right, I just … the idea of going into Riddle’s body to kill him from within … ugh.”

Severus scowled in disgust. “His body? Why should you need to enter his body? Will his dreams not be enough?”

Harry gave a strangled cough. “Sev, um, these dreams, I figured out last night—they’re taking place inside the body. So, last night, when I healed you, I was ….”

“Inside me.” Severus gasped at his own wording and the sudden desire to feel Harry inside him in a different manner. He shifted his legs to hide any untoward evidence.

Harry’s face was bright red when Severus dared look up once more.

“Oh, gods. Forgive me, Potter.”

A flash of pain filled Harry’s eyes. He sighed and dabbed at Severus’ wounds.

“Will you never call me by my proper name, Severus?”

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “It is difficult to when I feel uncomfortable, Harry, but I shall try.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “Thanks.”

“What have I done?” Severus cupped Harry’s cheek. “Look at me. What did I say that hurt you so? Was it truly using your surname?”

“It’s not so much what you said as … well, never mind.” He kissed Severus’ hand and nudged him away. “Let me heal this, Sev. It’s only that I thought you might be ready for … but you’re not.”

Severus frowned in bemusement. “Ready for what?”
"Doesn’t matter." Harry put the dittany aside and took the burn salve. "This now, right?"

"Yes." Severus rubbed Harry’s hand. "Use your fingers so that the cloth does not absorb all the medicine." He watched as Harry Banished the basin and dirty flannels without the use of his wand. "Merlin, Harry. You have learned so quickly. It’s stunning.”

Harry blushed to his hairline. "T-thanks. I kind of had to, if I wanted to save your life.”

"Even with such a strong motivation, it is astonishing that you have learned so much so soon.” Severus rubbed his chin. "Harry, how did you discover that your dreams take place inside the body?"

Harry shuddered. "Right. Well, I’ve told you I can fly in these dreams? Last night, when I arrived in your body, it looked like a bomb of black confetti or something had gone off in there. A black spider-web had covered the grass and choked it. It was everywhere. I was so terrified for you.”

“I am here, Harry,” Severus said in a soft voice. “I am here.”

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “You are now, thank Merlin, but last night, I was terrified I’d lose you. I knew I had to kill that damn parasite bleeding your soul, but with that black stuff everywhere, I couldn’t find the heart.”

“The heart? Mine?”

Harry opened his eyes again and resumed healing Severus. “No, the parasite’s. Cináed had told me to cut close to its heart before I went inside … er ….”

His cheeks went bright red, and Severus’ desire flared again. Harry was so damn attractive, so innocent. Severus wanted to devour him, to kiss him all over and see if every part of Harry tasted of cherries.

“Inside my dreams,” Harry continued, startling Severus out of his brief flight of fancy. “Ah, anyway, I reckoned that if I didn’t find the bloody drain point and cut there, it would kill you instead of the parasite. So, to find the heart, I flew really high—and that’s when I figured out it was actually inside your body. The sky was a ceiling, and it felt … fleshy. Warm, soft, like a belly.” He shuddered. “It was weird.”

“So it sounds.” Severus could not get the idea of feeling Harry inside him—or vice versa—out of his mind. He raised his strongest mental barriers to ward against the physical evidence showing either on his face or between his legs.

Harry jerked his head up, a deep frown creasing his forehead. “Sev? Why are you blocking me out all of a sudden?”

Severus frowned. “How do you know I’m Occluding? And, for the record, I am not shutting you out. I merely need the extra control during this conversation. It is unnerving.”

Harry gave him a wry smile and cracked open the burn salve. "Yeah. I wish I could do it, too.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s cheek. “When we have a moment on this mad hunt, I will teach you in earnest, if you are so inclined.”

“Yeah. I’d like to learn from you. Merlin, you’re amazing.”

“Says the wizard who has the ability to dream-walk, save lives or end them at will from within the
body, talk to snakes, and cast advanced wandless charms without training.”

Harry chuckled. “You make it sound like that’s not typical in wizards or something.”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Not typical, he says. Merlin save me.”

Harry laughed and started applying the burn salve. The instant Harry’s potion-coated fingers touched Severus’ skin, the sharp pain in his arm faded to a muted ache.

“Oh, thank the gods. That is incredible.”

“It should be,” said Harry with a chuckle. “You made it, and you’re a brilliant potions master.” He smiled and rubbed more of the medicine into Severus’ burn. “I know it didn’t seem like it in class, but I really do admire your skills with a cauldron. You can make anything into a potion, and you invented them so young! And spells, too.”

“Hmm. You did seem to take rather an unhealthy interest in my youthful indiscretions.”

Harry gave a wry laugh and rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. Probably should have checked what that spell did before I used it on a human. Malfoy’s an annoying little twit but I never meant to cut him to ribbons.”

Severus laid a hand over Harry’s. “I know. The fault was mine for ever inventing such a terrible spell.”

“It’s okay. Well, not okay, but I forgave you already.” Harry’s smile softened. “In fact, do you know why I didn’t give you your potions book back that night? It wasn’t because I was ashamed or guilty over Malfoy, even though I did feel bloody horrible. It was because I had a bit of a crush on the Prince and I didn’t want to give up my only link to him.”

Severus’ face flamed clear to his hair, and his heart pounded so hard, he feared it might jump from his chest. “Me? You actually had a … an interest in the younger me?”

Harry grinned. “Yeah. Drove Hermione batty. She was a bit jealous, I think. Not of me, you understand. It’s always been Ron for her, and I’ve always looked at her like a big sister. But she was jealous of my potions grades.”

Severus chuckled. “Now that I can believe.”

Harry’s smile faded a little. “Believe the rest of it, too. Ask any of the Gryffindors and they’ll tell you I always had my nose in your book. I even slept with it.” He looked away. “Back then, when everyone believed I was crazy for tailing Malfoy all the time, it felt like the Prince was my only friend.” He closed his eyes and sighed. “It shattered me when I cast Sectumsempra at Malfoy and saw your dark side. I felt so utterly alone.”

Holding his injured arm out of the way, Severus brought Harry into half a hug and tucked the younger man’s head under his chin. “I am sorry, Harry. From here on out, if you have need of me, you need only ask. I swear that I will make myself available to you at the soonest possible moment.”

Harry pressed a gentle, lingering kiss into Severus’ jawline and set the spy’s lonely heart stuttering. Severus gasped and tipped his head back before he could stop himself.

Harry murmured against Severus’ throat, “You’re utterly amazing, Severus Snape, and I am privileged to know you.”
Intense emotion filled Severus’ heart despite his shields, but he did at least manage to keep his tears at bay.

“As are you, Harry Potter.” He laid his cheek upon that beloved messy mop. “And the privilege is mine.”

Harry kissed Severus’ neck lightly and resumed treating the older man’s burns. With the imprint of Harry’s lips still hot on his throat, it was a moment before Severus could gather breath enough to speak once more.

“What happened after you flew into the … ceiling? How did you kill the parasite and save me?”

Harry sighed. “And this was such a pleasant conversation, too.” He dipped out more of the salve and began work on a second layer. “Well, despite crashing into the ceiling, I was still several metres above the ground. Enough to find a disgusting red orb sucking the life from you.”

“A red orb?”

“Put me in mind of Riddle’s glowing eyes. The skull on your mark had glowing red eyes when I went in after you, too. Scared the bloody shite out of me.”

Severus shuddered. “Merlin. I should think so. Is it still glowing?”

Harry peered at the tattoo. “Not that I can see through the burns, but it all looks a mess right now. I, I think I got it though, Sev. I didn’t feel any danger last night when I fell asleep.”

Severus clutched his chest and closed his eyes. “I suppose we shall know … if that awful coldness returns.”

Harry laid his hand over Severus’. “It won’t. And if it does, I’ll go in and fight him for you as many times as it takes until we finally kill the bastard for good.”

Severus held Harry’s hand under his chin. “Thank you, for fighting so hard for me. I do not deserve it.”

“You deserve more.” Harry squeezed Severus’ hand and pulled back, but Severus refused to release him. “It’s okay, Sev. I’m here, but I kind of need that back if I’m to put this salve on you.”

Severus sighed and released Harry’s hand. “Very well. Then tell me how you killed the parasite. I need the information.”

“Information? For what?”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Call it morbid curiosity, or a desire to learn more about how to use your powers consciously. Either way, talk.”

“Yes, Professor.” Harry’s smile belied his use of Severus’ title. “Right. So after I found the little bastard, I reckoned the only way to kill it was to cut all the fibres leading away from the heart at once, which, after some time practising, I did with a wandless severing charm. The orb tried to reattach its arms, so I hit it with Incendio. After that, the ugly thing shrivelled and died, and the fibres disintegrated and blew away on their own. Then I woke up here.”

Severus frowned. “I had rather hoped for a bit more detail than that. How did you make your wandless magic work?”
Harry shrugged. “Well, at first I tried doing it like you had said in class before, by controlling my will and directing the magic into it. It worked a little. It was stronger than when I had just tested it the first time, but even with all the will I had, it wasn’t strong enough.” He rubbed his chin. “I reckon it was a normal level for a seventh year trying a wandless *Lumos*.”

“Most likely. What did you try after that?”

Harry chuckled wryly. “After that, I just got bloody furious and screamed the spell at Riddle, and was shocked when it worked. That’s when it clicked that it wasn’t so much that my wandless magic triggered as a response to you being in danger, but rather as a response to my own emotional turmoil. So, as a test, I channelled all the emotion I could dredge up into my hands and tried to make a circular *Lumos*—and it was perfect.”

Severus’ jaw dropped. “Mother of Merlin. That is the exact opposite of how we try to train wandless magic. Occlumency is reckoned to be essential.”

“No wonder you’re so good at it,” said a pouting Harry.

“And no wonder I could never teach you Occlumency,” said Severus with a wry laugh. “You’re a natural empath. Your magic is fuelled by emotion, not will. It is quite a rare ability, and one that will make my job harder. Traditional Occlumentic practices will not work for you.”

Harry frowned. “But … but I’ll try this time, Sev. Honest.”

“I believe you, but the will-based practices of traditional mental magic will do an empath no good no matter how hard he tries, Harry. They are unconducive to the way your magic operates, so we shall have to seek an alternative method of closing your mind.” Severus tapped his lip. “Hmm. Perhaps an emotion-driven shield would work.”

Harry begun winding gauze around Severus’ treated arm. “Like when I cast *Protego* on you in lessons that time?”

“Hmm. Something like that, only internal and wandless so it can endure a determined assault.” Severus gave him a wry smile. “I will enjoy the challenge of teaching you mind magic. Especially since your natural abilities will incline you to powerful Legilimency—in fact, they already have begun to.”

Harry frowned. “They have? How do you know?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “How did you know I was using Occlumency earlier?”

“Hey! I wasn’t using Legilimency. I just got this sense of coldness from you that I always get when you’re Occluding.”

Severus kissed Harry’s temple. “Shh. I wasn’t suggesting that you would use Legilimency on me without my consent.” He pulled back and motioned for Harry to resume healing his wrist. “Did you feel this coldness from me before a few weeks prior?”

Harry started wrapping Severus’ arm once more. “Not that I remember. Not unless we were actively working on mind magic.”

“As I thought. Your skills as an empath are coming to the fore with your maturity. Soon, I shall be able to hide nothing.” He paled at the realisation that this included his feelings for Harry. “I … oh, Merlin.”
Harry took Severus’ hands. “It’s okay. Whatever you’re hiding in there, it’s okay. I’ll never use it to my advantage—” He frowned. “Actually, can you just teach me to turn it off? I don’t want to be reading everyone’s thoughts all the time.”

Severus sighed, relief washing through him. “Yes, I believe I can. We will begin work on that as soon as your skills with Legilimency become more tangible. In the meantime, are you quite finished with that bandage?”

Harry laid the gauze aside. “Yes, you’re good.”

“Good. Then put away the supplies and fashion a Patronus messenger for me. In case it is intercepted, it will be to our advantage that Riddle believes I am either dead or incapacitated.”

Harry nodded. “Expecto Patronum Nuntius!” The stag appeared and waited. “Listen to Severus for your message, okay? I don’t know what he wanted to tell you.”

The stag looked at Harry bemusedly, then turned to Severus for his message, and the spy’s heart shot into his throat. Merlin! Harry’s Patronus would carry messages for him? But that could only mean—no. It couldn’t be. Yet there stood Harry’s Patronus, waiting for Severus’ message as if he did this every day.

Severus stared at the stag, reeling and terrified that Harry would understand what it meant when a bonded Patronus responded to anyone other than the caster. Did Harry know? Could he have any idea of the significance …?

Severus dared a glance at the young man, and his heart began to beat again. Harry didn’t look disgusted or horrified. No, he only appeared bemused and worried about Severus.

Harry couldn’t know, or he would be more terrified than Severus was.

Harry laid a hand on Severus’ shoulder. “Sev? Are you okay? He’s waiting.”

Severus hid his turmoil with a steel-hard Occlumency wall and stared at the silvery beast.

“Ah, yes, t-thank you.” He cleared his throat and gathered his wits. “Right. I would like you to go to Fred Weasley. Be discreet and take great care not to let anyone but Weasley and his compatriots see or hear you. Ask him for the gist of what was covered in Potterwatch last night and if they have heard anything about the attack on Blackpool, or if they know if Riddle has been incapacitated. There is a possibility that Harry might have injured him indirectly, though we do not believe he will be dead yet.”

The stag bowed and vanished. Severus stared after the beast with his heart racing.

“I did not think he would listen to me.”

Harry gave Severus a warm smile. “He knows that I trust you with all of my being.”

“Yes, but usually, Patroni do not respond to anyone other than their owners, their owners’ immediate family, or … or ….”

‘Or their owners’ mates.’

Severus gulped and shook his head. “Well, typically just their owners. Then again, we are speaking of you. As we have already established, typical is hardly a word that applies.”
Harry raised an eyebrow. “Mm-hmm. Or …?”

Severus jerked back, terror screaming through his veins, and barked, “Never mind it, Potter!” The shock and pain in Harry’s beautiful eyes chastised Severus, and the former spy lowered his voice. “Merlin. I … forgive me. I only … well, it is nothing to concern yourself for, Potter.”

Harry merely looked at him with those reproachful, hurt-filled eyes, and Severus’ chest throbbed with guilt and anguish. He rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“I did not intend to be so sharp, Harry. Will you just help me down to the breakfast table, please? Cináed will be busy readying the meal for the other patrons. He does not need to worry about waiting on me as well.”

Harry heaved Severus to his feet, but didn’t meet the man’s eyes. “Fine, Professor.” He looked away. “I hope you’ll learn to trust me one day, like I trust you.”

Severus froze, struck through the heart at the use of his former title and Harry’s sharp tone.

“H-Harry? I, I didn’t mean to hurt you. Please, don’t … don’t ….”

“I hope you’ll learn to trust me one day ….”

Shite. Severus didn’t know what he had done to hurt the young man—besides barking his surname in such a harsh tone—but regardless, Harry’s words proved that a show of faith was needed. He closed his eyes and swallowed his soul-deep fear of losing Harry.

“No,” Severus said in a firm tone—though his trembling body belied his bravado. “You will not leave me. You have told me time and again, and it is time I begin believing in you, as you have said.” He hesitated. “But … will you be angry with me long?”

With a sigh, Harry took Severus’ hand and shook his head. “I’m not angry now.” He gave Severus a bright smile, though his eyes still held pain. “Thank you. I know that was terribly hard for you, but you’re right. I won’t leave you, even if you do infuriate me sometimes with that cloak and dagger stuff.” His smile faded. “You will trust me someday, won’t you?”

Severus caught Harry against him in a rough embrace. “If not you, no one.”

Harry squeezed Severus and stepped back. “Good. Then let’s go get some breakfast. I don’t think I’ve had anything since that lamb stew night before last. I could eat an entire lamb by now.”

Severus smirked. “Well, let us go slaughter one, then. Perhaps two, as I am famished as well. After all, this is Scotland. Sheep are a half-step away from being the national animal. I am sure we could find a lamb or two somewhere nearby.”

Harry grimaced. “On second thought, maybe I’ll stick to bacon.”

Severus laughed and let Harry help him out of his pyjamas. For once, he didn’t cover himself with his arms or shy away, either. Harry was right. The man deserved more of Severus’ trust. Harry hadn’t said anything cruel about him since their masks had come off three weeks before; rather, he called Severus beautiful. Whether or not Severus agreed with him, he knew by now that Harry believed it.

Severus struggled to contain a grin at the thought that Harry thought him beautiful. His Harry, the man he loved found Severus’ scarred, skinny body attractive. The mere thought sent desire and joy rocketing through Severus’ veins. As did the touch of Harry’s calloused, but gentle fingertips on his
If Severus had believed for a moment that Harry felt anything for him beyond friendship and a platonic appreciation of his figure, he might have given into his desires, just this once. He ached for Harry, and the thought of easing the young man under the covers and making love to him as long as Severus’ injuries would allow was good. Damn good. Gods, he wanted to see Harry, to make love to him, even just to hold him, but Harry was simply too good for Severus.

Still, he supposed it wouldn’t hurt to dream, if only for a moment.

Harry didn’t know what had started the process—whether it was becoming aware of his abilities as an empath or because of his closer connection to Severus—but ever since the man had woken up that morning, Harry had occasionally caught snatches of his thoughts. Not entire thoughts, but images and words and flashes. And as he buttoned Severus’ shirt for him, a flash crossed his mind.

He saw himself lying on their hotel room bed, completely bare and rocking with passion. Severus over him, his face delirious with ecstasy and long hair swinging with his every movement. Harry’s legs wrapped around Severus’ naked waist and tangled behind him, locked around him and with his heels rubbing into Severus’ arse. Severus taking him apart bit by bit, with tongue and lips and body all at once.

Harry’s fingers stumbled and his breath rushed out in a stuttered pant. Fuck! The sight of Severus’ pleasure alone could have brought Harry to climax.

Suddenly, the positions switched, and Severus was on his knees before Harry, slender back arched and covered in a sheen of sweat. Harry held the man’s waist and rocked forwards, and Severus moaned.

Oh gods, yes. Harry needed to hear that sound again. And again.

Severus gave Harry a bemused look and brought the man back to the present with the force of a speeding bludger. Fuck. Harry was aching for Severus, and any moment, the man would realise … shite! Harry shifted to hide his erection.

Fantasies or no, Severus could barely believe Harry liked him, let alone that he wanted to rip Severus’ clothes off and take him hard and fast, or make love to him slowly, or just be with him in the quiet times of the night. Besides, Harry had yet to tell Severus that he loved him. Sex would have to wait until Harry had found his courage and a moment to breathe.

Still, those scorching hot fantasies had let Harry know that Severus was definitely open to the idea.

As Harry buttoned Severus’ trousers, another flash arrested him, this one of Severus sliding off skin.
Harry’s pants and sampling the treasures beneath with the whole of his mouth. Harry let out a sound somewhere between a grunt and a squeak. Dear Merlin! As much as he enjoyed these images, gods! He had to stop them before he stripped Severus then and there.

“Um, Sev? Should I take the journal and work on it under a Muffliato?”

That stopped the fantasies cold. Like ice water down his back. Instead, Riddle’s red eyes and scaly face haunted Harry’s mind. At least it took care of his other problem.

Severus shuddered. “Merlin, no. Malfoy knows we are here, and while I do believe he was telling the truth yesterday—at least, what I was able to understand—there is always the possibility that he will scout us. Besides that, I’m not sure how much more my soul can take of that hideous book. Riddle has given it quite enough trouble lately to be going on with.”

“You … soul … Oh no.”

Severus’ words hit him like the Hogwarts Express, and Harry had to sit before his knees gave out. He collapsed into the armchair by the window with a graceless grunt.

Fuck. Sev’s soul—Blackpool—the soul weapon. In the relief of finding Severus safe and the shock of discovering his injured arm and all that came after, Harry had forgotten about Blackpool. Oh, gods, Severus still had no idea what Voldemort had done to him.

How in Merlin’s name was Harry supposed to tell him?

Harry shrank into himself. Gods, he couldn’t do it. Couldn’t speak those words.

Maybe … Severus didn’t need to know. Maybe it was kinder to keep him oblivious. After all, none of it was Severus’ fault, but knowing what his soul had done, even under Voldemort’s control, might break Severus right down the middle. It would certainly destroy what little progress Harry had made in making Severus understand his own worth.

Yet, if Harry didn’t tell him, Cináed might. Such a terrible revelation from a stranger would only make it hurt worse. Or, gods forbid, Severus might discover the information later, on his own, when Harry wasn’t around to hold him together. Severus might even be driven to suicide under the weight of such horrible guilt if Harry couldn’t protect him. And even if Severus was able to bear up under the guilt, he might still consider Harry’s silence an outright betrayal, no matter that Harry had only wanted to spare him pain.

Harry shuddered and closed his eyes. Fuck-fuck-fuck. He had no choice. Severus needed to know the truth now, when Harry could keep him from taking any drastic action.

“Harry?” Severus touched the man’s shoulder. “Are you well? Should we have our meal here after all?”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. Despite not eating for an entire day, he doubted he could keep anything down.

“Sev, I think … we’re going to have to wait. Maybe just take a potion instead.”

Severus gave Harry a bemused look. “You want to skip a perfectly good meal and choke down a potion instead? Why?”

“Because … because I just remembered something from y-yesterday, something really, really awful, and I don’t think I can stomach food right now.”
Severus paled. “If it is severe enough to take your appetite away after a full day without sustenance, perhaps we should indeed take potions. But tell me, Harry. What have I missed?”

Harry dug his nails into his jeans and shuddered. “Oh, gods. Sev, sit.”

The man went paler and seated himself on the bed. Harry forced his feet to move and dragged himself to Severus’ side. He wrapped one arm around Severus’ back and, with the other, took the man’s wand hand in a firm grip.

“Now,” said Harry in a voice steadier than he felt, “Sev, what I’m going to tell you is … it’s terrible. But before I say a word, I want you to swear a magical oath to me that you won’t do anything to hurt yourself.”


Harry interlaced his fingers with Severus’ and held the man’s troubled gaze. “Swear it. Please. I need you.”

Severus swallowed and gave Harry a shaky nod. “I … s-swear upon my life that I shan’t … harm myself after you have spoken. This I so swear.” Blue light settled on his form and made Severus shudder. “Why? Why are you forcing oaths out of me again? I thought … you trusted me now.”

Harry held Severus’ waist tight and nodded. “I do. And I care about you, more than you realise, so the idea that you might try to hurt yourself for something that isn’t your fault is … I can’t bear it.” He couldn’t bear the pain in Severus’ eyes, either. “Well, if it makes you feel better, I’ll free you from the oath and just accept your promise to me?”

Severus sighed and nodded. “Yes, please.”

Harry laid a shaky hand over Severus’ heart. “I, Harry James Potter, hereby free Severus Snape of bonds of all oaths he has spoken to me in the past three weeks.” Green light glowed on the older man’s skin and faded. “There. Now, will you promise me?”

“I already have, but yes. I promise. Now, what the bloody hell has terrified you so?”

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed a tense knot in his throat. “Oh gods, Sev. I wish … I wish I didn’t have to tell you. You were doing so well, making so much progress … and this ….” Tears slipped beyond Harry’s control despite his best efforts. “Merlin, I hope you can forgive me.”

“Just tell me, Potter! Please.”

Harry shook himself and gathered his courage. “Right. I’m a Gryffindor, I can do this.” He took a deep breath. “Severus, yesterday, you remember how Malfoy said that Riddle was gathering energy from somewhere to make a powerful weapon, the one he used against Blackpool and wanted to use against Hogwarts?”

Severus gasped. “Merlin! How could I have forgotten to warn them?” He made Harry call his stag again and would not let the young man say another word until he had sent Prongs off with a message that Hogwarts was in grave danger. He warned them to be on standby and evacuate Hogsmeade as soon as possible.

“Now, that’s settled.” Severus turned back to Harry. “All right, what about this weapon?”

Harry could hardly see for tears, but he focused on Severus’ eyes and held the man’s face. “Severus,
think. Riddle was draining your soul, and within a few days …” He swallowed and closed his eyes. “B-Blackpool. Oh, Sev. He used your soul as a weapon against Blackpool.”

The room went deathly still. Even Severus’ breathing seemed to have stopped. Harry winced and opened his eyes to see a stricken, horrified Severus staring at nothing, dark eyes wide with unspeakable horrors.

“Sev, please. Please say something.”

The man tore out of Harry’s arms and rushed to the loo. Tell-tale sounds of retching followed, and Harry bolted to Severus’ side.

Severus was kneeling with his head over the toilet, purging what little his stomach held. Harry knelt beside the man and gently pulled his hair back.

“Sev, I …”

What could he say at a time like this? What words could possibly heal the wounds in Severus’ soul? Harry could think of nothing big enough to fix it, nothing that didn’t sound trite and useless in the scope of such horror. He was helpless. Empty handed and small in the face of such huge tragedy and violation.

Harry sighed and rubbed his free hand across Severus’ heaving back. He would give anything to spare the man he loved this anguish, but he had nothing to offer except his presence. Nothing to give, but his love and comfort and the warmth of his hand.

Harry knelt closer and laid his head against Severus’ shoulder. “Sev? I … I’m here. I’m with you.”

It wasn’t enough, but it was all he had. Merlin, how he wished he could offer more.

Severus was an indirect murderer again, but this time, thousands had died. Perhaps no one he knew personally—that he yet knew of—but his soul had nonetheless killed an entire city. Old men and women. Young men and women. Babies, children, mothers, siblings—gods, he couldn’t take it. He hadn’t cried and vomited simultaneously since Lily had died, but now, he couldn’t decide what would choke him first—tears or bile.

First Lily, then this? Fuck! Apparently he killed people just by being in the vicinity! Not even in the vicinity—Blackpool was on the other side of the country and he had been at Hogwarts when Lily died.

Maybe he should just stay the hell away from Scotland.

But no, it would do no good. He was the issue. He killed people. It didn’t matter where he was, the longer he remained on the earth, the more people would die.

Dazed with horror and shock, Severus didn’t immediately register the hands holding back his hair and rubbing his back or the soft voice in his ear, but when he did, he jerked away and held his hands out, warning Harry to stay clear of him.

“Don’t,” he said, his voice raspy with bile and tears. “Don’t come near me.”
“Sev …” Harry looked at him with eyes that hurt Severus’ soul.

‘What soul? Riddle has destroyed it. He has destroyed me.’

Severus sank to his knees and sobbed into his hands. Again, Harry came to him and rubbed his back.

“Don’t touch me,” Severus cried. “I, I will … I am poison!”

Harry shook his head and knelt before him. “No. Riddle is poison. You have just been hurt and violated, terribly.”

“Don’t,” he repeated, but his voice had lost its strength. “Stop touching me! Stop!”

With eyes full of anguish as deep as Severus’, Harry withdrew his hands and wrapped them around his knees instead.

“Go, Harry. Get away from me.”

Harry reeled back, flinching as if struck a physical blow. “No. You can’t mean that.”

Severus snapped, “I do!” His chest ached with having to hurt Harry so, but it was to the best. Harry would at least survive.

Harry whispered, “You … you really want me to leave?”

Severus closed his eyes and willed the agony to quiet, willed his soul-deep need for Harry to silence itself.

“Yes. Please. Go.”

Harry let slip a soft sob and hesitantly reached for Severus’ hand, though he stopped short of touching him. “I, please. Please don’t make me leave. It hurts.”

Severus stood and glared, forcing the Professor out for Harry’s own sake. “Potter. I gave you a direct order. Obey me!”

Harry jerked back as if slapped. “Obey you.” He stood, holding a hand to his chest, and the near-manic look filled his eyes again. “I should have known you would never see me as an equal. I should have realised … it was … too good to be true.” His voice broke, tears slid down his face, and he ran out of the room with a strangled cry.

The door opened and shut, and Severus’ heart shattered. Harry was gone.

Empty and numb, Severus slid down the wall and buried his head in his knees, not caring about the lingering pain in his ribs. The pain in his heart hurt worse. His Harry was gone, and with him, the core of Severus’ being. He felt like a broken doll, chest empty and cracked down the middle, naked, abandoned, and helpless. And utterly alone.

Still, perhaps Harry would at least be safer away from him. At least his one love might survive, if it meant Severus had to endure the pain of a broken heart for the rest of his life. An empty heart, perhaps. Broken suggested there was something left to shatter, and he was void, desolate and barren inside. Either way, he would survive as long as Harry did. Even if he no longer wanted to.

Gods, Severus hoped Harry would manage. That look in his eyes, the pain in his face, the way he had held his chest when he left … would he recover?
Severus shook his head. What folly. Of course he would. Harry was young and gorgeous and talented. He was every man’s dream. Harry would find someone to heal him someday and patch up all the holes Severus couldn’t fix. And even if he didn’t, even if his heart bled forever, at least it would beat. If he stayed near Severus, he would surely die.

Severus buried his head into his knees and keened. He needed Harry, needed the man to hold him and tell him he was still worth something, but it was simply too dangerous. He had to set Harry free, for his own sake.

Even if the loss of him twisted what remained of Severus’ soul right out of his chest.

He would endure somehow. He always had.

Harry ran from the room in blind tears. Severus had sent him away. Gods, he just wanted to help the man, and Severus had run him out of the room and out of his life.

A knife-like pain sliced through Harry’s heart and turned his limbs to ice. He looked down at his hands and shuddered. They were actually white and shaking. Besides that, his stomach felt like he’d eaten a bowlful of lead, and his heart stuttered out of rhythm, as if Severus’ rejection had physically hurt him.

Harry hardly cared if it had. With his heart bleeding and shattered, with the pain of loss an ice-cold weight in his chest—again—he wasn’t sure he wanted to go on.

He forced himself to his feet. No. People were depending on him. He had to live, at least until Voldemort was gone, and then, perhaps, his task was over and he could finally rest.

Maybe that line about neither being able to live while the other survived was literal and they would both die in the final hour. At that moment, bleeding and broken and frozen inside, Harry almost hoped he would.

Gods, this was madness. He was going mad.

He had to get out of here. Go find Hermione or something. She would be able to help him, if she couldn’t heal the wounds. At least she wouldn’t throw him out when bad things happened, like Severus had done. Though Ron might, if he was still with her. Maybe McGonagall could help him.

He staggered towards the door. He had a vague idea of finding Cináed and Brian and thanking them before apparating to Hogsmeade, but when he opened the door, Cináed was already standing on the other side.

“Whatever you’re about to do, Harry,” said Cináed in a low, shaken voice, “you must stop. Now.”

Harry hesitated. “S-stop?”

“Yes. The spirits are screaming at me. They’ve never screamed before.”

Harry swallowed and followed Cináed into the room. He winced at the sight of the bed. The memory of holding Severus close there just a few moments earlier shot another knife through Harry’s heart, and he jerked back from the blow.
Cináed held Harry’s shoulder. “You’re wounded.”

“S-Sev, broke my heart. S-sent me away. It hurts.”

Cináed guided Harry towards the bed. “Not emotionally—it’s physical. Or perhaps spiritual. I cannot tell for certain as I’m neither doctor nor priest, but the spirits tell me you’re broken inside and it’s far more serious than a broken heart.”

Harry frowned and rubbed his chest. “It does feel strange. Cold. My heart is … it’s not right.”

Cináed pointed to the bed. “Sit. You need your mate, I think.”

Harry gasped at the pain of another blow and staggered into the nightstand. “Doesn’t … want me,” he gasped out. “Doesn’t need me.”

“Sit!”

Cináed’s sharp tone and fearful eyes made Harry collapse onto the bed and curl into a ball. He held his chest and wondered if it was actually bleeding. No, his hand came away dry, but how could just losing Severus hurt him like this? Enough to terrify Cináed?

What did he see that Harry couldn’t?

As soon as Harry was resting, after a fashion, Cináed went straight to the loo and ripped the door open. Harry winced and hoped Severus hadn’t been using the facilities.

“What the bloody—Cináed?”

“What are you doing in here, Severus?” The Seer’s tone was scolding. “Don’t you know that Harry needs you?”

Severus stood in the doorway. From Harry’s reclined position, he could only see the edge of the older man’s hands, white and shaking and wet with tears.

“Needs me? Hah. He needs me like he needs a vial of arsenic.” Severus’ voice hitched. “I will only kill him if he stays near me. I kill everyone.”

Cináed’s voice softened. “Ah. So he told you of Blackpool.”

Severus turned away and laid his head against the doorjamb. “How? How could one tiny, shredded soul destroy an entire city?”

“You’re asking a Squib? I know nothing about soul magic.”

“I thought … your spirits …?”

Cináed snorted. “They don’t know everything, and what they do concerns time and fate and its outcomes, not so much the inner workings of the soul.” He paused and cocked his head as if listening. “Well, they say that your Harry here understands more about souls than they do. More than anyone ever has before.”

Harry was too stunned to answer. He knew nothing about souls, only that his hurt when Severus had turned him away.

Cináed nodded to no one in particular. “Hmm. They say his dream-walking has more to do with soul magic than anything else.”
“Soul magic!” Severus whipped off the doorjamb and stepped back. “But it’s forbidden.”

“With good reason. A soul is something far beyond most wizards’ ken. They shouldn’t muck about in what they don’t understand and in what doesn’t belong to them.” Cináed gave Harry a nervous glance. “But your Harry, he doesn’t hurt souls—he heals them. And if anyone can manipulate the soul without causing undue harm, Harry can.” He paused and listened again. “Ah, they say it has something to do with emotions. Um, empathy.”

Severus frowned. “Because he is an empath, he is better equipped to deal with souls?”

“Yes, precisely. Oh, and there … they say there’s another reason, but I can’t catch what they’re saying. Something about dragons? No, angels? Ach. Too many voices at once—you understand?”

Severus looked as dumbfounded as Harry felt. “I am afraid I do not.”

Cináed shook his head. “There’s no time for this anyway. Come out of the loo this instant and apologise to your Harry.”

Severus froze. “He … he is still here?”

“He’s not capable of going anywhere, Severus. Go to him.”

Cináed took Severus’ hand and led him from the loo. Severus walked as if going to his funeral, and the knowledge of his reluctance to see Harry after the relatively easy camaraderie with Cináed shot another bolt into Harry’s heart. He whimpered and curled into himself, trying to hold in the pain and failing.

Gods, where was the blood? Shouldn’t there be blood for it to hurt this much?

“Harry!”

Cináed and Severus cried out at once, and suddenly a warm arm wrapped around his shoulders and supported his head. Harry opened pain-glazed eyes to stare into Severus’ tear-streaked face.


Harry could only moan and turn his head back into the sheets.

“Gods, he’s frozen,” Severus muttered. “What happened, Cináed? Did he fall outside? I cannot understand how he came to be so cold and injured in the course of five minutes.”

“Never … left the … room,” Harry muttered.

Severus hesitated. “But the door …? Oh. It was you, Cináed?”

“Yes,” said the Seer. “The spirits were screaming at me to come help before the world turned on its end. They’re still screaming.” His voice wobbled. “I, it’s terrifying. Ach, please, make it stop already.”

Harry opened his eyes a crack to see Severus looking between him and Cináed with a stricken expression.

“How? What am I supposed to do? I don’t even know what’s happened to Harry.”

Cináed’s expression was grim. “He’s withering. His soul is torn down the middle. He can’t live with it broken like that.”
Harry’s heart stalled. “I, I’m d-dying?”

Severus let slip a strangled, bestial cry and made to bolt from the room, but Cináed caught his uninjured wrist and held firm.

“Don’t, no, let me go,” Severus cried, his voice broken and desolate. “I have to, have to go, now!”

Cináed’s voice rang with authority and fury. “Stop, you absolute numpty!”

The airy Seer’s unusually demanding tone stunned Harry and Severus alike into stillness.

“That’s better,” said Cináed with a huff. “Now, let’s get this straightened out quickly. Harry doesn’t have time for delays, and besides, I left the breakfast going. Severus, you want to leave because you’re afraid Harry will die if you don’t?”

“I, I must! Look at him! It has already begun. I am poison!” Severus sounded as if the words had ripped the soul right out of him.

A little of Harry’s anguish abated. Severus had only sent him away in the belief that it would save his life?

Cináed sighed. “It’s not your presence that hurts him, it’s your absence. If you leave him now, he’ll die, and the rest of us with him! He’s the one hope this world has, and he needs you.”

Harry huffed. “Not a … saviour.”

Cináed’s silver eyes fixed on him. “No. You are the avenger, whether you like it or not, and without you, the world will perish for Riddle’s twisted pursuit of domination.” He winced and clapped his hands over his ears. “Fire … blood … ach, make it stop!”

Severus hesitantly touched Cináed’s shoulder. “If the world needs Harry, and I … I am hurting him by sending him away, what do I do to heal him? Is there anything to do?” He curled in on himself and pressed his hand over his heart. “Am I too late?”

“No,” Cináed said in a soft voice. “It’s not too late. But you must put aside these foolish fears and recognise that the evil one was the man who took part of your soul and used it for ill. You had no part in Blackpool’s death. You were too busy dying yourself.”

Severus frowned. “You knew I was dying before you met me?”

Cináed chuckled. “I knew the moment you walked in. I felt death following you and warned Brian to keep an eye on you. Death left as soon as Harry came back from his dream-walk, though.”

Severus paled. “You can feel death? Merlin. Your skills are more curse than blessing, I fear.”

“No when the world is at peace. Now, though, I can feel the angels near him.” He tipped his head towards Harry, and the young man winced and curled into a tighter ball as if that would protect him.

Harry might have laughed at himself had he not been so utterly terrified. What could protect him from death itself? His mother wasn’t around to take the curse for him this time. He was helpless, and the thought left him shaking inside and out.

“They do not want to take him,” Cináed continued. “They’re waiting as long as they can, but if you continue this foolishness, they’ll have no choice. So for God’s sake, stop stalling and go to him. Tell
him how you *truly* feel and stop dodging your fate. I *know* you understand what all of this means.”

Severus went ashen. “I … I do not know if … but I shall try, for his sake.”

Cináed let slip a sigh. “Thank God. Now, I’ve got to go rescue breakfast before I burn the place down. Even on low, the bacon is done and I’ve about a minute before the eggs catch fire.” He spun out of the room and closed the door.

Harry gave Severus a wry look, though his accompanying grimace of pain most likely ruined the effect. “No wonder he’s such a good chef. He uses his Sight to cook.”

Severus didn’t smile. He sighed and sat beside Harry. “I am sorry, Harry. He is right—I didn’t mean what I said. I only feared for your life if you stayed close to … to such a monster.” Tears slipped down his face. “But in banishing you, it appears I have almost killed you, and this time, the fault is most definitely mine.”

The icy-sharp pain melted a little. “So, you don’t want me to leave?”

Severus brushed his fingers through Harry’s hair. “No.” He lay beside Harry and caught the man into his arms. “Nothing is further from the truth. I need you. I … I care so much about you. Please, please don’t leave me, Harry. Please, hold on. I cannot bear to lose Lily and you both.”

The sharp pain in Harry’s chest faded and tender warmth replaced it. “Sev? I, I think I’m okay now.”

Severus frowned. “Truly? Simply because I apologised?”

“I don’t understand it either, but it’s true. I’m not in pain anymore.” Harry tucked his head into the warm gap under Severus’ chin and kissed the man’s throat. “I don’t want to leave you. Ever.”

“Gods, you’re cold.” Severus clutched Harry tighter. “Ah, ever?”

“No. I want to stay where I am, right by your side. Don’t send me away again. Please. I want to, to *be* with you. This is … home.”

Severus stared, wide-eyed and shaking hard. “Do you mean what I think you do?”

Heart pounding, body shaking as hard as Severus’ was, Harry managed a mute nod.

Severus gave a soft cry and crushed Harry to his chest. “Oh, Harry. I dared not hope. Is it true?”

“Y-yeah. So you’ll b-be with me? Be m-mine?”

“I think I have always been yours, in one manner or another.” Severus kissed the corner of Harry’s lips, and Harry gasped and shivered at the rush of joy the simple touch had sent through him. It was like molten light in his veins.

“Sev … oh, that feels so good.” Harry sighed and buried his head in Severus’ chest, worn out from his ordeal and the emotional roller coaster his life had been as of late. “Sev? I’m really tired. Do you need to talk about … you know?”

Severus shuddered. “I think it would be more therapeutic, at least for the moment, to simply stay close to you.” He closed his eyes and brought Harry to lie against his chest. “I am so sorry. I only wanted to protect you, even if it hurt me to make you leave.”

“Don’t do it again. No matter what happens, don’t make me go. I don’t know if I can pull through another time like that. It hurt so much.”
Severus hugged him close. “No. I will never—I was only afraid.” He frowned and pulled back. “Harry, I shan’t endanger your life again, but why should my perceived anger hurt you physically? I feared it might break your heart, at least at first, but I did not expect it to do so literally.”

Harry winced and pulled away, his chest aching again. “Why did you make me go if you thought it would break my heart?”

With a shaky gasp, Severus shouted, “Because a broken heart is better than death!” He hesitated, obviously stunned at the volume of his own voice. “Forgive me, Harry. I only did not want to … to tear your soul again.” He sighed and held Harry’s cheek. “I am sorry I tried to drive you away before. I was trying to spare you death, and next to that, a broken heart seemed trivial. I never imagined it would hurt you like this.” He pulled Harry against him. “Please, Harry, I know I was irrational. I was terrified, and I just thought … I …."

Mollified, Harry kissed Severus’ temple. “It’s okay. You weren’t really irrational, you were terrified. And you had a right to be, Sev. I can’t even imagine how much it must hurt you, but, sweetheart, it is not your fault. I swear it.”

Severus gave him a shy, hesitant smile. “S-sweetheart?”

Harry winced. “I didn’t even realise I’d said that. You don’t like it?”

“On the contrary, I think I rather do. As odd as it may seem. No one has ever called me such a tender pet name before.”

Harry smiled again. “Then I’ll call you sweet names often, if it makes you happy again.” He brushed Severus’ long hair back from his face and stroked his cheek gently. “Are you—well, no, of course you’re not okay, but … is it a little better, at least?”

“I do not know. I think I am too stunned and appalled to truly process it.”

Harry stroked Severus’ cheek. “It’s okay, Sev. I’ll be here when you can … right?”

Severus touched his lips to Harry’s forehead. “I … what you said before, about wanting to stay by my side forever?”

Harry’s heart sputtered to a stop. “Y-yes?”

“Ssh. Do not fear.” He traced his fingertips down Harry’s cheek. “I only wanted to say that I must confess, I have the same wish.”

Harry let out a shaky breath and hugged Severus tight. “Then let me stay, Severus. Please.”

“Yes. As long as you wish.”

“Always, my angel.”

“Angel? Merlin, I never imagined I would hear ….” Tears on his lashes, Severus kissed Harry’s forehead and cradled him close. “Thank you, Harry. If you wish to stay with me for always, then always it shall be. Now, go to sleep. I swear, I shall be here when next you open your eyes.”

Harry nodded and curled into his love, feeling safer now that he knew Severus had agreed to a relationship with Harry, had promised to stay. Perhaps it wasn’t exactly an admission of love, but it was damn close.
Harry was feeling much better when he woke from his nap warm and sheltered in Severus’ arms. Severus, however, looked pale and drawn. His eyes held ghosts and horrors untold, and Harry’s heart thudded to a stop when he realised Severus might again be in danger.

“Sev! Are you okay?”

The man jumped and answered with a low moan and a shake of his head.

Harry’s body froze. “No. It’s not … your soul?”

Severus turned and buried his face in Harry’s neck. “I am in no danger of losing it, but it hurts, Harry. So many dead, all because I was a fool twenty years ago.”

“No.” Harry breathed out a sigh of relief and caught Severus’ shoulders. “No. This is not my fault. Riddle is the one who took your soul against your will and used it to hurt people. You didn’t brandish your own spirit as a weapon against others, so you’re not at fault.”

“Perhaps not directly, but——”

“But nothing. Sev, don’t you understand? What he did to you, it’s like ….” Harry’s face screwed up with fury and disgust. “It’s like rape, only worse. You’re a victim of a heinous crime, Severus, not the guilty party.”

Severus jerked back, aghast and disgusted. “Rape? Merlin, he has never touched me. I would have sooner broken whatever appendage came close enough to do so.”

“I didn’t mean that he literally raped you. It’s just that the concept is the same. He took a part of you against your will, used it to satisfy his wishes, and gravely injured you in the process. The only element lacking here is the sex.”

Severus shuddered. “Yet, as sexual violence is the defining criterion for rape, perhaps you could never use that term in relation to myself and the Dark Lord again? I have quite enough nightmare fodder without adding that to the pool.”

Harry grimaced. “Ugh. Okay, I concede your point. That’s horrifying.” He shook off a chill and took Severus into his arms. “All I was trying to say was that you’re not guilty because he violated you. He hurt you, Sev, abominably, and——” A terrible fire filled Harry’s chest and spread to his toes. His vision went teal around the edges. “And I swear to everything good and holy in this world and the next, I will make him pay for it!”

The windows rattled, and Severus silenced Harry’s rage with a tender embrace. “Harry, ssh. Calm yourself. This is a Muggle inn. You must not let loose your accidental magic. Especially now that you are an empath, it will be far too strong. You will hurt people. Breathe. I am here. I am safe.”

“But you’re also hurt,” Harry muttered, “and I can’t stand for that.”

“Ssh. I believe you, but save your rage for Riddle and not innocent Muggles and Squibs.”

Harry took a deep breath. “Right. You’re right.” He pressed his nose into the dip of Severus’ throat and breathed in the man’s herbal fragrance. Like sandalwood and sage. The scent gave him peace,
and he let his fury go with a sigh.

“Thanks. I didn’t mean to lose control. Only, I hate to see you suffering.”

Severus pressed Harry close. “I think, I will suffer for this for a long, long time, but as long as you are with me, perhaps I will endure.”

“You’ll endure. I won’t let you do anything else.” Harry kissed his forehead. “One day, you’ll look back at this and feel only anger that Riddle used you so heinously and grief for the lives lost, but no guilt. I’ll make sure of it.”

“No guilt?” Severus sat and gave Harry a wry look. “I fear I would not know myself.”

“Well, then maybe it’s time we made a new you.” Harry sat with Severus and kissed his cheek. “One who doesn’t need to punish himself for every crime of the world at large.”

Severus sighed and moved off the bed. “I fear that day is a long time coming. But enough moping about. We must be on the move. My … illness has wasted enough time already.”

Harry nodded. “Recovery isn’t a waste of time, but we do need to be on the move if you’re feeling better. Let’s pack up and say goodbye to Brian and Cináed. We owe them too much.”

He smiled softly, thinking perhaps they might bond here one day, if Severus was so inclined. It would be perfect, the one place Harry had felt at home in months and the place where he had finally gotten the courage up to ask Severus to date him. Yes, if they made it so far, this was the place he wanted to bond with his Sev. Cináed and Brian would be dead chuffed about it, too.

Harry chuckled to himself. Cináed probably already knew.

“Yes.” Severus sighed and hugged his chest. “Pity we cannot take Cináed along. I fear for our safety without his unique insight, but no. A Squib would only be in constant danger on such a perilous journey.”

Harry smirked. “That, and I think Brian would fight us for him. Might win, too, wands or no. I can still feel where he clapped me the other day.”

Severus gave a low chuckle. “He is rather imposing. But, come, let us go, Harry. I need to move on.”

Harry stood and slid his hand in Severus’. “Yeah. Sounds good, only move on with me at your side?”

Severus swallowed and his hand trembled in Harry’s. “Yes, well, you are coming along. It will be rather hard to travel if you do not move on with me.”

Harry snorted. “Glad to see you’re snarking again.” He squeezed Severus’ hand and went to pack up. “Believe it or not, I’ve missed it these past couple of days.”

Severus lifted an eyebrow. “You missed my sarcasm?”

“Yup. It’s funny.” Harry concentrated, and, by focusing on his love for Severus, was able to Summon all his scattered clothing and miscellanea and pile them all into his bag.

Severus gave the bag a longsuffering look. “I suppose it’s too much to hope for that you might also learn to *fold* your clothing sans wand?”
“Probably,” said Harry with a snicker. “I never remember to do it with one.”

Severus rolled his eyes, then flicked his wand at Harry’s bag, and the contents rearranged themselves.

“Better.” He used his hand to perform the same charm Harry had, only his clothing went in washed, dried, pressed, and folded. “Just so you do not forget that you are not the only strong wizard about.”

Harry gaped. “Merlin. Teach me?”

“In time.” Severus jerked his head towards the door. “For now, we must find some kind of sustenance and be on our way.”

“Right.” Harry slipped his hand into Severus’ and tiptoed to kiss his cheek. “To tide me over, you know. For all those moments I can’t touch you in the bar.”

Severus shivered, and a bright pink blush painted his cheeks.

‘Adorable.’

Severus gasped. “I am most certainly not!”

“Not what?” Harry gave the man a mock glare. “Severus … did you read my thoughts?”

Severus blushed brighter. “Oh. Did I? I assure you, if I did, it was unintentional. I … I could have sworn you spoke.”

Harry shook his head. “Maybe I’m broadcasting.” He grinned wickedly. “But then again, so are you.” He debated telling Severus about seeing the man’s fantasies, but that might give the incredibly insecure Severus the idea that Harry only wanted him for sex. Instead, Harry again took Severus’ hand in his and rubbed his thumb gently against the man’s skin. “You’ll have to teach me those Legilimency blocking skills soon, Sev. I’m starting to pick up flashes of your thoughts, too.”

Severus froze and went white. “W-what kind of flashes?”

Harry leaned up and kissed Severus’ cheek. “Ssh. Nothing you need to worry about.” He caressed Severus’ face and hair until the fear left the man’s eyes. “It’s okay. It’s just that, I’ve trespassed on your privacy once and regretted it terribly since. I don’t want to do it again. So, teach me when we get a moment?”

Severus leaned into Harry’s caressing hand and closed his eyes. “As you wish.”

“Yeah. Sev?”

“Hmm?”

“You really are sweet like this.”

Severus scowled and rubbed his ear. “Hmm. That illness must have damaged my hearing. I could have sworn I heard you call me … sweet.” He made the word sound like something vile.

Harry chuckled into Severus’ neck. “You did.”

“Preposterous.” His voice was soft, however, and Harry dared press a light kiss to the man’s earlobe. Severus gasped and turned his cheek into Harry’s face. “Oh ….”
A flash of Harry tugging on Severus’ ears with light teeth and gentle suction flickered into Harry’s mind, along with a powerful wave of desire. With a soft pant, Harry made a mental note to return to Severus’ ears later, when they were ready and he had more time to explore. For the moment, he simply brushed his lips across Severus’ cheek.

“Come on, Sev. We really do need to go.”

Severus had gone pink again. Harry grinned and whispered in his ear, “You really are adorable when you blush.”

“You’re speaking nonsense, Potter!”

Harry laughed and moved to the door. “Harry. It’s Harry now, love. And let’s go.”

Severus rolled his eyes and pulled on the handle. “Exactly what I had suggested when you had to go and think a thing like that.”

A familiar voice said, “Like what, lads?”

Harry peeked around the door and chuckled. Cináed and Brian were waiting outside their room, both suppressing grins.

Harry grinned back. “Should’ve known you’d be there, Cináed.” His mirth faded. “Merlin, how I’ll miss you both.”

The seer gave an airy laugh. “You’ll return someday.”

Harry flicked his eyes to Severus. “Yeah. We’ve said so among ourselves. And, well, we’d have to temporarily ward the place against Muggles, but I think I might have plans for this place someday. Well, maybe.”

Cináed beamed. “The spirits say they like your plans. So do I.”

Harry laughed. “I knew you’d figure it out before I said a word!”

Brian chuckled. “Hmm. Perhaps you have a bit of the sight as well, lad.”

Severus looked between them, his expression bemused. “What on earth are you talking about? What plans, Pot ….” He peered out into the hallway, a frown creasing his brows.

Cináed smiled. “No one is listening, but you should call him by his first name now that you’re together.”

Severus groaned. “You know? What am I saying? Of course you know. You seem to function more in the realm of the Sight than without.”

Cináed’s mirth faded and a deep sadness replaced it. “Such is the curse of being one of the avenger’s messengers. The spirits chose me for it long ago, and ever since, my Sight has been so strong, it … people fear me sometimes. They don’t want to be too close. Even my sisters have distanced themselves. Brian is the only one who’s really loved me since it happened. Well, and Mum.”

Brian ran a hand down Cináed’s cheek. “I do love you. From the first moment I saw you, my lovely lad.”

Cináed went on his tiptoes to give the man a light kiss.
Severus laid a hand on the man’s arm. “Forgive me, Cináed. I did not mean to hurt you. And I did not know of the sacrifices you have made for us, even before you knew our names.”

Cináed gave him a shy smile. “How could I do otherwise? The both of you needed me. And, well, Brian and I, maybe it doesn’t seem like it, but we needed you. It’s been so nice to have another couple about who doesn’t judge us.”

At the mention of being judged, red hair and blue eyes and a disgusted scowl flickered through Harry’s mind. He sighed and hugged his waist. Ron would never really accept him, especially not now that he had decided to spend his life at Severus’ side.

“I understand,” Harry said in a low voice. “Well, a bit.”

Severus wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders and guided him into the older man’s embrace.

Cináed frowned. “Harry? Your friend—he’s confused and being a bit of a duffer at the moment, but he’ll come around. He loves you. He’s just ignorant. And ignorance is curable. Just let him see how much Severus adores you and he’ll learn.”

Harry nodded, but his chest still ached. “It’ll never be the same, will it?”

Cináed’s smile was sad. “No, but it can still be good. It’ll be okay, one day.”

Harry squeezed the Seer’s hands. “Thanks, Cináed. For everything.”

“Good luck on your journey,” said Cináed with a warm smile, “though the spirits say you won’t need it. They’re fighting on your side.” He paused and frowned. “And Severus, when you meet an old friend soon, don’t despair. Take the time to think over the situation before you judge yourself unworthy. All is not what it appears. Harry, they say that the same thing goes for you. Try to think before you act.”

“For me?” Harry frowned and stared at Severus. “I’m going to meet an old friend, too?”

Cináed frowned. “No. Not quite. I don’t … it’s muddled. Forgive me. I can only repeat their warning.”

“And even if you did understand,” said Severus with a piercing gaze at the Seer, “you wouldn’t speak, would you? For fear it would alter our fate.”

Cináed hummed and looked away.

Harry shook his head. “Let’s just get going. I’m famished. Is there any breakfast to be had?”

Cináed beamed. “I saved some for you. Come on. You two need food badly, and you’d best eat every bite.”

Harry blinked. “Okay. I doubt we’ll have trouble. You’re a fantastic cook.”

“Thank you! Now, do come eat some proper Scottish cooking. You’re too thin.”

As Cináed turned towards the stairs and led off with Brian at his side, Harry leaned into Severus’ shoulder and whispered, “Is it just me, or has he channelled Missus Weasley all of a sudden? I mean, he’s even got the red hair.”

Severus simply snorted and followed the men downstairs.
Severus stared at the ruins of Blackpool, his heart blasted open and bleeding for the loss of life his own soul had caused despite his fierce mental shields. Gods, he had committed terrible sins as a young man, but ever since Lily, he had strived with all of his being never to cause another human’s demise if he could help it.

And two days before, he had murdered thousands.

A warm hand slipped into his. “Sev … love, it’s not your fault. You weren’t responsible for this.”

Severus’ voice was smaller than Harry ever remembered it being. “My soul ….”

“Was not in your control.” Harry tugged Severus into his arms. “Ssh. I know it hurts. I feel guilty, too. If I’d only realised sooner ….”

Severus buried his face in Harry’s hair and inhaled the scent of him to wash the smell of blood and ash from his nose. “No. It is not your fault. It is his.”

“Exactly.”

“But ….”


Severus sank to his knees and burrowed into Harry’s shoulder with a low moan. Perhaps Harry was right and none of this was his fault, but that awful feeling of responsibility and guilt would not leave him. Remorse strangled him with every breath, even more so than the ash and lingering scent of blood. His chest ached with heavy, choking pain that, for once, he longed to release in tears, yet they refused to come.

He did not deserve the relief.

A gentle hand smoothed down his hair and cradled his head against Harry’s shirt. “I, I don’t know if it helps, Sev, but I’m here. You’re not alone.”

Severus buried his head in Harry’s warm, soft neck and kissed his throat lightly. Harry shivered and held Severus tighter.

“It’s going to be okay, Sev,” Harry whispered.
“Okay? Nothing can make this okay.”

Harry winced. “No. I guess you’re right. But it’ll be better one day, all right? We’ll make sure this never happens again.”

“Yes. That I can agree with.”

With a heavy sigh, Severus released Harry and hugged his own chest. He would have liked to hold the man all day and take comfort in Harry’s sweet presence, but there were Muggle police and military officers hanging about. A hug might be seen as comfort for the scope of the tragedy, but if Severus lingered too long, they would draw the attention of the officers, and that would be bad for everyone.

He might not care if they weren’t in so much danger, but they were, and he had come to this place for a purpose. A reckoning or cleansing—he still hadn’t determined which.

Severus looked around and found himself kneeling in the rubble before what had likely been a family’s first home. A fold of bright pink stood out among the wash of grey and brown, and, heart pounding and stomach twisted in apprehension, he reached for it. Stones shifted above it, but the cloth was attached to something larger and did not immediately give. He pulled, praying he had not just discovered a corpse, and a tiny cloth body in a bright pink dress emerged from the ash.

A little girl’s doll.

He cradled the toy in shaking hands, the numb, barren ache in his chest turning sharp. The sight of the baby doll, still intact when her owner had long since died, broke the dam on Severus’ grief, and he sobbed in relief and agony at once. Tears fell unchecked as he hugged the toy to his chest, wishing it could have been the baby girl instead.

He would have protected her, had she lived.

“Oh, little one,” he whispered, “I am so sorry for the loss of your life, and for everyone else who perished with you. I wish … there was some way to make amends, some way to restore you, but there is not. There is nothing I can do. Nothing.” He hugged the doll and sobbed. “I’m sorry. So sorry.”

Warmth pressed into his side and gentle fingers stroked through his hair. Harry. The young man said nothing, but simply offered the comfort of his presence as Severus mourned. Severus had never had that kind of silent comfort before. He found it was just right, Harry quiet but present, caring for him and touching him softly, communicating his care without interrupting his mourning.

Severus took Harry’s hand over his shoulder and held it, Muggles be damned. He needed a warm touch to ground him, needed Harry’s touch, and the scope of his loss left no room to worry about bigoted idiots. Gods, he was drowning in grief, suffocating in remorse.

He clutched the baby doll with his free hand, rocking it a bit as if it were a real child, and held it close to his heart.

“Little baby,” Severus whispered through his tears, “I wish with all of my being that I could undo this atrocity. I cannot. I cannot offer you the life so cruelly taken from you.” His tears slowed as a spark in his belly caught and turned into a blazing inferno of outrage. “No, I have no power to turn back time or bring you back from the dead—but—this I promise you: I will make sure the disgusting wretch that wrought this abomination upon you meets his fate. I will avenge you, little one.” He held the doll out for Harry. “Will you help me?”
Harry gently touched the doll’s yellow yarn hair and spoke in a wobbly voice. Tears streaked his face as well, white tracks through smudges of ash. “Of course I’ll help you, Sev. That’s been my goal all along, remember?” He drew his fingertip across the doll’s forehead. “Had Mum not given her life for mine, this would have been me.” His voice shattered. “G-gods, the poor baby.”

Harry’s breath hitched, and he hid his face in his arm for a moment, his chest heaving. Severus stroked Harry’s fingers and held his back, his own tears half-blinding him.

“How old do you reckon she was, Sev? Seven, eight?”

Severus shook his head. “This is a toy for a much younger child. She was more likely perhaps two or three. Possibly even younger.”

“Oh, gods, no.” Harry stared at the doll, tears shimmering on his lashes. “So little. She … n-never had a chance. She might even have been a little witch. Might have even been in one of your classes in a few years. Now we’ll never know.”

He gave a heart-wrenching sob and sank to his knees, and his tears fell into the ash. To Severus, it felt sanctifying, like the tears of their grief might at least wash the evil from this place, if it could not heal the damage.

If he let himself truly feel his pain, perhaps they might offer at least the sacrifice of their tears to the dead. It wasn’t enough, but Severus could do nothing to heal them. He was powerless, except in his ability to mourn.

He stopped Occluding.

A cutting wave of anguish ripped through him and besieged his heart, tearing a howl from his throat. Great, heaving sobs racked his chest and tears bathed the ground. He sank to his hands and knees beside Harry, sobbing like a child, and begged every deity he knew of for a way to heal the damage, for something he could do to make this better.

Strong arms came around him and pulled him into a firm shoulder. Harry. Severus wept into his throat and held onto Harry with everything he had, his one anchor in this terrible storm of anguish.

Harry whispered into his ear, “I’m here, it’s going to get better, I care so much about you,” anything the young man could think of to help, but Severus only felt the intense wash of grief.

Until Harry offered him something he wouldn’t have dared hope for.

“Sev, um, there are probably going to be a lot of orphans from Blackpool, you know. Not all the children died.” Harry rubbed his toe in the dirt and held the baby doll to his chest along with Severus. “If you, I mean, if we’re still together … um, maybe we could adopt one or two.”

Severus’ heart skidded to a screeching halt. “Did … did you just ask me to raise a child with you?”

Harry’s face went bright red. “Er, not so much asked. Um, more like … offered. Um, that is, if … if you still want me around by the time we’re ready.”

Severus stared as Harry spoke, dumbfounded and shocked to his core, yet also flattered. Harry wanted to have a family with him? By gods, that was more than a fling. Severus had never thought Harry could truly love him, but Harry would never have dared suggest adoption if he thought of his relationship with Severus as a casual affair.

Harry played with the doll’s arms, his eyes on the ground, a trainer-covered toe rubbing through the
dirt. “Um, I know it’s really soon, and it’s okay if you don’t want to … a-adopt with me. I just thought … that it would be something positive we could do. A way we could help turn one of the lives hurt by this around for the better. Like … sanctification, you know?”

Severus’ breath stuck in his throat. Harry knew him well enough to know he needed to do something to atone. And what’s more, he didn’t judge Severus or continue insisting he shouldn’t blame himself, but had suggested something … something beautiful. The mere thought of it made Severus ache to take Harry in his arms and show the young man how much he loved him.

“It’s, it’s okay if you don’t want to or it’s too soon to be talking about it,” Harry babbled, “I just thought, maybe the knowledge that I’m willing, if you want to later, might hel—mmmph!”

Severus kissed him. Overcome with emotion and need, he threw one arm around Harry’s waist, slid the other hand into his messy hair, and kissed him with all he was worth. And Merlin save him, it felt wonderful.

Despite the terrible surroundings, despite the danger, Severus felt this a good place to share their first kiss. Perhaps such a beautiful moment would sanctify the ruins, at least a little, and their joy in one another might go some way towards making this place whole again.

And even if not, Severus found he could not wait another second.

Harry tensed in shock, then closed his eyes and melted into Severus with a soft moan. Gods. Warmth and love flooded Severus at the sound of Harry’s pleasure.

Harry wanted this, wanted him.

Relieved, Severus wrapped his arms around Harry’s waist and brought the young man in closer, thrilling in the feel of Harry’s mouth against his own.

Oh Merlin, this was paradise.

Harry’s lips felt like velvet against Severus’—soft, full, and a bit chapped from the cold. Severus smoothed the rough places with his tongue, seeking respite and healing in their love, and Harry’s lips opened on a gasp. With a low murmur of pleasure, Severus chased the younger man’s breath and slipped inside, desperate to feel him, to know that Harry was truly here with him in this desolate place, the only beautiful thing for miles. That Harry was real, and he was his. That Harry belonged with Severus.

Wet heat tentatively tested the tip of Severus’ own tongue, and the former spy was lost. Gods, Harry tasted like heaven. So good, so pure, so—”

A man cried, “Oi! My god! Haven’t you any respect for the dead? Take your unnatural perversions elsewhere.”

Severus jerked back with a gasp.

The Muggles were all staring. The kinder ones looked confused, no doubt wondering what could possibly inspire passion in a place like this, but others—others who carried large guns—looked at them with hatred and disgust. Severus’ heart leapt into his throat and his blood rushed to his ears. A wand wasn’t protection against thirty heavily-armed soldiers.

How could he have forgotten himself in such a dangerous situation?

“Shite! Harry, I ….”
“It’s okay,” Harry whispered. “Let’s just pack up and go before they get too close.” He smiled and helped the man to his feet. “Besides, I want to continue that kiss where no bigoted idiots will interrupt.”

Severus shivered and wrapped Harry’s smaller hand in his, just for a moment. “Then let us go.”

With a nod, Harry released Severus’ hand and led him away from the judgmental people, towards the city limits. For a moment, he wondered if coming here was a mistake, but no. He had needed to see the city, needed to put a face to the thousands of lives screaming for absolution.

Even now, their lost souls called out to him, asking him, “Why us? Why now? What did we do to deserve this?”

As always when faced with the aftermath of Riddle’s senseless violence, Severus had no answers. He could only grieve and hope somehow, he could find a way to ease their pain and put their spirits to rest.

As they moved back into the healthy forests and hills around Blackpool and Godric’s Hollow and the sharp edges of his pain softened a bit, Severus found himself considering Harry’s proposal. Sanctification. Severus wasn’t sure if Harry had meant that to adopt a baby might sanctify Severus’ soul or the devastated city—perhaps both—but the idea had taken hold of his broken heart and wouldn’t let go.

Perhaps raising an orphan from this place would, in some small way, absolve Severus. It sounded right. Like this was the only path to redemption.

It might, at least, heal that child. One child or even a handful of children among hundreds would not mend the breach, but by gods, it was a start.

But Merlin, it was so soon to be thinking about this. So early in their fledgling relationship. They had only been together a few hours, and Harry already wanted a family with him? With him, Severus Snape, the greasy git of the dungeons?

But Harry didn’t think of Severus that way anymore, did he? He certainly hadn’t seemed to mind their kiss. On the contrary, he had opened himself to Severus and started to explore on his own. And that little moan he had given at the start of their impromptu first kiss—dear Merlin! Severus had thought he would melt at the sound of it.

Maybe they weren’t ready for children yet, but continuing their kiss sounded good. Damn good. Riddle’s filthy journal could wait for an hour or two while Severus mapped every inch of Harry’s body with his tongue.

Severus shivered and forced his attention back to their surroundings. He had to control himself or he would have an uncomfortable situation to deal with in a moment. One the few remaining guards would take note of, without a doubt. Severus had already risked too much by kissing Harry in the first place—what if one of the officers had been a Squib and reported it back to the Prophet? They would be in even more danger then.

Love made him foolish, apparently, and they could not afford to be fools. Not out in the open at least.

To drag his mind back on track, Severus considered Harry’s idea in greater depth. A child. Would he be a good father? Obviously Harry thought so.

Severus wished he could take Harry’s hand. Hold him and let him know he loved the man and that
his idea wasn’t bad. In fact, the more he thought of it, the more Severus found he wanted to follow through—though later, when their relationship was more settled. Even if Harry didn’t stay with Severus, the idea of raising a child from Blackpool, of healing their hurts with love appealed to Severus, even if he had to do it alone. It was trading beauty for ashes, joy for mourning, and it gave him hope.

Perhaps one day, the love of his future child might even heal the gaping hole in his chest whenever he thought of the catastrophe Riddle had caused.

The city—what was left of it—vanished behind a screen of trees, and Severus breathed a sigh. He reached for Harry’s hand—only to close his fingers upon the baby doll still clutched to Harry’s side.

“Harry?”

The young man gave a sheepish chuckle and hugged the toy to his chest. “I don’t know what to do with it. I don’t want to just drop it. It feels … wrong. And I don’t want to let it go either.”

Severus looked at the doll, an idea forming in his mind. Yes. This would be a way to ease the pain of Blackpool’s lost and bleeding souls.

He smoothed a loose piece of yarn atop the doll’s head. “It may seem … odd, but perhaps we can perform a sending with that doll. A ritual to heal all the lost souls of Blackpool as much as we can and help send them to their final resting places.” He looked back, towards the city they had just left, and grief arrested him once more. “Perhaps, since it was my soul that wounded them so greatly, it is my duty to help them in such a manner.”

Harry sniffled and wiped his eyes. “Y-yeah. Let’s do it, Sev, but not for duty’s sake. Just because it’s the right thing to do.”

“So it is. Let us help them, then, however we are able.”

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead, then set about making a space for the ritual.

Harry’s mind whirled as they sought out a place to camp and have lunch. The ash at Blackpool and the child lost far too soon haunted him—if he listened hard, the wind had started to sound like the cries of a young child. Screams as she lost everything and everyone she had ever known.

He had sobbed when Severus took the doll away to bury it and complete the rite. Harry understood that the burial was symbolic for the earth taking the spirits of those lost back into herself, but he had grieved as if for his own child when the dirt and snow covered that small, cloth form.

Severus had wept, too. He said it was good for the ritual, that their tears were cleansing and would help the spirits on their way. To Harry, who knew little of rituals or the ancient ways but much about loss, they just hurt.

He started to set up the tent in a daze, his mind on everything but what he was doing, until Severus laid a hand on his shoulder and begged him to pay attention. The fear in the older man’s voice snapped Harry out of his grief. A gentle fingertip traced the thin scar on his cheek, a scar from a tent
peg, and Harry understood.

“Sorry, Sev. I’ll pay attention now.”

“Please be careful. I might not be able to heal you if, say, it were to hit your eye.”

Harry shuddered and forced his mind off his grief. “Yeah. Let’s not do that.”

Severus watched him work a moment, obviously torn between ensuring Harry’s safety and doing his own job—foraging.

“Go on, Sev. I’m okay now. Sorry I scared you.”

Severus sighed and kissed Harry’s forehead. “If anything happens, you will send me a Patronus or call for me?”

“Yes, love. Go on. It’s all right.”

With a worried frown, Severus tore himself away from Harry and trotted into the woods. Harry returned to putting the tent up and made damn sure he focused on the task at hand, for Severus’ sake.

Just as Harry finished nailing in the last peg, Severus returned, his arms laden with a veritable cornucopia of greenery.

“Ooh,” Harry said with a grin. “Looks like you found a lot. What’s in there?”

Severus looked over Harry’s face and body, sighing when he found no injuries. He shook himself and gave a little smirk.

“Well, besides several potions ingredients I doubt you’re interested in—”

“Touché,” said Harry with a snort.

Severus grinned. “You’re not the only wizard who can perform a wandless Summoning charm, Harry.”

Harry laughed. “You’re giving away your secrets.”

Severus chuckled and summoned a bag for his forage from his rucksack. “Not all of them, I assure you. You still don’t know how to identify or use most of those.”

“Er, no. Well, set that down and help me get a fire going.”

Severus nodded and, after a few moments of firewood and kindling hunting and ward casting, had a cozy fire going outside the tent with a conjured roaster full to the brim of pine nuts and chicory roots. Though they had hardly begun cooking, the smell was amazing. Harry took a big whiff and sighed.
“Gods, I’m glad you’re with me, Sev. It’s nice not to starve.”

Severus tipped Harry’s chin up and kissed his forehead. “I shall never let you go hungry again. I swear it.”

Unbidden, tears formed in Harry’s eyes. He felt foolish, but Severus’ words had healed wounds buried deep within, wounds started in a lonely cupboard. For a moment, he was that boy again, the boy without a name sniffling alone in the dark. The boy who had to wrap scrawny arms around his empty belly to lessen the ache and rocking himself to sleep. The unloved boy no one had missed while he languished in darkness and pain.

Severus had just told him, promised him, that he would never have to go back to that place, never be without food or love again. Tears blurred Harry’s vision as he pulled Severus into a soft kiss.

“Thank you,” he whispered, his breath hitching a bit. “I need … needed that.”

Severus caught him into a tender embrace. “I know, Harry. I know.”

Harry buried his face into Severus’ neck. “I won’t let you go hungry or be alone anymore either, love.”

The arms around him tightened, and a sigh warmed his scalp. “Thank you.”

“Yeah.” Harry hugged Severus tight. “I understand.”

“So you do.” Severus stood and cleared his throat. “Come, Harry. Let us start lunch. We cannot stay here long. We need to try to find Godric’s Hollow before nightfall.”

“Right.” Harry wiped his eyes and went to the tent flap. “Want some tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches?”

“That does sound good. After you.”

As Harry lifted the tent flap and stepped inside, a bright silver glow hit him right in the eyes and blinded him temporarily.

“What the bloody hell?”

Patronuses. Everywhere, Patronuses. He felt he had walked into an old DA meeting.

“Well,” said Severus with a wry frown. “This cannot be good.”

“Shite,” Harry muttered. “Who even are all these people?”

“That one—the tabby—is from Minerva.” Severus pointed each out as he spoke. “The jackal I believe is either Fred or George Weasley or perhaps both—they have the same form and usually share it. I’m fairly sure that Jack Russell will be Ronald Weasley attempting to apologise once more despite his brothers’ warnings—” Harry groaned. “And that one, no! That is … Poppy!”

Severus darted to the smallest of the Patronuses, a fat little partridge hen roosting among Harry’s blankets. He tapped his wand to the bird’s head and murmured, “Poppy, Harry and I are here and listening. Are you well? Are you safe?”

The partridge opened its beak. “Harry, dear, I just wanted to thank you for saving my life and killing that monster of a snake. Minerva told me, you know. About the snake, and about … about the Headmaster. Is he still with you, Harry? Minerva seemed to think he would die sooner than leave
Harry moved to Severus’ side and ran his fingers through all that silky hair. Severus, still kneeling, laid his head against Harry’s hip and wrapped an arm around his thighs.

“Thank you,” Severus whispered to Harry.

Harry continued stroking Severus’ hair and waved the Patronus on.

The bird fixed beady silver eyes on Severus. The man visibly flinched, and Harry had to suppress a chuckle. Madam Pomfrey was a small woman, but she could still cow giants of men with one look. Her Patronus had apparently inherited the ability.

“Severus, if you are there, my lad, how I wish I might give you a hug and smack you across the head at the same time! What were you thinking, risking your life like that, day in and day out? He would have killed you, had Albus not had other plans in place!”

Severus buried his head in Harry’s waist but said nothing. Harry held his head close, trying to communicate that he would protect Severus without words.

There was no need. Pomfrey’s voice softened, her admonishments finished. “I am glad you made it, Severus. I always knew you were on our side, even after … after Albus.”

Severus flinched and burrowed deeper into Harry’s side. Harry held him and tried to soothe him as best as he could.

“I saw what you went through every time you went to those godsforsaken Death Eater meetings,” Pomfrey’s Patronus continued. “No one who didn’t have courage like a lion and fierce resolve would endure that time after time. If it helps heal you at all, know that I am so very proud of you.”

Severus reached out and laid a hand on the bird’s head. “Thank you, Poppy. Gods, I am … just, thank you.”

Harry leaned down and kissed Severus’ temple. “We’ll tell her soon, okay, Sev?”

“Y-yes. Thank you.” He took a deep breath and nodded to the bird.

The bird let out a little plaintive cheep, and Harry imagined Madam Pomfrey wiping her eyes.

“Merlin help me, but I am so glad the two of you are safe. Please be careful, and good luck on your journey. If you should ever run into trouble, do send me a message. I’ll come help as soon as I’m able.”

The bird vanished, and Severus buried his face into Harry’s waist. Harry stroked the man’s hair and cheek and tried to ignore the intense pleasure of Severus’ breath against his hip. Gods, it felt like fire. He hoped he could control his wayward teenage hormones and keep from poking poor Severus in the ear.

“Thank you, Harry, for saving her life,” Severus murmured into Harry’s coat. “I, I would have grieved for her terribly, had she perished.”

Harry gave him a soft smile. “I know, love. I care about her, too.”
Severus closed his eyes at the loving name and pressed his lips into Harry’s hip. Heat and a jolt of electricity shot through Harry with the touch, and he yelped. He squirmed, debating on whether to hide his sudden issue or to see if Severus was willing to live out one of his fantasies. Oh, dear Merlin. Thinking of that was a mistake. Harry’s entire body came alive at the mere thought.

“S-Sev …?”

Severus smirked. “Hmm. We shall continue that later. Once we have dealt with all of our uninvi—”

A scratching sound and a hoot at the tent flap made Severus groan. “An owl as well? You must be joking.” Severus pressed an open-mouthed kiss into Harry’s hip, making molten lava pool in Harry’s groin and ripping a soft moan from his throat, then the older man stood and left Harry breathless and entirely at the mercy of his wayward hormones.

‘Gods. Not fair, Sev!’

Severus smirked as he went to open the flap. The bloody tease.

Well, shite. Now Harry had an issue he couldn’t hide … unless ….

He concentrated and used his frustrated desire and to push the tent flap open with a wave of his hand. With his energy used for a purpose, Harry’s desire flagged and returned to normal levels.

Severus gaped. “Merlin, your skills are growing so fast, it is frightening, Harry.”

With a smile, Harry turned to the tent entrance, then froze in shock and cold grief as a plump snowy owl flew inside.

‘Hedwig?’

But it wasn’t her. It would never be her again. Grief hit Harry like a sledgehammer and he nearly buckled under the force of the blow. Gods, how he missed her.


Harry gasped, alarm snapping him out of his grief in a hurry. “The shitehead has a snowy, too? What, did he just copy me to be cool or something?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Well. That was exceedingly mature.”

Harry crossed his arms over his chest and pouted. “Humph. It’s Malfoy. He brings out the worst in me. Him and his prat of a son.”

Severus cupped Harry’s cheek. “And that, Harry, is a dangerous mistake. Remember that he is not a foolish schoolboy like Draco. He is a Death Eater, and a powerful one. You would do well to take more care.”

Harry recoiled and sneered. “You expect me to respect the bastard?”

“No one suggested you need go that far. Indeed, even I only respect his skills with curses and duelling.” Severus scowled. “And the fact that no matter how much shite he rolls in, the man always seems to slither out of it without so much as a smudge on his nose.”

“Oh, he’s a smooth talker all right,” Harry said with a shudder. “Bastard. Let’s get his owl out of the way so I don’t have to look at … at her much longer.”

Severus opened his arms wide. “Come, my Harry.”
Harry gave him a grateful smile and buried his face in Severus’ chest. The man wrapped one arm around him and, with the other, checked the letter for curses and removed it from the owl’s leg. Beside Harry’s ear, parchment rustled as Severus rolled it open.

Severus read out loud, “‘Severus, if you are not dead yet—my, what touching concern—I am writing to give you fair warning. We both want this bastard in the ground no matter how much we might detest each other. So I am forced to lower myself to—Oh, get to the point, you pompous nitwit.’”

Harry snorted.

Severus rubbed Harry’s hair and said nothing for a long moment. “Ah, finally. Five full paragraphs of posturing! Gods, what a twit.”

Over Harry’s laughter, Severus cleared his throat and read on.

“‘The Dark Lord is incapacitated, as difficult as that is to grasp. I do not know what happened after I left Hearthstane yesterday eve, but hardly a couple hours after I returned to the manor, while we were eating dinner, the Dark Lord suddenly gripped his chest and sank to the floor as if someone had cursed him. I did check, but no one had cursed him, and the food was not altered in any way. There was nothing to explain his odd behaviour and sudden weakness. He has since taken to his bed.’” Severus scowled at the letter. “And you did not think to kill him then? Bloody coward.”

Harry nodded. “He’s not a tenth of the man you are, Sev. Not even close.”

Severus gave Harry a wan smile and read on.

“‘Three hours or so after he collapsed at dinner, the Dark Lord summoned Pettigrew. The snivelling idiot then ran to the Dark Lord’s sick room as if the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels, and I have not seen him since. Had I not been into the Dark Lord’s chamber myself at some point, I might have suspected that he was keeping Pettigrew on call to attend to his needs. However, I saw no sign of him. There was an aura of dark magic hanging about, but I saw nothing amiss.’”

Severus rubbed his lip. “Hmm. This does not bode well for the last Marauder.”

Harry snarled. “He was never a Marauder. He’s just a filthy traitor. If Riddle killed him, then that’s what the bastard deserved.”

“Perhaps, but I fear Riddle may have done worse than merely kill him.”

“Worse?”

Severus shuddered. “Oh yes. There are far worse things than death, and Riddle is all too familiar with them. So am I, unfortunately for him.”

He read on, deep lines marring his forehead and downturned mouth. “‘For now, the Dark Lord can do nothing, but once he recovers, he will be furious. He has already broken every window in the manor three times, and I think he may have used Rowle as … entertainment. I certainly have not seen him about the manor since this morning.’”

Both Harry and Severus shuddered.

“‘The Dark Lord is looking more dark than lordly these days, if you understand. He has gone quite mad. And when he comes out of this illness, Severus, he will be coming for you, not Harry. It’s your name he keeps cursing these days. Whatever you did to him, he is singularly displeased about it, and, if my judgment is sound, will likely take his revenge upon Hogwarts as soon as he is able,”
knowing the two of you will rush to its aid. I do not know if he has found a way through the wards yet, but I will try to keep you abreast of the situation as much as I safely can."

Severus closed the parchment and stared at it as if he wanted to figure it out. Harry understood. He hadn’t a clue what had gotten into Malfoy, either, suddenly deciding to play spy for them.

“Riddle’s going after Hogwarts,” said Harry with a shudder.

“Yes, but we already knew that.” Severus let slip a dark chuckle. “What interests me is the fact that Lucius-bloody-Malfoy, prince of peacocks and pomposity, somehow fancies himself a spy. He hasn’t the spine for it.”

Harry ran a hand down Severus’ spine, thrilling in the way the man froze and shivered under his hands. “Nope. Nothing like this one. He’ll be out on his ear before the weekend.”

Severus laughed and turned the parchment over. “Accio quill.”

Harry watched over the man’s shoulder as Severus penned his reply.

Malfoy,

Whatever gave you the idea that you have the bollocks to play spy? I am interested to see how long you last. Potter has started the betting at five days. I believe I will give you a bit longer, perhaps a week. After all, you are the most slippery bastard I’ve ever had the misfortune of meeting. Perhaps that will allow you to slither away when Riddle brings out his fire whips. Should you make it long enough to reply to this, I shall start the next round of betting at ten days.

But, pleasantries aside, yes, I am still alive. You may go about in peace now, undisturbed by fears of my untimely demise.

Now, onto the crux of the matter. You said Pettigrew is missing and that there was an aura of dark magic about Riddle’s bedchamber when you entered? How very thorough.

What kind of dark magic, you idiot? Blood magic, soul magic, curses? Each form has a different scent. I suspect you will have smelled something like the crackling, dry smell of a curse and I fear you will have also smelled ginger. As well, if there is a residue of ash that should not be present—perhaps beside the Dark Lord’s sickbed—I need to know immediately. Do not make it obvious what you are looking for or even where you are looking and Occlude well if you wish to survive long enough to make it to our second round of betting.

Reply to this note as soon as possible with useful details. Describe the room, the scent, and Riddle’s appearance and behaviour. Leave nothing out, or you may officially stop playing spy and leave the real intelligence work to those with higher brain functions.

I await your reply with bated breath.

Harry snickered as Severus rolled the letter up. “You’ve a wicked sense of humour.”

Severus raised an eyebrow and sealed the letter. “Humour? I was perfectly serious.”

Harry burst into laughter. “Gods, you’re brilliant.”

Severus chuckled. “I try.” He cast several spells Harry had never heard of on the letter before tying it to the owl’s leg. “Do hurry with that and try not to be seen,” he said to the owl. “Your master is taking his life in his own hands and he’ll be in for a world of pain should the Dark Lord happen to
discover that letter and break through its wards.”

The owl fluffed up his feathers and shivered, then zoomed through the tent flap once more. Harry watched him go, his chest aching with grief for his own beloved snowy.

Severus caressed his cheek. “Perhaps we shall purchase a new owl for you soon. Maybe when this bloody war is over so it need not worry about stray curses.”

Harry sighed and turned into Severus’ hand. “It feels … wrong. Like I’m betraying her.”

“No, love. She is at rest now. We shall need an owl regardless. I would suggest that we simply use mine, but I fear … I fear that he has met the same fate as your own. He would have found us by now, if he still lived.” Severus closed his eyes and lowered his head. “He was all I had. My only friend.”

“Oh, Sev.” Harry brought the man into a soft, loving kiss until the tension in his body eased. “I understand. But, if it helps, he’s not your only friend any longer.” He wrapped his arms around Severus’ neck and kissed him again. “You have me. You’ll always have me.”

Severus’ smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Thank you, Harry.” He kissed the younger man’s forehead and nuzzled his hair. “Come. There will be time enough to grieve when we have put this bastard in the ground for good. Let us see what the other Patronuses have to say.”

Harry turned to address Ron’s terrier. “Let’s just get this over with, shall we?”

Severus embraced him from behind and tucked Harry’s head under his chin. Feeling warm and protected, Harry caressed the man’s hands for a moment, then took a deep breath for courage and tapped his wand on the terrier’s head.

“All right, Ron. It’s just me and Severus. What is it this time?”

The terrier’s ears drooped and he let out a plaintive whine. “Harry, I reckon I’ve really screwed up, mate. Not a person in the family looks at me the same way. Hermione isn’t speaking to me, unless it’s to yell at me. Charlie has all but disowned me. George … well, he’s talking to me at least, but I can see in his eyes that he doesn’t trust me any longer. And Fred is angry at me for hurting George and you. And, you know, I finally understand—I think—they’re angry because I hurt Snape, too.”

The terrier tucked his tail. “Mate, I don’t know if I should even try to apologise again since I just keep mucking it up and I’m finding it really hard to let go of the past. But I do think I should say that … that part of the reason I’m so slow to forgive Snape is that he hurt you so much before.

“I just … it’s hard to see you let him hold you and touch you when I can’t stop thinking of when he spit your surname like it was poison and singled you out from the first day. All we were doing was taking notes! Well, you were. I was probably doodling or something, you know me. But you were just being a good student, and he acted like you were showing off because you didn’t know what some advanced ingredients were as a Muggle-raised first year! It was awful, and he only got worse from there.”

The terrier whimpered. “It’s just that, he was so cruel to you in the past, Harry, it’s hard to believe he’ll treat you right as your … um, boyfriend? Well, as anything, really. And I know he’s been better since being outed. I saw how kind he was to you at the rite and how the others’ acceptance broke him up, but I can’t help but worry about you anyway. You are my best friend, you know. Even if you hate me these days.”

Severus sighed. “Forgive me, Harry. He has a right to worry. I did treat you abominably, but I feared
that unless I showed animosity from the start ….”

Harry kissed him lightly. “Ssh. I’ve already said I forgive you. I know why you had to be hard, and you’ve been so gentle since you came to me for help. It’s okay, Sev. It’s over now.”

Severus closed his eyes and held him close. “Thank you.”

“Nothing to thank me for.” Harry motioned to the Jack Russel. “Go on.”

The terrier whined before continuing and let its ears droop again. “Mate, I know what you’re thinking. My anger at Snape wasn’t the reason I recoiled like you were something foul that night. You’re right. There’s more. None of it was your fault, but … well, I’ll just tell you.

“See, there was this time that Seamus—I don’t want to make you angry at him when he’s dead now and it was in third year, before we understood things like boundaries and consent—”

Harry’s heart skidded to a halt. “Oh gods, no.”

“—But he kind of came onto me. At the time, I didn’t even know being gay was a thing, you know? It had never occurred to me. Anyway, I just told him no that first time, but he kept hitting on me when we were alone and such. I explained that I didn’t like guys, but he still wouldn’t stop. Kept saying I couldn’t know if I didn’t like him unless I tried it. So I started avoiding him and staying in the common room so he couldn’t corner me. That whole thing with Sirius attacking me that night made for a good cover up, but I was really scared of Seamus.

“Then one night while you were at your dementor lessons, I went up to the dorm to study with Nev because it was too loud in the common room and we had a Potions test the next day. Well, Seamus came in while Neville was in the loo, and he grabbed me and kissed me. He might have done more had I not pulled my wand on him and threatened to hex his bollocks off if he ever touched me again.”

Harry’s knees wobbled and his stomach lurched. “Seamus … he … I didn’t know.”

Severus eased Harry to the floor and settled him between his thighs. With Severus’ long legs enclosing Harry and those strong, slender arms wrapped about his waist, he felt protected. Harry waved at the terrier to continue and buried his head in Severus’ neck.

“I don’t want you mad at Seamus, mate. He’s gone now. And besides, he never came at me again and he apologised for it anyway, but that whole episode just made me leery of gays regardless. I was never totally comfortable with Seamus again after that, or with any guy I knew was gay. Bit stupid of me, really. It’s not like every man who likes guys would like me, but then, it wasn’t a rational fear to begin with.

“So, after the rite, Bill made me talk to him about what had happened to make me dislike gays. After I told him about Seamus, he made me go stay with Fred and George—and Angelina and Lee live there too.

“At first, I was really scared of Lee, but you know what? He’s great to George. And he’s never even looked twice at me or anyone else. He’s stuck on George, like the man is his entire world, and George looks at Lee the same way. As they should be, since they’re talking about bonding.

“They’ve really helped me to see that I was being silly and not all gays are going to hit on me, and of those, very few would keep going when I refused. And Bill reminded me that there’s also a lot of men who hurt women like that and even women who might hurt either gender, and it’s not their sexuality that’s the issue, but the fact that they don’t stop when the other person says no.”
The terrier sat a little straighter. “Besides that, I’ve been thinking about how you and Snape acted around each other at the rite. I even asked the twins to pensieve their memories of it—Hermione bought one for revisiting lessons after class because of course she did—and I watched their points of view. I watched when they talked to you after, too. And when he looked at you—gods, Harry. I wish Hermione would look at me like that.”

The terrier huffed and shook his head. “Harry, I don’t pretend to understand how it happened. You hated him as much as I did three weeks ago, and I thought he hated you, but since then, somehow you’ve become his entire world, the way Lee is for George and Bill is for Fleur and … and the way Hermione was for me. Still is, even if she never looks at me like she used to. I reckon … m-maybe I’ve lost her. Gods, I hope not, but I know why now. Because … because I was really an idiot, Harry, and I should have just listened.”

Ron’s voice had broken, and the pain in his tone cut Harry to bits. He buried his head in Severus’ shoulder and struggled not to weep.

“Harry, you’ve heard my apologies before. You know how bad I feel about hurting you. But Snape, well, I’ve not really apologised to you yet.” The terrier paused and shook his coat out. “Professor Snape, I, I was wrong. I’m sorry about the way I’ve acted. I’m still angry with you, and I’m still trying to wrap my head around all of this, but I’ll try to get past it all. For Harry’s sake, I’ll try.

“I just have one thing to ask of you, okay? Treat him well. Though he’s still furious at me, Harry’s as much my brother as George or Fred or even that prat, Percy. More than Percy. Just take care of him for me. Please. Even if he never forgives me, take care of him.”

Severus held Harry tighter and whispered, “I will.”

The terrier licked Harry’s cheek—it felt a bit like a cool breeze—and vanished.

Harry stared at the place the terrier had been, lost and blasted open. So Seamus had attacked Ron, and that’s where his mistrust of gays had come from. Merlin. Harry hadn’t even known Seamus was gay, let alone that he’d had a thing for Ron. And now, he didn’t know what to feel, what with Seamus gone and Ron trying to look past the troubles of his early years.

Severus wrapped his legs around Harry’s and kissed his cheek. “It was apology enough for me. I did not know of the incident between Weasley and Finnigan either, or I would have punished Finnigan harshly. I believe lines on consent would have made for a fair start. Perhaps about ten thousand or so?”

Harry snorted, but it ended in a sob. “He’s gone, Sev. Seamus. There’s nothing we could do to him that’s worse than the snatchers already have. And he didn’t deserve it anyway. He was just a stupid kid who didn’t know better, and he learned how to fix it later. Even if he’d done it as an adult and fully knowing what he did wrong, he still didn’t deserve that.”

Severus held Harry and smoothed his hair as the young man wept for the grief he’d never had time or peace enough to release. He wept for Seamus, Lavender, Remus, and everyone else they’d lost to this horrible war. He wept for Ron—both his pain and his folly—and wished they could just be a family again.

Harry sat and wiped his eyes. Maybe they could, at least to some extent. Ron had finally come through, after all.

He buried his face into Severus’ throat and breathed the man in, taking comfort and joy from his herbal, woody scent. He kissed the man’s neck just under his ear and thrilled in Severus’ little gasp
of pleasure, the way his head tilted to give Harry access, how his hands slowed on Harry’s back and clutched at the fabric of his coat. The desire to taste Severus, to use his tongue and see how the older man reacted nearly overwhelmed Harry, but they hadn’t time yet. Instead, he used the joy of Severus’ pleasure in him to call his Patronus.

“Be careful to hide yourself, Prongs,” he said to the stag, “and go to Ron Weasley. Tell him: ‘You should have told me sooner about Seamus. I’d have kicked his arse for you. I wish he was still here so I could kick it now. You’re forgiven, as long as you’re never a prat like this again.

‘And, just so you know, Severus is wonderful to me. He asks me to forgive him a lot, too. He hated that he had to hurt me so much, and you, and everyone. He was so alone, Ron. No one knew the real man underneath but Mum, and she turned him away and then d-died.’”

At a sudden surge of grief, Harry paused and breathed deeply until he could control himself again.

“‘I’m not going to tell you anything else though. You’re just going to have to watch us together after this is over and see for yourself that he treats me well. And I swear to Merlin, if you hurt him again, I’ll sic the twins on you, Ron! He’s been through enough.

‘Just try to forgive him, okay? He’s a good man. And I, I really care for him.’”

Harry rubbed his forehead and sighed. “‘It’s okay now. We’re all right, and I’ll have Prongs tell the others you’ve made it up, okay? Now will you please stop sending bloody Patronuses to me unless there’s a real emergency? You might get us caught.’ That’s all, Prongs. Good luck.”

The stag vanished, and Harry called another instance of him. “All right, Prongs two. You, I want to go around to the Weasley family: Molly, Arthur, Bill, Charlie, Fred, George, and Ginny—don’t go to Percy—and tell them this: ‘Prat Junior has officially removed his head from his posterior.’”

Severus snorted.

“Go on, then,” said a grinning Harry, “and take care not to be seen by anyone else except Angelina, Fleur, and Lee.”

The second Patronus vanished, and Harry called a third. “Hello, Prongs three. You’re to go to Hermione. Make sure no one sees you but her. Tell her: ‘Ron’s explained himself properly this time, and there was a really good reason why he was freaked out before. I don’t want to say what happened because that’s his business to tell you, but if you can, stop boxing his ears and ask him why he was so upset about this in the first place. And try to remember, he loves you, okay? I do, too. I’ll talk to you again as soon as it’s safe and I’ve anything of value to report. Oh, and you’re now the second to officially know. You know what I mean.’ That’s all, Prongs. Go on with you.”

The last Patronus vanished, and Severus gave Harry a wry smile. “Are there to be any other stags running across the countryside?”

“Only the flesh and blood kind,” said Harry with a snort. “Now, who’s next? The twins or McGonagall?”

“Professor McGonagall, and I believe we should check the twins’ report next.”

Harry nodded and tapped the jackal with his wand. “All right Gred and Forge, it’s just Severus and me. On with your message.”

The jackal let out a cackle like a hag, making Harry and Severus jump back and grab their wands.
“Nice trick, eh? Gred figured that one out. If you weren’t Harry and the Headmaster, he would have done much worse. The laugh would have released a sleeping gas so he could escape. Next time you see us in person, we’ll give you the spell, all right?”

“Merlin, they’re brilliant,” said Harry with a chuckle. “Devious, but brilliant.”

Severus nodded. “Which one is Gred?”

Harry shrugged. “I think they switch.” He motioned the jackal on.

George said, “Now that that’s done, how in the bloody hell are you using Harry’s stag, Professor? We didn’t think that was possible. McGonagall is giving it strange looks, shocked looks, so we’ll be playing a bit of cat and mouse for the answer shortly.”

Severus winced. Harry slid his hand into the man’s and rubbed his fingertips.

Fred’s voice took over. “About the news—tonight’s password is ‘Moony,’ by the way—”

Harry paled and swayed into Severus. “No ….”

Severus embraced Harry and murmured, “I shall open the broadcast.”

“T-thank you, love.”

Severus held Harry closer and nodded to the Patronus.

Fred continued, “Nothing much happened last night. There was a small attack in Yorkshire, but again, no one found You-Know-Who to be involved. No one died this time, though the Death Eaters did manage to burn a Muggle home down. The aurors got a tip-off to the attack that morning and were already on the scene when the Death Eaters showed up. Popular opinion is that Riddle apparated out as soon as the battle started, but we don’t think he was ever involved. If he was, this would have been much bigger. It was hardly a skirmish, and nothing else happened last night that pointed to a Riddle-orchestrated attack.”

George took over. “In fact, the only other report we had at all last night was that one of Bill’s Muggleborn classmates—Julia Thompson—was taken by the snatchers. The news on her is grim, I’m afraid, but Riddle wasn’t involved in her death—Bellatrix got her, the mad bitch. Everything else has been quiet.”

Fred reclaimed the message. “So that leaves only one unanswered question here: why the hell is Riddle being so docile? Blackpool proved he’s gotten his hands on some horrible weapon, so why hasn’t he attacked again with it? We don’t know.”

George said, “If he is injured, Professor, it would explain all of this, but your message was the first we’ve heard of it.”

Fred interjected, “Oh, and Harry’s family is fine, as far as we know. We’ve heard nothing about them being attacked anyway, the foul little bastards. I still say Harry should let us have some fun with them. We can always use new test subjects, you know.”

The twins switched again. “Let us know if you have news, or if Harry decides to let us test some pranks on the Muggle berks.”

Severus squeezed Harry as the jackal vanished. “Are you able to call another stag?”
Harry gave a wry chuckle. “There’s a herd of them already, but I’ll see if my magic will stretch that far.” He focused on the feel of Severus’ arms and sighed when a new instance of Prongs stood in wait. “Prongs, listen to Severus for this message.” As the stag lifted its head to face the taller man, Harry met Severus’ eyes as well. “I don’t suppose you’ll tell me why he listens to you yet?”

Severus hugged him tighter. “N-not today. Give me time.”

Harry sighed and kissed his cheek. “All right. Just, know I won’t hurt you for it, okay?”

“I will explain once I am certain of all the details.” Severus held Harry tight, easing the younger man’s disappointment, and turned to the stag. “Prongs, tell Fred and George Weasley this: ‘There is a new spy within Riddle’s ranks, and he is likely the origin of your ministry tip-off about Yorkshire. For his sake, I cannot reveal his name. He is not nearly so skilled at spying as I am and will likely be dead within the week if anyone at all knows of his involvement. To be sure, the idiot may perish regardless, but nevertheless, he has already given Harry and I some crucial information.’

‘Riddle is indeed incapacitated, as we have learned this morning. Harry’s powers hurt him severely, and our spy reports that he has been bedridden since last evening. The spy also reported that Pettigrew went into Riddle’s chambers late that same evening and has not been seen since. Our spy did not see Pettigrew leave and found no evidence of his corpse, and Riddle took out his anger on Rowle as well later. This, and the fact that he mentioned sensing an aura of dark magic prior to Rowle’s torture, all indicates that there is something sinister afoot.’

Severus took a deep breath and clutched Harry close. “‘There is a spell. One so dark, so terrible, I would not, in normal circumstances, dare mention it to anyone, but the events of the last three days have made it an absolute necessity. This spell—you will not beat the name of it out of me—drains the life from the victim without leaving a corpse, mainly because it does not entirely kill the victim. Not in the usual sense.

‘Instead, it … it works much like a horcrux, only it does not leave the caster immortal or split their soul. Rather, the victim’s soul is taken and housed within the caster’s body until the end of the caster’s life, with just enough of the victim’s life force sustained to keep their soul in this plane. This means, unfortunately for Pettigrew, that the victim is able to feel pain and be aware of their predicament on the most basic levels. As such a dark spell stains the caster irrevocably, it is usually only used when the caster’s soul has been weakened beyond the point of repair, such as in the case of creating multiple horcruxes.’

‘Mother of Merlin,’ Harry breathed into Severus’ shoulder, his stomach roiling with disgust.

Severus slid a hand into Harry’s hair and cradled the young man’s head against his shoulder. “Forgive me, Harry. I would not speak of it unless absolutely necessary.”

Harry looked into Severus’ face, stricken and ill. “Love, how much do you keep hidden? How many dark secrets do you know that you can never reveal to anyone?”

Severus shuddered and closed his eyes. “Far too many.”

“Unburden what you can on me. I can bear it.”

Severus gave Harry a sad smile and kissed his forehead. “I could never hurt you like that, Harry. I will not stain you with that kind of knowledge.”

“I already know about horcruxes and soul-eating spells. How much worse can it be?”

Severus’ lip twisted in what Harry knew wasn’t a scowl, but sheer horror. “Trust me, Harry. You do
not want the answer to that question.”

“Merlin,” breathed a shocked Harry.

Severus continued his message in the lapse while Harry gathered his wits. “Prongs, carry on with: ‘The good news for us is that all dark magic comes with a price, and in this case, it is usually the caster’s sanity. I have no doubt that Riddle believed himself powerful enough to resist the mental damage, when, on the contrary, I believe his extreme soul disfigurement will make him far more susceptible than most. His mind will blend with Pettigrew’s, and Pettigrew is a much simpler, much more predictable man.

‘As of now, this is instinct rather than confirmed evidence. However, the spy has already reported evidence of madness in Riddle, and this spell leaves behind traces: the distinctive scent of ginger that accompanies the casting of all soul magic and a pile of ash in place of the victim’s body. I have sent an owl to our new spy asking for a report of the conditions he found when he noticed Pettigrew missing and a report on Riddle’s behaviour—this spy is incapable of casting even a non-corporeal Patronus—and will send you another message once I have further information.

‘Be advised that, even if the spell is confirmed, I do not think it wise to spread this information on the radio show. Besides the dangers of revealing the existence of such a ghastly spell to the public at large, the listeners may become lax upon hearing that Riddle is injured and forget that even injured, he is still capable of horrendous dark magic. Do tell our most trusted comrades, however, and keep your eyes and ears open.’ That is all, Prongs.”

The stag vanished.

Harry shuddered and hugged Severus tight. “Pettigrew is a … not-quite horcrux now?”

“I cannot be certain until Archimedes returns with a sensible reply from Lucius, but that is my fear. I suspect Riddle had set that soul drain to go through himself, and when you cut off his source and destroyed the parasite, you burned what little remains of his own. He would have had no choice but to take in a secondary soul as he has split his into separate containers that we have destroyed. He will not be able to make another horcrux now, I think.”

“Merlin,” Harry breathed. “I can’t … it’s so horrible, but then, so is Pettigrew.”

Severus’ eyes hardened. “The man signed his death warrant twenty years ago.”

“Mum.”

“Yes, and all the other people he has hurt or killed. Like Diggory, Harry.”

Harry growled. “Right. Cedric was just a boy.”

“He was your age, Harry.” Severus frowned. “Merlin, now I feel strange.”

“Don’t. I’m ages older than Cedric ever was.”

Severus relaxed and held Harry’s face. “True. And, at least to me, far more beautiful.”

Soft lips found his own, and Harry’s tension faded into a wash of tender love. He slid his hands into Severus’ hair and tried to deepen the kiss, but Severus pulled back with a wry smile.

“Not yet. I feel odd with Minerva watching me.”
Harry chuckled. “All right.” He tapped the tabby’s head. “Go on, Professor. It’s just Severus and I.”

“Severus, Harry,” said the cat Patronus, “I wanted to thank you for the timely warning. We cannot broadcast this in case someone on the dark side is listening, but Hogwarts is safe for the time being. As well, we have completely evacuated Hogsmeade. Only Aberforth and Ariana remain as watchmen, and should the city come under attack, Aberforth will come with Ariana to the castle and help us prepare to fight. Rosmerta and a few of the braver and more trustworthy shopkeepers are also here to help—and yes, Severus, we have already tested them all under Veritaserum, just in case.

“We have also begun rites to reinforce the castle against foreign invaders, and I believe it shall hold up to a siege for quite some time, especially since you stopped the creation of another soul-bomb. Severus, my lad, I do hope you are recovering well. Harry, take care of him in my stead. I am with you both, in spirit.”

The tabby rubbed her head against Harry’s and Severus’ feet in turn. “May the might of Merlin guard your steps, the love of Morgana protect your hearts, and the sight of Circe guide your way.”

As the tabby vanished, a curious warmth spread through Harry’s chest, feet, and forehead.

“Was that another ritual, Sev?”

The man nodded. “She has blessed us with the protection of the ancient sorcerers. I do not know if it actually calls upon their spirits, but the intent of the rite does seem to help.”

“Brian and Cináed saved your life with it. I feel better knowing we have McGonagall’s protection, too. Can we send that same spell back to her and the other professors?”

Severus smiled. “Perhaps modified a bit as they are not hunting horcruxes, and since we cannot touch her directly, we shall have to enact a more complicated rite than what Brian used, but we can indeed grant them our protection. I believe I will send my doe this time as Hogwarts is well-guarded for the time being and your stag is a bit overworked.” He closed his eyes and smiled, and a doe appeared with his quiet incantation.

“Sev?”

He looked to Harry with a curious expression.

“Are your happy memories the same? Do you still think of my mum?”

A pink blush painted Severus’ cheeks. “N-no. I, that time, I remembered when you asked if I would like to adopt a child with you.”

Harry gave him a hopeful, bright smile. “You never did answer me. The thought makes you happy, then?”

Severus hugged him tight. “It does, but is too soon to think of such things now. If we are still … together after this war, then I would like to consider it. For now, however, we must focus on killing Riddle, or all this will be for naught.”

Harry’s joy faded. “Right. Yeah, you’re right. No point of thinking about kids if we don’t know where we’re going to be later.”

Severus tipped Harry’s chin up to look into his eyes and winced at the sight of the tears Harry couldn’t stop.
“Harry … I am not saying no.” He kissed the young man’s forehead. “On the contrary, I rather like the idea. But we need to spend more time together first, to make sure a relationship will even survive this war or the peace afterwards.” He thumbed a stray tear away. “Don’t cry, Harry. Please. I am not rejecting you, only asking for time.”

Harry sighed and rubbed at his eyes. “I’m sorry, Sev. I know damn well that you’re right. I just, the idea seemed so perfect. And I thought, well, you didn’t shoot me down, so I guess I got my hopes up too soon.”

Severus tucked Harry’s head under his chin and held him tight. “Let us just end this war first. Even if I did feel it was a good time to discuss this, no child would be safe with us until Riddle and all his supporters are either dead or in Azkaban. I would not wish to take in a baby only for the child to die a few weeks later in an attack.”

Harry shuddered. “Merlin, no. That would destroy me.”

“As it would me. So let us first make sure we have a safe place to keep children and that we are stable enough to raise them well.”

Harry sniffled. “So, we can think of it as a long-term goal, then?”

Severus stroked Harry’s hair. “That, I believe, is acceptable.”

Harry’s joy returned. “Great. That’s okay, then.”

“Good. Then let us prepare our lunch and be on our way. It will take us some time to walk to the point that Godric’s Hollow is marked on this map, and likely some time longer to find the entrance. We shall need to be constantly seeking the energy of wards.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Severus nodded and went to help Harry make lunch.
As snow began to fall late that afternoon, Severus and Harry were forced to stop searching for the night and settled somewhere around the blue dot on Dumbledore’s map. They had yet to feel the sizzle of wards, but Severus suspected they would come upon them tomorrow. They might have kept looking that evening as neither was yet tired, but the woods around them would be too difficult to traverse in the snow and they dared not risk a Lumos, not so close to a wizarding village and one of Riddle’s most well-known targets.

Besides that, Severus’ wrist and chest were aching again. He had yet to feel the coldness of soul-magic and doubted he would with Riddle incapacitated, but his body was making its need for rest known. With the thought of taking a general healing potion before bedtime, he quaffed a mild pain reliever and settled in for a restful evening with his books.

While Harry lay on his belly in the living area, the journal and his translations spread out before him, Severus flicked on a Tempus spell to keep track of the time before Potterwatch and searched through Granger’s considerable library for information on Harry’s odd conglomeration of skills. He already knew there was nothing in his own.

After an hour or so, he tossed aside ‘Ancient Magicks and the Wizards Who Love Them’ with a sigh of disgust. Nothing. Not a whisper of dream-walking or unusual prowess with wandless magic or the ability to heal and kill remotely from within the body.

Harry looked up from the journal and gave him a commiserating smile. “No luck?”

Severus shook his head and returned to the beaded bag for another search, the previous book in hand. He poked his head into the bag and, after replacing the last selection, ran a fingertip down a neat row of ordered spines. ‘Animagi and You.’ Not that one. ‘The Animagus Transformation in Depth.’ Hmm. He poked his head out of the bag.

“Was Granger studying to be an Animagus?”

Harry replied, “We all were. Ron and Hermione got theirs a few weeks before you showed up. He’s a beagle and she’s a fox. I’m the only one still trying to figure it out.”

“Hmm. I am a leopard.”

Harry’s eyes dilated. “Show me?”
Severus swallowed hard at the look of hunger in the young man’s eyes. With a shiver, he focused his core on shifting form and shook himself out after he had transformed into a clouded leopard. Hesitant and needing approval like he had never done, he lifted his head to meet Harry’s gaze and prayed he would find neither disgust nor pity in those eyes—even as an animal, scars marked every inch of his hide.

But Harry’s eyes were wide and shining with excitement. “Merlin! Sev, you’re absolutely gorgeous!”

Severus frowned—an action the leopard translated as a cock of its head. Gorgeous? How?

Harry stood and knelt before him, holding a hand steady over his head. “Can I?”

Severus closed his eyes and pushed his head into that small, but strong hand. Harry grinned and stroked his fur with reverent, gentle palms.

“Gods, so sleek. You’re amazing, Severus.”

Severus could not quite prevent the deep rumble in his throat.

“Purring? Oh Merlin. So adorable.”

The purring cut off immediately, turning instead to a muted growl.

Harry chuckled and kissed the top of his head. “I can think you’re sweet without you taking it as a blow to your pride. You see, I also happen to think you’re the sexiest man alive.”

Severus tried to hold it back, but his throat rumbled without his consent, and a chuckling Harry petted him to soothe his injured dignity. Those gentle hands explored Severus’ neck and throat, but as soon as Harry’s fingers touched his chest, Severus balked and hung his head. He hated the scars there and feared Harry’s rejection, should he feel them under his hands.

Perhaps it was only too dark for Harry to see what he truly was.

Harry hesitated. “Did I hurt you, love? I’m sorry.” He stroked down Severus’ back instead, all the way down his tail, and Severus released a shocked huff.

He had felt that on his arse.

Before his body escaped his control—which, after all, would be particularly visible on an animal—he shifted into his human form once more.

“Well, there you are. My leopard.” He turned away and tried to gather his wits.

“It’s beautiful, Sev. You’re beautiful.”

“I am not sure how you could think so, but thank you.”

Harry gently turned him back around to meet emerald eyes bright with mischief. “Did it feel good? When I petted your tail?”

Severus coughed. “Oh. Ah—wait a moment! You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

Harry burst into laughter. “Sure did! It was payback for earlier!”

Severus groaned. “Teenagers.”
Harry’s laughter warmed his heart, despite Severus’ stern expression.

Severus gave in and let a smile cross his face. “Yes, it did feel good.”

“Hmm, so did when you kissed my hip.”

“I had noticed.”

Harry’s face went bright pink.

“Hmm. Adorable indeed.”

His ears turned pink too. “Touché.”

Severus chuckled and stroked Harry’s blushing cheek. “Beautiful. Now, exactly what part of the Animagus transformation is giving you trouble, Harry?”

Harry fidgeted his hands. “Well, it’s not exactly that it’s giving me trouble, per se, it’s just ….”

“Just?”

“Well, it’s a weird form, and I’m afraid it’ll be too big for the tent.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Too big?”

Harry huffed and turned his back. “I think I’m some sort of dragon.”

“Merlin!” Severus tapped his chin in thought. “You’re sure it’s a dragon?”

“No, not exactly, but the wings sure look like one. Only, they’re feathered at the bottom which has me stumped.” Harry sighed and turned back to Severus. “I was actually doing okay with the transformation work, but I stopped trying once I realised that my form would possibly be too big for our wards, let alone the tent.”

“Hmm. A wise precaution.” Severus rubbed his lip in thought. “But perhaps unnecessary. I know of no dragons with feathers, although there are a handful of magical creatures with feathered wings and scales. What colour were your scales? The feathers? Were your wings shaped like bird wings or otherwise?”

Harry ruffled his hair. “Um, the wings, from what I recall, weren’t much like a bird’s. They had the five points and sharp angles dragon wings do, only with feathers instead of skin. Both scales and feathers were black, but with an iridescent teal sheen. I asked Charlie, and even he had no idea what kind of dragon—or beast, if it’s not a dragon—it could be.”

Severus nodded. “I am not a dragon handler, but I have studied creatures in depth for twenty years—the Order needed to know what kinds Riddle might try and recruit. Perhaps I have seen your dragon in my research. Will you show me what you have managed?”

Harry hesitated. “What if I transform all the way and it’s too big?”

Severus frowned and cast a few quick spells on their surroundings. “There. Now the tent will expand—and the wards with it—as needed. As well, we are in wizarding space now, so our tent will not outgrow the area either. Let me see what you can do.”

Harry gaped. “You … you can do that?”
Severus rolled his eyes. “Obviously. Are you going to show me or is that ‘doxy in the wandlight look’ a permanent expression?”

“Doxy in the wandlight? Don’t you mean ‘deer in the headlights’?”

“Among the many differences between wizards and Muggles, Harry, is the fact that we don’t use autos. Now, your form?”

Harry stood and shoved his hands in his pockets. “You’re sure it’s safe?”

Severus brushed the frightened young man’s hair back from his forehead. “Yes, love. I would never endanger you.”


Harry closed his eyes in concentration, and, after a few seconds, dragon-like wings with feathers emerged from his back. There were two other traits, however, that convinced Severus they would have no need for wizard space to complete Harry’s Animagus training.

“Harry, I do not think you are a dragon.”

Harry blinked and looked at his wings. “But …?”

“Your hands, Harry. Look at your hands.”

Hands indeed. They were paws. Big, black paws with scales coming to a point at the top of each. A magical cat’s paws, judging by the fuzzy, black ears poking out of that beloved mop top and the lack of visible claws.

“Whoa!” Harry stretched his paws out, revealing his claws and confirming Severus’ suspicions. “Merlin! Scales, wings, and fur? What in the world am I?”

Severus chuckled. “An osirin. An Egyptian magical panther with wings. Ancient Egyptians used to worship them, though they believed the cats to be representative of their cat goddess, Bast. This could not be further from the truth, however. Bast is regarded as the goddess of family and fertility. Osiris, from whom the osirin take their name, is the Egyptian god of the dead.”

“Merlin. So are these osirins associated with Osiris, then?”

“That, I do not know. We do not know if the deities in ancient times actually exist. True osirins, however—and do forgive me for bringing this up—are known as the guardians of the veil. The masters of life and death.”

Harry shuddered hard. “Does that mean I …?”

“Does it mean you are a true osirin? No, love. It is only an Animagus form, though a singularly powerful one. And I am sure of it, because you do not have eyes here.”

He touched the top of Harry’s wings, the corner where the longest feathers started. His fingertips brushed something soft and rounded and he drew back in shock.

“But dear Merlin, you will! How strange. Usually Animagus forms with extra senses—such as an extra pair of eyes or ears—will alter so as not to overwhelm the wizard or witch with senses they have never had before. It appears you have inherited all the osirin traits.” He frowned and touched
Harry’s paw. “But they do not usually have these scales. How unusual.”

Harry had gone white. He gripped Severus’ hands and choked out, “Sev. Am I a guardian of the veil or not?”

Severus shook his head. “It might explain your dream powers, but no. You are human, love. True osirins have no human shape. They are fully bestial, though sentient and gentle in nature.”

Harry let slip a huge sigh and buried his face in Severus’ shoulder. “I don’t want that power. Never want power like that.”

Severus stroked his hair. “Forgive me, Harry. I was only trying to teach you about the beasts themselves. I did not mean to frighten you.”

“It’s okay.” Harry gave him a bright smile. “So I’m an osirin. You finally solved the mystery.”

Severus chuckled and summoned a book from his bag. He scanned through the pages until he found what he was looking for. “Look. This is an osirin. They are quite lovely, no?”

Harry peered at the book and came up grinning. “I’ve got to tell Hermione.”

Severus chuckled and waved him on.

Harry closed his eyes and called his stag, but hesitated before giving it a message. “Sev, um, what should I call you? My boyfriend?”

Severus shuddered, his lip curling in disgust. “I should think not.”

The stag vanished, and terrible pain entered Harry’s eyes. “Oh. But I thought … oh.” He shuddered as if in physical pain. “Sev! I, hurts.”

Harry clutched at his heart, and Severus’ soul screamed with terror.

‘Oh gods, he’s withering again!’

“Harry!” Horrified, Severus rushed to correct his mistake and eased Harry to the floor, cradling the suffering young man in his arms. “Dear Merlin, I did not mean—Harry, please, love. Don’t leave me!”

Harry clutched at Severus’ collar. “You, you don’t want to be rid of me?”

“Never.” Severus kissed him hard, though he kept it short so Harry could breathe, and buried his nose into Harry’s neck. “Never want to be rid of you. You are my world.”

Harry’s hand relaxed and slid into Severus’ hair. “You still care about me?”

“I never stopped, love. You simply misunderstood, or perhaps I worded that badly, but I never wanted to end our relationship or deny that we have one.” Severus tipped the young man’s chin up and kissed him. “Forgive me. I did not mean that I did not want you, only that I take issue with … that term. I have not been a boy for decades. Would ‘partner’ suit?”

The life came back to Harry’s eyes. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s great.” He buried his face in Severus’ neck. “M’sorry. I don’t know why it hurts me so much when I get scared.”

Severus held Harry tight, his lips turned in a frown. “Neither do I, but perhaps this will help prevent endangering your life. My Harry, I may disagree with you from time to time, but just as you
promised me that a simple disagreement does not mean the end of our friendship, neither does it mean I would simply throw you away.” He kissed Harry tenderly and brushed his hair back from his forehead. “You are mine now, do you understand me? I will never let you go.”

Harry gave him a beatific smile. “Really?”

“Yes. You are mine, and I am yours. As long as you want me. Please, do not fear that I will leave you again. Please. It terrifies me to see you suffering and close to death and to know it is all because I have said or done something foolish.” Severus laid his head against Harry’s. “Love, I am … inexperienced in matters of the heart at best, and may at times say hurtful things simply because I am unused to watching my tongue, but I will never reject you. I will never throw your care away. I am yours. Always.”

“Sev ….”

Soft, full lips claimed his own, and Severus smoothed the chapped places with gentle caresses of his tongue.

“Thank you, love,” said a smiling Harry. “I think I understand now.”

“Thank Merlin. I do not want to hurt you. Never want to hurt you again.”

“I know, Sev. I know.” Harry sat up and pulled out his wand. “I’m going to try to call Prongs again. Is it okay if I talk to Hermione about us? Only, she asked me to keep her updated.”

“As you wish, but do try to keep it succinct. We have sent too many messages today.”

Harry nodded and summoned his stag once more. “All right Prongs, this is for Hermione. Be careful not to be seen by anyone but her and only approach if she’s safely hidden somewhere inside. Tell her: ‘Hermione! Guess what? My brilliant partner here knows what I am in Animagus form. I’m an osirin! It’s not a dragon at all—it’s a panther with wings. He says they’re from Egypt, and he showed me a picture in one of his books—’ ”

Severus interrupted with the book’s title.

Harry grinned. “Prongs, carry on with: The book is ‘Creatures of the Nile’ since we all know you’re going to want to look it up first thing.’ ”

A soft expression crossed Harry’s face. “‘Oh, ‘Mione, I’m happier than I’d ever imagined I could be. Severus is so brilliant. So kind to me, too, now that the masks are off. I, I never thought I’d be so lucky.’ ” Harry sniffled and gave the stunned Severus a bright smile. “‘I guess I found my Prince after all.’ ”

Harry banished the stag to go on his way, and Severus watched him, his heart spilling over with love for his partner. They were truly partners now. A thrill ran up Severus’ spine. Harry had been happy about it, too.

The stag bowed and vanished, and Severus wrapped Harry up from behind, burying his nose in that sweet-smelling messy hair. “I am the fortunate one, Harry.”

Soft wings folded around him and gentle paws protected his hands, and Severus thought he had never felt so loved. Harry held him like this for a long moment, then turned to face him and wrapped Severus in his arms and wings alike.

“Well, what do you think of these?” He nodded towards one of his wings. “They come in handy for
holding you, though the paws are a bit more difficult to manage. I miss having thumbs.”

Severus laughed and stroked Harry’s ear, marvelling at its softness. “You are lovely. Do you know your pupils are slitted like this? It’s magnificent with those bright green eyes of yours.” He nuzzled Harry’s nose. “You are quite safe to continue practising without my spells. You will be the same size as myself in full Animagus form, perhaps a bit larger, but certainly not so large as to break our tent or our wards.”

Harry’s eyes shone. “So even as Animagi, we fit together.” He shifted back into his human form and gave Severus a tender kiss. “Thank you.”

Severus responded with a kiss of his own. “I am looking forward to seeing you as a full osirin. You will undoubtedly be a stunning Animagus.”

Harry laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “Yeah. It’s great. There’s just one problem: I just won’t be able to just run like you or the others can. People would notice a bloody panther with wings.” He burrowed into Severus’ neck and sighed. “Just one more way I’m different.”

“You are not different; you are unique. Rare and precious, my Harry.” Severus kissed Harry’s scar. “And a clouded leopard cannot exactly run around Britain either.”

“Sev,” Harry whispered against his cheek. “You make this … oddity sound like a good thing.”

“It is. There is no one like you in the world.”

Harry tensed with grief. “No. I just want to be normal, Sev. Not rare or special. Just me. Just normal.”

Severus kissed his forehead. “I know. But your ability to love is born of your rarity, love. No ‘normal’ young man without your experiences of the world would be able to see me the way you do.”

Harry nuzzled his neck. “Bah. You’re gorgeous and brilliant and sexy. Anyone could see it, if you’d give them the chance to look.”

Severus’ went quiet. “What makes you think I haven’t?”

Harry looked up at him, his emerald eyes full of sorrow. “Before you became a spy?”

“Yes. Only Regulus Black ever thought I was worth a second look, and he never … held me like you do.”

Severus stroked Harry’s soft ear and slid a hand into that messy mop—it was softer in his part-Animagus form. Soon Harry would have his fur.

“He never looked at me with these eyes full of hurt for my pain.”

Severus kissed Harry, letting his emotion and love spill over into his lips. Harry sighed into his kiss and wrapped his fingers in Severus’ hair.

“He never kissed me like this, either, like nothing else in the world mattered.”

Severus pressed his forehead against Harry’s. ‘He never loved me like you do.’

Gods, he hoped Harry loved him, even if he couldn’t quite believe it.
Harry kissed him lightly. “You’re my heart, Sev. When you kiss me, nothing else exists. Only you. When you touch me, I feel at home. And I guess if having you, having this, means I have to deal with being unique, then so be it.” Harry pulled the taller man into his lap, much to Severus’ surprise. “I won’t let you go for anything.”

Severus squirmed, his face hot. “Am I not too heavy?”

“Not at all, love. It feels nice to hold you like this, though it would be easier with a proper chair.”

Severus conjured a plush armchair under Harry and levitated them into it without so much as blinking.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Show off.”

Severus laughed and laid his head atop Harry’s. “This would be easier with you in my lap. I am too tall.”

“You’re just right.” Harry nuzzled his chest. “I feel protected and like I’m protecting you at once.” He looked up and frowned. “But yeah, you do dwarf me a bit. Budge up and switch me places.”

Severus chuckled and stood. “Let me find a new book and I will return.”

“All right.” Harry looked at the journal and shuddered. “I don’t think I can look at that thing anymore right now, Sev. I’m sick of it.”

Severus nodded. “I will find a book on Legilimency for you. We shall have to alter the practical portion, but the theory will be the same for even an empath.”

“Thanks, love.”

Severus nodded and returned to their rucksacks. He first Summoned a theoretical Legilimency book from his own stores and sent it soaring to Harry. The seeker caught it with a grin and set about reading.

Amused, Severus returned to searching the beaded bag for titles that might give a hint as to Harry’s powers and his unusual animagus form—osirins were among the most powerfully magical of beasts and no wizard he had ever heard of had become one in Animagus form. More commonly, magical forms tended to be small creatures like Snidgets or crups.

Harry was right about one thing—nothing about him was common.


Creatures. Hmm.

He jerked up and almost banged his head on the top of the bag—which had a ceiling from the inside—as he realised why the book had caught his attention. All Harry’s skills, his strange powers, unusual Animagus form, and even his protectiveness of and attachment to Severus himself could be explained with a creature inheritance.

Sweet Circe, no wonder he was so different from his peers. Harry wasn’t human!

Severus pulled the book from the shelf and stood, stunned and shaking all over. All the signs made
sense now. The strange taste of cherries whenever Severus kissed Harry’s skin. Harry’s sudden prowess with wandless magic and the way it sprang up almost without the man’s consent whenever he perceived Severus to be in danger. The way Harry begun to perish if Severus withdrew from him.

Merlin, this was it! It was why he had no idea where Harry’s skills had come from. Harry had only just come into his inheritance and his skills hadn’t entirely developed yet. Harry was a magical creature!

But what was he? Osirins were not human in any sense, so Harry’s Animagus form was simply that—a form, not his core being. What, then? What being had skin that tasted of cherries, powerful wandless magic, and perished when someone they cared about left them? No, no. Not just anyone. Weasley and Granger’s leaving had not affected Harry adversely except to make him grieve. It was only Severus who could not leave Harry without risking the young man’s life.

He considered what he knew beyond the physical manifestations. Harry was not an osirin, but whatever creature he was would most likely have a strong association with the cycle of life and death for his powers and Animagus form to be so closely intertwined with both. Yet, besides osirins, Severus had never heard of such a creature, even after decades of research.

Whatever Harry was, it was incredibly rare.

Severus’ heart sputtered at a second realisation, one that almost sent him crashing to the floor in shock. Many of the signs about Harry’s heritage had involved Severus himself, and that could mean only one thing.

Mother of Merlin, whatever kind of creature Harry turned out to be, Severus was Harry’s mate!

He clutched the book to his chest and let slip a shaky sigh, relief coursing through him. They were mates! Harry couldn’t leave him, not without severe consequences to the younger wizard. And Harry’s feelings were unlikely to change. It would be ingrained within his being to love and protect his mate for the rest of his days. A biological imperative he could not resist even if he wanted to, and Harry’s tender treatment of Severus and his joy in their partnership made it clear even to Severus’ cynical heart that Harry did not want to resist it.

A hesitant smile crossed his face as he returned to Harry’s armchair, his book held tight against his chest. Because of the natural pull between mates, if Harry didn’t love Severus already, he soon would. His inner creature would make sure of it. And Severus would not have been chosen as Harry’s mate if they weren’t exceptionally compatible on all levels. Creature bonds were forever, after all. To protect their creatures and their mates, they always came with built-in protections against a mate who wouldn’t suit.

Forever. The mere thought made Severus giddy. Harry really was his, for always.

And he belonged to Harry, in more than just the sense that they were lovers. He really would belong to Harry. As the creature in their pairing, Harry would have a drive to protect Severus. Urges to make sure Severus and any children they might have were safe and happy. The undeniable need to guard Severus and his ‘den’ and keep everything domestic in order.

In short, Harry would one day become the dominant partner.

He would never control Severus—besides it not being a part of the creature bond, Severus knew Harry would never want to control him—but Harry would eventually need to take the lead.

Severus was fine with that.
For twenty years, Severus had had to control every detail of his life, down to his facial expressions and speech and who he appeared to like or not. He had been forced to keep such a tight rein on his true personality, so tight that no one but Harry even knew who he was any longer.

Control had been his bread and butter for two decades, and he was beyond sick of it.

Harry, however, had been ordered about and controlled in every detail of his life for most of his existence. He had to be desperate for a bit of his own authority.

Severus didn’t mind giving it to him, either. The idea of letting Harry have most of the control, letting him make the decisions for their household and even direct his mate a bit if he so chose, put him at ease, unwound something inside Severus that had been tight and aching for ages. Just thinking about having a strong mate who led him without controlling him or causing him pain was enough to make his knees weak.

Severus clutched his book tighter and swallowed a lump in his throat. He had been strong and tightly ordered for so long. The thought of having someone to lean on, someone to help him—gods, it was perfect. It was everything Severus had ever wanted.

Tears pooled on his lashes and his heart warmed him like the sun. He would be loved, protected, and cherished with Harry. Safe and free at once. Forever.

Gods. If not for his Occlumency and his pride, he might have burst into sobs from sheer joy.

Harry called, “Sev? Are you all right? You’re just … staring and you’ve this weird smile on your face.”

Severus shook himself and chuckled. “Forgive me. I was … thinking.”

“About what?” Harry stood, and Severus settled into the armchair.

“About you.” Severus pulled Harry into his lap and brought him close. “About how happy I am here with you.”

Harry’s eyes lit up. “Sev … I’m happy too. Can I tell you something?”

Severus smiled, content and trusting that whatever Harry said, it would be good. “Whatever you wish.”

Harry slipped his hands into Severus’ hair and laid their foreheads together. “I, this might be too soon, but, I want you to know that I … I love you.”

Severus’ tears spilled over and splashed down his face. Heart soaring, he gasped and clutched Harry closer. “You love me, Harry? Truly?”

“Yeah. Have done since that night in the pub when you kissed my fingertip.” He touched Severus lips with his finger, breath hitching as Severus sucked the tip into his mouth.

“Merlin,” Harry breathed.

Severus released his fingertip and kissed it. “Do you know you taste of cherries?”

Harry blinked. “I haven’t touched any cherries in months.”

“Nevertheless, whenever I taste your skin, it is like cherries.” Severus kissed the back of Harry’s hand and touched the tip of his tongue to his skin. “Do you know that I love cherries? They are my
favourite fruit.” He held Harry’s dazed, frightened face and kissed him softly upon his lips. “I love you as well, my Harry.”

Harry’s smile lit the tent ablaze, and his eyes glowed with that strange teal light. “You do? Really? Oh, Sev!” He threw his arms around Severus’ neck and brought him into such a tender, emotional kiss, that Severus did not even mind that it hurt his shoulder a bit.

Harry loved him. His beautiful, wonderful Harry really loved him. He was not surprised to find both of their faces wet as they pulled away.

“You have never known love, have you, Harry?”

“N—not since mum and da died,” Harry whispered. “Well, Hermione and Ron love me, but it’s not the same. You haven’t either, have you?”

“Never. My mother tried, but it did not go far for a child as tortured as I was.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean.” Harry kissed him again and cupped Severus’ face. “So, we’ll just show each other a lot, okay? So we can make up for all the love we lacked.”

Severus smiled to himself at Harry’s small show of assertiveness. He would begin to take the lead soon. Contentment settled on Severus like a fuzzy blanket.

“Yes, my Harry. We shall.”

Harry gave him such a bright, beautiful smile, Severus melted inside. He slipped a hand into Harry’s mop and tugged him into a tender kiss.

“Yes,” Severus repeated against Harry’s lips. “Every moment.”

After another long kiss, Harry nuzzled Severus’ cheek and settled his head on the older man’s shoulder, giving a little sigh of happiness. “D’you still want to read? Because I’m content just like this. I could almost fall asleep.”

Severus kissed Harry’s hair and opened his book. “Rest then, my love. I am able to hold you as I work.”

“Yeah. Yeah, that sounds good.” Harry closed his eyes and snuggled close.

Severus held him and set about reading while the young man took respite in his arms. Merlin, it felt like home to hold Harry like this. So sweet, so domestic and simple.

It was the life he had always dreamed of but never hoped to have.

As soon as Severus had an inkling of what sort of being Harry might be, they were going to have a long talk about the future.

