Bleeding Hearts

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Bleeding Hearts

by lyraonyx

Summary

It's the last day of sixth year, and Malfoy has gotten it into his head that Harry has to die. Harry, with nowhere left to turn, takes refuge in a potions classroom, hoping to escape long enough to survive, but he's not alone. Severus is also in the room, holding a bloody knife over his own arm. Harry tries to save him, secrets come out, and the two come to an understanding. Then Malfoy's secrets come out, and all hell breaks loose. Harry loses still more to the war, Severus loses his very humanity, and only together can they hope to come out on top.

AU Note: This just became a crossover with Fantastic Beasts. Well, kinda--it's just history, but it's going to be a major plot point later, so it needs the tag. Might get a bit squicky. (Major age difference between mates. They don't actually get together--fate messed up big time--but if the idea of a 35 year age difference between long-lived, fated mates (who don't actually ever date) turns you off, well, you've been warned.)

Notes
Foreword about the AU: I don't think there are going to be any horcruxes in this story. If there are, it's going to be just the journal and Nagini. I'm still working out the details of Harry's scar in this world, so I'm not positive what route that's going to take. Therefore, Dumbledore is not cursed and Severus has no reason to attack him. Also, Dumbles is good in this story. Figured I needed to change it up a bit.

The events in canon where Harry curses Malfoy with Sectumsempra are reversed. This time, it's Malfoy who curses Harry and is shocked by what the spell does. Sev still saves the day.

As per the usual, Harry et al are aged up one year to avoid underage issues, and the assault in Severus' past will not be brushed aside as schoolboy antics like it was in canon. It was assault, and that's how it's going to be written in my stories every single time.

There's a lot of character death in here. I doubt we're talking GoT level, but I've written nine chapters so far and two major characters are already dead. No, I'm not going to kill Harry or Sev. Can't do sad endings.

Also, if you're a fan of the Malfoys, you might just hate me before the end of this story. Fair warning.

**New AU note concerning Fantastic Beasts info:** Because of plot, Riddle is born 5 years earlier than canon. Certain events have a major effect on his character, so... yeah. I went with that tweak because it was the least destructive to canon.

Also, be kind to me about the fantastic beasts stuff. I haven't read/seen it and I don't have a lot of access to the outside world (disabled mom who can't walk well/drive on her own), so my only reference is the internet. Hopefully I can get my hands on a copy before I get to the FB stuff, but just in case I can't, please don't flame me for making errors. Just tell me where I've gone off the beaten path and I'll fix it if possible. Actually, the same is true for the original HP stuff. I haven't had access to the books/movies in 6 years so my memory is a bit foggy.

Thank you and enjoy!
A Desperate Escape

The snitch zoomed into Harry’s hand as if it was meant to be there, and cheers erupted all over the stadium.

Colin Creevey’s jubilant voice rang out over the pitch. “Yes! Harry Potter’s got the snitch! Gryffindor wins the Term Tourney!”

With a smile for his teammates, Harry alighted at the centre of the pitch and held the snitch over his head like a trophy. His teammates pressed in and bombarded him with hugs and slaps on the back, knocking him this way and that in their exuberance. Harry endured it with a grin, because it made them happy.

Inside, he was wondering what the point of it all was.

Suddenly, a streak of green and silver alighted ahead of him, and Harry found himself face-to-face with Malfoy’s pointy scowl.

“Enjoy it while you can, Potter.” Malfoy flashed a vicious smile. “Tomorrow won’t be so good for you.”

Ron stepped up beside Harry and cracked his knuckles. “Was that a threat, Ferret-boy?”

“It was a promise, Weasel.”

The rest of the team moved into place beside Harry and pulled out their wands as one.

“You have ten seconds to leave the pitch before we rearrange your insides,” said Jack Sloper from Harry’s left.

“Make that five,” said Ginny from Harry’s right. “You’re outnumbered, Malfoy. Take your issues elsewhere.”

Malfoy growled and twitched his wand as if he was tempted to test his luck, but after one more scowl in Harry’s direction, turned and left the pitch.

“I don’t even know why that little prick is allowed in the school,” said a furious Ron. “He’s a bloody Death Eater!”

With how vicious Malfoy had been lately, Harry didn’t know either, but he kept his mouth shut. He’d heard enough about his supposed obsession with the slimy Slytherin ferret to be going on with.


Several of the others agreed, but Harry knew better.

“Voldemort’s taken younger,” said Harry in a quiet voice. “And Malfoy is marked. I’ve seen it, when the bastard tried to cut me in half in the loo last month.”

The team went quiet.

Katie Bell whispered, “He’s really marked?”
“Yeah,” said Ron. “He is, and he shouldn’t be in school here. He’s dangerous, the bloody prat. I don’t understand why Dumbledore doesn’t just chuck him.”

But Harry thought of another Slytherin who had been marked young, one who turned to the light and risked his very life and sanity all for them, and he thought he understood. He didn’t dare share his thoughts with his teammates, however. They still saw the world in black and white. Not a one of them understood yet that the world was all shades of grey.

Well, none of them had been forced to grow up as early as Harry had. They were still children, and that was okay. They were supposed to be children. Harry shook his head and, just for a moment, mourned the loss of his childhood.

Yet another precious thing he had sacrificed for this bloody war.

“Just forget him, guys,” said Ginny. “Let’s not let the Prince of Ponces ruin our fun, yeah? Come on! Harry just won us the tourney, remember? Why aren’t we celebrating?”

Her exuberant words brought back the team’s excitement, though the shine had worn off for Harry, and they broke into cheers.

The next thing he knew, Harry was up in the air again, hoisted high on his teammates’ shoulders. He forced his grin steady as they cheered and carried him about, too swept away in their excitement to notice their captain’s growing discomfort. Too many hands touching him, too many fingers too close.

He endured it despite his fear, because he didn’t want them to know his greatest shame.

The crowd grew. Gryffindors and ‘fans’ from other houses slipped into the huddle for their piece of the action, and suddenly there were hands all over him. Too much—too many. His grin turned into a grimace, and he asked to be put down. Of course, they didn’t listen.

Instead, someone grabbed his arse, and he tensed with sudden terror.

“Guys, that’s enough, really. I can walk!”

But they were too wrapped up in an off-key verse of “Potter is Hotter” to hear. Harry tried moving his rear end out of the way, but it seemed no matter how he wiggled, someone was always too close. Part of him wondered if normal men—men who hadn’t been damaged by war and insane relatives—actually enjoyed this, or if they just put up with it, too.

Shite. Where were his teammates? He didn’t even know the group hoisting him now.

Then some adventurous twit—he wasn’t sure who—grabbed him between the legs on the next toss and rubbed, and Harry shrieked with the violation. That was too bloody far.

“Oi! What the hell? Put me down this instant!”

At the fury and volume in his voice, the crowd obeyed—finally—and set Harry on his own two feet. His teammates pushed through the unfamiliar faces, and he glared at the lot of them, sparing only Ron and Ginny his wrath. Harry knew better than to suspect either of them for this.

“Who the bloody hell thought it was fair to grope me, huh? Just because you read some stupid story saying I like such things or so much rubbish—and I don’t—but even if I did, that still doesn’t give you the right to fucking assault me!”

Ron laid a soothing hand on his shoulder. “Mate, easy. I know you’re angry, but it was probably an
accident. Hard to gauge when you’re in the air like that.”

“Oh no, Ron,” said a seething Harry. “This was no accident. Someone thought my fame or the fact that I’d won the tourney gave them a free ticket to my bits. Well, it doesn’t. Stay the hell away from me.” He rubbed a hand across his face—he was shaking all over. “I … I need a minute.”

He stalked away to a chorus of disappointed moans and the sound of Ron bellowing at the crowd. Harry just wanted to get away from it all.

Jack, Ritchie, and Katie muscled the crowd out of the way, parting the sea of excited students and rabid fans to give Harry an escape. He gave them a grateful look and dashed away on his Firebolt the moment he gained enough ground for a takeoff.

Their eyes dragged across his body like fingers, and Harry shuddered with a sudden urge to retch. Why did people think they owned him just because he’d rebounded Voldemort’s curse as a baby? Gods. All he wanted was peace, a little bit of normalcy in his mad life. Instead he was hounded everywhere he went—unless he used polyjuice or glamours. It was insane. People didn’t treat Ron or Hermione like this—only him.

He was utterly sick of it.

Harry flew around the castle a few times to clear his head and, once he could go five minutes together without snarling, alighted by the beech tree beside the lake. As everyone was still hanging about the pitch, the grounds near the lake were peaceful and empty. The giant squid had come out to play and was waving its arms lazily in the sun, but otherwise, the lake was silent.

Harry breathed in the quiet and the stillness, and sighed. This was more like it. All he was missing was the Prince’s book, and he would have everything he needed to wash the stain of groping hands from his memory. With a nod, he Summoned his rucksack from his dorm and grinned as it sailed into his arms.

As his nerves slowly began to settle, he cracked open the potions book and lost himself in its pages. The Prince was such an expressive writer. Whether he was adjusting a potions recipe or writing poetry in the blanks between recipes, his way with words captivated Harry.

He wished he could meet the man, just once, before Voldemort killed Harry.

“Sectumsempra—for enemies.”

Harry frowned and traced his finger over the words, a spell written in the handwriting of his beloved Prince. Wasn’t that the curse Malfoy had tossed at him in the loo three weeks ago? When Harry had thought he would be cut in half? Snape had come to his rescue and sang over him, his low, dark chant healing the wounds, but gods, until then, Harry had been certain he would die.

How Malfoy hadn’t been expelled … but then, Harry remembered the terror on the boy’s face, the shock and horror at what he had done. Maybe Malfoy hadn’t known what the spell would do when he cast it. Gods, what a stupid thing to do. He might have killed Harry, not that it would have been such a great loss to the little ferret.

What was that twisted spell doing in the Half-Blood Prince’s book?

“Where’s your protective detail, Potter?”

The voice raised the hair on the back of Harry’s neck. Malfoy. He closed his book and carefully set it inside his rucksack.
“What do you want, Malfoy?”

There was no answer, and, heart thundering in his ears, Harry dared peek around the tree. Malfoy and his twin muscles, as well as a distraught Theo Nott, were standing about twenty yards away, all four with wands raised and pointed straight for him. And this time, Harry was alone.

Shite. He did not like those odds. Especially given Malfoy’s strange behaviour at the match, Harry knew he needed to get out of there. Something about this situation was just not right.

Harry moved slowly, never taking his eyes off the group ahead, and slipped his fingers around the base of his wand.

Malfoy sneered and cried, “Sectumsempra!”

Shite! So much for Malfoy being horrified of himself.

Harry rolled away from the spell, towards his books and broom. It cut through the bark of the tree where his head had been seconds before, and Harry’s stomach dropped into his gut.

This wasn’t Malfoy the schoolboy rival, this was Malfoy the Death Eater, and he wasn’t playing games.

Goyle shouted, “Oculignis!”

Harry had no idea what that sickly grey light would do to him, but he didn’t want to find out. After a quick dodge, he leapt atop his broom and jerked his rucksack over his shoulders.

“Confringo!”

The branch directly above Harry’s head burst into bits and dropped.

“Protego!” His shield went up just in time to send the heavy branch and pieces bouncing harmlessly to the side.

Bloody hell, he had to move! With a little cry of alarm, Harry shot into the sky and darted about to avoid any incoming curses.

Malfoy screamed, “Crucio!”

Harry dropped like a stone to avoid the Unforgiveable, then zipped away, pouring his considerable power into his shields and his broom for greater speed.

For a moment, he thought he was safe. Then, the curses and spells started again, and Harry realised that the little ferret had come prepared. A quick glance behind him confirmed his fears—they had all mounted brooms and were tearing after him, still shooting curses at every opportunity.

Dear Merlin, this was bad.

Harry dodged another cutting curse and flattened himself to his broom, soaring as fast as his power would allow towards the castle doors. He had to get out of the open, and in there, at least he could take shelter in a password-warded room. No one would be inside except perhaps for a couple of teachers who hadn’t been that interested in the impromptu, end-of-term quidditch tourney, but he could escape to the Headmaster’s office and wait until Dumbledore returned. Malfoy wouldn’t be able to get in there.

As he might have predicted, his plans didn’t work out as he’d hoped. Malfoy was just as fast as
Harry and the little shite was clearly determined to do him in. Just as Harry reached the way to the headmaster’s tower ….

“Accius Draconis!”

Harry skidded to a stop in front of a burst of green fire and barely ducked under a pair of snapping, fiery jaws. Heart heavy as a stone, terror turning to despair, he turned on his heel and darted down the only remaining route—the way to the dungeons.

Snape. If he could get to Snape, maybe he’d have a chance. The man hated him, but he wouldn’t let Harry be cursed to bits. With a little cry of frustration and terror, he dashed towards Snape’s office and prayed the man would be there. He had to change route again, however, when Goyle summoned a viper and dropped it at the doorway. Shite! Harry could speak to the snake, sure, but he hadn’t the time to convince it not to strike with curses exploding all around his head.

With a cry of rage and terror, Harry turned again and dashed for the potions classrooms. If nothing else, he could take refuge in the heavily-warded rooms. Their thick doors and stone walls would keep the worst of Malfoy’s curses out, if only he could reach them in time.

Harry darted to the nearest classroom, but the door wouldn’t budge. He cast a hasty Alohamora and dashed inside, slamming the door shut just as Crabbe threw a blasting curse at him. He registered the looming presence of someone else in the room, but he had no time to take in any other detail—the wards would do no good if he left the door unlocked. He turned and cast the strongest locking charm he knew at the door, praying it would be enough, and whipped back around to warn the room’s other occupant, whoever it was.

As his eyes took in the identity and condition of the man on the other side of the room, a panicked cry for help died on his lips. Snape was standing by the window, eyes wide and face streaked with tears, his marked arm dripping blood and a red-coated knife in his hand.
Warning: Self-harm, allusions to child sexual abuse, a not-so-great attempt at poetry.

***AN: I'm not sure how often I'm going to be able to update this with 3 stories going at once (also being sick with chronic illness and two types of flu at the same time), but I'll try to update as often as I can. The sickness would be why I haven't been able to update the other stories recently, either. As they say in my part of the world, this one is a doozy.***

***AN2: I realize it's a bit of a stretch that Harry wouldn't know what putting his ring on that finger meant, but I honestly didn't know until I was probably thirteen, and I didn't grow up in a cupboard. My thought is that since his only exposure to the outside world is in Hogwarts, where the professors don't really have love lives, and there's no TV, and the kids are all a bit young to be getting engaged, it's possible he wouldn't have put two and two together, despite seeing a couple of people being engaged. To him, it's the type of ring that makes it special, not the place they wear it. At least, that's my reasoning here.***

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**CHAPTER 2**

**SNAPE’S SECRET**

“What the hell?”

Malfoy and crew momentarily forgotten, Harry dropped his rucksack and darted to Snape’s side. The man was staring at him like a deer in the headlights, obviously shocked into stillness, and Harry took advantage of his surprise to tug the knife from the older man’s hand. With a deep breath to calm himself, he held Snape’s wrist and bent the man’s arm up at the elbow, using firm pressure to stem the bleeding.

“Gods, Professor. I know it’s rough, what you do, but Merlin. Nothing is this bad.”

Snape yanked his arm away and dropped it to his side. Blood again dripped down his arm and off his fingertips, and Harry’s stomach lurched.

“I wasn’t manhandling you.” Harry’s voice cracked, much to his dismay, and Snape’s eyes went wide again. “I was just t-trying to save your life. Gods, Professor! I … I know you hate me, but is it so bad that you won’t even let me help you when you’re bleeding and …” He gave a dark laugh and turned away. “Who am I kidding? Of course it is. I’ll just call Dumbledore or Madam Pomfrey, yeah?”
Harry gasped when he remembered what was on the other side of that door.

“Oh gods. Not Pomfrey, she’ll only be hurt.” He ran back to the door and slammed his back against it, determined to use his own body weight if that was the only way to keep Malfoy and his crew away. “But Dumbledore. Yeah. Got to get him here right now.”

He tried to conjure his Patronus, hoping he could figure out how to make the message spell work this time, but Snape called out before Harry could calm himself enough to cast.

“Potter, wait. I am not suicidal.”

Harry lifted his head and gave him a wry look. “I just caught you slitting your wrists. What would you call it?”

Severus sighed and rubbed his forehead with his uninjured arm. “It was not deep enough to kill me.”

“How would Snape know how deep was too deep unless he’d had practise?”

“You’ve done this before, haven’t you?”

Severus snarled, “That is none of your business! Get out!”

Harry winced and gripped his wand tight. “I can’t.”

“Ah, for Merlin’s sake, I’m not in any danger, Potter.”

“No, you don’t understand, Professor. Even if you weren’t in danger—and I’m not convinced you’re not—I am. Malfoy and his entire crew are out there, trying to kill me.”

Snape scoffed. “What is this I hear? The sainted Potter, the hope for all of our lives, cannot face three foolish seventh years? Well, there goes the war.”

Harry glared. “Four—Nott is with them, and I’m only doing what you told me to. You told me not to be so quick to attack. You told me to use my head and consider the odds before I tried fighting, even if they’re enemies. It was four-on-one and they’re using Death Eater curses, Professor! What did you expect me to do?”

“Perhaps call for a professor before you ran the length of the castle?”

Harry shook his head. “There weren’t any around, Professor, or Malfoy and his goons wouldn’t have been brave enough to attack in the first place. Everyone was at the pitch. I was by the lake, and I … well, I thought I was alone.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “Alone? And why, pray tell, were you not celebrating your glorious quidditch win with your teammates?” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

Harry bristled and blinked hard. “Why do you care?” He turned his face away. “Suffice it to say some of my idiot fans thought hiding in the crowd would be a great way to assault me anonymously. I’m not hurt or anything, but I couldn’t … I had to get away.”

Snape paled and took a step closer, his hand trailing drops of blood. “Potter?”

Harry winced. “It’s nothing. Look, will you just ward that door, please? I … I’m honestly afraid they’re going to kill me.”
Snape raised an eyebrow and listened. Of course Malfoy would choose then to stop cursing the walls. “Sounds like it, Potter.”

Harry gulped. “Well, maybe they’re hiding.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “How utterly terrifying.”

“Please, sir. Please! I’m n-not lying. Malfoy cast Sectumsempra and Crucio and I don’t even know what else at me. I’m … I’m really scared.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “He cast an unforgiveable on school grounds? Balderdash. Even Malfoy would not be so foolish.”

Harry looked up with eyes full of tears and shook his head. He should have known better than to come to Snape for help. He set his jaw and turned, setting his weight against his foot on the bottom of the door. He didn’t know many warding charms besides Conserva and Custodia, the most basic of the lot, but he cast them with all his power and hoped it would be enough.

Snape sighed. “Potter … the room is already warded. No one with ill intent or a Dark Mark—besides myself—can so much as touch that door. You should not have been able to get through it either, but as always with Saint Potter, you have yet again proved to be the exception to every rule.”

Harry considered the man’s injuries and realised this was probably the truth. Snape wouldn’t want just anyone walking in on him in the middle of his … whatever this was.

Harry sighed and slumped against the door, struggling not to sob with relief. For the first time since the mishap on the pitch, he began to feel truly safe. At least for the moment.

“T-that’s good.”

Snape’s voice was closer. “Potter, are you well?”

Harry gave a breathless laugh and stood, shaking, against the door. “I don’t even know.” He patted himself down, relieved to find himself mostly in one piece. “I … I think so?”

“Good. Then get out.”

Harry shook his head hard and pressed himself against the door. “But I can’t! They’ll kill me. Read my mind, if you don’t believe me.”

Snape went rigid. “You wish me to perform Legilimency on you?”

“If that’s the only way to convince you I came in here running for my life, then yeah.”

Snape swallowed hard. “You would not offer if it were not the truth. Dear Merlin.”

Harry nodded and hugged his arms, but winced when the touch sent a shock of pain down his right shoulder. So Malfoy and crew had caught him with something after all.

“Come, Potter. Let me see that arm.”

Harry gulped and hesitantly moved to Snape’s side. He unbuttoned his robes and shirt enough to remove his injured arm and gasped. A long, deep gash ran across the curve of his bicep and blood was dripping from the wound. If not for Harry’s robes, he might have looked much like his professor by now.
Snape pursed his lips and ran his wand over the cut. When a simple healing charm did not work, he performed the same chant he had sang over Harry in the loo a few weeks hence.

“It’s Sectumsempra again?”

Snape waited until the wound closed to answer. “Obviously, Potter.” He cast a Scourgify on Harry’s arm, cleaned and dried the young man’s robes, and repaired the cut to Harry’s sleeve with a quick flick of his wand. Harry gave him a tentative smile and returned his arm to his robes.

“Thanks, sir. Um … might I heal you now?”

“No.” Snape scowled and moved away, rubbing his uninjured hand across his chin. “This creates a problem, Potter. If I call the Headmaster to apprehend them now, when everyone save myself is gone to the match, Malfoy will know who turned him in. I will be exposed. However, this level of offence cannot be condoned.” Snape shuddered and turned on his heel, dragging his bloody arm behind him.

“Of all the professors in the school, you had to come to the one teacher who cannot help you without risking the entire bloody war, didn’t you, Potter?”

Harry cringed. “I tried to go to the headmaster, but they blocked the path with a d-dragon and a snake and I didn’t have time to try to talk them out of eating me!”

Snape muttered something and paced, his arm still bleeding heavily. Harry watched the blood drip from his fingertips, mesmerised and horrified all at once.

“Um … Professor? That looks really bad. Do you need Madam Pomfrey?”

Snape turned and stared at his bleeding arm. “You worry about a little cut? I am well enough, Potter, or if I am not, I have the skill to heal such minor wounds myself. Why do you even care?”

Harry swallowed his hurt and fear and took a step towards the man, reminding himself that Snape was a human being in need of help in spite of all the cutting words. “Well, you’re not the nicest person, Professor, I’ll give you that.”

“I am not nice at all.”

His patience thin from all he had endured that afternoon, Harry snapped back, “No, frankly, you’ve been a complete arsehole to me for the past six yea—”

Snape snarled. “Potter! Fifteen points from Gryffindor and detention with me at seven tonight.” His smile was vicious. “Oh dear. I suppose that means you will miss the leaving feast. How very sad.”

Harry shrugged. “What does missing one more meal matter? It’s not like I’m going to be fed at home anyway.” Besides, he could always nick some leftovers from the kitchen later, or just ask Dobby for food.

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “Potter … what is that supposed to mean?”

Harry frowned. “You don’t know? Even after two years of invading my head, you still don’t know?”

He debated on making a snarky remark about Snape’s supposed intelligence, but at the last moment, decided he had enough people trying to do him in without adding an enraged Snape to the mix.

“Well, it doesn’t matter really.” He moved to Snape’s side and, when the man did not knock him away or yell, he stood by Snape’s bleeding arm. “All I meant to say was, yeah, you’re not a nice
person, but you’re still a human being.”

With slow, cautious movements, he reached for Snape’s hand and gently laid his bleeding arm wrist up on the teacher’s table. Harry struggled not to let his shock and worry show on his features when he realised that Snape must have been cutting into his arms on purpose for years, judging by the scars marring his mark and the white skin around it.

“It’s okay,” Harry said in a soft voice. “It’s okay now.”

Snape’s face was a stony mask, but he did not withdraw.

Harry gulped and carefully took out his wand, expecting to be slapped away at any time. “I’m just going to heal this, okay, sir?”

When Snape did not attack him or pull away, Harry whispered a healing charm against the man’s open wounds. Snape watched him, his black eyes curiously full of emotion and his stone mask gone. Confusion and fear filled his face, and a bit of wonder.

Snape whispered, “Why, Potter? Why bother to heal me?”

Harry conjured a cloth and wet it with a spell. He gathered his courage and carefully dabbed at the man’s arm, being cautious around the newly-sealed wounds in case he hadn’t managed to close them all the way.

“Why are you letting me?”

“I … I ….”

Harry glanced up to see bemusement and shame in Snape’s eyes, along with deep pain and terrible fear.

“Hey … it’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you.” Harry shook his head and wiped a stream of blood from the man’s palm. “It looks like you’ve been doing a bang up job of that yourself.”

Snape winced and pulled his arm away. “Stop. I am capable of healing my own injuries.”

Harry carefully took the man’s hand once more, not really understanding why he was doing it, and wiped another line of blood away.

“Yeah. I know you can. But I reckon you’ve never really had anyone help you with it, have you?”

Snape scowled, but didn’t pull away this time. “That is none of your business.”

Harry shook his head. “I suppose it isn’t.” He held Snape’s hand still so he could wipe the blood from the back. “But I can see it, you know. I’m not a complete dunderhead.”

“I beg to differ.”

Harry’s laugh was bitter. “Yeah, I know what you think of my intelligence, thanks. No need to remind me.”

As he wiped blood from Snape’s knuckles, Harry realised that the man was shaking. He laid his hand over the professor’s, cloth and all, and gave him what he hoped was a soothing look.

“Hey, ssh. I know we’re not the best of friends—”
Snape snorted.

“Or friends at all,” said Harry with a wry smile, “but I’m not a monster, okay? You’re not a monster either, and you need help right now. Even if you don’t want it.”

Snape sighed and watched, his eyes full of fear and confusion as Harry cleaned his hand and arm.

“I suppose I can expect all of Gryffindor tower to know about this in the morning?”

Harry reeled back, struck to the core. Despite knowing the man didn’t like him and had never trusted him, being allowed to help had felt like progress.

He set Snape’s hand down and gave the professor a sad smile. “I guess you would think that of me, wouldn’t you?”

Snape only looked more confused, so Harry gave it up as a bad job and moved to the door.

“Reckon they’re gone yet?”

Snape rolled his eyes and flicked his wand. “Homenum Revelio.” Four white shapes appeared hovering around a corner. “So much for proving your intelligence, Potter.”

Harry scowled and sank into a chair. “So you know a spell I’ve never heard of. You’re twenty years older than I am! Merlin.” He sighed and dropped his head into his hands. “It’s no use, is it? You’re going to hate me until the end of time no matter what I do.”

If Harry hadn’t known better, he could have sworn he saw Snape flinch.

“Potter, I ….”

“Forget it,” Harry said with another sigh. “It doesn’t matter anyway. You’ll be shot of me after next year anyway. Well, except for Order business.”

He dug a textbook out of his bag—any book—just to hide the pain the thought caused him. Gods, he had given everything to fix this mess between them, and it made no difference.

Ever since seeing those horrid memories, since learning that his ‘sainted’ father and godfather were nothing like the heroes he’d believed, Harry had struggled to reconcile the truth with his preconceptions.

That summer had been a hard one, each night haunted by alternating nightmares of Sirius falling through the veil, and “Kill the spare,” and “Who wants to see me take Snivellus’ pants off?” In his nightmares, young Snape’s torment didn’t stop there—the adult Snape wasn’t there to pull Harry out of the pensieve.

Harry’s darkest fear—besides those involving Voldemort and the war—was that it hadn’t stopped there in real life, either.

It had taken him all summer to come to grips with the fact that his preconceptions about Snape, even those about himself, were wrong. Before term started, Harry had decided that, despite Snape’s bad behaviour, he owed the man an apology. And he had started about trying to set things straight the first day he could, the third day of term—it was the first moment Harry had an opportunity to slip away from his loving, but sometimes overbearing friends.
Harry’s palms sweated like mad as he stood in front of Snape’s office door, rocking on his heels and wondering if he had lost the plot. Was he really going to do this? Was he really going to subject himself to the man’s razor-sharp tongue, all for the purpose of setting right past wrongs?

Well, yeah. He was. It was past time. Maybe Snape would appreciate it as a peace offering and not be so horrible to Harry all the time.

The young man barely suppressed an urge to laugh. Snape, appreciate him? The man would sooner eat bubotuber pus.

Harry sobered as he once again recalled that fateful memory and the reason for the older man’s antipathy, however unjust. After all, Harry had never done anything to Snape, regardless of his father’s and godfather’s idiocy. Well, besides breaking into his pensieve, but even that didn’t justify Snape’s behaviour.

He squelched a surge of indignation. It wasn’t the time. Harry had come to represent all Potters that afternoon, and that included his bully of a father and godfather. For, no matter that they had grown into heroes, Harry had finally come to realise that James Potter and Sirius Black had been worse than Dudley as teenagers, and for that, Snape was owed an apology. Since James Potter was no longer around to do it himself—and probably never would have even if he had survived—the responsibility for reparations fell on Harry’s shoulders.

Harry suppressed the bitter thought that everything else did, too, and raised his hand to knock.

Snape called through the door, “Stop dawdling, you incompetent twit, and get on with whatever idiocy you plan to subject me to this time, preferably before someone sees you there!”

Harry nearly jumped out of his skin at the man’s almost preternatural awareness of him, but realised Snape probably had a charm on the door and pushed his shock aside. With a deep breath, he gathered his courage around him like a cloak, squared his shoulders, and stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

Snape’s warning had reminded Harry of the risk his words might bring upon the man’s head, and he started visit with a request for a silencing charm.

Snape’s eyebrow shot up. “Whatever for? Surely you plan to rush to your friends when this is all over, no doubt to tell them more stories about the greasy git, hmm? I wager you all had a great lark over my misfortunes last term.”

Harry forced down a surge of anger at the unjust accusation. “No one knows. I did confront Sirius and Remus about their behaviour towards you, but as they were directly involved, I didn’t imagine it to be a breach of your privacy.”

Snape gave a dark laugh. “So concerned with my privacy now, are we? Where was that concern when I found you knee-deep in my pensieve last term, Potter?”

Harry sighed and lowered his head. “Please, just cast a charm first. I know you think I’m stupid and awful and maybe I deserve some of that, but I’m just trying to keep you alive here.”

Perhaps because of the rare display of deference, Snape obliged, though suspicion radiated from him so strongly, Harry could have touched it, had he dared lift a hand.

“Now, what on earth is all this about, Potter? I assure you, nothing you could possibly have to say would be of all interest to me.”
Harry wagered he was about to prove the professor wrong on that front. Still, it took him a moment to gather his strength.

“Today, Potter! Your other professors may indulge the every whim of our much-lauded saviour, but I have more pressing matters than your over-inflated ego. Get on with your accusations and get out.”

Harry looked up, honestly confused. “Accusations?”

Snape’s eyes turned fiery. “Do you think me a fool, Potter? I can read the thoughts on your mind without even trying. So go on. Tell me I deserved it. I would simply love to hear your justification of your sainted father and mutt.”

“Don’t call him that!” Harry winced at his own tone, forced out by grief. “Please. I know he was a bast—” At Snape’s sharp look, Harry remembered he was speaking to a professor and mitigated his language. “A berk to you, to say the least, but he was all I had. Please don’t call him that in my hearing. Especially not so soon.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “You expect me to believe that the blessed hero, the chosen one, the wonder-boy extraordinaire had no one to care for him but a mangy, half-mad man-child when the world bows at his feet? Nonsense. Stop wasting my time. If you have nothing pertinent to say, then leave me in peace.”

Harry clenched his fists and gritted his teeth against a wave of fury and grief. Gods, why did the man have to be such an arsehole about everything?

“Language, Potter!”

Harry gaped. “I didn’t say anything!”

“You are broadcasting your thoughts so loudly, you may as well have shouted it. Now, do speak or get out. I am too busy to indulge you in a staring match.”

“Er … right.”

Harry sighed and tried to gather his wits. He hadn’t expected this to be easy, but neither had he expected it to be so hard. To abase himself before the man who had ridiculed him without cause for five years left his guts roiling with shame and indignity, but it had to be done. Whether Snape was an arsehole or not was irrelevant. Harry’s family had done the man a grievous injustice, and he was the only person left to go about setting it right.

With his heart fluttering like mad, Harry sank to one knee and bowed his head.

“Potter? What manner of nonsense is this? Get up!”

Harry didn’t move and stared at the floor. The formal posture for a wizarding apology demanded he kneel and keep his head bowed—at least according to what Ron had told him in a letter—and he wasn’t sure he could go on with it if he looked at Snape’s scowling face anyway.

With a deep breath, Harry began the words he had rehearsed a hundred times over the summer. “Professor Snape, I come on behalf of my ancestors—namely, my parents and godfather—to offer my apologies for the pain and shame they inflicted upon your person. They were cruel, horrid bullies, and their abuse of you was criminal. Whether you were enemies or not, no one deserves the indignity they forced upon you that day.”
When Snape did not interrupt, Harry clenched his fist against the stone and continued.

“I must also offer you an apology for my own behaviour. Regardless of our mutually antagonistic past, I had no right to rifle through your pensieve and view your private memories. It was a gross invasion of your privacy and breach of your trust, and I am deeply sorry for my actions and the pain it caused you.”

Harry looked up to find Snape staring, his mouth open and his eyes full of undefinable emotion. The fine tremors in the man’s hands were the only sign of how deeply Harry’s apology had affected him. Harry hoped it was surprise and gratitude shaking the man’s rock-solid composure and not fury, but he doubted it.

Still, he trudged on.

“But I cannot say I regret it.” Harry stood and met the man’s suddenly angry glare with staunch determination. “Oh, don’t misunderstand me. I’m sorry I caused you grief, but I’m not sorry I saw what I did because it changed me. I can’t look at my family the same way ever again. I can’t look at anyone the same way, and that’s probably a good thing. Because I wasn’t seeing people for what they really are. I was seeing in black and white—either you were good or you were bad, and there was no in between.”

He blinked hard to keep from revealing too much weakness to the man. Snape would no doubt excoriate him for it, as soon as he found his tongue.

“And because you were cruel to me, you were bad then. But now, now I see that’s not really true. Yeah, you’re mean to me, but maybe there was some cause for it despite the fact that I’m not my father and I never did a thing to deserve your hatred—”

Snape puffed up, no doubt to remind Harry of what he had just apologised for, but Harry beat him to the punch.

“—Until that day I broke into your pensieve. So if you’re still mean to me now, well, I guess I brought it on myself. But I really don’t want to be like this anymore, Professor. I really don’t want to be your enemy any longer, and I am sorry. For everything.”

He closed his eyes and braced himself for the tirade.

Snape had ripped him a new arsehole for that, asking where Harry found the audacity to imagine any form of apology would ever be enough to right the wrongs of the past. He had insisted that it was all a trick to catch him off guard, and the cruel accusations had not stopped there. He had torn Harry’s already bleeding heart to shreds, and yet, by the end of the session, Snape agreed to continue Harry’s Occlumency lessons on the condition that Harry never so much as glanced at his pensieve again. Harry had given him his vow, and left feeling slightly better about himself, if not about his relationship with Snape.

Afterwards, nothing had really changed for a while. Snape was still the same cruel bastard he had always been, and his goading always managed to hit the softest spots of Harry’s armour. The boy still reacted with anger more often than not, but unlike in the past, Harry always apologised afterwards for his loss of control and disrespect.

It had galled Harry that he had to put so much effort into being the bigger man when Snape was so obviously in the wrong and twenty years his senior, but it also instilled a strange sense of serenity in
the young man. Harry knew he was doing everything he could to repair the relationship, and if
Snape couldn’t accept it, then at least Harry could go to sleep knowing that he wasn’t at fault.

That knowledge had helped him deal with Snape’s continuing cruelty, though it never stopped
hurting.

Harry had applied himself to Occlumency with a vengeance from their first lesson, now that he knew
what the cost of ignoring it could be. Especially since Voldemort now knew he could manipulate
Harry into danger, if he pressed the right buttons. And worse, Voldemort knew what Harry’s buttons
were.

Harry would never forget his second false vision and how it had left him weeping and terrified in the
middle of Snape’s office.

*Snapes lowered his wand and snarled, “Focus, Potter! You cannot hope to block your mind from a
pygmy puff if you do not learn to focus your thoughts!”

“I’m trying, Professor! Really.”

“Paugh. If you put half as much effort into your lessons as you do into bumbling your potions,
Potter, you would be as skilled an Occlumens as the headmaster. Do take your head out of the
clouds and try, or we may as well cease this sham and ….”

Snapes tirade faded out. Harry was in another room, a room full of jeering Death Eaters and
triumphant red eyes and Molly Weasley, writhing on the floor and screaming at the top of her lungs.
Riddle laughed and lowered his wand just enough to let her sob before hitting her with another
round of the Cruciatus.

A splash of cold water pulled Harry out of the vision, and he moaned with desperate pain and fear.
Snape hovered over him, hints of concern in his blank eyes and a potion in his hand.

“Drink.”

He pressed the potion into Harry’s palm, and Harry had just enough clarity of mind to register it as
an anti-Cruciatus draught before he downed the lot. It tasted of mouldy socks, but anything to ease
the agony was welcome. Then he remembered who he had seen in the chamber, and all other pain
vanished into one mind-numbing rush of terror.

“Professor, please! He’s got Molly!”

Snapes eyes narrowed. “Molly Weasley? I doubt that. She is at home, as far as I know, and we
would have heard if the Burrow’s defences had been breached.”

“But I saw it! We have to save her!”

He dashed to his feet and would have been out the door, had Snape not caught his arm and
slammed him back down onto the sofa—conjured, no doubt, as Snape did not keep such
accommodating furniture in his office.

Snape pinned Harry to the sofa by his wrist, pressed close to his face, and snarled. “Are you a
bloody fool, Potter? Or have you already forgotten the cost of your last ill-begotten quest?”

Harry flinched away from spittle and the memory of his worst failure.
“N-no.”

“Then prove it and sit there while I investigate!”

“Y-yes, sir.”

Snape huffed as he stood, glaring over Harry, and all the while the young man’s nerves screamed with terror.

“Please! Gods, please! Hurry!”

He felt the warmth of tears down his cheeks and buried his head in his hands. Molly was the closest thing to a mother he had, and if he lost her because of Snape’s stupid grudge, he would kill the man.

Snape’s glare softened infinitesimally and he swept towards his hearth. A flash of floo powder and bright green flames later, he knelt at the fire after a stern warning for Harry to stay put.

“Madam Weasley? Molly, are you there?”

The sound of an answering feminine voice relieved Harry so much, he sobbed into his hands.

“Severus? Whatever brings you about at this time of day?”

The potions professor scowled. “I was merely ensuring your safety. Mister Potter has not been applying himself to his lessons, not that I am surprised.”

Molly cried, “Severus Snape! You leave off of that boy. He suffers enough without your inp—”

But Snape had already pulled his head from the flames, cutting the link. He swept ash onto the fire—no doubt to prevent Molly from calling back and giving him an earful—and turned to face Harry with his eyebrow raised.

With a deep, shuddering breath, Harry wiped his eyes and knelt on the floor to spare his knees. “Let’s get back to it then, yeah? Obviously I need more practise if he’s still sending me false visions.”

Something like approval flickered in Snape’s eyes before he pulled out his wand and cast.

After that day, Harry had focused all his effort into Occlumency—even to the cost of his other lessons—with the knowledge that the next time he had a vision like that, Snape might not be around to pull him out of his panic. Harry’s friends and family were his weakness—he’d already lost so many. The thought of losing more turned him into a blind mess of terror—and Voldemort knew it. He would keep at it until Harry finally rushed in once more, thus getting himself and others killed—unless Harry learned how to block.

Thus motivated, he began to make progress, and by the Christmas hols, had finally learned to block Snape out every single time. Even when the man launched a sneak attack on him during Defence or while passing in the corridors, Harry fended him off.

From that day on, the visions had stopped, at least while Harry was awake.

From then on, Snape had stopped training him in Occlumency and used their lesson time to teach Harry advanced defence and duelling. And while he was never nice, Snape had stopped insulting him at every opportunity, shifting into the role of a harsh taskmaster rather than an abusive one. Even
such a small change had given Harry hope that maybe one day things could be different and they could put the past behind them.

Until now. If after all his effort, even at a moment like this, Snape still couldn’t accept him as an equal—or even a human being—well … maybe he never would.

And that hurt. Gods, it hurt. Harry had tried so hard, and all for nothing.

But it wasn’t as if Snape would care. It was just one more turn of the knife in Harry’s chest. Snape would probably consider it a point won.

With a sad sigh, Harry Occluded his thoughts—before Snape could excoriate him for being a sentimental fool—and hurried to get his book open. At the sight of the title, he barely suppressed a groan.

Potions. Of course it would be potions.

Too late to change his mind now. Snape was watching him, and Harry just wanted the conversation to end before the man hurt him any further. At least he might take some refuge in his ‘friendship’ with the Prince. Maybe he could teach Harry something. Slughorn was too interested in building his contacts, and Snape hadn’t cared enough to try.

Harry buried another shard of hurt and propped his book open on his knee.

“Hmm.” Snape sat in the chair beside Harry and gave the book a wry frown. “Potions, Potter? The year is over. Surely you do not read the book for pleasure?”

Harry’s face warmed. If Snape had any idea of how many lonely nights that book had cured ….

Snape gasped and took the book from him. “This is ….”

“Hey! That’s mine.”

“Is it indeed?” Snape turned to the front cover and read. “Property of the Half-Blood Prince.” His eyes filled with a strange emotion Harry couldn’t identify, but the next instant, his eyes went blank and hard again. “My apologies, your majesty, for not showing you the proper respect.” He gave an arrogant bow, and Harry scowled.

With a smirk, Snape offered it back, and Harry snatched his book away, not that he expected Snape to leave off there.

Nor did he. “The Half-Blood Prince? Where did you come up with such a name? I would think the adulation of your peers would be enough without seeking the fame of royalty.”

“The name was there when I found it, thanks.” Harry suppressed a snarl and turned to his favourite page—a poem the Prince had written long ago.

“Found it, did you? I thought this was your book?”

“And I thought I’d failed out of potions when I started this year, so I had to take one of the second-hand books from the back when Professor Slughorn accepted me into his class at the last minute.”

Snape’s stare pierced Harry like a sword. “Indeed? Why did you keep it, then? Why not purchase one of your own?”

Harry looked away. “Why do you care?”
“Call it morbid curiosity.”

Harry ignored him and read.

“Lassitude without end, quiet moments in the sun,
Each man has a friend, but for me, there is no one.
The sun which delights them only burns me.
The laughter they share, for me, it is empty.
Where is the place I belong?”

“Hmm.” Snape tapped the poem with a long finger. “Odd reading for a teen who has the world at their feet. You have crowds of friends.”

“Do I?” Harry gave a bitter laugh and met Snape’s eyes. “How many of those ‘friends’ really know me, Professor? Oh sure, they might have read an article in Witch Weekly about how my favourite colour is supposedly green, like my mother’s eyes, or some such hogwash, but will any of them listen when I tell them it’s actually blue? Would they even care?”

He scoffed and went back to the poem. “I have Ron and Hermione, and most days, not even them. They can’t begin to understand what it means to be hunted or … or anything else about my life, and I hope they never do.”

Snape frowned. “Your favourite colour is blue? I would have suspected Gryffindor red.”

Harry snorted—leave it to Snape to fixate on the least important detail. “Yeah? That doesn’t surprise me. You don’t particularly care to know the real me, either. You’ve made that abundantly clear over the past six years.” He gave another bitter laugh. “I mean, we’ve spent the last two in Occlumency lessons, and even now, you can’t look past what you think to be reality to understand what really happens back … there, and nothing—nothing I do or say makes any d-difference!”

The sting of tears snuck up on him, and Harry turned his face away. No need to give the man even more ammunition, after all.

Snape sat back and gave him a searching look. “Tell me, then. What have I missed?”

Harry scoffed and turned back to his book. “You don’t care. You just want more to use against me.”

He saw a flash of pain fill Snape’s eyes before they went hard and cold again.

“You would think that of me, wouldn’t you?”

Harry winced at the sound of his own words thrown back in his face. With a sigh, he decided to just read from his book and try to forget Snape was there. It was probably the only way they could spend five minutes together peaceably anyway.

Of course, Snape couldn’t let the matter be.

“You enjoy reading this Prince person’s writing, then?”

The softness in Snape’s tone lowered Harry’s guard—a bit.

“Um … yeah. I mean, I … I don’t know if he’d like me, you know? I really don’t know anything
about him other than he’s a bloke and he’s brilliant at potions, but I … I dunno. I feel like we’d be
friends if I could ever meet him.”

Snape’s throat bobbed. “Friends? Just from reading his notes and scribbles in his potions book?”

Harry turned back to his book, on defensive once again. “Maybe.”

“What makes you say such a thing?”

Harry closed his book and turned to glare at Snape. “Why should I even begin to trust you?”

Snape laid a hand on the arm he had cut. “I trusted you.”

“But I’ve never hurt you, Snape. Well, besides that thing with your pensieve, and I apologised about
that. I even apologised for my family, for Merlin’s sake. But you’ve attacked me over and over again
for six years for no other reason than you got it into your head that I’d be the same kind of spoiled
bully that my father was.”

He turned away. “Do you know how much that hurt? To see my father practically sexually assault
you—and my biggest fear is that what I saw wasn’t the worst of it—and then every summer, going
back to that place to endure the sa—”

With a wince, Harry jerked his head away and shut his mouth tight. Snape didn’t need to know and
probably would only think he was making it up anyway. Not even Ron or Hermione knew the truth
about his life at Privet Drive. Why the fuck would he tell Snape?

But judging by the sharp intake of breath and the way Snape’s eyes had gone wide with horror, the
man had figured it out anyway. Harry cringed and shrank into himself, waiting for the blow in the
place he was weakest, the one point that would break him if Snape poked at it.

“Dear gods, Potter.” Snape touched Harry’s hand gently. “I … I did not know.”

“You still don’t.” Harry jerked his hand away and snarled. “You know nothing!”

“No.” Snape sat next to him and laid his hands upon the desk, palms up. “I am not going to hurt you,
Potter. Not anymore. Not about this.”

Harry swallowed hard and gave him a terse nod.

Snape moved a hand to touch Harry’s shoulder, and his sleeve slid up with the change in position.
White and pink scars peeked out from under the hem of his left side.

Harry frowned and hesitantly reached for Snape’s scarred arm, stopping his fingertips just short of
touching the man. Snape did not pull away, though his eyes revealed his alarm. Harry decided that
was enough of a gesture of trust and moved away.

“Why?” Harry frowned and met the older man’s eyes. “I … I don’t understand. If you’re not trying
to kill yourself, then why cut so deep? Why hurt yourself at all?”

Snape shivered. “I … I am afraid to answer.”

Even that much was a concession for the sharp-tongued man, and Harry recognised it as a way of
trying to heal the breach.

He turned his chair to face Snape’s and gave him a hesitant smile. “I-I’m scared, too.”
Snape acknowledged his comment with a nod. “Understandable. Would you like to talk?”

“No. Gods, no.”

“Neither would I.” Snape stood and motioned for Harry to do the same. “I think we must deal first with Malfoy regardless. I cannot contact the headmaster from here, but perhaps if I do so from my office … well, he might suspect that you told Dumbledore on your own without any input from me.”

Harry nodded. “I would anyway.”

“Yes. Well then, follow me to my office. We must also arrange the details of your detention and … and I have something there that may help keep you safe this summer.”

“Safe?”

“Yes. Well, safer than what you would have been.” He sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Until you tell me what happens in that house, all I have are my suspicions. It will not be enough to convince Albus that the danger to you within the blood wards is greater than what awaits beyond them. Since you are unable to speak, I can only offer you my personal protection.”

Harry blinked and stared up at his professor, craning his neck to meet the taller man’s eyes. “You … you’d really do that for me?”

Snape closed his eyes and turned his head. “I do realise that in the past I have been cruel to you, Potter, but I should hope I have not presented as the type of man who would leave a child to be abused.”

“I’m not a child.”

Snape sighed. “No. I suppose not. Either way, what kind of man would I be if I simply left you there, knowing that something is severely amiss?”

“The same kind of man Dumbledore is, I reckon.”

Snape whipped back around, his eyes narrowed and sharp as daggers. “He knows?”

Harry backed away, uncertain if Snape was angry at him or at Dumbledore. “Um … he knows about as much as you do, I guess. I … I never really said ….” He ruffled his hair and rubbed his toe on the floor. “Look, it’s n-not really that bad. I mean, I can deal with it.”

Snape tipped up Harry’s chin, and the gentle touch shocked the young man into stillness.

“You should not have to, Harry.”

With Snape holding his face, all Harry could do was nod.

“Right. Then follow me. I shall ensure you are not without protection, at least.” Snape flicked his wand and the blood pools and drips vanished, as did the knife. The next instant, soap bubbles appeared. Snape waited until the cleaning spell had finished before he moved again.

Harry frowned as Snape led him to the door and took down the wards. “Um, what about Malfoy?”

“I had not forgotten. Act irritated, as if I had you scrubbing cauldrons this entire time, but keep your wand handy.”

“All right.” Harry plastered a scowl on his face and removed his wand from his back pocket.
With a nod, Snape opened the door and walked out first. Harry gripped his wand as he stepped out behind the man, just in case.

A light-coloured wand and pointy face poked out from around the corner.

“Ulciofaciem,” cried Malfoy, and a sickly yellow light shot straight at Snape’s chest. The professor’s eyes went wide with shock.

“How convenient that Harry already had a detention at seven. At least Snape was not being more of a bastard than he had to be, though the loss of points galled. As the cup had already gone to Ravenclaw, it appeared Gryffindor would start the year following in the negative, no thanks to Harry’s hero complex. His house mates would be thrilled.

Crabbe snickered from his hiding place, the coward. “Good job, Potty! Detention on the last day of term? Must be a new record.”

Harry swallowed sudden hurt, remembering almost too late that Snape was acting in character and that he had best do the same.

He glared and crossed his arms over his chest. “Oi! How are you giving me detention for saving your life? Malfoy just cursed you, or were we in different hallways just now?”

“How did you know I was the one giving you detention?”

“And that would be another detention for your disrespect and failure to recognise a fatal spell. Seven in the morning, in my office tomorrow. Perhaps a few early morning lines will teach you to think before you speak.”

“Seven! But that’s …” Harry thought he’d pushed the act far enough and sighed. “Yes, sir.”

“Better. Come with me to discuss the details of your detentions.” Snape turned and raised the volume of his voice. “And the rest of you, return to your dormitory this instant, before I change my mind about letting this … incident slide.”

The wand disappeared and three students called, “Yes, sir.” The sound of footsteps walking away should have relieved Harry, but the fact that Malfoy’s voice had not been among the chorus set his nerves on edge instead.

Snape flicked his wand, casting a spell Harry had never heard of, and motioned for Harry to follow him. They had almost cleared the hall when Snape whipped back around, eyes flashing with fury. Harry turned with him, wondering what had caught his attention, and gasped as his eyes focused.

Malfoy was still there, wand out and a curse on his lips.

With a flick of his wrist, Snape’s wand was in his hand and pointed directly at the blond prat. “I would not dare to finish that if I were you.”

Harry stepped behind the range of Snape’s peripheral vision and raised his wand as well. Damned if
he would let Malfoy curse Snape right when they had finally started to make some progress towards reconciliation.

“I do not know what has gotten into you, Mister Malfoy,” Snape said in a lethally cold voice, “but whether you are a member of my house or not, if you believe you can curse me twice and get away with it, you are sorely mistaken. Fifty points from Slytherin and detention for cursing a professor and your utter lack of sublety. Lower your wand this instant, or it shall be far worse for you.”

“Detention!” Malfoy’s face screwed up with irritation and something darker. “My father will hear about this.”

Snape’s smile chilled Harry’s blood—Malfoy paled as well.

“Oh, do tell him,” said Snape in dark, cold tones. “Do explain how you attempted to curse Potter right in front of me and missed. I am sure he will be thrilled to hear of it.” He gave the boy a fierce snarl. “Do you think I jest, Mister Malfoy? Lower your wand. Now, before I am forced to act in my defence.”

Malfoy’s eyes filled with terror and he turned his wand over in his hand, as if he was considering his odds against them. Harry boggled. Surely Malfoy wouldn’t attack Snape to his face—would he?

Snape’s eyes went hard. “Do not give me a reason, Malfoy. For the last time, lower your wand and return to your dorm.”

Malfoy winced. “But … but sir, I …”

“Now!”

With a wobble of his lower lip, the prat finally realised he wouldn’t be cursing anyone that day and turned on his heel. He looked as though he were walking to his own funeral.

“Dear Merlin,” Harry breathed.

“One word about what you have seen here, Potter,” Snape said as he turned, wand still held at the ready, “and I shall bury you in detentions until the end of your days.”

Harry gulped, having no idea if what Snape said was an act or not. “Y-yes, sir.”

Snape turned on his heel, and Harry scurried after him.

Harry waited until they were safely ensconced in Snape’s office to say, “Do I really have to be here at seven?”

Snape gave him a sharp look. “Did I not just say so?”

Harry winced. “Oh. I was … I thought … oh.”

Snape rolled his eyes and cast a silencing charm. “Now that we are safe, yes, you need to be here. In fact, I want you here by five. Not because I truly believe you deserve a detention, but because what Malfoy did today was … frightening. Much too desperate. I do not want you out of the presence of a professor tomorrow, even on the train.” He rubbed his lip. “Perhaps I can convince the headmaster to force me along for the ride, though I do not look forward to spending six hours next to prattling, hyperactive Gryffindors.” He sneered at the last word, revealing his distaste for the situation.

Harry frowned. “I … I can protect myself when it’s not four-on-one. Ron and Hermione would help
Snape raised his eyebrow. “And what if it becomes twenty on three, Potter, and those twenty students are determined to kill or capture you no matter the cost? What then?”

“Er ….”

“Exactly. Even with a large group, students will hesitate to attack with a teacher present, particularly if that teacher is myself. So I am afraid I will be joining you for the ride home. You may send your gushing letters of thanks by owl.” He turned to his desk and rummaged through the top drawer. “I shall call Minerva to escort you back to Gryffindor tower when you are ready to leave here.”

Harry grimaced. “Yes, sir.”

Snape returned to his search, and Harry paced and tugged at his hair, restless and angry. Yet again, his every move would be watched, every step dogged—and not just by his professors. Why did trouble follow him around like a lost puppy when all he wanted was one moment of peace?

“Why are you wearing a path in my floors, Potter?”

Harry sighed and flopped into the chair in front of Snape’s desk. “I just … I can’t believe this. Why does everything with me always turn out so mad?”

“Because you are Harry-bloody-Potter, that is why.”

Harry groaned. “I don’t want to be. I just … all I wanted was a moment alone, sir. Just to think. I can’t even do that anymore without bringing a catastrophe upon my head.” He raked his hands through his hair and gave a bitter laugh. “How much more can they take from me before there’s nothing left?”

Snape paused in his rummaging. “If you are truly so pressed for a quiet place, you may come here. I shall set the wards to allow you entrance. Only you must promise to use that cloak of yours and employ a silencing charm if you intend to speak while you are here.”

Harry gaped. “What? Really? But … I don’t understand. Why are you doing all this?”

Snape lowered his head. “Are you going to make me say it?”

Harry gasped as he realised what Snape was trying to do. He was, in his own way, trying to make an apology.

“Um … I guess I don’t really need to hear it, not if it bothers you that much.”

But he did. Inside, Harry did need to know. After six years of constant abuse, his soul ached for some kind of recognition, for some semblance of validation that what Snape had done to him was out of turn.

Fat chance of that.

Still, if Snape was at least willing to make the effort to make amends, it was enough.

“You are a pathetic liar.” Snape sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I … I have … been wrong about you, Potter. And I was … wrong to treat you so badly. I am s—”

“It’s okay.” Harry laid a hand on Snape’s. “I really don’t need it.”
Snape withdrew his hand and glared. “Do not lie to me, Potter! I am not a fool, and I can see your desire for reconciliation as clearly as if you had painted it across that garish scar of yours. At least respect me enough to let me finish.”

Harry swallowed hard and wrapped his arms around his waist. “But it … it’s not really … well, I mean, it’s important, yeah, but I’ll be okay without it. You don’t have to … that’s all I’m saying.”

Snape’s eyes filled with sorrow, and the emotion in them made Harry’s breath catch. “How long, Potter? How long have you been pushing your needs aside for others while I refused to notice?”

Harry shrugged. “Dunno. Besides, what does it really matter when I’ll be dead in a year or two anyway?”

Snape’s eyes flashed, and Harry knew he had said the wrong thing.

“Dead!”

Snape slammed his hands on the desk so hard, the sound rang out like a gunshot. Harry gulped and leaned back, gripping the arms of his chair.

“I have not sacrificed twenty years of my life to this war for you to give up and die, Potter! Cease the melodrama.”

Anger coursing through him, Harry jerked to his feet and glared. “It’s not melodrama. It’s fact. I’m not this hero everyone makes me out to be. Most days, I can’t even figure out which way to point my wand, and yet everyone expects me to somehow off a wizard fifty adults haven’t been able to in as many years. I mean, you make a point of telling me every time I survive that it’s all dumb luck, and you’re right.” His voice quieted, and he settled back into the chair. “You’re right. It is dumb luck. And eventually, my luck’s going to run out, and what happens then?”

He shuddered and hugged his arms. “I don’t want to die, sir, and I don’t plan on giving up, but none of that matters. He’ll kill me anyway, one day.”

Snape stared at him, mouth agape, shame and pain apparent in his eyes. “Merlin, Potter. Is this truly what you believe?”

Harry shrugged and looked away. What was he supposed to say? It was the bald truth.

Snape sank into the chair behind his desk and lowered his head into his hands. “Gods.”

Harry cringed and gripped his knees. He’d never really cared until recently, but knowing he’d disappointed Snape—again—it hurt. More than he would have expected. He desperately needed the man to look at him without hatred, just once, but everything he said and did seemed to make the situation worse.

When Snape looked up, his eyes were sad, but not angry or reproachful. He held Harry’s gaze for a long moment, and despite the tension winding him up like a top, Harry could not look away.

Snape’s voice was soft and heavy with remorse. “For everything I have done to bring you to such despair, Harry, I am truly sorry.”

Harry’s breath caught, and tears blurred his vision. He dropped his head and blinked hard until his sight cleared.

“T-thank you, Professor. Really.”
When he looked up, Snape was rummaging through his desk again, a faint pink colour dusting his cheeks. Harry wondered if the man had ever apologised to anyone before that day, and he felt strangely honoured to have experienced one of his own, despite it being long overdue.

Snape stopped his searching. “There it is. I was beginning to think I had lost it.”

He took a small object from his desk, cupped it in his palm, and muttered a string of chants and spells. Harry watched, fascinated, as the object glowed various colours and then split in two. Snape took one half and slipped it onto his index finger—a ring, then. He gave the second to Harry—it was black and plain, but elegant. A silver ‘P’ marked the front.

Why ‘P’? Harry would have thought it would be an ‘S’. Well, maybe someone had given it to Snape, which made the fact that he was willing to pass it on to Harry all the more precious. Harry closed his hand around it and gave his professor a hesitant smile.

“Thank you.”

Snape did not acknowledge his thanks, not that Harry had expected him to. Still, Harry was pleased enough with the gift that he did not so much care for politeness.

“Wear it at all times, Potter. As soon as you put it on, it will resize to your finger and disillusion itself, so do not forget it exists.”

Harry nodded and placed the ring onto his left ring finger. Snape’s cheeks went bright pink.

“Ah, Potter? Why … that finger?”

Harry blinked. “It’s where most people wear their rings, isn’t it?”

Snape opened his mouth as if to say something, then seemed to think better of it and shook his head.

“Professor?”

“Y-yes. Many people do wear rings there, but ….” His blush deepened, and Harry wondered what he had done to embarrass the man.

“Um … sir? Did I do something wrong?”

Snape shook himself. “It is nothing, Potter.” He tapped the ring on Harry’s finger. “This ring is connected to mine. Should you find yourself in any trouble this summer, any at all, I want you to turn it and call my name, and I will be able to apparate to your location instantly, even if you are behind wards. Come to think of it, wear it even after the summer, in case you should run astray of Riddle’s lackeys. Merlin knows you are a magnet for trouble.”

Harry gulped. “Um … so can I just say ‘Snape?’ Only, if I’m really in a fix, I might not have time to spit out your title.”

Snape frowned. “Yes. That should do. My forename will also work, should it happen to come to mind.” He let his hand fall to the table. “Can you not tell me what kind of trouble you are facing, Harry?”

Harry shuddered and shook his head. “I … I don’t … no. No, I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Snape sighed and stood. “Very well. Then wait here—silently—while I retrieve Professor McGonagall to escort you back to Gryffindor tower.” He met Harry’s eyes. “And do be careful,
Potter. I should not like to report back to the Order that their precious saviour has met a gristly end simply because he forgot to use his beckoning ring.”

“I’m nobody’s saviour,” Harry grumped, but then he gave Snape a hesitant smile. “I’ll try not to get into trouble though. Thanks. Might come through the summer in one piece now.”

Snape’s colour drained. “Indeed.”
The walk back to Gryffindor tower was awkward in the extreme.

“Detention during the leaving feast, Potter. That must be a record.”

Harry winced at the unintentional repetition of the Malfoy gang’s words.

McGonagall raised her eyebrows. “Hmm. What manner of trouble have you gotten yourself into this time?”

Harry blushed and gave Professor McGonagall a wry smile. “I might have cursed at Professor Snape.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose and grumbled. “Oh for Merlin’s sake. It’s the last day of term, Potter! Couldn’t you have waited one more day to blather on about the man?”

“Er … no. I said I cursed at him. To his face. I called him an ars—”

Her gaze turned sharp, and Harry gulped.

“I called him something … er … really rude, so this time I probably have it coming.”

She stopped dead and stared at him. “You called Professor Snape a foul name? How are you still walking?”

Harry snickered into his hand. “Oh, come on. He’s not that bad.”

“No, not to his Slytherins.” Her lips pursed. “But he is to you.”

“Y-yeah.” Harry frowned and whispered to her, “Will you cast a silencing charm for us? I’d do it, but I’m already in enough trouble. Magic in the corridors and all.”

She obliged and motioned him on. “Walk while you speak. The charm will follow us and we will draw attention by standing in the middle of the corridor. Now, what did you need a charm for?”

“I just … well, I can’t tell many people, Professor—he’s got an image to keep, you know, and it’s not just for reputation—but he actually apologised to me.”

She choked. “Severus Snape apologised? Merciful Merlin, are you taking the pi—” She blushed and covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh. Do excuse me.”

Harry snorted. “No, no. It’s brilliant! I almost made you say ’piss!’”
Her eyes pinned him like a bug on a card. “Do you want another detention?”

“Er … no, ma’am. I’m fairly well booked as is.”

“Then I’d advise you not to use such language and tell me what on earth made you tell such a ludicrous story.”

Harry frowned. “But it’s the truth, honest!”

She shook her head. “I could sooner believe my cat had grown wings.”

Harry sighed and kicked the floor. “Fine. Just keep this quiet, okay? His life would be at risk if anyone did believe me, though if you don’t, I doubt anyone else will.”

She paused and gave Harry an appraising look. “Hmm. You’ve grown up.”

“Er … thanks?”

She chuckled. “It was a compliment, but—Merlin. He truly apologised?”

“Yeah.”

“Why? I’ve been trying to get the man to see sense about you for six years. What on earth made him do it at the last?”

Harry gulped and remembered flashes of their conversation. A flash of silver, blood drops from Snape’s fingertips, Harry’s almost slip-of-the-tongue, the way Snape’s hand had trembled as Harry healed him.

“Uh … I don’t think I can talk about that, Professor. I don’t think he’d like it if I told anyone. It’s … really private.”

Her eyebrows shot into her hairline. “He trusted you—a student—with personal affairs?”

Harry blushed. “Er … not exactly. It’s more like I walked in on said affairs whilst trying not to be cursed to death by Malfoy and his goons.”

“Ah, now that I can bel—wait a moment. Cursed to death?” Her eyes narrowed. “What did they do?”

“Um … Malfoy and his goons tried to kill me. I mean, really tried to kill me. Besides hitting me in the arm with Sectumsempra—Professor Snape healed it already, so there’s no need to call Madame Pomfrey—I’m pretty sure Malfoy threw several Cruciatu curses at me, and that’s just the start.” Harry frowned. “Didn’t Professor Snape tell you?”

She sniffed. “He told me Malfoy had attacked you. He never mentioned unforgiveables.”

“Well, maybe he wanted me to tell you about it to keep his cover. Think we should turn off the charm?”

McGonagall shook her head. “The charm alone would make people suspicious that something serious is happening. We can use that to our benefit. But dear Merlin, Malfoy truly tried to kill you?”

Harry gave her a grim nod. “He attacked Professor Snape, too.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits. “Is that so? Then why did Professor Snape not take him straight to the
Headmaster?”

“Erm, I don’t think he could safely. Besides, he was going to go to Professor Dumbledore anyway once I’m out of danger. I imagine he’s chewing off the old man’s ear as we speak.”

Professor McGonagall’s lips twitched despite her stern look. “The Headmaster, not the old man, Harry. Do have some respect.”

Harry gave her a wry grin. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Hmm. Well, we’re here.” She spoke the password and let Harry in. “Don’t come out again until it’s time for your detention. I will be here to escort you to the dungeons at quarter to seven. If you are late, I will be sure Professor Snape knows who held us up.”

“Right.” He gave her a hesitant smile. “Thanks, Professor.”

“No trouble, Potter. And I mean that—do make an effort to stay out of trouble for sixteen hours, hmm?”

“Um, right. I will.”

She turned to walk away, and Harry called, “Um, Professor? Before you go, could you tell me something? What’s the significance of wearing a ring on your left third finger?”

Her eyes boggled. “Potter! How could you not know that?”

He ruffled his hair. “Um … well, my relatives didn’t exactly teach me those kinds of things.”

Fire flickered in her eyes. “Right. I suppose that does explain it, but why on earth do you ask?”

“I … er … someone gave me a ring for protection earlier—yes, they’re trustworthy—but when I went to put it on that finger, they looked really embarrassed. Why?”

The corners of her lips twitched, and she re-cast the silencing spell. “Was that someone Professor Snape, by any chance?”

Harry’s cheeks burned. “Um ….”

Professor McGonagall closed the portrait door and fixed Harry with a shrewd look. “Let me see if I understand these details correctly. You spoke to Professor Snape earlier, and during this conversation, he apologised.”

“Um … yeah?”

“Then he gave you a ring of protection?”

“Er ….”

“And you put it on your bonding finger?”

“Well, um, you see—wait, my what?”

She burst into laughter and slapped her thigh. “Oh, sweet Circe! That is too rich! What I wouldn’t have paid to see that!”

Harry frowned. “Professor, what are you talking about? I don’t understand what I did wrong.” He
couldn’t help pouting a bit. “Or why it’s so funny. Lots of people wear rings there.”

“Well, it’s not so much that you were wrong, just that you didn’t know.” She hid a chuckle behind her hand. “Sorry, so sorry. It’s only—I can just imagine his face, and—” After another snort, she cleared her throat and composed herself. “Do forgive me. We professors are human, after all.” She straightened her bun and gave a last giggle. “Now, as to why it was funny, the left third finger is the wedding finger. It’s where people wear bonding rings, Harry. Or wedding bands, if they choose to marry in the Muggle fashion. When one puts a ring on that finger, it generally indicates an engagement or union.”

His face flamed. “Oh. Oh.”

“Yes, oh indeed.” She smiled and straightened her dress. “So you see why I was so amused.”

Harry wasn’t. “Wait, wait. That doesn’t mean I just … we’re not …?”

Her eyes went wide. “Dear Merlin, no. It was only a bit of a faux pas. No, you’re not married or bonded to anyone until you actually exchange vows, nor are you engaged until someone asks for your hand and you agree, or vice versa. The rings are only a symbol. Well, there is a bit more to bonding rings than simple symbolism, but even so, you still must take the vows before they will work.”

Harry breathed a heavy sigh. “Thank goodness.”

“Yes, indeed.” She chuckled again, but her mirth soon faded into a scowl. “Be off with you now. It seems Professor Snape and I will need to have a discussion with the Headmaster about our Malfoy scion. Unforgiveables are most certainly not tolerated at Hogwarts, nor is the cursing of teachers.”

Harry just wanted to sink into the floor. Married or not, he’d put the ring on his bonding finger. The ring that Snape had connected to himself.

Dear Merlin, how odd.

“Er … thanks, Professor.”

“Yes, yes. Off with you.” She opened the portrait again and shooed him inside.

Harry went without a fuss and, as soon as the portrait closed behind him, he attempted to move his ring to another finger, but it wouldn’t come off. Snape must have charmed it to stay on during the summer in case his arsehole relatives found it somehow.

“Well, shite.”

It looked like he was ‘bonded’ to Snape for the foreseeable future, at least via his ring. Lovely. He’d have to call it off with Ginny tonight lest she found it there and made a scene. Well, he’d planned to anyway, but this was more incentive to stop putting it off.

Thank Merlin it was invisible. He didn’t want to think of the questions it would have brought up, if anyone knew it was there.

Severus shoved Albus’ beloved treats away with a sigh. “For the love of Merlin, Albus, no, I do not
want any bloody lemon drops. How many times must I refuse them before you learn I do not enjoy sweets?”

Albus twinkled and popped one of the atrocious concoctions into his own mouth. “As many times as it takes for you to lighten up.”

Merlin, the man was in a cheerful mood. No doubt because, for the first time since Potter started at Hogwarts, he thought they had managed to make it through the end of term without a major catastrophe. He did not yet know of Malfoy, of course. Severus, on the other hand, would not feel comfortable until all the students were home again in their beds—and not even then, not with his painful knowledge about Harry’s home life.

Severus huffed and flopped into the ridiculous purple wingback facing the Headmaster’s desk. “Lighten up, indeed. This is about Potter’s well-being, Albus. We have neither the time nor luxury for sweets.”

“Potter’s well-being?” Albus twinkled harder. “Hmm. I didn’t know you cared, Severus.”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake—you’re bloody infuriating, you know that?”

Albus chuckled. “Only to you, my dear boy. No need to get your feathers all in a tiff.”

Fawkes trilled from his perch and ruffled his feathers, much to Albus’ amusement.

Severus felt a headache coming on. “Albus, this is not a laughing matter. Could you be serious for five minutes? Please?”

At Severus’ honest plea, the humour left the old man’s eyes. “What has happened, Severus?”

Severus sighed. “It’s about bloody time. First, I believe we shall have to expel Mister Malfoy. Perhaps Messrs Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle as well, but certainly Malfoy.”

Albus gasped and turned his full attention onto Severus. “Dear Merlin. What makes you believe such drastic measures are necessary?”

Severus rubbed his temples again. “You recall what I told you of the rally last night? About the Dark Lord taking Draco aside, and how he was white-faced and shaking when he emerged from their meeting?”

Albus nodded and waved him on.

“Well, it appears he must have given Malfoy orders to hurt Potter, or perhaps even kill him.”

Albus paled and rose from his seat. “Dear gods. Is Harry all right?”

“Yes, for the moment. Minerva escorted him back to the tower.”

“Well, that is a relief. Tell me what happened, Severus. Start to finish.”

Severus sighed. “Very well. Perhaps two hours ago, while attempting to escape Malfoy et al, Potter burst into my … sanctuary.”

Albus winced. “So he knows about your … troubles, Severus?”

“He does.”
Albus sighed and sat once more. “I do wish you would talk to Poppy about it. It’s not healthy, Severus.”

“I do not believe therapy would help when my job is the source of my pain.”

“Oh come now, Severus. Surely the essays aren’t that bad.”

For a moment, Severus wanted to choke the old fool on his lemon drops.

Albus chuckled. “Just trying to lighten the mood a bit. No need to give me the death glare.” He sighed and stroked his beard. “Perhaps you are right, but it would do an old man some good to know you were at least trying to work through your troubles. I do care about you.”

Severus’ gaze softened. “I am sorry, Albus. I simply cannot stop yet.”

Albus patted his hand. “It is quite all right, my boy. I believe I understand, at least a bit.” He straightened and held out his wand. “I will heal you. Come.”

Severus gave him a wry smile. “Harry already has.”

“He has? Well. I must say that is unexpected. Not that he would heal you, but that you would allow him to.”

“I did not, not at first.” Severus sighed and shook himself. “This is unimportant, however. We were speaking of Malfoy.”

“Hmm. I beg to differ—anything which lessens your animosity towards Harry must be immensely important; however, the situation with Malfoy is more pressing. What happened to cause you to believe he must be expelled?”

Severus rubbed his wrist. “When Potter burst in on me, he was fleeing Malfoy, Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle. You know I have been training him to use his judgment before leaping into a fight? Well, he judged that this was too much for him, and I am inclined to agree. When Potter came into the room, he had a cut across his bicep from Sectumsempra.”

Albus’ expression turned grim. “That is serious indeed. Is Harry well?”

“Yes. It was only a glancing blow and, however unwittingly, he came to the one person in the school, besides yourself, who was able to heal it. I believe I shall remedy that in the morning and at least attempt to teach him the chant, but I digress. Upon further discussion with the boy, Harry revealed that Malfoy et al had also cast curses he was unfamiliar with, as well as the Cruciatus.”


“I am afraid it gets worse. When Potter and I left, I led out of the room thinking that Malfoy would not dare attack with a professor protecting his target.” Severus shuddered and stared at his lap. “I was wrong. Had Harry not cast a shield charm, Malfoy would have cursed me. I froze, like a fool. I had assumed they would be watching for Potter.”

He gave a dark laugh. “Malfoy was watching. He saw me, and he cursed me anyway. And when I ordered him gone and tried to leave with Harry, he tried to curse us while our backs were turned. I had no choice but to face him down as if he was an enemy. One of my students, Albus. One I have watched grow up, and I had to treat him like a Death Eater.”

Albus held Severus’ shoulder and gave him a look full of deep sorrow. “I understand, my boy. I do
understand.”

Severus shuddered at the reminder that every Death Eater in Riddle’s camp, including Riddle himself, had been a student under Albus’ leadership at one point or another. “How do you bear it, Albus?”

Albus gave him a sad smile. “I look at the ones like Harry and know that, at least with them, I have done something right.”

Severus winced, knowing he would have to strip away Albus’ illusions about that student, too. Still, perhaps they had hope. In spite of everything, Harry was still a kind, loving young man. One who had forgiven even Severus’ sins.

He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Nevertheless, Albus, we have a crisis on our hands. The mere thought that he would be so desperate to get to Harry that he would knowingly attack a professor is alarming, to say the least.”

Albus frowned deeply and stroked his beard. “It is indeed. What was the curse, Severus?”

“The boil-face curse. I would have been crippled with pain and blinded, possibly killed, and I do believe that was Malfoy’s goal—to incapacitate me and capture Harry. And, most likely, to take him to the Dark Lord once he was down.” Severus shook his head. “I am afraid this leaves us little choice, Albus.”

“Yes.” Albus closed his eyes and leaned on his desk. “Another student, lost. Merlin, he is so young, and already, his life is gone to darkness. It … hurts. Every time we lose one to this madness, it hurts.”

Severus lowered his head. “I tried, Albus. My hands were tied from fifth year on, but until then, I tried to guide them away from that life. And now, it is too late.”

Albus nodded and straightened, his eyes full of deep pain. “If I expel them, Severus, they will most likely be killed. Is there no hope to turn them to our side?”

“As spies, you mean?” Severus gave a bitter laugh. “Albus, to spy on the Dark Lord takes the kind of strength of character that neither Malfoy nor his cronies possess. They are not nearly brave enough to turn their backs on that life, nor do I believe for an instant that they would want to. By all means, question them if it makes you feel better about the situation, but do keep a phial of Veritaserum handy. They will undoubtedly lie to save their own skins and stab you in the back when you least expect it. Perhaps literally, with Malfoy.”

Albus slumped over, his face losing animation and colour, deepening the lines across his brow. “Yes. I suppose you are right. Now, the question is, can I expel them without endangering your life?”

Severus rubbed his lip in thought. “I believe so. It is not so farfetched to think that Potter would have reported such a serious attempt on his life, particularly since Malfoy attacked a professor in full view of the portraits.”

“There are no portraits in that section of the dungeon, are there?”

“No, and it is why I chose that area as my sanctuary, but I sincerely doubt either the Dark Lord or Malfoy knows that. Besides, Potter’s story alone would force your hand.”

“Yes.” Albus sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Very well. Then I suppose I must do as you suggest, though it sickens me to my soul.”
Severus took a phial from his robe pocket. “They made their choice, Albus. Would that they had the
courage to spy, but I do not believe them capable of it. I do have Veritaserum here, however, in the
event that I have misjudged them.” With a heavy sigh, he laid the phial on the table and slumped into
his hands. “After all, Potter has proved in spades that my judgment of character is … skewed.”

An inkling of Albus’ smile returned. “Have you forgiven him, Severus?”

“For what? The boy has never done anything to deserve my wrath. It is I who need his forgiveness.”

Albus squeezed Severus’ hand. “I am so very proud of you.”

Severus laughed bitterly. “For realising that an innocent boy is a human being and deserves to be
treated as such? Setting the bar rather low, aren’t we?”

“No, Severus. For overcoming the pain of your past and being brave enough to admit you were
wrong.”

A sudden welling in his eyes forced Severus to blink hard. “Paugh. I should have done years ago.
But, regardless, this business with Malfoy is not the only reason why I have come to you this
evening.”

Albus nodded. “Harry will have to be educated on your condition, I suppose.”

“Yes, but first, you and I need to be educated on Harry’s conditions.”

Albus blinked. “Harry’s conditions? Is he unwell?”

Severus’ eyes narrowed. He sat back in his chair and steepled his hands, observing the old man over
the tops of his fingers.

“How much do you know of what goes on at Potter’s … home?”

Albus winced. “I do know he is unhappy there, but unhappy is better than dead, Severus.”

Severus scanned the old man’s face and sighed, relieved and saddened at once. Albus honestly did
not know, and that meant Severus would have to enlighten him.

May the gods forgive them both.

“This goes far further than mere unhappiness, Albus. Potter’s words tonight suggest that the Muggles
he lives with are starving him and … and ….” Severus closed his eyes and took a deep breath.
“Abusing him sexually.”

Albus leapt to his feet. “Severus! You are certain of this?”

Severus sighed. “I could not convince him to admit it, and the implication of sexual abuse was more
in what he did not say than what he did. However, my best judgment suggests that he is indeed an
abuse victim.”

Albus turned and paced the floor behind his desk, tugging at his beard in distress. “No. I simply
cannot believe his life there is so terrible. He would have told me, surely?”

“Not if he is too ashamed, or if he believes he deserves it.”

Albus’ face crumpled. “But … but that’s preposterous. Harry is loved. He knows he is loved.”
Severus dropped his hands to his lap. “Perhaps not. Perhaps I have done more damage than I ever imagined, or perhaps his relatives have beaten it into his head that he is undeserving of care and affection.”

Albus sank into his chair, his eyes wide with horror. “What do we do, Severus? I am not positive I believe his conditions there are quite so bad, but if I do not send him back there for at least one month, he will lose the protection of his mother’s blood, and Tom will not hesitate to take advantage of the loss.”

Severus nodded, his eyes sad. “I thought I would be unable to convince you on my word alone—”

Anger flickered in Albus’ eyes. “Severus! That is completely unfair. You know I trust you with my life.”

Severus suppressed a flinch, pain twisting his stomach in knots. He hated disappointing Albus.

“I … it is not that I thought you would disbelieve me, I should say, but that I did not think the mere suggestion would be enough to sway you from sending him there, particularly with the issue of the blood wards.”

Albus frowned, but motioned him on.

“I … well, I was not sure of what would happen, so I created a beckoning ring for him.” He removed the disillusionment spell on his own ring and showed it to Albus. “There are also powerful protection spells woven in, and the moment he speaks my name and turns the ring, they will activate.”

Albus relaxed and let slip a relieved sigh. “So at least he will be safe from any untoward advances.”

“That is the hope. The core of the magic is also hidden, so the Ministry will not be able to trace any unauthorised magic use and have an excuse to … interfere.”

Albus nodded. “What if you are at a Death Eater meeting when he calls for help?”

Severus flinched. “My best hope is that the protective spells hold up until I can slip away and warn you.”

“Hmm. Not good enough.” Albus tapped the ring with his wand, and a second just like it appeared in his palm. He slipped it onto his middle finger. “Now, if he calls you, I will feel an echo of it and know to help him if you are gone.”

Severus frowned. “Yes. But, Albus, might we simply call the Muggle authorities on those demons and cut the problem off at the root? Will the protection reset if he stays with his aunt alone?”

“Until we know who is doing what, it is too much of a risk. She may very well be the one abusing him, Severus.”

“That, I highly doubt. Petunia is a prude of the highest order.”

Albus’ eyes went grim. “And who said the abuse is of a type where sexual gratification is involved? They may simply be causing him pain, much like you have endured yourself.”

Severus winced. “That is a fair point.” He met Albus’ eyes. “I have never understood. Why … did you let them stay? Surely what they did to me was a severe enough crime to warrant expulsion.”
Albus sighed and shook his head. “It was, but they were children, Severus. I … I had hoped, with some counselling and several hard detentions, they would come to see the error of their ways.”

“They never did.”

“I know. I am sorry, my boy. It was the blindness of an old man who does not wish to give up hope on children he loves.” Tears filled his eyes. “Children like Malfoy, like you were, once. It was, perhaps, a mistake. But one I cannot say I would not make again if I were to go back in time.” He gave Severus a sad smile. “We would not have Harry, had I not.”

“Perhaps.” Severus shook off his past hurts and rubbed his chin. “Albus, I do not like the idea of leaving him there alone. You said he must remain there for one month to keep the blood wards working?”

“Yes. At least until his birthday, after which, they will begin to break down regardless of how much time he spends in that place. By this time next year, they will be useless, but for now, it is the only real protection we can offer him.”

“I will not ask him to pay such a high price for our protection.” Severus stood and swept his cloak around him. “I will stay there as well, as often as I possibly can. In the shadows, so no one knows I am about. I will not let them hurt him, not if I can help it.”

Albus stood and took Severus’ hand. “Thank you, my boy. That eases my mind.”

“Yes.” Severus strode to the door, but paused with his hand on the doorknob. “Oh, and do make a scene in the morning and force me to ride to Surrey with Potter. Malfoy may become desperate, or this entire setup may be a cover for a better skilled assassin hiding in the wings.”

Albus frowned. “Will that not put you at risk?”

“I will use the same excuse I always do: if I expect to remain a spy, I obviously cannot kill or capture Potter without blowing my cover.”

The old man’s eyes held intense worry. “I have a bad feeling about this, Severus.”

“To be honest ….” Severus opened the door and shook his head. “So do I.”

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What with all the excitement of the Term Tourney and Gryffindor’s smashing win, it was a long while before Harry could get Hermione on her own. He knew quite well she would likely be in a relatively quiet spot, as she didn’t like the hustle and bustle of large crowds, but every time he tried to move away from his overexcited dorm-mates, they followed him. It was nearly six before he managed to get away.

With an exaggerated yawn, Harry moved towards the boys’ staircase. “Oh, man. I’m so bloody tired. All that quidditch, you know.” He looked at his watch. “Damn, six already. ‘Mione, I’ve got detention with Snape again. Mind helping me go over potions and runes? You know he’s going to attack me on it if I give him half the chance, and I won’t have another opportunity to look at our rune work until September.”

She gave a melodramatic sigh and followed Harry upstairs. “Silly boy. What did you do this time,
Harry?”

“You know. It’s Snape.” Harry felt bad about lying to her, but he had little choice if he wanted to keep his new ally alive.

She gave him a commiserating look and followed him upstairs, but as soon as the doors closed, she pounced.

“All right, what gives? That was as fake an excuse as they come. You were obviously lying through your teeth.”

Harry rubbed his neck. “Um, I actually do have detention tonight. Seven o’ clock.”

“During the feast? Merlin, he’s such a berk.”

“Hah. This time, I might actually deserve it. I may or may not have called him an arsehole. To his face.”

“Harry!”

Harry gave a nervous laugh. “I know, I know. But … um, you’re also right. It was an excuse to get you alone, so sit up here with me.” He patted his bed. “I really do need to talk to you without the others listening in. I figured the runes excuse would give us at least a few minutes before Ron comes barging in, but you know how jealous he gets.”

“Of both of us,” she said with a sniff. “If you’d only tell him the truth, you’d save me a world of trouble.”

Harry blushed. “I’m not sure he’s ready for that yet, ‘Mione. You’re more understanding, yeah?”

She shook her head. “Harry Potter, he’s not going to disown you just because you like guys better. And you really do owe Ginny the truth.”

Harry slumped over and sighed. “I know. I’ll … tell her tonight. I’m really not looking forward to it, but it’s just not fair to string her along. It’s too dangerous for her anyway.”

Hermione nodded. “She already suspects. You’re just going to be confirming what she already knows.”

He winced. “Damn. I really messed up with her.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Gee, thanks. Glad I can count on you to make me feel better.”

“Don’t be a flake about your relationships, and I will.”

Harry groaned. “Hermione, if I’d known you were going to box my ears again, I’d have just gone to the library and been done with it. Are you going to help me or not?”

A curious light flashed in her eyes, and she plopped onto the bed beside him. “Yeah. What’s up?”

She frowned. “Is this about … earlier, Harry? Are you okay?”

Harry winced. “That was unpleasant, but no, this isn’t about that.” He flicked his wand to close the curtains. Another swish, and the area inside the bed went utterly silent.
Her eyes narrowed. “So it’s important.”

“Important and … well, I don’t want it to get around.” Harry drew his knees into a cross-legged position and stared at his wrists. “I … saw something really scary today. I walked in on someone we know—don’t ask me who, I can’t say—and he … he had cut his wrists wide open.”

Hermione gasped and put a hand to her mouth. “Merlin!”

“Yeah. I thought he was going to kill himself, but he said it wasn’t for that. That he hadn’t cut deep enough.” He closed his eyes and shivered. “And when I went to heal his wrist—gods, Hermione. There were probably a hundred scars all over it. I’m not exaggerating at all—that might be an understatement, actually. He’s been doing this for years, and I … I don’t understand. I don’t know what this is or how to help him stop or what he needs.”

She gulped. “Dear Merlin, Harry. That’s not something I have a lot of experience with, either.”

“So you can’t help me at all?”

“I …” She sighed and twirled her hair around her finger. “Well, I can tell you that it’s definitely a mental illness.”

“Come again?”

“Like depression, anxiety—it’s a disorder in a person’s brain that affects their behaviour and emotions.”

Harry winced. “So … it can’t be fixed?”

She shrugged. “There are medicines and magical treatments for certain mental illnesses, but this—I have no idea. It sounds more like a traumatic thing than something they were born with, so I don’t know how much medicinal treatment would help.”

Harry nodded. “Considering the person, it’s definitely trauma. So what can I do, then?”

“Well, since you’re learning to be a healer, it wouldn’t hurt you to research ways to help him over the summer if you can manage it. I’ll try to owl you some books and make sure the owl knows to come late at night and scratch on your window, like we tell Pig. But probably the most helpful thing to do would be to talk to this person. Just be there for him, like we are for you when your visions get to be too much. That’s really all I can tell you.”

Harry gulped. “Talk to him. Right.”

Talk to Professor Snape? That would go over well.

Still, Harry supposed it was worth a try. The man needed help desperately, and he had saved Harry. He had even apologised and offered his protection during the summer. That had to mean something, right?

Since Snape wanted to heal the breach and was willing to risk his life to do so, Harry could at least return the favour with some effort on his part.

“Thanks, Hermione. I’ll try to talk to him.”

“Good on you. Now, let’s open these curtains and start studying before Ron comes in and makes a fuss.”
“Right.” Harry Summoned his rucksack and dug out his potions book, earning him an eye roll from his friend. “Oh, do shut up. I’m aware you dislike him, but he’s been the only thing keeping me afloat in potions.”

“You speak of him as if he’s an actual person, Harry.”

“Well, he is, somewhere. Just older than us.” He scratched his chin, torn between pride and annoyance at the stubble that had finally grown in. “You know, I think Snape knows who he is. He acted shocked when he saw this, like he recognised it.”

“Snape?” Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “Hmm. I’ll get back to you on that.”

Harry shrugged and turned to the section on antidotes. “All right, Hermione. This is the one thing the Prince can’t help me with and that Snape is likely to pick on, so … please?”

She sighed and Summoned her own potions book with nothing but a flick of her wrist. Harry gulped.

“That’s bloody scary, Hermione.”

She laughed and turned to the section on antidotes. “Now, the reason you’re not getting this, Harry, is because you can’t go into antidote making with a specific solution already in mind. You have to understand the ingredients and their properties before you can make an adequate buffer against their effects ….”

When Ron barged in ten minutes later, annoyed and anxious, Hermione and Harry were deep in discussion about the properties of common potions and how to counter them.
Confession

Chapter Summary

***Warnings: allusions to child sexual abuse, non-graphic.***

CHAPTER 4

CONFESSION

When Severus emerged from Albus’ office, Minerva pounced him, her lips pursed and her eyes angry. He prepared himself for a tirade and was considering how best to reply when it came.

“Severus Snape, if you tell me you have once again brushed Malfoy’s bad behaviour under the rug and let something of this nature slide, may Merlin help you when I am finished with your sorry hide.”

Severus suppressed a flinch. Shite. Minerva deserved the truth, but this place was simply too well-known. He wasn’t fool enough to act in any other role than the quintessential Death Eater in the Headmaster’s hall. After all, if Death Eaters wanted to keep the Order’s comings and goings under observation—or if they wanted to keep Severus under observation—this would be the perfect place to start.

He scowled and stood tall. “I have given Malfoy detention for his folly, and if that is not to your liking, then I will remind you that I am master of Slytherin House.”

He flicked his eyes towards a door off the main hallway, an empty classroom that now held an assortment of supplies and hadn’t been used for teaching in decades, hoping she would follow his lead.

“No, if you’ll excuse me, I am out of number three phials, and I would like to check the storage room here for replacements before I spend money I do not have to teach your abominable brats skills they take no interest in learning.”

He flicked his eyes to the door once more, fearing to make any other movement, and she gave him the barest nod.

‘Thank the gods for intelligent colleagues.’

She placed her hands on her hips and snapped, “Now, see here, Severus!”

Severus huffed and turned on his heel so sharply, his robes whipped his ankles. “I do not have to see anything, woman.”

“This is one of my students he’s threatening, Severus, so yes, you do!”

They continued to bicker all the way into the storage room, and Minerva carried on the argument in the form of a tirade while Severus performed every listening and scrying spell counter he knew. Once he was certain there was no one within the room and no spying spells in place, he cast several intense privacy wards and signalled for her to stop.
“Thank Merlin,” she said with a sigh. “I was running out of insults.”

Severus gave a dark chuckle. “Oh, I am sure you could find some when pressed.”

“Perhaps, but we’ve little time. What is really being done to Mister Malfoy?”

Severus closed his eyes and Occluded hard. The pain of his failure with that child cut far deeper than his knives ever would.

“He is being expelled, as are, most likely, the other three Slytherins involved. Unless, by some miracle, they should pass a Veritaserum test and agree to be spies, in which case, they will remain here on a probationary basis, if I understood Albus’ intentions correctly.”

She lifted a hand to her mouth. “Dear Merlin.”

“It is highly unlikely any of them will pass the test, and should they fail … the Dark Lord is not kind to those who fail his direct orders. I am afraid they will not survive the week.”

She went ashen. “I … I … that is ….”

“Yes. It is too cruel. If Malfoy were acting on his own will, perhaps it would suit, but I have no doubt he is being threatened into this.”

She flopped against a wall and held her chest. “Is there anything the Order can do to protect their lives?”

Severus shook his head. “Not unless they pass Albus’ questioning.”

She gave him a heartsick look. “Severus, if those boys die as a result of this, it will not only be their lives on the line. Harry will … he will blame himself.”

Severus closed his eyes and nodded.

“I know you are not fond of the boy, but he has done nothing to deserve such guilt.” She blinked hard and met his eyes. “If you have, as I have heard earlier, truly reached a truce with him, then I—”

Severus’ eyes widened and coldness washed over his limbs. “He told you? Dear Merlin, I thought he understood the danger! I must—”

“No, no. Ssh. It is not so dire. He asked me—quietly—to cast a silencing charm before he said a word. Until that moment, he acted as if your antipathy towards him had not changed. You are safe, Severus. I even blocked the sight of us from the portraits.”

Severus stood shaking for a moment, trying to let go of the terrible fear that this was all a setup and something had gone horribly wrong, but it would not release him.

“Severus? Oh, dear boy. It’s all right. You are safe.”

He shook himself. “I know.” He rubbed his brow and tried to collect his wits. “Yes, Mister Potter and I have reached an understanding.”

Her lips twitched, but she said nothing humorous, so Severus could not understand what had entertained her so.

“Well, that is a relief to hear,” she said, “and, perhaps, a solution to all of our problems. What if we brought their fate before Harry?”
The blood drained from Severus’ face. “You want me to place the decision in the hands of a seventeen year old boy? A decision that will cost them their lives? Dear gods, Minerva! Even when I hated him, I would not have been so cruel.”

She gave him a tearful nod. “I do understand and loathe the idea as much as yourself, and yet, if Harry is truly to have a role in this war, he must understand what kinds of decisions we adults must make every day.” Her shoulders slumped. “And, I must confess, I see no other recourse to give Malfoy et al a chance at survival. The boy deserves expulsion, but he does not deserve to die for it.”

“You do know that this was likely a ploy to capture Harry alive and present him to the Dark Lord, do you not?”

“I am quick enough to follow the signs, yes. However, it does not change the fact that he is seventeen and was most likely given a choice between that and being tortured to death.”

Perhaps, but to lay the responsibility for his life and the lives of his compatriots on another seventeen year old’s shoulders—an innocent—I … it is too cruel.”

“The alternative is sending four teenagers to their deaths, Severus. Unless you have a better idea?”

Severus sighed and slumped against the wall beside the woman. “I do not. But Merlin, how can I ask him this, Minerva? How can I put such a terrible burden on his shoulders? Will he even understand it?”

“Oh, he will understand it. He has understood the price of being in this war since the moment his mother died to save him.” She touched Severus’ arm, the same one Harry had healed not an hour before. “I do understand your worry, Severus, but I do not doubt for a moment that he will make the right decision.”

“There is no right decision here.”

She nodded sadly. “No, not one our war-torn eyes can see. But, perhaps, Harry might be able to … shed some light on the situation, so to speak.”

Severus crossed his arms over his chest. “I cannot ask him. I cannot.”

She squeezed his arm. “Forgive me, Severus. I know it is too much to ask of you.”

He sighed and pushed from the wall. “Very well. After all, I am a destroyer of innocence. What is one more broken spirit among a sea of them?”

“Severus. Come now, I have faith in him.”

“Perhaps too much.” With a shake of his head, he moved away from the wall and nodded towards the door. “We have tarried too long. Do continue haranguing me like the recalcitrant brat I am.”

Minerva snickered, then plastered on her customary pursed-lip frown. “—And another thing, Severus Snape ….?”

He tuned out her tirade, cancelled the spells, and moved to the exit, hastily whispering a Summoning charm for number three phials—none came, not that he had actually expected to find any here. His task completed, Severus left and closed the door behind him.
“So, you’re saying,” said Harry with a grin, “that all I have to do to make a standard antidote is just break down the poison into ingredients, find opposites for all of them, and make sure they I can mix them without melting my cauldron into goo?”

Hermione nodded. “Well, for the purposes of this class. With more complex poisons—which you will need to know as a healer, by the way—you also have to consider the effects of spells and runic changes and all kinds of outside forces.”

Harry’s grin vanished. Just when he thought he had begun to understand it ….

“But,” said Hermione with a smile, “for right now, yeah. You just need to find opposites that mix. We can work on the more complex formulas once you’re comfortable making antidotes for standard poisons.”

“Brilliant! I can do that. I think.”

From a dark corner, Ron stopped tossing and catching a quaffle long enough to mutter, “Good on you, mate.”

Harry frowned and turned to his friend. Ron was sullen and irritated, but behind that, Harry couldn’t ignore the pain and insecurity behind his eyes. Ron had always thought himself too slow for Hermione, never mind that Ron was fairly normal as intelligence went. Hermione’s brilliance just made everyone look like trolls—except for maybe Snape and Dumbledore.

Well, and Harry thought the Prince was pretty brilliant, but it was no use mentioning that to Hermione. She’d only start giving him dark looks and muttering about the sanity of having love affairs with imaginary friends again. Ron would not do well hearing that.

But then, Harry had put off telling him long enough. It wasn’t fair to keep Ron worrying like this, never mind that it wasn’t really fair for Ron to treat Hermione like he was either. Still, if Harry could shine some light on the elephant in the room, maybe it would totter away. Hopefully without stomping their friendship to bits.

Either way, it was past time for Harry to come clean.

“Oi, Ron.”

The redhead shook himself and gave Harry a wry smile. “Mate, don’t ask me about the opposite to inkworm juice or something like that. I’ve no idea.”

Harry chuckled. “I’ll ask you about it when I want to blow up Snape’s lab.”

Ron grinned wickedly. “On second thought ….”

Hermione glared. “Ron!”

Harry laughed. “It was a joke, Hermione. Merlin.” He motioned to the bed beside him. “No, it’s not about potions. Just sit down with us, Ron. I reckon it’s time I told you something. I’m going to tell Gin tonight too, so don’t lose your nut, okay? It’s … not something I planned.”

Ron gave him a bemused look, but stayed in his chair. “All right. But you’d better not be going around on her or something.”
“No! Gods, no.” Unless his fantasies about the Prince counted? No. That wasn’t real. Was it?

He shook his head and dug his toe in the carpet, tracing patterns. “See, the thing is, well, I … Ithkmgy.”

“Um, come again? In English this time?”

Harry gulped in a deep breath and reminded himself that this was Ron. It would be okay. It had to be.

“I … I think … I’m g-gay.”

Ron froze, eyes bugging. If he weren’t so afraid, Harry would have found his gaping-fish expression humorous in the extreme.

“But … but Ginny!”

Harry wrapped his arms around his waist and nodded. “I know. I … I didn’t realise what everything meant when we started dating. It was only when she tried to really snog me and I couldn’t—even though she’s all right and I like her—that I began to put the pieces together. I just like guys, I guess. So you can stop worrying that I’ll steal Hermione. Even if she wasn’t a sister, she doesn’t have the right parts, apparently.”

Ron growled, “But … Ginny! You’ll break her heart. When she knows ….”

A soft voice came from around the corner, and Harry’s breath caught in his throat.

“She already does.” Ginny appeared inside, her eyes full of tears and an Extendable Ear hanging from her fingertips. “I guess it’s true what they say about eavesdroppers, huh?” She sniffled, and Harry shuddered to know he had caused her so much pain.

“Gin, oh gods. I’m so sorry. I … I didn’t mean for you to find out like this.”

She held herself high and proud, showing the mettle Harry had always admired. She was a beautiful, strong woman, and he wished, in that moment, that he could love her.

“Did you mean for me to find out at all?”

Harry stood, determined to face his punishment like a man. If she hit him with her famous bat bogeys, well, it was nothing more than he deserved for leading her on.

“Yeah. I did. I was going to talk to you as soon as we got a minute of peace.” He nodded towards the common room. “Bit hard to talk about anything serious in the thick of that.”

“And for the two months we’ve been together prior to now?”

Harry sighed and looked at his feet. “I … I just … I was afraid, okay? I didn’t want to lose you, and I didn’t want to break your heart, and—gods, Gin! I wanted to love you. I wanted to be normal.” Tears blurred his vision, and Harry closed his eyes to hold them back. “But I’m just … not.”


“Different,” he finished in a dull voice. “Like everything else is about me. I didn’t want it, but it’s there, and it’s not fair to you to keep pretending, Gin. I … I’m so sorry.”

She gave him a tearful smile. “No. Don’t be. I’d rather you have told me the truth.” She sighed and
sat on Ron’s bed, across from Harry. “I think I’ve known for a while if I’m honest. I kept hoping but … but you never really looked at me the same way I looked at you. I’ve been wondering what I’ve been doing wrong, but I guess it’s just … the way it has to be.”

He hugged his waist to hold in his tears. “I didn’t want to hurt you. I’ve never wanted to hurt you.”

“I know.” She stood and wiped her face. “I just … I need some time, okay, Harry? If I ever hope to g-get over you, then I need to spend some time away.”

Harry nodded and rubbed a fist across his eyes. “Yeah. I … I understand. I really am sorry, Gin.”

She kissed his cheek. “I know. I’m sorry too.” With one last, heartbreaking look, she turned on her heel and left, red hair swinging behind her.

Hermione stood and held Harry’s shoulder. “Um … I think I should go with her. Just to make sure she’s okay. Are you going to be all right?”

Harry nodded and wiped his eyes. “Y-yeah. Just … I wish it didn’t have to be like this. I wish I hadn’t been so ….”

“Ssh. I know you do. I’m sorry, sweetheart.” She kissed his other cheek and went to the door. “I’ll come back and check on you after your detention, okay? Don’t forget.”

Harry nodded and gave her a brave attempt at a smile. “Thanks, ‘Mione. I’ll be okay. It’s Gin who needs help more right now.”

She winced. “Right. I’d better go after her.” With a wave, she darted away towards the girls’ dormitories, leaving Harry alone with the one person he’d been more afraid to face than Ginny.

“Ron, I … I’m sorry.”

Harry flinched as Ron stood, half-expecting a blow, but the young man only perched on his bed opposite Harry and stared at his friend. Harry swallowed hard and clenched his hands into fists to keep them from shaking.

“R-Ron? Say something, will you?”

Blue eyes pierced him with a death glare, and Harry wished he’d stayed silent.

“She’s my little sister. My only sister. I’m supposed to watch out for her. And by gods, by giving you my approval, that’s exactly what I thought I was doing.”

Harry lowered his eyes to the carpet, unable to bear the intensity of Ron’s stare. “It’s … I … I didn’t mean to hurt her, okay? When we started dating, I didn’t even know.”

“Well, why’d you start dating her, then? Why’d you get her hopes up if all you were going to do was dash them to pieces?”

Harry rocked into his knees. “I don’t know, okay! I thought … I thought I liked her, and maybe I did, but it just … I can’t love her, Ron. Not like she wants me to.”

“Why? What’s wrong with her? Why would you want a bloke over her?”

Harry cringed. “I don’t know that, either. She’s beautiful and brave and smart, and I hope someday she finds someone who will love her like she deserves, but it just can’t be me. Gods, I wish it could.”
Ron pounded his fist into the bed. “So … fix it, then!”

Harry gasped and drew his knees to his chest. “Fix it? Fix what? The fact that I can’t stare at a witch without … without thinking of ….” He shuddered and turned away. “Ron, you have no idea what I’ve endured ….” He buried his head into a shaky hand. “Never mind. Regardless, I can’t just fix it. Don’t you think if I could, I would have done before now?”

There was a long pause, and Harry begun to wonder if Ron had left. When he peeked through his fingers, the redhead was still across from him, his freckles standing out in stark relief against his ashen complexion.

Harry shuddered. So he had slipped with Ron, too. How many people would know before the night ended?

“Harry?” Ron’s voice was soft and afraid. “Did … something happen to you? I mean, besides earlier today?”

“Don’t!” He shuddered and buried his head in his knees. “Don’t ask me.”

“Oh.” Ron took in a shaky breath. “Oh.”

“Please. I can’t ….”

“All right. I … I won’t say anything. But damn, Harry. If you knew you couldn’t think about witches like that, why’d you mess with my sister to begin with?”

“I didn’t know, Ron. When have I ever had time to sort out my sexuality? Voldemort’s been breathing down my neck for six years. All I’ve ever had time to think about was how I was going to survive the next attack, how to stay ahead of his game when he’s stronger, older, and way more experienced than I am.” Harry shook his head. “It’s not safe for her to be involved with me anyway. He’d figure it out eventually, and then she’d be in danger.”

Ron frowned. “Harry, this isn’t … you didn’t just make all this up to protect her, did you?”

Harry shuddered as if struck a blow and stood. “What do you take me for, Ron? If I’d only been trying to protect her, I’d have told her so. I’d have left her with some hope that when this was all over, maybe we could try again.” Tears blotted out his sight. “But there isn’t, and we can’t, and I won’t string her along anymore. It’s past time I let her go, so she can move on with her life.”

“Yeah, she does.” Ron met his eyes head on, though his fury had softened. “She deserved better than to be used as an experiment, too.”

Harry cringed, struck through. “Is that what you really think of me? That I would just … use her to satisfy my curiosity? Merlin, Ron. I love her. It’s just … not enough. Not for this.”

“No. I guess not.”

Harry sighed and cast a tempus. Shite. It was almost a quarter to seven, and no doubt McGonagall would be hacked off if he waited much longer.

“Look. I’ve got to go. I have detention in fifteen minutes. Just … don’t hate me forever, okay? I
didn’t do any of this on purpose, and if I’d had my way, I’d have been able to love her like she wanted.”

Ron sighed and dropped his head into his hands. “Mate, I don’t hate you. I just … don’t understand.”

“I know. I’ll try to explain it better later, okay? Snape will hang me by my toes if I’m late, and I really can’t deal with that on top of everything else right now.”

Ron nodded. “So … later?”

“Yeah.” Harry paused by the door. “Are we still friends?”

“Of course we are, Harry. I think … I just need time, too. Like Gin.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “Well, you’re about to have hours of it. You know he’s going to keep me past curfew.”

Ron nodded to Harry’s trunk. “Better take your cloak then, just in case. There’s no way Snape will write you a pass for Filch.”

“Right.” Harry Summoned the cloak and tucked it under his jumper. “Ron? Thanks. For still being here, even though I know you’re hacked off.”

“Just go already before Snape boils your entrails in oil or something equally horrid.”

Harry gave a weak laugh and wished it was safe to tell his friend that Snape had changed, at least in private, but Ron couldn’t Occlude. Merlin knew Harry had tried to teach him.

“Yeah. See you later then?”

“Later.”

Harry gave Ron one last, uncertain look, then gathered his wits and raced from the dormitory. When he arrived at the portrait hole, panting and red-faced, McGonagall was pacing the entrance and looking prim.

“Er … hi?”

She sighed and motioned him to precede her. “Late again, Mister Potter? Let us hope Professor Snape is in a forgiving mood.”

Harry gave a wry snort. “Is he ever?”

She kept her expression serious, but her eyes twinkled. “Not where you are concerned, I am afraid. But perhaps … Harry? Dear, are you all right?”

Harry blushed and looked away. Damn. He’d forgotten his eyes. No doubt he looked a right mess.

“Y-yeah. It’s just … been a hard night. That’s all.”

Something like guilt flickered in the professor’s eyes. “Oh. I am sorry, Harry. So sorry.”

He got the feeling she was apologising for more than the obvious, but Harry couldn’t fathom what, so he just gave her a brave smile and trudged forwards, keeping his head down so as not to draw too much attention. To draw none was impossible, considering his fame, but if he could keep his eyes hidden, perhaps people wouldn’t ask too many questions.
“Stay close, Mister Potter,” said McGonagall in a stern voice. “And no stopping to prattle on with your admirers if you expect to make it to detention on time.”

She swept ahead of him, her stout shape and full skirt hiding most of Harry’s diminutive figure, and he gave her back a grateful smile.

“Thanks,” he whispered.

She gave him the barest of smiles over her shoulder. “Come, then. Don’t drag your feet.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He made it sound as if he were heading to his funeral, but Harry couldn’t help but feel a bit of curiosity at what detention would entail, now that Snape had become … human.
In retrospect, Harry should have realised Snape wouldn’t let up just because they’d shared a moment earlier. He supposed he did deserve a bit of manual labour, considering he had cursed at a teacher, but after scrubbing flobberworm guts out of his fifteenth cauldron—without magic, of course—it became difficult to remember that fact. Gods, his arms were on fire, and his shoulders felt as if someone was beating them with an ice pick.

“That is enough, Mister Potter.”

Harry blinked and emerged from his finished cauldron. There were still three stacks to go, and he had expected he would have to clean them all.

“Professor?”

Snape motioned him over to the desk. “Wash your hands and come sit. I said you would serve a proper detention. I did not say I would have you serve it all night nor force you to miss your supper entirely.”

