Longing of the Soul
by lyraonyx

Summary

Voldemort's possession of Harry during the events at the Department of Mysteries triggers a latent telepathic ability. Harry's mind begins reaching out to Riddle every night during his sleep, and Riddle takes advantage of that to cast Imperius on Harry, attempting to coerce him into murdering anyone and anything near him. Harry keeps the dreams quiet for fear of being locked up, but when he returns to school, he soon finds dealing with his nightmares and visions, not to mention flaky friends, unwanted advances, and a Snape who's more abusive than ever too much to handle alone. Will Harry survive when the entire world has turned against him and his closest ally comes from the last place he would ever expect?

AU notes: Harry et al are aged up one year to avoid underage issues. Harry is 16 at the start of the story, 17 in chapter 2, and 18 before any real romantic stuff begins.

Notes

Welcome to my 1st attempt at an angsty fic. It's still pretty sweet and fluffy, but also will rip your heart out in places (I tried anyway. You're welcome.). I hope it's interesting. <3
The Dangers of Dreaming

Longing of the Soul

**AU notes:** Harry et al are aged up one year to avoid underage issues. Hogwarts starts at age 12 as a result, not 11, and the dates are bumped up 1 year to reflect the changes as well.

The horcruxes are present in this story; however, Dumbledore doesn't know what they are beyond the journal and Nagini, so he never finds the ring, nor is he cursed by it.

Save only for Harry's cloak, the hallows are not a part of this story.

**STORY INFORMATION:**

**Main Pairing:** Harry Potter/Severus Snape

**Other Relationships:** Hermione Granger/Ron Weasley; Neville Longbottom/Luna Lovegood; Draco Malfoy/Dean Thomas (eventually).

**Major Characters:** Harry Potter, Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Neville Longbottom, Dean Thomas, Luna Lovegood, Draco Malfoy, Ginny Weasley, Lucius Malfoy.

**TAGS IN SUMMARY**

**CHARACTERIZATIONS**

**HARRY:** Less sassy and whiny than in canon. He’s dealing with depression so he doesn’t fight back as much. He gains his spirit back slowly as the story progresses.

**SEVERUS:** True to canon in the first few chapters. Has a wake-up call partway in, and gradually softens and opens up. Ends up pretty soft (with Harry, at least—he’s still hard with anyone who hasn’t earned his trust), for the sake of holding onto his relationships. Also, please note that this Severus has several severe phobias and PTSD. Once his walls start coming down, the past starts coming back to bite him. He’s afraid quite a bit during his recovery period, though he only shows it in private.

**DUMBLEDORE:** True to canon. He’s a manipulative berk but he means well. Mostly. He’s not evil, but definitely a morally grey character.

**RON:** He’s much less concerned with Harry and much more concerned with chasing tail and glory. He does grow up eventually.

**HERMIONE:** Gets sucked into her relationship and her studies to the point she alienates Harry, but comes to her senses before long.

**GINNY:** Think “Obsessive girlfriend meme.” Seriously, she has an unhealthy obsession with Harry. She isn’t a bad person—just sick. I’ve tried very hard to walk the line between making her evil and making her ill. It’s tough to make her somewhat sympathetic when she’s doing bad things.
SEAMUS: If you like him, you’re not going to like me much after this fic. He’s very much an antagonist for almost the entire book.

DRACO: He’s a decent kid stuck in a terrible situation. He’s not quite as snotty as in the books. Also, he’s gay. So… yeah, not quite canon.

LUCIUS: He’s pretty much worse than Voldemort here. Be warned.

JAMES and SIRIUS: In Severus’ experience, they are portrayed as the bullies and sexual assailants they are in canon. They might have grown up after school, but until then, they were awful. To Harry, they’re a mixed bag. The loving parents and godfather he remembers, and the bastards who broke Severus all in one. They are NOT portrayed in a good light here, in fact, none of my fics show them in a positive light unless Dumbledore is the bad guy and he’s compelling them to be assholes. If you’re looking for a fic that condones their bad behavior, look elsewhere. I don’t write it.

REMUS: Portrayed as the mild-mannered coward he is in canon. Harry is torn on his behavior. The man doesn’t stand by him like he ought to, doesn’t defend him well, doesn’t even show up in his life much after fifth year, and he stood by and let Severus be assaulted. Remus is avoiding Harry and Severus because of the fact that Harry is aware of his failures and he can’t face up to his mistakes.

LILY: She’s not given a pass either. She let her best friend be attacked. Even if he was a jerk at the time, she still should have helped him, in Harry’s opinion. Severus forgave her a long time ago as he has information Harry doesn’t. Harry’s view of her shifts when the entire story comes to light.

**STORY NOTES:**

There is a lot of past sexual abuse and domestic abuse in this story. It’s not graphic, but there are one or two short scenes where it is shown in flashback. I’ll post warnings at the top of each chapter to give those who would rather not read it a heads up.

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*Warnings for this Chapter: past attempted non-con, not successful. Imperius dreams. Implied child abuse. Depression.*

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**Longing of the Soul**

**PART I**

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**Chapter 1**
The Dangers of Dreaming

7 July, 1997

Through a haze of pain and confusion, a sibilant voice hissed into Harry Potter’s throbbing skull. “Kill … kill them all ….”

Images of his relatives flickered through his mind, all dead in their beds, Harry standing over them with an expression of utmost hatred. “Kill … kill ….”

But why would he want to? True, his relatives were terrible people and they deserved some pain, but to murder them in their sleep? No. He wasn’t that kind of monster. “You are like me, Harry Potter. You feel it. You know it. Ssstop denying your dessstiny and kill!”

Harry’s limbs moved independent of his will, forcing him to turn, to sit— “No!”

Harry’s garbled shout rang through the house, jarring him out of his nightmares, and the boy suppressed a wince. Shite, his uncle would not be happy with him. Though really, he should be grateful. After all, Harry had just stopped Voldemort from forcing Harry to kill his relatives for the third time that night. Gods, these dreams—they would drive him mad.

Or he would lose control of them one day and become what he feared worst.

At least Vernon didn’t know that Sirius had died three weeks ago—yet. Harry still had the protection of his godfather’s bad reputation, though how long it could last with Riddle poking through his mind every night was anyone’s guess. “BOY!”

Harry cringed and staggered out of bed. If he had to deal with his uncle, it was always better to face him on his feet. Easier to dodge that way.

The door locks clicked one by one and, as the last one opened, the door slammed inwards, creaking on its hinges. Vernon hovered at the door in his plaid pyjamas, huffing and puffing like a mad bull, eyes popping with fury. Harry took a step back for his own safety. “What do you think you’re doing, screaming like a bloody nancy boy every night! It’s gone far enough, I tell you! Some of us have to work in the morning, unlike lazy, good-for-nothing layabouts!” He stepped closer, and Harry backed away. “That’s it. You’re going back to that freaky school and never setting foot in this place again, do you hear me?”

Harry suppressed a snort. As if that would be a punishment. Even living with Snape would be more fun. At least the professor would feed him once in a while. Probably. “All right then,” Harry said with courage he didn’t feel. “I’ll just send my godfather a note then, as he’ll have to be the one to pick me up. I’m sure he’ll be glad to see me.”

Clenching his fists, he breathed deep and fought the roiling wave of grief in his chest at the mention of Sirius. Every night, he relived it, that terrible moment at the Ministry when his godfather was lost...
to him forever, a laugh frozen on his face even as he fell through the veil. It still hurt like a lost limb to know he had lost the only person who had loved him since his parents, but he couldn’t let even a flicker of that show, not to his uncle, or his last remnant of protection here would vanish.

His heart panged with guilt at the thought of using his godfather’s name this way. Was it wrong to protect himself with the reputation of a dead man?

No, Sirius would think it all a grand joke, were he still alive to enjoy it.

The thought of what else Sirius had thought made for excellent laughs turned Harry’s stomach, but he kept that thought from his expression too.

Vernon’s blotchy red colour receded, leaving him with a complexion like badly-mixed strawberry porridge.

“No, now. N-no need for that,” he choked out. “I suppose you can stay. But you’ll be working extra hard to make up for this tomorrow, you hear?”

Harry gave him a bored look. “So, the same as usual then?”

Vernon’s eyes bulged. “Don’t you sass me, you ungrateful little freak! We clothe you, feed you, shelter you, and you threaten us with your … freaky stuff and your criminal family—”

Fury sprang up, white hot in an instant. Magic rose in Harry and sparked on his skin.

“Get out. Out!”

Vernon took one look at the green-glowing teen and ran like the hounds of hell were on his heels.

Once the floor had stopped vibrating in the wake of Vernon’s retreat, Harry sank onto the bed and ruffled his hair, frustrated that he had lost control of his magic again. He shouldn’t let them provoke him—besides the fact that they weren’t worth the effort, any unauthorised use of magic would give the Ministry an excuse to torment Harry. He had no desire to endure another trial with the toad, but with the last of his family lying cold and lifeless beyond the veil, the insinuations on his loved ones’ characters just hurt too much to bear.

Even if … they were true.

Harry leaned against the wall and drew his knees to his chest, letting his tears flow now that he wasn’t in immediate danger. If things had only gone differently last month, Harry might have been at Grimmauld place with his real family by now. He could have spent the last few weeks playing chess with Ron and sneaking around the Order with the twins. He could have spent time doing his summer homework for once. Hermione would have been pleased. He could have spent some time in the air with the Weasleys, practising his favourite quidditch moves. He would been living with his godfather, making up for the past and learning what it meant to be part of a family. He would still have a godfather.

But, as much as he would have loved to spend the summer at his real home rather than in the Dursleys’ house of pain, how much would he have been able to enjoy it knowing what Sirius had done? Harry’s final words to Sirius hadn’t been kind, but even knowing that he had been so harsh with the man just days before his death, he couldn’t quite regret it. Harry had seen the dark side of his family in Snape’s pensieve that day and the knowledge had left a bitter aftertaste in spite of everything.

For years, Harry had operated under the misapprehension that Snape had been the bully. That, like
he had singled out Harry as a target for his ire, he had latched onto Harry’s innocent father and godfather and tormented them for no reason.

It was a convenient story, something he had used to comfort himself even when the facts didn’t line up. When Sirius said something too cruel. When Remus, cheeks red and his eyes downcast, let Sirius go on about Snape behind his back for hours without a break yet pretended to be friendly to him when Sirius wasn’t about. When Molly looked at both men, approbation sharp in her eyes and her lips pursed, wooden spoon shaking in her fist.

Even then, Harry had clung to the belief that his family were good, honest people and Snape the epitome of all things evil. Well, behind Voldemort, of course.

But that day in the pensieve had ripped the blinders away, and all of Harry’s carefully-constructed beliefs had come crashing down on his head. Like it or not, Harry couldn’t deny that, at least during the memory he had witnessed, Snape had been the victim.

At first, he had denied it. He had tried to blame Snape for their behaviour. The man was mean, so maybe he had brought it on himself. The thought left a squirmy, slimy feeling in the pit of his stomach, but Harry denied it over and over again. He couldn’t let go of his beliefs. Maybe his family had been crueler than usual that day, crueler than they needed to be, but it still had to be Snape’s fault somehow. It had to be.

The fact that Snape had cut Harry’s mum with the sharp side of his tongue when she had only been trying to help had only given the idea fodder. Harry’s mum must have recognised the evil in him when she turned him away. Snape had been associating with Death Eaters and scum and he had only gotten what he deserved. Harry refused to admit any other possible explanation.

Until he got a taste of Snape’s medicine a week into the summer hols and realised just what an awful thing his parents and godfather had done.

Piers, Gordon, and Dudley had cornered Harry in the park down the street. Apparently Harry Hunting had lost its appeal, so the bullies had decided to branch out in their abusive ways. The scrawny, myopic Harry hadn’t stood a chance against three burly brawlers without his wand or access to his accidental magic, and so, when they tired of beating him and wanted to view their work first hand, Harry had no choice but to let them look.

Piers closed in, and Harry backed into the wooden slat wall behind the playground, but he had nowhere to run. “Oi! Get his shirt off, Gordon! Let’s see what the freak is hiding!”

Meaty hands grabbed Harry’s too-loose shirt and pulled it off in one swoop, the garment far too large to have provided any real resistance.

“Cor, look at ‘im,” Gordon said. “Skin and bones.” He ran a hand down Harry’s abused ribs, bringing pain and horror to the smaller boy.

Tears stung Harry’s eyes in spite of himself. “Stop it! Don’t touch me!”

“Aw, poor widdle freak is gonna cwy!” Piers snickered. “I don’t blame him either! Look, there’s not an ounce of meat on him!”

Gordon poked at Harry’s ribs far too hard, and Harry shielded himself with his arms, shaking and struggling not to keep his accidental magic from killing them all.
“Gods, he’s an ugly little shite, isn’t he, Big D?”

Dudley gave an uncomfortable sort of laugh. “Er … I guess, but don’t you think—”

“Cor, look at this!” Harry cringed as Piers yanked him around, revealing the half-faded belt scars on his back and hips, interspersed with fresh cuts. “What’s he gotten into then, D?”

Dudley let out a muffled cry of shock. “I … I dunno.”

“Must be that school, innit? They cane ‘em there, don’t they?” Gordon poked one of Harry’s scars, and Harry reeled around and swung at the bastard.

“Get off me, you bloody perverts!”

Piers and Gordon laughed. Dudley just looked horrified.

“Perverts?” Piers snickered. “We ain’t nancy boys like you! But eh, maybe we could use him for a trial run, Gordon? Get some practise in for the real thing? Big D could use some.”

Harry moved back, eyes wide with horror and heart stuttering in his throat. “N-no. No!”

To Harry’s immense relief, Dudley had pummelled his idiot friends for even making the suggestion that he force himself onto his cousin, or Harry would have had no choice but to release his magic. He could endure a hell of a lot, but *rape*? No.

Harry had been spared that time—and Merlin, he had never imagined the day would come that he would be *grateful* for his cousin’s bullying tendencies—but Snape? No one had come to save him. And now, Harry knew what it meant to stand there, helpless and scared, while a gang of bullies stripped him, mocked him, and threatened far worse.

How far had it gone with Snape? The man had pulled him out of the pensieve before the memory ended, but Harry clearly recalled his own father calling out, “Who wants to see me take off Snivellus’ pants?” The thought that he might well have carried out his threat made Harry sick.

If James and Sirius had truly stripped Snape naked and left him hanging there for the entire school to mock—maybe even done worse—then Harry couldn’t deny that Snape hadn’t been the bully. However he acted as an adult, then he had been a scared kid, one on four, then one on thirty, hanging upside down and helpless while the entire fifth form attacked him.

As much as the thought hurt, Harry’s family had been the abusers, not Snape. And he would never look at them the same way again. Not his family, and not Snape either.

He had once viewed the world in black and white. Gryffindors were good, honest people, and Slytherins were bad, evil prats. Snape was an absolute monster who had to be working for Riddle, and Harry’s parents were wonderful people Snape had a grudge against for no good reason. After all, since Snape was mean, he couldn’t possibly be good.

And maybe good *was* a stretch. However Harry’s views on the man had changed, the fact remained that Snape had blamed Harry for crimes he had no part in, had hated him because of the parents he didn’t even remember, and had abused him every day of his life in Hogwarts just because he happened to be James Potter’s son. That wasn’t something *good* people did.

Even so, Harry couldn’t see him as the personification of all things evil any longer, nor could he
view his family as paragons of all things good and light. However they changed as adults, James Potter and Sirius Black had been criminals as children, and Severus Snape their victim. And Lily and Remus had let it happen, doing nothing to prevent Snape’s torture, when they might have spared him.

Merlin, Lily might have been the worst of them all. Harry’s mum had left him to suffer simply because Snape lashed out at her. Granted, the man deserved an arse kicking for using such a foul name against her, but to leave him there to be assaulted? Worse, Remus had told Harry that before that day, Lily had been Snape’s best friend! How could she abandon him like that? If it had been Ron or Hermione hanging there, Harry would have moved heaven and earth to save them, even if they did run their mouths. Hell, even if it had been Malfoy, Harry couldn’t have left him to suffer like that.

And what did that say about his family? Their ‘harmless pranks’ had broken Snape—that much was clear. The man was not just a bully, picking on any stray Gryffindor who happened to cross his path—he was damaged.

And Merlin, if that didn’t make hating the man difficult.

Harry sighed and wiped his tears. No doubt Snape would ensure Harry hated him again five minutes into the new term. He supposed there was time enough to worry about it then.

He looked at the clock over his desk—a broken one of Dudley’s he had salvaged—and groaned. It was only three in the morning and Riddle had already tried to take his mind over three times. Did he even dare go back to sleep?

Harry shuddered and pulled his threadbare blanket over his shoulders. If he didn’t at least attempt to sleep, he wouldn’t be able to work tomorrow. And if he couldn’t work, Vernon would starve him—and potentially strike him—regardless of his fear of Harry’s godfather. It seemed his cowardice only stretched so far before his hatred of his nephew took precedence. As much as the idea terrified him, Harry would have to try to sleep again and hope he didn’t dream.

He stared at his desk and debated for the hundredth time if he should tell the headmaster about his dreams. They had gotten worse since the DoM, when Riddle learned of his link to Harry, and they were certainly dangerous, but visions of chains and padded rooms danced in his mind, and Harry forced the idea away with a shudder. As long as he could resist the Imperius curse, he needn’t subject himself to the fate that awaited him should the grand manipulator ever discover the truth.

No. For now, he could control his nightmares. If that started to change, then he’d tell the headmaster, but not a moment before. Harry wouldn’t survive long locked up in a padded room with nothing but his dark, half-possessed mind for company.

With a sad sigh, Harry turned on his side and beat the lumps out of his makeshift pillow—a sack full of old, torn shirts. Dreams and grief and painful shadows haunted him as he drifted off, and, for the thousandth time that summer, Harry wished he had tried harder in Occlumency. Merlin, what he wouldn’t give for even a few hours without the bloody Dark Lord trying to take over his mind.

“Welcome back, Potter. Let uss try thisss again. Kill ….”
Chapter 2

Haunted Homecoming

1 September, 1997

McGonagall’s stern voice called over the sounds of an idling steam engine and a busy platform. “No loitering this year, children. All students are to bid their families goodbye and board the train immediately.”

Her strident tones, amplified with the Sonorous spell, drilled into Harry’s tired brain. He winced and trudged towards the train, dragging Hedwig’s cage and his trunk in his wake. Gods, but he hardly had the strength to pull it even with the trolley.

It seemed Voldemort had a new plan for taking Harry out: to kill him slowly through his dreams. After two months of hardly any sleep at night and working like a house elf all day, Harry could barely keep on his feet long enough to hear her message through to the end.

Cormac McLaggen called, “Professor, why can’t we say hello to our mates? It’s tradition to have a bit of a romp before the train ride, you know.”

McGonagall gave him a sharp look. “I am well aware of what young students like to do before their return to rules and supervision; however, you will have to put your traditions of mayhem on hold this year. Or perhaps you haven’t noticed that there is a war going on around you?”

McLaggen paled. “N-no, ma’am. We’ve all seen the papers.”

Harry hadn’t, but he had heard the gist on the Muggle news. Mass murders described as gas leaks, bridge failures, and carbon monoxide poisonings every other day, while the Order sat on their arses and worried over prophecies and boy heroes. He suppressed the urge to snort, and then to yawn. Some hero. He could barely lift his wand in this state.

A chill passed down his spine as he realised that might be Voldemort’s plan. An attack while he was this weak would not end well. And if that prophecy wasn’t bollocks, more than Harry would suffer for it.
McGonagall returned her gaze to the platform at large and continued. “For your safety, a professor will guard the hallway outside each compartment.” Scattered groans and whispers met her statement. “I assure you, we do not particularly care to hear your conversations either,” the woman went on, a piercing look in her eyes. “As I said, we will be guarding outside the doors. Nevertheless, I do advise you to pick a compartment and stick with it as much as possible. Making our job more difficult will not go well for you should the train be attacked.”

A tiny first year cried, “But it’s the Hogwarts Express! It can’t be attacked … c-can it?”

McGonagall gave the girl a sad smile. “Miss …?”

“Rupert, Professor. Cara Rupert.”

“Miss Rupert then. Yes, it can and has been attacked. Dementors swarmed the train two years ago. Luckily, there was a professor on board who managed to drive them away before anyone was seriously hurt. Like that year, we will not be taking chances. Please, board the train in an orderly fashion and get settled in a compartment. Prefects, please guide the first years.”

Ron and Hermione patted Harry on the shoulder and went to help the first years onto the train. Harry searched the crowd for the professors while he waited his turn—he had to do something to stay awake—and winced at the sight of a too-familiar scowl near the end of the platform. Snape stood as still as a snake poised to strike, expression as cold as ever. Only his eyes moved as he took in every detail of the platform, tension and irritation radiating from him like a dark aura.

All the students save the older Slytherins gave him a wide berth. Harry would have done too, if not for the too-observant look in a certain blonde Slytherin’s gaze. He observed Malfoy through the veil of a glare—so their rivalry was good for something—noting that the prat never took his eyes off Snape. Even when Parkinson slung her arm around his neck and leaned in for a kiss, Malfoy watched Snape from under half-lowered lids. The hairs on the back of Harry’s neck stood on end. Malfoy had no reason to watch Snape that much.

No reason beyond orders to report the man’s behaviour to Voldemort, anyway.

Harry narrowed his eyes and debated warning Snape, but after spending a few moments in discreet observation of the man, he deduced that Snape already knew. Harry shook his head and moved towards the train, dragging both his feet and his trunk. He should have realised. The man was a spy. Honestly, how thick could Harry get? Of course he knew.

Snape probably knew Harry had been watching them both too, come to think of it.

With a shiver and faint heat creeping into his cheeks, Harry boarded the train, handing his trolley over to a luggage witch, who flicked her wand and Banished Harry’s trunk to Hogwarts. She gave him his owl cage, and Harry took Hedwig back with a muttered thank you. He found Neville and Luna chatting in an otherwise empty compartment and deemed it good enough to be going on with. Professor Flitwick, standing guard outside the door, gave Harry a friendly hello and a wave as he approached.

“Hullo, sir,” he said, voice slurring with exhaustion. “Have ‘Mione and Ron been by yet?”

Flitwick gave him a worried look. “They are still assisting the first years, Mister Potter, but are you quite all right?”

Harry forced a smile. “Just a bit tired. Haven’t slept well the last few days.”

Well, it was true. Of course, he hadn’t slept well the past couple of months either.
Flitwick nodded. “Then by all means, do get settled and have a nap, Mister Potter. It might do a bit of good anyway.”

Harry thanked him and trudged into the compartment. Neville and Luna greeted him as he came in, their expressions serious. Mostly. Nothing could ruffle Luna, apparently.

“Hey,” Harry muttered. “Just gonna … s’okay if I sit here?”

Neville stood and took Hedwig from Harry. “Merlin. Sit down before you fall down, Harry.”

“Thanks.” Harry flopped into the seat and watched as Neville secured Hedwig’s cage safely above the seats, tucked into a corner where the motion of the train would not dislodge his sleeping owl.

“What’s going on, Harry? You look like you haven’t slept in weeks.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “That’s about the size of it.”

“What? Really? H-how are you functioning?”

“I’m not. Need a kip.” If he could control his bloody dreams. Maybe he should petrify himself first.

“Well, just go to sleep there then. Lu and I will put up a silencing charm for you.”

“Thanks, Neville. I might set the train on fire if I tried it now.” Harry leaned against the seat. “Listen, if I start talking in my sleep or act like I’m having a nightmare, wake me up, okay? Please?”

Neville gave him a sympathetic look. “Right. I understand. Too well.” He smiled sadly. “I’ll wake you up if I see it.”

“Thanks, mate.” Harry closed his eyes and fell asleep in seconds.

_Sirius’ laughter cut short as red light struck him in the chest. His expression frozen in a mania-tinged grin, he fell into the swirling mists of death. The veil swallowed him whole, and the last family Harry had left vanished, torn from him forever._

“Sirius! No!”

“Harry, stop! It’s too late. He’s gone.”

_But Remus’ anguished cry did not register. It wasn’t true. It couldn’t be true. Sirius wasn’t dead._

_Mad with grief, Harry broke out of Remus’ restraining hold and chased after his godfather, running straight into the veil after him. A wash of coldness passed over him as he passed its boundaries, but on the other side, nightmares rather than death awaited him._

_Sirius, healthy, hale, and twenty years younger, stood at the side of a young James Potter. Harry’s joy died at the sight of the vicious leers on their faces._

“No,” he whispered. “Don’t.”

_But he was too late. Sirius held a snarling Severus Snape aloft, suspended in the air by his ankles_
and bare under his robes except for a pair of tatty, grey ing y-fronts. A gaggle of students gathered around, laughing and jeering.

“Serves you right, Sev,” Lily snapped, “for being so bloody mean!”

The young Snape—Severus, in Harry’s mind—cried, “Help me, Lils, please! Aren’t I your friend?”

But she turned on her heel and abandoned him.

“F-fine then, stupid mudblood.” The tears on Severus’ face revealed his hurt in spite of his cold words. “I-I’ll just … get down myself.”

“Hah! Just try it, Snivellus! I’m not done with you yet.” Sirius jerked his wand in the air, and a cracking sound made a long red welt across Severus’ chest.

Severus cried out and curled into himself, struggling to cover his exposed body with his robe and holding one arm against his chest. “Stop it, Black! That hurts! And, Lupin, aren’t you a bloody prefect? Do something!”

“I can’t. I can’t.” Remus turned his back and covered his ears, as if he could stop this horror from happening by pretending it wasn’t.

Severus cringed and cried, “H-help me, someone, please!”

Harry ran to Severus, but the moment he came near, his body vanished. He tried to cover the boy and help him down, but his smoky hands disappeared in Severus’ robes and went through his arms.

Desperate, Harry shouted, “Finite Incantatem!”

But the spell didn’t work, perhaps because Harry hadn’t the skill yet to use wandless magic. Once more, he struggled to tug Severus down, but the boy couldn’t see him, couldn’t feel him. Just like when he had fallen into Snape’s pensieve, he found himself utterly helpless.

James stepped up, twirling his wand and smirking. “All right, who wants to see me take Snivellus’ pants off?”

Severus’ scream rang in Harry’s ears.

Harry woke to someone pulling on his hand. His palm and left side felt too-warm and sweaty as compared to the rest of his body. Strange.

“Wake up, Harry!”

A feminine voice in his ear brought Harry around with a jolt. He registered pale skin and red hair, and muttered the first name that came to mind.

“Mum?”

She scowled, and Harry realised she had brown eyes, not green.

“Oh damn. Sorry, Ginny.”

Harry went to rub his eyes and discovered the girl had placed his hand in her lap. With a little shiver of distaste, he tugged at his hand. She released him, but her reluctance to do so left Harry cold inside.
He edged away from her and rubbed his hands over his face. Maybe she had only intended to comfort him, but a shred of doubt remained.

“That must have been some dream to make you think my sister was your mum,” said Ron with a frown.

Harry looked up from his hands. Ron and Hermione sat cosied up in one corner of the compartment. Neville and Luna sat across Harry, both looking at Ginny with expressions of irritation. And Ginny, rather than sitting on another seat on the entire empty bench beside Harry, had spent the last who-knew-how-long plastered against his side. While he slept.

More than a little put-out, Harry moved into the corner with Hermione and Luna in pretence of greeting his friends.

“Hey, you two. Are the first years all right?”

Hermione snorted. “That was ages ago, Harry. We’re passing Edinburgh now.”

“Really? Merlin. How long have I been asleep?”

“Probably about three hours.” Ron looked at him like he was trying to figure Harry out. “What were you dreaming about, mate?”

Harry blanched. No way in hell he could tell Ron. The boy might keep Harry’s secrets, but Snape’s? Not a chance.

“The past. Bad memories and such.”

Another half-truth. It was certainly a bad memory, but not necessarily his own. If he kept this up much longer, he might prove to be more Slytherin than Gryffindor after all. Pity Snape wouldn’t care.

“Oh.” Ron gave him a commiserating look. “Sorry, mate.”

Harry waved him off. “I’ll be okay.”

That was true. Even with nightmares, he felt better for having at least a few hours of uninterrupted rest. At least he might be able to hold his wand straight if Voldemort attacked.

“Any reports of trouble yet?”

Hermione sighed and shrugged. “You know the … organisation. Even if there is a report of trouble, they won’t tell us anything until it’s right under our noses. I swear, they’ll ‘protect’ us right into an early grave one of these days.”

Harry grimaced. “True. And in that case ….” He stood and rolled the stiffness out of his shoulders. “I reckon we ought to get ready for a fight before they tell us one is coming.”

Hermione whipped out her DA galleon. “I can get a message to everyone. What do you want to say?”

Harry frowned, considering. “If I knew what we were facing, that would be one thing, but I don’t. He might send Death Eaters, or he might send Dementors, or something else we’ve never fought before. I don’t know. Just tell everyone to be on guard and watch for trouble.”

Ron gave him an annoyed look. “That’s it? No spells or anything?”
“You have a better idea?”

“Well, we could make some Patronuses ….”

Hermione shook her head. “That would drain our magical energy before we even know if we’re fighting Dementors.”

“Not to mention,” said Harry, “it would alert the professors that we’re not planning on being good little students and taking a fight sitting down.”

Ron frowned. “Shields?”

“Again, you’re draining energy and alerting the professors.” Harry sat beside Hermione again. Ginny pouted, but after waking up like he had, Harry had no intention of getting too close.

“Harry’s right,” said Neville, his face white but his eyes determined. “We can’t cast magic without letting the professors know we’re planning to fight. And if they know, they’ll stop us before we can do any good.”

“It’s never good to plant the burbleberries before the sunrise,” Luna added, her eyes oddly solemn for such a strange statement.

Harry gave her a wry look. At least that one he could make out. Maybe. “Right, Luna. We shouldn’t get ahead of ourselves. So, yes, Hermione, our message is to simply prepare for trouble—no defensive spells—and keep our eyes open.”

Hermione tapped her wand several times against her coin. “Done.”

“Thanks, ‘Mione.”

“You’re welcome. I just hope it proves unnecessary.”

Harry kept the thought that he doubted it would to himself. The fact that Voldemort hadn’t tortured him in dreams meant the bastard was planning something—or he was already on the way—but they didn’t need to know that.

Ron grumbled as if he had been denied a treat. “I still think it would be better to be ready for trouble when it comes. A Patronus charm would do some good, anyway.”

Harry levelled him with a sharp stare. “And if he sends giants, Ron? Or Greyback? Or vampires? What good will a Patronus do against them?”

Ron rolled his eyes. “For Merlin’s sake, Harry. It’s daylight. He can’t send vampires in the day.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Can’t he? Vampires don’t just turn to dust in sunlight like the Muggles think. They’re allergic to it, true, but the reaction drains them over time. And if they have a supply of fresh blood nearby—” He waved his hand to indicate the train full of students. “They can just heal themselves and ignore the sun as long as the blood lasts.”

Ron paled and gulped. “I-in that case, maybe we’d best save our energy.”

“Glad you could see it my way,” Harry muttered.

He moved through a quick routine to wake up his muscles and get his blood flowing. Ginny’s eyes followed him the entire time, unsettling him, but there was little he could do about it with her protective older brother hanging about. Later, he would have to set her straight. Quickly, before her
attachment grew too strong.

Then again, if the girl had grabbed Harry’s hand and practically sat in his lap while he slept, it might be too late for that.

Ugh. Cho had decided him against females long ago. He had zero desire to attempt another round with Ron’s little sister, Merlin, no. That was a terrible idea.

Not to mention, she really did look like Harry’s mum.

He shuddered and sat between Hermione and Luna again.

“Harry, come sit over here,” Ginny said with a pink blush and a shy smile. “There’s a whole seat, and you don’t need to be crammed in over there.”

Harry gave her a weak smile. “I don’t take up much room. I’m fine.”

Ginny pouted again and crossed her arms over her chest, but didn’t argue, to Harry’s relief. Hermione gave him a searching look, but he brushed her off with a shake of his head. No, he most definitely did not want to go into this now.

A sudden surge of white-hot pain in Harry’s scar accompanied a rush of glee, emotion not his own.

“Shite!” Harry stood and jerked out his wand. “He’s done something. Get ready!”

As the others leapt to their feet, ready to fight, Hermione tapped the message out to the DA. She joined them a second later, wand out and face grim.

“Any idea what we’re facing yet?”

Harry shook his head. “I just know he’s really happy and plotting something.”

Neville grimaced. “Something not good for us, you mean.”

“Exactly.”

“So do we cast those shields now then?”

Harry shook his head. “No. We still don’t know what ….”

The temperature in the train compartment dropped, growing frigid in seconds, and an all-too-familiar icy chill crept up his spine. He turned and gasped, noting frost creeping up the windows and hundreds of grey phantoms soaring towards the train.

A voice in Harry’s head cried, “Not Harry! Please, take me instead.”

Screams broke out around him, and Harry wasn’t sure if they came from the students or his memories.

He shook himself and drew his wand. “Now you can make that Patronus, Ron!”

“I told you so!”

“Shut up and do it,” Neville snapped. “There are too bloody many to be arguing!” He closed his eyes and steeled himself. “Expecto Patronum!” A silver badger raced from his wand and down the compartments.
“Well done, Neville.” Luna’s hare joined his next, then Hermione’s otter, Ron’s terrier, and Ginny’s horse.

The compartment door opened and a squeaky voice called, “Oh, well done, children! Excellent charms work! Twenty points to each of you!”

Harry, swaying under the force of grief and bad memories and struggling to call a single shred of untainted happiness, cried, “Professor, is this really the time to be worrying about points?”

The diminutive man blushed. “Quite right, dear boy! Lost my head a bit there. Let’s see here. *Expecto Patronum Magna!*” Flitwick’s bluebird shot down the corridor, a hundred times the size of the actual bird, and raced to join the fray.

“Nice,” Ron muttered. “Gotta remember that one.”

“Takes quite a bit of power, Mister Weasley. Mister Potter might be able to pull it off. Do try it, Harry.”

Harry swallowed hard and scrambled for a happy memory. He thought of his mum, of seeing her face in the Mirror of Erised, of how brave she had been when *Priori Incantatem* had activated at the graveyard. But in an instant, it shifted to a flash of red hair whipping over stiff shoulders and a hot-tempered girl abandoning her best friend to suffer.

Cold crept into his bones. His wand began to shake.

“*Lils … mudblood … help me!*”

The cold sank deeper and shrill screams rang in Harry’s ears. He tried his father too, but the man’s gentle smile shifted into a cruel leer as he brandished his wand aloft.

“*Who wants to see me take Snivellus’ pants off?*”

No. No! He had to focus. There had to be something good left. Maybe his times with his godfather before death and truth swept his joy away?

But Sirius’ smiling face morphed into a vicious teenager assaulting his peers, and then to Gordon’s hands grabbing at Harry’s hips, and Ginny’s body pressed into his side without his consent. It all jumbled and twisted into Sirius’ manic grin as he dropped beyond the veil.

“*Sirius, no!*”

“*It’s too late, Harry! He’s gone!*”

The screams hurt his brain. He whimpered and held his hand to his forehead, struggling to come up with something—anything—happy, but everything inside him was broken and dim.

“I … I don’t think I can,” he whispered, and succumbed to the darkness.

Severus stood in front of his assigned compartment, his expression bored and his gut churning with an increasing sense of dread. He had expected an attack at the station. So had the other teachers, to be honest. It would have been easier for the dark forces to kill the children while they were scattered
and out of reach of the adults.

Unless the Dark Lord hadn’t planned on sending Death Eaters in all along. Severus had thought—but if he wanted to keep identities quiet—and perhaps after losing so many Death Eaters to Azkaban last summer, he had no choice—he wouldn’t send them. He wouldn’t send humans at all, and that thought chilled Severus to his core. The Dark Lord commanded many varied forces of dark creatures. Severus and the other professors had no way to prepare if they had no idea which type of creature they would face.

Severus would have to walk a fine line too, if he wanted to keep his neck in one piece. Well, thank Merlin the professors had at least thought to place Severus far away from the Slytherins and the few Ravenclaws in the Dark Lord’s ranks. No one could report his actions to the Dark Lord if there were no junior Death Eaters about to see.

A commotion started in the compartment of Hufflepuffs behind him. A glance into the window showed them all staring at something in their hands, their expressions grim. The next instant, they all leapt to their feet and grabbed their wands, eyes scanning outside the windows and down the corridor for threats. At least two of them glared back at Severus as if expecting him to bite.

The brats knew trouble was brewing. And that could only be the work of ….

“Potter. Damn him to the furthest reaches of hell.”

Just what he needed. Ignorant children jumping in the middle of a battle meant for adults.

If any of them survived this bloody train ride it would be a miracle.

He reached for the door handle, ready to chide them and glare them into submission, but at that instant, a chill permeated the air and left him shivering. His breath came out in clouds and his fingers froze on the handle.

One of the Hufflepuffs cried, “Dementors!”

And that was all the warning Severus had before a silver badger damn near bowled him over. A badger? Who in Merlin’s name had a badger Patronus? Pomona’s was a niffler.

A horse joined the badger—another mystery Patronus—and Severus shook himself out of his shock. This was no time to be standing around with his mouth agape like a certain bespectacled ignoramus. He gathered his memories of Lily around him like a cloak against the chill.

“*Expecto Patronum*!” His silver doe joined the veritable crowd of Patronuses prancing the train.

Severus narrowed his eyes and held his wand ready. Something was wrong. Why would the Dark Lord send Dementors again when he knew full well they hadn’t worked to destroy Potter the first hundred times? He knew Potter had mastered the Patronus charm—and come to think of it, where was the boy’s stag? Well, perhaps Severus simply couldn’t see it from here. Still, why would the Dark Lord waste time and effort on an attack the students and teachers alike would have known to prepare for?

No, something wasn’t right. Severus opened the compartment door and motioned the children out of his way.

“Move, or I shall put you in detention until your eighties.”

The Hufflepuffs scrambled to get out of his way, each of them looking at him as if he somehow
Severus moved to the window and scanned the horizon for trouble. The Dementors had backed off, floating beyond the reach of the Patronuses protecting the train, but beyond the silver shield, something sinister had shown itself. Black-robed figures zipped between the Dementors, hiding under their shadows and blending in, but Severus had seen the sunlight flash on a face. A human face.


With a growl, he stood and glared at the students. “Sit down and don’t try to interfere, unless you would like to become a tasty snack for the nearest blood-sucking demon.”

The Hufflepuffs went stark white and slumped into their seats as one. Severus stalked out of the compartment, not bothering to check if they stayed there. Hufflepuffs, as a rule, didn’t act out once a professor—and particularly himself—had warned them against it, and he had bigger fish to fry anyway.

“Pomona!” The dumpy witch turned and gave Severus a wary look. “A flock of vampires are hiding under the Dementors’ cloaks. They are waiting for cloud cover, and then we shall find our hands full.”

Pomona turned ashen. “Merlin preserve us. Filius!” She turned to the next professor in the chain, and on his right, Minerva spread the message in the opposite direction.

Severus glanced behind him and just had time to register that the Hufflepuffs had risen to their feet again despite his warning before their window shattered and a snarling figure in black burst in.

“Lumos Maxima!” Severus aimed the powerful light spell right at the vampire’s eyes, and a screeching hiss of pain met his attack. A quick Gladius curse to the beast’s heart finished it, piercing it through as if impaled upon a sword. Without a blink, Severus Vanished the corpse and blood before it could contaminate the nearby students.

“Stay,” he hissed to the idiot Hufflepuffs and dashed back into the corridor.

An annoyingly-familiar voice cried out the incantation for the light spell. Granger. So a vampire had escaped Filius then. Heart pounding, Severus dashed to the compartment two spaces down and gasped at the sight that met his eyes. Three black-robed vampires had Filius cornered, and another was hovering over a prone figure on the floor of Granger’s compartment.

A prone figure with messy black hair. Fuck!

“Reducorporis!”

The vampire emitted a bestial screech and disintegrated, turning into dust before Severus’ eyes. He knelt beside Potter and touched two fingers to the boy’s neck. The brat still had a pulse, so despite the bleeding points on his neck, he had been neither turned nor drained. With a glare at the ignorant fools who dared to believe themselves capable fighters, Severus cast a specialised anti-dark shield over the hapless idiot and rushed to Filius’ aid.
Harry woke to not-so-quiet whispers and the smell of disinfectant. Dear gods, term had barely started and he was already in the hospital wing? Lovely.

Slowly, the fog around his senses dissipated and memories came back. He had been talking about preparing for a fight with the others, and then … right. Dementors. And Harry had failed to call his Patronus for the first time since that night in third year when he had rescued Sirius and Buckbeak—for all the good it had done.

And that was the problem. He had no happy memories left. Everything that had once brought him true joy had been fractured, leaving him with only hollow shades and a bleeding spirit.

“… Couldn’t call his Patronus,” someone whispered. “Never imagined *Harry* would—I mean, he’s brilliant with them.”

“He taught us all,” Neville murmured. “I don’t understand.”

Hermione sighed. “It’s … I think it’s Snuffles. It’s not been so long since he died. I don’t think Harry has recovered well at all.”

Neville gasped. “Merlin, you’re right. I should have thought of that.”

Ron muttered, “What do you think Snape was on about with that shield? Was he trying to drain Harry or something?”

“Of course not,” Neville snapped. “Do you really think that, even if Snape *was* a pure Death Eater, he would drain Harry in full view of the other students and professors? Merlin.”

“It wasn’t that anyway,” Hermione said, voice hushed. “It was an anti-dark shield. He knew the vampires would go for Harry, so he warded them away from him.” She sighed. “I tried to do the same thing after I used the Sunlight Charm. I thought for sure with as many times as I studied it, but I just didn’t have the power.”

‘Vampires?’ Harry swallowed hard and winced at a pain in his neck. Damn. He’d had a closer call than he had known apparently.

He made a note to teach his DA how to fight other dark creatures—including vampires, Inferi, and werewolves—as soon as he recovered. It wasn’t like they could depend on their defence instructor to do so.

“Thank Merlin Flitwick and Harry came through okay,” Dean murmured.

“I think you have Professor Snape to thank for that,” Neville said. “The man is an arsehole, but you can’t deny he’s a brilliant fighter. Merlin, we’d probably all be dead without his help.”

Harry suppressed a shudder. Dear gods. If Snape had saved their lives, he would be even worse than usual, probably for the entire bloody term. And perhaps not without good reason. Today had certainly proved Harry wasn’t as strong as he would like to think.

“I still can’t get over the fact that Harry couldn’t call his Patronus,” Ron said. “It’s just … he’s always been the best of us in Defence. Harry missing a defence spell is like Snape suddenly growing a heart. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Snape saved all of our bloody lives and you’re still …” Neville sighed. “Why am I even trying? Of course you are.”
“Oi, shut it. He’s a right bastard, whether he drove the vampires away or not. I reckon he just didn’t want to be a snack either. He sure as hell didn’t do it out of a burning need to protect Harry, believe that.”

Harry suppressed a snort. Ron probably had the right of it, at least as concerned Harry’s well-being.

Ginny murmured, “I wish Harry would let me protect him. Or any of us.”

At a brush of a foreign thumb across his knuckles, Harry realised the girl had his hand again and jerked it away. “Stop it.” He rubbed his aching forehead and tried to keep from sicking up. Between the pain and Ginny’s unwanted advances, he thought he might lose the battle.

Madam Pomfrey clucked. “Out, all of you out. If he’s awake, I need room to treat him.”

“But he shouldn’t be alone,” Ginny insisted.

“Just listen to her, Ginny,” Harry said with a groan.

“But—”

“Let’s go, Ginny.” Hermione pulled her up and away. “We’ll see you later then, Harry.”

“Yeah, later.”

With a pout, Ginny flipped her hair over her shoulders—again reminding Harry of his mum—and a fresh wave of nausea assaulted him.

“Gonna … feel sick.”

Pomfrey Summoned a yellow potion and stuck it under his nose. “Drink.”

Harry obeyed, though the taste almost caused him to lose the battle with his stomach. A moment later, his nausea quieted and the pain in his head eased. She handed him a dark red potion after that—a Blood Replenisher—and a green one Harry thought was probably a general Healing Draught. He choked all of them down in quick succession, and while he massaged his aching throat, a quiet crack at his side startled him. He turned to find Pomfrey breaking into a giant brick of chocolate with a hammer and pick.

She handed him a block as thick as his calf. “Eat.”

Harry attempted to obey. The woman stood over him, eyes sharp as a hawk’s as he choked down as much of the chocolate as he could stomach. It did take some of the coldness from his chest, so he supposed it had done something, though he feared nothing would ever make him feel truly warm or happy again.

“What happened, Mister Potter?”

“Dementors,” Harry muttered, avoiding her eyes. “And vampires, apparently.”

“You’ve not had problems with Dementors since third year.”

“Yeah? I had a godfather then, didn’t I?”

Pomfrey’s gaze softened. “I see. Well, that is to be expected. Grief takes time to heal.” She sat beside his bed and gave him another, thankfully smaller, piece of chocolate. “Would you like to talk about it?”
Harry shuddered. Merlin, no. Besides, even if he had wanted to, his grief now went far beyond the man’s death, and that story wasn’t his to share.

“No. I … I’m sorry. I just can’t.”

Pomfrey patted his arm. “Perhaps in time. For now, I want you to eat that chocolate, take another Blood Replenisher, and head down to the feast. Professor Snape stopped the vampire before it could do much damage, thank Merlin, and you’ve recovered well enough. Being around your friends and spending time in livelier atmospheres will help you recover from your grief too.”

Harry thought of all the staring first-years, doe-eyed girls, Snape’s glare of death, and Ginny’s hovering, and seriously doubted the feast would be of any aid at all. Still, anywhere was better than being stuck in the hospital wing talking about grief and being force-fed chocolate and potions.

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

She squeezed his shoulder and handed him a dark red potion. “Go on as soon as you’re finished with that, unless you’re still feeling queasy?”

Harry bolted up and shook his head. “No, ma’am, not queasy at all. The potion did the trick.” It wasn’t strictly true, but Harry would be dealing with starvation-induced illness for the next three days or so while his systems went back online anyway, and he didn’t fancy spending those three days cooped up in the hospital wing. He bolted down the potion and forced himself not to gag.

“Off with you then,” said Pomfrey after a moment, her voice kinder than her words. “But do return if you start feeling woozy, get too cold and can’t warm up by normal means, or develop a headache.”

A **headache**? He suppressed a dark laugh. Between his exhaustion and the constant visions, he would never escape the Infirmary if he came every time his head hurt.

Harry gave her a wan smile and stood on shaky legs. “Thank you, Madam Pomfrey. See you around.”

“Not too soon, I hope,” she muttered, and went about clearing up Harry’s bed and the giant block of chocolate.
Chapter 3

The New Abnormal

5 September, 1997

A sharp jab in the ribs woke Harry from the only normal sleep he ever got these days—a nap during history. He rubbed his side and glared at Hermione.

“Poke me again,” he hissed, “and I’ll hex you.”

She hissed back, “You have to pay attention, Harry. It’s NEWTs! They decide your whole future. Look, right now is history time. Then we have revision after lunch. Then—”

“Get this through your head, Hermione. Right now, I don’t give a damn about NEWTs. I haven’t slept in three days because of your bloody schedules! For Merlin’s sake, write in some leisure time!”

Needless to say, his first few days of school hadn’t gone well. Harry’s Imperius dreams had slowed to one or two a night—Hogwarts’ wards had probably granted the reprieve, small as it was—but his ‘normal’ nightmares and visions had more than made up for the difference. He was lucky if he got three hours of sleep a night, and between Hermione’s constant need to revise and his lack of time for naps, it was taking a toll.

A panicked, half-maniacal glint entered her eyes. “We don’t have time for leisure, Harry. These classes are too important—”

Harry stood and swept his book and parchment into his bag. “Then I’m making my own schedule from here on out. Yours is going to kill me. I’ll see you later.”

“Harry! You can’t just—”

“Yes I bloody well can.” He slung his bag over his shoulder and trudged from the room, so tired he
didn’t even care when he caught his shin on a counter.

Binns droned on as if nothing had happened.

Merlin, why did Hermione even care about this class? All the idiot ghost ever talked about was goblin rebellions, which made up about five percent or so of their actual exams. If Hermione hadn’t all but force-fed Harry and Ron their texts last term, they never would have passed their history OWLs.

For Merlin’s sake, Ron wasn’t even taking a NEWT in history. Wasn’t like knowing the ins and outs of all 8,032 goblin rebellions would help him in any career except Gringotts, and Ron had no interest in counting gold. Neither did Harry, come to think of it. Not that the goblins would let them anywhere near other people’s gold even if they did.

So what did it matter if Harry slept through the one class that never covered anything important and had an instructor who wouldn’t notice if the ceiling fell on his head? Hermione was bloody well obsessed.

With a sigh, Harry staggered through the hall towards Gryffindor tower, but halfway there, froze at the sound of a familiar, cold-as-ice tone.

“Well, well, well, what have we here? A foolish little lion who thinks he is above the … inconvenience of attending the classes we professors strive so hard to provide?”

Harry winced and turned, stumbling a bit. “Sir? I … can’t.” He forced his head up and dragged his heavy eyelids open. “T-too tired.”

Snape narrowed black eyes at him. Those dark depths bored into the depths of Harry’s soul, but saw nothing. Snape didn’t want to. Not that Harry was surprised.

“Oh, I see. Up too late basking in the glow of your fame, hmm? The poor little Chosen One—so many parties celebrating the grand occasion of his return, so little time. My heart aches for your plight.”

Harry said nothing. It would do no good. No matter what he said, Snape would twist it against him.

Snape’s lip curled in a sneer. “Well?”

So much for keeping quiet. “I think you know I hate the fame, sir. And I don’t like parties either.”

“You expect me to believe the arrogant, spoiled, dunderheaded son of James Potter is a recluse?” Snape snorted. “Spare me.”

Harry slumped, too exhausted to keep his posture. “It’s nightmares, sir.”

“Balderdash. You are simply searching for an excuse to cover your own foolishness and ineptitude. Your exhaustion is your own fault. Detention, seven PM in the potions classroom. No need to bring your text or supplies.”

Harry barely suppressed a groan. Just what he needed. Physical labour when his body ached all over and he couldn’t stop his limbs from shaking. And how like Snape not to believe the truth. Nothing had changed there, Harry supposed.

“But—”
“Save your whinging for someone who cares, Potter. Had you not stayed up three nights in a row signing autographs and flexing your non-existent musculature for simpering fools, you mightn’t be so tired now.”

Harry grimaced. “It really is nightmares, sir. I nee—”

He cut himself off before he could be foolish enough to ask for a Dreamless Sleep potion. They were carefully regulated, and Snape hadn’t believed his story about nightmares the first time. If he continued to press, the man might take it into his head that Harry wanted to use the potion as some sort of illegal drug. It wasn’t true, of course, but Snape wouldn’t care, nor would the Ministry. Fudge might have been gone, but after Umbridge, Harry had no illusions that the dark supporters hidden in the wings wouldn’t jump at any excuse to expel him.

Not to mention, even if the Ministry did allow a fair investigation, they would still ask questions. More involved questions than he wanted to answer. Especially if they involved Veritaserum, Harry wouldn’t be able to hide the truth of his Imperius dreams from Ministry-trained examiners. And if the cowards in the bureaucracy got one hint that Voldemort was taking control of Harry’s mind, they would lock him away in a padded room at St. Mungo’s faster than he could say Lockhart.

Damn. Much as it galled him, Harry had no choice but to grit his teeth and take his unfair punishment. As usual. No one had ever stepped in for him and no one would now. And to resist would only make his situation more painful.

Well, he could bear it, he supposed. After all, it was no worse than what he endured over the summer. Snape wouldn’t hit him or lock him in a cupboard—probably—and at least at Hogwarts, he had enough to eat.

“Yes, Potter? Do tell me what the great Saint Potter needs.” Snape’s voice threatened death if he dared ask for anything. “I live for the thrill of providing more vapid entertainment for the wizarding world’s spoiled darling.”

With a weary sigh, Harry forced a reply out in a calm voice. Dim and lifeless, but calm at least. “Nothing, sir. I don’t need anything. I’ll just … try to go to bed earlier.” Not that it would do any good, but Snape didn’t care either way. And Harry just wanted to forget the day had ever happened and sleep. At least for a while.

The professor stared at him, eyes narrowed as if he suspected a trick. “Know this, Potter, if you attempt any tomfoolery this evening, I will have you in detention until your thirties.”

Harry forced himself to meet Snape’s eyes. “I’m well aware, sir. May I go now?”

Snape sneered. “No. Thirty points from Gryffindor for skiving off. Now you may go.”

Harry held in a shrug and turned towards the tower once more. Thirty points was an obscene amount for skipping class, but he didn’t care much beyond the principle of it and the sting of Snape’s continued hatred. What did house points matter when the world cowered in fear of a madman who killed on a whim? Of course, Harry didn’t look forward to dealing with his housemates’ ire later when they realised he had lost them points—again—but he would survive.

Harry had felt a rift growing between him and his dorm mates anyway. He had been branded and changed by war, forced to grow up too early, but they were still children, with children’s interests and dreams and understanding of the world. As Harry hadn’t much desire to play gobstones or talk about girls these days, they had little common ground.
Harry slammed into the Fat Lady’s canvas, having lost himself in his turbulent thoughts. She huffed and straightened her hair, eyeing him with disdain.

“Was it really necessary to bowl me over like that?”

Shite. He hadn’t meant to hurt her. “S-sorry! Are you okay?”

She gave him a wry look. “I’m a portrait, Harry. You can’t hurt me by simply running into my canvas. I’m fine.” She frowned. “You don’t look well, though.”

“Yeah, it’s been a rough day. Um … Libertas et Fides.”

The portrait swung forwards, revealing a doorway and a short staircase. “Take care of yourself.”

He clambered inside. “Thanks,” he muttered as he pulled the portrait door to.

With a massive yawn, he dragged himself up the stairs, his vision narrowed to a single point—the staircase to his room. As such, he missed the redhead closing in on his side until she took hold of his arm and dragged it over her own shoulders.

“You look done in. Let me help you to bed.”

Harry frowned. She hadn’t necessarily done anything wrong, but her constant touching without his consent was making him nervous. He pulled his arm back and turned, forcing himself to wake up long enough to drive the point home to the girl, but how could he let her down without turning his best friend against him?

“Ginny, I just lost my godfather. I … um … I don’t really want to be touched right now. Please, can you give me some space?”

She jutted out her chin and gave him a stubborn smile. “Harry, if you’re grieving, that’s all the more reason to be here for you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I suppose I could use help from my friends.” He hoped the slight emphasis he placed on the word would be enough to make his point.

Ginny frowned. “I-I guess, but I ….” She shook her head and gave him a hesitant smile. “Okay. But you do know I’m here if you need me, right?”

Harry nodded, relieved. “Yeah. Right now, I just need time to heal.”

A spark lit her eyes, and Harry almost groaned out loud. He hadn’t meant to give her hope.

“Well, I understand that,” she said with a smile. “Go on and get some sleep.”

“T-thanks, Ginny.”

She went back to her texts with a wave, and Harry wanted to hit himself. Dear gods. She might back off for a time, and he would be greatly relieved if she did, but his poorly-chosen words had all but guaranteed she wouldn’t stay away forever.

Merlin, he couldn’t worry about this right now. He was too damn tired.

With a weary sigh, he stumbled up the stairs and into bed. Dropping face-first without bothering to undress, Harry fell asleep almost before he hit the bed.
In his dreams, a young, terrified Severus Snape hung upside-down above the ground, half-naked and exposed, tears running down his face. Beside him, Harry hovered in the same position, his face wet and hot with shame.

Lily pushed her way through the crowds of students and stared at them, eyes wide and shocked.

“Sev? H-Harry? What’s going on?”

Severus murmured, “Lils, please. Forgive me.”

Harry winced and called, “Mum! Help us!”

But Lily turned her back and walked away, a sheet of red hair flying in the wind. Halfway out of the circle, she shifted into Ginny Weasley. Besides losing an inch or two of height, Harry didn’t see much difference from the back. A shudder rippled the base of his neck and spread down to his toes.

Merlin help him. Even if he could like women, that one was just too close to home.

James Potter came through the jeering crowd, the students parting for him like subjects before their emperor. The fur-lined, purple-spangled cloak over his shoulders—reminiscent of Dumbledore’s finest gear—added to the impression. James smirked and twirled his wand like a royal sceptre, lording over the other students and his prey.

“Look what I’ve caught for you, everyone! Bow down to the master of pranks!”

Severus whimpered. “Potter, enough! L-let us down!”

Harry forced his voice to work around a throat full of tears. “Dad, please. Please don’t do this.”

James came near and poked Harry’s ribs with his wand, bringing up a painful welt with each touch. “He’s so scrawny! Look, I can count every one! One, two, three ….” By the time he had finished on both sides, Harry couldn’t see for the rivers of tears pouring into his hair.

“Dad, please. You’re hurting me. Please stop.”

James listened at last, only to step two paces to the side and start on Severus’ ribs too. The boy cried out at the first touch of James’ wand and tried to squirm away, but the spell held him firm.

“Stop,” Severus shouted. “It hurts!”

But James didn’t care. On the next rib, his features shifted.

“Cor, I could play a tune on these ribs, I could.”

Harry cringed to see Piers standing before Severus, a long maple switch in hand.

“Reckon I can make you make some music, huh?”

Severus gasped and tried to escape, but he had nowhere to go. “N-no. Don’t.”

Piers whacked the switch over the curve of Severus’ ribs, leaving as painful a welt as James’ wand
had done. “One ... two ... three ...”

“Stop! It hurts!”

Harry reached over and took Severus’ shaking hand in his own. “Merlin, I’m sorry.”

Severus whimpered and held Harry’s hand tight, murmuring over and over, “Please, please, help us, Harry. You’ve got to wake up.”

Harry grimaced. “I’m trying. I’m so tired.”

“I don’t care, mate. Wake up! ’Mione says we’re due to revise and you’ve already missed dinner.”

“Revise? Dinner? What are you—”

“For Merlin’s sake, Harry, WAKE UP!”

The bellow finally got it through to him that it wasn’t Severus calling him, but Ron. The dream dissolved in a flash of red hair and angry blue eyes.

Harry bolted up with a gasp and ran a shaking hand over his ribs. No welts and he still had all his clothing intact. It was only another nightmare.

“About time, mate,” Ron grumbled. “Been trying to wake you for half an hour.”

“Half an ... really? Merlin, I was more exhausted than I thought.” Harry dropped his head into his hands and rubbed away a growing headache. Gods, the lack of sleep was going to kill him soon.

“Yeah, well, it’s no excuse for how you treated Hermione in history today, you giant berk.”

Harry frowned. “Because I told her I would make my own study schedule?”

Ron glared. “You hurt her. She just wanted to make sure we pass and stuff.”

“All right, all right. I’ll apologise. But I’m still studying on my own time. She’s killing me. I’m not sleeping at all.”

“Slept enough today, didn’t you?”

“Have I?” Harry rubbed his face and tried to wake himself a bit more.

“Yeah, I brought you a sandwich back from dinner, not that you deserve it, really.”

Harry took the sandwich Ron offered—ham and swiss—and with a mutter of thanks, took a bite. The spicy Dijon mustard kicked his brain into gear, and Harry almost choked.

“W-wait, did you say I missed dinner? What time is it?”

Ron waved his wand and muttered, “Tempus.”

Harry blanched at the numbers shining at the end of his wand. “T-ten to? Shite, I’ve got to go!” He grabbed his cloak and his sandwich and dashed for the door.

Ron frowned and cancelled the spell. “Wait, go where?”
“Snape. Detention at seven. See you later.”

Harry bolted down the dormitory stairs, stuffing his face along the way, but Hermione had blockaded the portrait hole.

She stood akimbo before the portrait hole and glared. “Just where do you think you’re going? You’re late to revise, which you had better do since you slept through all your afternoon classes!”

“I’m also going to be late to detention with Snape unless you move,” he snapped back, annoyed with her imperious attitude. “I told you I’ll be studying on my own time from now on anyway.”

She sniffed and turned on her heel. “Detention? Well, it serves you right, Harry Potter!”

Harry’s temper flared, and words spilled out of him before he could stop them. “Oh yes, I deserve a completely bollocks detention because I dared skip a class no one but you cares about, which doesn’t cover anything on our NEWTs, and has a professor who wouldn’t notice if you dropped a bloody lorry on his head, and that because I was becoming ill from lack of sleep, which you continually interrupt to revise at all hours of the day!”

Ron bellowed from the staircase. “Oi!”

With a wince, Harry took a deep breath and raked a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry. I know you care, Hermione, but you’re going too far, and I’m going to be late.”

Hermione stuck out her chin, eyes full of tears, and glared. “Go then!”

“I bloody well have to, Hermione! It’s Snape.” With that, Harry remembered he had ten minutes to get down to the dungeons—closer to seven now—and dashed from the room. He’d figure out how to work things out with Hermione and Ron later. For now, he had to deal with Hogwarts’ resident viper and hope he came out of detention in one piece.

Harry was two minutes late. He had never had a more difficult and draining detention as a result. Snape had him clean fifteen soiled cauldrons—all which smelled foul enough to make him regret that hastily devoured sandwich—but the detention hadn’t ended there. As a punishment for his tardiness, Snape had ordered him to clean every phial and jar in the student cupboard with a specialised spell which required a hefty dose of magic. Even better, he had degraded and insulted Harry the entire time.

As a result, by the time Harry had finished, he left detention physically, emotionally, and magically drained. He somehow managed to drag himself up to the tower rather than going to sleep on a bench in the entrance hall, but when he arrived, he half-wished he’d given into the temptation. Hermione was waiting for him at the study table, her arms crossed and eyes sharp. Harry barely suppressed a scream of frustration and misery.

“Please. Please don’t do this now. Can you not see I’m past my limit?”

“Well, so am I!” Hermione shoved a stack of parchment at him. “You think it’s easy to revise all the time and plan your schedules and—”

“Stop.” Harry pushed the papers away as gently as possible under the circumstances. “I can’t follow
this schedule, Hermione. I can’t revise at all hours of the day. I understand that you want to help, but you’re killing me. Literally. I’m not getting enough sleep. I’m sorry. I don’t want to hurt you, but you’re going to have to accept that I’m my own person and I can decide what’s best for me.”

“Harry Potter, you’re not revising at all! You’re just sleeping all the time and—”

“And it’s his choice,” said a quiet voice from a dark corner nearby. Neville came out of the shadows, his eyes full of approbation and fixed on Hermione. “Harry just lost someone important to him. He’s in mourning. He needs more sleep to deal with those dark emotions. Merlin, but I know how it feels. And all you’re doing by trying to force him to follow your schedule is driving him away. You’re hurting him, Hermione.”

Hermione gasped. “But I … it’s NEWTs and—”

“I know, but gods, Hermione, look at him. Look at the shape he’s in and tell me you still think he’s fit to revise at one in the morning when you two have Potions first thing.”

Harry groaned. “Damn it. Two more hours with Snape—just what I need.” He rolled his aching shoulders and rubbed his neck. “He really tried to kill me this time, I swear.”

Neville’s eyes widened. “Harry! He hurt you?”

With a gasp, Harry shook his head hard. “I didn’t mean it literally. He just … mean.”

Neville snorted. “No arguments here.” He offered Harry an arm. “Come on, mate. Let’s get you in bed. You’re absolutely done in.” He whispered in Harry’s ear. “And I asked Pomfrey for some Dreamless Sleep for you. Well, I said it was for me, but you know.”

Harry could have kissed the boy. As he knew full well Neville wasn’t gay, he refrained.

“Gods, you’re a lifesaver, Nev. Thanks. Might not pass out halfway through my potion tomorrow now.”

Neville nodded and braced Harry up. “Come on then. Bedtime for you.”

Harry gratefully accepted his help and let the boy guide him towards the stairs. At the foot, a sniffling Hermione gave him a hug. “I’m sorry, Harry. You can revise on your own if you really need to. I just … I only wanted you to do well.”

He hugged her back. “I know. And if I can ever get this sleeping thing fixed, we’ll talk about it again. For now, I just need to rest or I’m not going to survive to NEWTs.” He left it unsaid that he mightn’t make it that long either way.

“Okay. I won’t push any longer.” She gave him a wry smile. “Ron’s been asking me to spend more time with him anyway, so maybe it works out.”

His heart gave a painful tug. “Oh. Well, yes, I guess so. You should spend some time as a couple.” Never mind that their time together would leave Harry alone.

Neville gave him a worried look. “Come on, Harry. You look miserable.”

“Yeah.” Harry gave the boy a wan smile and let Neville help him up to their dorm.

Once Harry had taken a quick shower, struggled into some sleep pants and a tee, and climbed into bed, Neville handed him a capful of blue-violet potion. Harry took it with a grateful smile, not even
minding the taste if it could get rid of his terrible Imperius dreams.

“Merlin, Neville, thanks for that.”

Neville patted his shoulder. “Maybe you won’t need it much longer. I hope so anyway.”

Harry forced a smile on his face. “Y-yeah. Maybe.”

Somehow, he doubted time would cure his ills. Still, perhaps the potion would help.

He lay back, already drowsy, eyes heavy as lead. “G’night, Nev,” he muttered.

“Goodnight.”

Within seconds, the potion had carried him off to sleep.


Had Harry the ability to do so while unconscious, he would have wept.
A Growing Divide

Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** Snape is BRUTAL here. He's a real asshole in this story until Dumbledore forces him to see the light, so be prepared. Description of murder in a vision, including kids, minus the gory details.

**Summary:** Severus is forced to take Harry into Potions and is a complete asshole as a result. Harry comes back to find Ron and Hermione are giant flakes, and wakes up from a nap to find the house in an uproar—over him, of course. Oh, and detention with Snape is as fun as it sounds.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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Chapter 4

A Growing Divide

Harry dragged himself into potions the next morning. Dumbledore had all but forced him into the subject despite the fact that Harry hadn’t met the requirements on his OWL. The man had used an excuse of extenuating circumstances, but Harry hadn’t bought it. It was just more meddling. But he couldn’t refuse the headmaster, so Harry had little choice but to go to a class he would have rather dropped.

Gods, he didn’t want to be here. Even if Snape hadn’t hated Harry, seeing the man and knowing why he had a reason to left Harry’s heart bleeding. But Snape did hate him, beyond all reason. And now Harry had two more years of utter misery to look forward to, no thanks to Dumbledore’s manipulations.

If only Harry could still hate the man back, it would be easier to bear. But he couldn’t. He understood Snape’s pain, not that he would ever let him see that. Harry would end up cut into pieces for potions ingredients before he could blink.

Hermione settled into the seat beside him and gave him a wan smile. “Do you need to read from my text?”

Harry held up the weatherbeaten copy of Advanced Potion Making Dumbledore had forced upon him. “No thanks. I’m all set.”

“Oh, good. Did you read ahead at all?”

He glared. “When, Hermione? I’ve had the book for all of three days, and you had me revising till midnight for two of them.”

She blushed and subsided, apparently deciding she would be better off reading her own text instead of poking at Harry about his. About damn time.
With a sigh, Harry opened his potions text and frowned at the front cover.

‘Property of the Half-Blood Prince.’

Prince? Well, someone had some delusions of grandeur, apparently. He turned to the first potion and blinked in surprise. The margins for the Draught of Living Death had notes scribbled in on all sides, including stirring diagrams, drawings of ingredients, and corrections to the original text. Merlin, but that handwriting looked familiar, too. He turned the book into the light and tried to figure out where he’d seen similar writing before, but couldn’t put his finger on a name.


Harry gave her a blank look.

“Writing all over the book like that! It’s … it’s just wrong.” She shot him a dark glare.

“Don’t look at me. It’s used. I got it like this, thank you.”

She scowled at the book as if it was Riddle himself. Harry just shook his head and tried to decipher the margin notes.

‘Crush the Sopophorous bean with flat side of silver dagger, releases juice better than cutting.’

A bit further down, another note read: ‘Add one clockwise stir after seven anti-clockwise stirs to obtain the clear colour faster.’

Hmm. Couldn’t hurt to try it. Snape would just Vanish Harry’s potion anyway, regardless of how it turned out.

Gods, Harry just wanted to crawl back into bed. Three hours of bad sleep after an awful detention hadn’t refreshed him nearly enough to face Snape right after breakfast. He closed his text and banged his head against the book with a groan. This would be sheer hell, he was sure of it.

“Buck up, Harry,” she said, worry in her eyes. “It won’t be that bad.”

Harry gave her a disbelieving look. “Not that bad? Where have you been for the past five years?”

She sighed. “I was just trying to cheer you up, you know.”

“Hermione, please. Dumbledore forced Snape to take me into this class despite not making the required grade. He’s going to be chomping at the bit to get to me—just watch.”

She grimaced. “M-maybe he’s calmed down since then?”

Harry snorted. “Sure. And next, Hagrid’s nifflers will donate their hoard to the poor.”

“Harry ….”

“Just be quiet. It’s going to be worse for me if we’re talking when he gets here.”

“F-fair enough.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for the professor to storm in, frothing at the mouth, most likely.

Just as the last student arrived, Snape stalked into the classroom, all black robes and dark glory, and
slammed the door shut with a bang. Harry jumped, and at the look on the man’s face, sank further into his seat to avoid his wrath.

Hagrid’s nifflers wouldn’t become philanthropists anytime soon.

“Sit down and shut up.” Snape paced behind the professor’s desk, eyes crackling with fury, hands clenched into white-knuckled fists. “Welcome, children, to NEWT level potions.” Black eyes bored into Harry and sparked. “Or what should have been NEWT level.”

Harry swallowed hard and prepared himself for a morning spent biting his tongue.

“Most of you,” the professor continued, his voice dark and frigid, “have displayed a high level of aptitude for the subject, and as such, have earned your place in this classroom.”

He gave Hermione a disdainful sneer and Malfoy what could only be described as a fond look—well, as ‘fond’ as a murderously angry Snape could get.

“And some of you …”

His eyes snapped back to Harry, full of the utmost revulsion. Harry dropped his gaze and tried not to feel the knife twisting in his chest.

How could it still hurt so much? He had expected Snape’s wrath and, by now, he had no hope that the man would ever forgive him anyway. Snape would never see beyond Harry’s resemblance and relation to the men who had hurt him. Damaged him.

Harry should be angry. It wasn’t his fault his family had been traitors and abusers. For gods’ sakes, he hadn’t even been born when they had assaulted Snape. He should be furious that the man blamed him for events he so obviously had no control over.

But he wasn’t. Instead, he wanted to curl up somewhere and cry. Merlin, he was a fool to care, but Harry had seen behind the man’s mask, seen Snape’s vulnerability under his steel façade, and he could no longer overlook the humanity in his potions professor, much as he wished he could at times like this.

It was much easier to tolerate hatred and revulsion from a monster than a man.

“Some of you,” Snape repeated, his voice soft and lethal, “have earned your place in this classroom by merit of fame alone. Some of you do not deserve to look at a cauldron, much less touch one, but because the world bows at your feet, I have no choice but to succumb to the whims of fools and attempt to drill the art and subtle science of potion making into your empty skulls.”

Dear Merlin, this year was going to be awful. Harry supposed he could understand Snape’s irritation—a bit anyway. The man had thought last term he would be rid of Harry after seeing his Exceeds Expectations OWL scores. He had probably spent all summer celebrating the fact, only to be told that he would need to make an exception for Harry this year. To be honest, Harry would rather be just about anywhere but a class where Snape not only hated him, but was somewhat justified in wanting him out.

And Ron was hacked off about it too. Dumbledore hadn’t made exception for him. Of course, Ron had barely scraped an Acceptable on his OWL and Harry had scored just under Outstanding level, but Ron still saw it as unfair treatment. Especially since he couldn’t be an auror without potions.

Harry agreed it was unfair, but not for the same reasons. He had missed an O grade by ten points. If Snape had bothered to treat him with a modicum of respect during his earlier years, he might have
done better on his OWLs and been able to take potions without hacking both Snape and his best friend off. As it was, he had little choice but to suck it up and bear another two years of hell. From both sides.

Well, it was no use fretting over it now. Unfair or not, Harry could do nothing about it.

“Potter!”

Harry jumped at the sharp call, snapping out of his thoughts with a vengeance.

“Tell me, Potter, where would I find the hair of a fire fairy?”

Hermione’s hand shot up. Snape, predictably, ignored it.

So they were to play this game again, were they? Harry suppressed a sigh.

“I don’t know, sir.” Of course he didn’t know. It was probably an ingredient of some master level potion no one but Snape—and Hermione—had ever heard of.

“Nothing?” Snape sneered. “Well then, let us try again. Where would I find the dewdrops of Diana?”

Hermione’s hand stretched higher, her eyes bright with impossible knowledge and the irrepressible thirst to prove herself. But of course, Snape did not acknowledge her.

“I don’t know, sir,” Harry said, his voice dull.

Gods, he didn’t want to do this. Why was he wasting his time in a class where he hadn’t a hope of succeeding? His time would be better spent sleeping. Or training for the war.

Hmm. Maybe that wasn’t such a bad idea.

Snape smirked. “Nothing again, hmm? Are you certain you have the capability to perform at the NEWT standard, Mister Potter?”

Harry looked around the classroom. Besides Hermione, everyone looked as lost as he felt. If those questions were anywhere near sixth year NEWT standard, Harry would eat the sorting hat.

“Well then,” Snape said, his voice deceptively light, “since the headmaster is so adamant that you belong in my class, let us try one more time, shall we? Tell me, Mister Potter, for what purpose would one choose to brew the Draught of Gunhilde?”

Beside him, Hermione gave a little squeak of dismay and lowered her hand. Harry had the mad urge to laugh. If even Hermione, know-it-all extraordinaire, had no answer for Snape’s question, how on earth could he expect Harry to know it?

“I don’t know, sir.” He barely resisted the urge to add a request to get on with the lesson now that Snape had had his fun. With his professor in this kind of mood, such cheek might get him killed.

“No? No idea?”

Snape gave Hermione a triumphant sneer, and Harry squashed a surge of anger. How dare he make fun of her for not knowing something no one else in the class did when she had known every other answer? It shouldn’t have surprised him that Snape would rub it in, though. Honestly, he should be used to this by now. Snape was only acting in the same role he had always done.
But the problem was, Harry cared now. He identified with Snape’s pain—or Severus’ at least. He wanted to belong, to heal the breach, hopeless as such impossible dreams were. Much as he wished he could ignore it, Snape’s loathing hurt, more than ever before.

“Well, it appears fame means no more now than it did in your first year.” Snape stalked to Harry’s desk and sneered, revulsion and rage apparent in every line of his face.

“For your information, not that I expect your pitiful mind to comprehend, fire fairies inhabit the Sahara Desert, and one might either search for a fairy there or purchase a phial of hairs from the nearby market, though they are hideously expensive. The dewdrops of Diana are a variety of moonflower that only blooms during the full moon, on the highest peak of Greece. And the Draught of Gunhilde is used to treat Gunhilde’s curse, an extremely dark spell that removes the victim’s intestines piece by piece over several days. It is important to administer the treatment quickly, or the victim will succumb to morbid infection regardless.”

He slammed his hands down on Harry’s desk, on either side of the boy’s closed text. “You may have slipped through the cracks by virtue of your blessed popularity, Potter, but let me make one thing perfectly clear; you do not deserve to be in this class, and I will make sure the world knows it before we are through!”

Harry bit down on a surge of indignation. The man was an utter bastard, but to speak up against him here would only make his life even more miserable.

“Yes, sir.”

Perhaps it was best to simply stick to that response in the future no matter what Snape said. After all, ‘yes’ did not necessarily indicate agreement, only that Harry had understood. The thought made answering without cheek easier in spite of the man’s continued abuse.

Snape floundered a moment, no doubt having expected a defiant reply. But Harry was tired, so tired, and what good did defiance do anyway? Nothing would change.


“Yes, sir.”

Snape snarled, teeth bared and lips curling into a sneer. “Thirty points from Gryffindor for being a spoiled, arrogant, dunderhead, just like your father!”

Harry did not respond to the obvious bait. “Yes, sir.”

He could do this. He just had to pretend he was somewhere else. Anywhere else, and try to ignore the bleeding void draining his happiness—what little remained anyway. Merlin, if a Dementor found him now …. He suppressed a shudder and stared at his book. He did not dare look at Snape lest his new resolve break and the man see the angry, bitter tears crowding the back of Harry’s lids.

Hermione huffed. “Sir, that is not remotely fair! Harry has done nothing but—”

“Did I ask for your opinion, Granger?” Snape rounded on her, eyes blazing with rage. “Thirty more points from Gryffindor for being an insufferable know-it-all and incessant nagging! There now, idiot girl, did you get the attention you so desperately seek? Is that enough to quell your insurmountable urge to prove yourself the better of everyone within range for five minutes? Sit down, shut up, and do not speak unless I call on you, or it shall be fifty points every time you open your mouth without permission!”
Hermione lowered her head, tears heavy on her lashes. Harry did not dare attempt to comfort her, not with Snape so enraged and looming over them.

“And you,” Snape hissed, turning back to Harry, “you will not ride on Miss Granger’s coattails any longer, Potter, not in my class. You will create your potions on your own merit, little as that may be.” A vicious smirk crossed his face. “By the end of the week, the entire school will know what a pathetic excuse for a brewer—and I daresay, a human being—you truly are!”

Harry yelped as his chair relocated itself with him still in it, and landed with his desk in the furthest corner of the room.

“And you, arrogant little guttersnipe, let us see what quality of potion you can produce without Granger spoon-feeding you the recipe!”

Harry closed his eyes to hide his tears and gave a muted, “Yes, sir.”

“Right,” said Snape. “Now that we have separated the deserving from the fools, let us begin. Do try and keep up, Mister Potter. The Draught of Living Death is used to emulate a state of lifelessness in its drinker ….”

Dear gods, if this was what Harry had to look forward to for the rest of his schooling, he wouldn’t even need to worry about Voldemort. Between his nightmares, lack of sleep, never-ending visions, and Snape’s viciousness, Harry would go mad long before he had the chance to fulfil his destiny—or die for trying.

The rest of Harry’s classes that day passed without incident, probably because he couldn’t bear to lift his head and meet anyone’s eyes. He hadn’t been able to keep from the release of tears—at several points during the day—and he couldn’t bear for anyone to see his shame either. Merlin knew he’d been humiliated enough that morning to last him for the next several years.

Snape had been even angrier when Harry’s potion hadn’t failed that morning. Actually, Harry was certain the Prince’s instructions had improved his brew. Unfortunately, as he hadn’t managed a perfect potion even with the extra help, Snape had taken great pleasure in pointing out every miniscule flaw. Then he had marked it as a D just for spite.

And Harry had a detention with the man to look forward to that evening. For nothing but existing. Breathing. Snape would probably be thrilled if he stopped.

Dejected and far more hurt than he could have believed possible, Harry crept up to the tower after classes and a quick loo break. He desperately needed to talk to his friends, to let off some steam and maybe do homework together, since he hadn’t been able to catch up on much of it yet. But when he arrived, Ron and Hermione were nowhere in sight. He couldn’t help feeling a bit betrayed.

Ginny and Neville were the only students Harry knew in attendance, each working on an essay. Ginny looked up as Harry came in and gave him a commiserating smile.

“Hey, I heard about Snape.”

Harry cringed. “I guess the whole school knows, then.”
Pink tinged her cheeks, and her smile crumbled. “Well, I ….”

“It’s fine,” he muttered, his voice dull. “Not like I could possibly be more humiliated anyway.”

Ginny sniffed. “You need to report him, Harry. That was … it was sickening.”

“Neither of you were there.” Harry kicked the carpet. “It won’t do any good anyway. It’s not like the headmaster cares.”

Ginny and Neville gave him shocked looks.

“That’s not true,” Ginny insisted. “Of course he cares.”

Neville hugged his chest. “W-why do you say that, Harry?”

“Took his time revealing the Prophecy, didn’t he? And it’s his fault I’m in that class in the first place. I didn’t want to take it at all.” Harry rubbed his scar—aching again already—and sighed. “Look, I’m just … it’s been a rough day, yeah? Do either of you know where Ron and Hermione went? They were with me when I went to the loo, and I thought they’d be here when I got back.”

Neville squirmed and looked away. “Um, well, Hermione was still pretty upset, so Ron took her out for a walk together. They didn’t say where they were heading. I’m sorry.”

Well, at least Hermione had found some comfort, but Harry’s sense of betrayal doubled. Shouldn’t they have been here for him? They knew he had suffered, but ….

He brushed off his emotions with grim determination. What did it matter if they had abandoned him? He had one purpose and one only: he was a weapon. Nothing more, nothing less. He had to remember that. If his friends left him in the end, it would only spare them pain when his purpose took his life.

Harry gave him a thin smile. “I’m glad Ron is taking care of her then. I’m just … I’m going to kip a bit before dinner, all right?”

Neville frowned and stood. “Harry, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Snape is just a bastard and I’ve … it’s nothing new. Not really.”

The lies rolled too easily from his tongue. With a bitter smile, he bid them goodbye and dragged himself up to his bed. He really did need a kip, but with his heart torn in pieces and choking, suffocating shame dragging him down, he doubted he would find any repose.

Harry woke from another horrid vision of murder and torture—an entire Muggle family in Leeds this time. Gods, he would never forget the look on the children’s faces as they died. One of them, a little boy, had still been in nappies. Harry had wanted to rush in and rescue the tot, hug him close to his heart, and take him somewhere no one could hurt him again.

Instead, he had been forced to watch a toddler die screaming for his mum.

He buried his head in his knees and wept, bitter choking sobs for the tiny child, for his siblings and parents, for the grandmother who had tried to fight Voldemort with her frying pan, and for everyone
else he hadn’t been able to save. For everyone who had perished in this bloody war, all because he wasn’t strong enough, brave enough to kill the psychopath responsible for their pain.

Gods, would it never end?

Once his tears quieted and he could breathe through the pain in his head, Harry staggered towards the common room. The sound of his name in conversation stopped him at the door.

“—Not even a week into term and we’re down ninety points because of Harry,” Seamus was saying. “I don’t know what he did to hack off Snape, but Merlin! He needs to fix it before we’re entirely out of the running for the house cup.”

“I … I don’t think it’s fair to blame Harry,” Dean replied. “I mean, Snape’s always picked on him for no reason. This is no different.”

“Yeah, but ninety points, Dean! It’s just … it’s a lot to make up for.”

“So what do you suggest? Harry can’t really do anything about it. It’s Snape’s problem.”

“Then he should stay the bloody hell away from Snape instead of making us all suffer!”

The bitter sting of tears had begun to feel familiar. Harry quietly Summoned his cloak, tugged it on, and slipped out of the dorm and into the common room. As he passed Dean and Seamus, playing chess and talking near the staircase to the dorms, Harry realised why they hadn’t bothered to lower their voices or use a silencing charm. Everyone was talking about him, even the first years. Only three of his classmates had refrained: Neville, who was glaring at everyone in the room at large, fists clenched in his lap and his mouth twisted in anger, and Ron and Hermione, who were too busy snogging to notice.

The knife of betrayal turned again in his chest and Harry fled. He slammed the portrait hole open and dashed away, not bothering to close it again in his hurry to escape the voices, the pain.

“Wait! Don’t just leave me hanging li—”

Harry turned onto a stairwell and the Fat Lady’s voice faded to nothing. Moving blindly, he raced up staircase after staircase. His feet carried him to the owlery, and he ran straight to a covered bench on the far side with a sob. The sound startled the owls—who couldn’t see him, after all—and a thousand shocked hoots and the rush of many wings filled the air. Only one bird knew the boy well enough to recognise her master, even under his cloak. Hedwig gave a sad hoot and landed on the bench beside Harry.

“Hullo, girl,” he murmured, voice breaking. With a sniffle, he took off his cloak and sat beside his owl, tucking his knees to his chest. Hedwig scooted close, and he petted her head.

“Glad you’re still here for me, even if no one else is.”

A low, doleful hoot was his answer.

Harry stayed there until dinnertime, petting his familiar and trying not to feel the bleeding hole in his chest. He wasn’t hungry, but he had transfiguration homework and it would be impossible to finish it after his detention.

“I’ve got to go now, girl. I’ve detention later. Snape’s got it in for me again this year. Not that it’s anything new.”
Hedwig clucked her beak and ruffled her feathers. Harry chuckled, warmed a bit by her outrage in his defence.

“Yeah. Me too.”

He looked around and, seeing no one, put a silencing field around them, one that would block their conversation from eavesdroppers. He had cast it around his bed so much since first year, he didn’t even need the incantation any longer.

“Yeah. Me too.”

He looked around and, seeing no one, put a silencing field around them, one that would block their conversation from eavesdroppers. He had cast it around his bed so much since first year, he didn’t even need the incantation any longer.

“You know what, girl? I … I can’t really hate him anymore. Snape, I mean. I probably should, but I don’t. I’ve seen too much.”

Hedwig whistled, her eyes wide.

“It’s … it’s just that, we’re too much alike. Or we were once. He’s damaged, Hedwig. And now that I know that, and that it was my family who damaged him, I can’t … can’t keep seeing him as the evil bastard everyone else does.” He gave a bitter snort. “I guess I really am a dunderhead, huh? He hates me worse than anyone, and I can’t hate him at all.”

Hedwig hooted sadly and nuzzled his hair.

“Thanks for staying with me, girl. Go get some dinner and a nap.” He gave her one last pet and watched her fly back into the eaves. Then, with a heavy sigh, he turned back towards the staircase and headed for the tower, hands in his pockets and his head bowed, so as not to attract any further wrath.

For a little while at least, until all of Snape’s considerable hatred focused solely on him. Merlin, but he hated his life sometimes.

Hermione and Ron were waiting when Harry made it back to the tower. A quick wash of his face and a basic healing spell to his eyes had removed the evidence of his despair, but they knew him too well to buy his front.

Hermione laid a hand on his arm. “Harry, are you all right?”

He gave her a forced smile. “I’m fine. I can handle him.” It was their abandonment that left him cold inside.

She frowned. “You … you’re not fine. I can tell.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You need to talk about it, Harry. It’s going to eat you up inside if you don’t—”

Ron laid his hand on her shoulder. “Hermione, he said he doesn’t want to. You can’t make him.”

Her shoulders slumped. “But I just … I … Harry?”

Harry shrugged, avoiding her eyes. “I have to revise anyway. I won’t have any other time tonight.”

“But it’s dinner,” Ron cried, as if Harry had suggested giving up air.
“I’m really not hungry.” It was true. Harry’s stomach churned at the mere thought of food. “I’ll be okay. It’s the only time I’ll have where I won’t have to listen to the entire common room gossip about me behind my back.”

Hermione flinched and Ron looked away.

“Yes, you heard, then,” Hermione said, blushing.

“Impossible to miss it,” Harry muttered, “given as no one was taking the trouble to lower their voices.”

“Oh, Harry. I … I’m sorry. I should have—are you okay?”

“I said I’m fine. Go to dinner. I need … I just need space right now.”

With a sniffle, Hermione nodded and led Ron away. Harry watched them leave, hollow and bitter inside. Maybe a while alone would make them realise they’d alienated Harry, but experience had taught him better.

Either way, he really did need to do homework. Or at least try.

After staring at a blank parchment for an hour without making the slightest progress, Harry gave up and went to his detention. Surely, it couldn’t be worse than the one before.

Snape soon proved him wrong.

Harry wasn’t surprised to find the common room deserted when he returned. He had half-hoped Hermione and Ron would wait for him, but knew better than to expect it, especially after he had asked for space. It was too much to hope for that they would understand what he couldn’t put voice to, that he felt betrayed and alone, and nothing that mattered to them mattered to him any longer. With a heavy sigh, he dragged himself towards the dorm.

As he passed the hearth, a muffled snort startled him. Harry turned to find Neville sprawled on the sofa, head lolling on one shoulder and a patch of drool on his shirt.

For the first time in weeks, warmth spread into the icy cold void that had become Harry’s world as of late. Neville had waited for him again. Perhaps Harry wasn’t entirely alone.

With a tentative smile, he went to the boy and gently shook his shoulder—the dry one. “Nev, Neville, wake up.”

The boy jumped and gave a startled snort. “What the … oh, Harry? Did I fall asleep?”

“Looks like it. Were you … um …?”

“Yeah, I tried to wait up for you.” Neville frowned and rubbed his face. “How late did he keep you this time? The fire’s down.”

“It’s …” Harry cast a Tempus and winced. “Three in the morning.”

“Gods! That shitehead.” Neville sighed. “At least it’s the weekend tomorrow. You can catch up on
your sleep a bit.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “I could, if he wasn’t making me rearrange the student cupboard again bright and early.”

“He … he is?” Neville gave Harry a worried look. “Harry, I reckon he really is trying to do you in. I think we ought to go to Professor McGonagall tomorrow.”

Harry grimaced. “If you do, it’ll only be worse for me. Please. Just let it be.”

“But, Harry, this … it’s not right.”

“I know.” Nothing in his life ever was. “But it’s only for a while.”

“You have two more years of potions left. That’s a hell of a long time to be dealing with this level of abuse.”

Harry rubbed his toe in the carpet. “It’s not that bad.” Merlin, that was a lie. Everything in him hurt. “And it’s my choice, isn’t it?”

Neville sighed. “I guess. I don’t like it, but if you really don’t want to report it, then there’s nothing I can do but try to help.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “I don’t think I’ll be in that class much longer anyway. It’s just making it horrible for everyone else. It’d be better if I left.”

“Harry! Don’t you listen to these prats. They’re all idiots.” Neville growled. “You’re not the one at fault. Snape deserves to be strung up by his ears and have his arse beaten raw for the way he’s treated you.”

Though Neville couldn’t possibly have learned about what Harry had seen in Snape’s pensieve nor what he endured at Privet Drive, the boy’s threat still struck a nerve.

Harry gave him a forced smile. “Y-yeah, maybe.”

“Harry?” Neville frowned. “Merlin, you know I didn’t mean that, right? I’m just angry.”

Harry gave a nervous laugh. “R-right. I ….” He shook himself out of his dark memories with a grimace. “Jesus, I’m sorry, Neville. It’s just been a rough night.”

Neville did not look entirely convinced, but he nodded and stood, bracing Harry on one arm again. “Come on then. Let’s get you to bed.”

“T-thanks.”

Harry woke to the sound of a blazing row in the common room. He came downstairs to find Neville at odds with Ron, both shouting so loud their silencing charm did nothing to cover it.

Neville cried, “—more important than your best mate? You didn’t see him yesterday, Ron! He was devastated because you couldn’t take five minutes out of your busy snogging schedule just to make sure he was okay!”
Ron snarled. “Well, he bloody well told us to take more time for ourselves, so we did! And Hermione was upset too, so yeah, I was trying to hold her together.”

“Hermione wasn’t the one being ripped to shreds!”

“Oi! I’ll have you know Snape was downright awful to her too!”

“For what, a moment? Maybe if he’d attacked her and her alone yesterday, I could see you taking off with her to make her feel better, but that’s not what happened, is it? Yeah, he turned on Hermione—I’ve already gotten the whole story from Daphne and Parvati, so don’t bother filling me in—but from there, he went on to tear into Harry the entire lesson, threatened him, isolated him, humiliated him at every turn. And you … you just left him to deal with it alone!”

“Thought that’s what he wanted!” Ron glared. “Besides, he’s been downright mean to Hermione since the beginning of term, so yeah, I thought it best to keep our distance for a bit.”

“Mean? Mean? Asking her to let him have a bloody kip was mean? Dear gods, Ron. You complain about her study schedules a thousand times a day, and yet you’re going to snap at Harry when he does it once? With a fair excuse, too?”

“He made her cry!”

“So did—”

“Enough!” Harry stepped into the middle of their row and pushed them apart. “Stop it. Stop arguing over me. I … I never wanted this. I’m just … I’m … I’ll talk to you later.”

“Harry!” Neville called after him. “Wait, I’m sorry. I just—”

“Don’t.” Harry Summoned his cloak and dashed out of the room, tears cooling on his cheeks.

This was what happened when freaks tried to have friends. Everything Harry touched, he destroyed. With a desolate, quiet sob, he thought maybe it was best for everyone if he just stayed quiet and out of the way.

Snape was pacing by the door when Harry came into the potions lab, tucking his cloak in a pocket. Harry didn’t bother trying to hide his misery. Snape might just ease up if he thought him to be in enough pain already.

Before ten minutes of his detention had passed, Harry wanted to laugh at his naivété. Instead, he grabbed the next phial and hoped his faltering magic didn’t break it to bits. If this was his punishment for being alive, Harry didn’t want to know what Snape would do to him for breaking one of his precious potions ingredients. The man had made it abundantly clear he cared far more for the cheapest, vilest, most common ingredient in his stores—flobberworm snot, to be sure—than he did about Harry’s well-being.

He took a deep breath and tried to focus his power, or what little remained of it. “Defaeco Pulverum.” Weak yellow light washed over the surface of the phial and he released his tension in a sigh. The spell had managed not to break the phial, but he had three-hundred more to sort.

If he survived the term—or even the morning—with all his parts intact, it would be a miracle.
Defaeco Pulverum: "Purge Dust" (Rowling-ish style translation). Spell to clean the dust off of potions phials without causing magical interference or breaking the phials.
Different Priorities

Chapter Summary

Warnings: Semi-suicidal thoughts. Harry’s not quite there yet, but he's tired of fighting and thinks of death more than he ought to. Ron is a jerk. He's not evil--this isn't a 'Slytherins rule, Gryffindors drool' fic--but Ron is fickle and immature, as teenagers are wont to be. I tried to make it read like typical teenage drama rather than an "I hate Ron" fest. I hope so anyway.

Summary: Harry is avoiding everyone to keep the house drama to a minimum. Neville is as loyal as always. Dumbledore sticks his nose in again and Harry rips him a new one. As usual, Dumbledore's manipulations cause Harry no end of problems.

Chapter Notes

So I've been writing like crazy on this. It's already over 200k, and I still have about 15 chapters to write out. This is DEFINITELY another epic, but I'm not going to split it up into a series this time. I'm predicting this will run about 300K at the end. *sigh* I just can't write a short story.

Chapter 5

Different Priorities

2 October, 1997

After that detention, Snape eased up. Harry had, for a time, entertained the notion that maybe the man had recognised his suffering and switched to simple cauldron cleaning out of the goodness of his heart. By the next potions lesson, he wanted to laugh at his own stupidity. Snape couldn't care less about Harry’s suffering. He had only eased up because the last detention had nearly killed Harry and he couldn’t afford to be sacked.

Harry shuddered with the memory as he made his way to lunch—alone, as usual. Merlin, he had never hurt like that in his life. By the end of his detention that day, he hadn’t been able to breathe without anguish, but Snape had driven him relentlessly. At least until Harry’s magic faltered and failed, and the berk had finally realised how dire Harry’s situation had become. The bastard had healed his magic, but it wasn’t enough to take away the pain. Even now, almost a month later, his bones still ached.

As usual for his new routine, Harry chose a seat far away from the other Gryffindors and ate his lunch in silence. The first years near him gave him a wide berth, having grown used to Harry’s despondent moods.
Neville, as per his usual routine these days, sat a couple of seats down from Harry. He didn’t talk. Harry had already made it plain he didn’t want to talk, but Neville kept him company anyway. Considering that Ron and Hermione had given up after the third day and were, even now, too absorbed in each other to notice Harry’s isolation, Harry welcomed Neville’s silent support. If only Harry wasn’t so afraid he would cause a war by speaking to him, he would open the lines of communication again.

But weapons weren’t meant to have friends. He couldn’t afford to forget it again. The last time had driven the entire house to war. And Harry had caused enough damage.

The memory of last night’s vision churned his stomach. “They sssuffer for you, Harry Potter. They die in your name.” Tears burned the back of his eyelids and Harry blinked them away. He would end it soon. He just had to find a way to kill the bloody bastard. Then, his purpose would be complete and maybe he could find the peace in death that he had lacked in life.

But when he remembered who would be waiting for him on the other side, he doubted he would ever find repose. He had several bones to pick with his family. Much as he wanted to, he couldn’t forget what he had seen in that pensieve. Much as Snape hated him, Harry still couldn’t hate him back.

Gods, he really was a fool.

“Hi, Harry.”

Ginny. She hovered near and stared at him over her food, but Harry ignored her as much as possible. He couldn’t avoid her altogether, but maybe if he pretended not to notice she would get the point eventually. Merlin, he hoped she would anyway. The girl’s constant ogling crawled on his skin like ants.

Harry picked at his sandwich and tried to choke down some steamed veg. It was easy to eat, easy on his stomach, and the nutrients would keep him alive even with his staggering lack of appetite. Who wanted food when every night was a new horror? Still, he had to try. He needed his strength to fight the Imperius visions.

Even if he sometimes wondered if it would be better for him to stop eating altogether. If he wasn’t around, maybe Voldemort would stop murdering people in his name.

Harry stifled a snort. Trolls would learn manners sooner.

No. He had to fight. He had to keep going, even if he wished he could just … stop. Just for a moment.

Weapons didn’t have that luxury.

He gave up and pushed away from the table.

“Harry,” Neville said, frowning. “Um, I think ….” He nodded towards the head table, and Harry glanced up to find Dumbledore approaching with an all-too-pleased expression on his face. The twinkle in his eyes made Harry wish he hadn’t tried so hard to eat after all.

“Ugh. I’m just going to pretend I didn’t see that. Thanks for the warning.”

Harry turned his back and started towards the doors.

“Harry, my boy—”
“Damn it,” Harry muttered and stopped, lest the headmaster do something drastic. “Yes, sir?” He turned, crossing his arms over his chest and staring at the headmaster’s eyebrow.

‘Never look the man in the eye. Not with what I’m hiding.’

“Harry, I wonder if you would join me in my office for a chat.”

Harry frowned. “I’ve Transfiguration in twenty minutes.”

“Yes, yes. This will only take a moment.”

Harry sighed, defeated. “Yes, sir.”

“Excellent. Just follow me, my boy.”

Harry pasted on a fake smile and followed the manipulative old goat out of the Great Hall. As soon as Harry sat down, Dumbledore flicked his wand and summoned a thick stack of parchment with something silver attached to the front. A badge or a seal of some sort.

The old man sat and handed the parchment to Harry, keeping the silver thing for himself. “Now then, my boy, I couldn’t help but notice you’ve looked rather, ah, as the youth put it, down in the dumps lately.”

Harry glared. “Really? I wonder why that could be.”

Dumbledore continued as if he hadn’t heard the sarcasm in Harry’s tone. “Ah, well, I took it upon myself to give you a bit of a … a boost, as it were. Something to bring you joy again.”

Harry grimaced and braced himself for another blatant manipulation. “And …?”

“Now, now. There’s no need to look so glum. I simply pulled a few strings down at the Ministry and had your lifetime quidditch ban revoked. Seemed they were quite happy to do so once I revealed the extent of Madam Umbridge’s … misplaced loyalties.”

Harry stared at the old man, wondering whether he should be shocked or not. “Quidditch. You think … this is about quidditch?”

Dumbledore turned pink. “Ah, well … no, my boy. I’m well-aware that you are mourning and—”

“And you think quidditch is going to fix it?” Harry gave a bitter laugh. “Tell me, sir, if I win the cup for Gryffindor, do you think it might bring Sirius back? Or maybe a big win for the lions could just … reverse the power of the veil and spit him back out, tail wagging?”

Dumbledore’s twinkle winked out. Good riddance. “Oh. Harry, no. Nothing will—”

“Exactly.” Harry fixed him with a sharp glare. “Nothing will fix it. Because of your blatant manipulations, my godfather is dead. You can’t just hand me a pass to play quidditch and expect that to make everything peachy again.”

Dumbledore sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I … perhaps not.” He held out a silver badge to Harry, the captain’s badge. “But you did used to find some joy in flying, Harry. It might do you good to have something positive to strive for.”

“You mean like ending the bloody war?” Harry scoffed. “I don’t have time for quidditch. Nor should I be on a broom in this state. Or, in your rose-tinted little world, have you failed to notice that I’m flagging?” He stood and tossed the badge back to the old man. “Give that to Ron. He actually still
has some interest in the game now. I’d just bring everyone down, or end up killing myself trying to
stay in the air on two hours of sleep.”

Dumbledore stared at the badge and sighed, shoulders slumping in defeat. “Harry, I … I’m trying to
help you.”

“Help me by staying out of my business. You’ve meddled in my life enough.”

“You know I cannot do that, Harry. You are my student—”

you want. I don’t care. It’s not like you’re going to listen to anything I say anyway. But I’m not
playing quidditch this year. Besides the fact that I have zero interest in the game at the moment, I’m
not quite suicidal enough to get on a broom right now when it’s all I can do to stay upright.”

Dumbledore laid the badge aside with a sad sigh. “If the nightmares are truly so bad, perhaps you
have a point. I will petition Madam Pomfrey to provide Dreamless Sleep for you. Perhaps by the
time the matches begin, you’ll be feeling better.”

Harry resisted the urge to laugh in his face. Barely. “May I go now?”

“Yes, yes. But, you’re sure there’s nothing I can do to help, Harry?”

Harry shook his head and turned to go, but stopped at the door at the memory of his latest nightmare,
one where he had endured Severus’ abuse in his place, with Professor Snape jeering at him instead
of James Potter and Dumbledore reigning over the proceedings like an emperor on his throne.

“Actually ….” He wheeled on Dumbledore and glared, making sure not to meet the man’s eyes.
“There is one thing I would like to talk to you about.”

Dumbledore’s fingers twitched on the desk, but otherwise he projected an aura of calm serenity.
Harry took comfort in the fact that he could rattle the man’s infernal placidity even this much.

“Yes, of course, Harry. What is it?”

Harry made sure the door was shut and took a step forwards, like a hunter closing in on his prey.
“I’m assuming Professor Snape told you why he cancelled our Occlumency lessons last term?”

Dumbledore gave a strained smile. “I did hear something about a pensieve ….”

“And did he tell you what memory I happened to stumble upon in his pensieve?”

“Of course, Harry. What is it?”

Dumbledore frowned. “Harry, I do not think it wise to reveal what you saw. There are many things
Professor Snape endures that I am not privy to, and he—”

Harry advanced on him, fury boiling in his gut. “Don’t try to evade me, sir. I wouldn’t dare break his
confidence if I wasn’t absolutely certain you already knew. The memory that’s haunting me
happened during his time as a student, twenty years ago, on the grounds by the lake. Ringing any
bells yet?”

Dumbledore sank back into his chair and frowned. “Ah, no. I do apologise, but that is quite a long
stretch of time and many things happened—”

“No? Well, let me just tell you the star characters then and see if it jogs your memory. The first
people I saw—other than the young Snape, of course—were my father and godfather, trailed by their
loyal werewolf and pet rat. Oh, and mum was there too. It was just after OWLs, I think, and Snape was reading a book under the big beech tree by the shore. Anything yet?”

Judging by the way Dumbledore had paled and the sheen of sweat forming on his forehead, Harry had struck home.

“I thought so.” Harry plopped himself into his former chair, willing to be late for class if it meant he had the chance to right the wrongs his family had done to Severus, at least in some small way.

“Thanks to my own stupid mistrust, I had the misfortune to witness my own family hang the young Snape up by his ankles and strip him to his underwear in front of the entire school. I have the sinking suspicion they did worse than that, but I can’t verify as Professor Snape pulled me out of the pensieve before I witnessed that horror.”

“Harry, I—”

But Harry wasn’t finished. “My father and godfather sexually assaulted an innocent teenager. Remus stood by like a coward and let it happen. Mum—who was supposed to be Snape’s best friend—abandoned him to be tortured. And you—” Harry stood, anger arcing from him in waves. “You let them all off! You did nothing! You validated Snape’s abusers and left him isolated and miserable, without any kind of help to recover from something that must have damaged him beyond belief, if he can still hold me accountable for it when I wasn’t even born!”

Dumbledore grimaced. “Harry, I gave them all several detentions and—”

Harry’s magic crackled around him. “Detentions! For sexual assault? They should have been expelled! Or suspended, at the very least! And Sirius, much as I loved the man, absolutely should have been expelled in seventh year after he nearly murdered the man.”

Dumbledore squirmed and pushed his spectacles up his nose. “Harry, please understand, I…I did what I thought was best for everyone at the time.”

Harry’s magic faded from the air, but his anger did not abate in the least. “Everyone, or the Gryffindors? Everyone, or those you thought you could turn to your purposes in the war?”

Dumbledore went ashen. “Harry! That is an unfair accusation—”

“Actually,” said one of the male portraits—Harry couldn’t tell which one. “I think he has the right of it.”

Dumbledore cringed. “Phineas, we’ve discussed your biases towards Slytherin House. Now is not the ti—”

“Oh, it is. It really is.” Harry crossed his arms over his chest. “You insist you did what was best for everyone. Okay, maybe you did. So let me ask you, did you send the young Snape to any kind of counselling or treatment after the attack? Did you even have Pomfrey check him over?”

“Madam Pomfrey, Harry.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Madam Pomfrey then. Well? Did you?”

Dumbledore frowned and pushed his spectacles up his nose. “It is none of your concern, my boy—”

“That’s a no,” Harry charged on. “So what about Remus? He was there. He could have stopped it. He was a bloody prefect at the time—he should have stopped it. Did you punish him for failing to uphold his duties? Strip his badge, maybe, and give it to less of a ruddy coward to start with?”
Dumbledore coughed. “I-I really think we should—”

‘Phineas’ answered for him, a cultured-looking man with a pointy moustache, robes à la Lucius Malfoy, and a head of greying brown hair. “Lupin was the one to report the event. He received several detentions, but was not stripped of his privileges as a prefect despite my support of that course of action.”

“Not only yours,” said a stern-looking older man with a powdered wig. Harry peered at the nameplate. Armando Dippet.

A healer headmistress in a wimple gave a firm nod. “No, many of us agreed—if he lacked the fortitude to uphold the duties of his office, he lacked the character to keep it.”

A pointy-nosed man with a turban sneered. “But Albus insisted that he deserved a second chance. And a third. And a fourth. And so on.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Really? So I assume Remus was never stripped of his prefect’s badge even though he failed to intervene again? Several times, apparently.”

“I think we both know,” said Phineas with a scowl, “that Lupin’s prefect badge had less to do with his suitability for the position and more to do with Albus’ desire to collect him for the Order.”

Albus cried, “Phineas! That is quite—”

Harry nodded and talked over the headmaster. “Yeah, I could see how he might have uses for a werewolf in his debt. Or a boy hero too blindly devoted to notice he’s being used.”

The room went silent. Dumbledore grimaced and popped several of his lemon drops at once.

Phineas scowled at him. “To answer your question, Harry, since it becomes more apparent by the moment that Albus has no intention of admitting responsibility, no, Severus did not receive long-term treatment. Albus did refer him to Poppy immediately after the assault, he did not receive counselling to the best of my knowledge. Even though, if memory serves, Poppy requested to see him on a regular basis.”

Dumbledore gasped out, “Phineas!”

The man in the portrait shook his head at Dumbledore. “The boy already knows, and he deserves to understand as it was his family involved.”

Dumbledore winced. “Severus will not like this.”

“What is he going to do, throw water at my canvas?”

“He might burn it,” Dumbledore muttered.

“Paugh. He knows there are charms on our portraits to prevent such things. You are simply out of sorts because we will not let you hide behind your benevolent façade.”

Harry decided then and there he liked this Phineas character. Anyone who could put Dumbledore in his place deserved his regard.

“Right,” Harry said with a glare at Dumbledore. “You’re still not off the hook. If you really did what was best for everyone, what did you do to punish Mum?”

Dumbledore blinked. “Lily? But she neither hurt Severus nor watched it happen.”
“No, she just abandoned him to it. Both Mum and Remus were in a position to stop them and they didn’t. They should have been punished. It seems like the only one who got anything close to a reasonable punishment was Remus. And I’m guessing he only got it because you had to punish him after reporting such a thing or it would come down hard against you.”

Dumbledore stood. “Harry! That is quite enough.”

Harry gave him a disgusted look. “I reckon it is. I’ve had about enough of hearing your excuses anyway.”

“Young man, that is enough disrespect out of you. Twenty points from—”

“No,” said Phineas with a glare. “No, Albus. You’ve had your comeuppance for your actions that day coming for a long time. A stern talking-to is relatively light considering what you did and what you deserve. Sit down and eat your bloody lemon drops.”

Harry snorted in spite of himself.

Dumbledore’s face worked for a moment, but he did sit down. He rubbed his forehead and slumped over his desk. “Harry, I … Merlin. Of all the people to take me to task for that, I never imagined it would be you.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “I know injustice where I see it, sir. Whether it’s my enemy suffering or not.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Yes, I see that. Harry, I can do nothing more than apologise for my actions that day. You are correct that I should have taken a firmer hand and given Severus better care. I … the truth is, I had never seen such a severe case of bullying during my time as headmaster until then, and I was in a bit over my head. I had hoped several letters home, an entire term of detentions, and my disappointment in them would have been enough to affect a change in their behaviour—”

Harry scowled and cut him off. “You’re lying through your lemon drops! You weren’t in over your head. You didn’t punish them because you wanted them to be in your debt for the Order! But, even if you were telling the truth, it’s still not enough. Maybe you hoped what little you did would alter their behaviour, but it never did.” Harry shook his head and fixed Dumbledore with a grim glare. “It never did, and that should have spurred you to take further action. Especially against Sirius. But you didn’t.”

“Harry, I tri—”

“No. You failed them. You failed to show the young Snape he was worth your concern, you failed to admonish Mum for her utter lack of loyalty and betrayal, and you failed to teach the rest of my family that there are consequences to hurting people and acting like fools. And before you try to tell me you’ve seen the error of your ways since then, twenty years later, you failed us all again! And this time, someone died because of it.”

Harry stood and moved to the door. “Maybe you did your best for Professor Snape. Maybe you tried. It doesn’t look it to me, but I wasn’t there.” He laid his hand on the knob and glared at the headmaster’s eyebrow. “But don’t come to me now—after twenty plus years of failing me and my family—and expect a bloody quidditch badge to make everything okay again.” He turned and opened the door. “Tell Ron he has the captain position or give it to Katie Bell. I don’t want to play this year.”

Harry walked out, leaving a speechless, shaken old man behind. He hoped it would teach the bastard
something. Maybe Dumbledore would grow from this, would learn his own actions had consequences too.

Somehow, Harry doubted it.

When Harry returned to the common room that night just before curfew, Ron was, for once, not snogging with his girlfriend. Hermione had her books spread out on the table near him, but Ron wasn’t revising with her either. He sat on the sofa near the hearth, Katie Bell and Ginny squished in on one side of the sofa and Dean and Alicia Spinnet on the other. He had the silver badge pinned to his chest for all to see, and the look of pride in his eyes made Harry smile.

So Dumbledore had taken his advice then. Perhaps that little talk had done some good after all. Harry was happy for Ron, too. He certainly wouldn’t tell Ron that he had only earned the captain’s badge after Harry himself had turned it down, even if Ron had become far too absorbed in his girlfriend these days.

Hell, Even Hermione had adopted a more moderate study schedule to make room for snogging. Harry wondered how it was affecting her grades. She always seemed to be the top of the class, so maybe she didn’t need so much revision time after all. Sometimes Harry missed studying with her, though.

Or maybe he just missed her.

If she had ever once apologised, if she had realised she’d been alienating him, he would have welcomed her company. But every time he looked for her, she had drowned herself in Ron’s arms or her books. After a few weeks, he’d given up and let them have their joy while it lasted. As miserable as he was all the time, he would only bring them down anyway.

Harry gave Ron a wan smile and made for the dorms, but he might have realised he wouldn’t escape confrontation so easily. As soon as Harry passed, Ron stood and grinned, going to meet Harry for the first time in weeks. If Harry didn’t know exactly what he wanted, he might have welcomed him. As it was, he just wanted to figure out a way to escape the coming confrontation unscathed. Maybe if he pretended to be asleep—

“Harry, mate, wait a mo.”

“Damn,” Harry whispered. He turned and put on a false smile. “C-congratulations, Ron. I know you’ve wanted it for a while.”

Ron puffed out his chest in pride. “Reckon it’s because of all those games I had to play after you were banned, Harry.”

Harry gave him a thin smile. “Yeah, maybe. Well, I’d best get to bed then. I can’t play, you know. Still banned and everything.”

Ron frowned. “That’s rubbish, mate. Dumbledore said you weren’t and to play would do you some good.”

“Did he now?” A spark lit in Harry’s chest. So much for his ribbing doing the barmy old goat any good. Meddling bastard.
“Well, yeah. Didn’t you know?”

Harry stared at his feet. “Uh, no, not really. I mean, they said a lifetime ban and all so I figured it couldn’t be revoked.”

Ron shrugged. “I reckon the old man pulled some strings for you.”

Harry’s eyelid twitched. “Reckon so.”

Ron gave him a bemused look. “Are you all right, mate?”

Harry stared at him. “Do I look it?”

“Uh … well ….”

Harry shrugged. “Never mind. I’m off to bed.”

“Yeah, but try to stay out of detention on Monday.”

Harry stopped dead. “Ron.”

“That’s our first practice, so you need to be free.”

He grimaced and turned, gaze sharp. “Ron.”

“Can’t have a quidditch team without our star seeker, you know.”

“Ron!” His shout finally got through.

Ron gave him an exasperated look. “What? Don’t tell me you’re already in detention?”

Harry raked a hand through his hair and sighed. “Ron, I’m not playing this year.”

“What?” Ron stared at him as if he’d grown a second head, then burst out laughing. “Oh, come off it, Harry. Great joke and all, but be serious.”

“No, Ron. I am serious. I’m not playing.”

Ron’s jaw dropped. “Wha … what do you mean you’re not playing? You have to play!”

The common room went dead silent and all eyes turned to them.

Harry shrunk in on himself. “Ron, please. I don’t want to play.”

“What? But that’s mad! You love quidditch!”

Harry sighed and gave him a sad smile. “I used to. But now, look at me, Ron. Do you really think I need to be on a broomstick like this?”

Ron grimaced. “Well, just get a good night’s sleep and you’ll be fine.”

“A good night’s sleep?” Harry gaped, hurt and betrayed that his friend could have missed something so vital. “Where the hell have you been the last month or so? Or the past five years, for that matter? I can’t sleep. Not even potions work.”

Ron squirmed and turned pink. “Well, I mean, maybe if you just … you know, try not to think of the bad stuff ….”
“Try not to—are you mad?” Harry grabbed his collar and pulled him down to his level. “You know I have visions. How do you reckon I stop thinking about those? Am I supposed to just ignore getting put under the bloody _Cruciatus_ every night and watching babies murdered in front of their mums? Just to play a ruddy game?” He stepped back and scowled. “I can’t just not think about it. It haunts me, every moment of every day!”

Ron stepped back with a wince. “Mother of Merlin. B-babies, Harry?”

Harry tapped his scar. “How old was I again the first time he came to kill me?”

Ron grimaced. “Gods. I … I didn’t know it was that bad, mate.”

Harry relaxed a fraction. “Y-yeah. It is.”

“Well, maybe playing will take your mind off of it, then.”

Harry’s heart twisted again. “H-have you not heard a word I said? I can’t play, Ron! It’s too dangerous.”

“But … but it’s _quidditch_, Harry! If you don’t play, Slytherin will take the cup. We can’t let the snakes win!”

Harry stared at him, wondering when he had grown so different from a boy he used to do everything with. “I’m sorry, Ron. Given the war and everything else I have to deal with right now, quidditch just isn’t a high priority to me any longer.”

Ron reeled back as if struck. “What! You can’t be serious. Of course it’s a priority! We have to win! We just _have_ to, Harry!”

“How?” Harry stood tall and faced him down, though he had to look up to do it. “Tell me, Ron. What happens if we lose? Worst case scenario, the Slytherins win, take home the cup, and are smug arseholes about it for the next year or so.”

“Well, yeah! That’s why it’s so important that you play, so we can beat those snotty bastards.”

Harry shook his head in disgust. “Okay, let’s say I listen to that utter rubbish and play in this condition. What’s the worst case scenario if, while playing, I have a vision on my broom, hmm? What happens then? I’ll tell you what happens. I plummet to my death and Voldemort wins the war! So you tell me, Ron, what’s more important here? The cup or my life?”

Ron coughed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, er, I mean, of _course_ your life is more important, Harry, but Dumbledore saved you before. He can do it again.”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “I see. So I’m supposed to hope Dumbledore’s quick enough with his wand to keep me from splattering to bits on the pitch, all so you can take home a cup that means nothing in the end.”

“N-nothing!” Ron spluttered and gasped, going tomato-red. “Nothing? How can you say that? It’s the quidditch cup, Harry!”

“And in the end, it’s nothing but a hunk of metal.” Harry hugged his chest and fought back tears. “I’m not playing, Ron. Glory, zooming around the pitch—none of that matters right now. There’s a war going on out there, and since none of the rest of you seem to care, it falls to me to fight it.”

Ron cried, “But the cup! The _cup_, Harry!”
Harry gave up. Ron just couldn’t understand. With a sigh, he Summoned his invisibility cloak and his knapsack, clutching both to his chest. “I’m going to the Room to revise tonight. Don’t follow me.”

“Harry! Wait, you can’t just—”

“Yes, he can,” said Neville from Harry’s side. He turned to Harry with a hesitant smile. “Do you mind if I come along to revise with you? I’ve quite a lot of Astronomy to catch up on.”

Harry shook his head sadly. “N-not tonight, Nev. I just … I need to be alone.”

Neville’s smile drooped. “O-okay, Harry. I … I guess I’ll just revise by myself then.”

“Harry—” Ron pushed Neville aside. “Wait a minute. You can’t just abandon us, mate. We’ve—”

“Look, just leave him alone,” Neville said with a glare. “He said no. You and your sister both need to learn the meaning of the word.”

Ron whirled on him. “My sister! What does Ginny have to do with this?”

“Well, she won’t quit ogling him and—”

“Oi!”

“Stop,” Harry called. “Just … just stop it. Please. There’s so much fighting out there—I can’t take it here too.” He unfolded his cloak and ran for the door, but Ginny was waiting for him there.

“Come on, Harry. We’ll go for a fly around the pitch, and you’ll feel better.” She took his arm and held it to her side. “You know you love to—”

“Ginny, get off of me!” He wrested his arm away. “I’ve already told you I don’t want to be touched!”

“You said to give it time and I have!” She pouted. “You can’t keep pushing everyone away, Harry. It’s not good for—”

She reached for him again, but this time Parvati held her back. “Stop it, Ginny. Harry said no.”

Harry shot Parvati a grateful look and vanished out the door.

“Wait just a minute, young man,” the fat lady called. “It’s past curfew!”

At the same time, Ginny cried, “Harry, wait!”

And Ron shouted, “Oi! What do you think you’re on about, giving her hope and then—”

But Harry ignored them all and pelted for the stairwell. Gods, he couldn’t believe this. Ron thought a stupid metal cup was more important than Harry’s life, and Ginny—fuck. He couldn’t take any more of her obsession.

He headed for the Room of Requirement, tears blinding him, and set the locks to ward everyone out. Maybe he should just stay here from now on and avoid the others. In the end, he only brought everyone pain.

No. He couldn’t do that, unfortunately. McGonagall would drag him back to the dorm by his ears eventually. And she wouldn’t listen to Harry’s reasoning for being out before she docked points and
shoved him in detention, either. Little as he cared about points these days, his dorm mates did, and Harry didn’t need still more of their ire heaped upon his head.

Shame he couldn’t just withdraw from Hogwarts and study on his own. Someone other than Harry Potter probably could. But between the war and his lack of family, he had nowhere to go. Besides, Dumbledore wouldn’t want to lose control over his dear little weapon. Harry would only be dragged kicking and screaming back to Hogwarts, and maybe locked up if they couldn’t keep him there any other way.

He shuddered and curled up on the bed, trembling at the thought of being so confined. No, as much as it sucked, he had no choice but to keep going back to the dorms and lie low.

With a snuffle, he curled up on the bed the room had offered, downed a Dreamless Sleep potion, and let it carry him to oblivion, if only for a moment.

None of the quidditch team—besides Dean—had anything to say to Harry the next day, and even Dean was hesitant.

“Harry, what’s going on, mate? I thought you liked quidditch?”

Harry groaned and gathered his courage for yet another confrontation. “I did, but the war is more important, and I’m asleep on my feet most days. It’s just too much of a risk.”

But Dean surprised him. “Okay. The team will miss your skills for sure, but I understand. I’d rather you stay in one piece.”

“Tell that to Ron,” Harry grumbled.

“Harry, he … he’s just ….”

“Being a berk,” Neville said with a shake of his head. “They’re all so focused on points and girls and other rubbish that they’re missing the important things.”

“I reckon you’re right,” said Dean with a sigh.

“It doesn’t matter,” Harry said. “Just let them have their happiness wherever it comes. The war is my battle anyway.”

“You don’t have to fight that battle alone, though.” Neville patted Harry’s shoulder. “You do have friends, Harry.”

Harry gave him a thin smile. The boy wanted to help, but he just didn’t understand. None of them did.

Still, Harry was getting awfully lonely these days.

The other Gryffindors sat in their usual space at lunch. All but Hermione, Parvati, the Creevey boys, and Ginny turned their backs as Harry passed to go to his solitary meal, but Harry paid them no heed. It hurt, of course it hurt that quidditch had outranked his life, but perhaps it was better that way. Then they wouldn’t be so damaged when the war destroyed him.
He sat in his chair at the far end of the table, closest to the staff and with three empty seats on either side. If he didn’t think Dumbledore would probably follow him and drag him back, he’d start taking his meals in the kitchens too. As it was, this was the best he could do.

A warm body and a plate settled beside him. He cringed, expecting to find Ginny pawing all over him, but it was only Neville.

“Thought you could use a friend.” He gave Harry a wry smile. “Even if you think you don’t want any right now.”

Harry blinked back a wave of sudden emotion, loss and grief warring with warmth that at least one person still cared. Dean sat across him and ignored his teammates’ dirty looks, and Harry’s eyes filled. Dean was risking stigma and losing his spot on the team to stay by Harry’s side.

Another warm body settled at his other side, and Harry blinked at the sight of long blonde hair and radish earrings.

“Luna? Aren’t you eating with the Ravenclaws?”

She gave him a dreamy smile. “Well, I usually do, but the Clarents told me that you need your friends beside you now.” Her smile turned conspiratorial. “Besides, we have you nice and boxed-in so Ginny and her buzzing cloud of Ticklebees can’t get too close.”

Harry choked back a laugh in spite of himself. “I … I guess that’s true. Um, t-thanks. All of you. I just … thank you.”

Luna beamed. “You’re welcome.”
Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** depression, mentions of suicide.

***AN: I'm going to stop putting summaries up. It occurs to me I'm spoiling my own chapters. Oops.***

Chapter 6

A Rude Awakening

29 October, 1997

Orange streamers and flying black bats decorated the Great Hall. Merlin, but Albus did love holiday decorations. Sentimental as it was, it distracted from the grief of war, if only for a moment. Besides, children needed whimsy to grow without damage anyway. Severus and Harry had certainly proved that in spades.

As he sat at the teacher’s table and started on breakfast, Albus searched for his little hero—though perhaps anti-hero would be more appropriate these days. Merlin, but that lecture Harry had given him earlier in the month still smarted. Even more so because Albus’ attempts to bring Harry onto the quidditch team—for his own good, of course—had not only failed to convince Harry to play, but had also driven a wedge between him and most of the Gryffindors.

“You’ve failed us all again.”

Yes, he had done. Albus sighed and sipped at his pumpkin juice. Well, perhaps he might have handled that situation better. Still, he had only wanted to cheer the boy a bit. That counted for something, didn’t it?

Harry wasn’t at the Gryffindor table yet. Albus opened his mouth to ask Minerva about him, but just then the doors open and the boy trudged in, eyes glued to the floor, shoulders slumped, and posture radiating sorrow and weariness.

Some cheer. Merlin, Harry looked miserable.

What on earth was wrong? Albus had thought by now the boy’s grief for his godfather would have begun to abate, or at least normalise, but if anything, Harry looked worse by the day.

Of course, the rift between him and his house had to hurt, but Albus hadn’t expected this level of pain. And most days, it seemed as if Harry encouraged the distance. He certainly hadn’t warmed up to Neville’s efforts to befriend him. Neville hadn’t given up yet, thank Merlin. Maybe Albus should say something to Harry about him.

On second thought, that might set Harry against Neville altogether.
He gave a sad, slight shake of his head. It would be so much easier to help people if they simply went along with his plans.

A voice in the back of his mind, one which sounded too much like Severus, snorted. ‘Because that has worked out so well for him in the past.’

Albus popped a carrot into his mouth and let the crunch drown out those nagging shards of conscience.

In the meantime, instinct told him something more than the obvious was hurting Harry. Over forty years and two wars, he had seen hundreds of students mourn and fight with their classmates. This felt different. Deeper.

Perhaps it was his nightmares? Were they truly this bad? No. His Dreamless Sleep potion should have nipped those in the bud. Something more serious had brought Harry to this state of desolation, Albus was sure of it.

Poppy’s voice distracted him from his observation of his favourite lion. “Albus, I think something is truly wrong with Harry Potter.”

Minerva gave the boy a pitying look. “So I’m not the only one to notice then.”

“No, indeed,” Albus murmured, his mind racing. What was bothering the boy?

“I notice no difference,” Severus said, barely lifting his gaze from his breakfast.

“Then you are blind,” Minerva snapped. She softened her tone to speak to the others. “Albus, are you aware that his Patronus failed on the train this year?”

Albus nodded. “Grief does tend to make conjuring one difficult.”

“That boy’s life has been nothing but grief,” Poppy interjected, “and he has never had a problem before. Albus, I … something is wrong. He looks so ill.”

Severus scoffed, but Poppy rounded on him with a fierce glare, the kind that sent most students cowering back into their beds. Even Severus could not hide a slight recoil.

“You keep your foul comments to yourself, young man,” she chided. “I’ve half a mind to inquire of his classmates if the problem here is you. The way you’ve treated him over the years is absolutely shameful!”

Albus patted her arm. “Now, now, Poppy. I’m sure Severus has done nothing to harm Harry.”

The look he gave his potions professor indicated there would be consequences this time if he had done. Harry had hit the nail on the head in his lecture earlier in the month, after all, and having it brought to light so sharply had forced Albus to at least recognise his failures. He had let his favourite boys down, over and over, and they had both suffered for his weaknesses. Well, he wouldn’t make that mistake again.

Severus sneered and looked away. “Thank you ever so for your vote of confidence.”

Albus watched him a moment longer, but detected no hint of shame. Of course, if the man believed his rancour justified, he wouldn’t feel shame over his actions.

Hmm. Perhaps the situation warranted more attention.
“I just don’t know how to help him,” Poppy said after a long moment. “He won’t come to me, he won’t talk to anyone, and it’s clear he needs to. Merlin, the boy is practically fading.”

“But what can we do?” Minerva sighed and watched Harry pick at his food. “If we try to pull him aside, I doubt he’ll take it well. He hates the attention.”

Severus snorted. “Dear gods. Merlin spare me such utter foolishness.”

Minerva speared him with a glare that could melt stone. “Oh, do share your exalted opinion, Severus. I’m quite sure we’ll all find it riveting.”

He sniffed. “It’s blatantly obvious if you look at him without the rose-tinted spectacles you all wear. This is merely an act of melodrama in a quest to acquire yet more attention.”

“Is it?” Albus looked pointedly at the boy, sitting alone at the end of the Gryffindor table, three seats between himself and any of his friends, though Neville and Ginny wouldn’t be put off. “How curious that he has elected to seek further attention by withdrawing and isolating himself from anyone who would give it. I must say, I have never heard of such tactics before.”

“Ten points to Gryffindor for ingenuity,” Minerva said, her tone acid. “And thirty more for putting up with the likes of you, Severus.”

“Fifty from—”

“No,” said Albus, his expression cold. “You have deducted enough needless points from Gryffindor these two months to secure your other position for the whole of the term. You will take no more in retaliation, for nothing more than the purpose of bitterness and pride.”

With a scowl, Severus pushed back from the table and left, robes billowing behind him.

Minerva watched him go with a sigh. “He plans to take them the next class, doesn’t he?”

“Most likely, I am afraid.” Albus shrugged. “We shall simply have to give them back.”

“I am running out of excuses,” Minerva muttered.

“Honestly,” Poppy said, her eyes full of sorrow. “I think we have more serious matters to worry about than house points. The last time I saw someone look like Harry does right now—Merlin help us, it was Tammy McAllen, Albus.”

Albus froze, the implications of her statement leaving him hollow and his insides cold with terror. Tammy had been a quiet girl, content with her lot and happy enough in her potions apprenticeship under Professor Slughorn—until her mother’s murder halfway through the first war with Voldemort. Then, all the life had drained out of her. The professors had tried to help, to reach out to her, but nothing had worked.

Three months into that dark term, they had found her body in the student potions’ storage, already cold. The half-chewed leaves of monkshood in her hand had left no doubt as to the manner of her death. Horace had retired the same week.

Dear gods. Would they lose Harry to the same fate? The thought was unconscionable, and not just for his sake. Every Muggleborn and Light-sided person in Britain would die without him.

Albus considered the situation and observed the boy carefully. Harry seemed too self-sacrificing, too concerned for the welfare of others to do something so potentially damaging—in particular when one
He had to know the truth, for the good of them all.

Harry looked up and turned, having sensed the headmaster’s stare on his back. Albus met his eyes and filtered through his surface thoughts, just enough to read his state of mind. Harry jerked his eyes away, his expression darkening with anger and betrayal. He was probably justified in his wrath—again—and would be less than congenial for quite some time, but at least Albus had seen what he needed to. The boy hadn’t abandoned his purpose. Not yet.

Better yet, Albus believed he had found the reason for Harry’s worsening condition and self-imposed isolation. He had seen traces of terrible visions, of Harry brewing secret potions during sleepless nights to deal with them on his own. If the child was enduring that kind of pain on a daily basis, Albus could only admire the boy’s resilience in holding himself together as well as he had done thus far.

He patted Poppy’s hand to reassure the terrified woman. “Harry is strong, Poppy. I have faith he will pull through. But in the meantime, I am going to see what can be done to mitigate his pain.” He shook his head and stood. “Though, I am afraid, neither he nor Severus will be best pleased with me before the day is done.”

Minerva glared. “Albus, what tomfoolery are you up to now?”

“Protecting him, Minerva. As always.” With that, he left his breakfast half-finished and prepared himself for what would most likely be a highly unpleasant conversation. Yes, it would be best to have a plentiful stack of lemon drops and a pot of hot tea ready for that meeting. And possibly a headache potion or three.

Severus’ heart raced as he made his way to the headmaster’s office. The summons had come after his NEWTs potions class. Had Potter gone and whined despite his arrogance and pride? It would be just like the boy to complain simply because Severus hadn’t shown him the adulation the rest of the staff did on a regular basis. For Merlin’s sake, someone had to teach the brat what his behaviour really deserved.

Still, somewhere deep down, a part of him worried he had gone too far. Potter was showing signs of exhaustion and despair. And there was that incident at the beginning of term when Severus had placed his detentions too close together and nearly drained the boy of all his magic. He had since relented—to an extent—and had the brat washing cauldrons through his numerous detentions, but even that would take a toll after too long.

Was Severus pushing him too hard?

He scowled at his own thoughts. No. Potter would do anything for attention and more fame. It was simply an act, just as Severus had told Minerva during breakfast.

Steeling himself, he wiped all evidence of emotion from his face and muttered the most recent password. “Fizzing Whizbees.”

Merlin, the passwords gained in imbecility each week.
With a scowl, he stalked up the stairs and entered the office at Albus’ greeting. The hairs on the back of his neck went up as soon as he stepped inside. Albus had the tea tray and a giant stack of lemon drops already perched upon his desk. He never brought out the tea pre-emptively unless—

“Yes, Severus,” said Albus with a wry smile, “I do believe you will find this discussion singularly unpleasant; however, it must be done. Sit down, please, and do take a cup of tea.”

Severus’ heart jumped and his hands trembled as he stalked to the chair and sat. Had Potter complained about his treatment? He resisted the urge to make some kind of denial by will alone and Summoned a cup of tea, black.

“Well?”

“First of all, I would like to know if you have noticed any peculiar symptoms in Mister Potter.”

Severus covered a flinch with his teacup. “If by peculiar you mean he is even more vapid and irritating than usual, perhaps.”

Albus’ gaze turned to steel. “Enough. This is not a laughing matter, Severus. The boy is quite seriously depressed. If you continue to torment him as you have done, you will drive him to an early grave, and I believe you know that will cost us far more than the loss of a brave and honest young man.”

“He is an arrogant sod! Just like his father!”

Albus gave a wry laugh. “Like James Potter? Harry?”

Severus snarled. “They are practically twins!”

“Perhaps in looks, you may be correct. Harry does carry many of his father’s features, though his size appears to be all his own.” Albus frowned. “It is strange. I do not recall any of the Potter family having such a diminutive frame, and Lily was quite tall as well.” He shook his head. “Perhaps it comes from further back in his mother’s line, but I digress. I will admit that Harry does bear a superficial resemblance to James, but that is where the similarities end.”

Severus scoffed. “He is just as foolish, just as arrogant, always breaking the rules as if they do not apply to him, riding on the coattails of his intellectual superiors and his fame—he is utterly intolerable! If anything, he is worse than James Potter, and I never imagined I would utter those words.”

Albus leaned back and steepled his hands. “Hmm. I confess I have seen nothing of the traits you have described in Harry. In fact, if you had not mentioned names nor carried a grudge against Harry from the day he set foot in this school—or rather, since the day of his birth—I would have assumed you were speaking of Mister Malfoy.”

Severus turned his magic inward to disguise the heat creeping into his face. Albus had said nothing outright, but neither had Severus missed the implication in his comments. He had a right to bear the Potter scion a grudge. The ungrateful brat deserved every bit of his punishment.

He should have known Albus would side with Potter. The old man always had done.

With a glare, Severus brought the discussion back to the point. “No. I have not noticed any symptoms in Potter that you have not already mentioned.”

Albus’ eyes narrowed. “Nothing at all, Severus?”
Severus glared back. “No, Albus. Other than a suspicious lack of defiance, which I am sure will resurface the moment his ‘woe-is-me’ act ceases to bring him the attention he so craves, I have noticed no strange symptoms.”

Albus sighed. “I see. Perhaps it was a mistake to hope you could one day outgrow your prejudice, but I am afraid the fact that it appears you cannot leaves us in quite a bind.”

Severus could not control the urge to swallow and tighten his fists this time. Cold, slimy dread crawled down his spine and settled in his gut. Merlin help him, what devious plan did Albus have in store for him now?

“During breakfast this morning, Poppy mentioned fears to me that Harry is demonstrating signs of severe depression, to the point that we should fear suicide. Besides the fact that I do care about the boy, to lose him would be devastating for us all—yes, even you. And so, I … well, perhaps it was ill-done of me, but I performed a surface scan on his thoughts, seeking out his will to live.”

Severus snorted. “And you insist I am the unethical one.”

Albus’ smile held an edge of danger. “Oh? And am I to assume you have given up the practice of invading Harry’s thoughts whenever the fancy strikes?”

Severus clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. “Get on with it, Albus. I have far better things to do than listen to more sob stories for the poor, neglected Potter scion.”