For the first time ever, Severus was looking forward to it.

________________________________________________________________________

The Potterwatch broadcast had been a mostly positive one for once. The authorities in Blackpool had found several hundred survivors, many of them children—one or two of which Harry would soon
convince Severus to adopt with him—and a group of Death Eaters had been apprehended by the Order and either killed or arrested, a *Cruciatus*-maddened Rowle among them. Besides the attacks the twins had mentioned in their earlier message, no other violence had been reported.

Harry listened to the broadcast from his perch in Severus’ lap, curled up like a cat in the taller man’s arms. He was cosy and safe and warm. Harry could get used to this.

“We have no other attacks to report at this time,” came Lee Jordan’s voice. “It appears the Death Eaters and Riddle are being quiet, but don’t get complacent. Blackpool proved he’s capable of terrible things. This may just be the calm before the next storm.”

“It might indeed, River,” said Fred Weasley, “but don’t give up hope, either. We can’t say much for fear of information leaking to the other side, but we have it on good authority that our very own namesake stopped You-Know-Who from deploying a second magic-bomb and destroyed his supply. That’s not to say You-Know-Who couldn’t fashion another, but it’s going to take him time to do so, and in the meantime, we’re going to do everything possible to take the bastard down before he can manage it.”

“Right, Rapier,” said Lee. “We have agents working in every area to end this disaster of a war once and for all, and by gods, we *will* do it. So keep faith. One day soon, we’ll be using this broadcast to report on how many cats old Arabella Figg’s adopted and what shampoo Harry’s using this week.”

“And selling versions of it in the shop, of course,” said a chuckling Fred.

George said, “It’s hair today, gone tomorrow, so get your own bottle while you can!”

Harry burst into laughter. “Gods, they’re brilliant.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “You do realise that if they really did stock your shampoo, half the market would buy it?”

“Yeah,” said Harry with a smirk, “they’d call it ‘Potter ‘Poo,’ or something equally ridiculous and the buyers would come away temporarily bald or with pink dreads or something. It’s a prank shop, not a beauty store.”

Severus laughed as well. “Indeed.” He paused and sniffed at Harry’s hair. “What brand do you use, out of morbid curiosity?”

“Er, believe it or not, I brew it myself so it’s resistant to outside influence. Poison and love potions and the like.”

“Hmm. Granger’s idea?”

Harry playfully smacked Severus’ arm—the right one so he didn’t cause the man any undue pain. “Hey! I can come up with some smart things on my own.” His joyous mood vanished. “No. I actually started after Ron was poisoned last year. It made me realise I wasn’t being careful enough with most things. So I looked up a recipe and had Hermione help me learn to do it on my own. She even made it smell good for me.”

“Quite brilliant. I am impressed with both of you.” Severus kissed him lightly. “However, this *does* explain why your hair is so untameable.” He lifted a strand and twirled it around his finger. “Disgraceful.” He said it in a low purr that let Harry know he meant the exact opposite.

Harry played along anyway, his amusement back in full force. “Oi! I’ll have you know that it’s been a bird’s nest since I was little, thank you very much. My shampoo has nothing to do with it.” He
paused. “But is there something you could do to the formula to make my hair less … mad?”

Severus twirled another strand around his finger and hummed. “Probably so.”

Harry pouted. “But you’re not going to show me, are you?”

“I rather enjoy your hair the way it is, so no.”

Harry chuckled and curled into Severus’ chest again. “Well, as long as you’re happy with it, I reckon it’s all right if it stays messy.”

“Hmm.”

Severus kissed Harry’s head, and Harry returned his attention to the broadcast.

“That’s the end of the news portion of our show, folks,” said George Weasley in a sombre voice, “but we do have more to discuss this evening.”

Harry’s heart lurched. “Oh no. What’s happened?”

Severus clutched him tight.

“That we do,” said an equally sombre Fred. “It has been well over a week since we’ve had any news of Remus Lupin. Tonight, we raise our wands in his honour and say goodbye.”

Harry tried to speak, to cry out against the indignity of giving up the search so soon, but all that came out was a strangled squeak. Severus wrapped his arms around Harry and held him to his chest, but his warmth and gentle love could not chase away the cold inside Harry’s heart. They were giving up on Remus, the last mentor Harry had left.

He drowned in tears as the twins and Lee spoke of the man and how much they had admired him.

Fred said, “You’ve all heard of Harry Potter’s defence class? The DA? None of it would have been possible had Remus not taught Harry how to cast a fully-corporeal Patronus as a third year. There are masses of grown adults incapable of casting a non-corporeal Patronus, and Harry could do a full one at fifteen thanks to Remus’ help. Gods, the man was such a good teacher.”

“Well, some of that feat came down to Harry’s own skills in defence,” said Lee. “After all, he taught all of us how to do the same thing later, but Professor Lupin was really good. I’ll never forget the boggart lesson. Merlin, did you hear what Neville did? I won’t repeat it for Professor Snape’s sake —”

“And your own, should I catch you speaking of it,” Severus muttered.

“—But it was hilarious. He’ll probably gut me for even saying that much later, but I couldn’t resist. Sorry, Professor. The teasing means you’re part of the pack, just so you know.”

Severus shook his head. “I am part of their … pack?”

“It means they like you,” said a tearful Harry.

Severus gave him a sorrowful smile and clutched him tighter. “I am here, love. I am with you.”

Harry kissed him lightly and returned his attention to the broadcast.

Lee was still on the subject of boggarts. “Mine’s probably changed since those days, but at the time, I
was afraid of big dogs. Well, when my turn was up, this raving beast came out of the closet, barking and red-eyed and mad, and I just imagined some peanut butter in his mouth, and hey presto! Problem solved.”

The twins laughed.

“That was a brilliant lesson,” said George. “I’m glad he covered it for all years despite boggarts being a bit behind fifth year curriculum. Mine was a prank that didn’t work! I just threw some confetti at it and made everyone cheer.”

“My was pretty much the same,” said Fred with a chuckle. “We were a bit single-minded in those days, hmm?”

Lee said, “Were?”

The twins laughed again.

“Touché,” said Fred, his mirth bleeding away. “Well, I’d love to sit here and reminisce all night, but we mustn’t forget his tribute, folks. Raise your wands with me for Remus Lupin.”

Harry held his wand up in a shaking hand. Severus supported him and added his own in tribute.

“May Merlin guard your soul, Professor,” said Lee, his voice breaking. “We love you.”

Harry let his wand drop and buried his grief in Severus’ arms.

“Run with the pack, Moony,” said Fred in wobbly tones. “We couldn’t have come this far without you, and tonight, it’s your show.”

“Oh gods,” Severus said in a horror-stricken voice. “Fuck! How could I have forgotten? Budge up, Potter!”

Harry wiped his eyes and moved off Severus’ lap. “What’s gotten into you? Why are you calling me Potter again?”

Severus waved aside his questions and flicked his wand left and right, shrinking things and sending them flying willy-nilly into their rucksacks.

“Um, Severus? What are you doing?”

“It’s the full moon, Harry! And we’re out here in a bloody tent right by one of Riddle’s most famous targets. We have perhaps an hour before the moon rises, and we had better hope we’ve found sturdier shelter by then. Simple wards and canvas won’t keep out Greyback tonight, whether it’s still snowing or not, and my money is on not. We are not in Scotland anymore.”

Harry’s blood congealed. “Shite!”

He jerked out his wand and set to work helping put away their things. Working under the threat of dismemberment or lycanthropy, they had the tent packed and dismantled in record time. Harry shoved it into his rucksack as soon as they finished breaking camp and ripped the zip closed.

The snow had stopped and the woods had gone still and silent in the darkness of early night, but Harry was all too aware of the dangers lurking in the shadows. A hasty wandless Summoning charm called both the journal and their enchanted map into Harry’s hand, and he struggled to make sense of the markings in the dark.
“Shite. I can’t see the map at all, Severus. Do we risk a light?”

“So nightvision is not among your odd powers,” Severus said with a wince. “I had hoped, but never mind it.” He pulled out his wand and muttered charms to himself. “Hmm. Tell me if you can see this light, Harry. *Lumos Privatos.*”

A dim light showed at the tip of Severus’ wand.

“Yeah, but it’s not as bright as a typical *Lumos.*”

“Hmm. Not that incantation then. *Nox.* And this one? *Lumos Secretum.*”

The light blinded Harry. He covered his eyes, and Severus *Noxed* his wand again.

“*Definitely* not that one. Ah, what should I do? There must be *some* way ….” He tapped his chin and hesitantly tried, “This, maybe? *Lumos Mihi Solum.*”

Nothing happened. Harry frowned and stared at Severus’ wandtip. “Did it work? I can’t see anything.”


“No good, Sev. I can see it this time.”

“That is exactly what I wanted to happen. The first working incantation was ‘light for me alone.’ The second was ‘light for us alone.’ You are supposed to see it this time.”

Harry grinned and tried the second incantation on his own wand, focusing on a light visible to only himself and Severus. His own was blue.

“What colour is your light, Sev?”

“Bluish. Why?”

“Yours looks gold to me, but mine is blue.”

“Yours is also golden to me. Interesting. I wonder how this would work when used with other participants.”

“We can test it after we’re away from the werewolves,” Harry said with a pointed shake of the map. “I just wanted to make sure I’d cast the charm correctly.”


Harry stared at the map, but had no idea of which way to go now that they were already on top of the dot. “I’ll try to make the zooming feature work again. Maybe with my weird skills, it’ll take us right to the entrance. It’s worth a try anyway.”

“All right.”

Harry focused on the exact location of Godric’s Hollow and asked the map to zoom in his mind. “Ah! There we are. Come on, love. I’ll navigate.”

Severus nodded and followed Harry into the night. “I do hope no one else can see these lights,” he said with a shiver. “I believe it should work, but I have no way to test it with only two of us.”
Harry frowned at his wandtip. “I could try asking my stag.”

“No. A Patronus would draw more attention than the lights even if they are visible.”

“What about Dobby?”

“The crack of his apparition would alert everything for miles. As would his garish attire.”

Harry sighed. “Good point.”

“We will just have to risk it, Harry.”

“All right. I tried to help.”

Severus ran a hand through Harry’s hair. “I know, love.”

Harry kissed Severus’ palm, then focused on the map. It showed him a forested cliff by the sea and a single building tucked away in a grove of pines. If only he had some way of knowing where he was in relation to their destination, it would be much easier to—oh! A pair of blinking feet appeared at the southeast corner of the map, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

“This way, Sev. We’re heading a bit too far west.”

A gloved hand slipped into his. “Hurry. The moon will be out soon.”

“Right. Come on.”

Harry held the map like a lifeline and followed the path to the building. The blue dot hovered just above it, so Harry reckoned it was most likely the way into the wizarding city. If he could only get them to the entrance in one piece, they would be safe. He set his feet towards the dot and moved as fast as he dared.

Beside him, Severus staggered a little. “Harry, I cannot … slow down a bit.”

“Hmm?”

Harry lifted his head from the map and turned to look at Severus rather than his feet. As a result, he toppled over a tree root and went sprawling into the meadow beyond, jerking Severus with him. The older man’s heavier weight and innate grace steadied Severus, and, thanks to the man’s grasp on his hand, Harry managed to recover his stance before he landed on his face. Barely.

“Sorry, Sev.” Harry turned to check the man for injuries. “Are you okay?”

Severus batted his hands away. “I’m well enough. Merlin, only you would manage to find the very last root in a wood and trip on it mere seconds before entering level ground.”

Harry gave a wry snort. “I’m like Krum. Not nearly as graceful on the ground as I am in the air, unfortunately. Are you really okay?”

Severus nodded and jabbed the map. “Hurry. Whether I am well or not, we must find safe lodgings.”

Harry examined the map and frowned. “It should be ….”

He looked around the clearing, scanning forested hills and grey seas for the building on the map. His eyes fixed upon an old, ramshackle barn a little ways to the north and relief washed over him. There. That had to be the place.
“Come on,” he muttered, and led Severus by his hand towards the barn.

After a few more steps, Harry felt the sizzle of wards and the relief made him giddy. “Almost there, Sev,” he chirped and increased his pace.

“Harry! I need … I cannot … my chest is still injured.”

Harry slowed down again and bounced from foot to foot even as he walked. “Almost there, just around the bend.”

Severus gave a little grunt of annoyance. “Yes, you’ve already said so.”

“Well, _pardon me_ for trying to encourage you.”

Severus shook his head and trudged on, holding his ribs tight. Harry swore he would heal the man as soon as they found a safe place to hide through the full moon.

“Sometimes I don’t know why I agreed to go on this mad goose chase with you, Potter.”

Harry looked up long enough to roll his eyes at his surly lover. “Because being tortured as a traitor sounded less fun than traipsing around the country with your favourite student, remember?”

Severus muttered, “Such are the dangers of being forced to make important decisions while suffering from a concussion.”

Harry laughed and linked his arm through Severus’. “Oh, come on ….”

As soon as Harry led Severus into the barn, he knew he had found the right place. A quick search revealed the right door, and he helped Severus through it with a sigh. One obstacle down, but they still weren’t safe.

On the other side, houses decked with fairy lights and holly lined the cobblestone streets, and Harry gaped in surprise. How had he managed to forget it was nearly Christmas?

“Sev? What’s today?”

“The day before Christmas Eve, I believe. It has been difficult to keep track on the run.”

Harry nodded and led Severus into the street. “Are we going to draw attention with me half-carrying you like this?”

“A bit, perhaps. If you wrap your arm around my waist—yes, like that—then I might just—” He draped his arm across Harry’s shoulders. “There. Now, with some glamours ….” He flicked his wand over their faces several times. “Good. Now we merely look like a young couple out to see the lights. Let me just set wards to protect us, and we should be safe long enough to find lodgings.”

As Severus began chanting incantations for several complex privacy and anti-werewolf warding charms, Harry looked into Severus’ now youthful, softer face, bright blue eyes, and warm smile—and scowled. He couldn’t suppress the feeling of _wrong-wrong-wrong_ that instantly overpowered him. This wasn’t his Sev, and Harry did _not_ like it. He backed away and bared his teeth, though his conscious mind did not understand what his body was doing.
Severus paused and frowned at his distressed companion. “Harry? What is it?”

“S’not you,” Harry forced out through a fierce urge to change Severus’ face back. “S’not right. Want you the way you are.”

Severus frowned and reached for Harry’s face, but Harry backed away and snarled.

“Not my Sev.”

Somewhere under the screaming in Harry’s body, his rational mind whispered, ‘Am I going mad? It’s just Sev under glamours. I even watched him set them. What’s wrong with me?’

Severus let his hand fall and pierced Harry with those wrong-wrong-wrong blue eyes. ‘Not the right eyes. I need his right eyes.’

“Harry, look at me. It’s just a glamour. I am still Severus.

Harry shuddered and took another step away, even as his rational mind boggled at his own behaviour. “Not my Sev.”

Severus gave him a sad smile. “You can’t bear it with my face altered, can you?”

Harry shook his head hard and barely suppressed a growl. “S-sorry. I don’t understand what’s wrong with me. I need your right face. Need my Sev.”

“It’s all right, love. I understand. Your instincts are taking over. You know we’re in danger and that combined with my altered appearance has your … protective urges going mad.”

Harry nodded. That seemed to describe what was happening to him to a T.

“Harry, try to fight it, if you can. We must stay glamoured. It is too dangerous not to.”

Harry gripped his cheeks and swung his head from side to side, overwhelmed with dismay and terror. “No. No, I can’t. I know, but I can’t. I need my Sev. Where is my Sev?”

Harry’s inner voice cried, ‘What the fuck is wrong with me? I know that’s Severus! Why does his appearance matter so much?’

Severus’ low murmur carried over the screams for Harry’s Sev and his inner confusion and the overpowering mantra of wrong-wrong-wrong.

“Listen to my voice, Harry,” Severus called. “I am still your Sev. I am only wearing a different face to keep us both safe. Can you hear my voice? Do you recognise me?”

The low, soft tones pierced the clamour in Harry’s subconscious and quieted some of the strange irritation inside him. Harry shook himself, fighting against his urges, and hesitantly slid his arm around Severus’ waist again. Wrong-wrong-wrong! No! This wasn’t his Sev. He pulled away and shook his head again.

“No. S-sorry. I can’t do this. I don’t understand.”

“Harry, ssh. You can’t help it, love. It’s all right. Is it better if I do this?”

Severus flicked his wand, and those awful blue eyes shifted into the dark, piercing orbs Harry loved so much. As if someone had flipped a switch inside Harry, the strange irritation vanished, leaving only relief that his Severus was safe and still with him. Harry melted into the man’s chest and slid his
hand into the still dark, but shorter hair.

“‘Yes,’” Harry breathed into Severus’ neck. “Much better. I’m sorry. I don’t understand what
happened.”

“It’s all right,” Severus murmured in that wonderful low voice. “I am safe. I am here.”

The soft tones quieted the last of the clamour, and Harry kissed the man gently. It still felt odd against
fuller, younger lips, but he knew this was his Severus now, even inside.

Merlin, how strange that he should react so fiercely after watching the man apply glamours. Harry
shook his head as he withdrew.

“What was that?”

Severus shook his head. “Nothing to worry yourself over. I will simply leave my eyes unglamoured
in the future so you will recognise me even in your core. I should have considered this possibility
sooner, but it is of no matter now.”

Harry frowned and met Severus’ eyes. “Sev, do you know why I reacted like that?”

Severus paused. “I do. I just discovered the possibility tonight, and your behaviour now has all but
confirmed my suspicions, but it is too long a discussion to have while we are in such danger. Come,
Harry, if you are well. I will tell you what I know when we’re safe.”

“All right.” Harry shook himself and squeezed Severus’ waist, nudging him closer. “I’m sorry.”

Severus kissed Harry’s temple. “It’s over now. Let’s just find an inn. Quickly.”

Harry sighed and led Severus into the streets. He looked at the map again and frowned to see that the
dot had moved. Now, instead of hovering over the barn they had just passed through, it appeared to
be sitting over a small lake a few streets to their right. Harry shrugged and followed it, wondering
exactly what Dumbledore had done to this strange map.

Severus whispered, “Where are you taking us? I had assumed you would go straight into the city.”

“I don’t know. The dot changed position, so I’m following it.”

Severus shook his head and took the map. “I will navigate. You work on the journal while I find a
safe place to weather the night.”

Harry nodded and began to read. “‘Muggles have such insulting traditions for All Hallows Eve. They
cannot even call it by its proper name.’” He swallowed hard and looked to Severus. “H-Halloween?
Oh no. I think we’re coming up on where Vol—”

Severus cried, “Potter! The taboo!”

Harry gasped and buried his head into Severus’ shoulder. “Shite! Sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Severus looked around, wand drawn and shoulders tense. After a long, quiet moment, he relaxed.
“Never mind it. We are safe for the moment, but for Merlin’s sake, don’t say his name!”

Harry nodded and swallowed a surge of emotion. “I’m sorry, Sev. I don’t know why ….”

“You keep reading the name, so it’s at the forefront of your mind. I may have been mistaken in
suggesting you read from the journal again.”
Harry shook his head. “I have to keep going. We have to know who he altered and we’re so close. I can feel it.”

Severus sighed and tucked the map in his breast pocket. “So I might slap my hand over your mouth if you dare utter another syllable of that foul name.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “All right, but how will you navigate?”

“The dot was straight ahead. We have only to continue on this road to its end. I will check the map again then.”

“All right.” Harry swallowed and laid his head on Severus’ arm. “Please, hold me tight, Sev. I’m so scared.”

Severus pulled Harry closer. “I am here. What has troubled you so?”

Harry shuddered. “Halloween, Sev. He’s talking about Halloween.”

“You mean …?”

“Right. At least, I think this is the year.”

“Merlin.” Severus kissed Harry’s hair. “Do not fear, my love. I am with you, whatever happens.”

Harry gave Severus a soft smile. “Oh. I … I like that, Sev. Call me that often, okay?”

“I will try to remember. Do you think you can read now?”

Harry swallowed hard and gathered his courage. “I can try. Just stay close.”

“I must regardless. I need your support, remember?”

“I need yours too.”

“I am here.” Severus turned Harry into him and kissed him. “I am with you. I love you.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “I love you, too.” He turned back to the book and took a deep breath. “I had set spies in every probable location, but as always, they returned to me with empty hands. Then, tonight, he came. The—oh gods, no!—the … Gryffindor rat.’”

Severus stopped cold. “Pettigrew. It is indeed the year.”

Harry stood frozen and shaking. “Y-yeah. I don’t know if I can do this, Sev. Just stand here and read about their deaths as if, as if they weren’t ….” Tears slid down his cheeks, and Severus grabbed Harry’s shoulders and muscled him off the main road.

“Come. I have privacy wards set, but I do not want to test them so severely. If there is a werewolf near, we will draw too much attention by weeping in plain sight.”

Harry nodded and let Severus steer him towards a grassy, round valley, lined with quiet homes. A small lake pooled at the bottom, glistening under the light of the moon. It was a beautiful place, if a bit unexpected. At least they could see a werewolf approach from all sides here.

Harry looked to the skies with a sad sigh. Remus would have also been a wolf tonight. Perhaps, somewhere beyond, he was running with Padfoot and Prongs again. Harry hoped so.
Severus guided Harry under a tree, and, out of the light of the moon, Harry remembered the journal. He turned into Severus, buried his head in the man’s shoulder, and gulped in his scent, struggling for strength.

Gods, how could he do this? Just read and translate their deaths? He had to—they still didn’t know who the last horcrux was or where they might be—but the idea of translating the words condemning his parents to death when he still couldn’t even say Remus’ name left him cold inside.

A door opened on the street, and a group of carollers emerged singing “Silent Night.” Severus hugged Harry closer, his posture tense and watchful. Both the song and Severus’ strong, protective stance comforted Harry. He felt safe despite the danger.

“Harry,” Severus murmured, “I think we should try to translate this later. We do not have time right now.”

Harry nodded and went to put the journal away, but a feeling like nails scratching down a chalkboard screeched down his spine and jangled until he jerked the book back out. The terrible screeching stopped, and the relief felt like music.

“Harry?”

“I can’t. I can’t stop. Something—I have to read it.”

Severus shook his head. “There will be time later, love. Right now, we are in danger.”

“No, no. You don’t understand. I have to read it now. Something is telling me to, like we’ll be in terrible trouble if I don’t.”

“Instinct.” Severus shuddered. “Yours have been sound in the past, and it may be part of those odd traits you have collected lately regardless.” He held Harry tighter and grasped his wand. “Very well. Just be aware that, should I detect anything suspicious, I will apparate us straight to Cináed and Brian.”

Harry grinned. “I half hope you do, just so we might see them again.” A shudder passed down his spine. “Sev, we’re running out of time.”

“All right,” Severus said. “Hurry then. I am here.”

Harry nodded and gathered his courage. He could do this. He hadn’t been sorted into Gryffindor for no reason.

He took a deep, calming breath and lifted the journal again. “‘It amuses me’—gods, what a bastard—‘that the one who … ultimately betrayed them was one they trusted enough to give their most dangerous secret. And now, the ‘one who has the power to defeat the Dark Lord’ shall be no more.’”

Severus clutched Harry tight. “Harry, I, I’m so sorry. I never meant ….”

“I know, Sev. I forgave you weeks ago.” Harry pressed a light kiss to the man’s jawline before reading again. “‘I believe he shall be a perfect target for the seventh horcrux. My final protection shall be complete with Harry Potter’s death.’” He gasped and reeled into Severus’ chest. “M-me? I’m the horcrux?”
Severus clutched him tight. “No, love. He never managed to make one from you. He died—or as close to it as he could come—with Lily, remember? He never made it to you.”

Harry rubbed his scar, panic racing through his veins. “You … you’re sure? It’s not my scar?”

“I do not believe so. I have sensed no dark magic in it.” Severus kissed Harry’s hair and rubbed a hand down his cheek. “Do not fear. I do not believe he was able to make a horcrux of you, but if by chance he did, we shall find a way to destroy it without hurting you. I will not sacrifice you to this war.” He paused. “And I do not believe he could have made you into a horcrux even if he had lived long enough to try, knowing what I do, but read on, love. If he did complete the ritual, he would have boasted about it later.”

“I … I’m really scared, Sev. I don’t want to die.”

Severus snapped, “I will not let you! I have just found you, Harry. I will not let you go!”

Harry gave him a hesitant smile. “You’ll help me find a way to beat him without dying?”

Severus cradled him close. “I will never sacrifice you. You are mine, do you understand? He cannot have you.”

Harry swallowed hard and laid his head against Severus’. “I love you, Sev.”

Severus brought him into a passionate kiss. “He cannot have you.” His voice broke and his eyes shone with tears. “I will not lose you, too.”

“All right, love. All right. Let’s just … let’s see if this is even anything to worry about. You might be right. He might not have completed the ritual.”

Though he tried to be brave for Severus’ sake, Harry still feared the worst. His heart beat like mad and his breath was tight. A horcrux. Merlin help him.

“Right.” Severus took a deep breath and held Harry close. “Read on, Harry. Whatever it says, know I am with you.”

“Y-yeah.” With a kiss to Severus’ wet cheek, Harry returned to the journal. “Okay. There’s only one paragraph left here. ‘I am going to the Potters’ tonight. We shall see how well the ‘chosen one’ does against the Dark Lord.’” He turned the page and shuddered. “It’s blank. This must be when he ‘died.’”

“Is there anything else written?”

Harry turned the page again and frowned. “Yeah, but it’s in different handwriting. Must have been Quirrell?”

“Most likely. Read and we shall find out.”

“All right. ‘Ten years since I have been able to write again’—Ten years? It’s Quirrell all right—‘I have lost my body and am forced to write through my servant, but I will rise again. I will make a new body, and finish what I started on my quest for immortality. At least I now know that the horcruxes work, though I could not make Harry Potter into my last. Damn it all, I shall have to find a new subject. I will not be able to use a soul like that.’” Harry’s breath came out in a rush and his knees wobbled. “He didn’t do it. I’m … I’m okay.”

Severus crushed Harry into him and kissed him hard, and Harry realised Severus had been more
afraid than he let on. Severus was crying when he pulled away.

“Sev, ssh. It’s okay now.”

Severus buried his face in Harry’s hair. “I was so afraid I would lose you.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Don’t,” Severus murmured against Harry’s ear. “Don’t you dare leave me.”

The words warmed Harry from within. “I won’t. I’m yours.”


“Right.” Harry nuzzled his cheek. “I was scared, too.”

“I know. But we are safe now.” Severus took a deep, calming breath. “Do you think you can put the journal away now, or do your instincts say to keep reading?”

Harry tried to put the journal up, but the screeching returned. “Definitely need to keep going. Sorry, Sev.”

The man held him tighter and returned to his defensive stance.

Harry swallowed his fear and held the journal in shaking hands. “All right, let’s make this as quick as we can then. ‘Though I have failed to create my final horcrux from the Potter boy, I now know more about the ‘power’ this chosen one has. Merlin, I still cannot fathom it. I must record the details so that I do not misinterpret what I saw.’

‘That night, I went to the Potters’ as planned.’” Harry shuddered. “Sev, I don’t know if I can do this.”

Severus kissed Harry’s temple. “I am still here. You are not alone.”

“Y-yeah.” Harry cleared his throat and the roughness from his voice. “‘I found the house easily enough. It sat upon the edge of a strange sort of round valley with a lake at the bottom.’” Chills spread through Harry. “Severus!”

Severus hugged him tighter. “I know. Keep reading, love. We need to move as soon as possible.”

Harry gripped the journal tighter. “R-right. ‘I believe there was something strange upon one side of the valley, but I had other plans in mind and did not take the time to discover what lay there. In hindsight, perhaps I erred.’

‘The house was quiet when I arrived. The child was apparently sleeping. I knocked upon the door with my wand held at the ready. The father answered, and before he could say much beyond warning his wife to hide, I killed him. He fell easily enough. I stepped over the corpse and … and …’”

Harry turned his face into Severus’ shoulder and wept. Severus held him and stroked his hair and cheek with a gentle hand and murmured comfort to him.

After a moment, Harry found his voice and spat out, “The bastard just talked about Da like he was some kind of obstacle in his way. Like he meant nothing.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “Remember you are reading the journal of a monster, Harry. He
does not see people as human beings, not even his own followers.”

“I k-know. It just hurts to read about my father like that.”

Severus caressed Harry’s hair again. “Does this help at all?”

“Yeah. It feels good. Keep touching me, please.” Harry took a deep breath and turned again, so his back was to Severus once more. “Okay. I, I’ll try again.”

“I am with you, Harry. You’re doing well.”

Harry kissed the man’s stubbled cheek and returned to the journal. “‘I stepped over … and I made my way upstairs. The red-haired woman had the baby clutched to her chest, and her eyes glowed with some strange lamp—no—strange light. I had thought she had green eyes, but the light in her irises was blue. I should have realised then that something was amiss.’”

Harry frowned and looked up at Severus. “Do you know what that light was?”

Severus nodded. “I saw it once or twice when she was angry, and I have seen a similar glow in yours. I believe I know what it means, but again, we must find a safe place first. We are somewhat protected here with houses all about and the carollers taking attention off of us, but it is not safe enough. Come to think of it, we should move to a safer place, if you’re able.”

Harry shook his head. “No. We need to stay here. That dot was leading us here anyway. I … I don’t want to risk leaving. Neither do … my instincts or whatever that is.”

Severus sighed. “Very well. At least I can see on all sides in this valley, though it may not do any good if there is a werewolf about. Hurry and read on.”

In the distance, the carollers stopped. Harry moved closer to Severus, feeling cold and exposed without the comfort of their songs. After a quick embrace, he shook off his fears. The sooner he finished with this blasted journal, the sooner they could get to safety.

“All right. I can do this. ‘Since Sen… Seff … Sether’—oh!—‘Since Severus had begged me to spare her, I decided to give the woman a choice. Move aside and give me her son, and she could live. She, of course, rejected my offer, but that is where she did not act like a usual mother. I should have realised, but I did not.

‘The woman kept her son close, and that eerie light in her eyes glowed brighter. She said, ‘I am not the one who will die tonight.’ And, in fury, I cursed her and her son at once, but it rebounded. Just as I began to fade, I noticed … I noticed …’”

Harry went still, his heart pounding in his ears.

Wings?

No. It couldn’t be, but the words before him ….

“Oh my gods, Severus,” he breathed. “Mum, this … I think she’s alive!”

Severus swayed and clutched Harry convulsively. “No! You, you must be mistranslating, Harry. She cannot be alive.”

It made sense, but Harry’s instincts were screaming that this was the answer. “But Severus, this isn’t one word. The entire page … oh gods! Sev, she’s alive, and … and … it says something about
wings. She can’t be dead. And … what if she’s here?”

Harry jerked the map from Severus’ pocket and gulped when he realised the dot was just a few metres below where he stood. “Sev, this is it! Where the map is leading us—it’s here. It’s got to be her.” He turned out of Severus’ arms and looked down the odd valley. A metre or so below him, an old wooden crate sat upon the grass, half-hidden behind a tree. He swallowed his fear and hope and raced toward it.

“Harry! What in Merlin’s name …?”

But Harry wasn’t listening. His entire body thrummed with excitement and hope and sheer terror that he was wrong. That someone had pulled a cruel trick on him. But no. As he reached the crate—an old shipping box with ‘FRAGILE’ painted on the side in peeling red letters—the paint shifted to spell: ‘LILY’ and morphed into what looked like an old trap door.

“Oh my gods. Sev, look!”

The man frowned at the trap door and gave Harry a perplexed stare. “I, it’s just an old crate, Harry.”

“No, it’s a door. Can’t you see it?”

Severus’ eyes went wide. “No, but if there was a ward set to Potter blood ….”

“You wouldn’t see it. Oh gods, Sev! I, I can’t believe it!” Harry slumped into Severus’ chest and wept with his wild emotions. “She’s alive. Oh, Merlin, I know she’s alive. But why? If she lived, why did I live with the Dursleys? Where was she? Didn’t she care at all?”

Severus held Harry’s shoulder. “That is why I think she must have died, Harry. The Lily I knew would never have abandoned her son to be raised by abusive Muggles. Even in that foul journal, she protected you. Riddle must have been confused in his dying moments. Or perhaps the rebounded curse addled him. Considering what he is now, I would not be surprised.”

“That … makes sense.” Sharp pain flooded Harry’s chest. He felt as if he had lost his mother all over again. “I really wanted her to be alive, Sev.”

Severus held Harry tight. “I know. So did I.”

Harry looked up to realise they were both weeping. He wiped Severus’ tears and gave the man a loving kiss.

“I’m sorry, Sev. I shouldn’t have gotten your hopes up. Of course he was just confused.”

A gentle hand stroked the hair back from Harry’s scar. “Whatever happened in truth, Harry, I am glad you survived.”

Harry crushed Severus to him and kissed him hard. “I’m glad you made it out, too.” He turned back to the crate-door. “You still can’t see it?”

“No,” said Severus, “but if you can, I believe we should explore it. Perhaps Dumbledore left us something to help and that is why this mark is out of place with the rune. Either way, it will at least be out of the open, and with a blood ward set, no werewolf not of the Potter line could reach us inside.”

“True, but you’re not of the Potter line either, Sev. How do I take you with me?”
Severus held out his hand. “You’ll have to take three drops of blood from me and drop it over the door, then add three drops of yours. The incantation is *Exuno Sanguine*.”

Harry frowned. “What if I say it wrong?”

“That could be unpleasant, so do take care. Blood magic can be quite nasty.”

Harry gulped. “R-right. *Exuno Sanguine*?”

“Correct.”

Harry transfigured a stick from nearby into a needle, conjured a flame to sanitize it, and pricked Severus’ middle finger. He dared not say a word, though he hated hurting the man, even in such a small way. With a deep breath, he held Severus’ hand over the trap door and squeezed out three drops of blood. Severus withdrew his hand and sealed his cut with a silent spell. He held Harry’s shoulder while Harry re-sanitized the needle and pricked his own finger.

Three drops of blood and a careful incantation later, yellow light shimmered over Severus and faded into his skin. Harry gasped and grabbed the man’s hands, careless of his still open cut.

“Severus! Are you okay? Did I say it wrong?”

Severus squeezed Harry’s hands. “I’m quite all right. That was only the wards adding me to their protection. I can see the door now, Harry.”

Harry let out a breath that sounded suspiciously like a sob. “Oh, thank Merlin.” He hugged Severus tight and buried his head in the man’s chest. “I thought I’d hurt you.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s cheek. “No. You did well. Here. Let me see your hand.”

Harry laid his still-bleeding hand in Severus’. The man healed Harry’s tiny cut with a brush of his finger and Scourgified the remaining blood away. Harry gave Severus a shaky smile and turned to the door.

“So, together?”

Severus nodded. “I will be right beside you.”

Harry took a deep breath and opened the door. Just as it closed behind them, he swore he heard a bone-chilling howl.
Chapter 19

The trapdoor opened to reveal a staircase leading into the hill. Severus grabbed Harry and dragged him inside just as a howl ripped through the night and turned his bones to ice.

Greyback.

“Sev …” Harry turned to the door and hesitated. “Will they … what should we do?”

“Harry, Greyback is after us, if that was indeed a werewolf. If we go out there, we will be killed.”

Harry moved his hand towards the door handle, but jerked it back and shook his head. “Can’t. It’s screaming—cold, can’t touch it. Can’t save them.”

Severus caught the young man into his arms. “Ssh. This is a wizarding village, Harry. They all know full well to be inside and protected before the full moon rises.”

“I …. You’re, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, Harry. It’s your care for them that makes you human. But come. We should see what is here.”

“Y-yeah.” Harry lit his wand and stepped into the tunnel. Severus followed, his own wand lit and held high to get an idea of their surroundings.

What was this place? Stones lined the tunnel and made for a well-built and sheltered pathway, but it looked as though it hadn’t been used in years. Whatever Dumbledore had hidden here, it had been done long before his death.

Severus poked his wand in a corner and grimaced at the sight of massive cobwebs and a family of spiders. With a wave of his wand, the cobwebs, vermin, and dust vanished. The spiders would have to find new homes outside.

“Nice,” Harry muttered.

“Thank you.”

Harry nodded and slipped his hand into Severus’, lacing their fingers. The touch soothed Severus’ nerves.

Severus squeezed Harry’s hand. “Are you ready, love?”
Harry nodded. “Yeah, but can we take off the glamours now? I can’t stand not looking at your real face when I need my Sev.”

“As you wish.” Severus applied a Finite to both of their faces. “Better?”

“Much,” Harry said with a sigh. “I missed your face.”

“Hmm.” Severus held him close and fought a blush. “I must admit, I did not like kissing someone who looks so different from you.”

He pressed their lips together and sank into the kiss with a moan. Harry responded by whimpering with need and slipping his tongue between Severus’ lips. Oh gods. Severus clutched Harry’s waist and rocked the younger man close, fingers splayed against the small of Harry’s back and peeking under his trousers, mouth pliant as his mate claimed him.

“H-Harry,” he panted after they broke the kiss. “Gods. I love you, but this really isn’t the time.”

Harry chuckled and blushed. “No, I guess not, but I needed to feel you.”

“I am here, love.” Severus kissed his forehead. “Are you ready to move on?”

“Yeah.” Harry started along the tunnel, hand in hand with Severus. “So will you tell me about this thing you said you wouldn’t talk about until we’re safe? We’re safe now.”

Severus shivered. “I will, but I’m not sure how you will take it. Promise me you will not run? Stay close to me and let me comfort you if you are afraid or angry?”

Harry frowned. “Yeah, I promise, but what is it? I’m scared now. How bad is it?”

“It … it is not that this is bad, Harry, just shocking.” Severus realised he was frightening Harry and decided to cut to the chase. “Love, I don’t think you’re entirely human.”

Harry stopped dead. “A c-creature?”

“Yes. Like a Veela or vampire, though you are neither. As of yet, I am uncertain what you are. I have never met nor read of any being with the conglomeration of skills and traits that you possess.”

Harry reeled into Severus’ side. “What if I’m dark, Sev? What then? Will you leave me?”

“Lupin was a dark creature, Harry. Does that make you love him any less?”

“N-no. He’s, he’s … gods, I miss him.”

“I know, love. I’m sorry.” Severus kissed Harry lightly, then took his hand again and led him down the hall. “It does not matter what kind of creature you are, Harry. I love you and that shall never change.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand so tight, it hurt, and his breathing accelerated. He turned eyes wide
with panic onto Severus’. “What if I’m a werewolf? What if I’m going to hurt you—I can’t—”

Severus cut him off with a tender kiss. “You are not a werewolf—obviously. Must I take you back to defence classes and repeat a lesson or two?”

Harry’s breathing slowed a bit. “Oh. Full moon. Right.”

“Yes.” He held Harry’s shoulders and spoke in a low, soothing voice. “My Harry, be at peace. You are nothing like anything I have come across in my research, so I think you cannot be particularly dangerous. If you were, it would have been noted somewhere. There would have been regulations in the Ministry, or warnings in texts, something to indicate the level of danger. As there is nothing written anywhere I have yet discovered, I cannot believe you are a dark creature.”

He kissed Harry again and held his face. “But even if you are, even if there is some danger to overcome, I will not leave you. I will brew you a potion to help, or invent one if nothing exists, or restrain you until the danger is past as Albus did with Lupin. I will not abandon you, Harry. I am yours, for always.”

Tears slid down Harry’s cheeks, even as he gave Severus a small smile. “I, really?”

“Yes.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Wait a moment. Oh gods, Sev! Creatures … they have mates. What if you … if you’re not—”

“Ssh. I am. I am your mate. Your behaviour tonight and the way you wither if I leave you proves it. As well, Cináed and you yourself have called me your mate before.”

“I did?”

“When Malfoy was … delaying us. You told him you would kill him if he didn’t stop threatening your mate.”

“Merlin. I don’t remember that at all. I just remember being terrified for you and furious at him.”

“Yes. I did not recall it either until just now. I am afraid I was rather dazed at the time.” Severus swallowed a lump of sudden terror. “Is this … acceptable, Harry? That I am your mate?”

Harry gasped and caught Severus into his arms. “Acceptable? Sev, I love you. I wouldn’t have anyone else. I was only afraid I’d lose you.”

Severus kissed him tenderly and pressed their foreheads together. “So, you will accept me as your mate for life?”

“Yes, love. Always yes.”

Severus’ heart soared. He clutched Harry tight and gave a huffed little laugh against the man’s ear. “I cannot believe this. Two days ago, I loved you and believed you could never love me in return, and that you would be better off that way. Today I am your mate. Oh, my gorgeous Harry. You are my miracle.”

Harry kissed Severus with love and sneaked his hands into the man’s shirt. His hands were somehow warm against Severus’ bare skin. “Mine,” he growled into Severus’ ear, and the man rocked into Harry, though he didn’t quite understand his actions.
“Yes,” Severus panted and tilted his head back. “Yours. Always yours.”

Harry looked up, and his eyes had gone that peculiar teal shade of his light. A pattern of black, shiny scales reminiscent of his partial Animagus form had appeared around his eyes, circling them and pointing up past his lashes almost as if he had applied eyeliner. A spike of scales edged his lightning bolt and pointed down the bridge of his nose as well, swooping to curve over his eyebrows.

Severus gulped. He wasn’t speaking to his loving, gentle Harry any longer. This was the creature within him, and he had no idea what to expect.

A gentle hand tipped with sharp nails stroked down his cheek. “Do not fear me, beloved. I will never hurt you.”

*Beloved.* The name melted some remnant of ice inside Severus’ heart and rendered him speechless. He met the gorgeous eyes of his mate and gave him a shy smile and a nod.

Harry gazed at him and stroked his hair and face. “You are mine.”

“Yes,” was all Severus could say.

“You are beautiful.”

Severus could not answer.

“Mate, you think I find you wanting?”

Severus frowned and shook his head. “No. I am aware that you see … beauty when you look at me. But I? I do not see it in myself.” He traced a gentle fingertip along the scales outside Harry’s eyes. “Merlin. This is lovely. Your face … your features are so … so striking.”

Harry smiled, revealing pointed canines. “You think I am beautiful?”


Harry’s smile faded. “No one else sees this in me. If they saw this, what I am, if they knew the truth of me, they would be afraid. Are you afraid of me?”

Severus swallowed. “A little, but it is only because I do not know what to expect of you like this. And, there is also ….” *Desire. Anticipation. Thrill.*

Harry’s slitted pupils dilated and he revealed his teeth again. With a huff, he ran his nose along Severus’ neck and caused the older man to shiver.

Harry whispered against him. “That is not fear. That is *desire.* I smell it.”

Severus’ breath hitched. “Oh. So you are one of a race that can smell my needs.”

“Mm, most creatures can where their mate is concerned.”

Harry stepped closer and wedged a firm thigh between Severus’ legs, sending a jolt of desire through the older man’s body. Severus released a shaky gasp and pawed at Harry’s shoulders.

“H-Harry?”

The young man dragged his teeth across Severus’ neck, and Severus tipped his head back and struggled not to arch into his love.
Harry murmured, “Why do you fight me, mate? I desire you as well. There is no need to be frightened.”

“But, but will … will your human Harry regret it?”

The young man gave him a bemused look.

Severus tried to think, tried to find the words he needed with Harry’s body pressed so close to his own. It was difficult, when, with every breath, Harry rocked him a little closer.

“I am … afraid that … your full human side will … be afraid when he comes back. I do—oh gods, Harry—do not w-want him to regret me.”

“We are the same being, Severus,” Harry murmured. “My avenger side has the upper hand at the moment, but I feel you. I want you just as much.”

“A-avenger? That is a creature? I had assumed Cináed—” Harry’s thigh rubbed upwards, and Severus melted at the contact. “Mhn, maybe this is not the time, hmm?”

Harry’s laughter in this form was deeper, wilder. It sent thrills down his spine, even as those strong, sharp-nailed hands settled on either side of his hips and guided him into place against his mate. Severus’ breath left him in a moan, and his entire body arched.

“H-Harry, you are sure … this will not frighten you later?”

A pleasure-roughened, wild voice murmured in his ear. “If it does, then I am counting on you to soothe me, mate.”

“Ah, oh gods, Harry.”

Severus could say nothing else, as his fierce, passionate mate caught him into a deep kiss and rubbed hard against him. He gasped and moved in concert with Harry, tongues intertwined, lips dancing together, hands clenching and releasing Harry’s shoulders. Harry moaned into him, obviously enjoying it as much as Severus, and the older man was lost to him.

For a long time, there was nothing in that dark tunnel but his mate’s sure movements and impassioned kisses, Severus’ need and desire building with every slow, maddening thrust.

He broke from their kiss with a pant. “Harry, need, need more.”


“Gods, yes.”

He gasped as Harry tugged him still closer, almost lifting him off the ground with his strength. Another thrust sent sharp jolts of electricity through Severus, and yet another followed the next second. Harry was taking him apart in earnest now, his hips moving hard and fast and his tongue tracing circles on Severus’ neck, one thigh held up in Harry’s strong hand.

“H-Harry, please.” He keened it. Severus didn’t know what he needed, but not having it was driving him mad. Something inside him was missing, something that ached to be complete.

Harry whispered against him, “Soon, love. Soon. I want to claim you in a bed, where I can touch all of this glorious skin and truly make you my own.”

*Claim him.* Oh Merlin, Harry wanted to seal the mate bond with him. Even as Severus’ body went
mad with passion, his heart pounded with sheer joy and wonder. Harry wanted him. Even knowing all the parts of Severus—good and bad—Harry still wanted him to be his mate. His forever.

Harry’s breathing turned to snarls and pants and muted cries of Severus’ name, and the older man thought he would break into pieces. He had never heard anything so arousing as Harry lost to passion—lost to him. With a soft cry, Severus tipped back his head and rode the tidal wave of their desire, mounting, reaching—so close.

“Severus,” Harry panted against his throat. “You are mine.”

Severus moaned and tilted his head to give Harry better access. “Yes, yours, Harry.”

“You are my mate.”

“Ye-hah-yes. Oh, there.”

Harry gratified his sudden plea with harder thrusts and sharp canines lightly dragging his throat. The sensation sent Severus reeling. He wrapped the leg Harry was holding around his mate’s hips and used his foot to push Harry even closer.

Harry murmured against his skin, “You will accept me, forever?”

This time, Severus heard both the wildness of Harry’s creature and Harry himself, uncertain and afraid Severus would turn him away.

“Yes, always yes.” Severus held Harry tight and moved with him, stumbling towards ecstasy in his arms. “Harry, please.”

“Yes, my mate. Yes. You are mine.” Harry bit Severus’ neck gently, just enough to make Severus feel the strength behind those sharp teeth, not enough to hurt, and with another thrust, stars burst in Severus’ vision. He cried out, shuddering with wave after wave of heat and light and sheer joy to be experiencing this with his Harry. His beloved.

A messy head fell onto his shoulder, the heat of Harry’s breath surging in rapid bursts down his chest, and Severus slowly came down from his passion to realise he had tears on his face. A trickle of fear wriggled into his chest and bid him to check on his mate.

“Harry?”

He slipped a gentle hand under Harry’s chin and eased the man’s face to meet his own. The scales had vanished, and in their place, a blushing young man watched him with the same kind of worry in his eyes that niggled Severus’ heart.

“Love, are you all right?”

Harry gave him a shy smile. “N-never done that before.”

“I know. Are you well? Did it frighten you?”

“Merlin, no,” Harry said with a grin. “It was brilliant.” He gently wiped Severus’ tears away. “Was it … bad? Why are you crying, Sev?”

“I … I am not sure. Only … knowing you wanted me forever was … it was …” More tears slid down his cheeks, but Severus smiled through them. “Beautiful. I do not know why I am weeping, unless I am simply overwhelmed.”
Harry kissed his tears away. “Seeing you come apart was amazing, Sev. I want to watch that happen every night. I want to see you gone to passion in my arms every morning.”

Severus shivered and rubbed Harry’s back. “Gods, Harry. I am older, love. I’m not sure I have that kind of stamina.”

Harry chuckled and pulled Severus into his arms, letting the man’s leg down at last only to wrap his arms around Severus’ neck. “I don’t care. I just want to love you, Sev, as long as I’m alive.”

Another wave of tears fell. “I want that too, my love.” Severus kissed Harry’s ear and nuzzled his neck. He smelled of male heat and sex and pine.

_Gods._

Severus pressed his nose into Harry’s shoulder and breathed him in.

“I love you, Severus,” Harry murmured. “Um, I know my … creature came out to play, but what was it?”

Severus gave him a wry look. “I honestly have no earthly idea. An avenger, you said, but I have never heard of it.”

“It’s … I’m an _avenger_? That’s my actual creature?” Harry made a wry face. “So Cináed was being literal then.”

“Apparently there are layers to that man’s words the world may never fully understand.”

Harry laughed and hugged Severus tight. “It was good, you know. Feeling your body like that. I want to see you next time.”

“Next time ….” Severus sighed and kissed Harry’s neck. “Yes, all right.”

“You trust me?”

“With my life. And … with my body, which is somehow more difficult.”

Harry kissed Severus’ cheek. “I promise, I’ll only ever honour you. Love you. I’ll never hurt you.”

Severus smiled against him. “I believe you.”

Harry sighed and stroked Severus’ cheek. “Um, I don’t think I want to try cleaning us up—afraid I might use too much power or something. Er, do you mind?”

Severus gave an inelegant snort, but did as Harry asked. “There. Is that better?”

“Yeah.” Harry took his wand from where he’d laid it on the floor and linked his arm through Severus’. “Come on. Let’s see what else this tunnel has to offer besides mindblowing sex with my love.”

Severus’ breath rushed out in a pant. “Merlin, Harry. I begin to wonder if I will survive being mated to you.”

Harry laid his head upon Severus’ shoulder. “You had better. I can’t do without you.”

Severus nodded and nudged Harry closer. “So I have seen.”
They walked along in silence, Severus worrying about what would happen to Harry when he died and, in between fearful thoughts, wondering just how far this tunnel went on. He judged they were well past the city limits by now, and damn. Severus was tired and achy and he needed that potion already. He had never had the chance to take it before the fear of the full moon and then sex had clouded his mind. Now that both terror and desire had faded, his pain had come back full force.

“Harry?” Severus held his shoulder and gave his mate a pained look. “Will you help me?”

“Help you with … oh, Sev!” Harry wrapped an arm around the man’s waist and helped him to stand. “Love, we could just set up here for the night. There’s not a lot of room, but it’s at least sheltered from the cold and werewolves, and I could take care of you here.”

“No, we need to keep going, but there is a general healing potion in my bag. Will you get it for me?”

Harry guided Severus to a wall and moved behind him to open his rucksack. “What strength, love?”

“Ah, three, I think.”

“Three?” Harry’s voice shook. “I shouldn’t have pushed you back there. I just made it worse.”

Severus wished he could reach behind him to comfort his mate. “No, love. While you were making love to me, I forgot my injuries. It’s only now, with the emotions gone, the pain seems more potent.”

Harry kissed the back of Severus’ neck. “I could always make love to you again.”

Severus gave a wan chuckle. “Even at eighteen, my Harry, I doubt you could become aroused again so quickly. I know I cannot.”

“Good point.” Harry held the flap of Severus’ rucksack open and whispered, “Accio number three Healing Draught.” A bottle tinkled behind him, and then Harry moved to the front of him again with a purple phial in hand. “This one, right?”

Severus sighed and took the potion from him, downing it in one gulp. It began to work immediately, and he slumped onto Harry’s shoulder in sheer relief.

“Thank you.”

Harry held Severus and stroked his hair until he could stand again.

“All right?” Harry offered his arm, and Severus took it.

“Yes. Much better. I still need rest, but that is helping my pain.”

“Good. You … your soul’s still okay, right?”

“Yes. I do not feel the same coldness. I will tell you right away if that changes.”

Harry sighed and tugged Severus closer. “Good. I refuse to let him hurt you like that ever again.”

Severus kissed Harry’s temple and led them on. And on. And on.

Gods, where the hell were they? He had thought to find a cache of tools to find the last horcrux, or perhaps the horcrux itself nestled in a blood-warded hideaway, but this tunnel went on for miles. Even with the strength of Severus’ potion, he had begun to hurt again before they encountered something beyond more cobwebs to banish.
Harry paused and tilted his head. “Do you hear that, Sev?”

The man nodded. “It sounds a bit like a telly.”

“So it does. Come on. Let’s go.”

Severus let go of Harry’s arm and whispered in his ear, “Defensive position, love, in case whomever lives here is unfriendly.”

“I doubt they would be, living underground and in a tunnel warded to my blood, but better safe than sorry.”

Harry shifted into a battle stance, holding his wand at the ready just as Severus had taught him in Defence the year prior. Severus thrilled in the flash of pride the sight brought. So Harry had paid attention. Severus had tried so hard to teach him without appearing to. Apparently it had made a difference.

After a few more meters, they came upon a shimmering pink field across the hall.

“A spirit-warded barrier,” Severus said with a frown. “Merlin. There’s no question that Albus set this.” He touched the barrier, but it didn’t give. “Gods, what do we do now? We cannot stay here forever.”

Harry held up a palm. “Let me try? Maybe I can ….” He pressed his palm to the glowing field, and, with a whoosh, the barrier disappeared. “Well. That was … easier than I’d thought it would be.”

Severus gave him a wry look. “Indeed.”

They walked on in silence, listening as the voices became more distinct. There were three males, as far as Severus could tell. He turned his head, trying to catch the sound better and thus make a stab at identifying what they were hearing, but as he moved, his wandlight caught on something metallic at their left. He placed a steadying arm on Harry’s shoulder and nodded towards the metallic object, not daring to speak.

With a frown, Harry raised his wand high and increased the power of his light, revealing a heavy steel door.

“What the …?”

Harry knocked, but no one answered. “What do we do?”

Severus pushed the door, but it didn’t budge. “Alohamora.” No change. “Hmm.” He then exhausted every unlocking and unwarding spell he knew, but the door remained firmly shut. He thought to prick Harry’s finger and unward it that way, but the moment Severus touched him, Harry jerked his hand away and shook his head hard.

“No. Can’t do it. Whatever is in there is dangerous and not meant for us.”

Severus swallowed hard and investigated the door itself, trying to gauge the risk. As he moved close, he caught a smell that reminded him of … something ….

He gasped as it came to him. Fur and teeth and claws and a desperate escape by the light of the full moon.

“Fuck!” He grabbed Harry and dashed away from the door, adding a few warding spells of his own
for good measure. “Good gods. I am glad your instincts kicked in before I tried using your blood, Harry. That is a werewolf in there.”

Harry went stock still. “Merlin! How do you know?”

“They smell of gunpowder, blood, and wet dog in one. I remembered the odour from when I encountered Lupin while he was transformed.”

“Gods.” Harry slid his hand in Severus’ and pulled him away from the door. “Come on. Let’s get the hell away from it in case those wards fail.”

Severus could not have agreed more. He led Harry away at a quick pace and set a spying spell on his back. If anything so much as breathed behind them, the spell would let him know immediately.

They followed the sound of the ‘telly’ down the hallway, straight to another barrier. By the colour and smell, Severus knew this one was blood magic. Most likely to keep the werewolf contained until after the full moon, should it escape the warded room.

Harry asked, “Another spirit barrier?”

“No, a blood ward. It is red, not pink.” Hesitantly, Severus touched just the tip of his finger to the ward. His hand passed through it as if it was water, and he let out a sigh. “It should be safe to cross, Harry, but try with a fingertip first, just in case.”

Harry gulped and pressed a shaking fingertip to the shimmering red wall. As before, his hand slipped through without trouble.

“Must be set to the same blood the entry is,” Harry said.

“Yes,” said Severus with a raised eyebrow. “Yours.”

“Mine? How?”

“Albus must have taken a little when you were a baby to seal this place.”

Harry frowned, his eyes showing the same niggling worry gnawing at Severus’ heart. Why on earth would Albus do this? There were at least two people here—a werewolf and a human. Why would he ward them in, like animals in a cage?

Severus swallowed and motioned Harry forwards once more. They would never find out unless they went on. Harry seemed to understand and led Severus without a word.

The tunnel turned again, and Severus noted the lack of cobwebs past the bend. This part was inhabited on a regular basis. Harry had noticed it, too, judging by the tension in the young man’s shoulders and his careful silence. Severus stayed close, guarding Harry and watching ahead as the telly increased in volume. Soon, the character of the speakers’ voices became clear, and Severus gaped.

Harry paused and listened a moment, head cocked and a bemused expression on his face. He whispered, “Is that … George?”

Severus leaned down to whisper, “You can tell the difference just from their voices?”

“George speaks a little softer, a little less accented. Fred is more boister—and there’s Fred. What in the world? How could they be here if it’s warded to my blood?”
“Perhaps it is their radio programme—they must still be going on about Lupin.”

Harry gasped. “Oh! Yeah, you’re right. So the people here are with the light, then?”

Severus frowned. “Or they guessed the password.”

“Sev, this tunnel’s been empty for years. I’ve no idea how they could’ve even known the show existed without being exposed to the Order somehow. Come on. Let’s find out what’s going on.”

Severus hung back and tugged Harry closer. “Harry … I am afraid.”

Harry embraced him and kissed him with gentle acceptance. “Sev, it’s okay. I feel it—we’re safe here, but I won’t leave your side regardless. It’s all right, love.”

Severus sighed and hugged Harry close. “Stay at my side. Let me protect you.” He kissed Harry’s forehead. “I have already come close to losing you once tonight. I have no wish to repeat the experience.”

“As long as you let me protect you as well.”

Severus nodded and followed Harry towards the radio, staying behind to protect him from the werewolf, should it manage to escape.

“…The search for Remus’ body continues,” came Lee Jordan’s voice. “We still haven’t found him, and gods, a part of me hopes he’s still alive, despite all the evidence to the contrary. I can’t help it, despite knowing better. Death Eaters don’t leave people alive.”

“I rather hope it myself, River,” said Fred. “Remus was a good man, a good teacher, a good fighter. We all loved him.”

Harry stopped and wiped away tears, shrinking into himself as the broadcast continued. Severus stepped behind him, pulled them against a wall, and tucked Harry into his arms. He held his wand at the ready, protecting his mate.

Merlin help him, he would not lose Harry, too.

Harry buried his face into Severus’ chest and struggled not to weep. Severus, for his part, just held the young man and watched for danger.

“Too right, Rapier,” said George. “I hope we find some news, some hope of him soon.”

Fred replied, “As do I, Rapscallion. While we’re here—and because I forgot to ask earlier—what’s the report from the home front?”

“Well, a lot of citizens want to know where Harry Potter is and why he hasn’t rescued us from You-Know-Who yet,” said George. “But I’ve got something to tell them.” He cleared his throat and shuffled some papers. “Get up and fight yourselves, you lazy berks! Harry’s job is to fight You-Know-Who, yeah, but what about the Death Eaters? You really think an eighteen year old can take on all forty or so? Stop putting the entire war on the shoulders of one already overwhelmed teenager. You have wands—use them.”

Harry sighed into Severus’ chest. “Thanks, George.”

Severus kissed the top of Harry’s head.

“That’s a strong message for our listeners, Rapscallion,” said Lee. “One I wholeheartedly support.
What about you, Rapier? What do you think?"

“I think Rapscallion’s on the money, River. We all know Harry, and he’s honestly too young for
this. Hell, Dumbledore was too young for this war. We can’t pin all our hopes on one man, no matter
how many times he’s managed to face You-Know-Who and come out unscathed. We’ve got to carry
the battle to the Death Eaters ourselves, you know? Fight back, and tell them where they can shove
their wands.”

Lee replied, “I agree, and besides that, even those of us who aren’t capable of fighting still need to
help carry the war where we can. We can work on getting the Death Eaters and supporters out of the
Ministry through litigation, make medical supplies for the injured, send food and care packages to
our front lines fighters—there are many ways you can help even if you’re not of able body.”

“Right, River,” said Fred. “And that’s exactly what we here at Potterwatch intend to do. We’re out
of time for the night, but—wait a tick. What’s this?”

“It’s Royal’s Patronus,” said a frightened Lee. “Something’s happening.”

Severus froze, alarm ringing through him. Harry went rigid and clutched bunches of Severus’ coat in
white-knuckled fists.

“Right.” Fred paused. “All right, Royal, you’re on the air with Rapier, Rapscallion, and River.
What’s gone wrong now?”

“Werewolf attack in Godric’s Hollow!”

The unknown person listening to the show cried out in dismay—a woman, judging by the tone.

Shacklebolt’s deep voice continued, “There are no known casualties at this time—we just had the
report that one’s on the loose a moment ago—but for gods sakes, if you’re in Godric’s Hollow—stay
inside! The aurors will handle it.”

There was a brief pause.

“Shite,” Harry breathed into Severus’ shoulder. “It really was Greyback.”

Severus nodded and clutched Harry closer. “I never imagined I would be so grateful for instinctual
magic. You saved our lives tonight, Harry. Merlin, thank you.”

As Harry brought him into a gentle kiss, the radio show continued.

“Looks like that’s all Royal had to say, folks,” said George. “And you heard him. There’s a known
werewolf on the loose in Godric’s Hollow, so by all means, stay inside and keep your doors
warded.”

“And that goes for all our listeners,” said Lee. “Werewolves on You-Know-Who’s side have been
out in greater numbers since this war really got started, and they’re resistant to spells. Just about the
only thing that’s going to save you—maybe—is a silver sword, and you’d better hope it’s pure silver
and not an alloy or transfiguration.”

“In other words,” said George, “stay indoors and out of dodge. I’d warn our listeners off playing the
hero, but it seems like most of you expect Harry to do all the work while you stay at home and knit
doilies. Still, this is one night you’d best stay on your lazy arses and leave the werewolf capturing to
the experts. That means you too, Harry!”
Harry winced. “Touché.”

Severus cuddled him closer.

“Well put, Rapscallion,” said Fred. “Now, with that out of the way, we’re out of time for tonight, but we’ll be back tomorrow, same time, same station. The next password will be: Vance. Keep the fight strong, listeners, and even if you’re nowhere near Godric’s Hollow, remember to use special full-moon precautions if you’re traveling for the holidays tonight. Either use a warded floo or unregistered portkey, or set up an indoors apparition point with your relatives in advance—don’t go outside for any reason. Stay together, stay united, and keep faith. Until next time, good night.”

The radio clicked off, and a feminine voice said, “It’s about bloody time someone told Harry’s ‘adoring’ public to get off their lazy arses and help him, but gods, what a shame about Godric’s Hollow.” She sighed. “I’ll never be able to go home.”

Severus froze.

“No,” he breathed, shock and dismay running rampant through his veins. “It can’t be.”

Harry looked up. “Sev? What is it? Do you know her?”

Severus stood paralysed, unable to speak for the emotion clogging his throat. He hadn’t heard that voice in twenty years, not since he tried and failed to gain her forgiveness one last time. She had refused, and two weeks later, Severus had been marked. He wished with all that was in him he had not given up, but he had, and he had paid for his mistakes with her loss.

Or so he had thought.

“No. It … it cannot be!”

He barely felt the tears on his cheeks, so strong was the pain and hope and disbelief crashing together in his chest. His limbs had gone numb, and his cold feet dragged over the stones as he moved toward the voice.

Harry whispered, “Sev, your wand!”

But Severus knew better. She would never attack him, even if she had lost all hope for him decades before. Harry made a soft noise of alarm and followed, wand at the ready.

The tunnel turned, and at the end of it, an open doorway revealed a homely living area with a purple couch and sky-blue cushions. Her favourite colours. A flash of red hair and green eyes poked around the doorway, and Severus hardly registered either the quick flick of a wand or the red light coming in his direction. He was only aware of her and the words upon his own lips.

“Lily,” he breathed, and everything went black.

“Stupefy!”

Harry leapt back, trying to pull Severus with him, but the man wouldn’t budge. He stood and stared as the red light zoomed towards him, and Harry could not heave Severus’ larger body out of the way. The spell hit Severus square in the chest, and Harry grunted as the heavy man collapsed into his
shoulder. He eased Severus to the floor as quickly and gently as he could and stood protectively over him, waiting for the unfamiliar witch to appear again.

At another flash of red hair, Harry was ready.

“Petrificus Totalus!”

The spell missed, but the woman gave a squeak of surprise and stuck a wandless hand around the edge of her doorway.

“Wait, wait. You’re a human?”

Harry frowned and trained his wand on the woman’s hiding place. “Obviously. Why did you attack? We only came to—” Then she stepped around the corner, and all the breath went out of Harry’s lungs in a single rush, “Mum?”

“Harry!”

Lily let out a sobbing sort of shriek and ran to embrace him, weeping into Harry’s hair. Harry stood frozen, paralysed with shock.

“Oh, my baby! I thought you would never find me. I’ve been trapped here so long, just waiting on you, but you were gone, and I, I just ….”

“Mum?”

Harry couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe. His mother was alive. Even after reading it in the journal, he hadn’t fully believed it.

“Yes, baby,” she said, kissing his face all over. “Well, not a baby.” She stepped back and held Harry’s shoulders. “Look at you! You’re a man now. Hmm. I thought you’d be taller, but no matter. You’re perfect. Oh, Harry. I’ve missed you so much.”

“Mum?”

“Yes, Harry. I’m your mother. Don’t you recognize me? Oh. No, I suppose you wouldn’t, would you?” She sounded so sad at the thought. “I’m so sorry, baby.”

Harry trembled as she held him, kissed his cheeks and hair, wept over him. He was numb.

“I don’t understand,” Harry finally managed. “Why, how are you even alive?”

His mother bristled. “Wait a tick. He never told you? I can understand not telling Britain at large, but he never told you either?” She stamped her foot. “Gods, that infuriating, meddling, manipulative, sociopath of a bastard! First he kidnaps you, then he traps me here and sends you to my bitch of a sister, and then he doesn’t even have the decency to tell you I’m alive? Shite! I’d kill him if—”

Harry frowned. “Who, You-Know-Who?”

“No! Dumbledore! He did all this to us, that shite-head.”

Harry went cold all over again. “D-did what? I don’t understand.”

Lily sighed and motioned him in. “Come on. Let’s get your friend up first and get you inside. Um, I’m sorry I stupefied him. I thought you were ….” She looked over Harry’s shoulder towards the hall they had just left and shook her head.
“The werewolf?”

She drew up short and gasped. “Um, is he loose?”

Harry shuddered. “Pretty sure I wouldn’t be here if he was. No, we just recognised the scent.”

“Oh. I’ve never been so close to one when they’re transformed. I would have just made him wolfsbane, but I didn’t have any aconite.”

Harry crinkled his nose. “Er … isn’t that poisonous to werewolves? And humans in general?”

“Not if you prepare it correctly. So you’re not a potions prodigy, hmm?”

Harry snorted. “Not at all.”

Lily shook herself and stood tall. Taller than Harry. He pouted internally.

“Never mind it, love,” she said. “Um, do you know the spell to wake up your friend?”

Harry frowned. “Of course I do. But Mum, don’t you know him?”

She shook her head. “Didn’t see his face. Why? Should I?”

Harry gulped. “Y-yeah.” He stepped out of the way and revealed Severus’ unconscious form.

“Sev!” Lily gaped and gave Harry a confused look. “Harry, what in the world are you doing with him? Don’t you know what he is?”

Harry glared hard. “Yes. I know. Do you?”

“Him?” His voice went icy-cold. “Hmm. And the last twenty-five years? Where were you then? Did you see him grow up? Did you watch his heart shatter to pieces again and again when you rejected his forgiveness? Did you watch him and was almost tortured into madness for daring to ask? Do you know he begged for your life and was almost tortured into madness for daring to ask? Do you know he’s a gentle, caring, sensitive man underneath that snarky shell? I’m willing to bet you didn’t.”

Lily gaped, mouth opening and closing like a fish’s, as Harry knelt beside Severus and laid a gentle hand on his cheek. Fury, joy, and grief thrummed through him all at once, but Harry fought his anger for Severus’ sake. He brushed the hair back from Severus’ forehead and whispered *Enervate* against his cheek. The man woke and tensed, terrified and unsure of what had happened to him or why he was lying in the floor, no doubt.

Harry rubbed a thumb over the man’s cheek. “Sev, it’s okay. I’m here.”

The confused man set his eyes on Harry and smiled. “Harry. Wha-what happened?” He sat and rubbed the back of his head, and when he looked behind Harry, his eyes went wide. “Oh. Oh gods. Is it true, Harry? Am I hallucinating?”

Harry shot his mother a cold look, warning her with his eyes not to say a word against Severus. She still appeared too shocked to speak, so Harry helped Severus to stand and rubbed the man’s back.

“No, Sev. It’s not a hallucination. She’s real, and really my mum. It seems Dumbledore has much more to answer for than we ever suspected.”
Severus jerked back as if struck, his eyes filling with grief. “Albus did this? But … I gave him everything. I became his spy for her, because he said it would honour her memory. For her son, because he hadn’t a soul left in the world to protect him.”

“I know, Sev. I’m sorry.”

Distressed and pacing, Severus went on as if he hadn’t heard.

“Twenty years—twenty fucking years! I never had another friend, a lover, mentor—no one for all that time. It was too dangerous, and I had to pretend to be the loyal little Death Eater anyway. Who would have wanted such a callous man even if I could have taken a partner or even a friend?”

Harry whispered, “I do.”

Lily spun and gave him a shocked look, but said nothing. Harry ignored her in his worry for his mate.

Severus sniffled and grabbed at his hair. “I put everything I had into spying for Albus, to finding cures for Riddle’s spells and poisons and other ways to combat Riddle if he should find a way to return. Ways to remove the mark. I spent meetings with Riddle being cursed and tortured and humiliated because of my blood status, all for Albus, and, and …” His voice went cold, like Professor Snape’s had been. “And now you tell me that he lied to me all this time? That he used my grief to manipulate me into serving as his spy and pawn?”

Harry blinked the tears from his vision and held Severus’ hands. “I, I’m s-sorry. He did it to me, too. And her.”

Severus gently put Harry’s hands aside and stood. “I, I need time.” He turned on his heel and started off.

“Severus!” Harry bolted to his feet and started after him. “Severus, wait! Please.”

Severus paused. “Harry. I am … not leaving you. I just need a moment to think.” He turned and rubbed Harry’s hair. “It’s all right. Will you give me a bit of time to myself? I swear I shall come back.”

Harry gave him a tearful nod. “You … you’re not leaving me?”

“No. Do you remember my oath? I shall need you tonight, after this.” He lowered his voice to whisper in Harry’s ear, “I shall need your love desperately.”

Harry nodded and wiped shaky hands at his eyes. “S-sorry. I don’t know why I get scared so easily.”

“I believe we can blame your relatives for that. And …” Severus’ lip curled into a sneer. “And Albus.” His eyes filled. “Please, Harry. I need … time.”

Harry gave him a tentative nod and watched as Severus walked away, his heart trembling and unsure. “Please, Severus. Please don’t leave me.”

Harry moved as if to go after him, but Lily shook her head and pulled him away.

“Don’t. Let him have a moment to himself.”

Harry wrapped his arms around his chest and whispered, “I’m afraid. What if he doesn’t come back?”
Lily gave the empty hallway where Severus had gone a wistful look. “He will. If there is one thing I know about Severus, he keeps his oaths. And that was Severus at his best. Merlin, I’ve never seen him be so kind—not even to me.” She shook her head. “Well, he’ll be back when he can process this. So, will you come and talk to me, baby? I can see things have changed much since I’ve been out of the loop. Catch me up.”

Harry stared after Severus a long moment, hoping desperately to hear a swishing robe or the catlike footfalls of soft-soled shoes, but the hall remained empty and silent. With a heart like lead and a void sucking his chest into oblivion, he followed his mother into her … home. Bunker. Prison, perhaps. Whatever it was, it felt empty without the other half of Harry’s soul.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Warnings: We find out a bit more of what kind of crap Dumbledore was willing to do just to end the war. Harry finds out what he is at last.

***AN: The next chapter will come slower because I have to write at least a portion of it from scratch and it's not coming easy. That, and I'm sick again and need some rest.***

CHAPTER 20

Severus drifted like a ghost down the silent tunnel, his arms crossed over his chest and heart bleeding and raw. All this time, Albus had known Lily was alive, and he had callously used Severus’ belief in her death to manipulate him into service in the war. He pretended to be like a father, but gods, the man had imprisoned Lily for twenty years and made Severus believe she was dead. His best, his only friend, and Albus had used her ‘death’ like a weapon. He had beaten Severus over the head with it time and time again to force him into decisions he didn’t want to make. Serving as a spy. Teaching at the same time. Treating Harry like absolute shite.

Harry.

Gods. What he had done to Severus didn’t compare to what he had done to Harry. The man had ripped Harry away from his mother when he was but a baby and left him with terrible, abusive relatives. His mother was still alive and loved him dearly, and yet, Albus had kidnapped Harry and forced him to grow up where he was starved and locked away like something foul. Completely unwanted and unloved.

And Lily! Could there be any worse crime than tearing a mother’s only son from her arms and imprisoning her, alone, while her child grew up elsewhere? Lily had had nothing of her son for twenty years but Potterwatch broadcasts and perhaps Daily Prophets. She had no way of knowing that he was happy, well, even if he was alive, beyond what the public told her. And that was nothing real at all.

Shite. Nothing could excuse the old man’s treatment of them. Nothing.

Twenty years. Twenty long years he had grieved Lily Evans. Twenty-five, if one counted the years after Severus had broken their friendship with one foolish word. Seventeen years, Lily had grieved her son, alone and in prison. Seventeen years, Harry had lived through hell believing his mother was dead and that he had no one in the entire world.

Albus had almost destroyed them all.

Yet, they had survived, and now that they knew what he had done, perhaps they could go about healing the damage. Severus hoped they could anyway.

Gods. Severus still couldn’t believe it. Lily was alive! After all this time of atoning, she was alive, and his life without her was over.
Or, it should have been.

A pang twisted Severus’ heart as he remembered her reaction, her face at the sight of him, the horror and shock in her eyes. The way she inched towards Harry as if trying to drag him away before Severus hurt him.

Even now, she still believed the worst of Severus. Couldn’t she see how much it hurt?

But no, ultimately, it wasn’t Lily’s fault. There were greater forces at play.

‘Greater forces? Hmm.’

Severus gave a bitter snort. He wouldn’t be surprised if Dumbledore had manipulated Lily into rejecting him. Severus couldn’t deny it had moulded the broken boy he was into the perfect spy.

Dear Merlin, this betrayal hurt. Severus’ chest felt as if someone had turned all his ribs inward and stabbed them into his heart. His gut was heavy with lead. Numbness plagued his limbs and forced his steps into a shuffle.

Albus. Severus had trusted him. He had given the man everything, even taken the old bastard’s life when he asked, but Albus had given Severus nothing in return but an old journal and twenty years of lies. Perhaps longer.

He paused at the blood barrier. The only ward between him and the werewolf. With a shudder, Severus turned back towards the house. Towards Harry.

The pain in Severus’ heart lightened. Whatever terrible acts Dumbledore had committed, at least Severus had gained Harry’s love from this mess. His mate. His home.

Albus could never separate them now, no matter how hard he tried, and that gave Severus some little relief.

He swallowed a sudden pang of guilt. Harry had asked him not to go. The young man’s voice had been full of terror and grief, even after Severus’ reassurances that he would come back. Those beautiful emerald eyes he loved so much had revealed the depths of his pain, and Severus had left him anyway. He had left Harry alone to deal with the pain of Dumbledore’s betrayal and seeing his mother after believing her dead all his life. His stomach roiled, and a tight, cold feeling pinched his chest.

He would soon be no better than Lily at this rate.

Severus increased the length of his stride in spite of the ache in his upper body, making his robes snap around his ankles like they had while he stalked Hogwarts’ halls. Harry needed him. He would not stand by and let Harry deal with this trauma alone. At least, not for long.

Gods, he still couldn’t wrap his head around all of this. Lily was alive—and still hated him, apparently.

Severus shook his head and held a hand to his aching chest—whether it hurt from his injuries or from grief, he couldn’t be sure.

There was no help for it. He had done all he could to atone. By this point, even if Lily did try to re-establish their friendship, it would likely never be the same. Her refusals had driven Severus to the Dark Lord, and though he had blamed himself for it for twenty years, he knew Harry wouldn’t see it that way. Harry had even told him she had been in the wrong, and after weeks of the young man’s
love and gentle care, Severus had finally begun to believe it.

Angry or not, she never should have abandoned him that day.

Severus sighed and rubbed his chest. He could still forgive her, but he could not forget. And that would colour any future relationship they dared attempt.

How would this affect his relationship with Harry? Would Harry still accept him as his mate if his own mother rejected Severus? Would it breed resentment between them?

No. He would not let a twenty-five year old grudge come between himself and his mate. His family. Severus would do everything within his power to heal the breach between himself and Lily, regardless of whether she reciprocated, for Harry’s sake. For them, and the future they had yet to build together.

Merlin, he hoped it would be enough.

He approached the door and heard his name. Severus knew he shouldn’t listen, but the curiosity of why, after all this time, they would speak of him and not their own renewed relationship mystified and intrigued him. He leaned beside the archway and ducked behind the wall.

Lily led Harry into what appeared to be a cozy little home. A loveseat and sofa sat catty-cornered around a rustic coffee table, which held a half-drunk cup of tea. No doubt Lily had been drinking it when she heard them in the hall. An ancient radio and old brass lamp sat on a table between the seating. And, along what appeared to be the wall separating the living room from the kitchen and dining area, were bookcases so stuffed with books on every subject, even the bibliophilic Severus would be hard-pressed to read them all.

Harry’s chest panged. Severus. Gods, how could Lily still hate him after so long?

As if she’d read his mind, Lily flopped down on the sofa and said, “So all this time, Severus was a spy.”

Harry watched his mum with wary eyes. Why hadn’t she come for him? Why had she treated Severus so badly? This place with its fluffy couches and rustic furniture was quite nice for being underground, but Merlin! How could she abandon him and hide out here for twenty years? It … wasn’t right. None of this was right. Especially how she was treating Severus, even now. At least she was trying to make it up to Harry, but Severus—she had already been as cruel to him that day as she had been twenty-five years before.

He wanted some questions answered before he ‘caught her up’ on anything.

“You drove him to Riddle, you know,” Harry said in a low voice full of betrayal. “He was never truly dark. He was scared, and you drove him away.”

Lily cringed and held out her hands as if trying to gentle him. “Harry, I, you have to understand. He’s a Slytherin.”

Harry leapt to his feet. “I have to understand? You don’t even know me. And gods, you sound like Ron—only he had an excuse.”
She frowned. “I would think that’s a good thing. I thought he was your best friend.”

“Was. Severus is now, and Hermione. But Ron, well, I forgave him, but he really hurt me and I’ve not forgotten it yet. He’s prejudiced and stubborn and blinded when it comes to gays and Slytherins—though he’s at least trying now and he had a reason for the former—and you sound just like him right now. Are you going to tell me I’m disgusting because I like men, Mum? That, so far, is the only difference I see.”

“Harry! Of course not. I don’t care if you like men or women or both, but this has nothing to do with that. We’re talking about Severus, aren’t we?”

Harry let out a low, bitter laugh. “Merlin. Gods, you’re blind. Everyone else saw it before we did, and you can’t even consider the possibility—”

Lily interrupted, “Harry, cut me a little slack, okay? I, I’m not blind, but I, I don’t know what happened. What’s changed between you and Sev?”

He snapped, “You don’t get to call him that! He’s not Sev to you. Not anymore.”

Tears ran down her cheeks, and Harry turned his back so he wouldn’t have to see them.

“Mum, you do realise James—Da—sexually assaulted him, don’t you?”

Lily gasped. “What? He just—”

“Stripped Severus naked and hung him up for the entire school to mock! What part of that isn’t assault? True, Da didn’t actually touch Severus, but it almost might have been easier for Sev to deal with if he had. As it was, Sev had to endure all the trauma of an attack and molestation that his best friend abandoned him to, and no one helped him escape, and no one even believed counted as assault.” He wiped his eyes and wrapped his arms around his chest. “It was vile, Mum, what Da did to him. What you did.”

Lily shook her head, denying it hard. “No, no, Harry. He’s, he’s poisoned your view. That’s, not quite what happened.”

“The hell it isn’t! I saw it, Mum! He’s my mind magic teacher. We’ve shared memories, and I know how to differentiate a false memory from a true one. And before you try to say Sev lied about that, I looked the difference up myself. Hermione helped me study Occlumency because I was total shite at it.”

“Language, Harry.”

He whirled on her again. “You don’t get to tell me what I can and can’t say or do. I’m an adult and I’ll damn well curse if the situation calls for it. And besides, where the hell do you get off thinking you can be my mum after all this time? Where were you when Petunia made me cook for them all—at four fucking years old—and then made me stand there while they ate it all? If I was lucky, I might have gotten to lick their plates, but most of the time, they stood over me and made me rinse them before I got the chance.”

“Harry,” breathed a horrified Lily.

“Oh, you think that’s bad?” He laughed, and it was a horrible sound. “Where the hell were you when they locked me in a tiny cupboard for weeks at a time, with nothing but a hunk of stale bread and a cup of dish water to drink every three days? Hmm? Were you comfy here in your cosy little hideaway while Vernon beat me bloody for existing? For nothing more than the crime of being a
wizard?” He turned his back once more. “Don’t try to mother me. You lost that right seventeen years ago.”

Lily leapt up and reached for him, but Harry stepped away.

She cried, “Harry, please! I didn’t stay here out of choice! Dumbledore bound me to this place. He used my blood in some sort of ancient location bonding spell I’ve never heard of and trapped me behind a spirit barrier. It could never fall until my family—my mate and son—found me. Not even my Patronus could get through. I suppose it’s down now, but Harry—” She stood and lifted her hands towards him. “Please, please don’t shut me out of your life. I’ve prayed for you to find me so long, and to know that you, you hate me so much, I ….”

She burst into tears, and Harry’s conscience stabbed him. He flopped into a chair with a sigh. “You were really forced here against your will?”

She wiped her eyes and nodded.

“Swear it.”

She frowned. “What?”

“Swear what you said is true. I want an oath that you couldn’t leave this place even though you wanted to because of ancient spirit magic or something to that effect.”

Lily shrank into herself. “You don’t trust me.”

“You’ve not given me any reason to lately.”

She sniffled and closed her eyes, obviously struck to the heart, but Harry wouldn’t budge. He’d been lied to far too much to trust people on their word without a damn good reason.

Still, perhaps if he told her that, it wouldn’t hurt her quite as much.

“Mum, it’s not necessarily you. It’s that Dumbledore lied to me my entire life. He forced Severus to, as well. Sirius and Remus told me they were just pranksters when Sirius almost killed Severus, and he and Da practically molested Sev in front of the entire student body. Everyone told me you were sweet and smart and friendly to Severus, but you abandoned him to be tortured because he called you a name when he was humiliated out of his mind and scared to death. Then you rejected his apologies over and over again, and for what? Some stupid belief that wearing green on your school robes makes you evil?”

Harry snapped, “I’ll have you know it was a Gryffindor that got Da killed! A Gryffindor and a friend he trusted enough to give him the literal keys to his life. And Dumbledore was my headmaster and mentor, Sirius was my Godfather, and … and R-Remus was my friend. And they all fucking lied to me! So I don’t care what house colours people wore or even who they are. I don’t trust people out of necessity. It keeps me alive.”

“I … all right. I guess that makes sense, but ….” Lily gave Harry a piercing look. “Love, do you defend Severus so strongly for a reason I haven’t seen yet?”

Harry’s eyes hardened to steel. “That’s none of your business until you swear your oath.”


“Blame Dumbledore. I’ve been fighting Voldemort since I was eleven years old. Your oath? Or do I
turn around and leave you here?”

Lily sighed. “Fine. I swear upon my magic that I was trapped here against my will and could not escape to find you, Harry, but, oh! How I wanted to. This I so swear.”

Blue light settled on her and faded. She flicked her wand and levitated a cushion.

“Satisfied?”

Harry relaxed marginally. “That this part of your story is true at least. But how can you possibly defend what you did to Severus? Why? I thought you cared about him?”

She hesitated. “I, I did. I thought, if I taught him a lesson, he’d turn away from those evil Slytherins around him.”

“You mean his dorm mates? What was he supposed to do, ask Dumbledore for a private room?”

“Well, um, Dumbledore probably would have d—”

Harry cut her off. “And then the actual evil Slytherins would’ve killed him for it! Gods, Mum. Did you really think he was dark just because he had green on his robes? Fuck. You’ve been listening to Potterwatch. Don’t you know Kingsley—Royal—was a Slytherin? He’s an auror, brilliant, and a Slytherin. Are you going to start hating him now?”

She stared at him as if her jaw had come unhinged. “Kingsley’s a Slytherin?”

Harry scoffed. “Yeah.”

“I … had no idea.”

The look in her eyes said she didn’t like the idea, either.

Harry tugged his knees to his chest, wishing he could be with Severus right now rather than this prejudiced woman whom he barely knew. This wasn’t his mum. This wasn’t the woman who had protected him with her life.

He didn’t know who she was.

“Did you know that I missed being sorted as a Slytherin by the skin of my teeth? The only reason I wasn’t is because I’d met a prat Slytherin earlier that day, and after seeing him act like a pompous idiot and hearing all the stories about Riddle and Slytherins in general, I asked the hat not to put me there. It’s probably a good thing I did because there aren’t half as many Death Eaters in Gryffindor as there are in Slytherin, but you know what? If it weren’t for my life being at risk, my house wouldn’t have mattered that much. I’d have come out the same.”

He gave her a heartsick look. “But I have to wonder, would you have treated me the same way had I been sorted as a Slytherin? Would my own mother have turned me out because I had the wrong colour on my robes? Do you not see how mad it is that I even need to ask this question?”

Tears poured down her face. “I … but the Death Eaters!”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of them in Slytherin. There are also a lot of Ravenclaws and several Gryffindors. Yes, Gryffindors. Need I remind you of Pettigrew again? And while the Hufflepuffs generally want to mind their own business and keep their nose out of conflicts like this—there are even a couple badgers in Riddle’s ranks. Did you know that?”
Harry scoffed and flopped back in his seat. “House doesn’t matter. It’s an arbitrary system that honestly ought to be done away with, as far as I’m concerned.”

She gaped again. “You think there shouldn’t be houses at Hogwarts?”

“If it breeds this kind of contempt? Makes so many people think everyone from a certain house is dark that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy? Creates arseholes like Malfoy and gives Riddle a base to build upon? Yeah, you bet your arse I do.”

Lily stared at him, shocked, and Harry sighed.

“Mum, look. I’m not going to pretend everyone in Slytherin is okay. They’re not. Both the elder and junior Malfoy are total arseholes and I hate them. Parkinson is a bint. Nott is a pain. Goyle and Crabbe are hulking idiots that aren’t even smart enough to handle first year charms. I have no idea how they made it to seventh. But not all Slytherins are like that.

“Severus is, gods, he’s brilliant. In both senses of the word. And besides him, there’s Blaise Zabini who isn’t so bad when he’s not being pressured to be, Daphne Greengrass who stood up with us at the rite and risked her life to do it, and Professor Sinistra is pretty cool too. I mean, I don’t have a lot of Slytherin friends besides Severus, but the point is that I do have some. And despite the fact that these people are all decent, as soon as they leave Hogwarts, they’re going to meet a brick wall of prejudice a hundred metres high just because they’re snakes. And that’s wrong. They should be judged on the quality of their character, not their house.”

He huffed and leaned on his knees. “This kind of system breeds people like Malfoy and Riddle and hurts people like Greengrass, when she hasn’t done anything except try to help us and get through her schooling with her and her little sister in one piece. And it stunts growth within the houses. If everyone has the same traits, what do we learn from each other?” He shook his head. “It’s a faulty system based on prejudice, and it needs to go.”

“Merlin,” Lily breathed. “I … I guess I never thought of it like that.” She gave Harry a pained look. “You had to grow up before you were even out of nappies, didn’t you, baby?”

Harry nodded and looked to the door. Why hadn’t Severus come back yet? He needed his Sev. Badly.

“Harry? I, I’m sorry. For everything. I wish I could have been there for you. You have no idea how much I wish I could have watched you become the man you are now.”

Harry gave her a wan smile. “I’m sure. But you didn’t care about how Severus grew up, did you?”

She winced and looked away. Harry leaned his elbows on his knees and sighed.

“What changed you, Mum? The little girl Severus has told me so much about, she didn’t care if he was rich or poor or even a little confused as to what was safe or appropriate. That girl didn’t mind his tatty robes or messy hair. She just talked to him and made him feel like at least one person in the world cared what happened to him.”

Lily sniffled. “I did care. Do.”

Harry glared. “Really? I haven’t seen any evidence of it. But we were talking about your childhood self.” He dug his fingernails into the chair arms and spoke in a voice one step from a snarl. “There’s one thing I don’t understand. One thing I can’t wrap my head around. You’re kind to me, loving to me, but to Severus? Gods. You don’t even know the man and you hate him.
“What’s sad is that you didn’t always. I think you loved him once. Back in your early years, you befriended Severus despite your differences in houses, values, and upbringing, and gave him a reason to look to the light for four years. Gave him a reason to hope, and that, that was brilliant. But what I don’t understand is how, when he needed you most, when he was terrified and crying and being assaulted in front of the entire school, how you could just leave him there? How could you look at him then, see how scared and hurt he was, and decide, ‘Oh, he needs to be taught a fucking lesson?’ It’s inhuman!”

“Harry, I—”

“No!” Harry shouted, and Lily recoiled. “He needed you! What the hell was wrong with you that you could abandon him to that, even if it was for the purposes of supposedly saving his soul? What kind of person does something like that?”

“Harry, you don’t understa—”

“Oh, yes I do. I understand perfectly. It’s you who’s blinded.” He wiped away a river of tears and gave a bitter laugh. “You know, before fifth year, I used to wish I could meet you and Da. I used to imagine you as good, kind people and parents I could look up to. Until that day I saw Sev’s worst memory of you. Of both of you. I have never been more ashamed of my heritage than I was in that moment. Than I am now.”

Harry stood and rubbed his cheeks. “I’m going back into the tunnel. We can’t leave this structure until after the full moon, but I don’t think I want to stay here another minute. Goodbye, Mum.”

Lily stood and reached for him. “Harry, no. Please! Don’t leave it like this. I, there’s room for you to stay here. Please don’t go.”

He stopped at the door. “Can you leave now that I’ve broken the barrier?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I’ve never had the opportunity to try.”

He nodded. “Then I’ll return in the morning. You don’t want me to stay right now. Nothing I have to say to you is good.”

She covered her mouth and a broken sob. “Harry, no. I’m s-sorry.”

He gave her a sad, disappointed smile. “Thanks. But I’m not the one who deserves and needs to hear that. Good night.”

Harry left the room, trying to ignore the sound of his mother’s shattered sobs and failing. He knew he was being too hard on her, but gods! He couldn’t understand how she could have hurt Sev the way she did.

“Sev, I wish I could fix it,” he whispered.

Another whisper on his left made Harry jump. “It is not your place, Harry.”

‘Shite. He heard.’

Severus had never been so shocked in his life to hear Harry’s fierce defence of him. Against his own
mother, too. Merlin! He had never had someone fight so hard for his happiness. The idea that Harry wanted to heal and protect him so much filled him with a heady sort of joy.

And yet, he could not allow Harry to leave his mother like that. Whatever Lily had done to him, Severus had never stopped loving her. Everything he had done for the light had been for her memory—and for Harry, of course. He could not leave her in utter despair and let Harry become estranged from his last living family.

“Come,” Severus said, and steered Harry into the room by his elbow. “We are going to work this out.” He removed Harry’s rucksack and set it on the floor, then removed his own, and guided Harry to face his mother. “Come, Harry—she is your mother. You need her. And Lily, do buck up. I’ve missed you too long and it’s rather difficult to have a conversation like this.”

Lily glared through her tears. “You never were very compassionate.”

Harry glared right back. “Not true, actually. Sev’s been the only one to hold me together these past few weeks. He just has a bit of a dark sense of humour.”

Severus sighed. “I truly was trying to make you laugh, Lily. I haven’t any other humour than sarcasm. It does have the unfortunate habit of hurting people sometimes, though Harry seems immune to it. Perhaps because after how I treated him in the past, it seems like nothing. Forgive me, Lily.”

She blinked. “Sev? I, that’s honest?”

Severus frowned. “Yes. Why do you ask?”

“I haven’t ever heard you so open before. It used to be pulling teeth to get you to admit anything at all.”

He shook his head sadly. “I am neither fifteen nor a spy any longer, Lily, and I have since seen far worse things than a drunk of a father or schoolyard assailants.”

She scoffed. “Done them, too.”

He turned away, ice building in his chest. “Yes.”

Harry wrapped an arm around Severus’ waist, pulling him close. “Sev, ssh. I know it hurts, but I still see you for who you really are.” He tucked a stray lock of Severus’ hair behind his ear, and, after Severus gave him a wan smile, he turned to stare down his mother with that fierce teal light glowing in his eyes. “Yes, Sev has done terrible things, but he did them all to save me, Mum. I should think you’d be a little more grateful, considering he had to sacrifice even his very soul for me. Literally.”

Severus shuddered at the reminder of Blackpool, and Harry slipped his fingers slid into the hair at the nape of Severus’ neck. He had to suppress a different kind of shudder at the feathery touch.

“His soul and heart are still broken now,” Harry continued, “but I’m putting him back together. So I won’t have you attacking him. You don’t know anything about what he’s become, how brave and strong and faithful he truly is, or how much his past hurts him. Leave off.”

“Harry.” Severus turned and placed his hands on Harry’s shoulders, trying to steady the man and calm his anger. The light in his eyes dimmed a bit. “Thank you, but such fierce defence is more than I need.”

Harry glared. “You’ve had no one to defend you for twenty-five years. I will not leave you to fight
Severus half-wished Harry’s leadership traits had come in a bit later, but he recognised the young man’s undeniable need to guard and protect his mate and knew he could not fight it.

“Thank you, Harry, for standing by me in my hour of need.”

The fierceness in Harry’s eyes softened. “I always will, Sev. I always will.”

With a sigh, Lily held her hands up in supplication. “Okay. Harry, I get it. You’re going to fight for him tooth and nail, and if I keep going against him, I’ll lose you all over again. I can’t bear for you to walk away from here hating me, so, I’ll try to understand. Just explain it to me, okay? I really don’t know what happened between you. How did you end up so close? I was under the impression that Sev hated you.”

Harry shook his head. “He had to act like he did while he was spying, but he never really hated me. And he’s sworn a magical oath on his life about that, so don’t tell me he’s lying.”

Severus could not help but lower his head and shiver as Harry’s fingers again reached up and stroked the back of his neck. Each touch sent a chill straight to his toes and made it hard to think.

“H-Harry, please. I can’t … that’s incredibly distracting.”

Harry went pink all over and lowered his hand to rest on the man’s shoulder instead. “Sorry, Sev. I didn’t realise.”

Severus couldn’t hold back a smile. Harry was so sweet when he blushed.

“It’s quite all right. Lily, may we sit down and discuss this with you?”

She hesitated. “All right.” As they moved towards the couch, she continued with, “I have to say, I’m surprised at you, Severus. The last ten times I saw you, the first thing out of your mouth was you asking for my forgiveness. You haven’t even mentioned it.”

Severus looked away to hide the intense pain her flippant comments evoked. “I learned long ago to stop asking. If you had wanted to forgive me, you would have done.”

“Besides that,” Harry said in a hard voice, “he’s not the one who needs it.” He slipped his hand into Severus’ and looked up at the man. “Are you okay?”

Severus sighed and turned his face away. “Twenty-five years, twenty years giving my entire life for her memory, and it is still not enough. I suppose it never will be.”

Harry tugged Severus into his arms, and Severus took comfort from the young man’s gentle acceptance.

“It was more than enough for me, Severus, and you did much less forgivable things to me in my school years. If she can’t forgive you for one word slipped out in duress, it’s her issue. You have done everything you could and more than enough. It’s okay. It’s not your fault.”

“I, it wasn’t just the word,” Lily said, her eyes full of tears. “It was those awful Slytherins you were always around, Sev.”

Severus closed his eyes. Even now, it still hurt him to see her cry.

“As Harry told you, they were my dorm mates. If I had not at least appeared civil, my life would
have been infinitely harder. And much shorter, most likely. The only one I had any small amount of liking for was Regulus Black. He was my first partner, actually.”

Harry whispered in his ear, “Not your last.”

Severus shivered and edged a bit closer.

Lily scoffed. “You shagged Regulus Black? He was a Death Eater, Severus. And you still say you weren’t going dark?”

Severus closed his eyes against the sharp waves of pain both from Lily’s continued hatred and his memories of Regulus.

“He wasn’t,” Harry said in a quiet, sorrowful tone. “Regulus Black was as much a spy as Severus was. He gave his life trying to destroy Riddle’s first horcrux. He poisoned himself and then was taken by inferi, all for the cause of making the Supreme Bastard mortal again. Don’t you dare call Regulus evil. He had to wear a mask, yes, but he gave everything he had for the light.”

“Harry,” Severus soothed, though his voice broke, “she d-didn’t know. She couldn’t. Reg, he had to … I didn’t even know. Please. I, I can’t.”

He buried his face in Harry’s shoulder to hide his tears. Fuck. His entire chest felt as if someone had carved it out with a spoon. He couldn’t breathe for the pain. It was drowning him, suffocating him in anguish for the friend who would never believe in his innocence and his first partner, lost so long before. They had barely been together two months when Regulus had vanished, but Severus had loved him dearly. And to know he had died in such a horrible manner, all alone and surrounded by evil, hollowed Severus’ soul and left barbed wire in its place.

“Severus,” Harry whispered. “Oh, Sev. I shouldn’t have—gods. I’m so sorry.”

A strong arm wrapped around Severus’ waist and pulled him in closer, and a tender hand threaded into his hair. Soft lips kissed his cheek and temple and whispered in his ear.

“I’m sorry, Sev. I know it hurts. I’m here. Right here with you, and I will be as long as you want me.”

“Don’t go,” Severus muttered.

“I won’t. I … I …” Harry looked to his mother, then sighed and nestled his head against Severus’ cheek. “I’m here. Always.”

Lily was sniffing too. “I, I’ve never seen you cry, Sev. Only when I turned you away again and ag —oh gods.” She buried her head in her hands. “Why? Why have I done this? Harry, I think there’s something wrong with me. Why can’t I forgive him? Why am I still hateful, when I wanted him back ages ago?”

Severus’ heart panged, and he stood tall. “You did?”

Lily gave him a hesitant nod, but the action looked as if it had taken great effort. Severus winced and looked away.

“Don’t lie to me. At least grant me that much of a courtesy, if you cannot grant me your forgiveness.”

Lily shook her head. “I’m not lying! I just … it was hard to do that, okay? I don’t even
understand why. Part of me wanted you back decades ago. Why, why am I acting like this now, when I know better?"

Harry gave Lily a piercing look. “What do you mean? You want to forgive Sev but you’re not able to? That’s a load of shite. It’s your choice. You always have th—”

Severus stopped him with a hand on the young man’s chest, a horrible, appalling idea taking root in his head. What if she didn’t have the choice? There were spells … dark spells to compel a person into any behaviour the caster wished. And he knew one person who would have benefited from Lily’s continued hatred of him, the pain of which had driven Severus both to the darkness and to be a spy.

Albus Dumbledore.

The day before, he would have considered such a possibility as nothing more than the desperate yearnings of a broken man. But if Albus was capable of hiding the woman’s life and using her imagined death against Severus, he was capable of anything.

Severus slipped his shaking hand into his mate’s, needing Harry’s support. “Oh Merlin, I think I know what is happening to her. Harry, she will not trust me. Will you run that clean scan I taught you on her? When we investigated the horcrux at Dumbarton for curses?”


“It is not only for dark magic—it lists anything affecting the subject, but I ask because I fear Lily is under compulsions.”

Lily gasped and jumped back. “Compulsions! But that’s mad! There’s been no one here for seventeen years, except ….”

Her eyes widened, then narrowed to glowing blue slits. She was bloody furious. Severus did not move, though his every instinct warned him to run. He slid an arm around Harry’s waist and pulled the man a little behind him, enough that he could jump in front of his mate if needed.

“Oh gods,” Lily snarled. “That conniving, twisted, manipulative old bastard!”

Harry gasped. “Dumbledore again?”

“Looks like it.” Lily growled in sheer rage. “Severus, just to spite the git, do the spell yourself.”

Severus swallowed hard and, with a shaking hand, raised his wand. “You are certain?”

Lily huffed. “Damn straight, I am. Do it and stop dawdling.”

Severus couldn’t help smiling in spite of his alarm. She reminded him of his fierce young friend like this. With a nod, he said the incantation aloud to reassure Lily and waved his wand at her. A list appeared before him, longer than he had expected. Longer even than he had feared.

‘Mother of Merlin!"

Lily moved to his side. “Well?”

“Gods, Lils. I … I am sorry. You are most definitely under compulsions. Would you like Harry to read it?”

She sighed and shook her head, though Severus saw the effort behind it. She was trying to break the
compulsion against him, but hadn’t yet entirely succeeded. The knowledge gave him hope.

With a ray of light in his heavy heart, weighed down by Dumbledore’s betrayal, Severus read. “As you wish. There is so much here. He has you under compulsions to hate Slytherins, one to increase your ties to your own house, a strong one to make you distrust and dislike me, one to keep you from ever forgiving me, one to make you think I am dark—you are beginning to break through the three against myself on your own. Thank you.”

Lily nodded, but she was still spitting fire. “The old bastard took my best friend away from me. He made me hurt you so much. Why?”

Severus’ gaze hardened. “To create a spy, of course. I was so broken, so sick with grief when you continually turned me away, that I sought my home where I believed I would belong.” He scowled. “I learned how wrong I was barely a week later, but it was too late. Still, I wasn’t tempted to risk my life by spying until the threat of your death drove me to despair. And when it happened, when I believed I had lost you, I would have given anything to make it right somehow.” He lifted his eyes and gave Harry a shy smile. “So I vowed to spend my life protecting and fighting for the life of your son, even if I had to appear to hate him while I did it.”

“I know better now, Sev.” Harry slipped his hand into Severus’. “You can be yourself around me now and not be afraid.”

Severus rubbed his fingers. “Yes. But to answer your question, Lily, he imprisoned you and stole your … best friend and son, shattered me, and all but destroyed Harry for one reason: ‘the greater good.’ He wanted his spy and his weapon against Riddle, and he got them, the twisted bastard. I spent twenty years in hell for him and Harry is more soldier than young man. He is older than I am some days.”

“Told you I was older than Cedric,” said a smirking Harry.

Severus snorted. “And then there are some moments where he acts very much his age.”

Harry stuck out his tongue at Severus.

“Or younger.”

Lily laughed along with the men, though pain diluted their mirth. Their laughter died quickly, feeling foreign at a time like this, and Severus returned to the list with a sigh.

“Do you want to hear the rest?”

Lily huffed. “There are more? Merlin! What else did he do to me? Or ….” Her eyes glowed blue again. “I may know already, but go on and read that.”

Severus nodded. “Besides what we have already discussed, there is also a compulsion to make you condone the Marauders’ pranks—” He paused and frowned at what he had just read. “—But only those against myself or Regulus Black—that’s odd. Why should he make you distrust and dislike Regulus? You had nothing to do with him, did you?”

“Nothing at all. Maybe it was because you did.”

Severus winced. “Perhaps. Well, there is also a milder compulsion set against … Remus Lupin? It’s set so that you will always be friends, but it seems as if it’s been weakened already. Another oddity.”

“Not when you have the whole story,” said a furious Lily. Her eyes were nearing cyan with her
anger. “I know there’s more there. What else?”

“Well, there is the spirit bonding spell. And something to … tie you to human form?” Severus looked up and frowned at her glowing blue eyes. “You are a creature. Harry inherited it from you?”

Lily’s gaze flickered to Harry. “That’s something best discussed after we’re through with these spells. I don’t want to be influenced when I try to tell the both of you about it.”

“You … you will trust me with that information, Lils?”

She pointed to the list. “According to this, I should have done twenty-five years ago. Is that the extent of the spells, Sev?”

He read through the last one and shuddered. No. His eyes flickered to Harry and back to the list, then he Banished the vile thing. “There is one more, but I … no, I cannot.”

“Let me guess,” said a spitting-mad Lily. “One to compel me to love and reproduce with Harry’s father?”

Harry made a strangled noise of horror, and Severus brought the young man into his arms, enfolding him against his chest.

Severus sighed and wished he could take this all back. “I apologize, Harry, but, yes. That is it exactly.”

Harry moaned and buried his face in Severus’ shoulder.

“Ssh,” Severus soothed. “We will work this out, Harry. Influenced or not, your mother clearly loves you, and so did your father.”

Harry turned his head to speak, his voice plaintive and broken. “Why? Why would Dumbledore do this?”

Lily sighed and motioned to the couch. “Come on, you two. Sit down.” She waved her wand over herself in attempt to dispel all the foreign spells and gave a convulsive shudder. “Merlin. Did that clear them, Severus?”

Severus performed the scan again. “Most. You are still under the spirit bind and the one making you love James. The latter is most likely a potion. I could provide you an antidote if you have the ingredients available.”

“I can make a standard love potion antidote myself. Besides, it doesn’t particularly matter as he’s gone now anyway. It may be best that I leave it, so my feelings towards Harry’s father stay positive.” She gave a little sob and ran to Severus, hugging him tight. “Sev, for everything I’ve done to hurt you—oh gods—I’m so terribly sorry. I love you like a brother—I always have done.”

Severus froze and breathed in a shaky gasp. “Lils, you, you mean it?”

“I forgive you, Severus, and I am so sorry I didn’t get you out of there in the first place. I never should have left you there. Never should have rejected you. I should have been there. Oh, Sev. Can you ever forgive me?”

Severus cried out with joy and grief at once and caught Lily into a crushing embrace. “Lils, oh gods, Lils! I’ve missed you so long.”
Lily fell into tears on his shoulder. “I’ve missed you, too.”

Severus wept with her, overwhelmed and broken, until he noticed Harry, sitting on the couch with his head buried in his knees and his shoulders shaking. He was pale and ill-looking, and what little Severus could see of his face was soaked with tears.

“Oh, Harry.” He gently set Lily aside and swept the young man up, prying him from his knees and wrapping him in loving arms. Harry sobbed quietly and buried his head in Severus’ shoulder.

Lily sat beside Severus and ran her fingers through Harry’s messy locks. “Baby, what is it? I thought you’d be happy Sev and I managed to reconcile.”

“I am,” he choked out, “but why did Dumbledore prevent it? Why did he fuck with our lives so goddamned much?”

In light of his agony, Lily apparently decided not to chide Harry’s language despite her grimace. “Love, I, I think I know, but you’re not going to like it.”

“I know too.” Harry turned in Severus’ arms so he leaned against the older man’s chest, with his head laying back on Severus’ shoulder. “It’s because of me and the war, isn’t it?”

Lily nodded. “Yes, love. I think so.”

Harry growled and punched a cushion. “If he weren’t already dead ….”

Severus felt much the same. “Can you explain, Lily? Why would Albus go to such lengths to ensure you ended up with James Potter and gave birth to Harry, only to take him away from you and give him to his horrid Muggle relatives to raise?”

Lily sighed and rubbed her forehead. “Because James and I are both creature races, that’s why, and he wanted Harry to be a weapon made of both. I’m assuming he thought both races together in one being would be enough to defeat Riddle.”

“So I’m not even half human then,” Harry said in a small voice.

“No, love,” said Lily sadly. “You’re unique. There is no other creature like you in the entire world. You see, typically, your father’s race and mine repel each other and never mate. Which explains why, until fifth year when I suppose Dumbledore must have hexed or dosed me, I found James to be an annoying toerag ninety-nine percent of the time. I’m confused as to why James was always after me, unless Dumbledore had altered him early on. The Potters were a prominent family in the Order, so it’s possible he had known of James’ heritage and chosen him from day one. But regardless of how it happened, the result of our union produced a racial blend no one has ever heard of before.”

“We … we never mate? I can’t have a partner?” Harry looked to Severus, the pain in his eyes haunting. Severus clutched him hard, unwilling to let Harry leave regardless.

“No, love.” Lily smiled. “You’re unique. There is no other creature like you in the entire world. You see, typically, your father’s race and mine repel each other and never mate. Which explains why, until fifth year when I suppose Dumbledore must have hexed or dosed me, I found James to be an annoying toerag ninety-nine percent of the time. I’m confused as to why James was always after me, unless Dumbledore had altered him early on. The Potters were a prominent family in the Order, so it’s possible he had known of James’ heritage and chosen him from day one. But regardless of how it happened, the result of our union produced a racial blend no one has ever heard of before.”

“Or have you met them already?” Severus tried, but he could not prevent his blush.

“Sev! Merlin, it’s really you?”
He cringed and ducked his head. “If it troubles you, I—”

“Oh, shush!” She grabbed Severus into a hug and kissed his cheek. “Welcome to the family. It’s about time you were part of it.”

Severus gasped, stunned. “You … you accept me, Lily? As Harry’s mate?”

“Does he accept you?”

“Damn straight I do,” Harry said in a fierce tone that reminded Severus of Lily for an instant. “He’s my world. And even if you don’t accept him, I’m not giving him up.”

Lily shuddered. “Merlin. I would never ask that, Harry. Do you know what happens to my race if our mates reject us?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Something along the lines of our hearts going mad and our souls tearing down the middle?”

Lily glared. “What did you do, Severus?”

Severus flinched back, frightened of her wrath.

“Nothing.” Harry laid a hand on Severus’ arm. “He’s done nothing. It was only that I misunderstood him and got scared, but yeah. I know we wither.” He turned back to his mother. “So you’re okay with this?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay with it, love. I just want you to be happy, and Sev, too.”

Severus sighed and tugged Harry into his lap. “I am. Merlin help me, I’ve never been so happy.” He closed his eyes and pressed Harry tight. “Nor so hurt.”

“Dumbledore,” Harry all but growled.

“Yes.”

Harry tugged Severus’ arms around his waist and held his hands. “I’m here, love.” He kissed the older man lightly, then turned his attention back to his mother. “So, what has the old bastard been hiding from me all these years? What race am I?”

Lily shook her head. “You don’t have a race. You’re unique. As for the parts of it, well, first tell me what traits you’ve seen.”

“Hard to know what all is a trait and what’s just me being the mess I am.”

Lily chuckled. “Anything unique to you.”

Harry gaped. “Merlin, Mum, that’s everything.”

She laughed and patted his hand. “Let me help with what I know from the portraits and wizard-telly and radio show. You’re a Parselmouth—that’s your da’s race, though he wasn’t one himself. You have visions—that’s from my race. You-Know-Who can’t touch you—that’s unique to you. I believe the combination of mine and your father’s race gave you that trait, as we both had our own form of immunity to him.” Her eyes went sad. “Unfortunately, James never had the chance to use his.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah. I know.”
“You know?”

He nodded. “I see it every time a dementor gets too close. Only I never saw him kill you. Now I guess I know why.”

She sighed. “The fact that your father died was when I finally realised he had never been my true mate. Our race—we have protections against death. And if James had been my mate, they would have passed to him even if he’d been a full human like Sev.”

Harry went rigid. “Protections against death? You mean I can’t die?”

“No. You can absolutely die. Things such as certain illnesses, a lorry smacking into you, someone slipping poison in your drink, old age—all those things can kill you. But a silly human wizard who warned us—three times, might I add—that he was going to kill us? Bah. Those things we can protect against.”

Harry relaxed marginally. “So, so I’m not immortal?”

Lily hesitated. “Not … exactly.”

Harry jerked up. “What do you mean, not exactly? There isn’t a grade of immortality. I either am or I’m not! Which is it?”

She sighed and motioned Harry back down. “No, you’re not technically immortal. But our race—and our mates, before you get terrified—we live a very, very long time. Two to three thousand years before a new one is chosen.”

“Chosen?” Harry screwed up his nose. “We’re not born?”

“Sometimes, like you were, but rarely. Most of the time, we’re chosen at birth when our successor becomes unable to perform, decides to retire, or dies. Dumbledore really took the fates into his own hands by trying to set this up. It could have had a much different result.” She shook her head and a flash of anger from her eyes. “You were my miracle. You still are.”

Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose, his tension obvious. Severus rubbed between his shoulder blades in attempt to soothe him.

“All this is doing is driving me in circles, mum. Just tell me straight. What am I?”

Lily sighed. “On your father’s side, you’re a Dragoon.”

Severus gaped. “The dragon-souled, those with control over the forces of life? James Potter was a Dragoon?”

“Yes,” said Lily with a shrug. “The more I think about it, the more I realise Dumbledore must have had him under compulsions from day one. They’re not usually like that.”

Severus sucked in a deep breath, pain bleeding him. Potter never would have hurt him, had Dumbledore not interfered. “I—indeed.”

Harry snapped, “Like what? Might I remind you that one of us has no bloody idea what’s going on? What do you mean, control the forces of life? I can’t make life … can I?”

Lily gave him a careful nod. “Most likely, you can, to some extent. Now, Dragoons are not gods. They do not have the power to create a human life without severely draining their own, usually past
the point of return. The Dragoon who tries it usually dies a short time later. Well, they can create humans the traditional way ....” She patted her belly to explain, then gave Harry a wry look. “And for you, in less traditional ways, but to just birth a human out of air and nothingness? No. That power is beyond the scope of your race. Well, it’s possible, but no sane Dragoon would attempt it, not when they have the power to save a life even halfway gone to death.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. So it’s just really powerful healing, then?”

Severus shook his head. “No. Dragoons cannot usually create humans, but animals—even magical animals—are no challenge.”

“Right,” said Lily. “You could even create your own magical race and breed them, but do be careful with that. You don’t want to make a race too powerful, or they could overrun us all.”

Harry shuddered. “Right. So no creating giant, super-venomous acromantula then.”

Severus chuckled. “Even super-potent fwoopers could overrun us if you do not give them some weaknesses. There must always be a system of checks and balances in whatever you give life to.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. “I think I’ll wait a bit on that, then.”

Severus nodded. “Probably wise.”

“So what else can a Dragoon do?”

“Well, many have the ability to scent life,” said Lily. “No invisibility spell will work on a Dragoon who can smell your life-force.”

Harry frowned. “I don’t think I have that one. I would have known Sev was waiting outside the door earlier. What else?”

“It may develop later,” said Severus. “Besides that which she has already mentioned, I only know of a certain affinity for healing and blood magic.”

Lily nodded. “That’s not the extent of it, but those are some abilities and talents. There is also the Dragoon form, which has wings and scales. And while they can be a bit clumsy on the ground, they have almost supernatural ability on a broom, Mister Seeker of the Century.”

Harry chuckled. “Well, I’ve definitely got that last one. Both sides. Can they go through dreams and heal people?”

“Yes, actually, though it’s not a common ability and thus not written about much. Dream-walking tends to occur only in those Dragoons who also have the powers of a Seer. Since you are my race as well, that makes sense. Visions are often part of our heritage.”

Harry nodded. “And what about killing or injuring someone in dreams?”

Lily shook her head. “No. No Dragoon has that power. They don’t have control over the forces of death.”

Harry stiffened. “So that means …?”

Lily rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Harry, I’ll tell you and your mate because you need to know, but you must take great care in who you reveal this to. There’s a reason there’s no literature on my race.”
“What? Why?”

Lily sighed. “Fear. Love, if anyone knew what powers I really have, they’d lock me up in the Ministry as a class five dark beast.”

Chills ran down Severus’ arms and set his hair on end. “Class five? But … Merlin, Lily, that’s the most powerful there is.”

She nodded gravely. “James’ race and my own are the most powerful human races in existence. Well, and now Harry’s. And my side is dark.”

Harry cringed and curled in on himself. “S-sorry. So sorry. Don’t want to be—”

“Harry!” Severus clutched the young man close and held his cheek. “Ssh. Love, don’t you remember what I said before, when we discussed your creature form on the way in? Even now, I still love you, I still accept you. If there are dangers, we will work through them.”

Lily placed a hand on Severus’ arm. “Harry, calm down, love. It’s only what the Ministry would do. You and I both know they’re idiots. I mean, they regard hippogriffs as a class four, and as long as you don’t insult them, they’re perfectly safe. And so are we. Just because we have the power to kill, Merlin! That doesn’t mean we’ll use them! Especially without discretion! Gods.”

“The … power to kill?” Harry sat and dug his nails into his trousers. “What are we? What do you mean?”

She sighed and closed her eyes. “Harry, we’re the human aides of osirins. We’re Reapers, Harry, the literal angels of death.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

***AN: Whew. This chapter was REALLY hard. I had to rewrite it 3 or 4 times before I was satisfied with it. It's REALLY long, too. Hope it's not too much of a slog.***

Warnings: a whole helluva lot of talking, some melodrama, and plots to murder Dumbles. Again. He really does kinda have it coming. He went a lot darker grey in this story than I'd originally intended, but oh well.

Also, thanks to the commenter who suggested making Voldie a Dragoon. It filled in a plot hole I wasn't sure how to fix (Dumbles' motivation)! I totally ran with it. :D

Oh, and Merry Christmas/Yule/Hanukkah, and so on and so forth. <3

CHAPTER 21

All the blood went to Harry’s head in one mind-numbing rush. Death. He was an angel of death.

What the fuck was that supposed to mean? Was he supposed to guide souls to the veil? Old women, young women, babies? How the hell was he supposed to guide a child peacefully to death? No. No, he couldn’t. Ever.

But if he was an angel of death, would that be expected of him?

Gods. How was he supposed to just stand by and let people die? And, dear Merlin, would he have to kill them? Would he be expected to murder and … and ….

Harry jerked from Severus’ arms, stomach roiling, mouth full of acid. He choked out, “Loo?”

Lily pointed to a door on the other side of the sofa, and Harry bolted for it. Ten seconds later, he was expelling the contents of everything he’d eaten within the past year.

No. No he couldn’t do this. He couldn’t just kill people. Gods, even killing Carrow, even as an accident, had almost destroyed him—and she had deserved it. What about the people who didn’t? Like that baby girl from Blackpool they had mourned just that morning? Would he be required to kill babies like her?

Was it really that morning? Fuck. Harry felt like he’d lived two lifetimes in twelve hours. So much had happened. The good parts with Severus, the werewolves, and now this. He heaved again and sobbed with anguish.

He was a monster. Gods help him, he was no better than Voldemort.

Dumbledore’s words from long ago drifted through his mind, clear as the day he had spoken them. “You can speak Parseltongue, Harry, because Lord Voldemort—who is the last remaining descendant of Salazar Slytherin—can speak Parseltongue. Unless I'm much mistaken, he transferred some of his own powers to you the night he gave you that scar.”
But that was a lie, wasn’t it? Harry’s Parseltongue powers had come from his father’s race, not Voldemort. So did that mean Harry was like Voldemort? Had Dumbledore lied to him then to keep Harry on the straight and narrow until … until what? Until now, when the veil came off and Harry found out the truth of how disgusting and evil and dark he really was?

Why? What was the point? Dumbledore was dead now. What could he possibly do with Harry’s terrible heritage from beyond the grave?

But Dumbledore hadn’t planned on dying, had he? Not until that curse hit him.

Maybe he’d have enacted even worse plans for Harry, if he had survived.

Harry retched anew at the thought. Dumbledore had betrayed him so thoroughly, and Harry had fallen for it. Eaten up Dumbledore’s praise like candy. Let the man’s chiding hurt him like no one else’s could. Listened to him as he would have a grandfather.

Harry had *loved* him, but Dumbledore had lied about everything.

Harry had been a fool to trust one word out of that monster’s mouth. A fool to have believed in him at all, and gods, hadn’t he *believed* in the man? He had given Dumbledore his loyalty over and over. For gods’ sake, Harry had even named his defence class in honour of him.

Harry scoffed, though it came out more like a sob. Dumbledore’s Army indeed. A training ground for a generation of weapons, all fighting under the banner of a demon. The meddling old bastard had certainly twisted the strings of fate to bring that about, hadn’t he?

Gods, what if Harry had gone dark during his DA classes? What if he had taught his friends to murder and kill and they had stayed loyal to *him* in spite of it all, the same way Harry had to Dumbledore despite all his misgivings?

Dear Merlin. He could have turned his friends—innocent teenagers and young adults—into monsters like Dumbledore. Monsters like *him*.

Another round of sobbing and retching ensued. Harry had no idea how he had anything left in his stomach to expel by this point, but he couldn’t stop.

“It is our choices, Harry, that show who we truly are, far more than our abilities.”

Those words had comforted him five years ago, when he had feared he was the heir of Slytherin. Now that he was something *worse* and he couldn’t depend on Dumbledore any longer, they only made him miserable.

He was a nearly immortal being with powers to create life and control death. How was that any different from Voldemort?

Harry hung his head over the toilet and retched all over again.

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Severus slouched into the back of the sofa, stunned and shaken by what he had heard. Harry was both a light being that controlled the forces of life and healing, and a dark being that controlled death and the soul gates. A man who, with such combined powers, could destroy or rebuild the world at
his whim.

And wasn’t that a terrifying thought?

Power like that corrupted. And if it had been given to a being less pure, less honest than Harry, Severus might have tested his skill against him and tried to kill him before his powers came into play. But to kill Harry? His Harry?

No. The world might damn Severus for it one day, but he could not lift a hand against his mate.

Perhaps, instead, he could ground Harry and make sure the man always remembered why he had to take care with his abilities. To remind him that there were better things in life than having too much power.

Given that Harry had rushed to the loo the instant Lily told them and was currently expelling their dinner, Severus doubted this would even be an issue for a few centuries at least.

By Merlin, centuries! They had millennia to live.

Severus shuddered. He had never planned to live so long. All their loved ones would die long before they did, save for Lily and her mate. Gods, what a terrifying thought.

It seemed Severus would have his work cut out for him, in keeping Harry happy.

Still, he could not believe that Harry would feel any desire for control for a long while, and if, in the future, anything begun to change, Severus would simply remind him of the costs of Riddle’s mad pursuit of power. To show him where true joy could be found—not in dominion, but in love. Family, friends, and in Severus’ own arms.

Light began to melt away the icy fear gripping Severus’ heart. Right. He just needed to keep Harry happy, and the man would be okay.

Gods, he hoped it would be okay.

It didn’t matter at the moment anyway. The future was far away, and at the present, Severus’ mate needed his help. Severus stood tall and made his way to the loo, though his shaky knees caused him to stagger a bit.

Lily gave him a sad smile at the door, where she stood biting her nails and listening to her son’s pain. No doubt, she had no idea how to help Harry or even if her help would be well received. He patted her shoulder and set his hand upon the doorknob.

He knew how. After all, he had made a career out of pulling Harry’s arse from the fire, hadn’t he? The memory of their playful moments together brought a smile to his face and reassured him that he could help Harry where no one else could.

It would be okay. He would make sure of it.

“Harry? Love, I am coming in to help you.”


“Nonsense.”

Severus stepped inside to see his love bowed over the toilet and dry-heaving. Harry’s hair stuck up at odd angles, and tears had streaked through the bile on his cheeks.
Dear Merlin, Harry was in a state.

With a sigh, Severus knelt beside the young man and brushed a hand through his hair. “Ssh. Perhaps you are dangerous to one Tom Riddle, but to the rest of us? No, I think you are too good to harm anyone who does not deserve it. Even when they do deserve it, I think you are too good to harm them.”

Harry sat back on his knees and scrubbed a shaky hand across his mouth. “And, and who draws that line, Severus?” His voice was raspy and higher than normal with sheer terror.

Gods. Severus should have come sooner.

A pang of guilt twanged Severus’ heart, but he ignored it. Harry needed his full attention now.

“Love, ssh. It will be all right.”

“All right?” Harry jerked up and cried, “Will it, Severus? What happens when I start thinking I decide who’s right and wrong, hmm? How will it be all right then? You’ll have another dark lord and one who can’t fucking die! There won’t be any horcruxes to make me mortal, either!” He turned his face away and broke into pitiful sobs.

“Oh, love.” Severus banished the vomit, conjured a wet cloth, and brought the sobbing young man into his arms. “Now, that is nonsense as well.” He mopped up Harry’s face and held him his cheeks. “Whatever makes you think I will ever allow you to travel so far down a dark path, hmm? I have seen first-hand what madness lust for power brings, and I will never allow my lovely, gentle mate to fall prey to such a fate.” He kissed Harry’s freshly-cleaned brow. “Never, my Harry.”

Harry gave a laugh that twisted Severus’ heart. Madness and bitter sorrow ran rampant through the sound, and he clutched Harry tighter.

Merlin, Severus was terrified. What if he couldn’t bring Harry back from this? What if he failed?

No. He couldn’t allow himself to think like that. Harry was depending on him.

He murmured in soothing tones, “I won’t let you become that man, Harry. Ever.”

Harry rasped out, “So, so you’ll kill me if I go too far? Poison me?”

Severus blanched. “Kill you? Kill my mate and the man I love? Gods, no. I … I love you. I cannot harm you.” He stroked Harry’s damp hair back from his face. “But I will keep you from feeling the need for such power. From the pain and want and desolation that brings about such a desire in people like us. I will keep you happy, so you never feel the need to go so far.”

He laid a gentle kiss on Harry’s forehead. “We are not greedy, Harry, not people like you and I. We have been neglected, and so we sop up every bit of affection bestowed us like sponges. It is only when that affection, that warmth is taken away that we turn to … other sources of power, to fill that void.” Severus tapped his lips. “Open, love.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, but did as he was told. Severus used a gentle mouth-cleaning charm and guided Harry to spit in the loo.

“So, I think the solution is simple.” Severus took Harry into his arms and rocked him close. “I will simply make sure you always know you are loved, so that void never forms.”

Tears streaked Harry’s face. “And, and if that still doesn’t work? If something happens and I break?”
“I will not let you. I will *never* let you break.”

Harry shouted, “You can’t prevent it, Severus! All the love in the world can’t prevent that.”

Severus shouted back, “I will damn well try!”

“But—”

“Boys!” Lily opened the door and sighed. “Harry, it’s okay. Come out of the loo, sweetheart. I haven’t explained well and now you’ve misunderstood. It’s going to be all right. You won’t be another dark lord.”

Harry gave her a dull nod, and Severus guided him out of the loo as best as he could with his still aching injuries. Lily helped on Harry’s other side as well.

As soon as Severus had ensconced the shaking young man in his lap once more, he motioned for Lily to speak.

“Now, Harry, you’re a bit worried about something you’ve no cause to be,” Lily started, but Harry cut her off with a shriek.

“No *cause* to be? You don’t think it disturbing that, if I should so choose, I could wipe every being off the planet and no one or nothing would be able to stop me?”

Lily shook her head. “If that were the case, but it’s not. That simply won’t happen, love. Do you not remember me saying we’re *angels*? ’’ She hesitated. “Well, in a manner of speaking. We’re nothing like Muggle mythology paints us, but the basic concept is essentially the same. We have wings, we have incredible powers, we serv—”

Harry sniffled and cut in with, “Reapers have wings too? Maybe that’s why mine have feathers. Dragoons don’t, do they?”

Lily smiled. “No, they don’t, but Reapers do.”

“My wings have eyes at the top, too. Like Osirins.”

“Do they? That’s unique to you, then. Reapers just have the feathers.” She brushed tears away from Harry’s cheek and smiled. “See? It’s not so bad. You can fly on your own now, sweetheart, so long as you take care that no one will see it. No more need for a broom, unless you want one.”

Harry nodded. “We could fly together, Sev, with that spell you know.”

Severus gave him a sad smile. “It is dark magic, Harry.”

“Oh. Does it hurt people? Does it hurt you?”

“Not precisely, but the drain on my magic is extreme. I cannot maintain it for long.”

Harry nodded. “Then I’ll just cast a featherweight and carry you. Or you can come with me on a broom.”

Severus smiled and nodded into Harry’s hair. “Yes. That sounds lovely.”

Harry held Severus’ hands. “Flying with my mate. Ah, I’ve always wanted something like that.” His face twisted into a bitter parody of a smile. “It almost makes knowing I could end civilisation worth it. Almost.”
Lily sighed and took Harry’s hands. “Harry, listen to me. You cannot end civilisation. Don’t you remember me saying that we’re chosen to bear this power, not born?”

“But I was born into it.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re still only a guardian of our powers, not an irrevocable bearer of it. Reapers’ powers don’t work in quite the same manner as a normal creature inheritance.”

Harry hesitated. “So … I can’t end up like another Riddle, only worse?”

Lily rubbed his hair. “No. The soul gates—you saw one of them in the Department of Mysteries—”

“The Veil?”

“Yes. It’s only one manifestation. Most of them are invisible. Anyway, the soul gates are what give the Reapers their powers. Beings above human consciousness and from a plane we don’t quite understand, not even the Reapers or Osirins. And these beings, well, they don’t like being overcrowded with souls, so they’ll only give Reaper powers to people who don’t like to kill. The moment that changes, the powers are revoked and given to someone more suitable. Perhaps an heir, if you have one.”

Harry grabbed her hand. “I’ll lose my powers if I go mad? You, you’re sure?”

“Yes, baby.”

Harry let out a shuddering sigh. “Oh, thank Merlin!”

Lily squeezed Severus’ arm—thankfully not his injured one. “There are consequences for the loss of power, though—death among them—so it’s in your best interests to stick to that life plan you had earlier anyway, Sev.”

Severus bowed his head. “I had intended to.”

Harry hugged Severus’ arms tighter around him. “Thanks, love. Thank you for being patient and staying with me.”

Severus kissed Harry’s scar. “I always will.”

“Yeah, it’s the same for me.” Harry ruffled his hair and turned back to Lily. “I’m still confused, Mum. If the soul-gates choose people to bear our powers, there must be a reason. So what do they expect of me? Do I have to kill people when it’s their time to die? Just murder them in their beds or something?”

“Merlin!” Lily paled and gave Harry a stunned look. “Holy shite, Harry! Do you really believe me capable of murdering someone in their sleep?”

He winced. “No. S-sorry. I just … don’t understand. So … so it doesn’t mean I’ll have to kill innocent people?”

“No, gods, no.” She took a deep breath. “I haven’t explained this well at all, have I?”

“You did not have much of a chance,” said Severus with a wry smile. “The moment you said ‘Reapers,’ Harry rushed off to the loo to forcefully remove the contents of his stomach.”

Harry glared. “Don’t you think I’ve some cause for it?”
Severus stroked Harry’s hair, calming him. “Of course, but let’s just listen now before we draw any further erroneous conclusions, hmm?”

Harry took a deep breath. “Right.” He turned to his mother again. “Okay. So if I don’t have to kill people and I can’t become a murdering beast, what am I supposed to do with our powers?” He paused. “Come to think of it, what exactly are our powers?”

Lily frowned and rubbed her chin. “I’m trying to think of a way to say it that won’t terrify you.” She sighed when even that much had Harry’s eyes bugging again. “Easy! It’s not that bad. I just … you’re so worked up tonight. You’ve been through too much. I’m just worried about you, love.”

Harry trembled hard and panted, clearly on the verge of another panic attack.

“Harry,” said Severus in a low voice, “ssh, my love. Calm yourself. If it were something so terrible as that, Lily would be damaged by now after seventeen years locked in a virtual prison, alone.”

Harry took a deep breath and laid his head on Severus’ shoulder, slowly calming within the presence of his arms. Severus gave Lily a worried look.

“Just spit it out,” he mouthed.

Lily nodded and squared her shoulders.

“Harry, listen to me,” Lily said in a firm, but soothing voice. “Your duties as a Reaper are no different than what they were as a human. You don’t have to kill innocents or take anyone beyond the veil. The other death spirits do that. Now, sit up and listen, okay? You’re jumping to conclusions again without giving me a chance to explain. Will you listen this time?”

Harry obeyed, though his expression was wary. “A-all right.”

Lily smiled and rubbed his cheek. “There you are. Now, Harry, you need to know how death actually works before I can explain what you’re supposed to do with it.”

He nodded. “Okay. I’m listening.”