Harry almost dropped the cauldron in his shock, but at the last moment, decided he’d better not test Snape’s patience and put it next to the other clean ones.

“Thanks.”

Harry washed his hands and joined his professor. To his surprise, Snape had set a plate of tuna sandwiches and crisps at his desk for Harry, along with a glass of cold lemonade. Across from him, Harry blushed to realise Snape was having the same thing, only with ice water to drink.

“Um, sorry, Professor, for making you miss the feast too.”

Snape gave a low chuckle. “Whatever makes you think I wanted to go? Your punishment provided the perfect excuse to avoid droves of hyperactive teens. I believe I must thank you for your conveniently timed display of disrespect.”

“Er … you’re welcome?”

Snape snorted and motioned to the food. “Eat. I assure you, it isn’t poisoned.”

Harry bit into a sandwich, half-expecting to find a flobberworm between his teeth. On the contrary, it tasted good. “Thanks. I thought I’d have to ask Dobby for food after everyone went to sleep. How did you know I like tuna salad? Seems like most everyone else here doesn’t.”

Snape raised an eyebrow.
“Right. Spy. Of course you would notice mundane details about me no one else has the time to care about.” That came out more bitter than he’d intended. “Er … never mind.”

“Hmm.”

Snape watched Harry eat for a moment, nibbling on a sandwich himself. After the third time Harry rolled his shoulders, trying to release the discomfort, Snape flicked his wrist and a pinkish potion flew into his outstretched hand. He slid the phial towards Harry.

“Here. That should relieve the muscle aches.”

Harry almost choked on his sandwich. “Blimey. Really?”

“Yes, really. Your dramatics are putting me off my supper.”

Harry hesitated, but at Snape’s twitching lips, realised the man was joking, and let out a bright grin.

“Thanks!” He downed the potion and made a face. “You sure you couldn’t make them taste like blueberries or something?”

“Why would I want to when I derive so much entertainment from them as they are?”

Harry chuckled. “Guess that’s a fair point.” He washed the foul taste down with some of his lemonade. “Oh, that’s good. Thanks. How come you don’t have any?”

Snape’s lip curled. “I get enough lemon-flavoured sweets from Albus’ stash as it is, thank you.”

Harry paused and sipped at his drink. “I’ve never seen you take one.”

“And that would be the point.”

Harry laughed. “Huh. Never imagined we’d be sitting here talking, laughing even. It’s … nice. I’m glad.”

Snape gave him a sort of shy smile. “I … do not often converse with students.” His eyes went heavy with something dark and terrible. “But I am afraid I must tonight. Eat your dinner. We must have a serious conversation about the war when you are finished, and this will be the only time we have to do so before it is too late.”

Harry nodded and gulped down the rest of his food. After the sudden change in Snape’s mood, he wasn’t particularly hungry, but he figured he’d best eat regardless.

Who knew when he’d be fed again, after all?

Harry finished the last of his lemonade and gave Snape a hesitant smile. “That was good, Professor. Did you make it?”

“Of course. Cooking is not so different from potion making, after all. Not that tinned tuna is anything much to boast about.” Snape cleared the plates away with a flick of his hand and set them washing themselves in the sink.

Harry sighed, wishing he had half the man’s prowess with magic. Had he tried to do that wandlessly, no doubt the plates would probably have grown teeth and tried to bite him.

“Perhaps I will be able to train you soon,” said Snape with a raised eyebrow. “Do work on your Occlumency, however. It is dangerous to leave your mind so open.”
Harry blushed. “S-sorry. I figured it was safe enough to let my guard down a bit in here.”

“It is best not to let your guard down at all until the Dark Lord is no more. And as far as wandless magic, yes, I believe we shall start training you to fight with it as soon as term begins again. Should the Death Eaters manage to capture you, they will not let you keep your wand, after all.”

Harry scowled and thought of the graveyard. “Depends on if Voldemort decides he wants to show off again or not.”

Snape whirled on Harry, eyes flashing and teeth bared in a snarl. “Don’t say the name! Not in my hearing. Never in my hearing.”

Harry stepped back, alarmed, and lifted one hand to protect himself. “Why? It’s just a name. There’s no reason to fear it.”

“Perhaps not for you.” Snape closed his eyes and turned away. “Do you have any idea what he does to his followers who use his title without respect? Or, have you already forgotten that I must masquerade as the loyal Death Eater in his presence?” He clenched his hands into white-knuckled fists. “One slip, one mistake, and ….”

Harry cringed. “Right. I’m sorry. Didn’t think about that.”

“I am well aware. Forethought is not one of your much-lauded skills.”

Harry winced and looked away, stung. He had hoped their truce would mean Snape would stop insulting him. Apparently that was hoping for a miracle.

A gentle hand settled on his shoulder. “Harry, I am still learning to curb my tongue with you. Are you well?”

Harry’s hurt washed away in a wave of relief. “Y-yeah. I’ll be all right. I just … don’t want to be your enemy any longer, okay? Please.”

Snape let his hand fall and nodded. “I shall try to remember.” He motioned for Harry to follow him into his adjoining office. “Come. We have much to discuss.”

“Right.” Harry followed Snape past familiar shelves of creepy crawly jars. “Um, I’m sorry about using the name, sir. I didn’t mean to disrespect you. It’s just habit for me.”

Snape said nothing until the door shut firmly behind them and he had cast several spells that Harry didn’t recognise, though the power of them sent crackles of magic through the air and set the young man’s hair in absolute rebellion.

Snape tucked his wand away once he had finished. “It is best if you keep using the name outside of these walls as you always have.” He smirked as he turned around. “Good look for you, that.”

Harry scowled. “Oh, shut—”

Another sharp look reminded Harry he was speaking to a professor.

“—the door.”

As the door was already shut, it was a lame cover, but at least he hadn’t earned himself yet another detention.

“Shut the door indeed,” Snape muttered. He shook his head and sank into his office chair. “Now, do
sit down. We have quite a serious situation on our hands.”

Harry nodded and obeyed. “Okay. What’s the matter, sir?”

Snape looked at him with something like pride in his eyes and settled into his story.

Perhaps Minerva had been right about Harry. As soon as Severus addressed him as a wartime colleague, Potter’s eyes had taken on the gleam of steel, and his posture straightened. All traces of the young man’s boyhood had vanished and left a hardened soldier behind.

“Okay,” he said in a calm, assured tone. “What’s the matter, sir?”

Severus’ respect for the young man shot up. Any other teenager would have been shaking in their trainers. He decided to hold nothing back—Potter had forgiven him without restraint and treated him with respect, despite all the terrible things Severus had done to him.

This young man deserved his honesty—and his trust. It was overdue.

He gave Potter a nod and started in. “I am sure you know by now that I have spoken to the headmaster about your altercation with Mister Malfoy?”

Potter nodded. “I’d assumed you would. Even when you really hated me, you would never have let an Unforgivable or attempted murder slip.”

“Nor the fact that he cursed a teacher, or would have, had you not saved me in time.”

Potter blushed. “I … I didn’t think—I really saved you? I thought you’d stop it yourself for sure, but just in case, I wanted to help.”

Severus shook his head. “I was not expecting him to curse me. I would not have been able to block it in time, unfortunately. It was a grave error in judgment I shall not make again.”

Potter smiled shyly. “I, I’m glad I reacted, then.”

“As am I. That would have been a particularly unpleasant curse to endure. It is not taught at Hogwarts for good reason.”

Potter frowned. “I’ve never heard of it. What does it do?”

Severus met his eyes. “It is a Death Eater curse, Harry. Are you sure you wish to know?”

Something in Potter hardened at those words. “I need to know, don’t I? He was going to hit an ally with it, so yeah. I need to know what it does just in case he comes after me with it or curses one of my friends.”

Severus’ respect for the young man went up another notch. “Very well. It translates to: boil face. Upon contact with its victim, painful, bleeding sores erupt all over the facial area—including the inside of the victim’s mouth and nose and within their sclera.”

“Sclera?”
“The whites of one’s eyes.”

Potter cringed. “Dear Merlin.”

“Yes. The curse makes it excruciating to breathe, renders its victim blind—sometimes it is irreversible—and fills them with such pain that movement becomes all but impossible. Had it hit, I would not have been able to call for help or fight back. Especially with my damaged nose, I would have likely suffocated before I could get help.” He laid a hand on Potter’s. “Thank you, Harry. I believe you have saved my vision, and possibly my life.”

The young man’s eyes filled, and for a moment, Severus feared he had gone too far in his explanation, but then Potter gave him a warm smile and turned up his palm to grasp the older man’s hand.

“I-I’m glad I did, then.” He pouted a bit. “Even if you did give me ‘detention’ for it.”

Severus withdrew his hand with a frown. “You know why I had to, Harry.”

“Yeah, I guess I do.” Potter smiled hesitantly. “Sir, would you … mind calling me Harry? At least in private? I know you can’t out there, but I really don’t like being called ‘Potter.’”

Severus gave him a hesitant nod. “I shall try, but do try to remember it is an additional risk for me, and I am not able to do so always.”

Harry winced. “Merlin. It’s like You-Know-Who’s name, isn’t it? If you slip in front of the wrong people ….” He shook his head. “Never mind it—you can call me by my surname. Just knowing you’d be willing to use my proper name if you could safely is enough.”

Severus nodded in acknowledgement of his concession, but said nothing.

Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets. “So this thing with Malfoy—I know he wasn’t aiming for me. He had to know you were there, sir. He had to be looking to see where to curse.”

And Severus’ respect for the boy climbed again. He was more astute than Severus had ever given him credit for.

“Yes, I do believe he saw me, and no, I do not think he was aiming for you, either.”

“So what do we do about it? How is he going to be punished? Or is he going to be punished?”

Severus frowned. “Harry, of course he will be punished. I realise my role forces me to show a ridiculous amount of favouritism, but this is too far. He cursed a professor with dark magic that could have killed me, and the entire group tried to murder you. These are offences even the ever-benevolent headmaster cannot afford to condone, and the Dark Lord knows it.”

Harry nodded grimly. “So what does that mean for them?”

Severus leaned on his desk for strength. “Before your detention, Albus called Professors Flitwick and Sinistra to escort Malfoy and his friends to the headmaster’s office—I could not do so for obvious reasons. I did provide the headmaster with Veritaserum, which means by now he is likely in the middle of questioning them. I think, given Malfoy’s desperation, there is no question that he was threatened into his odd behaviour today.”

Harry nodded. “He’s not usually mad like that. I think he was terrified.”
Severus inclined his head. “Yes. Your Occluding is still blocking the visions, is it not?”

Harry blinked at the rapid subject change. “Um … yeah? As long as I remember to use it. If I forget or I’m sleeping when the vision starts, it’s really hard to get out of it. And I still get twinges when he’s angry or really happy sometimes, and no amount of Occluding seems to block them. Why do you ask, sir?”

Severus leaned back and folded his hands in his lap. “I merely wanted to ascertain if you were already aware that I had to attend a Death Eater rally last night.”

Harry shuddered. “Gods. No, I didn’t know. Are you all right, sir?”

Severus bristled. “I am quite able to take care of myself.”

“Yes, I know.” Harry gave him a sad smile. “But I kind of want to look out for you anyway, since it seems like only Professor Dumbledore and maybe Professor McGonagall care whether you come back from those meetings bleeding or not.” His eyes filled with sorrow and understanding. “Oh. That’s why, isn’t it? Why you … hurt yourself earlier? Because of what happened at this meeting?”

Severus swallowed hard, tense and unsure of how much to reveal. Harry had only come to trust him recently, and if he revealed too much, Severus feared being hurt. He feared himself if Harry hurt him where he was weakest.

Besides that, this evening, they simply hadn’t the time.

“It … definitely affected my choices, but now is not the time to discuss it.”

Harry gave him a hesitant smile. “Okay. But know if you ever do want to talk about it, I’ll listen without prejudice, yeah?”

Harry’s shy offer touched Severus deeply. He had to swallow several times and clear his throat before he was certain he could speak without revealing the depths of his emotion.

From the look in Harry’s eyes, the boy knew anyway. Still, Severus did have his pride.

“At this time? Dear Merlin. He had just given Harry an in, however unintentionally.

Harry smiled. “If that changes, I’ll try to help. So what happened at the meeting last night? Well, if you can talk about it.”

Severus thanked the gods that Harry knew not to push the issue. He set his hands on his desk again and wished he had thought to ask a house elf for tea. Well, it was too late now.

“I can speak of it here, though I will spare you the … gruesome details.”

Harry shuddered. “Thanks for that.” His eyes went sad. “Gods, what you do for us.”

Again, Severus found himself strangely affected by Harry’s kindness. “I … I am … I ….”

Harry took Severus’ hand. “Hey, it’s okay. Just tell me about the meeting, all right?”

Severus stared at their entwined fingers, captivated and stunned by the feel of warm flesh and the cooler metal of Harry’s beckoning ring against his knuckles. Harry gasped and moved his hand
away.

“Oh. Um, s-sorry about that, sir. I just wanted to … I don’t know what came over me.”

Severus rubbed the hand Harry had held, still feeling the warmth of his touch.

“Ah, it is quite all right. I … it was … comforting.”

Severus’ ears flamed. Gods, had he really said that?

Harry grinned, and the boy’s smile made Severus feel like less of a dolt.

“I’m glad it helped. Really.”

After giving Harry a small smile, Severus shook himself and dropped both hands into his lap. As nice as it was to be comforted, they had no time for distractions.

“We must move on, Potter.”

Harry assumed his soldier’s posture once more. Perhaps the difference in names had reminded the young man that they were still at war. Severus locked that fact away for future use.

“Now, we were discussing this meeting and its impact for Malfoy junior and his cronies. Nott was marked last night, and he was terrified. If Albus manages to get a spy out of that group, though I am not at all confident that he will, it will be Theo. Draco will most certainly not change loyalties any time soon.”

He allowed himself a brief moment to grieve the boy he had failed so utterly.

“Professor? I’m here, if it helps.”

Severus scowled to cover how much Harry’s gentle words had affected him. “Potter, I do realise that I am twenty years your senior, but I am not yet so decrepit that I risk senility. I have not forgotten your presence since you last reminded me of it not thirty seconds ago.”

Harry snorted. “Yes, sir. I was only trying to offer you comfort.”

Severus pulled himself together and rubbed his temples. “We have no time for that. As I was saying, last night the Dark Lord took Draco aside—along with Theodore, Vincent, and Gregory—and when they emerged from said meeting, Draco looked as though he had been tortured. He was pale and shaking, and his lip was bleeding. I did ask him what had occurred, but Draco did not trust me enough to reveal it. All he would say is that he had been given a mission and it was not my business. The other boys were just as recalcitrant.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “And you think his mission is to kill me?”

“I doubt it is to kill you personally. The Dark Lord wants that ‘honour’ for himself. However, I do believe he intends to have Malfoy incapacitate and capture you, and the fact that he was desperate enough to curse a teacher to do so is chilling indeed. I do not know what the Dark Lord said to him to inspire such terror—or loyalty—but I fear Malfoy will not stop until you are dead. Hence my insistence to ride home with you tomorrow.”

“Why not just send them home through the floo, if we’re so worried about that?”

Severus sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Malfoy will not be on the Express tomorrow, Harry, but I do not think that this stops with him. Why would the Dark Lord entrust your capture—which is,
in his mind, the most important mission of this war—solely to a sulky, irresponsible teenager who has borne the mark less than two months? Besides that, if you recall, he is still displeased with Lucius after his failure to capture you at the Department of Mysteries. This may all be an excuse to kill Draco as a way to punish Lucius for his ineptitude.”

“Merlin,” Harry breathed.

“Yes, it is quite disturbing.” He laid his head in his hand. “Something is off about this, Harry. You will agree with me that setting a seventeen year old boy the task of bringing you in, forcing him to attack in broad daylight where a professor is present—it is a terrible plan, is it not? One doomed to failure?”

Harry nodded. “Well, I mean, Malfoy did corner me while I was alone. He might have gotten lucky had I not been faster or you hadn’t been there to help.”

“Indeed. But had you not been assaulted at the game, you never would have been on your own today, would you?”

Harry winced. “Probably not.”

“Yes, and the Dark Lord knows you usually have some kind of protective detail with you at all times. So this entire situation strikes me as far too brash, too desperate.” Severus tucked his arms around his chest. “Something is wrong, Harry. The Dark Lord is a megalomaniac and a braggart, but he is never so foolish as this.”

Harry inched closer. “So what does it mean, then?”

Severus shuddered. “I can only conceive of two possibilities: either the Dark Lord has gone utterly mad, or he has a more sinister plan waiting in the wings and this chaos with Malfoy is merely a diversion. Unfortunately, I believe it to be the latter.”

Harry frowned. “You believe, but you don’t know?”

“Correct.”

“But why wouldn’t he tell you?”

Severus folded his hands together to keep them from shaking. “If he suspects I am a triple agent ….”

Harry went ashen. “He might keep you in the dark until it’s too late.”

“Exactly. This may be a test of my loyalties, or it may simply be that he is keeping his cards close to his chest. Either way, I believe strongly that this situation with Malfoy is simply the tip of the iceberg, as it were.”

Harry shuddered and hugged his waist. “It’s the end of term catastrophe again, isn’t it?”

“The end of term catastrophe?” Severus gave a grim smile. “How very apt. Yes, I do believe he will make an attempt on your life—one far more serious than what we have already seen.”

“So, what do we do?”

Severus sighed and rubbed a fingertip across his lips. “Well, I believe that will be up to you, as much as I detest Mi—my fellow Order members for suggesting it.”

Harry went ashen. “Up to me? Dear Merlin, why would they ask me? I don’t bloody know!”
Severus raised an eyebrow. “Language, Potter.”

The boy stood and paced, tugging at his hair. “Sorry, but I’m just … a little upset, okay? These are people’s lives on the line, and I don’t know the first thing about strategy. Why are they asking me?”

Severus sighed and motioned for Harry to sit. “Come. You have misunderstood. I do not mean that they are looking to you for strategy, but for mercy.”

“Mercy?” Harry frowned and sat. “You mean for Malfoy? Why would I show that little prig anything but the door? He tried to kill me! He tried to kill you, too!”

Severus nodded. “And for such a grievous assault, he deserves expulsion and time in a Ministry holding cell, but you and I both know that is not what will happen. If Albus expels Malfoy and his peers, they will not go to the Ministry or even to their homes. Unless they are able to flee the country immediately—and with his parents in disgrace, Malfoy is incapable of leaving Britain—the Dark Lord will hunt them down and kill them for their failures. As I have said, I suspect that this is his intention all along and, besides capturing you, his true goal is to kill Draco for Lucius’ bumbling.”

Harry winced. “So you’re saying that unless I tell the headmaster that they can stay on as students despite the fact that they’re determined to kill me, they’ll be tortured to death?”

Severus closed his eyes and suffocated in guilt. “I … would that I could tell you anything else, but yes. Unless you see another way out of this, then they will die if they are expelled.”

Harry swallowed hard and clenched his hands into white-knuckled fists. “This shouldn’t be my decision.”

Severus bowed his head. “I know.”

Harry sighed and leaned onto the desk. “Okay. So if they’re expelled they die, if they stay, I die. Well, I’m not willing to die for that slimy prat, and I don’t want his blood on my hands either—”

Severus laid a hand on Harry’s. “It would not be on your hands. They made their choice.”

“As kids, Professor! Even if they’re evil little snots, I can’t … can’t just turn my back knowing they’ll die for it. There has to be another way.”

“I cannot think of one, but if you have an idea ….”

Harry rubbed his chin. “Well, they deserve to be in prison, right? Azkaban is out, but does the Order have a prison?”

Severus frowned. “No. And now that you mention it, it seems a grievous oversight.”

“Really? There’s nothing? No locked safehouses, no converted bomb shelters—nothing?”

“Converting a bomb shelter is a rather good idea, but at this time, no. Grimmauld Place is the only safehouse we have left, and I am not willing to send Death Eaters to our one safe haven, however young they may be.”

Harry nodded and tugged at his hair. “No, you’re right. That’s too dangerous, but there’s just got to be somewhere to put them.”

He stood and paced, and Severus listened while he rattled off suggestions, each one more desperate than the last.
“No, Harry. There are no Order-controlled holding cells at the Ministry, and even if there were, do recall that the Dark Lord has moles there. Malfoy et al would be poisoned within the week, and probably their guard, too.”

Harry sighed and flopped into his chair. “That’s … I can’t think of … but I can’t just let them die, either. Even if they do kind of deserve it. If only there were a proper prison ….”

He frowned, and a hesitant smile crossed his face. “Wait. A proper prison—that’s it! We can put them in Nurmengard!”

Severus froze and stared at Harry. “Grindelwald’s prison?”

“Well, it’s empty except for Grindelwald himself, isn’t it? And it’s not in You-Know-Who’s control?”

“If it was, Grindelwald would have been either recruited into You-Know-Who’s ranks or killed as potential competition.” Severus rubbed a finger across his lip. “It might be possible to put it under Fidelius, at least for a short time. Time enough to build or find a wizard prison for the student captives. As well, if we make it abundantly clear to the captives that, should the Dark Lord discover their failures, they will die for it, I imagine they will not be quick to break it.”

“Malfoy might. His ego is bigger than his brain.”

“Yes, but if he does boast and bring the Death Eaters upon his head, then his fate will be his own fault and not ours.” Severus gave Harry a wan smile. “This is a good plan, Potter. Not ideal, not as secure as I would like, but it is better than sending them straight to their deaths. I will inform Albus of your thoughts as soon as you return to Gryffindor tower for the evening.”

Harry sat back into his chair with a sigh. “All right. But what about the train ride, sir? If there’s another assassin …?”

“I believe there is,” said Severus with a grim nod. “Which is why I shall go with you to Surrey.”

“Yeah.” Harry crossed his arms over his chest and rocked forwards. “Professor? I … I still have a really bad feeling about this.”

Severus nodded. “That is wisdom creeping in, Potter.” He smirked a little. “Hmm. About time.”

Harry gave him a half-hearted glare. “Gods, I, I’m really scared. Of everything.” He frowned. “And don’t torment me about that, please? It’s been … a really rough night.”

Severus sensed he wasn’t talking about Malfoy alone.

“Has something else occurred since this afternoon that we should be aware of, Harry?”

Harry shrugged. “Just personal stuff. It’s nothing important to the war.”

Severus frowned and gave the young man an appraising look. He needed help.

“Harry, you have offered to listen to me if I need to speak about my … troubles, yes?”

Harry frowned, no doubt surprised by the turn in conversation. “Yeah, I will. Do you need to talk?”

“Not at the moment—not when there is so much at stake—but I would like to extend the same courtesy to you. I realise I have been … cruel to you in the past, but I hope tonight has shown you that I am trying to put my animosity to rest. If you … are in need of a safe place to talk, you may
come to me. But do keep your cloak wi—"

A fire burst to life in Severus’ hearth, shocking both men into silence, and Albus’ head appeared in the flames.

“Ah, Harry. I am glad you are still here. I do apologise for the interruption, but may I see the two of you in my office? Just come through the floo so no one suspects anything.”

Severus gave Harry a bemused look and nodded to Albus.

“As you wish. We will be there presently.”
Dumbledore led Harry and Professor Snape to sit behind his desk and made the obligatory offering of tea and lemon drops. Harry took a drop and a cup of tea, Snape just took the tea, and Dumbledore sat and popped three of the sweets into his mouth before he would even speak.

‘Bloody hell,’ Harry thought.

It wasn’t good if Dumbledore needed that much of a pick-me-up.

Snape’s hand shook as he laid his teacup on the desk. “Dear Merlin, Albus. What is it?”

Dumbledore pushed his sweets aside, making him look a bit like a fluffy grey chipmunk. With wrinkles. And spectacles. And a purple-starred robe.

“I questioned them under Veritaserum as you suggested, Severus,” he said in a slightly muffled voice. “However, it appears that they were given some kind of antidote beforehand.”

“An antidote to Veritaserum?” Severus frowned. “Not possible.”

“Possible or not, that is what has occurred, Severus. I am assuming the counter must have been administered last night when Tom took them aside, and Nott’s story seems to verify that.”

Harry frowned. “You mean a long-term antidote, sir? I didn’t think there was one. As far as I know, there’s just the clearing potion you take when the questioning is over, but even that doesn’t prevent you from being dosed again.”

Snape gave him an incredulous look. “Where did that titbit of potions knowledge come from? You certainly were not so attentive in my class.”

Harry chuckled and ruffled his hair. “Partly from the Prince, and partly because I thought you might quiz me on antidotes tonight so I had Hermione help me with the theory earlier.”

That same look of pride flashed in Snape’s eyes. Seeing it there made Harry feel good.
“Excellent work in taking control of your studies, Harry,” said Dumbledore with a bright twinkle. “And I must say, I am relieved to see the two of you getting along so well.” His twinkle dimmed. “And, yes, I do believe they have taken some kind of long-term antidote, Severus. I can see no other possibility. I tried questioning them for an hour before I contacted you, but—”

Snape smacked his hand on the desk. “It’s impossible, Albus! No such antidote exists, and I have received no requests for such a potion from the Dark Lord.”

“Nevertheless, someone has engineered one. In fact, Mister Nott has confessed to being offered an antidote the evening before and receiving orders to capture Harry at all costs. He has also confessed to being terrified and overwhelmed and says that this is not the life he wanted.”

Snape sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Well, perhaps that is one we might still save at least. Did he have any other information?”

“Alas, nothing pertinent to the situation with Mister Malfoy. However ….” The old man’s face paled. “He described young Mister Malfoy’s torture in grim detail. None of them know what happened—it seems Riddle took Draco into a private room to … persuade him, but that did not stop the others from hearing his screams and pleas for mercy.”

Snape shuddered. “Dear gods. Are there any visible marks on Malfoy that you could tell? The Dark Lord could control him through a mark, if such a thing exists. Did he show any signs of being under Imperius?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “Would that I could answer positively. Malfoy would not let me close enough to examine him; however, what I was able to see of him looked unmarked. Unusually pale and cold, but then, perhaps that is to be expected in the face of one’s enemy. And he does not appear to be under Imperius at this time.”

Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Lovely. What did the others say?”

Dumbledore sighed. “Messrs Crabbe and Goyle will only talk about ‘getting the respect they deserve,’ and, do forgive the term, but they are also saying that ‘the mudbloods deserve their punishment,’ and so on. I can get no truthful story out of them, or any story at all, rather.”

Snape clutched his teacup tighter. “And Draco?”

Dumbledore shook his head and refused to answer until he had taken a long sip of his tea. Harry gulped.

“Professor Dumbledore, how bad is it?”

The old man’s hands shook as he set his tea upon the desk. “Quite bad. I do not know what has possessed the boy, but I fear he has gone mad. He has been clawing at the walls and throwing himself against the door in effort to escape. I had to bind him to get any story out of him whatsoever, and even after I had paralysed him and bound him to a bed, he still focused on nothing but escape. I had no choice but to put him under a sleeping spell so he would not frighten himself to death.”

Snape’s eyes had narrowed almost to slits. “Were you able to get any tale out of him at all?”

“Not much, I fear. He would say nothing at all until I vowed to help him if he would only tell me what had him so terrified. Then, he would only tell me that he had to finish his mission immediately. When asked what his mission was, he only became more agitated. I confess, I am at a loss on what to do with him.”
“The Dark Lord has threatened him.”

“Yes, that is quite clear, but unfortunately, so are Hogwarts’ bylaws. The boy attacked a professor and tried to murder a fellow student. Without some kind of explanation, I have no ability to help him. I will have no choice but to expel him, come morning, though I fear for him should Tom find him afterwards.”

Snape gave Dumbledore a grim nod. “Where is Theo?”

Dumbledore waved to a bookcase full of golden spinners. “I isolated him from the others when Messrs Crabbe and Goyle became violent and threatened to kill him for his ‘betrayal.’”

Snape rubbed his forehead. “It is how we suspected he might behave, but with an antidote to Veritaserum in his system, we still cannot trust his answers.”

“Perhaps not, but my instinct is that he is telling the truth. He is in the room just there if you would like to question him with your own techniques.”

Snape stood and nodded. “I may be able to learn something more about the antidote from his behaviour and presentation, and perhaps he will trust me enough to reveal more of what he knows. I will return shortly.” He gave Harry a stern look. “Stay put, Potter. If Nott is lying, this would be an easy opportunity to attack while I am distracted.”

Harry stared at the bookcase, wondering where the door was. “Yes, sir. Best not to make it too easy for them to do me in, yeah?”

“Indeed.”

Snape went to the bookcase and tugged on one of the spinning objects. It turned into a door handle and pulled the bookcase away from the wall, revealing a small sitting room beyond. He walked inside and pulled the bookcase shut behind him, shutting it with a quiet snap.

“Wicked,” Harry whispered.

Dumbledore chuckled. “Ah, I do miss the days when everything about magic was still new.”

Harry gave him a wry look. “Not everything. I’ve seen plenty of it, good and bad.”

Dumbledore’s mirth faded into sorrow. “I suppose you have. Well, never mind it.” He gave Harry a fatherly smile. “How are you getting on with Professor Snape now?”

Harry frowned. “Um … is this really important right now? Shouldn’t we be talking about Malfoy and the others?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “I am afraid until Professor Snape returns, there is little else I can tell you. Besides that, I confess I need a moment to gather my wits, and a more pleasant topic seems the perfect balm for a troubled soul.”

Harry gave him a bemused look. “Um … all right. Well, he’s … he was really good to me after detention. I mean, he still made me scrub out like a hundred cauldrons—by hand! Why is it always by hand?”

“Because using magic would make it fun and und conducive to teaching obstreperous students the error of their ways,” said Dumbledore in such a great impersonation of Snape’s sarcastic tone that Harry burst into laughter in spite of himself.
“Oh, that’s brilliant.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “I am glad you liked it. I do know Severus quite well, after all. Now, you were saying about after the detention?”

Harry couldn’t help but smile, though it surprised him a bit that he felt like it, considering the gravity of their situation. “Well, he was … kind. Respectful. He made dinner for me and joked with me. I’ve never heard him laugh before today, either. It’s brilliant! His laugh is so nice.” He paused, recalling the way Snape’s smile had taken ten years off his face. When Dumbledore twinkled at him, Harry came back to himself with a little shake. “Um, anyway, he even trusted me with his thoughts on the situation with Malfoy, Professor, and asked for my input on their punishment.”

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair with a bright smile. “Well, it is far past time that Severus began to see you as a human being. I am glad I was still alive to see it.”

Harry frowned. “Don’t witches and wizards live to be like two hundred?”

Dumbledore laughed. “Yes, when dark lords don’t interfere with their life spans. I feared it might take him that long.”

“Oh.” He looked to the door Snape had vanished into. “No, he’s been nicer ever since I learned to Occlude. Well, a bit.”

“And do you understand why that is?”

Harry nodded. “He had to be nasty until I could block out Voldemort. Otherwise, his life and mine would have been at risk.”

“Right.”

Harry was still staring at the door and rubbing the ring on his finger. He hoped Snape’s life wasn’t at risk now. Between the mess with Malfoy, and Snape’s behaviour earlier, Harry wasn’t at all sure the man was safe.

“Harry, Professor Snape told me you walked in on one of his … sessions today. You saw him injuring himself, correct?”

Harry jumped and gave Dumbledore a worried frown. “I … I don’t know if I should ….”

“My boy, it is quite all right. I am his confidant, his only confidant in this situation.” His eyes turned sad. “Except, perhaps, you.” Dumbledore offered him another lemon drop, and Harry gladly accepted, hoping it would calm him a bit. “Do you understand what he is doing?”

Harry shook his head and sucked on his sweet.

“Well, has he explained at all?”

Harry rubbed his arm. “I know he doesn’t mean to kill himself, but other than that … he didn’t seem to want to talk about it, and I didn’t push. There wasn’t time to go into it anyway, not with Malfoy acting mad.”

Dumbledore eyes filled with heavy sorrow, and he glanced to the bookcases where Snape had gone. “Indeed.”

Harry winced, realising too late that no matter how much of a prat Malfoy was, his loss still must hurt
the old man who loved all his students. “S-sorry, Professor.”

He turned back to Harry and gave him a sad smile, his twinkle gone. “Not at all. You spoke nothing more than the truth. However, there is little we can do at the moment for Mister Malfoy, and you need to know how to cope with what you have seen today concerning Professor Snape. I will attempt to explain, though I must admit, the details are a bit murky even to me.” He toyed with his beard and watched his fire. “I think you will agree with me that what Severus has to do to spy for us is … taxing, to say the least.”


Dumbledore sighed. “Yes, unfortunately. It is too much for him to endure. For anyone to endure. As well, I believe the fact that Severus must keep his emotions hidden at all times and project that which he does not truly feel exacerbates the problem. He has no safe outlet for his pain, and the amount he endures is extreme. And so, when it all becomes too much, he turns to the only method that works—transferring his emotions into physical pain and letting it bleed away.”

Harry blinked. “How does hurting himself lessen his emotional pain? That doesn’t make any sense.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, not to you or I. But to Severus, it does indeed relieve some of his internal anguish.”

“Gods. He … he has to cut himself to feel better? That’s … I can’t even find a word, but I can hardly bear it.”

Dumbledore’s gaze turned sharp. “He is a human being, Harry, with limits, and this is, at the moment, the only way he has to cope. You would judge him for trying to survive?”

Harry winced. “Merlin, that’s not what I meant. I just … I want to help him. I want to take away some of his pain inside so he doesn’t have to resort to such drastic measures anymore.”

Dumbledore’s eyes softened again. “I see. Forgive my assumption. It is difficult for most people to … accept Severus the way he is, so he has told no one except myself, and now you. I do believe Poppy is aware of the problem as well, but only in a medical capacity. He has never spoken of it with her, though I continually urge him to seek her help.”

Harry gulped. “Um, Professor? I asked Hermione for help with it. I didn’t say who I was asking about, but you know her, sir. She might figure it out.”

“Considering the amount of apparent antagonism between Professor Snape and yourself in public, I sincerely doubt her mind will turn in his direction. However, if it does, she is at least forgiving and understanding. She will not judge him or reveal his secret, but for the safety of all involved, it is best to keep her in the dark, as it were, for as long as possible.”

“I know. I hate lying to them, but I don’t have a choice if I’m to keep him alive.”

“Yes.” Dumbledore frowned. “Perhaps Miss Granger might be skilled enough to learn Occlumency. You do need a confidant.”

“Yeah, and Hermione’s studied it on her own, but I don’t know how much she could learn by herself. I tried to teach them both, but Ron doesn’t—he’s not stupid, you know, but he just doesn’t have the focus to learn Occlumency.”

Dumbledore nodded sadly. “Nor the interest, I fear.”
“Right. And teaching Hermione and not Ron would only drive a wedge between them. I don’t want to hurt them. I … I’ve already done enough damage.”

Dumbledore frowned. “Damage? Both Miss Granger and Mister Weasley love you.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah, and Ginny loves me too.”

“What does Miss Weasley have to do with your relationship with her brother and Miss Granger?”

Harry winced and leaned on his knees, wishing he could sink through the floor.

“Harry?”

Harry sighed and gave it up as a bad job. Dumbledore would know eventually—the man knew everything—and maybe he could offer some advice if Harry came clean with him.

At least, he might be able to make it hurt less.

“Well, you know I was dating Ginny?”

Dumbledore frowned. “Was?”

“Yeah. I had to … the problem is … I can’t. I can’t be with her. Not with any witch. And she found that out tonight. Ron is … furious, Hermione’s upset, and Ginny is devastated, and I feel like a total berk for doing this to them all, but I swear, I didn’t know.” He laid his head on Dumbledore’s desk and sniffled. “All I want is to be normal, and I can’t be. Not even in this.”

Dumbledore laid his hand on Harry’s head. “Being attracted to the same gender is not abnormal. Or, if it is, then I am abnormal as well.” He gave a little laugh. “Well, perhaps that is not so far from the truth regardless of my orientation.”

Harry jerked up and gasped. “Really? You like men, sir? But I’ve never … I mean, you’re not … oh gods. I’m just going to shut up now.”

Dumbledore laughed again. “It is no trouble, Harry. I am indeed too old for such things to matter, but once, yes. I loved a man. It was a mistake, and when it ended, I never loved again. I never trusted myself to make good choices in men after that abysmal failure.”

Harry frowned. “Who?”

Dumbledore shut his eyes. “Perhaps that is best left in the past, Harry. It was well over eighty years ago, and I would prefer not to drag it back into the light. However, I do hope it helps to know you are not alone.” His eyes flickered briefly to the door where Snape was, and Harry’s stomach lurched at the tacit implications of the gesture.

Was Snape gay, too?

Harry almost laughed at the thought of asking the man such a question. Truce or no, Snape would nail Harry’s toes to the ceiling. Perhaps not literally, but Harry was certain he’d find himself buried in dirty cauldrons if he dared mention it.

‘Best not to poke that bear,’ he thought.

Still, Snape was being more honest with him. Maybe if Harry talked about himself and the issues he was facing, Snape might open up about his experiences on his own.
Harry then wondered why it mattered so much and shook himself. Dumbledore was twinkling madly when he looked back, and Harry blushed, to his consternation.

What was with him today?

“Er … thanks, Professor.”

“You are most welcome. Do you need to talk about it?”

Harry sighed and shook his head. “I’m all right, mostly. I’m much more worried about this situation with Malfoy and Voldemort to be honest.”

Dumbledore sat back and folded his hands in his lap. “Yes, I suppose I have dallied long enough. Forgive an old man his diversions, Harry. It is only that the situation is quite dark, and I do not know how to approach it.”

Harry frowned. “Um, I had some ideas ….”

Dumbledore smiled. “Yes, you did say that Professor Snape had asked your advice. I must confess, the idea had not occurred to me. This is not an area I had thought you would have experience in.”

Harry rubbed up the back of his hair. “Well, no, I don’t, but I don’t need it to know that Malfoy and his goons don’t deserve to be tortured to death, especially if Malfoy’s been forced into this. Besides, you can’t keep coddling me. How am I ever going to defeat Voldemort if I don’t know how to fight or even what’s going on?”

Dumbledore sighed. “I had hoped to spare you the horrors of war as long as I could.”

“You can’t. I see them whenever Voldemort stops Occluding, especially whenever my own guard is down, and despite my best efforts, I can’t Occlude all the time. Not like Professor Snape does. So there’s really no point in treating me like a child. I never was.”

The old man’s gaze turned piercing. “You were not even a child in the years before Tom’s return? Hmm.” He leaned on the desk and gave Harry a searching look. “Will you tell me about what you went through at your relatives’ home? If we understand what is happening, Severus and I will be better able to protect you.”

Harry shuddered and set his tea on the desk. “I c-can’t.” He drew his knees up and rocked to protect himself. “I’m sorry. S-so sorry.”

Dumbledore leaned over the desk to touch Harry’s shoulder. “It is quite all right, Harry. If you are not ready to open up, you are not ready. I will not force your confidence.” He returned to his seat and smiled sadly. “However, I will echo Severus. If you are in need of someone to talk to, then I am here. I believe Minerva, Poppy, or Molly would also be glad to help, if you would rather talk to a w—”

Harry jerked back and hissed, “No! No women.”

Dumbledore’s eyes filled with questions, but he only nodded. “As you wish. Well, my offer still stands, as does Professor Snape’s. You may talk to either of us if you find yourself in need of an ear.”

Harry was too busy trembling and trying to banish terrible memories to answer.

“Harry? Would you like to talk about something else?”
Harry forced himself to nod.

“Very well. You mentioned having ideas on how to help this situation with Malfoy? I confess I am at a loss and would welcome any suggestions you might have.”

Harry pulled himself together after several deep breaths. “Y-yeah. Um, well, Professor Snape said that if you just expel them, they’re going to die.”

Dumbledore’s gaze went hard. “Did he, now?”

Harry glared. “Yeah, and he was right to. I get that you want to shelter me, sir, but you can’t. Not about this. How do you think I’d feel if you’d just expelled them—because of me—without telling me what would happen as a result, and I saw him being murdered for it? Or even if I didn’t see it and heard about it later? I hate the little prat, but he doesn’t deserve to die, and knowing I might have prevented it … well, I’d have blamed myself. Probably forever.”

Dumbledore paled. “Oh. Dear Merlin, I see your point. Forgive me, Harry. I only meant to protect you.”

Harry nodded. “Then treat me like an adult. I’m old enough to know the ramifications of what decisions I make in this war, especially if I’m old enough to fight it in the first place.”

Dumbledore popped another lemon drop and rubbed his temple, and Harry felt guilty for troubling him.

“It’s only that I can’t fight if I don’t know what I’m doing or why I’m doing it, sir.”

Dumbledore nodded and met Harry’s eyes. “I understand. In the future, I shall strive to be more forthright.”

Relief settled in Harry’s bones, even as he wondered if Dumbledore would really include him completely or just give him the highlights. Well, even that much was better than getting his information in bits and pieces and from Extendable Ears.

Harry smiled. “Thank you, sir.”

“You are quite welcome, though I imagine you will not thank me for my candor come this time next year.” He leaned back in his chair and motioned Harry on. “What were your ideas, Harry?”

Harry blushed. He’d almost forgotten them in his need to be treated as an equal. “R-right. Um, well, since they’ll die if we expel them and turn them loose, but we can’t just let this slide either, I thought that we should still expel them—well, maybe except for Nott—but put them in Nurmengard instead of just turning them loose. They deserve some time for everything they’ve done, honestly, and until we can get a prison built or converted for the Order, it’s probably the safest place for them that doesn’t also put our colleagues at risk. Malfoy and his goons will be out of Riddle’s reach in Nurmengard, and they won’t be able to cause any trouble there, either.”

Dumbledore frowned. “Unless they manage to release the bind on Grindelwald’s magic. There is a reason all his guards are squibs.”

Harry shuddered. “Merlin. No, we don’t need two dark lords running about, thank you.”

Dumbledore nodded, and the expression in his eyes was hopelessly sad. “No. I am afraid Gellert needs to stay precisely where he is.”
Harry frowned. ‘Gellert?’

“However,” Dumbledore continued, “Nurmengard is quite an expansive prison. So long as we place the students on the opposite side of the complex, they should be well enough there for a short time. Long enough for us to decide where to place them on a permanent basis.”

“Professor Snape said something about setting a Fidelius there.”

Dumbledore’s expression cleared of worry. “Oh! That is a good idea. That would keep our wayward students safely locked away in their corner and Gellert in his. Yes, I believe that will do quite nicely. Good work, Harry.”

Harry grinned. “Thanks.”

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “I shall floo the warden after we are finished here and begin preparations immediately. If all goes well, we should be able to place them in the prison within a day or so, and until then, I will keep them under lock and key here.”

A knot unravelled from Harry’s tense shoulders. “So, it’s okay then? We don’t need to worry about an end of term catastrophe now?”

Dumbledore frowned. “I am afraid it is not so simple. Perhaps Draco and the others shan’t be able to finish whatever Tom had tasked him with, but we would be the greatest of fools to believe that such a paranoid individual would entrust the entirety of his plans solely to a seventeen year old boy. No, Harry, I am afraid we cannot afford to become complacent. Tom Riddle always has a backup plan.”

Harry remembered his night in the graveyard, how not even death had been a match for Riddle’s scheming, and shuddered hard. “R-right.”

Severus was ready to throw something by the time he returned to Albus’ office. The old man offered him a fresh cup of tea without a word and—for once—held back on the sweets. Severus took the drink with an expression of gratitude, wishing it was a vat of Firewhiskey he could drown himself in instead.

“I take it you were unsuccessful, Severus?”

Severus sighed and let the warmth of his tea drive away the worst of his frustration. “I am at a loss. From my observations, I have determined that Theo’s story is true and that he is honestly remorseful for his decisions. I also questioned him on Draco’s mad behaviour, but he has no idea what would have driven him to such extremes. In this, I sense he is also speaking the truth.”

Albus gave him a sorrowful nod. “Such were my own conclusions. Did you find anything concerning the antidote?”

Severus set his tea down and rubbed his temples, hoping to banish his headache before it started. “Not what I’d hoped for. I did detect anise on Nott’s breath. Since he does not enjoy liquorice and he has had nothing else containing anise, I can only conclude that the antidote was based on it. However, that is not nearly enough information to provide a suitable counter, and I could find no other traces by observation alone. I have taken samples of his blood, saliva, and hair, but my initial scans of the samples came back clean as well. I have no choice but to run physical tests and try to
determine the components of this potion by process of elimination. I need not tell you the counter potion will not be ready any time soon, if I am able to craft one at all.”

Albus patted his hand. “I have faith in you, my boy.”

“Faith will not give me an ingredients list, Albus. We do not have the time for weeks upon end of experiments that may prove fruitless even with my best efforts. If his potioneer is skilled enough to produce a counter for Veritaserum where none is supposed to exist, then they may also be skilled enough to cover their tracks.”

“But they are not you, Severus.” Albus gave him a warm smile that eased some of the coldness weighing Severus down. “You will do it. I believe in you.”

Severus’ cheeks warmed. “Thank you, Albus.” He lowered his head to hide his blush from Harry’s all-too-curious eyes. “Nevertheless, even if I am eventually successful—and I do not have the faith in myself that you do, Albus—finding a counter will take time. Time that we do not have, if we are to determine anything helpful about Malfoy’s plans.”

Harry piped up, “Can I help?” The boy looked shocked to have said it.

Severus almost choked on his tea. “You want to help me find an experimental counter for this anti-Veritaserum potion?”

Harry gulped. “Um … well, y-yeah? I mean, unless I’d be in the way.”

Severus looked to Dumbledore for an explanation, but the man looked as perplexed as Severus—though he was twinkling like mad.

Severus leaned down so he could examine Harry’s body language and glean any truth he tried to hide. “Are you a bloody masochist? Surely you have had enough of my potions classes by now. Why do you wish to help me?”

Harry gave a wry laugh. “Honestly, I have no idea. Er … actually, no. I do know.” He straightened and met Severus eye to eye. “You were really cruel to me before in potions class, but even so, I could tell from the first moment that you were brilliant. I was taking notes that first day you called me out for not paying attention, did you know?”

Severus suppressed a flinch—gods, he had been so cruel to this boy. How Harry could forgive him so thoroughly … it was beyond his ken.

“I did not. And this is why I am so surprised by your offer to help. I am a terrible teacher, Harry. Why in Merlin’s name would you wish to subject yourself to more lessons under my tutelage?”

Harry shook his head. “Because that’s just it—you aren’t a bad teacher. When you weren’t snapping at me or overlooking the Slytherins while they chucked things in my cauldron, I actually learned a lot. You know potions. And, well, I don’t—not like I ought to. I have to learn how to find antidotes when it’s a complex solution. And that means I need to see someone who knows what they’re doing work on it and help, if I can. It’s the way I learn best—by being right in the thick of it.”

Severus frowned. “You have not been a particularly promising potions student in the past, and this is gravely important, Harry. Too important to risk delegating to an inexperienced and inattentive assistant.”

“I … well, I can’t help being inexperienced,” said Harry with a frown, “but I know it’s important. I’d never interfere with something this crucial.”
“Nevertheless, I am able to work more efficiently on my own, Harry. I am sorry, but I cannot allow you to help with this. It is simply too dangerous.”

The boy looked down, crestfallen, and Severus touched his hand. “Harry, it is not because of the past. I simply have a limited amount of samples and I must take great care with them.”

Harry sniffed. “I wouldn’t mess with your samples. I’d be happy sweeping the lab if you would let me.”

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. “I … I will consider it. Later. For the moment, will you explain to me what exactly brought this sudden interest in antidotes about?”

Harry blushed and rubbed his toe in the carpet. “Well, I … I want to be a healer, Professor, and they have to know potions, and antidotes in particular.”

Severus frowned. “What happened to your aspirations of joining the auror corps? And how are you making up the Runes requirement for healing?”

“Er … Hermione’s tutoring me on runes. I’m up to third year now. I reckon by the time we’re ready to take the exams, I’ll be up to OWL level and I can wing it. Well, if she doesn’t get so absorbed in her own studies that she forgets me.” Harry laughed as he said it, but Severus sensed the real fear behind his words and decided on the spot that he would help Harry with his runes as well, if Granger proved unreliable.

Dear Merlin, where had *that* come from? Severus plastered a scowl on his face lest Harry see too much. Albus’ damned twinkling was infuriating enough without the boy cottoning on, too.

“As for wanting to be an auror ….” Harry shook his head and watched Albus’ gadgets for a moment. “Honestly, I just said that to hack off Umbridge. And when I had to fight at the Department of Mysteries, I realised that I really don’t much like hurting people. Even when they have it coming.”

Severus tapped his chin. “But if you discovered you did not wish to be an auror prior to sixth year, and did not yet know you wished to be a healer, why did you insist on taking potions? To the point that you had to take m—a second-hand book? You hated potions then, did you not?”

Severus covered his slip of the tongue with an honest frown. He wasn’t quite ready to reveal himself as the Prince yet. Not until he had a better idea of Harry’s opinion of him.

He chose not to consider why Harry’s opinion mattered so much.

Harry’s eyes narrowed, but he must not have seen anything telling in Severus’ face, because he pushed the slip aside and shrugged.

“Well, yeah, I hated potions, but I still thought I’d have to be an auror whether I wanted to or not. I kept thinking of the prophecy, you know? Besides, at the time, I didn’t think I was any good at anything else besides quidditch and fighting dark wizards, and though I like flying, I don’t want to make a career out of it. I want to do something worthwhile, you know? Not just entertaining. I want to help people, and I thought being an auror was the only way I could.”

Dumbledore nodded. “What convinced you of your other talents, Harry? I did know of your interest in healing, but you never did tell me what engendered your change of heart.”

Harry blushed. “Erm, well, one day last winter, just before the Christmas hols, Ron and I were late to charms, and when we were rushing down that corridor with the suits of armour—gods. Ron tripped over one and its sword caught him on the shoulder, and I, um … I might have healed him on the way
Severus’ eyes narrowed. “Mister Potter, that was foolish in the extreme. Healing is a complex branch of magic, and at the time, you knew nothing besides the most basic of charms. You might have killed Mister Weasley while trying to help.”

Harry ruffled his hair and gave him a sheepish smile. “I know. And I was scared to death that I would, but he was bleeding quite badly, and I was afraid he wouldn’t make it unless I tried to help him. So I tried just to close it enough to slow the bleeding, but somehow my spell healed the wound entirely. Madam Pomfrey was really confused when we came in all bloody but with nothing to heal. When I told her I’d healed it, she scolded me for a bit, but then she offered to take me in as her apprentice if I can pass the coursework at Hogwarts for healing.” He grinned. “So … that’s what I’m doing now.”

His smile faded. “But potions and runes are difficult. Hermione’s helping me with runes, but she doesn’t have time to tutor me in potions too. The Prince’s book helps a lot, but it’s blank on antidotes, and I might not always have a bezoar handy.”

“Or,” said Severus with a raised eyebrow, “as in this case, a bezoar might not work as what we need an antidote for is not a poison.”

“Right. So … might I help you research the counter potion if I can’t help you with your actual lab work? I really do need to learn, and I promise I won’t be a berk.”

Severus sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Harry … I … it is not that I would not teach you, but our situation is so very precarious. If we are seen together ….”

Harry grinned. “I’ll wear my cloak every time. I promise.”

“Even so, I do not see how I can safely allow it. Someone might walk in at any time.”

Albus cleared his throat. “If I may, Severus, I believe that is a moot point. The fact that Tom has gone to someone else to have this potion created is a sign that your spying days are at an end. If he no longer trusts you, then I will not send you back to him and risk your life.”

Severus paled. “But if I do not spy, then who will?”

“That is neither here nor there. I will not risk you, Severus.”

Severus rubbed his arms, cold and afraid. What was he, if not a spy?

“But … Albus, the Dark Lord may only be testing my loyalty. You know we discussed that earlier. If he is, and I do not return, then we shall lose our only source of information inside the Death Eaters’ ranks!”

Albus nodded. “Perhaps. But if this is not a test and you return, then not only will we still lose our one source of information in the Death Eaters’ ranks, but we shall also lose you, and that, my boy, is entirely unacceptable.”

Severus shook his head, and continued shaking it as he spoke. “I cannot leave until I am certain I am no longer trusted, Albus. I cannot. Having a spy is simply too vital to the cause.”

Harry laid a trembling hand on Severus’. “But if you get hurt, who’s going to help me if I need that ring?”
Severus opened his mouth to reassure Harry that Albus would, but at a stern look from the old man, quickly closed it again. No, Albus couldn’t help Harry full-time, even though he wanted to. He simply hadn’t the time for it. The man was the leader of the Order, the Headmaster of Hogwarts School, and the general of the Light during one of the bloodiest wars Wizarding Britain had ever seen—not to mention his duties to the Wizengamot. Watching over Harry while Severus was in a Death Eater rally was one thing, but Albus was simply too busy to guard the boy reliably for over a month.

Which meant that Severus had to protect his own life as top priority, even if it cost him his position as a spy. Harry was depending on him to stay alive.

“I suppose you are right.” Severus sighed and rubbed his temples. “I will wear a portkey on my wrist at every meeting from here on out. If I become the slightest bit suspicious that I am no longer trusted, I will simply portkey out and neutralise the mark.”

Albus’ eyes went wide, as well they might—the man knew Severus wasn’t talking about neutralising it with a potion.

Still, Severus would rather be an amputee than dead.

“Severus!” Albus stood and fixed him with a stern look. “We shall have no more talk of this. Harry’s blood is proof against Tom. I am sure, if you ask him, he will help you keep your life safe once you need to … change careers, so to speak.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand—how had he forgotten the young man was still holding it? With a blush, Severus moved his fingers out of reach.

“Of course I’ll help if I can,” said a bemused Harry, “but, Professor Dumbledore, I don’t see how my blood could possibly be proof against Riddle when he used it to resurrect himself. It’s the same blood, isn’t it?”

Albus’ smile had a touch mischief in it. “That is what Tom believes, yes; however, do you recall that intent is ninety percent of magic?”

Harry frowned. “Yeah? What does that have to do with it?”

“Well, Tom took your blood by force, Harry. You were unwilling, and when you fought against him in the cemetery, you enacted a sort of magical barrier. Will magic. It is … complex theory to say the least, but what happened in the most basic of terms is this: since Tom stole your blood, it resists him now. Your blood will not allow him near it again. That is why he could not possess you at the Ministry. That, and your soul is pure while his is not.”

Harry stared, obviously confused. “How does that help Professor Snape?”

“Well, your blood—when willingly given—now includes that protection against Tom. So if you were to give Professor Snape some of it, then that protection would pass to him and Tom would not be able to hurt him through the mark. At least, that is our theory.”

Harry gulped. “You’re not sure?”

Severus sighed. “Nothing about will magic is ever sure, Harry. It is a strange beast, to say the least, but Albus’ hypothesis is sound and reasonably proved through the Dark Lord’s failed attempt at possession. At any rate, it is the best chance I have at survival.”

Harry nodded and sat tall. “All right. Then what do you need? Er … I guess I should say, how much
Severus shook his head. “At the moment, I do not know. It may be that your touch is enough to ground me. Or, in the worst case scenario, I may need ….” He gulped. “To … imbibe some of your blood straight from the source.”

Harry paled. “You mean like drink it? From me? Won’t that make you a vampire?”

Severus snorted and buried his face in his hand. “Dear Merlin. What Muggle trash have you been reading, Potter?”

“Er … but isn’t that how …?”

“Harry, the only way one becomes a vampire, other than being born to vampiric parents, is by imbibing the blood of a vampire—the more swallows they take, the worse the condition is. One swallow just gives them an urge for rarer meats. Five swallows, and they need blood to survive, but they are also still in control of their mind and have no compulsion to kill. By ten, they become a fully feral monster with no shred of humanity left.”

Harry shuddered. “Merlin. Who would even want to do that?”

Albus said with a grim look, “Some do, Harry. However, it is rather easy for a vampire to overpower a human—even wizards and witches—and … force them to turn.”

Harry paled. “Dear Merlin.”

“Indeed.” Severus fixed Harry with a piercing stare. “Do you have any urges to drink the student population’s throats dry, Harry?”

“Er … no. Not at all.”

“Then I believe we can safely conclude that taking your blood will not make me a vampire. It will, however, be singularly unpleasant.” He sighed and rubbed his forehead. “But if that is the price I must pay to survive this with my sanity and all my limbs intact, then so be it. Assuming you still wish to aid me?”

Harry lifted his head with bravery and gave Severus a firm nod. “Yeah. Even if you have to take blood right from me, yeah. I’ll do whatever it takes to save your life.” His expression turned sad. “It’s about time someone repaid the favour.”

Severus shook his head. “You owe me nothing, but I am glad to have your promise of assistance nonetheless.” He rubbed his left forearm and grimaced. “I am afraid the alternative may have severely hampered my livelihood.”

“And perhaps your life,” Albus said with a deep frown. “I will not allow it. If nothing else, Poppy can surgically remove the skin and regr—”

Severus cut across him. “It does not work, Albus, or have you forgotten that is precisely the reason why I started down this dark path of self-injury?”

Albus’ eyes filled with fear and sorrow. “I will not sacrifice you, Severus. Neither your arm nor your life. I will not do it.” He wiped his eyes and turned his head. “I will not lose you.”

Albus’ rare display of emotion broke something within Severus. In that instant, he realised how much he meant to the old man. How much Albus loved him, and how much his death would cost the
the headmaster if he overstayed his welcome within the Dark Lord’s camp or bled to death trying to amputate his mark before it killed him.

Severus stood and laid a hand on Albus’ shoulder. “Perhaps, with Harry’s assistance, it shall no longer be necessary.” He gave the boy a searching look. “Would you consent to leave a phial of your blood with me in case I am discovered before I see you next?”

Harry nodded cautiously. “Just … keep it hidden and safe, yeah? The last time someone took my blood, we got a dark lord out of it.”

Severus gave him a half smile. “I am glad you are learning caution. Yes, I shall keep it on my person, hidden within a container that only I can see, hear, feel, or open.”

“Maybe you and Madame Pomfrey, just in case you’re incapacitated, yeah?”

Severus inclined his head. “I will key in Albus as well. Does that satisfy you?”

Harry nodded and held out his hand. “Like this, then?”

Severus shrugged. “Albus, do you have the proper instruments here?”

“I do not, but you will need to return to your office before Harry can leave anyway, Severus.” Albus gave Harry a wry smile. “It’s gone ten, well past curfew. I believe we’ve kept you in detention long enough, hmm?”

Harry nodded. “And I have to be right back in it come five, so yeah, I need a kip.”

Albus raised an eyebrow. “Another detention? Whatever for?”

Severus shook his head. “Officially, because he used magic between classes—to shield me from Malfoy’s curse. Unofficially, it is not a detention at all, but rather a way to keep Harry from being left alone, considering there may be other students in on this plot without our knowledge. I had planned to let him rest, but with all we have learned this evening, I believe we shall instead use the time to teach him a handful of wandless defence spells and healing chants, or at least start the process.”

Harry frowned. “Can I practise those at home without triggering the underage magic use law again?”

“Yes. Wandless charms are untraceable.”

“Then why did they send me a warning after Dobby dropped a pudding on my uncle?”

Albus scratched his beard. “Well, because he did so in front of a group of Muggles who were not aware of wizards. That distinction triggered the secrecy act alarms and, from there, they assumed underage magic use to be the cause as it was not known that a house elf was in the premises at the time.”

“So … I’d be able to use these to protect myself then, so long as I didn’t do it in front of people who don’t know about magic?”

“Precisely,” said Severus. “And if you do not use your wand. The trace is attached to it, after all, so do not be a dunderhead and use it prior to your seventeenth birthday.”

Harry grinned. “Wicked. If I’d realised that, I’d have been working on wandless magic much sooner.”

“Which is precisely why we did not tell you,” said Severus with a roll of his eyes. “Come, Potter. I
must take your blood and send you back to the tower for the evening. We shall have Dobby escort you in secret, but do let me know you have arrived safely by turning your ring one time as soon as you are safely in your bed.”

“Yes, sir.”

Severus motioned Harry into the floo and watched as the boy bid Albus goodnight and disappeared into the flames. He stopped at the hearth when Albus laid a hand on his arm.

“I will not keep you long, Severus, but from what Harry was able to tell me earlier tonight, I believe his aunt is the one abusing him. Do keep an eye on her, when you are able.”

Severus nodded and swept into the floo.
In the Shadows

Chapter Summary

**Warnings: brief reference to abuse of a minor, and Riddle's dastardly plan begins.**

***AN: Guys, I'm really sick. I've had the flu for almost 3 weeks without a sign of recovery and it's going into my lungs. I'm going to put up the next chapter soon so you're not left with a cliffie, but after that, I need a few days to get my health back together. the next update on any of my stories might take a week or so. I'm still writing, don't worry. I just need some rest.***

**CHAPTER 7**

_IN THE SHADOWS_

The common room was silent when Harry trudged in, aching and weary to his bones, his arm twinging where Snape had taken a phial of his blood. Merlin, he needed sleep in the worst way. After all the revelations of the day, even Harry’s hair was tired.

Not that he would get much rest with a five a.m. ‘detention.’

As he passed the hearth and made his way towards the boys’ dorm, a quiet sound from the fireside set him on guard. He whipped around, wand at the ready, only to find a sleep-tousled Hermione rousing herself from the sofa and rubbing her eyes.

“H-Harry?”

He sighed and relaxed. “Yeah, it’s me. The old bat kept me later than usual.” Since he had his wand out anyway, he cast _Muffliato_—one of the Prince’s handier spells—and plopped down next to his friend. “This time, it wasn’t just for cauldrons, though. I didn’t get a chance to tell you earlier—Malfoy’s all but gone mad and he’s taken his goons down with him. They’re being expelled as we speak.”

Hermione lifted a hand to her mouth. “Expelled? Dear Merlin! What did they do?”

“Tried to kill me. And Snape. I saved the bugger’s life, and he gave me detention at five in the morning for it!” Harry wished, yet again, he could tell her the truth.

Well, maybe he _could_, at least a bit.

“But you know, I don’t know if he’s honestly doing it this time to be a berk or not. I think he’s really scared. I mean, that curse Malfoy was going to hit him with—it’s really, _really_ bad. Snape would have died.”

Hermione was shaking. “Oh gods. But … I don’t understand it. Why?”

“To get to me, of course. Snape was in the way, so ….” Harry shook his head. “I don’t like it, Hermione. He had to be really desperate to do it. So promise me you’ll be on guard tomorrow and don’t go anywhere alone, okay? And warn the girls for me. I have the worst feeling like this isn’t over and something terrible is going to happen.”
She nodded and held Harry’s shoulder. “Are you okay? Did Snape hurt you this time?”

“Not too much. Honestly, this business with Malfoy has him shaken up, I think. He wasn’t half as bad as usual.”

Well, it was as close to the truth as he could come. For now. One day, he’d come clean with them about everything. One day, when Voldemort was in the ground and his bitch of an aunt couldn’t hurt him any longer.

She gave him a wan smile. “Well, there’s that at least.”

“Yeah.” He flopped back onto the sofa and cast the girls’ dorm a sorrowful look. “How’s Gin?”

She winced. “Um … well, she ….”

“That bad, huh?” Harry closed his eyes and drew his knees to his chest. “I never meant to hurt her.”

“She knows. It’s just … right now, the pain is really sharp for her. She’ll heal with time.”

“I … I hope so.”

Hermione rubbed Harry’s back and said nothing.

“And Ron?”

She sighed. “He’s … angry, Harry. He probably will be until she begins to recover. Dean is furious, too.”

Harry cringed. “Is everyone?”

“No, no. I think most everyone understands and thinks you did the right thing even if the whole situation is … well, a bit of a mess. It’s only that Dean and Ron really love her and can’t stand to see her suffering.”

“Maybe Dean will help her. He’d just never had a girlfriend before, you know? He just wanted to keep her safe and went way too far.”

“Well, I do hope he’s learned his lesson, but right now, I don’t think Ginny needs to be with anyone. She needs to take time to heal and find what she wants out of life. She’s chased after you for so long, I don’t think she really even knows what that is anymore.”

“I wish I could have been what she needs, ‘Mione. I wanted to … gods, I wanted to. But I just … can’t.”

Her small hand rubbed Harry’s shoulders. “I know. We all know. Are you going to be okay?”

He sighed and jerked a hand across his eyes, unsurprised to find them wet. “Yeah. I just, I think I’ll try to sleep. I have to be up in, what, six hours?”

She grimaced. “More like five if you expect to shower and dress before dashing to Snape’s office. Just get some sleep, yeah? It mightn’t look so bad in the morning.”

“Yeah, or it might be worse.” He sighed and bid her goodnight, then dragged himself to his dorm, half-expecting Ron and Dean to be waiting to ambush him.

Instead, all the curtains were closed but Harry’s, and someone had turned his quilts pink and dumped
a jar of what looked like molasses on his pillow. Pain lancing through his chest, Harry corrected the colour, cleaned and dried his bedding as best as he could, and crawled between the damp, still-sticky sheets.

In retrospect, if his roommates were *this* angry with him, perhaps it was best that Snape wanted him out of the dorm before they could do anything worse.

He turned his ring once to let Snape know he was safe and wished the Prince could be there with him. Harry would have Summoned the book for comfort if he could have, but he feared the sticky sheets would ruin it. Instead, he imagined the man lying beside him, an arm over Harry’s waist and their heads pressed close together. For some reason, this time he had long, black hair, pale skin, and dark eyes.

Harry found he liked that incarnation the best of all and locked the combination into his memory. *This* was what his Prince was supposed to look like—he was sure of it.

Snuggling close to his secret friend and wishing the Prince could be there in truth, Harry buried a sniffle in his soggy pillow and willed sleep to come quickly.

It didn’t.

An irritating buzzing in his ear woke him the next morning. He sat and groaned. Gods. He felt as if he hadn’t slept at all.

What time was it? He cast a groggy *Tempus* and gasped. Four-forty? He had no time to shower—he’d just have to throw on his clothing and pray he made it to Snape’s before he was late.

Harry tiptoed about as fast as he dared, jerking on clothing this way and that. As he was throwing on his invisibility cloak, the curtains of Ron’s bed opened.

“What in the bloody hell?” He rubbed his eyes and growled. “Oh. It’s *you*. Running away, are we?”

Harry closed his eyes at a sharp twist of anguish and swallowed hard. “No. I’d sleep if I could, but I’ve detention again at five.”

“Serves you right,” said Ron with a sniff. He turned his back and jerked his curtains shut again.

“Ron?” Harry sniffled and blinked hard. “Are you going to hate me forever?”

The young man sighed. “No, but I’m bloody furious at you right now. Just … leave me alone for a bit, okay? I reckon I need time to cool off.”

“Ron?” Harry sniffled and blinked hard. “Are you going to hate me forever?”

The young man sighed. “No, but I’m bloody furious at you right now. Just … leave me alone for a bit, okay? I reckon I need time to cool off.”

Harry swallowed and turned, feeling as if someone had punched him in the gut. “Y-yeah. Okay. S-see you at breakfast, I guess.” He tugged his hood over his head, glad the cloak would hide his tears from the world at large. “Listen, Ron. I was going to tell you last night, but you were already asleep when I got back. Malfoy’s gone completely mad. He tried to kill me and Snape yesterday, and none of us think this stops there. So just … be careful, okay? Even if you *are* furious at me, I still don’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

Ron growled. “Malfoy attacked Snape? That’s a load of bollocks. Snape kisses the ground Malfoy
walks on!” He scowled and narrowed his eyes. “What is this? Are you trying to make me feel sorry for you or something? Well, I’m not buying it. Not this time.”

Harry gasped, pain shooting through his chest, and struggled to keep his voice steady. “N-no. It’s real, but I … look, if you don’t believe me, just ask Hermione when you’re up, okay? Or Professor Dumbledore. I … just be caref—” His voice broke on a sob, and Harry jerked his hood over his face. “I’m sorry, Ron. I have to g-go.”

Ron sat and muttered Harry’s name, but Harry couldn’t take anymore. He turned on his heel and fled to the portrait hole. Tears blinded him and caused him to dash his shin against a table, but he didn’t stop. Ron might find him if he did, and he couldn’t face him yet.

Besides, he was late anyway.

A soft, squeaky voice met his ears as soon as the portrait hole opened. “Dobby is here to takes the great Harry Potter to Professor Snape’s office. Dobby will guard you with his life.”

“That’s … not necessary, Dobby,” Harry forced out. “Just stay close and watch out for trouble, okay?”

“Okay, great Harry Potter. But is you being all right? You’s sounding sad.”

“Yeah. I am sad. I’ve had a fight with my friends and Ron’s angry with me.”

Dobby murmured, “Not to worry, oh great Harry Potter. Harry’s Wheezy loves you. He will be coming around soon.”

Harry smiled and wiped his eyes. “Thanks, Dobby. I did need to hear that.”

“Oh, oh, you’s so kind to thank Do—”

Harry cut him off before the house elf could start wailing, as was his custom. “Ssh! We have to be quiet, remember?”

The house elf nodded and went silent, big green eyes staring up at Harry with worry and concern. Harry wondered if the elf could see him despite his cloak, like Dumbledore could.

“Good. Now, let’s get going. I’ve got to dash or I’ll be late.”

“Dobby is with Harry Potter all the way!”

“Er … yeah.”

Harry shut the portrait hole as quietly as he could and started for the dungeons, trying to strike a balance between speed and silence. Apparently quidditch was good for more than just spotting snitches, because Harry made it to the dungeons in record time and without waking anyone up. Breathless and hot, he knocked on the door and slumped onto his knees to catch his breath.

“Come in,” came a silky voice. “You’re two minutes late, by the by.”

Harry winced. “Oh. I tried to … I mean … Ron caught me and ….” He lowered his cloak inside the office, and Snape jerked to his feet.

The door shut with a quiet snap, and a strong hand came down on Harry’s shoulder.

“Dear Merlin. What’s happened to you, Potter?”
Harry waved off his concern. “I’m okay.” At Snape’s sharp look, he amended, “Well, not okay, but not in danger, either. It’s … nothing to do with the war.”

Snape’s tense posture eased and he stepped back, though he left his hand on Harry’s shoulder. Harry found he liked the weight of it, that his warmth was comforting and safe.

How strange.

Snape said in a low voice, “So it is personal troubles that have you so affected?”

Harry rubbed a hand across his eyes and nodded.

Snape’s eyes softened with concern. “Is it the fact that you are leaving soon, Harry? I will try to protect you as much as I possibly can, and if you can only endure for one more month with all the safeguards we have in place, you need never return there again.”

Out of curiosity—and a little fear—Harry said, “What if they attack me before the month is out?”

Severus growled. “Then I will bloody well sit on them until your protection resets, war or no war. I will not let them assault a child.”

“I’m not a child.”

“Until you turn eighteen, you are, in fact, a minor. And I will not let you be hurt on my watch regardless.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “T-thanks.”

Snape squeezed Harry’s shoulder and let his hand drop. Harry found himself missing the comfort of his touch.

“Hmm.” Snape glanced over him and shook his head. “Did you oversleep, Harry?”

“Um ….”

Snape frowned and touched Harry’s neck, sending a zing of sensation down the young man’s spine. Harry’s breath caught and his eyes widened. What was that all about?

“What in Merlin’s name?” Snape sniffed his fingers and frowned harder. “Decide on a midnight snack, did you?”

Harry blushed. “N-no. Um, Ron and Dean … they’d hexed my bed when I came up last night. I tried to get rid of all of it, but ….”

“I see.” Snape sighed and clapped his hands together. “Dobby!”

The bouncy little elf appeared with a pop, hats teetering precariously over his ear.

“What can Dobby be doing for you, Master Snape and great Harry Potter?”

Snape’s eyelid twitched at the greeting. Harry had to stifle a snort.

“Please retrieve a clean change of clothing for Mister Potter, along with his toothbrush, razor, and comb, and bring the lot here immediately. Take care not to be seen. And when you have done that, please ask the kitchens to prepare a light breakfast for two, to be delivered to my private quarters in perhaps half an hour.”
Harry jolted and gave Snape a questioning look, but Snape did not meet his eyes.

“Right away, Master Snape.”

“Thank you, Dobby.”

After the elf’s characteristic show of gratitude, the creature vanished with a great pop and reappeared half a moment later, underneath a small stack of clothing and the requested hygienic items. Harry snatched up his clothing and attempted to hide his tatty smalls, hole-ridden socks, and worn-out tee against his chest. His ears and cheeks flamed, and he ducked to avoid Snape’s eyes.

A gentle hand settled on his shoulder. “Do not be ashamed. It is not your shortcoming, but theirs, that they have not cared for you like they ought. I shall help you repair them, if you wish.”

Harry shook his head hard. “No. Please. They’ll only … please don’t.”

Snape’s hand squeezed gently. “Very well. Then, if you are able, follow me.”

Harry blinked away the start of tears and followed Snape through a hidden door at the back of his office. He held his breath as he stepped into the man’s home, half expecting more creepy-crawly things to stare at him from dark corners.

Instead, he felt he had stepped into a home out of a catalogue.

Snape obviously had good taste. He had laid hardwood floors over the dungeon’s stone and installed several enchanted windows to give the place natural light despite the fact that it was several stories underground, each showing a different area of Hogwarts’ grounds.

No doubt that was a useful tool for the spy.

Besides the windows, the place had cosy furnishings all in shades of dark green and brown, and the paintings on the walls—no portraits, of course—gave the place character. Harry was especially drawn to one of a white doe over the hearth and went to get a closer look.

“In honour of your mother,” Snape said in a soft voice. He touched the doe’s forehead and smiled as she rubbed against his hand. “I did love her, once.”

Harry paled. “You … I … but I thought … how?”

Snape watched the doe frolic a bit. “We were friends, Harry. We grew up in the same neighbourhood, and spent much of our childhoods together. For a time, we were inseparable, even after we were sorted into rival houses.” His eyes filled with a terrible sadness. “And then, one day, I lashed out and hurt her beyond what she could forgive. I have never forgiven myself for it, either.”

Harry remembered the scene in the pensieve and shuddered. He slipped his hand into Snape’s, even as he wondered at his own bravery.

“For what it’s worth, I think Mum was partly at fault there, too. No matter how angry she was, no matter what stupid thing you’d said, she should have helped you first—then raked you over the coals later, once you were okay. What she did to you, that wasn’t forgivable. What you said—while you were terrified and humiliated and ashamed—that was. At least, that’s how I see it.”

Snape’s hand tightened on Harry’s, and for a moment, he stood there, staring at the doe without moving. When he spoke again, his voice was rough.
“Come. The loo is this way.”

Harry released Snape’s hand and followed him to a small, but cosy bedroom—decorated in tranquil blues, to his surprise—and the grandest loo Harry had ever seen. Dear Merlin, the bath was bigger than the one in the Prefects’ bathroom, and it had the same fancy fixtures.

“Wow.”

Snape snorted. “Some months after I became a spy, Professor Dumbledore added a rather ostentatious loo to my suite because he insisted I needed the space to relax. I am not sure if he is correct or not, but I have never seen a reason to complain.”

“Can’t say I blame you. This would almost be worth …. ” Harry shook his head. “No. Nothing is worth that.”

Snape squeezed his shoulder. “Go ahead and shower. You may dress in here, or in the bedroom if you feel so inclined, then I would like you to join me in the kitchen for breakfast. We will discuss what happened this morning over our meal, if you are able.”

Harry gulped. “A-all right.”

“Do not spend too much time in there. I know it is tempting, but we must hurry if I am to teach you anything of worth before you leave today.”

Harry nodded and gave Snape a hesitant smile. “Um … thank you. Really.”

“It is past time I treated you with respect, Harry.” Snape turned and paused with his hand upon the doorknob. “And it is I who must thank you for your forgiveness.”

With those words—a gesture that sent shockwaves of relief and inexplicable warmth through Harry’s entire body—Snape left, closing the door behind him.

Severus went into the living room and settled on the sofa with a quiet groan. What on earth was happening to him? He had a minor student in his shower at five in the morning. No student had ever even been in these rooms before, and because Harry had come in looking sticky and messy and in tears, Severus hadn’t been able to deny him the simple comfort of a shower. Especially when he knew the boy’s relatives might punish Harry for showing up in such a state.

He had only been trying to help, but gods. A student in a professor’s personal shower? That had to be breaking at least twenty school rules. And perhaps a law or two.

Had he lost the plot?

When Dumbledore’s head popped to life in his fireplace a moment later, for an instant, Severus was terrified he’d been found out.

“A-Albus? What on earth?”

“Oh, thank goodness.” Albus looked around and fear filled his eyes. “Where is Harry? I thought he would be with you by now? And why are you not in your office?”
Severus gulped. Surely Albus couldn’t know. Not so soon. Could he?

Severus sighed and lowered his head. He might as well get the worst over with now. If Albus thought Harry was missing and Severus didn’t say anything, the old man would definitely suspect something untoward was happening. Even if he knew full well Severus would sooner cut off a limb than take advantage of a student.

“Mister Potter is here,” said Severus in a hesitant voice. “He came into my office looking woebegone and with molasses in his hair from a trick Messrs Thomas and Weasley used on his bed. He was quite distraught. I realise it is … unorthodox, but I offered him the use of my shower so that his relatives would not be able to hurt him for his roughshod appearance.”

The twinkle in Albus’ eyes relieved Severus so much, he had to repress a sigh.

“Ah. I must say, it is an immense relief to see the two of you put the past behind you. Did I not tell you he is truly a wonderful boy, Severus?”

Severus sighed. “I am beginning to see it. No common young man would forgive such terrible things as I have done to Mister Potter. Certainly not so easily as he has.”

Albus frowned. “You were calling him Harry last night. What happened?”

Severus’ cheeks warmed. “It is only that … in such private settings, I feel I must keep some sort of boundary of professionalism. This is already so very inappropriate and I do not wish to appea—”

“Oh, balderdash! If Harry needs a shower and has nowhere else to go, then by all means, let the boy use your loo. I know you would never take advantage of him, Severus. Call him what you will, do whatever you need to do to take care of him. You have my trust.”

Severus swallowed a sudden lump in his throat and Occluded his emotions away.

“Thank you, Albus. I shan’t abuse it.”

“I do know that.”

Severus nodded and leaned on his knees. “Albus, why are you here? You and I both know you did not come solely to check on Harry.”

“Well, it was in part to make sure he had arrived safely, but you are correct. It is not the only reason.” Albus beckoned him close. “Cast a strong silencing charm—and yes, I know your rooms are already warded.”

Severus gulped and obeyed with the most powerful charm he knew. It left a peculiar buzzing sound in his ears, but no one would be able to hear their conversation after he was finished, even if they were standing right beside him. He would not be able to hear anyone else, either, but such was the price one paid for powerful magic.

“All right. What is it, Albus?”

The man finished his own spell and gave Severus a grave look. “It is Mister Malfoy. As you no doubt have already surmised, I cast powerful monitoring spells on our four fugitives after you and Harry left and set a house elf guard over each. Draco’s guard woke me a short while ago, at the same time the alarm for him went off in my bedchamber.”

Severus went ashen. “Do not tell me he has escaped.”
“No, no. He is still under the sleeping charm I placed last night. And yet, something is terribly amiss, Severus. His heart rate is abysmally slow. Too slow to support life, and yet he is still breathing. He is also near frozen to the touch, and no amount of warming charms seem to affect him. I do not quite know what has happened to him and neither does Poppy, but I sense dark magic, Severus. Extremely dark magic. He positively reeks of it. We must be on our guard.”

Every hair on Severus’ body stood on end. “Dear Merlin. That is terrifying, Albus. You have no idea at all what might have happened?”

Albus shook his head. “I would normally assume vampirism, but there is no possibility of exposure. He has been locked in that room all night, or my alarms would have alerted me, but I know of nothing else which presents in such a manner.”

Severus gave him a grim nod. “Bind him. Bind him with the most powerful spell you have. Riddle has done something terrible to him.”

“That is my fear as well. I will do everything I can, Severus, and alert you at the first sign of a change.”

“Take care that you are not harmed, Albus.”

“I will. Do tell Harry I said good morning. And good luck with his wandless training.”

Severus inclined his head in response, barely hearing the man for the whirring in his own skull. Low heart rate, cold temperature, dark magic. What did he know of that created such a combination?

As Albus had said, the only thing Severus could think of was vampirism, but Draco had not been exposed overnight and one did not gradually become a vampire. The turning happened immediately after the first swallow of vampiric blood and worsened with every subsequent dose. There was no incubation period, and no vampire could have possibly attacked Draco last night without alerting the headmaster or his guards.

It had to be something else, but what?

He was still racking his brains for answers when Harry—freshly showered and dressed in the tatty, overlarge garments Dobby had brought—grabbed Severus’ shoulder and shook him, his eyes wide with terror and his face red from shouting. Tears had formed at the corners of his lashes, and his entire body trembled with fear.

Severus gasped and sat up. “Shite!” He cancelled the silencing charm and brought the shaking young man onto the sofa beside him. “Harry, calm yourself.”

Harry half-shouted, “Why didn’t you answer me? I was screaming and you weren’t … why?”

Severus laid a hand on the boy’s to calm him. “It was unintentional. While you were in the shower, Professor Dumbledore floo called me with grim news and asked me to cast a silencing charm. I confess his news frightened me, and I quite forgot to cancel the charm.”

He laid a gentle hand on the boy’s pale forehead, checking for signs of fever or shock. He seemed to be within a normal range.

“Are you well?”

Harry shuddered and grabbed Severus’ hand, pulling it down from his forehead and into his lap. “Don’t … don’t ever scare me like that again. You weren’t moving. You were just staring at the
ceiling and … and I thought you were d-dead.” He turned his head and hid a sob in his shoulder. “I thought I’d killed you just by trying to be your friend.”

Severus’ breath caught. His friend?

Despite Harry’s terror and the grim situation with Malfoy, those words filled Severus with a kind of soaring, quivering joy he hadn’t known in almost thirty years. Not since the day Lily had welcomed him on the playground all those years ago, awkwardness and all, had he felt such a fuzzy-light sensation of acceptance. Of belonging.

And how right that it should be Lily’s son to offer it to him.

Severus couldn’t quite Occlude the joy from his eyes as he brought Harry into a gentle embrace and rubbed the young man’s shoulders. It wasn’t strictly allowed between a professor and student—the only exception was for a grieving student in need of comfort—but the boy was distraught, and Albus had just given Severus free rein to help Harry as he saw fit. This was helping, wasn’t it?

Besides, at that moment, he simply wanted to hug his new friend, the first he had made in fifteen years, since Minerva had finally realised he wasn’t all snark and snappishness.

“Harry, ssh. It’s all right. I am safe.”

Harry’s arms came up around his back and hugged him tight. “Don’t die. Please. Don’t. Especially not for me.”

“Harry, I apologise. If I had known the charm would affect you so strongly, I would have included you in its effects. In the future, I will do so.”

Harry laid his head against Severus’ shoulder and sniffled. “Do you … have to let me go yet?”

The warmth inside Severus’ chest doubled, and he knew his eyes must be shining with it. Still, they had little time to waste.

“I am afraid so. We must work quickly.”

Harry sighed and pulled back, rubbing his eyes. When he opened them again, he blinked and gave Severus a shy smile.

“Your eyes look really happy today, but I’m confused. I thought you said Professor Dumbledore had bad news.”

The reminder of the situation with Draco brought Severus back to earth with a jolt. Why the hell was he thinking of friendship and the like when any moment, all hell could break loose? He needed to start training Harry—now. Everything else could wait until the young man could better defend himself.

Severus said in a soft voice, “I was only happy that you had accepted me, but—”

Harry grinned. “Really? That made you happy?”

Severus patted the boy’s shoulder. “Yes, but you are right about the headmaster’s news. We must hurry with our lesson and save breakfast for later. I am afraid something quite sinister is happening with Mister Malfoy, and we do not know yet what to expect.”

Harry paled. “What’s going on?”
“We are uncertain. The Headmaster reported a low heart rate, cold body temperature, and an aura of dark magic. Madame Pomfrey does not know what is happening to him, and neither do I, but the suspicion is that this is part of Riddle’s plan. Draco has a house elf guard and is under lock and key, so even if Riddle has done something terrible to him, I do not believe he will be able to do anything major, but there is always the possibility that I am wrong.”

Harry shuddered and sat tall. “Right. Then we’d better start training right away, yeah?”

“That was my thought as well.” Severus switched to his teaching voice and settled in.

Harry focused every ounce of his attention on the lesson with Snape and found, to his delight, that when the man cared for his students and was allowed to act on his own devices, he was an excellent teacher. Harry had already mastered a wandless Summoning charm—important in case someone kicked his wand away or cornered him unawares—and had made good progress on wandless shields and stunners.

From there, Snape had begun teaching him healing spells and chants, and the young man was fascinated. The Vulnera Santentur chant was especially incredible, and the fact that only he and Snape could perform it gave Harry a thrill, but he found he enjoyed the common spells just as much.

“So that’s all I have to do to set a bone? Any bone? Just aim and cast *Episkey*?”

Snape nodded. “The amount of power you will need depends on both the severity of the break and the size of the bone—the small bones in one’s ears, vertebrae, and skull also require quite a lot of power due to their complexity—but yes, the charm is the same for them all. Here.”

He cast upon the stuffed bear they were using as a training dummy, giving it longer limbs and false bones.

“*Osperdere!*”

Snape aimed the curse at the bear’s leg, snapping the thigh ‘bone’ cleanly in half. The bear gained an extra bend in his leg, and Harry shuddered.

“Merlin. Remind me to stay out of the way of that one.”

Snape gave a grim nod. “It can be quite dangerous, depending on where it hits. Do try to heal the bone, however.”

“Yes, sir.” Harry pointed his wand at the bear, focused his healing energy, and cried, “*Episkey!*”

The bone set without a hitch. Snape smiled.

“Excellent. I do believe you have the makings of a fine healer.” He frowned and stared at Harry. “Perhaps even a Shaman. I do not believe your average healer finds these spells so easy. Especially not the *Vulnera Santentur*. Even Poppy is not able to utilise it.”

“Shaman? Isn’t that a Muggle word for a spirit doctor or something like that?”

Snape nodded. “We borrowed the word. In wizarding terms, it refers to a healer who has an innate talent for the skill—more than talent, I should say. It is a powerful magical gift, such as being a Seer...”
or a Parselmouth, and is quite as rare.”

Harry winced. “Are people going to hate me for this one too?”

“No, no. It is in high demand, actually, as Shamans are quite good at saving lives others consider beyond help.” Snape leaned back in his chair and gave Harry a searching look. “Do you want to hear the legend behind the skill?”

“There’s a legend? Yeah, I guess.”

Snape rubbed a fingertip against his lip. “It is said that this gift is given only to those whom Death has tested….” He traced the same fingertip down Harry’s scar. “And found worthy. It is said that a Shaman’s core and essence, as a reward for their resilience, becomes proof against death, so long as they do not taint themselves with evil.”

Harry gulped. “Oh. So my scar …?”

“Indeed. Perhaps you are a Shaman. I shall mention it to Poppy the next time I am able to safely do so. She will no doubt be chomping at the bit to take you into training then.”

Harry grinned. “You will? Really?”

Severus nodded. “It may save lives if she will agree to begin training you this year rather than the one after. I wi—”

A wailing, high-pitched drone sounded in the hall outside Snape’s quarters, and Harry’s heart leapt into his throat. Across from him, Snape’s eyes were wide with sudden terror.

Heart beating a timpani in his ears, even louder than the alarm, Harry clapped his hands over his ears and cried, “What is that?”

“Dark magic alarm.” Snape’s voice trembled. “Something terrible has happened.”

He jerked Harry to his feet and threw a handful of floo powder into the fire.

“Albus Dumbledore’s office!”

Before Harry could blink, long arms wrapped firmly around him and lifted him off his feet. He gave a little cry of shock, wincing as green fire and soot suddenly raced around him, and when he opened his eyes again, he was standing in Albus Dumbledore’s office. Snape had carried him through the floo.

Dear Merlin, whatever that alarm meant, it must have been awful for Snape to just pick Harry up and haul him away. Harry stood by the hearth, shaking and covered in soot, terror rooting him to the spot.

What in Merlin’s name had gone wrong this time?

Severus guided the petrified boy away from the fire and cried, “Albus! Where are you?”

The headmaster emerged from a side room—likely his sleeping quarters—grim-faced and tugging
duelling robes on over a lime-green duster and purple palazzo pants.

“Severus! Harry! Oh, thank Merlin.” Albus ran to Harry’s side and checked the boy’s face. “Are you quite well?”

Harry rallied at the Headmaster’s question, and Severus secretly praised the young man’s courage.

“Yes, I’m fine, sir. We were training when the alarm went off. What’s happening?”

Albus stood straight and gave Severus a fearful look. “I am afraid I do not know, other than Draco Malfoy is missing and even his house elf guard cannot find him. I had assumed whatever had triggered the alarms—whether it is Draco or something else—would go straight to you, Harry.”

Severus’ stomach sunk like lead in water. “Albus, what if it has? If the threat has gone where Harry should be at six in the morning on the last day of term?”

Albus went ashen. “Dear gods.”

With a flick of his wand, he Summoned a second duelling robe for Severus and pressed it against the man’s chest. Severus tugged them on over his head without a word and donned the hood to hide his face. In an instant, he had cast a glamour to blur his features, but knew if he truly encountered danger, he would not be able to sustain it for long.

When he had finished, he guided Harry to sit in his usual chair and knelt at his feet.

“Harry, I know you are terrified and want to help, but whatever this is, most likely, it is after you. Promise me you will stay here, where you are safe?”

Harry shook his head, tears dropping down his cheeks. “Please. No, I have to—it’s my fault. Have to … can’t ….”

Severus caught Harry’s shoulders. “It is not your fault, Harry, but there is no time! The longer we must go over this, the more likely ….”

He could not finish, but by the stricken horror and guilt in Harry’s eyes, the young man understood anyway. With a sob, Harry nodded and curled into his chair, drawing his knees to his chest and shaking all over with terror and grief.

Severus understood, too. The boys in that room, no matter that something strange was going on between them, were Harry’s brothers. Family. He could not bear to see them hurt. Severus wished he could comfort Harry, but if he intended to save the others, he had to go.

Besides that, he did not know if there would be any comfort to give. Nothing small would trigger Hogwarts’ alarms. After all, werewolves had attended this school without tripping them.

Then again, Lupin had never been in the castle during the full moon.

Severus tore himself from Harry and dashed to the fire. Albus was already there, wand in hand and eyes hard as steel.

In that moment, Severus understood why he was the only wizard the Dark Lord feared.

‘Perhaps not the only wizard,’ he thought, casting one last glance at Harry.

“He will be safe here, Severus,” said Albus, “but they are not.”
Severus nodded, took a pinch of floo powder, and tossed it into the flames. “Gryffindor Common Room!”

With a deep breath, he stepped into the flames and prayed they had not come too late.
Catastrophe Strikes

Chapter Summary

Warnings: major character death, gore, blood, violence.

Summary: Riddle's plan comes to pass, and Harry comes face-to-face with his worst nightmare.

***AN: I'm still sick, guys, so this might be the last thing I'm able to post for a while, until I start getting better, or it might just be slower going. I'm going to try to get to the doctor as soon as the snow clears up enough, so hopefully it won't be long.***

CHAPTER 8

CATASTROPHE STRIKES

As soon as Snape and Dumbledore disappeared, Harry’s head exploded with pain, and he doubled over with the agony of it. Shite! In fear for his roommates, he had forgotten to Occlude.

Now, he would pay the price.

Harry opened his eyes to a room swimming with red. Red curtains on the beds, red bedclothes, red hair splayed on red pillows, and red blood pooling, spraying everywhere, painting everything else the same vivid hue. Blue eyes wide with pain and horror met his, a gurgled cry filled his ears, and those terrified eyes stilled and unfocused.

Horror and triumph raced through him at once, his own emotions superimposed over the mind of his host.

Harry’s mind screamed, “No!” But whomever he had ‘possessed’ simply laughed. A cold, sharp cackle nothing like Voldemort’s high-pitched laugh.

Oh gods. Whose mind had he fallen into now? And fuck—Ron! Ron was hurt, bleeding—Harry had to save him! Snape had said Harry could save lives everyone else had given up on, but he had to do it now. He raged and shrieked within his mind, desperate to break through the vision, but he was trapped.

No, this wasn’t the way. He couldn’t afford to panic. He had to Occlude, or he would never break loose. He struggled to close off his emotions, to blank out his mind, but all he could think of was a blinding gush of crimson and the fact that his best friend was dying.
It was hopeless. He would never be able to Occlude this away.

His host moved from the first bed and onto the next, where a dark-skinned boy had taken refuge between the mattress and the wall. The host laughed—Harry still thought it sounded familiar—then he lunged, and Dean screamed and cast a fire curse. It glanced harmlessly off Harry’s host, making the bastard laugh again.

Gods, where had Harry heard that twisted little cackle before?

Then all he could see was brown skin and tight, wiry hair. Something soft gave way like butter under his teeth, and another spray of red filled his vision.

Fuck-fuck-fuck! The monster was going to kill them all before Harry could break out of the vision. Where the hell were Snape and Dumbledore?

That instant, the door slammed open and curses slammed into Harry, or his host, rather. The demon laughed and took them all, impervious, immune. They hardly tickled—even Snape’s darkest arsenal was useless.

Bloody hell. This was bad, and Harry still couldn’t break free.

With a horrible, animalistic snarl, the beast went straight for Snape. The older man was mostly hidden by his hood and his glamour, but the acrid stench of sheer terror revealed Snape’s fear. The glamour dropped, and, heart screaming with horror, Harry watched hope fade from the man’s fathomless eyes, even as his vision filled with black robes and pale skin.

“No!”

Harry didn’t know if he’d screamed or if one of his remaining friends had, but the cry was enough of a distraction to give Snape an instant to move away. The host’s teeth snapped against stone walls instead of soft skin, and the beast gave a hissing snarl of pain and frustration and whipped around, in search of his elusive prey.

Sharp pain ripped through Harry’s back, and his host froze, paralysed by whatever had finally gotten through his armour. A snarl of rage sounded behind him, and with a great thud against his back, Harry slammed into the wall. The pain tripled and ripped through his chest, and Harry looked down to see a wooden stake poking through his ribs. Black blood dripped from the tip and pooled at his feet. His host took a gurgling breath and dropped to the floor.

Over the host’s fury and irritation to have been stopped before completing their task—task?—and an overwhelming surge of Voldemort’s white-hot rage, Harry cried out with relief. It would be okay now. He just had to break out of the vision and save his friends.

Vision fading, he looked up into the furious, tear-streaked face of Neville Longbottom. The boy stood over him, panting and holding a broken chair in bleeding hands.

“Rot in hell, you slimy bastard!”

And the world went black.

Harry woke up with the migraine from hell, but the horror of his vision quickly overrode his pain and turned into an overwhelming surge of panic. Oh gods. Ron! Dean! They needed help, and even if they were angry with Harry, they were still his brothers. He had to save them.
No doubt Snape would ream Harry for disobeying orders, but at that moment, with his friends dying, he didn’t care. He had to go to them, now!

If he really was a Shaman, he might be the only person alive able to save them.

He fought through the pain and terror screaming in his brain and staggered to the hearth. The flames turned green with a pinch of floo powder—it might have been more like a cloud of it. Harry was too far gone to care.

Though he could barely breathe for sobs, he forced his voice steady long enough to bark out, “Gryffindor common room,” and stumbled into the flames.

He knocked his elbow on the grate on the way out, sending a sickening wave of pain along his arm and shoulder, but Harry didn’t care. He could fix his arm later. That moment, he had lives to save. Gods, he hoped he wasn’t too late.

People cornered and questioned him the second he stepped out. He screamed for them to move, and the sea of shocked and terrified Gryffindors parted.

Over the muttering of his classmates, McGonagall cried, “Harry Potter! What do you think you are doing? Get over here at on—”

“No time, Professor!”

Harry bolted for his dorm. As he dashed to the stairs, under McGonagall’s cries for him to stop, whispers of Snape’s name, of You-Know-Who, of dark magic and beasts and screams in the sixth year boys’ dorm inundated him, but he ignored them all and kept running. He had no time. No time for anything.

His best friend was dying.

Harry careened into the room and his breath lodged in his throat. Dear fucking Merlin, blood was everywhere! He slipped in a puddle of it as he entered and skidded into a desk, where more blood slid and congealed under his fingertips. The metallic smell of it was like miasma, and Harry choked back bile and tried to get his bearings.

Neville and Seamus were weeping together, huddled in a corner of the room, both covered in gore. Dumbledore was speaking to his familiar, no doubt asking him to retrieve Madame Pomfrey. Snape was in a corner of the room, huddled over a smaller body and chanting desperately—Ron! Oh, gods!

And in the centre of the floor, Draco Malfoy lay dead, a broken-off chair leg impaled through his chest and black blood pooling around him.

Harry started at the sight of the dead Slytherin, but shook off his horror and the urge to vomit and ran to help Snape. The professor was keening the same chant he had taught Harry that morning, his hands clasped hard over Ron’s neck, blood spurting in between his fingers. Tears streaked the stoic professor’s face, and the sight of them warned Harry that time was swiftly running out for his best mate.

With a cry, he shoved Snape away from his friend, taking over the chant for the man without blinking. It was only when he moved into place over the victim’s neck that he realised Snape had been trying to save Dean’s life, not Ron’s.

Why? Why save Dean first? Ron had been more seriously injured!
Nevertheless, Dean was bleeding out in front of him, his dark eyes boring into Harry’s and begging for help, and Harry could not refuse him. With a sob and a desperate plea for someone to look after Ron, he focused all his power into his hands, everything he had, and let it flow from him into Dean. All the while, he continued his chant.

Dumbledore tugged at Harry’s shoulder. “Harry, I know you are upset, but you must let Professor Snape wo—”


Dumbledore started to protest, but then Harry felt Dean’s flesh knit under his palms. The boy let out a sob and took a deep rattling breath, and part of Harry’s heart healed. Dean would survive, maybe. A warm, bloodstained hand settled on Harry’s own.

“Good work, Harry. He will live.”

Though Snape’s discreet touch and whispered encouragement comforted him, Harry wasn’t sure he believed the man. Dean had lost so much blood. Harry gave Dean one last burst of energy, just in case, and dashed to Ron’s bed. His stomach turned to stone at the sight of it.

Someone had pulled the blankets over Ron’s head.

“No, no, no!”

Harry jerked them down and slapped his hands over the gory wound in Ron’s neck. It wasn’t pulsing, wasn’t spraying, not like Dean’s had, and the skin was cold. Ron’s empty, staring blue eyes struck terror through Harry’s heart like nothing else had done, but he refused to give up. He could still save him. Harry was a bloody Shaman, and Shamans could save people like this, couldn’t they?

“No!”

Harry didn’t care that he was screaming. This was his best friend, the only man in the world who really understood Harry, and Harry loved him. Loved him like the brother he had never had.

He couldn’t be dead!

Dimly, Harry heard Dumbledore urge Seamus and Neville out of the room in case Malfoy was not as dead as he looked, but he barely registered it beyond the screams in his own head.

No. Not Ron!

Harry had to save him. With a broken cry, he began his chant again, tried to force his energy into his hands, but it didn’t respond. Instinctively, Harry knew it was because there was no answering life force left in Ron to pull his magic forwards, but he refused to believe it.

“V-Vulnera San-nentur. Vuln-ner-a San … Come on, Ron! Vulnera ….”

Dumbledore took his hand and pulled him away. “Harry, I … I am sorry. He—”

“No!” Harry snarled and jerked free, returning to Ron’s side. “Vuln-era S-Sanentur ….”

Another, stronger pair of arms gently tugged him away from Ron’s side and into a firm wall of black duelling robes.

Snape’s voice was uncharacteristically gentle. “Harry … he is gone.”
“No! No! I won’t let him d—I can s-save him! I’m a Sha—have to—let me go, damn it!”

But the arms kept holding him tight, even when Harry beat hopelessly against Snape’s chest.

“There to s-save him. Have to. Only one who c-can.”

Snape held him tighter. “Harry, I am sorry, but even a Shaman cannot raise the dead.”

“Nooo.” It came out like the wounded cry of an animal. “No. He’s not dead. He can’t be dead. I c-can’t … not like this!”

Snape’s hand slipped into Harry’s hair and, without a word, the man eased Harry’s head to rest against a firm chest and beating heart. That sound, more than anything, drove the truth home.

Ron’s heart wasn’t beating any longer. Harry might be a shaman, but there was nothing left in Ron to save. He was gone.

With a broken cry, Harry buried his face into Snape’s chest and wept.

Just an hour ago, Ron had been angry with Harry. He had given Harry his word it wouldn’t be forever, that someday they would be okay again, and he just needed time to calm down.

But they didn’t have time now. Their chance had passed, and Ron was dead!

Above his head, the older men were talking. He couldn’t make out their words over the screaming chorus of dead-dead-dead reverberating throughout his skull.

“Come, Harry,” Snape called. “We must get you to safety.”

Harry barely registered the feel of Snape’s arms wrapping around his shoulders and knees, the way gravity lurched as the man lifted Harry up and carried him out of the room. He hardly heard the cries and fear of the other Gryffindors as Snape carried him into the common room, his face blurred with a new glamour and again hidden under his hood. He barely blinked as Neville and Seamus, having been given leave to return, helped Madame Pomfrey levitate Dean onto a magical stretcher and float him past Harry and Snape.

He was in a daze. All that mattered was that Ron was gone, and Harry had failed him.

Never in his life had Severus been so ashamed of himself. He had been too slow, too assured in his own knowledge to believe of what the changes in Malfoy meant, and because of it, an innocent boy was dead, another on the verge of it, and still another had become a killer before he reached adulthood. And Finnegan—and probably Harry, judging by his face when he had burst into the room—had witnessed it all.

None of the boys in that dorm would ever be the same, and it was all his fault. Severus had failed them, utterly.

Severus held the shaking, weeping, broken boy in his arms a little tighter, relieved that this one, at least, he had been able to save. Though how a feral vampire could maintain enough of his mind to target a particular victim mystified him—they were entirely bestial, indiscriminate killing machines without a shred of humanity left—he wasn’t fool enough to believe that Ronald Weasley had been
Malfoy’s true goal.

Had Severus not set Harry a new time for his ‘detention,’ the boy would be dead, too.

He stayed in the shadows, watching Minerva try to wrangle her terrified cubs into some sort of order. She hadn’t much luck until Albus addressed the panicking Gryffindors in a grave, shaking voice.

“Everyone, gather around,” said the headmaster.

There was something to be said for Gryffindor loyalty. At the grief in the old man’s tone, everyone in the room—even the first years—rallied and dashed to hear Albus’ report.

“I … I am afraid there has been an attack. Are any of you aware that we apprehended four Death Eaters among the students yesterday evening, Draco Malfoy among them?”

“Y-yes,” said Hermione in a shaking voice. “Please. What happened to Dean? What’s wrong with Harry? Who is he with? What’s going on?”

The other Gryffindors echoed her questions in a rush of panic. Loud panic. Severus’ head ached with their shouts. Dumbledore silenced them with a wave of his hand.

“Mister Thomas is gravely injured, but alive. We do not yet know if he will recover, but with medical treatment, there is hope. Mister Potter is … simply in shock, and Mister Simeon here—a friend who was visiting with me at the time of the attack—is helping him to cope. Harry is uninjured, but the aftermath of the attack has left him … incapacitated. I am afraid we … we were unable to save everyone.”

Minerva gasped and covered her mouth with a shaking hand.

Hermione went ashen. “No. No. It’s not … please say it’s not true.”

Dumbledore blinked tears into his beard. “I am sorry to say that I cannot. Draco Malfoy, unbeknownst to us, was altered somehow, and just moments ago, became a feral vampire. He is dead now—Mister Longbottom vanquished him—but before he perished, he … gravely injured both Mister Thomas and Mister Weasley.” He bowed his head and laid a hand over his heart. “I am grieved to report that Ronald did not survive.”

Shrieks and cries and pleas rang out all around Severus, making his ears ring and his eyes well, and he Occluded hard to keep from giving himself away. He had to be strong. Had to be hard. These students’ lives depended on it. And he had already failed them once that morning.

Despite the pang that terrible thought gave him, Severus forced his sorrow to quiet and held Harry closer, trying to spare him the pain of hearing his classmates’ screams of grief.

It was only then he realised that Harry was screaming, too.

Shite. He had to get them out of here. Harry was too noticeable, too famous—he would draw attention, and that would be bad both for his recovery and Severus’ safety.

“Albus,” he called, disguising his voice with the tricks of long practice.

Dumbledore gave him a grim nod. “Take him and Miss Granger to the safe place, Steven. Hurry.”

Snape nodded and knelt before the fire. “Miss Granger? Where is Miss Granger?”

‘Steven Simeon’ would not know who she was, after all, and he could not afford further mistakes.
The girl extricated herself from Ginevra Weasley’s arms and staggered to his side. “I … I’m H-Hermione Granger.”

Severus gave her a sympathetic look—her grief pierced his heart, and he would not be hard on her, not today.

He altered his voice just enough to sound unfamiliar. “I am terribly sorry for your loss, Miss Granger; however, we must get Mister Potter to safety. If you will, please place some floo powder inside the flames for us. I am unable.”

Hermione gave him a curious look, but scrubbed tears from her face and obeyed. Snape thanked her and went to her side.

He leaned down, clutching Harry close, and whispered, “Miss Granger, for Potter’s sake and mine, do not react, but I need you to follow me to this address: Professor Snape’s hidden shelter.”

She gasped, but only replied with the barest of nods.

“Good.” He cast a *Muffliato* around the hearth and murmured the address into the fire. As soon as the flames turned green, he stepped through with his precious burden.

The other side opened up into a small bunker, a safe haven Severus hadn’t seen for years. It still looked exactly as it had when he left it last.

Harry would be safe here, no matter what manner of catastrophe the Dark Lord brought upon their heads. The warding magic on the room was so powerful, it shone in the perimeter, making the stone walls look like diamond. Nothing short of a nuclear bomb would pierce those wards, and probably not even that.

Severus walked past a small kitchenette and table for two and into a studio bedroom. Japanese screens walled off a space for a narrow wardrobe and two single beds, positioned with a nightstand between them. Those were *their* beds, Severus’ and Harry’s, though Harry had no idea and mightn’t for some time.

Severus hoped there was never a need to tell him.

Albus had designed this place sixteen years ago, the moment Harry had been orphaned and Severus had pledged his life to protecting him. The moment the war had taken both of their lives and balanced them on a sword’s edge. Despite Severus’ protests, Albus had insisted they would need a place to run in case the shite hit the fan. At the time, the idea of sharing such close quarters with Potter had twisted his guts into knots.

In Harry’s third year, when Albus had considered using the shelter to hide Harry and Severus from Sirius Black, Severus had insisted that they wouldn’t need to worry about Black before the week was out—he and Potter would have killed each other.

At the time, he was probably right. Now, he thought they might get on rather well. Ever since Severus had apologised and Harry had accepted him without prejudice, Severus had found the boy’s presence … comfortable. He wouldn’t mind being here with Harry now, if they had to escape in a hurry.

Still, he hoped they never need seriously use it. Friendly or not, those quarters would get too close fast when they had nowhere to be alone. Not to mention, a need to stay there would mean their lives were in immediate, omnipresent danger that even Hogwarts’ wards could not protect them from.
No, Severus did not look forward to that situation.

The attack from that morning, however, gave Severus the creeping suspicion that the day they would need this shelter was coming, and coming soon.

With a sigh, he laid Harry upon the nearest bed and brushed the boy’s fringe from his forehead. Harry had stopped screaming, but his broken sobs hurt Severus like knives through his heart.

“Wait here, Harry. I am going to retrieve Miss Granger for you. You can grieve here in peace without worrying about being disturbed.”

“D-don’t leave me,” Harry sobbed. “Please.”