“As you wish.” Albus took a lemon drop. “Harry is not quite to that state yet, thankfully. He has not given up on his mission. The prophecy and Voldemort’s obsession with him is—”

Severus hissed at a sharp surge of pain up his arm. Damn him, Albus knew of the link between the Dark Mark and the Dark Lord’s self-fashioned name. No doubt the old bastard thought Severus deserved a bit of pain for his treatment of the Potter brat.

A tiny voice in the back of his mind—one that sounded too much like Lily—whispered, “And he might be right, if you’ve driven him near suicide.”

Severus stomped on the voice with all his might and gave Albus a venomous glare.

Albus took another sweet and gave Severus a too-innocent smile. “Are you quite all right, my boy?”

Severus also stomped on the urge to strangle the old man. “Fine,” he gritted out. “Get on with it.”

“Very well. As I was saying, Harry is not yet suicidal, but his level of pain is alarming.” Albus pushed his spectacles on his nose and leaned on his elbows, his expression grim. “And, while I was in his mind, I believe I discovered the reason why he feels so poorly.”

Severus forced himself not to react, though he could not stop the blood from draining from his face. Merlin, but he had a bad feeling about this.

“And?”

“And, Severus, it appears Tom is sending Harry visions again. He knows the boy will not be able to bear their pain—he feels it, you know. And it will soon drive him straight to Tom’s clutches if the visions are not stopped.”

Fury rose white-hot in Severus chest. He jerked to his feet, knocking his lukewarm tea to the floor and not caring where it spilled. “No! Do you hear me, the answer is no! I will not teach that
incompetent, arrogant, spoiled, vicious little brat!”

Albus Vanished the spilt tea and returned the cup to his tray. “Even if the consequence is the death of all you know?”

Severus snarled. “Yes, old man, or have you forgotten that I have already attempted it? The boy is a menace! He did not want to learn, did not even try to comprehend, and you dare ask me to repeat such an exercise in futility? I will not waste my time trying to drill a concept into his brain that he is too moronic to understand!”

Rather than the goading Severus had expected, Albus’ eyes filled with deep sorrow. “I see. So you will not teach him even though Tom is torturing him every single day? You will let him suffer the Cruciatius over and over, let him watch toddlers die screaming and bleeding in their beds every night and believe it is for him they perish? Will you still refuse to teach him, knowing the cost will be Harry’s life, and all of ours with him?”

Severus swallowed hard. Toddlers? The Cruciatius? He hadn’t considered it might be so severe. Even so ….

Severus huffed and sank back into his seat. “He is arrogant and foolish and does not want to learn. You ask the impossible.”

Albus lowered his head into his hand. “Then you may go, Severus. I suppose I will have no choice but to teach him myself. Perhaps it is better that way despite the risk, if you are truly so blinded by hatred as to believe his life is not worth a bit of inconvenience.” He flicked a hand and opened the office door. “Go. I cannot bear to look at you at the moment.”

Severus gripped the arms of his chair, unable to leave. “A-Albus ….”

“What do you want, Severus? You have already made it quite clear that you believe it is better to see the boy suffer terrible pain on a daily basis than attempt to instruct him. I confess such callous disregard for a human life fills me with doubt that I have chosen my … confidants well.” Albus gave a weary sigh and rubbed his forehead. “Perhaps you are not the only one who has been blind.”

The desolate, grief-stricken tone in Albus’ voice cracked Severus’ heart down the middle. He was a cold bastard most of the time—he had to be to keep his cover—but Albus was the only person who had ever stood by him. Albus was the only one who had ever given him a chance to redeem himself. And to know he had disappointed the man so greatly cut him to the core.

“I … you ….” Severus sighed and dropped his head. “Perhaps you are right. Very well. I … I will …. ” He swallowed a surge of loathing and rage. “Teach the boy.”

Albus looked up, his eyes untrusting and uncertain. “Will you? Will you truly teach him and do your best to ensure he understands what he needs to know? Can you, when you value his life so little?”

Severus wrapped an arm around his waist, feeling raw and exposed. “Albus, please. I … am not fond of the boy, but for Merlin’s sake, I never said I wanted him dead!”

Albus stared at him for a long time. Eventually, he sighed and flicked his arm once more, shutting the door. “Very well. I wish you to begin lessons tonight, if possible.”

The twinkle returned to his eyes, now that he’d gotten his way. Manipulative bastard.

Severus growled, irritated at Albus’ skilful handling of his character. “I will do, on the condition the brat actually listens, but know this, Albus. If the boy so much as looks at my pensieve again, I will
not be wrangled into teaching him a third time, consequences or no.”

Albus fixed Severus with a piercing stare, deep blue eyes staring into his soul. “You know, Severus, I do believe that if you had attempted to teach Harry in the first place rather than using his lessons as an excuse to hurt him, humiliate him, and rape his mind repeatedly, he would have trusted you enough to stay away from it at your request.”

Severus reeled, shocked at Albus’ blunt assessment. “I … y-you truly have so little faith in me, Albus?”

“In everything but this, I have the utmost faith in you. But you have carried a grudge and a blind spot for Harry far too long.” Albus’ eyes took on a note of steel. “I will not tolerate such rough treatment a second time, Severus. Last year, I had no choice but to overlook your abuse with the Ministry looking for an excuse to take over the school—one hint of such behaviour, and they would have had a reason to oust me, permanently. I am not so hindered now. If you are to teach him, you will teach him properly. Otherwise, I will assume control of his lessons and pray Riddle does not notice my presence.”

Severus swallowed bile and gave Albus a hesitant nod. Was it true? Had he hurt the boy so badly? He swayed, cold horror creeping down his spine.

“I will … take more care with his training from now on.” His voice came out shaken and raw. “I will not … a-attack him during his lessons.”

“Very good.” Albus Banished his tea tray and opened the door once more. “Then you are free to leave, my boy, and good luck.”

Stunned, Severus gave the man a dazed nod and made his way back to the dungeons. “If you had not used the lessons as an excuse to hurt him ….” Had he done?

No. No, it couldn’t be. Potter was just thick. It … it had to be that. He wasn’t willing to consider the alternative.

The voice whispered in the back of his mind, “Sounds rather familiar, doesn’t it?”

Severus Occluded with a vengeance. He wasn’t his father. He wasn’t.

With a growl, he shoved his confusion and shame to the back of his mind and set to work on the Infirmary’s latest batch of potions. The familiar motions would settle his wild thoughts and calm him.

Albus would see before long that Severus had been right. Potter was a hopeless case.

Severus waited in the shadows outside the transfiguration classroom, knowing Potter would come through those doors any moment. A Notice-Me-Not charm ensured the students would not see him as he observed. Albus believed Potter to be severely depressed. If that was true, Severus needed to see it for himself.

Not to mention, he had yet to tell the brat of their newly reinstated Occlumency lessons. If not for the fact that he would need to spend even more time with the boy, he would have anticipated the look on Potter’s face with glee.
He still might at that.

The door opened and students trickled into the hallway in trios and pairs, all murmuring to each other. Severus tuned out their conversations, but Potter’s name caught his attention.

“Harry’s not talking to anyone anymore,” Longbottom said to the Lovegood girl. “I … I’m really scared for him. He’s so miserable, but he won’t let anyone in. I don’t know what to do.”

Lovegood gave him a commiserating smile. “Yes, I’m afraid the wrackspurts are quite deep in his brain right now. He is floundering among the mist-creepers.”

Longbottom winced. “Translated, that means he’s really in trouble.”

“Yes, I think so.”

Longbottom cast a silencing charm, but Severus broke through it with a specialised eavesdropping spell. Lovegood turned as if she had seen him and Severus’ heart thumped into his ribs. Merlin. How had she seen through a spell even the Dark Lord didn’t notice?

Then again, perhaps she hadn’t. After a beat, she turned back to Longbottom without a word. Surely if she had noticed him, she would have spoken up?

Unsettled, Severus moved a bit further into his alcove and tightened his wards.

Longbottom sighed and clutched his books to his chest. “What do we do, Lu? How do we help him when he’s pushing everyone away?”

“Well, I suggest not fighting among yourselves for a start.”

Longbottom grimaced. “Luna, you haven’t heard them. They’re all blaming him for the points, and then quidditch—Merlin, Lu, I think Harry had the right of it when he said he couldn’t play seeker this year. He’s so exhausted, yet he never sleeps and even Dreamless Sleep doesn’t do a damn thing to keep his nightmares away.”

Lovegood gave him a sad nod. “Nightmares are more difficult to suppress when they come from a broken soul.”

“Broken soul?” He shuddered. “Gods. I hope it’s not that bad.”

“Yes, so do we all.”

He kicked at the floor and shook his head. “Honestly, Luna, I think it’s Snape doing this to him. You should have seen him when he came back from that one weekend detention early in the term. It’s not been as bad since, but that time, it was awful. I was so afraid he might not wake up again, but Harry threatened to sleep somewhere else if I tried to take him to the Infirmary. I was so afraid, Lu, but I was more afraid he would die in his sleep if I tried to force him to go, so I just stayed with him and watched him through the night. And gods, it was terrible. He was crying out in his sleep the whole time.”

Severus swallowed hard. It had to be exaggeration. Surely he hadn’t pushed Potter that far. He had healed the boy, for Merlin’s sake. Potter shouldn’t have suffered so much.

“And every night he has a detention since,” Longbottom went on, “he lies awake for hours and just … cries. He has a silencing charm up, but I … I’ve checked on him a few nights. I don’t know if it’s because Snape tears him to bits with his tongue or if he’s in pain, but gods, it rips the heart from me.
to watch him and know he’s suffering. But when I try to help ….” Longbottom sighed and let his shoulders slumped. “I don’t know what to do, Luna. He won’t let me in.”

Severus listened for Lovegood’s response, but the duo had gone around a corner and out of range of his eavesdropping spell.

Damn. He hugged his chest and tried to gather his wits. Potter was so miserable after every detention? No. There had to be a mistake. Potter was an arrogant sod. He didn’t weep, he expressed his irritation with anger and defiance. He always had done. And Severus would prove it, so help him.

The trickle of students slowed to drips, and still, Potter had not come through. Severus tapped his foot in irritation. The boy would pick that moment to drag his feet.

Potter appeared a moment later, eyes on the floor and books held tight to his chest. He trudged along the edge of the corridor as if trying to avoid notice, shoulders dropped forward and steps minced. He looked desolate.

Severus shook off a surge of guilt. It was an act! Just an act. He had to remember this was Potter, the attention-seeking prat. He only wanted pity.

Rage and indignation sparked to life in his belly—why should he have to teach this idiot anything? Severus called out the boy’s name and smirked at his startled gasp.

Potter froze and turned, eyes closed and expression tense. He gripped his books in white-knuckled hands and took a shaky breath.

“Yes, Professor?”

Severus sneered at his pathetic display of fear. “I am afraid the headmaster has … taken note of your lacklustre performance in Potions, not that I am surprised. He has made it all too clear that his precious golden boy is not to miss out on any chance for further glory, and so, we shall begin remedial potions lessons again tonight at seven.”

The colour drained out of Potter’s face. He slapped a hand to his scar and shook his head wildly. “No. I … no, please. Not that. Please, no.”

The fearful response confused Severus, but fury quickly overrode any doubt. He stepped closer, forcing Potter to back against a wall, and loomed over the boy.

“But you think this is a game, Mister Potter?” The cut of Severus’ tone might have sliced through stone. “Do you think I wish to take time out of my busy day to cater to the ever-growing needs of an arrogant idiot with a saviour-complex, in order to afford you the freedom to slack off? Do you think I want to waste my evenings trying to pound some semblance of a cohesive thought into your woefully inadequate brain?”

Potter met his eyes, his expression flat and devoid of life. “No, sir.”

Severus scowled. Still pretending not to care. His trademark defiance would come back soon. He was sure of it.

He stepped back with a sneer. “Of course you don’t,” he said as if it were a foregone conclusion. “Thinking seems to be a pastime far beyond your menial mental capabilities.”

Potter simply straightened his posture and stared at Severus, saying nothing. If Severus didn’t know
better, he would have thought the boy was waiting for the man to run out of steam. The thought unnerved him, coming so close after Albus’ earlier admonishments.

Severus moved back and glared at the boy. It wasn’t his fault Potter was so arrogant and rude.

“Ten points from Gryffindor for being a useless, arrogant sod. I am not fooled by your pitiful act of melodrama. Nor do I care. Your attention-seeking show of spineless despair does not fool me, so you can cease your simpering attempts to garner pity with me. Come to think of it, twenty more points for your deception!”

Potter dragged his head up and gave him a heartsick look, the weary, resigned expression in his eyes more of a reproach than any of his former diatribes had ever been.

“Yes, sir.” It was all he ever said any longer, even when Severus used his worst barbs. Merlin, Severus didn’t understand it. Why wasn’t Potter fighting back?

“If you are not careful, you will drive him to an early grave ....”

Shaken, Severus moved a few paces away and glared at the brat.

“Your first lesson will take place tonight at seven. Do not dare to be late.”

Potter closed his eyes, clenched his fists, and hunched his shoulders. A-ha! Now it was coming, his arrogance and defiance. About damn time.

“Y-yes, sir.”

Severus froze, having just gathered breath for an insult that made no sense now, seeing as Potter wasn’t fighting his fate.

“Well, right.” Severus turned on his heel and strode off by a few paces, but turned before Potter could completely escape. “Oh, and Potter?”

The boy stopped at the end of the hall, freezing as if someone had shot him.

Severus’ voice was hard as steel. “Should your much-lauded nose find its way into places it doesn’t belong this time, I will not be responsible for my actions.”

Potter flinched. “Yes, sir.”

“Get out of my sight.”

The boy ran as if the hounds of hell were on his heels. Scowling, Severus stormed back to his office, stewing the whole confrontation over in his mind. Over all their confrontations, in truth.

Since the start of term, Severus had goaded the boy relentlessly, yet Potter had never returned fire. Never said a word beyond acknowledging Severus. Where once he had fought back with all the fire of his father’s arrogance, the boy had become little more than a ghost. He looked defeated. As if he didn’t have it in him to fight any longer.

And Merlin, why had the mention of Occlumency terrified him so?

“If you had bothered to teach the boy, rather than using his lessons as an excuse to hurt him, humiliate him, and rape his mind ....”

Severus frowned, more shaken by Albus’ words and Potter’s abject fear than he wanted to admit. If
the mere thought of Occlumency had rendered Potter into a state of gibbering terror, perhaps there might have been some truth to the old man’s admonishments. It merited some examination, he supposed.

Severus snarled and increased his pace. Damn it. He didn’t have time to be worrying about this.

Well then, he would just have to prove Albus and Potter wrong once and for all. Robes snapping behind him, Severus returned to his office, locked and warded the door, and took out his pensieve. Expression grim, he removed several memories of Potter’s lessons and placed them into the basin.

“Now we shall see who is in the wrong.”

With a deep breath, and not a little apprehension, Severus leaned forwards and ducked his head into the basin.

He came out of his memories shaking and sick to his stomach. Viewed objectively, from outside Potter’s mind, Severus could not deny the pain he had inflicted on the boy. By the end of each lesson, Potter had left white-faced and trembling, hands on his head and eyes narrowed in agony.

Of course, the boy was as much a spoiled, defiant prat as Severus had ever assumed, but Severus was not without fault either. He had indeed hurt the boy. He had used his authority over Potter to degrade him, taken pleasure of the sight of the lauded saviour on his knees before him, and used the memories he had seen in Potter’s mind as weapons. Granted, the boy deserved some punishment, but this kind of aggressive Legilimency was illegal, for good reason.

The memory of a particular session broke into his thoughts, where Severus had stood with his wand pointed between Potter’s eyes, casually threatening and insulting him. The boy had stared up at him, defiant, angry, but with tears of pain and humiliation running down his face.

“Stop it, sir! Please. You’re hurting me.”

“Do you imagine I care, Potter?”

The image of another scene superimposed his memory: of a twelve-year-old Severus kneeling before his father, weeping and pleading with him not to hit him again.

“You’re hurting me, Da! Please—”

“Yeah? Good!”

A strangled gasp escaped him. “I am not my father. I am not ….”

But no matter how he looked at it, every time he had forced Potter to his knees and used his own mind against him, wielded his trust like a weapon in the spots the boy was weakest, he saw Tobias Snape standing over his younger self, belt in hand and a vicious look of triumph in his eyes.

That day Severus had made Potter weep, he might have been his father’s twin.

As if that were not enough, another voice taunted him from the shadows of his mind—the dark spaces Severus tried never to acknowledge, a cultured, superior voice he tried so hard to forget.
“Well, well, little pet. It seems as though I have trained you well after all.”

Severus slammed his fist into the wall and instantly regretted it. What was wrong with him, punching solid stone? Then again, that evil bastard had always had a terrible effect on his better judgment.

“Episkey.”

With his split, cracked knuckles healed, Severus leaned his head in his hands and stared into the empty pensieve. As much as he would like to have blamed the failed Occlumency lessons on Potter—and perhaps his lack of desire to learn had made the lessons more difficult—the evidence against Severus was damning. His former ‘teaching’ methods were atrocious.

Potter’s tearful face flickered into his mind once more. “You’re hurting me!”

No. Not just atrocious, but tantamount to child abuse and mental rape. Severus had all but broken that boy and left him vulnerable to attack from the Dark Lord. The realisation chilled him down to his core. Besides that he had abused a child, the knowledge that they might have lost the war because of his wrath left him cold.

Appalled and shaken, Severus vowed to make more of an effort this time. Too much was riding on Potter’s ability to Occlude. Whether he loathed the boy or not, he had to teach him properly and not let his personal feelings interfere with their lessons.

Besides, Severus still had potions lessons to teach him the error of his ways. He would need to be kinder in Occlumency, but in potions class, he had plenty of opportunity to make sure Potter understood that whatever might have changed behind closed doors, he would never see the useless brat as anything more than his father’s son.

That would have to be enough.

Harry ran straight to the Room of Requirement after his confrontation with Snape, skiving off History. He had just five hours to learn some kind of basic Occlumency—at least enough to keep Snape away from his darkest secrets. Much as Snape wanted to win the war, the man wouldn’t hesitate to sell Harry’s secrets to the Ministry if it meant he never had to teach Harry another potion again.

Harry couldn’t endure St. Mungo’s. He couldn’t. And gods, what if they locked him up in Azkaban? He hadn’t done anything wrong—yet—but with the level of corruption within the Ministry, that mightn’t matter. Umbridge still worked in the court system, after all, and he had no doubt she would love to give Harry some comeuppance for that little escapade with the centaurs.

He shuddered and paced in front of the Room, shaking all over as he focused on his needs. “I need a secret room to learn Occlumency fast. I need a secret room to ....”

The door appeared on the third repetition, and Harry almost yanked it off the hinges in his urgency. He found himself in a blue and silver room with beanbag chairs and a shelf of fat books in one corner. With a sigh of relief, Harry tore to the bookcase and scanned the titles. He grabbed the first likely-looking book he saw and plopped into one of the beanbags, hands shaking as he devoured the text.
Four hours and forty minutes later, Harry still couldn’t block the Room-created dummy from learning his secrets. He paced the room, debating on not going to his lessons at all, but if he didn’t, Snape would do his best to see him expelled. Worse, Harry couldn’t depend on the headmaster to protect him any longer, either. No, he would have to go to his lesson and hope he could somehow distract Snape. Maybe if he gave him enough humiliating memories of the Dursleys to chew on, it would keep the man from his truly dangerous secrets.

Harry forced himself out of the room and down the stairs, shaking so hard he almost missed several steps on the way to the dungeons. Gods, he couldn’t do this. He couldn’t. Snape had been awful last year, of course, but ever since Dumbledore had forced Harry into his potions class, the man had made it his personal mission to see Harry break.

He didn’t even want to think of how much pain he would be in after the lesson this time. And Voldemort had gained easier access to Harry’s mind after every past lesson, too. Gods help him, what if Snape broke him down so far, Voldemort actually possessed Harry? Combined with his desire to Imperius Harry into murder … fuck. That would be awful.

‘Merlin, please—please—let my control hold enough to keep me in control.’

He would have to hope that was enough, as he had arrived at the potions master’s office. He stood in front of Snape’s door, cold sweat pooling at the base of his spine, heart thundering. Was he really going to do this? Snape’s cruelty might risk more than Harry’s life and sanity this time. Maybe he should just go … but the thought of being dragged in here bodily, of Snape coming at him so hard Harry had no chance of keeping his secrets his own, forced him to lift his fist towards the door.

As terrifying as it was, he had no choice but to endure it. He would have to risk it and hope he could Occlude better with his life—and that of everyone he loved—on the line. Fear had been known to help him in the past, once.

‘Please, please … someone. Anyone. Please help me.’

Harry’s wand alarm went off. Seven o’ clock. He had no further time to dawdle. He silenced the alarm and, swallowing bile, he struggled to control the tears of sheer terror forming at the corners of his eyes and knocked on the door.

“It’s H-Ha-Harry, s-sir.”

Gods, he could barely talk.

“Stop stammering like a nitwit and get in here, Potter.”

Harry bit his lip to keep from whimpering and obeyed. He closed the door behind him and stood against the wall, gaze on the floor, breathing so fast, black spots formed in his vision.

“Oh good lord.” Snape grabbed Harry by the collar and deposited him in one of the chairs. “Cease your melodramatics, Potter. I shan’t delve into your secret adolescent fumblings tonight.”

Harry shook the fuzz from his brain, trying to comprehend. Surely he hadn’t heard that right?

“W-what?” Tears ran down his face in spite of all his efforts to control them. He winced and ducked his head, terrified Snape would see the reason for them if he dared lift his eyes.

“Stop snivelling, idiot boy. I said, I am not going to use Legilimency on you today.”

Harry froze, hardly daring to breathe. “Y-you’re not?”
“Have you gone deaf? How many times must I say it before it sinks in? Should I spell it out for you?”

“N-no, sir.”

Snape huffed and tossed a book into Harry’s lap. The corner hit him in the gut and knocked the wind from him, but Harry didn’t even care if it meant he might learn to protect himself before Snape learned of his *Imperius* dreams.

“Potter.”

When Harry looked up, Snape was frowning. “Are you hurt?”

Harry winced and jerked his gaze back down to the floor. Of *course* a book corner slamming into his stomach had hurt, but wasn’t fool enough to say so in Snape’s domain.

“I-I’m fine, sir.”

Snape eyed him for a moment, but apparently decided he didn’t care. Not that Harry was surprised.

“Good. Then read the first two chapters of that book and don’t bother me until you are finished, assuming you are capable of following such basic instructions.”

Harry ignored his jibe. Compared to what Snape had unleashed in potions earlier in the week, this was nothing. He took a deep breath and cracked open the book.

‘Clearing the Mind: A Primer.’

Harry could have laughed. A theory book. Gods, Snape was going to teach him the theory this time. Harry had time to learn to protect himself. Thank *Merlin*.

Giddy with sheer relief, he settled the book in his lap and forced his fragmented attention to focus upon the first page.

‘To clear one’s mind, one must first establish a safe place. Somewhere there are no other people, pets, or responsibilities to distract from the peace of an empty mind ....’
Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** child abuse, depression, ruthless Dumbledore being a total hypocrite and justifying it to himself.

Chapter Notes

***AN: Shit, this story is killing me. I cried a river writing a chapter this morning, and now I'm about to do it to myself all over again. Seriously, I have got to kill the angst before I give myself a cold or something. XD

That said, I have over 250K words on this and about 10 more chapters to write. I need to rewrite a few about 2/3 of the way in to get rid of some redundancy, but other than that, I feel like it's fairly solid. It's sure as hell wringing the feels out of me, so I'm hoping that means it's going to make my readers feel it too.

Anyway, hope you enjoy it!***

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 7

15 November

Hidden under his cloak, Harry sat in an otherwise empty corner of the Gryffindor stands, watching the first match of the season—Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw.

Colin Creevey’s excited voice rang out over the pitch. “—An excellent catch by Katie Bell. Oh, she’s passed to Alicia Spinnet, and back to Bell. Antonio García just smacked a bludger at—oh, nice dodge there, Katie. Lucas Stone is in pursuit of the quaffle, but Bell is almost to the posts—and she scores! Fifty to twenty, in favour of Gryffin—wait! I think Dean has seen the—oh, yes he has! Thomas is after the snitch!”

Harry watched from a quiet corner of the stands, almost hidden in the shadows, as Dean Thomas dove towards the Ravenclaw goals, robes whipping in the wind behind him, Cho in hot pursuit. The thrill of the chase illuminated his expression and set his dark eyes aglow. A smile crossed Harry’s face in spite of himself. Everything was dark and dim for Harry as of late, but he still remembered when chasing the snitch was the highlight of the day. He silently cheered Dean on from his corner and watched him zip about, staying just ahead of Cho.
Harry slipped out of the stands as soon as the match ended, slinking through the shadows so he might congratulate his classmates in the quiet of the changing rooms rather than fighting the crowd. He sat on the shower bench and waited, knees drawn to his chest, as memories of happier times inundated him.

Once, he had taken pleasure in flight. He had once loved bringing his team home the cup above all else. Somewhere in him, he still missed the euphoria, the excitement, the glory of a well-earned win—but distantly. He remembered the joy, but he couldn’t feel it any longer. Better someone happier, someone not weighed down and crushed under the burden of fate to take his place.

And Dean had done well. He was a better chaser than seeker, but the boy did have a sharp eye and had listened to Harry’s late-night pointers after the rest of the team had gone to bed. Then, they couldn’t muscle Dean away from ‘the rogue seeker.’

Harry supposed that nickname should have hurt, but all he felt was dim sorrow that his friends couldn’t understand why he had no choice but to leave the game in more capable hands. He simply didn’t have it in him any longer.

The team laughed and joked as they came inside. In spite of his lingering desolation and nervousness over the coming confrontation, Harry smiled in remembrance of when life had revolved around points and snitches instead of war and body counts. What was the tally now? He didn’t even know. Only that the number was far too high and he had no time to waste. No time, no energy, no joy.

Still, he could be there for his former teammates and friends, even if they were no longer there for him, even if they didn’t understand why everything had changed for Harry.

After all, he knew how much it hurt to be abandoned.

The team came around the corner and stopped dead at the sight of him.

“Harry!” Ginny moved towards him, but Dean held her back.

“This space is only for team players,” Ritchie Coote grumbled.

Harry stood and brushed off his robes. “I have no intention of staying.” He ignored Ginny’s pout and gave Dean a wan smile. “Congratulations, Dean. You did really well.”

Dean beamed. “I… I didn’t think I had a chance against Cho, but you were right. Once I was in the air, everything just… faded into the background.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Harry looked at his former best friend and conjured a smile for him too despite the grinding pain in his heart. “Congratulations, Ron. The whole team played well.”

No one spoke—other than Ginny demanding that Dean let her go—so Harry sighed and made his way towards the door, head down as he slipped past the team on the way out.

Near the door, a hand caught his arm and stopped him. He turned, half-expecting a fight, only to come face-to-face with his former best friend’s sheepish smile.

“Harry, um, thanks. For coming.”

Harry nodded and stared at the floor. “Wouldn’t have been right not to support you.”
The team went silent. Did Harry imagine he felt a wave of shame from them?

Ron choked out, “Er… y-yeah.”

Harry looked up to find red tingeing everyone’s faces save for Ginny and Dean. Ron rubbed the back of his neck and rubbed his toe against the floor.

“Erm, Harry, about that… I’m sorry. I’ve been a right berk.”

“I… I reckon we all have,” said Alicia with her head bowed.

Katie nodded and hugged her chest. “Yeah. Um, are you okay, Harry?”

He gave them a wan smile. “I’m fine.”

Ron and Dean winced.

“Mate, I… look,” said Ron, “I know I’ve been a prat, but you do know you can still come to me if you need help, right?”

Harry suppressed a laugh. Did Ron think he’d been on vacation for the past three months while he had suffered alone? But Harry didn’t have the energy to fight—not again. He simply looked his once-best friend in the eye and gave him a sad smile.

“Yes.”

It wasn’t worth it to argue, to point out his sins. It just wasn’t worth it.

Ron’s smile crumbled. “Oh.”

Harry lowered his gaze again. “I’m going so you lot can get out of those muddy clothes. Congratulations, all of you.”

With that, he turned and left.

2 December

Relations had eased somewhat between Harry and the rest of Gryffindor house. At least Ron wasn’t ignoring him any longer. He and Hermione both had been trying to heal the breach, and Harry, out of sheer loneliness, let them in. Yet he was much quieter than before, and their earlier abandonment left a distance between them he doubted would ever heal. They hadn’t been there for him when he had needed them, and they simply had different priorities these days anyway.

Gryffindor house had stopped shunning Harry since then too, at least actively. Harry still wanted to be left alone. The others just didn’t understand him, didn’t want to. Only Neville and Dean seemed willing to try to meet him halfway, and most of the time, Harry stayed near them even if he didn’t talk. It was safe there. Dean and Neville didn’t make demands, didn’t pressure him to be what he wasn’t. Neville, especially, had earned Harry’s respect with his devotion. Sometimes—namely, after potions class—he felt like Neville was the only friend he had left.

At least Occlumency with Snape had become less of a torture session and more of an actual lesson these days. Rather than attacking Harry ruthlessly as he had always done, Snape had spent several lessons simply going over the theory. The next few, he had begun practical training, but by then,
Harry had enough of a grasp on the subject to keep his secret dreams hidden—the nightmares of Severus too. He couldn’t stop Snape from dragging out humiliating memories from his past, but those that truly terrified him stayed under wraps, thank Merlin.

But potions… gods, that was an utter disaster. The man spent every lesson making sure Harry knew how worthless he was. He capitalised on Harry’s misery and distraction, pointing out each miniscule flaw with undisguised glee. And if that wasn’t bad enough, he showed each of Harry’s potions to the class as an example of how not to brew, even when Harry’s potions came out decent. And when they came out perfect despite the man’s abuse, well, Harry had somehow cheated despite being metres away from anyone who might help him. He always botched his potions a bit after the first perfect potion. The points loss from his supposed cheating had turned Gryffindor against him again for days.

Even so, it didn’t seem to matter. After every lesson, the massive point loss Harry suffered for breathing in Snape’s vicinity reignited Gryffindor’s irritation. Only Neville and Dean consistently stood by Harry. Ron and Hermione, for all their vows to be better friends, had grown so used to being in each other’s company that they let him down more often than not.

And Seamus—Merlin, he was almost as bad as Malfoy these days.

Yet none of it hurt him like Snape’s baseless loathing. Every vicious remark cut Harry to the bone—particularly when he still dreamed of the young Severus every other day. Gods, it hurt. Each confrontation with Snape ripped the soul from him and left him bleeding. And when he remembered that, for all Harry himself had never done anything to Snape, the man’s hatred was not as unjustified as the rest of the world thought, he wanted to crawl into a hole somewhere and never come out again.

Still, Harry might have endured in silence had Snape not started attacking the other Gryffindors too.

Harry watched, horrified and sick, as Snape rounded on a shell-shocked Dean. “What is this rubbish? You call this a Wiggenweld Potion? This….” He dipped the ladle in Dean’s spoiled potion and dropped chunks of purple sludge back into his cauldron. “This isn’t fit to feed to maggots. Tell me, how did you manage to create an exact facsimile of the sludge Potter produces every time he looks at a cauldron?”

Harry flinched and stirred his own potion. It was perfect. He added a few more drops of salamander blood, just enough to drop his grade to an Acceptable without exploding his cauldron.

As Snape loomed and scowled into Dean’s cauldron, the boy cringed and leaned away. “Sir, I-I think I put too mu—”

Snape slammed his hands on the desk. “It was a rhetorical question, you utter nitwit! Do you believe I care to listen to the inane babble of idiot Gryffindors? Do not dare to dictate your mistakes to me! You are an arrogant, brainless twit to assume you even have the brain capacity to form a complete sentence, much less analyse the errors in a failed potion without Granger announcing it for all and sundry, like a pathetic little lapdog in search of treats! No, Granger, we do not need yet another tedious explanation of why we all fall short of your intellectual glory. Sit down and shut up.”

Hermione squeaked and dropped the hand she had raised halfway through Snape’s first rant. Harry’s hand clenched on his stirring rod and tears blurred the room into a mess of black and greenish steam. Gods. Why did it have to be this way? Harry just wanted to brew his potions and get out without causing trouble. Instead, he made life miserable for all of his classmates the moment he walked through the door.
Snape, on a roll, proceeded to denigrate Dean over and over until the placid, level-headed boy broke down in tears.

“O-okay,” Dean choked out. “I’ll d-do better, sir.”

Snape snorted. “Now that I should like to see!”

“Please, sir, please.” Tears streaked Dean’s face, and Harry’s heart cracked.

Snape’s lip curled in a vicious sneer. “Gods, Spare me. Snivelling like a toddler denied his treats. Do stop your pathetic whinging and tidy this ridiculous excuse for a potion!”

Harry dropped his stirring rod and stood, anger and grief mingling hot and cold in his gut. This was too far. Dean was one of the only people who had stood by Harry when the rest of the house abandoned him. Damned if Harry would repay him with more needless suffering.

“Enough!” He wiped his face and shook his head. “Enough. I’ll give you what you want, Professor. Just stop torturing the rest of them, please.”

Harry was done. He’d tried to hack it in potions despite Snape’s hatred. He’d done his best. But Snape would never give him a chance in this class, and the longer he stayed, the worse it would be for everyone.

Snape’s eyes narrowed to slits and his teeth bared. “What did you say to me, Potter?”

Harry bowed his head and blinked back tears. “I said it’s enough, sir. You win. I’m done.”

Snape went apoplectic, but Harry had no intention of staying to facilitate another temper tantrum. Perhaps the vindictive glee of finally ridding himself of the Potter brat would be enough to stave off his fury.

With a quiet apology to Dean, Harry Vanished his potion, packed his supplies, and left. Snape’s triumphant laugh echoed in Harry’s ears long after the slam of the classroom door had cut off the sound.

Gods, why did the man loathe him so much? True, Harry’s parents had apparently been arseholes, but Harry had never done anything to deserve this level of hatred.

“They are dying for you, Harry Potter. Can you feel their pain? Sssee their sssuffering?”

Tears choked him. Maybe he did deserve it. He didn’t know any longer. But Dean—no. Whatever Snape might say about Harry or his family, he couldn’t say it about Dean, Hermione, or the rest of his housemates.

Firming his resolution, Harry made his way to the headmaster’s office and wiped his eyes before he started guessing passwords. The door opened at “blood pops,” and he climbed the stairs to the headmaster’s office.

“Come in, Harry,” said Dumbledore before Harry touched the door.

With a wry shake of his head for Dumbledore’s preternatural awareness, Harry went inside. Dumbledore had just started decorating for the holidays, judging by the open box of garland and tinsel in the corner and the fairy lights surrounding disgruntled portraits. Phineas looked particularly grumpy. Humming cheerfully to himself, Dumbledore hung a sprig of mistletoe over Phineas’ frame just as Harry walked inside. The former headmaster turned on his heel and stalked away, scowling
“Harry?” Dumbledore’s smile faded at the sight of him. “Come, child. Sit and tell me what is on your mind.”

“Hullo, sir.” Harry’s voice barely made a sound as he sat in one of Dumbledore’s purple chintz armchairs. “I… I’m here because I need to drop potions.”

Something hard flickered in Dumbledore’s eyes, but Harry sensed it wasn’t meant for him, and it faded to concern and confusion the next instant anyway.

“To drop it? I had thought you wished to pursue the auror corps after Hogwarts, my boy.”

Harry lowered his gaze lest the headmaster try to invade his mind again. “I don’t think that’s a good fit anymore, to be honest. What kind of auror can’t call a Patronus?”

Dumbledore sighed. “Oh, Harry. Grief makes finding happiness difficult. Your ability will return in time, when you make new happy memories.”

Harry didn’t comment on the likelihood of that while hatred and anguish made sport of his life.

“Why do you wish to drop potions, Harry?”

Harry swallowed and wrapped his arms around his waist. How much did he reveal here? Snape had been truly horrible to him and to his classmates, but on the other hand, if Harry got the man sacked, he’d be killed.

“They are dying for you, Harry Potter….”

No. He couldn’t do it. He remembered all the visions, the murders done in his name, and he couldn’t be responsible for the death of one more person, even if Snape did deserve an arse kicking.

“I-I’m just not very happy in it, sir. And I’m not doing well either, to be honest. It seems pointless to waste what little time I have on a class I’ll never pass.”

“I see.”

Dumbledore said nothing for a long moment. Before he spoke again, he summoned a pot of tea and a tray of shortbread biscuits.

“Have a cup of tea, Harry. It would do you some good, I think.”

Harry had no idea what Dumbledore thought a bloody cup of tea would fix, but he took one anyway to appease him. It did taste good, and lightened some of the burden of misery on his soul.

Ah. So the old man had dosed it. No wonder he wanted Harry to have a cup.

Well, it did help, so this once, Harry let the headmaster’s blatant manipulation slide.

“Now, I take it to mean that when you say you are unhappy in potions, most of that is due to your… problems with its professor.”

Harry stared into his cup and refused to answer.

“I see.” Dumbledore took a cup of tea for himself and sipped in thought. “Well, I don’t think it would do to drop potions, Harry.”
Harry whipped his head up and glared, remembering at the last second to focus his gaze above the man’s eyebrow. “Why? Do you tell other students they can’t drop NEWT level classes they don’t want to attend any longer, or am I just that special?” He spit the last word like poison.

Dumbledore sighed. “Harry, please. I will not make you attend Professor Snape’s NEWT class any longer, but you are too talented in the subject to drop it entirely. I would like you to continue to study potions under a different professor. An independent study, if you will.”

Something tight in Harry’s chest unwound. “I… I don’t have to go to cl—” He winced and changed his wording, fearful of implicating Snape by accident. “You mean I can learn it on my own? I didn’t know it was an option.”

“Well, entirely independent study is an option for many classes; however, potions is not among them. You understand that it would be too dangerous to allow an untrained brewer to attempt the labs without supervision?”

Harry nodded. “So someone else would be teaching me, sir?”

“Yes.” Dumbledore rubbed his beard thoughtfully. “And I do believe I know just the one. Madam Pomfrey is a certified potioneer and can guide you through NEWT level potions without issue.”

Harry frowned. “But will she have time? I mean, with running the Infirmary and all, won’t she be too busy?”

“Most days, Madam Pomfrey has plenty of time on her hands. I do admit there may be some days where there is an emergency and she must postpone your lessons, but I do not believe it will be enough of a problem to interfere with either your grades or her work.”

Harry slumped in relief. “Then that sounds brilliant, sir, if she’s okay with it.”

“I think she will be pleased.” Dumbledore folded his hands on the desk and gave Harry a sad smile. “We have all been quite worried for you, Harry. It is clear you are not coping well.”

Harry looked away. “I’m fine.”

“Harry, do me the honour of telling me the truth.”

Harry scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, why don’t you just take the truth if that’s what you want to hear? It certainly didn’t stop you the other day. I don’t even know why you’re asking me. Just rifle through my mind and find out for yourself.”

Dumbledore winced. “I suppose I deserved that.” He sighed and held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. “I apologise, Harry. I did enter your mind without your permission. It was wrong and unfair, but I would like you to know that I only did so because I feared for your life.”

Harry shut his eyes tight, terrified the sting of tears would turn into more than a threat. “I’m fine!”

“On the contrary, Harry, I think you are most certainly not fine.”

Harry said nothing. To reveal the hypocrisy behind the old man’s sudden worry about his well-being, he would have to reveal the truth of his life. He wasn’t ready to admit how much the Dursleys hurt him. Not to Dumbledore. Not to anyone.

“Harry, will you at least tell me a bit about what’s troubling you so? If you give me something to work with, perhaps I can aid you in some way.”
Harry clenched his fists and stared at his lap, struggling to keep his terror from his face. Dumbledore already knew about the visions, or he would never have forced Harry back into Occlumency. He knew about the nightmares too. And if Dumbledore was asking after his well-being again, he also knew something else was wrong, but not what. Not yet.

Gods, what should Harry say? He couldn’t reveal the truth about his Imperius dreams, but if he didn’t give the old man something, Dumbledore might pry in his mind again and find out on his own. Harry could hide it from Professor Snape as long as the bastard wasn’t invading his mind at random, but to hide his thoughts during a sneak Legilimency attack was beyond his current ability. Well, maybe revealing the inefficacy of his potion prescription would be enough to keep Dumbledore off the scent.

With a prayer his ploy worked, Harry gripped his knees and forced his voice steady. “I… it’s just… I’m still having nightmares, sir. A lot of them, every night. It’s hard to get any rest and Dreamless Sleep isn’t working. Between that and the visions—it’s just too much.”

Dumbledore gave him a sympathetic nod. “Yes, I could see that, given everything you have and are currently enduring.”

Hah. The old man didn’t know the half of it.

Harry froze as a horrible possibility flickered to life in the back of his mind. Dear gods, did the old man know? Had placing Harry with the Dursleys been a deliberate attempt to make him strong? To hone Dumbledore’s little pet weapon into a sword against evil?

Harry’s stomach lurched and his breath stilled in his lungs. Oh Merlin. It made a twisted kind of sense. It explained why Dumbledore always made Harry wait a couple of months before seeking out Pomfrey for his yearly physical exam. Why Harry was never allowed to spend even short holidays at Grimmauld or the Burrow when the Order could have protected him in either place.

And why Dumbledore would never let Harry stay at Hogwarts when he was just as safe there as with his relatives. More so, as he had enough to eat and didn’t have to worry about his uncle’s fists. Comfort and safety didn’t go far in training a weapon to fight, after all.

Lost in betrayal and grief as he was, Harry almost missed Dumbledore’s next words. “Would you like to talk about your dreams, Harry?”

Was the old man actually trying to be sympathetic when he had made Harry’s entire life a ruin?

Harry glared and stood. “No. And if there’s nothing else, I’d like to get some revision done before Herbology, sir.”

Dumbledore frowned at his sudden shift in attitude, but didn’t comment. “There is one more thing, Harry. The visions. Have they eased at all?”

Harry cringed. “N-not as much as I would like.”

“Hmm. Professor Snape is not mistreating you during Occlumency?”

Harry shook his head, fearful of giving too much away if he answered verbally.

Dumbledore eyed him a moment, but when Harry offered no further information and avoided his gaze, he relented with a sigh. “Well, that is good to know. Perhaps your interactions with him from here on out will not be quite as antagonistic.” He folded his hands in his lap and gave Harry a stern
look. “Nevertheless, I will advise you to pay attention in your Occlumency lessons and make a strong effort to improve. It is too important to let your history with the professor interfere with your ability to learn.”

Indignation and bitter grief boiled in Harry’s chest. “Oh really? And who was it again who concealed the prophecy from me and the reason I needed to learn until it was too late?”

Dumbledore frowned and took one of his lemon drops. “Harry, you know why I could not reveal it.”

“No I don’t.” Harry scoffed. “You know what, it doesn’t matter. It’s not as if you would care even if I did want to get into it right now.”

Dumbledore winced. “Harry—”

“Just, never mind. Can you really think, after seeing the last of my family die last term and knowing it’s my fault he was there in the first place, I don’t know the cost for failing?” He blinked back a sudden surge of tears. “I am trying. I don’t know why it’s so hard.” A bitter laugh escaped him. “Maybe Professor Snape is right and there’s just nothing in there to block with. Either way, I’m doing the best I can.”

Dumbledore dismissed him with a sad smile. “Perhaps the lack of trust between you is making it difficult. Well, off with you then. I’ll arrange your lessons with Madam Pomfrey and advise you of your new schedule as soon as possible.”

“Thank you, sir.” For that, at least. “I’ll see you at lunch.”

With a forced smile, Harry turned on his heel and tried not to make his escape look like fleeing.

Albus watched the boy all but run from his office with a heavy sigh. “Phineas.”

Phineas Nigellus stalked into his frame, his expression sour. “You knew I was listening.”

“Hmm. You do so like to hang about in shadows.”

Phineas glared. “Oh, thank you ever so for that glowing assessment. Now, what do you want?”

Albus rubbed his beard, grief and guilt weighing heavily upon him. “Were you also watching?”

Phineas gave a curt nod.

“He did not look me in the eye once, did he?”

Phineas snorted. “What did you expect, Albus? Or have you already forgotten your shameful handling of your last meeting?”

Albus grimaced. “I-I do not think such a thing would be enough to shatter his trust in me.”

“No, your own foolish behaviour has done that. Merlin, after all you have done to him, why would he trust you? He would be a bloody fool to.”

Albus sniffed. “That is hardly a fair assessment——”
“No? You don’t think it’s fair? Merlin, Albus. Wake up and smell the lemon drops. You consistently withhold information from him, some of which cost us my descendant and his godfather—and he is aware of it. You lock him in that miserable place every summer when we both know Hogwarts is just as safe—and I highly suspect he is aware of that, too. You have pitted him against trial after trial to test his mettle and nearly gotten him killed more than once. You tried to force him onto the quidditch team when he does not wish to play and alienated him from his house as a result. You break into his mind illegally and read his private thoughts without permission on a regular basis. And perhaps worst of all, you continue to place him where he is at risk from a man who seems to take great delight in punishing him for crimes the boy never committed. Did you honestly expect to earn his trust by such underhanded behaviour? It’s a wonder he hasn’t had you thrown in Azkaban yet!”

Fawkes gave a chiding trill, joining in on the lecture.

Albus winced at the blunt litany of his crimes against the boy. Much as he would have liked to defend his choices, he knew better. Phineas was right. And Severus’ treatment of Harry during potions had proved beyond a doubt, by placing those two in close proximity, he had been playing with fire.

The trouble was, the flame from Albus’ mistakes hadn’t burned himself. His ill-advised plotting—and Merlin, hadn’t Minerva warned him against it—had hurt an innocent child instead. How badly so remained to be seen.

With a heavy sigh, Albus Banished the tea tray and biscuits and drafted a note for his potions master, soon-to-be ex-potions master if he did not begin to act in a professional manner. For the sake of the greater good, Albus often had no choice but to let some level of abuse slide in certain situations, even if it scarred his soul. But he drew the line at abuse that threatened a child’s safety and survival, and it was clear Harry was ill and cracking under the strain. He did not know how far Severus had gone in contributing to Harry’s state of being and how much he could attribute to grief, visions, and nightmares, but he would soon find out.

Albus finished his note and called to his phoenix. “Fawkes, old friend, I need you to carry this to Severus. Do not wait for a reply.”

Fawkes took the letter and vanished in a burst of flames.

Once the thrill of Severus’ victory wore off, alarm and dismay set in. Dear gods, what had he done? He had been acting on sheer emotion and blind rage ever since Potter had wormed his way into his class—nothing like a spy should do. He had let his anger get the better of him like a bloody fool.

And now he was utterly f*cked.

True, he had wanted Potter to leave the class. The brat didn’t deserve to be there, didn’t deserve to be anywhere near a cauldron, but Severus’ plan had been to make him feel as if he didn’t have the skills for potions, not to drive him away with his vitriol. Had Potter simply felt he wasn’t up to the task, he would have dropped the class or simply stopped coming. But now, there was no doubt the boy would go to the headmaster. And that would not go well for Severus.

Severus Snape had always lost when it came to the Potter clan.

He spent the rest of the lesson stalking around in silence, the chill of terror and squirming shame
quelling his tongue. Merlin, he had done it now. Albus would sack him for certain, but if he lost his position in the school, he also lost his use to the Dark Lord. He would be dead before the week was out.

Was there any good will left in the old man towards him? He supposed he would know soon enough.

With ten minutes left in the students’ brewing time, Fawkes appeared at Severus’ desk bearing a missive with familiar loopy writing. Severus’ heart leapt into his throat and pounded in his ears.

That hadn’t taken long.

With the skill of long practise, Severus hid a sudden tremor from the students and took the note from the phoenix. The bird gave him a sharp look before vanishing in fire and fury.

Fuck. If even the bird was angry with him, he had no chance. With a tremulous sigh, Severus sat at his desk and opened the letter.

Severus,

I would like to see you immediately. Dismiss your current class and report to my office as soon as you receive this note.

Albus

Severus’ stomach dropped like a stone. Dear gods, he was in trouble. Albus was never so direct. Or curt.

His voice shook beyond his control as he ordered the students to bottle what they had finished of their potions and set them on his desk, clearly labelled. He waited, trembling and cold with dread, as they obeyed—or not. They dallied, and Severus didn’t have time. He snapped his head up, ready to chide them for taking so bloody long, but his reproach caught in his throat.

The students weren’t dawdling—they were terrified. All but two had their heads down—Daphne Greengrass and Draco Malfoy—and even Malfoy looked alarmed. Daphne, though, glaring at him in all her green-eyed, auburn-haired fury, was a slap across the face. Not only was Daphne one of his own, but she had always liked him. The disgust and disappointment behind her glare took him twenty-five years into the past, when he had hurt another green-eyed redhead and lost her trust forever.

Severus whipped his gaze away, unable to bear her scorn. “I am afraid an emergency has come up,” he said in a soft voice, lest he damage these children further, “and I must leave right away. Place your phials on the desk and I will grade them as soon as I am able.” He cast a warding spell on the door. “Once you are gone, the doors will seal until I return, so I advise against any after-hours attempts to alter your grade.”

He gave his students one last look, and the desire washed over him to apologise. To tell these terrified, traumatised children he would treat them fairly from now on.

But he couldn’t. Particularly if he was about to lose his position, to admit a desire to give the Gryffindors some semblance of dignity back was more than his life was worth.
With shame burning his face and icy-cold guilt pooling in the pit of his stomach, Severus swept out of his classroom—his for the moment anyway—and started the long trek towards the headmaster’s office.

The teapot and lemon drops were not in evidence when Severus arrived, but he had no idea how to interpret their absence. Albus might have decided not to sack him, not yet, or he might have decided that Severus had broken his trust and therefore did not deserve the simple comfort of a cup of tea.

The pensieve on his desk, however, left little doubt as to Albus’ intentions.

“Do have a seat, Severus.”

He sat and dared not speak a word. As Albus also seemed content to stare at Severus, his expression heavy with disappointment, the silence grew oppressive. Severus could hear nothing but the beat of his own heart. Too fast, too loud—if he hadn’t known it impossible, he would have feared Albus could hear it too.

After many moments, Severus could bear the tension no longer.

“Albus, say something.”

“Hmm.” Albus laid his folded hands on his desk and leaned on his elbows. “Have I made a mistake, Severus, in allowing you to guide our students’ potions skills?”

Severus swallowed hard and gripped the arms of his chair. Hiding his tells would do no good here—Albus already knew. “I… perhaps I have been too harsh with the class at large lately.”

“Too harsh?” Albus’ gaze burned holes in Severus’ soul. “I think abusive would be a better descriptor. Particularly with Harry.”

Severus scowled. “That boy—his arrogance knows no bounds. I suppose he told you I beat them or some other nonsense?”

“Well, I suppose I did rather have that coming. But the fact remains, Severus, that whether Harry was willing to reveal the truth or not, I was able to glean enough from his physical state, body language, and your behaviour to piece together the facts.”

“I am not abusive to him!” The image of Potter kneeling and weeping before him flashed through Severus’ mind and his insides squirmed. “It is not abuse. I… I simply take a firm hand with him, which none of the rest of you are willing to do.”

Phineas Nigellus snorted.

Pink dusted Albus’ cheeks. “In that case, I suppose you won’t mind to provide me with the memory of your class today, and of the detentions you have been making him serve since the start of term? In particular, the session which you kept him almost twelve hours with hardly a break. In my experience, an eight hour detention going long into the night, then a four hour detention not four hours later is quite suspicious enough on its own, but perhaps the boy is stronger than I think.”

Severus trembled as he touched his wand to his temple and focused on the memories the headmaster
had asked for. There was no use in trying to alter them or deny Albus the right to view them. To do so would be an undeniable admission of guilt, and while Severus would admit he had perhaps been too harsh at times, the Potter brat surely had it coming.

Albus stood and straightened his robes—magenta with purple suns today. “Thank you, Severus.” He looked down into the pensieve, revealing an image of Potter bent over his desk, shaking hands clenched into fists and tears dripping onto a red-slashed parchment, a raging Severus looming over him. “Considering that the pensieve selects an image most representative of the sum of the memories found within, I must say this is already quite damning.”

Severus looked away. “Just… go.”

“Go?” Albus gave Severus a smile like the curve of a scimitar. “Oh no, my boy. I am not going into these alone. We will be viewing the evidence together. Perhaps it will do you some good to observe your behaviour without the benefit of denial or, shall we say, rose-tinted spectacles?”

Severus barely repressed the urge to flinch at the return of his own ill-advised words. “As you wish.”

He stood and moved to Albus’ side. “Will we be viewing every moment of these memories? Only they are rather long, and I have not made plans for the rest of the day.”

Albus raised an eyebrow. “Well, I suppose that depends on what I see here.”

Severus did not manage to suppress his flinch this time. “Albus….”

Albus gave him a sorrow-laden smile. “Severus, long ago, I placed my faith in you. I believed that, above all, even in spite of your past, you would be the best person to keep Harry Potter safe. I know full well what I see here will… disappoint me greatly.”

Severus swallowed hard and lowered his head. Only Albus had the gift of making him feel two inches tall.

“In spite of that, I still believe, some day, you can overcome this. Perhaps I am foolish to do so when everyone else has abandoned the hope that you will ever grow beyond your past. Yet, I cannot help but hold onto my belief in the good of your heart, or the faith I placed in a boy who once risked everything for the woman he once called his dearest friend.”

Severus shut his eyes around a sharp sting. Gods, he hadn’t wept in years. He wouldn’t start now, so help him.

Albus’ tone shifted to take on an edge of steel. “But I must make this clear, Severus. This is the first and only time I will afford you this opportunity to face your flaws and grow beyond them. I am willing to give you a second chance, but it is the only one you will get. I cannot afford—none of us can—to have Harry broken by a childhood grudge that never applied to him in the first place.”

Severus shuddered. “So you will let me go, knowing it will mean my death.”

“I think, after we view these memories, Severus, it will not be an issue.” Albus laid a hand on Severus’ shoulder. “I believe in you. Now, will you agree to take the blinders of hatred down, even if only for a few moments, and look at these with objectivity?”

Severus clenched his fists to keep from hugging his waist out of sheer grief and shame. “I… I can promise I will try.”

Albus squeezed his shoulder. “That is a start. Now, let us go.”
Severus took a deep breath, forced his emotions back, and tipped forwards into the basin.

He materialised at the beginning of Potter’s first detention of the term.

“Ah, I see you are two minutes late, Potter. It appears you assume that I, like every other professor in this school, have unlimited time at my disposal to cater to your whims. However, I assure you, this is not the case. As such, you will remain past your scheduled attention for two hours, in return for the two moments I lost waiting for you.”

Potter frowned. “That’s not….” He sighed and let his shoulders slump. “Yes, sir.”

“Get over there and scrub those cauldrons until they shine. I would tell you I want to see your face in them, but I prefer my cauldrons whole.”

Potter flinched as if struck, dropped his gaze, and walked over to the cauldrons without another word.

Albus paused the memory. “Severus, would you like to tell me what you have done wrong?”

Severus frowned. “He was late. I simply added on to his punishment as I would have for anyone else.”

“Anyone?”

The scene shifted, and instead of Potter, Draco Malfoy stood at the door. Severus sucked in a sharp breath. The boy had lost weight, judging by his gaunt appearance. He had dark rings under his eyes—both bloodshot and rimmed with pink. Had Potter been crying before his detention? He looked… well, miserable. Seeing Malfoy like this—a boy who took great pains never to appear in public with a single hair out of place—it was shocking, to be sure.

“Come now, Albus. Did you truly need to make Draco appear so woebegone to make a point?”

Albus raised an eyebrow. “I used nothing but a simple identity switching spell, Severus. The exhaustion and anguish you see here is also present in Harry.” To illustrate his point, Albus cast the specialised—and antiquated—counter, this time saying the words aloud so Severus could not possibly mistake the incantation.

“Personae Revertis!”

The worn-down, trodden-upon Draco Malfoy shifted back into Harry Potter. This time, Severus could not deny the boy looked utterly exhausted. Albus must have done something to make him appear so. Severus couldn’t have missed that much misery… could he?

“And just to show that there is no duplicity at work here,” Albus said with a knowing smile, “Finite Incantatem Totalis!”

Nothing happened. The miserable, trembling waif hadn’t changed at all. Severus’ belly squirmed with guilt. Had Potter truly been so sick and Severus hadn’t cared to see it?

“Now,” said Albus, “I believe you know that the spell I have just cast, with my power, would cancel any glamour or alteration I could possibly have placed on a figure in a memory. Perhaps not to a true
person, but a shred of memory can only hold so much magic.”

Severus nodded. “P-perhaps we should simply let the memory play now.”

“Oh, not quite yet. You have said you treated Harry just the same as you would any student in his position. Let us see if your treatment of Harry holds water when another student must endure it. *Personae Permuto!*

Potter’s desolate, weary form shifted to take on the features of Daphne Greengrass. Severus’ breath caught in his throat. *No.* Daphne was *nothing* like Potter. She didn’t deserve this. Watching her endure Potter’s punishment would be sheer torture.

“W-why Daphne, Albus?”

“Because you have already proved to me you cannot watch Harry Potter endure your undeserved wrath objectively.”

Severus frowned. “I… I have?”

“Yes.” Albus moved around to stand by the girl and clucked his tongue at her obvious misery. “The poor child. How is he coping like this?”

He sighed and turned back to Severus, his expression full of sorrow and reproach. “I chose Daphne for a simple reason: you cannot hate her or ignore her pain. She is a Light-sided Slytherin with no ties to the dark. You cannot suggest she deserves the punishment due to her association with Death Eaters either, as she is innocent of such crimes. As well, I am aware you hold a certain fondness for her, so to see her in the same situation you have placed Harry will, I believe, be more effective in forcing you to see past your prejudice than any other person I could have chosen, save one.” He gave Severus a sad smile. “And I am not so ruthless as that.”

Severus shuddered. He couldn’t have endured watching Lily suffer his wrath. Watching Daphne, who had the same colour hair and eyes but no other resemblance, was bad enough.

“Now, I am going to restart the memory,” Albus said. “However, first I would remind you that *Personae Permuto* alters nothing beyond the surface. The memory student before you will have Daphne’s face, voice, and body, but everything beyond that is projected from Harry’s true state of being at the time this memory was recorded. Everything Daphne does, everything she says, every whisper of emotion on her face is a mirror of what Harry did, said, and felt that night. Remember that, and tell me if you still believe your punishment justified when we are finished here. *Sileo Memoria.*”

The memory restarted from the beginning, and the same scene with Daphne Greengrass in place of Harry Potter left a taste of iron in Severus’ mouth. He could not deny he had been rough with the boy. And Merlin, Daphne’s face at the implication that her appearance would break Severus’ cauldrons nearly tore his heart down the middle. Gods, had Severus’ callous words truly cut the boy so deeply?

Watching a girl with eyes and features so similar to Lily’s enduring his vitriol and spite for hours on end was appalling. Well, simulated hours, at least. Outside the pensieve, he doubted ten minutes had gone by.

Regardless, Severus wanted out long before the end of the first detention. He had been terribly cruel, and worse, the girl never fought back. She was never disrespectful, never raised her voice, never said a word except ‘yes, sir,’ or ‘no, sir,’ and even that much only when Severus demanded an answer.
She showed no signs of arrogance and defiance at all, but took her punishment with quiet forbearance and resignation.

Though it galled to admit it, this proved Potter hadn’t deserved Severus’ ire that evening. The boy might have been an arse in the past, but that night, he had shown nothing but pain and despair.

And Severus had torn him to pieces for it.

Forced to see his ‘detention’ in this new light, Severus could not deny he had treated Potter appallingly. He had abused the boy. Broken him down and sent him back to the dorms in mental, physical, and emotional anguish, without so much as a pain potion to help him sleep.

“It’s nightmares, sir.”

Viewed in this context, Severus wondered if the boy hadn’t been telling the truth.

And yet—it simply couldn’t be! He couldn’t have been so far wrong.

Then Albus forced him to watch the third detention, the one placed so soon after a gruelling session the night before, again with Daphne taking Potter’s role. This time, Severus hadn’t been able to ignore the girl’s trembling form, the flinches of pain with every movement, or the moments when, pushed beyond her limit of endurance, she had given Severus a look full of dazed desperation. But she never spoke, not once. Instead, she had only given a weary sigh and turned back to her task, cleaning already spotless phials without a single complaint.

It hurt, that he had not trusted Severus enough to admit he was in agony.

Severus whispered, “Why, Albus? Why did he never ask me for help?”

Albus turned, sorrow heavy in his eyes. “What would have happened to you if you had asked your father for aid when you were in pain, Severus?”

Severus dropped to his knees, stunned and horrified. “No. No. I… I am not. It cannot be so terrible.”

At that exact moment, Daphne gave a muted whimper of agony and dropped the phial she was holding. Indeed, her hands shook so much, Severus was shocked she had aimed her cleaning spells properly at all.

“Foolish, idiot, worthless boy! Clean it up this instant, and you shall make up your mistake in detention tonight, too!”

Daphne stared at the mess, wand trembling in her hand, and shook her head wearily. With a shaky sigh, she sank to her knees and picked up the broken bits of glass by hand, piling them in a fold of her robes. Memory-Severus gaped, then grabbed the girl by the collar and pulled her away from the glass.

“Have you lost the bloody plot?” Severus jerked out his wand. “Show me your hands.”

Daphne flinched, but held her hands out palms down. She gritted her teeth and trembled, but did not move. The position struck some kind of familiarity in Severus, but he did not immediately understand why.

“The other way, foolish boy.”
Daphne looked at him in confusion. Merlin, she looked as though she would pass out at any moment. “S-str?”

“Palms up, you imbecile.”

“O-oh. I thought….” She winced and obeyed, turning her wrists to reveal fingertips already streaked with crimson.

Severus scowled and jabbed his wand at Daphne’s injured hands. “What manner of idiocy are you playing at? Can you, in your utter imbecility, honestly believe for a second that I will allow you to show these to the headmaster? Did you truly imagine I would let you get away with such an ill-conceived plot? Well, unfortunately for you, I am not so foolish as to let you have me sacked! Episkey! Tergeo!”

Tiny shards of glass removed themselves from Daphne’s fingertips and vanished, along with the blood. The girl barely flinched.

“Use your wand to clean it up, incompetent fool.”

Daphne shuddered. “I… I can’t. It’s not… so tired.”

Severus grabbed her shoulder and snarled into her face, “Don’t you dare play your pity-party games with me, boy. Do what I say or you shall return for another round tonight.”

Daphne whimpered and tugged out her wand. “Y-yes, sir.” Her hands shook as she aimed at the broken glass. “Evanesco.” Her voice was hardly a breath. A yellow light flickered on the end of her wand and winked out, and Daphne swayed and sank to her knees. “I’m sorry. I c-can’t.”

Severus watched, horror-stricken and shamed beyond belief as his memory self finally put the pieces together and understood “Daphne” wasn’t acting. After two days spent in detention using a massive amount of magic on top of classes and an almost complete lack of rest, the girl—Potter, rather—had succumbed to magical exhaustion. The boy was rumoured to have the same level of raw, magical power as Albus himself—not that Severus believed those rumours—and he had all but drained Potter’s reserves dry.

Beside Severus, Albus whispered, “Personae Revertis.”

Daphne shifted back into the form of Harry Potter. The boy was ashen, shaking all over, his head bowed and shoulders slumped with exhaustion. Memory-Severus conjured a rough seat and hefted Potter into it. The boy gave him a frightened, bemused look, but Severus ignored it and pulled out his wand.

Potter froze, petrified, as Severus pointed his wand at the boy’s forehead. “S-sir, please!”

“Oh do stop panicking like a snivelling infant,” Severus sniped. “Statum Corporis Magicae.” He paled at the findings and immediately Summoned several phials of magical restorative draughts. “Drink.”

Potter took the potion without a word and downed it, stunning Severus with his trust. “Thank you, sir.”
“Ten points from Gryffindor for your cheek. Do you imagine I care for your thanks? Just drink your potions and be silent.”

Potter grimaced and lowered his head, anguish apparent in every line of his form. “Y-yes, sir.”

Albus paused the memory and reversed it to view the numbers on Harry’s diagnostic. His finger tapped a red number. “Twenty. Twenty percent left, Severus.”

Severus dropped his head and pressed a hand to his mouth, trying not to sick up. Eighty-percent magical exhaustion. At ninety, a wizard’s systems shut down. At ninety-five, the condition became irreversible. It was fatal in every known case.

Dear gods, Severus had cut it far too fine.

Severus’ memory form continued feeding the boy potions until his numbers approached a normal level for a wizard in need of sleep.

“Get out of my sight,” he snapped. “And don’t bother returning tonight. I haven’t enough spare ingredients to waste on your fatuity.”

Potter staggered to his feet and forced out, “Y-yes, sir.”

The memory ended and showed the start of potions class that morning, but Albus paused it after a few moments and gave Severus a sad, reproachful look.

“I believe I have seen enough.”

Severus could only nod. He swayed as he came to his feet and followed Albus out of the pensieve.

Albus guided him to a chair as soon as they left Severus’ memories and gave him a cup of tea. “Sip it. It will help.”

Severus sniffed the beverage and detected the faint smell of calming draught. With a nod, he drank, relieved when the tea blunted the sharpest edge of horror and shame.

“Severus,” Albus said in a soft voice, “I trust there will be no need to repeat this… exercise in the future?”

“No,” Severus replied, his voice raspy and hollow. “No, gods no. I… I did not realise I was so far gone.”

“Yes, I know. I do believe if you had realised what you were doing was abusive, you would have put a stop to it. However, Harry’s heritage has always blinded you to the truth.” Albus fixed him with a stern look. “You do understand that what you have done to him was, in fact, some of the worst abuse I have ever seen take place under my leadership at Hogwarts? Only Tom Riddle himself did more harm.”

Severus dropped his head, struggling to hold back tears of shame and guilt. “Y-yes. I… I have failed to keep my oath. I was meant to protect him, a-and I… I hurt him. I have no excuse. I will take my punishment.”
“No.” Albus laid a hand on Severus’ arm. “No, Severus. I will not exact the punishment for it this time. As I said, foolish as it may be, I still have faith that you will overcome this one day. However, I have little choice but to remove Harry from your authority, for the safety of everyone involved. From this day on, he will be studying potions under Poppy, therefore, he is no longer your student.”

Severus grimaced. “And you do not think she will coddle the boy?”

“No, Severus, as I will be grading his assignments, at least until Poppy is prepared to take them on.”

Severus frowned. “You coddle him too.”

“Do I, Severus? Consider what I have asked of that child—what I have asked of you—and tell me if you still believe I am prone to coddling.”

Severus winced. Albus had a genial personality and did at least attempt to protect those he cared about, but Severus thought of his own double-agent role, of the fact that the Order had all but placed the fate of the world in the hands of a depressed teenager, and could not deny that Albus could be just as ruthless as the Dark Lord at times.

“No,” he murmured, chastised.

Albus nodded. “Since you have expressed worry that he will be graded unfairly, you will be grading his assignments for the first six weeks or so. Under my supervision, of course. And anonymously, since I fear to give your prejudice any chance to take root.”

Severus frowned. “How am I to grade his assignments anonymously when he is the only student not in my classroom?”

“Quite simply. I will take three samples of your students’ work, disguise names and handwriting with a spell, and you will grade each without prejudice. I will supervise and ensure that your grading is fair, since I am not entirely convinced you would not simply fail the lot to avoid giving Harry a passing grade.”

“Glad to see that your trust in me is so strong,” Severus said bitterly.

“With Riddle? The Order? I trust you implicitly. However, when it comes to Harry, you have a blind spot which cannot be ignored. I think we have seen proof enough of that.”

Severus bowed his head, unable to refute his claims.

Albus sighed and folded his hands in front of his chest. “Severus, I am giving you a second chance because I know there is goodness and honour within you. I am placing my faith in you that you will work to overcome your prejudice in the future, or if you cannot, that you will at least cease in your mistreatment of an innocent child.”

His voice took on an edge of steel. “However, I cannot simply condone what I have seen today either. I am afraid you will need to serve a three week suspension, starting immediately.”

Severus’ breath stilled and his stomach dropped. “W-what will I tell the Dark Lord?”

“I believe you will need to tell him at least part of the truth. That you became too caught up in the thrill of punishing Harry Potter and got carried away. As a result, I had no choice but to take action against you.”

“He will punish me, Albus. Harshly.”
“I am afraid it cannot be helped, Severus.” The ruthlessness Severus could sometimes forget existed in the man resurfaced. “After all, it is certainly no worse than the agony you have inflicted on an innocent. Magical exhaustion is not a painless affliction by any means.”

Severus cringed and dropped his head. “I see.”

Albus sighed. “Severus, I do not want you to be harmed, believe it or not. But if I do not take some kind of action after seeing such behaviour as this, it is I who will find myself in danger of suspension. And I think you know how dangerous that would be for us all. I have no choice but to act this time, Severus. I would not be beyond my rights to suggest a term in Azkaban for such abuse.”

Severus gasped and clawed the edges of the chair. “A-Albus, I….”

“Peace, child. I will not. I am not without guilt where Harry is concerned either.”

Phineas snorted. “You truly are the master of understatement, Albus.”

Albus cleared his throat and acted as though he hadn’t heard. “Ah, I merely mentioned Azkaban to impress the severity of your actions, Severus. I must discipline you, for an offence so grave.”

“I… understand.” Even though Severus’ stomach had turned to lead and his body trembled with dread.

Albus gave Severus a firm look. “My boy, a three week suspension is light for this kind of offence.” Phineas opened his mouth to make some smartarse remark, but Albus spoke over him before he could. “H-however, I do realise the pain it will cause you, so I will do nothing more.” His gaze turned sharp. “This time. You must learn to control your prejudices, Severus. I do understand that your position precludes kindness to Gryffindors, but that is no excuse for abusing them.”

“Y-yes, headmaster,” Severus murmured, once again feeling two inches tall.

“If you cannot learn to conquer your blind spots, I will have no choice but to take further action, Severus. I will not remove you from Hogwarts, knowing what the cost will be if I do. However, if you cannot learn to treat your students with a modicum of respect, then I believe it is perfectly clear you are not suited to teaching.”

The hair on Severus’ neck stood on end.

“I-I understand.”

Albus’ expression softened. “I have faith in you, Severus. Please, don’t disappoint me again.”

Severus bowed his head. “I will do my best.”

“That is a relief.” Albus rubbed his forehead. “I suggest you take the day to gather your wits and report to Tom tonight, before the rumours make it back to the Death Eater parents. Send a message to me before you go, and I will be on standby with Poppy for your return.”

“And if I return in no condition to call you?”

Albus gave him an enigmatic smile. “Your portkey sounds alarms in my office, but even without it, I believe I will find out, one way or another.”

Severus gave him a curt nod and stood, Occluding fiercely to keep the terror from his face and body language. Perhaps Albus was right and what he suffered at the Dark Lord’s hand was deserved this
time, but that did not make the thought of enduring such agony less dreadful.

“I… if I do not make it back, Albus,” Severus started, but Albus cut him off.

“You will. I trust you. Show him that, if you must, to strengthen your case.”

Severus blinked back the burn of tears and nodded. “Then… with any luck, I shall see you in the morning.”

“Yes. Until then.”

Severus left the office in a cataclysm of terror. Even if he did survive the night, it would be a close thing.

Utterly fucked indeed.

Chapter End Notes

**Spells:**

*Personae Revertis:* Revert persona. Shifts an altered identity back into its original form.

*Personae Permuto:* Swap persona. Switches a person's identity to someone else's.

*Sileo Memoria:* Restart Memory
Chapter Summary

**Warnings**: Violence, blood, Ron and Seamus are idiots.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Chapter 8**

*Unexpected Aid*

Harry hadn’t seen Professor Snape all day. Not that he *wanted* to after the fiasco that morning—Dean had been absolutely wrecked all day no thanks to Snape’s cruelty—but the thought that Dumbledore might have sacked the man in spite of Harry’s reticence left him chilled.

When Snape failed to show up for dinner, Harry could stand it no longer and went to Dumbledore’s office. The password hadn’t changed yet, so Harry dashed straight up the stairs and to the door.

As usual, Dumbledore called him in before he could knock. “Ah, do come in, Harry.”

The boy gave a wry shake of his head and walked in. “Sir, did you sack him?”

Dumbledore watched him for a moment. Harry lifted his gaze to meet the man’s on purpose, showing him his anger and fear for the professor in spite of everything.

Dumbledore smiled sadly. “Harry, you truly are too kind.” He waved to the seat in front of his desk. “Sit.”

“I’m not sitting anywhere until you tell me whether you sacked him or not. I don’t like the man, and he certainly needs a good kick in the bum, but he doesn’t deserve to be tortured to death!”

“No, Harry, I did not sack him. Have a seat, please, and I will tell you what I am able to.”

Harry let slip a sigh of relief and flopped into a chair. “T-thanks. When he didn’t show up today, I was scared.” He frowned. “If you didn’t sack him, where is he?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “That I cannot answer. I do not know.”

Harry went rigid. “You don’t know? Merlin, d-did you throw him out?”

“Harry, calm yourself. I am as aware of Professor Snape’s precarious position as you are, if not more so. I have not removed him from the premises either, and I will not. I do not know where he is because he has not told me. I assume he is either in his quarters or his private lab, but as I have not heard confirmation on either location, I cannot say so with certainty.”

Harry relaxed and gave a bitter laugh. “Why do I even care, sir?”
“Because you are, at heart, a kind young man. I do wish Professor Snape could see that too.”
Dumbledore sighed. “I am sorry, child, that you endured such pain under his authority this term.”

Harry paled. “H-how? I didn’t tell you. I didn’t tell anyone!”

“Peace, Harry. I am not blind, child. I am afraid that he had hurt you was quite obvious. But as to how I know, I asked him myself.” Dumbledore gave him a sad smile. “Harry, I cannot say much more without breaking his confidence, but I do hope he will change from here on out. I believe that he will.”

Harry shook his head. “No offence, sir, but I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“I do not blame you for that.”

Harry snorted. “So I guess he just got a talking to then?”

It was what he expected—what he hoped for. Dumbledore couldn’t risk Snape’s position without risking his life. But just in case the old man had done something more serious, if Harry pretended to be irritated at him, Dumbledore might come clean. That lecture Harry had dished out earlier in the month was bound to smart a bit still, especially since Dumbledore hadn’t gotten his way in the end.

Harry scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s not like you’ve ever done anything to him when he’s hurt me in the past, is it?”

“Harry….” Dumbledore sighed and rubbed his temples. “I… I suppose I have let it go on too long. As it happens, no, he did not get a talking to this time.”

Harry jerked to his feet as if he were furious—he didn’t have to fake it with the barmy old goat either—and directed his glare at a point above the old man’s eyebrow. “So you let him off? I guess you never learn from your mistakes, do you?”

He knew better. The old man had done something foolish, for sure. Maybe Dumbledore might not have sacked Snape, but any overt punishment might threaten the spy’s life if Riddle believed Snape had lost his standing at Hogwarts.

Dumbledore winced. “Harry, please. I did not let him off. After what I saw today, I had no choice but to take action against him. I would have faced disciplinary action myself if I had not.”

Ah. So the headmaster had taken action against Snape, but not out of a desire to protect Harry or teach the bastard something, but simply to protect his own hide. Well, the other motives might have had some influence on his decision, but Harry doubted Dumbledore would have done a thing had his own position not been threatened. Typical.

“Really? But you wouldn’t have faced it for letting sexual assault slide? Interesting.”

Dumbledore rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Harry, please. Sit down.”

Harry obeyed, wary gaze fixed on the old man’s brow.

Dumbledore popped a couple of lemon drops and tugged at his beard, an action Harry had long since learned to associate with thoughtfulness or stress. “Since I am going to announce the situation at breakfast tomorrow anyway—assuming nothing prevents my attendance—I suppose I can safely share the truth with you now. I need not tell you that it should not be spread among your peers, I hope?”
Harry scowled. “I know to use discretion where Professor Snape is concerned, sir.”

“Very well. As I said, I had little other choice but to take disciplinary action. He was far too abusive and far too indiscreet for it to pass by with nothing but a reprimand. He has been suspended for three weeks, though I will not remove him from the premises for his own safety.”

Harry’s heart stilled. Oh gods. It was worse than he feared.

“Suspended?”

“I could not condone such behaviour, Harry.”

“R-right.” Harry crossed his arms over his chest and chewed on his lip. “Which means the Death Eaters will know by lunchtime tomorrow, if they don’t already.”

Dumbledore gave him a condescending smile. “It is nothing you need concern yourself with, my boy. We are already taking measures to ensure Professor Snape’s safety.” He stood and patted Harry’s shoulder. “Go and get some rest, child. You have had quite the traumatic day and could use some sleep.”

Harry scoffed and threw off the old man’s hand. “Let me know when you figure out I haven’t been a child for years, sir.”

With a scowl, he turned on his heel and stalked out of the office, his mind racing and his heart conflicted. Dumbledore clearly thought Harry was stupid. The Death Eaters would know about Snape’s suspension by the next afternoon, and if Snape didn’t report it himself first, Voldemort might just kill him. Which meant the spy would most likely be going straight into the lion’s den tonight.

Besides, after surviving—barely—several years under Dumbledore’s idea of protection, Harry wasn’t at all confident that Snape wouldn’t end up in pieces. Most likely, Dumbledore’s ‘safety measures’ meant waiting around for Snape to return and call for him, which wouldn’t work out very well if the man was unconscious.

Well, that left Harry little choice about how to proceed, though he had to be a bloody masochist for even considering such a mad plan. With a groan for his fucked-up life, he made his way towards the library. He had studying to do.

Merlin, this night would be hell.

Albus watched Harry go with a sad smile on his face. The boy was furious at him—again, and perhaps with good reason. But in this case, Albus’ hands were tied. Severus might lose control of his rage again if Albus revealed more than what he had to Harry, but Albus knew Harry well enough to understand the refusal to treat him as an equal would drive the boy to do exactly what Albus wanted.

Phineas Nigellus stalked into his canvas and gave Albus a piercing look. “More mind games, Albus? Are you certain you were a Gryffindor?”

Albus shrugged. “You know, lions do have a fair amount of cunning.”

Phineas looked to the door Harry had just left through. “Indeed. Old man, I think the boy was not the
only pawn in play this evening.”

With that, the man left his canvas and gave Albus much to consider.

Harry staggered to the dorms, a heavy stack of books pressed to his chest and his face set in grim determination. As soon as he came through, he searched for Ron and Hermione out of habit, but they were ensconced in a corner in their own little world. He couldn’t trust Ron not to rat Snape out regardless.

With a sad sigh, he looked around to see who else was hanging about. Dean and Seamus were playing gobstones, but after what Dean had gone through that morning and how Seamus had been acting lately, he didn’t think it a good idea to bother them either.

Near the fire, Ginny was giving him hopeful looks over her quidditch mag, but Harry pretended he didn’t notice. He didn’t need to deal with her right now for certain.

Besides her, he saw only a group of lower years he didn’t know well enough to ask for help. Neville must have already gone to bed, or maybe he hadn’t come back to the dorm yet. It was early in the evening still.

With a sad sigh, Harry Summoned his cloak and grabbed it against his chest along with the books. As he opened the portrait hole once more, Ginny called out to him, but Harry acted as though he hadn’t heard and clambered through. Gods knew he needed help, but Ginny knew less on the subject than he did and she was driving him mad anyway.

He clutched his cloak tight and sprinted away lest she follow him. Another call of his name sounded behind him just as he turned the corner and entered the stairwell, but thankfully, the girl didn’t pursue him further.

At the landing to the seventh floor, Luna waved and ran to join him, dressed in a black shift and grey hood. Harry stared at her, bemused by the typically flamboyant girl’s sombre attire and sudden appearance.

Luna gave him a dreamy smile. “The Feathersprites warned me you would need help tonight. He’s in danger, isn’t he?”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “H-how did you…?”

“Oh, didn’t you know? The Feathersprites show me things. Lots of things, really. Some I would rather not see, if we are being completely honest, but then, time is not always a happy place.”

“Time? Things?” It clicked, and Harry gasped. “You’re a Seer!”

She cocked her head. “I suppose you might call me that. It’s really the Feathersprites who see things, but then, they do show them to me as well. I’m really more of a medium.”

Harry shook his head. “Er… right. Well, the… Feathersprites are dead on—I do need help, and yes, he is in danger. Will you help me, even knowing we’ll probably be out after curfew and might get in trouble?”
Luna chuckled. “Ask the thestrals.”

“Ask the… oh.” Harry supposed if the girl had been willing to fly on a thestral’s back straight into a fight with Voldemort and Death Eaters, rescuing Snape must seem like a walk in the park. “Right then. Come on. I have about five hours or so to learn how to heal, or at least some basic first aid.”

“Four.”

Harry grimaced. “Then I guess we’d best hurry.”

“Yes, we should go before the Nightprowlers find us.”

He had no idea what a Nightprowler was, but reckoned running into one wouldn’t be good if a Seer—or a medium—had warned against them.

“Right then.” Harry led Luna at a sprint to the Room of Requirement and paced in front of the tapestry. “I need a safe place to learn to heal. I need a safe place…. ”

Severus stared into the fire, half-empty bottle of firewhiskey in his hand. Though the alcohol dulled his racing thoughts, it did nothing to fill the bleeding void in his soul or the dread creeping into his heart, like ghostly fingers clawing at his chest.

What had he become? True, he loathed the Potter boy, but that did not give him the excuse to hurt him, to watch him suffer and gloat. Dear gods, the boy hadn’t even flinched when he picked up broken glass with bare fingers. Never complained, even when the glass cut him, and that atop a dangerous magical drain.

Fuck. Severus had suffered the Cruciatuṣ under the Dark Lord’s wand enough times to know the feeling intimately, and he had no doubt a magical drain of that strength would hurt almost as much. Yet Potter had just endured it. Not a cry, not a peep, not a whimper until his body gave out.

How could the brat have such a high tolerance for pain? Even Severus would have shied away. The only way a child could have such incredible endurance… he would have to be used to high levels of pain. But his long string of injuries acquired over the past five years and the three or four short-lived Cruciatuṣ curses Potter had lived through, terrible as they were, would not have given him the ability to endure pain in the long-term.

Perhaps, if Potter had lived his entire life in some level of anguish, he might have had the strength to endure such pain in stoic silence, but that was preposterous! Surely the Potter scion had been pampered all his life… hadn’t he?

Images from Occlumency flickered through his troubled thoughts—a dark, tiny cupboard, a meekly bowed head and a raging uncle, a five-year old boy serving dinner—but Severus dismissed them with a scoff. Perhaps the cupboard was a bit harsh, but the other punishments, no doubt Potter had done something to deserve them.

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“Like he deserved to nearly be tortured to death by your hand?”

“Shut up,” Severus muttered to his own mind. Yes, he had gone much too far. He didn’t deny it. But neither would he believe that the Potter boy was an innocent victim. No spawn of James Potter
would ever be completely innocent.

“Ah, but he is also Lily’s son—have you forgotten?”

With a snarl, Severus threw the alcohol into the fire and watched it blaze. As if he could forget her. Every time he saw anger and disdain in those deep green eyes, he remembered. He remembered his lost best friend and his worst sins.

“Perhaps that is the real reason why you hate the boy.”

“Enough!” Severus lifted a shaky hand and Summoned a sobriety potion. “This should shut you up,” he grumbled and downed it. In an instant, his alcohol-induced haze abandoned him, but rather than stopping, his thoughts raced like mad.

“Really, it’s not about him at all, is it?”

With a growl, Severus slammed down his Occlumency shields as hard as he could. His rebellious thoughts stopped, finally, but the void in his chest swallowed him, leaving him cold and desolate in the wake of his shame.

He had abused a child. His reasons didn’t matter. His past traumas didn’t matter. Whether Potter had deserved some kind of punishment or not didn’t matter either. The fact was Severus had vowed to protect Potter long ago, and he had abused the boy instead. Viciously. He had no justification. Arrogant brat or not, no child deserved what Severus had done.

Severus laid his head in his hands and closed his eyes against a wet sting. Gods. That morning, he had become one of the two men he hated as much as Tom Riddle: his own father. If the scene with Potter’s abuse had taken place in a Muggle home—a teenaged boy on his knees and bleeding, swaying from pain and sheer exhaustion under the authority of a much larger man—fuck. Severus might have thought he was experiencing another flashback of his own past. Gods. He even bore a physical resemblance to his father. The similarities were uncanny.

In a flash, Severus realised what had struck him as familiar about Potter’s position when he had held his hands out that afternoon. He had expected Severus to hit him! Potter had held his hands out palms down first because he expected his professor to strike him across his knuckles for his failures, much like Severus’ strict primary school teachers had done.

Dear gods.

How had Potter known about that punishment? Severus would never have hit him—as far as he had fallen, he had never been that kind of monster—but how had a pampered prince known about such a position at all? And even more telling, he had just stood there, not pleading, not complaining. Potter had prepared himself to endure agony in silence like one who had lived his entire life in suffering—and worse, one who knew daring to refuse his punishment or plead for mercy would only add to his pain.

The thought set the hairs on the back of Severus’ neck on end. Had Potter been abused?

No. It couldn’t be. It was mere coincidence, surely.

Wasn’t it?

Severus shook off his alarm and paced. Whether Potter had been abused before that day or not, the fact remained that Severus had abused him. In that moment, with a child in pain and bleeding before him while he terrified and taunted them, he had been no better than his father.
And that terrified Severus more than the prospect of what the Dark Lord might do to him for his failures. Long before, he had vowed never to become that bastard, but he had. Gods, he had. And not just with Potter. Thomas, Granger, all the students in his NEWT class had borne the brunt of his wrath.

No longer. Albus was right. Assuming Severus survived the night, he would have to make a change. Perhaps he could not afford to be kind to the Gryffindors—and truly, he did not have it in him to be kind to anyone anymore—but neither did he have to be a monster.

With that resolve in place, Severus Summoned several healing potions and his Death Eater garb, and gathered his courage around him like a cloak. The time had come to face the consequences of his failures, and he would accept them with forbearance. His punishment was just. He had failed in his mission, his oaths, and his honour as a man. He had some pain coming for what he had done.

He only hoped he survived long enough to implement his plan to change.

Severus focused on his time at the park with Lily, the same memory he always used to conjure his Patronus, but Potter’s tearful, pain-glazed eyes overlapped hers. And Lily’s ghost stared at him with sharp reproach in her eyes.

“He is my son too, Severus. My baby. And you hurt him.”

“Damn it.” He Occluded harder and focused on the memory, but that look in her eyes would not leave his mind. “E-Expecto Patronum.”

He might have expected the mist.

“Shite! I have to… this cannot be….”

But no matter how he tried—even using other memories—he never managed more than a vaguely doe-shaped mist.

“Oh gods.”

Like Potter, he had apparently lost the ability to conjure a Patronus. All of his happy memories involved Lily, and everything involving Lily now bore the stain of Severus’ guilt.

He had no joy left.

“Puts Potter’s problems in perspective, now doesn’t it?”

With a strangled cry of frustration, Severus made his way to the hearth instead and tossed a pinch of floo powder into the flames. “Albus Dumbledore’s office, Hogwarts.” It took more of an effort than he liked to keep his voice steady.

Albus appeared in the flames, looking confused. “Severus? Is something wrong?”

“I… I am leaving now to… explain.”

Albus nodded, his expression grim. “I will be on standby for your return. But, my boy, why did you not simply send your Patronus?”

Severus could not hold back a flinch. “I deemed the floo a safer option, old man,” he snapped, looking away so the old man mightn’t see through his thin lies.

So we have two advanced defence users who have lost the ability to conjure their Patronus then. I wonder if there is some sort of… illness, or if this is a plot.”

Severus snarled and bit out, “Leave it, Albus.” He bowed his head and dug his fingernails into the hearth. “Please.”

Albus’ eyes filled with understanding. “Oh, Severus.” He reached through the floo and patted the younger man’s shoulder. “In time, perhaps you may heal. For now, you must try to calm yourself and gather your wits. It would not do for Tom to see this in your thoughts.”

Severus clenched his teeth against a wave of roiling dread. “To be honest, I doubt it will matter. Tom suffers neither fools nor traitors.”

“I have faith all will be well in the end. And keep in mind that I am prepared for trouble. I will warn Poppy as soon as we are finished here. You do have your emergency portkey?”

“For what it is worth, yes, but it will do little good as I will have no means to contact you now, if I am indeed in need of urgent medical care.”

“I have taken measures to ensure you are not left alone tonight, and I will hear your portkey alarms regardless, should you be so injured as to require it. Now, do you believe you can face this?”

Severus took a deep breath and lifted his head. He gave Albus a curt nod.

“Fate willing, I will return before sunrise. If I do not… you know what to do.”

“Yes. Good luck, child.”

Severus nodded once more and ended the call. With a sigh, he straightened his shoulders, tightened his shields to their maximum, and drained his emotions of everything but worry and a sense of shame—the Dark Lord would expect to see both. Merlin, even as a natural Zopath, It would take all his strength to keep his emotions steady and his mind free of traitorous thoughts, but he had endured many similar nights before. He had stared death in the face for nearly twenty years. Tonight was no different.

With one last deep breath, he disillusioned himself and swept away.

“Oh, here’s a good one, Luna,” Harry said, poring over a thick medical text. “This is a first aid spell to help the person breathe. Auxilium Spiritus. Could come in handy if Snape comes back in pieces.”

Luna nodded and added a pinch of bloodroot to her cauldron. “The Feathersprites say they like that one.”

Harry gulped. He had learned to translate a few of Luna’s creatures in working with her over the last few hours. The Feathersprites were her Seer creatures, so if they said Harry would need it, damn! That meant Snape wouldn’t be breathing when he came back.

“B-better get that one down quick then,” he muttered and shut the book. Like all healing spells, it required Harry to focus on love to use it.

Merlin, but this would be difficult when everyone he loved had either moved on without him or
proved not to be so great after all, and when Snape was an utter bastard.

“Forgiveness is a type of love, you know,” said Luna out of nowhere. “I imagine you could find some, if you looked for it.”

“Forgetting….” Harry stared at the manikin the room had conjured for him to practise on, imagining Snape’s face on its features. He jumped when the Room shifted the manikin to resemble Snape, bat robes and all. “Gods. That’s disturbing.”

Luna chuckled. “Good practise, though.”

Harry sighed and leaned beside the manikin. “True, I suppose.” He stared at the man’s hooked nose, sharp jaw, and lanky hair, irritation and despair mingling in his chest. “Luna, I’m not sure I… how do I forgive him when he’s hurt me so much?”

She gave him a dreamy smile. “I think you already have, or we wouldn’t be here brewing Blood Replenishers and learning emergency healing spells. How did you forgive him before?”

Harry lowered his head. “I suppose… I forgave him because I felt his pain. Some of it anyway.”

He touched the manikin’s cheek and jumped at the feel of warm skin under his fingers. Merlin, even the manikin’s faint breath brushed his knuckles. It was almost too real.

“What do you mean about his pain, Harry?”

He jumped again, startled out of his examination of the manikin’s features. “Er… well, he’s had a rough life. You know, I think no one has ever really loved him at all. And my Da and Sirius….” He shook his head and took a deep breath. “Well, they didn’t get along with him.”

“The Feathersprites are telling me sad stories,” Luna said with a grimace. “That’s not good. Not good at all. And you say you felt the same way?”

Harry shuddered. “Not something I want to talk about, Luna.”

“No, I suppose not. But you should, you know. Talking is good for healing, even if it’s only to your familiar.”

“Hedwig?” Harry smiled to himself. “Yeah. She won’t tell my secrets.”

“Of course not, but many people also love you, Harry. They would keep secrets for you.”

Harry lowered his head. “Do they, Lu? Do they really? Where are they, then?” He traced his fingertips along the manikin’s hairline and wondered if the real Snape’s skin was so soft.

Luna stirred her cauldron and gave him a sad smile. “Well, we do sometimes get carried away by pride and the Ticklebees.”

“Ticklebees?”

“They make us think of love. Of making families of our own.”

Harry winced. “Yeah. I’ve no interest in Ticklebees at the moment then. I’ve too many to deal with as is.”

Luna tittered. “Your Ticklebees are closer than you think, Harry Potter. Now, do try and focus on your spell. He’ll be back soon.”
Harry shuddered. “Merlin, you’re right. I don’t have time to worry about this.”

He shook himself and focused on Snape’s face, searching for a way to forgive the man who had hurt him so much. In sleep, he looked softer, less menacing. More like his younger self. Harry jolted at the realisation that Snape was still a young man, just past his mid-thirties. Too young to be so damaged, to be sure.

Harry touched the man’s hair, smoothing it, surprised to find it silky and not oily. It did look that way sometimes. Maybe it was all the potion fumes. Or maybe the Room didn’t think that level of realism was a good idea.

He was fully-aware that Snape would kill him if he ever realised Harry had touched even a manikin of himself like this, but as he was trying to work up forgiveness for the man, he didn’t stop. Harry tucked the man’s hair behind his ear and rubbed his temple, wondering if Snape had ever felt a caring touch. Honestly, he doubted it. Maybe it wasn’t so surprising a man who had been so damaged, who had grown up without a shred of love, would have turned so vicious. Especially with those who had hurt him—and their son, of course.

Thinking of what his parents had done to damage this man made Harry remember the young Severus. In his dreams, Severus—he couldn’t make himself refer to that scared, innocent boy as Snape—wasn’t the cold, bitter individual he had become as an adult. In Harry’s dreams, Severus held his hand and cried out to him for help. In Harry’s dreams, they were the same.

The Room shifted the manikin’s features to resemble the young Severus. Harry’s heart lurched and his breath caught in his throat. Oh Merlin, Snape was Severus. He had known—of course Harry had known—but seeing them shift, the similarities between the boy and the man had brought it home to him: his dream friend and cruel professor were the same person.

With a deep breath, he took the manikin’s hand in his own and held it tight. “I’ll save you,” he whispered. “Somehow I’ll—ughn!”

A sharp, searing pain split Harry’s skull. It wasn’t like his typical visions—Voldemort must have been trying to block Harry—but he saw enough to know their time was up.

“How very disappointing, Severus. You could have gone so far, but to throw away your chance on foolish revenge when I have warned you to take care? That is unforgivable.”

Harry forced away the vision and struggled to catch his breath. “Lu, is that potion done?”

She held up a pink and blue sequined purse, overflowing with dark-red, yellow, and green potions. “I am ready. The Feathersprites agree with you—we are out of time.”

“Right. Let’s go.” Harry grabbed Luna’s hand, threw the cloak over them both, and dashed from the Room.

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Harry repeated all the incantations he had learned that night over and over in his head as he made his way down to the gates, Luna’s bag slung over his shoulder. Sarcio Vulnera would heal deep wounds. Sana Totalis would help stabilize Snape’s condition until Harry could narrow down what specialised spells he might need. Then there was Episkey, Ferula, and a host of other spells he could use to support the man until Luna could find Madam Pomfrey. Between the magic he had learned
and Luna’s potions, Harry felt confident he could keep the man alive long enough to get him to safety.

Not that Snape would thank him for it.

Luna was waiting at the Entrance Hall, her expression grim.

“Lu?” Harry tucked her under the cloak. “What’s the matter? Where’s Madam Pomfrey?”

“Quarantined for the next three days. Two students came down with dragon pox, and she has been exposed. A substitute healer is coming from St. Mungo’s, but he won’t be here until tomorrow morning.”

Harry grimaced. “So we’re on our own.”

“Yes.”

“Merlin, we’d better hope these spells stick then.”

“I believe in you, Harry, and so do the Feathersprites.”

“Good to know!” At another white-hot surge down his skull, Harry grabbed Luna’s hand and led her through the doors. “No time. I think he’s here, or about to be.”

“Yes.”

They raced down the path to the gates—Harry was unsurprised to find them unattended. “Good thing I didn’t listen to the old codger. Some protection!”

Luna gave a noncommittal hum. “I think we are the protection.” A flash of blue light flickered and faded beyond the gates, and she gasped. “There! Look, that’s the light Nanotinklers make.”

“Nanotinklers? Lu, can you speak plain English, just for the moment?”

She giggled. “They make portkeys work.”

“Portkeys? He had a portkey?”

“Apparently.” She hesitated. “Oh. The Feathersprites say it was for emergencies. We had best hurry.”

“Shite!”

Harry ducked out from under the cloak and tore off full-speed down the path. He skidded to a halt beside Snape’s unconscious form and sucked in a gasp at the sight of him. He had landed face down, robes torn to strips over his bleeding, whip-lashed back, hair matted with blood, skin bone-white. His chest wasn’t moving, and a dark pool was rapidly forming under him.

“Oh dear Merlin!”

Harry ripped off his own cloak and laid it beside the man, then rolled him onto his back. Snape’s face had lashes over his cheek and temple and a burn mark down the other side, his elbow bent at a strange angle, and his thigh had more lashes, but by far, the worst injury was to his chest. His ribs had been slashed wide-open, as if someone had attacked him with a sword.

“Oh fuck!” Harry sank to his knees next to the man, horror choking him. “Oh gods. I d-don’t know
He grimaced and shook himself out of his shock. He might not be able to save Snape, but unless he took action now, the man would die before he could find out.

“Sana Totalis!” It wouldn’t help much, not with this level of injury, but it might keep him alive long enough for Harry to figure out what to do.

Well, the first step was obvious. He had to stop that godsawful blood loss before Snape bled out. He wasn’t sure his wound healing spell was powerful enough, but thankfully Luna dashed up to his side just then and pressed her hands over the man’s chest, holding his wound closed as best as she could. That would do for the moment.

Harry focused on Snape’s face and aimed his wand. Forgiving the man wasn’t hard, not after seeing him torn to bits. Whatever punishment Snape might have deserved, this was too much.

“Auxilium Spiritus!” Snape choked and coughed up blood, but at least he was breathing again. Now, Harry had to focus on that sword wound. “Tergeo! Sarcio Vulnera!”

The blood vanished and the wound healed slightly, but not enough. Not nearly enough.

‘Shite!’

Harry focused with all his power, poured love and grief and forgiveness into his wand, and cast with all his strength. A massive surge of green light blinded him, but when he blinked the stars away, Snape was still dying.

“Oh gods, it’s not working. W-what do I do, Luna?”

She didn’t answer in words. The girl cocked her head, listening, then leaned down and started singing over the man’s chest. Harry opened his mouth to shout that this wasn’t the ruddy time for a lark, until he saw green light on her breath and realised she was healing Snape. A chant of some type? He listened, following the words.

With a deep breath and a prayer his voice wasn’t so bad it would ruin her spell, Harry let his magic pool in his chest and joined in.

“Vulnera Sanentur,” he murmured, surprised to have found a lower harmony, one that made an eerie, ethereal sort of sound when blended with hers. He wondered if magic had aided him, then remembered he was supposed to be healing Snape and focused on the strange, musical spell. To aid it, he let love and forgiveness fill him and wove the emotions in with his chant, and the green light on his breath turned brilliant white.

Harry watched, fascinated, as the wound slowly closed and Snape’s breathing eased. He continued his song a moment longer, just to be sure it had sealed completely, but a movement above him startled him out of his chant. He gasped to find the man’s black eyes open and staring at him.

“Pot… ter?”

“Yes, sir. It’s all right. We’re…. But Snape had already fallen unconscious again. It was probably for the best. “Right. Lu, think that’s healed now?”

She nodded. “I can’t find any trace of a wound any longer.”

Harry carefully opened Snape’s bloodstained robes and examined his chest. “No, it looks okay
now.” He hesitated before closing them again. “Reckon we should try to heal his back or get him into the castle first?”

“Potions before we do either one.”

“Right.” He carefully lifted Snape to rest across Harry’s knees and back against his arm. Snape flinched and groaned, but didn’t wake again.

“Here, this one first.” Luna handed him a Blood Replenisher. “Two of them, I think.”

“Er… but he’s unconscious.”

“Just pour them slowly. I’ll help him swallow.”

“You’re sure you know what you’re….” Harry remembered her miraculous find of the healing chant a moment before and shut up. “Right.” He tugged the cap off the potion with his teeth and placed the phial tip between the man’s bloody, parted lips. “Okay, I’m pouring it now.”

“Slowly.”

Harry nodded and tipped the phial just enough to get a dribble of potion into the man’s mouth. Below him, Luna massaged Snape’s throat, and to Harry’s relief, the man swallowed. Together, they kept this process going until Snape had taken two Blood Replenishers, a general healing draught, and an Anti-Cru-ciatus Draught Harry had taken from his own supply. Snape would never know Harry had brewed it, or so he hoped.

“There we go,” said Luna. “We should try to get him inside now.”

“Yeah, but where? If there’s Dragon Pox in the Infirmary, we can’t take him there.”

“We should take him to Professor Dumbledore, silly.”

Harry frowned. “Do you reckon he knows how to heal these wounds?”

“I certainly hope so, because he’s almost here.”

Harry grumbled, “About time.”

“Yes. He is running rather late.”

Harry harrumphed and conjured a handkerchief. With more care than Snape probably deserved, he gently wiped the blood from his face and neck, muttering healing spells as he went. By the time Dumbledore showed up, out of breath and ashen, Harry had finished with everything but Snape’s back, wrist, and leg.

He glared at Dumbledore. “That was some plan of protection you had in place, sir.”

“I…” Dumbledore panted and mopped his forehead with a red and green handkerchief. “You are right. It did not go as I had planned. Is he well?”

“I hardly call nearly bleeding to death before we could save him well, but I think he’ll survive now.”

“Merlin!” Dumbledore gave Harry a wan smile. “Child, I doubt Professor Snape will be inclined to thank you for this, but I do. Fifty points to Ravenclaw and Gryffindor.”

Harry shrugged. “He’ll just take them away when he wakes up. Anyway, what do we do now?”
Dumbledore tapped Snape’s broken wrist with his wand. “Ferula.” Splints and bandages formed around the injury and wrapped it tight. Snape flinched.

“I believe I can take it from here, children. Thank you, both of you. Go get some rest.” He conjured a stretcher and levitated Snape onto it. “Go on, then.”

Harry hesitated. “Will he be all right?”

“I am sure you have saved his life, my boy. The minor injuries I see here are not beyond my ability to heal.” Dumbledore waved them on. “Off with you now, and do not mention your… timely rescue of our potions professor, hmm?”

“Er, but….” Harry motioned to his gore-spattered robes. “Don’t you think this might draw some questions?”

Dumbledore frowned. “Quite right. Lavabisiccum.” Soap suds washed the bloodstains from Luna’s and Harry’s robes, then a blast of warm air dried their clothing from head to toe. “There you are.”

Harry looked over his freshly-laundered robes and grinned. “Well, that was handy.”

Luna tittered. “Yes, I’ll need to remember that one.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Quite. Goodnight, children.” The authority in his tone was a subtle warning to obey.

“Er… right, goodnight.”

Harry handed Luna her bag and led her away. “How much do you want to bet Snape hates me even more for this?”

Luna shook her head. “Time and understanding heals all wounds, Harry.”

He gave a bitter snort and trudged towards the castle. Time and understanding, huh? The day Snape came to understand him would be the day Dumbledore learned fashion sense.

Luna parted ways with him on the staircase and left for the Ravenclaw dorms. Harry dragged himself up to the tower, exhaustion setting in fast on the heels of his adrenaline-fueled rescue.

The Fat Lady gave him a reproachful look as he came into view. “Curfew was two hours ago, young man. Where have you been?”

“Studying.” Well, it was partially true. He covered a yawn so wide, he thought his jaw might have cracked. “Vit-Vitam et Amor.”

The Fat Lady gasped even as her frame swung open. “Get that looked at, Harry.”

Harry gave her a bemused frown, but shrugged it off and staggered up the stairs. Ron and Seamus were waiting at the door, both looking irritated. Harry eyed them in suspicion as he stepped into the common room.

Seamus snapped, “Where’ve you been then? Off losing us more points?”

Harry ignored him and started to push past, but Ron grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

“Wait just a minute, Harry,” Ron said, eyes sharp. “Seamus and I are here because we think it’s time for an intervention. I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately—quitting the team, pushing everyone
away—but it’s got to stop. We’re already three hundred points down and it’s not even the Christmas hols yet.”

Harry just stared at him. Arguing would do no good. These boys were still children, and perhaps that was a good thing. Harry certainly wouldn’t wish his life on anyone.

“Look,” said Ron with a sigh, “you can’t just go gallivanting around after curfew right now. We’re in too deep.”

Harry glared. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

Ron scowled. “Yeah? Well, why didn’t you bring us along then?”

“You’ve barely spoken to me for two months! Why would I even try to ask you?” Harry scowled and turned away. “Besides, when I came up here looking for help, you were too busy snogging to even notice me.”

“Oi!”

Harry sighed and tried to push past them again, only to find the way blocked. “Guys, just leave me alone. I don’t need an intervention. I need sleep.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you wouldn’t be so tired if you’d stop running the halls all night,” Seamus fired back.

“I wasn’t. Most of the time I’ve been out, I was studying.” It was true, though these two sure as hell didn’t need to know what he had been studying or why.

“Studying?” Ron scowled. “Merlin, you complain about Hermione’s schedules and then stay out at all hours of the night revising? I like that!”

Harry groaned and rubbed his forehead. “Look, I had to, okay? It was—”

“Merlin!” Ron jerked Harry’s hand down and gasped. “What the hell? What have you done to yourself?”

Harry frowned. “What do you mean?” He followed Ron’s gaze down and gasped. Red and brown stains covered his fingers and palms, even up to his wrists.

“Shite!” He flushed and pulled away. “It’s not mine. And I told you I had to!”

“What the fuck do you mean it’s not yours?” Seamus stared at him, eyes wide. “Who’ve you been killing then?”

Harry reeled back, anguish ringing off his ribs to strike him in the heart. “That’s what you think of me? That’s really—all this time and….” Tears stung his eyes and he jerked back, hiding his face. “For your information, I neither killed anyone nor lost points! I saved a bloody life. Oh, and I gained you fifty points, not that it matters!”

“What?” Seamus snarled. “No wonder we’re losing points left and right if you think they don’t matter! Slytherin will have the cup at this rate.”

Harry fixed him with a glare so sharp, the boy gulped and took a step back. “And why the hell should I care about points when Voldemort is murdering ten, fifteen people a night and I have to feel them die?”
The colour drained out of both boys’ faces.

Ron reeled back and choked out, “W-wha—”

But Harry had been silent too long and words poured out of him before he could stop them. “Who the fuck cares about house points when Voldemort is doing the best he can to torture Britain to death—and me into the bargain—before he takes over? I reckon since it doesn’t affect you—yet—you don’t care, but I bloody well have to, or did you forget the prophecy already? So yeah, go on worrying about your fucking house cup and quidditch and snogging, and I’ll go on fighting a bloody war all of you seem to have forgotten has taken everyone, everyone from me I ever loved!”

His voice broke, and with a snarl, he shoved away from both boys and turned for the portrait hole. “Fuck this. Not like I’ll be able to sleep now anyway.”

“H-Harry! Wait!”

But Harry ignored Ron’s call and dashed for the staircases. The Room of Requirement would give him a place to sleep for one night, he hoped. Or at least to hide until morning.

After a quick shower and a change into a Room-provided pair of pyjamas, Harry crawled into bed and struggled to find repose, but lay awake long into the night. When he finally slept, he dreamed of Severus, hanging naked and crying tears of blood, his chest lashed wide open. Harry hung in the same position beside him and watched as Gryffindor house took bets on who would die first.

Chapter End Notes

**Spells:**

*Auxilium Spiritus:* "Aid Breathing." Self-explanatory.

*Sana Totalis:* "Heal All." (JKified translation.) Used to keep people in dire straits alive until more specialized spells can be applied.

*Sarcio Vulnera:* "Mend Wounds." Major wound healing spell. Doesn't work on *Sectumsempra* as it has a specialized counter.

*Lavabissicum:* "Wash and Dry." Cleans and dries clothing.
A Heart Divided

Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** Discussions of graphic violence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 9

A Heart Divided

3 December

Severus woke with a terrible headache, miserable pain in his chest, and various other aches and pains, but the fact that he had woken at all shocked him. The Dark Lord had ended Severus’ torture with a *Sectumsempra* straight to his chest. The curse should have been fatal within a minute, if that long, and Albus wouldn’t have been able to make it to his side so quickly even with his emergency alarms on standby.

Who had saved him? And *how*?

“Ah, I see you’re awake.”

Albus’ voice went straight through Severus’ aching skull. He groaned and buried his head in the pillow.

“Go away.”

Albus chuckled. “Not until you have had some potions and a bit of breakfast. I imagine some pain reliever will go quite a ways towards making you more sociable.”

“I don’t *do* sociable, old man.” Nevertheless, Severus grabbed the phial of blessed blue potion in his uninjured wrist and drank it down, but choked halfway through.

“Slowly, Severus. That sword wound did rather significant damage.”

“Sword wound?” Severus coughed and wiped his mouth. “What ruddy sword wound?”

Albus frowned. “The one that nearly killed you, I presume.”

“That wasn’t a sword wound. The Dark Lord thought it would be amusing to kill me with my own bloody curse.” Severus rubbed his chest and winced at the sharp pain of a healing wound. “H-how am I alive?”

Albus’ eyes went as wide as galleons. “Oh dear Merlin. *That* is a good question.”
Severus swallowed the rest of the potion and set the phial aside. “You didn’t heal it?”

“No. By the time I arrived, it would have been far too late.”

“Who?”

Albus gave him a wan smile. “Who else could it have been, Severus? Who else knew of your suspension?”

Severus went rigid, dread pooling in his gut. “Albus… who did you inform?”

But before Albus said a word, Severus already knew. He had thought it a dream—or perhaps a nightmare—when he woke in agony with a blood-streaked Potter kneeling over him. He hadn’t seen much beyond a flash of shock on Potter’s features, hadn’t stayed conscious long enough to hear much beyond an affirmation of the boy’s identity. He had thought Potter had come to exact revenge while he was weak, to gloat over him while his life bled away. Instead, it appeared he owed Potter his life.

Of all the fucked up ways to survive certain death.

“Potter!” Severus regretted shouting immediately. He swayed under a sharp surge of pain and gripped his chest.

“Do calm yourself, Severus.” Albus handed him a phial of calming draught. “I do mean that. You are in neither the condition nor the standing to become violent.”

Severus shuddered and drank the potion against his better judgment. “Potter, Albus? Why? How? I never taught him the counter.”

“I do not know how, but why is quite simple, my boy. He knew the minute I told him you were suspended that Tom would punish you, and he did not believe you deserved to be tortured to death.”

Severus stared, unable to comprehend. “But… that… no. It cannot be. That….”

“The truth, Severus.” Albus gave him a sheepish look. “I am afraid I have annoyed him again. You see, when you did not make an appearance around the castle yesterday, he came to my office after dinner believing I had terminated your teaching contract. The first words out of his mouth were a demand to know if I had let you go. At first, I admit, I thought he may have been hoping for such an outcome, and thus I was reluctant to tell him anything. Then he made eye-contact—for the first time in days—and willingly showed me his thoughts. He was furious, but not at you. He believed I had sent you out of the castle, knowing the danger, and was out for my blood.”

Severus choked and clutched at the sheets. “That’s preposterous! He would not—for Merlin’s sake, Albus, I have been a monster to him. Why should he even care?”

Albus chuckled wryly. “He asked me the same question.”

Severus opened and closed his mouth, utterly gobsmacked. “And… and what was your answer?”

“He cares because he is too kind not to care, even to those who have harmed him. As for why he cares about you specifically, when you have indeed been monstrously cruel, I suspect there is more I do not know. I had the sense that he identifies with you on some level when he allowed me access to his mind, but I do not know how he has come to that conclusion.”

“I-identifies with me? Our lives could not be more different if we tried.”
Albus gave him a sad smile. “On the contrary, Severus, I fear you are much more alike than you will ever admit.”

“I admit nothing! He is an arrogant, foolish… and… and I….” Severus could not stop himself from hugging his chest for comfort, unbalanced and weak as he was. He regretted it immediately and let his hands fall. “A-Albus, I do not understand. Why would he save me?”

“Perhaps you might ask him yourself, if you can do so without being cruel.”

Severus closed his eyes, his brain hurting from all the wild thoughts racing within. “You never explained how he learned the counter.”

“Because I do not know. I am aware he was up for several hours last night studying healing, but—”

“Why would he even want to go to all that trouble, Albus? Why did he insist on coming to my aid when he knew you were aware of the situation?”

Albus gave a deep sigh. “Because I have let him down, Severus. Repeatedly. Every year, I have promised him he is safe here, and every year, he has been harmed greatly in some fashion or another. I imagine he believed my protection would prove inadequate.” He closed his eyes and lowered his head. “And, once again, he was correct to doubt me.”

“Albus…” Severus gave the man a sorrowful look. “You have sheltered me all these years. And yesterday—any other headmaster would have dismissed me, if not thrown me in prison.”

“But last night, I was not the one to save you, Severus. Indeed, my aid would have come far too late. Harry saved your life. Harry, and Miss Lovegood, though I am convinced Harry did the brunt of the healing magic. He appears to have a great aptitude for it, to my relief.”

“You must be joking.”

Albus raised an eyebrow. “Hmm. Well, I do not know what state you arrived in, but there was little enough left for me to patch up by the time I arrived, and it could not have been more than ten minutes since I had first heard your portkey alarm. In that time, Harry had healed you of everything but a broken wrist and the lash wounds on your thigh and back.”

“That….” Severus frowned. “I would think the lash wounds would have been the most serious injury behind Sectumsempra, then my wrist. Why did he leave those?”

Albus shook his head. “I cannot say for certain. I believe he simply missed your wrist in his urgency to heal your chest and breathing, but as far as your lash wounds, I surmise he left those intentionally to preserve your modesty. Your clothing was… well, I had to Vanish it to treat you. Still, the boy did well, especially for his first time. Beyond your wrist, chest, and the lash wounds, I am not even aware of what other injuries you may have had.”

Severus stared, stunned. “Albus, I was tortured for hours. I was injured from head to toe. How is it possible any sixth year could have healed so much, let alone Potter?”

“As I said, he was up for many hours studying with Miss Lovegood and brewing potions to save your life—”

“He fed me potions he brewed, and I am not poisoned?”

Albus fixed him with a sharp look. “I believe Miss Lovegood brewed the potions as I am sure Harry anticipated such a reaction. However, he is more skilled than you give him credit for. I am almost
certain he has been brewing potions to help with aftercare for his visions all term. Which includes Anti-Crucius draught, Severus, and you know that is high NEWT level.”

“So, in other words, Miss Granger has been brewing for him.”

“No. Harry has distanced himself from his friends, and you are well aware of this.” Albus sighed. “Severus, will you never see the truth of him?”

“I am the only one who does,” Severus grumbled.

“I had hoped yesterday morning would have proved you quite wrong on that point.”

Severus flinched. He had certainly been wrong about many things, but this? He… simply couldn’t wrap his head around it. Or anything else for that matter. Gods, had he fallen into an alternate dimension somehow?

“Just… let me rest, Albus. Please. I am in quite a lot of pain.” It wasn’t even a lie. He felt as though he had been hit by a lorry.

“Very well.” Albus stood. “Your opinions are your own, Severus, but I will not have you hurting the boy. Not for this. We would have certainly lost you without his assistance.”

“And Lovegood. I am inclined to attribute the bulk of my survival to her, much as it baffles me.”

Albus stroked his beard, eyes thoughtful. “I suppose it is possible; however, I do not believe that is the case. When I arrived, Miss Lovegood was Vanishing your blood, cleaning up a stack of empty phials, and tucking several full potions back into her bag. Harry was holding you across his lap, washing the blood from your face, and…”

Albus kept talking, but Severus heard little beyond….

“He had me in his lap?”

Albus snorted. “No, not quite. Harry had you lying astride his legs and his arm supporting your shoulders. I believe they had placed you in such a position so as to administer potions without suffocating you, as you were still quite unconscious. Did you hear the rest of what I said beyond that?”

“Nothing beyond he was washing my… my face? Are you sure he… I simply cannot imagine it.”

Albus tapped his temple. “See for yourself.”

Severus gulped and forced himself to meet Albus’ eyes. The old man lowered his barriers enough to show Severus a scene out of… if not nightmares, certainly the strangest dream he ever saw.

Albus approached the gates at a run, as fast as his creaking knees would carry him—a considerable speed for a hundred and fifteen year old man, but far too slow to save Severus’ life. Merlin help him, he should have listened to Harry. The boy had been right about his failures—again—but gods, how was Albus to know an attack of Dragon Pox would hit the Infirmary ten minutes before Severus needed Poppy?

There was no help for it. Albus just had to hope Harry had taken the bait earlier and somehow managed to find the skill to bring Severus back from the brink of death.
It wouldn’t be the first time the boy had pulled off a miracle.

Albus gasped at the sight of emerald green light glowing around three silhouettes, one prone. Merlin—Harry was healing Severus. Along with a friend. Mister Longbottom, perhaps? The light flickered on and off—was their magic failing or were they using several spells in quick succession?

He shook himself and put on another burst of speed, using magic to aid him. He would not arrive in time to find out unless he hurried.

And yet, a few yards before the gates, he skidded to a halt, speechless and rooted to the spot.

Miss Lovegood was in the middle of Vanishing a massive pool of blood and Banishing potion phials into a brightly coloured purse, but the boy… Merlin! It appeared even Albus could still be shocked.

Harry held Severus across his lap, cradling the man’s head against his shoulder. He dabbed at the unconscious man’s face with unbelievable gentleness, considering how cruel Severus had been just that morning. Soft murmurs fell from his lips along with bursts of healing light.

Albus stared, awe and hope flooding his chest. Not even Poppy had been able to heal like this at Harry’s age. Maybe Severus would pull through after all. He came a few steps closer, straining to make out Harry’s incantations.

“Episkey… Sarcio Vulnera… Consano Corporis….” The boy paused and rested his cheek against Severus’ mouth, his expression focused. “Damn. Still not strong enough.” He moved his face back again. “Auxilium Spiritus….”

Albus’ heart stilled. Dear gods. Severus couldn’t breathe!

He shook off his shock and dashed towards the gates again, just as Harry had started another round of healing spells, almost in the form of a chant. The light from his hands and wand glowed bright green, bright enough to eclipse the light from Miss Lovegood’s wand.

Harry looked up just as Albus arrived and glared. “That was some plan of protection you had in place, sir.”

“I….” Albus panted and rubbed his forehead, bemused and gobsmacked at the evening’s strange events. “You are right. It did not go as I had planned. Is he well?”

“I hardly call nearly bleeding to death before we could save him well, but I think he’ll survive now.”

Severus pulled back shaking. The way Potter had held him, had touched his face to heal him, gods. He hadn’t felt such touch in twenty years—and never without an ulterior motive. He might have thought Potter had one too, had Severus been conscious. There could be no manipulation or abuse if Severus hadn’t even been aware of his touch. And Potter hadn’t taken advantage either. He had simply cared for Severus’ wounds, held him and washed his face as if… as if he cared and wanted to ease Severus’ pain.

No one had ever shown him such gentleness. Of course Poppy had cleaned his wounds and Albus had sometimes treated injuries or comforted him after particularly bad Death Eater meetings, but this… no. Severus had no experience of it. Poppy used her wand to clean him after being injured. Albus was a bit more tactile in that he would pat Severus’ shoulder or rub his back.

Not since his early youth had anyone washed Severus’ face by hand. Nor had anyone held him or
cradled his head against their shoulder. Neither had anyone ever touched Severus so softly, so gently, as if they cared about more than just his physical well-being. Besides his mother, the only person who had ever touched him beyond a purely physical release or the barest affection had used touch as a weapon against him, and he had certainly never been so tender.

It clawed at Severus, tore at his heart that the first person to have shown him such gentle, unadulterated care was none other than the same boy he had abused terribly not twelve hours before.

Shite. He couldn’t process this. It called everything he had ever known into question.

“Albus, I… I need a drink.” His voice came out rough and shaky. He hoped Albus would blame the quality of it on his injuries and not his emotional state.

Albus laughed. “No, you most certainly do not, not in this condition. You need rest.”

He draped a blanket over Severus’ shoulders, and the kind gesture reiterated the younger man’s raw, desperate ache for someone, anyone to care about him. Someone he could trust.

Well, perhaps Albus cared in his way, but Severus could not reveal his broken heart to him, even if the old man was the closest thing he had to a father. Albus was a general first and foremost. He would use Severus’ weaknesses against him in a heartbeat, if the greater good required it. Severus couldn’t begin to trust such a manipulative man with the softer parts of him—never again—but Merlin, how he wished one trustworthy person would show him unconditional love. Just once.

His mental voice interjected, “One did, just last night. Have you already forgotten?”

Severus growled and huddled into the covers. No… not Potter. There had to be a catch.

“Or you have simply been wrong about him this entire time.”

No. He couldn’t believe that. It was Potter, the son of the man who had so ruthlessly tortured him and the godson of his partner-in-crime. The laws of genetics alone insisted that Potter couldn’t be so different from his family.

“But he also has Lily’s genes. And he is no more blood relation to the Mutt than you. Less, probably.”

Severus bit back a whimper and buried his face into the pillow. It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t.

Even if Potter was better than Severus had given him credit for, even if he wasn’t the spoiled brat Severus had always made him out to be, Severus had been brutal to the boy. Who could possibly have such capability for forgiveness within them? Daphne had always been one of his favourites, and even she had turned away from him in disgust. Of course, Daphne did not and could not know of his double life, but even if she had known Severus was in trouble, he doubted the girl would have rushed to his aid had he spent years making her out to be subhuman and using her pain for his amusement.

How was it possible that he owed his life to the one person he had hurt more than any other? He would have liked to insist that Lovegood had brought him back from the brink for the sake of his sanity, but no. after seeing that image in Albus’ mind, Severus could not deny that Potter had saved him. Perhaps she had assisted, in her way, but those rapid-fire healing spells Albus had seen took more raw power than Lovegood possessed.

So did the counterchant for Sectumsempra, come to think of it. Where in Merlin’s name had Potter learned it?
And how could the boy have found it within him to care, to have enough forgiveness and concern for his abuser to have touched him with more gentleness and love than Severus had ever known? How could he have dredged up enough love for his abuser to heal Severus at all?

Gods help him, what did all of this mean?

Albus’ voice broke into Severus’ troubled thoughts. “Are you hungry, Severus?”

“No,” Severus breathed. “No, I cannot eat at the moment.” His churning stomach would reject anything he dared put in it.

Albus nodded. “I thought you might not be up to it. It is rather shocking to have one’s world turned upside-down overnight.”

Severus shot him a dark glare.

Albus chuckled. “No need to shoot the messenger, as it were.” He stood and brushed off his robes. “Well, if you are not hungry, at least try to rest. I must leave for the Great Hall now, but I will return after breakfast. If you require aid before then, please call for Dobby and he will retrieve whatever you need.”

He left the room, leaving the door partially open, and Severus whispered a thank you into his purple chintz pillow. Wait. Purple chintz? So he was in Albus’ quarters then. Curiosity got the better of him, but he soon wished he hadn’t looked. Neon pink, orange, and green paisley wallpaper? Merlin. It was as if a radioactive fairy had vomited all over the walls. And the furniture wasn’t much better.

“He is trying to murder me by bad taste alone,” Severus muttered and tugged the covers over his head.

The shelter of his blankets blocked out the horrendous décor, but it did nothing to stop Severus’ crushing shame or the terrible, creeping feeling that he had been wrong all this time.

With a whimper he couldn’t prevent, Severus Occluded everything from his mind and let sleep bring him some semblance of peace, at least as long as it lasted.

Harry woke the next morning with a heavy pit of grief shadowing his spirit and a nagging shard of fear twanging at his spine. As he prepared himself for the day, he sorted through his wild emotions, struggling to think of what had inspired that creeping, sick feeling of dread. He cast a laundering charm on his clothing, and as he remembered where he had learned it, he realised what had frightened him so. He was worried about Snape, despite his bafflement that he should care at all.

Dumbledore hadn’t sent word that Snape had survived the night. Harry supposed he could reasonably expect to learn the truth at breakfast as the old man planned to announce Snape’s suspension then—if Snape had died in his sleep, he would be announcing a funeral instead—but Harry wasn’t hungry. Grief and dread had turned his guts into a churning mess. He had no desire to deal with his classmates anyway, not when their betrayal still cut too deep and the nagging feeling that he had missed something with Snape would not leave him be.

Harry sat up and stared out the window. Dawn had come and gone. His classmates would have already dressed and showered and been on their way to the Great Hall—without Harry. The pain in
his chest doubled, but he ignored it. The cold pit of fear in his gut was stronger.

He pondered over the situation as he washed up and brushed his teeth. Snape was safe in Dumbledore’s care, and yet, Harry knew something was wrong. But what? They had sealed his serious wounds last night. Could he have developed an infection that Dumbledore had missed? Luna hadn’t had time to worry about cleanliness when she pressed the wound on Snape’s chest closed. Maybe it was possible.

Either way, Harry couldn’t rest until he knew what was going on.

With a sigh, he decided there was nothing else for it but to go to Dumbledore’s office and see Snape for himself. The man would probably excoriate him for it, but if Snape did have the strength to cut Harry with the sharp side of his tongue, at least Harry would know he had a fighting chance. Harry doubted he could concentrate on his classes with this strange prickling sensation down his spine anyway.

He ran over all the healing spells he knew as he tugged on his clothing from the night before, both those he had learned last night and others picked up over a thousand run-ins with the Infirmary. Confident he would at least be able to stabilise the man until he could get help, he went to tug on his cloak and frowned when it wasn’t there. Oh. Right—he had placed it under Snape’s back while they were healing him last night. The man must still have it then.

Seemed Harry had a reason to head to the headmaster’s office beyond instinct after all. It was too bloody cold on the grounds to go outside without a cloak and Hagrid wouldn’t mind if he was a bit late.

With a shrug, Harry buttoned his robe and tucked his wand in his pocket. “Dobby.”

The house elf appeared dressed in several pairs of Bermuda shorts, a purple and blue scarf, and a red jumper with tiny Christmas trees on the front. He had a Santa hat over one ear and a candy cane hanging off the other like an earring. The little creature fretted as if he was nervous, but hugged Harry in greeting as usual.

“Hello, Great Master Harry Potter sir. How’s can Dobby be helping you?”

“Um, I couldn’t sleep in the dorm last night and I don’t have time to go back. Would you mind to grab my books for transfiguration and charms, my knapsack, and my supplies, please?”

Dobby’s ears perked up. “Yes, Dobby will get it. I’s not have much more time than that though, Great Master Harry Potter, sir.”

“That’s fine, Dobby. I’m running short of it myself.”

“Oh! Then I’s will be right back.” The little elf vanished and reappeared with Harry’s belongings, already packed into his knapsack. “Here you are, Great Master Harry Potter, sir.”

Harry took his bag with a smile. “Brilliant! Thanks, Dobby.”

The elf wailed and gushed, but popped away much faster than Harry could usually calm him.

“Merlin, he really is in a hurry.” Harry frowned and slung his bag over his shoulder. “And so should I be, if I plan to make it to charms in time. Into the lions’ den we go.”

Steeling himself against the lion’s—or rather, the snake’s—sharp teeth, he threw on his invisibility cloak and made his way towards the headmaster’s office, though he took his hood off to identify
himself to the gargoyle. Dumbledore had changed the password, but it didn’t take long to guess.

“Drooble’s best.”

The gargoyle gave Harry a worried look as it leapt aside and jerked its head towards the staircase.

Harry swallowed hard, nerves on edge. “Is something… wrong?”

But the gargoyle couldn’t speak. Heart hammering in his chest, Harry started up the staircase, but froze as soon as his eyes landed on the headmaster’s door.

It was open.

The headmaster would never leave an injured, vulnerable Snape behind an open door.

‘Shite. Something isn’t right about this. Silencio Motus!’

The nonverbal spell—one of only a few Harry had mastered—silenced his movements and footsteps. Between his cloak and his spell, if there was anyone in the office who shouldn’t be, they would never know Harry was there. He tugged his hood back down, hid his wand under his sleeve, and hurried up the stairs.

All was quiet in the office. Fawkes had gone from his perch—why? Surely Dumbledore would have left the phoenix to guard Snape?

A tiny chirping from the bottom of the perch answered his question. The phoenix had gone through a burning day, but that made no sense. Yesterday, he had been in his prime, all red and gold plumage and tinkling trills. He should have been fine.

Unless someone had killed him—or tried to. Nothing could kill a phoenix permanently, but a well-placed curse might certainly render an otherwise capable bird helpless.

The hair on the back of Harry’s neck stood on end. Someone was here, someone out to get either Dumbledore or Snape. And as everyone knew the headmaster would be at breakfast at this hour, Harry had a fair idea which one they wanted.

‘Fuck. Dumbledore’s protection fails again. Should have known.’

Harry crept into the office and quietly closed the door behind him, searching for any sign of movement, straining his ears for the slightest sound. A door over the main office was open and, seeing nothing in the office area, Harry raced up the back stairs and slipped through it.

He found himself in an explosion of purple, yellow, and chintz that could only be Dumbledore’s quarters. A pink polka dot sofa and two lime-green chairs sat by the fireplace. Just ahead of them, a mahogany coffee table held a stack of transfiguration journals and a charms magazine. Bookcases of books and more of Dumbledore’s gadgets lined the walls, all except for three doors and a handful of scattered paintings consisting of a couple modern art pieces, a portrait of a young woman Harry didn’t know, and another of a young couple he guessed must have been Dumbledore’s parents. Two doors in the back beside a small kitchenette were closed, but faint snores resonated from behind the third door, hanging ajar near the painting of the young woman.

Thank Merlin, Snape was still alive. But where was his would-be attacker? Gods help him, were they already in the room? By the way all the portraits stared at a spot near the open door, eyes wide with horror, Harry judged whoever had come to hurt Snape was far too close to succeeding. He followed their gaze, but saw nothing until—
A tiny squeak at floor level caught his attention, and Harry jerked his eyes downward, wand trained on the place it had come from. There! A fat rat with a suspicious silver paw was creeping along the wall, heading for Snape’s door. Pettigrew!

Rage and terror surged to life in Harry’s blood. ‘Oh no you don’t. Not this time!’

“Stupefy!”

The snores halted with a jerk, and a vicious little rat went down in a cloud of red light. Triumph and vindication rang throughout Harry’s body and flooded him with a grim sort of joy. His parents and Sirius would be avenged soon, at least in part.

The portrait girl applauded him, but didn’t speak.

With a whoop, Harry ran to the rat and made sure the bastard was really down. “And stay out, you bloody menace! Incarcerous!” Ropes bound the foul beast, but they wouldn’t hold him for long.

“Fuck. What now?”

“P-Potter?” Snape’s voice had never sounded so frightened.

“It’s all right, sir.” Harry poked his head out of his cloak and around Snape’s door, scowling at the awful décor. “Merlin, what a colour scheme.”

Snape glared and pointed his wand at Harry. “I am not as helpless as I look, Potter, so do put aside any misplaced ideas of revenge.”

“Sir, please.” Harry sighed. He should have known Snape wouldn’t trust him. “I’m not after you. I actually just came by to make sure you were all right. The headmaster didn’t tell me if you survived the night and I was… I had a bad feeling.” He glowered. “And I was right to.”

Snape moved as if he wanted to sit, but Harry shook his head and motioned him to stay. “Please, don’t get up, sir. You’re still recovering. I just… would you happen to have an idea on how to contain a stunned Animagus until the headmaster returns?”

All the colour blanched from Severus’ face. “Pettigrew.”

“Yeah. I just caught him, sir. That was what you heard. I wasn’t attacking you.”

Snape stared at him, eyes sharp with disbelief.

With a sad shake of his head, Harry turned and went back into the main room. “I’ll just have to find something myself then.” He muttered to himself as he searched the quarters and kept one eye on the rat. “Maybe a cage? No, that wouldn’t work. The bastard would just slip through the bars. Hmm. I need something solid, something he can’t chew through or transform to break out of.”

The portrait girl mimed a box.

“Oh, right. A box would do.” Harry gave her a curious look. “Can’t you talk?”

She shrugged and looked away, and Harry gathered she had no interest in talking. Or couldn’t.

“Oh. I’m sorry. Um, thanks for the help.”

She smiled hesitantly and moved her arm like she was flicking a wand.

It took Harry a second to understand. “Oh. I guess I could try to conjure a box, only I’m not that
good. And a metal box… damn. I don’t think I can transfigure that.”

A steel box with holes in the top levitated from Snape’s room and landed in front of the door.

“Oh! That’s good. Thanks, sir.”

Harry grabbed the rat by the tail and dropped the bastard into the box. “Sero!” The lid clicked and locked. “That’ll keep you.” He returned to Snape’s door. “Are you all right, sir?”

Snape dragged the covers up to his chest and snapped, “I will be better when you and that detestable rodent are out of my presence! I don’t know what game you’re playing by trying to place me in your debt, Potter, but I assure you, this only makes us even!”

“Debts.” Harry gave a bitter, dry laugh. “I should have known you would see it that way, sir. Don’t know why I… never mind.” With a sorrowful sigh, he turned and slipped out of the room. “You’re welcome,” he whispered, not that he had expected any thanks. He’d only saved the man’s life twice in twelve hours, but what did that matter when Snape was determined to see the worst in him? He should know by now not to get his hopes up.

“A Accio box.” He caught Pettigrew’s prison and carried it under one arm, despair and hurt sharp in his chest. He began to wonder if he would ever stop bleeding inside.

He paused at the door to Dumbledore’s quarters and called, “Professor, I’m locking this door behind me so no one else can get in.” At least for the moment. Once Dumbledore returned, Harry was going to have a little chat with him about his idea of security measures.

He had expected another tongue-lashing, but Snape said nothing. Perhaps the silent treatment was an improvement. Or perhaps he was just being silent for fear of giving himself away to their uninvited guest. Either way, it was probably best for Harry to just lock the door and leave him be. The portrait girl waved on his way out. Harry gave her a weak smile and closed the door.

Back downstairs, Harry set the box on the desk and knelt before Fawkes’ perch, helping the infant phoenix out of a pile of ash and burned feathers.

“Poor little guy. Never saw it coming, did you?”

The baby phoenix gave a tiny twitter and curled up in Harry’s hand. He held the bird to his chest to keep him warm and sat in the seat before Dumbledore’s desk, wand trained on the box. A terrified squeak emerged from the holes a moment later, and Harry smirked.

“Don’t get too comfortable, traitor. You’ll be getting a bigger box very soon.”

Harry sat back and watched the rat squirm.
his well-being and the intelligence to seek out and eliminate a threat to his life. Unless… what if the boy had sold him out? No. Surely he wouldn’t—not after going to so much trouble to save him. It boggled the mind.

Even so, Severus simply comprehend this level of forgiveness.

He contemplated the situation for a long time, trying to fit pieces together that didn’t mesh, until, at last, he recalled the elf. Perhaps Dobby could give him some insight into Potter’s true motives.

“Dobby!”

An elf wearing the strangest array of clothing Severus had ever seen appeared. Festive clothing. Severus contained the urge to scowl.

“How can Dobby’s helping Master Snapey?”