“Good. So, there’s a three-tier hierarchy on how death is handled. When a lethal event happens to a person—be it old age, poison, illness, or anything else—the physical body breaks down too far to sustain its soul. Should the soul remain in the body past that point, it would perish, too, so it’s critical to get the soul out and past the soul gates before it dies with the human.”

“All right,” said Harry with a bemused look. “Still don’t understand what this has to do with me.”

Severus rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Merlin, Harry. I’m experiencing flashbacks to potions class.” He gave his mate a wry smile. “Take the cotton from your ears and just listen for a moment, love. She’s trying to teach you about the hierarchy of death so she can explain how you fit into it. And I, for one, am quite interested to hear how it works.”

Harry blushed. “Oh. S-sorry.”

“It’s quite all right.” Lily patted his hand. “Did you understand what I said before?”

Harry nodded.

“Good. So, the instant a human body dies and its soul needs to be released, that’s where the soul-gates come in. They have the largest tier in the hierarchy, the biggest role. Whenever anyone dies,
baby, elder, whoever, they come in and cut the fabric tethering the soul to its body. They also guard
the realm beyond and keep it healthy, so it can sustain our souls indefinitely. If not for them, we’d all
perish completely at our deaths and cease to exist.”

Harry shuddered. “That’s a … chilling thought.”

“Yes.” Lily took his hand. “All right, love?”

Harry gave her a tentative nod. “So, what happens next?”

“Well, once the soul-gate does its job, then you have a loose soul just floating around in the ether. If
it sticks around too long, or fights transport later—assuming it’s a wizard or squib—it becomes a
ghost. We don’t know what happens to lost Muggle souls. Muggles often report things like non-
corporeal ghosts and spirits, though. Perhaps that’s where they go, as horrible as that sounds.”

Severus shivered, repulsed at the thought.

Harry seemed equally disgusted. “Ugh. But it would serve Vernon and Petunia right.”

Lily sniffed. “They deserve worse than that, foul creatures. Gods. I never thought Petunia could hate
me so much.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s a good thing I won’t have to transport their
souls. The temptation to simply … drop them would be too much.”

Harry frowned. “Even with everything they’ve done to me, I don’t think I could condemn them to
that fate.”

She gave him a sad smile. “I know. I couldn’t either, not really, though if I ever manage to escape
this place I’ll make my sister wish I had died.”

Harry gave a wan laugh. “I guess you should be able to now.”

“Lils,” Severus prodded, “the hierarchy? We still don’t know what Harry is to do.”

Faint pink coloured her cheeks. “Oops. Well, what we were saying about not being able to really
hurt those foul people, no matter how much they deserve it, actually plays in to where I was going
next, so no harm done. The soul-gates don’t like the idea of lost souls either, so they created the
Osirins for the next tier—the soul gatherers. Osirins are the ones who travel the spirit plane and
gather up untethered spirits. They then guide them beyond, wherever that is.”

Harry frowned. “You don’t know?”

“Of course not. I won’t know until I die.”

Harry blinked. “But if we’re Reapers …?”

“We’re also humans, Harry. Well, mostly. We don’t escort souls into death, so we don’t see the other
realm until we die.”

Harry ruffled his hair. “I … all right, but why not?”

“Well, would you want to carry, for example, a stillborn infant to the veil? Or a teenager who got
cought on the wrong end of a curse? Or, gods forbid, your own child?”

Harry shuddered. “Gods, no.”

Lily nodded, a sympathetic expression in her eyes. “No, neither would I. Most humans wouldn’t.
Osirins understand death better and are able to transport souls as needed, even those of their own kits, but us? No. We’re too emotionally volatile, too attached to this world. We’re terrified of death and the beyond and we mourn our lost loved ones as if they were a part of our own souls. And the soul-gates understand that. They would never ask us to transport or untether one of our own. It’s just not something we’re emotionally capable of.”

Harry nodded. “That only leaves the killing. So I … am I responsible for … ?”

Lily sighed. “Merlin, Harry! Have you been listening at all? No. Life kills people. Old age, poison, accidents—there’s no need for anyone else to wield the scythe, so to speak.” She gave him a mischievous grin. “We do have one, though. Reapers. It’s brilliant, actually.”

Harry gave her a wan smile. “Oh. That’s … good?”

Lily sighed and took Harry’s hands. “Harry. Calm yourself and listen. You don’t have to kill innocents, okay? Or transport them or anything at all. The soul-gates and Osirins handle ninety-nine percent of everything involving death in this world, okay? We have a very small piece of the pie and it’s no different than what you were already expected to do.”

Severus stroked a gentle hand down Harry’s spine. “All is well, beloved. We are with you.”

“R-right.” Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “So if we don’t kill people, and we don’t untether souls, and we don’t transport them either, what do we do? There’s nothing left to do that I can see.”

“Oh no. There is one task, and that one is ours.” Lily’s posture firmed and her eyes filled with purpose and pride. “We’re soldiers, Harry.”

“Soldiers?”

“Yes. As you well know, people can go bad. Very bad. And, every so often, there comes around someone who goes so bad, they threaten all of humanity. People like Grindelwald. Like Hitler, or Genghis Khan, or Vlad the Impaler.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Like a demented bastard who cut his soul into eight pieces for the sake of immortality?”

She gave him a grim smile. “Exactly.”

Lily took Harry’s hand and held it in her lap. “You see, Harry, neither the soul-gates or Osirins actually kill anyone. They depend on life and the natural order of things to do that, and usually, the system works. But twisted people like Riddle defy order. They slay humans and beasts alike, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. And that, Harry, is a terrible thing, not just for the massive loss of life, but for the threat to the realm of souls.”

Ice shot through Severus’ veins and set every hair on his body on edge. “The … entire realm?”

Severus clutched Harry tighter. “Riddle’s destruction threatens not only this world, but the next as well?”

Lily nodded, her eyes fearful. “Unless we stop him, it’s going to get quite grim.”

Harry sniffed. “You speak as if it wasn’t already.”

“Yes, but you only know half of the story, love. You don’t know what his destruction is threatening to do to the other realm, Harry.” She shuddered. “And the increase in dementors means it’s already
Severus swallowed a tight knot of terror and resisted the urge to bury his face in Harry’s shoulder. Barely.

“What … what will happen to the other side, Lily, should Riddle’s rampage go on?”

“Oh, I don’t like to think of it.” She gripped Harry’s hand tighter. “The problem is that there are only so many soul gates and Osirins, and we outnumber them by far. There’s perhaps one Osirin to every fifty thousand humans, and just one soul-gate to every ten Osirins. Too few to keep up with rampages of this scale. Just keeping up with the natural course of death keeps them busy.

“As I said before, normally they do just fine on their own, but people like Riddle throw a spanner into the works. Their killing sprees jam up the ether with souls and overwhelm both the soul-gates and Osirins.” She shuddered and closed her eyes. “And when they’re overwhelmed, bad things happen, Harry. Terrible things. Souls die or get lost, or even worse, the integrity of the entire soul realm begins to break down.”

“Dear gods,” Severus breathed.

Lily nodded and closed her eyes. “It gets worse.”

Severus swallowed hard and held his shaking mate closer.

“The soul-realm has a symbiotic relationship with our realm,” Lily continued. “When it breaks down, it has an intensely negative affect on our world as well—it causes worldwide famines, the black plague, terrible things like that—and that’s beyond the horror of what it does to those poor lost souls. Should the soul realm die completely, so will life as we know it.”

“Merlin,” Harry breathed.

“Right. It’s a terrible fate the soul-gates and Osirins need help to prevent—” She sat tall and gave Harry a proud smile. “—And that’s where we come in. We’re the soldiers of the death hierarchy, Harry.” She frowned and rubbed her chin. “Well, perhaps more like specialised assassins than soldiers. Anyway, our duty is this: we’re supposed to track and fight those humans who threaten all of humanity and … and yes, kill them, for the sake of both realms.”

Harry frowned. “So … Riddle?”

“Yes, that’s right, love. I tried to do him in seventeen years ago. We have the ability to snuff out life with nothing but the power of choice, you see, and I tried to do that day he killed your da. If the bastard hadn’t made horcruxes, or if I’d known about them, I’d have killed him and you would have had a relatively happy childhood.”

She slumped over and buried her face in a shaky hand. “I’m so sorry, Harry. I’m sorry I failed you. I … I tried to spare you, but I just … I ….”

Harry hugged her and kissed her cheek. “Mum, ssh. I’m okay. I have Sev and now you, and I might never had been so close to the Weasleys had I not needed a family so badly. It’s okay. I’m just glad you’re here.”

She squeezed him tight and kissed his scar. “I’d have spared you this, if I could.”

“I know. It’s all right, Mum.”
She sat back and wiped her face. Severus rubbed her hair, like he had long ago when Lily was upset, and the familiar, but long-forgotten comfort brought light back into her eyes.

“Thank you, my sweet boys.” She smiled and held their hands. “I’m so glad you’re with me.”

“As are we.” Severus continued petting her hair. “So, if I understand correctly, you are saying that Harry’s sole duty is to kill Riddle?”

Lily shook her head. “Not just Riddle. We live thousands of years, Severus. We’ll have many targets in our lifetimes, unfortunately.”

Harry frowned and hugged his waist. “But, that’s it? Really? I’m just supposed to kill the ones in my lifetime who go so bad they threaten both realms, until the day I die?”

Lily frowned and cocked her head. “No, not necessarily until you die. Should you feel you’re unable to continue with your duties, or if you just want to retire and enjoy your golden years with Sev and your family, then you can pass your job on to the next Reaper without suffering any consequences for it. But yes, that’s your task. Just to kill the lunatics before they do us all in.” She gave him a wry smile. “Like I said, it’s the same duty as it’s always been for you.”

Harry let out a shaky sigh. “Oh. Oh, that’s ….”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Not nearly as bad as you were thinking, was it?”

Harry let out a breathless laugh and dropped his head back onto Severus’ uninjured shoulder. “Merlin, no. Not even close. I mean, it’s still not great, but nothing so terrible as I was afraid of.” He groaned and rubbed his face. “Gods, I’m such an idiot.”

“You are not an idiot.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “Are you all right now?”

Harry nodded and turned his face into Severus’ neck. “M’sorry. Got scared.”

“It is understandable, Harry. I was quite frightened myself.”

“Oh.” Harry lifted his head and held Severus’ gaze. “Are you okay, love? Is this all … too much for you?”

“I am well. I am relieved, in fact, knowing that nothing about our task has changed.”

“Yeah.” Harry smiled and lay his head on Severus’ shoulder again. “Yeah. S’okay now.”

Severus slipped his fingers through Harry’s hair, knowing the touch soothed the younger man. As predicted, Harry slumped into Severus with a sigh and curled into his arms.

“Hmm,” said Lily with a smile. “You two are good for each other. I never would have guessed it, but you are. He brings out your gentle side, Sev, and you calm him when he’s afraid—and that’s just what I’ve seen in the past few minutes.” She kissed Severus’ cheek. “Welcome to the family, Severus. Treat him well always, please?”

Severus gasped and touched his face. “Oh, Lils ….”

Her innocent kiss and welcome touched Severus deep within his soul. How long had he longed for this? A family and a home and Lily’s forgiveness?

He blinked back tears and gave her a solemn nod. “You have my word, Lily. I will not take his love for granted. Merlin knows it has been rare enough in our lives.”
Her eyes shaded to turquoise and shone with tears. “I love you both. I’d have shown you loads of it, if only that bloody toser hadn’t stolen you away from me.” She drew her knees to her chest, much like Harry did when he was in pain. “I don’t understand it. I thought he cared about us—all of us. Why would he compel me to hate you for so long, Sev? Why would he tear my baby away from me and hold me prisoner? And what he did to my son … ugh!” She jerked her hands through her hair and sighed. “I … I just don’t understand. What purpose could it possibly serve to hurt us all so much?”

Harry came up with his eyes glowing bright teal. “Oh, I know why he did it all. The bastard wanted a spy out of Severus and a weapon out of me. He ripped you away from us—the one person who loved us both unconditionally—so we would value that same love as a rarity and cherish it so completely, we’d risk our lives over and over again to preserve it.”

He sneered. “He didn’t need to do any of that, though. Severus has too much honour to not risk his life for the good of humanity—even without Dumbledore’s interference—and I … I would have ….”

Deep pain filled his eyes. “I’d have done the same even if you had raised me, Mum. I know it. You and Da did it all the time before … before Riddle ….” A tear dropped down his face.

She patted his cheek and wiped his tears away. “Ssh. Don’t think of that now, love.” Her features twisted with pain. “We’ve enough troubles without borrowing from the past. Mother of Merlin. I still can’t wrap my head around it. Dumbledore’s hurt us all so much, and for wh—”

Severus pressed a hand over Lily’s mouth, a terrible realisation dawning on him. His blood had gone cold, and every hair on his body stood on end. If Albus had put such terrible compulsions on Lily and James Potter, the former stars of the Order, he might have put them on anyone.

He might have put them on Harry.

“H-hey!” Lily moved Severus’ hand and gave him a bemused look. “What was that all about?”

Severus choked out, “Us. Lily, us!” He pulled out his wand, pointing it straight at Harry. “Revelaro Magica Statum!”

Harry gasped and paled as a list appeared. “Oh my gods. He had me under compulsions too?”

Severus took the conjured parchment in shaking hands. “So it appears.”

Lily’s teacup shattered.

“Harry!” Lily repaired the cup and took her son’s hand. “Try to keep your anger under control, love. It can be dangerous when we let our accidental magic run riot.”

Severus shot her a curious glance, but Harry cut across him with a shout before he could question Lily.

“The bastard! The fucking bastard!” He winced. “S-sorry, Mum. It’s just … gods! I can’t believe this.” He settled against Severus and took a deep breath, obviously trying to control his anger. “Well? How bad is it, Sev?”

Severus held the list in a shaky hand. “Let me read it and I shall tell you.” He skimmed the status of each compulsion. “Hmm. It appears as if you have broken most of them on your own.”

Harry gave him a grim smile. “He shouldn’t have messed with an Avenger, yeah?”

“Indeed.” Severus kissed him lightly. “My powerful mate. I love you.”
Harry nuzzled his nose. “I love you too, Sev.” He sighed and curled into Severus’ shoulder. “Just tell me, love. What did the slimy bastard do to me?”

“Right.” Severus gathered his strength and returned to the parchment. “Firstly, there is a compulsion to increase your loyalty to Gryffindor House and make you hate Slytherins. You’ve broken that one. Then there is … oh.” Fire flickered in Severus’ heart. “Oh, he is a bastard. He has a spell upon you to make your emotions more volatile. That is extremely dangerous to an empath. You might have killed someone with your accidental magic—or even killed yourself.”

“Mother fu—” Harry looked at his mother and turned his face into Severus’ shoulder, no doubt so that he might curse all he wanted without bothering Lily. Severus petted Harry’s hair in hopes the gentle touch would keep his mate relatively calm.

“I’d kill him if he wasn’t already dead,” Lily growled. “Take that one off him, Severus. Right away.”

“I cannot—not if I am to read what else the arsehole has done to him first.”

She duplicated the list with *Gemino* and cast some other spell upon it Severus had never heard of before—perhaps it was a secret of the Unspeakables. “Do it now, Severus. This list is bound to make him angry. I don’t want Harry losing control and hurting himself or someone else because of that shithead’s manipulations—oh, and Harry, this does it. You can curse him if you need to and I will *not* be ashamed. The man deserves far worse.”

Harry let slip a sigh. “Thank Merlin! That bloody fucking shit-eating piece of horse manure! I’ll—”

Severus cleared the remaining compulsions from Harry, causing the list in his hand to vanish—Lily’s copy remained—and the young man’s tirade dropped off.

“Merlin. I feel—*Merlin*!” He dropped his head back into Severus’ shoulder and rubbed his chest. “Oh, Sev, the rage—the anger that’s been poking me since Umbridge, it’s gone.” Harry sighed and turned into Severus’ neck. “Gods. I didn’t realise how bad it was.”

Severus stroked Harry’s cheek. “Better, my love?”

“Loads.” Harry sat up and rubbed his hand where Umbridge had scarred him. “That must be when Dumbledore hit me with the emotion increasing spell—fifth year. I was so angry all the time. I thought it was Riddle taking my mind over, but it was *Dumbledore* the whole time, the sick bastard! He even *told* me it was Riddle and I had to focus on love or some other shite to block him out. Gods! The man has no shame.”

Lily gave the duplicated list back to Severus. “You had better read that. I’m quite as likely to destroy something as Harry if I do.”

“Hmm.” Severus took the list and gave her a searching look. “You do not seem surprised that he is an empath, Lily. Care to explain why?”

She blinked. “Oh. I didn’t tell you two about our full powers, did I?”

Severus chuckled. “Not beyond the ability to snuff out life, if other powers exist. You were too busy explaining why the fact that Harry has them is not the end of the world.”

Lily glared. “Don’t pick at him right now, Sev. He’s barely holding on to his temper.”

Harry turned enough to mutter, “He’s fine, Mum. That picking of his makes me laugh. Well, usually. Not so much when my entire world view is falling apart, but ….”

Severus stroked Harry’s hair again and held him tight. “I am here, love.”

“Yeah, I know.” Harry’s lips brushed Severus’ neck and sent a little rush of fire through the man. He Occluded firmly—now was not the time.

Lily rubbed Severus’ arm and brought his attention back to their discussion. “Sorry, Sev. I didn’t know.”

“It is quite all right. I suppose it does sound rather cruel to an outsider, but I was only attempting to bring him out of his despair.”

Harry scowled. “I’m not despairing—I’m bloody furious! Do you realise, Severus, that he must have known I’m an empath? That he must have known Mum’s powers—had to, to force her to … to breed me with Da. He must have realised I’d be an empath and used that compulsion to raise the power of my accidental magic.” He buried his head in his hands. “He really did see me as nothing more than a weapon, didn’t he?”

Severus frowned. “How could he have known, Harry? Lily said there is no available literature on Reapers—but no. He must have known. As you said, he would not have forced Lily to … mate with James if that were not the case.”

Lily snorted. “Oh, he knew. I’ve no idea how. Like you said, Sev, there’s no human literature, and normally only Fates and Dragoons—well, and Osirins and the soul-gates, of course—even have an inkling we exist anyway, but somehow the evil bastard figured it out.”

Harry sat and wiped his eyes. “What’s a Fate? You don’t mean like in the Muggle myths, do you?”

Lily raised an eyebrow. “How do you know about the myths? I didn’t think Hogwarts taught them.”

“They do not, and it is a shame,” said Severus. “How are the students to understand Muggles if we teach them nothing beyond that we are to stay hidden from them and they use toasters and such? They know nothing of Muggle history or culture or anything that matters, not unless they are Muggleborn.”

Harry smiled. “Well, maybe we can change that one day, Sev. You’re still headmaster, after all. And I’d be a pretty good defence professor, once we put Riddle in the ground and break his curse on the position.” He frowned. “Well, at least Dumbledore told me it was cursed.”

“It is,” said Lily. “It’s listed in the Department of Mysteries.”

Harry nodded. “Well, at least he didn’t lie about everything then. But you lot never told me, what’s a fate?”

Severus nudged Harry closer. “A particularly secretive magical creature with a third eye and the ability to See and alter futures.”

“Oh. Could Dumbledore be a Fate, then?”

Severus shook his head. “Unlikely. The man has made a career of meddling in others’ business. Fates are usually detached—recluses and hermits—and do not interfere in human lives. They do not even have mates. It is one of their cardinal rules, actually, that Fates are never to intervene directly, but rather influence the path of humanity for good through their tapestries.”

Harry blinked. “They … actually weave tapestries? I thought that was a myth.”
Severus chuckled. “I do not think it is literal. Soul tapestries, if you will. Not actual fabric and string, though some might do it as a hobby or for the sheer irony of it.”

“Oh. Well, if he’s not a Fate, what about a Dragoon?”

“Definitely not,” said Lily with a scowl. “Dragoons—when they’re not influenced by meddling bastards—are kind, loving creatures whose sole purpose is to preserve and protect life. Healers and activists and midwives. Even under Dumbledore’s influence, James wanted to be an Auror to guard lives and refused to kill anyone in the line of duty. Couldn’t even bring himself to kill Riddle, but Dumbledore is a meddling bastard who obviously doesn’t care if his spells kill my empath son, and he’s already killed Grindelwald.”

Harry blinked. “He … killed Grindelwald? I thought he was in Nurmengard.”

“That is? Lily frowned. “But I was positive—the soul-gates would have passed that duty onto me if he had survived.”

“I’ve seen him in a vision, Mum. Riddle killed him, but before that, he was in Nurmengard all this time.”

“Merlin. How strange.” She frowned and tapped her fingers on her knee. “I wonder if Dumbledore stripped his powers instead and it was just reported as a killing in the Prophet. That might be enough to quiet the soul-gates without actually killing him.”

Severus sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Lils, this is all moot. Grindelwald is gone and as to Albus’ knowledge of your powers—well, the bastard has always been near omniscient. Perhaps he is an especially potent Seer—”

“That was the best explanation I could come up with,” Lily said with a nod.

Severus shrugged. “You are probably correct, but either way, it is still moot. However he stumbled across the knowledge of your race, Lils, Albus and Grindelwald are dead now, and Riddle still lives.”

She sighed. “Right. You’re right. Well, Harry, I’m just going to give you a quick run-down of your powers from me, and then we’ll get back to that godsforsaken list.”

Harry nodded, though his eyes held fear.

“Right. So you already know about being an empath—that’s from our side. We have to know if the people we’re tasked with killing actually are threats to the entire world. Therefore, we have the Sight, we’re empathic, we have powerful instinct which works off the Sight, and we’re able to see the fabric of the soul—whether it’s black or grey or white. A black soul is beyond saving. I have no idea what Riddle’s is, though, seeing as how he’s twisted it so far beyond normal capacity and broken it into bits.”

Harry frowned. “The Sight? But I’ve never been able to See a thing in Divination.”

Lily snorted. “That class is an utter farce. You either have the Sight or you don’t. It can’t be taught, and it rarely comes upon demand. Ours does, but only when we’re trying to determine if our target is a threat to both worlds. Other than that, our visions mostly just tell us about our target.” She shuddered. “The Sight is especially … unpleasant for a Reaper.”

Harry nodded vigorously. “Yeah, it is.” He frowned and hugged his waist. “So is that it, then? The Sight, instinct, empathy, the power to see souls, powers to end evil lives, and flight?”
“Well, there’s also our gear. The Osirins present it to each new Reaper at their birth or choosing. Yours is in my bedroom closet.” She chortled into her hand. “It’s quite funny, actually. We have an actual scythe and black hooded robes.”

“So the Muggles weren’t that far off then,” said Harry with a wry grin. “But what’s so special about this gear?”

“It’s attuned to you and will help you fight our targets. There are heavy protections against curses and weapons weaved into it, and besides that, once we wear it and pull up the hood, we’re only visible to them—the target—and that adds an element of fear. It all comes in handy to keep us safe and secret.”

Harry nodded and leaned back against Severus’ good shoulder. “Is that all, Mum?”

Her smile didn’t reach her eyes. “That’s it, baby. Sev, is there anything else on that list?”

“Unfortunately so.” Severus held it up once more. “Let us see. A mild love potion tuned to Ginny Weasley that you have destroyed on your own. Dear Merlin. That means we shall have to check her as well. Perhaps she is not capable of breaking through it as you have.”

Harry paled. “You mean … since even before first year? Because she’s watched me that long.”

Severus shuddered. “Gods, I hope not. It may have been a bit of hero worship in her early years that Dumbledore decided to use to suit his purposes. Or, it may be completely genuine. We have no way of knowing without testing her.”

Harry winced. “I … I never meant to hurt her. Gods, I hope she’ll be okay.”

“She will. Ginevra is strong, love. And the fact that you are homosexual will actually help her. She will know there is no turning back and look to her future. At least, she will once we remove the compulsions and potions from her, if there are any.”

Harry nodded. “We’ll message her as soon as we can.”

“Indeed.” Severus returned to the list. “Next is a spell to make you distrustful of Draco Malfoy. That one is absolutely still in effect.”

Harry chuckled darkly. “Well, what was the point of that, then? I can’t trust the little prick. That’s just redundant.”

Severus rubbed his lower lip with a fingertip, his eyes narrowed in thought. “Hmm. Perhaps it is, or perhaps Dumbledore had a reason for increasing your natural distrust of the Malfoy scion. He has altered all of his precious Gryffindors, after all. Why not a Slytherin?”

Harry paled. “Merlin. You mean Malfoy might not really be a pri—”

Lily cleared her throat. “Harry, Malfoy is not Dumbledore.”

Harry paused. “Er, right. Sorry, Mum. So you’re saying that he might not be a total berk after all, Sev?”

Severus gave a dark laugh. “Oh no. I am sure he is as quite as much a prejudiced twit as his father.” He traced a fingertip along his injured wrist. “But perhaps not an evil twit. Without Dumbledore’s influence, he might not have joined the Death Eaters.” He frowned. “This past year, he has been quiet and fearful—shy and trying to stay out of everyone’s way despite the horrible task he had been
assigned. He was still quite angry, but then, that is understandable when a dark lord holds one’s mother hostage in return for an impossible murder. That may be his true personality in the face of all this madness.”

Severus shook his head and glared at the list, wishing he could punch the man responsible for it. Hard. “I suspect the real Draco Malfoy would never have wanted to be involved in this war at all.”

“Gods.” Harry slumped back into Severus’ chest. “I shouldn’t have been quite so hard on him then. But why would Dumbledore bother with altering Draco regardless? It doesn’t make sense.”

Lily’s eyes glowed blue. “No, not to a normal person with an actual moral compass, but if you’re a twisted bastard like Dumbledore, playing chess with real people … well, he might have seen Draco as a liability and wanted him solidly on one side or the other. Since he knew no Malfoy had a hope of being accepted into the light, he pushed him fully dark. That way he couldn’t vacillate between sides and play spy for one or the other, nor set himself up in neutral territory. Dumbledore wanted him out of the way.” She scowled and crossed her arms over her chest. “If you see children as expendable, then it makes a twisted sort of sense.”

Severus shuddered. “Indeed it does. I shall send an owl to Lucius the next time I am able.”

“Yeah.” Harry nudged the list. “Is that it?”

Severus returned to the list with a pensive frown. “Not quite. There is one other spell ….” He blanched as the words became clear.

“Compulsion (highest strength, broken): to hate Severus Tobias Snape with unmitigated fervour until the end of the compelled’s life.”

Severus Banished the list and curled into himself. If Harry hadn’t broken through that spell, in three days, Severus would have died an innocent man at the hand of his own mate.

“Sev?” Harry tipped the man’s chin up and met his eyes. “What is it? What has he done?”

Severus closed his eyes. “Compelled you, using all his strength, to hate me beyond all reason until you die.” Tears stung his eyelids and throat. “Harry, he sent me to you for Sanctuary knowing this compulsion was there. Knowing, unless you broke it, that you would never forgive me.”

His heart snapped in two. “He wanted me to die, didn’t he?”

A boom sounded just beside him, making Severus jump.

Lily shrieked, “Mother of Merlin, Harry!”

A rush of heat engulfed Severus’ legs. Confused and alarmed, he opened his eyes to find the coffee table merrily roasting a few inches away.

“Shite!” Severus jerked his feet back and doused the fire with a shaky Aguamenti. Lily repaired the table and her teacup for the second time that evening.

“Um, s-sorry about that,” said a blushing Harry.

Severus huffed. “Yes, so you should be. If you set the place ablaze, we may find soon it a much less comfortable domicile than our tent. I did know you like your mutts, Harry, but Merlin! I have no desire to meet them tonight.”
Harry gulped. “Right. In that case, I’ll try to keep my emotions steadier. Help me, Sev?”

Severus took a deep breath to calm himself and turned Harry to face him. “Always. Shall we try a bit of empathic Occlumency now?”

Harry nodded. “I’ll try.”

“Good. Then, look at me. Look into my eyes. Do you see how much I love you?”

Harry sniffled and gave him a shaky nod. “I l-love you, too. And that bastard tried to make me kill you!”

Severus held Harry’s face. “I know, my angel. I know it hurts. But do not think of it now. Only look at me and see how much I love you, feel my heartbeat and know I am alive. Take your mother’s hand and know she is alive as well. Can you feel our love for you, Harry?”

Harry gave him a tearful smile. “Yeah. It’s brilliant.”

Severus smiled back. “It is indeed. Now, I want you to focus on that feeling. Hold it in your heart and let it cover you like a shield. Let it comfort you and quiet your anger and grief. Dumbledore is dead and cannot hurt us any longer. Riddle cannot touch us here, nor can his minions. We are safe, we love you, and we are with you until the end.”

A silver light filled Harry’s eyes and faded. “Oh. Oh, Merlin. I think it worked, Sev. I feel ever so much calmer.”

Severus smiled brightly. “Did it? I wasn’t sure ….”

“It worked. Gods, I can breathe again.” He buried his face into Severus’ neck. “I love you. Even if I hadn’t fallen in love with you, after these past few weeks, I could never hate you again.” He pulled back and frowned. “Sev, is there a way to release you from that Sanctuary spell early? There’s no way in hell I’m going to kill you.”

Severus shook his head. “Not that I am aware of. We must ride it out, I suppose. It is only a few more days.”

Harry kissed Severus gently. “Yeah. Sev, these compulsions, does he have any on you?”

Severus closed his eyes, wishing love-based Occlumency could quiet the turmoil his own will-based mind magic couldn’t combat.

“There were, once,” he said in a small, sorrowful voice. “There was a compulsion to make me more laconic and reserved, one to dampen my emotions—fear, in particular—and one to increase my grief for Lils and my desire to atone. I had assumed they were placed to help me spy and did not touch them until after my discovery. They served no purpose then, and once I had found you, I cleared them myself as soon as I was able.”

He lowered his head and swallowed hard. “But now, after all we have discovered this evening, I wonder if they were placed not to help me to spy, but to force me to be solitary and miserable until my death. To drive me to death.” Tears slipped down his face. “Why? I loved him like a father. Why would he want me to die? And why, if that was his wish, did he not simply let the Dark Lord kill me when I was discovered? Why send me to you at all?”

“The horcruxes,” said Harry with a snarl. “He wanted you to lead me to the horcruxes and for me to kill you when the month was out. I suppose you were supposed to be ‘practise’ for his little
weapon.” He punched a pillow and screamed, “Bloody buggering *fuck!*”

Lily cried, “Harry! Remember what Severus just taught you.”

With a blush, he sighed and shoved the pillow away. “Right. I’m not sure it’s going to help with this, but I’ll try.” He took a deep breath, but it ended as a snarl. “No. I can’t stop thinking that he wanted me to murder my *mate.*” Teal light and tears filled his eyes. “He wanted me to kill my Sev, my one love.”

He growled and jerked a hand across his face. “The bloody bastard! It’s completely unfair that he’s a portrait now.” A wicked gleam shone in his eyes. “I don’t suppose I could set him on fire?”

Severus gave a wan chuckle. “It *would* be satisfying, but no. We are not like him. We shall not stoop to his level.”

Harry sighed and laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “I guess you’re right. I still want to roast him, though.”

“That makes all of us,” said a fiery Lily. “Gods, I cannot believe the things that utter psychopath has done just to win this war. He’s lost his humanity in pursuit of it.”

“Or he never had it,” said Harry with a growl. “He *did* have a thing for Grindelwald, after all. Maybe he’s always been twisted.”

Severus nodded and pulled Harry closer, needing the warmth. “Perhaps.” He groaned and buried his face in Harry’s shoulder. “I am a spy. Why did I never see it? I should have seen it.”

“None of us did, Sev,” said Lily. “I always thought him entirely benevolent—right up until the moment he locked me in here and stole my son from me.”

Harry sat up suddenly, agitation and nervousness clear in his posture. “Can we, maybe not talk about him now? I don’t think I can handle any more betrayal in one night.”

Lily nodded. “Well, um—” She glanced to the door and hesitated. “Love, do you think some good news—even if it’s a bit shocking—will help?”

Harry fixed her with a piercing look. “You really need to ask that question? Everything in my life lately is shocking, so that’s nothing new. But good news, well, *that* would be a novelty.”

Lily gave him a sad smile. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. I was going to tell you in the morning, but perhaps it’s better to get the shock out of the way first.” She took a deep breath. “You remember me telling you that the soul-barrier could only break if my son *and* my mate found me?”

Harry blinked. “Mate? No, I must have missed that. So this werewolf …?”

She nodded. “Did the pink barrier vanish when you touched it?”

“Yeah. It’s gone.”

She smiled. “Then yes, Remus is my mate.”

Harry grinned. “Oh, good. I’m glad you—wait, *what!*” He leapt to his feet and grabbed his mother’s hands. “Did you say Remus?”

She gave him a bright smile. “Yes. He’s alive, baby. He’s here.”
Severus groaned and rubbed his forehead. “Lovely. No wonder I recognised his odour.”

“Behave,” Lily chided.

“R-Remus … is alive?” Harry covered his mouth with a shaking hand and sank to his knees. “Alive. All this time, he’s ….” He choked back a sob and buried his face in his hands. “Oh, oh thank the gods. I … I thought he was gone.”

Severus put away his issues with Lupin in face of his mate’s need. “Come, Harry. Come and let me hold you, love.”

Harry stood and paced, his eyes a bit wild. “Can’t. Need to move. I can’t handle all this. Can’t take anything else. Shite!” Harry jerked his hands through his hair and set it on end. “He’s alive. Gods, Mum! Do you know how sick with grief I’ve been? Why didn’t he message me? Owl me? Anything!”

Lily watched him with fear in her eyes. “Harry, how could he? We’ve both been trapped here, love. We couldn’t contact anyone. Gods, how we tried, but we just couldn’t break through that awful barrier until you found us. There’s even some kind of geis on the portraits preventing them from telling anyone about what they see here.”

“Portraits?” Harry stopped pacing and looked around, but came up as empty as Severus had. “Where? I don’t see any.”

“There’s a frame in the sitting room off the kitchen. It’s blank most of the time, but when I do need human company, I can press my hand to the canvas and one of the portraits from the Headmaster’s office will come see me. I can even ask for whomever I want.”

Harry’s eyes glowed teal. “Really now? So you’re saying that we could drag Dumbledore here for a reckoning?”

Lily gave him a mischievous smile. “We could, couldn’t we? Hmm. I’ve wanted to know how the bastard knew about me for years. It’s about time he answered some questions.”

Severus frowned and rubbed his lips, Lily’s words triggering something deep within his mind. How had the slimy bastard known? Was it possible that someone else had known—maybe a Fate or Dragoon—and revealed her secret?

‘Someone else?’

A memory flashed through his thoughts, a vision of Harry shaking in his arms as he translated from the journal. “I will not be able to use a soul like that.”

He frowned as another memory prodded him, Harry, desperately chugging on and trying to get through the translation in one piece, choking out, “I should have realised, but I did not.”

Severus rubbed his chin and ran over the entirety of the conversation, and again, the last line of the night’s translation demanded his attention. “Just as I began to fade, I noticed … her wings.”

Wings?

The pieces fell into place and crashed into Severus with the force of a sledgehammer.

“Oh my gods,” he said, interrupting something Harry was saying. “Riddle knows!”
Lily and Harry gave him a bemused look.

She said, “Knows what?”

Severus was shaking all over. “About you, Lily, about Harry. He knows what you are.”

She reeled back. “He knows specifically that we’re Reapers? How? I … no one knows.”

“Yes, yes, I heard you. No one knows except Fates, Osirins, and Dragoons, but somehow Ri—oh gods, no.” Severus looked to Lily and saw the same horror reflected in her eyes.

Lily lifted a hand to her mouth and whispered, “No.”

But it was true. It was the only explanation that made sense.

Riddle was a Dragoon—a mad, soul-twisted Dragoon.

“Um, guys?” Harry looked between his distraught mother and horror-stricken mate, unsure of what had just happened but knowing it was important. “Uh, want to explain to the class? I’m lost.”

Lily just kept staring at Severus as if he was a ghost. “How, Sev? How is it possible?”

“I’m not sure,” said Severus in a shaky voice, and Harry swivelled to look at him. “He has many of the traits, but they are inverted, twisted. It’s like his mind has somehow turned in on itself.”

“Dragoons don’t just go mad, Sev. Something caused it.”

Harry frowned. ‘Dragoons?’

“I know.” Severus traced a fingertip over his lips. “Lily, you’ve said that the ability to create life has a terrible impact on a Dragoon. What exactly does it do?”

“Wait, wait a moment.” Harry stared between them, his eyes popping and his hands shaking. “Are you two saying that Riddle, Tom-Murderpants-Riddle, is a Dragoon? How the hell is that even possible?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” said Lily.

Severus stifled a snort in his hand. “Murderpants?”

“Shut it and explain. What in the world even gave you the idea? He’s the antithesis of life!”

Severus’ mirth faded. “And that is what makes it likely, as strange as it sounds. Consider it, Harry. He is becoming more serpent-like, is he not?”

Harry nodded hesitantly. “Doesn’t make him a Dragoon.”

“No, but what about the Parseltongue? The obsession with elongating his life, the slitted eyes, his love-affair with soul magic and his obsession with purity of blood, even his skill with a wand and without—save for his Parseltongue and slitted eyes, they are all inversions of Dragoon traits, Dragoon abilities turned inward and focused on himself rather than upon the lives of others.” Severus
shook his head. “I do understand your confusion, but I am sure we are on the right track. He is a Dragoon, Harry, but one who has gone utterly mad.”

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but a chilling, ringing sort of sensation went up his spine and settled somewhere between his ears. He shivered and scooted closer to Severus—as did his mother. Harry fixed her with a piercing look.

“Did you feel it too, Mum?”

She nodded. “That was instinct telling us we’ve hit on the right answer.”

“We … we have?” Harry gaped. “But … I don’t understand. I thought you said Dragoons are loving creatures.”

Lily’s eyes darkened. “They can be altered into something far less than benevolent, as Dumbledore has already proven in spades.”

Severus shuddered, and Harry climbed back into the man’s lap to comfort him. “It’s okay now, love.” He turned back to his mother. “You’re not suggesting that Dumbledore made Riddle lose the plot with compulsions, are you? Because that’s a bit far-fetched even for him.”

She shook his head. “No, no. Dumbledore’s always been about the greater good, even to the point that he values it over human lives—like he did with ours. I highly doubt he would have altered Riddle to cause this war.”

“Then … what did it? What made him into the monster he is, if he’s really a Dragoon?”

“Perhaps Riddle overused his powers,” said Severus. “Lils, you never did tell me what happens when a Dragoon creates a new human life.”

She frowned. “Well, it makes a newborn baby, then takes the Dragoon’s life force and gives it to the baby—almost all of it. So they don’t live very long after that. Usually just long enough to get the baby to safety. So even if Riddle had made a baby, it wouldn’t have driven him mad. It would have just killed him.”

Severus nodded and rubbed his lip again. “I wonder … what if he did not create a new life? What if he simply brought life back to a soul who had already crossed the veil?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh my gods. Sev, that might be … I could see it.”

“What happens, Lils?”

“I don’t know—to the best of my knowledge, no one’s ever been mad enough to attempt it—but I do know that once a soul crosses the veil, it’s supposed to stay there.”

She shivered and rubbed her arms. “It’s possible—easy in fact—for a Dragoon to give life back to an untethered spirit, but once the Osirin have carried them beyond—no. That is impossible, or at least, it should be.” Her eyes darkened. “But gods, if Riddle can fashion himself a new body from nothing but a few pieces of flesh, blood, and bone, then it’s possible he found a ritual to force the soul back here. And I have no doubt that the person he revived would have gone mad—once they shift beyond the veil, they don’t fit into human forms any longer. It’s quite possible Riddle went mad as well, either from the shock of his failure or the cost of the ritual he used.”

“Or the very act of committing such a gross abomination against nature,” Severus said in a dark voice. “Such dark magic always comes with a price.”
Lily nodded and shuddered. “Too high a price.”

“Indeed.” Severus sighed and leaned back into the sofa. “So it’s possible? Probable, even?”

“Yes, but this is all speculation, Sev. Who would he even want to bring back, especially if he had any idea of the cost?”

Harry ventured, “His mother, maybe?”

Lily and Severus turned their eyes on Harry, and he felt two inches tall. “Well, it was an idea.”

“A good idea,” Severus said in a gentle voice, “but I was unaware you knew anything of his mother.”

“Dumbledore didn’t tell yo—what am I saying? Of course he didn’t, the bloody manipulative bastard!” Harry scoffed and turned to face his lover. “The bearded prickhead showed me a lot of memories concerning Riddle’s past when he was teaching me about the horcruxes. Merope Gaunt was Riddle’s mum. She fell in love with a Muggle and, when he didn’t return it, she made up a love potion to force Tom Riddle Senior to marry her. When she got pregnant, she got the idea in her head that he’d stay without the potion and stopped dosing him or fed him an antidote. But he left her—can’t say I blame him, though it’s a bad job altogether—and Merope died a few moments after Riddle Junior was born. She only lived long enough to tell the midwife and the matron of the orphanage his name.”

Lily’s eyes narrowed. “She went to an orphanage to have the baby? Awfully convenient.”

Harry shrugged. “I think she knew she was dying.”

“Or Dumbledore did not tell you the truth,” said Severus with a scowl. “Orphanages do not usually keep midwives on staff.”

Harry winced. “That’s … also a possibility.”

Severus shook his head. “If we can take at least the crux of this memory as genuine—”

“I can’t be positive, Sev, but I think it was. Dumbledore told me about Merope’s death after the memory, though, so she might have died later than what he said. I get the sense that even if Dumbledore lied about the orphanage, she still died while Tom was really young. Definitely before he went to Hogwarts.”

Severus nodded. “Then it is possible Riddle may have tried to revive his mother, if she truly did die in his childhood. By the time enough years had passed for him to gain the skill required, she most definitely would have been beyond the veil.”

“Beyond the veil and situated in whatever form of life awaits us there,” said Lily with sorrow in her eyes. “It would have driven her mad for certain.”

Harry sighed and hugged his knees. “Isn’t this a pointless discussion, though? Whether he’s a mad Dragoon or not, I still have to kill him. It’s only going to be harder to do my job if I pity him.”

Severus slipped his hand into Harry’s. “Perhaps, but knowing what brought this about might help us to prevent it ever happening again. If we publish literature stating that Riddle was a Dragoon who broke his mind by trying to bring someone back to life, the news would spread through Britain like wildfire. And after the story becomes public knowledge, it is highly unlikely any future Dragoons would dare attempt it. Besides that, knowing that Riddle is a creature and how to combat him will
make your job easier when we do find the way to reach him.”

Harry shuddered. “Gods, I wish this was over already, but all right. How do we find out who he tried to revive for certain? Or does it even matter?”

“It definitely matters,” said Lily. “We need a timeline, Sev.”

Severus rubbed his lip again. “Slughorn or Minerva might have some ideas. They might at least be able to give us a window. The moment Riddle began exhibiting signs of madness—that is likely when he attempted the ritual.”

“From the second memory Dumbledore showed me,” said Harry with a frown, “Riddle’s always been mad, so that might not be very helpful.”

Lily’s eyes flashed. “And we’re positive that memory was truthful? He’s only lied about everything else.”

Harry winced. Damn. He hadn’t considered that angle. Dumbledore could have easily altered his memories to make them show anything he wanted.

Could Harry believe anything he knew about Tom Riddle?

“I … I’m not sure,” he said in a small voice. “I didn’t look up how to differentiate between true and false memories until later, when Dumbledore showed me one Slughorn had altered in attempt to hide the fact that he taught Riddle a bit about horcruxes. Well, rather, Riddle manipulated it out of him.

“In the original, Slughorn’s memory went foggy and his voice blasted over the truth so you couldn’t hear anything else. There was nothing like that in the memory Dumbledore showed me from the orphanage, but then, no doubt Dumbledore would be better at altering them than Slughorn.”

“Or creating them from scratch,” said Severus. “Or staging them. There are many ways to create a false memory.”

Harry sighed. “So what do we do?”

“Exactly what I have said—we contact Minerva and Horace and try to discover a timeline of when Riddle went mad. In the meantime, we continue searching for the last horcrux. And,” Severus met Lily’s eyes, “we tell the Order you are alive.”

She went ashen. “But … but if Riddle knows I survived ….”

“He already does,” Harry said with a frown. “That’s what started this whole discussion, remember?”

Her shoulders slumped. “I still don’t know if it’s wise.”

Severus held her shoulder. “It is unfair to hide it from them, Lils. I know Molly, for one, was devastated when we believed you had died.”

Lily cast Harry a nervous look, then sighed and gave them a nod. “I suppose if he already knows about us, there’s no point in hiding it.”

“Yeah.” Harry sighed and leaned back into Severus’ neck. “Sev, what are we going to do? Even if we do figure all this out about the Dragoon thing, how do I kill him?”

Severus wrapped his arms about the young man’s waist. “I still believe the secret lies in your ability to kill from within, Harry. It is unique to you, and I cannot help but think it is there for a reason.”
Harry rubbed his eyes and cursed the feeling of ringing up his spine. “Instinct agrees.” He tugged Severus’ arms tighter around him and sighed. “I guess I probably could do it—I killed his snake like that—but the thing is, how? When I had to heal you a couple days ago, Sev, I had to touch the source of your illness—his mark, Mum—before I could do anything to help you. How am I supposed to get Riddle to sit still long enough for me to touch him for an instant, let alone just relax while I kill him from within? And besides that, touching Riddle hurts me. How can I bear it even if we do manage to hit him with a paralysing curse or something?”

“You healed Poppy remotely, Harry,” said Severus with a frown. “There must be a way to kill him through your dreams without needing to touch him. I am sure of it.”

Harry sighed and turned into Severus’ shoulder. “I know you’re right, but I would feel a lot better about it if we had more of the details worked out.”

Severus nodded. “At the moment, it is moot regardless. We must still destroy the final horcrux before we can do anything about Riddle.”

Harry shuddered and curled into Severus’ neck. “I don’t want to do it, Sev. I don’t want to have to kill someone I love.”

Lily gasped. “What? Kill someone?”

Severus pulled the journal from Harry’s back pocket, sending a rush of sensation through the young man as those long fingers brushed his bum. Harry lifted his head and gave the man a weak glare. Severus chuckled, but his mirth vanished at the sight of the evil book in his hand.

“This, Lily, is Riddle’s private diary—the one Harry has been translating to find the horcruxes.”

Lily recoiled and stared at the thing as if it might bite her.

“Yes, that is quite how we feel about it as well, but it is necessary to our cause. Through it, we have found and destroyed the last three inanimate horcruxes, but—”

Lily went grey and gasped out, “Inanimate?”

Severus’ heart panged. “Yes. Riddle placed the final horcrux into a living being. Likely one of our allies, but we do not yet know who or where they are.”

“Or what to do when we find them,” said a stricken Harry. “What am I supposed to do? Just kill Ron, or McGonagall, or Fred? I can’t. I can’t do it. Even if it was Malfoy, I couldn’t do it.”

Severus clutched Harry tight, his heart cold. “No. I shall do it. I shall—”

“No!” Harry clapped his hand over Severus’ mouth and glared him into submission. “No. I won’t let you sacrifice your soul like that. I won’t let you kill them.”

“But … if I do not …”

“No.” Harry sighed and tipped his head back against Severus’ uninjured shoulder. “There has to be another way, all right? There just has to be. What good is being a Reaper and having control over death if I can’t kill a horcrux without also killing someone I love?”

Lily shook her head, tears pooling on her lashes. “Oh, Harry. Oh gods. I don’t think … our powers don’t really … I don’t know if that’s possible.”
Fire and determination hot in his chest, Harry snapped, “Well, maybe it is for me! I have life powers too, remember?” He sighed and dropped his head in his hands. “Whoever has this horcrux, I have to try to destroy it myself. I’m the only person who might possibly be able to spare their life in the process.”

Severus held his mate close and prayed with all his might. Gods, Harry was right. When they finally found the last horcrux, it would be up to Harry to destroy it and hope to the gods he was able to save the host’s life in the process.

But Merlin, if he failed, if Harry had to kill someone he loved in cold blood … he might not come out of it sane. He might break, and Severus didn’t know if he could heal Harry’s mind of such a grievous wound.

It might be the final blow that crushed his beloved mate.

No. He couldn’t lose his Harry. Not like that. Not at all.

‘I won’t let you break.’ He clutched Harry tighter and struggled to keep back tears.

Lily rubbed Severus’ shoulder. “You two have had a terrible night, haven’t you?”

Harry removed his face from Severus’ shoulder and chuckled darkly. “Well, there have been some good parts.”

Severus’ face flamed in spite of himself.

Lily’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh? Anything you want to share with your mum?”

Harry snorted. “Not a chance!”

Lily laughed. “Really, hmm? Well, just be careful, boys. Your physiology is different, Harry. If you do seal the mate bond anytime soon, just, um—gods, I’m sorry about this—but make sure you top. For now. There might be, um … unexpected consequences if you don’t.”

Harry leapt from Severus’ lap and went bright crimson. “Mum! Dear Merlin! I don’t want to talk about this stuff … here.”

Lily gave a nervous chuckle. “Sorry, baby. I don’t really want to talk about it either, but I’m trying to protect you.”

Harry sighed and patted her hand. “It’s okay. Does that mean I have to … er … forever? I can’t see Sev being okay with that.”

Severus frowned. “If that is what it takes to keep you, yes. But no, I would prefer to have … ah, freedom within our relationship.” He looked to Lily and raised an eyebrow.

She blushed deeply. “Merlin, this is awkward. No, Harry, you don’t have to, uh, lead things forever, but Severus might need to develop a potion for you before you can … switch.”

Harry’s shoulders drooped. “Oh.”
She sighed and patted Harry’s shoulder. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow, okay? I think you’ve had enough for one night.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry, Sev.”

Severus huffed and pulled Harry into his arms. “Sorry? For what? Did I not already tell you that if I needed to develop potions for you, I would?”

“Well, yeah, but ….” Harry buried his face in Severus’ shoulder. “You d’serve b’ter. Oughtta get rid’f me. Find s’mone b’ter.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “If that appalling attempt at English was what I think it was and you just told me to throw you away and find someone better, then I may have to revert to my old ways and remind you what an insufferable dolt you are.”

“Don’t,” Lily said with a growl. “Don’t you dare hurt my boy when he’s already hu——”

But Harry was laughing into Severus’ neck. “You wouldn’t!”

Lily relaxed and watched the exchange with a hesitant smile.

Severus gave her an apologetic look, then turned his attention back to his mate. “Indeed I would. Perhaps we would have to devise some … creative punishments since it seems your weeks upon weeks of detentions didn’t take after all.”

Harry snorted and sat up. “Oh? Like what?”

Severus smirked. “I thought you said you did not wish to discuss such personal affairs in front of your mother?”

“Sev!”

Severus laughed and hugged Harry close. “My Harry, how could you ever think I would want to give up such a beautiful, loving man, even if you wouldn’t wither for it? You are my life. My love. My only hope for a better future.”

“M’not your only hope. You could do better than me, you know.”

Severus scowled and held Harry by his shoulders. “Potter! For gods’ sakes, there is no one better. And why would you think I would want anyone else regardless? I love you!” He released the man and sighed. “Besides, have you looked at me lately? Truly looked with objective eyes?”

Harry lifted bemused eyes to his mate. “Sev?”

Severus tugged the silver lock of hair into his face. “Look at me, Harry. I am a thirty-seven year old wizard and already going grey. I am abysmally thin and my nose is larger than the whole of my face. Yet somehow, you look at me and see something beautiful. How many people do you think could say the same?”

“I do,” said Lily with a smile.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. “Not helping, Lils. You’re the wrong gender.”

She laughed and patted his shoulder. “Go on. I just wanted to let you know that I think you’re striking, too.”
Severus’ cheeks warmed. “T-thank you.” He shook his head. “Nevertheless, however you and Harry see me, the rest of the world is not so kind.”

Severus wrapped his arms around his mate once more and gazed into the young man’s eyes. “Harry, you are the only man who looks at me and sees something worth loving. The only man who gives me hope. You brought me from despair and taught me to love again. You taught me to trust and believe that maybe, just maybe, the future could be beautiful.”

Severus brought Harry close and buried his face in the young man’s hair. “How could you think I would merely discard you and forget all the joy you have given me? You are my world, my Harry.”

Harry turned Severus’ face and kissed him with love and affection and all the things Severus had been missing his entire life.

“Gods,” Severus whispered as they broke apart, “how I love you.”

Harry smiled, his eyes wet and glowing with his beautiful teal light—Merlin, Severus hoped that was love and not anger. He gave Harry a hesitant smile.

“I love you, too, my Sev.”

Severus’ breath let out in a great whoosh and he brought Harry close within his arms. “You are mine, do you hear me? My entire world. I will never let you go.”

Harry sighed and laid his head on Severus’ shoulder once more. “Yeah. Yours.”

Lily sniffled, and Severus looked up to find her wiping her eyes. “Lils?”

She gave a breathy laugh and smiled. “I’m okay. It’s just … Merlin. That was so lovely, Sev.”

He blushed and gave her an awkward bow.

Lily chuckled. “Now that is the Severus I remember.”

“Oh, do shut up.”

She burst into laughter. “Merlin, how I’ve missed you, Sev.”

Severus buried his face into Harry’s hair to hide his smile.

Harry sniffled and nuzzled Severus’ cheek. “Sev? I … I’m sorry about … you know.”

Severus kissed Harry’s temple. “Ssh. Nothing to be sorry for, my love. If I must brew a potion, then so I will. I am a potions master, after all. It will be all right, my Harry.”

Harry attempted to kiss him, but yawned right as they touched lips. The young man pulled away, red to his hairline.

“Um … sorry about that, too.”

Severus snorted and tried to cover a laugh. “That enticing, am I?”

Harry laughed, too. “Hush. I’m just exhausted and you know it.”

Severus nodded. “I suppose we do have a right to be. Merlin, what time is it?”
Lily glanced to the wall across from them, where an old-fashioned clock sat atop a bookshelf. “It’s just gone two. Far past time for us to be in bed.” She stood and gave Harry a hesitant smile. “Love, I did prepare a room for you if you ever found me, but I wasn’t expecting you to show up with your mate. It’s … a little small right now, but perhaps with some charms, you can both spend the night there peaceably.”

“That’ll do,” said Harry. “Um, thanks, Mum. I’m done in.”

He did look it, with his eyes red from weeping and the pallor of his earlier bout with illness still apparent. Severus’ protective instincts took over and he stood to go to his mate, but his knees buckled as his own injuries reminded him that he was unwell, too.

“Sev?” Lily frowned and held out a hand to steady him. “Are you okay?”

“I am still injured from Blackpool. Riddle … he ….” Severus shuddered. “No. I cannot speak of it. Not tonight. Suffice it to say that my chest and shoulder are injured and, though I took a potion earlier, it has long since worn off.”

Lily nodded and levitated the men’s rucksacks into her hands. “Then let’s get you settled for the night.”

She led them to a little hall off to the other side of the couch. Two doors lined either end. One door led to a loo, and the other side opened to a small bedroom decorated in blue, with a border of clouds and zooming snitches. The room held a small single bed, a desk, a tall dresser, and a bookcase crammed full of books for all ages. Harry went inside and stared, his arms wrapped around his chest and a broken expression in his eyes.

She laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “What’s wrong, love? We can make it bigger. And, I know it’s not … well, I thought you might be tired of red, but I can change it if you want.”

“It’s fine, Mum. Really.” Harry hugged himself tighter. “I’ve never had a place all my own like this. Never had someone make a real bedroom just for me.” A tear slipped down his cheek. “Dumbledore took so much away from us, Mum. So much I never knew I could have.”

Lily wrapped an arm around his shoulders and kissed his hair. “I’m here now, Harry. I’ll do everything I can to make it up to you.”

Harry sighed and patted his mother’s arm. “Thanks, Mum. It’s okay, though. You aren’t the one at fault.” He shook himself and gave her a smile. “Thank you. It’s lovely.”

Lily smiled back. “Welcome home, love.”

Harry blinked hard and hugged her tight, then turned back to the room. “It’ll do well enough—I’m sure Severus will just love the snitches—”

Severus deadpanned, “However did you know?”

Harry snorted. “Lucky guess. Anyway, it’ll be fine, Mum. We can just do an expansion charm on the bed ….” He frowned. “And maybe on the walls. Would that work, Sev?”

“It may.” Severus turned to Lily. “What is this place? Is it magical or structural?”

She shrugged. “As far as I know, Dumbledore created this place from magic as a prison for me, but he must have given it structure somehow or it would have collapsed upon his death. Either way, if it’s held up this long, a simple expansion charm shouldn’t hurt anything.”
“True. In that case, you and I can do the charms.” Severus nodded to their rucksacks. “Harry, would you unpack my potions and supplies for the night while we are working on the room?”

“Yeah.” Harry scratched at his neck and looked down his body. He gave a wry chuckle. “We never took off our coats, Sev. We’ve been inside for hours and we’re still dressed for snow. How did we not burn up?”

Severus gave a dark laugh. “We had too much to worry about to consider our attire. Or even our body temperature, apparently.”

Harry’s eyes filled with sorrow. “Yeah.”

“I’ll help you with your coat, Sev, if you’d like.” Lily held her hands out, but Severus stepped away.

“I, forgive me.” He couldn’t meet her eyes.

She smiled. “You’d rather Harry do it, huh?”

“Yes. I am … quite uncomfortable with the concept of anyone but Harry … seeing much of me.”

“Sev, it’s only your coat. I’m not going to strip yo—” Severus winced, and she paled and stepped away. “Oh. Oh Merlin. I’m so sorry, Severus. I didn’t mean to ….”

He patted her arm. “No trouble, Lils. It’s over now.”

She gave him a shaky smile. “R-right. Well, we’ll just let Harry take care of you, then. I’m sure he knows what you need better than myself.” With a little shake, she gathered her wits and aimed her wand at the walls. “You fix the bed and I’ll do the walls, okay? Harry, just take off your coat—er, do you need help with it?”

“No, I’m fine.” Harry began peeling off his layers for emphasis. “Just tired. Sev’s the only one who’s hurt.”

“All right. Then just help Severus get his potions ready while we’re at work with this.”

“Already working on it.” Harry used a hand to wandlessly flick open their rucksacks and began levitating potions and salves out even as he was removing his coat.


“What?” Harry looked up from his buttons to find his mother gaping. “Er … did I get the wrong potions or something?”

“I believe she is impressed with your feat of wandless magic, love.” Severus shook his head. “Did you not even realise you were doing it?”

Harry blushed. “Um ….”

“Sweet Circe,” Lily said. “You … you’re eighteen! That kind of control doesn’t come—Sev, can you even do that?”

He shrugged and levitated the pillows as he unbuttoned his coat. “Occlumency users are usually quite skilled at wandless magic, Lils. You know that.”

She shook herself. “Merlin. Can you do Occlumency then, Harry?”
The young man snorted. “Only how Severus taught me earlier.”

Severus frowned at Lily. “I take it that proficiency in wandless charms is not a part of your racial abilities?”

She shook her head. “Nor is that a part of James’ powers.”

“Must be my own thing then,” said a dismal looking Harry. “Gods. Can’t one thing about me just be normal?”

“Your eyesight is fairly normal,” said Severus with a smirk.

Harry wandlessly threw a pillow at him, which Severus levitated back. Harry caught it with a laugh and set it on the chair.

“Smart arse,” he muttered, even as he arranged Severus’ medicine in neat rows.

Severus chuckled. “Of course. Every part of me is ‘smart.’”

Harry snorted and continued laying out Severus’ medicines. Once he had everything for his mate in order, Harry slipped off his coat and shoes and plopped into the desk chair to wait. Lily was still staring at her son when he had finished, and Harry gave her a bemused look.

Severus grumped, “Lils, it would help me if you could possibly stop gaping and do the damned charm on the walls already.” She jumped at his voice, and Severus sighed. “Oh, never mind it. I’ll do it.”

She blushed and gave him a sheepish grin. “No, no. I’ve got it, Sev. I was just … just so proud of my baby.” She kissed Harry’s forehead. “You’ve grown to be such a man, my little love. I’m so very glad to have you home at last.”

Harry grinned. “Me too.”

Lily sniffled, then flicked her wand and began enlarging the room. Severus worked in tandem with her so the bed stayed within its boundaries, and soon they had a room large enough for two.

“There you are, boys.” Lily stood by the bookcase with a wistful look and took a soft baby book from its lowest shelf. “You know, Harry, I’ve read these to you every night from when you were a baby, even though you couldn’t hear me. I knew it would never carry. And yet, I’ve never stopped. I needed to feel like … some part of you … like I had something of you here. Like I could have some kind of influence on your life.” She held the book to her chest and sighed. “I suppose it was silly, but some nights, reading to you even if you were so far away—it was the only thing that kept me sane.”

Harry stood, his eyes full of unshed tears. “Oh, Mum ….”

She sobbed and pressed a hand to her eyes. “I had nothing left of you, Harry. He left us with nothing!” She paced and waved the book around, gesticulating madly as Harry did when he was agitated. “I couldn’t watch my baby grow into a man, couldn’t help him with anything, couldn’t do anything but sit and listen as the world ran all over him. And you, you never got to have a mum kiss your bumps and bruises, never had me to help you with your lessons, never got a bedtime story you could h-hear.”

She held her book tighter. “You never had the chance to know me until now, when it’s too late for me to do any good. You’re already a man. What am I supposed to do now that you don’t need me any longer?”
Obviously at a loss for words, Harry just went to his mother and held her, laying his head upon her shoulder. With a sob, Lily caught him up and kissed his messy hair, and Severus’ heart bled for both of them.

Gods. Of all the things Dumbledore had done, tearing Lily away from her son had to be the cruellest.

Severus watched Lily weep over her son, torn between staying and leaving them a moment to themselves, but the sight of Harry’s tears decided him. He went to them and stood behind his mate, wrapping his arms around both Harry and his friend.

“Lils,” he murmured in a low, soothing voice, “yes, Harry is a man now, but he still needs you. And you can still be here for him. You can guide him through all the changes and problems he’s going to face both as a creature and as a man. Especially as a gay man, and as the figurehead of a war he never wanted any part in. You can help him understand his tasks as a Reaper and Dragoon, teach him how to use his powers, and help him learn to control his emotions and use them for good. In short, you can still be his mother.”

Harry stepped back and held Lily’s shoulders. “You’re always going to be my mum, no matter how old I am. That slimy berk can’t take that away from us.” He gave her a shy smile. “Um, you can read that to me if you want to. I mean, I’m too old for it, but if it’ll make you feel better, I’ll listen.”

Lily gave a little laugh and wiped her eyes. “Merlin, no. No, I just wanted to take one with me, to hold onto, I guess. It’s a bit silly, but it helps me when the nights are especially hard.” Her eyes flickered to the door. “And tonight’s going to be a bit hard, without Remus to help me.”

Harry rubbed a toe on the carpet. “I, I’m sorry, Mum. About everything.”

“It’s not your fault, love. Not at all. I’m so glad you’re home. It’s just been a rough night and I need a little extra comfort. I’d gotten used to having Remus beside me.”

Harry met Severus’ eyes. “I understand. We’ve slept in the same bed since our second week together, since I heard about Remus’ … death, actually.” He frowned and hugged his chest. “Mum, Remus is really your mate?”

“Yes, love. I’m sorry it couldn’t be your father, but I am quite happy with Remus, if it helps.”

Harry gave her a sad smile. “That’s not what I was worried about. It’s just … you’re my mum. So does that mean Remus will want to …?”

Lily smiled. “Adopt you?”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Merlin, do you think he would? I mean, I’m not a child anymore so I suppose there’s not much point, but … but ….”

“But you need a da anyway.” Lily smiled and kissed Harry’s forehead. “Why don’t you ask Remus in the morning? I think he’ll be happy to hear it from you.”

Harry grinned. “You mean it? Oh, Mum. That’s … it’s brilliant. Remus has already been like a da since Sirius died anyway, and … and even before, Sirius was more like a big brother than a father. Remus is … since third year, he’s always been ….”

Lily embraced Harry and kissed his hair. “Family, baby. He’s your family now. Your da, if you want him to be.”

Harry gave a tearful nod and buried his head in his mother’s hair.
Severus tried, but couldn’t quite hold back a groan. “Merlin. I’ve been sucked into the wolf’s pack. Well, I suppose it could have been worse. Could have been the mutt.”

“Sorry, Sev,” said a laughing Harry. “He’s your family, too. Well, I mean, he’s dead, but he’s still my godfather.”

“Merlin save me. I’ll have fleas within the week.”

“Sev!” Lily’s voice was sharp and her eyes glowing teal. “That’s enough!”

Severus raised shaking hands in supplication and backed away, his heart pounding in his ears. Merlin. He hadn’t been serious, but Lily clearly didn’t understand his humour any longer. He had, however unintentionally, just insulted his only friend’s mate. His creature friend.

“Lils, please. I, I did not mean—”

Harry moved to stand before Severus and took a defensive posture. Severus’ heart slowed a bit with Harry protecting him.

“Back down, Mum,” said Harry in a calm, but firm voice. “Severus didn’t mean to really insult Remus. He knows how much I love him. And you have to understand there is some bad blood between them. Remus should have helped Sev when Da assaulted him, but he abandoned him as much as you did that day. And after.”

The fire in her eyes faded. “Oh, Merlin.” She lifted a hand to her mouth. “Sev, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to react like that. It’s just—it’s a new bond, you know? And I … were you being sarcastic?”

Severus gave her a slow nod. “Harry is also correct. After the events of my school years, my feelings towards Lupin are less than congenial, but I shall attempt to keep a civil tongue for your sake.”

Lily sighed. “Sev, Remus isn’t like that. He never treated anyone else with the same kind of disdain he showed to you—not a one. Not even other Slytherins. He even treated Malfoy with more respect, and that’s just odd.” Her eyes hardened to steel. “I have no doubt that he’s under as many compulsions as I am.”

Severus’ tension relaxed and a deep, ages-old pain unwound itself from his chest. “That would … explain much. I always wondered why Lupin—who always took the side of the underdog in every other fight—abandoned me to endure such terrible abuse. I had imagined that he hated me to such a point, his very personality changed when near me, but no, your explanation makes more sense. Which means that, most likely, Black was altered as well, though I doubt I can excuse Pettigrew. He is too much of a swine for even Dumbledore’s compulsions to explain his behaviour. They cannot alter the core of one’s nature, after all, not to the point that a good soul becomes evil enough to murder their one-time friends.”

Harry scowled. “Pettigrew has no excuse. He’s always been a rat. His Animagus form proves that.”

“Yes.” Severus sat on the bed and laid his head in his hands, pain running rampant through his entire being. “If this is true, Lils, if Lupin was indeed compelled to stand by and let me be abused, and Potter and Black were compelled to attack, then it appears that the Marauders never assaulted me at all. Dumbledore did. The man I looked up to as my father.”

Harry sat beside Severus on the bed and wrapped an arm around his mate’s waist. “Mum, I think I need to help Severus through this alone. Can we say goodnight now?”

“Of course, love.” She came to Harry’s side and kissed his cheek. “I love you, baby. I know it’s
been terrible tonight, but I want you to know that having you here, and Remus, and Sev—I’m so happy in spite of it all. My family is finally home.” She gave Severus a sad smile. “Are you going to be okay, Sev?”

He nodded and closed his eyes around tears. “I believe so.

Lily hugged him and kissed his cheek. “I have no doubt Harry will make you feel better, but if you still need help, know I’m here for you, okay? You can wake me up at any hour if you need to.”

“Thank you, Lils. That means more to me than I can say.”

She smoothed Severus’ hair back and smiled. “You know, Harry is right, Sev. This silver streak of yours is striking. You should leave it.”

He gave her a wry smile. “If you say so.”

She patted his shoulder. “I’ll leave you two alone now. Harry, I … remember what I said before, okay? I know it’s embarrassing, but it’s important.”

Harry blushed to his hairline. “Mum, please. There is no possibility I could ever forget that conversation. Much as I want to.”

She chuckled and patted his shoulder, too. “No, I’d say not.” She hesitated at the door, her baby book still clutched tight against her chest. “Goodnight, boys. I love you both.”

“Goodnight,” said Harry. “I love you, too.”

Severus added, “Lily, you have my love as well, but before you go, can Patronuses and owls reach us here?”

She frowned and tugged at her hair. “Well, as long as the spirit barrier’s down, they should be able to. There’s an owl entrance through the portrait room—though Dumbledore did something odd to it so that I couldn’t send owls out, just receive them—and Patronuses can just appear wherever. Why?”

“I am expecting a letter from our spy in Riddle’s camp. His owl needs to be able to reach me. And I must compose a rather lengthy Patronus message for the Order to let them know most of what we have discovered tonight.”

“Just don’t tell them about my race, Sev,” Lily said with a shudder. “It could be lethal. We’re not supposed to reveal it to anyone but our mates and heirs, nor are we supposed to tell anyone outside of the family about the hierarchy of death. It’s just too dangerous.”

Severus nodded. “You have my word.”

“Thank you.” She smiled and stood by the door. “Is there anything else? Do you need anything? A drink of water or an extra blanket?”

Harry shook his head. “We’re fine, Mum. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, my boys.” She gave them one last look and left, closing the door behind her.

Harry flopped back onto the bed with a sigh. “Merlin, what a long day this has been.”

“Indeed.” Severus stroked Harry’s stomach where his tee had rode up and revealed a strip of creamy golden skin. “And we are not finished with it yet, my love.”
Harry blushed and gave him a lopsided smile. “Yeah?”

Severus smiled back, feeling better in spite of his grief. After all, whatever the bearded bastard had intended to happen, Severus had found his family at last.

“Yes, my beautiful mate. I need to forget everything, just for a moment. Do you feel the same?”

Harry grinned. “Yeah. Sounds good.”

Severus kissed Harry’s belly and sighed. Yes. A night of relaxation with his mate, after everything they had endured, sounded wonderful.

But first, he had a long-overdue Patronus to send.

Gods. How on earth was he to tell the Order that their long-beloved leader was a complete sham? Would any of them even believe him?

He had no idea, but he had to try.
Harry watched Severus compose a Patronus message for the Weasley twins and Minerva, again using Harry’s stag, while Harry himself undressed down to his sleep trousers and socked feet. Thus attired, he went to help Severus out of his coat. Severus kissed Harry’s hair in welcome and continued his message over the young man’s shoulder.

“Fred, George, I can hardly believe it myself, but everything I’m telling you is the truth. She’s really alive, and Dumbledore kept her prisoner all this time. We have yet to confront him on his reasoning, but I speculate that he wanted Harry to grow up in a loveless environment to make him strong. To turn an innocent boy into a weapon.”

Harry shuddered. A boy. When had he ever had the chance to be a boy?

He shook his head and returned to Severus’ coat buttons. Good gods, there were a lot of them. Had the man raided a button factory in the past? Why on earth did he need so many?

Harry paused over the man’s chest. Perhaps they made Severus feel safe. And after the assault the elder Potter had put him through, Harry couldn’t blame him.

“Harry is … as well as can be expected. All of this is a shock, I’m sure you understand. But at the moment, he is standing here with me, helping me, and he seems well.”

Harry gave him a soft smile and kept working.

Severus was comfortable enough letting Harry undress him now. Certainly more so than he had been when Lily had offered. Why?

Harry paused on a button above Severus’ waist, overcome with emotion, as the answers came to him —via instinct or otherwise.

Severus’ past had scarred him inside as well as out. Because of what Harry’s own da had done to the man—or rather, what Dumbledore had done through his bloody compulsions—Severus had developed a fear of showing any of his skin, any at all. He had a deep-seated need to keep himself covered at all times, and the cruelty of his peers and society had only reinforced it as he had aged.
And yet, he trusted Harry to take off his coat for him. More than his coat—Severus had allowed Harry to undress him down to his underwear over the past week, had let Harry’s fingers ghost over his bare skin, and rather than fearing him, Severus seemed to take pleasure in it.

Severus looked down at Harry, questioning him with those beautiful dark eyes, and Harry gave him a brilliant smile.

This was a huge step for the reclusive man, a degree of trust Severus had only given once before and never again in twenty years. Never since becoming a spy. Those buttons were his armour, and he trusted Harry enough to let him remove it piece by piece. To bare himself before his mate and trust that his concession would be treated with respect.

The thought overwhelmed Harry with love for Severus, all his little quirks included. Gods, how he loved this man. This fragile, brave, wonderful man.

Harry pressed a kiss to Severus’ chest, and the man paused in his dictation long enough to caress Harry’s cheek and search his eyes.

“I’m okay,” Harry mouthed so as not to interrupt the message. “Just taking care of you.”

Severus’ eyes warmed, and he kissed Harry’s forehead before returning to the stag.

As Harry worked on the last row of Severus’ coat buttons, he reaffirmed the desire of his heart to always be gentle and loving with his scarred mate—never rough, never careless. Severus needed Harry to protect him, and Harry would do anything he could to meet Severus’ needs.

After all, Severus’ body was Harry’s temple. Harry would worship every inch of it until the man felt safe in his own skin again—and afterwards.

A long life of loving his mate sounded good to him.

Prongs bounded away just as Harry laid Severus’ coat aside. Harry gave the man a tender smile and gazed into his eyes. Gods. They were so deep. So beautiful.

Severus tucked a stray bit of hair behind Harry’s ear. “What?”

Harry kissed Severus lightly. “Just thinking about how much I love you.”

Severus smiled, but said nothing. Harry reassured him with soft murmurs of encouragement and helped him out of his jumper. He then set to work on the man’s undershirt, the final row of buttons shielding him from Harry’s sight. Beneath Harry’s fingers, even with his steady flow of reassurance, Severus was trembling.

Harry paused. “Love? Are you okay?”

Severus gave him a small, hesitant smile. “I am only a bit nervous. I do not know what you … hope for from me tonight.”

Harry kissed him lightly. “Whatever you’re willing to give. If you’d rather just undress and go to bed, that’s fine. It’s been a hard day.”

Severus shook his head and, blushing to his hairline, murmured, “No. I, it has also been traumatic. Too traumatic. I need you, Harry.”

Severus met Harry’s eyes, then, in a clearly submissive gesture, lowered his gaze and bowed his
head. Harry’s breath hitched.

He tipped up Severus’ chin and brushed the man’s hair back from his face. “Are you asking me … do you want me to make love to you? To lead you?”

Severus’ eyes fluttered closed, and he gave Harry a slow nod. “If … if you want me.”

A wild flame flickered to life in Harry’s chest. He cast a powerful silencing charm on the room and brought his mate into his arms. As before, the tone of his voice surprised him when it came out a little deeper than usual, a little less tame, and with a different speech pattern than he had intended.

“I will always want you, my mate.”

So he had become his creature form again. Why did his desire bring it out? As Severus looked up at him, wide-eyed and trembling, but with a smile on his face, Harry decided he didn’t care. As long as Severus felt good, he didn’t mind having extra features or an unusual way of speaking.

A hand reached up and behind him, confusing Harry, until Severus’ fingertips brushed delicate skin Harry hadn’t known he possessed.

“Beautiful,” Severus whispered.

Harry looked around and gasped. His wings had come out—shaped like a dragon’s but covered with feathers. Two closed eyes—or what looked like them—sat at the apex of each wing. Curious, Harry tried opening them, but they were fused shut.

So this wasn’t his full form, not yet. Still, he had come closer this time.

Severus ran a fingertip down one of Harry’s long black feathers, and a bolt of sensation speared the younger man. Harry gave a surprised huff and leaned into Severus’ neck.

Merlin. Who would have thought feathers could be so sensitive? Maybe he only felt it so strongly because Severus was touching him. His Severus.

With a pant, he stretched his wings out, testing the new muscles, and laid them across Severus’ shoulders. He folded them behind his mate’s back and sighed. Perfect. Severus fit within his wings just right.

“Mm,” Severus murmured, “I do feel safe like this.”

“You are. You are always safe with me.”

Severus tilted his face towards his mate, and Harry kissed him with ardour, sliding a hand into Severus’ silky raven and ivory locks and slowly savouring the taste of him.

As their kiss deepened, the intoxicating fragrance of desire flooded Harry’s nostrils, and gods, he feared he would melt. Severus’ arousal smelled of cinnamon and treacle and everything Harry loved. It was heady-sweet, and Harry craved it.

With a soft moan, he turned his face into Severus’ neck and lapped up the delicious taste of him, like vanilla with a bit of spice. It reminded him of ice cream and apple pie.

Severus tilted his head back and whispered, “Harry …”

That wonderful fragrance grew stronger, and Harry was lost to him.
“My Sev.”

This was where he belonged. His home, at last.

With a kiss upon Severus’ nose, Harry resumed unbuttoning his mate’s shirt, kissing every inch of skin the buttons revealed, rewarding the older man’s trust with love. With a sigh of contentment, he traced his tongue along smooth, strong collarbones and the little dip in the centre. He pressed soft, open-mouthed kisses to the flat stretch of skin underneath, firm and rippling with wiry strength. And the rough, scarred skin of his chest—but … wait a moment. Harry touched his lips to Severus’ breastbone again and gasped.

“Merlin!”

Severus recoiled, no doubt fearing rejection, but Harry calmed him with soft kisses and tender touches to his face and hair.

“Ssh. I was not rejecting you. I was only surprised. Love, your chest—”

Severus winced. “I know. I know it is horribly scarred. Nothing seems to help.”

The wildness in Harry’s blood quieted at his mate’s need for reassurance. “No, no. I’ve seen them, but that’s just it, Sev—the scars are gone.”

“What?” Severus sat and stared at his chest—smooth and creamy-pale once more—and he let out a sobbing breath. “It, it’s gone? But how? I … I do not understand.”

“Neither do I, but I’m glad. I don’t like knowing you feel bad about your appearance, and I know those scars really bothered you.”

Severus nodded and brought Harry close to him. “They did. I never understood what I had done to deserve being beaten with a fire whip—not even in Riddle’s eyes. It was … so cruel and strange, even for him.”

Harry kissed him with a bit of passion. “Don’t think of that tonight. No one else is here. It is only you and I. Keep your eyes on me, beloved, and let me make love to you.”

Severus’ breath hitched. He wrapped his arms around Harry’s neck and gave him a shaky nod. “I think no one has ever made love to me. Not even … before.”

“Mm, I did, earlier today, but I believe I know what you mean.” An image of Severus splayed out, his calves tucked behind his mate’s shoulders, flickered into Harry’s consciousness. “Oh, Severus. Is that what you wish, beloved? You wish me to claim you and seal our bond?”

With a low moan, Severus crushed Harry to him and claimed his mouth in a fierce, seeking kiss. Harry’s body sang at the feel of Severus’ tongue exploring his own, and he thrilled in the shudder that passed through his mate at the sound. The aroma of cinnamon and vanilla filled his nostrils.

Gods, Severus’ desire was the best cologne Harry had ever smelled. He could have fallen in love with that fragrance alone.

“Yes,” Severus whispered. “Yes, claim me. I wish to be yours, Harry Potter.”

“Prince,” Harry whispered back. “From here on out, we are both Princes. Both your name and mine are associated with too much pain, but I have always loved my Half-Blood Prince. And you loved your mother despite the trouble in your lives. Will you be my Prince, love?”
Severus gasped as Harry tasted the sweet cream of his throat and slowly slipped the shirt from his mate’s shoulders.

“Harry, I cannot change my name unless …”

“Unless we bond.”

Harry kissed him with tenderness and knelt at Severus’ feet. When he looked up, his heart was going a thousand miles per hour and his throat was so tight, he could barely form words. He forced them out anyway, though his voice trembled.

“I, I haven’t a ring for you, not yet, but will you be my bonded as well as my mate? Will you be mine forever, my love?”

Tears slid down Severus’ face, and Harry’s heart cracked, but before he could begin to feel the pain, Severus hauled him up into his arms and kissed the breath from him.

“Yes,” he whispered in a shaky, breaking voice. “My gods, yes.”

The crack in Harry’s heart sealed and excitement filled him to bursting. “Really? You’ll marry me? Bond with me … however it works.”

“Bond—marrying in the Muggle fashion is still illegal for two men, but I am honoured to be your bondmate.” He laughed and held Harry so tight, the man could barely breathe. “Merlin, Harry, I never dreamed I would find this. Lily alive and my beloved mate kneeling at my feet, asking to bond with me forever. Gods! Is it real? I will not wake up in the morning to find this all a beautiful dream?”

Harry kissed him softly and laid him back onto the sheets. “No. I am really here, love.”

Severus said in a soft, awed voice, “This is my every wish come true, Harry.”

Harry’s eyes filled. “For me as well.” He kissed Severus with soft emotion and cradled his mate’s face in gentle hands. “I love you, Severus. With all of my heart and soul and mind.”

Severus laced his hands behind Harry’s waist and tugged the man down to lie atop him. “Then stop dallying, love, and claim me. I wish for nothing more than to be yours.”

Wildfire raced through Harry and set his every nerve alight. “Yes. Merlin, yes.” He straddled Severus’ hips and kissed him with love and passion, seeking the depths of his mate’s honey-sweet mouth, and pulled back panting.

“What do we need to make love, Severus?”

Harry blinked, surprised at himself. A flash of insight filled his mind, and he suddenly knew he couldn’t just enter his mate without first preparing him, but mother of Merlin, where had that come from? Harry hadn’t the slightest idea how to make love to a man. And yet, when he thought of it, the answers came to him.

How strange. Was this from Severus? Instinct? Or perhaps his creature just … knew?

He shrugged internally. He didn’t particularly care so long as the knowledge allowed him to make love to Severus without hurting him.

Below him, Severus blushed and flicked his wrist. A second later, a jar of clear gel floated from his
rucksack and into Harry’s waiting hand.

“That is … healing lubricant. I had some in my stores and I thought, well, I am unsure what I thought, but when you gave Minerva a moment alone with me after the rite, I asked her to—and gods, wasn’t that humiliating—but I asked her to pack it. I … I don’t know what possessed me then, bu—”

Harry laid the jar aside and stilled his mate’s fearful words with a kiss. “There is no need to explain, Severus. I am simply glad you thought ahead.” He tried to hold in a chuckle, but it burst out anyway. “You really asked Professor McGonagall to pack it for us? Did it shock the tartan off of her?”

Severus snorted. “You have no idea.”

Harry snorted into his hands. “Oh my gods. That’s brilliant. Will you pensieve that whole conversation for me?”

Severus laughed. “Merlin. I suppose I could.”

“Thanks. I have got to see the old tabby’s face when you just out and as—oh.”

Harry caught a whiff of Severus’ scent and decided they could save the laughter for later. He turned his face into Severus’ throat and tasted him anew.

“Ah.” Severus shivered and reached for Harry’s waist, opening his legs for his mate. “Please. Take me.”

“Like this? Now?” Stunned, Harry sat and frowned, searching his mate’s eyes. “Merlin. Did Regulus do that to you? Just take you without making love to you at all?”

Severus’ cheeks went bright red, and he turned his face away.

“Merlin, he did. Sev ….”

Severus shook his head. “He wasn’t cruel, love. We simply hadn’t time for much else. Had we moved too slowly, the homophobic bigots in Riddle’s ranks might have found and killed us for our …. He sneered. “Perversions.”

“Oh. Oh, I see.” Harry ran a hand down Severus’ chest. “Well, there are no homophobic bigots here. No Riddle, no Death Eaters. Just you and me.” He leaned down and kissed Severus slowly. “So I won’t rush. Won’t hurt you. Instead, I am going to take my time. I am going to make love to you, my beloved mate, not simply claim you.”

Severus held Harry’s face, eyes wide and full of emotion. “I have never been treated with such care.”

“I’ll always treat you with care, my mate. You deserve to be cherished. Always.”

Severus gave him a soft smile and a nod, and Harry kissed him once more. Those long, gorgeous legs came up around Harry’s hips, and he felt at home within their embrace. Merlin. So warm. He sighed into Severus’ mouth and slowly began to move down his mate’s body, suckling the man’s neck as his palms explored Severus’ chest and sides.

Gods. Severus tasted so good. Like all of Harry’s favourite treats in one package.

“Harry,” Severus panted. “Please.”

“Mm-hmm.”
With a careful hand, Harry lowered his fingers to the zip of Severus’ trousers. He felt the man tense below him, and kissed him slowly until his mate’s fear eased. He pulled back and gazed into black eyes full of desire and trust.

“Are you all right, Sev?”

He smiled. “I do like to hear your usual voice. It reminds me that you are still there, and these new features are part of you.”

Harry hesitated. “I … I am confused. Do you not want me like this?”

Severus stroked a gentle hand over the top of Harry’s wing and sent shocks of desire through the younger man. “You are beautiful, Harry. In every form. I only liked the comfort of knowing the man I fell in love with is still here, that under these striking features, it is still you.”

He brushed the back of his hand down Harry’s feathers, and the creature inside the younger man let slip a growl of need. Harry shuddered as shock after shock of electricity surged through him and excited him like he had never been before. It took every ounce of his self-control not to pounce on Severus and ravish him.

No. Severus deserved better than to be taken like an animal, but Merlin! Harry could hardly control himself.

“Oh?” Severus smirked, oblivious to his mate’s struggle—or perhaps not so oblivious. “These are quite sensitive, then.” He stroked again, and Harry slumped into Severus’ neck with a moan.

“Sev.”

“Hmm. So they are.”

Harry gasped as the man gently pushed him down his body a bit and carefully eased a wing toward his face. A tentative tongue touched the inner scales of his wing just below his closed extra eye, and a shockwave of heat laid Harry flat. He mewled as Severus explored him, taking him apart with careful swipes of his tongue.

“S-Sev … please.”

The man released Harry’s wing, and Harry sucked in a shaky breath in the reprieve. He gathered his wits and started to move a bit lower down Severus’ body—then the man explored Harry’s other wing and left him a mewling, shivering heap upon Severus’ chest.

Dear gods. He was going to melt. Just turn into a puddle of goo on Severus’ chest, and he didn’t even mind.

Fire and pressure prodded at his mind, and Harry understood that he couldn’t just lie there while Severus took him apart by inches. He had to return the favour. So, controlling his desire as best as he could, Harry gave a low growl and attacked Severus’ chest with kisses. He traced a rib around to his side and suckled, and Severus stifled laughter.

Harry came up with a chuckle. “Tickles?”

“Perhaps a bit. I did not give you leave to stop, however.”

Harry grinned and latched onto a dusky pink nipple instead. Severus’ breath left him in a huff, and he arched into Harry with a gasp, his eyes wide.
“Merlin,” he gasped out.

Harry gathered from Severus’ breathless pants and clawing hands that it felt good and kept going—tucking his wings behind him for good measure. He lapped and suckled and flicked with his tongue, enjoying both the heady scent of Severus’ passion and the taste of his skin, and kissed his way over to the other nipple after a time, stopping to press a tender, loving kiss to the centre of Severus’ breastbone.

The man gasped and leaned up. “Harry … do that again.”

“What? Kiss your chest, love?”

Severus nodded.

Harry wondered why kissing the man’s chest would bring more of a reaction than his nipples, but did as Severus asked. If kissing him here made him feel good, Harry didn’t mind.

Severus let slip a sigh and slipped his hand into Harry’s hair. “As I thought. You are healing me.”

“Hmm? Healing what?”

“My soul. My injuries. Your kisses and touches are taking my pain away.”

Harry sat and grinned. “Really? Oh, Sev. That’s brilliant.”

He took Severus’ left hand in his own and kissed the man’s fingertips, sucking upon each one in turn. Severus stroked his free hand through Harry’s wild hair, his eyes soft and warm.

“That is … I have never felt so loved.”

Harry gave him a bright smile. “Good.”

He returned to his ministrations, kissing down Severus’ palm. Severus winced at the lightest touch on his gauze-wrapped wrist, so Harry skipped over it and moved up his arm and shoulder instead. He carefully kissed and caressed every surface of Severus’ arm and chest, even turning him on his stomach to bestow his love on the other side, and as he pressed a tender kiss to the centre of Severus’ spine between his shoulder blades, the man sighed and relaxed into the blankets.

“I think … I am healed, Harry. At least, it does not hurt any longer.”

“Good,” Harry whispered against his back. “Then I believe I will get back to ….” He parted Severus’ hair and suckled the back of the man’s neck.


“Mm. Yes. That’s more like it.”

Harry traced his fingernails lightly down Severus’ spine, taking care not to catch the scars across his shoulders and ribs, and dragged them all the way down to the dip above the waistline of Severus’ pants. Severus shivered and arched into Harry’s hand.

“Sev, you want me to …?”

“Yes. Please.”

Harry slowly slipped a hand inside the man’s underwear and over a firm cheek. Severus moaned and
rubbed up, his hips slowly moving against the bed.

Harry growled against Severus’ neck. “Oh, no you don’t. Not yet.”

With a smirk, Harry moved between Severus’ thighs and lifted his hips so the man was kneeling with his knees on either side of Harry’s legs. Harry leaned back and took in the sight of his mate, legs spread wide and desire hanging low, and a bolt of heat sizzled through him.

He wanted those smalls gone.

“Sev, can I … take these off?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Harry hesitated halfway through pulling at the man’s waistband, memories of the assault in fifth year stilling his hand. No. Severus deserved to see Harry first.

“Wait. Turn around, love.”

The man obeyed, but his expression held fear and shame. Harry kissed him softly.

“Ssh. I wasn’t rejecting you. I just thought … well, maybe I should go first.”

Severus’ eyes blazed with desire. “I shan’t object.”

Swallowing hard, Harry climbed off the bed and stood near his mate’s face. He held shaking hands at his waistband, holding both trousers and smalls at once, and trembled hard. What if Severus didn’t like him? What if he found Harry’s youth and his innocence wanting? What if—

“Harry … you are afraid?”

“Y-yeah. Just, just don’t want you to … to not like it. Me.”

“I assure you, that shan’t happen.”

Severus scooted close and kissed Harry beneath his navel, and the sensation stole the younger man’s breath. He had never felt a touch so near his core before. Especially not—oh dear Merlin. Severus teased the thin trail of hair beneath Harry’s belly button with his tongue, and suddenly Harry couldn’t get his pants off fast enough. With a gasp, he pushed both trousers and smalls down, leaving him in nothing but his socks, and gamely kicked them aside.

He was shaking all over as Severus moved back and drank him in.

“Gods,” Severus whispered, and the hitch in his breath relieved Harry more than he would have thought possible.

“G-good?”

Severus groaned and brought Harry into the circle of his arms, pressing his face against Harry’s hip. “Perfect.”

“Ah … oh.”

Severus’ lips and tongue traced the hollow just above Harry’s thigh, and screaming hot tension cut through Harry’s body like a knife. He went rigid and clutched at Severus’ hair, a shocked cry coming out without a sound. He couldn’t find the air to make a sound. Nothing but strangled
squeaks and gasps escaped him as Severus branded his hip with his tongue.

Then a gentle hand traced the length of him, and Harry jerked back with a cry. “Gonna, gonna—too fast. Too much. Don’t want to let you down.”

Severus gave him a molten smile. “Let me down? Merlin. You are already the best lover I have ever known.”

“Gah.” Harry leaned over Severus, panting, struggling for control. “I need to make this good for you, Sev. I need to … to … not yet. Can’t lose it yet.”

Severus smirked. “You do realise you are eighteen and a creature and could probably sustain more than one erection in one go, don’t you?”

“Next time,” Harry panted. “Next time you can see how many times you can make me hard for you in one sitting, but this time, this time I need to make love to you and claim you and make you mine.”

Severus’ eyes blazed. “Now that is a promise. Come then, and make love to me however you wish, my beautiful mate.”

Harry shivered. “Yeah. Yeah, sounds good.” He thought cold thoughts and brushed a gentle hand over the edge of Severus’ underwear. “C-can I?”

“Merlin, yes.” Severus lifted his hips, enabling Harry to slide his smalls down and off of those beautiful, long legs, and Harry let his eyes drink their fill.

Shite. Severus was long and lanky all over, apparently, and oh. Just the sight of him, and Harry had to bite on his knuckle to keep himself from losing control.

“Gods, Sev. Gods. So … so ….” With a moan, he buried his face in Severus’ stomach and took in rapid, deep breaths.

“Harry?”

The fear in Severus’ voice gave Harry the control he needed, and he lifted his face with a smile.

“Oh, Sev,” Harry said in a soft voice. “I was … only trying not to jump on you like a rabbit.”

Severus’ fear melted into a short, relieved burst of laughter. “Ah, I see.”

“You’re so damn gorgeous.”

Harry tentatively traced Severus’ velvet length—like silk over steel—with a gentle fingertip, and Severus arched and let slip a strangled cry.

“G-gods!”

Harry climbed back onto the bed, situating himself between Severus’ knees. “Good?”

All Severus could manage was a shaky nod.

Harry smiled and grew a little bolder, this time stroking him with his entire palm. Severus grabbed the sheets and rocked into his touch, his eyes wide and his hips shaking with need. Harry stroked up, and pushed gently down, touching Severus a bit like he enjoyed to touch himself, and the man let out a cry.
“H-Harry, please!”

“Mm, I’ve barely started.”

Severus said something, it might have been English, and Harry gave him another slow stroke. The scent of his mate’s desire made Harry’s mouth water, and suddenly he wondered if Severus tasted as good as he smelled. He remembered a certain fantasy, something Severus had clearly liked the thought of, and decided it couldn’t hurt to try.

As he leaned forward, Severus muttered a shocked, “W-what are you doing, Ha-Ha….”

Then Harry touched his tongue to his mate’s tip, and Severus released his breath in one long moan.

Gods. The man somehow tasted of *vanilla*. So good. With a pant, Harry took in more, filling his mouth with the taste, and sucked it down as if Severus were a sort of hot ice lolly. And Severus *screamed*.

Dear mother of … *gods*! The sound of his mate shrieking above him, the feel of him arching beyond all control into Harry’s mouth, the way his hands clutched Harry’s hair and tugged, *shite*! Harry was going to lose it. If he could just angle himself against the man’s leg—no!

No. He couldn’t. Not yet. This time was for Severus.

“Harry, Harry, please. Too much. Gods, too much.”

Harry backed off and licked the tip. “Better?”

“Ghn. Please—I can’t take much more. I need you.”

Harry nodded. He’d wanted to make love to every inch of Severus’ body, but perhaps the man was right. Severus hadn’t touched anyone in over twenty years and Harry was a virgin. They just didn’t have the stamina for more.

Well, there was always next time.

Harry smiled to himself and grabbed the lubricant from within a mess of tangled quilts. He scooted up so he sat between Severus’ thighs and gazed at his mate. Severus lay upon the pillows, black hair wild and dishevelled, the silver streak plastered to his damp forehead. His breath came in explosive pants, and a delicious flush had painted that creamy skin pink from his navel to his hairline.

Gods. He was *gorgeous* like that.

Severus groaned and spread his legs. “Please.”

Harry gulped and hoped the creature side of himself knew what to do, because his human side was clueless. A flash appeared to him of gentle fingertips and … well, apparently he would need more of the lubricant than he’d thought. He dipped in for a larger scoop and pressed his fingertips to his mate. A shiver passed through Severus and Harry paused.

“All right, love?”

Severus took a deep breath and gave Harry a tentative smile. “I trust you. Only, be gentle and slow, my Harry. It has been a very long time for me.”

“My beautiful mate, I will always be gentle with you.”
Severus relaxed and motioned Harry on. “I trust you. I am yours.”

“Yes. Always.”

With a silent prayer to the fates for help, Harry draped his wings on either side of his mate and set about the careful work of preparing him.

At the first touch of Harry’s fingertips against his entrance, a hard shudder spread through Severus’ body. *Merlin.* Harry was a virgin, and Severus doubted Harry had found time to study the process of gay sex while hunting horcruxes in the woods. Gods, the young man hadn’t even been able to process his own sexuality until a few months ago.

Severus refused to admit it, but he was afraid. And damned if his mate didn’t sense it.

“All right, love?”

Severus took a deep breath and chided himself for his folly. This was *Harry.* His beloved mate who had already shown him more love in two days than Severus had known his entire life. Harry would never hurt him, and if, in his inexperience, he *did* cause Severus pain, he would stop. Severus knew he would stop, slow down, and try again with more care. Harry *loved* him. He would never leave Severus in pain.

After a steadying sigh, he gave Harry a tentative smile. “I trust you. Only, be gentle and slow, my Harry. It has been a very long time for me.”

Harry’s eyes softened. “My beautiful mate, I will always be gentle with you.”

Reassured, Severus relaxed and motioned Harry on. “I trust you. I am yours.”

“Yes. Always.”

Harry’s fingertip slowly pressed inside, and Severus gasped at the sensation. The total *lack* of pain. *Merlin,* especially with a beginner, he had expected at least a little discomfort, but Harry slid into him as if he were meant to be there.

Perhaps he *was.* Perhaps some innate magic in Harry’s being was smoothing the way.

Severus had never realised there were so many benefits to being the mate of a creature.

“Harry! *More.*”

His mate obliged, and within moments, Severus was keening, begging for him, yet Harry still hesitated. The young man’s eyes held worry and uncertainty, and the obvious fear of making a mistake. This was Harry, his human mate, not the sure, knowledgeable creature within him.

Severus found the change a relief. He wanted his first moment to be with the human he had fallen in love with, his shy, uncertain, loving Harry.

“Beloved,” he forced out, though his entire body was screaming for his mate, “look at me. Do you see how I need you? It’s all right. Just be slow and gentle and give me time to adjust, and everything will be fine.”
Harry let out a heavy sigh. “Merlin, thank you. I was listening for my instincts, but I can’t hear them right now.”

“Your creature is backing down because he knows I need you right now, my love. The gentle, compassionate man I fell in love with. I want my first moment to be just us—just you and me.” Severus caressed Harry’s wings. “Though the feathers are a nice touch.”

Harry gave a breathless laugh and removed his hand. He shifted his hips, resting Severus’ body on his thighs, and angled himself forwards. “You, you’re sure it’s okay? You’re sure you’re ready enough?”


With a shaky pant, Harry nodded and slowly entered Severus.

_Gods._

Even now, Severus felt no pain. Only the intense pleasure of being claimed, of feeling his Harry inside him. He could hardly breathe for the joy of it.

“Merlin,” Harry gasped out. “So tight.”

“More, Harry. Please.”

“Oh. Oh, Sev. I’m just … I’m so afraid of hurting you.”

“You’re not.” Severus pounded Harry’s thigh with his palm. “Please! I need you!”

Harry’s eyes glowed teal. “Demanding, are we?” His voice had gone low and wild again. “Have patience, my beloved. I will not simply take you like an animal.”

Harry’s sudden assertiveness filled a keening ache in Severus’ heart. Merlin, he hadn’t realised how much he had needed Harry to take control.

As a gentle hand rubbed his belly and a second took hold of his thigh, draping his leg over Harry’s shoulder, peace and pleasure and love settled on Severus. He relaxed and closed his eyes, taking the hand on his stomach in his own.

“Yes,” Harry soothed. “Yes. There it is. Be at peace, beloved, and simply feel me.”

The words acted like a switch within Severus’ brain. Suddenly every synapse in his body went into overdrive, every cell in his blood caught fire, every muscle tingled with the incredible ache of sheer pleasure inside him.

“Fuck!”

Harry gave a low laugh and slid home. With a tilt of his hips and another slow thrust, Severus’ body blazed with sensation.

“Fuck me!” He’d said it as an epithet of shock, not a command, but Harry must have heard otherwise.

“No.” Harry bent forwards and kissed Severus’ chest right over his heart. “No, I will not ‘fuck’ you. You are my beloved and my mate and I love you. This—” He leaned back again and pressed in hard. “—Is called _making love._”
Severus arched and clutched at the blankets. Shite. Every fibre of him was aflame.

“Ghn, not, not what I meant. Merlin, Harry! How can it feel so—oh gods, don’t, don’t stop.”

Harry gave a low, breathy chuckle and set to taking Severus apart in earnest. All Severus could do was hold onto the sheets and let Harry do as he wished.

Gods, this was what it felt like to make love? Merlin! He didn’t know if he’d survive it. His entire body pulsed with every movement, his heart had gone mad, and his breath came in hisses and pants, interspersed with shrieks of Harry’s name.

Oh, oh gods. He was going to fly to pieces. Any moment, his body would shatter in Harry’s arms, and fuck all if he could do anything about it. He was lost, drowning, breaking.

For a moment, he was terrified. What if his soul wasn’t healed enough to endure this?

Then Harry’s eyes met his, and a gentle hand caressed his cheek, and Severus’ fear calmed. He took Harry’s hand and sucked his fingers between his lips, and that familiar taste of cherries grounded him. Harry caressed his tongue, then withdrew and held Severus’ cheek.


Severus nodded, breathless and held captive by Harry’s eyes. Harry slowed his thrusts for a moment and returned his gaze, his emerald eyes full of love as he lowered Severus’ thighs to his waist and leaned forwards. Harry’s breath brushed Severus’ chest as he spoke in a rough, wild voice rippling with desire.

“Severus, I need your words now. Do you accept me as your mate and lifebond for all of our days?”

Severus forced a breathy, strained “yes” past his lips.

“Will you swear to love me, to stay faithful to me alone, and to protect me to the best of your ability for all of our time together?”

“Yes. H-Harry, please.”

“I know, love.” Harry panted and smoothed Severus’ hair. “I know. I will finish this soon, but we must do this little ritual first.” He took a deep breath and rocked into Severus once more, sending electrifying sensations through Severus’ entire body.

“Need you, love,” Severus moaned. “Please. Please.”

“Ssh.” Harry caressed Severus’ lips. “Ssh. Look at me, beloved. Watch me while I give you my vows.”

“All right.” Severus forced his attention away from the cataclysm of sensations ravishing his body and focused on Harry’s beautiful green eyes. “Harry ….”

Harry held Severus’ cheek and whispered, “Severus Tobias Snape—my Prince—I give you all of me. I am your protector and mate from this moment on. I swear always to love you and you alone, to come to your bed each night and spend each day at your side. I swear to guard you and ….” He moaned as Severus moved against him—Severus couldn’t help it. “And … ghn, keep your heart and soul safe. From here on out, Severus, you are mine.” He bowed his head and tucked his wings around Severus’ shoulders. “And I am yours.”
“Yes, yes, Harry. I am yours always.” Severus pressed against his mate once more, and Harry’s eyes filled with teal fire.

“Mine!”

Harry tugged Severus forwards, bent him almost double, and bit into the flesh of his once-injured shoulder. Severus gasped and gave a little cry, expecting pain as sharp teeth pierced his skin, but there must have been some kind of analgesic in Harry’s saliva. He only felt the sharp zing of pleasure through his body at the knowledge that Harry had claimed him entirely. He was now Harry’s mate forever, and nothing could separate them.

Nothing.

With a moan and sob of Severus’ name, Harry grabbed Severus’ face and searched his eyes.

“Oh, gods. Did I hurt you? Sev—oh fuck, you’re bleeding! I’m sorry! I don’t know why—I’m so s-sorry.”

“Ssh.” Severus brought his distraught mate into a fierce kiss, though he had to bend almost double to reach him, and kissed Harry’s forehead as he pulled away. “Love, it’s all right. That was just the final part of the bonding ritual. It did not hurt at all.”

Harry had tears on his face. “But … but you’re bleeding.”

“Ssh. We shall heal it soon. You did what you were supposed to, love. That bite marks me as yours forever. No creature would dare make a pass at me now with your scent and mark forever on my body. It’s all right. It’s comforting to me, believe it or not.”

“R-really?”

“Yes. We shall heal this when we’re finished, but for now, do try and finish. I need you, and the bonding isn’t complete until we do.”

Harry shook his head. “I can’t look at that and … and ….” He waved his hand over Severus’ shoulder and sighed as the wound closed. “There. Better. Now I can ….” He began to move once more, and Severus fell back onto the pillows with a groan.

“Yes, yes, Harry. More.”

Harry’s eyes fixed on him, the fear and guilt inside them slowly giving way to passion and love as they moved closer to completion. Severus’ cries increased in volume and pitch and Harry’s breathing again turned to laboured pants, low growls, and breathless cries of Severus’ name.

Severus dug his heels into Harry’s arse, burying him still deeper within, and thrashed as every thrust brought forth shockwaves of heat. More. Gods, he needed more. He was melting, burning. He would die if Harry didn’t, oh, he … he was falling, fading, and yes, there!

“Harry!”

Shockwaves of simultaneous heat and chills rushed over Severus, and he clutched at his mate, giving into release with a shudder and a cry. Harry gasped atop him, and his eyes rolled back, and the next instant, warmth flooded Severus and sent his pleasure spiralling even higher.

“Sev,” Harry panted. “Oh, gods, Sev.” He flopped onto his mate’s chest with a groan and hugged Severus’ waist. “I … what the hell have we been doing all this time when we could have been doing
Severus gave a low laugh. “Saving the world, I suppose.”

“Yeah.” Harry eased out with a moan and climbed up Severus’ body. “Are you okay? Does your shoulder hurt? Your um … you know?”

Severus chuckled and brought Harry into his arms. “I am … better than I have ever been. Come here, my love, and just lie with me a moment.”

Harry sighed and curled up into Severus’ arms, laying his head upon the shoulder he had marked. He smiled as Severus’ arms came up around him and held him tight. With Harry snuggled into his arms and his wings draped over them, with the pleasant lassitude of afterglow warming him inside and out, Severus felt completely content and at peace.

“I love you, Harry.”

Harry kissed his neck and nuzzled his chin. “I love you, too. Do you know you taste like cream and vanilla? Even when I … you tasted so good.”

A shiver passed over him. “Merlin. Be quiet, my brat. This old man has had quite enough to be going on with for one evening.”

Harry buried a laugh in Severus’ shoulder, then pulled back with a gasp. “Oh! Your shoulder, Sev.”

He angled his head to see and smiled at the mark decorating his body. It was a white diamond interlocked with a black one, with a teal circle at the centre. Perfect for Harry’s dual nature.

“Lovely,” he murmured and tugged Harry closer. “That is one mark I am happy to bear.”

Harry leaned up and gave him a shy smile. “Really? You’re not angry?”

“Not in the least. I am … relieved. Comforted to know you will always be with me.”

Harry sighed and curled into Severus’ side. “Yeah. Always, my Sev.”

His breathing began to deepen soon after, and Severus thought he’d better clean them up before Harry fell entirely asleep. A quick wandless *Scourgify* made Harry jolt, then he gave his new bonded mate a soft smile and went right back to dozing on Severus’ shoulder.

‘This,’ Severus thought to himself, ‘this moment—this is worth everything I have lost and given in this mad war. He is worth everything.’

He held Harry tighter and, as the young man’s wings drew back into his body and his scales disappeared, Severus magicked the quilt atop him. He turned to settle in with his mate, but his bladder took that moment to remind him it had been hours since he’d used a loo, much to Severus’ annoyance. He would have rather have held Harry all night, but then, it wouldn’t do to make a puddle in their marriage bed.

Their *marriage bed*. Severus grinned. They were bonded mates! And soon … oh. Damn it. His bladder forcefully reminded him to carry on with this sentimentalism later, and Severus moved back from Harry’s warmth with a sigh. He slowly extricated himself from his mate’s embrace and stood beside the bed, watching Harry sleep for just a moment.
Gods, he was beautiful.

And yet, as Severus moved to Summon a bathrobe from his rucksack, the pleasure of their moment together faded just enough for his sorrow to come rushing back with the force of a speeding lorry.

Albus. Why had the man tried so hard to take this beauty, this love away from Severus? Why had he tried so hard to have Severus killed before he ever felt a loving hand upon his own?

Severus tied his robe and tucked his wand in a pocket. He wanted answers, and by gods, he would have them. Now.

Hmm. Hadn’t Lily said there was a portrait frame here?

Severus smiled without mirth. Tonight, Albus would answer for his crimes. Severus would accept nothing less than a full confession, or by gods, he would set the bastard’s portrait ablaze.

It would serve the meddling arsehole right, after all he had done to hurt them.

Severus left for the loo and closed the door behind him.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

***Warnings: Nothing major, other than foul language. Severus rips Dumbles a new one. Then he gets really bad news.***

There’s also a sketch of Harry in his creature form coming for Sev. I didn't do the background because I need surgery on my hand and just that and Sev’s drawing from the other night is killing me. Also, I have to write the next chapter so it won't be up quite as fast, but I'll get it done as soon as I can.

CHAPTER 23

Severus set a low-level silencing charm on the portrait room—so he could still hear Harry if the young man woke up and needed him—and pressed his palm to the canvas, just as Lily had said he must.

“Albus Dumbledore, come and speak to me, you fucking pile of rotting horse-shite.”

Severus backed away and watched, just to see what the old man would do.

A benevolent smile and white beard appeared in the portrait, and the meddling bastard looked around in confusion. “Lily? Where are you, my girl?”

Severus stepped out of the shadows and glared. Albus’ smile melted away.

“S-Severus? What in Merlin’s name—you cannot be here, boy! You must go!”

Severus slammed his fist into the canvas as hard as he could. He was sure he’d broken a few fingers, but fuck if it didn’t feel good. He set his hand with an Episkey charm and stared at the old man, satisfaction running through him at the sight of a great purple bruise marking the old bastard’s eye.

“I suppose I deserved that,” Albus muttered. He wiped his spectacles and replaced them as if nothing was amiss. “But I am only doing this for your own good. For their good. For—”

“For the greater good?” Severus stepped forwards and set cold eyes on the old fool. “It took me the better part of twenty years to remember where I had heard that before, old man. Now I realise it wasn’t my memory that was the problem, but the fact that I could not believe that you, of all people, would support his lunacy.” He glared and clenched his fists, ignoring the burn in his split knuckles. “But you never just supported it, did you? You were part of that madman’s game.”

Dumbledore aged ten years in an instant. “Severus—no. You don’t understand. I was—”

“Then explain yourself! Explain to me why it was acceptable for you to rip a baby away from his
mother and just *leave him* with people who did not care for him at all. Explain to me why it was acceptable for you to *engineer* said baby’s birth by forcing two opposite parents together, parents who would have naturally repelled each other without your meddling, and then, if that were not bad enough, letting the father die while you locked the mother away from her only child with nothing but Daily Prophets and newscasts to keep her abreast of her son’s development and safety?*

Severus panted, glaring at the portrait with all his force.

Albus paled further. “But, but the *Prophecy!*”

“*Oh, no.* Albus, this goes much further back than the Prophecy.” He raised his sleeve, revealing the injury on his forearm. “I was fifteen when you altered Lily. James was—gods, who knows? Probably an infant when you altered him. And how old was Harry? Two, three? Did you force him to hate me the instant he set foot in the school?” Severus spoke on in spite of the tears blinding him. “I was cruel to him, Albus, on your orders. But even at my worst, I never hurt him like you have.”

Albus sat back and rubbed his forehead. “So you know.”

“Lily wanted to know why she couldn’t forgive me after twenty-five years when she had longed for me that entire time.” Severus blinked down his tears and gave Albus a vicious smile. “She broke through the spells you set on her. The one against Remus Lupin and those against me. You were not strong enough to bind her forever.”

Albus sighed. “No. I suppose not. And Harry?”

Severus smirked and stood tall with pride for his mate. “Shattered every single compulsion but the one about Malfoy, and we are wise to your game there, too.” His eyes narrowed. “What did you do to him? What is he like without your horrid influence turning him into a disaster of a human being?”

Albus sniffed. “All I did was increase his loyalty to his father—”

Severus gave a bitter laugh. “*Bullshite.* Utter *bullshite.* You wanted him out of the way. A child. You forced a *child* into the Death Eaters’ ranks simply so he wouldn’t ruin your plans.” He sneered. “And that is *almost* as vile as what you did to Lily and Harry. I will send a message to Lucius in the morning and let him know to check Draco for damage.”

“Lucius! Why would you communicate with him at all?”

Severus gave a vicious grin. “Seems I’m not the only one willing to risk their pretty neck if it means Riddle dies for good. Lucius destroyed the last horcrux, did you know? I was too injured because Riddle tried to *suck out my soul!*”

He jerked his uninjured hand across his eyes. “Blackpool—that is on you, old man. Their blood is on your hands. Had Lily never abandoned me, had I never become a Death Eater, he never would have been able to draw on my soul through the mark.”

Albus’ face went grey. “Severus—you do not know everything, then.”

Severus’ eyes turned to steel. “Then I believe it is past time you explained. Everything. You are far overdue for a reckoning.”

Albus shook his head. “There is too much at stake. I mustn’t speak for the good of mankind.”

“The good of mankind? You actually expect me to believe that?”
Before Albus could move, Severus whipped out his wand and cast a silent paralysing spell on the portrait from the chest down—including the bastard’s hands.

“I am not your lackey any longer, Albus. I will not be your fool.” He stood in front of the portrait and held his wand in clear view. “Now that you cannot run back to the safety of your domicile, you have ten seconds to come clean with me before I begin an experiment to see what effects and consequences Legilimency has on a portrait. Then, if I do not have a full confession twenty seconds after that, I confess, I see no further use for you.” He tapped his wand against his chin. “Hmm. Harry did suggest setting you ablaze. Not such a bad idea that. Perhaps you’ll make nice kindling. You certainly have failed as a human being.”

“But, Severus!”


“You don’t understand, I—”

“Five. Four. Three.”

Albus sighed and raised his hand to his forehead. “Oh, very well.”

When he lowered his hand, an extra eye was staring at Severus from Albus’ wrinkled brow. All three had gone a shade of electric blue. Severus reeled back, stunned. Every hair on his body stood on end and his heart lodged in his throat. He took a few steps back for good measure.

“Dear Merlin, Harry was right! You are a bloody Fate!”

Albus nodded. “So now you know.”

“Fuck!” Severus would have slammed his fist into the canvas again, had he not feared waking the entire house. “You are not supposed to interfere directly with mankind!”

Albus sighed and lowered his head. “I know. But I foresaw the end of mankind unless I did, and so I acted.”

Severus sneered. “Is that supposed to be some kind of excuse? Whatever you foresaw, it did not give you the right to act as you have done!”

“Do you truly imagine I am proud of the things I had to give the human race a chance at survival, Severus? It haunts me, but I cannot stop. Until Riddle is in the earth, I cannot stop.”

“But why like this, Albus? Surely there was a better way than tearing Harry from his mother and leaving Lily a prisoner for seventeen years, and that after losing her entire family?”

Albus’ laugh was bitter. “If there was, I could not see it. Riddle has twisted his soul beyond nature. There was only one way to stop him—by combining life and death into a single being. I knew no other way than to have a Reaper and Dragoon mate. The prophecy verified that decision.”


Albus sighed. “Ask your questions, then.”

Severus scoffed. “Oh, of course. How silly of me! Why should I expect a full explanation from you? You only answer when you’re forced to.” He speared the painting with his glare and started in a low,
dangerous voice. “Then let us start with myself, hmm? Why did you isolate me from everyone who had ever cared? I might never have joined the Death Eaters if you had not.”

Albus lowered his head. “No. You would not have, and that would have been terrible for the sake of Britain overall. Do you realise how many times your information saved Harry’s life?”

“A life you engineered.” Severus sneered. “And how, pray tell, did you even know I would become a spy after all your poking and prodding? Fate or not, the future is never certain. Instead of joining the Death Eaters, I might have just thrown myself from a bridge, and then where would you be?”

Albus flinched. “It was … I feared you might. And so, I … I tried to help.”

“By pretending to be a father figure? By pretending to love me while you tore my life to shreds behind the scenes?” Tears blurred Severus’ vision. “I trusted you, Albus! You were like a father to me.” A bitter laugh escaped him. “A father. In hindsight, I should have expected it. My fathers were both beasts of men.”

Albus flinched. “Please, Severus. I … I wasn’t pretending. I do love you like a so—”

Severus jabbed his wand between the portrait’s eyes and under the third. “If I were you, I would not dare to finish that sentence.”

Albus sighed and wiped tears from his cheeks. “Very well. I suppose it is no more than what I deserve.”

“What you deserve, you manipulative bastard, is for me to set your canvas ablaze this moment.”

Severus stepped back and lowered his wand. “But I am not like you.”

“No.” Albus closed his eyes and whispered, “No, you are my better.”

Severus snorted. “I doubt you actually believe that.”

Albus rubbed the bridge of his nose under his spectacles. “I do, or I would never have sent you into Tom’s forces. No average human could spy on him and come out in one piece. I needed a spy with unusual strength, courage, intelligence, and honour, and you were the only one I have ever met who could manage it. However, I suspect you do not wish to hear that, either. So, what other questions do you have?”

Severus stood there, shaking and stricken. How could Albus lie so straight to his face? If he believed any of that, he would not continually try to kill Severus.

He opened his mouth to demand an explanation, but, at the last moment, realised he did not want to hear it. Not yet.

He simply wasn’t strong enough.

Severus blinked hard and clutched his wand tight. “V-very well. Then answer me this: why did you even need a spy in Riddle’s camp if you are a Fate? You could have Seen the outcome of battles yourself!”

Albus shook his head. “If I could have, Severus, I never would have altered you. But the sight of a Fate does not work like that. I cannot usually See the outcome of small events, events that do not alter the entire course of humanity. And battles, no matter how terrible the cost, do not usually threaten the fabric of our world.”
Severus glared. “Now that is a lie. They do indeed threaten it—down to the very realm of souls! Especially with Riddle. Lily said so herself, and I have no reason to doubt her.”

Albus frowned. “I … they do? Severus, I do not know what you are talking about. Honestly. I am not a Reaper.”

At the bastard’s sudden curiosity, Severus remembered Lily’s warning about keeping her secrets. He forced his anger behind powerful Occlumentic barriers and took a deep breath. He must keep calm. With Dumbledore listening and sniffing about for clues, any further slip of the tongue might prove disastrous.

“That … is fair,” Severus said in cold, but steady tones. “However, if you cannot See the outcome of battles, then what can you See? You are rumoured to have the most powerful Sight of all creatures, so do not understand.”

Albus raised an eyebrow. “You are not going to explain about the realm of souls?”

Severus’ eyes hardened to steel. “I will have you remember that I am not the one on trial here. And no. I am not. Not to you.”

Albus winced at the ice in Severus’ voice. “Please, child. Please do not hate me so. I never meant to … I did not wish for any of this to happen! I … everything I have done has been for th—”

Severus cut across him with a snarl. “Keep your petty excuses, old man! I have heard them all before. The ‘greater good’ indeed.” He scowled and flicked his wand. “Stop rationalising your cruelty. Whatever your reasons, it is still cruelty.”

Albus lowered his head and sniffled. Severus refused to be moved. It was an act. Everything with this man was an act. Severus struggled to keep that thought firmly in mind as he continued the interrogation.

“Why did you believe you needed to force Lily and James to produce an heir? Reapers alone could have handled Riddle, and what you did to Potter and Lily was akin to rape! Lily has decided to leave the love potion you dosed her with, for Harry’s sake, but when it wears off, she will likely hate Potter with the fire of a thousand phoenixes, even more so for the fact that he touched her when his very being repels her. And, if Potter had survived, it would have been the same for him.”

Albus shook his head. “I do understand the gravity of that crime, and yes, Reapers can usually handle mass murderers, but not him. Not Tom. He has twisted his soul too far out of the norm for a Reaper alone to be able to dispose of him.”

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“The horcruxes?” Severus scoffed. “Lily herself knew about them the moment she tried to kill Riddle and he did not die. She might have dealt with them on her own.”

“How, Severus? She cannot speak Parseltongue, and he had hidden their locations in his journal.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “You do not speak it either, yet you managed to translate that journal.” He frowned. “Come to think of it, where did you find it?”

“At the same time I found the ring. I saw it through the wards Riddle had set upon it, duplicated it, and took the duplicate.” Albus shook his head. “Pity I could not also see the curse upon the ring.”

Severus crossed his arms over his chest. “Hmm. How did you fail to see it?”

Albus sighed and shook his head. “It was a punishment, a trap set for myself. I am not the only Fate
in existence, after all. The others were … quite displeased with my meddling.”

Severus’ smile was brutal. “Remind me to send all of them a thank you card.”

Albus crumpled. “You … you truly hate me so much?”

Severus turned his back so the old man wouldn’t see his tears. “I loved you once.”

Albus’ sigh would have ruffled Severus’ robe if a portrait could produce breath. “I am sorry, my boy.”

“Don’t.” Severus’ voice echoed with pain. “Do not call me that any longer. You forfeited that right long ago.”

“A-as you wish.”

Albus went silent, and for a long moment, Severus could not find the strength to speak. Gods, this hurt. His chest felt as if someone had hollowed it out and filled the void with rusty nails.

Severus closed his eyes and Occluded hard. The pain in his chest diminished slightly.

“If you managed to translate the journal without knowing Parseltongue, Lily might have used the same trick.”

He turned just in time to see Albus shake his head.

“I translated it through the Sight, Severus.”

Severus frowned. “And Lily also has the Sight.”

“Hers is too specific for this. I fear it would have been of little aid.”

Severus considered what he knew of Harry’s visions and had to concede the point. It did not usually lend itself to such specialised work.

“Perhaps, but if her Sight is anything like Harry’s, her visions might have still guided her to the horcruxes.”

Dumbledore gave him a sad smile. “Hmm. Perhaps. Was Harry having any luck finding the horcruxes before you went to him?”

“You mean before you sent me to Harry knowing he hated me and would likely kill me at the end of the thirty days required?” Severus sneered at Albus’ flinch. “No. He had one horcrux. We had no idea where the others might be.”

Albus nodded. “I know. I Saw the outcome of leaving Riddle’s fate to a simple Reaper, and it was not good. They were not enough, Severus. They hadn’t enough power to kill him permanently.”

Severus whirled on him. “So, what? You thought that justified forcing two opposite beings—beings who hated each other—to produce a child together? To marry? What if they had broken your compulsions or swallowed a love potion antidote? What then? Your entire grand plan would have come apart at the seams!”

Albus sighed and closed his eyes. “I know, Severus. It was always a fear. One misstep, and the entire war would be lost.”
“You do not have fears that you do not plan for. So, what did you do?”

When the portrait babbled an excuse about the risks one took in war or similar nonsense, Severus levelled his wand at him again.

That Albus would lie to him now, more than anything, convinced Severus that the man had never truly cared. Severus’ wand hand shook, but he held the tip steady.

“The truth, Albus. Your lies will not work on me any longer.”

Albus huffed. “If you must know, I had a house elf feed them the potion every night with their dinner and disguise it in case they thought to check. They never did.”

“Because they trusted you, right until Potter was murdered and you ripped Lily’s baby away from her and forced them both into prison!” Fury lit Severus’ chest ablaze. “And that, you sack of mouldy horse-shite, is possibly the worst of your crimes, equal only to forcing me to murder you and leaving Harry without his mother. So? What is your justification for that, old man? I am waiting on tenterhooks to hear it.”

“To keep them alive, Severus. The blood wards—”

“Are a bloody lie,” Severus snarled. “Lily never died for him, so there was never any protection over that house.”

“It was my blood, for Merlin’s sake. I warded the Death Eaters and Tom out of that house, much like I warded them out of this place.”

Severus snapped, “And you also warded Lily in. Why? And why add the condition that, should Harry and Remus discover her, the wards would fall? Why guide us here in the first place with that map if you did not wish me to find out about your lies?”

Albus’ shoulders slumped. “I had supposed you would come here after the war had ended. The spell upon the map was only supposed to activate the path to Godric’s Hollow and Lily after all the horcruxes had been destroyed. I … I must have made a misstep in the spell calculations.”

He paused and tapped at his chin, obviously distracted.

“Albus!”

The portrait jumped. “Oh. Do forgive an old man’s wanderings.”

Severus growled, “Answer—the fucking—question, you senile arsehole!”

“Really, Severus. There is no need for such language.”

At Severus’ mad glare, the painting obviously decided he had danced around the topic enough.

“Severus, for Merlin’s sake, I am not a monster! I did not intend for Lily to be trapped forever, but for her own safety, it was best that she stay low until after the war. And for Harry, well, I was trying to keep him safe as well, and I tho—”

A spark erupted from Severus’ wand and alighted on the canvas. It smoked and sizzled out, and Albus swatted at his arm to put out the small fire on his robe.

“Try again, Albus,” Severus said through gritted teeth. “Harry would have been safe with his mother or at Hogwarts. You did not place him with those monsters of humans for the sake of his safety.”
Albus paled. “I never imagined he would trust you enough to speak of his past.”

Severus jabbed his wand in the triangle between Albus’ eyes as hard as he dared. “He shattered your compulsions, you bloody fuckwit. He’s told me everything—the starvation, the lack of love, the cupboard, and so on—so you can stop dancing around the truth and fucking explain yourself already, before I decide the other Fates let you off too easy and send you up in flames.”

“You wouldn’t, Severus. You wouldn’t hurt me—”

Another spark landed in Dumbeldore’s beard. Severus leaned into his wand and snarled, “Try me.”

Albus patted out his beard and looked at Severus as if he had never seen the man before. “You … have changed, child.”

Fire blazed in Severus’ chest. “Yes. For the better. And you have five seconds to answer before I decide I’ve had enough of you.”

Albus sighed and rubbed his temples. “You already know why, Severus. It was … cruel of me, but Harry had to be strong. He had to grow up fighting, because if he hadn’t, he never would have been able to fight Tom soon enough. I could not let Lily raise him in a loving environment when it would have destroyed us all, Harry included!”

“So you turned a toddler into a weapon. He was barely a year old!”

“I was trying to save us all, Severus!”

“All of us?” Severus’ eyes filled. “Or only those you deemed worthy of being saved?”

Albus turned away, and Severus could not bear it. He jerked a hand across his eyes. “Whatever mistakes I have made in my life, Albus, I did not deserve this.”

Severus started to walk away, but just as he reached the door, another question occurred to him. One he doubted he would get a truthful answer on, but perhaps he could glean the truth out of the old man’s reactions. Apparently, as a portrait, Albus had a difficult time hiding his emotions. If Severus was to ever get the truth out of the monster, he would have to do it now.

“One more thing, Albus, and I will let you crawl back to your ivory tower.” He turned and fixed the portrait with a piercing stare, looking for the slightest change of expression. “Do you know what happened to Tom Riddle to drive him to this madness? He is a Dragoon!”

“That … I … I do not know ….”

But Severus had seen the flash of horror, the briefest surge of guilt in his eyes.

“Mother fucking Merlin, it was you!”

Dumbledore gasped, “Severus, how could you—”

This time, Severus jabbed the wand in the old bastard’s throat. “Don’t you try to play innocent old man with me, you lying bastard! What the fuck did you do to him? When?”

“I … I never ….”

Severus poked as hard as he could without breaking his wand. “The next words out of my mouth, you twisted piece of shite, will be a fire curse. Choose your side wisely.”
Albus’ eyes filled with tears, and he slumped over. Severus had never seen the lying bastard look so old.

“I … yes. It was … my fault.”

Severus ground out, “When?”

“He was … perhaps f-fourteen.”

“A child. A second year, and you used him. Broke him.”

Tears dripped down the old man’s face. “I … I never meant to hurt the boy. I knew to create life would kill him, but I did not imagine bringing someone back—”

“Stop.” Severus snarled and pressed his wand harder against the bastard’s throat. “Do not lie to me again. You’re a fate. You knew.”

Albus flinched. “All right. Yes, I knew it would hurt him, but I was blinded. So desperate to have him back, that I forgot everything else in pursuit of my goal. I never imagined that this would be the cost of my folly!” He jerked his head away from Severus’ wand and wiped his face with a flower-spotted handkerchief. “And before you accuse me of lying about that, I will remind you that fates cannot See everything.” His shoulders slumped. “I will admit that I was a monster. I sacrificed a young boy’s health and mind for my own selfish wants, but gods, Severus. If it was her, if it was Lily, could you have just let her go, when there was a way, a possibility—”

Severus grabbed the demon’s throat with his hand this time. Even though it felt as if he had tried to grab a wall, somehow his fingers still closed on the old man’s neck.

He leaned close and spat right in Albus’ face. “Yes, I could let her go, and no thanks to you, I have for seventeen years!”

Albus sniffled, then his eyes widened. “Oh.” He sniffed the air, and Severus jerked his arm away, realising his mistake far too late. “This is unexpected. You have a creature mate, Severus?”

Severus glared and wrapped his arms around his chest. “Why should I tell you?”

Another wave of tears slipped down the bastard’s face. “Because … because Severus, what if it was your mate? What if you had lost your one lifelong love, with no hope of ever finding another, and found a way to bring him back at the cost of one person’s health? Could you resist?”

Severus bared his teeth at the threat to his mate. “You did not sacrifice one person—you have caused a bloody war!”

Albus slumped. “I know. Why do you think I have gone to such extremes to end it, Severus? It is my fault. And I … I only want the bloodshed to stop.”

“You are a monster, Albus! Gods, how could you use a boy to bring back your mate—and wait a minute.” Severus growled. “You have lied to me again! Fates do not have mates! They are not supposed to interfere with the human race.”

“No,” Albus said with a sigh. “I was supposed to be detached, but I am not. I cared for humans, and for him—gods. I made the mistake of falling in love. He was not my given mate, but I adored him. I bonded to him regardless of mating assignments. I loved him. Can you truly blame me for wanting him back?”
“Yes. Yes I can. Your selfishness cost hundreds—thousands—of people their lives. I can absolutely blame you. Not for loving him, perhaps, but for your choices afterwards.”

Dumbledore blinked down tears. “And if it was the one you loved? If your mate had died? Would you not do the same?”

Severus shuddered. “If something happened to my mate, I would perish with him, or fight here as long as I could bear it until I went to rest beside him at last. I have nothing without him, and his loss would destroy what remains of me, but even so, I would not sacrifice an innocent life to bring him back! A child’s life, Albus!”

Albus gave Severus a sad smile. “I know you wouldn’t. As I said before, you are my better. But I? When I was faced with either a life of bitter loneliness or the chance to bring him back, I made the wrong decision. I was weak.”

Severus sneered and flicked the wand at him. “Go on.”

Albus lowered his head. “I found the ritual in an ancient grimoire that, if I had been strong enough, I should have destroyed on sight. But I did not. I had loved my bonded for thirty years, even beyond the grave, and the very thought of being with him again—it consumed me. I was obsessed beyond reason, beyond the warnings my Sight screamed at me. I insisted that all I wanted was the one person I loved, and since my intent was love, it could not possibly be so dire.” He gave a bitter laugh. “Merlin, was I ever wrong.”

“However, I did not understand the full scope of the danger at the time—keep in mind that a Fate’s powers develop slowly so as not to overwhelm them—so I went ahead with my plans despite the signs against it.

I knew I would need a Dragoon, so I began to search among the students and teachers and anyone else I happened to meet. And, while I searched, I also sought another ritual to protect the Dragoon’s life and sanity. I had just found one I believed to be a strong enough rite of protection when Tom Riddle revived the flobberworms used in his second year potions class. Slughorn was flummoxed, but I knew.”

Severus shuddered, disgusted and distrustful of the man. “So, what? You just marched him into this ritual and told him his position, and …?”

Dumbledore sighed and lowered his head. “No. I asked him to help me. I told him I had lost someone I loved and had a ritual to keep him safe, and h—”

“Bollocks. You have never been so forthright with anyone, you manipulative bastard.”

Tears tracked down the old man’s face. “I was then. It was sixty years ago, when the world still had hope. I keep my secrets now because I must, but then, there was no reason to.”

Severus glared, and Albus went on with a sigh.

“I am telling you the truth, Severus. I asked him to help me, and being a creature of love and life, he agreed without a struggle. He was a bit afraid, but I … I assured him he would be well. I believed he would, despite the signs screaming in my head that this was a mistake that would cost us dearly.”

Albus raised a shaking hand to his forehead. “I did not want to hear them. I wanted my bonded back, and then, nothing else mattered. I … I was a bloody fool.”

“Indeed.”
Severus could not help but pity the man. If something had happened to Harry, he would be lost. But Merlin, to risk the sanity of a child when everything warned him it would fail? No. He would never have gone so far.

Albus continued with a sigh. “So, I led him to the dungeons and set up the ritual. At first, I thought it had gone well. My bonded was alive and in his body once more, exactly the way I remembered him. Then he opened his eyes, and they both screamed. Screamed as if on fire. And … and in that moment, I knew I had failed. I will never forget the sound of it as long as I ….” Albus looked around his canvas and shook his head. “As long as I live, though it is only a half-life now. Either way, it is burned into my memory now.”