Severus hesitated, but the pain in the boy’s voice captured him. “As you wish.”

He sat on the bed beside Harry and held the boy’s hand, though he felt awkward about it.

Then the flames roared to life, and Granger cried out. “Harry!”

Severus called, “Over here, Miss Granger.” To Harry, he whispered, “I must stand. She does not know.”

Harry gave him a nod, but whimpered as Severus released his hand. The older man brushed Harry’s hair back gently before rising and standing at the foot of the bed. He trembled as he removed his glamours.

Gods, Severus hoped Granger deserved the trust he was about to place in her.

Granger came into the room, wiping her eyes, and checked at the door. “P-Professor Snape?”

“Yes.” Severus met her eyes. “Miss Granger, have you applied what Harry has told you about Occlumency at all?”

The girl blushed through her tears. “Yes, but I hardly think this is the time—”

“It is. You know I lead a double life. Before I will let you stay, I must know that you will keep my secrets—for all of our sakes. Can you Occlude?”

She sobbed and covered her eyes. “Damn it, Snape! I just lost my boyfriend. Do you think I care about your spying right now or your grudges? Just go already.”

Severus glared. “The only reason I will not punish you for such an outburst is that I know you are grieving. However, I cannot leave you here without your word that you will Occlude what you see in this place from the outside world. My life and Harry’s depends on it. Are you capable of it, and will you swear to do so?”

She lowered her hand, revealing brown eyes wide with shock. “H-Harry? You called him Harry?”

“Your word, Miss Granger.”

She glared through rivers of tears, but shouted, “All right! Yes, I can Occlude and I swear I will! Gods.”

Severus sighed. “Thank Merlin.” He made quick strides back to Harry’s side and took the boy’s hand once more. “I must go send my Slytherins to their dorms, or he will suspect I am not where I should be. Will you be well here with Miss Granger until I can return?”
“No,” Harry sobbed. “Never be well again.”

Severus’ heart twisted. “I know. Believe me, I know.”

Harry sniffled and looked into Severus’ eyes. The pain in the younger man’s cut Severus to the quick.

“Mum?”

Severus gave him a terse nod.

Harry grimaced against another wave of tears. “Does it ever get any easier?”

Severus brushed Harry’s hair back from his face. “I miss her every single day I breathe, Harry. Likewise, you will always miss him, but you will also learn how to go on again, in time.” He squeezed Harry’s hand. “I do not know if it gets easier, per se, but we learn to bear it.”

Harry gave him a wan smile, though his tears did not slow. “T-thanks. I think … I’ll be safe now. Not okay, but safe.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulder before he stood. “I will return as soon as I safely can.” He turned to Granger with a grim expression, taking in the girl’s wide eyes and gaping mouth.

“As I said, Miss Granger, I live a double life. Until you knew Occlumency, it was not safe to reveal it.” He frowned. “And I shall have to test the strength of yours, later. However, for now, you need not concern yourself with anything but recovering. Simply grieve and help Harry through his pain, if you are able.”

“Thanks, Professor,” Harry said in a broken voice.

Severus nodded and patted the screen beside Harry’s bed. “The loo is on the other side of this screen, behind a blue door. If you are thirsty, there is water and perhaps some kind of soda in the refrigerator. I doubt you will be hungry after such a loss, but if you do need something to eat, there are many things to choose from in the kitchen. I do not know what, as the elves keep this place stocked and clean. You are welcome to help yourself to whatever you need, or you may also call Dobby here—only Dobby. We are assured of his loyalty, but the other house elves are unknowns.”

He moved to the doorway. “Please, do not leave this space, however. We are not positive that the danger has passed.”

Granger shook herself out of her shock and gave him a hesitant nod. “Will you … check on Dean for us, sir, if you’re able?”

Severus inclined his head. “I shall do my best. I will not be able to if I am observed. It may be best to floo-call Madame Pomfrey instead—call her office, not the hospital wing itself. Do give her time to treat him first, however. Wait two hours or until I have returned, and if I am unable to ascertain the state of Thomas’ health by then, we shall call her together.”

Granger nodded and moved to sit beside Harry on the bed. “I’ll … try to … t-take care of him, Professor.”

He laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, to her obvious surprise. “I will be back as soon as I can.”

She nodded, and with his heart bleeding and raw, Severus gave them one last look before he swept away to his private quarters. Before he did anything in public, he would have to tidy himself and
change clothing. If he went into the snakes’ den with the blood of a vampire and two Gryffindors on him, it would not go well for any of them.

Despite his precautions, as he *Scourgified* the blood of dead and dying teenagers off of his body, he had the sinking feeling that nothing would ever be well again.
The Aftermath

Chapter Summary

Warnings: self-harm brought about by trauma. Summary: Harry and Severus have to deal with the fallout after losing Ron.

CHAPTER 9
THE AFTERMATH

As soon as Snape left, Hermione caught Harry into a hug and burst into tears on his shoulder. For Harry’s part, he just patted her back and stared at the wall, dazed and empty.

How could Ron be dead? It didn’t feel real—any moment he would wake up and find this all a horrible nightmare. Only … every time he glanced at his hands, he saw the blood under his fingernails, sticking between the creases of his fingers, and he remembered it cooling and congealing under his palms. Remembered his failure to save his first friend.

And inside, he bled.

It seemed hours had passed before Hermione sat back, red-eyed and puffy, her face slick with tears. In reality, it was probably only a few moments. Pain made time crawl—Harry had enough experience with grief to know.

“I was in a tiff at him,” she choked out, her tears falling anew. “I hadn’t told him I loved him that night because I was so angry at him for treating you badly.” She buried her face in her hands and sobbed. “But I never imagined I’d never get to say it to him again!”

Harry sniffled, torn asunder by her words, and hugged her again. “You can tell him. You can always tell him. He just … can’t say it back now. But he loves—loved you, Hermione. With everything in him. And he … he loved me, too. He was just a-angry.” He bit his lip to keep from sobbing along with her.

“It’s not right.” She buried her face into Harry’s shoulder. “We should have been able to fix it. We should have had more time.”

Harry’s lip quivered, and he didn’t trust himself to speak. He was trying so hard to be strong for her, but with every moment, the daze faded, and horrible, crushing pain stole his breath.

Ron was dead. Dean might yet survive, and Malfoy had brought his death upon himself, but Ron had done nothing to deserve this. He had died a horrible, gruesome death—at the age of seventeen—all for the crime of being Harry’s friend.

Harry had blood on his hands.

Suddenly, he could smell it. In his pain, his senses had turned off, but as he looked down and realised his hands actually were bloody, the smell hit him like a lorry. His stomach lurched violently.

With a grunt, he shoved Hermione away and dashed to the loo. It was cramped, as loos went. Thank goodness Harry was small. He had just enough room to crash to his knees, lean over the toilet, and
expel everything he had eaten for the past week.

When he had finished, he still smelled their blood.

He sobbed and tore off his shirt, and it was only when he started work on his trousers and Hermione gave a strangled cry that he realised she had been in there with him the entire time, rubbing his back.

“Can’t—have to get the blood off. Smell it. It’s everywhere.” He retched again.

Hermione paled. “Oh gods. Harry … oh! I didn’t even … I was so distraught. How could I have … oh dear Merlin, you’re covered. Get in the shower. I’ll be okay for a few minutes.”

“O-okay. A-ask Dobby to get some clothes for me again?”

She frowned. “Again?”

“I had to shower at Snape’s this mo—” He moved, and the scent of blood overpowered him again. “Please.”

“All right.” Hermione took the blood-covered shirt, and when Harry removed the rest of his clothing, she took those too—from around the door. “Do you want me to get rid of these?”

“B-burn them. All of it.”

“Even your trainers?”

“C-can’t touch them again. Just burn them.”

She sniffled and sobbed. “I’m so sorry, Harry.”

“So’m I.” More than she would ever know.

She padded away, and Harry bolted for the shower to scrub away the smell of death.

Even when the water ran clear, he still smelled it everywhere.

Severus’ students had been surprisingly well-behaved, the news of the death of one of their own and expulsion of two others mitigating any unwelcome glee over Weasley’s death. Even so, it had taken time to calm his students down and get them into their dorms, and when he emerged from the Slytherin common room, Albus was waiting for him.

“Do you have any explanation, Severus?”

Severus shuddered and shook his head. “He was not a vampire yesterday, Albus. I know of no possible way he could have contracted the disease with a house elf guard and locked up in Hogwarts’ most secure chambers.”

Albus stroked his beard. “It is most troubling. Perhaps more so is the question of how he escaped in the first place.”

“That, I have an answer to. True vampires—those who have ingested at least five parts of vampire
blood—have the ability to shadow walk. They can, especially in the case of ferals, sometimes bypass wards this way. And since Draco was a student, the wards would have known his magical signature and that made it easier for him to slip by them undetected.”

Albus frowned. “Any full vampire could do this?”

“Unfortunately. I fear it is the main reason why the Dark Lord is so determined to recruit as many as he can, though as of yet, I have no proof.”

Albus’ eyes turned to steel. “The students are not safe here.”

“They will be far less so outside these walls.”

“Perhaps, but until we alter the wards to exclude vampires, we are all at risk.”

“Do we not have two or three non-feral vampiric students? I know I must make blood replenishing potions for them regularly, at any rate.”

Albus nodded. “We shall have to add them as exceptions somehow.”

Severus frowned. “I do not think that is possible.”

“I will discuss it with Bill Weasley. If anyone knows warding, it is he.”

“Perhaps it might wait until after his brother is laid to rest?”

Albus flinched. “Yes. Dear Merlin, Severus, I thought they were safe!” The old man bowed his head and dabbed at his eyes, and Severus’ chest ached. “I told them there was no safer place than Hogwarts. And now, now one of our boys has been murdered in his own bed, another lies dead and altered beyond recognition, and yet another barely clings to life.” Tears dripped into his beard. “I have failed them.”

Severus wished he could be more demonstrative in public, but with eyes everywhere, all he could do was cast a silencing charm and reassure Albus verbally.

“Albus, it is not your fault. I should have recognised the signs. I, the Defence teacher, the spy, the man who has spent half his life in the darkness—I failed to see and understand Draco’s symptoms. I should have warned you, and then we might have ended this tragedy before it began.”

Albus sighed and slumped in defeat. “Perhaps there is nothing we could have done even if we had known, Severus. Vampire or no, I could not murder a student in cold blood.”

Severus’ eyes hardened. “I could have done. If it meant saving innocents, I would have done it.”

Albus laid a hand on Severus’ shoulder. “No. That boy’s failures alone have shattered you inside, Severus. It would have destroyed you to kill him.”

“It does not matter. I would still have done it, had I not been such a fool.”

“I … I know, Severus. But I would not have let you.”

Severus shook his head and threw off Albus’ touch. The old man would understand he did it out of necessity and not because Severus was rejecting him.

“This entire discussion is moot, Albus. Whether we are the abysmal failures we believe ourselves to be or not, going over our mistakes will bring us no closer to an explanation. How did Draco even
turn to start with? He was never exposed to a vampire!”

“Perhaps not in Hogwarts, my boy, but while in that room with Tom? Who knows.”

Severus swallowed hard. “When he emerged, he had blood on his mouth. I had assumed it was from torture, but ….”

Albus shivered. “Oh. Yes, it may well have been.”

“But that makes no sense, Albus! When one takes the blood of a vampire, they turn immediately. They do not hold on to their humanity for a day, then turn. It is impossible.”

Albus nodded and stroked his beard. “Perhaps, but until last night, we also believed it impossible to counter Veritaserum, and so Tom has.”

Severus winced. “True. I suppose it is theoretically possible he has found a potion which might delay the effects of vampiric blood.”

“And if he has, what a powerful weapon of persuasion that would be. Perhaps enough to drive an otherwise normal teenage boy to murder a fellow student and professor.”

Severus stopped in his tracks. The desperation, the madness, not caring if he cursed Severus so long as he took Potter down. If the Dark Lord had threatened Draco with vampirism in twenty-four hours if he failed ….

Severus imagined he would have been desperate, too.

Even so, one thing didn’t fit.

“For that to be effective, Albus, the Dark Lord would have to have an antidote as well. Else Draco would not have bothered to try. He would have simply killed himself, perhaps, or sought my help.”

Albus shook his head. “I doubt Tom has discovered an antidote so soon. It would have taken his potioner’s entire focus to produce a counter to Veritaserum and a late-onset vampirism potion. I do not think he has had much opportunity to test the latter, so it is unlikely he has had the time to develop a delayed-vampirism antidote. That said, Tom has lied to achieve his ends before, Severus. Why should he stop now?”

Severus rubbed his arms. “Why indeed. Have you found any evidence of other vampires or plots?”

Albus appeared to age ten years. “No, but the first one did quite enough damage.”

Severus thought of Harry and winced. “I should return to the flat, Albus.”

“Hmm. Yes, but first, we need to see to Harry’s dorm mates. They saw you, Severus. They know.”

Severus shuddered. “Then it is only a matter of time.”

“Perhaps they can be persuaded.”

“It may be better to keep silent and let them draw their own conclusions. No doubt their hatred will supply them with an explanation for my presence.”

Albus frowned. “Perhaps with Seamus and Neville, but Dean saw you weeping over him, Severus. He knows he owes you his life.”
“With the amount of blood loss Mister Thomas sustained, it is highly unlikely he will recall it. However, if he does, we shall deal with it then. For now, I am only concerned about making liabilities of Longbottom and Finnegan. Especially Finnegan. The boy cannot even keep his own secrets, let alone mine. Thomas, at least, is capable of discretion.” Severus frowned. “If you make the suggestion that I had to come with you or lose my position, perhaps it will aid them in drawing the conclusions we wish them to.”

Albus gave him a sad nod and led Severus towards the hospital wing. “How I wish you might be the man you truly are, Severus.”

Severus bowed his head. “I am able to with you, and with Harry, and now with Miss Granger. For now, that is enough.”

“Miss Granger is able to Occlude?”

“I shall have to test her later, but yes. It does appear she is able.”

“Well, that is good news. Harry needs a confidant more than ever now.”

Sorrow weighed down Severus’ shoulders. “Yes.”

Albus opened the door to the hospital wing and cancelled their privacy wards. Severus forced his customary scowl onto his face and Occluded hard, lest his emotions wreak havoc upon his cover.

Poppy had placed Thomas in the intensive care ward, tucking him away in a secluded room in the back, where prying eyes wouldn’t find him. Severus kept his expression impassive as he took in the sight of the boy lying pale and silent, surrounded by medical equipment and magical monitors. Unflappable as always, Poppy hovered over him like an avenging angel, darting this way and that in attempt to save his life. Longbottom and Finnegan sat near the injured Gryffindor’s bed, tears streaking their faces and their eyes dull with pain.

Albus stepped inside the room and beckoned Severus to follow. “How is he, Poppy?”

She shook her head. “I am doing everything I can. He’s weak, but so long as he is not stressed too severely—” Here she shot Severus a stern glare. “He should recover.”

Severus’ gaze turned to steel. “I should hope you know me better than to think I would trouble a student on the verge of death, particularly now.”

She huffed and went back to her work. “Just don’t shout at them, Severus. They have been through enough.”

Severus buried a shard of hurt deep beneath his shields. “Be quiet, woman, and tend to your patients.”

After shooting him another glare, Poppy ignored him in favour of saving the boy’s life, to Severus’ relief. He was unsure if he could stay calm if she continued debasing his character.

Albus discreetly patted Severus’ arm as he passed, the only comfort he could afford to offer while they were trying to maintain Severus’ cover. Severus said nothing and stepped back to allow Albus free rein.

Albus stood before Longbottom and Finnegan with pain in his eyes. “My dear boys, I am so dreadfully sorry. Are either of you injured?”
Neville held up his hands, both of which were wrapped with white gauze. Beside him, Finnegan pulled back his loose shirt, revealing an arm and shoulder black with bruises.

Albus winced. “I did not see the vampire attack you. I am sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” said Finnegan.

He cast Severus a dirty look that said he blamed the Slytherin for the attack. Despite the pain the knowledge caused him, Severus simply scowled and did nothing to discourage his belief. That was what they wanted him to believe, after all.

Albus said, “What happened? How did you come to be so injured?”

Finnegan turned back to Albus, his expression softening in the face of the headmaster. “Had to break the chair apart, didn’t we? Neville held the leg and I had to ram it against the wall to break it loose. Then Neville … well, it tore through his hands when he … when ….”

The boy shuddered, and Albus patted his hand again. “I believe I understand. Thank you both for your quick thinking. You have saved many lives today, though I do understand that it feels inadequate in the face of such loss.”

Severus looked away and wished he could thank Longbottom as well. Severus hadn’t been prepared to face a feral vampire—none of them had—and if not for Longbottom and Finnegan’s quick thinking, he would certainly have died that morning.

He owed Longbottom his life and an apology, but the boy could not Occlude, and Severus already had too many liabilities to worry about. All he could do was sneer and hope that one day, he could thank Neville properly. Perhaps begin to make up all the terrible things he had done to the boy.

The morning had proved he had misjudged Longbottom as much as he had Harry.

Gods, he wished he were free to apologise. At least to give the boy some small comfort. Maintaining such a cruel persona hurt him as much as it did his students, if not more.

Longbottom gave him a bemused look, and Severus realised some of his emotions must have been showing on his face. Terror fuelling his mental shields, he forced his lips into a sneer and watched as Longbottom turned away, anger sharp in his eyes.

Severus wanted to cry. Gods, he hated lying like this. He hated having to treat children like shite all for the sake of a war he wished he’d never gotten involved with in the first place. It was enough to make him hope, just for a moment, that his spying had been discovered. The prospect of a final rest sounded so nice, but then he remembered Harry, remembered his need, and strength came back to him.

He had to continue this façade, at least for now. Harry was depending on him.

“Poppy,” said Albus with a sad sigh, “how is Mister Thomas? Will he pull through?”

Poppy looked up for a moment. “You know full well I cannot give you any guarantees, Headmaster. However, Mister Potter appears to have sealed these wounds in time, and there is no trace of infection. Mister Thomas has lost over a third of his blood volume and will be healing for some time, and even when he does heal, there may be lasting damage to his mental faculties, if he was deprived of oxygen long enough. However, given the state of his health at the moment and what the boys shared with me, I have reason to hope he will survive intact.”
Albus gave her a wan smile. “Thank Merlin for that. We have … suffered enough loss this morning.”

Poppy lowered her head and sniffled. “Too much. Poor Harry. Is he enduring well?”

Severus remembered Harry’s dazed expression when he had left earlier and suppressed a shiver. No, Harry was not enduring well. He hoped Miss Granger could help.

“As well as can be expected, Poppy,” said Albus with a sigh. “I am afraid that is not very well at all.”

The mediwitch and Gryffindors lowered their heads.

Albus patted the Gryffindors—Longbottom on his shoulder and Finnegan’s hand. “My boys, I am so terribly sorry for your loss and thank you for your quick action. If not for your resolve, we might all have perished.” He bowed his head in deference. “Thank you.”

Severus echoed the sentiment in his mind, but did not bow.

The boys sniffled and covered their faces, and Severus thought it prudent to step outside, so they might reveal their grief to the Headmaster—someone they trusted far more than himself. He leaned against the wall outside the room, brooding on the situation and wishing his persona was soft enough to let him grieve as well.

No matter his pride, no matter his strength, he had failed the Gryffindors that morning. The entire sixth-year boys’ dorm—and Granger—had been altered irrevocably, because he simply wasn’t fast or prepared enough to save them all.

He lowered his head to disguise the pain he could not Occlude away.

If he hurt this much, he hated to think how much Harry was suffering. Gods, he hoped the young man was safe.

Merlin, Harry had been such a hero. He had rushed into the dorm without any thought for his own safety and saved Thomas’ life. Severus would have words with him about that reckless disregard when the boy could bear it, but he had to admit, he was proud of the boy’s courage. And Longbottom! Gods, the boy had killed a grade-ten feral vampire that two highly experienced and powerful professors had not been able to conquer. With a bloody chair leg, no less! Even Finnegan had helped, when any other sixth year would have run for their lives.

Severus could not deny the truth when it danced in front of his face. If not for the quick thinking of three sixth-years, everyone in the room that morning—perhaps even everyone in the castle—might have died.

Merlin forgive him, but those boys had mettle like he had never imagined.

Severus flicked his eyes both ways and, seeing no one, cast a quick silencing charm. “Two-hundred bloody points to Gryffindor for heroism. And may I never have need to say those words again.” Not least because he hated to give points to Gryffindors. Minerva spoiled her cubs enough without his help.

He lowered his charm and waited, leaning against the wall with his ankles crossed.

A moment later, the Headmaster appeared again, his face streaked with tears and his eyes ancient with mourning. Severus again wished for a softer persona so that he might comfort the man, but he
could not risk it.

After all, Severus had his doubts that this would go as they had hoped. Finnegan would surely rail about how Severus was just there to save his own hide and whatnot, but if it got back to the Dark Lord that he was there at all, then Severus would have to think fast if he wanted to survive.

However the boys reacted, Severus’ time as a spy was running out. He only hoped he could do enough to protect Harry and the others before Finnegan—or someone else—blew his cover.

Albus wiped his eyes and blew his nose in a star-spangled handkerchief.

Severus scowled at the garish cloth. “Are they … situated, Headmaster?” He dared not say anything more open, not in this place where anyone might walk in.

Albus’ expression revealed his understanding. “I believe they are as well as they can be, given the situation.”

Severus gave him a curt nod and swept away, knowing Albus would follow. He forced his expression into one of irritation, despite the fact that the old man’s presence relieved him at the moment. He needed his mentor at a time like this.

Albus recast the privacy wards and silencing charms. “Severus … are you all right, my boy?”

Severus shook his head, knowing the wards would block him out, sight and sound. “No. I failed them, Albus. And it is only a matter of time now before they reveal me.”

Albus gave him a grim nod. “Severus, I fear you will be summoned soon, but I do not wish you to go. The fact that you were not informed of this plan to turn Draco is alarming.”

Severus shook his head. “I must go. I cannot stop now.”

“Severus, he knows or he would have summoned you. Your time as a spy is over.”

Severus pursed his lips and turned away. “No, Albus. I must try to learn more about this strange potion, about both of them. I cannot stop until we are certain ….”

Albus sighed and lowered his head. “I believe we are, but if you must continue, then at least hurry to put on your portkey.”

“Yes. That I will do. It is back in my off….”

A silvery otter leapt out of a wall, bounded around Severus’ feet, and left the way it had come.

“That is Hermione Granger’s Patronus,” Albus said in a grim voice.

“She would not call unless something was gravely amiss.” Severus gave Albus a stern look, a cover for the fear ripping him apart. “I must go to him. Now.”

Albus waved his wand against the wall beside him, revealing a door that hadn’t been there before. “Use your lab floo, Severus.”

“My lab? But—”

“The castle answers my needs, Severus. Do hurry.”

Severus nodded and rushed into the room Albus had opened. To his shock, he found himself in his
When he stepped inside the dungeon lab, he found the door had shut behind him, and Albus was gone.

“Most peculiar.”

He shook himself and rushed to the floo. It didn’t matter—nothing mattered if something had happened to Harry.

Without him, they were all doomed.

He tossed a handful of floo powder into the fire, called out the address for his flat under *Muffliato*, and rushed inside. At first, all seemed quiet. Then he heard Granger sobbing from around the corner.

“Harry, please! *Please* come out. You’re bleeding.”

Severus’ heart leapt into his throat. He dashed in the direction of the loo to find Granger leaning against the door, one fist against the wood, the other locked around the door handle. She was shaking with sobs, and her voice had gone hoarse from screaming.

Severus laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Miss Granger, what has happened?”

She jolted, then turned to Severus with a gasp. “Oh, thank Merlin. Professor, you’ve *got* to help him. He’s been in there almost since you left, and he’s scrubbing skin off, but he won’t *stop!*”

“Dear gods!”

The blood—Ronald’s blood—it had been all over them. Everyone in that room had been all but bathed in it. No doubt Harry would have been repulsed and horrified. Most likely, he had scrubbed his skin off trying to get the emotional trace of his experiences off long after the physical evidence had gone. It happened often enough with trauma victims—Severus himself had fallen prey to the illusion several times, and might have scrubbed himself bloody if not for Albus.

Severus jerked the door open, though his face flamed at the thought of what he had to do. “Why did you not pull him out, Granger? I would think his safety would trump your inhibitions.”

“I *tried!* The moment I touched him, he screamed at the top of his lungs and begged me to leave. He kept screaming and screaming, and I didn’t know what else to do! I don’t want to make him even *worse*.”

Severus squeezed her shoulder and charged into the loo. Gods, he hoped Albus would forgive him for this, but Harry’s needs were more important than Severus’ fear of breaking boundaries.

“Harry, I am coming in to help you.”

The boy sobbed. “Make it go away. Make it stop.”

Severus crept near to the shower, where a small pink blob had taken refuge in the furthest corner.

“I know, Harry. I know you feel filthy. I do understand. But it is only an illusion. The blood is gone. You are clean.”

“I still—urk—still smell it everywhere.”

“It is a psychological manifestation of severe trauma.” Severus gulped and placed a hand upon the shower door. “I am going to open this door and get you out, all right, Harry?”
“No, no. Have to get it off. Blood on my hands.”

“Harry, Ronald’s death is not your fault. His blood is not on your hands, either literally or figuratively.” Severus took a deep breath and pulled the shower door open.

Harry was crumpled in the corner, knees pulled up tight to his chest, scrubbing his hands with a loofah that had gone crimson.

“Dear Merlin!”

Severus jerked the loofah away, causing Harry to shriek and lunge for it, but Severus caught the soaking wet, naked boy and dragged him from the scalding-hot spray. His hands were dripping blood.

“Harry … dear gods. Look what you have done to yourself.”

“Blood on them. Had to get off the blood. Still bloody.”

“Yes, with your own blood, Harry. Not Ronald’s.”

“Blood everywhere. Everywhere!”

With a sigh, Severus Summoned a large towel and wrapped it around the boy, then lifted the sobbing, shaking teen into his arms and carried him from the loo. Granger was waiting outside the door, looking miserable and afraid.

Severus clutched Harry tight and laid him on the left-side bed—Harry’s own bed, though the boy was not yet aware of it. “Miss Granger, if you will, please fetch a full set of garments from the left-hand side of the wardrobe and a bottle of ‘Essence of Dittany’ from the laboratory. The laboratory is on the opposite side of the flat, down the hall from the kitchen.”

“Dobby already brought Harry’s clothes. They’re at the end of the bed.”

“Ah. Then hurry after the dittany, then.”

“Yes, sir.”

While darted towards the lab, Severus sat beside Harry and stroked his wet hair, a touch that he hoped would calm the distraught boy and bring him out of the past.

“I do understand your fear, Harry. I know you still smell and feel it all around you, but open your eyes. The blood is gone. You are no longer in that room, among the pain and death and chaos. You are safe, in your bed, in my care.”


“Your own blood, yes, but not his. Harry, the Dark Lord and Malfoy killed him, not you. Never you.” He held Harry’s cheek. “You are not guilty.”

“I am.”

“No. You are not.”

“He died because he was my friend!”

Severus shook his head. “He died because he was in Malfoy’s way. Malfoy was feral, Harry. He
would not have recognised any of us.”

“Then why did he go to my common room? Why aren’t Crabbe and Goyle dead instead of Ron if he was an indiscriminate killer?”

Severus frowned, unsure of the answer himself. “Perhaps he retained enough of his mind to remember a grudge. Or perhaps the Dark Lord had somehow placed some kind of control upon him. I do not know.” He wiped Harry’s tears and wished he had come sooner. “The one answer I have for you is this: regardless of Draco’s state of mind, regardless of how much he did and did not recall or if he was in control of his actions, Ronald Weasley’s death is in no way your fault, Harry. He was dead before you arrived.”

Harry’s face contorted with pain. “And if I had been Occluding properly, I could have broken through the vision and come sooner, maybe I could have saved him!”

Severus stroked through the boy’s hair again as the touch seemed to calm him more than any other. “If you had been Occluding properly, you would not have known at all. And if you had not known, if you had not come the moment you did, we would have lost Mister Thomas, too.”

Granger gasped and set the dittany beside Severus. “What was that, Professor?”

Severus continued stroking Harry’s hair, despite the fact that Granger’s presence made him self-conscious about showing such vulnerability. Harry was too fragile, too broken to pull his hand away. The boy would fall back into flashbacks without some kind of grounding touch.

“Harry saved Mister Thomas’ life, Miss Granger. I could not heal him. The wounds were too deep, too dark for my power. Yet, Harry managed to seal them.”

She laid a hand over her mouth. “He … he did? How? I mean, we’ve been researching healing together, but we hadn’t dared try any real healing spells beyond the basics yet.”

“As you should not have done,” said Severus with a nod. “But Harry is apparently a Shaman—in wizarding terms, Miss Granger, that means a healer with especially powerful ability. I had not the power to save Mister Thomas, but Harry did.”

Granger knelt beside Harry’s head and kissed the boy’s cheek. “See, Harry? It’s not your fault. You saved lives.” Her voice wobbled. “I wish you’d been able to save Ron, too, but I do understand that it’s not your fault, and I’m glad you were able to save Dean.”

“I’m s-sorry, Hermione. I tried to save him. I really did, but I just couldn’t make my magic work.”

“He was already gone before the Headmaster and I made it into the room, Harry.” Severus held the boy’s shoulder. “There is nothing more you could have done.”

“M’sorry. So sorry.”

“Ssh,” Granger soothed. “You have nothing to be sorry for, Harry. Nothing.”

Harry broke into bitter tears, and a tense knot of panic unwound itself from Severus’ chest. The boy would recover. He had broken out of the past, at least, and that was enough to be going on with for the moment.

While Granger comforted the boy, Severus took the dittany from the bed and dabbed at Harry’s bleeding fingers. Harry had all but scrubbed the cuticles off in attempt to wash the perception of blood away. Severus wished he had come sooner.
He shook his head. Healing Harry like this would take more time than they had. He conjured a deep basin and turned the entire jar of dittany into the bottom. With some well-placed charms, the size of the dittany’s molecules increased until it filled half of the basin. Severus set the basin on Harry’s legs and carefully guided him to a sitting position.

“Here you are. Place your hands in here, Harry.”

The boy obeyed with a sob. “S-sorry, Professor. So sorry. Did I … are you going to be discovered because of me?”

Severus debated on telling the boy that Albus feared he had already been discovered, but decided against it. Harry had enough troubles without adding Severus’ fears.

“No, Harry. Professor Dumbledore and I were alone and under wards when Miss Granger summoned us.”

“I … I told her to come to you only if it was safe,” said Hermione with a sniffle.

Severus patted her shoulder. “You did well.”

He checked on the boy’s hands and was pleased to see that the worst of Harry’s injuries had sealed. He was still not well, but it was enough to stop the bleeding and help him dress, at least. They could continue his treatment once Harry was covered.

“Miss Granger, if you will stand on the other side of the screen, please, I will help Harry dress.”

The young man blushed. “I can do it.”

“Not with your hands in this state, you cannot.” Severus patted Harry’s arm. “It is quite all right. I shan’t need to touch you. We are wizards, after all.”

Harry went bright red and gave him an uncertain nod. Severus waited until Granger was on the other side of the screen to remove the vat and towel, and keeping his eyes high, he dressed Harry with a few flicks of his wand. In seconds, Harry was in another tatty tee and an even more woebegone pair of jeans than the first. He had no trainers.

“What happened to your shoes, Harry?”

The boy shuddered. “Couldn’t … covered in blood … had to burn them.”

Severus sighed and moved to sit beside the boy. “We shall find a new pair for you then. I cannot send you home with no shoes.”

Harry winced. “C-can you make them look like my other ones?”

Severus understood. If the Dursleys saw Harry with new trainers, they would either learn of his fortune or hurt him for spending money on himself, the monsters. Severus sighed.

“Yes, but I cannot make it a permanent charm, Harry. It will, at best, last a month.”

Harry nodded. “That’s all I need, isn’t it?”

“Yes. The protection will reset after one month, and then we shall take you from that place.”

“Until next year,” he said in a gloomy voice.
“No. The blood protections begin to fade after your eighteenth birthday no matter what we do. So there is no need to return there after this year.”

Harry looked up, some of the life and animation returning to his eyes. “Really? I don’t ever have to go back after this?”

“Yes.” Severus stood and held Harry’s shoulder. “Will you be well for a time? I must return to my office and prepare for ….” He remembered the presence of the girl and shook his head. “I must retrieve the portkey we discussed.”

Harry grimaced. “Yeah. I’ll be all right now. I mean, not all right, but I’m not in danger like you are. Go ahead, sir.”

Severus could not help but brush the fringe back from Harry’s eyes in a soothing gesture. The boy was trying to be brave, but Severus could feel his fear.

“I will return, Harry. And until then, you will be safe here.”

Harry frowned. “What about the train ride?”

Severus shook his head. “Neither you nor Miss Granger will be on it. As for the other students, I do not know. I will speak to the Headmaster, if I am able.”

Harry nodded understanding. “Thank you, sir. For everything.”

Severus bowed his head. “Miss Granger, you may come in now.”

The girl stepped around the screen with bright red cheeks and curiosity burning in her eyes, even over the intense veil of grief.

“Do not trouble Harry with questions that can wait,” said a stern Severus. “The two of you need to grieve before anything else.” He neglected to mention his fears that Harry would not be allowed to grieve once he returned to those blasted Muggles, and needed to do as much of it as he could now. He did not know how much Granger knew of the situation, after all.

“It’s all right, Professor,” said Harry with a wan smile. “I … it might help to think of something else for a moment.”

Those simple words brought home to Severus how familiar Harry was with loss. He closed his eyes, mourning the boy’s innocence, and squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “As you wish. I will return as soon as I am able.”

He turned and headed for the floo, but Granger’s voice called him back.

“Professor, wait. Just quickly, were you able to check on the others?”

Severus nodded. “Finnegan, Longbottom, and Thomas are all injured, Thomas far more gravely than the others. Finnegan has what appears to be a dislocated or broken shoulder, Longbottom tore his hands while ….” He swallowed hard. “Killing Draco. And Thomas—the vampire slashed his throat. Longbottom and Finnegan will most likely be healed before the day is out, at least of their physical wounds. Thomas will be ill for quite some time, but Madame Pomfrey is hopeful that he will survive.”

Harry sobbed in relief. “Oh, thank Merlin. At least I was able to save Dean.”
Granger sat beside him and wrapped him in a hug. “I … thank you, Harry.”

Harry sniffled and buried his face in her shoulder. Severus brushed the boy’s hair with the lightest touch of his fingertips.

“I will return as soon as I am able. Miss Granger, if something else should happen to Harry, he has a ring on his left third finger. Turn it and say my name, and I will know to come as soon as I am able. Or if I am not, the Headmaster also has a copy and will come.”

Her eyebrow shot up. “A ring? There?”

Severus’ face flamed. “Yes.”

“But you’re a professor!”

Harry gave an embarrassed cough. “Hermione! Merlin. It’s not like that. I just … I didn’t know about bonding rings and the like, and there’s a sticking charm on it, so I couldn’t switch when Professor McGonagall explained it.”

She stared at Harry for a long moment before giving into giggles. “Only you, Harry. Only you.”

“Oh, shut up.”

Severus barely suppressed a groan. Merlin help him, Minerva knew about the ring. No wonder she had looked so entertained when Severus had mentioned it yesterday.

He could not keep the heat from his face, so he turned away. “I trust you will not forget the ring should anything happen, Miss Granger?”

“I won’t either,” said Harry. “Thank you, Professor. We’ll be okay now. Really.”

Severus turned long enough to give them one last, uncertain look, then swept away.
“All right, what gives?”

Harry winced at the determined look on his friend’s face. She would not rest until she had answers. He sighed and rubbed up the back of his hair.

“Um, what do you want to know?”

“Why is he being so … nice?” She shook her head and sat beside Harry. “I mean, I expected him to be less cruel, given that we just … we lost ….” Tears streaked down her cheeks, and Harry took her hand.

“Yeah.”

Hermione shook her head and scrubbed her face. “Don’t. You still need to heal your hands the rest of the way.” She plopped the vat of dittany down in Harry’s lap and guided his hands into it. “There you go.”

He gave her a wan smile. “Thanks.”

“Yeah. But what’s going on with Snape, Harry? He … he’s acting like he really cares about you. You should have seen his face when I told him you were tearing yourself up before. He was terrified.”

He nodded. “You know he’s a spy. He can’t be nice in public or he’ll die, ‘Mione.”

“But he was cruel to you even in Occlumency lessons, Harry. Even alone. Even when you knew how to Occlude. What changed since then?”

Harry winced. “He … we … I don’t know how much I should say, Hermione. It’s just, yesterday we learned things about each other, and it changed everything.”

“Yesterday?” Her eyes narrowed, then grew to the size of saucers. “Dear Merlin. It was him, wasn’t it?”

Harry blinked. “What was?”

“He’s the one you found … hurting himself.”

Harry cringed. “Hermione, gods. Don’t ask me that.”
“So he was. Merlin! Why? Do you know why?”

He closed his mouth and turned away. “I can’t. It isn’t my place.”

She paused. “I suppose that’s true. So was that what changed your view of him, then? Knowing he’s sick?”

Harry shook his head. “The pensieve. What I saw in the pensieve at the end of last year—I’ll never be able to look at him the same way. I can’t say what I saw, but it … it changed my perceptions, not just of him, but of my parents and Sirius. Hermione, they were terrible to him. They abused him. Da and Sirius should have been expelled for what they did to him.”

She put a hand over her mouth. “Oh gods. What did they—”

“No. I can’t. I probably said too much already.”

She sighed and waved him on. “I suppose, though you know I’m trustworthy.”

“It’s not that, Hermione. It’s just not my secret to tell, and I’ve already broken his trust once before. I don’t want to hurt him like that again. Especially not now that he’s … he’s my friend.”

She smiled. “Really?”

“Yeah. I told him as much this morning. Well, sort of. When … when Dumbledore floo called him to warn him there was something wrong with … with Malfoy—gods, I wish we had known ….”


“It wasn’t enough. It’s never enough.”

“Y-yes, it is. We still have Dean.”

At the pain in her voice, Harry thought he should move on.

“Yeah. Well, anyway, while they were talking, Professor Snape put on a heavy silencing charm. It was so intense, he couldn’t hear me literally screaming in his ear. I was so terrified he’d died, Hermione. He was just sitting there, eyes closed, not moving—you know how he goes still sometimes. I was crying, and when he realised I was there, he pulled me to sit with him and held my hands and I … I told him I thought he was dead, just because he was my f-friend. Like everyone else.”

Hermione gasped. “Oh, Harry. Do you really believe that?”

He stared at his hands. “Why do you think Voldemort made Malfoy target Ron? He’s not a Muggleborn, Hermione! Riddle wanted to get to me. And gods, I’m so terrified for you. And now for Snape. I can’t lose any more friends. I can’t.”

She laid a hand on his shoulder. “Harry … we don’t know for sure that Voldemort controlled Malfoy.”

“Yes we do. I wouldn’t have s-seen it otherwise.”

She paled and lifted her hand to her mouth. “Oh dear gods! You saw it?”

Harry’s face scrunched up with grief and horrible memories, but Hermione caught him into a hug before he could lose himself in them again.
She half-sobbed in his ear. “We’ll get him, Harry. It’s *his* fault, not yours, okay?”

With a sigh, Harry shook himself out of his memories. “I dunno about that. But anyway, we were talking about Snape.”

Hermione rubbed Harry’s back. “Yeah? So what did he do when you told him that you were his friend?”

Harry blinked hard. “He … he hugged me. Held me so tight, and for that one moment, I felt safe. I’ve never really felt safe before, but I did then.” He gave her a bemused look. “Why? Why should I feel like that when, up until yesterday, he’s always been so mean?”

Hermione shrugged. “He *was* mean, but he was also there to save you whenever you needed help. Like when Quirrell cursed your broom or when Remus transformed near us. Snape was so furious that night, but he still jumped in front of us to protect us from Moony. Maybe in spite of his razor-blade tongue, you always knew he was good somewhere.”

Harry snorted. “Yeah, right. Until fifth year, I thought he was a monster and had no idea why Dumbledore trusted him.” He shook his head sadly. “Well, I know now. He risks everything for us, time and time again, and he doesn’t have a soul he can turn to besides Dumbledore.”

“And you, now.” Hermione smiled. “His friend, right?”

Harry blushed. “Right.”

“Well, he can come to me too now, if he wants.” She looked towards the living room and chewed on her lip. “Do you think he’s okay, Harry?”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “Are any of us?”

She lowered her head and sniffled. “No. Not anymore.”

Harry held her waist and wished they still had a time turner. He would do anything to bring Ron back.

“I’m sorry, Hermione.”

“I am, too.” She laid her head upon his shoulder and wept.

Severus watched the Hogwarts Express pull out of the station with a pit of ice in his belly. Most of the students had opted to go home, feeling unsafe in the castle, but Severus worried for their safety regardless. Several aurors and professors—less Minerva, who was needed for her grieving and injured Gryffindors—had boarded the train with the students, all suited up to fight vampires and Death Eaters alike. Severus had the feeling that Draco was the only threat, now that the darker side of Riddle’s plan had revealed itself, but no one had felt safe without the fighters in attendance.

Severus couldn’t blame them. He didn’t feel safe, either.

The lack of a burn on his forearm increased his worry as he made his way to seek out the Headmaster—he should have been summoned already. Maybe Albus was right and the Dark Lord had somehow discovered Severus’ true loyalties.
Severus shuddered and shook his head. No. If he had, Severus would have already been summoned and tortured to death.

He pushed his fears to the side and concentrated on finding the headmaster. Albus would not be in his office in such a dire situation, but Severus wasn’t sure where the man might have felt he was most needed.

Most needed? Of course. Albus would be with the Weasleys, as would Harry and Granger, most likely.

At least Severus wouldn’t need to be cruel to the boy again, not yet. All the Weasleys—even the youngest—knew of his role within the Order. Severus could not be kind to Harry in such a situation—not with people who couldn’t Occlude—but he could at least be civil, and that was better than the alternative. Severus wasn’t sure he could be harsh to Harry now, not after everything.

It was amazing how much one day could change his perceptions.

Severus entered the Great Hall and had to immediately push all his strength into his Occlumentic shields. Molly Weasley knelt in a circle of weeping redheads, clutching her youngest son’s body to her chest and keening with grief. The sound of her broken cries hurt even Severus’ hardened heart, and he fought to keep his sorrow from his expression.

Someone—probably Poppy, the poor woman—had sealed the gaping wound in Ronald’s throat and cleaned his body. And thank Merlin she had, because Severus might have had to hurt someone otherwise. No mother deserved to see her son torn in pieces and covered in blood. Seeing him cold and dead was terrible enough.

He came closer and frowned to see Granger kneeling with Ronald’s head in her lap, her tears wetting the boy’s hair. If Granger was here, then Harry must also be in attendance, but where was he? Why was he not grieving with his surrogate family? Surely Molly wouldn’t have turned him away. She would never have blamed Harry—would she?

No. The Weasleys loved Harry and were the epitome of kindness and fairness. None of them would have placed the blame at Harry’s feet. And it was a good thing, because Severus was sure he would have blown his cover had they done.

Still, where was he?

A quiet sniffle from the shadows drew Severus’ gaze. He looked only with his eyes, unwilling to draw attention to himself by movement, and saw not Harry, but Remus Lupin. The werewolf held on to someone Severus couldn’t see without turning his head. He suppressed a groan. It made sense that Albus would call the werewolf here for Harry’s sake, but Merlin, that didn’t mean Severus had to like it.

Slowly, so as not to be seen, Severus turned. From beneath a mop of black hair, a pair of red-rimmed green eyes looked up to meet his own. Well, Severus had found Harry—curled up in Lupin’s side and trying not to weep. A shard of jealousy stabbed his gut, and he glared at the wolf.

Wait a moment. Jealousy? Where on earth had that come from?

Nevertheless, he felt strange watching Lupin comfort the boy. It should have been Severus’ place.

Severus frowned at his own thoughts. *It was never my place. I do not even deserve his forgiveness, let alone to be the one he turns to in need.*
And yet, he wished he could be.

Severus let slip a soft sigh and pushed away his sentimentalism. Harry might be his friend now, but the boy also had others who had been kinder to him in the past. And if Harry could take comfort from them, then Severus wouldn’t interfere.

Besides the fact that Harry needed all the comfort he could get, if Severus interfered, it would be dangerous for them both.

He fixed his stony expression in place and sought out Albus. He was sure to be here somewhere, most likely with Minerva.

Ah. There he was. Behind the Weasleys, nearer to Harry and Lupin than the others. Severus strode through the shadows so as not to disturb the grieving family and made his way towards Albus and Minerva.

“Was there any trouble with the train, Severus?”

He should have known Albus would notice him before anyone else. Well, except Harry.

Severus shook his head. “If there had been, the alarms would have sounded, no doubt.”

Albus nodded. “If another vampire had turned, yes, but not in the case of covert Death Eaters. There were no further attacks, then?”

Severus shook his head. “Not yet. However, if there are covert agents on the train, they will not attack so close to the school. They will wait until they are out of reach of our aid.”

“Such was my fear.” Albus tugged on his beard and watched the Weasleys grieve with eyes full of pain. “I could not protect them, Severus. Either of them. I confess I am feeling all of my years today.”

Severus laid a hand on Albus’ shoulder. “I … I understand, Albus.” He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Albus’ statement had brought up another issue that, in wake of all the trouble and fear, he had forgotten. “Has anyone notified the Malfoys?”

Albus nodded. “They are on their way from Hogsmeade.”

“Who is with them?”

“Hagrid and Aurora.”

Severus winced. “If they attack …”

“They will not see their only son,” said Minerva in a voice thick with grief. “I doubt they will attack considering this. They are the foulest of the foul—Lucius in particular—but they are also parents and their only child died this morning. That will keep them subdued, I think.”

“And if not,” said Albus with a grim smile, “Aurora is quite the duellist and Hagrid has the alliance of the entire forest. They will find themselves outmatched.”

Severus frowned. “So I hope.” He cast a sidelong glance at Harry, frowning when he did not find him. “Where …?” He turned fully to see Harry in a faraway corner and talking with Lupin. By the looks on their faces, it was an intense discussion that Severus would be better off avoiding.

Minerva gave a snifflle and wiped her eyes. “I could not help but notice that my lions had quite a
significant increase in points this morning. Care to explain, Severus?"

He scowled and looked away. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“Oh? I did not give them points—though they deserve them. There simply hasn’t been time. Albus said he did not either. So …?”

Severus huffed. “All right, all right. I gave your lions those bloody points.” His glare softened. “They deserved them. As well as a stern lecture about the risks of rushing in.”

Albus laid a hand on his arm. “Not yet, Severus.”

Severus looked to the red-head lying dead in his mother’s arms. “No. Not yet.”

Minerva reached around Albus and patted Severus’ hand. “Thank you.”

“Don’t get used to it. It took slaying a vampire to make it happen this time. Nothing less than bringing me the head of the Dark Lord himself will bring it about a second time.”

She gave a wan chuckle. “Well, we shall all do our best to help Harry in that endeavour, if for no other reason than to see how many points you award my house this time.”

“Indeed.”

Severus turned to Harry with a frown, wondering if such a small, broken young man could truly fulfil that horrid prophecy. At the moment, he wondered if Harry had the strength even to make it through the day, given everything the boy was facing.

Severus shook himself. Harry would endure—he always had. Besides, he hadn’t the time to worry for Harry regardless, not when the boy had friends all around him and the Malfoys were on their way. As a supposed Death Eater, Severus’ place would be with Draco, as much as he longed to be almost anywhere else. He cast one more look at Harry, burying a shard of worry for him, and turned back to his colleagues.

Minerva had a sad smile on her face. “Harry will be fine, Severus. We will take care of him while you do what you must.”

Severus bowed in thanks. “Where is Draco?”

Albus’ eyes filled with pain again. “I believe Filius placed him in the small antechamber off the Entrance Hall behind the painting of Delores the Deranged. The password is ‘honoris.’ Do be careful, Severus, and keep your secret handy. Lucius Malfoy is a dangerous man at the best of times, and this is far from the best.”

Severus gleaned the warning to wear his emergency portkey from the Headmaster’s words and mind, and bowed in acknowledgment. “I will return as soon as I am able.”

“Good luck, dear boy.”

Severus held Albus’ shoulder briefly, then left the way he had come.
Watching Molly Weasley grieve over Ron—over Harry’s best mate—had all but ripped the still-beating heart from his chest. He hadn’t been able to bear coming too close. It was, after all, the family’s turn to grieve, and their pain made him bleed regardless. It was his fault. If he had never made friends with Ron that day, Missus Weasley would still have her son.

The thought made Harry want to withdraw from everyone, to become a recluse and never risk anyone by befriending them again.

As if Remus had heard Harry’s thoughts, he hugged Harry’s shoulders and murmured, “Harry, please. Stop beating yourself up. This isn’t your fault.”

Harry knew better than to argue. Remus would only say the same thing he had when Sirius had died, and it hadn’t been true then, either.

Harry was poison. Everyone who came close to him died.

The thought made him worry for Snape out of the blue, though he would hardly call their fledgling friendship close. Still, that moment when Snape had hugged him that morning, right before all hell broke loose, Harry had never felt so safe. Harry liked and trusted Snape—at least he did now that Snape was kinder—and that meant Snape was in even more danger than before.

He looked up and gulped to find Snape’s eyes on him. Something sparked in those dark eyes before they went blank and cold again, something like anger, but Harry didn’t know why Snape would be angry with him. Then he remembered who was holding him and understood. Snape was irritated to find Remus there, not angry with Harry. The thought reminded him of his apology at the beginning of the year, and the fact that he had never told Remus about it.

Harry wasn’t the only one who owed Snape reparations.

Snape swept past them to join Dumbledore and McGonagall, no doubt to discuss the events of the day and plans for tomorrow, and Harry decided then that he would confront Remus about it. He needed to get away from the pain for a moment anyway. Watching Molly grieve was shattering what remained of his soul.

He stood and motioned for Remus to follow him, choosing a faraway corner of the hall as an ideal place for this conversation. Well, not ideal, not with his surrogate family mourning ten metres away, but it would do after a silencing charm or two. Harry led Remus to the shadowed end of the Ravenclaw table and cast his charms, earning a raised eyebrow from the older man.

“Sit. We need to talk about Snape.”

Remus looked to Ron’s body and frowned. “Now, Harry?”

Harry winced. “Well, yeah. I don’t know when I’m going to see you again, and besides … I can’t … I need to think about something else for a minute.”

Remus sat and gave Harry a hesitant smile. “Well, I suppose if it helps you deal with this, then I’ll listen. Has Severus been troubling you today? I had hoped even he would have the decency to know ___”

“Stop there, Remus,” said Harry with a grim expression. “Snape isn’t in trouble—you are.”

Remus blinked. “I am? What have I done?”

“Recently, nothing that I’m aware of. But I want a real explanation for the past. How could you let
them, Remus? How could you just *stand there* and do nothing while Da and Sirius sexually assaulted him?*

Remus frowned and ran a hand through his hair. “That, well, it wasn’t really sexual assault, it was just—”

“If you tell me it was schoolboy antics or a prank, I swear I’ll walk out of here. That *was* sexual assault, Remus. I mean, no, they didn’t rape him, but they stripped him and … and I don’t even know if it went beyond that, because that’s when Snape pulled me out of the memory.” Tears blurred Harry’s vision, and he jerked a hand across his eyes. “But every other night, I see it in my nightmares, and it never stops there. So? I’m waiting, Remus.”

Remus gaped. “Harry … where on earth did all of this come from? And why now?”

Harry sniffled and brought his knees up to his chest. “I dunno. Just, Snape apologised to me yesterday before all this happened. He was … honest with me. Helped me to understand what was happening and even listened to my suggestions about what to do with … with that *monster* and his goons.” He gave a bitter laugh that ended in a sob. “I should’ve told them to kill him. I should’ve … should’ve just hit the bastard with *Avada* when he tried to kill me. I should’ve never let him—”

“Harry, please.” Remus took Harry’s hands and squeezed, unintentionally hurting him. Harry flinched and jerked back his still-healing hands.

Remus’ eyes filled with anguish. “What? You don’t want me to help you anymore?”

At the pain in Remus’ voice, Harry shook his head hard. “No, of course not. My hands are just injured—it’s not too bad, so don’t worry.”

“Are you okay? What happened?”

“I just … scratched them, badly, when I was trying to wash the b-blood ….”

“Oh.” Remus moved to sit beside Harry and wrapped his arm around the boy’s shoulders. “Do you need to talk about it?”

“No. Not now.” Harry scrubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms and shook his head. “I need the truth, Remus. I *need* to know why.”

Remus sighed. “Harry, I don’t know why you decided that *this* was a good time to talk about my past with Snape, but if you really need an explanation to heal, I’ll try.”

Harry nodded. “I do.”

Remus sighed and lowered his head. “All right. Well, the truth is—I knew it was wrong, what they were doing. I don’t know if I fully realised it was sexual assault, not then, but I knew it was far beyond the pale. And it horrified me. I guess I froze, Harry. I was so appalled at what they were doing and so scared of losing the only place I belonged that I just … locked up.”

“It’s no excuse.”

“I know.”

Harry sniffled. “Why didn’t you *do* anything? You were a prefect!”

Remus sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I *did*, Harry. Sirius and James took off his pants and left
him hanging there, naked and helpless, and when I saw his face, when I realised how utterly terrified
Severus was, it broke me. I’d never seen Severus cry, not until that day, and I couldn’t stand it. So I
snatched up their wands, set Severus on his feet, and punched both Sirius and James in the face.”

Harry gasped. “You did?”

Remus nodded. “They went too far. Much too far. So I knocked them flat, called them utter
arseholes, and gave them both the maximum punishment I could as a prefect. Then I went to Severus
—he pushed me off, of course—and gave him his wand. He hexed me for it and ran away, but I just
let him. I guess I felt I had it coming, for leaving him there so long without help.”

Harry frowned and wiped his eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me? It’s been driving me mad that everyone
I loved had been so horrible to him.”

Remus shook his head. “I just … I didn’t want you to think of them as monsters, Harry. They went
too far that day, but they regretted it later. Even Sirius. And … well, I just wanted you to have good
memories of them.”

“But it wasn’t true!”

Remus sighed. “I know. I’m sorry. I should have been honest. I just wanted to protect all of you, and
I guess I failed. Again.”

Harry winced and hugged Remus. “It’s okay. I mean, not okay, but I forgive you. Just don’t lie to
me again, okay? Even if you’re trying to protect me.”

“You have my word.”

Harry nodded and watched Snape for a moment. His expression was as stony as ever, but his eyes
revealed intense sorrow and fear. Harry felt much the same.

“Did you know I offered Snape a formal apology for it—the wizarding kind—at the start of this
year? I asked R-Ron about it last summer and as soon as I could get away, I went right to him. He
was a berk about it, of course, but for that moment, when I told him I was sorry for the pain my
family had caused him, gods, Remus. I thought he would cry.”

Remus watched the man as well, his expression hesitant and sad.

“He’s never forgiven me, Harry. Never. Even though I attacked my own friends for what they did to
him and never let them hex Severus again, he’s never forgiven me.”

“Have you ever tried apologising?”

Remus blushed. “I … I haven’t. Silly of me, hmm?”

“Perhaps a bit.” Harry watched Snape press Dumbledore’s shoulder and slip away. “He’s not what
he acts like, not really. He was … good to me yesterday and this morning. He rescued me, too, from
myself. When I kept seeing blood on my hands. He … he taught me to heal, and if I hadn’t known
… Dean would have …. I tried to save Ron, too, but I c-couldn’t. I couldn’t save him.”

Harry’s grief again slammed into him with the force of a speeding lorry, and he wept into Remus’
neck. “It’s my fault. All my fault.”

“Ssh. It’s no one’s fault but Malfoy’s.”
“I don’t even think it was his fault, Remus. Voldemort did this to him.”

Remus hugged Harry tight. “Then blame Voldemort, Harry. He’s the one who has taken so much from all of us. He’s the one who killed Ron—and Draco, too. Not you. Never you.”

Harry sniffled and laid his head on Remus’ shoulder. “Y-yeah.”

Severus watched Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy mourn their son with the creeping feeling that something was off. They wept and railed at the injustice of it all and threatened to have Hogwarts shut down—all of which Severus had expected—but it seemed a tad … forced. Severus could not dismiss the fear that the Malfoys were not to be trusted, not even in this.

Narcissa had expressed a wish to bury her son on her own grounds. Severus could not deny a grieving mother such a simple request, and so he watched as the woman wrapped her child in burial cloths transfigured from a shawl and levitated him into the flames. As the body floated past, Severus caught a whiff of cayenne and mugwort. Keeping his expression steady despite a sharp spike of alarm, he filed the knowledge away to report to the Headmaster later and pretended to have noticed nothing.

Narcissa followed her son, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. She said nothing to Severus, choosing instead to simply vanish into the bright green flames. Lucius, red-eyed and with a tinge of madness in his bearing, pressed a book into Severus’ hand.

Severus tucked his fingers away so that the man would not feel his ring.

“What is this?” He lifted the book and read the title. “A Compendium of Bog Ingredients. Are you implying my knowledge is lacking, Lucius?”

Lucius gave a sharp laugh that set Severus’ nerves on edge. “Of course not, my friend. It is simply a portkey. The Dark Lord wished to see you after we retrieved D-Draco. I would not keep him waiting, if I were you.”

Severus swallowed a shard of terror. “Indeed? Then I shall not waste time.”

Lucius gave him a disdainful nod and vanished into the floo.

Severus’ heart hammered like a timpani in his ears. His reprieve was over. He clutched the book tight, recalled the first happy memory that came to mind—incidentally, it was holding Harry in his arms and the way he had felt when the boy had called him a friend—and shot off a Patronus to Albus.

“Hello, Asphodel.” He patted the doe’s fetlock. “Tell Albus that Lucius gave me a portkey to the Dark Lord and I must go immediately.”

The doe bowed and vanished. Severus held the book tight and reinforced his mental shields as much as he could.

With a shudder, he lifted the book to his chest and whispered, “Portus.”
While the older Weasleys and professors discussed funeral arrangements for Ron, Harry led Ginny, Hermione, and Remus to the hospital wing to visit his remaining dorm mates. Dean was still unconscious, so they detoured to Neville’s and Seamus’ beds.

Before five minutes had passed, Harry wished he hadn’t come.

Seamus was livid and cursing Snape’s name with every breath. “The damn Death Eater bastard held up Dumbledore on purpose! I know he did. He wanted us all to die! It’s a shame Neville killed that monster before he took down Snape, too.”

Neville cried, “Seamus! Didn’t you see him trying to save Dean? He’d have died.”

“How do we know he was really trying, Nev? It was probably a front. As soon as Harry started that chant, Dean healed, no problem. I think Snape was faking it for Dumbledore just to keep his job.”

Harry didn’t know what to say. It was safest, probably, to let Seamus believe what he did, but at the same time, it was all completely wrong. And if anyone figured out that Harry had been in detention with Snape when it happened, they would question him. As he didn’t know what story Snape wanted him to tell—and because he didn’t think he could bear another minute of Seamus’ tirade without losing his temper—he slipped away and went to sit with Dean.

It was quiet in there. Madam Pomfrey had gone, having done all she could. The beeping of the monitors and Dean’s ragged breathing were the only sounds.

Harry took Dean’s hand and squeezed his fingers. “I’m so sorry, mate. If I’d realised Malfoy was this dangerous, I’d have killed him yesterday and been done with it.”

Dean’s hand twitched in Harry’s.

Harry’s heart thumped. “Dean? Mate, are you okay? Can you open your eyes?”

The boy’s eyelashes fluttered, and Dean voiced a soft groan of pain.

Harry squeezed his hand. “Dean! That’s it. Come on. Come back to us.”

Dean croaked, “Water.”

Harry almost sobbed with relief and filled a glass near his bedside with conjured water. With a gentle hand, Harry supported Dean and helped him to take a few careful sips—not too much, in case the injury to his throat had affected his ability to swallow. Dean managed to take it without too much trouble.

When Dean indicated he’d had enough, Harry eased the boy back onto the bed and set the glass aside.

“Dean … I’m so sorry. About Ginny. About Ron. Everything.”

He groaned. “No. It’s … don’t apologise.” Dean’s voice was raspy and weak, but at least he was talking. “Ron’s gone. It’s … it doesn’t matter, you know? I mean, it does, but not like this. I guess it all seems silly now.”

Harry blinked down tears. “I tried. I tried to help him.”
“I know.” Dean squeezed Harry’s hand. “S-horry about your bed, mate.”

“It’s nothing. I’m just glad you’re still h-here.” Harry had to hide a sob in his shoulder. “I’m so sorry. None of you would have been hurt if not for me.”

“If not for you,” Dean whispered, “I’d be dead.”

Harry choked back a sob and squeezed Dean’s hand. “Y-yeah. I’m still sorry.”

“It’s okay. Don’t … don’t worry about it.”

Harry frowned. “Is it hurting you to talk?”

Dean nodded. “Throat really hurts.”

“Oh. I’ll get Madame Pomfrey. Hold on a moment.” Harry stood and started to pull away, but Dean tugged him back.

“Wait. Tell me … Snape was crying over me. Why?”

Harry gulped. “Oh. I … I don’t know how much I can say, Dean. His life is on the line.”

“His life?”

Harry frowned and sighed. “I … I guess I can tell you this much. He’s a spy, mate. Most of the stuff he does to us is a cover. But you can’t say anything, okay? Not even to Neville or Seamus. Especially not Seamus. He’s convinced the whole attack is Snape’s fault, but I … I was …” Harry shook his head. “I don’t think I can say anything else. Just know Snape isn’t as bad as you think and he was crying because he was afraid he wouldn’t be able to save you in time.”

Dean gave him a hesitant nod. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah.”

He frowned. “How did … you save … me? Just a student.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “I’m apparently a Shaman. An extremely powerful healer. I just learned that chant this morning.” Tears blurred his vision. “I didn’t t-think I’d have to use it so s-soon.”

Dean squeezed Harry’s fingers. “Thank you.”

Harry stood and wiped his eyes. “I’ll get Madame Pomfrey for you, yeah? Just don’t say a word about Snape. Pretend like he’s the same arsehole you always thought he was. It’s safest that way.”

“I … promise.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back.”

Harry closed the door and trotted off after the matron with a worried heart. So now Dean knew about Snape, too, and Seamus would no doubt rail about the man’s ‘crimes’ to anyone who would listen. And people would listen. The junior Death Eaters, especially, would be interested in the angry Gryffindor’s tale. It was only a matter of time before the wrong person heard, and then … what?

Harry shook his head. He didn’t know what it would mean for Snape when the story got back to Voldemort, but it couldn’t be good.
Recovery

Chapter Summary

Warnings: Self-harm and referenced/implied sexual assault. Not quite rape, and it's only talked about in vague terms AFTER the fact, so it shouldn't be too graphic. Be warned though, the assault was absolutely brutal, and the hints imply terrible things.

Summary: Severus returns after his meeting in pieces. Harry puts him back together again.

***AN: Sev is going to be gentle with Harry from this point on, though only in private. He doesn't realize it yet, but Harry's already won his heart. Severus can't be snappish to him much anymore. As well, they've both just gone through intense trauma and are in need of human comfort, so I figured Severus might let his guard down a bit once he knew Harry wouldn't hurt him for it. Also, the formatting errors in this should be fixed now.***

CHAPTER 11

RECOVERY

Severus staggered back from Hogsmeade, his entire body one big mess of pain. The moon had long since risen, and most of the world would be in bed. Albus would be awake, as he always was whenever Severus had to go to a 'meeting.' Someone needed to be on hand to heal the man, after all.

But this time, the abuse had been personal, and Severus needed a bath and some time to himself before he could face … anyone, injured or not.

Tears threatened to overwhelm him all the way back to Hogwarts. He held his composure only by the merest thread and intense Occlumency. He could break down the moment he was safely hidden in the secret flat, the place he always went when the wounds cut too deep, but until then, he had to remain calm. Merlin help him if a student should happen upon him crying. Most had gone home on the train, true, but there were still a few liabilities to worry about.

Even if there were not, Severus would not feel safe until he was alone.

He disillusioned himself and cast a silencing charm on his feet as soon as he made it to the castle, and thus hidden, limped to the nearest floo. A moment later, the flames spit him out into the hidden flat, and Severus sank to his knees. The tears would wait no longer. He cancelled his charms, buried his face in his hands, and let out a broken moan of pain.
Someone must have told the Dark Lord of how the Marauders tormented him in fifth year. It was the only reason the bastard would have employed the methods he had that evening. For a moment, Severus had been sixteen again—naked, shamed, and terrified as his peers jeered. Only this time, there had been no Remus Lupin present to rescue him, and Death Eaters—not schoolboys—had held him prisoner.

Well, a few had been schoolboys, and those few Severus would never be able to look at the same way again. He would not even be able to teach them, knowing they had seen his greatest shame. He moaned again and wished he could melt into the stone.

As if coming out of a trance, he slowly registered the feel of hands on his shoulder and hair and soft murmurs in his ear.

“Ssh. I’m … here for you, sir. It’s over now.”

Dear gods, it was Harry.

How had Severus forgotten the boy would be here? Had he truly been so distraught the reason for his ‘punishment’ had slipped his mind? His detention with Potter had removed the boy from danger and thus foiled Riddle’s plans to kill him, never mind that Draco was feral and the Dark Lord should have had no control over him. When Severus pointed that out, Riddle had only laughed.

Then he had ordered twenty lashes for impertinence and handed him over to the Death Eaters to torment. They hadn’t been allowed to truly damage him, but what they had done would scar him sufficiently enough—inside and out.

Had he endured such terrible trauma even two days hence, Severus would only have hated Potter a thousand times more for what he had suffered to keep him safe. Tonight, he could only regret that Harry had seen him weep.

“Professor, I … I know it’s not what you wanted, but I’m here.”

Severus jerked to his feet and covered his face with his arm. “Go, Potter.”

He felt more than saw Harry cringe. “I c-can’t. Professor Dumbledore made me promise to stay here tonight.”

Severus swallowed a wave of shame. Of course Harry couldn’t leave. He was the one in danger, after all. With a strangled sob, Severus turned towards the floo to go to his quarters instead, but Harry caught his hand and held him firm.

“Please, please don’t. I don’t think you need to be alone tonight, Professor.” He sniffled and rubbed his face. “And I don’t want to be alone, either.”

Harry’s hand settled between Severus’ shoulders, and the gentle touch was like fire down his spine. He gasped and twisted away with a cry.

“Don’t touch me, Potter!”

Harry drew back, his expression guarded and hurt, and crossed his arms over his chest. “Oh. I g-guess I should have known better than to think ….” He sighed and sat on the couch, drawing his knees up in a protective gesture. “I’ll just get Professor Dumbledore then, sir?”

The flat, emotionless tone of Harry’s voice revealed more of his anguish than if he had broken into tears. He was Occluding hard to hide his pain from Severus, and that meant he no longer felt safe. It
meant he was withdrawing.

After everything Severus had endured that night, he couldn’t bear to lose a friend. Not again. It would be too much of a parallel with one of the worst days of his past, and he couldn’t stand the thought of enduring such a terrible experience a second time. Even if it meant his devastated dignity had to take another blow.

“H-Harry … I … I am sorry.”

He gave Severus a stiff nod and said nothing.

“I am injured, Harry. And … and they … it was … I cannot.” The hitch in his voice made Harry flinch.

“Professor,” Harry said in a soft voice, letting his knees drop to the floor, “I want to help. Can I … help you with your injuries, or do I need to get Madame Pomfrey?”

Severus shuddered at the thought of letting the woman near him now. He could not face the horror and shame in her eyes if she knew.

“Your healing will suffice.”

Harry gave him a hesitant smile and approached, hands held out as if he were gentling a skittish horse. Though the image irritated Severus, he understood Harry only meant to reassure him.

“Um, do you want to sit?”

Severus winced. “I do not think that wise at this time.”

Harry gulped. “Dear Merlin. What did they do to you?”

Severus closed his eyes and shook his head hard. “I cannot. It … no.”

A shaking hand closed upon his own. “Sir, they didn’t … r-rape you, did they?”


But it was close enough, and a fresh wave of tears must have convinced Harry of this.

Harry rubbed Severus’ fingertips. “Was it … like me?”

Severus opened his eyes and raised an eyebrow. “I do not know what happens to you. You have not been able to tell me.”

Harry cringed. “I still can’t—not now. But it’s … painful, there, and I … it’s so terrible.”

Severus’ guard lowered. Harry understood. He needn’t hide his shame from this one boy, this young man who knew from painful experience what Severus had suffered.

“Yes. It was much like that.”

Harry cringed. “I’m s-sorry. How can I help?”

“I think I must remain standing. If you will place your hands here—” Severus guided Harry’s hands to encircle his waist and chose to ignore the young man’s blush. “—Then use the general healing chant I taught you this morning, it should be enough.”
Harry’s hands trembled around his frame. “A-all right. I’ll try.” He closed his eyes and cleared his
throat. Twice. Three times.

Gods, the boy must have been disgusted, just like Severus’ tormentors had been. Their taunts, still so
fresh in his memory, rang in Severus’ head, bringing him low once more.

“This is the best you’ll ever get, Snivellus.” The last, a courtesy from Pettigrew, had caused all the
other Death Eaters to latch onto the horrid name with unparalleled alacrity.

Deep shame tingled in his belly and limbs. Merlin help him, it seemed Harry felt much about
Severus’ broken, violated body as the Death Eaters had.

“How utterly repulsive you are, my dear Severus.”

Lucius’ mocking voice broke him, and Severus wrenched away to hide the sudden sting of tears.
“Never mind it, Potter.” His voice was low and defeated, but at least it hadn’t broken. “If it disturbs
you so much to touch me, then I shall simply ask Albus to heal me.”

“Professor! Oh, oh no! Please, I didn’t … Gods, that isn’t what I meant, sir. Not at all.”

Harry dashed around Severus and gently put his hands on the man’s waist once more. When he lifted
his face, the boy was flushed and his eyes held deep concern, guilt, and some other emotion Severus
couldn’t identify, but no trace of revulsion.

“I’m so sorry, Professor. Please don’t be ashamed—it’s nothing to do with you. I’m just, um … a bit
embarrassed. That’s all.”

Severus hesitated, unsure if he could trust the boy.

“No sir. I swear, I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

At the sincerity in Harry’s voice, Severus relaxed. This was an awkward position for his student,
after all. Particularly a straight student. Severus knew all too well about Harry’s relationship with
Ginevra Weasley.

A twinge of jealousy in Severus’ chest caught him off guard. Why should he care who Harry dated?
It was none of his business.

Face burning, Severus shook his head to clear it and patted Harry’s arm. “Go on then, if you are
able.”

Harry nodded and lowered his head—this time Severus saw the action only as timidity. A shard of
guilt lodged between his ribs. How could Severus have thought so little of the boy? Harry had only
tried to be a good friend to him thus far, at least in the past several months, and that after Severus had
treated the boy like utter shite for six years.

Merlin, he was a fool. Harry deserved his trust.

“It’s okay, sir,” Harry whispered. “I’ll heal you as best as I’m able. Just hold on, yeah?”

Severus nodded, reassured in spite of himself. Harry’s fingers tightened marginally around Severus’
waist, then, with a deep breath, the boy began murmuring in Latin. As Severus’ wounds healed,
relieving his pain, he had the strangest urge to stroke Harry’s hair.

He kept his hands to himself. This was inappropriate enough as it was. Harry would probably run screaming if he knew the truth about Severus anyway.

Severus scowled at his own thoughts and stepped away. He wasn’t entirely healed, but it was enough that a potion or two would make up the difference.

“That is enough.” He turned and summoned a moderately-strong healing draught and a phial of sleeping potion from his lab. Merlin knew both he and Harry would need the latter that night.

Hmm. Only he and Harry?

Severus downed the healing draught and looked into the bedroom, but both beds were empty and unrumpled. “Where is Miss Granger, Harry?”

“She wanted to stay with Ginny.” Harry winced. “Gin’s in a right state and Hermione, well, they’re both in the same kind of pain right now, only Ginny has it double.”

Severus frowned. “I would have thought Ginevra would seek out your comfort.”

Harry flinched and lowered his head. “That’s why she’s in double pain, sir. I … I broke it off with her last night, and this morning, she lost her brother. That’s why Dean and Ron were tormenting me yesterday too—they were angry about Ginny.” He sniffled and covered his face. “I didn’t mean to pile up so much pain on her at once. I just … we weren’t right for each other, and I was trying to spare her grief, not make her hurt worse.”

Harry went silent, sniffing every so often, and Severus laid a gentle hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“You did well to end it if you felt you were not suited. The timing of this is not your fault, and I am certain she understands that.”

“I know, but it still hurts that I caused her so much extra pain at a time when she needs comfort.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “You are also in need of comfort. I am here, Harry. I will listen.”

“Thank you, sir, but I don’t really want to talk about it anymore. Not tonight. It’s all just too much.”

Severus squeezed Harry’s shoulder before dropping his hand. “I understand.”

Harry touched Severus’ arm. “Um, Professor? Do you need my blood?”

Severus stared, wondering why Harry was asking about blood until he recalled the phial hidden around his own neck. Thank the gods he had anchored the flask to his chest as soon as he had put it on. Invisible or not, hanging upside down for half the day would have surely dislodged the phial had he not anchored it. The Death Eaters could hardly have missed the clinking of metal if it had fallen, and if they had discovered what the phial held …. 

Severus shuddered at how close he had come to disaster.

“No, Harry. I have not been discovered.”

Yet. Severus couldn’t help but worry that his punishment that evening had been too extreme. Nor could he shake the feeling that something was off.

Harry’s voice was small and afraid. “You … you’re sure?”
Severus fixed Harry with a stern look. “I did not stutter.”

Harry flinched, and Severus immediately regretted his harsh rejoinder.

“Harry, I—”

“I know, sir. I know you didn’t mean that to come out so sharp.” Harry lowered his head and turned his hands over one another. “It’s just … I don’t think I can stand to lose any more friends, especially not so s-soon.” He looked up again, and his expression was fierce and stubborn despite the tears lining his lashes. “And you’re my friend now, whether you like it or not.”

Harry’s firm declaration brought Severus back in time, to when he stood, nervous and wrong-footed before a red-headed beauty and offered her his friendship.

Lily. Gods, how Severus had loved her. For years, she was the only light in his life. The one person who cared about him as he was, and not for what he could do for her. And because of that, Severus had adored her. Though she was sometimes callous, Severus had always deserved it. His lovely friend could do no wrong, and Severus—well, everything about him was wrong. He was an ugly, sharp-tongued, damaged swot, and only Lily had ever been able to see him as anything more.

But then, on a day eerily like this one, Severus had driven her away. His razor-blade tongue had finally cut too deep, and Lily had left him to suffer.

Severus could not help but shiver at the parallels. Even down to the assault—only the Death Eaters were merciless and there had been no one to stop the abuse. No one who cared at all. Severus had once thought of Lucius as a sometimes friend, but that night, the man had watched Severus’ disgrace with an expression of utter delight. His cruel words had cut all the deeper for the betrayal they implied.

Merlin, that had hurt, but not as badly as the whips. Or, gods help him, the rod. He shuddered and tried to banish the cold, tearing pain, but the ghost of it would not leave him. Shite. He wished he could Obliviate himself, but no doubt the Dark Lord would expect to see those memories the next time they met. He would want Severus to relive them. Over and over and …. His stomach clenched, and Severus covered his mouth with a shaking hand.

“‘Severus?’” Harry held his hands near the man’s arms, but did not touch him, for which Severus was grateful. “Is it okay if I hug you? Only I can tell you’re remembering it, and I want to make you feel better if I can. I know you might not want touch, so it’s okay if you don’t. But, um, I’d really like to hug you right now, if it’s not going to hurt you worse.”

Severus flashed back twenty years, when he hung upside-down, exposed and broken and a red-haired firecracker had offered him her help. Like he had done then, Severus was tempted to lash out. He needed to hide in his shell and lick his wounds where no one else could see his pain, but no. His pride had cost him dearly the first time, hadn’t it?

He looked down into those limpid green eyes, full of fear and concern and not a bit of revulsion, and Severus sighed. He had pushed people away enough. Harry only wanted to comfort him.

“V-very well.”

Harry gave him a hesitant smile and carefully eased his arms around the man, murmuring comfort to him all the while.

“It’s okay, sir. I know how bad it hurts, how ashamed and afraid you are, but you’re safe now. I
promise, I’ll protect you.”

Severus’ heart panged. Protect him? No one had ever protected him before. Even Albus continually shoved him into danger for the sake of information. Severus didn’t blame the old man and went to the Death Eater meetings of his own will, but he had never felt this warm trickle inside his chest that proclaimed ‘safe’ to his war-weary soul, not with Albus. Not with Lily, or his mother, or even Minerva. Not with anyone.

Until now.

He never wanted to lose that feeling. Never wanted to lose Harry.

Then and there, Severus resolved to keep a tight rein on his tongue—at least in private. Harry understood the need for his vitriol in public, but in moments like these, when Harry offered him his trust, Severus could break him by his vituperative nature.

Severus had lost the mother. He would not lose the son.

With a sigh, he slipped an arm around Harry’s shoulders and hugged him tight.

“Harry … thank you.”

His soft, low tone must have communicated some of his emotion to the boy, for Harry sniffled and buried his face in Severus’ shoulder, babbling his fears to the man. “Was so scared. Scared you wouldn’t come back. Scared I wouldn’t get a chance to know who you really are.”

Severus held Harry close and sighed into his hair. “I was afraid, too.”

Harry sniffled and looked up. “Severus, can you talk about it?”

Severus shuddered. “Not in detail, but … that incident you saw in my pensieve? The Dark Lord and his followers repeated it tonight, only this time, it was far worse. Death Eaters do not have the mercy that schoolboys do, and they are much more … inventive in their brutality.”

“Oh, dear gods!” Harry wrapped Severus in his arms and sobbed. “M’sorry. So sorry. S’my fault. All my fault.”

“Harry Potter!” Severus pushed the boy back and tipped up his chin. “Never let me hear you say that again. This is not your fault. Not what happened to me, not Ronald, not Draco—none of it. The Dark Lord is the one at fault.”

Harry gave him a weak laugh and wiped his eyes. “R-Remus said the same thing.”

Severus’ eyelid twitched. “Well, perhaps the wolf can be intelligent every now and then. Wonders never cease.”

Harry smirked through remnants of tears. “Thought you’d like that.”

“Humph.” He turned on his heel. “Harry, I need to bathe. Will you call the Headmaster here in about twenty minutes? Use the floo to his office.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. Go ahead. Just … don’t hurt yourself in there, okay?” He held up his still-red hands for emphasis. “I’ll come after you if you do, and I don’t think you’d feel safe. So, be gentle with yourself, okay? Please.”

Severus gave him a hesitant nod and made his way into the loo.
Twenty minutes later, Harry had called Dumbledore—who had to dress and would be there in a few moments—but Snape still hadn’t come out of the loo. After twenty-five minutes, Harry was getting worried. He went to the door and knocked hesitantly.

“Professor? Are you okay?”

Snape gasped out, “I-I am well, Potter.”

The use of his surname and the pain in the man’s voice convinced Harry of just the opposite.

“I’m coming in there.”

“No! I am not ….”

Harry sighed and hesitantly poked his head around the door. Snape stood in the corner by the tub, bare save for a towel hastily tied around his hips, his arm dripping blood and his face wet with tears.

“Oh, sir.” Harry wandlessly Summoned a bathrobe for the man, thrilled when it came at his first try, and padded into the loo with his hands held out in what he hoped was a soothing gesture. “It’s all right, Professor. I think I understand. Tonight—it was just too much, wasn’t it?”

Snape hesitated, clearly unsure of whether he could trust Harry.

“It’s okay, Snape. You’re safe with me. I’m not going to judge you, and I won’t hurt you further.”

Snape glared. “Why are you calling me by my surname? I am your professor.”

Harry stood his ground. “Right now, you’re a friend who needs my help. I’ll call you sir if you want me to, but I’d rather not, not when you’re in so much pain and I’m trying to take care of you.”

Snape snarled and withdrew. “I can take care of myself, Potter!”

Harry gulped and paused, fearful if he took one more step, Snape would toss him out. “I know. You’re the strongest person I know. But right now, you’re hurting. Will you let me help you, Snape? As a friend?”

The man’s mask slipped, tears welling on his lashes. “I am so afraid.”

“I know.” Harry took another step and held out the robe. “I thought … you wouldn’t be comfortable without being covered, not after what you went through tonight. Er … would this help?”

Snape snatched the robe from Harry’s hands and jerked it around his uninjured arm. He hesitated with the bleeding side, staring at his wrist with red-rimmed eyes. Harry gathered his courage and went to Snape’s side, hesitantly reaching behind him to drape the other side of his robe over the man’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” Snape said in a voice barely above a breath.

Harry stepped back, unsure if the man would want to be touched after enduring what he had. “Um, can I help you with your arm, please? You’re really bleeding badly, and I … it hurts to look at it.” He stared at his hands and shuddered, still struggling to get the image and feel of Ron’s blood out of
his head. “Please, Snape?”

The man gave a put upon sigh. “Severus. If you insist on calling me by my name and not my title, then call me by my forename—but only here, Harry. Only when you are acting as a friend and not my student, are we clear?”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “Severus. Yeah, I understand.” He took the man’s bloody hand, shuddering again at the slimy, sticky feel, and met a pair of uncertain dark eyes. “Will you let me heal you?”

Sna—Severus gave him a curt nod and closed his eyes. Harry cupped his other hand over the deep cuts slashed over Severus’ mark and poured his healing energy—as much as he could gather—into the wounds. Pale green light emanated from Harry’s palm and diffused over the man’s arm, and Severus gasped. All of his pain—and even some of the older aches that never quite left him—had vanished in an instant.

When Harry moved his hand away, not only had Severus’ wounds healed, but many of the man’s scars had disappeared too.

“Merlin,” Severus breathed. “They … how?”

Harry shrugged and gave him a sheepish smile. “I have no idea. I just pushed my healing energy into you to close the wounds, like we talked about this morning. It … did a bit more than I expected.”

Severus wandlessly Scourgified the blood from his arm and stared at the renewed skin. When he looked up, his eyes were wide and full of swirling emotion. “Thank you, Harry.”

Harry squeezed the hand he was still holding. “Anytime you need my help, you have it, okay? I promise.”

Severus closed his eyes and swallowed several times, and Harry knew his words had touched the man deeply.

Without a word, Severus pushed his healed arm through his sleeve and tied the robe around his waist. He shimmied out of the towel as well, and Harry blushed to think that the man was naked beneath that thin layer of silk. A twinge of heat in his belly surprised him, and he turned away to hide his face.

Merlin. Turned on by the thought of Snape naked. Where had that come from?

Then again, he wasn’t Snape anymore, was he? He was Severus, and maybe that made a difference.

Harry’s face must have been on fire. He lowered his head and smashed down his fringe, hoping to hide as much as he could from the too-observant man.

“Harry, come now. I am covered. There is no need to be so embarrassed.”

Harry gave a nervous laugh. Embarrassed. That was only part of his problem. Still, he’d rather Severus caught onto that and not his other issues. Especially given what the man had endured just that evening.

“Harry, come now. I am covered. There is no need to be so embarrassed.”

Harry gave a nervous laugh. Embarrassed. That was only part of his problem. Still, he’d rather Severus caught onto that and not his other issues. Especially given what the man had endured just that evening.

At the thought, his arousal curled up and died. Severus needed help, not a drooling idiot pawing and ogling his body. Harry had no right to think of him in such a way, not then, not ever.

Chest aching with the cold edge of guilt, Harry forced himself to meet Severus’ eyes despite
knowing his cheeks must be florid. “Yeah, I’m being a git. Are you okay?”

Severus gave a bitter laugh. “Far from it. However, I believe I will be able to manage now without causing myself injury, and I do believe that is what you intended by your inquiry.”

“Yeah, partially. I also want to know if it’s okay if I give you a hug?”

Severus shivered. “Perhaps … you might refrain until I am fully dressed. Please.”

Harry stepped away immediately, determined not to hurt the man further. “Sure. I’ll let you get dressed then.” He gave the man a hesitant smile. “Thank you for trusting me enough to help with your arm. See you in a bit.”

Severus inclined his head, and Harry dashed back to the living room, desperate to escape before he did anything else stupid. He checked at the entry—Dumbledore was sitting in the armchair beside the sofa with a benign smile on his face.

“I assume you guided Severus through his troubles, Harry?”

Harry’s face went bright red. “Um … y-yeah. I tried.”

“Tell me what you did.”

“Oh. Uh, should I be talking about it? Only, I don’t want to betray his trust.”

Dumbledore smiled. “There is no need to tell me the details. Only tell me how you helped him so I might teach you how to handle it better the next time, if necessary.”

Harry nodded. “Well, I just tried to be supportive and just help him without making him feel guilty. I tried not to be judgmental or scared. I thought … well, he’s probably already feeling bad enough about himself right now without me making it worse. Was that … okay?”

Dumbledore smiled brighter. “More than okay. That is the best way to handle the situation. You did well.”

Harry flushed with pleasure and relief. “S-so I helped?”

“Well, that is for Severus to judge, but I should think so.” Dumbledore patted the arm of the sofa nearest his chair. “Have a seat, Harry.”

“A-all right. I’m not in trouble, am I? Or is Sev—Professor Snape?”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “Neither of you are—you were helping a man in need. But, Harry, Severus gave you permission to use his forename?”

Harry blushed. “Oh. Yeah. I wasn’t supposed to say it then though, I don’t think.”

Dumbledore stroked his beard and looked into the fire. “Hmm. I was not expecting that.”

“Neither was I,” said Severus from the bedroom.

Harry jumped and gave a nervous laugh. “Er, sorry, Professor. I might have slipped.”

“Hmm. It is safe to do so here. Only do not use my forename outside these walls or those of my private quarters.”
“Yes, sir. Severus.”

Dumbledore gave him a bright smile. “My boy, I believe you are helping him more than you know. But Severus, are you still in need of healing?”

Severus emerged dressed in a navy button-down and black trousers. Harry had to force his mouth not to fall open. Merlin, the man looked good without those heavy robes to hide his figure and with his freshly-washed hair hanging down his back.

Heat crept into Harry’s face—again—and he suppressed a groan. Gods. When had he become a blushing ninny?

Severus raised an eyebrow and sat next to Harry on the sofa. “I am well enough, Albus. Harry healed me, for the most part.”

Harry frowned, embarrassment forgotten in fear for his friend. “The most part? Are you still injured?”

Severus hesitated. “Slightly.”

“Where?”

Severus’ eyes went flat and blank. “It is of no consequence. My potions can heal it.”

Harry cringed, understanding what he was trying not to say. “Oh.”

Severus sat tall and adopted a neutral expression. “I am afraid we must discuss business regardless. We have little time to prepare.”

Harry straightened and readied himself for more bad news—it was always bad where Voldemort was concerned.

Severus took a deep breath and attempted to gather his wits. Harry’s healing and kindness had taken myriad layers of anguish away—and left Severus’s frozen heart vulnerable and raw—but he had no time to indulge his softer emotions. He allowed himself one, brief moment to feel the wonder Harry had instilled within him, then Occluded his emotions away and plunged straight into his story.

“Albus, you will recall that I stayed with the Malfoys while they grieved their son and prepared him for transport to Malfoy Manor?”

Albus nodded. “Did you learn anything by it?”

“I certainly hope not. If I did, then we are all in grave danger.”

Albus’ eyes narrowed. “What happened?”

Severus shook his head. “Besides that their mourning felt staged and that Lucius looks quite as mad as Bellatrix these days? When Narcissa wrapped Draco in his burial shroud, I caught an odour of mugwort and cayenne.”

“Wait a moment,” said a frowning Harry. “Hermione and I covered those while working on
antidotes yesterday. We were working from a clotting poison as a base and … and wait. Those two herbs—are they blood thinners?"

Surprise and a flash of pride surged through Severus. “Yes, Harry. They are indeed, as well as anti-coagulants—agents that prevent blood clotting. The two effects do tend to go hand-in-hand, but they are not concurrent every time. The stronger the blood thinner, the more likely it is to also be an anti-coagulant. After all, blood needs some thickness to clot, and the strongest blood thinners often come with the unfortunate side effect of destroying platelets, which is what allows blood to coagulate. Unfortunately for us, mugwort is indeed one of the most powerful blood thinners. Are you paying attention, Harry?”

Harry nodded and smiled. “Yes, Professor. I’ll try to remember all that.”

Severus inclined his head, secretly pleased that Harry had remembered to refer to him by his title while he was acting in a professorial capacity. “Should the need arise, I will remind you when you have your notes on hand.” He leaned forwards and fixed Albus with a piercing gaze. “I think I need not say that the significance of using anti-coagulants on a deceased vampire is chilling, to say the least.”

Albus’ face drained of colour.

Harry had gone bone-white as well. “Dear gods. Riddle means to infect someone else through Malfoy’s blood!”

Severus gave a grim nod. “That is my fear. And worse, I would wager he has more than one victim in mind.”

Albus frowned. “While I do agree that Tom is most likely planning on preserving Draco’s blood, I fail to see the logic in such a dangerous plan. Why would he use vampires? They could easily turn on his own followers.”

Severus’ expression was grim. “The delay potion minimises the risk to himself—the vampire will not be near the Dark Lord or his sycophants when it turns, after all. Most likely, it will be wherever the Dark Lord supposes Harry to be. And even if the vampire does turn near the Death Eaters, we cannot dismiss the possibility that the Dark Lord may have taken steps we are unaware of to protect himself and his followers.”

Albus frowned. “Steps, Severus?”

Severus held up a quelling hand. “As of yet, I do not know of any possibilities, but that does not mean the Dark Lord has not found a way. Indeed, I surmise that, given his obsession with immortality, it is extremely unlikely that the Dark Lord would have chosen to use feral vampires as a weapon without some sort of protection.”

Harry nodded. “He’s right, Professor Dumbledore. Riddle’s done something to make him and his lackeys safe—I’m sure of it.”

Severus gave Harry a brief nod as thanks. “As for why he chose this route, Albus, vampires are lethal, difficult to kill, and relatively easy to produce—particularly if one drains a vampire corpse of its blood and keeps it fresh.”

Harry shuddered. “Good gods, that’s vile. I feel bad for Malfoy, and I never thought those words would cross my lips.”

Albus patted Harry’s knee—all he could reach. “Keep that sympathy, Harry. That is what separates
men like us from men like Tom—the ability to empathise, even when the victim is someone we do not like and who has cost us dearly. And, in this instance, young Draco was as much a victim as Ronald.”

Harry sniffled and drew his knees to his chest. “It’s all because of me, isn’t it?”

Severus closed his eyes, stricken with grief for the young man so ready to take all the guilt in the world upon his narrow shoulders. “Harry, you know this is not your fault. I have tried to impress it upon you.”

“So you have, but I wasn’t talking about my guilt. The thing is, Severus, Riddle wants to kill me so bad he can taste it, and he’s angry that I’ve evaded him time and time again. He’s getting desperate, so since he can’t figure out the thing with our wands or how to kill me with spells, now he’s using vampires to do his dirty work.”

Severus nodded, his heart chilled at the thought of losing his new friend, who was also quickly becoming his dearest. “I … as much as I hate it, Harry, that does still appear to be his ultimate goal. I was punished so harshly tonight because I prevented your death by placing you in detention.”

Harry cringed and blinked hard. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Severus.”

“Harry … please. It’s not your fault. Do not trouble yourself like this.”

Harry sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. “I … all right. It really hurts knowing you … suffered for my sake, but if you can keep your tears back when you’re the one who endured it, then I can do no less.” He gave Severus a sad smile. “I’m sorry. We can move on now.”

Severus frowned. “Harry, are you sure y—”

“Please. Let’s just move on, okay?”

Severus crossed his arms over his chest, half-miffed, half-worried for his friend. “As you wish.”

Albus twirled his wand absently, his expression one of intense thought. “Severus, just to clarify what you have told me, you believe that the Malfoys have aided Voldemort in preserving Draco’s blood?”

Severus answered with a tight nod.

“And he has stored this blood in hopes of turning more vampires—possibly a horde of them—in hopes of killing Harry?”

Severus gave him a grim look. “Yes, but I doubt he wants them solely for Harry. With an army of feral vampires, he could annihilate us all.”

Albus and Harry shuddered.

Albus sat taller, his face grey and troubled. “Severus, if that is indeed his plan, it seems to be lacking one key element—control. How does he intend to direct a feral vampire where he wants them to go? Even Draco—I cannot understand how he managed to leave my wards when he should not have retained enough of his mind to recognise them.”

“I do not know.” Severus rubbed at his chin, considering the situation hard. “There is the possibility that Draco was a grade-nine vampire rather than ten. He would retain some of his memories that way.”
“Yes, and his ability of speech, which he did not demonstrate at all this morning. That is too
uncharacteristic of the boy to think it coincidental.” Albus shook his head. “No, he was much too
resistant to our spells to be anything but a grade-ten, Severus. That is why I used spells in the first
place. I had thought a fully feral vampire would not have gotten to the Gryffindor dorms without
leaving a trail of death and destruction in his wake. He would not have the presence of mind to
manage it, or he should not have.”

“No, but he managed it somehow. I have no explanation, unless perhaps his skill at Occlumency
protected some trace of his mind.”

“I do not think that possible, Severus, but perhaps I am wrong.”

“You guys are forgetting something,” said Harry with a frown. “Riddle had Malfoy under his
control. It doesn’t matter if he was feral. Malfoy didn’t break through the wards on his own power—
Riddle made him do it.”

Albus paled. “You believe Riddle had control over Malfoy?”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “I know he did.”

“But … how, Harry? A grade-ten vampire—and even the lower grades—are extremely resistant to
magic. There is no method of control available to Voldemort that he could have utilised on even a
grade-five vampire—save by the fact that a vampire of that level would still have control of their
mind and thus the ability to follow orders of his or her own choice. But a feral? No, that is
impossible, Harry.”

Harry’s jaw jutted out in a familiar display of stubbornness. To Severus’ surprise, he found the
expression endearing rather than infuriating.

Hmm. How the past two days had changed him.

“It’s what happened, Professor,” Harry insisted. “Riddle possessed Malfoy to control him. I mean,
Riddle possessed me in the Atrium at the Ministry—why couldn’t he possess his Death Eaters too?”

Severus’ heart lurched. Riddle could possess him and break his mind? But his mind was all he had!
If Riddle could steal that, too … gods. Severus would sooner die.

Every hair on his body raised in an all-encompassing chill. No. He couldn’t bear that fate.

Harry gave him a worried look and slipped his hand into Severus’. His soft touch beat back the worst
of Severus’ sudden terror, but the edge remained, sharp and freezing under his skin. His stomach felt
like lead and his legs had frozen to the sofa. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, he knew nothing
beyond Harry’s hand in his and a mind-numbing rush of panic.

Shaking all over, Severus blinked as a potion phial whizzed past his nose into Albus’ hand. The old
man gave it to Harry.

“Try to get him to take this, Harry,” Albus urged.

“Severus,” Harry called softly. “Severus, look at me.”

But Severus couldn’t move.

“Severus, please.”
At the sound of Harry’s terror, Severus struggled to control his own. He couldn’t let the mere threat of madness overwhelm him so. He had known such things were a possibility the day he became a spy.

Slowly, he registered Harry’s fingertips rubbing circles in his palm and the fearful gazes of both of his comrades. “Severus, come on. We need you to take this. It’ll make you feel better.”

He gave a numb nod and allowed Harry to tip his head back and help him take the potion. The familiar taste of Calming Draught gave Severus some little comfort, and he struggled to get his bearings. The soothing touch of Harry’s hand in his helped.

When Severus felt he had gathered enough control to have his head above the icy waters of terror, he Occluded the rest of his fears away. The coldness left him and, at last, he could breathe normally again.

Harry called once more, “Severus?”

With a quiet sigh, Severus inclined his head in a curt nod, his way of telling them to get on with the meeting already, a tactic to direct attention away from his panic attack. Albus nodded back, but Harry didn’t bite.

The young man searched Severus’ face and rubbed his palm. “Are you okay now?”

Severus closed his eyes and suppressed a shudder. “Your idea of possession is a sound one, Harry, but deeply appalling. I … I have not much left to me but my mind. The idea of losing it to that madman is horrifying.”

Harry held Severus’ hand tighter. “You have many good qualities other than your mind, Severus, but it’s okay. I won’t let you go mad or fall to Riddle.”

Severus gave a bitter snort. “We shall see.”

Harry got that stubborn look again, and Severus found it even more endearing when it was in defence of his life. “Yes we shall, mister cynic.”

One corner of Severus’ mouth quirked up. “Optimistic Gryffindor brat.”

Harry grinned back. “Pessimistic Slytherin git.”

“I believe this is all a moot point, boys,” Albus intervened, though with a smile. “Harry, your idea is a good thought, but as I have said, a feral vampire has no mind left to possess.”

Harry huffed. “I’m pretty sure a feral has enough mind to follow basic directions of where to go and when to start killing people. I mean, a feral couldn’t infiltrate the Ministry or anything like that, but carnage doesn’t take a lot of brain power, unfortunately. Just aim and bite. Even an Inferius is capable of that much.”

Severus nodded. “He is correct, Albus. You know well that the Dark Lord often uses Inferi as disposable soldiers. They can indeed receive direction and their mental capacity is comparable to a feral.”

Albus frowned. “Well, be that as it may, Riddle still cannot possess a vampire. They are resistant to magic; therefore, without a link like your scar, Harry, I do not see how he could without sacrificing his own body. Even if he managed that much, I still believe his control would be negligible.” The old man shook his head. “No, I believe Draco simply retained enough of his mind to remember his
orders and a grudge. Perhaps Severus’ hypothesis as to his Occlumency skills is sounder than I had originally thought.”

“If that was the case, Professor, I wouldn’t have known about the attack at all, not until someone had come for me and told me about it. You know I don’t have a bit of skill at Divination.”

Albus gave him a mischievous smile. “Really? That is not what Professor Trelawney says about you. She rather seems to think you have a natural gift.”

Harry snorted. “I just make up a load of doom and gloom and she sops it up.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Should you be sharing this with your professors?”

Harry frowned. “Am I speaking to my professors at the moment? I had thought we were meeting as comrades in arms, as equals. Am I wrong?”

“For the moment, we are comrades, Harry,” said Albus with a sad smile. “Though you are too young for it, in all honesty.”

“I’ll be a legal adult in two months, and I don’t think I could be a child again now if I tried.”

Severus released Harry’s hand and wrapped an arm around his shoulder instead. “I am here.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “I’m glad, but I’m strong enough to cope with this, Severus.”

Severus acknowledged the truth with a nod. In all honesty, Harry was stronger than anyone Severus knew, except perhaps himself and Albus. “Yes, you are. Now, since you have made it clear you would like to focus on the matter at hand, why did you mention Divination, Harry? Your visions? I had assumed that you saw the attack or you would not have known to come.”


He burst into bitter sobs, and in light of the young man’s distress, Severus neglected to chide him for his language. Instead, Severus simply caught him up and rocked him close to his chest, laying his head atop the Harry’s and holding him tight.

‘I am not your Ron, Harry, but I am with you always.’

The young man sat and wiped his eyes, giving Severus a warm smile. “T-thanks. I’m with you too, you know?”

Severus blinked, surprised. Had he said that out loud?

“Y-yes. I am glad.” Severus smiled wryly. ‘More than you know.’

“Yeah. I feel it.”

A soft whisper melted into his mind or his ears—Severus wasn’t sure which. “The only place I feel safe anymore is in your arms, Severus. Please don’t let me go.”

With a little gasp, Severus hugged Harry tight and Occluded hard to keep his emotions from showing on his face. Merlin. He had never been anyone’s refuge, and he found he quite liked the idea of being Harry’s, at least in these private moments.

He laid his head atop that fluffy mop, just long enough to breathe in the scent of Harry’s shampoo. ‘I
Harry gave Severus a bright smile and wiped his eyes with the conjured handkerchief. He sat up, moving away from Severus’ chest, but the spy did not release Harry’s shoulders. Indeed, it seemed one or the other was in constant need of comfort. He told himself that he left his arm around the boy for the sheer purposes of energy conservation, but something within him knew better.

Somehow, Harry had become Severus’ refuge, too.

Albus spoke in a distracted tone, making both of the younger men jump. “The fact that you saw the attack, Harry, does suggest that Voldemort was in control of Draco. Since you only see visions through Voldemort’s eyes, then there is no other explanation. But the how still evades me.”

“I’m telling you, Professor, Riddle possessed him,” Harry said with a shudder. “It felt the same as when he tried to possess me in Ministry. Not as intense—it didn’t hurt as much—but that cold, slimy feeling was the same. Like I’d swallowed death.”

Albus frowned and tugged at his beard far more fiercely than usual. “I should have brought my lemon drops.”

Harry snorted. “Dobby!”

The elf appeared wearing bright purple and gold pyjamas, red and green socks, and a stack of nightcaps. “What can Dobby be doing for sir Harry Potter, sir?”

“Oh, I’m sorry to wake you up, Dobby. Um, would you mind to bring us some of the Headmaster’s lemon drop stash?”

Dobby hesitated. “I’s not be minding, but Dobby does not know which ones to bring, Harry Potter, sir. Is you wanting the potioned ones or the regular ones?”

Severus let out a crow and glared at Albus. “I knew it! You do dose your lemon drops with Calming Draught, you wily old schemer! Are you sure you were a Gryffindor?”

Albus chuckled and adopted a sheepish expression. “Guilty as charged, Severus. It does help keep confrontations to a minimum. Of course, it only works when my visitors take a sweet, and fewer and fewer seem to have a taste for my beloved lemon drops these days.”

“With good reason,” Severus grumped. “Could you not be addicted to chocolate, old man?”

Albus laughed. “Unfortunately, my tastes tend to lean towards even sweeter things.” He motioned to the elf. “Dobby, I think perhaps the regular drops will do. Severus may wish to take a potion of his own before bedtime, and I am certain he will give some to Harry.”

Severus nodded in confirmation.

“Yes, Master Headmaster sir.” The elf grinned and popped out. When he reappeared, he had a towering stack of the onerous yellow candies on a silver tray.

“Thank you, Dobby,” said Harry with a smile.

After the elf’s usual profusion of delight, Dobby set the dish on the table and popped back to his bed, wherever that was.

Albus took one of the sweets with a sigh of relief. “Ah, that is ever so much better.” After a moment,
he sat tall and gave Harry a grim look. “If that is what you felt during the attack, Harry—it was different from your usual visions?”

Harry nodded. “The pain wasn’t nearly as severe.” His eyes closed. “At least, not the physical pain. And there were the other sensations I already told you about.”

Albus’ expression went even grimmer. “Then I must, unfortunately, agree with your assessment of the situation, Harry, even if I do not know how Tom could maintain his body and possess Draco without some kind of link ….” His eyes widened at the same time the implications hit Severus.

“The mark,” Severus said in a voice without inflection or emotion, despite the roiling terror in his gut. “He used the mark to possess Draco, which means he could do it to any marked Death Eater in his ranks.” Including himself.

Albus nodded, his eyes fearful. “That does at least limit our pool to a select few. He cannot infect all of his followers, after all, or he will have no one left to carry out his orders.”

Severus sneered, fear bringing his temper to the fore. “And what is stopping him from marking all his victims, Albus? From inflicting this abomination upon the Muggleborns he captures, for example? No doubt he would enjoy the irony of using them as cannon fodder against their own interests!”

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’ again and squeezed the man’s palm. “I won’t let him get you, Severus. I won’t.”

Harry’s soft declaration melted some of Severus’ fear, but not enough.

Severus dropped his head into his free hand. “We are utterly fucked, Albus.”

Albus chided, “Severus!”

Severus ignored the reproach and struggled to swallow the nauseating waves of terror within him. A long while passed before he became conscious of Harry’s hand on his back, rubbing his shoulders and stroking through the ends of his hair. The touch on his hair especially soothed him, and Severus leaned back into it, closing his eyes.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“It’s going to be okay, Severus,” Harry said, though he sniffled halfway through. “I’m scared too, but you have all kinds of protections Riddle doesn’t know about. We’ll keep you safe, okay?”

Severus sighed and nodded, letting Harry’s hand drop from his hair as he sat tall once more. “Yes. I … perhaps there is a potion against possession. I will need to research it.”

“We must find the vampirism cure first, Severus,” said Albus gently.

“Yes.” Severus sighed and shook himself. “Albus, we must hurry. I have little time if I am to find an antidote.”

“Yes, but we do have a problem, Severus. If Tom possessed Draco, then I fear he saw everything the boy did. He will know you were present during the attack. I fear for your life, my boy.”

Severus winced. “Why do you think I was punished so severely, Albus? I did not serve as tonight’s ‘entertainment’ on a whim.” He shuddered, and relaxed a little when Harry’s hand returned to his own. “He does not know my loyalties—not yet. I made my excuses.”
Harry frowned. “What did you tell him?”

“I simply said that since I am the resident dark arts expert at Hogwarts, Albus requested my assistance to deal with the threat—a threat which I was obviously not privy to at the time and so could not have known it came from the Dark Lord—and, in order to keep appearances, I had no choice but to go or be sacked. Obviously, if I am sacked, I can no longer ‘spy’ on you, Harry, and so if I wanted to maintain the position the Dark Lord had ordained for me, I had to act as Albus would expect a true professor to have done.”

Albus frowned. “And he believed that?”

“After several rounds of Cruciatux, yes. Of course, I was punished further for unwittingly foiling his plans, but the fact remains that I am still alive. If he suspected the truth of my loyalties, he would have killed me after the others finished playing with their new toy.”

Harry winced and squeezed Severus’ hand. “Merlin, Severus. I’m so sorry.”

Severus scowled and jerked his hand away, fear making him irritable. “I do not need your pity.”

Harry gaped for a moment before his formidable temper came to the fore. “You bloody git! There’s a difference between pity and being sad that your friends were hurt. Merlin, Severus! I know you’re strong.” He slipped his hand around Severus’ arm and traced a fingertip along a particularly brutal scar. “Well, most of the time. Still, I know you’re powerful. I know you’re brilliant and brave and I wish you didn’t have to.”

Albus gave Severus a twinkling smile. “Listen to your friend, Severus.”

Severus’ ears burned. “Damn. Caught that, did you? Not that I should be surprised. Are you certain you aren’t a Seer, Albus?”

The man laughed. “I do not need to be a Seer to understand that the two of you have come to be quite close. I do have eyes.”

Severus muttered about lemon drops and barmy old men under his breath, making Harry snort.

Albus chuckled. “No, Severus. If I were a Seer, I would simply attune my sight to the Death Eater rallies and spare you this pain, my boy.” He sighed and lowered his head. “Unfortunately, I haven’t any ability in the Sight and therefore, must rely on your eyes.”

Severus sat tall. “It is a choice I do not regret, Albus.” One of perhaps three he did not, his decision to trust Harry being the most recent.

Albus nodded, though his eyes held intense grief. “Were you able to discover anything else of importance at the meeting, Severus? Did you learn anything of those potions?”

Severus shook his head. “Nothing of significance yet concerning the potions. I did see several new potions in the lab prior to the meeting’s start; however, I was unable to obtain samples unobserved.” He scowled. “Lucius followed me into the lab and stood directly in front of them, as if he knew I wanted them.”

Harry narrowed his eyes and let his legs down from the sofa. “Maybe he did know. Could Lucius have made those potions?”

Severus gasped and reeled back. “Potions to be used upon his own son?”
Harry winced at Severus’ shouted rebuttal. “Well, Riddle might not have said anything about using them on Malfoy. And you said yourself that Lucius is looking as mad as Bellatrix. She certainly wouldn’t care about murdering her son if it furthered Riddle’s cause.”