“I would like you to… to find Harry Potter. Do not interact with him or show yourself—stay hidden. I would only like you to observe him and report to me what he is doing.”

Dobby narrowed his eyes. “Is you being hurting Great Master Harry Potter, sir?”

Severus choked back a snarl. Another Potter sycophant. Lovely.

“No. I only wish to know what he is doing.”

Dobby gave him a bemused look. “I’s be checking on him, but you is not to hurt him, you hear? He saved Dobby’s life.”

Severus snorted. “Join the club, elf. He has saved mine twice in twelve hours, and I would like to know why.”

The elf cocked his head, making his candy cane earring dangle. “You is a strange human, Master Snapey. He is saving you because he is good. Just like he is saving me.”

Severus rubbed his forehead, already irritated beyond measure. “Will you just check, please?”

The elf’s eyes widened. “Please? Oh, I is just an elf, sir. You is not needing to….” He smiled and shook tears down his face. “You is a good human too.” With that, he popped away, leaving a thoroughly shocked Severus behind.

“What in Merlin’s name just happened here?”

With a shake of his head, Severus settled back against the pillows and stared at the ceiling—painted purple and covered in Muggle glow-in-the-dark stars—to avoid looking at the walls. The elf’s words twisted something in his chest.

“You is a good human….”

But how good was he when he couldn’t believe a child capable of saving a man’s life out of pure kindness?

The elf apparated in and startled Severus.

“Great Master Harry Potter sir is being sitting in Master Dumbles’ office.”

Severus frowned. “Yes? And?”
“And he is having a metal box on the desk. He is pointing his wand at it and holding a baby bird against his chest.” Dobby frowned. “I’s didn’t think Fawkes was ready to burn.”

Severus shuddered. Pettigrew must have ‘killed’ the bird to take out his guard. “No. He was not. Will you please retrieve Professor Dumbledore? There is a Death Eater in that metal box, so I am obviously not as safe here as we thought.”

The elf squeaked and leapt back, flopping his Santa hat into his eyes. “Dobby will be getting him right away!”

With that, the elf vanished, leaving Severus alone with his troubled thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

**Spells:**

*Consano Corporis:* "Cure Body." Cure-all for poisonings and diseases.

*Silencio Motus:* "Silence Movements."
Chapter 10

Shattered Perceptions

Albus placed a bite of sausage in his mouth and fixed his gaze on the Gryffindor table, a pit of worry building in his gut. Harry had yet to show for breakfast, and the sixth year Gryffindors all had their heads together, whispering about something or another. By the sharp tone of Hermione Granger’s hisses and Neville Longbottom’s irritated glares, he had a fair idea what—or whom—they were discussing.

He sighed and sipped his juice. Merlin, poor Harry. The boy couldn’t go one day without some catastrophe falling onto his head.

Well, perhaps with Severus’ grudge nipped in the bud, things would start to improve for him soon. Albus certainly hoped so anyway.

“Albus,” Minerva murmured, “where is Severus this morning? And yesterday?”

He shook his head. “I will let the school know all at once shortly.”

Minerva paled. “Dear gods. What has happened?”

“Much, to be sure.” He poked at his remaining sausage, but much as he might want to indulge in another, he hadn’t the time. “And perhaps now is a good time to announce it.” He pushed his plate back, but before he could stand, a sharp pop beside his chair startled him.

“Master Dumbles, sir! You must come!”

Albus turned to find a panicking Dobby standing at his side, hand outstretched. “Dobby? Is something the matter with Severus?”
Minerva and Filius fixed their eyes on him.

“Yes, Master Dumbles. Great Master Harry Potter is catching a Death Eater in your office, sir!”

“What?”

At Minerva’s startled cry, the students turned to stare at the head table as one. Albus patted Minerva’s shoulder. “I need you to take over for me while I sort this out. Will you let them know Potions classes are cancelled until further notice?”

Minerva glared. “Albus Dumbledore, I expect an explanation!”

Filius cleared his throat. “Perhaps it could wait until after the Death Eater has been dealt with, Minerva?”

She blushed. “Merlin. O-of course. I’ll handle it, Albus.”

“Thank you.” Albus motioned to Dobby. “Let me lead us away from the students first, Dobby.” He hurried out of the Great Hall with the elf in tow, leaving a stunned student body and several shocked professors behind.

Fawkes shivered against Harry’s chest. He petted the little bird and cupped his hand closer, but it didn’t seem to be enough. Perhaps his body just wasn’t warm enough for a firebird.

A quick scan of the office revealed a plush red cushion near Fawkes’ perch. Maybe Dumbledore used it for burning days. At any rate, he could cast a warming charm on it to keep Fawkes alive long enough for Dumbledore to come and help.

“Accio pillow. Calefacius Modera.” He settled the hot pillow on the desk, well away from the box, and set the little phoenix in the middle. “There now. Is that warm enough?”

Fawkes gave a little sigh and curled up to sleep. Harry could just stand the air around him enough to pet the bird, and he stroked his little head to comfort him and keep an eye on his body temperature. After a moment, Fawkes stopped shivering and fell asleep. Harry cast a silencing field around him so the rat’s squeaking didn’t wake the exhausted little bird.

“Poor little guy. Sure has had a rough morning.” Harry slammed a fist against the box, earning a stream of high-pitched shrieks and squeals. “Your fault, you fucking piece of shite.”

Phineas emerged from a shadow of his painting and smirked. “My, what a mouth we have.” The man gave the mistletoe and fairy lights dangling above his portrait an ominous glare and settled into his chair. “Do you usually speak so crudely?”

Harry looked up, blushing. “Er, no. S-sorry about that, sir. You see, this… er… nasty little berk betrayed and killed my parents and also killed Fawkes this morning, and he was rooting around in Headmaster Dumbledore’s quarters earlier. Merlin only knows what he thought he was after.” There. If Pettigrew somehow got a report back to Voldemort, he would think Harry had caught him by chance and hadn’t known Snape was there. He hoped anyway.

The man in the portrait winced and mouthed, “Severus?”
Harry gave him a grim nod. “He’s okay.”

The man relaxed and bowed his head in acknowledgement. “Are you al—”

Another portrait, a woman in a wimple cut Phineas off and gave Harry a simpering smile. “Oh, I know you. You’re Harry Potter!”

Harry groaned. “Oh joy. You’ve heard of me.”

“Oh, yes. We’ve all heard how brave and handsome and, well, do you think you could—just here —” She tittered and pointed to a corner of her canvas.

Harry glowered. “You’re not serious.”

But apparently she was. “Oh, just there. Come on. There’s even a quill on the de—”

“I’m not signing an autograph for a bloody portrait! You’ve already got one!”

The woman sniffed and stuck her nose up in the air. “Well, I never.” She huffed and stalked out of her portrait, not that Harry was sorry to see her go.

Phineas snorted. “My, my. Do you greet all your fans in such a manner?”

Harry scowled. “You try being famous for a week and see how much you like it. It gets old. Fast.” He poked the box with his wand. “Especially when I didn’t do anything to deserve it.”

“The Boy-Who-Lived did nothing to deserve his fame?”

Harry glared and poked harder, earning a shower of sparks and a petrified squeak. “Mum made sure the Noseless Wonder died the first time. All I’ve done is run around blind and try to avoid the bastard, and I still somehow manage to get caught every single year like clockwork. It’s everyone else making it out like I’m something special. I’m just trying not to die.”

“You are going to transfigure that box by accident if you are not careful,” Phineas said with a devious smirk.

Judging by the panicked squeal from inside the box, it had been intentional.

“Nice one, er—” Harry investigated the nameplate under the portrait. He couldn’t call a former headmaster by his first name without permission. “—Headmaster Black. Wait, Black? You’re—”

“Family, yes I know.” Black sounded just as thrilled with the concept as Harry had about his fame. “When you are pureblooded, you are related to everyone.”

Harry laughed wryly, but kept his thoughts to himself about how one found a wife when all the purebloods were related. Somehow, he doubted the portrait would appreciate it. And, for all he knew, the man might have been gay. Or single. He remembered Sirius pointing him out on the Black family tapestry—with extreme disdain—but couldn’t remember anything else beyond the fact that he had had a brother who had died young with Sirius’ name.

“I would like to ask you a question, Harry,” said Phineas, jolting him out of his musing. “Why did you come here this morning?”

Harry frowned at the box. “I can’t say anything in front of him.”

“The spell is Obice Silentium. Imagine a barrier to prevent all sound around your head and my
Headmaster Black moved his wand in a sharp sideways motion.

Harry gave the man a wan smile and neglected to inform him about his long-time affinity for silencing spells. He said the incantation aloud to prevent suspicion too.

“Obice Silentium!”

Cyan light enveloped his head and the portrait. It faded the next instant, but the magic still tingled where the barrier touched his skin, so Harry knew it had worked.

“Test it,” Phineas said.

Harry didn’t need to, but nonetheless, he snapped, “Oi, Pettigrew! I found this really handy spell to melt metal the other day. Reckon I should give it a go?” The level of terrified squeaking remained constant, but just in case the rat was acting, he aimed his wand through one of the air holes and stunned the bastard again.

“That works too,” said an amused Headmaster Black.

Faint shimmers disrupted the silencing barrier on his left.

Harry frowned at the area he had felt a disturbance. “Um, is that normal?”

Black’s eyes flicked to the door above the stairs. “Hmm. I think it is fine.”

Harry looked to the staircase too and understood. Snape was eavesdropping, the sneaky bastard. With a shake of his head, he turned to Black and sighed. “Well, you wanted to know why I came this morning, right?”

“Indeed. I should think you would be glad to be shot of Severus, considering how he has treated you.”

“I… it’s… not quite that simple.” He closed his eyes and turned his face away just in case Black was a Legilimens—and mind magic worked with portraits. He couldn’t talk about the young Severus here. Snape would kill him.

“It had nothing to do with… our history.” He hugged his waist and stared at the floor. “I mean, it’s true Snape thinks I’m a carbon copy of my father—”

“A what copy?”

“Er… Muggle thing. It means an exact duplicate.”

Black made a face of distaste. “Oh. Well, do go on then.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at the portrait but decided not to comment. The man was a Black, after all. A certain level of disdain for Muggles was par for the course.

“Right, well, like I said, Professor Snape thinks I’m just like my father and he hates me for that. He’ll probably think I saved him just so I can lord it over him later—or he might even have some other terrible idea in mind about me, like I did it to make him my slave or some other ridiculous nonsense. He really believes I’m that a-awful.”

He jerked his hand across his stinging eyelids. He wouldn’t cry. Not again.
With a deep breath, he continued in a soft, shaky voice. “So he’ll probably hate me even more for saving him, but it doesn’t matter. No matter how he feels about me, he’s still a human being and he doesn’t deserve to die.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Besides, I couldn’t let one more person die because of me anyway. This whole damn war is already my fault.”

Black frowned. “Hmm. Well, how did you save him? The curse Riddle used is, ah… highly specialised and—”

A loud pop sounded through the office, announcing the arrival of Dumbledore and Dobby, and spared Harry from answering. For the moment, at least.

“Thank you, Dobby,” the headmaster said, and after his customary wailing and tears, Dobby apparated away.

Dumbledore rushed to Harry’s side. “Harry, are you quite all right?”

“Finite Incantatem,” Harry muttered, cancelling the silencing charm. “Yes, sir, but I’ve found an uninvited guest poking about. Some track record you’re building here, hmm?”

Dumbledore sighed and settled behind his desk. “We shall discuss it once unfriendly ears are out of the room.” He frowned at the pillow and his sleeping phoenix. “So that is how he got past Fawkes. My dear little friend, I am sorry.” He placed another warming charm on the pillow and levitated it to a quiet space near the hearth. A moment later, a blazing fire made the little bird twitter happily and snuggle closer into his pillow.

“I already had a warming charm on that,” said Harry with a wry look.

“Yes, I sensed it, but phoenixes need quite a bit of heat to survive when they are first hatched. Enough that the pillow requires a flame-repelling charm.” Dumbledore poked the metal box with a frown. “Where did you get this?”

“Upstairs.” Harry hoped Dumbledore would understand the insinuation without needing further detail.

Dumbledore rubbed his beard and cast a new silencing charm, this time including Harry, the portrait, and himself within the barrier. Snape broke into the charm again not two seconds after Dumbledore set it, but the old man didn’t even blink. He had probably known the prat was listening in from the moment he arrived.

“Harry, will Pettigrew need to be Obliviated?”

“I don’t think so. I stunned him before I said a word to Professor Snape and he didn’t wake up again until I had him in the box and was back in your office.”

“And you did not discuss anything sensitive with Headmaster Black while I was away?”

Harry shook his head. “Not where the rat could hear anyway. I used a silencing field, sir.”

“Oh, good. In that case, I believe I will call Kingsley and hand our guest over to the aurors straight away. You should go on to class.”

“No.”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “No?”
“No, sir. I’m not going anywhere until something is done to keep your other guest from being murdered while I’m in class.”

“Harry, I do understand your concern, but it is not your place t—”

Harry slammed his hands on the desk. “It is when you’ve almost gotten him killed twice in twelve hours and I’ve been the one to clean up your mess!”

Dumbledore flinched—a small thing, but enough to show Harry he had struck a nerve. “Perhaps you have a point, but I must in—”

“I agree with the boy, Albus,” said Headmaster Black. “He has earned the right to this discussion. And you have proved your idea of ‘safety measures’ is not very safe at all.”

Dumbledore frowned. “I… oh very well.”

Black smirked.

Harry grinned at him. “You were a Slytherin, weren’t you, sir?”

Black chuckled. “Indeed, but whatever gave you that idea?”

“Well, first, because you’re a Black. Besides Sirius, you’re all Slytherins. And second, only Slytherins enjoy getting one over on Headmaster Dumbledore that much.”

‘Slytherins and boy weapons,’ Harry added to himself.

Phineas snorted. “Touché.”

Dumbledore looked between them with a wry chuckle. “Seems the two of you have been conspiring in my absence.” He sighed. “Harry, Severus will not be happy about this, you do know that?”

Harry scowled. “When is he happy when I’m involved? Unless it’s torture or something.”

“Harry, that is… well, perhaps that is neither entirely untrue nor undeserved, but it is disrespectful nonetheless.”

Harry bowed his head. “I… yes, you’re right. Sorry, sir.”

“Thank you. Now, what do you propose, Harry?”

“Deal with the rat first, sir, in case he can hear something in spite of the barriers. I’ve heard my roommates arguing over them before.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Very well. Then sit tight and we shall discuss Severus’ situation in a moment.”

Harry nodded and settled himself in to wait.

As it happened, it turned out to be a good thing Harry had refused to return to classes. Once Kingsley knew Harry had apprehended the rat, he had wanted to question Harry on how he had
come to find him and what he had been doing in the headmaster’s office in the first place.

“Well, you see,” Harry said with a thin smile, “I came up here after my cloak. I left it in the office last night and I wanted to grab it before classes started. I was hoping I could catch Professor Dumbledore before he went to breakfast, but when I arrived, the door was ajar and the gargoyle looked upset. It put me on guard. Then I found Pettigrew poking around and the rest is history.”

Headmaster Black gave Harry a piercing look. Harry ignored it.

“Well, that’s all I need then,” said Kingsley with a nod. “Good work, Harry. We’ll be glad to have you on the squad one day.”

Harry struggled not to flinch. “Oh. Y-yeah. That’s… good.”

Kingsley patted his shoulder. “Buck up. NEWTs are tough for everyone. I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

Harry forced himself to smile. “T-thanks.”

Kingsley nodded and went through the floo, metal box and evil rat firmly in hand.

Dumbledore fixed Harry with a searching look. “Would you like to explain to me why you believed it necessary to lie to Kingsley, Harry?”

“Well, I was protecting Professor Snape, sir, but I didn’t actually lie. Everything I said was the truth. Or part of it, anyway.”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “Indeed?”

Harry grinned. “Professor Snape, if you wouldn’t mind, could you please open that door a tad?”

Dumbledore and Black both choked back a laugh.

Dumbledore’s moustache twitched. “How long have you known he was listening?”

“Um, about half an hour or so, but I reckon he was probably listening before then too.”

“Most likely.” Dumbledore turned to call up the stairs. “You may as well come down and join us, Severus, if you are feeling well enough to participate in the conversations you eavesdrop upon.”

Snape opened the door and grumbled, “Bloody impertinent Gryffindors.”

Harry smirked and raised his wand. “Speaking of, sir, Accio Harry Potter’s school cloak.”

A bolt of black fabric came zooming over Snape’s head and settled in Harry’s lap, much to Snape’s annoyance. “Potter! What is the point of saving my life twice if you attempt to kill me not an hour later?”

“It’s just a cloak, sir.” He held it up to show the others it was harmless. “Like I said, headmaster, I didn’t lie to Kingsley. I had put this under Professor Snape last night to keep the wounds on his back clean while we treated him, and somehow it didn’t get returned to me last night.”

Snape shuddered as if coming into such close contact with Harry Potter’s things would make him ill. Harry ignored it, and the rush of shame and anguish Snape’s hatred caused.

Black snorted. “You’re a rather Slytherin sort of Gryffindor, aren’t you, Harry?”
Harry chuckled wryly. “Ask the sorting hat.”

Snape shot the hat, nestled atop a bookshelf, a glare of death. “Do not dare suggest it.”

The hat glared back.

Harry perched on the edge of his chair, biting his lip as he watched Snape’s slow progress down the stairs. Gods, he could barely walk. If Harry didn’t know full well Snape would throw him down the stairs for the mere suggestion, he would have offered to help, but as it was, all he could do was watch and hope Snape reached the bottom of the staircase in one piece.

He let slip a quiet sigh when Snape’s feet landed on the lower level without trouble. He shuffled into the only other seat in Dumbledore’s office—a purple chintz armchair adjacent to Harry’s chair—and settled his arms over his chest with a grimace of pain and a huff.

“Whatever hare-brained suggestion Potter has concocted to ensure my safety,” Snape grumbled, “I won’t be taking it.”

Bitter grief twisted Harry’s heart, and he dropped his head to hide his flush of shame. ‘Why did I even dare hope for anything else? I know better by now.’ He stifled a sigh and stared into his lap. ‘Don’t think of it. Just don’t think at all.’

Shame he hadn’t learned how to Occlude yet.

“Now, now, Severus,” said Dumbledore, his eyes full of warning. “You will at least listen to Harry without being cruel.”

Snape scowled, but said nothing.

Nothing was good. Harry could deal with nothing. Snape’s refusal to accept him after everything Harry had done and was about to do for him hurt, but he could live with the pain. It was nothing new, after all.

And yet, as Snape shifted in his chair, obviously suffering and unable to reach out, a pang of sympathy and loneliness stabbed Harry in the heart. He wanted Snape to accept him, even if he knew better than to hope for it. The image of the boy Snape once was would not leave his mind.

Harry closed his eyes and wished he knew how to move on, how to let go of impossible dreams.

Severus sat and pretended to be as snarly and angry as usual, but inside, he could hardly think for shock. Potter’s words kept ringing in his head over and over.

“He’s still a human being and he didn’t deserve to die.”

Worse, the broken whisper he had uttered afterwards—“I can’t let one more person die because of me...”—had left a hollow in his chest. For sixteen years, some part of Severus had blamed Potter for his mother’s death, but he had never realised the boy blamed himself too.

He might have thought Potter was lying, but the boy couldn’t lie to save his hide. The only reason his excuses had flown when he acted to cover Severus’ arse—and Merlin, why on earth had he done that?—was because he hadn’t lied at all. When Shacklebolt had asked about the aurors, Potter’s story
crumbled.

But that knowledge called many more of Severus’ core beliefs into question, and damn, he just wasn’t ready to deal with it yet. Because if Potter was honest, then all of the stories Severus had believed to be lies were true. If Potter was honest, then all of the beliefs Severus had held so dear about the boy were lies.

Gods, he couldn’t focus on this right now. His whole body hurt, and Potter was right about one thing: the Dark Lord hadn’t given up on killing Severus yet and staying here was a security risk. Merlin, even he had never imagined Pettigrew could get into the Headmaster’s office.

If Albus’ quarters weren’t safe, what place in Hogwarts was?

Albus Summoned a pot of tea and some biscuits. “Do help yourself, Severus. And, Harry, please try to eat something. Minerva expressed concern that she has not seen you eating since lunchtime yesterday.”

Potter looked away. “I haven’t been hungry, sir.”

Severus stared at the boy, confused. How could a sixteen year old boy go so long and not notice his hunger? Boys were bottomless pits at that age.

Albus wasn’t buying it either. “For an entire day, Harry?”

“Er, well, I mean there was a lot going on, and… I-I just haven’t had much appetite.”

Interesting. The first part was a lie—or an incomplete truth—but the second was true. He truly hadn’t been hungry. Another idiosyncrasy to assign to this mystery of a boy.

“Oh, do cease your melodrama and eat a bloody biscuit, Potter. We will get nowhere until you do.”

Potter gave him a bemused look, but took a biscuit and a cup of tea. Severus watched him eat it as they talked. He started out with slow nibbles, as if he really wasn’t hungry, but it must have given him some appetite back. Before Severus had updated Dumbledore on half of what had happened during his torture, let alone the morning afterwards, Potter had downed four of the biscuits and a cup of tea, and was pouring a second.

“Perhaps you should ask that mad house elf to bring Potter a sandwich before he moves on to eating the saucer, Albus? I have heard porcelain shards do tend to be rough on the digestive system.”

Severus said it with enough malice that no one would believe him to be concerned.

But he was. Somewhere deep down, he was. And fuck all, what did that mean for him?

Potter froze and went ashen. His hands trembled on the teacup, his breathing accelerated, and the fine hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

Gods, Severus had terrified the boy. But how? What had he said? His tone had certainly been cold, but for Merlin’s sake, he had been a hell of a lot crueler to Potter than that in the past. Nothing had garnered this kind of reaction before—well, except the day he had announced their Occlumency lessons, but then Potter had had some excuse for being upset. This was… he had no idea what was happening. Severus gave Albus a bemused look, but Albus looked just as lost.

“I’m fine.” Potter set down his teacup and dragged his knees to his chest.

“Harry?” Albus laid a hand on the desk, reaching out towards the boy. “Is anything the matter?”
“I said, I’m fine!”

But Severus was no fool. The boy was panicking and trying hard to keep them from prodding him.

Severus looked to his mentor, opening his mind for the man to see. [Albus, I do not know what I said to terrify him like this, but it was not intentional.]

Albus nodded almost imperceptibly. [I know, my boy. I am trying to get a read on his emotional state, but he is blocking me.]

[Occluding?]

[I cannot tell. It seems more like a blind. As if he is intentionally bringing forth feelings and thoughts he would prefer me to see than the ones he does not want us to touch.]

Severus gaped. [But that is a high-level mind mage skill.]

[I am aware. Perhaps he is simply burying his worries. Or perhaps he is better at mind magic than your assessment would suggest.]

Severus didn’t miss the implication that his bias had hindered Harry’s progress. [Do you truly imagine I want to stay in lessons with him longer? If the boy could Occlude, by Merlin, I would run to your office to tell you.]

Albus’ lips twitched. [You do make a good point. Hmm. It bears looking into. For now, let us get back to our discussion.]

[Indeed.]

“Harry,” Albus said in a gentle voice, “it is quite all right if you would like to have some breakfast while we talk. It is unhealthy for growing boys to go so long without sustenance.”

The look Potter shot Albus might have killed. Albus blinked and moved back, stunned.

“W-what did I say, Harry?”

“Nothing.” Potter lowered his gaze and stared at the floor. “I’m fine. I’ll go to lunch later. Can we just talk about the matter at hand now? Please?”

“Well, do at least have another biscuit and finish your tea.”

Potter blanched and shook his head. “Can’t eat anything else right now. Please, just move on.”

Albus opened his mouth to protest, but Severus cut him off.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake, Albus. If the brat wants to starve himself, who are we to judge?”

Potter flinched as if struck and dropped his head onto his knees, but once again, Severus did not understand where he had gone wrong.

“I… what in Merlin’s name is the matter with you, boy?”

“Don’t!”

Severus gave Albus another gobsmacked look. [Albus, what the hell is going on?]
Albus prodded, “Don’t what, Harry?”

Potter made a strangled sound of frustration and dropped his knees. He grabbed a biscuit and shoved half of it in his mouth at once. “There. I’m eating now. Can we move on already?”

“I… I suppose.” Albus gave the boy a troubled look. “You’re sure yo—”

Black cleared his throat. “Albus.”

The old man sighed and relented. “Very well. Harry, seeing as you have had quite the eventful past two days, if you would like to eat before lunch, you may simply ask Dobby to fetch you something before you return to classes.”

Potter nodded, relief washing the tension from his frame. “Thank you, sir.”

“Not at all. Now, Severus, you were saying?”

Severus continued his story, watching Potter out of the corner of his eye. The boy laid the other half of his biscuit down and did not touch the teacup, to Severus’ consternation. He hadn’t intended to petrify the boy, but somehow, he had done, and now he couldn’t eat after almost a full day without a meal.

Obviously, the boy was just being melodramatic—there was no need to stop eating just because Severus’ offhand remarks had startled him—but why had they bothered Potter at all? The boy had endured far worse without a flinch.

Something strange had just happened here, and Severus didn’t like it. Perhaps he could get to the bottom of it during Occlumency lessons. He was sure, with some careful prodding, Potter would crack.

He would just have to take care that he did not break the boy in the process.

He poured himself a cup of tea as he talked and, out of the corner of his eye, caught Potter watching him. He used the opportunity to discreetly observe the boy’s reactions. Potter was pale and anxious, but the dark terror that had gripped him before seemed to have gone for the time being. Relieved in spite of himself, Severus sipped his tea and returned his focus to the matter at hand.

Oh gods. Harry wanted to melt into the chair and vanish. He was certain Snape hadn’t meant to bring up such terrible memories, but dear gods, he had. And Harry had let them see. His reaction had been so virulent, so strong—two men as intelligent as Dumbledore and Snape could not possibly have missed it.

Harry made damn sure to keep his eyes on the floor—or at least away from Snape’s and Dumbledore’s gaze—and listened to Snape tell his side of the story.

“After you left, Albus,” Snape said, his voice subdued and soft, “I… I thought on what you had shared with me for some time, but I must have fallen asleep at some point. I heard neither Pettigrew nor Potter come in, not until Potter stunned the rat. I….”
Snape swallowed hard and stared at his hands. Harry followed his gaze to realise the man was shaking.

“Professor, I really wasn’t aiming for you. I wasn’t even angry at you, though I probably should be.”

Snape wheeled on him. “Spare me your Gryffindor martyr act, Potter! No one is as saintly as you are pretending to be. There is... *something* off about this, and I will get to the bottom of it.”

“Severus,” Albus snapped.

Harry glared at the old man. “Let him speak his mind. He’s not actually insulting me. I don’t mind either way anyway. I’ve faced a lot worse—today.” He stared both men down, despair and mad grief weighing down his heart, but his shoulders squared with the determination to let neither of them see it. Not this time.

Snape scowled. “Wh—you *want* me to insult you?”

Harry gave him a weary look. “Of course not, sir. I’d prefer you to see me as I am. But I’ve endured six years of abuse from you, so it’s not like I’m not used to it.”

He dropped his head and stared at the floor, struggling to keep his anguish out of his voice. “Regardless of what you think of me, sir, I’m not stupid. I’m well aware you’ll never trust me or see me as anything worthwhile. If saving your life twice in twelve hours—and doing so fully aware you would only hate me more for the effort—if that isn’t enough to make you see anything good in me, n-nothing ever will be.”

He hugged his knees to his chest and stared ahead, at a blank space of wall lest one of the men try to read the crushing pain on his heart. “I know better than to hope by now.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry watched Dumbledore fold his hands over his lap and give Snape a pointed look. As it held less of a threat and more of a request for Snape to open his eyes and see what was right in front of him, Harry did not challenge him this time.

Snape stared at Harry as if he didn’t recognise him. “W-what is this in aid of, Potter? I... I do not understand. Why are you doing this?”

“I would have thought that would have been obvious by now, Severus,” said Headmaster Black. “Somehow, he cares about you in spite of your constant cruelty. He is absolutely crushed that you think so little of him despite all he has done to help you, has no hope that you will ever see the truth of him, and yet he *still* defends you. He saved your life despite your abuse—twice—and you still refuse to acknowledge any shred of humanity within him, all because he physically resembles a father he does not even remember, at least in his face.”

“Oh, I remember him,” Harry muttered.

Dumbledore, Snape, and Black all fixed him with a piercing look.

Dumbledore broke the silence. “How is that possible, Harry? You were only fifteen months when he died.”

“I remembered Hagrid on Sirius’ bike. I dreamed about it for years before I came here. But as far as my father goes, besides what I saw in the Mirror of Erised, *Priori Incantatem* in the graveyard, and...” He shot Snape a glance and gulped. “In other places, I remember the images I see every time a Dementor comes too close. ‘Take Harry and run, Lily!’ That’s the only real memory I have of him: the fear and determination in his face seconds before he died to save me.”
The office went silent. Even Fawkes’ twittering and Snape’s still-laboured breathing quieted, and an atmosphere heavy as lead choked the air.


A small, strangled sound on his left brought Harry’s attention around. Snape had his fists clenched on his lap, so tight Harry guessed he was drawing blood, and a fall of black hair covered his face. The man was shaking and tense from head to toe.

Dear Merlin, Harry must have hurt him badly, but how? All he had done was talk about his… oh. His mum—Snape’s one friend.

“Oh gods. Professor Snape, I’m sorry. I-I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

Snape gave another choked sound of grief. Harry wanted to comfort him, but wasn’t yet suicidal enough to risk it.

Dumbledore started, “Severus, my boy, are you qui—”

Snape whipped his head up and glared. Harry couldn’t help but notice the redness around his eyes. Fuck. He hadn’t meant to make the man cry. He hadn’t believed Snape still knew how.

Harry squirmed, his stomach writhing with guilt and shame. Maybe Snape wasn’t the only one guilty of prejudice.

“I am just peachy, Albus,” Snape snarled in a voice that proved just the opposite. “If we might move on from this… lovely walk down memory lane, I still have a story to tell. Unless you do not wish to know what the Dark Lord had to say as he tortured the life from me?”

“Go on then,” Dumbledore said, his eyes troubled. “What happened?”

After Potter’s story, it had taken all Severus’ strength to compose himself, but he wasn’t a spy for nothing. The dosed tea had helped him get through his tale more than he would ever admit.

“… And just after then, you arrived with that mad house elf.” Severus finished his story and set aside his empty cup. “Now, what are we to do about this mess, Headmaster? Obviously, I cannot remain here.”

“Well, Severus,” said Albus with a frown, “I confess I do not know. I had believed this to be the safest place to keep you. Unless….” He turned to Harry. “What about the place you used last year to teach your DA, Harry? You managed to keep it from the former high inquisitor for quite a while. Severus would be safe there, would he not?”

“If the DA wasn’t still using it to train and hang out sometimes, I’d say yes,” said Potter in a subdued voice. “If you put him there, he’ll be discovered in no more than two or three days, tops. And with everyone… angry at him, I don’t think they’ll keep his hiding place a secret for long, even if I ask them to.”

Albus’ shoulders slumped. “Oh, I see. That was the best idea I had.”

“You haven’t asked me yet,” Potter said, his eyes flashing with irritation.
Albus frowned. “Well, you are only a boy, so I hadn’t thought—”

Potter scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. “Underestimating me again?” He scoffed and kicked at the floor. “Should have expected that, I guess. But I’m not stupid, sir, and I haven’t been a child in a long time, regardless of my age. My first suggestion is Grimmauld Place.”

“And that rubbish idea is an excellent example of why we don’t include dunderheaded children in strategy sessions,” Severus said with a scowl. “What do you think will happen when Arthur Weasley discovers why I am there? Or Shacklebolt?”

Potter winced. “Good point. So you need to stay at Hogwarts, sir?”

“Obviously, Potter. If you used that space between your ears you refer to as a brain—”

“Severus,” Albus said, his tone fierce with warning. “Must I revisit our discussions from yesterday so soon?”

The admonition filled Severus with dread. He snapped his mouth shut and stared at the floor. He should have remembered Albus would take Potter’s side and throw him under the bus. It had been that way since his school days, and it would always be so.

“Headmaster,” said Potter sharply, “don’t you think Professor Snape has endured enough death threats in the past twenty-four hours? I can hack it. Really, it’s nothing new. So let’s just focus on the task at hand, please.”

Albus and Phineas both turned to stare at Severus, eyebrows raised. Severus dropped his head and struggled to keep a surge of heat from his face. Why did Potter keep breaking the bloody rules? He was supposed to be an arrogant tosser, not this… this self-sacrificing defender of Severus’ honour and life. Gods. He couldn’t comprehend any of it.

“He’s still a human being and he doesn’t deserve to die.”

Guilt wrapped cold fingers around Severus’ heart and squeezed. A human being….

Had he already forgotten that just yesterday, he had tormented this child to the point of sobbing in front of his classmates? Some of whom wanted Potter dead and would kill to find the boy’s weakness? Had Severus already forgotten the pain he had caused the boy in that detention which had come too close to taking Potter’s life as well?

Had he forgotten, in the midst of all his hatred, that Harry Potter was a human being, too?

Severus closed his eyes and lowered his head into his hands, utterly ashamed of himself. No matter what he thought of the boy, Potter had saved his life twice in twelve hours. Potter had gone out of his way to rescue a man who had tortured him and denied him the most basic of human needs.

Severus would not hurt him further. Never again. He had done enough damage.

“Harry,” said Albus, bringing Severus’ attention back to their discussion, “Severus is quite right about Grimmauld Place. As well as the danger from our allies should they realise what Severus has done to you—”

Severus barely suppressed a flinch.

“—There is also the fact that Sirius’ death has made Secret Keepers of everyone. It is simply too dangerous now to leave either yourself or Severus there, when any moment one of the Order may
slip and reveal our safehouse. No, it is better for everyone involved that Severus remain within Hogwarts, though I admit, if I cannot keep him safe even within the headmaster’s private quarters, then I am at a loss as to how to protect him.”

Potter grimaced and closed his eyes. His shoulders bowed forwards in a protective posture and his hands clenched into fists. Something had frightened him, but Severus couldn’t understand what the boy had reacted to this time. Unless it was leftover grief for the mutt’s untimely demise.

“In that case,” Potter said in a quiet, uncertain tone, “there’s only one place in this school that’s secure enough to keep Riddle and his cronies out entirely. And even then, Professor Snape… would need help. But it would do. The only people who can get in and out of this place are Riddle and me, and Riddle is too much of a coward to charge into Hogwarts after the professor as long as you’re still here, sir.”

Albus frowned. “Yes, I believe you are correct about Tom, but what place do you speak of, Harry?”

Potter gulped and took a deep breath, eyes closed and fists trembling in his lap. “T-the Chamber of Secrets.”

Severus nearly choked on his tea.

Albus’ eyes widened. “Oh! That is a rather good idea, Harry.” He frowned. “But that would mean Severus would require your help on a daily basis until he is able to return to his quarters and his position.”

Potter gave him a grim nod. “Do you know another way to keep him alive until Riddle gets over his temper tantrum?”

Albus winced. “I do not.”

“Then I guess you’ll be stuck needing my help for a while longer.” Something about his tone smacked of bitterness, sorrow, and deep anger, but Severus couldn’t understand why Potter would detest helping him now when he had been doing so for the past day and a half without complaint.

Then again, this Potter wasn’t the headmaster’s sycophant any longer. Perhaps he wasn’t angry with Severus at all, but with Albus.

What had happened there? Hadn’t the boy trusted Albus blindly once? Was this sharp lack of trust all down to the mutt’s death and Albus’ failure to report the prophecy?

“I have failed him, Severus. Repeatedly.”

Hmm. No, something deeper had happened between the two of them. Something Severus had missed.

Merlin, he didn’t like that. If Severus’ hatred had blinded him to the cause of the fallout between Potter and the Headmaster, what else might he have missed in his determination to see Potter as the enemy? Oh, that didn’t bear thinking about.

Gods, he had to change. His hatred had cost him his honour, half of his skin, his value to the Order, and now his prided powers of observation had fallen to the wayside. What good was a spy if he couldn’t see past his own prejudice?

Well, perhaps none at all, now that Riddle had turned on him. Fuck. His hatred had cost him everything.
“I do think the Chamber is the safest place to keep Severus,” said Albus, pulling Severus out of his grim thoughts. “At least until the threats to his life diminish. Well done, Harry.”

Severus shook off the choking noose of shame and despair to focus on the matter at hand. The Chamber. Well, whether Potter wanted to help Severus survive within its walls or not, there was one problem with the Chamber. Two, really.

“Albus, you cannot be serious!”

Albus gave Severus a warning look. “I am quite serious indeed, Severus. And I would advise you to put your grudges behind you as you now owe Harry your life, thrice over.”

Severus winced. “I… it is not Potter I am objecting to. Has everyone but me forgotten that there is a bloody giant basilisk corpse rotting in there?”

Albus chuckled. “Nothing a few spells and a bit of spring cleaning won’t fix. I daresay the Chamber is in rather dire need of it even without the basilisk.”

Severus glared. “Albus, one cannot simply Vanish a basilisk corpse. It is resistant to magic, and besides that, basilisk venom does not react well to being tossed into non-being. Try to send an entire corpse there, and we will be teaching classes in a crater rather than a castle. Metaphorically speaking, of course, as we will all be dead!”

Albus winced. “Ah. Well, in that case, I am sure the house elves would be glad to help us remove it manually.”

“Er…” Potter shook his head. “No good, sir. The house elves are as terrified of that place as the spiders are. I might be able to convince Dobby to help once he knows the snake is dead, but I’m not sure.”

“Well, then we shall have to carry it out by hand ourselves,” Albus said with a frown. “It is not a task I relish, but I would like losing our potions master even less.”

“You’ll need brooms to get out. I would have said Fawkes could take us back and forth, but…” Potter looked to the sleeping fledgling and shook his head. “He’s too small now.”

“Yes, I am afraid Fawkes will need to learn to fly again before he can be of any help with magical transport.” Albus rubbed his beard. “But clearing out the Chamber is not impossible, Severus. Unpleasant, but not impossible.”

Severus shuddered. “Unpleasant is a gross understatement. By now, that corpse will be utterly vile and highly toxic.” And Merlin, what a waste of rare potions ingredients that was. “But even without the great rotting snake corpse, there is also the issue of my… communication problems to consider. As well as my needs. Perhaps I can conjure a loo, water, and a bed, but I cannot conjure food.”

“Ah.” Albus frowned and rubbed his beard. “All of these would be surmountable issues with the help of Harry or a house elf. Dobby!”

The elf appeared, his Santa hat flopped over one ear. The candy cane earring now had three friends dangling nearby, all in different colours, and he had added a tinsel garland necklace, complete with a Muggle Christmas elf ornament as a pendant.

“Hello, Master Dumbles, Master Snapey, and Great Master Harry Potter sir. How’s can Dobby be helping you?”

“Ah, Dobby! Yes, well, you see, we have a problem…”
Potter motioned the elf to his side. “Dobby, we have a problem. Professor Snape was nearly attacked this morning, so we have to get him to safety. I think I know of a safe place, but the thing is, he won’t be able to get in and out easily on his own. Can you apparate to the Chamber of Secrets, Dobby? I promise it’s safe. I killed the basilisk there years ago.”

Dobby’s ears drooped. “I is being sorry, Great Master Harry Potter, sir. There is magic on the Chamber—nothing can apparate in, not even house elves.”

“So we would have no choice but to rely on Harry for assistance,” said Albus with a sigh. “Well, it will interfere with your class schedule, Harry. Are you certain you are willing to do this?”

Potter shot him a dark glare. “Since when have I valued grades over human life, sir?”

“Considering the fact that you are here during lessons, I would say never,” said Phineas Nigellus with a smirk.

Potter snorted. “True enough.”

“Very well,” said Albus with a wry smile. “Then I think we have little choice but to set the Chamber up for Severus and provide him with a way to contact you when he needs help.” Albus fixed Severus with a sharp look over his spectacles. “And you will not punish him for his assistance, are we clear?”

Severus glared and crossed his arms over his chest. Merlin, but his pride would take a hit before this nightmare was over.

“As I am not Potter’s instructor any longer, I am not in a position to punish him.”

“You will not be cruel about it either, Severus.”

“Stop,” Potter snapped. “I don’t care if he snipes at me. I’m not helping him to get in his good books. We all know Voldemort—”

Electricity and fire shot up Severus’ arm. He couldn’t hold back a gasp and wince.

Potter looked at him, uncertain. “Er… well, we all know Riddle would sooner switch sides and beg for forgiveness than Professor Snape will acknowledge my humanity. So let’s just focus on keeping him alive for now.”

Albus and Phineas gave a resigned nod, as if they accepted that Severus would likely never overcome his prejudice.

Two days ago, Severus would have agreed with them. But now, after everything he had endured the past couple of days, he wasn’t so sure.

Images from Albus’ memories flickered into his mind, of Potter holding Severus like he had never been held before, of Potter’s fingertips stroking Severus’ hair away from his forehead and a gentle hand washing his face.

He should be furious. He should be mad with rage that the Potter scion had touched him without consent. He should be terrified, given how much he hated to be touched by those he didn’t trust implicitly.

But all he could feel, as he lost himself in those bittersweet, confusing images, was a desperate wish that he had been conscious and capable of feeling that gentle caress.
Merlin, but this was going to be a long month.

Chapter End Notes

Spell Notes:


*Obice Silentium*: "Barrier of Silence." Silencing spell that blocks sound *IN*. People outside the range of the charm will not be able to hear what is said within its barriers.
Chapter 11

The Journey

Harry watched the potions master out of the corner of his eye, wondering what was going on in his head. He hadn’t spoken since they had settled on the Chamber as his refuge, and now he looked greatly subdued as they stood to leave the headmaster’s office. The man disillusioned himself and leaned on Dumbledore for support, but they had a long way to go, and Harry worried a man of the
headmaster’s advanced age would not be able to hold Snape up for so many floors.

“Um, professors?” He edged towards them, twisting his hands over one another. “The entrance to the Chamber is in Myrtle’s loo on the second floor. Erm, it’s a really long way to go. Um, you… I-I know you hate me, Professor Snape, but it might be better to lean on me until we’re there. Especially since you’re having to bend a bit to support him, Headmaster.”

Snape snapped, “Potter!”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Worried for my age, Harry?”

Heat suffused Harry’s face. “Um….”

“It’s quite all right, my boy. I am in good health and perfectly capable of aiding Severus; however, should he become too heavy on the way, I will allow you to assist.”

Harry shook his head. “Too suspicious, sir. He’s invisible. It’s going to be difficult to get him situated, and anyone who happens to be walking by is going to wonder why we’re moving so oddly.” He frowned. “Come to think of it, they’ll wonder why you’re holding your arm out for nothing, too.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “My arm will be glamoured, dear boy. No one but the three of us will see the truth of it. And as to supporting Severus, well, perhaps you are younger than I, Harry, but Severus is far heavier than he looks. He is slender, but quite strong, and—”

Snape gasped out, “Albus!”

Harry couldn’t see the man, but somehow knew Snape’s face would be bright red. Shame and embarrassment practically radiated from him, though Harry wondered why his own cheeks had taken on a bit of heat too. Strange.

“Oh, do calm yourself, Severus,” Dumbledore said with a chuckle. “It’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Now, as I was saying, Harry, Severus is rather heavy for his size and you are quite petite. I do not believe you will be able to bear him any better than I.”

Harry gave Albus a smile full of anger and grim knowledge of the old man’s numerous betrayals. “Maybe so, but it would be good training for the war, wouldn’t it, sir?”

Severus opened his mouth to protest Potter’s disrespectful tone, but froze at the sight of Albus’ face. The old man might be able to hide his reactions from the boy—or perhaps not, as Potter had apparently picked up on something Severus hadn’t—but either way, guilt was as plain as day in Albus’ eyes.

Something strange was indeed going on between Potter and Albus.

Training for the war, hmm? What kind of training had Albus forced Potter through to engender that kind of rage?

Merlin help him. What had Severus missed all these years?

Albus cleared his throat and gave Potter a thin smile. “Well, perhaps you do have a point, Harry.
Severus, would you consent to allowing Harry to help you?”

Severus snarled, panic and distrust crashing through his veins. It couldn’t be so simple. No one could truly be so forgiving. Potter had asked for this to enact his revenge.

His own thoughts laughed at him. “He saved your life three times just to what, push you down the stairs? In front of the headmaster, no less? That makes perfect sense.”

He scowled and backed away a step. Perhaps it was foolish to think Potter would hurt him after he had done so much to save him, but Severus couldn’t abide the thought of being so vulnerable, of trusting Potter to support him when he was too injured to stand unaided. No. Even trusting Albus or Poppy in such a situation pushed him past his limits.

Severus growled, “Why should I be so foolish as to trust a mere waif of a boy to bear my weight? He would be bowed over in pain before we made it ten metres.”

Potter fixed Severus with a piercing look. “I believe we’ve already established I can handle pain.”

And hadn’t that cut Severus down to size? He snapped back, but inside, his heart was bleeding. The boy was right. Potter had proved himself capable of enduring more pain than even a spy could—pain Severus had caused him—and what did that say about Severus?

In the end, Potter shrugged and turned away. “Have it your way, sir. I should have known by now….” He shook his head and cut himself off. “Never mind. Let’s just get out of here before I miss the entire day. Hermione’s bound to be in a tiff as is and I’m not sure I can—um, well, let’s just go.”

Albus shot Severus a sharp look, his desire for Severus to go to the boy clear in his eyes, but Severus couldn’t move. He couldn’t trust Potter like that.

Even if… the boy might deserve it.

Perhaps Albus might have felt Severus trembling, as the glare slipped off of his face and understanding replaced it.

“Well, I believe we will be all right, Harry, if you would like to lead the way?”

Potter nodded and walked out the door. The moment he entered the hallway, he shrunk into himself and wrapped his arms about his chest, dropping his gaze to the floor. The sudden change shocked Severus. One moment, Potter’s posture had shown confidence in spite of his tangible despair, the next, he practically faded into the background. Something odd was going on with the boy, and the thought had Severus more than a bit worried.

Worried? Two days ago he had hated Potter beyond anything, and today he was worried about the boy? Gods, was it possible to have such a paradigm shift in twenty-four hours?

Apparently so.

Merlin help him, Severus’ mind would soon break under the strain of so much change, so much new information in such a short time. Maybe it already had done. After all, how sane was he to set up temporary residence in Slytherin’s secret chamber alongside a rotting basilisk?

He shuddered. Potter seemed to take great enjoyment in bringing chaos to Severus’ well-ordered life.

As he watched Potter duck around a corner to avoid a group of students with red on their collars—Granger among them—Severus wondered if he was the only one enduring chaos and torment.
“That wasn’t what we discussed, Ron! You weren’t supposed to—”

Hermione’s irritated voice drifted to Harry’s ears from around the corner. He winced and turned into an empty hallway. It was a bit of a detour, but at least he could avoid her ranting for the time being. Not to mention, she might insist on coming along with Harry and the headmaster. And given that they weren’t alone, Harry couldn’t allow that.

He doubted Hermione would be as forgiving as he was. She hadn’t seen Snape the way Harry had. Couldn’t. No one who hadn’t lived through what he had seen and experienced would understand.

He gave a silent, dry laugh. Neither would most of those who had.

Maybe Snape had a point and Harry was screwed up somewhere. Between the visions, nightmares, Imperius dreams, the fallout with his friends, and Snape’s never-ending hatred, Harry wouldn’t be surprised. One of them would drive him barmy one day, if he wasn’t already there.

Just ahead, McGonagall ushered a group of chattering second years into her class and shut the door behind them. So second period had started and Harry was missing Defence. As they actually had a decent instructor this year—the real Moody—no doubt his classmates would be shocked that Harry hadn’t attended. Still, one lesson wouldn’t have much effect on his grade, even if he did enjoy learning from the wily old auror. Maybe Mad-Eye would be willing to give him the run down of what Harry had missed later that evening.

Hermione wouldn’t see it that way, though. Merlin, he wasn’t looking forward to going back to the dorms tonight. Maybe one more night in the Room was in order.

Harry frowned and shook his head. No, he’d have to stay in the Chamber with Snape, at least until the man could fend for himself—possibly for the entire duration of his stay. Joy of all joys, but the man needed help whether he liked it or not, and Harry was the only Parselmouth in the school. Or in Scotland, for that matter.

He sighed and gave up on his lessons for the day. There simply wouldn’t be time.

With classes in session, they met no one in the halls and the rest of the trip to the second floor went without a hitch. Maybe Dumbledore was stronger than he looked too. Harry filed that fact away for future use and led the old man at a gentle pace towards the broken girls’ loo, the silence only broken by Snape’s laboured breathing and his occasional grunt of pain.

At least until Harry stepped into the loo.

Myrtle popped up over one of the stalls. “Harry! It’s been ages since you—”

The headmaster and Snape came in at this point, and Myrtle squeaked and vanished with an almighty splash.

“Well,” said Dumbledore with a wry smile, “I daresay I hadn’t imagined my appearance to be quite that alarming.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “She just didn’t expect you, I think.”
“Riveting,” Snape said, deadpan. “Might we hurry this expedition along before someone else discovers us?”

“No one ever comes here.” A gurgle sounded from one of the loos, and Harry stepped back just in time to avoid a minor flood. “And that would be why.” He Vanished the water and moved to stand in front of the broken tap.

“Dobby?”

The elf appeared with a bow. “Hello, great Master Harry Potter, sir.”

“Hi, Dobby. Um, could you please get my broom from my dorm for me?”

Snape snorted. “Too good to Summon it, Potter?”

Harry stared at the floor, unwilling to let the bastard see how much pain he was in. “I had thought a broom zooming unattended through the halls of the school might draw unwanted notice, sir.”

Dumbledore gave Snape a reproachful look. “So it would. Go on, Dobby, and please retrieve my broom as well.”

The elf shot a glare at Snape—invisible or no, the elf could no doubt sense him. “You is mean to Great Master Harry Potter, Master Snapey, when he is nice to you. You’s will be losing all your friends that way.” With that, he vanished with a crack and reappeared a moment later, carrying Harry’s Firebolt and Dumbledore’s old Shooting Star.

Another unexpected wash of Snape’s shame made Harry’s cheeks heat. Merlin. What was going on? Wasn’t the man Occluding properly? Maybe he was too injured.

Concern overrode Harry’s irritation. He had best nip Dobby’s irritation in the bud, for Snape’s sake. Even if the elf did have a point.

“Thanks, Dobby,” said Harry with a wan smile. “But, um, don’t worry about Professor Snape. He’s… uh, well, I can handle it. And he’s in a lot of pain anyway, so I don’t mind if he’s sharp. I don’t think he can help it right now.”

Snape snarled. “Potter!”

“S-sorry, sir. Just trying to….” Harry sighed and gave it up. No matter what he said, Snape would believe the worst of him. With a sad shake of his head, he turned back to the elf and patted his head, lightly so as not to squash his hat. “Thanks for trying to protect me, Dobby, but I’m all right.”

The elf’s eyes shimmered with tears. “Oh! Great Master Harry Potter sir is so brave, so kind!”

Harry winced at the elf’s squealing. “Er, that’s n-nice, but we’re trying to be quiet here. And I need to get them to safety. Quickly.”

“I’s be understanding.” The elf vanished, leaving them alone in the loo with nothing but the sound of Snape’s breathing and dripping water.

“Right.” Harry gripped his broom handle and edged closer to the sink. A cock of his head made the snake carved on the side of the broken tap appear to wriggle in the candlelight. “Open.”

The sink and tap melted into the wall and morphed into a person-sized hole. Harry, having no desire to slide down a slimy pipe, mounted his broom.
He kept his eyes averted and his voice low. “Professor, this is one time I really do think you’d be safer riding with me. Unless you’ve some talent with a broom I don’t know about, Headmaster?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Not at all, my boy. I am afraid I am not particularly skilled in the air. Severus would most certainly be safer with you.”

“That’s debatable,” Snape grumbled.

“Well, you could slide down the pipe if you really don’t want to fly,” Harry said, looking down to hide his pain, “but it’s slimy and a rough ride, and with your injuries, sir, I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Snape groaned. “Is there no other way?”

“Not unless you can fly without a broom.”

Snape sighed. “Not at the moment, to be sure.”

At the moment? Harry raised an eyebrow. “Can you fly on normal days then, sir?”

Snape snarled. “That is none of your business.”

Harry turned away and reminded himself not to attempt civility with Snape. The berk wouldn’t know it if it bit him on the arse.

Dumbledore cancelled the disillusionment spell to reveal a pale, shaking Professor Snape. He looked done in—and having walked down five floors and across a castle while injured would certainly have taken it out of him.

Harry motioned to his broom. “Sir, please let me get you to safety. I won’t let you fall.”

Snape glowered. “It would be quite the convenient way to rid oneself of an irritant, would it not?”

Harry gave a laugh tinged with hysteria. “Why do I even try? J-just ride with Professor Dumbledore then, if you really think badly enough of me that I would throw an injured man off of my broom not two hours after saving his life—twice!” Tears blurred his vision, and Harry was too miserable to even care.

Gods, why did he keep hurting himself? Hadn’t Snape given him enough indication that nothing would ever change? Harry rubbed his eyelids harshly, hating himself for caring.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said, his tone sharp, “that is enough!”

“Albus, you know it’s the truth. It would be all too easy to—”

Dumbledore’s gaze turned as cold and hard as steel. “I see. Well, if you still think so badly of Harry as all this, perhaps I have made a mistake in trusting you to treat him with more respect.”

Snape gave a strangled noise of alarm. “A-Albus, I—”

“Stop!” Harry dropped his broom and stood toe-to-toe with the headmaster. “That is enough from you too, sir. You can’t just give him death threats until he behaves. He’s not going to change until he wants to, if he ever does, and all you’re doing by forcing him is making him hate me even more! He’s going to resent us both for this soon, if he doesn’t already. And I, for one, have enough resentment to deal with in my life without you adding that to my tally too!”
He turned his back and stormed back to his broom, leaving two shell-shocked men behind. “Not to mention, it’s bloody cruel to keep scaring Professor Snape like this, even if he is being horrible to me. It hurts, of course it does—but he’s not endangering my life by his sharp tongue. You are endangering his, and that’s too ruthless even for you, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore swayed, shock written all over his face. “Harry!”

Harry glared. Fuck all if he would take back a word.

Snape stared at Harry, eyes wide and complexion ashen. “P-Potter, why do you keep doing this? I… I don’t understand.”

Harry turned his face away. “You heard me the first time I explained, sir. It’s just you don’t want to believe it.”

Snape’s voice had gone soft and held a note of uncertainty. “I am not asking why you saved my life. Why are you being… kind? Why do you continually defend me? I… surely you are angry with me?”

Harry gave the man a sad, resigned smile. “Sir, all of that faded last night when I saw you whipped all over, broken, burned, and bleeding to death, and knew you had suffered because I didn’t have the strength to tough out your anger or keep your secrets.”

Snape staggered back, his eyes dark and shadowed with confusion and remorse. “I… because what? How can you…? This is incomprehensible.”

Dumbledore caught Severus and steadied him. “I must confess I am confused as well, but either way, I recommend we hurry and go down to the Chamber to discuss it before someone comes. I have a silencing charm over the room and Harry is correct that people do not come here often, but not often is not never.”

Harry suppressed a snort. Polyjuice potion took twenty-one days to brew and theirs had sat on one of the loos that entire time without being disturbed. Still, with his luck, this would be the time someone grew desperate enough for a loo break to risk Myrtle’s mercurial mood swings and random floods.

“All right. I’ll just light my wand and go ahead of you two then. Make sure you follow me exactly, or you might bump into the walls.”

Harry took out his wand, but before he could move, a tentative voice froze his feet to the floor.

“W-wait.”

Professor Snape, and he sounded frightened.

Harry’s breath stilled. “Sir?”

Snape sighed and limped to Harry’s side. “You will… be careful?”

Harry swallowed hard. “Yes, sir.”

He dared say nothing else lest Snape change his mind. Despite what the man might think, Harry wasn’t stupid. As small as it might seem to trust him with a broom ride, it wasn’t. The man was trusting a boy he had, until recently, thought subhuman with his life. It was a massive step for him, and Harry would be damned if he would say anything to discourage him.

As Snape cautiously settled onto the broom behind him, hands white-knuckled on the handle, Harry
vowed he would protect the man. Even if he got snarky and mean again.

“Okay, Professor. Can you hold onto me?”

Snape flinched, but wrapped his arms gingerly around Harry’s waist.

“Tighter than that, sir. This tunnel is very steep. You’ll fall if you don’t hold on.”

A shaky breath warmed Harry’s neck and sent a strange ticklish feeling down his spine. Snape’s long legs settled on either side of Harry’s hips and his body pressed close, arms hugging him tight. Snape’s breathing came fast and shallow against Harry’s neck and his entire body trembled.

“Do try not to kill me, Potter. I have had one too many close calls over the past day.”

“Yes, I know, as I was there for both of them, sir.” He laid a hand over Snape’s arm, hoping he wouldn’t get slapped for it, and rubbed just a little. “It’s all right. I’ll keep you safe, sir. Just hold on tight.”

Snape clutched Harry’s chest, shaking hard against him, and laid his head on the boy’s shoulder. For a moment, Harry couldn’t breathe. Shock and something soft bloomed in his heart.

Maybe it wasn’t hopeless. Maybe Snape wouldn’t hate him forever after all.

“Today, Potter.”

Or maybe that day was a long way off. With a little sigh, Harry gathered his wits and kicked off slowly, acclimating himself to the change in balance Snape’s weight had caused. Merlin, Dumbledore wasn’t kidding. Snape really was heavier than Harry would have given such a slim man credit for. He edged forwards to make up for the tail drag.

“Come forwards a little, sir. We’re unbalanced.”

Snape’s breath hitched and he scooted close, burrowing further in Harry’s shoulder.

“Ah, there we go.” Harry tested the broom a little and nodded. “That’s the ticket. Now, just hold on tight, sir. I’ve got you, and we’ll take this nice and slow. Here we go. Lumos.”

With a deep breath, Harry tightened his grip and flew into the pipe.

Severus held Potter tight and struggled to keep his fear in check. Gods, he hated brooms. And flying on the back of one with a boy who, in all honesty, had every right to chuck him to his death, made the experience even more terrifying. He couldn’t stop shaking, couldn’t lift his head from Potter’s shoulder, couldn’t move. He focused on his breathing, on the feel of Potter’s heartbeat against his arms, on his surprisingly soothing scent, and somehow managed to keep his panic in check until Potter alighted.

“Okay, sir. We’re here.”

Severus tried to move, but terror had rendered him rigid.

“Merlin.” Potter gently pried Severus’ left hand away—the one the Dark Lord hadn’t broken—and
held it in his. “Breathe, sir. It’s all right. You’re here. You’re safe.”

Potter’s gentle touch rendered Severus breathless. The soft, sweet caress healed a broken part of his soul at the same time the anguish of clawing, keening need and the bitter ache of a broken heart ripped him apart.

No. He couldn’t bear it—he needed this too much. He would lose himself if he gave into it even for a moment. He wouldn’t be that desperate, lonely wretch again, dancing at the whim of another. No!

He jerked back, eyes wide and fear deeper than even his terror of brooms tearing away his composure. With a shake of his head, Snape yanked his hand away and dashed into the shadows. He stood panting against a wall and tried to gather his wits, shaking so hard his teeth rattled.

“Oh.” Potter sighed and moved off his broom, eyes downcast and full of sorrow darker and deeper than this blasted tunnel. “I’m sorry, sir. I s-shouldn’t have touched you. I won’t do it again.”

Dear gods, the pain in his voice ripped Severus’ heart to shreds. He looked up to find Albus watching the boy, guilt and deep remorse tingeing the sorrow in his eyes. Potter had his back turned to them both, one hand wrapped around the handle of his broom, the other arm hugging his waist. He slumped, head bowed, and the boy’s shoulders trembled with suppressed tears.

Fuck. Severus hadn’t meant to hurt him like that. He had reacted out of sheer mindless terror. But what could he do? As much as his soul longed for touch, his heart and mind feared it. He couldn’t let Potter touch him. He couldn’t open himself so far, not to anyone. Never again.

And yet, the boy’s obvious anguish made Severus want to fix what his fears had broken, somehow.

Heart hammering, breath rushing in short bursts, Severus took a halting step. Crunching under his feet shocked him, and he looked down to realise he was standing atop a pile of dried animal bones. With a shudder, he cleaned up the remains of the basilisk’s meals—a little-known spell to Vanish dangerous substances without backlash made sure they would not be blown to bits for his efforts—and attempted to collect himself.

“P-Potter.”

The boy flinched and turned, but did not lift his head. Severus winced at the sight of silvery tracks down both the boy’s cheeks.

“Come… come here.”

He wasn’t sure he could make it to Potter without support, given the way his limbs were shaking.

“Yes, sir.” The boy’s voice was flat and dim, and the sound of it hurt Severus.

Gods, how had he not seen how anguished Potter was before now?

Severus took a steadying breath and gathered his courage. “If you are amenable, I… I believe I have trespassed too far already on Albus’ reserves. Perhaps… you would a-assist me to the Chamber?”

Potter jerked up, eyes wide and rimmed pink. “But I would have to…”

Severus looked away. “I know. When I pulled away, I was not… it was not….”

Albus moved to Harry’s side and gave Severus a sad smile. “Would you like me to explain a bit, my boy?”
Severus clenched his fists and dropped his gaze. “No details. That is my choice to offer.”

“Of course.” Albus laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Harry, Severus is… ah, reserved, to an extreme. It takes a great deal of trust before he can bear touch from another person.”

“Oh.” Potter hugged his chest and dragged his toe along the floor. “Then I guess you’d rather the headmaster help you, sir.”

Severus tried not to snap. “I asked you, did I not?”

Potter smiled wanly. “Yeah. And that’s enough. You don’t trust me yet, sir, but knowing you were willing to try is….” He dropped his head and turned his face away. “It’s enough.”

Severus winced. “I….”

“It’s okay. Let’s just get started, sir. Otherwise we’ll be here all day.”

“He does make a good point,” said Albus. “Harry, can you close the Chamber entrance?”

Potter frowned. “Um, I can when we get to the main doors, maybe. I need to see a snake or something like it to speak Parseltongue. Otherwise it just comes out in English.”

“Serpensortia!” A black and jade viper slithered out of Severus’ wand tip and landed on the floor before them. It reared its head and hissed, fangs extended, and Severus guided Albus back a step.

Potter gave the beast an appreciative look and hissed to it. After a moment, the snake’s irritated posture eased.

“Thank you, sir. She says she’s a Sri Lankan pit viper and her name is Isuri.”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Fascinating. I did not summon her for a chat.”

Potter grimaced. “C-could you, maybe not Banish her? It’s… I can’t stand it.”

“And what am I to do with a pit viper, Potter? Perhaps you have forgotten, but they are quite venomous.”

Potter flushed and looked down. “I-I’d be willing to look after her.”

“A brilliant idea,” said Albus before Severus could protest. “So long as you can extract a vow from her never to injure humans or any magical creatures about the area.”

Potter nodded and hissed to the snake again. The creature jerked her head in a parody of a nod and slithered up Potter’s extended arm to wrap loosely around his neck. He petted her neck and hissed once more, and a clinking sound above them signified the Chamber door had closed.

“Good work, Harry,” said Albus. “Perhaps you and your new friend would like to lead us on? This is not the primary Chamber, is it?”

“No, sir,” Potter said, still stroking the serpent’s scales. “The entrance is this way.” He paused. “Oh. But I do hope one of you knows a spell to clear a cave-in. Lockhart, genius that he is, nearly brought the tunnel down on our heads.”

Severus scowled. “And you did not think to mention this until now, Potter?”

The boy flinched and lowered his head. “I didn’t remember until now, sir.”
“There we have it. Official proof that you are, in fact, a—” The look on Albus’ face and Potter’s sudden shrinking posture killed the words on Severus’ tongue. Hadn’t he vowed not to hurt the boy again not half an hour ago? Damn. He just kept failing this child.

“Never mind it,” he said with a sigh. “Let us just get this over with.”

Potter hissed something to his new familiar and led them through a narrow tunnel, head bowed and steps slow and guarded. The more Severus watched him, the less the boy resembled the arrogant berk his father had been. Indeed, even their physical similarities lessened by the moment.

True, Harry had his father’s wild head of hair and his ridiculously out-of-fashion glasses, and the boy had definitely inherited his nose from the former head of Potter house, but James Potter had been… well, large. The boy had towered over Severus, even at the respectable height Severus had gained as an adult. Combined with his powerful, muscular form, James Potter had been a brute in more ways than one.

But his son… Merlin, the boy was tiny in comparison. He barely topped five feet and had nothing of his father’s musculature. The child was practically a waif.

The thought raised a memory from twenty-seven years ago, Severus’ first year. He hadn’t grown much until sixth year, and his small size left him vulnerable to the bigger bullies: Black, Potter, Avery, Rowle—all of them had dwarfed Severus, and their sheer physical advantage meant Severus hadn’t a hope of defending himself until he learned bigger, better hexes and jinxes than they knew. Eventually, he learned how to protect himself, but in first year, he hadn’t a prayer.

The prats were after him again. It was just luck that Severus’ small size lent him speed, or else he might never evade the bullies’ obsession with him. Why did they pick on him anyway? Just because he was small, poor, and Slytherin? What right did that give them?

Merlin, he wished he’d stayed in the library with Lils, but he had missed lunch—no thanks to the prats—and he was hungry. His mum couldn’t spare much, but she had sent him some shortbread biscuits a couple days before. He had wanted to grab a few from his dorm before dinner, but of course the prats had found him along the way, and now he was stuck hiding in the corner of a broom closet and hoping they would pass him over this time. It worked, some days.

Quick footsteps came closer, and Severus dropped to his knees and ducked his head. If he hid in the shadows and made himself small, maybe they would overlook him. That was the key to survival in the Snape home, and in school now, too. Gods, had he truly once believed that Hogwarts would be a safe haven? Ha!

The footsteps stopped, and voices sounded a few yards away from his hiding spot.

“Is it working?” Pettigrew. He sounded excited. The vicious little devil did seem to have a thing for blood.

“Maybe.” Black paused. “That look right to you, James?”

“Well the lines are a bit wonky, but it does look right. See, there’s a door here and it says the same there.”

“One way to find out, right?” Pettigrew gave his odd, snuffling laugh. “I get first go this time.”

“No way,” Potter fired back. “I’m the leader and I say I get the first go.”
“Not fair! You always do!”

“Yeah? If you don’t like it, then tag along with someone else.”

Pettigrew grumbled something, and the footsteps came nearer. Severus bit back a whimper and curled up tighter. The steps halted outside his hiding spot.

Potter called through the door, “Snape, I know you’re hiding in there, you filthy little coward.”

Severus forced himself not to speak, not to make a sound, and held his breath as the door opened.

“Aw, playing hide and seek, Snape? Guess I’ll just have to try again later, then.”

Severus’ heart pattered. Had he escaped?

“Caeliturpis!”

A green cloud of noxious fumes, like the entire world’s rubbish rolled into one foul punch, filled the room. Potter laughed and closed the door, locking in the stench. Severus held his breath as long as he could, but the hex didn’t clear, and he had to breathe before long. Oh gods. The smell made his eyes water and his nose and throat burn. He coughed and choked and gagged, but when he tried to escape, he found the door locked.

The brats laughed on the other side, mocking his pain.

“Let me out, you imbeciles!”

Black guffawed. “And ruin a perfectly good hex? Nah. You’re going to get all cosy in there for a while. Smells like home, doesn’t it?”

Pettigrew snickered. “A rotten old skip bin is more like it.”

“Exactly my point.”

Tears of pain and anger dripped down Severus’ face, relieving some of the awful burn. “Shut up! You don’t know anything about me!” His retort ended in a coughing fit, making his tears run harder.

Oh gods, he had to get out of here before he choked to death. The prats wouldn’t release him, not without torturing him first, but hadn’t he seen a spell in the library earlier to unlock doors? Lily hadn’t wanted to record it, but Severus had run into trouble too often to overlook such a potentially useful spell. He grabbed his wand and pointed it at the doorknob.

“Alohamora!”

The door clicked, and Severus came rushing out, coughing and retching.

“You little shite!” Potter grabbed Severus by the collar and slammed him against a wall. “How did you break out of that? That’s two weeks’ work, wasted! I reckon I ought to make you pay.”

A hard punch slammed into Severus’ gut and doubled him over. He sank to his knees, winded and holding back the urge to retch by the barest thread.

“L-leave me alone,” he choked out.

“I don’t think so,” Potter snarled. “You ruined our test, now you get to pay the toll. Oh, does that
scare you? Are you going to cry?” He laughed cruelly. “Look at this, boys. He’s over here
snivelling like a little nancy boy.”

“If the shoe fits,” Black said with a barking jeer of a laugh. “His mum should’ve named him
‘Snivellus,’ much as he bawls.”

“Snivellus, huh?” Potter leered. “I like that. Oi, Snivellus! Get up before I make you.”

Tears blinding him, Severus looked up the length of Potter, towering over him and glaring with all
his might, and obeyed. If he didn’t, they would only hurt him worse.

Severus shuddered, struggling to banish the pain of long-hated memories. Then the living Potter
turned and motioned to a pile of rubble ahead, head bowed and stains of tear tracks still visible on his
cheeks, and the similarity of their pasts struck Severus like the Hogwarts Express. He had put this
child through the exact same kind of anguish Potter’s father and godfather had done to him, and like
them, he towered over the boy.

Fuck. Harry wasn’t like James Potter—Severus was. The thought set his stomach roiling.

“Here’s the cave-in, sir,” Potter said, his voice low and dim, as if he was trying not to anger Severus
again.

Severus was too busy reeling to be angry. Gods. Gods! How many of his abusers would he become
before the day was through? First his father and now Potter Senior and Black. He supposed he
should be relieved he had at least not sunk to the level of his two worst abusers, but he couldn’t think
beyond the ringing horror in his veins, the aching nausea in his gut.

Appalled and shaken as he was, he hardly noticed as Albus cleared the rubble away, added structural
support to the tunnel, and led him on once more.

The old man’s words from the previous day rang in Severus’ ears. “I had the sense that he identifies
with you on some level....”

Severus watched as the boy hissed to a door with carved snakes on its surface, shock and deep
remorse playing havoc with his heart. He still had no idea how Potter, the adored, pampered saviour,
believed he could identify with the hated, cruel potions master, but never had Severus imagined he
would find himself in a similar situation.

“Lily would be so proud of me.”

The thought cut deep, and Severus limped into the ancient Chamber of Salazar Slytherin in as
subdued a mood as Harry himself.

Where had he gone so wrong?

Chapter End Notes

Spell Notes:

Caeliturpis: “Foul air.” A hex to flood an area with noxious clouds of stench.
Chapter 12

The Generosity of a Hero

Albus entered the Chamber prepared to cast an air-cleaning charm, but it proved unnecessary. He wondered how a great beast could have lain dead in this place for so long without rotting until he saw Harry standing by it, looking at the pristine corpse with an expression of dismay.

“How did I manage to kill this thing as a second year?”

How indeed. Albus’ breath caught at the size of the beast. It was at least ten metres long and as thick as his waist. Merlin. A snake that size could have swallowed Harry whole then, let alone as a thirteen year old child. Adding in its murderous gaze and lethal venom, not to mention the half-formed horcrux Tom that Ginevra’s folly had awakened, the fact that Harry had survived at all was a miracle.

Beside him, Severus uttered a strangled sound of shock. “It is… preserved?”

“There must be a charm on the place.” Harry shuddered and turned away. “It’s just like when I left here. Even the…. He gagged and covered his mouth, edging away from a dark pool glimmering near his feet.

“Severus,” Albus muttered to his protégé, “is it safe to remove that blood?”

“I will do it.”

Severus Vanished the still-wet pool of blood from the boy’s feet with a flick of his wand and a strange incantation Albus had never heard. Perhaps Severus had invented it.

A shiver crept down Albus’ spine. Thank Merlin none but a Parselmouth could enter the Chamber. Envenomed or no, that blood could have cost them the war—and Harry—had Tom ever discovered it.

Harry shuddered and walked away from the basilisk corpse, instead staring up at the statue of Slytherin, his expression torn.

“I wonder if he really looked like this.”

“Considering he carved and built this Chamber himself,” Severus snapped, “I would say it is most likely a fair approximation, idi—”

He choked off the insult, pressed his fist to his mouth, and bowed his head in remorse. “Albus….”
The man swayed with exhaustion, cold sweat gleaming on his forehead, and Albus understood. The man was past his limit and snapping at them out of sheer misery.

Albus conjured a bed for him, well away from the serpent. “Rest, Severus. Harry and I will deal with the basilisk.”

Severus groaned as Albus half-carried the younger man to the bed. “Bloody pity, it is,” he muttered.

Harry gave him a bemused look. “What, the snake? I didn’t actually want to kill it. I had no choice though. It wanted to kill me.”

Severus sat on the mattress, shaking all over, and wiped his brow. “Not that, Potter—the corpse.” His voice came out breathy with weariness. “Other than the venom, which cannot be used for anything but dark purposes, that corpse is a fortune’s worth of rare ingredients.”

Harry shrugged and turned back to the statue. “So just keep it then.”

Severus gasped and went rigid, all the colour draining from his complexion, not that he had much at the moment to speak of. “I c-cannot. You killed the beast. By all rights, it is yours.”

“What am I going to do with a dead basilisk? Merlin, just take it. I don’t want it.”

Severus reeled. “T-take it? But that is worth millions of galleons!”

“And I don’t need the money. If you can save people’s lives with it, take it and welcome. I really don’t want it.” Harry shuddered. “Selling dead animal parts for money—gods no. Just take it, sir. Really.”

Severus sank onto the pillows as if he could not support himself any longer, his face white and eyes round as galleons. “D-did he just… an entire…? Albus, am I going mad?”

Albus chuckled and patted Severus’ shoulder. “Strange how the light of truth reveals things we never expected, isn’t it?”

“Albus. Don’t torment me further. Please.”

Harry nodded. “I agree, sir. He’s been shocked enough for one day. Besides, it looks like we have a basilisk to harvest.”

Albus stared at the corpse and sighed. “Merlin, we really do need house elves to help with this. It will take us weeks.”

“Well, Dobby can’t apparate in here, but I reckon I could just bring him down on my broom. And maybe Winky might feel better if she had some real work. And some of the other elves might chip in. I can ask around in the kitchens and see who’s willing and who’s not.”

“The kitchens.” Severus sat and gave Harry a piercing look. “Is there any location within this castle you have not… familiarised yourself with?”

Harry gave him a wan smile, obviously having caught the implication of wrongdoing behind Severus’ words. “Probably not, sir.”

“Well, it works in our favour for now,” Albus said with a nod. “Harry, do go question the house elves. In the meantime, I will ask Severus what we need to harvest this and make a list for Dobby.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be back in a mo, then.” He hissed to his snake, and the beast slithered into his shirt,
hiding under his clothing. “Right. Wish me luck.” With that, Harry turned on his heel and practically raced out of the Chamber, leaving Albus alone with Severus.

“My boy,” Albus said, eyes searching, “how are you doing?”

“How do you think? I am exhausted, injured, on the Dark Lord’s death list, and my entire system of beliefs has just been turned on its head. I need a pint of scotch and a full phial of Dreamless Sleep.”

“Come now, Severus. You know better than to combine alcohol and Dreamless Sleep. You might not wake up.”

Severus gave him a look full of grim understanding.

Oh.

“Dear gods, Severus. Don’t tell me you would rather die than accept the truth? So you were wrong about him. That is no reason to give up.”

Severus glared. “I am not suicidal. I only—it is… difficult to come to terms with. And I am….” He dropped his head, cheeks tinting pink and hands shaking, and Albus understood. Shame had overwhelmed him.

The old man laid a hand on Severus’ shoulder, but pulled away at his wince. “Severus, Harry has been remarkably forgiving. I believe it is not too late to heal the damage you have done, if that is your wish.”

“I… l-leave me be, Albus. Please.”

Albus sighed and conjured a notepad and quill. “Very well. As long as you are not being cruel to the boy, I will not push you to reconcile. For the moment, however, I do need a list of supplies and any special considerations.”

Severus took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “I cannot believe—is this real?”

“Yes, my boy. Harry is quite generous, though I imagine this is the first time you have experienced that generosity and kindness of spirit for yourself.”

“It… I cannot understand it. How could the son of such a terrible man be… be so different?”

Albus raised an eyebrow. “I can think of one other instance where a child grew beyond the traits of his father.” His eyes hardened. “Most of the time.”

Severus cringed, eyes shimmering with grief. “A-Albus, no. No, I am not….”

Albus stared, knowing his protégé would never understand how far he had fallen without the comparison to his own past.

Severus shrank in on himself and buried his head in his hands. “I… I see.”

Albus sighed and relented. “You are doing better since last night. For now, Severus, what do we need for the basilisk?”

Severus sat and examined the corpse, eyes dark with terrible grief. “L-leave the head. Cut a metre below the base of the skull, seal the head in a blood-bound impermeable barrier, and do not break it for any reason. The venom is extremely dangerous. I will need specialised equipment to collect and dispose of it, and I would prefer to do so myself after I have had some time to heal.”
Albus peered over the rim of his spectacles. “You are going to collect the venom? Which can only be used for dark purposes?”

Severus winced. “Several phials for antivenin.”

“There is no antivenin for basilisk venom, not that I am aware of. Other than phoenix tears, of course, and only fresh from a phoenix.”

“That is true, and also why basilisk venom is so lethal. Who other than you and Potter has a phoenix to come at their beck and call? And even Potter has only your familiar’s loyalty, not a phoenix of his own.” Severus lowered his head. “That is why I… I would like to try to develop a potion form of antivenin, if Fawkes will consent to work with me once he is matured enough.”

It was a reasonable answer, but Albus sensed Severus had not been entirely forthright. “Hmm. Is it only because the venom is available, or is there more to your sudden desire to cure basilisk poisoning?”

Severus shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. “I have heard hints that the Dark Lord plans to use basilisk venom against his victims in the future. As of yet, I do not know what he intends to do with it, but I fear for the safety of our students.” He lowered his head. “And yes, I do know it is ironic for me to suggest such a thing not twenty-four hours after being suspended for abusing said students.”

Albus simply looked at him. If Severus did have other plans for the venom, the man would reveal it under pressure.

“Albus, please.” Severus dropped his head and clenched his fists in the quilt beneath him. By the colour of his complexion and the tremor in his shoulders, Albus gathered he was holding back tears. “Do you truly believe me so far gone as to use such terrible venom against human beings? I realise I am in disgrace, but you… you said you believed in me. I… I had hoped that you meant it.” Severus looked up, expression contorted with bitter anguish and deep anger. “Or was that simply another manipulation to bend me to your will?”

Albus did not need Legilimency to see that such a betrayal would turn Severus against him forever.

He laid a hand on Severus’ wrist, one of the few forms of touch the man could bear, even with those he was close to. “My boy, if I did not believe in you, I would have simply terminated your contract. But I do believe in you, Severus. And since this morning, I have seen proof my faith in you is not without merit. I simply wanted to know what your plans were, as you are correct that the venom is quite lethal.”

Severus took a deep breath and, slowly, the pain and betrayal left his face. “I will not use any to harm people, nor will I allow it to be used for such a purpose. I swear it, Albus. I will dispose of what I do not need to develop antivenin as soon as I am able.”

Albus nodded and poised his quill over the paper. “Very well, Severus. I will take you at your word. What do we need to harvest the body then, as well as for your habitation here? And is the shed skin in the tunnel outside usable?”

Severus frowned. “There was a shed skin? I did not see it.”

“I suspect you were too distracted by your pain to notice. There are probably many hidden in the Chamber somewhere. Perhaps Harry could help us search.”

“Perhaps. Concerning the one we are sure of, however, as long as the scales have not turned brown,
it should be usable. As for the rest of the snake, you will need at least ten large collection bins, heavy-duty and reinforced against corrosive substances, thick dragonhide gloves for all of us, a diamond carving knife—I have one in my personal lab...."

As Albus recorded Severus’ needs, he said a little prayer for his protégé. In spite of all he had done wrong, Albus did love the boy and wanted the best for him. If Severus could grow past this incident and let go of his hatred, he might have some hope for a proper life after the war ended. Else, Albus wasn’t positive he could keep the man from Azkaban.

He cast a glance at the basilisk corpse and a thread of hope curled around his heart, warm and glowing, relieving a burden of fear he had carried since Severus’ first brush with that awful prison. Perhaps he wasn’t the only one who would stand up for his wayward potions professor, when the time came.

With a secret smile, Albus returned his attention to his list.

Harry had been right about Winky. Having real work to do had indeed cheered the elf up. He made a note to give her more to do in the future. Along with her, Dobby and one of the braver elves, Tippy, had agreed to help, but the rest were hesitant to trust him.

“I know it’s scary,” Harry assured them, “but I promise it’s dead. And there’s nothing else down there.” He paused. “At least, nothing interested in us. At any rate, between Professor Dumbledore and myself, nothing will hurt you.”

The elves whimpered and backed away.

A tiny female house elf asked, “I-is the headmaster ordering us to helps?”

“No, no. Of course not. We both know you’re all pretty scared, so if you don’t want to help, you don’t have to. It really is safe though. Just a bit of a pain since you can’t just pop in and out like usual.”

She nodded. “I’s being helping you then.”

“Great!” Harry knelt down to her and offered his hand. “What’s your name?”

“Berry, Master Harry Potter sir.”

“Nice to meet you, Berry.” Harry shook her hand and motioned to the waiting elves. “Would you join my friends here? We might have enough now. I hope so anyway.” Just as he stood, his stomach let out a huge rumble. “Oh. Guess my appetite came back a bit.”

Berry frowned. “You is hungry, Master Harry?”

“Yeah. Haven’t had much in the past two days, honestly. But we don’t really have time to—”

The house elves let out a wail as one.

“No, no!” Tippy rushed about and brought him a turkey sandwich and crisps. “We is not letting you go hungry, Master Harry! You is needing to eat something.”
Harry grinned at her. “All right, all right. I can see I’m outnumbered. Thank you.”

Another mass wail—happy this time—met this statement. He chuckled and sat down to eat his sandwich. It was good—made just the way he liked it.

“How do you lot know how to make food to our preferences?” He motioned to his sandwich. “You even knew I don’t like onions. How do you do it?”

“Is a house elf skill,” said Berry with a shrug. “We is just knowing.”

“I’m a bit jealous. Sounds like a good skill to have.” He gave a dark laugh. “Sure would have helped me in Professor Snape’s potions class.”

On second thought, Snape would have likely assumed Harry was cheating if he had pulled off a perfect potion, despite the fact that Snape had kept him isolated since the beginning of term.

Well, maybe those days were over now. Harry certainly hoped so. Snape had been almost kind—well, for him—in the Chamber. And he had even offered to let Harry help. Maybe it would be okay between them from now on. The thought relieved a dark burden of grief he had carried for far too long.

Then the door to the kitchen opened, and Harry’s hopeful mood evaporated like his Patronus mist before a Dementor.

Three younger Hufflepuffs came in—third years, probably—chattering and laughing. They stopped dead at the sight of Harry.

“Go on,” Harry said with a hesitant smile. “There’s enough room for more.”

All the colour leached out of their faces.

“I—I’m not that hungry, really,” said a girl.

The lone boy laughed nervously and backed towards the door, leading both girls with him. “Yeah, it’s not that long to lunch. I r-reckon we’ll wait it out.”

The last girl just stared, eyes wide and body shaking.

“Well, um, bye!” The first girl grabbed the boy’s hand and dashed out of the kitchens, dragging the others in her wake.

Harry watched them flee the kitchen with a sinking heart. After being in the Chamber again so recently, he couldn’t have missed the implication of their sudden fear. It was like second year all over again. Someone had spread some awful rumour about him, and given what he had endured last night in the common room, he had a fair idea who.

“M-maybe I’m not that hungry after all.” He pushed his plate away, but at the worry in the house elves’ eyes, sighed and choked down the rest of his sandwich. He did need to eat, he supposed, even if his stomach felt like lead.

“I can’t eat anymore,” he said once he had finished his sandwich and some of his crisps. “T-thanks for lunch.” He held a hand out to Dobby. “Are you lot ready to go then?”

The elves nodded, their expressions sad, and Dobby popped Harry away to Myrtle’s loo. Myrtle appeared over the top of her stall and gave Harry a curious stare.
“They’re saying you killed someone, you know.”

Harry flinched and turned away. It was worse than he had expected then.

Dobby shrieked, “Great Master Harry Potter sir would never be killing someone! They are liars and
sneaks and deserve to have their ears ironed!”

Harry rubbed his ears, half out of sympathy and half from the shrill tone of Dobby’s protests.
“Dobby, no ear ironing. And please be quiet. I don’t want to draw attention to this place.”

Dobby’s ears drooped. “But they is lying about you, Master Harry Potter sir.”

“It’s nothing new.” Harry gave Myrtle a sad smile. “I suppose they’re saying I attacked a Death
Eater or something then?”

Myrtle shook her head so hard, her pigtails smacked her in the face. “No. They’re saying you killed
Professor Snape for revenge.”

Harry choked. “Pr-Professor Snape? That’s utterly mad! Have you seen the man duel? I doubt I
could get anywhere near him in a real fight. Not to mention, he’s not dead!”

Myrtle huffed. “Well, I didn’t start the rumours, so there’s no need to get tetchy.”

Harry sighed. “Sorry, Myrtle. I… it’s just been a hard day. Listen, if anyone asks if you’ve seen me
hanging about your loo, don’t say anything, please. I’d really appreciate it.”

Myrtle tittered and blushed. “Okay. You know, that offer to share with me is still good.”

Harry swallowed a surge of utter revulsion. “Um, t-thanks, Myrtle. I’ll keep that in mind. For now,
I’ve really got to go.” Trying to pretend he wasn’t fleeing, he turned to the tap and hissed to the
engraved snake. [For the love of all that is holy, open!]

Isuri hissed a laugh in his ear.

The tap turned into a door, and Harry led Dobby onto his broom. “Hold on tight, Dobby. The rest of
you, please wait here a tick. I’ll be right back as soon as I let Dobby down.”

Trying to ignore the bleeding ache in his heart, Harry hugged Dobby to his chest and zoomed down
the tunnel.

Severus had finished giving his list to Albus, but Potter hadn’t returned yet. He found himself hoping
the boy had gotten some lunch and shook his head at his change of heart. Merlin, he felt as though
he’d spent the past couple of days in the centre of a tornado. His mind simply couldn’t process the
massive amount of change he had survived since coming to realise Harry Potter was indeed a human
being.

A human being he was desperate to figure out.

For five and a quarter years, Severus had based his opinions of Potter on lies and prejudice. He had
come to see the error of his ways, but that left him at a disadvantage. He had vowed to protect Potter
years before, and if he didn’t know Potter, he couldn’t protect him.
Not that he hadn’t already broken his vows, but he wanted to make it right again.

And he wanted to know the boy. He wanted to understand what he had missed all these years. How could Harry be so forgiving when his father had been so cruel and his mother had never accepted Severus’ apologies? How could he have cared about Severus at all?

He wanted to understand. He wanted to know more about Harry Potter.

And that knowledge left Severus shaken to his core.

Merlin help him, he felt as though he had crawled into an alternate dimension somehow. The past two days, Potter—Potter!—had defended him and saved him at every turn. And even after everything Severus had put him through—to the point of nearly killing the boy—he had still given the man an entire basilisk as if it meant nothing.

Had he truly felt bad about killing it? A monster?

Wait. Hadn’t Severus called himself a monster in the past two days?

Maybe Potter saw the beauty in beasts.

Gods. Severus had no idea what to make of any of this. He just didn’t understand, but he wanted to.

He needed to. He needed to find his footing in this strange new world, and that had to start with Potter.

But by Merlin, he was so bloody lost. How did he even begin?

“Severus, are you quite all right?” Albus, having sealed the basilisk’s head behind a barrier and a Nox shield spell to hide it from sight, sat at Severus’ side. “All this about Harry is rather a lot to take in, isn’t it?”

Severus gave a bitter snort. “Understatement, old man.”

“Hmm. I am glad you are at least considering it. I had begun to fear nothing would get through to you.”

Severus dropped his head into his hands. “I… why? Why did I hate him for so long?”

“I suppose because you have never moved on from the past.” Albus patted his hand. “Perhaps Harry can help you with that.”

“Albus, be serious. I have abused him for five and a half years. Why would he care to help me? And even if he does, how do I even begin to make up for the pain I have caused him?”

“Start by showing him basic respect and go from there. I believe he has earned the right to your trust, if you can give it.”

Severus took in a shaky breath. “I—I will try.”

“Very good. I—”

The Chamber door opened, and Potter soared into the room with the Christmas house elf on his broom.

“Here’s Dobby,” Potter said, head low, voice flat. “I’ve three more elves waiting.”
“Ah, excellent,” said Albus. “Here you are, Dobby. This is a list of supplies we need.”

The elf took the list and frowned at its contents. “Where can Dobby be finding these things?”

“I have most in my personal storage,” said Severus, “and what I do not have should be available in the school supply closet.”

Dobby nodded and tucked the list in one of his many pairs of trousers. “Dobby will be right back with the supplies then. Great Master Harry Potter sir, will you be taking me out again?”

Potter nodded and helped the elf onto his broom. “I’ll be back in a mo.” He sounded subdued and grief marked his features.

“Potter, wait.” Severus sat, unnerved and unsettled by the broken look in the boy’s eyes. “Have I said something? I… I did not intend to hurt you.” It was as much of an admission of guilt as Severus could bear.

Potter froze, his eyes going wide and his mouth falling open. “Y-you… you care?”

Severus snarled, hurt and afraid at his statement. “I-if you are going to be transporting house elves down the tunnel, it falls to us to ensure you will not drop them to their deaths!”

Potter closed his mouth and dropped his head. “R-right. Well, I’m fine.”

“I believe it is clear that you are not.”

The boy looked away. “I’ll manage. I always do.” He clutched Dobby against him and shot out of the room before Severus could say anything else.

Albus gave him a weary look and sighed. “Severus….”

But Severus was already beating himself up for his sharp tongue and reactive temper. “Don’t, Albus. Just… don’t.”

Gods, he had to do better. He had to stop snarling every time Potter came too close to the truth.

With a sigh, Severus swore to himself the next time they spoke, he would be kinder. Potter had proved in spades, he deserved far better than this.
Chapter Summary

No warnings for this chapter. I've tried to make Severus' haphephobia (fear of touch) believable, but I couldn't find good reference. Also, it should be noted his true fear is philophobia (fear of love, intimacy), and his fear of touch is secondary to that. I'm doing my best to make both his phobia and recovery realistic. Which means he'll be dealing with this throughout the story— one doesn't conquer phobias overnight.

Chapter 13

Seeing Rightly

By nightfall, Potter, Albus, and the elves had managed to harvest all of the basilisk but the head and store it in Severus’ bins, after a fashion. Having neither the experience nor knowledge of how to handle such toxic ingredients, they had had little choice but to simply cut the beast into sections and store it whole in special bins for corrosive ingredients. Severus would sort it later. He would prefer to organise his harvest himself anyway.

He still couldn’t believe Potter meant him to have it.

Albus stood from the last load of parts and stretched his back. The cracking sound made Severus wince.

“Oh, that sounded painful,” Potter said with a grimace. “Are you all right, sir? I’ve some rather good healing spells now if you need them.”

Albus chuckled. “It was quite the opposite of painful, however it sounded. But we must soon go for the night. Harry, it is time for you to return to the dorms.”

“No, sir.”

Albus fixed him with a stern look. “Harry, that is quite enough resistance for one day.”

Potter glared back. “I’m not resisting. Or at least, not only resisting. Someone has to stay with Professor Snape— someone who can get in and out of this place easily.”

Albus frowned. “He can communicate with you if he needs you, Harry.”

Potter crossed his arms over his chest. “And how is he going to do that, sir? The elves can’t get to him here or get out, even if I left one with him. You could maybe make a coin with a Protean charm like Hermione did for the DA, but there’s no guarantee I’ll feel it if I’m asleep, especially if I’m in a vision. And he can’t send a Patronus without tipping off my entire dorm that I’m helping him. I imagine that’s not going to sit well with the other Death Eaters. Or my dormmates, come to think of it.”
His snake lifted her head and hissed at Potter. “Hmm. Isuri says she would be willing to watch over him—”

“Well, there you have it. Isuri may stay—”

Potter gave a derisive snort. “Oh yes, great plan, sir. Only one problem: what happens if Riddle does find a way into the Chamber again? Professor Snape doesn’t speak Parseltongue and even if Isuri does understand him, it would take her time to get from here to the tower—time he might not have.”

Albus sighed. “Then I will stay with him for the night.”

“That won’t work either, sir. You have a school to run. If anything happens, you have to be able to respond for the sake of the students, but if you stay down here, you’re trapped until I come again. Which might not be until late the next morning if I have trouble evading my dorm mates.” Pain flickered across Potter’s features, but he didn’t comment on whatever had troubled him. “Not to mention, if I have to keep making excuses, they’re just going to get suspicious and maybe follow me. If I’m here to start, they can’t track me down.”

Severus frowned. “And you believe sleeping elsewhere will not raise your dorm mates’ suspicions?”

Potter looked away. “Actually, they’ll probably be expecting that, given…. He shut his mouth and stared at his feet.

“Potter? What has happened?”

He gave a bitter laugh. “Apparently there’s a rumour around the school that I snapped and killed you, Professor. They’ll expect me to avoid the tower after that.”

Severus had the feeling Potter hadn’t told him the entire story, but he didn’t push. The boy had no reason to trust him—not yet, at any rate. He resolved to change that fact, but for now, he couldn’t push their nascent truce too far. Instead, he simply scowled and gave a huff of irritation for the students’ idiocy and capriciousness. Gods, the nonsense they conjured up got worse every year.

“That is utterly ridiculous.”

“That’s what I said. You’re a master of defence for Merlin’s sake. You’d have me on my back in three seconds.”

“Two,” said Severus, unable to keep his lips from twitching with mirth.

Potter gave a sad, weak smile, a painful thing that hurt to look at. “Most likely. But the point is they’ll expect me to stay away from the dorms now. I did it a lot last year when everything was too much and Seamus was spreading rumours about me.” He dropped his head and sighed. “Not that he’s stopped.”

Albus shook his head. “Nevertheless, Harry, you are still a student, and—”

Severus raised a hand to forestall him. “He is right, Albus.” Gods, he couldn’t believe he had just said that. “Potter is… right. I am not in the condition to remain here on my own, not yet, and neither of us can leave this place without his help. As Potter’s snake most likely cannot understand us—”

“She does sometimes, sir,” Potter interjected, “but not always. Um… she says it’s a new ability since becoming my familiar and she’s still learning to use it.”

Severus gave him a sharp look, but did not reprimand him for the interruption. “As his snake cannot
always understand us, then that leaves only Potter to help me.”

Albus gave Severus an incredulous look. “You wish Harry to stay with you?”

Severus shifted in discomfort. “It is less about what I wish for and more about what is practical. Until I am able to return to my proper quarters, I need his assistance.”

“Severus… that won’t be until after the hols—if then. You’re talking about over a month in close quarters, and that’s assuming Riddle ceases these attacks when he sees you are still useful as a spy.”

“He will,” Potter said with a wry look. “If anything, headmaster, your protection and emergency portkey even after a suspension will convince him Professor Snape is untouchable and therefore a more valuable spy than he imagined. Riddle will be hacked off for a bit, but then Professor Snape will likely gain status within the Inner Circle rather than lose it.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “And how do you know so much about the Dark Lord’s motivations, Potter?”

The boy snorted and tapped his temple.

Severus frowned. It was true. The boy had a connection and insight into the Dark Lord no one else did. Considering, Potter might know more about the way the Dark Lord worked than even Severus did.

Tentative hope built in his chest. Perhaps he hadn’t lost his worth to the war after all.

“Oh, very well, Harry,” said Albus with a sigh. “But you must still obey curfew, even if you are not reporting to the dorm for the time being.” He rubbed his forehead and grimaced. “Merlin, I will have much to explain to Minerva.”

Severus snorted. “I do not envy you that job.”

“Yeah.” Potter crossed his arms over his chest, looking vulnerable and small. “Sir, what will you tell the others about me?”

“Hmm. Has anyone seen you since last night?”

Potter nodded. “Ron, Seamus, and a few younger Hufflepuffs this afternoon. Not to mention Moaning Myrtle.”

Albus frowned and tugged his beard. “Then saying you caught dragon pox will not do.”

“I couldn’t attend classes if you said that, sir. Or leave. And that would severely hinder my ability to help Professor Snape.”

“Not to mention we would likely kill each other within a day,” Severus muttered.

Albus fixed him with a sharp glare. “You will not harm him, is that understood?”

Severus blanched and dropped his head. Perhaps that had been in bad taste, but he hadn’t meant it literally. He only feared that with their relationship so… unstable, in such close quarters with no breaks, any truce they might have had would fall apart.

Potter sighed. “Headmaster, I don’t think Professor Snape meant that like it sounded. It’s just close in here, that’s all. Even Ron and I would….” He closed his eyes and turned his face away. “Well, it would be difficult to share the same space all the time even if the professor and I were best friends,
and we’re obviously not.” He gave Severus a wan smile. “But I can tell you’re trying, sir. And… it’s enough for me.”

Potter went to touch Severus’ shoulder, but flinched and drew back at the last second. “S-sorry, sir. I almost forgot.”

To his shock and dismay, Severus wanted that gentle touch. He wanted to know what it felt like to be cared for. The dark, deep, clawing need keened for it, tempting him to reach for Potter’s hand. He refrained, though it took more effort than he would have liked. He dropped his head and clenched his hands into fists.


Severus wanted to reassure him, to call him back, but his lips would not form the words. He stared into his lap and trembled, torn between a desperate desire to reach for Potter’s hand and horrible, crushing fear of what that vulnerability might cost him.

Albus looked between them, deep concern in his eyes. “Something tells me this is a terrible idea.”

Severus Occluded his secrets away and glared at the old man. “Do you have a better suggestion?”

“Unfortunately, I do not.” Albus sighed. “I suppose it cannot be helped. Harry, are your dormmates aware of your visions?”

Potter blushed and kicked at the floor. “I’ve used silencing charms since first year. Other than Ron, I don’t think so.”

“Longbottom is aware,” said Severus, watching the boy for signs of anger. “I overheard him speaking about them to Miss Lovegood several weeks ago. He was quite concerned.”

“Neville knows?” Harry grimaced. “Blimey. No wonder he’s been staying up with me.”

Albus gave him a sad smile. “I believe Neville truly cares about you, Harry. And this allows me a way to smooth feathers, so to speak. I will not be able to announce your location to the school at large, and perhaps that is to the best, but at least to your roommates, I will let them know you are safe, but will not be in the dorm or at mealtimes until after the hols.”

Potter gave Albus a wan smile. Something in his eyes suggested the boy would not be returning after the hols either. Merlin. What had happened? Was it only the rumours? No, Potter had endured worse. Perhaps Severus could unearth the truth in Occlumency.

Severus barely controlled a wince. No. Potter had shown him incredible faith and forgiveness. He would not return it by stealing the boy’s secrets without permission. If he asked, perhaps Potter might be willing to talk. And if not, he would investigate the matter on his own, as soon as he had the freedom to do so.

Damned if he would break Potter’s trust again.

Albus continued as if he hadn’t seen Potter’s tells, though Severus doubted the old man had missed anything. “If several of your roommates have noticed your difficulties sleeping, Harry, then I will be able to use the excuse that Poppy is treating you for your nightmares as they have not been responding to Dreamless Sleep. That is true, is it not?”

Potter nodded. “It… lessens them, but I still don’t sleep well. And it does nothing for the visions.”
Lessened them? Dear Merlin. Severus had never heard of Dreamless Sleep failing to silence dreams completely, but then again, Potter always seemed to be the exception to every rule. Really, given the boy’s track record, Severus might have predicted it. With a sigh, he made a note to experiment with the potion and attempt to find a version that would ward off Potter’s nightmares without harming him further.

“Then they shall have no way to poke holes in our story,” Albus said.

Potter crossed his arms over his chest and gave Albus a sharp look. “Maybe not the other Gryffindors, but as I’m not actually in the Infirmary, Madam Pomfrey could if they asked her.”

Albus gave the boy a grim nod. “I am afraid I will have little choice but to tell the staff the entire truth of the situation. Otherwise, they will not understand why you may need to leave classes in the middle of the day with no obvious reason.”

Potter’s eyes narrowed. “Really? And will Professor Snape be safe if you do that? You’re sure none of the professors are on Riddle’s side?”

“Scanning for the mark is compulsory before taking on a new professor, Harry. Severus is a special case, of course, but none of the others are marked.”

Potter scoffed. “That doesn’t rule out unmarked dark supporters, sir. After all, Greyback isn’t marked, but he’s worse than half of the Inner Circle combined.”

Severus jerked his head around, staring at Potter with thinly-veiled shock. That was the kind of argument Severus himself would have rebutted with. In fact, it had been on the tip of his tongue when Potter said it. Merlin. He hadn’t imagined the boy to have such intelligence in him.

Perhaps in this as well, Severus had misjudged the boy. Gods. He had missed so much while prejudice and hatred had ruled him.

Well, he would not do so again. A spy could not afford to be so blind. He settled onto his pillows and observed, intent on learning the truth about his new… roommate, even if it hurt.

“That is true, Harry,” said Albus with a sad smile. “And, unfortunately, I have no way of guaranteeing without a doubt that none of my professors are involved in the forces of the dark. However, if they had been present at the meetings, Severus would most likely have seen them before.”

Potter tapped his scar. “Did Professor Snape see Pettigrew before it was too late?”

Albus winced. “No.”

Severus wanted to wince too, but he refused to show his discomfort.

Potter nodded, eyes sharp with determination and anger. “So I reckon that means there might be Death Eaters under the radar—even in your own school?”

Damn. Severus had greatly underestimated Potter’s intelligence and discernment. Gods, he felt like an utter fool.

Albus sighed. “I think not, Harry, but as you have pointed out, I cannot say so without a doubt. Very well. I will only tell those I am absolutely certain of: Minerva, Poppy, Pomona, Hagrid—”

“Not Hagrid,” Potter said with a fierce shake of his head. “Absolutely not Hagrid. As much as I love
the man, and as much as I agree with you he would chop off his own arm before joining the dark, he
can’t keep a secret to save his life. How do you think I learned how to calm Fluffy or where the
Philosopher’s Stone was? Merlin, he even gave me the flute I used. And that’s not even close to the
extent of it. Every Gryffindor worth their salt knows how to wrangle a secret out of him before
second year. Please, for everyone’s sake, do not tell Hagrid anything.”

“Potter is correct, Albus,” Severus said with a grim nod—and Merlin help him, now he’d said it
twice in one evening. It was bloody surreal. “I strongly advise against informing him as well. Besides
those you have mentioned, Filius and Aurora are the only other professors I would trust with such
dangerous secrets.”

Potter nodded. “I can’t speak for Professor Sinistra, but I agree about Professor Flitwick, and I trust
Professor Snape’s judgment.”

Shock rang through Severus. “You are a bloody masochist,” he muttered.

Potter gave a wan chuckle. “I’ve thought that myself more than once the past two days.”

“Indeed.” Albus gave Potter a searching look. “Hagrid told you how to pass Fluffy?”

All semblance of mirth vanished from Potter’s expression in an instant. He rounded on Albus,
challenge and fury sparking in his eyes. “Are you really going to pretend as though you didn’t
already know that, sir?”

Severus turned back to Albus just in time to see the old man cover a flinch and hide his guilt behind
his usual genial expression.

Creeping dread crawled down the nape of Severus’ neck and settled, cold and writhing, in his belly.
Merlin. Albus had hurt the boy somehow to earn such disapprobation—and deserve it apparently—but what had he done? Again, Severus had missed some crucial bit of information in his quest to hate
Potter as much as possible, and that did not sit well with him. Some spy he had been.

“You already know….”

Hmm. Did Potter believe Albus had told Hagrid of the stone deliberately? That the entire encounter
with Quirrell and the Dark Lord had been engineered?

A chill settled in Severus’ veins. Engineered? Had Albus used Quirrell to test Potter? To pit him
against evil in his first year and see how he handled it?

It might explain why Albus had never listened to Severus’ warnings about the turbaned-terror. And
how convenient that Albus had been standing by in the Mirror Chamber, ready to save the day the
moment Potter began to flag….

Gods. As much as Severus wanted to deny the possibility, he knew all too well how cold Albus
could be in pursuit of the ‘greater good.’ He had experienced it himself often enough, but the idea
that Potter—a seventeen-year-old boy—already knew the grim truth hiding behind Albus’ genial
façade, and had done since his first year at Hogwarts, left Severus cold.

Dear Merlin. Albus’ terrible ruthlessness was unconscionable even against an adult, but a twelve-
year-old child?

He sent Albus a dark look. “Albus, I think you have much to answer for. Quite as much as I do.”

A pink blush crept up the old man’s cheeks. “I… I am sure I do not know what you are talking
about, Severus.”

Potter snorted. “Why am I not surprised?” He said something to his familiar that made her give a hissing sort of laugh.

Albus coughed and turned the conversation back to the task at hand. “Ah, well, b-be that as it may, I will take your advice into account, boys, and only inform the professors we have all agreed upon of the truth of your situation. Is that acceptable to you, Harry? I’m afraid the story about your nightmares may place you in a bit of a bad light, but I truly cannot think of another way to explain your absence at night.”

“It’s fine, so long as you’re not announcing it to the school.” Potter’s head drooped. “Though it’s only going to inflame the rumours either way.”

“As I intend to announce Professor Snape’s situation tomorrow,” said Albus with a wry smile, “I do not imagine they will last long.”

Potter gave him a thin smile. “Maybe not.” Somehow, he didn’t sound convinced.

To be fair, Severus wasn’t either.

“Perhaps it would not hurt to make an appearance tomorrow, Albus. To assure them I am well, though I imagine the sound of their moans of disappointment will carry to Edinburgh.”

Albus chuckled. “I shall advise the staff to bring earplugs.”

Potter gave Severus a hesitant half-smile. “Sir, um, i-if it means anything, I’m glad you pulled through.”

Shock ringing through him for the umpteenth time that day, Severus searched Potter’s eyes and reeled at the honesty and sincerity he found within them.

Dear gods, the boy had meant it.

Severus gripped the sheets for balance and struggled to make some sense of his new roommate’s indomitable forgiveness.

“Potter… I don’t understand. Why? You of all the students have more than enough reason to wish me gone. I understand why you saved my life, but this… this concern, this relief that I am safe—I cannot comprehend it. Why do you care when I… I have been…?” He looked away and clenched his fists at his side. He couldn’t finish the words. Merlin forgive him, he couldn’t force his lips to form an apology, though if anyone deserved one, Potter did.

Potter ducked his head. “I… I just do, sir. I don’t always understand it myself, but I do.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “E-even if admitting it makes you hate me more, it’s true. I… I just wish….” He sighed and wrapped his arms around his waist. “S-sorry, sir.”

Sorry? Guilt and shame choked Severus. Potter was apologising for nothing, and Severus couldn’t choke out an apology for behaviour that, under any other headmaster, would have surely landed him in Azkaban. Gods, he had been a complete monster to this boy, and somehow Potter thought he needed to apologise.

Even more baffling, somehow, Potter still believed Severus worth saving, even knowing it would cause him pain.
Gods, none of this made sense! How could he care when Severus had all but broken him? *Was* Potter truly a masochist, or was there something… unique about him? Severus remembered his resolve to seek out the truth of Harry Potter and considered the situation hard while Albus tried to comfort the boy, however ineffectually.

“I believe Harry’s power—the power he knows not—lies mostly in his ability to love. His loyalty, his honour and sacrifice for those he wants to protect. I have rarely seen the like of it.”

Severus closed his eyes, buffeted by remorse as the memory of that conversation washed over him. Even in Potter’s first year, his depth of character had been apparent to everyone but Severus. With the blinders of prejudice gone, he could no longer deny that Albus might have had a point.

“Sir?” Potter’s voice brought Severus out of his thoughts with a jolt. “Are you all right? Um, I-I can get you another pain potion if you need it. I think your last one wore off about ten minutes ago.”

He had been keeping track? Merlin. The boy truly *did* care.

“I…” Severus swallowed a strange tightness in the back of his throat. “I am well enough, at least for the moment.”

Potter gave him a small, hesitant smile. “All right. Just let me know if you need anything.”

Severus nodded, throat too thick with emotion to speak. Gods, he didn’t deserve this.

Potter looked down and rubbed his toe along the floor. “Sir, um… about tomorrow, t-thank you. It m-might keep the students from panicking if you can at least make it to breakfast in the morning. Just…” The boy ducked and hunched his shoulders, eyes closed as if waiting for a blow. “Um, j-just check your food for poison, please? Riddle won’t give up this easily and Fawkes can’t save you this time.”

Severus lowered his head too, tears of wonder and remorse creeping up the back of his eyelids and stealing his breath. Merlin, but it was a strange sensation to be so well-protected.

“I will ensure that I do so,” he murmured, voice rough.

Potter lifted his head, his eyes full of the same strange mix of wonder, hope, and wariness Severus felt. “Yeah? I-I mean, yes, sir.”

His twinkle blinding, Albus clapped his hands and startled Severus—Potter jumped too. “Well then, I will make the announcement at lunch tomorrow, boys.” The light in his eyes dimmed. “Do take Harry’s advice, Severus. Tom may indeed be prepared for your appearance.”

Severus nodded. “I am aware. And with that settled, I believe Potter and I will be well for the evening now, Albus.”

“Oh, one moment….,” Albus conjured a bed for Potter a metre or so away from Severus’, with a Japanese folding screen between them. “There we are. I do hope it will make the situation a bit less awkward.” He gave them a hesitant smile. “Do be gentle with each other, and I hope to see you both well in the morning. Goodnight, my boys.”

Severus and bid him goodnight and watched as Potter flew him out of the tunnel. There was a slight delay, and an irritated Potter returned a moment later. Severus narrowed his eyes, waiting for an explosion. Perhaps Potter had only been so kind in front of Albus? But no. The boy merely flopped onto his bed and sighed.
“Gods, that barmy old coot,” Potter murmured under his breath, barely audible.

Ah. Again, Albus had incurred Potter’s wrath. What had the meddling fool said this time?

“Merlin, I’m knackered,” Potter said with a groan.

Severus gave a wry snort. The boy had certainly earned the right to it, running after Severus the past two days the way he had done.

“I am quite tired myself,” Severus replied, and meant it. Changing one’s entire world view so soon after a mortal injury took it out of a man, apparently.

“Maybe we should just go to bed early then.” Potter stood and stretched. “I need a shower first. Is that all right, sir?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “You are asking me if you have permission to bathe after spending most of the day harvesting a dead basilisk?”

Potter grimaced. “Right. I’m off to the loo then. Unless you need anything first?”

“I am well. Off with you.”

“Yes, sir.”

Potter laid his viper on his bed, cast a warming charm over her, and dashed into the loo Albus had conjured a few paces from the beds. A moment later, the sound of running water echoed in the Chamber, reminding Severus of the rain on his childhood home’s tin roof. It was the only fond memory he had of the place.

It occurred to him to warn Potter that all conjured showers started out cold, but from the sound of the water flow, the boy was already under the spray and hadn’t issued a complaint. How odd. Severus would have expected a yelp from one not used to a cold shower. Perhaps the plumbing in Gryffindor tower did not function as well as that of Slytherin.

While Potter washed, Severus lay back and contemplated his strange situation. Merlin, he felt as though he had been turned inside out. He didn’t know how to make sense of anything any longer, especially Potter. And now he had four weeks alone with the boy. Would they come to an understanding, or would several weeks in close quarters turn them against each other once more?

To his utter shock, Severus found himself hoping they could reconcile. Forgiveness and compassion like Potter had shown him was rare in the extreme—particularly in Severus’ experience. As much as it unsettled him, he hoped for the chance to earn a place in the boy’s life, this time as more than a villain.

A man could do worse than to have the loyalty and trust of such a forgiving boy.

Either way, Severus wanted to make it right between them. He had never been able to heal the breach with Lily, but her son had given him a second chance. As much as the knowledge frightened him, Severus wanted to take it. At least, he wanted to try.

The shower cut off, and Potter emerged a moment later with wet hair and the same robes as before. He moved to Severus’ side, and the citrusy scent from his clothing reassured the man Potter had spell-laundered his clothing before dressing, much to Severus’ relief.

Twisting his hands over each other, Potter cleared his throat and bowed his head. He was bracing
himself for a blow. “Um, is there anything you need before bed, sir? Are you able to change on your own?”

Heat crowded Severus’ cheeks. “I should hope so.”

Potter blushed too. “Ah, I… I just thought, with those lash wounds and the fact that your chest is still healing, it might be difficult to… um, those robes are pretty involved, I mean. Um, I d-don’t mind helping you if you need it.”

Severus swallowed hard. He could manage his clothing with spells, but…. “Ah, I… if you could help with my boots, I believe I will be well.”

Potter blushed to his ears. “Okay.” He knelt at Severus’ feet and lifted one booted foot into his lap. “Um, I’m sorry, sir. I know you don’t want me touching you. I’ll try to avoid it as much as possible.”

Severus was too busy shaking with anguish, desperate loneliness to respond. Gods, how could Potter be so gentle? He had never felt such a soft touch, especially not on his feet, and it left him hollow and keening with a soul-deep need for this tender, intimate moment never to end.

And yet, at the same time, he dreaded it. That need, the clawing ache inside him—he would die before he let himself fall prey to it again. He was lonely, true, but to let someone in, to reveal the softest parts of his heart… no. He would only be hurt.

As Potter removed his boot and sock, Severus sat frozen, heart pounding in his ears and fingers clenched in the sheets. Potter wrapped his hand around Severus’ bare ankle and lowered his foot to the floor, fear of his own apparent in his eyes.

“S-sorry, sir,” Potter murmured, his expression pained. “I’m trying not to bother you.”

Merlin, Severus wished he could find his voice. The boy was shaking, lashes lowered and cheeks dull red. Potter needed reassurance, and for once, Severus wanted to give it, but the words wouldn’t come.

Still, he had to do something. He couldn’t leave Potter in such pain, not when the boy had been so kind and Severus’ fears weren’t Potter’s fault. Potter couldn’t possibly understand what touch meant to a man like Severus, for whom intimacy had long-since been the enemy, but neither should he believe Severus hated him still.

Albus was right. Potter had earned Severus’ trust.

Potter lifted the man’s other foot into his lap, jerking his hands away as if burned. “I-I’m so sorry. I’m t-trying not to….”

His voice broke, and Severus couldn’t bear his pain another second. Despite his fears, he lifted a tentative hand to Potter’s head and smoothed his hair.

The boy froze, eyes wide as galleons and lips parted, cheeks fast turning crimson. “S-sir?”

“It is not… your fault,” Severus whispered, and let his hand fall.

Potter looked up, eyes shimmering and wet, a sad smile on his face. Did Severus imagine he saw the same desperate longing in the boy’s eyes? It couldn’t be, could it? Potter had never been alone, not like Severus.

“Thank you,” Potter murmured, and set about removing the other boot.
He moved efficiently, taking care with Severus and touching no more than necessary. His respect and patience left Severus bleeding inside.

Gods. He should have seen the truth about this young man so much sooner.

Severus clutched the edge of the bed and clenched his teeth, struggling to breathe through a combination of fear, remorse, and regret that he could not enjoy this moment, the first time someone touched him with kindness in over twenty years.

“Sir? Are you all right?”

Severus nodded, too overcome to speak.


Severus shook his head and forced his voice to work. “I am able to remove the rest.” He flicked his wand, and his robe unbuttoned itself. A second swish had it flying across the room, folded neatly. A third changed his dress shirt and trousers to black pyjamas.

Potter gave him a wry smile. “I’m surprised you didn’t do that with your boots.”

Heat crept into Severus’ cheeks. “I might have done, but there are no spells to remove boots without harming their wearer.”

“Oh. I wonder why. Seems like something people would find handy.”

“It simply has not been invented yet.” But in time, perhaps Severus would find a working incantation and spell matrix for it. With the number of times he had been too injured to remove his boots, such a spell was a necessity. If only he could figure out how to unlace the damn things properly, he would have it done.

Well, he would have time to work on it over the hols. Perhaps he could have it finished before he returned to spying, if he returned.

“Ah. Well, I’m going to go change myself….” Potter looked around and blushed. “Or not. I don’t have anything to change into, do I?”

“I will help you.”

Severus flicked his wand for Potter this time, first removing and folding his robe, then switching the Muggle tee and black trousers he wore underneath to pyjamas much like his own, but crimson in honour of his house. Severus’ breath caught at the change. Merlin, Potter looked good in red.

Potter blushed and gave Severus a hesitant half-smile. “Thank you, sir. Um… do you need a drink or anything? I can get Dobby.”

“I am well. We can make water, Potter.”

Potter frowned. “Yes, sir. Um… sir, if… would it be too much trouble to call me Harry? I really don’t like my last name.”

Severus gave him a searching look. “Is there a reason?”

Po—Harry paled and turned away. “I just don’t. If you don’t want to use my first name or can’t because of your other position, it’s fine. Just thought I’d ask.”
“Hmm.”

Severus watched the boy with growing concern. Why would he hate his family name? The boy idolised his parents, did he not? Then again, perhaps after seeing them in the light he had in Severus’ pensieve, he had become disillusioned. Either way, if Harry preferred his forename, it wasn’t much of a sacrifice on Severus’ part to use it.

Merlin, he had changed.

“Go to sleep, Harry.”

A shy, tentative smile and a spark of hope in Harry’s eyes rewarded Severus’ efforts. “Y-yeah. Goodnight, sir.”

“Goodnight.”

Severus watched Harry as he walked around the screen and listened as he settled in bed. After a moment, Severus lay down too, his mind full of conflicting thoughts and emotions.

Into the silence, Harry murmured, “Sir? You… you don’t need to say anything. I don’t want you to feel… bad or anything. But thank you for trying so hard. I… it’s just… oh Merlin, t-thank you.”

At the break in Harry’s voice, Severus wondered just how much damage his hatred had done. And marvelled that he did not feel it at all any longer. Somehow, Harry had conquered the walls of his past.

Well, some of them at least.

Yet, Severus could not respond, could not make himself vulnerable enough to admit that he should be the one to thank Harry. He had never known the kind of forgiveness Harry had shown him all day and he could not deny the profound effect it had on his heart, but neither could he admit it.

‘Thank you, Harry, and gods, I am so sorry, child.’

Perhaps, one day, he would find the strength to say it out loud.
Chapter 14

Facing the Music

4 December

Harry hung next to the young Severus, naked and terrified, tears pouring down his face. Severus, knowing this dream too well by now, slipped his hand into Harry’s and held tight.

“I’m here,” he whispered.

Harry laced their fingers together and tried to face his attackers bravely. Severus’ touch gave him courage to endure.

Eventually, the bullies tired of tormenting them and left, dropping Severus and Harry to the ground. Harry groaned and held his nose, which was broken and bleeding.

“Oh Merlin.” Severus, still naked, but uncaring now that their abusers had gone, brushed Harry’s cheek with gentle fingertips. “We need to get you to Madam Pomfrey.”

Harry winced. “Can’t. Don’t want her to see me like this.”

Severus stroked Harry’s face, wiping away tears and blood. “You’re injured, Harry.”

“The spell is Episkey. Focus on love and try to heal me.”

Severus’ cheeks burned. He held Harry’s face and leaned a bit closer. “Episkey.”

Harry gasped as his bones healed and the bleeding stopped. A ginger pat to his nose satisfied him it had set correctly.

“Thanks.”

Severus nodded. “Tergeo.”

The blood vanished from Harry’s face, taking its sticky-slimy feeling with it. Severus traced his fingertips across Harry’s temples and behind his ears. Merlin, but Harry wished he could feel it better.

Severus wrapped an arm around Harry and pulled him close. “Where did you learn that spell?”
“Healing you. I had to save your life.”

“Hmm. Then may I tell you something?”

The softness of his voice let Harry know whatever Severus had to say was important. Even as he nodded, Harry swallowed hard and tried to quiet a strange sense of anticipation.

“When I healed you,” Severus murmured in Harry’s ear, “I thought of—”

“Harry! Merlin, wake up.”

Severus—Snape?—called Harry’s name and pulled him out of dreams with a jerk. An odd sense of disappointment filled him. He wanted to know what Severus had thought of. Then again, it was only a dream, and the real Severus sounded panicked.

Harry’s breath caught at the feel of Snape’s hand on his face. Had that aspect of the dream been real, then? Gentle fingertips brushed the sides of his face, tracing across his temples. Definitely real. But why? Why was Snape touching him like this, particularly when the man had a phobia of touch?

“Harry!”

The man moved to pat Harry’s shoulder, and with the breeze Snape’s movements made, Harry understood. By the irritation under his lids and the wetness of his skin, he had wept during his nightmares. Snape must have been trying to wipe his tears away. The thought filled him with hope and a tender, fluttery feeling he didn’t understand.

“Harry, wake up. Please.”

The anguished tone of Snape’s voice cut Harry to the quick. He opened his eyes and took a sharp breath. Snape was sitting on the edge of his bed, hand gentle on Harry’s face and his eyes full of alarm.

“S-sir?”

Snape drew his hand back, leaving Harry feeling cold and desolate without his touch, and covered his eyes with the same palm.

“Gods, Harry. Why have you told no one your visions are so dreadful?”

Harry frowned. Visions? He hadn’t had any since early in the night. The Chamber’s magic went a long way towards blocking them out, apparently.

“Er… how long have you been sitting up with me, sir?”

“Perhaps twenty minutes. I came to wake you and you were crying out for help.”

“Oh. Then I don’t think you were seeing my visions. That was just a nightmare.” Though the ending hadn’t been so bad.

“A nightmare?” Snape dropped his hand and stared at Harry, eyes round with shock. “What kind of nightmare could hurt you so much, you weep throughout and cannot be roused?”

Harry winced and turned away. They had made so much progress. He couldn’t bear to tell Snape the truth knowing it would infuriate the man if he realised Harry had dreamed of his naked body, even if
was a younger Snape and they had been suffering together at the time. Snape might never be ready to hear that.

Snape sighed and gently brushed tears from Harry’s temple. “Are you well?”

Harry closed his eyes at the soft touch; the familiar ache and clawing need for someone to end the loneliness brought fresh tears to his eyes. “F-fine. I’m fine.”

Snape pulled his hand away. “I will not trouble you.”

He stood to leave, and panic crashed through Harry’s veins. “Wait, sir, please. You’re not bothering me. I’m s-sorry.”

Snape paused. “You did not mind…?” He lifted his hand towards Harry’s face as if he would touch him again, but drew back at the last moment, his eyes uncertain.

Harry gave him a hesitant smile. “No. I don’t mind, sir.”

Something painful flickered across Snape’s features, and he nodded and moved away.

Harry swallowed a surge of fear and sat up. “D-did I say something wrong, sir?”

“No, but we will be late for breakfast if we do not hurry. You overslept.”

“Oh.” Harry sat and rubbed his eyes. “Do you need help with your boots today, sir?”

Snape shook his head. “I am recovered enough to manage them myself.”

“That’s good.” Harry gave him a hesitant smile. “Well, let’s get ready for breakfast then.”

“That is what I said.”

Harry chuckled and roused himself from the bed. He checked on Isuri, stroking her back gently.

[Good morning, my friend. Would you like to sleep on my neck instead? I must leave to eat, but you are free to sleep here, if you prefer.]

Isuri slithered under Harry’s pyjama top and wrapped herself around his neck. [Master is warm. I will sleep here.]

Harry shivered at the strange creepy-crawly feeling and shook his shoulders a bit, settling her.

“Hold still.” Snape flicked his wand and transfigured the boy’s pyjamas back into his tee and trousers.

Isuri poked her head out and hissed in Harry’s ear. [Tell your friend not to switch your skins while I am under them.]

He turned his face away from the ticklish sensation, suppressing a giggle. “Isuri said she doesn’t like it when you change my ‘skin’ while she’s hiding under it.”

“Your skin?” Snape raised an eyebrow.

“Well, not everything in Parseltongue translates to English. Snakes don’t wear clothing, you know. I reckon they think ours is something like a shed skin.”

Isuri cocked her head. [It is not?]
[No. It is not a part of us. Humans do not have fur or scales so we must cover ourselves with…] He had to imitate the phonetics of a word that did not translate to snake language. [Clooothh Hess. They keep us warm and protect our soft spots. Think of it like... wearing leaves.]

Isuri shook her head and hissed her snake laugh. [Leaves are not much protection for your soft spots, Master.]

[That is why we have spells!]

Isuri laughed again and settled back into Harry’s shirt. He patted her and went about packing his knapsack for classes.

Around the other side of the screen, Snape called in a sombre voice, “Harry, you will not tell me what you were dreaming about, will you?”

Harry cringed. Gods, no.

“Um… it’s just… a bit too upsetting, sir. I’d rather move on, if that’s okay with you.”

“Very well. Your vision then. What happened?”

Harry sat on his bed and petted Isuri for comfort. “He k-killed a Muggleborn woman. An old lady who lived by herself. I don’t know her name or where she was. She… she fought so hard but….”

Snape came round the screen again fully dressed, though his hair was still mussed. He said nothing, perhaps there was nothing he could say, but he sat beside Harry and laid a halting hand on Harry’s wrist. His trembling fingertips tickled with their barely-there caress, but nevertheless, Snape’s hesitant touch—and the trust it implied—comforted Harry far more than any useless words could have done. Touch meant so much more from a man who feared it.

He let slip a shuddering sigh and leaned into Snape slightly. Merlin, but it felt odd to keep calling him Snape when they were doing well, but Harry wasn’t fool enough to dare utter the man’s forename without permission. Perhaps after some time here, Snape might allow him the small concession. At least in private.

For the moment, it was enough to remember this man and the Severus from his dreams were the same person. With Snape working so hard to overcome his prejudice and hatred, Harry could see it, at last, the gentle heart under his hard façade.

And yet, he was all too aware that one misstep would set Snape against him forever. He had to be exceedingly careful with this damaged, lonely man.

“Thank you, sir,” he whispered, not daring to call him what he wished.

Snape’s hand lifted from Harry’s arm, then settled closer to his skin. “It helps?”

“Yeah.”

Snape traced Harry’s arm lightly, then stood. He had Occluded all traces of emotion from his expression, but Harry sensed his cautious hope and hesitant trust nonetheless. It was enough.

“Come. We must dress and hurry to breakfast.” Snape paused. “Unless you feel you are unable?”

Harry shook his head. “Last night was actually pretty light in terms of visions. It’s still… it still hurts, but it’s nothing I’m not used to.”
Quiet horror and sorrow filled Snape’s dark eyes. “You witnessed a woman murdered last night and… and it is nothing new?”

Harry grimaced. If knowing he witnessed her murder had appalled the man, he had best keep it to himself that he had felt her die.

“When you… s-see five or so people killed a night, one is not as bad.”

Snape covered his face with a shaking hand. “Dear gods. Harry, I must find a way to teach you Occlumency. That is… h-how are you still functioning?”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “I’m not sure I am. At least, not well.” He smiled hesitantly at the man. “But knowing you care helps.”

Snape sighed. “I should have….” He shook his head and turned away. “Come. If you are truly able to bear it, we should hurry before we are late.”

Harry stood and hoped his post-Cruciatus twitches weren’t too obvious. He hadn’t had time to retrieve his potions stock before bed the night before. Well, maybe he could ask Dobby to bring them today, or sneak up to his dorm and grab them himself. Either way, going a few hours without it wouldn’t kill him.

“I’m fine, sir. Let’s go.”

Snape gave him a piercing look, but if he had noticed Harry’s tremor, he didn’t comment. “Lead the way.”

For the sake of their safety, Severus had sent Harry along to breakfast by himself. Their hatred might have been fading in private, but in public, it was more than Severus’ life was worth to reveal he had lost his edge against the boy.

Harry went first, shifting into that downtrodden wallflower again before he stepped out of Myrtle’s loo. Severus had half a mind to call him back and ask why he tried to blend with the walls in public, but he couldn’t. Not yet. Not until they were safe within the Chamber again.

Severus waited two minutes exactly, then set out for the Great Hall himself, mulling over Harry’s revelations of the morning. Gods. To see so many deaths every night—how was the child still sane?

He stopped short just outside the second story stairwell, horror crashing anew down on him. Hadn’t Albus said Harry needed Anti-Cruciatus Draught for his visions? Did that mean he not only witnessed their deaths, but experienced them? Felt their pain?

Dear fucking Merlin, Severus hoped not. Even if Harry had been as terrible as Severus had imagined him to be before, he wouldn’t deserve that. Gods.

It couldn’t be. It simply couldn’t be so bad. If Harry endured torture and death—more than once—every single night, he would be utterly mad, if not dead himself. Perhaps he only needed the potions for the effects of coming so close to dark magic. Merlin, Severus hoped that was the case.

Thus reassured, he entered the stairwell and made his way to the Great Hall. His musing had made
him late, and so, he arrived at the teachers’ entrance a few moments after the meal had already begun. Damn. Harry would be worried over him.

And gods, wasn’t that a strange thought?

Severus shook his head and cancelled his invisibility spell. Stranger things had happened to him—yesterday.

As he pushed the door open and made his way onto the teachers’ dais, silence descended on the hall. All faces turned to him, the professors with a mixture of relief and irritation, the students with wide eyes full of disbelief—and several with scowls of disappointment, the bloodthirsty little bastards. Well, it served them right for believing such ridiculous rumours.

He glared them all down and settled in his usual seat, taking great pains to conceal his limp.

Minerva whispered as Severus sat down, “Where have you been these past two days? The students have been spreading the most ridiculous rubbish, and I must admit I have been concerned.”

“You should know better than to believe that horde of babbling dunderheads.” Severus poured himself a cup of tea to give him time to formulate an answer, keeping his fingers well away from the inside of his cup and the tea itself, just in case Harry’s worries proved well-founded. “As to your concerns about my whereabouts, my… other employer took it upon himself to voice his displeasure with something I had done, and I have been convalescing.”

Minerva flinched. “Merlin. Are you all right?”

“I am here, am I not?”

“Well, yes, but that doesn’t mean you aren’t in pain.”

Severus sniffed. “I am well enough. Perhaps not entirely recovered but enough to manage a meal or two.”

Filius frowned and gave Severus a look full of concern. “You will not be teaching today either, Severus?”

Severus glared. “Ask Albus. In the meantime, I would like to eat my breakfast in peace.” If one could call the blatant stares and whispering peaceful.

“Humph.” Minerva turned and went back to her own dish.

Severus waited until Filius’ attention had left him to perform a quick poison-checking spell on his plate and cup. He wasn’t surprised when both flickered dark red.

He Vanished the plate and cup with the specialised spell for handling basilisk venom, just in case the Dark Lord had decided Severus would be his guinea pig. The magic flickered violet and expanded, sending Severus scooting backwards in alarm, then his plate and cup Vanished, taking the dark aura with them.

Severus’ breath ran short and his heart slammed into his ribs. Dear gods! Had he not used his specialised Vanishing charm, the entire head table would have just been blown away. Merlin, that had been far too close.

“D-Dobby.”
The elf appeared at his side. “What is Master Snape be needing?”

“It appears someone has made an attempt at my life—upon all of our lives. I have neutralised the threat, but do alert the headmaster and, if it is possible, bring breakfast for me. Prepare it yourself and do not let any other hands touch the plate, and double-check that the plate and cup are both clean before you use them. Be careful.”

Dobby bowed and vanished.

“Severus?” Minerva whispered in his ear. “What just happened?”

“My other employer is still rather displeased with me, it seems.”

She paled. “Poison?”

Severus gave her the barest nod and whispered, “Basilisk venom, or something equally lethal and resistant to magic. Had I not used the Tegovanesco charm… gods help us all.”

She clutched at her heart and gasped. “Sweet Circe!”

Dobby reappeared with a new full English for Severus and a fresh cup of tea. Severus tested both before he nodded to the elf and began eating as if nothing had happened. He had expected the attempt, after all. Unnerving as it was, he would not let it trouble him. He had to do this, for Harry’s sake.

“Calm yourself, Minerva,” he whispered after realising his colleague had stopped eating. “The threat is neutralised. You are safe.”

Minerva swallowed hard. “W-would you… the charm to check your plate? Please?”

“Yes, for me as well,” said Filius, his usual jollity faded to ashen shock.

“If yours had been poisoned, you would be dead already, but if it will ease your nerves….” Severus performed the spell on all the professor’s plates at once. “The rest of the teachers are safe. There is no further danger.”

Minerva sighed and picked over her food. “I seem to have lost my appetite regardless.”

Severus snorted. “In that, I do not blame you.”

He looked up to find the entire student body staring at him and whispering behind their hands. Harry sat hunched over his food, poking at the plate with his fork while Granger hissed in his ear and Weasley stared at Harry as if the boy was a basilisk himself.

The Weasley girl rubbed Harry’s back and gave him a simpering smile, but Harry turned away from her and scowled. Severus frowned at Harry’s shudder and the revulsion obvious in his posture. He didn’t want her to touch him? How strange. Severus had imagined Harry would welcome affection by the way he had responded to Severus’ tentative touches earlier. Perhaps Harry simply had an issue with the Weasley girl.

Or perhaps he was much like Severus in that he only accepted touch from those he trusted. The idea left Severus breathless, stunned that he had so much of the boy’s trust when he had done nothing to deserve it.

Severus clenched his hand on his fork. From then on, he would, by Merlin. He would prove himself
worthy of the immense faith the boy had placed in him, somehow.

Minerva muttered, “What in Merlin’s name is wrong with my lions?”

Severus’ voice came out unsteady. “How s-should I know?”

She gave him a worried look. “Are you quite all right?”

He replied with a curt nod, not trusting his voice, and struggled for mastery over his wild emotions. By the time he managed it, the Gryffindor table had turned into an all-out battlefield. He wasn’t surprised to see Harry slam down his plate and stalk out of the Great Hall, his eyes full of desperate pain. Severus wanted to go after him, but stayed in his seat. His attentiveness to a boy who should appear to be his enemy might get them both killed.

Granger and the Weasley girl stood to go after Harry instead, but Longbottom snapped at them. Both girls dropped into their seats, the former blushing in shame and the latter sulking and staring after Harry. Longbottom glared the Gryffindors into submission, then sent a glare at Severus for good measure.

Severus acted as if he hadn’t noticed, though Longbottom’s sudden ire at him unnerved the man. Since when had the most fearful boy in the school gathered the courage to glare at its most feared instructor?

Then again, Longbottom had fought at the Department of Mysteries last term. Perhaps after facing the Dark Lord and several of his best Death Eaters, a cruel potions professor didn’t seem so terrifying any longer.

But why was Longbottom so angry in the first place? Why was Harry so upset?

Severus returned to his meal, eating methodically despite a lack of appetite. Perhaps his reappearance hadn’t been such a good idea after all.

“Harry James Potter!”

Harry winced and ducked his head. So much for a quiet entrance. Hermione’s shrill shout had announced his presence to the entire hall as efficiently as a bloody banshee. Head down, he made his way to the far end of the Gryffindor table, hoping sitting away from her would avoid a messy confrontation.