Severus jabbed his wand at the air to motion that the beast of a man should go on.

“They were both mad as hatters. Both hateful and fearful of me. Did you imagine it was because of my power that Tom Riddle feared me?” Dumbledore’s laugh was bitter. “A convenient lie. No, it was because I made him into the beast that he is. I shattered his mind, all to bring back a man who reminded me it was I who had killed him in the first place.”

“Grindelwald.” Severus growled. “You sacrificed an entire legion of people just to bring back another fucking dark lord? One you had already defeated?”

“One I loved, Severus. I loved him even then.” Albus brought his hand up to cover his eyes—all three of them. “I had planned to … to raise Tom myself since it was I who had broken him and his parents were either dead or absent, but it did not work out. The sirens for dark magic at Hogwarts had gone off, and Dippet had called the aurors already. They found Gellert, raving about spirits and veils, and assumed it was he who had driven Tom mad. They locked Gellert away in Nurmengard and made Tom a ward of the Ministry, and I could not say a word for fear they would know what terrible thing I had done.”

He let slip a miserable sob. “I have never even been allowed to see him since—either of them. My folly hurt them all, including the one I wished most to save, and damned the entire world in the process.”

Severus’ heart panged with pity and fury at once. ‘Fuck! I cannot believe it. All of this … you did all of this, for Grindelwald? Whether you loved him or not, the man was a monster! Do you have any idea how many he killed for his twisted beliefs?” He whirled on the portrait and glared. “Or did you kill beside him? Were you as evil as he is?”

“No,” Dumbledore whispered. “No. I have only ever killed one person, Severus, and that one ripped the very soul from me. I could not bear to raise my wand with intent to kill again.”

Severus sensed the truth in those words, but even so, they sickened him. “So you only supported him through the madness?”

Dumbledore winced. “I tried … to lead him away. I tried to … to help him.”

“To help him? A fucking dark lord?” Severus shuddered and paced, twisting his hands in agitation. His split knuckles stung at the touch, and he healed them just so he could wring his hands without pain. “You are twisted. Sick. I can’t … gods. How could you even fall for him in the first place? Didn’t you know he was evil?”

Albus closed all three of his eyes. “No. Not when I met him. Fates do not develop their Sight until their thirties. I was seventeen when we met, and I thought he was beautiful. He was much like Riddle was in his early years. Charismatic, handsome, intelligent. His views sounded quite lovely—
like it would protect us all from the Muggles who would hurt us, especially if they knew what I was in truth. By the time the mask fell and I realised his plans were not so benevolent, we had already been bonded for ten years. By the time my Sight warned me I had made a grievous error, it was already too late.”

“You knew it was an error from the start. Fates are not supposed to mate!”

“When I bonded to him, I did not know I was a Fate!”

Severus paused and frowned at the portrait. “How could you not know? Are you not chosen and guided from birth?”

“No I. I am only half Fate, Severus. My mother fell in love with a Muggle man, and so I came about. She did not want us to be lonely, so she taught us about love. None of this is her fault, but now, I am paying the price regardless. And she paid the price when my sister ….”

“Ariana.” Severus hugged his chest. “Was she …? Is Aberforth?”

Albus shook his head sadly. “They are both human, though both also had the Sight.”

“I … I do not know what to think.” Severus gave a bitter laugh and tore at his hair. “Wait, yes, I do. Regardless of your reasons, of your past, you still threw away the life of a child and thousands of others for a love you were not supposed to have, for a man who murdered hundreds of innocents. And, regardless of what you knew when you met him, by the time you did this godsforsaken ritual, you knew you were never supposed to mate him in the first place. Not him, not at all, and yet you still raised him! For this!”

He paced, barely aware of the floods of tears on his face. “I can’t believe I listened to you—believed in you for so many years, when all the while you were lying to us, using us to right your sins! And you would never have even admitted them, had I not held a wand to your head and forced you. Gods! You are a bloody demon.”

“I will not deny it.” Dumbledore closed all of his eyes and bowed his head. “This war, as much as it hurts to admit it, ultimately, is my fault. And somewhere, I have no doubt that my mortal soul is paying the price. This shred—this empty existence is all that remains to me, and it is no less than I deserve.”

“I have already told you what you deserve, and it is taking all my strength not to set you on fire this moment, you fiend.”

Dumbledore sighed. “If you will at least let me finish speaking, Severus, I shan’t stop you.”

Severus scowled. “Make it quick, then. I have had about enough of your poison.”

“Very well.” Dumbledore rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Severus, I am sorry to say this, but you should not have mated.”

“What?” Severus snarled and advanced on the painting. “So it wasn’t enough that you kept me miserable and alone for twenty-three years, now you want me to die without love, do you?” He broke into bitter sobs. “Why? What did I ever do but serve you, Albus? What did I do to deserve such antipathy?”

When Severus looked up, Albus was weeping as hard as he was.

“Severus, I do not hate you, and I do not want you to die. On the contrary, I have felt as if you have
been my son all these years.”

In that, at least, Severus sensed that the portrait was speaking the truth.

“Then why?” He ripped a hand across his face and wiped his tears. “Why would you send me to Harry knowing that compulsion was on him? Why not warn me? Gods, if he hadn’t broken through it, he would have killed me in three days’ time—and do you have any idea what kind of damage that would have done to him?” Severus jerked his collar aside, revealing the mark on his shoulder. “Tell me, Dumbledore, who do you think made this?”

Dumbledore flinched at the use of his surname, but looked at the tattoo with all three eyes. He sank into his painting a moment later, an expression of utter horror on his features. With a scowl, Severus jerked his bathrobe back up and tightened the ties.

“Well? What have you to say for yourself, old man?”

Albus ran a shaky hand across his forehead. “What have I done? Oh, gods forgive me. We are doomed!”

Severus gaped. That was a far more extreme response than he had anticipated.

“W-what? Why are we doomed?”

Albus fixed him with a piercing stare—it was even more unnerving with three eyes on Severus. “Have you translated so far in the journal as to learn that there is a seventh horcrux, a human horcrux?”

Severus gave a tight nod. “Yes? What are you saying? Do you know who it is?”

Albus said nothing and continued to stare, and, as the silence stretched on, a horrible, sinking realisation settled into Severus’ mind. The soul bomb. The way Riddle’s horcruxes had recognised him. The terrible parasite bleeding his soul away from within him.

He was the final horcrux.

“No.” He sank to his knees and buried his face in them. “No. I … it cannot be.”

Albus shuddered hard. “I am sorry, Severus. It was when he hit you with the fire whip. I smelled it the moment you returned—you remember that the wounds didn’t heal?”

Severus frowned and rubbed a hand over his chest. Hadn’t Harry said those wounds had vanished?

“I am afraid there is nothing for it, Severus. You must leave and … and pray Harry is strong enough to overcome the withering. You must die, do you understand? Not because I wish it, but because there is no other way to end this terrible war.” Albus covered his eyes. “Gods, I am so sorry, Severus. If I could go back, if I could do this all again, I would save you instead.”

Severus knelt there, hardly hearing the Fate’s words. He was a horcrux. He had just found his mate, not thirty minutes before had finally learned what it meant to be truly happy in his arms, and now he had to throw it all away, to die and likely kill them both, all for the sake of a bloody war that was Albus’ fault to begin with.

No. No, he wasn’t strong enough. He couldn’t leave his Harry. He couldn’t tear himself away from the one source of love and joy he had ever known.
But he looked to Albus, and remembered the man’s folly. Remembered his choice to use an innocent child to bring back his dead lover and all that cruel decision had cost their world.

If Severus left now, he would die, and probably Harry with him, but what did two lives matter when everyone would die if he remained? When the world would burn for their simple union? Even if Severus stayed, could he be happy with Harry now, knowing the cost? And worst of all, what if the taint on Severus’ soul poisoned his love? What if the evil from the horcrux inside Severus turned Harry into the undefeatable monster they both feared?

But, dear Merlin, how could he do it? How could he walk away and kill himself, knowing Harry would die with him?

It was one thing to kill himself alone, but to take the mate he loved down too?

Gods, no. He wasn’t brave enough for that.

“I believe Lily can keep him alive long enough to end the war,” Albus was saying. “There is a spell to diminish the effects of the withering. It … it may be enough to give them a chance, but you must hurry if they are to use it. You cannot stay alive long. The spell ends when Lily’s power runs out, and so does Harry’s last chance to end Riddle.”

Severus stared at Albus, helpless and broken, but his path had become clear, as much as it hurt. He had to die. He had no choice but to perish and pray he met a better fate in the world beyond.

Perhaps since his mate was a guardian of the veil and none of this was their own fault, the soul gates would be kind to them. It was the only hope he had left, with death looming dark and cold over them both.

A broken whisper escaped him. “Harry, f-forgive me. I never, never wanted to hurt you.”

But Harry couldn’t hear him. Severus’ heart shattered in two at the knowledge that he would not even get to say goodbye. He would have to leave in the cold of night, with only the memory of the warmth of Harry’s arms to take with him into death.

He sobbed and forced himself to rise, holding his legs steady with sheer force of will. His feet trembled as he forced them to move. It would not be technically difficult, at least, though the mere thought of dying with Harry tore his spirit to shreds. A phial of aconite Summoned from his stores and a blanket from the sofa would provide the means to finish his last task. He need only move far enough away that Harry would be spared the horror of finding his dead body.

Tears poured down Severus’ face as he whispered, “Love, be with me now.”

Even though he knew Harry couldn’t hear him, he felt a bit stronger, and after a calming breath, made his way towards the door.

“Forgive me, beloved, if you can. I never meant it to come to this.”

Harry woke to a sound like screaming, like nails on a chalkboard. It was in his head, railing at him that something was wrong, but what? He was warm and safe, his mum was alive, and Severus was
right beside hi—Severus. Harry sat and let slip a terrified gasp.

Severus was gone!

No. Severus had been so happy before. Why would he leave Harry?

Harry shook his head. Severus wouldn’t abandon him. Something was wrong—Severus was in danger. Maybe something had gotten inside the flat—oh no.

Remus! He wouldn’t be in his right mind during the full moon. Had he somehow broken loose with Severus out and about, exposed to the danger and unaware?

“Shite!”

Harry jerked out of bed and yanked on his trousers and an undershirt, not bothering with anything else—there was simply no time. He grabbed his wand from the desk and raced into the main chamber, preparing to do battle with a vicious beast resistant to magic.

The house was silent.

“What the hell?”

His heart jumped into his throat. Maybe Severus hadn’t been as happy as Harry thought. Maybe he had wanted to leave in the night, where Harry wouldn’t be able to draw conclusions or stop him. Maybe he … wait.

Harry frowned at a soft sound, something like a sniffle, coming from behind the wall just ahead. The kitchen?

He held his wand at the ready and tiptoed towards the noise. Halfway there, his mum came out of another hall dressed in a pale pink bathrobe and with her wand held out as well. She looked around and frowned.

“Where’s Sev?”

Harry swallowed a rush of terror and tried to hear over the screaming in his head. “I don’t know. We bonded a while ago, but I woke up and he was gone and my instincts were going mad to save him. They’re still going mad.”

She paled. “So are mine, but for both of you. I thought maybe Remus had …”

Harry nodded. “So do I, but it’s quiet.”

Lily frowned and motioned for Harry to follow her. “Something isn’t right. Come on.”

Harry nodded and walked beside her to the kitchen. Nothing appeared out of place. It was a nice kitchen—potted plants peeked from every available spot, a rack of brass pans hanging under the sink shone with high polish, and a festive runner and poinsettia centrepiece decorated the rustic dining table—but it was empty.

Where the hell was Severus?

Lily tapped Harry’s shoulder and pointed to a faint light under a door he’d overlooked.

“The portrait room,” she whispered.
Harry scowled. “Dumbledore.”

“Most likely. Come on. Let’s go before the old bastard can do too much damage.”

Harry nodded and followed her to the door. As they came close, Lily waved her wand, and their footsteps and breathing silenced. With another wave, Harry could see inside the room and hear voices. He swallowed hard and moved closer.

Dumbledore was indeed in the portrait frame, but the third eye in his forehead sent Harry staggering back into his mother. “What the hell?”

Lily gasped and whispered, “So he is a Fate! Merlin. That explains a lot.” She tugged Harry into the shadows. “Ssh. Stay back and listen.”

“But—”

“We have to know what’s going on if we’re going to help Sev.”

“I … I can’t. I have to go to him.”

She pressed a hand to his chest and whispered, “I know. I feel it too. But we have to know what Dumbledore’s done to him if we want to be able to fix it.”

“Shite.” Harry wiped his eyes and nodded. “I … a-all right.”

“Ssh. Just hide back here and listen.”

“O-okay.”

Though his instincts kept prodding him to hurry, Harry leaned close to the doorknob and strained his ears for clues. Both men in the room beyond were weeping, as far as he could tell, and the sound of his mate’s anguish made it a thousand times harder for Harry to stay put. He stepped forward, needing to comfort his love, but Lily laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Wait. My instinct says if we rush in, it … it’s going to be bad. He’ll clam up and hide whatever’s wrong until it’s too late. Wait, please.”

His mate’s suffering twisted a knife into Harry’s heart, but he nodded and leaned against the wall, holding his chest in effort to quiet the pain.

“Severus,” said Dumbledore, “gods, my boy. I am so sorry. I wish it had been anyone, anyone other than you.”

Harry gave his mother a bemused look, but Lily just shrugged.

“I am sorry, child,” the meddling old man continued. “I know you hate me now, and I do not blame you, but this—I never meant for this to happen! If I could, I would take the horcrux from you and—”

Harry sank to his knees. “No. Gods, no!”

Lily held a hand over her mouth and knelt beside her son. Her eyes had gone wide with horror, and she was shaking all over.

“I … I just got him back!”

Harry nodded, numb and bleeding inside. Sev—his Sev—was the final horcrux? How? When?
And what the *fuck* were they going to do now?

Even if he could kill his own mate—and he couldn’t—Harry couldn’t live without his Sev. *Literally.* He would die if Severus died, and that meant they would lose the war regardless. Everything they had worked so hard for would be for naught.

“No,” he moaned into his mother’s shoulder. “No. I can’t.”

She held Harry tight and wept over him.

Dumbledore spoke again. “I know you are worried for Harry, Severus, but I believe Lily can keep him alive long enough to end the war. There is a spell to diminish the effects of the withering. It … it may be enough to give them a chance, but you must hurry if they are to use it. You cannot stay alive long. The spell ends when Lily’s power runs out, and so does Harry’s last chance to end Riddle.”

Fire and rage like Harry had never known surged through him. “That fucking bastard!”

He stood and growled, prickling tingles all over his skin warning him that he had gone into his creature form again. He blinked, and a deeper, wider range of sight temporarily shocked him.

His other eyes had come in, apparently.

Harry heard Severus shuffle to his feet, no doubt to kill himself and leave Harry without half of his soul, and terror consumed the young man. No. No, godsdamn it.

The man whispered something Harry couldn’t hear, and every instinct in Harry’s body warned him to act now, before it was too late.

“Goodbye, Severus,” said Dumbledore. “May your fate in the world beyond be kinder.”

With a vicious snarl, Harry darted into the room and sent a surge of harmless bluebell fire at the canvas.

“The next time you tell my mate to murder himself,” he growled, shaking with the force of his anger, “it will be the last thing you say at all.”

Severus looked Harry over, his eyes wide and full of desperate sorrow and fear. Harry’s heart ached at the sight of him. Severus looked as broken as he had when he had stumbled into Harry’s tent four weeks before.

“H-Harry ….”

Harry opened his arms and beckoned his mate. “Come, Sev.”

“But … but the horcrux—”

“I will *not* sacrifice you!” He moved to Severus’ side and wrapped the sobbing man in his arms and wings. “We will find another way. I will not give you up.”

Dumbledore said, “Harry, my boy—”

“If you want to keep your bollocks,” Harry said in a fierce growl, “I suggest you drop the act and *never* call me your boy again. I haven’t been a boy since the day you *tore me away* from my mother and dropped me on my bitch of an aunt’s doorstep.” He snarled and bared his teeth at the man, his
wings spreading of their own volition. “You really think I’ll accept any of your lies and false affection any longer, after everything you’ve done to hurt me and my family? Naff off.”

Albus turned to Lily, but she snarled as well. “Save it, you meddling shitehead. I’ve hated you for seventeen years. I’m not going to come to your rescue. And you can stop pretending to be human.” She tapped her forehead. “We saw that, too.”

Albus pouted, but after a moment, took his true form and gave up trying to appeal to them.

“So I have no quarter here any longer.”

“What did you expect after everything you’ve done to us?” Harry looked at the portrait closer and smirked. “Did Sev give you that shiner? Good on you, love.” He kissed the still weeping man’s cheek and hair. “Ssh. It’s not hopeless. Come on, beloved. Remember what I said earlier tonight when we were talking about this? It’s going to be all right.”

Dumbledore said, “But, Harry, there’s no way to destroy a horcrux witho—”

Harry flicked another round of harmless flames at the portrait, watching as they engulfed him. “The next time I use _Incendio_, old man. This is your last warning.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I am sorry, Harry. I did not mean for this to happen.”

“No, you _meant_ for me to fight Riddle and die doing it, just like you _meant_ for Severus to die. And Mum. And Da. And for what?”

Dumbledore lowered his head. “For _my_ Severus, Harry.”

“Grindelwald?” Madness tinged Harry’s laughter. “This—all this, was for _him_?” Fire built in his chest. “Wait a tick.” Pieces flew together. Dumbledore had defeated Grindelwald in the battle years ago, yet somehow a few years later the man had been found alive and shipped off to Nurmengard.

There was only one explanation.

“Holy shite, it was _you_! _You_ destroyed Riddle’s mind and condemned us all to burn in the aftermath!” His wand went up once more. “_INCEND_—”

“No!” Severus brought Harry’s wand arm down and held his arms tight. “No. Peace, my love. We are better than that beast of a man. We are not murderers, not even of portraits.” He turned to the painting and released the paralysing spell with a scowl. “I suggest you leave now. The next time I may not be able to stop him in time to save your worthless hide.”

Tears slipped down the old man’s face. He turned one last look on Harry, then vanished from his canvas with a sigh.

Harry crumpled into Severus’ arms and kissed the man’s tearful face. “No. No! I’ve given up too much to Riddle and this mad war. I won’t let him have you, too.”

Severus’ eyes were vulnerable and afraid. “But … what if he’s right, Harry? What if there is no other way?”

“There _has_ to be!” Harry cupped Severus’ face and held his gaze. “Love, I’m the only being in existence with life and death magic. You’re my mate. Don’t you think it’s too convenient? I think the spirits—Cináed’s spirits, Luna’s creatures—I think they’re looking out for us. I think they led you to me because I’m the only person who can save you.” Tears slipped down Harry’s face. “And even if
not, you can bet your arse I’m damn well going to have a good try.”

Severus sighed and wiped Harry’s tears with gentle hands. “I hoped you would come and save me.”

“I did.” Harry kissed him with tenderness. “I have. You are safe and loved, my Prince, and I will never let you go.”

Severus clutched Harry close and buried a sob in the man’s shoulder. “I don’t want to go. I don’t want to leave you.”

Tears blurring his vision, Harry slid a hand into Severus’ hair and cradled the man’s head against him. “Ssh. You won’t. I won’t let you.”

“Harry, love you, don’t want to—so afraid.”

“I know, beloved. I know.”

Harry sank to his knees with his terrified love in his arms, wings wrapped close around him and his head atop Severus’. Lily knelt beside them and held them both.

“I won’t lose you,” she said. “Either of you. I just found you. I won’t let you go so soon.”

Severus slipped his hand into hers and buried his face in Harry’s throat. “I’m s-sorry. So sorry. I did not know.”

“Ssh,” Harry whispered to his mate. “It’s all right, beloved. We will find the way. I swear it.”

Gods, Harry hoped he could keep that promise. The entire world was riding on it.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Warnings: Nothing major. They talk a bit and Remus finally joins the group.

CHAPTER 24

Severus felt safe and protected curled up in Harry’s lap, even if it was a bit awkward with their height difference. Harry had understood without the need for words that Severus needed the comfort of being held. He sat across Harry’s legs rather than against the younger man’s chest, and Harry’s fingertips traced patterns up Severus’ back.

“Well,” said a tearful Lily, “since none of us can sleep anyway, how does a spot of hot tea sound?”

Severus gave her a wan smile. “That sounds lovely, Lils. Thank you.”

Lily kissed his cheek. “I’m so glad to be able to see this gentle side of you.” She pulled back with tears on her lashes. “I … I won’t give you up again, Sev. I know Harry can do this. I believe in him.”

“No pressure,” Harry said with a half-hearted grin.

She patted his cheek and sighed. “Your whole life has been one big mess of pressure, hasn’t it, baby?”

“Considering I’m slotted as the only person alive capable of killing the single biggest threat to humanity … yeah, kind of.”

Lily gave him a wan chuckle. “You can do it. I know you can.”

Their weak attempt at humour faded into a terrible stillness. Harry looked into Severus’ eyes and sighed. Whatever fears he had, he would not voice them, no doubt to keep from frightening Severus himself.

“It’s all right, love.” Lily brushed Harry’s hair back from his face. “You just sit here and take some comfort from your mate. I’ll go put the kettle on.” She moved towards the kitchen but paused a few steps away. “I know it’s almost morning, but I’d rather wait to make breakfast until Remus can join us. Are the two of you hungry at all?”

“I don’t think I can eat anything,” Harry said with a grimace.

Severus shuddered at the thought of putting food in his stomach. Lily gave him an understanding smile.

“All right. I’ll just put the tea on and see if I can find something to calm our stomachs.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

She looked at them for a moment longer, terrible fear and pain in her eyes, then turned with a sigh and went into the kitchen.
“Poor Mum,” Harry murmured. “She’s so afraid.”

“So am I,” Severus whispered. “So terribly afraid.”

Severus saw the same fear reflected in Harry’s eyes, but the young Avenger spoke with bravery.

“Don’t be. It’ll be okay, love. I can probably fix it through a dream-walk, you know? I just need to figure out the details.”

“Perhaps.” Severus wasn’t convinced, and it showed in his tone.

Harry sighed and pulled Severus to lie against the younger man’s body and cast a quick *Muffliato.*

“Are you sore, love? From … earlier?”

Severus gave him a wry look. “I was doing quite well, until the speed of that subject change gave me whiplash.”

Harry gave a low chuckle. “Oh no. Guess I’ll have to fix that, too.”

“Hmm. Perhaps.”

A strong, gentle hand rubbed the muscles in his neck, and Severus sighed into Harry’s hair.

“Does that help?”

“Mhn.”

Strange how Harry’s touch could render him so incoherent.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Harry brought his other hand up and rubbed Severus’ neck in earnest.

“When I woke up and you were gone, I was so afraid. For a second, I’d thought maybe you weren’t happy after all and wanted to be left alone. I thought, maybe I’d hurt you. That I’d messed up somehow and you were just being gracious about it earlier. I mean, it was my first time. I’m pretty sure I made mistakes.” He sighed and moved his massage to Severus’ shoulders. “I knew better, I knew you wouldn’t leave me for that, but I was still so afraid.”

Severus forced his mouth to move despite those wicked fingers turning him into a puddle of goo.

“Harry, good gods, love. Are you quite serious? You believe your performance was … lacking?” He gave a little huff of a laugh. “If I hadn’t known you were a virgin, I’d never have believed it. Your instincts turned you into a consummate lover.”

Harry blushed to his hairline. “R-really? Um … is that good?”

“Good? My love, could you not tell how … lost I was? How your touch nearly drove me to madness with sheer pleasure? Merlin. I thought I would fall to pieces in your arms.”

Harry grinned. “Oh. Wow. I … thank you, Sev. I was worried I hadn’t lived up to your expectations.”

Severus kissed him and traced a hand down the young man’s face. “You have shattered them into dust.”

“Good. You deserve to be loved.”

“As do you.”
Severus turned to sit on his hip and scooted down Harry’s thigh. With more room for his longer body, he could rest his head on Harry’s shoulder.

“I am afraid, Harry. Our bonding was the single most beautiful moment I have ever experienced, but I do not want it to be my last. Or your last. Gods, my own death, I could face, but yours? No. No, I cannot. I love you too much.”

Lily came back into the room, and Severus discreetly cancelled the Muffliato. She gave him a wry look, one that said she knew exactly what they’d been discussing, and set a tea tray upon the coffee table.

“Here you are, boys.” A few flicks of her wand brought three teacups, spoons, and a tray of butter biscuits sailing into the room. She set each beside the teapot. “This is all I could find that might take the edge off your hunger without making you sick. No worries if you can’t manage them, though. I do understand. I’m quite ill myself.”

Harry nodded and, without touching either teapot or wand, made a cup of tea to Severus’ exact liking. He Summoned the cup and passed it to his mate, blushing at the wry look he received from his mate and his mother’s shocked expression.

“Er … did I do that wandlessly again?”

Severus chuckled and hugged Harry tight. “The fact that you can do so without realising it is quite stunning.”

Harry ruffled his hair. “Well, I mean, they’re simple spells. It’s not anything amazing like what Severus can do. It’s just a bit of magical pushing and pulling and Summoning spells.”

“And most wizards never make it to the point that they can manipulate raw magic to make things move without a specific spell.” Lily gave him a wry smile and shook her head. “I can’t do it.”

Harry grumbled, “Great. More things to make me different.” He sighed and poured his own tea by hand. “Mum, do you know what time it is?”

“You can’t do a Tempus wandlessly?”

Harry pouted. “Had enough of the stares, thanks.”

Lily chuckled. “It’s almost six. I’ll have to go fetch Remus soon.”

Severus shuddered. “Are you certain it is safe to fetch him so early?”

“Yes, yes. The moon would have set at least an hour ago. Besides, there’s a spell to warn me if he’s not fully back to himself yet.”

Severus shuddered. “I, I do not like werewolves.”

Lily reached behind Harry and rubbed Severus’ hair. “We’ll make him wolfsbane next time. It’ll be okay, Sev. I wouldn’t let him around you if I thought he’d hurt you. I don’t want to lose you any more than Harry.”

Severus flinched at the reminder of his terrible burden. “You may not have the choice.”

She shook her head. “I believe in my baby. We will save you.”

“And if you cannot?”
“We will,” said Harry with a low growl. “Do not doubt me, my mate. I will not let you die.”

Severus shivered at the authority in Harry’s tone. Gods. He hadn’t realised how much he needed that strength, not until terror threatened to rip him apart and Harry was there. His mate’s power and confidence held Severus together.

With a sigh, he laid his head upon Harry’s. “I … I will try not to, but I am afraid, Harry. So very afraid.”

“I know, love. I am too, but don’t give up hope.” Harry lifted Severus’ left hand to his mouth and kissed his fingers. “I’ll heal your wrist while Mum’s getting Remus, okay? I need to change the dressing anyway.” He blushed crimson. “We … er … kind of forgot last night.”

Severus laid his head upon Harry’s and laced their fingers together. “It is all right. A few extra hours will not hurt it.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah.” His human eyes looked to the clock and the Osirin eyes stared at the door—Severus couldn’t help but wonder what Harry was seeing. “Mum, is … is Remus going to be okay when you bring him in here and he sees Severus in my lap? Especially if he’s under compulsions to hate Severus and considers me as his … his son?”

She winced. “Oh, you have a point. This could be an … interesting meeting.”

Severus curled into Harry’s body and drew his legs up close. Harry rubbed a hand up and down Severus’ back and kissed his arm—all he could reach.

“Tell him of the compulsions before you tell him of Harry and I,” said Severus with a shudder. “I’ve already been much too close to his werewolf form once.”

Lily patted the man’s hand. “Remus doesn’t dislike you that much, Severus.”

“The hell he doesn’t.”

Harry’s hand touched Severus’ cheek and calmed his fear. “I won’t let him hurt you, Sev. I don’t think he’d try, compulsions or no, but I won’t let him near you if he does.”

Severus trembled. “He might not be able to help it. If the compulsions are strong enough and if he … his werewolf senses take over, I … well, we may have the horcrux problem solved.”

Harry growled again. “No more talk of dying. I will not let you die.”

Severus stood and paced. “Lily, you must take the compulsions off before he gets here. If he attacks, Harry will not be able to help defending me. And then we would a catastrophe on our hands.”

Lily gave him a solemn nod. “I, like Harry, don’t think Remus would attack you, but for Merlin’s sake, Severus, of course I’m going to take his compulsions off as soon as possible. I want my mate to act as he truly is, and not what Dumbledore wanted him to be.”

Severus huffed and sat beside his mate. “I still believe he will be angry, compulsions or no, and then we will be in a pretty mess.” He crossed his arms over his waist and sighed. “But by all means, let us bring in the slavering beast and start the family reunion.”

Lily’s eyes narrowed. “That had better be sarcasm.”

“For Merlin’s sake, woman! Do you truly think I am foolish enough to honestly insult a creature’s
mate right in front of them? Of course it was sarcasm.” He dropped his head into shaking hands. “I am simply terrified out of my wits.”

Harry climbed into Severus’ lap and wrapped his wings and arms around the man. “There. Now he has to get through me to attack you, and he’s not going to attack his own cub. So you’re safe now.”

“But ….”

Harry kissed him. “Ssh. Calm yourself, my mate. Do not doubt me. I will protect you.”

Severus swallowed hard, comforted by Harry’s strength, and gave him a hesitant nod.

“Good.” Harry held Severus’ cheek. “It’s going to be okay. I promise.”

“I … I hope so.”

Harry quieted his fears with a tender kiss. “Ssh. I am here, beloved. Have faith in me.”

Severus buried his face into Harry’s shoulder. He hated himself for his weakness, but he couldn’t help but whisper a broken plea in Harry’s ear.

“Hold me. Please. I am so afraid.”

Harry hugged him tight just as a clock over the bookcase announced the hour with a loud clang. Six of them.

It was time.

“And that’s my cue to go retrieve him.” Lily stood and patted Severus’ shoulder. “It’s all right, Sev. I’ll remove the compulsions and fill him in a bit on the way back, all right? He’ll be in his proper mind when he meets you again.”

She left, red hair sweeping behind her, and crushing, all-encompassing terror clenched Severus’ chest. He stared at the door, shaking all over.

“This is utter folly. He will kill me when he senses my mark.”

Harry kissed Severus and held his face. “Hey. Look at me. I’m not going to let him hurt you, okay? Not that he would try, but regardless, I’m here, and you’re safe.” His eyes filled with teal light and determination. “Nothing is going to take you away from me, do you understand? Nothing. I swear it.”

Severus understood—Harry wasn’t just speaking of the werewolf. With a hesitant nod, he clutched Harry tight and prayed to all that was good and holy that his mate could keep his promise.

After Lily had gone, Harry turned in Severus’ lap so he faced the door and wrapped his wings around his mate from behind. It was a bit odd, being able to see behind his head, but it wasn’t so much different from his usual sight that it bothered him. He just had more of it.

At least the eyes in his wings didn’t seem to need glasses, though he couldn’t imagine how they would be practical in flight. It was most likely best to keep them closed in the air anyway. The wind
would probably hurt them.

His extra sight proved useful then as Harry watched both the door and his mate’s face. Severus was tense and trembling, holding tight to Harry’s waist and struggling not to panic.

“Hey, Sev, ssh.” When Severus didn’t calm, he stood and tugged the shaking man to his feet. “Come on. Let’s go in the kitchen and take care of your wrist, okay? It’ll take Mum awhile to get to the warded room and explain to Remus anyway.”

“Y-yes. I … I suppose it would.”

Harry guided his terrified mate into the kitchen. Severus’ tension dropped when they weren’t in sight of the door, and Harry understood. Here, he would have more time to prepare himself if Remus was angry. More cover if he attacked—not that he ever would, but to Severus’ mind, the barrier of a table and chairs must still have been comforting.

Well, they could wait in the kitchen if it made Severus feel safer. That was no trouble. With a wan smile for his mate, Harry started to Summon the tea and biscuits, then thought better of it and decided to leave them where they were until he was finished with Severus’ wounds. Best not to get blood in the food. Instead, he Summoned the medical equipment he’d laid out upon the desk last night and never used.

Harry sighed when the medicines landed in a heap rather than the neat lines he’d wanted.

“Well,” said Severus with a wry smile. “At least I will have something yet to teach you.” His smile faded.

“Yeah,” said Harry with a firm nod. “You will. I’m a right mess. I need you to help me straighten myself out.”

Severus gave him a shaky smile. “I will … try. It may well be a hopeless endeavour.”

Harry snorted and set about untangling the supplies. As he was unwinding the gauze from the dittany, it suddenly tugged free of his hands, rose up like a cobra, and zoomed free of the medicines to land in a neat pile beside Harry’s elbow. The phials righted themselves and moved to sit in a line, arranged by order of application, and the bottle of saline and washing vat scooted to sit at the table before Severus.

Severus smirked and raised an eyebrow. “Well, are you a wizard or not?”

Harry laughed and kissed Severus lightly. “Now there’s my smart-arse mate. Just hold your wrist over that basin, Sev, and—yeah. Just so.” He sanitised his hands with a spell and took hold of either end of the gauze. “Love, I, this might hurt. I’m sorry. I’ll try to be as gentle as I can.”

Severus gave him a weak smile. “I will survive.”

“Yes.” Harry met his gaze and held his wrist. “Yes, you will.”

Severus swallowed and blinked hard. “I … I … t-thank you, beloved.”

“My pleasure, love. Are you ready?”

Severus nodded.

“One … two … three.”
Harry used one of his sharp nails to cut under the gauze and gently peeled it away from Severus’ forearm. Severus flinched, but the bandage came off without trouble, and he relaxed once it was away from his burns. Underneath, the skin was still a bit raw and blistered, but it had cleared enough to notice … something odd.

The skull—the ugly part of Severus’ mark—had vanished, leaving behind only an open-mouthed cobra. She had her eyes closed, probably due to the fact that the burns had injured her, too.

“Sev … Mother of Merlin, look at this!”

Severus frowned and looked at his arm. “What is it? It appears to be healing nor—” He gasped and jerked his wrist closer, studying the mark with wide eyes. “Merlin! It … I do not understand, Harry. Where did the skull go?”

“I don’t know. I don’t get it either.” Harry turned Severus’ arm this way and that, but the skull was gone. “Maybe I erased it when I healed you. It’s the only explanation I can think of. I’ll try to ask her later, after the dittany’s had time to work another round.”

Severus frowned. “Whom? Lily? She will not know, love.”

“No, no. Painted Lady.”

Severus blinked. “Painted—Merlin, do you mean the snake?”

Harry rubbed up the back of his neck and hair. “Well, yeah. Who else is there?”

Severus stared at him as if he’d grown another head. “How is my snake tattoo female? I am a man. And what do you mean, you will ask her? She should not be able to speak.”

“She spoke when I healed you of blood poisoning that night, remember? I asked her to stop biting you.”

“That was a special case. Riddle had activated the tattoo, so it was likely feeding off of his magic.”

Harry frowned. “Huh. Might have been, I guess. I … I have a hunch it wasn’t, but I guess we’ll find out later. I don’t want to try when you’re still blistered in case she can speak and moving her mouth hurts you.”

Severus shook his head. “I … I don’t even know what to say to that.”

Harry snorted. “Don’t worry about it. You might be right.”

Severus shrugged. “I can see no way I am not. She is a tattoo, Harry. It is. Damn it.”

Harry gave a short burst of a laugh. “I’m converting you, hmm?”

“Poisoning me is more accurate.”

Harry grinned and patted dittany on the place where the skull had been, where Severus’ injuries were the worst. “Either way, I’m glad that it’s gone. This is actually a pretty nice tattoo now. Just a snake for my Slytherin. Oh, if you move your arm, she’ll really be Slytherin. Geddit?” He gyrated a bit like a snake for emphasis.

Severus chuckled and cuffed Harry’s hair lightly. “Good gods, that was moronic. Even Slytherin first years could do better.”
“I got you to laugh.” Harry smiled and kissed Severus with tenderness. “That was all I wanted. Just to hear you laugh.”

Severus sighed and laid his head against Harry’s shoulder. “It is … difficult to laugh right now. I am still so very afraid.”

“I know. I’m here, love. Lean on me.” Harry kissed Severus’ hair. “Maybe not literally, though. Not until I’m done fixing up your arm.”

The older man sat back and rubbed his forehead, staring at the ceiling as Harry worked.

“There,” Harry murmured after a moment. “It’s doing a lot better. Didn’t need nearly as much work to fix it this ti—”

A rustling sound from the portrait room sent both men leaping to their feet. Severus snarled and drew his wand.

“If that is Albus, returned for more mischief, we shall see how well canvas burns.”

“I’m all for it,” Harry said with a grim smile. “Let’s see what’s going on.”

Severus nodded and assumed a fighter’s stance. “Defensive posture, just in case.”

Harry looked Severus up and down and suppressed a whistle. “Gods, you’re sexy like that.”

Pink painted Severus’ cheeks. “Not the time, Harry!”

Harry grinned and assumed his own defensive position, holding his wand tight. “Okay. Ready?”

Severus nodded towards the room and cast a powerful Notice-Me-Not on them both. Harry let Severus lead as he was the more experienced fighter, but vowed that one day, he would be the one to protect his mate. As soon as he knew how to fight, Harry would take over.

Severus deserved a break.

A second rustling sound set Harry’s nerves on edge, but then came a hoot, and he let himself relax.

“Shite,” he said with a wry smile. “It’s just an owl. Mum said there’s an entrance in there. I’d forgotten until now.”

Severus nodded, but did not put away his wand. “Stay close.” He led Harry to the room and, just as they came near, cast a wide-range curse cleaning spell. The owl gave an indignant squawk and ruffled his feathers.

“Forgive me, Archimedes,” Severus murmured in a soothing voice. “You have come from a dark place. I needed to make sure you were safe.”

The owl gave a sort of sighing sound and alighted on Severus’ extended wrist—the good one. Harry took the letter attached to the bird’s leg and watched as the animal immediately turned around and flew straight through a wall.

He shook his head. “I guess that means the anti-owl spell is still in effect.”

“Perhaps. Or Lucius may have instructed him to return immediately.” Severus opened the letter and cleared his throat. “‘My dearest Severus,’—oh, be still my heart—‘I see your sarcasm is in fine form, old friend. As far as my bollocks, they are firmly in place. And, I do believe you have won the first
round of betting. I, for one, am running a pool on how long it takes Potter to trip over a killing curse. I will let you know who wins.”’ Severus snarled and clutched the letter in tight fists. “Unless I kill you first, you pretty little arsehole.”

Harry raised an eyebrow a la Severus. “Since when are arseholes pretty?”

Severus snorted and scanned the letter.

Harry murmured in Severus’ ear, “Well, yours is nice enough.”

Severus gasped and turned crimson. “Dear Merlin! Definitely not the time, Harry! Gods, your mother and Lupin could walk in at any moment!”

Harry chuckled nervously and slipped his arm through Severus’. “Er … good point. Um, did Malfoy have anything good to tell us, or does he fail spying 101?”

Severus sighed. “I am still working through the three pages of obligatory posturing.”

Harry laughed a laugh in Severus’ arm.

“Ah, here we are. ‘I am not positive about the aura, Severus. I was more concerned with finding a near comatose Rowle bleeding at my feet. And besides the smell of blood—which was everywhere, so I do not know if it was from a type of magic or not—I do believe there was a faint spicy smell. Perhaps cinnamon, or it may have indeed been ginger. And, I did see traces of ash beside the Dark Lord’s bed when I brought his potion to him last evening. As for Riddle’s behaviour, he seems … odd. Skittish, somehow. And far more twitchy than I ever remember him being. Besides that, I have noticed nothing of consequence.’”

Severus sneered and banished the letter. “In other words, you noticed nothing which I did not hand-feed you. Merlin, my kingdom for a decent spy.”

Harry chuckled, but it died quickly. “This means Riddle ate Pettigrew’s soul, doesn’t it?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “That is an apt description. And yes, it does indeed.” He sighed and flicked out his wand, tried to summon his doe, but only a wisp came out. A second try failed as well, and he slumped over in defeat. “I … I cannot.”

Harry guided him to sit at the dining table and kissed his head. “I’ll do it, love. You’ve had a hard morning. Anyone would have trouble.” He tried Summoning his own as well, but the fear of losing Severus kept creeping into his happy memories, and even after several tries, Harry, too, could produce nothing but mist.

Severus patted his thighs. “Come.”

Harry slid into his lover’s lap, straddling his hips. He wrapped his arms around Severus’ neck and pressed their foreheads together.

“I’m sorry,” Harry whispered. “So sorry.”

“Shh.” Severus kissed him lightly. “Do not fret. We are both afraid.” He slid a hand into Harry’s hair and brought him close. “Perhaps, if you make me forget for a moment ….”

Harry’s breath caught. “Oh. Yeah, maybe.”

Harry leaned in and kissed his mate with slow, exquisite tenderness. Severus’ fingers clutched at
Harry’s hair, and a long-fingered hand smoothed down his back—and kept going. Harry gasped into his mate’s kiss as Severus’ hand slipped under his waistband and cupped the bare skin of his bum. Little explosions of sensation exploded within him every time Severus’ strong fingertips dug in a bit and rubbed, and Harry leaned back with a soft cry.

“Yeah,” he panted. “Sev.”

Severus gave a low growl and buried his face in Harry’s neck. Fierce, hot kisses branded the side of Harry’s throat and he arched, trying to get more of those wicked fingers and Severus’ mouth at the same time.

“Sev, oh. Touch me.”

Severus groaned, and a hard shudder passed through him. He sat back and gasped out, “Next time. *Expecto Patronum Nuntius!*”

Severus’ doe appeared and sniffed the air.

Harry blushed. “Bloody hell. I forgot why we were doing this.”

Severus chuckled and kissed Harry softly. “Later, love. It is not appropriate to push you further here. To be honest, I should not have done that much, but you are irresistible.” He slipped his hands free of Harry’s trousers and motioned to the chair beside him. “Sit, before your legs go numb like that.” His tone softened. “And sit close, if you are able.”

With the aid of his wings and Severus’ strength, Harry climbed from Severus’ lap and onto the chair beside him. He scooted it over until he was right against Severus’ side and tucked in his arms.

The doe approached her master before Severus had said a word and sniffed the man’s shoulder. With a wry smile, Severus unfastened the top layers of his buttons with a spell and pushed his shirt down until the doe could see his bonding mark.

It was beautiful, at least to Harry. He kissed the tattoo—couldn’t resist—and held his mate close.

The doe sniffed the mark and gave her master a curious look.

“Yes, I am mated now.”

She sniffed Harry’s hair and face, then a tingly-warm tongue swiped his cheek.

Harry looked to his mate, bemused. “Um … what was that about?”

“She was accepting you as my mate.”

The doe inclined her head.


She nuzzled Harry’s cheek and pulled back with a cock of her head.

Harry smiled and patted her fetlock. “Will you carry a message for me?”

She nodded and swivelled her ears forwards.

“Thanks, sweetheart. My message is for Professor Minerva McGonagall and the Weasley twins—Fred and George. Tell them: ‘*We heard from our spy. Riddle … ate Pettigrew’s soul, just like*
Severus said. We have proof now. And it sounds like the madness that comes as a cost of that spell is already affecting him—well, he’s madder than he was before at any rate. From what the spy said, he’s acting more like Pettigrew than himself. We also found definitive proof that Riddle was a Dragoon who went entirely mad. It’s a long story and not safe to reveal over Patronus, but it’s the truth.

“Oh, by the way, Sev and I are bonded mates now and about to meet Remus for the first time since sealing the bond. Wish us luck, yeah?” Okay, girl. That’s it. Just make sure you’re not seen by anyone but McGonagall and the twins and be careful.”

The doe bowed and vanished.

Harry sighed and curled into Severus’ arms. “I hope they’ll all accept it, Sev. I love you so much.”

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead and held him close. “I will make every effort to make amends with your friends and family. Perhaps, one day, they will have no reason to doubt that I love you, too.”

“I hope so. I really, really hope so.”

“So do I, love.”

Harry sat up at the feel of a shudder down Severus’ body. “What is it, my Sev?”

“They are coming.”

Harry gulped. “You hear them?”

Severus nodded and released Harry. He stood and pushed his chair under the table, and Harry stood with him. Severus drew his wand and clutched it in a shaking hand, though he did not raise it for attack, not completely anyway, and Harry slipped his arm around Severus’ waist.

“It’s going to be okay, love. I know it.”

Severus nodded and kept his eyes on the doorway. Indistinct voices filtered to Harry’s ears—how had Severus heard them from so far away?—and Harry removed his arm from Severus’ waist long enough to Banish the healing supplies back to their bedroom and clean up the table. Severus gave him a fearful look as Harry returned his former position. The man moved as if to step away, but Harry clutched him close and shook his head.

“Stay where you are, my mate.” Harry’s voice was low and authoritative again. “We face Remus together.”

Severus swallowed hard and trembled. “I only did not wish to irritate him.”

Harry growled. “If he is irritated because I am holding my mate, then that is his issue. I will not alienate you because he had troubles with you in childhood. He will either grow up and accept you, or he will have to deal with my wrath.”

Severus winced. “That is what I am afraid of. I can endure Lupin’s antipathy. Merlin knows I have seen enough of it over the years. But I cannot endure knowing I am the cause of strife in your family, Harry. I do not wish to tear you apart.”

Harry’s creature side backed down in the face of Severus’ fear. “Love, ssh. It’s going to be okay. Remus isn’t like that, really, he’s not.”
Lily called, “Boys? Where did you go?”

Harry jumped. “Oh. We’re in the kitchen, Mum.” He slipped his hand into Severus’ and held it tight. “I’m with you, love,” he whispered. “Always, no matter what happens.”

Severus nodded, his eyes narrowed with tension and body shaking. His hand trembled around his wand, but his grip didn’t falter.

Despite his worry for his mate, Harry couldn’t help but grin when Remus’ familiar shabby robes and greying hair appeared around the wall.

“Remus!”

The man smiled and opened his arms, but Harry looked to his mate and shook his head.

“I can’t. He’s terrified.”

Remus met Severus’ eyes, and the werewolf’s held deep pain. “Severus … you fear me? I … well, I suppose that’s fair, considering everything. But perhaps this will ease your mind. I hope so, at least.” He bowed his head and held his hands out in supplication. “For everything I have done to you, for everything I did not do when I should have, I am so very sorry, Severus.”

Severus swallowed and hesitantly lowered his wand. “You are … did he compel you to hate me as well?”

Lily shook her head. “Not entirely. More like dislike and stand by and do nothing while his comrades abused you. I suppose Dumbledore thought outright hatred and bullying would be so far out of character for Remus, someone would notice. And besides that, Remus had already broken through most of the compulsions when I went to remove them.”

Remus spoke in a soft voice, no doubt so to keep Severus calm. “I think I had begun to break them long ago, when we started working in the Order together. I saw then that, while you’re sharp-tongued and have a quick temper, you’re also honourable and brave as a dragon. It made no sense after that to retain my schoolboy grudges, and yet, I could not completely let them go.

“Then, the moment I heard the twins’ defence of you, their story about Harry standing at your side and protecting you, well, I realised something was amiss with me. Why should I still feel such dislike when everything I’d seen and heard pointed to a man deserving of my trust?” His usual friendly smile faded to a look of intense pain. “I had thought there was something wrong with me, that maybe I couldn’t leave the past where it belongs. I never dreamed Albus would go this far.”

He sighed and gave his ‘cub’ a hesitant smile. “Harry, are you all right?”

Harry bristled. “Sev is wonderful to me, Remus, and I don’t appreciate the accu—”

Severus’ gentle hand upon Harry’s lips stopped his tirade cold.

“Love, ssh. I do not think he was accusing me of anything. I believe he was inquiring after your health, given the number of shocks we have endured lately.”

“Oh.” Harry blushed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Um … s-sorry, Remus. I’m … I’ve been better. But I … I’ll ….” He looked to Severus and gripped the man’s hand. “We’ll survive.”

Remus frowned. “Well, of course you will. I’m not going to attack you, you know. I’m just relieved the two of you found us.”
Severus winced and met Lily’s eyes. “You did not tell him?”

She shook her head. “There simply wasn’t time with everything else. Remy, sit down. I’ll make us some fresh tea and breakfast and you two can catch him up.”

“All right, Lils.” Remus moved to stand in front of Severus and offered the man his hand. “Before we start that, might we call a truce? For Harry’s sake? I’d … well, I mean, I’d like to be friends, but I do understand if you’re not ready to forgive me yet.”

Severus sighed and shook Remus’ hand. “Let us simply start at the beginning. It is not you who wronged me. Indeed, I do not even know you. I only know what Albus wanted you to be, and you only know me as the cruel man I had to be as a spy.”

Remus grinned and squeezed Severus’ hand. “Wonderful. I had hoped, for Harry’s sake, that we could put the past behind us, so starting over sounds grand.” He released the still nervous man and moved to the younger man. “Harry … can you forgive me for making you worry so?”

Harry sobbed and threw his arms around Remus’ neck. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”


“I missed you too.” Harry pulled back and wiped his eyes. “I couldn’t even say your name when I thought … it hurt so much, I couldn’t face it.” Tears escaped his control. “I’m glad you’re home, Remus. And Mum! I never imagined, but … are you happy?”

He smiled brightly and gave Lily a soft look. “Happier than I ever dreamed I could be.”

Lily smiled and kissed him lightly. “Well, now you’re going to be happy all the time, love. But go on and sit. We do have a lot to talk about, Remy, and it’s not at all good.”

Remus nodded and took a seat at the table. “I’m listening.”

“Right,” said Harry, and he started in.
Chapter 25

Two hours later, Severus and Harry had caught Lily and her mate up on everything they knew. Lily had been in tears since the mention of Blackpool, and Remus was not far behind her, but they had both listened without prejudice or judgment.

It relieved Severus down to his soul to know Harry’s family trusted him, or was at least making the effort.

Harry sat beside his weeping mother and rubbed her shoulders. “Mum … I know all this about Blackpool is a bad job, but Sev and I … well, we’re doing okay. At least, I think he is.”

Severus gave him a cautious nod. “I simply have not had time to think of it. Once the madness recedes, however ….”

Harry reached over and took his hand. “We’ll be there to help you through it, okay?”

Severus rubbed his thumb over Harry’s knuckles and sighed. “That is assuming we live through the war.”

“We will,” said Harry in his wild tones. “Do not give up hope.”

Though Severus wasn’t convinced, he found he could not doubt the strength in that voice. He nodded in spite of himself and gave Harry a hesitant smile.

“That’s better.” Harry caressed Severus’ hand and kissed the backs of his fingers. “We’re going to survive. We have plans, remember?”

Severus smiled a little more. Yes. Plans to bond as wizards and to start a family soon. The thought of having a family of his own, a family with his beloved mate and friends at his side, filled him with joy and hope for the future.

“I hope you can find a way to destroy this horcrux without killing me, my Harry. Those dreams of ours are … I ….” He sighed and lowered his head. His fear of Remus still lingered and would not let him reveal his deeper emotions in front of the man, but nevertheless, Harry seemed to understand.

“Yeah.” Harry rubbed Severus’ hand. “They sound good to me, too.”
“I only hope we live to see them come to fruition,” Severus whispered.

Harry returned to his mate’s side, leaving his mother to Remus’ care, and held Severus’ shoulders. “I need you to have faith in me, Sev.”

Severus sighed and leaned against Harry’s stomach. “I do have faith in you. I am only afraid, Harry. I cannot seem to Occlude it away, either. The very thought of having that demon’s soul in me ….”

He shuddered and gave Harry a pleading look.

Harry stroked Severus’ hair. “I know. We’ll get it out, I promise you. The second we know how to without hurting you, I’ll get rid of it.” His eyes filled with teal rage. “And then I will burn the bastard in the hottest fires of hell for daring to lay a finger on my mate.”

Though Severus felt a fool for doing so, he could not resist the urge to bury his face in Harry’s stomach and hug him hard. He had been so brave for so long, but this … it terrified him down to the depths of his soul. Harry brought out his wings again and draped them across Severus’ back, and the feel of being cocooned within his mate’s embrace gave him strength. He sighed and breathed his Harry in, taking comfort in the warmth and pine-scented fragrance of his mate.

Remus spoke suddenly and startled Severus out of his hiding place.

“Harry—oh, sorry, Severus.”

The man gave him a weak glare and sat straight, the spell of Harry’s embrace broken.

Remus shook his head and patted the chair next to him—and, incidentally, next to Severus as well. “Harry, sit and tell me everything you know about this last horcrux. It … I know the situation seems grim right now, but maybe if we lay all the details out, we’ll find a solution to kill it while sparing Severus. It can’t hurt to try, anyway.”

“All right.” Harry sat beside Severus and leaned on the table. “Well, I first realised it existed when I read about it in the journal a couple weeks ago. Riddle realised that Malfoy knew his secret and decided he needed extra insurance.”

“I remember you saying that,” said Remus. “What did you read about it after that?”

Harry shrugged. “Not much. Just him going on about this person or that, saying that this one wasn’t strong enough, this one wasn’t important enough, and so on. We didn’t find anything definitive until earlier last night.” He shuddered. “The last thing I read, he was writing through Quirrell. He had wanted me for his last horcrux, but the ritual failed when Mum ‘killed’ him.”

Remus’ eyes glowed amber. “Shame he didn’t stay dead. I’ll kill him this time.”

Harry gave a wry laugh. “Well, no. I will, but you can definitely help.”

Remus nodded. “Good enough. What happened next?”

“The next thing we learned about it was what Dumbledore told Sev.”

Remus turned to Severus with deep sadness in his eyes. “I am sorry, Severus. No one deserves what Dumbledore did to you.”

Severus acknowledged him with a nod. “None of us deserved his manipulations.”

“True. Can you tell me the details of what Albus said? Don’t leave anything out.”
“I will try.” Severus rubbed his temples, trying to recall that terrible conversation. “I was, perhaps, far too distraught to recall every detail without the aid of a pensieve—”

“I have one here if you need it,” said Lily.

Severus nodded. “Might we use it? I am not positive I can speak about it, and I fear I will forget important details otherwise.”

“All right.” She rose and left.

Remus patted Harry’s hand as soon as she’d gone. “Harry, are you okay with this?”

Harry sniffed. “Might have to hunt down that lying bastard and burn him when all’s said and done, but yeah. I’ll be all right. Sev needs me to be strong right now anyway.”

Remus’ eyes filled with sorrow. “I … if you find you’re unable to stay strong without help, you can talk to me, you know? The offer is open for you as well, Severus, though I don’t think you’ll take it.”

Severus shook his head. “I am barely able to speak of it to Harry. I do appreciate the offer, however.”

Remus gave him a sad smile. “I wish I had known this side of you, Severus. I wish he hadn’t taken so much away from us.”

Lily set the pensieve on the table and ran her hand through Remus’ hair. “So do we all. Are we ready for this?”

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’. “I’m here for you, love.”

“I am for you as well.”

Severus closed his eyes and called up his memories of that horrible discussion. Tears welled under his lashes and rolled down his cheeks as he pulled the memory away and placed it in the basin. Argent ripples flowed from his wand and filled the bowl, showing a scene of Severus glaring at Dumbledore’s portrait in the centre.

Harry wiped Severus’ tears and kissed him softly. “Don’t give up hope, okay? I haven’t.”

Severus laced his fingers with Harry’s and took comfort from his warmth. “I am trying. Hope is … new to me.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “I know what you mean. But come on. Let’s get this over with, yeah?”

“Yes. Stay with me?”

“Always.”

Severus took a deep breath and touched his nose to the silvery fluid.

Harry could not believe the shite Dumbledore had done. Gods! He was a bastard of the first order.
He could understand how the man had needed his lover. Merlin, if anything should ever happen to Severus—well, and if Harry could survive his death for more than a few moments—he would be miserable without his mate. Broken and empty with half his soul beyond the veil.

That, he could sympathise with.

But if the worst had happened, and Harry had lost his mate without dying right along with him, he would like to think he wouldn’t sacrifice a child’s health and the life of thousands just to get Severus back! Dear Merlin. And Grindelwald hadn’t even been Dumbledore’s fated mate. There was no biological imperative driving them to be together—only the same kind of love any human might have shared with another of their species.

Dumbledore had no excuse for what he had done.

It was sickening, listening to the bastard prattle on about why he had done this and that and why he was only a man in love, blah-blah-blah. If Harry hadn’t been trying to find clues to save Severus’ life, he would have just tuned the fucker out and tended to his desolate lover.

Merlin knew Severus needed his attention.

Listening to Dumbledore might have sickened and hurt Harry, but Severus? Gods. The spy had loved and served Albus exclusively for twenty years. To hear the extent of his betrayal over again must have ripped the very soul from the man. He had gone still as a stone, his eyes blank from fierce Occluding, but rivers of tears still poured down his face.

If Remus hadn’t been present, Severus would have likely been sobbing.

While Dumbledore spoke of the ritual to bring Grindelwald back, a stricken Remus approached and hesitantly laid a hand on Severus’ shoulder.

“If you need to … express your grief, I won’t judge you for it, Severus. Merlin, I’m devastated myself.”

Severus’ stone-hard expression faltered, and his voice came out in a breathy, broken tone. “I fear if I allow myself to truly weep, Lupin, I shan’t be able to stop.”

“I … I know what you mean. I just wanted to let you know it was okay to cry, if you need to. I understand.” Remus wiped tears of his own as he returned to his mate and left Harry alone with his love.

Harry said nothing, but simply brought Severus into his arms and wrapped his wings around his taller mate. Within the safe-haven of Harry’s embrace, Severus’ insecurities faded enough to let him release a low moan of pain and sink to his knees. Shaking and cold with grief, he buried his face in the younger man’s shoulder and wept. Each gasping, quiet sob shattered Harry inside, but he refused to give into his anguish. Severus needed him to listen, as much as Harry hated it.

This time, Harry had to be the strong one for Severus.

With a sigh, he slipped his fingers through Severus’ silky hair and forced himself to pay attention. It was a struggle, with his broken mate weeping in his arms and softly begging Harry to make the pain stop.

Fuck. He couldn’t take it. Couldn’t bear Severus’ agony. Not like this.

A low, strange yowling sound of anguish escaped Harry’s control, and his mother looked to him
with a broken expression.

“I know. It hurts when he’s miserable, huh?”

Harry nodded and clutched Severus tighter.

“I’m here, baby. I’ll help you be strong for him.”

She laid a hand on Harry’s back and stroked Severus’ hair. On his other side, Remus laid his head against Harry’s and held his hand, and with his mum and adoptive da at his side, the young man’s strength returned. At least, their touch allowed him enough respite to choke back his agony and listen to the portrait.

Just then, Dumbledore looked on the memory Severus as if he cared and said, “It was when he hit you with the fire whip. I smelled it the moment you returned—you remember that the wounds didn’t heal?”

Severus gasped and leaned back. Their eyes met, and Harry nodded, his heart racing with excitement and fear and hope all at once.

Lily whispered, “What is it?”

“Later,” Severus whispered back. “Let us finish the memory in case there is something else we have missed.”

She nodded and returned her attention to the old man’s raving, but Harry found it hard to concentrate. Those scars—they had vanished last night, along with the skull on Severus’ mark.

If the horcrux scars were gone, if Harry could heal them, then maybe there was hope to heal the rest of it. Maybe, just maybe, they could both get through this alive.

Harry turned his attention back to the conversation as much as he could, though his mind refused to settle. Then a tingling, sandpaper-tongue licked up his neck, and he jolted and let out a yelp.

All eyes turned to Harry.

In a shaky voice, Severus asked, “What in Merlin’s n-name was that about?”

“Something licked me,” Harry muttered, rubbing his neck. “Felt like a Patronus.”

The sensation came again, and Harry jumped. “Definitely a Patronus.”

Severus nodded and pulled himself to his feet. “It must be one of our c-colleagues with a reply.” He wiped his face and took a deep breath. “Come. I believe we have learned all we can from this memory, and I can bear no more of it regardless. If needs must, we can always return to view the final portion later.”

“All right.”

Severus tugged Harry back into the real world, and they all sat up, gasping and trying to adjust. A silvery shape prowled in the periphery of Harry’s extended vision, and he turned to find McGonagall’s tabby cat pacing and yowling at his feet, all her fur standing on end.

“Merlin, what’s gone wrong now?” He rushed to his feet and tapped the tabby’s head. “We’re here, Professor. Harry, Mu—”
The cat didn’t wait for him to finish. “Harry! You must answer me, boy. What has happened? I thought you and Severus were doing well, but the Headmaster’s portraits are all weeping and screaming that Severus has betrayed and killed you and that everything he told us about Lily and Remus is a lie. Gods, please, please answer me, child. Are you all right?”

The cat vanished.

Severus slumped back into his chair, devastation and horror plain on his face. “He … told them … I killed you?”

“Oh, Severus,” Remus breathed, just as appalled. “Gods, we’ll … we’ll set it right.”

“Nothing can set this right, Lupin. Nothing.”

Tears slipped down Severus’ face, and the sight of his mate’s suffering stoked a fire in Harry’s chest. His stubby fingernails grew into talons and his canines came down so fast, they nicked his lower lip. He winced, but pushed the pain aside and jerked out his wand. Beside him, his mother was in much the same condition, minus the fangs.

Lily placed a hand on his arm. “Wait. I believe this one is my place.”

Harry nodded. “Together, then. Since I’m your son, your Patronus will listen to me, right?”

She tugged out her wand and gave him a feral grin. “One way to find out, yeah? Expecto Patronum Nuntius!”

A silver wolf bounded from her wandtip and settled at Lily’s feet.

“Um, hi there,” said Harry cautiously. “Will you carry a message for me?”

The wolf cocked his head. He sniffed Harry and gave the young man a playful yip.

Harry interpreted that as a yes.

“Good. Then tell Minerva McGonagall this from me: ‘Yes, yes, I’m all right. Severus hasn’t and wouldn’t hurt me, and Dumbledore is a fucking lying bastard. Excuse my language. You can give me detention for it when I’m not ready to murder the arsehole.

‘Back to the point, Severus hasn’t laid a finger on me, at least not one that hurt. I wish you could see him, Professor. He’s broken and scared and hurt, and the great bearded bastard doesn’t care at all. Somehow Dumbledore has gotten it into his head that Severus has to die for the godsdamn ‘greater good’ and apparently he isn’t satisfied with letting me work the situation out on my own. This is all a ploy to get the Order to murder Severus the moment he sets foot in public, even though he’s completely innocent and we’re working on a real solution, one that doesn’t cost Severus his life.

‘And the portraits—the meddling prick’s got them all under a geis. Break the geis—can you do that since Dumbledore set it? Well, if you can, you’ll get the truth from them. But just in case you can’t, know that Dumbledore forced them to lie about Mum for seventeen years, and he’s forcing them to lie now. I’m fine, she’s fine, Remus is fine—well, other than the fact that we’re all bloody hacked off and sickened by his betrayal.

‘Oh, and one more thing. Tell the old man from me that we’ve got the … artefact situation handled, and if he ever so much as threatens another hair on Severus’ head, I will use him for fucking kindling and make sure he feels it in the afterlife, too.’”
His tirade complete, Harry flopped into his chair, panting and shaking with the force of his fury.

Lily stroked his hair and turned to her Patronus. “Crescent, we’re not done yet. Also tell Minerva from me: ‘I’m alive, and don’t listen to another word that shitehead or the portraits say until the geis is lifted. I have no idea what he was thinking, spreading those awful lies when he must have known we would contact you the second the barrier went down. Well, maybe he thought we would wait until morning or that I would want to keep it secret for Harry’s sake, but Riddle already knows, and the others deserve the truth.

‘Anyway, everything that bastard has told you is hogwash. Severus has been absolutely wonderful to Harry. The love he feels for my boy—well I’ll probably embarrass him if I go into too much detail, but know that he clearly adores my son, and I, for one, am happy to welcome him to the family.’”

Remus said in a shaking voice, “Crescent, add from me as well, ‘Severus is treating Harry like a treasure and even offered me his forgiveness and a clean slate, once he realised Dumbledore had me under compulsions as well. He has been a perfect gentleman and this entire situation is breaking him to pieces.’” He straightened, and his eyes went amber. ‘Let Dumbledore know this. If he does not stop threatening my … s-son-in-law, I’ll get some practice in with my teeth and claws before Harry roasts him.’”

Severus jerked out of his despair with a cough. “Son-in-law?”

Remus gave him a wry laugh. “I take it you won’t be calling me ‘papa’?”

Severus fixed Remus with a death glare. “If you ever suggest it again, I will use you as a test subject for poisons.”

Remus chuckled nervously and gave Lily a cautious glance. “Be careful, Severus. New bond and all. Things like that might upset her.”

Lily cuffed his hair lightly. “Oh, hush. I knew he wasn’t serious. Besides, I’m most definitely not Severus’ mother-in-law, so you won’t be his father-in-law either. We’ll just be family and leave it at that.”

Remus’ smile definitely had a bit of Marauder in it, and Harry was ready to bet his Firebolt that, come Christmas, they’d have a card from their ‘in-laws’ under the tree.

He opened his mouth to warn Remus off of it, but Severus chose that moment to set his head in his hands and sob, and so Harry forgot in his need to comfort his mate.

“I looked to Dumbledore as a father,” Severus choked out in a broken voice. “And I look where that got me. The first one beat me and this one … gods. I wish he had only beaten me.” He whispered, “Even if I were young enough, I do not want another father. Ever.”

The mischievous light faded from Remus’ eyes. He slipped a hand over Severus’ and left it there, offering what small comfort he could.

“Would you prefer a friend? Or perhaps, in time, a brother?”

Severus let slip a shaky sigh. “Yes. That … that I could bear.”

Harry gave Remus a grateful smile and held Severus’ shoulders. “Mum, go ahead and send that Patronus, and let’s go into the living room to hash this out, yeah? I need to be close to Sev and I can’t in these chairs.”
Lily wiped her eyes and nodded. “Right.” She turned to her Patronus and patted his head. “Then, Crescent, we’re done with our message, but avoid Death Eaters and Muggles, okay? Don’t be afraid to deliver your message in front of the entire Order if need be, though. In fact, if you can prance around in front of them all while you’re delivering it, that would be brilliant. But it’s most important to get this to Minerva as fast as possible, so just worry about that first, okay? Now, go on, and hurry.”

The wolf vanished, and Harry prayed he would make it to McGonagall before anyone else heard the portraits’ cries.

Severus lay across the loveseat, his head in Harry’s lap as the younger man stroked his hair and played with the grey streak. His chest had caved in with the force of his grief, or so it felt, and he lay frozen, shaking and careless of the tears on his face, waiting for word from Minerva. He wasn’t sure how many minutes had elapsed since the wolf had gone with his message, but it had to have been at least a century’s worth.

Fuck. He would be grey all over before they heard anything.

If they heard anything. If Minerva decided to believe the portraits, she would not dare to reply. But Severus could not see how she could. Not with Lily’s wolf and proof of Dumbledore’s betrayal staring her in the face.

A silvery streak crossed his vision, and Severus jerked up, his heart hammering in his ears. Oh, thank Merlin, it was the tabby.

Harry pulled Severus into his lap, then tapped the cat’s head.

“I’m listening, Professor. We all are.”

The cat’s breath exploded in a sob. “Oh, Harry. Oh, thank Merlin, you’re alive. I was so terrified, but also so confused. I had received your Patronus not ten minutes before arriving at the Headmaster’s office, or I might have believed the portraits, gods forgive me. And Severus, don’t worry, child. We shan’t hurt you, and I will make sure Albus’ interference stops today.”

The cat leapt into Severus’ lap and curled up as if to take a nap. With warmth and grief warring within him, he petted the argent beast and took some comfort from the touch. Without changing position, the cat looked around to Lily and Remus and gave a chirruping sound.

“Lily, oh child. I have missed you so long. It is so wonderful to hear your voice. And you, Remus! Merlin, I have such wonderful news for the Order.” The cat’s ears drooped. “And terrible news at once. Whatever shall we do now that Albus cannot be trusted?”

She sighed and shook her head. “I suppose we pick ourselves up by our bootstraps and go on. Perhaps this is what comes of giving one man too much power. Well, we shall know better in the future.”

She licked Severus’ hand and nuzzled his palm. “All is well, Severus. I shall make sure the Order knows that you are still loyal. Do not fear.”

The argent beast vanished, leaving Severus feeling slightly bereft without her warmth. Harry gave
him a knowing look and kissed Severus’ hand.

“Maybe we should get a pet from Blackpool as well as a child, yeah?”

Severus frowned and hugged his waist, wishing his insides would stop bleeding already. “One thing at a time, love.”

“Right.”

Harry slid his arms under Severus’ with intent to hold him, but his still-sharp nail caught the older man’s injured wrist and sent a shock of pain through him. Severus flinched and drew his arm away.

“Oh, Sev!” Harry moved his hands back, and his talons vanished. “I’m so sorry, love. Are you all right?”

Severus nodded and flicked his wrist a little. “Only stung a bit. I will survive.”

Harry caught his arm and gently turned it up to see the underside. “Let me check, love. Just to make sure I didn’t break open any of those blisters.”

“If you must.” He sighed as if put-upon, but knew Harry would understand that he truly enjoyed his mate’s solicititude.

“I must.” Harry pulled back Severus’ bandage and peered underneath, and a deep frown marred his features.

Remus leaned forwards and frowned as well. “Is he all right, Harry?”

“Yeah?” Harry shook his head. “He’s not hurt, but … Sev, does Painted Lady look … greyer to you?”

Remus gave Lily a bemused look and mouthed, “Painted Lady?”

She shrugged.

Severus sat up with a scowl. “My snake tattoo is not female, Harry.” He peeked under his bandage and blinked. She— it, damn it—did look grey. Besides the ink lines weakening, the snake’s scales had taken on a ghastly colour as well. Severus’ heart skipped.

Was it going to poison him again? Had Riddle found a way to link to his snake even with the connection between them broken?

He tore off the gauze and gripped Harry’s hands, terror making his voice unsteady. “T-talk to her. I don’t care if it hurts. I do not want to be poisoned or soul-drained again.”

Harry went ashen. “Dear Merlin. All right. Hold your arm steady there.”

He knelt in the floor at Severus’ feet. Severus watched, terrified, as Harry fixed his eyes on the snake and begun to hiss.

“Painted Lady, can you hear me?”
Harry waited, straining his ears, both fearing and hoping to hear a hiss in return.

“I h-hear you, Little Dragon.” Her voice was weak and shaky.

“Painted Lady, are you sssick?”

“I … I think I am dying. My chessst is cold and hurting, and my body feels weak.”

Harry frowned. “Your chessst is cold? Do you know if it is like when Sssev was ssso sssick a couple of days ago?”

“You mean my bearer? Yesss, I think it is the sssame.”

Harry paled and gripped Severus’ hand. “Oh, love. She says she’s soul sick, like you were before … before Blackpool. Could he be draining her?”

Severus blinked. “Draining her? She’s a tattoo, Harry! She shouldn’t have anything to drain.”

“She shouldn’t be able to talk, either,” said Remus, “and yet, here we are.” He frowned and peered closer. “Harry, is it just me, or is half of Severus’ mark gone?”

“Yeah, the skull was gone when I went to heal him earlier this morning. We don’t know what happened to it.”

Remus nodded. “Maybe you should ask her about that.”

“She’s … really sick, but I’ll try.” Harry switched to Parseltongue again. “Painted Lady, we are trying to find out what is wrong. Do you know what happened to the ssskull that was painted when you were?”

She hissed back, “I do not underssstand how, but a day ago, it was burned away and destroyed from within. The evil presence went with it, but now I feel as if I cannot sssussstain my own life.”

Harry blinked. “Your life? Are you really alive?”

“I do not know. All I know is I am frightened and in pain. I must be alive in sssome way to feel pain and fear.”

“That is … a very good point. I am sssorry. I will try to help you, if I can.”

She gave a snakish sigh. “Thank you. Little Dragon, I like you. Will you be near my bearer often?”

Harry smiled. “Always. He is my mate.”

“Oh, good. I would ssstay with you, if I am able, Little Dragon. It is lonely with no one to talk to.”

“I will talk to you more often then. And my name is Harry, Painted Lady.”

“You may give me a name if you wish. Other than what you have called me, I do not have one.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll think of one. Just hold on, yesss? We are trying to find a way to help.” He switched to English and gave his family a bemused look. “I don’t understand this. She says she’s in pain and afraid, and she couldn’t be if she didn’t have life, could she?”

Lily shook her head. “I don’t think so, baby.”
“But how? Sev’s right. She’s a tattoo. None of this should be possible!”

Remus tapped his chin, his eyes narrowed to slits. “Harry, you said you removed this parasite within Severus two days ago, correct?”

He nodded.

“And the skull vanished at the same time, yes?”

Harry gasped. “Wait a moment. Those scars—we figured out they were gone last night too, Sev. So they have to all be related.”

Remus bolted up. “Wait, the scars—the scars that wouldn’t heal when Riddle hit him with the fire whip and cursed him with the horcrux—they’re gone? And they vanished when you destroyed this parasite and the other half of Riddle’s mark, Harry?”

Harry frowned. “Yeah. What are you getting at, Remus?”

Severus bolted to his feet. “Lupin! Do you mean—are you thinking what I am?”

Lily nodded and put her hand over her mouth. “Oh, Sev. Oh, Merlin!”

Harry sighed. Once again, everyone understood but himself. Next to the older adults, he felt abysmally slow sometimes.

He said in a small voice, “Um, would someone please explain to me what’s going on? I feel like an idiot, but I just don’t understand.”

Lily blinked tears down her face and took Harry’s hands. “Oh, love, don’t you see? We think you must have already destroyed the horcrux! That when you killed that parasite, it was actually the horcrux killing Severus, and when you destroyed it, you set him free!”

Harry sank back into the couch, shock and hope coursing through him and stealing his breath. “It … it’s gone? He’s really safe?”

Lily nodded, her grin stretching ear to ear. “Well, I mean, we don’t know for certain yet, but it sure sounds like it.”

Harry sobbed and buried his face in Severus’ belly. “You’re okay! You’re going to be okay. Gods, I love you.”

Severus’ fingers stroked through Harry’s mop, and his voice was breathy and broken. “I love you as well, my brave, beautiful mate.” He tipped up Harry’s chin. “But we do not know beyond a doubt that it is gone, not yet.”

Remus rubbed his chin. “Didn’t Dumbledore mention something about being able to smell the horcruxes?”

Severus nodded. “But after what he has done this morning, we can no longer trust anything he says.”

“No, not naturally,” said a devilishly grinning Lily, “but there is a certain spell ….”

Severus returned her grin. “I do believe I know what you mean. Let us begin.”
Harry stood before the portrait frame, each of his family members flanking him with their wands raised and a spell on their lips. He pressed his palm to the canvas and took a deep breath.

“Albus Dumbledore, come here right now, you lying son of a bitch.”

This time, the old man appeared reluctantly, knowing his welcome would be cold.

Harry had an urge to laugh. The bearded bastard had no idea what was about to hit him.

The adults cried at once, “Veritas Doloris!”

At the same time, Harry cried “Immobulus” and pressed his palm to the portrait’s head.

Dumbledore jerked back twice and sighed. “Hello, all of you.”

“Skip the pleasantries, you murderous old fool,” snapped Lily. “This isn’t a social call. We’re here to ask you some questions, and you had better answer truthfully, or you’re going to regret it.”

Dumbledore stared blankly ahead. “What do you want?”

“First off, old man,” said Remus in a voice barely above a snarl, “can you or can you not smell horcruxes?”

The fate shrugged. “I smelled the one in Severus. The others had a slightly different odour, but it was close enough that I knew what it was.” He met Severus’ eyes and pleaded. “Severus, please—”

Harry drew back his arm and punched the old man in his eye, the one Severus hadn’t yet blacked. His fingers cracked against the hard stone, but damn, it felt good to give the bastard back some of the pain he had caused them.

Harry snarled, “I did warn you, you fucker. Be glad it wasn’t a fire curse.”

“The next time, it will be,” said Lily in a cold, lethal tone. She healed Harry’s hand and fixed blazing green eyes on the portrait. “Now that that’s done, next question. Did you or did you not smell Severus’ bonding mark with Harry?”

Dumbledore rubbed his eyes and groaned. “If you would cease hitting me—”

“Answer the fucking question, Albus.” Remus’ teeth came out, and perhaps because Dumbledore had no desire to meet a fully transformed werewolf—Harry dared not think the man cared enough to wish to spare them from the same fate—the portrait gave in.

“Yes, I smelled it. I smell it now. What does this have to do with an—”

“Last question,” said Harry in a sharp tone, cutting across him. “And this is the one you had best be truthful with. Do you still smell Severus’ horcrux?”

Dumbledore sighed. “Of course I do. He has to die, Harry. It’s the on—oh. Oh dear gods.” He doubled over and clutched his chest. “What in the world is this?”

“The Truth or Pain curse, Dumbledore,” said a triumphant Lily. “Either you answer honestly, or you suffer increasing pain until you do. Keep lying to us, and it will soon rival the Cruciatus. So, try again. Do you still smell Severus’ horcrux?”
Dumbledore panted and clutched his chest. “I wasn’t l-lying. He still lives, so the horcrux must still ex-exist … oh gods.”

“Sniff him and tell us the truth, you slimy piece of shite,” Harry snarled, “or I set you ablaze in ten seconds, and it won’t be bluebell fire this time!”

Dumbledore was pale and shaking, but he smelled Severus’ outstretched arm and gasped. “But … I do not understand. How can it be?”

Harry grinned. “It’s gone? You don’t smell it any longer?”

“No.” Dumbledore gasped and straightened. “Merlin, that is a cruel curse.”

“Not half so cruel as you have been.” Severus’ voice was soft and full of pain.

“I … I was only trying to win the war, Severus. I was only trying to make all the pain and death and misery stop, even if I had to make sacrifices along the way.”

“Sacrifices?” Lily’s eyes blazed. “You didn’t make sacrifices, old man. You sacrificed people. You let them die, set their towns ablaze, broke their hearts and souls into bits—and all for nothing. There was always a better way. Just like when you insisted that Severus had to die, and all along, Harry had the ability to save him.” She scoffed. “You’re blind, Albus. Blind and egotistical and foolish, and if not for my son, you would have cost us everything with your folly.”

Dumbledore blinked down tears and looked to the man who had loved him like a father for twenty years. “S-Severus, I am sorry. I truly believed it was the only way.”

“You were unwilling to search for other ways.” Severus turned away, standing tall and brave despite the tears on his lashes. “I have one further question for you, Albus, and then, if I never see you again, it will be too soon.”

He blinked, and his tears tracked down his cheeks. Harry longed to kiss them away, but sensed that for this moment, Severus needed to appear strong on his own two feet. He gave the man an encouraging smile and a nod and hoped it helped, at least a little.

Severus’ voice came out smooth and without a break. “Did you ever truly care about me, Albus? About any of us?”

Dumbledore clutched his chest again, but Harry didn’t think it was from the curse this time.

The old man murmured in a broken voice, “I loved you, Severus. I still love you.”

When the curse did not hit the portrait again, Harry didn’t know if that made everything a little better or much worse. If Dumbledore truly loved Severus, how could he have been so terribly cruel to him?

Harry shook his head. However much Dumbledore might have loved Severus, he loved his plots and plans and ‘the greater good’ more.

“Enough,” said a disgusted Remus. “We have our answers. Send him back to whatever punishment Minerva has devised for him.”

Lily nodded. “One more thing, Albus. Take the geis off the portraits. It’s cruel to force them to parrot your lies.”

“I cannot,” said Dumbledore in a low, broken voice, “but Minerva can. I will tell her how when I
next return to Hogwarts. Will you at least remove the curse?”

Lily laughed viciously. “Oh no. No, after the little stunt you pulled this morning, I believe we’ll leave that one on you. Your lying days are over, old man.”

Dumbledore sighed and bowed his head. “Very well. I am sorry to have hurt you all so very much. I did try.”

“The problem with that answer, Albus,” said Severus softly, “is that it is so very vague that it borders on untruth. You tried, yes, but what did you try to do?” He shook his head. “Do not answer that. I do not want to know.” With a flick of his hand, the paralysing spell dissipated. “Go. I cannot bear to look at you any longer.”

Dumbledore sighed and vanished, and Severus crumbled. Harry ran and caught him in his arms, kissing the tears from his mate’s face.

“Oh gods, love. I’m so sorry. I know it hurts, but it’s not all bad, right? The horcrux is gone! We’re going to live, okay? We’re going to live, and then we’re going to kick his arse for all the bad things he did to us.”

Severus sighed into Harry’s hair and held him close. “No. We are going to live, and then we are going to move on with our lives. We are going to end this war, then we are going to bond and start a family. We will not let his darkness poison us any longer. We will be better men.”

Harry smiled and slipped his hands into Severus’ “Yeah. Yeah, we will.”

Severus held Harry in his lap and tried to sort out his emotions. Everything Dumbledore had done had hurt, but, with Severus’ horcrux gone, at least he had the future with Harry to look forward to, and nothing but time stood between them and Riddle now. All the horcruxes were gone. They had only to find a way to kill the bastard with Harry’s powers, and the war was as good as won. Then they could really begin to live.

And that, he supposed, was worth all the sacrifices he had made to get here.

“I am glad the bastard told me to seek you out for Sanctuary after all, Harry.” He hugged his love tight. “Whatever his intentions were, so much good has come of it.”

Harry smiled and kissed his cheek. “I’m glad too. I have a family again.”

“Yes. Always.” Severus buried his face in Harry’s hair and sighed. “It is worth it. You are worth it.”

Harry slid his hand into Severus’ and frowned as he passed the bandage around the man’s arm. “Sev, what are we going to do about Painted Lady? She’s a living creature now and I can’t just let her die, but I don’t know how to help her.”

Lily patted his hand. “You’re a Dragoon, love. You can make a new body for her and transfer her over.”

“I can? Merlin!” Harry sat up and grinned. “We’d have the pet problem solved then, yeah, Sev?”

Severus hesitated. “What if she’s tainted? We do not even understand how she has life in the first
“I don’t think she is,” said Remus, “or Dumbledore probably would have smelled it.”

“Well, yes, but even so, how does she have life? Is it Riddle’s soul within her, or her own?”

“Since she’s dying without Riddle’s horcrux present,” said Remus, “she most likely drew from the soul within the horcrux to power her own life. The bastard did make the tattoos capable of responding to magic, so the only explanation I can think of is that when he put the horcrux in you, the snake recognised the magic and slowly responded to it, developing a life of her own in time.” He scratched his head. “Well, it’s a bit farfetched, but then, so is a living tattoo.”

Severus shuddered and went cold. “But that would mean this is Riddle’s soul and we must destroy it before we can kill him!”

“No, no,” said Remus with a frown. “You misunderstand me. If it was Riddle’s soul, Albus would have smelled it and jumped on that to force you to die, prick that he is. So it has to be her own life, but to gain it, she must have used the neighbouring power of Riddle’s soul to create her own. Does that make sense?”

“Not at all,” said a bemused Harry.

Severus felt the same, and he had made a lifelong practice of studying obscure magics.

“Boys,” said Lily with a chuckle, “you’re all worried about something that’s actually moot. When a Dragoon revives a dying animal, the part that’s injured is made brand new. Since she’s soul sick, she’ll get a brand new spirit when Harry revives her. There won’t be any trace of Riddle or his darkness left. It’ll be like she was just born, only with memories.”

“But then what do we do with the trace of her left in Severus?”

Lily shrugged. “Without Painted Lady, it will die on its own. Soul fragments are entirely dependent on their containers.”

Severus trembled. “And if it considers its container to be myself?”

“It wouldn’t have aligned with Painted Lady in the first place if it did. However, if it does implant in you through some odd twist of fate, I’ll clean that fragment from you, Sev. Since it’s not a horcrux woven in with your own soul, it won’t hurt you.”

Severus swallowed a lump of fear. “You … you’re sure, Lils?”

“Yes, Sev. It’s okay. Harry can save Painted Lady without risking the war or hurting you. It’s just a matter of getting her to trust a trainee Dragoon with her essence.”

“Um … I don’t even trust myself with it.” Harry stared at the snake tattoo with eyes full of pain. “What do I do, Mum? I don’t know how to transfer her.”

Lily rubbed her chin. “Well, I’m not a Dragoon, but when your da did that for injured animals, he always just called upon his magic to make the body, then he asked them for their trust. He said everything else after that was pure instinct.”

Harry nodded hesitantly. “But how do I call upon my magic?”

“Well, with him, it was a bit like meditation. He just closed his eyes and asked his core for help with
what he needed. The life-fire within him did the rest.”

Harry gulped. “Well, I guess I could try it. She’s no worse off if I fail.”

“True enough,” said Severus. “Though I still worry about whether it is wise to risk it.”

“She’ll be fine, Severus,” said Remus. “With a new body and new soul, Riddle will have no
connection to link to. Harry might as well be creating a new snake rather than saving a dying one.”

Severus sighed and acknowledged him with a nod. “That is reasonable.” He sighed and laid his arm
palm-up in Harry’s hands. “Very well. Go ahead and try to save her, but I refuse to call her ‘Painted
Lady’ if you do manage it.”

Harry pouted. “Well, what would you like to call her then?”

Severus thought a moment. “Zera.”

“Zera?”

“A name I once heard in a story and liked. It means ‘reborn.’”

Harry grinned. “Perfect. All right, give me a moment and pray this works.”

Severus petted Harry’s hair with his free hand while his mate hissed over the snake. After a while,
Harry closed his eyes and brought his knees in tight, and when he opened them, the body of a cobra
had formed at his feet. A bright turquoise cobra. The colour reminded Severus of the light in Harry’s
eyes when they made love.

She would be a good companion, he supposed, if Harry could truly save her life.

Harry hissed something—it sounded almost like a song—and then the snake stirred. Severus drew
back his feet in case she was startled—one did not toy with a cobra, after all—and watched as a
fragment of blue light left his arm and moved to rest between Harry’s palms. The young man
watched the snake for a moment, and when she took a breath, he turned teal-blas ing eyes upon his
hands, sending the grain of blue light up in flames.

“Merlin!” Severus jumped back and gripped the sofa arm. “What was that about, Harry?”

“I was making sure all the remaining soul magic inside you is gone. I burned it with death—I think it
was death anyway—to make sure it couldn’t regenerate.”

“Reaper fire,” said Lily with a grin. “It’s okay, Sev. He just did instinctively the exact same ritual I
had planned to do with you when he had finished. It’s okay.”

Relieved, Severus looked at his arm to check the damage.

The mark was gone. Besides the remaining burns, his arm looked as clean and clear as it had in his
youth. Severus wanted to weep with the sheer joy of it.

He was finally free!

“Harry! The mark—it is completely gone!”

Harry grinned and grabbed his hand. “It’s because Zera’s here, now. I hope that means this worked.”
He hissed in sibilant tones to the snake, no doubt trying to wake her and check on her well-being.
Just then, the snake opened her eyes and lifted her head.

Severus moved his feet onto the couch, just in case. “Is she well, Harry?”

Harry leaned down to the creature and hesitantly petted her head, hissing softly to the cobra. She closed her eyes and flicked her tongue along Harry’s palm. With a bright grin, he looked up and nodded.

“She’s fine, Sev, and she says she loves the name Zera and her new colour. I guess she’s ours now, yeah?”

“If she will also accept me.” Severus held out a shaking hand and waited, wincing as the creature hissed.

“She says not to be afraid,” Harry said with a smile.

Severus nodded and tried to swallow his fear. The big snake came close and nuzzled his fingers, and Severus could not help but tremble. That snake could kill in half a moment if she bit him. He sighed at the feeling of her tongue against his palm—the sign that she had accepted him as her wizard family and would not hurt him.

“I suppose that means she is ours.”

Harry laughed and let the snake crawl over his shoulders and around his arms. Severus had to admit, he looked undeniably sexy like that.

“We started our family a bit earlier than we meant to, Sev,” said Harry in a worried voice. “Is that okay?”

“Of course it is. We are bonded mates now. Time is irrelevant.” He patted his lap. “Come and sit with me. I need my family close after the day this has been.”

“Merlin, you aren’t kidding,” said Remus with a chuckle. “And it’s not even noon.”

“I am still working on the day before,” said Severus with a grimace.

Harry held out his hands. “Then come on, love. Let’s get some sleep. Zera and I are both exhausted now anyway, and, at least for the moment, we don’t have anything to fear.”

Severus sighed, the relief of that statement washing away twenty years of grief. “All right, love. Lupin, Lily, I will speak with you after we wake.”

The wolf couple bid him goodnight, and he followed Harry into their bedroom for some much needed rest.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Warnings: Slash sex. If you don’t want to read it, skip the last section. Also a discussion of potential MPreg in the middle. They don’t act on the possibility yet.

This is basically a super fluffy, happy chapter before we get back into the war. I figured Harry and Sev deserved a fun family Christmas for once. Also, the sex at the end is intense enough that I think this needs to go up a rating point (again).

CHAPTER 26

Harry woke up feeling warm and safe with Severus’ long limbs wrapped around him. At first, he didn’t recall where they were. Then the events of the previous day smacked into him with the force of a speeding lorry. Dumbledore. Remus. Mum. Zera. The last horcrux.

Harry gave a little sobbing sigh and caught Severus into his arms. It was gone! Harry had destroyed the horcrux, without hurting his beloved Sev.

Well, no. Harry had hurt Severus a bit, but the man’s arm was healing well now that the poison was gone from it. It was certainly better than losing Severus altogether like Dumbledore had tried to orchestrate.

A flash of fury sparked through Harry, but then he remembered that it was Christmas Eve and he would get to spend it with his family. Not even Dumbledore could put a damper on that joy.

Maybe he could help his mum make a nice dinner for them. It would be a nice change to cook with someone rather than as a slave. Besides, Harry didn’t have any other gifts to give his new family. A nice meal might make up for that.

Next year, he promised himself. Next year he would buy out a store for them all. For this one, he was content just to have his family near.

He cuddled into Severus’ neck, breathing in that herbal vanilla scent he loved so much. Severus groaned and snuggled him back.

“It is too bloody early.”

Harry snickered. “Sev, it’s like three in the afternoon.”

“Still too early.” He nuzzled Harry’s neck. “Mhn. I believe I shall sleep until bedtime, and then sleep again.”

Harry laughed, then grew serious. “If you need to. Are you still sick from the horcrux?”

Severus shook his head and sighed into Harry’s hair. “Not at all. I feel better than I have done for years.” He pressed an open-mouthed kiss to Harry’s throat and made the young man squirm. “Especially now that I have a beautiful bonded mate to call my own.”
Harry blinked. “Ah, damn.”

Severus sat and gave him a fearful look. “What? Do you not want to bond with me now?”

Harry brought him into a tender kiss. “Ssh. I was just thinking that I should have asked you to bond with me today.”

“Hmm? Why?”

“Because it’s Christmas Eve and I could have made it like a gift. I don’t have anything else to give you.”

Severus chuckled into Harry’s neck. “I am fairly certain it was Christmas Eve when you asked me. So let us consider it my gift.” He kissed Harry with love and affection. “It was the greatest gift I have ever received. You gave me a family, love, and I have always longed for that.”

Harry grinned and rolled Severus onto his back, straddling him. “And you gave me you. Feeling you all around me, watching you come apart in my arms, gods, Severus. It was brilliant. Definitely the best gift ever.”

Severus’ lips parted, and he rocked into Harry with a soft pant. “Keep talking like that, and you shall have me again.”

“Oh, I don’t mind that idea at all.” He frowned and sat up. “But I need the loo first. My breath smells like something died in there.”

Severus burst into laughter. “As you wish, love.”

Harry smiled and stroked his hair. “I’m glad you’re laughing again. I missed it.”

“I do not know if I will always be able to—I am still so relieved to be alive—but I do not know how long it will last.”

Harry kissed the tip of his nose. “It’s okay. If you need to mourn, Sev, I’ll be there for you. I promise.” He squirmed again. “But I really do need the loo. We’ll talk in a minute, yeah?”

“Hmm. Hurry and take care of your needs, then allow me to, and perhaps we might shower together?”


Harry darted away, leaving behind a laughing Severus, and Zera, too.

After Harry had gone, Severus sat and started to stretch, only to find their new cobra staring at him from the foot of the bed. He gulped and held out a cautious hand. She sniffed him with nostrils and tongue, then butted her head against his hand. Severus smiled and stroked her with careful, gentle fingers.

“Hello, Zera. I do hope you are well now that you have a life of your own.”

The snake bobbed her head and wound around Severus’ arm. He watched, fascinated, as she
slithered around his shoulders, coming around to rest her head on his collarbones.

“I take it you are happy here with Harry and myself?”

Her tongue flicked against Severus’ neck.

Harry dashed back into the room, face washed and cheeks flushed. “Okay, I’m done. You can have th—oh.”

Severus looked up to find Harry watching him with fierce desire in his eyes. Severus swallowed, wondering what he looked like half naked with a snake wound around his torso.

“Dear gods,” Harry said with a breathless pant. “That may be the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. Thank you for that, Zera.”

She hissed something against Severus’ throat that made Harry snort.

“What did she say?”

“Only that she would prefer that we remove her from your neck before we start mating like rabbits.”

Severus chuckled. “Of course.” He petted the snake once more and gently unwound her from his body. “Here you are, milady.” He set her on the floor and motioned to the door. “I am guessing you are likely quite hungry by now—”

She hissed and bobbed her head.

“That was a yes,” said Harry.

Severus shot him a wry look. “I could follow her gestures, thank you. Zera, You may go into the city, but take care not to be seen.” He cast a camouflaging spell upon her. “There, that should help. Only make sure you avoid people, pets, and livestock. Hunt in the woods.”

Zera—just visible with the spell making her blend in with her surroundings—bobbed her head and slithered away.

Harry gave Severus a bemused look. “Why the camouflage spell?”

“She is too bright to have much success hunting without it.”

Harry winced. “Oh. I wonder if I can give her that ability.”

“I do believe you can. We shall confirm it with Lily later. For now … your schedule is full.”

Harry blushed and gave Severus a big grin.

Severus wrapped a bathrobe around his shoulders and went to the door. “Come in when you hear the shower start.”

He left with those words and took care of his needs. A wicked smile crossed his face as he started the shower—speaking of Christmas gifts, he had a few up his sleeve.

Ah, the wonders of magic.

Harry scampered in, a bright smile on his face. “I think Mum and Remus must be asleep. They’d surely have come to check on us otherwise.”
Severus gave a low chuckle and swept Harry into his arms. “Or they have the good sense to know we are bonded mates in the first stages of our union and have left us well enough alone.”

Harry smirked as he slid Severus’ robe off his shoulders. “Fair warning, that won’t change, not even when we’ve been bonded for years.”

Severus kissed Harry with ardour, cast a heavy silencing and locking charm upon the door, and slipped his hands under the young man’s trousers. “No. It won’t.”

Harry walked out of the shower feeling a bit dazed. Gods, the things Severus could do with his tongue. His knees were still wobbling when he was fully dressed and had brushed his teeth and hair.

Severus’ arms enfolded him from behind, and a gentle kiss fell upon his earlobe. “I am happy with you, Harry. For the first time in my life, I am happy.”

Harry smiled and laced his fingers with his mate’s. “I’ll do everything I can to make sure you stay that way, my angel.”

Severus snorted. “I believe that should be my pet name for you, my beloved. After all, I am not the one with wings.”

Harry chuckled. “Mm, call me whatever you like so long as you stay.”

“Always.” Severus straightened and Summoned a comb. “As I said, I am happy with you. I have no reason to leave.”

Harry watched Severus comb his hair and had the sudden desire to show his mate a kind of affection he doubted the man had ever felt. Harry took the man’s comb and hopped onto the sink counter.

“I’ll do that.” He caressed Severus’ hair and cheek as he gently combed the man’s hair and watched wonder and peace fill his mate’s dark eyes.

“I have … never been so cared for,” Severus whispered. “Never so loved.”

Harry nuzzled his nose and kissed the tip. “And you will never again be without it.”

Severus gave him a bright smile, the brightest Harry had ever seen upon his sorrowful mate’s face. He vowed to bring that expression out as much as he could. Severus deserved joy.

When Harry had finished with his mate’s hair, he kissed Severus lightly and jumped down from the sink. His legs were a bit numb, but it was a small price to pay for Severus’ happiness. He shook himself out and laid the comb on the sink.

“Come on, love. I reckon we’d best show our faces before Mum and Remus think we’ve drowned in here.”

Severus laughed and followed Harry out of the loo. When they came to the living room, Lily and Remus were hanging a garland of holly and poinsettia, and piles of wrapped gifts filled one corner of the room, stacked three high under a squat little tree. The room smelled of cinnamon and pine, and Harry’s heart filled with glee. His first real Christmas with his family! He had dreamed of this all his life.
“Mum! Where’d you get all this?”

Lily grinned. “Remus and I tested the barrier—it’s really down! We’re free!”

Severus smiled and kissed her cheek. “I am glad. You have suffered here alone far too long.”

She nodded. “I couldn’t wait to see the world again, so while you two were sleeping, Remus and I went into Godric’s Hollow and shopped like mad.” Her smile turned dark. “Let Dumbledore try to say I’m dead now that all of the village has seen me again.”

Harry took the garland from her and shook his head. “None of that. It’s Christmas Eve, and we’re going to celebrate it like a family for once. We’re not going to think of the bearded bastard or the snake-eyed menace. We’re going to decorate this place like a home and cook Christmas dinner and enjoy each other’s company.”

Lily grinned and invited Severus to take the next part of garland up for her. “That sounds lovely, baby. We’ll make up for all those years we had to be apart.”

Harry blushed. “Well, Sev and I don’t have anything to give.”

“Baby, just having the both of you home is the best Christmas present I have ever had in my entire life. That’s more than enough for me.”

Harry grinned. “For me, too. Still, maybe we could go into town before all the shops close, love?”

Severus cast a *Tempus* and shook his head. “It’s gone five, Harry. By the time we make it to the village, everything will have closed.”

Harry sighed. “Well, then you’ll just have to wait a bit, all right, Mum? Once we get a break from this war and I can get into Gringotts again, I’ll buy gifts for the lot of you—eighteen years’ worth.”

Lily chuckled and gave Harry a kiss on the cheek. “Love, I don’t think children buy presents for their families until … well, until they’re old enough to have money.”

Harry gave her an obstinate pout. “I’m still doing it.”

She grinned and Summoned a box of tree decorations. “If it makes you happy, go for it. Just don’t spend all your money in one place, hmm?”

Harry laughed and returned to the garlands.

Remus jumped down and kissed Lily’s cheek. “Now that our lovebirds are finished, I am going to take a bath, love. I still feel all the aches of the full moon.”

Severus frowned. “Wait, Lupin.” He flicked his wand and Summoned a potion from his rucksack. “Put five drops of this in your bath water. It should relax your muscles and ease the pain.”

Remus grinned as he took the potion. “Thank you, Severus. It’s always nice to have a potions master in the family.”

Severus fixed him with a dark glare.

Remus smirked. “Too soon?”

“Go take your bath, wolf!”
Remus left with a barking laugh. Harry chuckled with him and smiled over his shoulder.

“Thanks, Sev.”

“Humph.” Severus returned to helping Harry with the garland. “Just because I did not wish to hear him howling all day . . . .”

Harry snorted. “Uh-huh. Sure, that’s why you did it.”

“Impertinent brat.”

“You wouldn’t have me any other way.”

Severus’ glare softened. “No.” He stuck a portion of the garland to the wall and moved on to the next section. “Lils, now that Lupin is . . . otherwise occupied, might you tell us why you suggested that Harry . . . take the dominant position in our marital relations?”

Harry choked and almost dropped his garland. “Sev!”

“What? We need to know.”

Lily gave a wry laugh. “That you do.” She hung a candy cane on the tree and shook her head. “Merlin, you’re going to be so embarrassed, but there’s no help for it.” She set her box aside and motioned to the couch. “I think you’d best sit for this discussion. We can work on the room once I know you’re not going to faint on me.”

“Faint?” Harry gulped and stepped down from his chair. “Dear Merlin. Is it that bad?”

She gave him a soft smile. “Not bad, just shocking. But sit.”

Harry obeyed, pulling Severus down beside him. “Okay, what is it?”

Lily perched on the armchair beside the sofa. “Harry, remember how I said that Dragoons can create life?”

Harry gave her a hesitant nod. “Yeah?”

“Well, they can do it the traditional way, too. By having babies, I mean.”

“Okay . . . ?”

She chuckled wryly. “Harry, I’m saying that you and Sev can have a family together.”

Harry frowned. “Well, of course we can. We were talking about adopting a child from Blackpool once we’re ready for that step.”

Lily frowned and shook her head. “No. I mean you can make a family together. A family of your own.”

Harry blinked. “I’m . . . not getting it.”

“Get to the point, Lils,” Severus said.

Lily sighed and shrugged. “Well, I was trying to be gentle, but if you want it blunt—you can get pregnant and carry children, Harry.”
Harry jumped to his feet, shock and alarm rushing through him. “What? But I … I’m a man! And Sev’s a man. How is that remotely possible?”

She waved him back down. “Yes, you’re a man. You’re also part Dragoon, love, and Dragonos are all about life. So … when a male Dragoon prefers other males, well, their life magic makes a way for them to reproduce.”

Severus tugged Harry back into his seat and held the man’s waist. His eyes were shining with hope and love. “You mean it, Lils? Harry and I can have children of our own one day?”

“Well, if he’s willing.”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Sev, I, I dunno if I’m ready for that. I mean, how does it even work?”

Lily frowned and rubbed her chin. “Well, I don’t know all the details. James just warned me of this when you were born, Harry, because he noticed you had unusual anatomy.”

Harry gaped. “Wait just a minute—I’m a man, Mum. I don’t have any female parts.”

“Not outside, love, but inside, you do. You have a womb, though without ovaries or other female organs.”

Harry shook his head. “Then how is it possible for me to be pregnant? Wouldn’t there have to be something to … mix? I’d have to have eggs, wouldn’t I?”

“Not for a Dragoon. It’s your magic that makes the baby, not your physical body. Your very magic is life, so the moment Sev tops you and his magic blends with yours, well, you run a risk of getting up the duff.”

Severus rubbed a soothing hand down Harry’s spine. “Even with him being part-Reaper as well?”

She nodded. “If it wasn’t possible, Harry wouldn’t have been born the way he was.”

Harry let out a huff of shock and flopped into Severus’ side. “I … I can’t believe this.”

“I’m sorry, love. I had hoped it would make you happy.”

Harry gave a dark chuckle. “It’s just one more thing to make me different, isn’t it?”

Severus pulled Harry into his lap. “One more thing to make you lovely. Gods, I … I never thought …” He kissed Harry’s ear. “I do understand this is not something you are ready for, not yet, but the hope that we might one day have a child of our own blood is … beautiful to me, Harry.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “I … I’m glad it doesn’t repulse you.”

“Repulse me? I love you all the more for it.”

Harry sighed, one fear resolved with Severus’ happy acceptance of his … oddity. Still, he wasn’t quite ready to embrace the concept yet.

“Mum, how does it work? I mean, I’m a man. Where does the baby come out? Not there, surely?”

She choked and scowled with disgust. “Dear gods, are you mad? That would be entirely unsanitary.”
“Well, where else could it go? I don’t have a … um ….”

Lily’s lips twitched. “A vagina?”

“Yeah, that.”

She grinned. “Merlin, you’re so innocent, Harry. They’re just words.”

“Oi!”

She laughed. “Keep your pants on. And no, Harry, you don’t have a birth canal. Which means there is only one way for the baby to come out.”

Severus held Harry’s stomach. “A caesarean?”

“Yes. That means they have to cut into your belly to get the baby out, Harry.”

The blood drained from Harry’s face. “Cut into me?”

Lily smiled. “Yes, love. Women do that all the time and come out perfectly fine. It’s a normal procedure whenever there’s a need for it. Sometimes the baby is too big for the mum, or sometimes the baby goes into distress and they have to get them out quickly, or sometimes, like you, they simply don’t have another way out. It’s normal, Harry.”

“For a woman, yeah, but I’m not a woman!”

Severus stroked Harry’s stomach and kissed his hair. “Peace, beloved. I will simply research a male contraceptive for Dragoons and then we have nothing to worry about.”

Harry turned in Severus’ arms and gave his mate a searching look. “But you want this.”

“You do not, so I am well enough with adoption. My only concern is that … we live so long, Harry, and a pure human will not. A child of our own will grow at a similar rate, but ….”

“But any child we adopt—unless we should happen to find another Reaper—will die long before we do.” Harry shuddered and buried his face in Severus’ shoulder. “D’you still even want to adopt, knowing this?”

Severus gave him a hesitant nod. “As we said, it would be sanctifying. And whether the child lives long or not, as long as he or she has breath, I will love them. And afterwards.”

“But … losing them would hurt so much.”

“Yes. Hence wishing for a child of our own blood to mitigate that pain. However, if you are not able, then we shall just adopt more children when we are healed enough after the first. Perhaps we should do so anyway. Regardless, I have always wished for a family, love, and however you are able to share that with me, it will be enough.”

Harry smiled and kissed his mate, relief and love surging through him with Severus’ gentle acceptance.

“All right.” He nuzzled Severus’ nose. “Might we adopt first, then? Just to give me time to get used to the idea?”

“Of course.” Severus held Harry tight and kissed his forehead. “You are lovely, Harry. So perfect. I never imagined I would have such joy.”
Harry blushed and buried his face in Severus’ hair. “Sev … I love you too, but might’n’t we turn the mush down in front of my mum?”

Behind him, Lily burst into laughter. “Oh, tosh. I’m just going to decorate the tree. Harry, want to help?”

Harry gave Severus a quick kiss and dashed to his mother’s side. “Yeah! It’s my first time, though, so you’ll have to teach me.”

“Not a problem. Just look for the empty spots and put decorations there. Not too close together, now ….”

As Harry and Lily decorated the tree, Severus hung garlands and fairy lights with a heart full of hope for the future. Merlin, they could really have a family. The idea filled him with a sort of heady anticipation. He could not keep a smile from his face. A family! Gods. It was everything he had ever wanted.

As he looked around the room, seeing Harry and Lily laughing together, as it always should have been, incredible peace and joy filled his heart. They were together now, and whether Harry could ever embrace the idea of bearing for Severus or not, Severus felt at home. He had a place again, a place and a family who loved and accepted him, and plans to grow that family with Harry soon.

He could not have asked for a better Christmas gift.

“Oh, Harry?” Lily’s voice was low and secretive. “I just want to tell you this now before Remus comes back out. It’s too early to be sure, but all the scans are coming back positive and … and I ….”

Harry turned a bemused look on his mother. “What?”

“I … I’m pregnant, love. You’re going to have a baby sibling soon, well, if they pull through the first few—mmph!”

Harry caught his mother into a tight hug and squealed with delight. “Oh, Mum! Remus doesn’t know?”

“It’s in one of his cards as a surprise for tomorrow. I just wanted to give you a heads up in case you weren’t happy … you know?”

“Not happy! Do you know how long I’ve wanted a little brother or sister? I’m chuffed!”

Lily grinned and hugged him tight. “I’m so glad, but don’t get too set on it. Sometimes pregnancies don’t hold in the first few weeks. It’s sad, but it happens. So far though, everything looks good. The baby appears to be developing normally for such a wee little thing, so there’s hope.”

Harry placed a hand on her belly. “If anything goes wrong on your scans, let me know. I’ll try to heal it.”

She gave him a bright grin. “Wonderful! I don’t know if I could endure a miscarriage too, after everything ….” Her smile faded, and tears formed on her lashes.

“You won’t.” Harry kissed her cheek. “I’ll do everything I can to make sure my little brother or sister
Severus came to her and laid a hand on her shoulder. “I will aid you with potions as well. I will craft a nutrient mix for you based on your personal body composition that will help the foetus thrive.”

She smiled and wiped her eyes. “Thank you, both of you. Just keep quiet until Remus opens his card, yeah?”

Harry dragged a finger across his chest. “Cross my heart.”

She grinned and squeezed her son tight. “Merlin, I’m so happy. My grown baby is finally home and we have a new one on the way.”

“So am I!” Harry gave his mum a shy smile. “You know, maybe watching you with this little one, it might give me courage for my own, yeah?”

She smiled and kissed Harry’s cheek. “It might. You’ll just have to stay close to your mum so you can see how things develop, yeah?”

Harry nodded. “Sounds like a plan.” With a grin, he went back to decorating the tree.

Severus’ heart soared. Lily was pregnant! And Harry wanted to pay attention to the whole process. The knowledge gave Severus hope that, one day, he and Harry would experience a similar moment for themselves.

Until then, just knowing he had a real family again was enough.

Just then, a familiar tabby Patronus jumped through the walls, and Severus’ heart sank into his feet. Gods, what foul trick had Dumbledore pulled now? Harry stood beside him and wrapped an arm around Severus’ waist, a silent show of support that the older man appreciated.

The tabby went to Severus and sat, waiting for his attention. With a sad sigh for the loss of his joy, he tapped the feline’s forehead and urged her to speak.

“Severus, I just wanted you to know that the Order knows you’re honest and loyal and has denounced Albus. We have also removed his portrait from the headmaster’s office. I thought, if you ever wanted to resume your previous post, the sight of him would likely turn you away. So he has been relegated to the third floor corridor where that three-headed beast once was. I doubt he will find much audience for his schemes there, although he did seem curiously honest and helpful this afternoon. I wonder, did you have something to do with that, Severus?”

The tabby gave a little chirruping sound and rubbed Severus’ feet. “Happy Christmas, all of you. I hope this makes it a little better, despite the pain that man has caused.”

The cat vanished, leaving a smirking Severus behind. Harry met his eyes, and the two of them burst into laughter.

Harry choked out between giggles, “Fluffy’s corridor! I’ll bet it still smells like dog. Serves him right, the old coot.”

“Fluffy?” Lily gave Harry a curious look. “I don’t believe I’ve heard this story.”

Severus grinned wickedly. “Oh? Then do let me enlighten you.”

Harry groaned. “Must you?”
“I must indeed. Your mother deserves to know what a recalcitrant brat you were in your early years. Perhaps you are overdue for some … parental guidance?”

Harry sighed and returned to decorating the tree. “Sorry in advance, Mum.”

Severus chuckled and settled into his tale.

Harry’s ears were still ringing by the time Potterwatch came on for the evening. Severus hadn’t spared him—at all—while sharing his childhood misadventures with his mum, and Lily had raked him over the coals for most of it.

When all was said and done, however, she had brought Harry into a hug and told him she was proud of his bravery.

She also gave him the warning that if he ever ran off half-cocked again, she’d ground him for a month.

Harry just laughed and shrugged it off. He was a mated man with a life and a family of his own. There was no way in hell anyone was grounding him—not after the Dursleys. He was done with arbitrary punishments for as long as he lived, so help him. Judging by the look in Severus’ eyes and the thoughts bleeding into Harry’s mind, he felt the same way.

“If you are quite finished treating my fully-grown mate like a child,” said an aggravated Severus, “it is time for the radio show.”

Lily huffed. “You started this, Mister, but yes, I believe I’ve had my say.”

Remus kissed Lily’s cheek. “Love, you can’t ground him. Harry hasn’t been a child since … well, in a very long time. Besides that, the Dursleys were more than enough punishment for a lifetime.”

Her eyes flashed. “Yes, indeed. Remind me to make a trip to Surrey when this is all over.”

“They aren’t there anymore,” Harry said with a shrug. “I don’t know where they are.”

“Oh, but Minerva does,” said a viciously grinning Severus. “I imagine it would not be so difficult to get their address from her after this is over so that we might … say goodbye.”

Harry gave a wry snort. “Only you can make something so mundane sound terrifying. But Sev, Mum, it doesn’t matter. It’s over now. They can’t hurt me any longer.”

“Oh, but they can.” Severus cupped Harry’s cheek. “Every time you cling to me in the desperate fear that I will leave you, simply because I need a moment to think, I see them hurt you. Every time you brush your needs and emotions aside because you think they don’t matter, I see them hurt you. Every time I hear you crying out at night, fearful your fat demon of an uncle will put you back in the cupboard, they hurt you. When you forget to eat, forget to drink, even push aside your need for a loo—they hurt you. And when you let all of this go as if your past hurts mean nothing, they are hurting you even now.”

Harry could not respond. He was too busy struggling to keep his raging emotions in check. How had Severus noticed all of that? Harry himself hadn’t even realised he had so many tells. He had tried so
hard to hide all evidence of his past.

He should have known a spy would see through it.

Severus clutched a shaking Harry close. “I will not let them get away with what they have done. I will not let them poison you forever. You need closure, love. You need to know you are worth a bit of a ruckus. You are worth everything. And I will not let you continue to believe otherwise.”

Harry curled into his shoulder and buried a sniffle in his robe. “I … I didn’t realise it was so bad.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s hair. “You are not bad, Harry. Nor is it bad to show the damage they have done—Merlin knows I am damaged as well—but neither can I let it go, knowing that your desire to do so stems from the belief that you are not worth the trouble it will take to set them right.”

“I just want to move on and start our family together, Sev. That’s all I want.”

“And we will, after we put your relatives in their place.”

Harry gave it up as a bad job, knowing Severus would not give in. And perhaps he was right not to.

“A-all right. Just … don’t be too mean. I don’t want to start off our life together with you in Azkaban.”

Severus nodded. “They deserve the worst curses in my arsenal, but I shall not use them. For your sake, I shall temper my actions with mercy.”

“Thank you. And that goes for the rest of you. Mum, don’t use any Unspeakable curses on them. Remus, don’t gnaw off their legs.”

Remus chuckled. “Not their legs, of course. Perhaps a finger or two?”

Harry glared.

“I was teasing, Harry. Merlin. You know I don’t chew off people’s limbs.”

“You know what I meant, Remus.”

“Yes, yes. I shall keep my wand—and my teeth—to myself. Mostly. I know a little hex that would be perfect for them.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “A hex, not a curse?”

Remus nodded. “It’s not really dark. It just returns the pain that the ‘victims’ have given out to everyone in their immediate proximity. It lasts for about a week and activates every night at eight.”

He ruffled his hair and gave Severus a sheepish smile. “We figured everyone would be back from dinner by then.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “We, as in the Marauders? Hmm. This was a hex designed for myself, wasn’t it?”

“Um, yes, but I wouldn’t let James and Sirius near you with it. And I reminded them that it can backfire, if the caster has caused as much or more pain to the recipients. That put them off ever trying it.”

Severus scowled. “It would not have backfired upon them, apparently.”
Remus bowed his head. “No. Apparently not. Still, it wasn’t fair to use it on you.”

Severus nodded. “Thank you. It appears you were breaking your compulsions long before today.”

“It’s not easy to compel a werewolf, so most likely, I broke them several times. He must have recast them over and over without us noticing somehow.”

“Oh we did notice,” said a growling Lily, “and he Obliviated us.”

Severus scowled. “Given how sensitive I am to magic, I am certain that is the more reasonable explanation. Perhaps I can retrieve the memories now that we know they exist.”

“Stop,” said Harry with a frown. “Stop thinking about that arsehole. Today is for family. Our family. So I don’t want to hear anything else about the Dursleys or Dumbledore. Today, we’re celebrating being together, and tomorrow too. The war and the bastards can wait for two days. Especially since Mouldy-pants is still recovering.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, but that’s different. That’s him getting his comeuppance, not us revisiting our wounds.”

Severus tugged Harry into his lap and kissed his mate’s neck. “All right, love. It’s time to turn on the radio, however, and you know Fred and George will have a lot to say about him. They have yet to announce Dumbledore’s betrayal.”

George’s voice came through the speaker. “—And welcome to Potterwatch. Tonight, folks, we’re going to need more than an hour. In fact, I’m guessing that even with the extra hour we’re allowing ourselves, we’re going to run short on time.”

“That’s right, Rapscallion,” said Fred in a sombre voice. “You see, it appears that the man we all looked up to, the one man we believed untouchable, was as corrupt as they come.”

George cried, “The man gave a love potion to our own little sister, for Merlin’s sake! She was perhaps ten when he started dosing her. Ten! She hadn’t even started Hogwarts yet.”

“No, but apparently he wanted a good little wife for Harry Potter, so she had to suffer. And worse, he didn’t start dosing Harry until sixth year, so he didn’t even notice her pain. And still worse, Harry … had some extenuating circumstances and broke through the potion while our sister was still suffering.”

Harry gasped as Lily’s Patronus message played on the radio. “I’m alive, and don’t listen to another
Fred said, “Folks, that was part of a Patronus message to Minerva McGonagall from none other than Lily Evans Potter, less a few details for safety. And it was sent this morning. She’s alive, people. She’s been alive all this time, but Dumbledore kept her prisoner so that Harry would grow up unloved and alone, to turn him into a weapon.”

Harry stifled the urge to punch something.

“You heard us right,” said George with a snarl. “Professor Dumbledore kidnapped Lily Potter and placed her in a magical prison for the crime of loving Harry and saving her son’s life. He tore her baby boy away from her and sent him to live with horrifically abusive relatives, all for the bloody ‘greater good.’ Dear Merlin, I’m so angry I could torch something.”

Lee snorted. “Professor Snape said Harry already did.”

“Right, Professor Snape.” Fred took a deep breath, a gesture Harry knew was an attempt to calm himself. “Speaking of the headmaster, just in case someone heard the portraits in the Headmaster’s office but not Professor McGonagall’s message, let’s just tell you what Dumbledore did to Professor Snape this morning.”

“That’s right,” said Lee with a huff. “You see, everyone, we all got a bit of a surprise last night—and that’s beyond finding out that Lily Potter and Remus Lupin are both alive. That’s right, folks! We found Moony!”

George said, “Couldn’t believe that one, but it was such a relief.”

“One of the few good things we learned last night,” said Fred. “But also among the good was that our own Harry Potter is a unique creature race and Severus Snape is his mate. They’ve bonded, apparently, and are clearly in love.”

“It explained how soft Professor Snape was with him at the rite,” said Lee with a chuckle. “He was already crazy for Harry. We could all see it.”

“That’s right, River,” said Fred. “It was beautiful, how much they were in love. And neither of them even knew it yet!”

George laughed. “No, not yet they didn’t, Rapier, but they figured it out soon after. And the thing is … Dumbledore tried to tear them apart. He had gotten it into his head that Profes—oh, what’s this? A Patronus?”

Lee said, “Whose is it?”

“I have no idea,” said Fred. “Who has a beetle Patronus?”

Harry groaned and buried his face in Severus’ shoulder. “Oh no.”

Severus frowned and nudged Harry closer. “Harry?”

“Well,” said George, “Patronuses can’t hurt us, so there’s only one way to find out.”

After a brief pause, a strident female voice pierced the air. “Hello, boys. This is Rita Skeeter from the Prophet.”
“Well, that explains Harry’s reaction,” said Lily with a wry smile.

Severus nodded and rubbed his mate’s back.

The beetle-woman continued: “I cannot believe my own ears! I would recognise that voice anywhere. Lily Evans Potter, alive! Captured and held prisoner while her son grew up in hell! It’s abominable.”

“So is twisting the words of a child and making him out to be a lunatic,” Lily snapped.

Harry nodded and turned towards his family again. “The entire world will know by lunchtime tomorrow.”

“Good,” said Severus with a wicked grin. “That’s exactly what we wanted, and the world will believe Rita Skeeter, as vile as she is.”

Remus’ expression had more than a bit of Marauder in it. “Indeed they will. She’ll lap up the dramatics and lay it on thick, unfortunately, but she’ll also excoriate him. She’ll be absolutely brutal. By the time she’s through, no one will trust Dumbledore ever again.”

Severus nodded. “It is the perfect revenge against a sociopath.”

Remus grinned. “Exactly. We’re hitting Dumbledore right where it hurts: his reputation. His manipulating days are over, and that will drive him mad.”

Harry’s lips curled up in a grin. “Oh? Well then, this is one time I’m glad to let Rita run riot. Let me just send her a little message ….”

Harry whipped out his stag and gave him a devious grin. “Prongs, this one is for Rita Skeeter. Go ahead and approach no matter who’s with her, unless they’re Death Eaters or Muggles of course. Tell her this: ‘Rita, for the purposes of the story you’re no doubt already penning even as I speak, consider our agreement in fourth year null and void. Just for this story, understand? It’s still in effect for every other article after this, but for tonight, I’m giving you a bit of an early Christmas gift. You officially have free rein to demolish Dumbledore as much as you want, even if you have to emphasise my past or play the poor abused orphan Harry card. Happy Christmas. Just don’t encourage Dumbledore’s lies about Severus, or Riddle’s shite about us being undesirables number whatever it is this week, or I’ll have your hide, and so will the Ministry.’ Go on, Prongs.”

The stag vanished, and Harry looked up to find everyone’s eyes fixed upon him.

Remus raised an eyebrow. “Our agreement?”

Severus added, “And the Ministry will have her hide?”

Harry grinned. “Ask Hermione. It’s her story to tell. For now, let’s sit back and listen while Dumbledore reaps what he sowed.”

Remus gave him a wolfish grin and leaned back into the sofa, draping his arm over Lily’s shoulders. “Sounds good to me.”

Severus gave Harry a look that said the conversation would be continued later, then a smirk. “Seems you still have some stories to tell, Mister Potter.”

“How many times do I have to tell you my name is Harry?”
Severus laughed and tugged his mate into his arms.

Three hours later, Severus was weeping into Harry’s shoulder, but the tears were cleansing. A release of all the pain Dumbledore had caused so he could move on with his mate. They no longer had anything to fear—between Skeeter’s upcoming article and the Patronus messages that kept interrupting the radio show, Severus no longer feared the public’s scorn.

Everything would be okay now. They just had to defeat Riddle, and then they could move on with their lives.

After the show ended, Severus pulled himself together and kissed Harry hard.

“Thank you. I would not have this life if not for you.”

Harry gave him a sheepish smile. “Happy Christmas, love.”

Severus chuckled and snuggled him tight. “Happy Christmas, indeed.”

While the others rested around the fire, Severus roasted chestnuts and Harry made hot chocolate. They spent another hour together, laughing, and welcomed Christmas at midnight with a toast.

It was the best holiday Severus could ever remember having.

Soon after, the family retired to bed. As soon as the door closed behind Severus and Harry, his mate sat upon the bed and called his stag once more.

“Love? What are you doing?”

Harry smirked. “Giving Rita the details so she doesn’t butcher them too badly with her suppositions. Well, everything I safely can.”

Severus grinned and sat beside his mate. “Should I help?”

“Oh, that would be brilliant. Shame we can’t take a photo for her. She’s bound to find some old ones and make us look silly.”

“Oh, but perhaps we can. Patronuses can carry memories, don’t you know? And I have no doubt that Skeeter knows how to remove them.”

Harry rubbed his chin. “Hmm. Do you have a camera?”

“No, but I can conjure one. That is enough for an imprinted photo.”

Harry laughed and draped his arm over his mate’s shoulders. “Well, then what are we waiting for?”

Severus conjured a camera and kissed Harry’s cheek just as the flash went off. Harry blushed and gave him a curious smile.

Severus nuzzled his hair. “The readers will devour that sap with their Christmas turkey. Not to mention, it will show me in a positive light, which can only aid our position.”
“Brilliant!” Harry held him closer. “I do love you, you know? With everything I am.”

Severus banished the camera and whispered in his mate’s ear. “Then, when you are finished with your message, will you show me? Claim me all over again and make me yours?”

Harry’s breath hitched. “Merlin. A-all right.” He dove into his tale with a sappy grin on his face.

Once the stag had gone, Harry pounced his mate, though he retained his human form for the moment.

“You’re mine, love. All mine.”

Severus lifted his hands above his head and tilted up his chin to bare his throat, a show of submission to his dominant mate. “Yes, always yours.”

As he had predicted, the gesture brought out Harry’s creature side. To Severus’ surprise, Harry had gained new features along his forehead and chest. A line of white scales underlined the black strokes surrounding his scar, and a chevron-shaped white line decorated the skin over his heart.

Severus traced the line on his chest with a smile. “Lovely. Do you suppose this is because you have created a life?” He nocked his head toward Zera—who was curled up in the armchair by the bed and fast asleep.

Harry shrugged. “Dunno. As long as you like it, I don’t particularly care, either. Not right now, anyway.”

He claimed Severus’ lips in a fierce kiss, and Severus found he couldn’t care about the new features in that moment, either. He just wanted to celebrate his freedom and his new life with his mate, and feel Harry’s love deep within him.

“Please,” he whispered.

Harry eased them out of their clothing and traced kisses all down Severus’ front.

“Oh, please.”

Heat and wetness sucked him into Harry’s mouth, a soft tongue tracing around the tip, and Severus cried out in pleasure.

“Yes ….”

The zing of a cleaning spell over his entrance shocked Severus. Then Harry spread Severus’ legs and ducked his head, and Severus’ breath exploded from him in a rush of curses. His brain melted into mush at the first stroke of Harry’s tongue, frissons of electricity shooting through Severus with every touch. Dear gods, he was on fire, blazing with passion and need, and each soft caress left him mewling with desire.

Dear Merlin, no one had ever touched him like this.

“H-Harry, please!”

The jar of lubrication came sailing across the room into Harry’s outstretched hand, but the man did not open it yet. Instead, Harry wedged a pillow under Severus’ hips, spread him still wider, and gently pressed his tongue inside.

Severus shrieked with pleasure and arched up, his entire body responding to his mate’s touch. Yes.
Yes. He screamed it and arched into Harry’s strokes, mewling and muttering and begging him to hurry it up.

Harry chuckled against him, and Severus felt the vibrations down to his soul. Dear gods.

“Harry, please! Can’t … can’t take much more.”

No indeed, if Harry kept taking him apart from the inside out, he would come untouched.

To his immense pleasure, a gentle finger slid inside beside Harry’s tongue and pressed deep. Severus gasped and begged, and cried out as Harry’s other hand caressed his length in firm, slow strokes that would soon drive him mad. The man’s tongue and fingers followed the same rhythm, slowly preparing and exploring Severus, and Severus could do nothing but rock with him. Grip the sheets and kick his feet, overcome with sensations he had no control over. He was going to fall apart, melt, die soon. It was all too much.

“Gods, Harry, can’t take anymore. Please!”

The fingers and tongue slipped out, and his mate—covered in slippery gel and fiery hot against him—rubbed just outside Severus’ entrance.

“You’re sure you’re ready?”

Severus sobbed. “By gods, Harry, if you don’t get inside me this instant, I’ll have you in detention for the rest of your life!”

Harry gave a low chuckle and rubbed for a couple more strokes, teasing, driving Severus mad.

“Can’t have that, can we?”

“Please, please. Need you.”

Harry sighed and gently slid home. “Ah. I need you too, my beloved.”

Severus moaned at the glorious full feeling, arching his hips and pressing down to take all of his mate inside him. Harry gasped and leaned on his hands, going still.

“Trying to … be slow.”

“I’m ready, Harry. Just move already.”

Harry groaned and pulled back. Severus slammed their hips together on his downstroke. He was done with slow and gentle. He wanted to feel Harry deep inside him.

Harry gave a little grunt as Severus flipped them over and rode his mate hard, bouncing atop Harry with his throat bared and his erection bobbing with his thrusts.


A warm hand, still wet with lubrication, gripped Severus’ raging desire and stroked, and Severus began to come apart at the seams. His thrusts sped up, becoming irregular, his breath stuttered out in gasps and mewls, and his pleasure spiralled out of control.

“Harry!”

His mate grabbed Severus’ hips and thrust up hard, and Severus exploded into a thousand tiny pieces. With another cry of his mate’s name, Severus drove himself down once more, watching as
Harry followed him into pleasure.

“Oh, gods, Sev!”

They didn’t move for a moment, staying locked together, panting, as their pleasure slowly dissolved into a rush of warmth and lassitude.

Harry gasped and pulled his mate into his arms. “Merlin, that was amazing. Do that again sometime, hmm?”

Severus gave a breathless chuckle and eased himself off of Harry and down beside him. “Couldn’t help myself. You were going too damn slow.”

Harry burst into laughter. “Noted.” He blushed. “Um, do you know that … you still taste of vanilla? Even ….”

Severus’ face flamed. “Merlin, are you serious?”

Harry nodded. “I have to say, I don’t mind that creature trait.”

“No, and now I am curious.”

“Huh?”

Severus moved down Harry’s body and started all over again.

They did not sleep until dawn.
Week 5

Chapter Summary

Warnings: somewhat graphic description of death. Summary: It’s time to get back to the war for Harry and Sev.

***AN: I just did a suggestion of Harry’s wings in the drawing. He’s in human form in the story anyway. Still, I wanted to put them in there because I thought it would look cool, but my hands were protesting.***

CHAPTER 27

WEEK 5

With their first family Christmas behind them, Harry felt it was time to focus again on the war. Every day he let Riddle live was another day the demon had to plot his revenge, and Harry couldn’t abide that. So, while he racked his brains for a way to take down Riddle from afar, Harry worked on combat and wandless magic training and continued translating from the journal in his downtime. His choice to continue on the journal bemused his family until a few days after Christmas, when Lily approached him with her concerns.

“Love, why are you still reading from that foul monstrosity? You’ve healed Severus, and you said all the other horcruxes are gone now.”

“All the ones we know of,” said Harry in a grim voice. “Who’s to say he hasn’t made another? I won’t let the bastard get away this time, Mum. He’s going down, and if that means I have to read this disaster of a journal until I’m half-mad, then so be it.”

She winced and made him a cup of tea. “If you must read that horrible thing, at least take care of yourself while you do. I don’t want you going mad, and I’m sure Sev doesn’t either.”

“Indeed, he doesn’t,” said Severus from Harry’s side. “Harry does have a point, though. And I believe we are almost to the end of this journal regardless.”

Lily frowned and sat with them, Summoning the teapot and a plate of biscuits. “This journal? Do you think there’s another?”

“No,” said Harry and Severus at once.

Lily sighed and patted Harry’s hand. “Love, I know the idea’s frightening, but you can’t just dismiss the possibility because you don’t want it to exist.”

Harry shot her a sharp look. “There isn’t another journal.” He turned it around so she could see, revealing the fact that he was reading the last page. “This entry wasn’t there yesterday. Dumbledore told Sev he duplicated this journal from the original. I’m guessing the bearded bastard also linked them so that any new information would be recorded in here.”

“This is a new entry?” She peered over the book and shook her head. “Gibberish to me. What’s it say?”
“Mostly gibberish,” said Severus with a wry laugh. “As I told you before, the spell Riddle used to … consume Pettigrew’s soul has driven him the rest of the way into madness. There is little sense to the words.”

Harry shook his head. “There’s some sense in it, Sev. Or at least there are themes. He’s stuck on soul magic. He’s convinced that the power of souls is the only way to get through Hogwarts’ wards.”

Severus drummed his fingers on the table. “So I have heard, Harry, but I do not believe it will work. As powerful as that magic is, the ward around Hogwarts is set to only allow certain people through. It will block anything and everything else out. He may destroy the lands around Hogwarts and Hogsmeade with his soul bomb, if he can make one without the link to me, but it still won’t get him through those wards.”

“There’s some sense in it, Sev. Or at least there are themes. He’s stuck on soul magic. He’s convinced that the power of souls is the only way to get through Hogwarts’ wards.”

“Maybe, but what if he finds a way?”

“Then we shall be there to fight him. If I have to kill him with a well-placed cutting curse, then so be it. Still, it would be less dangerous to kill him from within, so we shall keep trying to find a way to finish him before it comes to that.”

“I just don’t know how, Sev.” Harry sighed and pushed the journal away. “I can’t look at this disaster any longer anyway. Let’s go do some combat training.” He stood and offered his hand to Severus. “I have this feeling like no matter what we do, it’s still going to come down to a fight.”

“Well, we shall be ready for him, love.” Severus took Harry’s hand and allowed his mate to pull him to his feet. Harry smiled at the concession.

“You’re so different, Sev.” Harry kissed him lightly. “Your trust in me is beautiful.”