“Dear Merlin, you have a point.” Severus shuddered. “Tonight, Lucius watched them torture me with the most delighted expression on his face. Even … even when they ….” He cut himself off and buried his head in shaking hands.

Harry slipped his arm around Severus’ shoulder. “I’m here, Severus. I’ll protect you, okay?”

Severus gave a low, dark laugh. “You had better not. We are supposed to be enemies, remember? Should you rush to my aid, I doubt any story I could spin would save my cover or my wretched hide. Not that it is worth anything n-now.”

To his horror, the final word came out in a broken sob. Tears slid down his face, a warm reminder of more terrible substances that had found their way to his cheeks during the evening. He gagged, but before he could break away from the others and bolt to more private quarters, Harry pulled him into a warm shoulder and wrapped him in strong, gentle arms. The boy tucked Severus’ head under his chin and, despite his embarrassment, Severus could not help burying his face in Harry’s neck. He felt safe there, protected, and \textit{Merlin}, how he needed just to feel safe.

“I’m here, Severus,” Harry whispered, his hand carding through Severus’ hair. “You’re okay now. No one can hurt you here.”

Severus allowed himself one moment of weakness, cocooned in Harry’s warm embrace, but he refused to fall apart completely. No. Harry had eased his pain, and he was strong enough to endure without hysterics.

Severus took a deep breath, letting the strangely soothing smell of Harry’s soap comfort him. That was enough. He could face them now. He sat and rubbed a hand over his eyes, trying to make it appear as though he was simply tired. Neither man would be fooled by his little ruse, but Severus still had his pride. It was one of the few things left to him now.

Well, at least the other Death Eaters hadn’t wanted to touch Severus with their bodies—nothing more than rough, slapping hands anyway, and nowhere too personal—they had made it clear that Severus’ scarred, lanky body repulsed them, much as Potter Senior and Black had done. He was, according to his assailants, too ugly to arouse even the most lecherous of the lot. Severus had never imagined he would be glad of such callous degradation, but the Death Eaters’ revulsion had spared his innocence, if nothing else.

An involuntary shudder passed through him, but Harry’s soothing touch on his back reminded him that some people were not too repulsed to touch him, at least. Severus gave the young man a hesitant, wan smile.

Harry searched Severus’ face, concern evident in his eyes. “Are you—well, not all right, of course you’re not all right—but does this help at all?”

Severus gave him a hesitant nod. “It does. I must beg your forgiveness for my outburst.”

“So, No forgiveness needed, Severus. You were in pain. It’s okay to need help, at least with us. I will \textit{never} use it against you, okay? Never.”

Severus leaned into Harry’s arm, blinking hard to hide the evidence of his gratitude. “Thank you, Harry. I will promise you the same. I have no choice but to be cruel to you in public, but I swear to
you that nothing we speak of in private will ever be used against you.”

Harry nudged Severus closer. “I know. I trust you.”

“I have no idea how you can.”

Harry shrugged and gave him a soft smile. “I just do. You’re a good man, sir.”

Severus winced, still feeling the sting of his traumatic evening. “I do not know how you can say that, either.”

“Oh, Severus.” Harry looked to Albus and frowned slightly before taking Severus’ hands again. “Um, I know they made you feel bad about yourself. I know you feel … dirty and ugly and worthless.” Albus sucked in a sharp breath and Harry flinched. “Damn it. I’m so sorry, Severus. I was trying to be discreet, but I guess I’m not very good at it.”

Severus sighed and waved Harry on. “No Gryffindor is without training. We shall work on that in the future. Continue.”

Harry nodded and took a deep breath, no doubt to gather his wits before he started babbling. “Um, I know you feel utterly ashamed and like nothing is ever going to be okay again.”

Harry took Severus’ chin in a gentle hand and rubbed his thumb along the man’s jaw. Stunned into stillness, Severus could not resist. He could not even breathe as Harry held him captive and looked at him with such caring eyes, lovely eyes. Severus’ heart felt as if it might beat out of his chest as the young man tenderly tilted his head down and brought him closer.

“But none of that is true, Severus. None of it.”

“Perhaps you might deny the other assumptions, Harry, but I am quite unattractive. There is no denying that.” And saying it broke something in Severus, but it was true.

Still, some small part of him realised he had only said that in hopes that Harry would deny it, that Harry could look at him and see something beautiful. For some strange reason he did not dare attempt to comprehend, Severus felt his entire life hinged upon Harry’s reply. He forgot to breathe as Harry shook his head and continued rubbing his thumb across Severus’ jaw.

“Ssh. Severus, yes, you have strong features—”

Severus closed his eyes, broken by the rejection. If even Harry could see nothing redeemable in his appearance, then there was nothing to see. He was repulsive, and Severus was shocked at how much the knowledge hurt. He had not given a whit about his looks for years. Why did he suddenly care again?

Harry was not finished. “But,” he said in a firm, assured voice, “you are not ugly.”

Severus snapped his eyes open and stared at Harry, stunned speechless and shaking from head to toe.

“You aren’t.” Harry released Severus’ chin and slipped his hand into the spy’s hair instead. “You’ve a dignified sort of look about you, Severus. Sharp and angular, but also elegant and chiselled. At least you are to me.”

To Severus’ horror, tears slipped out of his control and down his cheeks. Harry gently brushed them away and held his gaze.
“I know you’re scared, Severus. I know you probably don’t believe me, but will you at least believe that I find you handsome, even if you don’t agree? Because I do.” The way Harry’s hands trembled and the bright blush creeping up his face convinced Severus that the boy was telling the truth, as farfetched as it seemed.

He nodded once, stunned to his core and shaking hard. Merlin, Harry thought he was good-looking? Dignified, he had said. Elegant. After the abuse he had heard tonight, Severus could hardly process this. He had always been found wanting, and here Harry was reassuring him that he was enough.

The little piece of his soul that had so depended on Harry’s response filled with a melting, bubbling sort of joy Severus had never experienced before. It left him breathless, dizzy, and bloody confused. How could Harry see so much of beauty in him, when he was a monster?

“Severus?”

Albus’ pain-filled voice brought Severus out of his shock as if someone had doused him with cold water. The younger man sat up and shook himself, still a little dazed.

“Y-yes?”

“What Harry has said is true, but please. Severus, please tell me what you suffered tonight was not so bad as I fear.”

Severus winced at the sight of tears on the old man’s lashes. “It is not quite as bad as you imagine.” He turned away from those devastated blue eyes, staring at his knees and clenching his fists in his lap. “I was not … technically raped, not … personally, but it was close enough. I fear it has damaged me greatly, but I will endure.”

Albus closed his eyes and moaned into his hand, letting his tears drop into his beard. “Oh, my child, my dear boy, I am so terribly sorry that I could not spare you such pain.”

Albus’ anguish, on top of Harry’s and his own, was too much for Severus to bear. He could not take another moment of this terrifying, devastating emotional squalor they had all fallen into. He was a man of reason, for Merlin’s sake, not a bloody Gryffindor sop.

His voice edged from fear and grief, he snapped out, “I am not going to crumble, Albus! There is no need to torture yourself so. I have faced … many terrible punishments before. This is no different.”

“You’re wrong, Severus,” said Harry in a low, dark voice. “It is completely different.”

A chill raced up Severus’ spine. He stared at the boy, held captive by the surety and sorrow in Harry’s voice. Guilt forced him to speak, when he would have rather been silent and ignored the terrifying anguish in Harry’s beautiful eyes.

“Harry, I—”

“Don’t,” Harry cut across his apology. “We’re not talking about me, Severus. I’m just trying to tell you that this kind of abuse cuts much deeper and in different ways than you’re used to. You’ll need help to recover this time.”

Severus winced, fearful of both the possibility of a long, messy recovery and the implication that Harry’s had been even more painful than his own would be. “Did you have help, Harry?”

From the way the boy looked away and refused to speak, Severus divined the answer was “no.” He sighed and wrapped his arm around Harry’s shoulders again. “Very well. Then we shall help each
other, but I am … not ready to discuss it further. Not tonight. I am already at the limit of what I can bear.”

Harry nodded and leaned close to Severus’ side. “Whenever you’re ready, we’ll talk, okay? Who knows. Maybe if you can talk to me, it might help me open up, too.”

Severus gave him a wan smile. “Yes, perhaps.” Pain flooded his chest as he recalled opening up to another man. “In the far past, I spoke to Lucius about the punishments we endured. I believed we were friends, of a sort, though I never would have trusted him to keep my deeper secrets. Nothing concerning my loyalties—I was not fool enough to believe Lucius would not use it against me, should I present him with the opportunity to twist the knife in my back. But even so, I never would have thought he would enjoy watching me suffer. He was grinning the entire time. And he even knew that I … .”

Severus cut himself off again and shook his head. He could not bear to admit before a seventeen year old student that he had never felt a loving touch, that no one had ever so much as held him, save for Albus on Severus’ worst nights. Harry was the only person who touched him freely, and despite the fear that Severus had broken some kind of sacred rule by allowing the boy’s touch, he could not deny that he needed those gentle displays of trust and care as much as he needed air.

No, he could not reveal his shame. If he did, Harry might draw away, and Severus didn’t think he could bear to lose him, not now. He was already in too deep.

Harry sighed and laid his head against Severus’ shoulder. “Hey, whatever you’re thinking about, stop. It’s hurting you.”

Severus hugged Harry’s shoulders. “I will try.”

Harry sat straight again and bit his lip. “Severus, I really think Lucius is the one behind those potions. The smell on Draco’s shroud, the madness you saw in his eyes, the way he guarded the potions lab and grinned while you were being assaulted—it all fits, as vile as it is that he would do this to his own son.”

Albus steepled his hands. “Harry makes several good points. Do you believe Lucius capable of creating the potions, Severus? I do remember he demonstrated skill with the art while in school.”

Severus frowned. “I do not know. He is an uncommonly skilled brewer, Albus, but I doubt he is skilled enough to have created counters to Veritaserum or delayed-onset vampirism potions. That requires an ability to invent potions, and while Lucius was always skilled whenever there was a recipe in front of him, his inventions were always … lacklustre, to say the least. He lacks the intuition and the understanding of ingredients required for invention.”

Harry shook his head. “I know it’s him, Severus.”

Severus frowned. “You saw him in a vision?”

Harry’s shoulders slumped. “Well, no, but—”

“Then we cannot make the assumption that Lucius is the culprit, even with the current evidence against him. That is a dangerous mistake, Harry. Death Eaters are quite good at using blinds when it suits their purposes. Lucius may very well be attempting to keep me from discovering the true inventor, only to have them stab me in the back—literally, knowing him—while I am distracted.”

Harry winced. “I didn’t think of that.”
“Do not trouble yourself. So many years of spying has taught me to be thorough.” Severus gave Harry a sad smile. “In most cases. I am afraid I let prejudice blind me to your good qualities before I assumed the worst of you, Harry, but now that I have realised the gravity of my error, I will never allow myself to fall into the same trap again.”

Harry smiled shyly in acknowledgment. “Thanks, Severus. But if it’s not Lucius, then who else could it be? Is there anyone you know of for sure who’s skilled enough to make those potions?”

Severus shook his head. “None of the Death Eaters or supporters I know of can match me for skill.”

“What about people who aren’t supporters? Remember Pettigrew? We can’t afford to assume that just because someone appears to be with the Light, they aren’t hiding things.”

Severus nodded in acknowledgement. “That is … quite intelligent, Harry.”

“Always the tone of surprise. I’m not a complete moron, you know.”

Severus chuckled. “No. I have seen this since our acquaintance has become less volatile. But Harry, I am afraid that your idea, however wise, is not enough in this case. There is no one in the British Isles who can match me for invention. It is why the Dark Lord wanted me within his ranks.” He sighed and lowered his head into his hands. “I confess, I am at a loss.”

Harry leaned on his knees and stared at the floor. “I … you’re sure there’s no one? No one at all?” His voice was soft and rife with pain, as if he had lost his best friend all over again.

“Not that I know of. I suppose it is possible he went abroad to find an inventor, but if so, we shall have a difficult time tracking them.” Severus laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Harry? Are you all right?”

The boy sighed and cringed. “It’s just, I might know who it is. And if it’s him, then, it’s really going to hurt.”

Severus gasped. “Who, Harry?”

Tears shone on the boy’s lashes. “The … the Half-Blood Prince. He’s absolutely brilliant at potions, but he has a darker side, as I discovered just yesterday. That Sectumsempra spell—he invented it, plus a lot of other potions, so there’s no doubt he has that intuition you said Lucius lacks. He’s also the cause of my high potions marks this year, so if anyone could do it—well, besides you, Severus—then it’s him.”

Severus choked and struggled to keep a blush from staining his cheeks. “Harry, I know for a fact that the … Half-Blood Prince has nothing to do with these potions.”

Harry gave Severus a searching look. “I knew it. You do know him. Who is he?”

Severus coughed and looked away. “That is … unimportant at this time.”

Harry leapt to his feet, emotion and anger rippling through his frame. “Unimportant? Gods, Severus! Don’t you know I’ve been searching for him all year? I’m desperate to find him, and … and to know if … if he’d ….” Harry sighed and flopped back onto the sofa. “No. Maybe it’s best I never know who he is. He’d probably think I’m just an idiot kid anyway. Not like I can hold my own in his field of interest, after all. Any of them, from what I’ve seen.” He whispered something into his hand, too softly for Severus to make out.

Albus shot Severus a sharp look, but Severus was too terrified to reveal himself. What if he told
Harry and lost his friend all over again? He didn’t think he could bear losing Harry a second time, especially since Harry knew by now that Severus’ spells had hurt people. Killed them. Harry would be horrified. No. He simply couldn’t do it. Not yet.

But Harry had sounded so desperate. Why? Why had finding the Prince become so important to the boy? Severus’ curiosity got the better of his common sense.

He forced his voice steady. “Harry, why do you wish so much to find the Prince?”

Harry’s face flamed and he looked away. “It’s … personal. Too personal. Just … you really won’t tell me, Severus?”

The clock struck midnight, and Severus jumped half out of his skin. “I think we will need to wait for another night for that discussion either way, Harry. I must begin working on those samples if I am ever to find an antidote.”

Harry frowned. “Aren’t you going to sleep?”

“I … think I should not waste the time.”

Harry paled. “Merlin, Severus! Of course you should! You told me yourself you have to be careful with those samples. If you don’t sleep, your brain will be all muddled up and you might miss something. We don’t have many samples, so we can’t afford mistakes.”

Severus couldn’t argue with that logic. “Very well.”

Harry nodded. “Um, will you stay here with me? So we’re not alone tonight?”

Severus sighed as if put upon, although in truth, he was pleased to have a friend willing to stay near him and share in his pain.

“I suppose I could.”

He neglected to mention that he had planned to since the moment he realised Granger had left Harry alone.

Harry grinned. “Great. That almost makes up for ….” His joy dimmed to deep grief, a pain that ripped the heart from Severus to know his reticence had caused it. “You will tell me about the Prince one day, won’t you?”

Severus met Albus’ eyes—stern and encouraging at once.

Severus tore his gaze away and Occluded to control his sudden fear. No. He couldn’t reveal his secret, but Harry sounded so desolate. The pain of Harry’s anguish shattered Severus’ resolve. He closed his eyes and clutched at his trousers.

“Yes,” he whispered, broken and afraid. “One day, but not tonight, Harry.”

Albus gave Severus a sorrowful look that made the spy lower his head in shame.

Harry sighed. “That’ll have to do, I suppose.”

Severus squeezed Harry’s hand, hoping his touch would comfort him despite the boy’s disappointment. “Forgive me. Now is simply not the time. Might we go to sleep now so I can begin the testing tomorrow?”
Harry nodded. “Can I watch, even if I can’t work with you?”

“May I, and yes, so long as you do not touch the samples.”

Harry gave him a grin. “Cross my heart.”
Harry read the Prince’s book while Severus showered. Harry had just fallen prey to the allure of one of his favourite poems when a sound at the entrance of the bedroom area made him look up and reach for his wand.

It was only Severus, but his choice of sleep clothing made Harry’s mouth fall open in shock. Severus had changed into silk button-down pyjamas that clung to his body—white silk. With his bare feet and long hair brushed down his back, he looked positively sexy. There was no other word for it. The man was gorgeous in white.

Harry dropped his book in his lap and squeaked out, “Merlin!”

Severus cringed and wrapped his arms around himself. “Well, if it is so terrible, you are free to look elsewhere.” He turned his back, and though he stood tall, Harry saw him trembling.

Face flaming, Harry went to the man and laid a hand on his back—Severus gasped at his touch.

“Severus? It was just the opposite, actually. I was …” Harry gulped. “Er … well, maybe I shouldn’t
say. You’ve had a traumatic night already.”

Severus frowned and turned to stare at the young man. “What?”

Harry flinched. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to stare. I only—I’ve never seen you in white before, and, well ….” He looked down to hide his blush. “Itstsu.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “No mumbling, Potter.”

Harry dragged a toe across the floor, cheeks and ears burning. “It … suits you. White does, I mean.” He dared a quick peek at his companion and smiled at the pink dusting Severus’ cheeks.

Severus wrapped his arms around his waist. “Oh. T-thank you, Harry. I do not wear it in public—too dangerous for my image. But the truth is that I am not as fond of black as I would like the masses to think.”

Harry smiled. “Really? What’s your favourite colour then?”

Severus gave a low laugh. “What is yours, Mister Potter?”

“I already told you. It’s blue, remember?”

Severus gave him a curt nod. “So you did.” His blush deepened. “Mine is silver, actually. But I do also like green and blue.”

“Slytherin colours, eh?”

Severus chuckled. “Actually, I prefer a paler green than the Slytherin banners would suggest. More like the colour of your eyes.”

Harry blushed fiercely.

“However,” said Severus with a sad smile, “I must keep up appearances, and so I am afraid my robes are all rather sombre, no matter that I would prefer something lighter.”

Harry motioned to the beds and was pleased when Severus followed and sat across him.

“I like silver too,” he said with a smile. “And that deep, almost purplish blue.”

“Indigo.”

“I suppose.”

Severus chuckled. “I never would have suspected the Gryffindor golden boy to prefer Ravenclaw colours.”

Harry’s good mood deflated like a popped balloon. He turned and drew his knees up to his chest. “Yeah. Shocking, isn’t it?”

A hand touched his knee. “Harry? I did not mean to insult you.”

Harry looked away. “Don’t, okay? Don’t call me that. I hate being the Boy-Who-Lived and all that rot. It’s only brought me nothing but pain.” Ron’s eyes flashed before him, empty and cold like the deepest abyss, and grief crushed his heart in a vice. “I wish I could be someone else. A-Anyone else.”

The bed dipped behind him and warm arms wrapped him into a hug. “Harry, I … I do not know
to comfort anyone, nor how to be a good friend, but I am here, if it helps.

Harry sniffled and turned so he could lay his head on Severus’ shoulder. “Thanks. It’s just … if I was just some random person, someone other than me, Ron would still be alive.”

Severus squeezed his shoulder. “That is not true, Harry. You did not kill either Draco or Ronald—you tried to save their lives and showed Draco mercy.”

“It doesn’t matter though, does it?” Harry’s voice was dull and low. “I hate this. I hate being who I am.”

Severus frowned and held him tighter. “As much as you hate the notoriety—and I do not blame you, if what happened on the pitch yesterday is a common occurrence—you do give people hope.”

Harry snorted. “Yesterday was nothing to fifth year. I was regarded as a dark lord in training then, no thanks to Fudge and Umbridge. Though I will admit that getting groped just because someone wanted a free pass at the Golden Boy’s bits was unpleasant.”

Severus’ voice was low and heavy. “Yes. It must have been.”

Harry winced and turned to better return Severus’ embrace. “I’m sorry. It doesn’t compare to what you went through tonight, does it?”

Severus said nothing for a long time, and Harry withdrew, fearful he had ruined their easy camaraderie with his big mouth. Would Severus revert back into Snarky Snape now? Would he blame Harry for his pain? Maybe he thought ….

“Severus, I never told anyone what I saw in your pensieve. Never. Not even Hermione or … or R-Ron.” A sudden surge of grief left Harry breathless, but he shook it off in lieu of Severus’ need. “Not even this morning. Hermione kept asking me what I had seen that changed my opinion of you, and I tried so hard to keep everything secret, and—oh gods, I’m so sorry.”

Severus wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders and tugged him close. “Ssh. Harry, I know you never spoke of it. Have you forgotten that there were at least twenty other witnesses to that event when it occurred, including Pettigrew? If I suspect anyone of revealing my weaknesses, it is that foul rodent. Or perhaps Lucius Malfoy wanted to make a stepping stone out of me. Regardless, I never suspected you, Harry. Even when I disliked you so much before, I would not have believed you capable of it.” His face contorted in a spasm of grief. “Or, no. I would have. Until you apologised to me, I did. And for that, I must apologise to you.”

Harry gaped at Severus. “So … you don’t blame me for it?”

“How could I? You were not even there, Harry.” He rubbed the young man’s shoulder. “Ssh. Not every terrible thing that happens is your fault.”

Harry sucked in a shaky breath. “Oh. I … thanks, Severus.”

Severus nudged him closer. “You are welcome.”

Harry tilted his head around and gave the man a sad smile. “Well, if it wasn’t anger at me, why did you go quiet then?”

Severus closed his eyes. “I was merely trying to gather the courage to confide in you about … what happened to me this evening.”
Harry cringed. “And I ruined it. I’m sorry. I just ….”

“Harry … ssh. Please stop blaming yourself.”

Harry looked away. “It feels like I should. My da and godfather are the reason you suffered—twice.”

“The Dark Lord and his followers are the reason I suffered tonight. I do not even blame the original perpetrators for it. They are both long dead and had no hand in what happened earlier.”

“You don’t? Merlin.”

Severus gave him a wry smile. “I am a proud, bitter man, Harry, and it took me months to admit it, but nonetheless, your apology at the beginning of term affected me deeply. Your willingness to abase yourself in their stead removed some of the blinders of hatred I had carried for so long. I will not say I have forgiven them, but I was able to recall that Lupin kept them under control after that day. From there on out, the hex war ceased, mainly because Lupin threatened them with detention every time they so much as spoke my name.” He gave Harry a wry grin. “Well, I suppose I must be forthright. I did seek revenge, though I had not the stomach to truly hurt them, not as they hurt me.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Oh? What did you do then?”

“Wrote Lily love letters from Black—in his handwriting and while imitating his magical signature. Watching the war that caused was rather entertaining. It was weeks before Lupin and Lily discovered the true author, and even then, Black and Potter still bickered all of that term and well into the next.”

Harry snickered and nestled his head on Severus’ shoulder. “That’s actually pretty funny. Mean, but they deserved a lot worse, and it’s funny either way.”

Severus chuckled. “Hmm. I cannot quite believe you think so, but I am relieved it does not hurt you further.”

“They deserved to be expelled, Severus. A little prank is not going to upset me.”

Severus frowned. “I should not have used Lily to get back at them.”

Harry shook his head. “She hurt you just as much as they did when she abandoned you. She had some revenge coming, too.”

Severus gave Harry a look of surprise and relief. “You truly believe I was justified?”

“More than. Especially considering what Sirius did to you in seventh year.” Harry gave Severus a worried look. “Why wasn’t he expelled for that, Severus? You could have died!”

Severus sighed. “Because to expel him would have exposed Lupin as a dangerous dark creature. It would have put an innocent life at risk of execution. The headmaster had no choice but to pretend nothing had happened, for Lupin’s sake. Black was punished, though. Harshly. He spent every single night of the rest of his NEWTs year in detention with Filch.”

Harry snorted. “It’s a wonder he passed them then. Still, it wasn’t fair. To either yourself or Remus.”

Severus nodded. “I believe Lupin stopped speaking to him for a full year after that. As far as I know, only the Potter-Evans wedding brought them back together.”

“Yeah. Sirius told me that he begged Remus’ forgiveness at their reception and then had to dodge a
hacked off bride because of it. Merlin, I didn’t know about bonding rings and even I know you never upstage the bride at her own wedding.” Harry chuckled sadly. “They were idiots, but I still miss them.”

“I know. It is why I have tried not to insult them in your hearing as of late.”

“Thank you.” Harry hugged Severus’ waist. “Is this okay? I’m not hurting you or making you uncomfortable?”

Severus sighed. “It is highly inappropriate behaviour between a student and professor.” When Harry frowned and moved away, Severus pulled him back with a shy smile. “However, we are also friends, are we not?"

Harry nodded.

“And since both of us are suffering and in need of friendly contact at the moment, I see nothing wrong with a simple embrace.”

Harry gave him a nervous look. “Well, I need contact, but I would understand if you don’t, given what you endured. Are you sure it’s okay?”

“Yes. I would tell you if I was uncomfortable, Harry.”

Relieved, Harry smiled and laid his head on Severus’ shoulder again with a sigh. “Good. I feel safe like this.”

“Hmm. I share your sentiments, though it surprises me. I have hardly felt safe in my life.”

“I know. I haven’t either.”

Severus hugged him tighter. “I am glad, then, that you are able to relax with me.”

“So’m I.” Harry looked up at the man. “Severus? Do you want to talk about … tonight? I’ll listen, if you need to.”

Severus shuddered. “I think I would prefer to try to sleep first. It may be easier to speak of it when it is not so fresh.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “Yeah. I understand.” He nestled his head against Severus’ shoulder and stayed there, offering silent support, until a gentle hand shook him awake sometime later.

“Harry, go to sleep. We will try to talk in the morning.”

“Mm-hmm. Thanks, Sev’rus.”

Severus brushed Harry’s hair back softly, and with his professor’s touch to keep away the pain of losing Ron, Harry sank into the pillow and fell into dreams.

In retrospect, Harry should have realised that the first night of their shared grief would not pass so easily. Between Severus’ flashbacks and Harry’s nightmares, they spent most of the night with one or the other in agony.
At four, Harry dreamed of drowning in Ron’s blood and woke up screaming.

Severus came rushing in from the loo, looking terrified. “Harry! Are you well? Was it a vision?”

“S-sorry,” Harry panted. “No, just a really bad nightmare. Blood—it was everywhere.” He covered his face with his hands and wept, half wishing he could drown, if that would only stop the pain.

Severus sat beside Harry and wrapped an arm around him. Harry buried his face in the man’s shoulder, but stopped crying when the zing of a spell brushed past his back. A second tingle made him sit up and rub his eyes.

“Severus? What are you …?” He caught the glint of silver in Severus’ hand and drops of blood on his wrist, welling fresh where Severus had likely just cleaned the old blood away, and sighed. “Oh. Well, I understand, Severus. It’s okay.”

Harry slid his hand over Severus’ arm and closed the wounds with another burst of pure healing magic. Again, some of his scars faded. And, though Harry wasn’t sure, he thought the Dark Mark didn’t look quite as black. It was probably just his imagination, though. Or maybe wishful thinking. Still, at least the bleeding had stopped.

Gently, he removed the knife from Severus’ hand, but wasn’t sure what to do with it afterwards. Severus Banished it somewhere, and Harry slid his hand into his professor’s, lacing their fingers together.

“Would it help if you talked about it, Severus?”

“I think it would make it worse,” he murmured. “But I feel less broken now.”

“Do you mean after hurting yourself or because I’m here?”

“I think … it is because you are with me.”

Harry smiled. “Severus, then how about you sleep here with me tonight? It might help us both to cope.”

Severus’ cheeks went red. “I am uncertain … that would be highly inappropriate.”

“For a professor and student, yes. But tonight, we’re two friends who have both lost something dear. You feel violated and exposed and I feel lost and alone. I think we both need someone we can trust close tonight. I just want to sleep, Severus, and I don’t think I’m going to be able to without someone near to hold me together. I think you’re in the same situation.”

Severus hesitated, looking frightened.

“Do you want to ask Professor Dumbledore if it’s all right?”

Severus sighed and shook his head. “No. Albus already gave me leave to take care of you however I see fit. I suppose it is all right. Only, I am afraid, Harry. I cannot … we must be proper. Please.”

Harry gasped, appalled. “Severus! Merlin. You’re my professor! And even if I did want … more from you, I wouldn’t do anything tonight! You’ve just been assaulted, for gods sake. The last thing you need is someone pawing you when it might bring up bad memories.”

Severus shuddered, and Harry slid his hand carefully into the older man’s.

“Severus? I … I’m sorry. All I want is someone near me, and I thought having me close might help
keep you calm too, but if it really bothers you that much, then we don’t have to … um, sleep close.
I’ll be all right—nightmares can’t really hurt me, right?” He gave a nervous little laugh. “And … and
though I hate the thought of you hurting yourself, I guess you know how much damage is too
much.” Harry squeezed his eyes shut to hold back tears. “I-it’s okay, sir. I understand.”

“Severus.” The spy enfolded Harry in his arms and laid his head atop the younger man’s. “I am not
your professor tonight. We are two friends in need of comfort, and I believe you are Gryffindor
enough not to take advantage of my trust in you.” He hesitated. “I … will share the bed with you
Harry, so long as you promise to maintain propriety.” He sighed. “Well, as much propriety as one
can maintain in such a situation.”

Harry smiled. “I promise, Severus. Are you sure, though?”

“Yes. Lie down. I am tired, and we must start on the antidotes in the morning.”

“All right.”

Severus lay against the screen, leaving Harry to lie on the outside edge of the bed. With a flick of his
wrist, Severus sent the nightstand out of the room. Another flick connected the beds so Harry had a
bit more room to move without falling off. Even so, Harry stayed close, though he did let Severus
move away from the wall.

Knowing the spy was there to protect him—and vice versa—melted the sharp edge of panic on
Harry’s heart. With a sigh, he relaxed into the sheets and pulled the covers over them both.

“Thanks, Severus. I feel much safer.”

Severus moved a bit closer, though still not close enough to touch. “As do I, though I find it
surprising that we should feel so comfortable with each other so soon, given our history of
antagonism.”

“Yeah. It’s okay, though.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulder with a gentle hand. “Sleep, if you are able.”

“You too. I’m here, okay? Wake me up if you need me.”

Severus slipped his hand into Harry’s. “Now you will know if I wake.”

Harry smiled into his pillow and laced his fingers with Severus’. “Yeah.”

Within moments, Harry had drifted off holding Severus’ hand. He did not wake again for the rest of
the night.

Harry woke just before breakfast feeling warm and comfortable. Severus had spooned against him
in the night, twining their legs together and pressing the younger man close within his arms. Harry lay
within the comfort of Severus’ embrace for a moment, feeling safer than he ever had in his life, but
his full bladder would not let him rest for long. Carefully, he extracted himself—to his relief, without
waking Severus—and tiptoed to the loo.

When Harry came back to grab some clothing for a shower, Severus had kicked the sheet off and lay
on his back, one leg bent at the knee and his arm draped over his chest. His shirt had come up, revealing a defined stomach, the tops of narrow hips, and a thin trail of black hair leading into his trousers.

Harry’s eyes boggled. Dear Merlin, the man was far more athletic than Harry had ever imagined, but no—that was silly. Harry should have realised Severus would have a strong body—the man was a skilled fighter, which probably included Muggle techniques. Karate or the like would definitely be an advantage against wizards who eschewed anything Muggle. They would never see a physical punch coming until Severus laid them out.

“Brilliant,” he whispered. “Always one step ahead, aren’t you?”

Harry made a mental note to ask to join in the next time Severus trained, assuming he hadn’t yet been carted off to the Dursleys’.

He couldn’t help but gaze at Severus’ stomach for a moment, but when he realised he was staring at a man who had just been assaulted the night before, he gasped at his own stupidity and gently pulled the cover over Severus’ exposed belly.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, chagrined. “I shouldn’t have ….”

Well, he would only make matters worse if he woke Severus now. With a sigh, Harry brushed a lock of hair back from Severus’ face—the man mumbled something in his sleep and turned towards Harry’s hand. Harry stood over him, watching his eyes flit back and forth behind his lids, tracing the shape of sinfully long lashes over high cheekbones and the curve of Severus’ open lips.

Severus looked so much softer in sleep, so vulnerable. Vulnerable? Gods, Severus would kill him if he knew Harry had been watching him like this. With a wince, Harry tore his eyes away from his sleeping professor and searched through the wardrobe for something to wear.

He figured he’d have to transfigure one of Severus’ black robes and ask the man to shorten it for him, but to his surprise, there were a line of Muggle tees and jeans on the left-hand side, all in Harry’s proper size. Bemused, but not one to question good luck, Harry took out a pair of jeans and a tee with the Weird Sisters logo on it, then rooted in the drawers for underpants. There were boxers in his size on the left-hand side too, as well as several pairs of the thick crew socks Harry preferred, and the drawer underneath had a pair of red canvas trainers and another of black school shoes. How strange.

Had Severus purchased these the day before? No. He’d been busy all day. First there was the vampire, then the aurors had questioned everyone about the murders, then Severus had to see off the train, and after that, he had been at the Death Eaters’ nonexistent mercy until after midnight. There was no way Severus would have had time to buy all this for Harry, and the Headmaster hadn’t been close enough to realise he needed clothing. Where had it all come from?

Harry shrugged, not one to push aside a stroke of good luck, and grabbed a pair of socks, shorts, and the trainers. By the time he finished his shower and came out, still drying his hair, Severus was awake and sitting on the edge of the bed. Severus had his head down and looked ashamed of himself.

“Are you okay, Severus?”

Severus flinched. “Potter,” he said in a pained voice, “I apologise for last night. I did not intend to alarm you.”
Harry squeezed the man’s shoulder. “You didn’t. I just woke up before you did and thought I’d go ahead and shower while you were sleeping. I reckoned you might need more rest considering how badly you were tortured last night.” He looked the man over for signs of pain. “Are you okay? Do you need more healing?”

Severus gave Harry a wan smile. “I am recovered. Physically, at least.”

“I’ll help you with the emotional side of things too. You’ll be all right. I promise.” Harry gave the man a gentle hug and pulled back with a blush. “Anyway, I’ll go in the living room so you can get dressed in peace, okay? Then maybe we can work on the antidote after breakfast, if you’re feeling up to it.”

Severus’ smile warmed. “That is acceptable.”

Harry turned to leave, but paused at the edge of the screen. “Hey, Severus, there was a lot of new clothing in that wardrobe in my proper size. Even shoes.” He held out his trainer-covered foot and wiggled his toes. “Where did it all come from?”

To Harry’s surprise, Severus blushed. “I did tell you that Dobby keeps this place stocked, did I not?”

Harry frowned. “Yes, but a full wardrobe of clothing in my size and preferred style that I’ve never bought before? It’s just odd. Even if Dobby did know what to buy and could have gotten the money for it, how would he have gotten so many outfits in such a short time? Muggle outfits too.”

Severus sighed. “I believe that is a conversation for after I am dressed. May we discuss it over breakfast?”

“Sure. Should I just ask Dobby to bring us something to eat?”

Severus nodded. “Ask him for my usual and order whatever you would like.”

“Yes, sir. See you in a bit.”

Harry went into the kitchen and ordered two of whatever Severus usually ate, out of pure curiosity. Dobby popped back momentarily carrying a teapot and plates of bacon, eggs, sautéed mushrooms, sliced tomatoes, and scones. Well, that would do, though Harry was all too happy to leave the mushrooms for Severus.

A full jug of pumpkin juice wobbled precariously on Dobby’s hat stack, and Harry snatched it away in order to prevent a minor catastrophe. “Thanks, Dobby. I’ll just set this up for us, yeah?”

The elf professed his gratitude for Harry’s thanks—loudly—but would not allow Harry to touch the platters until he had levitated them into the centre of the small kitchen table and snapped two full place settings into existence. He popped away before Harry could thank him for that too, and the young man wondered what else the elf might have been working on that morning. With a shrug, Harry cast warming charms over the plates and settled in to wait for Severus.

A few moments later, Severus joined him, dressed in a pale green jumper and khaki trousers. Harry almost choked on his tea at the sight of him. The jumper softened the harsh lines of Severus’ face, and the pale colours blended more readily with his fair skin, turning what had been flaws into nothing more than strong features. He wasn’t beautiful—no mere article of clothing could alter him so drastically—but he did have a sort of aristocratic mystery about his appearance that Harry found undeniably appealing.

Severus glared. “What?”

“Nothing, nothing. Sorry.” Harry busied himself with his scone to hide his fierce blush.

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Will I need to read your surface thoughts to obtain a truthful answer, Mister Potter?”

Harry gasped. “N-no. No need for that.” He muttered into his scone. “Yulkhansm.”

Severus’ other eyebrow shot up. “Was that Parseltongue?”

Harry gobbled down a bite of scone, then hurriedly drank a bit of pumpkin juice to wet his suddenly dry throat. “No. I said … you, uh, you l-look handsome.”

Pink flooded Severus’ cheeks. “You … are you being honest?”

“Of course I am! Why else would I have been so embarrassed to say it?”

Severus gave him a smile that made Harry’s breath catch.

“Gods,” Harry breathed.

Severus’ cheeks reddened further. “Hmm.” He settled into the chair across from Harry. “You, ah, you seem to prefer me in light colours.”

Harry gulped. That was a landmine if he’d ever seen one. He had best choose his words with care. “Um, it’s your choice, Severus. You can wear what you want. I like you either way.”

Severus gave a wry laugh. “Trying to appeal to my vanity, are we?”

“Um ….”

Severus chuckled. “Actually, I have little choice about what I wear in public. Professors are expected to wear robes. Death Eater professors are expected to wear black, severely cut robes that make them look like an overgrown bat.”

Harry snorted into his tea, nervousness fading in a rush of sudden mirth. “Merlin, have you heard the other Gryffindors talking about you swooping about and hanging from the rafters?”

Severus’ eyebrow shot up again. “The other Gryffindors?”

Harry blushed and dragged his fork through his eggs. “Well, I admit that before this year, I thought you were evil and made fun of you a lot. But when I realised the truth, I didn’t want to tease you anymore. I still had to act the part of the good little Gryffindor prat on occasion, though. To keep you alive. I’m sorry, sir.”

Severus reached across the table and took Harry’s hand. “Thank you, Harry.” He released the boy’s hand and smirked. “Must I remind you not to play with your food?”

Harry stopped playing with his eggs long enough to take a bite. “Iffwooh.”

Severus groaned. “Dear Merlin, Harry. Swallow first, if you intend to be understood by anyone other than a troll.”

Harry’s face burned, and he gulped down his eggs. “Oh. Sorry. Um, I said it’s true. You really do look like a bat in those robes. Shame you can’t teach in what you’re wearing now, though maybe it’s
a good thing. You’d probably have a lot more giggling girls blowing up cauldrons.”

Severus snorted and set a scone on his plate. “I encourage them to think of me as a bat, Harry. Fewer people question those whom they fear.”

Harry sobered. “So it’s protective.”

“Yes.”

Harry smiled. “Well then, I’m glad you trust me enough to let me see the real you.”

Severus nodded. “You have proved yourself over and over the past few days. The past year, truly. I regret that I did not notice sooner.”

Harry shook his head. “It’s for the best. This is bound to make it harder on you to spy.” He sighed. “I wish you would listen to Professor Dumbledore and let me neutralise your mark—or at least try. I’m scared for you.”


“You still feel guilty?”

Severus lowered his head. “Perhaps I always shall.”

Harry reached across the table to take Severus’ hand. “If it makes a difference, Severus, I think you’ve done more than enough to make up for your past.”

Severus gave Harry a shy smile and nodded. “It does help, but I still cannot stop. My guilt aside, I still need the information on these potions, Harry. If we cannot discover a way to combat these delayed-onset vampires, it will be cataclysmic. The entire world will perish.” He dropped a bit of sugar into a cup of tea and stirred, his eyes low. “My life matters little when faced with such a grim alternative.”

Harry winced. “Merlin, that sounds familiar.”

Severus frowned. “Familiar? Have you met many Death Eaters turned spy and potions professor?”

Harry laughed. “Just the one!”

“And thank Merlin for that,” Severus agreed. “Knowing one is quite enough trouble for anyone.”

Harry’s mirth faded quickly. “I’m honoured to know you, sir. Besides, we’re a lot alike. What you said, it sounds familiar because that’s what I tell myself every single time I face Riddle. What does my life matter if he kills everyone I love? I don’t mean much, not compared to the entire world.”

Severus’ jaw dropped. “You don’t … that’s preposterous! You have friends, Harry. The Headmaster adores you. Professor McGonagall, Miss Granger, the Weasleys—they all love you. You matter to them.” His eyes filled with heavy sorrow. “And to me.” The last came out so quietly, Harry wasn’t sure Severus meant him to hear it.

Harry gave Severus a sad smile. “Just as you matter to me, Severus.”

Severus froze, wide-eyed and raw, his expression soft even in his shock. He took a sip of tea, holding the cup in shaking hands, and when he set his cup aside, a smirk had wiped away all evidence of deeper emotion. Harry wished he could hide his feelings half as well.
“How very Slytherin of you, Mister Potter,” Severus said.

Harry grinned. “Well, I missed being sorted there by the skin of my teeth, so I suppose it fits that I have some Slytherin traits.”

Severus scowled and stabbed at a mushroom with his fork. “So I’ve heard. Often.”

Harry laughed. “The Headmaster?”

“Who else?” Severus bit into his mushroom and made a face of sheer ecstasy. “Merlin, these are so good.”

Harry chuckled and tried a mushroom, just out of curiosity’s sake. They were tasty, to his great surprise. What spices did the house elves use to make them taste so different from the slimy bits and pieces he had scrounged from Petunia’s dinners? Perhaps it helped the taste if they were actually hot.

Harry slid a few more mushrooms onto his plate. “Mm-hmm. I never liked mushrooms before, but those are good.”

“The house elves use a bit of garlic along with the butter, I think. Best to use a breath-freshening spell after you eat them.”

Harry nodded and nibbled on another mushroom. “Noted. So, you were going to tell me about the wardrobe over breakfast?”

Severus dished some scrambled eggs and bacon onto his plate alongside his mushrooms. “Yes, but to explain that, I must also explain about the flat in general. Have you noticed the wards here?”

Harry nodded and took some bacon for himself. “Strongest I’ve ever seen. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever been able to see wards. But these are so powerful, they’re visible in the walls.”

“Very good. Ten points to Gryffindor.”

Harry dropped a piece of bacon into his tea. “Come again?”

Severus narrowed his eyes. “I am not making it twenty. I have already given enough points to your wretched house in the past two days to absolve me from that onerous duty for several centuries.”

Harry laughed. “Well, it was worth a shot.” He grinned as he fished out his bacon and poured a fresh cup of tea.

Severus shook his head in amusement. “You have not yet achieved a Slytherin level of cunning, Mister Potter, but should you continue in this vein, I may have to reconsider my opinion that you are entirely too Gryffindor.”

Harry chuckled. “Honestly? I wasn’t trying to get more points. I was just shocked.”


“Well, I suppose I am still rather Gryffindor, then. At least with you.”

“Indeed. Perhaps that is why I feel safe in your presence.”

Harry washed his bacon down with some juice. “You are safe. I won’t hurt you, Severus. Ever.”
Severus lowered his head, clearly overcome. After a moment, he cleared his throat and spoke on about the flat as if Harry hadn’t said anything at all. Harry allowed him the distance, figuring that Severus could only take so much honest emotion before he needed to draw a line. That was okay with Harry.

“Ah, we have travelled a bit off topic. We were speaking of the flat.” Severus set down his scone and motioned to the walls. “You are correct—the wards here are incredibly powerful. So powerful, not even the Dark Lord could break through them.” A frown crossed his features. “Though now Albus and I will need to determine if the flat is also warded against vampires.”

Harry shuddered.

Severus gave him an assessing look. “Are you well?”

Harry nodded. “Just don’t like to remember ….” He closed his eyes and struggled to fend off visions of blood and fangs and the taste of metal gushing in his mouth.

A chair scraped the floor and a warm arm draped across Harry’s shoulders.

“I am here, Harry.”

Harry opened his eyes to find Severus had moved his chair to sit beside Harry rather than across the table. He was watching Harry’s face with deep concern.

Harry gave Severus a wan smile and leaned into the man’s embrace. “Thanks. I think I’ll be all right, though.”

Severus nodded hesitantly and levitated his plate and tea over to his new seat. “You will tell me if you become overwhelmed and I do not notice?”

Harry patted his hand. “I promise.”

“Thank you.” Severus sighed and took a sip of his tea. “Well, to continue my tale about the flat—just under seventeen years ago, Professor Dumbledore and I built this place directly atop the nexus of Hogwarts—that is why the wards are so strong here. We were able to draw straight from the castle herself and use her strength to keep them powered.”

“Seventeen years ago …?” Harry’s eyes widened. “Merlin. You built this place for me?”

Severus nodded, but his eyes were wary. “Not just for you, Harry. If you will notice, there are two beds.”

Harry frowned. “Then who …?” He gasped. “You! It would have to be you. You’re the only person in as much danger as I am all the time.”

Severus nodded. “It was meant as an emergency hideout for the two of us should there ever come a day that Hogwarts’ wards could no longer protect us.” He shuddered. “I fear that day is here.”

Harry looked around the quarters, taking in the small space with a frown. “Good thing we’re friends now, Severus. We’d have killed each other if we hadn’t made a truce.”

Severus gave a dark laugh. “The Headmaster suggested placing us here in your third year. I convinced him the threat of Sirius Black was nothing to the threat of the calamity we might wreak upon the castle should he lock us in such close quarters for any amount of time. Even these wards would have been no match for that explosion.”
Harry burst into laughter. “Yeah, that wouldn’t have gone well.” His chest panged with grief. “I really miss Sirius. I know you hated him, and I can’t say I blame you considering how awful he was to you, but he really was the only family I had left. Now I have no one.”

Severus slung his arm around Harry’s shoulders and nudged him closer. “You have me, Harry, small comfort that it is.”

“No, it’s brilliant, Severus. I’m glad to have you.” With a sigh, Harry wiped his eyes and focused on his breakfast. “Thanks, Severus. I guess all this trouble means we’re stuck here for a while, huh?”

“No necessarily. The Headmaster and I believe the threat is past for the moment, however, we also believe that you should not be left alone at this time, and I will not allow you to return to your … relatives—” He sneered and spat the word like it tasted foul. “—Until you are better prepared to endure them.”

“Until I’ve had time to grieve, in other words.”

“Yes, and to attend Mister Weasley’s funeral. You will need that moment of closure to move on. I am not a kind man, but neither will I let you return to those beasts when you are still broken up by nightmares and in desperate need of solace.”

Harry frowned. “Severus, you’ve been very kind to me the past two days, but about my nightmares—nothing is going to fix those. I have them every night.”

The man gave him a sorrowful look. “I see. Well, perhaps a few days where you are safe and allowed to grieve will alleviate them to some extent. And if not, then I will provide you with a potion to help over the summer. It is not as effective as Dreamless Sleep, but neither is it addictive.”

“If it’s not Dreamless Sleep, it may not work at all on my nightmares. I’ll try it though, and if it doesn’t work, then don’t worry about it. I’ve had them all my life—a few more weeks of them won’t make that much of a difference. If you do give me a potion, though, you’d have to also give me a way to hide it from my relatives. They’ll take it away from me and either lock it up or destroy it if they think it has anything to do with magic.”

Severus sighed. “How much we have missed, Harry.”

He squirmed and poked at his eggs. “I’m fine, Severus. Really.”

The man fixed him with a glare.

Harry blushed. “O-okay, so I’m not fine. Not at all. But I am used to dealing with nightmares. It’s just, they were really painful last night. I kept seeing the b-blood—”

A sudden wave of grief nearly knocked Harry flat and he bit into his knuckles to keep from breaking down. ‘Oh gods, Ron.’

Severus’ arms came up around him. “I am with you, Harry.”

Harry snuggled into Severus’ embrace, closer to the warmth chasing away the cold edge of loss. After a few deep breaths and a moment with his face buried in Severus’ hair—‘Soft, not greasy at all.’—Harry sat tall and wiped his eyes.

“Thanks, Severus. Sorry. I seem to be falling apart at the strangest times.”

Severus stroked Harry’s hair. “You have just lost someone precious to you, Harry. Grief is normal
and expected. In fact, I expect to see more of it than this. Please do not hold in your pain.”

“But the antidotes—we have to make them so ….” Tears choked him again, but Harry pressed on. “So I don’t lose anyone else.”

Severus nodded. “We do indeed, and perhaps working towards such a goal will help you to heal, but do not fight it all day, Harry. You need time to grieve, much like everyone who was close to Mister Weasley.”

Harry gave him a tearful nod. “Maybe, after we work on the antidotes, we can talk about … yesterday. For both of us.”

Severus closed his eyes and shivered. “Yes. Perhaps that is best, but do try and finish your breakfast. I cannot delay my testing much longer. Or would you prefer to speak to Professor McGonagall while I divide the samples, perhaps?”

Harry shuddered. “Can’t … not a woman.”

Severus frowned. “Not even Molly?”

He cringed. “She won’t … I can’t. Even if I could face her, she doesn’t need my pain on top of everything else. It’s my fault she doesn’t have a youngest son anymore.”

Severus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “This self-blaming tendency of yours is going to be quite difficult to overcome, isn’t it?”

Harry’s ears burned and he stared at his feet. “It’s the truth. I might not have killed him, Severus, but we both know if I hadn’t made friends with him, Vo—Riddle would never have paid him any attention. Riddle had no reason to target him, except me.”

Severus rubbed his lip. “Hmm. No reason at all, you say?”

Harry frowned. “Yes. He’s a pureblood.”

Severus’ tone was scathing. “And Muggleborns and Muggles are the only groups Death Eaters target now, are they?”

“I …” Harry tried to defend himself, but he was confused and hurt, and afraid to damage his relationship with Severus further. What had he said to set the man off? His mouth snapped shut, but he reckoned his pain must have shone in his eyes, because Severus’ tone softened.

“I am sorry, Harry. It is … difficult to change my past all in one day. Especially given how trying that day was.”

Harry acknowledged the apology with a hesitant nod, still frightened to speak lest he anger the man again. He didn’t understand what he had done wrong in the first place.

Severus sighed and rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “It’s all right, Harry. I was out of turn.”

Harry nodded and relaxed a bit. “Why … what made you angry?”

“Not angry, only frustrated, and it was not truly with you, but everyone who has left you to discover what you must learn the hard way—including myself.”

“Oh.” Harry looked at his feet, still uncertain.
Severus gave a quiet sigh and squeezed the young man’s shoulder. “Harry, do you know why Fred and George Weasley have those particular initials?” He kept his voice soft, and so Harry found the courage to answer, though the non-sequitur had stunned him.

“Um … so Molly and Arthur can tell them apart, I guess?”

Severus raised an eyebrow, obviously curious as to how their initials could help in that capacity.

Harry grinned. “Different letters on their Weasley jumpers.”

Severus chuckled. “Much good that would do, considering the brats switch.”

Harry snorted. “True enough.” He gave Severus a wry look. “How do you know that?”

“Legimimacy is good for more than reading minds and intent.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Is that legal?”

“Probably not, but neither are half the activities said twins engaged in while students in this school.”

Harry shook his head and laughed. “The swamp was brilliant though, you have to admit.”

“Not least in that it displeased the Great Pink Toad,” Severus said with a chuckle.

Harry grinned wickedly. “I’m pretty sure that was the only thing we agreed upon in fifth year—that Umbridge was a bloody menace.”

“Until the pensieve.”

Harry’s smile faded. “Yes.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s hand. “I have forgiven you for it. Truth be told, I forgave you long before our … truce.”

“I hope it’s more than a truce by now, sir. I’d like to think you still regard us as friends.”

Severus looked sorrowful as he took in Harry’s uncertain expression.

“I do not abandon my friends, Harry.”

After how long and hard Severus had atoned for Harry’s mother’s death, the young man knew it was fact. He gave Severus a brilliant smile.

“Neither do I. But why were you talking about Gred and Forge?”

“I had hopes of dislodging that guilt-complex of yours, but considering the size of it, it may take more of a concentrated effort.”

Harry winced and lowered his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Dear Merlin, and now he feels guilty for feeling guilty. How in the names of all the gods am I supposed to combat that level of self-flagellation?”

Severus’ mock-aggrieved tone made Harry snort in spite of himself.

“Harry, one day, I will get it through that thick skull of yours that you are not to blame yourself for everything.”
Harry gave him a hesitant smile. “Good luck, sir.”

“Ha! I shall need it, I fear.” Severus chuckled and squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “Harry, I brought up Fred and George to prove that your beliefs about purebloods being immune to the Dark Lord’s wrath are false. The twins were so named for their uncles, Fabian and Gideon Prewett—Molly’s brothers.”

Harry frowned. “I didn’t know Molly had brothers.”

“That is because they are dead, Harry, and Molly can hardly bear to speak of them even now. You see, seventeen years ago—before you were born, so do not think to blame yourself for this also—Death Eaters killed them, not because they were friends with the Boy-Who-Lived or his parents, but simply because they were members of the Order and therefore blood traitors, at least in the Dark Lord’s eyes. They freely associated with Muggleborns and worked to defend them, and because of that, the Dark Lord murdered them.”

“Merlin. I … didn’t know.”

Severus brought the shocked young man into a hug. “It’s all right, Harry. I only spoke of it to prove that the Dark Lord is a brutal tyrant who murders all who do not fit into his perceived ideals. A bit like Adolf Hitler. Have you ever heard of Hitler, Harry?”

Harry shuddered. “They spoke of him in Muggle primary school. He was a monster.”

“Yes. Do you recall from your lessons that his purpose for bringing about the Holocaust was to create a so-called Aryan race, to destroy what he believed to be the flaws of humanity and leave only the supposedly perfect, the members of said race?”

Harry nodded and pushed away his breakfast, feeling too ill to stand the smell of it.

“I expect you to eat that later, Harry, but I do understand your discomfort. It is rather sickening.” Severus shivered. “But I bring it up to illustrate the similarities between Hitler and the Dark Lord. Just as Hitler, the Dark Lord is attempting to create an Aryan race. He believes that Muggles bear the sole imperfections of humanity and only pure wizards are the Aryans. Half-bloods are worth less than purebloods, and Muggleborns barely human. Muggles are utter abominations in his eyes. Those who ally themselves with Muggles or Muggleborns—blood traitors—are even worse in his opinion, because they ‘sully’ themselves with impure blood out of choice. Pure or half-bloods who choose to marry Muggles or Muggleborns are the lowest rung of all, and—according to the Dark Lord—deserve a slow, torturous death for polluting the old bloodlines.”

Harry jumped from his seat and shouted, “But that’s mad!”

“I know that, Harry. I know. I am not a spy for nothing. I am explaining his point of view, but that does not mean I support it.” Severus tugged on the young man’s hand, and Harry seated himself again, though his irritation still boiled under the surface.

“What’s the point of all this, Severus?”

“The point is that Ronald’s death was not your fault, Harry. As I have attempted to demonstrate by my examples, the Dark Lord detests blood traitors above all others, and Ronald was a pureblood wizard from a family of ‘blood traitors’ who fell in love with a Muggleborn witch. He would have been a high-priority target even if you had never met him, Harry.”

Tears stung Harry’s eyes and he hurriedly brushed them away. “Maybe so, maybe you’re right about all this blood traitor stuff and Riddle would have targeted him anyway, but we both know that’s not why Ron’s dead now. Riddle was trying to murder me, and because Ron was there, he decided to
murder him as a substitute."

Severus hugged the young man tight. “Harry, Ronald is dead because he was in the way of a feral vampire, Harry, one the Dark Lord should have had no control over, and—”

Harry stuck out his lip and scowled. “He did control him. I don’t know how he did it, unless it was the way we talked about last night, but he was controlling Malfoy or I would never have seen the attack and Crabbe and Goyle would be dead, not Ron.”

Severus sighed. “I hear you, Harry, and I am not denying your conclusions, but as of now, I do not have proof or a reasonable explanation and must operate off of what I know to be fact.” He turned Harry to face him and held the young man’s shoulders. “Regardless of how Malfoy came to attack Ronald, it is not your fault that he is dead, and to continue to believe this way is toxic. You must let that remorse go. You were not even there, Harry.”

“I should have been!” Harry’s voice cracked, and his tears bled out of his control. “It should have been me!”

Through a sheen of tears, Harry saw deep pain fill Severus’ dark eyes.

“Oh, Harry. No.” Severus brought Harry into a warm embrace and stroked the boy’s hair. “Ssh. You are experiencing something called survivor’s guilt, and while I am intimately familiar with the concept, it is unhealthy and untrue.” He held Harry’s face gently and tipped his chin up. “It is not your fault, Harry.”

Harry shook his head and refused to hear it. “No! It is, if not for me, they’d be alive.”


“Sirius, mum and da, Cedric, Neville’s parents would be okay, Emmeline Vance, Mad-Eye, all of them would be okay if not for me!” He sobbed and covered his face with his hands. “I’m just a freak and a waste of space and I get everyone I love ki-killed.” The words rushed out of him without his consent, and he cringed away from Severus as if expecting a blow for revealing the truth of himself.

Nothing happened. Harry panted and covered his face, waiting for Severus’ imminent rejection, now that he knew what Harry really was.

Severus’ voice trembled when he finally spoke again. “A freak? A waste of space? Dear Merlin, Harry. How could you possibly believe any of that?”

Harry flinched and said nothing, hoping Severus would let it go, but the older man was too intelligent.

“Your relatives have done this to you,” Severus said in a deathly-quiet tone. “They have made you believe you are worthless and that you cause the deaths of everyone you love. Did they torment you after Black’s death, Harry?” His eyes narrowed. “Or does it go even further back?”

It was no use. His secret was out. Harry supposed he might as well come clean, now that Severus knew.

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Harry drew his knees to his chest and spoke in a monotone. “It’s true. I killed them, killed them all, just by being born. I’m s-sorry. I should have told you sooner. Now it’s bound to hurt that you know what I really am.”

Severus’ voice was a low growl. “And what are you, Harry?”
Harry whispered, “A f-freak. I’m sorry.”

Severus slammed his fist into the table, sending bits of egg flying everywhere. “Those bloody bastards! I will kill them for this!”

Horrified in spite of his crushing shame, Harry gasped and grabbed Severus’ hand. “N-no. Don’t, please. I don’t want—no more pain because of me. I don’t … please.”

Severus gave him an incredulous look. “Harry … dear gods. You cannot mean that you don’t want them punished for what they did to you? It’s inhuman!”

Harry sniffled and drew his knees to his chest. “N-no. It’s not that bad. I mean, I’m f-fine.”

“Oh, yes,” snapped Severus, “if taking the blame for everything that has gone wrong in the past twenty years is fine. If believing that you are so unworthy of love and affection that a simple admission of the truth will drive me away, if that is fine, then yes, I assume you are just dandy.”

At his vituperative tone, Harry winced and buried his face in his knees, shaking hard. Severus would surely abandon him now that he knew how broken Harry really was, how freaky.

Severus sighed and laid a hand upon his hair. “Harry, forgive me. I am angry at them, not you.”

Harry gave him a hesitant frown. “Why are you still here? Why haven’t you left?”

“Because you are my friend, and I do not leave my friends.”

Tears choked Harry. “But you can’t—I’m a freak and rubbish and I get everyone killed, and you must want more than that. You can’t want ….”

Severus caught the boy into his arms and held him tight. “Nonsense. Harry, not one word of that is true.”

“But it is!”

“No. Harry, that is poison your abusive relatives have been spoon-feeding to you since the time you were old enough to walk. It is no wonder you believe it when you have known nothing else, but it is not true. You are not a freak or rubbish and you do not cause everyone you care about to be killed —”

“Then why are they all dead?”

Severus took Harry’s hand and laid it upon his own chest. “Do you feel my heartbeat, Harry?”

The young man nodded, confused, but desperate to believe.

“I assume you must care about me, as you have said we are friends. Do you?”

Harry’s cheeks flamed, but he nodded again. “A lot. Even before you were nice to me.”

Severus gave him a tentative smile. “Truly?”

“Yeah. I really tried hard to be your friend this year, Severus. It hurt when you kept pushing me away.”

Severus laid his hand over Harry’s, pressing it firmly against the heartbeat beneath their palms. “I regret that I did not understand sooner.”
“It’s okay. I’m just glad you’re here now.”

Severus closed his eyes, and the hand over Harry’s trembled a bit. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Severus cleared his throat and shook himself. “You do feel that I am still alive, yes?”

Harry nodded hesitantly.

“Well then, you have just proved your own assumption to be false. Which means that the others are faulty as well, since they rely upon that belief.” Severus rubbed Harry’s fingers. “You are not a freak, Harry. You are a lovely, brave, intelligent young man who has had altogether too much pain and burden pressed upon his shoulders.”

“But they said ….”

“Harry, tell me about your relatives. Are they good people?”

Harry’s nose wrinkled. “Not hardly.”

“Paragons of virtue?”

“Merlin, no.”

Severus’ gaze sharpened. “Honest people you can trust to tell you the truth, especially as pertains to you?”

Harry whispered, “No.”

“And do you trust me to speak the truth, Harry?”

Harry blinked tears down his face and nodded.

“Out loud, Harry. Do you trust me to tell you the truth?”

“Yes. I trust you completely.”

Severus gave him a shy smile and brushed his hair back from his scar. “Then believe me when I say that your relatives have lied to you, Harry. None of what they said to you is true. You are not a freak. You are not rubbish. You do not kill everyone you love simply by caring about them. You are a lovely, brave young man I am proud to call my friend.”

Harry’s breath caught in a sob. He threw his arms around Severus’ neck and wept into his shoulder.

“T-thank you, Severus,” he babbled, hardly sensible of his words. “Thank you. Always been a freak. Always been worthless. But I … maybe it’s true. Maybe you’re right. Gods, I hate them!”

Severus held Harry tight. “Then explain to me why you do not want them punished for their crimes against you. Their treatment of you is absolutely appalling, Harry. Even the pain of my own childhood pales in comparison.”

Harry frowned and plopped back into his chair, peeling a scone onto a napkin just to have something to do with his hands. “I guess it’s not so much that I don’t want them punished. It’s that I don’t want you to suffer because you punished them. It’s not that bad, Severus. I mean, it’s not like they committed a crime.”
“Not that ba—Harry!” Severus dropped into the seat beside him and took Harry’s hand, forcing him to drop his scone. “Do you realise what the wizarding punishment is for the kind of systematic emotional and physical abuse they have employed against you? Particularly if it lasts longer than five years?”

Harry frowned and shook his head. “What?”

“First, they are given a stern warning to stop the behaviour, which the Dursleys received in your fifth year, correct?”

Harry nodded.

“If it continues afterwards, and especially if there is sexual abuse to contend with, then it’s the Kiss, Harry. The Dementor’s Kiss. Or, for a period less than five years, a life sentence in Azkaban. That is how terribly they have treated you.”

All the breath rushed out of Harry’s lungs, and he scabbled for some kind of footing in this strange new world. The Kiss? But all his life, he had been told he was useless and worthless and deserved everything he got. How could his relatives deserve the harshest punishment in the wizarding world if he had deserved his pain? It made no sense.

“I … I don’t understand.”

Severus’ hand on Harry’s back was a warm anchor to the real world, the only thing keeping Harry from breaking into pieces.

“Harry, listen to me. What the Dursleys have done to you is absolutely criminal. What you have told me alone is enough to secure them a one-way trip to the Dementors’ chambers in Azkaban, and I know you have not spoken of everything.”

“But … but I’m just … I don’t deserve ….”

Severus sighed and hugged Harry tight. “Harry, you truly believe you are so evil and so worthless, that you do not deserve to be avenged?”

Harry could only answer with a broken whimper.

“So you do.” Severus sighed and cradled the young man close to his heart. “Harry, I am … going to speak to you about something I have never revealed to another student in my entire career. You already know my childhood was unpleasant from our Occlumency sessions. Did you know that I was also abused?”

Harry gasped and shook his head, his eyes wide. “I … no.” It came out as a whisper.

Severus closed his eyes, his expression pained. “Yes. My mother ensured I was never starved and tried to protect me as much as she could, but my father—he beat me for the slightest infraction, real or imagined. And, like your relatives, he referred to me as a freak of nature and claimed that I deserved everything he ever did to us.”

Severus slipped a hand through Harry’s hair and gently tipped the young man’s head back to look into those soulful dark eyes. ‘Beautiful eyes,’ Harry thought.

“Now, Harry, I ask you, was it true? Am I worthless and a freak? Did I deserve to be hit and degraded? Did I deserve to be abused?”
Harry’s breath stuttered. “Severus! Gods, no! You’re brave and strong and kind, and no! You didn’t deserve any of that. You deserve to be loved and protected and ….”

Severus raised an eyebrow and stroked Harry’s hair, saying nothing. Harry shuddered and looked away, understanding his tacit implication.

“No, Severus. No, it’s different. You didn’t cause people to die like I have.”

Severus gaped. “Harry, I was a Death Eater. I still must keep up appearances as a spy. How do you then draw the conclusion that I have never been responsible for someone’s death? Indeed, your own family’s death was my fault.”

Harry winced. “No. It was Riddle’s.”

Terrible pain crossed Severus’ face before he withdrew from Harry and laid his head in his hands. “And who do you think told Riddle of the half-prophecy that caused your parents to die? I did, Harry. I did not realise Lily was pregnant, nor did I imagine the Dark Lord would take to killing babies as a result of my folly, but it does not absolve my sins. They are dead because I reported back to my master like a good little Death Eater.”

The last sentence was said with such intense self-loathing, Harry flinched.

Harry gasped out, “You told him?”

Severus’ fingers twitched, and his voice was low and full of pain. “Yes. It was the worst mistake of my life.”

Harry should have been angry. He should have been furious. But as he looked at Severus, a broken man who had made a terrible error in judgment and lost his only friend because of it—and who had probably had to choose between reporting to Riddle and a painful death—he surprised himself by forgiving the man. Severus hadn’t known Harry’s mum was pregnant or that Riddle would take to killing infants because of the Prophecy. And while it was true that the lack of such knowledge didn’t excuse his choices, it was clear he regretted it. Remorse radiated from Severus in waves so thick, Harry might have choked on it.

Harry couldn’t hate the man, not when Severus hated himself enough for ten people.

Harry murmured, “That’s why you’re doing this, isn’t it?”

Severus’ head shot up. “What?”

“This—the spying. That’s why, isn’t it? Because you’re trying to atone for Mum.”

Severus gave him a hesitant nod. “Yes, I have been for the past seventeen years. It makes no difference, however. No matter what I do, nothing will bring her back. Not your mother, nor your … father, nor anyone else I have k-killed.”

Harry gave a shaky nod and stared at the table, lost in thought.

Gods, he and Severus were so much alike. Harry had never realised how much. Severus had been abused too, and because of it he hated himself, just like Harry. Severus’ Dark Mark was the only real difference between them.

The dark side had never seduced Harry like it had done for Severus.
Severus hadn’t had anyone to guide him away from the darkness, not when he was young. His one friend had abandoned him to be tortured, and no one else had filled her shoes until Dumbledore took Severus in years later, long after Severus had already fallen prey to the darkness. Likely, Severus had only joined Riddle in the first place because no one else had wanted him. He did tend to push people away, at least until they earned his trust, like Harry had done—eventually. Few were as stubborn as Harry, though, and fewer still would have kept trying after Severus hurt them too many times.

The man hadn’t had a soul to save him, not when it counted.

Harry toyed with his scone and thought over his own past, trying to place himself in Severus’ shoes. What if Ron and Hermione had never befriended him or had abandoned him later? What if the Gryffindors had rejected him outright instead, like James and Sirius had rejected Severus?

Had all of that occurred, Draco Malfoy would have been the only one to offer Harry his friendship, and Harry would have most likely been sorted into Slytherin. And as a half-blood and the Boy-Who-Lived, his life would have been miserable there—assuming he survived the first night among people who still supported Voldemort. Harry would have been ostracised for his blood, much like Severus had been. Oh, there would have been some—like Malfoy—who would have tried to get close to him because of his fame, but Harry would have known no one wanted him just to be his friend, not like Ron and Hermione had always done.

It wasn’t a stretch to believe that such a life might have turned Harry bitter. Might have made him listen to the Death Eaters when they tried to recruit him, for no doubt they would have, especially once it became clear that Harry Potter was a Slytherin and a Parselmouth. They would have wanted him for his talents, just like they had wanted Severus for his abilities.

Harry let out a breath and blinked back tears. Merlin help him. Had it not been for Ron’s friendship, Harry would have likely been a Death Eater by now, or more likely, dead. Voldemort wouldn’t have wanted the competition of another Dark Lord, after all.

He shuddered at the realisation of how close he had come to falling. Only Ron’s kindness had saved him that day. And gods, what a poor way to repay him, by getting him killed.

Harry buried his face in his knees and struggled to hide his tears. ‘I’m sorry, Ron. So sorry. I never meant this to happen.’

Severus echoed the spirit of Harry’s words. “Harry … for everything my sins have cost you, Merlin, I am so very sorry.”

Harry gasped and looked up. Tears shone on Severus’ eyelashes and terrible pain haunted his eyes.

Merlin, they were alike. Just like Harry was tormenting himself for Ron’s death, Severus was blaming himself for Harry’s mum. He had spent seventeen years trying to atone for her life and even now, guilt strangled him. Severus probably blamed himself for Harry’s father too, despite the bad blood between them.

Harry understood that feeling all too well. He would probably still be atoning for Ron, Sirius, and Cedric on his own deathbed.

He sat back and observed the man, just watching his eyes as Severus struggled to get his emotions under control. Severus obviously hated himself. He felt he had no worth to anyone except as a spy. Harry understood his pain, but he couldn’t understand how Severus could feel so badly about himself.
In spite of the sins of his youth, despite his astounding ability to hold grudges, his scathing tongue, and his phenomenal temper, Severus was still the bravest man Harry had ever known. Brave and blisteringly intelligent and, though Harry wouldn’t have believed it possible even the week before, selfless and kind. Tender and sensitive under his sarcastic shell, and full of genuine emotion.

Severus should love himself. He was a good person who deserved to be loved.

The hair on the back of Harry’s neck stood on end. If Severus was good—Severus, who was so much like Harry—then did that mean Harry wasn’t the monster he had always believed? Did he deserve better too?

But if that was true, then where did it leave him? What was Harry, if not a freak or a monster?

“Harry, please,” said Severus in a pained voice, interrupting Harry’s churning thoughts. “Say something. Will you turn from me now that you know what I am?”

Harry frowned. “What you are?”

“A monster. I killed your parents.”

Harry winced at the reiteration of his own inner monologue. Gods, how had he never realised how alike they were?

And how had he never known how much this broken man needed his forgiveness?

Harry sighed and got to his feet. Without a word, he wrapped his arms around Severus and hugged him tight. Severus let slip a strangled gasp and buried his face in Harry’s shoulder. Shaking arms embraced him and tears wetted the back of Harry’s shirt.

“Hey,” Harry said in a soft voice. “It’s okay. Ssh. It’s not your fault. If it’s true that I didn’t kill Ron by being his friend, then it’s also true that you didn’t kill Mum and Dad by talking about a prophecy that you had no idea even applied to them. You were just trying to stay alive, Severus.”

Severus gasped and pulled back with a shudder. “How can you say that? Those situations are not remotely comparable.”

“They are, though. Being my friend put Ron at risk. You revealing the Prophecy put my parents at risk. But in the end, we didn’t kill them. Riddle did.”

Tears slipped down the older man’s face. “But if I had not ….”

“I could say the same thing, Severus, and you won’t let me take the blame, so I won’t let you take it, either.” He brushed Severus’ tears away and held his face. “I forgive you, Severus.”

Severus shuddered and closed his eyes. He laid his hands over Harry’s and spoke in a voice barely above a whisper, each word raw and heavy with emotion.

“I never … never imagined I would hear those words, not from you.” Severus swallowed and looked into Harry’s eyes. Hot tears streaked over their joined hands and dripped onto Severus’ jumper. “Thank you.”

Harry gave Severus a hesitant smile and rubbed the man’s tears away. “You okay?”

Severus let his hands fall and brought Harry into a tight embrace. “I will be.”

Harry sniffled and laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “Me too.”
The Minister's Folly

Chapter Summary

Warnings: none. The minister of magic demands an interview from Harry and instantly regrets it, Rita Skeeter gets a free one-way trip to Ireland, Ron is laid to rest, and Harry and Severus find new purpose in working on the antidote together.

CHAPTER 13
THE MINISTER'S FOLLY

After their emotional morning and several hours of experimentation on the blood samples Severus had taken from Malfoy, Fawkes burst into Severus’ lab with an urgent message from the Headmaster, forcing the spy to place his work in stasis. Grumbling and clenching his fists in irritation, Severus led a trembling Harry to the Headmaster’s office.

Fear radiated off of Harry, and Severus would have liked to keep a hand on the young man’s shoulder, but he couldn’t risk it—not here, where so many eyes might see and report back to the Dark Lord. All he could do was slow his usual brisk pace slightly so Harry would not have to trot to keep up with his longer legs. At least Severus had no trouble scowling and looking irritated. Any observer would interpret it as anger at Harry; in reality, he wanted to tear the Minister’s head off.

Scrimgeour had charged into Albus’ office a few moments ago, demanding an interview with the famous Harry Potter concerning Ronald’s death, despite the fact that Harry hadn’t even been in the room until afterwards. Even Harry’s vision had only revealed the end of the attack on Ronald, not the beginning, but the minister was not to know Harry had visions at all. As far as Scrimgeour knew, Harry had burst into the common room after Ronald’s death simply because he hadn’t been able to take the worry for his friends. So why the man wanted to question Harry—other than to piggyback off his fame, of course—was beyond Severus.

According to Fawkes, Albus had told the minister that it was actually Longbottom and Finnegan who had seen the events unfold and killed the vampire, but Scrimgeour had ignored him. The smarmy bastard’s fixation with Harry and his callous disregard of the other boys’ heroism irritated Severus to no end, but he could do nothing about it without blowing his cover. And that irritated him even more.

Gods, he really hated being a spy.

He suppressed a sigh and muttered the password to the gargoyle. The beast leapt aside as if it had sensed his anger.

Well, at least Severus could unload his vitriol upon the incompetent minister and no one would suspect a thing. Harry would be sure to appreciate it as well, even if he couldn’t express approval of Severus’ humour in front of the minister and his lackeys.

He hoped Albus would dismiss them quickly. Harry did not need to deal with this so soon after Ronald’s death. Severus wasn’t exactly in a forgiving mood, either.

The headmaster’s door opened at the top of the staircase, and Severus wanted to smirk at the sight
within. According to Severus’ missive from Fawkes, the minister had requested a ‘private’ meeting with Harry, no doubt in hopes of forcing Harry into supporting whatever claptrap the Ministry had come up with this time. Instead, it appeared Albus had gathered every able-bodied Potter supporter available into his office.

‘Good luck, Minister,’ Severus thought with a sneer. ‘You’ll need it.’

Severus stepped inside and looked around the room, observing who was there and what their mental state appeared to be lest he needed to stop a fight—or dodge the crossfire.

Molly and Arthur Weasley stood in the corner nearest the door. Molly had her arms crossed over her bosom and her eyes narrowed to slits, and her husband wore a wan smile upon his face—a deceptive smile. Arthur knew his affable personality and fascination with all things Muggle made others overlook his sharp mind and sharper eyes, and he used that fact to the Order’s advantage. Arthur rarely missed anything, and the redhead could observe while hardly being noticed himself. He was as much a spy as Severus, though in slightly more congenial territory. Severus gave the man a barely perceptible nod. Arthur smiled back.

Beside Arthur and Molly stood Ginevra Weasley and Miss Granger, the red-head in passable imitation of her mother and the Granger girl with a calculating look in her eyes. If ever there was a missort, it was the Granger girl. She should have been a Ravenclaw with the way her mind worked. At least Severus knew he could depend on her sharp observations. He did not greet her—could not, though he would have liked to. As of late, Granger had earned his respect, just like Harry.

Severus frowned as he realised he still needed to test the girl in Occlumency. He resolved to do so later in the day, as soon as he could come to a better stopping place on his first round of experimentation.

Beside Miss Granger, Minerva stood like a mother lion over her cubs, her lips pursed in her tightest scowl of disapproval and her eyes as sharp as flint. Minerva’s claws were out—she would shred the minister if he stuck one toe out of line. Severus was looking forward to the show. She nodded to Severus as he came in, and he returned it, hoping his inward amusement didn’t show on his face.

Beside Minerva stood Longbottom and Finnegan. Both shot Severus looks of hatred. He let it roll off his back despite the hurt their rancour caused—the feel of Harry’s hand discreetly pressed into the small of Severus’ back reminded the spy that not every Gryffindor believed him to be the root of all evil. He chose to ignore how much Harry’s touch comforted him, mainly because it was not safe to think of it here, not where the softening of his expression might cost both of them their lives. He Occluded hard and fixed his face in a rigid scowl.

On the other side of Albus, who sat serenely at his desk surrounded by a massive tea service and piles of lemon drops, stood Luna Lovegood. Why was she there? He shook off his confusion and observed her discreetly. The girl wore as serene a smile as the Headmaster, though the pink rimming her eyes reminded Severus that the girl had cared for Ron as much as any of them. She carried a Muggle notepad and a bright pink quill with a rolling eyeball along the side of the feather. As Severus watched, she poked the eyeball, and the quill began writing on its own.

‘Hmm. What is she doing?’

Given the source, he decided not knowing was better and looked to the next attendee.

Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt stood beside Lovegood, their expressions sombre. Tonks had turned her hair a coppery red, no doubt in honour of the Weasleys’ loss, and Shacklebolt looked as grim as Severus had ever seen him. The man scowled at Severus as soon as he walked in, but
Severus ignored it. Shacklebolt no doubt believed Severus had brought in the vampire, but the Headmaster would hand the auror his arse if he dared make such an outrageous claim.

Severus suppressed the urge to sigh. Merlin, he had no stomach to endure another lambasting for something he hadn’t done.

In the final corner of the room, near the other side of the door, Percy Weasley and Rita-bloody-Skeeter flanked the minister. Oh, _lovely_. As if the minister wasn’t bad enough alone, he had come with an entourage. The rogue Weasley and the _Prophet’s_ pocket harpy. Gods, Severus could barely stomach the sight of her. That vile woman turned everything she touched foul.

Well, _this_ promised to be interesting. Severus shot them all a scowl and leaned against the door, where he could keep an eye on everyone present.

While Severus settled himself, Harry smiled at Lovegood and took his place beside her. The boy could not help but glance back at Severus, his eyes wide and fearful, before twisting his features into a convincing sneer. Severus couldn’t blame him for being afraid. Between Molly’s thunderous scowl, Percy Weasley’s pinched expression, and the look of glee on Rita Skeeter’s vile face, Severus had no doubt that this would be a tense meeting, to say the least.

The Headmaster smiled benignly at the assembled group and stood. “Well, now that everyone is present, we can begin this meeting—once Miss Skeeter leaves the premises, of course.”

She squawked. “_Leave?_ Whyever would I do that?”

Albus fixed her with a piercing stare. “Because, Miss Skeeter, you know quite well that you are no longer allowed on the grounds.”

She put on her most winning smile. Severus’ stomach turned, and Harry sneered as if he had just stepped in something foul.

“Oh,” Skeeter cajoled, “but Albus, _surely_ you want the public to know what happened yesterday?”

The Minister added, “Yes. The public deserves the truth, Headmaster, and I will not have it shoved under the rug.”

With a not-quite-innocent smile, Albus motioned to Miss Lovegood. “And they will have the truth, but from a … mostly reputable source. _The Daily Prophet_, I’m afraid, has a rather nasty habit of twisting the facts for the purpose of sensationalism. Please vacate the premises, Miss Skeeter.”

Skeeter’s smile vanished. She snarled and stabbed her infamous quill into her parchment. “I have just as much right to be here as the Lovegood brat, and I refuse to leave such an important story to the likes of the Qu—”

“Actually, Miss Skeeter, you are mistaken,” said Albus, his smile turning cold. “You _do not_ have the right to be here.” He levelled a fierce glare at the woman, a dangerous look that made even Severus shiver a little. “You see, Miss Skeeter, your behaviour towards Harry and the school in general during the past three years has been atrocious. Unfortunately, I am afraid that I do not have the power to prevent you from writing about Harry in general; however, _I do_ have the power to ban you from Hogwarts’ grounds and deny you the right to report on anything that happens within this school as, since you are not allowed here to gather the evidence required for a factual story, anything you publish concerning this event or any other that happens within Hogwarts’ walls would be libel.”

He popped another lemon drop. “So, Miss Skeeter, you have a choice. You can either leave on your own power, or I will forcibly remove you from the premises. What will it be?”
Skeeter snarled and gesticulated madly, garish red talons clawing the air. “You can’t deny me the right to report on anything, Dumbledore! The public deserves to kno—”

Albus held up a hand and pinched his fingers together, cutting off the Skeeter bint’s rant. She clutched at her throat and scowled.

Albus gave her a deceptively pleasant smile. “The next time you enter the grounds, Miss Skeeter, you will be detained on sight and given over to the Aurors. That is, if you enter in your human form. I do not recommend trying to use your … *other* shape to enter Hogwarts. What with the power of our wards and the additional keys against yourself and Mister Pettigrew, well, the results would not be pretty, I am afraid.”

Skeeter went the colour of old putty and stepped back.

Severus was intrigued. Other form? Hmm. He observed Harry’s triumphant smirk and the ferocious glint in Miss Granger’s eyes and resolved to question them on it later. Those two knew something, or he wasn’t a spy.

“Furthermore,” Albus continued, “if I see anything in the Prophet concerning Ronald’s death other than the bald facts—and I do mean the *facts*, Miss Skeeter—then you will face both a personal lawsuit and a similar suit against the Prophet. And before you disregard this warning, do recall that I have the political backing to win in both cases and exact the maximum punishment upon you and your employer.”

He adjusted his spectacles and pinned her with a piercing stare, all the more threatening for its placidity. “I would suggest that you find something else to report on today, Miss Skeeter. You have been warned. Now, I do hope you have a pleasant day.” He waved a hand at her as if brushing away a bit of rubbish and the vile woman disappeared with a pop.

“Merlin,” said Harry with a grin. “Where did you send her, sir?”

Albus chuckled. “I sent her to a little town off the coast of Ireland. Perhaps a nice walk along the beach will do her temper some good.”

Harry snorted into his hands.

“But that’s impossible,” said Granger, her eyes bugging. “You can’t disapparate within Hogwarts’ wards!”

Albus chuckled. “The headmaster can circumvent those rules when necessary, dear. One of the perks of the job.”

She blinked. “Oh.”

“Now see here, Albus,” said Scrimgeour. “You can’t just go vanishing innocent people from your offi—”

“Actually, Minister,” said a grinning Shacklebolt, “he *can*. Rita is banned from the premises and she was notified about it prior to this meeting. Albus is well within his rights. *You*, however, might be in for some questioning if you ever bring that vile woman onto this property again. Especially since you were aware of the ban as well.”

Scrimgeour’s face turned puce with outrage. “I pay your salary, Shacklebolt!”

Severus swept in with his coldest tones and a glacial glare. “And even the ever-exalted minister is
subject to the law. Or are you suggesting that you are above it?” He sneered at the idiot. “Ignoring our bylaws and behaving like a tyrant did not go well for your predecessor. I suggest you avoid following in his tracks if you would like to keep your job.”

Harry scowled as if Severus’ mere existence annoyed him, but his eyes sparkled with suppressed mirth.

“That’s rich, coming from you, Death Eater,” Scrimgeour growled.

Severus played with his nails, not deigning to look at the minister. Scrimgeour scowled and started another rant, but Albus cut across him in a calm, but authoritative voice.

“No one present is a Death Eater, and I will thank you to keep your accusations to yourself, minister.”

Scrimgeour scoffed. “You can’t protect him forever, Dumbledore.”

“Hmm, perhaps not. I am well into my hundreds, after all, and Severus is still quite young. However, when I pass from this mortal plane, I will see to it that Severus has other champions to defend him from overzealous foes.”

He stared at the Minister, including Shacklebolt in his gaze—and Harry too, for good measure. Both Harry and Shacklebolt lowered their heads as if chastised. When Harry came up again, however, he met Severus’ eyes and gave a slight nod, acknowledging Albus’ hidden entreaty. It was a tiny movement, barely noticeable even to a spy, but it communicated a message of grave import to the spy.

‘I’ll protect you, Severus.’

Severus’ breath lodged in his throat. With Harry as his champion, the Ministry would never be able to truly hurt him. He looked away to hide the sudden welling of emotion in his eyes.

‘Thank you, Harry.’

Harry frowned and looked at Severus as if he was trying to understand something beyond his grasp, but Severus couldn’t guess what had troubled h—

Albus clapped his hands and made Severus jump. “Well, now that we are all present and have put aside all the disagreeable things for now, we can begin this meeting. I have tea and lemon drops for anyone who would like some. No? No one? Very well then.” He popped another sweet—probably one of the candies laced with calming draught—and settled into his chair with a benign smile, steepling his hands on his desk. “Now, Minister Scrimgeour, you had questions about the events of yesterday morning, correct?”

Scrimgeour grumbled, “I had questions for Harry, as you well know.”

Albus smiled and waved to the boy. “Then by all means, ask them.”

“Just so,” said the Minister with a false smile. “Harry, my dear boy, perhaps you’d like to take a walk with me? It’s quite crowded in here.”

Harry gave him a look of disgust. “Oh, I don’t think so. I’m staying right here where the others can protect me if you make false accusations or try to force me into supporting you or the Ministry, which, as you should know by now, is a lost cause.”
Scrimgeour turned an unpleasant shade of red. “I will remind you, boy, that I am in charge here, and you—”

“Actually, Minister,” said Albus, “as long as you stand on Hogwarts grounds, I am in charge, and Harry is under my protection. He has said he would prefer to stay here, so here he stays. If you wish to question him, you will do so only under my supervision. And, please do recall that Harry has suffered the loss of his best friend among other traumas within the past two days. Should I come to the conclusion that this interview has become too stressful for him, or for the others present, it will end immediately.”

“I … you bloody interfering prig, how dare y—”

“There is no need for such language.” Albus took another lemon drop, much to the consternation of the fuming Minister. “Ah, I do love my sweets. I find them quite calming. Perhaps you should have some, minister.”

Severus smirked. Definitely the laced candies then.

Harry snorted, unabashedly amused. Several of his friends had to make an effort to conceal their mirth.

Albus gave Harry an indulgent smile and ignored the minister’s indignant spluttering. “No, Rufus? I assure you, I have plenty.”

Scrimgeour turned purple. “No, I don’t want any bloody lemon drops, you asinine fool!”

Albus’ eyes hardened, making Scrimgeour flinch back and pale. “I said there is no need for such language. If you cannot conduct yourself in a gentlemanly fashion, Rufus, then I am afraid I see no reason to allow your presence near such impressionable young minds.”

Harry immediately adopted such an exaggerated expression of innocence, Severus was hard-pressed not to snort. Gods, but the boy had a good sense of humour. How had Severus never noticed?

Scrimgeour glared, but stopped his cursing and spluttering.

“Very good,” said Albus with a benign smile that fooled no one. “Now, I do hope we can carry on this meeting in a congenial manner. I would so hate to have to cut your discussion with Harry short, Minister.”

Scrimgeour stomped his foot, his patience exhausted, not that he had ever had much. “You cannot order me off Hogwarts grounds, nor can you tell me whom I can and cannot interview, Dumbledore! I am the Minister of Magic!”

Albus replied in a calm voice that radiated with power. “And I am the Headmaster of Hogwarts School, and as such, the students are under my care while they are here.” He poured a cup of tea while he spoke, paying the irate minister less attention than he would give a fly. “We have already been here twenty minutes and have yet to accomplish anything. I will remind you that our time is limited. My potions master has an important experiment to return to, and two of my students are still recovering from injuries they sustained while dispatching the vampire. As such, I advise you to ask your questions now, Rufus, and do so quickly before I decide that Harry and the others would do better taking this time to recover rather than attending a meeting with very little purpose.”

He added several teaspoons of sugar and cream to his tea and gave the irate minister an unconcerned smile. Severus had to admit, Albus had the market on insulting people, but politely. The man was brilliant, and Severus was having difficulty keeping a straight face. Harry was entertained too,
judging by the laughter in his eyes. For a moment, Severus had a hard time looking away.

‘Merlin, he does have beautiful eyes when he is happy.’

Albus sipped his tea. “Well, Rufus? We are all waiting to hear what you have to say.”

The man’s quiet comment startled Severus out of his staring, and the spy turned away from Harry with what he hoped wasn’t a blush. He couldn’t afford to reveal his weaknesses, not here. The thought cooled his blood sufficiently enough that he might look up, and when he did, Harry was watching him with a frown. Severus read concern in Harry’s eyes, though his face gave nothing away, and the thought that Harry was worried for him warmed him inside. Even so, he gave the young man a fierce scowl, reminding Harry that this wasn’t the time or place to appear friendly. With a little shake, Harry scowled back, and Severus nodded ever so slightly.

While this nonverbal communication was taking place, the minister had apparently come to the conclusion that he would not come out on top if he attempted to best Albus Dumbledore. First intelligent thing the man had done since he walked onto the grounds, really.

“Oh, very well,” the man said with an unbecoming pout. “Harry, if you will, tell me what happened yesterday when Mister Weasley was attacked.”

Harry glared at the minister. “First of all, Scrimgeour, Ron wasn’t the only one who was attacked. Riddle also attacked Dean Thomas and almost killed him, and he would have killed the others too had Neville and Seamus not stopped Malfoy before he could. Secondly, Professor Dumbledore has already made it clear to you that I’m not the person you need to ask about Ron. I wasn’t there until after both Malfoy and Ron were … already d-dead.”

The boy took a deep breath to gain control of his grief, then raised his head and met the minister’s eyes head on. “Seamus and Neville are the only ones who saw everything. They’re the heroes here, not me. Ask them.”

Shacklebolt cast a sharp look at the minister. “He won’t be asking them anything about that. We’ve already questioned the boys and sent the report to your desk, Minister. There’s no need for them to relive what was undeniably a traumatising event.”

The minister fumed. “I only wanted to hear it from Harry.”

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, you can’t. I wasn’t there until after Malfoy was already dead. Sorry to disappoint you.”

Scrimgeour gritted his teeth. “What happened after you came into the room, then?”

“I helped save Dean’s life and grieved for my best friend, as I’ve already told the aurors.” Harry’s eyes narrowed. “What exactly do you want, Minister? No one here is stupid enough to believe you’re really just after my side of the events, especially considering I’ve already been questioned and this happened two days ago.”

Scrimgeour sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I just … oh, very well. I read the reports, Harry. You can’t really believe it was … You-Know-Who?”

Harry didn’t flinch. “Yes. I do, and Professor Dumbledore supports that belief. Next question.”

Scrimgeour winced. “But if the public reads that, if they see that You-Know-Who has control of feral vampires, they’ll panic! Surely you don’t want that to be published and incite a riot?”
Harry’s eyes flashed like emeralds, and Severus’ breath hitched at the change. Gods, he was a beautiful young man.

“Let me see if I understand you, Minister,” Harry said in a voice barely above a snarl. “You want me to pretend Voldemort wasn’t involved in the attack so the public goes on about their happy little lives, never suspecting that tomorrow might be the day he sets a feral on them? Or is this just an excuse to put the blame on Malfoy so you have a reason to take his father into custody?” His eyes went as cold as glaciers. “Wait. I think I know what this is. You want me to cover Riddle’s involvement in this up so your cushy little position isn’t threatened. That’s it, isn’t it? Everything else I mentioned is just a bonus.”

Severus secretly praised Harry’s cunning as he watched Percy Weasley pale, then turn an unbecoming shade of red.

Scrimgeour went ashen. “Now, Harry, I never said—”

“Oh, you didn’t have to,” Harry spat. “I’ve heard this enough from Fudge to recognise the setup. Well, Minister, the answer was no with Fudge and it’s still no with you. I will not deny the involvement of You-Know-Who to further your political agenda. I will not pile the guilt upon a mostly innocent boy who died at the whim of a madman just so you have an excuse to interrogate his father. I will not diminish the bravery of my dormmates, who faced and defeated a feral vampire that Voldemort had control of, just so you can maintain appearances and keep the public under your thumb. And I will never, never spit upon the death of my best friend to further your career!”

By this point, Percy was almost purple with fury. Severus gripped his wand, ready to fend off an attack if one came. He looked around the room and noticed that several others were ready to defend against him too, including Arthur. Merlin, he hoped this didn’t come down to a fight between a father and son. Severus wasn’t sure he could handle that without blowing his cover.

Across the room, Harry’s eyes sparked with fury as he continued his tirade. “You hear that, mister former auror extraordinaire? Two sixth years teamed up to kill a grade-ten vampire while you sat on your arse and kissed babies.”

“Language, Potter,” said Minerva, though her expression was far too smug for her to have meant it.

“Sorry, Professor,” Harry said in a voice that implied just the opposite. He moved to stand toe-to-toe with the dumbstruck minister, his small frame rippling with power and fury. Severus tensed for a fight.

“No, Scrimgeour. I will not deny that Voldemort was behind this. I will not make my best friend’s sacrifice into a political springing platform for you. Get lost.”

Scrimgeour growled and glared at the boy, a vein popping in his forehead. “I don’t think you understand who you’re speaking to, boy. Are you really going to deny the Minister of Magic?”

Harry gave him a feral grin before moving back a few paces. “Do you forget who you’re speaking to, Minister? What do you think would happen if I decided to, I don’t know, take a career in politics?” He smirked. “I’m fairly sure I’d have the support of everyone here. What do you say, guys? Would you back me if I ran for Minister in a year or so?”

Severus scowled, though inwardly he was struggling not to laugh at Scrimgeour’s face. “Merlin preserve us from that fate,” he muttered. Harry shot him a cold look, but Severus read his amusement in the thoughts Harry let him see.
"Well, I’d back you, Harry," said Longbottom with a cold smile, his eyes hard as flint.

The boy’s unwavering reply brought it home to Severus that this boy, the child he had tormented for six years, had just two days prior killed a grade-ten vampire with nothing but a chair leg. He had faced the darkest pits of hell and come out on top. Severus would never be able to intimidate Longbottom again, not that he truly wished to. Longbottom had grown up and deserved his respect.

Severus vowed to make the past up to the boy, someday.

“Oh, I don’t think you need to worry about us, Harry,” said Finnegan with a vicious grin. “The entire bloody world would back you. You’re the Boy-Who-Lived, remember?”

Harry gave an airy chuckle. “Oh, I’d almost forgotten that part.” His innocent grin fooled no one, and it wasn’t meant to.

Percy spoke before anyone else had a chance to reply, which relieved Severus. Otherwise he would have been forced to make a slanderous comment on Harry’s supposed arrogance and his arsehole of a father. Severus did not want to hurt Harry like that ever again, especially since Harry knew the pain his father had caused Severus and deeply regretted it.

Percy snarled, “I can’t believe this.” His face was cold with rage, almost apoplectic with fury, but instead of glaring at Harry or his family, as Severus had expected, Percy directed his glare at the minister. “Am I meant to understand, sir, that you intend to use the death of my baby brother as political leverage?”

Scrimgeour scowled. “Oh, shove it, Weatherby. You agreed to this before we came here.”

“No.” Percy’s voice was icy-cold. “No, I agreed to cover up the involvement of You-Know-Who to prevent a nationwide panic. I never agreed to dishonour my brother’s death so you could use it as a political tool. Never.” He threw down his notepad and stepped on it. “I will not go along with this. And for the last time, my surname is Weasley.”


“About time,” said Harry with a wry grin. “Ready to come back to the good side, Percy?”

Percy said nothing and turned his face away, but not before Severus saw the shame and disillusionment in his eyes. Percy would not change alliances again that day—his pride wouldn’t let him—but the moment was coming.

The prodigal son would soon return home.

Severus gave Arthur a slight nod, and a hesitant smile crossed the man’s face.

Harry sighed, his eyes dark with disappointment. “That’s a shame, Percy. But, I have to say, Minister Scrimgeour, his anger is quite telling. If even your devoted assistant is irritated with you by this point, I reckon you might want to watch your back once I get my NEWTs. It’s about time someone with decent morals was running the British Wizarding community, and if that means I have to do it myself, then so be it.”

Scrimgeour scowled and went the colour of parchment. “Very well, Mister Potter. You win. For now.”

“Good. Now get out of my face. We have an article to print and a funeral to arrange. And you’re not invited, Minister Scrimgeour.” He lowered his voice and spoke to the shaking Weasley boy.
“Though you are, Percy, and it would really help your mum heal if you’d come. No pressure about your job or anything. You should be able to mourn your brother and send him off no matter where you stand politically.”

“He’s right, love,” said Molly with a hopeful expression. “Please come. Please give R-Ron that honour, even if you won’t—” Tears dripped down her cheeks. “—Won’t c-come home. Though we do miss you, dear. So very much.”

Arthur slid his arm around her shoulder and whispered something bracing in her ear. He gave his third son a wan smile. “Come if you’re able, Percy. No one will deny you that right, all allegiances aside.”

Percy turned and gave his mother a hesitant nod. Molly burst into tears and opened her arms, but Percy stayed back. Severus watched the joy melt off her face, feeling as if he had witnessed something beautiful die. When she finally realised that Percy would not come home that day, she gave a broken cry and buried her face in Arthur’s shoulder.

Arthur sighed heavily, the only sign of his grief he allowed himself in public, and held his wife tight. “I’m sorry, Mollywobbles.”

She nodded and burrowed her face further into his robes.

Harry stared at Molly, his expression full of desperate grief that Severus wished he could take away. The boy closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes again, all traces of a mourning youth had vanished, leaving a soldier in his place. Severus still ached to comfort Harry, knowing full well it was a front, wished to give Molly some little hope, but all he could do was scowl.

Severus had never hated the restrictions of his position more than at that moment.

“Well, Minister,” said Harry in an icy tone, “is there a reason you’re still fouling the air here? I believe we’ve made it perfectly clear you aren’t welcome.”

Scrimgeour puffed up and glared, but Albus interrupted him before he could speak.

“There is no need for such incivility, Harry,” Albus chided.

The boy bowed his head. “Sorry, sir.” He sounded as if he had meant it this time.

Albus turned to the minister, his expression hard as stone. “We will not alter the truth to suit the Ministry’s agenda, Rufus. Please leave. My students have been stressed enough.”

The minister scowled. “You’ll regret this, Albus.”

“Will I?” Albus turned to Lovegood. “Be sure you include that statement in your report, dear girl. It will make for quite the titillating finish.”

“Yes, sir,” she said with a dreamy smile. “I’ll be sure it’s in print by tomorrow. Daddy will be so thrilled. It’s been quite a long time since Harry’s given us such a big story, you know.”

The minister turned white. “Uh, no need to print that. Really. Just a bit of banter between friends, right, Albus?”

The Headmaster smiled, the curve of his lips resembling nothing so much as sharp edge of a scimitar. “Oh, of course, Minister. However, I am quite interested to see how the public interprets such jollity.
I imagine the rumours will be thoroughly entertaining.”

Severus smirked so he wouldn’t grin.

Scrimgeour tugged at his collar and wiped his brow with a pocket handkerchief. “Y-yes. Entertaining indeed. But really, there’s no need to put that in the paper. Or anything at all, really. I just wanted to—well, it was supposed to be a friendly meeting but, I suppose my intent was lost in the delivery. You know how these things go.”

Albus smiled serenely. “Indeed. Would you like a lemon drop on your way out, Rufus? They are quite soothing, and you do look a bit ruffled.”

“No, no. I’m quite all right. But we’re not going to report this, right?”

Albus smiled. “Oh, we most definitely are. After all, the public has a right to the truth, do they not, Rufus?”

“Yes, but—”

Severus cut him off with a vicious grin. “If I were you, Scrimgeour, and be sure that I am glad I am not, I would leave now before you incriminate yourself further.”

“Be quiet, Death Eater!” Scrimgeour glared at Severus. “I’ll get you one day. Be sure of it. Fancy a little kiss?”

Harry’s eyes flashed, but the boy said nothing, to Severus’ immense relief. Instead, Miss Lovegood snuck in the parting blow.

“Oh, thank you, Minister,” she said with a wide-eyed smile. “That will make for such an exciting ending, don’t you think, Headmaster?”

Albus chuckled. “Oh, indeed. Threatening a Hogwarts professor with the Dementor’s Kiss without provocation. I imagine the readers will find that very interesting.”

Scrimgeour winced.

“You’re only digging your own grave here, Scrimgeour,” said a grinning Harry. “Snape is right for once. Get out before you bury yourself.”

“Professor Snape, Harry,” corrected Minerva.

“Right. Sorry, Professor.” He injected just the right amount of casualness into his tone to make Severus believe he didn’t care.

‘Well done, Harry.’

The boy jumped and looked at Severus with a confused frown. Severus barely suppressed his surprise. Had Harry heard him? Severus hadn’t attempted to communicate telepathically. Indeed, as far as he knew, he lacked the ability.

How strange.

The minister gave an irritated huff and called for ‘Weatherby’ to follow him out. Percy gave his family an uncertain look before trailing after the man, his expression deeply troubled.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Harry gave a crow of triumph. “Take that, you greedy, self-
absorbed bastard!”

Molly and Minerva cried at once, “Language, Harry!”

He gave them a sheepish smile. “Sorry. It’s just that he’s had it coming for a while. Maybe after Luna’s article, we’ll finally be able to get someone decent in office.”

Finnegan waggled his eyebrows. “Aren’t you applying for the job, mate?”

Harry shuddered. “Not unless every other honourable person on the planet turns it down first. Ugh. I’d rather muck out the stalls for Hagrid’s blast-ended skrewts.”

Everyone laughed but Severus, who never laughed in public, and Molly, who was still distraught over Percy.

Harry gave Shacklebolt an assessing look. “King, I’d be willing to endorse you for the job. Would you take it? You would know how to clean up the Ministry and get the slime out, and I trust you to lead the war effort from within the Ministry without falling prey to greed.”

Kingsley gaped. “Me? I’m an auror, Harry, not a politician.”

“I know, but that’s good. You’re a natural leader, you’re fair and honest, you understand what we’re up against in the war, and you aren’t a power-grubbing idiot like Fudge or Scrimgeour. That’s exactly what we need.”

Albus gave the bald auror a genuine smile. “I agree with Harry’s assessment, and if this is something you would like to pursue, I would be glad to lend my support and help, Kingsley.”

The auror rubbed his head. “Er, I mean, it’s not really something I’d ever considered. Might I have some time to think on it and discuss it with my family first?”

Albus nodded. “Take all the time you need. For the moment, this is only a hypothetical situation regardless. We do not know if this article alone will be enough to turn the tide of public opinion against Scrimgeour. I certainly hope so; however, we must keep in mind that The Quibbler does not carry as much weight with the public as The Daily Prophet, fine magazine that it is.”

Arthur sighed. “No. We need an in at the Prophet, but I don’t know anyone who works there besides Rita Skeeter, and she’s anything but trustworthy.”

“No, I wouldn’t trust her as far as I could throw her, without magic.” Harry rubbed his chin. “What if we asked Colin Creevey to try for a photography internship at the Prophet this summer and look around for leads on possible allies while he’s at it? I’ve no doubt he’s loyal.”

Severus inwardly cheered Harry’s plan, but scowled to keep his cover. “I am impressed, Potter. You have just broken your record for imbecility. Between Creevey’s vapid hero-worship and his obsession with that godsforsaken camera of his, the only place he will lead any possible ally is straight into unemployment or the closed ward at Saint Mungo’s.”

Albus chuckled. “Now, now, Severus. Harry’s idea is actually quite a good one. We will simply need to ensure that Mister Creevey moderates his camera use, as his affection for Harry will likely win him friends rather than otherwise. Thank you, Harry. I will send him a letter tonight and see if he is amenable.”

Harry beamed, and Severus ached inside. He wished he could smile back, rather than being forced to scoff and roll his eyes.
“Merlin help us. Colin Creevey as an ally.” Severus snorted. “We will all be dead by lunchtime tomorrow. Still, I suppose it could be worse.” He glared right at Harry, lest anyone get the idea that he liked the boy.

‘I am sorry, Harry. I wish I could be myself.’

To Severus’ shock, as Harry looked at him and frowned, an answering thought whispered at the edges of his mind.

‘So do I.’

By the time Albus dismissed the group fifteen minutes later, Severus had convinced himself he had imagined it.

Ron’s funeral was that evening. For Harry, the ceremony and burial passed in a blur of greyed-out pain and hazy grief. The one moment that stood out in his memory was when Ron’s casket hit the bottom of his grave. The heavy thudding sound and slight spray of dirt, almost lost among the sounds of murmured goodbyes and sniffles, brought it home to Harry at last.

Ron was really gone.

He would never again trounce Harry at chess. They would never again team up to avoid Hermione’s mad study schedules or walk the halls at night under Harry’s cloak. They wouldn’t have the chance to fight side-by-side in the final battle, like Harry had always imagined they would.

Harry’s friend, his brother, his best mate was dead.

As the dirt piled onto his friend’s casket, the wizards around Harry broke into song, beginning a send-off ritual he could only whisper along to. Harry had little voice to speak of anyway, but even if he had been a fabulous vocalist, he couldn’t have found the heart to sing at that moment. He wanted to throw himself into the grave with his friend and weep, beg him to wake up and tell Harry it was all a prank or a bad dream.

It wasn’t right. They should have had more time. Now, Harry would have to go through life remembering Ron’s last words were to accuse him of lying when Harry had been trying to save him.

Trying, and failing. He had failed Ron. Harry hadn’t been able to save his one true friend, and dear Merlin, it hurt.

Tears coursed down his cheeks like rain as the song went on, and by the time the last shovelful of dirt splattered atop the grave, Harry hadn’t moved. He stayed there throughout prayers and well-wishes, while family laid flowers and trinkets atop the earth. He hardly felt the friendly pats on his shoulders or gentle hugs. He knelt in the mud beside his first friend’s grave, head bowed and tears streaking his face, lost to everything but pain until everyone else had left. Only the aurors on protection detail and Severus remained with Harry throughout his lonely vigil, though the latter was heavily-glamoured to look like a Weasley relative.

Not even the chill of Scottish rain could break Harry out of his crushing, paralysing grief. Ron was gone, and Harry couldn’t find it in him to care about anything else.
He wasn’t sure how long he knelt there, rain blurring the fresh top to Ron’s grave and muddying Harry’s knees, before Severus could drag him away.

Back in the hidden flat, Severus removed his glamours and helped a half-frozen Harry out of his drenched cloak and muddy robes. The kind gesture broke something within Harry, and he buried his face in Severus’ chest and wept like he had never allowed himself to in his life. Harry felt as though his heart was bleeding out through his eyes, shattering into a million pieces, burning to ash. Only the slow, gentle strokes of Severus’ hand through Harry’s hair kept him together amidst the raging storm of his grief.

It seemed as though hours had passed before he became conscious of the fact that he was sitting on the sofa next to Severus, his face still pressed into the man’s chest, and that he was dry and warm despite having spent a long time weeping in the rain. Severus must have cast a warming and drying charm over Harry at some point. Harry slipped a hand up to wipe his face and found his way blocked by the soft quilt Severus had wrapped around him. The fire had been lit as well, and with Severus’ body warmth so close, Harry found he wasn’t cold in the least.

Severus had taken care of him without Harry even noticing. Idly, Harry wondered how often the man had done so even when they were still enemies.

As Harry surfaced from drowning waves of grief, he became conscious of the fact that Severus was trembling despite the warmth. Whispers, a bit panicked, brushed against Harry’s ear.

“Harry, ssh. It’s … I … oh Merlin, Harry. I am not the one you should come to for comfort. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to help you.”

Harry sniffled and laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “Ssh. It’s okay, Severus. This is all I need, just you to be here with me. You don’t have to try to fix it. I know nothing ever will.”