He was not to be so lucky. Hermione picked up her plate and books and plopped down beside him, the other sixth years and Ginny following in her wake.

“Where in Merlin’s name have you been, Harry?”

“Busy.” What did she expect? Harry couldn’t tell her the truth, not with every ear in Hogwarts tuned in to their conversation.

“Busy! I hardly believe that! You’ve missed every single one of your classes, and don’t even get me started on revising.”

Harry shot her a dark glare and stabbed at his eggs. “I told you, I’m doing my revision on my own
“You haven’t been doing it at all!” She dumped a pile of parchment on his lap. “That’s everything you missed yesterday. You have to make it up. You have to pay attention this year, Harry! NEWTs are so important. You can’t just go gallivanting off wherever you like.”

Ron scoffed. “Been doing more than gallivanting, hasn’t he?”

Ginny shot her brother a glare and shoved him out of the way, sliding into the seat next to Harry. “You’re mad, Ron.” She gave Harry a shy smile. “You’d never hurt anyone, Harry. I just know it.”

Harry edged away. “Of course not.”

“I didn’t say he’d hurt someone,” Ron retorted, “but he’s gotten into trouble for sure. There was blood all—”

“Ssh!” Harry leaned across Ginny and clapped a hand over Ron’s mouth, willing to risk her unwanted advances if it kept Snape alive. “Stop it, Ron. It’s war stuff.”

Ginny leaned into his arm, squishy breasts pressing into his bicep, and Harry jerked back with a glare at the girl and a shudder of revulsion. Ugh.

“You use that excuse every time you don’t want to face up to the truth,” Hermione snapped. “I don’t know what you’ve been getting into, Harry Potter, but it’s high time you started caring about your grades and how they affect us as well as you!”

Blood simmering with fury, Harry slammed his fist on the table. “Excuse me, Hermione, for being too busy trying to keep someone alive yesterday to care about your bloody grades!”

Seamus snorted. “Murdering someone, more like. So who got it then, huh? Rumour has it Snape went mental on you his last class and I notice he’s nowhere around here this morning. Finally snap and put the greasy git in his place then?”

Harry stared at the boy, gobsmacked. “H-have you lost the bloody plot? Yes, Snape is an arsehole —” Merlin, he hated having to say that when the man had been trying so hard to make amends. “— but I don’t want him dead!”

“Of course you don’t,” said Neville, glaring at Seamus. “All of us with a brain know that.”

Dean nodded, his eyes wide with dismay and grief. Harry swallowed a pang of remorse. He had never wanted to come between Dean and his best mate, but something had gotten into Seamus last year. This wasn’t the same flamboyant boy Harry had grown up with.

Harry turned away from Dean and picked at his rashers. “It doesn’t matter even if I did want to hurt Snape. Do you really think I could? The man is a master in defence for Merlin’s sake, or didn’t you see him killing vampires on the train this year like it was nothing? You lot talked about it for weeks! And you think I could fight him? Please. I’m still in school. I’d have no chance against a dueller like that.”

Seamus fixed him with a sharp glare. “Yeah? Didn’t stop you from killing You-Know-Who, did it?”

“Oh, come off it, Seamus,” Ron said, irritated. “I told you Harry’s not like that.”

“You’re a sod, Seamus,” Ginny said, brown eyes flashing. “Harry’s a good person.” She slipped her hand over Harry’s. “And this is bound to hurt him.”
“Stop it.” Harry jerked his hand away and wrapped both arms around his chest. “All of you, just stop! I said I can’t talk about it here.”

Seamus scoffed. “Yeah, because you don’t want to be cau—”

The doors to the teachers’ dais opened and a familiar figure in dark robes glided in. Relief washing his irritation away, Harry watched Snape walk to his usual seat and pour himself a cup of tea, admiring the man’s ability to hide his pain.

He turned a cold glare on Seamus. “Well? What was that about murdering Snape again?”

Seamus blushed. “Well, maybe it wasn’t the bat. But you were out doing someone in! I saw your hands.”

“I’ve already told you I was trying to save someone, you git!”

Hermione nudged Harry’s side. “Wait. Look. What’s Snape doing?”

Harry watched as the man cast a spell against his plate, causing it to glow red. Snape Vanished his food in a strange purple light—plate and cup too—and jumped back in alarm. He Summoned Dobby and spoke to his nearest colleagues, terrifying them both.

“I know that spell,” said Dean, his face ashen. “The first one I mean. Mum made me study it when You-Know-Who came back last year. It’s… it glows red when there’s some kind of lethal poison in your food.”

Harry froze, terrified for his new… friend? “Oh gods. Is he…?”

A new plate appeared before Snape, and the man’s second test came up clear. Harry breathed a shaky sigh.

“Not trying to do him in, huh?” Seamus glared. “I reckon that’s all the proof I need.”

Ron edged away, eyes wide. “Harry, you didn’t!”

Harry’s heart cracked down the middle. “Ron, you can’t possibly believe—”

Seamus waved towards the teacher’s table. “We all just saw it, didn’t we? Guess when you couldn’t take down a ‘defence master’ in a duel, poison would work just as well, huh?”

Harry gasped, trying to breathe through the pain of betrayal. “Wait, wait just a minute. How could I possibly poison the man? I don’t make the food here!”

Seamus scoffed. “No, but you do know where the kitchens are, don’t you? You and Ron used to get us food after curfew all the time.”

Harry blinked hard, struggling to keep back his tears. He couldn’t cry here. “Yes, but I… I mean, it’s not like the plates are labelled down there. How am I supposed to know which one goes to Professor Snape? Might have poisoned myself if I’d tried it.”

“Could’ve asked, couldn’t you? I mean, you are friends with that ruddy house elf.”

“The same one who just brought Snape a clean plate, for Merlin’s sake!”

“Yeah, and he has to do what he’s told,” Seamus said with a scowl.
“Oh, don’t be so thick, Seamus,” Hermione snapped. “Harry wouldn’t and you know it.”

“But—”

“It’s okay,” Ginny murmured, too damn close to Harry’s ear. “I know you’re innocent, Harry.” She rubbed his back, and Harry scooted away, temper rising.

“Ginny! Stop it, will you? I told you before I don’t want to be touched like this!”

She glared, brown eyes defiant. “I’m trying to defend you! And you need comfort, I can see it.”

Harry groaned and dropped his head into his hands. “Please. Just… all of you stop. I don’t want this.”

“Harry’s right,” Hermione said with a huff. “The lot of you are acting like animals. Ron, Seamus, you both know better than to accuse Harry of such a terrible thing and Dobby is the only one of the elves with any sense anyway. He’s a free elf, remember? He doesn’t have to do what he’s told if he doesn’t want to.”

“But he’s mad for Harry, and we all know it.” Ron scooted back, horror painting his freckles in stark relief. “I… I reckon Seamus might have a point.”

Harry choked back his grief. “Ron, you can’t…” But Ron hadn’t exactly been a good friend lately, and Harry remembered it all too well. He turned back to his plate and struggled to keep his breathing steady, to hide the tears he couldn’t stop.

“Harry,” Ginny whispered, “let me help.”

He shuddered as the girl rubbed his back in spite of his lack of consent, but didn’t pull away. What was the point? No one was listening to him anyway.

“Oh, do stop being such an idiot, Ron.” Hermione scoffed. “You know Harry isn’t capable of that. And you also know he isn’t the only one who might want to do Snape in.”

Ron hissed, “Look at the evidence, ‘Mione!”

“I am, and I’m telling you it’s preposterous. You should be ashamed of yourself!”

Harry buried his face in his hand. “S-stop. Please, just—”

“All of you should be ashamed of yourselves!” Neville’s sharp voice made Harry cringe. “Seamus, you’re being a bloody arse! You know better than to make such awful accusations.”

Seamus snarled. “And I’ve the proof to ba—”

Neville charged on over him. “Shut it, Seamus. Just shut it. You have nothing other than a stupid grudge over points. And you, Hermione, you’re complaining because Harry hasn’t been around in classes, but where have you been the past three months, hmm? Where have you been when he’s needed you? What the hell gives you the gall to act so sanctimonious when you’re just as bad as any of them?”

Hermione opened her mouth and closed it again, dull red flushing her cheeks. Neville nodded and continued his diatribe.

“Thought so. And for Merlin’s sake, Ginny, Harry’s asked you to stop and you’re still touching him. Back off!”
Ginny glared and rubbed Harry’s back harder. “I’m trying to help him!”

“No, you’re bloody assaulting him. He said no. Learn the meaning of the word.”

She sniffled and jerked her hand away, crossing her arms over her chest and pouting. Harry shivered in relief. Gods, he wished she would turn her affections on someone else. Anyone else. Even if he hadn’t been gay, he wasn’t about to date his mother’s twin.

“Oi!” Ron glared at Neville. “She’s not hurting him! He’s been toying with her, giving her hope one minute and pulling away the n—”

Neville rounded on him. “Get over yourself, Ron! Are both of you deaf or something? He’s said no time and time again. And by the way, how the hell do you turn on your best mate like that? You’ve been friends for years, and suddenly you think he’s capable of murder? That’s disgusting.”

“N-Neville, please,” Harry begged. “Please stop. Please don’t fight over me.”

Neville hesitated, then gave Harry a sad smile. “I can’t let them say these things about you, Harry. I won’t yell anymore though. I’m sorry.”

“Well, I will,” Seamus retorted. “Are you blind, Neville? Can’t you see he’s bloody dangerous? First all that business with You-Know-Who and now this? I reckon maybe You-Know-Who poisoned him at the DoM last year. Maybe he’s all muddled now, like Quirrell was, remember?”

Harry gasped and shrunk into himself. He wasn’t possessed! Just because he had dark dreams, he wasn’t possessed. He… he could control it. It was fine.

Wasn’t it?

“Oh, come off it,” Hermione snapped. “Quirrell had Voldemort plastered to the back of his head! As you can see, Harry has nothing but a bird’s nest back there.”

Seamus glared. “And how do we know that’s true? We never saw under Quirrell’s turban, yeah? We just had Harry’s word to go on.”

“And that should be enough!” Finally at the end of his tether, Dean slammed his hands on the table, jerked to his feet, and shouted them down. “I thought we were friends here! Harry’s had our back all these years, and suddenly we’re turning on him?” He glared at his best friend, eyes rimmed with tears. “What the hell is wrong with you, Seamus? You’re ruddy mad to think Harry is capable of murder after all he’s done to keep us alive, even if Snape is an arsehole.”

Seamus snarled. “I’m the only one who sees the bloody signs! But go ahead, ignore it and wait until he murders you in your beds!”

“That’s mad! Absolutely barmy! If Harry wanted us dead, he might have done it long before now.”

“Please,” Harry whispered, but no one could hear him over all the shouting.

“Oh, just stuff it, all of you,” Hermione snapped. “This isn’t Harry’s fault, and we should all be more concerned with NEWTs anyway.”

“NEWTs?” Seamus let slip a hysterical laugh. “Harry’s trying to off Snape and you’re more concerned about NEWTs?”

Ginny cried, “Harry’s not trying to off anyone, you bloody git!”
Harry jerked to his feet. He couldn’t take this anymore. Stomach roiling, heart bleeding, Harry raked a hand across his face and dashed for the door.

“Harry!” Hermione called. “Wait, don’t just—we have class in fifteen minutes! You had better not skive off again or we’ll never pa—”

Neville snapped, “Oh, do shut up, Hermione. Shove your self-righteous act and let the man have some bloody peace for once. And you, Ginny, sit down and stay the hell away from him already! Enough is enough!”

Harry slammed the door behind him and raced away.

After a morning spent dealing with the Ministry over Severus’ suspension and Pettigrew’s capture, Albus had been looking forward to a fulfilling breakfast, but everything had gone so terribly wrong. He had watched the Gryffindor table descend into chaos with growing concern, and only the fact that he was not the only professor frightened for his favourite lion had relieved his worries. Severus kept his interest hidden from the others, but Albus knew the man too well not to see the worry and remorse in his eyes.

At least he could be assured Severus had begun to heal, but Harry…. Albus watched the boy flee the Great Hall with deep concern. He sighed and turned to Severus, who had returned to his breakfast with the mechanical air of a man who would rather be elsewhere.

“Go,” he whispered to his protégé. “Take care of him. I will handle the others.”

Severus whispered back, “I must not leave too soon, and I… I do not know if I can provide him with what he needs, but I will try.”

“Thank you, my boy.” Albus stood and gave Minerva a grave look. “Minerva, if you will retrieve Mister Longbottom, Mister Weasley, and Miss Granger, there is much I must tell you. Please bring them to my office immediately.”

Minerva nodded, lips pursed in a thin line. “I’m not sure what just happened here, Albus, but I would rather like to give them a talking to myself.”

Albus looked out over the Gryffindor table, cloaked in unnatural silence and tension. “Yes, I quite agree.”

Harry ran blindly through the castle, hardly noticing where he was heading until he arrived at Myrtle’s loo. The ghost wasn’t about, to his immense relief, so he slumped against the wall near the broken tap and dropped his cloak over his head.

Merlin, he might have known his ‘reintroduction to Gryffindor society’ would be an utter catastrophe with the way his ‘friends’ had been acting lately, but for them to go so far as this? He hadn’t believed them capable of such a depth of betrayal. At least Neville and Dean had stood by him, but at what
cost? Gods, Harry had never meant to cause trouble.

He wasn’t sure how long he’d been standing there in tears, Isuri licking them away, when a small splash—a booted foot landing on wet floors—startled him out of his misery. Harry looked up to see… nothing. Ripples crossed the puddles, footsteps coming closer, then a gentle hand brushed his fringe back from his face.

“Harry,” Snape whispered. “Merlin, child. I… I did not anticipate my reappearance would hurt you so badly.”

Harry whimpered. “It’s not your fault, Sir. I… I’m s-sorry. I—”

“You have nothing to apologise for, Harry.” Snape paused and brushed a shaking hand down Harry’s cheek, barely touching, but the caress comforted Harry nonetheless. “Ssh. You do not need to fear me any longer. I… I simply wish to help, if you will allow it.”

With a little cry, Harry threw his arms around Snape and buried his face in the man’s shoulder. Snape tensed and gasped, and Harry jerked away.

“Oh gods, sir! I-I didn’t think—are you okay?”

Harry shrank into himself and trembled, his tears redoubling at the fear he had broken Snape’s trust already. Shite! Snape hated to be touched and Harry knew it. What if his impulsive need for comfort had ruined everything?

“S-sir, I… Merlin, I’m so sorry. Please, please don’t h-hate me again.”

Isuri whispered in Harry’s ear. [Your friend is not angry. Only surprised and scared.]

Harry slumped in relief. [H-how can you tell?]

[I can smell it.]

He patted her in thanks.

Snape laid a shaking hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I… I am w-well enough, if a bit startled, but come. It is not safe to discuss this here. Let us go into the Chamber. Ah, but first—Dobby.”

The elf appeared and reeled at the sight of Harry. “Oh, Great Master Harry Potter, sir! You is crying? Oh, what can Dobby be doing to help?”

“Dobby,” Snape said, his voice soft, “Harry is… distraught. Will you let, ah—Harry, what is your first class today?”

“C-charms.”

Snape watched Harry’s face, his eyes troubled. “Dobby, please let Professor Flitwick know that Harry will not be present in class today.”

Dobby bowed. “Yes, Master Snapey.” He gave the man a sad smile. “Will you’s help Great Master Harry Potter feel better, please?”

Snape bowed slightly. “I will try.”

“Oh, thank you, Master Snapey, sir. Please takes good care of him. I’s be off to tell Professor Flitwickies now.”
The elf popped away, leaving Snape and Harry alone in the loo.

Snape rested a hesitant hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Come. I… I am no great comforter, but I will try to help you, if you will allow it.”

Harry nodded and turned his head into Snape’s arm, not touching, but close enough to feel his warmth, to breathe in his scent—sandalwood and something uniquely Snape. The man did not draw away, but the slight tremor in his hand warned Harry he was too close. He sighed into Snape’s elbow, taking comfort in his trust and presence, and moved back.

“O-okay.” He turned to the tap and hissed, [Open.]
Chapter 15

Safe Harbour

Severus climbed onto the broom behind Harry and shuddered all over. Gods, but he hated this. Heights, brooms, and being so close to another man—fuck, the whole thing terrified him. Harry had never let him fall and he couldn’t have asked for a more skilled companion, but gods! Three phobias in one was too much even for someone as brave as Severus.

Shaking with uncontrollable terror, he held the boy as tight as he could and buried his face in Harry’s shoulder, taking some comfort in his warmth and soothing scent. Apparently, Harry’s forgiving, protective nature had rendered him far less frightening than the flimsy twig between his legs.

Damn brooms to hell and back. The second Severus recovered enough to fly on his own power, fuck all if he would ever mount one again.

Harry ran one hand over Severus’ fingers as they descended, murmuring reassurance to him. “It’s all right, sir. I’ve got you. I won’t let you be hurt.”

Obviously. Severus knew Harry cared about him now. But dear gods, trusting his life to a bloody stick terrified him regardless.

The broom alighted, and like every other time before, Severus needed a moment to gather his wits before he could move. Harry did not push him away, but simply closed the entrance to the tunnel and continued his litany of soothing encouragement.

“We’re on the ground now, sir. It’s all right. We’re safe.”

Shite. He hated that Harry knew his aversion to heights too, but it couldn’t be helped.

Gods help him, Severus had to overcome his phobias, for the good of them all. The Dark Lord would not hesitate to use them against Severus should he ever learn of his weaknesses. But how did he move past them?
“I’m here, sir,” Harry murmured. “You’re all right. Just rest against me as long as you need to. I’ll protect you.”

Gentle warmth softened the edges of the ice in Severus’ chest and stunned him with its power to soothe. Dear Merlin.

Was it possible Harry’s unwavering patience might be the support Severus needed to recover? Perhaps, if their alliance went well in the coming few weeks, he would ask the boy….

Oh gods, what was he thinking? Severus shuddered. Merlin, the very thought of leaving himself so open, so vulnerable—sweet Circe, no! Harry might have earned his trust, but Severus couldn’t face the thought of revealing so much of himself to anyone.

He should focus on simply establishing a rapport with Harry for now. And he couldn’t take Harry’s help for granted regardless. Even if Severus found the courage to open himself so far as to ask for his help, the boy mightn’t want to invest so much time and effort into a man who had spent half a decade abusing him. Severus wouldn’t blame him.

“Sir, it’s all right. I’m here, okay? Whenever you need me.”

The warmth inside his chest doubled, and Severus sighed into Harry’s shoulder. Merlin, he didn’t deserve such care, especially not from one he had hurt so badly, but having it made him feel safer.

Even so, he had to get this under control. He was a spy, damn it, not a ruddy jellyfish.

With a slow, deep breath, Severus poured his focus into draining his terror and rebuilding his shields. After a few moments, he managed to pry himself away and stagger off the broom. Harry dismounted and turned to him, red-rimmed, concerned green eyes gazing at him and a wan smile on his face. He reached out to Severus, but his trembling hand stopped just short of Severus’ own.

“Oh, wait. No, I shouldn’t. I’m sorry.”

He withdrew and wrapped one arm around his chest, lifting the other hand to his mouth. His eyes held deep worry, revealing his inner conflict—the boy wanted to comfort Severus, but also respected his need for distance. Both Harry’s concern and respect relieved Severus, and his terror soon eased.

“C-come,” he said, unable to prevent a slight stammer. “You are more distressed than I.”

Harry gave him a wan smile and led him into the main chamber. “Are you all right now, sir?”

“Yes. I simply do not like brooms.” Or heights, or intimacy, or touch… damn it.

“Um… if it’s not too personal, would you tell me why?”

It was personal, but Harry’s gentle patience deserved an answer. “It is… difficult to trust them.”

Harry shoved his hands in his pockets and nodded. “I reckon I can see that. I mean, I like to fly—it makes me feel free—but I can understand why others might not enjoy it. It is rather dangerous, especially if you’re not particularly confident on a broom.” He glanced at Severus and quickly away. “Um… can you fly, sir? I mean, without brooms? I got the sense yesterday that you could, but you didn’t seem to want to talk about it. It’s okay if you still don’t. I just… you’ve been more open lately, so I thought it couldn’t hurt to ask.”

Severus nodded and suppressed the urge to close himself off. He could trust Harry this far. “Yes. I invented the spell as a… last resort many years ago in anticipation of the Dark Lord’s return. If ever I
am discovered and must flee, I will not be able to mount a broom quickly enough to evade capture. Therefore, I created a spell that will both increase my speed and shock him enough to ensure my escape, or so I hope.”

He paused, clenching a fist in his robes and trying to calm his racing heart. Harry knew of his fears, so speaking about them wouldn’t make him any more vulnerable than he already was, would it? He took a deep breath and, recalling his resolution during breakfast, made an effort to trust the boy, to return some of the faith Harry had placed in him.

His voice came out soft and uncertain regardless. “I… I can manage on a broom if needs must, such as when I refereed that quidditch match in your first year, but it is difficult. I confess not all of the penalties I missed were due to my prejudice.” He closed his eyes and waited to be rejected or mocked.

Harry’s voice, though ragged with grief, was soft, gentle. “It’s okay, sir. You were afraid. It’s easy to miss things when you’re scared, and you kept me alive in spite of it. And making a charm to overcome your fears is bloody brilliant.” Harry blushed. “Er… s-sorry sir.”

“I am not acting as your professor at the moment,” Severus murmured, “but do try not to take advantage.”

Harry nodded and moved closer, relieving the lingering ache of Severus’ insecurities. The boy hadn’t rejected him, but rather, had tried to understand. Hope surged through Severus. Maybe Harry truly could help him overcome his phobias and trauma, one day. Perhaps he could try, at least, if Harry was willing.

Harry gave Severus a tentative smile. “So the charm makes it easier for you to fly then, sir?”

Again, Severus shut down the urge to snap, to protect his soft underbelly. Harry deserved better than his snide defensiveness. “Y-yes,” he said, his voice breathy and uncertain. “With the charm, I rely on my own power and not that of an inanimate object. It is far less… daunting in such a situation.”

Harry’s smile brightened, a bit of life returning to his face. “That sounds brilliant, sir. Maybe will you show me someday when you’re recovered?”

Severus nodded, heat flooding his cheeks. “I suppose I will have to. Damned if I will ride a broom once I am recovered enough to use my charms.”

Harry gave a wan chuckle. “Yeah, I don’t blame you. If I had a spell like that, I imagine I’d never stop flying.”

Severus’ lips twitched in spite of himself. “I see.”

“Don’t suppose you’d teach me?”

Severus shook his head. “Not yet. Flight requires both incredible control and a massive reserve of power. You have the power. I do not believe you have the control yet. It is something you must work towards, however, if you truly do intend to face the Dark Lord someday.”

Harry’s fleeting smile vanished in an instant. “Right.” His shoulders slumped and his head drooped. “Harry?”

The boy stopped and gave Severus a despairing look. “How? How am I to defeat him? I can barely hold my wand the right way and he—what am I supposed to do against a wizard that powerful?”
Severus swallowed, more affected by the stark terror in Harry’s eyes than he had thought possible. “I… there is the ‘power he knows not.’ It is not hopeless.”

Harry scoffed and turned back towards the Chamber. “The headmaster seems to think the ‘power he knows not’ is love. And maybe I am good at loving people. I don’t know. But what am I going to do, hug him to death?”

Severus snorted. “I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Harry wrapped his arms around his chest and kicked at the floor. “Yeah.”

The boy’s fear and despair hung heavy in the air, almost tangible in its power. Severus’ belly squirmed with the desire to take Harry’s pain away, to ease his fear. And yet, what could he do? Words meant nothing here, and he had no idea what to say regardless. He did not know what Harry’s unknown power was either, and if it did have something to do with his unique ability to love, he had no idea how the boy would use it against the Dark Lord.

And yet, Severus wanted to help, if he could.

He remembered the longing, the desperate sorrow in Harry’s eyes the night before, when Severus had forced his fears back long enough to touch the boy’s hair. If he hadn’t known better, he might have thought Harry to be as desolate and starved for affection as himself.

It couldn’t be, could it? Hadn’t Harry always been loved?

Severus closed his eyes to hide a wince. He had also believed Harry to be an arrogant idiot just twenty-four hours before, and Harry had since blasted that belief to bits.

Perhaps Severus had misjudged more than the boy’s kindness and intelligence.

A squirmy sensation settled in his chest. He knew, both from instinct and the memory of Harry’s impulsive embrace in Myrtle’s loo, the boy needed touch to heal, but gods, could Severus do it? The idea of reaching out, of opening himself to another after so many years of guarding himself from every potential advance… the mere thought left him shaken.

And yet, hadn’t he said himself he needed to overcome his phobias—and that Harry might be the one to help him do it?

Perhaps, if Severus simply started by offering tactile comfort in a controlled, careful manner, it might give him some mastery over his fears without revealing too much of his vulnerability. It was worth a try, at least.

With a deep breath to gather his courage, Severus brushed halting fingertips across Harry’s soft curls. ‘Soft?’ He had been too afraid to pay much attention to the texture of Harry’s curls last night, but this time, curiosity overcame his age-old fears. Merlin. He had imagined Harry’s bird’s nest would feel rough, coarse, but his wild curls whispered against Severus’ fingers like silk.

Harry gasped and stopped walking. “Sir?”

Trembling, Severus ran his fingertips through Harry’s hair, fearful of rejection and reciprocation at once, but Harry only turned into Severus’ touch and sighed, the sound heavy with relief.

Severus closed his eyes and dropped his hand to Harry’s shoulder, shaking with both the softness of feeling caressing Harry had brought him and the uncomfortable realisation that he hadn’t been afraid at all. What did it mean? He didn’t know, but he wasn’t ready to face it.
Harry murmured, “Are you all right, sir?”

“Yes,” Severus whispered. He let his fingers trail down to Harry’s wrist. “I… I wanted to….”

“Sir….”

At the gentle tone in Harry’s voice, Severus opened his eyes to find Harry smiling at him, tentative and fragile, but an actual smile.

Gods. The boy hadn’t shown a single sign of true joy in months. Had Severus’ pathetic little caresses truly brought about this kind of change?

“*His greatest gift is his ability to love.*”

Perhaps it was true, if the barest touch from Severus could make him smile again.

“Thank you, sir,” Harry whispered.

Severus nodded in acknowledgement, warmth softening the knot of worry in his chest. His attempt to comfort the boy must have done some good after all, and Harry hadn’t rejected his touch. Indeed, it seemed he took joy in it. The thought made the warm feeling in Severus’ chest grow and spread to his limbs, driving the last vestiges of fear away.

For the moment, at least.

They resumed walking, and Severus returned his attention to the conversation they had left off before.

“Harry, I… I do think you are capable of more… care than the typical person.” He bowed his head to cover the flush in his cheeks, the shame in his eyes. “I cannot understand why you would save me, why you would value me, when I have been so….” He swallowed hard and forced the words out. “So very cruel.”

Harry stopped before the Chamber door and gave Severus a searching look. “I just do, sir.” He turned and hissed the door open. “I’m glad you’re letting me in now, if it’s okay to say that. I never imagined we’d be able to talk like this.”

Severus nodded as the door closed behind him. “I… it is a new experience for me as well.”

“It’s not bad, though,” Harry murmured, so low Severus had to strain to hear him. “It’s… good. Even if I can’t….”

“Cannot what, Harry?”

The boy went bright red. “N-nothing, sir.”

Severus raised an eyebrow and waited.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “I… well, it’s not nothing, I reckon, but I don’t want to put pressure on you. It’s okay.”

From that, Severus gathered the boy was speaking of his reluctance to be touched and let it go. Perhaps they might conquer it in time. “Hmm. For now, sit with me—” He conjured a sofa and coffee table near the beds and guided Harry onto it. “—And explain to me what happened at breakfast that troubled you so.”
Harry swallowed and looked down at his hands, twisting them in his lap. The mad desire to hold one almost overcame Severus, but he resisted. He couldn’t bear the risk. Not yet.

Harry closed his eyes and leaned into his hands, trembling hard. “S-sir, is it okay if I… um, just lean on you a bit?”

Severus’ heart thundered and his breath ran short. “Lean on me?”

“Y-yeah. Maybe against your arm?” Harry sighed and turned away. “Never mind. It’s not fair to ask you when I know you’re afraid. I just… I feel so alone.”

Severus swallowed a rush of fear. He had to move past this. He had to. And Harry was so gentle, so understanding and patient. He took in the boy’s hunched posture, the way he pressed his fists into his stomach in imitation of a tight embrace, a vain attempt to drive away his grief and bitter loneliness. Gods, but Severus knew how that felt. He watched silvery tears build on Harry’s lashes and drop to the knees of his trousers, spots like blood against the dark fabric of his uniform.

He remembered the years he had left Harry to suffer like this, had caused his pain, and he could not let the boy’s pleas for help go unanswered another moment.

With a shaky sigh, Severus laid his hand on Harry’s wrist. “Only my arm?”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “It’s all right, sir. You don’t have to force yourself.”

“I am not. I wish to… to….” Severus simply couldn’t form the words for: ‘heal all the pain I have caused you. To be a better man.’ Instead, he closed his eyes and carefully tugged Harry to rest against his shoulder.

Harry went rigid. “Sir, please. I don’t want to scare you.”

But, to his surprise, Severus wasn’t afraid. Perhaps since Harry had asked, since he had been so concerned about Severus’ welfare, this small touch felt safe and comforting.

“Ssh. I do not mind. Lean on me, Harry, and tell me what has hurt you so.”

Harry’s breath caught. He searched Severus’ eyes, tears gleaming on his lashes. “Really, sir? It’s… okay?”

“Yes.”

Harry sighed and rested his head against Severus’ shoulder. “Tell me if you’re afraid? I don’t want to hurt you.”

Cautiously, Severus brushed his fingertips against Harry’s hair. “If I become so, I am capable of moving away.”

Harry nodded and turned his face into Severus’ shoulder. “T-thank you, sir. This means a lot to me.”

Severus gave him a curt nod. He would have liked to say more, but the tightness in his throat and chest forbid it. Gods, he couldn’t believe Harry trusted him so much, liked him well enough to take comfort from his touch and presence, and that Harry’s touch didn’t terrify Severus in turn.

At least, not the small touches. Perhaps he wasn’t ready for hugs, but this… this felt safe.

He took a deep, calming breath and allowed the rare, precious feeling of warmth against his side to comfort him.
“Harry, tell me what happened in the Great Hall, if you are able.”

Harry shivered and spoke in a low, hesitant tone. “W-well, as soon as I came inside, Hermione attacked me for not going to classes. I had expected that, to be honest, but the rest of it came as a shock….”

Albus watched the Gryffindors gathered in his office, trying to determine what had happened before he spoke. Minerva stood akimbo by the door, eyes sharp and lips pursed. Granger’s expression altered between humility and self-righteousness. He wondered which had won out at the table that morning. Ron’s eyes were wide with fright and confusion. What in Merlin’s name had gotten into him? And Neville—he was glaring at them all.

No, Albus had no idea what could have set them off like this.

“Would one of you like to explain what happened at breakfast this morning?”

Ron shrank into himself and gave a breathy, “no.”

Hermione blushed and lowered her head.

Neville scoffed at his classmates. “I’ll tell you, sir. The second Harry came in the door, Hermione took it upon herself to lecture him on his attendance and grades. She acted as though NEWT scores were the most important thing in life and embarrassed him thoroughly. Then Seamus accused Harry of murdering Professor Snape—and of poisoning him later—and this idiot believed it! Ron really believed Harry capable of killing someone. It’s… well, I had thought better of them than this.”

Hermione winced and ducked her head lower. “I-it’s just that NEWTs decide our future and I want him to do well.”

Minerva fixed her sharp eyes upon the girl. “And you believed the best way to encourage him is to dictate his entire life, to plan it out to the last second, without leaving him any time to rest? Have you not noticed how ill Potter is looking this term? Something is wrong with the boy, and he does not have the energy to follow your schedules!”

Hermione hugged her waist. “W-well, he hasn’t been. He decided to revise on his own earlier in the year.”

“And that gave these two the perfect excuse to distance themselves,” Neville muttered. “Honestly, the two of you use revision as an excuse, but if you ask me, you’ve been doing a lot more snogging than studying.”

She blushed brighter and squeaked.

“Oi!” Ron jumped in. “Stop attacking Hermione, already. Harry’s the one we ought to be concerned about. He’s the one poisoning people!”

Minerva gasped. “Mister Weasley! Fifteen points from Gryffindor!”

A frown creased Ron’s brow. “B-but, shouldn’t you at least look into it, ma’am?”

“As it happens,” said Albus, fixing the redhead with a sharp stare, “there is no need. It was not Harry
who tried to poison Professor Snape. It was Voldemort.”

Ron flinched. “But why? Snape’s a sp—”

Hermione clapped her hand over Ron’s mouth. “Neville doesn’t know!”

“That he’s a spy?” Neville snorted. “I figured that out last year.”

Albus gave Neville an appraising look. “Did you? And how, exactly, did you come to this conclusion?”

“Well, it’s just logic. The man is cruel, especially to Gryffindors. Which suggests an allegiance to You-Know-Who. But you wouldn’t hire him and keep him employed if he was really loyal to the Death Eaters. I mean, he could just be a Gryffindor-hating berk, but I don’t think you would have let him get away with half of what he has if that was the case. So just based on his behaviour and your defence of him, it’s the only explanation that fits.”

Albus smiled wryly. “Well done, Mister Longbottom. Ten points to Gryffindor. Yes, Severus is a spy. And until these past two days, he held a particular grudge against Harry. In part, he had to be cruel to the boy to keep his cover. However, he took it much too far, and that is what has resulted in the events of the past two days.”

He summoned a chair and covered it in tartan. “Have a seat, Minerva. This will be quite shocking for you as well.”

She sighed and folded herself into the chair. “I don’t suppose you have any of those infernal lemon drops?”

Albus chuckled and levitated a tray to her. “My special recipe.”

“Indeed.” Minerva took one and floated the tray around. “Mister Weasley, I suggest you take one of these as well.”

Albus suppressed a laugh. Minerva knew he dosed his drops with calming draught and cheering charms. All the staff did. As did Harry, most likely. It would explain why he never took one.

Ron took a lemon drop and relaxed after a moment. The others declined.

“Now that we’re all comfortable,” said Albus, “I will begin my story immediately after Potions this past Tuesday. Harry came to me in tears asking to drop the class. I have instead placed him with Poppy under private instruction; however, I suspected abuse, and so I brought Severus in for questioning. I reviewed his detentions with the boy and a bit of the class in question, and that was enough to determine he had, in fact, been quite severely abusive.”

Minerva paled. “Albus, what did you do?”

Albus sighed. “I am afraid I had little choice but to suspend him. He will not be returning to teach until January.”

Hermione gasped. “B-but what about our lessons? How will we pass?”

Minerva fixed her with a sharp look. “At the moment, I believe you should be far more worried about your friend than your grades.”

She paled and ducked her head once more. “S-sorry.”
Albus pierced Hermione with a gaze full of disappointment, but did not berate her further. It wasn’t in his nature, and Neville and Minerva seemed to have taken the task in hand regardless. “Professor Slughorn has agreed to return from retirement for a few weeks to take over Severus’ lessons, starting Monday.”

Minerva clenched her fists in her lap, the only sign of the fear Albus knew had taken her over. She did care for Severus, after a fashion, if she didn’t trust him entirely.

“I’m assuming Severus had little choice but to report this to You-Know-Who, Albus?”

Albus nodded. “He did indeed. And that is where the story turns to the… unexpected. Harry has stunned me these past few days with his ability to forgive. And I am not the only one who has seen it.”

Minerva gasped and cast a quick silencing field between them. “Albus, do you mean… Severus?”

Albus gave her a soft smile. “Yes, dear girl. The changes in him… it is astounding how far he has come in such a short time. He has gone to take care of Harry this moment.”

Tears pooled in the woman’s eyes. “Oh thank Merlin. You know I care for him, but it is difficult to—he hurt my lions so much, Albus.”

“I believe he will change from here on out, Minerva. In fact, he will most likely have no other choice, if he is to maintain his position as a spy after all this blows over.”

Minerva frowned. “Will it blow over?”

“Harry seems to think so, and Severus and I agree. Either way, he cannot reveal his true feelings in public until we are certain he has lost his standing perma—”

“Hey,” a scowling Ron interjected. “We’re still here, you know.”

Minerva cancelled her silencing charm and turned a glare on the boy. “Five points from Gryffindor for disrespect.”

“But—”

Hermione nudged him. “Stop it. You’ve done enough damage. Just be quiet and listen before we’re in the negative again. I can’t keep up when we’re bleeding points from both ends!”

Ron scowled and subsided.

Albus debated chiding the girl for her arrogance, but decided against it in the interest of time. “Well then,” he said with a sigh, “I imagine you would like to know what has happened with Harry and Professor Snape?”

“Yes, yes,” said Hermione, leaning forwards in anticipation. “We want to know every detail.”

“Well,” Neville said with a frown at the girl, “I would like to know what’s happened, but every detail isn’t necessary. If you need to keep certain things quiet to keep them safe, I’d rather you do so.”

Albus gave him a warm smile. “Ten points to Gryffindor for your understanding, Mister Longbottom.” He added mentally, ‘And fifty more for being such a good friend to Harry when no one else was.’
Neville’s cheeks pinked. Ah, so he hadn’t grown up entirely yet. Albus took comfort in knowing the boy still had some traits of the sweet, timid youth he had been, though hardship had rendered him a man too young.

“Thank you, sir,” the boy said. “Will you tell us what you can?”

Albus nodded. “Of course. You must promise not to speak of this with anyone outside of this room, however. That includes your dormmates and other friends. This information will not only risk Professor Snape’s life, but Harry’s as well. And perhaps your own, should it fall into the wrong hands.”

“We promise,” said Hermione, bouncing on the edge of her seat. “Please tell us now.”

Albus raised an eyebrow. “Patience, child. Ron, do you swear?”

“Yes, sir. I promise not to talk to anyone else but Harry about it.”

“Good. And you, Neville?”

“I promise not to tell anyone who doesn’t already know.”

The wording of his promise set Albus’ suspicions on edge. He checked the boy’s thoughts and, to his surprise, discovered some key information on one of his Ravenclaws. So Luna was a spiritual medium. Hmm. It explained how Harry had come across the counterchant for Sectumsempra. It seemed Severus owed Luna his life as much as Harry after all.

Albus nodded to himself. Luna was entirely loyal to Harry and Neville. She would not break their confidence.

“Very well.” He folded his hands in his lap and took a lemon drop. “After dinner, Harry came to my office and demanded to know what I had done to Severus.”

Minerva winced. “I suppose he wanted him sacked?”

Albus gave a wry laugh. “On the contrary, I imagine if I had sacked Severus, Harry would have been quite irate.”

Ron’s head jerked up. “What? ‘Course he’d want Snape sacked! We all do!”

“No,” Neville snapped. “Some of us can see past our own nose. Had the headmaster sacked Professor Snape, he’d have been tortured to death.”

Ron scowled. “Well, it’d serve him right.”

“And you dare to accuse Harry of attempted murder?” Minerva scoffed. “I am utterly disappointed in you, Mister Weasley.”

Ron blushed and dropped his head.

Albus fixed the boy with a piercing look. “No, Harry did not ask for Professor Snape’s termination. Instead, he insisted that I not terminate Professor Snape’s contract regardless of his poor behaviour. In fact, Mister Potter demanded to know what I had done to punish him.”

Phineas snorted. “Manipulated it out of you is more accurate, old man. I must say, it was highly satisfying to see your own mind games turned against you.”
Amidst the students’ outrage, Minerva smirked. “Well done, Harry. Twenty points to Gryffindor.”

Ron and Hermione gaped at her, but Neville gave the old tabby a curious look. Hmm. It seemed Albus would soon lose Neville’s trust, more than likely. He sighed and made a vow to get his meddling under control. He couldn’t afford to turn the entire student body against him.

Minerva poured herself a cup of tea and smiled like the cat that caught the canary. “So, Albus, what did Harry do after he weaselled the truth out of you?”

Albus’ cheeks pinked. “Ah, well, he judged correctly that Severus would report to Tom that evening and would most likely suffer for it. In fact, he determined that Professor Snape would most likely die before I could reach him, and took it upon himself to learn healing spells and first aid so he could save Severus’ life, should I be delayed.”

He sighed and lowered his head. “As it happens, he was correct to. Poppy and I were on standby, waiting for Severus’ alarms to go off—”

Hermione frowned. “Alarms?”

“He wears an emergency portkey at all times,” Albus explained. “Should he be gravely injured or incapacitated, the portkey activates and brings him to the gates. Would that it could bring him to the Infirmary directly, but the wards do not allow it. There are alarms attached to his portkey in my office, all set to go off when certain conditions are met.”

“That portkey won’t do him a bit of good if someone decides to cast the killing curse on him,” said Neville with a frown.

Albus nodded sadly. “No, I am afraid there is little anyone can do in such a scenario. The portkey is the best protection I can provide, unfortunately.”

Hermione drummed her hands on the edge of her chair and leaned forwards. “Well, yes, of course, but we all know that already. You were saying about the alarms going off?”

Albus gave her a look full of reproach. “Miss Granger, do be patient. As I was saying, Poppy was on standby; however, five minutes before Severus’ alarms went off, three students came into the Infirmary and tested positive for Dragon Pox. The Infirmary went on immediate lockdown to prevent an epidemic, and Poppy and the students were quarantined. She could not contact me before Severus’ alarms sounded, so I was forced to run after him myself.”

He lowered his head. “It was not enough. Had Harry and Miss Lovegood not spent the night learning healing and preparing for Severus’ arrival, we would have lost him before I could reach him.”

Minerva’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, Albus. What happened?”

Albus closed his eyes. “Besides torturing him for hours, Voldemort used a dark cutting curse on Severus, directly over his heart. He would have died in perhaps a minute had Harry and Miss Lovegood not been waiting for his arrival.”


“He is doing quite well now, Minerva.” Albus gave her a wan smile. “They saved his life. By the time I arrived, in fact, Harry had healed everything save for a broken wrist and lash wounds that would have required him to undress Severus. I then took over Severus’ care and set him up in my guest chamber.”
Albus shook his head sadly. “But it was not enough protection, and once again, Harry anticipated an attack. He came here early the next morning to check on Severus and retrieve his cloak, which he had used to lay Severus upon the night before, and discovered Pettigrew two metres away from Severus’ room. Harry stunned him and captured him, and Kingsley has him now in Ministry custody.”

“He… what?” Hermione stared at Albus, eyes round with shock. “I-in two days, Harry has learned healing magic—enough to save a man on the verge of death—and caught a Death Eater on his own?”

Albus caught the hint of disbelief and jealousy and frowned at her, reproach sharp in his features. “In a few hours, actually, as concerns the healing magic. Barely four hours passed from the time he left my office that night until Severus’ alarms went off.”

“B-but how? I wasn’t there to help him! How could he have learned it so fast without me?”

Minerva snapped, “Miss Granger, you would do well to remember you are not the only intelligent student within these walls. Ten points from Gryffindor for your arrogance!”

Hermione gave a startled cry and lowered her head, cheeks bright red and tears on her lashes. Albus hoped the reprimand did her good.

Neville shot Hermione a look of pure disgust and turned back to Albus. “So he captured Pettigrew then, sir?”

“Yes.” Albus popped another lemon drop in anticipation of an outcry. “He also pointed out the danger in leaving Severus where other Death Eaters could access him until Tom’s wrath passes. It seems Harry has taken the task of protecting Severus upon himself, and he is doing quite an admirable job. In light of that, I have given Harry permission to guard him until Severus returns to teaching. Harry and Severus will be staying in the Chamber of Secrets for the time being, and as such, he will not be present in the Gryffindor dorms or mealtimes until after the hols.”

The office rang with cries of shock and dismay. Only Neville appeared to be listening and taking the situation in calmly.

Albus chuckled to himself and gave Phineas Nigellus’ portrait a wry smile.

“Old man,” said Phineas with a snort, “you do love shocking people a bit too much.”

Albus raised his teacup to the portrait in salute.

Before the end of their talk, Harry found himself with his face buried in Snape’s shoulder. Snape allowed the contact, brushing tears from Harry’s face as they fell, and after going so long without a caring touch, Snape’s gentle concern broke Harry inside.
“Your Gryffindor friends will not be in the dark for long,” Snape murmured, his breath warm against Harry’s hair. “Albus advised me to take care of you before leaving breakfast, and told me he would handle the others. I imagine he is informing them of your new quarters as we speak. Perhaps they will be more receptive later.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Harry pressed closer, struggling to breathe through the pain of betrayal. “Ron’s been my friend since first year. He should have trusted me. Instead, he believed me capable of murder. I can’t forget that. And Hermione is more concerned about grades than the fact that the entire house has turned against me—again. Not to mention, she’s been so busy snogging Ron I hardly see her anymore.” Harry clung to Snape’s arm and choked out, “Even if they do wake up and come back, nothing will ever be the same.”

“Harry, you forgave me of worse. Why can you not forgive your friends?”

“Because you hated me then, sir. You thought I was awful, so of course you didn’t want to support me. But they were supposed to love me. They were supposed to stand by my side. And they didn’t. I….” Harry sniffled and leaned back. “I reckon I don’t know why it’s harder to forgive them—
especially Ron. But it is.”

“Hmm. Well, it sounds as though you have true friends in Longbottom and Thomas, at least. And Lovegood, odd as she is.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “Y-yeah. Maybe so.”

“I believe the fact that Longbottom and Thomas have stood by you this entire time and Lovegood has helped you as much as she can, being in a different year and house, is evidence enough that they are loyal and faithful.” Snape laid a tentative hand on Harry’s wrist. “Do not make my mistakes, Harry. Let them in.”

Harry gave a shuddering sigh. “I just… I don’t want to cause any more fights.”

“The other Gryffindors seem to be doing that quite well without your help. Their idiocy is not your fault.”

“I… maybe you’re right.” Harry sniffled and nodded. “I’ll try, sir.”

“Good.”

Snape leaned back a bit, and Harry interpreted the move as a need for space. He sat up and wiped his cheeks.

“Are you okay, sir?”

Snape nodded. “I am… well.” He frowned as if he couldn’t believe it. He probably couldn’t, given how afraid he was of touch in typical situations. “Harry, are you able to attend your next class?”

Harry gave him a grim smile. “I have to be. I’m a student. Not much point in that if I don’t learn.”

“Do you….” Snape’s throat bobbed. “Do you need anything?”

“You mean to calm down?” Harry gave him a hesitant smile. “If you’re really okay like this, would you mind just… staying with me for a bit?”

Pink coloured Snape’s cheeks and he lowered his head. “I… do not mind.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Snape nodded and sat in silence with Harry, his stoic presence steadying and comforting in the midst of such chaos.
With Friends Like These

Chapter Summary

Warnings: Ron and Hermione are still kind of jerkish.

**AN: So I have 5 chapters left to write on this and it's already 345k. I hope you guys are in for the long haul. XD Also, you'll be getting probably 2 updates per week for a while--I want the Christmas chapter to line up with Christmas, and I've got a schedule to keep. *rubs hands together* With that said, let's get down to business.**

Chapter 16

With Friends Like These

After the debacle at breakfast, Harry avoided most of the Gryffindors. He sat alone during Magical Theory class, but Hermione plopped down next to him anyway. To be fair, there weren’t many students to choose from. Besides Hermione and Harry, only Daphne Greengrass, Padma Patil, Zacharias Smith, and Draco Malfoy had chosen to take the class, and Harry sure as hell wasn’t sitting by Zacharias or Draco. He didn’t know the other girls well either, but maybe next class he’d get to know them if Hermione didn’t stop driving him mad.

Hermione scooted closer and pleaded with him. “Harry? I—I’m really sorry. I should have been concerned about you, not NEWTs, and… and you’re right. I’ve been a bint all term. You needed me and I… I wasn’t there. And gods! I’m so sorry about Ron.”

Well, maybe she was making an effort.

He opened his mouth to tell her it was all right, but, before he could speak, a strange sensation washed over him and stole his breath. Somehow, her thoughts and emotions imprinted into his mind. He couldn’t hear her voice, but he had the sense it hovered just out of reach, as if a little more experience with this strange phenomenon would enable him to read her thoughts plain as day—with or without Legilimency.

The second their eyes met, a lingering sense of superiority and a desire to mould Harry into a ‘proper’ student washed over him. She did regret her behaviour, but retained the obsessive need to shape him as she saw fit. Without her guidance, she believed his inferiority would reflect poorly upon herself.

What on earth? Harry shook himself, wondering if he had been imagining things.

“It’s only that I wanted you to do well,” Hermione went on, “and you haven’t been following my schedule or using my notes very much, so I worried you wouldn’t be able to keep up.”

Indignation coiled like a serpent in his chest. So he couldn’t learn unless Hermione hand-fed him the information, hmm? She had a lot to learn about humility before Harry could forgive her. He turned his back and ignored her apologies.
But Merlin, what had just happened? Clearly, he hadn’t simply imagined it, but how had he sensed her thoughts and emotions? He hadn’t been trying. And come to think of it, it wasn’t the first time this had happened recently. Hmm. Snape would know, maybe.

Harry shivered. No. He couldn’t risk telling Snape. What if he thought Harry would use that strange… power against him? Snape would shut their nascent friendship down, and already the prickly man was far too important to Harry to simply cast aside.

Harry didn’t understand that either, but it was true.

Maybe he could ask Dumbledore later.

Dear gods. What was he thinking? Ask Dumbledore? Harry would have snorted at himself if he hadn’t been in the middle of class. No, he most certainly would not be asking the headmaster anything, not if he could help it. He had no desire to become a guinea pig for the man’s latest schemes.

“Harry,” Hermione whispered, “please talk to me.”

“Not now, Hermione. I’m trying to pay attention. You know. Get good grades and all lest I bring the other Gryffindors down.”

That shut her up. She sniffled and turned her attention to her notes. He ignored her and focused on Professor Stonewall’s lecture. The gruff old half-dwarf was fair and knowledgeable, if a bit cantankerous, and it didn’t take Harry long to lose himself in the lesson.

After theory, Harry returned to the Chamber. Dobby had brought him sandwiches and tomato soup for lunch, all packed with plates, goblets, utensils, and various edibles in a neat picnic basket. The elf had insisted on riding down with him, and while Harry and Snape enjoyed a quiet lunch well away from the basilisk parts, Dobby busied himself with cleaning the Chamber and setting up a proper living area, complete with several shelves crammed with Snape’s books.

After the chaos of his day, Harry found Snape’s quiet company refreshing. Who would have thought.

“Sir?”

Snape looked up from his meal and gave Harry a curious look. “Yes?”

Harry dropped his gaze to his soup, fearful of letting Snape see too much emotion behind his words. “I… is it strange that I’ve liked eating with you more than in the Great Hall?”

Snape paused halfway through taking a sip of his ice water. “Hmm. You prefer eating lunch with me to spending the afternoon with your friends?”

Harry lowered his gaze to his plate, afraid to meet Snape’s eyes. “Is it strange?”

“No, but I do I find it surprising. May I ask why?”

“I don’t know. I reckon it’s less stressful. You’re quiet, you know. And here I don’t have to worry about people trying to slip me a love potion—or poison—and ogling me while I’m trying to eat.”
Snape gave a slow nod. “In that case, I suppose it would be preferable.” His eyes followed Harry as he went back to his meal, as if the man had questions, but whatever they were, he kept them to himself.

“Sir?”

“Hmm?”

“Would it be all right if… might I read some of your books too, if it’s okay with you?”

Snape hesitated. “Some are quite ancient and require specialised spells to read, and others are too dark. But there are many I have that would be suitable. I do not mind you reading those.”

“You don’t think I should read the dark ones?”

“You are seventeen, Harry.”

Harry met Snape’s eyes. “Do you really think I haven’t witnessed dark magic firsthand? I see it every single night, sir, but I don’t understand it. I don’t know how to protect myself from it, if there is a way to protect myself. And I reckon if I’m going to go up against the darkest wizard in history, well, it just makes sense to have a fair idea of what I’m getting myself into.”

Snape watched him, perfectly still, not a hint of expression on his face. After several moments where Harry stayed silent, afraid to say anything else lest he start babbling and ruin his chances, Snape gave a wry snort and shook his head.

“Phineas was right. You are a rather Slytherin sort of Gryffindor.”

Harry frowned. “Er… is that a yes or a no?”

Snape smirked. “One who needs to work on learning to comprehend subtlety, apparently. It was a yes, though I will ask you not to inform the headmaster.” A scowl twisted his mouth. “That man doesn’t want you—or anyone—exposed to dark magic, even the theory. I’ve always thought his judgment on the matter too naive. How can one fight what one does not understand?”

He took a sip of his water and met Harry’s eyes. “I will consent to let you read my books, as long as you only do so in my presence and under my supervision.”

Harry grinned. “Yes, sir.”

After lunch, Harry zoomed up to Myrtle’s loo, basket of magically-cleaned dishes and an excited house elf in hand. Dobby whisked away with the basket, claiming a need to help the other elves with the dishes, and Harry trudged out of the loo towards the entrance hall. Merlin, he hoped Ron and Hermione would leave him alone. He had nothing to say to them right now.

But of course, they ambushed him at the doors.

“Harry, look,” said Ron, “we’re both sorry. I mean, I guess it was pretty stupid to think—but it’s Snape, you know. He’s so evil.”

Harry shot him a dark look. “Leave me alone.”
“Harry, please.” Hermione tugged on his elbow, but Harry jerked it out of her grip.

“I said, leave me alone. Neither of you have learned a bloody thing! Just go snog each other and let me be.”

“But—”

Ron scowled and pulled Hermione away. “Fine then, maybe we will.”

“Go ahead.” Harry hid his hurt behind a mask of annoyance and increased his pace, hoping they would get the point and go away.

“I really don’t think this is the time,” Hermione snapped at her boyfriend. “Harry’s upset with us and we have to fix it.”

“Fix yourself first,” Harry fired over his shoulder. “I’m not going to have time to talk with you anyway, given that I have to catch up on all my revision. Wouldn’t want to make you look bad, after all.” With that, he stalked across the lawn towards the greenhouses.

“Harry!” Hermione ran after him. “Really, I’m sorry. Please—”

“Gods damn it, Hermione, leave—me—alone! I heard you the first twelve times you apologised. It doesn’t mean anything when you still think you’ve the right to tell me when and how I learn. It doesn’t mean anything when you still think yourself my superior because your marks are slightly better. It doesn’t mean anything when even now, even when you’re trying to bloody apologise, you’re still not taking my needs or wishes into account. I’m still angry with you, Hermione! Learn to listen to something other than the professors and leave me be!”

“Oi!” Ron snarled and grabbed Harry’s arm. “Don’t you talk to her li—”

“Areatus Silentium!” Harry cast a silencing ward around his head—one that silenced the area outside the ward rather than the people within its protection—and breathed a sigh of relief at the sudden quiet.

He whirled at a tap on his shoulder, but relaxed at the sight of Neville. “Finite. Hi, Nev.”

Neville nodded in greeting. “Harry, um, about this morning, I’m sorry. I was angry with them, but I shouldn’t have put you on the spot like that. Are you okay?”

Harry got another flash of emotion, Neville’s. The boy was panicking, worried about Harry and fearful he might end up hurting himself if his depression didn’t turn around soon. He sensed no ulterior motive—just genuine concern and care for Harry’s life and health.
Relieved even as he wondered what strange ability had been born in him as of late, Harry gave Neville a wan smile and patted his shoulder. “It's okay.”

A surge of relief and hope crossed from Neville to Harry.

“No, it’s not,” Neville said with a sigh. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have embarrassed you, but gods. I never thought they would….”

Harry crossed his arms over his chest and stared at his feet, watching his breath come out in frozen clouds. “Yeah. Me neither.”

They said nothing for a long moment.

“Hey, Nev? I… I’m sorry I’ve been ignoring you a lot lately. I just didn’t want to cause more fights, but apparently they don’t need me to do that.”

Neville gave him a sad smile. “I know. Luna told me. And I’m… if you need me to, I’ll just try to stay out of it and keep you sane instead of arguing with them.” He shook his head and huffed. “Not like any of them are learning anything anyway.”

“T-thanks, Neville. Yeah, I… I would like that, if it’s all right with you.”

Neville nodded. “I was only fighting with them to try to help you. If it’s not working, then obviously I need to do something different.”

Harry closed his eyes to hide the tears building in them. “You’ve really been a good friend. I’m sorry I’ve been rubbish.”

“It’s nothing, mate. Like you said, you were trying not to start a war and you’ve been going through hell. It’s okay.”

Harry nodded and hugged his chest. “I-it might be better now. At least with Snape, now I’m not in his class.”

“I sure hope so.” Neville gave him a shy smile. “Um, would you like to work with me today? I usually work with Dean and Seamus, but after this, not even Dean is talking to that giant prat. Dean might want to work with us too, come to think of it, if you’re okay with that.”

Harry winced. “I didn’t want this, Neville. I didn’t want to tear apart the whole house. I was just trying to keep him alive.”

Neville held Harry’s shoulder. “You didn’t do this, Harry. It’s not your fault some people are berks. You did the right thing.”

Harry sighed. “When I see him and know he’d have died without me, I know that, but no one else seems to get it.”

“Well, not a lot of people like him, mate.”

“No one knows I saved him.”

“I know. It’s just… well, everyone’s hated him for so long. Maybe they’re playing out some kind of twisted fantasy of their own and using you as a scapegoat.” Neville scowled. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Harry shuddered. “No. I wish people would find someone else to tear apart though.”
“So do I.” Neville opened the greenhouse door and let Harry in, but closed it before the other Gryffindors could follow. “So, do you want to work with me?”

“Sure. Not like I’d learn anything with the others.”

“I reckon I can fix that. I’ve a hell of a green thumb, as it happens.”

Harry chuckled and followed Neville to his station, where Dean was already waiting.

“Hey, Nev,” Dean said with a hesitant smile, “can I work with you today? And you too, Harry, if you want? I…” He cast a sad look at Seamus and shook his head. “I can’t work with him. Not after this.”

Seamus glared at them, muttering about losing points and detentions.

Neville snorted. “Idiot. He’s just hacked off because Professor McGonagall took sixty points from him and put him in detention for three weeks.”

“The berk deserves it,” Dean replied, his mouth set in a scowl but his eyes sad.

Harry closed his eyes to hide the blush of shame colouring his face. “Gods, I’m so sorry, Dean. I didn’t mean to cause so much trouble.”

Neville thumped Harry in the back of the head. “I told you, you didn’t cause it, git.”

Rubbing his head, Harry chuckled softly. “I… all right, I guess, but I still feel bad.”

Dean patted Harry’s shoulder. “It’s not your fault, mate. You didn’t do anything except be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It’s Seamus who’s got his head up his arse.”

Harry snorted in spite of himself. “Y-yeah.”

A searching look filled Dean’s eyes. “If it’s all right, Harry, can you tell me who you saved? I believe you, but I didn’t know anyone had been hurt.”

Harry winced. “Not here. It’s too dangerous and too long a story. Can it wait until after dinner tonight, maybe?” He frowned. “Ah, bugger. I can’t do that either. I have to go take care of him. He’s still injured.”

“Don’t worry about it, Harry,” said Neville. “If you give me permission, I’ll tell him about it later.”

Harry nodded. “Just so long as the both of you know never to tell anyone else. It’s so dangerous. He’ll die if the truth gets back to the wrong ears.”

Dean laid his hand over his heart. “I promise. And if it’s that dangerous, we should hold off discussing it here.”

“True.” Harry turned to their plant tray and gave the berry bushes a curious look. “Well, we can work together on these if you blokes don’t mind that I’ve not a clue about what these plants are or what to do with them.”

“I can teach you.” Neville moved to the middle of the station and lifted a handful of mauve berries hidden in fern-like leaves. “These are fritzberries. They make magic charges in the berries—see?” He squeezed one of the berries lightly, and a pink arc of electricity shot out. “The magic won’t hurt you. I imagine we’re to harvest it in class today, though I’m not sure what it’s used for.”
“Magic replenishing draughts,” Harry said with a wry smile. “It’s the key ingredient.”

“Ah. Good to know. Potions might have been useful for Herbology, but I just couldn’t take another ye—”

“Harry!” Hermione called again. “Please, I just wanted to make sure you were learning enough, and without me—”

Fury surged in Harry’s blood. “Areatus Silentium!”

He enclosed himself, Dean, and Neville in his silencing bubble and glared at Hermione, who was still ‘apologising’ beyond the charm’s barrier. She tried scooting within the limits of the charm, but Dean shoved her back and poked his head through the shield to shout at her. Harry couldn’t make out what he said, but his irritation spilled over through Harry’s new abilities.

Dean popped back into the charm’s range. “Gods, can’t fault her perseverance, can you?”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “When it comes to grades, snogging, and trying to apologise even though she doesn’t mean a word? Absolutely not.”

Neville frowned. “Harry, I do think she means it.”

“Maybe. She does feel a prat from what I can tell. She also still thinks me too thick to wipe my own arse without her input.”

Neville grimaced. “In that case, let her stew.”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “That was the plan.”

Thank Merlin, Professor Sprout came in at that juncture and Hermione had no choice but to go back to her boyfriend with her tail between her legs. Harry cancelled their silencing charm just as the professor took her place at the top of the greenhouse.

“All right, class,” said Professor Sprout. “Today we’re harvesting magic from fritzberries for Professor Snape. It seems he’s run out of magic replenishers, so we’re gathering ingredients.” She fixed them with a stern look. “And don’t even think of sabotage as a petty act of revenge or you’ll find yourself in detention—with Professor Snape—faster than you can blink.”

Neville grinned. “Called it.”

Harry chuckled and settled into the lesson.

Neville wasn’t kidding about his green thumb. Merlin. The boy taught Harry and Dean loads. Their fritzberry stock earned them the highest scores at the end of the class, much to Hermione’s consternation. Harry made a mental note to partner with Neville from now on in Herbology. The man was a genius with plants, and Dean’s Muggle scientific knowledge and Harry’s skill with other disciplines made them a damn good team.

After class, Neville and Dean lagged behind on purpose, keeping Harry company so he could avoid another confrontation with Ron and Hermione. Another silencing field let the couple know Harry wasn’t open to more arguments and, after a moment of useless pleading, they moved on. Harry and his friends followed at a safe distance, but Dean stepped away once they had made it to the Entrance Hall.

“I need the loo before class. See you two in history?”
Harry nodded. “Go on. We’ll be all right. Thanks for sticking with me.”

Dean patted his shoulder. “Of course, mate. See you in a bit.”

He scurried away, leaving Neville to finish accompanying Harry to class.

Neville sighed once he had gone and gave Harry a wan smile. “Are you okay, mate?”

Harry shook his head. “Okay is a stretch. But I’m… it’s not as bad as it could be. I’m better than I was yesterday anyway.” His shoulders slumped. “Ron and Hermione—they just keep trying, but I can’t forget that Ron believed I’d kill Snape. Hermione, well, maybe I can forgive her eventually—*if* she takes her head out of her arse and stops trying to turn me into some kind of trophy friend or what have you—but Ron… this is too far.”

Neville nodded grimly. “I know. I can’t forgive it either.”

They walked in silence for a while.

“Harry? Is… your guest, the one you’re protecting—is he treating you well?”

Harry’s smile was genuine this time. “Believe it or not, he is. It took some talking and I really had to prove myself, but he’s been taking good care of me since yesterday afternoon-ish. Actually, he held me together this morning. Let me cry on him—and didn’t even dock points for it,” he added with a wry laugh.

Neville frowned. “I wouldn’t have thought he had it in him. And I’m a bit surprised that you’ve done so much for him considering how badly he hurt you before.”

“I know.”

“Why *did* you do it, Harry?”

Harry froze, hurt and anger building in his heart. Why would *no one* understand? “He would have died without me, Nev. I couldn’t just let him die!”

“Oh, that’s not—” Neville patted Harry’s shoulder. “Easy, mate. I didn’t mean that. Of course you wouldn’t let him die. All I meant was that I would have thought it would be easier to forgive Hermione than… your guest.”

Harry shook his head and held his books to his chest, the sharpness inside easing at Neville’s explanation. “Oh. Well, he said the same thing, you know. I don’t really know why. I reckon it’s because they were my friends to start with and they should have stood by me, but they didn’t. My *guest* hated me, so of course he wasn’t going to be nice. Now that he’s… er… seen the light, he’s really trying, and that makes it easier not to be angry.”

“I suppose I can see that. I’m hacked off at them too.” Neville gave Harry a searching look. “But I reckon what I’m trying to understand is why you went so far out of your way to help him in the first place. I’m not talking about saving his life, so please don’t be hurt. It’s just… I mean, judging from what Dumbledore said and what you just told me, you’ve been good to him and he really doesn’t deserve it. Is there a reason?”

Harry walked in silence for a moment, considering what he could reveal without breaking Snape’s confidence. “I… I can’t say much, but last term changed how I saw him. I… stumbled on something I wasn’t supposed to see, and it showed me nothing is black and white. He’s not just an abusive bastard—he’s *damaged*, Nev. Broken. And… I don’t know. As mad as it is, after seeing him in the
light I did, I guess it made me want to fix his broken pieces, if I can. Or at least help him heal.”

Neville frowned. “Really? He’s so cruel, I wouldn’t have thought, but then again, I haven’t seen him like you have. Is he okay?”

Harry shrugged. “I think he’s doing better anyway. Knowing I saved him in spite of everything—I think it helped him, somehow. I hope so anyway.”

A hesitant smile crossed Neville’s face. “Well, I’m not going to say I like the berk, but I guess he can’t be all bad. It looks like he’s helped you some anyway. You don’t seem as miserable, even with Ron, Seamus, and Hermione sticking their heads up their arses and half our housemates turning into idiots. Again.”

Harry shuddered and stepped closer to his friend. “Yeah. It’s been an awful term.”

“I know. I was really scared for you, Harry. I reckon if… your new friend can turn that around, if he can pull you out of despair and give you some hope, it’s worth giving him another shot.”

Harry closed his eyes, warmed by Neville’s gesture even if he wouldn’t likely have much of a chance to act on it. “Thanks, Nev. But, um… did Professor Dumbledore tell you what my… friend does for a living? Besides the obvious, I mean?”

Neville snorted. “Didn’t need to. I put it together for myself.” He whispered to Harry, “Yes, I know he’s a spy.”

Harry froze and cast a silencing barrier, the type to block sound in this time. “Nev, how did you figure that out? If he’s revealing himself in public, we’re all screwed.”

“He’s not, don’t worry. I just figured it out because I thought Dumbledore would have, um, sent him on his way by now if he was really what he projects. I expect most people think he’s done something sinister to cement his place here regardless, so I think it’s okay.”

Harry took a deep breath. “Oh. In that case, I’ll just warn him he’ll need to change when he returns, and it should be all right. He’ll have to anyway if he wants to keep his position.”

“That’s what Dumbledore said.”

“Yes.” Harry hugged his books closer to his chest, trying to calm his racing heart. Gods, he had been truly terrified for his new friend. Already, the idea of losing Snape hurt too much to contemplate.

“Harry? Are you all right?”

“Yeah. That just… scared me.” He shook himself out of his fear. Once he warned Snape, everything would be all right. He’d make sure of it. “Um, well, since you know of his work, you also understand he can’t be kind in public?”

“So long as he’s all right in private and you’re okay with it, I’m okay.”

Harry smiled. “I… I’m glad. I don’t really understand it, Nev, but it does make me happy. Maybe I’ve wanted him to accept me for a long time, you know? Either way, I… it’s been good to know he cares.”

“I’m happy for you, mate. Well, about that anyway.”
Harry looked to the History classroom, where Hermione and Ron were snuggled in each other’s arms as if nothing else mattered—including him. Harry couldn’t blame them entirely with how hard he was shutting them down, but still….

“Yes. I know what you mean.”

Harry sat next to Neville for History too. And afterwards, Neville and Dean walked him to the second floor corridor after class.

“Tell your friend I said hello and to treat you well,” said Neville.

Harry chuckled. “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled.” He turned to leave, but the thought of Parseltongue reminded him of his other new friend. “Hey, Nev, Dean, wait.”

Neville turned, bemused. “I don’t think he’ll want to talk to us, Harry.”

Dean gave Harry a bemused look. “He won’t?”

Harry grimaced. “Neville will explain later, when it’s safe.”

Neville nodded and patted Dean’s shoulder. “Later, I promise. What did you want, Harry?”

Harry hissed at his new familiar and gently lifted the viper out of his clothing. “I wanted to introduce you to Isuri.”

“Merlin!” Neville gasped and inched back. “She’s… venomous, isn’t she?”

Dean, who had been staring at the snake in blatant curiosity, took a step back too. “Um… is she?”

Harry nodded. “I don’t think she’s that dangerous to humans, though. She says she’s not anyway, and she won’t hurt you regardless. She’s pretty content just to sleep around my neck most of the time actually.”

Neville moved closer. “You’re sure she won’t bite?”

Isuri gave the boy a curious sniff, tongue poking out, then sniffed Dean, too.

~Master, your friends are frightened. The brown one is less so.~

Harry petted her head. ~I know. Be gentle with them, okay? They really protected me today.~ Isuri nodded, and Harry turned back to his friends. “She was letting me know you’re afraid. It’s okay though. She really is a calm snake. She won’t hurt you. I promise.”

Neville gave the snake a hesitant smile. “She is lovely, even if I’m not as fond of snakes as you are. Her scales are so bright.”

“Yes, she’s a beautiful snake,” said Dean. “Even has Slytherin colours!”

“She’s a Sri Lankan pit viper,” Harry said, pride swelling in his chest. He did have rather lovely familiars, in his opinion.

Isuri bobbed her head and flickered her tongue against Neville’s cheek. ~Thank you, humans.~
repeated the gesture with Dean, and the boy gave a soft giggle and rubbed his cheek.

“Tickles!”

Isuri hissed her snake laugh. ~You are good friends. Keep protecting him, please.~

Harry eased the snake back from the boys. ~I'll tell them, Isuri.~ She curled back around his neck and snuggled in for another nap.

“She said thank you and asked you to protect me,” Harry translated.

Neville nodded. “We will, mate. Tell her that.”

“She can understand simple phrases like that without my help, and she’s learning the rest. Just don’t tell anyone else about her, okay? She protects me too.”

“Sure thing,” said Dean.

“Of course,” Neville said with a nod. “You’d best get into the Chamber before we’re seen here, though. We’ll talk more tomorrow, Harry.”

“Yeah, thanks. See you then.”

Harry waved goodbye to his friends and slipped away to the second floor girls’ loo under his cloak. Dobby was waiting under a house elf invisibility spell with a basket of pasta and garlic bread. Harry took the basket with an appreciative grin and clambered atop the broom.

“Coming, Dobby?”

Dobby shook his head solemnly, candy cane earrings waving with the motion. “Dobby has work to do in the kitchens, unless Great Master Harry Potter sir needs him.”

“No, that’s fine. We’re pretty well set up in here now, at least for the moment.” Though Snape would soon miss his brewing, Harry had no doubt about that. “Thank you for dinner!”

After his customary wails of gratitude, which Harry silenced quickly, Dobby popped away, and Harry dropped into the Chamber. As soon as he had the Chamber doors shut, he cast a warming charm on his snake to keep her comfortable and set her down on his bed.

~I thought you would want to get some exercise after napping on me all day, but feel free to sleep here if you are still tired.~

Isuri lifted her head and looked around. ~There is a strong smell of snake here. Big snake.~

~Yes. There was once a basilisk in this chamber, but she is dead now. Stay away from the boxes and dark wall in the corner there. Her remains are still here and they are lethal. The rest of the room is safe to explore.~

Isuri nodded. ~I would like to see Master’s nest.~

~This is a… seasonal nest, Isuri, not a permanent one, but it is where we are staying for the time.~ He petted her head and turned, just as Snape called out to him.

“Harry? Is Isuri well?”

Harry came out from behind the screen to see Snape setting up their dinner table. “Yes, sir. She’s just
going to explore a bit. I already warned her about the basilisk parts.”

Snape nodded. “If she is amenable, will you ask her to search for other shed skins? They should not be harmful to her, but tell her not to put them in her mouth. It is enough to let us know where she finds them, if any exist.”

“They’d have to, wouldn’t they? That snake was here for over a thousand years.”

Snape nodded. “I confess I am surprised the Chamber is not littered with old skins.”

“Hmm. Good point.” Harry frowned. “Sir, do basilisks generally live so long?”

“Unless killed, they are immortal.”

Harry shuddered. “Dear gods. Whoever made a giant, immortal snake with lethal venom, eyes that turn you to stone, fangs as long as my arm, and a seriously bad attitude should be taken out somewhere and shot.”

Snape snorted. “You will hear no argument from me. Though they do come in handy once foolhardy Gryffindors dispose of them.”

“For the opportunistic Slytherins, you mean?”

Snape shot him a glare. Harry gave a nervous laugh and held his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

“Sir, I was only teasing. I didn’t mean…. “ He winced and turned away. Gods, one stupid comment and he’d ruined everything. Why couldn’t he keep his big mouth shut?

“I’m sorry, sir. I… I’ll just tell Isuri about the skins now.”

Snape’s glare softened. “Harry, I am not accustomed to… teasing. It has been many years since anyone has attempted it without malice.”

Harry tried to smile, though he feared it came out as more of a grimace. “I-I’ll try to remember, sir.” He took a steadying breath and went to his viper, who was nosing along the base of Slytherin’s statue. ~Isuri?~

She looked at Harry and cocked her head. ~Why is there a giant human head made of stone here, Master? Did the basilisk kill him?~

Harry laughed in spite of himself. ~That is a good thought, but no. It is only a… an image of a human. Do snakes bring things into their nests to decorate them?~

She stared at Harry, tongue flickering in and out. He had the sense she was confused.

~Um, a decoration is something to make the nest… look attractive, or to make it smell good. It has no practical purpose other than to be pleasing to the owners.~

Isuri cocked her head. ~Some snakes might… decorate their nests, perhaps. Some like the smell of grass or dead things—I am not sure if that is decoration. And I have not had a nest yet, so I do not know if I will like to decorate it either.~

~I hope you have a big nest in the future, Isuri. But for now, this is a sort of decoration for our nest. The first owner of this place made it. I do not like it much, but it is too big and too dangerous to move.~
She bobbed her head in understanding. ~I see. The human who lived here before liked strange decorations.~

Harry snorted. ~True.~ He knelt at her feet and petted her head. ~Isuri, Severus would like me to ask you something, but it may be too frightening for you. It is fine to refuse if you would not like to do it.~

He might not be able to use Snape’s forename in conversation yet, but surely it couldn’t hurt to call him that with his snake, right? He hoped so anyway.

~What is it?~

~The basilisk that lived here before us was here for a thousand years, and its skins are very valuable. They can save lives, if we can find them. Severus and I are not able to find her skins on our own, and we would like you to look for them, if it is not too frightening.~

~Why would it frighten me, Master? The big snake is dead. She cannot hurt me now.~

Harry gave a wry snort. He should have taken the mindset of a snake into account. They didn’t mourn their dead like humans did, at least not in his experience. Some even ate other snakes, so the fact that Isuri didn’t appear to mind sorting through the shed skins of another of her kind shouldn’t have surprised him.

~Yes, you are right. I was thinking like a human.~

~You are a human. How else would you think?~

Harry laughed. ~Yes, I am glad I have you to remind me. So you do not mind looking for the skins for us?~

~I will look.~

~Severus said if you do find some, do not put them in your mouth. Just tell me.~

~Yes, master. Go to your friend. His stomach is making hungry noises and he is waiting for you.~

Harry chuckled and petted her head. ~Thank you, Isuri. I will go make sure Severus puts some food in his belly so you can concentrate.~

Isuri gave her snake laugh and slithered away. Harry watched her poke about the base of the statue for a moment before he went to the table, where Snape had already plated a giant bowl of Tuscan shrimp penne, a tray of garlic bread, and goblets of white wine. There was a bottle of pumpkin juice for Harry as well.

“Merlin, that looks delicious. Dobby is worth his weight in gold.”

Snape snorted. “Basilisk parts are more expensive than gold.”

“Then worth his weight in dead basilisk.” Harry sat down and smiled at Snape. “Thanks for setting this up.”

“It is no trouble. You are… aiding me. I must do my part to help.”

Harry lowered his head to hide the way such words affected him. He had never had someone to help him with the household chores before. Not a human anyway. Hogwarts didn’t feel much like a human home as the house elves did everything invisibly, but here, Snape and Harry had to clean up after themselves. That Snape was willing to share the load filled Harry with warmth.
“Thank you, sir.”

“Harry? Are you all right?”

Harry nodded and took a piece of garlic bread. “I’m okay, sir. Let’s eat while it’s hot.”

“The food has warming charms, but I would prefer to start as well.”

Snape dished some pasta onto his plate, then passed it to Harry, and they settled in to eat. For a while, only Isuri’s occasional comment about finding a hole here or there and the sound of clinking utensils broke the silence, but once the sharp edge of hunger abated, Harry found himself curious about Snape and how he had amused himself during Harry’s classes.

“Sir, if you don’t mind me asking, how did you do here by yourself today?”

Snape acknowledged the comment with a nod, finishing his bite and wiping his mouth before he would speak. The man certainly had impeccable table manners. Harry made a mental note to pay attention when they ate and maybe learn some of Snape’s etiquette. It could only smooth relations if Snape didn’t find Harry’s eating habits atrocious.

“I did well enough, I suppose. My injuries are not entirely healed so I could not yet resume my usual training regimen—”

“Training?” Harry’s ears perked up. “What kind of training, sir?”

“Many types. Besides training my mind to keep my magic and mind skills sharp, I also train in defensive techniques, both Muggle and wizarding.”

Harry gave him a hesitant smile. “Um, would you be willing to teach me some?”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “You wish to train with me?”

“Well, if I’m going to have to fight Voldemort—”

Snape gasped and grabbed his arm. “Don’t!”

“Don’t say his name?” Harry frowned. “It’s only a name. There’s no need to fear it.”

Snape’s gaze sharpened to steel. “Do not insult me.”

Harry lowered his head and shut his mouth lest he ruin everything. Again. Appetite gone, he pressed his arm into his waist and tried not to show his sudden distress.

‘Damn it. I just don’t know how to talk to him.’

Snape sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Harry…”

Harry kept his gaze on the table and said nothing. What could he say? He had no idea what would and wouldn’t set Snape off sometimes.

“Harry, look at me.”

Harry swallowed hard and forced himself to meet Snape’s eyes. He hoped his fear and shame wasn’t obvious, but should have realised Snape would see through any defence.

Snape’s expression was softer, tinged with guilt. “I… I believe I handled that badly.”
Harry barely suppressed a gasp. He was admitting fault? Gods, the man had changed.

“I do not react well to being called a coward, Harry. At all.”

Snape’s statement forced Harry to react. “A-a coward? How on earth did you get that from what I said?”

“You suggested I was afraid of his name.”

“Er… but everyone is. I just… I thought—you’re not?”

Snape shook his head. “I do not want the name spoken in my hearing for two reasons. First and foremost, I must always refer to him as the Dark Lord as long as I am spying within his ranks. One slip and I am finished. As people tend to assimilate what they hear, it is dangerous for me to hear it.

“Secondly, the Dark Lord created a connection between his self-fashioned name and the Dark Mark. Whenever his ridiculous title is mentioned in the presence of aDeath Eater, it causes them terrible pain through the mark. It is meant to be a way to teach us respect.” Snape’s scowl of disgust made his opinion of such brutality plain.

Harry winced. “Merlin. I’m sorry, sir. I won’t say it again where you can hear it. I don’t want to call him You-Know-Who and encourage fear of his name though. Should I just call him… er, Riddle?”

“That will do. It is highly unlikely I would slip with his surname. It does not come to mind in his presence at any rate. He is hardly human by this point, after all.”

“Oh.” Harry twirled his fork in his pasta, but didn’t eat. “Um, you were telling me about training?”

Snape gave Harry an assessing look. “Hmm. If I am to train you, you must promise to eat healthier meals and more of them. The training is intense and will drain your reserves quickly if you do not take in enough food to replenish your energy.”

Harry gave him a hesitant smile. “Yes, sir!” He took another bite of his pasta and found, with their argument settled, his appetite had returned. It was good pasta, after all.

The corner of Snape’s lips twitched. Harry’s heart filled with hope that one day soon, the man could smile again. Gods, he hoped so.

Snape’s breath hitched and his eyes widened.

Harry’s heart stilled. Oh shite. Just then, he had been looking into the man’s eyes and not shielding his thoughts.

Snape had heard him.

Face burning, Harry gave Snape an apologetic look and mentally kicked himself. Hadn’t he just thought the day before that he would need to be careful with this man? And here he was stomping all over their budding truce like a bloody minotaur in a china shop.

Snape’s throat bobbed, his eyes glimmered, and a pink flush spread across his cheeks. “Harry, I….” His voice came out rough and he cleared his throat. “I believe I was telling you what I had done with myself today.”

Harry nodded, smiling to himself. He shielded his mind as best as he could. ‘Hearing how much I care about his happiness must have affected him. Gods, I hope so. I hope he cares.’
Snape took a bite of his meal as if he needed time to think of his reply. Harry suspected he was trying to get his emotions under control.

“I spent much of the day reading about basilisks and the properties of their derivative ingredients, the venom in particular.”

Harry shuddered. “I’ve had enough experience with basilisk venom to last me a lifetime, thanks.”

Snape looked him over, his expression curious and calculating. “Harry, would you mind telling me of your poisoning? How it felt, how fast it worked, how it felt when Fawkes healed you? It is so rare that a victim of basilisk poisoning survives, there is hardly any information on the experience to be had. Such information is vital to developing an antivenin.”

Harry gulped and almost choked on a half-chewed bite of pasta. He swallowed it down with some pumpkin juice and wiped his mouth before speaking, as he had seen Snape do every time.

“I… well, do I have to do it now?”

“Of course not. I would prefer to record your account, and I cannot do so over the dinner table. I was simply asking if you are willing.”

Harry gave him a tentative nod. “Can I show you the memory? Would you be able to get more details if you could feel what I felt then, maybe?”

Snape paused, breath catching, and stared at Harry for a long moment. Then, to Harry’s shock and joy, he smiled. It was a small thing, fleeting and unsure, but a real smile.

“I cannot believe you trust me with such information, but yes, to share your memory of the event would give me a unique understanding of the effects of basilisk poisoning. It may be enough to save lives.”

Snape bowed his head slightly and Harry felt a rush of gratitude from him. A thank you! Snape had thanked him. Well, a bow wasn’t much of a thank you, to be honest, but from Snape? Gods, this was a huge step for him.

Harry smiled back, but decided not to draw attention to Snape’s display of gratitude for fear of making him crawl back into his shell.

“I hope so, sir.”

Hope. For the first time in months, Harry felt it. Maybe, just maybe, things would be okay again soon. Perhaps he’d never be the same with Ron and Hermione, but gaining Neville, Dean, and Snape made it easier to cope.

Snape nodded and returned to his meal. Harry watched out of the corner of his eye as the man fidgeted with a piece of shrimp, a faint blush colouring his cheeks. What was he thinking?

As Harry watched, wishing he could know the man’s thoughts, Snape’s voice drifted into his mind.

[I should ask him. He is being incredibly kind and I know he is distressed. His day must have been difficult with the divide in his house. I… but what if I ask him and…? I am so afraid.]

Harry ducked his head with a quiet gasp. Oh gods. He was sure Snape hadn’t projected that thought. What in Merlin’s name was happening to him?
Harry looked to Snape, wondering if he should ask about it, but decided this wasn’t the time. Snape would assume Harry had overheard his thoughts. And to know Harry had heard something so private… it would shatter their trust at this point. He would have to wait a bit, until their bond was strong enough to bear the blow.

For the moment, he decided to take the burden of decision off his new friend.

“My day… Merlin, it was rough.”

Snape’s expression shifted to pure relief, and Harry knew he had done the right thing.

“Ron and Hermione cornered me on the way to Herbology….”
Chapter 17

Settling In

After dinner, Severus trained Harry in Occlumency. Something appeared to be bothering the boy, but Harry had plenty of excuse to be upset and Severus took the fact that he hadn’t been able to uncover the cause of Harry’s confusion and worry as a sign of progress. Merlin, but it was about time. Occlumency wasn’t the easiest discipline, but neither did it merit such struggle.

Perhaps their growing trust had helped Harry overcome his disinclination for the subject.

“Well done, Harry.” He handed the boy a headache reliever and put away his wand.

Harry downed the potion with a grateful look and dropped his head into his hands. Severus knelt beside him and lightly laid his hand against Harry’s scalp, soothing him with one of the many chants he had perfected over the years.

“Sana Cerebra....”

Harry sighed and leaned into his touch. “Merlin, thank you. That’s so much better.”

Severus nodded and moved back. “Are you well enough to stand now?”

Harry stood and swayed a bit, but did not fall. “Yes, sir, I’m all right. Or I will be. These lessons always take it out of me.” He moved to the sofa and groaned. “Ugh. Feels like a lorry smacked me in the skull when we’re done, no matter how gentle you are about it.”

“You are showing progress, so with luck, we may not need to continue them for long.”

Harry frowned and lowered his gaze. “Maybe so, sir.”

“Harry?”
Harry gave him a wan smile. “It’s nothing. I just need a minute.”

Severus frowned. Harry wasn’t being truthful, not entirely, but he didn’t push. It was too early in their acquaintance to push for confidences if Harry wasn’t ready to give them.

Still, perhaps Severus could ask for them. And he knew just the question he wanted to ask.

He sat beside the boy and laid a gentle hand on his back, relieved that the touch did not frighten him. “Harry, I would like to speak to you about something. It has been troubling me since we discussed my living arrangements yesterday.”

Harry tensed under Severus’ hand. “Am I bothering you, sir?”

“No. At least so far, you have been quite an easy housemate.”

Harry relaxed again and gave him a shy smile. “I’m glad. I’ve liked it here too. Well, other than the dead basilisk—” He shuddered. “And the giant statue of Slytherin. It’s been nice to be here away from all the chaos.”

“You find my presence restful as compared to your housemates?” Severus grimaced. “On reconsideration and given what you have been through recently, perhaps that does make sense.”

“Yeah.” Harry gave him a wan smile. “I thought your company was restful before the fallout with Gryffindor though, or at least I did after you stopped hating me so much.”

Severus couldn’t stop himself from running his hand over Harry’s curls. Despite his fears, he wanted a touch for himself. Something soft and gentle to chase away the cold, bitter loneliness he had carried for so long.

Harry’s eyes closed and he turned into Severus’ hand. Merlin, he was like a cat. The thought brought a hesitant smile to Severus’ face… until he recalled Harry’s reaction to the female Weasley at lunch that morning. Why did Harry enjoy Severus’ touch so much when he did not appear to like it from his friends?

The thought made Severus nervous and he dropped his hand to Harry’s shoulder again.

Harry gave Severus a soft smile, full of trust and hope. Severus’ heart twisted. He didn’t deserve this, Harry’s trust and affection. And even if he did, fate always took away whatever made Severus happy. He couldn’t afford to become too reliant on Harry’s acceptance.

Even if the thought of losing his trust already hurt more than it should.

No. No. He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t let Harry in so far. He had to protect himself.

Harry’s smile slipped, uncertainty rolling in like storm clouds. Merlin, Severus’ thoughts must have bled through his barriers and shown on his face. He composed himself quickly.

Harry winced and looked away. Perhaps he knew Severus was worried and hiding it. Why did he care though? Severus simply couldn’t understand how Harry could hold him in such regard, and he couldn’t trust it anyway. He had never been so fortunate.

“What did you want to ask me about, sir?”

Severus jumped—inside, at least. In the mire of his troubled thoughts, somehow he had forgotten why he had tried to soothe Harry through his touch in the first place. Severus had questions, and he
anticipated they would be painful for the boy. With a little huff of irritation at his own maudlin sentimentality, he laid his hand on Harry’s forearm, tracing the greenish lacework of veins. This, at least, did not frighten him.

“It will likely trouble you, Harry, so brace yourself.”

Harry froze, eyes wide with fear. “H-have I done something wrong, sir?”

“No. Breathe, Harry. I am not angry.”

Harry relaxed. “I just didn’t want you to hate me again.”

“If I hated you, or was considering it, would I…?” Severus squeezed Harry’s forearm to indicate what he couldn’t say.

Harry smiled and shook his head. “I reckon not. All right. What is it then?”

Severus took a deep breath to calm himself and kept his eyes trained on Harry’s face, watching for the slightest reaction. “In Albus’ office yesterday, something concerning happened. I was rather abrupt with you; however, I have said much worse than what I did to you then, so your strong reaction to my words stunned me. Harry, why did it terrify you when I suggested you might eat the plate? You do realise I….”

But Harry had frozen. His eyes were wide, tears shimmering in the corners, all the colour draining from his face. He trembled violently against Severus’ side and shook his head so hard, his fringe flapped into his eyes.

“No. No, I can’t. Please. Don’t ask.”

Severus held his arm tight and brushed Harry’s fringe back with his other hand. “Even when I am here to help you?”

“Please. Please don’t. I can’t.”

“Are you able to show me the memory?”

“No! Gods, please. I can’t live it again. Please.” Tears dripped down Harry’s cheeks, and Severus relented.

“Very well. I will not force you if it troubles you so. I am only concerned.”

Harry gave a shaky cry and buried his face in Severus’ shoulder. “S-sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Severus gasped at the touch, but in light of Harry’s severe distress, did not move away. “Peace. I am here. I have memories of my own that are too painful.”

But why should this terrify Harry so? Why should the mere mention of something so silly render him crippled with fear when nothing else could?

What in Merlin’s name had happened to him?

Heart troubled, Severus traced his fingers through Harry’s soft curls and tried to calm them both.
Harry knew he had revealed too much with his terror, but he couldn’t help it. The pain, the fear of that episode still left him screaming his throat raw in the night sometimes. He couldn’t speak of it even if doing so would not also reveal the horrible truth of his life with the Dursleys.

Snape had been abused too—he might even understand Harry’s pain and fear—but it didn’t matter. Harry couldn’t talk about it. He couldn’t admit his past, because the fear that the Dursleys were right and he was just a little freak who deserved all his pain still haunted him.

Snape held Harry’s arm and brushed light fingertips over his wrist. Merlin, Snape was terrified of touch, but he had tried so hard to overcome it for Harry’s sake. Harry wanted to hug the man and hold him tight, but restrained himself. This was as far as Snape could go, and that was more than Harry had ever expected.

“S-sir?”

“Hmm? Are you well?”

Harry shivered. “Y-yeah. I’m fine.” He wasn’t, but he didn’t want to remember. “I… I’m sorry I can’t talk about it.”

“I should not have asked you so soon. Perhaps you will be able to discuss it eventually, but at the moment, I fear our trust is still too new.”

Harry nodded, though he doubted he would ever be able to discuss his life at Privet Drive. If Severus knew—if anyone knew—what a little freak he was, he would lose what little he had left. And Harry wasn’t sure he could survive if everyone abandoned him.

Perhaps he could talk to Isuri about it. A snake wouldn’t care what his relatives thought. The idea was compelling, and gave Harry some little hope he might one day overcome his past.

For now, though, he needed to pull himself together. He had two essays due the next day and he had barely a word written on either.

“Sir? Um, if you’re okay with it, I really do have a lot of work to catch up on.”

Snape released him and nodded. “Of course. Though, if you will, before you start, would you mind sharing your memory of the basilisk attack with me?”

“Do you need your pensieve? You can just keep it in there if you want. It’s not like I want to remember it.”

Snape gave him that small, tentative smile again. “That would be acceptable. However, if I am to experience what you experienced, I must use a special form of Legilimency.”

Harry nodded and focused on the memory of the basilisk attack. A shudder crept down his spine as the snake loomed up in his memory, so much larger than it had seemed yesterday, fangs dripping with liquid death.

“O-okay. I’m ready.”

Snape lifted his wand. “Do not block me this time. Just let me in. I will not harm you.”

Harry nodded tersely. “Will you… hold my arm or my hand, just so I know I’m safe?”
Snape swallowed hard and laid a hesitant hand on Harry’s wrist. He curled his fingers around Harry’s arm and slowly rubbed up and down his skin. “Will this be enough?”

Harry gave him a tentative smile. “Yeah. It’s good.”

“I’d rather him hold my hand, but I don’t think he’s capable of it, not yet.’”

He banished that thought and focused solely on his memory of the basilisk.

“Okay. Ready when you are, sir.”

“Good. Legilimens Oculitu.”

Harry gasped at the strange sensation that Snape was with him, inside his own mind as he relived the experience with the basilisk, the pain, the fear that he was done for. Snape’s gentle touch on his arm was the only thing keeping them separate, the only barrier between their hearts and minds. It was the most intimate feeling Harry had ever experienced.

“Severus,” he breathed—so close, he couldn’t form the man’s title.

Snape’s eyes widened, but he did not reprimand Harry. He simply traced slow, gentle fingertips over Harry’s arm as the memory resumed, and Harry reckoned that gave him permission enough to refer to the man by his forename, at least within his own mind.

Severus pulled back with a nod, leaving Harry empty without his presence, and briefly touched Harry’s hand. “That will help me immensely.”

Harry pulled himself together and gave Severus a shy smile. “I’m glad, sir.”

Severus looked into Harry’s eyes for a long, silent moment, then stood. “I would like to record what I experienced through your memory now, Harry. You may stay here to work on your assignments or return to your common room, if you would prefer.”

Well, that was an easy decision. “Here. I wouldn’t have any peace in the common room.”

“Very well. You may ask me questions if you wish, but I will remind you I am not your professor any longer and have work of my own.” Severus’ shoulders slumped. “Even if I am not free to continue teaching until after term.”

Harry cautiously laid his hand on Severus’ wrist. “I’m sorry.”

“You have done nothing to warrant an apology. My suspension is my own fault.” Severus gently removed Harry’s hand and moved back. “Off with you now. I must record this memory while it is still fresh.”

Harry nodded and dashed away.

Harry soon found Severus to be an ideal companion for studying. He was quiet and studious, and helped Harry understand if he came across a concept that made little sense. Harry made much more progress on his work than he had expected, and at the end of the night, Severus even reviewed his Transfiguration essay while Harry was in the shower.
“Your explanation of atom alteration in human-to-animal transfiguration is flawed,” he said when Harry emerged. “It is not the size or amount that changes, but rather the type. While heat or cold is required to alter the space between Muggle atoms, Magical atoms can condense when they need to become something smaller, or disperse when they need to create a larger object. Thus, when a human is transfigured to an animal, the number of his atoms and size remains constant, but they shift in distance to accommodate size, whether larger or smaller, and take on the characteristics of the animal in question. Review the explanation of magical atomic structure and alteration again, and I believe it will become clear.”

Harry grinned. “Merlin! Thank you, sir. That should help my grade.”

“This is an E level essay otherwise, I think. Well done.”

Warmth bloomed in Harry’s heart and face. “I… I… t-thank you.”

He turned so Severus might not see how strongly that praise had affected him. Gods, he had tried so hard to earn Severus’ approval for so long. Having it meant much more than Harry could hope to explain. He had no idea why it was so important to him, only that it was.

With a secret smile, he sat at his desk and corrected his essay while Severus showered. By the time the man returned, Harry had finished his Transfiguration essay and added another paragraph to his essay for Charms. Hermione had given him notes for both, but he couldn’t bear to look at them after that morning. Instead, he chose to read the material himself and form his own conclusions.

He learned before long that he preferred to work this way. If he made a mistake, the lesson would be more likely to stick—he had certainly learned from Severus’ lesson on magical atomic structure, after all. And if he succeeded, Hermione’s studiousness didn’t overshadow his efforts. Pass or fail, the work he did on his essays was his own. He smiled to himself as he finished his paragraph and laid aside his quill.

Severus was drying his hair with a towel and watching over Harry’s shoulder. He set aside his towel, letting a fall of silky black hair tumble down his back and shoulders, and Harry’s heart thumped. Merlin. What was that about?

“May I?” Severus held his hand out, and Harry shook himself out of his confusion.

“What? Oh, the essay. Yes, sir.” Harry handed the man his essay and watched, biting his lip and shifting from foot to foot, as Severus read.

The man looked up with a curious expression on his face. “Granger gave you these notes?”

With a pang of shame, Harry lowered his head. Maybe he should have used her work after all. “N-no, sir. I… after everything, I didn’t want to look at anything from her. I tried to do it on my own.”

Severus’ eyes widened. “Did you? This is… surprising.”

Harry grimaced and hugged his waist, face burning. He should have known better.

“I-I’m sorry. I know I’m not that smart.”

“On the contrary, Harry, this is work I would have expected from your mother.”

Harry froze, breath hitching. “Mum? I… is that good?”
Severus frowned. “Has no one ever told you, Harry?”

Harry shook his head. “Everyone likes to talk about Dad. No one tells me much about Mum.”

Severus’ eyes flashed. “Is that so? Well then, I will tell you about her. She had a mastery in Charms, Harry. She was an Unspeakable, and this… this is the kind of unique, innovative understanding I would have expected from her.”

A hesitant smile blossomed on Harry’s lips. “Really, sir? You… you think it’s good?”

“This is an O level essay, without a doubt. Even Granger’s will fall short.” A shadow passed over his face. “How could I have forgotten that you are Lily’s son? So many years… here is the evidence before my eyes, and yet I ignored it.”

Harry stood and reached out, just touching Severus’ forearm. He wanted to hold the man’s shoulder or smooth his hair, but he didn’t dare. Severus had allowed Harry to touch his wrist in the past. Perhaps a simple touch there would comfort him, if Harry didn’t push the man beyond what he could bear.

He held in a breath, but Severus didn’t pull away, and Harry relaxed, slowly running his hand up and down Severus’ wrist.

“It’s okay, sir. It’s over now. You’re more than making up for it.”

Severus gave him a look full of deep sorrow and remorse. “I am only treating you as I should have done all along.”

“It’s enough for me, sir.”

Something in Severus’ eyes softened. He laid a trembling hand over Harry’s and held it against his arm for a moment.

“I am… relieved to hear that.”

Harry smiled and squeezed Severus’ arm.

Severus moved back and laid the essay on Harry’s desk. “Do promise you will continue to revise on your own.”

Harry gave him a bright smile. “I… yeah. I think you’re right.”

He thrilled in the warm, fuzzy joy running through his chest. He had done well and Severus was proud of him—just him. Merlin, it felt good.

“It is time for bed, Harry. Whether I am teaching or not, I must keep a schedule, and you do have classes tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Goodnight, sir.”

“Goodnight.”

They climbed into bed, and a moment later, Severus doused the lights. With Severus’ soft breathing turning into quiet snores beside him and the warmth of his praise still glowing in Harry’s heart, he had no trouble falling asleep.
**Spell Notes:**

*Sana Cerebra:* "Heal brain (and head)." (JK-ified translation). An original Half-Blood Prince era chant to heal minor head injuries or migraines.

*Legilimens Oculitu:* "Read mind through your eyes." (JK-ified translation, or as close as I can come to one.) A form of Legilimency that places the caster in the mind of the target, allowing the caster to experience everything in a specific memory as if they are living it.
Chapter 18

Tides of Change

A flash of irritation and frustration jolted Harry out of dreams of his roommate’s younger form and into a grimy study he knew well, though he had never set foot inside its walls.

An unctuous, cultured tone called through the door. “My Lord, I have crucial information if you have a moment.”

A surge of anger ripped through Harry’s skull. He jerked the door open and glared at the self-important bastard who dared interrupt his plans.

“What do you want, Luciusss? Can you not sssee I am busssy?”

The dream faded, turning cloudy and unfocused.

“Pettigrew has been captured…. ”

Another sharp surge of anger dulled Harry’s senses for a moment.

“…House elves dwelling about the… heard voices… not in his office… he must be near…. ”

“Interesssring,” said Voldemort, and cut off the dream.

Harry bolted up with a gasp. Merlin. What had just happened? All Harry could make out was that Lucius Malfoy had walked in on Riddles’ plotting and he had looked awfully smug about something.
Harry hadn’t gleaned much of use from their conversation, but even so, a shiver of dread crept down his back and raised the hair on his arms. Anything that made Lucius Malfoy look so pleased with himself couldn’t be good.

Isuri poked her head against Harry’s cheek, startling him. ~Master, why do you smell of death and darkness?~

Harry winced. ~I do? It must be my scar. I see visions sometimes, and they are from the dark snake speaker. I think you are smelling him.~

~I see.~ She nuzzled his cheek. ~I was afraid for you.~

~I am well. Though sometimes the visions are quite bad, this one was not terrible.~

~That is good to know.~ Isuri lifted her head and gave a low hiss. ~Master, where may I hunt? I am hungry.~

Harry frowned. ~It is terribly cold in Scotland right now, Isuri. There is a lot of snow and very little game, but you might find something to eat around the castle.~

He hoped so anyway. When he’d taken Isuri on, he hadn’t exactly considered the best way to feed a carnivorous pit viper from the rainforest in the middle of a Scottish winter.

~You may hunt anywhere you wish. I only ask that you do not hurt the elves, people, or their familiars.~

Isuri bobbed her head. ~I will look for a castle rat.~

~Yes, that will do, only make sure it is not someone’s familiar, though I am not sure—is there a way to tell the difference?~

~Yes, master. Familiars smell of magic and are more intelligent. I will not bother them.~

~Thank you.~ Harry cast a warming charm over her. ~There. That should help keep your blood warm. Come back if you get too cold. The snow here is dangerous for snakes.~

~I will.~ She slithered out of bed and opened the Chamber door.

Severus jolted up. “H-Harry?”

“It’s okay, sir. It’s just Isuri. She was hungry and went to hunt.”

The door closed behind the viper, and Harry sighed in relief. “Thank Merlin she’s a smart snake. I’ll listen for the Chamber exit to close but it should be okay. Go back to sleep, sir.”

“Hmn.” Severus’ breathing regulated to light snores almost immediately.

The Chamber exit opened and closed again. Harry curled up and tried to rest, but his mind would not let him fall back to sleep. He kept running over everything, trying to sort the madness he had lived through. Mostly, everything that had happened with Severus.

Merlin, they had made progress, or so it seemed. Severus was trying hard to bridge the gap, and knowing he cared enough to make the effort healed something long-since broken inside Harry.

Exactly how long had he yearned for this? The idea left him unsettled. Perhaps the reason Severus’ barbs had always hurt so much had less to do with the quality of his insults than the source.
Overcome by sudden worry for his friend, Harry got up and tiptoed to the other side of the screen, watching the man sleep. Severus slept on his side and hugged his pillow, hair draped over his face and puffing out with his breath. The sight made Harry wonder if Severus felt empty inside, if the pillow substituted for the human warmth he had never found in life.

Harry winced at a sharp rush of pain through his chest. Gods, the thought of Severus living his entire life alone hurt much more than it ought to have for a two-day-old friendship. What was going on with him?

He frowned as he watched Severus sleep. Could the man breathe with his hair in his face? Especially after a chest injury, it worried him. With a sigh, he tucked the man’s silky hair behind his ear, keeping his touch light so as not to disturb his skittish companion. He pulled Severus’ blanket higher over his shoulders too and watched his chest rise and fall, glad to see his breathing was easier since two nights before.

Had it only been two nights? So much had changed Harry felt he could have squeezed a lifetime in the past two days.

Severus gave a muffled sigh, bringing Harry’s attention back to his face. Merlin, but he looked younger in sleep. Much like the Severus Harry couldn’t stop dreaming about.

Dreaming. Shite. He was staring at Severus while the man slept. Ugh. Severus would kill him if he knew. With a blush, Harry scurried back to his own bed and let Severus be.

‘Merlin, I’m an idiot. He would have panicked if he had woken up and I’d been standing over him like a bloody stalker or something. Best not to do that again.’

Harry hugged his pillow too and winced when the pressure against his chest and belly did take some of the sharp edge of loneliness away.

‘Gods, the poor man. Well, he has me now. I’ll make sure it stays that way.’

Though their friendship wouldn’t last long if Harry kept doing stupid things like hovering over the man while he slept and trying to hug someone who was afraid of touch. He shook his head and drove his embarrassment and shame to the back of his mind. He would just have to do better in the future. Severus was learning too, so maybe it would be okay.

Comforted, Harry hugged his pillow tight and closed his eyes. He had just started to drift when insistent hissing prodded him awake.

~Isuri? What is it? Did you not find food?~

Isuri slithered onto Harry’s bed and shook her head. ~No, Master. I did not have time. There is another snake in the castle, and she says she is looking for this place.~

Harry bolted up. “Oh shite! Sev—er, Professor Snape! Wake up!”

Severus jerked up with a snort. “Potter?”

“I think we have trouble, sir.” Harry hissed to Isuri, ~This other snake, did you tell her where to find our nest?~

~No, master. I do not want another snake in my nest. I told her it was the other way.~

Harry let slip a sigh. ~Thank Merlin. Well done, Isuri.~
“Harry?” Severus’ voice held deep alarm.

“Just a minute, sir.” He switched to Parseltongue again. ~Isuri, did this snake tell you her name?~

~No, master. She said her master said she was not to reveal it.~

~Not good. What—~

Severus appeared around the side of the screen, hair mussed and eyes alert. “Harry, what is it?”

“Sorry, sir. Isuri said there’s another snake in the castle looking for the Chamber. I’m trying to get information from her.”

Severus’ breath caught. “Nagini?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out.” Harry turned back to his viper. ~Isuri, this snake you met might be dangerous. What did she look like?~

Isuri’s body shivered, as if she were shuddering. ~She was very big, master. And had big fangs. I think she is very venomous.~

Harry cringed. ~What colour?~

~Ah... like the sky at twilight.~ Isuri’s body shivered, as if she were shuddering. ~She smelled of dark magic, master. Very dark. Like death and dying things, though she is alive.~

Harry’s heart slammed into his ribs. ~Dear gods. Like my scar earlier, Isuri?~

~Yes, master. Exactly like that.~

“Shite!”

Severus settled next to Harry and laid a hand at his shoulder. “Is it Nagini?”

“Yes, sir. I have the feeling she’s been sent after you.”

Severus paled. “And the Chamber will not block her entry. What do we do?”

“I don’t know.” Harry turned back to his familiar. ~Where did you see her, Isuri?~

~At the big door. It was cold there, so I did not want to stay.~

~Were there, um, hollow metal people near it and a hanging cloth with four colours? One like the centres of flowers, one like the sky, one like grass, and another like blood?~

Isuri bobbed her head. ~Yes, master. I came back here right after I sent her the other way. The snake went up the stairs.~

Harry sighed, the sharpest edge of terror abating. “Isuri says she just met Nagini in the Entrance Hall and came straight back here, but that Nagini went the other way. Isuri directed her away from the Chamber.”

“For now,” Severus grimly, “but she’ll find either it or the students eventually.”

Harry shuddered. “Oh Merlin.” He grabbed his wand and stood up. “What do we do? Kill her?”

Severus shook his head. “Somehow I doubt the Dark Lord will be pleased with me if I cause the
death of his familiar. I could certainly not return to spying in that case.”

“What choice do we have if she’s going to kill us? I’d rather you lose your position as a spy than lose you, sir.”

Severus froze and gave Harry a searching look. “Do you mean that?”

Harry glared. “Of course I do! Merlin. Why is everyone so determined to think I don’t care about human life lately?”

Severus reached out and held Harry’s wrist in a trembling hand. “I did not mean that. It is only….”

His thoughts filtered into Harry’s mind. Harry wasn’t sure if the man had meant to transfer them or not. [It is only that no one has ever cared about me so much before.]

Harry’s glare softened. “It’s okay, sir. But I do care about you, so maybe we can decide how best to keep you alive before we worry about your position?”

Severus’ eyes shimmered. “Oh. I... see.” He slipped his hand over Harry’s, light and unsure, but definitely there. The tentative touch warmed Harry throughout in spite of his fear.

“Sir? Are you all right?”

Severus shook himself and let his hand fall. “Yes. Ideally, Harry, we need to plan to keep both my life and position. We will kill her if it is absolutely necessary, but it would be better to simply lock her out of the Chamber.”

“How do we do that? She’s a snake. She can get in once she finds it, and I doubt it will take her long. She’s probably following your scent by now.”

“A anti-animal ward would do it.”

“What about Isuri, though?”

“It would lock her in, not out. However, I am able to add her as an exception and let her pass freely, if she will permit me to take one drop of her blood.”

“We’ll need to do it with Fawkes too, and maybe Hedwig. Do you have an owl?”

“I highly doubt owls can get in here, but yes I do. His name is Solaris.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll take care of him with Hedwig then, if he’ll let me.”

“We shall go to the owlery tomorrow and I will introduce you. In the meantime, we must get a message to Albus so he can protect the students.”

Harry nodded and headed for the door. “I’ll go up on my broom right—”

“Stop!” A strong arm caught him around the chest and held him back. “Are you mad, Potter?”

Severus released him and turned him around to face the man. “Nagini is searching for this place. She may be at the door this moment! You have no way to defend yourself against such a deadly snake, and Isuri is no match for her.”

Harry looked to the basilisk remains and shuddered. “Er… you’re right, sir. Maybe I shouldn’t tempt fate a second time, especially since Fawkes is too young to save me now. But then how do we get a message out?”
Severus wrapped an arm around his waist and lowered his gaze. “I… I will try.” He closed his eyes and held out his wand. “*Expecto Patronum.*”

Like for Harry, only mist escaped his wand. Severus scowled and stared at it, his cheeks red and his eyes full of bitter shame.

Harry winced. “Sir, um, is there another memory you could try?”

Severus would not answer in words, but a shake of his head communicated his despair well enough.

Harry swallowed hard and chose his reply with care. “I—I know how you feel, I think. It was the same for me at the beginning of the year—I’d lost all my happy memories. But… well, I think… there have been some happy moments the last couple of days, haven’t there? I… I think so anyway. If you tell me how to make it talk, I’ll try.”

Severus sighed and shook his head. “It requires time and practise to master, time we do not have. I will simply have to… *Expecto Patronum.*”

At the appearance of more mist, Harry laid a hand on Severus’ wrist, light and careful. “Maybe when I told you I’d give you my memory of the basilisk? You looked happy then.”

Severus’ cheeks flushed deeper. “Oh. I… I suppose I can try it.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. It’s all right. I’m having trouble too.”

Severus sighed and hesitantly took Harry’s hand. “Perhaps… this will help.”

Harry hardly dared breathe lest Severus’ courage falter. “Y-yeah. I hope so.”

Severus closed his eyes and ran a trembling thumb over Harry’s knuckles. Harry stayed stock-still, afraid to break the man’s concentration or scare him away.

Severus’ voice came out on a whisper. “*Expecto Patronum.*”

A silvery doe landed before him and shook out her fur. She bowed to Harry and gave her master an expectant look.

“A doe,” Harry breathed. Dear gods. Severus’ Patronus was the mate of Harry’s stag. Maybe they were meant to be friends all along, and that was why Severus’ hatred had hurt him so much. Maybe their magic had been calling to each other for a while, if the reflection of it was so similar. Harry sighed at the thought, relieved to have an easy explanation for his strong emotions concerning his friend.

“Oh, thank Merlin,” Severus said, bringing Harry back to the present. “Calla, I have an urgent message for Albus. It is an emergency. Tell him Harry’s familiar has discovered Nagini in the castle. She is after me. We will ward the Chamber against animals to keep her out, but he must ensure the protection of the students and staff. Go now.”

The doe nodded and vanished.

Severus tugged on Harry’s hand. “Now that we have warned the headmaster, we must begin setting the wards immediately. Talk to your familiar about her blood.”

“Yes, sir.” Harry squeezed Severus’ hand. “Go ahead and start the wards, but know if it comes down to it, I’ll protect you.”
Severus gave him a brief, searching look, then nodded and swept away towards the Chamber door. “If you will open this, Harry?”

~Open!~

The Chamber door opened and Severus went through, Harry following on his heels.

~Isuri, will you allow my friend to take a drop of your blood? We are setting a barrier to keep the big snake out—she wants to kill Severus—but it will also trap you unless we add your… um… your scent to the barrier.~

Isuri weaved through the air to look at Severus. ~Just one drop?~

~Only one. Severus likes you.~

Isuri nodded. ~Then he may take it.~

Harry petted her head. ~I will get my owl to bring you a nice fat mouse for that.~

As Severus had begun a long stream of Latin, Harry did not dare interrupt him. Instead, he moved away so as not to disturb him and listened, attempting to translate what he could. Harry thought he discerned several standard wards mixed in with some he had never heard of.

A distant wailing, like an air-raid siren, sounded outside the Chamber. Harry shuddered and held Isuri protectively against his chest. Merlin, he hoped that didn’t mean someone had died. As Severus did not react, he deemed it safe enough for the time being and watched the man work.

After a moment, Severus turned and held out his wand. “Did Isuri give me permission?”

Harry nodded.

Severus held his wand near the snake’s tail. “I will try not to hurt you, Isuri.”

Harry translated, and the snake nodded. A small spark and a quiet hiss later, Severus had the blood he needed in a conjured eyedropper. He sealed the tiny cut and bowed in thanks to Isuri, then went back to his chanting almost without a break. Partway through, he dropped the blood onto the floor, where bright red-orange sparks shot up and vanished. Severus chanted a few more words and a vibrant orange light enclosed the Chamber, both the entrance and the room beyond. With a groan, Severus slumped back against the wall in exhaustion.

“It is done,” he panted. “I warded the entire area so she might not find a way in through the pipes.”

“Brilliant.” Harry offered a hand. “Let’s get you into bed, sir. You’re still recovering.”

Severus nodded and allowed Harry to guide him back to his bed. The gesture warmed Harry deep within, but worry for his dorm mates overwhelmed his simple pleasure in Severus’ trust.

“Sir, do you think they’ll be all right?”

Severus nodded. “That siren you hear is the warning against intruders. The moment it goes off, all the dorms and staff quarters go on lockdown—nothing can get in or out. Any students or professors caught outside their sleeping quarters when the alarm sounds are sealed off in safe areas until the threat passes. Nagini will get nowhere tonight. In fact, she is probably already on her way out.”

Harry eased Severus down to his bed and sat on the edge beside him. “Why were we not transported to safety when the alarms went off then?”
“I imagine because the magic on this place prevents it. At any rate, the school is as safe as we can reasonably make it, Nagini knows by now she has been discovered, and any easily accessible area has been sealed to her. If she is especially determined, she may still try to find this place, but she will be foiled in that too.”

Harry sighed and slumped over in relief. “Thank Merlin.”

“Thank Isuri is more like it.” The snake poked her head over Severus’ bed, and the man tentatively petted her back. “Well done, little one. You have saved many lives tonight.”

Isuri hissed her pleasure. Severus withdrew his hand until Harry reassured him.

“It’s all right, sir. She likes it.”

Severus nodded and tentatively petted her scales again.

Isuri slithered onto the bed and curled up between the humans. ~*Master’s nest mate is a good man.*~

Harry gave Severus a shy smile. ~*Yes, Isuri. He is.*~

Severus raised an eyebrow at Harry, but didn’t comment. For a long time, neither said anything. They sat in companionable silence until the sirens stopped and Dumbledore’s Patronus appeared.

~*Thank you, boys, for the timely warning,*~ said the phoenix in Dumbledore’s low voice. ~*The wards indicate Nagini has left the castle, and no staff or students have been harmed. Well done. And well done, Isuri.*~

Harry sighed and slumped against Severus’ arm. “Oh thank the gods. They’re safe.”

“Yes.” Severus continued stroking the snake, a concerned expression on his face. “Harry, how did the Dark Lord know to search here? I thought we had hidden my whereabouts well.”

Harry frowned. “I’m not sure. Someone must have tipped him off, but how is be—wait a minute. House elves… voices… dear gods! *Malfoy* did this. Malfoy must have overheard the house elves in the loo and told his berk of a father about it. I saw it in a vision—Lucius interrupted Riddle last night to tell him about the house elves and someone not being in his office. I couldn’t make out a lot of what he said at the time, but—Professor?”

Severus had gone rigid. His eyes held unspeakable pain and dark, bitter rage. Harry gulped and edged away, unsure of what he had done to set the man off.

“S-sir? What did I say?”

Severus laid a gentle hand on Harry’s shoulder and shook his head, then stood and stalked away, locking himself in the loo without a word. Harry stared after him, utterly bemused.

~*Isuri, what just happened?*~

~*I… am not sure either, Master.*~

Harry frowned at the loo door and wondered where he had gone wrong.
Severus enlarged the loo to give himself room and paced up and down the length of the bathtub, torn between blind fury and deep heartache, a bleeding wound that had never healed. Lucius. It shouldn’t surprise him that Lucius had been the one to turn Severus in. Jumped at the chance, probably. After all, Lucius had been setting him up to take the fall since Severus was twelve years old.

Twenty-five years later, and the man still hadn’t tired of his twisted games.

Severus sat on the loo and drew his knees up to his chest—then set them back down at a shock of pain through his ribs and the backs of his thighs. Merlin, that was stupid. Then again, Lucius had always prided himself in his ability to turn Severus, a typically brilliant man, into a sodding fool.

He rested his elbows on his knees and buried his head in his hands. All this time, and nothing had changed.

All this time, and Lucius still had the power to break his heart.

A gentle knock sounded at the door. “Sir?”

Harry. Severus froze, uncertain and afraid. What did the boy want?

“Um… I… I’m not going to come in or anything. I just… I don’t know what I said to hurt you like this, but I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. And, um, I’m here if… if you want to talk.”

Harry paused, then his footsteps moved away.

Severus stared at the door, a curious warmth slowly patching the bleed in his heart. Perhaps one thing had changed. Lucius was still a manipulative sociopath, Albus would still use Severus for the greater good in a heartbeat, and Lily was still dead, but he had Harry on his side now. Perhaps having the trust and loyalty of one beleaguered boy wouldn’t make much difference in the grand scheme of things, but knowing Harry cared about him certainly made the world look less dark.

Severus gave the door a sad smile. “Thank you, Harry,” he whispered.

Someday, he promised himself, he would find the courage to say it to Harry’s face.

With a sigh, Harry turned from the loo and walked away, stopping as Isuri slithered down his arm and moved back to the door.

~Do not disturb him, Isuri.~

~I only wish to make sure he is safe. Master will be sad if he is hurt.~

Harry winced. ~True. Just do not go inside, please. That is a… private territory.~

The snake bobbed her head and sniffed, pink tongue tasting the air. After a moment, she returned to Harry’s arm and settled herself around his neck once more.

~Your friend said thank you, Master.~

Harry froze. ~He did? You are sure?~
I am able to understand that much of human speech. He said your name too.

Harry let slip a shaky sigh. Oh. That is… that is good.

Your heart is going fast, master.

Is it? I suppose I am worried for him.

Isuri sniffed Harry’s neck. It does not smell like worry.

Relief then, I suppose. He patted her head. Are you still hungry?

Yes. I did not get to hunt.

Hmm. Can you eat chicken?

What is that?

Um… a bird. Humans eat it. I thought I could ask Dobby to bring a piece of chicken for you from the kitchen. Or… wait, you can eat eggs, right?

Yes, eggs are good.

Then I will get some eggs for you.

Harry moved to the Chamber door, but hesitated before opening it. “Sir,” he called, “now that Nagini is gone, I’m going to ask Dobby to bring some food for Isuri, so don’t be afraid if you hear the doors open. I’ll be right back.”

Snape didn’t answer, but Harry reckoned the man probably felt awkward about talking while he was hiding in the loo. With a sad shake of his head and a little prayer that Severus would recover soon, Harry turned to the Chamber door and looked at his new familiar.

Open.

By the time Severus managed to compose himself, Harry had set out a dish full of raw eggs for his familiar and was watching Isuri eat them. The snake apparently liked to break into the shells with her fangs and suck out the fluid. Severus watched her for a moment before joining Harry on the sofa.

“I… I….” Severus took a deep breath and gathered his courage. “I apologise for leaving as I did, Harry.”

Harry gave him a hesitant smile. “It’s okay, sir. Are you all right?”

“I detest Malfoy.” Though he hadn’t always.

“You do?” Harry frowned and wrapped his arms around his chest. Something in his expression held deep-seated hurt and an edge of betrayal, but Severus couldn’t understand where it had come from.

“Harry? I was not angry with you.”

Harry nodded and stared at his snake, silent and radiating hurt, and Severus struggled to contain a
cold pit of fear in his belly. What had he done? Was Harry angry that he did not speak of his past? But Merlin, Severus could not even talk to Albus about it. How could he possibly tell Harry?

“It’s okay, sir. You don’t have to tell me anything.”

Severus’ stomach jolted with surprise. He hadn’t said that out loud, had he? Harry wasn’t even looking at him, so he couldn’t have used Legilimency. Not to mention the boy hadn’t the power. How could he have replied to a question Severus hadn’t asked?

Well, perhaps the boy simply understood Severus better than he had thought.

“Sir, I just don’t understand,” Harry said, voice pained. “You like Draco, don’t you?”

Severus nodded. “To an extent. I believe I am far closer to you now.”

Pink coloured Harry’s cheeks and some of the anguish left his eyes. “Oh. I… t-thank you.”

“Harry, have I done something to hurt you? I do not understand why you are troubled.”

Harry sighed and dropped his head against the back of the sofa. “Maybe it’s stupid. No, of course it is. Lucius never abused you. Why would you hate Draco like you hated me? It was my family who hurt you.”

Severus inhaled sharply and slammed all his power into his mental shields. Fuck. _Fuck! _Lucius had never abused him? Harry couldn’t possibly know, but the man had made Potter et al look like saints. The kind of systemic abuse Lucius had put Severus through—it had _ruined _him. He had never been able to trust, never been able to love again, and never would do.

Thank Merlin Severus had pulled Harry out of his pensieve when he had, or the boy would have discovered a darker truth than Severus was prepared to admit. Or even think about, for that matter. For all the damage Potter and crew had wreaked upon Severus’ soul, as terrible as Severus’ own father had been, no one—_no one_—had ever hurt him as much as Lucius Malfoy.

And that raised an interesting point, didn’t it? Why hadn’t he hated Draco? The man was practically a clone of his father. Cultured, arrogant, spoiled beyond all reason, dangerous….

And yet, the core of him was good. Innocent, in spite of his harsh front.

Besides, Severus understood him too well to hate him. He had seen the bruises when Draco returned for term. He had helped him deal with nightmares as a first year and taught him to protect himself as best as he could. He had even tried to have the boy removed from the home for his own safety, but Lucius had too much political clout. The case hadn’t even made it to investigation before Lucius’ minions ‘lost the report.’ Even Albus’ power had done little to protect the boy.

Perhaps that was why Severus had never hated Draco. He had walked in Draco’s shoes, at least in part. He had never known wealth or prestige, but he knew what it meant to feel the cut of his father’s belt and the pain of his hatred. He knew what it felt like to flounder under Lucius’ thumb—and fists, and boots.

He couldn’t hate Draco because he knew what it meant to _be _Draco.

And Draco wasn’t the sociopath his father was regardless. The boy’s anger ran hot, not cold. He didn’t plot and plan for years to bring someone down—he lost his temper on the spot or chucked extra ingredients in their cauldrons. Despite the life he led, Draco was still redeemable. And Severus couldn’t help but hope someone, somehow, would help him find the way out of the darkness.
He looked to his companion and wondered if Harry's incredible brand of forgiveness might just save more than one lost Slytherin.

For the moment, however, Harry needed reassurance. He needed to know Severus had changed—that he cared about him. Somehow, Severus' regard had become immensely important to this young man, and Severus did not want to cause him any further pain. He had damaged this gentle, forgiving boy enough.

Forgiveness. Maybe... maybe that was the key. Severus certainly needed it, for all he had done.

With a sigh, Severus moved a little closer and rubbed Harry's forearm. “I... Harry, for the way I have treated you, for all the pain and humiliation and misery I inflicted upon you....” He closed his eyes and bowed his head. “I am truly... sorry.”

Harry's breath hitched. “Sir...” He sniffled and laid his head against Severus' shoulder. Only then did Severus realise the boy was shaking from head to toe.

“T-thank you,” Harry whispered. “I... thank you, sir.”

Gentle warmth settled against Severus' wrist, and he looked down to see Harry’s hand covering his arm, fingertips rubbing just over the edge of his sleeve.

“Is this okay?”

Severus sighed and let the warmth of Harry’s forgiveness wash his fears away. “Yes.”

Harry gave him the brightest smile he had seen in a long time.
Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** Ginny is weird. Hermione is self-righteous and arrogant. Sexual harassment, stalking, obsession. Discussion of the murder of two teenagers. Harry cries a lot, but considering what he just went through, I figured it was understandable. Death hurts, even for heroes. Especially teenage heroes with too much on their shoulders.

***AN: The chapter count *might* go up one more time if I decide to add two more scenes (and if I can't keep them short), but other than that, I'm almost done writing this. I have 1 chapter left and the epilogue to go, and half the last chapter was already done in the first draft. So... yay! Once I finish writing this, I'm going to wrangle some kind of ending out of Rescue Me and get back on track on SDS2. So, woohoo!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Chapter 19

*Reaching Across the Divide*

5 DECEMBER

After their close call, it had taken Severus and Harry a while to fall back to sleep. Around three, Severus had finally succumbed to dreams, but he felt as though he hadn’t slept at all when he woke.

“Tempus.” He frowned at the flashing numbers at the end of his hand. Five in the morning? He had set his alarm for seven. What had woken him?

He gasped as a strange creeping sensation washed over him. His heart slammed into his ribs and his breath hitched. Dear gods, he knew that feeling, like slime in his bones, ants crawling over his skin. It was the stain of dark magic, the same feeling he had every time the Dark Lord cursed someone in his immediate vicinity.

Fuck! Somehow, the bastard must have gotten through the wards after all.

Severus jolted up and grabbed his wand, but the utter silence confused him.

A hissing sound on his left registered, and Severus went rigid. Nagini? No, they had warded her out. He turned, wand trained on the sound, and let slip a sigh of relief at the sight of Harry’s viper, coiled up beside Severus’s pillow.

“Isuri? Is something wrong with Harry?”

The snake bobbed her head and slithered off the bed, moving towards Harry’s side of the screen. Severus gulped and followed her, mentally preparing himself for the worst.
Gods, if Harry had been killed….

Tears stung his eyelids. A week ago, Severus would have lamented the loss of the war and drunk himself into a stupor. Today… everything had changed. To hell with the war—he would mourn the loss of the first person who had truly cared for him in twenty-five years instead. The first person to ever show him unconditional trust and affection.

Merlin, the knowledge shocked him, but if Harry died, it would shatter Severus’ heart to pieces.

“Please, please be safe,” he whispered, and stepped around the screen.

Harry was screaming, but Severus couldn’t hear a sound. Shite! His silencing charms must have blocked it out. The boy writhed as if in agony and cried out, tears streaming down his face. “No, please. Don’t.” Severus didn’t need to hear it to understand.

Harry’s body arched up, bowed and straining against something invisible, and Severus shuddered at the creeping feeling of dark magic on his skin.

The Cruciatius. He had seen it cast too many times not to recognise it.

Dear gods. It had to be a vision. So that meant… fuck! Harry did feel the deaths of those Riddle killed in his visions. Merlin help him, the mere idea left every hair on Severus’ body standing on end and his heart frozen. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move at the sheer horror of it.

How was Harry even alive, let alone the gentle, brave person Severus had come to value so much in spite of everything? How had he survived so much agony, over and over, for gods knew how long?

The boy turned onto his side and clutched at his head, and Severus cringed. Harry’s scar was raw and bleeding.

The sight of his injuries kicked Severus’ mind into gear. Sweet Circe, why the hell was he just standing there, gaping like a bloody fool? Had the shock of the past few days rendered him a gibbering idiot?

With a gasp, he dashed through Harry’s silencing field and caught the screaming boy’s shoulders. “Harry! Harry, wake up!”

Harry gasped and jerked back, eyes flying open. “G-gods. Help me.”

Severus hesitantly touched the boy’s hair, smoothing his damp, wild curls with a shaking hand. Harry’s lip trembled, and he turned into Severus’ touch.

“Please,” he whispered. “Please stay.”

Severus’ throat tightened and his heart thumped. He settled next to Harry and placed a gentle hand on his temple. “I am here. You are safe now. Sana Cerebra…”

The chant healed the injury to Harry’s scar and what must have been a terrible headache. Harry whimpered and pressed into Severus’ hand, tears streaming around the tops of his ears and into his hair. Gods. The sight ripped the heart from Severus and made his own eyelids burn. How had he ever imagined this boy to be spoiled and rude?

“Accio Anti-Cruciatius Draught,” Severus called, too distraught to dare tempt it silently though he had been able to Summon without words or wand for ten years.
A bottle of yellow potion zoomed out of the small store of potions Dobby had brought during lunch. A memory sparked in his mind as Severus uncapped the potion and helped his flagging companion to drink it.

“I believe Harry has been brewing Anti-Cruciatus Draught....”

As Severus watched the tremors and pain subside from Harry’s form, he mused on Albus’ thoughts. Had the old man simply let his desire to believe in his favourite lion overcome reason or was there some truth to his assumptions? Had Harry somehow managed to brew a high-level NEWT potion without any aid and with an instructor who had a vendetta against him?

The implications of that thought left Severus nauseated. He had always assumed Harry had no talent for potions. His father certainly hadn’t. And the boy had blown up his fair share of cauldrons during his Hogwarts career. But Lily had been an excellent brewer, and somehow, Severus had forgotten that Harry had also inherited her genes.

How many of Harry’s failures in potions had been Severus’ fault?

Severus had made it clear from day one the boy had no chance to succeed in his class, and he hadn’t missed Draco’s frequent ‘additions’ to Harry’s cauldron either. Couldn’t afford to miss them. Had Draco ever chosen a dangerous additive, Severus would have had no choice but to intercede lest Draco kill them all.

Was it possible that Severus had stunted an innocent boy’s ability to brew?

He would have to investigate it over the next few weeks. Harry’s lessons with Poppy would tell Severus for certain how badly he had failed his students, and this one in particular.

Harry sat and wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve. He was still trembling, but it lacked the twitchy quality of Cruciatus tremors.

“Are you in need of further healing, Harry?”

Harry shook his head and shivered. “N-not physically.”

Severus could imagine he would need mental healing after what he must have seen. “I will attempt to help. Are you able to speak to me of what you saw?”

Tears slid down Harry’s face. “He... invaded a Muggle home in Bath. They had k-kids. Maybe sixteen years old—twin girls. And he... he tortured them both to death in front of their parents. They... they screamed for them the entire time and I... I... c-can’t bear it.”

“Sweet mother of Merlin,” Severus breathed, appalled.

Harry gave an anguished cry and buried his face in his hands. “It’s m-my fault. He... he said he chose them for me. Because those girls were close to my age and had black hair like me.”

“He did what?” Rage and horror churned in Severus’ gut.

Harry curled into a ball, making himself as insignificant as possible. “H-he kept daring me to save them. To... to....” He broke into harsh, bitter sobs, unable to go on, but Severus had heard enough to understand.

Not only had the Dark Lord forced Harry to witness and experience the deaths of two children, he had used their suffering as a weapon against Harry.
Dearest gods. It was utterly horrific.

He stood and paced, his wild emotions exploding forth in a scourge of vituperative fury. “That fucked-up bastard! Gods damn him to hell! How could he—how could anyone torment innocent children like this? Even at my worst, I never—shite. Fucking shite! He is a fucking monstrosity of a soulless piece of rubbish!”

Harry gasped, eyes wide and a pink blush staining his cheeks. “S-sir?”

“I… oh Merlin.” Heat stole up Severus’ face. “Gods, forgive me, Harry. I should not have spoken so crudely.”

“N-no, it’s… I’m the one who needs forgiveness.” Harry stared at his lap, tears pouring down his face. “None of this would have happened if not for me.”

Severus’ heart gave a painful thump. He grabbed Harry’s shoulders and held him firm. “Harry, look at me. Come. There you are.” He squeezed Harry’s shoulders, ignoring a shard of fear, and held his gaze. “Listen to me, Harry. Do not believe a word that fiend says. He is a psychopath. He chose them, he tortured and killed them, not you. It is not your fault.”

“But if I hadn’t been born—so many people are dead because of me!”

Severus rubbed his thumbs on Harry’s shoulders, pushing his own fears aside in the face of Harry’s stark need. “No. People are dead because the Dark Lord is a twisted, hollow shell of a monster. He may blame you, he may torment you and say you are at fault, but never forget, Harry, he is the one who holds the wand.”

Harry sucked in a sharp breath. “I… but I….”

Severus settled beside him again and guided Harry to rest against his shoulder. “It is not your fault, little one. Not in the least.”

Harry broke into bitter tears. “H-help me. It hurts so much. I just… I want it to stop.”

Severus used his natural powers to ease some of Harry’s suffering, draining his negative emotions into himself and Occluding them away. “Ssh. Harry, we will stop it. I will begin training you tomorrow afternoon.”

“Please,” Harry sobbed, clutching at Severus’ wrist. “D-don’t leave me, sir. Please. It hurts so much.”

Emotion crept up Severus’ eyelids and blurred his vision. Hoping his presence could soothe Harry’s pain, he held the boy’s arm and brushed his tears away. “I shan’t. I am here, Harry. I am with you.”

Harry turned his face into Severus’ shoulder and wept.

After his vision, Harry couldn’t go back to sleep. Neither could Severus, and Harry felt a bit guilty for waking him up when they had had such a rough night.
“Do not trouble yourself,” Severus said with a shrug. “I am used to little sleep and have nothing to do today besides harvest basilisk parts and continue my research on an antivenin. If I become tired, I will sleep while you are in class.” He frowned. “Will you be able to manage?”

Harry gave him a wry smile. “I’m used to it too, sir. If I get tired, I’ll come here and nap during lunch.”

Severus nodded. “If you need it, I will not disturb you.” He covered a yawn with his hand and trudged towards the loo. “I am going to shower. Will you be all right with Isuri for a few moments?”

“Yes, I’m better now.” Harry smiled, tears crowding the back of his lids. “Sir, I… thank you. It helped—what you said. That he’s the one holding the wand.”

Severus held Harry’s wrist. “Remember that, Harry. No matter what that… that _demon_ does in the future, he is the one responsible for the people he has killed, not you.”

Harry nodded and held those words close to his heart like a shield. It wasn’t his fault. The words felt new and strange, but, as Severus made his way to the loo and left Harry alone with his thoughts, he tried to accept them as truth. True, he had done many things he wasn’t proud of, but he had never killed anyone.

_‘It’s not my fault.’_

He took a deep breath and committed the knowledge to memory, trying to ground himself. He was innocent.

One day, he would put that bastard in the ground and stop the killing. One day, he would end this madness, but until then, he had to be strong. He had to train his mind, body, and magical power. He had to learn to be the warrior the prophecy foretold him to be. Then, when he met the bald-headed menace again, he would be ready.

Determination drove the last of Harry’s guilt away, though it would be a long time before he healed from the memories, and he drew his focus back to the tasks he had to do that day.

_“Tempus.”_

Harry winced at the time. Gods, class started in a couple of hours and he still had to finish his Charms essay. Flitwick had given him a three-day extension over the coming weekend, but Harry didn’t want to press his luck. Who knew what might happen in the future? He might need more help later, and his essay was already a day late.