Severus stroked down Harry’s face. “I do trust you.” He kissed Harry lightly and slipped his hands into his mate’s. “Lead me where you wish. I will follow.”

Harry grinned. “As long as you’re leading me on the battlefield.” His smile slipped. “I’ll get us all killed if you put me in charge.”

Severus squeezed Harry’s hand. “I think you would do better than you believe, but yes, I will lead you then. I fear I shall need to lead us all.”

“General Severus. I like it.”

Severus rolled his eyes. “General indeed. No one but our family and perhaps Minerva would follow me into battle.”

“I think you’d be surprised.” Harry tugged on his hands. “But come on. Teach me that sword spell you showed me yesterday.”

“All right.” Severus Banished the journal and their notes to the bedroom and followed Harry into the living room.

“Boys,” said Lily from outside her bedroom door, “before you get too involved, I think it’s time I gave you your last Christmas gift, Harry. It’s a bit late, but I didn’t want you thinking about the war during Christmas.”

Harry stopped by the sofa and gave his mother a curious look. “It’s going to help with the war?”

“Yeah. Hold on a moment.”
Lily vanished into her room and returned with a strange black box. It had a silver clasp shaped a bit like a curled snake, but when Harry looked closer, he saw no features that suggested an animal. She gave him a hesitant smile and passed him the box.

“Harry James Potter, do you accept the accoutrements of your station?”

“Do I … wait, is this the Reaper gear?” He grinned. “Yeah!”

She chuckled and shook her head. “Try again. It’s a ceremony, love.”

“Oh. Sorry. You didn’t exactly warn me.”

“I guess not.” She cleared her throat and repeated her formal request.

Harry bowed his head. “Yes, I accept.”

Lily smiled. “Do you swear to keep these accoutrements safe and out of the view of all others, excepting only your mate and immediate family?”

“Yes.” At Lily’s stern expression, Harry realised it was a magically binding oath and added a rushed, “I so swear.”

She gave him a little nod. “And do you swear to never use these items, save only for the purpose of hunting and exterminating your targets, or for training to do so?”

“I so swear.”

“Do you also swear to honour the sanctity of life, to use your powers for the good of all living beings?”

“I so swear.”

“Finally, do you swear to honour the Reaper code and never kill a sentient creature or human without first making sure your intended target is indeed a threat to both realms, except in defence of yourself or others?”

Harry gulped. “I so swear.” He hoped fighting the Death Eaters would not violate that vow. He had little choice about that.

“Excellent,” said Lily with a smile. “Then before the witnesses gathered here—” She nodded to Severus and Remus. “—I pronounce you the next of Reaper kin and an honoured soldier of the soul realm. Welcome, Harry James Potter.”

Blue light flickered from Harry’s feet and enveloped him in pointed waves reminiscent of flames.

“Whoa!”

Severus rushed to save him. “Harry!”

Remus caught Severus around the arms and held him back. “It’s okay, Severus. They’re not hurting him. Ssh. It’s all right.”

Severus snarled a warning at Remus, but just then, the light vanished, leaving Harry whole and trembling, and still holding the box.

She grinned. “Okay, that’s it, baby. You’re officially a Reaper. And, Sev, it’s okay. Harry’s all right,
aren’t you, love?”

Harry shook himself and gave Severus a smile. “Yeah. I’m all right, Sev.”

Severus caught him into his arms anyway, box and all, and kissed him hard. “Never scare me like that again.” His breath caught in what sounded terribly like a sob as he kissed Harry all over his face and held him tight. “I was so afraid you would be burned. I cannot do without you, Harry. I would not want to.”

“Oh, Sev.” Harry slid his hands into Severus’ hair and kissed him gently, caressing and soothing him with tender lips and tongue. “Ssh. It’s all right. I’m here. I’m here.”

Severus was shaking as he stepped back and wiped his face. “I must beg your forgiveness for that pathetic display. Have I ruined the ceremony?”

Lily took his hand and brought him into a hug. “Sev, it’s not pathetic. You were scared. It’s okay.” She led him away and kissed his cheek. “And no, you didn’t ruin anything. The ceremony was over anyway.”

Remus touched Severus’ arm. “Are you all right?”

Severus scowled and jerked his arms around his chest. “Of course I am. Cease your hovering, wolf.”

Remus chuckled. “Glad to have you back, Severus.”

Severus harrumphed and muttered something under his breath, his cheeks red with embarrassment.

Harry thought it was best to take the attention off of his mate before the man felt backed into a corner and lashed out.

“So that’s it, Mum? I’m a Reaper now?”

Severus gave him a grateful look.

Lily grinned and patted Harry on the shoulder. “You sure are. Now, open that already!”

Harry gave her a lopsided smile and pulled the catch. The box vanished, leaving Harry holding a black robe and hooded cloak in one hand and a scythe as long as he was in the other. The scythe had a purple orb at the end with what looked like stars swirling inside, beaded red chains hanging from the ricasso along with a white feather, and a dual-pointed tang behind the main blade. He couldn’t wait to test it, though he feared such a large weapon might prove unwieldy. Still, he couldn’t deny its appeal.

“Wicked! Can I try it, Mum?”

She laughed. “Go ahead. Let’s see how you look.”

Harry grinned and ran into his bedroom. He didn’t usually wear robes, so he left his trousers and undershirt on for comfort, but it was hardly needed. The cloth felt like velvet against his skin, breathed like cotton, and yet, he couldn’t poke a finger into it. He debated trying with the scythe, but reckoned it was likely magical and might cut through the cloth where other weapons would fail.

Instead, he conjured a knife and poked at the fabric. Sparks flew where the metal touched the robe, and when Harry pulled the knife away, the tip had melted.

“Merlin!” He grinned and Banished the remains of his knife. “This is brilliant!”
He grabbed his scythe, pulled the hood up, and looked into the full-length mirror behind the door.

“Wow! I look good!”

He went to show his family, barely resisting the urge to run. He kept Severus’ stately gait in mind as he walked out, chin held high and eyes shining with glee.

The others looked at the door and frowned when he stepped out.

Harry winced. “That bad?”

“Oh!” Lily chuckled. “Love, do you have the hood up?”

Harry nodded.

Remus stood from the couch and peered around the door, but Harry couldn’t guess what he was looking at. “Um … was that a yes, Harry?”

Harry huffed. “Yeah, it’s up.”

“Then we can’t see you, sweetheart,” said Lily with a chuckle. “Only Riddle can when it’s up, remember?”

Oh. So much for his grand entrance.

Harry blushed and pushed the hood back down. “Er, no. I’d forgotten, actually.”

Severus’ mouth fell open. “Merlin, Harry. You are absolutely stunning.”

Harry’s ears and cheeks burned. “Really?”

“Yes, my love. That is beautiful. Can you move in it?”

Harry shrugged. “I guess we could try a match and find out. I’ll have to get used to it anyway, but be careful, Sev. I conjured a knife to test the robes and they melted it.”

Severus nodded. “So nothing that will hurt us if it reflects. Minor jinxes until we know what those robes can do. Unless … Lily?”

She shrugged and sighed. “I never had the opportunity to test them. James refused to spar with me while I was pregnant, and then we had a baby and no time.” Her eyes filled with sorrow. “And then I was alone.”

Remus took her into his arms. “Never again.”

She smiled and laid her head on his shoulder.

Severus flicked out his wand. “Harry, take position.”

Harry obeyed, grinning, and held out his hands. They had learned quickly that his results were better without a wand than with—it was only a matter of teaching him to decrease his cast time. And for that, Harry simply needed practise.

Severus mirrored him and cast a strong shield over himself, Lily, Remus, and the room around them
—just in case that armour was more powerful than they thought, Harry added his own as well.

“Let us begin,” said Severus, and he cast his first jinx.

Before the end of the battle, Severus found himself wishing he had robes like Harry’s. They absorbed anything minor, and before long, Severus had begun casting more dangerous spells to test the limit of the fabric.

That came to an end at the level of bone-breaking curses. It bounced off Harry’s robe-covered wrist and hit Severus in the leg. And despite intense shields and protections, it cut through his leg like butter. He went down with a sharp cry, and the next instant, his mate was over him, healing him and holding his face.

“Severus! Oh, gods, I’m so sorry. Hold on, love. I’ll help you.” Harry lifted his head and barked out, “Mum! Get some of Sev’s Skele-gro from his rucksack.”

Lily was already offering Harry a phial, though it wasn’t in one of Severus’ bottles. “Here. This is mine, not Sev’s, but it’ll do.”

Harry hesitated. “You’re sure?”

Severus grabbed the phial himself and downed it. “Lils is … almost as good at potions … as I am.” He made a face at the taste. “Blueberries. Did you … flavour this?”

She laughed and rubbed his shoulder. “Not all of us derive secret pleasure from watching the students gag on unflavoured potions.”

Severus gave her a pained smirk that likely came across as more of a grimace. “You discovered my secret. I shall have to kill you now.”

Lupin growled. “Not happening!”

“Easy, Remus,” said Lily in a soothing tone. “He was only teasing.”

Harry bared his canines—sharp in his creature form, “And I’ll thank you not to threaten my mate.”

“Merlin!” Severus groaned and covered his eyes. “There is simply too much testosterone in this room. Thank the gods my own is rather … drowned out by pain, or we should all be at each other’s throats like fools.”

Harry winced. “Sorry, Sev. You’re right, of course.” He slid his arms under Severus’ knees and shoulders. “Mum, immobilise his leg for me.”

She nodded and froze Severus’ leg in place from his hip to his toes. The second he was immobilised, a second tingle of magic washed over Severus—a wandless featherlight charm, no doubt—and Harry lifted him into his arms.

“Bedtime for you, love.”

While Harry carried him to the sofa, Lily widened and lengthened it to make room for Severus’ long legs.
Harry laid Severus atop the cushions with a kiss to his mate’s brow. “Are you okay? Is the potion working well?”

Severus frowned. “I trust Lils, but I suppose it would not hurt to check its progress.”

He cast a scanning charm over his leg and winced. The curse had shattered both his tibia and fibula—he would be down for the rest of the day, at least. He hoped Riddle’s injuries would remain that long as well.

“Well, it appears I will need another dose of Skele-gro. And Merlin help the Death Eater who tries to curse you when you are wearing that, my love.”

Harry gave a weak laugh and unzipped his robe. “I don’t like it. I don’t like that these hurt you.”

Severus took Harry’s hand. “I do. Despite the pain, I will heal, and we now know that those will keep you safe.”

“You didn’t aim for my face, Sev.”

Severus winced. “No. I could not bring myself to hex you in the face. I am sorry.”

Harry zipped his robes once more and frowned. “We have to test that. Remus! Do me a favour and cast a tickling charm at my head.”

Remus obeyed, and Harry doubled over in helpless laughter.

He choked out between giggles, “Turn it off!”

Remus chuckled and sent the countercharm at Harry. “Better?”

Harry stood again with a frown. “Yeah, except that this means my face is a vulnerable spot.”

“It is if your hood is down,” said Lily. “Try it with the hood up. We won’t be able to see you, but if you cast a bit of wandless light over your face and hands, then we’ll be able to aim for them regardless.”

Harry nodded and obeyed. The second the hood covered his messy hair, he disappeared.

“Merlin, that is incredible,” said Severus.

“Just like my invisibility cloak,” said Harry with a chuckle, “but this time, I have the advantage of making everyone think Riddle’s mad. Well, madder.”

“So long as you do not give yourself away by speaking.”

“Yeah. Unless ….”

Severus didn’t need to see Harry to recognise the devious grin in his voice. “Unless?”

“Unless I cast a two-person silencing spell and block everyone but Riddle from hearing me, too.”

Severus laughed and regretted it immediately. “Ah, oh. Remind me not to do that again for several hours.” He rubbed his aching thigh. “Though that is a rather brilliant idea, Harry. Do utilise it. I will teach you the spell as soon as we are done here. Now, do cast your lights.”

Harry obeyed, covering an area about five feet off the ground with rosy light.
Severus smirked. “Pink?”

“Hush. I was thinking about our sparks, thank you.”

Lupin chuckled. “They were beautiful when I saw them, too.” He flicked a tickling spell at the light, but Harry didn’t laugh. “Did it absorb, Harry?”

“Yup! That would have hit me dead on, had it not dissolved an inch from my nose. Try my hands now.”

Twin lights appeared on either side of the pink glow—blue this time—and Lily and Lupin cast tickling charms at both. Harry pulled back his hood, revealing a bright grin.

“Nothing. So these robes make me pretty much invulnerable so long as I leave the hood up.” He frowned and rubbed his hands. “Seems a bit unfair. I almost feel bad for the advantage.”

“Don’t,” said Lily with a grim expression. “Don’t forget, Sev will be fighting too, and if anything happens to him ….”

Harry winced. “I die.”

“Right. So while Sev’s healing, I’m going to train you on how to block death. We’ll train Sev, too, when he’s up to it.”

“And you and I will continue sparring, Harry,” said Lupin. “Just in case. That armour is only good to you if we have time to put it on. You need to know how to fight without it.”

Severus had never imagined he would find the desire to send Lupin a look of gratitude, but he did then.

“You’re welcome, Severus,” said a grinning Lupin.

“I said nothing, wolf.”

Lupin laughed and sat beside the man as Harry and Lily began training. Severus found their conversation intriguing, despite knowing that he did not have Harry’s race.

“We can do it too, you know.” Lupin gave him a wry smile. “Because we’re their mates. They’d die without us, so, it’s a way to keep them safe as well.”

“Then by all means,” said Severus with a growl, “do shut up so I might listen.”

Lupin smiled and turned away, though the expression in his eyes was sad. “Will you ever forgive me, Severus?”

Severus sighed and turned his head down so that Lupin might not see the shame in his eyes. “It is not your fault, Lupin. I am finding it difficult to let go of the past, but I have forgiven you. Indeed, it was never your fault to begin with.”

Lupin laid a hand on his shoulder. “I never hated you, did you know? I felt something pushing me to, but I just … I thought you were brilliant and brave, and I wanted to befriend you, in part so you wouldn’t fall into the wrong crowd, and in part because I liked you in spite of all your snide remarks.” He snarled and pounded his fist against his knee. “But those godsdamned compulsions would never let me forget the resentment. Every time I got close to throwing it off, I found myself angry at you all over again. I guess that was him renewing the compulsions, even though I can’t
remember it.”

Severus lifted his face to meet Lupin’s eyes. “If you would like, I can try to retrieve those memories while they are working together.”

Lupin shook his head. “What’s the point, Severus? We all know he did it anyway. Having proof of it would only hurt us worse.”

Severus frowned and returned his gaze to his mate. “You do not wish to know?”

“We do know. There’s no other explanation that fits. I just don’t want the memory of it. All of this mess hurts enough to be getting on with.”

Severus nodded and rubbed his chin. “I wonder if Harry had broken his compulsions before, too. He did apologise about the Pensieve incident at the start of sixth year, and for a time, I had hoped he would be less combative and perhaps I could reveal the truth of my role to him soon, but the next day, he hated me even more than the one before.” Severus frowned again and watched Harry create a blue light around himself and breathe it in. “Now that I think of it, he was like that every year. The beginning of every year, he seemed honestly willing to make amends, but then Dumbledore would meet with him, and the next day, he was again recalcitrant and full of anger.” His chest panged with grief. “Why did I never see it, Lupin? I never even suspected, and I should have. As a spy, I should have suspected him.”

Lupin squeezed Severus’ shoulder. “But as a man, you loved him. Trusted him. And that guarded him from your suspicion.” He wrapped his arms around his chest and stared at the floor. “He played us all like instruments, Severus. He gave me a home and what I thought was his trust. And so I loved him, too, when I should have taken him into the shack with me.”

Severus shook his head. “If you had, you would have been executed, and Harry would have lost his mother and his one-day adoptive father in one fell swoop. We would never have found the truth without Lily, or without you, Lupin.”

Lupin gave him a hesitant smile. “You think so? I … thank you, Severus.” He frowned. “Might you call me by my first name? If you aren’t too uncomfortable with it, that is.”

Severus swallowed a wave of fear and gave him a shaky nod. “I shall try, R-Remus.”

Lupin grinned. “Brilliant. Thank you, Severus.”

“You are welcome. Might we pay attention to the lesson now? It is crucial that we learn how to do this as well, and focusing upon it will distract me from the pain.”

Lupin—Remus—patted Severus’ shoulder and returned his attention to the Reapers. Severus sighed and tried to listen, but guilt and worry weighed upon him. He hadn’t realised how much his lingering irritation was hurting Lu—Remus. Was it true that the man had never truly hated him and would have been his friend, if not for Dumbledore’s meddling?

Severus glanced at the man. Remus was watching the lesson with a slight smile on his face, but at Severus’ look, he turned and frowned, worry creasing his brow.

“Am I bothering you, Severus? I can move, if I need to.” The man’s eyes filled with sorrow and resignation with his words, and Severus sighed.

“My leg is broken, Lu—Remus, not my vocal cords. If I wish you to move, I shall let you know.”
Remus gave him a bright smile. “Good. If you need anything, just ask, okay?”

Severus nodded and looked to Harry and Lily, though his mind was still on the werewolf. Remus’ emotions were genuine—he couldn’t Occlude, and Severus had read the man’s pain and relief in his eyes without the need for Legilimency—and that, more than anything, showed Severus that he had been holding on to his grudge too long. Yes, Moony had tried to kill him once, but Remus had had no control and hadn’t been in on the prank. Neither had Potter or Black, apparently.

The only man who deserved his antipathy was currently a portrait in an abandoned corridor. From the moment Severus had met him without Dumbledore’s influence to muddy the waters, Remus had only tried to be his friend.

Severus sighed and laid his anger and his fears to rest. It was past time he let his grudges go. Remus deserved better.

“Remus?”

“ Hmm?”

“Thank you.”

Remus gave him a warm smile and held Severus’ shoulder briefly. In the touch, Severus felt the man’s relief and joy.

Yes. It was time to move beyond the past. Severus vowed to never let Dumbledore’s meddling colour his judgment of Remus again and turned to watch the lesson with a lighter heart.

Severus wasn’t healed enough to hold Harry in his lap during Potterwatch that evening, but his mate wouldn’t give up on keeping him close. Instead, Severus found himself sitting astride his mate’s lap, his broken leg immobilised and supported on cushions and with Harry’s arm around his back. Severus was a bit embarrassed to be so held in front of the others, but he had to admit that he felt safe like this, cradled in his mate’s arms. Harry had even let out his wings, and with those soft feathers wrapping him up, Severus couldn’t fear. Harry was his home.

Harry reached up to kiss Severus’ jaw and tapped his wand upon the radio. “Alice.”

“—And welcome all to Potterwatch,” said Lee Jordan. “Tonight is dedicated mostly to continuing coverage of Dumbledore’s betrayal, but before we get into that, we have a few small incidents to report.”

“That’s right, River,” said George. “First, we have the official report concerning the werewolf attack in Godric’s Hollow.”

Lily tensed and gripped Remus’ hand.

“It’s good news all around, folks. It was Greyback, and the aurors killed him before he could turn or injure anyone. I repeat, Royal killed Fenrir Greyback, so that’s at least one more monster off of the streets permanently.”

Remus grinned viciously, his eyes flashing amber. “Remind me to send Kingsley a thank you card
and the biggest gift basket we can find.”

Lily chuckled and hugged Remus tight. “Thank the gods. That beast was an absolute horror.”

“He’s gone now,” said Harry with a hesitant smile.

Severus leaned closer to Harry, sensing the conflict within his mate, a man who hated to kill, even where it was necessary. “Yes. He will turn no more children into werewolves. He will destroy no more innocent lives.”

Harry’s eyes hardened. “Right.” He snuggled into Severus’ shoulder and sighed. “Thank you, love.”

Severus stroked Harry’s hair and listened to the radio. The twins were finishing up on Godric’s Hollow.

“—The church was a bit damaged,” Fred was saying, “but the villagers report that it will be repaired before the week is out. We have no other reports of injuries or damages at this time. So it looks to be that all is well in Godric’s Hollow.”

“Right, Rapier,” said Lee. “Unfortunately, the Death Eaters did cause havoc in York last evening. Two Death Eaters—Runcorn and Yaxley, judging by eye-witness descriptions—attacked the home of Muggleborns Jane and Adam Terrence and their four-year-old son, Jack. Aurors came too late to save a Muggle called Thomas Sims who, being blind, unfortunately walked straight into the crossfire whilst trying to help.”

“However,” said Fred, “we do have some good news. I’m sure all of our DA mates will recall Miss Hannah Abbott of Hufflepuff? Well, she lives across the street from the house the Death Eaters chose to attack. Susan Bones had come over to spend the night as well, and the two of them attacked the Death Eaters and drove them off before they could hurt anyone else.”

“From what Royal told us,” said George in an amused voice, “they were great. Hexes and curses flying like mad, and it was all Yaxley and Runcorn could do to keep their heads attached.”

Lee chuckled. “It was indeed. Once the Terrences had assured their son’s safety, Mister Terrence joined in as well, and the Death Eaters had no choice but to flee.”

Fred said, “Harry, Remus, Professor Snape—bang up job teaching those girls to fight. They were bloody brilliant, and we both know they hadn’t any other decent Defence instructors.”

Harry gave Severus a wan smile. “I wish they might have saved the blind man.”

Severus hugged him tight. “I know, love. At least they saved the little boy.”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s true.” His grief faded, and a hesitant smile peeked through. “Maybe you’ll teach him someday.”

Severus chuckled. “Maybe.” He stroked through his mate’s hair to soothe them both and, with his mate taken care of, he returned his attention to the radio.

Lee Jordan was still covering the fight at the Terrences’. “Both houses sustained heavy curse damage, but the Terrences and Abbots are working together on repairs, and both say the incident has brought their families closer together.”

“Which is what we ought to do in times like this, River,” said George. “Get up and fight. Protect one another and show the Death Eaters that Harry isn’t the only one of us with a wand. Thank you,
Susan, Hannah, and Mister Terrence, for your bravery and the reminder that we’re all in this together. You’re all heroes in my book.”

“That they are, Rapscallion,” said Fred. “But we must move on if we hope to have time to get through everything we have planned for the evening.”

Lee said, “Well, we only have one other incident to report before we delve further into the bearded bastard’s treachery, but it’s a strange one.”

“Yes, River,” said George. “Very strange. Ministry officials found Rowle dead in his cell this morning. According to our sources at the Ministry, he slept peacefully through the night, but when they found him at seven this morning, he was dried up and withered as if he had died weeks ago.” He gave an audible shudder. “Ugh. It’s horrifying, frankly.”

“It is indeed,” said Lee. “Perhaps more so is that neither the Unspeakables nor the healers can determine what happened to him. They have no cause of death at this time, despite the fact that it’s obvious foul play is involved. There is no evidence of curses or poisons, and even untraceable poisons leave markers the Unspeakables can track. We have no explanation.”

“I do,” said a grim Severus. He whipped out his wand and called his doe and patted her head. “I need you to take a message to Kingsley Shacklebolt at the Ministry. Take care that the man is alone when you approach him and do not let yourself be seen by anyone else, not even Ministry officials—many are corrupt. Here is my message: ‘Shacklebolt, I need you to check Rowle’s corpse if you are able. Tell me if there is a smell of ginger about him. I may well know the cause of his death, and if I am right, we must all prepare for battle soon.’ That is all, Asphodel. Go on.”

The doe bounded away.

Harry frowned. “Soul magic?”

Severus nodded. “My fear is that he drained Rowle’s soul through the mark to create a second bomb. If so, I have no doubt he will attempt to use it against the wards on Hogsmeade and Hogwarts the moment he is recovered enough to fight.”

Harry paled. “We need to warn them.”

“Wait until Shacklebolt gets back to us. I will also ….”

Severus summoned his doe once more and, after warning her of the dangers, told her to ask Malfoy for a report on the Dark Lord’s condition. After she bounded away, he returned his attention to his worried mate and family.

“Now, with any luck, we shall have the full truth of the situation by the end of the night and can decide how best to proceed from there.”

Harry nodded, though Severus read his fear in his eyes and thoughts.

“Do not be afraid, my love. We will fight him, if that is the only way to take him down.”

“But I don’t know how to kill him yet.”

Severus gave a wry laugh. “I imagine that scythe will cut through him easily enough, if there is no other way.”

Harry gulped. “Yeah, probably so.”
Severus held Harry as tight as he could with a broken leg and focused his attention on the broadcast.

Before the end of the night, Severus received a visit from Shacklebolt’s lynx and Archimedes, both having arrived at the same time. As before, Archimedes turned and flew away as soon as he delivered his letter. Severus held it in a shaking hand as he bid Kingsley’s Patronus to speak.

“I snuck into the Ministry morgue and checked the body, Snape. I’m afraid you’re right—it does smell of ginger. He’s also horribly desiccated, and—oddly enough—his mark is muddled. It looks as if someone stirred the ink around. The roots of his hair have also gone grey, and his eyes are entirely white. I don’t mean filmed over from death—I mean the irises are gone. It’s the oddest, most disturbing thing I have ever seen.

“I really hope this is all you wanted to know, Snape, because I’ll be seeing him like that in my nightmares for years to come.”

Severus shuddered as the Patronus disappeared. “Merlin. I must apologise to Shacklebolt, I think.”

Harry turned on the bed and gave his mate a worried look. “Riddle made the bomb, didn’t he?”

Severus nodded. “I am afraid this implies it. There is always the possibility that he could not make a new weapon without the horcrux to link to, but we would fools to depend on that as truth with no evidence.”

Harry paled and hugged his waist. “What do we do? Do we go after him now, before he uses it?”

“We shall become its victims if we do. I am afraid we have little other choice but to wait and warn those we can.”

Harry trembled and shook his head. “Don’t want to wait. People are going to die.”

Severus cupped his mate’s cheeks. “If we don’t, Harry, we will die, and then we shall lose this war and the entire world with it. I understand, but we cannot go after him. Not yet.”

Harry sniffled and blinked down tears. “I’m s-sorry. So sorry.”

“Ssh. Do not forget your dream-walking abilities. Perhaps, if he tries to use it, they will activate in attempt to save lives.” Severus lowered his head. “I am afraid that is our only hope of stopping him at the moment.”

Harry sniffled and laid his head against Severus’ shoulder. “What’s the letter say?”

“Just a moment.” Severus opened it and frowned. Malfoy hadn’t gone into his usual three-page boast, but rather, had gotten straight to the point.

The man was terrified.

Severus swallowed his fear and kept his voice steady, for Harry’s sake. “It reads: ‘The Dark Lord is up and walking again, and he is demanding that we prepare the manor for the arrival of his army. He is also carrying a staff I have never seen, and there is a strange red orb at the top. When I came within a yard or so of it, I smelled ginger and blood.’”
Harry winced. “It’s Rowle’s soul. Is he going to use it like a regular weapon rather than a bomb?”

Severus shook his head. “I am afraid I do not know. Either way, it bodes ill for us.”

“Oh. W-what else does the letter say, Sev?”

“Only this: ‘Prepare your allies for war, Severus. It is coming soon.’”

Harry gulped. “Well, I guess it’s a good thing we’re already doing that, yeah?”

Severus Banished the letter and gave his mate a grim nod. “Now we warn Minerva.”

Harry curled into Severus and buried his head in the man’s neck, and the feel of his mate so near gave Severus the strength he needed to call his Patronus despite the terror creeping through his veins.

The end was upon them, and he had no idea if they would all survive it in one piece.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Warnings: Slash sex towards the end. Summary: The Order and supporters prepare for war.

***AN: Whew. Finally feeling better. I'm still not 100% and it's harder to keep up the pace I did before as my son is WAY more active these days, but more updates for all my stories should be coming soon anyway. I have to write the next chapters of SDS and TFH, but I AM writing again at least. Now, without further ado, on with the story.***

CHAPTER 28

Hogwarts was busier than Harry had ever seen it, especially considering that all the students had gone home—besides those in the Order or DA, of course. Neville had even brought in some new DA members—people Harry hadn’t thought wise to recruit in his fifth year, but who had fought the Carrows alongside him for months while Harry was out hunting horcruxes. Harry didn’t mind. They would need everyone they could find to fight the Death Eaters, and Harry trusted Neville’s judgment.

Between the ever-growing DA, the teachers, Order members, and unaffiliated fighters from all around the world who were just as eager as Harry to see the end of Riddle, it seemed as if every hallway in the castle had one group or another preparing for war. It relieved Harry to see so many had come to help him fight. Voldemort would be expecting an easy fight, but even with the Snatchers and such included, Harry still thought the Order outnumbered the Death Eaters two to one. It gave him hope that they might win this war yet.

If only he had the slightest idea how to kill the bald-headed bastard, Harry would have been exhilarated. As it was, he constantly teetered on the edge of panic.

Voldemort would come any day, and Harry still couldn’t finish him. His heart sputtered every time he thought of it, but Severus and Lily constantly reassured him that when the time came, he would know.

Gods, Harry hoped they were right.

To help his friends survive—and because he would go mad if he didn’t do something to prepare—Harry had gathered all the former and current DA members into the Room of Requirement and started training them in all the new skills his family had taught him over the past weeks. Severus helped every step of the way, and before three days had passed, Harry felt much better about their chances of survival.

“Excellent work, everyone,” he said at the end of the third day. “I’m proud of how much you’ve managed to learn in such a short time and honoured to call you my friends.”
Dean called from the crowd, “Old Mouldy won’t know what hit him, yeah?”

Harry laughed. “That’s the idea.” He sighed and ruffled his hair. “Though I still don’t know how to finish him yet.”

“You’ll get it, mate,” said Ron. “We have faith in you.”

Harry beamed, his heart warmed by Ron’s acceptance. “T-thanks, Ron.”

The redhead grinned. “Harry, I’ve a suggestion. Since we’ve all learned the truth about the Painted Prick, I think a name change for our little group is in order.”

“Hear, hear,” said Fred, and several others echoed him.

Harry chuckled. “Sounds good to me. What were you thinking, Ron?”

The redhead looked to the man standing behind Harry, the one who never left his side and who had trained all of them to be warriors, or as close as they could come to it in three days.

“You’re not going to believe me, mate, but I’m thinking Severus’ Soldiers sounds pretty good.”

Harry’s breath caught. “Ron ….” He slumped back into his mate, overwhelmed and blinking back tears.

Severus was shaking so hard, he was making Harry tremble, too. Harry reached back and took his mate’s hands, bringing them forwards to wrap around his chest.

“Yeah, that’s good with me, Ron,” Harry said, tears blurring his vision. “Anyone who doesn’t like it, say nay.”

The silence in the room was only broken by a soft sob from Harry’s mate. In the back, Cho Chang looked a bit sour, but she didn’t say anything. And Harry wouldn’t have listened to her even if she had.

“Oh, Merlin,” Severus gasped out. “I can’t … truly?”

Harry turned and caught him into his arms. “Ssh. It’s okay, sweetheart. You’re okay.”

With a nod, Severus buried his face in Harry’s hair and held onto him for dear life.

“Well, I like the name,” said Hermione. “Seconded.”

Harry turned to see a soft smile on her face and grins on those of his other colleagues.

Dean grinned brightly and raised his hand. “All in favour?”

A chorus of ayes deafened Harry and brought Severus to his knees. Harry quickly hauled him back to his feet, knowing Severus would not be thrilled about this display of vulnerability when his shock wore off.

Harry held Severus up by his waist and beamed at his friends. “All of you—Merlin, thank you. It’s bloody brilliant. Sev’s sacrificed so much and fought so hard to bring us all to this point, and knowing that all of you can respect that now, despite our pasts—it’s amazing. I ….” He turned his head into his shoulder, trying to stop the sting of sudden tears. “T-thank you.”

“He’s earned it, Harry,” said Neville with a wry smile. His smile faded. “And I reckon he’s the one
Dumbledore hurt the worst, so it only follows we ought to honour his bravery.”

“Thank you,” Severus whispered.

Harry gave his mate a bright smile. “I believe they’re trying to thank you, my love.”

“I … gods, Harry. How you have changed my life.”

Severus cupped his mate’s face and kissed him passionately, turning Harry’s knees to mush. Helpless and captured, Harry could do nothing but slip his arms around Severus’ neck and kiss him back with all he was worth.

The wolf-whistles reminded Harry of where he was. He broke from Severus, his face on fire with embarrassment.

“All right, all right. Back to the dorms with you lot.”

Laughing, the group split up and headed their separate ways, but not before Harry found his best friend and caught him into a tight hug.

“You have no idea what that meant to him, Ron. To me. Thank you.”

Ron gave him a sheepish smile. “Reckon it’s about time I pulled my head out of my arse, yeah?”

Harry laughed. “Yeah, maybe.”

A strong hand fell on Harry’s shoulder from behind, and the smell of vanilla and herbs let him know it was his mate. Harry leaned back into his lover’s firm chest and basked in his warmth, pulling Severus’ hand into his own.

“Mister Weasley,” said Severus in a soft voice rife with emotion, “I cannot express my gratitude for your acceptance. I realise I have already apologised for my conduct with your class, however, it is inadequate. I mu—”

Ron laid a hand on Severus’ shoulder. “No. You’re not the one who owes us an apology, Professor. Oh, and if you’re practically married to my best mate, don’t you think you ought to be calling me by my first name?”

Severus gave him a shy smile. “I … I will try.”

“It’s really hard for him to do that, Ron,” said Harry with a chuckle. “He only started using mine all the time when he figured out we were creature mates.”

Hermione’s eyebrows shot up. “But you two were so obviously in love at the rite! You still weren’t using each other’s names, even in private? Well, no, I heard Harry, but you weren’t, Professor?”

“Severus,” the man said in a low voice. “Call me Severus. As you have pointed out, we might as well be family. Using surnames seems too formal in such a situation.” He sighed and held Harry closer. “And we did not yet know we were in love, Miss Gran—” At her sharp look, he paused and started again. “Hermione. Harry knew, but I was not yet sure. I considered it from time to time, but did not entirely register what my feelings meant. Nor did I believe Harry would ever overcome his hatred so thoroughly as to love me.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed, and a sharp spike of anger speared his gut. “I should have done from the first day we met. Bloody bearded bastard.”
Severus smirked. “No, Harry. I was a spy, and you were twelve. That would not have gone well for either my life or my conscience.”

Harry burst into laughter. “No, s’pose not.” He pulled Severus’ other arm around him so that the man was holding him tight. “Still, I’m so relieved we broke those compulsions, love.” He frowned and looked around the room. “Did they check the others? I know Ginny had a love potion—she seems to be okay, though.”

“She can speak for herself,” said a female voice from Harry’s side that sent a shock of cold water through his system.

Harry gulped and turned his head. “H-hi, Gin.”

She gave him a wry smile. “No need to look so ill, Harry. I’m fine. And now that the potion is out of my system, I can finally think in terms of what I want to do with my life and not what Harry Potter would want me to do.”

Harry winced. “Gin … gods, I’m so sorr—”

She pressed a palm against his mouth. “If you dare to finish that sentence, I’ll whip out the best curse in my arsenal, and between you, Dean, Neville, and Professor Snape, that’s bound to be pretty painful.”

“Severus,” the man corrected again. “Call me Severus. At least among family.”

Ginny gave him a bright smile. “All right. Just, no more apologising, okay, Harry? This isn’t your fault.”

Harry ruffled his hair and nodded. “I just … I never wanted this, you know?”

“I know. Dumbledore wanted it.” She spat the name like a curse word. “I never wanted it either, but the bastard had been dosing me so long, I grew up believing that I did.” Her shoulders slumped. “I still don’t know what I really want. Without his meddling, I don’t know who I am.”

Harry held her shoulder. “You’re Ginny Weasley, a bloody good chaser, a great friend, and a tough-as-nails woman who will come back from this even stronger than before. I believe in you, okay?”

She gave him a tearful smile and wiped her eyes. “Thanks, Harry. I was a little afraid you’d hate me, or at least things would be awkward between us.”

Harry gave a wry chuckle. “Yeah, so was I. But we’re not going to let it be, okay? That man has interfered with our lives enough, right?”

She stood tall and grinned. “Damn straight.”

Harry grinned back, feeling at peace for the first time since hearing of Rowle’s death. They couldn’t change the past, but they could damn well prepare for the future, and that’s exactly what he planned to do.

“All right, guys. Anyone left in here, are you opposed to some duelling practice?”

The whoops and cheers that met his question left him in little doubt of their agreement.
The castle had gone to sleep—Harry included—but Severus stood outside the door to Fluffy’s corridor, arguing with himself on whether he wanted the answers to his final question or not. In the end, his thirst for knowledge won out over his trepidation, and he forced the door open.

Briefly, he considered banishing the cobwebs everywhere, but decided against it. Their presence would discourage students from exploring this area and thus limit the number of people the old man could manipulate in the future. Dumbledore had proved in the underground flat that, while he couldn’t tell an outright lie, he could still weasel his way around the truth spell with vague answers. It was only a matter of time before he learned to use that to his advantage, if he hadn’t already.

No, it was best that this place stayed derelict and abandoned. Severus only had one question anyway, and then he could go about his life in peace. He knew, whether he liked the answer or not, if he did not ask, he would forever wonder, and he did not want to start his life with Harry while holding any regrets.

The portrait was in a dark corner with only a single candle for illumination. The sight made Severus remember Harry’s tales about his cupboard, and any pity he might have felt for the old man faded. Harry had endured eleven years in hell and another child had been driven mad all for that abominable old man’s selfish plots.

Dumbledore deserved worse than this.

Severus Occluded hard to keep his emotions from showing on his face and stared the portrait down. Albus sighed, obviously still believing he was alone, and Severus cleared his throat. The old man whipped his head up so fast, his beard flopped into his face. Severus had a hard time keeping from laughing as Albus sputtered and rubbed the hair from his eyes.

“Ah, Minerva. I knew you would relent.” The portrait sounded smug.

“Try again, old man.”

Albus flinched. “Severus.”

“Headmaster Snape to you.”

Dumbledore sighed and lowered his head. “Well? What is it now? I told you I could not smell the horcrux in you any longer, and it was the truth.”

“Hmm. Yes, I know. We have already verified that.” Severus lifted his left arm, revealing the now-healed skin and mark-free arm.

Albus gaped. “H-how?”

“The horcrux was in my mark,” said Severus with a smile of pride for his mate. “When Harry destroyed it using his combined racial powers, the skull vanished. We later removed the snake and filtered any trace of Riddle from her soul before giving her a proper body. She is hunting in the forest as we speak.”

Albus sighed. “I see.”

“The scars on my chest have disappeared as well, so I have no doubt the horcrux has been eradicated.”
“Then what do you want from me, Severus? Did you come to see me brought low? I had always thought you were the type to gloat.”

“If I was,” the Slytherin snarled, “it was because you made me that way.”

Albus winced.

“No, Dumbledore,” said Severus in a cold voice. “I have not come to gloat. I do not care what fate befalls you, to be honest, so long as it is one that prevents you from meddling in the lives of others.”

“Your spell alone will do that!”

Severus gave a bitter laugh. “Do you believe me a fool? That spell only prevents you from lying outright. It does not prevent ambiguity or leading questions. You could still manipulate the minds of unsuspecting youth.” A vicious smile twisted his lips. “Or you could, if the Weasley twins had not made it their personal mission to make sure every household in Britain knows what a manipulative, heartless, lying sociopath of a bastard you are.”

He laughed coldly at Dumbledore’s grimace.

“No one will ever trust you again, Albus. Ever. Centuries from now, children will refer to you as Dumbledore the Deranged, or Albus the Addled, or some other questionable moniker. They will put as much stock in your lies as they do in the chances of the Cannons winning the world cup.” He swooped in close and gave him a vicious smile, letting his voice drop to its iciest tone. “And even better, you will have the immense pleasure of knowing you might have remained in the history books as one of the greatest wizards of all time, had you not fallen prey to greed and cowardice.”

Albus made a face as if he were sucking on a particularly sour lemon and crossed his arms over his chest. “Thank you for your kindness, Severus. I should have known I could count on you to get revenge.”

Severus reared back, teeth bared, hands clenched into fists. “I? I was not the one who tried to turn the entire Order against me by claiming I had murdered my mate!”

Albus sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Severus, I have told you that I believed it was the only way —”

Severus’ answering shout brought dust down from the ceiling. “And you were wrong, old man!” He brushed off his robes and lowered his voice. “You were wrong. But that is not why I have come, and you will not distract me from my purpose with your moaning and groaning. I have one last question, and you will answer it truthfully or pay the price.”

“Ask it then!”

He stood tall and glared at the portrait. “Very well. You have claimed that you kept me apart from Lily to create a spy out of me, but at the time the Marauders attacked me, it was too early for you to have realised I would have the proper traits. I am not a fool, Albus. So? Why did you do it? And I will remind you that the Truth or Pain spell is still active and any ambiguity will be met with hexes of increasing strength until you answer truthfully.”

Dumbledore snarled. “I have not forgotten!” When Severus merely raised an eyebrow at his outburst, Dumbledore slumped and shook his head, looking defeated. “No, I did not separate you from Lily because I believed you would be a perfect spy. Not in the beginning. That only came later. At first, it was because I believed you were Lily’s true mate, and once I learned what she was, I could not allow you near her, not if I meant to create Harry.”
“Her mate?” Severus reeled back, stunned. “I am homosexual, Albus. I have always been drawn to the attractions of my own gender.”

“I did not know that when you were sixteen, Severus. Or if I did—and I honestly do not recall if I had an inkling then or not—I believed Lily’s love for you might well overcome that.”

Severus scowled. “There is no such thing as overcoming sexual preferences within a creature mating bond. It chooses only those who will be well-suited.”

“Well, that is not something I had experienced for myself, now is it?”

“Perhaps not, but you knew anyway. The truth is that you felt threatened by my closeness to Lily and had me sexually assaulted and broke my heart all so I wouldn’t interfere with your plans. Do you deny it?”

Albus’ muttered “No” came at the prompting of the spell, but it was enough to give Severus the truth. With a bitter scowl, he turned on his heel, his questions answered, if not in the most welcome manner.

“Goodbye and good riddance, Albus.”

Severus stalked towards the door, but a quiet voice stopped him as he laid a hand on the knob.

“Wait! Please, don’t leave me back here alone. It’s completely dark and lonely.”

Severus turned and gave the portrait his nastiest Snape-sneer. “My, that sounds familiar. Harry would know all about this kind of treatment, wouldn’t he?”

Albus flinched. “Severus … please.”

“I told you to call me Headmaster Snape.”

“As you wish, Headmaster. Must I beg?”

“No, Albus. Begging will do you no good. I think this is quite a suitable punishment considering what you have done to earn it. And as I am still Headmaster of this school, I am in control of your … placement. I have no intention of moving you anytime soon.”

Albus looked up. “But you might, in the future?”

Severus glared. “I might—might—release you on a probationary basis after a suitable term of punishment has been met, but not a moment sooner.”

Albus winced. “And how long might I expect that to be?”

Severus’ sneer turned into a devious smile. “Oh, I believe perhaps eleven years should be sufficient.” He stalked out of the room and slammed the door. “Bloody meddling bastard.”

It was only as the door closed behind him that his mask slipped, and he realised he was shaking all over. Tears had blurred his vision, but he blinked them back.

No. He would not let the old man’s manipulations hurt him any longer. He had the truth of his past now, and that meant he could embrace his future with Harry with a clear heart. No looking back, no questions, no regrets.

A soft voice behind him made Severus jump a foot into the air.
“I thought I might find you here.”


She gave a dark chuckle. “Well, that is what I do, is it not?”

Severus smirked. “I thought you were only meant to assassinate the likes of Riddle.”

“Touché.” She flicked her wand at the door and cast a powerful locking charm on it. “No student will be able to get past that, I think.”

Severus shook his head and started towards his quarters. “Remind me to introduce you to Fred and George Weasley. Or your own son, for that matter.”

Lily gave a bell-like laugh and linked her arm through Severus’. “Well, if they can get past an Unspeakable’s locking spell, I guess they’ve earned it, hmm?”

Severus snorted. “And several detentions. I never seem to have enough help scrubbing out cauldron bottoms.”

Lily laughed again and squeezed his arm. “True. So, did you find all the answers you needed?”

Severus gave her a terse nod. “I believe I can move on now with no regrets.”

“Good. What did you ask him, out of morbid curiosity? I thought we covered everything we needed to know.”

He shrugged. “It was more of a personal question, I suppose. I wanted to know the truth of why he engineered that … catastrophe in fifth year and drove us apart.”

She raised an eyebrow. “That was your burning question? Well. I figured you would have asked about Harry.”

He shook his head. “Dumbledore already explained his actions as far as Harry is concerned, but the explanation he gave for separating us during our school years seemed … lacking. How could he have possibly known—even with that bloody third eye of his—that I would be a spy? I was sixteen, Lils. I hadn’t finished developing yet.”

She frowned. “Fair point. What was his answer?”

He gave the woman a wry look. “Because he believed us to be mates.”

She choked and stopped dead. “Us? Sev, I knew you played for the same team even before we came to Hogwarts!”

He burst into laughter. “I didn’t! Not until perhaps third year when I realised Lucius Malfoy had a rather nice arse, even if he is a bloody prat.”

She scowled and led them on again. “Ugh. Don’t remind me. It took me a good year to talk you out of that crush, and you only realised how much of a pompous berk he is when he asked about your ‘mudblood’ shadow.”

Severus winced. “Do not use that word in my hearing, Lils. Please. It cost me far too much.”

She squeezed his arm and led them onto a moving staircase. “No, Dumbledore did. It wasn’t your fault.” She frowned and searched Severus’ face. “Sev, why did you call me a mudblood that day?
I’ve forgiven you, but I never understood.”

He sighed and lowered his head. “I do not know. I was furious and humiliated beyond words, but even then, I do not understand why I did not simply reach out to you for help. I do not understand why I was suddenly so angry at you. I have never understood.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I think I have a fair idea.”

“Dumbledore.”

“Well, he manipulated every other player on the board that day. Why not you?”

Severus flinched. “Now that I think of it, he had invited me for tea that day. He claimed it was to tell me my Potions OWLs were the highest in three centuries—and they were—but now that we know what kind of man he is, it is quite possible that he used the opportunity to alter me then. A potion in tea would have worn off quickly enough to explain my abrupt about-face that evening, and at that age, I had not yet learned how to detect poisons in all substances. I would not have suspected him of such a terrible betrayal regardless.”

The staircase stopped, and Severus guided Lily away before it started moving again.

As they moved onto the Headmaster’s floor, she sighed and laid her head against his arm. “I’m sorry, Sev. For all of it.”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “It was not your fault. The blame lies solely on the old man we have just locked in the literal doghouse.”

Lily burst into giggles. “Hah! I have to hand it to her. That was one of Minerva’s better ideas.”

Severus chuckled. “So it was. I believe she had the safety of the other students in mind when she chose that particular corridor, but it is a fitting punishment. Poetic justice, perhaps.” He stopped in front of the Headmaster’s office and whispered his master password to the gargoyle. “Invictus.” The statue leapt aside and let them onto the staircase. “At any rate, I see no reason to move him to another home until he has served a fair few years there.”

“Eleven. I heard. Why eleven?”

Severus shook his head. “For Harry, of course. Does it not remind you of that infernal cupboard?”

Lily closed her eyes and sighed. “Oh, my poor boy.”

“He endured it well, Lils. He’s stronger than Dumbledore would ever believe, and when his past does return to haunt him, I will be there to hold him together.”

She kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

“It is not a chore, nothing involving Harry is. He has utterly changed my li—”

A panicked voice called from the Headmaster’s quarters. “Sev? Is that you?”

She winced. “Merlin. Sev, did you not tell him where you were?”


A black-haired rocket burst from the bedroom and crashed into Severus’ chest. “Where did you go,
Sev? I kept thinking of the last time you left when you almost died and … and I …. His voice broke. “I dreamed Riddle stole you from me, and then I woke up, and you were gone. I couldn’t find you.”

“Oh, Harry.” Severus wrapped his shaking mate in strong arms and kissed his forehead. “I apologise, beloved. I only went to find the answer to a question that has been troubling me for several days. I did not mean to frighten you.”

Harry looked up, and his face twisted into a scowl. “Dumbledore again? Sev, let it g—”

Lily laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Love, I hate to interrupt, but this dream—what was it? It might have been a vision.”

Harry frowned. “I dreamed Riddle was trying to claim Sev’s soul again. Sev was dying, withering like Rowle right in front of my eyes and I couldn’t do anything to stop it.” He let slip a broken sob and buried his face in Severus’ chest. “Don’t leave me. Can’t live without you.”

Severus shuddered and clutched at his mate. “Merlin. Lils?”

Lily patted Harry’s back and spoke in a soothing voice. “Ssh. Boys, it’s okay. It’s not a vision. Reapers don’t have visions of the future—only present day or past. As you’re not hurt, Sev, I think it was just a normal nightmare.”

Severus frowned and held Harry tighter. “A terrible nightmare. Lils, I believe I need to take care of him in private. Unless—would you rather your mother stay, my love?”

Harry shook his head and hugged Lily tight. “N-not this time. I need to make sure you’re okay, Sev, and I can’t do that with Mum here.”

Heat traced Severus’ cheeks. “Oh. Then perhaps it is best we bid you goodnight, Lily.”

“Yes, I think you’re right.” She kissed their cheeks in turn and hugged them both. “Goodnight, my boys. Just send me a Patronus if you need me or Remus, okay? We’re just down the hall.”

“Thank you, Lils,” Severus said against Harry’s wet cheek. “I believe we will be all right.”

“Thanks, Mum,” Harry said through sniffles. “I’m s-sorry.”

“Ssh. Nothing to be sorry for. I’d need to take care of Remus in the same situation. It’s quite all right.” She kissed Harry’s hair and hugged him once more.

“I’ll see you in the morning, boys. I love you both.”

“We love you as well, Lils.”

Lily rubbed Harry’s tears away, gave him a worried look, and left, though Severus felt her fear for her son, empathy or no.

As the door shut behind her, Severus opened his mouth to reassure his mate, but found it suddenly claimed in a fierce kiss. He blinked, caught by surprise, then melted into Harry’s ardour with a moan. A thrusting tongue demanded entry, and Severus opened willingly, letting Harry suck the very breath from him and turn his knees to mush.

Sudden wetness against his face and a broken sob gave Severus the will to pull away and cup his mate’s tearful face.
“My love, what is it?”

Harry whispered his name and gathered Severus close. “I was so scared for you, Sev. I woke up alone and thought you’d died, and then I thought I was going to die, and then we were all going to die because there was no one left to finish the bastard.” His voice broke on a sob, and Severus’ heart cracked down the middle.

“Oh, love.” Severus guided Harry to the small sofa beside the Headmaster’s floo and eased the young man down into his lap. “I’m so sorry, Harry. I never meant to hurt you. I only wanted answers. If I had realised you would wake up and worry for me while I was interrogating him, I would not have gone without you.”

Harry glared through his tears. “Why did you go at all, Sev? You heard Ginny tonight, didn’t you? That prick has done enough to ruin our lives without giving him even more control. Let it go, please.”

Severus rubbed a hand through Harry’s mop. “Love, I am not the sort who can leave my questions unanswered—”

Harry’s eyes filled with pain, and Severus cupped his face and kissed him lightly.

“But I have no further questions now. I needed to have my past sorted before I could move on into the future with you, and it is done.”

Harry sniffled and slid his arms around Severus’ neck. “So … you’re okay now?”

Severus kissed the tip of Harry’s nose. “I do not know if ‘okay’ applies in this situation, but I believe I can move on now without the shadows of the past to haunt me.”

Harry gave him a shaky smile. “Well, then I guess it was worth me getting in a bit of a tizzy. But maybe could you tell me next time? Not just wander off in the night?”

Severus brushed Harry’s fringe back from his face. “You have my word.”

Harry relaxed in Severus’ arms. “Then it’s all right. I was just so scared.”

“I am sorry, love. I did not wish to wake you, but neither did I intend to frighten you so. I shall not leave without informing you again, even if you are asleep.”

“Thank you.” Harry stood and tugged Severus to his feet. “Come on. After that, I ne—”

A tapping at the window made both men freeze in place.

Harry frowned at the window. “An owl? Now?”

Severus exchanged looks with his mate. “All our allies are here. It may be Lucius, or it may be someone even less savoury. Be on guard.”

Harry whipped out his wand and held his other hand at the ready. “Okay.”

Severus opened the latch with his wand, not daring to approach in case the visiting bird had some kind of proximity charm on them. The moment the window opened and a mass of black and violet flew inside, he threw a powerful cleansing charm at the unknown bird and leapt back at the odd chirping sound it gave by way of reply.

Chirping? That was no owl.
The unfamiliar bird landed beside the desk, on the perch Severus’ owl used to prefer, and he swallowed a sharp wave of grief. Gods, how he missed his Telos. A warm hand rubbed the small of his back, and Severus gave Harry a wan smile.

“I’m sorry, Sev. I miss Hedwig, too. Is it clean, whatever that is?”

Severus nodded. “There were no spells on it to begin with, but it was best to be safe. However, I have no idea who this … this ….” He stepped closer to the unfamiliar bird, hardly daring to believe his eyes, but no. Those long, violet-tipped black feathers were unmistakable. As were the sapphire eyes, one of which was fixed steadily upon them. “Dear gods. I can’t believe it.”

“Severus? What’s wrong?”

At the panic in Harry’s voice, Severus came out of his shock and laid a hand on his mate’s shoulder. “Peace, Harry. It won’t hurt us. I am only surprised.”

Harry stepped closer. “Sev, what kind of bird is that?”

“That is what shocked me. That is a nighthawk.”

“A what?”

“Like a phoenix, only associated more with death than rebirth. Rather than dying and being reborn, they simply fade in and out of death when it is their time, so to speak. They are the pets of Osirins, usually.”

Harry gulped. “Well, that’s … oddly apropos. But whose is it?”

“I have never heard of them serving any human whatsoever, so we will not know until we check its letter. Considering that you are the Reaper here, I have no doubt it is for you.”

“Oh.” Harry edged closer. “The letter’s okay, right?”

Severus nodded. “That was a wide-range spell. If the letter was cursed, it would have been cleared or incinerated on contact.”

Harry gulped and held out his hand. “Um, hello, bird. Is that letter for me?”

The nighthawk fixed a bright blue eye on Harry and bobbed its head. Severus got the distinct impression it was amused.

“Er, is it okay if I come get it, then?”

This time, Severus was certain the bird laughed. It gave a funny little trill and flew onto Harry’s outstretched hand. The bird warbled and held out a leg to which a Muggle-style envelope was attached, and Harry took the letter with a frown.

“A Muggle letter on a magical bird?”

Severus shrugged. “Who is it from?”

Harry blushed and read the front. “Merlin! It’s from Cináed!”

Severus groaned. “I should have known. Well, open it then.”

Harry nodded and held the letter up so Severus could read it too.
Dear Harry and Severus,

Congratulations on your mating bond and best wishes for the future. Should you still decide to carry out those plans you had, Harry, the pub is always open to you.

Now, I know you’re nervous, Harry, but don’t be afraid. Don’t forget that the spirits are guiding you. They’re going to help you during the last fight too, okay? You will find the way.

Listen to your mate and be brave. The fight is coming soon, tomorrow or the next day. Watch out for that staff he carries—destroy it with a Banishing spell or something of the like as soon as you possibly can. Then you’ll have the upper hand and can finish this without issues.

We believe in you, lads. It’s going to be all right.

Love,
Brian and Cináed

P.S. The spirits say the bird is yours, Harry. She’s looking for a new master since her owner recently passed away. She will serve your mate and children too, but most likely your mum and new dad will need to purchase an owl or the like for their own correspondence.

Harry was trembling and wide-eyed when he looked up again. “S-Sev … it’s coming. The battle. I’m not ready. I don’t know how to fight him.”

The bird gave a mournful trill and rubbed Harry’s cheek with her head, but the young man wasn’t paying attention. Terror had gripped him entirely. Severus doubted Harry had even read past the third paragraph. With a sigh, Severus gently guided the nighthawk to his shoulder and wrapped Harry into his arms.

“Ssh. Do you see what Cináed told you? The spirits are guarding you, love. It’s going to be all right.”

“I know, Sev, but what if it’s not enough? What if I’m not enough?”

Severus kissed his mate lightly. “Love, you are. You are.” He held Harry tight and murmured to the bird. “Little one, I believe I need to take care of my mate. He has had a rough night. Will you be all right sleeping in the study for tonight? I would leave you on the perch there, but it belonged to my owl—he’s dead, I fear—and I can barely stand to see it occupied. Besides that, Harry also has a cobra familiar who is out hunting at the moment. I fear it may alarm her if she meets you before Harry has the opportunity to introduce you.”

The bird gave a nod and nuzzled Severus’ hair.

“Thank you. Speaking of introductions, do you have a name, little one?”

The bird gave a low, mournful trill, and Severus gathered that either she did not or she could not communicate it.
“Hmm. Harry? Do you want to name her?”

The young man looked up with tears in her eyes. “I can’t, Sev. Too upset. I’m sorry. You come up with better names anyway.”

Severus stroked his mate’s hair and held him close. “Ssh. It’s all right. I will name her, then.”

He smiled as the bird sorted through his hair with her beak, much like Fawkes had done. What had happened to the phoenix? Severus hoped he was all right, wherever he was. The faults of his human weren’t the familiar’s fault or choice. Fawkes had chosen Albus long before the man had gone mad, and phoenixes did not abandon their human, no matter how far they strayed.

Severus hoped Fawkes’ next human would be someone worthy of his affection.

The nighthawk tugged on a strand sharply as if to bring his attention back to her. He gave her a mild glare.

“If you would please leave my hair attached.” She gave a little huffing sound, and Severus chuckled. “Impatient, are we? Well, if you must know, I was wondering about one of your day kin I was once familiar with and hoping he is safe. As for your name, what do you think of Eirene?”

The bird gave a happy trill and nodded. Severus smiled.

“Harry, is that acceptable to you?”

Harry sniffled and petted the bird’s chest with a shaking hand. “Y-yeah. What does it mean?”

“Peace.”

Harry blinked tears down his cheeks and nodded. “Yeah. That’s, peace is good.”

Severus kissed his forehead. “Then I am going to put Eirene in the study for the night and ward it so Zera is not alarmed.”

“All right.” Harry stepped back and wiped his eyes. “Sev?”

Severus paused at the study door and turned to face Harry. “Yes, love?”

“When you’re finished in there, I need you. Badly.”

A spark burst to life in Severus’ groin and his breath hitched. “Are you saying that you want me tonight, my Harry?”

Harry nodded vigorously. “Merlin, yes.”

Severus smirked and hurried to put their new familiar to bed.

As soon as Harry had his mate in their bedroom, he magicked Severus’ clothing and shoes off and gently pushed the shocked man onto the bed. Severus landed with a huff of surprise, but before he could speak, Harry was atop him, just as naked and full of desire and desperation.
Harry’s nightmare had been terrifying—as had waking up to an empty bed—but it had only sharpened the cold edge of trepidation already creeping into his soul. He had known even before Cináed’s letter that the final confrontation between himself and Riddle was coming soon, and the letter had made it real. Within twenty-four hours, Harry would have to fight the most feared dark wizard in history—Harry, no one else—and he still didn’t know how to win.

Maybe it wasn’t possible to win. He was terrified it wasn’t.

He was terrified, period. The fear that Harry’s family might not make it out of the battle was strangling him. He couldn’t bear it. To lose any one of them would tear him to pieces.

And to lose Severus would destroy him utterly.

Harry moved his kisses down Severus’ neck and breathed in a whiff of cinnamon and vanilla—Severus’ desire. Passion and terror claimed him at the same time. Gods, he loved Severus—loved his body too—but would Harry ever taste his divine flavour again after tonight? Would he ever have another chance to breathe in the scent of his mate’s passion? The smell of his sweat as they rocked together? Hell, Harry would even miss the smell of Severus’ potions and the way they clung to his robes.

Come morning, would all of it be gone?

Determination flickered to life beside Harry’s fear. If tonight was his last night with his mate, then by gods, Harry was going to enjoy every moment of it.

Severus tilted his head back and bared his throat to his mate. The sign of submission set Harry’s wild blood flowing, and he fell to with a growl.

Still, Harry’s fears would not leave him alone. Even as he made love to Severus’ neck, he kept seeing that beautiful throat slit open, bleeding, his lovely Sev dying and crying out for his mate. Harry shivered against Severus’ throat and swallowed tears.

No!

Severus was going to survive this. He had to survive. Harry couldn’t live without him.

Severus sighed, a contented sound, and traced his fingernails down Harry’s back. “I love you, Harry,” he murmured. “Don’t be afraid. It’s going to be all right.”

Harry came up with a wince. “I have to be afraid. It is coming soon—the end.”

Severus cupped Harry’s cheek. “Not the end. The beginning.”

Harry huffed and jerked away, his desire fading into an all-encompassing wave of panic. “No. I don’t even know how to fight him, Severus! I have no idea! He’s coming, he’s gathering people and getting ready for war—and we don’t know what he’s planning with that staff—and even if we did, I still don’t have a clue how to defeat him. It’s hopeless.”

Severus brought Harry into his arms. “Ssh. Harry, I believe in you. We will defeat him.”

“How, Sev? I have no idea what to do.”

Severus turned Harry onto his back and nuzzled his neck. “We have discussed this before, Harry. If all else fails, just strike him with your scythe. He will split in two just as any other man of flesh and blood.”

“Will he, though? He’s not a normal man and you know it. Besides that, he knows about Mum and
me. What if he’s taken precautions against Reapers and their scythes?”

Severus frowned. “That … is actually a fair point. I do not know if such measures can be taken, but do not fear. Perhaps I have a way to circumvent them.”

He stood and went to a wall with potions paraphernalia hanging on brass racks. Harry watched, bemused, as Severus pressed the edge of a pewter cauldron and stepped back. The rack swung forward, revealing a door, and Severus tugged it open with a whispered password Harry could not hear. The man rummaged behind the door for a moment, muttered something Harry couldn’t make out, and emerged with a silver dagger and a dark smile on his face.

“This, love, will help. And a small fighter such as yourself is well-suited to it.” He held out his hand, and a leather strap flew into his palm. “I am going to set these on your nightstand, but when you dress yourself again—even when you are only wearing nightclothes—I want you to wear this around your waist at all times except when you bathe. That way it will always be available to you.”

Harry picked up the dagger and unsheathed it. A smell of rosemary and something sharper, something lethal pricked his nostrils.

“Take care, Harry. The blade is poisoned. It is also warded against accidental injury or the possibility of striking allies, but I would not recommend testing it.”

Harry grimaced and sheathed the dagger. “Especially not where one wrong move might kill us both.” He laid the weapon on the nightstand and frowned. “How is it safe to wear that all the time if it’s poisoned?”

“As I said, it is warded against accidents.”

“Oh.” Harry shuddered and pulled Severus down onto the bed with him. “I won’t wear it while I make love to you.”

Severus laughed and turned onto his back, taking Harry with him. “I should hope not. I would find the prospect of being poked by that rather too daunting to enjoy it.”

Harry gave Severus a sad smile. “Sev, how are you able to laugh and smile right now? I’m so bloody scared, and you look … well, you’re still happy.”

Severus shrugged. “I suppose it is because I have spent the past twenty years preparing for this moment, and now that it is here, I am relieved that I do not have to face it alone. As well, it does not hurt that I have faith in you, my love. Your instincts have been sound every time. I believe they will come through for us on the battlefield, too.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then you shall have to rely on my wit.” He eased Harry into a tender kiss. “Come, love. Do not trouble yourself with what may come. The battle will be here soon enough. Until then, I am determined to enjoy my time with you.”

Harry sighed and relaxed into his mate’s embrace. “I wish I had your courage.”

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “You do. My love, you do.”

He wrapped his arms around Harry’s waist and guided his mate to straddle him. Severus gave a soft moan and rocked into Harry, his dark eyes warm with love and desire.
“My Harry, you will win this. Just as you believed you would find the horcrux in me and destroy it, so I believe in you. I cannot say that everything will be all right—indeed, I do not know—but I have hope that we will emerge victorious even if Riddle does find a way through our wards.” Severus kissed his mate and held his face in strong, gentle hands. “I have faith in you, Harry. You are stronger than you know.”

Another slow rock into Harry’s hips sent a rush of liquid fire through his bones, and he let his fears go. Perhaps Severus was right. Perhaps they would win.

And if not, well, why was Harry wasting his last few hours on earth worrying about it when he could be spending his time in far more pleasurable pursuits?

With a sigh, Harry leaned down to Severus and brought him into a passionate kiss. His mate met him eagerly and tangled his fingers in Harry’s messy hair.

“Love you, love you so much,” Harry muttered between impassioned kisses. “Can’t lose you. Can’t let you go.”

Severus reached down, sliding his fingertips into Harry’s cleft, and Harry’s breathless litany stopped cold. He sucked in a shocked breath as Severus circled his entrance, not pushing, just caressing him and sending lightning bolts of sensation through Harry.

“Focus on me, love,” Severus murmured in Harry’s ear. “Just for now, forget about the war and let me make love to you.”

Harry’s breath left him with a moan. “Merlin, yes. Will you … top me, Sev?”

Severus swallowed audibly. “I … do not think that is wise, love. I have not yet had time to develop a contraceptive for you.”

Harry winced. “But I might never get another chance to feel it and if I’m going to die tomorrow, I—”

Severus growled and shut Harry up with a fierce kiss. “Silence. You are not going to die. I will not allow it.”

“But—”

Severus hissed and flipped Harry onto his back, pinning the smaller man’s wrists above his head and shocking Harry into silence. “But nothing, Potter. I will not hear of this any longer.” His scowl crumbled, and tears filled his eyes. “I cannot. I cannot bear to think of losing you, Harry. You are the one source of true joy in my life, and the thought of losing you is … too much. Please. I need you.”

Harry eased Severus onto his back and kissed him with tender love, regretting that he had frightened his mate so badly. His wild blood and wings came out in response to Severus’ need, and Harry wrapped them around his mate with a gentle kiss.

“Hey, look at me.” Severus obeyed, and the tears in his eyes broke something in Harry. “Ssh. I’m sorry. You’re right.” He kissed and caressed Severus all over his face until the man’s tears faded. “Are you okay?”

“I’d be better if you’d bloody well shut up and make love to me already.”

Harry chuckled and pushed his fears aside. “All right, love. Just rest and let me show you how much I adore you.”
Severus’ eyes fluttered closed. “Don’t go slow tonight. I need you, need to feel you hard and fast, so deep, I will be limping tomorrow.”

Harry gasped, shock and thrills running through him at Severus’ blunt words. “Merlin, Severus. I’m not going to hurt you, especially not now when so much is at stake, but if you need it hard and fast, that I can do.”

Severus moaned and bared his throat. “Please, Harry. Now.”

Harry groaned and lavished Severus’ neck with tongue and gentle teeth, rocking their hips together with steady, hard strokes. Severus arched when Harry’s mouth latched onto his nipple, and cried out when his hand stroked between Severus’ open thighs.

“Yes,” he gasped out. “T-take me.”

“No like this, not when it will hurt you.”

Harry Summoned their lube from wherever they had dropped it the night before and slipped one slick finger inside Severus. The man’s eyes closed and his mouth opened in a silent plea.

“Yes, love,” Harry murmured to his mate. “Does it feel good?”

“H-hurry it up,” Severus growled. “Need you inside me.”

“Do not argue, my mate. I will not hurt you.”

Severus groaned and went limp at Harry’s assertive tone, his hips rocking slowly into his mate.

“Please. Please.”

At Severus’ keen, Harry slid another finger inside and crooked them. Severus arched like a bow pulled taut and cried out Harry’s name. Harry pressed that place inside his mate again, and Severus shrieked.

“Now, damn it. Now!”

Harry chuckled and prepared his mate despite his demands, refusing to give in until he knew Severus was ready and a minor pain would not cost the man his life on the battlefield the next day, should Riddle break through their wards. When he was certain Severus was ready, Harry took the man’s thighs and spread him wide apart. Severus was almost sobbing with his need, so Harry slid inside, moving deeper inch by inch until he was fully seated within his mate.

“Harry, move.”

“Wait.” With his dry hand, Harry brushed damp strands of hair from Severus’ face, giving the silver one an extra stroke, and cupped his beloved mate’s cheek. “I will never hurt you, Severus. Not even in a small way. Which means you will always be thoroughly prepared. Do you understand?”

Severus’ eyes were glazed and wet, but he nodded. “Please, Harry. I can’t bear it.”

Tears slipped down the man’s face, and at the sight of them, Harry relented. He could not endure Severus’ tears.

“Ssh. I will. It’s okay. I love you, Severus.”

With a sigh, he slowly moved in and out, still being cautious. Dear gods, it felt so good, Harry could barely control himself, but he was determined not to cause his love any pain. He set a slow, deep
pace, watching Severus’ eyes as they made love.

Severus begged for Harry to take him harder with every stroke, and the second Harry felt his mate’s body adjust to accommodate him, he obeyed.

“You want me to take you hard and fast, beloved?”

Severus groaned and grabbed Harry’s shoulders. “Please, gods. I need you.”

“I am here, Sev. And now, you are mine.”

With a low growl, he bent his mate almost double and slammed into him. Severus let out a joyous cry and hooked his legs behind Harry’s neck.

“Yes,” he gasped out. “Yes, like that.”

Harry panted Severus’ name and altered his angle so his next hard thrust made the man scream in pleasure. Dear Merlin, that had to be the hottest sound Harry had ever heard. He had to think cold thoughts to keep from losing it that instant. Severus would not be pleased if Harry lost his steam on the second thrust.

Well, all Harry had to do was remember that this might be the last time he ever felt Severus wrapped around him, so warm and welcoming and wonderful, and the imminent threat of orgasm faded to a distant memory.

Tears blurred his vision, but he ignored them and slammed in hard, again aiming for that place inside his mate that turned Severus into a sobbing, writhing mess of ecstasy. Severus called Harry’s name and reached for him, tears slipping down the sides of his face and his eyes alight with desire.

In that instant, Harry fell in love with him all over again.

“Mine,” Harry breathed against his palm. “Always mine.”


“All right.”

Harry forced away the thought that he might never feel so loved again and dove into his lover, grabbing his thighs for leverage. He set a brutal pace and aimed for Severus’ prostate with each stroke, delighting in the sight of his lover’s pleasure. Severus cried out Harry’s name and demanded more, thrashing and writhing and rocking into his mate’s hard thrusts.

Severus’ words soon devolved into senseless pleas, and, as Harry watched his mate come undone beneath him, he could only think of how beautiful Severus was, how brave and loving and kind.

“Please,” he prayed to whoever was listening. “Please don’t take him from me. Please, let him survive.”

Harry reached for him, wanting to kiss his mate but, not having the reach, settled for caressing Severus’ face. Despite his body’s need for release, he never wanted this to end. He wanted to stay like this, warm in Severus’ arms, forever.

Merlin help him, what if he never felt this again? What if this was their last moment together? Harry’s eyes filled even as his body betrayed him and climbed ever closer to its limit.

“Severus,” Harry murmured. “Oh, Sev. Don’t let me go. Don’t let it end.”
Severus leaned forwards and caught Harry into a kiss. “H-Harry … can’t hold on. Love you so much.”

Harry held his hand throughout the rest of their journey towards pleasure, tears blurring the sight of Severus’ face.

“I love you, love y-y—hah—oh, Sev. I love you! Severus!”

Severus’ eyes rolled back in his head and shrieked Harry’s name. Heat surged against Harry’s stomach, and the accompanying tension in Severus’ body drove Harry over the edge. With a cry, Harry flooded his mate, but as his pleasure peaked and faded, he let out a broken sob.

Oh gods, it was over, it was really over, and the thought that he might never experience this love, this deep communion with his partner again was tearing Harry in two. Tears blinded him and he flopped, exhausted, onto Severus’ chest, breaking into heart-rending sobs.

“Severus ….”

He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t just walk onto the field tomorrow or the next day, knowing that he might not survive. That he might never be with his mate again.

“I can’t let you go, Sev.”

A trembling hand carded through Harry’s mop. “It is no easier for me, beloved.” Severus’ voice broke, and Harry looked up to realise Severus was weeping as well.

“Oh, love.”

Harry carefully freed himself and crawled up his lover’s body until he could reach Severus’ tear-streaked face.

“Angel, I love you. It’s okay. I’m here.”

Severus grabbed him into a tight embrace and kissed him hard. “Don’t leave me. I cannot face this world without you.”

Harry let slip a bitter sob and wished he could say the words his mate wished to hear, but he couldn’t. He didn’t know if he could keep such a vow.

“I’ll try, my love. I’ll try my hardest to stay with you forever.” It was the best he could do.

“Don’t leave me. Please … please.”

Severus buried his face in Harry’s shoulder, clutching desperately at his mate. Harry had no strength for further words and simply held him, his fear for what the morning would bring cold and hollow in his belly.

They fell asleep wrapped in each other’s arms and with tears drying on their cheeks.

A few hours later, Harry woke with a cry of his mate’s name. The terror of the vision hadn’t yet left him, but it was rage that tore him out of sleep and made him reach for his dagger and wand. It wasn’t
much of a vision—it seemed the spell to absorb Pettigrew’s soul had addled Riddle’s mind more than they had realised—but he had seen enough to know Riddle’s plans.

And fuck all if Harry would let him win. Not this time.

As Harry was tying his boots, Severus’ sleepy voice murmured, “Harry? Is everything okay?”

Harry took a deep breath and forced his voice steady. “No. Riddle is at the edge of Hogsmeade, Sev, and he knows how to get in.”

Severus leapt up and began tossing on clothing. “How?”

Harry growled as he jerked on his coat. “You. He’s using the remainder of what he was able to draw from your soul to break through the recognition system.”

Severus’ eyes flashed. “I’ll kill him.”

“That would be my job, love. Just get your soldiers ready for war.” He tugged his coat closed and darted out the door.

“Harry! Wait! Your ro—”

But Harry was already out of the Headmaster’s office and fuming too hard to listen anyway. Fuck Riddle. Harry would not let him violate Severus further.

It was time to end this, once and for all.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Warnings: little bit of foul language. Summary: Severus goes after his silly mate and gets everyone ready for battle. The soul-gates have their say, too.

***AN: I had to edit this to add a little tense scene between Harry and Cho just before they discuss Remus' help from the soul-gates. I wasn't originally planning to use her character in this story, but plot visited me and changed my mind.***

***AN2: I believe I have altered all references to the "SS" as concerns Severus' Soldiers now. The acronym is just unfortunate and has a really dark connotation I didn't intend to give them. They should all read as "the Soldiers" now, but if I've missed any, please let me know. Thanks!***

CHAPTER 29

Severus cried out after Harry, but the young man had already gone, and Severus was stark naked. Shite! He had no choice but to dress himself—quickly—and hope he could catch Harry before the idiot got himself killed.

Then he would kill Harry himself for leaving without his gear.

Well, thank the gods Severus was a wizard. He Summoned his clothing and spelled it onto his body with three well-aimed flicks of his wand, then Summoned a golden scimitar from his weapons rack, along with Harry’s gear. To his surprise, the Reaper gear came in the box Lily had presented it in—including the scythe, shrunked to fit. Severus’ hands trembled as he took the box and prayed the gear would recognise that he had no ill intent towards its true bearer. It settled into his hands without so much as a tickle, and Severus let out a sigh of relief.

Tucking the gear and sword under his arm, he raced into his office and slammed down the switch to set off the castle’s alarms. As the screaming, wailing sirens rang out all around him, fear flooded his veins. Fuck. He was running out of time. Harry had said Riddle was already at Hogsmeade and had found a way through the wards.

Severus sneered at the idea that the bastard still had remnants of his soul. Was it possible to call them back? He tried to pull the shreds of his being back to himself, but felt no response. Without the link, perhaps it was impossible to reunite with the remaining pieces, or perhaps they had no true connection to Severus any longer since Harry had healed his soul. He knew without a doubt that his soul was whole once more, even if Riddle had managed to maintain a bit of his magical signature, or whatever he had in that staff. Severus would be all right, but Merlin, he worried about what Riddle could do with Rowle’s soul. The monster had the whole of that unfortunate’s being at his command. Only time would tell what the bastard planned to do with it.

Perhaps they could set a ward against soul magic to prevent him levelling Hogwarts like he had Blackpool. Maybe then they would have a chance. That should accomplish their goal, especially if
they could convince the soul-gates to aid them. Yes, he would do that, as soon as he caught Harry and—

*Harry.* Coldness washed over him. Shite, what was Severus doing worrying about souls and magical theory? He still had to catch Harry and prepare the castle’s occupants for war.

Gods, Harry wasn’t the only idiot in residence tonight.

Wanting to hit himself for the delay, Severus dashed off a Patronus to Minerva, then, with his warning sent, borrowed of the castle’s power to apparate himself to the entry hall. Just as he landed—on his feet, of course—Harry came careening around a corner and almost bowled Severus over.

“Where do you think you are going, Mister Potter?”

Harry cringed and tried to run past him, but Severus caught him by the arm.

“Are you *mad,* Harry? You’re alone and unprepared for battle! By the gods, have some common sense, man! You cannot face Riddle and all his Death Eaters like this!”

Harry said nothing and struggled to break loose, but Severus held him in a death grip.

“Harry! Stop this at once!”

Harry sobbed out, “He’s got fragments of your soul, Sev. I can’t let hi—”

A shuddering boom shook the castle, knocking even the graceful Severus onto his arse. Harry toppled on top of him and landed in a heap, but the next instant, was on his feet and barrelling towards the door with murder in his eyes.

“*Incarcerous!*”

Magical ropes bound Harry’s legs and brought him down, and Severus dragged the struggling young man towards him. With a snarl, he flipped Harry onto his back and grabbed his mate’s face.

“If you do not stop struggling this instant and begin using the brain I *know* you have in there, I shall lock you in the dungeons until this is over. Do you understand me?”

Harry fought and growled, but when Severus knelt before him and brought him into his arms, the young man stilled, no doubt in fear of hurting his mate.

“Please. *Please* stop this, Harry. You cannot go out there unarmed and alone. He will *kill* you, and then I will have nothing left.”

“Your s-soul,” Harry choked out between sobs. “He’s g-got a piece of it.”

Severus held him tighter and took in a shaky breath. “I know, and judging by the force of that explosion, he has already used what little he had left.”

Harry howled and struggled to break loose, but Severus refused to let him go.

“Harry, be at peace. Everyone save Ariana is out of Hogsmeade, and she will be back in the castle by now, warning the Order that Riddle is here. He cannot use my soul to kill this time.”

With a sob, Harry flopped onto Severus’ shoulder. “I’m s-so afraid. You’re not drained? It doesn’t hurt at all?”
Severus ran a hand through his mate’s hair. “He has no link to me any longer. He cannot drain me. I do not even think those pieces he had left have a connection to me, not now that you have healed all the emptiness within me. Perhaps it might have hurt me before then, but now, he can do nothing to harm me, not indirectly at least.” He kissed Harry’s forehead and lifted the young man’s chin with a gentle hand. “Come, love. I am well, but I will not be for long if you get yourself killed trying to save me from a danger that has already passed.”

Harry sniffled and gave Severus a hesitant nod. “I … I’m sorry.”

“It was understandable—bloody stupid, but understandable, if you were afraid I would die because of Riddle’s staff. But I am safe, and now we must prepare our troops for battle. I am the general, at least in spirit, and you are the hero. They need us both. Are you able to face the soldiers with me by your side?”

Harry sniffled and wiped his eyes. “Y-yeah. I was just afraid it would drain you again. Couldn’t lose you. You … you’re sure your chest doesn’t hurt?”

Severus kissed him lightly. “You healed me completely, love, and that has not changed. Now, buck up and let’s get our troops ready for war.”

Harry sighed. “Think you could take the ropes off my legs first?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Can you swear not to run into battle alone and without your gear again?”

Harry looked down at his chest and winced. “Merlin. I really forgot it. I am an idiot.”

Severus chuckled. “You are merely a Gryffindor. You think with your heart first and your brain second, like all of your House. But I have your gear here, and I will give it to you and release your legs if you swear to use your bloody head from now on.”

Harry rubbed his scar and nodded. “I promise. Let me up.”

Severus released the ropes and hauled his lover to his feet. “No more mad dashes, Potter. I expect you to live long enough to attend our wedding.”

Harry gave a wan chuckle and took the box from Severus. “You won’t be able to call me Potter then. Anyway, give me a minute to change.”

“Hmm. Out of sight of our allies, I think.”

Severus used the castle’s magic again to bring them to his office.

“What a,” said a dazed Harry. “You can apparate here because you’re the headmaster?”

Severus gave a curt nod and unhooked the dagger from Harry’s waist. “Indeed, but we must hurry, love. We have little time.”

Harry nodded and tugged the robes over his shoulders. Severus helped him dress, and once the young man had zipped his robes and belted the dagger around his waist again, Severus passed Harry his scythe. Harry took it with a frown, lines of worry creasing his forehead.

“What should I do with this, Sev? I can’t just leave it visible. You know some of those idiots would get ideas, and they might hit too close to the truth. And Merlin help me if Rita Skeeter gets hold of that little titbit.”
Severus frowned too. “Indeed. Well, strap it on and put a disillusionment spell on it. I would, but I am afraid it might react poorly to any magic but your own.”

Harry winced. “Good thinking.”

He strapped the weapon to his back and cast. The scythe vanished, but Severus made note of its position lest he accidentally take off his own head.

“Do be careful not to hit anyone with that, Harry. Keep your back clear. I will warn the troops not to touch your back and make sure they don’t get too curious.”

Harry nodded. “Are they in the Great Hall?”

“They should already be there, but we are not finished here yet. Here. Take this scimitar as well, just in case. I intend it to be more for show than anything, but if all else fails, it is always good to have a backup weapon.”

Harry smirked. “I thought that was the dagger.”

“A backup for your backup, then. I am taking no chances, not with you.”

“All right, love. Help me with the belt, then?”

“Yes.”

Severus girded the scimitar around his love’s waist behind the dagger, hoping against hope Harry would not need it. He was an inexperienced swordsman at best and a danger to himself at worst. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to have the weapon as a last resort should all his other preparations fail. Besides that, it looked intimidating, and Severus was all too familiar with the psychology of war.

As for himself, he dressed himself in long, black duelling robes with silver filigree and strapped a silver katana to his back. At his waist, he carried the sword of Gryffindor, though he had no intention of depending upon it in battle unless it presented itself. It was simply too finicky to rely upon in a true life-or-death situation. Still, at least it would be on the battlefield should it decide to place itself where it was needed, whether that was in Severus’ hands or someone else’s. And again, it looked intimidating. It would bolster his image with their allies as well.

Harry whistled as Severus snapped a wand holster to his wrist, complete with a spare wand. “Merlin, you’re bloody hot like that.”

Severus gave a wry laugh. “In more ways than one, apparently. These robes are a bit too warm, though that will change as soon as we are outside. January in the Scottish highlands is unpleasant, to say the least.” He tied his hair back and checked himself in the mirror. “There. I believe I am ready. Are you warm enough, Harry?”

“I will be. These robes are spelled to stay the right temperature.”

Severus gave him a half-hearted glare. “Merlin, what I wouldn’t give for a pair like that.”

“I wish you had some too. I’d feel a lot safer.”

Severus nodded. “You would be at that, but I promise to keep myself out of danger as much as possible and take every precaution.”

Harry gave him a grim nod. “You’d better.”
“Hmm. I said I would. Now, come, if you’re finished.”

“Yeah, but wait. I just want to ….”

“What? We don’t have time to was—”

Harry grabbed Severus’ face and caught him into a breath-stealing kiss.

“There,” he panted after a moment. “Now I can face this.”

Severus shook himself out of a daze and nodded. “Right. Then come, and let us floo to the Great Hall.”

“After you, love. Otherwise I might fall on my face.”

Severus snorted and led the way to the floo. By the time they entered the Great Hall, the soldiers had already gathered. Minerva and Filius had the students in two lines near the staff dais, the two professors heading an effort to distribute spare duelling robes and weapons among those who had none of their own. Lily and Remus were helping the students dress once they had their robes in hand.

The aurors stood front and centre, having forgone their customary red robes for less obvious grey. Each carried a short sword and dagger along with two wands, and all of them looked deadly serious, even Tonks.

On the side of the hall opposite the students, the Order members milled about, each one pale and afraid but determined. The non-Order affiliated adults gathered around the middle of the hall, looking nervous and unsure of their welcome. And the teachers not involved with handing out weapons or herding the troops had gathered around the staff table, watching the proceedings below with worried eyes.

Every head turned when Harry and Severus walked into the hall, and the relief in the room was palpable. Harry scowled, obviously irritated that these fully-grown adults placed so much on his young shoulders, but a discreet poke from Severus cleared that up quickly.

Severus whispered out of the corner of his mouth, “Do try not to terrify the army before they even meet the enemy, hmm?”

Harry frowned. “Sorry. The hero worship thing just gets old.”

“I know. For now, however, you must endure it.”

Harry smirked. “They’re enamoured of you a bit now too, you know?”

Severus struggled to keep from blushing. “I … I do not know what you mean.” Before Harry could ‘explain’ and overwhelm him further, Severus climbed atop the Hufflepuff table and cast a *Sonorous* upon his throat. “Thank you, all of you, for your support tonight,” he said in an amplified voice. “Having trained most of you at some time during the past week, I can safely say I am honoured to be fighting alongside you.”

Harry clambered up beside him with much less grace, but with more enthusiasm. He cast an amplifying spell as well. “Same here, but there’s something we need to settle before we go out there tonight. Everyone, I know you guys all think I’m some sort of hero, the Boy-Who-Lived and all that rot—” Severus shot him a sharp look, and Harry smiled. “I swear to you,” Harry continued, “I’ll do my best to fulfil that role, but I’m not your leader. Not here.”
He stepped forwards and held his hands out in a gesture of supplication. “I’m an eighteen year old boy, not a warrior. I’m not a general, not a leader. The truth is, I don’t have a bloody clue how to lead an army. My sole focus is finding and dispatching Riddle before he can kill us all, and that’s what I’ll be doing tonight. My mission is a solitary one, so I can’t lead you. Your leader, the one you need to listen to is Severus.” Harry reached behind him and took Severus’ hand, pulling him forwards to stand at Harry’s side. “He’s experienced in battle, a brilliant strategist, and he knows our enemy a lot better than I do. You take orders from him tonight, not me.”

“General Snape,” cried someone from the former DA—Severus wasn’t sure who. “We’re honoured to follow you into battle!”

Severus’ face flamed and warmth filled his heart. “T-thank you.”

Harry squeezed his mate’s hand, and Severus kissed the back of Harry’s. “I love you, Harry.”

Shite. Severus had forgotten to mute his Sonorous, and as a result, the entire hall heard his soft declaration. His cheeks flamed as the crowd erupted into a shameful display of sentimentalism, and he resolved not to be so affectionate again, not in front of the entire army at least. He Occluded hard and let his arm drop, but did not release his mate’s hand. He needed Harry’s touch to keep him grounded.

“I love you, too,” Harry murmured in Severus’ ear. Harry, thankfully, had remembered to cover his throat and mute the charm. Severus wasn’t sure he could handle further embarrassment.

Severus cleared his throat and glared the whistling, cheering crowd back into submission. “Well, now that you are assured of my loyalty and I am assured of yours, please form ranks like we discussed earlier in the week. Grab your wands and weapons, and be warned that I will tolerate no foolishness.” He sent his fiercest glare straight at the Weasley twins. They held their hands up in a gesture of surrender, but Severus knew better than to trust it. “Hurry and get into battle positions, excepting those of you who are still waiting for duelling gear. This is not a training run—Riddle is in Hogsmeade as we speak.”

All traces of amusement died and a shudder went through the crowd. Still, they all moved into their assigned positions, save for the students still in line for gear.

“I will not pretend this is not a dangerous fight,” said Severus after the adult fighters had taken their places. “Besides his Death Eaters, Riddle has a magical staff full of soul magic—the same kind of magic that levelled Blackpool. We do not yet know if he intends to use it as a weapon or if he will try to level the entire battlefield at once, though Harry, his mother, Remus Lupin, and myself will be taking measures to prevent the latter.

“To that end, Harry has a secret weapon that will harm anyone besides himself who touches it. He is wearing it on his back—there are spells upon it that make it so only Harry can see it until the right time. Be warned and do not touch his back. I am his mate so it will not harm me, but I cannot say the same for anyone else who gets too close.”

Harry smirked and squeezed Severus’ hand. Severus smiled back. He thought it rather an ingenious plan to keep the masses away from Harry’s scythe himself. Judging by the awed, nervous looks on the crowd’s faces, he could trust that no one would risk getting too close to Harry, which had the extra benefit of keeping any fawning admirers from getting too close.

Severus even surprised himself with his intelligence, on occasion.

He Occluded away his amusement as he faced the crowd once more. “We are taking every
precaution to keep everyone safe, but even with the best we can do, casualties are inevitable tonight, much as I wish I could say otherwise. I do understand that this is a daunting prospect, as does my mate, so we will not judge you if you are frightened to face such a grim situation or do not think yourselves adequate. Anyone not prepared to die may take refuge in the castle without fear of judgment. As for the rest of you, hurry and ready yourselves to fight. We march in half an hour— sooner if he arrives at the gates before then or our wards do not work.”

There was a mad dash for the duelling gear, and several other professors stepped down from the dais to help hand it out.

“Lily, Remus, Filius, Miss Tonks, and Mister William Weasley,” said Severus, “please follow us outside. We need your help to strengthen our wards. Anyone else with warding skills, strong elemental magic, or large magical power reserves, please feel free to join us.”

Those Severus mentioned left rank and dashed to the ‘general’s’ side, along with a few others— Kingsley Shacklebolt, Neville Longbottom, Charlie Weasley and his twin brothers, Hermione Granger, and several aurors and adult warriors Severus was unfamiliar with. Without a word, they each saluted their battlemaster and fell in line behind him. Harry gave his mate a quick kiss and took his place at Severus’ side.

“I’m proud of you,” Harry murmured to his mate.

Severus gave him a shy smile. “Thank you. Do not overwhelm me now, though. I need my wits about me.”

Harry kissed his cheek, but said nothing else. Relieved, Severus led them to an area near the lake, about halfway between the castle gates and the entrance. He examined the position of the moon, checked the magical currents, laid his hand against the earth—bloody hell, it was cold. The fire element would be weak at this time of year no matter where he started the ward. With a shake of his head, he wet a finger in his mouth and tested the direction of the wind.

No, not there. The water element overpowered in his current location. Frowning, he moved about ten yards away from the lake and checked again. Not there either—the beech by the lake blocked the air element and muted it. Severus moved out of the way of the tree and tested one more time. Ah, all the elements were in balance there. Well, save the dip in fire magic, but there was nothing he could do about that. Not in the Scottish highlands in January. He would just have to hope his fire warder had powerful enough magic to make up for the deficit.

“This will do.”

He took Harry’s hand and moved him into position at what would be the nexus of the circle. He motioned to Lily, and she took her place standing in front of and a little to the side of her son. Severus placed Remus in front of her and saved a position for himself in front of Harry. The others had gathered around in the meantime and stood in a circle, watching with nervous expressions and blowing on their hands to keep them warm. Severus cast a wide-area warming charm. He hoped the blast of heat would not only keep his casters out of hypothermia, but also boost the weakened fire element. He checked the earth one more time and grinned. Perfect.

Severus stood and brushed off his hands. “Charles, why did you come to help?”

Charlie grinned. “Call me Charlie, please. You’re my brother now. And as for my skills, you’d better know how to cast really strong wards if you’re going to work with dragons, unless you want to be toasted every time one of them gets in a tiff.”
Severus nodded. “What kind of elemental magic are you best at, Charlie? Answer in as few words as possible. We have little time.”

Charlie replied, “Earth. Rock wards and such.”

Severus tested the young man’s power level and, satisfied that Charlie would be able to handle it, placed the dragon keeper to the left of the Reapers and about two yards away, atop a quickly cleared patch of earth. “You will be a key then. Stay there. Longbottom, your reason for coming out and your skills?”

The boy lifted his chin. “Power reserves, sir, but I’m not really sure what element I’m aligned to.”

Severus nodded. “Had you a decent Defence professor, it would have been taught this year. There is a simple spell: *Elementum Cor Meum*. Simply hold your wand in front of your body like this—”

Severus demonstrated by holding his wand parallel with his body and just in front of his heart. “—And open your heart to the elements as you cast, Mister Longbottom. Try it now.”

Longbottom smiled wryly. “Call me Neville, sir. Harry is my family, too.” He closed his eyes and cast.

Severus watched as an almost neon green light surrounded the boy. Well. That would explain his proficiency with herbology.

“You are a natural earth Elemental, Neville. One of the most powerful users of earth magic I have ever had the opportunity to meet. When this is over, if you are both well, you should see Professor Sprout for guidance. She is not an Elemental herself, but she will know how to get you the training you need.”

Neville flushed pink. “Really, sir? Merlin. Well, I guess it’s a good thing I’d planned to apprentice to her next year anyway.”

Severus nodded. “Indeed. Take your position to the left of Charlie. You will be his primary grounder.” He watched as a grinning Neville bounded into position. “Shacklebolt, your skills?”

Kingsley stepped forward. “Warding and water magic, sir.”

Severus blinked at the honorific. “Sir?”

“Well, you are leading us at the moment, aren’t you?” Kingsley grinned. “Slytherins know when to show respect. Well, most of us do.”

Severus bowed his head in response and, as he was already familiar with the man’s power level, placed Kingsley directly across from Charlie and Neville, in the position nearest the lake. The groundwater was plentiful there, so the auror would have plenty of natural magic to draw from.

“You are the water key, Shacklebolt. Now, Tonks!”

She stepped forward with a grin. “Power reserves and fire magic, sir, in particular, controlling Fiendfyre.”

Severus shuddered. Merlin. Only the most powerful of fire Elementals would even dare attempt controlling Fiendfyre. It seemed Tonks had some secrets, too. “No casting of Fiendfyre here tonight, though your skill with fire will be helpful. You will be the primary grounder for the fire key, once I find one.” He placed her in the corner nearest the gates and cast an extra warming charm under her feet. “Filius, you have air magic and high power reserves, but no particular skill at warding, yes?”
The little wizard squeaked an affirmation.

“Then you will be a grounder for an air warder, again, once I find one.”

“That’s us,” said Fred Weasley.

“We have great wards and powerful air magic,” said George.

Fred smirked. “We’re Elementals too.”

George shook his head. “Yes, but we can’t use our powers—”

“Unless you put us together.”

Fred gave him a sheepish smile. “Our cores are linked.”

“That’s why we always—”

“Finish each other’s sentences.”

“The air magic in our cores—”

“Carries our thoughts between us.”

“Merlin,” Harry said with a grin. “That’s bloody amazing!”

The twins bowed dramatically, making everyone laugh.

Severus brought them to task for it, too. “This is not the time! We must get these wards up before Riddle uses that staff.”

The twins sobered immediately and trotted to Severus’ side. With a nod and a mental note to examine their magic closely at a later date, Severus placed the twins and Filius opposite Kingsley. Bill turned out to be a high-powered warder aligned with fire, so he placed him nearest the castle with Tonks.

And so he went on until he had nine people in position, one powerhouse to each warder—excepting the Weasley twin duo—and each element represented. He placed the others in a circle around them, keeping the elements together as much as he could. He thanked whatever deities had decided to look favourably upon him that day that he had a relatively even number of each. There were a few less air elementals, but with the Weasley twins as their key, the power from the air side would be approximately equal to the others.

“Now that we are all in position, keys, prepare to pour all your elemental warding magic into Harry, Lily, Remus, and myself. Grounders, prepare to share your elemental magic with the warders. Charlie, if you will explain the process to Neville while I am working with our primary warders, it will save us time.”

Charlie nodded, and Severus took his place in front of Harry and beside Lily, lowering his voice so only his family could hear.

“Harry, Lils, you are our only people with intrinsic soul magic. You are going to use your intent magic to cast the most powerful soul wards you are able to. Ask the soul-gates for help in your minds while you chant the incantation for soul warding out loud. The incantation is: Locus Praesidio Animus. Do not stop chanting that for anything until the wards have set. Remus and I will ask the soul-gates as well, but I do not think them likely to obey our requests. You two are the … magical
beings here. They will be most likely to listen to you.”

The others nodded.

“Do not hold back.” Severus held his hands out, palms facing his mate and Remus. “Place one hand against my hand, Remus, and one against your mate’s. Harry, you place one hand against Lily’s and one against mine.”

His mate and friends obeyed, until their arms were intertwined in a knot of sorts.

“Good. Now ….” Severus raised his voice again, speaking to the others as well as his family. “On the count of three, we will begin releasing our power. Everyone, ready yourselves.” He gathered his magic and searched for an opening in the currents. No … not yet … yes, there! Severus latched his magic onto the surge in magical current and tied his in to that of his family as best as he was able.

“One … two … three!”

Severus’ breath left him in a rush as the power hit him. Dear Merlin, it was singing in his veins, setting his entire body tingling. Every hair on his body—including that atop his head—rose at the surge in magic, and beside him, his family looked much the same. Lily, in particular, drew the eye, her red hair flying all around her head like flames, but Severus focused on his mate. With a sigh, he laced their fingers together, enjoying the closeness with his beloved. He did the same with Remus, just in case something happened to shock them during the casting. To his relief, the others mirrored him without the need to be told.

“Begin your incantations,” Severus murmured to his family.

“Locus Praesidio Animus … Locus Praesidio Animus ….”

As the chant began to take on a song-like form, one the magic had shaped for itself, Severus gave over his power to the soul-gates and begged their assistance.

“Soul-gates, please, help us. Help us guard our souls from the evil threat, the one you have created Reapers to destroy. We need your assistance.”

Suddenly Severus was whisked away to someplace … different. Rainbows of colour drifted about in a whiteness so bright, Severus had to shield his eyes. He looked around for Harry and his family, but they were nowhere in sight, and neither was Hogwarts—or anything at all other than the strange light.

Panic fluttered in Severus’ chest. Had they failed? Had he used too much power and killed them all?

“Harry!”

“Peace, little human.”

The voice seemed to come from within him somewhere as well as from the whiteness. Severus was unsure if its bearer was male or female, nor could he distinguish an age from the sound.

An androgynous figure in silvery-white robe shimmered into existence before his eyes. Severus gasped at the creature, a being unlike any he had ever seen. It had slitted pupils and eyes of a rainbow hue, a catlike nose, a cloud of silvery curls that stretched to its feet, and rabbit-like ears that twitched and turned every which way extending high above its hair. Its skin was the same glittery silver as its robe and, as it came nearer, Severus wondered if the ‘robe’ was not actually fur of some sort. A long, bushy tail curled around the creature’s feet—paws, in truth—and angelic wings drifted
lazily behind its back.

“Who … who are you? Where am I?”

“All is well,” the creature said without moving its mouth. “Your family is safe, little one. We are simply granting your request for an audience individually.”

Severus gulped. “You are a soul-gate?”

The creature bowed its head in acknowledgement.

“Merlin. You are nothing like I expected.”

The creature gave a tinkling laugh. Female, then? “Perhaps you expected us all to look like the Veil in your … Ministry?”

“P-perhaps.”

“Little human, have you forgotten that you asked me here for a purpose?”

Severus shook himself and sank to one knee. “Forgive me. I had indeed forgotten. I was rather stunned.”

“There is no need to kneel. You are the mate of our Avenger. You do not kneel to us.”

Bemused and shaken, Severus rose to wobbly legs and tried to gather his wits. “Thank you. Ah, Madam Soul-Gate—”

The creature laughed again. “You believe I am female? How dear.”

Severus winced. “You are not? I apologise, sir.”

The soul-gate gave Severus what could only be described as a grin. “And now you believe I am male. Humans are rather entertaining creatures, I must say. So limited, though, with only two genders to choose from. I suppose it is no wonder you all look so much alike.”

Severus gaped. “Ah … oh. H-how should I refer to you, then?”

“You could call me by my name, perhaps. I am Xenidan.”

Severus bowed. “It is my pleasure to meet you, Xenidan. You may call me Severus.”

Xenidan bowed in a graceful, exotic move somewhere between dancing and a curtsey. “Welcome, Severus, to the realm of In-Between.”

“This is not the soul realm?”

The soul-gate tittered again and shook its curls. “Oh, little human, I quite like you. You ask such funny questions.”

Severus shook himself. “Right. This is not the time for pointless inquiries. We have no time.”

“Do not worry, Severus. Time does not pass here. You will arrive back at your previous location the same instant you left it.”

Severus let out his breath in a rushing whoosh. “That is a relief. Thank you.” He cleared his throat to
give him a moment to think. “Ah, Xenidan, we requested your help in order to protect the Reapers and our soldiers from their target.”

The soul-gate’s eyes narrowed, and Severus gulped, terrified he had offended it. He had no idea what strange powers this creature might have, but he did not want to be on its bad side.

“Ah yes,” Xenidan hissed through its teeth. “Tom Marvolo Riddle, otherwise known as the Dark Lord and Vold—”

Severus cried, “Don’t!”

The soul-gate raised an eyebrow. “His taboo does not work on the realm of beyond, dear Severus, but thank you for your efforts to protect me.”

Severus bowed his head, shamed. Of course the taboo would not work here. Had he left all his wits on earth?

“No need to be so dismayed, little human. You are in shock. Now, how can we help you defeat Riddle? Your mate has told you we are not killers, yes?”

Severus nodded. “His mother did, but we are not asking you to help us kill Riddle. We simply need your help to protect our fighters while Harry does his job.”

Xenidan made a sort of gasping sound and lowered its ears. “You have asked the soul-gates for protection? That is strange. None of your kind have ever done so before.”

Severus bowed, acknowledging the statement as a likely truth. “This battle is unusual for us as well. Our dilemma is this: Riddle has obtained a magical staff and filled it with the soul of a human being, along with remnants of m—”

The soul-gate hissed and bared sharp teeth. Severus reckoned it was not angry with him, but took a step back just in case.

“Abomination,” Xenidan spat. “It is an abomination against life to steal the soul energy of another.”

Severus lowered his head and struggled to hold in a sudden surge of grief. “Yes, I know.”

Xenidan’s voice softened. “Your soul has been healed recently.”

Severus nodded. “Riddle nearly drained all of mine to … to destroy Blackpool. An entire human city.” Tears dripped down his face in spite of himself. “Almost everyone within perished, and I shall have to carry that guilt for the rest of my life, however long or short it may be.”

“Oh, little one. So much pain inside you.”

Xenidan pressed a paw to Severus’ heart, and he gasped as his anguish abated, healed as if years had passed in an instant and he had somehow already gained perspective on his grief. It wasn’t his fault. It had never been his fault. Riddle was to blame, and Dumbledore. Severus stood tall and wiped his eyes.

“There. How does that feel, Severus?”

Severus looked up, wide-eyed and shaking. “B-but … I don’t … how?”

Xenidan chuckled. “We are masters of soul magic, Severus, though we do not use it to harm like
Riddle does. To heal a broken spirit is not so difficult for our kind.”

Severus swallowed hard and laid his hand on Xenidan’s paw. “Thank you,” he said in an emotion-roughened voice. “It is much improved.”

The soul-gate patted his hand and stepped back. “I am glad. Now, little one, tell me how Riddle drained your soul? Heretofore, we had thought this impossible.”

Severus scowled. “He had attached a horcrux to my skin and, through its evil taint, he was bleeding my soul to feed his power. Then, a few weeks ago, he either found or created a spell to speed the process.” He lowered his head. “Had Harry not used his unique abilities to destroy the horcrux within me and heal my soul, we would both be dead by now. Worse, I … I do not know what would have become of me, with my soul destroyed.”

Xenidan’s eyes took on a bright white glow. “Ask of us what you will, dear human. If it is within our power, it will be granted.”

Severus gasped. “Truly?”

“For one who has been used so cruelly and to destroy the abomination who would do such a terrible thing, we will aid you in whatever way we can.”

Severus released a shaky sigh. “Oh, thank Merlin.”

Harry opened his eyes to the familiar scene of Hogwarts and had the strangest urge to kiss the earth. Merlin, the In-Between realm was weird. That purple panther being—Harry still had no idea if it had been male or female, and he hadn’t been foolish enough to ask. Still, at least it had agreed to help.

Harry looked around and frowned. His family was all still … asleep? In a trance? At any rate, they were unconscious on their feet. Harry shook out his stiff muscles and settled in to wait. They would awaken any moment, and then they would have a battle on their hands.

A battle. Right. Harry continued the chant as soon as his mind cleared. “Locus Praesidio Animus.”

Severus woke first, and when he came to, he nearly toppled into Harry’s arms. Only sheer strength and a gust of wandless levitation magic from Harry kept the man on his feet.

“Locus Praesidio Animus,” Harry said in a firm voice, trying to help Severus remember where he was.

Severus gave Harry a look as if he didn’t recognise him, then the fog cleared, and the man smiled more brightly than Harry had ever seen. Merlin. Harry would have to ask Severus what had happened in his experience with the soul-gates as soon as they had the time.

As Severus joined in the chant, Lily woke up. She looked as disoriented as Severus had for a moment, then smiled and joined in as well. Finally Remus came to, and the man burst into tears of joy the moment his eyes opened. There was another one Harry would have to speak to when they had the opportunity.

He had to believe they would survive long enough to have those conversations, because he couldn’t
bear the alternative. Losing any of his family would destroy him.

As soon as Remus joined in the chant once more, the ground beneath Harry’s feet began to shake. At first, Harry thought Riddle had activated his weapon and a surge of terror raced through him, but no. Harry could see the gates from his vantage point and they were still firmly closed. Flames had started in Hogsmeade, turning the sky there orange, but the area near the gates was quiet. Riddle had not yet made it to Hogwarts, thank Merlin.

Harry looked down and noticed a bluish magical fire, the same kind that had surrounded him during his initiation into the Reaper ranks, had started at their feet, indicating it was the source of the rumbles. Harry gulped and continued his chant as the fire licked around the chanters in a circle, rising higher and higher until it had sealed them in a bubble of flames. Harry found it oddly comforting, a reminder of the beings that had given their oath to protect Hogwarts and her defenders.

In that at least, they had an advantage over Riddle. Denoxia’s unflappable cheer had shifted to fierce rage the instant Harry had told the strange being what Riddle had done to his mate. Well, now Voldemort would find out what the consequences were when one messed with souls. Well, thanks to Harry, the consequences for Tom Riddle wouldn’t be as bad as they might have been, but he reckoned Riddle was still in for a rude awakening when he crossed over to the Realm of Souls.

Merlin, he only hoped his family would understand his choices. Severus, especially.

It had to be this way, though. Harry had no choice if he wanted to be sure they destroyed all the horcruxes before Tom Riddle met his end. There was no guarantee, after all, that Riddle hadn’t created others that he hadn’t boasted about in his journal. It was the only way to be sure Voldemort well and truly died this time, with no way to return.

Denoxia had given Harry a spell to use when he finally learned how to destroy Tom’s life from within, if Harry could manage the feat. The spell would draw together all the remaining bits of Tom’s soul—even if there were other horcruxes Harry didn’t know about yet—and patch them together again. It would even collect the bits Harry had already sent into the soul realm and affix them to the remainder of Tom’s soul without harming anyone involved. It would expel all foreign entities as well, so Pettigrew would be sent to the soul realm rather than existing on as a living horcrux for eternity.

Even the rat didn’t deserve a fate like that.

When Harry finished the spell, if everything worked as it was supposed to, Pettigrew would be officially dead and Tom’s soul would be that of his teenage self, the way he was before Dumbledore had corrupted him. A whole human being once more.

Unfortunately, it would do nothing to cure Tom’s mind, so Harry would still have to kill the man.

The only problem was that Denoxia hadn’t known how to help with finding a way into Tom’s dream realm, but Harry had decided that it didn’t matter. One way or another, whether by his scythe or by his dreams, Harry would perform that spell and send Tom to the soul-gates. It was time for all this madness to end once and for all.

A loud whooshing sound brought Harry back to the present. The flames above them shimmered white and silvery, like Denoxia’s robes, then shot out in an ever-increasing radius, spreading over the entirety of the Hogwarts grounds.

Exhilaration rushed through Harry, bursting from him in a laugh. They had done it!
Then the power left him, and Harry fell to his knees with a groan. Dear Merlin, he felt as if he had been run over by a lorry. How was he supposed to fight like this?

“Some Pepper-up is in order, I believe,” said a panting Severus, kneeling before his mate.

“Uh-huh,” Harry agreed.

Severus called for one of the medic elves and requested a tray of Pepper-Up be made available to all the warders once they made it back to the Great Hall. The others helped the four exhausted soul warders to the castle, where Poppy Pomfrey appeared out of nowhere with a tray full of Severus’ strongest Pepper-up brew.

“Madame Pomfrey!” Harry rushed the woman and hugged her tight, weariness forgotten in the joy of seeing her alive and well. “Merlin, I’m so glad you’re okay.”

She gave him an indulgent smile. “Mister Potter, I cannot hand out these potions if you hold my arms.” She laughed. “But how glad I am to see you again, and only in need of a potion this time!”

Harry grinned and took one off the tray, downing it in one gulp. He shuddered at the taste, but as soon as he had swallowed, his energy came back in full force.

“Gods, that’s brilliant, Sev.”

The Headmaster gave the shocked matron a smirk and plucked a bottle off her tray. “Only the best for my mate.” He took his potion in one swallow and banished the phial. “Much better.”

Poppy blinked back tears as she handed out the rest of the potions. “Oh, Severus! You’re mated? Honestly?”

Severus nodded and pulled Harry into an embrace. “We are, and we love each other dearly, but we do not have time to chat, I am afraid. Riddle will break into the grounds soon, and we must be ready for him.”

Bill Weasley frowned and sidled up to them. “But the wards we just set—”

Severus interrupted. “—Will keep him from turning Hogwarts into another Blackpool and limit what he can do with that staff, but they won’t keep him out indefinitely.”

Bill grimaced. “You’d best break that to the others, then. We all thought it was to keep him out.”

Severus frowned. “My apologies. Harry, come with me in case they are angry.”

Harry linked his arm through Severus’. “I think it’ll be okay, but I’ll come. Actually, do you just want me to handle it?”

“That might be best.”

“All right.” Harry leapt onto the nearest school table and cast a new Sonorous on his throat. “All right, people, gather round.”

The soldiers rushed to stand around Harry, all pepperering him with questions at once.

“What was that fire?”

“Are we safe?”
“Has Riddle breached the gates yet?”

Severus silenced them with a glare. “Be quiet and listen, and we shall tell you.”

Harry chuckled. “Go easy, Sev. They’re scared.”

“Hmm.”

Harry cleared his throat. “Okay, here’s the status report. You remember that General Snape—” His mate gave a strangled gasp. “—Told you that Riddle had a staff chock full of soul magic? Well, that blue fire was us setting wards to neutralise it with the use of ancient elemental magic. No good asking me what spell we used—I can’t tell you. Rules of the wards and all. They have to stay a secret to keep their power.”

Severus stifled a snort.

“Anyway,” said a grinning Harry, “those wards will keep Riddle from levelling this place like he did with Blackpool and limit his staff’s power, but they can’t stop him completely. We bought a little time, but that’s it. So we need you all to get back into ranks and get ready to follow us onto the battlefield.”

A hush fell over the crowd, one pregnant with fear and unsaid things.

Harry closed his eyes, overwhelmed with the knowledge that any or all of these people could be dead by the time the sun rose again. He covered his throat with a hand to temporarily mute his sonorous spell and whispered, “Denoxia, watch over us all.”

Severus gave him a strange look, then his features relaxed. “Denoxia was your soul-gate, love?”

Harry nodded.

“Xenidan, grant us your blessings,” Severus whispered.

Beside him and from the ground, Lily murmured, “Cerizio, guide our spirits and our feet.”

Remus bowed his head and added, “Unara, thank you for your gifts and help us to use them well.”

Harry closed his hand over his heart and hoped that their friends from the worlds beyond had heard their message. He lifted his eyes and removed his hand from his throat. The soldiers were all watching him with nervous expressions.

“We were asking for blessings,” said Harry with a sad smile. “But now, we must prepare for war. General Snape will help. And—” He fixed a cold glare on the room. “Be warned. I will take any disrespect against him as a direct insult towards me. And you do not want to hack me off, so treat him with the respect he deserves.”

“We’ll take it as an insult too,” Ron bellowed, his eyes narrowed and his mouth set in a devious Weasley-twin grin. “The Soldiers—that’s us, in case you were wondering.” He motioned to the group of students all wearing navy blue duelling robes. “We’ve been training under Headmaster Snape this entire time. So we’ll take any threat to General Snape as an insult to our family—because he is, and we’d all be clueless tonight if not for his help anyway. Right?”

The Soldiers—formerly known as the DA—all cheered in response, and Harry beamed at his friend.

“Ron—Merlin, mate. Thank you.”
Ron grinned, this time without the devious edge. “We all love you, Harry, and that means General Snape is family. And we Weasleys are all about family.”

“Damn straight,” said Bill with a grin.

Harry’s eyes prickled. “Thank you. All of you. He means the world to me, so protect him, please.”

“We’ve got your back, Harry,” said Dean with a nod. “The Soldiers will keep him safe.”

Severus laid his head on Harry’s shoulder to hide an influx of emotion. Harry wrapped an arm around his back and brought him close, his heart soaring to know the people he loved most had accepted his beloved mate. Somehow, knowing that made the fight ahead less terrifying. Severus had an entire army looking out for him, and Harry trusted his soldiers with his life.

Everything would be okay again, soon.

Someone among the medics called out, “No disrespect intended, sirs, but what’s the Soldiers?”

“Severus’ Soldiers,” said Harry with a grin. “My secret defence class, and later, Neville’s. We used to go by the DA: Dumbledore’s Army, but once we realised what kind of man Dumbledore really is, we thought it was time for a change. Severus has been training us all the past few days, and since he worked so hard with us and suffered so terribly from Dumbledore’s manipulations, we thought he deserved to be our namesake instead.”

“Hear, hear,” said McGonagall.

The room burst into cheers, and Severus sobbed into Harry’s shoulder. Damn. Severus was completely overwhelmed. They had to get down to business for his sake.

“All right, everyone, we’re running out of time. Everybody line up according to their groups—remember where the General wanted you, because he’ll be inspecting the ranks before we go out. Get moving.”

Severus squeezed Harry’s hand as thanks.

Harry muted his Sonorous again. “Love, are you okay?”

Severus stood tall and wiped his eyes. Tears still rimmed his lashes, but he was smiling. He covered his throat as well. “I am better than I have ever been, my lovely mate.”

Harry brushed the tears from his mate’s cheeks and kissed him gently. “Good. I love you.”

“And I, you.”

Harry smiled at his mate and dropped his hand from his throat so the others could hear him again. “Then, if you’re ready, go inspect your troops, General Snape.” He cancelled his amplification spell and motioned Severus on.

Severus chuckled and, after cancelling his Sonorous as well, began to work his way through the crowd.

Earlier in the week, Severus, Kingsley, McGonagall, and the senior aurors had questioned everyone on what their strengths were and tested their levels individually. They hadn’t time to do a full scan on everyone, but what they could do was enough to form several platoons of mixed fighters, including everything from charms masters to martial artist non-magical folks to Animagi, and everything in
between. Severus and Kingsley had also assigned several medics, shielders, warders, and grounders to each infantry unit. As well, they had gathered two groups of ranged fighters made up of Muggle weapons users and Elemental mages, and two groups of stealthy individuals good at sneak attacks.

Severus had made it clear that he wasn’t sure what tactics they would need to use when Riddle attacked, but thought it wise to cover his bases. His helpers agreed and had worked hard to set up the infantry so they would be prepared for anything. Harry hoped it was enough.

None of the fighters had elected to take refuge in the castle. Despite the fear Harry could almost taste in the air—if he had been able to let his creature out to play, he probably would have choked on it—everyone wanted to be a part of the last battle, and they were even willing to listen to Severus to do it, despite the lingering tension between the new general and those he had alienated and even hurt in the past. A few medical personnel—led by Madame Pomfrey, of course—would remain behind to treat the injuries too severe for the field medics, but everyone else would be out on the field, fighting. Even the few house elves left in the building had taken up arms, with Kreacher and Dobby each leading a team, and a finally-sober Winky would be helping in the Infirmary.

Harry was so proud of them all, he thought he might burst.

But someone was calling his name and probably had been for several moments, judging by the irritation in their tone.

“Er, sorry about that.” Harry tore his eyes away from his mate and looked down. Cho Chang stood at the edge of the table, her hands on her hips and her face a moue of indignation.

Harry ruffled his hair. “Um, yes?”

She instantly put on a winning expression, and Harry’s guard went up. “Oh, just wanted to talk to the hero, that’s all.”

Harry bristled. “Then go talk to Severus. He’s the real hero here.”

“Oh, so modest.” Cho laughed as if he’d made a joke.

“I’m serious.”

“Of course you are,” but she acted as if she didn’t care either way.

“Cho, what do you want?”

She looked hurt. “Can’t I say hello?”

Harry gave her a sharp glare. “Not if you intend on insulting my mate while you do it.”

She scowled. “Right. I’d forgotten about that. Why did you—”

“Cho. Get in rank. We have a war to fight.”

The direct command got through when nothing else would, and the woman walked off with a huff of irritation.

“Well,” said Remus from the ground, “that looked unpleasant. Friend of yours?”

“The type with an ex attached to it,” Harry muttered.

“Oh, that kind. Sirius had more than a few of those.” He chuckled and climbed atop the table. “Need
some protection?”

“Please!”

Lily laughed and climbed up on Harry’s other side. “Happy to oblige.”

With Cho gone and Severus busy taking care of the troops, Harry’s curiosity about the ritual would wait no longer. He cast a surreptitious silencing spell and motioned his family closer.

“Hey, Remy, what happened during the ritual that made you so happy?”

Remus gave him a brilliant grin, the first without a trace of pain that Harry had ever seen upon his face. It made him look ten years younger. “Unara, the soul-gate? She cured my lycanthropy. Now I’m just a wolf Animagus rather than a werewolf. I’ll be able to have a normal life again, Harry.”

Harry grinned so hard, he thought his cheeks might split. “Remy, are you serious? Oh gods, that’s brilliant!”

“Mine blessed our daughter with good health,” said Lily with a misty-eyed smile. “He set a protection spell over me and my belly so the baby wouldn’t be harmed in the battle. What did yours and Sev’s do? Cerizio said we would all be given gifts or help of some sort.”

“He did? Brilliant!” Harry frowned. “I don’t know what they did to help Sev, though. I didn’t have a chance to ask.”

Remus rubbed his shoulder. “We can ask him later then. After the battle. What did yours do?”

Harry stared at his feet and rubbed his toe on the table. “Denoxia gave me a spell.”

Remus prodded, “Yes?”

Harry winced. “Don’t be mad at me, okay? I had to do it if I’m going to kill him. It was the only way.”

“Then there’s nothing to be so worried about, Harry,” said Lily with an encouraging smile. “Come on, love. You can tell us.”

Harry sighed. “I asked them to help me put Riddle’s soul back together and look after him in the realm beyond. He’ll be a teenager again when this is done, the spell I mean, and a Dragoon again without the madness, since it doesn’t affect a soul. So I thought, well, it’s not that teenager’s fault that all this happened. It’s Dumbledore’s. So I asked them to help him through his grief over his sins when he does cross over. I don’t think I could have killed him with a clear conscience otherwise.”

Lily wrapped her son in a hug. “I’m so proud of you, baby.”

Harry gasped. “You’re not angry?”

She moved back and held his shoulders. “Because you showed compassion? Of course not. This way, we know we’ve destroyed all the horcruxes without a doubt, right?”

Harry gave her a hesitant nod.

Remus held his shoulder. “Then you did the right thing, Harry. It’s okay. We understand, and I think you were right to ask.”

Harry smiled tentatively. “Even though he’s such an evil bastard?”
Lily shook her head. “The adult Riddle is. The teenager hadn’t done anything wrong yet. So yes.”

Harry grinned. “Thanks Mum, Da.”

Remus hugged Harry tight. “I’m proud of you, too.”

Harry sighed, relieved that at least his parents had accepted him. “Do you think Sev will hate me for it?”

“I don’t,” said Lily, looking to her friend with a soft smile. “I think he’ll love you even more.”

Harry smiled at his mate too. He was standing on the teaching dais arranging a pile of what looked like dark blue purses. “I sure hope so. I don’t want to hu—”

Severus’ amplified voice cut across Harry. “Field medics, over here, please.” Harry frowned and cancelled their silencing spell so he could listen properly.

Severus had moved to stand beside the pile of blue purses and was holding a giant purple bag he hadSummoned from Merlin knew where. Several people broke rank—a portion of each group, even the ranged fighters—and went to hover around Harry’s mate. Each one of them were wearing grey robes with a green signet on the breast pocket—the field medics’ uniform. Severus pulled a small blue disk out of his giant bag and held it up so everyone could see.

“Field medics, pay attention. These are portkeys to the Great Hall. If, while on the battlefield, you come across someone who is too injured to carry on fighting, but in no danger of immediate death, place a token on their chest and activate it to send them here. A house elf will then transport them to the Infirmary as space becomes available.” He placed the token into the sack once more. “The activation word is ‘Sanctuary.’ I have enough here for all of you to take fifty and a token bag for everyone.” He pointed to the pile of blue bags beside him. “Summon the carrying bag first and then Summon the tokens into your bags, please. We do not have time for you to each count out your portions.”

Severus motioned to a pile of blue messenger bags on the platform beside him, and the field medics each Summoned a bag and called their tokens inside it, sending little blue disks flying every which way. Once everyone had their tokens, they strapped their bags around their shoulders and looked back to the general. Severus then moved aside and a wave of his hand revealed a pile of red bags much like the blue ones.

Severus Banished the empty purple sack and Summoned a smaller red sack from behind the staff table. He reached into the bag and pulled out a token similar to the first, but red instead of blue.

“This is an emergency portkey. It will transport a severely injured fighter directly to the Infirmary. The activation word is the same as for the Great Hall tokens. Please do not use them unless your target is truly in danger of dying—our Infirmary staff will most likely be extremely busy tonight. There are enough here for each of you to take twenty. As before, Summon them into your bags.”

A shiver went through the group at the mention of the risk for casualties, but the field medics each Summoned and filled their bags as before. These were shorter messenger bags which fitted over the blue pouch, resting at the medic’s side in two neat tiers. Harry had to admire his mate’s ingenuity. Those tokens would save a lot of lives that evening. If they pulled through this battle, come morning, Harry would make sure everyone knew who had really made it possible.

Severus stepped aside, revealing a pile of black fanny packs that sent a shiver through Harry at the sight of them. He could guess what those bags were for without being told.
A grim-faced Severus Summoned another large sack, also black, from the same place the red one had come. The room had gone silent as the grave, and Harry guessed he wasn’t the only one who had deduced the purpose of the black pouches.

Severus cleared his throat and pulled a black disk from the sack, holding it up as before. “This is to be used … when your target has died. Please make absolutely sure with a life-force scan before you use it, as it will transport the person’s body directly to a cold room in the dungeons. If they are not dead when you use the portkey, the cold will finish them off before long, and the medical staff will not know of their plight. If you have any doubt, use the red tokens.” He returned the disk to the sack. “The activation word for these is ‘Peace.’ There are enough for each of you to take ten.”

The medics shuddered, but dutifully Summoned the bags and their tokens. As the medics fastened their black bags to their hips with a sombre air, Harry noticed Severus had revealed a shelf full of neat white briefcases positioned behind him. Harry had no idea what those might be for, but beside him, Lily let out a soft gasp. Her reaction only increased his curiosity.

Severus waited until the medics had finished strapping on their death tokens before he pointed to the shelf. “This contains a fully-stocked field kit for each of you. Each one has a standard array of healing and rejuvenating potions, as well as several non-standard potions to combat curses I know the Death Eaters favour quite often. Each potion is clearly labelled and can be Summoned by listing the curse or symptom, so that you might locate the correct potion quickly. Besides potions, each kit also contains a wide range of medical supplies, including several pounds of gauze and pressure bandages. I am sure you will need them.”

Severus moved to the end of the shelf and stood beside it. “There are replacement supplies and potions in the Infirmary stockroom if you run out while you are in the castle. You may also call for one of the following house elves: Tizzy, Jula, Dindy, or Patchy, and they will retrieve fresh supplies for you. You may keep the kits after the battle if you care to, or donate them to St. Mungo’s or our own Infirmary if you do not. Please Summon one bag apiece.”

Harry watched, open-mouthed and wide-eyed, as the field medics eagerly strapped on their new kits. Mother of Merlin, where had Severus found the time between training and evaluating everyone’s skills to create thirty-plus medical kits? If Harry hadn’t woken up next to the man every morning, he would have thought Severus had skipped on his sleep.

Harry shook off his shock and sent his mate a blinding smile. Severus blushed and gave him a shy smile in return. And gods, Harry loved that sweet side of his mate. No one would ever have suspected Severus was capable of it until his walls had melted away a couple weeks before. Harry himself wouldn’t have even suspected, but now that Dumbledore’s manipulations had finally ended, Severus could be himself at last.

As Harry watched the medics strap on their kits with expressions of shock and glee—kits he expected were worth a small fortune apiece—he knew once more how lovely his mate truly was, inside and out.

“Gods, I’m so lucky,” he whispered to himself, then raised his voice. “Severus Snape, you beautiful man! You had better pull through this in one piece, you hear me!”

Dean cried, “Hear, hear!” The medics and Harry’s year mates cheered. Many of the other soldiers did the same, and after a moment, a round of applause broke out.

The medics all called, “Thank you, General Snape,” and Harry soared with pride for his mate all over again.
“Mine,” he mouthed to Severus, his very being alight with joy and desire. “You are mine, my beloved.”

Severus blushed pink and nodded. The man cleared his throat and laid his hand over his chest before he spoke again, and Harry smiled, knowing his words had deeply affected his mate. The man was still so unused to praise.

But he deserved it. Merlin, how he deserved it.

Severus addressed the medics once more. “I can do but one more thing to protect you. May the might of Merlin go with each of you.” He held out his hands, and a wash of white light spread from his palms, settling over everyone in the building.

As warmth spread through his chest, Harry tilted his head back to welcome the blessing. “May the might of Merlin go with you as well, my beloved,” he murmured, and lifted his hand to return the gesture. He was not the only one to do so either. Severus lowered his head, overwhelmed once more, as light from several sources settled on his slender frame.

“Thank you.” The man had said it in breathless tones, but Harry heard him just the same.

Severus cancelled his Sonorous and moved to join Harry once more. As soon as his mate reached him, Harry jumped down from the table and tilted his head back to receive a tender, thorough kiss.

“I love you,” Severus whispered against Harry’s forehead. “I love you with all of me. No matter what happens tonight, know that.”

Harry wrapped his arms around Severus’ neck. “And I love you, my snarky, sweet, lovely mate. Please, protect yourself and don’t take unnecessary risks. I know you think your life isn’t equal to everyone else’s, but it is, and I can’t endure without you regardless.”

Severus nodded and pulled out a necklace. “A portkey. Should I become seriously injured or cursed in any way, this will transport me directly to the Infirmary, whether I am capable of speech or not. I do not need to activate it.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a double of the pendant. “And this one is for you.” He slipped it over Harry’s head and tuck ed it beneath his robes, pressing a hand against the younger man’s chest where it lay hidden. “Be careful, my Harry. You are my entire world.”

Harry thought it best to reply to that with a kiss, and so he snogged his mate senseless. He only stopped when his year mates catcalled and whistled at him.

Harry pulled back with a laugh. “All right, Sev. I … I don’t want to let you go, but I think I’d better. It’s time.”

Severus laid his forehead against Harry’s. “Be safe.”

“You too.”

With a sigh, Severus nodded and moved away from the warmth of Harry’s embrace. He kept his eyes on Harry even as he moved towards the doors, his mate following him to his own position at the centre of the armies, with Remus and Lily beside him. Harry held that look of love and longing in his heart like a benediction.

“I will return to you safely, my Sev. See that you do the same.”

As if Severus had heard him, he gave Harry a nod and finally turned his face towards the troops.
Severus restored his *Sonorous*.

“Now, my friends and allies,” Severus said in a strong voice full of courage, “we go to meet our fate, whatever that may be. I expect to see you all here in one piece come morning.” He opened the doors and brought an arm down in a sweeping motion. “Follow me.”

Severus led the way out of the doors, and Harry took a deep breath, gathering the love of his mate close around him like a cloak.

“I will follow you anywhere, my beloved.”

With a nod to firm up his courage, Harry tugged his hood over his head and prepared himself for battle.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Warnings: lots of blood and violence. Vampires—not the sparkly kind, either. A look inside the twisted minds of Voldemort and Pettigrew that reveals more than Harry ever wanted to know. It's a cliffhanger, but the next chapter is already done and will be up soon.

CHAPTER 30

Severus’ heart was thundering as he led his troops to battle, but his face remained as impassive as ever. He had to look unruffled, unconcerned, despite the terror clawing at him like a werewolf. He suppressed a shudder and glanced at the moon out of habit, despite knowing it was nowhere near full. Yes, waning gibbous, as it should have been. The familiar action settled some of his nerves, and Severus squared his shoulders as he marched into the fields of Hogwarts.

The army was mostly silent, besides a few nervous whispers and wishes for good luck. He thanked his lucky stars for that—now that he believed he actually had a few—and took stock of their surroundings. Riddle had not yet reached the gates, but if the height of the flames in Hogsmeade was anything to judge by, the Death Eaters had finished looting the city.

Ariana would have to stay in the castle now. Thank Merlin Minerva had thought to create a permanent portrait for her in the Headmaster’s office. Whatever crimes her fool brother had committed, she was just an innocent girl. Well, she would be safe now. And Severus thought it the ultimate irony that she had taken her older brother’s place behind the Headmaster’s desk.

He suppressed the wild urge to snort. No doubt the nervous troops would not look upon unexplained laughter with favour while they marched to their prospective deaths. They would probably think Severus had gone mad.

Considering everything he had endured to reach this point in his life, it was a wonder he hadn’t.

He glanced behind him as the doors snicked closed. Ah, everyone was clear of the castle now. He dared not cast another Sonorous so close to the gates, but he turned towards the troops and shouted instead.

“Ranged fighters! Move to the flanks. Group one on the left, group two on the right. Grounders and Warders, fall back to the rear and ready your magic. Everyone, cast warming charms over yourself so you don’t freeze in this weather.”

As troops shifted to obey his orders, Severus motioned for them to start moving again. The volume among the soldiers increased as his message was passed along from the front of the lines to the back, but once everyone knew where they were supposed to be, the group again dropped their voices to hushed murmurs.

Severus led them to a position approximately thirty metres from the gates and motioned for the troops to surround them. In a few moments, their armies had closed in on the gates in a semi-circle, with the ranged fighters on the outside edges.
Severus lifted a finger to his lips. The troops passed the signal on—silently this time—and even the murmurs stopped. He then unsheathed his katana and raised it high, the signal for the troops to assume a fighting stance. Metal scraped and whistled as his allies drew their weapons, and then, the fields went dead silent.

Now they had nothing to do but wait and pray that the deities looked upon them with favour.

“If anyone out there is listening, please, be with us now.”

Out of the blue, Severus remembered the Muggle priest and, in a fit of pique likely never to be repeated, made the sign of cross over his chest and forehead. Despite not being Christian, he hoped that, if God truly existed, he would look upon their endeavours tonight with favour. The Light could use all the blessings and good fortune they could get.

In the silence, Severus heard the distant echo of jeering voices and shouts. Riddle was coming.

As soon as Lily vanished under her Reaper hood, Harry realised their mistake. Remus was to go with them into battle and help keep the Reapers safe, but with Lily and Harry invisible, the man was a sitting duck.

“Shite,” Harry muttered. “We forgot to hide Remus, Mum.”

She whispered back, “Yes. Merlin, what should we do, love? Remy can’t maintain an invisibility spell and watch our backs.”

Harry chewed on his lip for all of about ten seconds before the answer came to him. He lifted his hand and whispered, “Accio Harry Potter’s invisibility cloak!”