Severus sighed into his hair and hugged Harry into his side. “Then I am here as long as you need. Does it help when I am … close?”

“Yeah,” Harry whispered into Severus’ neck. “Yeah, helps a lot. Stay?”

Severus swallowed hard, and his voice came out a little breathless. “Yes. Though it is still hard for me to believe you wish me to.”

“I do. Can I just stay here a bit longer?”

“Yes. As long as you need.”

“Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

Harry nuzzled Severus’ shoulder, slipped his hand into the other man’s, and let the warmth of his friend’s touch drive away the icy cold feeling Ron’s funeral had left in his soul. Bit by bit, the pain abated to a deep, gnawing ache rather than an all-encompassing scourge, and Harry sighed with the relief. Severus was keeping his anguish at bay just by being there, the man’s presence soothing him like no one else could.

With a slight frown, he wondered why Severus had more power to help him than his other friends did. Harry cared for Severus deeply, respected him, trusted him absolutely, but it struck him as odd that he found more comfort in Severus’ embrace than in sharing his grief with Hermione, who had loved Ron too. Or Neville, who had been Ron’s brother almost as much as Harry had. Why should
he find a safe harbour with a man who used to torment him, who had, up until three days ago, hated him?

But no, Harry refused to think of the past. He had forgiven Severus completely. He wouldn’t keep wondering about the power of their friendship when Severus was obviously trying so hard to put his mistakes behind him, trying to be what Harry needed, even to the point of allowing himself to be frightened and sorrowful in Harry’s presence. For a man as proud and careful as Severus, that amount of trust was incredible.

Besides, Hermione and Neville were grieving too, and Harry had always hated being a burden. He needn’t worry about overwhelming Severus. The man had grieved for Ron, but as a teacher to a student might, not like the way Hermione was shattered without her boyfriend or Ginny was lost without her brother. It was okay to lean on Severus. Harry knew his blistering grief wouldn’t break the man, though he did worry about Severus’ own recovery from his recent assault.

Oh Merlin, his assault! Suddenly, Harry felt like a total cad. Severus had been sexually assaulted the night before and Harry was practically sitting in his lap. Severus had to be uncomfortable.

Harry leaned back a bit and looked his friend in the eyes. “Severus?”

Severus gave him a hesitant smile. “Hmm?”

“Are you okay? I … I don’t want to bother you. Am I too close?”

Severus brought Harry back against him and stroked a hand through the younger man’s hair. “Ssh. You are not troubling me, Harry. I trust you. That oversized Gryffindor honour of yours would never let you harm me.”

Harry gave a wan chuckle and snuggled close again. “All right. But you’ll tell me if you do get scared?”

“Upon my honour as a Slytherin.”

Harry chuckled again. “You know, before I learned the truth about you, I would have said Slytherins don’t have honour.” He turned to look into Severus’ fathomless eyes. “But you do. Merlin, you do.”

A faint blush coloured Severus’ cheeks, and he replied to the compliment with a nod. Harry gave him a sad smile and laid his head upon Severus’ shoulder again.

After a while, Severus had laid his cheek upon Harry’s hair and tucked him in closer, and the tender display of affection filled Harry with warmth. Soft, sweet, Severus Snape. Who would have guessed? Harry smiled and traced patterns over Severus’ knuckles with his thumb, feeling utterly safe. It was such an unusual sensation, that Harry could not tear himself away.

Severus gently shook Harry awake some time later and suggested they go to bed. Harry grunted agreement and dropped off to soft fingertips gently stroking his hair back from his scar. Merlin, Harry had never felt so cared for as he did in that moment. Sleep came to him without a struggle that night despite his lingering grief.

A dream of giant spiders and chess pieces dancing to a chorus of ‘Weasley is Our King’ broke Harry
out of peaceful reverie with a vengeance. He woke up in tears and found Severus’ arms already around him.

“Don’t wanna to sleep alone,” Harry whispered. “Can’t drive away the nightmares. Can’t stop thinking about him even in my sleep.”

“All right.” Severus enlarged the bed again and lay beside Harry. “Come. I am here.”

With a sigh, Harry slipped his hand into Severus’ and let the man’s closeness comfort him.

“Severus?”

“Mmh?”

Harry found the man’s sleepy mumbles more adorable than he would have believed possible.

“Goodnight.”

“Mm. ‘Night.”

The man brought Harry’s hand to his chest and fell into soft snores. Harry watched him a moment, studying the planes of his companion’s face, softened in repose.

“Handsome,” he whispered to himself.

Severus’ eyes blinked open. “Hm?”

Harry blushed. “N-nothing. Go back to sleep. It’s okay.”

“Hn.”

Severus closed his eyes and was asleep again in seconds. Harry suppressed a chuckle and settled down next to him.

He did not dream again.

The next morning, Harry woke to the feel of something tugging at his hair. “Gerroff, Sev’rus. Too early.”

“S’not me,” Severus muttered from directly beside his head.

Harry blinked and opened his eyes. Apparently he had snuggled up to the man in his sleep again. Severus lay on his back underneath Harry, who was sprawled over the man’s chest with his face in Severus’ hair. The tugging sensation must have come from Severus’ owl, as the black barn owl was nipping at Harry’s hair in attempt to wake them. He hooted in Harry’s ear, bringing the young man fully awake.

Fully awake and aware.

Harry gasped, a blush heating his face and chest when he realised just how close he was to his companion. So close, his teenage hormones had asserted themselves and were currently prodding
Severus’ hip. And they really, really liked the sensation.

“Shite!” Harry scooted back and dropped his hands over his ‘little problem,’ not so little after feeling Severus warm and firm against him. “Oh gods, Severus. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to … I’ll just go.”

A gentle hand caught Harry’s wrist before he could escape. “It is nothing. I am not unaffected by masculinity’s pitfalls, Harry.”

“Huh? You’re not upset?”

“Harry, it is a natural biological process that no man has control over. I do understand.”

When the meaning of that gentle reassurance finally pierced Harry’s hormone-fogged brain, he glanced down Severus’ body and quickly averted his eyes. _Merlin._ Severus was indeed a man, judging by the tent above his hips. An impressive man. And fuck all if Harry wasn’t hot all over at the thought of it.

“Oh, oh gods.”

Was it possible to actually die of mortification? Harry thought it might be.

“Gonna … go loo.”

Severus released Harry’s wrist with a low chuckle. “Go, then, but do not be ashamed. You have done nothing untoward, Harry. Nothing. I am unharmed.”

Severus’ soft-spoken words unravelled something tight and aching in Harry’s chest, but he still couldn’t bear to look at the man. Shite. He couldn’t believe that … and dear gods, Severus was still hard. And Harry was still looking. With a terse nod, Harry darted into the safety of the loo, casting warding and privacy charms the moment the door closed behind him.

Fuck. He needed a shower. A cold one. And maybe an _Obliviate_ or two.

With a groan, Harry crawled into the shower and turned the cold water all the way up.

When he emerged a few moments later, teeth brushed, hair combed, and dressed in fresh jeans and a tee, Severus was sitting at the kitchen table with a magazine and a mug of steaming hot coffee, surrounded by the makings of a full English. He had added a dressing gown to his usual white pyjamas, but otherwise looked unruffled and peaceful. The owl sat next to Severus’ plate and helped itself to a piece of bacon.

“Er, m-morning, Severus.”

Severus took a drink from his coffee mug and gave Harry a warm smile. Harry went all hot and funny again and quickly looked away.

A rich chuckle sounded from the other man. “Come now, Harry. We are both men. It happens sometimes. Nothing to fret about.”

“Easy for you to say. You weren’t the one digging into your—” Harry clapped his hands over his mouth and let out an unmanly squeak.

Severus snorted. “Shy, are we? It’s no trouble. You did not hurt me. Now, come and eat, Harry. Telos brought us _The Quibbler_ at the Headmaster’s request. I thought you might enjoy reading it. In
particular, the ten-page long exposé on page thirty-six.”

“Thirty-six?” Curiosity overcame his embarrassment, and Harry took the seat across from Severus. “I’d have thought they would want it right at the front.”

Severus shook his head and passed The Quibbler over. “Not in magazines. They put the cover stories closer to the centre in hopes of causing a reader to pass by an article or advert that interests them. It is an attempt to gain further subscriptions by catching a reader’s fancy.”

“Ah. I hadn’t considered that. Haven’t read a lot of magazines in any case besides Ron’s quidditch rags, and all the articles in those catch my eye.” Harry shrugged and gave Severus a wry smile. “I always just read them like a book. Thought everyone else did, too.” He shrugged and flipped to the correct page, ignoring an article on Blibbering Humdingers and another about alien infiltrations in the Ministry.

Severus chuckled. “Most people use the cover and table of contents to find the articles they wish to read and discard the rest.”

“Really? But that’s such a waste. Well, maybe not so much with The Quibbler, even if some of the stories are entertaining, but with other mags, it seems wasteful to just pick part of the stories and throw the rest away.”

“Hmm.” Severus scooped some scrambled eggs on his plate and added a slice of tomato and the mushrooms he liked so well. “If I am honest, I read my potions journals from cover to cover as well.”

Harry grinned before he returned his attention to the magazine again. He was on page thirty-six, and a blazing headline topped a picture of a scowling Scrimgeour.

**Minister Scrimgeour: Friend of the Public or Dastardly Dimplingler in Disguise?**

Harry snorted hard enough to spray the article. Severus glared, and Harry cast a sheepish Tergeo.

“Er, sorry about that. But seriously, a Dastardly Dimplingler? Didn’t you laugh?”

Severus raised an eyebrow as if to suggest he found the concept ludicrous, but the light in his eyes belied his harsh expression.

“I, Mister Potter, simply read the article beneath rather than spitting all over it.”

“Better the magazine than our breakfast.”

“Touché. Now read.”

Harry obeyed.

The article was well-done, a clean, concise story without any of Luna’s usual nonsensical rambling. The transcription of the meeting yesterday took up the bulk of the length, but where Luna interjected with her explanations or observations, the writing was clear and to the point, nothing like her usual dreamy style. He suspected Professor McGonagall’s hand in the editing and resolved to send them both a thank you present as soon as he could get his hands on a proper gift. Maybe Dobby could help.
He laid the magazine aside when he realised he was staring at an article about Crumple-Horned Snorkacks without taking in a word.

“Do you think it will do any good, Severus?”

The man shrugged. “It might, despite the nonsensical headline. However, even if it does work and Scrimgeour is ousted, we still need an in at the Prophet. I do hope your idea about recruiting Creevey works.”

Harry gave a wry laugh. “Yeah, me too.”

“Eat your breakfast, Harry. Once you finish, I am going to work on the samples. Would you like to help?”

Harry grinned. “Can I?”

“Well, I cannot allow you to touch the samples themselves, but you were a great help yesterday by simply taking the task of recording ingredients off of my hands.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll help then.”

He piled a plate full of eggs, bacon, and mushrooms, happier at the prospect of working on potions with Severus than he would have ever believed. Well, this time, he wasn’t blowing anything up, so he supposed he was safe. And watching Severus in his element was amazing in itself. The man was brilliant. Maybe if Harry was lucky, some of that shine would rub off on him while they were working together and he could have a hope of passing his healer qualifications.

And maybe if they were both lucky, they could find a cure to delayed-onset vampirism before anyone else had to die.

Determination filling his veins, Harry set about finishing his breakfast so they might begin work on an antidote that much quicker. They had to hurry. Harry couldn’t stand to lose any other friends.

Severus stood and banished the dishes to the sink once Harry had pushed his plate aside. “Ready, Harry?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

He followed Severus into the lab with renewed purpose.
No One's Home

Chapter Summary

Warnings: mentions of child abuse, child sexual abuse, nothing graphic. Harry finds one of the Prince's books in Severus' lab, but no answers are forthcoming. Severus takes Harry home and tells the Dursleys exactly how things are going to be from now on.

***AN1: I've been fighting a lot of mental fog and increased pain lately. Writing is hard, but I'm still going. It's just taking me longer.***

CHAPTER 14

NO ONE'S HOME

The rest of the time Harry spent at Hogwarts—one month, all said—passed quietly. When Severus would let him, Harry helped with the search for an antidote, taking great care to be the kind of assistant the potions master would appreciate. Whenever Severus muttered another ingredient, Harry made himself useful by researching said ingredient in the Prince’s book and Severus’ many compendiums. He dutifully wrote out each of the item’s uses and side effects he could find upon a lengthy sheet of parchment and researched the relation of those side effects as they related to vampirism, keeping detailed notes on anything relevant he found. Harry reckoned the Prince would be proud of him, if he could only see him now.

By then, Harry was positive Severus knew something about the Prince, but the man had kept stubbornly mum about it. Harry understood that Severus was afraid to reveal what he knew, but he couldn’t understand why. It wasn’t like Harry would reject Severus even if the Prince did turn out to be someone Harry wasn’t fond of. Still, no amount of poking and prodding would get Severus to speak, and out of fear of pushing too hard, Harry gave it up as a bad job and decided to continue searching for the Prince on his own.

Harry would find him one day. He was certain of it.

On the last day of his stay at Hogwarts—all of the other students had already returned home weeks ago—Harry got up early to do some last minute research on their ingredients list, just to double-check that he hadn’t missed anything. The last ingredient Severus had called out—borage—was relatively well-known, so this time Harry passed over Severus’ myriad rare and ancient texts in search of a more common work. He dragged his finger along the spines and paused upon the cover of a seventh year potions textbook. Hmm. It must have been Severus’ from his school days.

Curious, Harry took the book and set it upon his work table. His fingertips tingled with some kind of strange familiarity as he flipped open the tattered, well-used cover and examined the first page.

‘Property of the Half-Blood Prince’ was emblazoned on the top corner.

Harry slammed the book closed. “Mother of Merlin!”

With a shaky gasp, Harry held the book in trembling hands and forced himself to open the cover once more. Oh yes, it really was the Prince’s book. He would recognise that writing anywhere. Flowing, elegant, unique. Harry could not help but run a finger across the letters and feel the echo of
his wished-for companion. He felt as though if he could only find the right page, the Prince would step out and introduce himself and all would be well.

A lump formed in Harry’s throat as he read a poem upon the inside front cover, one that made him fear for his Prince’s safety. It spoke of darkness all around, the pain of terrible choices, and positively reeked of regret.

“Oh, Prince,” he whispered. “What happened to you?”

Harry held the book to his chest and sighed, closing his eyes and imagining his Prince standing nearby. Gods, if only he could take this book with him when he left. It was a piece of his friend’s history he longed to keep, and yet this book belonged to Severus. He couldn’t take it anywhere, as much as he longed to.

His eyes snapped open. Wait a moment. Severus’? What in Merlin’s name was Severus doing with the Prince’s book?

A rush of triumph surged through Harry. So Severus did know the Prince, and knew him well, if the Prince had trusted Severus enough to leave his book with the spy. But Severus had said he had no friends other than Harry’s mum, McGonagall, and Dumbledore. Had he lied?

No. Severus was many things, but he wasn’t dishonest—at least not with Harry. So who was the Prince then? How did Severus know him? How had Severus come upon this book? Harry could make no sense of the situation.

“What on earth has you looking like that, Harry?”

Harry jumped as Severus came into the lab, his eyebrows high and the corner of his lips twitching with suppressed amusement.

“Good morning to you, too.” Harry gave him a wry smile. “Well, I thought I’d come in here and double-check the list while I had time but … well … I found ….”

Severus’ amusement vanished. “Found what? Do you see a connection?”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “If only I could. You’re the potions genius here. All I see is a load of complex symptoms that don’t match up. But this ….” He carefully peeled the book from his chest and held it in a shaking hand. “Why? Why do you have it?”

Severus took the book and ran a fingertip over the cover. “It has been mine for many years.”

“Why? Why do you have it?”

Severus closed his eyes and turned away. “Did you manage to find any other information besides this book?”

Harry sighed, wishing Severus could let go of his fears. “No. Hadn’t the chance. That was the first book I pulled, and when I realised whose it was, I forgot what I’d been looking for in the first place.”

Severus pressed the book into his hands. “Then take that and look up whatever the last ingredient was. Quickly, though. We shall have to leave for Surrey after breakfast.”

Harry shuddered and clutched the Prince’s book like a lifeline. “I don’t want to go back there.”

Severus paused in checking his apparatus. “You must leave today if you are to stay a month with
“I know, but I … I wish I could stay with you.”

“I am sorry. I would let you if I could, but the blood wards are even more important now that these ferals are an issue, Harry. If not for that, perhaps we could find a way to protect you without your relatives’ … input.” Severus turned back to Harry and smoothed the young man’s wild hair. “Even so, do not forget, this time, you do not face them alone. I am watching over you.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “Thank you.”

Severus squeezed his shoulder and returned to his samples. “Back to work, Harry. We have little time to waste.”

“All right.” Harry shook his sorrow off and opened the book. “Borage … let’s see. Anti-headache, stomach soothing, bone-knitting, hmm. Nothing here that would slow the onset of vampirism.” He wrote down all the effects anyway, just in case, and looked back to the book to make sure he hadn’t missed anything. “Oh! There’s a note here from the Prince saying that borage is also known to slow the reactions of the central nervous system, the brain stem in particular.” He met Severus’ eyes. “That’s a start, yeah?”

Severus rubbed his lips with a fingertip. “Hmm. I had forgotten that study. It may indeed open other possibilities.”

“You forgot a study in the Prince’s book?” Harry narrowed his eyes. “Severus, please. Why won’t you tell me what you know?”

Severus gave him a sad look. “When you are willing to embrace what your eyes see, you will find him. Until then, I cannot speak.”

Harry blinked, gobsmacked. “What?”

Severus sighed and tapped the book. “You may keep that, if you wish. Perhaps it will help you on your search.”

Harry pouted. “You might just make it easier yourself, you know.”

Severus gave a mirthless laugh. “I might, but then what would you have learned by it?”

Harry grumbled, but was too happy about getting another of the Prince’s books to really be irritated. New reading material would help him to deal with the never-ending ache Ron’s absence had left behind. At least he wouldn’t be too alone this summer—assuming he could hide the book from his relatives.

“Severus? Do you think you could make this look like something boring and patronising to the Muggles?”


Harry smirked. “That’s perfect. Thanks.”

Severus snorted and went back to his work.
As the train had long since come and gone, Severus would need to side-along apparate Harry to Surrey. Severus’ young charge looked less than happy with the idea, and the closer they came to Hogsmeade, the more he shrunk into himself. Severus, again under heavy glamours, wrapped an arm around the young man’s shoulders and pressed him close.

“Do not fear. I will not let them harm you.”

Harry sniffled and turned his face into Severus’ side. “You can’t stop them, not really.”

“I will do everything I can to prevent it, and do not forget your ring. If you are in distress, any at all, please, use it. I will come as soon as I am able.”

Harry nodded and stood tall, drawing his strength around him like a veil. Severus left his hand on the boy’s shoulder all the way to the apparition point.

“All right, Harry. Are you ready?”

Harry closed his eyes and nodded. “S-scared, but ready.”

“Good. Now, hold out your left wrist.”

Harry frowned, but obeyed. Severus conjured a plain gold bracelet with a decoration of an onyx and opal eye and snapped it around the boy’s wrist. A sticking charm held it in place, and would do so for the length of his conjuration ability—one month precisely. He glamoured Harry’s trainers to look old and used as well and did the same with the boy’s new jeans and tee shirt.

“There you are, though I much preferred your former attire.”

Harry’s expression darkened. “Yes, well, we can’t have the freak wearing decent things, now can we?”

Severus held Harry’s shoulders. “You are not a freak. Do not let them poison you again. I have worked too hard to help you overcome that line of thinking this summer.”

Harry bowed his head. “I’ll try, but I hope you have a good explanation for the bracelet. They’ll kill me for it.”

Severus’ smile was positively devious. “Oh, I do indeed. Are you ready to leave?”

Harry hesitated. “Yeah, just ….” He leapt into Severus and threw his arms around the man’s neck. “Thank you. For everything you’ve done for me, thank you.” He kissed Severus’ cheek and nestled close, and Severus gasped at the unfamiliar sensation.

‘Harry just … kissed me. I should be horrified at his cheek, but ….’

Instead, Severus slowly wrapped his arms around the young man and held him tight. He felt so … cared for like this, so cherished, that he could not seem to help it. With a soft sigh, he rested his cheek against that messy mop, thrilling in the feel of being held so warmly.

No one had ever touched him like Harry did.
“You are welcome, Harry.”

For a long, quiet moment, there was nothing but the two of them. The road was still and silent, and Harry warm and trembling within Severus’ arms. Severus wished he could take the young man’s fear away, but all he could offer was this, a tight hug to drive away the loneliness encroaching on his spirit.

“I will help you endure as much as I can, Harry. I promise. I will protect you.”

Harry was sniffling. “I don’t want to let go.”

Severus squeezed Harry as tight as he could. “I do not either, but it is time.” After one more deep breath, where he gathered the feel of Harry’s embrace into his soul and locked it away, Severus moved back and looked into his young charge’s frightened eyes. “We must go.”

Harry sniffled and lowered his eyes. “A-all right.”

Severus moved so he held onto Harry’s arm instead of his entire person. “Hold on.”

“Yes, sir.” Harry’s fingers closed around Severus’ arm in a pincer grip.

Severus focused on his destination and spun on his heel. The pressure-tube of apparition sucked him up and spat him out, and he landed gracefully on his feet. A quick jerk of Harry’s arm ensured the boy stayed upright as well despite his ungainly landing.

“Thanks.”

Severus nodded and released the boy’s arm, though a part of him would have liked to keep holding it, if only to offer Harry some small comfort in this place of pain and humiliation. It wasn’t worth the risk. The neighbourhood was crawling with nosy and bigoted Muggles, and all it would take was one mistake to cause Harry a month of pain.

Severus had caused the boy enough grief in his life without adding that to his tally.

Instead, he brushed off his robes and motioned for Harry to walk beside him. “Come. Let us go have a chat with your lovely relatives, hmm?”

Harry nodded and followed, nervously rubbing the band on his wrist. “You never did tell me what this bracelet does.”

Severus chuckled. “There is a protection charm and mild sticking charm, but nothing major. It is the eye that will do the magic for us, even though it is not enchanted.”

Harry frowned. “You lost me three houses back.”

Severus shook his head and led Harry on. “It is best I say no more on it until we are at your relatives’ lest one of their neighbours overhears.”

Harry nodded and walked closer to Severus, fear radiating from him in waves. Severus wished he had more to offer the boy. If he did not need to break down and reconstruct the vampiric delay potion urgently, he might have simply stayed there with Harry for the entire month. Indeed, he still planned to as often as he could—with the help of a portable potions lab and powerful, undetectable wards. No one would know, not even Harry himself—it was too dangerous for all involved if Severus was caught watching over the Boy-Who-Lived—but he would be there just in case the shite hit the fan.
He only hoped said shite could wait thirty-one days, until Harry’s eighteenth birthday.

Harry tugged at Severus’ elbow. “T-that’s it.”

Severus sneered at the pristine paint, the over-groomed lawn, and pruned-to-death rosebushes, all too perfect by half. “Yes, this has Petunia Evans written all over it. Well, let us start the reunion, hmm?”

Harry fiddled with the bracelet. “Severus, sir … if they … I’m really scared.”

Severus squeezed Harry’s shoulder briefly. “I will not bring you to harm. Come. Trust me, Harry.”

Harry gulped and squared his shoulders. “All right, sir. Then, come this way, I guess.”

Severus nodded and followed his charge to his front door.

Harry was shaking all over by the time they made it to the stoop of 4 Privet Drive. The fact that he had come here a month late—likely making the Dursleys wait for him at the station because of course they wouldn’t open wizarding letters—was enough to make his last month there a miserable one on its own. The golden bracelet on his wrist would only make matters worse for him. Gods, he hoped Severus had a good explanation for it.

Harry took a deep breath and shook his head. Severus had grown up in hell himself—the man had shared that with him recently, and Harry had never forgotten what he had seen during Occlumency and in the pensieve. Severus knew what it meant to have family who would hurt him for anything deviating from their idea of the norm. He would not leave Harry without protection.

A warm hand settled on his shoulder. “Harry, I am with you. All will be well.”

Harry gulped and reached a discreet hand up to squeeze Severus’ fingers. “I’m sorry. Just scared.”

“I know. I am here.”

Harry laid his head on the shoulder Severus was holding, just briefly, then gathered his strength around him like a cloak. He could do this. It was just thirty-one days, and this time he wouldn’t be alone. He pulled the Prince’s new book from his pocket, a tiny square he couldn’t hope to read without help.

“Unshrink this for me, please?”

Severus tapped the square with his wand and smiled sadly when Harry clutched the book close to his chest.

“Okay. I can do this now, I think.” Harry took a deep breath and pressed a trembling finger against the doorbell. The resounding ding-dong was like a funeral bell, and Harry couldn’t resist edging closer to his professor.

Severus left his hand on Harry’s shoulder. Harry knew it wasn’t strictly wise with the way his neighbours would gossip, but at that moment, he didn’t care. The warmth and protection of that strong hand was the only thing keeping him from dissolving into a mess of tears and pain.

He didn’t know if he could face this without having Ron’s letters or help from Missus Weasley to
keep him fed and sane. Severus had assured Harry that the Weasleys would not abandon him, but Harry couldn’t help but worry. Without Ron, why would they care about him?

Harry closed his eyes around a wave of tears. It was only a month. He could survive for a month, and then he would never have to set foot in this awful place again.

The fingers on his shoulders tightened, and Harry snapped his eyes open just as a heavy tread sounded in the room beyond.

“Just a moment, I’m coming.”

Vernon. Harry was already practically flush against Severus’ side, but he edged still closer at the sound of his uncle’s booming voice.

“I am with you,” Severus whispered, just before the door opened and the bull of a man set eyes on his nephew.

“You!” He turned and called into the house. “Petunia! Get Dudders to safety. It’s the Freak and another freak!”

Severus’ low growl made Harry feel safer. Then Vernon turned and stuck a fat finger in Harry’s face, and it was all the young wizard could do not to turn and run.

“What do you think you’re doing here, you ungrateful little slime?”

“Enough of that, Mister Dursley,” said Severus in an icy voice. He moved Harry back and behind him a bit, so the taller man’s frame protected Harry. “Keep your fingers to yourself.”

Vernon fixed his glare on Severus. “You don’t order me around, and I’ll not have your kind fouling up my house regardless. Begone with you, both of you.”

Severus’ fingers clenched Harry’s shoulder tightly, just this side of being painful.

“No, Mister Dursley. You are going to open this door this instant and welcome your nephew into your home for the summer, and myself for the time being, or the consequences will be dire, I assure you.”

Vernon’s face turned an ugly shade of purple. “Where do you get off thinking you can threaten me? What’s a scrawny thing like you going to do about it anyway? I know you can’t do that … that freaky stuff here, or your Ministry will come after you.”

Harry couldn’t hold in a snicker. Severus Snape? Scrawny? The man was lithe, true, but he also radiated presence and power. Vernon was in for a rude awakening.

Severus gave him a hurt look, but Harry shook his head and rubbed Severus’ hand, trying to make it known that he wasn’t laughing at his professor. The pain in the man’s eyes faded, and Severus squeezed Harry’s shoulder in response.

Then Severus turned back to Uncle Vernon, and the gentle, caring person Harry had known these past four weeks vanished, leaving Professor Snape in his place. Harry gasped at the sudden transformation. Where there had been a kind, but no-nonsense type of man on Harry’s front stoop, a glaring, vicious predator stood. Even Vernon stepped back and paled at the change in the man’s aura.

“Listen to me, Vernon Dursley, and listen well,” said Severus in his coldest Snape voice. “First, let
me correct your mistaken understanding of wizarding law. You are labouring under the misapprehension that I am forbidden to perform magic in the summer. That law only applies to underage wizards, and I assure you, I am well over eighteen years of age. Should I decide to turn you into the bull you so resemble, I am well within my rights.” His wand flicked out and levelled at Vernon’s face before the beefy man had time to blink. “Now, let us try this again. You are going to let us into your house this instant, with no more foolishness, or we will see how much you like having four hooves and a tail. Now, Mister Dursley.”

The man gulped audibly and scrambled out of the way. “Get the freak inside then and hurry up with it.”

Severus gave him a curt nod and ushered Harry inside, but when Vernon made to slam the door in his face, he caught the wood and shouldered it aside.

“I said you were to welcome us both inside, Mister Dursley.”

Severus’ wand flicked, and one of Vernon’s hands turned into a hoof. The man screamed and clawed at his arm, and a wet patch appeared at the front of his pants. Harry’s lip curled in a scowl of disgust.

“Pathetic,” Severus said with a sneer. “Go and change your nappy, Mister Dursley. Harry and I will see ourselves into your living room. You are to gather your repugnant family and meet us there within five minutes, or I will drag you there, and you shall not like my methods if I am forced to fetch you.”

“Wait, wait,” Vernon pleaded. “Change it back. Please!”

Severus gave him a cold glare, but perhaps recognised that Vernon would have difficulty changing his trousers without the use of both hands. Grudgingly, he removed the transfiguration.

“If you are a good boy during this … conversation, Mister Dursley, you will be allowed to keep your hands. Anger me again, and we will see how well you can perform at work with hooves for fingers. On both sides.”

Vernon whimpered and bolted upstairs. As soon as he disappeared, Harry buried his face into Severus’ side and burst into silent laughter.

“Thank you for that memory.”

Severus chuckled and motioned to the house. “Lead me to the living room, Harry.”

He nodded and led Severus through the front hall and into a spacious, but prissy sitting room decorated with roses and lace doilies and photos of Dudley on every wall.

“Here you are.”

Severus shuddered. “Dear Merlin. This is like walking into Umbridge’s home. The only thing missing are the kittens, though the photos of your cousin are just as numerous and vile.”

Harry gave a dark laugh. “You have no idea how right you are.”

Severus ran a gentle hand through Harry’s hair. “I will try to make it better for you.”

Harry closed his eyes and leaned into the touch, surprised at how soft it made him feel inside. “T-thanks, Severus.”
“Mm. Best to call me sir or Professor Snape while we are with your relatives.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now sit in that dreadful armchair. I will stay close and protect you, for as long as I am able.”

“Thank you, sir. For everything.”

“It is the least I can do, Harry. There is much I need to atone for.”

Harry shook his head. “No. You’re forgiven, Professor. Completely forgiven.”

Severus’ hand stilled in Harry’s hair. “Thank you, Harry.”

He gave Severus a wan smile. “Least I can do.”

Severus smiled back, but it morphed into a scowl as the click of heels sounded in the hallway behind them. He removed his hand from Harry’s locks and crossed his arms over his chest—the young man felt bereft at the loss of his warmth. Harry ran to plop himself into the armchair, and Severus strode to his side, facing the door with a cold scowl on his face.

Severus had hoped that he might never meet Petunia Dursley née Evans again, but he had never been a fortunate man. As the woman trotted into the room, a scowl on her horsey face, an involuntary shudder passed down Severus’ spine. In an instant, he recalled years of summers playing alongside the bitch. How had he never realised that Harry would suffer under the ‘care’ of such a spiteful, vindictive woman?

Well, he knew now, and Severus was determined that this summer would not be as painful for his charge. Discreetly, he added another spell to the bracelet. It was only a simple spell that would cause it to give a mild shock to the Dursleys should one of them touch Harry without his consent, but he hoped it would keep the boy safe.

“Ah, Tuney,” he said in a falsely civil voice. “It has been so long. Do come in and catch me up.”

The woman started and fixed wide eyes on Severus. “You! I remember you. You’re that no-good little wretch from the factory road.”

Severus’ lip curled in a sneer. “Not so much a wretch now, am I?”

Harry murmured, “No, sir. You’re a hero.”

Severus gave the boy a soft look before setting his strongest glare upon the bitch. He was gratified to see her pale and clutch at her enormous son, as if she could hide his bulk. The boy whimpered and drew back, trembling all over his wide body.

Severus scowled. “Sit down, Petunia, and take your whale of a son with you.”

She glared and crossed her arms, but when Severus took out his wand and aimed it at them, they obeyed post-haste. Vernon scurried in a moment later and, at Severus’ direction, plopped onto the sofa beside his son. The sofa gave a groan of displeasure.
“Now that we are all present and accounted for,” said Severus in his coldest voice, “it has come to my attention that you have been mistreating Harry during his summers here.”

Dursley senior turned puce and bellowed, “Now see here! What has that ungrateful little brat been telling you? He gets more than he deserves from us, taking time and attention away from our own flesh and blood, and—”

Severus flicked his wand and Dursley’s tirade cut off though his mouth kept moving. Harry suppressed a laugh.

“As I was saying,” said Severus, ignoring Dursley’s bulging eyes and panicked gasps, “it has come to my attention that Harry has been mistreated here. I am here to tell you that this stops today. You will welcome him. You will feed him just as much as you do your son.” He looked to the son and sneered. “Well, perhaps no one needs that much food, but you will at least supply him with adequate nutrition. You will not lock him in either the cupboard or his room. You will not physically hurt him in any way.”

He fixed his glare on Petunia. “And you, you foul bitch, will keep your vile hands to yourself. If I hear tell of one word of sexual assault when Harry returns this fall, then I will personally see to it that your reproductive organs … switch, permanently. Let us see how much your dear husband enjoys buggering one of his own gender.”

Dursley senior stopped struggling and turned wide eyes on his wife. Interesting. So the minotaur did not know of his wife’s … persuasions.

Petunia gasped and clapped her hands over Dudley’s ears. “You filthy deviant! As if I would ever touch that disgusting freak! How dare you accuse me of—”

Harry shrank into his chair and shuddered, and Severus flicked his wand at her, too. Silencing charms were a wonderful thing. Petunia gasped and clutched at her throat, but she did not panic like Dursley senior had. Pity.

“And that shall cease, too.” Severus moved and turned up the heat in his glare so all three Dursleys squirmed. “Harry is not a freak. He is not a deviant, or a brat, or whatever nonsense you vile creatures have conceived within those puny brains of yours. He is a beautiful, wonderful young man—” Harry gasped and gave Severus a shocked sort of smile. “—And you shall treat him as such from here on out.”

Severus held up Harry’s wrist, where the bracelet hung in clear view. He noted the Muggles’ narrowed eyes and thought it prudent to remind them he still had a wand. At the tiniest flick of his wrist, they cowered once more.

“Do you see this eye here? I am watching you through it. I can see everything you do, hear everything you say. And if I even think Harry is being neglected—gods help you if I suspect outright abuse—I will be here so quickly, your heads will spin. And then they will roll when I am through with you. Do we have an understanding?”

The Muggles nodded, but he saw a devious gleam in Petunia’s eyes.

Severus placed Harry’s wrist in the boy’s lap and levelled his wand at the bitch. “Do not even try to remove it. It has a sticking charm on it, preventing even Harry himself from taking it off, and spells to electrocute the Muggle who dares touch it. The first time, you will see sparks and receive a mild shock as a warning. The second time will not be so kind. Merlin help you if you dare touch it a third time.” He swooped down to glare at Petunia, nose-to-nose. “That includes you, you vile bitch. One
hand, one finger where it doesn’t belong, and I will come and break it off like I should have done twenty-five years ago. Do I make myself clear?”

The bitch nodded so fast, she banged her forehead against Severus’. The man glowered and healed his own head, neglecting the Muggle.

“Now, I am going to remove the silencing spell, and you two are going to give me an oath that you shall not hurt Harry in the thirty-one days he must remain present in this home. Any violation of that oath will result in immediate and dire consequences.”

Severus flicked his wand and let the silencing spell fade. The Muggles clutched their throats as if he had hurt them and Severus rolled his eyes. Bloody melodramatic prats.

Dursley puffed up like a balloon. “Now see here. You can’t just … hurt us with that bloody stick of yours. We’ll go to the police!”

Severus’ smile was vicious. Even Harry cringed away a bit.

“Will you, Dursley? Will you, the worst kind of magic-fearing Muggles, go to the police with … shall we say, plaid skin? Or hair that changes colour every five seconds? Or with reindeer antlers on your fat heads? I am sure your lovely neighbours would be thrilled to see that. Imagine what kind of stories they might tell.”

The Dursleys paled and sank into the sofa, and Severus grinned.

“You will not do a single thing but what I have told you. Vernon Dursley, Petunia Evans Dursley, and Dudley Dursley, you will now swear an oath to treat Harry James Potter with the respect and kindness he deserves for the duration of his thirty-one day stay in this … home.”

Severus sneered, leaving no doubt as to his opinion of said home.

He paced as he reeled off his conditions, doing his best to close any loopholes. “You will not starve your relative, Harry James Potter, or deprive him of water or the use of the loo. You will not strike him. You will not deprive him of freedom. You will not lock him in any space whatsoever. You will not verbally disparage him in any way. You will not inundate him in chores that you could easily do yourselves.”

He pinned Petunia with a harsh glare. “You will not touch him in an inappropriate manner.”

She cowered, and Severus resumed his pacing. “You will not prevent him from doing his studies. You will not bully him or treat him as a lesser being. You will not prevent him from sending his owl out or taking care of her. You will not harm Harry, his owl, or his possessions at all. If you violate even one of these statements, or try to circumvent them to hurt Harry in any way whatsoever, I will punish you harshly. Do you agree?”

The Dursleys sulked. Severus pointed his wand at the son.

“I said, do you agree?”

They gave grudging agreement, and Severus flicked his wand to create ribbons of light. Muggles and Squibs couldn’t give unbreakable vows, but the less they knew about that, the better. The Dursleys cowered away from the light and huddled together.

“Now,” said a smirking Severus, “you have given your oath. One toe out of line, and I will know.”
Harry gave him a grateful smile edged with tears. “Thank you,” he mouthed.

Severus stroked his hair. “You deserve more,” he whispered, and Harry’s tears dropped. Severus brushed them away with gentle fingertips.

“Oi,” the younger Dursley squawked. “You said we’re not to touch him, but here you are being a ponce with him!”

“I should have known the freak was a pouf,” Dursley senior muttered.

With a flick of Severus’ wand, the two male Dursleys suddenly sported dramatic makeup and flashy sequined skirts. They squealed like pigs and tried to cover their hairy legs without much success. The sight of the two virtual minotaurs in drag was almost more than Severus’ stomach could take, but it would teach them a lesson, he hoped. And it made Harry laugh. Severus could endure burned retinas for the sake of his friend’s happiness.

“The two of you have already violated your oath,” said Severus in a cold voice. “Harry is neither a ponce nor a pouf, and neither am I.”

Harry frowned and motioned Severus down so he could whisper in his ear. “Um, sir, that’s … not exactly true. I am gay.”

Severus froze, stunned. Harry was gay? Merlin. Severus didn’t understand why that mattered so much to him, but something inside of him relaxed at the admission.

“It does not matter,” Severus whispered back. “You may be homosexual, as am I, but we are neither one ponces or poufs.”

Harry’s eyes widened, then a hesitant smile played over his lips. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” Severus squeezed Harry’s shoulder and stood tall, again addressing the squealing and shrieking Dursleys. “Be silent!” They whimpered and shut up, thankfully. “Now that you can hear something besides your own idiocy, know that I will not tolerate such abusive language towards him. That … garb will remain for three days. Remove it when you shower or to use the loo, and the moment you are finished, it will reappear.”

He swooped close so his face was right next to the senior Dursley. “This is just a taste of what you will endure if you continue abusing your nephew and cousin—any further violations, and your punishment will be far worse. Again, do I make myself clear?”

The Dursleys nodded and cowered away from the man.

“Good. So glad we could come to an understanding.” He turned a kind smile on Harry. “I must go. Do not forget that you can reach me at any time you have need of me, and I will come.”

Harry held his left hand in his right and discreetly rubbed a finger against his ring. Severus felt the touch through his own band, gently warming him.

“Thank you, Professor,” Harry said. “I think I’ll be okay here now.”

“Good. If that changes, you know how to contact me.” He glared at the Dursleys. “And before you get any ideas, he does not need his owl to reach me. One feather out of place on her, and you shall answer to a fully-grown wizard and one of the best duellers in Britain. I would not test my patience if I were you. I am not known for it.”
Harry snorted. “Understatement, sir.”

Severus chuckled and patted Harry’s shoulder. “Do you feel safer?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, go on. I’ll be okay here now.” He glared at his relatives. “And if I’m not, well, you’re not so far away.” He rubbed the bracelet for emphasis and grinned as his vile relatives cowered.

Severus smiled. “I will come to retrieve you as soon as your term here is ended.”

Harry nodded and gave him a bright smile. “Thank you, Professor.”

It was a moment before Severus could catch his breath. “Y-yes. You’re quite welcome. I will see you soon, Harry.”

He squeezed the boy’s shoulder, shot the Dursleys one last glare, and apparated away.

Harry grinned as his relatives scurried out of the room, Vernon and Dudley to the loos, no doubt. This summer was already looking like it would be the best he’d ever had. Then he remembered Ron, how much the redhead would have appreciated hearing about his uncle and cousin, and Harry’s joy faded into familiar melancholy. The ache cut deeper without Severus to mitigate it.

With a sad sigh, Harry clutched his book to his chest and padded up to his room. At least he would have the Prince to keep him company. Maybe his time here wouldn’t be so bad after all, even if he couldn’t tell Ron about the drag queens. As he entered his room, he remembered his words to Hermione when grief was still fresh.

“You can still tell him. He’ll hear you. He just can’t talk back anymore.”

Harry shut his door behind him and sat upon his threadbare mattress, grinning even through a veil of tears.

“Mate, I have so much to tell you.”
Warning: none. Summary: Harry's and Severus' connection gets deeper, and Harry inadvertently reveals his feelings to Severus, who in turn reveals the truth about his identity. Severus is terrified, but when both Harry and Albus accept his identity and choice without question, he dares to take the leap.

***AN: Pain fog has been intense lately. I'm still struggling to write through it, but it's slow going. And another dear friend died this morning so I'm a bit of a wreck. My focus is really poor, so forgive me if this jumps around a lot (and please do point out specific errors if you find them).***

***AN2: Yes, I know Harry would be 16-17 here in canon. It's illegal for a 38 year old man to mess around with a 17 year old boy in this country, so I have to age them up a year.***

CHAPTER 15
THE PRINCE

Three weeks passed in Privet Drive without trouble. Harry stayed out of his relatives’ sight for the most part, unwilling to tempt them into breaking their vows, and spent most of his day either reading the Prince’s potions book, studying for his summer work, puttering in the garden, or writing back and forth to Severus and Hermione.

Judging by Severus’ letters, it seemed the Prince’s tip about borage had led the man down an interesting path, and from it, he had discovered the secret to the vampiric delay potion. He was already working on a way to cure those affected with it before the vampirism hit and nothing could be done. Harry tried to help as much as he could, sending Severus his affection and whatever help the Prince’s books could offer.

Harry was no closer in finding the Prince’s identity, but he had learned new things about his friend, and each page revealed new secrets. Early on, the Prince’s writing reeked with loneliness and aching sorrow, a desperate need to belong somewhere, for someone to care about him. The Prince’s bitter sorrow and choking despair had made Harry ache for him, and so the young man imagined his companion with him in those days often, feeling the need to comfort the boy. Harry would hold his Prince, caress his face and hands, trying to tell the boy that he would always have a place with Harry. His gentle acceptance revealed a side of the Prince Harry had not yet seen, and would never have suspected to exist given the caustic nature of the young man’s writing.

The Prince was starved for affection. Each small touch captivated him, awed and devastated him by turns. Sensing the boy’s fear and desolation, Harry kept his touches light—even in fantasy, he couldn’t bear to push his only companion. The Prince’s reactions—turning into Harry’s hand every time he stroked the young man’s cheek, sighing when Harry petted his hair, trembling when Harry held him—reinforced the idea that the Prince was an innocent. Judging by his need and surprise in
each touch, the Prince had never had anyone to care for him like this at all.

Before long, Harry began to doubt that he had simply imagined those traits into his Prince. After all, how many people could really touch their fantasies? Especially and have them touch back. The Prince was tentative and shy, and rarely found the courage to touch Harry of his own volition, but how could a fantasy touch him at all without being directed to? And even if Harry had directed it, how could he feel a fantasy’s body? Harry was all for the power of imagination, but to be able to feel the silk-soft texture of Prince’s hair, the velvet of his skin, the roughness of his stubble? No, that was too much even for a fantasy life as well-developed as Harry’s.

Something odd was happening between Harry and his Prince. Since Harry didn’t know how to explain it, he kept reading, hoping to find the Prince’s identity. He thought the Prince, being twenty years older, might have a better idea about what was going on, but Harry would have to find his identity before he could ask. He’d already tried sending Hedwig with a letter addressed to the Prince, but she hadn’t known where to go and had brought it back undelivered. With a sigh, Harry had decided to use the letter as a bookmark and read on. Surely Harry could find some hint to the man’s identity. Eventually.

Each page of the Prince’s book spoke of a spiralling fall into despair. Harry feared the pain would consume his love. The Prince’s writing grew darker and darker, courting death and terrifying Harry, until, on page 215, his sorrow suddenly lifted. The Prince had apparently found a group of wizards who wanted him, who appreciated his talents and intelligence, and knowing he had a place to belong had eased both the Prince’s pain and Harry’s worry he might top himself if it didn’t abate.

For a couple chapters, all was well. Then Harry had read the journalistic revelations on the blank page between “Draught of Peace” and “Purple Pimple Salve,” and immediately wished he hadn’t.

His Prince had fallen prey to the dark. Evil had seduced him with promises of recognition and belonging, praised his intelligence and cunning and made him feel like someone cared, because no one else ever had.

The Prince’s classmates had bullied and isolated him. ‘I wonder that they have not yet tired of attacking me. Then again, those with a childlike intellect are fascinated by repetition. Why will no one help me?’

The Prince’s best friend had abandoned him to pain and broken his heart. ‘The rose is beautiful and beloved until one strikes the thorns. I believed my flower-friend to be a rose without flaw, but she proved that even the softest petals can make a man bleed.’

The Prince’s father had used him as a punching bag. ‘My weakened bones made him strong, my bruises fed his rage. Would that I could claim some truly royal lineage, but the man who dares call me his son is little more than a monster.’

And his mother had done nothing to help. ‘She is little more than a ghost these days. I wonder if, when she dies, if she will become one in truth just to hold on to her farce of a marriage that much longer. Come to think of it, that would be the perfect revenge against my magic-hating father, so I would be a fool to expect it. She would never rally the strength to defy him even in death.’

Everyone he loved had failed him, and so, the Prince had turned to the darkness to find a place to belong. It was awful, heartbreaking, but thank the gods, Harry’s Prince was too intelligent, too good to be taken in for long.

I came expectant of a home, anticipating a life of belonging after eighteen years of unmitigated anguish. At first, they praised my wisdom, my superior intellect, my skills,
but … the more I remain with them, the more I feel I have made a terrible mistake.

The higher echelon will not allow me into their meetings, no doubt to shield me from whatever evil goes on there, but surely they are aware that dark magic leaves traces? I feel it in the air when they meet behind closed doors. The stench of death and decay and darkness clings to their robes like the stain of blood, and I fear it will choke me before the week is out.

Harry’s beloved Prince was a Death Eater, but he wanted out.

Harry blinked down tears as he held the book close to his heart. “I would have loved you then, Prince, if I could have.” He kissed the pages and held his book tighter, imagining his broken, suffering love on the bed beside him.

“I’m sorry,” Harry whispered.

His prince, now with a crooked nose, soulful dark eyes, and a terrible black tattoo on his arm, though Harry wasn’t sure when those features had appeared, laid his head upon his friend’s shoulder and sighed. Long black hair trailed down Harry’s back and chest and he slipped his hand through silky dream-tresses, wishing he could touch the man in truth.

“If I ever find you,” Harry whispered to his phantom, “I’ll help you. I’ll get you away from this life and love you so you’re never tempted by the shadows again.”

An image of Severus flickered into his consciousness, of the feel of rough stubble and a soft cheek under his lips, and Harry frowned. Where had that come from?

A ghostly kiss whispered across his cheek, distracting him from his thoughts, and Harry shivered at the sensation. Gods. It was like lightning through his entire body. He wanted, needed more.

“I will love you, my prince, as long as you let me.”

Carefully, softly, Harry tipped the Prince’s chin up and kissed his phantom full on the mouth.

Gods. This was heaven. His Prince’s lips were soft and gentle, his hands warm and strong. The Prince’s hot, quick breath brushed against Harry’s lips and sent shivers through the young man. Merlin. He couldn’t wait to find his prince in real life, if this was what it felt like to kiss him in a mere fantasy.

Petunia’s voice called Harry out of his dream-kisses with a vengeance. He opened his eyes and glared at the woman standing at his bedroom door, her lips pursed and eyes full of hatred.

“Young dinner.” She held out a dish with a slab of cold roast beef and potatoes.

Harry laid his book aside and took the food from her. “Thanks.”

She turned on her heel without acknowledging him and stalked down the stairs. He shrugged and closed his bedroom door. She hadn’t brought him a fork, of course, but it was nothing he couldn’t fix with some of the bread Severus had sent him under a keep-fresh charm earlier in the week. With a plastic spoon he’d hidden under his floorboard and some of Molly Weasley’s homemade sandwich spread—though he still didn’t understand why the woman insisted on continuing to include him in her family when Ron was gone and he had hurt Ginny—it might make for a decent meal. He thought he might even be able to do a wandless warming charm on the food, with a little practise.

Ten minutes later, Harry sat down to a steaming hot roast beef sandwich with potatoes, his Prince at
“I wish you could eat dinner with me for real, you know.”

The phantom smiled by way of reply and sat at Harry’s feet, his head draped over Harry’s thigh. Harry could almost feel the weight of him, the silky strands under his fingers as he caressed his love.

“One day I’ll find you, and we’ll do this for real, okay? Only you get to eat too.”

The phantom chuckled into his leg, and Harry swore he could feel the warmth of his breath. He shook his head, hoping he found the Prince’s real identity soon, and took a bite of his sandwich.

Severus was in the Dursleys’ backyard under intense privacy wards—wards even Harry would not be able to sense or see through—when it happened again. He could swear he felt Harry’s hands in his hair, stroking down his shoulder and back. He shivered and put his experiment in stasis lest a stray touch cause him to ruin all his work.

Why did this keep happening? He had known for weeks that Harry was daydreaming about the Prince, but there should be no reason why Severus should actually feel the touches Harry bestowed upon what he believed to be his imaginary friend. So why were gentle fingers slipping through Severus’ hair this moment, and why did Harry’s embrace warm Severus’ chest when he was still as hopelessly alone as always?

Severus closed his eyes and let the sensations wash over him anyway. He had long since stopped worrying about it, though he still longed to solve the mystery. Harry’s phantom caresses were the closest thing to love he had felt in a long time, and while he felt a bit guilty for keeping his secrets, he couldn’t quite make himself resent Harry’s touch.

Even if he had wanted to stop it, he had no control. Not even his strongest wards and Occlumency could block the gentle feeling of Harry’s fingertips upon his skin, his face, in his hair. When it happened, Severus had no choice but to be still and endure it.

It hadn’t taken long for endurance to become want. No one had ever touched Severus like this, so softly and gently, not seeking sexual favours that Severus invariably refused, but only caressing him. Despite his worry and guilt about the source, he was powerless to resist the siren call of Harry’s tender affection. If he was honest with himself, he no longer wanted to.

Severus gasped as the touches moved to his face. His head tipped back and his lips parted. Merlin, it felt so good to be touched like this. So powerful. A sweet tension built in his lips and throat, and he stood there, bemused, as the sensation spread through his chest and into his toes. What was happening—oh. Oh sweet merciful Merlin, Harry was kissing him!

Severus froze, eyes wide and heart thundering in his ears as gentle lips ghosted over his own. Harry’s phantom kiss was soft and sweet, purifying in its innocence, and Severus could hardly breathe with the intensity of the sensation. His throat tight and aching, knees too weak to support him, he slumped into his chair with a shaky sigh.

Gods help him, Harry wasn’t just friends with his Prince—he was in love! In love with Severus.

Oh Merlin. What had he done? Severus had to put a stop to this. Harry wasn’t thinking straight. It
wasn’t right to … to let him ….  

But gods, his kiss felt so good. Severus should resist, but his world had closed in, leaving room for nothing beyond the feel of Harry’s mouth on his own, those sweet lips chapped in places yet still soft and full. Warm, quick breaths cooling against damp kisses captivated him, and despite his fears, he could not move away. He was lost. 

With a soft moan, Severus lifted his hands to capture his phantom’s face, to hold him and return his kiss with all the shy, powerful affection of a first love. Gods, it was perfect. If he closed his eyes, it was as if Harry was really there, his hands warm in Severus’ hair, lips moving sensually against his own, panted breath mingling. Oh, how long Severus had ached for just this, a moment of pure love, shared between him and his partner. 

For a moment, he forgot everything and lost himself to Harry’s kiss. Right up until he went to smooth a chapped place of Harry’s lips with his tongue and the sensations cut off as if someone had doused him with cold water. Severus fell back in his chair, wide-eyed and breathless. 

Severus laid his head in his hands and moaned. Oh gods, what had he done? He was panting, shaking all over, and undeniably aroused over a seventeen year old boy. Merlin forgive him, Severus had kissed Harry Potter! His student, and the boy wasn’t even of age yet. Shite. Severus had fallen far to let the fumbling kisses of an adolescent entrance him so. Had he lost his mind? His honour, that he would allow a boy to kiss him, a boy twenty years his junior who had no idea of the consequences of his actions? 

No. Severus was no paedophile. He could not allow himself to touch a student in such a manner. He would not taint one so pure. 

This had gone on long enough. He had to stop Harry’s crush before it went too far and the boy ended up with a shattered heart. 

With a little cry of pain, Severus jerked to his feet and packed up his lab and experiments. Gods, how had he let this go on so long? Why? He should have told Harry the truth weeks ago, but the thought of facing the boy’s rejection left him cold. Severus couldn’t bear to lose Harry, but he wasn’t fool enough to believe the boy would forgive him for this betrayal either. Especially if Harry realised that Severus could feel his touch, even that painfully tender kiss, a kiss meant to be a mere fantasy. A private fantasy that Severus had allowed to cross into the bounds of reality. 

When he realised what had happened, Harry would feel just as violated as Severus had been when the Death Eaters had attacked him six weeks prior. The thought left him sick. 

Perhaps if Harry knew how lonely Severus was—if he knew that sweet kiss he hadn’t been able to refuse was Severus’ first—could Harry forgive him, if he realised Severus had never felt such a soft, caring touch in his entire life? 

No. Severus pushed the possibility away ruthlessly. Even if Harry could, Severus would not taint the boy with his darkness. Harry deserved better, and Severus would be better off alone. Even if the thought of losing Harry’s friendship destroyed him inside, it would be better for Harry in the long run if Severus just let him know the truth and withdrew. Harry would be hurt enough as it was, and Severus would not add to his pain. No more than he had to. 

Severus wiped damning wetness from his eyes and packed his portable lab into his pocket. Gods, he had well and truly fucked up this time, hadn’t he? 

He focused on Hogsmeade and apparated. How could he rectify this situation before it went any
further? Severus supposed he could simply tell Harry, probably should tell him in person, but the idea of facing the boy left him cold. Perhaps Severus was a coward, but the thought of seeing Harry draw back in revulsion, of seeing Harry look at him like everyone else had done before now—no. Severus simply hadn’t the strength to watch Harry’s trust in him die.

Perhaps a letter would accomplish his ends? Or … wait. Miss Granger had asked Severus two weeks ago if he knew of the Prince family, no doubt in aid of Harry’s search. Perhaps it was time Severus sent her a certain book. She would find what she was looking for in half a moment, and then Harry would know. Yes, that way he could tell Harry and spare himself unnecessary pain, though the boy might feel slighted that Severus hadn’t the courage to tell him himself.

Even so, Severus couldn’t make himself face Harry. He couldn’t bear the pain, and his correspondence with Granger would reveal the truth soon enough.

If Harry’s touches and letters stopped after Granger’s next post, Severus would know the boy had rejected him. The mere thought left Severus shaking with terror and bone-deep grief. He had already lost everyone he loved but Minerva and Albus. He would not survive without Harry, too.

Severus cast a glance at his arm, the one where the mark lay hidden under his robes, and a shudder passed over him. It didn’t matter if losing Harry did prove to be one blow too many. His days were numbered anyway.

With that thought in mind, Severus doubled his resolve to end their association, even if it ripped his own heart to shreds. Harry could not bear to lose anyone else he cared about. The only way to spare Harry another crushing loss was to make the boy hate him again before Severus died.

Gods, the thought hurt. Hurt so much he could hardly breathe.

‘Harry … oh, Harry. Forgive me. Please forgive me.’

Severus buried his face in a shaking hand, struggling to gather his wits. After a few deep breaths and forceful application of his Occlumentic shields, he was under control again, at least outwardly. Inside, he felt he would fly apart at the seams at any given moment.

But Severus’ pain, however debilitating, did not matter in the grand scheme of things. He was a marked man anyway, and soon, would find rest. It was Harry who needed help. And the only way to help him was for Severus to let him go.

Tears hovered at the corners of Severus’ lashes, but he refused to let them drop. Instead, he forced his feet to lead him to his personal library and scanned his shelves until he found the volume detailing his wizarding heritage. The Prince Family Tree. His mother had endured many a bruise to keep this safe for Severus, and he had cherished it. Until today, when he realised it would soon rip away the most beautiful friendship he had ever known.

Even so, it had to be done. Trembling, Severus wrapped the book in plain brown paper and spelled it against curses or detection. Telos scooted close, ready to deliver for him, but Severus shook his head and patted the tawny’s back.

“I cannot risk you for this mission, little one. Should the Death Eaters learn I have been corresponding with a Muggleborn student … Merlin help us all.”

The owl shuddered and nipped Severus’ ear in understanding.

“Thank you, my friend. Perhaps I will have a letter to entrust to you soon. I am sorry I cannot send you more frequently.”
The owl nuzzled Severus’ cheek and flew back to his perch.

Giving his familiar a sad smile, Severus called a school owl. Once a fat barn owl had arrived, the despairing man attached his bulky package to its leg. The bird protested at the weight.

“Peace, little one. Here. I will make your load easier to bear.”

Severus cast a featherlight charm and shrunk the book to the size of a coin. Miss Granger was of age, after all, and intelligent enough to know how to unshrink a parcel.

“There you are,” he said once the bird was ready. “Please take that to Hermione Granger immediately.”

The owl hooted and flew away. Severus watched her go, feeling as if he had just signed his own death warrant. Well, it was unlikely he would die from that book, unless the Death Eaters happened to intercept the package and somehow glean the truth from it, but he would undoubtedly lose another friend.

A small voice in the back of his head whispered, “And the possibility of something more.”

He shushed the voice and left the owlery, his heart heavy and his chest aching. It had to be done regardless of the consequences. It wasn’t fair to Harry to keep him in the dark. Not anymore. Perhaps it had never been.

Severus wrapped his arms around his chest to warm the chill inside him and waited for his last veil to fall. It wouldn’t be long now.

———

Harry liked waiting until after the Dursleys had gone to bed to take his showers—that way he didn’t need to worry about his lovely relatives banging down the door just to irritate him and cut his personal time short. With a wandless silencing charm, they needn’t even know he was in the loo at all, never mind taking a long, luxurious shower of the sort he had always been denied.

He was rinsing his hair when a strange sensation tickled at the edges of his mind, a bit like someone was rifling through his memories. He Occluded hard, sure it was Voldemort picking his brains, but even with Harry’s shields as tough as he could make them, the sensation remained. And Harry’s shields were formidable now, thanks to Severus’ teaching.

Shite! If Riddle could get to Harry’s mind even through his shields, they had a serious problem. He had to contact Dumbledore immediately.

Trembling from more than the sudden loss of heat, Harry dashed out of the shower and tied a towel around his waist, halfway to his room before he had the knot secure. He jerked open his bedroom door and dashed inside, only to see his aunt bent over his bed and searching through something, a fluffy pink bathrobe tied over her prissy silk nightgown.

Relief and indignation warred within him. This explained the odd sensation—Petunia had breached Harry’s wards.

“Hey!”
Petunia stood and dropped the Prince’s book as if it was on fire. It landed open at her feet, and incandescent rage burst to life in Harry’s chest. That was *his* book. His and Severus’. He hadn’t even shown it to Hermione yet, and he sure as hell hadn’t planned on telling Petunia about the Prince.

“What do you think you’re *doing*? You’re not supposed to touch my belongings!”

The glare she fixed on Harry was colder than he had ever seen. Taken aback by the sheer force of the hatred in her gaze, he grabbed a shirt to cover his naked chest and held his hand at the ready to cast a shield, should he need it.

“Get out,” he snapped. “I don’t have much to call my own, but that book *is* mine, and I have no intention of sharing.”

She sneered as if he had suggested that the woman lick slime from his toes. “As if I want anything to do with your filthy freak books.”

“Then why were you looking at them?”

She sniffed. “That’s none of your business.”

“It is, if you’re rifling through my belongings. Have you forgotten your oath already?”

He held up the bracelet and glared, inwardly grinning at the instant effect. His aunt turned the colour of old porridge and fled the room as if the hounds of hell were on her heels, slamming the door behind her.

Harry sighed, glad to be rid of her so easily, and rubbed a thumb over his bracelet. He really needed to do something nice for Severus. A gift or something. That bracelet had surely saved Harry a world of pain.

“Thank you for this, Sev.”

Harry rushed to check the Prince’s beloved book for damage, but found nothing amiss. He closed his eyes and clutched the book to his chest, relief coursing through him with the force of a tsunami. His Prince’s book was safe. Gods, he didn’t know what he would do if something had happened to it. Harry needed his Prince like he needed air.

Not to mention the fact that Severus wouldn’t be pleased if Harry damaged his property.

Harry shook his head and laid the book on his pillow so he could dress. He wouldn’t let them near it again, but what the hell was Aunt Petunia doing looking at his books in the first place? The woman hated all things magical. He would have thought she’d have avoided his textbooks like the plague.

Harry paused halfway through pulling his shirt over his head. Petunia would indeed cut off her own hands before she touched his *schoolbooks*, but that particular book didn’t look like a potions text to her, did it? Severus had glamoured it to appear like a history of British criminals to Muggles.

No *wonder* she’d been suspicious. It was supposed to look like something patronising and insulting to keep his relatives off the scent, and Harry had been carrying it with him everywhere.

Shite. He would have to be more cautious. If his aunt found out the truth of that book somehow, no doubt his life at Privet Drive would only get more difficult. Harry shuddered and made a vow to himself to hide the Prince’s book whenever it wasn’t in his hands. He slid the text beneath his mattress, satisfied his nosy aunt would never think to look for it there.
With a nod, he began dressing himself for bed and wondered if he should warn Severus about this when Hedwig came back from her hunting. Harry shook his head. Nothing had happened—yet. He would just have to be more cautious. That was all.

Even so, as Harry tugged on his sleep pants, he had the nagging feeling like something had gone terribly wrong.

Severus had buried himself in his research all day so he would not have time to feel the pain of Harry’s imminent rejection. After all, once Harry knew his Prince was his snarky git of a professor, he would surely turn from his fascination and, disgusted, give his charms to other, worthier men. It was better for both of them that way, and Severus knew it.

And yet, every time he thought of losing Harry, he felt as if someone had punched a hole straight through his heart. During these moments of pain, Severus clutched his chest and worked without a flinch, lest someone suspect his desperate need for a student. It wasn’t right. Harry was too young, too pure. He deserved someone his own age, someone better than Severus.

He told himself that continually, but it was no good. He couldn’t stop thinking of Harry regardless.

As soon as he lay down that night, when he hadn’t the luxury of research to distract him, Severus began seeing phantoms of his own. He fought hard against the wish to hold Harry, but the moment ghostly caresses brushed across his chest and stroked through his hair, his resolve shattered to dust. He could not stop himself from pulling his phantom Harry close and burying his face in the young man’s hair, imagining he could still smell the scent of his shampoo. Apple. For some reason, Harry always smelled of apples.

Severus cringed at a wave of intense self-loathing. How pathetic, to be dragged in by the charms of a man twenty years his junior—a man who wasn’t truly there—and one who didn’t even know who Severus was. And Merlin, didn’t that thought rip the heart from his chest and leave it to bleed? Harry didn’t know his beloved Prince was actually Severus. If he did, he would have stopped touching the man long ago.

No one had ever wanted to hold the ‘Greasy Git’ like this. No one had ever cared.

The day was coming when Harry would stop caring too. Miss Granger would soon know the truth about him, and she would make sure to tell Harry. All too soon, Harry would know that the Prince he had fallen in love with was his most hated Professor, and when he did, those tender touches Severus needed so desperately would stop forever. It was only a matter of time.

Severus buried his face in his pillow and wept.

Three days passed in relative peace, although Aunt Petunia had started giving Harry darker glares than usual. She wouldn’t allow him near Dudley, either. Not that Harry wanted to be near Dudley, but was it really necessary to erect a wall upon table so Harry wouldn’t be able to see the prat during breakfast?
Harry put it down to more anti-magic strangeness and ignored her odd behaviour. At least he no longer had to watch the slob inhale his meals, and he certainly wouldn’t complain about more reasons to avoid his bully of a cousin.

He had only one problem during those three days—well, besides his aunt’s odd behaviour and his lingering grief for Ron—something was wrong with the Prince. Harry didn’t understand why, but each night when he held the man before they went to sleep, the Prince wept. Bitterly. Harry had tried to soothe him, tried to stop his tears, but nothing he did made any difference.

Harry didn’t understand it. The Prince was imaginary, wasn’t he? A fantasy of Harry’s own making. So Harry should have been able to control the Prince’s reactions. He should have been able to soothe him, simply because he wanted to and imagined it.

Only it didn’t seem to matter what Harry wanted to happen. Despite his wish to calm his lover, every night, his Prince would weep in his arms, and Harry was helpless to soothe him. The Prince’s soul-deep grief shattered Harry at the same time that it raised the question that there was more at work here than simple fantasising. Was the Prince real?

Harry snorted to himself. Of course the man was real. Imaginary people didn’t write in books. But this phantom Harry had dreamed up—did he have a connection with the actual person? Harry supposed a link must have existed between them, or else he would have been able to calm the man’s tears. But Merlin, if that was so, then it meant the true Prince—wherever, whoever he was—was in absolute agony.

Why? What had hurt him so? Had Voldemort tortured him? Harry checked his love’s body, or at least what he could see of it without taking advantage of the man, but he saw no evidence of physical injury besides some old scarring on his back. Was it emotional anguish then? Had the Prince lost someone he cared about, maybe?

Harry didn’t know, but Merlin, he longed to take the man’s pain away. If only he knew how. Harry couldn’t actually talk to the real Prince, so he had no recourse except to hold his shattered phantom and hope that his love somehow eased the real man’s pain.

The third night the Prince wept in his arms, Harry shed tears of his own. “Oh, Prince.” He eased his phantom onto his back and kissed the trembling man with gentleness.

“Ssh. Don’t cry, love. Please don’t cry anymore. I don’t understand what’s wrong or why you’re able to cry in the first place, but I’m with you. It’s okay.”

Harry kissed him again, and gave a soft moan as the ‘phantom’ under him returned it. He didn’t understand how that was possible either—how could he feel the kisses of someone who wasn’t even there?—but he didn’t mind that side effect too much. Not when a hesitant, wet tongue pressed at the seam of his lips and caressed him. Harry wouldn’t open his mouth—he felt too odd about that considering his partner wasn’t here in truth and mightn’t have a clue as to who was kissing him—but the feel of the Prince’s soft, warm tongue caressing Harry’s lips was almost enough to make him try it regardless.

Harry was hot and aroused, aching for his Prince … and yet, the man beneath him was still weeping. Their secret kiss had only seemed to make the broken-hearted man cry harder. Bemused and desperate to heal his devastated love, Harry kissed the Prince’s tears away and held him tight, hoping that the real man, wherever he was, would take some comfort from his embrace.

“I’m with you,” Harry whispered as he fell into dreams.
The next morning, an insistent tapping sound made Harry look up from his charms essay. A pale brown owl hovered outside his bedroom window, rapping her beak against the glass. Hermione’s new owl. Her parents had purchased her after Ron’s death to help Hermione heal. McGonagall had even approved her bringing both Crookshanks and the owl, Nimue, to Hogwarts for her last year. Hermione needed the extra comfort. They all did, really.

Harry grinned and rushed to let the bird inside, having learned a wandless unlocking charm for the bars three days into the summer.

“Hello, Nimue. Let me just close the door and we’ll see what you’ve got for me.”

The bird hooted and held out her leg, to which a Muggle-style envelope was attached. Harry pushed the bedroom door closed with a wave of pure magic and untied the letter from the bird’s leg.

“Is she waiting for a reply?”

The owl hooted and rested upon his desk. That was a yes. Harry scattered some owl treats for her and conjured a bit of water into half of a broken plastic ball with a wandless Aguamenti. He was getting pretty good at wandless magic these days, though offensive spells still evaded him.

Well, at least he could heal himself if his relatives did decide to break their oaths. His Shamanic powers would see to that.

As Nimue pecked at her treats, Hedwig glared at the intruder and ruffled her feathers.

“Oh, don’t be jealous, girl.” Harry gave Hedwig some treats as well. “If you’re so ready for a trip, I’ll change your feather colour and send you with a letter for Severus, hmm?”

She gave him a happy hoot, and Harry resolved to write something to his other friend as soon as he had drafted Hermione’s reply. Severus would want to know about his aunt’s odd behaviour anyway.

Harry shook himself and opened his letter.

Harry,

Oh Merlin, you’re not going to believe this. Remember how you said you thought Professor Snape knew the Prince?

He doesn’t just know the Prince, Harry. He is the Prince.

Harry almost dropped the letter in his shock. What? Severus was the Half-Blood Prince? It couldn’t be. Could it?

Severus’ words on their last morning in the lab came back to Harry then, hitting him with such force, it knocked the breath from his lungs.

“When you are willing to embrace what your eyes see, you will find him.”

Oh Merlin. Severus had been trying to tell Harry! He’d all but come right out with it, but Harry had been too thick to understand and hurt Severus by it.
But what about the handwriting? Severus’ writing was so different from the Prince’s elegant hand.

Then again, that could simply be the difference between rushing and writing with care. Merlin knew Harry’s handwriting looked better when he took the time to put effort into it. And after twenty years, it could have easily changed. Or, given his career choices, Severus might have masked his handwriting intentionally all this time.

Harry groaned and smacked his forehead. Dear Merlin, he was an idiot. A dunderhead, just as Severus had said before they became friends.

How could Harry have missed it all this time? Everything fit. Severus’ brilliance at potions and spellweaving, the dark mark he hated, his lack of friends and lonely life. Severus himself had even told Harry about much of it during their conversations in the flat. Those quiet talks had kept Harry sane in the long nights without his best friend, so how had he failed to put the pieces together all this time?

Merlin. It was true. Severus was Harry’s Half-Blood Prince.

Shaken and blinking back a sudden wave of tears, Harry returned to the letter.

I hope this doesn’t destroy your friendship with the Professor, Harry. He’s been really good to you since you started talking honestly with each other. I’m sorry to upset you, though. I know it’s bound to be a shock.

Anyway, I suppose you’re wondering how I know about all this. Well, do you remember that picture of Eileen Prince I found in the student records last year? Remember I thought she was the Prince? Well, the story under her photo didn’t give any information on her life after Hogwarts, and I wanted to know where she had gone. I thought information on her family might help us find your Prince, or with enough research, I might be able to connect her to the text.

So when you told me you’d found the next volume of the Prince’s books in Professor Snape’s lab, I asked him if he knew anything about the Prince family.

For a long time, he didn’t answer me at all. I think he was afraid of how you would react when you knew the truth—be good to him, Harry. Now that we know him better, I’m positive he kept it quiet so long because he was afraid you would reject him.

But anyway, just yesterday, he sent me a volume of the Prince Family ancestry, and, Harry, Eileen Prince was his mother! A pureblood, and since she married a Muggle—

Harry gasped out loud. “That’s why he chose the name ‘Half-Blood Prince.’ It’s literal! He’s a half-blood, and his mother’s maiden name is Prince. Since he hated his father, he chose her name instead.”

Harry moaned and banged his head on the desk. “Fuck. How could I have been so bloody thick? No wonder Severus was so sad whenever I mentioned the Prince. He was miserable that I couldn’t see him as he was.” He sighed and rubbed his forehead where the desk had no doubt left a red mark. “Shite. I owe him an apology.”

Harry read the rest of Hermione’s letter with a heavy heart. After her shocking news, she went on to talk about how her grief hadn’t abated in the least and she still needed Ron like she needed air. Harry understood. His chest still ached with the hollow his friend had left behind. He wished his Prince—Severus—could be there to comfort him for real in the moments when grief for his former dorm-mate
She then expressed valid fears that as soon as school started, Voldemort would attack through vampires again and begged Harry to always be ready for them. She was probably right, but what did she expect him to do? He couldn’t just carry garlic and a wooden stake with him to his classes.

He shook his head and kept reading.

_I know you’re shaking your head at me. I just want to keep you safe, so spare me the dramatics and just try to keep yourself in one piece, okay? I’ve lost too many people I love already. I don’t think I could bear it if I lost you, too._

_Anyway, send me a reply with Nimue, Harry. I’m really worried about you, even if Professor Snape did put those horrid people in their place. They’re still feeding you, right? I can send you more food if I need to._

_P.S. Now that you know who your Prince is—do you feel the same about him? I know you loved him before. Do you still?_

_You know, I might have yelled at you about it if we’d learned about this before the end of last year, but I don’t think I can now. Professor Snape has proved himself to be a gentleman and a hero, and you’ve been trying to heal the breach with him for so long now. I just worry about the rules and how he’ll have to treat you in class._

_Well, either way, I hope you’ll be gentle with his heart, Harry. He’s softer inside than he likes to admit._

Harry sniffled and clutched the letter close to his chest. Merlin, he could always depend on Hermione to get straight to the core of the issue. _Did_ Harry still love the Prince, knowing who he was?

With a sigh, he laid her letter on the desk and turned his chair about. Trembling all over, he imagined his Prince into existence—still a tall, lanky teenager, at least to Harry’s mind. The boy stayed across the room, his dark eyes full of fear and uncertainty and his body shaking visibly. He wrapped one arm around his chest as Harry watched him, leaving the other dangling at his side and trembling hard.

Did Severus feel like this? He had to know Hermione would tell Harry the moment she found the truth. Was Severus really scared of Harry’s rejection? The man was so brave, it was hard to believe he could fear such a simple thing, but then, Severus hadn’t known anyone to stay by his side, had he? Only Dumbledore and McGonagall had ever truly accepted him, and now Harry. And his past with Harry wasn’t good, to say the least.

As Harry thought of his professor, the Prince’s form shifted. Instead of a teenager, the man stood before him. _Severus_. He stayed in the same position that the Prince had adopted, his eyes wary and flat from Occlumency, but no less vulnerable. His free hand was still shaking.

_So Severus was afraid. Or had Harry just imagined him that way? Harry shook his head, confused. Why hadn’t Severus just told him? Wouldn’t it have saved him all this pain?_

_Well, Harry supposed it didn’t matter. Even if it had taken Severus a long time to gather up the courage, the man had eventually admitted to his past. That was good enough for Harry._
Joy bubbled up inside his chest. Merlin, Harry had finally found his Prince! The real person behind all the beautiful words. The man he had been searching for all this time. And it was Severus!

Severus. Harry looked into Severus’ eyes—well, the phantom’s eyes—and despite the man’s powerful Occlumency skills, he saw intense fear and shame reflected within. Severus was afraid. He was terrified. And the fact that Harry’s phantom could touch him, could kiss him—and that Harry could feel it—suggested that his fantasies of the Prince weren’t just a figment of Harry’s imagination. Something had changed—perhaps since Severus came to learn Harry was searching for him—and now his phantom was much more real.

Maybe Severus’ knowledge had created some kind of bond between them, or perhaps Severus was reaching out to Harry too. Did that mean Severus could feel Harry’s touch just as much as Harry could feel Severus’? Had the phantom had spent the last three nights weeping in Harry’s arms because the real Severus was terrified Harry would turn him away?

It was the only explanation that made some sort of sense to him. Or perhaps he only wanted to believe it. Either way, Harry suspected that the real Severus was suffering and afraid Harry would reject him. And it was possible—probable, even—that Severus knew Harry was thinking about him at that very moment.

And Harry had done nothing but stare at him.

Shite. In case Severus did know, Harry couldn’t just leave the man terrified like that. He needed to make a decision.

Harry took a deep breath and tried to think of the situation logically. Hermione had brought up several points against trying for a relationship with Severus, however unintentionally. There were rules against student-teacher relationships, and Severus and Harry had a rocky past to say the least. Besides that, Severus would have to pretend as if nothing had changed between them in public—and Harry had better do the same, or both of their lives would be forfeit.

And yet, the month Harry had spent in Severus’ underground flat—even with his grief over Ron—had been the most peaceful time of his life. When Severus had been there with him, Harry had felt safe for the first time ever. Protected. Wanted.

Would it be such a stretch to imagine that Severus’ desire to protect Harry might one day develop into love?

Harry didn’t know. He had no idea if Severus would ever let himself fall for a student, or even if he did, if they could overcome all the obstacles that would make a relationship between them difficult. And gods, there were obstacles.

Yet somehow, none of it mattered. No matter the risks, Harry wanted to try with Severus. Couldn’t do anything but try. He had fallen in love with the Prince months ago, and knowing his identity only made accepting all of him easier. Harry already cared for and respected Severus. Knowing Severus was his Prince, Harry found it all too easy to love him too.

Harry stood and went to his shaking phantom. “Ssh,” he murmured against the man’s ear. “This changes nothing between us. I won’t give you up.”

He stepped into the shadowy Severus’ embrace, hoping the real man could feel Harry’s acceptance. Maybe he could, somehow.

“I meant it, you know.” He kissed his Prince’s shoulder and leaned against his chest, almost feeling
the pressure of the man’s heartbeat. “Now that I know who you are, I’ll get you away from that bastard and love you until you feel safe and happy again. It’s okay … Severus. You’re safe now, or you will be soon.”

Severus whispered his name. Strong, shaking arms embraced Harry, and he felt he had finally come home.

“I love you, Severus.”

One day, he would say it to the man’s face.

With a sigh, Harry kissed his Prince lightly and went to the desk again. He had letters to write. In particular, one that he hoped would stop Severus’ tears.

By the time a pale brown owl Severus had never seen came tapping on his enchanted window, he had convinced himself that the whispered caress he had felt yesterday afternoon, those soft words of love in his ear had been his imagination. Harry must not have received Miss Granger’s letter yet, or he wouldn’t reach out to Severus so.

The man sighed and put his latest experiment in stasis. He had little hope this antidote would work, much as the last twelve attempts had failed, but he had to keep trying. Other students would die unless he found a solution. Harry might die, and even when Severus had hated him, that was a fate too terrible to contemplate.

Now, it was a fate Severus did not wish to survive, should it come to pass.

He frowned as he scanned the letter for curses and such. Despite the owl’s odd colouring unlike any breed Severus had met, she looked … familiar. After determining the letter to not only be safe, but protected from interference, Severus took the missive and scanned the outside.

“Hedwig?”

The owl gave a happy hoot and bobbed her head.

“Merlin. Harry has already learned to change your colour?”

She nodded again.

Severus was deeply impressed despite himself. It appeared Harry would have a powerful affinity for wandless magic. Good thing, too. The boy needed every bit of help he could get if he planned on defeating the Dark Lord one day.

Severus shuddered, overcome with the fear of losing Harry, but still, he gathered his courage. This was it. Harry would reject him with this letter. He would lose his friend all over again, and any chance of real happiness in one shot.

Gods help him, but he was more afraid of that letter than he was of the Dark Lord.

Tears blurred his vision as he opened the letter. With a sigh, he blinked them down his face so he could read.
Severus,

Why didn’t you tell me, you big git? Do you have any idea how long I’ve been searching for you? How much it hurt that I couldn’t find you?

Hermione seems to think you kept it secret because you were afraid of losing me. I guess that makes sense. I’d probably be scared, too.

But you haven’t lost me, okay? I’m still here. I still care about you just as much as I did before. In fact, I’m happy you’re the Prince. I already like you, so that makes … everything else easier.

Severus choked back a sob and covered his mouth with his hand, letting the letter drop from his fingers. He gave the owl a tearful, incredulous look, and the bird nodded again as if to say, “Yes, you silly man. It’s real.”

Overwhelmed with emotion, Severus sank to his knees and lifted the letter up in careful hands, cradling it against his chest. Harry hadn’t rejected him? Harry knew, and … and said he liked Severus? That he would stay?

Relief flooded Severus’ chest, and he smiled as he pressed a fist to his lips to hold back tears. He still had his friend. Even after revealing the truth, he still had his friend.

On a whim, he decided to send Harry the poetry book he had composed as a young man under his adopted moniker. The boy would like it, Severus hoped. And if not … well, that book showed the deepest core of him, revealed his darkest fears and most cherished hopes. If Harry hated it, it would be as if he hated Severus.

If he sent the book and Harry rejected it, then Severus would know the truth of the boy before he was in too deep. If he wasn’t already.

Severus sighed and Summoned the book. Best to get it over with now. Besides, Harry’s birthday was next week. He might appreciate such a personal gift, though Severus planned to buy him something special too. Well, he knew the Weasleys were still planning to surprise Harry with a party. Perhaps he could send his book to Harry beforehand and give him the bought present at the party. Yes, that was best. This one was far too private to have Harry open in front of a gaggle of boisterous redheads.

His mind made up, Severus conjured some green and silver wrapping paper and spelled it onto the book. With a conjured silver bow and ribbon, it looked nice enough to him. He wasn’t in the habit of giving birthday presents, but Harry was different. The boy had never had anyone to care about him except the Weasleys and Miss Granger, and he needed to know Severus cared too. Harry needed that reassurance.

Severus did care. More than he had ever cared about anyone before, if he was honest with himself, and he feared what that revelation meant for him.

Harry would surely run from him, if he knew.

With a sad sigh, Severus opened the letter to read the rest.

Nothing has changed concerning my feelings, Severus—I hope that doesn’t terrify you. I do understand the rules and the fact that you’re a spy and I can’t reveal anything in public. It’s okay. I swear I’ll help you keep any positive feelings between us hidden from the masses, whatever they may be. But I want you to know that I still care about you.
Severus could not help closing his eyes and clutching the letter to his heart. Merlin. Was Harry still in love with him, even knowing who he was? It couldn’t be … but when Severus looked again, Harry’s words hadn’t changed. Merlin, the mere thought of having Harry’s love made Severus’ heart thump in spite of his misgivings.

Well, he supposed he would find out if Harry loved him that night. If Harry still kissed and cuddled him tonight, Severus would know.

Severus frowned. Why could he feel Harry’s kisses and cuddles at all? What was going on between them?

He shook his head. It had to be something inherent to the boy’s magic causing Severus to feel these touches. Harry was a Shaman, after all. Maybe there was some kind of telepathic element to his powers. It would explain how he had communicated with Harry telepathically in the meeting with the minister, too.

Shame that article hadn’t worked, but with Creevey working on securing an ally for the Order from within the Prophet, it was only a matter of time.

Severus made a mental note to research Shamans in depth when he had a moment and returned to his letter.

Anyway, while I’m writing you, I thought you should know that Petunia is acting really strange. She hasn’t hurt me or anything, but the other day I caught her rifling through your book, which was probably my fault. I’ve been carrying it around everywhere, and no doubt she was curious as to why I’d care so much about a book that was supposed to be insulting and patronising, at least as far as she could see.

No need to lecture me and call me a dunderhead. I’ve taken to hiding it under my mattress and I’ve stopped carrying it around with me. And I’ve given it tougher wards. Not least because I don’t want Petunia’s foul fingers dirtying it up again.

But, Severus, something’s off about her. Ever since that night, she’s been even more hateful than usual. She acts like I’m going to poison Dudley by looking at him or something. She’s been forcing us apart too, like if I come into the same room he’s in, she makes him go outside or play video games. And she even made some kind of partition to put at the table so I can’t see him during breakfast.

I mean, I’m not complaining. I don’t exactly like the berk, but it’s so odd. I don’t know what’s gotten into her.

Severus debated on the wisdom of going to Privet Drive and knocking some sense into the vile bitch, but decided against it. Harry had only another week to endure in her company anyway. Keeping Harry apart from his idiotic cousin could only serve to keep him safer, though Severus couldn’t understand her motives either.

But enough about my horror of an aunt. I’ve been meaning to ask you something, and now that I know who to ask, here goes. Can you feel it when I think of you, Severus? I … sometimes, when I imagine the Prince, I can feel him—you—touching me. I feel the warmth of your hands, how soft your hair is, and it’s bloody amazing.

I really hope you can feel it too. I don’t want you to be alone all the time.
Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that you’re still my friend and I still care about you, so much. It’s okay, Severus. Don’t cry anymore, okay? It’s all right. I’m not going anywhere.

Love,
Harry

Severus read the signature and his breath caught in his throat. Harry had signed with love. Gods. That single word, whether he meant it as friendly love or more, brought tears to Severus’ eyes. Never, not once in his almost forty years, had anyone said they loved him, not even like this.

Student or not, Severus began to understand that if Harry said so, he would not be able to refuse him. The boy had claimed his heart, for better or for worse, and Severus could do nothing but hold on for the ride and pray they didn’t break into pieces at the end.

Despite himself, Severus couldn’t resist running a fingertip over Harry’s signature. Love. Merlin. A part of him wished for it desperately, and another part of him was terrified it might be true. Albus would kill him if he knew.

Severus froze, chills washing over him. Albus. Shite. The old man might really kill him for this. Maybe it was best if Severus told the headmaster sooner rather than later, before anything happened that might hurt all of them.

Tears slipped down his cheeks as he held the letter to his heart and went to the floo.

“Albus Dumbledore’s office!”

Severus stuck his head in the flames and half-wished they would burn him. “Albus? Are you about?”

The old man appeared after a moment, dressed in a blue robe with bright pink suns. “Severus? What is it, my boy?”

Tears blurred his vision. “Albus, I … I think I have made a terrible mistake.”

Albus paled and motioned him back. In a moment, the old man had come through the floo and caught Severus’ hands.

“What happened, Severus? Are you all right?”

Severus shook his head. “Nothing has happened—yet—but I fear it will. Albus … Harry, I think he is in love with me.”

Albus gasped. “In love? Dear gods. That is not a development I had expected.”

“N-nor I. I did not think I had encouraged it, but perhaps, I may have been too familiar. I only wanted to make sure he felt safe and cared for, but perhaps I went too far.”

Tears slid down his face again, and Albus gasped. “Oh, Severus. You are in love with him too, aren’t you?”

Severus flinched and buried his face in his hands. “I am unsure. Perhaps. I … I feel closer to him than I have ever felt to anyone, and the way he touches me, Albus—I do not mean anything inappropriate, just that he has held my hand when I am weak or touched my hair—but it is so soft, so kind. No one has ever touched me so gently.” He sat tall and closed his eyes tight. “I think you must separate us. Put him in private tutoring with Poppy for his potions and separate us during Order
meetings. Otherwise, I do not think I am strong enough to resist him.”

Albus wrapped an arm around Severus’ shoulders. “Oh, Severus. No. I will not do that.”

Severus cringed, making more tears drop. “But, Albus! I will fall!”

Albus gently brushed Severus’ tears away and brought him into a hug. “It’s all right. You cannot help your heart, and as of one week, he is of age.”

Severus gaped. “You … you cannot seriously condone this.”

“Hmm. I do, though. You need love desperately and so does he. If you can find it in each other, then who am I to come between you?”

“My employer, Albus. I cannot. He is a student.”

“Ssh. He is an adult student as of the thirty-first. Just promise me you will not touch him in a sexual manner until after that day, and I will say nothing more on the matter except to wish you luck.”

Severus moaned and put his head in his hands. “Albus, I think I already have.”


“Would that I could! I do not know what is happening. I have never experienced the like of it in all my days.”

Albus rubbed Severus’ shoulder. “Very well. Just tell me what has happened.”

Severus sighed. “I will try. You recall that while I was a student, I went by the moniker of the Half-Blood Prince and scribbled in my textbooks?”

Albus frowned. “Yes, and Harry has one of them now. What does that have to do with this situation?”

“He has two. He found my seventh year book as well and I gave it to him, but I digress. The point of this is that Harry fell in love with the Prince over the summer without knowing who he was. He asked me about him before, but I was afraid if he knew the truth, I would lose the first friend I have gained since Minerva, so I kept quiet. You must recall that from the night before Draco ….”

Albus nodded, a sad look in his eyes. “I do. Go on, Severus.”

Severus shivered and rubbed his shoulders. “Yes, well, about four days after I left Harry at the Dursleys’, I began experiencing—I do not know what to call it, but it felt as if a shadow of Harry was with me. A phantom of sorts. Not like a ghost—he was warm and I could not see him, but I felt him touching me and knew it was Harry. He would hold my hand or lay his head on my lap, and no matter what I did, no matter how hard I Occluded or what I tried to block it, the sensation remained. It has continued over these past weeks, and a few days ago, he kissed me in one of these … visits, so to speak. I am ashamed to admit that I did not resist.”

“Dear Merlin,” said Albus with a gasp. “That is … a strange phenomenon, Severus. Why did you not tell me of it sooner?”

“I had believed it was my imagination, until today.”

Albus sighed. “A bit strong to be imagination, don’t you think?”
Severus groaned. “I was also afraid to speak of it for fear I was losing my mind.”

Albus nodded and rubbed Severus’ arm. “What happened after he kissed you then?”

Severus sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “After that, I came clean to him, so to speak. Well, rather I sent Miss Granger a copy of my ancestry and let her fill in the blanks. I felt I could not keep mum after that, not if he believed himself in love with the Prince. Every night since, I have felt him hold me and kiss me, and I cannot alter it at all. I cannot Occlude him out, I cannot ward him away, nothing works. I do not understand what is happening.”

Albus stroked his beard. “How peculiar. Hmm. I have never heard of such things before.”

Severus’ shoulders slumped. “So you have no idea what could be happening?”

“None at all, I am afraid.” He gave Severus a searching look. “Harry understands that you are the Half-Blood Prince now, correct?”

“Yes. Just now, he sent me this.”

Severus handed the letter to Albus and watched his expressions as he read. Severus had expected fury, but instead the man read the letter with a soft smile until about halfway through, when worry filled his eyes. Albus gave the letter back to Severus with a frown, but said nothing for several moments.

Severus could not bear the man’s reticence. “Well? Will you dismiss me?”

Albus patted Severus’ hand. “Of course not. I do not believe this is an occurrence either of you have any control over. This situation with Petunia bears investigating, however.”

Severus let his breath out in a rush. “That … that is all, Albus? You are not going to send me away?”

Albus gave him a sorrowful look. “I believe you have been cast aside far too often in your life, my boy.”

Severus closed his eyes to hide how true such a comment was.

“No, I am not going to take any action against you. As you have said, you do not have any control over the situation, and Harry believed he was only fantasising. It is only recently that he began to suspect there was something strange happening, and he contacted you about it as soon as he knew who to ask. No, I do not believe either of you have done anything wrong.”

Severus blinked hard, holding back tears. “But he is a student, Albus! Seventeen!”

“Eighteen in a week. And, judging by what I have read here, there is something preternatural drawing you together, Severus. I do not yet know what, but I will research and try to find an answer while you are searching for the cure to that delayed onset vampirism potion. In the meantime, perhaps you should reply to that letter.”

Severus looked at Albus, lost and confused. Nothing had happened like he had expected it would. Where was the censure, the anger? Why did Albus not hate him? How could Harry love him? Severus didn’t understand.

Albus laid a hand on Severus’ shoulder. “I beg you not to push Harry away, child. I do understand your fears, but he will be of age in a few days and he is, as far as I am able to tell, entirely in love with you. Do not throw that away, please. You are both in such desperate need of each other.”
Severus gulped and blinked tears back. “But, Albus ….”

“Severus, love is a precious thing. Do not waste the gift you have been given.”

Severus recalled Albus’ own ill-fated affair and sighed. “I … I will try, but does he not deserve better? Someone purer, kinder?”

Albus squeezed his shoulder. “My boy, he could do no better than you.”

Severus’ breath caught and came out in a sob. Tears blinded him, and Albus rubbed Severus’ back until he was calm again.

“Severus, you will be fine. Respond to the boy. Let him know how you feel.”

Severus clutched the letter close to his heart and gave Albus a weak nod. “I … I will try.”

“Good. Do you need me to stay, child?”

He sighed and wiped his eyes. “No. As you said, I have a letter to write, and I cannot delay the tests on this potion for long. I will be all right, Albus.”

The old man gave him a gentle smile. “Good. Then I will take my leave. If you should need me again, I am but a floo call away.”

Severus bowed his head. “I will contact you later. Thank you, Albus.”

“It was my pleasure. Good luck, my boy.”

Severus’ face flamed. “T-thank you.”

Albus patted his shoulder and left through the floo.
Letters Home

Chapter Summary

**Warnings**: tons of tooth-rotting fluff, OOC-ness. I realize they're both being too lovey for their characters. My reasoning is that this is the first time either of them have been in love, so they're being sweet and gentle because it's all so new and they're afraid of losing it. They'll be more playful and snarky once they're comfortable in the relationship.

**Summary**: Now that Harry knows who Severus is, they spend time together in fantasy and write each other letters. Long distance relationships are hard and Petunia is nasty as usual. Severus wonders if this is all too good to be true.

***AN: I'm sorry my updates are slow right now. It's really tough to write at the moment when my toddler is so much more demanding these days and my health is tanking. I'm still working on these stories, they're just taking longer.***

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CHAPTER 16

*LETTERS HOME*

That night, Harry curled into bed and opened his mind to the Prince. By now, he knew this form of Severus wasn’t simply a fantasy—he was simply too real for there not to be some kind of connection between them—even if Harry didn’t understand what that connection was. Learning the man’s identity had only solidified his belief. Though he wasn’t positive it would work, this time instead of daydreaming Severus into existence, Harry reached out to his companion’s spirit and welcomed him into his own.

“Come to me, Severus.”

The connection was instant and infinitely stronger.

He opened his eyes to the solid, complete form of his adult friend, his love, dressed in his usual white silk sleep pants and shirt. Merlin, this was no fantasy for certain. The man looked as real as when Harry saw him in everyday life.

And gods, he was gorgeous. Severus looked so good in white. So innocent, even though the man had seen the worst of the world.

“Yeah, there you are.” Harry opened his arms and lifted his blanket. “C’mere.”

Hesitantly, the phantom of Severus came into Harry’s bed and lay beside him. Harry wrapped him in gentle arms and pressed a soft kiss to his mouth.

“Hi there.”

Severus’ phantom shivered and pressed his forehead against Harry’s. A couple of tears slipped down
his face, and Harry brushed them away.

“Is it going to be another bad night, love? It’s all right. I’m here.”

The phantom of Severus closed his eyes and slipped a tentative hand to Harry’s cheek. Harry sighed at the touch. It was so rare that either the Prince or Severus had touched him on his own will.

“Ah, Severus. I’m so relieved to have a name for you now.”

The phantom simply continued stroking Harry’s cheek and didn’t respond.

“Are you happy, love? Can you accept me?”

Severus’ phantom didn’t react at all.

“Severus?”

Severus looked up at that and must have realised Harry was speaking. His lips moved, and Harry thought maybe his name had been in the message somewhere, but he couldn’t hear it.

“Try again, love. I can’t hear you.”

Severus frowned harder and turned as if trying to listen.

“You can’t hear me either, huh?”

Severus’ eyes stayed on Harry’s lips, and after a moment, he shook his head.

“Lip reading?”

The phantom nodded.

Harry’s heart sank. “I can’t.”

He mouthed something Harry thought was supposed to soothe him. Harry just nodded and caressed the man’s cheek. He wished they could talk to each other, but this was enough for now. Once he was back at school, they could talk all he wanted, so long as they kept any civility private. Besides, Harry could always communicate through touch.

With a smile, Harry rolled Severus onto his back, tucked his phantom love under his body, and whispered against his hair.

“I love you. And I’m going to show you.”

He lowered his lips to the man’s forehead and hoped that the real Severus could feel him, wherever he was.

Severus was reading in bed when he felt the phantom of Harry appear beside him again. With a hesitant smile, Severus laid his book aside and took in the sight of the young man dressed in only a pair of sleep pants and Muggle tee.

Merlin, he looked so real this time. Every detail complete and lovely. Somehow, their bare feet
seemed erotic as they tangled together. Severus gulped and brought his attention back up to the young man’s face.

He couldn’t help but wonder if Harry would act differently, now that he knew who his ‘Prince’ was. Severus’ entire body trembled as Harry took him into his arms and held him close.

“H-hello, Harry.”

The phantom smiled and brushed his lips across Severus’. The kiss, so soft and light, yet so incredibly tender, healed something long broken within him. Harry wasn’t kissing a phantom or a fantasy any longer. He was kissing Severus. He was letting Severus know he was still loved.

Tears slipped down his cheeks without his consent, and the young man in his arms gently brushed them away. Severus sighed and lifted a hand to his young love’s face, searching those beautiful eyes for any sign of fear or discomfort. He saw none, and so he caressed the young man with tentative fingertips, committing the feel of his skin to memory—soft on his cheekbone and rough over his jaw—and thrilling in the fact that Harry accepted his touch.

“Is this truly what you want, Harry? You wish for me?”

The phantom did not respond, and Severus’ heart gave a pang. He tore his eyes away from his hand on Harry’s face and realised the man was trying to speak to him, but no sound was coming from his mouth.

“Mute?”

Severus frowned, turning his head in hopes bringing his ear closer would let him hear the young man’s voice, but the room remained silent. Worried, he turned back and watched Harry’s mouth as he spoke. If he couldn’t hear, maybe he could read the man’s lips.

“... can’t hear me ...?”

He hadn’t caught all of that, but it was enough to understand. Severus shook his head.

Harry said without sound, “Lip reading?”

Severus nodded. He had no other way to communicate.

Harry’s eyes filled with regret and disappointment. “I can’t.”

Severus gave him a gentle smile. “Do not trouble yourself. This is enough. You are enough.”

Harry watched Severus’ mouth, but only frowned harder even as he nodded. Severus caressed the young man’s temple and hoped he understood that it would be all right. Severus was just glad to be able to hold him. Talking was brilliant, but just holding Harry was wonderful.

At his touch, a smile crossed Harry’s face and a gentle hand held Severus’ face as well. His breath hitched at the soft touch, and he leaned into the caress like a cat. Merlin, if this kept up, he would start purring soon.

A determined glint entered Harry’s eyes and Severus wondered what he was thinking. Would Legilimency work on a phantom? Before he could test it, Harry grinned and turned Severus onto his back. How the hell had a phantom moved his body?

As Harry straddled Severus’ hips, a bolt of fear coursed through the older man. Severus couldn’t stop
these sensations. He had no control over them at all. So if Harry decided he wanted to push for sex with him, Severus could do nothing to stop it.

He looked into Harry’s eyes, panicking, tears running down his cheeks. “No. Not like this, Harry.” He shook his head hard and nudged at Harry’s hips, trying to get him to move off of him. It was too close. Severus’ body was starting to respond and he didn’t want to do anything like this. His sexual purity was all the innocence he had left, and if he lost it by force to a seventeen year old, he would hate himself forever.

“No, Harry. Please, stop.”

The phantom looked horrified at Severus’ terror and tears. “Severus?”

Severus nudged him again and shook his head. “Not yet. Please, not yet.”

With a nod, though Severus doubted the boy had entirely understood his panicked pleas, Harry moved off Severus and lay beside him instead. He still held Severus, but without the pressure too close to his groin, the older man could breathe again. Relief surged through him, even as Harry softly kissed his tears away and apologised over and over for frightening him. Severus closed his eyes and leaned into Harry, trying to get his breathing under control.

Gods, that had been terrifying.

A soft whisper reached his ears. “Never hurt you.”

Hmm. So Harry could speak as a phantom, on occasion at least. Well, Harry was terribly upset, judging by the tears brimming his lashes and his trembling body. The boy looked terrified, confused, and appalled to have hurt Severus. Perhaps voices only broke through whatever strange magic had brought them together in moments of high emotion.

Severus turned and kissed the young man’s cheek, relieved that Harry hadn’t intended to frighten him. Harry gasped and gave him a bright smile. A gentle thumb rubbed across Severus’ chin and tilted it down, and soft lips pressed into his hair. Severus melted at the tender touch, feeling loved and protected as he had never done, and he couldn’t resist sliding his arm around Harry’s waist and pulling him closer.

Harry slowly moved his kisses down Severus’ forehead, and he wondered what the young man was up to. When he realised Harry was kissing down the edge of his infamous crooked nose, Severus’ breath caught and his heart filled with warmth. Harry was trying to tell Severus without words that he knew who he was, that he accepted Severus.

Severus slipped his hands into Harry’s hair and wished, wished with all his might that the real person could be here with him instead.

“I am falling in love with you, my Harry. Please, please don’t cast me aside.”

The phantom—Harry’s eyes widened, and tears filled his eyes. Severus could not hear the young man’s words, but he could read those soft, sweet lips.

“You … love me?”

Severus swallowed hard and answered with a hesitant nod.

The phantom gave him a brilliant smile and claimed his mouth in a soft, tender kiss. Severus moaned and reached for him, but at the last moment, his sanity intervened, and he gently pushed Harry back.
and placed a gentle fingertip upon his lips.

Trying to communicate his needs, Severus shook his head and whispered, “Not yet.”

Harry winced and curled in on himself, obviously thinking Severus had rejected him. Severus pulled him into his arms and kissed the boy’s forehead.

“Ssh. I am not casting you aside either. Wait, Harry. Wait until you are an adult. Please. For my sake.”

Harry turned his back, clearly not understanding, and Severus sighed and held him close. “I am sorry, Harry. When my letter arrives, you will understand, I hope.”

But for that moment, Harry did not understand, couldn’t, and the phantom’s tears hurt Severus as much as if it had been the real boy weeping in his arms.

“Oh, Harry. I am so sorry.”

Severus held his phantom tight and hoped, somehow, Harry would forgive him when Hedwig arrived with his reply.

Harry woke feeling listless and puffy-eyed. He could have sworn Severus said he loved him, but then the next moment, he pushed Harry away. Harry knew there was a reason, that his phantom had been trying to communicate something to him that he just couldn’t understand—and because of that, he hadn’t pulled away or banished Severus last evening—but it still hurt like hell. He couldn’t fathom why Severus would kiss him one moment and reject him the next. It wasn’t fair.

With a sad sigh, Harry wiped his eyes and performed a bit of wandless healing to remove the puffiness. He didn’t need his aunt gloating over his misery at breakfast, not today. It was hard enough when he’d come down after weeping for Ron. He wasn’t sure he could bear it now that he had lost both Ron and his Prince.

More tears slipped down Harry’s cheeks, but he refused to give in to his weakness for long. He couldn’t afford to, not here. His horrid relatives would take advantage of it, if they could.

With a shake of his head, Harry dressed himself, combed his hair, and trudged down to breakfast.

As usual, Petunia was glaring at him when he arrived. She slopped food onto his plate—cold, of course, but it was nothing a subtle warming charm couldn’t fix—and slapped it down in front of Harry. Dudley came in the next instant, scratching his arse, and his aunt scurried to set up a barrier between Harry and his cousin.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’m not going to bite him, you know.”

Her glare went into sub-zero temperatures, and Harry decided it was best not to anger her further lest she decide the prospect of punishment was less frightening than him. He bolted down his breakfast, washed his dishes, and returned to his room.

Hedwig was tapping at his window when he made it upstairs. He smiled hesitantly and shut his door behind him, rushing to open the window.
“Hey, girl. Do you have a reply for me?”

She held out her leg and gave a proud hoot. To his surprise, she had a shrunken box attached to her leg as well as a letter.

“How. What’s this?” He unhooked both letter and box and unshrunk the package with his wandless magic. A silver and green wrapped gift appeared in his hands.

“A birthday present?” He smiled and laid the box aside. “So maybe he hasn’t rejected me entirely then.”

Hedwig hooted and nudged the letter into Harry’s hands. “I should read that first, girl?”

She nodded and nipped his finger gently.

Harry patted her head and took the letter with a nervous smile. “A-all right. I … I’m really scared about this one. He pushed me away last night, and I don’t understand why.”

She nuzzled his hair and flew off to her perch. Harry frowned and rushed to get her some food and water.

“There you go, girl. I guess I’ll have to read it to find out why, huh?”

She bobbed her head and settled into her food with a hoot.

Harry gave a wan chuckle and opened his letter with shaking hands. As soon as he started reading, though, he had the thought that Severus should be here with him, at least in spirit, and so he opened his soul to the man he loved.

“Severus … be with me now. At least hold my hand, if you won’t kiss me any longer.”

Tears dropped down his cheeks, and Harry closed his eyes when he felt gentle fingertips brush them away. He lifted his gaze to meet fearful, contrite black eyes. Severus was scared and miserable, so he couldn’t have meant to hurt Harry. Perhaps the letter would explain.

“Come here.”

Harry patted his thigh, and the phantom-Severus knelt at his feet and laid his head in Harry’s lap. Harry smiled through his pain and slipped his fingers through Severus’ hair. At least the man would allow this much, if the soft kiss he pressed to Harry’s thigh was any indication.

“I don’t understand, Severus. I don’t understand why you pushed me away last night.”

The phantom touched the letter, though his fingers went through it, and Harry sighed.

“All right. I’ll read it.”

He petted Severus’ hair, as much to calm himself as his nervous phantom, and read.

My Harry,

I do hope you are able to unshrink that parcel without my assistance, but do not worry. I will help you when I next see you if you are unable. I only ask that you do not open it in front of others. It is an extremely personal gift, and I do not trust anyone else with its
contents. If you are able to unshrink it, you have my leave to open it early. Consider it a reward for progressing so far in your wandless magic. Happy birthday, Harry.

As far as your recent discovery goes, I cannot believe you are not angry with me for hiding my identity for so long. You are correct—I was afraid of losing you, and so I kept my secrets. I am sorry I did not tell you sooner. I was mistaken in my fears, if your current level of attachment is any proof.

As to that, Harry, I … I do not know what to say. I understand from your letter that you are … that you feel … I cannot even bring myself to say it for fear that I have misconstrued your intent. I do not wish to say the wrong words and drive you away, but, yes, I felt you kiss me. I feel the way you touch my hair and my face, the way you hold me, and I have never felt anything like it in all my life.

Harry was shaking as he held the letter to his chest. “Dear Merlin, you can feel me.”

The phantom-Severus gave Harry a fearful look.

Harry stroked his cheek and hair lightly. “It’s okay. I just … don’t understand this. Do you know what’s going on?”

Severus simply leaned into Harry’s hand, unable to hear him. Harry let the man press his cheek against Harry’s fingers, and the touch relieved some of his fear. At least in this, Severus would not push him away.

Shaken and hopeful at once, Harry read on.

You hold me captive every time you touch me, Harry, and though I am afraid, I cannot resist you. I find it difficult to believe that I am who you want, but if you do, if it is truly your wish to pursue a romantic relationship with me, then know that I am not … averse to opening myself to you.

I am yours, if you will have me.

Harry sank onto his bed with a gasp, a breathless sob working its way out of his throat. “Oh, Severus. Really? You want me, too?”

The phantom looked up, shaking and confused, and Harry opened his arms. “Come.”

Hesitantly, the phantom-Severus sat beside Harry and brought him into his arms. Harry sighed against Severus’ throat, tears falling thick and fast under the man’s robes, and kissed the soft, warm skin under his lips. Merlin, he felt so real. He smiled when Severus didn’t pull away and slowly made his way up to the man’s face, but when Harry tried to kiss Severus’ mouth, again, the phantom shook his head and gave Harry a look full of sorrow and fear.