With a little shake to compose himself, he brought up what mental barriers he could and went to his desk. He only had a few more inches to go. He could manage that before breakfast, maybe. He frowned at the realisation that he also had the entirety of the first period to work—it would have been his potions lesson. Merlin, Severus must be feeling awful, considering.

Well then, Harry would just have to finish his essay and turn it in before first period. Maybe Severus would feel better if Harry gave him another chance to teach him. Firming his resolve, Harry dipped his quill in ink and set to work.

Before long, he had settled into his task, the words flowing from his pen almost faster than he could write. Hmm. Maybe Severus was right. Maybe he _did_ have a knack for Charms. In spite of his altered perceptions of his family, Harry rejoiced at having something other than his eyes in common with his mother. That thought in mind, he did his best, hoping she could see from the world beyond and would be proud of him. He hoped he could make Severus proud, too.
Harry had written half of the remaining length by the time Severus came out of the loo, dressed in his white dress shirt and trousers, his long hair tied back with a silver clasp. Merlin, he looked good. Maybe Severus wasn’t beautiful, per se, but he had a slim, shapely figure and the half-back style of his hair complimented and softened his sharp features.

Severus frowned at him. “Did I miss something on my face?”

Harry’s cheeks flamed. “N-no, sir. I was just thinking it was nice to see you out of your robes.” He coughed, heat creeping into his hairline and horror into his gut. Dear Merlin! Had he really just come out with it? “Er, I-I mean, it’s nice that you trust me enough to show me—oh gods.” He covered his fiery face with his hands. “I’m just going to shut up now.”

Severus said nothing for a long moment, and Harry peeked through his fingers to find the man staring at him, eyes wide and pink creeping up his cheeks.

Severus coughed and cleared his throat. “O-oh. Considering all you have done for me, I would be a fool not to at least attempt to trust you.” His blush deepened to red, and he turned away. “I am going to work on my research. I suggest you finish your essay while I am busy.”

Harry smiled in spite of his embarrassment. The man was busying himself with his research on purpose to give Harry time to finish. He could sense it, somehow, from Severus’ stance and emotions.

“Yes, sir.”

Warmth healing the hole in his chest his visions had wrought, Harry returned to his work and poured his all into it. He finished just before seven and read over it once more, searching for errors. A few corrected spellings and revised wordings later, Harry felt confident he had done his best.

“I think I’m done, sir, if you’re ready for breakfast.”

Severus stood and rubbed his neck. “I would like to see your essay first, if you are amenable.”

Harry’s face flamed as he brought the man his work. “I, er, I tried my best.”

“I am sure. Let us have a look.”

Severus held the essay in his lap as he read, one long leg crossed over his knee. Harry stood by and bounced on his heels, hoping his work measured up to the high expectations Severus had from the night before.

“This is excellent,” Severus said with a smirk. “I imagine Miss Granger will be shocked when you take home Filius’ point lottery for the essay this round.”

Harry beamed, relief washing away his nervousness. “Really, sir? You think so?”

“I am sure of it. You did miss an ‘i’ here, in ‘ameliorates.’ Before the ‘o.’ Excellent word choice, by the way.”

Harry grinned and corrected his spelling. “Merlin, thank you, sir.”

“Not at all.” Severus stood and watched Harry finish. “Are you well enough to eat now, Harry? If I am to begin your training today, you will need the calories.”

Harry nodded, resolution and determination setting in again. “I’ll do whatever it takes, sir, even if
“I shall not make you eat like Mister Weasley,” Severus said with a wry look. “A single meal will do.”

Harry laughed in spite of himself. “Yes, sir.” He shuddered, fear setting in at the thought of facing the rest of Gryffindor again. “I’m not looking forward to classes today.”

“If they harass you and you are not ready to speak to them, simply ward them out as you have been doing thus far.”

“Hermione will figure out how to break it eventually,” Harry said, shoulders slumping.

“Well then, I suppose I will need to teach you a stronger charm.” Severus’ eyes shone. “As I developed it myself for espionage, I imagine Granger will have a difficult time discovering the counter.”

Harry beamed. “Merlin, would you? That would be brilliant.”

Severus’ eyes sharpened. “On two conditions: one, you do not use this charm unless your friends’ harassment necessitates it. It is not to be used when a common silencing charm will do. And two, you are never to use this charm over your bed at night. I would rather you leave your silencing charms off altogether while you are here, but if you must silence your nightmares, then use a common charm. Otherwise neither I nor Longbottom will be able to assist you if the situation calls for it, nor will your snake be able to help you until you cast the counter.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, sir. But will I be able to use it with my… real friends, sir? Dean, Neville, and Luna have helped me a lot. I wouldn’t want to be cut off from them.”

“It makes conversation quite difficult even within its barriers, which is why I warned you not to use it as a typical silencing charm. It is only to ward yourself from harassment or keep you safe from Death Eaters. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Then let us begin your training.”

Harry beamed and took position next to Severus.

Ginny was loitering about outside the Charms hallway, talking to Dean and looking over her shoulder every few seconds. Harry almost turned around and decided to turn his essay in before Defence instead, but Ginny saw him and beckoned him over before he could escape. He approached warily, books clutched to his chest and eyes on the girl’s hands.

“Hi, Harry,” she said with a too-bright smile. “Reckoned I could walk you to class.”

“No, thank you,” Harry replied and tried to walk past her.

“Harry, come on. You can’t keep pushing everyone away.” A hand squirmed in under his arm and around his bicep.
Harry jerked away. “I said no, Ginny. I meant it. Leave me alone and find someone else to torment, for Merlin’s sake!”

“Torment! I’m trying to help you, Harry.” She tried to grab his arm again, but he evaded her.

“Ginny!” Dean grabbed her by the collar and pulled her back. “Dear gods, woman! Have you never heard of consent? He said no!”

Tears filled her eyes. “But I just want to—Harry, I mean, it’s okay. You’re just lonely and you need—”

“What I need,” Harry snarled, “is for you to take a bloody hint and leave me alone!”

She slammed one hand on her hip and reached for him with the other, but Harry had had enough. If she wouldn’t listen to reason, there were other ways to keep her away. With a quick apology to Dean, he bolted down the Charms corridor towards Flitwick’s classroom.

“Harry! Wait!”

“Areatus Silentium! Protego Corporalis!”

Between his silencing charms and physical shields designed to keep unwanted objects and persons out, he hoped Ginny would get the point. Merlin, she was becoming a nuisance.

She pouted outside his shields for a moment, shouting so loudly, Harry caught a few words even with his silencing charm.

“Can’t you see… just want… Harry, listen to me!”

Flitwick stepped outside the room, his expression stern and tense with irritation. Harry dropped his silencing charms, but left his shields up.

“Miss Weasley,” Flitwick said, his voice sharp, “is there a reason you think it necessary to shout mine and Mister Potter’s ears off?”

Ginny winced. “I just—” She gave the professor a defeated look and shook her head. “I’m sorry, sir. I… I guess I’ll just talk to you later, Harry.”

“Not if I can help it,” Harry muttered under his breath as she walked away.

“Mister Potter,” said Flitwick with a concerned expression, “did you need something?”

Harry shook himself. “Oh, right. Yes, sir.” He dropped his shields and handed the tiny man the parchment clutched in his fist. “Oh Merlin. It’s my essay, but I think I squashed it.”

Flitwick chuckled. “Nothing a little neatening charm won’t fix. Tersus!” Harry’s essay straightened itself and the smudges disappeared.

“That’s handy,” said Harry with a grin. “Thank you, sir.”

“Not at all.” Flitwick levitated Harry’s essay onto his desk. “Well done. I’ll mark it with the others. Is there anything else you need?”

Harry shook his head. “I’m off.”

“I will see you on Tuesday then, Mister Potter.”
Harry waved and dashed for Myrtle’s loo before Ginny could corner him again. A few students cast him nervous looks and skittered to the other side of the hall, but Harry ignored them. Really, it was nothing new. It hurt, of course, but knowing he had at least won Severus’ trust took the edge off. Who cared what strangers believed about him? They would see the truth of the matter eventually, and if they didn’t, he had no time to waste on gossiping idiots.

Harry zoomed into the Chamber again to find Severus searching through his shelves and muttering to himself.

“Sir? Are you all right?”

Severus nodded and turned to Harry, a perplexed look on his face. “You’re sure that elf brought all my books?”

Harry frowned. “Are you missing some, sir?”

“Not some—only one. My personal copy of Advanced Potions Making. I had thought if I gave it to you, it would, perhaps, go some way towards making up for the grief I have caused you in class.”

Harry glanced to his knapsack. “Thank you, but I already have the text, sir.”

“Yes, I know, but I edited and added to mine. There are many changes to outdated brews I had thought would help you in your lessons, but I cannot find the book anywhere.”

A sneaking suspicion flickered to life in Harry’s mind. “Really? And would Dumbledore have had access to your books prior to term?”

Severus blinked. “Albus? Well, he is the headmaster. It is rather impossible to ward him out of anywhere within the school. I have warded him out of my private lab, but Hogwarts will still let him pass in case of emergency.” He frowned. “And yes, he did have access.”

Harry held out his wand and a hand. “Accio Harry Potter’s copy of Advanced Potion Making.” The text flew out of his knapsack and landed in his hands. “Let’s see.” He opened the book in the middle and turned to the first correction he saw. “Does this sound familiar, sir? For Euphoria Inducing Elixir, add a sprig of peppermint to counter excessive singing and nose tweaking side effects.”

Severus let slip a growl. “That manipulative old codger. He stole that from me, didn’t he?”

“And gave it to me at the start of the year, apparently,” said Harry with a shake of his head. “I knew that handwriting looked familiar.”

Severus sighed and motioned Harry over. “Well, never mind it. I would have preferred to give it to you myself, but no matter.”

Harry tucked the book against his chest. “You know, the past few weeks—when the team started avoiding me and I had no one else to talk to—the Prince felt like my only friend.”

“T-that moniker. Merlin.” Severus’ cheeks pinked and he squirmed, making Harry smile at his uncharacteristic display of embarrassment. “I… it is not quite as pompous as it sounds. You see, my mother’s maiden name is Prince, and I am a half-blood. So it is literal, in a sense. I would much prefer to denounce my father’s name and carry on my magical line.”

Harry gave him a shy smile. “Well, maybe you can one day, when this war is over. Prince is a good name. I like it.”
The pink shifted to red. “Oh. I am… glad.” Severus cleared his throat and turned away, probably to hide his face. “Regardless, the book should help you achieve better grades on your NEWTs than what you might have received otherwise.”

“Sir….” Harry moved to his side and touched Severus’ hand, but the man gasped and jerked away. Harry leapt back, chagrin and grief washing away his joy. “Oh gods. I’m sorry, sir. I only meant to thank you.”

Grief and bitterness hollowed Harry’s chest. Maybe Severus didn’t trust him as well as he had thought. Maybe he didn’t like Harry at all. Maybe he was just tolerating him whi—

Warm fingers closed on his palm and held his hand. Severus rubbed Harry’s fingers, though his own trembled, and moved away. His emotions poured into Harry—terror iced his gut at the same time shame set his face ablaze.

[I cannot bear it. Not even to comfort him—and that after holding his hand without issue last night! Gods. I am such a fool.]

From that, Harry understood Severus didn’t have an issue with him, but simply didn’t like being touched on his hands. Harry shoved his own in his pockets to avoid temptation and gave the man a hesitant smile.

“Sir, it’s all right. I should have asked.” He grimaced. “Merlin knows I understand how you feel.”

Severus gave him a bemused look. “Do you?”

“Chosen one, remember? People seem to think I’m up for grabs just because I’m famous or something. Especially Ginny. She’s driving me mad.”

Outrage flickered to life in Severus’ eyes. “She is touching you without consent?”

Harry grimaced. “Yeah. All the time.”

Severus scowled. “So that episode I witnessed at the breakfast table yesterday…?”

Harry shuddered and wrapped his arms around his waist out of a need for protection. “I told her to stop—so did half the group—but she won’t listen.”

Severus scowled. “Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

Severus sighed and patted Harry’s shoulder. “Keep using your shields. I will speak to Minerva about her behaviour and see what can be done.”
Harry gave him a relieved smile. “Thank you. Merlin, thank you.”

Severus nodded, his expression troubled. “Perhaps you will pass a message onto your head of house that I need to speak with her soon?”

“Yeah, will do.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “Good. Since you are safe for the moment, I will begin harvesting the basilisk parts.”

Harry frowned. “Hmm. I had thought—” He shook his head. They really did need to get that basilisk out of there before someone got hurt. “All right. Is there anything I can help with?”

Severus shuddered. “I would prefer that you stay far, far away from this process, Harry. It is incredibly dangerous. Perhaps you might use this time to revise instead.”

“Actually, I think I should go up to the Owlery and check on Hedwig. I’ve not seen her since this drama went down and she’s probably worried. Not to mention, she’s never met Isuri.”

Severus frowned and rubbed his chin. “Hmm. I should introduce you to Solaris as well.”

“Well, let’s go see the owls and make sure they’re okay first, then you can come back here and work on the basilisk. It’s a two-hour period so we’ve the time. And all the students should be in class right now.”

“Should being the operative word,” said Severus in a dark tone. “But let us go. You need to order supplies for your snake anyway.”

Harry paused halfway to the door. “Right. Do you mind if I make up an owl order for that first then?”

“Not at all.”

“Thanks.” With a nod, Harry ran off to write his list.

Harry kept his shields up all the way to Defence and ignored the redhead trailing him. Dear gods, he hoped McGonagall could do something about her. She was driving him mad.

Ron and Hermione were waiting at the door, but he just cast a silencing charm and walked past them. Neville looked up and smiled as Harry came in.

“You’re welcome to work with me, Harry,” he said after Harry expanded the boundaries of his charm to include Neville. “Dean is teaming with Daphne from now on, I think.”

Harry frowned. “Greengrass? Doesn’t she usually team with Bulstrode?”

“Well, Bulstrode is apparently dating Ernie MacMillan, so they asked to work together. Which leaves Seamus to work with Smith. Serves him right, the berk.”

“Bulstrode is dating MacMillan? Really? When did that happen?”
“During all the drama, I suppose.” Neville shrugged. “I’m honestly surprised Ernie could get over his prejudice, but he seems pretty taken with her. I hope so, for her sake. She’s all right this year.”

Harry nodded and slid into the seat next to Neville. “I think Greengrass has been a good influence on her. I hope so at least.”

Neville gave him a wry look. “That, and the fallout after the Ministry last term. I think it really hit home with her then that the Death Eaters are, well, deadly.” He crossed his arms over his chest and sighed. “I think it hit home for a lot of people then. Even Malfoy.”

Harry shook his head. “Malfoy hasn’t changed as far as I can tell.”

“Not on the surface, but Lu says there’s trouble underneath, something he’s trying really hard to hide.”

“Hmm.” Harry gave the Malfoy a worried look. “I hope he’s all right.”

Neville smiled at Harry, his expression soft. “You know, I believe you. I doubt most of Gryffindor would—they would probably call you a traitor for even thinking it, the prats—but I do. And you’re right. Arsehole or not, he doesn’t deserve to be hurt.”

Harry shook his head and dug his book out of his knapsack. “No one does, except maybe Snakeface and his merry men. Are you up to snuff on shields, mate?”

“Well, I think so. Ever since the DoM, I’ve been practising with Lu a lot. She’s—”

Just then, Professor Moody walked in. Harry cancelled his silencing charms.

“Everyone, put your texts away,” said Mad-Eye. “We’re duelling today.”

Neville winced. “I had to pick the best defence student in the school for my partner on a duelling day?”

Harry laughed softly. “I won’t hurt you.”

“We’ll see!”

Moody barked, “Everyone, against the back wall—take your belongings with you.” Harry and Neville obeyed and watched as the professor stacked their desks and chairs against the sides of the room. “Right. Now pair up and spread out. I’m not shielding individual areas this time, so be aware of your classmates’ spells at all times. Constant vigilance!”

Seamus whined, “But sir, that’s not fair. We can’t watch everyone at once.”

Both of Moody’s eyes fixed on the Irish lad. “Tell me, Finnigan, have you ever been in a fight for your life?”

Seamus blushed. “Er….”

Moody turned to Harry. “Potter, please tell Finnigan why I’ve told you to be aware of everyone’s spells at once.”

Harry sighed. Seamus would be even angrier at him now, but it couldn’t be helped.

“Because in a real battle with Death Eaters, curses fly every which way and, what’s more, you have to rely on yourself for shields. It’s possible an ally might shield you in time to save your hide if you
forget, but more than likely, they’re going to be too busy fighting for their own lives. Not to mention, friendly fire can kill you just as fast as a Death Eater curse.”

Seamus muttered, “Not so friendly from you.”

Harry turned away, shame burning his cheeks and the backs of his eyelids. Gods, what had he ever done to deserve such hatred? Neville rubbed Harry’s shoulder and glared at the git, but said nothing.

“Well done, Potter. Ten points to Gryffindor.” Moody’s magical eye fixed on the pouting Seamus. “And you, laddie. Five points from Gryffindor, and don’t let me hear you disparage your classmate again or you’ll be in detention faster than you can blink. I’m sure I could teach you exactly why Potter has the right of it.”

Seamus paled and slid down the wall a bit. “Y-yes, sir.”

“Good. Now, get in your pairs and get started. I want to see some creativity—don’t do everything by the book.” His magical eye focused on Hermione, making her turn pink. “Use your heads, improvise. Death Eaters don’t care if your articulation is perfect or if you move your wand just so.” He gave them a gristly smile. “Just don’t make me send anyone to the Infirmary, you hear? I’d rather face a Death Eater than Poppy on a righteous rampage any day.”

Harry snorted. True enough.

Other than his classmates’ wariness, Ginny’s stalking, and Hermione and Ron’s attempts to get back in Harry’s good graces without actually changing anything about their behaviour, the rest of the day went well. It was a light day anyway. After Defence, he had only lunch and one more class—Ancient Magic. It became somewhat easy to avoid Hermione in that class—he simply sat beside Blaise Zabini, and Hermione decided she’d rather work alone than approach the Slytherin boy.

Zabini raised his eyebrow and gave Harry a wary look. “Is there a reason you’re sitting here and not with the bookworm, Potter?”

“Yeah. You sit by yourself most days, and I’m a bit fed up with the bookworm at the moment.”

Zabini chuckled. “Really now? What did she do? Must have been something to split up the golden trio.”

Harry squirmed and looked away. Confiding in Neville about Hermione was one thing, but Zabini…. “Not something I want to talk about, thanks.”

“Fair enough.”

Harry opened his book and turned to the page they had left off on the last time. Elf magic—only wood elves, not house elves, though they fell under the elf races too. House elves should be part of the class, Harry thought, but he doubted any wizard would ever ‘condescend’ to write of their unusual magic—to their cost. Well, maybe he would just do it himself. Dobby would be glad to help, he was sure of it.

Zabini proved to be a studious, quiet study partner and, like Bulstrode, he had dropped the superior attitude. Harry doubted Zabini would pair up with a Muggleborn anytime soon, but he no longer
acted as though blood purity meant everything. He hadn’t referred to Hermione as a ‘Mudblood’ at any rate. Harry wouldn’t have tolerated that. Hermione’s recent lack of loyalty and her obsession with grades said a lot more about her character than her heritage.

After class, Zabini nodded to Harry and packed up to leave, passing him without trouble. Harry had actually found his quiet company relaxing—a bit like Severus. Were all Slytherins so reserved? He shook his head at his own thoughts. Malfoy sure as hell didn’t qualify. Nor did Parkinson, Greengrass, or Bulstrode, come to think of it. Maybe Harry just liked quiet people these days.

As Harry slowly gathered his things—always the last out the door on purpose, Hermione rounded on him, eyes flashing and face red with either embarrassment or rage. Or both, judging by the tenor of her emotional feedback. He really needed to figure out what that was all about.

Harry attempted to ignore her, but she would not be put off.

“What is wrong with you, Harry? How could you sit with Zabini over me? He’s a pureblood supremacist, and I have all the class notes anyway. You won’t learn a thing from the likes of him!”

Harry gave her a look full of disgust. “And that, Hermione Granger, is exactly why I’m not speaking to you.”

“Why, because I’m smart enough to stay away from Death Eaters?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry noticed Zabini stop dead by the door, all the colour draining from his face. A rush of shame and fear flooded Harry from the boy.

[Oh gods! If anyone thinks I’m spreading that around….] Zabini’s thoughts cut off, but Harry heard enough to get the drift.

“Hermione, shut it! Zabini is no more Death Eater than I am.”

Wonder and shock flooded him from Zabini. [He’s… defending me?]

“He’s a Slytherin,” Hermione cried, as if that explained everything.

Harry scowled. “Merlin. Just being a snake doesn’t make you evil. You’re even friends with Greengrass!”

“Not so much after that remark,” said a hacked-off Daphne from a few seats away.

Hermione blushed. “I… it’s just that all of the Death Eaters are Slytherins, and I don’t want—”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “All of them? That’s funny. I could have sworn I knew of at least one other in our house. You know, the one who got my parents killed? That Death Eater?”

Hermione gulped. “Well, I just meant—”

“And half of them are Ravenclaws anyway,” interjected Bulstrode, her dark eyes boring into Hermione. “Not all the swots you look up to so much are a decent sort, Granger.”

Hermione blushed redder. “O-okay, so maybe that remark was in bad taste. But you can’t deny that most of them are Slytherin, and Zabini—”

“Isn’t a Death Eater,” the boy himself said, raising his bare left arm. “Stop spreading that rubbish before your mouth gets me killed!”
“But—”

“He’s right,” said Harry with a glare. “And you’re lying. You might be worried about the Death Eaters, but that’s not why you’re in a tizzy. You’re hacked off because you think you’re more intelligent than Zabini—and everyone else for that matter—and that I can’t possibly learn without taking the notes you hand-feed me.” He snarled, “Well, we’ll just see about that soon enough, won’t we?”

Pink flooding her face, Hermione stuck her nose in the air and swung her bag over her shoulder. “Yes, I suppose we will.” She gave Greengrass an apologetic look. “Daphne, I didn’t mean you were a—”

Greengrass scowled. “No, just my house. Go on, Granger. I’ve nothing to say to you.”

“But I—”

By this point, even Professor Origa, a bookish Nigerian witch who rarely interfered in student affairs, had had enough. “I think Miss Greengrass is right, Miss Granger. You must go.”

Hermione winced. “But, Professor, I—”

Daphne gave Harry a wry look. “You know, Potter, I think I like your style for dealing with persistent pests.” She glared at Hermione and flicked her wand. “Areatus Silentium!” Her blue field enclosed everyone but Hermione, and the girl left with a sniff, her face red and eyes wet.

“Ten points to Slytherin for a beautiful charm, Greengrass,” said Professor Origa with a shake of her head, sending her braids flying everywhere. She huffed and went back to preparing for her next class, muttering to herself in her native tongue.

Harry cancelled Greengrass’ spell and made his way to Zabini. “Hey, um, I’m really sorry about that. If I’d have realised she’d go so far, I’d have just sat alone. Are you okay?”

Zabini hesitated. “I’m all right, I suppose, but confused. Since when do you care so much about Slytherins?”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “Since I was forced to grow up and learned the world isn’t painted in black and white.”

Zabini gave him an appraising look. “You know, you might be on to something there.”

Harry nodded and bid his classmates farewell, anxious to get out of there even if it meant he wasn’t the last out of the classroom. With a sigh, he headed back towards the Chamber. Severus would want to know about this for sure.

Chapter End Notes

Spell notes: just a reminder that Areatus Silentium blocks out external sound, rather than sealing sounds within an area.
New Friendships

Chapter Summary

Warnings: Ron and Hermione are still being jerkish. Ginny is still being a creep. Dean saves the day.

AN: just a formatting reminder:
[Mental communication via Telepathy or Legilmency, or thoughts Harry picks up.]
~Parseltongue communication, written or oral.~
'Private thoughts Harry doesn't pick up or the thinker doesn't know he does.'
"spells and Latin words."
"Regular speech."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 20

New Friendships

6 DECEMBER

Harry investigated the stacks of phials Severus had harvested yesterday with a curious eye, though he kept his fingers well away. Severus had lined an entire potions shelf with them and was working on a second.

"Looks like you’ll have plenty of supplies to experiment with."

Severus flushed slightly and gave Harry his small smile. “Yes. Your gift will, with any luck, save many lives.”

Harry moved away from the potions and went to Severus’ side instead. The man was hunched over his desk, scribbling away in a leather-bound journal.

“Have you made any progress on the antivenin?”

Severus sat back and sighed. “In theory, but I do not possess the correct reference books to verify my hypotheses.”

Harry leaned his hip on the desk and crossed his arms over his chest. “Hmm. What do you need?”

“Rarer books than I possess, to be sure.”

“Would the library have them?”

Severus rubbed his chin. “Perhaps it might have some selection, but they are likely to be in the
“Oh. And you can’t really write me a note without getting yourself in trouble.”

“No.”

Harry frowned. “Well, we need the antivenin. What books do you need, sir?”

“References on basilisks, venoms, isolating poison strains, and the processes of venoms in the blood, specifically cardiotoxins, neurotoxins, and haemorrhagins.”

Harry grimaced. “Um, maybe write those down for me? I’ll never remember that.”

Severus snorted and scribbled a list down on a sheet from his journal. He handed Harry the list when he had finished. “How do you plan on acquiring those?”

Harry gave him a feral grin. “Dumbledore owes me about a few hundred favours by this point.”

Severus smirked. “That is rather Slytherin of you.”

Harry beamed. “Well I did miss being put there by the skin of my teeth. I reckon it’s time I started showing it a bit more.” He frowned. “Speaking of that, I’ll check on Zabini for you while I’m out.”

Severus bowed in thanks and returned to his work. Harry reached to touch his shoulder, a gesture meant in solidarity and comfort, but thought better of it and put his hand in his pocket instead. Severus wouldn’t find it comforting. Shaking his head, Harry turned to leave, but a hand on his wrist stopped him.

“Harry….” Severus’ voice was soft, gentle. “Thank you.”

Harry gasped, heart thundering in his chest. Severus had thanked him—out loud! “F-for the list? Oh, it’s not a big deal, sir. But you’re welcome.”

“No, for….” Severus squeezed his wrist. “For… understanding me.”

Oh. His aversion to touch.

Harry gave him a sad smile. “I don’t want to become your Ginny, sir.”

Severus shuddered. “Merlin preserve us from that fate!”

Harry laughed in spite of his discomfort. He wanted to touch Severus, just little things, but he also didn’t want to hurt the man.

Well, maybe in time Severus would be more comfortable with him. Harry would have to be careful not to push him, though. No meant no, even for what Harry considered casual contact. It wasn’t casual to Severus.

Harry pasted a grin on his face. “Yes, please. One Ginny is enough.”

“Too much, rather,” said Severus in a dark tone. “Do ask Professor McGonagall about meeting me later.”

“I will. I’ll be back soon, sir.”

“Good luck on your hunt, and with avoiding your fan club.”
Harry snorted and patted his neck gently, where Isuri was hidden. “I do have a secret weapon if they annoy me too much.”

Severus snorted. “Try not to send them to the Infirmary, Isuri.”

Isuri hissed a laugh against Harry’s neck, tickling him and setting him giggling. Severus’ eyes lit up and a small smile crossed his face.

“I am glad to see you laughing again, Harry.”

Harry’s heart thumped and a soft, warm feeling flooded his chest. “T-thank you, sir.”

“Off with you now, or we shall be here till lunch.”

Harry chuckled and Summoned his broom. ~Open!~ In an instant, he was zooming up the pipes.

After a successful Dumbledore-wrangling session, Harry headed to the library. Dumbledore had been altogether too willing to give Harry the books as soon as he mentioned Severus’ name. He had even loaned Harry some from his own shelves. The old man probably had an ulterior motive, but if he did, it wasn’t making itself known.

Well, maybe he wanted to support Harry’s alliance with Severus, or perhaps he was just trying to gain Harry’s approval again. The latter thought made him want to laugh. As if a stack of books would regain his respect. Merlin, he wasn’t Hermione.

The thought brought him a pang as he opened the library door and stepped inside.

Rapid hissing ahead confused him—it sounded like snakes, but Harry couldn’t make out any words. What in the world?

~Isuri, can you understand that?~

Isuri poked her head up and listened. ~No, master. I think it is not snake speak.~

~I see. Please hide yourself, little one. Many people may not take well to snakes here.~

~Yes, master.~

She curled back under Harry’s cloak and, with his refreshed Notice-me-Not glamours, faded from view. The hissing ahead hadn’t stopped. He frowned and moved towards the sound, and immediately wished he’d minded his own business.

Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Dean were sitting near the front of the library, books and parchment strewn over their table. Ginny and Dean leaned away, both squirming in discomfort, while Ron and Hermione hissed back and forth over an open Herbology text.

“They beat us in Herbology last time, Ron,” Hermione whispered. “I’m not taking the chance that it’s a fluke.”

Dean snapped, “Oi! We worked hard for that grade, thank you very much.”
Hermione flushed. “Oh. I… I’m sorry, Dean. I’m sure you did.” But she didn’t look convinced. “It’s just, I can’t afford to fail.” She turned back to Ron and hissed, “We have to revise more. It’s just—it’s so important and I can’t fall behind.”

More like she couldn’t accept that someone else might be more intelligent or better at a subject than she was. Harry muffled his footsteps and edged away, heading towards the restricted section and hoping to avoid notice.

Ron hissed, “Hermione, come off it! We already revise too much as is. I want to spend time with my girl, and I’ve got to practise extra hard for quidditch since Harry isn’t on the team this year. We’ve got to make up the slack.”

‘Gee thanks, Ron.’ Harry scowled and moved faster, having heard more than he wanted to. What was that they said about eavesdroppers? Well, he had learned his lesson. Merlin.

He didn’t move fast enough.

“Harry! Oh, wait up.”

He groaned and restored his physical shield. “Ginny, for the eight-hundredth time, leave me alone!”

She pouted and crossed her arms over her chest. “You told me to wait, and I have!”

Harry rubbed his forehead, sick to death of this confrontation already. “No, Ginny. No. I told you I didn’t want to be touched at the time. I didn’t. I still don’t. I’m not interested. Please, please find someone else to fancy.”

“But—”

“Gods damn it, Ginny, I said no!”

She sniffled and turned away.

Dean moved to her side and murmured, “Ginny, hey, um, do you want to play a seeker’s match with me? I really do need to practise.”

She shot Harry a dark look. “I guess because someone isn’t interested, I might as well.”

She stormed off, to Harry’s relief, and Dean gave him a thumbs up behind her back.

“Thank you,” Harry mouthed to the boy. Dean nodded and led Ginny away.

As soon as the doors shut behind them, Ron snapped, “Oi! What’s with you, always leading her on?”

Madam Pince looked up from her desk and shot them all a glare. “Quiet! This is a library, not a quidditch pitch.”

With a nod to the librarian, Harry kicked at the floor and walked away without answering Ron, his chest cold and aching with his friends’ betrayal. Gods. He just wanted to get away. It hurt so badly that people he had once loved—still did, somewhere under the pain—could turn on him like this.

Ron grabbed at his arm, but Harry’s shield stopped him.

“Oi,” Ron snapped, voice low, but sharp with irritation. “Harry, what is this? You have a shield up?”
Harry wheeled on him and glared. “Yes. I had to put one up to keep your dear little sister from touching me without my consent!”

“Well, if you’d stop giving her hope and then crushing it….”

“I’m not giving her anything—she’s bloody well stalking me. Don’t you care at all?”

Ron scowled. “She’s my sister, you git! She’s better than that. You’re just being a berk to everyone lately. First you insult Hermione all the time and now thi—”

“Really? So I didn’t just hear Hermione suggest that I don’t have the intelligence to come up with a better grade on my own?”

“Well, it’s Hermione, so yeah!”

Harry turned on his heel and marched to the restricted section, ignoring Ron’s continued hisses. Eventually he would either get bored and go somewhere else or get so angry that—

Ron bellowed, “OI! You don’t get to ignore me, Harry!”

“That is enough, young man,” Pince snapped. “Out, out with you.”

“But—”

“I do have the authority to issue detentions, you know.”

Ron scowled and stormed out of the library, ears red with his fury. Harry slumped against one of the shelves, struggling to keep tears back. Merlin. Why couldn’t he have just five minutes of peace?

Madam Pince swooped down on him, eyes sharp behind her spectacles. “Mister Potter, what are you doing in the restricted section?”

“Oh.” Harry sniffled and handed her his pass with shaking hands. “Sorry, ma’am. With all that mess, I f-forgot to give it to you first.”

Madam Pince’s hawklike stare softened. “Yes, so I saw. Are you all right?”

“I… I will be. Just, can you tell me where I can find these books, ma’am? They’re for the headmaster.”

Madam Pince’s eyebrow shot up. “The headmaster wants books on venom?”

Harry grimaced. He had a choice to make here, and either one might risk his friend’s life.

“Er… well, I think he actually asked for them for Professor Snape, but I’m not really sure. I haven’t seen Snape since Thursday. I reckon the headmaster has him doing some kind of research to keep him out of trouble while he’s suspended, and he asked me to get these since he’s snowed under in paperwork.”

“Ah, that makes a bit more sense. Follow me then.” Pince led him to the next shelf over and pulled several books from the shelves. She had to smack one to keep it from biting her. “Watch out for that one. Nasty teeth on it.”

Harry gulped and made a note to belt that one closed à la his Monster Book of Monsters.

Pince piled more books on his stack. He could have sworn one of them hissed at him. Isuri poked her
head out of his cloak, but Harry put her back under it before Madam Pince saw.

~She is most likely frightened of snakes, Isuri, and I need her help.~

Isuri grumbled, ~I want to see the hissing leaf-tower.~

~Leaf-tower? Strange translation. Well, I will let you see all the leaf-towers you want when we are home.~

Madam Pince piled the last one up on his stack with a frown. “That book… does it speak Parseltongue?”

Harry’s ears burned. “Well, that’s what I was trying to find out. I heard it hissing, but I can’t make out what it said. If it said anything, that is.”

“Hmm. Interesting. If it does speak the snake tongue, will you tell me when you return them?”

“Sure. Thank you, ma’am.”

She nodded. “Take care of them like your children or I’ll have your hide.”

Harry winced and clutched the books tight against his chest lest the biting one break free and start chewing on the other titles. “Y-yes, ma’am.”

“Best to hurry back to the headmaster now, before he can think of some other errand to send you on.”

“Ah, yes, I’d better. Thank you!”

Harry didn’t dare release the books, so he gave her a nod instead of waving and scurried away. He detoured to the Transfiguration corridor before returning to the Chamber, however, and breathed a sigh of relief when Professor McGonagall answered the door.

“Enter!”

Harry obeyed, carting his books into the tartan-covered office, and grinned at the sight of a catnip toy on the floor by the desk.

“Were you having a bit of a romp between essays then, Professor?”

McGonagall blushed and pushed the cat toy out of sight with her foot.

Harry chuckled. “No worries. I won’t tell.”

A smile curved the corners of McGonagall’s lips. “Well, I don’t mind a bit of fun at my expense if it gets you laughing again, Harry.” Her expression softened to concern. “We’ve all been quite worried for you. I’m glad to see you’ve made some progress.”

Harry grimaced. “That’s not what I meant. I mean I still have serious problems, ma’am. Um, this office is safe, right? I can speak freely without endangering our mutual friend?”

She cast a silencing charm and warded the portraits away. “It is now.” Her eyes hardened. “Don’t
tell me Severus is causing you trouble again.”

Harry shook his head hard. “N-no, ma’am. Just the opposite. Professor Snape has been… ever since
Wednesday night, he’s been… Merlin, it’s like he’s a different person. He’s been so gentle. He’s
been holding me together, to be honest. I probably would be broken into pieces without his help, and
Neville and Dean too.”

McGonagall let slip a sigh. “Oh, thank Merlin. That poor man—he’s been so alone for so long and
he refuses to let anyone in. Have you… do you think you can reach him, Harry?”

He flushed. “I… I’m not sure he’d want me talking about that.”

“Oh, poppycock. Severus is as much my friend as he appears to be yours. I imagine he’ll want to talk
to me about you if things are going as well as you say.”

Harry bit his lip. “I really don’t want to make him hate me again.”

“Well, if you’re that worried about it, I won’t press.” She leaned on her desk and gave him a look
full of pleading. “But if you can reach him, Harry, please try to heal him, if you’re able. He is
completely broken inside, and none of us have been able to break through that shell of venom and
spite.”

Harry lowered his eyes and nodded. “I… I want that too. To heal him. And… I don’t know. I might
be able to. I think he trusts me.”

McGonagall rubbed her lip. “Hmm. Has he let you touch him? At all?”

Harry blushed. “I… he… you saw me run out of the Great Hall Thursday morning?”

She winced. “Yes. I am sorry for the way your friends have been treating you.”

“That’s part of why I’m here. But after that, I was a wreck. I… I couldn’t hold it together. But he
held my arm and I ended up, well, h-he let me rest against his shoulder.” A blush crept up his face,
and Harry looked away. “Oh, and last night, we were both having trouble conjuring a Patronus to
warn the headmaster about Nagini, but he held my hand for a minute, and then he was able to call
his. And, this morning, he took care of me after a vision. It was horrid, and I couldn’t get myself
under control, so he had me… well, let’s just say I ended up leaning on his shoulder again.”

When Harry looked up, McGonagall’s mouth was hanging open and her eyes took up half her face.
“Um… professor?”

She shut her mouth with an audible click. “Dear Merlin.”

She crossed his arms over his chest, needing the comfort. “I-is that… bad?”

“Oh, child.” Tears formed on her lashes. “Oh, Harry. No. It’s not bad. Not at all.” She conjured a
handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. “Forgive me. It’s only that I thought no one would ever be able
to break through to him, and it seems you have done.” She gave him a tearful smile. “Whatever
you’re doing, Harry, keep it up.”

Relief coursed through Harry, and he let his breath out in a rush. “I-I will. I promise.”

She Banished her handkerchief and cleared her throat, once again becoming his prim and proper
professor. “Well then, now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, what did you need with me,
Harry?”
“Um, well, Professor Snape wants to talk to you later today. Would you be okay coming to the Chamber with me? Just don’t shift into your cat form—it’s warded against all animals except my familiar, and we’re going to add Fawkes, once we have time. I don’t know if Animagi count, but I don’t think I’d want to test it. After Pettigrew, I highly doubt Professor Snape left that option open.”

McGonagall frowned. “I didn’t think owls could get into the Chamber.”

Harry winced. “My other familiar. I-I haven’t had her long.” At McGonagall’s piercing look, he sighed and reached for his cloak. “Um, I’ll show you if you promise not to make me get rid of her. She’s keeping me safe and she’s really docile.”

McGonagall raised an eyebrow. “Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to be a fan?”

Harry gave a nervous laugh. “W-well, I am a Parselmouth and… um… do you like snakes?”

McGonagall groaned. “Sweet mother of Circe.”

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After dinner, Harry had gone to revise with Neville and Luna, leaving Minerva in the Chamber with Severus. He’d brought them tea and biscuits from Dobby before he went, so Severus sipped his tea while he tried to come up with something to say to her. He owed her an apology, to be sure, but those words had never come easy for him.

He found it easier to trust Harry, odd as it seemed. How he should have learned to care for and trust the boy so quickly after hating him so long left him dazed, but he did. Perhaps because Harry had forgiven him so completely, because he had faith in Severus, it was easy to have faith in him.

Not to mention, Severus owed that boy far more than just his life.

He rubbed his chest where the wound had all but healed. The curse had left a terrible scar, but he would live. Yet, if not for Harry’s unbelievable forgiveness and care for him even in his darkest hour, Severus would be dead. He still couldn’t wrap his head around it.

Severus shivered and opened his mouth to speak, but Minerva beat him to it.

“Severus, I am so relieved to see this.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “To see me hiding among dead basilisk parts?”

Minerva snorted. “To see you beginning to heal, Severus. To see you cohabiting with Harry without killing each other. I confess I am hoping he can help you recover.”

“I am mostly healed,” Severus muttered, turning his face away to hide a blush.

“I think you know I didn’t mean physically.”

Severus coughed and sipped his tea. “Nevertheless, I have brought you here out of concern for Harry, not myself.”

She smiled like the cat that got the canary. “Harry, hmm?”

Severus’ cheeks burned. “He… asked me to use his forename. He does not like his last name,
apparently.”

Her smile faded. “He doesn’t?”

“No. I do not know why, though I believe… well, perhaps I do have an explanation.” He set his tea down and gripped the bridge of his nose. “Did Albus inform you that Harry broke into my pensieve last term?”

Minerva nodded. “I cannot see what that has to do with his aversion to his surname.”

“He… he saw them, Minerva. Potter and Black. He saw them assault me.”

She paled. “Oh dear gods. You mean… fifth year?”

Severus gave her a grim nod.

Minerva cringed. “Oh! Well, I can certainly see how that would disillusion him.” She rubbed her temples as if she had a headache. “Albus has much to answer for. As much as I loved those boys, they deserved far harsher punishment, and not only for that incident. If he had been firmer with their blatant disobedience and bullying, perhaps it might have stopped before that day.” She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “You know, I did try to bring them back in line, but there was only so much I could do. Detentions did not work, and they did not seem to care for points either.”

“Neither does Harry, but I believe he has very different reasons.”

She gave him a sad smile. “Yes. Our Harry has grown up, far too soon.”

“I believe I am at least partially to blame for that,” Severus said, his voice rife with sorrow. “He has saved my life four times in three days, Minerva, and he is in so much pain. How have I missed it so long?”

Minerva patted his wrist, about all Severus could tolerate from her. “Well, you’re helping him now. Harry did not want to reveal much in my office, but he said he was crying on you? Well, rather he implied it. I think he was a bit embarrassed.”

Severus growled. “Those infernal brats.”

Her sad smile morphed into a glare. “Severus Snape! Harry has done nothing—”

He halted her diatribe with a shake of his head. “No, no. Not Harry. I was speaking of his so-called friends.”

She scowled. “Yes, I am sorely disappointed in Mister Weasley and Miss Granger—and Finnigan! I have no idea what has gotten into that child, but he has changed much as of late, and not for the better.”

“As much as I agree with your assessment of those three, the real problem is Miss Weasley.”

Minerva blinked. “Ginevra? Merlin, I had thought she was trying to support him.”

“Stalk him is more accurate.”

Minerva’s eyes narrowed. “Indeed? Tell me, Severus, what have I missed?”

“My pleasure.”
After their talk, Minerva Summoned Harry with her Patronus and bid them goodnight, leaving them with a promise to deal with the Ginevra issue in the morning. When Harry returned from taking her up the pipe, Severus called him over.

“Harry, I am going to deal with the basilisk head and venom now. I need you and Isuri to stay well away from me while I work and keep quiet. This will be extremely dangerous.”

Harry nodded. “I’ve still my essay for Ancient Magic, so I’ll work on it while you’re busy. Just call for me when you’re done so I know it’s safe to talk.”

Severus gave him a tentative half-smile. “Very well. What is the topic for your essay?”

“Elf magic, but the book only includes information on wood elves and high elves, despite the fact that house elves fall under the elf umbrella as well. I thought I might add a comparison to house elves and the similarities and differences between their magic and the other species’. What do you think?”

Severus nodded. “It would make for an interesting study. I would like to read it when you are finished, if you are amenable.”

Harry beamed. “Brilliant. I doubt it’ll be as good as the Charms essay, but I’ll do my best.”

“As you should do. I am going to work now, Harry. I will speak to you later.”

Harry waved and moved to his ‘bedroom,’ but didn’t get far before his snake poked her head out of Harry’s collar and hissed for attention.

“Okay, okay, Isuri. I’ll let you down. Merlin.”

He removed Isuri from his neck and set her on the bed, hissing quietly to her. By the way Harry pointed to Severus and shook his head, Severus gathered he was warning the snake away from the basilisk. Reassured, Severus suited up in heavy lab gear, set several protective charms upon his person, and went to work.

Some hours later, he had harvested all he could. Carefully, he enclosed the remains in a specialised shield spell and took a deep breath. He needed to Vanish the mess, but one wrong move, and they would perish and bring the entire castle down with them.

‘Merlin, let this work.’ He held his breath, poured all his focus into his spell, carefully measured his power level, and whispered, “Tegovanesco.”

A brilliant purple light glowed within the shield and disappeared. He let his breath out and slumped in relief. Merlin, he hated working with such volatile substances.

“Thank the gods.”

After a few calming breaths, Severus performed the same spell upon his gear without removing it from his body. It wasn’t reusable, not after coming into contact with such powerful venom, and to attempt to remove it manually might poison him. One more careful spell removed the last traces of blood and venom on the floor, and he heaved a huge sigh. It was done, and no one had ended up as a crater.
Severus brushed his hair out of his eyes and looked up to find Harry watching him, obviously entranced. Heat surged into his cheeks.

“What?”

Harry blushed too. “Oh. You’re just so skilled. That was terrifying and gross, but also amazing.”

Severus’ lips curved up in spite of himself. “Ah. I… I admit I was afraid to breathe at some points.”

“So was I! Merlin, that stuff is so lethal.” Harry shuddered. “You’re safe, right? It’s done?”

Severus nodded. “I need to shower, but I will be fine.”

“Thank goodness.” Harry turned to his desk. “Go on and shower now, if you want. I’ve yet to finish this.” He laughed wryly. “I got a bit distracted.”

Severus’ face flamed. “How long were you watching?”

“I have no idea. Awhile. I was afraid for you.”

Severus closed his eyes and let the rare feeling of being so cared for wash over him. “I am well.” His voice came out rougher than intended.

When he opened his eyes, Harry’s expression had gone soft and warm.

“I’m glad,” he said, his voice as soft as the look in his eyes.

“Oh.” Severus’ heart thumped and his breath hitched. What in Merlin’s name? “I… I am going to take that shower now.” He fled to the relative safety of the loo and focused on dealing with the grime of hard work rather than sentimental emotions he didn’t understand. The fresh-scented soap and hot water cleared his head, and when he came out of the loo, Severus felt much better.

Harry was talking with his snake near one of the walls. “Hello, sir. Isuri said she found another skin near this pipe here.”

Severus nodded. “I will examine it in the morning. Did you finish your essay?”

“Not quite. I want to talk to Dobby first, and I didn’t want to disturb you while you were working on something so dangerous.”

“Oh.” Severus went to sit down and read, but Harry called to him in a soft, uncertain voice. “Sir, um, would you… maybe like to play chess with me?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Chess. You do know I am a strategist for the Order?”

Harry chuckled. “Oh, I’m sure you’ll beat me in ten turns, if it takes that long. But it’s just… it’s not so much about the game as… well…” He shook his head and gave Severus a sad smile. “Never mind. I’ll just practise for Defence or something.”

Severus sighed and Summoned Harry’s chess board and their pieces. “I will be black.”

Harry chuckled. “I don’t think that head start is going to help me much, but sure.”

“Well then, watch and learn.”

Harry grinned and settled across from Severus. “Yes, sir!”
Spell notes:
*Tegovanesco*: Severus' customized Vanishing spell for volatile substances (such as basilisk venom).
Chapter 21

Fruits of Hard Labour

7 December

Harry needed a break. He had spent half the morning training with Severus—and Merlin, he felt it. Severus’ usual routine had all but pounded Harry to bits. Thank the gods the man modified his training during the weekdays or Harry wouldn’t have been able to keep up. Even after several rounds of potions, every muscle in his body still ached.

No wonder Severus had advised him to eat more, especially protein. Harry would need the calories.

After training, he had finished his essay with Dobby’s help, then spent a couple of hours reading ahead. By the time they had finished with dinner, Harry was feeling a bit stir-crazy.

“Sir?”

Severus made a half-hearted effort to look up from his research notes, but the man was so absorbed, his head barely moved. “Hmm?”

“I’m going out for a bit. I’ll be outside or in the Room of Requirement, I think, so it should be safe to send me a Patronus if anything happens.”

“Oh, all right. I believe I am well enough for now.” Severus returned to his research and was back to muttering under his breath a moment later.

Harry suppressed a laugh. Even if he did find Severus’ study habits cute, he knew better than to draw attention to the fact. Severus Snape didn’t do cute, at least not intentionally. Harry watched him work for a moment, a soft smile on his face. Gods, the man was brilliant.

With a little shake, Harry Summoned his broom and zoomed out of the Chamber. As soon as he shook off Myrtle and made his way into the corridor outside the loo, Isuri hissed in his ear.

~Master, I am hungry.~

Harry removed the snake from around his neck. ~I will cast the hiding spell on you. If you take care not to startle the other students and teachers, it will keep you out of sight even away from me.~

Isuri hissed her agreement, and Harry let her down and cast his spells, including a warming charm
and a Notice-Me-Not spell. A wavering mist, much like the air above asphalt on a hot day, shimmered around the snake’s form, letting Harry know the glamour was working properly.

~There you are, girl. Good hunting.~

~Thank you, Master. Shall I bring you back a fat rat?~

Harry choked and swallowed a wave of revulsion. ~No thank you, Isuri. I do not eat rats.~

She hissed a laugh. ~More for me then.~

Harry chuckled and petted her back. ~Yes. You may have all the rats you can catch.~

~Yes, Master. I will return to the nest when I am finished hunting.~

~Good girl. I will see you later then.~

Harry stroked her warm, slippery scales once more, then set off towards the Entrance Hall. Merlin, it felt like he hadn’t seen the outside world in a week. Well, he hadn’t really, save for through a window. Taking care of Severus and dealing with all the other drama surrounding his life had taken all his time and concentration for the past few days.

Gods, but he needed some fresh air.

He set a warming charm on his cloak just inside the Entrance Hall doors and stepped outside. As soon as the cold night air hit him, he breathed a sigh of relief. His breath froze in a wreath around his face, and Harry gave a soft laugh, making more frozen-air clouds. Ah, this was good. He had missed nature, and missed the joy he had once taken in the outside world more.

Healing the breach with Severus had done wonders for his morale, apparently, even if his supposed friends had yet to take their heads out of their arses. Strange, how one new relationship could heal him so well in the midst of a storm.

As he walked towards the lake, his feet crunching on fresh snow, he mused on his new… acquaintance? Friendship? Were they friends? He had no idea. He wanted to be, but he didn’t know if Severus felt the same.

Merlin, how had they come so far so fast? Well, in Harry’s case, he had always wanted the potions master to stop hating him. How long had he craved Severus’ approval and hadn’t known it? He shook his head. Maybe since that first class….

“Clearly, celebrity isn’t everything.”

Harry had marked Snape down as a heartless bastard from day one, even going so far as to assume the man wanted him dead. The Philosopher’s Stone had come as his first taste of the truth, and the pensieve had brought it home in stark relief—Severus was a human being, not a monster, and a damaged one. Ever since, Harry had wanted to help him, if he could.

“If you can reach him, Harry, please try to heal him….”

Merlin, he had never seen Professor McGonagall so emotional. She really did care for Severus. Maybe Harry should tell him.

He shook his head and turned towards the forest, thinking of walking along the perimeter a bit before returning home. No, it was best to keep that conversation to himself for now, but maybe someday in
the future, Severus would trust Harry enough to hear it. Merlin, he hoped so.

Harry grimaced at the sound of a feminine voice near the trees. He was halfway through turning back to the castle when he recognised her.

“Well, the Wrackspurts are still chewing his ears, but the mist-creepers have mostly gone.”

Neville’s voice drifted to his ears in reply, “Oh, thank goodness. I’ve been so worr—oh! Harry! Come here, mate. We were just talking about you.”

Harry winced and turned towards the pair. “Not bad, I hope.”

Luna dug a hunk of raw meat from a burlap bag at her hip and tossed it towards the treeline. “Of course not. We were simply saying that you’re looking a bit less unhappy recently.” She gave him a wry smile. “I don’t suppose you could straighten out the Shadow-Keepers for us?”

Harry watched, bemused, as Luna tossed another hunk of meat into the trees. “Shadow-Keepers? And why exactly are we—?”

A thestral poked its head out of the trees and snatched up the meat, answering Harry’s second question.

“She asked you to tell us your secrets,” said Neville with a chuckle. “And we’re feeding the thestral.”

“So I see.”

Luna handed Harry a bag of his own. “Here you are.”

Neville chuckled. “I was wondering who the third bag was for all this time.”

Harry gave in and took the bag, deciding not to argue against his apparent fate. Even if the meat was cold and squishy under his fingers.

“I guess I am happier,” Harry said with a shake of his head, watching as a thestral colt gobbled the chunk he had thrown in one bite. “But as far as why… I need a silencing charm. Will it scare the thestral?”

Luna shook her head. “They know we mean no harm.”

“All right.” Harry flicked his wand and covered them in a bubble of silence. “Well, it’s just that… Luna, you won’t tell this to Ginny, right? Or anyone else?”

Luna grimaced. “Ginny isn’t as good of a friend as she used to be.” She gave Harry a wry smile. “The Ticklebees are buzzing so loud in her brain, she can’t hear herself think.”

Harry choked and burst into laughter. “True!” He stifled a snort and threw the next hunk of meat to a greying thestral hanging around the edges of the herd. “Thanks, Luna. I needed that!”

“Laughter is good for chasing Wrackspurts away,” she said with a grin.

“So I see.” He tossed in another hunk of meat, watching the aging thestral nab it before he spoke again. “Well, it’s Professor Snape. He’s been… well, like a friend these past few days. I was just thinking on the way here that maybe I’ve been wanting him to like me for a long time, because having his support has really helped.” He shook his head and fed a filly. “I guess I don’t really understand why it helps so much when we’ve been enemies so long. With most of my house turning
on me, I should be miserable, but he makes me feel better.”

“Well,” said Luna in with a sad smile, “sometimes we can’t be picky where we find our friends.”

Harry patted her shoulder with his clean hand and resolved to spend more time with her. She did care about him and her strange brand of wisdom had helped him out of a pinch more times than he cared to admit.

“I’m sorry, Luna.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean you, Harry. You’ve been here for me as much as you can be. I… it’s only that Ginny was my best friend once, and now she’s… changed.”

“Seems to be going around,” said Neville with a bitter snort.

Luna cocked her head. “Yes, perhaps there is an epidemic of Panwhinglers in the air.” She tossed a steak to a heavily pregnant mare. “I should warn Madam Pomfrey.”

“Maybe,” said Harry darkly. “Or maybe they’re just not as loyal as we once thought.”

“Well, that’s what I just said!”

Harry and Neville laughed.

“Luna, you’re brilliant,” Harry said with a chuckle. “We should feed the thestrals more often.”

Luna giggled. “Not too often! They’ll get fat if you feed them too much, you know.”

Harry snickered and tossed another steak to the foals. “Well, they could use a little meat on their bones! They’re practically skeletons.”

Luna snickered. “They’re supposed to be skeletons.”

“That was the point!”

The three of them laughed, and when their mirth cleared, Harry felt much better.

“I… I’m really glad I have you two. And Professor Snape now.”

“He’s glad of it too, I think,” said Luna.

“I’m curious if this changes his teaching method,” said Neville with a frown. “Do you think he’ll alter it a lot, Harry?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t think he can afford to be fair to Gryffindors and keep his skin on. The junior Death Eaters are always looking for… oh.” His stomach dropped into his feet and his heart stilled. “Oh sweet Merlin.”

He’d just told two students who didn’t know Occlumency that he and Severus had more than a bare truce.

“Oh shite. You two, I think I’m going to have to teach you to Occlude now. I shouldn’t have said anything—and now even if you’re not trying to reveal it, someone could see this in your minds. I’ve made you targets.” Terror ran through his veins, colder than the winter air. “Shite!”

Luna patted Harry’s arm and calmed him. “It’s quite all right, Harry. I’ve often thought I should
branch out in my mind magic skills. Occlumency would be interesting, though quite the challenge.”

“You’re not kidding,” Harry agreed emphatically.

“I’ve been meaning to learn anyway,” said Neville with a wry smile. “It’s sort of a tacit requirement for the lords of pureblood houses.”

Harry’s fear abated. “R-really? You’ll let me train you?”

Neville grinned. “On one condition.”

Harry winced. Whatever it was, he’d have to do it. Severus’ life depended on their ability to keep his secrets. “Yes?”

“Train us to fight like you do too!”

Harry relaxed and gave a soft laugh. “A-all right. Professor Snape is training me, so I reckon I can just teach you as he teaches me.”

Luna stuck out her non-bloody hand. “It’s a deal then.”

Harry shook on it.

When Harry returned, Severus was reading one of the books he had brought—the biting one. “Hello, sir. Are you all right?”

Severus nodded. “I am simply trying to translate this monstrosity. It is written in such atrocious German I can barely make heads or tails of it.”

A curious smile spread across Harry’s face. “You speak German, sir?”

“It behoves a spy to know several languages lest his targets converse in tongues he cannot understand. I also speak French, Italian, and Irish Gaelic.” He closed his eyes. “I am technically Irish at any rate, though I have made my home in Scotland. And, as such, I can understand the Scottish form of Gaelic as well, though I am not as fluent in speech.”

“Wow!” Harry beamed and sat nearby. “That’s brilliant!”

Severus bowed his head in thanks, his cheeks pink.

“I should learn a new language one day, once the war is over. Won’t have time until then.” Harry looked around the Chamber and frowned. “Is Isuri back yet, sir?”

“Yes, she was poking around the pipes earlier. I have not seen her since.”

Isuri slithered out of a nearby hole. ~I am here, Master.~

Harry petted her slim body. ~Did you find any rats?~

~Yes, the kitchen elves seemed glad to have me. They said a snake will help keep the rodents away from the human food.~
Harry grimaced. ~*Good to know.*~

~*Master, I think I have checked all the pipes here I can reach. There is one more small snake skin in this pipe, but I have not seen any others.*~

~*Hmm. Good work, Isuri.*~

She nodded and slipped away, curling up on Severus’ bed for a nap.

The man gave the snake a wry look. “Do explain whose bed is whose, Harry,” he said with a snort.

“I think she knows.” Harry chuckled softly. ~*Isuri, Severus said to tell you that is his nest.*~

~*And now it is mine. He is not using it.*~

Harry laughed. “She knows.”

Severus snorted and shook his head. “I suppose she may nap there, so long as she will let me sleep when I am ready.”

“I’ll take care of it, sir.”

Severus nodded and went back to his book, and Harry dug out his Defence revision for tomorrow. For all he knew, Moody might ‘test’ them before the holidays.

As he opened the book, he remembered Isuri’s comments. “Oh, sir, I forgot to mention, Isuri wanted to let us know she found one more skin in that last pipe, but she thinks that’s it. She can’t find anywhere else to explore.”

Severus rubbed his chin, a frown on his features. “Only four skins for a thousand year-old basilisk?”

“I don’t know what to tell you. She said it was a small skin too, so I have no idea where the big skins are.”

“Hmm. Well, we’ll keep looking. Perhaps I might find a spell to help.”

Harry gave him a wry look. “Or you could just invent something. I’ve seen that book, you know.”

Severus shuddered. “Harry, some of those spells—you must promise me you will *never* use *Sectumsempra.* Of all the spells I created, that is the darkest.”

Harry nodded. “I promise, but what is it?”

“The cutting spell that nearly killed me.”

“Jesus! Bastard tried to murder you with your own spell? What a berk.” Harry frowned. “Sir, why *did* you invent that? It’s so… it’s brutal.”

Severus closed his eyes and clenched his fists in his lap. His emotions reeked of fear. “I… I cannot.” He took a deep breath and slowly unclenched his hands. “It is not something I am prepared to speak of, Harry. Simply promise me you will not use it against anything alive.”

Despite his curiosity, Harry thought it best not to push him to talk. “I have done, sir, and I meant it.”

“Ah, yes.” Severus shook his head as if coming out of a dream—or bad memories. “Well, I must make some progress on this translation. Go and finish your work.”
“All right.” Harry gave him a sad smile. “You do know that if you want to talk about things, I’ll listen without judgment, right?”

Severus lowered his head. “Would that I had seen it sooner. Yes, I am aware. Like your story with the porcelain shards, this is simply an aspect of my past I am not prepared to face.”

Harry shuddered at the mention of that horrible memory. “Y-yes, sir. I understand that.”

“Good. Go and finish your homework, Harry. I will speak to you when I am finished with this chapter.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry settled into his revision, reviewing facts and figures. He knew the theory by heart, but names and dates sometimes eluded him. When he had studied as much as he could stand, he set aside his homework and went to sit with Severus. The man had stopped reading and was staring off into space, the biting book secured firmly with a binding spell. Ah. That explained how he had read the blasted thing without injury.

“Sir?”

Severus jumped and gave him a curious look. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. I just wanted to talk to you earlier, but it didn’t seem like a good time with you working.”

Harry drew his knees up to his chest. “I hope you’re not angry, but Neville and Luna know about you now. I talked to them about how we’re getting along better earlier—yes, I made absolutely sure no one else would hear it, and Luna and Neville won’t reveal your secrets.” He made a face.

“Actually, I think Luna might know a lot more than I told her. She’s a Seer or something—well, a medium, she says. She talks to some kind of supernatural beings, that’s for sure.”

“A medium?” Severus gasped. “That is how you discovered the counterchant for my chest injury. Lovegood saw it?”

“ Heard it, more like, but yes, sir.” Harry gave him a nervous look. “Will you… maybe not tell the headmaster that?”

“I suppose I can attempt to avoid it, but why?”

Harry’s gaze sharpened. “Because he’ll use her for his own gain and say it’s for the ‘greater good.’”

Severus tentatively rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “Why do you say that?”

Harry gave Severus a slight smile and leaned into his touch. “Because it’s true. It’s a good thing he works for the light, because the man is ruthless.”

“You misunderstand me, Harry. I am not asking why you think he is ruthless—as much as I care for the headmaster, he is rather brutal in his methods. I am asking what he has done to you personally to have earned your mistrust.”

“Besides dropping me at—” Harry cut himself off and buried his head in his hands. “A lot of things, sir, but the most recent was neglecting to inform me of the Prophecy until after Sirius was already dead.”

Severus stroked Harry’s hair, a touch that appeared to soothe them both despite Severus’ fears. It seemed the man had an easier time initiating contact than accepting it. Harry could deal with that,
though he wished he could reciprocate. Still, perhaps if he was patient, one day he might help the man recover from his fears.

“Dropping you where, Harry?”

Harry froze, dread icy in his gut. “It’s n-nothing, sir.”

“It is not nothing. Can you not speak of it?”

Harry shuddered. “S-sir, it’s like your spell. I can’t talk about it. It’s not that I don’t trust you. I do. I just can’t… can’t relive it.”

Severus’ hand stilled in Harry’s hair. “You trust me?”

Harry leaned back so he could rest his head against Severus’ shoulder, like the man let him do when Harry was upset. “Yeah. You’re a good man, sir, even if we had a bad start.”

Severus paused for a long moment, then wrapped his arms around Harry’s shoulders and pulled the boy into his side. Harry’s breath caught. He hardly dared move as Severus embraced him, for the first time on his own will.

Harry turned his head against Severus’ shoulder and sighed, warm and content in the older man’s arms.

“I will not force you to speak of it, Harry,” Severus murmured, “but if you… wish to talk of what troubles you, I will listen.”

“You do all the time.” Harry gave him a sad look. “Like I said, I’ll listen for you too, you know. If you need to talk.”

Severus shivered. “I will try, Harry.”

“That’s good enough for me.”

Severus leaned back and returned his hand to Harry’s hair. “Did your friends take the news of our improved relationship well?”

“Yeah. Neville is glad for us both, though not in a hurry to say hello. And Luna… like I said, I think she knew all along.”

Severus gave a dark laugh. “Yes, I imagine Longbottom is quite content to stay far away from me.” He lowered his head. “Another child I have scarred.”

“I think… he’d forgive you, sir, if you wanted him to.”

“Perhaps I should make some kind of amends.” Severus sighed and leaned his head against the back of the sofa. “Merlin. I still have much to atone for, it seems.”

Harry brushed his fingers over Severus’ wrist. “You’re doing a good job with me, sir.”

Severus gave Harry that shadow of a smile, one that hinted at his lost joy. It hurt Harry sometimes, to see how little he had left.

“I am glad of that.” Severus stood. “Do you still have work to do tonight?”

“No, I’m fairly well caught up, and as it’s almost the end of term, the other teachers aren’t assigning
a lot of essays and such. Are you asking me to let you get back to work?”

Severus shook his head. “Actually, I would like your help. Do you recall I wanted to create a spell to remove shoes for people who are injured?”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure what I can do to help with that.”

“I think your approach to charms may be just what I need. Would you be willing to work with me on the spell matrix?”

Harry reeled. “R-really? You want my help with… Merlin!” He jumped up and grinned. “Yeah! But, um, I don’t know how to do a spell matrix. We weren’t supposed to cover them in Charms until next year.”

Severus smirked. “Well, you shall have quite the head start.”

Harry laughed and followed Severus to the man’s desk. “Hermione will lose the plot.”

“I should think, given how she has treated you lately, that would be more incentive than otherwise.”

“Exactly.” Harry studied the charts on Severus’ desk and frowned. “Sir, do I need to know Arithmancy for this?”

“It would help, but no. I will handle the calculations. I need your help with the actual magic manipulation and charm work.”


“Good. Now, the first step is to make the charm untie the shoes without tangling its laces or otherwise damaging either the shoe or its wearer, preferably both shoes at the same time. This is the step where this spell has always gone wrong in the past, ending up with laces cutting off legs or the spell unravelling the subject’s intestines along with their boots.”

Harry cringed. “Dear Merlin. Are you sure you want me—a novice—to help you with something so dangerous?”

Severus shook his head. “I have already managed to make a spell matrix that does not injure the wearer, but its current configuration does not unlace the shoes correctly either, nor does it work on both feet at the same time. Well, eventually, we will also need to take amputees and those with extra feet into consideration, but we must first create a spell that works on both shoes and only the shoes. I believe you are capable enough to help me with that.”


“Good.” Severus flicked his wand, revealing a complex web of magic upon his desk. “This is the current matrix configuration. Now, I have assigned this node here to the agnets, and this to….”

9 December

Harry snuck to the owlery while the other students attended breakfast. He and Severus had started eating earlier so while everyone else was filling their bellies, Harry could bring food for the owls and make sure they were healthy.
Over the past few days, Solaris had become more accustomed to Harry, though Isuri still startled him if she poked her head out. Harry had, at first, warned her to stay out of sight, but the owls had smelled her anyway. Neither one would approach until Harry had introduced them and explained that Isuri ate smaller prey and wasn’t hungry anyway.

By now, both birds were more used to Harry’s snake friend, and Hedwig had even gotten over her initial snit about Harry taking a second familiar. Informing her that Severus had Summoned Isuri as a way to save his life and Harry hadn’t been able to let him Banish her had helped smooth her ruffled feathers.

After the birds had finished their breakfast, Solaris landed on Harry’s outstretched arm and gave him a little nudge.

“Are you worried about your human, little one?”

Solaris bobbed his head.

“He’s doing well. He’s safe and recovered from the attack, and he’s been using his time in isolation to catch up on research he hasn’t had time to work on over the years. We’ve already made a new spell to take off shoes by magic, and we’re working on another to trace magic light through holes.”

Harry sighed. “We’re trying to find out if there’s more to… our hiding spot that meets the eye. Isuri hasn’t been able to find much, not yet, and we’re hoping the light spell will help, once we finish it.”

Solaris gave a relieved hoot and nuzzled Harry’s cheek.

“You’re welcome. Go on up, though. I’ll be late for Charms.” He grinned. “I’m looking forward to it. Your human said my essay will make Hermione’s look trite.”

A wave of sadness washed over him. “Is it wrong that I’m eager to see her taken down a peg? She almost killed me trying to force me to revise and she’s been so awful lately… I don’t know. Maybe it’s not very nice of me. But at the same time, I can’t help but think learning she’s not the only person with some intelligence would be good for her.”

Solaris gave a soft whoo.

Harry smiled and petted his head. “Thanks. I’ll let your human know you miss him. Maybe we can sneak up here after curfew soon.”

Solaris bobbed his head and took off with a cheerful hoot. Harry watched him settle beside Hedwig before grabbing his rucksack and slinking down the owlery stairs. He’d gotten so good at blending in with the scenery, no one noticed him even ten metres from the classroom. Just in case, he ducked into an alcove and watched the others from the safety of shadows.

Ron and Hermione had snuggled up to one another, no surprise there. Dean stood a fair distance away from Seamus and scowled at him. Seamus glared back. Sally-Anne Perks, Lisa Turpin, and Lavender were gossiping away. The other students gathered around the girls, listening with wide eyes. Harry’s name came up too often for comfort.

Still, he had expected all of that. It was the other redhead waiting by the door that turned his stomach sour.

What the hell was Ginny doing there? She had her own classes, and McGonagall had already put her through the wringer for her behaviour. Merlin. Just how obsessed was she?

Harry suppressed a shudder and decided he was fine where he was, at least until Flitwick arrived.
A flicker of magic spread over him, and Harry turned, ready to hex whoever had dared cast on him without permission, but relaxed at the sight of Neville and Luna with their hands up in a gesture of surrender.

“Sorry to startle you, Harry,” Neville said with a hesitant smile.

“We didn’t want the Dinglegangers to overhear,” said Luna, solemn as the grave.

“Er… Dinglegangers?” Harry kept his voice low in case their voices carried over the silencing charm. “That’s a new one.”

“Gossipers and idiots,” said Neville with a snort. He turned to look at the crowd gathered before the classroom door and frowned. “Merlin. What’s Ginny doing here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Luna shook her head. “The cloud of Ticklebees around her is so thick, she can’t see the Nootenwinds for the Weavans.”

Even Neville looked perplexed at that. “Um… so it’s more of her obsession then?”

Luna tittered. “That’s what I said.”

Harry gave Neville a wry look. “Mate, I reckon you ought to start writing a key for Luna-speak. You’re about the only one of us who understands.”

Neville chuckled and rubbed the back of his hair. “Maybe. It would certainly make my life easier.”

Harry laughed. “True. And speaking of making lives easier, my friend and I finished the boot spell last night. Works like a charm!”

“It is a charm, so that’s rather a good thing,” said Luna with a wide smile.

Harry grinned. “Yeah. It even works on amputees now. Well, we tried it on a medical manikin with one leg anyway. And on a lot of others with different combinations of shoes and more than two legs. We just had to alter the matrix so that it recognised the laces on the person as one entity rather than individual strands. After we did that, it didn’t seem to matter how many shoes it needed to untie at once—it worked the right way every time.”

Neville beamed. “Harry, that’s bloody amazing!”

Harry blushed. “Well, it’s just a simple spell. Nothing fancy. And my friend made the spell base—I just helped him get it to work right.”

“Still, no one’s ever been able to figure it out before you.” Neville clapped him on the back. “Well done. I have to say, knowing that you’re a spellcrafter now, I can’t wait to see how your essay turned out.”

Harry smirked. “You’re not the only one. My friend said he wants me to memorise every detail of Hermione’s expression for the pensieve later.”

Luna and Neville laughed.

“He does have a bit of a vindictive streak,” said Neville wryly, “but he cares about you. I never thought I’d live to see the day.”

“That makes… probably all of us, mate. Even him.”
Luna patted Harry’s shoulder. “You might not know it yet, Harry, but you’re healing his wounds. The Clarents tell me the number of Wrackspurts eating his spirit have gone down quite a bit.”

Harry frowned, bemused. “And what are the Clarents and Wrackspurts again?”

“Wrackspurts make a person grieve. Clarents tell me how people are feeling.” She gave him a curious look. “Harry, do you hear the Clarents too?”

“So I do?” He frowned. “Um… maybe. I’ve been hearing people’s thoughts and getting snatches of their emotions anyway. Not all the time though.”

“Ah!” Neville grinned. “You’re an Empath. So is Luna, so maybe you do hear her Clarents.”

Luna gave him a dreamy smile and a nod. “Though, I can’t hear thoughts on my own. The Windsprites do that.”

“Maybe it just works differently for Harry.”

“So this hearing other people’s thoughts and emotions thing, it means I’m an Empath?” Harry shuddered. “I don’t think I should tell my friend that. He might think I’m using it to manipulate him. Might be best to keep that to myself.”

“Perhaps for now,” said Luna with a frown, “but not always. It isn’t a good idea to keep secrets from your friends.”

Harry considered the number of secrets he kept and lowered his gaze. “I… there are a lot of things I just can’t talk about, Luna. Not yet.”

“Hmm, I understand. In time, I think you’ll be able to, at least with him.”

“Are your Feathersprites saying that?”

“No, just women’s intuition.”

Harry gave a wry snort. “Luna, between that, Empathy, and being a medium, you’re downright dangerous.”

She giggled. “Yes. Well, I’d best go for now though. I need to be in Transfiguration in a few moments.”

Harry gave her puppy dog eyes. “Can you possibly drag Ginny away?”

“Well, I can try, but she might not be able to hear me over all the buzzing in her brain.”

Harry stifled a laugh in his hands, afraid it would carry over the silencing barrier. “Gods, Luna. You’re amazing.”

She beamed. “I quite like you myself. I’ll see you later, boys.” With a wave, she stepped out of their silencing field, cancelled the spell over herself, and made her way to the door. Harry watched, curious to see what the girl would do.

“Ginny,” Luna said with a smile, “it’s almost time for Transfiguration. We shouldn’t be late.”

Ginny gave her a pout. “But Harry hasn’t come yet.”

“Well, considering that you’re stalking him, I can’t say I’m surprised.”
Harry and Neville stifled laughs.

Ginny frowned at her friend and stood akimbo. “W-what? Not you too, Lu. You know I wouldn’t do that. It’s just that he’s got a lot to deal with, and I want to help.”

“The Clarents say you’re doing the opposite of that,” said Luna with a shake of her head. “And class starts in one minute.”

Ginny scowled and set her feet. “I’m waiting to see him off.”

“You’re going to be waiting right into a detention,” said Hermione, frowning down her nose. “Luna is right, for once. Sort of. I think. Anyway, you really are stalking him—Professor McGonagall just boxed your ears about it Sunday, remember? And Gryffindor can’t afford to lose any more points either way. Just go to class, Ginny.”

“Oi,” Ron said, frowning. “Don’t be mean to her, Hermione. She just wants to help.”

“No, she doesn’t. And besides, she’s just driving him away like this.”

Luna fixed Hermione with a piercing look. “I think you should talk to the Narcissi.” She turned and shook her head. “Well, I am not going to be late. Bye.”

Luna vanished around the corner. Ginny watched her go, biting her lip.

Harry whispered to Neville, “What does she mean by Narcissi?”

“The story of Narcissus is a Greek myth about a man who fell in love with his own reflection and pined away staring at himself in a lake. She’s basically telling Hermione to look in the mirror.”

Harry snorted. “She should do!” He frowned and rubbed his chin. “You know, maybe I should read some about Greek mythology. I bet my friend has some books on it.”

“He migh—oh. Look.”

Professor Flitwick had just turned the corner. From their sheltered alcove, Harry and Neville watched as Flitwick ushered the students into the classroom and frowned at Ginny.

“Miss Weasley, this is not your class. I suggest you run along.”

“But I’m waiting for—”

“Nevertheless, you’re quite late for your own class, so unless you go now, I’ll be forced to take points.”

“Go, Ginny,” Seamus snapped. “Harry’s gone and lost us enough without you taking more away. Don’t know what you see in him anyway.”

Flitwick shot Seamus a reproachful look. “That is quite enough from you, Mister Finnigan.” He waved Ginny on. “Miss Weasley, you are holding up my class.”

“All right, all right.” She scowled and turned on her heel, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

She hadn’t made it far when Flitwick said, “Ah, but where are Mister Potter and Mister Longbottom?”

“We’re both here, Professor,” Harry said, coming out of the shadows.
Ginny stopped and wheeled around. “Harry? Where did you come from?”

“Been there the whole time,” he muttered, and dragged Neville into class before she could start pawing him again.

“Wait, I—”

Flitwick guarded the door. “Miss Weasley, five points from Gryffindor. Off with you, now, before I add a detention.”

Seamus groaned. “Ginny!”

“Y-yes, sir.” She turned and stormed away.

Professor Flitwick closed the door behind the boys and gave Harry a commiserating look. “Believe it or not, I was more popular than I wanted to be in school as well. Something to do with my height, I suppose.” He shrugged and motioned them into their seats. “I don’t mind if you need to take cover until class starts, Harry. Just try to be here on time when you can.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry gave a sigh of relief and sat at an empty table, one near enough to Ron and Hermione that he could see her without risking being drawn into unwanted conversation. Though it seemed after the debacle in Ancient Magic, she had stopped speaking to him. Not that he minded at the moment. After the way Hermione had been treating him lately, Harry could use a bit of peace and quiet. Merlin, he hoped Severus’ prediction panned out.

Hmm. Maybe Severus wasn’t the only one with a vindictive streak.

Well, he’d said it himself. Hermione needed to be brought back down to earth. She was completely obsessed with being the top student, and her self-righteousness really needed to be nipped in the bud. It could only do her good to learn others could also perform well in academic pursuits, and without her force-feeding them her notes or driving them to revise at all hours of the day.

Still, butterflies and doubt had begun to build in Harry’s belly. Severus wasn’t the Charms teacher. Maybe Flitwick wouldn’t feel the same way that Severus did about Harry’s innovations. Maybe he would prefer things to be done by the book and by rote, like Hermione always did. Or maybe it just wasn’t as good of an essay as they thought.

Well, he supposed he would find out in a moment.

“Good morning, class.” While the students responded, Flitwick climbed onto his usual stack of books and beamed at them. “Well, you all did quite well on your essays. I was very impressed with one in particular.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry watched as Hermione straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. Beside him, Neville was watching her too. Harry barely suppressed a snort.

“As you know, I give ten points to the best essay in class, however this time… I confess I think I am inclined to give a few more. Not since Lily Evans—ah, Lily Potter, I should say—have I witnessed such brilliant understanding of the theory behind intent magic.”

A few scattered students turned curious looks on Harry. He crossed his fingers under the table and waited, his heart thundering. Hermione straightened her shoulders a little more and Ron gave her a besotted grin. Neville smirked.
“I must say, this time the winning essay came as quite a surprise.” Flitwick bounced up and down, his excitement palpable.

Harry’s heart jumped. Oh! Was it possible? Had he really done it?

Beside him, Hermione’s brows drew together and her lips turned down. That was a good sign.

Flitwick continued, “The concepts discussed—it was quite a treat for this old man to see such profound understanding and innovation in what is, without a doubt, one of the most complex concepts in magical theory.” Flitwick gave Harry a beaming smile. “Well done, Mister Potter. Twenty points to Gryffindor, and I would like to speak to you later about your thoughts on will transference, ah, if you have time, that is.”

Every eye turned to Harry, mouths wide open with shock. Hermione had gone dull red. Inside, Harry was ecstatic. He really had done it! Gods, he could hardly believe it. Severus would be proud, and somehow that thought made him even happier than his own success had done.

“Really?” Harry grinned. “Brilliant. I’d love to talk to you about it, sir.”

“Good, good. Perhaps we can meet af—”

“B-but, Professor,” Hermione cut across him without bothering to raise her hand. The diminutive man gave her a displeased look but did not interrupt. “How can that be? I gave Harry my notes to study from, so shouldn’t mine have been the best?”

Flitwick’s eyebrows shot up. “Hmm. Well, you may have given him your notes, Miss Granger, but it’s fairly obvious Mister Potter chose not to use them. Your essays are as different as night and day.”

She blinked. “He… they are?”

“Yes. And next time do raise your hand.”

Harry raised his hand and waited to be called upon. “Sir, I wanted to do it on my own this time. I wasn’t sure if it would… well, I was a bit worried you’d prefer me just to stick to the books, but I feel like I’ve been leaning too hard on others for too long. So, pass or fail, I want to be graded on my own merits from now on. Especially since I can’t always depend on others to be there for me when the going gets tough.”

Ron and Hermione sank into their seats a bit.

Flitwick chuckled. “Is that so? Well, please continue to do so in the future, Mister Potter. This is the best work I have ever seen from you, indeed, the best I’ve seen in twenty years.”

Hermione flushed redder and ducked her head. Ron scowled at Harry and rubbed her back, muttering to her under his breath. Harry ignored them both.

“Now, with that done,” Flitwick went on, “I’d like to discuss some of what Harry pointed out in his essay with you today. I believe you all can learn from it.”

Hermione flinched and sank further into her seat.

Neville whispered in Harry’s ear, “Somehow, I don’t think I need Luna’s Feathersprites to know your friend is going to be laughing his arse off later.”

Even though he felt a bit guilty for it, Harry couldn’t help but grin.
Harry went by the tower after classes to pick up more clothing from his dorm and see if Isuri’s supplies had come yet. Seamus scowled at him and moved away as soon as he entered the common room. Most of the younger years gave him a wide berth, too.

As Neville hadn’t returned from the Greenhouses yet, Harry made a point to get in and out. He sure as hell didn’t want to be caught in the common room alone when Ginny came back. With a nod to the Creevey brothers, who were working over Colin’s photos nearby, Harry dashed up the stairs with every intention to throw some clothing in his rucksack and dart back out of the tower.

But the dorm wasn’t empty. Ron and Hermione were sitting on Ron’s bed, and Ron was scowling. Hermione had that manic look in her eyes Harry knew all too well. Apparently their Charms marks hadn’t sat well with her, especially so soon after Harry’s group had wiped the floor with her in Herbology.

Merlin, he didn’t want to deal with her in that kind of mood. He debated on whether he would just leave and try to come back tomorrow, but he really needed to check his post. And Isuri needed her food and supplies. And he could only do with laundering charms so many times before they started wearing on his clothes.

Maybe he should just send Dobby after his post and belongings, but gods. He shouldn’t be afraid to go into his own bedroom… should he?

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest and stuck out her chin. “I’m falling behind, Ron. We’ve got to revise more.”

“More? I already gave you another hour, ‘Mione, and we were revising five hours a day before then. Merlin, I don’t want to spend all my time revising.”

“Well, I want to pass! I’m a Muggleborn, Ron, and a woman! Unless I get the top grades, I don’t have a chance in such a patriarchal, class-driven society. I have to do well, I have to!”

“But it’s two bloody assignments, Hermione. Two. It doesn’t really matter that much in the—oh.”

Harry grimaced. They’d seen him while he was wavering in indecision.

“Uh… I’m just here to check my post.” Face burning, he pretended he hadn’t heard anything and scurried to his desk. Ah, Isuri’s terrarium had come—shrunken in a neat little cube and covered in preservation charms—and it appeared her mice had come too. Good. There was a letter under the terrarium as well. Harry picked up the missive and had unrolled the parchment halfway before Hermione snapped.

“What did you do to get such a grade on the Charms essay, Harry?” Her voice crackled with fury and accusation. “Your… guest wrote it, didn’t he? You got tutoring from him while the rest of us have to struggle on alone!”

Harry whirled around and fixed her with a fierce glare. “You don’t think I could have possibly come up with such a concept on my own? Never mind that I’ve crafted a new spell this week—with my guest’s help, of course, but I came up with the solution to the problem—and the fact that my mother was an Unspeakable and Charms master. I suppose because I’m not a walking textbook, I can’t have an original idea in my head.”
Hermione hissed, “You’ve never done so well!”

Harry scowled, fury forcing out words he hadn’t meant to say. “Well, yes, because I spent the last six years choking down your notes.”

She gasped and blinked hard. “You… you don’t mean that….”

Ron rounded on him. “Oi! You take that back! Hermione’s brilliant.”

Harry took a deep breath and tried to speak rationally. It wasn’t easy with indignation and rage boiling in his blood.

“I never said she wasn’t intelligent,” he gritted out. Another deep breath took the sharpest edge from his tone. “You are smart, Hermione, but you’re too bloody rigid. You won’t think outside the box at all, and that’s why I scored higher than you today. And no, my guest didn’t help me. Well, he corrected one spelling, but you’ve done much more than that to my essays before, so I don’t want to hear you shouting about it.”

Hermione slapped her hand on the nightstand. “But that just can’t be! There’s no way you could have scored so well on your own!”

Harry’s eyes sparked and he advanced on them, hands curling into fists and chest tight with rage. “So that’s how it is, hmm?” His voice came out icy-cold. “You’ve always been top in everything except Defence—and of course since there’s a reason for that, you don’t need to feel challenged. I’m supposed to be the best at Defence, right? Defeated or escaped Riddle umpteen times, then there’s the prophecy and all that, so of course I’m the top student. But in academic classes? Apparently anyone who does better than you is a cheat.” He turned his back and grabbed his post, tears burning his eyelids and fury boiling in his gut. “You’re just hacked off because someone beat you for once.”

Ron shouted, “Oi! You shut up about her!”

Harry wheeled on him. “Naff off, Ron! You were just whinging about it too, so don’t tell me I can’t tell the bloody truth!” He flicked out a wrist, blind to everything but rage and the bitter pain of betrayal. “Accio Harry Potter’s clothing!”

A veritable storm of black, red, and grey extricated itself from Harry’s wardrobe and trunk and slapped into his chest.

Ron shouted, “You can’t just—”

Isuri hissed in irritation and poked her head out of his shirt, stopping Ron mid-rant. ~Master, please do not strike me when I am hiding.~

Harry petted her head gently. ~Sorry, Isuri. I did not mean to hit you.~

“S-s-snake,” Ron gasped out. “Wh-why do you have a s-snake?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Because she’s my familiar. Why wouldn’t a Parselmouth have a snake?”

Ron grimaced and edged away. “You’re turning into a S-Slytherin!”

Harry fixed him with a sharp glare. “You know what? The few Slytherins I’ve been around the past week or so have all been treating me a hell of a lot better than either of you, so if I’ve gone snake, then so be it!”
He shrank the pile of his clothing with another flick and stuffed the lot into his pocket. He added his post atop that and stormed out, fuming and holding back tears. Hermione called his name, but he ignored her. It was one thing for her to be irritated that Harry beat her. He had prepared for that. But to act as though he couldn’t beat her without Severus hand-feeding him his essay—that he wasn’t intelligent enough to outscore her on his own? That stung.

And Ron! Maybe he was her boyfriend and had to fight her battles, but at the expense of his friendships? He was only enabling her flaws—and complaining about them in the same breath.

Gods, Harry had thought better of them, but they had let him down in spectacular fashion, and it hurt. A knife had buried itself in his chest and his breath came at the cost of blood. He held back tears by the merest thread and, blurred as his vision was, he didn’t see the redhead approaching him until her arm had linked through his.

“Harry! There you are. I’ve been lo—”

“Stop!” Harry was beyond delicacy at this point. He’d been careful with her for Ron’s sake, but Ron had just broken his heart, and he couldn’t take her violations anymore. “For gods’ sake, Ginny, stop fucking touching me!” He backed away and jerked a hand across his eyes to clear his vision. “Let me make this clear to you now since you seem to have gotten some strange ideas about me into your head: I am not interested! I do not want to be your boyfriend! I don’t even like you as a friend any longer, what with the way you’ve been treating me lately. For gods’ sakes, leave me the hell alone!”

Ginny stuck out her chin and stamped her foot. “You… you’re just confused. You keep pushing people away but—”

She reached for his hand, but Harry snarled and backed away. His magic crackled around him in a spectacular display of green and blue light. Such was the power of his fury, his hair stood on end, prickling his scalp and swaying with the currents of his magic.

“Get it through your head, Ginny. The answer is no! Not maybe later, not wait for me—it’s hell-fucking-NO!”

At such a display of danger, Ginny finally backed down and, tears on her lashes, darted for the girls’ dorm.

From a nearby corner, someone clapped. Harry looked up to see Neville watching him with a look of pride and solidarity. He must have come in while Harry was arguing with his former best friends.

“Bloody hell, but that was brilliant, Harry. And very, very overdue.”

But Neville stood alone. The rest of the house, excepting only Dean and the Creevey boys, stared at him as if he would cut them all to ribbons any second. Harry’s magic sank back into his skin and the prickling sensation melted away. Tears blurred the sight of thirty terrified faces, and he turned away, shoulders hunched and heart shattered. He had to get out of there.

The sound of footsteps on the boys’ dorm staircase decided him. Merlin help him, he couldn’t deal with Ron and Hermione right now. Heart bleeding with the betrayal of nearly his entire house, Harry turned tail and fled.

He heard footsteps behind him and cringed, fearful Ron had followed to exact retribution for scaring off his ‘innocent’ little sister, but a quick glance over his shoulder showed Neville following him at a sprint.

“Harry, wait up.”
Harry slowed until Neville could run beside him.

“I’m sorry,” Neville pleaded, panting. “I didn’t mean to hurt you by that, Harry. I just thought she’s had it coming for a long time.”

“I-it wasn’t you.” Harry darted into an alcove and tried to catch his breath. If not for the anguish in his chest and the sobs crowding his throat, he might have done. “They all looked at me like I’d killed her.”

“Idiots.”

“A-and Ron and Hermione—”

“Yeah, Dean and Colin are busy giving them what-for right now.”

Harry winced and dragged a hand across his eyes. “That’s not—I-I just want to get out of here, Nev.”

Neville nodded. “You need your other friend.”

Harry sniffled and hugged his chest. “W-why does he make me feel so much better? I… I don’t understand it.”

“I don’t reckon we need to. If he’s what you need, then let’s get you to him.” Neville wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders, and Harry leaned into the comfort, covering his face to hide the tears he couldn’t stop.

“Come on,” Neville murmured. “Let’s go before the gawkers come.”

“Yeah.” Harry wiped his face and let Neville lead him. “N-Nev? Thanks.”

“It’s what friends do.”

Harry closed his eyes around a sharp ache. Not all friends, apparently.
Standing Together

Chapter Summary

No warnings. Next update will be on the 21st. A bit early for Christmas, but right on time for the Solstice!

Chapter 22

Standing Together

Severus had to admit, he was looking forward to Harry’s return after classes. The boy’s essay would floor Filius, he had no doubt about it. Granger was an intelligent girl—no one could deny that—but she hadn’t an original thought in her head. She devoured and memorised every text she could get her hands on, regurgitating the proper passages whenever the need arose, but to see beyond the words on the page, to take those written theories and conceive of something new, was beyond her. Granger had a talent for retaining knowledge, but Harry had the talent to create.

Merlin, that boy would be a brilliant wizard one day.

And gods, he wished he had seen it sooner. Gods forgive him, Severus had the feeling he had destroyed Harry’s potential in potions. An innovative mind like Harry’s should have done well, but he had never given Harry a chance, had he?

Severus laid his book aside and paced. He missed brewing, and as he had finally finished harvesting the basilisk and the foundation of his antivenin formula, he needed to begin his experiments anyway. A part of him wanted to test Harry too, to get an idea of his skill level in potions without the pressure of hatred weighing the boy down. He hadn’t seen Harry brewing any potions lately, so he had no other basis to go by.

Then again, Harry hadn’t any potions lessons at the moment and he had said he had fewer visions in the Chamber. Perhaps something about the magic on the room blocked them.

That was a frightening thought. Harry had at least one vision a night. If that was relief, dear gods, what was his normal?

No wonder the boy had looked so exhausted before.

“It’s nightmares, sir.”

More than nightmares. Severus shook his head and kicked at the floor, ashamed at the part he had played in Harry’s suffering.

“I will make amends… somehow.” He would start by improving his Dreamless Sleep formula for Harry. Perhaps sleep without nightmares would go some way towards healing the breach.

The outer door to the Chamber opened, and Severus moved back to his chair, all maudlin thoughts
vanishing in anticipation of seeing Granger knocked down a peg. Merlin, but that girl had all but driven him mad these past six years. A know-it-all who didn’t know nearly as much as she thought was irritating. Especially when she never said anything wrong—just uninspired.

Well, perhaps he was expecting too much from a teenager. She might grow into the size of her brain, one day.

Severus’ smirk of anticipation dropped off his face as the door opened. Harry zoomed into the Chamber on his Firebolt, blinded by tears, and almost crashed into the statue.

“Harry!”

The boy pulled the broom up short just in time and let it down. “S-sorry.”

Severus ran to him and visually checked him for injuries. “Never mind that, are you all right?”

Harry sniffled and hugged his chest. “I… no. I’m really, really not.”

With a sad sigh, Severus took Harry’s wrist and led him to the sofa. “I am listening.”

Harry gave a wry laugh and a tearful smile. “Merlin, things really are backwards, aren’t they? You’re helping me and… well, you’re trying so hard. Yet my supposed friends….” He cut off his words and dropped his gaze.

A fierce surge of fury and protectiveness surprised Severus. It had been so long since he had experienced those feelings for anyone other than Draco or Daphne, and even then, the urge to shield had never been so strong. With a frown, he sat next to Harry, tentatively guiding the boy to rest against his shoulder.

“What happened?”

Harry sighed and leaned against Severus’ side. “Well, I went to the tower after class to check my post and see if Isuri’s things had come yet. They have—I have them with me and a letter too—but when I got to the dorm, Hermione and Ron were already there and in the middle of a blazing row….”

Severus listened to Harry’s story with apparent aplomb, though inside he was boiling. How could they have treated him so badly? And to suggest Severus had spoon-fed Harry his essay? Utterly ridiculous. The brats didn’t know Harry and Severus had reconciled beyond basic trust and acceptance. Granger must have been mad with jealousy to have dared to suggest such tripe. Perhaps another chat with Minerva was in order.

And he had half a mind to see the Weasley girl expelled if she didn’t learn some proper boundaries.

Harry moved back and wiped his face. “Sir, thank you for listening. I feel a lot better.”

Severus patted his shoulder. “Well enough to eat, perhaps? I am famished.”

Harry nodded. “Do you mind if I just check this letter first? I didn’t have a chance to read it earlier with all the chaos.”
“Not at all.”

Harry gave him a soft smile. “You’ve changed so much, sir. I’m… it makes me really happy.” He blushed. “Oh. I hope… I didn’t mean that in a bad way. I… um….”

“You did not offend me. Read your letter.”

“R-right. Sorry. I guess all this upset has made me really insecure about my friendships.”

Harry opened his parchment to read, leaving Severus silently reeling from his words. A friend. Harry considered him a friend. A close one, if he had come to Severus for support rather than leaning on a boy who had been like his brother for six years.

He didn’t understand how Harry could hold so much forgiveness and affection for a man who had been so cruel to him, but the thought that Harry valued him, that he wanted Severus’ friendship and feared losing it left Severus feeling brighter and warmer than he had in twenty-five years. Not since Lucius had begun systematically stripping every bit of joy from Severus’ life had he felt so… light.

Merlin. He had a friend.

Fear came crashing down on the tail end of his joy. Nearly every friend he had ever had, he had also lost. He had only Minerva and Albus left, and already he was much closer to Harry than Minerva. And he trusted Harry far more than Albus.

Gods, Severus had to take care to keep his new relationship with Harry healthy. He couldn’t endure losing him, too.

“Oh!” Harry stared at his letter with wide eyes. “Oh Merlin.”

Severus shook himself out of his thoughts. “What is it?”

“It’s… it’s from Madam Pomfrey. She says she’ll be thrilled to teach me potions—but this… Merlin. It looks like our dear headmaster has been meddling again, but this time it’s not bad. As soon as he told her that I rescued you and how I did it, she decided she wants to talk to me about becoming her apprentice.”

Severus’ heart thumped, bubbling with both pain and joy at once. He was happy Harry had found a possible niche, but miserable that his own folly had taken the boy out of his classes. Now he would never have the chance to correct his mistakes.

“Well done, Harry.”

Harry’s smile made Severus forget his grief. Maybe he had screwed up, but as long as Harry was happy, that was all that really mattered, wasn’t it?

Still, the thought that he would like a second chance would not leave him alone. He mused on the situation through dinner and, by the time Harry finished revising for the night, had made up his mind.

“Harry?”

Harry looked up from his charms homework and gave Severus a warm smile. “Hmm?”

“Do you believe my hatred of you affected your abilities in potions?”

Harry’s cheeks went red. “Um… a-are you sure this is a good subject? I-I don’t want you angry with me.”
“Just be honest. I am aware I have stunted your liking for the subject. I would like to know if you also felt you could not perform up to standard.”

Harry turned away and twisted his hands in his lap. “Well, um, I… it was awfully hard to concentrate when….”

Severus winced. “When every spare moment, I was tearing you to bits.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

Severus sighed and wrapped his arms around his chest. “I would like to… if you are amenable, I would like to assess your abilities again.”

Harry paled. “Sir, please! I… I don’t know if I can do it well enough and I don’t want you to hate me again. Please.”

Severus sat on the edge of Harry’s desk and stroked his hair. “Peace. I shall not hate you. Indeed, I think I cannot.”

Harry leaned into his touch and closed his eyes. “E-even if I explode the cauldron?”

Severus’ lips twitched. “Even then.” He wrapped his arms around his waist once more. “It does not sit well with me that I have harmed your skill and appreciation in my field. And so, I wish to know how you do when I am not breathing vitriol down your neck.”

Harry stared at his desk and chewed on his lip. “You… you won’t attack me?”

“No. I have hurt you too much as is.”

Harry sighed and gave a hesitant nod. “I’ll get Dobby and Winky to help set up your lab.”

Severus bowed in thanks and gave Harry’s shoulder a brief pat. “I will prepare a space while you retrieve them.”

Harry nodded. “Just don’t expect much.”

“Hmm. I believe this time I will go into the experiment with no preconceived notions at all. Is that acceptable?”

Harry gave him a shy smile. “Yeah. Sounds good.”

Harry stood in front of Severus’ temporary lab table, heart racing and cold sweat pooling at the base of his spine. Gods, what was he thinking, trying to make a suitable potion for Severus? They would be enemies again in five minutes, if it took that long.

His breath hitched. He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t lose Se—

A gentle hand settled on his shoulder.

“Harry, breathe. If you are truly so terrified, I will not force you.”
But the sorrow in Severus’ tone, the remorse, made Harry want to try, if only to take the pain from his friend’s voice.

“I… I’ll try. I’m just scared.”

Severus stroked Harry’s hair, and the soft, tender gesture made Harry’s fear evaporate in spite of his better judgment. Merlin, Severus’ touch soothed him like nothing else. He wanted to curl up against the man’s chest and soak up his affection. He wouldn’t, of course—it would only terrify his touch-phobic friend—but startling as it was, he wanted to.

And he wanted to prove himself to Severus. He just wasn’t sure he could hope to measure up.

Still, if he never tried, he would never know.

He firmed his resolve. Severus had said he wouldn’t hate him, even if Harry botched his efforts entirely. Perhaps it was time to trust him at his word and believe Severus truly had left the shadow of his former self behind.

“All right. What am I making then, sir?”

“Hmm.” Severus moved to stand beside Harry and flicked his wand several times without saying a word. Various ingredients floated from his nearby storage cabinet to land on the table. Harry noted the presence of burdock, feverfew, devil’s claw, and billywig stingers and gulped.

“Tell me, Harry, what potion are you going to brew?”

Harry coughed. Shite. Severus knew he’d been brewing his own potions. Well, it wasn’t like he had had a choice. It was either brew potions for his vision aftercare himself or suffer permanent nerve damage from repeated exposure and lack of treatment. Poppy would never allow him out of the Infirmary if she knew he was suffering under the _Cruciatus_ curse every night.

“Er, Anti- _Cruciatus_ Draught, sir?”

“Indeed. And would you like to tell me why you recognise it?”

Heat flushed Harry’s face. “B—been brewing it since fifth year. I had to.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “Peace. You are not in trouble. I only wanted you to tell me.”

Harry scowled at the ingredients. “Dumbledore told you, didn’t he?”

“ _Headmaster_ Dumbledore, Harry.”

“Bah! That meddling old coot infuriates me.”

Severus snorted. “And I do not?”

“Not anymore!”

Severus moved to the side, and Harry gave an inward cheer at the sight of a half-smile on his face. That was progress.

“No, show me what you can do,” Severus said, and Harry set to work.

Everything went well until it came time to add the billywig stingers. Then, as Harry went to chop them, he caught something out of place.
“Sir, why is this one purple?”

Severus’ breath caught. He moved to Harry’s side and carefully knocked his hand out of the way.

“Shite! That is not a billywig stinger—that is the spine of a death flower. Sweet Merlin, do not touch them. This entire sample has been contaminated.”

He flicked his wand and Vanished the contents with the same spell he had used on the basilisk venom. The containment field around the stingers turned dark purple before they disappeared, along with the phial and cutting board.

Harry’s heart slammed into his ribs. “Oh gods. Would that have—”

“Put your potion in stasis before it burns, Harry.”

Harry obeyed with a gulp. “Sir, that spine…?”

Severus gave him a grim nod. “It is quite as lethal as you imagine. Thank Merlin you saw it before you touched the stingers.” He shuddered. “Your seeker’s eyes have saved both of our lives. I am not sure I would have caught it in time.”

“Dear gods.” Harry swayed and Severus caught him. “I-it was Riddle, wasn’t it? Another attempt on your life?”

“Apparently so. I shall have to take great care in the future.” Severus sounded as shaken as Harry, but he pulled himself together. “If not for the fact that I am out of Anti-Cruciatus Draught and you have already had several visions this week, I would suggest we leave this where it is and continue when we are calmer, but it cannot wait. Are you able to continue or would you prefer me to take over at this point?”

If Harry’s seeker eyes had just saved Severus’ life, there was no way in hell he would let the man finish this potion. Not until they verified all of Severus’ remaining ingredients were safe.

“I’ll do it. Do you have more—”

In reply, Severus flicked his wand and sent a fresh bottle of stingers to Harry’s side. He turned out the entire jar onto a new cutting board and investigated the contents, then waited for Severus to do the same before he would touch them.

“Those are safe,” Severus assured him.

With a deep breath, Harry chopped the required amount of stingers and replaced the rest, removed his potion from stasis, and relit the flame. Once he had brought it to the right stage again, he levitated in the billywig stingers one at a time, watching the potion change colours. When it reached acid green, he stirred seven times anticlockwise, ten times clockwise, and tapped the cauldron three times to rid it of air pockets. The potion turned a bright lemon yellow.

Merlin, he hoped they were supposed to be that colour.

“Um… I think I’m finished, sir.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “You think?”

“Er, no. I know. I’m just not sure how I did.”

“Well, you did not cause your cauldron to explode, which is more than I can say for most sixth year
students attempting such a complex brew.”

At the anguished tone of Severus’ voice, Harry looked up to find the man staring at his potion, eyes tormented and his mouth turned down in more of a frown than a scowl.

“T ruining you,” Severus muttered.

Harry cautiously reached for the man’s hand, but paused at the memory of Ginny doing the same when he didn’t want to be touched. “Sir, can I?”

Severus stared at Harry’s outstretched hand. “Why do you want to? How can you forgive me? It is clear from this potion, had I not treated you so badly, you would have excelled. Will excel, under another instructor.”

Harry turned his palm up, offering his hand. “I just do.”

Severus sighed and took Harry’s hand in his own. “I am sorry, Harry.”

“I know. It’s okay.”

“It is not! I have destroyed your abilities—and this suggests you have as much of natural talent in the subject as Lily did. I… this is not okay.”

Eyes on his friend’s face, Harry carefully rubbed his thumb across Severus’ knuckles. “…if it really hurts you so much, maybe you could help Madam Pomfrey teach me? I imagine she won’t have time some days and… well, I’d like to learn from you too, if you really want to make up for the past.”

Severus held Harry’s hand against his side and stared into the cauldron, grief warring with hope.

“It’s really okay, sir. We can just start over now. Clean slate.”

Severus sighed and squeezed Harry’s hand. “Yes. I would like that, but perhaps it is best to leave your marks in the hands of Madam Pomfrey. I fear I am too close to you to judge fairly.”

Harry gave Severus a radiant smile. “Brilliant.” He stared at the phial of billywig stingers and shuddered. “But, um, maybe tonight we could spend time going through your ingredients storage and make sure everything is safe first?”

Severus nodded. “Yes. I would appreciate your assistance. Do take great care not to touch anything until you are certain it is not contaminated.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry had just climbed into bed, exhausted after a long night of sorting through Severus’ potions cupboard, when a bolt of white-hot pain shot down his scar and dropped him onto the pillow with a cry.

*Irritation and impotent fury made Harry’s unusually-sibilant voice sharp. “Over three dayssss have passsed and you ssstill have no information?”*
Before him, a man with cold grey eyes and silver-blonde hair scowled. “Draco has not seen him since the day he discovered the poison at breakfast, my lord, but neither has Dumbledore announced his death.”

“How… disappointing.”

“My lord, I—”

“Crucio!”

Malfoy dropped like a stone, and Harry paced slowly along the length of his twitching frame, holding the curse steady as he talked to himself in hissing tones. “I have poisoned his ingredientssss, his cloak, and his food, cut open his chessst, and sssent Nagini and Peter to kill him, yet he lives. Perhapss he has not compromised his position after all. It ssseems the old man is keen to protect him, at any rate.”

Harry scowled at Malfoy and released the curse. “Get out of my sssight.”

Malfoy staggered to his feet and limped towards the door, panting and twitching.

“Oh, and Luciusss? Do not disappoint me again. My pet ssservant mussst be quite uncomfortable in his current box, but I believe I can arrange one sssuitable to hold you ssshould the need arise.”

Malfoy grimaced. “Y-yes, my lord.”

The door closed, and Malfoy was gone.

“Well, well, well, Ssseveruss,” Harry muttered to himself. “Always one ssstep ahead. As a good ssspy ssshould be. Perhaps I might have ussse for you yet.”

Severus’ voice broke Harry out of the vision with a jolt. Harry gasped and bolted up, nearly banging his head against Severus’. The man released Harry’s shoulders and sat beside him, rubbing a gentle hand along his back.

“Accio Anti-Cruciatuss Draught and Headache Reliever.” Two potions, one blue, one yellow, soared into Severus’ hands. He handed Harry the blue first, and Harry swallowed it with a sigh of gratitude. The sickening pain in his skull eased enough to keep down the next potion too, and Harry finished both off with a conjured glass of water.

Severus nudged Harry to rest against his shoulder. “How bad was it?”

“He wasn’t murdering people.” Harry gasped. “Oh shite. Sir, you need to test all your cloaks for poison too.”

“My cloaks? Why do you say that?” Severus’ eyes narrowed. “He was speaking of me?”

“Yes. He said he poisoned one of them.”

Severus went ashen and shuddered. “Dear gods. It could only be my winter cloak. It is still in my quarters. I have not yet worn it since the first attack, but I had planned to gather ingredients in the forest tomorrow night. I could not do so with the students present—and now I suppose I cannot at all.”

“You can borrow my cloak, sir. It’s a bit short, but you can transfigure it, I think.”
“Oh. I… t-that will do. I… if you’re sure?”

“Why would I care? It’s a cloak, sir. The only thing is—well, now that I think about it, maybe you can ask to borrow Dumbledore’s instead. He’s closer to your size for one thing, and I don’t want to leave you alone right now for the other.” Harry lowered his head. “Unless you’d rather go without me.”

“I think, given the circumstances, I should not go alone.” Severus leaned on his knees and laid his head in his hands, shaking so hard the vibrations passed to Harry.

Gods, Harry had never seen him so terrified.

Harry touched Severus’ wrist, a light brush in case he recoiled, but it seemed Severus needed the comfort. He slipped his hand in Harry’s and leaned close, trembling and cold.

“Harry, what am I to do?” Severus’ voice came out soft and unsteady. “I cannot test everything I come in contact with. If he is so determined to kill me, he will succeed eventually. Sooner rather than later, I fear.”

Harry watched Severus’ face for signs of alarm and stroked his knuckles softly. Severus shivered, but did not let go.

“Sir, I think you’re going to be okay.”

“How can you think—?”

“Easy, sir. It’s all right. He thinks the headmaster is protecting you. And because of that, he also thinks you’re still valuable. I’m pretty sure he’s going to stop attacking you from here on out, but it’d probably be best to keep checking everything you can for a while, just in case.”

Severus let slip a shaky sigh. “He… what did he say exactly?”

Harry grimaced. “Well, I could just let you see it, but… well, um….”

“What?”

“M-Malfoy was in it, and I don’t want you to be hurt again.”

Severus stilled. “Why would Malfoy’s presence hurt me?” But Harry heard his hidden thoughts. [No, gods! Tell me he doesn’t know!] His sudden fear choked Harry, jangling in his belly and setting his heart racing.

Harry swallowed hard and forced his voice to work. “Um… I d-don’t know exactly. You just didn’t react well the last time I had a vision of Malfoy and I don’t want to hurt you, sir.” He stared at their still-joined hands and tried not to move. “I…I can try to remember it if you’d rather not see it. I’m just not sure I’ll get all the details.”

Severus sighed and let go of Harry’s hand, wrapping his arms around his chest. “No, I will view it. Look into my eyes and focus on your memory of the vision.”

Harry obeyed and let Severus into his mind. He shivered at the sense of his friend’s presence and held his wrist, needing the ballast to stay calm. Severus lowered his arm to allow the contact, and Harry let his memory play.

Afterwards, Severus gave a bitter laugh. “Well, Lucius got a bit of comeuppance at least. And I
must….” He held Harry’s shoulder and summoned his Patronus. “Calla, please tell Albus that Lucius is planning to break Pettigrew out of custody. Most likely through bribery, but he may use physical means, if his attempts fail. And, if possible, I will need to borrow or purchase a new winter cloak. It appears the Dark Lord has poisoned mine and the first crop of ice roses will be ready by tomorrow night. Off with you now.”

The doe bowed and bounded away.

“No that’s done….” Severus turned back to Harry and motioned to his bed. “We are going to work on shielding your mind right now in hopes you might avoid whatever backlash the Dark Lord has planned tonight.”

Harry obeyed and gave him a soft smile. “Thank you, sir, for helping me.”

Severus gave his small half-smile back. “I… yes. I will do from now on.” He took a deep breath and stroked Harry’s hair. “I want you to focus on the sensation of my hand. Nothing else—simply my touch. Block out all other thoughts, all other sensations. Let nothing distract you from this.”

Harry hesitated. He needed Severus’ touch, but feared hurting him.

“Sir, it’s not… you’re sure it’s okay? You’re not afraid?”

Severus’ hand stilled on Harry’s curls. “Not of you, little one. Focus on my touch now, and let it guide you to a place of safety.”

“Yeah.” Harry turned into his hand with a sigh. “Safe….” He closed his eyes and let Severus’ soothing, calming caress clear the dredges of pain and fear from his mind.

For the first time in a long time, Harry had pleasant dreams.
Chapter 23

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

25 December

Harry woke with a yawn and stretched. A quick check of the clock above his bed startled him. Four AM? Why on earth he had woken so early? It was the hols.

He yawned and lay back down, then his brain kicked on. It was Christmas!

Harry grinned and sat up, ruffling his messy hair. He wouldn’t have any presents at the foot of his bed like every other year—neither Hedwig nor the elves could get into the Chamber—but… wait a minute. There were presents! And a tree! Sitting in the corner by Severus’ conjured hearth and their sitting area.

He whispered, “How on earth…?”

A hissing chuckle from the foot of his bed brought Harry’s head around. ~Isuri, why are there gifts and a tree here?~

She slithered up Harry’s arm and coiled around his neck. ~Questions later, master. I am tired.~

~Isuri! Please tell me. If someone can enter our nest despite the magic, I need to know.~

~No. The nest is safe. Your friend with big ears saw me while I was hunting two days ago and asked me to let him in last night, as he had gifts for my master and his nest mate.~

Relief washed over him. ~Dobby?~

~Yes, master. May I sleep now?~

A surge of affection filled his heart, and Harry petted the snake’s back with a smile. ~Yes, you have earned a nice rest. Thank you, girl.~

~You are welcome, master.~

She laid her head on Harry’s shoulder, and in a moment, was fast asleep. He wondered sometimes how she managed to sleep on him when he moved, but she never seemed to have trouble. Well, she
was a rainforest snake. Maybe she was used to swaying trees and vines and the like.

With a giant grin, Harry clambered out of bed and made his way towards the tree, but the sight of his sleeping friend just beyond their screen stopped him. Severus’ hair was in his face again and he was trembling. His hand clenched and unclenched on the pillow. Was he having a nightmare? And how would Harry help if he was? Should he wake the man?

Well, maybe just moving his hair would help. Severus might have been scared simply because it was hard to breathe.

Carefully, Harry brushed the man’s hair out of his face and tucked it behind his ear. Severus sighed and turned into his touch slightly, and Harry’s heart jumped. A soft, sweet feeling flooded his chest. He would have liked to caress Severus’ hair and soothe his dreams that way, but no. Severus apparently feared touch much less while he slept, but to take advantage of him while he couldn’t consent would be unforgiveable.

Harry stepped back for fear of temptation and watched Severus sleep from the edge of the screen. He seemed comfortable now, his face soft and relaxed in repose.

The sight triggered a memory of the first time Harry had seen his sleeping face—on a manikin in the Room of Requirement while he trained to save the man’s life. Then, the change in his features had shocked Harry. Now, he had grown accustomed to seeing this softer guise, open and warm, a sign of the gentle heart Harry hadn’t believed Severus possessed once.

Gods, so much had changed since then. The past three weeks had brought him closer to Severus than he would have imagined possible on that fateful night in the Room.

The morning after they had organised Severus’ potions cupboard, the students had gone home for term. Of the Gryffindors, Harry had only said goodbye to Dean, Neville, and the Creeveys—who, while they ran in their own circles, had never been unkind to Harry. Hermione had approached like she wanted to apologise—or nag him again—but Harry’s dark glare had sent her packing. Of course, he said goodbye to Luna too. And, in hopes of developing new friendships—and gaining some ears in Slytherin house—he had also bid Zabini, Bulstrode, and Greengrass farewell.

“Call me Blaise,” the boy offered in return. His expression darkened. “I’m not so fond of my last name, you see.”

Harry snorted. “Really? What a coincidence. I don’t much like mine either.”

Zab—Blaise gave him a surprised look. “You don’t like Potter?”

“Nope.”

When Harry didn’t elaborate, Blaise shrugged and offered him a hand. “Harry, then.”

Harry shook his hand. “See you after the hols, Blaise.”

Blaise nodded and went his own way.

Greengrass and Bulstrode had also asked Harry to use their first names, and Harry offered his in turn. Astoria—Daphne’s younger sister and Luna’s dormmate—had offered her name and a tentative
alliance, as had a few of the younger Slytherins. Harry had even caught Malfoy once looking at him like he wanted to approach, but as soon as he noticed Harry watching him, the boy scowled and turned his back.

Interesting. Maybe the boy did have some secrets.

All in all, it was a good start making inroads into the snakes’ territory. Harry knew he could trust Daphne anyway. Her thoughts and motives, as well as Severus’ advice, had made that clear enough.

Before the girl left to head to the station, he had pulled her aside and set up a silencing charm.

“Daphne, can I trust you with something that’s life or death?”

The girl raised an eyebrow. “Why me, Harry? Why not Neville?”

“Neville already knows, but I need help in Slytherin too, and you’re the one Slytherin I know for sure I can trust with something so dangerous.”

Daphne frowned. “All right. I guess you want me to keep the Death Eaters away?”

Harry gave a low chuckle. “Good luck with that. Somehow they always manage to find me at least once a year, no matter how ‘protected’ I am.” He shook his head. “Not away from me, actually. You’ll only make yourself a target. I want you to keep an eye on them for Snape.”

Daphne’s eyes boggled. “Snape! Mother of Merlin! W-why would you—he loathes you, in case you haven’t noticed!”

Harry closed his eyes. “And this is where I need to be able to trust you. This is life or death, Daphne—and mine. Will you promise not to mention anything I’m about to tell you to anyone who doesn’t already know? Right now, that’s me, Professor Snape and a handful of the other teachers, Neville, Dean, Luna, and the headmaster.”

Daphne stared at him, bemused, but after a moment, gave him her vow. Harry sighed in sheer relief. It would be all right now, he hoped.

“Thank Merlin.”

Harry had proceeded to give her a brief rundown of events concerning Severus and asked her to watch over the man as best as she could. Daphne agreed, and he had watched from the shadows as Daphne went to leave. She made eye contact with Severus, held his gaze briefly, and gave him a slight nod. The wave of relief Severus felt at her forgiveness and understanding had rocked Harry to his core.

Yes, it seemed Harry was definitely an Empath.

Once the students had gone, Harry went to Madam Pomfrey about his apprenticeship.

“Ma’am, Professor Dumbledore told you I saved Professor Snape’s life, right?”

Pomfrey gave him a warm smile. “He did, and Merlin, Harry, I am so proud of you. Well done,
child. Well done.”

Harry’s breath hitched and warmth flooded his heart. Proud. Gods, he’d hardly ever heard it.

“T-thank you, ma’am.”

“Not at all.” She straightened her wimple and assumed her usual stern demeanour. “Now, Albus told me you healed Severus of a Sectumsempra curse straight to the heart, as well as numerous less dire injuries.”

Harry flushed and rubbed his toe in the floor. “Well, Luna helped.”

“Yes, so I heard, but Albus seems to think you handled the brunt of the healing magic.”

Harry glared at the floor. How would Dumbledore had known that unless the manipulative old codger had stood there and watched while Harry struggled to save Severus? The bastard had risked Severus’ life just to see who had more healing power.

“That barmy, lemon-headed berk,” he muttered.

Pomfrey snorted in spite of herself and lifted a hand to her mouth. “Now, now, Mister Potter. If you are to be my apprentice, you must conduct yourself in a professional manner at all times while under my direction… even if you might have a point about the headmaster.”

Harry laughed and gave Pomfrey a bright smile. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Now then, are you interested in becoming my apprentice?”

“If you’re really sure I’m up to the task, ma’am, I think I’d like that.”

“Excellent! We’ll have a little test of your skills later. First, I think I’d like to get you started on the potions lessons you’ve missed.”

Harry blinked. “Over the hols?”

“Is there a problem, Mister Potter?”

He gave her a wry smile. “No, ma’am. I suppose I am rather behind.”

“Yes, and you’ll be ahead by the time the others return.” She gave him a smirk. “We’ll show Severus what you can do behind a cauldron when he’s not breathing down your neck, hmm?”

Harry gave a nervous laugh and cast a silencing charm. “H-he kind of already had me brew Anti-Cruciatus Draught. And he was really miserable with remorse afterwards, so let’s not pick at him unless we have an audience and can’t avoid it, okay? Please? He’s really been good to me as of late and I don’t want to hurt him.”

Pomfrey gave him a warm smile. “Now that I’m glad to hear. Well, come then, and we’ll just do him proud instead.”

Harry beamed and cancelled his charm. “Sounds good!”

Since then, Harry had divided his time between combat training, potions and apprentice lessons, working on the light tracing spell matrix with Severus, and Occlumency. Mostly Occlumency, to be
honest. Merlin, he just couldn’t get it. Severus was frustrated with Harry’s lack of progress, but instead of lashing out, he had simply wondered aloud what he was doing wrong.

“I don’t reckon you’re doing anything wrong this time, sir,” Harry said, nerves taut with the fear Severus might revert to his old ways if Harry couldn’t get the hang of this soon. “I… I mean, we all have subjects we’re bad at, right? Maybe mind magic is just the one I’m going to have trouble with.”

And maybe it had something to do with his Empathic abilities. Luna was having as much trouble as Harry, but Neville and Dean had grasped the concepts within a few days. Maybe Harry would let them take over their extra mind magic lessons come January. Well, the Occlumency side anyway.

The only way to test each other’s progress in Occlumency was to cast Legilimens on one another. And before the end of their first lesson, Harry had discovered an inborn talent for Legilimency. Luna was good at Legilimency too, but she said her spirits helped her, and even with that, she couldn’t match Harry. His skills in the doctrine grew so quickly, that by the third lesson, he didn’t even need the spell.

Not even Severus had that kind of power. The knowledge made Harry uneasy and hesitant to reveal the truth of his skills to Severus. Somehow, he knew the man wouldn’t take it well. At least, not yet. Harry hoped, one day, their bond would be strong enough to bear the blow. He hoped that, by then, he wouldn’t have held the truth back too long for Severus to forgive him, too.

“I’m sorry, sir. I really am trying.”

“I know you are.” Severus’ shoulders slumped in defeat and weariness. “I do not understand why you are having such trouble.”

Harry gave Severus a hesitant smile and decided to take a risk in hopes of easing Severus’ worries. He trusted his friend not to prod for the information he didn’t want to reveal. Merlin, he hoped he was right to.

In true Gryffindor style, he dove in and hoped Severus wouldn’t be upset.

“I-I think I might be doing better than you realise, sir.” Harry swallowed hard and clenched his hands into fists to hide their shaking. “I’m actually keeping a lot of things secret that I don’t want anyone to see, and you haven’t seen them so far. So maybe I’m not able to hide everything yet, but I am able to block some things.”

Severus gave him a curious look. “Will you tell me what you are hiding?”

Harry shuddered. “Please, please don’t ask me. I… I c-can’t tell anyone. It’s too awful.” And it would cost him one of his dearest friends.

Severus held Harry’s shoulder and nodded, though Harry felt his grief and remorse and hated himself for causing it. “Do you believe you might trust me enough, one day?”

Harry gave Severus a sad smile. “It’s not that, sir. I do trust you. It’s just that it’s… hard to talk about.”

And dangerous.

“Very well. But if you do choose to confide in me, I promise you, I will listen without judgment.”
Pain filled Severus’ eyes and filtered into Harry’s chest, the professor’s remorse cold and heavy as lead in Harry’s gut. “I… I have failed you in the past, hurt you so much… I wish only to help you from now on.”

Harry rubbed Severus’ wrist, keeping his caresses light even on the one place Severus didn’t mind a friendly touch. “You’re not hurting me now. You’re my… well, you’re really good to me.”

He wasn’t sure Severus was ready to hear the word ‘friend’, even if the man had quickly become his closest companion. He didn’t understand where this bond had come from, given their history, but a bond existed, and Harry couldn’t bear the thought of losing it. And pushing such a wary man too far, too fast, would most likely break their friendship beyond repair. Severus would cut Harry out of his life to protect himself.

Harry had to be gentle with Severus’ damaged heart. As long as the man kept letting him in, even if only a bit at a time, he didn’t mind.

“Come on, sir,” he said into a heavy silence. “Let’s give it another go. This time, see if you can tell I’m hiding something—but please don’t push. Not there. I don’t mind if you see my other secrets, but these… please don’t.”

Severus bowed his head. “You have my word.” He lifted his wand and gave Harry his tiny smile. “Legimens!”

Severus had kept his word and didn’t pry, and thank Merlin for that. If he ever caught a hint of Harry’s dreams, the man would kill him. Certainly, their friendship would shrivel to dust.

Well, Severus was making progress on an improved Dreamless Sleep formula for Harry. Maybe soon, it wouldn’t be an issue any longer.

With a shake of his head, Harry went to use the loo and shower before breakfast. Merlin, he had to get his head out of the clouds. Severus would wake soon, and Harry wanted everything ready for him when he did. He doubted the man had ever had a proper Christmas, and this time, he was going to offer Severus just that.

Severus woke to the sound of the Chamber door closing. Harry came in carrying a basket and gave Severus a warm smile.

“Happy Christmas, sir. The loo’s all yours if you’d like to wash while I set up breakfast and tidy a bit.”

Severus caught a glint of some ulterior motive in Harry’s eyes, but as it was Christmas, he decided to give the boy the benefit of the doubt and take his advice. Most likely, Harry simply wanted to surprise him with a gift. With that in mind, Severus pretended he hadn’t noticed and simply headed towards the loo.

When he emerged a half hour later, still working the water from his hair, Harry had set out breakfast and hidden their beds behind a new screen. Severus tested the screen with his palm, detecting the trace of magic.
“Um, the headmaster conjured that for me,” said Harry with a faint blush. “I’m not good enough to make something that detailed yet.”

Severus nodded and joined Harry at the table spread with a full English and cinnamon muffins. “Merlin! The elves certainly outdid themselves today.”

Harry blushed brighter. “A–actually, sir, it wasn’t the elves.”

Severus frowned. “Who then?”

“Um… w–will you still eat if I said it was me?”

Severus looked at the table and back up to Harry’s face. “You did this? How early did you wake up, exactly?”

“I–it’s Christmas! I always wake up early.” Harry stared at his feet, red to his ears and shaking. “Might we just eat before it gets cold?” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I can ask Dobby to bring something if it’s no good.”

Severus held Harry’s gaze. The boy had some dark secret about food. He was sure of it. Yet Harry couldn’t speak of it, and Severus didn’t want to push him. Especially not on a holiday that obviously had immense value to Harry.

With a small smile, Severus sat beside his companion and started filling his plate. “Thank you.” It had become easier to say as of late.

Harry gave him a nervous grin and made a plate for himself. He waited for Severus to start, so Severus took a bite of his eggs—done perfectly, and the taste… dear Merlin! With a little gasp of surprise and pleasure, he tried a bite of the muffin—and nearly melted on the spot. Sweet Circe, the rich, buttery-cinnamon taste left him salivating.

“Delicious,” he said, and set into his food with a relish.

Harry relaxed and started in on his own breakfast, beaming from ear to ear.

Severus was almost too busy stuffing his face to notice. Merlin, where on earth had Harry learned to cook like this? He had even put the house elves to shame.

As he finished the muffin and sipped some tea to clear his palate, his simple delight in good food gave way to guilt. “And here is more evidence of your brewing skills.” A heavy sigh crossed his lips. “I should have seen it sooner.”

Harry choked. “S–sir, there aren’t any potions in the food.”

Severus took one look at Harry’s startled expression and gave a stifled snort, holding back laughter by the merest thread. “You dunderhead.” His smile and his tone left no doubt he meant it as a gentle jibe and not the ruthless cruelty he had shown in the past. “I simply meant that you are an excellent cook. As the disciplines are closely intertwined, it follows that someone with skill in the kitchen will also have skill with a cauldron.”

Harry wiped his mouth and cocked his head, a curious expression on his face. “Does that mean you’re good at cooking too, sir?”

Heat flushed Severus’ face. “Ah, well, I have never had anyone to sample it, but I have yet to set the kitchen ablaze.”
Harry chuckled. “Really? Well, if you want someone to eat your food, I’ll happily volunteer.”

Severus smirked. “You simply want a free meal.”

“I’ll do your dishes.”

“We have *spells* for that.”

“Fine, I’ll clean your cauldrons.”

Severus neglected to tell Harry there were also spells for that, but by the scandalised look Harry gave him, he gathered the boy had worked it out for himself regardless. Merlin help him. Harry was growing too astute for his own good.

Severus gave the boy a wry smile. “I will make you a deal: don’t make me rescue you from Dark Lords or Death Eaters, and I won’t make you clean my cauldrons.”

“Hmm,” Harry said with a narrow-eyed smirk. “Considering I’ve plenty of interest built up by those parameters, how about a free meal from time to time?”

Severus gave a low chuckle. “I was merely teasing you, Harry. If you would like me to cook for you, perhaps I will sometime, when it is safe. I should like to know what others think of my skills, though I fear I will not measure up to this standard.”

Harry grinned, and Severus found himself proud to have made him happy.

Merlin, how the world had changed.

“Well, I’m better with breakfast than dinner,” said Harry, “so we might be able to teach each other something.” Something dark and painful crossed his face, but the boy pushed it aside the next instant. “Um, sir? I wanted to make sure it’s okay with you, but I thought we could ask Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, and the Headmaster to come for presents, if you want.” A pink blush coloured his cheeks. “Thought it would make it feel more like a holiday.”

Severus’ breath caught at Harry’s forethought and consideration of his wishes, but he hid it with a gruff nod. “That is acceptable.”

“Great!”

Harry was off like a shot, his breakfast half-finished. Severus shook his head and laughed under his breath. The boy acted as though it was his first Christmas.

It wasn’t Harry’s *first* Christmas, but it was close enough. He’d never had anyone but Ron and Hermione to celebrate with until last year, so having his professors over made it feel more like he had a real family.

He might have invited Remus, but Severus and Remus had a lot of bad blood—for good reason—and Harry didn’t trust him with his secrets anyway. Remus had failed to defend Severus too many times in the past to believe he would protect him now. Not to mention the man had fallen off the earth since the DoM. Harry didn’t know if Remus blamed him for Sirius’ death or if he didn’t want to face up to his own failures, but either way, the respect Harry had once held for the man had
dimmed to a low hum of disappointment.

He nudged Remus’ gift to him with his foot, debating on sending it back unopened for spite, but shook his head at his own folly. The man might have sent him something useful, and Harry didn’t want to be petty. Even so, he wouldn’t build up his hopes. Remus had let him down. Seemed to be the trendy thing these days.

“Oh, Severus, happy Christmas!”

Professor Flitwick’s jovial greeting brought Harry out of his dark thoughts, and he put his musing aside for another time. Remus or no Remus, today would be a good day for all of them—he would make damn sure of it.

The professors all greeted Harry and Severus and settled around the fire, each bearing bundles for everyone in attendance. Harry gave Flitwick and McGonagall a brief hug, nodded to Dumbledore, and settled onto the sofa beside Severus.

“Merlin, I am so very glad to see you boys getting along,” McGonagall said with a smile.

Severus shot her a dark look. “I am not a boy.”

“You’re always going to be a boy to me, Severus,” said McGonagall, lips twitching. “Even when you’re eighty.”

Severus groaned. “Merlin, spare me.”

Harry laughed softly. “You’ll live.”

“Humph!”

Dumbledore chuckled and sat beside McGonagall. “I am glad to see my boys getting along as well.”

That earned him a glare from Severus and Harry.

Dumbledore looked a bit put out. McGonagall and Flitwick laughed.

“Severus,” said McGonagall, “I haven’t heard from you in some days. How is your work on the antivenin progressing?”

Severus shook his head. “Poorly. I cannot find a neutralising agent strong enough to counter such powerful venom. Even phoenix tears are not potent enough in their stored form, and I cannot simply stuff Fawkes into a phial.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “No, I think my feathered friend would not like that.”

Severus snorted. “He would simply regenerate and destroy all my phials in the process. But short of using the fresh tears of a phoenix, which is not a reliable cure, I can find no other remedy that works.” He shook his head. “Even so, I will not give up. There must be something to combat it. Some unusual combination of brews, or some exotic ingredient I have not thought to try.”

Harry patted his wrist. “You’ll find the way, Severus. I have faith in you.”

A rush of powerful emotion from Severus filled Harry with joy.

Flitwick gave Harry a bright smile. “Harry, your forgiveness and loyalty does encourage me so. As long as there is love such as this in the world, Riddle doesn’t stand a chance.”
Harry smiled. “I really hope so, sir.”

Dumbledore closed his eyes and sighed. “If only it were that simple.”

McGonagall nodded, her eyes dark with worry. “Nothing ever is.” She shook herself and gave the boys a stern glare. “Come now. I shall hear of no more talk of wars or megalomaniacs. It’s Christmas! We’re here to celebrate.”

“Quite right,” said an excitable Flitwick, bouncing in his chair. “And to that, end, let’s open our presents. I’ve one here for Harry.”

Harry took the heavy box from Flitwick with a grin. “Since you’re my professor, I’m going to go out on a limb and say this is probably a book.”

Flitwick giggled. “Well, open it and see!”

Harry chuckled and pulled back the paper. As expected, it was a book. “Experimental Charms by Gideon Lockhart.” Harry gave Flitwick a wry look. “Tell me he’s not like the nutter we had in second year.”

Flitwick snorted. “No, no, not at all. He is quite the genius with testing the boundaries of what magic can do. I’m fairly sure they’re not related. Or if they are, Gideon inherited all the brains of the family.”

Harry grinned. “Brilliant. Between learning spellcraft from Professor Snape and this, I’ll be all set for my Charms NEWT before the Easter hols.”

Flitwick chuckled. “Perhaps! You’ll certainly have quite the head-start. Now it’s your turn, Severus.”

Severus took a blue-wrapped bundle from Flitwick and opened it to reveal… the exact same book as Harry.

“I might have just borrowed his copy, you know,” Severus said with a snort.

Flitwick blushed and rubbed his neck. “Well, I didn’t realise you were quite so close, or I might have gotten you the next instalment instead.”

Severus shook his head. “Not a problem, Filius. This way I needn’t risk being caught with Harry’s books in my quarters.”

“True.”

“I will go next,” said McGonagall with a smile. “Ladies… second, you know.”

Flitwick blushed and gave her a bow. “Do forgive me, Minerva, dear.”

“Not at all, not at all. I simply wanted to get the jump on Albus.”

Dumbledore laughed and popped a lemon drop, beaming as the professors finished exchanging gifts with their hosts.

Harry received a fur-lined hat and gloves from McGonagall—red tartan, of course—and a small foeglass from Dumbledore. McGonagall gave Severus a bottle of Scottish whisky and the same hat and gloves she had given Harry, only in black. The old man gave Severus a set of crystal phials and a silk vest in robin’s egg blue. Severus had immediately scowled at the garment and shoved it under the box of phials. Harry doubted it would ever see the light of day.
Once Severus had finished with Dumbledore’s gifts, McGonagall gave him a curious look. “But what did you get for Severus, Harry?”

Heat suffused his face. “I… I’d rather wait to give it, if you don’t mind. I… it’s only I’m not sure how h-he’ll react and, I… well, I’d just rather not have an audience if it flops.”

Severus laid his hand on Harry’s shoulder, his touch light but soothing. He said nothing, but his thoughts made his wishes clear enough. [I hope he trusts me soon.]

Harry winced. “S-sir, I… well, I-I can give it to you now if you’d rather?”

Severus shook his head. “I find I would prefer to exchange yours in private as well.”

Harry gave him a relieved smile. “Oh. Then let’s just give out the professors’ gifts.”

“Yes.” Severus Summoned a black package from under the tree, wrapped in a black bow, and levitated it to Dumbledore with a smirk. “I thought you would appreciate the colours.”

Harry smothered a snicker in his hand, earning Severus’ half-smile.

Dumbledore gave the paper a put-upon sigh. “Such dreary colours for Christmas paper! Wherever did you even find it? Well, no matter. If it makes Harry laugh again, I suppose I don’t mind being the butt of the joke!” He removed the paper to reveal a magazine. “Fashion for Older British Gents. Really, Severus? Is my wardrobe that reprehensible to you?”

Harry burst into laughter, earning several soft looks from his professors.

Severus gave Harry another half-smile and raised an eyebrow at the headmaster. “You are wearing every colour of the rainbow at once—so, yes. It is. But the true gift is underneath.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Ah, I thought it was a bit heavy for a simple magazine.”

He placed the fashion magazine under his black paper. No doubt it would find its way into the bin with the wrappings and Severus’ vest. A smile set his twinkle blazing as he removed a thick book from the gift box next.

“Oh, Chess Strategies Through the Ages. Now this could be helpful once we resume our weekly games.”

Harry gave them a wry look. “You know, I actually have no idea who would win a chess match between the two of you.”

“Severus would,” said Flitwick and Dumbledore at once.

Severus smirked. “Put that book to use and you might stand a chance, old man.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Yes, yes. We’ll see.”

The rest of the morning passed in a similar fashion, the professors making jokes with each other and Harry watching in amusement, enjoying the rare opportunity to see them as humans and friends rather than his teachers. Before they left, Harry felt closer to all of them, and honoured to have had the privilege of seeing them let their hair down, so to speak.

He let them out of the Chamber a bit before lunch so they could eat in the Great Hall with the other students. When he returned, Severus had brought a large silver and red box from under the tree.
He stood beside it, his face pink, and gave Harry a hesitant smile. “I assume this green and silver gift under the tree is for me?”