Lily chuckled. “Good thinking, baby!”

Just as their line made it out of the doors, Harry’s cloak settled into his hands. He passed it over to Remus without blinking. “Here you go, Dad. Time to activate Flitwick’s bauble now?”

Remus nodded and touched a golden orb around his neck. “Visio Sociis Sanguis!”

The orb glowed white and cast Harry, Remus, and Lily in ghostly yellow relief, allowing them to see each other despite their cloaks. No one but their family group would be able to see them or the bauble, as Flitwick had tied the magic to a drop of their blood earlier in the week, but with the orb lit, they could at least see each other. It would allow them to fight together until Remus deactivated the charm. Without it, Harry was certain he would have hit his family with his scythe unintentionally.

Remus whispered, “Weapons out now?”

Lily nodded and drew her scythe. It was a bit lighter and smaller than Harry’s, and hers lacked the feather decoration, purple orb, and dual tang.

“Why does yours look different, Mum?”

She gave him a wry smile. “Because I’m only half the being you are, love.”

Harry blushed. Of course. He was an Avenger, not strictly a Reaper. It made sense that his weapon
would be different.

“Right. Forgot that minor detail.”

Remus patted his shoulder. “Quiet, now. Severus is speaking.”

Harry tilted his head to listen and just caught the man’s orders to fall into battle position.

“That’s our cue,” Harry whispered. “Follow me.”

“Lead on, love,” Lily whispered back.

He led the others at a jog between the lines and towards the rear, taking great care not to jostle the soldiers or lose his family. A few moments later, Harry waited behind the troops for Lily and Remus. Ahead, Severus had just motioned the troops to form a semi-circle around the gates. Harry paced, anxious about his task and sick with worry for his mate, but he hadn’t long to wait before Lily and Remus emerged from the ranks.

He whispered to his family, “What happened?”

“Got stuck when the battalion started shifting,” Lily whispered back. “Ready to go?”

Harry nodded and started towards the Forbidden Forest as per their plan, but Remus tugged at his sleeve and shook his head.

Remus tugged Harry’s sleeve. “Harry, I’ve been thinking, and now that Riddle is half Pettigrew, I’m sure he’s not going to come in through the forest. That coward is too afraid of it.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “The Whomping Willow. You think he’ll come in through there.”

“Most likely. Even Riddle is too much of a coward to storm the gates with the others, and with Peter poisoning him, he’ll be even more afraid. The Forest is too dangerous for the rat.”

“Riddle can fly, Da. If he wants to get onto the grounds without alerting us, he could do it just about anywhere, and the Forest would be the easiest route in if he’s planning to come that way.”

Remus winced. “True, but with him going mad, I still think the Whomping Willow is his most likely course. Peter will force him to stick with what he’s comfortable with, unless Riddle has more control of his mind than I think.”

Harry nodded and turned towards the tree. “Can’t hurt to try it, I guess. If all else fails, I can pick you up and we’ll fly to wherever he’s hiding.”

Remus groaned softly. “Let’s hope there’s no need for that. I’m not good with heights.”

Harry stifled a chuckle and led them onto the Willow in silence. His scythe was a comforting weight in his hands, and Harry ran through some of his less acrobatic moves as they approached, in part as a warm-up and in part to settle his nerves. Remus and Lily gave him a wide berth, just in case.

Just outside the reach of the Willow’s woody fists, Harry stopped and motioned his family near.

As Remus and Lily joined him, Harry whispered, “Do we go in?”

“That would be suicide,” Remus whispered back. “Between your wings and weapons, you wouldn’t be able to move in that small tunnel.”
“He’s right,” Lily added. “We need space to fight, love. Besides that, on the off-chance that we are wrong about his point of entry, in there, we won’t know until it’s too late.”

Harry nodded and jerked his scythe over his shoulder. “Then let’s move back a bit. I don’t fancy a fight right under the Whomping Willow’s boughs.”

“No indeed,” said Remus with a shudder.

They turned towards the grounds and started moving back from the Willow, but before they had made it ten paces, a resounding boom shook the air and earth. Harry cried out with shock, then cried out again as a sudden pain in his scar knocked him to his knees.

Harry grinned, thrilled that his staff had broken the wards over Hogwarts at last. He had no idea what kind of power had kept him out for so long, but in the end, he was victorious, and the filthy-little Mudblood lovers would rue the day they dared to challenge them—him—them—no! This was his mind, not the rat’s. Not the snake’s. Not the—argh!

Harry gripped his staff tighter and pushed the other consciousness to the back of his mind. He had no time to play with the rat. No, tonight was for bigger game.

The trees looked like ghosts in the night, their leaves stripped bare and their naked fingers clawing at his robes. He shuddered and pulled his cloak close around his shoulders. He would have preferred to fly, but then he would have had to come alone, and that was not to be borne. No, he needed leverage—guards—hostages on a night like this.

Finally, the trees parted, and Harry grinned again. The idiots had left the castle wide open. They were all gathered by the gates. All he had to do was slip in behind them, keep quiet, and the castle was as good as his. Then he could crow over Snivellus and show him who was boss—no, damn it!

That was not their purpose here. He was here to reclaim Hogwarts and take over Britain, and it would be good if the rat could remember that. Once he had established control, then they would get revenge on Severus—Snivellus—Severus.

His body shivered and fidgeted his hands without his consent, irritating the already angry dark lord further.

He hissed, “Stop it, you fool rat.”

A mad cackle erupted on his left. “Poor little rodent, missing his bod—”

“Be silent, Bellatrix! We are trying to sneak into the castle, you bloody fool. You will give our position away before we are near enough to claim our victory.”

The witch shut her mouth, thank Merlin, and Harry moved on. As soon as he stepped out of the trees, however, something strange happened to his staff. The beautiful violet light he had worked so hard to harvest from Rowle swirled and brightened, then blinked out.

“No,” he gasped.

To his shock and horror—the orb then disintegrated and the wind made off with the pieces.

Harry stared at his staff—now a useless stick—disbelieving his own eyes. Years and decades of research and creation, gone. But how? What strange magic could have done this? Who could have
possibly broken his beautiful soul staff before he even had the opportunity to use it?

Well, there was no doubt about that, was there? Only one creature had usurped his rightful throne—no, stolen his mate! An image filtered into Harry’s consciousness. James Potter zooming around on his broom with the snitch in hand, resplendent in his quidditch robes and smiling with that cocky air Peter loved so much. The snake was only supposed to kill Lily and the boy! Then Peter would have swooped in to comfort James and—Harry let out a growl of frustration and slammed the unwelcome images behind fierce Occlumency shields.

“Keep your disgusting perversions to yourself, you foul rodent.”

Harry cared nothing for James Potter. It was the son who continually escaped and defied him, who had snatched his living horcrux and his soul feeder out of his reach and thwarted his plans again and again. It was the younger Potter who had reduced him to sharing his existence with the rat, despite his best efforts to keep the rodent out.

Living on Severus’ soul would have been much more tolerable, but Potter had snatched that out of his reach, too. And now, revenge was so close, he could taste it.

Harry Potter would pay, at last.

Harry came out of his vision with a gasp and a groan of pain. He retched into the grass, repulsed by the images floating around Pettigrew’s head and the reason for the rat’s betrayal. Ugh. Poor James, to have someone so twisted enamoured of him. Especially a dirty, perverted, treacherous rat someone.

“Mum, I just found out why he did it.”

She blinked. “Why who did what?”

“Pettigrew. Why he betrayed us.” Harry gave a manic laugh and wiped bile from his face. “He was in love with da—James, I mean! Believed they were mates or some such hogwash.”


“I’m gonna be—urk.” He retched again, and Lily rummaged in a medical kit much like the ones Severus had distributed among the medics. No wonder she had recognised them. Severus must have given her a kit in private before the war started.

“Here, love,” Lily said.

Harry gulped down the anti-nausea potion with a relish. It tasted like shite, but began to work instantly. Almost before he had finished it, he was able to clamber to his feet and brush off his robes. Lily Banished Harry’s mess and handed him a pain potion as well, which Harry downed in one swallow.

“Thanks, Mum.”

“Are you feeling better?”

Harry nodded.

“Good,” Remus whispered. “Then get your scythe. He’ll be here any moment.”

Harry picked up the weapon, but shook his head. “No. Riddle came in through the forest on foot.
He’s at the edge of the trees near Hagrid’s hut.”

Remus groaned. “Guess that means we’re flying.”

Harry glared. “Unless you want him to take the castle while everyone’s guarding the gates, yeah it does.”

Lily shook her head at the ill-looking man. “Come now, Remy. I’ll carry you. Just bury your face in my shoulder, love, and you won’t even know we’re in the air.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Remus muttered. “I’ll just run as Moo—”

Harry snapped, “There’s no time for this, Remus!”

Remus winced. “But—”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake. Figure it out, Dad. I’m going now!”

Lily cried out to him, “Harry!”

But he couldn’t wait. The longer they delayed, the closer Riddle got to the castle, and Riddle was just itching for revenge. Harry had no idea what the monster thought he could do with an empty castle, but Harry didn’t want to find out. Particularly since Madame Pomfrey and some of the medics were still inside.

With a snarl, Harry spread his wings and shot into the night.

The blast took Severus by surprise. One moment he was on his feet, watching the gates for any sign of trouble, the next, he was on his knees and surrounded by shouts. Someone screamed “Traitor” and for one, terrible instant, Severus thought his troops had turned on him. But no, it wasn’t the troops screaming.

It was the Death Eaters, and they were screaming at him.

Apparently the soul ward had been masking their proximity. They were at the gates and tearing them down, and Severus was still on his knees.

‘Fuck!’

A yellow curse ripped the air and shot straight towards him—one that would kill him on contact if it hit—but Severus was not so easily defeated. With a shout, he whipped up his katana and deflected the curse back at its caster, smirking in satisfaction as Dolohov dropped like a stone.

Severus doubted anyone had missed that confrontation, but just in case, he sounded the charge and hoped his troops could regain their heads quickly.

“To arms!”

Red spell light rushed past his ear and struck someone behind him. A feminine shriek pierced the night, followed almost immediately by a cry of “Sanctuary.” The word brought him back five weeks, when he had stumbled into Harry’s tent and demanded mercy.
“I beg Sanctuary from all who might hurt me and place my life in your hands, Harry Potter.”

He hadn’t realised at the time how true that statement was. The spell had ended, but Harry was still Severus’ sanctuary, his safe place, his home.

Merlin, how he loved that man.

A flash of bright green jerked Severus back to the present. A killing curse shot past him and into the Light ranks, but someone used their blade to deflect it.

The reflected curse missed Severus’ wrist by an inch.

‘Fuck, that was too close.’

It happened again half a moment later, only the curse missed his shoulder this time.

The next moment, he had to duck under an ally’s sword, and the next forced him to roll away from a cutting curse—more friendly fire. What the hell? Were his allies trying to kill him? They were getting closer to it than the Death Eaters, that was certain.

He chanced a glance behind him and swore. The soldiers had broken ranks and rushed the gates. They were so close together that their own front lines—the Light’s best fighters—would die by friendly fire before the others came anywhere near the Death Eaters.

Bloody jumpy idiots.

Severus barked, “Get back into formation before you kill us all!”

The idiots panicked and scattered, leaving gaps in the ranks, but at least Severus didn’t need to worry about friendly fire any longer. Merlin! As he dodged a *Cruciatus* and sent a slashing hex back in retaliation, he made a mental note to find out what fools had rushed the line and assign them castle clean-up duty for the next two months.

If they survived.

Rabastan Lestrange screamed, “Go, go, go!”

Severus swallowed a spike of fear as Death Eaters rushed the Light. He had hoped for a relatively small battalion that they could surround and overpower quickly, hence pinning them in at the gates. Instead, it appeared Riddle had gathered every available dark supporter and put them all on the gates at once. They rushed the gates, spilling through onto Hogwarts’ front lawn, and it was simply too much in too small a space. Severus could not even risk a wide-range spell for fear of hitting his allies.

“Damn it! Fall back!”

His allies moved backwards without turning, keeping their eyes on the battle ahead. The extra space gave Severus room to fight, and so he threw himself into the battle with everything he had. For a moment, he thought they might win.

Then a flock of vampires flew in, picking off stragglers from above. Shite-shite-shite! They hadn’t prepared for *that* many vampires. Severus had no idea what had convinced them to fight for the dark when, while he was still spying, they were neutral at best. Perhaps Riddle had bribed them—or threatened them—with his staff. Severus could think of no other expl—

A low, raspy groan sounded from the gates, and Severus’ heart sank like a stone. Inferi were
stumbling into the lawn, rotting teeth bared and clawing hands held out before them.

Dear Merlin, Death Eaters, vampires, and Inferi? If the Light survived this, it would be a miracle.

Then a vampire engaged him, and all thoughts besides survival flew from Severus’ head. He ducked under the vampire’s claws, but then he had to jump over the creature’s sword the next instant. It went for his throat next, fangs gleaming in the moonlight, and Severus spun out of the way, slamming his sword in the creature’s back and elbowing him into the ground for good measure. A desiccating spell set to the vampire’s blood finished the beast, but Severus had no time to make sure he was dead—a killing curse rocketed towards his waist just as he freed his sword from the beast’s back. Severus deflected it, only to find himself in the throes of battle with some nameless, faceless Death Eater out for his blood.

The battle had degraded into utter pandemonium, and it was all Severus could do just to stay alive, let alone win.

Gods, he hoped Harry was faring better.

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“Harry James Potter!”

Harry ignored his mum’s shout and surged towards the forest. Dimly, he noted that the battle had begun—and it looked much more intense than he had anticipated considering all their careful preparations—but he could spare the chaos no more than a glance. Riddle was too close.

Harry’s wings flapped like mad as he careened towards the treeline. He had to hurry—any minute, Riddle could—fuck!

Harry cried out as flames engulfed Hagrid’s hut, but as Hagrid was in the crowd fighting alongside Fang, he didn’t let it trouble him for long. It was only a hut. Hagrid would probably enjoy building a new one, and unless Harry finished his task, the half-giant might die in truth.

A flap and a hiss on Harry’s left was his only warning before a vampire engaged him—in the air and with Harry wearing his robes. “What the fuck? How can you see me?”

The vampire surged back and laughed. “I cannot, but I still smell you, little human. You cannot hide your scent.”

Harry scowled. “Well, the joke’s on you then—I’m not human!”

The vampire growled and shot at him. Harry’s creature took full control, and he swiped at the vampire’s face with talons. The beast withdrew and touched a hand to his face, obviously shocked to find his cheek cut by talons and not fingernails.

“You are a creature. A powerful creature to have bested a vampiric sire.”

Acting on instinct, Harry jerked back his hood, revealing his scythe, robes, and black-scaled features to the vampire. The beast went paler than normal for his kind, which was to say, bone-white.

“Fates forgive me, you are the kohl-eyed sky-warrior!”

Harry could only gape at that strange statement. “The what? Coal? But my eyes are green.”
“No, kohl as in what the ancient Egyptians used to decorate their face.”

“I’m not wearing makeup!” Harry shook himself and tried to shove past the vampire. “Ugh. I don’t have time for this! Get out of my way.”

“Wait, please!”

Please? Since when did vampires beg? Harry frowned and stared at the creature, sword raised and claws poised to strike.

“I am not your enemy, Sky-Warrior,” said the vampire in a sorrowful tone. “My people want no part of this war, but the snake-eyed human forced us to fight. He destroyed our homes with that staff and is holding our children hostage as we speak.”

Harry growled, “Well, the staff is destroyed, so you can run along after your kids now.”

The vampire gasped. “You destroyed it?”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “My… kin did.”

The vampire held Harry’s eyes. His own were silver, a bit like Luna’s. “Your kin. As in, the kin who made you what you are?”

Harry’s heart stuttered. “How do you know wh—”

The vampire held up a quelling hand. “I will explain later. We are short of time now.”

Harry acknowledged this as truth with a terse nod.

“In the meantime, I would like to offer you my allegiance, Sky-Warrior. My kin are dying while fighting a war we want no part of. If you will offer us Sanctuary from Riddle until we are able to rebuild somewhere safe, we will fight for your people instead of against them.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Sanctuary. As in the spell that sublimates you to me for thirty days and allows me to pass judgment upon you at the end of it, in return for my protection and a chance for you to plead your case? And you’re asking for your entire group?”

The vampire smiled. It was not a reassuring sight. “You are wise for a young one. Yes, that is the spell I mean, and yes, I am asking for Sanctuary for my entire family group. I am its patriarch, Ferin Grey.” The vampire bowed as best as he could in the air. “If you will protect my clan, Harry Potter, we will serve you until we are able to rebuild our lives away from those we have no true desire to harm.”

Harry frowned. “How will your clan know you have made this bargain?”

“Telepathy, Mister Potter. Vampires are quite skilled at it, especially between those who share bonds of either kith or kin, and all the vampires here tonight are family, either by blood or mating.”

Harry feared he would regret his decision in the morning, but after Severus, he had a soft spot for the Sanctuary spell. Besides, it did force the person under his protection to protect Harry in turn. He figured he could use all the protection he could get that night.

With a sigh, he gave the vampire a short bow, hoping it wouldn’t come back to bite him—either literally or figuratively. “Very well. I’ll grant you Sanctuary if you’ll call your family off. And if you might protect my mate?”
“I will. Who is your mate, Mister Potter?”

“The general. Severus Snape. He’s front and centre of that mess down there. We’re bonded, and my life is tied to his. If he dies, so do I, and your deal will do you no good if I’m not here to see it to fruition.”

The vampire bowed. “Then I will guard him myself, at least until dawn. Thank you, Sky-Warrior.”

“My name is Harry, not Sky-Warrior. And when the sun comes up, take refuge in the dungeons—no windows there. Just don’t let anyone inside see you until I have time to explain your presence.”

“It shall be as you wish.” The vampire bowed once more and whipped around, flying back towards the battle.

Harry watched him go with deep trepidation in his heart. “Merlin, I hope I’ve done the right thing.”

Lily’s voice broke through the sounds of battle—“Harry James Potter, get back here this instant!”—and Harry shook off his worries and darted back towards the Forest. However beneficial, the confrontation with Ferin had cost him valuable time.

“Where are you, you bald-headed menace?” He sheathed his sword and shot away into the night.

Yet another vampire attacked Severus, and he was tiring quickly. Why were they all coming for him? Unless—of course. Riddle must have told them to. Traitors who had escaped justice rated fairly high on Riddle’s hit list, after all. With a cry of despair, he clashed blades with the creature and hoped Harry could end this war before they all perished.

The vampire growled and swiped at Severus’ middle, and the man couldn’t dodge the blow entirely. He managed to avoid being cut in two, but his katana clattered to the ground some yards away, and without it, Severus had no solid defence against the creature’s fangs.

He had failed.

The vampire went to strike, but as a flash of white teeth came near Severus’ arm, a shield settled in front of him—a shield of titanium with ruby edges, one of the same kind high-ranking vampires used.

The vampire who had challenged him cried, “Sire? What is happening?”

‘Sire!’ The bloody sire of the vampire clan had just rescued Severus from his own kin? What strange drama was this?

Stunned, but not fool enough to leave himself unprotected for long, Severus used the delay to snatch up his sword and stagger to his feet. The vampiric sire moved to his side and again shielded him. Severus gaped, bemused, as the sire addressed the female in low, urgent tones.

“Sirenia, go and rescue our children. Take half of the clan with you and tell the rest that we fight with the Light now.”

She gasped. “We do? But the staff—”
The sire smiled. “We are saved, Sirenia. The sky-warrior has come at last! The staff is destroyed, and our people have a powerful protector now.”

“Oh gods, sire! It is true? The one with kohl-eyes has come?”

Severus frowned. ‘Kohl-eyes? Sky-Warrior?’ His stomach dropped into his feet. ‘Mother of Merlin, are they speaking of Harry?’

Alarmed, Severus gripped his katana in a shaking hand and watched the interchange between the vampires, ready to attack the sire himself if the strange creature had so much as harmed a hair upon his mate’s head.

As if the beast could sense his fear—and perhaps he could—the sire turned to Severus with an attempt at a reassuring look. It only frightened Severus further. “Peace, human. Your mate is well.” He turned to the female again. “Sirenia, hurry. My time-shield will not hold much longer and our kin suffer. Go to our young and bring them home.”

“Oh, thank the gods. It shall be as you command, my Sire.”

There was a flash of black and red, smoke burst into the air everywhere, and the Death Eaters screamed in outrage as soon as it cleared. Severus dared look beyond the shield and gasped—all the vampires nearby had gone, and the rest had all positioned themselves behind the Death Eaters, pinning them in.

A surge of relief swept through him and left him weak. Severus was safe, and that meant Harry was, too. At least for the moment.

A low, cultured voice said, “You are in need of protection, yes, General Severus Snape?”

Shite! In his relief that the others had left, Severus had forgotten about the sire—the oldest and most dangerous vampire of them all. He turned and growled, sword slashing at the beast, but the vampire simply deflected the blow and stepped back.

“I am not your enemy. Your mate has asked me to help you. The creature.”

An Inferi attacked while the vampire was speaking, and Severus went to slice it in half, but the vampire had already torn it apart before he could so much as raise his sword. The vampire tossed the flaming carcass aside and gave Severus a pointed look.

Severus gaped. “You … Harry … he asked you to protect me?”

“Yes. We never wanted to—” The vampire slashed through another Inferius and set its corpse ablaze. “We never wanted to fight you. We were hostages to that staff.” The sire tore into a nameless Death Eater’s throat, and Severus winced away from the spray. “We do not usually harm your kind, but the human with snake eyes—” He tossed the Death Eater’s corpse into a row of enemies, knocking them back. “—forced us to fight with that horrid staff. Now that it is destroyed and your mate has offered us Sanctuary—” The sire stopped an Inferi from attacking the dumbfounded Severus with a blast of fire magic. “We are on your side.”

“Our side,” Severus said in a low, shaking voice. “And Harry gave you Sanctuary?”

“Yes.” The vampire knocked back another Death Eater and toed at one of the many corpses piling up around Severus, sighing in dismay. “Though I understand you were only defending yourself, I would appreciate it if you would cease killing my kin.”
Severus gripped his head, unable to process this strange turn of events. “Merlin help me. A vampiric sire is protecting me and asking me—asking—not to kill his kin. I have officially gone mad.” He shook himself and raised his head. “Well, it seems I shall have to kill Harry for his rashness when this is all over. For now, let us fight.”

The vampire laughed and gave a short bow. “I am Ferin Grey, human friend.” He raised his sword in offer of allegiance. “And my blade is yours.”

“I am Severus Snape.” He raised his katana to accept the formal offer of kinship. “I accept your blade, sire, and thank you for your allegiance.”

Behind him, an awed voice said, “Bloody hell, Hermione. Have I gone mad?”

“No more so than usual,” the girl returned amidst a blast of furious spellwork. “Why?”

“Because I could swear I just heard that Harry had managed to convince—” Ron grunted, and a surge of fire on Severus’ left suggested the boy had just exterminated an Inferius. “—The sire of the Grey clan to swear allegiance to his mate.”

“Er … that looks to be about the size of it.”

“But … but the Grey clan!”

“Ron! In case you hadn’t noticed—” Another blast of fire went up on Severus’ right. “We’re still surrounded by Inferi and Death Eaters. Maybe we could discuss this later?”

“Oh. Right. Er … sorry.”

Ferin gave a low chuckle.

Severus leaned towards the vampire to mutter, “I think he may need your protection more than I.”

Ferin laughed outright. “I rather like you, General Severus Snape.”

“Charmed, I’m sure.” He dispatched another Inferius and tossed it aside. “And just call me Severus. But perhaps we might also talk later?”

“Indeed.”

Severus snorted and returned to battle.

Half a kilometre from Hagrid’s flaming hut, Harry spotted a flicker of black and grey along the ground surrounded by spots of black, silver-blond, and brown. Triumph surged through him.

‘There you are, you bloody bastard.’

Harry made sure his hood was up once more and soared over Riddle, keeping far enough away that the man mightn’t notice as he began his spell. With a deep breath for courage, Harry called his life energy forth and gathered it in his palms.

“Restitue Ani—”
But Riddle looked up and cut Harry’s soul spell off with a rapid-fire cutting hex. Cursing, Harry rolled out of the way, dropped a metre or so, and flapped his wings to regain altitude. Another spell shot towards him, which he blocked, and Harry noticed Riddle waving his followers on, pointing at him. A silver-blond, harried boy looked up, followed by his father, Bellatrix, and her husband, but their eyes couldn’t focus on him.

Harry smirked and discreetly cast the two-person silencing spell Severus had taught him.

“They can’t see me, Tommy-boy,” Harry taunted. “It’s just you and—” He dodged a slashing hex. “—And me.”

Merlin, three hexes already? Where was Riddle’s usual rant about blood supremacy and such? Fear and worry bubbled in Harry’s gut. This quiet, less cocky Riddle was an anomaly, one Harry had no idea how to read. Harry cast a shield over himself and watched the enemy closely.

“Harry Potter,” Riddle drawled, finally acting a bit more like himself. “You show your face at last. I had begun to think you would let all your friends die for you before you showed any courage.”

“Potter?” Draco scanned the ground. “My lord, what are you talking about?”

“Look up, you fool! Or have you already forgotten that Harry Potter has creature blood?” Riddle jerked a finger towards Harry. “There. Now do you see?”

Malfoy looked but stared right through Harry. “I … I see nothing, Master.”

Just for spite, Harry shouted. “Oh, Malfoy! Oi, Ferret boy!”

Malfoy shook his head. “I’m sorry, my lord. I can’t find him.”

“Arrogant, foolish, idiot boy! Let us see if you can miss this!” Riddle shot an ugly yellow curse at Harry’s head, but Harry had anticipated that move and ducked easily.

Harry smirked and waved at Malfoy. “Well, can you see me, Ferret-head? No? I thought not.”

Riddle shot another curse, but Harry’s shield deflected it.

“What’s the matter, Tommy-boy? Feeling a little outnumbered now that your vampire friends are on our side?”

“What!”

Harry smirked. “That’s right. They found out your precious soul staff was destroyed and swore to protect m—” A killing curse shot towards him, but Harry dodged it. “Oh, does that make you angry? Poor Tommy, so alone in the world.”

Riddle snarled. “You are the one who is alone, you fool!”

Riddle cast some complicated, wide-range spell that Harry couldn’t avoid. It bypassed his shield as well, but instead of hurting Harry, the spell barely tingled as it passed harmlessly through his body. What on earth was that?

Riddle cried, “There! Now, do you see him, Draco?”

Malfoy winced and hung his head. “Um, n-no, Master. I’m s-sorry.”

Ah. It was some kind of revealing spell, then. Well, Harry knew how to handle that. Discreetly, he
recast his silencing charm in case the spell had broken it.

“Idiot boy!” A *Cruciatus* curse downed the younger Malfoy, and Harry decided it was time to end the charade. Malfoy was a prat, but not even he deserved the *Cruciatus*.

Harry shot a stunning spell that Riddle barely avoided in time. “Don’t know everything about my race, do you, Tom? Your allies won’t see me, nor will they hear me.”

Riddle snarled and started a protest, but Harry just hefted his scythe and tilted back his head just enough to reveal his creature traits. When Harry’s vision shaded teal around the edges, a sign that his eyes were glowing, Riddle cut himself off and stepped back. His eyes went wide, darting back and forth like Pettigrew’s used to, and Harry laughed.

“That’s right, Tom. I’m not a little boy anymore, not one you can kill in his crib like the coward you are. No, now I know how to fight back!”

Riddle stepped away again, twitching like Pettigrew at his worst. “What *are* you?”

Harry gave him a vicious grin. “Your worst nightmare.” He started his spell again. “Restitu—shite!”

This time, a *Cruciatus* curse barely missed knocking him out of the air. Maybe it was best that Harry landed before a spell hit—Riddle wasn’t behaving like Harry had expected him to. He held his scythe high and descended to the earth.

Just as he touched down, his mother’s voice became clear once more. “Harry! Oh Merlin, *Harry*!”

Harry glanced back to see Lily and her mate—in wolf form and whining in Lily’s arms—soaring towards him. When he turned around again, Riddle was running away like the coward he was.

“Shite!” Harry shot a stunner at the demon’s bald head but missed. A second stunner hit nothing but air despite its proper placement—Riddle had transformed into Pettigrew’s rat and was tearing away towards his allies and the forest.

“Oh, no you don’t!”

Harry transformed into his Osirin Animagus form and shot towards the rat like a bullet. He attempted to place a wandless tracer on Riddle even as he pursued him, but the rat was weaving and darting between his allies like a madman, and Harry couldn’t get close enough to make the spell hold. The other Death Eaters bolted towards the Forest too, all shouting in confusion, but Harry managed to stun Rodolphus at least before the others made it to the treeline.

“*Stupefy!*” He shot at the treacherous rat just as it crossed into the Forbidden Forest with Malfoy and Bellatrix. The spell would have hit too, had Voldemort not taken his human form again, grabbed Draco, and disapparated into the night.

“Shite, where’d he go?”

Harry whipped around, half expecting the man to apparate again behind him like in the Ministry of Magic two years ago, but no. There were anti-apparition wards on the grounds—all except a ten-yard area near Hagrid’s hut. Riddle must have learned of it from Severus’ mind—it was the place he had always apparated to and from when Riddle had Summoned him, the one place on the Hogwarts grounds with no anti-apparition charms.

The rat-bastard wasn’t coming back. Riddle had well and truly gone, leaving Harry a failure.
“You bloody coward! Get back here!”

Harry tried to catch the remaining Death Eaters, but it was too late. Bellatrix and Lucius had already reached the treeline, and they vanished before he could even get a spell off.

Harry landed in front of the trees and punched the nearest sapling as hard as he could. “Fuck!”

“Harry James Potter, what in Merlin’s name has gotten into you?”

His mother and Remus—in human form again—alighted beside Harry, both looking terrified and angry, though Remus was also rather green. Lily bound and gagged the one Death Eater Harry had managed to capture, and he wished he had waited for them. Gods, he was stupid.

“I’m waiting for an explanation, Harry,” Remus said in a calm, but too-cold voice. The man was furious.

Harry pressed his now-injured hand to his scar and groaned. “Please. I know it was stupid. I failed. There’s no need to tear into me further. I already hate myself for it.”

Then Lily approached, and Harry wanted to sink through the ground. Tear tracks had dried on her cheeks and her eyes were flashing with rage. “Oh, I think there is, Harry James. How could you be so stupid? Could you not have waited thirty seconds for us to get Moony situated? Thirty seconds, Harry! We might have caught them all, but no! You had to run off and play the hero. You could have been killed! Do you have any idea what that would have done to Severus? To me?”

Tears flooded Harry’s eyes. He looked away, unable to respond, because she was right. He had been an idiot and it could have cost them everything.

“Oh gods, Sev!”
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Warnings: some violence. Sev gets hurt, Harry heals him, the vampires go hide, and Lucius pays the boys a visit.

Edited 8/17/18 because I'm a dummy and I misspelled "sanentur" like 20 times in this chapter. Whoops.

CHAPTER 31

The curse hit Severus before anyone saw it coming, before Ferin could prevent it. He had spun under and away from Rabastan Lestrange’s sword when a sharp pain hit him in the gut. He looked down, stunned, to see a slash through his duelling robes and blood blossoming all over his white undershirt. 

Sectumsempra. He’d been felled by his own spell. And worse, no one in the Infirmary knew how to cure it. Not even Harry could heal him now.

He had failed.

Beside him, a vampiric growl alerted him to the sire’s fury. Even if Ferin’s protection had not been enough in the end, at least Rabastan and the remaining Death Eaters would not last long against a vampiric sire in blood-rage. A silver lining, perhaps.

“Oh gods, Severus!”

Hermione’s despairing shriek was the last thing he heard before his hidden portkey whisked him away.

Severus opened his eyes to a wash of white and healers rushing about left and right, hair flying out of their hats and blood spattered all over their robes. He had landed on a bed in a quiet corner and none of the healers had noticed him yet, but it mattered not. Not even Poppy had enough power to use the counterchant for Sectumsempra. Severus had certainly tried to teach all the medics over the past few days, but none of them were natural chanter's, and thus, none but Severus could heal that curse.

And Severus hadn’t the power while his magic was all going towards keeping him alive.

The Infirmary doors banged open, startling the healers, but Severus had fallen into his own world and barely heard it. With a rasping sigh, he closed his eyes and waited for death. If only Poppy had been a chanter—but no. There was no one to help him, and now he and Harry would both die.

“I am sorry, beloved.” Blood bubbled on his words and dribbled down his chin.

“Don’t apologise,” Harry’s voice called back. “Just tell me the counter.”
Severus looked up to see a tear-streaked Avenger standing at his side. His face was drawn and grey, but he was alive. And if anyone had the power to save Severus, it was Harry.

A tiny spark of hope flickered to life in Severus’ chest. He hardly dared to breathe lest it die again.

“Vulnera … Sanentur,” he whispered. “Chant.”

Harry slipped his hand behind Severus’ head and cradled him close. Tears slipped down his face as he murmured the words.

“Vulnera Sanentur … Vulnera Sanentur ….” After a few spoken rounds, magic filtered into the words and turned into song, and Severus dared to breathe again. Harry was doing it!

The Infirmary door slammed open again, and this time Severus was coherent enough to realise Remus and Lily had just burst into the room, no doubt searching for Harry.

Lily cried, “Harry! Where is h—oh. Oh Merlin, no!”

She rushed over to them, tears streaking her cheeks, and her sudden cry brought the Healers’ attention around. Terror nudged into Severus’ chest along with the spark of hope, making him hot and cold at once. If they interrupted Harry now ….

Doggedly, Harry continued chanting. “Vulnera Sanen—”

“Severus!” Poppy bustled past Harry and pushed him aside, interrupting his chant and killing Severus’ hope. “Harry, move over so I can he—”

Harry’s voice came out in a snarl. “Get out of the way!” The man’s teeth were bared and his eyes sharp with teal light. His scales had come out—though his wings stayed in—and his nails had curved into claws. “Back away from my mate, woman!”

Poppy put a hand over her chest and gasped. “My goodness!”

Severus registered a pair of small hands with pink-painted nails forcibly dragging Poppy back, then he succumbed to oblivion.

When Harry turned back around, Severus had fallen unconscious. ‘No-no-no! He can’t die!’

With a broken sob, heart aching as if it would fall apart—or perhaps it already had—Harry slipped his hand back under Severus’ head and resumed his chanting. A shield went up around them, wards to keep everyone out. So help him, no one would interrupt this time.

A couple of yards away, Lily held Madame Pomfrey back and Remus kept the other healers from interfering and getting hexed for it, but they didn’t think to block the noise.

“Vulnera Sanentur ….” Harry struggled to focus, but trying to chant while fifteen healers squabbled over the best way to help Severus was distracting, to say the least. Despite his best efforts, he was having trouble getting the chant to take.

“Lily, please,” Pomfrey cried. “I need to help Severus.”
“You can’t right now,” Lily said in a firm voice. “Stay back.”

“Vulnera Sanentur,” Harry half-shouted. He needed them to back away. Why couldn’t they understand that?

Pomfrey gasped. “Oh Merlin, no. Severus was hit with Sectumsempra?”

Lily’s voice was shaky. “I … I’m assuming so, if that’s the counter for it. Why?”

“No one can heal it. None of us. Harry can’t possibly—”

Remus cut her off with a fierce, “Ssh! Let him concentrate. All of you, be quiet!”

Harry could have kissed him.

“But the counter is too difficult,” Pomfrey insisted. “If a medic can’t do it, what makes you think—”

Lily clapped a hand over Pomfrey’s mouth and dragged her away, to Harry’s relief. He couldn’t focus like this.

“But let him work, Poppy! He’s half Dragoon. He’s the only person alive who can save Severus now.”

“Vulnera Sanentur ….”

Pomfrey let slip a little cry. “Oh my. A Dragoon! Well, that does explain it. I’ll just … get a course of potions for Severus then?”

“Yes, that will do nicely,” said Remus in a gentler tone. “Then go back to your other patients. There’s nothing you can do for Severus except to let Harry work in peace.”

“I … I suppose. I’ll be right back.”

The woman finally walked away, her heels clicking against the tile, and Harry let slip a sigh. As soon as she had gone, his stubborn repetition had once again tapped into his magic, taking on a songlike form. As he crooned the chant over Severus, the gaping wound in the man’s abdomen slowly knit and the blood stopped.

Gods, there was blood everywhere. Could Severus survive after losing so much?

“Lily, here,” Pomfrey murmured. “Blood replenisher, grade three antibiotic, and a grade three general healing draught. Perhaps you could give these to Severus while Harry’s working?”

“I don’t dare interfere,” Lily replied. “Harry’s creature side is agitated at the moment and terrified for his mate. He’ll lash out at anyone who comes near Severus. Any treatment beyond that chant will just have to wait until Severus’ wound seals.”

‘Yes, it bloody well will,’ Harry thought even as he continued his chant. He would let no one near his mate until Severus was out of immediate danger.

Pomfrey nodded and watched the injured man, her eyes full of deep pain. “Oh, Severus. I do hope you pull through. We need you. And we love you.” With a sigh, she wiped her eyes and walked away.

Nervous and feeling as though half his heart was out of place, Harry kept up the chant until finally—finally—Severus’ wound closed. He checked his mate’s heartbeat and let out a sob. Severus was
still alive. He dropped his wards, caring about nothing in that moment but holding his Sev, feeling his breath, hearing his heartbeat.

With a cry of mingled pain and relief, he slumped over onto his mate’s forehead and wept. “I am so sorry, my beloved. I should have been by your side.”

Lily nudged his shoulder. “Harry, we need to——”

Harry snarled at her, even as he cursed his instincts for forcing him to react so violently. “Don’t! Don’t touch me.”

Lily backed away, her expression pained and eyes wide with shock. “Why? I thought—I’m your mother, Harry. I hadn’t thought your instincts would lock me out.”

Remus wrapped Lily in his arms. “Remember, Lils, you weren’t able to be there for him until very recently. He might not recognise you as his mother in this state.”

The creature inside him reared up and snapped out the words Harry did not want to say. “If I do not accept her, then it is because she rejected me not ten minutes ago. I needed you, Mother, and you told me to leave. You did not want me. Why then, do you wonder why I am angry?”

Harry gasped and clamped his lips shut, determined that no more painful truths should slip beyond his control that morning.


“Then why? Why did you tell me to leave you?”

Lily sniffled and wiped her eyes. “Merlin, Harry! I said to leave me alone, not leave me forever! Like people say when they’re angry. That’s all it was. I just wanted a moment to calm down so I wouldn’t say something I didn’t mean and hurt you.” She crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a look full of grief and desperate longing. “I don’t understand how you could possibly believe I don’t want to be your mum, love, when everything I have done thus far has been for you.”

“I … I thought you said ….” Harry drew his knees to his chest. “I thought … you wanted me to leave. And I’d just failed all over again, and I was stupid and a freak and——” Dear gods. Harry was going to shove his fist in his mouth in a moment if he couldn’t get control of it.

“A freak? Harry! You were impetuous and foolish rushing into that battle alone, but I knew you were only trying to save us. I never thought … Merlin, love! How could you believe that of yourself? No, you didn’t manage to kill Riddle, but gods! Just for the trying, you were brave.” She gave Remus a bemused, heartbroken look. “I … I just don’t understand where this is coming from.”

Remus growled. “The Dursleys. They’ve beaten it into his head that he’s unlovable, so at the first hint of rejection ….”

“He thinks we don’t want him. Oh, Harry, no. I was angry, but I never meant that I didn’t want to be your mum.”

Harry groaned and buried his face into his knees. “I’m sorry. Can’t do anything right. So sorry.”

Lily sighed and hesitantly approached her son. “Love, can I come near you? Just to help and reassure
you? And to help Sev?"

Harry winced and shook his pain off. “Damn it. You’re right. I can’t do this. Not now, not when Sev is so critical.” He clamped down on his instincts as hard as he could and lifted a shaking hand. “Here. The potion.”

Lily passed it to him carefully. “Check it if you need to reassure yourself.”

Harry did, much to his chagrin. Sighing in irritation, he sniffed the bottle, and when his instinct—and common sense—deemed it safe, he gave her a hesitant nod.

Lily kept her voice low and soothing to calm Harry’s wayward creature side. “Okay, love. I’ll need you to hold his mouth open for me in a moment, but not just yet. First, I need to teach you how to help him take it while he’s unconscious. I think that would be best since you’re leery of anyone touching him right now.”

Harry nodded, relieved that she was trying to heal the breach, and more importantly, to heal his mate. He needed her help to save Severus, and that acknowledgement made something in his instinctual reactions relax. Lily loved Severus as much as she loved Harry. It would be okay.

Harry took a deep breath to let his pain go, then reached across the divide and took his mother’s hand. “I’m sorry, Mum. I was afraid he’d get into the castle if I didn’t run after him then, and then I got held up and … I don’t know. I just didn’t want him to hurt the healers or house elves or turn Hogwarts against us.”

“It’s okay, baby. Well, not okay—don’t you ever run off alone like that again, okay?”

Harry gave her a sad smile. “I’m not sure I can help it. I’m too used to being on my own.”

She held his hands. “You’re not now. You have a family who all love you and want to share your burdens. So please, let us.”

Harry closed his eyes against the painful-sweet relief her words brought. He had never had anyone to rely on before, not in the hard times, and his mother wanted to. In fact, was angry because Harry hadn’t let her. Maybe he didn’t have to do this alone. Maybe he could relax, a little.

“I … I’ll try, Mum.”

“Good.” She squeezed his hands. “Now, watch me, okay? I’m going to show you how to help Sev take this.”

Harry nodded and released her hands.

Lily held up the potion. “When I pour this in his mouth, it’s going to block his air since he can’t swallow it on his own. What you have to do is rub his throat firmly, right here.” She indicated the spot just under her chin where her jaw met her throat. “I’ll demonstrate on Remus so I don’t upset your instincts further, okay?”

Remus came to the side of the bed with his hands held out in a gesture of supplication—he understood what being a magical creature was like too, even if he was only a human now. The gesture calmed Harry, despite his overwhelming fear for his mate.

Remus’ voice was soft. “I’m just coming closer so Lily can show you how to help Severus, okay?”

Harry nodded and gave the man a wan smile. “Thank you, both of you.”
Lily smiled. “We love Severus too, Harry, and it’s okay that you’re scared. I’d be just as upset if it was Remus or you on that bed.”

Harry nodded and smiled a little brighter, feeling less like a dolt. “O-okay. So how do I rub his neck to make him swallow?”

Lily showed him the process, and once Harry had managed to make Severus swallow a couple times as a trial, he pried his lover’s mouth open and watched as Lily gave him the blood replenisher. The red liquid pooled in Severus’ throat, blocking the man’s air, and Harry hurriedly worked to make Severus swallow once more. The potion went down smoothly, and Harry sighed with relief when Severus took a breath immediately afterwards. In quick succession, Harry also fed Severus the antibiotic and the healing draught, and after the man finished the last one, Harry began to feel better.

Severus was healing.

“I think he’s going to be okay,” Harry said in a shaky voice. “At least my chest doesn’t hurt as much any longer.”

“Good!” Lily rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “That’s good. Um, do you think you’d be okay if I get Poppy to run a diagnostic scan on him, just to make sure he’s not injured anywhere else and that he doesn’t need another potion? He’s lost quite a lot of blood, you see, and I don’t want him to suffer.”

The thought of Pomfrey set Harry’s creature side off again. He growled even as he cursed his wild blood for its stupidity.

Lily tried to placate him. “Harry, love, she didn’t know about your creature side and she was trying to save his life.”

Harry gave his mother a weary look. “I know that, but my bloody Avenger side has apparently labelled her as the enemy. I can’t seem to stop it.”

Lily sighed. “Well, it’s to be expected. You’re a new creature. Controlling those impulses gets easier with time and experience. Do you think you could let one of the other healers near?”

Harry’s growl doubled in volume. “Definitely not. My Avenger at least knows Madame Pomfrey is a good person and meant well, but I don’t know them.”

Lily gave him a wry smile. “I see. Well, I can do the diagnostic then. I’m just not as good at it as Poppy, but it should be enough to at least tell us if Sev is still suffering.”

Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose and motioned her on. “I’m sorry. I feel like such a prat. Sev is hurt and I can’t let Madame Pomfrey near him when she’s the best person to help him, not to mention that I terrified you two running off like an idiot and then having a meltdown, and to top it all off, I wasn’t even able to kill the bastard. It’s been a banner night all around.”

Lily rubbed Harry’s hand and whispered, “It’s okay. We’ll just kill him through your dream-walking as soon as we know how, okay? It’s safer that way anyway.”

Harry nodded. “Safer, definitely. Riddle was entirely unpredictable this time. He always used to go on and on before he shot curses at me, but this time he was shooting them almost before he saw me. It was odd, facing Riddle and not hearing the usual hour-long monologue about his supposed superiority.”

Lily winced. “Merlin, Harry. Please don’t face him alone again.”
“I imagine I’ll have to when I kill him, even if it’s … indirectly.”

“Well, that would be different. He can’t fight back in there.” She took out her wand, but didn’t aim it at Severus yet. “Is it all right if I run the diagnostic scan now, Harry?”

He gave her a hesitant nod and watched as she ran her wand in a line down the entire length of Severus’ body. A length of parchment with writing appeared in the air before Lily, and she skimmed it before shuddering and closing her eyes.

“Merlin, what that poor man has suffered as a spy. It’s inhuman, and I doubt I picked up the half of it.”

Harry winced and didn’t reach for the parchment. Judging by Lily’s reaction, it would only make his instincts go even madder.

“Is he okay, Mum?”

She nodded, but a frown creased her brow. “Yes, but this is strange. Harry, I think we need to have Poppy do this charm. This says Severus was caught by a sword, not Sectumsempra, and I know he’s too intelligent to make that kind of mistake. Something isn’t right about this.”

Harry gulped. “You … you’re sure he needs Pomfrey?”

Lily nodded. “Can you keep your instincts under control if she doesn’t come too close?”

“I can try. I won’t hurt her either way, but I might get angry.”

“Well, she’s used to that from Severus, I’d wager. He’s a terrible patient.”

Harry growled and sighed immediately afterwards. “Sorry, Mum. I know you’re right, but my instincts don’t like anything bad said about him right now, even as a joke. Or if it’s true.”

She gave him a sorrowful smile. “It’s all right. I should have realised that might upset you. I’m sorry. May I get Poppy, love?”

Harry shook his head. “Remus, you go. I want Mum to help me keep him safe. I don’t know enough healing charms if something happens.”

Remus nodded. “I’ll be right back then, and I’ll warn Poppy not to get too close.” He left and returned a moment later with the matron in tow.

“Harry?” She gave him a hesitant smile. “I’m sorry for pushing you earlier. I didn’t realise you were a Dragoon or that you were chanting. My own instincts kicked in, you see, and I love Severus like a son.” She shook her head. “I don’t know if he realises that.”

“You should tell him when he wakes up,” Harry said, keeping his voice low lest he lose control of his instincts. He didn’t want to hurt the woman, and she was only trying to protect someone she cared about.

The apology had helped soothe his creature, though, as had her love for his mate. He was able to let her approach within a metre before a growl escaped his control.

He clapped a hand over his throat. “S-sorry. I can’t—no closer.”

She nodded and held out her wand. “May I cast the charm now?”
He gave her a terse nod. “Hurry.”

Pomfrey scanned the man and stepped back when she had a parchment like Lily’s in hand. “Dear Merlin, how that man sacrifices for us.” She gave a sad sigh, but confusion marred her features the next moment. “Now, that is odd. I thought he was hit with Sectumsempra.”

Lily peeked over her shoulder. “Yours says it was a sword, too. How strange. I can’t see Severus making that kind of mistake. Something is off about this.”

“Well, in the thick of battle, it’s possible he might have been too distracted to see the blade. He may have just assumed it was Sectumsempra if he didn’t see it happen.”

Harry frowned. “But how could he not have seen a blade if they were close enough to almost cut him in half? And it shouldn’t have happened in the first place. Ferin was supposed to be protecting him.”


Harry gave them a wry grin. “The sire of the Grey clan. Riddle had forced them to fight with that staff of his—he was holding their children hostage!”


“Yes, why?”

“They’re the oldest, most powerful clan in existence, Harry!”

“Oh. Well, his name is Ferin Grey and he’s the sire, so I assumed ….”

“That’s him,” said Lily with a shudder. “So that was who you were talking to in the air, then?”

Harry nodded. “As soon as Ferin found out I’m a creature and that our … kin had destroyed the staff, he swore allegiance to me and asked for Sanctuary for his clan. I figured it was safer for all of us if I agreed.”


Harry snorted. “No kidding.” He looked at his mate and sniffled. “But I … I don’t understand. I thought Sanctuary meant the requester has to protect the giver too.”

“It does,” said Remus, “and if the sire swore his allegiance, then that also binds the entire clan to keep his oath. What happened to Severus must have been an accident, Harry. Even a vampiric sire is fallible, and the Death Eaters were likely told to rush Severus. In the midst of fighting multiple enemies, it’s possible one might have slipped through.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Against Severus and a vampiric sire, Remus? Have you seen the man fight? He’s bloody brilliant with a blade.” He frowned and shook his head. “No. Something is off about this entire situation.”

Lily stiffened and paled, but said nothing. Harry frowned at her, but whatever she had thought of was not forthcoming.

Pomfrey sighed and looked to the injured man with sad eyes. “Only Severus will be able to tell us what happened, or perhaps those nearest him might have seen—”
One of the healers cried, “Madame! Madame, please!”

She winced. “I have to go help. Good luck. And someone warn the others about the vampires before they’re attacked! I don’t need more patients in my Infirmary from either side.” She passed the list to Lily and darted away.

Lily turned to her mate with a grim expression. “Remus, go find Shacklebolt and tell him about the clan. Use your scent tracking. See if you can find the sire too and ask him what happened to Severus.”

Remus nodded. “I’ll try. If not Shacklebolt, I’ll find someone else we can trust.”

“Good luck, Remy, and be careful.”

The man kissed her tenderly, gave Harry a pat on the shoulder, and ran away, shifting into Moony halfway through the Infirmary doors.

After he had gone, Harry gave his mother a worried look. “Mum, you know something. I can’t imagine the oldest, most powerful vampiric sire letting a Death Eater slip past him, and I don’t think you can either.”

Her face went carefully blank. “I have a suspicion, but I think … it might be best to wait to hear from Ferin or whoever was fighting near Severus before we jump to any conclusions, particularly with your instincts on alert, Harry.”

He gulped. “O-okay?”

“Trust me.” Lily looked at Pomfrey’s parchment and frowned. “Hmm. Poppy’s list is better. Mine didn’t show that Severus hasn’t slept in a week.”

Harry frowned. “Hasn’t slept? But I know he slept. He was there when I went to bed and when I woke up.”

Lily gave him a knowing smile. “And in the middle?”

Harry paused. “Well, of course he … oh. So that’s how he made all those kits and portkeys. He got up in the middle of the night while I was sleeping, the sneaky git.”

“Well, Remus and I helped with the portkeys,” she said with a chuckle. “Not at night, though. I didn’t realise he was working then.”

Harry huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. “Why did no one tell me? I’d have helped.”

“Love, it wasn’t intentional. Severus works best and fastest with potions alone. I’m sure he just didn’t want to worry you. And, well, you were almost always in training with the Soldiers or one of the professors. Remy and I didn’t want to interrupt when that was so important.”

Harry slumped and rested his head in his hand. “Fat lot of good it did. I still couldn’t catch the bastard.”

Lily stroked Harry’s hair, and the gentle touch eased his fears and pain. “It’ll be okay, Harry. We’ll get him. Maybe not today, but we’ll get him.”

Harry sighed and let his mother’s touch soothe him. After a moment, he waved her on. “I can’t leave Sev, but will you go help the others?”
Lily shook her head. “The battle was over when we ran in here, as far as I could tell. The vampires must have made short work of it.”

“The medics might need help, though.”

Lily looked at him sadly. “You need to be alone with him.”

Harry nodded. “I need to know if the others are okay too.”

She sighed. “May I bid him goodbye, Harry? I swear not to hurt him.”

Harry winced. “Just … be careful, okay? I know it’s not fair, but I can’t seem to control my instincts right now.”

She gave him a solemn nod. “I swear it.” Lily stayed near Harry, but reached a slow, careful hand out to brush the hair back from Severus’ brow. The action brought Harry’s attention to his mate’s face, and Harry gasped as he realised the condition his mate was in beyond his injuries.

His hair was in total disarray, he was covered in smudges of dirt and dried blood—most likely not his own—and his entire body was a tangled mess of scrapes and scratches. His hair was wet with sweat and hung in clumps, and his robes were covered in blood, mud, and ash and torn almost to shreds.

“Gods,” Harry breathed. “Mum, I need to take care of him. Clean him up and such.”

She nodded. “All right. Just let me ….” She placed a light kiss on the man’s forehead. “Get better, Sev. Harry adores you and can’t live without you, and I love you both too much to let either of you go.” At a stifled growl from Harry, she moved back and gave her son a hug instead. “It’s okay. You’re just responding to the need to protect your mate. I’m not offended, love.” She kissed his cheek. “You’ll send me a Patronus if anything changes?”

Harry sighed. “If my instincts will let me think straight long enough to remember.”

“All right. I’m going now, love. I’ll see you later.”

“Right. Be careful, Mum.”

She nodded and gave them a wave. The curtains closed behind her a moment later, and the tingle and glow of a silencing ward washed over them. Harry let out a shuddering sigh as the noise beyond his small, warded area ceased.

“T-thanks, Mum.”

He turned to his mate, taking in everything from his muddy boots to his sweat-soaked, dirty hair. Merlin, Severus looked a mess.

And Harry loved him all the more for it.

“You were brilliant, weren’t you, beloved? I bet Ferin missed your attacker because he thought you could defend yourself—you’re amazing with that katana of yours.” Tears blurred his vision. “But me, not so much. I couldn’t even get close to my target.” A sob crept up his throat. “I … I’m so sorry, Sev. I failed you.”

Harry laid his head on his mate’s and wept.
Severus woke to the sound of birdsong and his mate’s soft snores. He was too weak to open his eyes, but the warm air and silky sheets beneath him suggested that he was in his bedroom and not the Infirmary. How had he come to be here? What had happened? He attempted to rise and go to the loo, but a throbbing pain through his belly made him think better of it.

Right. Someone had cursed him with Sectumsempra and nearly cut him in two. He had best not forget it again, lest he reopen his wounds and kill them both.

He frowned and rubbed a hand over his belly, noticing along the way that he was dressed in fresh sleep trousers. Harry must have cleaned and dressed him since the Infirmary, then. Severus wondered how many hours had passed and if it was safe to use magic yet. He felt well enough, but decided not to risk it, just in case he put himself into a relapse. Harry might physically restrain him to the bed if Severus delayed his recovery for a simple Tempus.

His recovery. Merlin, how had Severus survived? Wounds by that curse bled doubly fast, and with such a grave injury, Severus should have died within perhaps two minutes. Harry hadn’t managed the counter that fast, had he?

Severus shook his head and immediately regretted the movement. He was lucky to be alive, but Merlin, it hurt to be just then. He ached all over, as if someone had set a pitch full of bludgers on him. Every muscle in his body screamed at the slightest movement and his stomach burned like liquid fire. Gods, what he wouldn’t give for a pain potion. He resented the fact that he was likely too unwell to Summon one himself.

Severus sighed and relaxed into the pillows. At least he was safe. Severus had thought he would die last night and take Harry with him, but no. Someone somewhere—Xenidan?—had seen fit to give him a second chance, and Severus would not waste it. His Harry deserved a long life full of love. And Severus would give him plenty of it, now that this bloody war was over.

Severus forced his eyes open with the intent of checking his mate over and blinked at the sight of black and violet feathers sitting on his chest. Below that, turquoise scales had wrapped around his legs.


The snake stared and hissed a greeting Severus couldn’t understand, and the bird gave a happy tweet and shook her head.

“Hmm. I am surprised Zera took to you so well, Eirene. I was fearful for your safety.” He frowned. “Wait, how did you get past the wards on the study?”

She tipped her head towards the snake.

“Zera let you out? But … oh. That ward-slipping ability. I see.”
Three days prior, Harry had given Zera the ability to break through Hogwarts’ wards when she had complained that there was nothing to hunt on the grounds. Severus had his misgivings about letting a ward-breaking, camouflaged cobra have the run of the place, but Zera had only used it to hunt a rabbit in the Forest and had stayed in their quarters since then. Perhaps she felt she had seen enough of the darkness of the world while living next to a horcrux, or perhaps she didn’t feel safe venturing too far from her humans yet. Either way, Severus had to admit that the snake was exceptionally well-behaved.

Still, he would have expected her to resent having an unknown magical creature in her masters’ house. She didn’t like owls, after all, and though she had promised Harry she wouldn’t hurt them, that promise did not extend to Eirene.

“Why did you not attack her, Zera?”

The snake shook her head slowly, unable to answer, and Severus berated himself for asking a familiar an open-ended question. His injury must have weakened him more than he thought.

Eirene trilled to call his attention to her. As Severus watched, bemused, the bird turned her head over his belly and let a silvery tear drop onto his exposed stomach. The bird bobbed her beak between the tear and the snake, and understanding dawned on the injured man.

“Oh. Is that why, Zera? You sensed that Eirene wanted to heal me?”

The bird and snake nodded.

Severus smiled. “Good. I am glad you let her help, Zera. That was well done of you.”

The snake rubbed her head against Severus’ leg, obviously pleased with the praise.

“Well, since Harry is indisposed, I suppose I shall have to introduce you. Zera, this is Eirene, Harry’s nighthawk familiar.”

Eirene shook her head.

Shock coursed through him. “Wait. You’re not Harry’s?”

The bird trilled and climbed up Severus’ body. With a cooing sound, she nuzzled the man’s cheek and settled down over his heart.

Wonder washed over Severus as he stroked the nighthawk’s soft feathers. His hands were shaking. “Mine? You are truly mine?” His voice came out in a whisper.

She twittered and gave a happy nod.

Severus smiled, thrilled and awed at once. “Merlin. I had assumed that you would align yourself to Harry since nighthawks are the traditional pets of Osirins.”

She gave a twittering sort of laugh and laid her head on Severus’ chest, curling up to go to sleep. The display of trust and love warmed him from within, and he vowed on the spot to keep his new friend safe to the best of his ability. He would not lose her, not like his poor beloved Telos. He sighed for his longtime friend and hoped the faithful little owl was at peace in the world beyond.

Harry’s muffled voice made Severus jump. “I already have two familiars, Sev, and you’re my mate.” He lifted his head and rubbed his eyes. “Remember, you’ve inherited some of my powers, and even if you hadn’t, I can’t think of anyone else who’s walked the edge of death so long—not even me.”
“That’s true, I suppose.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “Forgive me, beloved. I was trying not to wake you.”

“It’s okay.” Harry sat and stretched, yawning so hard, tears formed at the corners of his eyes. “Ugh. What a terrible night. Are you feeling any better, love?”

Severus nodded. “Better than dead at any rate. What time is it?”

Harry yawned again and cast a Tempus. “Just past seven in the morning. Feel free to go back to sleep if you want. I plan on it.”

Severus blushed. “I think I will need your assistance first. I am in need of the loo.”

Harry shook his head. “Madame Pomfrey said you aren’t to be moved for two days.” He waved his hand over Severus’ stomach, and a strange empty feeling filled his lower abdomen. “There you are.”

Severus’ face flamed. “T-thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it, love. Do you need a potion?”

“Yes. Ah, a grade three pain potion, grade three healing draught—unless Poppy already gave me one?”

Harry nodded. “She gave you that, a blood replenisher, and a grade three antibiotic.”

“Then I will just need the pain potion and a grade one muscle soother. I suppose I am not well enough to Summon them myself?”

Don’t even think about it.” Harry retrieved the requested potions and helped Severus take them one by one. After a glass of water to wash out the taste, Severus felt much better.

“Thank you, my love.”

Harry nuzzled his hair. “It’s nothing. I want to take care of you.”

Severus smiled and pulled his mate into a kiss. “See that you take care of yourself as well. Are you injured? And where are the vampires?”

“I'm all right. Ferin and the remainder of his clan are taking refuge in the dungeons. Remus spread the word among the soldiers that they were forced to fight to keep their children alive and they’ve sworn allegiance to me now. I thought it best to leave them alone for the day, to let them rest and mourn their dead.”

“Yes, that is wise. He was incredibly helpful, you know. I am certain I would not have survived long without his assistance.”

Tears shimmered on Harry’s cheeks. “Then I’ll have to see to it that he gets a proper reward for protecting you so well. A grand new home in the country, perhaps. One with powerful wards.”

“I am sure he will be ecstatic to receive it, once we find such a place.” Severus rubbed Harry’s cheek. “Oh, my Harry. I am so relieved you are safe. I was terrified you would die with me. So terrified I would kill you.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “I couldn’t let my mate die, now could I?”

Severus smiled back. “No.” His joy faded at Harry’s despairing expression. “Love, what is it? Did
we lose family?"

Harry shook his head, his expression turning dark. “Not that I’m aware of. I know we did lose some of our troops, but I don’t think anyone we were particularly close to died. It’s just … I failed, Sev. I tried so hard, but he wasn’t anything like what I was expecting, and he used Pettigrew’s rat form to get away in the end.” He banged the heel of his fist against the wall and growled. “ Couldn’t even get the soul spell off.”

Severus blinked. “Soul spell?”

Harry paled. “Oh. I forgot to tell you. Um, Denoxia, it gave me—”

The Headmaster’s floo connection whooshed to life and a sharp, male voice cried out. “Severus! Where the bloody hell are you? I need help!”

Harry frowned. “Is that Malfoy?”

“Yes,” said Severus, “and he sounds as if he is in great distress. We must—”

Severus had started to rise, but Harry eased him back down. “No. I’ll handle it. You rest.”

Severus lamented his weakness, but gave into his mate’s request. Not least because that firm voice always made him melt a little inside. “Be careful, my Harry. I love you.”

Harry kissed him soundly and held him close for a long, sweet moment. “I will, love. I promise.”

With another light kiss, Harry eased Severus back onto the pillows and moved into the main room. The young man closed the door, meaning Severus couldn’t hear anything without help, to his annoyance. With a quick inventory of his health and power levels, he judged his magic healed enough for simple magic and cast a wandless amplifying spell at the door. He would not let Harry face Lucius without at least being able to hear—even if he could do little to protect Harry if Lucius did lose his head.

With a sigh for his weakened state, Severus settled in to listen, petting Eirene’s back and taking comfort from her warm, soft feathers.

Harry said in a cool, even tone, “Can I help you, Malfoy?”

“You’d best help me,” Malfoy shot back. “Where is Severus? This isn’t a matter for a mere boy.”

“Severus is indisposed and—”

The floo roared again and boot heels clacked on the office floors. Had the idiot stepped through with no preamble? Shite. What had happened? Lucius was never so incautious.

“Damn it, boy, do you think I care about your lover’s state of undress? I need help, and I am not going to let your prudish attitudes—”

A thud against the wall of the bedroom let Severus know that Harry’s instincts had come to the fore and he had best get into the office immediately if he wanted to save his foolish spy’s life. He gently lifted Eirene from his chest and sat to remove Zera—she gave him a reproachful look as she slithered away.

“I said he’s indisposed,” Harry snarled, “and if you think I’m going to let a traitorous little shite like you anywhere near him, you’re deluded. Now, what in Merlin’s name do you want?”
With his pets safely out of the way, Severus dragged himself to his feet, ignoring the pain, and silently Summoned a bathrobe to cover his bare torso. Out of morbid curiosity, he examined his stomach as he tugged on the robe, but the lack of new scarring shocked him. *Sectumsempra* always left scars, even from a glancing blow. Why had it healed without a mark this time?

Another thud came from the office, and Severus shoved that worry aside to deal with later. He had a murder to prevent.

“I need to speak with Severus, Potter! Do you think I would dare show my face here if it were not a matter of life or death? No one but you knows I am spying. They would kill me on sight!”

“And I will kill you if you dare step near Severus, so you had best tell me what the fuck you want already!”

Severus staggered into the office and winced. Harry had Lucius pinned against the wall by his throat. The young man’s wings were fluttering with sheer anger and Lucius was turning whiter by the moment.

Gods. It was simply too early in the morning for such melodramatics.

Severus sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Lucius, if I were you, I would obey Harry before his instincts drive him to tear you to shreds.”

Harry gasped and turned a snarl on his mate. “I told you, Pomfrey said you were not to get out of bed for two days!”

Severus wanted to roll his eyes, but with Harry in such an agitated state, he thought better of it. “And Poppy does not know we are in possession of a nighthawk. I am well enough to stand, beloved, though not well enough to fend off the aurors if you acquire a murder charge, so perhaps you might let our admittedly foolish spy breathe?”

Harry winced and loosened his grip on the man’s throat, but did not release him. “You had best explain your presence here immediately, Malfoy. I am not in a patient mood.”

“It’s Draco,” Lucius wheezed, clawing at his throat. “Please!”

Harry released the man, and Lucius sank to the floor like a stone, gasping and holding his throat.

“A-about … time,” he gasped out.


“The Dark Lord—gone. Took Draco hostage. Been gone for hours. I can’t find him.”

“So? Ferret boy is probably loving all the one-on-one arse kis—”

Lucius roared and leapt to his feet, and this time it was Harry pinned by his throat. “You bloody fool. Do you not understand me? He has Draco hostage. Alone, after you foiled him yet again. Do you imagine the Dark Lord will be in a mood for arse-kissing now, Potter?”

Harry winced. “No, but what do you want me to do about it, Malfoy? I tried to kill him last night, but I can’t! I failed, okay? I’m just a boy and he … he’s too much for me.”

Malfoy growled and slammed Harry into the wall once more. “I don’t care! H—”

Severus shot a warning spell in front of Lucius’ nose. “Unhand my mate this instant, Lucius, or I will
make sure your ancestors feel your punishment.”

Lucius blinked, stunned, but dropped his hands. “I … he’s my son, Severus. My only heir. I can’t … please. Please do something.”

Severus rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Harry is correct, Lucius. We have tried. We do not know how to kill Riddle, and without knowing where Draco is, I am afraid by the time we find him, it will most likely be too late to save him even if we had a viable plan. Indeed, it may already be too late.”

“You promised me, Severus. Promised me ….”

Severus winced, stung. “And I have done all I can to keep it. Without a way to—”

Lucius sank to his knees and held up his hands in supplication. “Please. Please help me. I am begging you. Please do not simply let him die.”

“But, Malfoy,” Harry said in a sad voice, “we don’t know how—”

But Severus held up a hand to stop his mate’s speech. Lucius’ robes were in tatters, and the gesture of lifting his hands had revealed what Severus might have otherwise overlooked: his Dark Mark. The same mark Riddle had used to drain Severus and Rowle.

The mark that linked Lucius to Voldemort’s innermost being.

Harry called, “Severus?”

“I know how to defeat him.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “What? How?”

Severus grabbed Malfoy’s left wrist and held it up. “Our little spy is going to help us, aren’t you?”

Harry gasped. “Bloody hell. The mark! I can get to him through the mark!”

“Exactly. So, Malfoy, are you willing to risk your life to save Draco?”

Tears flooded Malfoy’s eyes. “Whatever it takes to save my son.”

Hatred left Harry’s eyes and grudging respect replaced it. “Then let’s find a place to put you while I kill the sadistic bastard. Sev, you go lie down and don’t get up again!”

Severus shook his head. “I am well enough with those potions you gave me, love. Besides, I have some unfinished business with dear Lucius.”

Lucius stood and brushed off his robes, not that it mattered with the state they were in. “Business, Severus?”

Severus reared back and punched him across the jaw, sending Lucius flying into the wall opposite. With a growl, Severus moved over the stunned man and hauled him back to his feet.

“If you ever lay a hand on my mate again, I will personally ensure that Draco is the last heir you have.”

Malfoy gulped and nodded, rubbing his jaw.

“Severus,” said an exasperated Harry, “was that really necessary? You’re injured.”
“Absolutely necessary.” Severus shoved Malfoy away with a sneer. “He threatened what is mine.”


Malfoy straightened, rubbing his bruised jaw and injured dignity. “Well, at least one of you is civilised.”

Harry’s grin was positively devious. “Oh, I wouldn’t go that far.” He smacked his palm against Lucius’ forehead, and the man fell into a dead faint.

Severus frowned and toed the unconscious man. “What did you do to him?”

“Sleeping spell. Go lie down, Severus. Now.”

“I cannot. Someone must contact the aurors and let them know that Draco is innocent and in danger.”

Harry’s jaw worked, but he sighed and waved him on after a moment. “Do you have a spare bedroom up here?”

Severus gave the castle his request. A door formed beside their bedroom, pushing aside some portraits and increasing the size of the room.

“We do now,” said Severus. “There should be two beds in there. I will not allow you to share a bed with another man, not even for this.”

“Sev, you can’t possibly think I want to be anywhere near this sad excuse for a human being, can you?”

Severus smiled. “No, but I am afraid you will find me a rather possessive mate, my love. I do not share. At all.”

“I like that, but I unfortunately have to at least be near the same bed to use his mark to kill Riddle.” Harry sighed and used his foot to flop Malfoy onto his back. “I’m off to dream land, then. Wish me luck.”

He pointed a finger at the unconscious man and flicked it skyward. Malfoy’s body levitated awkwardly in the air before Harry. The young man didn’t appear too concerned about whether Malfoy’s limbs got banged up on the way to the bedroom, either. Severus smirked. Served the pompous bastard right.

Still, in case they were wrong about the link connecting to Voldemort, Severus didn’t want Harry to actually kill the man.

Severus called, “Wait for me before you dream-walk, Harry. I would like to set up some safeguards.”

Harry nodded and disappeared into the spare room behind the unconscious Malfoy. Severus rushed to call his doe as soon as he had gone. They had little time—Draco had already been with Riddle for upwards of three hours. If the boy was still living by the time Harry finished with Riddle, he would not remain so for long, not without help.

Severus asked his Patronus to retrieve Lily and Remus before she sought the Order’s aurors and sent her on her way. With the authorities thus notified, he Summoned a spare field kit, spelled a proper robe onto his body, and staggered after Harry as fast as his injuries would allow.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Warnings: none. Harry finds a way to end the war and kill Voldemort at last, but the cost may be too high for him to pay. Severus is alternately amused and terrified by the proceedings. Lucius is most definitely NOT amused.

CHAPTER 32

Harry had pushed the beds closer together in the spare room, though he left a space between them. The idea of sharing a bed with Malfoy, even for a few moments, was too disturbing. Not to mention, Severus would set back his recovery while murdering Lucius. Harry situated the haggard-looking aristocrat on the bed nearest the wall and used Incarcerous to bind his right wrist to the headboard, leaving the left dangling into the space between the beds. He bound the man’s feet too, just to be damn sure Malfoy stayed put.

Harry was taking no chances with this twisted bastard.

Just as he finished lashing Malfoy and had started towards his own bed, the door chime sounded, indicating someone who knew the password had just stepped onto the stairs.

“I’ll get it, Sev. Stay out here until I can go in with you, okay? I need to protect you right now.”

Severus raised an eyebrow, but settled into the headmaster’s chair to wait. “Most likely, that is the rest of your family, love.”

“Our family, Sev.” Harry gripped his wand as he moved to stand by the door, waiting until the chiming stopped. “Come in.”

Remus and Lily stepped into the room, both with excited expressions.

Lily grabbed Harry’s hands. “You found the way?”

Harry nodded. “Sev did, but come on. There’s no time.”

She frowned. “No time? What’s going on?”

“Riddle has Draco captive and is likely torturing him to death as we speak. Lucius is … secured in the other room and his mark is the key to destroying Riddle.” Harry gave her a feral grin. “He never should have linked them to his core.”

Remus shuddered. “No, definitely not. Come on, Harry. If Draco’s being tortured, then we need to hurry. He’s already been there three hours.”

“I know.”

Grim and determined, Harry moved across the room to his mate and helped him to his feet. Severus gave a little groan as Harry guided him into the spare room and conjured a narrow bed for him against the wall perpendicular to the foot of the other two beds. He conjured pillows for Severus to
rest upon and raised the height of the bed so his injured mate could still see everything that was happening without having to strain himself.

"Thank you, love," Severus whispered in Harry’s ear. “This will do nicely.”

Harry gave him a sweet kiss and moved out of the way, allowing Severus to get his first view of Lucius since entering the room. Severus’ eyebrow shot sky-high.

“You tied him up?”

Harry stuck out his chin. “Well, you said you didn’t want him making moves on me. Now he won’t. He won’t be moving at all.”

Severus buried a laugh in his hand. “Merlin, Harry. I didn’t mean you needed to be quite that cautious.”

“Humph. He’s staying right where he is.”

Severus frowned. “Instinct?”

“No. I just don’t trust him as far as I could throw Hagrid. Without magic.”

Severus snorted. “Wise decision. It may be best to leave him restrained regardless. What I wish you to do, if our plan does not work, will hurt him rather than Riddle, and if he is not restrained, he may damage himself further before Lily is able to heal it.”

Harry nodded. “All right. What’s the plan then?”

“Lie down and take a capful of ….” Severus rummaged in his kit and brought out a mild sleeping potion. “That. In five minutes, or if Lucius is obviously hurt, we will wake you. Lily, do you mind?”

The woman smiled. “Not at all.”

“Good. Now, Harry, what I want you to do is try to reach Riddle through Lucius’ mark, and when you get there, hurt him. Try to choose a non-vital area, however, because if the link does not work, you will be hurting Lucius instead. Then, when you wake up, we will know if our plan is working if you managed to hurt your target and Lucius remains unaffected.”

Harry nodded. “Good, but what if five minutes isn’t enough time?”

“Then we shall try again but give you ten. I fear we can give you no more than that if we are to have any chance of saving Draco. You will have to move quickly.”

Remus moved to Lily’s side. “Do you think this will work, Harry?”

Harry listened for his instincts, but nothing happened. “I don’t know. Won’t hurt us to try anyway.”

Remus coughed into his hand, no doubt to hide a laugh. “No, I suppose not. Well, hurry then. Draco is … unpleasant, Harry, but even so, he doesn’t deserve to be tortured to death.”

“Right.”

Harry lay across from Malfoy and scowled at the thought of touching the bastard, but after a second to compose himself, he grabbed the man’s arm and affixed his palm to the mark with a sticking charm. With any luck, it wouldn’t need to last for long. Lily handed him the potion and Harry downed it without delay, already itching to get his hands off Malfoy as fast as humanly possible.
As soon as Harry opened his eyes in the dreamscape, he knew something had gone wrong. Riddle’s soul light should have been black, or perhaps some other strange colour, given all the horrible things Riddle had done. Yet, the light on the horizon was a pale grey. Not white, but not beyond saving, either.

Heart heavy, he tried to think of how he would test it, just in case he was wrong, without killing Malfoy. He considered cutting a slash into the ground, but he had no idea if that would be severe enough to show.

He looked up and frowned. Hadn’t he once thought the strange ceiling in here to be skin? A cutting hex in that would show, surely. Not Sectumsempra, though. Harry had no way of telling if what he decided to cut was important or not. He didn’t want to actually kill Malfoy, however much the bastard had some punishment coming.

With a scowl and a shudder, he shot into the air, slowing as he neared where he thought the ceiling would be. Sure enough, his palm met a spongy wall after another metre or two, and Harry angled his hand so if the ceiling bled, he wouldn’t be drenched.

“Partipellis!”

The ‘ceiling’ about two feet in front of his hand split, and what looked like black rain poured down into the sky.

“Gross.”

Harry hadn’t time to notice anything else before the landscape dissolved.

Harry came to and sat up. Remus was hovering over him and Lily over a moaning Lucius, though she looked less than pleased about the situation.

“It didn’t work, did it?”

Remus shook his head sadly. “I’m afraid not. You cut Lucius … somewhere he’s unlikely to forget anytime soon.”

Harry looked over to the other bed and suppressed a smirk. Lucius’ pants had turned crimson in an especially private area.

“Oops,” Harry said with a shrug.

“How very sincere,” said Severus in a wry tone. “Well, now that we have established that Lucius will have no further heirs, what do we do? We have no other link to Riddle.”

Having healed the injured man, Lily sighed and sat beside Harry. “It must be that the marks aren’t linked closely enough to Riddle’s soul. After all, why would he leave that end open? Severus, for example, is more than intelligent enough to learn how to turn it against him, if he had ever had the time.”

Severus slammed his hand against the bed. “Paranoid bastard. What do we do, Lils? Harry cannot kill him the traditional way—particularly if Riddle transforms into Pettigrew’s Animagus every time—and we have no other link to Riddle. All the horcruxes are gone, and all trace of Riddle that was in
Zera has been removed.” Severus dropped his head into his hand. “There is nothing left.”

“All trace of Riddle … a link …?”

Heart thundering, Harry lifted a hand to his scar and traced a finger down the lightning bolt shape.

Understanding hit him like a sledgehammer, dragging a gasp from his lips. Harry was the link. Riddle had linked himself to Harry seventeen years ago in Godric’s Hollow. A mutual link, too. Harry had entered Riddle’s mind through it as much as Riddle had entered Harry’s. Harry had felt Riddle’s anger, seen his plans, heard his thoughts. Yes, it was true that Reapers had visions about their target, but the pain in Harry’s scar every time he had one of these ‘visions’ suggested a deeper connection than even Reapers usually had to their targets.

A ringing, tingling sensation ran up his spine and settled between his ears. Harry gulped at the implication.

This was the answer. Riddle had protected himself against manipulation through the marks, but Riddle couldn’t protect a link he hadn’t meant to make in the first place.

“Sev,” Harry interrupted an argument between the older adults. “I know how to do it.”

Severus gave his mate a bemused look. “How, Harry?”

Harry considered hiding his plans from his mate for about two seconds before he realised he would never be able to. He wanted to protect Severus, wanted to avoid causing his family distress, but Severus could read minds and knew Harry’s especially well. He would know Harry was hiding something from him, and the minute Harry laid his hand against his forehead to establish the dream-walking link, his plans would become blatantly obvious anyway.

Harry sighed and crossed his arms over his chest in anticipation of needing to defend himself against the coming outcry. “My scar. It’s an unprotected link to Riddle. Our only unprotected link.”

As predicted, the others railed against the idea and tried to talk him out of it, but Harry overrode them all.

“Instinct has already confirmed to me that this is the right choice. I didn’t get anything with Malfoy. And Mum, you know I’m right.”

She winced. “But … but I don’t … what if we’re both wrong?”

Harry shrugged. “Then I get another scar and Draco will probably die. But if I’m right, Mum, then this could be the end of it all. The war, the pain, the darkness. Your instinct kicked in when I mentioned it, didn’t it?”

She sniffled and lowered her head. “It doesn’t mean it mightn’t be wrong.”

“Has it ever been wrong before?”

“I … there’s always a first time.”

“Mum, please. You know I have to do this. It’s the only way.”

Severus motioned Harry close. “Love, please. Risking your life might not be our only recourse. There could still be another horcrux. We can search—”

Harry cut him off, frustrated with his family’s coddling and refusal to accept the truth. “Sev, that’s a
long shot and you know it. That journal is the only record we have and we’ve read the entire thing, including the newer entries. And there’s nothing. Not one word as to another ritual. I don’t think Riddle has enough soul left to make a new horcrux without destroying himself entirely, but even if he has managed another, we have no idea what we might be looking for and no idea where to find it. It might take us decades to find it, and by then, Riddle will have another soul staff or something even worse, and we might not be able to stop him.”

Harry took Severus’ hands and implored him. “I understand your fear, love, and if it was you who had to do this, I’d probably be upset too. But you’re rational, Severus. Blindingly intelligent and a brilliant strategist to boot. You know we have next to no chance of finding another horcrux before Riddle takes over everything, and it may well be he’s found a way to ward them against Reapers anyway. He will eventually regardless, now that he knows we’re aware of them. Probably before we find a hint of another horcrux, even if one does exist.”

Severus flinched. “Yes, but he may have done so with your scar as well.”

Harry shook his head. “That’s your fear talking. You know perfectly well he didn’t mean to make a link to me. He hadn’t the opportunity to ward it because he was dead, after a fashion, as soon as his curse hit, and I’ve escaped him every other time he might have come close enough to try.” He scooted onto the bed beside his mate and kissed Severus’ forehead with exquisite gentleness. “It’s going to be okay, love. Trust me.”

“I do trust you, but it’s such a terrible risk.”

Harry stroked through his mate’s hair, hoping to comfort him by the familiar gesture. “Love, the risk to myself is negligible. At worst, I’ll get a new cut Mum can fix in half a moment and we’re back to searching for other horcruxes or training until I’m good enough to defeat him the old-fashioned way. But if this works out—we’ll have won the war. Sev, you could finally be free.”

Severus gave Harry a heartsick look. “But I am already free. Your love freed me, Harry.”

Harry met Severus’ eyes and let his guard down, let all his weariness show. Severus gasped at the change.

“I am not, my Sev. I’m still tied to that man. And every time he’s angry or happy or has a particularly nasty punishment in mind for me, I feel it. I see it. Through his eyes. Mum, do your visions work like that? Do you See as if you were Riddle? Do you feel his anger, his hatred, his pleasure as he cuts Muggles into bits?”

She cringed, sending tears down her cheeks. “Merlin, no. I … it’s as though I’m there, observing, but not in Riddle’s head. Your visions—they’re really like that?”

Harry nodded. “I feel everything he does, hear his thoughts. My link to him is much deeper than yours, as much as it disgusts me.”

“Harry,” said Remus, his face drawn, “I hear what you’re saying and I understand why you think it might work, but I still don’t think this is a good idea. It’s just so risky. Were you aiming for Malfoy’s genitals when you cut?”

Harry shook his head. “I have no idea where I’m aiming in there. All I know is that the soul-light is close to the heart, so I stay well away from there. There are no other indicators.”

“Well, then what if you go to test cut and you stab through your eye, Harry? Even magic cast immediately after such an injury might not be able to heal it.”
Harry winced. “That would definitely be unpleasant, but I can live without an eye, Remus. I might not survive if Riddle takes over the world, and if we don’t take our chances now, he just might. Besides that, there might be an indicator in my own body of where the scar is as it’s a foreign magic that hurts me. It’s a good chance my dream realm would mark it as an invasion. It did with Severus’ mark and even with Zera. In that case, I’ll just run well away from that area and test somewhere safer.”

Remus frowned. “But then you might hit your liver or your intestines or even your own genitalia, Harry, and I can’t imagine Severus would be thrilled to lose those.”

“No indeed,” said Severus with a wry look.

Harry frowned and looked to Lily. “Mum, when I cut Lucius, did I cut anything beyond his skin?”

Lily shook her head. “It cut through the entire layer of skin, but nothing underneath.”

“That’s what I thought. I aimed for the ceiling in my dream-realm, and it’s nothing but skin. There’s no danger to my internal organs so long as I test there.” Instinct shot up his spine and confirmed it, and he let out a sigh at seeing Lily shiver in reaction to her own. “See? There’s no risk to me beyond another scar.”

“Harry, you still might harm yourself more than we can heal easily,” Remus said with a frown. “Even if you can cut only skin, if you cut your nose or lips, for example, it would be difficult to close the wounds before you suffocated.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Bollocks, Dad. Mum is good enough with healing magic to prevent that. If it all goes to hell, so is Severus. And I just said I would stay well away from my scar anyway, which includes my face.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Look. I appreciate that you all love me and are worried about me, but really, there’s nothing to worry about. I’ll be fine.”

“You don’t know that, Harry. You can’t know that. We simply haven’t tested this enough to know for sure.”

“For once, I agree with the wolf,” Severus snapped, his fear making him irritable. “This is madness, Harry.”

“No, madness is doing nothing while he kills Draco—and me—slowly.” Harry cupped his mate’s face. “I know you’re scared, but it’s going to be all right. I’m sure of it this time.”

Tears slipped beyond Severus’ control and into his hair. “I can’t lose you.”

“And if I do this, you won’t. But if I don’t …” Harry closed his eyes and shuddered. “Every time I have one of these visions, I become him, Severus. His thoughts become my thoughts. His rage becomes my rage. Every time, I lose a little more of myself. One day, I might lose too much.” He opened his eyes, showing the pain and fear behind them. “And that day will be the day I die. I will lose my Reaper powers and die as a result. It might not be today or tomorrow, but unless I finish him, it’s coming.”

“I … Harry ….”

“I know.” Harry held Severus’ hands and kissed him. “I know you’re scared, but all I’m risking to myself here is a cut. I’ll come back from that. I might not come back from madness.”

Severus sighed and clasped Harry tight, and Harry knew the battle was won.
“Very well,” he murmured. “If you *must* do this, then I will support you, but only if we take precautions first.”

Harry nodded and bounded to his bed. “Another test?”

“Yes.”

“All right.” He lay down and held out his hand. “Give me another capful, Mum.”

Lily hesitated. “Baby, I don’t like this.”

“Mum, I know you’re scared, but you have to treat me like an adult now. I’ve made my decision and my mate agrees with me. Please do as I’ve asked or I’ll have Sev put me under a sleeping spell instead.”

With a sniffle, she passed the medicine to him, though her hands shook so much, she nearly spilled it. Remus held her, but he looked as torn as she did.

“Monitor his health, Lily,” said Severus, his expression full of worry, “and Remus, have a spell to wake him at the ready.”

“All right,” said Remus, his eyes fearful.

“I’ll be okay, guys. Promise.” Harry downed his capful, pressed his hand to his forehead, and waited for dreams to come.

This time was different. When Harry landed, he knew without a doubt he was in the right place. The ‘grass’ was still red, but so was the sky, and the light on the horizon glowed like lava.

“Merlin,” Harry breathed. “He’s destroyed himself.”

With a shake of his head, he went to test the connection, but hadn’t gotten ten feet into the air before that nails-on-a-chalkboard, screaming sound started in his head again. He stopped, and the screaming ceased, too.

“You’re saying I shouldn’t test it?”

The ringing shot up his spine again and confirmed.

“Okay … then I just sit here?”

The screaming started again.

“Then what? I can’t just … start the spell, can I?”

As the ringing tinges settled between his ears, he gave a weary sigh and hoped Severus would forgive him … eventually.

With a deep breath for courage, Harry shot towards Riddle’s soul-light like a rocket. He had five minutes to get close enough to the light, cast the soul-cleaning spell, kill Riddle, and get out. At least he had landed relatively close to the light. He wouldn’t have had time to complete the soul-gathering
spell otherwise.

Harry touched down and rubbed his hands together, gathering his energy in his palms. When he held them out towards the soul-light, they crackled with teal streaks of electricity.

He closed his eyes, let his emotions take control, and screamed, “Restitue Anima Integritas!”

As little bits of black and red flew past him and reattached to holes in the soul-light, Harry kept his energy steady and watched it fade from rocky crimson to a brighter red, waiting for the light to glow white once more.

Severus, absorbed as he was in staring at Harry’s still form, jumped at a sudden question from Remus.

“How many minutes has it been?”

Severus raised an eyebrow and pointed to his Tempus spell. “Barely thirty seconds.”

“Oh.” Remus rubbed the back of his neck with his hand that wasn’t gripped tightly around his wand. “S-sorry. I’m scared for him.”

“So are we all, Remy,” said Lily in a soft voice.

The chime sounded at the door, and all three conscious people jumped this time.

Lily said, “Merlin, who could that be?”

Severus shrugged. “It may be Shacklebolt with a report on Draco’s location.”

“I’ll get it.” Remus started to move away, but a sharp command from Severus to stay put stopped him cold.

“Enter!” Severus called as loudly as he could. Lily and Remus rubbed their ears a bit, and Severus reckoned his visitor would have heard despite the distance and the barrier of walls between them.

The office door creaked open and a feminine voice called, “Severus? Harry?”

“Miss—Hermione,” Severus called. “Is Ronald with you?”

The boy replied, “How many times must I remind you to call me Ron?” He paused. “Er, where are you?”

Lily whispered, “Can we trust them with Harry’s secrets? With mine?”

Severus nodded. “Inasmuch as we do not reveal your true creature status, yes.”

Lily frowned and flicked her wand at the door. The second it opened, she returned her wand to Harry and resumed monitoring his vitals.

Severus looked to his Tempus spell. One minute and ten seconds.

“Are you all right, si—Severus?” A shock of red hair poked through the door. “Bloody hell. What’s
Severus snorted. “All right, no. Will I survive, yes.” He waved the boy and his girlfriend inside. “Come, come. Harry might want you to be here anyway.”

Hermione frowned at her friend. “Severus, what’s going on? Did something happen to Harry?”

Ron added, “Yeah. And why is Lucius Malfoy tied up on your bed? And … bloody hell, what did you do to his bollocks?”

Remus snorted into his hand, Lily blushed bright red, Hermione smacked her forehead, and Severus choked.

“Dear Merlin,” Severus cried. “I have done nothing to his bollocks, nor do I intend to! Harry was trying to get to Riddle and cut Malfoy by accident. Gods. Tied up in my bed indeed.”

“Er, but this is part of your quarters isn’t it? So he’s … oh. Oh.” Ron went as red as his hair. “Merlin, Severus, that’s not what I meant.”

In spite of the tension, Severus could not help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. He regretted it immediately.

“Ah, oh. Please keep the humour to a minimum. I am not entirely healed.”

Hermione’s face clouded over with something like fear. “I’m glad you’re better at least. That’s what we came about—your injury—but before we get into that, is Harry okay?”

“Yes, yes. He is attempting to discern if he can get to Riddle through dream-walking and using his scar as a link.” Severus shuddered. “It is … a chilling thought.”

Ron nodded. “He’s always had those dreams, though. Nightmares of Riddle every night.”

Severus winced. “How long?”

“Always. Since first year.”

Severus’ eyebrows shot up. “And you never thought to tell anyone?”

Ron glared. “Told Dumbledore, didn’t I? How was I to know he was a fraud?”

Severus sighed. “You weren’t. Forgive me. I am ….”

“You’re afraid for Harry,” said Hermione.

“Terrified,” Severus whispered.

Hermione stepped close and laid her hand on his. “How can we help?”

Severus enjoyed the comfort of her touch even if it wasn’t the one he wanted most. She had been good to him from the beginning, and he would not forget it soon.

“Thank you.” He took her hand in his. “Stay with me, if you are amenable. And do not interfere with Lily and Remus or disturb Harry. We are waiting five minutes before we wake him, but Lily is also monitoring his health in case something goes awry. She needs to be able to concentrate.”

Hermione nodded. “We’ll try to stay out of the way then.” She shot Ron a look.
Ron winced and scurried away from Harry’s bed, where he had been hovering. “Sorry. Just wanted to see if he was breathing okay.”

“Quite all right,” said Remus. “It’s understandable that you would be afraid, but Harry’s all right, isn’t he, love?”

Lily nodded. “For the moment. His heart rate is up a bit, but that’s to be expected and he seems okay otherwise.”

“Good.” Ron moved to Lily’s side, but stayed behind her so as not to break her focus.

Severus checked the Tempus. Three minutes. Harry must have managed to break into Riddle’s body after all. He had cut Malfoy before a minute and a half had passed in the first trial.

“Severus,” said Hermione in a soft voice, “I wanted to talk to you about last night. Do you know what happened to you?”

Severus shook his head. “I had thought I was hit with Sectumsempra, but I did not lose enough blood and there is no scarring. Had it truly been such a curse, Harry would have had to call me back from the brink of death, and it is unlikely he would have had the strength while dying himself.”

“He might have done,” said Hermione with tears in her eyes. “He adores you. And so do we all. You saved our lives, Severus. That was … the fighting was terrible. And we lost a few of the Soldiers and some of the others too. But without your training—I don’t think any of us would have stood a chance.”

“It was considerably worse than I had expected.” He looked to the spell again. Just shy of four minutes.

Hermione took a deep breath. “Severus, I wanted to come to you because Ron and I, we saw your attacker. We were right by your side last night, rank or no. Yes, I know we disobeyed orders and you can tear us apart for it later if you like, but know we did it for Harry’s sake. For yours. We wanted to protect you and thought someone in our own ranks might carry a grudge despite everything you’ve done to help us.” She shut her eyes and squared her shoulders, and her hand tightened around Severus’. “And we were right.”

Ice settled in Severus’ gut. “Who?”

“Cho Chang. She cut you with a katana and bolted before anyone could react, but Ron saw it. He saw her attack you and her face as she ran away.”

“And she looked … smug about it, Severus,” said Ron with a grimace. “It wasn’t an accident.”

“Merlin,” said Remus with a gasp. “Why? Why would she do such a thing? Severus, you were never especially cruel to her, were you?”

Severus shook his head, bemused. “I was admittedly more tolerant of the Ravenclaws, more so than any other class but the Slytherins. Of the eagles, only Luna received more than a nominal dose of my ire, and that only because her dreaming often resulted in dangerous potions accidents that I could not afford to overlook. I believe Luna understands this. And Chang wasn’t here this year for the more severe punishments. I cannot understand why she would—”

A sudden scream from Harry stopped Severus’ heart cold.

“What the bloody hell?”
Lily frowned. “His vitals look al—”

Beside Harry, Malfoy screamed, too, and his mark started dripping off his arm.

Severus cried, “Remus! Something’s gone wrong. Wake him, now!”

Remus winced and cast Enervate at the young man, but he remained stubbornly still. He gave Lily a bemused look. She frowned and looked at her monitoring spell again.

“Remus! Oh, gods, Harry’s going into shock!”

Remus gasped and cast again, but Harry stayed unconscious. He frowned and tried a higher-powered spell, but it was still no good.

“What … I don’t understand what’s happening, Lils! He won’t wake—”

“Move!” She pushed Remus out of the way and started her own spells, and Severus’ heart stilled.

Why wasn’t Harry waking? Was he sick? Was he injured? Harry might have been wrong about the test only cutting skin, and if Lily had missed it in her scans … Gods help him, what if Harry was dying? Severus couldn’t lose him now. Harry was his entire world, and without him, Severus had nothing.

Tears blurred his vision, so he closed his eyes and clenched Hermione’s hand tight, praying to every deity he knew of that Harry would survive. That his one love wouldn’t die right before his eyes, and all because he had given in to Harry’s foolishness. Severus had approved this mad plan after all. If Harry died, it would be entirely Severus’ fault.

Remus and Lily combined their casts, but Harry’s eyes stayed closed.

A sudden feminine shriek cut Severus to the bone, much deeper than Chang’s sword had. ‘Harry!’

Lily sobbed, “Oh, Merlin, no! His heart’s stopped!”


It couldn’t be happening. Harry couldn’t be dying.

But he was. He was, and soon, Severus would be alone.

Gods, Severus had been such a fool to have believed such beauty would be his for long. His life was pain. Had always been pain. And now, having known love and joy and acceptance, he didn’t think he would survive going back to a life of mourning and guilt.

No. He refused to accept it. Despite his injuries, Severus cast the strongest healing spell he knew and put all the force of his love and emotion behind it. It left him dizzy and trembling, but damned if that would stop him. He couldn’t lose Harry. He couldn’t face the world without the man who had made his life beautiful again and saved Severus’ soul.

His soul?

With a gasp, Severus whispered, “X-Xenidan, help him find a way home, please!”

Hermione gave him a bemused look, broken up with tears, but Severus couldn’t be arsed to care. He couldn’t endure without his Harry, and if that meant the girl discovered the truth about her friend, then so be it. After all he had seen, Severus had no doubt she would remain loyal to Harry no matter
But first, they had to save Harry’s life, or Severus’ fears—and his life—would be moot.

“Hermione, go help them stabilise him. Hurry.”

The girl nodded and ran to Harry’s side, breaking out an arsenal of healing and protection spells he would never have imagined a seventh year could know. Merlin, that girl was something else.

He shook off his surprise and cast another healing spell, but it fizzled out before reaching Harry. He barely suppressed the urge to retch, loath to distract his family from Harry. His magic and endurance was at the end of its tether. All he had left was his prayers.

“Xenidan, please. Help him find a way home to me.”

Severus clung desperately to the hope that the soul-gates would find Harry and rescue him. They had to. The alternative was not to be borne.

“Harry, come home. I love you.”

Riddle’s soul light had gone a pale pink. Harry reckoned there was maybe one or two more pieces left—and dear Merlin, how many horcruxes had the man made? Pieces of soul had been flying past and reattaching for what seemed like hours, hundreds of them.

Well, Severus had said that murder tore one’s soul regardless of whether horcruxes were involved or not, so it was no surprise that Voldemort’s looked like Swiss cheese put through a grater. Really, the only surprising thing was that the man had any soul left at all.

A sharp pain pricked Harry’s forehead and made him stagger, blinded and gasping for breath. Fuck, that had hurt. As his vision came back into focus, the urge to vomit nearly overcame him. A massive chunk of black-stained red had just floated away from his own forehead and attached itself to one of the holes in Voldemort’s being. The implications left Harry reeling and sick.

Ritual or no, Harry had been a horcrux after all.

Somehow, that night Lily and Harry had destroyed Voldemort’s body, his near-disintegrated soul must have broken apart further, allowing a part of itself to attach to Harry’s. There was no other explanation for it. All the other chunks he had seen so far were small, not like this piece almost as big as a human being.

He clenched his jaw and swallowed bile, holding the spell steady. It was almost done. It had to be. Only a spider-web of black covered the whiteness now.

One more giant chunk of soul flew in from somewhere—so Riddle had made another horcrux—and the soul restoration was complete. Harry thanked all the gods he knew of that he had thought to ask Denoxia for it. Had he not, Riddle would have never died, as Harry wouldn’t have had a record of his last two horcruxes.

Well, they were all gone now, thank Merlin. Now Harry just needed to kill the bastard before he murdered Draco and tore his soul again.
Instinct began to scream for him to hurry, and Harry cast the first curse he thought of, a curse still fresh on his mind after his harrowing experiences of the night before.

“SECTUMSEMPRA!”

Harry cast the curse straight down the soul light, relieved that Denoxia had explained to him that attacking his soul-light wouldn’t actually harm Riddle’s soul, but simply release it into the ether. In other words, this would kill him faster than anything else Harry might have done besides using an Unforgiveable, and the Unforgivables had failed him too often for Harry to rely upon them. He simply hadn’t the hatred within his spirit to make them stick.

Besides, killing Riddle with Severus’ spell felt like poetic justice.

Harry watched as white mist bled from the soul-light, taking the form of a vaguely human shape, while the light itself turned quickly black. A second human shape broke free and scurried away in the shape of a rat. Pettigrew.

“Good riddance,” Harry muttered.

When all the light had bled out and disappeared, he let out a whoop of triumph. Riddle was dead! Harry had finally won!

Harry sank to his knees, tears of relief and guilt dripping down his face. The war was over, but at what cost? Besides all the friends he had lost, in essence, Harry had just killed the soul of a confused teenager, one that, if not for Dumbledore’s treachery, might never have needed to die. Harry might have despaired, if not for the knowledge that he had killed Riddle so another confused teenager—along with everyone else Harry knew and loved—might live.

As much as he hated killing, this was the way it had to be.

“I’m sorry, Tom. I hope you fare better on the other side.”

Harry stood and wiped his eyes. And when his tears cleared and he could see clearly, he realised his mistake.

With Tom Riddle’s soul gone and his body dead, there was nothing left to sustain his dream realm. The world was disintegrating before Harry’s eyes. The ground beneath him had begun changing into a black bog, and while Harry was weeping, he had begun to sink.

“Oh fuck!”

Heart thundering, breath stuttering in his chest, Harry zipped into the air, kicking his feet to free himself from the mire. The black … stuff dissolved from his feet the moment he took flight, but Harry wasn’t sure that was a good thing as everything else around him was dissolving too.

“Shite!”

Harry zipped away from the soul-light, heading towards the last areas of red and violet he could see, but as he approached them, they faded into black, too. With a shriek, he shot for the sky, but it was disintegrating, death and blackness eating what had been violet stars.

Gasping and shaking with fear, he zoomed into a patch of violet and made himself as small as possible while still maintaining his altitude.

Surely it had been five minutes already? Any second now, they would wake him up and he could
escape this nightmare. Only Harry didn’t wake up, and the nightmare worsened by the second. The dream realm had all gone black except for the tiny patch of sky where Harry was hiding, and it would fall to the void of death in mere seconds.

He wasn’t going to wake up. He was going to die along with Riddle.

“Oh gods, Denoxia, get me out of here!”

A shimmering white light appeared on Harry’s left, and with no better alternative, he shot into it headfirst.

Harry opened his eyes in the shimmery rainbow realm of In-Between. Panic arrested him for a moment. Had he died? Had his soul gone here to wait for the Osirins?

“Peace, little human. All is well.”

Harry looked around and wept with relief. Denoxia was standing just ahead of him, along with three other strange creatures Harry didn’t know. Besides the sparkly purple panther Harry had met before, one looked a bit like an anthropomorphised rabbit with rainbow eyes and cat paws, another vaguely resembled a werewolf but with a kind face and no trace of madness in her eyes, and the last looked mostly human save for his pointed ears, but he was wearing a tunic of shimmery white flowers and had white flower petals for hair.

“Denoxia!” Harry let out a cry of relief and rushed to hug the strange creature. “Oh gods, I was so scared. I thought I would die in there and leave Severus alone for millennia!”

Denoxia looked surprised, but after a moment, the soul-gate returned Harry’s embrace and gave his hair a cat-kiss.


Harry hugged the soul-gate tightly, then stepped back and wiped his eyes. “Will Tom be all right? It wasn’t really his fault, you know. I mean, it was, but he never would have been that way had Dumbledore not broken him.”

Denoxia gave him a warm smile. “He will, little one. We will guide him through his grief. And as for your fears for your mate, you should know that if something does happen to you, Severus’ lifespan will revert to that of a normal human.”

Harry’s heart stilled. “Oh. Am I dead then?”

“No, little one. You will have many bright years ahead with your loved ones, our gift to you for your bravery in stopping the greatest threat our realms have ever known.”

Harry grinned, almost giddy with relief. “Can’t wait. But, um, where did that portal come from and is there a way I can call it to escape from the dream realm if I need to kill another target that way in the future?”

“You might simply ask for it, Mister Potter,” said the rabbit-like being.

Harry blinked. “You sound like an androgynous form of Severus.”
The rabbit-being laughed. “Perhaps that is why I was called to speak to him. I am not androgynous, however. Simply a different gender than what you are used to.”

Harry gulped. “Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“It is quite all right, Harry Potter. Perhaps an explanation is in order so that we avoid such confusion in the future. You have already met Denoxia, yes?”

Harry nodded.

“Among soul-gates, there are five genders: the two you are familiar with, as well as two along the middle of the spectrum and a true androgyne. We are none of us androgynes. Denoxia is tyfem, which, in terms your species can understand, is much like a hermaphrodite with the ability to bear children. I am, in a sense, a hermaphrodite with the ability to father young. This is, of course, an oversimplification, but that is as best as I can explain it to a person who has only ever seen two genders.”

Harry grinned. “Thanks for that. I know Severus is bursting with curiosity. But how do I refer to you?”

Xenidan chuckled. “As I told your mate, you might simply use our names. I am Xenidan. The flower-elf beside Denoxia is Cerizio, and the star-wolf on my left is Unara.”

Harry gasped. “Merlin! You guys were the ones who came to talk to my family! You healed Remus’ lycanthropy and protected my little sister. Oh gods, thank you! For everything you’ve done for us, thank you.”

He hugged the soul-gates in turn, who all gave him indulgent smiles.

“You are brave, Harry Potter,” said Cerizio. “Few humans wish to hug us until they have spent years among our presence. They find our varied appearances and genders too off-putting, I suppose.”

Harry grinned. “I’m weird. And please, call me Harry. All of you. You’re my friends now, right?”

Xenidan smiled. “I believe we are. Now, would you like to return home to your family and other friends? They are all quite worried for you.”

Harry nodded. “I don’t want Severus to be afraid.”

Denoxia patted Harry on the shoulder. “Time does not pass here, little human, but it is best that you return to your own world soon. You came close to dying before you thought to call upon us. Your family is afraid.”

Harry frowned. “How do you know?”

Xenidan gave him a sad smile. “Your mate has been begging me for assistance, but until you called out to Denoxia, we did not know where to find you.”

Harry cringed. “Oh gods, poor Severus. I’d best get home to him before he worries himself to death.”
“Yes, especially since it seems he was injured. Take care of him, Harry. Even with my healing, he is still fragile inside.”

“Healing?”

Xenidan smiled. “Perhaps it is best that you ask him when you return.”

Harry nodded and gave the rabbit-being one more hug. “I will. Thank you, all of you. You saved our lives.”

Denoxia hugged Harry. “It is a small repayment, little one, for all your sacrifices. Know you have done the right thing, and Tom will be safe now. Because of your soul spell, he will be able to recover one day from all the damage done to him, whether by his own hand or by others’.”

Harry scowled. “And Dumbledore?”

“We are not in the business of punishing souls, no matter how they deserve it.” Cerizio gave him a sad smile. “However, the soul tends to punish itself when the blinders of ego and motivation are removed. Without them, the cost of one’s sins become all too clear. He is quite unhappy, but it brings us no joy to say so.”

Harry nodded. “That’s … merciful. And how it should be, I think.”

“I am glad you understand, little human,” said Unara. “You are wise for your years.”

“Comes with the job, I think.”

The soul-gates laughed.

“It has been a pleasure, Harry,” said Denoxia. “Now, let us bring you home to your mate and let you enjoy the world you have created, a world without Voldemort.”

Harry let slip a sigh. “That sounds really, really great.”

“Until we meet again, little one, fare well.” Denoxia placed a cat-kiss upon Harry’s forehead, and he closed his eyes, falling into the open arms of slumber once more.

“I think he’s coming to!” A feminine voice half-screamed in his ear, and Harry winced from the volume. But Merlin, that screech sounded familiar.

“Hermione?”

The girl let out a squeal and hugged Harry so tight he thought she might have cracked a rib. His mother quickly grabbed them both up and wept into Harry’s hair, and in half a moment, Harry found himself buried under a pile of his loved ones.

“Air, guys,” he wheezed. “Air.”

With chuckles wet with tears, they moved back, but stayed close enough to touch him, their hands trembling from emotion.
If Harry had ever doubted his family loved him, this would have proved it.

“Hey, it’s all right, everyone. I’m really okay.”

“Oh gods, Harry,” Hermione sobbed into her hands, “we thought you had died.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry murmured, staring at his knees. “I didn’t mean to scare anyone.”


“Er … well ….”

Hermione took over the interrogation. “Why did you go into shock? We thought you were just sleeping, and then suddenly, your heart had stopped!”


“Yeah,” said Ron, his eyes suspiciously wet and pink around the edges. “You started screaming, and then Malfoy started screaming, and it was utter bedlam until that white light appeared and you woke up.”

Harry frowned. “Malfoy screamed?”

“Yeah, mate. Blue murder. Thought he was dying or something, but then he just stopped screaming and went back to sleep. We were more concerned with you, though, to be honest.”

Harry frowned and looked over to the sleeping man—the man whose marked arm was still hanging over the edge of the bed, only his mark had bled off in black and red streaks. Blood, no doubt.

“Merlin.”

He stared at Malfoy’s bleeding mark, the implications pinging around in his skull. He supposed it was possible that all the Death Eaters had screamed and lost their marks when Riddle died, but Harry had a sneaking suspicion that it had just been Malfoy.

After all, it would have been the height of irony to turn the one man who had discovered Riddle’s secrets into a horcrux. Riddle would have found it amusing, the twisted little shite.

Harry shuddered, gladder than ever that he had asked for that soul reunification spell. They never would have defeated the monster otherwise.

Softly, Severus called, “Harry ….”

At the pain in his mate’s voice, Harry darted across the room and climbed into the bed beside Severus. “Oh, love! I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m here, sweetheart. I’m here. It’s all right now.”

Severus slipped a shaking hand to Harry’s face and just looked at him, tears streaming unchecked down his cheeks. Harry hated to see Severus so distressed, hated even more that he had caused it. His creature whined at the sight of his mate’s suffering, and Harry’s voice once again took on that wild quality.

“Oh, Severus. I am here, beloved. I am with you.” Harry wrapped Severus in his wings and rocked him close, being gentle with his recovering abdomen. “Ssh. Do not cry, love.”

“I was so afraid I had lost you,” Severus whispered into Harry’s shoulder. “So afraid.”
Severus buried a cry of mingled pain and relief in Harry’s neck and clutched him so tight, Harry could hardly breathe. He didn’t care. Feeling Severus so close felt good.

“I’m so sorry, Severus. I didn’t mean to terrify you like this.” Nerves kicked in, turning his belly into a churning mess, and Harry’s words of comfort turned to babble. “It’s just, while I was in Riddle’s body, my instincts went mad when I tried to test the link. So … um, please don’t be angry with me. I had no choice really.”

Severus pulled back and held Harry at arms’ length, his dark eyes narrowed and no less intimidating for the fact that tears lined them. “What did you do, Potter?”

Harry winced. “Um … I kind of cast a spell to bring Riddle’s soul all together again—and he had two more horcruxes, Severus. I was one of them.”

Severus went deathly pale. “No. Please, no.”

All around, Harry’s family broke into cries of horror and fear.

“Oi!” Harry waved to bring them all out of their shock. “Wait, wait. It’s not so grim as all that! I said I was one of them—I’m not any longer. The soul spell I used removed it without hurting me. Well, beyond one hell of a headache.”

Severus traced a shaking finger over Harry’s scar. “It’s gone. Your scar is gone.”

Harry grinned. “Is it? Great. I hated that thing.” He brought Severus into a gentle kiss. “It’s over now, my love.”

Severus’ breath caught. “Over?”

“He’s dead. That’s what I was saying. I killed him while I was in there. With your spell, no less. Seemed fitting.”

Hermione cried, “Oh, Harry! He’s really dead? The war’s over?”

He gave her a sad smile. “Yeah.”

Severus took Harry’s chin in his hand and turned the young man’s face around. Harry gasped as Severus pressed him into the mattress and kissed him hard, passion, relief, love, and wonder all apparent in his touch. Harry held Severus’ face, felt the man’s tears running over both of them, and kissed back with as much emotion.

A cleared throat brought them out of the moment.

“Boys,” said Lily with a chuckle, “wait until you’re alone to celebrate in that manner, hmm? And we should probably wait for some kind of confirmation anyway.”

Severus wiped his eyes and moved off of his mate. “The aurors who survived the battle last night more or less intact are searching for Draco as we speak. As soon as they find him, I imagine we will have our answers.”

“I don’t understand,” said Ron with a frown. “How is You-Know-Who dead when Harry didn’t leave the room?”

“His dream-walking, naturally,” said Hermione in an exasperated voice. “Honestly, Ron. Where
have you been the past few weeks?”

Ron gave a wry laugh and rubbed the back of his neck. “Er … trying to help everyone get ready to
fight?”

“Humph.”

“Actually,” said Severus in a dark voice that let Harry know he was in trouble, “an explanation
sounds like a rather good idea right now.”

Harry gulped. “O-okay?”

Lily sniffled and rubbed at her eyes. “Harry, it’s just … we were terrified when you were in shock
and dying and no one knew why.” She buried her face into Remus’ shoulder and shook with the
release of her fear.

Remus held his mate and gave Harry a grim look. “Never scare us like that again, Harry. We all love
you too much.”

“Never indeed,” said an equally shaken Severus.

Harry burrowed himself further into his mate’s embrace. “I’m sorry. I was only trying to do the right
thing, love. I didn’t mean to scare you. Any of you.”

Severus sighed and kissed Harry’s forehead. “Just tell us what happened. We do need to know. But
someone make sure Malfoy stays unconscious. He does not need to hear the details.”

“Let’s go into the private sitting room and put Malfoy under a heavy sleeping spell then,” said Lily
with a shake of her head. “He’d only panic if he were awake anyway.” She cast at the man and
moved away from the bed. “Sev, can you make it?”

Harry nodded. “I’ll levitate him if I need to.”

Severus gave Harry a sharp look, but Harry stuck out his chin and glared right back. To hell with
Severus’ pride. He wasn’t about to allow the man to be hurt because of some misplaced sense of
dignity.

“I can manage it,” Severus said with a scowl. “Without levitation.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Harry retorted.

With a shake of his head, Severus pushed himself up on the pillows and, between Harry and Ron’s
help, he staggered into the sitting room on his own power. They laid the man on the long sofa, his
head in Harry’s lap, and once he was comfortable and the others had called for tea and a snack,
Harry set into his tale.

“All right. So when I went into the dream realm, I knew right away that I’d found the right place.
Usually soul-lights are white or grey if the person is sick or has committed murder. Riddle’s soul-
light was red and black, like lava ….”
believe what his mate had accomplished in such a short time, but more so, he could not believe his mate had been so bloody foolish. To just kill Riddle without a test, based on some kind of creature-hunch? No. Severus could not let such a grievous error go.

He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at his mate. “So … you simply rushed his light without any thought, any preparation, Harry? You could have died! You almost did! I am so … so ….” He huffed and turned away from his mate, sitting and staring at the window.

Terrified. He was absolutely terrified and furious at once, more so than he had ever been in his life. How could Harry have taken such a grave risk? Granted, Harry hadn’t realised that the dream realm would disintegrate and take him into death with its host—and Severus hadn’t either—but that was why they had decided to test the process first. And Harry had just decided it wasn’t necessary without any real idea of what he was doing.

What if they hadn’t thought to monitor his health? What if Lily hadn’t noticed Harry was going into shock? What if Harry’s call to the soul-gates hadn’t reached them in time? There were so many things that could have gone horribly wrong and Severus couldn’t deal with any of them. Harry’s rash actions could have cost him his life, and Severus couldn’t abide by that.

He glared, trying to impress the severity of his disappointment upon his mate without truly hurting him. “How could you do that to us, Harry? Do you not understand how frightened we were?”

“So,” Harry said in a stricken tone, “I … it’s not like that. I said it was instinct.”

“So you risked your life because you had a gut feeling it would work out?”

“But … no! My creature instincts, Sev. It’s not the same thing. Please. Please don’t hate me.”

Severus turned his back and buried his face in a shaking hand. “I do not hate you, Harry. I simply cannot believe you would be so foolish. I have trained you for weeks, years if you include my work during your schooling, little help as it was. In all that time, have you learned nothing about preparation, about the consequences of thinking like a bloody Gryffindor all the time?”

Ron snapped, “Oi!”

“It is as I have always said,” Severus continued over the redhead’s objections. “You do not think, Potter! You rush in and pay no attention to the details, and one day, you will get yourself and your loved ones killed by this foolishness!”

Severus knew he was being a bit unfair, but Merlin! Watching Harry lying there cold and still, dying in front of his eyes while everyone was helpless to save him—it had been one of the most harrowing experiences of his life, and Severus had many harrowing experiences to draw upon for comparison. Severus couldn’t live without his mate, and the idea that Harry might die one day while pursuing these instincts was more than he could bear.

“Severus, please.” Lily’s gentle voice soothed his fury somewhat. “I know you’re afraid, but look at your mate. You’re being too hard on him. You know perfectly well our instinct isn’t simply a gut feeling or rashness. Or have you forgotten we’re also Seers?”

With a wince, Severus turned around and swallowed a wave of remorse at the sight of his love. Severus had only meant to dissuade Harry from ever taking such a dangerous risk again, but the days where Harry could ignore the cut of Severus’ razor-blade tongue had long since passed. Harry had curled into a ball, his face buried in his knees, and his shoulders were shaking with the effort of containing tears.
Damn. Severus had come down too hard on the young man.

“Harry …” He softened his tone and slipped in beside his mate, but Harry scooted away and squeezed into a tighter ball. “Love, please. I am sorry. I should not have been so sharp. It is only that I am terrified you will rush into a future … conquest and, this time, you will not find luck on your side.”

Conscious of the others’ observance, Severus tugged Harry into his arms and whispered against his ear. “Please. I love you, my Harry. I am only afraid. You are the whole of my life, the one truly beautiful thing I have ever had for my own, and I do not want to lose you.” He murmured into Harry’s hair, “I only want you to be careful.”

Harry lifted his head, and the pain in his eyes made Severus regret his caustic words all the more.

“But I am careful, Severus. My instinct—it isn’t like, ‘oh, I think I should do this,’ and then I do it and get lucky. It’s more like, ‘if I don’t do this, everyone I love is going to die. The world is going to end and it’ll be all my fault.’ I don’t have the ability to ignore that, and I’m not going to try. It’s saved me countless times—and you as well, I might add.”

Severus frowned, remembering the night they had barely avoided Greyback’s clutches, and that only because Harry hadn’t been able to put the journal down. And later, hadn’t both Lily and Harry said something about their instinct driving them to stop Severus from killing himself due to Dumbledore’s manipulations? Harry had probably accepted Ferin’s aid based on instinct, too. And even earlier in their relationship, Harry had been continually responding to pulls he didn’t understand at the time—pulls that had saved Severus’ life on more than one occasion, or at least his skin.

So it wasn’t foolhardiness or acting on a simple hunch. Harry was responding to an innate ability to See and understand the currents of fate. Such a rare skill was invaluable—indeed, it had saved Harry’s life and won them the war—and Severus had been treating it like a wilful disregard of forethought and safety.

He sighed and caught Harry into his lap. “Forgive me, love. I did not understand.”

Harry sniffled and looked into Severus’ eyes. “Are you going to do this every time I follow my instincts, Sev? Because I don’t think I can—or should—prevent it, and it’s not fair to have to endure this every time I do what I’m made to.”

Severus closed his eyes and laid his head atop Harry’s. “No. It may … take time for me to become accustomed to such seemingly spontaneous behaviour when my life has always been balanced on a sword’s edge of calculated risk, but I will not hurt you for following your instincts again.”

Harry relaxed in his embrace and gave Severus a doe-eyed look. “Oh. I didn’t consider it from that point of view. No wonder it’s so terrifying for you to just … believe in your gut. It would have gotten you killed before.”

“And not just me,” Severus said with a nod. “You, Minerva, your friends—there is no telling how many would have died had I not been exceedingly cautious in every move I made.”

Harry frowned. “Your way is so much harder, Sev. Me? I just know when something’s right, but you—you had to plan it all out, consider every angle and possibility and pray like mad that whatever choices you made didn’t destroy everything you’d worked so hard for. You’re really amazing, you know that?”

Severus’ face warmed. “Thank you.” He nuzzled Harry’s cheek. “I, however, believe that you are
just as wonderful for following those instincts of yours without a shred of proof beyond your belief that there is still hope in the world, despite all the darkness you have seen.”

A hushed, “Wow,” made both men jump.

Severus looked around to find Ron looking sheepish and blushing to the roots of his hair.

“Er, sorry about that. It’s just, I never have seen you be so loving with him, Severus. And it’s … well, I was a dolt before. Let’s just leave it at that.”

“A massive dolt,” Harry agreed, but he was smiling.

“Huge,” said Hermione.

“The biggest,” said Remus with a chuckle.

“Quite,” said Severus with a snort.

“No need to rub it in,” Ron huffed. “I just said I was.”

Harry laughed. “It’s okay, Ron. Maybe it made our friendship stronger in the end because we overcame it. You know what I mean?”

Ron grinned. “Yeah, I think I do. Thanks, mate. For not hating me.”

“Couldn’t if I tried.” Harry kissed Severus’ cheek. “So, are we okay then, love?”

Severus smirked. “Mostly. First, I must ask you something. Do you have faith in me as an instructor?”

Harry blinked. “Er … yeah? You were brilliant with the Soldiers. Hence the new name.”

“Um … I’m not exactly a potions student anymore, but you teach me a lot anyway. What’s this about, Sev?”

“Oh, it’s about the fact that I’m assigning you detention for the next month for scaring the life out of us all.” He stopped Harry’s protest with a kiss. “Ah-ah-ah, you said you trusted my ability as an instructor, Harry.”

Harry gaped. “But I’m your mate.”

Severus smirked. “And technically, you are also my student, which you just confirmed.”

Harry opened and shut his mouth several times. “You sneaky Slytherin git.”

Severus laughed. “Yes, indeed.”

“You’re not going to make me wash cauldrons again, are you? Or will you at least let me use magic?”

Severus smirked. “Oh, I think I can come up with more useful activities for you. We do have a castle to repair, after all. Perhaps if we are quick about it, we may be able to reopen the school in time to continue the year, although I am not sure how helpful it will be considering the farce that was last term.”
Harry grimaced. “Lovely. Well, might I make a little detour before we start, then? Only there’s one thing I need to do before the news of Riddle’s death goes public, and it won’t be long once the aurors find Ferret-boy.”

Severus searched his gaze and understood. “Go ahead. But do try not to burn down the entire third floor corridor, hmm?”

Harry grinned. “No promises.” He stood and moved to the door. “Thanks, Severus. I’ll be back soon, yeah?”

“Harry.” Lily pulled him aside and whispered in his ear, no doubt to tell him how to lock and unlock the door to Dumbledore’s ‘chamber.’

Harry grinned. “Thanks, Mum. Good to know. Take care of Sev for me until I come back?”

Lily nodded. “Of course. Remus and I will watch over him.”

“Leave the mess, Harry,” said Severus with a frown. “Should someone else discover how to break into that room—and it is not impossible—then the appearance of disuse may discourage them from exploring further.”

Harry nodded. “Good thinking. I’m off then. Be back soon.”

The others wished Harry good luck, and Severus watched as the young man left, relieved to know he would be coming home soon, a free man at last.

Home. Severus looked around the quarters and smiled. Yes. Perhaps they could build their first home here, at least until Harry graduated and they could move on. Hogwarts still needed her headmaster, after all.

As his family talked quietly among themselves, each word tinted with the joy and relief that the war was finally over, Severus thought that maybe his life wasn’t so grim after all.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Warning: none. Harry saves lives, gets his story straight, and tells the castle the good news of Voldemort's defeat.

CHAPTER 33

Harry closed the door behind him silently and moved further into Fluffy’s corridor. A few yards in, the former headmaster’s portrait came into view, and Harry took the opportunity to observe the man unobserved.

The soul-gates were right that remorse was its own punishment, and it looked to be taking its toll on the former headmaster. The old man sat with his head in his hand, beard unkempt and clothes atypically sombre. He looked tired and miserable, and Harry reckoned Dumbledore’s time within this abandoned chamber would feel like an eternity, however long his internment actually lasted. Severus had mentioned something about leaving him there for eleven years, but he would probably relent before then. Severus wasn’t cruel, after all. He had never been cruel—his less than stellar behaviour had resulted from spying and Dumbledore’s manipulations driving him to despair.

The thought of Severus’ pain caused a spark of fury to build in Harry’s belly. On second thought, maybe Dumbledore deserved more than eleven years. Maybe he deserved to feel every bit of the pain he had put Severus through—but no. Harry shook himself out of his anger and took a deep breath. He hadn’t come for revenge.

Ending Riddle had killed all desire for vengeance within Harry and left an introspective sense of justice in its place. Voldemort had not been innocent, but neither had he been entirely at fault for his behaviour. And perhaps Dumbledore wasn’t a complete monster, either. Merlin knew if Severus died—and if Harry had the ability to survive his mate—letting him go would be extremely difficult. Maybe it had broken something vital inside of Dumbledore to kill Grindelwald, maybe it had broken the man’s mind. If it had been Severus ….

Harry shuddered and drew his cloak around himself. He could never harm Severus, not even for the ‘Greater Good.’

Then again, Dumbledore had almost driven Harry to do so with his twisted compulsions, hadn’t he? Shite. His mind was going in circles, and none of them were leading anywhere.

With a sigh, he pushed his painful thoughts to the back of his mind. Musing on the situation wouldn’t help him. What was done was done. He was here for a purpose anyway, and he would carry it out with some measure of grace. He stepped into the light and squared his shoulders. He had come to weigh the last of Dumbledore’s sins, true, but he would do so as the man he had become, not the boy he once was.

“You were wrong, you know.”

Well, perhaps as a Slytherin sort of man, but a man nonetheless.
Dumbledore looked up and sighed. “Yes, I do know. I have told you I can no longer smell the horcrux on Severus. What more do you want from me?”

Harry’s gaze hardened. “Did you smell one in me, old man?”

The bearded man froze. “No.” His voice was breathy and broken. “I … no.”

“Yes. My scar was a horcrux.”

If Harry had ever imagined Dumbledore had truly cared about him, comparing the man’s reaction to that of his family proved him wrong. They had been too overtaken with terror for Harry to catch his wording, even the usually astute Severus, but Dumbledore didn’t miss the tense. The man was still as single-minded as always. War first, people second, assuming people made his list of priorities at all.

“Was?”

Harry gave him a terse nod, willing a shard of hurt away. This man had already committed far worse crimes against him, after all. Why should one more betrayal make a difference?

Dumbledore frowned and scratched at his beard. “But how did you destroy it without the use of your dream-walking skills? I did not think you could apply them to yourself.”

Harry shrugged. “That’s one secret you’ll have to live without. You’re not privy to that kind of trust any longer.”

Harry hadn’t withheld the information to be spiteful—he was all too familiar with Dumbledore’s bad habit of using anything and everything to further his own goals—but even so, it was rather satisfying to know he held all the cards for once. Dumbledore had left Harry guessing for years, dangling little carrots of information in front of Harry’s nose to guide him where he wished, but never giving the Avenger enough to understand the full truth.

Let the old man stew knowing people were keeping secrets from him for a change.

Dumbledore made a face like he had just eaten a particularly sour lemon drop. “Why bother to tell me about it at all, then?”

Harry picked at a fingernail, trying to look unconcerned. “I had assumed you would want to know the outcome of the war, but if you’re not interested, there are other people with whom I could occupy my time.” He looked up and gave a wry laugh. “I’m starting to talk like Severus. But it is true.” A devious smirk crossed his face. “In fact, I probably should go visit Ferin. He’ll want to share my news with his clan, after all.”

“Ferin!” Dumbledore had gone bone-white. “Not Ferin Grey?”

Harry grinned. “That would be the one.”

Dumbledore’s eyes went as wide as saucers. “What are you doing trusting vampires, Harry? You will cost us everything! They are aligned with Riddle!”

Harry gave the man a sad look. “Did you tell the Order that based solely on prejudice, Dumbledore? Because it isn’t true. Riddle forced the Grey clan to fight us tonight after taking their children hostage and destroying their home.”

“Lies! They said that to make you believe them, then when you are least expecting it ….”
Harry snorted. “Ferin can’t hurt me.”

“He’s a master vampire, Harry! Of course he could.”

“You don’t get it, Dumbledore. I’m not saying he’s not strong enough—we all know he is. I’m saying he is physically incapable of hurting me or any of my friends and family.”

Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed. “I do not understand.”

“So I’d noticed.” Harry smirked. “You see, I met Ferin on the battlefield while tracking Riddle last night, but once he knew who I am and what I was about, he swore allegiance to me on the spot. After vowing to protect my kith and kin, he saved Severus’ life again and again last night, and the two of them fought side by side for almost the entire battle. I dare say they won it for us singlehandedly.”

“The … vampires did?”

“Severus and Ferin,” said Harry with a frown. “They won us the battle last night.” His expression brightened. “And I won us the war. And I didn’t have to die or leave the boy you ruined in pieces to do it, either. No, I fixed his soul back to what it was before you destroyed it. So now he’ll be safe on the other side, though he’ll have to work through a lot of grief. He’ll be all right eventually though, because he’ll one day come to terms with the fact that if you hadn’t twisted his mind in childhood, he would never have become the monster he was as an adult.”

Harry pinned Dumbledore with a piercing stare. “You, on the other hand, will have all of his crimes to reckon for plus all of your own. And that, Dumbledore, is a very long list.”

Dumbledore cringed and sagged in his canvas. “Y-yes. I know.”

With a shake of his head, Harry turned on his heel and moved to the door. “Goodbye, Dumbledore. I’m off to speak to the clan.”

“Harry! Wait, wait just a moment. You cannot just go speak to vampires. They will hurt you!”

Harry turned to the portrait and pointedly rubbed where his scar used to be, revelling in the lack of raised skin or rough patches. “I really don’t think you have the right to advise me on that. Nor on anything else for that matter. You forfeited your right to my confidence long ago.” He dropped his hand and gave the portrait one last, sad smile. “I don’t think we’ll meet again, Dumbledore. May your life as a portrait teach you the humility that you never learned as a man. Goodbye.”

He ignored Dumbledore’s sputtering and left, sealing the door behind him. When he turned around, Ron and Hermione were waiting for him, curious expressions on their faces.

Ron tipped his head towards the door. “What did you say to him, mate?”

Harry was torn between tears and mirth. He decided on the latter and gave a small, joyless laugh. “I just informed him that the war was over. And that I planned to inform the sire of the Grey clan as well as soon as I was finished with him. He had the strangest urge to protect me from Ferin, but I reminded him of his place.” He brushed off his robes as if he had walked through something foul and gave his friends a smile. “So, are you coming with?”

Ron went ashen. “What, to talk to the v-v-vampires? Are you mad?”

Harry shrugged. “If I was, no one would blame me. But no, I’m not mad. Ferin swore to protect Severus and my entire ’clan’—which includes you, by the way—and his clan is bound to the same
promise.”

Ron gaped like a fish for a moment, then the colour returned to his cheeks and he began looking somewhat normal again. “How in the bloody hell did you manage to rope the sire of the Grey clan into a kinship bond?”

Harry blinked. “Kinship bond?”

“Well, yeah. That’s what it means when a vampire clan vows to protect a human clan. By their laws, we become kin and therefore, they guard us as ferociously as their own family.”

Harry grinned. “Merlin! I had no idea.”

“Of course you didn’t,” said Hermione with a sigh. “You just rushed in on instinct, right?”

Harry bristled. “Oi! We already had this conversation upstairs, ‘Mione. I don’t need another lecture for saving all of your arses!”

Ron coughed. “Pretty sure it was Severus and Sire Grey doing most of the saving, mate.”


“Easy, Harry. Easy. You remember we’re on your side, right?”

Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Sorry. I wish people would just trust me and it drives me mad when they don’t.”

Hermione gave him an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Harry. Just, try to remember that we don’t feel the instincts that you do, so sometimes your behaviour looks a lot like madness to us lowly humans.”

Harry rubbed his hair up and blushed. “Right. Sorry, ‘Mione. None of this being lowly humans shite again, though. You know better than that.”

“Hmm. It’s okay. But how did you convince Sire Grey to enter into a kinship bond with you?”

Harry frowned. “To be honest, I’m not entirely sure. Ferin said something about kohl-eyes and being a sky-warrior when I revealed myself to him. I dunno. Maybe it’s some obscure part of vampiric culture we don’t understand. But I think he would have sworn regardless once he realised we were responsible for destroying that bloody staff. They were all terrified of it.”

Hermione shuddered. “Can’t say I blame them. Well, if you really want to go, I’ll come with you, Harry. Ferin is rather intimidating, but he saved Severus’ life—and ours—countless times last night.”

Ron looked between them like they had both lost their minds, then gave in with a sigh. “Severus is going to be furious about this, just so you know. It’s an unnecessary risk. And I really think you should wait until Severus can come with you anyway. Not just so he’ll be able to protect you, but because it will cost him status with the vampires if you leave your mate behind in any meeting of importance.”

Harry frowned. “Oh. Then I’ll help him in through his old office floo. He told me how to get in, just in case I needed something out of there. I’d have just taken him with me to start with—”

“But he’s still injured and not well enough to stand or even sit for a long time, Harry,” said Hermione with a shake of her head. “No, I think it’s best that you wait until Severus, Lily, and Remus are all able to attend—well, and Ron and myself of course. Luna too, I think, and she’s still in the infirmary.
Besides, you should wait for confirmation from the aurors before we tell the vampires anything, just in case we’re wrong and they think we were lying.”

“Ferin won’t hurt us, Hermione, and neither will his clan. They can’t.”

Ron gave him a wry smile. “No, ‘Mione’s thinking in terms of propriety, mate, and she has the right of it. If you’re going to discuss a pact with the sire of a vampire clan, especially when there’s a kinship bond present, then it’s best to have your close family all present and your ducks in a row. It shows respect.”