“Why? I don’t understand, Severus. Why do you keep pulling away if you want me?”

The phantom closed his eyes and touched the letter with a trembling hand.
“All right. But this hurts, you know?”

Severus buried his face in Harry’s shoulder, shaking all over, and Harry couldn’t find it in him to be angry. Whatever was bothering Severus was something immensely important to him, and the man was clearly afraid.

“Ssh.” Harry kissed the man’s hair, half-afraid he would pull away from that, too, but Severus only held him tighter. “It’s all right. Whatever’s bothering you, we’ll work it out, okay?”

Severus kissed Harry’s shoulder, and some of his pain abated. The man wasn’t turning him away altogether, he just had some kind of hangup about kissing Harry’s mouth. Well, he supposed they could work through that. Maybe Severus just wanted to wait until they could share a kiss in person.

Oh gods, kissing Severus for real. Harry’s breath lodged in his throat at the mere thought, and he prayed—prayed—that Severus wouldn’t push him away forever.

With his heart beating madly, Harry returned to his letter.

_I am yours, Harry, but you must wait. You are still seventeen. I cannot in good conscience let you kiss me and make love to me knowing that I am an adult and you are not—and yes, I can hear you telling me you are not a child. No, you are not, or I would never consider a relationship with you at all. You have endured things most adults never experience, and you are braver and stronger than most forty-year-olds. However, you are still legally a minor. I cannot condone that._

_I understand that this will irritate you, and I am sorry. All I ask is that you wait until you are eighteen. You will be an adult then, and I will not turn you away should you still wish to pursue me. Only give me a few days before you kiss me again, Harry. Please._

_For the sake of my sanity, if for nothing else._

Relief washed over Harry, and he wrapped Severus in his arms. So _that_ was what had troubled Severus last night. He only wanted to wait until Harry was legally an adult. Well, Harry would be impatient for a few days, certainly, but he could honour Severus’ wishes. As long as he could still hold the man. Harry didn’t think he could do without that.

“Hey, look at me.” Harry tipped the man’s chin up and held his face. “That’s all it was? You just want to wait until I’m a legal adult?”

Severus frowned, unable to understand, but Harry thought he knew how to make it clear. Harry moved in as if he were going to kiss Severus, but instead of touching his lips, he turned the man’s face so his kiss landed on Severus’ cheek. He pulled away with a hesitant smile and nodded, and relief filled Severus’ eyes.

“Thank you,” Severus mouthed.

Harry kissed his forehead. “It’s all right, Sev. Whatever makes you happy.”

Severus nodded and gave him a sad smile, but he was still shaking and afraid. Harry gathered he had best see what else the man had written.
Harry, I must ask your forgiveness, but when I understood from your letter and your touches that you … have amorous feelings for me, I felt as though I had to contact Albus. I know you will be angry, but I feared for my job and my life if I did not say anything.

Harry gasped and clutched the letter tight. “Oh no. Oh no-no-no. He’ll forbid it, and then where will we be?”

Tears blinding him, he caught the phantom-Severus into his arms and searched his face. The phantom looked afraid, but not unwilling, so perhaps he had some kind of a solution. Harry would see Severus entirely in secret if he had to. Hermione would cover for him, he was certain.

He sighed and kissed Severus’ temple, holding him tight as he returned to the letter.

I can hardly believe it, Harry, but Albus said he is happy for us. He wants us both to have love and—if you will believe me—actually encouraged me to pursue you. Had he not, I fear I would have … pushed you away entirely for the sake of my honour. I believed it was wrong of me to tie you in with a man such as myself—you deserve so much more—but Albus convinced me of my folly.

I am sorry, Harry. I only meant to do right by you, but every time you touch me, I become more and more convinced that none of my fears matter any longer. Every time you touch me—whether in truth or in these shared dreams of a sort—I lose more of myself to you.

Please, Harry, I realise this is out of character for me, but I cannot endure waiting without knowing your answer. I … I am so afraid you will cast me aside. I am terrified will reject me. Please, will you summon me—my image or what have you—when you receive this and give me your answer? When you have read the letter, if you will agree to a relationship with me, though with the stipulation of waiting until after your eighteenth birthday for further sexual contact, then will you hold my image and kiss me upon my left hand, where your beckoning ring is hidden? It is on my middle finger, in case you have forgotten.

I await your answer with joy and trepidation at once.

Yours,

Severus

Harry laid the letter down with a shaky sigh. Dear Merlin. The Headmaster had not merely condoned but encouraged their relationship? And Severus would have been too ashamed to pursue him if not for Dumbledore’s encouragement?

Hmm. Harry thought he understood. Severus had felt inadequate and tainted his entire life, and no doubt the abuse the Death Eaters had subjected him to two months ago had only reinforced that impression. It was no wonder he felt he wasn’t good enough for Harry. And yet, in spite of his fears, Severus had still reached out. For Merlin’s sake, the man had asked Harry for a sign.

And shite—Harry hadn’t given it yet. The poor man had to be terrified.
Harry slipped his fingers under Severus’ left hand and brought it to his lips, kissing the hidden ring. A part of him wished Severus had placed it just one finger over, and then perhaps their beckoning rings might hold a deeper meaning—but no. They weren’t ready for that step yet. Harry lingered over the ring, but looked up when he heard the phantom take in a shaky sob.

The man was weeping openly and trying to cover his face with his other hand.

“Oh, Severus.”

Harry wrapped the shattered man into his arms and pressed a kiss into his hair. “Ssh. It’s all right. You’re loved and safe now, okay? Always will be, no matter what happens. I love you, Severus. With all of my heart.”

The arms around him tightened, and Harry wondered if Severus had heard. He hoped so. Severus deserved to know he was loved.

“You’re mine now, love.” Harry kissed Severus’ temple. “And everything is going to be okay. You’ll see.”

Severus buried his face in Harry’s shoulder and wept.

Severus came back from breakfast the next morning still feeling a bit ashamed over his pitiful display of weakness the day before. Dear Merlin, he hadn’t wept like that since Lily’s death. But knowing Harry loved him, knowing the young man understood and was willing to wait for him and honour his wishes had completely overwhelmed him.

He hadn’t dared believe it, not until Harry laid that small kiss upon his ring, but in that moment, everything had become real. Severus could no longer deny that Harry understood and welcomed his love.

He had wept for—he wasn’t even sure how long, but Harry had held him the entire time, just stroking his hair and whispering things he couldn’t hear, but knew were meant to heal his heart. He could swear at one point, he had heard Harry tell him he loved him. Even the thought of those words had shattered him inside.

Gods, he hadn’t realised how much he needed love until a pure, beautiful young man offered it to him, no strings attached.

With a sniffle, Severus slipped into his quarters and jolted at the sound of a cheerful hoot. Hedwig. She would have a letter from his beloved, no doubt.

His heart suddenly light, Severus swept across the room and relieved the owl of her burden. To his surprise, a tiny tube came with the letter, something Harry had shrunk for him, no doubt. Severus unshrunk the parcel with shaking hands and a blush crept over his face as he realised what it was.

A single red rose. Merlin. In all his life, no one had ever thought to give him something so obviously romantic. With a smile, Severus held it to his lips, breathing in the sweet smell. A soft, warm feeling flooded him down to his toes, and he closed his eyes, cherishing the novel sensation.

A chipper little hoot brought him back to the present, and Severus reluctantly parted with his first gift.
from a suitor. He hadn’t a vase, but thought a long potions phial would do just as well until he could procure one. Harry might get a laugh out of the setup, actually. Maybe he should just leave it like that. With a smile, he set the ‘vase’ atop the desk in his private study, cast a preserving charm upon the rose, and sat down to read his letter, occasionally glancing at the flower and smiling to himself.

My Prince,

I do hope you like the rose. I may or may not have nicked it from the rosebushes while my aunt wasn’t looking. With as much as I’ve tended those bushes over the course of my life, that should rightfully be mine anyway. They’d never bloom if not for me. I’d have bought you one, but I don’t have any Muggle money on me and it’s too dangerous to leave the house anyway. I promise, when next I’m able, I’ll buy a whole bunch for you if you want them.

Severus, gods. Your letter … I’m so happy. I never really thought you’d be interested in me. You’re so brave, so intelligent, so sexy, and I’m just … well, a dunderhead. I mean, I didn’t even know who you were until Hermione spelled it out for me.

Merlin, I’m sorry about that. I know it must have hurt, seeing me falling in love with the Prince when you were right there that whole time, and I didn’t know.

Well, I know now. And I love you even more for it.

Severus clutched his letter close and covered his face to hold in tears. He hadn’t imagined it, then. Harry really did love him.

Gods, he wasn’t going to cry again. No, he’d been doing that altogether too much lately. With a deep breath, he held his letter in trembling hands and read Harry’s words.

Bet you never imagined this happening, huh? Your least favourite student falling head over heels for you. It’s true though. I do love you. And one day, I’ll get you away from that monster so you can live your life in peace. Maybe then you can love me too without being afraid of the consequences.

Don’t worry, Severus. I know you have to keep up appearances. I’ll help you. Just know that whatever I have to say in that guise is a lie. I am yours.

Um, how am I doing so far? I’ve never actually written a love letter to anyone before. I guess I’m making a lot of mistakes. I hope you know I mean well, though. I hope you know that … knowing you’re my Prince gives me hope.

By the way, your poetry book is gorgeous. I’m stunned that you would give me such a personal gift, and gods—it’s brilliant. I can see right into your heart, and I think I fall in love with you more with each word. Thank you so much for trusting me with this secret side of you. I will cherish it.

Severus let slip a shaky sigh and closed his eyes. Harry had accepted his book. Harry understood
what the gesture meant and loved it. That, more than anything he had yet seen, brought it home to Severus just how much the boy adored him.

“Merlin, when did I become so fortunate?”

Severus didn’t know, but he wasn’t going to question it. Fate owed him some happiness, after all. It had certainly spent enough time making his life hell, at least until now. He returned to his letter with a soft smile on his face.

Anyway, nothing’s really changed here. They pretty much just ignore me as much as they can, and I’m perfectly okay with that. The one exception is Petunia. She’s still glaring at me, and still trying to separate me from Dudley like he’ll be poisoned if he breathes the same air. I mean, she’s always treated me like total rubbish, but this is different.

I have no idea what’s gotten into her. She put up a partition across the table again when Dudley came in to eat this morning. I muttered something like ‘I’m not going to bite him,’ and she looked at me like I’d threatened him with dismemberment or something equally awful. I reckoned it was safest not to irritate her further and just got out of there in a hurry, but I still don’t know what her issue is. Even Dudley looks confused about it, from what I can see of him.

Severus, please be here the moment these charms fade. I’m afraid of what she’ll do to me if you’re not.

Love,
Harry

Severus held his letter close to his heart and vowed that he would be there for Harry, he would move heaven and earth to make sure he got his love out in time.

In the meantime, Severus knew of a particular rose in the greenhouses that would only reveal itself to the recipient—with the proper charms, of course. He had never imagined he would have an occasion to send one, but now that he had, he was going to take advantage of it. Hiding his smile inside, lest someone see, he slipped out of his room, gardening shears in hand.

That night, Harry curled up with his Prince as always, but he kept Severus’ wishes in mind and did not kiss the man’s mouth, as tempting as it was. Instead, he simply kissed his cheek and nestled his head under the older man’s chin. He fell asleep listening to the sound of Severus’ heartbeat, though he had no idea why he could hear it at all.
After reading Harry’s next letter, Severus shrunk the missive and folded it into his pocket. The boy had let him know of some concerning developments, and Albus needed to know. Just as he made to go to the floo, however, a second set of taps on his window caught him by surprise.

“Hmm. And who might that be?”

Severus feared the Dark Lord’s eagle owl or Lucius Malfoy’s bloody albino peacock—enchanted to have flight, of course—but no. It was only Granger’s tawny. Frowning, he let the bird in and took the letter from Nimue’s leg.

“Is she well, Nimue?”

The owl nodded and gave a mournful hoot, which Severus interpreted to mean that the girl was not in danger but still mourning her boyfriend’s death. Briefly, Severus thought of how he would feel if Harry died, and the instant coldness and hollow in his chest nearly knocked him to his knees.

His respect for Granger shot up as he unfolded her letter. Anyone who could maintain a semi-cheerful persona while enduring that kind of agony deserved respect.

Professor,

Hello. I hope I’m not bothering you, sir. I just wanted to make sure you’re okay. Harry knows about your book now, and, well, I just wanted to be sure he hadn’t made a mess of things. I know he loved his Prince, and he did write me to say he loved you too, but well, he never said if you were okay with all of this.

I hope I’m not overstepping my bounds. Feel free to tell me if it’s none of my business. I only wanted to make sure you were okay.

Sincerely,
Hermione Granger

Severus swallowed hard as he closed the letter, more affected by Granger’s words than he wanted to admit. It seemed she cared about him too, if she would send such a letter without informing Harry of her intent. And that boded well for Severus. If Harry’s closest remaining friend approved of him, then perhaps they would survive the obstacles in their relationship. Her support could only help.

With a sigh, he laid the letter beside Nimue and gave both the tawny and Harry’s snowy some treats.

“I am afraid I must go to Albus urgently,” said Severus to the owls. “It is a matter of Harry’s safety; however, I will return to draft a reply to both letters as soon as I am able. Feel free to rest here and help yourself to the water dish over there by the owl perch. Telos will not mind. The water has an auto-refresh charm and should do to sustain you until I am able to send you back to your humans.”

The owls hooted in reply, and Severus petted both of their heads before sweeping away to the floo. Minerva was in Albus’ office when Severus stuck his head into the flames.

“Albus? Might I come through? I have some ….” He frowned at Minerva. “Ah, personal affairs I need help with urgently.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Hmm. Is that a nice way of telling me to make myself scarce, Severus?”
He gave a wry laugh. “Would you prefer it if I told you to return to your tower like a recalcitrant student?”

She chuckled. “No, no. Albus and I were finished anyway, but, Severus, you do know that you can come to me if you need help, don’t you?”

Severus Occluded against a blush. “Of course I do. It is only quite personal, Minerva, and I rather need a male perspective.”

She snickered and gave him a knowing look. “A gay male’s perspective?”

His blush broke through his barriers. “Minerva!”

She grinned like the cat that caught the canary and clapped her hands. “Oh, do tell. Who is the lucky man, Severus?”

He had the strangest urge to bang his head against the coals. She must have sensed it, because she picked up her skirts and vacated her seat.

“Hmm, I do sense a mystery. Perhaps I’ll have to … sniff around, eh?”

Severus groaned. “Minerva, please.”

She laughed and patted his cheek through the flames. “Never mind it, Severus. I’ll see you at dinner?”

“If I am not too involved in my research, yes. I must find a cure.”

Her mirth vanished instantly. “Yes. Well, I shan’t impede you there. Until next time, Severus, Albus.”

She waved and left the office, closing the door behind her.

“Come through, Severus,” said Albus with a worried expression.

Severus nodded and swept into Albus’ office. “She will investigate this, won’t she?”

Albus gave him a grave nod. “And I do not believe she will be as … accommodating as I have been.”

“No, most likely not.” Severus sighed and sat in the chair Minerva had just left. “Well, we shall deal with that when the time comes. Albus, have you learned anything else about this odd connection between Harry and myself?”

The old man shook his head. “Not as much as I would have hoped. It would appear that this is an exceedingly rare phenomenon. At least, I have yet to find any recorded instances of it.”

Severus laid Harry’s most recent letter on the table, pointing out the relevant passages with his finger. “Look at this.”

Albus scanned over the letter even as Severus rereded the passage himself.

Last night was so sweet, Severus. I hope I didn’t push too far. I know you want to keep things platonic until after my birthday, but I needed you close last night. I hope it was
okay to hold you like that. Well, your phantom didn’t seem to resist, but then, I’m not always sure that it lines up with what you want. I don’t want to push you.

Anyway, I wanted to tell you that as much as I loved falling asleep like that, it was a bit strange in that I could hear your heartbeat. I’m pretty sure I shouldn’t have been able to. But I could, and it was so comforting. Between that and your warmth and the feel of your breath in my hair, it was almost like you were really there with me.

Albus sat back with a pensive expression. “I take it your relationship is going well then?”

Severus could not fight another blush. “Quite.”

“Hmm.” Albus toyed with his beard for a long moment. “I am glad you showed me this. Perhaps it will help me find answers, now that we have more information. Has anything else happened with these ‘phantom figures’ that I should be aware of?”

Severus frowned. “Sometimes I can hear Harry speak. It is rare, and perhaps only when he puts particular emotion behind what he is saying, but I have heard him tell me he … he loves me before.” His ears flamed. “I … it was the first time anyone had ever said that to me.”

Albus’ eyes went ancient and sad. “I love you as well, Severus, like the son I have never had. Forgive me that I have failed to say so before now.”

Severus closed his eyes around a sudden welling of tears. “T-thank you, Albus. I feel as though you are my true father.”

A gentle hand squeezed his fingers. “It will be all right, Severus. I believe Minerva loves you, too.”

Severus’ worry wiped away the welling of emotion in his chest. “Right until the moment she finds out I am romantically involved with her favourite lion. Then, I imagine she will not feel so amiable towards me.”

Albus sighed. “Well, perhaps we are mistaken. Especially if she knows you only acted with my support, she may come around.”

“Before or after she reports me to the governors? Or the Death Eaters? Either way, the result is the same.” He laid his head in his hands. “I will die for daring to fall in love.”

Albus’ voice was soft. “Oh, Severus. You love him?”

“With everything in me, Albus, and that will be my undoing, I fear.”

“Well, my boy, I have already asked you to cease spying. I think now we have even more reason.”

Severus gave Albus a heartsick look. “But the potion! I still do not know who created it or why or how to combat it, and I do not have enough samples left to continue testing much longer. I am running out of time and hope, Albus.”

“You have made great strides, and I am satisfied that you will find a cure soon.” Albus patted his hand. “It is enough, Severus. You have atoned enough.”

He winced and looked away, hoping his Occlumency would cover the bleeding hole in his heart.

“Don’t you think Lily would want you to be happy, Severus? Especially since her son loves you?”
He pushed away those foreign words. “No. Lily died hating me, Albus. It will never be enough. I can never … never heal it ….”

Albus held Severus’ hand and said nothing, and Severus was beyond grateful for the silent comfort.

After a long moment, Albus murmured, “If it helps, Severus, I want you to be happy.”

Severus closed his eyes to hide a surge of pain. “I am sorry. I cannot stop now, not when I am so close.”

Albus sighed. “I fear for Harry if you continue putting yourself in danger. However, if this is what you must do, then I will support you.”

“Thank you.” Severus freed his hand and tapped the letter again. “That is not the only reason I came, Albus. Look.” He read along with the old man again.

I’m really worried about Aunt Petunia, Severus. She keeps giving me these looks like I’m a piece of rotten meat. I mean, she’s never liked me, but this is extreme even for her. I really don’t want to be scoured again, Sev. Please help me. Please get me out of here before she goes mad.

Albus had gone pale. “Scoured? Dear Merlin.”

Severus searched the old man’s eyes. “Do you think it means what I imagine it to?”

Albus shuddered. “Given their history and this wording, it sounds as if she … cleans him. All too thoroughly.”

Severus gave a grim nod. “I fear it resembles the kind of cleaning I discovered Harry in the midst of directly after Mister Weasley’s death. I fear she hurts him with these … scourings.”

Albus pinched the bridge of his nose. “It would explain why he cannot let a female touch him.”

Severus frowned. “He cannot?”

“Did he not explain to you about Miss Weasley? I know he had intended to, but then Ronald perished—I imagine the boy must have forgotten amidst all the trauma.”

Severus barely suppressed a growl. “And what, pray tell, was he supposed to tell me about Miss Weasley?”

Albus lowered his hand and gave Severus a wry smile. “My, Severus. You are in love with him.”

“Yes, and if he is … involved, I need to know.”

Albus shook his head. “He is not that kind of person, Severus. Love has been too rare in his life for him to waste it. Ask him about her—kindly—and he will be happy to explain, I am sure. I do not feel it is my place to relate the story to you. I will tell you this now, however. You have absolutely no cause to be jealous. Harry is completely devoted to you. I noticed it even before he left for the summer.”

Severus took a deep breath and tried to calm his anger. “I cannot share him. I cannot.”
“No one is asking you to, Severus. You only made an erroneous assumption based on my mentioning a name. And, if you do feel threatened, I will ask you to find me one other example of a couple so devoted to each other that they are able to call phantoms of the other’s spirit and touch each other while in different countries.”

Severus winced. “Harry can call me. I cannot call him.”

“Hmm. Have you ever tried, Severus?”

“I … of course I ….” Severus frowned and cut off his own protest. “No. Now that you mention it, I do not believe I have.”

“Try it now. We will need that information if I am to discover what is happening between you. Besides that, I confess I am quite worried for Harry’s safety, and I would like to know that he is well. I would also like to know if I am able to see and touch this phantom or not.”

Severus gulped. “Yes. I … I will try.”

He closed his eyes and thought of Harry. How had the young man explained it? Severus’ eyes snapped open. Albus needed to know this information—Severus was certain of it.

“Wait. Before I try to call him, Albus, I believe you need to understand how it works.”

Albus nodded. “I had assumed you were simply fantasising.”

Severus frowned. “I believe it started that way on Harry’s side, but he said here—” He tapped a paragraph in his most recent letter. “—That, especially since learning my identity, he has been using a different process. He said he … reaches out to me and then I am there. He described it as opening his soul to me and calling out to mine.”

Something clicked in Albus’ eyes. “Merlin. Severus, I may have an idea. I will need to research it first, of course, but that may have been the key we needed.”

“Truly?”

“Yes. But I do need to verify it first. I would not wish to excite you only for it to turn out to be another dead end.”

Severus nodded. “Very well. Then do your research and tell me as soon as you know?”

Albus rubbed his beard. “I believe I will need to go to Romania and research the hall of records there. The last case—that I know of—happened there, and they may have more detailed information.”

Severus frowned. “Just … try to be back before Harry’s birthday?”

“If it is at all possible. If I cannot be here in time, I will send the Weasleys after him, should you be Summoned.”

Severus breathed a sigh. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome. Now, try to call up Harry, please.”

“Yes.”

Severus again closed his eyes and thought of his love. With a deep breath, he let all his mental and
spiritual barriers fall. A wave of suppressed emotion assaulted him, but he ignored it in search of his Harry.

“Come to me, love.”

There was a thump, and Severus opened his eyes to find his bewildered lover sitting astride his lap. The boy’s words were silent, but Severus read his lips easily enough.

“**Severus? What’s wrong?**”

Severus smiled and kissed Harry’s forehead, relieved. He brought the boy into his arms and held him tight, rubbing one hand slowly across the young man’s back. Harry relaxed into his arms and, after a moment, buried his face into Severus’ throat. His contented sigh warmed Severus’ chest.

“How interesting,” said Albus.

Severus looked up to see the man had put his spectacles on and was staring at the young man in Severus’ lap.

“How can you see him, Albus?”

The old man shook his head. “Not even with my spectacles. Can you, my boy?”

“Yes. As of three days ago, I have been able to see him. Ever since I revealed myself to him, even before he had confirmation of my identity, I have been able to see him. Perhaps it was because I acknowledged him and a connection between myself and his fantasies. It seems to grow every time we take steps closer to one another.”

Albus leaned back and stroked his beard. “Hmm. Tell me what you are experiencing.”

“**Very well.**” Severus closed his eyes and kissed Harry’s temple. “He is sitting in my lap with his arms wrapped around my waist. I am resting my arms against him, and his body is able to support them—they do not pass through as they would with a ghost or a mere fantasy. As well, I can feel his weight upon my legs, and he feels as heavy as I imagine he would be in truth. He has his face cuddled into my throat, and his breath is warming me. His body is also warm, and his hair is tickling my cheek a bit. I quite like it.”

Albus smiled. “Ah, young love.” His eyes went terribly sad. “I do miss it.”

Severus reached over and squeezed the man’s hand. “It is not too late to try again, Albus.”

Albus laughed and patted Severus’ arm. “I am well over a hundred years old, my boy. I am afraid my time in the sun has come and gone. However, I do thank you for your kindness. Will you attempt an experiment for me?”

“Yes. What do you wish of me?”

“Please test whether Harry can see me or not.”

Severus nodded. “I will try.”

He kissed Harry’s forehead and took the young man’s chin in a gentle hand. While rubbing Harry’s chin with his thumb so the young man did not think Severus was pushing him away, he moved back and held Harry steady. If Harry could see anything beyond Severus, he would be staring straight at Albus. Severus pointed to him, trying to communicate that he wanted Harry to look ahead.
The boy stared, frowned in bemusement, and laid his head back on Severus’ shoulder.

Severus stroked Harry’s hair to calm any upset he might have inadvertently caused the young man. “I do not think he can see you, Albus.”

“How peculiar.” Albus rubbed at his beard. “Harry, we are testing the bounds of your connection with Severus so that I might find answers for you. Can you hear me?”

Harry did not react at all.

“I do not think he can, Albus,” said Severus in a soft voice, “but to be fair, he can only hear me upon rare occasions. It is the same for him. Usually, I must read his lips or communicate by touch if I am to understand him at all.” He laid his head upon Harry’s and held his lovely lion close, breathing in the scent of the boy’s shampoo.

“I can smell him too,” Severus murmured. “His aftershave, his shampoo, the fragrance of the detergent on his clothing. His own natural scent, too.” He closed his eyes and breathed Harry in. “How is it possible that such a small thing could be so incredibly soothing, Albus?”

Albus gave him an indulgent smile. “I am happy for you, Severus. I remember how it felt to hold him, even now. It always soothed me, too. At least until I learned the truth of him.”

Albus’ confession made Severus all the more grateful for the gift Harry had given him. He had no doubts of Harry’s goodness. The man was utterly selfless. Severus held Harry tighter and prayed he could be worthy of him one day.

“How I wish I could see Harry,” Albus said in a wistful voice. “He makes you so happy, Severus. Your entire countenance changes.”

Severus felt as if someone had doused him in ice water. “Albus, I cannot afford to let my countenance change. If I slip, even one time ….”

“What is one more reason why I do wish you would stop spying. However, I believe it will not be an issue either way. Harry knows you are a spy and will not touch you like this in the sight of anyone dangerous. He would never put you at risk like that. All will be well.”

Severus sighed and held his beloved tighter. “He said he would help me keep my cover.”

“And so he will.” Albus patted his arm. “Why don’t you take Harry back to your rooms and continue your experiments. Write him and ask him if he saw me or heard anything, or if he even noticed where he was. I am of the opinion that he is incapable of noticing much beyond yourself, Severus, but we shall see.”

Severus frowned. “I do not feel safe taking him through the floo.”

“Then take his hand and walk him back to your office. Consider it a lover’s stroll. No one besides Minerva is about the castle today, and she will not see Harry anyway.”

Severus gulped. “You are sure?”

“Well, it would be a good test.”

“She will kill me, Albus!”

“No, she will not, and if she does see Harry and reports it to me, then I will remind her of the dangers
that await both of you if she does not treat the situation with discretion. It will be all right, Severus.”

“Nothing in my life is ever all right, Albus.”

The old man looked pointedly at Severus’ lap. “Well, I may not be able to see him, Severus, but what I can see looks promising for you.”

Severus sighed and stood, lifting Harry into his arms. The boy gripped Severus’ neck with a surprised cry, then leaned back with a grin.

“Hmm. I feel his weight when I lift him up like this. And apparently he is enjoying being held.”

Albus smiled and shooed him. “Away with you two. Only be careful until the day after tomorrow, Severus.”

Severus winced. “Merlin, is it already the twenty-ninth? I have yet to purchase his gift.”

“Then I suppose I know where you’ll be today. I will have to secure a passport for Romania, I suppose. Perhaps Charlie Weasley will offer his assistance.”

Severus gave a grunt of agreement and set Harry on his feet. He laced his fingers with his love’s and led them to the door. “Thank you, Albus. I’ll be in touch.”

Albus sent Harry’s letter floating to Severus. “Keep that hidden and ward it well.”

Severus winced and folded the letter into his pocket. “Yes.” He held Harry’s hand and led him from the Headmaster’s office with an ever-increasing pit of worry in his belly. He couldn’t understand why, but he had the feeling that this brief period of bliss was drawing to an end.

With a sigh, Severus led Harry towards the dungeons. If his time with Harry was limited, then by gods, he intended to enjoy every moment he could.
Captured

Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** Violence, torture. **Summary:** Petunia freaks out, Severus goes postal, and both Harry and Severus must face the consequences of their actions.

**CHAPTER 17**

**CAPTURED**

Harry woke on his last full day in Privet Drive with a cold feeling in his belly and upon the back of his neck. He couldn’t explain it, but he had the terrible suspicion that something bad was going to happen.

With a sigh, he sat and went to climb out of bed, only to realise his Prince was still holding him. Merlin! Severus had never stayed with him throughout the night before. He usually tended to fade out as soon as Harry fell asleep.

The comfort of waking up to his love, even if it was just some kind of projection, eased Harry’s fears and brought a smile to his lips. With a happy sigh, he snuggled back into Severus’ arms and kissed the corner of his mouth.

“Good morning, my love.”

Severus must not have been fully awake. The next thing Harry knew, he was on his back with a fully aroused phantom straddling his hips. Harry gasped as Severus claimed his lips in a passionate kiss and ground his hips into Harry’s.

Oh gods! It felt amazing, but Harry knew Severus would hate himself if he let this continue.

Harry pushed him off and shook his head, fear in his eyes. “No, Severus. No, not yet. You told me to wait, remember?”

The phantom shook himself as if just waking, and Harry watched as horror and shame filled his eyes.

“Ssh.” He kissed Severus’ forehead and hugged him tight. “It’s all right. I’d have let you keep going if I was eighteen, but I knew you’d feel too guilty. It’s okay. I love you so much.”

A whisper met his ears, and Harry knew Severus must have felt terrible for him to hear it.

“I thought it was a dream.”

Harry nodded and stroked Severus’ hair. “It’s okay. I figured you weren’t completely awake. No harm done. I still love you with everything in me. It’s going to be okay. Soon we’ll be together and there’s nothing they can say or do to prevent it. Just one more day, love, and we can be toge—”

A knock on Harry’s door turned his blood cold. Shite. He hadn’t been whispering. He sat up abruptly and pressed a hand over Severus’ mouth, just in case he said something audible.

“What?”
Petunia opened the door and brought in a plate of cold eggs and bangers. “You slept through breakfast, so I brought it to you.” The look in her eyes was icy cold. “And if you so much as go near my son, bracelet or no bracelet, I’ll kill you.”

Harry frowned. “Your son? Why on earth would I want to go near Dudley?”

“I heard you jabbering on. I know what you want, you depraved little freak. Well, you’re not going to get it, you hear me? You won’t touch him!”

Harry suddenly lost his appetite. “Wait a tick. You think—you actually think—I want Dudley? Dear Merlin, where on earth did you get that idea? Even if he wasn’t a complete prat, he’s my bloody cousin! Urgh!” He shuddered and crawled closer to Severus, hoping the man’s warmth would erase the filth upon him, but his beloved phantom was gone.

“You watch your mouth, you foul little deviant.” She slammed the plate onto Harry’s desk, scattering bits of egg over his charms essay and onto the beautiful white rose Severus had given him. “I’m watching you, you hear me? You stay away from my precious Dudders.”

“As if that would be a sacrifice,” Harry retorted.

The woman went to slap Harry, but a burst of sparks from the bracelet and a jolt to her hand stopped her cold. She went ghostly white and ran from the room without another word. Harry gulped. Severus would want to know about this for certain.

Harry Banished the eggs, hurriedly pulled on his invisibility cloak and trainers, cast the best shielding charms he could without a wand, and dashed around the corner. He pounded upon his neighbour’s door, hoping against hope she would be home.

“Arabella! Missus Figg! Please, please wake up. It’s an emergency.”

Severus paced his quarters in his sleep pants and shirt, barefoot and shaking all over. He could not believe he had all but assaulted Harry that morning. Harry had held Severus and kissed him afterwards, and Severus had sworn he had heard Harry promise they would be together soon with no need for these worries, but then he had simply vanished without warning. Was Harry angry with him?

Or had something terrible happened? Severus held the hand with his ring, waiting for a tingle to let him know Harry was in trouble, but minute after minute passed and he felt nothing. He was beginning to consider the wisdom of apparating into Surrey and making sure Harry was all right when his floo roared to life and Harry’s head appeared in the flames.

“Sev! Severus! I need you.”

Severus dashed to the hearth and knelt before his lover. “Harry!” He stroked through Harry’s hair and cupped the boy’s face, looking for injuries. “Are you well?”

The young man nodded and shuddered. “Can you come through, since I can’t leave the wards?”

“Where are you, love?”
“Arabella Figg’s house. She’s in the other room feeding her cats, so it’s okay.”

Severus nodded and swept through the floo and into Harry’s arms. The young man hugged him, careless of soot, and Severus sighed at the feel of having the real Harry to hold at last.

He whispered in Harry’s ear, “Ssh, be at peace, my love. I am here. I am with you.”

Harry sighed and buried his face in Severus’ neck. “Are you sure you won’t kiss me just once?”

“I would prefer to wait. Why?”

Harry shuddered. “Need you to get the taste out of my mouth.”

Severus growled. “They attacked you?”

“No. Yes. I … kind of?” He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “No one touched me sexually, but Petunia tried to hit me and disgusted me to the point that I couldn’t even touch my breakfast and I ran straight to you.”

Severus sighed, feeling Harry’s turmoil as his own. Understanding that the boy needed a grounding touch and wasn’t seeking more, he decided to bend his own rules a bit and give Harry what he had asked for. Shaking hard, Severus slipped a hand under Harry’s chin and brought him close.

“H-Harry, I … I have never ….”

Harry’s eyes widened. “You’ve never been kissed before, love?”

“Only by your shadow.”

Harry’s expression turned soft. “Then let’s wait, okay? I want your first kiss to be perfect. I don’t want you to have to feel any guilt about it.” He frowned and ducked his head. “Not like me.”

Severus growled and lifted Harry’s chin. “Is there something I should know?”

Harry paled. “Severus! You … don’t trust me?”

Severus closed his eyes and released Harry, guilt and grief rocketing through him. “It is not you, Harry. I feel as though I am not enough.”

Harry wrapped his arms around Severus’ neck and kissed his cheek. “Well, stop thinking that. I think you’re brilliant, okay? In both senses of the word. And there’s no one else. It’s only ever been you.”

Severus sighed and buried his face in Harry’s hair. “Thank you.”

“Nothing to thank me for. All I was saying is that I did date Cho, and then Ginny for a time, but it was always wrong. I didn’t understand why until I realised I was in love with the Prince. So my first kiss was … well, unpleasant. And I want yours to be perfect, because I know it’s going to be heaven for me.”

Severus blushed and laid his head against Harry’s. “I … am anticipating it with joy.”

“Me too, love.”

“Hmm.” Severus pulled back and stroked Harry’s cheek. “Harry, what happened?”

Harry shuddered. “Well, I found out why Petunia’s been so barmy about Dudley. She actually thinks
I … urk … want him. I mean like I want you. She thinks I’m … that I ….” He gagged, and Severus clutched him tighter.

“That monstrosity? She actually had the audacity to suggest that you would desire that cowering, bullying brat? Dear Merlin!”

“Yeah. And when I told her there was no chance in hell of me ever wanting the prat, she threatened to kill me if I didn’t stay away from him. I said that wasn’t a sacrifice, and she tried to slap me. Your bracelet scared her off, though. Then I ran straight here as soon as she left.”

Severus growled. “Well. It appears I will need to make a visit to the Dursleys. Only we cannot appear to be together, Harry. That that woman would take great pleasure in reporting it to the authorities, despite the fact that we have yet to do anything sexual and you are eighteen at midnight.”

“She would make it sound sordid, too.” Harry leaned on Severus’ chest and held him tight. “Might we stay like this for a moment longer? I’ve missed you so much.”

“Only a moment.”

Harry nodded and gave Severus a mischievous grin. “I really wish I could kiss you now, you know. But maybe it’s good you’re setting boundaries. I don’t think I could stop.”

Severus carded through Harry’s hair and kissed his forehead. “I could not either.” He sighed and looked into Harry’s eyes. “I am sorry, but we must hurry, my love.”

Harry nodded and moved out of Severus’ arms. “Come tomorrow night, I’m not waiting any longer, Severus.”

Severus shivered. “Tomorrow night, I will not stop you.”

Harry kissed just the corner of Severus’ mouth and nuzzled his cheek. “Okay. Then I think I can face them now. But you might want to transfigure your clothing and conjure some shoes or something.”

Severus looked down at himself and blushed. How had he forgotten to dress? He was still in his white silk pyjamas.

“Yes, indeed.”

With a few flicks of his wand, he was dressed in his usual black attire. Only Harry knew he had to transfigure his smalls into shoes, and the man’s expression at knowing Severus was bare under his long black robe was pure heat. Severus had a difficult time keeping his ardour under control when Harry looked at him like that.

“Please, Harry;” he half-panted. “I must control myself.”

Harry gave him a sheepish smile. “Sorry, love. Are you okay?”

“Yes. Now, let us go visit your demon of an aunt, shall we?”

Harry grinned. “Sounds good to me.”
Harry wished he could hold Severus’ hand as they went into the house, but he knew what the bitch would do if she got even an inkling that Harry was involved with a professor. It would give her the greatest of pleasure to destroy Harry’s life, and so he kept a respectable distance. It wasn’t easy, not when the knowledge that Severus was naked under his robes kept popping into his mind at random intervals.

Harry caught himself salivating again and frowned to cover his embarrassment.

Merlin. This year was going to be harder than he’d thought.

He then caught sight of his relatives talking in hushed voices in the living room and all semblance of desire limped away, fear taking its place. He unconsciously stepped closer to his Prince and covered his chest in a protective gesture. Severus laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“Oh, Tuney,” Severus called in a cold voice. “We need to have a word about your oaths.”

Harry might have laughed at the way the colour drained out of the Dursleys’ faces had he not been so terrified. He inched closer to Severus and tried not to shake.

The woman turned an icy glare on Harry, and her gall scared Harry further. If she wasn’t even afraid of Severus any longer, did Harry have a weapon against her? Well, he had his shield magic, but would it work against Muggle methods? Harry made a mental note to smuggle a knife into his room and keep it handy.

Severus stepped forwards and a bit in front of Harry, protecting him. “I did warn you that I could see and hear you through Harry’s bracelet, did I not?”

Petunia scowled. “Then you’ve seen him trying to get to my Dudders! I won’t have it! It’s filthy.”

Harry growled. “You’re one to talk! And what makes you think I’m gay anyway? I’d never tell the likes of you.”

She drew herself to her full height and gave him an evil smirk. “Do you think I’m blind, boy? I saw your book, the one you carry about everywhere.”

Harry blinked. “The one about prisoners? That’s how you judged I’m gay?”

She glared. “Don’t lie to me. The one about those filthy potions. Signed by the Half-Blood Prince and full of ridiculous romantic poetry. The one you fantasise about when you think no one’s looking, but I hear you! I hear you talking to a man, and it’s filthy!”

“Wait, wait a moment.” Harry’s eyes bugged. “You saw my potions book? But it’s spelled against Muggles. You should have seen a history of British criminals.”

She sniffed. “Well, your freaky stuff didn’t work very well, now did it?”

“Professor Snape’s magic didn’t work? Hah!” Harry gasped as realisation settled in. “Wait a minute, if you can see it, that means you’re not a Muggle. You’re a bloody Squib!”

Petunia went ghostly white and screamed, “Shut up! You don’t know what you’re talking about, you dirty, disgusting boy!”

Severus fixed her with a piercing glare. “My, my, Tuney. Hiding a secret like this from your dear husband and child? Oh, how would they feel if they knew you have a magical core, hmm? Or that since you are a squib, your dear Dudders’ children are just as likely as Harry’s to be magical? Or that
your dear son may be a Squib as well? How … interesting.”

Dudley whimpered and turned the colour of clay. “M-Mum? Is that true?”

She snarled. “Of course it’s not true. He’s only trying to turn you against me.” She stepped closer to Harry. “It’s all your fault, you know. Everything. Not only are you a freak, but you’re an abomination to boot, and now you’re trying to make me out to be the same kind of nasty freak as your accursed mother? Ungrateful little snot! We gave you ever—”

Harry screamed, “Shut up, you vile bitch!”

A wind rushed through the house and snapped Petunia’s lips shut with an audible clack.

Harry stepped closer, his hair crackling with magical energy and his eyes glowing almost pure white. “So you think being gay makes me an abomination? Being magical makes me a freak? Then tell me, oh auntie dearest, what kind of monster is a woman who abuses her only nephew just because he has magic? Who bloody scrubs his skin off with lye—including private places—because she believes he might infect her household? Huh? Tell me that. What kind of abomination are you?”

She moved as if to slap Harry, but Severus caught her arm. When he released it, she had nothing but a closed off stump. Her hand was gone.

Petunia screeched and clawed at her arm, but with Harry’s accidental magic still in effect, she could not speak.

“It is a temporary curse,” said Severus with a cold glare. “It will last ten hours. However, the next time you try to strike your nephew, I will make it permanent. And that is nothing to what I will do to you if you so much as think of attacking him with lye again.”

“Bloody hell,” Harry whispered. “I didn’t mean to say ….”

Severus squeezed his shoulder. The comfort reassured Harry that Severus would not turn him away.

Meanwhile, Petunia fainted, and Vernon screamed like a little girl.

“What have you done to my wife? You fix it this instant, you bloody freak, or I’ll ca—”

With a flick of Severus’ hand, Vernon’s mouth sealed itself and grew together, vanishing his lips and cutting off his tirade. Dudley cowered in a corner, his hands over his bum.

“Another temporary curse,” said Severus to the struggling man. “One I will not make permanent because of the fact that it would kill you eventually. However, it would not do you harm to let you temporarily experience the lack of food and water you forced your nephew to endure while in your care. In light of that, your curse will last twenty-four hours. Would you like one of your own, oh Dudders?”

The boy promptly wet himself and shook his head hard.

“Then I suggest you leave your cousin alone until we come to retrieve him.” His eyes turned feral. “And I assure you, he has better taste than to be remotely interested in a cowering bully such as yourself.” He scowled. “Even a dog would choose another leg.”

Harry snorted into his hands. “Brilliant.”

Severus gave Harry an amused smile, then turned a sharp glare upon the fear-maddened Dursleys
once more. “The next time you disobey your oaths, I will set permanent curses upon you. All of you. Are we clear?”

The conscious Dursleys whimpered and nodded.

“Good.” Severus spun on his heel, but stopped before he left the room. “Oh, and one more thing.” He flicked his wand at the prone Petunia and grinned when a dull grey light appeared over her chest. “That, gentlemen, is Petunia’s magical core. As you can see, it is inactive. She is what we wizards call a Squib—a person born with to wizards who has no magic, or a person born with a magical core but too little power to perform spells. Your dear Petunia is the latter. Which means …” He paused to grin viciously at the male Dursleys. “She has … that freaky stuff. Enjoy your day.”

He smirked and turned up the stairs, guiding Harry into his room.

Harry grinned as soon as the door shut behind him. “Sev, that was bloody brilliant. Thank you.”

Severus gave a dark chuckle. “Please do tell me how your idiot cousin and uncle react.” He frowned. “On second thought, I would prefer that you simply stay away from them. Stay here as much as you can, love.”

Harry gave him a grimace. “Well, I guess I can go a day without food. Merlin knows I’ve done it before.”

Severus shook his head. “I shan’t let you go hungry. I will send a basket of food and water by floo as soon as I return to Hogwarts and give Missus Figg instructions to deliver it to you directly. Once you have it safely here, lock and ward your doors and do not come out except to go to the loo.” He kissed Harry’s forehead. “This will all be over soon, I promise.”

Harry slipped his hands into Severus’. “Thank you. I’ll try to stay away from them as much as I can. But you’d better go before they get suspicious. Though I do love being able to touch you for real.”

“As do I.” Severus traced a hand down Harry’s cheek. “I thought you might want to know that Albus is researching our strange connection. Perhaps we will have an answer soon.”


Severus snorted. “I’d like to see a group of cowering Muggles hurt me.”

“Then go, before I get hurt.”

Severus’ expression sobered. “Indeed.” He pressed a kiss to the corner of Harry’s lips, sending a shock of sensation down the boy’s spine. “I will return for you at dawn tomorrow. Be ready to go.”

Harry nodded, a bit dazed at Severus’ kiss.

In a swirl of black robes, Severus was gone. Harry shook himself out of his daze and decided it was safest to wait for Severus’ package over at Missus Figg’s rather than trust his relatives to retrieve him after Severus was so brutal with his curses. Still, the man had warned them. Several times. And the punishments for child abuse under wizard law were much more severe than what Severus had doled out.

His relatives should consider themselves lucky they weren’t in Azkaban waiting the Kiss. Severus had at least left them … mostly intact. The Dementors wouldn’t be so kind.
Albus was already in Romania when Severus had finished giving Harry his food basket and updating Missus Figg about the situation. The batty woman hadn’t known he was abused at all, and when Severus told her, she was livid. She had raged about what she was going to do to the Dursleys for a good half hour before Severus reminded her they were on a schedule and Harry needed to get home before the Dursleys overcame their fright.

The woman had even scared Severus a bit, though he would sooner die than admit it.

Once Harry had his food and water and had reassured Severus through his shadow that he was safely hidden, Severus returned to his quarters and composed a Patronus for his mentor.

“Albus, Harry is in trouble. I have handled the situation as best as I am able, but I think it best that you return from Romania as soon as you can.”

Severus worked on the antidotes through the day, worried about his love and frustrated that he couldn’t find the last ingredient. There was something in the vampiric delay potion he was missing. Something that might be crucial to a cure. But he was out of samples, and had no other way to test it besides trial and error.

The clock chimed ten times and Severus growled at another failure. “Damn it!”

He was tempted to throw the useless potion against the wall, but seeing as it had vampiric blood in it, he restrained himself. Shite. He slid down the wall and buried his head in his hands. He just couldn’t do it. Everything he tried, failed.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat there, mind whirring with fears and puzzles he couldn’t solve, before a silver phoenix materialised in front of him.

“Go ahead, Albus,” Severus said, his voice suddenly tight with tension.

The phoenix nuzzled the man’s cheek before it spoke in the familiar, rumbling tones of his mentor. “Oh, Severus. I do hope you are well. And Harry? Is he safe?”

Severus snorted. “Are any of us truly safe any longer?”

The phoenix gave a sad trill before continuing with his message.

“As for returning to Britain, I have made a formal request at the Romanian Ministry for a portkey. As it happens, I believe I have found the information I need and had planned to return anyway, but the portkey will not be ready for at least twenty more hours, or just before dawn tomorrow. I cannot legally apparate without raising their international alarms, and I am afraid I do not have the influence here that I enjoy in Britain. If it becomes a life or death emergency, then I shall come and damn the consequences, but until then, I will be forced to wait it out. I am sorry, my boy. I will be home as soon as I am able.”

Severus sighed and banged his head against the wall. There was nothing for it but to monitor Harry and continue his experiments, if only to keep himself sane.

He stared at the empty cauldron, cleaned out of yet another failure, and wondered if such a course wasn’t actually detrimental to his mental health. Surely such continual frustration and shame would drive him to madness, if his fears for Harry did not manage it first.
Severus shook his head at his maudlin thoughts and hauled himself back to his feet. The cost to his well-being was irrelevant. Unless he found a cure, none of them would likely have any health to worry for anyway. Besides, he had sworn to find a cure and by gods he would keep that vow.

He took the phial of vampiric blood—the last sample he had left from Draco—and held it up to the light. Only three drops remained. Three more experiments. Three more chances before their hope ran out. With a shudder, he replaced the phial and stalked to his sitting room. He couldn’t concentrate when he was worrying over Harry, and he would be a fool to waste the last three samples when he would be prone to making mistakes.

“Damn. But if not that, then what am I to do with myself other than worry?”

Worry. Well, he could do that just as well from Privet Drive, couldn’t he? He knew the Death Eaters were likely to be watching the area that day, but as long as he stayed hidden and within the wards, no one would be the wiser.

Satisfied with his decision, Severus grabbed his portable lab—he had to have something to do even if he couldn’t work on his experiments—and slipped through the shadows to the apparition point.

‘Soon, Harry, you’ll be safe again and all this will be a bad memory. I promise.’

As he apparated onto Harry’s street, disillusioned and glamoured in case someone was watching, he prayed to every deity he knew of that he could keep his vow.

From what Severus could observe from his vantage point, Harry was locked away in his room and staying out of reach of his relatives. Good. The boy should be safe there, so long as he kept out of sight and out of the Dursleys’ way. Severus hoped so anyway.

Muffled sounds of weeping and moaning floated through the windows on occasion, but he couldn’t find it in himself to feel remorse for his … creative punishments. The foul wretches should be relieved they were Muggles and thus needn’t worry about facing the wrath of the wizarding world. What Severus had done was minor in comparison.

Briefly, he entertained the thought of reporting them to the Wizengamot, but no. To do so would put Harry’s suffering in the limelight, and Severus had learned enough about his young lover to know it would destroy Harry to have his troubled past pasted all over the Daily Prophet. No doubt Skeeter would twist the tale to her heart’s content, making Harry out to be a poor, pathetic victim too weak to defend himself—or possibly even worse, a young dark lord in training who had deserved such harsh punishments. Severus could see the headlines now.

‘How else would Muggles keep him in line, after all.’

No. He could not report these monsters no matter how he wished to. But he could take revenge. In private. The Vicissim Dolorem curse was sounding better and better by the moment. And appropriate, that they should feel the pain they had inflicted on Harry. Over and over, for the same amount of time he suffered under their watch. Really, it was poetic justice.

The sudden touch of a hand against his face brought Severus out of his plotting. He blinked to find himself with a lapful of Harry. Alarmed, he lifted his eyes to the boy’s room and was relieved to see the edge of Harry’s face, where he sat upon his bed as if lying back against someone he loved.
It was only their connection again. Harry was dreaming of his Prince.

Severus sighed and turned into the gentle touch.

Harry wasn’t sure how he was supposed to get through the day shut up in his room. He had done it before, yes, but he had become used to having a bit more freedom this summer and the yoke of captivity chafed like it never had before. Still, he didn’t fancy meeting his relatives in a tiff—even one-handed, Harry had no doubt Petunia could still pack a wallop—so he settled himself in for a long, anxious wait.

At least he needn’t do this again after today. Come dawn, he was a free man.

A free man who wouldn’t be returning here. Hmm. He had best be ready to go when Severus came for him.

With a nod, Harry went through his room, packing away everything he wanted to take with him from this place. He left out one outfit, his sleep clothing, his toiletries, and the Prince’s poetry book. And Severus’ food basket, of course. Everything else he cared about went into his school trunk. The fact that the process took the better part of an hour surprised Harry. Usually, he had his belongings packed in two or three minutes flat.

Then again, he had never been allowed to unpack them before this summer, had he?

With everything settled and packed, he turned to his beloved owl and opened the window for her. “Fly to Hogwarts, love, and wait for me there. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She pecked his ear affectionately and surged out the window with a hoot. He watched her go, then cleaned her cage and packed it as well.

With a grin, Harry settled onto his bed and opened his mind—his soul, maybe—to his beloved Prince. Harry found himself supported by warm, strong thighs and leaning against a flat, muscled abdomen. Severus’ lap? Well, that was new. He’d only ended up there the one time Severus had called him while he was working on his transfiguration homework. Maybe Severus had been thinking of him too. The thought sent a thrill through Harry.

Harry looked down and gasped when he realised that the phantom’s body had actually lifted him off of the bed. Merlin. This was no mere daydream, that was for sure. If Severus’ phantom form had enough substance and weight to actually support Harry’s body, then this was undoubtedly real. Harry would need to tell Severus in the morning, he supposed. For the moment, he just wanted to enjoy his Prince’s presence.

The sight of Severus’ powerful, black-clad thighs tempted him, but Harry resisted the urge to run his hands along the sides. It wouldn’t be sporting of him when Severus was trying to keep things mostly platonic until after Harry’s birthday.

He could wait. It was only a few more hours.

Instead, Harry turned so he sat astride his love and laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. He should have been resting against air, but the man’s firm torso somehow supported him just as his legs did, even though Severus was in another country. Harry sighed heavily. It was hard to be so close to his
Severus and yet so far away. He couldn’t talk to this phantom, and that was what he craved most. To talk to Severus, to tell him all the wonderful things he had discovered that summer—about Severus and about himself.

Again, Harry could wait. They could talk tomorrow. He had no doubt that Severus had missed his companionship too.

Harry traced his fingertips along Severus’ cheek, studying the planes of the man’s face and wondering how he had ever found him unattractive. Over the past few weeks, Severus had become lovely in Harry’s eyes, even if he realised the rest of the world would probably think him mad. Harry didn’t care. They thought him mad for every decision he made regardless.

Harry pressed a lingering, loving kiss to the man’s cheek, brushing his lips along the ridge. Severus’ arms came up around Harry’s waist and held him close, and Harry sighed against Severus’ temple.

“I love you, Severus,” Harry whispered.

With soft, tender touches, he traced over every inch of Severus’ face, taking the time to acquaint himself with every curve and dip, sharp lines and soft skin. Severus tilted his head towards Harry’s touch and closed his eyes, clearly enjoying the attention. Harry liked it too. Especially when Severus’ hand traced Harry’s cheeks, brushed against his temples, slipped through his hair.

Harry had never felt such a welling of pure love before. Perhaps he had been a bit disappointed that Severus would not let them kiss yet, especially since he already knew how wonderful the man’s lips felt against his own, but Merlin, this was almost more powerful, this soft, tender exploration of each other, not passionate, but still brilliant in its intensity. With each tentative stroke of Severus’ fingertips, each soft brush of his lips against Harry’s skin, gods—Harry thought he might melt. Before long, he was trembling. He longed to lie down with his Prince, but it appeared Severus was in a place where that was impossible, so the older man simply held Harry across his lap, cradling him in strong arms while his fingers burned new paths in Harry’s neural pathways.

When Severus leaned down, and it seemed the man’s desire for him might overcome his honour, Harry buried his face in Severus’ neck and held his Prince tight. Severus trembled against him for a long, long time, but eventually, he relaxed in Harry’s arms, content just to hold him.

“It’s only one more day, love,” Harry murmured. “Just a few more hours, and this wait will be over. We can do that. We can be strong.”

Harry felt Severus nod against him, heard a whispered, “Thank you,” in his ear, and all was silent, peaceful.

Until Severus tensed under Harry and vanished, leaving the young man to flop helplessly against his bed.

“Oomph!” Harry rubbed his bum where it had crashed against the hard mattress. “A little warning next time, Sev,” he muttered, and tugged out the Prince’s book instead.

A trickle of worry entered his mind. Harry wished he could check up on his Prince, but if something had happened to startle him out of his connection with Harry, Severus probably needed his wits about him. Harry was a distraction and he didn’t want to risk getting Severus hurt or killed just for a hug. The man was simply in too much danger for Harry to monopolise his time.

With a sigh, Harry opened the Prince’s poetry book and let its words carry him away.
The sound of a twig cracking nearby snapped Severus out of his ‘daydreams’ with a vengeance. Something—or someone—was too close. Logically, he knew no one but a select few among the Order and Harry could cross the blood wards, and even if they could, Severus was hidden behind wards of his own, but some nervous part of his brain warned him to be on guard.

He hoped Harry wouldn’t try to distract him again—for now, he needed to assess the threat. To his relief, Harry did not appear. Severus carefully cast his spell to unobtrusively peek into Harry’s bedroom and nodded to himself when he saw the young man reading.

“Thank you, Harry.”

To his surprise, an answering thought came back. “Severus? Are you okay?”

Severus blinked. He had never been telepathic, but perhaps Harry was? Severus would have thought training a natural telepath in Occlumency would have been easier, but then again, he had never met one before. Perhaps it was easier for a telepath to open his mind rather than close it.

Still, there was one way to test it.

“Harry? Yes, love, I am safe, but there is something about. I must keep watch.”

As a natural telepath when Severus was not, Harry might have been able to hear one or two words of that message. Telepaths could only carry mental conversations with other telepaths. If Harry heard the entirety, then Severus would have to discard the theory of telepathy and hope Albus returned with other answers.

Severus winced at the sound of a soft, loving whisper against his mind. “Thank Merlin. I’ll stay out of your hair then. Let me know if anything h—”

Harry’s mental voice faded out like a badly-tuned radio. It seemed whatever strange connection existed between them had been stretched to the limit, but Severus had his answer.

It wasn’t telepathy.

Deeply unsettled and with the creeping, prickling sensation that he was being watched, Severus hunkered down inside his wards and watched back.

Though Severus hadn’t been able to answer Harry, the young man sensed Severus’ fear. He didn’t know what was going on, but thought it prudent not to bother his love again and let him concentrate on whatever had his defences up. Whatever had troubled Severus had brought back that feeling of wrongness Harry had woken with, and the young man had trouble focusing on his book with that creepy, slimy feeling in his gut.

Eventually, he pushed it aside and paced, unable to concentrate on anything so long as he was worried for Severus. So the hours passed in lonely, agonising increments, each one seeming to last years, until around eight o’clock when a soft hand caught Harry’s face.
"Harry, it’s all right. Please sit down and eat something."

Harry blinked, wondering how Severus knew he hadn’t eaten yet, but brushed it aside as yet another aspect of their strange connection.

“All right. I’m sorry. I’m just scared for you.”

“I am safe. Please take ca—”

Severus faded out, much like last time. Maybe they needed to practise talking to each other to strengthen the bond, but for the moment, Severus was right. Harry needed to eat.  

With a sigh, Harry grabbed his basket and sat at his desk. He wasn’t particularly hungry, not with fear turning his stomach sour, but if Severus could feel his empty stomach and worry, then Harry was distracting the man without trying to.

Gamely, he tried to quiet his anxiety, at least long enough to eat a cold ham and cheese sandwich. When he had finished, his stomach protested the food, but Harry managed to keep it down. He lay on his belly to pressure it into submission and forced himself to read the Prince’s poetry.

Before long, the stress of his day and his Prince’s words eased him into sleep.

Severus sighed, relieved as Harry slipped into dreams and that constant nagging feeling of fear faded to more manageable levels. He brought out what research he’d been able to take with him to Privet Drive and read, his ears open to catch the slightest sound. A crackling leaf nearby snapped his attention back to his surroundings, but it was only a tabby cat.

‘Minerva?’

He peered at the cat while it washed its face, searching for an identifying sign, but she lacked Minerva’s trademark spectacle-shaped markings or any other mark, the sign of an Animagus. Just a normal cat then. The little creature washed itself and soon pranced away, but Severus stared after it for a long while, unsure of why the presence of the beast bothered him. With a shake of his head, he returned to his research.

His book was fascinating. New possibilities sprung forth, challenging his hypotheses and what he thought he knew of neurology. The brain worked through an array of complex, delicate neurons and specialised cells, but the brain stem was ordered a little differently. It was more primitive, more … feral.

Severus froze, Feral? Oh Merlin. That was it! He had disregarded the brain stem as his original research indicated a change in the prefrontal cortex, but nothing had come of altering it and he had tried everything. If he was aiming his experimentation at the wrong source, then of course nothing would work. Perhaps it was time to start his research from a new angle.

Hmm. Borage had been the turning point of his research into the delayed-onset potion. It might also prove to be the key ingredient to a cure. Severus thanked Harry a thousand times over for his help and decided to try a new experiment using the herb as soon as he returned to his proper lab … but Merlin, he only had enough altered vampiric blood left for three tests.
It wasn’t enough. Even if aiming his potion at the brain stem was the right path—and he still wasn’t positive it would work—Severus would never find the right combination of ingredients and preparation with only three tests to work with.

If he could reproduce the potion and administer it to his lab rats, perhaps he could get an idea of a working cure, but there was no guarantee it would then work on an affected human without poisoning them. No, he needed more human samples. More of Draco’s blood, or all his work would be for naught.

And he only knew of one place to get it.

He would have to sneak into the potions lab at the Riddle hideout and hope he could gather a fresh sample without alerting anyone. It was the only way t—

As if on cue, fire shot up his left arm and paralysed Severus with terror. Dear gods, did the Dark Lord know?

No, he wasn’t anywhere near the Dark Lord. He couldn’t have learned of Severus’ plan when he had only thought of it himself a moment ago. It was coincidence. Had to be.

Working through the pain, Severus summoned his doe. “Albus, I know you’re worried about the legalities, but I will definitely need you to return now. I have just been Summoned. If you cannot come yourself, please alert the Weasleys. Harry’s only protection from his relatives will fade any moment now. They are sleeping now, but come morning … I fear for him if there is no one about to take him out of this horrible place. Particularly since I had little choice but to curse them this morning. Harshly. They will suffer no permanent damage, but neither will they be happy to see Harry. Without his protection ... just hurry, Albus. Please.”

Severus sent the doe on her way and apparated straight to Hogsmeade. He flew back to the castle and raced through the corridors as fast as his legs would carry him. Merlin, he should have stayed at the castle. It would have saved him so much time, but there was no help for it now.

Once he had gathered his emergency portkey and Death Eater garb, he pocketed several empty phials. If he apparated outside the potions lab instead of the throne room, perhaps he might still gather the samples he needed—enough to finish his research at least. A Cruciatu or two for arriving late was worth the information, assuming he could slip in and out of the potions lab without being caught.

Severus dressed in his gear, disillusioned himself, and bolted to the Entrance Hall. Faster! He had to hurry. Even running flat out, he would not have much time.

As soon as he cleared the castle walls, he leapt into the air and used his flight to increase his speed. It would cost him some of his magic, but even enduring the full brunt of a Cruciatu without his shielding would be worth it, if he could only reach those samples in time.

As soon as his feet touched ground in Hogsmeade, he apparated.

Severus landed outside the potions lab, as he had planned, and managed not to splinch himself despite his rushed exit. Thank Merlin for small miracles.

He discreetly checked for observers through a combination of spells and his eyes, and seeing no one, ducked quickly into the lab. After checking once more for human presences and finding none, he dashed to the shelf of new potions he had seen a few weeks ago.

Damn. Someone had moved them, and he wasn’t fool enough to attempt a Summoning spell. Who
knew what kind of wards Riddle would have on the phials. He would have to find them the old-fashioned way, which would cost him more time. Already, his arm felt as though someone had cut it off. Shite, he had to hurry or the pain would soon disable him.

He glanced around in search of that dark red colour he remembered from the last time he had been here and let out a sigh of relief when he saw a wall of it tucked in the back corner. There. It had to be there.

Darting among shelves and out of sight, Severus ignored the pain in his arm and rushed to the potions. A quick visual scan of the phials confirmed it as his quarry.

‘Malfoy Vamp. Blood.’

Severus’ breath came out in a rush. Oh, thank Merlin! There it was, a whole wall of the stuff. He shuddered to think of the damage Riddle could wreak with that much vampiric blood and debated on destroying it all, but another rush of pain up his arm reminded him that he was on a tight schedule and destroying the blood would definitely reveal his true loyalties. With a cringe, he disabled the wards as quickly and carefully as possible and swept three phials into his pocket.

Severus was ready to turn away when he noticed the labels on the phials beside Draco’s blood. ‘One-Day Vampirism Potion,’ ‘Anti-Truth,’ and beside that, ‘Vamp. Virus Exp. 3.’

He drew his hand back, disgust and horror sending shudders down his spine. A vampiric virus? Dear gods, if Riddle worked that out, they were all as good as dead.

Quickly, Severus filled three phials each with the new potions. A quick charm labelled the bottles automatically, and he used another to seal that pocket, another to make the phials unbreakable, and a third to adhere the pocket containing them to his skin. He was attempting a shield charm over the pocket when a hand settled on his shoulder and made him jump.

“My, my, Severus,” said a cold, drawling voice. “What do we have here?”

Malfoy. Merlin help him, Severus had been caught.

He schooled all signs of terror and guilt from his expression and turned to glare at Lucius. “Remove your hand from my person before I remove it for you.”

Malfoy let his hand drop and gave him a cocky smirk. “I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist the siren call of my work.”

Severus’ heart stilled. “Your work? You invented these? How? You haven’t a creative bone in your body.”

Malfoy’s smirk twisted into a snarl. “Don’t I?” He gave a mirthless laugh. “Well, perhaps that was true before.”

Malfoy’s words had an odd kind of reverence to them, as if he was referring to some kind of profound experience and not simply time and age as Severus had originally thought. Perhaps he could get an idea of what had happened if he played his cards right.

“Before … what exactly?”

Malfoy’s smile was introspective, filled with awe, and twisted with far more insanity than Severus had ever seen in the man’s silvery eyes. “Before I learned to think, Severus,” he said in a hushed, excited tone, as if he were imparting the wisdom of the ages. “Before the minds imparted their
wisdom upon me and made me see like I have never seen before. I have been reborn, and it is beautiful."

He laughed, this time with a manic edge. Alarmed, Severus would have stepped away but for the wall of warded phials behind him. He didn’t like to think of what those wards would do to him if he simply stepped into them without disarming them again first.

“You’re jealous, aren’t you? Oh, you hide it well, Severus, but I see that glint in your eye. You want to know my secrets. Ah-ah-ah, a master never tells.”

Jealous? Severus just wanted to get away from this madman as fast as possible. Still, he made sure to alter his expression a bit, show a little envy since that was what Malfoy wanted to see.

Malfoy smirked in triumph. “Oh, so jealous even a master of Occlumency cannot hide it. I am flattered!” He chuckled. “But not flattered enough to reveal where to find such mysterious knowledge. No, I am afraid a man of your … calibre could do without that kind of alteration.”

Severus’ eyes narrowed. Malfoy was toying with him, no doubt. Teasing him. He had assumed Severus would want whatever had given him a creative edge—and driven him mad, no doubt—and was dangling it in front of him like the carrot before the racehorse. Mysterious … that was a hint. Thinking … minds … reborn … alteration. The words triggered something in his mind, something indistinct, but he had no time to consider it in more detail now. He was already late for his summons and Malfoy was making it worse.

“Yes, well, if you’ll excuse me, I must report to our lord.”

“Oh, don’t let me hold you back.” Malfoy smirked wider and stepped out of the way.

Before Severus had taken two steps towards the door, a petrifying spell hit him in the back. He crashed to the ground, knocking a table full of ingredients onto him. Thankfully, none appeared to be corrosive or otherwise dangerous, but it would not take long for that to change when they all mixed.

Severus’ heart thundered in his ears. Fuck! What the hell was Malfoy on about? Gods, Severus hoped the man was just posturing and hadn’t discovered his loyalties. Petrified like this, Severus couldn’t reach his portkey, nor could he defend himself. He was trapped.

Malfoy grabbed Severus’ hair and jerked his head up to look into the madman’s eyes. “Did you think I wouldn’t know, Severus? You were with the Potter boy today to protect him.” He laughed, a sickly sound that terrified Severus to the depths of his soul. “I suppose he is rather decorative, but still—a student, Severus! I am surprised at you.”

Severus’ eyes widened in shock despite the petrifying spell. How on earth could Malfoy have known he was involved with Harry or even that he had come to protect him? He was behind the blood wards the entire time and protected by personal wards besides that. Malfoy had to be bluffing. And yet, some part of Severus knew the madman was not. But how? How could Malfoy have known?

Malfoy smirked. “No doubt you are wondering how?”

Severus glared. Of course he was, the bloody idiot.

He gave Severus a twisted smile. “Strange thing about those blood wards you had over Potter.”

Severus’ breath hitched. Fuck, the wards! He should have known they were down the second that
stray cat leapt onto the property—there was an anti-animal ward on Privet Drive, intended to keep Animagi out as well as possessed beasts. Oh gods. Harry was in danger. Tears stung his eyes and he blinked fast to hide them.

Malfoy gave a dark laugh. “Oh yes, they’re down. You see, they only worked so long as those vile Muggles he lived with accepted him. Something must have changed today. Perhaps someone threatened them a bit too much, hmm?”

Severus’ stomach jolted, and he barely controlled a wince. Shite. This was his fault. He should have been more careful. He should have just stayed in the house with the boy rather than damaging his family, no matter how temporary the curses were. Now not only had he apparently revealed himself as a spy, but Harry was completely unprotected. It appeared that the Death Eaters wanted to come after their own traitor first, but once they finished with Severus, they would go after Harry. And there was nothing Severus could do to stop them.

He prayed his bond to Harry, whatever it was, would not be affected by the Occlumentic shields he was employing against Malfoy. “Harry! Oh, love. Get up and run! The wards are down and I have been captured! Get to Missus Figg’s and go t—”

“Are you sad, Severus?” Malfoy taunted him with a vicious laugh and cut off his chain of thought. “Good. For too long, I have longed to pluck the thorn from my side that is Severus Snape, and now you have made it all too easy.”

He leered, and Severus could not help but recoil from the ghoulish expression. Gods, Lucius was utterly unhinged.

“Our brilliance relegated me to the shadows once, but no longer. Our lord will be pleased with me now that I have caught the traitor in our midst.” Malfoy grinned and leaned in as if to whisper to him, slipping behind Severus’ head to bring him close. “I do hope you enjoyed looking at those phials, old friend. A look will be all you get. Those wards are keyed to your magical signature, you know. They would have killed you if you had tried to break them. Be thankful I caught you in time.”

Severus kept his confusion from his face by sheer force of will. The wards were keyed to his magic? But he had broken them, hadn’t he? Yes, the phials were still heavy and whole in his pocket despite falling atop them when Malfoy petrified him.

Either Malfoy was madder than Severus thought or the wards had failed. The idea that wizards as powerful as Malfoy or the Dark Lord could have set faulty wards was ludicrous, but it was even more ludicrous that Severus’ magical signature would have been altered enough to slip past wards keyed to him. Magical signatures never changed unless the wizard made a conscious effort to mask theirs, and Severus hadn’t thought to use that kind of protection. Never mind that it took time he didn’t have.

But if all that was true, then how was he not dead?

A question to consider if he survived the night, to be sure. For the moment, he was simply relieved that Malfoy didn’t know of the potions in his pocket. If Severus could find a way to escape alive, at least he might retain the phials.

Unless they stripped him, of course. Severus could not suppress a shudder at the thought. He had hoped to save his innocence—or what remained of it—for Harry.

He thanked his lucky stars that few Death Eaters had interest in punishing prisoners sexually. Even better, most liked to see their victims struggle. If they would only remove the petrifying spell—or if
Severus could find the strength to throw it off—he might yet reach his portkey in time enough to save his wretched hide. And his research.

While Malfoy continued to ramble, Severus worked at freeing himself.

With a sudden scoff, Malfoy let Severus’ head drop. His skull banged into the stone and Severus saw stars for a moment.

“How disappointing, my dear old friend, that you would ally yourself with Mudbloods and fools when you might have been great.” Lucius stood and sneered at the still-petrified man. “Ah, well. More glory for me, I suppose. Enjoy your nap.”

‘Nap?’

The next instant, the crash of a heavy cane against Severus’ skull answered his question.

‘I am officially fucked,’ was his last thought as darkness and pain descended on his mind.

Back at Privet Drive, Harry had woken with a jolt. The strange feeling of wrongness hadn’t left him—if anything, it had become more intense—but his excitement for his coming birthday drowned out his fears. 11:58. He was two minutes away from freedom, and by gods, he couldn’t wait. At midnight, he would be of age. He would be able to use magic with no restraints—well, within reason—and he would be going home with Severus at dawn.

Oh Merlin, tomorrow Harry would be alone with his Prince at last, and as an adult. He would get to explore Severus’ body without fear of rejection, to feel those strong hands on his skin, kiss that sensual mouth—gods! Harry shivered just thinking about it.

Midnight struck, and Harry grinned as he Summoned his wand. It glowed for a moment, shone bright, and then with a clicking sound, the light vanished.

Yes! The trace was gone! He was officially an adult. About bloody time, too—Harry hadn’t been a child in years.

With a grin, he cast a levitation charm on his pillow just for the fun of it. When nothing happened, he grinned wider and leapt into bed. Severus couldn’t deny him a kiss now. He was finally eighteen and more than ready to show his lover how excited he was for the coming day. Harry lay down in nothing but sleep pants—tented, of course—and focused his energy on his Severus.

“Come to me, love.”

The moment their souls connected, Harry knew something was off. Severus’ presence felt … empty. Broken, somehow. Terrified, Harry opened his eyes and his desire flagged and limped away for the second time that day.

Severus lay beside him, his arms stretched high and rigid above his head, his clothes torn, and his body covered in welts and blood.

“Oh gods, no! Sev!”

Harry leapt forwards and laid his ear against the man’s chest, sick with the fear that he might not hear
anything this time. A second felt like an eternity as he listened … listened … and then a soft th-
thump made him sob with relief.

“Oh, Sev. Love, what’s happened?” He lay beside the man and stroked Severus’ cheek, easing him
onto his back so his head was supported. “Come on, Severus. Wake up for me.”

Even as Harry watched, another welt appeared on Severus’ chest, causing his love to jerk
spasmodically. Still, Severus did not wake. Tears blurred Harry’s vision and, petrified Severus would
die before he could escape, he shook the man gently.

“Sev. Severus, come on. You’ve got to wake up so you can get out of there.”

Damn it all, it would be much easier to wake the man up if he could hear Harry. But no. Severus had
only reacted to Harry’s words on a few emotional occasions, and Harry didn’t dare scream now.
Wait—hadn’t he read about a sort of silencing charm in the Prince’s book recently? Muffliato? Yes.
With that in place, Harry could shout as much as he needed to.

Harry cast the charm wordlessly so his sniffles wouldn’t break the spell. As soon as the charm settled
in the walls—it buzzed and tickled his ears—he gripped Severus’ face and screamed at the top of his
lungs.

“Wake up, Severus!”

The man jolted, but didn’t wake. Harry tried again and again, until his voice was hoarse, but it
seemed Severus had a head injury and couldn’t stay conscious long enough to react.

Fuck! What was Harry supposed to do? He had no idea how to send a message with his Patronus,
Hedwig would never make it to the Order in time, and Harry didn’t dare scream now.
Wait—hadn’t he read about a sort of silencing charm in the Prince’s book recently? Muffliato? Yes.
With that in place, Harry could shout as much as he needed to.

Call? Wait, the floo! He could run to Arabella’s and—another welt appeared on Severus’ stomach,
spraying blood into the air, and this time Harry heard the thwack. Were they whipping the man while
he was unconscious? Merlin, what monsters.

Shite, Harry had to get to the floo, but he didn’t want to leave his Prince like this. He could dismiss
him and call him back once he’d finished with the floo call, but what if Harry’s presence was the
only thing keeping Severus alive? What if Severus woke up and cried out for him?

No. If Harry was going to use the floo, Severus was coming with him—but how? Maybe if he tried a
featherlight charm, he could carry Severus? It was the best idea he had. The only idea, really.

With a broken sob, he cupped Severus’ face and kissed his forehead. “Hold on, baby. I’m going to
get help.”

Sniffling quietly, Harry cast a featherlight charm on his lover and lifted the Prince into his arms,
rolling the man’s shoulders forward so his stiff arms would drop onto his chest.

Only they wouldn’t move from that strained, rigid position above Severus’ head. Harry grunted and
laid Severus on the bed again, attempting to pull his arms down manually, but they remained
stubbornly in place.
Shite. The Death Eaters must have him bound. And with the man’s hands stuck over his head, Harry had no hope of being able to manoeuver him through the doors, not if he planned to carry him bridal style. No, he would have to change the plan.

With a sniffle and a whispered apology, Harry heaved the man up over his shoulders so Severus’ hips were at the level of Harry’s head, his waist bent down Harry’s back and his palms brushing the back of the young man’s knees. It wasn’t the most graceful position, but with Severus being well over six feet tall, it was the only way Harry could carry him without ramming the already injured man into walls. Harry had no idea if it would affect the true Severus if he accidentally hurt the man’s image, but he didn’t want to find out.

Like this, Harry had no choice but to grip the man’s arse and thighs if he wanted to keep from dropping him. He hoped Severus could forgive him the indignity later, once he was out of danger.

“I’m so sorry, love,” Harry murmured. “I’ll hurry. Hold on.”

He Summoned his cloak and draped it over them both, though the process was awkward and challenging with Severus on his shoulder. Once they were hidden as best as he could manage, Harry dashed away towards Arabella’s, thankfully without seeing his relatives. The less he saw of them, the better.

As soon as he landed on the stoop, Harry banged on the door and bashed in the doorbell. “Missus Figg! Please, please be home. It’s an emergency!”

The two minutes it took Missus Figg to reach the door seemed to last forever. The door creaked open and Arabella peeked out, curlers in her hair and dressed in a fluffy pink bathrobe and fuzzy cat slippers. She frowned and looked around her stoop, confused.

“Right here!” Harry pushed his hood back enough to reveal his face. “Missus Figg, I need your floo! Se—Snape’s been discovered as a spy! I … er, I saw it. Vision.” He rubbed his scar for good measure, though that meant he had to grip Severus’ arse tighter to keep him from falling down his shoulder.

Arabella gasped and covered her mouth. “Good heavens! Hurry to the floo, dear.” She stepped back and motioned Harry into the house.

“Thank you!”

With hardly a check, Harry dashed to the floo, leaping over a hapless Mister Tibbles, and skidded to a halt in front of the fireplace. He ripped off his cloak and laid Severus’ unconscious form at his feet.

“It’ll be okay, Sev,” he whispered. “Just hold on.”

Harry dared not cast a fire charm with the way his hands were shaking, so he Summoned firewood, kindling, and Arabella’s lighter and struggled to turn on the latter.

“Come on, come on! Why isn’t this working?”

The elderly lady took the lighter from him and pressed a button on the bottom. “You have to turn off the safety first, dear. Here you are.”

She poked the lit flame around in the kindling, and in a moment, had a small fire started. Harry urged her to step back and once she was clear of the flames, he added streams of raw magic to boost the growing fire. In another moment, the hearth was blazing with heat.
Even so, it had all taken far too long.

He couldn’t bear the fear any longer and laid a hand on Severus’ chest, feeling his love’s heartbeat through trembling fingers as Arabella threw in a pinch of floo powder.

“You make the call, Harry,” Arabella said. “My knees aren’t what they used to be.”

“Right.” Harry yelled into the flames. “Albus Dumbledore’s office, Hogwarts!”

He poked his head into the green fire and screamed for the man to come to the hearth, but no one answered.

Tears streaked down his face. “Oh gods. What do we do? Who do we call?”

Arabella patted his shoulder. “Try Minerva, dear. She should be in the castle, but call her quarters, not her office. She’ll be in bed this time of night.”

“Right! Professor McGonagall. I should’ve thought of that.” With a shaky sob, Harry wiped his face and tossed in another pinch of floo powder. “Minerva McGonagall’s private quarters, Hogwarts!”

Harry stuck his head in the green fire and frowned at all the tartan furnishings and cat toys stashed in McGonagall’s parlour. He’d be sure to tease her about that later, but right now, all he wanted was to see her come running to help.

“Professor! Professor McGonagall! Please, please come. Hurry!”

He heard a muffled snort from beyond a door somewhere, then to his relief, McGonagall appeared in a tartan dressing gown with her hair in a nightcap. She dashed to the floo, but reeled back when she saw who was calling her.

“Harry? Sweet Circe, what are you doing in my floo?”

“Sorry, Professor. I tried Professor Dumbledore first but—oh, gods. It’s Professor Snape! He’s been discovered and he’s being tortured to death. Please, we’ve got to help.”

Tears slid down his face despite his best efforts, and McGonagall paled. “Dear Merlin. It must be bad for you to weep. You’re sure it’s a true vision and not a trick?”

“Why would Riddle trick me by showing me Professor Snape in pain? He thinks we hate each other, remember?”

Her lips pursed. “He might choose to, if Severus has truly been discovered. He might have already discovered Severus’ secrets.”

“Professor, please. I’m sure it’s real this time. We … I’ve another way to verify, and I’ve already checked. He’s definitely in trouble.”

She winced and sank to her knees. “Then I will contact the Order, Harry, but even so, you must understand that there is little we can do. We don’t know where the Riddle house is, and we don’t have the forces to charge it regardless. I … we may not be able to save him.”

Harry’s face twisted in grief. “No! You can’t just give up on him! You have to try! Or so help me, I’ll go find him myself!”

McGonagall’s eyes flashed. “Mister Potter! Do not threaten me. You will march yourself right back to your aunt’s home and stay there until further notice, do you understand?”
He sobbed and covered his mouth. “Then help him! Please. I can’t lose anyone else.”

The anger melted from her expression, replaced with sympathy. “I will try, Harry. That is all I can do.”

She flicked her wand, and a silver tabby appeared at her feet.

“Oh my,” said Arabella. “You do have such a lovely Patronus, Minerva.”

McGonagall gave the elderly woman a wan smile. “Thank you.” She lowered her head to speak to the cat. “Go. Tell Kingsley that the blackbird is in hand and to send in the hounds. Hurry.”

The cat nodded and vanished in a puff of silver mist.

McGonagall stood and brushed off her dressing gown. “That is all I can do besides gather the Order members and form a search party, which I will do as soon as you are out of the floo and back home, Mister Potter. I will not have you risking your life to save him. Off with you now.”

“All right, all right. I’m going.” He wiped his eyes again. “Just please, don’t give up on him.”

McGonagall’s eyes filled with tears. “Do recall that he is my friend too, Harry. I will never abandon him, but you must face that we are human and do have limits, as much as I wish we didn’t. I cannot risk the entire Order, Harry. Not even for one I care for.”

He wanted to challenge her, to ask her if she would risk them if she loved him like Harry did, but even in his terror, he understood it would be more than his life was worth to reveal that. If Severus survived, he would be in enough trouble without adding an illicit affair with an underage student to his record—even if they hadn’t done anything and Harry was technically an adult now. Professor McGonagall would not see it that way, and neither would the Ministry or the press, nor anyone else who could make Severus’ life miserable. They would tear Harry and Severus apart, and Harry could not bear to lose him. Not after everything.

“Fine,” he snapped. “I’m going, but only so you can hurry and get the Order together.”

She nodded. “We will do our best, Harry. You have my word.”

“Yeah.”

Somehow, McGonagall’s word didn’t fill him with confidence. Her best. Well, it wasn’t good enough when her best was to make a useless search party and knock around Britain hoping to get lucky. No, if Severus was going to escape, he would have to do it on his own. The Order sure as hell wouldn’t be any help.

Harry didn’t know why he was surprised. The adults he was supposed to depend on had always let him down. Why shouldn’t they let Severus down, too?

“I’m going home.”

Harry heaved Severus back onto his shoulders, not caring how it looked, and covered them with the invisibility cloak again.

“I’ll listen for a message about him, Harry,” said Arabella. “I’m sorry I can’t do more.”

Harry pulled down his hood long enough to give her a thin smile, then turned away and vanished into the night.
Blood and Vengeance

Chapter Summary

Warnings: Child abuse, torture, blood, vampirism. Summary: Riddle tries to shatter Severus' mind, but when Harry's aunt goes mad and tries to kill him, Harry finally remembers a way to save them both. But Severus is not the same, will never be the same again, and the broken man's self-loathing causes him to make a mistake he will regret forever, unless someone with better sense intervenes.

CHAPTER 18
BLOOD AND VENGEANCE

The hours passed in misery and terror for Harry. He watched over Severus all night, caring for his shadow as best as he could. He had conjured a feather tick to rest Severus on—it was lumpy and one corner had a tear, but it was good enough for his purposes.

Gods, he hated waiting like this. If only Harry knew where Severus was, he would have rushed after him in a second, Voldemort or no Voldemort, but he had no idea where to start. By the time Harry found Severus—if he found him—he might already be dead. The best Harry could do was to hold the man’s phantom and care for him, hoping it gave him strength to hold on until a solution came. Maybe when Severus woke up, he could communicate to Harry where he was being held prisoner, but until then, Harry had no other options.

Merlin, he wished he knew how to make Severus wake up. This was unbearable. Harry cared for the man’s wounds as best as he could, but it did little good. Harry couldn’t heal the man lest it incite the Death Eaters to worse violence. All he could do was wash Severus’ broken body and wipe the blood, tears, and bile from his face, over and over as new wounds appeared. He had never felt so helpless in his life.

While Harry cared for Severus, he called out to the man in his spirit all night, until he felt he might die from sheer exhaustion. Still, he did not give up. Severus’ only hope was to regain consciousness and tell Harry where he was.

The dawn brought change, both to Severus and Harry. At seven precisely, his aunt started beating on Harry’s door, screaming that it was all his fault, demanding that he get out of her house and never show his face there again. Harry shuddered and cast powerful locking and warding charms at the door, determined to focus on Severus, but with his attention so divided and his magic worn, he wasn’t sure how long they would hold.

When he returned to his Prince, the sight of tearful black eyes looking into his own ripped a gasp from Harry’s throat.

“Severus! Oh gods, you’re awake!”

Petunia screeched, “Get out of my house, you twisted abomination!”

Harry ignored her and stroked Severus’ hair, careless of the blood and dirt matting it. “Baby, listen, get your portkey and run! I’ll apparate to Hogwarts as soon as you’re safe and come help you.”
“Freak, monster, evil little shite. It’s all your fault. Get out of my house and take your freaky stuff with you!”

Harry frowned as Severus’ eyes widened with terror and his cheeks were pinched, as if someone had grabbed his face.

“Sev? Sev! Sweetheart, tell me where you are! The Order is—fuck, what’s happening?”

Severus was struggling against someone, but whoever it was managed to force his lips apart anyway.

“Oh gods. What are they doing to you, love?”

Harry watched, horrified, as something red splashed onto Severus’ tongue, and the man fell into convulsions. Poison? Harry flung himself on his love and wept, holding him tight.

“Severus! Don’t leave me!”

Severus woke to crushing pain and the feel of gentle fingertips on his cheek. Bright green eyes stared into his own, widening with shock, and joy filled them. Had he escaped somehow? Had Harry pulled off another hare-brained scheme and rescued him? Severus wanted to be furious, but he could only feel relief at the sight of those beautiful, loving eyes.

“Harry,” he whispered.

Jeering laughter brought him back to the present. No, he wasn’t with Harry—not in truth. It was another projection. Even now, Harry was screaming at him. Severus still couldn’t hear the words, but he could lip-read enough to get the gist.

“Get your portkey … I’ll apparate … help—”

Someone kicked him in the side—going through Harry, who did not react—and Severus groaned at the impact. He was sure he had at least three broken ribs. Maybe more. He was beginning to have trouble breathing.

A cold, sibilant voice broke through his pain. “Dear Sssoeverus, how disssappointing that you have betrayed me. We could have done ssuch great thingss together.” Riddle clucked his tongue disapprovingly and reached into his robes. “But do not lossse hope. We ssshall sssstill do thossse thingss I mentioned, though it will cosssst me a brilliant mind. Pity.”

“You no longer need his brilliance, my lord,” said Malfoy from his left. The man was gloating.

Severus blinked and tried to get a bearing on his condition. His hands were still bound, though no longer petrified. It made little difference, however, as his wrists were broken and he could not reach his bracelet. He did not see any other Death Eaters, so it appeared whatever Riddle had planned for him was a private party he did not want the others privy to just yet.

Riddle gave Severus a ghastly smile and held a dark red phial out, near enough for even the pain-dazed, nauseated Severus to see.

‘Malfoy Vamp. Blood.’
Severus’ heart plunged into the icy abyss. Oh gods. Riddle was going to turn him feral! Tears blurring his vision, he turned his head and struggled to escape, but a paralysing spell below the neck stopped him cold. No! He couldn’t—gods, would he be used to kill Harry? The one man he had ever loved?

He could not prevent his breathless sob.

“No.”

“Oh yes,” said Riddle with a vicious smile. “You see what I will do. I always loved that I never needed to explain anything to you, Severus. Well, now there shall be no point. You will be mine, whether you wish it or not. Lucius, ready him.”

“Yes, my lord,” Malfoy purred.

As Riddle conjured an eyedropper and sucked up some of the vile substance, Malfoy grabbed Severus’ face and tried to pry his mouth open. No! Severus yanked his head to the side and clamped his mouth shut. To his despair, Riddle forced his head to turn back up and used his magic to hold Severus’ mouth open.

“It is so much easier when they come willingly,” Riddle said with a sigh, “but no matter. They will all come in the end.” He dangled the dropper over Severus’ open mouth even as Severus struggled to combat the powerful magic holding him in place.

“Do you remember the rhyme, my friend?” Riddle gave him a dark smile. “No? Well, I shall remind you.”

Severus knew it quite well. The bastard knew that.

“One drop, and sight becomes a friend.”

Riddle let one drop fall onto Severus’ tongue. Fire racked his body, focusing in his eyes. Severus screamed and pressed his lids shut, trying to block out the pain, but it was no good. He wanted to claw at his lids, rip out his eyes, anything to stop the horrible burning pain, but he couldn’t move.

Finally, the pain stopped and Severus opened tearful, aching eyes to a strange new world. Shadows had more substance than they had ever possessed, and everything—even Harry—seemed more solid, more real. His body glowed with some sort of ethereal light Severus had never seen before.

Fuck. It was aura-vision. The first grade of vampirism. Whether he swallowed or not, just the taste of vampiric blood was enough to alter him. With a cry of despair, Severus gave himself up for lost.

“Two, and thy craving begins,” Riddle intoned, and let another drop fall onto Severus’ tongue.

Dear Merlin, what was happening to Severus? Every time that accursed red drop appeared in his mouth, the man screamed and arched with terrible pain. His eyes were bleeding, his gums were red and swelling, his skin had turned ice-white, and now a steady drizzle of blood had started from his nose.

Gods, what were they giving him, and how in the hell was Harry supposed to stop it?
“Freak! Foul abomination! I will get through this door if I must break it down!”

Petunia crashed into the door, trying to break it open. Severus screamed with agony again at the same time, causing Harry’s magic to falter and the wards to weaken, though he was barely conscious of the fact with Severus in such agony. He sobbed and grabbed up his mate.

“Baby, please, please hold on.”

“Don’t you speak of my Dudders like that!”

At the volume of her voice, Harry whirled around. Oh Merlin, Petunia had broken through. His heart thundered and his stomach turned to lead. Gods, this day kept getting worse and worse.

She gave a manic laugh and grabbed Harry’s arm. “Where’s your guardian bracelet, boy? Hmm? Your professor can’t save you now!”

Harry tried to squirm away, tried to return to Severus, but the man’s image had faded. “No! Let go of me! I have to help him.”

“Don’t you touch my Dudders!” The woman screamed and raked her claws down Harry’s face, leaving him bleeding and raw.

“Fuck off!” He cast a shield and backed away. “I don’t want your bloody Dudders! I have a lover, and it’s not your fat, idiot, bully of a son!”

“Don’t you talk of my baby like that! He’s perfect, and you—you’re an abomination! I’ll kill you this time, I really will!”

She reached for something—Harry couldn’t tell what—and swiped at the young man’s waist. On the upswing, he realised the woman had packed a knife into her pocket and was slashing at him indiscriminately.

Dear Merlin! Petunia had gone absolutely mad!

Could Harry cast against a Squib without getting in trouble legally? He didn’t know, but he was willing to bet if there was even a tiny loophole in the law allowing for persecution of wizards who attacked Squibs, Scrimgeour and Umbridge would not hesitate to throw it in his face. Harry would have to make do with shields and physical blocks.

The woman slashed at him again, and before Harry could find something—anything—to block her with, her knife slashed into the soft skin of his forearm, cutting it wide open. He screamed, but beyond the initial burn, adrenaline seemed to be numbing most of the pain. With a gasp, he snatched a book from the nearby shelf and used it as a shield, holding it in his uninjured right arm as his left bled all over the khaki trousers Severus had bought for him.

Severus! Fuck, what was Harry doing, letting his crazed aunt come at him like this? He had to save Severus!

But first, he had to save himself. He had to get help, but how? A Patronus was out of the question when he was fighting for his life, and Severus was bound. He couldn’t just come to Harry … wait. His ring! Hadn’t Severus said that no matter what condition he was in on the other side, if Harry called him through the ring, he would instantly be able to apparate to Harry’s location?

Possibly even through Death Eater wards?
Severus was in trouble. He was already a full-fledged vampire now. He had just grown in the fangs, ripping his lips and gums wide open. His blood tasted sickly-sweet, tangy and wrong. Gods, so wrong.

And Severus could not stop himself from swallowing every drop.

It would only get worse from here. He still had his mental facilities and his honour at the moment, but each drop Riddle continued to force upon him after this would slowly strip those away until he was nothing but a blind monster, killing and maiming at Riddle’s whim.

‘I’m so sorry, Harry.’

Tears of water and blood drowned him as Riddle watched him weep.

“Do not fear, dear Severus. I shan’t make you entirely feral. Oh no. We would not want you to attack us, after all. No, you will retain enough of your mind to know who I wish you to attack, at least. Hmm. Grade eight, perhaps. Yes, that should do.”

Severus despaired. As a grade eight, his honour, his morals, everything would fall to the need for blood. He would be a killing machine, but he would retain enough of his mind to hate himself for it.

It was the worst possible life he could imagine, and if this was what fate had in store for him, he would sooner die. A stake through the heart should do nicely. Perhaps he could even convince Malfoy to do it for him.

The Dark Lord crooned, “Six, and the craving becomes need.”

Another drop fell upon Severus’ tongue and his stomach twisted, hunger pangs ripping through him as if he hadn’t eaten in months. He had to have blood, and he had to have it before he died for the lack. He had never been so hungry, so parched. He was dying of starvation before the monster’s eyes.

Above him, Riddle grinned viciously. “You know what happens with the next drop, don’t you? You begin to fall apart as a human being and your unbreakable sense of honour … cracks. Are you ready?”

Severus could not prevent a whimper of terror. ‘Help me. Oh gods, I don’t want this. I don’t want to lose my mind.’

Just as Riddle started to speak, the ring on Severus’ left hand burned like ice. Harry. The boy was in danger.

Severus’ eyes widened and his heart leapt into his throat. Harry was in danger, and all Severus had to do to immediately go to his side was speak the boy’s name. Merlin help him, he was saved!
“Seven, and thy mind bleeds.”

Severus saw Malfoy’s fingers clench around the dropper, carefully measuring out the next dose, but before the accursed drop fell ….

“Harry!”

The ring activated, and Severus vanished amidst screams of impotent rage.

Harry cried out in relief as Severus appeared at his feet, unconscious and bloodied but alive.

Petunia staggered back with a screech. “Freak! What have you done?”

Thinking of nothing beyond saving his Prince’s life and removing the danger from his vicinity, Harry used the opportunity her distraction afforded to shove her into the hall again with a burst of raw magic. The door slammed shut. Fifteen clicks signified he had locked her out, giving Harry at least a few minutes to heal Severus and escape. Harry let his breath out in a sigh of relief.

“Custodia, Conserva.”

With the door warded as best as he knew how, Harry knelt beside Severus and tried to save his life.

Concentrating all his power into his palms, Harry laid his hands on Severus’ chest and filled him with as much pure healing energy as he could manage. As soon as his healing surged through him and sank into Severus’ skin, Harry knew something was different. Severus’ magic felt … changed somehow. Darker, wilder.

Merlin, what had Riddle done to Harry’s beautiful love?

Tears blinding him, Harry swore they would work through whatever it was. He kissed Severus’ forehead and pressed another wave of healing into him.

Severus groaned and turned his head toward Harry, but did not open his eyes. Damn it. Not enough. A third burst of healing made Severus open those beautiful black eyes, only … there was something wrong about them.

A tinge of crimson filled the dark depths and the sight filled Harry with terror. Had Riddle possessed Severus somehow?

Then Severus growled and opened his mouth, and grief and guilt jangled with Harry’s soul-crushing fear.

Dear gods, Riddle had turned Severus. The man had become a vampire.

“No,” Harry choked out. “Oh gods, Sev. Please. Please tell me you’re still in there, somewhere, that he hasn’t broken your beautiful mind.”


Harry sobbed and clutched his lover tight, weeping over him. Oh, thank Merlin. Ferals couldn’t talk, and if Severus could beg for him, could ask and not take, then he still had his morals and mind. He
was not lost to darkness, even if he had been forever altered.

“Severus, oh gods, love, what do I do? What do you need?”

“Starving. Thirsty.”

Blood. Merlin, the man needed blood. He was at least a grade five, then.

Suddenly, Severus bowed up off the ground, screaming in pain and jerking his marked arm to his chest. Harry gasped and clutched the man’s face.

“Sev! Sev, look at me! Take my blood, love. Take it now before he kills you through the mark!”

Severus sobbed. “Sorry. So sorry.”

“Ssh. Just take it. I’d rather lose a little blood than you.”

Harry offered his cut arm and held it to Severus’ mouth. The vampire growled and latched onto Harry’s wrist, licking and sucking and sending a surprising surge of warmth through the young man. Harry had expected pain, weakness, but something in Severus’ saliva must have dulled the pain. It soothed him to feed Severus like this, to offer him comfort and peace along with his sustenance.

Hope filled Harry’s heart. They could overcome this. Severus was still Severus, after all, at least where it mattered.

Sighing softly, he slipped a hand into Severus’ hair and held him close, trying to support him through what had to be a terrifying, traumatic experience for him. It was, clearly. Severus wept as he fed.

“Ssh,” Harry soothed him. “It’s okay, baby. You’re not hurting me. Just try not to drain me, okay?”

Severus gave him a tearful nod even as he continued to feed. After several moments, Harry felt dizzy and lightheaded, and his aunt’s renewed pounding and screeching drilled straight into his brain.

“Too much, Sev. Need to stop now.”

With a wince, Severus slowly ran his tongue over the wound. Harry sighed as the painful cut closed and healed completely.

Harry stroked Severus’ hair. “Okay now, baby?”

Severus shook his head and buried his face into his hands. “Monster. I am a monster.”

Harry caressed the man’s cheek. “No. You’re still you. You only took my blood when I offered and stopped when I asked. You’re not a monster. You just have different needs now that we’ll have to take care of. Is the mark still hurting you?”

“Barely. Everything else hurts much more.”

Petunia screamed, “Freak! Abomination!”

Severus winced. “Merlin. We must go now, Harry. The blood wards are broken.”

Harry gasped. “Dear gods. That means the Death Eaters could be here any moment!”

“Yes. Are you ready to go?”
Harry flicked his wand to pack the rest of his clothing, shrunk his trunk, and tucked it in his pocket. He grabbed the Prince’s poetry book and Severus’ hand. “I am now. Where are we going?”

“Hogwarts. We must hurry.”

“But they’ll be expecting you to return to Hogwarts. And I should ….” Harry went to the door, his heart aching. “Aunt Petunia. I know you hate me,” he called, “but unless you get out of here now, you’re going to have a house full of Death Eaters ready to kill you. Get your family and get out before they murder you.”

She only screamed more insults at Harry. Harry tried again.

“Merlin, Petunia! Don’t you understand? They’ll torture and kill you if you don’t—”

“Shut your filthy mouth, you demon! Get out of our house!”

Severus pulled him away from the door. “It is no good. If they will not listen, there is nothing we can do. I can alert the Order once we are safe, but if I cast a Patronus here, it will only give away our position.”

Harry wiped angry tears from his face. “I don’t know why I even care.”

Severus hugged him. “Because they are the only family you have left, but you have done what you can. We must go.”

“But ….”

“I know, Harry, I understand, but if we stay here, we will die. As will they. Saving their lives will depend on speed.”

Harry lowered his head. “Okay. What do we do?”

“We must go to Hogwarts now, before it is too late.”

“Might already be too late.”

Harry pulled out his trunk again, unshrunk it, and removed his invisibility cloak. Another flick of his wand shrunk the trunk and sent it sailing into his pocket once more.

Petunia screamed like a madman and threw herself against the door. Harry winced.

“Shite. She broke it down like that the last time.”

“Hurry then,” Severus panted. “I cannot stand for long anyway.”

Harry nodded and tugged his cloak over their heads. Once he had them covered, he slid an arm around Severus’ waist and braced him up.

“Okay. Just let me cast a silencing spell around us.” He flicked his wand once more and nodded. “There. Now take us home, love.”

Severus winced and turned his face away, but the next moment, they had landed in Hogsmeade—amidst a crew of angry Death Eaters.

“Shite,” Harry breathed.
Severus dragged Harry away from the Death Eaters, staying in the middle of the road where no one was searching—they would expect them to hide in the shadows, after all. Harry hardly dared take a breath until they were beyond the town and inside Hogwarts’ gates.

“Are we going to the flat, Severus?”

“No, my quarters. I will lead you.”

“All right. Maybe we should just floo there from the entrance hall.”

Severus shuddered. “I fear I cannot bear the trip.”

“Okay. Then I’ll just have to support you. Come on, love.”

Harry wrapped his arm tighter around Severus’ waist and took the man’s nearest hand in his own. He rubbed Severus’ cool fingertips and leaned close.

As soon as they stepped into the entrance hall, Harry stopped them. “Sev? Warn the Order from here.”

“Right.”

Leaning heavily on Harry, Severus struggled to call his Patronus and failed time and time again. Harry blinked tears down his cheeks and turned into his love.

“Oh, Severus. Is it because they turned you?”

Severus cringed and lowered his head. “Yes, and no.”

“Tell me.” Harry caressed Severus’ cheek and frowned at the man’s flinch. “Baby, tell me. What is it?”

Severus ripped his face away. “Not here. In my quarters. We shall use the floo after all.”

Harry frowned and let his hands drop. Why did Severus keep pulling away?

“O-okay. I’ll hold onto you so you don’t fall, but keep in mind I’m not very good at this.”

“Precisely why I feared I would not survive the trip.”

The little joke made Harry feel better and he snickered in spite of himself. “Well, I’ll just have to hold on tighter then.” He gripped Severus’ waist and tossed a pinch of floo powder in the flames. “Professor Snape’s private quarters, Hogwarts!” The flames remained stubbornly orange, and Harry frowned up at the professor. “Is there a password, love?”

Severus flinched again. “Vive la résistance.” The flames turned green.

“Ah.”

Harry tucked Severus closer and stepped into the grate. The next moment, they were spinning, spiralling, until the flames spat them out on Severus’ hearth. Harry managed by sheer force of will to stay upright despite his inherent clumsiness and the throbbing in his head—Severus needed him to keep his balance, and by the gods, he would do it or die trying.

With a grunt, Harry heaved a staggering Severus closer and staggered to the sofa. “Rest there a moment.” He kissed Severus’ forehead and frowned when the man pulled away. “Please. Don’t be
scared, Sev. We’ll be all right. I know you’re miserable and terrified and you feel like everything’s broken, but you’re alive, aren’t you? And you still have your mind and heart. It’s going to be okay.”

Red-tinged tears slid down the man’s face. “Nothing. Nothing is okay.”

Harry held him and kissed his hair. “Ssh. I have to get McGonagall now. Do you need me to call Madame Pomfrey?”

Severus shook his head hard. “Potions, healing—I can do it myself.”

“None of that. I will be taking care of you.” He helped Severus to lie down. “I’ll be right back, all right?”

Severus gave him a terse nod and buried his face in a shaking hand. Harry longed so much to hold him, comfort him, but he had no time. Any moment, the Death Eaters would figure out Severus had no plans of going to Hogsmeade—or that they had missed him—and would storm Privet Drive in retaliation. And it was past dawn—the Weasleys might already be there.

The thought of Molly losing another of her sons set Harry’s blood running cold and he dashed to the hearth. A pinch of floo powder and a quick shout later, he had his head in the emergency floo at Grimmauld Place. It was only open to a few hearths—Severus’ being one of them—and required a password and blood identification, but it did open for Harry, and a moment later, Remus Lupin had come running.

“Harry? Merlin, where are you? The twins just sent us a Patronus saying they couldn’t find you and —”

“Shite, the twins are there? Oh Merlin, Remus, get them out! The wards are down. Death Eaters are already in Hogsmeade and they’ll be in Privet Drive any moment. I tried to make them evacuate, but Petunia’s gone off her rocker and is refusing to listen—she’s as mad as Bellatrix now. She’s already tried to kill me once this morning and the twins don’t know to avoid her. Get them out!”

“Dear gods,” Remus breathed. He sent a wolf Patronus dashing away. “Harry, where are you? Is that … are you in Severus’ quarters?”

Harry sighed. “No time to explain, Remy. Just get the Order dispatched. And tell McGonagall I’ve got Professor Snape. He … well, he’ll never be the same. But he’s alive and relatively safe, and I’ll heal his injuries while I’m here. Mine too. Just get the Order out and warn the twins before it’s too late.”

“All right, Harry. But you promise you’ll go to Madame Pomfrey if you need help taking care of yourself or if Severus is too harsh with you?”

“Yeah, I promise. Now get going, Remus. And come back in one piece!”

“Marauder’s honour, cub.”

The floo connection broke, and Harry pulled his head out of the flames with a sob. He buried his face in his shoulder and whispered, “Oh gods. Please let them be okay. I can’t … no one else. Can’t lose anyone else to this disaster. Especially not them.”

“Harry,” Severus called. “They will be all right. The twins are nothing if not resourceful, and any Death Eater that challenges them may find they regret it sooner than they think.”

Harry gave a wistful chuckle and wiped his eyes. “Y-yeah.” He stood on wobbly legs and moved to

Severus scowled and shook his head. “Before you do anything to aid me, Harry, you will be taking a Healing Draught—strength one—and two phials of Blood Replenisher. Now.”

Harry Summoned said potions and downed them one after the other. He made a face and shuddered at the aftertaste. “Merlin, that’s foul.” He knelt down beside Severus and stroked the man’s forehead, frowning at the man’s wince. “Okay, love. Potions taken. Now what do I need to give you?”

“Level three Healing Draught—two of them—a capful of Skele-gro, two capfuls of Wiggenweld Solution, one Blood Replenisher, and … and one V-Vampiric Soother.”

Harry winced. “What grade are you, Severus?”

“She-six.”

Harry sighed and took his lover’s hand, running his fingers gently over his knuckles. “So you’ll have bloodlust now, but you still retain your mind and personality. That’s not so bad. As long as we keep you fed and on the soother regularly, it shouldn’t be an issue.”

“I am a monster. Of course it is bad.”

“Oh, Severus. No. No, you’re not a monster. You’re lovely.” Harry caressed his cheek and pressed a soft kiss to the man’s lips. “Er … oh, I should have asked. Was that all right? I’m of age now, but maybe … I’m sorry.”

Tears slipped down Severus’ temples and into his hair. “I do not understand why you would still kiss me, when I am this!”

“Severus, hush. I love Remus, don’t I? He’s a dark creature, and he’s practically my dad. I’m not going to abandon you just because you’ve been turned. You’re still you inside. You still have your mind and your honour. It’s only your dietary needs that have changed.”

“Yes, I am now a blood-sucking demon.”

“You’re not a demon, love. You’re a vampire, yes, but not feral. Not evil. And you’re still mine.”

Severus turned his head away. “Just … Summon the potions, please. I do not know if I have the strength.”

“All right, but after that I’m going to help you take a bath and put you to bed.”

Severus winced. “You do not want to see me like this.”

“Love, ssh. I’m not going to do anything, not tonight. You need time to recover.” Harry brushed a lock of hair behind Severus’ ear. “I’m not going to touch you until you’re feeling better and you’re comfortable with it, not beyond helping you wash anyway, but I do want to see you.”

Severus sighed. “Just get the potions, Potter.”


With an anxious sigh, he sat back on his heels and Summoned the potions Severus had asked for. Gently, he guided Severus to sit, leaning on Harry’s chest for support, and helped him to take each of them in turn. When Severus had finished, Harry conjured a glass and filled it with water.
“Here, love.”

Severus took a few sips and pushed it aside. Harry finished the rest.

“Okay, love. Come on. Let’s get all this blood off you.”

Severus shook his head and stood, drawing into himself. “No. You must leave now.”