Harry’s face warmed. “Y-yeah. It’s not… anything grand, but I hope you like it.” He dug the box out from under the tree and presented it to his friend. “Here you are. Happy Christmas.”

Severus gave Harry his half-smile and opened the paper. A long, hooded cloak with silver fastenings flowed into his hands, covered in one side with black velvet and the other with fur of the same colour. Well, it was simulated fur, but the shopkeeper had assured Harry it was of the highest quality and would hold up under any conditions. For Severus’ sake, Harry hoped the man had been telling the truth. Dumbledore had said it was good quality too, but Harry didn’t trust him much either.

Severus’ eyes widened and his breath hitched. “Harry… oh, this is lovely.”

Heat flushed Harry’s cheeks. “I-I’m glad you like it. Um, it’s charmed, sir. It, ah… it has a standard warming charm on the inside, of course, but it’s also waterproof and it repels poisons and absorbs most curses. It can’t stop Unforgivable, but if you wear that to the next Death Eater meeting and Riddle uses the Cruciatu...”

Severus’ eyes took on a bright sheen and he clutched the cloak close to his chest. “Harry, Merlin. I… no one has ever…” He couldn’t finish, but Harry felt his immense gratitude and overpowering wonder. [No one has ever given me such a personal gift, something I needed, or to keep me safe in times of trouble. Gods.]

Harry made a note to buy Severus a pendant for when he couldn’t wear his cloak and give it to him for his birthday along with the null-magic crystals he had ordered. He had run across a reference to them in one of Severus’ books—they were expensive, but also might mean the difference between life and death for a spy trying to dismantle wards without leaving a trace.

Harry hesitantly laid a hand on Severus’ wrist. “I would miss you if something happened to you, sir.”

Severus closed his eyes, and a shaking hand enclosed Harry’s. “Thank you,” he said, his voice rough.

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand and rubbed his knuckles, watching him slowly calm. After a moment, Severus pulled back, discreetly wiping his eyes, and motioned to the red box.

“Go on then.”

Harry grinned and tore off the paper like a little boy, thrilled with the success of his gift. Inside, he found a squat, black leather briefcase with a flip top and a set of fine robes. They were white with lime green trim and the symbol of a healer on the front lapel. Two more of the same rested underneath, both sets folded neatly.

Oh gods. Severus had bought his apprentice robes. Harry had thought it strange when Poppy had assured him not to worry about them earlier in the hols. She must have known Severus had this planned all along. Merlin.

“Oh, sir. These are brilliant!” And judging by the size, they would fit him perfectly.

“Try them on,” said Severus with a soft smile, the first true one Harry had ever seen.

Harry grinned and dashed into the loo. He snuck a peek in the mirror before running back out and beamed at the sight of himself, proud to know he was an official apprentice. Hermione would do her
nut when she saw his new robes, and serve her right for being such a cow! He sniffled, still hurt over her behaviour, but shook off his sudden grief with a grin. Severus had bought these for him, the first real outfits he had ever owned other than his school robes.

“Fits a treat,” Harry said as he emerged.

Severus came to him, briefcase in hand, and straightened Harry’s robes, checking seams and making sure they fit properly. “Ah, they do look well on you. I had worried about the colour, but it suits you.”

Harry gave him a brilliant smile. “Oh wow. Thank you, sir. Really!”

Severus’ cheeks reddened. “Well, go on and open your other gift.”

“It’s not the case?”

“In part. Open it.”

Harry nodded and obeyed. The case came open with a single click, and his breath stilled as he realised it was so much more than a simple briefcase. Now he knew what Severus had spent all day and night brewing for the past two weeks. Harry had thought he was stocking the Infirmary. Instead, it appeared he had been stocking a medical kit for Harry. The case held numerous compartments and each one was full to the brim of potions phials and jars of salves.

“This is your apprentice’s kit,” Severus said, his cheeks flushed and his voice low. “I have made all the standard healing potions as well as a few of my customised treatments—Poppy can teach you how to use those. They are organised in order of frequency of use—the most likely treatments are found in the front, and the rarer remedies in the back. As well, I have placed your tools here, where they are within easy reach in case of an emergency.”

Harry opened the compartment Severus indicated and swallowed a wave of tears. The small pocket worked like a wizarding tent—it was much larger on the inside—and Severus had stocked it to overflowing. Rolls of bandages, balls of gauze, sterling scissors and knives, and every other tool Harry could conceive of sat nestled in the compartment, all clearly labelled.

‘Gods. This must have cost a fortune.’

“S-sir… this is so much.”

Severus brushed Harry’s fringe back from his face and shook his head. “It is not. I have been so cruel for so long. It is a small payment towards that debt, and something I hope will be of use in giving you confidence and purpose once more. I never wish to see you as miserable as you were prior to moving here.”

Overcome, Harry threw his arms around Severus and hugged him before he thought.

With a sharp gasp, Severus pushed him back. “Please… no, don’t.”

Harry winced and staggered away. “S-sir, oh gods. I’m so sorry. I lost my head a bit. A-are you okay?”

Severus wrapped shaking arms around his middle. “F-forgive me. I cannot.”

“Ssh. It’s not your fault. I shouldn’t have….” Harry sank onto the sofa and dropped his head into his hands. “I’m sorry.”
Severus stood still and silent for a long moment, trying to calm himself. His fragmented emotions and deep shame filtered to Harry through his Empathy, and Harry felt like a cad. Gods. Was he acting like Ginny, continually screwing up and pressing Severus for more than he wanted to give? Had he assaulted the man? Shite, he hoped not.

“S-sir, please, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I was just… so overwhelmed. So happy. And I wanted to show you I was grateful. I didn’t mean to terrify you.”

Severus sighed and sat beside Harry. “I need warning before you do that, and I may not be able to accept it either way, but I do… you are…. ” He slowly wrapped his arms around the young man and pulled him close, the words he couldn’t say continuing in Harry’s mind. [You are important to me. Please don’t be angry or ashamed.]

Harry sighed and laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “C-can I hug you back, sir?”

Severus froze. “I… i-if you must.”

“No.” Harry shook his head. “It’s only okay if you want a hug too.” He sniffled and buried his face in the man’s robe. “But I don’t understand, sir. Why is it that you can hug me and touch my hair, but I can’t touch anything but your wrist and your shoulder like this without terrifying you? It… it’s okay if that’s what you need, but I don’t understand why.”

Severus shuddered. “I… I cannot speak of it, Harry. But…. ” He looked at his friend and sighed. “Perhaps you have a point. I do need to overcome my phobias.” He took a deep breath and fought to control a wave of nervousness so powerful, it set Harry’s heart racing too. “I… w-will you help me, Harry?” [I don’t think I can overcome them without you.]

Harry sat back and wiped his eyes. “Of course, if you want me to, but how?”

“I think, at first, simply respecting my wishes and not pushing me too far, but allowing me to… embrace you and such on occasion will help. Perhaps later, we will work on helping me accept touch from you—small things, then more as those become less frightening. Do you think you are able to bear it?”

Harry gave him a soft smile. “Sir, yeah. Yeah, I’d like that. For now, will it help you if I ask before I touch you?”

“That would help quite a bit. It gives me the option to refuse if I am not comfortable, and restores my loss of control.”

“Then we’ll try it.” Harry gave him a bright, tear-edged smile. “And that you trust me enough to let me help you is the best gift I got all day.”

Severus returned his confession with a small, shy smile and laid his hand over Harry’s. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, sir. Really.”

5 January, 1998

The other students had returned from the hols, and Harry had never been gladder to have an excuse not to return to the dorms. The term exam reports, much as it had amused Harry to see Hermione’s name second on the list this time, had been driving him mad since she had returned on Saturday. Dear Merlin, all of the Gryffindors were ready to push her down the Astronomy Tower stairs if she
didn’t give it a rest soon, even Ron.

Harry had never been so glad to be gay either. Else, it might have been him in Ron’s shoes, being nagged to revise until two in the morning. It was almost enough to make Harry pity the prat in spite of his behaviour.

Almost.

As it was, he simply avoided them both as much as possible and stayed near Neville and Dean when he couldn’t avoid Gryffindor altogether. Gryffindor avoided him for the most part, too. After his explosion before the hols, even Ginny seemed keen to stay out of his way. Only the Creeveys didn’t seem to mind greeting Harry with a smile every day. Of course, the latest article in the Prophet decrying him as an unstable madman with a murderous streak might have had something to do with that.

Honestly, if it didn’t hurt so much to be regarded as a dangerous lunatic by nine tenths of the school, he might have thanked the Skeeter bint for getting Ginny off his back. She really had been driving him mad.

Now Ron and Hermione’s bickering had taken over in that capacity, but at least he wasn’t alone. All of Gryffindor had given them a wide berth since their return, Harry most of all. He had far more important things to focus on, such as Severus’ return to teaching.

Harry had warned all his professors ahead of time—at least the ones he could trust not to blab—that he would be staying with Severus the first day back and watching over him in secret. McGonagall had forwarded the message on to the rest of his professors with an excuse about experimental dream treatment, and they had all given Harry his lessons for the day ahead of time. He’d finished them before Saturday. Now, he had only to sit in on Severus’ classes and make sure no one hurt his friend.

Harry snuck into Severus’ classroom before the lesson, hidden under his cloak and the Prince’s invisibility spell, Obscurus. He murmured to the man, “I’m here, sir.”

Severus greeted him with a barely perceptible nod and indicated a safe corner to sit. After a brief clasp of Harry’s hand, Severus warded Harry in with mild distraction wards—other than Harry and Severus, anyone who came too close would stop and go back to their work.

“This is the most dangerous class I have,” Severus whispered once he had finished with the wards. “Seventh year Ravenclaws and Slytherins. Almost all of the junior Death Eaters will be present this morning.”

Harry set his shoulders in grim determination. “Then I suppose I’d best be ready for trouble. You’ve your pendant on?” He had given it to Severus early in preparation for the students’ return and planned to give him the anti-magic crystals on his birthday instead.

“Yes. I should be safe, but I am glad for your assistance.”

Harry smiled, though Severus couldn’t see it. “You’re welcome. Go to your desk though, just in case they’re watching us.”

“They cannot see through the door, but perhaps you have a point.” Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulder and returned to his desk.

Many of the students glared at Severus as they came in. Harry noted each one with an invisible glare of his own. Severus had them brewing Euphoria Elixir as a precaution against poisoning, but Harry wouldn’t rest until the class had gone and everyone was out.
A good thing too. Near the end of the class, one of the Slytherins—Malcolm Avery—got a shifty
look in his eyes that Harry didn’t like. As Severus passed, Avery attempted to throw his boiling-hot,
unfinished potion in Severus’ face. Unfortunately for him, Severus’ pendant and Harry’s lightning-
quick shield tossed it onto the prat’s chest instead.

Severus scowled and doused the murderous git with a blast of icy water. “Off to the Infirmary with
you, Avery,” he snapped, then lowered his voice to a dark, lethal tone, “and if I ever catch you
attempting to injure me again, you had best hope it works the first time. Get out of my sight.”
Mentally, he added, [And a hundred points from Slytherin!] Harry wondered if it would take since
Severus hadn’t said it out loud. He would have to check the hourglasses later.

Avery hobbled away, whimpering and shielding his chest. Severus sent the other students a dark
glare, intimidating them into behaving. It did the trick. No one else dared lift their head for the
remainder of the period.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief once the students had gone and rushed to Severus. “Are you hurt? Did
any of that potion hit you?”

Severus shook his head. “Thanks to your gift and shields, I am well.”

“Good!” Harry sighed. “But I thought Riddle would stop hurting you.”

“Oh, I highly doubt that foolish attack was on anyone’s orders, let alone the Dark Lord’s. It was too
obvious, too ill-conceived to be anything besides an attempt to use my downfall for personal gain.
Avery must have heard of the Dark Lord’s failed attempts on my life and believed he could gain
status among the Death Eaters by killing me, but he greatly underestimated my skill and level of
protection.”

Something dark and painful flashed across Severus’ features, and his emotions turned bitter with pain
and shame. [Wouldn’t be the first time, after all.]

“Sir? Are you okay?”

Severus nodded, though the bitter feeling hadn’t subsided.

“May I take your hand? You look… scared.” Upset was closer to it, but Harry didn’t think it would
go over well if he pinpointed Severus’ emotions too closely at the moment.

Severus sighed and took Harry’s hand on his own, though he had to search for it a bit. Harry
squelched a surge of disappointment. Severus simply couldn’t bear to be touched yet, but it was still
early in his recovery. At least, Harry hoped he was recovering. Most days, it seemed as though they
hadn’t progressed at all, but then, perhaps simply being Harry’s friend was a big step for Severus.

Merlin, Harry hoped he wasn’t mangling everything.

“Sir, I’m going to sit down before your next cla—”

A sharp pecking at the door sent Harry flying into his corner, wand at the ready. Without a word,
Severus opened the door and ducked as a black great horned owl swooped in. The hair on Harry’s
neck lifted at the sight of it. Merlin help them, for being an innocent bird, it had an aura of dark
magic so thick, he could have cut it with a spoon.

Severus set heavy wards and scanned the bird for curses immediately. Harry didn’t dare move or
speak lest the bird report his presence to its owner—it could only be a Death Eater’s owl with an
aura that dark.
Severus finished his scans and levitated a letter away from the bird’s claws, taking great care not to touch it. As soon as it had delivered its burden, the bird flew out the open door and Severus spelled it shut.

“It is safe to speak now,” he muttered.

Harry ran to stand by his friend. “Whose owl?”

“The Dark Lord’s.”

“Merlin! What does he want?”

“We shall find out.” Severus spelled the letter open and read it carefully. “It appears he wishes to congratulate me on maintaining my position at Hogwarts and is offering me a new place in the Inner Circle, of higher rank than before.”

Harry sighed, relieved and disappointed at once. The idea of losing Severus terrified him. Not to mention, the letter mightn’t be truthful.

“Sir? I… c-could we stay in the Chamber just a few more days? Just to make sure it’s not a trick? And tell me when you report to him the first time, so I can try to help you if he is lying?”

“Ah… a wise suggestion. Very well.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “A-and will you… I mean, if it all goes well and you do get to go back into your quarters soon, w-will you still let me visit?”

Fear flickered across Severus’ features. “I… you will have to be careful, Harry.”

“I know. I would never endanger your life. I’ll come when no one is around and under the cloak.”

Severus sighed. “If you promise me you will take great caution and only come late in the day when your peers are busy revising and out of my corner of the dungeons, then yes, you may visit.” His cheeks turned faintly pink. “I have become accustomed to your company as well. And I would like to continue working on spells with you.”

Harry beamed, though Severus couldn’t see it. “That sounds good to me, sir!”

Severus gave him a faint, barely-there smile—but a smile nonetheless. “I am glad to hear it.”

Harry’s heart soared.
Chapter Summary

**Warnings**: Ron and Hermione are bratty. Relatively short update this time.

**PART II**

Chapter 24

20 January

The night of Severus’ birthday, he had been accepted back into the Inner Circle with no trouble. Harry hadn’t wanted to leave the Chamber, but with Severus’ safety no longer a concern—at least, not an immediate one—he had no more excuse to stay. They had given it two more days, just to be sure, but when nothing happened, Harry had moved into the dorms again the following weekend.

And gods, it was just as miserable as he had imagined. Besides the fact that his house still avoided him like the plague for the most part, he still had to deal with his former ‘friends’ and the fact that they seemed to have decided that Harry had forgiven them whether he agreed or not.

Hermione had become utterly obsessed with her studies, not that it surprised him. When she wasn’t bickering with Ron or reading some obscure tome, she had taken to nagging Harry about his marks and revision again, always acting as if he couldn’t possibly hope to keep up without her help and seething in jealousy and suspicion when he did.

He ignored her as best as he could. Even so, he had almost decided to resort to silencing spells with her as well when he managed to shock her into submission. For a while at least.

Between Hermione’s obsessive revision, her extracurricular classes, and her distraction over Ron, she either hadn’t been in the dorm at the times Harry left for his apprenticeship or hadn’t noticed. But when Professor Vector caught the wizarding flu and had to cancel her classes for the week—including Hermione’s Wednesday afternoon extracurricular session—she returned to the common room much earlier than usual. At the same time, Harry exited the dorm in his apprentice robes, Isuri
tucked around his neck and his medical kit in hand.

The look of utter shock on her face as Harry walked past and made for the portrait hole would remain in his memory forever. Perhaps he should pensieve it for Severus later.

“Harry?”

He shot her a glare, but in the interest of a possible route to peace and quiet, stopped and turned, arms crossed over his chest. “What?”

“W-why are you in apprentice robes?”

He snorted. “I should think that’s obvious.”

“B-but… how? Who? I didn’t think—wait, is it your guest? Did he offer you this out of pity?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “That’s utterly pathetic, Hermione. Your jealousy is appalling.”

Her face turned a blotchy red and her fists clenched at her sides. “Well, I never!”

“You should then. And as for my apprenticeship, not that it’s any of your business, it just so happens that Madam Pomfrey heard about how I saved my guest’s life from a rare, fatal curse and decided to test my skill. As I’m a particularly powerful natural healer with a high raw magic reserve, she asked me to be her apprentice. I’ve been working under her since before Christmas. You’ve just been too self-absorbed to notice. Now, if you please, move your giant ego out of the way before I’m late.”

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but Harry shoved past her and ignored her tirade. Jealous bint. She would get her own soon. Her harpy-like shouting, inability to cope with second place, and anal-retentive personality would drive everyone who cared away soon enough. She had certainly driven away Harry.

He would have liked to say his life calmed down after putting her in his place, but Hermione wasn’t the only one driving him mad. Ron babbled on to Harry as if nothing had happened between them, despite the fact that Harry never spoke back. At least until Isuri got bored with Harry’s growing irritation and poked her head out of her cloaking spells. Then Ron gibbered in terror and ran from the room.

It was one way to get some peace and quiet.

Seamus, of course, hated Isuri on sight and claimed Harry planned to kill them all in their sleep. He wouldn’t listen to Harry’s claims that her venom couldn’t kill them, insisting that her presence indicated Harry was turning into a snake.

Isuri hissed, ~Why does he think you are turning into a snake, Master? You are human.~

Harry glared at Seamus and hissed back, ~He means a member of the snake house at my… learning place. Severus is the master of the snake house here. He thinks I am becoming like them. Like Severus and his… charges.~

~Oh. Then he is right.~
Harry snorted in spite of himself, then laughed at the sight of Seamus hightailing it out of the dorms.
~I think he forgot I speak the snake language.~

~I think he is a stupid human.~

~Smart snake.~

Gods, he missed the quiet, the peace of spending his nights in the Chamber with Severus. And not just for the company. His *Imperius* dreams had stopped while he slept in the Chamber, but here, they had started again full force. He had taken to warding his bed each night with a spell he’d seen in Severus’ books. It kept him safe, at least, if it did frighten Neville. His friend didn’t like not being able to get to him when his visions hit, but Harry couldn’t risk revealing the truth of his dreams, not even to his friends. One word to the wrong person, and he was done for.

Still, life had improved from the misery of last term at least. The dreams had made him tired again, but grief didn’t cripple him any longer, and Severus’ alterations to Dreamless Sleep had taken away his other nightmares, including his dreams of the younger version of his friend, thank Merlin. Harry had been terrified the man would see a glimpse of them in his mind, but so far, Harry had managed to keep them hidden. It would be easier now that they were memories and not an active problem.

Overall, Harry was doing much better. Building a peaceful relationship with Severus had healed many of Harry’s wounds, and with most of his bad dreams under control, at least he got *some* sleep. Only his distance from his so-called friends still hurt, but as the days went by without a break in Ron and Hermione’s arguments, Harry soon begun to see it as a blessing. Gods, did they *never* tire of bickering? Merlin, what he wouldn’t give to be able to escape to the quiet and safety of Severus’ company.

Harry was halfway through his latest charms essay—and helping Neville and Dean with theirs—when a strident voice interrupted his explanation of blood-bound barriers.

“Harry,” Hermione called, “you’ve obviously learned the importance of revising. Tell this blockhead here we can’t afford to slack off!”

Well, apparently she’d gotten over her snit concerning Harry’s apprenticeship. He found himself missing her silent ire and dark glares.

“Oi!” Ron gave Harry an annoyed look. “Mate, why’d you have to get studious *now*? She won’t lay off!”

Harry stood and gathered his books. “I think that’s enough for now, Neville, Dean. We’ll finish the last part somewhere quieter.”

Dean nodded. “I’m beat anyway. I’ll go take a kip. Thanks, Harry.”

Hermione huffed. “Harry, aren’t you going to—?”

Harry cut across her. “See you later, Dean.”

Dean waved and went upstairs.

Harry gave his other friend an apologetic smile. “Sorry about the noise, Neville. I can try to explain it
again later, if you want.”

Hermione shrieked, “Noise?”

Neville stood and packed his books too. “Sure, Harry. We’ve been at it for a while anyway. I could use a breather.”

“Let’s go then.”

“Oi,” Ron called. “We’re talking to you!”

Harry whirled and shot them both dark glares. “And have you somehow forgotten over the past few weeks that I am not talking to either of you? Go find someone else to mediate for you. I’m not interested.”

Hermione gave him a pitying look that lit his irritation ablaze. “Oh, Harry. You’re not still angry, are you? It’s not healthy to hold a grudge so long.”

Harry sent them his best imitation of Severus’ coldest sneer and turned back to Neville, leading the way through the portrait hole. “Now she’s concerned for my health? Honestly. It’s like they’ve forgotten the past six months!”

Neville snorted. “Want to go work on Herbology instead? I’ve had a sneak look at next week’s plants from Professor Sprout. We’re doing Littlebee flowers.”

Harry frowned. “Are those like Luna’s Ticklebees?”

“Not at all. They’re called that because they buzz like bees and the flowers make honey instead of nectar. They’re edible too, and Professor Sprout won’t mind if we taste a few in the name of experimentation.”

“Ooh! Free snacks? I’m in.”

Neville laughed, but beneath the sound, both boys heard the portrait door click behind them. Of course the prats wouldn’t give up so easily. Harry sighed in irritation, but Neville simply gave Harry a dark smirk worthy of Severus’ most mischievous moods and kept walking as if he hadn’t noticed their tagalongs.

“Sorry about the disaster back there, Harry,” Neville said, tilting his head towards the door. “That lot will never learn, I’m afraid.”

Harry caught on quickly. “Hmm. You might be right. Still, if they’re going to treat me like rubbish, they ought not to expect me to jump between their battles any longer.”

A squeak behind them warned Harry that Hermione was right on their heels. A glance over his shoulder revealed a frowning Ron right by her side.

“Harry, you can’t just… abandon us,” Ron said. “I mean, we’ve been friends for how long?”

Harry fixed him with a cold glare. Beside him, Neville had done the same.

“I can’t abandon you, hmm? Funny, isn’t that exactly what you did to me when you turned your back on me when I was suffering just to snog Hermione at all hours of the day? And when I didn’t want to play quidditch and you called me a traitor to my house and turned everyone against me? And when you accused me of murdering Professor Snape?”
Ron choked. “Um, well, I—”

“And what about Hermione, hmm? Didn’t she abandon me when she decided that her boyfriend and revision was more important than my health and happiness? Or when she declared I wasn’t intelligent enough to beat her marks on my own?” Harry glared at the girl. “How’s that theory holding up for you now that I’m not staying with my guest and I’m still beating you in Charms, Theory, and Potions, huh?”

She squeaked and lowered her head. “H-Harry, that’s not fair.”

“Oh, yes it is! That’s exactly how you’ve been treating me—I reckon a little of your own medicine is overdue.” He scowled and hitched his books higher against his chest. “Besides, have the both of you somehow forgotten your refusal to stand by me when the entire house allied against me—twice?” He scoffed. “Oh yes, you two have been great friends! I reckon not even a Death Eater could do a better job of hurting and humiliating me at every bloody turn!”

Ron blushed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Harry, Merlin. I’m sorry, okay?”

“No. It’s not okay. I could forgive your jealousy, or getting too caught up in romance, or maybe even your idiocy over the quidditch team—well, eventually—but this time you’ve gone too far.” He turned back to Neville and called over his shoulder. “The next time either of you follow us, I start throwing hexes.”

“Harry!” Hermione’s scolding tone set Harry’s ire raging. “That’s against the rules. You’ll lose us even more poi—”

He whirled, magic flashing on his skin. “Read my lips, Hermione: I don’t—fucking—care! Points are bollocks as far as I’m concerned. We’re in the middle of a bloody war, and I’m just a tad more concerned with the bodies piling up every night than whether Ravenclaw or Gryffindor wins the house cup or if I get all O’s on my NEWTs—or whether you do for that matter. Get it through your godsdamned head already that there are more important things than rules and grades. And until you do, don’t expect me to listen to your bloody nagging!”

Ron cried, “Oi! You leave of—”

“Shut up, Ron! You don’t get to tell me not to shout at her when you’ve been doing it all damn month. Just leave me alone!”

Severus materialised from around the corner and fixed Harry with a sharp glare. Behind his eyes, he projected the thought, [Forgive me,] and relieved Harry’s sudden fear.

“Detention, Potter, seven o’clock in my office, and ten points from Gryffindor for foul language.”

Harry ducked his head in the deferent, defeated manner he had been using all term. It would be too suspicious to change it now. “Yes, sir.”

“Hmm.” Severus turned, a dark glare on his face. “Oh, and Weasley? Fifty points from Gryffindor for inventing the maddest, most ill-conceived rumour to have ever circulated Hogwarts’ halls. Killed me indeed.”

“Oi! I didn’t inv—”

Hermione smacked her hand over Ron’s mouth. “Don’t make it worse,” she hissed.

Severus loomed, a smirk spreading over his features. “Ah, Miss Granger. I confess I am surprised to
find you without your nose buried in the nearest textbook. Perhaps the fact that Miss Greengrass outscored you this term doesn’t rankle quite as much as I had assumed?”

Harry almost chuckled at the look of pride in Severus’ eyes. He did care about his snakes, whatever other flaws he might possess.

Hermione turned pink and vanished back into the portrait hole, Ron clambering after her.

Severus turned on his heel and disappeared around the corner, but Harry wasn’t surprised to feel him walking at his side shortly after, invisible and silent.

The man bent down to Harry’s ear and whispered, “Are you well?”

Harry gave him a barely perceptible nod and squeezed the hand that had settled on his own.

“We will speak later.” Severus rubbed Harry’s hand once and slipped away.

“Sir,” Harry asked when Severus’ office door had shut firmly behind him, “are you really angry with me?”

Severus shook his head. “I could not feasibly let you get away with cursing in front of an instructor, not publicly at least, but I do understand your frustration. Though I probably should, I have no intention of making you serve a true detention tonight.”

Harry let slip a sigh and settled in front of Severus’ desk. “I was afraid.”

“I tried to reassure you.”

“I know. I just couldn’t help worrying. It’s the first time I’ve had a detention with you since….”

Severus grimaced. “Since I have ceased to be an abusive monster, I hope.”

Harry wished he could reach the man like this, wished Severus wasn’t afraid of his touch. “Oh. You’re not. You’ve been really good to me since the headmaster intervened.” He gave Severus a wan smile. “And I haven’t thought you were a monster in a long time.”

“The pensieve.”

Harry went rigid, fear crashing through his veins. “I… w-what about it?”

“That is when your perceptions of me underwent a forcible change, is it not?”

Harry swallowed though his throat was dry and dropped his gaze. If Severus realised it had haunted him to the level it did, their nascent friendship might break to pieces. And Harry already knew he needed Severus’ friendship, his regard and trust, more than anything. Why it was so important eluded him, it simply mattered that it was.

Severus stood and motioned to a door in the back of his office, one Harry hadn’t noticed before. “Come.”

Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets to keep them from shaking and followed Severus to the door,
head down, gaze on the floor.

Gentle fingertips settled on the top of Harry’s head and traced down his scalp, sorting his bird’s nest hair through long fingers.

“Peace, Harry. You are safe here.”

A shaky sigh escaped Harry and he turned his head into Severus’ arm. “I… I’m afraid to talk about it.”

“I know. Come.”

Severus motioned to the door, and Harry followed him into what could only be the man’s private quarters. Severus had good taste, at least to Harry. He hadn’t seen many homes beyond the Burrow and the Dursleys’, but he liked the clean lines and simple colours of Severus’ rooms. He thanked Merlin for the lack of floral patterns, doilies, and posturing for the neighbours and went to investigate the mantel. Besides a serviceable tin for floo powder, Severus had two photos displayed—an animated Polaroid of himself and Harry’s mum as children, and a larger photo of a blue-eyed, dark-haired woman Harry had never seen.

“My mother,” Severus said from behind him.

Harry jumped. “Oh.” Nerves crept up his belly. What was he supposed to say in this situation? He had no idea what was polite. “She looks diff—um… are you clo—Merlin.” Maybe it was best to leave that subject alone and let Severus talk about her as he wanted to.

Severus gave a wry snort. “Do not trouble yourself so. No, I do not favour Mother much, to my cost. She was, perhaps, not a great beauty, but I would have much preferred to inherit her looks than my father’s.” He said the last word with such loathing, Harry knew instantly to never bring up the man’s father if he could at all avoid the subject. “And she is long since dead, so no, we are not close.”

Something dark and painful flashed across his face. Harry laid his hand over Severus’, not touching, but offering comfort. This time, Severus shook his head and drew away.

“I cannot. Forgive me.”

Harry forced back a wave of disappointment. It wasn’t Severus’ fault. Harry shouldn’t keep pressuring him.

But when Severus’ eyes filled with that cold, bitter grief, Harry wanted to comfort him, and his words so often fell short. On top of a sense of rejection he couldn’t quite quell, he felt so helpless when Severus pushed him away.

“I’m sorry.” He tried to smile, but Severus wasn’t fooled.

The pain in his dark eyes sharpened. “Harry….”

“It’s okay. It’s my fault. I keep trying to—but you don’t like it, and….” He sighed and turned away. “Never mind it. What am I doing for detention?”

Severus ran a gentle hand through Harry’s hair. “Speaking with me, if you choose. Else, you may work on your revision here.”

Harry frowned. “Sir, what if someone comes? Shouldn’t we stay in the office?”
Severus smirked. “Did you imagine I left the door unwarded? Anyone who comes other than the headmaster, your true friends, or Poppy—excepting only emergencies—will remember an urgent errand they have ‘forgotten’ to do and find they cannot leave it for another moment.”

Harry smiled wanly. “You’re brilliant, sir.”

A faint pink colour filled Severus’ cheeks. He watched Harry for a long moment, dark eyes searching. Harry didn’t know what he wanted, but tried to show him nothing but the sincere desire of his heart to befriend the man.

Severus sighed and looked away. “You… truly mean that, don’t you?”

Harry frowned up at the man. “Of course I do. I mean, even people who don’t like you think you’re intelligent. Even Ron won’t deny your skills.” He lowered his gaze and took a shaky breath. “But I do like you, sir. So yes, I mean it.”

Severus froze, eyes widened slightly, lips parted. “I… how?” Pain again flashed in his eyes. “How can you… like me, when I have been so—”

“I forgave you months ago, sir. It’s okay. It’s over now.”

Severus sank into the armchair by the fire, wonder and disbelief warring for control of his expression. Harry sighed and turned back to the photos, watching as his mum made faces at the young Severus, trying to make him smile. Occasionally, ten-year-old Severus’ grim façade broke and a silent, smothered laugh escaped him. Harry could tell it was a favourite game, one they both enjoyed despite the young Severus’ scowl.

Harry watched the photo-boy snicker behind his hands and sighed softly. What would it take to make the adult Severus happy again? Could Harry make him grin if he tried? He tried to imagine the expression, but failed. Severus just wasn’t inclined to such open joy.

Still, maybe one day, Harry would learn what the man looked like when he was truly happy. Merlin, he hoped so.

“Severus,” the potions master said into the silence.

“What?” Harry turned to face him, confused.

“Call me Severus when we are alone.”

Harry’s heart thumped and warmth flooded his chest. “R-really? You… you’re sure?”

Severus gave him a hesitant nod. “You have earned the right.”

Harry beamed. “Brilliant.”

A ghost of a smile played at Severus’ lips, a shadow of the grin his photo wore when Lily made him laugh, but even a hint gave Harry hope he might one day be happy again.

“What did you want to talk about, si-Severus?”

“Tell me what happened with your friends.”

Harry grimaced and settled onto the sofa near his friend. “They’re bickering more. A lot more. And they wanted to put me in the middle like they used to….”
The words flowed so easily with Severus now. He was a good listener and offered Harry comfort when he needed it. And Harry felt so safe when Severus held him or petted his hair.

If only Severus would allow Harry to hug him too, or even just to touch his hand, things might have been perfect. Still, Harry understood Severus didn’t mean it as a slight. Some dark mystery in his past had hurt the man to the point of developing phobias. Harry didn’t ask. Maybe someday, Severus would trust him enough to tell him his secrets.

Maybe someday, Harry would trust Severus enough to tell him his own.

For now, being his friend and knowing Severus trusted Harry to help with his fears was enough.

“I feel guilty, Severus,” Harry said with a sigh. “Do you think I’m being too harsh by not accepting them back?”

Severus gave a wry snort. “Are you honestly asking me if you are being too cruel to your friends?”

Harry laughed softly. “Well, you’re kind to me now. I reckon you’re good to those you trust, so you might know better than I do.”

Severus gave him a sad nod. “Trust is hard won for me.” He folded his hands upon his desk and shook his head. “I have no doubt Albus would tell you to welcome them with open arms, but I think you have revealed the reason you cannot do so yourself: they have broken your trust. Until they earn it back, I think you are wise to be cautious.”

He sighed and dropped his head into his hand. “But I am not sure I am a good person to ask. I have been too cautious.”

He took Harry’s hand and held it to his heart, just briefly. It was enough to wash away the pain of his earlier rejection.

“Harry, I do think you are wise to keep your distance—at least until they earn your trust again—but do not shut those who do care out. Longbottom, Lovegood, and Thomas all care genuinely about you. Even Daphne, Millicent, and Blaise seem to like you quite well these days. Don’t turn them away.” His thoughts echoed in Harry’s mind after his words stopped. [Don’t become like me.]

Harry gave Severus a hesitant smile. “So I can keep visiting you, then?”

Severus’ cheeks turned pink. “So long as you are careful, I do not mind.”

Warmth and hope flooded Harry’s chest. “Yes, sir.”
Chapter 25

Altered Relationships

27 January

Professor Origa, while quite a knowledgeable woman, was a bit of a procrastinator, and as such, hadn’t finished grading the classes’ elf magic essays for Ancient Magic until almost a month into the spring term. Harry had been waiting on tenterhooks to see how his additions held up, and the professor’s announcement had caught the interest of more than one student. Beside Harry, Blaise looked just as excited.

Just before the hols, Harry had helped Blaise, Millicent, and Daphne add to their essays too, sharing some of his discussions with Dobby and Winky to supplement their knowledge. The two bookish Slytherins—Daphne and Blaise—had eaten it up, and Millicent, while considerably less studious than the others, had provided valuable insight by sharing her experiences with a house elf nanny. Apparently Timma had been more of a mother to Millie than her own parents and, as a result, Millie had seen her do many interesting feats of magic. Some of her stories had surprised even Harry. No doubt they would shock Professor Origa. Harry looked forward to seeing if their extra work paid off.

He guessed that Hermione might have thought to ask the house elves too, but he honestly doubted she could have focused on what they wanted to say long enough to learn about them, given her no-holds-barred crusade to free them all—whether they wanted it or not. The only elf who might have dared talk to her was Dobby, and he had a… unique perspective on life. Winky’s input had been much more representative of the race as a whole, though Harry had worked his friend’s unusual way of thinking into his essay as well.

Professor Origa entered the classroom and greeted them all with her usual wave. “Good morning, class. I think many of you have heard I have finished with your essays, yes? Five of them were very, very surprising to this old witch. I have not considered the ways house elves are part of the elf magic spectrum, but you have opened my eyes these past few weeks! That is the reason your essays took so long to grade. With so many writing of house elves and no references that I could find, I have had little choice but to find the house elves and speak to them myself before I could grade these few.”
Hermione pouted, no doubt upset that four others had thought of the same tactics she had. Harry gave his study mates a wry grin.

“Four of you,” Origa continued, “have impressed me with your extra work. One, I am afraid, appears to have written of dreams more than facts.”

Hermione shot Harry a triumphant glare, but somehow, Harry doubted hers would be the winning essay. He ignored her. She would have plenty of crow to eat soon enough.

“Overall, everyone did very well this time! Excellent work.” Origa levitated their essays back. Harry read his “Outstanding” grade and grinned. Blaise nudged him, showing him his own O rated essay, and gave Harry a nod of thanks.

“Well done,” Harry whispered. “Did you talk to your own house elves?”

Blaise chuckled softly. “But of course.” He frowned. “And I will be treating them better from now on. I never realised they were sentient, you know? I mean—it sounds awful. It is awful. I should have done. But we were all taught our whole lives that they were… less than. Subhuman, without minds or wills of their own.” He shook his head sadly. “Well, I know better now.”

“That means more than your grade, I think.”

“So do—”

Hermione’s indignant squeak interrupted Blaise. “P-Professor Origa, I think there must have been some mistake.”

Origa narrowed her eyes. “It is a rule here in England to raise your hand in class when you must speak, yes?”

Hermione’s cheeks flushed bright red. “Y-yes, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am.” She raised her hand, and Origa called on her with a sigh.

“What is the problem, Miss Granger?”

“Well, this is graded as an P. I… that can’t be right.”

“You think there is some problem with my markings? You received a Poor because that is what you earned.”

“But, Professor! I even included information on house elves and their magic and—”

Origa’s gaze sharpened. “No, Miss Granger. You included very little true information on house elves and spent most of your essay speaking of your beliefs that all house elves are oppressed beings who should be set free for their good. You did not speak on the other elf races beyond a paragraph or two, and so you have failed this assignment.”

“But the house elves said—”

“Miss Granger, I doubt the house elves said much to you. From what they have told me, few of them will even speak to you for fear you will try to force clothing on them despite their refusal. They do not wish to be free, Miss Granger, therefore, your essay is more dream than fact.”

Tears formed on Hermione’s lashes. “But I… I just don’t understand! Professor, s-surely you agree that they shouldn’t be enslaved and—”
Origa heaved a huge sigh. “Miss Granger. First of all, you should remember this is a class on Ancient Magic, not house elf rights. But of course I agree they should not be oppressed.”

Hermione puffed up, vindicated.

“However, what you are doing is wrong.”

The air rushed out of Hermione like a popped balloon. “I… I don’t understand. How is it wrong to wish them to be happy?”

“You are not wishing for their happiness, you are wishing for your own.” Origa flipped her braids out of her face and rubbed her brow. “The elves are the *victims*, Miss Granger. By forcing to take freedom when they are afraid and do not want it, you make the victims bear the burden of change, not the abusers. It is not house elves you should be working to alter, but the wizards who hurt them.”

Hermione sniffled. “But that’s why I’m trying to free them, to get them away from their abusers.”

“They do not see it that way. They see your forced freedom as a threat.”

“But that’s why they need to be educated and—”

“Miss Granger, my suggestion to you is instead of wasting time knitting hats the elves do not want, to put all that energy into creating stronger laws—or even *any* laws—condemning house elf abuse. Once their lives have improved and they are able to see beyond their chains, perhaps some might be more willing to take your hats, but either way, to force them into freedom when they do not want it is just as cruel as forcing them to obey your will with no concern for their own.”

“But… how is it cruel?”

Origa fixed her with a sharp look. “Besides the fact that they are more fearful of you than their masters? You are not taking their wishes into account and ignoring their refusal of consent. Is that not considered assault in this country when it is done to another human?”

Hermione lowered her head and her hand, face red and tears in her eyes. “Y-yes, ma’am. I… I’ll consider that.”

“Good. Then this lesson is a success before I have even taught.”

Hermione winced and shrank into her seat.

“I reckon *that* will shut her up about spew for a week or so,” Blaise muttered.

Harry stifled a sad, bitter laugh in his hand.

Harry returned to the common room later to find Hermione and Ron in the midst of another row—not that it surprised him. This time, however, he heard his own name in the mix and decided he didn’t want to know. He would have cast Severus’ invisibility spell if Colin hadn’t already seen him. Instead, he returned Colin’s wave and made his way to where Neville sat by the fire, scowling at the arguing couple.

Harry whispered, “Um, do you want to get out of here? I reckon we could find something to revise.
Or we could just hang out.” [Anywhere but here.] he added mentally.

Neville snorted bitterly. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

“Sure, but where’s Dean? Do you think he’d want to come?”

“He might, but I wouldn’t risk asking him at the moment. He took Ginny out to the pitch. I think he’s trying to keep her away from you as much as possible, if you get my drift.”

Harry grimaced. “Remind me to buy him a giant box of Honeyduke’s next Hogsmeade weekend. Come on. Let’s go before—”

“Oi! Harry! What do you think you’re on about?”

Harry groaned at the sound of Ron’s shout. “—Before that happens.”

Neville gave him a commiserating look and rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “Sorry, mate.”

Ron came storming over, his face a picture of rage. “What is with you, Harry? You made sure Hermione was humiliated in class, you’re revising even more than she is these days, you won’t talk to us but you’re fine with fraternizing with the enemy, and you have a bloody snake now? Are you trying to help Slytherin win the cup or something?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I thought I’d already made it blatantly obvious I don’t care about who wins the cup, so I’m certainly not helping Slytherin for that purpose. It just so happens the snakes are treating me better than the lions these days.” He smiled at Neville. “Well, most of the lions.”

“Don’t worry about me, mate,” said Neville with a shrug. “I know who you mean.”

Ron scoffed. “That’s just not on! You know we—”

“That aside,” said Harry without acknowledging Ron’s continued ranting, “Hermione embarrassed herself quite well on her own without any help from me. She ignored the house elves and, instead of writing factual information, choked her essay with that spew rubbish. You know, the rights organisation you complained about more than anyone? Well, Professor Origa didn’t buy into it either. Hermione’s grades are her own fault, and if she’s sending you to fight her battles because she can’t own up to her failures, then I think anyone can take a wild guess why she barely passed in the first place.”

“Oi! You don’t—”

“And, as I’m still not speaking to either of you, take your bloody problems elsewhere!”

Ron scowled. “I… I don’t believe you. You really are turning Slytherin. First your snake, then you dump Ginny for no good reason, then teaming up with Zabini over Hermione—”

“Ginny was harassing me,” Harry snapped, “and I chose my study partner well as Blaise and I scored Outstandings on the essay Hermione failed!”

“Bollocks! You know she deserved better! And it doesn’t even matter. You shouldn’t be talking with Death Eaters! First Zabini and then… well, you know. And now you’re choosing them over us! It’s not natural!”

“No, Ron,” Harry snarled. “What’s not natural is carrying stupid prejudices against all the people of a certain house because they don’t think like you. What’s unnatural is abandoning and turning on
your supposed best friends and then blaming your flaws on them! What’s unnatural is being afraid of everyone who’s not like you! And for the umpteenth time, Blaise isn’t a Death Eater! You’re going to get him killed with that shite!”

Harry shoved past Ron and made his way to the door, but Seamus blocked him.

“Ron’s right, you know,” Seamus said, his voice rife with disgust. “You’re more snake than lion, and that monster around your neck proves it.”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed, joining Seamus and scowling, though his voice broke. “I reckon, maybe he’s r-right. M-maybe you don’t belong here anymore.”

Tears blurred Harry’s vision, but he blinked them down viciously. “Well, good! I don’t want to be here with you pricks anyway!”

Gods, what a bastard. He was done with Ron from now on. Let him fume and shout. The minute he started on Harry from here on out, he would just silence the git and move on with his day.

Ron snarled, “Oi!”

“Silencio!”

Seamus and Ron grabbed their throats and glared.

“Let’s see you two idiots break that nonverbally!” With a sniffle, Harry shoved them out of the way and stalked from the common room.

Neville sighed and followed Harry out of the portrait hole. “Come on, Harry. Let’s get you to your friend. You need him after that, huh?”

Harry sniffled and wiped his eyes. “W-why does it still hurt, Nev? I just want to be done with Ron for good, and yet everything just… it hurts.”

“I know. He’s being an absolute prick, and I hope it comes back to bite him. For now though, you need help.”

“Y-yeah. I guess you’re right.”

“Come on. Your other friend will be able to help you more than I can.”

Harry sniffled and leaned on Neville’s shoulder, grateful for his friend’s comfort and understanding. “Nev… really, thank you for standing by me.”

“That’s what friends are supposed to do,” Neville muttered with a huff.

Harry sniffled and blinked back another rush of tears. “Y-yeah.”

“…And then, Ron teamed up with Seamus and said I didn’t belong in Gryffindor any longer!” Harry leaned into Severus’ shoulder, trying to stave off his tears. “Gods, I feel like such a fool for believing in him for so long, when he could turn around and do this to me. He was supposed to be my friend!”
Isuri slithered up Harry’s arm and licked his face. ~I am your friend, Master. I will help you.~

Harry petted the snake’s back and wiped his eyes. ~Yes. You have been a good friend to me.~

Severus trailed his fingertip down Isuri’s head. “Thank you, Isuri, for watching over him when I cannot.”

~You are welcome, Master’s favourite friend.~

“She said you’re welcome.” Harry curled into Severus’ shoulder, sniffing in spite of himself. “Severus, am I... am I stupid for still loving him in spite of everything? I should hate him for this, but I can’t. I can’t forget he was my brother for so long, and... and it really hurts.”

Severus wrapped his arms around Harry and held him tight. “Ssh. You care about him because you are kinder than he is and more familiar with loss. Ronald Weasley, for all he is poor, has never lacked for anything. His parents, perhaps, cannot afford the best of everything, but he has never gone hungry. He has never had to sit in the dark while others experience the love he should know. He has never been hit or abused or lost someone he loves. His life has been a sheltered one, and his immature attitudes are a result of that.”

Harry had the sense Severus was comparing Ron’s life to his own, not Harry’s, but it hit so close to home that Harry could not help but shudder and clutch at Severus’ chest.

“P-please,” Harry whimpered, “please don’t.”

“Harry?”

“So scared.”

Severus slipped his hand into Harry’s curls and murmured against his temple. “Ssh. I am here, little one. You are not alone. I will protect you.”

Harry desperately needed an anchor against the dark memories of his past. “Severus, please, please let me hold you too. I need... I’m so damn terrified.”

Severus shuddered. “H-Harry, I... that is... terrifying for me.”

Harry whimpered and buried his face in his hands. “Gods. I just—all I want is just to hold onto you until I can breathe again. I-I don’t want to hurt you, Severus. I care for you more than anyone in the whole world.”

Severus’ breath hitched. “H-Harry? You... is that true?”

Harry gave a soft, sad laugh. “To be honest, I don’t know where it came from myself. I mean, we’ve only been friends two months. But, yeah. It’s true. Not even Neville can pull me together like you can, and he’s my best friend. The only one who’s been loyal this whole time, too. Well, Luna always seems to know exactly what to say. But she has ‘help’ and... I don’t know. I feel safest here with you, Sev.”

Severus froze. “Oh. Oh, Harry. Please....”

Harry looked up, confused and hurt. “Severus? I’m not touching you, am I? What’s the matter?”

Severus closed his eyes and lowered his head. “No one has called me S-Sev in nineteen years.”

“Nineteen?” Harry glanced to Severus’ mantel. The only two people besides Harry who had ever
cared about him were their mothers: Harry’s and Severus’. And nineteen years was after Lily’s friendship with Severus had ended. Harry winced. “Your mum?”

Severus nodded. “Three days before her death, she… she sent me a message through a mirror begging me to come home, calling me Sev as she had often done when I was a child.” He covered his eyes with a trembling hand. “It was the last time I saw her alive.”

Harry swallowed tears of sympathy—and Severus’ dark, soul-deep pain—and offered his hands. “Severus, I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I’m not going to take your hands, but mine are here for you if you want them.”

Severus took in a shaky breath and slipped his hands into Harry’s. “I have regretted my decision to remain… where I was at the time ever since. I would have liked to… to tell her I… but I did not, and now there are so many things I will never have the chance to say.”

Harry rubbed Severus’ knuckles and tentatively brought the man’s hands to his heart. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up such painful memories, Severus. But, you know, you can say those things. I believe she’ll hear you. She just can’t talk back any longer.”

“How could you possibly know that? She is dead, Harry.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “Mum knew what I had said to her when my wand called her in the graveyard. She knew what I had done, what I was doing then. I suppose it’s possible that it might have been some kind of projection of my will—maybe she only knew because I wanted her to know—but….” He held Severus’ hands tighter and traced his thumbs over his friend’s fingers. “But I believe she was real, even if she could only stay for a moment.”

Severus gave him a stricken, heartsick look. “Lils—the image in the graveyard—she knew?”

“Yeah. And, you know, it would be pretty hard for Luna to be a spiritual medium if spirits don’t exist beyond the grave.”

“That is a fair point.” Severus closed his eyes and held on to Harry’s hands like a lifeline. “Then I suppose I have much to discuss with Lily, and with my own mother.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “I’ll stay with you, if you want.”

“I think I should do it alone. I cannot bear to….” [I don’t want you to see me break.]

“Okay, Severus. Whatever you need.”

Severus opened his eyes and two hot tears tracked down his face. Harry’s heart cracked. Gods, he’d never seen Severus cry. With everything in him, he wanted so much to reach up and brush his tears away. It hurt, a physical ache deep in his soul. Unable to bear it, Harry lifted a hand towards Severus’ cheek, but at Severus’ fearful look, stopped short and dropped his hand.

“M’sorry. I just wanted to… your tears hurt. I want to make you happy.”

Severus sighed and tucked Harry into his arms. “Gods, Harry. No one has ever cared for me like you do.” He held the boy tight and buried his face in Harry’s hair. “I think you may call me Sev if you wish to. I would not allow anyone else, but you… you are…” [Special. So important to me.]

Warmth and hope flooded Harry’s chest. “S-Severus, you’re sure?”

“Yes.” [You are the only one I truly trust.] “Call me Sev, if you wish. I think you will take the sting
Harry sighed into his neck. “O-okay, Sev.” Severus shivered, and Harry ached to be closer. “Gods, I wish you could let me hold you. It’s okay—you don’t have to. I won’t pressure you. I just really want to hug you right now, that’s all.”

Severus let slip a shaky sigh. “I… forgive me, Harry. It is still frightening to me. But I am trying. And perhaps I am making progress, even if it does not seem like it. Being able to hold you is more than I have done in over sixteen years.”

Harry nodded against Severus’ shoulder. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

“It is quite all right.” Severus shifted so Harry was leaning against his side with the older man’s arm wrapped around Harry’s shoulders. “There is something I am curious about, however. How is it that you wish so strongly for my touch but you are so repulsed against Miss Weasley?”

“Well, if Ginny had taken no for an answer, the occasional hug or something probably wouldn’t have bothered me. A big part of it is her pushiness and the fact that she’s all but forcing herself onto me.”

“Oh, I am sure that is the case now, but I meant prior to the start of her harassment. Why did you refuse her at the first? I would have thought she would be a good match for you—at least before she began assaulting and harassing you at all hours of the day. Obviously, I was incorrect, but I am curious as to why you thought so in the beginning.”

Harry coughed and a fierce blush burned his face. “Um, well, it’s not just Ginny. I couldn’t like her even if she wasn’t a creepy, stubborn bint. I… it’s all women, Sev. I’m gay.”

Severus’ breath hitched, and Harry prayed he hadn’t just repulsed the man. Gods, if Severus turned on him simply because he preferred men—after everything Harry had lost, he mightn’t be able to endure it.

“Oh,” Severus breathed. “Oh, I suppose that would complicate matters.”

Harry flinched. “You… you don’t hate me, do you?”

Severus gave a dark laugh. “I would be quite the hypocrite if so.”

Harry ran those words over in his head, trying to make sense of them, and gasped as their meaning cleared. “Merlin! You’re gay too?”

Severus smiled wryly, his cheeks going soft pink. “I am indeed. We are quite the pair, hmm?”

Harry chuckled and nuzzled his face into Severus’ shoulder. “Yeah.”

For some reason unknown to him, the knowledge of Severus’ sexuality had eased some deep worry Harry hadn’t acknowledged until now. He hadn’t the slightest idea why it should matter what gender his professor preferred, but knowing Severus liked men made Harry feel better. Maybe it was simply relief to have found someone similar he could trust.

“Severus, would you be too embarrassed if I talked to you about… well, what we go through as gay blokes? I don’t know of any others.”

Severus shook his head. “I do not mind so long as we maintain certain boundaries of propriety. I am still your professor… at least in spirit.”
Harry nodded. “I think I can manage that. It’s not like I have time to date anyway.”

Severus snorted. “No, indeed. And on that note, if you are feeling better, it is time to begin your martial arts lesson.”

Harry stood with a grin. “Now that I’m always ready for! Just try to leave me in one piece this time? And we should probably work on the light tracing spell afterwards if you have time tonight. For all we know, Slytherin might have developed an antivenin for his familiar himself and it’s there, just waiting for us to find.”

“Indeed.” Severus stood and motioned to the back of his quarters, to his second bedroom that he had converted into a training area. “After you then.”

Harry beamed and ran to the training room.
Chapter 26

10 February

Harry dodged a singing cupid and made his way towards the Gryffindor table for lunch. As soon as he walked near Ginny, who was sitting beside Dean, the girl gave Dean a besotted smile and laid their joined hands on the table. Dean smiled back and shyly rubbed her fingers.

Harry wasn’t fooled. To anyone passing, they looked like a loving couple—and Dean’s attraction was genuine, now that Ginny had abandoned her relentless pursuit of his friend—but Harry sensed an ulterior motive behind Ginny’s desires and little of true affection. He couldn’t tell what she wanted exactly, but given their past, he had a fair idea.

Harry looked away lest she get the idea her ploy had worked, ducking again, this time to avoid a cloud of irritating pink hearts. Gods, he hated Valentine’s Day, though he was obviously in the minority. At least fifteen people had already asked Harry to the Cupid’s Ball that morning, much to Harry’s disgust. He guessed Ginny’s sudden desire to date Dean had more to do with wanting a date herself than actual affection—and much more to do with making Harry jealous, not that she could.

Should he warn Dean? The boy had been loyal to him and Harry didn’t want to see him hurt, but if he told Dean that Ginny wasn’t genuine, he didn’t know how Dean would take it. It might backfire on all of them.

Harry sighed and vowed to ask Luna and Severus about it later. Those two always knew what to do. On second thought, he decided to bypass the Gryffindor table altogether and sit with Luna instead. Neville followed and set up beside the dreamy girl, dodging a cloud of singing bumblebees with pink, heart-shaped wings and grating voices.

“Hi, Lu,” Harry said with a nod. “How are you today?”

“Just fine! And better, now that I have good friends to talk to.” She gave the bumblebees a wry look. “Those Ticklebees are not done well. The bodies should be pink too.”

Harry watched the bees buzz a monotone version of “I Put a Spell on You” over Ginny and Dean. He looked as thrilled as Harry felt.

Harry piled his plate with roasted chicken, cheese, and veg. “Those are Ticklebees?”

“Well, not quite. But I think they’re supposed to be.”
Harry shook his head wryly. “I hadn’t imagined anyone else could see your spirits, Lu. I guess someone must.”

Luna chuckled. “Someone who needs new glasses. Or who, perhaps, is colour blind.”

Harry snorted into a bite of mashed potato, sending it flying down his shirt. “Lu!”

She laughed and used Tergeo on his messy robes. “There you are.”

“Thanks. Um, Luna… I wanted to ask you. Do you think—”

She shook her head. “No. I’m afraid the Feathersprites are telling me to warn you against interfering. Sadly, he already knows, deep down, but he’s convinced himself it’s genuine. He doesn’t want to believe you right now, and it will only hurt him worse in the end if you try to step in.”

Harry sighed and sipped his juice. “I was afraid of that. How did it even happen?”

Luna grimaced. “Well, he has been her sympathetic ear quite a lot. I’m afraid she may have taken advantage of that fact.”

“Damn. What should I do, then?”

“Simply be his friend and be there for him when you can be. Besides, we might be wrong about her motives.”

Harry snorted, this time without making a mess of himself. “Somehow, I doubt it.”

Neville gave them bemused looks. “Mind explaining to the class?”

“Later,” said Harry with a shake of his head. “If I tell you here, the rumour mill will have it around the school by dinnertime.”

“Sooner,” said Luna, with a slight nod in the direction of Lisa Turpin, who was sitting nearby and watching avidly, a pink heart stuck to the side of her cheek.

“Right,” said Neville with a scowl. “We’ll just keep all private things to ourselves then. I’ve got something important to ask you anyway.” He gave Harry a bright smile. “Mate, where did you get your apprentice robes? Sprout’s asked me to apprentice her, and I’ll need to buy some. I like the cut of yours.”

Harry glanced to Turpin and shook his head slightly. “I’ll get back to you on that. They were a Christmas gift, but Merlin, mate! Congratulations!”

Neville beamed. “Thanks! I’m really excited. Gran’s glowing, said I’ve finally hit my stride.” He shook his head. “I think it was there all along, just in a different way from Dad.”

Pain filled his eyes, and Harry’s heart ached for his friend. Gods, it was a cruel twist of fate that had taken Neville’s parents from him so young.

Harry frowned to himself, thinking over their situation. Could he and Severus come up with a cure for Neville’s parents? Hmm. Not yet, most likely. Harry hadn’t the capability or medical knowledge to create such a complex treatment, but maybe someday—it was something to strive for at least. In the meantime, he would just be there for Neville.

“Yeah,” said Harry with a gentle smile. “You’re your own person.” His expression darkened. “I’m certainly nothing like my old man.”
“Not in the least,” said Luna with a nod. She leaned in to whisper, “And he’s glad of that. He says you’re the better man and he is proud of you, even if you are friends with… oh! James Potter! Shame on you. I’m not repeating that.”

Harry smiled through a screen of tears; by now, he had come to accept her random bursts of knowledge from beyond the veil. “Luna, thank you. I think I really needed to hear that.”

“Yes, I know.”

He burst into laughter.

A week later, the light tracing spell was finally finished. Harry led Severus down to the Chamber that weekend and set it loose along with Isuri, watching as both light and snake followed the pipelines all through the Chamber walls. Merlin, he hadn’t imagined them to be so complex. It would take longer to explore this place than he had thought.

~Master,~ came Isuri’s breathy voice, sounding urgent, ~I think I have found something dangerous. There is a nest of snake skins and a dead bird.~

Harry followed his familiar’s voice and the light tracer around the edge of Slytherin’s statue and into a compartment behind the ear. “Oh! There is something back here. Lumos!”

His wandlight revealed his snake, poised to strike at a pile of basilisk skins, and a dead rooster, blood still wet under its bitten corpse.

Severus clambered in behind Harry, though it was a tight squeeze for the larger man, and shuddered at the sight. “Merlin. I think we have found its nest.”

~Yes,~ said Isuri. ~Master, the bird looks new. Is the snake still alive somehow? Did it have a mate? ~

Harry offered his arm to his frightened familiar. ~It is safe, Isuri. The snake is dead and cut up in Severus’ crystal tubes, and the rooster looks new because there is magic on this place that keeps things fresh. He has been dead a long time.~

Isuri shivered and crawled up Harry’s arm. ~I do not think I like this magic.~

~No, it is disturbing for me as well.~

“Harry,” said Severus, wand out, “stand back. I need to Vanish this.”

Harry stepped away with his familiar and watched as Severus carefully vanished the rooster and the blood around it with his specialised spell. Pity they couldn’t just vanish the venom from a human like that.

Harry froze, the hairs on his arms lifting. “Oh!” Excitement shooting a thrill through his veins, he babbled, “Sev! I might know—do you think it’s possible to alter that Vanishing spell to make our basilisk vaccine work?”

Severus frowned. “How?”
“Well….” Harry rubbed his chin, thinking hard. “The purpose of the vaccine is to stop the venom from killing the patient, right?”

“Yes…?”

“What if we’re going about it the wrong way? You’ve been trying to neutralise the venom, but honestly, Sev, that stuff is so powerful I doubt there’s anything in the world besides tears fresh from a phoenix that could. I mean, that’s why we thought of doing a vaccine in the first place—there’s just no time to administer antivenin before it kills you. As we can’t shove Fawkes into a potion and other neutralisation agents aren’t working, we need to try something else.” Harry’s eyes gleamed with excitement. “And if we could make the vaccine simply Vanish the venom on contact with the body, then a neutralising agent wouldn’t be necessary!”

Severus gasped. “Oh dear Merlin. Harry, I think—oh, it just might work! We would need to alter the spell matrix to exclude the body’s natural organs and processes and key it to the structure of the venom, but once we are past those hurdles—I can see no reason why it would fail.” He gave Harry a brighter smile than the young man had seen anywhere but the photo on his mantel and swept Harry into a hug. “You are a genius, my friend. Your innovative mind will save many lives—I am sure of it.”

Harry flushed from head to toe, heart racing and heat thrumming in his veins. “O-oh. You really think so, Severus?”

“I do.” Severus released Harry and moved back. “Come. Let us retire to my quarters and begin work.”

“All right.” Harry hissed to his familiar to come, but Isuri hesitated, nosing along the base of the wall in a dark corner.

~Master, I think there is something else here. I smell a strange scent, like your friend’s old leaf-towers.~

Books. Isuri was smelling books. Oh Merlin!

~Isuri, do you mean Severus’ leaf-towers? As old as his, or older?~

Isuri bobbed her head. ~These leaf-towers smell older. Like snake-magic too.~

Harry sucked in a sharp breath. “Slytherin’s study. It has to be.”

Severus frowned. “What?”

“Isuri smells books back here. Old books that smell like… snake magic. Parseltongue, I gather. What else could it be?”

Severus peered at the wall. “Interesting.” He jerked his gaze away and turned back towards the main Chamber. “We will explore it another day, Harry. For now, we must ready the vaccine. I fear he intends to begin poisoning students over the Easter hols, when there is less interference and Fawkes is due to burn. You are most likely his first target.”

Harry frowned at the wall, torn, but at Severus’ call, he turned and joined his friend. “All right, Sev. Let’s get to work.”
Severus had found a true colleague in Harry. He had never expected to meet his spellcrafting equal in a student, but the boy’s out-of-the-box thinking meshed well with Severus’ calculating intelligence, and together, they made great headway in Severus’ research. After several weeks, they had created what Severus hoped was a working anti-basilisk vaccine. It was more spell than potion, to be honest, but if it worked, they might save everyone’s lives.

Harry led Severus to the Room of Requirement, Severus under his spells and Harry under his cloak.

Outside the door, Harry whispered, “Wait, just in case someone else is inside.”

Severus squeezed his shoulder in understanding and stood by. Harry paced before the wall and breathed a sigh when a door appeared. Severus watched in fascination. So this was the famous Room of Requirement. Harry was even more resourceful than Severus had imagined to have discovered it.

Harry murmured, “The coast is clear,” and Severus slipped into the Room behind him.

“Sweet mother of Merlin!”

Severus found himself standing in a state-of-the-art medical lab, complete with several manikins of different configurations lying on slabs. Each one had been connected to a vitals monitor that tracked everything from brain waves to magic levels and displayed them on a massive magical screen next to the ‘patient.’ Severus swallowed hard at the sight of one with the appearance of a toddler. A breathing toddler.

“They… they are not real, are they?”

Harry shook his head. “Just manikins. The Room is really good at simulating life, but it can’t actually create it. I practised healing the night Riddle tried to kill you on a manikin with your features.” He shook his head. “If I’d known you were afraid of touch, I’d have done things differently, though.”

Severus froze. “What… is that supposed to mean?”

Harry shot him a glare. “Merlin, Severus! Do you really think I’d abuse you after what I saw in the pensieve? Gods. All I did was touch your face and try to find forgiveness.”

Severus winced. Fuck. That had been ill-done of him. He should have known better.

“Harry, I am sorry. I do trust you. Your wording simply startled me.”

Harry sighed and rubbed his face. “You don’t trust me. Not really. But maybe we’ll get there one day.” His shoulders slumped, he made his way to the first ‘patient,’ a nondescript boy of about Hogwarts age. “This should probably be our first test. He’s the most representative of our target recipients.”

Severus took Harry’s hand and turned the boy to face him. “At the moment, I am more concerned with you. Will you forgive me? I… I still have nightmares of my past, Harry. So many nights. And they do not only feature your family’s abuse.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Sev, are you saying you’ve been hurt like that more than once?”

Severus closed his eyes and nodded. He couldn’t go into details, but Harry did have a point. He did need to trust the boy.
“Oh dear gods.” Harry’s head came to rest on Severus’ chest. “Sev… Jesus, I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“T-that is why I am telling you now. I do trust you.”

Harry brought Severus’ hand to his chest and sighed. “Yeah. Yeah, I see that. I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

Severus ran his free hand through Harry’s hair, a touch that had become habit whenever they had a disagreement or they simply needed comfort. “Yes. Are you angry?”

“No. I wasn’t angry before, only disappointed. I really don’t want to hurt you, Sev.”

“I know.” Severus smoothed Harry’s ruffled curls—well, as much as they could be—and took position beside the Hogwarts age manikin. “We should begin testing. I think it would be best to wait thirty minutes after administering the vaccine before we introduce the venom. It will, I believe, grow in potency over time, but we do not know how much we have.”

“Right. Then we’ll start with this one and make our way around the room. And there’s a bookshelf there with medical references we could study while we wait. If you’ll just set a timer over each manikin as we go?”

“Of course.”

Harry spelled the potion into the unconscious manikin’s stomach with quite as much finesse as Poppy.

“Merlin, you truly are skilled in the medical field, Harry.”

Harry blushed and turned his face away. “Oh, that’s just a little feeding spell. It’s nothing impressive like you do every day, Sev.”

Severus set a timer over the boy manikin for thirty minutes. “I beg to differ. It is quite impressive for a sixth year to handle such a finicky spell with such skill. Well done.”

Harry blushed and moved on to the next manikin, an aging woman that put Severus in mind of Minerva. “W-well, I guess that’s why Poppy wanted me as her apprentice.”

“Indeed.” Severus set a timer over the woman too. “How is your apprenticeship going, Harry?”

“Well, I think. She seems happy with my progress.” He frowned as he moved on to another elderly manikin with a Dumbledorian beard. “The only problem is she wants to talk to me about what had me so depressed last term, but I can’t really—I mean, I’d be breaking your confidence if I talked about it. It’s worrying her, but I don’t know what I can do.”

Severus set a timer over the old man. “The pensieve incident, you mean. Does it truly still trouble you?”

Harry shuddered before a teenage girl manikin. “Much more than it should, I think.”

Severus held Harry’s shoulder. “Speak to her about it then. She is already aware of the events of that afternoon. And if it is causing you such distress, then I would prefer you seek treatment rather than….”

‘Than let it bleed as I have done for so long.’
Harry gave him a searching look. “You’re sure?”

“Yes. I would prefer you to recover. Speak to her of me if you wish. I trust you.”


“Mm. Go ahead and dose this one before we fall behind.”

“Right.”

Sometime later, Harry and Severus had run several tests with the vaccine, tweaking errors they had missed in the creation phase. One rendition had also Vanished the subject’s spleen. Another had left their nerve endings a mess, causing terrible pain that no potion could combat. Another version successfully Vanished the venom, but failed their consumption tests—everything the patient ate or drank afterwards also Vanished. But Severus felt confident they had worked out all the kinks with this version.

He held a heavy-duty syringe full of venom over the open mouth of a new Hogwarts age manikin. “Ready?”

Harry took a deep breath and tensed in anticipation, eyes glued to the vitals monitor. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Hold your breath.”

Harry obeyed, and Severus dribbled the venom into the manikin’s mouth. The second the viscous green liquid came in contact with the manikin’s tongue, dark purple light surrounded the boy and disappeared without a trace. So far, so good.

Severus replaced the phial and looked to his companion. “Harry?”

“Vitals are holding. There was a bit of a jump in heartrate when the vaccine went off, but that’s to be expected. It was probably just simulated shock. Give it a minute and we’ll see if anything changes.”

Severus waited, watching the manikin for any sign of deteriorating health.

“His vitals are still solid,” said Harry with a grin. “I think… well, let me just run a full diagnostic here and start the food simulation. Statum Corporis Revelaro!” Every statistic they could have asked for appeared on a long parchment in front of Harry. While the Room simulated feeding the patient various foods, drinks, and potions, Severus took one end of the parchment and Harry the other, and they checked everything twice until they met in the middle.

Harry looked up and checked the consumption test results, a grin spreading across his face. “Sev, I think… it works!”

Severus looked to the manikin’s vitals, still holding steady. “So it appears. Let us try the next subject.”

“Yes!” Harry raced to an elderly female manikin and bounced in anticipation.

“Hold your breath, remember?”
Harry obeyed, though it looked to be a challenge, and Severus administered the venom. Like before, the manikin showed no signs of deterioration, not even a burn on her tongue where the venom had landed, and the consumption tests came back clear.

“Oh, Sev! I think we’ve done it!”

Severus smiled. “Let us not count our gold before the nifflers move in. We still have an entire room full of subjects to test, and we have not yet tested the vaccine on patients with chronic conditions.”

“Well, let’s get busy then.”

By midnight, they had tested the vaccine on every variation of human they could think of and even tried it on a house elf manikin. It hadn’t worked on the elf, not on such a vastly different being, but they had already begun tweaking the formula to make sure the elf population was as protected as the humans.

“I think this is as safe and effective as we can make it without true human trials,” Severus said with a tired smile.

“Yes, tomorrow, we’re the manikins.”

Severus chuckled and ruffled Harry’s hair. “Go to sleep. You’re done in.”

“Why don’t we just kip here? We can make the Room into a flat for the night.”

“If we did not run the risk of having your friends run in on us—”

Harry beamed. “We don’t. Everyone but us is warded out, except for Neville, Dean, and Luna.”

Severus gave him a searching look. “Umbridge found this place last year.”

“Yeah, when we had liabilities. Edgecombe led her to it. With just you and I included, and those we can trust with our lives, there’s no one to break the wards.”

Severus hesitated, but relented after a moment. “Oh, very well. But I am sleeping in my own room this time, understood?”

Harry grinned. “Sure, as long as you tell me a bedtime story.”

Severus had the Room conjure a pillow and tossed it at Harry’s head.

12 April

By Easter dinner, everyone in attendance over the hols had received the basilisk vaccine under the guise of inoculation against a particularly virulent strain of Dragon Pox. Not even the Death Eater students had skipped out. Harry had thought it a good blind himself—no one wanted to endure the nightmare that was Dragon Pox, especially not a potent strain, and the memory of Poppy’s brush with the disease was still fresh in everyone’s minds.

Like at Christmas, the students and professors shared a table for Easter dinner, each with a cream and caramel filled chocolate ‘egg’ beside their plates. Harry filled up on savoury foods first and saved his egg for last. Most of the others had done the same.
“Bottoms up, Harry,” said Dumbledore with a wink, and lifted his egg.

Harry wanted to roll his eyes, but with the other students watching, decided it was best to simply oblige the batty old man. With a shrug, he bit into his egg at the same time Dumbledore sampled his, but the sweet taste he had expected never materialised. Instead, a curious sensation spread through his tongue and throat, cold and tingling, and left him dry. It was as if all his saliva had vanished at once.

Then, he saw the purple light around his face and the old man’s, and grim understanding settled over him like the chill of a Dementor.

“Oh my,” said Dumbledore with a frown. “It appears we shall have to forego our usual Easter treat this year. It seems someone has taken the liberty of poisoning our eggs.”

Jenna Timberly, a third year Hufflepuff, squeaked and pushed her egg away. “What do you mean, poisoned? How do you know?”

“Well,” said Dumbledore with a sigh, “that light indicates a powerful poison has just been Vanished from the bloodstream. Let me just run a quick diagnostic—”

“I’ll do that, if you don’t mind,” said Severus with a grimace. “Many poisons—well, they do not react well with certain spells, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore waved him on.

Severus performed the spell and revealed what they already knew. “Ah. Merlin, basilisk venom. Dear gods.” He Vanished everyone’s eggs and sat down, white-faced and visibly shaken. It wasn’t an act, either. Severus was terrified.

[If it hadn’t worked—oh gods. I would have lost them both.]

Harry didn’t dare make eye-contact with a table full of unknowns, but vowed to spend plenty of time with Severus later, when it was safe.

“Basilisk venom!” Poppy stood and gave a weak cry, “Sweet Circe! To the Infirmary this instant, the both of you. Did anyone else touch their egg or see purple light?”

Everyone shook their heads. Harry noted one Slytherin scowling—Malcolm Avery—and guessed he was the one to have dosed their eggs. As Harry left for the Infirmary, he noticed the seventh year slipping away with a dark-aligned Ravenclaw and winced. It seemed he would not have long to heal Severus’ fears after all.

Severus followed Poppy to the Infirmary. After all, it made sense that a potions master would want to be on call in such an event in case antivenin was needed. He caught the two Death Eater students slipping away and shuddered in anticipation of the pain he would feel that evening. No doubt the Dark Lord would be furious that his plan had failed.

It had failed, hadn’t it? Harry and Albus would be all right, wouldn’t they?

Sick with fear, Severus followed as close to his friend as he dared and watched Harry and Albus for
any sign of trouble.

Poppy led them to the closed wing of the Infirmary, ostensibly to prevent Harry and Albus from poisoning anyone else. In truth, it was so Severus could show his fear without being labelled a traitor to the dark. As soon as the doors closed behind them and Albus had warded the area, Harry dashed to Severus’ side and held out his hands, stopping short of touching the man.

“I’m okay, Sev. It’s all right. We’re going to be fine.”

Severus let slip a shaky gasp and caught Harry into his arms. “Don’t ever terrify me like that again. I cannot lose you.” He struggled to control his emotions and looked up. “E-either of you.”

“Oh, Sev!” Gentle hands rubbed his arms. “Ssh. It’s okay. We’re safe. The vaccine just left me feeling a bit dry but everything else is okay. I’m not in pain at all. Headmaster?”

“I feel much the same,” Albus said with a nod. “I could do with some water, but I believe in all other ways, I am fit as a fiddle. However, it certainly wouldn’t hurt to check, if only to ease Severus’ mind. Poppy, if you would be so kind…?”

“O-of course.” Poppy shook herself as if coming out of a daze and waved her wand over Harry. “Statum Corporis Revelaro!”

Harry let slip a squeak. “Poppy! The n-normal diagnostic would have done well enough.”

“Not with an otherwise untested vaccine and lethal venom, young man. This time, I need to see everything in your body to make sure you’ll heal properly.”

She affixed her spectacles to her nose and read the parchment forming in front of her, her lips pursing further and further with each line. Harry winced and shrunk in on himself, trembling in Severus’ arms.

Dear gods. What was the boy so afraid of?

Poppy rounded on Albus, to Severus’ shock. “Albus Dumbledore! You have much to answer for!” Her outraged cry reverberated off the wards Albus had placed and rang in Severus’ ears.

Harry whimpered and ducked his head. “Poppy, please. Please don’t.”

She sighed and Banished her list. “From here on out, you will be receiving treatment for the injuries and conditions I found on that parchment, do you understand, Harry?”

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

Severus froze, eyes wide, heart thundering. “Poppy?”

She shook her head. “I can’t reveal anything further without his permission. Rest assured the venom did not harm him, and I will heal the rest.”

Severus swallowed hard. “Harry, are you well?”

Harry ducked his head and trembled. “I… I wasn’t. For a long time. But I’m okay now.”

Severus tucked his friend into his arms and held him tight. “Yes, you are. I will make sure of it.”

Across the room, Poppy had performed the same scan on a downcast Albus and was forcing potions down his throat with unusual ferocity, muttering under her breath. By the set of her lips and her steel-
hard eyes, Severus gathered it was a diatribe rather than healing chants. Merlin. What had Albus done to make her so angry, and why was Harry so terrified?

What on earth had Poppy seen on that list?

Severus ran his hands up and down Harry’s back. “Harry, you do know you are free to speak with me about anything you wish, don’t you?”

Harry nodded and buried his face in Severus’ shoulder. “S-sorry. So sorry.”

Severus petted Harry’s curls and held him tight. “Ssh. You have nothing that requires an apology. You are safe here, little one. I have you.”

Slowly, Harry’s trembling eased.

“Harry,” Poppy said, her voice gentle, “I will reveal nothing on that list without your explicit permission. It’s quite all right, child. We will heal your wounds. I do want you to talk to me about what I found, however. Please. I promise you will not meet with judgment here.”

“I c-can’t,” Harry breathed. “I just… can’t.”

Poppy gave him a sad smile. “I do understand.” She looked to Severus and shook her head. “The two of you are more alike than you think. Well, never mind it. Harry, are you able to take some potions now?”

“D-do I need them?”

“Some, but for the most part, they’re simply a precaution.”

“Okay. Will you explain what you’re using them for later, please?”

“Of course.”

Severus helped Poppy guide Harry to a bed and sat by his side as Poppy administered his potions. Severus usually balked at letting Harry hold his hand, but when Harry reached out this time, Severus let the boy’s hand close on his own. He didn’t know what had happened to Harry in his past, but something on that sheet had terrified the boy out of his wits. Coming so close after nearly being poisoned, Severus couldn’t deny him the small comfort of holding his hand.

And Severus didn’t want to let him go either.

Merlin, was it typical to feel so strongly about a friend? He had thought his entire world would fall apart the moment the light appeared around Harry’s face and he understood what had just happened. Was that a normal reaction?

Gods, Severus didn’t know. How many friends had he known? And of those, he had lost them all. Perhaps such attachment was normal, given the circumstances.

Either way, Severus couldn’t bear to leave Harry’s side, even for a moment.

Poppy took one more diagnostic of Harry and nodded. “Well, this is improved. And I see no sign of damage on either of you. However, I feel you should remain overnight, just to make sure nothing goes awry.”

Harry shook his head. “I’m not staying if he’s called. And we’ll both need to make an appearance so the Death Eaters know we’re not dead.” He gave Albus a sharp look. “And after this, Avery needs
to be expelled and tried as a criminal. He’s tried to kill three of us in as many months.”

Albus winced. “But he is so young….”

“How old was Riddle when he first murdered someone?”

Albus grimaced. “According to my research, fifteen.”

“There you are then. Avery is a dangerous, amoral monster out for nothing but his own gain. Do the right thing for once, headmaster, before someone else dies for your blind spots.”

Albus lowered his head. “I suppose… you make a good point. I will contact Kingsley as soon as Poppy releases us.”

“About time you learned from your mista—agh!” Harry clapped a hand over his head and cried out.

“Harry!” Heart racing in his throat, Severus grabbed Harry’s hands and called desperately to his friend. “Harry, what is it? Are you hurt? What is wrong?”

Harry didn’t answer, and Poppy started a diagnostic spell.

“A vision,” Albus said and moved to Harry’s side. “I believe he is—”

Harry’s eyes flashed red and a rough voice hissed through his mouth, “Alive? How is that possible? There is no antidote! Crucio!” Harry shrieked and thrashed with the pain of the curse.

“Harry!” Severus caught the boy up and held him tight, praying it mitigated the pain.

Harry screamed, “Crucio!” Another round left tears trailing the boy’s face. Severus tried to hold him still through it and fought tears of his own.

“Albus, make this stop!”

Albus gave him a sorrowful look. “I cannot. I have no more control over Harry’s visions than over fate herself. Less, to be sure.”

“But—”

Harry’s rough voice cried, “Crucio!”

“Not again!” Severus blinked tears down and held the boy’s frame as tight as he could. Anything to keep him safe. “Hold on, Harry. Hold on.”

At the end of the third round, Harry croaked, “You have disappointed me for the last time, Malcolm! Avada Kedavra!” The boy bowed up, cried out, and sank onto the bed, pale, drenched in cold sweat, and unconscious. Gods help him.

Severus held Harry close, terrified the warm breath brushing his cheek would stop any moment. “Harry, oh gods.”

Poppy said in a small voice, “I-is it over?”

“I believe so,” said a grim Albus. “Merlin, the poor boy.”

With a deep breath to calm himself, Severus sat up and ran his hand through Harry’s damp curls. “It appears it will not be necessary to expel Avery after all, Albus,” he said, his voice rougher than he
would have liked.

Albus lowered his head, grief and guilt heavy in his eyes. “So I see.”

Just before ten that evening, Severus raced back to his quarters with an invisible Harry in tow, trembling from head-to-toe. Gods. He should have expected the summons, but seeing his dearest friends poisoned had terrified him out of his wits, and then knowing Avery had been killed right before Harry’s eyes—that Harry had lived his torture and death—Severus hadn’t been able to think much beyond the loss of one of his own students and Harry’s pain.

Harry waited in the living room, pacing and biting his nails, fear apparent in his every feature and stuttered breath. Severus had no time to reassure him, though he hated to leave him in such fear. He raced to his bedroom and changed into his accursed Death Eater robes and dug his mask out from its place in his top drawer.

As soon as Severus emerged from the bedroom, Harry ran to him but stopped before he touched, hands out and asking for an embrace without taking it. Merlin, this boy did so much to make him happy and safe.

Harry whispered, “Will you hug me, Sev? Please? I want to hold you too, but I won’t. I don’t want you going into this even more afraid than you already are.”

Severus held Harry tight and buried his face in the boy’s sweet-smelling curls. “I cannot stay.”

“I know. It’s okay. I just want to make you feel better, if I can.”

“H-hold me then, Harry,” Severus’ voice came out small and afraid. “I think… I need your strength.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. Hold me too.”

Harry sighed into Severus’ shoulder and wrapped him up tight, sliding one hand into the man’s hair and the other around his waist.

Gods.

Warmth and light flooded Severus’ entire body, driving darkness and fear away, and he melted in Harry’s arms. Why should Harry’s embrace should feel safe when no one else’s had ever done? Then again, perhaps even Severus’ phobias didn’t compare to the terror of facing a furious dark lord. He shuddered and buried his face into Harry’s hair, breathing him in and taking comfort from his presence.

“Sev, I’m here,” Harry murmured. “I’ll make sure you’re okay.”

“I am so afraid.”

“I know. I can feel you trembling. I’ve got you, Severus. I’ll protect you as best as I’m able.” Harry nuzzled Severus’ shoulder. “Merlin, I’m so proud of you.”

Severus’ heart pattered and his stomach jolted. “P-proud? Look at me, Harry! How can you feel any
sort of pride in me? I am a Death Eater, for Merlin’s sake.”

“No. You’re a spy, Sev. And you’re so bloody brave.” Harry hugged Severus tighter and stepped back, hands on the older man’s shoulders. “I am proud of you.” He straightened Severus’ robes and smoothed his hair. “And I’ll be waiting when you get back. You have your pendant and your cloak?”

Severus nodded. “Though I doubt even their combined power will prevent my death if he decides to use the Avada.”

“I hope so, Sev. I can’t lose you.”

Severus traced a gentle hand down Harry’s cheek, wishing to return the soft affection Harry had given him. “I feel the same, but I must go now, Harry. I am already running late.”

Harry closed his eyes and bit his lip. “I-I know. Please, please come back.”

“I shall do my best.”

Severus moved towards the door, but Harry stopped him just as he laid his hand on the knob.

“Wait!”

The boy pulled a square of silvery fabric from his pocket and unfolded it, revealing the infamous Potter cloak of invisibility. “Take this. Keep it. I want you to have it from now on.”

Severus gasped as Harry slipped the fabric over his shoulders and tied the fastenings. “H-Harry! This is… I cannot—it is too much!”

“Severus, you’re the most important person in my life. If you die, that cloak will mean nothing to me. Keep it. Use it to keep yourself safe.” Harry held his hands over Severus’ face but did not touch. “And come back to me.”

Severus laid his face in Harry’s palms and closed his eyes, shaking all over, heart thundering with fear and deep affection for this gentle, brave young man.

“I will do my best.” He straightened and gathered his wits about him, pulling his shields as tight as they would go. Merlin help him if Voldemort saw this in his mind. “I must go now, Harry. Be safe until I return.”

“I-I will, Sev.” Harry waved, tears coursing down his face. It broke Severus’ heart to turn away and close the door behind him, but he had no choice. The Dark Lord would kill him if he left it much later.

‘Merlin preserve me, for his sake if not my own.’ With that, he pulled the hood of Harry’s cloak over his head and dashed for the gates.

Harry sat on a conjured sofa outside the gates, comfortable enough between the velveteen winter cloak Severus had bought for him in January, Luna’s hot-air charm, and the hat and gloves McGonagall had given him. The fluffy patchwork quilt Luna had given him for Christmas went a long way towards keeping his legs warm too, and the body heat of his friends—Neville pressed in on
one side, Luna on his other, and Dean on the other side of Neville—kept the bitter chill of a Scottish winter away.

Luna’s *Tempus* spell chimed midnight, thankfully under a strong silencing charm, and Harry jumped.

“Oh gods. Where is he? Is he okay, Luna? Are your Clarents talking?”

Luna held Harry’s hand. “Beyond that he is alive, I cannot tell you much, Harry. Your mother is telling me to remind you that Severus has faced worse situations before and come out in one piece.”

Harry snarled, “My mother left him to some of those situations without caring how badly he was banged up, so forgive me if that’s not particularly comforting.” He winced and wrapped his arms around his chest. “I’m sorry, Lu. I’m not mad at you. I’m just so damn scared.”

“It’s quite all right, Harry,” Luna said with a sad smile. “I know you didn’t intend that diatribe for me.”

“No. I’m still angry at her.”

Neville rubbed Harry’s back. “Can you tell us about it, mate?”

“Never without Sev’s permission. He’d never forgive me. But suffice it to say they—meaning my family and Remus—earned worse punishment than they got.”

Dean blinked. “Really, mate? I always heard they were good people.”

“Never without Sev’s permission. He’d never forgive me. But suffice it to say they—meaning my family and Remus—earned worse punishment than they got.”

Luna rubbed her ears and gave Harry a wry look. “I don’t think your godfather liked that remark, Harry.”

“Yeah? Well, he was the worst of the lot, so he can stuff it for all I care.”

And yet, his loss still hurt. Harry began to wonder if he would ever sort out his mixed feelings for Sirius. Well, he had grown accustomed to Luna’s strange ability to communicate with the dead, so perhaps he might, one day.

Luna grimaced and rubbed her ears harder. “Sometimes being a spiritual medium is quite unpleasant.”

“Is he still boxing your ears?” Harry snorted. “Well, let’s see if this doesn’t sort him. Sirius, how about you put me in Severus’ position. That’s right, imagine me in the place of the greasy git and tell me if your excuses still hold water. Because I was in his position this summer, I felt everything he did—at least, what I saw of it—and what you did to him, all of you, was horrific! You should be ash—”

A crack of apparition had Harry on his feet like a shot. Severus groaned and slumped over, though all Harry could see was the hole in the snow where his body had fallen.

“Sev,” he breathed. “Oh gods.”

Harry raced to him and pulled the cloak off his shoulders, revealing a black eye, a cut across Severus’ lip, and several whip lashes across his chest, but the man’s injuries weren’t life-threatening this time.

“Thank Merlin.” Harry heaved Severus onto the sofa and fed him a healing potion. “I’m here, Severus. So are Neville, Dean, and Luna. We’ll get you home safely. And I’ll take care of you
tonight, okay?”

“Ughn.” Severus groaned and laid his head on Harry’s shoulder. “Hurts.”

Harry petted Severus’ hair, hoping it comforted rather than alarmed him, and murmured healing chants under his breath until Severus could stand.

“That’s all I dare do in this weather, Sev. How did you end up so hurt anyway? I thought those charms would block it.”

Severus gave a wry snort. “They did. When the Dark Lord’s curses failed to work, he had the entire Inner Circle cast against me at once. He was shocked that I only came out of a group Flagellae curse with a handful of lash marks.”

“Dear gods,” Harry breathed. “That might have cut you to ribbons.”

Severus nodded grimly. “It may have been his intent. However, seeing how well-guarded I am worked in our favour this time. I have ousted Malfoy from his former position.”

Harry snickered softly. “Bet he’s thrilled.”

Severus’ eyes flooded with pain. “Not quite.”

Harry sighed and held his arm out by Severus’ side. “I’m going to brace you up, Sev. Can you hold on to my shoulders?”

Severus obeyed, and after some struggle, Harry managed to heave him to his feet.

“There you are. Now, just lean on me, and we’ll get you home.”

Dean moved to Severus’ other side and offered an arm. “Sir, I’ll help too, if you want.”

But Severus shook his head hard and shied away, leaning against Harry. Dean’s hurt look twisted Harry’s heart. He rubbed Severus’ back in hopes it would soothe him.

“Sev, can I explain?”

Severus nodded and leaned on Harry. “O-on the way.”

Harry squeezed his waist gently and guided him up the path. “Dean, I’m sorry. I should have warned you first. Severus has a severe phobia of touch. He can’t bear for anyone he doesn’t have a close bond with to even touch his hand. To brace him up like this, to let me support him when he’s vulnerable—it takes a lot of trust.”

Severus’ thoughts rang in Harry’s ears. *[You are the only one I trust to touch my hands.]*

Harry couldn’t help catching his breath. He hoped Severus assumed it was from hauling him around.

“Oh.” Dean moved away a pace and held his wand steady at Severus’ side. “Then I’ll just stand by ready to catch him with magic in case anything happens, okay?”

“Acceptable,” Severus choked out. *[Merlin, forgive me. I do not mean to hurt them.]*

“It’s all right, Sev,” Harry said, breathless. “He knows it’s nothing personal.”

Severus nodded and said nothing, his eyes on the ground and his focus on his steps.
Partway to the castle, Harry breathed, “Severus, how bad is our situation?”

“Not as bad as we feared,” Severus panted. “I managed to convince him you foresaw his plans in a vision. And he believes Albus created the vaccine. I claimed you gave the basilisk from the Chamber to Albus years ago and he has been studying it ever since.”

Harry scowled. “What reason was there to torture you then?”

Severus gave a bitter laugh. “Anger management.”

“Bloody bastard,” Neville muttered, then blushed. “Oh, um, s-sorry, sir.”

Severus snorted. “Do not trouble yourself, Longbottom. Perhaps we shall never see eye-to-eye over a cauldron, but in this, we are in complete agreement.”

Dean snorted. “Understatement.”

Harry held Severus tighter, frowning at the trembling wracking his slim frame. “Come on, Severus. Let’s get you home.”

“But my report—”

“You can give it just as well from the comfort of your own sofa. The headmaster can come to you for once.”

Severus sighed and laid his head on Harry’s shoulder, too weak to argue. “As you wish.”

Harry slumped against Severus’ sofa, exhausted from his long vigil and healing the man. Thank Merlin it was the hols. He’d never make it through class like this.

Severus sent the old man a Patronus, and a moment later, the headmaster stepped through the floo, giving them a curious look.

“Why did you decide to meet here, Severus?”

“He didn’t,” Harry said with a scowl. “I did. I would think you would want him to be home where he can heal after such a terrible ordeal rather than making him climb several flights of stairs twice while he’s injured—twice!”

Dumbledore coughed and rubbed his beard. “Ah, an oversight I shall not allow again.”

“You shouldn’t have done in the first place, but fair enough.”

Severus motioned to the armchair beside the sofa. “Sit, Albus. I am too tired to argue at the moment.”

Harry winced. “Sorry, Sev. I was just trying to help.”

“It is no trouble, Harry. I value your protection.”

Harry smiled and laid a hand over Severus’ wrist. He would have liked to hold the man’s hand, but this was enough for now. Severus was hurt and exhausted, and he had already made great strides
earlier in the evening. Harry still felt the warmth of his body in his arms, the patter of his heartbeat against his shoulder, the feel of his trim waist cradled against his own.

Merlin, should the memory of it have made Harry blush? He shook off his thoughts and focused on the matter at hand.

Severus had just finished bringing Dumbledore up to date on what he had told Harry thus far and was discussing Voldemort’s likely plans.

“I am honestly not sure what he will do from here, Albus,” Severus said with a huff. “His attempts to drive Harry mad with his visions have failed as Harry is able to block most of them now. His poisoning attempts did not work. He is still attacking Muggles, but the aurors are onto him and tracking his signature every night, which has greatly curtailed his ability to pillage and destroy. I imagine he will do something major soon, but what… I am at a loss.”

“Well, I have a theory,” Harry said, rubbing his chin. “It might be… well, I’m not as good at strategy as Sev. But I do know how that bastard thinks—unfortunately—and this is what I would do in his shoes and thinking like the monster he is. He wants to get to Hogwarts. He wants the school and he wants me, but he’s afraid of the headmaster. So he’ll try to draw you away first, Headmaster, but we’ll be wise to that plan. And that means he’ll have no choice but to stop going after us directly. We’re too well-protected and too prepared for his games.”

Severus’ eyes narrowed, his intense focus and thought obvious on his face. “Directly?”

“Knew you’d catch that. Yes, he’ll have to stop attacking directly, but that doesn’t rule out the Slytherin route.”

“And you know what that is?”

Harry grimaced. “Well, maybe. I’m no Slytherin, but thinking about it from a tactical standpoint and in consideration of his goals and personality, I think his next move is to attack the Ministry. This time, with intent to take it over. If he can place himself or one of his agents in charge, he can force the headmaster out of the school. And with how corrupt and scattered the Ministry is at the moment, he’ll probably succeed too, in both cases.”

“Dear gods,” Severus breathed. “Merlin preserve us from that fate.”

Dumbledore shuddered. “Indeed. Severus, do you believe Harry’s theory is sound?”

“Would that I could say otherwise, but given what Harry has just pointed out, I think it is precisely what he will do.”

Dumbledore stood. “Then we must take measures to prevent such a disastrous occurrence immediately. I will advise Kingsley and Scrimgeour of the threat and offer the Order’s services to protect them. Kingsley will then mobilise his trustworthy aurors and oust those who are not, I hope, so we shall at least be prepared for an attack.”

Harry nodded. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and King will kill the bastard for us.”

Dumbledore cringed and returned to his seat. “Yes, well, about that. Harry, I think it is past time I revealed the truth of Voldemort’s resurrection to you.”

Fury bubbled in Harry’s gut, white-hot and stifling. “More secrets, sir?” Both older men winced at his tone.
Dumbledore rubbed his brow. “Forgive me, Harry. It is only that you were so young, and the magic is so dark, but, nevertheless, it cannot be put off any longer. Indeed, tonight has proven to me the folly of attributing too much innocence to students in my charge. Much as I would like you to remain pure children as long as possible, this is war, and I cannot afford to forget it again."

“About damn time, old man,” Severus snapped.

“Yes,” Harry agreed. “Well, what have you been hiding from us this time?”

Dumbledore folded his hands in his lap and cleared his throat. “Well, I first suspected Tom had delved into soul magic when he did not perish entirely the night he murdered your parents, Harry, but I received confirmation of that in your second year, when you brought me the journal from the Chamber of Secrets….”

Harry trembled against Severus’ side, reeling with horror. Horcruxes. Dear mother of gods, Voldemort had split his soul into an unknown number of pieces and stored them in Merlin knew what to keep himself alive permanently. And as Dumbledore did not know how many he had created or what any of them were besides the journal and Nagini—Isuri hadn’t much liked that revelation, to be sure—they had no other option but to find a spell powerful enough to kill him in spite of the horcruxes.

Worse, Dumbledore had insisted that only Harry had the power to do it, but had no idea how. Dear Merlin, Harry was a seventeen year old student! What was he supposed to do against a seventy year old dark lord? An immortal dark lord at that!

But Harry couldn’t ignore the Prophecy. “*The one with the power to destroy the dark lord approaches… power he knows not….*” What did it mean? What did Harry have that set him apart from everyone else?

Aside from his mother’s blood protection, he could think of nothing beyond his ability to speak to snakes. And that meant his answers lay in only one possible place: Slytherin’s secret study. Slytherin’s journals might have even given his heir the spells needed to mutilate his soul in the first place. And if the books held the answer to making horcruxes, then they might also hold the secret to destroying them, regardless of their proximity.

Even if they didn’t, Harry might find some inspiration there, or at least a hint.

With a sigh, he settled onto his bed, transfigured from Severus’ sofa, and crossed his arms over his waist. Severus sat beside him, stark terror written all over his face.

Severus’ voice trembled. “This war will never end, will it?”

Harry held his hand out for Severus to take. A warm palm slid against his.

“There has to be a way, Severus. I’m almost positive we’ll find the answer in Slytherin’s study.”

“A-and if we don’t?”

Harry gave him a grim look. “Then we’ll bloody well make one. We made an impossible antivenin, didn’t we? Maybe we can make an impossible horcrux breaking spell too.”
Some of the terror left Severus’ eyes. “That is true.”

“Yeah.” Harry rubbed Severus’ knuckles. “Don’t give up, Sev. Remember the prophecy said I had the power to defeat him, so it’s out there, somewhere. Or maybe in here.” He pointed to his chest. “We just have to find it.”

Severus sighed and squeezed Harry’s hand. “Yes. Yes, you are right.” He stared at their joined hands for a long moment. “Harry, I… if you do not mind, may I stay in the living room with you tonight? I need you to ground me in the midst of such horrors.”

Harry gave him a soft smile. “Of course it’s all right. To be honest, I miss our nights in the Chamber, you know? It was so peaceful there once we had the basilisk out, and I didn’t have to deal with flaky housemates. I’d feel safer if I could watch over your healing anyway.”

Severus nodded and tugged Harry’s hand into his lap. “I am glad you are with me.”

“So am I, Sev.” Harry rested his head against Severus’ shoulder and sighed, relieved that he didn’t have to face such a daunting task alone. “So am I.”
Chapter 27

A Chink in their Armour

21 April

Hermione and Ron came back from the hols arguing more than ever. It seemed Hermione had given up on getting Ron to take his studies seriously, but she couldn’t stop nagging him about his failings either. To Harry, it sounded as if she felt abandoned. And as Ron had taken to leaving the common room every night, not returning until just before curfew—or sometimes well after it—he couldn’t blame her.

Then again, Harry couldn’t blame Ron for seeking an escape from her constant nagging either. Harry couldn’t get out of the tower fast enough himself as of late. He would have avoided it altogether and just used Severus’ quarters to study, but he feared drawing too much attention. For the sake of his friend’s life, he had to at least make a few appearances in the tower now and again. Even if Gryffindor wasn’t a comfortable place for him any longer, whether his former friends were present or not.

Seamus had talked to the Prophet earlier in the hols, making Harry out to be a dark lord in training. “Always hanging with the Slytherins, he is, and they’re all dark as night. And that snake of his—he’s always talking to it. Hissing. You know who else likes to hiss? Dark lords.”

Harry had tossed the paper in the bin like the rubbish it was, but the allegations had still hurt. Gods, he didn’t need those kinds of charges levied against him, particularly when he was in the middle of planning a war against said dark lord. At least the Ministry had let up on him now they had concerns of their own to deal with. Otherwise he might have already been taken in on suspicion of being the next Voldemort simply because he was friends with a few light-sided Slytherins and had a snake familiar.

Ridiculous.

Harry sighed and took his usual seat beside Blaise for Ancient Magic. Worrying about the things he couldn’t change would only drive him mad in the end. It was best to focus on his studies, training, and the search for a Horcrux-banishing spell. In the end, Seamus’ misguided opinions meant nothing compared to that problem.

Merlin help him, he had no idea how to win this war.

Blaise nudged Harry’s shoulder. “Harry? Are you all right?”
Harry shook himself and gave the boy a wan smile. “Just worried about everything.”

“Yes, I would say so.”

Ahead of him, Hermione came into the classroom with Padma, chatting in a dull voice. “I was sure it would at least come in second, but no. I didn’t even place.”

Padma nodded. “Yes, well, the student-level competitions are more about making perfect potions. The Gilbroy-Newman competition wants more than that. They want to see innovation, changes to a formula that make it more accessible, more effective, that sort of thing. The potion they did choose—Balthazar’s Brew—people have been trying to tame it since Biblical times. And Mistress Hilta somehow turned it into a usable treatment for the Babel Curse—a treatment that other potions masters can recreate without too much difficulty. That curse has never been curable, so I think they made the right choice in recognising her efforts. A lot of people will have a real hope of a better life now thanks to her work.”

Hermione slumped. “I—I know. I just… well, I suppose I thought making a famously-difficult medicine would earn me some sort of recognition in the field, but I didn’t even make the top fifty.”

“Well, that doesn’t do anything to make the formula more accessible for other brewers or to help others; it just shows that you can make a difficult potion. It’s a decent achievement, but not enough to win the contest. Not that contest anyway.”

With a sigh, Hermione nodded and set her books on her usual table. “So it seems.”

“Buck up,” Padma said with a smile. “You did well. They did at least accept your entry. If it hadn’t been made well, they’d have just shipped it back and said ‘no thanks.’ So that’s something, isn’t it?”

Hermione gave her a wan smile. “Yes, I suppose it is. Thanks, Padma.”

“Anytime.” Padma moved to sit beside her sister and opened her books.

“Well, that’s not really a surprise,” Blaise whispered to Harry. “Granger is intelligent, but far too rigid. And arrogant.”

Harry gave a sad smile. “Sounds like she’s been knocked down a peg or twelve. Maybe it will give her a bit of humility.”

“I certainly hope so. She’s been an absolute horror to deal with all year.” Blaise leaned back with a frown, keeping his voice quiet, if no longer in a whisper. “Speaking of horrors, Harry, I’ve heard some strange rumours about Easter dinner this year. Are they true?”

Harry gave him a measured look. “That would depend on what you heard.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Hermione’s head had turned towards them.

“The rumours say you were poisoned,” said Blaise. “Along with the headmaster.”

“True.”

Hermione flinched.

“And,” said Blaise, eyes narrowed, “by basilisk venom.”

“Also true.”
Hermione stiffened and gasped.

“And you didn’t die. Or even flinch!”

Harry gave a wry laugh. “Well, I’m pretty sure I flinched, but I’m obviously not dead, and the last time I checked, the headmaster hasn’t gone on either.”

Blaise chuckled. “Well, clearly so. But the truly fantastic rumour is that not only were all the students inoculated against basilisk venom prior to the attack—”

“They were, and you have been too. Or what did you think that Dragon Pox vaccine really was?”

Blaise gasped. “Dear gods. It is true. You did invent it.”

Hermione lifted her hand to her mouth and went rigid.

Harry coughed. “Oh shite! N-no, no, it wasn’t me.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Yes, I developed it with help from my Slytherin friend. His life would be at stake if that information made it around the school—with confirmation, at least—so please, don’t tell anyone. The official story is that Dumbledore made it. Please counter any rumours of my involvement with that version. My friend might die otherwise.”

“Understood.” Blaise looked at him like he had never seen him before. “It sounds as though you and your friend should have won that competition.”

Harry flushed. “I-I couldn’t enter it without putting his life at risk even if we had thought about it. And the cure is more spell than potion anyway. There really isn’t anything besides fresh phoenix tears that will neutralise basilisk venom, so we altered a special Vanishing spell to get rid of it before it can damage the victim. The potion part just acts as a sort of glue and binds the charm to the patient’s cells.”

Blaise’s eyes widened. “Merlin! That’s brilliant!” He gave a soft chuckle. “Wonders never cease with you, Harry.”

Harry laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Sometimes I wish they would bother someone else for a change!”

Blaise chuckled. “I don’t doubt it.”

Professor Origa came in then and started the lesson. Harry forced his attention back to discussions of fairy and pixie magic and wondered if one could utilise them to banish horcruxes. He heard nothing promising, unfortunately. Still, the lesson was interesting. And that he didn’t need to freeze a classroom full of Cornish Pixies at the end of it was always a bonus.

Harry packed his supplies quietly, waiting for everyone else to leave as always. He was happier now that Severus had picked up his pieces and put him back together, but hanging back kept the other students from crowding him or whispering behind their hands when he walked past. And no one could hex him behind his back. To that end, he had kept up the practise of always being the last one out the door.

But when he looked up, certain everyone had gone on their way, he found a fuzzy-haired girl watching him with tears in her eyes.

“Harry,” said Hermione in a soft, broken voice, “I… I think I’ve been a fool.”
He sensed her sincere desire to change and let her speak, but did not respond.

“I… all this time, I’ve been so caught up in NEWTs and points and recognition… and I’ve left you to fight the war alone.”

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. “Not alone. Neville, Dean, and Luna stood by me, as have my Slytherin friends. One in particular.”

Hermione sniffled. “But we used to be friends. And I let stupid things sweep me away. I threw away our friendship for nothing more than foolish pride. Gods, I—I’m sorry, Harry. For everything.”

Harry nodded, but did not grant her forgiveness. She had simply hurt him too much.

She sighed and turned away, shoulders slumped and head bowed. Sniffling, she grabbed her bag and dashed from the room. Harry watched her go, torn between pity and distrust.

Well, she had at least apologised. Perhaps it wasn’t too late for her to grow up. He hoped so anyway.

With a shake of his head, Harry slung his knapsack over his shoulder and made his way back to the common room. He only had an hour to revise before his training with Severus started, and Flitwick had assigned an essay on bonding charms. Harry already knew quite a bit about sticking spells and such, but he needed to research marital bonds, and not just for his essay.

Flitwick had mentioned soul-bonding charms in class—a deep, unbreakable marriage bond that wove the souls of the participants together eternally. The second Harry heard about it, he thought of the horcruxes. Was it possible to alter a soul-bonding spell to bring in the soul pieces of a horcrux? He had no idea, not yet, but perhaps after a thorough examination of the structure and spell matrices of soul bonds, he would. It might just save them all.

It was the best hope he had, anyway.

As he ruminated on the possibilities and obstacles, he took the long way around to the tower, relying on Isuri’s sense of smell to guide him away from those he wanted to avoid.

~Master, the tall rude male and the short rude male are ahead.~

Snake for Seamus and Ron. Harry detoured.

~The fluffy-haired female that likes to talk is around the corner.~

Lavender. Harry detoured again.

~The irritating pest female is hiding in a wall-hole ahead.~

Ginny had ducked into an alcove ahead, apparently. With a shudder, Harry turned on his heel and backtracked to find a safe path.

In this manner, he eventually made it to the tower without being harassed. Ron and Seamus had arrived before him, but they just scowled at Harry and went to play chess in the corner. The sight gave Harry a pang of loss, but he squelched it and joined Dean and Neville at the study table.

“Are you two working on the essay for Flitwick?”

Neville nodded. “It’s a fascinating subject, bonding.”

Harry sat beside the boy and laid his bag on the table. “Really? What do you know about it, Nev? I
reckon you’d have a better grasp than either Dean or myself, being a pureblood.”

“Well, my parents were soul-bonded. I know that. I think that might be part of why they….”

Harry laid a hand on Neville’s shoulder. “Merlin, I didn’t mean to bring that up, Nev. Are you okay?”

Neville nodded and blinked hard. “F-fine. I only mentioned it because soul bonds are so powerful. Bonded souls fight to protect each other—I think that’s why they didn’t die. They lost… well, they’ll never be the same, but they’re alive.”

Harry squeezed his hand, offering silent comfort. On Neville’s other side, Dean rubbed his back.

“Thanks.” Neville took a deep breath and wiped his eyes. “A-anyway, a soul bond ties souls together and bonds them in a protective state. The bond won’t allow anything bad in—death, darkness, you name it. The downside is that, like Flitwick said, it’s eternal, and there’s no backing out. Ever. Once your soul bonds to someone else’s, you’re stuck with them for the rest of your existence, here and beyond, so you had best make damn sure it’s someone you can love that long.”

Harry rubbed his chin in thought. “Interesting.” He set a silencing barrier and whispered, “Nev, Dean, I was thinking in class and the way up. Those bonding spells tug on the soul. I’m wondering if it could be turned to our purposes in the war. For the you-know-whats.”

Neville gasped. “Oh! Merlin, it could be. You’d have to ask your friend, Harry. I’m not—that’s beyond me.”

Dean gave Harry a wry look. “You’re going to ask Snape? Mate, better you than me.”

Harry chuckled. “He’s nice when he’s not in public. I hope it works—the idea of the war going on indefinitely…. He shuddered. “Gods forbid.”

Neville squeezed Harry’s hand. “You’ll figure it out. I have faith in you. And we’ll be beside you every step of the way. So will Luna and Snape.”

Harry gave him a warm smile. “Thanks, Nev. I… I hope we can do it.” He shook off his grim mood. “Either way, I want to do some further research on marital bonding spells and their matrices before I really start writing on the essay, but I do know a thing or two about object bonding.” He dropped his silencing barrier so other students could benefit from his knowledge, if they chose to, and began his impromptu lesson.

“Right, the first thing you need to know about object bonds is….”

Dean and Neville settled in to listen, quills scratching notes as Harry talked. He had made it halfway through his explanation of bond permanency when a feminine voice spoke his name and jarred him out of his concentration.

“You’d be such a good teacher, Harry.”

Ginny. Harry scowled as she stood behind Dean and wrapped her arms around his neck, her lips curled in a smirk and her eyes daring him to look.

He dropped his gaze to Dean’s face instead and suppressed a sharp surge of guilt at the pained expression in his eyes. So Dean knew of her motives now. Gods, the poor man.

[I’m so sorry, mate.]
Dean shook his head slightly. “You were saying, Harry?”

“R-right.” If Dean wanted to go on as normal, Harry could do that. Maybe if he ignored the bint long enough, she would finally take a hint.

“Anyway,” Harry said with a wry smile, “before we were interrupted—"

Ginny pouted. “Hey!”

He continued as if he hadn’t noticed. “—I was talking about the science of bonding magic. My friend and I did quite a lot of research into the subject when we were working on our last project, hoping to find a neutralising agent capable of bonding with….“ He gave Ginny an unimpressed glance. “The deadly thing we were working on this spring.”

“We get it,” said Neville, scowling at Ginny.

“Merlin, Harry,” Ginny said, smiling widely. “I didn’t know you were so—"

“Well, we didn’t find a neutralising agent,” Harry said as if he hadn’t noticed her. “The thing was too dangerous—we had to go a different route to make the spell work, but while we worked on that stage, we took apart bonding spells from the ground up to see how they actually work.”

“That’s amazing,” Ginny interjected, but Harry just kept talking.

“It turns out, bonding spells alter the surface molecules of the objects in question. With temporary bonding charms, the bonding spell acts more like an adhesive. Like if you placed a bit of spellotape between two planks of wood. Granted, the stronger the charm, the stronger the seal, but—"

“Wow, Harry. You’re so—"

“—it basically glues things together. A permanent sticking charm, however, actually fuses the molecules at the atomic level. The two stuck objects become, essentially, one entity. You can’t tear them apart—"

Ginny whined, “Harry, I’m talking to yo—"

“—Or break the charm because the bond actually disappears once the molecules are fused. There’s no need for a spell to hold the objects together any longer as they’ve become one object. The only way to break it is with a severing—"

Ginny slapped her hand on the table beside Harry’s. “Harry! Look at me!”

Harry moved his hand away from Ginny’s and kept at his lesson. “—A severing curse. But if the bond is strong enough, like the one on Mrs. Black’s portrait at my godfather’s house, it’s impossible to break even with that. The only way to break the bond at that point is to destroy both objects together—and I’m fairly certain Sirius might come back and haunt me if I level his entrance hall.”

“That’s fascinating,” said Neville with a grin. “Flitwick will love it, I think.”

“Well, I certainly hope so. I don’t know much about marital bonding, though. I’ll have to look into it.”

“I could tell you all about it,” said Ginny with a wink.

Harry ignored her completely and suppressed a shudder of sheer revulsion. “I’m betting I could find some good books in the library. Dean, Neville, want to come with?”
Ginny’s bottom lip stuck out again. “But… but what about me?”

Dean gave Harry a sad look. “No, mate. I think my girlfriend and I need to have a serious discussion. Maybe you could fill me in later?”

Harry closed his eyes, sorrow and guilt racking him. “Y-y-yeah. Dean, for what it’s worth, I’m really sorry. I didn’t want this.”

“I know. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

Harry patted Dean’s hand. “Nev and I are here for you, okay?”

Dean gave him a wan smile. “T-thank you.”

Harry nodded and stood, slinging his bag over his shoulder once more. “Come on, Nev. Let’s leave them to discuss this in private.”

Ginny let go of Dean and moved towards Harry. “But I want to—”

“No,” Dean said, in the firmest voice Harry had ever heard from him. “No. You’re going to stay here and talk with your boyfriend, or need I remind you that you are not, in fact, dating Harry?”

Ginny huffed. “Fine. This wasn’t working out anyway. We’re done, Dean.” She turned on her heel and stalked away, leaving a desolate Dean behind.

Harry grimaced and folded himself into the seat beside Dean. “Gods, mate. I-I’m s—”

“Don’t. It’s my fault.” Dean dropped his head into his hands and sighed. “I should have known—I think I did know—but I just didn’t want to believe it.”

Harry rubbed Dean’s back and looked to the clock over the fireplace. “We still have some time before I start combat training. Want to go flying or something? To take your mind off things? It’s been a while since I’ve had a seeker’s match.”

“I could referee if you want,” said Neville with a sad smile. “I’m not very good on a broom, but I do know the rules.”

Dean gave Harry a sad smile. “I… I think I just need to… to get away for a bit.”

“Okay,” Harry said, heart breaking for him. “Do you want company?”

“N-not yet. I need to be alone for a while.”

Neville smiled sadly. “All right. We understand that. Want us to walk you to the Entrance Hall then?”

Dean nodded and wiped his eyes.

“Come on, then.” Harry helped his sorrowful friend to his feet and walked with him, side-by-side.

______________________________________________

“Parry, Harry! Parry! For Merlin’s sake, fight back!”
Severus cried instructions to his trainee, watching Harry’s stance and movements carefully. The boy had improved immensely since the start of term, but he still tended to pull his punches. Severus wondered if it was out of a general desire not to hurt people or if he simply cared for Severus too much to risk it against him.

Well, there was one way to answer that question.

“Time, Harry.”

Harry stopped moving and slumped against a wall, panting and mopping sweat from his brow. “Merlin, Sev. I thought you said my endurance would improve after a few months of strength training. I’m still getting winded every match and you look like you’ve just come from a leisurely stroll around the lake. It’s not bloody fair.”

Severus laughed softly. “You have improved. It is simply that I am pushing your limits as you grow stronger.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “And to that end, I think we need to do something different tonight. You aren’t fighting back, not with the kind of power you will need to battle the dark lord. Not even to counter a schoolmate, let alone a full Death Eater.”

Harry winced. “Sev… I just can’t. I can’t hurt you. I care about you too much.”

Severus’ heart leapt at that tender confession. Gods, he had never known someone so concerned for his wellbeing. It was heady.

A hot blush crept up his face. “I-I see. In that case, we will definitely need to alter your training regime. And to that end, I suggest we bring in Albus for a training duel tonight.”

Harry scowled. “Dumbledore wants to keep me a sweet little boy. I swear, he thinks I’ll beat Riddle by hugging him to death.”

Severus snorted and broke into soft laughs. “That is a sight I would pay good galleons to see. However, we both know that is highly impractical. And, while three months ago, I would have agreed with your assessment of Albus’ desires, I believe your firm hand with him has finally brought him under some semblance of control.”

Harry chuckled darkly. “That remains to be seen.”

“Perhaps. Nevertheless, I do believe we should try a duel with him.”

Harry nodded, his expression uncertain. “I guess. Could we do it next session, though? He might need time to prepare, and I… I really need to talk.”

Severus Summoned a cool, damp flannel and levitated it to Harry. “Mop yourself up and join me in the living room.” He looked over his shoulder at the door. “And do use a freshening charm this time!”

Harry laughed and threw the flannel at Severus, who ducked it. “Berk! I don’t smell… that bad.” He sniffed his shirt and made a face. “Okay, maybe you have a point.”

Severus chuckled and let the boy tidy himself. Harry emerged from the training room a few moments later smelling of spell-created soap and laundering charms. Severus made room for him on the sofa, wrapping his arm around Harry’s shoulders and pulling him into his side.

“All right. What has you looking so troubled?”
Harry sighed and leaned against Severus. “It’s Dean. Earlier, I gave him and Neville a rundown of the work we did on sticking charms, and Ginny came in while I was talking. She was flirting with me—I mean **blatantly**—while she had her arms around his neck. She even suggested she wanted me to **bond** with her! Jesus, I’ve never been so terrified. Even Riddle isn’t that scary.”

Severus scowled and clenched his fist in fury. Gods, he remembered how that had hurt.

“**Oh no, little pet,**” Lucius told Severus from his place beside the second Black sister. “**No, you will stay right there and watch. This is what the results of your poor behaviour has earned you.**”

Severus sat on the edge of his chair in Lucius’ flat, rigid and struggling for composure. “Y-yes, Lord Lucius.”

“**That is better.**” Lucius wrapped his arm around Narcissa and pulled her against his side, tracing his palm up and down her ribs. To be fair, Narcissa looked as disgusted with the arrangement as Severus was.

But Narcissa didn’t love Lucius like Severus did. It didn’t rip the soul from her to be touched, as he caressed her hair and face with his fingertips, as he stroked her side and hip and tugged her closer. Or perhaps it did—Lucius’ hand dropped to her breast and she flinched away.

“**Do not forget your place, woman,**” Lucius snarled, and Narcissa went still, tears on her lashes and her face as white as a sheet.

Severus wept for them both.

“Severus?”

He emerged from his painful memories to find Harry watching him, his distress clear. Severus blinked back wetness—he hadn’t wept, but it was a close thing—and focused on Harry again.

“Forgive me, little one,” he murmured. “I was… thinking. You were saying about Thomas?”

Harry hesitated, but at Severus’ urging, resumed his tale. “Well, she broke up with him right then and there, and I… I just feel terrible. I never wanted this to happen.”

Suddenly, Severus empathised with Narcissa more than he had ever done. Had she felt this way, those days Lucius used her to torment Severus? Had Severus’ pain hurt her, as she had never wanted to be the cause of his misery?

Perhaps it was worse for her, as Lucius had not stopped at threatening to bond with her. Thank Merlin it hadn’t been a soul bond. Her life was bound to his, subjugated like a slave, but at least she would not remain shackled to the bastard for eternity.

Even so, the thought of such a fate left Severus sick with horror. How terrible to be forced into a life bond—truly, barely a step above a slavery bond—to a man she did not love, to a monster who used her as he saw fit with no care to her needs. To a man who could **sexually assault** her for no other purpose than to torture his ‘pet.’

Gods, Severus had never imagined he would grieve for the woman who had facilitated his twenty-
year-long run with heartbreak, but he did. Merlin, he did. What kind of hellish life did that poor woman lead?

Again, Harry’s voice broke him out of his thoughts. “Sev, what is Ginny’s issue with me anyway? Why can’t she just leave me alone? I don’t want this. I don’t want to be the reason my friends’ hearts break.”

Severus closed his eyes at the reiteration of his own thoughts and tucked Harry’s head under his chin. “Hush, little one. You did not break his heart. You did not toy with him as she has done. Miss Weasley is the one who is to blame for Thomas’ pain. And, perhaps, he is at fault himself, in some small way, for believing in her in the first place.”

“I don’t think he could help it, Severus. He’d never fallen in love before. I think he didn’t know what it meant until it was too late.”

Severus exhaled against Harry’s curls, empathy for Thomas’ pain ripping him hollow. “No. I suppose he didn’t.”

Perhaps his worries about Dean and the discussion of horcruxes had weakened Harry’s shields, because he had visions that night for the first time in weeks. Of course, Occlumency did nothing to block out the *Imperius* dreams—and Merlin, didn’t that perplex him—but the actual visions hadn’t plagued him since before the Valentine’s Day dance. Maybe because of the reprieve, they rattled him far worse than before.

At a gentle shake and a familiar voice calling his name, Harry sat up with a cry and jerked his wand from the bedside. “Who—what? Don’t touch me!”

Dark-skinned hands with paler palms moved away from Harry’s shoulders and moved into a gesture of conciliation. Harry stared for a long moment, trying to work out where he was and what was happening, before the gentle, broken voice of his dormmate snapped him out of his vision-induced daze.

“Harry, look at me, mate. It’s only Dean. You know me.”

Harry took a shaky breath and grabbed his glasses from the nightstand. His blurry vision cleared, and he saw Isuri curled up on Neville’s lap, and both of his friends sitting on either side of his bed.

“S-sorry,” he choked out before the horror and gruesome nature of his vision came down hard against him. Tears crept up his throat and poured down his face, and Harry buried his head in his hands with a low moan.

“It’s all right, Harry.” Neville rubbed Harry’s back and spoke in a soft, gentle voice. “It’s over now.”

“P-probably not, really.”

Dean frowned. “Er… it’s not? Doesn’t he usually kill people in your visions?”

Harry gave a mirthless laugh. “Oh, s-she’ll die eventually. But she’s probably not dead yet.”

“Fuck,” Dean breathed. “Oh gods, Harry.”
Neville tugged Harry to lean into his side. “Can you tell us about it?”

“Merlin, why would you want to know?”

“Well, um… it’s not that we want to, but it might help you to get it out.”

Dean nodded and gave him a sorrowful look. “Helped me to talk about Ginny after I had a bit of time to myself.”

Harry let slip a shaky breath. “R-right. Well, he… this time, he attacked a single mum. Thank Merlin, her kids weren’t in the house—visiting their grandparents—but the mum’s boyfriend had just proposed to her. Gods… they were going to have a family together, and he… he ruined it!”

Neville rubbed Harry’s shoulders, and Dean pressed in on his other side. Isuri slithered into her master’s lap and coiled against his legs, knowing her weight helped him when he was afraid.

“I… it was awful. He had the boyfriend—a pureblood, but I don’t know who—pinned against the wall. He left him there to watch while he… he bound the woman and… he set his bloody snake on her! She kept biting—all places that wouldn’t make her bleed out so she died slowly. And—I think I’m going to be sick.”

Dean conjured a bucket—they had gained skill with that particular spell over weeks of dealing with Harry’s visions—and Neville helped him hold back his hair, but Harry didn’t vomit this time. He just cried into the bucket until Neville pulled him into a hug.

“We’ll get him, Harry. One day, we’ll figure out this horcrux thing, and we’ll get him.”

Harry pulled back with a sniffle and wiped his eyes. “T-thanks. I… Merlin, it’s been so long since I had a vision, I feel like I’ve forgotten how to handle it.”

“You were upset, mate,” said Dean, guilt heavy in his eyes. “I’m sorry, Harry. I didn’t mean to make your shields fail.”

“Merlin, you didn’t, mate. If anyone did, it was her. It’s appalling.” Harry shuddered and wrapped his arms around his chest. “I can’t get the images of that horrid snake out of my head.”

Isuri climbed up Harry’s arm and settled around his neck. ~Here, a good snake to take your mind off the bad one.~

Harry chuckled weakly and stroked her back. ~Thank you, friend.~

She rubbed her scales against his hand and cocked her head. ~I smell her.~

Harry froze and reeled back. “What? You smell Nagini? But that’s not possible—she can’t be here, she’s somewhere in Lancaster now, m-murdering innocent mums.”

Isuri rubbed his cheek with her head and paused. Harry frowned as her flickering tongue traced up his temple and against his throbbing scar. ~Here. I smell her here. Like death and dying things.~ A shiver crept down the snake. ~Evil—she smells of evil magic.~

Harry blanched and gasped for breath. The implications of her findings crashed over him in waves, leaving the hair on his arms standing on end and his blood cold in his gut.

“Harry?” Neville patted his shoulder. “Mate, what is it?”

“Me.” Harry choked out. “My scar—she smells Nagini in my scar.”
“But… that doesn’t make sense. How could she—”

Huge tears blurred Harry’s vision and dropped down his face. “It makes sense, if I’m a horcrux too.”

Neville and Dean swayed into him, both white with horror, and clutched at Harry’s arms.

Dean whispered, “I-it’s not p-possible, is it?”

“How c-could you be, Harry? He n-never did the ritual.”

“No, but he did cast a failed killing curse at me that reflected off me and hit him. If his soul was unstable when it hit….”


Dean hugged Harry tight, tears dripping down his face. “We’ll find a way, Harry. We will. We won’t let you die.”

Neville hugged them both. “No. We won’t give up.”

Harry buried his head in his friends’ shoulders and wept.
After a mostly sleepless night, Harry woke to the sound of shouting in the common room. In light of the current situation, he put aside the possibility of the horcrux in his scar for now. He might be wrong, after all. It might just be the stink of Voldemort’s magic Isuri had smelled. At least, he hoped so. The prickling feeling in his gut warned him he wouldn’t escape his fate so easily, but until he had something more than a smelly scar to go by, he couldn’t be sure. And he didn't want to think of it anyway. Merlin knew he had enough to worry about without that added in.

Ron’s booming voice knocked dust from the ceiling, and Harry winced. He could just imagine what he was shouting about, and if Dean was already awake—he glanced over to his friend’s empty bed and winced—he had probably heard every word. With a grumble of irritation for Ron’s wilful blindness and misplaced loyalty, he dressed quickly, used a spell on his teeth, raked a comb through his hair, and raced down the stairs. Just outside the entrance to the dorm, Neville and Dean stood by, watching with identical scowls as Hermione and Ron rowed a few paces away. Dread pooling in his belly, Harry moved to stand beside them and rubbed Dean’s shoulder in solidarity.

“Ginny cried all night,” Ron snarled to his girlfriend. “Don’t tell me you’re suddenly going to defend him now when she’s so brokenhearted.”

Hermione smacked her forehead, frustration rippling off her form in waves. “Gods, Ron, you’re completely blind! I’ve been telling you for months that Ginny is obsessed with Harry. As in a mental illness! And she used Dean to get to him. She broke Dean’s heart just to make Harry jealous. If there’s anyone you should be angry with, it’s your own bloody sister!”

Ginny, standing at the corner of the row, stomped her foot and crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, I like that! I’m not obsessed, and I was just trying to get over Harry! It didn’t work.”

Hermione scoffed. “Get over him my foot! You used Dean just to make Harry jealous.”

“She said she didn’t,” Ron shouted. “Stop attacking her anyway. This is about Harry! What’s so bad about my sister he doesn’t want her?”

“You mean other than the fact that she continually harasses and assaults me after I’ve made it clear I’m not interested in the least?” Harry stepped out of the stairwell, Summoning his knapsack with a
flick of his wrist—Severus’ wandless magic lessons had started to pay off at last. “There’s also the fact that she reminds me of my mother. Not to mention, she just used one of my best friends to get to me. Those kinds of underhanded tactics do not impress me. At all.”

He moved to Dean’s side and held his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“N—not really,” Dean said with a sniffle. He gave Harry a searching look. “Are you?”

Harry shuddered. “I… don’t want to think about it. Maybe we were wrong anyway.”

“Maybe.” But Dean didn’t look convinced. “Um, could we talk about it somewhere else though? Anywhere else?”

“Sure.” Harry slung his bag over his shoulder and headed for the door. “Neville, you in?"

“You bet,” Neville said, his face a picture of disgust.

“Wait, wait, Harry,” Ginny called. “I just wanted—”

“I don’t care what you wanted,” Harry cried, magic sparking on his breath. “Stay away from me, and stay away from my friends!”

Ginny sniffled and ran out of the portrait hole. Ron shot Harry a dark look and dashed after her.

“Well, that was pleasant,” Harry said with a sigh. “Gods. This is getting old.”

Neville snorted. “I second that.”

Hermione approached, tears on her lashes. “H-Harry, I’m sorry. I just… I couldn’t take his shouting any longer.” She gave him a wry look. “I suppose the shoe is on the other foot now.” But she looked weary and sad.

“Well, as long as you know where you went wrong, there’s hope to change.” Harry gave her a stern look. “But I don’t trust you yet. You really hurt me, Hermione. Again and again. And for what? Better grades? Who cares? In the end, an outstanding is an outstanding no matter who takes first place.”

Hermione bowed her head. “I know. I really screwed up. I’m sorry, Harry. That’s all I can say. And I… I’m really trying to change. I still want to study and try to be the best I can, but I don’t want to hurt people because of it. I don’t want to be so arrogant as to think no one else could beat me on their own merit.” She gave him a sad smile. “That was well done of you—the… the thing you made that saved your life this term, I mean. Amazing, really. How long have you been spellcrafting?”

She meant the vaccine, Harry supposed.

“Ah, since the Christmas hols. My friend taught me the basics and we ran with it from there.” Harry gave her a hesitant smile and offered an olive branch. She really was trying, and the drive to mould him, to beat him had vanished from her emotions. Now, she just wanted her friend back. “Well, I… I suppose I can show you the other spells we invented, if you want?”

She beamed. “Oh, if you have time, I’d… I’d really like that.”

He searched Dean’s eyes. “Is it all right with you?”

Dean gave him a wan smile. “It’s fine. I just didn’t want to be near… them.”
Harry nodded. “Understandable.” He patted Dean’s arm. “I really am… well, I know it’s not my fault, but I hate that it’s me she’s after and hurting you because of it.”

“Don’t apologise. You have enough troubles of your own without worrying about mine. And, to be honest, I’m much more concerned about yours.”

Harry grimaced. “I… yeah. As soon as I can face it, I’ll talk to my other friend about it.”

“I really think you should do,” said Neville, his expression worried. “He might know of a way to….” He cast Hermione a look. “To stop it.”

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “I don’t think there is a way, but I’m almost sure I jumped to conclusions anyway. It might just have been his magic on me, you know?”

Dean frowned. “Y-yeah… maybe you’re right.” He gave Harry a wan smile. “I hope you’re right.”

“So do I,” Harry agreed vehemently.

“Harry?” Hermione crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. “Um, are you okay?”

“I… not really, but I’ll manage.” He shook himself and pulled out his wand. “I was going to show you those spells anyway.”

Judging by her expression, the promise of esoteric knowledge hadn’t put off her worries entirely, and that alarmed and relieved him by turns. A Hermione in pursuit of answers was unstoppable—she would figure out the truth eventually—but the fact that she cared more about Harry than his spells gave him hope that maybe she really had learned her lesson. In spite of his lingering anger, he hoped she had. A part of him deeply missed his first friends, and it had hurt when they had turned him away.

“W-well, anyway, this is the first spell I helped create. Transveh Tabernus!” His shoes removed themselves and landed in a neat line next to his feet. “Then we thought we needed to reverse it, so… Induo Tabernus!” His shoes replaced themselves without knocking Harry down and tied themselves. “We designed it for people who are too injured to handle their own boots, but it sure comes in handy when you’re in a hurry.”

She gave him a sad smile. “I’m sure it does.” Tears slipped down her face. “Oh, Harry. I’ve been… such a fool, and I’ve missed so much. You’ve changed so much and I… Gods, I should have let you teach me instead of insisting I knew best.”

“Well, you’re learning now,” said Neville with a hesitant smile. “It’s a start.”

She sniffled and wiped her face. “R-right.”

30 APRIL

After his combat training with Severus, Harry crept up to the Astronomy Tower under his cloak. Sinistra’s classes weren’t due to start for another hour, so he had time to think, to mull over his fears before they drove him spare. He leaned on the parapet and stared out over the grounds.

A brilliant sunset painted the world vermillion, setting the forest ablaze with colour. The lake reflected the sky, a palette unbroken but for the giant squid splashing about near the centre. A herd of thestrals played near the edge of the forest, foals kicking up their heels and adults watching over them in serene contentment. The trees swayed in a gentle breeze and a smattering of stars twinkled on the far horizon.
The scene should have instilled some sense of awe and wonder in Harry, beautiful as it was, but even the draw of nature had no power to pull him from his dark thoughts. He traced a fingertip over his scar and winced at a sharp throb. It still ached from Occlumency practise earlier, and none of Severus’ potions could completely ease the hurt. Even his chants fell short sometimes.

Did it mean Harry was a horcrux? He hadn’t had a vision since the night Ginny had broken Dean’s heart, nor had Isuri mentioned smelling Nagini in his scar again, but then, he had been too terrified to ask. He didn’t know if he could cope if she said yes.

He leaned on his elbows and watched a thestral foal zoom about near the edge of the forest. Idly, he thought it had been a long time since he had fed them with Luna. To be fair, between his classes, Occlumency lessons, revision, his research into soul bonding spells, visiting Severus after curfew, and training combat twice a day—one with Severus and Dumbledore, and once to give the same lessons to his friends—he hadn’t much time for anything else. Even so, maybe taking care of the animals with Luna would give him something to think about besides the war and his own mortality.

What if he was a horcrux? What did it mean? Would he have to die to save them all, or was there a way to save him?

The soul bonding spell popped into his head. If he could only find the proper catalyst to pull the soul bits from their containers—a bonding spell would only stick them to the whole once they had already been removed—was it possible he could use it to draw the horcrux from himself, if one existed? Then maybe Harry wouldn’t need to die.

Hope bubbled up in him and washed away his fears… until Isuri shifted on his neck, and he realised it wouldn’t be so simple.

A memory of Dumbledore’s words echoed in his mind. “You can speak Parseltongue, Harry, because Lord Voldemort—who is the last remaining descendant of Salazar Slytherin—can speak Parseltongue. Unless I’m much mistaken, he transferred some of his own powers to you the night he gave you that scar.”

The night Harry became a horcrux, if he was a horcrux. For all he knew, he might be a descendent of Slytherin himself. Purebloods did tend to intermarry quite often.

But if Harry was a horcrux and his abilities had come from Riddle, then the fact that he had learned to use Parseltongue so well, to the point where he could speak it at will these days whether he was staring at Isuri or not, then the horcrux had entwined itself with Harry’s own soul. Perhaps too deeply to be removed without harming him.

Even if he managed to make a horcrux removing spell, he might still die before the battle truly begun. Or worse, he might not die. He might live, but without his soul. An empty shell. The glassy, vacant eyes of Barty Crouch flashed through his mind, and Harry shuddered against the cold dread creeping through his veins. Merlin, no. He would sooner die completely than exist as a husk for the rest of his days.

But would he have a choice in the end? If he really was a horcrux, he couldn’t ignore it. If he did nothing, Riddle would live on until Harry died. If he stood by and lived on while the horcrux inside him remained, by the time Harry reached the end of his natural life span—assuming Riddle didn’t kill him before then—there wouldn’t be anything left of the wizarding world. All his friends might be lost. Dean, Neville, Luna, Hermione… Severus.

Gods. The thought of Severus spying for the rest of his life left him shaking in horror. Merlin, no. He couldn’t bear the idea of even one more meeting for Severus, one more night of suffering and
anguish, let alone a lifetime of them.

No. No, he couldn’t simply stand by and watch his loved ones suffer. If he had to die, then he had to die. He would leap off the tower himself if he had to, if it meant he didn’t become an empty shell and his friends survived.

He stared at the ground for an instant, tempted, but turned away with a fierce shake of his head. No. He didn’t know for sure that he was a horcrux—it might honestly be traces of dark magic—but either way, he couldn’t die yet. Even if it turned out that he had reason to fear, Harry still had to finish the soul spell and do everything he could to make sure the wizarding world had the power to end the war without him.

And he had to make sure Severus would survive. He couldn’t bear the thought of leaving him alone to suffer.

Harry rubbed a hand across his eyes, forcing away his tears and his maudlin thoughts. He was getting ahead of himself. First, he had to make sure he was a horcrux, or all this worry was moot. With a sigh, he cleaned up the evidence of his tears and left the tower, heading towards the Room of Requirement.

Halfway to the Room, Neville and Luna met him in the corridor, holding hands and sporting shy blushes.

“H-hi, you two. I… um, I take it there’s been a development?”