Harry rubbed his chin. “Then I guess we’d better wait. But if they want everyone who’s close to us, we’ll need to call in McGonagall too. Severus is really close to her.”

Ron frowned. “To McGonagall? Merlin. Where was that little titbit when the sneaky git caught us out after curfew?”

Harry snorted. “Hidden, like everything else about him.” He gave his friend a nervous look. “You don’t still think of him as a git, do you?”

“After last night?” Ron shook his head. “Not a chance, mate. Hermione and I would both be long dead without him. He was bloody amazing in battle, Harry. I wish you could have seen him. You’d have been blown away.”

Harry smiled, his heart warm and pride welling. “Yeah. Maybe you can pensieve your memories for me. I’d love to see him in action.”

“Sure thing, you love-struck prat.”

Harry laughed. “Absolutely. But come on. We’ll go rest for a while and meet Ferin and the others later.”

“If you say so,” said a pale Ron. “Merlin, the things I do for you, Harry. Follow the spiders, teach giants to talk, make friends with vampires ….”

Harry was still chuckling when they reached the moving staircases, but as his eyes settled on an empty portrait, his mirth faded. “Hey, guys, do you know who … didn’t make it?”

Hermione cringed. “Officially, no. There hasn’t been time to do a full body count. Unofficially, I do know … some names.”

Harry swallowed hard and closed his eyes. “Tell me.”

Hermione fixed him with a piercing stare. “If I do, you have to swear not to blame yourself for their lives. They all went into battle tonight willing to die for the Light. Not just for you, but for their loved ones and in support of their own beliefs. And you didn’t kill any of them, Harry. No one besides Tom Riddle and Alecto Carrow are dead by your hand, and even those deaths were a mercy to the rest of us. So no self-blaming, okay?”

Harry wrapped his arms around his chest. “All right. I can’t promise I won’t feel guilty, but I’ll try not to take the blame. I did what I was supposed to last night. I wish I’d been able to do it faster, but I did the best I could. So?”

She sighed. “Zacharias Smith, Padma Patil, Marietta Edgecombe, Professor Vector, Madame Hooch, Katie Bell, Elphias Doge, and Sturgis Podmore. There may be more, but those are the ones who I know for sure didn’t make it.”
Harry sucked in a sharp gasp and leaned against the wall opposite, his world crashing in. “K-Katie’s gone?”

Ron rubbed a hand on Harry’s arm. “I know, mate. George is torn up.”

Harry’s heart stopped. “Just George? Is Fred okay?”

Ron flinched. “No, mate, he’s not. He’s in a coma. Pomfrey is … well, she’s scared he won’t m-make it.” Tears formed on his lashes. “I dunno if George will survive without him, Harry. They’re more than just brothers, you know?”

Harry sagged, the weight of impending loss dragging him down. “No. He can’t survive without Fred. Their cores are linked.”

Ron went ashen. “So if Fred d-dies, I’ll lose them both.”

Harry nodded, numb and sick with grief. Ron laid his head on Harry’s shoulder and wept, and Hermione held them both.

“Oh, Ron,” she gasped out. “Oh, I … I’m so sorry.”

“I can’t,” he breathed. “I can’t lose them, but when I was last there, Fred … I don’t know. Mum said she’d send me a Patronus if anything changed, but I can’t help being afraid.”

Harry shook himself and wiped his tears. “Come on, Ron. Get me to Fred. I can’t lose two of my brothers in one day either.”

Ron gasped. “You … oh shite, you’re a bloody Dragoon! Why didn’t I think of that sooner?”

“He couldn’t have helped sooner, Ron.” Hermione gave him a sad smile. “As long as Severus was in danger, he had to save his mate’s life before he could focus on anyone else.”

“But Sev isn’t in danger now.” Harry grabbed both of their hands and tugged them along. “Come on. We’ll take Sev’s floo so I can tell them where we are. It’s faster anyway. Hurry.”

“Right,” Ron said with a shudder. “Gods, I hope we’re not too late.”

“So do I,” Harry agreed.

An hour later, Harry had finished in the Infirmary. He had dream-walked for Fred, Parvati, Lavender, Ernie MacMillan, and Luna—the latter described the process as ticklish, though no one else was aware of him at all. He had then healed thirty more with raw life magic, some of them lives the healers had given up on—like Fred and Luna.

After everyone had been healed as best as Harry could, he went to Fred’s side, standing by while Arthur and Molly watched their son sleep. Harry had to believe it was only sleep. He simply couldn’t face the alternative.

“Hi,” he said in a soft voice. “Any change?”

Molly shook her head sadly and dabbed at her eyes. “Not a one.”
Throat thick, grief heavy in his chest, Harry moved to Fred’s side and took the man’s hand. He looked grey and weak under the Infirmary lights, a mere shadow of the force of life he once had been.

“Hey, you have to wake up, okay? Your family can’t do without you.”

Though exhaustion clung to him like a cloak, Harry forced a wave of magic through his fingertips and into Fred. It was weak, barely a flicker of the power he had commanded upon entering the hospital wing, but even so, the magic crackled and zinged along his nerve endings as it tried to heal Harry’s honorary brother.

“Come on, Fred. Come on.” Harry tried again, thought he sensed a flicker behind Fred’s eyelids, but after a long moment where the Weasleys held their breath to no avail, Harry dropped Fred’s hand with a sigh.

“I’m sorry. I’m just not strong enough.”

Molly patted his arm and murmured to him, her voice broken by sniffles. “No t-trouble, dear. You’ve done enough f-for one day, hmm?”

Ron gave a wry laugh thickened with suppressed tears. “If you only knew, Mum.”

Harry looked back and the sight of Hermione’s hand firmly ensconced in Ron’s relieved some of his pain, but nothing, nothing would take away the grief of failing the twins. This family had given him everything when he had nothing, and he could do nothing to repay them. He had cost them two of their own, and knowing how freely they gave of their love, the cost was simply too high to bear.

“I guess … I can try again t-tomorrow.” His voice broke on a sob, and he buried his face in his hands to hide his shame.

“Oh, Harry.” Hermione snatched him into an embrace, and thus, Harry missed what had caused a sudden flurry of excitement behind him.

Then a weak voice called, “Harry, mate, didn’t … know you cared.”

Heart stuttering to a halt, Harry whipped his head around, hardly daring to breathe, so fierce, so fragile was his hope.

“F-Fred?”

The red-headed imp smiled. “And you call yourself my brother? I’m George, don’t you know?”

Harry let out a broken cry and rushed to the bed, hugging whatever he could reach of Fred as a red-headed dogpile buried the young man in joy.

“By Merlin, young man,” said a fierce Molly Weasley, though her tears belied her sharp tone, “you had best take care of yourself from here on out! We all thought you were gone, that there was no hope, and that we would lose George, too!”

“Bloody idiot,” Ron muttered. “He’s been awake for the past five minutes. Haven’t you, you git?”

“Caught red-handed.” Fred laughed, though the sound was thin. “And hello to you too, Ickle Ronniekins.”

Ron’s ears turned red. “Oh, shut it, you prat. You’re such a moron, you know? Scaring us all to
death for a bloody joke.” He gave Fred a bright grin, streaked with tears. “But gods, I’m so glad to see you.”

“Hear, hear,” Charlie agreed.

George said nothing, but his relief danced at the edges of his grin, showed plainly in the renewed vigour of his eyes. Conversation swelled to a deafening pitch as all the Weasleys tried to tell Fred what had happened at once, and Harry winced. Using too much power had left his head a right mess, and while he was glad Fred was back, he could hardly bear the sheer volume of their celebration. His head felt cracked open and raw, and gods, he just needed a nap.

Under cover of an overexcited crowd of redheads, Hermione slipped a yawning, pale Harry away and half-carried him to the floo. “Go home and sleep, Harry. You’ve done all you can, and he’s okay. I think they’ll all be all right now, thanks to you.”

He gave her a wan smile and nodded. “Thanks, ‘Mione. Best get back to Ron before he realises you’ve gone. Let him know why?”

She smiled and gave him a brief hug. “Of course. Do you need me to take you through?”

“No. I can manage. It’s a short trip to Severus’ office.” With another yawn, Harry tossed a pinch of floo powder into the flames. “Headmaster Snape’s quarters, Hogwarts.” The flames turned green, and with a little wave, Harry stepped into the swirling, choking world of the floo network. The fire spat him out onto the carpet on the other side, and Harry groaned.

“Oh dear,” said Lily with a wry chuckle. “You look done in, love. Come on. I think it’s time for all of us to have a nice long nap.”

“Yeah.”

A nap sounded damn good. He could barely stay upright long enough for Lily to banish the soot from his robes and lead him into the other room. Somehow, he managed to change into a pair of pyjamas with Remus’ help, then Lily tucked Harry into bed beside his sleeping mate and pulled the blanket over their shoulders.

Severus started and blinked rapidly. “H-Harry?”

“Yeah, love. It’s just me.” He slid under Severus’ outstretched arm and snuggled close. “Mm. S’nice. Go back to sleep, love. I’m going too.”

“All right.” Severus kissed Harry lightly and drifted off again the next moment.

With a quiet chuckle, Lily leaned over them and kissed both of their foreheads. “Well done, boys. Well done.”

Harry gave her a wan smile. “Malfoy still here?”

She nodded. “Remy and I will see to him.”

“Tell him … Draco’s okay. Healed, just sleepin’.”

“I promise. For now, you just rest, baby. You’ve earned it.”

She stepped away and Noxed the lights. “Goodnight, boys.”

Harry was asleep before the door closed behind her.
The door chime woke Severus from a pleasant nap. Beside him, Harry groaned and buried his face into the crook of Severus’ neck.

“Must I get it?”

Severus chuckled and ran a hand through Harry’s hair. “You would prefer that I do?”

“No! You stay right there.” With a huff, Harry scrambled to his feet and tugged a dressing gown on over his pyjamas. “Enter,” he called as soon as he made it into the main room.

“Hello, Harry,” came Kingsley Shacklebolt’s deep drawl. “Is Severus about?”

“He’s—”

“Still healing,” Severus called from the bedroom, “but I can hear you. Or you may come in here.” He Summoned a robe and tugged it on, just in case.

Kingsley hesitated at the door. “Er … are you decent, Snape?”

“Of course. Do you imagine I would invite you into my bedroom if I were not? I am too injured to engage in amorous activities, Shacklebolt, so do stop being a prude and tell me what you have found.”

The auror chuckled and swept into the bedroom, Harry following with a grin on his face.

Harry smirked. “I bet I could find something you could do, Sev.”

Severus’ face warmed. “Later, brat. Shacklebolt, your report?”

The auror snickered. “A blushing Severus Snape! Never imagined I’d live to see the day!”

Severus gave Shacklebolt his fiercest glare, and the man relented.

“All right, all right. Merlin. Not the death glare.” He chuckled, but all traces of mirth left his face the next instant. “After I received your message, I gathered every auror and Order soldier of able body I could spare and set them scouring every known dark location we could find a record of. We used Granger’s galleons as a warning system—if an auror found Riddle, he or she was to alert the rest of us through the coin before engaging him, allowing us to apparate to their location immediately for backup.”

Severus nodded. “And?”

“It took us four hours, but eventually Tonks found them in Pettigrew’s old house. She heard something in the basement, and after looking in, she activated her galleon—but only called in me, not the others. It was too odd and she wanted an Order member first.”

“And?”

Kingsley rubbed his head and gave Severus a bemused look. “And … Merlin, it was the strangest thing, Severus. Malfoy’s severely injured—he’d been tortured for hours—but he’s alive and Poppy seems to think he’ll be right as rain in a day or two. But Riddle! He was human again for one thing
—looked like he did before he started turning into a snake, but besides that, he was just lying there, dead as a doornail.”

Harry grinned. “He’s dead? I really did it?”

Kingsley gave him a wry look. “We confirmed it with the *Spiritus* spell and every scan we could think of. He’s really dead, but we haven’t a clue how. Malfoy said that Riddle had healed right before his eyes, going from that repulsive snake form back into the body he used to have as a young man. After that, he supposedly started ranting about his soul being cured and said he planned to turn young Malfoy into a horcrux.” Kingsley shuddered. “Black magic, that. Horrid stuff.”

Harry winced. “Yes. Severus and I are *intimately* familiar with the concept.”

Severus snorted. “*Too* familiar.”

Kingsley frowned. “Er, you are?”

Harry nodded. “It’s how Riddle was staying alive. Sev and I were on a mission to destroy his horcruxes. He had … nine. Ten, if Nagini was a horcrux, and I think she may have been given that he could possess her and see through her eyes without killing her.”


“Utterly vile,” said Severus with a shudder.

Kingsley gave a wan nod and flopped into the armchair beside the door. “Gods. I can’t—you’re sure it was ten?”

“Absolutely,” said Harry. “Well, like I said, we’re not positive about Nagini, but there were definitely at least nine. Between Sev, Lucius Malfoy, and myself, we destroyed at least that many.”

“Merlin. That’s—wait, did you say Malfoy helped?”

Harry nodded. “With one horcrux. He’s still an unmitigated bastard and deserves to go to prison for his crimes, but he *did* help us fight Riddle at the end. He was our spy after Sev.”

Kingsley nodded. “Well, maybe that will get him some leniency. Some.”

Harry scowled. “Not sure he deserves it.”

Kingsley snorted. “Uh-huh. So tell me how you killed Riddle then.”

Harry frowned and settled next to his mate. “I … I don’t think we can tell the public the details. The truth is I followed the connection through my scar to Riddle and killed him through my dream-walking. What do I tell the public? How much did the aurors see?”

Kingsley tapped a finger against his chin. “Well, it was just Tonks and me who saw his body—we burned his corpse on the spot and Banished the ashes, just to make sure the bloody bastard stayed dead this time. The other aurors didn’t come in until after we’d finished with that. So I reckon we can say almost whatever you need to.” He conjured a notepad and biro. “Give me your story.”

Severus rubbed a finger across his lips, thinking hard. “Hmm … well, the public already knows Harry had a connection to Riddle because of that blasted Prophecy. So maybe we could say that Harry’s creature inheritance came with improved tracking abilities—it’s not untrue, just incomplete—
and because of that, he was able to locate Riddle through his magic, apparate to him, and kill him in a duel. Harry then burned the corpse to ashes to prevent anyone trying to resurrect him again. Did Tonks take Draco back before the aurors came in?"

Kingsley scribbled Severus’ answers down and nodded. “They saw nothing but blood.”

“That’s good. Then we’ll say that Harry knew Draco was missing because of Lucius coming through the floo to beg for help—which he did, by the way—and after warning you, Harry began seeking his connection to Riddle. Then, when he had just finished burning Riddle and was about to break Draco out, he heard Tonks come in. He was dizzy and weak, and apparated out with for fear of being caught by other Death Eaters when he hadn’t the strength to defend himself. He tried to take Draco out too, but the bindings on the boy wouldn’t let him and he had no time to break them. So he left Draco there, assuming the other Death Eaters wouldn’t hurt him, and warned you about the boy as soon as he could get his breath back. By then, Tonks had already called you to the scene.”

Kingsley wrote that down, too. “Good, but how did Harry get back to your office unseen when the castle is full of people and he’d have to walk in from Hogsmeade?”

“Invisibility cloak,” said Harry with a grin. “Pretty much all of Gryffindor knows I have one. They’ll back me up. Not to mention they’re aware I know of some shortcuts into the castle. And sheer stubbornness got me to Sev’s side after the duel, despite being exhausted. They’re all familiar with that side of me, too. Just ask anyone in the Infirmary right now.”

Severus groaned. “What did you do, Potter?”

Harry blushed. “Um … healed them all while you were sleeping?”

Severus sighed and buried his face in Harry’s neck. “Well, I suppose I can’t fault you for that, though I do wish you would cease risking your own health to save everyone else. Are you in need of healing?”

“No. Just rest. And maybe a headache potion later, if it doesn’t go away by bedtime.”

Severus shook his head and Summomed a potion for his mate. “Drink it now. No sense in suffering when you’re mated to a potions master, love.”

Harry grimaced, but took the potion as directed. He pushed the empty bottle away with a shudder. “Merlin, that’s vile.” He peeled one eye open and smiled. “And brilliant, too. Thanks, Sev. That’s much better.”

“Glad to hear it.” Severus turned back to the auror watching this exchange with a smile on his face. “That will change our story a bit. We will need to say that Harry had trouble finding the link and while he was waiting for an opening, went to the Infirmary to heal whom he could. Saving them gave him the courage to try again, and this time, he was able to find the link and apparate out. Perhaps seeing his allies restored gave him strength. Can you poke any other holes in our story, Shacklebolt?”

“Oh. Almost forgot why I’d come for a minute. Let me think.” Kingsley frowned and tapped his biro against his leg. “Hmm. Right. You’re not going to like this question, Harry, but I imagine you’ll hear it a lot. If you could apparate straight to Riddle, why did it take so long to end the war? Why not end it in your fourth year?”

Harry’s expression darkened. “Maybe because I was a bloody kid?”

Kingsley gave him a wry smile. “I know that, Harry, and I support you completely, but the public
might want a more … concrete reason.”

“Fucking vultures.”

Eirene chirped an agreement from her perch on the desk.

“Indeed,” Severus said with a wry chuckle.

“Merlin, Severus,” said Kingsley with a gasp. “Is that a nighthawk?”

“Yes. She came to me last night in anticipation of the battle. I do not think I would be in such a fit state for company without her assistance.” He held out his arm. “Come, little one.”

Eirene trilled and perched on Severus’ wrist.

“Hello, love. This is Kingsley Shacklebolt of the aurors. He is a friend and someone you can trust. Kingsley, this is Eirene.”

Kingsley held a tentative hand out to the bird. With a chirrup, she rubbed her head against his fingers.

The auror grinned from ear to ear. “Merlin, you’re a beautiful girl, aren’t you?”

She trilled her happiness to that statement, and Severus ran a finger down her soft feathers. “She is indeed.”

Harry petted her back as well. “Sev, do you know how to convince the public that I had a right to wait until I was a bloody adult to tackle the darkest wizard of all time?”

Severus snorted. “You mean beyond common sense? Let me ponder that. Hmm. Well, it is quite simple really. Your tracking abilities were a part of your creature inheritance, which does not develop in any magical being until after reaching adulthood. Beyond that, you also needed duelling lessons as Dumbledore had never deigned to train you in combat.”

“Good,” said Kingsley with a grin. “That might shut them up.”

Severus scowled. “Only might?”

“Don’t shoot the messenger, Severus. I’m on your side.”

“Humph. You do have a point, however. The public has been remarkably fickle where Riddle is concerned, content to sit on their collective arses and let Harry do all the work while they sit back and criticise his every move.”

“Too bloody right,” said Harry with a scowl.

Severus rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Well if common sense and preparation is not enough to pacify their idiocy, there is also the matter of Riddle’s soul staff. Considering that he recently destroyed an entire city with it, it simply wasn’t safe for anyone in their right mind to attempt to find him until Harry was able to destroy the staff. Tell them I held him back until I could be assured of his safety. All of what I said is true, save th—”

“Don’t tell me,” said Kingsley with a firm shake of his head. “If I don’t know, I can’t give it away under Veritaserum.”

Severus winced. “Gods. I truly am going soft. I would never have said such a thing before.”
Kingsley patted Severus’ hand. “It’s all right, Severus. It’s been a long day for all of us.”

Severus sighed. “Indeed. Well, will that story hold water?”

“Hmm.” Kingsley tapped his biro against his jaw. “Ah. One more thing. If Harry could destroy that staff, the public will see him as immensely powerful. So how did Riddle escape him last night?”

“No need to tweak the facts about that,” said Harry. “I wasn’t expecting Riddle to be an Animagus, so when Riddle transformed into a small animal—at night, in the Forbidden Forest, and right on top of the secret apparition point Severus used as a spy—he escaped before I could catch him, the blighter.”

“And after that,” Severus added, “I was seriously injured and Harry wasn’t able to attempt to find him again until he was sure I would survive. The call of his mate’s need was far too strong for him to leave my side for an instant. In fact, let us use that as the reason why Harry did not go after Riddle sooner. He had to remain with me until he was sure of my survival and that of his family, and only when we were all safe would his instincts allow him to seek out Riddle.”

“Mm-hmm. Perfect.” Kingsley scribbled a moment longer, then stashed his notepad and gave the men a grin. “That’ll do, boys.” He duplicated his notes and handed the copy to Harry. “Just make sure you stick to this story. You know the papers are going to want an interview or twelve. Especially the *Prophet*.”

“Skeeter can sod off,” said Harry with a snarl. “I’ll give an interview to Luna and no one else.”

“You’ll have to give a press conference eventually,” said Severus with a wry smile. “They’ll hound you otherwise.”

“They hound me anyway, but I guess it’d be suspicious if I didn’t talk to the press?”

“It would indeed. Our story will be questionable and incomplete enough without appearing unwilling to divulge what we can.”

Harry flopped onto his back beside his mate. “Why can’t I be a normal person? Just a nobody the papers don’t care about?”

“Because you’re Harry-bloody-Potter, love,” said a laughing Severus, “and the world needs you.”

“Kill me now.”

The words, playfully meant, hit too close to the fears still lingering around Severus’ subconscious and his voice came out sharp. “Potter, cease the histrionics.”

Harry turned to face Severus, surprised at his tone, but then his eyes softened. “I didn’t mean that, Sev. It was only an expression.”

Severus shivered and closed his eyes, trying to drive away the sight of Harry lying still and lifeless while his family mourned all around him. “I know. But perhaps not one I am ready to hear so soon after almost losing you this morning.”

Harry nodded and brought Severus into a tender kiss. “I’m sorry. I was scared, too.”

“I know.” Severus kissed his forehead and sat up. “Come, Harry. It must be near dinnertime and I am hungry.” He cast a quick *Tempus* and nodded. “Yes, dinner starts in half an hour. Perhaps we could make the announcement about Riddle there, assuming the house elves are able to pull a meal.
together so soon.”

“They had fed everyone lunch when I finished in the Infirmary, but I was just too tired to get anything to eat. Just want to sleep. Don’t suppose we could just go back to sleep and put it all off?” Severus gave him a mild glare. “Harry. Your friends are frightened and despairing. They need to know the truth.”

Harry sighed and moved to the door. “All right, Sev. Let’s go face the vultures.”

“There are no reporters allowed in the castle, love. Not after that travesty in your fourth year.” Severus sat, ignoring a twinge of pain, and smirked. “However, we might want to dress before we leave, my love.”

Harry looked down his bathrobe-covered body and groaned. “Gods, where have I put my brain?”

“You used it all killing Riddle.” Kingsley stood and patted Harry on the shoulder. “I’m going to go make an official report to the aurors. You two try to cover any remaining holes in your story before your press conference. I’ll handle the Ministry side of things. Anyway, good luck with the vultures, Harry, Severus.”

Harry sighed. “Right. Thanks, King.”

“You’re quite welcome.” After a round of goodbyes, the auror left.

Harry pouted at his mate. “Do we have to?”

Severus chuckled and motioned his love into his arms. “I am afraid so, but I will be there with you every step of the way, my love.”

“Mm, I suppose I can handle it then. Might we take a bath first, though? Cleaning charms only go so far and I still feel grimy.”

“That sounds like an inspired idea. Together?”

Harry grinned devilishly. “We might not make it in time for dinner if we do that.”

“Hmm. I do not mind being fashionably late if you don’t.”

“It’s a deal.” Harry cast a Featherlight charm on his mate, swept him into his arms, and carried him into the loo. “Let’s see what you’re capable of without straining yourself, hmm?”

Severus tightened his arms around Harry’s neck. He would never admit it, but he loved being held like this, secure and warm in his mate’s arms. He suspected Harry knew it, too.

“Yes, love. We shall be … creative.”

Harry shivered and settled Severus on the edge of the tub. “Brilliant.”

When Severus led his mate to the staff dais during dinner, both with hair still damp from the bath, the weight of the audience’s stares and the sound of their good-natured chuckles might have bowed him
with shame, if Harry’s hand hadn’t stayed warm and reassuring within his own all the way up to the podium. He took a deep breath and gazed at his mate. No, he would not be embarrassed. Harry was his now, and he didn’t care who knew it.

With a hesitant smile at the diners, he slipped an arm around Harry’s waist and brought him onto the podium in front of Severus. He breathed in the scent of Harry’s freshly-washed hair and wrapped his arms around his mate’s body, holding him tight even as he addressed those gathered at the tables. It helped support his weakened body, too, though he would die before admitting before all these people that he still needed aid just to stand.

“Good evening, all. I must beg your pardon that we are unable to remain long, but we have an announcement that cannot be delayed.”

“To make it short, sweet, and to the point,” said a grinning Harry, “the war is over. Riddle is dead.”

Severus chuckled at Harry’s shocker of a delivery and delighted in the reaction such a stunning announcement caused. At first, everyone sat still, mouths open, forks hanging useless in the air before their owner’s faces, food trailing off the ends and growing cold. Eyes wide with shock, stunned disbelief slowly giving way to desperate hope, and finally, to jubilation.

Neville stood, his face alight with joy. “It’s true? He’s really gone?”

“It is true indeed,” Severus replied. “Auror Shacklebolt just confirmed his death perhaps half an hour ago. We cannot divulge the details of his demise at this time, but rest assured that the former dark lord is well and truly dead. The war is over. At last.”

A deafening cheer rocked the foundations of Hogwarts. There was hugging and shouting and merriment like Severus had never before allowed in those hallowed halls, but that night, he couldn’t find it in him to dampen their joy. Instead, he let them celebrate however they wished and gave his mate a sweet smile.

“Would you like to find a quiet corner to eat before we are too surrounded with well-meaning partygoers to make our escape?”

Harry grinned. “There’s a certain painting I know of that will trade a nice, warm place to eat for a lark.”

Severus chuckled and allowed his mate to lead him away. “Is there any secret of this castle you don’t know, Harry?”

Harry shot him back a cheeky smile. “Probably not.”

Severus laughed low and long and followed Harry out of the hall.

After a light dinner, Harry carried his mate back to the Headmaster’s office, making good use of his invisibility cloak to avoid the crowds. A few people had gathered at the gargoyle, obviously meaning to harass Harry as soon as he returned home, but a light *Confundus* charm sent them along their merry way without harm.

After the last had gone, Severus whispered, “Where exactly did you send them, Harry?”
“Erm, back to the Great Hall. I figured the main party would still be going on there.”

“Most likely. Did you put power behind that charm?”

“No. Didn’t want to hurt their minds.”

Hidden under the cloak, Severus gave him a wry smirk. “Then you’d best hurry into the office before their determination breaks through your spell.”

Harry gulped and dashed through to the main office, kicking the door closed behind them. “Made it!”

“Indeed.” Severus burrowed his face into Harry’s throat and whispered, “Might you hold me a little longer?”

A warm, soft kind of joy filled Harry’s chest. “You like it, my mate?”

“Mm, yes. Feel safe, protected.”

“You are, my love.” Harry leaned down to give his mate a tender kiss, wondering if Severus had the strength to continue their earlier activities, when a trilling chirp from behind them made Harry jump.

“Oh! Hello, Eirene.” He frowned when he realised the bird held a letter in her talons. “Hmm? What’s this?”

“Put me on the bed before you read it, love,” Severus said. “I am still in too much pain to sit.”

“All right. I’ll just bring it in to you.” He carried Severus into the bedroom and settled him on the sheets, helping the man to take another round of potions. “Better, love?”

Severus gave him a sleepy smile. “Much. I may not have the ability to do what you were hoping for tonight, my Harry.”

Harry shook his head and kissed Severus’ lips lightly. “As long as you’re safe, that’s all that matters right now.” He stroked Severus’ hair back from his forehead. “Rest, beloved. I’ll bring that letter in and read it to you.”

Harry retrieved the letter from the nighthawk and grinned when he realised it was another letter from Cináed. No doubt the man already knew.

Harry perched on the bed beside Severus. “It’s from our red-headed Seer friend.”

“Cináed? But how did Eirene know to go to him?”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe he told her to after the war was over.”

“Perhaps.” Severus shook his head. “Well, he might explain in the letter. What does it say?”

Harry chuckled and ripped open the envelope. He straightened the Muggle notepaper within and held it up to the candlelight.

Harry and Severus,

Well done. Now that the world is at peace once more, when is the wedding?
Harry gave a wry laugh. “So much for an explanation, huh?”

Severus shook his head. “Should have known. Tell him it will take place, ah … at the end of June. You must graduate first and then we will need time to prepare. As will he. And—Harry? Are you all right, love? We needn’t bond in June if it is too soon—mmph!”

Harry shut him up with a fierce kiss. Bonded! They were going to be bonded! And at Cináed’s place, just as he’d hoped. Harry hadn’t dared believe in that dream, but there it was, and June! He hadn’t hoped on being bonded so soon either, but it seemed dreams were coming true for him in droves that day.

Breathless, Severus said, “You are amenable, then?”

Harry laughed. “Merlin, yes!” He kicked off his shoes and squirmed into the sheets beside his mate. “I can’t believe it. Riddle’s gone. There’s no shadow of death hanging over our heads any longer. And we’re getting bonded!” His voice went small and quiet. “Does it seem … too good to be true to you? Like there must be something bad lurking in the corners for everything to be this good?”

Severus gave him a hesitant nod. “I have never allowed myself to hope for anything beautiful before, Harry. I did not imagine I would live long enough to attain it. But you … every moment with you, no matter what happens, it is beautiful. So even if this is too good to be true—and I will do everything within my power to ensure that it isn’t—just being with you, having you for my mate, having a family again is worth everything I have had to endure to reach this point.”

Harry gave him a soft smile, tears shining at the edges of his lashes. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right.” He kissed Severus softly. “No matter what the future brings, this moment is worth it. You are worth it all.”

Happy tears wet on his cheeks, Severus stopped all further conversation with a tender kiss and the promise of more.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Warnings: none. Summary: Harry and Severus have to deal with clean-up after the war and start making plans for the future.

***AN1: Well, this story is coming to an end soon. Now I'm just tying up loose ends. Thanks for coming along for the ride!***

CHAPTER 34

The next day dawned grey and cloudy, but Harry couldn’t be arsed to care. The war was over, and that relieved him enough that no small thing would rain upon his joy.

And yet, a letter at the foot of his floo managed to dim his exuberance. The Ministry seal on the flap set Harry snarling before he even opened it. Gods, he hated them.

With a sigh, Harry opened the letter and scanned it. Thank Merlin, it wasn’t a request for a press conference or threats or anything of the sort. Kingsley had simply requested his presence during the interrogation of Cho Chang. As Severus was too injured to come on his own right, Harry would have to listen in his stead, unless they could find a way to help the former spy move around without sacrificing too much of his dignity.

Harry noted the time and day—the next morning at nine o’clock—and shook his head, not looking forward to a morning of dodging rabid sycophants. With any luck, Harry could convince his family to come along. Or maybe Severus would be well enough to attend by then. Harry sure as hell didn’t want to face the Ministry on his own.

He laid the letter on the desk in case Severus wanted to see it for himself and went to wake his mate for the day, but the office floo flared before he made it three steps.

“Harry?” Madam Pomfrey’s head appeared in the flames. “Can you come down to the Infirmary for a moment?”

Harry frowned and knelt before the flames. “What’s wrong? Did Fred take a turn for the worse? Luna?”

She gave him an encouraging smile. “No, no, dear. Everyone you healed is doing quite well, recovering nicely, and therein lies the problem. You also healed Draco Malfoy, and he is quite well enough to leave the Infirmary, as is his father.”

“Well enough to go to the Ministry for questioning, you mean.”

Pomfrey nodded. “Only Lucius is contesting the arrest claiming he was a spy for you, and the aurors aren’t sure what to do. I believe they are afraid to make assumptions after Severus.”

Harry scowled. “Yeah, I’ll come set it right. Bloody bastard.”

“Language, Harry. Now, come on through.”
Harry called to his sleeping partner in case the man hadn’t woken, however unlikely that was. “Sev? Sorry to wake you, love, but I’ve got to go to the Infirmary and sort Malfoy. I’ll be right back.”

Severus’ sleepy voice called back, “Try not to castrate him this time, Harry.”

Harry snorted. “No promises.” He tossed a pinch of floo powder into the flames and stepped through to the hospital wing.

As soon as Harry stumbled through and got his bearings, he dusted the soot from his robes and followed Madame Pomfrey. He stopped just as Malfoy came into view, hiding in the shadows and observing the surprisingly civil confrontation taking place beside Draco’s bed.

Draco was dressed and perched on the edge of his bed, a cocky sneer on his face and his arms crossed in annoyance. Even from this distance, Harry could easily tell it was a front to hide his fear. The boy was shaking, though he managed to hide it well.

Malfoy Senior stood just behind his son’s shoulder, staring down a trio of young, battle-weary aurors. Lucius had obviously recovered from the mishap during Harry’s dream-walk well enough to resume his usual haughty act. He held his cane in one white-knuckled hand and glared at the aurors.

They gulped and gathered closer together, clearly out of their depth.

Harry pursed his lips at the sight of them. This was who the Ministry had sent to deal with Malfoy? Merlin. Those rookies couldn’t handle Draco alone, let alone both Malfoys. They would break out in half a moment with those idiots.

Given the current level of Ministry corruption, Harry doubted whoever had chosen such green aurors to intercept Malfoy had done so in error. No doubt the Malfoy fortune had greased quite a few palms that morning.

He shook his head and darted behind a curtain, out of sight of the Malfoys and their ‘guard.’

Pomfrey stared at him in obvious confusion. “Harry? Aren’t we going?”

“Not yet. I’m not sending Malfoy anywhere with those rookies.”

Pomfrey glanced towards the aurors and nodded, her lips pursed. “Yes, I see your point.”

Harry moved towards the floo, keeping hidden. “I’m getting Kingsley and some real muscle. While I’m doing that, stall the Malfoys a bit, okay? Tell them I’m busy taking care of Severus but I’ll be down to set matters straight as soon as I can. Make it sound like I’m leaning towards letting Malfoy off so he doesn’t scarper. I’ll be right back as soon as I’ve got backup.”

Pomfrey gave an aggrieved sigh and nodded. “Hurry up, Mister Potter. I can only stall them so long.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

With a pat to her shoulder, Harry slunk out of the Infirmary with the ease of one well-used to evading certain snarky Slytherins after curfew. Once out in the hall, he conjured his stag and sent him off with a message for Kingsley.

“King, the Ministry is trying to let Malfoy off again. Three aurors are in the Hogwarts Infirmary to supposedly arrest him, but I’m pretty sure I could overpower all three of them while blindfolded. I need a real team here to arrest him as fast as you can manage it. We’re stalling them for now, but
the ruse won’t last long.”

Ten minutes later, Kingsley arrived, flanked by Tonks and three other aurors, all who looked tough and battle-hardened. Harry nodded, relieved.

“That’s more like it.”

“Wotcher, Harry,” said Tonks with a grin. Her hair was glittery gold and curly today. “What’s going on with the Malfoys?”

Harry sneered in disgust. “Besides the Ministry sending three recruits to apprehend them, Lucius is trying to claim that he earned clemency by spying for me, which he did—for two weeks at the very end of the war and only to save his heir.”

She shook her head, making her curls flop about. “Doesn’t cut it, then.”

“Not even close. Hurry and come this way before that slimy snake slithers away again.”

Kingsley fell in step with Harry and motioned the other aurors to follow. Harry thought they must have made an impressive sight. The way the colour drained from the Malfoys’ faces as the aurors and Harry turned the corner confirmed his thoughts.

Malfoy Senior gripped his cane and tossed his hair over his shoulder. “Greetings, Mister Potter. There seems to have been some sort of misunderstanding.”

Harry moved to stand right in front of Lucius and raised an eyebrow. “And that is?”

“These gentlemen seem to be unaware of my … contributions to the Light in the latter part of the war.”

Harry raised his other eyebrow. “And those are?”

Lucius glared. “You are well aware that I destroyed one of the Dark Lord’s horcruxes, and that I was a spy for you.”

Harry hummed. “And that’s supposed to convince me to let you off how exactly?”

Lucius’ nostrils flared. “I would have thought, considering that I offered myself up for the war effort yesterday, much as your dear mate did, you might be somewhat unders—”

Wild fury blazed in Harry, and he felt his wings and Avenger features erupt before he could control it. “Do not dare to compare your pitiful contributions to those of my mate. Severus spent seventeen years spying for the Light, Malfoy, five of which while Riddle was alive and at full strength and twelve attempting to destroy Riddle utterly before he could return to power. Of course, he did not succeed as, unlike you, we did not know of the horcruxes at all until my second year.”

Harry stepped forwards until he was belly-to-belly with the white-faced Malfoy, power crackling off of his skin. Draco opened his mouth to say something whiny, but Harry flicked a finger at him and silenced the brat.

“Stay out of this,” he snarled.

At such a casual display of wandless magic and the rage in his voice, Draco whimpered and withdrew. Harry sneered in disgust and turned his ire back on Lucius, who had stepped away and was staring at Harry as if he didn’t know what to make of him.
“As I was saying,” Harry spat, “Severus had little hope of destroying Riddle because he knew nothing of the horcruxes until Riddle was already sustaining his physical presence through other means. You, Malfoy, knew of the horcruxes a full year before my parents’ deaths and you did nothing until you believed your family line was in danger. You became a spy in the last two weeks of the war, not to atone for your crimes or out of any true desire to aid the Light, but out of a selfish wish to protect your family line. Your ‘contributions’ had nothing to do with sacrifice and honour and everything to do with keeping the Malfoys in power.”

Harry snarled and crossed his arms over his chest. “Do not compare yourself to my mate. You are not a tenth of the man that Severus is.”

Malfoy snarled, baring even white teeth. “I should have known you would break your word, Potter.”

Harry gave a vicious laugh. “I gave you no oath to shield you from the consequences of your crimes, Malfoy. I only swore to spare your son and wife in the battle. I have done so. In fact, I risked my own life to save your son despite the hell he has put me through for the past seven years. I will even go so far as to testify in front of the Wizengamot that you aided us in the final two weeks of the battle, however selfish your motives, but that is all I will do. Whether you are granted leniency or not was never a part of our deal.” Harry fixed him with a piercing glare. “My oath is upheld.”

Even Malfoy had nothing to say to that, apparently. He stood there, mouth opening and closing like a fish, face turning redder by the second.

Kingsley stepped forward with a pair of magic-binding cuffs in hand. “Let’s go, Malfoy. And don’t even try to weasel out of your punishment this time. I’ll have aurors on your arse day and night from here on out—proper aurors who can’t be bribed.” Kingsley gave him a feral smile. “And we’ll see to it that Amelia Bones handles your trial. She’s honourable. You’ll have a fair trial, and we’ll even mention your little spying kick. Maybe you’ll get off with fifty years instead of life. If you’re lucky.”

He shrugged and snapped the cuffs onto Malfoy’s wrists. “But hey, your heir’s alive, even if your family name will be worth squat by the time the Wizengamot is through with you.”

Malfoy glared daggers at the man even as he was roughly led away. Meanwhile, Tonks shackled a sulking Draco and made him follow his father at wandpoint.

A few yards from the Infirmary door, Lucius turned and snarled at Harry. “Potter! I won’t forget this.”

Harry let his talons show and his magic crackle around him. “Oh? Well then, in seventy years or so, when you finally crawl out of Azkaban, come find me. I think you will find that I remember, too.” He spread his wings and fixed all four eyes on the Malfoys, grinning at their obvious discomfort. “Good luck, Malfoy. You’ll need it.”

“Through the doors, boys,” said Tonks with a poke to Malfoy Senior’s shoulder. “We have places to be.”

Kingsley shoved him forwards, forcing Malfoy to move. “And the next time you speak out of turn, Malfoy, you’ll be silenced, petrified, and levitated into the Ministry. Imagine what that will do to your reputation, hmm?”

Lucius sneered and tossed his hair over his shoulder. “Come along, Draco. We shall play their game for now, but—”

A silencing spell, petrification, and levitation spell later, Malfoy had been forcibly shut up and was
floating away beside his mortified son. Draco hissed something to his father, but the door closed behind the aurors and their charges before Harry heard it.

Poppy laid a hand over her heart and sighed. “Well! That was certainly more excitement than I like upon a morning.”

Harry chuckled. “Sorry, Madame Pomfrey. It’s a shame, though. I had planned on arguing in his favour at the trial, right up until he tried to manipulate me into giving him a free ticket out of jail. He should’ve realised that would hack me off.”

She nodded and patted Harry’s shoulder. “You did well, dear. I’m afraid Lucius Malfoy is too set in his ways to make any proper reformation, but perhaps it’s not too late for Draco to reshape his life. You might speak for him, if you are so inclined. I doubt he had much choice in his decision to take the mark, considering who and what his father is.”

Harry snorted. “There’s always a choice.”

“Is there, Harry? Is there really?”

He sighed as he thought of Severus, how the man had grown up in sheer hell with no friends and no support, how he had been drawn to the Death Eaters by the hope of finding a home. Of course, Severus had discovered the truth of his new associates fast, but not fast enough to escape them.

That made him think of Regulus, how the pressures of family had driven him into Tom Riddle’s arms. The Blacks had all but groomed him to be a Death Eater, and Regulus had acted on what he believed to be family duty, only to have his illusions stripped away as he realised the true madness of his new master.

He thought of himself, how his love for Sirius had led him to mock Severus, to hurt him further, when the man was already hurting and had no one left in the entire world. True, Severus was cruel to Harry at the time, but even if he hadn’t been, Sirius’ hatred of the man might have still coloured Harry’s judgment against Severus, simply because Harry had wanted to think of him as infallible and good, simply because Sirius was the only family he had left.

Merlin, hadn’t that been a mistake! Though, come to think of it, how much of Sirius’ juvenile, cruel behaviour had truly been his fault? How much had Dumbledore’s compulsions altered the man? Had Harry ever known his godfather at all, or was his knowledge of Sirius only of the man Dumbledore had wanted him to see?

Gods. Dumbledore had woven webs of lies and snared them all in his net, forging alliances of age-old enemies and turning friends against one another, pulling and jerking his puppets until they fit his mould. And Draco had fallen prey to his plots as much as any of them.

Harry shook his head and ruffled his hair, worried that he had been too hard on the younger Malfoy. Pomfrey was right, there wasn’t always a choice, and perhaps the Malfoy heir, caught between the manipulations of both light and darkness, had been given the least choice of all of them.

Shite. As much as he still hated the little ferret, Harry would have to testify on his behalf. It was more than likely that Draco would never have joined Riddle in the first place, if not for the pressures of his twisted father and Dumbledore’s compulsions.

Harry sighed and wrapped his arms around his chest. “Maybe you’re right, ma’am. He really mucked about with all of our lives, didn’t he?”
Pomfrey’s lips pursed. It was clear she didn’t need any clarification as to which ‘he’ Harry had referred to.

“He did indeed, Harry. And we are left to pick up the pieces. We shouldn’t fall into the same trap Dumbledore did, of believing a boy to be inherently evil simply because we’re not fond of him. We shouldn’t simply discard him because we would rather not deal with his flaws.”

Harry winced, remembering how his own mate had suffered due to a similar prejudice. “No. We shouldn’t.”

The party celebrating the fall of Voldemort had gone on through the night before and showed no signs of stopping through the day, either. Severus had never been so glad to be injured before, as it afforded him ample opportunity to stay within the peace and shelter of his rooms and avoid the drunken crowds of revellers. Though many people had visited to pay their respects and wish him a speedy recovery, they had come a few at a time and not in great frequency. Certainly nothing like the seething mass of jubilant humanity that flooded the Great Hall below, at least according to Remus and Lily’s descriptions.

Harry hadn’t been so lucky, of course, and had come home after dinner in a snit. The young man hated being the centre of attention, and without Severus there to take some of the brunt of the crowds or alleviate his mate’s tension, he had been buffeted about all day. The poor man complained of a splitting headache from all the noise, and was in a foul temper from all the reaching hands and swooning girls.

That part had irritated Severus as well. Harry was his. And hadn’t Harry made his sexuality clear enough during the battle preparations two nights before? Apparently not clear enough for some die-hard fans.

It had taken a strong headache potion and a thorough round of lovemaking before Harry had calmed his ire. To be honest, Severus had needed the lovemaking too, if only to reassure himself that Harry wanted him and not some vapid little floozy downstairs. Spending time to soothe his mate had helped them both immensely. Harry’s tender touch and gentle kisses had reaffirmed his joy in their relationship enough to soothe even Severus’ insecurities, and Severus’ all-consuming love had washed Harry clean of irritation and tension.

All said, the couple were much improved by moonrise, and thankfully so since they had an appointment to meet the vampire clan. Severus might have requested one more day to heal had they the luxury of time, but Remus had made it clear that the vampires were anxious and uncomfortable, and since Hermione had devised a way to help Severus endure the meeting without aggravating his injuries, he could think of no viable reason to delay.

And so it came to pass that Severus floated into a kinship meeting with the Grey clan while strapped into a levitating chair. Despite his discomfiture at appearing in such a state, he had to admit, modelling a wizarding spell after Muggle wheelchairs was ingenious, and his sharp mind was already calculating ways to improve upon the concept. Disabled wizards could make great use of a hovering-chair, assuming he could work out the kinks and make it safe to use for long periods of time. He wasn’t certain the charms on this one would hold longer than a few days, but the framework for an excellent healing aid was there. It only needed a few tweaks. Perhaps a potion applied to the legs would help maintain the charms.
He was still at work on the puzzle when Harry knocked upon the door to Severus’ seventh year potions classroom, where Remus said they had placed the head vampire and his closest kin. As his NEWT students handled the most volatile potions, their classroom contained the strongest wards of any of the student labs and was the most spacious. Severus appreciated the man’s intelligence even more in that moment, as the vampiric sire would have expected the best the wizards could offer, and Remus knew it, not that a classroom was by any means glamorous. They would have placed the vampires in the dorms if they could have, but simply blocking a window wasn’t enough to protect the vampires from the sun. With that in mind, their only choice of housing was the potions classrooms or labs, none of which had windows to prevent dangerous interactions with potentially light-sensitive potions. Still, offering the head vampires the best of the rooms they had available would increase the humans’ standing with them, if only by a bit.

A young girl, perhaps eight, opened the door, revealing a surprisingly posh room full of the highest-ranking Grey vampires. Several of the student worktables had been transfigured into plush beds draped with silver velvet coverlets and red satin sheets. Other furniture had been transformed into a long dining table and chairs, decadent sofas and coffee tables, and rugs. The room looked more like a luxurious studio apartment than a classroom, excepting only the instructor’s desk, still sitting where Severus had left it last.

Severus peered around the little girl and frowned at a door that hadn’t been there the last time he taught. A loo, perhaps? Merlin, he hoped so. Otherwise, the vampires would have been desperate for relief by now.

The little girl stared up at Severus and gasped. “Oh, Lestat! You look so strange. What are you?”

Severus resisted the urge to chuckle at her odd epithet, barely. Beside him, Harry was not as successful in hiding his mirth.

“Hello, little one,” said Severus in a respectful voice. “We’re the humans who fought with Sire Grey and your clan’s soldiers. Might we speak to them?”

“Oh!” With a squeak, she turned and called into the room, “Mummy, Mummy! It’s humans!”

A female vampire Severus recognised from somewhere—where?—gave the girl a soft smile. “Thank you, love. Go finish your nap now.”

“But I’m not tired anymore, Mummy.”

She chuckled when the girl gave a yawn. “Oh, I think you are. Go on. I shall return as soon as I am able.”

The little girl pouted, but at a sharp look from her mother, ran behind the privacy screens post-haste.

That brief look of threat in the mother’s eyes, however mild, had triggered Severus’ memory. She was the vampire Severus had been fighting when Ferin first came to his aid. He wondered where she ranked in the clan even as the woman bowed and gave them a welcoming smile.

“Hello, friends,” she said in a soft, eloquent voice reminiscent of Narcissa Malfoy, only without the self-important airs and cold attitude. “I do apologise for that display of wilfulness. She is still learning proper behaviour and sometimes slips.”

“She’s adorable,” said Harry with a grin. “I’m glad you were able to save her, as well as your clan’s other children.”

The vampire closed her eyes. “To lose her, or any of our young, would have destroyed me, as well
“as my mate.” She came up with a smile for them all, though she kept her fangs hidden and her eyes were haunted with remembrance. “You have my deepest gratitude. Our family is whole again, thanks to your efforts.”

Ron frowned. “But you lost so many of your kin ….”

She nodded, grief tingling her cold, but beautiful features. “Yes, but many were saved. We will recover and make new bonds, and the existing ones will be stronger for the losses we share. So yes, we are whole again, if our clan is not so large as it once was. Our children are safe, and so, we will endure.”

Harry bowed to the vampire. “And due to your Sire’s help in the battle, and that of your warriors, our family will endure as well. Thank you, milady. I don’t think we could have won that fight without your aid.”

Severus slipped his hand behind Harry’s back and caressed him, trying to convey his approval through a gentle touch.

The vampire curtsied in acceptance of Harry’s thanks. “Sirenia. My name is Sirenia Grey. I am Ferin’s mate, the mistress of the Grey clan.”

Severus’ breath stilled. “His mate? Oh Merlin. If we … if I had ….”

Sirenia laid a hand on his shoulder. “All is forgiven, Sire Snape. You were defending your own, just as we were. Lay the blame where it belongs: upon the one who forced us to fight in the first place.”

“Yes.” Severus bowed his head in acknowledgement of her forgiveness. “Thank you, Lady Sirenia.”

She inclined her head. “Thank you as well. Now, may I have your names? I am familiar with the general and the sky-warrior, but I do not know the rest of you.”

Harry introduced them all in turn, using his best manners. Which weren’t as proper as they could be, considering the young man’s past, but the mistress didn’t take offence, to Severus’ relief. Perhaps she was simply too overjoyed to have her children safe again to care about an oversight here or there. Severus hoped she was, at any rate. He made a mental note to teach the young man proper etiquette before their next meeting with the clan, if at all possible.

“Lady Sirenia,” Severus said once the introductions had been completed, “we have news for the sire, if he is available and willing to grant us an audience. Truly, our news affects all of you, but it may be proper to speak with Sire Grey and his military advisors first, if it is not too much inconvenience.”

The vampire nodded. “As it should be.”

She closed her eyes, and without saying a word, summoned her husband. Severus was a bit jealous of their ability to communicate telepathically, but was also intelligent enough to hide it from his expression. When she opened her eyes, several vampires stood and made their way to the instructor’s desk. A moment later, Ferin emerged from behind one of the screens, straightened his tunic, and greeted the visitors with an amiable smile.

“Ah, welcome, honoured guests, to the temporary shelter of the Grey clan.” He moved to the entryway and shook Severus’, Remus’, and Harry’s hands. “I regret that I cannot offer refreshment, as I would have to summon your own house elves to do so, and I am not so ill-bred as that.”

“We’re quite well, thank you,” said Harry, “but do you need anything? I can ask for tea for us, if you’d like?”
Ferin smiled. “Thank you, but we are well enough. Your father made sure to see to all our needs. I am glad to hear from you and see Sire Severus well again. We were quite worried that he would not survive such a grievous wound.”

“I thank you for your concern,” said Severus, genuinely touched. “Harry saved my life and I am recovering well now, albeit a bit slower than I would like.”

Ferin grinned. “I am glad to hear it.” He waved them inside graciously. “Come, we have much to discuss, I think. Battle strategies and such. If we strike now, we will find our enemy weak, and perhaps can use that to our advantage.”

Harry rubbed his chin. “Might not be a bad idea to strike soon and round up the rest of the Death Eaters, but first, we have news for your clan concerning the war. I’m sorry we couldn’t come sooner. We’ve been a bit busy dealing with our own lot, and then we thought you might want time to rest and grieve.”

Ferin nodded. “Your tact is appreciated—we did indeed need time to mourn. But come, come in and sit with us.”

He led them to the teacher’s dais and passed around introductions to closest kin, then seated himself behind the desk as if it were a throne. Severus’ lips twitched at the realisation that Ferin had ‘claimed’ Severus’ former place, but wasn’t fool enough to mention it. Instead, he gave the vampire a smile and offered his hand once they had finished with the introductions.

“Before we begin, I must thank you for your help, Sire Grey. If not for your protection last night, I fear I would not have survived.”

Ferin’s eyes darkened. “Did you find the foul wretch who attacked you? I could not—my oath bound me against attacking her despite her crimes.”

Severus nodded. “We have, and her interrogation is scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. Once we determine her motives and whether she acted alone, we will act accordingly.”

Ferin bowed his head. “Forgive my failure, Prince. I did not expect an attack from your allies. My clan would cut off their own arms before they thought to betray their patriarch. It is … simply not done. I am not used to such behaviour and was unprepared for it.”

“And I hope you never do get used to it,” Harry said with a nervous frown, “but why on earth did you just call him Prince?”

Ferin smirked, and the expression even intimidated Severus a little. “I never did explain to you why I was so shocked upon seeing your true face, did I, Sire Potter?”

Harry shrugged. “Please call me Harry. And there wasn’t time to talk of much of anything then.”

“No, I suppose not. Well, then I shall tell you. Over four-thousand years ago, a vampiric scribe in Egypt received a vision. This scribe recorded a prophecy that has been passed down for millennia among my clan’s leaders.”

Harry gulped and clamped down on Severus’ hand. “And this prophecy was?”

The vampire raised an eyebrow at Harry’s sharp tone, but did not comment on it. “That, one day in the far future from the time of the prophecy’s birth, a warrior of the sky with emerald eyes lined in kohl, one born into lightning’s scourge, would—alongside his warlord and partner, the dark prince—save our people from the greatest threat we have ever known.”
Harry’s face contorted in rage and despair. “No! No, Merlin, NO! I’ve done my part, damn it. I’ve already fulfilled one prophecy—I’m not doing it all over again!”

“Harry,” Severus breathed, terrified his mate had overstepped his bounds. A vampire’s patience only stretched so far, after all, and they were surrounded by them.

Harry’s ‘clan’ had all taken a step back, each face bearing signs of shock and alarm, and Severus winced. Shite, this wasn’t good. The humans’ fear indicated a belief that the clan would not uphold their oaths, and the implied slight against the vampires’ honour would only irritate the clan further. Severus noted the offence in the Sire’s eyes and knew he had only seconds to bring this travesty back under control.

He bowed as low as his straps would allow and murmured, “Please accept my humble apologies for my mate’s anger. He is … distraught.”

“Damn right,” Harry said, tugging at his hair and pacing in agitation. “I can’t do this again. I just can’t.”

“Please, Harry. Calm yourself.”

Harry gave his mate a heart-sick look. “You can’t be okay with this, Sev. After everything you sacrificed, everything we lost for the last prophecy made about me?”

“Sky-Warrior, be at peace,” said Sirenia in such a calming voice, even Harry subsided. “You have misunderstood, Harry. We are not asking you to fight our wars.”

Harry frowned. “You … you’re not? But Sire Grey just said ….”

“My wife speaks the truth,” said Ferin with a tight smile. “You see, Harry, we are of the mind that you have already fulfilled the prophecy as of two nights ago.”

Harry paled and went rigid. “The soul-staff.”

“Yes. With such a weapon, Riddle might have enslaved us all.”

Harry winced. “And being immortal—until I fixed Riddle’s soul, anyway—your people would have suffered forever under his twisted reign.” He blushed and covered his face with a shaking hand. “Dear gods, Sire Grey, I’m sorry. I just heard ‘prophecy’ and lost my head. The first one was too hard to bear.”

“Perhaps because of Dumbledore’s meddling, love,” said Severus, his eyes on the Sire and watching for trouble. “Do recall that he continually kept trying to change fate, to alter streams, and it led to pain and suffering that might never have been had he simply left well enough alone. Usually, prophecies fulfill themselves without any outside effort.”

“True.” Harry blew out a breath and gave Ferin a formal bow. “My apologies to you and your clan, Sire Grey. I misunderstood your intent and acted out of turn.”

The tension in Ferin’s expression faded, and Severus allowed himself to breathe again.

“Apology accepted, Harry. Though, if I may be so free, I would advise that you listen to the entire tale before you judge its ending, hmm?”

Standing, Harry gave a wry laugh and rubbed the back of his neck. “Severus has been telling me that for years. Thank you for your understanding.”
“It is a small concession to give for the safety of my clan.”

Harry gave Severus a soft smile. “Yes, I understand.”

Ferin clapped his hands together and asked his son to bring him a scroll. Once the young vampire had returned, the sire laid the scroll upon ‘his’ desk, Summoned a quill from thin air, and held his hand poised to write.

“Now, shall we discuss our bonds of kinship, Clan Potter?”

Harry’s eyelid twitched. “Clan Prince, not Potter. Once Severus and I bond, our surname will change to Prince. Which must be why your prophecy referred to him as the dark prince—in time, he’ll be one, at least in name, and the surname comes from his maternal lineage.”

Severus squeezed Harry’s hand, an emotional response he couldn’t help. He hadn’t really believed Harry would be willing to take that name, let alone identify their ‘clan’ by it. He hoped his mother, wherever she was, would be pleased.

Ferin nodded. “Very well, Clan Prince, then. Are you ready to discuss our kinship?”

Harry gave a short bow. “We are honoured to discuss our kinship bond with Clan Grey.”

“Good, good. Then let us begin.”

The reporters were out in force at the Ministry. Harry scowled and squeezed in closer to Severus, holding the handles Lily had added to Severus’ hoverchair and wishing he could disappear. Unfortunately, he was required at Cho’s interrogation and couldn’t use his cloak, not at the Ministry.

Shouts broke out around them, and Harry growled when the flashes started going off.

“Bloody vultures,” he grumbled to his mate.

Severus snorted. “More like screech owls, what with that grating voice of Skeeter’s.”

Harry buried a laugh in Severus’ hair, but his mirth died quickly. Gods, they wouldn’t leave him alone. Ever since the Battle of Hogwarts, as it had come to be known, Harry couldn’t even walk outside the school gates without being harassed by Skeeter and her cronies. It was too much to hope for that the press wouldn’t have unearthed Cho’s interrogation date and, from there, gathered Harry would be at the Ministry this afternoon. And of course, that meant every reporter in three countries felt entitled to the story.

“Mister Potter, is it true that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is dead?”

“Yes,” Harry spat out. “He’s dead, Kingsley Shacklebolt already verified that claim. Let us move. You’re in the way.”

The crowds parted enough to let them through, but the questions didn’t stop. Harry ignored them as best as he could and hurried towards the lifts.

“Mister Snape, is it true that you were attacked by a vampire?”
“Mister Potter, is it true that you destroyed the soul staff singlehandedly?”

“Missus Potter, how do you feel having mated with Mister Lupin after the death of your husband?”

Then Rita Skeeter’s unctuous voice shrilled over the crowd. “Headmaster Snape, did you torture the students at Hogwarts to get back at Light oriented families for not trusting you?”

Every single person with Harry stopped and shot her their fiercest glares.

“No, you vile, sadistic harpy,” said Severus in his coldest ‘Professor Snape’ voice. “I did not torture anyone personally, and took what measures I could to both mitigate the pain the Carrows inflicted and protect the students without blowing my cover. Who do you think warded their hideout? Now, shut your odious mouth and get out of our way.”

Harry growled and let his scales and glowing eyes show. “And if you dare insult my mate again, Skeeter, I promise you, you’ll regret it.” He bared fanged teeth and grinned inwardly as the bitch paled and backed away.

“Just t-trying to get the true story here, Mister Potter.”

Ron snorted. “The true story? Trying to twist the truth into a disaster, more like.”

An animalistic snarl ripped from Harry’s throat. “Either way, when I’m through with you, Skeeter, you won’t be making any stories at all. Did you think I’d forgotten your lies about me through the years? Now that I’m free to do something about them, since I’m going to the DMLE anyway, I might just file a little … complaint.”

Skeeter turned the colour of badly-mixed clay. “You can’t touch me, Potter. You’ve no evidence.”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “Every foul story you ever printed about me is evidence.” He smirked. “Don’t get too confident, Skeeter. I’m about to take you down so hard your ancestors will feel it.”

He flicked her a two-fingered salute and pushed Severus along, turning his back on her pointedly.

“That was bloody awesome, mate,” Ron said with a grin.

“I hope you mean to follow through with it,” said Hermione with a sniff. “It’s about time that lying little snot is put in her place.”

“Like the rubbish bin,” said Harry with a snarl. “Or the bloody shredder.”

Severus gave a dark chuckle. “Oh, if you put her in the shredder, that is precisely what it will be.”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“Bloody.”

Harry laughed and kissed Severus on the cheek. “Gods bless that dark humour of yours.”

Severus chuckled. Ron nudged Harry in the side and said, “Harry, what’s a shredder?”

“Muggle thing they use to ….” The reporters closed in, and Harry shuddered. “Ask your da or Hermione later, Ron,” he muttered and turned Severus towards the lifts.

Only to discover that the crowds had them blocked.

Severus snapped, “Get out of the way, you imbeciles! You’re blocking the lifts.”
But of course, no one listened. Everyone was desperate for a piece of Harry Potter.

“Move!”

The crowd moved all right—but towards them, and Harry backed away. He didn’t dare try to push on through them. He had no doubts someone would grab and grope, and maybe even hurt Severus. Lily and Remus squeezed in close, both trying to protect Severus and Harry, but the crowd wasn’t stopping.

In his fear, Harry’s wings emerged and folded around his mate. “Merlin. They’re coming after us, Sev. What do we do?”

“We stick together,” said Ron with a smirk. “Time for a redhead roundabout!”

Severus frowned. “A what?”

But the Weasleys were already following Ron’s order. To Harry’s immense relief, the entire family closed in around them—less Molly and George, who were still in the Infirmary with Fred. With Hermione’s help, they formed a circle around Severus, Remus, Lily, and Harry and blocked them sight and sound from the crowds.

There was something to be said for traveling with an army of Weasleys.

Thus protected, their group pushed through the wall of idiots, no one letting any of them near Harry’s family, and they all squeezed into the lift. When everyone was in, Lily ended up almost in Severus’ lap.

“Merlin, this is too close,” Severus muttered.

Lily laughed. “Sorry, Sev. Can’t stand up like this. It’s too cramped in here.”

Harry, smashed between Charlie, Arthur, and the wheelchair, could only find enough breath to nod. Thankfully, they were only going to level three, so the ride was a short one.

The doors opened at level three and Harry’s heart sank into his feet. Another wall of fans and reporters waited here, and his family couldn’t manoeuver well enough in the lift to surround him this time.

Ron barked, “Get out of the way!”

“Let us out,” snapped Harry. “We can’t move!”

To his horror, the crowd moved towards the lifts rather than away, and Harry let out a half-scream of fear and frustration. This time, he had nowhere to escape to.

A deep voice called, “All right, you lot, get the bloody hell back and let them out before I arrest every last one of you!”

Kingsley’s voice had never been so welcome. Harry sagged in relief as the crowd parted with a moan of disappointment, revealing the irritated auror and a company of his colleagues. The aurors moved into position in front of the crowd, pushing them back against the walls of the level three atrium, and Harry and his family were able to escape the lift without further trouble.

“Thanks, King,” Harry said as soon as he and Severus were clear. “Really, thanks. That was terrifying.”
Kingsley nodded. “I’ll bet. Just stick by me. I’ll escort you to the interrogation, since I’m the one questioning her anyway.”

Harry sighed. “Thank Merlin for that. I thought all the courtrooms and interrogation chambers were on level ten though.”

Kingsley scowled. “Only for Death Eaters and vicious criminals. You never should have been on that floor, let alone innocent Muggleborns and everyone else Umbridge hurt.”

“I do hope she’s been sacked,” said Severus.

“And in auror custody for a list of crimes ten pages long.”

“Add torture with a blood quill to it,” said Harry with a snarl.

Kingsley and the others drew up short. “A blood quill? Who? When?”

Harry held his hand up so the auror could see the scar running along the back of it.

Kingsley frowned and turned his hand into the light. “I must not tell lies.’ She did this to you?”

“Fifth year, during all those detentions. It wasn’t just me, either.”

Kingsley’s lip curled in a snarl. “Filthy hag. I’ll make sure the bitch goes to Azkaban for life.”

“As evil as she is,” Ron spat, “she deserves ten lifetimes there.”

“Well, she’s only got the one, thankfully,” said Hermione. “Are we going?”

“Right. Come along then.” Kingsley waved them on and everyone followed.

After a moment of enduring more shouts from reporters, Harry muttered, “King? Can I file a formal suit against Rita Skeeter?”

Kingsley scowled. “If you have solid evidence that she committed libel, yes. Otherwise, there’s nothing I can do.”

Harry grimaced. “Pensieve memories won’t work?”

“Yes, but like I said, it’s not enough just to show the truth of whatever event Skeeter twisted and call it evidence. You have to be able to prove she knew the truth and wrote whatever she wanted anyway.”

Harry frowned. “But if you used Veritaserum—”

“It’s illegal without some kind of evidence against the subject,” said Severus with a shake of his head. “Which reminds me, you should also add illegal Veritaserum use against students to Umbridge’s record.”

“Done,” said Kingsley. “Merlin, that woman is foul.”

“You’re telling me,” said Ron with a shudder. “Ugh.”

Harry nodded absently and rubbed his chin, still thinking on his issues with Rita Skeeter. “King, what about that interview in fourth year, the first one before the Triwizard Tournament? I can give you my memory of what questions Skeeter asked and my answers, then all you’d have to do is look
up the article to see her embellishments. Would that be enough for Veritaserum?”

A feral smile spread over Kingsley’s face. “She made up answers you didn’t give?”

“And completely cocked up the ones I did. I barely said ten words in that interview. She made up everything else.”

Kingsley grinned. “We’ve got her then. Give me your memory of that before you go and I’ll get your case started. Andrew Greenwood is a great solicitor and has the right kind of attitude and experience for this case. I’ll send a copy of your evidence to him, all right?”

Harry nodded. “Thanks, King.”

“I should be thanking you. We’ve wanted to get her off the streets for years, but she’s too damn slippery. This should be enough to put her away. Thank you.”

Harry grinned. “You are most welcome.”

They walked in silence a bit longer, only broken by the muffled voices of the crowd by the lifts.

“King, one more thing,” said Harry in a halting voice. “Um, I know I was pretty hard on them yesterday, but you should go easy on Draco Malfoy in the trials.”

“Harry!” Ron squawked as if Harry had mortally offended him. “How could you even say that? I mean, besides the fact that he’s a vicious little prat, he wanted to kill Dumbledore—well, the Bearded Bastard had it coming, frankly—but we didn’t know that at the time and Malfoy still wanted him dead.”

Harry frowned. “No, Ron, Malfoy was forced to attack Dumbledore. He was under compulsions, remember? And Riddle had his mum as a hostage. And his dad is a sadistic bastard.” He shook his head. “That boy never had a chance. He shouldn’t get off completely, Kingsley, but neither should he suffer for things he couldn’t help.”

Kingsley nodded. “We’ll investigate for compulsions and other evidence to help him, but if you could speak for him during his trial, that’s what would turn the tide for him, Harry. It doesn’t matter that he was forced and under compulsions, all the Wizengamot is going to see is that mark on his arm unless you force them to open their eyes. I would suggest Severus since he’s our walking proof that people can make terrible mistakes and rise above them, but they’re prejudiced idiots. They’re going to treat him the same way without your help.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.” Harry sighed. “All right, I’ll do it. I hate the little ferret, but he doesn’t deserve Azkaban.”

Kingsley patted Harry’s shoulder. “Noted. I’ll add you as a witness for the defence then—under Fidelius, of course—and let you know when you need to be here.”

“Sounds good. Well, not good, but you know what I mean.”

Kingsley laughed. “I do indeed.”

Ron gave Harry a wounded look. “Testifying at Malfoy’s trial. Who are you and what have you done with Harry Potter?”

Hermione smacked him in the back of the head. “Some people are capable of showing maturity, Ronald. I, for one, am proud of him.”
Ron winced. “Ronald? Bloody hell. I’ve done it now, haven’t I, mate?”

Harry laughed and nodded.

Ron sighed. “If you don’t see me around tomorrow, it’s because she has me cleaning out Myrtle’s bathroom with a toothbrush.”

Hermione giggled. “Oh, I’m sure I can find something more useful for you to do.” A steely gleam entered her eyes. “Like helping me research the current laws and regulations concerning our government.”

Ron frowned. “Laws and regulations? Why do you want to research those?”

“Well, someone has to start cleaning up this sham of a Ministry. I plan to be that someone.”

Ron nodded. “Count me in, and you don’t need to punish me to do it either. If it means making sure idiots like Fudge can’t get into office again and ruin things for everyone, I want to help.”

Severus snorted. “You are going to spend the day researching legal texts? Did pigs grow wings overnight?”

Harry laughed. “Maybe he got hit on the head during the battle.”

Ron glared. “Oi! I can research. A bit.”

“We’re only teasing, Ron,” said Harry with a pat to his friend’s shoulder. “I think it’s a great idea. I don’t have time to help or I would.”

“I’ll help,” said Lily with a grin. “And way to show some maturity there, Ron.”

Ron grinned.

Hermione chuckled and kissed his cheek. “I knew there was a reason I fell in love with you.”

“Not because of my fantastic body?” He flexed his biceps and struck a pose, making everyone laugh.

“Definitely not,” said Hermione with a snort.

Ron sighed and slumped dramatically. “Well, can’t blame a bloke for trying.”

Kingsley winked. “You just need a bit of training up. Five months of auror training, and no one will be able to fault you.”

Ron beamed. “Glad someone sees my worth.”

“Hmm. We’ll see how you feel about that statement after a couple of weeks in the corps.” Kingsley waved to a door on the left of them. “Well, here we are, everyone. The room is too small to hold all of you, so only two people can come in with Severus and Harry. Who do you want, Severus?”

Severus deferred the question to Harry.

Harry frowned and considered his choices. “Um, Hermione and Mum? They’re the ones who know the most about Sev and this situation, other than me. Sorry, everyone.”

“It’s all right, mate,” said Ron with a lopsided grin. “I’d probably hex her halfway through and get us all into trouble anyway.”
Harry chuckled. “Maybe. We’ll be out soon, okay?”

The others wished them good luck, and Harry followed Kingsley into the room, pushing Severus’ chair ahead of him. Hermione and Lily followed after giving their respective partners a quick kiss goodbye.

The room was quite small, and Harry was glad Kingsley had left most of their entourage outside. Harry took a seat on the witness bench situated a short distance away from a table with two chairs. Cho sat at one end of the table, locked in magical cuffs and magically restrained to the seat, and a female auror Harry didn’t know sat beside her. The unknown auror looked up as they came in and nodded to the witnesses. Cho wasn’t so friendly.

“You,” she snarled at Severus as soon as he appeared. “You were supposed to die!”

“So sorry to disappoint you,” Severus said in a dry tone.

Harry snorted. “Merlin, you’re brilliant, Sev.”

He gave Harry a warm smile. Meanwhile, Cho struggled against her restraints, but a flick of the unknown auror’s wand stopped her cold.

“Enough of that, young lady.”

Cho glared at the woman, but being petrified from the neck down, could do little else.

The woman ignored her. “Are we ready to start the questioning, King?”

“As soon as I get the Veritaserum ready.” Kingsley gave Severus an apologetic look. “I’d ask you for a phial, but it’s a conflict of interest. Still, will you look this over and tell me if it’s good?”

He handed the man a small phial of clear liquid. Severus uncorked the phial and sniffed it, rolled a drop of potion on his fingertips, and tasted the smallest measure. Apparently satisfied with his testing, he stoppered it and handed it back to the auror.

“Not up to my standard,” he said with a smile that was part grimace, “but it will certainly do the job.”

Kingsley grinned. “Good enough for me, then. From here on out, you lot need to be quiet unless I ask you for clarification, okay? This is an official investigation and thus should be carried out in a professional manner. Not to mention, the dicta-scroll I’m about to conjure will record everything spoken aloud within the room and it gets to be a mess if too many people speak out at once. You can raise your hand if you have something relevant to add, but don’t just call it out, all right?”

Harry’s group nodded.

“Good.” Kingsley went to the table and tapped his wand at the centre, causing a roll of parchment to appear. “Auror head Kingsley Shacklebolt presiding over case number 67812, Severus Snape against Cho Chang, charges of attempted murder, assault with a deadly weapon, and aggravated assault. Female observer is present in accordance with law number 3891-Z, observer is auror Ellen Page, weapons specialist for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Also present in the observation deck is the victim: Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, chief spy, war hero, and general of the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Tobias Snape. His attendants are his mate, the hero of the war, Boy-Who-Lived—”

Harry snorted, but managed to keep from saying anything.
“—Vanquisher of Voldemort, and all too modest hero who deserves a little fuss—” Kingsley winked at Harry, making him chuckle. “—Harry James Potter. Also in attendance are Severus’ long-time friend and Harry’s mother, war heroine Lily Anne Evans Potter, and Harry’s long-time friend and Severus’ acquaintance and student, war heroine Hermione Granger. All present were soldiers in the Battle of Hogwarts, where, at approximately 6:21 A.M., Miss Chang attacked General Snape with a katana, causing him grievous injury. Miss Granger was on the scene at the time of the attack. Other witnesses were fighting the late Tom Marvolo Riddle, otherwise known as You-Know-Who and … V-Voldemort.” He shuddered and took a calming breath.

“Suspect is to be dosed with Veritaserum lot number 304-B, brewed November 28th, 1997, in the Ministry of Magic labs. Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt will now administer three drops to the suspect according to the dosage instructions.” With a sigh, Kingsley held the bottle out and moved to stand opposite Cho. “Miss Chang, open your mouth, please.”

Cho glared and clamped her jaw tightly shut.

“I repeat, open your mouth, or I will resort to force.”

She glared harder.

“For the record, suspect is refusing to cooperate. *Aperta Orum.*” With a flick of his wand, Kingsley forced Cho’s lips apart and let three drops fall onto her tongue. “*Hirundo.*”

Cho closed her mouth and swallowed, and a moment later, a glazed expression wiped away her glare. Kingsley waved his hand in front of her eyes, and when she gave no response but to follow it slowly, he sheathed his wand and sat opposite the girl.

“Veritaserum has been successfully administered and appears to be working correctly. Now commencing testing. Miss Chang, what is your full name?”

“Cho Mei-Li Chang,” she said in a dull monotone.

“Where did you attend wizarding school?”

“Hogwarts.”

“How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

Kingsley nodded and checked the parchment. “Testing phase is complete. Veritaserum is working correctly.” He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands in front of him. “Miss Chang, did you attack Severus Snape with a katana during the battle of Hogwarts?”

Cho made faces and winced in pain, a sign of fighting the potion. Eventually, it forced her compliance.

“Yes,” she muttered.

“Why?”

“Because he was in my way.”

Kingsley’s eyes narrowed. “Explain.”

Cho fought the potion again, but ultimately lacked the strength to win out. “Harry is mine, and Snape
took him from me.”

“Yours? What makes you believe Harry is yours?”

“We dated, in fifth year. I was there for him when he was sad over Cedric and fighting Umbridge and Snape. He’s supposed to be with me.”

Harry fidgeted and raised his hand, trying not to speak but desperate to clarify. Kingsley nodded.

“Note that witness Harry Potter would like to speak on Miss Chang’s accusations. Go ahead, Harry.”

“We did date in fifth year,” Harry said with a scowl, “but only once, and it was a disaster. I did mourn Cedric, yes, and I was fighting Severus and Umbridge at the time, but I did so with Ron and Hermione’s help, not Cho’s. She and I maybe talked five times in our entire acquaintance.”

“For the record, Harry,” said Ella, “which Ron and Hermione? We all know, but the Ministry needs to keep everything clear.”

“Oh. Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. Also, I broke up with Cho in fifth year. We didn’t speak much after that so I have no clue where she gets the idea that I belong to her.”

Kingsley nodded. “Thank you, Harry. Miss Chang, did Harry break up with you in fifth year?”

She glared. “No.”

Kingsley raised an eyebrow at Harry, but Harry was dumbfounded.

“But I did. Ask anyone.”

Hermione raised her hand, and Kingsley nodded to her.

“Hermione Granger would like to clarify. Go ahead, Hermione.”

She gave Harry an apologetic smile. “The technical truth is that Harry didn’t break up with her—he ghosted her, but it was still clear that he had no wish to continue the relationship with Cho.”

Kingsley frowned. “Ghosted?”

“As in he simply cut off contact with her rather than giving her a clear no. However, at the end of the year, Cho tried to rekindle the relationship and Harry told her in no uncertain terms to go away.”

Kingsley gave Harry an exasperated look, and Harry blushed under the scrutiny. In hindsight, he might have handled that situation better.

“Miss Chang, is that true? Did Harry make it clear to you that he had no desire to pursue a romantic relationship with you?”

Cho fought the potion again, but it won out in the end. “Yes,” she muttered.

“Then why do you believe him to be yours?”

“Because he should be!” Her emotions broke through the monotone briefly. “I had first claim, but then he left me alone for that Death Eater.”

Harry snarled, but Severus clapped his hand over the young man’s mouth before he could contradict her.
Kingsley answered in a calm tone, “Which Death Eater are you speaking of?”

“Snape.”

“Severus Snape was a spy, not a Death Eater.”

Harry shot his hand in the air again.

“Harry Potter would like to clarify once more. Harry?”

Harry held up Severus’ arm, revealing his bare, unmarked forearm. “He’s clear.”

Kingsley grinned. “For the record, Mister Potter just revealed Severus’ left arm, where no Dark Mark is apparent. Thank you, Harry.”

Harry smirked and sat again, folding Severus’ hand into his lap. Severus gave Harry a wry smile and curled his fingers around his mate’s.

Cho glared at them as if she knew she’d been tricked despite the potion, but Harry just glared back.

“Now that we’ve that settled,” said Kingsley, “Miss Chang, what makes you think that you have any claim on Mister Potter’s life?”

“I was there first.”

“And I dated a woman named Emmeline Vance first, but that did not give me claim to her. In fact, I think her widower would have to argue I had no claim at all. Even he had no claim on her because Emmeline was her own person, with her own rights and the freedom to make her own choices. As is Harry. And for someone who thinks they love Harry, you sure are acting a lot like you hate him. So why are you angry at him, then?”

Cho struggled again, but eventually had no choice but to answer. “He ruined my life.”

Kingsley gave her a curious look. “Explain. How did Harry ruin your life?”

“No one wants to be associated with the girl Harry Potter dumped. I can’t get a job. Can’t get into school. Can’t do anything, just because Harry didn’t want me.”

Harry’s heart sank into his feet, and pain forced him to speak. “Merlin, Cho! Why didn’t you just say something? Why attack my mate?”

Kingsley sighed in exasperation, but let the question stand.

“Because it’s your fault I’m like this in the first place,” Cho replied in that dead tone. “And Snape doesn’t deserve to be happy when I’m not.”

Severus glared the girl down, but did not respond. Harry opened his mouth to reply, but caught Kingsley’s glare and closed it again. Instead, he curled into Severus’ arms and buried his face in his mate’s shoulder, trembling all over. Severus stroked Harry’s cheek and kissed his forehead, comforting him without saying a word.

Kingsley continued the interrogation, probing Cho for information about accomplices and how she made it to Severus without being killed herself—she had none and apparently the other Light sided fighters had defended her, not knowing her true motives—but as far as Harry was concerned, he’d heard enough. Cho had been blacklisted simply because Harry didn’t want to date her. Did that mean Ginny would face the same treatment? No. Surely the Order would help her? But what if she wanted
to work somewhere that the Order didn’t control?

Harry supposed it wouldn’t hurt to send her off with a letter of recommendation, just in case.

Harry wished he had known about Cho’s predicament before now. He’d have done the same for her if she had only asked him.

Now he could do nothing. Cho would be blacklisted even harder, not for what Harry had done, but for her own choices. She had attacked the mate of Harry Potter and the General of the last battle. Now no one in the world would hire her, even when her sentence was up, and even if Harry tried to help. He wasn’t sure what he could do to fix it.

“Miss Chang,” said Kingsley in a subdued voice, “it surely wasn’t fair for you to endure censure for a childhood relationship that didn’t go well, but why on earth didn’t you just come to Harry for help? You know he’d have tried to clear your name, if at all possible.”

Cho lowered her head. “No, he wouldn’t have. No one would. Everyone hates me.”

She burst into tears, and it was a long half-hour before Kingsley could continue the investigation. To Harry, each of her sobs was like a knife in his ribs. He had done this, just by choosing not to be her mate for life.

Gods, he had to do something to help her.

After the questioning had been completed and when Kingsley went to turn off the parchment recorder, Harry raised his hand again.

“Harry? The interrogation is finished. Did you have another question?”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Er, not quite a question. I just … after all this, well, it sounds like she’s mentally ill rather than evil. If I might, I would like it on record that I suggest she be sent to St. Mungo’s for treatment rather than be incarcerated in Azkaban with Death Eaters and child molesters. She did hurt Severus, true, but he’s going to be all right, and it … I never meant to make life so hard for her.”

Kingsley sighed. “The record accepts Harry Potter’s recommendation.” He turned off the parchment and gave Harry a sad smile. “Just so you know, Harry, it’s not your fault. I know you’d have helped her, if she had only asked.”

Harry nodded. “Like I’ll help Ginny, now that I know this is a problem she might face, but you heard Cho. She didn’t think she could ask me. She thought everyone hated her and would have turned her away. It’s not a healthy viewpoint, King. I should know.”

Severus curled his arm around Harry’s waist and stroked his flank. “Systematic child abuse is a different animal, Harry. You were ill because your relatives made you believe you were worthless over years and years of severe abuse and neglect. Chang was rejected from a few classes and positions. The situation is hardly the same.”

Harry shrugged. “It doesn’t matter though. What Cho went through was enough to hurt her. She’s never faced the kind of hell I have, true, but that same hell was what made me strong. Of course her breaking point is going to be lower when she’s never had to fight before.”

Kingsley gave Harry a sad smile. “Pain has made you too wise for your age, Harry.” He sighed and rubbed a hand over his bald head. “Very well. I’ll do my best to make sure she gets treatment rather than incarceration, but in the end, the final decision doesn’t rest with me.”
Harry nodded. “It’s why I put my recommendation on record. Maybe it’s too late to help her with a career, but if I can keep her out of prison, then I’ll try.”

Severus sighed and tugged Harry closer. “Bloody soft-hearted Gryffindors.”

Harry winced. “Are you upset, Sev?”

“No, I actually agree with you. I just couldn’t resist teasing you a bit.”

Harry sighed and lifted Severus’ hand to his lips. “Come, love. Let’s get out of this zoo.”

Kingsley waved him over. “Let me get that memory about your interview with Skeeter first, Harry.” He turned to his colleague. “Can you escort Chang to the holding cells and finish up here? I have evidence for another case to collect and then I’m going to get Harry et al out of here via a portkey. No sense in making them endure that rabid bunch of lunatics again.”

Ellen gave him a bright smile. “I’ve got it. Just get Harry and the Professor home.” She grumbled. “Rabid bunch of lunatics is right. I could barely get to the lifts this morning because of Skeeter and her ilk, and I came in at six!”

Kingsley smirked. “With any luck, she’ll be out of business soon enough.”

“Oh? In that case, off with you, and be quick about it.”

Kingsley laughed and led Harry and his family out of the interrogation room.

Later that night, Harry lay with his mate in the headmaster’s bed, panting into Severus’ neck after a cleansing round of lovemaking. Severus’ skin was hot and damp, and his breath rushed in short gasps against Harry’s fringe.

“Merlin, you’re good at this, Harry.”

The young man blushed and wrapped his mate in his wings. “Mm, and you’re good for my ego.”

Severus laughed. “I wasn’t always.” He stroked a finger down Harry’s jaw. “Are you happy with me, love?”

“Happy!” Harry nuzzled his mate’s neck. “Much more than happy, Sev. I adore you.”

Severus turned on his side and tugged Harry closer, tucking the younger man under his chin. “As I, you. Have you thought about what you wish to do with your future?”

“Well, I’ll have to finish out the year here first, I suppose. You’d never let me live it down if I didn’t.”

Severus chuckled. “No indeed. You are too intelligent to let your NEWTs go. But after that, have you considered what you would like to do?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t think I want to be an auror still. Maybe I can’t be anyway because of the oaths I took when I became a full Reaper. I’m not supposed to kill if I can help it and I might not have a choice if I worked for the aurory.” He sighed into Severus’ neck. “I really don’t know yet.
I’m thinking of trying my hand at healing. Am I in the proper classes?”

Severus nodded. “You will need an OWL in ancient runes and arithmancy, but I will be glad to tutor you independently in pursuit of those. It may take a year or so after your NEWTs to complete, but I believe it to be well within your capabilities. Is it still something you wish to pursue?”

“Yeah. I think so. Could I work with children?”

“Yes. You can choose your specialty in healer training and be apprenticed accordingly.”

“Would I have to work at St. Mungo’s?”

“For your training, yes, but after that, you can choose whether to stay on at the hospital or to go into private practice. If you were to work as a paediatric mediwizard, you could see patients in an office setting, and you would not have to keep the mad hours of a hospital healer, either. You could set your own hours, though you will still have the occasional emergency to deal with and on-call days.”

Harry grinned. “That sounds brilliant. Thank you, love.”

Severus smiled and stroked Harry’s cheek. “This is what you wish to do?”

Harry nodded. “Been thinking on it ever since I helped the healers in the Infirmary. My Dragoon skills are too powerful to let them go to waste, but I really don’t want to work in a place as public as St. Mungo’s. I’d be harassed constantly.”

“And in a private practice, you could set personal wards to keep reporters and fans away. Hmm. I rather think you have the right idea. I will help you achieve your goals as best as I am able, love.”

“Thank you, Sev.” Harry kissed him softly. “Speaking of working with kids, are you still thinking of adopting?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. I would like to.”

“Maybe after term ends?”

“Well, yes, but where would we raise a child, Harry? Grimmauld Place is no more, and I would not feel comfortable raising a child there regardless.”

“No, neither would I. But Mum would probably let us use her old flat until we could find a place of our own. Or maybe here . . . .”

Severus shook his head. “Lily’s former ‘flat’ is too difficult to access and I do not intend to stay on at Hogwarts after this term. This school is too full of painful memories for me. I would prefer to take a career as an independent potions researcher. As such, I would be able to work in my spare time, so I can watch the children while you are away for training.”

Harry rubbed his chin. “Then how about we use the Easter hols to find a house? By the time term ends, it should be ready. Then we could adopt as soon as I’m done with my NEWTs, if you want. Or I can go to Gringotts tomorrow and see if my inheritance came with any properties we might like.”

Severus grinned. “An inspired idea, though we will also need to wait until after the bonding is complete. We would not wish to bring a child home into all that stress, and they could not otherwise take our proper name. However, preparing to adopt now is an excellent idea. We should have our finances in order at any rate, and the goblins may also be able to help us find a realtor. With any luck,
by the hols, all we will need do is visit the properties we have already chosen on paper and decide on our future home.”

Harry nodded. “Then it’s settled. I’ll visit the bank first thing in the morning and see what I can find. Maybe help me come up with a list of what we’re looking for before I go?”

“I will. Take Remus or one of the elder Weasleys with you and use your cloak.”

“All right.” Harry snuggled into his husband’s chest, warmth and peace flooding him. A silly grin crossed his face.

“What has you so happy?”

“We’re going to be parents soon, love. I’m excited!”

Severus chuckled and kissed Harry lightly. “I am relieved. To have a place at last, where I am loved and wanted and home—it is the hope of sanctuary after years of wandering.”

Tears blurred Harry’s eyes. “Yeah. You’re home, Sev. So am I.” He kissed his mate with passion and love. “Merlin, how I love you, Severus.”

“And I, you.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “Get some sleep, my love. After you return from the bank, we must begin repairing the castle if we are to bring the students back in time to finish the year.”

“All right.” Harry yawned and snuggled his mate. “You know, it feels a bit surreal to be making all these plans. I never thought I’d have the chance to talk about my future after the war. I never really believed I’d survive.”

Severus cradled his mate close and kissed Harry tenderly. “I understand. After decades of torment and chaos and manipulation, we are finally safe and free to live our lives as we see fit. It is not a feeling I am used to yet either.”

Harry moved back enough to look into Severus’ eyes. “We’ll get used to it, right? One day, we’ll just be a normal family going about a normal life?”

Severus smiled and slipped his hand into Harry’s. “Yes. One day, we will simply be a typical family, living somewhere out in the country where the chaos of war can no longer touch us. I look forward to sharing those peaceful days with you, my Harry.”

Harry sighed into Severus’ cheek. “Yeah. A quiet life in the countryside, just you and our kids. Merlin, I can’t wait.”

Severus’ voice was soft and full of hope. “Neither can I.”

They snuggled close and let sleep claim them. And for the first time in seventeen years, Harry dreamed of the future with a smile on his face.
Week 6

Chapter Summary

Warnings: discussion of child abuse and punishment of abusers. Not graphic.
Summary: Harry goes to Gringotts and finds more than a home waiting for him. Severus takes Harry, Remus, and Lily to the Dursleys’ hiding spot to exact justice and find an unexpected ally along with a pair of hateful idiots.

***AN1: My apologies for the delay on this. My grandmother died on the 3rd. I’ve lived with her 17 years of my life. We were very close, and I’ve been dealing with grief and struggling to attend as much of the funeral ceremonies as I could while in severe pain and with a hyperactive young toddler in tow. I’m already in chronic pain from spinal disease and I have 2 extra herniated disks right now--there were already 4 in my thoracic spine and now 2 more lumbar ones. The lumbar ones hurt much worse. It’s been hard to keep up given everything. Thank you for your patience.***

***AN2: Besides that, I’ve been attacked by 4 evil plot bunnies and couldn't stop on those until recently. Whew. I'll have no shortage of new Snarry stories when this ends.***

CHAPTER 35
WEEK 6

‘Thank Merlin for invisibility cloaks,’ thought Harry as, with Remus acting as decoy, he slipped past a group of hopeful fans and reporters hoping to catch him on his way to Gringotts.

Never mind that Severus had played as much of a role in winning the war as Harry had—if not more of one—no, all anyone cared about was the ‘Boy-Who-Lived-To-Defeat-The-Berk-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named,’ or whatever misnomer the Prophet had coined this week. Harry was seriously considering buying them out and subsequently relegating them to reporting nothing more interesting than adverts for broom polish if they didn’t stop hounding him.

A vicious grin crossed his face as he slipped undetected into the bank. Assuming he had enough galleons to manage, he might just do that. After he published several articles making it clear that anyone who did not cease and desist their obsessive shadowing of Harry Potter would soon be hexed and/or jailed for their trouble. And after publishing a few articles making it clear that Harry was not the sole hero of the war and really, his involvement had been relatively minimal. He had just patched up a soul and sent it on its merry way into the afterlife. It was Severus who had done all the hard work. Severus, McGonagall, the DA, the aurors—hell, even Ferin had done more in terms of actual battle. They deserved the credit.

And if Harry had the means, by gods, he was going to give it to them.

A sharp nudge in the ribs from Remus forced Harry out of his thoughts. “Ow! What was that—oh.” He hadn’t realised they were already at the teller booth, and the goblin was eyeing Harry—or at least
where he thought Harry might be—with a none-too-patient expression.

“Oh Merlin,” Harry mumbled, a fierce flush heading up his face. “S-sorry about that. Got a bit distracted by the reporters outside.”

The goblin did not appear amused. “Indeed. And your business is …?”

“Right! Er …” Harry fished out his key and set it on the counter, then pulled back his cloak just enough to reveal his face to the goblin. “I need a full accounting of my inheritance, if there is one, with particular attention to what properties and funds I have access to, if any.” He smiled wryly. “There are other things I need, but I thought it would be best to see what I’m working with first before I get too far ahead of myself.”

The goblin took the key. “Indeed. I advise you to keep that cloak on at all times until you are well away from the lobby and the tunnels. I will have an aide show you to a private conference room and fetch your accounts manager.” He tapped a silvery orb on his desk, making it glow green. “Rugnok!”

A youngish-looking goblin darted to the teller’s desk so fast, his ears flapped into his face. “Yes, Master Helthor. I am ready!”

The old teller gave a put-upon sigh. “For Grabthar’s sake, boy, control yourself.” He handed the chastised youth Harry’s key. “And once you have done so, see our clients here to conference room B. Steadily. Master … Sir here wants a full accounting of his holdings.”

Rugnok smiled in what Harry supposed must have been a cheerful manner for a sharp-toothed, eerie-looking creature and motioned for them to follow. “Right this way, sirs.”

More than a little amused, Harry obeyed.

“I am glad to help you today, Masters,” the goblin chirped.

*Chirped?* Whoever heard of a chirping goblin, but nevertheless, his voice had a distinct chirrup to it. Merlin. Harry wanted to laugh, but kept his mirth to himself so as not to offend their guide.

“I’ve never seen a human with a creature inheritance before,” the goblin continued with no care to Harry’s irreverent amusement. “Or rather smelled one, since I can’t see you at all. How are you hiding? Goblins can see through disillusionment spells, you know.”

He was hard-pressed not to snort at the young goblin’s enthusiasm. Did goblins just get cranky as they got older, or was this one more like Dobby in that he was an odd duck among his people? As Remus looked a bit flabbergasted, Harry guessed it was closer to the latter.

“Er, it’s an invisibility cloak,” said Harry. “A particularly rare one.”

Rugnok nodded so hard his ears flapped again. “Ah, I’d forgotten … your family had one passed down through the lines. It’s famous among our kin, did you know? It’s been passed down from the Peverell brothers, who were the originators of the Deathly Hallows story in Beedle the Bard. It’s only a story, you know, but there’s no denying that’s a rare cloak. It’s worth a vault-full of galleons.”

Remus gave Harry’s general location a bemused look. Harry shrugged, then remembered Remus couldn’t see it.

“Thank you for telling me about the cloak, Master Rugnok,” said Harry.
“Oh, just Rugnok. I’m not a master yet.” The goblin adopted a mutinous expression. “If old Master Helthor has anything to say about it, I never will be.”

Harry thanked the presence of his cloak once more as it hid the grin he couldn’t suppress. The hyper goblin sounded a bit like Harry had while complaining about Severus in the old days.

“You know, Rugnok, I quite like you. How would you like to help me with … a certain task I need done before I leave today? Maybe that will help your standing with Master Helthor.”

Rugnok gaped. “You have a task for me? Most wizards just think I’m too odd.”

“Well, I happen to be a rather odd person myself, so I don’t mind that too much.”

“Wonderful!” The goblin paused. “Ah, what is it you would like me to do?”

Harry smiled. “Well, if I have anything of worth to inherit—”

Remus rolled his eyes. “Harry, the Potter inheritance is one of the largest in Britain, not to mention what Sirius left for you. You have plenty.”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Right. Are we talking Malfoy level of wealth here?”

“Honestly? It’s probably more than that. Especially given that you’ve no doubt acquired several ‘gifts’ since the fall of Voldemort.”

Harry scowled. “I can’t give those back?”

Remus gave him a commiserating look. “Not without gravely offending whomever sent it, no.”

Harry sighed. “Then I suppose I’ll have to open a charity or something. Inheritances are one thing—money from strangers is another story entirely. But anyway, Rugnok, back to your task: I’d like you to look through my vaults for a few things in particular that I won’t have time to handle myself today.”

Rugnok nodded. “I can do that, as long as you give me permission.”

“Yes, you have permission. I need you to look for any fancy potions gear or finished potions, books or journals on either potions or dark arts, and … bonding rings, if there are any to be had. You don’t need to bring the lot to me, just pick out the best and bring them by while I’m in conference about my holdings.”

Remus grinned. “Going to surprise Severus with an engagement gift?”

“Of course. So, while it might not seem like a lot, this is really important to me, Rugnok, and I’d appreciate your help.”

Rugnok rubbed his toe in the floor. “You should probably ask a better goblin for that.”

Harry shook his head. “You’re more like me. You’ll pick out the same kind of things I would, at least I think so. Besides, my instincts are telling me you’re the best man—er, goblin, I should say—for the job.” He wasn’t fibbing about that, either. “Will you do it?”

Rugnok gave him a bashful smile—at least, Harry thought it was bashful judging by the pink on the goblin’s cheeks and ears. “I’d be happy to, Master Potter.” He said the name in a whisper, much to Harry’s relief. “I’ll do my best to find something suitable for Master Snape.”
“I’m sure you’ll do brilliantly. Thank you.” Harry gave him a formal bow, much like he had done with the vampires the evening before. The goblin’s eyes widened and shimmered.

“I … you are welcome, Master Potter. And thank you.”

“You’re welcome too.”

Rugnok blinked hard and looked away, but couldn’t hide the beaming grin on his face. “The conference room is right in here, sirs. Once you’re seated and I’ve called for your accounts manager, I’ll be right off to find the items you requested.”

Harry led Remus into a cozy conference room and gave the goblin a bright smile. “Thank you again, Rugnok.”

The goblin grinned and bowed before running to a strange-looking callbox in the corner of the room.

Remus whispered in Harry’s ear, “I think you’ve just made a friend for life out of him.”

“Well, we can all use more friends, can’t we?”

Remus chuckled. “Too right.”

If not for the Patronus Harry had sent Severus at lunchtime—‘Potter accounts much bigger than anticipated. This is going to take a while.’—Severus would have been mad with worry by the time Harry trudged into the Headmaster’s suite near six that evening, manila folder and shrunken parcel in hand. The young man looked dead on his feet, and Severus, having abandoned his hoverchair that morning, rushed to help his lover onto their private sofa and pulled Harry’s feet into his lap.

Harry sank into the plush sofa with a groan, looking content to fall asleep right there. “Dear gods, Sev, that was a bloody nightmare.”

Severus snorted. “I am rather glad I haven’t much left to claim in that case.”

Harry peeled open one eye. “Actually, I checked on that. It’s true there isn’t much left in terms of money—and we’ve certainly no more need of that—but you did have a house left to your name.”

Severus popped off Harry’s boots and rubbed his swollen soles before he would respond. “Oh?”

Harry groaned again and melted into the sofa. “Oh bloody hell, that’s amazing.”

“Hmm.” Severus removed Harry’s socks, too, and dug unerring fingers into the young man’s heel. “You were saying?”

“I have no idea,” Harry said, moaning with relief. “I can’t think of anything when you’re doing that.”

“Perhaps I will just have to put it aside then so you can form a coherent sentence.”

Harry gasped. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Severus grinned and dropped Harry’s foot in his lap.
“Okay, okay! I’ll talk. If I can. Merlin. Just don’t stop.”

Severus chuckled and resumed his massage. “Truth be told, it is quite relaxing for me as well. I rather missed this from our days when we were camping in the snow.”

Harry gave him a soft smile. “Then it’s your turn when you’re done with me. But first, I was talking about houses. All the Potter properties—well, except the one Moldyshorts ruined—are out. They’re all pompous, overblown, Malfoy-esque manors that I’d sooner gnaw off my own arm than live in. No thank you. Still, I thought we might use them for other purposes.”

Severus looked up from his massaging, intrigued. “Such as …?”

“Magical primary schools, magical orphanages and children’s homes, rehabilitation centres for the salvageable junior Death Eaters like Draco Malfoy, clinics and hospitals, day care centres—there are all kinds of services the wizarding world lacks, and since I have more money than I know what to do with and a bunch of houses I don’t want, I figured we could use our extra properties to do some good for our world. If that’s all right with you, that is.”

Severus frowned. “Harry, those are your properties. Do what you like with them.”

“No, beloved. They’re ours. What’s mine is yours, remember?”

A warm spiral of affection filled Severus’ chest. “If you truly feel you need my approval, then you have it. So long as we do not spend all our income on charitable affairs, or that we find a way to make your services break-even. Remember that we live an inordinate amount of time and will need much more than the average wizard to live comfortably.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Sev, we could buy and run a small country with what’s in our vaults. If Lucius Malfoy realised how much we have, he’d probably end up dying of jealous rage.”

Severus snorted. “A sight I should not like to miss. Perhaps we could drop a hint or two?”

Harry burst into laughter. “No, but Merlin, I love the way you think.”

“And I am ever so glad that you do.” Severus chuckled and rubbed Harry’s ankle. “But you said you were unable to find a suitable property for us?”

Harry smiled. “Actually, I said all the Potter properties are too frou-frou. Yours, on the other hand, is just perfect.” He handed the manila folder over and wriggled his feet against Severus’ thigh. “Look on the second page.”

“Hmm.” Severus had every intention of looking at the first page too, as it was a total sum of their combined finances. He paled at the number. “Dear gods, Harry. You weren’t in jest. We could live as kings for several hundred centuries on this.”

“It’s not diminishing either, so yeah, I think we need to give a huge chunk of that back. If nothing else, we could make it so the Ministry doesn’t have their grubby paws in everything.” Harry scowled. “And I want to buy out The Prophet.”

“Buy it out?” Severus smirked. “And force them to print what we want printed. How very Slytherin of you.”

“Well, I was thinking more along the lines of forcing them to print the actual truth or relegating them to the classifieds, but yeah, that was the general idea. Now, come on. Look at the house already. My feet are getting cold.”
Severus snorted and turned the page. He gasped at the sight of it. It was a lovely Tudor style home with a privacy hedge, gorgeous grounds complete with plenty of room for a potions garden and hothouse, and morning glories and climbing jasmine growing at will over the siding. A cedar grove provided privacy at the back of the grounds, and according to the parchment, the nearest neighbour lived a kilometre away and behind a row of forested hills. The house didn’t have a potions laboratory installed, but the full-sized, stone basement would be perfect to build one, especially if Severus could add some ventilation pipes along the back of the house. It had five bedrooms, enough for a big family if they wanted one someday, a large kitchen full of a blend of wizarding and muggle appliances, two and a half baths, and a functional floo in the living room. And, while it needed some work, it was in relatively good repair despite having been abandoned for three decades.

“This … this looks like it would suit us well, my Harry.”

Harry grinned. “Look at the location. The Muggle address.”

Severus frowned and peeked at the street address, but it meant little to him. “Where is ‘Airys Grove,’ love?”

Harry beamed so brightly, Severus thought he might be blinded by his radiance. “It’s a small wizarding village about five kilometres from Hearthstane.”

Severus’ heart leapt. “Hearthstane? Merlin. This is the one, then.”

Harry smirked. “I thought it sounded providential myself.”

Severus rolled his eyes. “You are altogether too pleased with yourself. And I am amazed that you know that word.”

Harry chuckled. “Learned from the best.”

He wriggled his feet in Severus’ lap, asking for more attention, but then seemed to think better of it and sat up instead.

“Sev? I … I, uh, I have something for you.”

“For me?” Severus frowned. “Did you go to the shops, Harry?”

“No, no. Just had Rugnok search my vaults.”

“Rugnok?”

Harry grinned. “A goblin who reminds me strongly of Dobby. I think I want him to handle our accounts. I really didn’t like our current manager. She’s efficient, but rude and a bit domineering. Tried to change my mind about a lot of the things I want to do with my wealth. I had to be quite firm with her actually, and check that she wrote the paperwork out as I wanted it. That’s partially why this took so long. Remus had to double and triple check every word.”


Harry frowned. “Well, yeah. He’s not quite as exuberant as Dobby, but just as loyal. I mean, it can’t hurt to have someone who is completely on board with our goals in charge of our holdings, rather than someone neutral who may or may not act in our best interest.”

Severus nodded. “Point, but do you know this particular goblin is skilled enough to handle the
responsibility?"

Harry frowned. “Not yet. Perhaps we’ll give him a bit of responsibility at a time, see how he does, and go from there. I guess if you really don’t like him, we can just sack the current manager and replace her with someone more competent. I do want to test Rugnok first, though.”

“Now that is a much safer plan, and one I will support once I meet this Rugnok and judge his loyalty for myself. I would want to test any goblin we put over our accounts regardless, and we shall absolutely sack the current manager in short order if you feel she is untrustworthy. But what did you have the Doblin search for?”


Severus chuckled. “I do have my moments. So?”

To Severus’ alarm, Harry shrank in on himself as if afraid of retribution or rejection. Oh Merlin. What had the silly Gryffindor done this time?

Harry cleared his throat and gently magicked the coffee table across the room. He set his book-sized parcel on the floor, then took something smaller—about the size of a matchbook—out of the top and tapped the larger parcel with his wand. It grew into a box the size of a dinner table and nearly the same height, and Severus stood so that he could see what in the world Harry had brought.

With a nervous flourish, Harry pocketed his small parcel and flipped open the lid on the giant box. “Right, so first off, there’s a platinum and gold cauldron in here. Rugnok even found one of diamond, but it’s rather small. Still—diamond! And then there are several antique phial holders, lots of fancy apparatus sets I don’t recognise, and a set of fire crystal phials—”

Severus sank back onto the sofa with a whoosh. “Dear Merlin, Harry! Do you know what even one of those items is worth?”

Harry gave him a wry smile. “Well, they were just sitting around in my vaults. Best they get used instead, don’t you think?”

Severus gave him a shaky nod, numb with shock.

“There are also loads of rare ingredients. Things like basilisk venom—which there might still be a giant store of in the Chamber of Secrets, come to think of it—but there’s also phoenix tears, fire flower pods, um … unicorn tears, selkie hoof shavings, and a lot more. I don’t even know half of them, but both Rugnok and even our current accounts manager assured me they were priceless and perfectly preserved.” Harry grinned and bent into the box, lifting a stack of books from the bottom. “But these—these I think you’ll really like.” Harry placed a small stack of ancient books in Severus’ lap and bowed with a flourish. “Ta-da! The potions journals of Morgana le Fay.”

“M-Morgana?” Severus took the topmost book in shaking hands. The moment his skin came in contact with the leather binding, tingles of ancient magic raced through him and sang to his blood. “But … how?”

Harry shrugged. “Apparently I’m a direct descendant.”

“Dear Merlin.”

“Him too. The diamond cauldron was Merlin’s. Gift from the Lady of the Lake, I think.”
Severus flopped back onto the couch, stunned half out of his wits.

Harry gave a nervous chuckle and rubbed his toe in the ground. “I-is it good, then?”

Severus choked. “Good? Is it good? Dear gods, man, you just gave me the world on a platter!” He frowned. “Or perhaps in a box. How could you possibly doubt the value of what you have given me? Bloody hell, Harry!” He jerked back, shaking his head and trembling all over. “No. I … I cannot accept—it is too much. I have nothing to give you in return.”

Harry’s cheeks pinked. “Well, there is one thing you could give me, Sev, but I’m not asking for it in return for what I’ve given you or anything. Don’t feel obligated.” He sucked in a deep breath and seemed to steel himself. “It’s just that you have the only thing in the entire world I want. This fancy stuff, it doesn’t mean much to me. I gave it to you because I knew you would love it. But me, I just want a simple life, with you and our family all around us. The thing I want more than anything, the thing you can give me that would mean more to me than all the fancy stuff in the world—it’s you, Severus. Just you.”

He took in a shaky breath and knelt before Severus, holding out the matchbox parcel. With a whispered word, it grew to the size and shape of a ring box.

With a gasp, Severus opened the box and blinked back tears. Two beautiful silver rings lay inside the box, each with engraved ivy running across the band and gold rimming the edges.

“Oh, H-Harry.”

Harry’s wings and creature appearance showed through. “My Severus, you mean far more to me than all the gold in the world, or any cauldron, or even a fancy broom. Whether I have nothing to my name or all the wealth in the world over, I wish for nothing more than to have you by my side. I know I asked you once already, but now that I have the Peverell bonding rings, I would like to ask you again. Will you do me the honour of becoming my bonded husband as well as my mate? Will you bond with me in front of our friends and family, declare our love as true and unbreakable to the world, be the father of my children, and give me everything I have ever dreamed of?”

Through the tears of joy blinding him, Severus took one of the rings—the left one called out to his soul—and placed it on his wedding finger. It glowed with a pure white light—the sign of truest love from his partner—and resized to fit him. More tears streaked Harry’s face as he took the other ring and placed it on his own finger, revealing the snow-white purity of Severus’ love, too.

With a cry, Harry leapt into Severus’ arms, careless of the fragile and priceless journals in the man’s lap, and kissed him with abandon.

“Bedtime. We can sort out your potions stuff in the morning,” said Harry with a grin.

Severus laid the journals aside, swept his mate into his arms, and carried him away.

The next morning, Harry chatted with Remus, Severus, and Lily about the events of the day before.

“Mum, you wouldn’t believe half the stuff that’s in our vaults. There are things from Merlin! I couldn’t—it’s bloody amazing. Malfoy would wet himself if he knew.”
Lily chuckled. “And I’ll bet you gave the best of the lot to Severus, didn’t you, love?”

Harry blushed and gave her a lopsided grin. “Well, er, the potions stuff, yeah. It’s not like I’m going to use it. I’m a disaster at potions.”

“Did you save a bit for your mum? I rather enjoy them myself.”

“Loads. I just picked out what I thought Severus would like because I didn’t have time to gather more, but yeah. There are still plenty of potions things: rare potions equipment, ingredients, potions —anything you could ask for really. Gods, I have no idea what to do with it all, to be honest.”

“Some of it is probably safest left in a high security vault,” said Severus with a grim expression. “Anything dangerous or dark should be moved there, if it can be safely handled by the goblins. If not, it should be warded against those with ill intent. Perhaps we could distribute some of the rest or use it in a school.”

Harry nodded. “Good ideas, love. I’ll take care of it the next time I go to the bank. For now, I’d just like a rest day.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s back. “Take your day off. You’ve certainly earned it. However, tomorrow morning, we have some unfinished business to take care of.”


“It is not what you have done, love, but what was done to you. I speak of dealing with your … relatives.”

Harry cringed. “Must we? It’s over now. I’m happy.”

“Yes, we must. You deserve justice.”

Harry rocked in his chair. “But what if The Prophet finds out? I don’t want my story to be public knowledge.”

Severus shook his head. “You can’t possibly think those magic fearing Muggles would report it to a wizard, can you?”

“If it hurts them enough ….”

Severus nodded and rubbed his chin. “Well then, we shall have to include a Fidelius so that they cannot speak to anyone about their punishment.”

Harry shook his head. “No. I don’t want anyone else to get hurt because of me. Sev, you might get in trouble, and then what?”

“How, love? They can’t talk about it. No one will know. And besides, you are mistaken if you think I will simply use Unforgivables on them. Or other cruel curses. I am human, Harry, and I am done with the dark.”

Harry frowned. “Then what do you plan to do?”

Lily answered in a hard voice. “The standard punishment for harsh child abusers who aren’t able to go to Azkaban—squibs and Muggles in other words. The Redire Datum Dolor curse. It reflects the pain they gave you onto them.”

Harry shuddered. “Still awful. Why not let the aurors do it if it’s standard punishment?”
Remus shook his head at Harry. “Because then the papers might get wind of it, Harry. There are still too many leaks at the Ministry to risk it.”

Harry gave them all a pleading look. “I … I don’t want … I don’t like this.”

“I know.” Severus pulled the young man in his lap. “And if it truly disturbs you, then we shall not do it. But, Harry, you must know that what they did to you was criminal. What Lily and I are going to do is nothing more than what the justice system would do to them here if we were able to report it.”

“It’s just … not worth it.”

“No.” Severus kissed Harry gently. “You are worth it. You are worth everything.”

“You’re biased.”

“Ask anyone.”

“Everyone’s biased where I’m concerned. Chosen one, remember?”

Severus snorted. “Ask Malfoy then. The younger.”

Harry scowled. “I’m telling him nothing.” He frowned. “But do you really think Draco would agree with this, even for me?”

“Definitely,” Severus said in a dark tone. “Child abuse is a terrible crime in the wizarding world. Even with your … history, he would be appalled.”

Harry shook his head. “But … I mean, it’s me. He hates me.”

“It’s not just for you, love,” said Lily with a sigh. “It’s the principle of the thing. Purebloods, like every other wizarding person—usually—are brought up to respect and love their children. They’re precious, especially magical children because we’re so rare overall.”

“I still don’t understand why we need to do it this way. It sounds so … inhumane.”

“Harry, listen to yourself,” said Remus with a frown. “The curse we’re talking about can only reflect pain they have already caused, not create it. If you think the punishment is inhumane, then they deserve it all the more.”

Harry winced and shook his head hard. “I still don’t like it. And I really don’t like getting you lot involved in this mess.”

Lily took Harry’s hands. “Sweetheart, listen to me. Your bitch of an aunt and horrid uncle are criminals at large as much as the leftover Death Eaters. Normally, we’d go to the Ministry to let the aurors handle it, but we can’t because of the risk to you. So we’re left with no other choice but to sidestep the governmental channels.”

“It’s just not worth it, Mum.”

Remus took Harry’s other hand. “Son, if, say, Neville Longbottom who’d been abused like this, wouldn’t you want justice for him?”

Harry cringed and nodded slowly.

“Then why is it so terrible to seek justice for you?”
Harry drew his hands back and shrunk into himself. “Just … I don’t deserve it. I’m just a fre—”

Severus clapped his hand over Harry’s mouth. “Ssh. You are not a freak. I will not allow you to use that word in reference to yourself. You are a lovely, brave, intelligent, caring young man who deserves to be honoured as much as Neville or any other person. Do not spew that poison your relatives fed you along with ….” He scowled. “Well, along with nothing as apparently food was a luxury they couldn’t afford on their … meagre salary.”

White-hot rage rippled through the man and vibrated the windows ominously, but Severus reined it in before anything broke. “Please stop thinking of yourself in such terrible terms, love. You are beautiful, Harry. And you are mine. And I always protect what is mine.”

Harry sighed and slumped back into Severus’ chest. “All right. We’ll set them straight then. But Merlin, I don’t like it.”

“No one said you had to like it,” said Remus with a sad smile. “In fact, if you did, I’d be rather worried about you.”

“Your sympathy for them is what makes you human and good, love,” said Lily with a nod. “But we still have to uphold the law, baby. It’s the right thing to do.”

“I … it doesn’t feel like it.”

“I know.” Severus squeezed Harry tight. “I know, love. But it is.”

Miserable but convinced, Harry could only nod and bury himself into the comfort of Severus’ warm shoulder.

Harry, Severus, Remus, and Lily stood outside the Dursleys’ new residence, 10 Wisteria Walk. Harry wasn’t sure if moving the Dursleys two blocks from where they’d lived before was incredibly stupid or a stroke of genius, but he imagined the prats must have acclimated to their new environment well enough. The prim and proper street with its rows of nearly identical houses and too-perfect rosebushes put Harry starkly in mind of Privet Drive and set him scowling. The only sign of life in the house at all was the red lorry in the drive, its bed full of boxes and furniture.

Whose auto was that? Harry had never seen it before. And all the boxes—surely the Dursleys couldn’t still be moving things in after almost five months, could they? He shook his head and returned his attention to the house, struggling to suppress instant flashbacks of long days spent in nothing but baggy shorts and bare feet, over-pruning rosebushes and vengefully-weeding gardens and lawns. If he stared too long, he could still feel the burn of the sun, the sting of sweat in his eyes, dirt under his fingernails. With a shiver, he tore his eyes away from the rosebushes and stared at the door instead, but the knowledge of what lay behind it was worse.

Bloody hell, coming here had been a mistake.

Lost in painful memories, Harry jumped at the sound of his mate’s voice.

“Lovely place, hmm?” By Severus’ tone, Harry knew the man meant the exact opposite.

“Oh yes.” Harry shuddered dramatically. “Promise me we’ll never live in a place like this?”
Severus gave him a knowing smile. “I cannot promise that we shall never visit a place like this or stay in one during a mission, perhaps, but I can promise never to make our home in a row house.” He scowled. “They have far too little privacy for my liking regardless.”

“Prince House suits me just fine,” Harry agreed.

“Glad to hear it boys,” said Lily, nudging Harry forwards, “but the longer we stand on the street, the more notice we’re likely to draw. And dear old Tuney will likely be poking her head around the curtains any—”

As if on cue, a series of loud banging and shouts rang out from inside the house.

Remus stepped a bit closer. “What in Merlin’s name …?”

Lily frowned. “Are they under attack?”

“Shite!” Harry started running for the door, Severus hot on his heels, but as soon as he came within a few metres, it burst open of its own accord, revealing a beefy blond man and a petite woman. Harry could swear he’d seen them both somewhere before.

Upon seeing them, the woman went pale, then blushed. She set the box she was carrying on the porch and gave Harry a hesitant smile.

Harry’s mouth fell open. No one at Privet Dri—er, Wisteria Walk ever smiled at the freak unless a promise of pain followed.

“Mum!” The blond man shouted, still facing away from the visitors and with a stack of giant boxes in hand. “We’ve been through this a hundred times. I’m not staying any longer. Callie and I are getting married and she isn’t safe here. I won’t have you treating her like rubbish because she’s not like us.”

At the voice, Harry reeled back, shocked. “D-Dudley?”

Dudley jumped as if someone had electrocuted him and wheeled around, peering over the stack of boxes. He promptly dropped them at the sight of his visitors.

“Harry?” Dudley winced and toed the boxes, now full of scattered and likely broken things. “Oh, bollocks. That’ll take hours to clean up.”

Severus smirked. “Have you forgotten what we are, Mister Dursley?”

Dudley narrowed his eyes at them. “Course not. But you can’t do that freaky ….” He shook his head and gave Harry an apologetic look, stunning the young Avenger. “Sorry. Old habits die hard. I meant that you can’t do magic here. It’s a Muggle neighbourhood, see? So, um, that … what was it, Callie? The statue thing?”

“The statute of secrecy,” the petite brunette replied.

“Yes. That. Well, you’d get in trouble because of that, and we’ve already made your life hell enough, Harry.”

Harry rubbed his eyes and shook his head. “Severus, did I hit my head too hard in the floo this morning or something?”

Severus moved to stand protectively by his mate. “On the contrary, Harry, it appears as if at least one
of your relatives regrets their treatment of you.”

Dudley flushed bright red. “Yeah. Have since you drove away those dementy-thingies, Harry. It just took Callie to get me the rest of the way sorted.”

A wail and shriek sounded in the house, and Dudley groaned. “God. Harry, I’m really sorry. You couldn’t have picked a worse time to show up. I’m moving out, see, and Mum and Dad are both really hacked off about it.” He knelt down and started packing things back in his boxes with the help of the girl. “Gotta get this cleaned up fast. We’ll just sort it later, Cal.”

Harry waved a hand, raising a Notice-Me-Not barrier, then sent Dudley’s things flying back into his boxes, sorted, cleaned, and repaired.

Dudley cried, “Harry! What are you doing? Aren’t you going to get in trouble for that?”

“I cast a spell first to hide us from the neighbours,” Harry replied. “They won’t have seen a thing.”

Dudley grinned. “Wow. I should’ve been more interested in this, Harry. That’s bloody amazing. But … er … I thought you had to have your wand to do magic?”

Harry chuckled. “Not me. Not anymore. I’m even more of a freak than dear Aunt Petunia ever guessed.”

Dudley scowled. “Don’t listen to her. She’s rubbishy in the head about your lot.”

Harry gave him a searching look. “You used to be rubbishy in the head about us too, Dudley. What changed?”

Dudley blushed and pulled the girl forwards by her hand. “She did. I fell in love, and found out my girl was a, er, a squib. And then Callie told me everything you did for us. I mean the war and such.” He blushed. “Reckon I owe you my thanks for that, though you were bloody suicidal to go up against that monster on your own.”

Severus snorted. “Finally, a sensible statement from the Dursley family.”

Harry elbowed him, though not too hard in case he was still injured. “Oh, shut it, Sev.” He gave the girl a hesitant smile. “So you’re Callie then?”

The brunette with Dudley nodded. “Yes, I’m Calliope Clearwater, Dudley’s fiancée. I go by Callie most of the time. It’s much more Muggle-friendly.” She smiled and shook Harry’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Harry.”

Harry gasped. “Clearwater! I knew I’d seen you somewhere. You’re Penelope’s … er, her sister then?”

Calliope—Callie—nodded. “Yeah, her twin, actually. Fraternal, of course, since I’m a squib and she’s a witch. I’m not much known in the magical world. Mum and dad weren’t best pleased about my lack of magic until they learned I could figure sums and sciences better than ….”

She blushed and gave him a shy smile. “Well, it’s my talent, I suppose, being good at science. I’m going into astronomy, and since it figures into the magical world too, Mum and Dad are quite happy now with my abilities. Penny’s going into astronomy with me—we planned it years ago. She’s going to do the magical side and I’m going Muggle, and we’re going to compare notes and see if we can’t improve the discipline in both areas.”
Harry grinned. “That’s great. And bloody brilliant. We should do that with all the magical disciplines, see what we can learn from Muggles. Defence, for example. We might not have lost so many people had our soldiers had guns as well as swords and magic.”

Callie giggled. “Well, what you did worked out well enough. You’d have needed to train them to shoot before guns could do any good.”

Harry nodded. “I’d bet a little magic would’ve improved the aim, don’t you think?”

A gleam Harry remembered from Hermione’s moments of insight filled Callie’s eyes. “Certainly. And science could improve the trajectory. Oh! With just a little tweaking of th—”

Dudley laid a hand on her shoulder. “Cal, I’m glad you’re getting along so well with my cousin, but we can’t chat all day.” He gave Harry a wry look. “Not that I’m not glad you came. I owe you about a hundred apologies and had no idea how to reach you or if you’d even listen—”

Harry nodded. “I’m listening. You were the only one who treated me civilly when I left. I haven’t forgotten.”

Dudley snorted. “If you want to call a handshake civil.” He rubbed a hand through his hair and lowered his head. “Truth is, I was a bloody prat to you, all our lives.”

“Dudley, it’s okay. I don’t hate you. You’re the only one in this house I don’t, really. You acted as you’d been taught, and when you realised maybe you’d been taught wrong, you tried to change. That’s good enough for me. It’s Vernon and Petunia who knew better and still hurt me anyway. You don’t need to impress me or anything.”

Severus fixed the boxer with his coldest glare. “But you will need to impress me if you expect to leave the premises unscathed.” His voice was dark and promised worlds of pain. Harry couldn’t help a little shiver at the authority in his tone. By Merlin, the man had a voice that could melt steel.

Dudley gulped. “Er … um, right. Yes sir.” He offered Severus a hand much less pudgy than Harry remembered. Boxing must have paid off for the man after all. “Um, I’m Dudley Dursley. Harry’s cousin. And you are?”

Severus showed a wicked smile. “General Severus Snape, Harry’s bonded mate.”

Dudley gasped. “Bloody hell, really? You’re gay, Harry? And you married a general?”

Harry edged closer to Severus, his arm crossing over the man’s front in a protective manner. “Yeah I am and yes I did. Sort of. Severus led the war effort, and he’s—Merlin, he’s brilliant, Dudley. You two should have a match—” At Severus’ sharp look, Harry winced and returned to the matter at hand. “Er, well, I guess that’s not important now. But, about the marriage thing—we’re not technically married—it’s a creature mating bond, but it comes down to the same thing and we’ll be bonded this summer. A wizarding marriage. Can’t marry via Muggle means as two men even if we wanted to.” Harry ran a hand through his hair and frowned. “Didn’t Calliope tell you any of this?”

Dudley gave the girl in question a wry smile. “Well, she told me about General Snape and how brilliant he was in battle, but she must have forgotten to mention the whole mate thing.”

Callie blushed. “I wasn’t sure how you’d handle it so I’d planned on leaving that shock for later. Sorry, Dudley. I figured you had already had enough what with my being a squib and the war and everything.”

Dudley shook his head and kissed her cheek. “It’s all right. No problem, love.” He turned back to a
defensive Harry and a darkly amused Severus. “Er, well, I know things aren’t the same in your world as it is mine, and … well, Callie’s taught me that a lot of the prejudices I grew up with were stupid and wrong, so … maybe that one is too.” He held his hand out higher. “Yeah, I think it is. I’d still like to make your acquaintance, sir, if you’re not too angry with me, that is.”

Severus stared at the man for so long, Dudley sighed and started to lower his hand. Only then did Severus take the beefy palm and shake it.

“If you are sincere in your desire to make amends with your family, I will not stop you. In fact, I should probably introduce my companions. More of your family is present, family other than Harry, I mean. This man is Harry’s adoptive father, Remus Lupin, and this—”

At this juncture, Petunia stuck her head out of the doorway and screeched. “You! What are you doing back here, you filthy freak! Get away from my Dudders thi—”

Lily stepped out from behind Severus’ billowing cloak and fixed her sister with a furious glare.

Petunia’s eyes went as round as saucers. “You! No, you’re dead!”

Lily smiled viciously. “Why, hello to you too, dear sister. I think we have a few things to catch up on while I’ve been away. Namely how you treated my son.”

Dudley gasped. “Wait, you … you’re my Aunt Lily? But … how? Are you a ghost? Callie said ghosts are real in the wizarding w—”

Petunia screeched again. “Dudley Christopher Dursley! We do not say such foul words in this household!”

Dudley scowled and fired back, “Well, I’m not part of this household any longer so shove your bloody stupid rules!”

Petunia gasped and put a hand to her chest. “Dudley! You … you … he’s poisoned you! Get back in here, Dudders, and we’ll get that freaky stuff out of your system. Maybe a little tea—”

Severus snorted. “Madam, I assure you, had Harry altered your son, it would take a good deal more than substandard Muggle tea to sort him out.”

“Don’t you threaten me,” Petunia snarled. “You can’t do a thing to me or your Ministry will—”

Remus stepped forward. “Turn a blind eye to the hero of the wizarding world and his mate, the General who led us all to freedom. Trust me. The Ministry won’t do a thing to stop us today.”

Petunia went sheet white, but still tried to fight them. “I’ll call the pol—”

“The only reason I haven’t called the Ministry on you and had you sent to Azkaban for the way you treated my son, Muggle or not,” snarled Lily, “is for Harry’s sake. He’d rather his past be kept quiet. In fact, he was forgiving enough to let us go without punishing you at all.” Her glittering green eyes went icy-cold. “But I’m not so easy-going, dear sister.”

Petunia stood akimbo and stuck her nose in the air. “Oh? Well, little miss perfect, where were you the past seventeen years then, while Vernon and I were raising your freak son? If you were alive, why didn’t you take him? We didn’t want that little demon fouling up our home.”

Harry shrunk into himself. This was why he hadn’t wanted to come back. He hadn’t wanted to hear the names, the accusations, the fact that even now, half of his family didn’t care if he died in a ditch.
Warm arms went around him and pulled him into a black-clothed chest, and Harry slumped against Severus with a sniffle.

“Hush, love,” Severus whispered, drowning out Petunia’s continued tirade. “Ssh. She is a dunderhead of the first class, to turn away someone as beautiful as you.”

Severus’ gentle words gave Harry strength to face the bitch, and the young man stood tall and turned around just as Vernon stuck his fat head outside.

“See here, what’s all this? If you’re moving, Dudders, then take your bloody things with you. Don’t just leave them here for everyone to trip o—oh.” His piggy eyes fixed on Harry. “Oh, no you don’t! We’ve rid of you for the last time, you hear? You’re not welcome here!” He tried to slam the door, but a wave of magic from Severus forced it to stay open.

“Silencio,” Severus muttered. “Petrificus Totalus.”

Vernon and Petunia keeled over and flopped on top of one another. Harry guessed he’d said the spells out loud so Harry and Callie would have an idea of what he had done to Vernon and Petunia, an act of reassurance. Severus could surely perform those spells without the incantation. Probably wandless too.

“Now that that’s taken care of—” He scowled in disgust and dusted his hands. “Perhaps we can retire to the living room and carry on this conversation out of sight of your neighbours?”

Dudley was trembling and pale as a ghost. “What did—what did you do? Did you kill them?”

“No, love,” Callie soothed him. “He simply silenced them so they can’t scream at us and forced them to be still. They’re all right, just silenced and bound.”

Dudley slumped into her shoulder. “God. I … if you’re here to take vengeance on us, I don’t know … er, actually, do you plan on taking it out on me, too?”

“No,” said Lily in a quiet voice. “Even if you hadn’t apologised, as Harry pointed out already, you simply acted on what you were taught. It was always Vernon and Petunia who hurt Harry. They hurt you too, really. Their spoiling and prejudice hurt you. You and Harry grew up together, both only children in the same household. The two of you might have been brothers without it their interference, but now you’ll never know that bond, and you’re being alienated in your own home because of your choice of wife. So, as far as I can see, you’re a victim too. I won’t harm you.”

“I won’t either,” said Remus.

Severus replied with a curt bow.

Harry gave Dudley a weak smile. “We’re not going to hurt you. Maybe we can meet up sometime? I … that is, if you really don’t hate me any longer.”

Dudley clapped Harry on the shoulder, hesitated, and pulled him into a hug. “I’m sorry, Harry. For everything. I should’ve defended you. Aunt Lily is right—we really should’ve been brothers all this time.”

Harry sniffled and hid tears in Dudley’s shoulder. “They hurt us both, yeah?”

“Well, not anymore.” Dudley pulled back and held Harry by the upper arms. “Just … don’t hurt them too much. Please. Not … permanently. I half want to kill them myself for what they did to us, but they’re still my mum and dad. I still love them, though at the moment I’m not sure why.”
Severus laid a hand on Dudley’s shoulder. “We know. The punishment we had planned on exacting is the standard treatment for child abusers who cannot be interred in Azkaban—Muggles and Squibs. Usually, the curse is applied to last for the term of abuse incurred—in Harry’s case, they would feel the same pain they inflicted upon Harry for seventeen years. His hunger, his loneliness, any physical abuse he has not yet admitted to—nothing would abate it no matter how much they attempted to sate their needs. They would feel exactly how Harry did, receiving the exact same amount of comfort—which is to say, none at all.”

Dudley paled. “I … that’s …."

“However,” Severus said in a quiet voice, “Harry does not wish them to suffer for so long or so harshly either. Because he has asked us to, we have decided to mitigate their punishment to take place over a term of six weeks, and the curse will not last the entire day as is typical, as Harry did not want Mister Dursley to lose his livelihood. They will feel his pain every night throughout the duration of the curse, starting from when Mister Dursley returns from work and ending seven hours later. On the days Mister Dursley does not work, the effects of the curse will not cease until seven A.M. on his next workday.”

He shook his head at Dudley’s fearful expression. “I realise this may still sound harsh, but in our world, child abuse akin to what Harry endured is punishable by a twenty-year term in Azkaban. Has Calliope described it to you?”

Dudley paled and shuddered. “The wizard prison with those demented things.”

“Dementors. And yes. As I said, the usual punishment for emotional and psychological abuse of this type is twenty years in Azkaban. If they abused him physically as well—”

Dudley nodded grimly.

Severus narrowed his eyes at his mate. “Oh? We will be discussing that later.” Harry cringed away and hugged his chest, and Severus brought the young man back into his arms. “Ssh. I only wish you to talk about it so you will heal.”

Harry nodded and leaned against Severus’ chest, taking comfort in the way his mate’s continuing silk-steel voice warmed his scalp.

“For physical abuse carried on over such a long period of time,” Severus went on, “the penalty is the equivalent of death. The Dementor’s kiss. For abusing Harry Potter in such a way—Merlin, I do not even want to think of what the Ministry would do to them, and just last week I fought a battle against vampires forced into combat, child rapists and murderers, traitorous allies, and reanimated corpses.”

Dudley turned green. “Bloody hell.” He shuddered. “If … if that’s their alternative, then do what you must. But I really don’t want to see it. This is the last of my stuff and that’s my lorry over there. If you don’t mind, just let Callie and I go before you … before …."

Dudley shut his eyes tight and knelt to gather his belongings. “I can’t watch that. I have to go.”

He started lifting a box, but Severus flicked his wand and sent the lot of Dudley’s boxes sailing into the lorry bed, stacking them neatly within the remaining space.

“Wow,” said Dudley with a wan smile. “Comes in handy, magic does. Thank you.”

Severus nodded in response. “Do you require any further assistance?”

“No, we’re good. That was the last of it.”
Harry squeezed his cousin’s arm. “Go on then. We’ll talk later, yeah?” Dudley nodded and Harry went on with, “Maybe I can get Callie an owl—they’ll answer to Squibs, you know. Would you be willing to use it if I bought one for you? Treat it well?”