Harry turned a bemused look up to the man. “L-leave? Severus, I’m not going anywhere. You need me.”

“No, Potter. What I need is to be left alone. This … liaison cannot continue any longer. I will not allow it.”

“Liaison?” Harry’s world screeched to a halt. *Liaison*. He couldn’t believe his ears.

“Severus, I … I don’t understand.”

Severus turned his face away. “There is nothing to understand. Our liaison is over and you must leave now.”

Harry’s heart cracked down the middle. He stood and faced Severus down, tears shining in his eyes. “Is that what this is to you then? I was just there to keep you sane over the summer months and now that you’re safe again, you’re going to throw me aside?”

“Safe? I hardly call this safe.” Severus glared. “But yes, we are done, Ha—Potter. Leave now.”

Harry struggled to breathe when his heart felt as if someone had ripped it from his chest. With herculean effort, he forced his voice to work.

“No! I won’t let you do this. You know it’s more than a liaison. You know I lo—”

Severus snarled, and the sound was quite as vicious as when it was Professor Snape standing in his place. “Spare me your romantic nonsense. I’ve no stomach for such sentimental drivel this early in the morning. Go. Now. Before I call Professor McGonagall to escort you out.”

Harry stood frozen, shaking, sick, and broken inside. Severus—*his* Severus—was truly throwing him out on his ear? When they had come so far, survived so much? Had it truly meant *nothing* to the man? He searched Severus’ expression, hoping, praying for some sign that it was all a bad joke and Severus would still welcome him, but the man’s eyes were as cold and filled with hate as they had been before Ron’s death. Maybe that was the only thing that had drawn Severus to him. Pity.

No, not *Severus*. Not any longer.

“No! I won’t let you do this. You know it’s more than a liaison. You know I lo—”

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No, not *Severus*. Not any longer.

“Fine,” Harry bit out, determined not to cry in front of the man. “I’ll be sending Madame Pomfrey in for you shortly, *Professor*.”

“No need, Potter. I have a floo, in case you have forgotten.”

Harry stood, unable to make his feet move. Every instinct in his body warned him not to leave. Warned him he was making a dire mistake if he abandoned Severus now, but what else could he do if the professor didn’t want him there?

“S-Severus, please. I love you. *Please* don’t do this.”

His voice was small and broken and hearing it destroyed something in Harry, but he had to try.
Severus snarled. “I said leave, Potter! Are you truly so foolish as to fail to understand such basic instructions?”

Harry gave him a heartsick look. “No, sir. I only hoped that after everything we’ve gone through, maybe you didn’t really mean it.”

“I always mean what I say, Potter. Now get out, before I force you out.”

Harry looked at the man, at the way he was barely standing, the bruising blossoming over his neck and arms, the blood still seeping from wounds all over his body. There was no way Severus could force Harry anywhere in such a state, but neither did Harry want to make him try. Even if Severus hated him, Harry still loved the man beyond all reason.

“Well then. I guess … this is goodbye, P-Professor.”

With a broken cry, Harry ripped his feet from the floor, forced them to turn, and tore his eyes away from the man he still loved, despite the pain Severus insisted on heaping upon him. The man didn’t speak as Harry dragged himself to the door, feeling as if he had left half his soul behind. Nothing but a hollowed-out, bleeding husk remained. He paused at the door and looked back once, but there was no room for forgiveness in Severus’ eyes.

“I … I’m sorry, Severus,” he whispered, and forced himself to turn the handle. As the door clicked shut behind him, Harry sank to his knees in the hallway and wept.

The door closed behind the love of his life, and Severus sank into the sofa with a bitter sob. It was better this way. Harry was safer without him.

But fuck, making him leave had ripped the very soul from Severus. The pain in the young man’s eyes—dear Merlin, it had destroyed him. He had only remained cold and impassive by sheer force of will and the thought of what terrible fate would await the boy if he didn’t.

Harry was gone, he was safe, but now, Severus was left with nothing but the broken pieces of a shattered life.

He didn’t imagine it would last very long, either. Now that he could no longer spy and Harry was gone, he had nothing left to live for. He would finish the cure because other lives depended on it, and then … then he would vanish. It was better for everyone if he left them to carry on without him.

After all, no one would miss him but Harry, and Harry was young and strong. He would recover.

Wouldn’t he?

No. Harry had to recover. Severus would not subject him to a life tied to a monster.

Heart shattered in a thousand pieces, Severus turned his face into the sofa and wept.
Mister Fix-It

Chapter Summary

Warnings: None. Summary: Dumbles to the rescue!

CHAPTER 19
MISTER FIX-IT

Harry trudged to the Headmaster’s office once he got his tears under control, or as much control as he was likely to manage. He didn’t know if the Headmaster was back from wherever he’d gone yet, but Harry had nowhere to go anyway and he wasn’t safe just roaming the halls. Who knew what eyes Riddle might have here. It was the reason Severus had never been comfortable showing any affection outside of their flat.

No. Harry couldn’t call him Severus any longer. He was only Professor Snape again. The man Harry loved had died that evening, broken to pieces by Riddle’s cruelty.

Gods, he was such an idiot. If only he had thought to use his ring sooner, maybe Sev—Snape wouldn’t be a vampire now. Maybe Harry wouldn’t have lost the one truly beautiful thing he had left.

Tears struggled to escape despite Harry’s best Occlumency shields and fierce control, but he blinked them back and vowed to think of nothing until he could relax within the safety of his room … wherever that might be now.

He ran through the list of sweets du jour for the Gargoyle, relieved when “Honeydukes” made the statue leap aside. Dumbledore’s office was cold and empty, so Harry lit a fire in the hearth and curled up in ‘his’ chair to wait. If nothing else, he supposed he could hide here until the Headmaster returned and shunted him off somewhere else.

Harry buried his head in his knees and settled in to wait, wishing he still had at least the daydream of his Prince to get him through this new, terrible pain.

But he had nothing left. His Prince was gone, and Harry was alone.

Harry wasn’t sure how long he sat in the Headmaster’s office, knees pulled up to his chest, body shaking despite the warmth of the fire, when a quiet ‘pop’ announced the old man’s arrival.

“Harry?”

He jerked up and tried to force a smile onto his face. Judging by the Headmaster’s frown, it had come off as more of a grimace.

“Have you any news, sir?” His voice was flat and dim, and it hurt Harry to hear it.
Dumbledore sank into the chair opposite him. “What is it, child? Where is Severus? I had thought he would be with you.”

Harry couldn’t quite suppress his flinch. “He … he’s in his quarters, sir. S-sent me here to find a place to sleep. Can’t stay with a professor, you know.” He gave a nervous titter. “So, um, I need a room, and then I’ll just be out of your hair.”

“Harry … you still have access to the flat. Why have you not returned there?”

Harry swallowed hard. There was no way he could go back to that place. The memories would choke him.

“He’d rather I lived on my own for a while, sir. Just to, er … get comfortable, you know? Doesn’t want to rush things.”

Dumbledore sat back and toyed with his beard, a sure sign he wasn’t buying anything Harry had sold him.

“Please, sir. Just give me a room. I need to … haven’t slept. Tired. And … I can’t …. ”

Dumbledore waved a door into existence beyond his desk. “Go and rest there for now. There is a loo attached as well. Is Professor Snape in the castle then?”

“Y-yeah. He’s … in his quarters. He needs healing, sir.”

Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed. “He needs healing, and a Shaman left him alone?”

“I … he …. ” Harry lowered his head. “He asked me to.”

“I see.” After a long, quiet moment where Harry felt he might break apart if something didn’t change, the Headmaster stood. “Go and rest, child. You are done in. I will tend to Severus myself.”

Harry managed a thin smile this time. “T-thank you, sir.”

He went into the small, cheerful bedroom Dumbledore had made for him and managed to cast a silencing charm just in time for another wave of grief to knock him to his knees.

“Severus, oh gods, Severus. Why? I … I don’t understand.”

Severus had planned to ward the door into disappearing if Harry knocked one more time. He’d bidden the boy to leave, hadn’t he? Was nothing sacred to him?

But the thundering voice on the other side of his door was far too deep for his … former lover. No, this was his employer.

Shite. Did Dumbledore know? Had Harry told the man of Severus’ betrayal? He hadn’t imagined Harry to be so free with Severus’ confidence, but perhaps he had been mistaken.

No. Severus had no right to think of Harry like that. If Harry had gone to Dumbledore, then such was his right. Severus had shattered the boy, and he had likely gone to the one source of comfort he had left. If Harry had broken Severus’ trust, then Severus only had himself to blame.
With a deep breath to calm his bitter heartbreak, Severus cast a quick Scourgify on his face, thankful he had at least managed to wash and dress in clean clothing. He healed the redness around his eyes as well, a sure sign that he had wept far more than was common for him, and dragged his weary body to the door.

“You’ve returned, Albus.”

He waved the old man in, forcing himself to meet Albus’ eyes. The pain and cold anger within them turned Severus’ stomach to stone, but what more could he expect? He had hurt Harry. If Albus lashed out at him, it was no more than he deserved.

“I suppose you want an explanation?”

“I do indeed.”

Severus suppressed a flinch at the hardness of his tone. “C-come in, then.” He closed the door behind Albus and led him to the chairs around the hearth. Harry’s scent still lingered around the end of the sofa and Severus sat there, the only closeness he could allow himself now that Harry was gone.

Albus sat in the chair diagonal to Severus’ seat and folded his hands upon his lap. “Well? Would you like to tell me why I found Harry curled in a foetal position in my office, shaking though the fire was blazing, and having obviously been weeping? Would you like to tell me why a Shaman left a patient in need, a patient he loves, and begged shelter from me? Or perhaps why you left him to roam the castle with nowhere to go and no protection?”

Severus swallowed hard. “He … he did not tell you?”

Albus’ eyes flashed. “What will it take to convince you the boy is worthy of you? What more will he have to sacrifice, to endure, before you see him as he truly is?”

Despite his fierce control, a tear slipped down Severus’ cheek.

“It is precisely because I do see him how he is that I have … let him go.”

“Forced him to go, you mean.”

Severus cringed. “Albus, I … it’s not because I don’t love him. I do, but I had to turn him away for his own protection. He is not safe here any longer. I could not subject him to … to ….” It was no good. Nothing Severus could say would fix what he had done. He let his shoulders slump and looked away. “Never mind it. I do not wish to impinge upon your hospitality. I will finish the potion, and then I will take my leave.”

The old man gripped Severus’ chin and forced him to look into Albus’ eyes, holding Severus frozen. “Severus … why in the name of Merlin would you think I want you to leave? Do you still not understand that you are like my son? I am angry with you for hurting Harry, but that does not make me love you any less. Now, tell me what happened.”

Severus lowered his head. “Did you receive the message that I was captured by the Dark Lord last night and outed as a spy?”

Albus paled. “No. Merlin, no. I suppose Minerva did not wish to worry me when I could not return to help. Are you well, my boy?”

“No. I am most certainly not. I was able to steal more samples of Draco’s blood—they are keeping it
to turn others, by the way.”

Albus shuddered. “As we feared. Go on.”

“I also stole samples of the vampiric delay potion, the anti-veritaserum potion, and dear gods, an experimental trial of vampiric *viral* potion—”

“Sweet Circe,” Albus gasped. “Let us hope they never finish that monstrosity.”

“I fear that is too great a hope, given what Malfoy has already accomplished in such a short time.”

“Malfoy! It truly was Lucius?”

Severus nodded. “Something odd is afoot. I have the sense that he has done some sort of dark spell or ritual to enhance his intelligence. I do not know what precisely, but some of the things he said … they sounded as if he wished to taunt me with knowledge out of my reach. I gave the impression that I was too consumed by jealousy to notice his clues, but I do not desire knowledge at the cost of my sanity. Clearly, whatever he has done has driven him mad.”

“Such is wisdom, my boy, but we will discuss Malfoy later. You were telling me what happened to make you drive a wedge between Harry and yourself. Particularly when two days ago, you were in my office holding an image of him and quite obviously in love.”

Severus closed his eyes. “I do love him, and that is why I sent him away. Albus … the Dark Lord altered me. I … I am ….” He could not say it. Broken and stricken with grief, he let his fangs emerge, wincing from the pain, and opened his mouth.


“Six.”

Albus let out a sigh. “So you are at least unaffected mentally. We may have to alter your curriculum a bit, but you should still be able to teach so long as you have a primary donor. Which is all the more reason why you *must* cease this nonsense and allow Harry back into your life.”

“No! I will only hurt him.”

Albus shook his head, his expression grave. “On the contrary, Severus, you will hurt him by pushing him away. Far more than he will ever be able to recover from. He will become as dark and soulless as Riddle, if he survives.”

Severus frowned. “That is … Albus, no. Harry is stronger than that. And too pure to ever become as twisted as Riddle.”

Albus’ nod was heavy with sorrow. “As long as he retains his entire soul, yes. But when half of it bonds to another and is cast aside? When half of his soul is ripped away and left to bleed?”

Severus scoffed. “I have never known you to be this maudlin, Albus. It is a break up, not a dark ritual.”

“Severus, I am being completely literal. By sending him away, you have torn out half of his soul, and half of your own.”

“But that’s preposterous, Albus! He is young. He will recover.”

Albus’ eyes went hard. “His age has nothing to do with this, Severus, and I am not being sentimental
or cruel to punish you. According to what I have discovered recently, by breaking your bond with
Harry, you have quite literally torn away half of his soul and left him with a wound he cannot hope
to recover from. And you have done the exact same thing to yourself. Unless you rectify it
immediately, we will soon have three Riddles to deal with, and one of them vampiric!”

Severus paled and sank back into the sofa. The faint scent of Harry’s skin brushed his senses and
filled him with crushing need and regret.

“W-what do you know, Albus?”

The old man patted his knee. “It is not too late to heal it. Now, I told you I recalled an instance of
something similar to your bond with Harry occurring in Romania?”

Severus nodded tersely. “You did mention it.”

“It was between a wizard named Mihai Antonescu and a witch called Ioana Văduva, five-hundred
years ago. I recalled hearing a legend about them once while I was in the country during the first war
I survived.” Albus looked away and tugged on his beard. When he spoke again, his voice was
rough. “It was one which gave me some surcease after ….”

“Grindelwald’s war?”

Albus closed his eyes and gave a short nod. “Yes.” He took a moment to gather his strength. “It
seems odd that it can still hurt after so many years.”

Severus’ eyes flicked to the door where Harry had left not long ago. “Y-yes. Is that what will …?”

Albus’ gaze went grim. “Oh no. For you, it will be far worse. I loved Gellert, but our souls never
mingled in our ill-fated affair.”

Severus swallowed a wave of apprehension. “Explain.”

Albus leaned back and rested steepled hands on his lap. “The legend I mentioned told of lovers who
were torn apart by civil war—soul mates, if you will. Their love was so great, they bypassed barriers
time and space to be with one another despite their feuding families and eventually planned an
elopement, without ever seeing each other in person or even passing letters. Their love eventually
overcame the boundaries of war and ended the conflict.”

“Fascinating,” said Severus in a dry tone.

Albus gave him a wry chuckle. “Well, I suppose most legends do get romanticised a bit, but as far as
I can tell, this one is as close to the exact truth as I have ever seen. The only added twist was that the
war ended with their elopement. It did not, and the couple were forced to leave the country and settle
elsewhere under new names. I was, unfortunately, unable to trace them after their marriage, and
could find no hint in the archives as to where they might have gone.”

Severus sighed. “Albus, I don’t care about legends. What does this have to do with Harry and me?”

“Everything. The Romanian archives kept records of the phenomenon I mentioned in the story—a
phenomenon eerily like to the distance communication that you have experienced with Harry.
Romania is a veritable fount of information on the subject. They had millennia-old records of who
had experienced it, symptoms, what it meant. Merlin and the Lady of the Lake appeared in their
records, as well as Nostradamus and his wife, though her name wasn’t listed, and many other notable
wizards and witches in history. They were almost all notable witches and wizards, come to think of
it.”

“The point is, dear boy, that beyond names of the affected, they also had a name for the phenomenon as well as a description of abilities and consequences of denial.” Albus fixed his eyes on Severus. “The condition you share with Harry is known as *Gemino Animas*.”

Severus blinked. “Twin souls?”

“Yes. For lack of a better term, you and Harry are soul mates.”

Severus scoffed. “That is a load of Muggle tripe, Albus. Soul mates do not exist.”

“Oh? Then you have a better explanation as to why you can cross time and space to meet with Harry’s soul? Why he can touch you, kiss you, while being in another country?” Albus pierced him with his gaze. “Why you can communicate with him mentally without being telepathic?”

Severus sucked in a sharp breath. “I had not yet informed you of that ability.”

Albus’ smile left Severus feeling caught out. “No. You have not. It was, however, on the list of abilities attributed to *Gemino Animas*. The next one on the list after soul communion, actually. The fact that you could hear his soul speak at times indicated that acquiring your telepathic link was close at hand.”

Severus shivered and swallowed hard. “I am listening, Albus.”

After Albus left, Severus spent several long moments staring at the fire. A fire Harry had made for him, his conscience oh-so-helpfully supplied.

Fuck. Severus had only meant to protect Harry, but his high-handed manner had come back to bite him in the arse. *Hard.*

He never should have sent Harry away. Without him, the young man would shatter. He would be prone to Riddle’s manipulations, because with only half of his soul, half of his power, Harry would not be able to Occlude tightly enough to block Riddle. All the horrors, the pain would come back, and Harry would break under the strain. He would crack down the middle and fade until he perished, broken and alone.

Or worse, if he somehow survived the anguish of losing his soul mate, Harry would then lose his way to the darkness. He would become the evil that had all but destroyed his life.

And so would Severus.

Damn it all, he couldn’t let this stand. He had to fix it, but he had no idea how. Albus had made it clear to him that he could not return to Harry out of duty. It must be from love, or the young man would see straight through Severus’ guise and turn him away.

And so, Severus sat in front of his fire, his head in his hands and his soul bleeding with the loss of his mate, desperately trying to think of a way to bring Harry home.

Gods, he was the worst possible person for such a task. He had so little experience of love and the little he had known before Harry was tainted, either through cruelty, obligation, fear, or his own
bloody pride. Even so, Severus thought back over his experiences, trying to remember how he had made up his sins before, but the trouble was, no one he had loved had ever received his efforts positively. Lily had outright rejected him, Lucius had led him to the Dark Lord, and even Albus, while kinder than most, had still forced Severus into a double life of pain and lies before he would believe the man was sincere.

Severus wanted to believe that Harry was different, that if he only reached out, the young man would come to him willingly and forgive him, just as he had always done, but fear of failure kept him back. What if Harry refused? So much more than Severus’ personal heartbreak was riding on this apology. And worse, if he went to his estranged lover with that thought in the forefront of his mind, Harry would know and all would be for naught.

Severus wanted to tear his hair out. He was going in circles, torn between aching desire to show Harry he loved him and the desperate need to succeed—or else.

No. Maybe it was best not to think of the consequences at all. Severus hadn’t known of them when he sent Harry away. He had reacted out of fear. And now he needed to act in love if he had any hope of setting things right again.

That was the way—Severus was sure of it. This had to be about them. Not about souls or vampirism or the Dark Lord—just them. Just the fact that Severus had made a grave error of judgment and his life wasn’t worth living without Harry in it.

But gods, he had no idea how to show his sincerity! Harry was the only one who had ever given him honest, pure love with no strings attached, and—wait.

Harry.

Of course! The young Shaman’s love had always been achingly pure, powerful, and honest. How had Harry shown his sincerity?

Severus thought back, through their short time together as a couple, to the time they had become friends, and all the way to the first day Severus had truly seen Harry for what he was. At the memory of Harry bowing before him, of how that simple apology had ripped the blinders from Severus’ eyes and forced a change in his perception, inspiration struck. It was a long shot, but maybe, just maybe, if Severus tried to show he had appreciated Harry’s efforts from the very beginning and honestly laid himself before the young man, Harry might welcome him back into his heart.

Or at least his life, and that was a start.

Severus gathered his courage and a pair of plant shears. He had some work to do before he sought out Harry.

Harry woke from a string of horrid nightmares to the sensation of someone gently stroking his hair and cheek. With a sigh, he nuzzled into the comforting touch. Then the events of the previous morning came crashing back with the force of the Hogwarts express and terror shot through him. No one should be touching him like this. Severus didn’t want him any longer and no one else cared.

With a shocked cry, Harry jerked away from those gentle hands and leapt to his feet, wand at the ready.
Severus stood before him, a white robe on his body, silver roses in his hands, and tears wobbling on his lashes. Harry stared, dumbfounded. What was the man doing here? Hadn’t he just pushed Harry away a few hours ago?

To Harry’s great surprise, as he stood there staring at Severus, the man sank to his knees. Severus knelt before him, his head bowed and shoulders shaking with terror and suppressed emotion. A formal apology! Merlin!

Harry stared at the kneeling figure, utterly confused. “Why? How? This room is warded. How did you get in here? Did Dumbledore ….”

Harry frowned when he realised Severus was speaking, but he couldn’t hear the words. So this was a projection then, not the actual person. Severus was probably still in his quarters, but to have him apologise like this—well, the man must have felt something for Harry if he was remorseful enough to beg. The silvery tears in Severus’ eyes tore the heart from Harry too, but could he trust them?

He didn’t know, but he wanted to trust Severus. Merlin, it hurt to be away from him, to have been cast aside so viciously. Maybe it was foolish, but if there was a chance to heal their relationship, Harry wanted to take it. He had no choice if he wanted to function at all.

With a sigh and a tentative bud of hope healing some of the breaks in his spirit, Harry knelt before Severus and tipped his chin up. His eyes were wide and terrified, and the same soul-deep pain Harry felt showed within their dark depths. Severus had always seemed so strong, but now he looked as broken and agonised as Harry.

Maybe he hadn’t wanted to send Harry away? Maybe there had been a reason he had to?

‘I am sorry,’ Severus mouthed.

Harry couldn’t hear the words, but he didn’t need them to recognise Severus’ remorse. The man practically reeked of it.

Harry hesitantly touched a shaking hand to Severus’ brow, fearful that any moment, the man would draw away and reject him. Instead, Severus turned into his hand and pressed a kiss to Harry’s palm.

“Why, Severus? Why?”

The older man sat on his knees and motioned to Harry. At first, Harry thought he wanted a hug, but when Harry moved closer, Severus shook his head.

“Come to me, Harry,” rang in his ears. “Please come home.”

Home. Harry frowned. Severus’ quarters had never been home.

“Where?”

“The fla—”

Severus’ voice faded out and his phantom sighed in obvious frustration, but Harry had heard enough. Severus wanted him to come to the flat, their true home.

Harry hesitated. Was this some kind of trick to make him vulnerable and twist the knife in his back further? Merlin knew Harry’s relatives were capable of terrible things like that, but no. This was Severus. His Severus. Even angry, Harry refused to think of Severus in such a manner. The man was honourable if nothing else, and it was probably his sense of honour which had forced him to drive
Harry away in the first place.

But then, why had Severus come back? Was it simply that he couldn’t bear the pain?

Harry gave him a fearful look. “Please. Tell me why.”

Severus winced at what he must have perceived as a rejection and let his head fall. Tears slipped hard and fast down his cheeks, and that rare vulnerability and trust—Merlin, who else would Severus allow to see him weep like this?—it was enough to convince Harry of Severus’ honesty.

With a sigh, he lifted Severus’ chin again and gently wiped the man’s tears away. “Ssh. I’ll come. I’ll be right there, okay?” He nodded for good measure, just in case Severus hadn’t been able to read enough of his message from his touch and words.

The relief in Severus’ eyes fixed something broken and raw inside Harry. It wasn’t enough to stop the bleeding inside, but at least he didn’t feel as if half of him was torn away and haemorrhaging.

“Okay.” He pressed a halting, tentative kiss to Severus’ cheek and stood. “I’m coming.”

Severus gave him a shaky nod and vanished. With a deep breath, Harry gathered his courage and left the little room Dumbledore had created for him. Dumbledore was sitting at his desk, writing on a stack of parchment.

“Hello, Harry. I am to inform you that the situation at Privet Drive and in Hogsmeade has been resolved with no injuries to our side. As soon as the Death Eaters realised you were in neither place and Severus had escaped, they left.”

“And my relatives?”

Dumbledore’s serene expression faltered into an uncharacteristic scowl. “Petunia has been taken to St. Mungo’s, to the Janus Thickey ward. Your uncle and cousin deemed it prudent to leave when Remus made it clear he would not tolerate any further resistance. I believe they went to stay with your uncle’s sister until they can move on with their lives.”

Harry nodded, relieved in spite of himself. “That’s good. I didn’t want them to be hurt because of me, even if they do kind of deserve it.”

Dumbledore gave him a sad smile. “Even if they had been hurt, Harry, it would not have been your fault. Now, have you spoken to Severus’ soul-image?”

“S-soul-image?”

“Hmm. So you aren’t able to speak with his ‘phantom’ yet, then?”

“Er, no. Not much. I can hear him in my mind a bit, but it doesn’t last long.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Then go and work on healing your bond. I assume he approached you?”

“Er … yeah. Did you talk to him?”

“You might say that.”

Harry sniffled and rubbed his toe in the floor. “Did he say … why?”

A gentle hand on his shoulder startled him. He hadn’t noticed Dumbledore standing.
“I think you would be best served asking him that, Harry.”

Harry sighed. “Right. Can I use your floo, then?”

“Of course. And, Harry? Be gentle with him, please. Inside, he is still very raw and full of old hurts and fears.”

Harry nodded and wiped at his eyes. “I’ll try. He really hurt me though.”

“I am sorry, my boy. I will be here if you need to talk with me about it. For now, will you deliver this to him?” Dumbledore gave him the topmost piece of parchment from his desk and Harry tucked it into his robes.

“I’ll take it. Can I go now? I need to fix this if I’m ever to be whole again. I at least need a reason.”

Dumbledore squeezed his shoulder. “Ask him. You might be surprised. Now, do go before he worries himself into a frenzy, hmm?”

Harry winced. “Right. Er, thanks, Professor.”

“You are very welcome. Good luck, my boy.”

Harry blushed.

“Go on, child. I’m sure Severus is frightened by now.”

“Right.”

Harry gave the man a wan smile and turned to the floo. A wild ride later, he stumbled into the flat’s hearth and a solid, warm chest. Strong arms wrapped around him and Harry melted into the embrace, unable to resist Severus’ pull despite his fears. With a quiet sniffle, he buried his face into Severus’ shoulder and held onto him as if he would never let go.

“I was beginning to fear you would not come,” Severus murmured into Harry’s hair.

“Don’t make me leave again. Don’t send me away. It hurts too much.”

“I won’t.” Severus kissed Harry’s hair. “It hurt me, too.”

Shaking, Harry clutched him tighter and breathed him in. His emotions had fallen beyond his control, but Harry couldn’t care, not while Severus held him close and whispered love into Harry’s ear.

“Ssh. It’s all right now. You are safe. You are home, and I shall never turn you out of it again.”

“Even if we fight?”

“Even then, though I might ask you to take a walk if we are too angry. I will not tell you that you cannot return, however. I will never forbid you sanctuary with me again, if that is still what you wish for.”

Harry clutched Severus tighter and nodded, overwhelmed with relief and the renewal of his spirit. The gaping void and raw, unbearable pain had gone, but a shred of doubt remained. Harry needed answers, needed assurance that this would never happen again.

“Why did you turn me away, Severus? Why did you hurt me like that?”
Severus sighed and moved back a step. “Come away from the hearth, love. Come sit with me on the sofa.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Are you stalling?”

“No, but it may be a long explanation and I am still injured, love. I cannot stand so long.”

Harry blushed and let his head fall. “M’sorry.”

“Ssh. Come and sit.”

“All r-right.”

Harry allowed Severus to lead him to the sofa and sat beside his love, curled into his side. “Er, wait. Before we start, Professor Dumbledore wanted you to have this.” He gave the letter over and watched as Severus scanned it.

Severus sighed and tucked the letter into his robes.

“Is everything okay, si—Severus?”

“Yes. He was merely reminding me not to be a fool.”

Harry sniffled and scooted close. “Why were you ‘a fool’ in the first place? Why did you break me like that?”

Severus flinched. “I did not intend to break you.” He sighed and slipped a hand into Harry’s hair. “I had hoped you would recover, but Albus made it plain to me that you would not. And that I was so terribly wrong to have hurt you so.”

“Then why? I don’t understand.”

Severus opened his mouth, revealing his fangs. “That is why. I was attempting to protect you. I was afraid of hurting you worse by what I am than what ending our relationship would have done.” He laid a hand against his chest and rubbed along his sternum. “But nothing in my life has ever hurt so much as it did to watch you leave. You took half of my soul with you.”

“It felt the same for me.”

Severus nudged Harry close and laid his head atop the younger man’s. “I shan’t attempt to ‘protect’ you in that manner again, if you are sure you are comfortable with my condition.”

Harry stroked Severus’ face. “If you were a grade-seven, I’d have problems. It would have eroded some of this beautiful sense of honour you have—honour that reaches even to the point of sacrificing everything you hold dear if it means keeping me safe.” He fixed Severus with a glare to warn him he’d best not try to sacrifice Harry again.

Severus nodded, but his expression was pained.

“But you’re not a grade-seven, Severus. Your honour is intact. You’re still pure. And you’re still mentally there, thank Merlin. As it is, I have no problems accepting you for what you are, fangs and all.” He traced a fingertip over the older man’s lower lip and smiled at the feel of a caught breath rushing against his skin.

“I still love you, you know.” Harry caressed Severus’ lip and watched arousal and hope fill his beautiful eyes. “But I’m not convinced you won’t throw me out the next time you go through
bloodlust or just have a bad day in general. I’m not convinced that the next time you get it into your head that you’re evil or worthless or some such rubbish, that you won’t cast me aside rather than bringing me closer and relying on me to help you through it.”

Severus closed his eyes and spoke in a rough, emotional voice. “I have never had anyone to rely on, Harry.”

“I know. Nor have I. So might we rely on each other?”

Severus sighed and kissed Harry’s fingertip. “I cannot make promises, love, but I will vow to try. And if I fail, you have the right to hold me down and make me see reason.”

Harry cupped Severus’ nape and moved closer. “That sounds interesting.”

Severus’ breath hitched. “Ah, y-yes.”

Harry hesitated. Given Severus’ past, that might have been a gasp of arousal, but it could also have been fear, and Harry wasn’t about to push Severus into intimacy if he wasn’t prepared for it.

“Sev? Are you okay?”

The man swallowed and slipped his hand to Harry’s cheek. “If … if you are amenable, will you … allow me to kiss you, Harry?”

Harry bit back a moan. “Oh Merlin. Yeah, sweetheart. Kiss me all you want. I’m yours, as long as you never hurt me again like you did today.”

“arate.

Harry leaned in and murmured against Severus’ parted lips, “Swear that you’re mine as well?”

Severus shivered and slid an arm around Harry’s waist. “Yes. I am y-yours, Harry.”

Harry kissed him with the lightest of touches. “Are you afraid, love?”

“Terrified, but it is not necessarily a bad feeling.”

Harry smiled against Severus’ lips. “Yeah. I think I understand.”

“Harry … please.”

That whispered, urgent need shot straight to Harry’s core, and he found himself incapable of denying Severus’ plea. With a soft moan, he cupped Severus’ face and melded their lips together. Severus gasped, his fingers clenching subconsciously around Harry’s waist, and the hand on Harry’s face slid into his hair.

Oh gods. Merlin, kissing Severus was incredible. His lips were soft, tentative, trembling against Harry’s, but his hands held Harry tight and his two-day beard scratched against Harry’s own. Harry pulled back with a pant and brushed a tear from Severus’ cheek.

“Are you all right?”

Severus nodded, eyes wide, lips parted and pink.

Harry kissed the tip of his nose. “More?”
Severus winced. “I … I do not know what to do.”

Harry stroked his cheek. “That’s all right. Do you want to learn?”

“Gods, yes.”

Harry smiled and straddled Severus’ lap. The man’s eyes grew wide and dark. Harry found Severus’ innocence undeniably appealing.

“Does that feel good?”

Severus swallowed, clearly struggling for some mastery of his wild emotions. “I believe I might find it tolerable.”

Harry laughed. “Just tolerable? Hmm. Maybe I should move away.”

A low growl escaped Severus. “Don’t even think it.”

“Hah! I knew you liked it.” He pressed another soft kiss to Severus’ mouth. “Seriously, is it too much pressure on your injuries?”

Severus shook his head.

“Good. Let me know if I hurt you. I’m not sure where you’re injured.”

“My ribs, mostly. My left ankle and head also sustained damage, and my back is not entirely healed from the whip. My mouth is also aching where my fangs are.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll try to avoid those places then. Pull your fangs in?”

“Yes.” Severus winced, and the sharp canines sank back into their normal human form. He dropped one hand to Harry’s hips and tangled the other in the young man’s hair. “Now, do shut up and teach me.”

Harry grinned. “Yes, sir.”

He draped his arms around Severus’ neck and brought him into a tender, loving kiss. He was gentle, letting Severus’ emotions guide him, and gods, it was brilliant. Light and fire erupted in Harry’s heart with each stroke—he felt he would break apart with the sheer intensity of it. Severus held on to Harry’s hair, his fingers tightening and relaxing reflexively with each brush of their lips. The innocence and sweetness of his touch made the experience all the more beautiful for Harry.

These were his first real kisses, the only ones that mattered. Never mind that he had experimented a bit with Ginny—these sweet kisses with Severus were the only ones that had ever left him breathless and aching. Severus’ shy exploration, the tentative brush of his lips, the soft sounds of pleasure he murmured low in his throat—this was what had been missing with Ginny. Harry moaned and leaned in closer, tipping Severus’ head back against the sofa.

“Mine,” Harry murmured against Severus’ lips, breathless and shaking with desire.

“Yours,” Severus whispered back, and Harry was lost.

With an almost feral growl, Harry descended on Severus again, one hand tangled in that sexy hair, the other tracing down his cheek and neck. He ran his tongue along the seam of Severus’ mouth, begging entry, and moaned as Severus’ lips parted. The older man whimpered, a sound of fear, and tensed underneath him. Harry backed off.
He kissed Severus’ forehead. “What’s the matter, love?”

“I … am afraid. I do not want to fail you.”

“Fail me? By letting me kiss you?”

Severus’ dark eyes held worlds of pain, buried years deep. “I do not want to disappoint you.”

Harry smiled and kissed him lightly. “You can’t disappoint me, Severus. I love you. Every touch from you is brilliant, but it’s okay if you’re not ready for more. We can wait.” He nuzzled Severus’ nose. “I reckon we have a lot to talk about anyway.”

“So we do.”

Harry climbed off of Severus’ lap and leaned into his side. “All right. So I know why you left—and you had better never do that to me again.”

Severus hugged Harry close. “I promise.”

“Good.” Harry laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “What I don’t know is what made you come back?”

Severus paused. “I … will you stay?”

Harry looked up at Severus and narrowed his eyes. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“I am going to tell you. I just … I love you, Harry, and I don’t want to lose you.”

The sudden tension in Harry’s heart eased at hearing those words from Severus’ lips.

“You love me, Sev? Really?”

Severus held Harry’s face in his hands. “With all of me. And that is the primary reason I returned to you. Gods, Harry—when you left, when I made you leave—I have never wept so hard in my life. Not even Lily’s death hurt so much. Without you, I wanted … I was …. I felt terrible without you, and before five minutes had passed, I knew what an awful mistake I had made. But I honestly believed you safer without me ….”

“Until the headmaster talked to you.”

“Yes.”

“Then I think it’s time you tell me what he said.”

Severus took a deep breath and nodded. “Very well.”
Twin Souled

Chapter Summary

Warnings: Bit of angst, fluff galore. Seriously, the fluff has taken over. Brief slash, nothing major yet. Sev is still way too injured. Summary: It's a rough ride to reconciliation after Severus' screw up, but after a misunderstanding or two, they get there.

CHAPTER 20
TWIN SOULED

Severus trembled as he held Harry tight. Merlin, he hoped he wouldn’t hurt Harry further by explaining everything. Would Harry understand?

“Okay, Sev,” Harry murmured. “Did he find out what this connection is between us?”

Severus gathered his courage and took a deep breath. “Yes. There is an extremely rare condition, one usually shared between the strongest wizarding pairs. Merlin and the lady of the lake. Morgana and Gawain. Nostradamus and Anne Gemelle. It is possible that the Dark Lord shares the same condition, but if he does, he has not been so fortunate as we have.”

Harry nodded. “What condition?”

“It is called Gemino Animas. Translated literally, it means ‘twin souls.’”

Harry frowned. “Our souls are twins?”

“No. It is … we are soul mates, in the simplest terms.”

Harry smiled. “Really? We’re meant for each other?”

Severus traced a finger down Harry’s cheek and nodded. “So, please, stay.”

“I’d planned on it, love.” Harry kissed him lightly. “Would you feel safer if I held you in my lap? Just so you know I’m with you and protecting you?”

“I … but would that not be awkward with our height disparity?”

“Sit astride me and lay your arm over my shoulders, and it should be fine.”

Hesitantly, Severus moved to sit across Harry’s legs and held him as the younger man had described. A gentle hand rubbed circles on Severus’ belly and Harry’s other hand caressed his shoulders.

“Is this better? Does it hurt?”

“I … it does feel safe.” Severus pulled Harry’s head to his chest and laid his own upon his mate’s. “Just be careful of my back and buttocks. The lashes are not entirely healed.”

Harry loosened his hold and gently stroked Severus’ waist instead. “Okay, love?”
“Yes.”

“Good. Now, can you tell me what Professor Dumbledore learned besides that we’re soul mates? I know you and you wouldn’t believe something like that without proof.”

Severus’ cheeks reddened. “No. I did not believe it until he described our telepathic link before I could mention it. Telepathic communion is the next trait in the list for Gemino Animas. Besides that, we have the ability to call soul-images of each other—your first fantasies of me began the link. Well, awakened is more of a proper description as we have been linked since your birth.”

He paused, shaking as a long-suppressed memory washed over him. “No. Before it. Dear Merlin, I always wondered—I can hardly believe it.”

Harry frowned and stilled his gentle petting. “Severus? What is it?”

“Forgive me. I had—it has been so long that I had forgotten, but the truth is that we have been linked since before you were born. Merlin, this explains so much. I was—before that day, I must have been—and then you came and … oh gods.” Severus’ heart raced and his breath came short at the power of his realisations—and a new, terrifying understanding of how close he had come to the edge. Fate had been playing with fire when she held back the birth of Severus’ soul mate for twenty years.


The panic in Harry’s voice brought Severus out of his shock. “Oh, Harry. I am sorry. Here, let me sit beside you and I will explain.”

Harry nodded and allowed Severus to move off of his lap. Severus took Harry’s hands for comfort and tried to gather his wits.

“Right. Well, you remember that I was shocked that day you saw the doe painting in my quarters and expressed anger at your mother?”

Harry glared, but Severus could tell his anger was not directed at him. “Yeah. She was terrible to you. She should have forgiven you. Actually, she should have apologised to you.”

“That’s just it, Harry. She did forgive me. Though the apology never came.”

Harry blinked. “Come again?”

“No one but your mother and I were aware of it. I think that is why no one ever told you. But I have gone too far ahead, I think. You saw in the Prince’s seventh year text that I had joined the Dark Lord halfway through term and regretted it soon after?”

Harry nodded. “It broke my heart. I was so afraid for both of us then.”

Severus kissed Harry softly. “You, pet, are the only soul pure enough to love me even seeing the worst of me.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “Well, I wonder now if I haven’t always.”

“Hmm. That I cannot answer. Perhaps I have too, but if so, I was a blind, bitter fool.” Severus shook his head. “Either way, I love you now. But back to the story, soon after I turned eighteen, my … honour weakened. I was angry and bitter and jealous, and with every passing day, the scruples I had held so tightly to in my youth began to fall apart.”
Harry was white and shaking. “Sev’rus. Did you … have you …?”

“I have never murdered, tortured, or raped a person, Harry, but at the time I learned of the prophecy, I was falling prey to the darker side of human nature. I realise now, with what we have learned, without my mate, I was starting to go soul mad.”

Harry gasped. “Oh my gods. Sev … you mean because I’m so much younger, you might have been lost?”

Severus shuddered. “We might both have been had Lily maintained her anger for me until the end.”

Harry paled and curled into his arms. “Oh gods. I … shite, that’s bloody terrifying. No wonder you were upset. Did you just now realise it?”

“I recalled the day I felt my soul heal just moments ago. Because I did not understand it for what it was, did not associate it with our condition until now. And yes, it was an appalling thought to know how close I came to ….” Severus shuddered, and Harry pressed in closer.

“Merlin! How did you heal your soul, love?”

Grief, guilt, and regret washed over him at the memory of his last meeting with Lily. Severus needed a moment to collect himself and even then, his voice came out rough and shaky.

“When I learned of the prophecy and reported it to the Dark Lord, I learned he meant to kill Lily to prevent it coming to pass. And the terror of losing her jarred me out of the darkness long enough to realise I had to save her. She was the only speck of light I had ever known, and I could not stand by and let her die.”

Severus shuddered and crossed his arms over his chest. “I pleaded with the Dark Lord to spare her, but that only angered him and he turned his wand on me. I was too useful at the time to kill, but he made sure I knew how displeased he was. By the time he left me alone, I was sick from the Cruciatius and battered all over, but I could not rest. From there, I apparated straight to Hogwarts and begged Albus for help.”

He sighed and lowered his head. “He offered me the potions position and a safe home at Hogwarts, but also bound me into a lifetime of spying and demanded a wizard’s oath to always serve the Light first and foremost and to protect you with my life.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “I’m glad you held to that vow and your spying saved a lot of lives, but … wasn’t it a bit cruel? Shouldn’t he have just helped you and been done with it?”

Severus shook his head. “I believe Albus must have sensed the darkness in me then. At the time, panic and pain had pushed it back, but with my soul falling to madness without yours, it would not be long before I fell into chaos again. It is my belief that he was trying to protect all of us, myself included.”

Harry’s expression relaxed. “Ah. That makes a little more sense. Go on then.”

“Yes. After I left Albus, I went straight to Lily.” Severus closed his eyes to hold back a sudden rush of tears. Gods, that had been such a painful, heart-breaking, beautiful day. He had come to her on his knees, tears streaking his cheeks and heart broken in two. She had allowed him into her living room, which was more than he had expected. Had Potter Senior been present, Severus doubted he would have made it past the gate, but he had been willing to die that day if it meant his friend would be saved.
Apparently, that one act of courage had saved Harry’s life. And his own.

Lily led Severus to the living room and stared at him, her eyes wary, fiery hair plaited and flipped over her shoulder, and her flour-coated apron flowing around her rounded belly. She was just as lovely as Severus remembered.

As soon as the door shut behind them, Lily whirled on her heel and glared at him, her expression somehow fierce and hopeful at once. With one hand over her baby bump and the other firmly on her hip, she challenged him.

“Well? What are you doing here?”

Severus cringed and bowed his head, wiping streams of tears from his cheeks. “L-Lils, I … I understand if you hate me forever, but please listen to me now. I have made a horrible mistake, and now … I have …. ” He bit into his knuckle to hide a desperate sob. “Lily, I screwed up. I know I did. And now your family is in danger. I … I came to warn you, even if the price is my life.”

Her voice was softer than he expected. “Tell me what happened.”

Severus’ breath hitched. “I … the D-Dark Lord has ordered me to seek the Defence position at Hogwarts. I am to be the potions master instead—but the Headmaster already knows what I am to tell you now. He has bound me to an oath—I am getting ahead of myself.” He took several deep breaths. “F-forgive me. I am … something is not … I’m sorry.”

A gentle hand smoothed his hair, and Severus sobbed in anguish. “Lils. Oh gods. If I could take it back ….”

“I know. Tell me.”

“R-right. I was at the Hogshead last night, w-waiting for my turn to interview. The Headmaster was talking to a … a strange woman who was interviewing for the Divination position.” He gave a bitter laugh. “After tonight, I daresay she has it.” He choked back tears and struggled to stay calm. “She gave a prophecy, one which I overheard. At least in part.”

Lily placed both hands protectively over her stomach. “And this prophecy was?”

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches … Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. ’I do not know if there was more. Aberforth caught me listening at that point and threw me out. Quite literally.” Severus rubbed his bum and grimaced at the memory.

Lily paled and clutched at her stomach. “Harry is due at the end of July. So … I see. You told him what you heard, of course, and now he thinks Harry is the one this prophecy predicted.”

Severus winced. “I … I’m s-sorry, Lily. However ill you may think of me—and you have a right to—I never wanted you or your son to be hurt.”

“And James?”

“Do not ask me that, Lils. You know how badly he hurt me. I do not think he deserves to die for it but I … I cannot care about him.” He shuddered. “Please. I … I do not care if you curse me for it or if you never listen to me again, nor do I blame you, but in this—please. Just run, Lils. Take your family and run where he cannot find you.”
She said nothing for a long moment, her expression troubled and full of grief.

Severus bowed his head and failed to hold back a soft keening cry. Even now, she would not hear him. Gods, he had been such a fool.

“I will go, then. I … I know you do not believe me, but I am truly remorseful that I have caused you and your family so much grief.” He tried to stand, but stilled at a gentle touch on his head.

“Tell me something, Sev.” His heart constricted painfully at the old nickname. “What happened to you? The boy I knew never would have followed those evil people. He never would have turned to the dark.”

Severus whimpered. “I … I was so alone without you, but …. ” He gave a stricken cry and buried his face in his hands. “Oh, Lils. I don’t know what’s happened to me. I … I swear, I never wanted this. I just … everything hurt so much. I just wanted a place to belong, but they’re all bloody mad! Albus had me agree to spy on them, and—and though it will probably mean my death, I don’t care. He will destroy us all otherwise, and I … I have much to atone for.”

He sobbed and covered his face. “I … I understand if you don’t forgive me. Just get yourself and your family to shelter. And I … fuck, I’m so sorry. For everything.”

Lily sighed and tipped Severus’ chin up. “Merlin, do you have any idea how long I’ve prayed for you to realise how far you’d fallen and come back home?”

Severus’ breath hitched. “You … you believe me?”

“I feel the change in your aura this time, Sev. It’s not just about me. You’re trying to protect my entire family and risking your own life to do it.” She petted his hair. “It’s all right. I forgive you. James probably won’t but he’s still as much of a tosser as ever where you’re concerned.” She frowned and looked to the fireplace. “You should go before he gets home.”

Severus nodded and staggered to his feet, wincing at the return of his pain. “T-thank you, Lily. I … I have prayed for your forgiveness too.”

She gave him a sad smile. “It’s been too long. Oh!” She jumped and laid a hand on her belly. “Wait, Sev—before you go.” She hesitantly took Severus’ hand. “You were my best friend once, and … and I have to say, I’ve been hoping you’d come back before he was born. I wanted to share this with you.” With a tearful smile, she pressed Severus’ palm against the rounded bulge of her belly. “There. He’s kicking! Can you feel it?”

Severus gasped as a tiny foot kicked against his skin, awed and overwhelmed. Lily had forgiven him. Maybe Severus wouldn’t be as close to her as they once were, maybe it was too late for that, but just knowing that she had wanted to share such an intimate moment with him, that she trusted him enough to lay his hand against the swell of her child—it meant the world to him.

“Lils … I feel him.”

Severus gasped as light and heat and peace surged through his heart and drove away his shadows and pain. Parts that had been out of alignment for years rearranged themselves into a peaceful harmony. Broken bits joined at the seams, and the internal bleeding he had felt for so long finally stopped.

Somehow, Lily had healed him. At last, he was whole again.

Tears slipped down his face. “Thank you,” he breathed. “I … I think … I am better.”
Lily frowned. “Yes, I feel it, but I don’t understand, Sev. What healed you?”

“Didn’t you? I had supposed it was your trust.”

“Hmm.” The woman did not look convinced, but she shrugged and patted his shoulder anyway. “As long as you’re well again, I suppose it doesn’t matter. Go home and rest. And thank you. I’ll warn James without implicating you and we’ll find a safe place to hunker down.” She gave him a relieved smile. “And welcome back.”

Severus squeezed her hand, bowed in acceptance of her thanks, and slipped back into the night.

Harry was weeping at the end of Severus’ story. The older man hoped they were tears of grief for Harry’s mother and not of betrayal for Severus’ sins.

Harry sniffled and rubbed tears from his cheeks. “So she did forgive you after all.”

“Yes.” Severus wiped his own eyes. “That was the last time I saw her alive. Once they went into hiding, I could not pass through the Fidelius. But knowing she did not die hating me did at least keep me from abandoning my oaths or … or worse.”

Harry took Severus’ face in gentle hands and kissed his tears away. “Thank you. Hardly anyone ever talks about Mum, so I cherish stories of her, but I know that was hard on you.” He kissed Severus tenderly and stroked his hair. “Are you all right?”

Severus nuzzled Harry’s cheek. “I am now, pet. Thank you for holding me together. It is always difficult to speak of her.”

“Anytime, love.” Harry cuddled Severus close and laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “So, that warmth when I kicked you as a baby, you think it was the soul link establishing and healing your soul madness?”

“I do. Even Lily felt the change, but she was always particularly skilled with auras.”

“So what does this mean? The soul link and all that?”

“Well, that first touch established it enough that I was able to retain my mind until you grew. Then, once you began fantasising about me, it activated and our abilities to communicate over the soul plane began to come into play. From there, as we became closer, the link developed and grew.” Severus sighed. “I have undoubtedly set it back with my foolishness earlier, so we will need to spend time together again to heal it.”

Harry nodded. “What other traits will we gain?”

“Well, Albus said he could not find a comprehensive list, possibly because many of the traits are unique from couple to couple. However, the communication traits I have already told you of are common to all twin souls. And there are two other major abilities. The first will only occur once we are able to speak to each other’s soul image without trouble. Once we have reached that stage, we will be able to mark each other’s soul image, and the mark appears on the face according to what Albus found.”

Harry paled. “M-mark each other?”

“It is not like the Dark Mark, love. It is only a simple magical mark that identifies the image as our
soul rather than our physical body. It does not show in the physical world, only when we are sharing soul space. And it serves no other purpose than to identify each other and to deepen our link.”

“Oh. So I won’t own you?”

“No.” Severus nuzzled Harry’s hair. “And it soothes me that your first worry is for me. But I shall not own you either. As I said, it serves no other purpose but to deepen our link to one another and identify whether we are speaking to each other’s souls or the whole person. I think, as we become better with communication, it will prove a necessary step.”

“All right. What was the last common trait?”

Severus hesitated. “Well, apparently when we have reached the pinnacle of our link, our powers will … merge. You will benefit from my magical skill and I from yours. Some of our abilities will transfer too. For example, I may become better at flight and you may learn more of potions than you ever anticipated.”

Harry grinned. “As I need those to pass my NEWTs, I’m not complaining.”

Severus chuckled. “Yes, well, it may not develop so quickly. But the point of this is that we will have a massive pool of magical power to draw from, love. It … it may be the key to defeating the Dark Lord once and for all.”

Harry gasped. “Merlin.”

“Yes, exactly. We will be as powerful as Merlin, between your reserves and mine, I am a bit fearful of what we may be able to do when we are fully linked.”

Harry blanched and leaned back. “Sev … maybe this isn’t a good idea. I … I don’t want that kind of power.”

Severus’ heart lurched with terror. “Please. Don’t!”

“But if we—”

“No! You don’t understand.” Severus leapt off of Harry’s lap so they might meet each other face to face and grabbed his shoulders. “Don’t—you have to listen to me. Please.”

Harry’s eyes were wide with fear, but he nodded and cupped Severus’ hand.

“We cannot split. The consequences—dear Merlin, Harry. Do you remember when I mentioned that Riddle might have the same condition?”

Harry paled. “Y-yes?”

“If he does, his soul mate has rejected him. What happens to Riddle, what was happening to me before I felt you link with me—that’s what we can look forward to if we split. We will both go soul-mad. If we survive.”

Harry drew away. “That’s what brought you back to me then. The fear of madness.”

Severus’ heart screamed with terror. “Harry, no!” Tears blinded him, but he couldn’t care right now. He was on the verge of losing everything, all because of his own stupid mistakes. He cupped Harry’s chin and rubbed his cheek. “Please. I don’t … it was more than that.”

Harry tugged Severus’ hand from his face and looked away. “I should have known. Love is just …
Severus choked back a cry and slid to his knees before the young man, injuries be damned. “Don’t. Please. I do love you.”

“Yes, just enough to tear both of our souls in two and then come begging when you realise the cost.”

“Harry, don’t you understand—you were the cost!” Severus buried his face in his hands. “I … I tried to … I didn’t want you to think it was only from duty or fear, so … so I tried to show you, but ….”

Severus stood to leave, his heart shattered into a million pieces and his chest on fire with pain—whether from his broken ribs or his broken relationship, he had no idea. Both, perhaps. It mattered not. Harry wouldn’t listen either way. Like every time before, Severus had ruined everything with his instinctive need to push others away. He had done it to protect Harry, but in the process had hurt them both, terribly. And now, the only thing left to him was to leave with what little of his dignity remained and wait for the soul-madness to creep in. Again.

This time, he would end his life before it drove him to darkness. He only hoped he could finish the antidote first.

Yes, the antidote. He should have been focusing on that, rather than filling his head with foolish hopes. Love was never meant for men like him.

Still, it was his fault. Just like always, he had been the one to destroy his own dreams.

Severus took several long, stuttering breaths, and when he spoke again, his voice was even, if devoid of life. “I am the one who should have realised it was too good to be true. I will never deserve love, have never deserved it. And the moment anyone dares try to love me, I ….” He choked out the next words through a throat tight with tears. “I kill them.”

He turned to leave, head held high in spite of the moisture dripping down his cheeks, but a firm hand caught his wrist.

“Sev, wait.”
streaming down Severus’ face despite his struggles to control them, and with every suppressed sob, he winced with pain. Merlin, weeping like this with broken ribs—it had to be sheer agony.

Harry cupped Severus’ face and thumbed the man’s tears away. “Ssh. Breathe, love. Just breathe. I’m here. I still love you. It’s all right.”

Shock and hope flooded Severus’ eyes, warring with a soul-deep pain Harry didn’t know how to combat. “You are not leaving me?” The small, frightened tone of Severus’ voice made both men wince. Harry had never heard Severus speak in such a fearful manner, and he never wanted to hear it again.

“Never.” Harry kissed him gently and pressed their foreheads together. “Ssh. Breathe, sweetheart. I need to take care of you, but first you have to calm down, okay? I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere either.”

Severus gave him a hesitant nod and closed his eyes, struggling to get his breathing under control. In the meantime, Harry Summoned a flannel from the loo, wet it with a spell, and gently washed Severus’ face. Between the soothing touch and Harry’s whispered love, Severus slowly calmed.

“All right, love?”

Severus shook his head. “I do not understand why you were so angry with me.” His breath hitched with a residual sob, and he cringed. “Merlin. I … this hurts.”

Harry stifled a pang of alarm, lest his mate become more fearful than he already was. “I see it. Come on. Let’s get you to bed.”

Severus clutched at Harry’s arm, his eyes wide and vulnerable. “Stay with me?”

“I never had any intention of leaving your side.” Harry stroked his hair. “This was just a misunderstanding, I think, and we’ll have to talk it out soon, but first you need rest and care. I need to treat your ribs and the rest of your wounds, and then you need sleep.” Harry sighed, ashamed of himself. “I should have remembered how much pain you were in before. I’m sorry, love.”

Severus shook his head. “I’d rather talk of it while you are taking care of me. I do not think I will sleep well with such troubles on my mind.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “You might have trouble sleeping anyway considering everything you went through today. If talking it out is one less thing on your mind, I suppose that can be arranged. First, let’s get you into bed though. Which side of your ribs is hurt?”

“The l-left—agh.”

Harry winced in sympathy. “I know, baby. I know. Just let me get you ….” He leaned down and braced Severus on his right side. “—Into bed, and I’ll see what I can do about easing those spasms.”

“It is my own fault for weeping like a bloody fool.”

Harry heaved Severus to his feet. “You had reason to cry. It’s all right. I’ll take care of you now.”

“B-been taking care … care of me for months.”

Harry couldn’t answer while he was trying to bear up under Severus’ weight. The man was slender, but half a foot of extra height made him heavier than Harry anyway. It took all his strength to haul his flagging mate to the beds—which Severus had already joined into a double—and to get him
Harry leaned on his knees and panted a bit. “Merlin. A month at the Dursleys and I’m out of shape again.”

Severus gave him a wry smile. “Once I am healed, you shan’t need to worry about that. I will be training you so hard, soon you will be able to carry me to bed.”

Harry came up and grinned. “Now that sounds like a plan I like.”

Severus flushed. “Oh. I think I rather like the idea too.”

Harry kissed him lightly. “We’ll try it once I’m not such a weakling. But for now, let’s just get you healed, okay?”

“Yes. That sounds good.”

Severus felt his face going hot as he realised he would need to remove his clothing for Harry to heal him completely. “Help me out of my robes? Ah … I think I need more salve on my ribs. And a Shaman’s magic always works more efficiently against skin.”

“Oh. Maybe that’s why I had a hard time bringing you around this morning.” Harry shook his head. “Part of it anyway. Gods, I shouldn’t have hurt you. You’ve been through hell today and I’m worried about semantics.” He sighed and tucked Severus’ hair behind his ear. “Well, I won’t do it again, that’s for sure. Can you look up so I can see your buttons? Ah, that’s it.”

“H-Harry? To treat me, you’ll have to remove everything, I think. My legs hurt too.”

“Oh.” Harry blushed too. “Are you going to be comfortable with that?”

“I don’t have much of a choice, but yes. Do take care with me, though. I am nervous.”

Harry frowned and paused on Severus’ third button. He lifted his face to look Severus in the eyes. “Nervous as in traumatised or nervous as in it’s the first time?”

“Perhaps a bit of b-both—ah, gods, that hurts.”

“Okay, Sev. We’ll just start with your robes and go from there.”

Through a terrible spasm, Severus managed to wheeze out a thank you. Harry frowned at his obvious pain and worked faster on the buttons, growling in frustration when some stuck.

With a whimper, Severus murmured, “Aperclavis.” His remaining buttons fell open in one fell swoop.

“Well, that’s one way to do it.” Harry gently eased the man’s robe off of his shoulders and the shirt underneath. “Can you lift your arms, sweetheart?”

Severus glared and tugged his arms free. “I’m not an invalid.”

“Of course not, but you are in pain.”
“Humph.” Severus tossed his robe and shirt into a nearby chair. When he realised he was half naked under Harry’s gaze, he shrunk in on himself, crossing his arms over his chest.

Harry traced a gentle hand along the man’s collarbone and arm. “Mm. You’re gorgeous, Sev.”

Severus lifted fearful dark eyes to Harry’s. “H-how can you think that?”

“Well, partially because I love you.” Harry kissed him softly and soothed Severus’ fears. “And mostly because it’s true.”

Severus hesitantly let his arms fall, trembling hard and terrified Harry would reject him. Instead, a gentle hand caressed his belly just over the open zip of his trousers, stroking through the fine trail of hair under his navel. Severus gasped and straightened, and regretted it as a surge of anguish shot through his left side. He grimaced and ducked back down, shielding his ribs and panting.

“I’m sorry, Sev,” Harry said in a worried voice. “I just meant to reassure you. Are you okay?”

“Mm, just heal me. Hurts to breathe.”

“All right. Lie on your right side if you can.”

Severus crawled onto the bed, kicking off his shoes on the way, and lay down. Harry climbed up beside him and slipped his hands under Severus’ shielding arm as gently as possible. Even so, Harry’s touch sent a shock like lightning through Severus’ chest and stole his breath.

Harry winced. “Gods. I’m sorry, love. Hold on.” He closed his eyes and stuck out his tongue in concentration.

‘Adorable,’ Severus thought, and flushed immediately. Merlin, he was becoming an absolute sop with Harry. Still, given the alternative, he could live with it.

Without warning, an intense wave of healing energy flowed into his body, hot and tingling and soothing all at once. Severus bowed back from the power of it, gasping at the feel of flesh knitting and bones healing instantly. Harry opened his eyes at the sound, and Severus’ breath caught. Harry’s eyes were glowing, full of a soft viridian light that rendered him absolutely stunning.

Stunning and intimidating. Never, in all his research, had Severus once come across a record of a Shaman’s eyes actually glowing with their power.

“Dear Merlin,” he breathed.

With a groan, Harry moved away from Severus’ ribs and swayed almost on top of his patient.

“Harry!” Severus grabbed Harry’s shoulder. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, just a bit dizzy. I tried a different technique—tried thinking about how much I love you as I worked. It seemed to help you heal more, but I wasn’t expecting it to take so much of my own power.” Harry shook himself and rubbed his forehead. “Ah, there. I’m okay now. Well, a bit tired, but we’ll sleep together once you’re taken care of, hmm?”

Severus nodded. “I think … you have healed most of it in that one burst. I will still need salve on the lashes … lower down my body and on my ribs, but the rest appears to be healed.” He stretched experimentally. “At least, it does not hurt any longer.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “Good. Turn over and let me get a look at your back.”
A lance of fear shot through Severus’ heart. “Harry, I … I have many scars.”

Harry stroked Severus’ cheek and hair. “It’s all right, Sev. Nothing will change. I love you.”

Severus sighed and hesitantly turned onto his stomach, struggling to hide his fear that Harry would turn him away once he realised how unattractive he really was. Gentle fingertips stroked a line from Severus’ right shoulder to the left side of his waist, and Severus shuddered. That scar—he knew it well. It was the worst, gained from his father’s whip at the ripe old age of five. It had not healed well.

Harry whispered, “Oh, love.”

“What? Is it too much? Forgive me.” Severus hated the sound of panic in his voice, but he couldn’t stop it.

Gentle lips caressed the nape of his neck, and Severus froze. Somehow, Harry’s kiss felt warm and cool at once, soothing and arousing in tandem, and Severus’ breath hitched at the sensations it brought. At least breathing no longer sent electric shocks through his ribs, or his mate’s touch would have been more pain than pleasure.

Harry whispered against Severus’ neck, “Okay?”

Severus could only nod, breathless as he was. Harry gently shifted Severus’ hair to one side, baring his throat and cheek, and kissed along the back of Severus’ neck up to his ear. Tingling, fiery sensation raced down his spine, curling through his chest and shoulders, down to the tips of his toes. Severus could not decide if he wanted to arch back or melt into the man’s touch.

“Oh.” It was a soft sound, more breath than voice, and Severus flushed at the obvious desire in his tone.

“Mm, Sev.” Harry moved back down Severus’ neck with the tip of his tongue, and Severus gasped. Arching into Harry’s touch, he tried to turn over and kiss his mate senseless, but Harry eased him back onto his stomach instead.

“Wait,” Harry said in a soft voice, his voice thick with the same arousal stealing Severus’ breath. “Let me show you this first, love.”

Severus nodded and buried his face into the quilt lest he start moaning.

Tender kisses and gentle nips started at the top of Severus’ right shoulder, making him shiver and squirm with anticipation. He had half expected Harry to kiss up his neck on the other side, but instead, the man kissed downwards and across, following a diagonal line across his back. As he continued down Severus’ side, the older man realised what Harry was doing.

He was making love to Severus’ scars. Letting Severus know he was wanted and loved for what he was.

Tears pricked Severus’ lids and his arousal morphed into something softer, something sweeter. His still-recovering body wasn’t quite ready for more, but knowing Harry loved him in spite of his flaws healed something long-since broken inside Severus.

“Harry, gods, how I love you.”

Harry moved back up Severus’ body and turned him over, catching him into a tender kiss. His tongue lapped at the part of Severus’ lips but did not press further, giving Severus the tentative confidence to open, just a bit. Harry slipped just the tip of his tongue in and traced his tentative
Severus gasp at the unexpected sensation. Harry pulled back with a smile.

“If I do too much more of that,” he said in a breathless voice, “we’ll both be in a state.”

Severus caressed Harry’s cheek. “Thank you.”

“Mm? For what, pet?”

“For … showing me you accept me. For loving me. For stopping even though I can see you would much rather not.”

Harry kissed Severus’ palm. “Part of loving you is knowing when you need rest more than fun. And right now is one of those times. Though I admit to getting a bit carried away on your back. It was just so … so good to feel you melt under me.” He shivered. “Better stop talking about it or I’m going to be in a state anyway.”

Severus chuckled. “Yes, love. What else do you need to do to treat me? Shall we take a look at my legs? They do not hurt any longer, but it wouldn’t hurt to be safe.”

“Mm-hmm.” Harry paused. “Sev, I’ll have to take your trousers off for that at the least. Do I need to take your pants off too?”

“Mm, you might check that I do not still have lashes on my bum, though I may be able to handle it myself.”

Harry flushed. “That’s a yes. All right.” He took a deep breath. “Um, would you be more comfortable if I … if I took my kit off too? So you’re not alone?”

Severus choked. “Dear gods, no. I would end up breaking my resolution to be a good little patient for certain.”

Harry laughed. “Okay, next time then. But tell me if you’re scared?”

“Harry, you are so gentle and considerate of me, I do not think I can be.”

“Well, just in case.”

“Very well. Should I become uncomfortable, I will tell you.”

“Thank you.”

Harry gently and efficiently removed Severus’ remaining clothing, reassuring him all the while with loving words and soft touches meant to soothe and not arouse. Though once he had the man completely nude and Severus was blushing to his ears, Harry pressed the lightest kiss to Severus’ flaccid tip. Heat and fire surged through Severus at the soft touch, and he couldn’t help imagining how much more it would be with Harry’s entire mouth around him. He gasped, his hips arching into Harry’s touch of their own volition. Harry gave it a little lick before pulling away, and Severus whimpered at a second, much stronger wave of desire. Gods. He had never imagined anything could feel so good.

“Oh kay, love,” Harry soothed, rubbing gently down Severus’ side. “I just wanted to show you that I do find your gorgeous body attractive.”

Severus grabbed Harry’s hand, tugging him into a kiss. “Merlin, I felt it. Do that again and I will not let you stop, weakened or not.”
Harry chuckled. “Next time I won’t. For now, just turn on your stomach and let me see the damage, Sev.”

As it turned out, Severus did have some bruising to the back of his right thigh and faint cuts across his bum, which Harry dispatched easily with some salve. More of it on his ribs took care of the rest of his injuries, at least as much as they could be healed for the moment, and satisfied, Harry helped the man into clean pants and a pair of his white pyjamas.

“Mm, I’ve missed seeing this,” Harry said softly, tracing down Severus’ buttons. “Having you beside me.”

Severus kissed his forehead. “Go dress for sleep yourself, and then we shall rest.”

“Didn’t you want to talk first, Sev?”

“Now that you mention it, I think we should.”

Harry nodded and stripped down to his pants without batting an eyelash. Severus’ breath caught. “Oh, Harry.”

The boy stood, blushing. “Shite. Forgot I’m not in the dorms there for a second.”

Severus laughed. “I do not mind. Truly, you are beautiful.”

Harry flushed all the way to his navel. “Oh. Um, I have to—I want a clean pair of pants, Sev, so if it’s going to bother you ….”

Fire flickered in his groin. “Merlin. Do it behind the screen or I shan’t be able to keep my hands to myself.”

Harry laughed and dug in the wardrobe for a pair of pyjamas and pants—blue sleep trousers with a snitch pattern, white boxers, and a grey tee. “Be right back.”

The young man vanished behind the screen and returned dressed for bed. Severus had little time to lament asking him to leave and missing out on the rest of his body before Harry had climbed in beside him and snuggled into his arms.

“Okay,” he said with a sigh. “Now that I’m back where I’m meant to be, tell me, love, why did you come back to me?”


Harry stroked Severus’ cheek. “I swear, I won’t go anywhere. We’re going to talk this out, sweetheart. Let’s just start with what was on your heart when you apologised to me earlier. When you came in your soul form.”

Severus closed his eyes and thought back to that terrible, frightening moment. “I was absolutely terrified. I knew I had made a horrible mistake, but I hadn’t the slightest idea how to fix it. All I could think of was to show you that your love had changed me from the first day, to try to apologise to you like you had done for me and hoped you realised what I meant by it.”

“I remembered, love, but that wasn’t quite what I wanted to know.” Harry fiddled with his sleeve and chewed on his lip, obviously at a loss.

Severus kissed his mouth to get him to stop abusing himself. “Be gentle to yourself.” He smoothed a
finger tip over Harry’s lip to make his meaning clear.

Harry nodded, but his eyes still held worry.

“Pet, what exactly is bothering you? What are you afraid of?”

Harry winced. “I just … I love you so much, Severus. All year, I’ve been in love with you without even knowing.”

Severus blanched. “Harry, I am not the same man as the Prince. I have grown up since then. I thought we had established this.”

“Yes, I know. I was actually talking about … well, you. As you are now. I didn’t understand why I needed your forgiveness so badly until I realised you and the Prince were the same person, nor why I felt so close to you so quickly.” Harry nuzzled close. “But when I realised who you were, well, pieces just started coming together. I’ve been in love with both your forms for a long time now, Sev. Not just the Prince.”

Severus’ breath caught. “H-Harry. You … truly? Even when I was so hard on you?”

“I knew what you were under the masks. Or at least I suspected. I … I wanted to get through them so badly. You were so broken, so hurt underneath, I don’t know. Maybe because I’m a Shaman, it drew me. I wanted to heal you.”

Severus gave him a soft smile. “Or because we are soul mates.”

“Yeah.”

To Severus’ dismay, the mention of their connection seemed to depress Harry rather than reassure him.

“Harry, please. Tell me what hurts you.”

Harry took a deep breath and met Severus’ eyes. “Right. I’m a Gryffindor, aren’t I?” He steeled himself. “Okay. What’s bothering me—I want to know what drove you back to me after Dumbledore talked to you. Was it fear or love?” He blinked tears back. “Because if you just came back just out of the fear that you’d go soul mad, I’m not sure I can bear it.”

Severus frowned and crossed his arms over his chest, fearful of being rejected.

“It’s okay, Sev. Just tell me the truth. Whatever your answer, we’ll find a way to work through it.”

The bravery and pain in Harry’s eyes gave Severus courage to speak. He couldn’t leave the boy in doubt, because he did love Harry. But he was also terrified of losing his mind, and even more afraid Harry would leave him for it.

Still, Harry deserved the truth.

Severus swallowed hard and hugged his chest, squeezing his eyes tightly shut. One wrong word—he couldn’t bear to see Harry look at him with disappointment or hatred.

“I-it was both, honestly. Of course I was afraid of being soul mad—who wouldn’t be? But I also came back because the idea of watching you die or lose your beautiful soul, one that radiates kindness and love—the idea was absolutely appalling. Especially since I had no one but myself to blame. I was sick with fear at the idea of what my mistakes might cost you.”
He opened his eyes a bit and found Harry wasn’t scowling, so perhaps he hadn’t bollixed it up too badly yet. He tentatively laid a hand on Harry’s cheek and let out a sigh when Harry did not turn away.

Severus pressed closer, encouraged. “But there was also … without you, I was bleeding. Dying. I couldn’t breathe for the pain, and not just because of my injuries or the soul tear. I wanted you to come home so I could erase that look—that last look you gave me when you walked away and you were trying to be brave for my sake—gods. I shall never forget it as long as I live.”

Harry caressed Severus’ cheek and kissed him lightly. “If you ask me, Sev, both of those reasons sound like love. You were afraid not so much for yourself, but for me. And you missed me and regretted that you hurt me. So … I think maybe I shouldn’t have been angry with you at all earlier.” He kissed Severus tenderly until his fears eased. “I’m sorry, love. I thought you only wanted me back to keep yourself from going mad, and that was terrible of me.”

Severus shook his head slowly. “I … I was afraid for myself, yes, but I could hardly think of it over the horror of what I had done to you.”

Harry held Severus close and kissed him hard. “Merlin, I was an idiot, Sev.” He peppered kisses between words. “You’re the least selfish person I know and I thought … I was so stupid. Will you forgive me?”

Severus’ lips curled up in a hesitant smile. “You … you are not angry?”

“At you, no. I’m a bit angry at myself.”

Severus kissed him lightly. “Don’t be. It has been a terrible day, and we were both past our limits. Let us just vow not to be so hasty in the future and move on.”

Harry smiled. “So I’m forgiven?”

“Of course, pet. Though I do not think you need it.”

Harry sighed. “Good. Do you want to try to sleep then? I know you’re tired.”

“I am not positive that I can, but I will try so long as you stay with me.”

Harry nodded and scooted down the bed a bit. “I want to stay. Don’t worry.” He laid his head on Severus’ chest and curled close. “Do you mind if I sleep like this? I need to hear your heartbeat.”

Severus draped an arm around Harry’s shoulders and kissed the top of his head. “It is soothing for me as well. Rest now, pet. Perhaps with you to keep me calm, I may at least manage a nap.”

“I hope so. Do you need a potion?”

“I have taken too many already. It is best to attempt to sleep naturally for now.”

“All right. Just, if you get scared, remember you’re safe and I’m right here with you. For real, this time.”

Severus smiled and hugged Harry tight. “Yes. You are here, and we are home.”

Harry smiled and settled into sleep. To his surprise, Severus was not long after him.
Harry jolted awake with the distinct feeling that something was wrong. He frowned and rubbed his eyes, trying to remember where he was and why. He gasped as the events of the past day came back to him: Severus’ turning and rescue, Petunia going mad, and the bumpy path to reconciliation after Severus had broken it off with Harry, terrified he would hurt him.

Wait. That was the problem. Where had Severus gone?

Heartsick and terrified, Harry raced to his feet and darted towards the hearth, but on his way, realised the light was on in the loo. He breathed a sigh of relief and chided himself for his mistrust and irrational fear. Severus had almost broken himself to pieces that afternoon to prove his love. The least Harry could do was trust him.

With a shake of his head, Harry padded into the kitchen to see what he had to work with for a meal. Briefly, he debated on calling Dobby, but no. Harry had no idea what time it was and he wanted to cook for Severus anyway. The man would have special needs now that the house elves might not understand. Harry bit his lip, trying to remember what kind of foods vampires liked besides rare meat.

Iron. That was it. Severus would need foods high in iron. Dark leafy greens, fish and meat, beans, legumes, and nightshade family vegetables—like tomatoes and potatoes—were all good. Eggs too. Hmm. He could make something from that. Maybe soup and a cheese toastie would do since Harry wasn’t sure how much solid food Severus could handle at the moment. A meat stew might be good, though it wouldn’t be as rare as Severus would prefer. Chicken might work in that case.

His menu settled, Harry moved to the kitchen and turned on the sconces. “Sev? Love, I’m going to make us some dinner. Just come join me when you’re ready.”

He got a noncommittal grunt as a reply and judged that the man was still half asleep.

“You can lie back down while I’m cooking if you need to, love.”

Severus didn’t answer, so Harry shrugged and set to prepping his veg and getting some chicken on to boil. By the time Harry had finished peeling and cutting carrots, onions, celery, and potatoes, Severus still hadn’t come out of the loo nor made a sound. Harry laid the spinach leaves he’d gathered for extra iron aside and turned the heat down on the chicken. Something told him Severus wasn’t just bathing and Harry would be needed in the loo for a while.

“Sev, sweetheart, are you all right?”
“No.” It was a plaintive whisper, spoken in the voice of someone lost.

“Do you want me to come in?”

“I … I think … I ….”

Harry suppressed a sigh and Summoned some bandages. Merlin, what he wouldn’t give to be able to help Severus past this. With a sad shake of his head, he placed his hand on the knob.

“Sev, I’m coming in, okay?”

“O-okay.”

Gods, the man sounded totally lost. Harry’s heart ached as he stepped into the bathroom, prepared to cast bubblehead charms on himself if necessary. Severus’ blood was dangerous now. They had to remember that. Severus would never forgive himself if he turned Harry through their own carelessness.

But when Harry stepped inside, there wasn’t a drop of blood to be found. Severus stood with his usual knife in hand, poised over the mark, but he hadn’t cut. His expression hurt Harry, the mix of fear, shame, and confusion enough to brand his very soul.

With a sad smile, Harry went to Severus’ side and eased the knife from his trembling hand. “What is it, love?”

“I … I can’t do it.”

Harry gave him a careful smile. “Well, that’s progress, isn’t it?”

Severus shook his head. “You do not understand. I want to do it, but I cannot. My blood is poison. I cannot endanger you by my illness.”

Harry winced. “Oh. So you’re still in just as bad of a place, but now you’re stuck without a way to deal with the pain?”

“Y-yes.” Severus’ face contorted with grief and he sank to his knees. “I cannot get them out of my head! Over and over … I feel it on my tongue, I taste it and … and I … I hear them telling me I will lose my mind, my morals … you. Everything that matters.”

“There’s no one here but you and me, Sev.” Harry cupped his hands over Severus’ ears. “Does that help at all? Knowing I’m here to shield you?”

“No. It is inside me. I can’t … can’t stop thinking of it.”

Harry knelt with Severus and kissed him lightly. “What about that?”

“I ….”

Harry cradled Severus’ face and kissed every surface of his skin, soft, loving touches that made his mate quiver with each caress. Across his forehead. Down the bridge of his nose. Across his eyelashes and the sweep of his cheekbones. Along his ears and his angular jaw. Before long, Severus was turning into him, holding Harry’s waist and whispering his name and soft pleas for more. Harry left Severus’ lips for last, finally sealing his purifying ritual with a tender kiss.

Against Severus’ lips, Harry whispered, “And that?”
Severus growled and caught Harry against him, kissing him hard enough to make the younger man tip backwards. Harry let slip a little moan and slid his hands into Severus’ hair, parting his lips for the older man and teasing him inside. Severus shuddered at the first touch of Harry’s tongue.

Worried, Harry started to pull away, but Severus grabbed the back of his head and tugged him right back, sealing his mouth with an aggressive kiss that stole the breath from Harry. Severus was still inexperienced and clumsy, but Harry couldn’t care under that kind of sensual assault. He moaned long and low and kissed back for all he was worth, panting through his nose and clutching helplessly at Severus’ pyjamas.

Harry made a little mewl of protest when Severus pulled away, despite the fact that his lips were most definitely bruised and Severus might have nicked his tongue by accident at some point. The man couldn’t always control his fangs yet, but the magic in his saliva had healed Harry immediately. He had hardly felt the sting.

“Dear **Merlin**, that was amazing,” Harry panted against Severus’ shoulder. “Why in the bloody hell were you worried about disappointing me, Sev? That’s the best kiss I’ve ever had. Not that I’ve much to compare it to, but still. Holy shite, I think I’m on fire.”

Severus gave a shocked snort. “The best kiss you have ever had is with a complete neophyte, kneeling on the cold floor of the loo, and after trying to distract your partner from a mental breakdown? **Merlin**, you truly **don’t** have much to compare to if that takes first prize.”

Harry laughed. “Prat. It doesn’t matter where or when. I always feel it when you kiss me. That was the first time you really let go, and please tell me you’ll do it more often. I felt it down to my toes.”

Severus kissed Harry gently. “Perhaps not in the middle of the loo floor.” He climbed to his feet with a groan and rubbed his ribs before helping Harry to his feet. “If it matters, that was my best kiss as well. Though I still think … the first one you gave me, in our soul forms—I was stunned and thrilled and terrified all at once, but it was lovely all the same.”

Harry smiled. “I hope we have many more to compare them to.” He stroked Severus’ arm, where the mark was now hidden by his sleeve. “Did it help at all, love?”

“Yes, pet. By the time you made it to my cheeks, I had forgotten everything but the feel of your lips on me.”

Harry nodded. “Then the next time you feel like this and you can’t talk about your pain, come to me and I’ll take care of you. I’d much prefer this method of calming you anyway. It hurts me to see you bleeding and in pain.”

Severus laid his head upon Harry’s. “I cannot regret it. It brought me you.”

Harry nuzzled Severus’ neck. “I’m just glad you’re healing. Are you okay now? Do you need more?”

“Mm, I would not say no to more, but I believe I am able to cope now.” Severus moved back and took Harry’s hand instead. “Did I hear you say you were cooking for us?”

Harry nodded. “Well, I’m not absolutely sure of what would be good for you right now, but I’m trying. Anyway, come rest in the kitchen and talk to me while I finish the prep.”

“Would it not be easier to let me prep? I am quite handy with a knife.”

Harry winced. “Y-yeah.”
Severus kissed the young man’s temple. “Forgive me. I only meant my potions knife, love. Potions and cookery borrow from the same skillset.”

Harry nodded and wrapped an arm around his stomach, trying to hold in the cold feeling, the fear he didn’t want Severus to see. It wasn’t Sev’s fault. He was trying to cope and maybe they had found an alternate method to keep him from going too far adrift, but Harry was afraid he would fall back to the old ways, vampiric blood or not. And Harry hated to see Severus hurt.

“Harry? Are you well?”

Harry gave him a brave smile. “I’m okay. I just … I hope this new method sticks.”

Severus turned Harry around and caressed the younger man’s cheek. “Dealing with my … problem has been difficult for you, hasn’t it, love?”

Harry gasped. “No! No, I … I mean, it’s not easy but I can handle it. Please. I don’t … don’t feel bad. It’s not your fault.”

“Ssh.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “I am sorry, love, that I have had to lean on you so hard. Now, I wish you to lean on me. I am well. Come here and take strength from me. Come, don’t be afraid. All is well.”

Harry fidgeted, unsure. “But … but I don’t want you to … to think you can’t come to me anymore because I can’t handle it sometimes or because your blood is dangerous now. I was ready to cast Bubblehead charms when I walked in, if I needed to. I don’t want to … if I were turned because I was careless, you’d blame yourself forever. I don’t want that. I just … I want to keep helping you, so I have to be strong.”

“Harry, is that what you have thought all this time? That I will cast you out in my moments of weakness if you show fear or hurt? Both of which are completely understandable when your partner is in pain?”

Harry winced and lowered his head. “M’sorry.”

Severus sighed and folded Harry into his arms. “Ssh. It is not your fault. I am afraid I have been remiss in my duties to you again.”

Harry nuzzled Severus’ face. “Ssh. No, you … it’s not your fault. I just … I’m just trying to be what you need.”

“You are, and you need not do anything special. Your love is my hope, pet.” Severus kissed Harry’s hair. “It’s all right. Tell me your fears. I will not bar you from assisting me in the future.”

Harry whimpered. “It’s just … I just hate seeing you cut open and bleeding. I can’t stand it. And I hate that I feel that way. You can’t help this, and I don’t want to make you feel bad about it, but Merlin, I can’t bear to see you in pain. I wish I could take it away.”

“Hmm. Albus has said the same things.” Severus kissed Harry gently. “I know, pet. I know it hurts you to see me suffering. And I am trying. I truly am trying to put it behind me. But yesterday ….” He shuddered. “The memories were so terrible, and the nightmares … gods. I needed to shut it out for a time.” He tipped Harry’s chin up. “But you did that for me with your kisses, and so there was no need to harm myself this time. Thank you. I think, if you will consent to help me through this, I will recover one day.”

Harry blinked back tears and gave him a shaky smile. “I’d love to, Sev. I’d much rather kiss your
“Pain away than bandage you up.” He paused. “Sev, is your mark hurting at all?”

“No. I may need to take more blood from you soon, but for the moment, I am not thirsty. Not for that at least.” Severus shut his eyes and lowered his head, his shame apparent, though someone less close to him than Harry might not have noticed.

“You’re perfect, Severus,” Harry said softly. “Just the way you are.”

Severus sighed. “Hardly, but I am glad you think so. Now, what do you say we put the maudlin Gryffindor sap away for the time being and finish dinner? I am hungry for food.”

Harry nodded and returned to the kitchen. He washed the potatoes again and checked the chicken. As it was done, he removed it from the stove. Severus peered into the pot and looked over Harry’s vegetable selections.

“Hmm. Chicken stew?”

“Yeah, Florentine style.” He held up the spinach. “Going to put in a few savoury spices too, I think, but I’m making it up as I go, so don’t put too much stock into it—ha!”

Severus rolled his eyes. “That was awful.”

Harry took a bow. “Thank you, I’m here all week.”

Severus snorted. “Little prat.”

“Oi!”

Severus chuckled and kissed Harry’s head. “I was only teasing. Anyway, the stew is a good choice, I think. The broth should help with my recovery and these vegetables are all acceptable for my new … diet. The spinach is for iron?”

“Yes.”

“Well done. What would you have me do to help? Other than scold you for bad puns?”

Harry laughed. “Um, I think it’s mostly done, really. Well, other than the actual cooking. Prep work is the tough part with stew.”

“Well, I shall handle the seasoning then, hmm?”

“Works for me. You know herbs better than I do.”

“Very well. I believe this chicken is ready. I will cool and shred it while you prepare the broth and vegetables.”

“Yes, sir!”

Severus chuckled and levitated the cooked chicken onto a dish. He moved to the counter to prep it and let Harry take care of the rest. Working together, they had a decent-looking stew and a couple of cheese toasties apiece ready in about half an hour. Harry dished the stew out, choosing to sit beside Severus rather than across from him. The man was still recovering and Harry wanted to be close by if he needed comfort.

“Well, here goes nothing!” Harry scooped up a bite of the stew and grinned at the taste. “Oh, nice.” He frowned. “I hope it still tastes good for you.”
Severus slipped his free hand to Harry’s thigh and held him as he cautiously tried a bite. He chewed for a moment, his expression thoughtful.

“I think the vampire in me prefers rarer meat, and the flavours are … changed somehow, but it is still quite palatable. It is good, only in a different way than I am used to.”

Harry smiled. “As long as you like it, that’s okay with me.”

“Mm-hmm.” Severus returned to his meal, and the two ate in silence until the sharp edge of hunger faded. Once they had finished, Severus set the dishes to wash and led Harry back to the sofa in the living room.

“Now that we have slept some and eaten, I think I should tell you what I discovered while I was a captive.”

Harry shuddered. “Sev, are you sure it’s wise to go through it so soon? I mean, you’re still recovering and you just … had a setback.”

“It will be worse if I wait, I fear.”

Harry nudged Severus back against the sofa and climbed into his lap. “Then hold me like this. It might help you to know you’re still safe, and honestly, I’m going to need it too.”

“As you wish.” Severus settled Harry astride his thighs and held him tight. “Then, onto my tale.”

Harry nodded and took Severus’ hand, holding him tight.

“After your relatives treated you so badly,” Severus murmured, “I wanted to be close at hand in case they attempted to hurt you. So I hid myself under wards and watched over you from your relatives’ back lawn.”

“You were there?” Harry pouted. “If I’d known, I’d have spent the day with you.”

“It would only have gotten us both killed.”

Harry frowned. “But the wards—”

Severus let slip a bitter laugh. “Yes, in regards to those, I should have realised they had fallen much sooner, but I was sorely distracted. Between my worry over the antidote and over you, I am afraid I did not recall the ward against animals when I saw a tabby cat cross the lawn, or I would have known something was amiss.”

Harry blanched. “They … the wards were down the entire time?”

Severus winced. “My fault, I am afraid. The blood wards only worked as long as your family accepted you, after a fashion. When I cursed Petunia so viciously, she ….”

“She wanted me out,” Harry said softly. “To the point that she rejected me as her kin.”

Severus nodded. “And that broke the wards.”

“Does that mean I’ve lost their protection? Was I there long enough for them to take hold?”

Severus shuddered. “I am … unsure. They may be weakened. But you should have most of the protection you have always had.”
“Not much then.” Harry nuzzled Severus’ throat. “Don’t blame yourself, love. You were only trying to keep me safe.”

“I should have stayed there and protected you.”

“You were afraid of being seen, Sev. Ssh. You did what you could, and it’s not your fault my relatives are insane.” Harry laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “Professor Dumbledore said they admitted Petunia to the Janus Thickey ward at St. Mungo’s.”

“Merlin. Did he say why?”

“I imagine the shock of discovering her and her dear Duddykins are squibs broke what little control she had over her mind to begin with.”

Severus scowled. “Such foolish, ignorant—why do they fear magic so?”

“It’s … different. They hate anything different from themselves. Gays, non-Christians, immigrants, everyone who isn’t a white, middle-class, Muggle Christian is poison to them.”

“Those people are religious? I have seen nothing of faith in them.”

Harry snorted. “I think it only applies to people they like.”

“Well then, if there is a higher power out there and it does conform to the Christian model, I imagine they will be quite unpleasantly surprised when it comes time for them to meet him.”

Harry chuckled. “Karma is a bitch, I guess.”

Severus playfully swatted Harry’s bum. “My, such a foul mouth we have.”

Harry smirked. “Does it turn you on?” He teased Severus’ throat with the tip of his tongue, and the older man gasped and tilted his head back.

“Ghn, rather the opposite, but that is certainly having an effect on me.”

Harry suckled his throat, drawing a low moan out of Severus, but the man pulled back with a pant.

“H-Harry, as good as that feels, we must focus.”

Harry nodded and settled for tracing his fingers up and down Severus’ chest instead. “Sorry, love. So what happened after you figured out the wards were down?”

“That is the problem. I did not realise they were down until it was too late.” Severus shivered. “I stayed at your former domicile until after you fell asleep.”

“How did you know I was sleeping?”

“Until you fell unconscious, your fear and nervousness filtered through our bond.”

Harry blushed. “I … I was so worried. About them and about you, and I kept thinking something awful was going to happen. I just … I didn’t understand what.”

“You sensed it?” Severus rubbed his chin. “Perhaps you have some latent skill as a Seer. It is something we should look into at any rate.”

“I think it was just intuition. I’ve always been like that.”
Severus nodded. “Perhaps you are correct. Still, it would not hurt to ask Firenze to test you.”

“Sure, but I’ve never been any good at Divination.”

Severus snorted. “Divination as a class is a joke. True sight cannot be taught. Firenze knows this, and that is why he focuses his lessons on the metaphysical, on trying to explain what exists beyond physical sight rather than forcing people without an ounce of intuition to read tea leaves and choke on incense.”

Harry shuddered. “The incense is the worst.”

“Yes, I know.” Severus held him tighter. “Moving on, however. Shortly after you fell asleep, I was Summoned. Earlier that day, I had made plans to attempt to steal more of Malfoy’s blood the next time I was Summoned, as I did not have enough samples left to continue my experimentation. So when I felt the mark burn, I hurried back to Hogwarts to change and pack up my portable lab. Once I had finished, I rushed straight to the Dark Lord’s potion lab and removed the wards on the blood samples and vampiric potions.”

He frowned. “That is where the night took a strange turn. I was able to dismantle the wards and managed to procure several new samples, but as I was placing the last ward on the pocket I had stored them in, I was caught. And I learned the wards were keyed to kill anyone with my magical signature. There is no way the Dark Lord made a mistake and I did not have time to alter my signature, so I do not know how I survived.”

Harry leaned into him. “Maybe it’s because we’re soulmates, love. Since the bond has grown, it might have affected our magic. You did say it would eventually merge.”

Severus gasped and clutched at Harry. “Oh Merlin. That must be it.” He kissed Harry with awe and wonder shining in his eyes. “You saved me. Your love for me saved me.”

Harry returned his affection with soft, loving kisses of his own. “I always will, Sev.” He pulled back and frowned. “Who caught you?”

“Malfoy. He came up behind me and bragged about the wards for a bit, then hit me in the back with a petrifying jinx as I was trying to leave. I … I do not know why I could not throw it off.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “I knew that sleazy little prat was involved in this somehow.”

“You are right. It was he who invented the potions.”

“I knew it!” Harry frowned. “But I thought you said he wasn’t skilled enough.”

Severus nodded, his expression wary. “I believe he has done something, some kind of ritual to increase his natural intelligence, at the cost of his sanity.”

“Dear Merlin. Nothing is worth that.”

Severus shuddered. “I completely agree.”

Harry hugged the man tight and kissed him tenderly. “Ssh. You’re still the same man I fell in love with. You’re still you. We just have a few extra needs now.”

“I … Merlin, what did I ever do to deserve you?” Severus cupped Harry’s face. “You are lovely. Absolutely lovely. Gods, how did I get so lucky?”
Tears formed at the corners of Harry’s eyes. “Well, I feel the same way, Severus. You’re my hope, my love, my light. And you’re still okay. So tell me what happened next. What makes you think Malfoy’s done something to himself?”

Severus shook his head. “He said … strange things. They sounded as if he was teasing me, mocking me with knowledge out of my reach, but I do not understand it.”

“Tell me.”

“I would rather show you the memory. Will you watch it with me?”

Harry winced. “All right. I … it’s going to be difficult to watch you suffer, though.”

“I will not make you endure my torture. I do not remember much from it at any rate, and I learned very little from being turned that we do not know already.”

“Okay. Then … do we have the pensieve?”

Severus shook his head. “No, but Albus does.”

“Will he be awake at this hour?”

“Even if he is not, he will not wish to delay this meeting. And I must make an appearance soon or the entire Order will be beating down my door and accusing me of betraying them.”

Harry growled. “Over my dead body.”

Severus nuzzled Harry’s cheek. “My hero. But come, let us meet with him.”

Harry nodded and let Severus lead him to the floo.

Severus paused at the fireplace. “Pet, I will need to call Minerva into this meeting as well. Will you be able to pretend to be my friend and nothing more?”

Harry closed his eyes. “Can I still hug you if you’re scared?”

“Of course. But be careful about kissing me or where you touch me. Anything too intimate will give us away.”

Harry nodded and tugged Severus into a passionate kiss. “That should tide me over then.”

Severus stood, looking a bit dazed. “Ah. Merlin. I need a moment now.”

Harry chuckled. “Sorry, not sorry.”

Severus frowned. “I do hope we can keep this secret. I would love to announce you to the world, but the governors … I am afraid they would not see our relationship as I do.”

“Maybe not, but listen to me, Sev. If they do find out about us and try to sack you or get in between us, we’ll stay here. They can’t get in here and Professor Dumbledore would surely protect us. We can’t separate now, not with being bonded three times over.”

Severus blinked. “Three times?”

“Once for our souls, once because of the bond between a vampire and his donor, and once because we love each other.” Harry cupped Severus’ cheeks. “Whatever happens, nothing and no one will
separate us, okay?"

Severus laid his hands over Harry’s and nodded. “I swear it.”

“I swear to you as well.” Harry kissed him lightly and stepped back. “Now, are you okay to meet the others?”

Severus nodded and tossed a pinch of powder into the fire. “Albus Dumbledore’s office, Hogwarts.”
On Equal Ground

Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** none. **Summary:** Harry meets with Albus and Severus, and the Weasleys, Remus, and McGonagall crash the party. Severus deals with the first setback of his new condition, and once he's under control and they managed to convince the others that Harry is a capable adult, they discuss what Severus has learned and how to deal with it.

***AN: I added a drawing to chapter 12 if anyone wants to check it out.***

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CHAPTER 22

ON EQUAL GROUND

Harry stepped out of the floo and into a warzone. Dumbledore sat behind his desk, a cup of tea in hand and his expression somewhere between amused and besieged. On the other side of the room, McGonagall had worked herself into quite the tiff, and Molly Weasley looked close to detonation. Arthur stood by and let the women rage, his expression weary and annoyed by turns.

Harry stumbled and regained his balance; no one but Dumbledore seemed to have noticed his presence at all. With a wink at the old man, Harry kept silent and stepped aside so that Severus would not topple him over when he came through as well.

“—How many times will you allow this to happen?” McGonagall huffed and slammed her hand down on Dumbledore’s desk. “The boy continually rushes into danger, no thought to his own welfare, and you simply sit back and let him have his way! When will you put your foot down, Albus? How many times must he risk his life before it’s enough?”

A gentle hand fell on Harry’s shoulder, letting him know Severus was with him. The older man squeezed Harry’s shoulder and ran a discreet hand through the back of his hair before letting it drop. Harry stepped a little closer to his warmth, but did not dare touch him. Not before this audience.

As McGonagall started into a new tirade, this time with Molly to back her, Harry looked up at Severus and whispered through their bond, “Um … are we enemies now?”

Severus looked to those present and gave the slightest shake of his head. “There is little point in continuing that deception. I am no longer a spy.”

Relieved, Harry squeezed Severus’ hand before turning to watch the show.

“And another thing,” Molly was saying, “Harry would’ve had no need to go off after Severus at all had you not continually forced the boy into danger spying on the Death Eaters!”

Severus gave Harry a disgusted look. “Boy?”

Harry covered his mouth to suppress a snicker. “My boy.”

Severus grimaced. “Oh gods. Albus calls me that.”
Harry buried his face in Severus’ side to keep from laughing. Severus sent a chuckle over their link and ran his hand through Harry’s hair.

“Now, Molly,” Albus said in a voice as serene as ever, “I would like it said that I have urged Severus to stop spying many times these past few months. He did not feel he could, not with the threat of ….” He paused and gave her a sorrowful look. “Regardless, Harry did not rush into dang—”


“Merlin. She said bollocks!”

Severus covered his face to stifle a snort.

Meanwhile, McGonagall continued her rant. “Remus told us Harry contacted us from Severus’ quarters with the man himself in pieces behind him. How else would he have rescued him, hmm?”

Albus sighed. “As I have attempted to explain, Harry and Severus wear ri—”

A sudden knock at the door had Severus tensing. Harry looked up to see a faint crimson light in the older man’s eyes and went rigid.

He whispered, “Oh shite. Sev, is it bloodlust?”

“Danger,” Severus hissed, his fangs showing.

“Come in,” Albus called, his eyes fixed on Severus. “My boy, do try and calm yourself. It is only Remus.”

The other three occupants of the room swerved to stare bemusedly at the agitated vampire and his fearful mate.

“Severus?” McGonagall stepped closer. “How long have you—”

Severus hissed at her and drew back.

She goggled. “Sweet Circe, did you just—”

Severus cringed and turned into Harry as the door opened. “Stay back,” he growled.

“Sev,” Harry whispered, panicked, “calm down, please. It’s all right.”

Remus stepped into the room and started to greet Albus, then a shudder passed over him. Amber light glowed in his eyes and the man whipped out his wand.

“Albus! Something isn’t right! I smell—”

Albus stood and called in a firm voice, “Remus, Severus, calm yourselves. Remus, you smell Severus. Severus, you are sensing Remus. Neither of you are a threat.”

Harry caught Severus into his arms and hugged the squirming, irritated vampire. “Hey, easy. It’s okay. Remus isn’t going to hurt us. He loves me and likes you. It’s all right.”

Remus snarled, “Harry, get away from him. Something—he’s different. Dangerous.”

“Oh, sit down already,” barked an annoyed McGonagall. “Honestly. The two of you are like a couple of peacocks strutting about. Do stop posturing so we might get down to business.”
“It’s not posturing.” Harry looked over to Albus. “I might need to—he doesn’t know how to calm himself yet.”

Albus gave Harry a sad smile. “No, I am afraid this is all rather sudden for him. Severus, do forgive me. I did not know Remus would be coming or I would have warned you both.”

“Warned …?” Remus paled. “Albus, what in Merlin’s name is going on?”

“Just … just calm down and back off, Remus,” Harry ground out. “Severus, come on. You can beat this. I know you can.”

Severus shuddered and buried his face in Harry’s shoulder. “Ground me.”

“I am.” Harry held Severus’ head against him and hugged him tight. “I’m here. It’s okay. Yes, Remus is a werewolf but he would never hurt us. You’re okay.”

Severus trembled in Harry’s arms, panting in his shoulder. “I … I am s-sorry.”

“Ssh. It’s okay. This is all new—you’ll get the hang of it. I’ll help you.”

Severus shuddered and sank to his knees, clutching at Harry’s waist. “Do not … let go yet. I am not positive I am safe.”

Harry held him as tight as he could without hurting Severus’ still-healing ribs. “Okay. I’ll keep you grounded.”

“Thank you.”

Harry wished so much he could kiss the man to soothe him, if only on his hair or his cheek. Instead, he whispered in the man’s ear, “Do you need blood?”

Severus shook his head. “I need … control.”

“All right. I’m here.”

Severus nodded and held on for dear life.

“I take it they’re no longer enemies, Albus?” Arthur’s wry voice made Harry jump and Severus growl.

Dumbledore chuckled. “No, not quite.”

“What … what happened to him, Albus?” Remus’ threatening posture had relaxed, but the fear hadn’t left his eyes. “Why does he smell like blood?”

“I imagine in part because Tom does not take well to traitors and Severus has been at his mercy for much of the previous day.”

Severus shivered and nuzzled his face further into Harry’s shoulder.

Dumbledore gave Severus a sad smile. “But I fear the reason you reacted so violently to his presence, Remus, has a darker root. You see, it appears Tom has indeed kept young Mister Malfoy’s altered blood on hand for … future use. And he tested a portion of it on Severus last night.”

Severus clutched Harry tighter and shuddered, tense and afraid. Harry guarded him and stared the others down, a clear warning in his eyes.
“Don’t worry, Sev. I won’t let them hurt you.”

The other adults reeled back, shock and horror plain on their faces.

“No,” breathed McGonagall.

Molly removed her hand from her mouth long enough to speak in a wavering voice. “You mean … Severus is, what we’re seeing now, he’s in bloodlust?”

Severus gasped and struggled to escape, not to attack but to flee. Harry could feel the new vampire’s shame like a noose around his own throat.

“No,” Harry said in a soothing voice. “Not bloodlust. Severus has too much control.” He added in his telepathic voice, “Easy, love. It’s okay. I’m with you.”

“So he is a vampire then,” said a stunned Remus. “That’s why I … oh gods.” He sank into a chair and rubbed his temples. “If he’s a high enough grade to trigger my wolf, he’s fully turned. How bad is it?”

Severus growled and struggled to escape, but Harry held him tight. “Sev, please. It’s okay. They don’t hate you. They’re just worried.”

“Worried I will eat their children like the monster I have become,” he spat out.

“Oh, Severus,” McGonagall said, her voice broken.

Harry slipped a hand into the older man’s hair and hugged him tight. “That’s nonsense, Severus. Ssh. They care about you and you’re not a monster. It’s okay.”

“Albus,” said a sorrowful Arthur, “what grade?”

“Six,” Harry answered for the old man. “He’s safe. He’s just having trouble adjusting. It’s only been a few hours and he’s been through hell almost that entire time.”

“So we see,” said McGonagall with a sigh. “Merlin, boys. What have you endured?”

Harry shuddered. “A lot.”

He wanted to turn his head into Severus’ cheek but didn’t dare. They were already too close. Severus could claim need of a grounding influence to control his bloodlust, but Harry had no such excuse.

Merlin, he hoped Severus could pull it together soon. Every moment they stayed like this was another moment they risked discovery.

Severus whispered into Harry’s mind, “Are you afraid of me, love?”

Harry wasn’t sure their mental connection would last long enough, so he whispered in Severus’ ear instead. “Never of you. Afraid of them and what they might see.”

Severus shuddered. “Merlin.” He pulled back slowly, the light in his eyes still apparent but fading. “Forgive me, Potter.”

“It’s nothing. Are you all right?”

“N-not … not entirely.”
“Stay close then. I’ll keep you grounded.” Harry didn’t want to be away from him anyway.

Severus nodded and took Harry’s hand. “You are … proving rather adept at grounding me, Harry. Perhaps this will not be as bad as I feared.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand. “It’s going to be okay. I’ll help you adjust. By the time term starts, you’ll be able to deal with it.”

Severus winced. “So I hope.”

“So I know. It’s going to be okay.”

“You cannot know that.”

“Perhaps not,” said Dumbledore, his voice soothing, “but know this, my boy: if teaching does prove to be too much with your condition, I will not simply cast you aside. You will be safe here, regardless of your ability to instruct.”

Severus grimaced. “But if I cannot teach—”

“Then you will still be of great worth to me.” Albus stood and laid a hand on Severus’ shoulder. “My boy, you will be all right. Harry and I will make sure of it.”

Severus trembled and lowered his head, giving a terse nod. “I … gods. I cannot believe this.”

Harry traced his thumb discreetly over Severus’ fingers. “He loves you. I do too.”

Molly huffed. “Will someone please explain to me what exactly is going on? I am glad that Harry can ground Severus, but Merlin! They hated each other two months ago! I don’t understand.”

“On the contrary,” said Severus in a soft voice, “two months ago, Harry and I had just begun a friendship. The shared trauma of those two months has perhaps driven us closer than we would have otherwise been, and as such, he is better able to ground me than most.”

Remus frowned. “Severus, friends aren’t enough to ground a bloodlusting vampire.”

Molly gasped. “Good heavens, just what are you suggesting, Remus? Harry is a student!”

In the clamour that followed her outraged cry, Harry’s hand clenched on Severus’. “So Mum Weasley won’t condone us then.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s fingers. “Regardless, I am yours.”

“Me too, love.”

Albus brought the shouting down with a wave of his hand. “I will remind you all that Harry is an adult student who has had precious little choice in his life. Nevertheless, you are mistaken in your assumptions, Molly. Remus was not implying a romantic relationship. A lover could not ground a vampire either: only his or her donor can.”

Four sets of eyes fixed sharp glares on Severus.

“His donor,” said Molly in a harsh voice. “Severus Snape, this is really too much! To take advantage of a boy like this! I’m disgusted in you. You saw a weakness and ru—”

“Stop.” Harry cut her off in a fierce voice. “Stop there before you cross a line I can’t forgive.”
Molly winced. “Oh, forgive me. That was cruel to suggest. I simply let fear carry me away. I’m sorry, Severus.”

Severus gave her a curt nod. “I have tried to protect him for the past eighteen years, at least in terms of his life, though I will admit I failed him in many other ways. However, I am aware of it now and attempting to make amends. You should remember that before you make groundless accusations.”

“Yes, you should,” Harry snapped.

“I am sorry,” Molly said, her eyes contrite. “But … Harry, you must rethink this. You don’t know what you’re getting into!”

Harry snarled. “For Merlin’s sake! Mum Weasley, I’m eighteen, not eight! I’m an adult who’s perfectly capable of making my own decisions. And I’ll have you know I’m the top defence student of my class and probably more knowledgeable than some aurors, at least in terms of practical defence. How many of them have faced Riddle head on or seen Priori Incantatem in action? Not to mention, I’ve been working with Severus on researching an antidote and learning everything I can about vampires while we’ve been at it—and yes, that includes donor bonds! I know exactly what I’m getting into.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but Harry wasn’t finished.

“And it’s moot anyway. I have to be his donor. There’s absolutely no one else who could keep Severus alive.”

Molly huffed. “That’s nonsense, Harry! Vampires could establish a donor bond with anyone so long as they’re healthy. He doesn’t need your blood—”

“He does, actually,” said Albus. “Harry speaks the truth. Without his blood, Severus will die. Not because of starvation—if that were the only element at play here, then you would be correct, Molly, and Severus could choose any donor he wished. But as it stands, Harry’s blood is the only barrier against death, due to the very fact that Harry’s stolen blood runs through Tom’s veins. Severus still bears the mark, remember, and he is now seen as a traitor. I am afraid Tom does not care for traitors who escape his version of justice.”

“He has already tried to kill me through it once today,” Severus said, his voice soft. “The moment I took Harry’s blood, the pain stopped. It is something to do with will magic. Because the Dark Lord stole Harry’s blood, but Harry is offering the same freely to me, it provides protection.”

“And I would have given him my blood even if it wasn’t for that.” Harry crossed his arms over his chest and glared at them all.

Molly started to argue again, but this time Arthur cut her off. “Enough, Mollywobbles. Harry’s old enough to choose this if that’s what he wants.”

Her lip wobbled. “I … I only … I just want him to be happy.”

Harry shook his head. “How happy do you think I’d be if I sit by and let my friend be tortured to death when I can stop it by nothing more than the occasional blood donation?”

Remus frowned. “Harry, a donor bond is much more complex than a blood donation.”

“I’m aware of that. And I don’t care. I’m not going to let Severus die.”

Remus nodded and held up his hands in surrender. “As long as you understand, I won’t argue.”
“Thanks,” said Harry, relieved.