He tried to smile, to support them, but he failed to keep the quaver from his voice. Their joy did make him happy, and Harry wished them all the happiness in the world too, but the last time his close friends had started dating each other, it hadn’t worked out in his favour. Merlin, he didn’t know what he would do if he lost them too.

“Don’t worry, Harry,” said Luna with a dreamy smile. “We love each other, but we love you too. We’re not going anywhere.”

Harry beamed, worries of horcruxes and lost friendships washed away in a rush of sheer wonder. “Oh Merlin, Lu. That’s the first time I’ve ever heard t—”

Fuck. He’d said too much. He snapped his mouth shut and looked away, praying they hadn’t noticed.

“Uh, I mean, c-congratulations. I hope it goes well for you.”

“The Feathersprites seem to think we’ll be fine together,” said Neville with a frown. “Unlike Ginny and Michael Corner, poor sod. But, Harry, no one’s ever said they love you before?”

Harry grimaced and ruffled his hair. “Er… I s-suppose my mum and da must have done, but I don’t really remember it.”

Neville scowled. “I knew you weren’t happy at home. Are you okay? I mean, we go back for the summer in two months. Will you be all right?”

Harry gave a dark laugh. “Oh, this time I will be. I don’t need my wand to cast any longer—at least a few spells, and I’m learning more all the time. If they try to hu—I mean, if they get tetchy, I’ll remind them I’m not a helpless little boy anymore.”

Neville stared, eyes wide with shock. Luna’s face held understanding and sympathy.
“I’ll be sure to send you loads of good food, Harry,” Luna said.

Harry blushed. “No gumbleroots or plimpies, please.”

Luna chuckled. “No, no. Food you like.”

Harry crossed his arms over his chest and followed Luna towards the Room of Requirement. “Lu, do you know? I mean, what it’s like there?”

She cocked her head. “Well, the Clarents and Feathersprites don’t tell me everything. But I’ve seen enough to have a fair idea.”

Harry winced, shame weighing him down and slowing his steps. “I d-don’t… you don’t hate me?”

“Merlin, no! Why would I? They’re the horrible people who abuse you. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

Harry sniffled and lowered his head, overcome. “T-thanks. I… it’s always been my fault. Or that’s what they want me to believe, anyway. Isuri’s been trying to help me with that, but I guess it’s harder to overcome than I thought.”

She rubbed his back. “Yes, it is difficult to find faith in yourself when those who should love you have torn you to pieces, but don’t let them poison you. You’re a good man, Harry. And a very good friend.”

He gave her a sad smile. “So are you. Well, minus the man bit.”

Luna tittered. “I am definitely not a man!”

“And thank Merlin for that.” Neville wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders. “You can stay with me, mate. Gran is… well, she’s strict, but she’s not abusive.”

“I can’t. The blood wards—well, I don’t know if they really keep me safe, but you can bet your arse Dumbledore won’t let me go anywhere but straight back to hell.” Harry scowled. “I’m almost positive he knows, too. That he’s doing it on purpose to train me.”

Luna grimaced. “The Feathersprites aren’t absolutely certain, but either way, we’ll be here for you even if he isn’t. And you have your secret weapon now.”

“Weapon?”

Isuri poked her head out of Harry’s collar. ~I think she is speaking of me, Master. If they hurt you, I will bite them.~

Harry grinned and petted Isuri’s head. “You’re right. I guess I’ll be fine then.” And he mightn’t have long left to worry about it anyway. Hoping his shields hid his thoughts from his intuitive friend, he gave Luna a sad smile. “You can tell Neville and Dean what you know, if you want. And Daphne, Blaise, and Millie. I just… I don’t want to be there to hear it. It’s hard to—you understand?”

She nodded. “I will help them understand when you’re visiting your Slytherin friend.”

Harry smiled. “That’ll do. Thanks, Lu.”

“Not at all. But, Harry, you should tell your other friend yourself soon. About your past, your Empathy, and your fears about your scar. He wants to help you, and I’m afraid you might run into misunderstandings soon if you don’t begin to open up a little. Perhaps tonight. Talk to him, please. I
can’t read your thoughts, but I can sense your worries, and we’re all scared for you too.”

Harry shuddered. “Oh gods. I can’t. I mean, about my scar, I reckon I do need his help, but it’s just so… I’m not sure I can face it yet. And I don’t want to worry him for nothing. What if it’s just a dark magic trace? I have to know before I talk to him. It would kill him if I… if I have to….”

Luna hugged him tight. “Okay. If you need to know first, then that’s okay. But please, talk to him about the rest. You need to open up to someone, even if it’s not us, and Professor Snape cares about you.”

Harry pulled away and covered his face with his hands. “I can’t, Lu. I think he knows something isn’t right, but I just… what if I tell him and he thinks I’m a freak? If I lost him….”

She patted his shoulder. “Yes, your heart would break, but have you forgotten that he has experienced the same kind of things? I think he would accept you, Harry. You really should tell him soon. Please.”

Harry sighed. “I… I’ll try. I promise I’ll try.”

“Good.” She rubbed his shoulder, then paced the floor in front of the Room three times. “Now, should we go over what you learned in lessons today?” She opened the newly-formed door and led Harry into their usual training room. “He taught you some new combat moves?”

Harry forced his focus to training and off of his worries. “Actually, um, Dumbledore did. I’m fighting the old man now since I can’t attack Severus. I have absolutely no issues using Dumbledore’s wrinkled old arse for anger management.”

Neville and Luna burst into giggles.

“Too much information, Harry!” Neville snorted. “Gods. Maybe just show us the moves? I’m going to have nightmares about Dumbledore’s arse now.”

Harry laughed and started his lesson.

After training, Harry returned to his dorm, set his silencing and barrier wards, and dropped into bed like a stone. Training combat twice was good exercise, but gods, did it ever wear him out. He used his spell on his shoes, transfigured his denims into pyjama bottoms, and was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

As a result of his exhaustion, he forgot to take the Dreamless Sleep formula Severus had modified for him.

Harry was dreaming of the young Severus again. He found himself hanging next to his friend, upside down and naked, while his family looked on and jeered. Then Sirius reached between Severus’ legs, grabbing what didn’t belong to him, and Harry saw red.

“Get off! Get off of him!”

A blast of magic threw everyone back and dropped Harry and Severus to the ground. Again, the fall broke Harry’s nose, but he ignored the pain and took a sobbing Severus into his arms.


Severus laid his hand over Harry’s face and whispered, “Episkey.”
Harry yelped as his nose set and a wandless Tergeo wiped up the blood. He buried his head in Severus’ neck and breathed in the scent of his hair.

“Thank you, Sev,” he whispered. “I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

Severus slipped a hand into Harry’s hair. “Do you know what I thought of to heal you?”

Harry shook his head and burrowed closer. “What?”

Severus leaned back and tipped Harry’s chin up. “You.”

Harry gasped and went rigid. “M-me? You… really?”

Severus went bright pink. His blush trailed down to his chest. “Y-yes. Will you stay?”

“Sev…. ” Harry sighed and leaned in, brushing his lips over Severus’ and thrilling in the feel of him. “Yeah. I love you too.”

Severus gasped against Harry’s lips and melted into him. “Make love to me,” he breathed when they broke apart. “Make me feel you and only you.”

Harry moaned. The scenery shifted around them, the grounds of Hogwarts melting away into a blue and silver bedroom with a big four poster at the centre. “Sev… are you sure?”

“Yes.” Severus lay beside Harry and trailed a hand down his chest, tracing a thin line of dark hair to the younger boy’s bare erection. “I am sure. I want my first to be you.”

Harry groaned and arched into Severus’ hand, heat and passion curling within him. “Please, please. Let me…. ” He trailed a hand down Severus’ back and traced over the boy’s entrance.

“Yesss…. ” Severus hissed and arched back, taking Harry’s suddenly slick finger deep inside him.

“Oh gods,” Harry gasped out. “How are you wet?”

“Mm, I am already prepared. I have wanted you for weeks.”

Harry cried out as Severus slid down atop him, taking Harry to the root in one fell swoop. Gods, he felt like silk and heat, wrapped so tight around him Harry thought he might break to pieces.

“Yeah, yeah, wanted you too.” Harry bucked up and curled his fingers into Severus’ hair. “Ghn, you feel so good. So hot.”

“I… oh, Harry. Ah, claim me. Make me yours alone.”

“Sweet Merlin!” Harry grabbed Severus’ hips and rocked him forwards, pumping fast and hard into his lover. “Mine, love. You are mine.”

Severus howled and arched back, revealing a long, slender throat. Harry teased it with his tongue, tracing tiny beads of sweat and Severus’ natural taste. Gods, he loved it. Sweet and salty in one. Severus moaned and clutched at Harry’s face, rocking his hips upon his lover and crying out his name.

“Harry, yes, yes.”

Harry looked up, and suddenly it wasn’t the boy Severus making love to him, but the adult.
Severus leaned back and held his gaze. “I am not a good man, Harry.”

“You are. And I love you anyway.”

Severus grunted as Harry surged into him, filling his mate. Severus rocked a few more times, but did not climax.

“I’m sorry, love,” Harry said, dismayed. “I… I tried to make it feel good.”

“It did.” Severus squeezed around Harry and rocked, and Harry cried out and surged into him despite already being spent. “It is only that I wish to be inside you as well.”

Harry moaned and withdrew. “Yeah. Yeah, claim me, love.”

Severus guided Harry onto his stomach and eased his legs apart. “So lovely. Gods, you are so lovely.”

Harry moaned as a spell cleaned and prepared him, and Severus lifted Harry to his knees. A gentle finger slid inside and teased him, and Harry gasped and followed it with his body.

“Please, please.”

“Patience, pet.” The finger disappeared, and Severus’ erection slid inside Harry with the ease of dreams.

“Oh, Sev’rus. Yes, love. Make me yours.”

“Ghn.” Severus laid his head against Harry’s back as he pumped into his mate, kissing what he could reach and tracing one hand down Harry’s front. “Gods, you feel so good. So hot, so tight. Have you ever done this before?”

“No. You’re the first to claim me.”

“Ah, good. I want to be the last as well.”

“Yeah, I want that too.”

Gentle, strong fingers wrapped around Harry’s renewed erection and stroked, and Harry cried out with the dual pleasure.

“Sev’rus, please! Harder!”

Severus groaned and thrust hard and fast, panting Harry’s name into his shoulder, stroking him inside and out. Harry lost himself to their rhythm, the feel and scent of Severus’ body, the way he felt diving deep inside him, sliding out, diving in once more and hitting that spot that made Harry see stars every time.

“Sev’rus!” He howled the man’s name and came, clenching hard around his partner. Severus gave a snuffling sort of gasp and rocked deeper, then heat flooded Harry inside.

“Oh gods, pet.”

They sank to the bed, Harry’s back pressed against Severus’ front, his lover still buried inside.

Severus gasped out, “Gods, that was… incredible.”
Harry panted, “I love you,” and woke to the sound of hissing in his ear.

~Master? Why are you mating with air?~

Harry bolted up with a gasp. “Dear fucking gods.” He winced at the feel of wetness in his pants. ~Isuri, did I just have a… a mating dream about Severus?~

~You did call for him.~

Harry groaned and flopped back onto the bed. ~That… explains a lot.~

Isuri gave a snakish laugh. ~I think you want to make a mating ball with Severus.~

~Oh Merlin! Merlin! I-I think you are right.~ He groaned and cleaned himself up with a quick spell. ~But it cannot be. He would never see me like that, Isuri. I am too young and we have too much bad history.~

~Why does that matter? You are both mature. Mate and be happy.~

Harry gave a wry laugh. ~If only it were that simple.~

~Such unnecessary worrying. It is that simple. He puts his male parts in you, you put yours in him, you make little human babies.~

Harry nearly choked on his tongue. ~Um, two men cannot m-make babies together, Isuri. And, dear gods above, I think I am going to die of embarrassment now.~

~Because I spoke of mating?~ She flickered her tongue and shook her head slowly. ~You humans are strange creatures.~

~Yes, we are that to a snake, I suppose.~ Harry rubbed his face and sat up. Thank Merlin his dormmates were still asleep. ~I must wash before breakfast, so I need to leave the nest now. I have lessons early.~

The thought of seeing Severus again left him shaking, and Harry made a note to skive off his training for once. It was simply too dangerous to go until he could control his thoughts.

Gods. If the man saw that image in Occlumency lessons….

“Merlin help me,” he muttered.

Harry sent Severus a Patronus with the excuse that he was feeling a bit under the weather and dashed to the Room of Requirement with Neville and Luna. Dean was still grieving, and Harry didn’t think it right to bother him with his news. Neville had his books in tow, but he waited to find out what had upset Harry so much before starting on his revision.

“Um… I need to talk to you two about something,” Harry said, twisting his hands over each other and pacing the length of their usual study table.

Luna grinned. “Oh my. The Ticklebees are flying through your ears, Harry.”

Neville choked. “What? You’re in love, Harry?” He blushed. “Um, it’s not me, is it? You know I love you, mate, but I can’t… love you, if you get my drift.”

Harry snorted. “No worries, Neville. I know you’re the straightest man alive, except for maybe Ron.
Anyway, Luna would probably hurt me if I tried.”

Luna tittered. “He is all mine.”

“Yeah, I know.” Harry dropped his head into his hands. “In my case, I’m afraid it’s much more complicated. I… this morning, I had a dream of… S-Severus.”

Neville’s eyes bugged. “Professor Snape? You’re in love with him?”

“I d-don’t know, but… I think so. That’s why I wanted to talk to you lot. I don’t want to hurt him, you know?”

Neville shook his head and sat beside his friend. “You never do anything the easy way, do you?”

Harry gave a wry laugh. “I’m a masochist, apparently. But gods, Nev. What do I do? Severus is so afraid of touch. I don’t know what happened for sure—or at least, I get the feeling I don’t know everything—”

“The Clarents agree,” said Luna. “There’s some dark story in his past he can’t reveal yet. I can’t either. The Feathersprites warned me he’d be furious with both of us if I did so.”

“That’s for the best,” said Neville with a shake of his head. “It’s best Professor Snape tell him when he’s ready.”

“I agree,” said Harry, “but in the meantime, what do I do about this? He’s so traumatised and gods, if he sees that dream in my head, it’s not going to be pretty.”

“Well, you can Occlude now, can’t you? Make sure it’s good and hidden.”

Harry winced. “I can Occlude from you, Neville. And your everyday Legilimens. Luna and Dumbledore still get through my shields, as does Severus. He only sees glimpses, but a glimpse of this at the wrong time….”

Neville frowned. “Well, just try not to think of it then. That’s all I can tell you.”

“Easier said than done.”

Luna gave Harry a sad smile. “Harry, whatever happens, just remember he does care about you. It will be all right.”

Harry shivered. “It’s… not going to go well, is it?”

“The Feathersprites haven’t shown me anything. I only want you to remember he loves you.”

Harry held her gaze. “Is he in love with me?”

“Time will tell.”

“So you don’t know.”

“No, but you can trust him, Harry. With your heart and your past.”

He sighed and hugged his knees to his chest. “I… I’ll try to talk to him about it, but in the meantime, what do I do about this? How do I handle it?”

“I think… you should just try to go on as normal for now,” Neville said with a shake of his head.
“It’s too soon to do anything, and it’s kind of illegal anyway.”

Harry groaned. “I know, I know. I can’t do anything yet even if he was in love with me. But should I, when it’s safe?”

Luna gave him a dreamy smile. “I think your Ticklebees might just bring Professor Snape away from the mist-creepers, Harry.”

“Just take it slow, Harry,” Neville cautioned. “The man is damaged. If you push too hard or go too fast, he might break. You need to be sure about your feelings before you act on them anyway.”

Harry closed his eyes. “…I’m pretty sure, honestly. But that’s not the only issue at stake here. What if I really am a horcrux? Even if everything goes well between us, even if we end up falling completely in love with each other, I still might have to die and leave him broken in pieces. Should I even try, considering that?”

Luna stared into space, her silvery eyes taking on the ethereal shade he had long learned to associate with her Feathersprites and knowledge beyond her ken. “The future is never certain, Harry, and love is always a risk, but it just might save your soul, if you let it.”

“My soul…”

Harry shivered, the hair on his arms standing on end. He hadn’t told his friends about his darkest fears—sightless eyes, useless body, empty soul. To spare them pain, he had hidden them away under his strongest Occlumency shields, and he knew Luna couldn’t see past them on her own.

Something or someone had just given him an answer, even if he didn’t understand it yet.

He swallowed hard and gave her a tentative smile. “M-maybe you’re right, Luna. I mean, I guess it’s worth a try, when it’s safe and we’re both ready.”

She nodded and smiled serenely. “I think so too.”

He let his legs down and stretched, feeling better for his talk and Luna’s spiritual intervention. “Thanks, you two. Might make it through Occlumency tomorrow in one piece now.”

“Good luck,” Neville said with a grin.

“Thanks. So what did you need help with earlier, Nev?”

“Astronomy. Ugh. I can never get the charts right.”

“Well, that’s not so bad.” Luna took Neville’s book and, together, they set to work.
Severus paced his office, deep in thought over his young friend. Something odd had happened yesterday. That Patronus message—“Sorry, Sev. I’m feeling a bit poorly. We’ll pick up lessons tomorrow, okay?”—Severus hadn’t believed it for a second. Harry had skived off lessons as promised, but Severus had expected him to show up that evening and explain. The boy had been visiting past curfew all term, and his absence last night—it had hurt and frightened Severus.

Had he done something wrong? Had he been cruel? Perhaps Harry had simply tired of dealing with his phobias, but why now? He had always been so patient and kind.

“You don’t trust me yet, but I hope you will someday….”

Severus sighed and dropped his head into his hand. He shouldn’t doubt Harry. The boy had stood by his side through so much. Only something serious could break his usual pattern, but that concerned Severus even further. Harry had confided in him since that first day after their truce. Every painful jibe, every libellous article the Prophet touted as truth, every time supposed friends turned their backs on him—he had come to Severus for help with all of it. What could have possibly happened to make him turn away?

Wait. That wasn’t strictly true, was it?

Flashes of memories ran through Severus’ mind. First had been the incident with the plate. Whatever had happened, Harry could not speak of it. Then the event in the pensieve—or even just the subject of the pensieve itself—Harry would not bring it up in any of their talks, and the moment Severus did, he panicked and shut down. And his home life—any mention of it, and Harry refused to speak at all until Severus changed the subject. And perhaps most concerning of all was the moment he had broken down in Severus’ arms in the Infirmary just after the basilisk poisoning.

“…You will undergo treatment for all the injuries and conditions I see on this list….”

What injuries? Dear gods, what had Harry been hiding all this time?

Severus sat behind his desk and mulled over what he knew. Something about a plate had terrified Harry. He had some kind of frightening secret about food, too… perhaps related to the plate issue. He was hiding old injuries. He couldn’t speak of his life at home and… and… there were those images
in his mind. They came few and far between these days, but every now and then, Severus would come across a glimpse of a ‘punishment’ that seemed far too hard, too cruel for a gentle soul like Harry. What kind of guardian let a five-year-old boy go hungry while they devoured every crumb?

Was it possible that it wasn’t simply a difficult punishment? Had Harry been—

A sharp rap at the door interrupted Severus’ thoughts. He shook himself and glanced at the clock. Merlin. Four already. He stood and opened the door for his friend.

“Enter, Mister Potter.”

Harry dashed in and looked away, refusing to make eye contact. His cheeks had gone red and he trembled all over. Severus closed the door behind Harry and frowned. Harry never acted like this. Not even when he had feared Severus, had he refused to meet his eyes.

“How? Have I done something wrong?”

Harry blushed brighter. “No, sir.”

Severus’ heart constricted. “Sir? It has been months since you have called me by my title in private. What is troubling you?”

“Nothing. I mean, it’s just embarrassing, sir—Severus.” Harry covered his face and stared at the floor. “Just, I… I don’t want you to…” His voice was small and afraid. “Don’t hate me. Please don’t hate me again.”

Severus rubbed a hand through Harry’s hair. “Come now. You know I care for you.”

“Yeah.” Harry sighed and sat in front of Severus’ desk. “I’m sorry, Sev. Maybe, could we just get on with the lesson please? But… no, Luna said I should….” He paced and tore at his hair. “But what if…? Gods, I can’t. I know I’m being stupid, but I just can’t face the possibility that….”

“Harry. What are you so afraid of?”

“I….” Harry blinked hard and shook his head. “I can’t. C-could we just do the lesson, Sev?”

Severus stared at him a long moment. “As you wish.” Something strange was going on with the boy, but a bit of carefully placed prodding would get him to open up about it after the lesson without breaching his trust. At least, Severus hoped he would confide in him. He hated seeing Harry so distressed without knowing how to help.

At Harry’s pleading look, Severus sighed and put his musing away. Perhaps Harry would overcome his fears eventually. Until then, Severus could be patient.

“Legimens.”

Harry’s mind blocked him out like a steel trap. Merlin. Whatever the boy was hiding, he did not want Severus to discover it.

Well, Severus would leave him his privacy then. Gods knew he had secrets too. He went easy for once, simply testing Harry’s mental defences, advising him of where his shields lacked structure, helping him to build walls.

Then, in one of the weak spots, he saw a flicker of something he had never imagined he would find in Harry’s mind: a fantasy of his own naked body.
Severus’ gut dropped and his heart pounded in his ears. No. No. Harry wouldn’t—it couldn’t be!

Unable to resist, Severus dove in through the weak spot and found himself in the middle of an image out of his nightmares. The mist around the image indicated he was viewing a fantasy and not a true memory, but he would have known that by the content regardless. A sixteen-year-old Harry, stripped as naked as Severus’ teenage form, hung naked in the air beside him. Their hands were intertwined, tears running down both of their faces.

Horror and nausea overwhelmed him. No. Harry couldn’t—he wouldn’t use this against him.

In the fantasy, Black grabbed Severus between the legs, and the real Severus released a cry of appalled shock. He reeled at an instant scream from Harry and a burst of raw magic—within the fantasy apparently, not in reality—and opened his eyes to find Harry holding his younger form, a broken nose bleeding down Severus’ back.

“Episkey.” The young Severus whispered something in Harry’s ear—Severus stepped closer to hear their quiet conversation, though his stomach rebelled at the thought that Harry would go so far with his image. “I thought of you,” the young Severus whispered, and then they were kissing.

“No,” Severus breathed aloud. “It can’t b-be… no.”

The dream shifted, and Harry was inside him, and no! Fuck no! He jerked out of Harry’s mind with a strangled cry.

“No,” Severus breathed aloud. “It can’t b-be… no.”

The dream shifted, and Harry was inside him, and no! Fuck no! He jerked out of Harry’s mind with a strangled cry.

“Severus,” Harry looked up at him with tears in his eyes. “Please. It’s not—not what you think.”

“Get out.” Severus’ voice was low and lethal to hide the bleeding pain of betrayal inside.

“Severus, please! It was just a d—”

“Get out!” At his scream of rage and pain, Harry looked at him in despair, but at Severus’ refusal to relent, he gave a stricken sob and fled.

Severus sank into his chair, shivering and weak with anguish. He couldn’t believe what he had just seen. Couldn’t believe Harry—the boy who had fought for him, saved his life time and time again—would use him so badly. Even as a mere fantasy, the thought of having his worst memories used as sexual fodder appalled him. He could not shake the creeping feeling of horror along his veins.

Was it a dream? He pinched his face, but the pain convinced him he was awake.

Gods. How had it happened? Why?

But he was not to be given time to work it out. A searing pain up his left arm sent curses flying from his tongue.

Fuck. Of all times, why did he have to be called now?

Severus slammed back another shot of whisky and hoped the next might drown him.

Draco had asked him out for a drink after the meeting—a useless discussion of which Ministry pawns would be easiest to overpower and which to avoid—and following the revelations of Harry’s
fantasies and the betrayal of his only friend, Severus had been glad for the opportunity to dull the pain. He had drunk far more than was wise, but try as he might, he couldn’t get the image of Harry—no.

Not Harry. Not anymore. He had to be Potter again from here on out.

He couldn’t forget the sight of them together, Potter buried inside him and obviously enjoying Severus’ body.

The part that left Severus ill and quaking was his own face. That trusting, puppy-dog look he would never have given anyone, let alone one he was submitting to.

Although, he wasn’t sure how much riding his partner counted as submission—fuck! He downed another shot. He shouldn’t be thinking of this. Harry—Potter, damn it—was a student. An underage student. And even if the boy did have some kind of crush on him, Merlin, Severus could go to Azkaban for daring to entertain such dreams.

If not for the start of the fantasy, he couldn’t deny he might have reacted in a different manner. But the fact that the boy had used Severus’ abuse to fantasise about making love to him left him cold. Har—Potter knew how much that memory horrified him. To have used it as the basis of his sexual fantasies… fuck. Severus hadn’t drunk nearly enough to wash that stain from his soul.

“So, Sev’rus,” Draco slurred, “rumour around the dorms is you’re gay.”

Severus fixed him with a sharp glare. “What’s it to you?”

“That’s the thing—me too. Don’ wanna marry the pug girl.”

“Fascinating.” Dear Merlin, Severus hadn’t drunk enough for this conversation either.

“Could be.” Draco scooted closer, and Severus had a strange feeling of Déjà vu.

“Been watchin’ you for a long time,” Draco said, pink flushing his cheeks. “Want you. Maybe, want to give it a go?”

Severus choked on his scotch. Waste of a good drink.

“You what? Have you lost the bloody plot?”

The boy pouted. “Oh, come on. You know you want me.”

“You are seventeen! I could go to Azkaban for the mere thought.” Not to mention, the idea turned his stomach and made him wish he hadn’t dumped so much alcohol down his throat after all.

Draco laid his hand on Severus’ left wrist. “Since when does that matter?”

“Oh dear gods.” Severus shook Draco off and buried his head in his hand, wondering what on earth he had done to deserve this from two students within twenty-four hours. One of whom had broken his heart to pieces.

Maybe he could pawn them off on each other. They would deserve it, the foolish Malfoy heir and the traitorous Potter.

The words spilled from his lips before he could stop them. “I am most assuredly not interested. However, if you are truly so desperate for a date, you might ask Potter.”

Severus snorted. Potter had probably broken more rules in a month than Draco did in an entire year. It was just that, until that afternoon, Severus had believed he broke them to save people. Now he wasn’t so sure.

Maybe Potter had fooled them all.

Draco jerked to his feet and staggered. “I’m leavin’, if you’re gonna treat me like that.”

The brat spun on his heel and staggered to the floo, leaving Severus with the tab, not that he hadn’t expected it. He left some galleons for the waitress and stood, swaying under a surge of dizziness. Maybe he’d best just get home and call the night a horror of a loss. He could report to Albus in the morning.

Severus staggered out of his hearth and collapsed on the sofa.

Solaris hooted from his desk, calling Severus’ attention to a folded parchment sitting there. He frowned and trudged to the desk, hoping Draco hadn’t extended an invitation in letter form as well, but no. A different hand graced the front.

“Severus, I’m so sorry. Please… please read this. Please.”

“Harry….” The name escaped him in a broken whisper. Tears blurred the greeting, and Severus threw it aside, neither seeing nor caring where it landed. No. He couldn’t trust Potter any longer, couldn’t give him a single foothold into his heart. He’d been a fool to do so in the first place.

Severus woke with a drill between his eyes. He groaned and flopped over, then whimpered as the day’s events came back to him in a rush. Harry had betrayed him. Had been using his pain to fuel sexual fantasies. And Draco apparently had romantic inclinations towards him as well.

What was it with the students lately? They could solve everyone’s problems by dating each other, but no, they had to be—wait a moment!

Horror crashed through his veins. Oh gods. Severus sat bolt upright, uncaring of the pain in his head. Oh gods! He had told Draco to ask Potter on a date last night. He had given Harry’s sexual orientation to a Death Eater and his worst rival. And worse, he couldn’t walk it back now without making them both look suspicious.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, then groaned in pain.

Maybe it was best he stayed away from Harry from now on. Severus’ folly had only hurt them both.
Harry hadn’t slept at all. He staggered down to the Great Hall the next morning, barely conscious of anything happening around him. Neville muttered something on his left, but Harry didn’t know what he said. He kept his eyes glued to the teachers’ door, waiting. If Severus had read his letter, maybe... maybe everything would be okay.

But when Severus came in, his eyes hardened as he met Harry’s gaze. The man sneered and turned his back, and through his Empathy, Harry sensed it wasn’t an act this time. Heartsick and shattered, Harry turned and left without a word. He had no appetite anyway.

“Harry? Merlin, wait up.” Neville called after him, and Harry wished he hadn’t given his invisibility cloak to Severus. He couldn’t talk right now. Not about this.

“Harry… what is it? What’s wrong?”

Harry just shook his head and followed his feet wherever they would take him. He shouldn’t have been surprised to find himself standing in front of a familiar broken tap.

~O-open,~ he hissed.

“Whoa,” Neville breathed. “So this is the Chamber, huh?”

Harry nodded and jumped in. He hadn’t brought his broom, but at the moment, he didn’t care. Without Severus, everything felt broken and grey.

Neville followed with a shriek. Harry hissed the entrance closed after him and trudged on to the main quarters.

Somehow, a part of him had half-expected to find their conjured beds still there, Severus’ sofa and bookcases, and his temporary lab in the corner.

But the Chamber was empty. Had been for several months. Harry didn’t understand why when he knew it would be empty, but it hurt, seeing this sanctuary stripped bare, hollow and desolate as his spirit.

“Harry,” Neville said, “can you talk about it?”

Harry shook his head and sank, cross-legged, to the floor. Neville sat next to him and laid a hand on Harry’s wrist.

“That’s okay. I can’t always talk when it hurts either.”

Harry gave him a tearful smile. “‘T-thanks, Nev.”

“No problem.”

They sat in the silence of Harry’s broken heart for a long time.
Chapter 30

Torn in Two

1 June

Harry had become listless and devoid of life again. Albus watched from a distance as the boy sank further and further into despair, but had no idea how to heal it. In light of the deteriorating situation, he called Severus into his office that afternoon.

“My boy, how is Harry progressing in Occlumency?”

Severus’ expression and emotions closed off. Interesting. Something had happened there.

“He is becoming quite proficient,” Severus said, his tone flat.

“Too proficient.” Albus sighed and sank into his chair. “The boy is sinking into despair again, Severus, and I cannot break through his shields any longer. Are you able to tell me anything about his state of mind?”

Severus’ hand twitched, but otherwise showed no flicker of reaction. That small gesture was enough to let Albus know something had gone wrong—badly wrong, and Severus was hurt and angry, but unwilling to speak of it. Merlin. What had happened between them to reduce Severus’ former joy to this?

“None whatsoever,” Severus replied, still in that flat, clinical tone. “I can no longer read his emotional state.”

Albus sighed. Of course it was never so easy. He would have to dig if he wanted answers.

“And he has not come to you with his concerns either?”

Severus looked away. “I cannot allow it.”

“Why? I had thought you were friends. What has happened, my boy?”

Severus snarled, “It is none of your business, Albus!” He looked away and moderated his tone. “I am not mistreating him, but I cannot allow him close to me any longer either.”

“What happened, Severus? I thought… I had thought you cared about him.”
Deep pain filled Severus’ eyes for a moment before he buried it behind a wall of stone. “I did. And now, I cannot.”

“Severus….”

“I am sorry, Albus. I cannot answer your questions.” Severus stood, his eyes utterly blank, and left without another word.

Albus sighed and rubbed his temples. “Well, that did not go as well as I had hoped. Phineas, were you able to get a read on him at all?”

“Oh Severus? Particularly a Severus who does not wish to be read?” Phineas laughed wryly. “I would have better luck trying to pull secrets from a rock. I think we both could see that he is hurt and angry and the issue resolves around Harry, but beyond that—I have no idea.”

“Yes.” Albus groaned. “Of all the times to use his natural abilities against me. Damn. What am I to do, Phineas? I cannot simply allow Harry to flounder, but if Severus cannot help him any longer and he does not trust anyone else but Neville, Dean, and Luna, then I am at a loss. Those three are already doing all they can, as are Blaise and Hermione. I would reach out to him myself but you have seen how well he trusts me. Now that Severus has cut him out of his life, he will likely trust me even less. How am I to help him?”

Phineas Nigellus rubbed his chin. “Perhaps… if Harry had something to believe in? A wish to fight for?”

“Such as what?”

“I do not know. What does the boy wish for?”

“Family. The Mirror of Erised showed that his—wait. Oh sweet Merlin! Phineas, you are a genius!”

The former headmaster raised an eyebrow. “Of course I am. Why are you spouting poetry of my wit again?”

Albus beamed. “Don’t you see, Phineas? The Mirror—if I lead him to the Mirror once more, perhaps he will see the true longing of his soul and find something to fight for.”

Phineas’ expression darkened. “Or he will break his heart pining for what he cannot have.”

Albus sighed. “Well, let us hope what he sees is achievable. Otherwise, I suppose I shall have try another way to reach him.”

“If you do not break him in the process,” the portrait muttered and left his frame.

Albus watched him go with a tremor of trepidation. Was he making the right choice?

Yes, it had to be. He had no other way to give the boy hope. Surely a little dream couldn’t hurt?

“It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, Harry.”

He sighed and took a lemon drop from his stash. Well, perhaps he would save the Mirror for a last resort. He would need time to bring it back to the castle anyway.

Merlin, how complicated his life had become as of late.
Severus left Albus’ office with a tear down the middle of his heart. Of course he had noticed Harry’s increasing despair. How could he not? Every time they had Occlumency lessons, Harry looked at him with hope and tears in his eyes, and every time Severus pretended not to see, the boy faded a little more.

It hurt Severus too. In spite of his attempts to keep his distance, he couldn’t help but care for Harry. He wanted to be angry, he wanted to loathe him again, but he didn’t have it in him to hate this broken-hearted boy.

Why had his rejection hurt Harry so badly in the first place? If he had only wanted Severus’ body—and in such a depraved manner—why would it destroy him when Severus turned him down? Draco certainly hadn’t wasted time breaking his heart over Severus. From all reports, the boy was dating Parkinson by day—an act to please his father—and testing the waters with Theo Nott at night, though Nott appeared far less invested in the relationship than Draco.

But Harry… he had become a shadow. He had stopped talking, even to Lovegood and Longbottom. He wasn’t eating, wasn’t sleeping, and every Occlumency lesson, his spirit and magic weakened. He was killing himself with despair.

It made no sense. Severus had to be missing something.

The memory of his thoughts that day, the moment before Harry had come to his office and everything fell apart confronted him again. “You don’t trust me yet, but maybe one day….” Hadn’t Severus made a vow not to believe the worst of Harry just moments before he had done exactly that? A pang of guilt and remorse stole his breath. What if Harry hadn’t meant to hurt him? His fear of losing Severus had nearly paralysed him at the beginning of the lesson. Why would he care, if he only wanted Severus for selfish reasons?

Selfish. Before that day, Severus would have said Harry was the least selfish person he knew. Merlin, had he made a mistake to judge him so harshly?

And yet, that image of them writhing together would not leave Severus’ mind. If his worst humiliation had not precluded the fantasy, Severus couldn’t deny it might have evoked a far different emotion. He might have even… wanted it. Later, to be sure, when Harry was an adult. And if Severus could ever overcome his damaged heart. But knowing Harry had used his pain as some kind of twisted fetish to get off made it feel too much like those mind games that had broken him in the first place.

Fuck all if Severus would ever fall prey to that again.

Still, he couldn’t reconcile this bleeding, broken wraith of a boy with the twisted bastard who had used Severus for his own gain and tossed him aside, with those who had come after and cared for nothing but a quick shag against the wall. It if was only a game, if Severus meant nothing to Harry beyond gratification, then why would his distance hurt the boy so much? Gods, his mind was going in circles, and each round only buried him further in the mire of his pain. He simply couldn’t make sense of this mess.

Such was his distraction, Severus did not pay attention to his feet as he walked into his quarters and headed for the kitchen for a cup of tea. He forgot he had left his quarters in a hurry that morning, trying to get in and out of the Great Hall before Harry showed up and his pain killed Severus’ appetite. In his rush earlier in the day, he had left the chair out beside his desk, and, absorbed as he
was in his tormented thoughts, Severus failed to notice the blasted thing until he had tripped over it and gone head over heels. He landed on his arse on the carpet, one leg caught in the chair and the other stuck under his desk.

“Ugh.” Winded, he rubbed his aching head and struggled to catch his breath. A general healing charm cleared the spots from his eyes and allowed him to breathe, and Severus sat with a groan.

“Merlin, what a day.” He extricated his legs and went to stand, but paused when his foot pulled something white out from under the desk along with his boot. “What is this?” He picked it up and gasped at a flash of dim memory, blotted out by too much alcohol and pain.

“Severus, I’m so sorry. Please… please read this. Please.”

Harry. He had left this for Severus the night after he had seen that godsforsaken fantasy, but Severus had been drunk and miserable and couldn’t bear to read it at the time. Now, though, the prospect of getting some answers was a siren call he couldn’t deny.

Staring at the parchment, he climbed into his desk chair and held the letter unopened in his lap, hands shaking. He knew he would find the truth in here.

But was he ready for it?

Oh, fuck it. Severus had faced worse things than horny teenagers. With a deep breath, he unfolded the letter and began to read.

Severus,

Oh gods, I’m so sorry. I… I know you probably hate me right now, and if you’re thinking what I’m afraid you are, I can’t blame you. But let me just clarify one thing: that wasn’t a fantasy, Severus. I didn’t place you in that situation on purpose. Gods, I would never!

You have no idea how much that image from your pensieve has haunted me this year. Until you created that new Dreamless Sleep formula for me, I saw it every single bloody night—dreams, Severus, not fantasies, dreams. I saw you crying and scared and vulnerable and my family turning into monsters, and I woke up drowning in tears and sick with grief. And the night before last, I was so tired, I forgot to take my potion. That dream was the result.

I would never, ever use you like that, had I any choice in the matter. Your abuse has haunted me since the end of term last year. I wish I could heal it. I wish I could take that part of you and make it better.

Instead, I think I shattered you.

Gods, I should have told you about the pensieve sooner. I should have talked to you about my dreams. I was so afraid of losing you, but now, I’ve lost you anyway, and I’m so damn sorry.

Severus, please. Please understand, I didn’t mean that to happen. I had no control over those images and they shocked me almost as much as you.

Please forgive me. I never meant for this to happen. I never meant to hurt you. Please
understand. Please don’t hate me again. I don’t think I can bear it.

Harry

Severus clutched the letter in a shaking hand. Dreams? Not a fantasy, but a dream? By gods, if that was the case, then all this time, Harry had thought….

Shite. If this was real, then he had misjudged Harry. Terribly. And now….

A sob crept up his throat and choked him. Oh gods. He had gone andcocked up the best thing that had ever happened to him—again. Why would he never learn not to attack when he was afraid? Why could he never learn to shut up and analyse the situation first, rather than after he had already lashed out in self-defence and hurt people? Granted, in the past, he had had some reason to protect himself, but Harry had never given him any reason to suspect him of such terrible things as Severus had done.

Harry wasn’t Lucius, and Severus had treated the boy worse than he had ever done to the bastard who broke him in the first place.

He dropped his head into his hands and wept, miserable and furious at himself. He had been as much of a bastard as the students had ever believed him to be. And that, to the kindest, most forgiving person he had ever met.

Severus’ head snapped up, hope slowly building in his desolate heart. Forgiving… If Severus apologised, if he told Harry the truth—that he hadn’t seen his letter, that he hadn’t known it was a dream—would Harry accept him back into his life? Would he forgive him?

Gods, Severus hadn’t the slightest idea if he even deserved such forgiveness, but either way, he couldn’t bear his life without Harry. Even before he knew the truth, he had been on the breaking point. Whether he deserved another chance or not, whether Harry could even offer it, Merlin help him, he had to try. And that instant, before his resolve wavered.

He couldn’t bear to wait anyway.

Heart thundering with panic and hope at once, Severus scribbled a note on a scrap of parchment, warded it against all eyes but Harry’s and his own, and dashed to the owlery. He found the place deserted, much to his relief, and called for his familiar. Solaris alighted on his arm with a hoot, and Severus silenced his conversation with the bird.

“Hello, old friend. This is urgent. Please take that to Harry Potter’s bed. Just drop it there and leave it. Don’t let any of the other boys see you.”

Solaris hooted and vanished into the night. Severus watched him go, heart racing like mad against his ribs. He had screwed everything up with Lils, with Regulus, with his mother, and now all of them were gone. It was too late to heal things with them, but maybe, just maybe, fortune would smile on him this time.

Merlin knew he could do with a bit of good luck, for once.
Harry dragged himself up to bed early that evening, Neville on his heels. He had to study at some point though he could hardly concentrate through the fog of grief that permeated his soul. He had known for weeks now that he loved Severus, but the man wouldn’t even hear him. He had gone and assumed the worst about Harry—again—leaving him with no one but his classmates to heal his bleeding heart.

Gods, it hurt. Some days, he didn’t know how he managed to function at all.

With a sigh, Harry sat on his bed and leaned down to grab his books. As he moved, a flash of white near his pillow caught his eye.

“What the…?” His heart thrummed at the sight of a familiar scrawl. “S-Sev?”

Isuri poked her head above the collar of Harry’s shirt. ~Your heart is beating like a mouse’s, Master.~

Harry gave a shaky laugh. ~Severus sent me a talking-leaf.~ He switched to English. “Neville, it’s from… him.”

Neville gasped and plopped on the bed beside Harry. “What, really? What did he send you? I can’t see anything?”

“It’s just a note. He must have it warded.” With a deep breath, Harry forced his nerves to steady and pulled the parchment open. “Wait, let me—Obice Silentium.” A blue bubble formed around his head and Neville’s and faded. “Right. He says, ‘H, I had lost your letter when you sent it some weeks ago. I am afraid I was rather intoxicated that night and overlooked it until today. Merlin, I am so sorry. I had thought—but I was wrong. My friend, if what you wrote here is the truth, and it is not too late to make amends, will you meet me after midnight at the place we first stood as equals? S.’”

Neville grinned and hugged Harry’s shoulders. “Yes! It looks like it’s going to be okay, mate! He just didn’t know.”

Harry let slip a shaking sob and buried his face into Neville’s shoulder. “Oh gods. Oh gods. Is this nightmare really over?”

Neville hugged Harry tightly. “I think so, mate. I think so.”

Harry clung to Neville’s jumper and wept.

At thirty minutes to midnight, Neville walked Harry to the common room and helped the shaking young man straighten his cloak. “There you are. I’ve checked the map—you’ve a clear path from here to the meeting spot. And Lu is keeping Ginny busy, so you shouldn’t have trouble from her tonight either, with any luck. Just avoid the fifth floor—Filch is doing his rounds. Here’s the map.”

Harry took the parchment and hugged Neville tight. “Thank you, mate. I’d have gone mad long before now without you.”

“Well, you know,” Neville whispered in his ear, “some people might consider falling for the meanest professor in school a bit mad to start with, but I know what he means to you.”
Harry laughed. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“Best be off if you don’t want to run into trouble.” Neville sighed. “Your cloak would have come in handy about now, you know.”

“Yeah, but Sev needs it more. And I’ll cast my obscuring spell before I leave the stairwell anyway. I’d do it here, but there are too many eyes.”

“I know. You’ll be all right.”

Harry squeezed Neville’s shoulder and gave him a nervous smile. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck. And tell me about it in the morning. You two should hang out in the spot tonight and get things fixed between you.”


“Night, Harry.”

Harry waved and dashed away, keeping to the shadows. He didn’t see a soul until he reached the second floor staircase, checked his map once more, and had two seconds to panic before the door slammed open and a firm body nearly barrelled him over—before he had time to cast his spell.

“Potter!” Malfoy jerked back and gave Harry a vicious sneer. “What are you doing out? Going to meet your little redheaded girlfriend?”

Harry grimaced and whispered, ‘Mischief managed’ out of the corner of his lips. He tucked the map away and stared Malfoy down. No escaping this confrontation, as much as he would rather have not seen the little ferret. Not tonight, when so much was on the line.

“She is not my girlfriend, thank you very much, and what I do at night—or any other time of the day—is none of your business.”

“It is if I call for Professor McGonagall. Oh, what would she do to see her dear little golden boy out after curfew?”

“I imagine she’d put us both in detention as you’re here too, genius.”

Malfoy scowled. Obviously, he hadn’t learned from the first time he’d pulled that trick. Idiot.

“Shut up.” Malfoy turned away, and Harry frowned to see the boy had red rimming his eyes and his face was paler than normal.

“Hey, Malfoy, are you okay?”

Malfoy turned and shot Harry a dark glare. “What do you care?”

“Believe it or not, I’m not a total bastard. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine!” Malfoy hesitated, then leered. “Although, if you’re interested in making me feel better, I bet you’re pretty good in the sack.”

Harry choked. “C-come again?”

“Well? It’s not every day a Malfoy propositions you, you know.”

Malfoy grinned. “Sure about that? I’ve heard from a little birdie about the real reason you aren’t in bed with the Weaselette. And I’ve also heard hate sex is fun.”

Harry reeled, struck to the core. No one knew about his sexuality but Neville, Luna, and Severus. And the only one of them who had any association with Malfoy at all… was Severus.

“Y-you’re mad,” Harry choked out, blinking tears back with all his might, and fled like the hounds of hell were on his heels.

“Your loss, Potter,” Malfoy called and disappeared into the stairwell.

Harry dashed into the hallway, spell forgotten, and tried to make sense of what he had just heard.

No. No, it couldn’t be true. Severus had done a lot of nasty things in the past, but to share this with Malfoy? With a Death Eater?

But, as much as Harry wanted to deny any possibility of such a terrible explanation, it was the only one that made sense. Hadn’t he remarked on Severus’ vindictive streak himself in the past? If Severus had been angry that night, it would have been too easy for him to slip. To exact vengeance against the one who had hurt him so. He might not have even been coherent enough to realise the damage he had done until it was too late—Severus did like to drink when the world hurt him too much. And his note had said he was intoxicated that night. Too intoxicated to remember receiving Harry’s letter.

Gods. Every moment, the truth became clearer and clearer. Harry had trusted Severus with the deepest, most secret parts of his heart. And Severus had broken it.

Harry slowed and dragged himself to Myrtle’s loo, tears blinding him, soul bleeding. He loved Severus. Had done for months. Maybe longer. And yet, in spite of everything he had done for Severus, in spite of everything he had done for Severus, in spite of everything he had given the man, Severus had still believed the worst of him. Harry had saved his life, endured the loss of his best friend and the scorn of his house for his friendship with Severus and his students, had protected him, given him the last possession he had of his father’s just to keep the man he loved safe—and Severus had still sold him out to Malfoy for petty revenge.

Gods, it hurt so much worse than before. Harry hadn’t expected love. He was too young and Severus too damaged. Yet, he had expected the man’s loyalty. He had expected his trust, at least enough not to tell his secrets to those who wouldn’t hesitate to use it against him in terrible ways. Voldemort didn’t know about Harry’s sexuality yet or he would no doubt torment him about it in his Imperius dreams, but it could only be a matter of time before Malfoy let his secrets slip. And what would happen then?

Severus’ stupid stunt might have gotten Harry killed. It still might.

Water gurgled from a toilet and Myrtle popped over the top of the stall. She frowned at Harry.

“It’s after curfew.”

“I know,” he said in a dim, breaking voice.

“You… sound so sad.”

“I am.”
She leaned her arms on the top of the stall. “Well, are you coming in or not?”

Harry stared at the broken tap, where he knew Severus wanted him to go. He thought of everything they had been through, and everything the man had done to turn it against him. And his heart shattered anew.

“No,” he whispered, and turned away.

The rest of the term passed in a daze of grief and desolation for Harry. He had hoped his friends might lift him out of his agony, but nothing sealed the bleeding wound inside him. And every time Severus looked at him, rage and a mirror of Harry’s grief radiating from him like an inferno, his heart cracked a little more. He went through the last few weeks of term like a ghost, barely functioning for the crippling pain in his soul.

Even in his anguish, he hadn’t failed to notice he wasn’t the only one in despair. Dean still hadn’t healed from Ginny’s mistreatment. And as Dean had stood by him throughout hell, Harry tried to help him as best as he could. Which wasn’t much with his own heart broken.

“Mate,” Dean murmured one morning, “I reckon I should hate you.”

“Hate me?” Harry gave a low, bitter laugh. “Why not? It seems to be the trendy thing these days.”

Dean shook his head sadly. “I don’t hate you. I can’t. You’ve stood by me all the way through this and you’re as miserable as I am.”

Harry gave him a mournful smile. “Yeah. Reckon I am.”

“Is it Seamus? Ron?”

“They’re… arses, but they have been for a long time. It’s nothing new. No, I reckon I’m in the same boat as you are, mate, just with a different person.”

Dean glanced to the head table and snorted bitterly. “Yeah. Mate, can I ask you something, just between us? I swear I won’t tell anyone.”

Harry frowned and glanced around the Great Hall. Neville was listening and offering silent support, but he already knew all of Harry’s secrets. Hermione sat a couple of seats down, staring at her plate without eating, but Ron was nowhere in sight. A silencing field would make a risky question safe enough.

“Obice Silentium.” Harry included Dean and Neville in his barrier and gave his distraught friend a gentle pat. “Okay. What’s up?”

Dean sat up and gave Harry a wan smile. “It’s just… are you gay? You’ve never even looked at a girl as far as I can tell. It’s okay if you are. Or if you don’t want to talk about it. It’s just morbid curiosity.”

Merlin. Harry gave Neville a questioning look and received an encouraging smile and a nod in return. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Yeah, I am. Just don’t tell anyone, okay? It’s not just that I’m not ready to come out, but if
Voldemort finds out about it, he might try to use it against me.”

Dean sighed. “I thought so. You never showed the slightest hint of interest in Ginny. Or in any girl.”

Harry shook his head. “It’s not just that I’m gay with her, mate. It’s not even just her bad behaviour turning me off. She reminds me far too much of my mum.”

“She looks exactly like her,” Neville supplied, “only a little shorter and with brown eyes. They even have similar temperaments, from what Harry tells me, though this obsession thing is all Ginny. It’s a little eerie, to be honest. Even if Harry wasn’t gay, I doubt he’d ever want to pursue a relationship with her.”

Dean shuddered. “Merlin. Yeah, didn’t consider that.”

“It’s no problem.” Harry looked up at a flash of movement and frowned. Hermione was staring at them, eyes haunted and rimmed in tears. “I’m going to let this silencing field down, okay? So nothing more about my sexuality.”

“Wait just a bit. Can you tell me who…?”

Harry winced. “That I can’t share with anyone—not here. Besides, he’s made it perfectly clear he… he doesn’t… care about me.” He struggled to breathe through his pain and stared at his plate, as untouched as Hermione’s. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything sooner. I only didn’t tell you because you were so upset about Ginny. And I reckon it’s time I caught you up later, but not here. Not now. Please.”

Dean rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “Okay. I’m sorry, mate.”

Harry took a deep breath and rubbed his eyes, trying to make it appear as if he were tired and not on the verge of tears. “It’s okay.”

“You’ll tell me later though, right?”

“Yeah. Later, but no more about me right now. I can’t bear it, and besides, it looks like it’s not just us in pain.”

Dean’s eyes flickered to Hermione. He gave Harry a worried look and nodded.

“Finite,” Harry muttered, and the silencing barrier dissipated.

“H-Harry?” Hermione’s voice came out small and broken. “I… I’m sorry. C-could I sit with you?”

He frowned. “Why not Ron?”

She cringed and ducked her head. “He’s… we’re not… I-I ended it last night.”

Ah. So that was why Ron wasn’t at the Gryffindor table. Harry looked around, but didn’t see him.

“Where…?”

Hermione pointed Ron out at the Ravenclaw table, cosied up with a buxom blonde. Anger and pity surged through Harry at the sight.

“Mandy Brocklehurst,” Hermione explained, her voice barely a whisper. “I caught them snogging in the Ravenclaw corridor last night when Parvati and I went to visit Padma. If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I doubt he would have ever told me.”
For a moment, the temptation to rub it in her face, to tell Hermione she made her bed and she should bloody well lie in it almost overcame him. Well, she had been horrible to him for months. Then he glanced to the staff table and withered inside at Severus’ glare. No. If this was what Hermione felt, he wouldn’t leave her to bear it alone. She had been trying to make amends for a while now anyway.

He let the last vestiges of resentment go with a sigh and motioned to the seat on his left. “Come on then.”

Hermione gave him a tearful smile and nodded. “T-thanks, Harry.”

He nodded back and tried to choke down some of his sandwich.

A week before term ended, Harry answered Severus’ request for his final Occlumency lesson. It had taken a long time and hard work, but Harry had finally mastered it. He had mastered all the mental disciplines, actually, not that Severus knew that. Empathy and Legilimency came as easy to him as breathing, so with his completion of Occlumency, he was officially a Mind Mage. Severus had nothing left to teach him. Harry couldn’t decide if he was happy or miserable over the fact.

Perhaps it was for the best. Severus had proved in spades he would never trust Harry. And Harry couldn’t trust a man who would sell him out to the Death Eaters in a moment of petty revenge. He only wished he had realised that before falling hopelessly in love with said man.

It fit, he supposed, in his life of pain and broken dreams. Weapons had no use for love. And living horcruxes would have to die too soon to enjoy it anyway, though Harry still wasn’t sure if he was a horcrux or his scar only smelled of death and darkness because of Riddle. No one had ever been a horcrux, at least no one recorded in any of the books Harry or his friends could find. Even Luna had no idea.

Or if she did, she wasn’t telling.

Either way, it was probably best to leave distance between himself and Severus from now on. At least if he did, Harry mightn’t take Severus down with him when the smoke cleared.

“I see no reason to continue these lessons,” Severus said when Harry stepped inside and sat down, barely a word spoken between them. “There is little I can teach you now.”

Harry nodded and turned to go. “Thank you, for being so patient with me.”


He attempted to be sarcastic, but the pain behind his words cut Harry to bits inside. His hand tightened on the knob.

“I wanted to come to you, you know. That night you wrote me. But you don’t trust me, and you never will.”

Severus snarled and slammed his hands on the door on either side of Harry. “Why would I trust a boy who would… would use my pain like that?”

Harry looked up at him, letting his grief and betrayal show. “You saw my letter. I didn’t use your
pain for anything. You used mine, though.”

Severus cringed. “You said you had forgiven me for the past, and yet you wield it like a sword now?”

“I’m not talking about the past.” Harry turned away. “It’s better if I just go. You don’t want me around anyway, if you really think I could….” His voice broke. “C-could get off of seeing you almost raped.”

“Shut up!” Severus cried, his pain and fury bleeding into Harry and making him dizzy. “What would you know of it, Potter? You said you dream of it every night! Why would you, unless you find it utterly fascinating to see me brought so low?”

Anger flickered to life in Harry’s spirit, and he almost leapt with relief at the feel of something—anything—other than the desolate despair that had been slowly drowning him for months.

“That’s what you think? You really think I’m capable of that?”

Severus faltered. “I… once, I believed you would protect me always. But now… I believe I was a fool to have been so taken in.”

Blinking back tears, Harry grabbed Severus’ chin and forced him down, forced him to look into his eyes. “Legilimens Inverto!”

Severus gasped as Harry cast reverse Legilimency upon him, showing the contents of Harry’s mind to Severus whether he wanted to see or not. The man hadn’t expected him to know it, no doubt. Harry took grim satisfaction in knowing he still had a few surprises up his sleeve for this man who always seemed to see too much, and yet, understood nothing at all. Not where it concerned Harry at any rate.

With stubborn determination, he held tight to Severus’ face and brought up the memory that had forced him to see the man in a new light. He had kept it carefully hidden for so long, knowing if Severus had ever seen it, he would know about Harry’s life with the Dursleys. Would know they thought he was a freak and a useless brat, and even now, after months of Isuri trying to teach him differently, Harry couldn’t shake the fear that they were right.

But he had already lost Severus. What did it matter if Harry revealed the truth of his past to the man now? Even if Severus believed the worst of him—again—it would change nothing. Not anymore.

“This is why it torments me!”

The memory began.

“Oi! Get his shirt off, Gordon! Let’s see what the freak is hiding!”

Severus jerked back from Harry’s forcible Legilimency with a gasp. Oh gods. Oh gods! The boy had been abused. Not just by Severus, but by those monsters he was returning to in less than two days. He had nearly been gang-raped, beaten for Merlin knew how long, and by the size of him in the image, starved all summer too.
And Severus had accused him of dreaming of his torture for fun. Granted, it had come from a place of terrible hurt and anger, but fuck. Fuck! Once again, he had misread Harry, and once again, he had shattered the boy’s heart.

"H-Harry…"

Harry turned and jerked a hand across his face. “Don’t. Just don’t.” He took a shuddering breath, and if Severus hadn’t known the boy was frightened from the memory he had just relived, he would have caught him into his arms and held him tight, fears and misunderstandings be damned.

Gods forgive him, but Severus had fucked up royally. He kept fucking up.

“Please,” he whispered.

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “Severus, I reckon you and I are just too keen to hurt each other. Or maybe you’re just too keen to hurt me. All I’ve wanted to do since then is…..” He choked back a sob and pressed his fist into his mouth. “Never mind. Doesn’t matter. You would only think the worst of me anyway.”

“Harry, I—don’t go.”

“I have to, Severus. It hurts too bloody much to stay.”

Severus moved to catch Harry into his arms and hold him tight, to apologise and whisper his faith to the boy until his pain healed, but he had trained him too well. Harry slipped beyond his reach, and with one last broken-hearted look, turned and ran away. The click of the door shutting behind him had never sounded so final.

30 June

The leaving feast offered scores of delicacies and delights to tempt Harry’s palate, but everything tasted of ash. He ate mechanically, making sure to take in a healthy amount of calories despite the pit of cold grief in his belly. Gods, he didn’t want to leave. He didn’t want to walk out of here tomorrow morning with nothing solved between Severus and himself and his heart bleeding.

He pushed his plate away, unable to choke anything else down, and lifted his gaze to the head table. Severus looked up at the same time, and the haunting grief and remorse hidden behind his scowl for the public was almost enough to send Harry running back to him.

[Harry, please. Please don’t leave me.]

Harry closed his eyes around the sting of tears and clenched his fists. Fuck, it hurt so much. He ached to go to the man, to hug him and tell him it was all right…. But it wasn’t. Severus didn’t trust him. Not enough to allow his touch. Not enough to believe Harry would protect him. Not even enough to believe he would never use his dark past against him. And Severus had wielded Harry’s own sexuality as a weapon.

Had he done it a year ago, Harry would have forgiven him. But after coming so close, after feeling the warmth of Severus’ affection only to have it turned on him at the first serious misunderstanding—no. Severus had risked Harry’s life for petty revenge and believed the worst of him while doing it. Harry couldn’t afford to let him back in.
Even if turning his back and leaving the hall with Severus’ pain tearing him in two was the hardest thing he had ever done.

[Lils, I have done it all over again. And now—it hurts so much worse. Harry, please. Please come back.]

Harry knew Severus had no idea he could hear the man’s thoughts, but they hurt like hell just the same. He jerked to his feet and slipped out of the hall, eyelids stinging, fingernails digging welts into his palms. Severus’ grief rammed a javelin through his chest and left him bleeding, suffocating, crippled with anguish. He had to escape before he broke down in front of the entire school.

Tears streaked his cheeks as he fled, running blindly. His feet took him outside, and he ran the entire distance to the lake. He sat with his back against the beech tree and buried his head in his knees, bitter, choking sobs stealing the breath from him as he wept, helplessly, for all he had lost. Gods, it hurt. It hurt so much, he thought he might die any moment. But he kept living, his heart kept beating though half of it was gone, and for one, terrible moment, Harry wished it would stop.

But no. He couldn’t give up. He couldn’t give in to the darkness inside him. He still had a war to fight.

When it was over, he doubted he would be in a position to care anyway. Even if Harry wasn’t a horcrux, he had little hope of surviving. What chance did a teenager have, even a well-trained teenager, of defeating an immortal dark lord? All things considered, he would probably die in battle. If he could at least take Voldemort down with him when he went… well, maybe he could die fulfilled, if not happy.

A weapon. That’s all he was. Dumbledore’s sword of light, razor-sharp and lethal, but too fragile to last beyond the first blow. It didn’t matter. Harry only needed to get in one shot, once he knew how to kill the bastard despite his horcruxes. The Order could deal with the rest of the mess once he was gone.

Harry shuddered and drew his knees up closer. Gods, he was a fool. Out here in the dark, anyone could attack him at any time, and he wouldn’t know until it was too late.

With a soft whimper, Harry forced himself to his feet and started towards the castle, but froze two steps from the tree. Someone else was there, watching him from the shadows. He tensed and drew his wand, heart hammering against his ribs, but a wave of terrible sorrow and remorse set him at ease—at least as concerned his safety.

Severus. He had followed Harry out and placed himself in a position to protect him, even while it broke his own heart in two.

[I do not deserve his forgiveness, not if I have hurt him like this. Gods have mercy on me. I never meant to break him so.]

Harry struggled to shut out Severus’ razor-sharp thoughts, each one more painful than the last, and dragged himself to the castle. Severus’ silent, invisible presence guarded him all the way back to the Entrance Hall and halfway down the second story corridor. Then, his footsteps stopped, and a soul-deep wave of regret and anguish knocked the breath from him.

[I am so sorry, Harry.]

But sorry wasn’t enough. Not this time.

Neville and Luna were waiting in the loo, their eyes full of grief. Harry gave a broken sob and buried
his head on Neville’s shoulder. Neville jumped in surprise, but hugged Harry tight before he could move away.

“Hey, it’s all right, Harry. I’m here.”

Harry whimpered and wept bitterly. “Gods help me, it hurts so much.”

Luna rubbed Harry’s back and murmured, “Yes, it is always hard to survive when the mist-creepers dig their claws into your soul.”

Harry shuddered. It sure as hell felt like something had torn his soul to bits. “H-how do I fight it? How do I survive?”

Luna stroked his hair and rubbed his back, helping him gain some purchase over his shattered emotions. “Well, there’s only one way, really. The only way out of the mists is love.”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “He can’t even trust me not to use his pain as a sexual fantasy, and you expect him to love me?”

“I don’t think she meant that.” Neville hugged him tighter. “We’re showing you love right now. And I think he is too, in his way. We saw him leave after you. I doubt the rest of the school knew, but we did. He risked his life to follow you and make sure you wouldn’t be killed in your grief. It counts for something, doesn’t it?”

“I… if he hadn’t risked my life for petty revenge first, yes.” A sharp wave of pain twisted his heart and an anguished cry escaped him.

“Oh, Harry,” Neville breathed and hugged him tighter.

A wave of soft warmth washed over Harry and eased some of his soul-crushing grief. Maybe Luna had a point about love healing depression.

“Harry, I really don’t think it’s quite that simple,” Neville said. “He’s terrified.”

“I know.” Harry stood straight and wiped his face. “Terrified of me, when all I’ve ever done….” He shook his head and wrapped his arms around his chest, trying to hold in the terrible pain. “I… I just need to—I have to get away. It’s killing me to feel this way when he….”

Neville rubbed Harry’s back. “Okay. No one but you can get into the Chamber. Want to go hang out there until you can face it again?”

Harry nodded through a broken sob. “Y-yeah. I’ve got to search it again anyway. I know there’s a secret library or study down there somewhere. Isuri and I keep trying, but we just can’t find the way in.”

Luna gave him a sad smile. “Well, it might help if we asked.”

“Ask? Ask who, Lu?”

“Slytherin, of course. It is his Chamber.”

Harry gave her a bemused look. “Er… but he’s dead, Luna. He has been for almost a thousand years.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And am I not a spiritual medium?”
He gasped and swayed into her. “Oh Merlin! Why didn’t I think of that sooner? You’ve only been talking to my family all bloody term! Gods, I’m an idiot. Come on! Maybe if we can get him to let me in, we can grab a few books to work on over the summer.” He gave a dark laugh. “I have a few surprises up my sleeve if my arsehole relatives try to take away my things this year.”

Luna nodded. “Of course you do, but let’s not presume, Harry. Let’s just see what’s down there first.”

Harry nodded and firmed his shoulders. “Right. Dobby!”

The elf appeared wearing Ravenclaw colours in honour of the Eagles’ house cup win. “Hello, Great Master Harry Potter, sir. Is you needing your broom?”

Harry nodded. “And theirs.” The elf popped away, and Harry opened the Chamber, hoping that this time, he might find something there to distract him from the pain.

“… If he hadn’t risked my life for petty revenge….”

Severus gasped, well-hidden under the cloak he couldn’t bring himself to return—he kept hoping Harry would come for it, and being under the cloak made him feel like he still had a part of Harry, somehow. But Harry was gone, and his words in the loo brought it home to Severus that he wouldn’t come back anytime soon. Shattered and struggling for control, he slumped against the wall outside Myrtle’s loo and sank to his knees.

Oh gods. Harry knew. That was why Harry wouldn’t forgive him. It had nothing to do with their past or Severus’ ill-advised fit of temper. Harry knew Severus had revealed his orientation to Draco.

Remorse and anguish cut white-hot through his heart. Merlin help him. The worst of it was that Harry was right. Severus had risked his life over a moment of pettiness and, just like with Lils, it turned out that Harry hadn’t done anything to deserve it. Harry would argue against his own mother—and didn’t that say something for how much he cared for Severus?—but he didn’t know the whole story. No one did, not even Albus.

Severus had broken her heart long before that day, and he had shattered it when he turned her away in his hour of need. He hadn’t deserved her.

A sharp cry of agony brought Severus back to the present with a jolt. Oh Merlin. Harry was sobbing again, overwhelmed with misery.

Severus rarely used his natural abilities to interfere with others’ emotions—it felt too much like trespassing on their free will—but in this case, Harry was suffering. With a quiet sigh, Severus opened a channel to Harry’s emotions and let his pain bleed off into his own heart—Harry’s torment was Severus’ fault anyway.

He sent the boy a wave of warmth and peace he didn’t feel himself and endured the anguish for both of them. He didn’t Occlude the pain away either, though he could have done. He deserved to feel it, but gods! How would he live like this, with a hole in his spirit and his best friend, his only friend, suffering for his folly?

He buried his head in his knees and prayed that somehow, someway, he could find a way back into
Harry’s life.

Harry’s broken voice continued in the silence. “Yeah, he’s terrified of me, and all I’ve ever done….”

‘All he’s ever done is try to earn my trust, my affection. All he’s ever done is love me, and I… I have only hurt him.’

Harry’s voice rang in his memory, cutting him as deeply as it had done the first time Severus heard it, a few moments before.

“He can’t even trust me not to use his pain as a sexual fantasy, and you expect him to love me?”

Love. Gods, Severus was too broken to love anyone. But trust—he could give Harry that. The boy had earned it, and more.

Severus stood and clenched his fists at his side. He had let Harry down, had broken his heart to pieces, but this time, he wouldn’t stand by and let his one friend go on without him. He would prove to Harry that he did trust him and that he regretted his drunken mistakes with everything in him.

He would make it right again… somehow. He had to.

If he failed this time, he wasn’t sure he would survive.
Breaking and Healing

Chapter Summary

**Warnings**: references to child abuse, though Harry puts them in their place quickly enough. Still lots of angst, but this chapter has a happy ending. For now. It's only a temporary reprieve. The next part begins the really hard-hitting parts of this story, when all of Sev's fears are dragged out at once, and Harry is caught in the middle of the storm. So, get ready for a rough ride. Also, with this, I am officially halfway done.

*EDIT 3/16/2019:* removed part of the scene where Harry made Severus' ability to cope with his touch seem like a requirement for reconciliation (which is definitely NOT what I wanted to portray), and fixed the scene to be, I hope, more compassionate.

Chapter 31

**Breaking and Healing**

1 July

As Harry dragged himself through the door of number four, Privet Drive, Vernon loomed in the hall, ready to take his trunk away as usual. Petunia observed from the corner, staring down her nose at her nephew. Dudley stood by, looking uncomfortable but uncertain of how to act.

“Out of the way, boy,” Vernon barked, going for Harry’s trunk.

“Not this time, Uncle,” said Harry, a bitter smile on his face. “I’ll be keeping my books and supplies this summer.”

Vernon’s face turned purple and a vein bulged on his forehead. “What did you say, boy? You think I’ll let you keep your… *freaky* stuff? Like hell!”

“Oh, I think you will. Isuri?”

Harry’s viper poked her head out of his shirt and bared her fangs. Petunia ran and climbed onto a chair in the living room, screaming like a banshee. Dudley whimpered and backed away, hands up in surrender. Harry had no intention of hurting Dudley, though. The boy had changed since fifth year. At least he had tried to. The Dementors had started his redemption, and watching his friends almost gang-rape Harry had shocked him out of his bullying ways for good. About time, too.

Vernon, however, would find himself in trouble if he didn’t stop torturing Harry.

Vernon paled and staggered into the wall, eyes popping. “W-what is that—get that out of my house!”

Harry gave a low laugh. “No, no. I don’t think so. You see, this is Isuri, one of my familiars along with dear Hedwig, of course.” His trusty owl, glaring from her cage, gave a hoot and puffed up her
feathers with pride. “Yes, that’s right, girl.” He narrowed his eyes at his uncle. “And you’re going to leave us all alone this summer, you hear? You’re not going to hit me, you’re not going to starve me, and you’re not going to lock me in. Do you know why? Isuri’s venom is lethal.”

It wasn’t, of course, especially not to a minotaur like Vernon, but Harry’s relatives didn’t need to know that.

Isuri hissed for added drama. ~This is fun, Master.~

For spite, Harry hissed back. ~Not sure I would qualify this as fun, but I am glad you enjoy it at least.~

Vernon gibbered in terror and stepped back. “F-f-freak! Talking to bloody s-snakes. It’s not normal!”

Harry raised an eyebrow and petted Isuri’s back, having learned from Severus long before that sometimes silence could threaten and intimidate as much as words.

Vernon waved a fat finger in Harry’s face and jerked it back at a snap from his snake. “I-I’ll call the p-p-police! They’ll have her taken, and then what will you do?”

Harry gave him a vicious grin and held out a hand. “Llevicorpus.”

Vernon screamed like a little girl as Harry’s wandless magic lifted the man into the air and held him there by his ankles. Harry didn’t much like the spell considering how it had been used to hurt Severus, but Vernon wore trousers, not robes, and the bastard deserved some pain as far as Harry was concerned.

“You see, Uncle,” Harry spat, “I don’t need a wand any longer to curse you.”

Petunia fainted dead away. Dudley paled and stepped back, eyes round as saucers.

Vernon struggled to reach his ankles, but hadn’t the room with his ponderous belly in the way. “Y-y-your Ministry will expel you, freak! Let me down this instant!”

Harry smirked. “The Ministry tracks magic through wand use. They have no idea I’m using magic at all, or a letter would have already arrived for me.” He made a show of looking around. “Hmm. I don’t see any post, do you?”

Vernon whimpered. “Y-you’re lying! You can’t just—”

“Well, I suppose you could test it,” Harry said off-handedly, then let his lips curve in a cruel smirk. “But then again, I wouldn’t recommend it. I do have quite a lot of violence to repay you for over the years, don’t I? Oh, and even better, the entire time I’ve been away, I’ve been training for combat—wizarding and Muggle. I don’t need magic to take you out any longer—I could simply beat your sorry arse the old-fashioned way—but it sure could be fun to test out all the new wandless curses I’ve learned this year.”

He gave his uncle a feral grin. “You know, I could gouge out your eyeballs without lifting a finger. Or rearrange your intestines. Or split you clean down the middle. You could stand to lose some weight, I suppose.”

He was bluffing—he hadn’t the power to use such curses without his wand, and such violent magic would absolutely bring the Ministry down on his heads, trace or not, but Vernon didn’t know that. The man’s lip trembled and a wet patch appeared at his crotch.
Rage and disgust surged to life in Harry’s veins. “Pathetic! You’re bloody pathetic! You’re not such a big bully now that I’m not a defenceless baby, are you?” Magic boiled on his skin and the desire to hurt, to make this bastard pay for everything he had done to him. “You would deserve it, you filthy monster!”

“H-Harry, please! Please, don’t.”

Dudley’s terrified cry reminded Harry that at least one of the Dursleys had been trying to turn over a new leaf. He took a deep breath and stepped back. A flick of his wrist and a muttered, “Finite” sent Harry’s uncle crashing to the floor in a urine-soaked heap.

“I could hurt you,” Harry said, voice wavering. “But I won’t. I’m not like you.” He flicked his wrist and shrunk his trunk, then pocketed it. “I’m going to my room with my books. You’re going to leave me alone. As long as you don’t attack me or my familiars, I won’t have a need to defend myself. Are we clear?”

Vernon gave Harry a vigorous nod, and Harry sneered as he walked past. “Go take a bath, for Merlin’s sake. You smell like piss.”

He paused by Dudley. “I… I’m sorry.” He didn’t dare say anything else, in case he brought too much attention onto his cousin and made him a target too. Dudley gave his snake a nervous look and nodded to Harry.

As soon as Harry entered his room, he Vanished all the locks on the outside of his door and affixed one of them to the inside instead. A strangled shriek from outside the door told him Petunia had been planning to lock him in and had just received a nasty shock for her efforts. Well, it served her right. She was just as bad as Vernon.

“Goodnight, Aunt Petunia. Sweet dreams.”

The woman gave a yelp and rushed into the safety of her own room. Harry allowed himself a dark chuckle before he warded his door against intrusion and dropped into bed, Isuri curled on his stomach.

~Your nest mates this time are not good people, Master. They smell of malice.~

Harry snickered. ~And urine!~

Isuri gave her snake laugh and curled on the mattress beside him. ~I will guard you tonight, Master. I do not think they will keep their word.~

~Thank you, Isuri.~

Harry kicked off his shoes, turned on his side, and tried to sleep. Many hours passed before he could banish his pain long enough to rest, but eventually sleep came.

“Ah, Harry Potter. Home again, are we? Well, you may have blocked my attempts to overtake the Ministry, but the war is not over yet! Let us see if we cannot teach those pesky Muggles a lesson this time, hmm? Get up, Harry Potter. Kill… kill… kill!”

31 July

The Dursleys had been much more cooperative since learning Harry no longer needed a wand to
curse them and wouldn’t be arrested for it. It wasn’t strictly true, not with the Ministry once again looking for any possible excuse to bring Harry in now that the aurors had stopped Riddle’s coup, but anything to keep his arsehole aunt and uncle off his back was good by him.

His daily training routine didn’t hurt either—by now, his relatives knew he hadn’t been bluffing about his newfound prowess in martial arts. Sometimes Dudley trained with him and did surprisingly well, considering. Harry had even learned a few moves from his cousin, and Dudley had learned loads from him. Harry kept his secrets about disabling a bigger opponent to himself, however, just in case Dudley’s change of heart proved temporary. Of course, Vernon lost the plot every time he caught them together, but Harry didn’t care much, honestly. Between his broken heart, shattered friendships, and looming fate, he hadn’t the energy to fight them either way.

He wouldn’t need to worry about it much longer anyway. Dumbledore or no, Voldemort would come after Harry this term, before he left Hogwarts and became more difficult to track. He had under a year to learn to defeat the bastard, and he had no more information now than he had the year before. Well, he had found the secret study in the Chamber of Secrets before he left for the summer and brought several Parseltongue books back, but between the chores he couldn’t avoid without using more magic than he dared and attempting to translate a language that didn’t always line up with English, it was slow going.

Even so, Slytherin’s journals fascinated him. The man had indeed gone against the other founders with his wish to segregate the school, but as wizards and witches had been dying left and right at the hands of Muggle crusaders and the like, Harry could understand his views. Not support them, granted, but he empathised.

At any rate, Slytherin hadn’t earned his bad reputation if his journals had any truth to them. Judging by his accounts of the early Crusade Wars and his life at Hogwarts, he had never been a bastard or a pureblood supremacist; he just feared the people who kept killing his friends and family. Harry related a bit too much for comfort.

Merlin, Severus would have loved to know about these books, about the history of his house. But Harry still wasn’t speaking to him.

It hurt to avoid him. To ignore the letters Severus sent every week, trying to heal Harry’s heart, but nothing could fix it. Severus had sold him out to the enemy. Harry couldn’t trust him any longer, as much as he missed the man.

And gods, he missed Severus. He needed him like air. Without him, a part of Harry had died, leaving him shrivelled and broken inside, bleeding from Severus’ loss. Every day, it grew more and more difficult to convince his heart to stay away.

Until after midsummer, when the letters stopped coming and Harry cracked to his core.

Severus still sent him food every week, knowing Harry would starve otherwise, but he had stopped trying to talk, and it hurt.

Harry wished he hadn’t ignored Severus so thoroughly sometimes.

He wasn’t sleeping again either. Outside of Hogwarts, the Imperius dreams had worsened despite his skills at Occlumency, and it seemed harder to fight them. Or perhaps Harry hadn’t realised how strong they had been outside Hogwarts’ wards. Either way, he had learned to tie his wrist to his bed before he slept.

At least his wandless silencing charms kept his uncle from beating down his door at three in the
morning this time. Though sometimes, he found himself half wishing the bastard would try it, just so Harry could fight something, could vent some of his hurt and restlessness on someone who deserved it.

Harry’s eighteenth birthday dawned grey and dim. He hadn’t expected anything else, not with the bloody Dementors breeding like mad, but nevertheless he would have liked at least one sunny day.

He rose bright and early to make the prats breakfast. He took nothing for himself, but Harry had no appetite to speak of lately. When Vernon taunted him with a piece of toast heaped with jam and reminded him he would be getting nothing for his birthday again, Harry simply watched him rant with a wry sort of pity. How sad to be so small-minded as to take joy in causing others pain. He supposed he could have reminded his uncle that he wasn’t without weapons, but he didn’t want to draw attention to himself.

Besides, he didn’t much care anyway. This kind of suffering was nothing new. On top of his deeper anguish, he barely felt the sting.

Having failed to evoke the response he wanted, Vernon set an ever-increasing list of chores, and when that didn’t daunt Harry, he threatened with his belt.

Harry fixed his uncle with a vicious glare and lifted his hand. “Petrificus Totalis.”

The bastard dropped, stiff as a board and bone white, piggy eyes bugging out of his skull. Harry only left the curse on for a few seconds for fear his uncle might panic himself into a coronary, but the coward still acted as though he had been threatened within an inch of his life. Harry just ignored him and made his way up to his room—his prison—wondering if Hedwig would even have anything to bring him this year.

She did. Ron hadn’t bothered to send him anything, not that Harry had expected it, but his other friends had made up for the difference. From Hermione, he received a book on warding he could hardly wait to start reading and a silvery pendant with a note—‘Titanium is the best metal for holding personal wards, according to chapter twelve!’

He slipped the pendant around his neck. Between obsessed redheads, raving fans, and vicious megalomaniacs with a vendetta against him, Merlin knew Harry needed a warded charm. Honestly, he should have made one long before. With a promise to start reading his new book as soon as possible, he moved onto the next gift.

Dean had sent him a box of chocolate frogs and a framed photograph of Harry with his three closest schoolmates, all sitting under the beech tree beside the lake and laughing. Harry didn’t remember posing for it. Maybe Colin had taken it as one of his candids. Ah, yes. The card said the photo was from Colin too.

Well, it looked like Harry wouldn’t go without his favourite sweets this year after all. He set the photo on his nightstand and, popping a wriggling frog in his mouth, he examined the rest of his hoard.

Hagrid had sent him a box of rock cakes destined for the rubbish bin and treats for Isuri and Hedwig. Brilliant. He had run out last night. He tossed one to each of his familiars and returned to his pile.

Missus Weasley had made him a cake, as usual. That would serve as his dessert for the night, perhaps, though if Severus knew he had eaten chocolate for dinner and cake for dessert, Harry would catch it. Severus wouldn’t know, though. They weren’t friends any longer.
The thought hurt like hell, and Harry quickly moved on to his next gift.

Luna had sent him a guide to Empathy and a painting of himself with what he supposed must be one of her Clarents—it looked like a blue fairy with a third eye. He thought he recalled her describing one in a similar manner once. Either way, her thoughtful and lovingly-crafted gift made him smile, and wasn’t that something? After so many weeks of despair, he had begun to think he’d forgotten how.

His smile lasted until he opened the next gift. Remus had sent him a lightweight cloak, black with red velvet lining and gold trim, and a note with the barest attempt at checking on Harry. His far out-of-date information showed just how well he had been keeping up with his pseudo-godson—for Merlin’s sake, he had asked if Harry had brought home the quidditch cup this year. Harry scowled at the Gryffindor colours and turned the cloak emerald and silver for sheer spite. Maybe he would have his picture taken in it—with the altered colours—and send it to the prat for his birthday along with a book on overcoming cowardice. Useless berk.

He finished the stack with Neville’s gifts: a book of pureblood wizarding traditions and a set of tees with wizarding logos such as “My other ride is a dragon,” and “Seekers do it better.” The boy had included a note—“Make sure you wear a couple of these before you leave and get a good memory of your relatives’ expressions for me.” He gave a weak laugh at the shirts, pulled on the one about dragons, and set the book aside to read after Hermione’s warding book. It might prove useful—if he survived the war.

At 8:32 PM, the time of his birth, Harry watched the trace glow on his wand and fade, and jumped at the sound of footsteps on the stairs immediately afterwards. A knock fell on his door, and a soft voice—not the one he had been secretly longing for—called through the wood.

“Harry?”

Professor Dumbledore. Harry drew his knees up to his chest, unable to help feeling a bit disappointed despite his resolve to steer clear of Severus.

“I have a gift for you, my boy. Well, five, as it happens.”

“Five?” Harry plastered on a fake smile and opened the door. “Merlin.”

“Indeed.” Dumbledore stood holding a box wrapped in plain silver packaging, another in bright red and green wrappings, a third with yellow suns on a purple background, one in green tartan, and one in blue and gold stripes. He handed Harry the red and green package first. “That is from Dobby.”

Harry gave a wan chuckle as he opened the paper to reveal mismatched socks: one blue and gold with broomsticks and the other red and yellow with a pattern of snitches. Underneath was a serviceable red scarf he might actually wear in public come the colder months.

“Ah, there is nothing like a good pair of socks,” said Dumbledore with a smile.

Harry snorted. “I’m assuming this purple one is from you?”

Dumbledore nodded. “I’m afraid it is more practical than fun, but I do hope it helps in your search.”

Harry opened the paper to reveal an ancient text on the properties of soul bonding.

“That should do,” he said with a nod. “Where did you find this? I’ve looked all over the owl order catalogues with no luck.”
“In a little shop in Aberdeen,” said Dumbledore with a twinkle. Harry had the distinct impression the man was lying, but let it slide.

“This one is from Minerva,” said Dumbledore, and handed Harry the tartan one.

“Might have guessed from the paper,” said Harry with a snort.

It contained a note about why they hadn’t chosen Harry for Head Boy—not that he wanted it, but the statement that they simply hadn’t wanted to overwhelm him when he had so many other responsibilities already did ease his pride a bit. Underneath was a book on wandless Transfiguration in battle.

“Oh, that could come in handy.”

“Indeed it might.” Albus handed him the blue package. “From Filius, dear boy.”

Harry nodded and opened the box to reveal a crystal snake. Isuri poked her head out of her terrarium and watched, spellbound, as the snake wove its way up Harry’s arm and wrapped itself around his bicep before becoming solid again.

“Merlin! That’s lovely, sir. It’s just an armband?”

“It has powerful protective charms, actually,” said Dumbledore with a smile. “All four of the heads added their spells, and I put in a few of my own. Filius was responsible for crafting the bracelet itself, however; and he thought you would like a snake.”

~Master,~ said Isuri, ~why is the little snake like water?~

Harry chuckled wanly. ~He is not a real snake, Isuri. Only a decoration, like the chain Hermione sent me. He has magic to keep me safe.~

~Oh. He is a pretty snake, and useful, for not being alive.~

Harry chuckled in spite of his ever-present pain and gave Dumbledore a weak smile. “Isuri approves.”

“Filius will be pleased to hear that. And this—” The old man held out the silver package, his twinkle dimming. “—Is from Severus. He would have liked to come himself, but was sure he would not be welcomed.”

Harry laid his gifts aside and took the silver box with a nod, not trusting his voice.

Dumbledore stepped inside and closed the door behind him, his eyes full of honest worry. “Child, will you not tell me what has gone wrong between you? The man is broken over your loss. I have not seen him so desolate since….”

“Mum,” Harry whispered. “I know. But he hurt me worse than he ever hurt her.”

“You have forgiven him of more, have you not? Why is it so different now?”

“The same way it was different when Ron treated me like a killer. Severus was supposed to support me. To trust me. And….~

“And he did not.” Dumbledore sighed. “Harry, there is more to the story behind his fear of trust. A great deal more than you are aware of. I will not break his confidence, but I do wish you would at least attempt to reconcile.”
“I can’t. I can’t be hurt like this again.”

Dumbledore closed his eyes in grief. “Is living in this kind of pain better, Harry?”

Harry winced. “I… I don’t know.”

Dumbledore patted his shoulder. “Why don’t you see what Severus has given you? In the meantime, I will wait in the living room and have a pleasant, and most overdue, chat with your lovely relatives.”

“I hope you turn the lot of them to toads,” Harry grumbled as the old man left the room. “Well, not Dudley. He’s actually been distracting them for me this summer. Vernon and Petunia are fair game, though.”

“I will see what I can do.” Dumbledore chuckled quietly and made his way downstairs.

With his last distraction gone, Harry found himself staring at Severus’ gift, heart racing against his ribs and his breathing laboured. Shaking hard, he sat at his desk and pulled off the paper. He opened a black leather box and found another letter atop it.

**Dear Harry,**

*By now, I have given up the hope that you will respond, but I cannot stop trying. I suppose, given how badly I have failed you, I deserve it. I do. I know I do. But losing you hurts, Harry. More than I ever imagined it could.*

*I know you are aware I revealed your orientation to Draco. Gods, Harry, I am so sorry. I could tell you I was drunk and frightened, but I have no true excuse. I never should have broken your trust. It was foolish and petty, and I have torn myself to pieces over it these past few months. I have done what damage control I can, but I am afraid Draco is most likely aware it is a blind. He knows of your true preference, and it is my fault.*

*All I can do is apologise, Harry, and promise you I will never put you at such risk again. I wish to god I had never gone with him that night, whether I had a job to do or not. I wish I had kept my confidence and yours. I wish I had never mistrusted you in the first place.*

*That is the core of the problem, isn’t it? I have not been able to trust you as you have trusted me, and I—”*

Drops of splattered ink blurred the words. Dear gods, Severus had wept as he wrote this. And sent it anyway, tears and all. Harry’s vision blurred and he held the letter away from his face, lest he ruin it further.
Forgive me. I cannot seem to stop crying. Everything is dark to me, and I am in so much pain all the time. I do not understand why it hurts so much, but it does. Merlin help me, losing you has torn the soul from me. Perhaps because you have fought for me harder than anyone, knowing you have given up on me, and that it is all my fault, is devastating. Gods, I can’t stop.

Please, Harry. I do not know how to heal the breach between us. I do not know how to prove to you that I do trust you, and you are important to me, and I need you. I have never had anyone to teach me how.

But I hope, perhaps, if I give you something important of mine, something that holds history and value to me, you will see that I am trying, desperately, to make amends.

My mother—a pureblood—was disinherit before her death for marrying a Muggle. I have almost nothing left from her line save the watch she gave me on my eighteenth birthday, a few months prior to her death. It is traditional to give watches when a wizard comes of age, and she had saved this for me since the moment of my birth. It was my grandfather’s, and then hers, then mine, and now it is yours. I trust you will take care of it. I know you will.

I hope it goes some way to healing our friendship, or at least to earning some small measure of your forgiveness. Though I know I do not deserve it, I cannot help but hope. I miss you. Miss you terribly. Please forgive me, Harry. I am broken without you.

Yours (whether you forgive me or not),

Severus

Harry laid the letter aside with a choked sob and buried his head in his hands. Oh gods. Severus’ heartfelt pleas had torn Harry down the middle and left him bleeding.

Fuck. Maybe Dumbledore was right. Maybe this pain just wasn’t worth it.

And gods, he missed Severus so much. Clearly, Severus missed him too, so staying away was tearing them both to pieces. Harry didn’t know if he could endure it any longer, not if Severus was so contrite, he had poured the deepest parts of his heart out to Harry and given him one of his last memories of his mother.

Curiosity overcame his grief, and Harry lifted his head, sniffing and drenched in tears. With shaking hands, he lifted Severus’ ancient silver pocket watch from its velvet lining. A gold chain design circled an engraved ‘P’ along the front—Prince. Harry could pretend it marked his own last name, thankfully.

He flipped it open to find it had a wizarding hand for himself with places important to him marked around the edge, much like the Weasleys’ family clock. Home, school, travelling, training, and so on. A small slip of parchment dropped from the cover as he investigated the hand.

“Press your fingertip to the dial and think of a person to add their hand to the face. The process is the same to remove them.”

He didn’t have to try to think of Severus. Love spilled from every pore as Harry touched his fingertip
to the dial. Severus’ face appeared on a black hand and flipped to “in trouble.”

Harry’s heart caught in his throat. Oh gods, what kind of trouble? He supposed it wasn’t lethal—Severus wasn’t in “mortal peril” at least—but Harry feared for him anyway.

He shut the watch with a click and tucked it carefully in his pocket, warding it against loss and damage. With that taken care of, he rushed about the room, packing his birthday gifts and everything else that had any meaning to him—which wasn’t much—and stuffing it into his trunk, padded anything breakable with grubby tees and tatty denims.

Gods, he hoped Severus was all right. Maybe they had fallen out, but Harry still loved him. He couldn’t bear to think of the man hurt, suffering, and… alone, without a soul to help him through his pain.

No. He wouldn’t leave Severus alone any longer. The separation hurt them both too damn much, and Severus had done everything in his power to make amends. He regretted his mistakes terribly, not like Ron or even Hermione, before her failures and Harry’s successes forced her to leave her jealousy behind. Harry’s loss had absolutely shattered Severus, and Harry couldn’t bear to leave him in pain one more moment.

Stomach twisting in knots, Harry shrunk his trunk, shoved it in his pocket, and dashed like mad into the living room. “Headmaster, hurry! My friend gave me his pocket watch, and his hand is on ‘in trouble.’”

Dumbledore’s face fell. “Ah. I believe it is not as bad as you fear.”

Harry snarled, “I don’t want to wait around and find out the hard way!”

Dumbledore winced. “Quite right.” He stood and gave the Dursleys a sharp look. “Be glad I am more merciful than you. Good evening, and may you never trouble Harry again.”

Dudley gave Harry a hesitant smile. “Harry, um… I’ll miss you. Thanks for training with me, and good luck, mate.”

Harry shook the man’s hand. “Thank you for helping me.”

“Yeah, should have done a lot sooner. I… I really am sorry, for everything.”

“It’s all right, but I have to go. Now. Severus is—” Tears blurred his vision. “He’s… my best friend, and he’s suffering. I have to go to him.”

Dudley nodded. “I hope he’s okay. Keep in touch?”

Vernon opened his mouth, no doubt to berate Harry, but gave an almighty belch instead. Slugs dribbled out of his mouth and down his front, and he and Petunia both screamed in horror.

“I did warn you,” Dumbledore said with a blinding twinkle.

“The slug-vomiting curse, sir?” Harry frowned. “It’s not permanent, is it?”

“Oh, it is indeed. However, it only takes affect when they attempt to speak cruelty and lies. I confess, I had hoped it would mould them into better people, eventually.”

At another wave of slugs, Harry shook his head. “Somehow, I doubt it.” He rubbed the back of his neck and gave Dudley a tentative smile. “I—I’ll talk to you, if you really want me to, after….” He
nodded in the direction of the boy’s parents.

To his surprise, Dudley’s expression hardened. “They have worse coming. For what they did to both of us.”

Harry gaped. “To both of us?”

“Yeah.” Dudley lowered his head. “They made me into a monster. A vicious, spoiled prat. We might have grown up as brothers, had they just treated you with decency and taught me to do the same. They took that away from me—from us—and I’ll never forgive them for it.”

Tears wobbled on Harry’s lashes and his heart warmed. “W-we might still be brothers, if you’re interested. I’ve not so much family left I can afford to turn the decent ones away.”


Harry hugged the man and stepped back, wiping his eyes. “T-thanks. But I really have to—I’m scared for him.”

“Go on. Good luck, Harry.”

“You too.”

Dumbledore patted Harry’s shoulder. “Come.” He led Harry to the cupboard under the stairs. “Your trunk is in here, is it not?”

“No, actually. I have it in my pocket, and it’s already ready to go.”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “They allowed you to keep your trunk this year?”

Harry gave him a grim smile. “They did when they learned I could do wandless magic and have a pit viper for a familiar.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Well done. Then let us hurry to Hogwarts after your friend.”

“Not Grimmauld Place?”

“With so many secret keepers, I fear its safety has been compromised. No, you will be much safer at Hogwarts this year. As well, there is one person in residence at the castle who is quite broken without you.”

Harry winced. “Y-yeah. And speaking of, come on!”

“Quite right. Take my hand.”

Harry obeyed and, with an uncomfortable squeezing sensation, they landed at the gates. Harry did not wait for the old man, but rather took off at a run towards the castle, casting an obscuring charm as he went.

He reckoned Severus would be in his quarters at this time of night, but just in case, asked Isuri for help once he made it to the Entrance Hall. He might have used the map, but it was in his trunk and he hadn’t time to dig it out and unshrink it.

~Can you help me track Severus, Isuri?~

She directed Harry to the left, down the path to the dungeons, and Harry bolted down the hall as fast
as his legs would go.

Severus sat sprawled over his desk, thoroughly intoxicated and struggling not to weep. He had done all he could do to repair the breach with Harry, having finally come clean about Malfoy and giving him his most precious possession, but he doubted it would be enough. Harry had ignored his letters all summer, and each time cut deeper until Severus hadn’t been able to bear the pain any longer.

He didn’t expect this one to garner any positive result either. It was his own fault, but losing Harry hurt too much to endure. So much, Severus had begun to question his own feelings. How could Harry’s loss tear him apart more than Lily? More than even Lucius? It didn’t seem possible, but Severus couldn’t deny that he was all but incapacitated without his dearest friend.

Gods, how was he to survive this year? How was he to make it through the week? Every moment, it became more difficult to conceal his emotions, even with his skills as a natural Zopath. And if the Dark Lord caught even a hint of the real reason Severus had been so desolate… well, he doubted Harry would manage to save his life a fourth time. Or was it a fifth? He wasn’t even sure at this point. The alcohol wasn’t helping matters either.

A knock at the door—more of a pounding, actually—went through his aching skull like a sledgehammer. He groaned and forced himself to stagger to the door, expecting to find Albus on the other side.

Almost before he had the door open, he snarled, “What?”

A soft tenor, the voice he wanted most to hear in the world, murmured, “Let me in, you big oaf.”

“Harry!” Severus swayed and stepped backwards, shock and intoxication sending him toppling to his arse. He didn’t even care. Harry was here. He opened the wards with a flick of his wrist and footsteps sounded in front of him. “Harry….”

The boy—young man now—shut the door, cancelled his invisibility spell, dropped to his knees beside Severus, and opened his arms. Severus suppressed a whimper of sheer relief and threw himself into Harry’s embrace, nearly toppling them both to the floor. He buried his face in Harry’s throat, overcome and shaking all over.

Harry was here. He was home.

“H-Harry….”

“Merlin. Can I hold you, Sev?”

“Harry, Harry… oh gods, yes. Please.”

“Oh, Sev.” Gentle fingertips threaded through Severus’ hair and a strong arm wrapped around his waist, holding him snug against Harry’s warmth. “Ssh. It’s okay now. I’m here.”

Severus wept into Harry’s shoulder. Fuck, he couldn’t bear it. He had missed Harry so long, had convinced himself he would never feel the boy’s touch again. Harry was the only one who could touch him without terrifying him, and he had desperately missed feeling it, that safety and warmth Harry’s touch brought after years of bitter solitude and icy pain. He needed Harry’s affection, needed
his trust and loyalty. His… whatever emotion this was that bonded them together, dear gods, Severus needed it more than air.

“Harry, stay,” he pleaded. “Missed you so much.”

“I’m here, Sev. I’m with you. It’s over now.” Harry whimpered, his breath hitching against Severus’ hair. “Gods, I was so afraid. Are you okay?”

Severus clutched him tighter, one hand buried in Harry’s hair and the other arm wrapped around his waist.

“Better now,” he muttered into Harry’s shirt. “Don’t leave me.”

Harry leaned back and sniffed, a frown marring his tearful face. “That’s why your hand was on ‘in trouble.’ You’re drunk.”

Severus nodded and laid his head against Harry’s shoulder again. “Hurts too much. Please, don’t go. Don’t leave me.”

Harry slipped his hand to Severus’ chin and tipped the older man’s head back, his touch gentle but insistent. “Summon a sobriety potion.”

Severus nodded and obeyed, bringing a hangover potion as well for good measure. He drank both down in quick succession.

Harry moved his hands back and scooted away a little. “Better?”

Dark, heavy sorrow flooded Severus’ eyes. “I… that would depend on why you moved away from me. Are you still—is it too much? Can you not forgive me?”

“Oh, Severus. It’s not that. I just… it wasn’t right. I couldn’t take advantage of you when you were drunk, and I didn’t think you’d want to hold me when you’re sober.”

Severus caught Harry into his arms and held him tight against his chest, tight enough to seal the bleeding wound in his soul. “I need you. Please….”

Harry’s breath caught. “Sev? Do you want me to hold you too?”

Severus trembled, afraid of such intimacy now that the alcohol no longer diminished his inhibitions, but in spite of his fear, he wanted that touch. He missed Harry so much, it hurt. His warm smiles, gentle trust, his conscientiousness with Severus’ phobias and his willingness to help him overcome them. Severus found, despite the ice in his belly, the desperate need in his soul for proof of Harry’s forgiveness, for strong arms to hold him against the storm and ward out the pain inside—that ache for companionship far overshadowed his fears.

And this entire catastrophe had started because Severus hadn’t trusted Harry when he should have done. Fuck all if he would ever make that mistake again.

He needed Harry, more than he had the power to express, and for Harry’s sake—and his own—he wanted to try. He wanted to be held, to be safe in Harry’s arms, if only for a moment.

“I trust you, Harry. I only regret that it took me so long to realise it.” Closing his eyes, he tentatively laid the young man’s palm against his cheek. “Touch me, if you wish.”
Severus, you’re sure? It’s okay—you don’t need to hurt yourself to keep me.”

“I am sure.” Severus leaned into Harry’s palm, taking a shaky breath both from lingering fear and the soft feelings Harry’s kindness evoked despite it. “Touch me if you wish to. You have proven your worth to me over and over. It is time I stopped doubting it.”

“Severus….” Carefully, Harry moved his other hand to Severus’ cheek, hovering without touching. “May I hold you like this, Severus?”

Severus closed his eyes and took a leap he had never dreamed he would be capable of. The thought left him quaking inside, but he found he needed to feel it too. He wanted to be touched, by this man at least, and to know it was safe.

“You….” He took a deep breath and gathered his courage. “You do not need to ask for permission any longer, Harry. Simply touch me. I… I trust you implicitly.”

“Oh, Severus.” Tears streaked Harry’s face even as he smiled, and gentle, calloused fingertips traced Severus’ cheek and jaw. “You’re sure you don’t need me to ask any longer? It’s okay if you do.”

“No. You have earned my trust, little one. Touch me as you wish. I trust you to be gentle and respectful and not to press me further than I can bear.”

It was true. It had taken four months apart to understand, each moment alone darker and colder than the last, but Severus finally trusted Harry enough to let go of his safety net. If he fell, he knew Harry would always be there to catch him.

Another wave of tears slipped down Harry’s face. “Oh, Sev.” Harry cupped Severus’ face and brushed wetness from Severus’ cheeks as well. “Thank you. I swear I’ll respect you, but if you do get scared when I’m touching you, or if you simply need space, you can still ask for it, okay? You can still tell me no if you need to.”

Severus closed his eyes, more relieved by Harry’s words than he dared admit, and gave him a slow nod.


Tender caresses brushed over Severus’ cheekbones, his jawline, his temples. Warm fingers tucked his hair behind his ears and stroked the lobes, and it occurred to Severus that no one had ever touched him so carefully. Even past lovers—if one could call them such—had never been so solicitous. The thought gave him pause, but he let it go in favour of basking in the warmth of Harry’s gentle affection.

Harry murmured, “Oh, Severus. I can’t believe… is this real?”

Severus turned into Harry’s fingertips with a sigh. Gods, his touch was so soft, so tender. He couldn’t help but lean into Harry’s caress despite the lingering shadow of fear.

“Yes, Harry. You are the only person I trust to touch me like this,” he breathed against Harry’s palm. “The only one I know will not harm me for my vulnerability.”

Tears spilled over Harry’s cheeks and a soft kiss found Severus’ cheek, close to his lips. Simultaneous shocks of heat and ice rushed from Harry’s kiss down Severus’ body, straight to the core of him. He quivered and clutched at his friend.

“I’ll never hurt you, Sev,” Harry whispered against Severus’ skin. “I promise.”
“Oh, Harry.” Severus trembled at such an intimate touch. “Please. I… this is too much. I am afraid.”

Harry pulled back and ran his fingers through Severus’ hair, smoothing it. “Okay. I’m sorry. Are you all right now?”

Severus breathed a sigh of relief. “Yes. Thank you.”

“It’s okay. Honestly, we should probably be careful about rebuilding things anyway. Just… trust me, Severus. Please. It’s okay if you need time to work through your phobias still, but please keep trusting me not to hurt you.”

“I am trying to show you that I do. It is… perhaps not enough, but I am trying with all I am.”

“Yeah.” Harry gave him a tentative smile. “I… I see it.” He held Severus’ shoulders and traced his thumbs in small circles. “No more selling me out to Death Eaters if you’re angry?”

Severus cringed. “Merlin, no. And I will not think the worst of you either.” He held Harry’s face. “I am so sorry, Harry. Please, please forgive me.”

Harry closed his eyes and dropped a light kiss against Severus’ palm. “I have done. Just, don’t hurt me anymore?”

“Merlin, I’ll try, Harry. I promise you, I’ll try.”

“Okay. I believe you.”

Severus gave him a stunned look. “Still? After all I have done to hurt you?”

“Yeah. I do.” Harry stood and helped Severus to his feet. “Come on. I’ve missed talking with you.”

Severus wrapped his arm around Harry’s shoulders and led him to his sofa. “As have I.”

As soon as Severus sat down, tugging Harry down with him, Isuri slithered out of Harry’s tee shirt and into the older man’s lap. Severus chuckled and petted her back.

“Yes, yes, Isuri. I missed you too. I do hope the mice kept you and Hedwig well-fed.”

She hissed a reply, and Harry translated. “She said she enjoyed them. Between you, Neville, and Luna, we all had enough to eat.”

Severus sighed into Harry’s hair. “I am glad of it. Tell me about your summer.”

Harry gave a wry laugh. “You’re kidding, right? I spent the summer with the Dursleys. Although, it was slightly less awful now I don’t need a wand to curse them.”

“I am sorry. I tried to take you out, but because of the blood wards, Albus would not allow me to remove you.”

Harry snorted. “Blood wards indeed. Fat lot of good they did to protect me from the monsters on the inside.”

Severus nudged Harry closer. “I… are you all right?”

“Yeah, they didn’t hurt me this time around. I let them know from the start I wouldn’t tolerate any more of their rubbish. Merlin, even Dudley’s had it with them. He’s been protecting me all summer. Even so, my uncle still tried to attack me today, idiot. He tried to rub my nose in it that they weren’t
celebrating my birthday after buying a damn luxury auto for Dudley last month, but… to be honest, I was so miserable about everything else, it just didn’t matter.”

Severus ran his hand through Harry’s hair. “I… gods, Harry. I am sorry.”

Harry turned and laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “I know. It’s over now. I just said that because the prat got hacked off when I didn’t react to any of his games. So he threatened me with his belt.”

Severus stiffened. “Are you hurt?”

“No. I petrified the bastard. By the way he howled when I let him up, you’d have thought I broke his leg.”

Severus snorted, soft laughs getting the better of him. “He is lucky you did not do more.”

“I admit I considered petrifying him at the top of the staircase, but I decided in the end that I didn’t want to sink to his level.”

Severus held him tighter. “Good. You are better than that.”

“There are Death Eaters with more morals than that berk.” Harry shivered. “I almost lost control at the beginning of the summer, but he’s not worth it.” He snuggled into Severus’ side and held his hand above Severus’ heart, hovering but not touching. “May I put my hand against your chest here, Severus? Just right here. I won’t go wandering.”

Severus swallowed a bolt of nervous tension. “I did say you didn’t need to ask any longer.”

“I know, but I still think it’s best until you’re more comfortable. And I haven’t touched you here before, so I would feel better with your consent.”

Severus gave him a hesitant nod. “As you wish.”

Harry’s warm palm rested against Severus’ heart and warmed him, within and without, at the same time shards of fear prickled the base of his spine. He kept his mouth shut.

“Severus,” Harry said, his voice soft and soothing, “it’s okay if you’re scared. I’m not going to leave because you’re sometimes uncomfortable with touch. Do you want me to move?”

The offer put Severus at ease, and he relaxed into Harry’s side. “No. I trust you, but I… I am a little afraid.” He let slip a shaky sigh against Harry’s hair, fluffing his curls. “Be gentle with me, please.”

“I promise.” Harry caressed Severus’ chest with soft, barely-there strokes. “If you need me to move, let me know. Or just tell me about your summer if you feel safe.”

Severus gave a dark laugh. “I spent it running errands for both of my masters and trying to hide my grief from the Dark Lord.” He shuddered. “Before you came tonight, I was worried I would not survive the year. My pain was becoming quite obvious even with Occlumency.”

Harry shivered and kissed Severus’ shoulder, sending a bolt of shock and warmth through the man. “Then we’ll have to make sure you don’t suffer like that again.”

Severus laid his cheek atop Harry’s head. “Yes. And you as well.”

“That… sounds good to me, Severus.”

Severus held him tight and murmured, “Happy birthday, Harry.”
Harry’s smile held the edge of tears. “Best one yet.”
Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** Minor character death, sexual harassment bordering on assault.

***AN: And with this, the angst is back in full swing. It's going to be angst city for a while now, just a heads up. Also, apologies in advance. I hated to kill this character off, but the plot demanded it of me.***

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**Chapter 32**

**Too Soon**

29 September

Four weeks into his seventh year at Hogwarts, things were going well for Harry. Well, better than last term at least. Harry had reclaimed his high performance in his classes now that his grief had abated and his apprenticeship was going well. Malfoy hadn’t bothered Harry again, nor had he spread rumours of Harry’s orientation. And Harry and Severus were closer than ever for all they had overcome together. Harry loved him more every day.

Besides Ron’s continued rancour, his housemates’ wariness, and Seamus’ utter hatred of Harry and his familiar, the only thorn left in Harry’s side was Ginny. She had broken it off with Michael Corner prior to the summer hols, and a Slytherin fifth year Harry didn’t know had become her next victim a couple weeks into the current term. As other blokes had grown wise to her tactics and her efforts to incite Harry to jealousy had only served to disgust him, she had once again attached herself to Harry’s shadow like a limpet, always trying to touch him, always flirting.

His entire house save Ron did their best to keep her out of his hair, but sometimes she still snuck up on him. Not even several warnings from her professors and a string of detentions had diverted her attention. Her obsession had grown so obnoxious that Harry had even caught Malfoy scowling at the girl’s antics several times in the past two weeks.

Merlin help him, she was driving him mad.

Harry sighed and checked the clock. Thirty minutes to curfew. Perfect time to slip away. He picked up Isuri and went to put her on his shoulders, but the snake stopped him.

~Master, are you going to see your chosen?~

She meant his chosen mate. The phrase always made him blush.

~Y-yes. I had planned to. Why? Would you rather stay behind?~

Isuri hesitated. ~I do not want to stay alone in the room with the short rude male. He reeks of hatred when he looks at me.~
Harry petted her back. ~I think you are wise to stay away from him. Do you want to go hunt then?~

~Yes. I will wait to come back after the other nest mates are sleeping.~

~Good idea.~ He lifted her up and gave her head a peck. ~Be careful, and good luck on your hunt.~

~On yours as well, Master.~ she said with a sly tone, and Harry flushed to his ears. That damn snake was just too perceptive sometimes.

He cast his usual Notice-Me-Not glamour over Isuri. It wouldn’t work against his dormmates, who all knew her too well to be fooled, but it would do to keep her hidden from the general population of Hogwarts. He hoped it was enough to keep her safe, and waved as he left the dorm.

The common room was busy. Most of the other Gryffindors had come in for the night by then, though no one was in bed yet—at least none of the older students. Harry nodded to those few he cared about and made his way towards the portrait hole.

Hermione caught him at the door. “On your way to the Room?” She knew Harry used it as a cover to visit Severus, but of course they couldn’t say that out loud.

Harry nodded. “Need to get some training in.” He felt his snake crawl over his feet and hissed, ~Isuri, wait.~

~Yes, Master.~

He laid a hand on his friend’s arm. “Hermione, listen. Do you mind if Isuri stays with you tonight if she’s back before I am? Seamus is scaring me lately, and I don’t think she’s safe in the dorm without me.”

Hermione gave him a wry smile. “Well, the other girls mightn’t be too thrilled about that, but of course I’ll watch over her for you.”

Harry smiled back. “Thanks. Isuri, did you hear that, girl?”

~Yes, master. If you are gone when I return, I will go to your fuzzy friend’s bed instead.~

~Good girl. Go on and catch a nice fat rat for me.~

~I will save the fattest one for your chosen.~

Harry laughed and petted her head. ~Severus will be so honoured.~

Isuri’s hissing laugh followed her out of the dorm. Harry went to follow, but Hermione stopped him before he could leave.

“Harry,” she whispered, “be on guard. Ginny isn’t in the dorm yet, which means she’s probably out on the prowl. And when I saw her last, she was researching charms to counter a physical shield.”

Harry shuddered. “Merlin. Well, thank the gods, I don’t think she can counter my power level even if she does find a charm. Still, thanks for the warning. I’ll see you tomorrow, then?”

“Oh course.”

After a quick goodbye, Harry made his way out of the common room, making a mental note to add more protection wards to the pendant Hermione had gotten him for his birthday soon. Namely, protections against overeager fans and obsessed chits who refused to take no for an answer.
As soon as he exited the dorm, he detoured towards the Room of Requirement. He would have liked to go straight to the dungeons, but he had to cover his tracks first. To that end, he left his invisibility spells down as he headed to the seventh floor. The DA members who saw him would think he had either gone to the Room or the Headmaster’s Office. As soon as he had seen enough of them to establish his alibi, he would duck into the nearest alcove, apply his stealth spells, and turn back towards the dungeons. It was a pain in the arse, but it kept Severus safe, and that made the annoyance worth his trouble.

After passing Colin on his way back to the dorm, Padma Patil on her way to Ravenclaw, and a gaggle of Slytherin fifth years heading back from the Astronomy Tower, Harry reckoned enough people had seen him to make his escape. He headed for the next alcove, but just before he reached it, an unknown hand latched onto his and set his hair on end. He whipped around, ready to curse if necessary, and growled at the sight of a smirking redhead girl.

Harry ripped his hand away, tugging so hard, she toppled into his chest.

The girl grinned and grabbed his waist. “Told you, you can’t resist me!”

He pushed her back hard enough to slam her against the wall.

“Touch me again without consent, and I start hexing.” His eyes narrowed to slits. “And I don’t need a wand to do it anymore either, you psychotic bint.”

Ginny pouted. “Harry, stop fighting it! I just want to—”

A sharp male voice called, “Oi! Weaselette!”

Malfoy? What in Merlin’s name?

Harry cast a physical shield, released Ginny, and turned to find a scowling Malfoy just behind him, his grey eyes fiery with outrage and his lip curled in a sneer.

“Go away, Malfoy,” Ginny snapped. “Can’t you see you’re not wanted here?”

Malfoy scoffed. “Look in a bloody mirror, you clueless bitch! How many times does the man have to ward you off and threaten you before it sinks in? Let me spell it out for you, nice and slow so you can understand: Potter—doesn’t—want—you! Go force your vile attentions on someone else!”

Harry stared, gobsmacked. Had he gone mad, or had Malfoy just defended him?

Ginny stuck out her lip. “Come on, Harry. Let’s get out of here.”

Harry came to his senses with a jolt. “Actually,” he snarled, “I think I’d rather stay right here, thanks. Without you. Sod off, Ginny, before I force you to leave.”

She sniffed and turned on her heel. “Y—you’ll see, Harry. You’ll love me one day.”

“I’d sooner kiss Voldemort! With tongue!”

Ginny scowled and stalked away.

“Dear gods, Potter,” Malfoy said with a grimace. “Did you really need to put that image in my head?”

Harry snorted in spite of himself. “Well, if it gets the job done.” He turned and fixed Malfoy with a piercing look. “What the hell was that all about?”
Malfoy shrugged and turned away. “Don’t read too much into it, scarhead. It just so happens she’s more sickening than you.”

“Well, thank you anyway.”

“Whatever.” Malfoy gave him a two-fingered salute and sauntered off.

With a wry shake of his head, Harry made his way to the closest empty, unobserved alcove, placed his stealth spells, and dashed away like a bat out of hell. Gods, this obsession of Ginny’s was really getting out of hand if she’d even disgusted Malfoy to the point he felt the need to intervene on Harry’s behalf.

What a mad world he had fallen into as of late.

Well, at least Severus’ progress in accepting Harry’s touch and affection made him feel better. The man was still afraid, but every time Harry touched him, always being careful to show the man he was safe, Severus slowly relaxed and began trusting him more. He had slowly grown accustomed to Harry’s affection, and had even altered his wards to let him in his quarters without the need to knock. The display of trust had washed away the last of Harry’s doubts.

It was time to let Severus know how much his efforts meant to Harry. It was time for Harry to show Severus he was loved. And with Isuri out hunting, it was a good night for it, just in case Severus wanted more. Harry was sure he’d be willing to at least try, fears or no. They obviously loved each other. And, now that he was eighteen, Harry couldn’t wait any longer anyway.

The thought of the Horcrux in his scar—if one existed—gave him pause. Was it wrong to love him, when he might have to die? But he remembered Luna’s words from before—“Love might save your soul if you let it.” He didn’t understand entirely, but he remembered too well what ignoring Luna had cost him before, and knew he couldn’t doubt in his choice. He had to have faith that Severus’ love would pull him through, somehow, and take the risk.

It would all be worth it in the end. He was sure of it.

Harry let himself in Severus’ wards and made his way to the kitchen, where he heard pans and water running. Severus was making a pot of tea, apparently.

“Need a nightcap?”

Severus jumped and glared at Harry. “You are getting altogether too good at sneaking about. How long have you been there?”

“Not long.” Harry laid his map on the table and hugged Severus. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, the meeting was long and boring but he did not torture me this time.”

Harry blinked and leaned back. “We’re talking about the staff meeting and not a Death Eater rally, right?”

Severus chuckled softly. “Yes, and if you ever sit through one of those meetings, you will understand why I refer to it as torture.”

Harry snickered. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“So you should.” Severus stepped back and rubbed Harry’s hair. “I am not complaining, but why did you come so late tonight, Harry? Did something happen?”
“I just wanted to see you.” Harry stared at his feet and tried not to blush.

“Hmm.” Severus gently tipped Harry’s chin up. “You are bright red for someone with no ulterior motive.”

Harry gave him a lopsided smile. “No use trying to surprise a spy, I guess.”

“You certainly did when you showed up out of the blue like a bloody ghost.”

“Hah!” Harry wrapped his arms around his waist. “Well, I guess something strange did happen. I’m a bit shaken up, honestly.”

An outraged scowl crossed Severus’ features. “Weasley again?”

Harry grimaced. “Yeah.”

“Gods, what is it going to take?”

Harry nodded grimly. “Malfoy just asked her the same thing.”

Severus choked. “Draco? He… what happened, exactly?”

Harry repeated the incident to Severus. The man was near apoplectic at the end of it.

“That is assault, Harry. She is going much too far. We must intervene.”

Harry nodded with a sigh. “I was trying to avoid it for Molly and Arthur’s sake, but she really is starting to scare me.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulders, soothing him. “I will report the incident to Albus in the morning and ensure he takes action this time. I won’t have you afraid to walk the halls.”

“Well, I’d have to be anyway because of Death Eaters—” Harry paused. Malfoy hadn’t been hurt at Harry’s use of Voldemort’s name. Was it possible he wasn’t marked yet?

Maybe Malfoy still had hope to change. Though Harry had no idea how he was supposed to get through to him when the prat’s good will only stretched just far enough to drive Harry’s would-be assailant away.

Well, maybe Blaise could help—he had managed to lead a few of the Slytherins away from the dark, after all. Harry would mention it to him tomorrow.

“Harry? Are you all right?”

Harry shook himself and gave Severus a reassuring smile. “Just thinking.”

He hesitantly pressed his hand to Severus’ face, watching his reactions. The man tensed at first, then slowly eased into his touch, his long lashes fluttering closed. ‘Beautiful eyes. Gods.’

“Severus, you’re… happy, right?”

Severus opened his eyes once more and gave Harry a soft smile. The sight made Harry’s heart thump. Gods, he had never seen the man so open, so warm. Severus was lovely when he smiled—at least, Harry thought so. If he hadn’t already loved the man with all of his being, he would have fallen for him then.
Severus murmured, voice rich with contentment. “I am assuming you are referring to our friendship? Yes, I am.”

Harry’s heart pounded and his throat tightened. “A-and you want to stay with me?”

Severus frowned. “Harry? Where is this going?”

“I just… I want you to… I mean—oh bollocks.”

Unable to voice what he felt, Harry leaned up on his toes and touched Severus’ lips with his own. Severus stilled, his breath rushing hard and fast against Harry’s mouth, his hand tight on the younger man’s waist.

“Sev,” Harry whispered. “Stay.” He kissed the man once more, but Severus pulled back.

“Harry, please. We cannot.”

Harry’s world crashed to a halt. Oh gods, no. Severus didn’t want him. He’d misjudged, and now everything was ruined. He couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think for the agony in his chest. Damn it. He should have waited. He should have—but he had been so sure!

Crushed and horrified, Harry turned to flee, but Severus caught him into his arms.

“No.” Severus held him tight. “No, don’t run, Harry. You do not understand.”

“W-what’s to understand? I just… just made a fool of mys-self and—”

“Harry, it is illegal.”

Harry slumped into his arms. “I thought it wasn’t the same for gays in the wizarding world. So I’ll never be able to…?”

“That is not what I mean.” Severus turned him around and held Harry’s face. “You are a student, Harry.”

“I’m eighteen!”

“But still legally under my authority as long as you are a student here. I cannot. I am already risking Azkaban by spying. This will… I will… they will break me, Harry.” Severus closed his eyes. “And I… I am not sure I would ever be able to… give you what you are asking for even if it was legal.”

“Then don’t give me false hope,” Harry choked out. “Don’t tell me I just have to wait and then say that. Just….” He struggled half-heartedly against Severus’ arms. “P-please, let me go.”

“Harry, Merlin, I am sorry. Please, please don’t go.” Severus whispered against his hair, “Don’t leave me.”

The terror and grief in Severus’ voice shattered Harry’s resistance. He slumped into Severus’ arms, tears bleeding down his face and his heart broken, but unable to leave the man he loved in pain.

“S-Sev… hurts so much.”

“Oh gods, Harry. Forgive me, little one. Please forgive me.”

With a soft whimper of pain, Harry buried his face into Severus’ shoulder and wept. “Not your fault, Sev. I was stupid. Shouldn’t have—I’m such a stupid little fool.”
Fuck, this hurt, but it was his own fault. Harry was an idiot for believing Severus could love a freak like him. For believing he deserved love at all.

Luna’s perfect track record was broken. Weapons and Horcruxes were meant to die alone. Gods, he wished she had been wrong about something else—anything but this.

Severus held him, trembling from head to toe, tears of his own dropping into Harry’s curls. “I am sorry, Harry. So sorry.”

Harry dragged himself back to the dorm well after curfew, tears dripping down his cheeks. Severus had held him for hours, trying to heal his broken heart, but it just wasn’t enough. Harry loved him. Adored him. And Severus couldn’t return it.

Thinking vaguely of waking Neville and Dean for help, Harry rubbed his eyes and trudged into the dorm, but the second he stepped inside, the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Even through his runny, swollen nose, the smell of blood overwhelmed him.

“Oh gods!”

Terrified someone had murdered his roommates, Harry lit his wand and searched for the source of the odour. Ron was still breathing and in one piece. Seamus wasn’t about. Dean’s soft snores assured Harry of his friend’s safety, and Neville snorted and sat up when Harry shined the light over him.

“H-Harry? What’s wrong?”

Harry shuddered. “Can’t you smell it?”

Neville sniffed and hesitated. “W-what is that?”

“Blood. Get up. The others are okay but something isn’t right here.”

“Okay, but… what’s wrong, mate? You look awful.”

Harry shuddered. “Definitely not the time.” He cast a quick healing spell on his face and held his wand up high. “Everyone is okay, but… oh.” The light reflected on something dark and shiny on his own bed. “Oh no.” He darted to the bed and sank to his knees, grief hitting him like a freight train to the gut.

Someone had stabbed Isuri to Harry’s bed through her neck. She was gone.

“Oh gods, Isuri!” Neville touched the snake’s body and drew his hand away with a grimace. “Oh, Harry. I’m so sorry.”

Harry choked out, “Who did this? Do you know?”

Neville’s eyes flickered to Seamus. “I… I never imagined he’d go so far… but—”

“But Seamus has hated me since fifth year, and Isuri by extension.”

Neville rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “Gods, I’m sorry, Harry. I didn’t realise you didn’t have her with you or I’d have kept her with me.”
“I—it’s not your fault. I told her to go to Hermione if I wasn’t back yet. Seamus must have been lying in wait for her, poor girl.” Harry traced shaking fingertips down her cold body. “Gods, I should have stayed.”

“It’s not your fault either, Harry. Don’t blame yourself.”

But Harry wasn’t listening. “I should have been here to protect her. I should have… oh, Isuri. I’m so sorry, girl.”

Neville hugged Harry’s shoulders and eased him away from the bed. “Come on, mate. I’ve got you.”

Harry sniffled and buried his face into Neville’s shoulder, taking the comfort his friend offered and struggling to hold it together. “She wasn’t just a pet.”

“I know, Harry. I’m sorry.”

“S’my fault. Should’ve been here sooner.” With a sob, Harry sat up and turned back to the bed. “I’m so sorry I failed you, girl.” Tears streaked his face as he Vanished the nail and levitated his familiar’s body into a conjured box. “I… I’m going to take her out to the forest. She always liked it there.”

Neville stood and helped Harry to his feet. “Come on. Let’s get your friend and take care of her.”

Harry shook his head. “I’ve already bothered him enough for one night.”

“Harry, don’t you think he’d want to be here for you now?”

“Actually, I reckon he’s glad to be rid of me.”

“Merlin, after what you told me happened this summer, you know that’s not true.”

“But you don’t know what happened tonight, Nev.”

Neville sighed and nodded. “Okay. Let’s just get out of here before the others wake up. Unless you want to get Dean?”

Harry hesitated. “Considering he’s still mourning for Ginny, I don’t think it’s fair to put this on him too. I… just let him sleep.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah.” Harry sniffled and cradled Isuri’s box close. “I… I knew I should have moved to the Chamber. I knew it.”

“Come on, Harry.” Neville guided him out of the dorm, even though Harry’s feet felt like lead. “It’s not your fault.”

“Yes, it is. I should have protected her better.”

They staggered through the common room, Neville half-dragging Harry, when a red-haired girl—the last one Harry wanted to deal with at the moment—appeared at the foot of the girls’ dorm stairs.

“Harry? Neville? What’s the matter?”

“Never you mind, Ginny,” Neville said. “Harry’s had a rough night. And we’re out to… to bury his familiar.”

Harry groaned. “No! No, I can’t deal with that on top of everything else.”

She glared, tears on her lashes. “Why, Harry? Why won’t you let me near you?”

“Because I’m not interested, Ginny! How many times do I have to say it? The answer is no.”

His heart broke all over again, remembering the rejection he had suffered that evening.

“Please, please. I can’t deal with this right now. Please just go.”

Ginny sniffled and turned on her heel, racing back up the stairs to her dorm.

Harry sighed and stared after her, his heart hollow and bleeding. “Ron’s going to be hacked off at me again in the morning, isn’t he? It’s the second time tonight I’ve had to send her packing.”

Neville nodded. “Mate, I reckon it’s time you set them both straight about your… er… lack of straightness.”

“Not today, Nev. Just… not today.”

Neville looked to the dead snake in Harry’s arms and nodded. “Yeah. Maybe it can wait a bit. But I do think we should get your friend, Harry. We… might need his help. Being as we’re going to the forest and all.”

Harry whimpered and cast a silencing field. “Nev, I kissed him tonight. And he turned me down.”

Neville grimaced. “Mate, he’d have to. He’s a professor.”

“I didn’t know that was the rule! I thought I just had to be eighteen. So I kissed him… and I… I just… I’ve ruined it.”

“He threw you out?”

“No. He… he held me the whole time I was there and tried to help, but it’s just… it hurts anyway.”

“Oh gods, Harry. I’m so sorry.”

“I k-know.”

Neville ran a soothing hand up and down Harry’s back. “Mate, if he didn’t turn you out, I really think we ought to get him, if you can bear it. He loved Isuri too. And he might be able to hold you together better than I can.”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “Sometimes, Nev, I wish you were gay.”

Neville chuckled and ruffled his hair. “Pretty sure Luna would have something to say about that.”

“Most likely.” Harry sighed and gathered his courage. “C’come on then, mate. Maybe we should get Severus. He… he would at least… be able to hold me.”

“If he’s done that much, Harry, even after you kissed him, I reckon he feels more than he’s ready to admit. If that’s any consolation.”

“Don’t give me hope. It’s useless.”
Severus grimaced as a quiet knock sounded against his door. Harry had come back, but why did he not just come through the wards? Merlin, Severus wasn’t looking forward to this. If he could choose anyone for a partner, it would be Harry, but he... he just couldn’t. And it wasn’t only because of Azkaban.

Still, Harry hadn’t pushed him. Perhaps he just needed further care. Severus didn’t mind taking care of him, especially since he knew the boy was hurting, and badly so. It wasn’t as if he was going to sleep tonight anyway, not with a Harry-sized hole in his chest.

Severus tugged on a dressing gown and dragged himself to the door. Harry was standing on his stoop, his face ragged with grief, but he hadn’t expected Longbottom too. Merlin, he hoped the boy wasn’t about to attack him for turning Harry down. He couldn’t accept the boy legally even if he was ready for a relationship. But no, Longbottom’s face held as much grief and horror as Harry’s did.

Severus opened his mouth to greet them, but froze as the scent of blood filled his nostrils. Oh gods. What had happened?

A shiver of dread spread down his spine. “Merlin, get in before someone sees you there.”

The boys dragged themselves into the room, Harry clutching a box close to his chest.

Harry sniffled and dropped his head. “Oh damn. Sev, I... I should have hidden us. I’m s-sorry.”

“Ssh. No one is about. Come. Are you safe?”

Harry winced. “W-we are, but... oh gods. Severus, I can’t bear it.”

Longbottom took the box from Harry and let the other boy fall, sobbing, into Severus’ arms.

“Oh, Harry.” Severus gave Longbottom a nervous glance, not comfortable showing his softer side with an audience, but Harry’s need called to him. He threaded his hand through his friend’s curls and held him tight. “What happened?”

Longbottom lowered his head and held out the box. Severus steeled himself and looked inside. At the sight of its contents, his heart slammed into his feet.


“Harry found her... s-stabbed into his bed.”

“Gods, no!”

Grief lanced through Severus’ already broken heart. Eyes stinging and throat tight, he pressed Harry’s head against his heart and held him tight. Merlin, he needed the comfort too. True, Severus hadn’t been able to speak to Harry’s snake, but she was a friend all the same. He would miss her
almost as much as Harry would do.

Harry whimpered and buried his face against Severus’ chest. “Sev… it hurts.”

“Y-yes. I am so sorry, Harry. This is too much with… what you endured earlier in the evening. Far too much. I… forgive me.”

Harry hugged Severus tight and shook his head against the man’s chest. “Not your fault.” He removed his face from Severus’ robes long enough to answer. “I was s-stupid to k-kiss you, and stupid to l-leave her alone.”

Severus winced and gave Longbottom a terrified look. The boy just shook his head.

“I’ve known for months, sir. I won’t say anything.”

Relief crashed through Severus, followed immediately with a crushing wave of grief and remorse. Dear gods, why now? Why tonight, after Severus had already broken Harry’s heart?

He held Harry close and tried to comfort him. “I am here, Harry. I know it is… not what you want, but I am here. I will hold you.”

“C-can I stay tonight?”

Severus closed his eyes, “I… given the circumstances, I-I am not sure that is a good idea, Harry. Unless… Longbottom, will you stay as well? If both of you are here, then it will not be so dangerous.”

Longbottom nodded. “Whatever you two need. I know you’re both in pain. You loved Isuri too, didn’t you, sir?”

Severus nodded and closed his eyes. “She was a friend. A good friend.”

“Severus gave her to me,” Harry choked out. “She was the first gift he ever gave me.”

Severus held Harry tight. “I am here, Harry. I will take care of you.”

Harry wrapped his arms around Severus’ waist and wept.

“Come,” Severus said after a long moment. “We will go bury her in the forest. I know a spot where the sun shines all year long. She would like it, I think.”

Harry nodded weakly and let Severus lead him away.
Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** Suicidal ideations, this time more intense than before. Minor incident of sexual assault--(forced kiss). As you might guess from the chapter title, the hits just keep coming. *Bring tissues.*

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**Chapter 33**

*Forsaken*

30 September

Harry did not go to classes the next day. He simply could not function well enough to focus. Severus wrote a note for him, passed through the headmaster, excusing him. Instead, Harry stayed in Severus’ quarters all day and alternated between mourning and trying to read. Severus stayed near as much as he could and checked on him between his own classes, as did Dobby and his friends, and somehow Harry got through until dinnertime.

He hadn’t eaten much, hadn’t been hungry, but Severus bid him eat some soup and part of a sandwich for dinner. He had wept again, because he was eating when Isuri couldn’t.

After dinner, the headmaster came to Severus’ quarters wearing a grave expression. “Ah, Harry. I thought I might find you here.”

Harry glared through his tears, not in the mood to deal with more manipulations.

The headmaster sighed. “I am sorry about Isuri, Harry. I know she was more than just a familiar to you.”

“They stop being pets when they can talk back,” Harry muttered.

“Yes, I know. Fawkes is more than a pet to me as well. I would be… quite desolate if something were to happen to him that his phoenix fire could not save him from.”

Harry just stared at the table. Dumbledore knew quite well nothing could kill a phoenix. His hollow attempt at comfort left Harry more grief-stricken than before.

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. “I have questioned your dorm mates on the situation. I am afraid Mister Longbottom was quite right. It was Mister Finnigan who killed her. It appears he has been afraid of her for quite some time and ambushed her upon her return from hunting. He stunned her before… killing her, so at least I can report that she did not suffer, though I know it is of little comfort.”

Severus fixed the man with a sharp look. “I do hope you expelled the little bugger.”
Dumbledore winced. “I did try. The governors are fighting me on the situation. They insist that, since Isuri had venom and was not technically a type of familiar the rules allowed, Mister Finnigan was justified in defending himself against her. I have made it clear that nothing about the attack was defensive—he murdered her, frankly—but they refuse to see reason. I have suspended him for a month.” His shoulders slumped. “It was the best I could do without bringing the wrath of the governors down upon us all; however, you still have the option of pressing legal charges against him with the Ministry.”

Harry snorted. “With Umbridge and Scrimgeour in charge? Umbridge would probably give Seamus a medal, and Scrimgeour is more interested in his image than justice. The fact that I told him in no uncertain terms last year that I would never be his poster boy would most likely hurt my chances too.” He lowered his head into his hands and rubbed his temples. “Even if I managed to find a fair jury when the Ministry is so biased against me at the moment, what would they do to him? I’m positive they don’t give out Azkaban time for murdering familiars, though they should.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulders and hair. “The worst they would do is issue him a fine. I am sorry, Harry. It is not justice, but in this political climate, I fear there is little we can do.” His lips turned up in a cruel smirk. “Through the legal channels, at least. I should warn you, I do fear Gryffindor now has no chance at all at winning the house cup so long as Finnigan remains a student.”

“Just leave it,” Harry said, his voice dark and dim. “It won’t bring her back, and it might make you a target should anyone on the dark side connect the dots, Sev. And nothing will make him stop hating me, regardless.”

Severus flinched, no doubt remembering when Harry had said the same thing about him. Severus sat beside him and stroked Harry’s hair, perhaps not having words but wanting to offer comfort. Harry leaned into his touch. Knowing Severus couldn’t feel more for him hurt like hell, but having his touch, his presence helped, at least a bit.

“Harry, given the circumstances,” said Dumbledore, “we have prepared a private room for you off the infirmary. It’s behind the portrait of Penelope the Peace-Seeker just off the main wing. I’m only sorry we could not do so sooner.”

Harry nodded. Honestly, he couldn’t care less. He’d stay in Severus’ quarters when he could and the Chamber when he couldn’t. He doubted he’d see much of that room.

Severus rose to his feet and patted Harry’s back. “Why don’t you gather your things, Harry, and try to get settled. I’m sure Dobby, Thomas, and Longbottom would be glad to help.”

Harry nodded and stood. With a heavy sigh, he wrapped his arms around Severus’ waist and buried his head in the man’s shoulder, breathing in his scent and feeling his warmth. Severus held him tight and whispered words of faith and encouragement in his ear.

“You are strong enough to endure this, Harry. I will help you as much as I am able.”

Harry pulled back with a broken smile. It wasn’t enough, but it was better than nothing. “Thank you, Severus, for holding me together.” He suppressed the urge to kiss the man and turned away, keeping his heart from shattering by sheer force of will.

Dumbledore’s expression held deep sorrow, but Harry did not acknowledge it. He knew the man cared, but even so, it for his sake that Harry had become nothing more than a weapon. Dumbledore’s finely-honed sword against evil, never mind that the blade cut at both ends.

With a nod to the old man, as much as he dared say just then, Harry stiffened his spine and left
Severus’ quarters. He felt as though he had left a part of him in that room, and the hole left behind might bleed him to death before he healed, but he could bear it. Even knowing Severus could never love him—it didn’t matter. He had forgotten his purpose for a time, dared to believe he could have more from life, but he knew better now.

Maybe it was his own fault for daring to love in spite of the fact that his life would end soon. The dreams had tapered off since returning to school—for a moment, he had dared to believe he was mistaken about the Horcrux, but last night… gods. They had haunted what few moments of repose Harry had found, and he knew he had been wrong. Utterly wrong to hope.

He had one purpose, one choice: to defeat Voldemort and die in the process. He only hoped Severus would heal after he was gone. To that end, he would love the man as much as Severus would allow while he had time. If he could heal that broken part of Severus’ heart before his time came, maybe the man could move on and find someone he could love, after Harry met his fate.