Dudley nodded and wiped at his eyes. “Haven’t the slightest idea how to care for the little buggers, but I reckon Callie will.”

“We can buy an owl ourselves though,” Callie said with a hesitant smile. “I was planning to get one anyway. We just weren’t sure you’d read Dudley’s letters after everything.”

“I will,” Harry said in a soft voice. “Thanks, Dudley. For … for trying so hard. It means a lot to me.”

Dudley patted Harry’s shoulder. “Let us get settled into our flat and we’ll hang out. Start making up for all the years they stole from us.”

Tears blurred Harry’s vision, but he grinned anyway. “Sounds good.”

Dudley patted Harry’s shoulder, gave his aunt a hesitant hug, and led his fiancée away. Harry and his kin watched them go, then a grim Severus took charge.

“Let us begin to set these monsters of human beings straight,” he said in a low, dark tone. “Their punishment is hardly enough, but perhaps if we are lucky, it will teach them what kind of people they have been.”

Harry shook his head. “I think it’s just going to make them hate the magical world more.”

“It might,” said Lily in a sad voice, “but that’s not our concern.”

“Maybe it is,” said Harry, keeping his eyes on the ground. “If there had ever been anyone to teach them, to show them that magic isn’t something to be feared, they might not have hurt me so much. They did this because they’re afraid of what they don’t understand. And if Dumbledore had ever bothered to teach them instead of just forcing them to obey his will ….”

“Maybe things might have been different for you,” Remus said in a soft voice. “You have a point, Harry, but we can’t change the past, and I doubt much will change these two regardless.”

Harry nodded. “You’re probably right, but we could still try. Maybe we could send someone to talk to them, a Muggleborn wizard or something, someone who’s familiar with both worlds, and get them to try to rehabilitate the Dursleys. Try to make them understand why we did this and what they did wrong. If Dudley can learn that the magical world is not something to be feared, anyone can.”

He shook his head and waved to the petrified couple. “Well, maybe not those two. Like I said, given everything, it’s probably too late to help them. Too much has been done to set them in their ways and this punishment is certainly not going to help them understand. But it might not be too late for other families. Other Muggles struggling to raise magical children when they’re afraid of magic and don’t understand it or their kids. I’m not the only one who’s had a terrible childhood because of ignorant guardians.”

Severus smiled and caressed Harry’s cheek. “Love, I believe that is a wonderful idea. I will begin to implement a sort of … training program for Muggle parents of magical children as soon as we have a moment to breathe.”

Harry chuckled. “So, next century sometime?”

Severus snorted. “Sooner than that.” His mirth faded. “Come. Notice-Me-Not charms are all well and
good, but they do not hold indefinitely, not even when masters of empathetic magic cast them, and we are here for a purpose.

“Right. A purpose. Merlin, I hate this.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s back. “I know, love, but we are stalling, and it will only become harder to carry out our mission the longer we wait.”

With a hesitant nod, Harry moved away and let Severus lead the way. Stomach churning and hands tightened into white-knuckled fists, Harry steel’d himself and followed his mate into the Dursleys’ home. Even as he watched the others carry out their curse, tears streaming down his cheeks, Harry wondered if there was any hope of redemption for his family or such a harsh punishment would only push them further into hatred.

For once, Harry’s instinct was silent. It seemed even fate had no idea how to heal this pain.

Vernon flailed and trembled, begging for someone to hold him. Harry covered his face and turned away. Merlin, he hoped they were doing the right thing.

That night, an owl Harry had never seen—a big tawny with curiously green eyes—landed on Severus’ desk and held out a Muggle-style envelope addressed to Harry.

Still shaken from earlier, Harry dragged himself from Severus’ arms to take the letter. “Thanks, little one,” he said with a wan smile. He cut off a piece of the pork chop he had pretended to nibble on at dinner and gave it to the bird. “I promise I didn’t eat off that bit. Been a rough day, you know?”

The bird gave a chipper hoot as if to say, “Cheer up! You’ve got post!”

Harry chuckled and opened his letter to reveal a folded piece of Muggle notebook paper.

Harry,

Callie took me to Diagon Alley today to pick out her owl—this one reminded us of you because of his eyes. His name is Bubo—it’s from some old film about Greek gods and such, Callie says. I’ve never seen it, but the name stuck.

Bloody hell, man! I wish I’d have not been such a prat to you even more now. Diagon Alley was incredible! Magic can do so many things I’d never even thought of. People were shrinking stuff left and right, popping in and out of the street like it was nothing, floating stuff around—I’m jealous, actually. Wish I’d been born with a bit of magic myself. Callie says it was like that for her too her first time in the Alley, and until she came up with that career plan with her sister, they had a lot of rows about Callie’s lack of magic. Seems it’s a rough life for squibs born into a magical family. Though in my experience, wizards stuck with Muggles have it worse.

Anyway, we found something out while we were shopping. It’s why I wrote so soon. Couldn’t wait. You’re not going to believe this, Harry. I hardly believe it myself. I’m still in shock, I think.
Shite, I’m rambling. The point is, well, the owl—Bubo—he answers to me, Harry. Not just Callie. We thought she would have to ask Bubo to carry this, but as soon as I said I should write you soon, the ruddy bird just perched right on my shoulder and stuck out his leg like he was waiting for a letter! And because of that, Callie thinks I’m not a Muggle after all, but a squib like her. And I’m absolutely sick to my stomach about it. Not because of hating magic or anything like that, but because that means I’m what my parents hate. I’ve been what they hate all along.

It’s killing me to know that if they had known what I am, they’d have treated us both like shite.

Callie says she thinks that means Mum is a squib too. I don’t know if I should even tell her. I’ve no doubt Da will be furious if I do. Probably disown us both, and then what will Mum do? She’s always been a housewife. I don’t even know if she has any skills she could use.

But then again, maybe … if Mum realises she’s part of this world, that she can’t run from it, and her own dear Dudders is partly magical—well, sort of—she might come around. It makes sense that she would, right?

Who am I kidding? Mum hates magic. She’ll just hate us all the more for what I am and deny her own heritage like mad. I know she will. But I can’t seem to stop hoping there’s a chance to reconcile. Do you think it’s worth it to tell her? I don’t have a bloody clue what to do.

Maybe you can come over for tea and a chat soon, cousin. I think I need your advice to wrap my head around all this. Callie wants to chat with you anyway, just to get to know you and Severus better. Maybe you could bring Aunt Lily so we could start getting to know each other too? I never told Mum because I knew she’d hate it, but I always wished I’d had a chance to meet her.

See you soon maybe,

Dudley and Callie

Harry sank back into Severus’ lap, his breath leaving him in a great whoosh. Squibs! His aunt and cousin were squibs. Merlin!

“Harry, love?” Severus kissed Harry’s neck and held him tight. “Are you all right?”

Without a word, Harry passed the letter back to Severus. The man frowned and read it, his eyes going wide towards the end.

“Oh, Merlin. Harry—this might be what you hoped for. If she truly is a squib, there might be hope for reconciliation one day after all.”

Harry nodded, numb. “Yeah.”

Severus held him closer and rested his chin on Harry’s shoulder. “What are you feeling, love?”

“Shocked. Maybe hopeful. Also just … most of me thinks telling her won’t do any good and she’ll just denounce us all as freaks.”

“If she does, will you be able to handle it?”
Harry shrugged. “It’s nothing different than what I’ve dealt with my whole life. I feel bad for Dudley, though. He’s not used to it.”

“Hmm. I admit I am having trouble drumming up sympathy considering how he treated you until today, but I am rather protective of my mate.”

“Yeah.” Harry sighed and slumped back into Severus’ arms. “You know what? It’s okay. If they come to their senses, great. If they never do and stay prejudiced idiots until the end of their days, then so what? It’s their loss. They’ll lose their son and their nephew and our children. They’ll never get to know the greatest people on earth, like you, like Mum, Dad … it’s us who’ll have all the beauty. We’ll be the ones with happiness and fulfilment, because we’ll always know we did what we could. We’ll help Dudley and Callie adjust too. But Petunia and Vernon? They’ll have to grow old alone and bitter. So it’s okay. Whatever happens, we’ll be okay—together.”

Severus smiled and held Harry tight. “Yes. Together with you sounds lovely.”

Harry closed his eyes and relaxed into his mate’s arms. Even if he never gained the love of his aunt or uncle, at least the day hadn’t been a total loss. He had his cousin to back him, and he had the family and friends he had made within the wizarding world. Whatever happened, as long as Harry had his Severus and his true family, life was good.
Chapter 36

Severus signed his last letter to a prospective replacement teacher and attached the letter to Eirene’s leg beside the second to last letter. He would use school owls for further requests if these two didn’t accept the positions offered, but for this first batch, something more personal was required.

He patted the nighthawk’s head, smoothed her feathers, and sent her on her way just as Bubo flew in with a letter for Harry. Severus watched as his mate read his letter and frowned at the play of emotions over his features.

Severus did not need either their bond or his experience with reading people to know Harry was upset.

Harry growled and tossed the letter on his desk, an addition Severus had added last week so they might work together during the next term. “Sev, are you busy today, love?”

Severus moved to his mate’s side. “I had planned to make sure the classrooms are clear and help Ferin prepare to return his clan home, but I can postpone those plans if necessary. What is it, pet?”

Harry shuddered. “Remember that I warned Dudley to wait before he told Aunt Petunia?”

Severus grimaced. “He did not heed your advice?”

“No. Not that I can blame him. He just wanted his mum’s support.”

“And she was not supportive, was she?”

“Not in the least. Dudley is a wreck and needs family who doesn’t judge him, but Sev, I think there’s more to it. Petunia was … weird about it. I’m reading between the lines here, but judging from what Dudley said in his letter—I think she knew about him. Or maybe it was even worse than we thought.”

Severus paled. “What are you saying?”

“Sev … I think … maybe she did something to him. Maybe he was supposed to be … like me.”

Severus froze. “You think he is a wizard?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe. Instinct seems to be confused on it, like he’s neither a wizard nor a squib, or maybe both at the same time, but I don’t understand how he could be. I mean, he either has magic or he doesn’t, right?”
“Both ….” Severus’ temper flared hot. “There is one way: if she somehow managed to suppress his magic, but how could a Muggle do so? Unless ….” A horrid thought occurred to him and his fists clenched. “Harry, how likely do you think it is that the Dursleys accepted you into their home without … persuasion?”

“Not likely at all.” Harry gasped. “Wait. You think … Dumbledore did it?”

“I can see no other way. Come. We will find answers once and for all before we return to your cousin.”

“The Bearded Bastard’s portrait?”

“Indeed. After we check the Book.”

“Book?”

Severus motioned to the huge tome on a pedestal in a dark corner. “That book. The Book of Names. It lists every child born with magic at birth, before any … complications arise. It is the Headmaster’s duty to scan it each year and send letters to all incoming students, but it is also possible to see the names of all magical children born in a given year, as it keeps a complete record. And there is no tampering with it, so if Dudley was a wizard ….”

“He’ll be in there.”

Severus gave a curt nod and guided Harry to the tome. After a quick spell to remove the dust, he gathered Harry close to his side. “Your cousin was born in the same year?”

Harry nodded. “He’s just two months older than me.”

“So he would have been in your year had he been able to attend.” Severus took Harry’s hand and laid it beside his on the cover. “Please show the year 1980.”

A flash of pale azure light covered the book and sank into its cover. “Now,” Severus said in a low voice, “we shall see if Dumbledore’s meddling goes even deeper than we suspected.”

Harry nodded, his frame taut with determination, and helped Severus opened the book. “Aab, Amkh; Aao, Mei-Li; Aaron, Beatrice.” As Harry said the names, a set of basic facts appeared under each listing. “Hmm. It lists every magical child in the world, not just Hogwarts students?”

Severus nodded. “Those with the power and potential to attend Hogwarts are listed in green. Beauxbatons students are blue. Durmstrang students are red. The other colours indicate students that are best fit to other schools, either by their birth country or skillset. For example, Miss Beatrice Aaron is shown in purple because she was born in Minnesota and therefore was slotted to attend Ilvermorny in the United States.”

Harry nodded. “Interesting. What if she had moved to, say, Ireland before getting her letter?”

“Then the colours of her name would change to indicate that she would be best fit to attend Hogwarts.”

“Wicked.”

Severus chuckled. “It is simple tracing magic, love. But come. Let us turn to the D’s and see if your cousin was altered.”
Harry gave a grim nod and turned the pages sections at a time, until they arrived at the proper place. “Dum, Yen-Sun; Duncan, Thomas; Dunne, Fiona—huh, she’s Irish. I wonder why she’s slotted for Durmstrang.”

“It could be any number of factors.” Severus’ finger tapped on a name. A grey name. “Harry …”

Harry focused on the name above Severus’ fingertip. “Dursley, Dudley.” A shudder of fury passed through his smaller mate. “It’s true then. Why is his name grey?”

Severus placed a soothing hand at Harry’s back, hoping to calm him before he rushed off on a portrait-killing spree. “It indicates a child who, either through disease, injury, or suppression … lost their magic prior to reaching twelve years of age.”

Harry’s hands shook and moisture shone on his lashes. “He should have come to school with me. We should have been brothers. Allies. That meddling fucker took everything away from me and my entire fucking family, and now he’s gone and done it to my cousin too.” His eyes blazed with a green eerily reminiscent of the killing curse. “I believe we have a portrait to set on fire.”

Severus winced. “Harry … I … understand your fury, and you have a right to it, but if you kill the bastard, we won’t be able to learn how to help your cousin.”

Harry fixed a piercing stare on Severus. “We can help him? You mean it mightn’t be permanent?”

“A complete, permanent magic drain is almost impossible to achieve without severe injury—the victim must be crippled entirely, or their magic is likely to return and heal them.” Severus tapped Dudley’s name again. “Suppression, however, is quite easy to maintain for long periods of time without causing injury to the victim. A magic-draining bracelet like the ones they place on high-security Azkaban prisoners, for example, would reduce a person’s magic levels to that of a Squib without crippling them. And it is possible to place charms on the bracelet that would make it undetectable and difficult to remove.”

A wan smile flickered across Harry’s face. “So he mightn’t be a squib forever then?”

“That’s the idea, love.”

“All right. Then let’s go find out what method the fucker used. Then I’ll set the bastard on fire.”

Severus snorted. “At this point, I am half-ready to help. However, I do not advise it as he may be harbouring other secrets.”

Harry pouted. “Just a little fire?”

Severus smirked. “If it is quickly put out, well, I suppose a bit of a forceful reminder that he is not the puppetmaster any longer would not go astray.”

Harry’s smile was positively devious. “In that case, I think I should put on my Reaper robes. And get my scythe. And you should wear your duelling gear and your sword, just to put the bastard on edge.”

Severus grinned back. “I think that is a marvellous idea, my love.”

They left the headmaster’s office in full duelling gear, though Harry had his hood up and thus was invisible to the castle’s inhabitants. If anyone asked, Severus was on his way to an important meeting and needed to look intimidating, which, he supposed, wasn’t so far from the truth.
Three small blazes and one hell of an interrogation later, Harry apparated Severus to Dudley’s new flat a few blocks from the entrance of Diagon Alley. Callie answered the door as soon as Harry knocked, and the distraught woman ushered both Severus and Harry inside with hardly a greeting.

“Thank God you’re here,” she said with a sniffle. “He’s ….” She sighed and shook her head, twisting her hands over and over. “Well, it’s not good.”

Harry’s expression went grim. “We don’t come bearing good news. The Dursleys’ betrayal went deeper than any of us ever knew.”

Callie paled. “Merlin. I’ll … just get us some tea going.”

Severus laid a hand on her arm. “Allow me to help you. I believe we will need calming draught to get through this meeting in one piece.”

She gulped. “O-okay, General Snape.”

“Severus. You are family, Callie, and the war is over.”

“R-right. The kitchen is this way.” The girl led Severus off, and Harry stepped into the house in search of his cousin.

“Dudley? Where are you, mate?”

A weak voice called from down the hall; Harry followed to find his cousin slumped onto the living room couch, his head in his hands. He was pale and shaking all over.

“Merlin.” Harry settled next to the man and patted his shoulder awkwardly. “Um, I’m here. Not sure how much it helps, but I am.”


Dudley cringed. “Shite. I just … I can’t believe it. I thought they loved me.”

Harry just held onto his cousin’s hand and wished he had words. The Dursleys had betrayed him too, but that was par for the course for him. Somehow, he didn’t think his experiences would help Dudley cope.

“I’m sorry. It should have been different for us.” He let Dudley’s hand go and rubbed his shoulder instead. “Sev might get a bit jealous of that even though he knows better.”

Dudley made a face. “Ew. You’re practically my brother.”

Harry nodded and closed his eyes. “That’s the thing, Dudley. We should have been brothers. In every capacity but blood.”

Dudley paled further. “What … what are you saying?”
“That’s probably best saved until Sev is done with the tea. For now, um, how are you finding the wizarding world?”

Dudley gave him a weak smile. “It’s a shock, that’s for sure, but interesting too. I can’t understand why I was ever afraid of magic. It’s so … fascinating. I’m a bit jealous, to be honest.”

Severus came in that moment with the tea tray and a plate of ginger biscuits. “In that case, you might find our news somewhat more palatable than otherwise.” He set the tray on the table and poured a cup of tea for Dudley. “Sweeten it as you wish but do not drink it yet.”

Dudley nodded and added two sugars and a splash of milk. Severus took the cup and added a capful of clear potion.

“Now you may drink it, and we shall not tell you our news until you have finished.”

Dudley hesitated. “What did you put in it?”

“A potion to help calm your nerves.”

“You’re sure it’s safe?”

Harry chuckled. “Dudley, Severus is the top potion master in Europe. It’s safe.”

Dudley frowned. “That’s not what I meant. I know he’s good—Callie told me. I just meant, is it safe for me? For a squib.”

Severus’ expression shuttered. “It is safe for people of all magical levels or lack thereof. I would not give you a potion if I believed it would harm you.”

Dudley nodded and downed his tea in two gulps. Harry hoped the milk had cooled it enough to keep from burning the man’s throat.

As soon as Dudley had finished, Severus poured tea for all of them and refilled Dudley’s cup while the potion took effect. He added calming draught to Callie’s and Harry’s tea as well, but advised them to sip it rather than take it all in one dose.

“Now that we are settled and better able to cope, I must ask you a question, Mister Dursley.”

“Dudley,” the young man said in a soft voice. “You might as well be my brother-in-law, Severus, and I’m half of the opinion that I’ll be taking Callie’s surname when we marry anyway.”

Severus nodded. “Dudley then. My question is this: are you comfortable with the life you have now, or would you like to know the full truth? The truth will open avenues for you that you have never before considered, but it will also alienate you from your family even further, if not completely shatter whatever tenuous link remains. I would not break such news without your consent. What would you have me do?”

Dudley winced. “So what you’re saying is that you know something about me that’s going to drive my parents the rest of the way away from me if you tell me.”

“I’m afraid that is quite likely, given their treatment of you thus far.”

Dudley sighed. “They’ve already destroyed our relationship. I reckon what you have to say can’t be much worse.”

Harry took the man’s hand again. “Dudley, it can be. It is. It’s a lot worse. I was reluctant to punish
them for what they did to me, but when I heard this, I wanted to go back and increase their term of punishment to the full seventeen years—and turn them into the Ministry. I’m still half tempted to do it, even if it means coming out about my own past.”

Dudley cringed again. “Shite. If it’s that bad, I reckon I need to know. If they’re going to put me or Cal in danger, then I can’t risk bringing my family around them again. Especially if we have kids. They could be wizards, you know. And, well, I need to be aware so I can protect them.”

With a wan smile, Harry stood and patted the seat he’d just vacated. “Callie, sit here and keep him calm for me. I need my own mate for this, and he’ll need you.”

She sniffled and settled into Harry’s seat, and Harry perched himself in Severus’ lap. Severus wrapped a steadying arm around his mate’s waist and laid his teacup on the end table beside his armchair.

Severus’ voice was soft and kind, nothing like the sharp tones of Harry’s past. “Are you sure you wish to know, Dudley? I am afraid it will hurt.”

The man gave him a terse nod. “The truth usually does. Just get it over with.”

Severus sighed. “Very well. When we received your letter this morning, Harry said that he thought Petunia’s behaviour seemed … strange. Suspicious. That led us to the conclusion that she was hiding something. Because of Harry’s creature instincts, we were able to determine what we thought she might have done. And so, we decided to check the Book of Names at Hogwarts for your name.”

Callie gasped and covered her mouth with a shaking hand. “Oh, Dudley. Oh they didn’t!”

Harry gave her a commiserating look. “I’m sorry, Callie.”

She shuddered and buried her face in Dudley’s shoulder.

Dudley frowned at his fiancée. “Cal? What is it, pet? And what’s the Book of Names?”

Severus kept his voice low and soothing. “That is what has your betrothed so distraught. The Book of Names is a magical record that lists the name of every magical child born the world over. Each magical school has a copy so they know where to send their acceptance letters, particularly in the case of Muggleborn students, or Muggle-raised, such as Harry. Without that record, we would have no way of identifying the magical children not born to established wizarding lines, and that would be dangerous for both of our worlds.”

Dudley nodded grimly. “All right. So what did you find?”


Dudley went sheet-white. “But I’m not … I’ve never ….”

“No, you haven’t shown any magical ability, but that does not mean you were not born with the potential.” Severus gave a sad sigh. “The Book is never wrong about who is born with magic; however, sometimes an accident—or purposeful event—occurs which breaks the child’s magic or drains it prior to Hogwarts age. Such an event occurred with you. Your name was grey, which meant your magic had been … blocked.”

“I was a wizard,” Dudley said in a breathless voice. “I had magic, but it’s gone now?”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “Yes and no. That was what confused me with my instincts. They told
me you were neither Muggle, Squib, nor wizard, and Severus and I were stumped. We were even more confused when we realised what it must mean. There isn’t a lot that can happen to a person to drain their magic. I mean, there’s a spell, but it causes a lot of mental damage, to the point of total madness. A long time ago, the Ministry used it against dangerous criminals, but it’s completely inhumane and they made it illegal several centuries back. It breaks the victim’s mind beyond repair, you see, and there are much better ways now to keep criminals contained, though the Ministry still sanctions the dementor's kiss and that’s just as bad.”

Severus squeezed Harry close, no doubt sensing the man’s growing irritation.

Harry gave Severus a weak smile. “Thanks, love. Back to your magic, Dudley, besides the spell, there are a couple of physical things that could happen to drain you—injuries, illnesses, stuff like that—but to drain your magic permanently, it would have had to be absolutely devastating. Magic naturally regenerates itself, so for something physical to break it beyond repair, you’d have been broken in pieces too. You certainly never would have become a boxer or even been able to attend Muggle school.”

Dudley took another gulp of his tea, holding the cup in both hands so his trembling didn’t slosh his drink everywhere. “O-okay, but I don’t understand. I’m definitely more brawn than brains, but I’m sure I’m not mad. And I’m sure as hell not crippled either, so what blocked my magic if those are the only possibilities?”

Severus’ expression was grave and his voice quiet, though it trembled with righteous fury. “There is one method of taking away a wizard’s magic without breaking either his mind, soul, or body: suppression. **Intentional** suppression.”

Dudley paled further. “Dear God. You’re saying they knew. They knew I was a wizard and cut off my magic before it could grow. But that’s … it can’t be. I mean, I know they aren’t what I thought they were, but they wouldn’t go that far.” He looked at Harry’s haunted eyes and winced. “W-would they?”

“I’m sorry, Dudley,” Harry said in a shaking voice. “They **did**.”

Dudley let slip a broken sob and hid his face in Callie’s hair. His soft cries and shocked denials cut Harry to the core. Gods, what kind of monsters could do this to their own son?

“I don’t understand,” said a shaken Callie. “How could they have suppressed Dudley’s magic? They’re Muggles. They don’t have access to suppression tools.”

Harry suppressed a sharp spike of anger for his cousin’s sake. “No, you’re right about that. They couldn’t have suppressed him without help.”

Her eyes went as wide as saucers. “Oh Merlin. Who? Death Eaters?”

Severus gave a bitter snort. “He may as well have been despite his posturing as the figurehead of the light. The former headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, suppressed Dudley’s magic to further his plans for the war.”

Callie gasped. “Dumbledore **again**? That fucking bastard deserves to rot!”

Severus snorted. “I see you have been listening to Potterwatch.” He gave her a devious smile. “If it is any consolation, Harry set his portrait on fire when he found out. The only reason we did not let it burn to ash is the fear that he may have harboured still more secrets.”

She sniffed and gave Severus a firm nod. “Remind me to send you a gift for that once we’re properly
Harry chuckled wanly. “Watching him dance around the canvas like a bloody lunatic was gift
enough.” He sighed and reached out for his cousin. “Dudley, might I see your left wrist?”

The man held out a violently shaking arm.

Severus took Dudley’s teacup and dropped in another capful of calming draught. “Sip it this time.”

Dudley took a sip and set it aside, then gave his wrist back to Harry. “W-what are you looking for?”

“Suppression cuff.” Harry let instinct guide him and whispered a spell over the distraught man’s
wrist. He winced when a silver-grey leather cuff appeared, marked with dark blue runes. “Shite. I
was really hoping this was all a big mistake or a nightmare, but ….”

Dudley shrieked and clawed at his wrist, tears heavy on his lashes. “Oh my God! No-no-no-no—
NO! Get it off, Harry! P-please, God, g-get it off me!”

Severus grabbed the panicking man’s arm, steadying him. “Drink your tea—all at once—now.”

Dudley obeyed, though he could hardly breathe for sobs. “Please, t-take it off.”

“We cannot,” Severus said in a firm voice. “Not yet. Your magic has been suppressed for over
sixteen years. If we remove it without letting your body acclimatise itself to the reappearance of your
magic, the sudden release will kill you. We must remove the cuff slowly, one rune at a time.” He
frowned. “Or, perhaps, if you would rather, I can brew a suppressor potion to hold most of your
magic in check and gradually reduce the dose. That way, once you have taken the potion, I can
remove the cuff entirely so long as you are faithful to each dose. However, either way, I cannot
simply take that off without killing you.”

“Potion,” Dudley said with a shake of his head. “I don’t—I don’t want to be … that’s like a prison
handcuff. I want it off.”

“All right.” Severus hugged Harry’s waist. “Will you be well, love? I will return to Hogwarts and
brew his potion while you are working this out.”

Harry shook his head. “Stay. You’re his family too. He needs to know we accept him.”

Callie stood. “Severus, if you tell me what you need, maybe I can have it brought here? Penny
would be glad to bring it by.”

Severus nodded. “We shall go in the kitchen and make up a list. Is that acceptable?”

Dudley waved them off. “I’ll be okay with Harry. Go do what you need to do.” He gave Severus a
pained look. “And t-thanks.”

Severus nodded. “We shall return shortly.”

Harry stood so Severus could move and watched as he went into the kitchen with Dudley’s fiancée.

“Are you okay?”

Dudley gave him a wry look.

Harry chuckled weakly. “Yeah, dumb question.” He settled onto the sofa beside his cousin again.
“Do you want to know the whole story?”
Dudley gave him a wan nod.

“All right. Well, it goes like this. Dumbledore—we all thought he was a good guy, leading the war effort and trying to help us out and all that, but it turns out he caused the whole bloody thing. He forced my parents to mate—two different creature races that hate each other—just to breed me as a type of human weapon against the bad guy. Well, the worse guy. Though that’s all Dumbledore’s fault too.”

Dudley paled. “Christ, he bred you? And I thought I had it bad. Must have been awful for Aunt Lily too.”

Harry snorted. “I’m over it and Mum’s found her true mate. He’s adopted me, so he’s your uncle too now, I suppose. Severus helps a lot with my past too, and I did find out Mum’s still alive, so there’s that.”

Dudley gave him a sad look. “I thought I had a mum.”

Harry rubbed his shoulder. “I’m sorry, mate. I bet my Mum would be willing to … step up for you, if you wanted her to.”

Dudley gave him a wan smile. “Thanks. I … maybe later. I’m not … not ready for that yet.”

“Okay. You don’t have to do anything about it if you don’t want to. I understand.”

Dudley took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Thanks. So what happened next?”

Harry shuddered and rubbed his upper arms. “Well, Callie told you about Voldemort? That he came in and murdered my dad but couldn’t kill me or Mum?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Dumbledore locked Mum away behind magical barriers and pretended she’d died so I’d grow up away from a loving family. He wanted me to be abused. Wanted me to grow up strong and depend on him for guidance, so he brought me to a family who hated magic. Worse, he made up some sob story about blood wards and such to keep me there even when people knew I was being mistreated. They all wanted to help me, but they didn’t know how bad it was and they thought I’d die if they took me out of the wards. When Mum Weasley—that’s my best mate’s mum; she kind of stepped in for my own when we thought she was dead—when she knew what Dumbledore had done, she was livid. She honestly scared me a bit.”

“Lovely,” Dudley said with a scowl. “And I was a part of that scheme too.”

“Water under the bridge, mate. For one thing, you were just a kid acting on what you’d been taught and you tried to fix it as soon as you realised it wasn’t true. For another, Dumbledore was just as awful to you.”

Dudley stared at the cuff and shuddered. “Right. So what happened after that then?”

“Well, being as they hate magic, your parents didn’t want to take me in. Dumbledore offered compensation at first, but when he realised how greedy Vernon is and that he’d have to sell them an arm and a leg before they would even consider raising me, he decided to threaten them instead. He told them that their precious normal family had a wizard son. And if they took me in, he’d make it so their son grew up like a Muggle, with no freaky stuff to worry about. They caved at that and Dumbledore bound your magic, just to make sure I grew up hated and alone.”
Dudley drew his knees up to his chest, and Harry appreciated the hard work and weight loss that had allowed the action. He’d been too heavy to manage it last summer.

“Damn,” Dudley muttered. “Fuck. I can’t … they really bound me, just so they could pretend I wasn’t … magical?”

Harry nodded. “I’m sorry, Dudley.”

“God. Can you imagine if he hadn’t told them? If they’d found out about my magic later? We’d have been shoved in that cupboard together!”

“Or thrown out,” said Harry in a dark voice.

Dudley nodded and laid his head on his knees. “I guess that’s it then. I either give up my fiancée and the magic part of myself or I lose my parents.”

Harry didn’t know what to say, so he just rubbed Dudley’s shoulder. The man gave him a wan smile.

“Easy decision, really,” Dudley said after a moment, though his eyes were wet. “You’re about the only person other than Callie who’s ever accepted me in any form, Muggle or Wizard. And I’d be a fool to give up either of you. If they can’t accept me for what I am, then they can’t accept me at all.” Tears slipped down his face. “But God, it sucks.”

“I know. Believe me, I know.”

Dudley sighed. “What happens now? Can I still learn magic even though I’m too old to go to school with you?”

Severus returned with Callie and sat beside Harry. “You can indeed, once you have fully reintegrated your core. There are adult education courses for those who, for whatever reason, did not discover their magic until later in life. I will help you get started in them, or I am sure Penelope will be happy to guide you.”

Dudley sniffled. “Good. Then as soon as I learn how, I’ll go to their house and turn everything in Dad’s wardrobe frilly and pink and everything in Mum’s to plaid and overalls.”

Harry snorted. “That’s brilliant. Take pictures, please?”

Dudley laughed, and for the first time, Harry felt like a true family with him. Dudley was hurting, but in time, they’d be all right. Brothers, like they should have been long ago.

“Hey, Dudley, I dunno if it helps, but I thought you might want to know that Sev and I are working on some changes to help Muggleborns—like you, mostly—be integrated into the community better. Maybe if Dumbledore had bothered to teach your parents about magic instead of using it to threaten them, they’d have been more willing to accept it.” Harry shook his head. “Maybe not, given how stupid they are about it, but even if it doesn’t and wouldn’t have helped us, it might help others.”

Dudley smiled. “Could I … maybe do something to help?”

Harry grinned. “I think that would be great.”
Severus had a positive reply to his letters sitting on his desk when he returned, and with a full staff, decided to begin classes in three days for those on campus, and next week for those returning. He pulled Harry aside once they’d had supper and sat him down on the parlour sofa.

“Love, classes will begin in three days. Will you help me get the message out to the Soldiers and your other friends?”

Harry nodded. “Sure, but who’s teaching Muggle Studies, Potions, and Defence? We’re missing three teachers, aren’t we?”

Severus grinned. “We are not. I convinced Slughorn to carry on with Potions until the end of the year. After that, it will be Minerva’s responsibility to find a suitable Potions instructor. We are moving on once the year is done, correct?”

Harry scooted closer. “Yeah. I’m ready to make new, happier memories in a place all our own. Though I might want to come back and teach Defence one day, if that’s all right with you?”

Severus kissed his hair. “I can carry on an owl-order apothecary from anywhere. I’d prefer to keep a shop front, but when you return to teach, if you do, then I will take my business wherever I need to. And research is just as easily done within Hogwarts’ labs as in my own.” He rubbed his chin. “With that in mind, I believe I will begin research for your contraceptive now, inasmuch as I have time to do so.”

Harry grinned. “Good. I’d love to … you know, switch it up a bit.”

Severus shivered. “Merlin, so would I.” He kissed Harry lightly. “Back to the topic at hand, however — as far as my other new professors go, I believe you will be quite happy with my appointments.”

“Oh?”

“I managed to convince Missus Lily Potter-Lupin to teach Muggle Studies and have Mister Remus Lupin return for Defence. Since he is no longer a werewolf, the governors can do nothing to stop him.”

Harry squealed in joy and tackled Severus in a fierce hug. “You’re brilliant! Oh gods, I love you so much!”

Severus laughed and snuggled his husband. “As I do you, pet.” He kissed Harry with warmth and gentle passion. “I take it you are pleased?”

“Yes indeed. And I’ll show you just how much I am as soon as you answer a question for me.”

“Hmm? What question?”

“Well, Remus got his Lycanthropy cured by the soul gates. Mum’s baby was protected. I got the soul spell. But what did you ask for?”

Severus rubbed his chin. “I did not actually ask for anything. Xenidan simply healed my soul of all the damage done during the wars and by Blackpool, so that I could move on without carrying my emotional baggage into our future.” He kissed Harry’s forehead where the scar had gone. “And they brought you home. I could not ask for a greater gift.”

Harry cupped Severus’ face and gazed into his eyes, tears wobbling on the Avenger’s lashes. “Xenidan healed you? You’re free, love?”
Severus smiled and held Harry close. “I may still grieve in the future, but the greatest burden of sorrow is gone from my soul, my beloved. I am free to enjoy you, to look forward to our life together without guilt.”

“Oh, Severus. That … Merlin. That’s wonderful.” Harry’s tears dropped, and he brought Severus into a painfully tender kiss. “Come to bed. Let me show you how happy I am to begin this life with you. How very proud I am of everything you have accomplished, my beautiful mate.”

Severus caught Harry into a fierce kiss and fell into his mate’s embrace.

Severus sat at his desk, idly flipping Kingsley’s letter back and forth and waiting for Harry to return from his third day of classes. Hermione and Ron would most likely be at his side when he arrived, having both asked for potions tutoring alongside Harry, but the lesson would have to be postponed today. Instead, Severus wanted a moment to speak to Harry about his past. He guessed Harry wouldn’t want his friends present for that discussion.

The gargoyle leapt aside for Severus’ mate and laughter and jollity followed Harry and his friends up the stairs. Severus smiled at the sound, truly glad that his mate had reconciled with his friends and was enjoying his life as a young man. It was good to hear his Harry laugh.

He almost considered leaving the serious discussion for later, but looked at his letter once more and knew he could not afford to put it off. They only had two days to come up with a plan of action and discuss Harry’s definition of justice. It would need to be addressed prior to the trials, but Merlin, he hated to be the one to kill his mate’s joy.

“Hi, Severus,” said Harry as he came into the headmaster’s office.

Ron and Hermione greeted him cordially as well.

“Hello,” said Severus. “Did you enjoy your classes today?”

Harry smiled. “It’s hard getting used to being a student again, but learning magic is always good. I’m just glad I tossed history. Merlin, that class is boring.”

Severus chuckled. “Indeed. I will make a suggestion to Minerva that she guide Professor Binns to the great beyond. He is past his expiration date.”

Harry snorted. “And then some.” He pecked his mate on the lips and perched on the arm of his chair. “Bad day, love? You look awfully serious.”

Severus nodded. “We’ll need to postpone your potions lessons until the end of the week, if that is acceptable. I have had a response from Kingsley concerning the trials and we need to discuss it tonight, Harry.”

Ron shared a look with Hermione. “Um, you mean you need to discuss it alone, sir?”

Severus gave them a wan smile. “I believe Harry will feel more comfortable alone, yes. Forgive me.”

“It’s all right,” Hermione said with a shrug. “We can always talk later. See you at dinner?”

“We shall most likely be dining here tonight,” said Severus with a shake of his head. “But we shall
see you at breakfast.”

Hermione and Ron nodded and slipped out of the office. A nervous Harry settled into Severus’ lap.

“Love, why do we need to talk about the trials alone? They could have helped us with strategy and such.”

Severus nodded. “I plan on utilising them tomorrow as well as Lily and Remus, but first, we need to speak about your approach to justice.”

Harry blinked. “My approach?”

“Yes.” Severus sighed. “Come into the parlour and get comfortable, love. This will be a long discussion and my legs will not appreciate such treatment for the duration. Not in this chair.”

Harry smirked. “Are you calling me fat?”

Severus laughed. “Where? There is not an ounce of fat on you.” He kissed Harry lightly. “But even if you gained ten stone, I would not love you any less.”

Harry leapt up with a grin. “I thought you said you weren’t any good at this romance thing, Sev. That was lovely.”

Severus stood and followed Harry into the parlour hand-in-hand. “I have a gentle, loving mate who is teaching me well.” He sat upon the sofa and guided Harry back into his lap, where he could hold his mate and calm him through what promised to be a difficult discussion.

“All right, Sev. What’s this about?”

“I told you Kingsley responded about the trials? They begin tomorrow, and the Malfoys are scheduled first thing, starting with Draco.” Severus gave Harry a sad smile. “I think that, in order to ensure they are judged fairly, we must first work out … a bit of your past, love.”

Harry frowned. “My past? You mean with Draco? I’ve already decided I’m going to try to help him get off with community service or something. He isn’t a monster, even if he is a prat, and he was under duress when he brought in the Death Eaters in sixth year.”

“That is fair, love, but I was not concerned about Draco or Narcissa. It is Lucius you seem to hold a rather large grudge against, and in contrary, dismiss all acts of violence done upon your own person without a fight. I would like to understand the reasons for both and bring you to a fairer system of justice.”

“Fair!” Harry squawked and would have leapt off of Severus’ lap in a fury, but the man hugged him tight.

“Ssh. I am not trying to insult you, love. I am only trying to help.”

Harry huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. “Fine. What do you want to know?”

“I do not believe you need to tell me more than you already have concerning your past, but I would like you to think about it and recognise how it is affecting you today. In three days, I have seen you enact two extremes of justice: you wanted to let the Dursleys go without any punishment for their crimes whatsoever, yet you came down brutally hard on Lucius, even after he helped us defeat Riddle in the end.”
“But I’d already left the Dursleys, so they can’t hurt me anymore. And Lucius was trying to manipulate me into letting him off altogether!”

Severus gave him a wry smile. “Lucius will forever try to evade the consequences of his actions. It is simply his nature. But the fact of the matter is, Harry, the Dursleys can hurt you now, and they are. And I am not simply referring to the debacle with your cousin.” He paused. “How is he getting on with the preliminary adult classes, by the way? Has he said anything yet?”

Harry nodded. “He told me about it when I dropped off his next dose of potion at lunch. He seems really excited and Callie is happy for him. She’s even more thrilled to hear about your idea to invert the suppression potion into a possible solution for giving Squibs magic.”

Severus blushed. “I am not certain it will come to anything, and even if it does, it may only be a small amount. I may not be able to give them a fully-functional core, though that is my hope.”

“I have faith in you, love. You’ll do it.”

Severus smiled. “Thank you.” He paused. “But that brings me back around to our issue with the lasting harm the Dursleys have done you. Do you have any faith in yourself?”

Harry squirmed. “Um … I suppose.”

“Tell me. What makes you worthy, love?”

Harry bit his lip and dropped his arms to his waist, a protective gesture that made Severus ache for his pain.

“I … I mean, I’m pretty good at defence.”

“You defeated and survived Riddle, Harry. You are more than pretty good. What else?”

Harry blushed and looked away. “I … I don’t, I don’t like talking about myself, Severus.”

Severus nodded and turned Harry’s face back around with a gentle hand. “I know. I have seen it. And that is part of the damage they have done. For so long, they called you worthless, freak, useless, that you have come to believe it. And therein lies the key problem with your ability to judge objectively. You feel worthless, so you imagine crimes committed against your person to be insignificant. But when someone who loves you—an event you believe to be miraculous in and of itself—when they are hurt, your anger is swift and merciless.”

Harry flushed and glared. “I don’t think that’s fair, Severus.”

“Hmm. Very well. Consider this. If Draco Malfoy had cast that cutting curse on you in sixth year, a Sectumsempra to the chest, what would you recommend his punishment to be?”

Harry frowned. “I mean, I really didn’t get punished for it beyond some detentions, so it wouldn’t be fair ….”

“Assuming we were in court of law, love. What would you recommend?”

“Er … maybe a month of community service in St. Mungo’s and mandatory education about healing curses and why not to use such dark magic?”

Severus nodded. “Suitable punishment. And if he had aimed that exact same curse at me?”

Harry’s eyes flashed and his nostrils flared. “That’s going below the belt, love. You’re my mate.”
You know I can’t help defending you.”

Severus bowed in acquiescence. “Fair point. Hermione Granger then.”

Harry’s mouth opened and shut, his brow furrowed, and he let out a tense sigh. “All right. You might have a point.”

“You would punish him more harshly then?”

Harry nodded tersely. “Azkaban.”

“Right. And you see how that is unfair? We are speaking of the exact same crime, with the identity of the victim as the only distinguishing factor. In an unbiased justice system, the punishment for both crimes would be exactly the same because there was no greater wrong committed against either victim.”

Harry sighed. “I … when you put it like that, I can see it, but it’s hard to remember that when it’s my friends and family suffering.”

“I know. If your help was not so crucial in achieving a fair trial for everyone, I would tell you that you are too biased and should not be allowed to participate beyond giving testimony. However, if you do not speak, then I am afraid no one with a mark will have any sort of fair trial at all.”

Harry shivered. “What do you mean, love?”

Severus leaned back and rubbed Harry’s back. “As the law currently stands, the punishment for using an Unforgiveable—any of them, under any circumstance—is a lifetime in Azkaban. They are waiving that rule for the light-sided fighters who used them during the Battle of Hogwarts, but not for the vampires or Death Eaters. Surely you can see how unfair this is?”

Harry blinked. “It is? I mean, they’re the bad guys, aren’t they? Well, not the vampires—we’ll have to do something about that—but the Death Eaters?”

“Well, yes, however, waiving the punishment for one side and not the other is still a double-standard. The punishment should be waived during the battle for both sides. War is war and justice should be blind.”

Harry frowned. “Considering that we were acting in defence and they were trying to kill us, I can’t say I agree.”

“What of the vampires, Harry? They attacked, but under duress. If we do not apply the waiver to everyone, they will suffer too.”

Harry winced. “Point. All right. I guess we can push for the waiver to cover everyone. The Death Eaters who need to be convicted will have committed enough crimes for Azkaban without counting the battle itself anyway.”

Severus nodded. “Exactly.”

“So why do you think the lifetime sentence is unfair? I mean, I already agree with you for the most part, but I want to hear your reasoning.”

Severus gave him a tender kiss. “Thank you. And the reason I do not agree with it is that a blanket punishment for such varied curses is unjust. The killing curse, perhaps, deserves a lifetime sentence, only excepting its use as a defensive measure. But Crucio, even as terrible as it is, does not kill a
person unless it is held for an obscene amount of time. A light application of the curse should still
garner harsh punishment as, even in the best case scenario, there is long-lasting mental damage, but a
lifetime sentence is too harsh unless the damage is permanent, as in the case of the Longbottoms.
And Imperio? The uses of that curse alone are so widely varied that having a single sentence for it is
ludicrous. One could, of course, use it to force the victim to kill or maim a person, but one could also
use it to force the victim to steal a loaf of bread for a hungry mother and child. It should be judged on
an individual basis.”

Harry frowned. “You’re right, but what am I supposed to do about it?”

“Love, not you alone. I am taking all of our heroes with us. Perhaps not Ferin as the case takes place
in the daytime and his presence may be more hurtful than otherwise, despite all the good he did, but
Lily, Remus, and your friends will be with us.”

“But still, what can we do? We’re one group of people against the entire Ministry.”

“We are one group of war heroes against the entire Ministry. We have the clout to threaten their
authority, and we must use that for everyone’s good, or Britain will soon see the rise of another dark
lord, I fear. The world is ready for change, and we have the political power and a rare window of
opportunity to affect it. I believe this is our one chance to truly lay the seeds for a better future.”

Severus cupped Harry’s face. “But before we have a hope of succeeding, we must help you to be
able to apply justice fairly, with regard to the circumstances and not whether the victims are your
personal friends or not.” He frowned and traced a fingertip down Harry’s jaw. “Though, to be fair, I
believe the only ones you would be prejudiced against are either dead or mostly innocent.”

Harry frowned. “Like who?”

“Riddle, Bellatrix Lestrange, Pettigrew, and Malfoy Senior. The former three are dead and the latter
is mostly innocent.”

Harry frowned harder. “You think Lucius-arsehole-extraordinaire-Malfoy is innocent?”

Severus snorted. “I said mostly. No, Malfoy has been complicit in many crimes, but I do not believe
he is nearly as guilty as you think.”

Harry sat up and glared. “He’s killed people, hasn’t he? That makes him guilty.”

“Actually, I do not believe he has.”


“Malfoy is an excellent duellist and quite dangerous in battle, but as Death Eaters go, he is as
cowardly as his son.” Severus shook his head. “Riddle did not recruit him for his ability to torture
and maim Muggleborns, Harry. His worth lay more in political influence and wealth than anything.
Lucius detested getting his hands dirty and I doubt he has the stomach for anything approaching
murder. No, considering everything I know about the man, I do not think he has used the
Unforgiveables much at all, with the exception of training his son to endure them, which, to be fair,
is quite reprehensible enough to be going on with.”

Harry shuddered. “Yeah. But that’s not quite on the same level as Bellatrix torturing the
Longbottoms into madness or dissecting Muggles for fun, is it?”

“No. Not quite.”

Harry sighed. “All right, love. We’ll get the whole story out of Malfoy and judge him fairly. I’ll let
you recommend his punishment and back you up, all right?"

Severus nodded. “That sounds like a good idea.”

“Yeah, but you know what, Sev—if I’m not really fit to judge Malfoy, then I’m betting half the Wizengamot isn’t either. And we can only recommend punishment. In the end, they’ll do what they want. So what do we do, love?”

“That is where we start implementing those changes I mentioned. We shall start with the Wizengamot and go from there. Are you prepared?”

Harry squared his shoulders. “All right. Let’s do this.”

Severus replied with a passionate kiss.

The Ministry lift dinged and slammed to a stop. Harry’s stomach lurched.

“Level ten, Death Eater trials. Authorised personnel only.”

Harry shuddered and slipped his hand into Severus’. “Stay close to me?”

Severus recalled the story of a much younger Harry facing a full trial in these dark, cold rooms and squeezed his mate’s hand. “Of course. Let us go, love, before we are late.” He said over his shoulder, “Follow us, everyone—” A blushing witch tried to edge closer and Severus shot her a cold glare. “Everyone who is *authorised* to attend the trial.”

The witch subsided with a pout, and Severus led them all off the lifts. Harry stayed close, willing happy thoughts to drive away the cold. Kingsley had already done away with most of the dementors and banished them to a special prison under the Department of Mysteries, but their chill still permeated these halls, clinging to the stones like slime. Harry would have liked to bury his face in Severus’ side and take comfort in his mate’s strength, but for this, he needed to appear strong. Like the hero the Wizengamot wanted to see.

Even if the thought of using his fame to get people like Lucius *bloody* Malfoy out of trouble made it difficult not to scowl.

Harry looked around at his companions, relieved to see that they had opted to go for the heroic look as well. His family and selected Soldiers members walked with shoulders squared and solemn expressions. They made for an impressive lot. Harry just hoped it was enough to convince the courts that the wizarding world needed to change, starting with the archaic, outmoded Ministry.

Harry didn’t know if they could accomplish everything they hoped to today, but if he had anything to say about it, they’d make a good start.

The doors to courtroom ten opened, and Harry scowled at the sight of a petrified Draco Malfoy, locked in the chair with chains and surrounded by dementors. The boy was pale and clammy, and his knuckles on the armrests had gone bone-white.

*This* wasn’t justice, and Harry wouldn’t stand for it.

“*Expecto Patronum!*”
Among a chorus of outraged shouts and panicked cries, Harry marched in behind his stag, his expression livid and sparks trailing in his wake. “We were informed there would be no dementors present, and I refuse to allow them within this courtroom while I am present. They shouldn’t be present at all regardless. This is a trial, not a prison! And Malfoy might be a prat who needs taking down a peg, but he’s never done anything to deserve those horrid things. You should be ashamed of yourselves for setting them on a terrified teenager, especially one who’s already in magic-suppressing cuffs and bound to a chair!”

Draco gave Harry a look of mixed bemusement and gratitude. Harry ignored it. They weren’t friends, after all, and hearing Draco Malfoy’s dirty laundry aired wasn’t likely to make Harry like him any better. Still, the gratitude showed that there might yet be some kind of hope for the prat. Harry stood tall, surer in his purpose than ever.

“Mister Potter,” said one of the older wizards on the Wizengamot, “the use of dementors in the trials of dangerous criminals is completely warranted. This boy is a Death Eater!”

Harry scowled at the man. “By force, not by choice. And even if he had gone willingly, he still never did anything bad enough to deserve those creatures. Few have.”

“The Death Eaters are all alike,” someone else shouted.

“Oh?” Harry fixed that person with a fierce glare. “So my mate deserves dementors? Because until I freed him, Severus bore the Dark Mark.”

“Harry,” Severus whispered in a frightened hiss. “Please. You may turn them against me.”

“They’ll have to come through me first,” Harry said in a voice low with promise.

“They’ll have to come through all of us,” said Ron, his eyes hard as flint, and the Soldiers and Harry’s family arranged themselves in a protective position around Draco and Severus. Harry beamed at them.

“Right,” Harry said with a firm nod. “Since some of you seem to think this is a torture chamber and not a hall of justice, let’s just get down to business. First of all, how many of the Wizengamot believe that Death Eaters are all one and the same, that every criminal among them deserves the dementor’s kiss or life in Azkaban, and these trials are a waste of time? Just raise your hands, please, and don’t try to deceive me. I’ll know.”

About half the group harrumphed and raised their hands.

Harry paced to keep from scowling. “Hmm. Keep those up. Now, how many of those left have had family members personally attacked by the Death Eaters?”

A third of the remaining hands went up too.

“And of those left, how many of you are just here because you have to be to keep your seat and take no real interest in the proceedings today?”

A few hesitant hands went up.

“All right.” Harry stopped his pacing and faced the presiding judge. “Madam Bones, I move that everyone who raised their hands should be excused from the bench during the trials. They’re not objective or interested enough, or they have a conflict of interest.”

Over a clamour of objections, Amelia bones banged her gavel. “Harry Potter, I remind you that you
do not have the authority to dismiss Wizengamot members.”

Harry turned his glare on her. “I simply moved to have them dismissed, not sent them on their merry way. But I have to say, Madam Bones, I’m disappointed that you didn’t think to take such measures yourself. Biased judgment and unfair prejudice is half the reason Voldemort had as many supporters as he did. Many people, like Draco, like my mate, were driven to Voldemort because they had no other choice.” He waved an arm towards the angry Wizengamot members. “And people like that did the driving.”

“That is an unfair statement, Harry,” Amelia started, but Harry cut her off.

“No.” Harry’s voice was cold and sharp as steel. “Placing a teenager in magic-suppressing cuffs and then letting dementors snack on his soul while we decide whether or not he gets to keep it is unfair.” To Harry’s triumph, many of the Wizengamot members in question shared guilty looks.

“I will not participate in a witch hunt, Madam Bones,” Harry continued. “These people need to be dismissed before any semblance of a fair trial can be achieved.”

Amelia sighed and rubbed her forehead. “Harry, please. This is the way it’s always been done.”

“And it’s wrong! Just like it was wrong to try an innocent sixteen-year old in that very same chair just for defending his cousin from dementors!” Harry pointed at Draco’s seat and glared at the Wizengamot.

The courtroom went silent, and every face in the Wizengamot looked away.

“Harry is exactly right,” Lily said, moving to stand beside her son. “We like to believe ourselves better than Muggles, but do you know that Muggles have a strict justice system that denies any person with a conflict of interest the right to participate in the judgment portion of a trial? They know angry, hateful people can’t make fair calls about the accused’s innocence or guilt; why should we, who have the benefit of magic to aid us, do anything less?”

Hermione stepped forward, somehow managing to look imposing despite her petite frame. “To do anything less would be illegal regardless. Wizarding law has a clause to support Harry’s claims as well.” She gave Amelia a deceptively-sweet smile. “And as to the history of the Wizengamot, you’re quite incorrect, Madam Bones: this is not how it’s always been done. Paragraph fourteen, section 36D of the Canterbury Convention states: ‘No wizard of indignant state or wilful anger against the accused can sit in judgment.’” She turned her cold smile on the Wizengamot. “That particular law has been overlooked in recent years as people have become … comfortable in their Wizengamot seats, but in the past it was followed to the letter. And I must say, it’s quite disappointing to find that we have fallen back on such archaic systems when our own laws forbid it.”

Harry shot Hermione a dazzling grin. Even Severus couldn’t hold back a smirk.

Amelia frowned at Hermione and snapped her fingers. “Zippy.” A house elf in a navy towel stamped with the Ministry crest appeared below the judge’s seat. “Zippy, please fetch me a copy of the Canterbury Convention laws, namely the section pertaining to paragraph fourteen.”

The elf popped away and returned in half a moment holding a roll of parchment. Amelia thanked the elf and scanned through the document, heaving a sigh after a moment. “How strange that I did not know this law existed until today. Miss Granger, have you considered a career in legal work?”

The girl grinned. “I have, actually, but I believe I’d rather represent magical beings except in cases like this, when the Ministry’s performance is … underwhelming. Humans have enough reputable
lawyers, if you don’t mind me saying so, and beings don’t have any at all.”

Amelia pursed her lips. “Indeed. Well, I cannot fault your arguments here, Mister Potter, Miss Granger, Missus Potter-Lupin. You are quite correct about our laws.” She motioned to the Wizengamot. “Anyone Mister Potter pointed out and anyone who has a conflict of interest he did not mention, please vacate the bench. Your services will not be required for the remainder of the Death Eater trials.”

It took several rounds of Amelia’s hammer and a threat to send in the aurors, but the biased judges did eventually clear out, leaving only a third of the usual Wizengamot. She shook her head at the empty seats.

“We do not usually conduct full trials with such a low turnout, but I cannot see what else is to be done. By your own rules, Mister Potter, almost everyone has a conflict of interest.”

Harry glared. “Not my rules—the Ministry’s. And that’s the nature of war—people get hurt. Now, can we get on with the trial? I’m sure Draco’s ready to go home.”

Amelia’s eyebrows shot up. “So sure he’s innocent, are you?”

“Positive. And we have proof or we wouldn’t be here standing in his defence. And either way, he still doesn’t deserve Azkaban.”

“The judges will decide that, Mister Potter.” Amelia banged her gavel once more. “Let us begin the trial.”

Three weeks later, the trials had ended and term was well underway. After a long day of classes and a longer afternoon ensuring that Nicholas Avery received a fair trial—even if the man did thoroughly earn his life sentence in Azkaban—Severus was stretched out on the parlour sofa and relaxing with his mate. Smiling at the domesticity of the moment, he held his exhausted spouse’s feet in his lap and rubbed the aches from Harry’s weary soles.

“Oh Merlin, that’s brilliant, Sev.”

Severus gave him a radiant smile. “You deserve it. You’ve worked hard to ensure every accused Death Eater deserved their sentences. And Lucius—well, five years in Azkaban is a bitter pill for him to swallow, but it’s certainly a better fate than he could have expected had you not intervened. Kingsley had no intention of letting him slip through the cracks this time. If you had not testified in his favour—”

“Don’t give me all the credit, love. You testified too. And Hermione was bloody amazing with finding all those forgotten laws for us. That girl’s going to clean up the entire Ministry singlehandedly, mark my words. I’ll bet you fifty galleons she’ll be the Minister one day.”

Severus chuckled. “I am not foolish enough to take that bet. But while you are right about Hermione’s invaluable assistance, I am still very proud of you, my love.”

“Say that after next week. I might have gotten Draco off with six months community service, but that doesn’t mean I still won’t hex the prat if he’s an arse at dinner Friday.”
Severus snorted. “That would rather defeat the purpose of trying to help him find his footing again, would it not?”

“Could always stick his feet to the floor,” Harry muttered.

Severus laughed and swatted Harry’s leg. “Behave. And now that I am finished here, go get dressed. Something nice.”

“Nice? What’re we doing?”

“We’re going out to celebrate your victory over Rita Skeeter.”

Harry gaped. “The trial’s already over? But I didn’t testify!”

“You did not need to. Veritaserum and your memories did all the work for you.”

Severus held out his copy of the Evening Prophet, which Harry snapped up with a grin. Bright green eyes flashed over the text for a moment before the young man burst into hysterical giggles.

“Oh Merlin. That’s rich. Banned from every newspaper and publishing company the world over and a six-year stint working community service as a custodian at Eeylops. She had best hope she doesn’t spontaneously transform in there, or some adventurous owl will have her for a snack.”

Severus smirked. “I believe that is why they chose the owl shop, so that she could not use her Animagus form to shirk her punishment.”

Harry wiped tears of mirth from his cheeks. “Oh, that’s too good.” He stood and pulled Severus to his feet with a grin. “Sev, this calls for a proper celebration, not just dinner. Mightn’t we go dancing tonight too? I never liked it before, but I might like to try with you.”

Severus had never been one for either dancing or spontaneity, but then, he had never been happy before Harry either. He was willing to try new things in the name of sharing an evening of gaiety with his love at his side. Life with Harry had been a wild ride so far, but damned if Severus wasn’t enjoying every last moment.

Severus smiled brighter than he could ever remember. “That sounds perfect, love. Let’s give it a try.”

When all was said and done, Severus couldn’t remember having more fun in his life.
A New Life

Chapter Summary

Warnings: slash! Summary: Harry and Severus move into their new home, get married, and adopt a little girl who's been waiting for them all this time.

***AN: Sorry for the delay, people. My health has been super bad, and on top of that, I've had to take care of a sick toddler and husband. It's been a rough month, but things are starting to get better. Also, next chapter is the epilogue! Can't believe this one is almost finished!***

CHAPTER 37
A NEW LIFE

The house Harry had chosen was everything Severus had ever dreamed of. White picket fence and all, it was the perfect home to raise a family. He hoped one day he could convince Harry to carry a child for them, but in the meantime, he couldn’t wait to adopt and finally have the family he had always longed for. Even without the crushing weight of guilt breaking him down, he wanted so much to bring a Blackpool child home and sanctify their tragedy with love. And with Harry out of school and done with the war, they finally could. Well, once they were officially bonded, of course.

Severus had never been one for giddiness, but as he walked into his home, Harry grinning beside him, he thought he might come close to it.

“Merlin, Harry. This place is beautiful. I can’t believe it.”

He stepped into the living room and smiled with excitement. The house was full of boxes and stacked furniture in odd places, but soon it would become a home—their home. He was almost too joyous to contain it.

“Are you happy, love?”

Harry beamed. “I’m on cloud nine! I can’t wait to show the place to Brian and Cináed.”

Severus chuckled and blushed. “Well, they’ll be here in a bit. I asked them to help us move in.”

Harry launched himself at Severus and kissed him hard. “You wonderful, lovely man. What did I ever do to deserve you?”

Severus smirked. “Won the war, ended the darkest age of the wizarding world, saved me from certain death—twice—destroyed a great bloody menace of a snake, saved the entire Grey clan fr—”

“Enough, enough,” Harry said with a blush. “Merlin.”

Severus laughed and smoothed Harry’s hair. “Come. Let us get started.”
“Right.”

They went to the sofa, settled awkwardly in a corner, and each took one end. After a bit of huffing and puffing, they had it settled in front of the hearth, with enough room for a cosy rug between them. Harry and Severus settled end tables and chairs on each end, and they were halfway through settling a bookcase into position against the back wall when someone knocked on the door.

“I’ll get it,” cried an exuberant Harry. He dashed to the door and grinned at the sight of their Hearthstane friends, each wearing brilliant smiles. “Brian! Cináed! You made it. Come in. We just got the living room … sort of in order, so feel free to rest on the sofa if you’d like. I’m not sure where the teapot is, but I’ll find it if you’d like some tea.”

Brian laughed and clapped Harry on the shoulder. Severus snickered at the way Harry shuddered under the contact, glad he had avoided Brian’s ‘friendly pat’ this time. The burly barkeep just didn’t know his own strength.

“Rest?” Brian shook his head, making his beard flop about. “We came here to work, lad, make no mistake. Well, and to catch up. Cináed says you’re both well and happy, but a man likes to see some things for himself.”

Harry grinned. “We’re doing great, Brian.” He motioned them to the other bookcases. “Sev and I have a library of books between us, so if you’d help us get these three lined up in here, that would be great.”

Brian nodded and led his partner to a new bookcase. “We’ll just carry this beside Harry’s, yes?”

Cináed nodded and helped him lift it. “How is your project with the orphanages coming along, Harry?”

Harry blinked. “How did you kno—never mind.” He laughed. “It’s doing well. Percy Weasley—well, he was estranged from my friend’s family for a long time. He was too ambitious and wanted to advance in the Ministry, but once he realised the Ministry was actually aiding Voldemort rather than otherwise, he took his head out of his arse and said he wanted to help us clean up the Wizarding world. He’s good with organising things, and so we have him in charge of the paperwork and legalities and such for the orphanages. He’s doing a good job.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Cináed. “Have you found caretakers yet?”

“Yeah. As it happens, Percy’s mum is having a bit of empty nest syndrome—”

Brian guffawed.

Harry grinned. “She has seven kids, but they’re all grown—her youngest is in her last year at Hogwarts now. So we asked Molly to help us watch over the children. She found a lot of other mothers and fathers who miss having a little one at home and a bunch of younger people who like kids, and now we have three orphanages fully staffed and running. They’ve already started finding homes. Er … you wouldn’t be interested in adopting one, would you?”

Brian hesitated. “I’m not sure we could, Harry. It’s a lovely idea, but Muggles don’t look fondly on gays. They look even less kindly on gays with children, lad.”

Cináed smiled. “Our own gift is coming soon, Brian. Not quite yet, but soon.”

Brian blinked. “It is? Well, that’s good then.”
Severus chuckled. He had a feeling that many of Brian and Cináed’s conversations went something like that.

“We’ve also started up a rehabilitation centre for the junior Death Eaters who weren’t in too deep,” Harry said after a long silence. “Percy’s running the administration for that as well, and Narcissa Malfoy is running the centre and going a great job of it. Her son and husband were Death Eaters, but Lucius helped us win the war—sort of—and Draco didn’t want to be involved at all. Dumbledore messed with his mind and forced him into the battle, and now we’re left to pick up the pieces.” Harry shook his head. “A lot of the younger Slytherins are in similar situations. Narcissa has proved to be really good at getting them to open up and heal. It’s been great—a few are even volunteering at the orphanages or the revolution centre.”

Harry moved a coffee table into place before he spoke again. “And speaking of the new revolution centre, it’s been doing well too. Hermione’s at the head of that one. She’s working to reform the legal aspects of the wizarding world and get rid of stupid prejudices and outdated laws. She’s been doing a damn good job of it too.”

“That girl will be minister in twenty years,” said Severus with a chuckle.

“Eleven,” said Cináed.

Harry gaped. “Minister at twenty-nine? Damn, Hermione.”

“She is rather impressive,” Severus conceded. He nudged the coffee table he had just placed a bit to the left. “Come and help us with the kitchen, gentlemen. This is enough in here.”

“For now, anyway,” Harry agreed. “We’re just doing the big stuff first, then comes the real unpacking. I’m not looking forwards to going through all Sev’s knick knacks. Merlin, who knew one man could collect so much!”

Severus snorted and waved the others into the next room. The barkeeps followed Severus and Harry through the hallway into a large eat-in kitchen with floor-to-ceiling windows.

“Oh, lovely,” said Brian with a grin. “You lads picked a treasure.”

“We certainly did,” said Severus with a smile. “It was the last property left to my name.”

“We fell in love with it at first sight.” Harry grabbed an end of the dining table. “Cináed, wanna help m—Merlin.”

The Seer was already there and lifting up the other end.

“I have no idea how you do that,” Harry said with a laugh.

“Practice,” said Cináed, grinning.

Harry snorted and guided the table into place in front of the tallest windows. He and the others each grabbed a chair and pushed them into place.

As Cináed set his chair down, he set his silvery gaze on the potions master. “How are your projects coming, Severus?”

Severus jumped, surprised. “Oh. Well, I am almost finished with a … er, a special potion for Harry. Besides that, I am making progress on a hovering wheelchair and a potion to … well, perhaps I shouldn’t speak of that one. I would not like to dash anyone’s hopes.”
Cináed was not to be fooled. “The squib reactivation potion is going well then?”

Severus gaped. “Oh … I … y-yes, I believe so, but I cannot be sure without thorough trials. It will be some time before it is ready, and that is assuming I can complete it at all.”

Cináed gave the man an enigmatic smile. “Hmm. I believe in you.”

Harry grinned. “If he does, I know it’s going to work.”

Severus blushed. “Well, I do hope it does. It would certainly put paid to the pureblood ideology, though that is not the reason I am pursuing it.”

Cináed laughed. “We all know that, Severus. No Sight needed.”

Harry chuckled. “So we do.” He leaned against the wall for a bit to catch his breath. “Whew. This is hard work.”

Brian nodded. “Why not use your wands, lads?”

“Because it is good physical training and we have not had time to indulge in much of that since the end of the war,” said Severus with a smile. “We need the exercise.”

“Well, moving in is certainly good for that,” said Brian with a chuckle.

“That it is,” Harry agreed, mopping his forehead. “Brian, Cináed, we’re going to need your place on June thirtieth to bond. Is that all right with you? You’ll have to close up for the day because we can’t have any Muggles about.”

Brian nodded. “Fine with me, lad. We owe you more than a day off.”

“Well, I wouldn’t call it a day off. We’ll be paying you, and I plan to have Cináed and Molly cook up a storm for us. And we’ll be paying for that too.”

Cináed grinned. “Looking forward to it. I’ll be sure to have plenty of treacle tart and cherry cheesecake.”

Harry’s eyes darted to Severus and they both flushed.

Harry covered his face. “Dear Merlin.”

Severus snorted. “Never take up spying, Harry. And Cináed, that sounds lovely, however you got your information.”

Cináed smirked. “My spirits are very thorough sometimes. Too thorough.”

Harry choked on air. “Dear gods. I hope they’re not that thorough.”

Severus laughed. “It does not matter as you just were!”

Harry blushed crimson. “Well, shite.”

Cináed snickered. “They are telling me a subject change would be good for our ears right about now.” Harry nodded profusely, and Cináed laughed out loud. “Ha! Well then, tell Brian how your Muggleborn and Squib integration project is going.”

Harry sighed. “That one is meeting obstacles. No one can seem to agree on the right way to teach
Muggle parents about us, or who to teach, or whether it breaks the statute of secrecy or not.” He shook his head. “We’ll get it going. It’s just going to take a while to wade through all the red tape.”

“Yes, you will,” said Cináed with a smile. “You’ll do well, and bring great hope to the world. I’m quite proud of you, Harry and Severus. We both are.”

Severus’ cheeks flamed. “T-thank you.” Embarrassed at the praise, he cleared his throat and motioned to a pantry. “Perhaps one of you might help me get this situated in the corner by the stairs there?”

Brian gave him a knowing smile. “Sure thing, lad.”

Severus’ heart thundered as he descended to his lab. The final test on this round of potion should have been finished by now, and Severus had a feeling that he would finally have the result he was hoping for. The last two trials had worked, and if this one did as well, he would be satisfied that he had a reasonably effective potion.

Of course, he couldn’t exactly test it in the field as he had no potential subjects save one, but he’d assembled a reasonable facsimile of a field test using blood from Harry’s abdomen charged with the boy’s life magic. If this test showed no change in the sample after the massive influx of power Severus had inundated it with last night, then he would be able to tell Harry.

Just in time, too. Their bonding was tomorrow. Severus had never been so excited and nervous all at once. Had they done everything? Had they gotten the rings right and the robes and the flowers and—

Severus jerked himself out of his racing thoughts as he entered his lab and went to his titration setup. He had to finish this project before the bonding—well, if he could manage it—then he would worry about the bonding preparations.

He checked the final phial with simple sight first. It looked the same as last night, only a bit drier, which was to be expected. With a frown, he passed a wave of magic at the blood. When it didn’t push back, he grinned and performed his final test—a diagnostic scan. There was no change from yesterday.

“Ah! Finally!”

A thump sounded upstairs. “Severus? Are you okay, baby?”

“Yes, yes.” Severus set the titration kit in the sink to clean and rinsed the final phial free of blood. “Harry, love, come into the lab.”

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and after a moment, Harry’s wild head poked into the door. When he saw Severus was just washing up, he came in all the way.

“Hello, love. How’d the test go?”

Severus grinned. “It’s complete. The contraceptive potion works, at least as far as I can test it without a human subject.”

Harry smirked. “Really? How would you like to test it on me?”
Severus shivered. “Oh. Tomorrow? I would like our bonding to be special. And you will need to take a dose of the potion twenty-four hours prior anyway.”

Harry smiled. “Well? Where’s my dose, love?”

Severus kissed Harry and Summoned the potion. “Here you are.”

Harry lifted it as if to toast Severus and tipped it back. He shuddered at the taste and wiped his mouth. “Hmm. Unpleasant going down, but if it means I get to feel you inside me without worrying about starting a brood, it’s worth it.”

Severus groaned. “You are not making it easy to resist, love.”

Harry smirked. “Who said we had to resist? Or do you not like it when I take you?”

“Oh _gods._” Severus ran some water through his kit. “That’s clean enough for now. Take me to bed.”

Harry laughed and led his mate upstairs.

Severus, dressed in black velvet robes with white trim, paced the floor in front of the door and tried not to remember all the trauma he had once suffered in this very room. While he was to wait for the bonding ceremony to start, Brian had placed him in the same bedroom he’d shared with Harry while they were still hunting horcruxes. No doubt Brian had thought it sentimental, but hell—Severus had almost _died_ in this room!

Despite his best efforts, sorrow-tinged memories kept creeping in. That day, the day the horcrux attacked him and tried to steal his soul, Severus had been prepared to say goodbye to Harry without ever telling the man how much he loved him. He had hoped the young man would then be able to move on with no strings attached. He hadn’t known they were already mates and bound to each other’s lives. If Severus had died, Harry would have gone with him.

Thank Merlin, fate hadn’t been that cruel. He didn’t want to think of what would have happened to the world had Harry not managed to save him that night. Severus looked around the room and shivered. They had come so close to losing it all right here, but as always, Harry had come through with shining colours and saved the day.

Merlin, Severus was a fortunate man. How many people were lucky enough to find second chances? Or in Severus’ case, more like fifth or sixth. Or maybe even more, considering how many times he’d come close to expiring as a result of the Dark Lord’s anger.

Severus sat on the bed and took a deep breath. It was truly over. Voldemort was _dead_, never to return. Already, Draco’s mark was barely a pale shadow upon his forearm, soon to be gone forever, its magic as dead as its creator. Severus had checked two weeks ago, just to be sure. The world was safe again, and Severus still had his Harry. They had overcome evil despite all the odds, and had even found love along the way.

And they were to be bonded soon! In mere moments, he would join his mate at the altar and bond with him as wizards, for all eternity. A giddy thrill rushed through Severus and set his belly a flutter. Gods, this was such a beautiful ending to the grim horror story that had been their lives until recently.
Severus looked to his engagement ring and smiled. No. It was a beautiful *beginning*. A new day to start a life of love and happiness with Harry by his side. He couldn’t wait.

A knock sounded at the door and Brian’s deep voice drifted through the wood. “Severus? Are you dressed, lad? It’s time.”

Severus’ heart skipped. “Yes, I am dressed.” He stood and moved to the door, giving the bedroom one last look. “The darkness is over, and new life begins.”

Brian opened the door, a bright smile on his face. “Cináed said you needed to face your demons here. I reckon you’re ready to leave them behind you?”

Severus smiled back. “I am ready to embrace the future for the first time in my life.” He gave the big barkeep a hesitant hug. “Thank you. For everything.”

Brian patted Severus’ back and, when Severus pulled away, the man was blushing. “Ah, it’s nothing, lad. It’s us who’re in your debt.”

Severus shook his head and smiled brighter. “No. No debts, no chains. We’re free now.”

Brian chuckled. “So we are.” He offered Severus his arm. “Are you ready then?”

Severus shivered. “Harry is … he is …?”

Brian laughed. “Just as antsy as you are! And he’s not skipped town yet. Now come on and get ready for your husband.”

Severus beamed. “Husband. Merlin, that is a beautiful word.”

“Well, come then and meet him.”

Severus allowed Brian to guide him down the stairs and into the main tavern, which had been magically enlarged for the day and organized like a small chapel. Black and white damask draped the pews and red roses decorated either end. A white arbour decorated with more roses and black and white ribbons stood at the top of the aisle, and Severus’ stomach gave a little lurch at the sight of it. Where was his Harry?

“Don’t you worry, lad,” Brian murmured. “He wants to come to you on the fuzzy lassie’s arm.”

“Hermione?”

“Yes, that’s the one. ‘Fraid it’s been a bit difficult to learn everyone’s names in such a short time. Cináed’s much better, but then again, he has help!” Brian rumbled a rich laugh. “All’s well, Severus. Your lad will be here in just a bit.”

“Thank you,” Severus said as Minerva moved to his side.

Minerva sniffled and wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. “Oh, Severus. You look simply radiant. Lovely.”

Severus flushed at the praise and lowered his head. “T-thank you.”

Lovely—well, that was a bit of a stretch. Severus had tried to clean up as much as he could, but the war had done him no favours. On the best of days, he was still too thin, still all nose and crooked teeth, and his hair still lay flat as a board. But he had put a whitening spell on his teeth, washed his hair twice and brushed it till it shone, and let the one white streak hang free beside his face—Harry
liked it that way. He hoped it made some kind of difference, even if he would never win any beauty contests.

“Come then, Severus. You have a bonding to attend.” She wiggled her elbow, and Severus took her arm with a hesitant smile.

She held his forearm and turned him toward the altar. Severus flushed as the guests stood and turned to face him, each wearing a welcoming smile. Some of the worry in Severus’ heart eased. Even after everything he’d done, he had still been afraid someone would make trouble for them today. All was well.

Cináed began playing an old Scottish ballad on his violin and, as a fall of red rose petals dropped from the ceiling and onto the aisle, Severus stepped forward, his head held high and tears of joy pooling at the corners of his eyes. He blinked them back. He would not spend his bonding sniffling. It was a happy day.

With a deep breath, he took his place on the altar and tried to calm himself as Minerva took her place beside him. At the top of the altar, Filius stood on a stack of books atop a chair, officiating for the men that evening. Ron stood opposite Minerva—best man for Harry and woman for Severus. A gap in the next tier was reserved for Hermione, Harry’s best woman, and Bill Weasley—who had always been kind to Severus—stood opposite her in the position of Severus’ best man. Once, it would have been Filius, but with Albus’ betrayal, Filius had taken over as their officiant.

Cináed’s song ended, leaving the tavern silent but for a few sniffles from the guests, and Severus’ heart raced. Where was Hermione? She was supposed to bring in Harry, wasn’t she? Shouldn’t she have come already? Severus searched for her, but not seeing her anywhere, he began to panic in earnest.

Where was Harry? Had he changed his mind? Had he found some younger man to mate with instead? Or had he decided a life without bonding to Severus would be better? Maybe Harry had simply tired of him. Last night he’d been happy, but maybe Severus hadn’t done enough to please him, or maybe he hadn’t been affectionate enough. Gods, he still had so much trouble letting his sensitive side out. What if it wasn’t enough? What if—”

The stairwell door opened once more, and Hermione stepped through, leading Harry. Severus couldn’t suppress a sigh of relief, but as he got a good look at his mate, it turned into a gasp.

Harry had dressed in white silk robes trimmed with blood red and with delicate crimson embroidery. Rather than attempt to tame and flatten his hair—which never worked anyway—Hermione had fixed it into a mass of glorious curls that left Severus’ mouth dry. Thanks to a temporary vision correction potion Severus had given him the night before, Harry had forgone his glasses, and his luminous viridian eyes knocked the breath from his mate. His cheeks held a soft pink flush and his eyes were bright and clear, tears of happiness shining on his lashes.

Dear Merlin, the man was stunning. Severus swallowed a rush of emotion and smiled at his beloved.

Harry caught Severus’ eye and looked the man up and down. Severus blushed under the scrutiny, but the widening of Harry’s eyes and beaming smile filled the older man with warmth and joy. Whatever the world thought of Severus’ appearance, Harry loved him and thought him beautiful. That was enough for Severus.

Harry looped his arm through Hermione’s and, as Cináed began to play again, Harry slowly walked up the aisle. He beamed at Severus, his expression radiant with joy and love. Severus could not take his eyes off the man. His world narrowed to one point, his Harry, his love, his life.
After today, Harry would be his in the eyes of the world, and he would belong to Harry.

In spite of his former resolution not to cry, tears pooled on Severus’ lashes as he took Harry’s hands and said his vows. He hardly noticed what he was saying, so deep was his focus on Harry. Tears streamed down the younger man’s cheeks, and Severus cupped his face and brushed them away. Harry was speaking his vows now, and Severus tried to listen, but all he could think of was how beautiful Harry looked when he was happy.

Harry took Severus’ hand and slipped a bonding ring on his finger. The prickle of new magic brought Severus out of his daze a bit, at least long enough to realise he should do the same for Harry. As Severus slid Harry’s ring on and watched it resize to fit his mate, a thrum of joy filled him.

Gods, he couldn’t believe they had made it this far. Sometimes he still found himself waiting for the other shoe to drop, but in his heart, he knew Harry had never let him down and never would.

Harry lifted a tear-streaked, smiling face to meet Severus’ gaze, and the older man gasped as he felt Harry’s fingertips against his cheeks. Wet cheeks. So Harry wasn’t the only one completely overwhelmed with the sheer joy of the moment.

“I now pronounce you wed,” said an exuberant Filius. “You may kiss!”

Harry cupped the nape of Severus’ neck and drew him down into a soft, emotional kiss.

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” Harry whispered between more kisses, as if he couldn’t tear himself away.

Severus embraced his husband—husband!—and whispered in his ear, “Gods, Harry. How much I love you.”

Harry gave a little laughing sort of whimper and buried his head in Severus’ shoulder. Severus held him there, eyes closed and tears streaming unchecked down his cheeks. He kissed Harry’s hair—Merlin, whatever Hermione had done to give him those curls had made it soft as silk—and cradled his love close.

Only when Harry pulled away to smile at the guests did Severus realise they were all cheering. And many were sniffling too. Severus gave the guests a hesitant smile, still unsure of his welcome even at a time like this.

“To Harry and Severus!” Brian raised a tankard of ale and clinked glasses with a sobbing Hagrid.

Hagrid blew his nose in what looked like an orange-spotted tablecloth. “Oh, wee Harry, all grown up and married teh our very own Perfessor Snape. Prince now, I s’pose.” He raised a tankard in salute. “Many happy years teh ye!”

Brian and Hagrid tossed back their drinks with a cheer. Once they’d finished their toast, several people flicked their wands at the tavern and the wedding chapel setup transformed into a dining area. Cináed reappeared then with a giant tray in tow, Molly hot on his heels with a number of silver serving dishes floating before her.

Cináed grinned as he laid his burden on the bar and removed the lid to reveal a fluffy white cake with borders made of fresh cherries and dark chocolate swirls. “Your favourites, Harry and Severus, all in one cake.”

Severus flushed from head to toe. “Dear gods. That man will never let us live that down now.”
Harry laughed and led Severus to the food. It was utterly delicious, but Severus hadn’t much of an appetite. He was too busy staring at his new husband and anxious for the honeymoon to start.

Harry stood and held out a hand. “May I have this dance?”

Only then did Severus realise the other tables had been cleared and Cináed was playing again, this time with several other witches and wizards on various instruments. Luna was playing a tambourine and dancing to her own beat—the sight made Severus chuckle.

“Of course, my love.”

Severus swept his husband onto the dance floor and swayed with him, knowing Harry wasn’t skilled at dancing and wouldn’t want to embarrass himself. At least not on the first dance. Later, when everyone was drunk, it might be another story.

Harry laid his head against Severus’ shoulder. “Are you happy, love?”

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “I have never been so happy in my life. Are you?”

“I’m bursting with it. I just know it’s bubbling out of every pore.”

Severus chuckled. “You are glowing a bit.” He sighed into Harry’s hair. “Beautiful. You are simply lovely today. I cannot keep my eyes off of you.”

“So are you. Merlin, I was afraid for a moment when I saw you in this gorgeous velvet that I’d embarrass myself before I even made it to the altar.”

Severus snorted. “Oh, to be a young man again.”

“That had nothing to do with my hormones. It was all you.”

Severus smiled and rocked his husband closer, enjoying his warmth and his scent.

The party went on well into the night, and once the moon had risen, Ferin and his closest family stopped by to offer their congratulations and to officially accept the leaders of Clan Prince into their kinship bond.

Their greeting brought it home to Severus that he was no longer a Snape. He was Severus Tobias Snape Prince, husband of Harry James Potter Prince. They were really married. It wasn’t simply a beautiful dream.

He spent the rest of the celebration in a quiet kind of giddiness, so happy he thought he might melt from sheer joy.

At ten, the barkeeps began ushering people out. Cináed and Brian had an early morning, and business wouldn’t wait. Harry and Severus were the first to leave, after thanking everyone for coming and accepting one last toast on their behalf.

“I am so ready to try out that potion,” Harry whispered in Severus’ ear as they walked up their front path—the house had anti-apparition wards, of course.

Severus shivered. “Yes, Merlin, yes. Only let me give you another dose and … ghn.” Harry was more than ready, apparently, as he had slipped his hand into Severus’ robes right there on their front lawn and was rubbing his awakening erection with a firm hand.

“Ohh.” Severus stopped and moved with Harry’s strokes, panting and arching with pleasure.
“Mm. Like that, my husband?”

Severus groaned at the title. “Merlin yes, but you must stop now, or I shan’t be able to walk to the bedroom and we shall be forced to try out that potion right here in the grass.”

Harry laughed and let his hand fall. “Sorry, love. Got a bit impatient.”

“Mm. I am impatient now too.”

Severus gripped Harry’s hand and dashed inside, a laughing Harry sprinting behind him. He wasn’t sure how they made it to the bedroom in one piece, given that they were kissing and stripping each other all the way to the bed. He wasn’t sure how Harry had managed to get his trousers off on the stairs without killing himself either, but neither was he in the mood to question it.

“Shite.” Harry caught Severus into a fierce kiss all the while struggling to get the man out of his undershirt. “Too many buttons. Why do you always wear so many buttons?”

Severus chuckled and pushed Harry back. “It keeps away the raving masses. *Deprimo.*” Their buttons all opened at once, and Harry groaned.

“Must remember that one.”

Harry pushed Severus’ shirt off his shoulders and shrugged out of his own. After a bit more frantic squirming, both men were naked. Harry pounced, letting his Avenger features out, and straddled Severus’ hips.

“Oh gods,” Severus cried out. He rocked into Harry and moaned at the feel of their erections rubbing together, velvet-steel against velvet-steel. “Harry, oh. Please.”

Harry groaned and turned around so his legs were around Severus’ shoulders and took his husband into his mouth. Severus cursed and arched his hips, Merlin, the feel of that wet heat was going to make him come too soon unless he distracted the little imp. No doubt Harry turned this way thinking turnabout was fair play, but Severus had other ideas in mind.

With a moan at a particularly hard suck, he grabbed Harry’s hips, cast a wandless cleaning spell, and swiped his tongue across his husband’s entrance. Gods, he had no idea how Harry tasted of cherries everywhere, but he wasn’t about to complain.

Harry howled and arched back, but it had the intended result of getting the man to release Severus before he made a mess of their plans. Instead, he set about reducing his husband to a moaning, gibbering pile of goo and wandlessly Summoned edible lubricant, Harry’s potion, and a glass of water.

Severus floated the potion and water to Harry. “Take that right now before we get too distracted and forget.”

Harry leaned back and drank his potion, followed by some of the water. “If I have to take that every day, I expect you to make it taste better sometime soon.”

“I will do my best. Now, get back down here. I hadn’t finished with you yet.”

Harry moaned and settled back down again, in the same position he had held before.

“Good.”
Severus licked Harry’s entrance and pressed inside, and Harry shrieked. With a smirk, Severus about preparing Harry, sliding lubricated fingers inside beside his tongue and stretching him slowly.

“Severus, oh gods, Severus.”

Severus shivered at the sound of his name pronounced in that mewling, desperate tone. Merlin, Harry was perfect, and Severus wanted inside him now. Panting, Severus backed off with his tongue and used two fingers to open his mate instead, watching them slide in and out of Harry with desire and fascination.

“Gods, you’re absolutely erotic like this,” Severus gasped out. “So tight, so hot.”

With a groan, Harry pushed back onto Severus’ fingers and sucked the head of his mate’s erection into his mouth. Severus grunted and gasped as Harry’s talented tongue swirled around the end, and he decided he’d best get on with the preparation quickly if he wanted to last long enough to enjoy it.

Severus removed his fingers and reapplied his tongue for a moment, spearing in and out of that tight heat and thrilling in the way Harry arched and mewed around a mouthful of Severus’ erection. Dear gods, that sensation would have him over the edge in half an instant. He reached down and grabbed the base of his shaft hard, staving off his climax for a moment at least, and slipped three lubricated fingers into his beloved Harry. He aimed downwards a bit, crooked his fingers and smirked at Harry’s sudden cry.

“Oh my gods, do that again, Severus.”

Severus kissed Harry’s thigh and obliged, watching himself prepare Harry, entranced by his lover’s willing body.

“Sev, Merlin, Sev, it’s enough. I need you.”

Harry turned around, and Severus guided him onto his back. He spread lubricant on his erection, then cast a quick cleaning charm on his fingers and cupped Harry’s face. “This time, you are mine to protect. This time, I am to take care of you, my mate.”

Harry moaned and arched up to meet his hips. “Yes. I’m yours, love. Take care of me.”

Severus had to take a deep breath so as not to lose himself at the sight of Harry’s eagerness for him.

“Merlin, you’re beautiful, beloved.” With the greatest of care, Severus eased into his mate, shivering at the feel of tight heat around him. “Gods. Gods. Feels so good. Are you in pain?”

For an answer, Harry pushed down on him and took the entire length of Severus inside.

“Oh dear Merlin!” Severus panted and still, overwhelmed and afraid Harry had hurt himself. “Slowly, my love. Are you all right?”

Harry rocked into him with a moan. “Doesn’t hurt. Feels good.”

Severus let slip a relieved sigh and cupped Harry’s face. “I love you.”

“And I you. Now move!”

Severus gave a dark laugh and obliged.
Merlin. Harry had imagined what it might feel like to have Severus inside him, but the real thing put his fantasies to shame. It was heat and pressure in just the right spots, but more than that, he could feel how much Severus cared for him in the slow pace, in the way the man cradled him close and kissed Harry’s face as they made love. Harry slipped his fingers through Severus’ hair, still silky-soft even with sweat dampening it, and followed Severus’ strokes with thrusts of his own.

“Love you, love you, love you.” Like at the wedding, tears stung his eyelids and dripped down his face, the sheer joy of their union overwhelming him.

Severus stopped and cupped Harry’s cheek. “Have I hurt you, love?”

Harry gave him a smile and shook his head. Words would hardly come.

“Just … just love you so much.”

Severus’ eyes filled with softness and warmth, and he kissed Harry tenderly before he would move again. “My angel, my love.” He leaned down, letting Harry’s legs lock behind Severus’ hips, and pressed a kiss to his shorter mate’s forehead. “I love you with everything I am.”


Severus brought Harry into a tender kiss and resumed his slow thrusts, but Harry was done with gentle. He pressed his heels into Severus’ arse and rocked up, taking him deep, and Severus gave a low moan.

“Yes. Merlin, yes,” the older man gasped out.

“Faster, Severus. I’m not going to break.”

Severus groaned. “I was aiming for romantic, you dunderhead.”

Harry laughed and held Severus’ shoulders. “Well, romance accomplished. Now I want to hear you scream.” He thrust up hard, and Severus’ breath hitched.

“Shite.” Severus anchored himself against the headboard and slammed into Harry. Heat and fierce power and pressure filled the younger man.

“Yes, yes more of that.”

Severus smirked. “If you’re still coherent, I’m not doing this right.”

He shifted his angle, thrust in hard, and an explosion of white-hot sensation pummelled Harry. The younger man shrieked and gripped Severus’ shoulders.

“Dear fucking Merlin, yes!”

“Now that’s more like it.”

Severus used the headboard for leverage as he slammed home again and again, reducing Harry to a pile of gibbering want. Mother of Merlin, if this was what Severus felt every time Harry took him, no wonder he liked it so much. It was so intense, all Harry could do was hold on for the ride.

“Sev, Sev, yes!”
Severus moaned, long and low, and panted in Harry’s ear. “Can’t … hold on much longer.”

“Let go, love. I want to … need you to … fuck!” Another white-hot jolt coursed through Harry and pulled a scream from him. “Gonna … me too.”

Severus growled and pounded mercilessly into his mate, hitting that spot that left Harry shrieking every time. Harry’s wings shot out to the side and tensed, his body arched like a live-wire, and with a cry of Severus’ name, he exploded. His vision went white and, for a moment, he didn’t register Severus’ answering howl. Then another rush of heat filled him, Severus’ thrusts stuttered and stopped, and Harry knew his mate was sated too.

With a moan, Severus withdrew and flopped onto Harry’s chest.

“Holy fucking hell,” Harry panted. “Is it that intense for you every time?”

Severus could only groan and turn onto his side. “You are … when you are inside me, my world narrows, there is no one but you, nothing but the feel of your body and mine.”

Harry smiled. “Yeah. Me too.” He gave a wry snort. “How the hell can you be so eloquent two seconds after sex?”

“It is a gift.”


Severus smiled and cupped Harry’s cheeks. “Do not be sorry. My name from your lips is lovely, whatever title you use.” He kissed Harry softly. “I do not care what you call me, Mister Prince, so long as you stay by my side.”

“Always, Severus. Always.”

Two weeks went by in a whirlwind. Severus and Harry spent every moment together, sometimes relearning each other’s bodies, other times just reading together or talking, curled up by the fire. Severus had to admit, he loved those moments the most, the ones he spent with Harry curled in his lap as they spoke about everything and nothing, making plans for the future and just sharing their lives. It was lovely, and it gave Severus hope that they would survive whatever trouble the future might bring. As long as they could talk to each other like this, they would be fine.

On occasion, Brian and Cináed stopped by—conveniently every time they were feeling lonely for outside companionship—and brought them fine ale and piles of Cináed’s best food. Harry was ecstatic when the man brought them fresh lamb stew. Severus smiled over the dish, remembering how close they had been to losing everything that night and how far they had come since.

“I am so happy you’re with me, Severus,” Harry said after a long, quiet moment. “I’m so glad I could save you.”

Severus could say nothing through the lump in his throat, so he simply held Harry’s hand and smiled.

The end of their honeymoon came both too quickly and not quickly enough. Severus had loved
every minute of those quiet days spent at his new husband’s side—and Merlin, had they ever needed some time to just relax—but he was eager to get started on his new life. Severus had already built up some stock for an owl-order potions business, and he couldn’t wait to open it to the public.

Besides that, the day their honeymoon ended, Harry had planned to go to the Blackpool orphanage with Severus. Harry wasn’t quite sure what he wanted to do as a career yet, other than helping with the hundred and one community improvement projects he’d taken on, but he did know he was ready to adopt.

Despite his husband’s youth, Severus had to agree. He wasn’t so young, and he was ready too. They would be raising the child together—Harry would care for the little one while Severus was working on his business, and Severus would care for them when Harry was about town, working on the community. When neither of them could watch the child, they had no lack of eager babysitters.

All in all, Severus was excited to bring a child into their home and their lives, and thrilled about the prospect of healing the damage of the past with love.

Severus and Harry arrived at the orphanage at half-past nine. Nervous, Severus slipped his hand into his husband’s—to hell with what the Muggles thought, he needed the comfort—and knocked at the door. A harried-looking woman with frazzled grey hair answered. She blinked at the sight of them, looked to their joined hands, and frowned.

“You’re together?”

Harry glared. “Does it matter? We’re here to adopt, and we have the proper papers and qualifications already taken care of.” He waved a stack of Muggle papers at the woman. They had started as a copy of the Ministry of Magic’s adoption approval, charmed to be whatever papers the Muggles in Blackpool needed, but she couldn’t know that.

The woman sighed and motioned them inside. “I never said I had a problem with it, dearies. It’s only most gay couples aren’t so brave in these parts. Can’t say I blame them what with all the narrow-minded idiots around here.” She gave them a wry smile. “If you’re here to take a child off my hands and you’re good parents, I am not going to get in your way. Lord knows these babies need proper loving homes, after everything they’ve lost.”

Severus’ glare softened. “Yes. That is why we chose this place. We wished to bring love and joy into a child’s life, one who has known pain and sorrow.”

“Our childhoods were pretty dark and painful too,” said Harry in a soft voice. “So we both know what it means to be alone. We want to … be a family for at least one child. It’s … well, it’s really not enough to fix it, but it’s all we can do. At least right now. Though … if you don’t mind me asking, Madam, are you understaffed?”

She frowned. “I’m not sure what business that is of yours.”

Harry blushed and ran a hand through his hair. “Er, I didn’t mean to be rude. It’s only that I’m the … well, I suppose you could call me the owner of several orphanages about Britain, and I wondered if I might be able to help.”

The woman gaped. “But you’re—what, twenty-five?”

Harry touched his face and frowned. “Do I look twenty-five, Sev?”

Severus smiled sadly. “Trouble has aged us both too soon, I’m afraid. I must look sixty if you look twenty-five.”
“You don’t look a day over thirty.”

Severus held up his white lock and raised an eyebrow.

Harry chuckled. “I keep telling you that white streak is striking.”

The woman smiled. “It is that. But if you don’t mind me asking, how old are you? We would question giving an orphan to a sixty-year old. Just because they mightn’t live long enough to raise them to adulthood, you understand, and then the little one would have to go through the pain of losing their parents twice.”

Harry nodded. “Severus here is thirty-eight. I’m eighteen—nineteen in two weeks—and yes, we know it’s a big difference. I had to grow up too soon and Sev’s always been alone. We had … too much in common not to fall in love.”

She gaped. “But you’re so young—to have the run of several facilities, I mean. Age doesn’t matter in love.”

Harry beamed. “Gods, it’s refreshing to find someone so accepting of us. Thank you.” His smile faded. “The reason I run orphanages is, well, I’m an orphan myself, you see. And I had a hard life until I came into my proper inheritance, which is, to be honest, far more than I could ever reasonably use, so I’ve been trying to, er, give back to the community. And growing up without love as I did, orphanages hold a special place in my heart.”

The woman gave him a hesitant smile. “Well, if you’re really interested in helping, a donation wouldn’t go amiss. We’re understaffed because I can’t afford to pay more than I do already, or I’d have had help in here long ago.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll be glad to help out as soon as I can get to my bank and arrange the transfer. In the meantime, though it’s a drop in the ocean, perhaps taking a child off your hands would be of some assistance?”

She grinned. “Come, come. Let me just look over your paperwork.” She flipped through the sheaf with a speed that left even Severus awed. “Yes, this looks to be in order. Let me take you to the children. They’ve just finished their breakfast and will be in the playroom. In the winter, they attend public school—” She sighed and shook her head. “Well, they did until the school was destroyed. The new one isn’t fully built yet, and it’s been more than we can manage to teach them properly with only five staff and over a hundred children.”

“Gods,” Harry gasped. “That is understaffed. I’ll help you take care of it as soon as I’m able.”

“Bless you,” she said with a smile. “The children will thank you for it, I’m sure.”

Severus squeezed Harry’s hand and followed the matron through the orphanage, sorrow filling him at the sight of the woebegone furnishings and peeling wallpaper. The building was clean and whole, thank goodness, but the stark rooms and tattered furnishings reminded Severus too much of his own childhood. He hoped the children were at least treated well, because it was clear they had little to call their own.

They moved past a kitchen where two women as harried as the matron stood washing towers of dishes—Severus performed a surreptitious charm to make them easier to clean without being too obvious—and into a large living room full of scattered sofas and aging toys. A bookshelf in the back held several children’s books in varying states of disarray, and beside it, a large toy chest was open and mostly empty, as the children had taken the toys to play with. There were at least fifty children
hanging about—Severus supposed the rest must be either too young or too old to find much entertainment in this particular area—and all of them looked up when Severus and Harry stepped into the room.

“Well, here are most of the children,” the matron said with a sad smile. “There are several babies and young toddlers down for naptime, if you’d like to look at them?”

Harry looked to Severus.

“No thank you, madam.” He crossed his arms over his chest, feeling vulnerable. “Most couples are seeking babies—they will find homes soon. No, we would like one a bit older, one that we could help recover. And perhaps one that mightn’t be adopted so easily.”

The matron beamed. “Oh, bless you two. In that case, I think I know just the one. Unless you’d rather a son than a daughter?”

Harry shook his head. “Girls are fine.”

“With me as well,” said Severus with a smile. “Which?”

The matron pointed out a little girl of about three, playing with her back turned to them. The girl wore her hair braided into two blonde tails down her back, and she had on white stockings and simple black flats, much like her playmates. But while the other children looked clean and well-cared for in their navy blue uniforms, her bright pink shift dress was stained and torn.

“She hasn’t taken that dress off since the explosion,” the matron said with a sigh. “Well, except to bathe, but no one can get it away from her when she’s finished. We’ve even had people try to hide it, but somehow she always finds it and puts it back on, no matter what we do. It’s like she calls it up out of thin air sometimes. Nothing will convince her to part with it.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. Was the girl magical? Hmm. A surreptitious core scan gave him his answer: she was most definitely a little witch. A powerful one. Perfect for their family, if she could be convinced to come with them.

Harry frowned at his husband. “Severus?”

Severus whispered in his ear. “I tested her for magic. She is a witch.”

Harry’s eyes widened. He whispered back. “Oh! Well, that settles it, if she wants us.” He frowned and turned back to the matron. “Um, do you know why she’s so attached to her dress?”

The matron ran a hand through her hair, a sign of distress. “Well, she says she can’t take it off because if she does, her proper family won’t recognise her. I keep trying to explain to her that her parents are dead, but … well, she says she’s not talking about her birth family.” She shrugged. “I can’t make heads or tails of it, but what it comes down to is that no one is willing to adopt a little girl who wears dirty things despite having access to better clothing.”

A Seer, perhaps? Severus found himself more intrigued by the little child by the moment. “We’ll talk to her,” he said in a soft voice. “Perhaps we’re the proper family she’s looking for.”

“Oh, but I hope so. She’s a sweet little thing, it’s only that dress she’s so stubborn about. She deserves better than this place, for certain.” The matron raised her voice. “Diana, come and talk to us, sweetheart.”

The little girl looked up, and Severus’ heart skidded to a halt. The child had huge green eyes the
exact same shade as Harry’s, a button nose and pink cheeks, and those blonde braids and her shift were undeniably familiar. In an instant, he was carried back to the day they had visited Blackpool when it was little more than rubble, when he had tugged a little girl’s doll out of the ash.

“My gods,” he breathed.

Harry had gone similarly still and white-faced. “The doll,” he breathed. “The one we buried!”

Severus blinked tears down and clutched Harry’s shoulders. “I believe we have found her owner.”

Harry buried his face into Severus’ shoulder. “She’s alive. Oh my gods, she lived, Sev!”

“I know. I know.” Severus had trouble suppressing his own tears. “I can’t believe it.”

The matron looked between them with a bemused expression. “What … wait. Gentlemen, do you recognise her?”

Severus could only nod. “She is meant for us. I am sure of it.”

As if on cue, the little girl squealed and rushed to them. “There you are!” She let slip a tiny sob and threw her arms around Severus’ legs. “I’ve been waitin’ for you for so long.” Big tears filled her eyes and slipped down her cheeks. “I thought you forgot me.”

Severus’ breath hitched, and he knelt to the little girl and wrapped her in a tight hug. “We did not know you were waiting, but we are here now.”

Harry gave a sobbing little laugh and nodded to the matron. “She’s ours for sure.”

The matron gaped, then her expression brightened. “Well, perhaps we can get her into a new dress now that she’s found her family!”

Diana shook her head and buried her face into Severus’ shoulder. “Don’t wanna let go.”

Severus didn’t want to either, but he knew the girl needed new clothes. If only for the sake of her health.

“Diana, little one, that dress is dirty and it could make you sick. We can buy you a new one just like it, if you like, but for now, will you let Harry and Madam …?” He gave the matron a questioning look.

“Brown,” the woman provided, wiping a tear from her eye. “Madam Laura Brown.”

Severus nodded. “Will you let Harry and Madam Brown help you dress, love?”

She sniffled. “Not Harry. Daddy. You’re Papa.”

Severus’ heart melted. “Yes, baby. Yes I am.”

Harry threw his arms around them both. “Oh, Severus. I can’t believe it.”

Severus petted Diana’s hair and smiled. “Miracles do happen then. And even to us, my Harry.”

“And me too,” Diana chirped.

Harry gave a tearful little laugh and held her tight. “Come on, little one. Let’s get you dressed and finish up here, and then we can go home.”
Diana squealed in happiness and ran ahead of Harry and the matron as fast as her chubby little legs would go. Severus followed at a more sedate pace, wiping tears and wondering when he had gotten so fortunate.

“Thank you,” he whispered to whoever was listening. “Thank you for them.”

He could’ve sworn a voice whispered back, one he recognised from his time in the realm between worlds. “You are most welcome.”

Severus smiled brighter than he ever had, making muscles unfamiliar with the expression ache, and went to help his husband and new daughter prepare for the rest of their lives. Now that they had found each other, they would never be alone again.
**Nineteen Years Later**

Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** mentions of M-Preg. **Summary:** Harry and Severus look back on the past two decades after the war and welcome the future.

***AN: This is it! The last chapter of TFH, finished on my son's 18 month 'birthday,' no less. More to celebrate! I have so enjoyed writing this journey, and I hope you enjoyed the story as well. *sniffles* I'm a bit sad to say goodbye to The Final Horcrux, but don't worry. There is much more Snarry to come from my (slightly) obsessed brain. I have at least 6 more stories ready to go and just got an idea for a new one this morning. I'll be doing this for a while LOL.

Anyway, enjoy the end of TFH and thanks for reading!***

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**CHAPTER 38**

**NINETEEN YEARS LATER**

“Dad! Papa! David! We’re here!”

Harry abandoned his spoon beside a saucepan of chocolate ganache, cast a stasis charm on the treat, and rushed to greet his twenty-three year old daughter and the newest member of his family. Severus had arrived first, his hair still mussed from preparing the living room for the party and his robes a bit out of order, but no less handsome for it. At least, not in Harry’s eyes. The man hadn’t gained any new silver hairs beyond the one white streak Harry loved so much—in fact, after two decades of happiness, Severus looked younger than ever. Peace looked good on him.

Harry kissed his husband’s and daughter’s cheek in greeting, but the excitement of seeing his tiny granddaughter would not be denied for long. “Where is my newest little princess?”

Severus moved to stand beside Harry and wrapped an arm around his husband’s waist. “She does indeed. Has her hair lightened since the last time we met? It looks paler.”

Diana sighed. “It’s only going to get paler as she grows. Danica … she’s a Veela too. After what I went through, I … I’d hoped she’d come out pure human, but ….”
Harry held his daughter’s face. “Ssh. You’re perfect as you are, Princess, and so is your baby girl.”

Tears wobbled in Diana’s eyes, but she blinked them away quickly. “Tell that to Jean-Luc. The bastard.”

“Oh, Diana.” Severus’ voice was soft and rife with pain. “Come here, baby.”

“It still hurts, Papa. All this time, and it still hurts.”

“Ssh. I know, baby. It is not your fault. Grief heals in its own time, and sometimes takes longer than we wish.” Severus slipped his arms around the shaking girl. “I am here, Princess. We are both here for you.”

Diana sniffled and buried her face in her papa's shoulder, carefully angling the baby away so as not to squish her. Harry stepped aside so Severus could comfort their daughter. The two of them had always had a special bond, one Harry envied at times, but he knew Diana needed her papa at a moment like this. He was content to stand aside and rub his daughter’s back, if only Severus’ love could help her recover.

Diana had been dating a French wizard of Fleur’s acquaintance for two years prior to learning she was pregnant. Upon discovering his fiancée’s condition, Jean-Luc had broken off the engagement and high-tailed it back to France, leaving Diana alone and three months pregnant. The young Veela, having to deal with both the pain of a human breakup and her creature side’s pain, had been devastated. Her grief had almost caused her to lose Danica, and it was only that scare that had pulled her out of her slump.

Diana was doing better now. Teddy Tonks, the son of Nymphadora and Kingsley, had helped her through the pregnancy and her grief with gentle acceptance and a tenderness Harry recognised as the same deep love he shared with Severus. The young Metamorph had fallen hard for his Veela daughter, and he encouraged the match as much as propriety allowed. Harry hoped they would mate as soon as Diana healed from her previous relationship. Teddy was doing an admirable job of healing her, but for the moment, Diana needed more time.

That was all right with Harry and Severus. Just so long as his daughter was healing, they were content to wait, and so was Teddy. Between the three of them, they would make sure Diana was whole again soon enough. She was already well on her way, and the birth of her daughter had helped her greatly to put the past behind her despite her lingering pain. Her bravery and love for her little girl had done both her fathers proud.

The baby let out a displeased mewl, confined as she was between mother and grandpapa, and Harry carefully extracted her from her mother’s arms. “Hush now, little one. Your Granddad is here.” Smiling at her baby snuffling, he kissed the little one’s hair, inhaling her fresh scent, and cradled her on his shoulder. “Ssh. It’s all right now. Your mama is just a little upset, but we’ll get her through it, won’t we, love?”

When Harry looked up, Severus was watching him with naked longing and love so raw and pure, it made Harry’s breath hitch.

“Severus?”

Severus kissed Harry softly. “You are beautiful.” His voice was rough with emotion. “Absolutely beautiful.”

Harry swallowed hard and gave Severus a shy smile. “Thank you, love.”
Severus kissed his forehead and opened his arms. “May I?”

Harry passed the baby to her other grandfather and watched Severus hold her, his heart full of love and longing. Merlin, seeing Severus so enamoured with the tiny, two-week old baby girl was incredible. In most things, Severus was still a bit harsh, still too distrusting to let his defences drop around strangers. But with his family, he transformed. He blossomed. And gods, it was a beautiful sight to behold.

Watching Severus hold his tiny granddaughter filled Harry with warm affection and gave him the last piece of courage he needed to face his fears. He had dallied long enough. Severus had longed for a child of his own ever since learning it was possible, had even tried to make a potion to bear them himself, but had failed repeatedly. It had devastated Severus to finally give up on that project years before, but no matter what combination of ingredients, Dragoon magic, and techniques he tried, the tests consistently failed to survive past the eight week mark. Even for wizards, the pure human male simply wasn’t built to carry children.

But Harry wasn’t human, and he was finally ready to give Severus a baby. The whole idea still made him a little nervous, but seeing Severus hold their granddaughter, seeing the depth of love that filled those lovely dark eyes, gave Harry not just the will but the desire to grant his beloved husband his dearest wish. And after nineteen years of marital bliss, it was about time.

He smiled as Severus rocked the little one back to sleep and cradled her close, adoration and awe written all over his face.

‘Soon, love. I promise.’

A door slammed at the back of the house and a boy’s voice called out. “Dad! Papa! Is Di here yet? I thought I heard ….”

An auburn-haired boy with big brown eyes and silver glasses much like his dad’s burst into the room and blushed as little Danica started fussing again.

“Oh. Merlin, I’m sorry, Di. I didn’t realise she’d be sleeping.”

Diana shook her head and gave her twelve-year-old brother a hug. “Hush, Davey. She’s going to be woken up a lot during the party. It’s a necessary evil, I’m afraid, though I’ll take her up for a nap soon.”

David grinned, showing white teeth and emphasising his freckled cheeks. “Can I hold her, Di? I promise I’ll be careful.”

Diana chuckled. “If you can get her away from her grandpapa!”

Severus shot her a mock-glare. “She is mine now. You cannot have her back.”

Diana laughed and kissed his cheek. “Papa, you know I’ll bring her to visit as much as you want. Maybe she can stay the night here once she’s old enough to sleep through.”

Severus smiled and passed the baby to David, watching to make sure that he held her correctly.

“Diana, you know that if you are able to express enough milk to feed her for the duration of a night, we would be glad to care for her whether she sleeps through or not.”

Harry smiled. “We would.”

Diana gave them a hesitant smile. “I … I can’t leave her yet. It’s the Veela in me. I need to protect
“Well, stay with us then. That way we get to spend a night with our granddaughter and you can get a full night of sleep without worrying about whether she’s safe or not.”

Diana beamed. “That sounds lovely. Next week, maybe?”

“Sure.” Harry brought his son into a hug. “Did you have fun on the pitch with Uncle Ron?”

David grinned. “Lots. He says he’ll be here in a minute with Aunt ‘Mione and crew.”

Severus sighed. “Merlin. That means the entire lot of Weasleys. I had best return to preparing the house for the invasion.”

Harry snorted. “And I need to get back to your cake, Diana, but David can keep you company for a while, can’t you, son?” The look in his eyes told his youngest that he had better not disagree.

David rolled his eyes. “Course I can. I need to get to know my little niece better.” He cooed at the infant and grinned when she rewarded his efforts with a gurgle.

Diana smiled and let her brother lead her into the parlour off the living room, where they could visit with everyone without getting in Severus’ way. Harry watched them go, touched at his son’s obvious love for his sister and niece, then returned to the kitchen.

As he stirred his ganache, he thought back over the years and how much everything had changed. Diana had been a lovely child, intelligent, honest, and loving, but Merlin, how she had tried her parents’ patience with her jokes. Fred and George had nothing on that child.

Then ten years later, Draco—now the main caretaker at Andromeda Orphanage along with his wife, Astoria—had called Harry about an orphan boy that no one could seem to get through to. They were at their wits end and Hermione had suggested Harry, after recalling how good he had been with Diana. Little David was two at the time, and he had gone functionally mute, refusing to talk to anyone but his mummy. As his mother had recently succumbed to a particularly severe case of dragon pox, the little man was stuck in his own world. Harry had simply sat beside the child for hours and rubbed his hair and back, saying nothing, just keeping him company.

Over several days, Harry had come to the orphanage and sat with little David as long as he would allow, and at the end of the week, he had finally talked.

“Mummy went bye-bye.”

That phrase had hit Harry like an arrow through the heart, but he had done his best to help the little boy understand that his mother loved him, but she couldn’t come back anymore. Little David had cried and wailed, and at the end of many more days, had attached himself to Harry’s neck and asked, “C’n I stay wif you?”

Harry hadn’t been able to tell him no, and so David—given a middle name of Severus as he hadn’t one to start with—became a full-fledged member of the Prince family. Once he had recovered from his mother’s death, the boy had proven to be studious, loyal, and brave. He reminded Harry so much of Severus that the boy had claimed a special place in his heart. Much like Diana had bonded to her papa, David had bonded with his Dad, and Harry wouldn’t have it any other way.

The floo chimed and whooshed, and Lily’s voice rang through the house. “Harry, Sev? We’re here!”

Harry called out, “In the kitchen, Mum!” At the same time, Severus announced his location.
Lily popped her head into the kitchen and smiled. “It smells heavenly in here, love. What are you working on?”

Harry turned off the stove and began beating his sauce. “Ganache for Di’s cake. If you want to help, there are some strawberries in the cold box that could use slicing.”

Lily grinned. “Sure thing.” She levitated two boxes of ripe, red berries to the table and rummaged in Harry’s utensil drawer for a knife. “You sure outdid your mum in cooking skills. Did you do this all the Muggle way?” She waved her knife over the table, indicating the huge spread Harry had laid out.

Harry blushed. “What I cooked of it, yes. Molly did plenty, and Daphne and Neville sent over quite a bit too.”


Harry snickered. “I’m not telling! I’d like a bite for myself, thanks.”

Lily gave a mock sigh. “Shame the Reaper sight only works when it wants to.”

Harry laughed, but it faded quickly. “You haven’t had more visions since then, have you?”

Lily smiled and shook her head. “Not a one. I don’t miss it either.”

“No, I can’t say I blame you.” Harry set the pan on the range for a moment and shook the aches out of his tired arm. “Where is everyone?”

“Remus is helping Sev with the living room and Nora, James, and Sarah ran outside to play in the treehouse. I swear, they love that thing more than they love us.”

Harry chuckled and resumed beating the sauce. “Couldn’t even hold them down long enough to say hello to their big brother.”

Lily chuckled. “They regard you as more of an uncle, to be honest.”

“They feel more like nieces and nephews than siblings. There’s too much of an age gap, and since we didn’t grow up together or go through the same things ….” Harry shrugged. “I do love them though.”

Lily nodded. “They love you too. How is Di?”

Harry shook his head. “Recovering, slowly.” He growled and stirred his ganache hard enough to bend the spoon. “If I ever find that shite Jean-Luc, I’ll break his arse over my knee, I swear it.”

Lily snorted. “You couldn’t even spank Diana when she hexed the Burrow into a Vegas-style hotel and covered the interior with feathers. I doubt you could break anyone over your knee.”

Harry gave her a dark look. “He hurt my baby. You bet your arse I could.”

Severus’ voice answered him. “Then perhaps it is a good thing he escaped to France, as you have vows to keep and I would much prefer to stay out of Azkaban.” He swept to Harry’s side—who moved the hot saucepan out of the way—and gave his husband a light kiss. “The living room is ready. Do you need my help here?”

Harry gave him a bright smile. “I think we’re mostly done. If you want to help me levitate stuff to the tables in the garden, that would be great. Just leave the cake—I’ve yet to put this on it.” He shook the saucepan for emphasis.
Severus nodded and began floating dishes outside. Lily watched him go with a smile.

“You’ve been really good for him, love. He’s a different person these days.”

“Amazing what being loved and free can do for a person.” Harry checked his ganache and nodded. “This is ready.” He began pouring the warm, sticky sauce over a chocolate cake, drizzling carefully so it coated every surface.

“Merlin, that looks delicious,” Lily said with a grin. “Don’t suppose I could do a taste test?”

Harry shot her a dark glare and Lily burst into laughter.

“I was teasing, Harry. Silly boy.”

Harry chuckled and went on pouring. “I made this to cheer up Di. I miss her laugh.”

Lily nodded. “I think Teddy is helping her more than anyone could dream of.”

“I hope so. Teddy is a good boy and he loved her before she matured.”

“So you know it’s not just the Veela allure talking, then.”

Harry smiled. “Exactly.” With the first layer frosted, he levitated strawberries onto the ganache in layers, pressing them neatly side to side. Two more layers of cake and ganache and a ring of strawberry slices completed his masterpiece.

“Lovely,” said Lily with a nod. “She’ll like that.”

“That’s the hope.” Harry moved to his mother’s side and Summoned a knife for himself. “We’re using the rest of these in a fruit salad.” He grabbed a berry and started slicing it.

“Mm.” Lily popped a slice in her mouth and grinned unrepentantly. “I approve.” She took another, but on her third attempt, Harry whacked her on the hand.

“Mum! Save some for the guests.”

She chuckled. “I was wondering when you were going to stop me.”

“Ugh. Remus and Di have rubbed off on you.”

She snorted. “Damn straight.” Lily returned to slicing quietly beside Harry. “Love, I couldn’t help but notice how longingly Sev was looking at little Danica when we passed through. Are you sure you don’t want to give him a baby? He wants it so very much.”

Harry gasped and went crimson. “Ssh! Sev will be back through in a minute.”

Lily gave him a bemused look and returned to slicing her strawberries.

Severus felt a bit like a professor again as he rounded up hordes of children—above half with red hair—and guided them to the tables he and Harry had set up for the naming party. Merlin, he could barely keep them all straight, there were so many. Hermione and Ron had little Rose and Hugo, both
with red hair, brown eyes, and a penchant for mischief—only Rose was smarter about it. Severus would bet his potions business that girl would be sorted into Slytherin next fall.

Beyond Ron’s and Hermione’s family, Neville and Daphne had Erin and Samantha, twin girls with Daphne’s sleek black hair and Neville’s steel-blue eyes. Luna and Dean had become close during their shared imprisonment in Malfoy Manor, and now had a dark-skinned, silver-eyed daughter named Camelia. She, much to her parents’ surprise, was dating Erin. Severus couldn’t have been more proud of the dreamy little Metamorphagus for being true to herself despite Dean’s initial opposition to the match. He wanted grandchildren, and worried he wouldn’t have any if his daughter married another woman. Once Severus had reminded him that the girls could adopt if they did decide to marry, Dean had given Severus a sheepish smile and embraced the match wholeheartedly.

After Britain had legalised gay marriage and adoption, Cináed and Brian had wed and gone straight to one of Harry’s orphanages. A little dark-haired Seer named Vivian Marie had completed their family, and Severus and Harry couldn’t have been happier for them. They had been good friends all these years, and Cináed’s advice had steered Harry and Severus away from trouble more often than not. The Princes loved them all dearly and visited as often as they could.

Ferin and Sirenia had come with their youngest, a precocious five-year old named Yvette. They had been accepted as kin in the Prince ‘clan’, and no one feared them these days. Even better, thanks to Severus’ painstaking work on a sun-blocking potion, the vampires could go around in daylight without burning or losing their vision. Ferin thanked him for the opportunity to see the sun every time he had the chance.

Just as Severus went to seat the Grey Clan where he had placed dishes suitable to a vampiric palate, David and fourteen-year-old Hugo tackled the clan leader and caught him into a playful game of ‘tickle-the-vampire.’ Ten years ago, Severus would have been petrified for his son. Now he simply laughed and helped Ferin to his feet.

“I hope my son did not hurt you with his rough games,” he said, shooting David a look.

David gulped. “S-sorry, Dad. We just haven’t seen Mister Ferin for a long time.”

Hugo nodded hard, making his red curls jiggle. “We missed him and got too excited.”

Ferin chuckled and brushed off his robes. “No harm done.” He held out his hand for his wife. “I must ask you not to tackle Sirenia, however, as she is carrying our newest son.”

“Merlin!” Severus gave him a friendly pat on the back. “Congratulations, Ferin, Sirenia. How many is this so far? Twenty? Thirty?”

Sirenia laughed and mock-slapped Severus’ shoulder. “Hush, you. He is only my tenth.”

Severus choked. “Only! You say that as if it is a small number.”

Sirenia chuckled. “Somehow, my friend, I imagine you will have as many yourself. Remember, we live long without growing old. Is it so surprising that after so many years, I long to hold a baby in my arms?”

Severus’ heart panged and he turned to look at his husband. The raw longing for a child of his own had never abated, but Harry still seemed reluctant to carry.

“No. Not at all.” Severus’ voice was rough again, but he knew the vampires would not comment on his moment of weakness.
“In time, Severus,” Ferin murmured. “In time.”

Severus swallowed a lump in his throat and nodded.

Ferin patted his arm. “Children, return to your seats so we might start the party. Danica is too small to stay in the sun for long.”

“Yes, sire!”

The boys waved and ran to their seats, Yvette in tow, and Severus escorted the vampires to their place at the head of their own table.

“Here you are, Clan Grey. I do hope the food is appropriate. Harry assured me it would be, but I never truly know. If it is unacceptable, we do have some blood punch for you.”

Ferin grinned. “Harry cooked for us? I am looking forward to the meal, then. He is an excellent chef.”

Severus nodded. “Practise makes perfect, I suppose.”

“Indeed. Thank you, Severus. I am quite sure we will enjoy it.” He smiled into the light and settled his wife, then himself at the table. “I do so enjoy seeing the world in light, Severus. Thank you again for your gift.”

Severus smiled and patted the vampire’s back. Ferin would never tire of thanking him, and he had long since given up on convincing him to desist. “I am glad you are able to enjoy it with us as well. Ours must be the first human and vampiric children to grow up side-by-side.”

Ferin nodded, his expression serious. “They are indeed, and it is my hope that this will usher in a new age of peace and acceptance for all of us.”

Severus bowed. “Harry and I will do everything we can to help it along.”

Sirenia kissed Severus’ cheek. “May the moon bless you and yours, friend of Clan Grey, for all you have done for us.”

Severus returned her kiss, knowing it was a formal blessing and a rare gift she had offered. “And you as well, milady.” He gave her a warm smile. “Thank you for your blessing. Please, have a seat and help yourself to some punch. Harry says he used his own blood for it because he thought it might be sweeter for you. I made an offering for it as well. I do hope it is acceptable.”

Ferin grinned. “I am looking forward to it.”

Once the vampires had been taken care of, Severus returned to his husband’s side.

Harry kissed Severus’ cheek and held him close. “What did Sirenia say to you that upset you so much, love?”

Severus shook his head. “I was not upset. Only … a bit sorrowful.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “She’s pregnant again, isn’t she? Cináed and Luna were discussing their visions and they mentioned a new child of blood to join the clan soon, one they think will bring about peace between our races.”

Severus nodded. “She is. She did not say how many months, but she is carrying a son. And Ferin will be pleased to hear of their prophecies concerning him.”
Harry rubbed a hand over his own stomach and gave Severus a secret kind of smile. “A son. I must remember to congratulate them before the day is out. Now, are we all ready to begin?”

“I think so.” Severus looked around, noting the way Teddy had an arm around Diana’s shoulders and how he looked at little Danica with awe and love. A smile crossed his features as he scanned the tables for a quick headcount. “Yes, everyone is present and seated.”

“Good. Then I believe it’s time to eat and welcome our new grandbaby to Clan Prince.”

Severus smiled and led Harry to the head of the table.

“Thank you for coming, everyone,” Harry said with a grin. “Now, I know we’re all famished and little Danica needs to go inside soon, so let’s eat!”

Never had a roar of approval sounded so loud. Severus rubbed his ringing ears and sat with a chuckle.

Diana was currently curled up on the living room sofa. Most of the other guests had gone, but Harry’s and Severus’ closest family had remained to help clean up and visit. They had gone to the kitchen to let Danica and her mother rest, but every now and then a laugh or a hoot would rise above the level of their silencing charms and remind Harry he still had guests. He would see to them later. For the moment, he was enjoying watching Severus hold their granddaughter.

The stoic man had retired to the parlour with Danica and sat ensconced in the rocking chair by the fireplace, cradling his little granddaughter in his arms. Love and wonder completely transformed the man’s face as he rocked the baby, singing an old Scottish lullaby, one he had sung to David and Diana, and even to Harry on nights when the man had nightmares and needed the extra comfort. Severus held the baby as if she were the most precious gift on the earth, and the expression in his eyes melted Harry’s heart.

Harry moved to his husband and ran a hand through Severus’ hair. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” He kept his voice low so as not to wake the sleeping infant.

Severus smiled at his husband. “Lovely. I am … I have never ….”

“It’s a wonderful feeling, isn’t it? Having a grandbaby.”

Severus blinked hard and nodded. “I can hardly stop smiling.”

“Don’t stop. You’re gorgeous. And, gods, the way you love her is simply beautiful to behold.”

“She is my first grandchild,” Severus said, a touch of haughtiness in his tone. “I am supposed to spoil her, am I not?”

Harry covered a laugh. “We both are.” He smiled and caressed Severus’ cheek. “Love, I’ve been thinking today. Seeing her with you—I think … I mean ….”

Severus frowned. “Harry? Are you all right?”

“Yes, yes of course.” Harry took a deep breath and tried to gather his wits. “It’s only that seeing you with a baby … it’s so lovely. And I was thinking—how would you like to have one of our own?”
Severus gave him a wistful smile tinged with secret sorrow. “We can see if there is a baby available at the orphanages tomorrow, if you wish.”


Severus gasped and his eyes went wide. “A-are you certain?”

Harry smiled and nodded. “Completely. I’m ready to give you that gift, love. And I must admit to being excited to experience making a new life for myself.”

Tears slipped down Severus’ cheeks. “Oh gods, Harry!” He carefully set the baby in her cot and, once she was settled, threw his arms around his husband. “Oh, I love you so much.”

“I love you too, sweetheart.”

Severus kissed Harry all over his face and held his cheeks, joy and hope rendering his dark eyes radiant. “You’re sure?”

Harry grinned. “Absolutely. Tonight, I come off the contraceptive. I want to give you this joy. I want it for myself, too, beloved.”

Severus sighed and buried his face in Harry’s hair. “Yes. I have longed for that for many, many years now.”

“I know. And I’m ready to give it to you now. You’ll stay by me through the pregnancy? Help me through it?”

“Of course, Harry. I am looking forward to that part, too. Rubbing your feet when you are tired, going out for pickles and ice cream at three in the morning—perhaps I am mad, but the idea of tending to my pregnant husband thrills me.” Tears running down his face, Severus ran a hand over Harry’s belly. “I cannot wait to see you heavy with our child.”

A happy laugh sounded from the living room entrance. “Congratulations, Dad, Papa. I wish you the best of luck.”

Severus smiled and wiped tears away. “Thank you, little one. You will not be upset?”

Diana kissed his cheeks and hugged him. “Of course not! Then Danica will have a little playmate.”

Harry hugged his daughter and kissed her cheek as well. “We won’t love you any less, I hope you know.”

She nodded and tapped Harry on the head. “Of course I know that, silly. You two have been the best parents anyone could ask for.”

Harry wrapped Severus into his arms. “I’m glad you think so. And if you’ll excuse me, Severus and I had best be getting along before the baby is ready for her next bottle.”

Diana covered a snort. “Merlin. I did not need to know that.” She patted Severus’ shoulder. “Go on though. Oh, wait. Before you go, I wanted to show you this. I know you didn’t have time to check the paper today what with all the party preparations and I forgot to mention it earlier, but I brought it over to show you. You two made the Prophet headlines again today.”

Severus groaned. “Lovely. What tripe have they published about us now?”
“It’s nothing bad this time. I’m in it too!” She held out the paper and grinned.

Harry read the headline and chuckled softly. “Man-Who-Conquered and Master Severus Prince Welcome Beautiful New Granddaughter.” He shook his head. “Not sure why that’s front page news, but I’m glad it’s good. Nothing like when Rita Skeeter made our lives hell.”

“She will defame no one else,” Severus said with a smirk. “The Ministry couldn’t hold her, but that curse I designed to prevent her from ever writing another story again was quite brilliant, hmm?”

Diana grinned. “Way to rub it in, Papa.”

Severus chuckled and kissed her cheek. “Well, for once, it appears the Daily Prophet has their facts straight. Danica is lovely.”

The warm smile that crossed over Diana’s face at the mention of her daughter made Harry love her all the more.

“She is, isn’t she?”

“Just like her mother,” said Harry with a smile. Diana’s eyes lit up, and Harry’s heart filled with joy. Gods, they were so lucky. He didn’t know how he had found everything he had ever wanted, but somehow, he had. He rubbed his belly and smiled. And soon Severus would have all he ever wanted too.

“Hey everyone,” Ron’s voice called from the kitchen—softly, so as not to wake the baby. “Potterwatch is on. I think they’re going to announce the baby in a minute.”

“Go on then,” said Diana with a smile. “I’ll stay with Danica and kip a bit in the rocking chair.”

“Good rest, little one.” Severus kissed her cheek and followed Harry into the kitchen.

“—Just welcomed a new grandchild to the family,” came Lee Jordan’s excited voice. “Little Danica Nichole has her mother’s hair and her grandfather’s eyes. She’s pretty as a picture, folks, and I’m proud as punch to be the funny uncle.”

George guffawed. “Oi! I’m the funny uncle, River!”

“You’re the holey uncle, Rapscallion,” said Fred with a snort. “I’m the funny one.”

Angelina’s voice overrode them. “You’re all funny—funny in the head that is. Get on with the announcement, you dolts.”

Three voices chimed, “Yes, Mum.”

A thwacking sound had everyone in the kitchen laughing.

“Ow,” George muttered. “No need to be so violent.”

Angelina snorted. “Oh please. If I wanted to be violent, you’d know. Now, can we please return to the announcement?”

“Of course, milady,” Fred said.

Lee gave a fake cough that sounded strangely like the word “whipped.” Another thwack made Harry snort.
“You’re going to give me a concussion, Raven! Merlin.”

Angelina laughed. “Come on, then.”

“Moving on—before we get brain damage,” said George with a laugh, “in honour of the newest member of the Prince family, we’ve added a new product to our store lines.”

Harry groaned. “Oh no. What have they done now?” Severus snorted and rubbed Harry’s back.

“That’s right, folks,” said a gleeful Fred. “Potter-Poo. Harry Prince’s own brand of shampoo made and packaged just for you.”

“It’s grandy, it’s dandy—”

“It’s every fan’s dream come true!”

“Because with just one use—”

“You’ll be sporting the perfect Potter-do!”

Harry dissolved into helpless laughter. “I told you, Sev. Didn’t I tell you?”

Severus just laughed along with him.

“Severus!”

The sound of Harry’s cries and the feel of his body clenching around Severus pushed the older man over the edge, and with a stuttered cry of his husband’s name, Severus slammed into Harry a final time and filled him.

“Oh gods,” Harry panted. “That was … it was ….”

“Wonderful.” Severus kissed Harry and flopped down beside him, tracing circles on the young man’s belly. “It is different when we are making love in hopes to conceive, isn’t it?”

Harry turned into Severus and stroked the man’s cheek. “Mm-hmm. It’s … sweeter somehow. More … real.”

“Yes. Even if we are not successful yet, I feel … complete.”

Harry yawned and scooted close. “How many days has it been since I stopped taking the contraceptive?”

“Mm, it has been five. It should be completely out of your system now.”

“So we should conceive soon?”

“If fate allows, yes.”

Harry rubbed Severus’ stubble-lined jaw. “Even if it doesn’t work, Severus, I’m glad to give you the chance. I hope it does work though. I want to be a dad again. And I want to car—”
Harry jumped, eyes wide, and laid his hands on his belly.

“Harry? Love, what is it? Are you all right?”

Harry nodded and looked down. Severus followed his gaze just in time to see a soft pink light fade from his husband’s abdomen.

“Sev ….” Harry’s voice was breathless with emotion.

Severus’ heart skipped, and wonder and love filled him. “Oh, Harry!”

“Severus, was that … our baby?”

Happy tears blurring his vision, Severus looked up and gave Harry a slow nod. “I believe so. I will need to make up a test potion to be certain, but … congratulations, my love. I think it is safe to say we shall be parents again in nine months.”

Harry grinned and kissed Severus breathless. “I can’t wait, Papa.”

Severus’ breath hitched and he caught his husband close to him. Merlin, how beautiful his life is now. A happy husband, a lovely home, two beautiful, healthy children, and his first biological child on the way. This moment, this life was everything he had ever dreamed of and more.

He held Harry close and sighed into his hair, joy and peace washing away all vestiges of grief. His life was beautiful, the world was at peace, and at last, all was well.

That's all folks. I hope you enjoyed it!

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