Molly protested, “But he’s—”

“The cost of your interference is my death,” said Severus in a cold voice, dark eyes fixed on the Weasley matriarch. “And not a quick one, either. He will torture me into insanity before he ends it. I ask you now, knowing this, will you still attempt to break the donor bond?”

“They can try,” Harry said, a growl low in his throat. “They won’t like the result.”

“Oh, Harry!” Molly went to hug him, but Harry flinched and jerked away from her so hard, he almost toppled Severus.

“Don’t,” Severus snapped, shielding Harry from the woman. “He cannot bear for women to touch him at the moment.”

Molly winced and hugged her chest. “I … I don’t understand, Severus. I’ve hugged Harry before with no problems, and I only wanted to reassure him that we wouldn’t let you die.”

“Harry … has had a most traumatic experience at home,” Dumbledore said in a pained voice, “and I fear it has exacerbated his aversion to women. Particularly women who, however well-meant their intentions may be, are threatening his freedom and the safety of his friends.”

“A threat?” Molly lowered her eyes and stepped back. “I never intended that. But I don’t understand, Albus. Why would he have an aversion to women? Besides, the twins said he wasn’t home, and Remus told us he was in Severus’ quarters. How could he have been at Privet Drive long enough to have something terrible happen and still have rescued Severus?”

Severus was quick to cut her down to size. “If you would listen for five minutes before jumping to conclusions, perhaps we might explain.” He glared at both women, and they had the good grace to blush.

“Ach, perhaps we were a bit hasty,” said McGonagall with a sheepish smile. “What happened, Severus?”

“As it happens,” said the man with a huff, “that is precisely what Harry and I have come to discuss.”

“Then let’s talk,” said Remus with a wan smile.

Some moments later, Severus stood at Harry’s side and glared at the two chastised women. Merlin, they were older than himself by far! They should know better than to make assumptions before knowing the facts.

A tiny voice at the back of his mind reminded Severus that not too long ago, he would have been the first to assume the worst of Harry. His cheeks warmed and he relented with a sigh.

“No need to apologise,” Severus admitted. “I am guilty of the same sin.”

Minerva chuckled dryly. “You always did have a gift for understatement, Severus.”

“Pull your claws back in, woman. I should hope I have changed since then.”
Minerva smiled. “You have.” Her smile faded. “Greatly. Oh, Severus. I’m so sorry we couldn’t find you sooner.”

“You didn’t find him at all,” Harry snapped. “Once again, it was up to me to save him, and once again, everyone was hacked off about it! Merlin. What was I supposed to do? Let him die?”

“Riddle had worse plans than death in store for me,” Severus muttered, voice dark and cold.

Harry squeezed Severus’ shoulder. “Over my dead body.”

“T—that’s exactly what we’re all worried about, Harry,” said Molly with a sniffle. “He’s … he’s so focused on you, and we just want you to be safe.”

Harry fixed her with a hard look. “Mum Weasley, I love you, but if you think I’ve ever been safe, you’re wrong. I wasn’t safe with my parents, I wasn’t safe at the Dursleys’ house, I’m not safe at school, and I’m not safe at Grimmauld. I won’t be safe until he’s dead and all of his followers are either dead or in prison. That’s just the way it is, like it or not.”

Molly cringed. “I … but ….”

Harry gave her a sad smile. “I’m sorry. I know you don’t want to hear this, but it’s the truth and it’s past time to admit it.”

Severus nodded and laid his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “You have my support.”

Harry flashed him a warm smile. “Thank you.” He turned to the rest of the group, not giving into their shocked, sorrowful expressions. “I know you want to protect me. Thank you, but keeping me in a bubble isn’t going to keep me safe.”

He stood tall, reminding them he was a man and a soldier. “You’ve all heard the prophecy. You can’t keep shoving it under the rug and pretending it didn’t happen because you don’t want it to be true. It’s him or me, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to sit around and play gobstones while I wait for him to kill me.”

“W-we don’t know that it’s true, Harry,” Molly tried. “You’re just a boy and—”

“No, Mum Weasley. I’m not a boy any longer. I’m not sure I ever was.”

She shook her head and pressed a hand to her mouth. “Harry, I ….”

He gave her a sad smile. “You have to let me grow up now. And whether the prophecy is real or not doesn’t matter. In the end, it’s still going to come down to him or me because he’s utterly fixated on my death. I’m going to have to fight him sooner or later, and it won’t stop until one of us is dead, because whether or not you believe in the prophecy, he does.”

“But the Order, Harry! The Order can protect you!”

Harry glared. “Like they protected Severus, you mean?”

She flinched. “I ….”

Harry shook his head. “No. Tonight isn’t the first time I’ve learned I can’t rely on the Order to come to my aid. When it comes down to it, I’ve had to face him on my own—every time—and I’ll have to face him on my own in the end too. So you can either help me prepare to fight or you can keep me in your bubble and leave me unprotected when he finally does corner me. What’s it going to be? Will
you help me or hinder me?”

Molly wiped her eyes. “Oh, Harry. Of course I’ll help. It’s only … I don’t want to l-lose you, too. I can’t bury another son.”

Harry froze, eyes wide, breath still. “Your … s-son?”

Molly smiled weakly. “Since that first day you came home with my Ronnie, you’ve been an honorary Weasley.”

“Oh joy,” came Severus’ dry response. Harry hid a snort behind a sniffle.

“Mum Weasley … oh, I … I’m s-sorry. I’m sorry for Ron and … and because I don’t know if I can promise you that! What if I can’t beat him? I just don’t know if I’ll survive.”

Severus grabbed Harry’s chin and turned him to stare the man in the face. “You will. Or I will drag you back from the afterlife and hold you in detention from now until my last breath.”

Harry chuckled through tears and nodded. “Okay.” He pulled back and wiped his face. “But the thing is, I need help to fight him and live. Which means I need the lot of you to treat me like an adult. I need you all to stop hiding stuff from me and stop trying to protect me by keeping me ‘innocent.’ I’m not a child, and trust me, I’ve seen far worse darkness than whatever it is you think you need to protect me from.”

“He speaks the truth.” Severus laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Though he has since learned to control his mind and block out the visions, what he saw in those alone is enough to break a heart of stone, never mind his firsthand encounters with the Dark Lord.”

Everyone but Harry, Severus, and Albus winced.

Severus let them recover before he continued. “Albus and I have already decided to treat Harry as a colleague rather than a child. Indeed, we must do so if he is to be ready to face Riddle the next time they meet. And since the day we began including him in our discussions, he has already proven to be a worthy soldier and strategist. To discount his efforts is folly.”

Harry squeezed the hand on his shoulder. “Thanks, Severus.”

“If not for you, we would have had more deaths on our hands, Harry. Thomas, Crabbe, and Goyle would all be dead without your quick intervention.” Severus gave Molly a firm look. “It is time to respect him as an equal, son or not.”

Molly sighed and wiped her eyes. “I … I’ll try.”

Harry gave her a grateful smile. “Thank you. And the rest of you?”

“You’ve had my support for a long time, Harry,” Remus said.

“And mine,” said Arthur.

Minerva huffed. “Of course we shan’t hinder you, Harry. I’ve been of a mind for some time now that we’ve kept you back too long. But at the moment, I fear we have more pressing concerns.”

Harry nodded, his expression shifting into the grim look of a soldier at war. “We do. And now that we’ve gotten past the other stuff, we can focus on the real reason Severus and I came today. Sev, you said you wanted us to use the headmaster’s pensieve?”
“If possible.” Severus shook his head. “I am certain most of Lucius’ words were clues, but I am at a
toss as to what they point to and what we are dealing with.”

Albus flicked his wand, Summoning his pensieve from a cabinet near his desk and an empty phial. A
quick charm sent the current contents of his pensieve into the phial, leaving the basin clear for
Severus’ memories. “There you are, my boy. Whenever you are ready.”

“Thank you, Albus.” Severus took out his wand and placed it against his temple.

“What are you going to show us, Severus?” Arthur’s voice held dread and dismay.

“My attempt to steal more blood samples. It obviously did not go as planned; however, none of my
torture is evident within this memory. I am afraid I was not entirely coherent then.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand. “I’m here, Severus. Don’t think of it.”

“Thank you, pet.”

Severus returned the squeeze and pulled the memory to the front of his mind, making sure to cut it
off just after Malfoy petrified him—to have the others hear Malfoy’s conclusions about his
relationship with Harry would be disastrous. With a practised hand, he dropped the memory into the
basin and an image of himself poking around a wall of dark red potions floated to the surface. Harry
frowned and pressed closer to Severus’ side.

“Are you ready?”

Severus nodded.

Molly looked as if she were about to protest, but Minerva shook her head and laid a hand on her arm.

“Harry is right. It is time to let him decide for himself what he can and cannot handle.”

Molly lowered her gaze. “Is it so terrible that I want to mother him when he has hardly ever known
love?”

Harry gave the woman a hug, though he kept it brief. “It’s not terrible. Even adult sons need their
mums sometimes. But right now, I need you to let me stand on my own two feet.”

She gave him a tearful smile and nodded. “As long as you remember to call on me when you need
your mum.”

Harry gave her a hesitant smile. “I promise.”

She dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief and tentatively patted his shoulder. “Go on then.”

Severus took Harry’s hand and, with a nod to Molly—a silent promise to watch over her son—
brought his mate into the pensieve. Albus, Minerva, and Lupin were quick to follow, and Arthur and
a much-more collected Molly came next. The latter had her Order face on, revealing the tough core
under her maternal nature, and Severus knew it would be all right, for today at least. Molly had only
fought so hard out of love and Harry was proving himself mature enough for the burdens he must
carry.

Still, Severus wished he need not suffer so. Discreetly, he stroked Harry’s hair while the others
gained their bearings. Harry leaned into the touch, making it appear as if he was looking about.
Severus ran his fingers down the younger man’s back before he withdrew.
“I wish I could touch you too,” Harry communicated. “I’d only get caught though.”

Severus didn’t think their connection would allow for much beyond a simple reply. “You are enough.”

“I—”

Severus wasn’t sure if their connection had died or Albus’ sudden clap had cut Harry off.

“Now that we’re all present, let us see what Severus wanted to show us.”

Severus drew their attention to where he stood in the memory, carefully taking potions out from beyond the wards. “You cannot see the labels from this angle, but I removed several phials of Malfoy’s blood, the delayed-onset vampirism potion, the counter to Veritaserum, and ….” He shuddered. “And an experimental trial of a vampiric viral potion.”

Beside him, Harry went rigid and let out a squeak of horror. “No. Gods, no.”

“As of yet, he has not perfected it,” Severus soothed. “But this is proof that we are running out of time. We must prepare for war.”

“A blood war,” said Lupin in a shaky whisper.

“That is what I fear.”

“Merlin help us all,” Minerva breathed.

Severus kept them talking through Malfoy’s mention of the tailored wards in hopes that they would miss the information or regard it as insignificant. By the look in the werewolf’s eyes, he judged he had not been entirely successful. Severus gave him a subtle warning not to speak up and drew the others’ attention back to Malfoy.

“This is what concerns me. Listen to his speech, the words he has emphasised. He sounds as if he intended to taunt me with unseen knowledge.”

“Well, perhaps that was true before,” Memory-Malfoy said.

The shade of Severus gave the man a narrow-eyed look. “Before … what exactly?”

Malfoy’s twisted smile froze Severus’ blood just as much then as it had the first time he had seen it. “Before I learned to think, Severus. Before the minds imparted their wisdom upon me and made me see like I have never seen before. I have been reborn, and it is beautiful.”

Severus was gratified to see that no sign of the terror and revulsion Malfoy’s manic laughter had inspired had showed on his face.

“You’re jealous, aren’t you? Oh, you hide it well, Severus, but I see that glint in your eye. You want to know my secrets. Ah-ah-ah, a master never tells.”

The slightest twist of Memory-Severus’ mouth and a bitter glare gave that impression for certain, though Severus recognised fear in his posture even if Malfoy did not.

Malfoy smirked. “Oh, so jealous even a master of Occlumency cannot hide it. I am flattered!” He chuckled. “But not flattered enough to reveal where to find such mysterious knowledge. No, I am afraid a man of your … calibre could do without that kind of alteration.”
The memory ended there, and Severus swept them all out of the pensieve. “I am afraid everything he said after that point was either threats or posturing, so I have precious little information to offer this time. Well, he did mention how they discovered my treachery, but I will let Albus impart that tale. It is unimportant at the moment.”

He sat at the sofa, guiding an absorbed Harry to sit at his side. Besides the fact that he wanted his mate and friend close, Harry’s touch kept him grounded in the presence of another dark creature.

*Creature*. Merlin help him, he was no longer human. Severus’ chest panged with grief and his hands clenched on his knees. He was a creature now, a beast no better than the monster who had nearly killed him twice, yet walked around as the most affable kind of man during the day. Worse, to be honest. Lupin was only dangerous one night out of the month. Severus would *always* be a threat.

A warm hand enclosed his own and gently pried it away from his knee.


Severus couldn’t hide a sharp hitch in his breathing. How could Harry still love him when he was this?

Harry pulled Severus into his arms and hugged him tight. “It’s all right, Severus. Ssh. I’m here.”

Lupin’s soft, bemused voice drifted to him from outside the warmth of Harry’s arms. “I … I’m controlling my wolf, Harry. What’s breaking his control?”

Severus cringed and turned his face into Harry’s shoulder.

“This isn’t grounding,” Harry murmured. “This is comfort for a friend who lost far too much the night before and doesn’t know what to do with himself now.” A gentle hand slipped through Severus’ hair. “But he’ll be all right.” Harry held him tight, whispering, “I’ll be here to pull you through, every step of the way.”

Harry’s touch and promises of faith gave Severus hope and, after a moment to gather his wits, he rallied. Severus sat and, though he was shaking, fierce Occlumency hid most of his emotions from his countenance, at least until he could deal with them alone.

He cast a glance to his partner. Perhaps not *entirely* alone. Not anymore.

Cheered by the thought, Severus sat tall and glared at the others. Merlin, need they look at him with such pity? Yes, he had shown weakness for once in his life. Was that any reason to treat him as if he would shatter at the first touch?

“Do forgive us our concern, Severus,” said Minerva, her eyes soft in spite of Severus’ scowl. “We’ve never seen you lose control for even a moment. Which makes it all the more shocking to see you break down in the arms of *Harry Potter*, of all people.”

Severus nodded curtly. She had a point but, nevertheless, he did not like being the focus of all that maudlin Gryffindor sap. At least not with anyone save Harry or Albus.

“Be that as it may, my emotional state is hardly the greatest of our concerns.” He clasped his hands in his lap and leaned on his knees. “Malfoy made those potions, but the Lucius Malfoy I knew had neither the skill nor the creativity to manage something so complex. He’s done some dark ritual to increase his intelligence, and I believe he was taunting me with hints during the conversation I just showed you. It is to our benefit to discover what, precisely, he has done.”
Minerva frowned. “What benefit, Severus? Even if we did learn of the ritual, how will it aid us?”

“In part, I suggest it because there may be other … effects we are unaware of at this time. However, the primary reason is that it behoves us to know our enemy well.”

“He’s right,” Harry said, his expression pensive. “Any information Malfoy has that we don’t is information he can use against us in battle. Severus, do you mind to show me that scene one more time?”

Severus nodded and looked into Harry’s eyes, leaving his barriers open.

He sensed Harry’s presence in his mind as the memory played again. Harry lingered just long enough to send him a wave of love and thanks, then exited with a gasp.

“Mother of Merlin, I know what he’s done!”

Severus fixed the young man with a piercing gaze. “Well?”

Harry shuddered and hugged his arms. “Oh gods. I can’t believe—why would anyone willingly—and how on earth am I to speak of it?”

Severus laid a hand on Harry’s arm. “It is especially troubling?”

“Y-yeah. He … he must have done it at the DoM in fifth year.”

Everyone in the room winced and Severus’ stomach dropped into his feet.

“I see.” Severus wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders and pressed the young man against his side. “Does that help?”

Harry trembled and nodded. “Y-yeah.” He took a deep breath. “Did any of you see the rooms at the DoM? How there were all different kinds of … oddities stashed there?”

“I remember several strange things from that night,” said Arthur.

“I am afraid I did not arrive in time to see the Department of Mysteries firsthand,” said Albus, “but I am aware that many unusual objects exist beyond its doors. Objects far stranger than prophecies and time turners. You believe Lucius encountered one of those items?”

“I know for a fact he encountered them. I saw it. But I didn’t think—Ron ran into them too and they didn’t hurt him, or not like this anyway.” Harry shuddered and shook his head. “Maybe Malfoy went back after the fact.”

“I believe you must be correct,” Severus said, rubbing his chin. “There would have been no time to conduct a dark ritual during battle. As well, I did not witness signs of insanity in Lucius until a few months ago, and he would have had little motive to pursue such a drastic course of action until then regardless.”

Albus nodded. “Status is everything to Lucius Malfoy. Even before he entered Tom’s ranks, he could not bear to accept second best in anything. It was, perhaps, one of the reasons why he had such a turbulent relationship with Severus over the years. He wanted the glory of Severus’ brilliance and so curried his favour, but in turn, resented him for his intelligence and acclaim.”

“An accurate assessment.” Severus shuddered. “I did not show the entirety of Lucius’ taunting, but towards the end of that encounter, he revealed his envy at being forced to play second fiddle to me.”
Molly cringed. “But to sacrifice his own son for his pride! I can hardly believe it.”

“Believe it,” Severus said, his voice cold. “That man cares for nothing beyond his own advancement. He doted on Draco as long as the boy promised to bring him further glory, but the moment Draco’s dedication to the dark wavered, the moment he fell from grace and became a source of embarrassment and dishonour, he lost all worth in his father’s eyes.”

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling the grief of his failures anew. “I believe that was why Draco fought my involvement so hard. He wanted his father to look at him with pride again and could not understand that Lucius had never loved him.”

Harry shivered. “Merlin. It makes me pity Draco even more.” He shook his head. “I wish one of us would’ve been able to get through to him.”

“It was too late for that boy the moment he was born a Malfoy,” Minerva said, her voice full of regret.

“Maybe.” Harry stared at his knees, his guilt and grief obvious in every breath.

Severus hugged him closer. “Harry, do not blame yourself. The boy was trying to murder you. There was nothing you could have done to save him—indeed, you showed him mercy. It is only a shame he did not live long enough to receive it.”

Harry took a deep breath and let it go. “It’s the Dursleys’ guilt complex again, isn’t it?”

“I … in this case, it is more likely survivor’s guilt. Either way—” Their link cut off, but Severus continued out loud. “It is not your fault.”

Harry nodded and hugged his knees to his chest. “R-right.” He took another deep breath and rallied. “Well, considering what Severus and Professor Dumbledore just said, I think Lucius must have come back to the DoM last year.” He frowned. “And I think I know when. Remember that false vision of Mum Weasley, Severus?”

Severus rubbed his lip in thought. “Yes. There was an article in the paper about a break-in at the Ministry the next day. At the time, I wondered at Riddle’s motives for sending you another false vision when he must have known you were learning to Occlude against him and aware of his previous deception. I should have realised it was a blind.”

Harry nodded. “I don’t know if he expected me to rush in after her or not, but either way, sending the vision at the same time Malfoy was busy in the Ministry warned us of a probable trap.”

“And I thus advised our troops to remain behind rather than risk their lives in a battle we were unprepared to face,” said Albus, toying with his beard. “A brilliant deception.”

“Indeed,” said Severus, his expression grim. “But this means the Dark Lord was aware of Lucius’ plans and endorsed them.”

“Or coerced him into doing it in the first place,” said Arthur in a dark voice.

“I don’t think he could’ve done,” said Harry. “Riddle would have had to know about the stuff in the Department of Mysteries to do that, and I don’t think his reach stretches that far, at least not yet. No, it’s much more likely that Malfoy went begging and offered himself up as a last resort.”

Severus frowned. “As I recall, Lucius had been used as entertainment perhaps two weeks prior to Harry’s vision of Molly. It may have been enough of a motivation for such a proud man. Perhaps the
loss of his sanity seemed a small price to pay in comparison to enduring such profound humiliation a second time.”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe. It’s likely he thought himself above the risks, though. Riddle is prone to overconfidence himself, so it wouldn’t surprise me a bit if Malfoy had thought himself above the pitfalls of the human mind just because of his bloodline or something.”

“Now that sounds much more likely to me,” said Minerva with a grim nod. “But all this talk of motivations is putting the cart ahead of the horse. What exactly did he do, Potter?”

Harry flushed. “Right. Guess I did get a bit distracted.” He shuddered and clutched his knees tight. “In one of the rooms we ran through, there was this ghastly tank of floating brains. They had tentacles and such, and when R-Ron came into contact with one, the tentacles burned him and made it hard for him to breathe. Malfoy got caught by three of them while we were fighting—I think Dean Banished them onto his head.”

“That would not have given him preternatural intelligence, I do not think,” said Severus with a frown. “Not even if he returned to repeat the act later.”

Harry shook his head. “No, it just would’ve killed him, but those brains had to be in the DoM for a purpose, right? Why would the Ministry keep them around if they were just dark objects with no value other than destruction? Even the veil makes itself useful for executions.”

“The Unspeakables like to toy with it as well,” said Albus. “It provides information on the world beyond, if one is skilled enough to interpret it correctly.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, so those brains must have some purpose other than to attack people and look ugly.”

Severus nodded thoughtfully. “You make a good point. Perhaps Malfoy paid off an Unspeakable to learn their true purpose. Albus, do we have a spy in the Ministry who is capable of researching said information?”

Albus toyed with his beard. “Not a spy, no, but one does not defeat a former dark lord without making numerous contacts far and wide. I believe I may know someone who could at least point us in the right direction.” He beamed at Harry. “And once again, my boy, you prove the wisdom of treating you as the man you have become. Well done, Harry.”

Harry blushed and gave Albus a hesitant smile. “I’m not positive it’s the right answer.”

“I can see no other explanation considering the hints Malfoy dropped the night before last.” Severus shuddered. “Merlin, was it truly only two nights ago? It seems as if I have lived a lifetime in two days.”

Harry squeezed his hand. “We’ve both been through a lot.”

“True.”

Minerva gave them sorrowful looks. “I am sorry, Harry, Severus.”

Harry acknowledged her apology with a nod. “Thank you.” He wrapped both arms around his knees once more. “Severus, did you learn anything else? Any hints as to how he’s planning to control the vampires? Or when he plans on making more?”

“Nothing on methods of control, but his timeline?” Severus shook his head. “That much is obvious.
He will time his vampires to turn on the Hogwarts Express in September. Or, he may wait a day or two, knowing we will anticipate the attack on the train."

Harry shuddered. “We need a slayer team in the school then.”

Severus paled. “Said slayers may take it upon themselves to come after me, Harry.”

“Like hell!” Harry grabbed Severus’ hand. “You’re not a danger, so long as you take your potions and keep fed, you’ll be fine.”

“Unfortunately, Harry,” said Albus, “there is always the risk that the slayer team will contain a spy. No, I am afraid we will have to make do with Order members. Kingsley can train some of his group to fight feral vampires. Severus will train you, Harry.” He frowned. “Or I will if he cannot endure it, given that he is also a vampire now. And the school will train its students to defend themselves as best as we are able.”

“We’ll need a warning system regardless,” Harry said. “Something that will let us know not only when a vampire turns, but where, and house elves on call to transport the slayer team.”

“Order members, Harry,” Albus corrected.

Harry shook his head. “Order members or not, if they’re here to kill vampires, that makes them a team of slayers.”

“True enough,” Albus conceded.

Molly frowned. “Why do we need house elves, Harry?”

Harry chuckled wryly. “Because no one ever thinks of the house elves. Riddle won’t expect us to use their abilities.”

Arthur looked as confused as Molly. “Er … what abilities, exactly?”

Severus scowled. “Merlin, did the two of you swallow a befuddling draught before coming here? Their apparition abilities, obviously.”

“Exactly,” said Harry with a grin. “We can’t apparate within the Hogwarts wards, but they can.” He shuddered. “And speaking of the wards, we’ll need to alter them to block out any vampires at grade eight or above.”

“I am not sure such alterations can be done, Harry,” said Albus with a grim expression. “Wards can either ban a creature altogether or allow them access. There is not, to my knowledge, a ward available to block a vampire based on grade.”

“Then we’d better invent one fast.”

“It will do little good with the delayed-onset potion, Harry,” said Severus with a shake of his head. “The vampire in question will already be past the wards when they turn.”

Harry frowned. “And there’s no way to make a ward that, once a vampire turns feral within its bounds, will either kill or trap them somewhere away from the human population?”

Severus blinked. “No, such a ward does not yet exist, but it may be possible to create one.”

Albus nodded. “Indeed it might, and to that end, while you are researching the antidote, Severus, I believe I will work on improving my wardcraft.”
Harry let slip a sigh. “That … makes me feel a lot safer.”

“Do not relax yet,” Severus said, his voice dark. “We may be able to protect Hogwarts, but we cannot place wards over all of Britain, and he will find a way around them eventually.”

Harry shuddered. “Then I reckon while you’re doing antidotes, Severus, and Professor Dumbledore is doing wardcraft, I’ll be learning how to kill dark lords.”

Molly opened her mouth and shut it again. She sighed and gave Harry a sad smile. “We’ll support you in whatever way we can.”

“The best way you can support us is to ready your family and friends for war. Teach them to fight so ….” Harry’s voice wobbled. “So I don’t lose anyone else I love.”

“Even that’s no guarantee,” said Arthur, his voice shaky too. “But we will do our best. And, for what it’s worth, I’m proud of you, son.”


Arthur smiled. “Harry, if … if you feel comfortable with it, you might just call us mum and dad, without the surname. Of course, only if you’d like to. I do understand if not.”

Harry blinked tears back. “R-really? You don’t mind?”

“Not at all, dear,” Molly said.

“But … but Ginny! How can you—are you angry with me?”

Arthur knelt before Harry and took his hand. “Son, Ginny herself explained the situation. You’re gay, aren’t you?”

Harry winced. “Y-yeah. I didn’t know until after we were already dating though.”

“Then, the way I see it, you did the right thing by confessing before the relationship went too far.”

Molly nodded. “Ginny’s forgiven you, dearie, so how could we do any less?”

“S-she has?” Harry sat up and wiped his face. “Thanks, M-Mum, Dad. I … I’m sorry about all that, and I’ll do my best to make sure you always have a reason to be proud of me.” He squeezed Severus’ hand. “We all will.”

Minerva gave Harry a warm smile. “That is all anyone can ask of you.” She stood and brushed off her robes. “I will do some research of my own into creating a warning system, Albus. With Filius’ help, we should be able to manage something before term begins.”

Harry nodded. “Hermione used galleons with Protean charms for the DA. Maybe you could do something on those lines?”

Minerva gaped. “A … a Protean charm? In fifth year? Dear Merlin, that girl never ceases to astound me.”

Harry chuckled. “Maybe you should ask her for help too then.”

The woman gave Harry an appraising look. “You know, Mister Potter, I believe I shall.”
Harry beamed.
An Open Secret

Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** Discussion of past sexual assault and child abuse. Mild Remus bashing. He comes around before the end of the chapter.

**Summary:** Long chapter. Remus knows too much of Severus' secrets, which forces the boys to come out. Remus is an arse and is promptly taken to task. Albus and the boys plan a diplomacy mission to the vampire clans to warn them of Voldemort's plans. After everyone leaves, Albus worries about what their discussion revealed of the long-forgotten past and what affect it might have on the future.

***AN: Sorry things are taking a long time. My son is much more active and thus I have much less time to write. I'm still going. It's just hard to keep up. Also, I've plotted out most of the rest of this, and it's going to be another series now. Man. I can't write anything that's NOT an epic fic apparently.***

CHAPTER 23
AN OPEN SECRET

Severus guided Harry to stay behind after the others left, hoping to have a moment alone to discuss their other findings with Albus. He should have known it would not be so easy.

“So, Severus,” said Lupin once the door had shut behind Minerva, “now that the others have gone, do you want to explain how your magical signature was altered enough to bypass the wards—before you became a vampire?”

Harry winced. “Um ….” He whispered telepathically, [*Shite, Sev, what do we do?]*

[I think there is little choice but to be honest. He knows too much. We will not be able to lie.]

Harry gave Severus a grim nod.

Severus lifted his chin high and faced the werewolf down. “Before I say a word, I want your oath you will do nothing to harm or hinder Harry.”

“To Harry?” Lupin’s gaze sharpened. “What has he got to do with it?”

“Your oath, wolf.”

Lupin stared at Severus for a long moment, as if trying to read him. With his barriers up, Severus had no idea what the wolf thought he could gain by it. If the Dark Lord hadn’t been able to break Severus under torture and threat of losing his mind, what chance did an untrained werewolf have against him?

Lupin nodded tersely. “I swear I will not harm or hinder Harry, not that I would have to begin with.”

“Very well. Albus?”
“Have a seat, Remus.” Albus motioned to the chairs in front of his desk and conjured an extra for the wolf. “Before we begin, I am prefacing the discussion by telling you I am already aware of the situation and have given Severus my blessing and protection. So I will advise you to listen to the story with a cool head.”

Lupin frowned. “All of this is making me certain I’ve good reason to be angry. So …?”

“You don’t,” Harry said, his voice sharp. “You aren’t my father, and I’m not a child. And you agreed not half an hour ago not to interfere so long as I understand what I’m getting into. I do, so don’t interfere.”

Lupin took a deep breath. “Harry, that only referred to your decision to offer a donor bond to Severus.”

“And I’m telling you now, if the logic applies to one situation, it ought to apply to all.”

“Not if you’re getting into trouble.”

“I’m not. I’m sparing us all a worse fate than Grindelwald and Riddle combined. That is, unless you want Severus and me to both go soul mad and grow as dark as Riddle himself?”

Something like horror flickered across Albus’ face, but whatever it was, it vanished the next instant. Severus stared at him, concerned and trying to get a read on his fears. Whatever it was, Severus could see nothing in his eyes. Something had terrified the old man, but he obviously wanted to keep his secrets for the time being.

Across the room, Lupin paled and sank back into his chair. “Than … oh dear gods.”

“Now that we have your attention, wolf,” Severus snapped, though half his own attention was still on Albus, “perhaps you would like to listen without judgment?”

Lupin gave a weak nod. “Whatever it is, it’s not worse than that fate.”

Albus flinched slightly, barely enough for even Severus to notice, but it was there.

“Good to see you have some of your priorities in order,” said Harry with a huff before Severus could address Albus’ fears, whatever they were. “Then, if you must know, Severus’ magical signature changed because our magic is merging. We’re soulmates, and he’s started to take on some of my characteristics, at least in terms of magic, and I’m taking on his.”

Lupin froze. “Soulmates don’t exist, but are you saying—”

“Actually, wolf,” Severus said, “they do exist, though I was quite as sceptical myself when Albus first told me of them, and yes, he is telling you we are in a romantic relationship.”

“May as well be bonded,” Harry said with a shrug. “Though I plan to do it properly, once we’re ready.”

Severus flushed and ignored the spluttering wolf in favour of cupping his mate’s face, shock and wonder thrumming within him. “Harry! Merlin, do you mean that?”

Harry kissed Severus’ palm. “Of course I do, love.”

Severus caught Harry into a tender kiss, overcome and unable to resist despite their audience. “You know what my answer will be when you are ready to ask me,” he whispered in the younger man’s
Harry clutched him close. “Severus ….”

“Albus! I demand you do something about this!” Lupin’s barking reminded Severus that this was not the place to be making such plans.

He kissed Harry on the forehead and drew back. “Later, beloved.”

Harry turned an annoyed look on the werewolf. “Yeah, I see what you mean.”

“What would you have me do, Remus?” Albus shook his head. “They are quite clearly in love, and besides that, I have already made it clear they have my blessing.”

“Your bl—he’s old enough to be his father!”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Merlin, who cares? We’re wizards, Remus. We live longer. It’s not going to matter in a few decades how old we are, so why should I worry about it now?”

Lupin sighed. “Harry, you’re seventeen—”

“Eighteen.”

“You’re still a child. You can’t be with a grown man.”

Harry scowled. “Actually, Remus, the last time I checked, being eighteen makes me an adult. Again, you have no say over this.”

Lupin gave Harry a sad look. “He’s really done a number on you. Gods. I should have come sooner.”

Harry blinked. “Done a … what?” He looked to Severus, bemused. “What in Merlin’s name is he on about?”

Severus snarled, fighting with all his might to keep his instincts under control. “I believe what the wolf is trying to suggest is that I have groomed you—conditioned you—to accept a relationship with me rather than coming by it naturally. He believes I trained you. Like a bloody pet!”

Harry’s eyes flashed killing-curse green. “Is that true, Remus?”

The werewolf gave another heavy sigh. “Harry, you hated him two months ago. Then Ron died, and it would have been … convenient for someone to take adv—”

“Stop there, before you say something I’ll never forgive,” Harry snapped, eyes sparkling. “Severus didn’t manipulate me into anything. We were friends before any romantic relationship developed, and for your information, I didn’t hate Severus at all last year. I pretended to around other people for the sake of his cover, but I think Severus and Professor Dumbledore could both tell you that around the time I learned how badly my family had assaulted him, and that you just stood there and let them do it, my opinions on him changed. So did my opinions of you, if it comes to that.”

Lupin shook his head. “Harry, no. This is … it’s wrong! It’s depraved!”

“I like that,” Harry snapped, his eyes brimming with hurt. “Loving someone is depraved then? I guess I should tell your girlfriend—who has a significant age difference from you, by the way—that she can just shove off then because god forbid people born a few years apart fall in love!”
Lupin winced. “Harry, that’s different. Dora’s an adult.”

Harry shouted, “And so am I! Are you even listening?”

Severus rubbed Harry’s back. “Calmly, Harry. Breathe.”

“Let go of him,” Lupin snarled at Severus, sending the vampire’s instincts berserk. “Get off of Harry!”


Lupin hovered as if he wanted to attack, but a fierce growl from Severus reminded the wolf he wasn’t the biggest bully on the playground any longer. Severus had powers too now.

Lupin sighed and backed away. “Harry, it’s just—don’t you see? Can’t you see what he’s done?” He held out a hand. “Cub, come away from Professor Snape and we’ll get you better.”

Harry cried, “You berk! Severus did nothing to me but love and protect me, which is more than I can say for you!”

“Harry! Merlin, he’s even turned you against us? You must come away—”

“Remus,” said Albus in a dark voice Harry had hardly ever heard from the man, “I must insist you cease and desist this insulting behaviour now. Severus does not deserve this treatment, and I will not stand for it.”

Lupin turned to the headmaster, eyes wide and angry. “Albus, he’s abusing him!”

Harry snarled, incensed, and magic crackled around his form. “Abuse, huh? You think you have a right to tell me who’s abusing me and who’s not?”

Lupin moved back, hands raised in a gesture meant to calm Harry. “I’m only trying to help you. You don’t realise you’re being abused, Harry, but this is against the law.”

“Not so, and even if it was illegal, the law is always fair and correct now, is it?” Severus stood as well and gave Lupin a sharp glare. “Tell me, wolf, how is your search for a bondmate proceeding? Or a home, for that matter. Have you managed to secure an appropriate occupation yet?”

Lupin paled. “That’s—that’s something different altogether. What you’re doing here is paedophilia and—”

“What part of ‘I’m an adult’ was so difficult for you to understand, Remus?” Harry’s magic swirled in arcs of green light. Severus shivered, both terrified and amazed at the sight of him.

“Harry, please. Try to bring your magic under control. Misguided as the wolf is, he does care.”

“Does he?” Harry pulled his magic back in, but the icy cold glare he fixed on Lupin was no less threatening. “Tell me, Remus. Do werewolves have increased powers of scent? Such as the ability to smell illness and blood? To scent bruises?”

Lupin frowned. “Ah, yes. Mostly. We might miss a bruise if it isn’t too serious, but what does that have to do with anything?”

Fire flashed in Harry’s eyes. “And did you, or did you not, see me soon after I left the Dursleys’ most summers after third year?”
Lupin swallowed hard and paled. “I … s-sometimes.”

Severus stepped forward, a tempest rising hot in his blood. “You knew.”

Lupin cringed back, confirming Severus’ suspicions. “I …”

Severus took another step, instinct and fury screaming with the need to conquer, to drive away the threat to his mate. “You knew! All this time—”

“Severus,” Albus called.

Harry clasped Severus’ hand and tugged him back a step. “Easy, love. He’s not a threat. Just a hypocritical berk.”

The touch of Harry’s hand and the sound of his voice brought Severus back from the brink. He gave his mate a curt nod, fury still blazing, and turned back to glare at the wolf.

“You knew he was suffering all this time, and yet you think you have the right to suggest I am abusive? I have never laid a hand on him and, since learning of his terrible life at home, have done everything within my power to correct it. What have you done, wolf?”

Lupin glared. “I … I did what I could. I—”

“You did nothing!” Severus’ roar rang off the walls, sending the nosy occupants of the portraits behind Albus’ desk to hide behind their frames. “I made sure he was protected. I threatened them, kept monitoring charms on him, made sure he was fed, watched over him as much as possible, and even sacrificed my position as a spy and my very humanity to keep him safe, all while you sat on your hands and pretended not to smell his pain. I should bleed you where you stand!”

Albus’ calm voice was a strange counterpoint to Severus’ fury. “However, as werewolf blood is quite toxic to vampires, I would advise strongly against such a course of action.”

Harry grabbed Severus’ other hand and tugged him backwards again. “Sev, please. I … I can’t lose you too.”

The fear in Harry’s voice forced Severus out of near bloodlust and into his arms. “I am here. Ssh.”

Harry hugged him tight, then stepped in front of him. “Let me handle this, love.”

Severus conceded that Harry had the right to it. “Very well.”

Harry turned and faced Lupin, his eyes dark with sorrow and sharp with fury. “Severus is right. He gave everything to protect me while you did nothing.”

Lupin cringed. “I … I didn’t think it was that bad, Harry.”

“Not that bad?” Harry scowled. “Oh, so if I was just being roughed up a little, that would have justified your cowardice?”

Lupin winced. “I …”

“Charming,” said Severus with a scowl of disgust.

Harry nodded. “Pathetic is more like it. And yes, for your information, Remus, it was that bad, though if not for Severus helping me come to terms with it over the summer, I doubt I would have ever been able to admit it. Merlin, Petunia would’ve probably killed me this time if not for Severus.”
She went completely berserk. Severus didn’t even have to break skin to take my blood as Petunia had already hacked me open. And until Severus taught me that everything those monsters told me was a lie, I thought I deserved it. But—” Harry fixed Lupin with a dark look. “I suppose, as long as you get to keep your cosy little status among the Order, well, that’s not bad enough to worry about, hmm?”

Severus snarled and stepped beside Harry, barely containing his rage. “There is no acceptable level of child abuse, Lupin.” He loomed, and was gratified to watch the wolf leap back in distress.

“Harry, it … it wasn’t like that. I … I just, I wasn’t s-sure it was really abuse. I mean, I smelled blood and bruises sometimes, yes, but boys get scrapes all the time.”

“And the starvation?” Severus’ eyes bored holes into the wolf, Harry’s tight hold on his hand the only thing keeping him from snarling. “Do well-treated young boys starve on a regular basis, hmm?”

“I ….” Lupin’s excuses failed. He stared at the floor and held his waist, shaking hard.

“Enough.” Harry gave the wolf a disgusted look. “I mean, come on, Remus! Even if you didn’t know, I was there for how many years and you never even checked on me? Not once? You were supposed to be my father’s best friend, but where the hell were you for the first fourteen years of my life, Remus? Huh? Where were you?”

The wolf winced and stared at the floor. “I … the missions for the Order—”

“Your tasks while the Dark Lord remained non-corporeal were few and far between, Lupin.” Severus sliced into him with a razor-sharp gaze. “You may lie to yourself to cover your weaknesses, but I will not allow you to lie to Harry.”

Harry scoffed, but tears pooled on his lashes and his voice shook with grief. “I’m not stupid enough to believe it anymore anyway. There was nothing keeping you away other than your own cowardly nature, Remus.”

Lupin reached for Harry. “Please, cub. It w-wasn’t like that. I d-didn’t realise you were unhappy and —”

“That’s enough, young man,” said one of the headmaster’s portraits, an older woman in a wimple who had always reminded Severus of Poppy. “Every one of us here can see you are in the wrong.”

“Indeed,” said Armando Dippet. “There are rules of course, but the bond between these two men is one that I am loath to interfere in, particularly where vampiric donor bonds and soul madness are also concerned. Either way, you, who have hurt both of these men, certainly have no place in arguing their relationship.”

“Thank you, Armando, Lennie, but that will be enough,” said Albus. “This is an issue that Harry and Severus need to face on their own.” He gave Harry and Severus a wry smile. “Well, with some support, of course.”

The portraits bowed and subsided.

“Harry, please.” Lupin reached for Harry’s hand. “Please just—I didn’t mean to—”

But Harry batted him away. “Gods, stop it, Remus! Just stop!” He jerked a hand across his face, wiping his tears before they could fall.

Severus cupped his mate’s face and searched his eyes, fearful Harry would break under this new
pain, but he found himself facing an angry warrior and not a betrayed youth. Harry’s eyes filled with determination and resolution in spite of his tears, and Severus let him go with a nod.

He would not impede his lover’s ability to stand on his own two feet. Harry would survive. He would pull through this and come out stronger for it.

He had endured worse betrayals, after all.

Harry gave him a wan smile and turned back to the wolf. “You knew about the abuse: mine, and Severus’. You absolutely knew, and you did nothing because you were afraid of rocking the boat. You thought if you revealed my living conditions or stood up for Severus, the people who supported you would turn on you. You were afraid of losing your friends for Severus and your cosy little spot in the Order for me, and so you sacrificed our blood, safety, and sanity for yours.”

“I ….” Lupin clutched his waist and stepped back again. “No, I ….”

“Enough.” Severus stepped forward. “For once in your miserable life, face the facts, Lupin. You owe it to Harry, if nothing else will make you see the truth.”

Lupin glared. “You have no right to—”

But Severus wasn’t finished. “Lupin, you are a bloody coward! You knew what Black and Potter were doing to me was wrong, but you let them get away with it for fear of losing your friends. You let them assault me, and did not dare speak out when they tried to murder me.”

Lupin winced, then glared. “This isn’t about you!”

“No?” Severus barked a laugh. “Then let us talk about your cowardice concerning Harry, shall we? And since Harry has already covered his life with the Dursleys, perhaps we shall discuss your time as an instructor in this school, when the safety of your students should have been your first priority!”

Lupin paled and took a step back. “I-I tried to keep them all safe, Severus.”

“Did you? Then do explain why, while masquerading as the sensitive, caring Defence instructor and friend of Harry’s family, you let Black continue his madness when he escaped from Azkaban, when you might have stopped him right away? We all thought he had murdered Pettigrew and betrayed Harry’s family, including you! And yet, even knowing he could come back and kill Harry at any time—thank Merlin he was not the true traitor, but we all thought he was—and still you did not tell the Headmaster about your little Animagus secrets. The bastard might have killed Harry, might have killed us all, but you pretended everything was just bloody peachy, because gods forbid Albus should know the perfect little pet werewolf broke the goddamned rules!”

Harry laid a hand on Severus’ chest to soothe the agitated vampire. “Easy, love.”

Severus let his mate’s voice calm him and focused on regulating his breathing and rapid heart rate.

Harry’s eyes hardened to something like steel as he whirled on Lupin. “Severus is right, and while we’re talking about rules, let’s just talk about the bloody laws you broke in school. And I’m not talking about the fact that you let your Animagi friends run wild with you every full moon and endangered every student in the school—reckless as it was, I can understand why—no, I’m talking about a little law against sexual abuse. You know, the same kind of thing you’re accusing Severus of?”

Lupin grimaced. “I’ve never—”
“Bollocks! Maybe you didn’t rape anyone, but you’re as guilty as the rest of them because you stood by and let it happen!”

Lupin gave him a sad look. “Is that really what you think—you think I would do that?”

“I don’t think it. I saw it. I watched you do it in Severus’ pensieve. OWL year, Remus. Ring a bell?”

When Lupin looked away, Harry scoffed bitterly. “Should have known you wouldn’t admit it. When you stood there and let Da and Sirius assault Severus, you became complicit in his assault.” Again, tears formed on his lashes, but Harry blinked them down. “And you know the really terrible thing? You act like you love me, like you care what happens to me, but you abandoned me to endure the same damn thing!”

Lupin went ashen. “No. I … but I never smelled it ….”

“And that, wolf,” said Severus with a snarl, “is as much an admission of guilt as we are ever likely to hear from your cowardly hide.”

Lupin cringed. “But if I’d known—I mean, I’d have known if—”

Harry scoffed. “The kind of abuse my aunt used on me didn’t leave that kind of mark.” He scowled and scrubbed his tears away. “It left me sick, poisoned, burned, but I didn’t bear anyone else’s scent. I doubt you could’ve smelled it over the lye even if I had. But you know what, Remus? Even if you had smelled it on me, I doubt you would have done anything about it. You’d have kept mum and pretended everything was good just to keep your happy little place in the status quo.”

Lupin reeled back as if struck. “Harry, no. I—”

Harry snapped, “No. No excuses. You did it to Severus. You would have done it to me too.”

Lupin’s eyes filled. “Harry … I just don’t want to see you hurt.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have left me in the middle of hell in the first place!”

Harry’s magic whipped around him again, glowing like a shield surrounding his body. Electric blue and killing-curse green arcs danced around him in an incredible display of raw power, beautiful and lethal at once. Severus watched him, awed and more in love with him by the moment. As powerful as he was, this wild display revealed Harry’s cracked core, the stark vulnerability inside a powerful warrior, and Severus wanted nothing more than to protect him from all those who would do him harm.

But for the moment, he could do little more than watch as Harry shredded the wolf’s last bastion of denial. Severus would have taken pleasure in seeing justice served, if he didn’t know the sword Harry wielded against Lupin had a blade on both ends.

Harry shouted, his voice breaking with rage and grief, “How dare you accuse Severus of abuse, when he was the only one who saved me? How dare you accuse him of something so vile, when you let me suffer worse! Even if he had taken me before I was of age—and he didn’t. Actually, he wouldn’t even let me kiss him—but even if he had made love to me then, it at least would have been of my own will! I wouldn’t have been nearly as ….” His voice broke and the magic cloud dissipated. “As d-damaged, as … I ….”

He choked back a sob and turned his face into Severus’ side. “Sev, hurts.”

Severus left off continuing to threaten the wolf in the face of Harry’s more pressing need for comfort.
“Here, love. Come, I will hold you together.”

Severus moved towards the sofa, but Harry shook his head and wiped his face fiercely. “No. I won’t be weak. I won’t let him break me too.”

Lupin made a sound something like a whimper and stepped closer, but halted at Severus’ harsh glare.

“H-Harry,” the wolf pleaded, “I never meant to—”

“It doesn’t matter, does it?” Harry stared Lupin down, and Severus was proud to see him standing tall against all opposition. “Whether you meant to or not, your inaction hurt me terribly. I’m scarred for life, and all you would have had to do to save me was lift a bloody finger.”

Lupin breathed in harshly and slumped. “I see. I suppose, in that case, it was rather hypocritical of me to—but Harry, it’s still not right. Don’t you see? He’s too old for you.”

“On the contrary,” said Albus with a disappointed look at the wolf, “many wizarding pairs have a larger age difference than theirs. Who will care in two hundred years? And, Severus’ vampirism means he will live longer than most of us. As will Harry, as a Shaman. Therefore, their ages are actually quite complimentary for their races.”

Something tight and painful unwound in Severus at hearing that. Albus was right. With Harry’s Shamanism and his vampirism, they would both outlive most wizards and, barring an early demise, would most likely die around the same time.

Assuming they survived the war, anyway.

“Even so, it’s still not right,” Lupin argued. “An adult with a child isn’t right!”

Harry groaned and smacked his forehead. “Merlin’s hairy bollocks, Remus!”

The portraits tittered at his turn of phrase. Even Severus had a hard time keeping a straight face.

Harry went on as if he hadn’t noticed. “I’m a bloody adult, you idiot! And as such, let me make this perfectly clear: you have no say over who I do or don’t spend my life with!”

Lupin cringed. “Your life? Oh, but … but, Harry! You could do so much better.”

“And the truth comes out at last,” Severus said with a scoff. “The little pet wolf doesn’t like the greasy Slytherin vampire, and so he is trying to set his cub against him.”

“The more you talk, the deeper you dig the hole under yourself, Remus,” Harry snarled, magic sharp and swirling around him again. “I’d advise you to shut up and listen now before I decide I’m shot of you forever.”

Severus turned and laid a hand on his arm. [Breathe, Harry. Remember our promise to each other. He cannot and will not tear us apart, no matter how he tries.]

Harry gave Severus a brief smile edged with sorrow and anger. [It hurts anyway.]

[I know. I am with you.]

Lupin stared between them, his expression still marked with sadness and disgust.

“Remus,” Harry said in a softer voice, “please. You’re the last link to my family I have left. I don’t want to lose you, but I will if you continue to come between me and my mate. I know you were just
scared to speak up about my abuse because you thought people wouldn’t believe it and turn on you. I can forgive that.”

Severus huffed. “I cannot.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “Your grudges with Remus go deeper than this, Sev.”

Severus nodded in acknowledgment of the truth of that statement.

Harry turned to the werewolf again, his eyes full of hurt and weariness. “I can forgive your refusal to speak up and inaction, but this on top of that is too far. Please. All I’m asking you to do is listen.”

Lupin sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “A-all right.” With a shake of his head, he collapsed into the nearest chair. “But this had better be good, Harry.”

“Oh it is.” Harry glared, eyes ice-cold. “I reckon when this conversation is over, you’ll feel like the hypocritical, cowardly prat you are.”

Lupin winced. “Very well. I’m … listening.” His tone suggested he would rather not.

“How very heartfelt and sincere.” Severus sneered and sat on the sofa, choosing the seat furthest from the slavering beast. Harry gave the wolf one look full of disappointment and bitter betrayal, then sat at Severus’ side and curled into the man’s chest.

“Is this what it’s going to be like with everyone, Sev?”

Severus sighed and slipped a hand into Harry’s hair. “For your sake, pet, I hope not.”

Lupin grimaced at their affection. “How, how can you condone this, Albus?”

Albus’ smile held worlds of sorrow. “I condone it—and indeed encourage it—simply because I love them both and I know what it is to endure without love. And so do they.”

Harry sniffled and buried his face in Severus’ shoulder. Severus held him and stroked his hair, his eyes on his mate.

“Albus,” he said in a soft voice, “if you will explain? I am not sure Harry is capable and I must help him recover.”

“Of course, my boys.” Albus fixed Lupin with a piercing gaze. “I must say, I am terribly disappointed in you, Remus. I had hoped you would be a support for Harry during the coming storm, but it seems old grudges die hard. Especially when there was never a justification for them in the first place.”

Lupin winced and looked away. “Perhaps you had best explain and be done with it.”

“As you wish.” Albus popped a lemon drop and floated cups of tea to his guests. “May as well make ourselves comfortable. This will be a long discussion.” He pushed his spectacles back with a gnarled finger. “Now then, Remus, have you ever heard of a condition called Gemino Animae?”

Harry listened to the discussion with half an ear, his heart aching at Remus’ disgust. If Remus would
not even condone their relationship, what hope did he have of convincing Mum Weasley or McGonagall to accept it? Remus was supposed to be the reasonable one.

Severus held Harry close during the discussion, running slow fingers through his hair and whispering words of love and faith in his ear.

“I am sorry, pet, that I have hurt you so. I did not intend to tear your family asunder.”

“It’s not your fault, Severus,” Harry said in a voice he was sure would carry. “If they can’t accept that you’re the one I chose, then I guess they didn’t love me as much as I thought. At least Hermione and the headmaster stand by us.”

Remus whipped his head around. “H-Hermione knows?”

“She encouraged me to accept him,” Harry said in a quiet, sorrowful voice. “And that was before we knew about Gemino Animae. She saw how much Severus was helping me heal, how good of a man and good of a friend he was to me, knew how much I was already in love with him, and told me to take the leap. I would have done anyway, but it was nice to know I had the support of one person I love.”

“Harry, you can’t be sure about this twin souls thing. I mean, it’s unheard of. And you just don’t know what Severus is capable of!”

Harry sent the man a glare that sent chills down even Severus’ spine. “Neither do you, clearly.”

“But—”

“Actually, we do have confirmation of Gemino Animae beyond the symptoms,” said Severus in a cold voice. “Did you know, wolf, that in the end, I came to warn Lily of the Dark Lord’s ire?”

Remus gave a terse nod. “What about it?”

“I had begun to go soul mad myself when I came to her, but the instant Lily took my hand and placed it against her belly where Harry was kicking, my soul recognised its mate and healed. The bond between us activated as soon as his soul came into contact with mine, and that was enough to halt the progress of my descent and restore me to health.”

Remus frowned. “Well, be that as may, doesn’t it bother you that at the time you were old enough to take a mate, Harry hadn’t even been born?”

Severus scowled. “I am not the one who aligned our souls. Blame fate if you must have a scapegoat for your revulsion.” He held Harry tighter. “And no, it does not bother me because he has lived a lifetime in his eighteen years. He is a mature, capable adult, or I would not consider him for a mate.”

“Just admit it, Remus,” said Harry, his voice flat and depressed, “this has nothing to do with our ages or his vampirism or anything really. You just don’t like seeing us together because of a grudge.”

Remus gaped. “But I … that’s not true, Harry! I’ve tried to be friendly over the years.”

“Have you?” Harry snorted. “Maybe you were civil, but were you ever really there for Severus like Hermione has been for me? Like R-Ron was? Did you help Severus with anything? No. You wouldn’t have done because, ultimately, you still think you’re better than he is. You think, because Da and Sirius made you feel good about yourself, that it was okay to treat Severus like dirt.”

He glared at Remus, unwilling to show the stark pain his rejection caused. “You know, I think
maybe that’s the real reason why you can’t accept Severus now. Because the moment you admit he’s as worthy of love and respect as you are, then you have to also admit you were wrong all those years you stood by and did nothing to help him.”

Remus winced. “Harry … Merlin, is that what you really think of me?”

“Right now, that’s not even the start of it. I’m so bloody disappointed in you, I can hardly stand to look at you.”

Remus ran a hand through his hair. “Harry, it’s only that … this isn’t the life James and Sirius would’ve wanted for you, and—”

Harry leapt to his feet, fists clenched, eyes blazing killing-curse green. “And James and Sirius—spoiled, vicious idiots that they were—are dead!”

Harry’s cry sounded like a gong in the quiet office. Remus stared at him as if he didn’t know who Harry was.

By all rights, apparently he didn’t.

“It’s true.” Harry sat again and leaned into Severus’ embrace, sighing with frustration. “Remus, let me ask you this. Why did they start picking on Severus?”

“Er … because he was a Slytherin. House rivalries and all that.”

“Really? Barring how immature that is in and of itself—”

“And untrue,” Severus interjected, “as they began tormenting me on the train ride to Hogwarts, long before I was sorted.”

“Lovely.” Harry stared at Remus. “Slytherin, eh?”

“Er … but it was, mostly,” Remus muttered.

“Well then, why not pick on other Slytherins too? Why Severus specifically?”

Remus frowned. “He … he fought us too.”

“No,” Harry clarified, “he retaliated. Your group started it—on the train, so neither Severus’ defence of himself nor his house had anything to do with it, other than to provide you with sorry excuses to keep going after you’d already taken a liking to it. Try again.”

“Well, I … I suppose it was because he was so scruffy and rude.” Remus blushed. “Not that that is a good reason, either.”

“No indeed,” Harry said with a scowl. “‘Oi, let’s torture the abused, lonely, Muggle-raised kid who can’t afford decent clothing.’ Sound familiar yet?”

“Harry, no, there’s a world of difference—”

“Is there?” Harry scoffed. “I think not. And besides, I still don’t think you’ve hit on the real reason Da targeted Severus yet. Let me give you a hint: she had red hair and eyes like mine.”

Remus gaped. “Lily? But … but that’s preposterous!”

“It isn’t. Da picked on Severus because he was jealous of his friendship with Lily. The clothes, the
books, his house—it was all an excuse. He wanted Lily for himself. To that end, he set about trying to make Severus look as bad as possible and placed himself in a position of power over Sev. He hoped she would choose him over Severus. And it worked. Sadly.”

Remus blanched. “And Sirius?”

“Sirius used Severus as a release for what he wanted to do to his family. Severus, a lonely Slytherin and his best mate’s rival, became his scapegoat for all things evil, and that’s partially why he was more violent. Also because, despite that I loved him, he was a vicious prat who never let his anger go. The man really needed therapy or a mind healer or something.”

Remus winced. “That’s ….”

“Accurate,” said Severus with a nod. “Harry is exactly right. Lily said so herself, often. And referred to her own husband as ‘an arrogant tosser where I am concerned’ when I apologised to her the last time, in case you imagined she believed James to be innocent.”

Remus cringed. “But—”

“Sounds like Mum hit the nail on the head, though she should have apologised for her own part in that fiasco, and I seriously question her judgment in marrying said arrogant tosser,” Harry interjected. “But we’re discussing motivations for the Marauders at the moment, so let’s get back to that. We all know Peter was a spineless coward who went with the biggest bully. No need for explanations there. But you, Remus, what reason did you have for going along with it?”

Remus looked away. “I ….”

“I’m waiting.”

Remus bit his lip and stared at his lap.

“You didn’t speak up because Black and Potter made you feel safe,” said Severus in a soft voice. “You stayed quiet because they were your friends, and you thought you would lose them if you fought for me. Like with Harry, you let them carry on the abuse to keep your place in the hierarchy. Even when they strayed into realms past abuse and into criminal behaviour, you never found your courage.”

“And you still haven’t,” said Harry, sorrow and disappointment dripping off every word. “You’re still letting their opinion of Severus form the basis of yours. You’re still afraid to think for yourself. You’re still leaning on their mistakes because to admit they were wrong and you let it slide would topple your world. And you know what? It’s past time. Your world sucks.”

Remus cringed. “I … you really think I’m that kind of coward?”

Harry’s expression turned stony. “You should ask my aunt that question.”

Remus lowered his head. “R-right.”

“I would advise that you ask Harry’s aunt nothing,” said Dumbledore with a grave shake of his head. “She is restrained at the Janus Thickey ward, and is quite frankly a danger to anyone who comes near.”

Remus flinched. “I … I suppose I am to blame for her condition, too?”

“No.” Harry looked to Severus and back to Remus. “That woman’s issue with magic goes much
further back than your acquaintance with her and mine. She was jealous of Mum. She wanted her magic so badly, but she couldn’t have it. So she convinced herself she didn’t need it. And soon, it became something to hate. So by the time she learned she had magic, but not enough to do her any good—well, it just … it was too much for her mind.”

Severus squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “An accurate assessment.”

Harry nodded. “She’d built her whole life upon a hatred of magic, and when her world turned in on itself, she couldn’t handle it.” He turned a searching gaze on Remus. “But I think you can, if you let yourself.”

Remus winced. “You want my world to fall apart?”

“Sometimes destruction is necessary for new growth to come,” Severus said in a soft voice, and Harry appreciated his gentleness.

“Exactly.” Harry stood and moved to the werewolf’s side. “My world fell apart in fifth year, when I saw in Severus’ pensieve just how cruel my family truly was to him. And like Sev said, it destroyed many of the iron-clad beliefs I held dear. I learned the men I had thought heroes and paragons of virtue were actually criminals and cowards. I learned that the man I had believed to be the cause of everything bad in my life was an innocent boy who had suffered the same way I had, and at his core, was a good person.”

He hugged his chest as the memory of his suffering during that summer left him cold and hollow, phantom pains he feared might never fade entirely. “It was rough, trying to reconcile all that. I had trouble accepting it at first, and it hurt like hell when I finally did, especially as I had just lost Sirius. Dealing with my grief for a man I loved and learning he was so deeply flawed at the same time was terrible, and I had no one to help me understand, or even just to give me a hug. It was awful that summer. Everything felt raw and empty and I thought I would bleed to death before it ended.

“But once I accepted that the world isn’t painted in black and white but shades of grey, and that even those we love can be terribly wrong, I knew I had to make a change. So I plucked up my courage at the beginning of sixth year and offered Severus a formal wizarding apology—not just for breaking into his pensieve, but for all of you, too. I offered him an apology for my whole family.” He gave Remus a wry smile. “Got thrown out on my ear for it too.”

Severus gave his soulmate a sad smile. “I hope you can forgive me for that, love.”

Harry came to him and kissed his forehead. “You know I have.”

“I love you,” Severus whispered in his ear, then turned to address the wolf again. “Harry is correct in that I did not respond well to his apology; however, that event was what truly began to change my impression of him. Not only did his ‘world-toppling’ growth alter him and make him into a better, braver man, it forced a change in me as well. After that moment, I could no longer reconcile the image of a spoiled, selfish, arrogant brat I had so carefully cultivated and carried like a shield against him, but rather was forced to see him as he was. By the time he rescued me at the end of last term—or perhaps we rescued each other—I had come to respect him, though I could not yet admit it.”

“R-rescued each other?” Remus frowned. “From what?”

“Severus saved me from Malfoy and his goons a few hours before ….” Harry shuddered. “I’d have died if not for him.”

Severus wrapped an arm about Harry’s waist and pulled him close.
“I can’t tell you about Severus though,” Harry murmured. “It’s highly personal.”

Severus eyed the werewolf. “In time, if you prove yourself to be trustworthy, I will consider sharing it with you, for Harry’s sake. At the moment, you have not begun to earn my trust.”

Remus winced. “No. I suppose not.”

Harry offered Remus a hand. “The thing is, Severus is trying to be fair to you despite the cruel way you treated him earlier. He has every reason to hate you, but because he loves me, he’s trying to move past it.”

Severus nodded in support of him.

“And now,” Harry continued, his voice soft and sad, “you have the same choice before you, Remus. You can face up to your past and admit that you’ve never been fair to Severus, or you can keep holding onto that cowardly, self-righteous façade you’ve hidden behind so long and, though I hate it, we’ll have to part ways. I love Severus, and I will stand up for him to the end. Someone needs to.”

Albus cleared his throat.

Harry gave him a wry smile. “Other than you, sir.” He looked back to Remus. “Are you brave enough to stop hiding and stand on your own two feet, Moony?”


Harry looked away. “Don’t bother if you’re only doing it to keep me. It won’t do any good unless you face up to what you did wrong. You’ll never find the will to change otherwise.”

“It’s not that, Harry.” Remus laid his head in his hands. “Well, I suppose it is, in part. I do love you, however poorly I’ve shown it over the years. But I … I ….” He swallowed hard and went silent for a long moment, battling with his emotions. Harry waited to see which would win and prepared himself for the worst. Merlin, he hoped Severus would be able to hold him together if Remus broke his heart.

Remus ruffled his hair, a gesture of pain and frustration, and let out heavy sigh. “I … I hate it, but Merlin help me, you’re right, Harry.” His voice lowered to a broken whisper. “You’re right.”

Hope flickered to life in Harry’s heart, but he refused to give into it yet. Remus had yet to admit his sins, and he could never hope to change unless he finally faced up to the past. Unless he did, his offer of reconciliation would never last.

Remus sat up and met Harry’s eyes, his own clouded and shimmering with tears. “I should have been there for you. I should have i-intervened for Severus. Instead, I let fear prevent me from sparing you pain, a child and a boy I loved as my own cub, and let an innocent boy be tortured right in front of me. They were as bad as Death Eaters that day and I-I just stood there like a bloody idiot! Shite! I never should have let it go so far. I never should have—” Tears slipped down his face. “You were abused and assaulted and I—I was more afraid for my own sorry hide than—” He let slip a cry of anguish. “Gods forgive me, what have I let myself become?”

Harry gave Severus a reassuring smile and went to the werewolf, wrapping him in a hug. “I know it hurts. The first step always does.”

“I can’t believe … I hate what I’ve done. I hate myself more.” Remus looked up and held Harry’s cheeks. “Cub, I am so sorry. I … I haven’t done right by you at all.”
“It’s not too late to change it. Just don’t hide in the shadows any longer. Don’t let fear rule you. Speak out against injustice, whether it costs you or not, and trust that your friends will have your back. Loads of people love you, Remus, and they would fight to the death for you. Hell, if you can learn to treat Severus with the respect he deserves and not just civility, he might even defend you.”

“For your sake, Harry, I would do so either way.” Severus glared at Remus. “However, without honest change on his part, I am afraid I would not do so gently.”

Remus sniffled. “I … it’s going to be difficult to change, but I’ll try, Severus.

Severus bowed his head in acceptance of his vow. “Will you continue to make trouble for Harry and myself?”

Remus sighed. “Promise me one thing?”

“I will promise nothing without knowing what you wish of me; however, I will at least hear your request.”

“All I ask is that you … you treat him well. Don’t belittle him or treat him as anything less than your equal.”

Severus’ eyes sparked, but he quelled his temper quickly. “You have my word.”

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’. “I don’t think it was meant to be offensive, love.”

“I-it wasn’t.” Remus buried his head in his hands. “Gods. I … I feel so lost.”

Albus gave him a sad smile. “So did I, when I first realised the man I loved was not what I believed him to be. It is difficult to rebuild one’s perceptions from the ground up, but as long as you do not give into the draw of your former prejudices, in time, you will begin to see the world as it truly is once more.”

Remus jerked up and gaped. “You’re gay, Albus? I had no idea.”

Albus chuckled. “Yes, well, it wasn’t something I advertised as I had no interest in taking another chance, not after him.” A trace of something terrible, something akin to horror flickered in his eyes, then shifted to desperate pain. “I wonder now if it was ever meant to be at all.”

Severus frowned. “Albus?”

Albus waved them off. “It’s nothing, my boys. Well, perhaps not nothing, but we have other concerns at the moment. Remus, now that you have Severus’ promise to honour Harry, will you accept their relationship?”

Remus shivered. “I don’t think I have a choice. I won’t—I can’t be the reason they lose their souls.”

He turned to Harry and gave him a sorrowful look. “And as for the rest of it, Merlin, I’m sorry, cub. To you too, Severus. I acted like a complete arse.” He grimaced. “I still think part of my reaction was normal given the age difference, though.”

“Fair enough,” said Harry. “But as I’m not a child, it’s moot.”

“You’re not a child by two days, cub. Barely legal doesn’t cut it here.”

“Thank you for making me feel like a sleazy old man,” Severus said with a groan.

“To qualify as a sleazy old man, we’d have had to do something sleazy,” said Harry with a laugh.
“No worries, Severus. If you’d rather wait a bit, I suppose I can try to hold it together until you feel comfortable.”

“Dear gods, pet. Must we discuss this in front of the man who may as well be my father and one of the men who may as well be yours?”

Harry blushed and hid himself in Severus’ side. “Er … good point. Merlin.”

Remus gave them a wan smile. “I take it you’re still a virgin, Harry?”

“Oi!”

Remus rubbed his forehead in a gesture of weariness. “Well, at least Severus will be able to show you the ropes.”

Severus flushed and looked away. “Enough!”

Harry squeezed his hand in comfort. [Don’t worry. We’ll learn together, love.]

Severus gave him a hesitant nod. [Do you regret that I do not know more?]

[Regret it? I think it’s brilliant we can be each other’s first.]

[Ah … truly? You are not disappointed?]

[No, Severus. Not at all.]

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead and whispered a soft thank you against his fringe.

“Interesting.” Albus was staring at them and rubbing his beard. “Your telepathic link seems to be holding longer.”

Severus choked. “Mother of Merlin—you heard that?”

Albus chuckled. “Sharing secrets, were we?”

Severus groaned. “Albus, please. This conversation is already humiliating enough.”

Albus shook his head. “Peace, Severus. I did not hear anything. As I am not a part of your soul bond, I cannot.”

“Oh, thank Merlin,” said Harry with a sigh.

Remus’ eyebrow shot up. “Just what were you talking about, hmm?”

Severus scowled. “None of your business, wolf!”

Remus groaned. “In that case, I’m sure I don’t want to know.”

Albus chuckled. “I assume the two of you would like to know how I was aware you were speaking telepathically?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. I didn’t think we were that obvious.”

“You aren’t, other than the fact that you cannot carry on a physical conversation while communicating mentally and there is the potential to leave gaps. I think most will not notice as long as you are careful about when and where you utilise the ability.”
Severus nodded. “We will take that into consideration. Is that how you realised?”

“No. In my case, though I cannot hear your conversations, being a powerful mind magic user and one with aura sight myself—not as a vampiric trait, but simply as a skill—I could see the magic passing between your minds. It appears as a blue light linking your foreheads.”

Harry frowned. “So we’ll have to take care about using it in front of vampires.”

“No necessarily,” said Severus. “My aura sight does not work unless I activate it—to use it constantly would drive me mad. And apart from the three vampiric students in Hogwarts, none of whom are close to us, any vampire we are likely to meet will be too far gone to care if we are communicating mentally.”

Harry shuddered. “Y-yeah.”

“We are doing what we can to mitigate the threat.” Albus rubbed his chin and gave the werewolf an appraising look. “But perhaps there is more to be done yet. Remus, what is your standing with the vampire clans?”

Remus gulped. “Don’t tell me you want to send a werewolf into the vampire clans?”

Albus frowned. “Well, I cannot send our only vampire, not without endangering his life. I had assumed a dark creature—at least by technicality—would be accepted with greater ease than a pure human.”

Remus shuddered. “Oh no. Not a were-creature. You saw how I reacted to Severus. You send me into a clan of that … no, that’s a phenomenally bad idea.”

Albus tugged on his beard. “You make a fair point. However, we do need to inform the clans of Voldemort’s plots to use their people as human cannons, so to speak. Whom do you recommend I send as a delegate?”

Remus rubbed his chin in thought. “Hmm. Kingsley. If anyone can handle that, he can.”

“For once, I agree with the wolf,” said Severus.

“Same here,” said Harry. “Just … maybe tell him to leave Tonks behind? She means well, but she’s a lot to handle, especially if there are higher grades about. I reckon she might set the tetchy ones off.”

“The clans do not allow grades higher than seven to mingle in society,” said Albus with a shake of his head. “Grades nine and ten … they are euthanised. At that point, any humanity the vampire might have had once is gone. The need for blood becomes an all-consuming craving that erodes their mind, their will, and causes them great anguish. It is too dangerous, and by their standards, cruel, to leave them in such pain.” He closed his eyes, his grief for his lost students apparent. With a sigh, he gave Harry a wan smile and continued. “And, as even grades six and seven are required to stay on soothers and have a donor, there is no danger from high grade vampires.”

Harry nodded. “Even so, individual personalities are still a potential problem. Tonks and tetchy vampires just don’t mix. Well, they might, I suppose. They might find her antics entertaining for all I know, but they might not. And I think it’s a risk we can’t afford to take.”

“Hmm.” Albus ran a hand through his beard, eyes narrowed in thought. “I could not send another auror regardless—the vampires would suspect duplicity and Ministry involvement—but Kingsley cannot handle such a dangerous mission alone. Who should aid him?”
Severus shuddered and closed his eyes. “I think, Albus, that choice should be obvious.”

“Severus ….” Albus folded his arms over his chest. “I do understand your reasoning, but you are a target, my boy. I fear to risk you.”

“Polyjuice potion should conceal my identity. The vampires will know I am under a potion, but as long as I am up front with them about it and let them know I am hiding my identity because my life is at risk, it should not hamper diplomacy.”

“And the antidote?”

“I will continue to work as I am able, and Harry is skilled enough to at least research for me while I’m away.”

Harry shuddered. “S-Sev, how many clans are there?”

“We shall only be visiting the major British clans,” Albus said with a shake of his head. “I do not know enough of the foreign clans to know if they would welcome delegates, and the clans we visit will be able to spread the message among their own people.”

Harry’s voice trembled with terror. “And how many is that?”

“Three,” Albus said in a soft voice. “Severus would be traveling for a week, give or take a few days. Can you bear to be apart that long?”

Harry gulped. “It’s not so much that we’d be apart. It’s that we’d be apart and he’d be in terrible danger. If he d-dies ….”

Albus gave Severus a grave look. “Harry makes a good point.”

Severus nodded and rubbed his lips. “We’ll need to take a house elf. One who can get us out of trouble at the first sign of danger, and one intelligent enough to know how to spy. As well, one brave enough to deal with many vampires at once and capable of keeping me in supply of Harry’s blood, should I need more while we are away.”

“Those are few and far between, Severus. Most house elves do not have the will to spy nor the courage to face dark creatures in such numbers.” Albus grinned devilishly. “But as it happens, I do happen to know one elf who would be perfect for the job.”

Severus groaned. “Albus, must we?”

Albus chuckled. “Oh, yes. I think Harry will feel much better about your safety if Dobby is present on your mission to the clans.”

“Yes I would,” Harry said with a grin. “Dobby, listen. Severus here—he’s my mate. And if anything happens to Severus, I go mad. So I need you to keep him safe no matter what!” He paused. “Just, er,
no barmy stuff like you pulled in my second year, okay? Don’t *hurt* him.”

Severus’ eyebrow shot up. “Albus ….”

“Oh!” Dobby squealed and clapped his hands. “Master Harry Potter be finding his mate? Yes, yes, Dobby will protect Master Harry’s Snapey with his life!”

“Albus ….”

Harry grinned at Severus’ discomfiture. “Oh, and Sev is a vampire too now, so he needs my blood to survive. If I can get Madam Pomfrey or Professor Dumbledore to draw it for me and seal it, can you bring it to him whenever he gets hungry for it or if he starts suffering through the mark?”

“Oh, yes. Dobby be watching Master Harry’s Snapey like an eagle and bringing Great Master Harry Potter’s blood back to Master Harry’s Snapey every time he is hungry or the mean dark wizard hurts him. He is not being having the chance to get a hunger pang!”

Harry snorted. “Er, don’t get too gung ho, Dobby. Remember his, um, *other* dietary needs have the potential to drain me if he takes too much. Use moderation, *please*, unless it’s a dire emergency.”

“Dobby be understanding, great Master Harry Potter, sir. I’s not be draining you or making Master Harry’s Snapey suffer.”

Severus slammed his hand on the desk. “Albus!”

Albus stroked his beard. “Yes, Severus, I see your point. We do have one problem with the situation. Dobby, Severus and Remus will be travelling to the three most powerful vampiric clans as soon as Severus is fully recovered, but your … ahem … flamboyant attire will draw too much notice and possibly offend the vampires. Would you consent to dressing in a, ah, more understated fashion for the duration of the mission?”

“You’re one to talk,” Severus grumbled, indicating the man’s purple spangled robes and lime green duster.

Albus chuckled wryly. “Touché.”

Harry snorted. “Er, maybe let Severus pick out an outfit for you, Dobby? Just for the duration of the trip?”

Dobby nodded. “I’s be wearing whatever Master Harry’s Snapey be wanting me to.”

Severus gave Harry a commiserating look. “He’s going to keep calling me that, isn’t he?”

Harry’s lips twitched with suppressed laughter. “I’m afraid you’re stuck with it. He never listens when I ask him to call me Harry.”

“Oh!” Dobby shook his head so hard his bat ears flapped and his tea cosies wobbled. “Oh, no. I’s couldn’t. That would be a grave insult, great Master Harry Potter.”

“Indeed.” Severus rubbed his chin. “Would you at least call me Master Snape, and not Snapey? You used to before.”

“That was before you’s being Master Harry’s. Now you is Master Harry’s Master Snapey!”

Severus groaned. “No, not—that is even worse. Just … oh, Merlin, what have I gotten myself into?”
Harry burst into laughter. “You’ll get used to it, love. He refers to almost everyone as mine for some reason. Only the headmaster gets a title of his own.”

“He’s be paying me to use it, great Master Harry Potter sir,” said Dobby in a stage whisper. “I’s really wants to call him Master Harry’s Dumbles, but he’s be making me call him Master Dumbles or Headmaster.”

Albus chuckled and shrugged. “It seemed a good idea at the time.”

Severus’ eyebrow quirked. “Really? Then if I added a galleon or two to your weekly salary, Dobby, perhaps you would call me by my own title?”

Dobby gave him a scandalised look. “But … but then how would the world know who’s your mate is being, Master Harry’s Snapey?”

Harry chuckled. “They wouldn’t, that’s his point.” He adopted a calmer expression and leaned down to the oddball elf. “Dobby, in all seriousness, my bond with Severus needs to be kept secret. Please call him simply Master Snape, or Snapey if you’d rather. We can’t risk word getting out about us. Not yet. They would hurt us.”

Dobby nodded gravely. “I’s be understanding. Then Master Snapey it is.”

Severus shook his head wryly. “Thank you for that, Harry.”

“Well, we can’t have you getting the use of your proper name when the rest of us get … special titles, now can we?”

“Merlin spare us that fate,” Severus said, deadpan.

Harry snickered. “You’ll survive, Sev. But honestly, Dobby, do you think you can handle this kind of mission? You’ll have to keep good manners and be really careful not to set the vampires off.”

“Or better yet,” said Severus with a shake of his head, “just stay hidden.”

Dobby winced. “I’s cannot hide from the vampires. They be smelling me.”

Severus sniffed and grimaced. “So we do.”

“Then it’s best to just show him from the start so they don’t suspect a spy,” said Remus with a grim smile, “and pray this doesn’t all go to hell in a handbasket.”

“Indeed,” said Severus with a shudder.

Albus watched his favourite boys go with a smile on his face and a crack down the middle of his heart. The door closed behind Remus with a click, shutting him in with his turbulent emotions.

They had—for the moment—settled their differences, but gods help him, Albus could hardly believe what Harry’s innocently-meant words had forced him to see. Yet, neither would he deny the truth. No, as much as it hurt, Albus had never been one to shy away from what he would rather not know.

“A fate worse than Grindelwald and Riddle combined … as mad as Riddle ….”
Soul-madness—even Severus had succumbed to it briefly. Albus remembered it now, that shadow he had sensed looming over Severus’ spirit when the boy had come into his service all those years ago. It was the reason he had bound Severus to an oath. Else, he might have just offered the broken-hearted young man sanctuary and helped him recover.

Thank Merlin, Severus had connected with his soulmate and restored his link to sanity in time.

But Albus had finally remembered how he had recognised that shadow over Severus, and where he had seen it before.

Gellert Grindelwald.

The man had been uncommonly powerful in his day, so much so, that only a wizard of Albus’ calibre had been able to defeat him. And even then, Albus had only won because he knew the evil wizard’s tactics, his weaknesses—and despite his love for the man, had used them relentlessly against him.

_No choice, no choice, everything for the greater good_—back in those days, those words had been his only comfort. Taking Gellert’s magic had saved thousands of lives. But if what he suspected was true, in saving those thousands, he had condemned at least one innocent person to a terrible fate.

If Albus had been fated for Gellert, the soul-sickness inside the man would have stopped long before the War of the Obscurial. No, Albus had never been his one love’s true mate. But someone else had been, once, and by cutting off Gellert’s magic, had Albus condemned that person to eternal soul madness? The thought was too terrible to contemplate.

Albus sat behind his desk with a sigh. “What am I to do?”

Ultimately, there was little he _could_ do. If Gellert had been a victim of _Gemino Animae_, then both he and his mate had been soul mad far too long to save. Even if Albus could restore Gellert’s power and bring them together, he couldn’t heal their minds after almost a century of decay, at least for Gellert. Perhaps his mate had been younger, but even if he assumed an age gap as large as Severus and Harry’s—surely fate would allow for nothing beyond it in beings so prone to soul madness—it was too late to save them now.

Albus paced by the hearth, biting his knuckle in a gesture of nervousness he would never let anyone but his portraits see. “It … it cannot be true. If it were, surely there would have been a powerful dark wizard—_another_ dark wizard, I should say—in existence at or about the same time. As far as I know, Gellert was the only one of his era.”

Albus dropped his hand to his waist. “Unless the other wizard was in another country, too far away for Gellert to meet or I to discover. Or perhaps they might not have been as powerful as Gellert—but then Harry and Severus are fairly equal in terms of magical strength, and so were many of the other examples in the Romanian archives.” He shook his head. “It could not be a weak wizard, not and match Gellert. But … I simply do not understand.”

Phineas Nigellus Black scoffed. “That _might_ be because you haven’t all the facts, old man. You’re working off the assumption that Grindelwald had this … this strange soul condition, but you’ve done nothing to verify that.”

Albus gave him a wry smile. “No, I suppose I have not.” He frowned. “I am not sure a trip to Nurmengard is wise for me, but I see no other way to find the answers I seek.”

“I am not sure about that either, old friend.” Albus sighed. “There is no help for it. I will need to go … and soon.”

“Not before Severus and the others return from their diplomacy mission, I hope,” said Headmistress Phyllida Spore, her expression leaning towards reproach.

Albus nodded and returned to his desk, drawing out his dosed sweets. “No. Not until they return. Harry will need me here to help him until then.” He popped a drop into his mouth and savoured both the sweet taste and instant relief of his fears. “Ah. Nothing like a good sweet to cure one’s ills.”

“Cure them!” Lennie Hepplewhite, the healer headmistress, snorted and shook her wimple-covered head. “Albus Dumbledore, you are going to cure yourself right into diabetes one day.”

Albus chuckled. “Oh, but won’t the ride be pleasant?”

Phineas rolled his eyes. “I will never understand you, old man.”

“That’s all to the better. Must maintain the image of proper senility, you know. Else, the Ministry will pile more paperwork upon my person and I am sadly taxed as it is.”

Fawkes twittered from his perch, amused.

“See, at least someone agrees with me.” Albus toasted his familiar with an empty teacup. “Cheerio, old boy. You’ll help me keep the parchment-pushers away, won’t you?”

Fawkes trilled a cheerful affirmative.

“Very good.” Albus took another sweet and chuckled at Phineas’ sour expression. “Oh, do lighten up, Phineas. Such constant dourness is not good for you.”

Phineas shook his head and stalked away.

“That man must be related to Severus,” said Phyllida to Lennie. The healer bobbed her head in solemn agreement.
Facing the Future

Chapter Summary

Warnings: Slash sex. High mature/light explicit rating. Awkward virgin fumbles abound. Summary: Harry and Severus come together for the first time as lovers and discuss their future.

This is the last chapter for this installment of Ten Drops to Madness. Like with Lords of the Realm (The Seventh Day Seer), I'll need some time to put together the next book before I post, so please be patient. I promise I'm working on both. It just takes time to work out the kinks. Hope you enjoy!

CHAPTER 24
FOND FAREWELLS

After a while spent researching the antidote, though Pomfrey had forbidden Severus from doing actual experimentation while he was recovering, Severus thought he might have hit on a decent possibility with borage. And the good news was that he would not need to gather more samples from Riddle’s lab again, even when his current supply ran out. He had plenty of vampiric blood to offer, and with a pristine sample of the delayed-onset potion, he could make do with lab rats for the rest.

Even though, if he was completely honest with himself, he hated using the creatures. He had to, to save innocent human lives, but they were living creatures and to sacrifice them to his experimentation felt … wrong. Still, he had little choice if Britain was to survive the war. Or the world. An army of feral vampires could easily decimate the entire continent.

Even the rats would die should that come to pass.

Severus shuddered and again focused on his research.

Some hours later, Harry’s book closed with a snap and made Severus jump.

Harry rubbed his eyes and groaned. “I can’t look at this any longer, Sev. My eyes are crossing.”

Severus chuckled. “Not quite used to long study sessions yet, hmm?”

“No, sir! Flying is much more my style.”

Severus frowned and set his book aside. “Ah, we cannot risk letting you fly right now, Harry. It is simply too dangerous.”

“There’s no one here, Severus.”

“That is exactly the danger. You will both be more obvious and more vulnerable should something
… unsavoury be lurking in the shadows.”

Harry huffed. “All right. Well, if I can’t go flying, can we at least do something physical? I need to move.”

“I am not up to training at the moment, love. Poppy would have my head.”

Harry smirked. “Who said I was talking about training?”

Severus swallowed hard, a fierce blush setting his cheeks ablaze. “Oh. I … ah, but am I not also too injured to participate in … that activity?”

Harry nodded. “Um, the whole thing? Absolutely. But there are other things we could do that wouldn’t hurt you, and I don’t want to, er, you’re still recovering in more ways than just physical anyway, so I’ll have to be slow with that.”

“So are you, pet.”

“Well, yeah, but my abuse was never actually associated with sex so my fears aren’t the same. I’m not afraid of feeling your ….” He blushed too. “Your body with mine, but keep the lye and loofahs well away from me, thanks.”

Severus could well imagine what that combination had done to Harry’s sensitive flesh and shuddered. “Dear gods, that woman is a monster.”

Harry scowled. “Yes, well, let’s not talk about her right now, please. It’s enough to put a man off his dinner. Or dessert, as the case may be.”

Severus gave a low chuckle. “Very well.” He opened his arms and sent their books flying back to the shelves. “You will … be gentle with me? I am still rather frightened.”

Harry climbed into his arms and held him tight. “Of course, Sev. And if it’s too scary or anything hurts, all you have to do is tell me to stop and I swear I will, right away.” He laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “We don’t have to do anything if you’re not ready. I just … I want to touch you. To show you it doesn’t have to hurt. And I want to learn that for myself, too.”

Severus tucked Harry’s head under his chin. “Have you, ah, done any research?”

Harry gave a little mewl of embarrassment. “Um … a bit. I think I have the basic idea how things work.”

“I made a point of reading on the subject myself when I learned of your love.” Severus gave Harry a shy smile. “I would like you to be the first one to show me pleasure.”

Harry moved back, fire in his eyes and his lips parted. “Let’s go lie down then. I want you to be safe and comfortable.”

A thrill of anticipation and golden-bubbly joy zinged through Severus’ chest. He had never imagined he would find a lover so careful with his pleasure, but knowing Harry loved him enough to take care of him felt … good. Safe. The uneasiness of past pains bled away, and Severus let Harry lead him to the bed.

Harry guided Severus to sit on the edge of the mattress and cupped his face. “Okay?”

Heart racing, eyes wide, Severus tilted his head up and answered with a soft, shy kiss. Harry
returned it, lips brushing feather-light against his own, warm breath teasing his kiss-damp skin. Harry’s lips moved upwards, placing a soft caress against his forehead, branding Severus with the sign of his love.

Harry moved back and held Severus’ cheeks in gentle hands. “The instant something scares you, or if you start feeling uncomfortable at all, tell me. Don’t worry about putting me off. I’d much rather wait and you feel safe with me than rush things and hurt you.”

Severus swallowed a rush of emotion, overwhelmed at the care his mate took with him. He gave Harry a terse nod, all he could manage with such a tenuous grip on his control, and closed his eyes as another kiss fell upon his lips. Harry must have feared to pressure Severus too hard, as his kisses remained light and gentle, even when he lapped at the part of Severus’ lips with a warm tongue.

“Harry,” Severus whispered, his voice a plea.

Harry slipped his hands into Severus’ hair, holding it back from his face. “More?”

“Merlin, yes.”

That must have been the signal Harry was waiting for, as the next instant, his kisses morphed into something fierce and hungry, lips and tongue and even a bit of gentle teeth taking Severus’ mouth as if Harry intended to devour him whole.

As much as it turned him on, such ferocity left a cold pit in Severus’ stomach and made it difficult to breathe. A whimper in his throat warned his partner of his alarm, and Harry gentled his touch, moving back with a penitent expression.

“I’m sorry, love. That was too hard, wasn’t it?”

Severus nodded and guided him close. “Gently. At least, more gently than if you intend to make a meal of me.”

Harry blushed and lowered his eyes, his expression shamed. “Merlin. Did I hurt you?”

“No, no.” Severus lifted Harry’s chin and rubbed his cheek in reassurance. “I am well, love. I am just … a little afraid.”

Harry nodded and sat beside him. “We can stop. I should have been … softer, like you said. I’ve never tried to kiss anyone like that other than that time in the loo with you, so I guess I did it wrong.”

Severus trailed a fingertip along Harry’s spine. “I would not be averse to more practise, if you are willing to try again.”

Harry searched Severus’ eyes, and the older man made sure no hints of fear showed in his expression. He did want to feel Harry’s body with his own.

“Okay. But stop me if I mess up again.”

Severus kissed his forehead. “Be at peace, love. We are both learning.”

Harry’s cheeks reddened. “Y-yeah.”

He slipped his hands into Severus’ hair and kissed him again, tentative and unsure now that his first real attempt at passion had gone awry. Severus encouraged him with gentle sweeps of his tongue, slowly exploring the tips of Harry’s teeth, the surface of his lips, and the tip of his tongue until need
overwhelmed Harry’s fear.

With a low moan, Harry tasted Severus’ mouth in return, seeking and warm, and Severus melted against him. Gods, Harry’s kiss had stolen his breath—pleasurably this time—and Severus thought he would either burn up or melt into a puddle of goo before it ended. His hands slid up Harry’s chest and clutched his shirt, long fingers curling into soft fabric, and Harry pulled back, panting. He laid his head on Severus’ shoulder briefly, breathing hard into his neck, and searched the older man’s eyes as he stood.

“Okay?”

“Yes.”

Harry gave him a hesitant smile and toyed with the hem of his tee. “C-can I undress then?”

Severus’ breath left him in a whoosh. “Oh Merlin, yes.”

Blushing crimson, Harry peeled off his shirt with trembling hands. Heat pooled in Severus’ groin as he slipped his hands up those quidditch-toned sides, unable to resist feeling Harry’s body for himself. Harry sucked in a sharp breath at his touch and squirmed.

“Oh. Oh gods.”

Severus placed a tender kiss at the centre of Harry’s chest. “Does this feel good?”

“Mhn. Yeah.”

Severus peppered kisses all over Harry’s chest as he stroked the young man’s sides, slowly coming closer to a dusky pink bud. Harry gasped and went rigid at the first taste, and mewled as Severus sucked his nipple.

“S-Sev … oh Merlin!”

With trembling hands, Severus opened the button of Harry’s trousers and brushed over the man’s burgeoning erection. Harry yelped and scrabbled at Severus’ shoulders.

“W-wait, wait.”

Severus pulled back, fear cooling his ardour. “Have I frightened you?”

Harry panted and shook his head hard. “No, not … not at all. But if you do that, I’m not going to last!”

Heat flooded Severus’ face. “Oh. Perhaps you should hurry then.”

Harry gulped, his eyes alight with desire and a shy blush on his cheeks. “A-all right.” With admirable Gryffindor bravado, he unzipped his trousers, kicked off his trainers, and yanked his entire kit off in one fell swoop. In nothing but his socks, Harry kicked his trousers aside and stood tall, face set with determination, but his cheeks and chest bright red. Severus found him irresistible.

“Lovely.” Severus traced a fingertip down the underside of Harry’s proud erection and received a cry for his efforts.

“Ghn, Sev’rus!”

Harry slurring Severus’ name in the heat of passion was the most thrilling sound the older man had
ever heard. He wanted more of it. With a curious touch, Severus wrapped his hand around his silken-steel skin and stroked with slow, firm pressure.

Harry cried out and bucked into his hand, fists clenched helplessly at his side, eyes dark and wide with need. Severus squeezed gently as he moved back up, and that sweet sound burst from his mate’s lips in a wail of passion.

“Sev’rus!”

Unable to resist, drawn to the scent and heat of his mate like a flower to the sun, Severus bent and swiped his tongue across the salty-sweet tip. Harry howled and threw his head back.

“Oh gods! Sev, I … I can’t …”

Another swipe, and Severus got a shock as Harry keened and rocked into his hand, head kissing his lips as a surge of hot liquid hit him in the face. Harry shuddered and moaned, another surge landing in Severus’ still-moving hand as the older man pulled back, stunned.

Harry opened his eyes and groaned. “Fucking hell, Sev’rus. I need to remember that image forever. Like a bloody wet dream.”

Severus blinked and rubbed wetness from his face, only then realising what it was. “Oh.” He stared at his glistening hand, unsure of what to do with Harry’s sudden release.

“Oh, sorry about that, love. It came on so fast I couldn’t stop it.” Harry Summoned a flannel, wet it with Aguamenti, and gently wiped Severus’ face and fingers. “Are you okay?”

“Other than being a bit surprised I am fine.” Severus gave a low chuckle. “I had quite forgotten the drawbacks to being a teenager.”

Harry flushed bright red and gave him a wry smile. “Right, bit quick off the mark.”

Severus stroked Harry’s softening shaft and smirked as it jumped at his touch. “Quick to recover too.”

Harry gasped and squirmed. “S-still sensitive, love. Give me a minute to … oh.”

Severus released him, and Harry grinned.

“Ready for more then?”

A soft, low sound of pleasure escaped Severus’ control and his face burned.

“Don’t be ashamed,” Harry murmured, stroking Severus’ cheek. “Your voice, your need for me is sexy as hell, and I’ll never use it against you. Show me, please?”

Severus trembled as he let his iron control go, perhaps for the first time in his life. “Yes. Show me as well. I … I wish to know how it feels.”

Harry tipped Severus’ chin up and kissed him with slow, gentle pressure and a teasing tongue. Severus arched into him, his heart racing and body on fire with ardour. He gave a soft moan as Harry’s fingers moved to his buttons, unfastening them one by one. Severus squirmed, still worried Harry would find his body lacking, but all that faded into a white haze of pleasure as Harry moved his kisses to Severus’ earlobe.

“G-gods,” he panted. “Ah!”
Harry tentatively nibbled the sensitive skin, and Severus released a cry of pleasure.

“Yes, Harry.”

Harry murmured Severus’ name and suckled his neck just underneath his ear, a hot tongue moving against his skin as gentle hands pushed Severus’ shirt off his shoulders.

“Mm, lovely.”

Harry guided him to lie back on the bed, shaking legs hanging off the edge. Severus closed his eyes and arched at the tingling, tugging heat of Harry’s kisses against his chest, and let slip a soft cry as his partner found his nipple.

“Ghn, H-Ha—Harry!”

Gentle pressure palmed and stroked Severus along his constrained erection, and he bucked into that firm hand, unable to prevent himself from rubbing against it. Harry pulled back with a hesitant smile.

“Not too much?”

Severus moaned. “No. Need more.”

Harry grinned. “Can I take these off? See all of you again?”

Severus gasped at a firm stroke and followed Harry’s hand with his hips. “If you don’t, I swear I will have you in detention for the rest of the year.”

With a laugh, Harry unbuttoned the man’s trousers and carefully pulled down his zip. “Ready?”

“Merlin, yes.”

Harry grabbed Severus’ waistband and pulled his trousers and pants down in one go, slowly sliding them off his long legs and fierce erection. Dazed and more turned on than he’d ever been in his life, Severus kicked the trousers aside and gazed at his mate. Harry stood between Severus’ legs, smiling at him and tracing a hand down his stomach and the thin trail of black hair beneath his navel.

“Gorgeous. Absolutely gorgeous.”

Severus gasped. “H-how? I am not ….”

Harry kissed him softly. “You are to me.”

Severus smiled, shy happiness blossoming through his chest. He kicked off his socks and scooted back onto the bed, opening his arms to his mate.

“Come, lie with me.”

Harry grinned and bounded onto the bed, ebullience radiant in his eyes. Severus had no more time to think, as Harry lay beside him and kissed the breath from his body. He tangled his hands in his mate’s hair and mewled into the kiss, tangling their legs together and gasping at the sharp heat of a hard erection rubbing into his own.

“Sev’rus, love you, want you.”

Severus turned Harry onto his back and straddled his hips. “Stay with me. Promise me you will stay with me forever, no matter what happens.”
Harry nodded and threaded his fingers into Severus’ hair. “As long as I live, I’m yours.”

“Stay then, stay by my side. Live with me always.”

“Yeah. Never want to be apart from you.”

Love, wonder, and need surged through Severus’ heart and flooded him to his toes. Tears on his lashes, he held Harry’s face and brought him into a tender, passionate kiss, aching to be closer, to be more with his beloved.

“Mm, my Sev’rus.”

“Yes,” he whispered. “Yours.”

Severus brought their mouths together once more and dipped his tongue inside, tasting Harry’s lips and the sweet nectar of his kiss. “Mhn.” Merlin, it was heaven to kiss this man. He could go on for days, subsist on nothing but this—he was sure of it.

“Sev,” Harry whispered between kisses of his own. His hands slipped down Severus’ sides, over his hips, and rested on the curve of his bum. Severus tensed, a trickle of fear mixing in with his passion.

Harry lifted one hand to Severus’ face and traced gentle circles on his bum with the other. “Ssh. You’re safe here. I love you. I will never hurt you.”

Severus bit his lip and gave Harry an uncertain nod.

“Do you need me to stop, love?”

Severus closed his eyes and rocked against Harry’s hand. Heat and lightning surged from the places their erections touched, and Severus couldn’t hold back a soft moan.

“No,” Severus murmured. “It feels good when you touch me.” He rocked once more, and Harry tossed his head back and gasped. “I trust you, Harry. Help me, mm, conquer my fears.”

Harry moaned and rocked up. “Yes, baby. Can I touch you?”

“Anywhere.”

Harry trailed his hand from Severus’ face, down his neck, and over a sensitive nipple. He rubbed and toyed with the erect peak, and a fierce tugging sensation shot straight to Severus’ groin. Combined with the heat of their slow, gentle rocking and the tingling caress against his bum, Severus could not help but arch back and cry out.

“Oh Merlin,” Harry panted. “So sexy.”

Severus dropped and took Harry into a hard, deep kiss. He tangled his hands in his partner’s hair, sampled his lips, and rocked against his firm body. They moaned and gasped into each other’s mouths, riding a slow crest of passion together. Harry’s other hand found Severus’ arse and cupped his cheeks, grinding them together, and Severus could only keen for more against Harry’s hair.

“Yes, yes. Please.”

Harry whispered Severus’ name and as their strokes quickened, tentatively moved one hand inward, stroking Severus over his cleft. Severus whimpered.

Harry drew back. “Too much?”
“No.” Severus panted, struggling to get control of his fear. He trusted Harry. It was only that the last time he had been touched there had hurt so much. “Be gentle with me.” He couldn’t say his true fear, but Harry understood.

“I won’t hurt you, Severus. I can’t. I love you too much.”

Severus nodded and, with a deep breath, arched his bum against Harry’s hand. “Touch me.”

“You’re sure, love?”

“Yes. I trust you.”

Harry kissed him softly. “Okay. But, um, do you have some lube or maybe a spell …?”

Severus murmured against Harry’s ear, “Lubricado.”

“Oh! That’s good.”

Slick, warm fingertips slid between Severus’ cheeks and caressed his rim. Severus gasped and arched back, shocked by the intensity of sensation Harry’s touch brought.

“Mhn, don’t stop,” he muttered, and rocked their erections together once more.

Harry kissed Severus’ throat and ears, setting him alight as his lubricated fingers toyed with his bum. Merlin, every soft touch sent shocks into his core. He rubbed back against Harry’s fingers and forwards into his mate, heat spiralling out of control with each slow thrust. Gods, he wasn’t going to last.

With a whimper, Severus wrapped their erections in one hand and whispered his spell for lubrication. Harry let slip a strangled groan and arched into Severus’ hand, his finger bearing down almost unconsciously against Severus’ bum. Firm pressure stroked but did not breach him as Severus brought them to a greater height of pleasure.

Harry moaned and rocked up. “Oh gods, Sev. Please.”

Severus panted into Harry’s neck. “Inside me. Touch me.”

Harry threw his head back and mewled. “I … I think … not going to—Sev!”

With a cry, he released all over Severus’ hand. The sight sent Severus into spasms of his own, and he soon followed, spilling his pleasure on Harry’s belly as well.

Harry had never breached him. Severus couldn’t decide if he was happy about that or not.

Harry withdrew his hand with a kiss to Severus’ cheek. “How do I clean this up?”

“Finite. Tergeo. Scourgify.”

Severus’ spells washed away the lubrication and mess from their bellies, and he settled beside Harry with a groan. “That was … as you say, brilliant, pet.”

Harry grinned and curled up into his mate’s arms. “Yeah. For me too.” He kissed Severus with soft, gentle lips and stroked the older man’s hair back from his face. “Are you okay, love? When I touched you, it didn’t scare you?”

“Mm. A bit at first. Not for long.” Severus sighed and tugged the blanket over them. “Why did you
not press inside?”

“Well, partially because by the time you asked, I was already coming. But even if I hadn’t been, you weren’t ready. Even if you thought you were.”

Severus huffed. “I am the one who decides when I am ready for something.”

“Yes, but I could tell you were still unsure. Your body might have wanted it, but your mind—it just wasn’t time. We need to talk about what you went through first.”

Severus shuddered. “Not tonight. Please.”

“Okay, love. If you need more time, that’s fine.” Harry hugged his soulmate close and buried his head against the older man’s shoulder. “Oh, Sev. I … I’ve missed you so much. I don’t want you to leave me so soon.”

“I do not wish to go either, beloved, but it must be done. I am our only vampire.”

“You’re a grade six, Sev. They make grade sixes have bonded donors. Will they let you come without me?”

“Mm, that I am not sure of. As long as they are aware I have a supply of your blood and a house elf capable of bringing more to me in a hurry, it should be fine.”

“What about grounding, love?”

Severus winced. “That may be more of an issue. Well, if it becomes an issue, I will try to convince them that Dobby is capable of bringing you to me in an emergency. If that is not enough, then I will have no choice but to bring you with me under glamours.”

Harry shivered. “This is so dangerous.”

“I know. I am afraid too.”

Harry held Severus’ cheek and kissed him lightly. “Promise me you’ll be careful? Or at least have Dobby get you the hell out of dodge if it gets bad?”

“I do not believe we will have trouble, pet. Vampires are … well, they are not the beasts Riddle would like to think they are, not as a whole. They are human too, at least in their core.”

Harry sighed. “I suppose you’re right. I just can’t help but worry about you. You’ll send your image to me every night?”

“And during the day, when I can safely. We must continue to work on our bond.”

“Yeah.” Harry laid his head on Severus’ arm and ran his fingers up and down his mate’s back. “What am I going to do while you’re gone to the clans?”

“Work on the antidote research. Train. Improve your Occlumency. Learn more about *Gemino Animae*. Help Albus with the wards. Keep the wolf from tearing his fur out.”

Harry snorted. “Behave.”

“Humph.” Severus traced his fingertips through Harry’s hair, toying with the short strands. “I cannot believe the bastard knew and left you there regardless. That is a level of cowardice even I would not have attributed to him. How he sorted Gryffindor is beyond me. The man is a born Hufflepuff.”
“With any luck, this will bring it home to him that it’s time to change. I hope it does. We need allies, Severus.” Harry turned into his soulmate’s neck and shivered. “I … I have the terrible feeling like this war is going to get really bad before we’re through.”

A cold shard of dread shot down Severus’ spine. “How bad, love?”

“I … I don’t know, but I’m afraid a lot of people are going to die before we can stop them.” He shuddered. “I don’t even know how to stop him.”

“You do not believe our combined magic will be enough?”

“How do we combine it?”

“I believe it to be a natural progression of the bond.”

“So it could take years.”

Severus grimaced. “More than likely.”

“We don’t have time to wait that long.” Harry sat and leaned against the headboard, his arms crossed over his chest and his expression grim. “By the time we learn to access our magic through the bond —unless we help it along—he might have turned or killed us all. I don’t think we can afford to sit by and wait.”

“Of course we won’t simply wait.” Severus laid his head in Harry’s lap, cherishing the feeling of safety and warmth it brought. “That would be the height of folly.”

Harry laid a gentle hand on Severus’ head, making him feel loved and protected. “Well, what do we do then?”

“We spend time together—as much as possible—in order to aid the bond, as well as train together towards that purpose. We search for spells and skills to help our cause. We search for cures and antidotes and find a way around that accursed Veritaserum counter and a vaccine for the viral potion, if it is functional. We gather allies and protect those we have already. We train to fight side-by-side, so that we may take him down together when the time comes.” He kissed Harry’s thigh. “That is not sitting and waiting.”

Harry sighed and stroked Severus’ hair. “Yeah. I know you’re right. I guess I’m just afraid. He’s already taken so much from me. I can’t stand to lose anyone else I love.”

Severus linked his hand with Harry’s free one and kissed his knuckles. “I am here, Harry. As long as I can be.”

“That had better be forever.” Harry shivered and buried his hand in Severus’ hair. “I can’t afford to lose you, and not just because it would shatter me into a thousand pieces.”

Severus winced. “No, we cannot afford that fate.” He sighed and draped his arm across Harry’s thighs. “Harry, are you truly … well with this?”

“With what, Sev?”

“Me. My curse. Meeting the wolf tonight has made me realise it is … stronger than I imagined. More difficult to fight. I may not be able to teach.”

Harry stroked his thumb in circles over Severus’ temple and massaged his scalp, soothing him in
spite of his worries.

“Sev, I love you. Period. I don’t care what you are, as long as you’re still you.”

“I am not me, Harry. Not any longer. That is what I am trying to tell you. Key elements of my personality have been altered. I am—my anger is much more dangerous and much more difficult to control.” He shivered and buried his face in Harry’s hip. “I am afraid. So very afraid I will lose control and hurt someone. Especially with your powers blended with mine, I am dangerous, Harry.”

Harry slid down the bed to lie in Severus’ arms again. “You controlled yourself today.”

“Because you were with me.” Severus buried his face in Harry’s throat. “What will happen when my instincts strike and you are not there to ground me?”

Harry caressed Severus’ cheek, soothing his soul-deep terror. “It’s true there might be times I’m not there. But you do have a failsafe, Sev.”

Severus lifted his head, frowning. “I do?”

“My soul image, love. If you’re in dire need and I’m not there, call me. Hold me and go calm down until I can get to you.”

“And if I forget?”

Harry frowned, brow furrowed in thought. “Hmm. We could put something on me. A ring or a pendant or something and tie it to your emotions. I could monitor you then, so if I feel a surge of fury, I’ll know to go to you right away.”

Severus’ face burned. A ring. He could think of one type of ring that would serve their purposes, but no. He wasn’t quite ready to ask Harry yet. Perhaps Harry couldn’t reasonably refuse him, but he could tell Severus it was too soon. Severus wasn’t sure he would survive the blow if he dared go out on a limb and ask this man he loved so much to bond with him and found Harry wasn’t as sure of him as he had thought. He would doubt the relationship forever.

No, best to wait a bit longer for that. With a sigh, he buried his face into Harry’s shoulder and held him tight.

“Yes, that will do. I will make a bracelet for you, I think. That way it will always be close to your skin but should not interfere with your movements. Will that do?”

“Mm, yes.” Harry kissed him softly. “Someday, I want to get you a ring.”

Severus’ breath hitched and his arms tightened around his mate. Soft love wrapped his heart in warmth and giddy thrills of hope curled into his chest and spread, tingling, into his limbs. He leaned back, a hesitant smile on his face, certain his joy was shining in his eyes.

“Someday, love.”

“Merlin, you’re beautiful when you’re happy, Sev.” Harry kissed him softly and cupped his cheek. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Harry.”

Severus kissed him, hope and happiness bubbling over, spilling into his lips and tongue. Harry gave it back, love and affection radiating from every pore.
“I do not know what the future will bring, my Harry,” Severus murmured against his mate’s lips, “but we shall face it together from now on.”

Harry gave him a hesitant smile. “Even on your bad days, Sev? Even when you feel like you’re not worthy of love—which is bollocks, by the way, so don’t ever think that.”

Severus laid his forehead against Harry’s and held his mate tight. “Yes, Harry. Even then. I will share my troubles and joy alike with you, if you will have me.”

Harry’s smile glowed with happiness, joy effervescent in his eyes. “Always, Severus.”

Severus held him tight and thanked whatever fates had led this beautiful young man to him that day in the classroom. The future was uncertain, and dark times lay ahead, but with Harry at his side, they would be all right.

“Come, Harry. Let us practise strengthening our bond. We shall need it soon.”

Harry smiled and let Severus pull him to his feet. “Lead the way, love.”

~… End of Part 1 …~

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