The idea of Severus with someone else tore Harry’s heart to shreds, but if that was what it took to make him happy, he would do it. He just had to remember his time was limited, and Severus had the chance to live and love again. It was enough to be near him for now and hope his love could carry the man through in the end.

With that grim determination in mind, Harry gathered his strength around him like a cloak, Occluded his pain from his expression, and slipped like a ghost through the halls to the tower. Severus’ stealth training had come in handy for something at least. Few people saw him, and the ones who did made no effort to stop him. Instead, their eyes skittered over him and their hands came up to their faces, covering whispers to their mates.

Harry grimaced, wondering what foul rumour had spread about him now. No doubt he would find out soon enough. Sooner than he’d like by all rights. He had enough to deal with at the moment without more rubbish to wade through.

Colin Creevey emerged from the portrait hole at the same time Harry reached it, eyes pink around the edges and anger sharp on his features. He froze at the sight of Harry.

“Oh!” He gave Harry a sad smile. “Hi, Harry. Um… I’m sorry about your snake.”

Harry’s smile must have come off as forced at best. “Thanks. Uh… are you all right?”

Colin shrugged. “Okay, I guess. Are you?”

“N-not… not really.”

Compassion filled Colin’s eyes. “Yeah. Seamus was awful to do that. It’s terrible.”

Harry nodded and edged towards the portrait hole. “He’s been upset with me since fifth year, but Isuri never hurt him.”

Colin gave him a hesitant smile. “Um, you know, if you want some help… er…” His cheeks went bright red. “Getting over things, you can always come to me.”

The hair on Harry’s neck stood on end. He couldn’t have understood that right. Could he?

“Er… I-I’ll keep that in mind.”

Colin frowned. “Harry?”
“Um, I’m kind of in a hurry.” He pushed past the boy and prayed his suspicions wouldn’t come to pass. “I’m… I’ve got to go.”

“Harry, wait! Don’t go in—”

Harry grimaced at Colin’s warning, his stomach sinking into his feet. Oh gods. It couldn’t be, could it? He tore through the portrait hole and hoped against hope the common room would be empty.

Instead, he stepped into a battlefield.

Hermione and Ron hadn’t been on good terms since last Christmas, and Ron’s infidelity hadn’t exactly helped matters. Relations between them were strained at best, but Harry had yet to see them screaming at each other from opposite sides of the common room. And that with the entire house split down the middle, half with Ron and half with Hermione.

Seamus, Lavender, and half of the lower forms stood on Ron’s side. Parvati, Dennis, and the other half of the lower forms stood by Hermione. Ginny stood in the middle, her expression torn between disbelief and fury. Neville and Dean stood by the hearth, their eyes dark with anger and worry.

As Harry exited the portrait hole, sticking to the shadows so as to avoid notice, Hermione shouted at Ron, her face contorted with rage. “You were his best friend—at least until you stuck your head up your arse last year—and now you’re going to turn your back on him after everything just because he’s gay?”

Harry’s breath rushed out in a *whoosh*. Fuck. It was true. Malfoy had let the news of Harry’s orientation *slip*. And now the entire bloody house was at war over it.

Dear gods, he couldn’t deal with this now. He couldn’t. He had reached his limit long before.

Ron fired back, “And what am I supposed to do, Hermione? He’s been leading Ginny on for two years now!”

“Leading *her* on? My God, you’re bloody delusional! Where have you *been* the last two years, you idiot? If anything, Ginny has been all but assaulting Harry and using everyone and everything to get to him!”

“Well, I like that,” Ginny cried. “I thought you were my friend!”

Hermione scoffed. “And as your friend, how many times have I told you to back off?”

Parvati echoed her. “We all have. It’s blatantly obvious that he’s tired of it. And you’re too stuck on him to care that you’re making him uncomfortable—not to mention breaking all the other boys’ hearts.”

Tears ran down Ginny’s face. “Well, what about how I feel, damn it? I love him and… and now—no! I won’t believe it! It’s just more of Malfoy’s lies.”

Dean looked up and winced at the sight of Harry standing by the portrait hole. He gave Harry a questioning look, and Harry nodded, though he wasn’t looking forward to the fallout.

“Believe it,” Dean said in a quiet, but firm voice. “Neville’s known for a year or so. I’ve known for several months. Harry *is* gay. He told me himself in June.”

“No, no, he’s just confused,” Ginny cried, as though she wanted to convince herself. “He’s been through so much hell, it’s no wonder he’s mixed up and—”
Neville shouted, “And do you really think this is the best time to be discussing this? By gods, we just buried his familiar last night!”

“And got me suspended,” Seamus growled. “Me mam’s bloody furious and it’s all that ruddy snake’s fault.”

Harry’s patience snapped. “Isuri never did a thing to hurt you, you murdering bastard.”

Seamus opened his mouth as if he would challenge Harry, but then Harry’s magic sparked to life on his skin and his vision shaded killing-curse-green with the force of his fury, and the shitehead slunk away.

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” Harry muttered under his breath and turned to face the rest of the gaping crowd. “As for the rest of you, what the hell is the matter with you? Why is every facet of my life so important to everyone else? Whether I’m gay or not is no one’s business but my own and any potential partner I might have in the future. It has no bearing on any of you. You should be ashamed of yourselves.”

A few on Ron’s side of the crowd blushed and lowered their heads. Hermione winced, but Harry’s issue wasn’t with her. Instead, he turned his fury-lit eyes on the stalker bitch.

“And you, Ginny, enough already! Get it through your thick skull. Even if I wasn’t gay—and I am—you’re bloody obsessed! I’ve told you no, apparently the entire girls’ dorm has told you no, and you still refuse to listen to reason! Why in Merlin’s name would I ever want to date someone who cares so little for my own wishes? I don’t even want to be in the same school with you, let alone the same room!”

Ginny glared and stormed across the room, tears streaking her cheeks. “Harry Potter, you’re just confused and I’m going to prove it!”

Harry put up a shield, but Ginny countered it. In his pain, his power had weakened enough to give her the edge.

She smirked. “Not this time!”

Fuck! Harry tried to scramble back and regroup, but before he could evade her or raise his shield again, the girl grabbed his face and dragged him into a kiss. He gave a strangled cry of revulsion and gasped at the feel of her tongue in his mouth. With a muffled shriek, he shoved her off as hard as he could manage and backed away.

“Ginny!” Dean’s horrified cry sent tears tracking down Harry’s face.

Neville shrieked, “Stop right there, you mad bint!” He whipped out his wand and aimed a hex at her, but Ginny had trained with the rest of the DA and avoided it with ease.

“Oi!” Ron leapt into the battle, leaving Ginny free to slip away and run after Harry again.

Spitting and crying with the violation, Harry racked his brains for a way to keep her away from him. As she wouldn’t listen to reason, he couldn’t shield himself from her any longer, and his friends couldn’t protect him all the time—especially with Ron’s interference getting in the way—that left him with no choice but to resort to stronger magical means.

Thank Merlin for that warding book and silver pendant Hermione had gotten him. Had she known he might need them to keep her away soon? Maybe Luna had suggested it, or maybe Hermione had heard Ginny waxing poetic about Harry in the girls’ dorms one too many times. A shudder spread
down his spine at the thought.

Harry jerked out his wand, forced all his power into his spell, and cried, “Excludere Ginevra Weasley, Nisi Subitis!”

Orange and gold light swirled around him in a fierce storm, halting Ginny’s progress. Harry focused his magic into his pendant and watched as it formed a solid barrier a metre around his body. The light shimmered and faded, but the magic of his warded pendant still tingled. Ginny gave a little cry and tried to grab him again, but she crashed into the barrier and was thrown back into the glaring crowd on Ron’s side of the fence.

Relief rushed over him. Thank Merlin, as long as Harry wore his pendant, she wouldn’t be able to approach him now except in cases of dire need. A shield was one thing, but she simply didn’t have the power to break his wards.

“You… you warded me out?” Tears poured down her face. “I c-can’t believe it.”

“You just fucking assaulted me,” Harry snarled. “Be glad I don’t do worse!”

She let out a whimper and turned on her heel, storming into the girls’ dorms. With her gone, the hex war tapered off, leaving both sides panting and furious.

Harry slumped in relief, barely aware of the tears on his own face. “C-can’t stand it.”

Neville was there in an instant, supporting him with a strong arm. Dean took the other side, and Harry turned into Neville’s shoulder with a little cry of grief.

“I’m s-sorry,” he gasped out.

“Nothing to apologise for,” Neville said quietly. “She attacked you. You had no choice.”


“Did you not see her just maul him?” Dean scowled. “Get it through your head, Ron, it’s Ginny who’s hurt Harry.”

“Bullshite! If he was gay he should’ve said so sooner.”

“Maybe,” said Neville, “but with the way everyone’s been treating him I don’t blame him for keeping it quiet.”

Hermione snapped, “Not to mention the fact that Voldemort could use it against him, Ron. We’ve kept it quiet for his own safety, you giant prat!”

“He’s probably in league with the old snake anyway,” Seamus shouted—when had the bastard come back? Maybe the scent of curses had drawn him like the evil beast he was. “Don’t see him defeated yet, do you?”

Parvati cried, “For gods’ sake, Harry’s eighteen, you git! What do you expect him to do? Cast a bloody disarming hex at him?”

Heat spread up Harry’s cheeks. In retrospect, he really needed to put that spell out to pasture.

Seamus grumbled, “Well, he’s done it before, hasn’t he? So why not now?”

“Oh, for the love of—will you listen to yourself?” Neville shook his head. “One minute you’re
hacked off because Harry hasn’t defeated the bastard yet and the next you’re talking like he’s already done it before and so it should be easy? Merlin! Have the lot of you been sneaking into Hagrid’s stash today?”

Harry snorted in spite of himself. “Would explain a lot.”

Neville gave him a wry grin.

Ron scowled. “Don’t you think you should tell Luna if you’re messing around with Harry?”

Hermione gave a vicious huff. “Oh, that’s rich, coming from you, Ron Juan!”

Ron shouted back, and the common room devolved into a screaming match. Neville tried to stop them, but no one was listening.

Harry gave a broken cry and tore himself away from Dean and Neville. “Stop! Just… just bloody stop. I’m not worth this.” With a choked sob, he dashed from the room and away, as fast as his feet would carry him.

“Harry, wait!” Neville called after him, but Harry couldn’t take anymore. He had to go, to get away from the pain. Gods, it had been one thing after another the past few days and he just needed peace.

His feet carried him up and up, all the way to the top of the Astronomy Tower. Thank the gods it was empty, because he couldn’t hold back his sobs another moment. Bitter tears choking him, Harry leaned over one of the parapets and let his grief bleed.

Gods, it hurt. First Severus, then Isuri, then Seamus, and now the entire bloody house had erupted into chaos over him. His former best friend had even defended the girl who had assaulted him.

Sweet Merlin, he couldn’t take this! If it had been one problem, he might have found some comfort, but with so much happening all at once, the betrayal of half his house was just too much. Their turning on him had opened a maw into his already bleeding heart, gods help him, it hurt!

He wanted the pain to stop, just for a moment, long enough to let him breathe, but Fate kept piling her rubbish onto Harry’s head, and fuck! He was one person, barely an adult, and he couldn’t handle everything.

He clenched his hands on the rough stone of the parapet, not caring if it scratched, and stared at the ground so far below. It would be so easy, to take that leap and stop the pain once and for all. So easy, and quick. A fall from this height wouldn’t leave him in suffering long. And if he really was a horcrux—‘Chosen one… Boy-Who-Lived… The one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord approaches… No one else has the ability to end him, Harry,’—then dying would make it easier to destroy the supreme bastard in the end.

He leaned forward, the promise of peace drawing him in. It would be all right. Severus could finish Riddle off.

He jerked back with a shuddering sob. ‘Severus….’

Oh gods. No, he couldn’t do this. It would utterly destroy Severus. The man had lost everyone he had ever loved. If Harry leapt to his death, Severus would break irrevocably and never heal again. He wouldn’t survive Harry’s suicide—the young man knew it without a doubt. Perhaps Severus would even follow in his footsteps, and that thought was reprehensible.

No. He couldn’t end it, not like this. No matter how much it hurt, he couldn’t bear to break Severus’
Besides, even if Harry was a Horcrux, if ended his life before he completed his mission and destroyed the rest of them, the dark would win. Everything he had fought and bled and suffered for would turn to ash, his hard work rendered worthless in an instant.

No. Harry had to keep fighting. No matter how dark his life became, he couldn’t give up. On the off chance that prophecy had any merit to it, the world would burn without him. And even if it wasn’t legitimate, his struggle against the darkness gave people hope. Some of them, anyway. If he gave up, maybe they would too, and then the war was lost. If he died before he completed his purpose, people would suffer—especially the one man he loved above all others. Fuck all if Harry would do that to him.

For now, he had to hold on. Soon enough, the war would end his pain, Horcrux or not.

He slid down the wall and buried his head in his knees, letting grief take him.

Severus had expected Longbottom and Harry back by now. He paced the floor in front of his hearth, unable to concentrate on atrocious second year essays with fear for his dearest friend clouding his heart. Where was the boy? He pressed a knuckle to his lips as he paced, and nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of an urgent knock at his door.

His stomach sank into his feet. By the gods, what had happened now?

He opened the door to find Longbottom on his stoop—alone—eyes wide in horror. “Sir, sir, you’ve got to—”

“Heard you, go inside.” He hissed. Fuck. If someone had seen… but the hallway was empty.

He dragged Longbottom into his quarters and shut the door. “What is—”

He didn’t even finish his question before a panicked Longbottom spoke over him. “Oh, gods, sir, it’s Harry! When he went to pack up, Malfoy had let slip the rumour about him being gay, and the entire house was in an uproar. Ron and Seamus had half the house against him, and Ginny bloody assaulted him, and now he’s up on the top of the Astronomy tower, and—”

Severus’ heart crashed to a halt. No! Gods no, he couldn’t lose Harry.

He Summoned the cloak and threw it on over his head. “Why did you not go to him yourself if you know where he is?”

Longbottom wiped his eyes. “Dean and I tried, but we’re warded out. Dean ran after Lu, but I don’t think she can get to him either. Harry… I don’t know if he’s even aware he’s warded the tower. I… he’s so miserable—I don’t think he’s conscious of much beyond his pain. And you were the only person I could think of who might be able to get through to him.”

Severus did not waste further time on questions. “Go to the headmaster and warn him of the situation. I will go to Harry.”

“May Merlin guide your feet, sir,” Longbottom murmured.
Severus nodded and dashed from the room. His heart bled as he raced up the ten floors to the top of the tower. Gods, was Harry truly so desolate as to consider taking his own life? So miserable his accidental magic had warded everyone who might help him away?

Tears blinded him as he ran. He couldn’t endure it, if Harry died. He needed Harry’s friendship like air—Severus would shrivel up and die without him. The thought that his affection for his friend might run deeper than he wanted to admit left him breathless with terror, but, gods help him, he would even embrace the consequences of loving Harry if it saved his life. Azkaban or no, Severus’ freedom, his fears meant nothing, nothing, if he lost Harry.

A stitch tearing his side, Severus charged through the tower trap door, expecting to meet resistance, but only felt the tingle of Harry’s wards as he passed the barrier. Harry sat against the edge of the parapet, knees drawn up to his chest, drowning in broken, anguished sobs.

“Oh, Harry! Thank Merlin!”

Harry jerked up and winced at the sound of his voice. “M’sorry, Sev’rus. Don’t wanna see me like this.”

Panting and gasping for breath, Severus climbed up and closed the door, adding his own wards. Once his shaking legs would let him move, he sat beside Harry, tucked the cloak around them both, and wrapped an arm around his desolate friend’s shoulders.

“Hush. I am here, little one.”

Harry let slip a pitiful cry and buried his face in Severus’ shoulder. “M-make it stop. It’s too much. I can’t bear this much all at once.”

Severus shuddered, terror freezing his veins. “Harry, don’t leave me. Please, hold on.”

Harry whimpered. “Not gonna jump. Thought of it, but I can’t. Gotta kill the bastard, and you need me.”

Severus threaded his hand through Harry’s hair and held him close. “I do need you, but I am also here to help you bear your burdens. Lean on me, Harry. I am strong enough to bear it.”

That thought in mind, Severus bled Harry’s pain into himself and instantly regretted it. Dear gods, he could hardly breathe for the sharp cut of anguish in his chest, the coldness in his belly. Merlin help him, Harry would break for certain under this kind of strain.

Severus Occluded the worst of Harry’s agony away and held his friend tighter. “Hold on, Harry. Please, hold on.”

Harry sobbed and clutched at Severus. “S-sorry. So sorry.”

“Ssh. You have done nothing warranting an apology.” Severus kissed his hair. “Lean on me. Weep if you need to. I am here.”

“Oh gods, Severus. I need that… but it hurts too.”

Severus winced and held Harry as close as he could bear. “I am sorry. I… if I could….”

“Don’t. Don’t give me hope. It hurts too bloody much to lose it.”

“As you wish.” Severus held Harry in silence, heartbroken for the pain he had caused him, for the
grief pouring so thick from Harry, Severus thought he might break under the weight of his suffering.

After a long while spent pouring out his misery, Harry looked up and wiped his face. “H-how did you find me, Sev?”

Severus conjured a handkerchief and washed Harry’s face, his touch soft and tender. “Longbottom. He came tearing into my quarters terrified you would take your own life.”

“Why didn’t he just come then?”

“You had the tower warded. Neither he nor Thomas could reach you.”

“I… I warded it?” Harry shivered. “I guess I didn’t want anyone but you to find me, but I didn’t mean to actually ward everyone out.”

Severus tucked Harry’s head under his chin and held him tight. “I am here.” He rubbed Harry’s shoulders and winced as the memory of Longbottom’s panicked pleas rushed over him. “Wait a moment. Harry, Longbottom said Miss Weasley assaulted you again. Are you hurt?”

Harry shuddered and curled in on himself. “No. Ginny refused to believe that I’m gay and don’t want her and… and she kissed me. Choked me half to death on her slimy tongue and caused a hex war in the common room. Even Dean went after her, but Ron stepped in and she got away. She tried to come after me again, but I threw her back, and….” He took a silver pendant out from under his robes. “I warded it against her. Ron is furious, but I just couldn’t bear her stealing that from me.”

He buried his head in Severus’ shoulder. “I know you can’t, but you’re the only one I—” He whimpered and clutched at Severus’ robe. “I should stop talking now.”

“Harry….”

Severus stroked the young man’s hair, deep grief cracking his heart. He wished he wasn’t forbidden from loving Harry. He wished he was able to love, regardless. But no. Lucius, Lily, and everyone else Severus had ever cared for in the past had made it abundantly clear, love was never meant for him.

He couldn’t allow himself to fall, even if a part of him longed for that kind of relationship with Harry, a beautiful, kind, honourable man who genuinely cared for him, maybe even loved him. Despite the little voice telling him that Harry was different and everything would be okay, the larger part of him feared the consequences of loving him—of loving anyone. The moment he fell, the moment they crossed that line… everything would fall apart. He didn’t dare risk it.

Even if Harry’s soft kisses had left him breathless and shaking with all-consuming need. Even if not returning his second kiss had been the hardest damn thing Severus had ever done. Even if, at that very moment, he still felt the gentle pressure of Harry’s lips and secretly longed for another taste. Gods, as much as he feared it, how he wanted to feel that soft, tender love Harry had in such abundance.

But he couldn’t. He would be throwing everything away if he tried. Instead, he contented himself with smoothing Harry’s wild hair and gently wiping his tears.

“I am here, little one. I will hold you as long as you need me to.”

Harry buried his head in Severus’ shoulder and wept until his tears ran dry.
Chapter 34

Broken Will

Harry sat on his makeshift bed, listening to Neville’s quiet breathing. The clock above the mantel said it was gone midnight, and he still hadn’t slept. Neville lay curled around his pillow on a bed a few paces away, and Severus’ faint snores assured Harry the older man had fallen asleep at last. Like Harry, he had lain awake for a long time, no doubt worrying over Harry’s pain.

Merlin, hadn’t a few months changed the entire world for them? This time last year, Severus had thought Harry the scum of the earth. Now Severus loved him, if not in the way Harry wanted him to. At least, Harry thought he did. Severus had never said anything like it and when Harry wasn’t falling to pieces, he wasn’t as demonstrative.

It didn’t matter. Whether Severus’ attachment to Harry could be qualified as love or not, the man cared about him. Immensely.

If only Harry could be content with that. If only every touch, each display of platonic affection didn’t draw blood.

Gods, he couldn’t bear it. He had to get away. To go somewhere and be alone, just to breathe. He longed for Severus, he missed Isuri’s comforting weight around his neck, and the fallout in the tower had left him shaken and hollow inside. Everything was just too much and he needed a moment of peace before he went mad.

With a sigh, Harry grabbed his school cloak and wand, kicked on a pair of fuzzy slippers, obscured himself, and slipped out of Severus’ quarters. He walked aimlessly, letting his feet guide him, careless and numb to the silent tears dripping down his face.

Albus couldn’t sleep. Neville’s report of the events in Gryffindor tower and Harry’s subsequent flight had stunned and appalled him. Merlin. He hadn’t known Harry was homosexual, but for it to cause such a disastrous conflict… he couldn’t comprehend why people who should have loved Harry would care.

He rubbed the hollow ache in his chest, a wound he had carried since the end of the war with Grindelwald. Albus’ dosed lemon drops eased the pain a little, but not enough to let him forget he
had secrets of his own. If half of the house had turned on Harry for nothing more than being homosexual, Albus supposed he had better keep his secrets—at least from those who couldn’t understand—lest the Light turn on him too. They had far too much at stake to squabble over the folly of his youth.

And Merlin! The news Severus had whispered to him while Harry was in the shower had terrified Albus beyond anything he had felt since Grindelwald. Harry, a boy he deeply cared for and the one person who might save them from Riddle’s brand of evil, was suicidal. Severus had found him in the Astronomy Tower, warded in and weeping against the parapet. And while Harry had pulled himself from the brink this time, there was the chance that he might not be able to in the future.

Gods, Albus had to do something. They couldn’t lose Harry. He couldn’t lose Harry. And Severus would go mad without him.

A scuffling sound ahead jerked Albus out of his thoughts. He looked up to find Harry stumbling through the corridors, head down and tears streaking his face. The edges of his form blurred, indicating the boy had hidden himself behind an invisibility charm, but Albus’ See-All Spectacles revealed him plain as day to the headmaster. How providential. Albus started to call out to him, then thought better of it.

Perhaps fate had led the boy to Albus’ side that evening. Albus finally had the Mirror back in the castle, not far from them, and Merlin, but Harry needed something to hope for, something to live for.

Yes. This was his chance to turn Harry’s misery around.

Mind made up, Albus made himself invisible and kicked his foot against the stone. Harry looked up and frowned at him, straining to see and hear.

“Professor?”

A safe answer. If it wasn’t Severus he sensed, his simple call of the man’s title and not his name would not reveal the Order’s spy. Merlin, the boy was intelligent, and they needed his intelligence, his strength. Albus had to help Harry recover, for the sake of them all.

He moved closer to the mirror, silencing his steps, and dropped an invisible pebble. Harry’s eyes narrowed and he pulled out his wand.

“Who’s there?”

Another pebble a few metres away, and Harry followed the sound, his posture alert and ready for a trap. Good. The boy still had some spirit left. Perhaps a bit of hope would turn his sorrow around.

Albus dropped another pebble a few metres closer to the Mirror, and in this manner, led Harry to the Mirror chamber. The tingle of strong wards brushed Albus’ skin as he stepped through the door, their only other exception following in his wake. Harry jumped at the feel of the wards, but passed through when they neither blocked nor harmed him. His mouth twisted in a scowl, suspicion evident in his eyes, then he turned and saw the Mirror.

“Oh.” The sound left him in a soft rush, shock and pain mingling in his tone.

He stared at the Mirror in clear apprehension, throat bobbing and eyes welling. Albus frowned. Why should he dread seeing the dearest desire of his heart? Certainly it would uplift him. At least give him something to fight for.

Worry filled Albus’ heart. Had he made a mistake by leading Harry here this evening?
“Something tells me I’m going to regret this,” the boy whispered, and stepped in front of the glass.

Instantly, he sank to his knees and laid his forehead against the image. Tears fell hard and fast from his eyes and his face contorted with grief.

Albus’ breath stilled. Oh gods. This wasn’t supposed to happen. What in Merlin’s name had Harry seen?

“Severus,” Harry whispered. “Gods, I wish—but it can’t be. I won’t have you sent to Azkaban on my account.” A broken sob escaped him and he laid his clenched fist against the glass. “I love you far too much to hurt you like that, and you… you don’t want me anyway.”

Albus watched in silent horror as Harry stood and traced a gentle hand over what must have been the image of Severus’ face.

“This dream, this wish… I can’t afford to dwell on it. As much as I love you, Severus, you’ll never return it.” He gave a bitter, tear-choked laugh. “Weapons and freaks have no use for love anyway. And, well, maybe it’s better this way. At least your heart won’t be as broken when the war is over and… and I can’t hold you any longer.”

He pressed his lips to the glass once and stepped back, eyes twice as haunted as before, tears blinding him.

“I’m sorry, Sev. I wish I could make it stop.”

With a broken whimper, Harry turned his back, hunched in pain, and staggered out of the chamber.

Albus slumped against the wall, stunned and utterly devastated. Severus! Gods help the boy, Harry had fallen in love with Severus!

Oh gods, showing Harry the mirror had been a dreadful mistake. This was one wish Albus could not likely help Harry achieve in any form. It wouldn’t send Severus to Azkaban—at least, Albus didn’t think it would. He would have to check the school rules—but either way, Severus was far too damaged to ever accept love again. It was hopeless.

“Or he will break his heart pining for what he cannot have.”

Gods. Phineas had warned him, hadn’t he? And, once again, Albus had ignored his good sense. Merlin forgive him. He had only wanted to help, but he had failed. The look in Harry’s eyes as he walked away from that accursed Mirror would haunt him until his dying breath.

“Oh, Harry. I am so very sorry.”

As Albus left and returned to his office, head bowed in remorse and grief, it occurred to him that every time he had tried to help Harry, he had only ever hurt him more.

Harry dragged himself back to Severus’ quarters, slipped through the wards, and lay on his bed, hugging the pillow to his chest and wishing it could fill the terrible void inside.

Merlin help him, he loved Severus so much. The Mirror had shown Severus holding Harry in his arms, golden bands gracing both of their wedding fingers. Severus had looked at him with such
wonder, such adoration—and Harry’s heart had snapped in two. Knowing it was only an illusion, one he would never live long enough to achieve, had turned the hollow inside his chest into a raging inferno of pain.

He had no hope. No chance. Nothing left but five dear friends, a meddling old coot—he knew exactly who had led him to that room, of course—and a war to fight and die for. The cruel caricature of Severus’ impossible, unreachable love had broken the last hope of a normal life he had.

Harry lay upon his makeshift bed and clutched his pillow to his chest. Gods, he had to sleep. Somehow he had to get through classes tomorrow, and he would need some kind of strength to face those who had abandoned him. Ron, Seamus…. Merlin, it hurt. They had been like brothers once, and now… everything was broken.

Harry hugged his pillow tighter and struggled to drift off, but after an hour or so, gave up and cast a sleeping spell on himself. “Sommus.” A gentle teal light flowed over his face and scalp, and his eyes finally shut.

But, in his grief, he had forgotten one immensely important detail: to restore the wards around his bed.

“Welcome back, Harry Potter. Oh, what is this? Despair?” Voldemort laughed, a dark, twisted sound. “How delightful. We shall make use of that, hmm?”

“No,” Harry muttered, but pain had weakened his ability to resist. He struggled to pull together some semblance of a fight—or failing that, to wake up—but his spell kept him unconscious and his grief had broken his will.

“Now, there is a mad old man in his cosy little tower. He has been a plague on me for far too long, but you will take care of that, won’t you, my little puppet?”

“Not yours, never yours.” Gods, he had almost choked trying to force the words out. Everything was so heavy, so oppressive, and Harry couldn’t fight any longer.

“We shall see. Imperio! Now, get up, Harry Potter. Get up and go to the tower. Pluck the thorn from my side that is Albus Dumbledore.”

“NO!”

But Harry’s legs were moving. He sat and moved to the door, screaming in his head, struggling against the curse to no avail. He simply had no strength left to fight.

“You are weak in your sorrow, Harry Potter. And now, you are mine. Get your wand, boy.”

“No.” But his lips and hands moved without consent and his wand floated into his fingertips. “Oh gods, Se-someone help me!”

Voldemort didn’t catch the slip, driven as he was on getting Harry to Dumbledore. “Hurry now, to the headmaster’s tower with you.”

Harry thanked Merlin the bastard couldn’t see through his closed eyes or read his mind from a distance and fought with all his might.

It wasn’t enough.
A loud creak and thump woke Severus from a fitful sleep. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, listening for the source of the noise, but his quarters had gone silent. He considered going back to sleep, but pressure on his bladder and the thought of Harry’s suffering decided him against it, at least for the moment.

Was the boy even able to sleep like this? Perhaps Severus should give him a potion.

With a sigh, he stood and made his way to the loo. When he finished, he stumbled to his living room, where Longbottom and Harry were sleeping.

But Harry’s bed was empty.

Severus froze, shock and horror paralysing him. Gone! Where would Harry have gone at two in the morning? Perhaps he had only wanted a drink of water?

Trying to calm his racing heart, Severus made his way towards the kitchen, but stopped cold as he passed the boys’ beds. An aura of dark magic, Unforgiveable magic, steeped the air near Harry’s empty bed. Oh gods. The Dark Lord—it had to be. Had Harry been captured somehow? Lured out of the castle with a false vision and killed?

No. Merlin, no. Severus couldn’t cope without him. He had to find the boy.

“He’s missing and there is an aura of dark magic by his bed."

Longbottom bolted up with a cry of distress. “Dear gods, not now. He’s past his limit!”

“I know.” Severus took a deep breath and forced his Occlumency barriers down. He couldn’t afford to panic. Not when Harry needed him. “If the visions have returned in the midst of this—I fear we have little time to save him.”

Longbottom winced. “Sir, I… I think it’s worse than that. Harry’s been having dreams, not visions, but in those dreams—he loses control for a moment. It’s why he always wards his bed. Luna and I think Vo—oh, sorry. Riddle is cursing him in his sleep—intentionally.”

Severus went rigid. “The Imperius Curse, you mean.”

“I… we aren’t sure—he won’t talk about it or even let Lu read it—but that’s what I’m afraid of. Especially since he’s able to resist the dreams and wake himself up. He’s the only one of us who can throw the Imperius off. It has to be that.”
“Dear gods.” Severus’ blood drained from his face and pooled in his feet. “Fuck—*fuck*! If the Dark Lord has him under the *Imperius* now—depression lowers one’s ability to resist. He will be helpless!” Severus slammed his fist onto the table. “Gods damn it! Why didn’t he tell me?”

Longbottom laid his hand carefully over Severus’ wrist. “Sir, this isn’t the time to worry about that right now. Harry needs help first.”

Severus tugged his hand away and rubbed tears from his cheeks. “You are right. We must find him, *fast*.”

Longbottom held up his wand. “*Accio* Marauder’s Map!”

Severus grimaced at the title. Bastards.

A folded piece of parchment—one he thought he recognized from Harry’s fourth year—sailed into Longbottom’s hands. Severus narrowed his eyes, watching as the boy unfolded the parchment and muttered, “I solemnly swear I am up to no good.”

He leaned over Longbottom’s shoulder and watched as lines formed on the map, showing the layout of the entire school and the locations of everyone within. A cold shudder of revulsion passed down his spine. So *this* was how the bullies had always found him, no matter where he hid. Gods, they had *invented* a map of the school to track him down for more torment—and to avoid being caught at it, no doubt. Did their cruelty know no bounds?

He shook off his memories and focused on the present. No matter the authors’ intent, they could use it now for good.

“And Find Harry Potter,” Longbottom murmured, and the map zoomed in on a dot with Harry’s name, stumbling down the seventh floor corridor.

Severus’ heart stopped. “Oh gods. The Dark Lord has sent Harry after Albus! *Fuck*!” He Summoned a dressing gown and slippers and yanked them on. “Longbottom, stay here. Watch the map. If Harry should alter course, send me a Patronus right away.”

“I don’t know how to make them talk yet, sir.”

Severus winced. “Can you direct them, at least?”

Longbottom nodded.

“Thank Merlin. Then simply inform your Patronus to guide me to where Harry is and that should be enough. I must go, now.”

“Please, let me know what happens?”

Severus nodded and swept from the room, jerking Harry’s invisibility cloak over his head. He dashed up the stairs towards the headmaster’s office, praying his quick feet and Harry’s struggle for control would aid him in reaching the boy in time.

Gods help him if he failed. Manipulative bastard that he was, Severus loved Albus like the father he never had. He couldn’t bear to lose him. And Harry! Severus’ life would shatter without his dearest friend. Gods, he had to hurry. Faster. He took the steps three at a time, sprinting with all his might.

Wait. Why the hell was he *running* when he could fly?
With a huff at his own stupidity, he opened a channel to his magic, letting his power flood his body, and surged into the air. Held aloft by the air currents and sheer strength of his core, Severus shot up the remaining storeys like an arrow from the string and alighted on the headmaster’s landing.

He slammed the stairwell door open and dashed for Albus’ office, heart thundering in his ears, a stitch tearing his side.

Harry stood in front of Albus’ door, wand in hand and eyes closed. “Confri—”

“No!”

With all the speed and power he could muster, Severus petrified Harry, keeping silent in case the Dark Lord could hear through Harry’s ears. Harry went rigid and dropped like a stone. Severus softened the floor to cushion his fall and raced to his side, casting a silent Rennervate along the way. ‘Finite!’ The silent spell released Harry’s petrification and, with a gasp, he bolted up and rose to his knees.

“Oh gods, oh gods.” Harry buried his head in his hands and wept, deep wracking sobs that tore through him with the bestial quality of utter despair. “I-I’m s-sorry. So s-sorry.”

Severus made sure the aura of dark magic had gone, then swept Harry into his arms. “I am here, Harry.”

Harry whimpered and buried his head in Severus’ shoulder. “H-help me. I can’t, can’t fight him anymore. Too broken.”

Severus’ hand clenched in Harry’s hair. “Harry, what do you mean?”

“I… I can’t s-say. I’m so scared.”

“Of what, little one?”

“Dumbledore! He’ll lock me up and… and I’ll die. I’ll go mad. I’m so scared.”

“If I swear to you that I will not let Albus harm you, will you tell me what is wrong?”

“Actually,” said Albus from over Severus’ shoulder, “I would quite like to know myself.”

Harry cringed and curled into himself. “No-no-no. I can’t.”

Severus sighed and lifted Harry into his arms, bridal style. “Albus, I believe some of your lemon drops and a hot cup of tea are in order.”

Albus gave the boy a worried look and nodded. “So I see. Well, come then, boys, and we shall get to the bottom of this.”

“No,” Harry breathed in Severus’ neck, but Severus just held Harry tighter against him and followed the headmaster up the stairs.
Chapter Summary

Warnings: Lots of angst, relatively mild slash scene, and a few answers for our boys. Long chapter with a smidgen of smut to make up for the relatively short cliffy last time.

***AN: I'm not sure if the next update will be on time or not. I've had major issues with my lungs the past few weeks, and it's becoming more and more of a problem. I have to go straight to the hospital the next time it gets bad, and I don't know what will happen from there. Anyway, here's hoping I'm worrying for nothing and I just need a new inhaler or something.***

Chapter 35

Tendrils of Truth

The headmaster’s emergency alarms had woken Albus from a troubled sleep. Expecting a Death Eater attack, he had thrown on a set of duelling robes and boots and dashed down his office stairs, only to find a sobbing Harry Potter on his doorstep, hiding in the arms of an invisible Severus Snape. The alarms had stopped at the same time.

Well, stranger things had happened, he supposed.

Severus carried the distraught boy into the office and gently set him in his usual chair. While Albus Summoned his teapot and a calming draught, Severus sent a Patronus to Neville, to the headmaster’s surprise, and once his doe had cantered off, prepared a dosed cup of tea for Harry.


Harry held his cup in shaking hands and obeyed, but his tears did not slow. Even as he drank, he wept, and Albus’ heart bled for his pain. Gods, this boy had simply been through too much.

Severus sat beside Harry, brushing tears from the younger man’s face and watching him with haunted eyes. “I am here, Harry.”

With a soft whimper, Harry merged his seat with Severus’, changing Albus’ chairs into a sofa without so much as a flick of his hand.

Well, well. How long had the boy been capable of such strong wandless magic?

Severus pulled Harry into his arms and tucked the boy close, rocking him against his chest. “Harry… oh, ssh. I have you. You will be all right. I will let no one harm you.”

Albus’ eyes nearly popped out of his head. Dear Merlin. Since when had Severus been so affectionate? Not even Lily had inspired such a reaction from the taciturn young man. And Lucius—Albus had never imagined Severus would be able to touch someone like this again after all the
damage that sadist had inflicted upon his young protégé.

Hmm. Maybe Harry’s heart’s desire wasn’t as impossible as Albus had thought.

“Harry, dear boy, what has happened? Have you been hurt?”

Harry shook his head and buried his face in his hands. “Don’t want to be locked up.”

Severus ran his hands through Harry’s hair, soothing him. “Harry, no one is going to imprison you. I won’t hear of it.”

“I have no intention of doing so either,” said a bemused Albus. “You have done nothing to deserve such a fate, Harry.”

“Harry, ssh,” Severus murmured. “It’s all right. You did not harm Albus. There is no need to send you to Azkaban.”

Harry whispered, “And what about St. Mungo’s?”

Albus gave Harry a sorrowful look. “Oh, child. Is your pain truly so bad that you wish to take your life?”

Harry grimaced. “No! I mean… you don’t understand. I did earlier, but I can’t. I know I have a task, and Severus needs me. I can’t hurt him like that, and Luna, Dean and Neville—Hermione too—they’d be devastated. I can’t abandon them.”

“Then explain it to us, Harry,” Albus said in a gentle voice. “If you are not suicidal, and neither are you ill, why do you believe we will lock you in St. Mungo’s?”

“I… I…” Harry’s shoulders slumped and he gave a broken whimper. “I suppose I have no choice but to tell you about it now. It almost killed you.”

Albus froze. “Me? What nearly killed me?”

“Riddle did.”

“Harry, he nearly killed you too,” Severus said, his voice shaking with terror. “I caught you in the midst of a blasting curse in the corridor outside Albus’ door. Had you finished it…” He couldn’t bear to go on, but everyone knew what such a powerful curse would have done to Harry, had he managed to cast it in such close quarters.

“Dear gods,” Albus breathed. “Harry, why?”

Severus shook his head. “He was not acting on his own will.” He tipped Harry’s chin up with his free hand and rubbed a stream of tears away. “Harry, Longbottom said he believes the Dark Lord is holding you under the Imperius Curse in your dreams. Is it true?”

Harry winced. “H-he knows?”

Albus’ breath caught. “So it is true.”

Harry turned so he faced Albus and dragged his knees to his chest. “Y-yeah. He puts me under the Imperius Curse in my dreams every night. Until last night, I’ve been able to fight it every time.” He shuddered and closed his eyes tight. “B-but now, I’m too broken.” He covered his face with a shaking hand. “I t-tried to throw him off like usual, but I couldn’t fight at all.”
Severus’ hand stilled on Harry’s hair. “How long has this been going on, Harry?”

“S-since… the Department of Mysteries.”

“What? This has been happening for over a year and you never said—why?”

“B-because I don’t want to be l-locked away, and until last night, I could control it.”

“Harry, for Merlin’s sake, that could have changed at any time! At a time when I was less prepared or able to help.” Tears glimmered on Severus’ lashes. “You were only in my quarters by chance last night—had I not woken when the door shut or had Longbottom not been present with that infernal map, this night would have ended much differently.”

He held Harry’s face and blinked hard, clearly holding back his tears by the merest thread. Albus had never seen the man so emotional.

Severus whispered, “Harry, do you not understand that had I come one second later tonight, I would have lost you both?”

Harry sucked in a sharp breath. “One second?”

“You had one syllable of the curse to go. One.” Severus’ tears dropped, and Albus’ heart broke for both of his lost boys. “You are so… I….” Words failed him, but Severus caught Harry into his arms again and held him tight, one hand buried in the boy’s hair and the other squeezing his waist close. “I cannot lose you, Harry. Please, never keep something so dangerous from me again.”

Harry whimpered and buried his head in Severus’ shoulder. “I’m s-sorry. I’m so sorry, Sev. I know it was stupid and reckless not to tell anyone. I’m just so scared.”

“Harry….” Severus leaned back and cupped the boy’s face, turning him to meet his eyes. “Why have you carried this burden so long alone? Do you not know by now I want to help you?”

“I was terrified, Severus. I still am. I won’t survive if he locks me away.”

“No one is going to lock you away.”

Harry turned his face into Severus’ hand and whispered, “Y-you promise?”

“Yes, little one. Even if I must withdraw from the war and guard you every night myself, I swear it. I would sooner lose my position as a spy than lose you.”

With a whimper, Harry turned into Severus, hiding his face in the man’s shoulder. “So scared, Sev. If I can’t control it, I can’t sleep.”

Severus held Harry tight and watched him weep with a pained expression. “We will find an answer.”

“First,” said Albus, “I believe we will need to find the cause. Harry, I thought you had mastered Occlumency.”

“I have. I don’t have visions anymore unless Riddle is hacked off enough to break through my shields, and even then, it’s not like before. Just flashes and blasts of emotion. I only have these… Imperius dreams now. Occlumency doesn’t work on them at all.”

Albus nodded and stroked his beard, thinking hard. “There is a possibility that these dreams are bypassing the mental barrier, or that your shields are failing in your sleep enough to let them through. Would you consent to a test?”
Harry reeled back, rigid and ashen with terror. “What kind of test?”

“For Merlin’s sake, Albus,” Severus grumbled. “Don’t terrify him. He is already past his limit.” He rubbed a gentle hand up and down Harry’s back. “Peace, little one. I will not allow you to come to harm.”

Harry relaxed into Severus’ touch and leaned against his caressing arm. “Yeah. I know.”

Severus smiled sadly and ran a hand through Harry’s curls.

“Do forgive me for frightening you, Harry,” said Albus in a contrite tone. “All I mean to do is take you into my guest room and have Severus observe your mental barriers while you sleep.”

Harry frowned. “How can he do that without eye contact?”

“There is a specialised charm,” Severus explained, his expression troubled. “Only natural Empaths, Telepaths, or Zopaths are capable of it—people born with innate abilities of Empathy, or Legilimency and Empathy at once, or Occlumency and reverse Empathy.”

Harry blinked. “There are such things as Telepaths and Zopaths?”

“Yes.” Severus shook his head and blew out a heavy sigh. “The library here does not have sufficient resources on the mental races. It was a constant source of frustration for me when I was seeking information on my abilities and what they meant. I did not learn the truth of my powers until after I became a spy and Albus discovered my abilities. I believe I have a text on it somewhere in my bedroom—I will loan it to you when we are finished here.”

“Thanks, but why don’t we have books on it?”

Albus gave a wry laugh. “For the same reason we have few books on Parselmouths. They are so incredibly rare, I did not imagine it to be worth the expenditure of purchasing extremely expensive, exotic texts for the, perhaps, five natural mental races I have seen in my entire Hogwarts career—and I am one of them.” He chuckled and toyed with his beard. “Then again, I have at least three in Hogwarts at this time, so perhaps I should do.”

Harry shot him an annoyed look. “You think?” He scowled and turned back to Severus. “If there weren’t any resources, how did you learn what you are, Sev? Er… I’m assuming you’re a… a Zopath? Is that right?”

“Yes. It is the most powerful of the closed-type—or Occlumency-based—mental races. Telepathy is its counterpart—the most powerful Legilimency-based, or open race. And as to how I learned, Albus discovered the fact soon after taking me under his wing as a spy. He had to train me in mind magic, and when he saw my prowess with Occlumency, surmised I was a natural mind race. From there, we tested my abilities and determined that I am a particularly powerful Zopath. So powerful, even a natural Legilimens like Riddle cannot read me without my consent.”

Harry frowned and stared at the floor, his expression part bemused, part worried.

“Harry?” Albus searched his eyes, but as usual, could read nothing of his thoughts. “Are you all right, my boy?”

Harry shook himself and gave Albus a hard look. “You’re supposed to be intelligent, aren’t you? You tell me.”

Albus’ heart panged with grief and guilt. “I… I only meant that you seemed distracted, child. Of
course you are not well, given the circumstances."

“Well, I’ve plenty to worry about, don’t I?” Harry gave Severus a sad smile. “So your… Zopathy, I take it that’s what allows you to spy so well?”

Severus frowned, no doubt worried about his friend, but did not push. “Yes. Without my inborn abilities, I fear I would not be able to hide the fact that I am Occluding from the Dark Lord and would be immediately suspect.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand. “You’re brilliant.”

A faint pink blush painted Severus’ cheeks. “Thank you.” He held Harry closer and laced his fingers with the boy’s. “Albus is also a natural Empath. He is better at reading emotions and has a bit of a leg up in Legilimency.”

“That explains a lot,” said Harry, his tone wry.

Albus squirmed in his seat, though he hid his discomfort from his boys. At least, he hoped he did. Those two seemed to see right through him these days.

“Harry, I have not attempted to use Legilimency against you since that time last year when I feared for your life. Forgive me, please.”

Harry watched Albus for a long time, staring into his eyes, and Albus had the strangest sense Harry was reading him in spite of his mental shields. But that wasn’t possible—was it?

Unless….

“Not even a natural Legilimens like Riddle can read me without my consent….”

But Harry had read Severus before, hadn’t he? And long before Severus trusted him. The man had ranted about Harry’s spontaneous *Protego* and accidental dip into Severus’ mind for weeks during the boy’s fifth year.

Albus looked to his favourite boys and wondered if they didn’t have three natural mind races in the room.

Wonder blossomed in his heart. If it was true, if the boy truly had the powers Albus suspected he did, it would explain how Voldemort was getting past his barriers. And it might provide an answer to more than one problem. He glanced to Harry’s hand, linked with Severus’, and hoped. Merlin, did he hope.

Harry narrowed his eyes. “What are you plotting, old man?”

Albus coughed. If Harry was truly a Telepath, lying to him now would ruin everything. “I will admit I have a suspicion as to why your barriers are failing and have a potential solution in mind; however, it would be remiss of me not to verify the cause of your dreams before we discuss it. We can take no action until we know for certain why and how your shields are failing.”

Harry stared at him for a long moment before nodding and turning back to Severus. “You were telling me about this charm?”

Severus rubbed his shoulder and back with a gentle touch. “The *Legilimens Somna* charm allows Empaths to view the subject’s dreams. The spell would place my mental presence within your shields whether you are holding eye contact with me or not, and I can maintain it for quite a while without
draining my reserves. It should allow me to identify the source and cause of the leak.”

He took a deep breath, his fingers tensing on Harry’s shoulder. “However, the spell is not without downsides. The first is that it is quite invasive. You will not be able to hide anything from me. While I am within your barriers, I will see and hear every thought as my own.”

Harry shivered. “Severus, you… might not like everything you see.”

“I know. I will not use it against you. Never again, Harry, I promise.”

“I know you won’t, Sev. I’m more worried that I’ll hurt you. My pain right now… I can barely breathe.”

Severus nudged Harry against his side. “I will bear it if it keeps you safe.”

Harry closed his eyes and laid his head against Severus’ shoulder again. His emotions radiated pure love.

Merlin, Albus hoped he could help them.

“Thank you, Severus,” Harry said in a whisper.

Severus rubbed Harry’s back and nodded in acknowledgment.

“What was the other downside?”

Severus grimaced. “I have not used the spell before and it is… difficult to master. It may take some… effort to align correctly.”

Harry winced. “Will it damage my mind if it misses?”

Severus shook his head. “I would not risk it if that were the case. However, it may hurt. The texts I have studied warned of pain until the spell is properly aligned or cancelled. I do not know for certain how much, but I fear for you.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “I can bear pain.”

Severus’ eyes filled with grief. “Yes, I know. But I have hurt you too much.”

“You know I forgave you a long time ago.”

“I do not wish to cause you more pain regardless. It might be best to let Albus attempt the charm, as it will be far more difficult for me than for a traditional Empath.”

Harry scowled. “And let him root around in my mind with no barriers? Not a bloody chance. I’d sooner trust Riddle in there than him.”

Albus flinched. Well, that had certainly laid Harry’s feelings out plain as day. Phineas gave him an “I-told-you-so” smirk, and Albus couldn’t even deny that he deserved it. Damn. He took a lemon drop and let it take the edge off his guilt.

“Just be careful, Severus,” Harry continued. “If it hurts me too much, we’ll try again. It’s okay.” He held Severus’ cheek with a trembling hand. “I trust you.”

Severus closed his eyes and gave Harry a curt nod, a sure sign he was overwhelmed and uncomfortable with showing his rampant emotions. Albus swooped in to save him.
“Now that Severus has explained the spell and its risks to you, Harry, I will tell you the rest of my plan. I would like him to observe your mind shields for any leaks or stray magic while you sleep. Once we are sure whether your shields are failing or not, we will make our plans on controlling them from that point.”

He bowed his head. “And I vow I will not imprison you. I will not send you to St. Mungo’s either. Indeed, I fear they would not know what to do with such an unusual affliction. If necessary, we will restrain you somewhere safe while you sleep, but only while you sleep. You will retain all the same freedom in your waking hours that you are used to. Is that a precaution you are prepared to accept if we can find no other way to stop the dreams?”

Harry fixed Albus with a searching stare. Again, Albus had the feeling Harry was reading him. He kept his barriers low and his thoughts relatively open.

[I will not harm you, Harry.]

Harry slumped in relief against Severus and let out a sigh. “Okay. I’d been doing that most days myself anyway. I tied my wrist to the headboard every night at the Dursleys’ and ward warding my bed here every night.” He lowered his head. “Last night, I was just too miserable to remember.”

Severus held Harry closer and whispered something in his ear that sent another palpable wave of relief through the boy.

“Okay,” Harry said, his voice barely a breath. “Okay, Sev.”

Albus waited until Harry sat up and wiped his eyes. “Now that we are all sure of what will happen during the test, are we ready to begin?”

Harry firmed his shoulders and nodded, determination clear in his eyes. “The sooner we fix this, the better.”

“Very good. Then if you will, please come with me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Severus followed Harry into the room he had spent the night in last year, after the Dark Lord had nearly killed him for his folly. Merlin, but they had come a long way since then, but the fear that the events of the evening would tear them apart left him cold inside.

He watched Harry seat himself on the bed, expression apprehensive, and tried to calm his racing heart for Harry’s sake. Even Occluding didn’t calm him this time, and he couldn’t drain his emotions if he intended to use such a powerful form of Legilimency without hurting his friend further.

Gods, Severus wasn’t ready for this, to be immersed in the young man’s mind, to feel his grief and… and other emotions overlapping Severus’ own. His past had scarred him, damaged him, and if he saw too much in Harry’s mind—gods. He didn’t know if he could handle it.

Was it mad to fear one’s fears?

They entered the radioactive-fairy guest room, and Severus scowled at the nauseating décor. Sweet
Circe. Only Albus Dumbledore could come up with such a vile colour scheme. And the students complained about Severus’ potions jars.

“Now then,” said a twinkling Albus—so the old man had caught his revulsion. “Harry, if you’ll just climb into bed—how convenient that you are already dressed for it!”

Harry looked down at his grey and blue striped pyjamas with a blush. “Er….”

“No need to be embarrassed, my boy. It can hardly be helped when inconsiderate dark lords rouse one from their sleep.”

Severus scowled. “Inconsiderate!”

Harry snickered despite his grief, and Severus responded with a smirk.

As Harry crawled into bed, Severus shook his head at the neon green and yellow bedding.

“Albus, I have no idea how you expect Harry to sleep in this disaster. I swear, my retinas are burning.”

Albus chuckled. “Ah, but bright colours encourage cheerful dreams, do they not?”

“Bright colours maybe,” Harry muttered. “I don’t know about neon.”

Severus laughed in spite of himself.

Harry gave Severus a tight smile. “Are we ready then?”

His eyes held deep trepidation and tremors wracked his slight frame. Severus winced. Gods help him, Harry was just as terrified as he was.

No. Severus couldn’t allow his fears to run away with him, not now. Harry needed him. He had to hold it together for Harry’s sake. Even if his mind revealed… what Severus wasn’t ready for. Even if Harry’s mind proved to be everything Severus feared, he had to trust in his friend. Harry would never hurt him, never push him, and the boy had simply lost too much to survive if Severus abandoned him on top of everything else.

‘I must be strong. Whether he… l-loves me or not, he needs me desperately.’ Severus took a deep breath to steel himself. ‘And I need him too.’

Severus sat on the bed beside Harry and threaded his fingers through the young man’s hair. Some of the fear left Harry’s eyes, and he turned into Severus’ palm.

“I’m sorry, Sev,” Harry murmured.

Severus rubbed Harry’s cheek with the pad of his thumb. “Ssh. You have done nothing that requires an apology. Calm yourself, little one. I will not harm you.”

“I know that,” Harry said, voice barely a breath. “But you might run.”

“No. The first time I turned from you nearly killed me. I am not so foolish as to hurt you so a second time.”

Tears shone in the young man’s eyes. “Even if you see…?”

“Even then. I will not abandon you. Never again, little one. I swear it.”
Harry’s tears dropped, and Severus brushed them away.

“If anyone must apologise,” Severus murmured, “it is I. I have hurt you, though I hate the thought of it, and I cannot heal it.”

Harry winced. “I-just being near you however you’ll allow is enough.” But Severus felt the prevarication in Harry’s tone, the desperate grief that forced him to accept what he could get, rather than what he wanted. He met Severus’ eyes and tried to smile anyway. “A-are you ready, then?”

Severus’ heart clenched. “Are you sure, Harry?”

“Yes. Let’s get it over with.”

“Very well.” Severus sat beside him and held his cheek, supporting him and stroking his thumb along the ridge of his cheekbone. “I will perform the spell on your word.”

Harry closed his eyes and leaned into Severus’ hand. He took a few steadying breaths and opened his eyes once more. “I’m ready.”

“Look into my eyes, Harry. It will help guide me.”

Harry nodded and fixed his gaze on Severus’ The depth and clarity of his eyes made Severus’ stomach jolt. Gods, Harry was a beautiful man. If only Severus could... but no. He was just too damaged, and this wasn’t the time to worry about it anyway. He had to focus, or he would end up hurting Harry even worse.

Severus pushed all other thoughts from his mind and poured his magic into establishing a link between their minds. A pull guided him into Harry’s mind, and he made a mental leap forwards, praying his aim was true.

“Legimens Somna!”

Harry jerked back from a punch like a sledgehammer between the eyes. He fell back onto the pillows with a cry, and a gentle hand settled against his temple.

[Oh gods, Harry. I’m so sorry.]

Severus’ voice whispered from inside his mind—and thank Merlin he didn’t shout, because Harry’s brain was being squeezed from his ears.

“Hurts,” Harry choked out.

[Hold on.]

Something in his brain shifted and the horrible, nauseating pain eased. Harry closed his eyes tight and pressed his palms into his aching temples.

“Jesus, that hurt.”

Severus held the sides of Harry’s face and hovered close, murmuring one of his many original chants. “Sana Cerebra....”
Within a few repetitions, the pain eased, and Harry turned into Severus’ hand with a sigh. “T-thank you.”

Severus’ low voice resonated in Harry’s mind, healing him from within as well. [Is the pain tolerable, Harry?]

“S’better now,” he muttered, exhaustion sapping his ability to speak.

Gentle thumbs massaged Harry’s temples and forehead, taking away the last vestiges of his headache.

[I am sorry, Harry. I tried not to hurt you, but I am a neophyte at this spell at best.]

[I know. It’s okay, Sev. It’s over now. The spell worked, didn’t it?]

[Yes.] Severus paused, looking at Harry with heartsick agony in his eyes. [You are sure the pain has stopped?]

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. [The physical pain, yes…]

Severus shuddered and stroked Harry’s hair. “Would it help if I…?”

He gave Dumbledore a questioning look. The old man nodded.

“Would you like me to hold you while you sleep, Harry?”

A rush of terrible anguish made Severus cringe.

“Knowing what I do, Severus,” Harry whispered, “I think it would only hurt me more.”

Severus bowed his head, silvery tears shining on his lashes. “I never wanted to hurt you like this. Not even… before. I never wanted to cause you such pain.”

Harry lifted a gentle hand to Severus’ cheek and brushed his tears away. “Ssh. You can’t help it, Sev. I don’t blame you at all. I’m the idiot who forgot my place.”

He tried to suppress it, but the same thoughts that had haunted him on the tower sprang up in the back of his mind. ‘Only a weapon… don’t deserve love… one purpose… destined to fight… destined to die.’

Severus went rigid and grabbed Harry’s shoulders. His eyes flashed with fire and he pressed so close, Harry tasted the tea on his breath.

“You listen to me, Harry Potter,” he spat. “You are not just a weapon. And so help me gods, if you even think of dying on me, I will fucking drag you back from the afterlife and hold you in detention until you’re as old as Albus!”

Harry couldn’t help an amused chuckle in spite of the tears crowding his vision and the crack down his heart. “H-how do you plan to carry out that threat, exactly?”

Severus’ gaze turned dark. “Well, if Nicholas Flamel can work out immortality….”

“Severus, ssh.” Harry slipped a hand into his friend’s hair. “I’m sorry. I’ll… try. But we all know the truth. Riddle’s been targeting me since before I was born. I’ve been prophesied to live and die at his hand. I’ll have to fight him one day, but I’m an eighteen-year-old against a seventy-year-old dark lord and who knows how many of his followers. I’ll try, Severus. I’ll try to live for you. But I don’t
think the odds are in my favour.”

Severus snarled, eyes full of desperate pain and fear. “I am not training you to fight so you can give up and die!”

“I know.” Harry rubbed Severus’ cheek with his thumb and tried to soothe the man as best as he could. “I’m not going to give up. But… I’m sorry, Sev. I’m not going to survive, either.”

Tears wobbled on Severus’ lashes. “How, precisely,” he demanded, “is that not giving up? You have already decided you will die before you fight! What is the point of training you then, if you are only going to let him—let him….?” Severus’ tirade broke off in a soft sob. “Don’t. Don’t do this to me, Harry. Please.”

Harry winced and curled in on himself. “Gods, Sev. I wish I could tell you it’s going to be okay, but….,” He closed his eyes and set his jaw. “I have to be honest. You deserve the truth.” He took a shaky breath and clutched Severus’ robe. “S-Sev, it’s not that I won’t fight him. I’m going to do my best, and with all you’ve done to teach me, I might have a chance of beating him. I don’t know.”

He closed his eyes, sending tears tracking down his face. “But even if I do defeat him, I’m still going to die in the battle.”

Severus grabbed Harry’s shoulders. “I won’t let him kill you!”

“Sev, you don’t understand. I’m not saying he’ll kill me—even though it’s a possibility. I’m saying I have to die—we won’t have a choice about it.”

“Harry?” Dumbledore gave him a pained look. “Child, whatever do you mean?”

Harry blinked tears down his face and wrapped his arms around his waist for comfort. “I… it’s my scar. This… this scar binds me to him. I-Isuri, after I had visions, she told me it smells the same as Nagini. And the only explanation I can think of that fits all the facts is… is that it’s a Horcrux.” Tears streamed down his face. “I’m sorry, Sev. I have to die, or he’ll never be defeated.”

“No,” Severus breathed. “No, it’s not true. It is only a curse scar, not a H-Horcrux. I… I refuse to b-believe it.”

Harry winced and stared at his knees. “I’m so sorry. If I had known sooner…..”

With a sound like a wounded animal, Severus caught Harry into his arms and held him across the older man’s lap. “I will not let you go! If that blasted scar is a Horcrux, then we shall find a way to remove it without destroying you.”

“Sev. I don’t think that’s possible.”

“We plan to pull the soul fragments with a bonding spell, do we not? Why would it not remove yours?”

Harry shuddered. “It might, but that horcrux—it’s been there for seventeen years. It’s entangled with my soul, my life, maybe too deeply to make a clean break—we all know I don’t need to see a snake to speak and read Parseltongue any longer. If you pull it from me, there’s a damn good chance you’ll pull out my soul too.” He closed his eyes. “If I have to die, I’d much rather die fighting than lose my soul.”

Severus snarled and clutched Harry tight. “No! I refuse to give up. I have lost everyone—everyone—I have ever cared for save you, and by gods, I will not lose you too!”
“Okay, Sev,” Harry murmured into Severus’ chest, bleeding inside for his friend’s pain as much as his own. “Ssh. I know you need me. We… we’ll try to find a way. I just… I don’t know if we can. And even if we do, I still might not be strong enough to defeat him in the end.”

Severus’ tears dripped into Harry’s hair. “You have to.” He cradled Harry close and rocked him against his heart. “You have to survive. You can’t leave me alone.”

“Oh, Severus. I’ll try. I swear to you I’ll try my best.”

Dumbledore spoke in a soft voice, making Harry jump. In the wake of Severus’ need, he had all but forgotten the old man was still there.

“Severus, breathe, my boy,” Dumbledore said, his voice soothing and low. “Harry is still alive, and we will do everything possible to make sure he survives.”

Severus’ head whipped up and red-rimmed, furious eyes speared Dumbledore. “This is your fault, old man. He believes he is nothing more than a weapon, a human sacrifice for the greater-fucking-good, all because you left him with those monsters and refused to listen to his pleas for help. You have sharpened him as a sword against the dark, never mind that you were breaking bits off a human child.”

Dumbledore flinched. “Severus, I—”

“Do not make excuses, Albus. I have no desire to hear them at the moment when, due to your ruthlessness, the only true friend I have believes his life is worth nothing, save to serve as your bloody weapon and die for it before he is even out of his teens.”

Dumbledore gasped. “H-Harry, is that true?”

Harry looked away and refused to answer. To do so would rip Severus apart.

But as Severus was inside Harry’s mind, the man heard it anyway.

“It is true,” Severus whispered, shaking with anger and grief.

Dumbledore lowered his head, his grief and remorse obvious. Severus scowled at him, though his veil of anger did nothing to hide the stark terror and anguish in his eyes.

“Severus…” Harry turned into the man’s arms and held him tight. “I-I’m sorry. You’re right. I won’t deny his plotting and scheming has damaged me. I learned the truth about my fate, about my value, when Dumbledore’s meddling let Sirius die. Until then, I thought Dumbledore was a nice old man with lemon drops, but that day, I saw the other side of him—the side that willingly sacrifices lives and loved ones for the sake of the greater good. That day, I learned I was nothing more than his pawn, his weapon against the dark. And I’ve been… broken inside ever since.”

He dropped his head onto Severus’ shoulder and wrapped his arms around the man’s waist. “You’re the first person who ever gave me hope for… for more. For a future.”

Severus made a sound of terrible grief and remorse. “And I broke it, too.”

“No. No, you can’t help it. Don’t blame yourself, Sev.” Harry sniffled and edged closer, needing the warmth of the man he loved to drive away his pain, even if Severus couldn’t love him back. “And don’t blame Dumbledore either.”

“How can you say that, Harry? How am I supposed to forgive him for breaking you?”
“Sev, Dumbledore didn’t make me a Horcrux. And besides, this is war. You of all people know that. You know the cost of this war, you know what sacrifices have to be made to survive. As cruel as it is, Dumbledore’s hurt us not out of a desire to be a bastard, but to stop the real monster from destroying us all.”

Harry nuzzled into Severus’ throat and murmured, “Let it go, Severus. As much as he’s hurt us, he also gave me the most beautiful gift of my life. I can’t hate him, even if he might deserve it. He brought me you.” He met Severus’ eyes and whispered into his mind, [And no matter how much it hurts right now, I’ll never regret learning what a beautiful, wonderful, loving man you really are.]

Severus’ breath hitched. [I… I am not—]

[You are to me.]

With a broken cry, Severus clutched Harry tight and kissed his forehead. “Oh, Harry. I wish I could be what you need. I… if I could….”

“Ssh. Don’t worry about it. I’m glad to have you as my friend, Severus.”

Tears fell hard and fast into Harry’s hair. “I am glad to have you as well.”

“Then let it go, Sev. There’s no point in hating him for it. The past is over and done with and he does care about us, in his way.”

Severus sighed and buried his face against Harry’s shoulder. “Harry, you are a far better man than I.” He moved back and gave the young man a sad smile. “Very well. I will… try to move past it, for you.”

Dumbledore sniffled and dabbed at his eyes. “I am sorry, my boys, for all the pain I have caused you. Perhaps it was a sacrifice of the few to save the many, but that means little when those few I sacrificed are the two men I care most about in the world, and I am faced with the blunt truth of what my decisions have cost you both. I… I am truly sorry.”

Severus stared at the old man for a long time, his eyes sharp and rimmed with tears. Then Harry pressed a gentle kiss into his shoulder, and he relented with a nod. It wasn’t much of a step towards forgiveness, but it was a start. Time would heal the rest.

Severus sighed and guided Harry onto his back, drawing away once he was lying down, but he must have felt the sharp wave of grief and loneliness that cut Harry to the quick. With an anguished look, he lay beside Harry and cradled the young man’s head against his heart.

Severus’ voice whispered in Harry’s mind, soft and heavy with sorrow, [I can do no more, little one, but if you wish it, for tonight, I will hold you while you sleep and chase away the pain.]

Harry breathed Severus’ name and curled up against him. [Hold me. Even if you can never... never c-care, the only time I feel safe is when I’m in your arms.]

Severus’ arms tightened around him. [Oh, Harry. If I... I wish....]

[Ssh. Don’t tear yourself to bits over it, Sev. This is enough.]

Severus slipped a hand into Harry’s curls and held him tight. “I am here, Harry. I am with you. Raise your shields and go to sleep. I will watch over you.”

“And w-wake me right away if something goes wrong?”
“Of course. I have had too many close calls with death in the past year. I would not like to experience another.”

“It’s not just that, Severus. If he senses your presence….”

Severus shuddered. “Yes. I will cancel the monitoring spell and wake you the instant I sense trouble.”

“Good.”

Harry curled his fingers into Severus’ nightshirt and focused on building his shields. It took time to structure them with so much grief flooding his spirit, but Severus’ gentle words and strong arms slowly drove the sharpest edge of pain away. After several moments of effort, solid walls enclosed Harry’s mind, wrapping him in a thick layer of steel.

[Severus?]

[I am still here, little one. Your walls are strong.]

Harry sensed Severus moving around his mind, checking for weak spots.

[Strengthen the shield over your scar. It is already strong, but if… if your fears are based in reality, I fear you will need to reinforce them here.]

Harry obeyed.

[Good. I think these are as strong as we can make them now.] Within his mind, Severus’ presence took position under his scar and watched for trouble. “I am ready. Try to sleep now, Harry.”

Harry nodded and snuggled close, taking comfort from the sound of Severus’ heartbeat and the feel of gentle fingers in his hair. Soon, he had drifted into dreams.

Severus held Harry close while he slept, emotions wild and confused, age-old fears of intimacy and touch alternating with a desperate wish that he could be what Harry needed. Merlin knew no one had ever cared about Severus so deeply. If not for Hogwarts’ rules against teacher-student relationships, he might have tried despite his phobias. Harry felt so warm, so sweet in his arms, and Severus could not help but long to feel him there more often.

And yet, the fear of losing it all left him paralysed. Try as he might, he could not forget all those he had loved and who had left him broken. He could not forget what had happened the first and last time he said he had given his heart to someone, and the scores of failed attempts afterwards.

Well, he had an entire year to work on his fears. Perhaps by the time Harry graduated….

If he graduated.

A Horcrux. Merlin forbid. Severus stood and stared at the reddish-black lightning bolt shape marking Harry’s scar from the inside of his mental walls. Gods. It certainly looked dark. He lifted a hand and let its aura touch his own.

Severus jerked his hand back with a grimace of horror. Dear gods, the aura on it was like blood.
Blood and death and gore.

If it wasn’t a Horcrux, it was something much like it.

Severus sank to his knees and buried his head in his hands. Oh gods. He couldn’t do this. He
couldn’t lose Harry. Maybe he wasn’t ready for love—he simply couldn’t embrace the idea yet—but
neither could he let the man go. Whether romantically or not, Severus adored him. And he would be
dammed before he let Harry sacrifice himself for the sake of people who didn’t care about him at all.

But what could he do? Everything Harry had said was accurate. Severus might be able to pull out the
Horcrux once they found the spell to do it, but it might destroy Harry in the process. And if Harry’s
scar—if his soul remained intact with the Horcrux attached… the Dark Lord would never perish.
Worse, if they managed to destroy all the soul pieces besides Harry’s and then attempted to kill the
Dark Lord, Riddle might just take over Harry. Indeed, he mightn’t have a choice in the matter, if
Harry’s was the only piece of soul he had remaining.

Severus shuddered and hugged his knees. Merlin, no. Whatever happened, he would die himself
before he let Harry succumb to that fate.

There had to be a way to destroy it without killing Harry. There had to be. They just had to keep
searching the journals, keep researching bonds and soul magic. Severus would search the world over
until he found the way if that’s what it took to save him.

Merlin help him, he just couldn’t let Harry go.

A spark of dreams flickered to life in Harry’s mind. Severus watched, jolted out of his grim thoughts,
as his own form walked into Harry’s dreamspace—a cosy living room Severus had never seen—and
embraced the young man.

“Hey, love,” Harry murmured, kissing Severus’ dream form lightly.

Severus’ breath hitched and his heart thumped. Gods, but he wished he could feel that sweet kiss.
Wished, and dreaded it at once. Merlin, he was a mess.

“How did your experiment go?”

Severus gave Harry a bright smile—brighter than he had ever been capable of. “I believe I managed
it. Of course, we will not know until we test it, but I have a safe sample ready if you would like to try
it.”

Harry grinned. “You mean now? We can start our own family?”

A shock of terror—and a zing of joy—rushed down Severus’ spine. A family? Dream-Severus
reached up to caress Harry’s hair and the real Severus gasped. A slim gold band adorned his dream
image’s bonding finger. Dear gods, Harry was dreaming of them as a bonded couple.

Well, that certainly suggested he felt more than care for Severus.

Severus froze as Harry cupped his dream image’s face and pulled him into a fiery, deep kiss. A surge
of desire built in Severus’ belly at the same time confusion and alarm tore through him. No, no. He
couldn’t be seeing this.

And yet, he couldn’t tear his eyes away.

With the ease of dreams, the next instant, Harry was naked and writhing in Severus’ arms. His lithe
body arched under Severus’ caressing fingertips as his hand trailed down, across pink nipples, over trim, defined abdominals, through a thin trail of dark hair, and kept going.

Oh gods.

Severus’ mouth ran dry as his dream version traced the curve of Harry’s erect shaft, his expression full of happiness. Trust. Love. Gods, what Severus wouldn’t give to feel it in truth.

He swallowed a bolt of desire and stared, unable to look away. His fingers covered Harry’s shiny red head. His slender fingers applied pressure as he moved downwards, drawing a drop of moisture from the tip. The circle of his fingers slipped over his head and down his shaft, and the young man gave a low moan of desire.

“Beautiful,” Dream-Severus said, and dragged his hand the rest of the way down Harry’s erection. The real Severus whimpered, half from the heat throbbing between his legs, and half from sheer terror. Sweet Circe, he couldn’t watch this. Couldn’t look away. Had to stop. Wanted more. Dream-Severus stroked Harry’s erection again languidly, drawing a long, low moan from the man.

“Oh gods, Severus—yes! More.”

“More….” The word jerked Severus out of his trance. No! He couldn’t let himself be so vul—

“Severus?” Albus’ voice dragged him out of the images in Harry’s mind. “Please keep in mind he has no control over his dreams. Whatever you are seeing that is frightening you so, it is only a product of his subconscious mind.”

“I-I can’t watch this, Albus. He’s a student.”

Albus’ eyebrow shot up. “Oh. That kind of dream, hmm? Well, I’m afraid the best advice I can give is to wait it out.”

In the dream, Harry slid his hands down the back of Severus’ trousers and squeezed, and the real Severus let slip a yelp.

“I can’t. I have to stop this before it goes any further!”

“Severus, don’t—”

Severus moved into an active presence in Harry’s mind. Shaking from head-to-toe and breathless with arousal, Severus moved behind Dream-Harry and tapped his shoulder.

“How did you get over there, Severus?”

With a smile, Dream-Harry cupped the real Severus’ face and kissed him with as much passion as he had the dream version of himself. Severus gave a muffled cry and made a half-hearted effort to escape, but… but… Harry tasted good, and his lips were so soft and warm.

And the fear of losing him made Severus want to hold on tight, phobias or no.

Harry’s kiss gentled. He brushed Severus’ hair from his face and cupped his jaw, concern and love warm in his eyes.

“Are you afraid?” Harry tiptoed and kissed Severus’ forehead. “Ssh. It’s all right, Sev. We’ve
wanted this for a while, haven’t we?”

Severus gave a stifled whimper as Harry kissed him again, soft and slow this time. Gentle. Warm. ‘Don’t—oh…’

Strong arms wrapped around him, caressing his back and shoulders, as soft lips caressed his own and drove his fears away. His hands clenched into fists and his breath ran short. He had never felt a kiss like this, so tender, so safe.

‘Don’t stop.’

Harry’s body heat enveloped him, drawing him closer… closer…. Yes. There. With a shaky pant, he threaded his hand into Harry’s hair and caught him up, cradling his warm, naked body in strong arms. Gods, his skin was like silk under Severus’ fingertips. He couldn’t help but caress him, drawing him closer, until their erections touched.

Sweet Merlin. Harry felt so good against him, so right.

Gentle and deliciously slow, Harry’s tongue traced the part of Severus’ lips, and lost to everything but the feel of his love, Severus opened to him. A soft sweep of warmth inside his mouth had Severus quivering and molten down to his core. Dear gods. Kissing Harry was bliss. Heaven. He never wanted to stop.

With a quiet moan, Severus clutched him tighter and delved into the sweetness of Harry’s mouth. ‘Yes.’ He tasted of honey and heat, and Severus ached inside, desperate for more.

But Harry pulled back, a smile on his lips, and the spell was broken.

“Yes,” he breathed against Severus’ lips. “It’s all right. Always going to take care of you, Sev’rus.”

In the short reprieve, Severus’ fears wrenched him back, drowning his desire in cold, icy terror. Too close, too much, too good. It would end—it would break—it always did.

With a pant, Severus stepped back and shook his head. “H-Harry, stop. This is only a dream. I… I am not—I c-cannot….”

Terrible pain filled Harry’s beautiful eyes. “You don’t want me? But I thought… I don’t understand.”

“I am sorry, Harry. I am still a professor.”

“But I’m not your student.”

“I… forgive me, but I still cannot.”

Tears flooded Harry’s eyes and dripped down his face. “A-all right, Severus. If you don’t want me, I… I guess I’ll just…..” With a broken sob, Harry removed his bonding ring and dropped it in Severus’ hand. “I’m sorry, Severus. I tried so hard to be what you need, but in the end, I guess I was never enough.”

“Harry!” Severus reached for him, but he dissolved like smoke, leaving Severus standing alone with a useless bonding ring and a broken heart. “Harry, don’t go….”

A gentle hand shook Severus’ shoulder, jarring him out of Harry’s dreamspace. Albus hovered over him, his eyes full of deep concern. Only when Severus exhaled a shuddering sob did he realise he
was weeping and probably had been for some time.

“Severus, are you well?”

Severus shook his head and trembled violently, his stomach churning with terror and shame. Gods help him, he had kissed Harry. Hadn’t been able to resist him. Granted, it had only been a dream version, but even so, Severus had definitely participated. He had pulled the boy closer, held his naked body tight, and tasted his tongue. And he had liked it, at least until his fears set in.

Merlin forgive him, Harry wasn’t the only one in too deep.

He couldn’t do it. He just couldn’t. Besides being a professor, he simply couldn’t love again. The first time had destroyed him utterly, left him hollow and bleeding even twenty years later. He wouldn’t survive it again.

“I’m sorry, Severus. I tried so hard to be what you need.”

And that was the rub, wasn’t it? Even if Severus could love Harry, he could never be the open, affectionate, trusting partner Harry needed. He couldn’t heal Harry’s wounds, and his own were far too massive for anyone to fix.

Though if anyone could heal him, it would be Harry. And with this added fear of losing him—gods, Severus wanted to cling tight in spite of everything.

He couldn’t let Harry go, and yet he wanted to run. Far and fast and never look back.

Fuck. Sometimes Severus truly hated his own mind.

Suppressing the desire to bang his head against the nearest wall, Severus gathered his wits and tried to pull himself out of this maddening downward spiral. It was only a dream anyway. Harry probably wouldn’t even remember it.

The problem was Severus would. And Harry’s dreams had revealed more than Severus was ready for.

Harry’s mental shields shifted to red, indicative of heavy pain and, potentially, the start of a nightmare.

The bottom dropped out of Severus’ stomach. Shields. Damn. In the simultaneous terror and thrill of Harry’s dream, he had all but forgotten he had entered the boy’s mind for a purpose.

With another deep breath and a bit of reverse Empathy to steady his wild emotions, Severus focused on the boy’s shields again.

Just in time to sense unfamiliar magic seeping through Harry’s walls and slipping beyond them.

“Shite!”

Severus shoved his turmoil aside with a vengeance and searched for the foreign invader. Harry’s shields remained strong and unbreakable, but the sense of a breeze at Severus’ back, like a draft through an old window, warned him something had breached them anyway. How? Where was it coming from?

He sent feelers of his magic into the walls, tracing the leak, and found it under Harry’s scar, situated directly between his eyes. And yet, the shield there remained strong. Nothing could break those
walls, Severus was certain of it.

And that meant this strange, unfamiliar magic wasn’t a leak, but rather originated from Harry himself. Severus racked his brains for an explanation, but before he could conceive of a reasonable possibility, the magic itself provided the answer.

He watched, gobsmacked, as tendrils of golden-white magic reached out of Harry’s mind and flailed about. Severus traced a tendril with his mental eyes and physical at once, watching in shock as it latched onto Albus’ forehead and spread into his core. The old man jumped and rubbed his head, his expression perplexed, then knowing.

A second tendril latched onto Severus’ own mind, increasing his awareness of the boy. The magic felt warm and curious. Non-threatening, but searching, seeking the truth of him out.

Sweet Merlin! Severus recognised that kind of magic. It had been years, but he had read about it extensively while reading of his own natural abilities, and he had never forgotten.

Telepathy! Harry was a natural Telepath, Severus’ opposite and counterpart! Gods help him, how had he missed it for so long?

Just then, a third tendril reached beyond Harry’s mind. Severus wondered if Harry was connecting to Fawkes, but no. The answering pull of magic as the tendril found its target reeked of darkness and death—the same aura Severus had sensed in Harry’s scar, but far more powerful. This evil had a sentient being behind it.

The Dark Lord.

“Sweet mother of Merlin!”

Severus immediately broke his connection to Harry and, once he had his bearings, shook the boy’s shoulders hard.

“Harry! Wake up!”

Harry gasped and clutched at Severus’ shoulder. “What happened? Did he possess me again?”

Severus eased Harry back to the bed and sat, a cold shard of dread spiking in his heart. “Not… exactly. Albus, we have a problem.”

Albus nodded, his eyes worried. “Yes, so I see.”
Chapter Summary

There are two drawings in this chapter. One for their first real kiss, which is my favorite Snarry picture I've ever done so far. I'm super proud of the hands—I didn't have any reference for them, but they turned out pretty. The other image is a graphic to help explain the mind races, I hope. I hope it's clear enough from the text, but just in case, I'm including a diagram. Anyway, enjoy.

Chapter 36

A Problematic Solution

Severus regretted his wording instantly, as Harry’s eyes widened and his breath quickened to the point of hyperventilation.

White-faced and tensed to bolt, Harry cried, “You promised you wouldn’t lock me up! I can’t—I can’t bear it. D-don’t.”

Severus brought his frightened friend into his arms and stroked his hair. “Harry, peace. We are not going to imprison you. We have simply discovered you are a natural Telepath.” He shook his head wryly, irritated at his own failure to piece together the signs. “I should have known you were an open-type mind race. Your struggles with Occlumency should have made it blatantly obvious.”

“A Telepath?” Harry frowned and rubbed his eyes. “No, that’s wrong. I’m an Empath.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “You knew?”

Harry blushed and lowered his head. “… I was afraid you’d think I was trying to… to break your privacy if I told you. I’d just worked up the courage to tell you when I had that dream last term and everything fell apart. And I’ve been too afraid to say anything since.”

Albus rubbed his beard thoughtfully. “Hmm. How did you discover that you are an Empath, Harry?”

“Um… well, Luna told me about it.” Severus knew Harry had utilised his half-lies to cover the truth, but let it go. The boy had mentioned a desire to protect his odd friend from becoming a part of Albus’ ‘collection’ before.

Albus toyed with his beard, his eyes both piercing and sad. So the old man knew too.

“Ah,” he said after a moment. “Well, what gave you the idea that you fit the description, Harry, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Harry winced. “You w-won’t hate me, Severus?”

“No. You cannot help it.”
Harry sighed and turned into his arm. “I… I was so afraid.”

“I am here, Harry.” Severus held him against his side and ran his fingers through Harry’s hair. “Tell us what happened.”

“R-right. Well, it started around the beginning of last year, I think, or maybe a bit later.”

Severus frowned. “As early as your sixth year? It should not have started until you came of age.”

Bitterness edged Harry’s reply. “Yeah, well, I’m the exception to every rule, aren’t I?”

“Perhaps Tom’s actions at the Department of Mysteries triggered your abilities early, Harry,” said Albus. “Yes, the more I think of it, the more I believe it would have to have done. Especially if you truly are a Horcrux.”

Harry looked away and wrapped his arms around his chest. Severus held him tight against his side and kept the darkest of his revelations secret, for now. At least until Harry had calmed somewhat and could better cope with the news.

Severus murmured, “What made you believe you are an Empath, Harry?”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “R-right. Well, at first, I started feeling people’s emotions and could tell if they were lying. Then, a couple of weeks after we moved into the Chamber, Sev, I started hearing people’s thoughts at the same time. I even heard yours despite your natural abilities, maybe because we trained mind magic together, or just because I wanted to understand you so much.” He ducked his head and blushed. “I… I tried to Occlude it out, but it hasn’t worked very well yet.”

Albus nodded, still stroking his beard in thought. “It seems you have a particularly strong talent if Occlumency cannot block it. Given the fact that Severus trained you, if Occluding to his standard does not block your powers, there is a good chance it never will. Severus is much the same, in that he cannot cease Occluding. He has learned to work around it, to feel and react in spite of it, but nevertheless, he cannot drop his shields. It takes a Legilimens of uncommon power to read much of anything of his thoughts. The fact that you have done—often—is further indication that your abilities run along a similar vein, and it is highly unlikely you will be able to… turn them off, so to speak.”

Harry’s shoulders slumped. “You mean I’ll always hear their thoughts? Even if I don’t want to?”

“Most likely. However, with time, I believe you will learn to tune it out, much as Severus has learned to function and feel in spite of his constant shielding.”

Severus ran his fingers through Harry’s hair. “I will work with you to ease the feedback from your abilities if you wish. Perhaps a more focused form of Occlumency will help to lower the strength of foreign emotions and thoughts, if not stop them completely.”

Harry gave him a weak smile. “Okay. It’s worth a try anyway.”

“Yes.”

Albus folded his hands in his lap and leaned back in his chair. “Harry, I am assuming you were reading me in my office earlier?”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. It’s just common sense when….”

“When I’ve given you plenty of reason not to trust me.” Albus gave him a sad smile. “I have nothing to hide. However, this, and your ability to read Severus despite his powers proves our earlier theory
concerning your mental race. You are not an Empath, Harry. Or rather, you are not only an Empath, I should say.”

Harry frowned. “But… but then—I don’t understand.”

“You are a Telepath, Harry,” Severus said. “Empaths do not hear thoughts.”

“Oh. I… I’m confused.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s back. “I will attempt to explain. You do recall the three branches of mind magic from the beginning of our second round of Occlumency lessons?”

Harry nodded. “Empathy, Legilimency, and Occlumency.”

“Yes. Emotion, intuition, and blocking. And while Legilimency and Occlumency can be trained, there are also six types of mind races which can be inherited at birth. You know this much already, yes?”

Harry nodded. “Well, I knew there were natural mind races. I didn’t realise there were six kinds. We’re all natural mind races, right? I mean you, me, and the headmaster.”

“Yes. Zopaths, Telepaths, and Empaths are born, not made. Much like the Sight, our skills cannot be trained unless one is born with them.”

Harry rubbed his chin, brow furrowed. “Then why can we learn Legilimency and Occlumency, but not the others?”

“Because Legilimency and Occlumency are the lowest ranking skills in the hierarchy of mind magic. Among inborn races, they are the bottom tier: the least powerful and most common, though all mind races are rare.” Severus gave his companions a wry look. “Usually. It is highly irregular to have all three types of Mind Mages in the same room.”

“Tell me about the different races, Sev,” Harry asked, his expression pensive. “I’ve never found any information on anything besides Legilimentes, Oclumentes, and Empaths.”

“Because the other branches of mind magic are exceedingly rare, but I will tell you what I know.” Severus assumed the role of the instructor, but still held Harry against his side. “There are three tiers of natural mental magic, and two branches on each level. Legilimentes and Oclumentes make up the first tier. They have only one natural skillset, though it is possible for them to learn the opposite practice, but they will never be a mind mage, no matter how much they train.”

Harry paused a moment, thinking over the information. Severus kept quiet to let him come to his own conclusions.

“Ah. I understand. Legilimentes and Oclumentes can’t become mind mages because they can’t learn Empathy, right?”

Severus nodded. “One needs all three branches to be a mind mage; however a tier one natural race can train in the opposite discipline to become a Mentipath—masters of Occlumency and Legilimency. All trained mind masters with no natural races are Mentipaths as well.”

“I think I understand. So what’s the next tier?”

“Empathy. Natural Empaths also have only one skillset, but they can learn the other disciplines and become mind mages. However, neither branch of Empath can learn the methods of the opposite
Harry’s mouth fell open. “The opposite type? You mean there’s more than one kind of Empath?”

Severus chuckled softly. “I am your opposite, so yes. As there are three tiers of mind magic, there are also two sides on every tier: open and closed. Legilimency, traditional Empathy, and Telepathy fall on the open side of the spectrum: minds which are open to reading and influencing other minds. Occlumency, reverse Empathy, and Zopathy are the closed races: minds which are protected from outside influence.”

“So, reverse Empathy is the opposite of my kind of Empathy, like Occlumency is to Legilimency?” Severus nodded.

“Oh. How does that work?”

Severus leaned back in his chair, struggling for the words to explain. “It works the same way as traditional Empathy, in the end. Both types of Empaths use their skills to read the emotions and intent of others; however, each goes about it in a different way. For open Empaths, to read others is as natural as breathing. A traditional Empath simply has to reach for the emotions of others, and they are there.” He gave Harry a searching look. “You, I suspect, do not even need to reach.”

Harry flushed and ducked his head. “I’m sorry. I try not to invade your privacy, but it’s hard not to feel it.”

“If our resident Telepath was any other person in Hogwarts save Albus, I would turn in my resignation immediately and go into hiding. Indeed, I would have little choice.” Severus brushed a kiss against Harry’s temple. “But I trust you. I know you will not hurt me.”

Harry turned into him and closed his eyes, his expression soft despite the tense set of his shoulders. “I care about you far too much to hurt you.”

“I know.” Severus held him close and lamented that his stunted emotions had hurt his one true friend. “Forgive me, Harry. I did not intend to cause you pain.”

Harry nuzzled Severus’ chest and sighed. “Touch me if you want to, Severus. Even if it hurts, I would still rather have what affection you can give me than none at all.”

Severus tucked Harry’s head under his chin and hoped his embrace could soothe him, wished he could offer him more.

“You were telling me how your Empathy works?”

“Ah.” Severus rubbed Harry’s side and sought out his friend’s emotional signals. “Well, for you, Empathy is natural. You are already open to the world. For a reverse Empath, to read others requires an additional step. First, I must lower my shields as much as I can, at least to that person. Then, as I am not open as you are, I must take a… a sample of their emotions unto myself. A bit of their feelings in a controlled environment.”

“So, if I’m understanding you correctly, since you’re not open, you have to draw a sample of their emotions behind your shields to read them?”

“Yes. It increases the risk of detection, but then I am not constantly bombarded by others’ emotions. Each side has its advantages and disadvantages, I suppose.”
“Yeah.” Harry sat up and crossed his arms over his waist. “So the third tier must be Zopathy and Telepathy then.”

“It is indeed,” said Albus with a nod. “The most powerful and rarest of all the mental races. And the two of you are even more powerful than most third tier races, to the best of my knowledge.”

“Lovely,” Harry said with a sigh. “One more complication in an already ridiculously complex life.”

Severus gave him a wry look. “I do understand, at least in this.”

Harry smiled sadly and laid his head against Severus’ arm. “You do. So, tell me about the third tier races, then.”

“We are the most powerful mind mages in existence, and we each have unique abilities found nowhere outside our respective races. Natural Zopaths, like myself, are the closed type of this tier. We are skilled in blocking all forms of mental and emotional intrusion, obviously, and are the only mind race capable of draining a person’s emotions.”

“Draining them?”

“The next level of reverse Empathy. Rather than taking a portion of your emotions to read them, I am able to bleed your emotions into myself entirely. Then, I will feel your emotions, but you feel them less acutely. I can drain any emotion, but I have never used the ability except in extreme circumstances—when you were on the tower earlier this evening, for example. I bled your pain into me in attempt to save your life.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Oh! I wondered why I was suddenly hurting less.” He winced. “So you suffered for me?”

Severus stroked Harry’s cheek. “I would do anytime you need it, but no. Do not forget I am also a natural Occlumens. I blocked your drained emotions so they did not incapacitate me and used my trained skills as a Legilimens to send you peace and warmth. Unfortunately, I am not as skilled with projecting emotions—that is a skill of your race, natural Telepaths.”

“What does that mean? What’s a Telepath?”

“You are the most powerful of the open-type races, possessing the innate skills of Legilimency and Empathy. You have the ability to read minds and emotions without a spell, advanced powers with Legilimency such as you utilised against me last term when... when I had failed you so badly, the powers of telepathic communication, and the ability to project any emotion you wish onto others.”
“We should teach you to access your emotion altering skills as soon as possible, Harry,” said Albus with a grim nod. “Besides the fact that it will help you become a better healer if you are able to calm your patients without effort, it would be immensely useful in battle.”

Harry grimaced. “Well, that would certainly explain why I learned Legilimency within ten seconds of trying the first time, but I don’t like the idea of manipulating others’ emotions.”

“Nor do I,” Severus confessed. “But Albus is right that we could use it against the Dark Lord when we meet again. Combined, I could drain his positive emotions at the same time you flood him with terror and uncertainty. Potentially, we could incapacitate him by virtue of his emotions alone. However, we will need to practise, perhaps against Albus. Riddle has the ability to subvert us, if he realises what we have done in time.”

“I… well, I guess that makes sense. It would make the bastard less dangerous if he’s gibbering in terror.” Harry sighed. “I still don’t like it.”

“Even if it saves lives?”

Harry snorted. “Severus, Merlin, now you sound like Dumbledore.” He sighed and gave the man a grim nod. “But you’re right. I’ll do it.”

Severus held Harry tight and kissed the top of his head. “I will aid you every step of the way.”

“T-thanks, Sev.” Harry took a deep breath and brought the discussion back around to the issue of his race and powers. “So since I’m an open-type race, that’s why I had so much trouble with Occlumency?”

“Yes. Blocking is difficult for you.”

“Does that mean Legilimency is a challenge for you, Sev?”

Severus gave a low laugh. “Well, it did once. I have since trained my mind well enough that the limitations of my race are no longer an issue, but when I was learning—Merlin! I have never had so much trouble with a subject in all my life. That is also why the spell I attempted to perform on you tonight was so difficult. It is far more challenging for Zopaths than for races with traditional
Empathy.”

Harry nodded. “Well, that makes me feel a bit better about my struggles in Occlumency.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulders. “It was never your fault.”

Harry leaned closer and took Severus’ other hand, bringing it to rest in his lap. “It’s okay, Sev, and I think I understand the races now, but what does all this mean in the grand scheme of things? Why is the fact that I’m a Telepath so concerning? I don’t understand why it’s a bad thing, especially if we can use my abilities to incapacitate Riddle. I would think the two of you would be leaping for joy.”

Severus closed his eyes and rubbed Harry’s hand. “Under normal circumstances, it would be excellent news. As it stands, however, you have an unbreakable link to Riddle, one we cannot circumvent, and your Telepathy is enabling your Imperius dreams.”

“The scar.”

“Yes.” Severus took Harry’s hands in his own. “Harry, I… I tested it while I was within your mind. And… you were correct.”

Harry froze. “It’s really a horcrux?”

Severus’ throat tightened and tears stung his eyelids. “Y-yes.”

“Dear gods,” Albus breathed.

Harry buried his head into Severus’ chest. “I’m sorry. So sorry. Don’t want to leave you alone.”

Severus held him so tight, he thought he heard ribs crack, but damned if he would let up an inch. He couldn’t let go. He needed Harry close.

“You shan’t! Perhaps we do not yet know a way to save you, but I swear I will not let you die! I will… I will invent a spell to save you, if I must.” He held Harry’s head against his shoulder and rocked him close. “I refuse to let you go.”

Harry wept quietly in Severus’ arms. Severus bled his grief away and held him, soothing the boy with his affection and loyalty.

“Ssh. I know you are frightened, little one, but I swear I will save you. I will drag your soul back by its arse if I must.”

Harry gave a soft, tearful chuckle and sat, wiping his eyes. “O-okay. We… we’ll find a way together.”

Severus linked his hand with Harry’s. “Yes.”

Harry took a deep breath and steadied himself. “So, my scar is a H-Horcrux and I can’t stop the dreams. Now what?”

“Now, we discuss plans of action,” Albus explained, his expression grim. “As long as the horcrux remains, you will connect to Riddle every time you sleep. In deep sleep, Harry, you are not aware enough to recognise it as a threat, but hope is not lost.” With a sad shake of his head, he motioned for the men to follow him back into the office. “Come. I think we shall need Phineas’ help for this discussion.”

Severus and Harry followed Albus back into the main office and settled on the conjured sofa, Harry
ensconced in Severus’ embrace and staring listlessly at the floor.

“Boys,” Albus said as he took his office chair, “I am afraid there is only one way around this
difficulty now.”

Severus glared. “Around it? Around a horcrux link and the powers of a Telepath? Albus, you’ve
overdosed on your lemon drops again.”

Harry snorted in spite of his grief.

Phineas gasped. “Wait, what is this about a horcrux? And who is a Telepath?”

“I am,” said Harry with a sniffle. “I’m both. A horcrux and a Telepath. My scar… it’s connecting me
to Riddle in my sleep.”


“I am not giving up,” Severus said, scowling. “I swear, I will save him.” He turned his glare on
Albus. “And with that settled, explain yourself, old man. There is no way to train a Telepath to block
such a deeply-ingrained link or to suppress his powers while unconscious.”

“No, there is no way to train or suppress his natural abilities, but….,” Albus sighed and gave Severus
an apologetic look.

Severus’ breath stilled—he had seen that expression far too many times not to know it always
preceded something singularly unpleasant. He swallowed a rush of fear and held tightly to Harry’s
hand. “But…?”

Albus closed his eyes as if preparing himself for a blow. “But if a natural Zopath or Occlumens
shared enough magic with Harry, he might be able to block the connection to Tom externally.”

Severus went rigid and grabbed the arms of his chair. His heart thundered in his ears and his vision
greyed around the edges. No. He couldn’t. Not him. Albus couldn’t possibly be asking him to…
to… no!

“A-A-Albus, h-have you lost the p-plot?”

“Of course he has, years ago,” said Harry, his eyes on Severus and full of worry, “but why should
that terrify you half out of your wits, Severus?”

Albus looked away. Severus struggled to answer his question, but could only form a strangled
whimper.

Phineas Nigellus sighed and took over. “Harry, I am sorry. The only way to share that kind of magic
is a deep, lifelong… bond.”

Harry went wraith-white. “You mean…?”

The portrait nodded, and Harry sank to his knees.

“Oh gods.” Harry choked back a sob and buried his head in his hand. “I can’t—can’t ask that of you,
S-Severus. No. It’s not—it’s not even legal, is it?”

Albus nodded. “It is legal. If Severus was still teaching you potions, it would absolutely go against
school policy. However, since he is not your professor but simply a professor at your school, there
are no laws against it.”
“But Severus does teach me,” Harry insisted.

“He has no control over your marks, Harry, and that is what defines a professor in the legal sense. There is no law or rule preventing a bonding between you.”

Severus gave another strangled cry and stared at Albus, wide-eyed and heart thundering.

Albus winced. “Severus—dear boy, breathe. No one is forcing you into this. If you cannot bear it, then we will simply restrain Harry at night.”

Harry buried his head in his knees and wept, heart-breaking sobs of sheer anguish. “Oh gods. No, no. I can’t do this.”

Albus cringed and looked between the two devastated, terrified men with his eyes full of pain and confusion.

“Harry, I don’t understand. I… I had the impression that you care deeply for Severus.”

Harry dragged his head up, and Severus winced at the pain ravaging his features. “I do. And that’s exactly why I can’t force him into a bond with me.”

He closed his eyes around tears and spoke in a broken voice rife with pain. “He can’t love me, sir. I don’t know why he’s so afraid of it—he couldn’t tell me—but he can’t love. So even if Severus did agree to a bond—and judging by the look of him, there’s no chance in hell of that—it would always be nothing more than a marriage of convenience. I would… I would… f-fall, but he won’t, and I’ll go to my grave knowing… I forced him to….”

He took a ragged breath and gave Albus a tear-soaked glare. “I know it was you. I know you led me to the Mirror, and I know you were there. If this is your way of trying to make my bloody dreams come true, then fuck you!”

Albus gasped, “Harry!”

“No, I won’t take it back! You… I can forgive my past, but now you’re fucking with my entire godsdamned life—not that there’s much of it left, but still! And Severus’ life—there’s no reason why he should die in the war, but if we’re bonded—he’ll feel the pain of it all his life when I’m… after….” He jerked a hand across his eyes. “And all because it fits in your little schemes. I-I can’t. I won’t subject us both to a life of utter misery because you think it’s convenient, you conniving bastard!”

Albus dropped his head into his hands and trembled. In all his years working under the general of the Light, Severus had never seen him so shaken.

Harry stood, swaying and eyes wild with grief. “I won’t let you manipulate Severus into this. I’ll… I’ll just… go stay somewhere I can’t hurt anyone.”

Albus looked up, tears shining on his lashes. Dear gods. Severus had never seen the man cry either.

“But, Harry, that does nothing to protect you.”

Harry cried out in a pain-ravaged rasp, “Then so be it! It won’t be long before that won’t matter anymore anyway, and if my only alternative is to force Severus to do something that renders him into this state of horror—” He choked on a sob and turned away. “I won’t do it. I won’t be the one to break him a second time.”
He started towards the door, and Severus’ world crashed to a halt. Harry was a strong man and had resilience and bravery Severus could not deny. And yet, over the course of two days, he had lost everyone and everything that mattered to him but Longbottom, Thomas, Lovegood, and a few other friends. Harry could hardly breathe for his pain—Severus didn’t need to use his reverse Empathy to see it. Every breath came at the cost of blood for him. And as much as Harry loved his friends, they hadn’t the power to sustain him through this kind of agony.

If Severus let Harry leave like this, he feared it would be the final nail in the boy’s coffin. Harry might vanish. Maybe even die. He’d been suicidal on the tower—with this added in, and with the knowledge that he was indeed a horcrux, Severus doubted he would last the week.

Shite, no. He couldn’t stand for that. He couldn’t let Harry go, believing Severus would sooner let him die than bond to him. The idea had terrified him, but now, faced with the idea of losing Harry forever… gods. He had never known true fear until that moment.

Through a wall of panic, Severus jerked to his feet, dashed across the room, and caught the sobbing boy into his arms.

“Don’t,” he cried. “Don’t go. Please!”

Harry pushed on Severus’ chest, trying to escape, but sorrow had weakened him. “No. L-let me go. You can’t… I can’t terrify you like this. I can’t hurt you.”

“And I cannot let you leave me!” Severus slipped a hand into Harry’s hair and held him close. “Ssh. I am here. I will not deny the idea of bonding terrified me at first, but this—this is worse. I cannot watch you suffer like this.”

Harry pulled back with a snarl. “You’re going to bond with me because the fear of losing me is worse?”

Severus flinched. In retrospect, he had worded that badly.

“No, Harry, please. I… it is not simply because I am afraid.”

Harry gave a harsh, bitter laugh. “Don’t try to tell me you want me now! You’ve made it perfectly clear that you don’t. For Merlin’s sake, you can hardly bear for me to touch you and you’re going to bond with me? You know we have to consummate a bond, right? You’d have to… and you can’t even stand to… no. I repulse you. And I can’t bear a bond like that. It hurts too damn much.”

“Harry….” Severus held onto him so tight, he could barely breathe. “Please. I feel many things when you touch me, but revulsion is not—has never been—one of them.”

Harry’s voice broke. “Severus, no. I can’t do this to you. You’re so scared, and I—”

Severus cupped Harry’s face, stopping his protests with a gentle kiss to his temple. “Ssh. Harry, stay. Stay here just a moment and trust me. Please.”

Tears poured down Harry’s face, but he nodded. Severus held him tight, cradling Harry’s head against his shoulder and petting his hair.

“I have you,” Severus murmured. “It will be all right now.”

Harry whimpered softly and buried his face in Severus’ shoulder. “Sev….”

“I am here, little one. I will not leave you.”
Harry nodded and held Severus tight, shaking in his arms.

Over Harry’s head, Severus fixed the headmaster with a piercing gaze. “Albus, you’re quite sure this is legal? One misstep and the Ministry will not hesitate to lock me in Azkaban and throw away the key.”

Albus nodded, eyes terribly sad. “I am positive, Severus, or I would never dare suggest it. I confess when I learned of Harry’s feelings, I consulted the school laws to see if it was even a possibility, and then the laws of Wizarding Britain as a whole. It is legal, my boy. The laws were written in such a way to protect minors and to prevent favouritism. As Harry is neither a minor nor are you his professor, at least not of any graded Hogwarts subject, you are free to bond with one another, if you so choose.”

Harry leaned away from Severus, his eyes sharp with anger as he stared Albus down. “You know damn well the school governors and the Ministry won’t accept that, sir. They see me as their pet hero and Severus as their scapegoat. They’ll go mad at the thought that we’re together and they have no power to plan out my life for me any longer.”

Albus winced at the subtle slap. “They may indeed try to cause trouble for you, Harry, but as there is no law or rule barring your relationship, they have no legal grounds for a case. They can shout and cajole, but they cannot take any legal action against either you or Severus for loving each other as two consenting adults. Particularly with a life-bond, there is nothing they can do. It cannot be broken.”

“Except by death,” said Severus in a grim voice.

Harry shook his head. “If it puts his life in danger, I’m not doing it.”

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“Then I suppose we shall need to go one level deeper,” said Albus with a sigh. “A soul bond is unbreakable by even death. The Ministry would not dare interfere, and anyone foolish enough to attempt it would regret it long before they could do any damage. Bonded souls fight to protect one another.” He froze, and a glint entered his eyes. “Oh! And perhaps that is the key to more than one of our current difficulties.”

Harry paled. “But that bond is eternal, sir.”

“Yes, Harry. But it may be the only way to ensure you both survive. Severus… with a soul bond—if you fought for Harry’s soul when the horcrux is removed, it might just be enough to keep him whole.”

Severus’ breath hitched. “Dear Merlin. It… Albus, I think you are right.”

And that made his decision clear. If bonding their souls was the only way to save Harry, then so be it. He would deal with his phobias and issues as they came, but to let Harry die when Severus had a chance to save him was unconscionable.

Harry whimpered. “Oh gods. Oh… I can’t. Severus can’t—it would be too cruel.”

Severus turned Harry back towards him and searched his face, gently brushing his tears away. “Harry, if I were willing to bond with you, would you accept me?”

Harry looked away. “I c-can’t force this on you.”

“No. Soul bonds cannot be forced. You know that. You have done enough research into the subject to be quite the expert.”
Harry winced and nodded. “We can’t. If you aren’t sure, especially with a horcrux involved, it would be a disaster, Sev.”

Severus cupped Harry’s face and guided him close. “Look at me, Harry. If I offered myself to you, with no coercion and on my own will, would you accept me?”

Harry opened his eyes, and the anguish in them broke Severus’ heart. “If I believed for a second that you wanted me, that there was something more than saving my life or obligation involved, I wouldn’t hesitate.” Tears flooded his eyes again. “But there’s not, and you don’t.”

“Ssh. That is not quite true.”

Harry gave a bitter, broken laugh. “Friends don’t soul-bond, Severus. You… you don’t want me. You can’t.”

“Harry….”

Severus gave up trying to convince him with words. Harry’s heart was simply too broken, his mindset too Gryffindor to reach with anything other than action. A show of affection. Severus could think of no other way to do so but with a kiss. A real kiss from the depths of his heart, one that would show his broken-hearted friend the spark under his phobias.

The mere thought left him quaking and cold, but at the same time, he couldn’t deny that Harry’s kisses, first in his quarters and then in his dreams, had awakened a keening, desperate ache for more inside him.

The idea of loving Harry as a husband—gods, Severus didn’t know if he could. But he had to try. He wanted to try, as much as it surprised him. Harry was his best friend and the only man who had ever offered him his heart.

If ever there was a chance for Severus to love again, this was it.

With a deep breath to gather his courage, he gently tilted Harry’s chin up and kissed him, soft and light, but full on the mouth. Fear and desire warred within him, but he hardly had time to register it before Harry gave a strangled cry and jerked back.

“No! D-don’t force this, Severus,” Harry pleaded, eyes wide and tears pouring down his face. “Please, please don’t force yourself to care. I can’t do that to you. I feel bad enough that you’ve been cornered into this already, and it h-hurts me too.”

Severus cradled Harry’s face and looked into his eyes. [I am not forcing myself, Harry. Do you remember your dream?]

Harry’s breath hitched. [Dream?]

[You dreamed while I was connected to your mind and… it surprised me, to say the least.] Severus showed him his memory of the two of them wrapped in each other’s arms, golden rings gracing their fingers. [I was stunned. And then….] He revealed the image of Harry naked and panting into dream-Severus’ throat, and a shocked Severus interrupting. [You kissed me instead of the dream version of myself. Hard.]

Harry froze. “Oh gods. Severus, I’m so sorry.”

[You cannot control your dreams, Harry. Ssh.] Severus swallowed a wave of fear and kissed Harry’s forehead.
“Stop, Severus. I can feel your fear. I know you don’t want this.”

“Do you feel *everything* I am feeling, Harry?”

Harry swallowed hard and looked up at him, tearful green eyes full of deep sorrow and a tiny flicker of hope. “E-everything? There… it’s not just fear?”

“No.” Severus caressed Harry’s chin and whispered into his mind. [I will admit I am afraid, of course I am—I think even a man who did not have such phobias as I do would be afraid given all we have learned tonight.]

Harry nodded, his eyes shimmering with grief. “Y-yeah. I’m scared too.”

Severus leaned down so the tips of their noses touched. “Yes, it is to be expected. But fear is not the only emotion I am experiencing now, Harry. Can you feel it?”

With a shaky breath and a prayer for courage, Severus closed his eyes and kissed Harry with shy, trembling lips. Harry whimpered and clutched at Severus’ robes. Severus waited, waited, hoping Harry would accept him… and *there*. Soft lips caressed his own. Gentle fingers wove through his hair. A trembling hand tangled itself in his nightshirt and pulled him closer.

Thank Merlin, Harry hadn’t pushed him away. With a soft sigh, Severus eased into his partner’s touch and the welling of warmth in his heart, and Harry melted in his arms.

‘*Oh, Harry…’*

Gods, even with Severus’ phobias, kissing Harry left him breathless and shaking with sheer desire. Nothing had ever felt so good, so soft, so *right*.

Even so, Harry was drowning in grief.

“It hurts,” he breathed against Severus’ mouth. “I w-want this, but you… you’re just *forcing* it to keep me alive.”

“No,” Severus caressed Harry’s cheek, tracing over soft skin and rough stubble. “Look into my eyes, Harry.”

Harry wiped a scourge of sorrow from his face and obeyed, though more tears followed. Severus wiped them away and showed him their dream kisses. The first one that had startled and shocked him, and the second one he hadn’t been able to help but return. Severus watched as his memory self parted his lips for Harry’s kisses and tugged him closer, a soft moan of pleasure low in his throat. The sight sent an undeniable bolt of arousal through him, and Severus closed his eyes, ending the replay. Merlin, but he didn’t want to be turned on in front of Albus.

Harry’s hands slipped into Severus’ hair. Severus opened his eyes to see wonder and hope flicker to life in Harry’s gaze.

“Sev’rus, it… it’s true?”

“Did you see the markers of a fantasy or false memory, Harry?”

“N-no.” He breathed the word against Severus’ lips and sent a shockwave of pleasure through the man. “Oh. Oh, I feel it.”

Severus brushed a gentle hand through Harry’s curls. “You feel what I do, beyond my fears?”
“Yeah.”

Tentatively, Harry leaned up and pressed their lips together. Severus couldn’t help a zing of alarm, but he quelled it by taking control, and a tingling rush of desire soon overpowered his hesitation. There. As long as he had the reins, perhaps he wouldn’t be so terrified to touch Harry, to be touched by him, even knowing Harry loved him. Severus brushed tears away as he kissed his best friend, the one man he had ever truly trusted.

Harry clutched at Severus’ shirt and trembled under his hands.

“Please,” he whispered as he pulled away. “Please don’t do this if you can’t… if you don’t at least want to care. I’m in too deep for it not to break me into a million pieces. And a soul bond would never take without at least the desire to love me on your side, especially if the actual emotion isn’t there yet.”

“I know.” Severus fought back a lingering wave of dread and tucked Harry into his arms. “I-I won’t deny that I am afraid, Harry.” He leaned down to whisper, “But if there is anyone I would choose, if anyone can heal me, it is you. I cannot… promise what you are hoping for. I do not know if I am capable of it. But you—I have come closer to it with you than with anyone ever before. I do not know if I can overcome my fears, but I will try, Harry. For you, I will try.”

Harry choked back tears and buried his head into Severus’ chest. Severus held him, fighting back his phobias, and holding onto the surge of hope Harry’s love brought.

“Harry, I will give you everything of me that I can. Is it enough? Am I enough?”

Harry leaned back and cupped Severus’ face. “Enough? You’re everything I want.” He traced his thumbs over Severus’ cheekbones and gazed into his eyes. “If we… do this, will you try to make this… real for me? At least, as much as you can?”

Severus swallowed hard and tried to still his shaking. “It is real to me, Harry. As much as it is to you.” He laid his forehead against Harry’s. “I am not… ready for what you feel yet, but I do wish to
learn to be. I do wish to give you a true future with me, though it will take time before I am able. Will you be patient and try to understand my fears until then?"

Harry tiptoed and pressed a light kiss to the corner of Severus’ lips. Ice and fire mingled in his blood from the soft touch, but Severus did not move away. He had to try. He wanted to try. Merlin help him, but he wanted to be happy. He wanted Harry to be happy too.

“Yeah, Sev,” Harry murmured. “I promise to take care of you.”

At the repetition of Harry’s dream words, a shiver of dread spread from the base Severus’ his neck and down to his toes. Had it been prophetic? Gods, he hoped not. That dream hadn’t ended well at all. Were they making a mistake?

Harry looked up at him, verdant eyes full of fear and breaking hope, and Severus let his terror go. No. His fears would become a self-fulfilling prophecy if he let them, and he had something the Severus in the dream hadn’t: the desire to make their bond, their partnership work. He wanted a real marriage—love, a family, a home with his mate. Maybe children someday when they were ready for them, assuming they both survived the war.

The war. Oh gods.

Another bolt of dread filled Severus with resolution. They would never have the chance to fulfil his dreams if Severus didn’t take the leap now. Harry would die without him and leave Severus desolate and broken forever.

No. Damned if he would let his phobias cost him the best friend he had ever known, his only true partner, and his one chance at redemption. Damned if he would let Harry die because of his past, or even let him suffer. Severus wanted him too, and by gods, he would make this work, for the future he had always dreamed of but never believed would happen. Harry had given him the chance. Now Severus only had to give Harry himself.

“Forgive me,” Severus whispered, and caught Harry close. “I only let my fears wander too far. I am willing, Harry.”

But the smile Harry gave him was uncertain at best, and Severus worried he had planted a seed of doubt in his bondmate’s mind before they even took their vows.

‘Gods, help me make him happy. Help me to be enough for him.’

With a sigh, he pressed a gentle kiss to Harry’s forehead and prayed it would ease his fears, but Harry only shook harder. Well, Severus supposed it was to be expected. They still had much to overcome.

Perhaps, if he made the bonding feel more real, something they both wanted, it would help. Severus had told him, but he knew all too well that words only went so far. Somehow, he would need to find a way to show his fearful fiancé that he wanted this too.

‘Fiancé. Dear gods. I have a fiancé.’

A rush of giddy hope flooded his chest at the same time as icy fear that he would fuck everything up. Harry was so fragile, so broken, and he needed Severus desperately. Merlin help him, Severus was so terrified, but so was Harry. He trembled in Severus’ arms, staring up at him with eyes wide with wary confusion.

No. He would not let Harry doubt him.
Firming his resolve, he leaned down and kissed Harry with all the trust and affection he could show. It mightn’t be love yet, not like Harry wanted, but Severus did care. He did want to love him. Maybe, in time, they could overcome Severus’ limitations and be a true bonded couple. Gods, he hoped so.

He turned them so Albus couldn’t see and hesitantly brushed his tongue against Harry’s parted lips. Harry gasped and clutched at Severus’ shirt, going rigid.

Severus whispered, “I have you, Harry. You are safe here.”

Harry threaded his fingers through Severus’ hair and whispered his name. Merlin. The breathy sound went straight to Severus’ heart, flooding him with warmth and relief. He had never imagined something so simple as the sound of his name could melt him like this. He cupped Harry’s head and brought him closer, offering a sweet, open-mouthed kiss to soothe his fiancé’s fears.

With a soft moan, Harry relaxed against his partner and welcomed him in. [Please, Sev, please let this be real.]

Severus couldn’t reply without eye contact, but he slipped his hand into Harry’s hair and brought him closer, gently tasting inside his mouth before he moved back. Harry panted against him, his face flushed and mouth wet from their kiss, eyes shimmering with hope and undeniable love.

“I am willing,” Severus whispered once more.

Harry looked up, his eyes swimming with tears and uncertainty. “I am too, but… but what if we do this and we can’t save me? Sev, you’ll spend the rest of your life in pain from the bond.”

“Don’t even think it.” Severus cupped Harry’s face and kissed his scar, a prayer and vow all in one. “I will save you.”

“But—”

“Harry, even if the worst happens, if I didn’t at least try, I would never forgive myself.”

Tears slid down Harry’s face. “I don’t want you to suffer.”

Severus pulled him into a close embrace and brushed his tears away. “Then I suppose you had best survive. Even without a bond, I will suffer if….”

Harry leaned into his touch, sniffling and trembling hard. “Okay. I… okay. I don’t know if I can, Sev, but I swear I’ll fight to survive it, for your sake.”

“For yours as well. You deserve a normal life, Harry.” Severus shot Albus a dark look. “One where you are free to be what you wish to be, rather than a living sword against evil.”

Albus winced and looked away.

“I… I’m not even sure I would know what to do with myself.” Harry gave a weak laugh and rested his head against Severus’ chest. “I’d like that. A… a normal life, with you. A chance to be your family, to live by your side and do the things everyone else takes for granted.”

“So would I,” Severus murmured, his heart soft with hope in spite of his fears. Someday, he would overcome them. For Harry’s sake, he would learn to love again.

Harry lifted his head and searched Severus’ eyes. “Y-you’re sure this is what you want, Sev? Not
just to save me, but from a real desire to be my husband? I don’t think a soul bond will take otherwise.”

“I am sure. I will not deny my fears, but neither will I deny myself the hope to overcome them.” Severus whispered against Harry’s hair, “You are that, Harry. My hope, my one chance for happiness. Yes, I want this.”

Harry collapsed into his arms with a sigh. “Then… yes, Severus. Yes, I… I’ll bond with you.”

“Excellent,” said Albus, making both men jump. “Then we’ll just start the ceremony?”

“No.” Severus soothed Harry’s sudden hurt with a soft kiss. “Not yet. Longbottom has been an immense support for Harry over these past few months. Indeed, without him, I am not sure any of us would have survived tonight. I believe he has earned the right to be here with us as a witness.”

Harry gave Severus a tearful smile. “Oh gods. Severus, really?”

Severus rubbed wetness from Harry’s cheek. “He has earned my trust.”

Harry threw his arms around Severus’ neck and hugged him tight. “Thank you. Merlin, thank you.”

A tight knot of worry unwound from Severus’ chest. His first attempt at being a good husband hadn’t gone badly. Perhaps, in time, they would be all right.

“If you will write a letter for him, Harry,” said Albus with a warm smile, “I will have Fawkes carry it and bring Neville back with him.”

“All right.” Harry wiped his eyes and moved to Albus’ desk. “Sir, I… about what I said earlier, when I cursed at you. I’m sorry.”

Albus patted Harry’s shoulder. “On the contrary, Harry, I believe I was far overdue for a tongue-lashing. And it is I who owe you an apology.” He gave Harry a sad smile. “I would like you to know, though, that I did not suggest this for convenience. It is true that Severus can block your mind externally and thus spare you this torment every night, but I truly hoped you could heal each other too. I do care about you, Harry.”

“I know.” Harry took a deep breath and leaned over the desk. “Do you have a quill and parchment?”

“Right here.” Albus pushed a piece of parchment towards Harry and handed him the quill and inkpot he used for his own correspondence.

Severus stood beside his fiancé as he wrote, not touching, but letting Harry know he was there. After a moment, Harry took Severus’ hand in his left and kissed the man’s knuckles. A soft, warm feeling accompanied the usual shard of fear, and Severus did not pull away. Instead, he simply held Harry’s hand and hoped the small concession soothed the young man’s pain.

‘Be patient, Harry. I will try. I promise you, I will try to make you happy.’

Gods, he hoped it would be enough.
Two Bodies, One Soul

Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** no warnings, per se, only a note that Harry is not nearly as confident in Severus’ affection for him as Severus is in Harry’s. Considering Severus recently rejected him, it seems understandable to me. Also if that Latin bit is wrong, blame Google! XD I don’t speak it, except for a few terms I learned from choral music. Feel free to correct it in the comments if necessary.

**Chapter 37**

*Two Bodies, One Soul*

Five minutes after Harry sent his letter via Fawkes, the phoenix returned alone. Hurt and betrayal lanced through Harry. Neville didn’t want to come, even for this? But then he saw the letter attached to the bird’s leg and hoped there was more to it than simple abandonment.


Okay, so two minutes after Professor Snape left, Luna showed up here and let me know you would be all right. She also said she’d be needed. She wants to come to the ceremony, if that’s all right with you and your friend. She’s already dressed for it, so I’m guessing the Feathersprites told her it would be.

Anyway, I’m just trying to find something less… pyjama-ish for us to wear and I’ll be right up. Should I get Dean? And does S. want me to bring something for him too?

* Neville

Harry let out a shaky sigh and laid the letter on Dumbledore’s desk. “Nev is coming. He’s just looking for an outfit for us that’s… well, more appropriate.”

“We will transfigure something, Harry,” said Severus. “Tell him not to risk waking the other boys.”

“Ah. So that means Dean can’t come.”

Severus winced. “If he did not sleep in the same room as the beast who murdered your familiar and the one who turned on you, I would not deny him. But should the other two hear them, if they should even suspect….”
Harry nodded sadly. “I understand. I think he will too, once I talk to him about it.”

“I hope so. I do not wish to exclude him. Only to protect you.”

“I know.”

Harry rubbed Severus’ fingers and took strength from the gentle touch of his hand. Gods, he could hardly believe this. Severus cared for him too, or at least he was willing to try. They were going to be bonded in a few moments, and nothing would ever separate them after that. It was Harry’s dream, and yet… he couldn’t stop feeling that something would go terribly wrong.

No. Harry steeled himself against his fears and laced his fingers with Severus’. He wouldn’t go into this doubting their chances. He had to have faith in his bondmate or they were doomed from the start.

With a hesitant smile, he eased Severus’ hand to his heart and caressed his knuckles. “Sev, Luna is with Neville and she wants to come, if it’s all right.”

Severus gaped. “How did she—oh.” He murmured into Harry’s mind, *[She foresaw the bonding?]*

*[/Neville said she showed up dressed for one.]*

Severus gave a wry chuckle. “That girl. Odd as she is, I cannot deny she is entertaining.” He rubbed a thumb over Harry’s hand. “And loyal. She has been as much of a support as Mister Longbottom has. Yes, she may come, as long as she is discreet. Albus?”

Dumbledore beamed. “With two witnesses who care about you both, your bond will be stronger. Of course she may come. Miss Lovegood is quite an expert at hiding secrets in plain sight.”

Severus frowned. “In plain sight?”

“He means that Luna could tell the entire school flat out that we’re bonded and no one would understand a word of it besides Neville and myself. And maybe Ginny.” Harry shook his head wryly. “We really do need a Luna-speak dictionary. But don’t worry, Sev. She’s not barmy though she’s certainly eccentric, and she cares about you far too much to risk your life for a bit of gossip.”

Severus smoothed a bit of Harry’s hair down. “If you believe she is trustworthy, then so do I. I trust your judgment.”

Harry gasped and swayed into his future husband. Gods, did Severus know how much his trust meant to him? “Sev….”

Severus gave him a light kiss. “Write your reply, Harry.”

“Y-yeah.”

Harry stroked Severus’ cheek once, but didn’t push for more. Even that gentle touch had Severus quivering. Merlin, the man truly needed to have control.

With a sad smile, Harry let his hand drop and hoped that one day, Severus would be able to let go of his fears. He needed to focus on his reply anyway, preferably before Neville returned to the dorm.

*Neville,*
Yeah, we’re okay. He’s... scared, but he’s trying. It'll be okay, I think, so long as I remember not to push him too hard before he’s ready.

My fiancé—fiancé! Merlin, I can’t believe it! Anyway, he said he’ll just transfigure our kits and not to risk getting nicer clothes. This has to be secret, for everyone’s sake. Which means we can’t bring Dean, unfortunately. I wish he could be here, but with Seamus and Ron in the same room, it’s just too risky.

Luna, though, is welcome. Just grab hold of Fawkes’ tail when he comes again and he’ll bring you here in a flash.

Harry

Fawkes took the note when Harry offered it and disappeared in a burst of flames.

Harry stood in Dumbledore’s spare room with Neville. Thanks to Dumbledore’s transfiguration skills, Neville sported black and white robes in a style of classical elegance. The red rose at his lapel was a nice touch. Harry bet Luna would love him like this.

As for himself, Harry wore crimson robes with black and white accents. Black satin trim decorated with white runes and Japanese ink wash-style designs lined his hem and sleeves, and a white satin band with black designs belted his waist. He carried a white rose in his lapel, and, before he went to help Severus dress, Dumbledore had somehow managed to style Harry’s hair in soft curls rather than his typical wild bird’s nest.

It would take someone of Dumbledore’s power to get Harry’s hair to behave.

One curl in the back refused to cooperate no matter what the old man did, but Neville said to leave it. Severus knew Harry with his messy hair and all. He’d probably prefer a reminder that it was still Harry under all the fancy clothing.

Fawkes appeared in the room with a trill, giving them the sign that the others were ready.

Harry’s hearthammered and his breath lodged in his throat. By gods, was he really going to do this? Would Severus back out? Merlin, he wasn’t sure he could take it if Severus rejected him after kissing him so passionately. Gods. Gods. Were they making a mistake? Would Sev—

Neville laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Breathe, mate. He said yes, didn’t he? You know, whatever other flaws he might have, Professor Snape is always good on his word.”

Harry took in a shuddering breath and tried to quell the butterflies in his stomach. “Okay. I don’t want him to get scared, so let’s do this.”

Dumbledore knocked and poked his head in the door. The man had transfigured his kit into crimson robes with golden stars and silver crescent moons—tame for his typical style. “Are you ready, Harry?”

Harry swallowed his nervousness and gave Dumbledore a firm nod. “As I’ll ever be. Is he…?”
“Quite as nervous as you are, my boy, but he has not changed his mind.”

Harry gave a sigh of relief. At least he wasn’t the only one suffering from bonding-day jitters. “O-okay. Take me to him then.”

Dumbledore smiled and waved them out of the room. “Follow me, gentlemen.”

Harry took a place behind Neville on instinct and followed both men out. He saw Luna first, standing beside the entrance to Dumbledore’s quarters in a pale golden Grecian-style gown. White and red roses and baby’s breath cascaded down the side of her hair and golden stars graced her ears. She had even put on a bit of makeup, just enough to enhance her natural beauty without overpowering her features. Her ever-present bottlecap necklace remained of her usual eccentric style. He gave her a brief smile.

“You look beautiful, Luna. But where’s—”

And then, Harry saw him.

Severus stood by Albus’ hearth dressed in black and white like Neville. A red waistcoat under his black robes and the crimson rose at his lapel gave him a bit more colour than usual, and the firelight made the satin shine. Severus’ throat bobbed at the sight of Harry and desire filled those beautiful ebony eyes. Harry sailed to him, love and wonder washing his fears away.

“Merlin, Severus,” Harry murmured as he reached his bondmate’s side. “You look… gods, you’re gorgeous.”

Severus’ cheeks flushed. “I… I am not….”

“You are to me,” Harry reminded him, and cupped one of those hot cheeks in his hand.

Severus closed his eyes and, though he trembled, dropped a kiss on Harry’s palm. “I am nothing to you. You are beautiful.” He opened his eyes and continued in his mental voice. [I must confess, the first time I saw you in red like this, you took my breath away.]

Harry blushed and stroked Severus’ cheek. [When?]

[The first night, Harry. I changed you into red pyjamas and… you are so lovely.]

Harry couldn’t resist giving the man a soft kiss. Tentatively, Severus returned it.

“Now there, boys,” Dumbledore said with a chuckle. “We haven’t reached that part of the ceremony yet.”

Harry pulled back with a shy smile and linked his hands with Severus’. Severus rubbed Harry’s knuckles once and went rigid, eyes widening with alarm.

“Albus, we forgot the bloody rings.”

Albus winced. “Dear Merlin. So we have.”

Harry froze, terrified. It was true that having rings made bonding easier—it gave the magic something to anchor to besides the participants themselves—but it was possible to bond without them. Perhaps in their situation, with an uneven amount of love between them, a horcrux in Harry’s scar, and a soul bond on the horizon, they needed the rings—anything to make the bonding easier could only help it take—but what if Severus had only mentioned it to avoid bonding with him?
Harry stood frozen, trembling and trying to quell his fears. He had no reason to doubt the man. He knew it, and yet, he couldn’t help the pit of cold dread in his belly or the fear that Severus would finally see him for the little freak he was and leave him all alone. Maybe he didn’t want the risk of fighting for Harry’s soul. Maybe he had decided it was simpler just to let go before he got too attat—

Severus cupped Harry’s chin and brought him into a soft, soothing kiss. “Peace, little one. I will not leave you.”

Harry winced. Damn it. He had promised himself he wouldn’t go into this doubting his bondmate, and he had already broken it. With a sigh, he laid his head against Severus’ chest and murmured an apology under his breath. Severus tucked Harry into his arms and held him close, rubbing his hand in slow circles across Harry’s back.

“I am with you, Harry,” Severus whispered in his ear. “Will you trust me?”

Harry sniffled and nuzzled Severus’ neck. “M’sorry. I shouldn’t have—just got scared.”

“It’s all right.” Severus smoothed Harry’s hair and raised his voice so the others might hear. “Harry, do you believe that free elf of yours will keep our secrets?”

“Dobby?” Harry leaned against Severus’ chest and nodded. “He would die for me, not that I would ever ask that of him. And by extension, he would also do anything for you. He’ll protect our secret—and us—with his life.”

Severus nodded. “Dobby!”

The little elf appeared in his usual array of mismatched clothing and gasped. “Oh! Master Snapey, sir, what’s being happening here?”

Harry extricated himself from his fiancé and gave Dobby a pat on his shoulder. “Severus and I are going to soul bond tonight, but you can’t tell anyone that, okay? We have to keep it secret. We’ll both die if it gets out.”

Dobby wailed and threw his arms around Harry’s neck. “Dobby will be keeping it secret, great master Harry Potter sir. Oh, I is so happy for you.”

Harry hugged the little elf. “Er, do you maybe want to stay for the ceremony?”

The elf gaped, wide-eyed and teary. “You is… is asking me to witness your bond?”

“Yes, Dobby,” said Severus with a wry smile. “You have earned our trust and respect. Your loyalty to Harry would help us seal the bond.”

Dobby moved as if he wanted to hug Severus’ legs, but he remembered Harry’s warning against touching the man at the last second and threw himself around Harry’s legs instead. “You is too good to Dobby, kind masters.”

Harry petted the elf’s head. “Ssh. That’s just what friends do.”

Severus nodded and gently eased Dobby back from his groom. “Dobby, before we begin, we do need your help, if you are amenable?”

Dobby nodded hard. “Dobby is glad to helps! What does you be needing?”

“Dobby is glad to helps! What does you be needing?”

“The Prince family bonding rings. They….,” Severus winced. “Oh. I forgot that they are warded.
Only a Prince family elf could pass by….”

Dobby’s ears drooped. “I’s bond with you if you needs it.”

Harry knelt by his side. “But you like being free, don’t you, Dobby?”

Dobby nodded. “I do, Great Master Harry Potter sir. But I’s give it up for you.”

“I know you would, but I can think of someone else who doesn’t like their freedom and needs a home.” Harry gave Dumbledore a questioning look.

“Winky?” Dumbledore clapped his hands. “I believe that is an excellent idea, my boy. She has been most unhappy here, and only showed signs of life again when you gave her extra work to do.”

“Yeah.” Harry called, “Winky!”

A few moments later, the Prince family had an ecstatic—and sober—new house elf, and Harry and Severus had their bonding rings. Harry slipped his hands into his future bondmate’s and watched Severus’ eyes. The man’s fear showed in every feature of his face, but his eyes revealed more. Hope, wonder, and the beginnings of what Harry prayed with all his might would become love, one day.

And yet, even if Severus’ emotions never developed beyond this, Harry swore to himself he would always love the man. Whatever happened, Severus would always hold his heart.

Dumbledore moved to stand before them, eyes awash with genuine affection for ‘his boys.’ The man was a ruthless bastard at times, but he did care for them. And Harry had meant it when he said Dumbledore had brought them together. For that, he could forgive the man’s constant meddling. Probably.

Severus gave Harry a nervous smile. His hands trembled. Harry tried to soothe him with gentle sweeps of his thumbs and let devotion show clearly in his eyes. Severus wasn’t ready for declarations, but he needed to know Harry would stand by his side no matter what. And Harry would. Gods help him, he would, even when it hurt.

Dumbledore cleared his throat and held their rings against his chest, wand clasped in his other hand.

“Are you ready, boys?”

Severus answered in a tremulous affirmative. Merlin, his fear nearly choked Harry.

Harry held the man’s cheek and whispered, “Severus, it’s going to be okay.” He closed his eyes and let his hand fall. “I-if you would rather not, if you don’t want to do this, then you don’t have to. I’ll… I’ll manage.”

He always had, no matter how many times he wished he could just… give up. Without Severus, especially after feeling the man’s kiss, it would be so much harder. He wasn’t sure he’d survive. Maybe he wouldn’t either way, but without Severus… Harry wouldn’t want to hold on.

With a Horcrux in his head, maybe he wouldn’t have a choice about it either.

Warm breath and a raspy jaw rubbed against his forehead. Severus brushed Harry’s fringe out of the way and kissed him above his scar.
“I gave you my vow already,” Severus whispered, lips brushing Harry’s skin. “Yes, I am afraid, but I will not give you up, and you… you are my one hope….” His thoughts continued in Harry’s mind. 

[For love, and for a normal life.]

Harry leaned into him and took a shaky breath. “Okay. Then, if… if you really want me, I’m yours.”

Severus’ fingers clenched around Harry’s and his breath caught. “Harry….” It came out in a breathless whisper, one Harry felt Severus’ strong emotion and desire behind, as well as crippling fear.

Merlin, Harry wished he knew why Severus was so damn afraid. He had no hope of helping him through something he didn’t understand.

Even so, he would try.


Harry’s blood thrummed and a thrill raced through his chest. His pulse quickened and his breath hitched.

“O-okay.” He kissed Severus’ cheek and leaned back. “All right, Headmaster. We’re ready.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Harry, after today, if you like, you have permission to refer to me as Albus in private. I consider Severus as—well, he is as close to a son as I am likely to have. You are both family now.”

Harry suppressed an urge to lash out against the man. Some family he had been.

“I’ll keep it in mind, sir.”

‘Albus’ looked a bit depressed at this, but Harry wasn’t about to relent. Forgiveness and acceptance did not go hand-in-hand.

“Well, let us begin.” With a heavy sigh, Dumbledore began a long-winded Latin chant. Harry tried to translate for a while, but soon found more interest in studying Severus’ face. The expression in his eyes alternated between alarm and hope, and Harry wished he knew how to take his fear away. He wished a simple declaration of love would do it, but Severus would only run.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said, bringing Harry’s attention back to the present, “are you ready for the vows?”

Severus took a deep breath and nodded.

“Repeat after me then. I, Severus Tobias Snape, hereby take you, Harry James Potter….”

Severus repeated the words and continued with his vows. Harry watched, apprehensive and praying Severus would make it through this without balking or breaking his heart.

“T-take you, Harry James Potter, as my… soul-bonded mate, from this moment on, eternally. I give to you my… m-mind, my body, my soul, and….”

He paused, eyes wide and shimmering with tears. The next words were ‘my love,’ but Harry knew without a doubt, Severus couldn’t say them. Still, it fractured something inside him when Severus continued with, “My trust, until the end of time.”

Harry dropped his head and stared at their hands, willing himself not to show his pain. It was the best
Severus could do, and better than he had expected.

Even so, it took everything in him not to cry.

Severus finished his vows, then tipped Harry’s face up and ran his hand over his fiancé’s cheek, as if he expected to find tears. “I am so sorry.”

Harry gave him a broken smile. “It’s okay.” But gods, it wasn’t. It really wasn’t.

“Harry…” Neville’s voice echoed with deep concern. “Are you…?”

“I’m fine.”

Everyone in the room winced. Damn. He really needed to think of a new word.

With a shuddering sigh, he turned his face away and stared at his feet. Fawkes gave a soft trill, and light and healing eased some of the crushing agony on Harry’s heart. It at least enabled him to look at his future husband without breaking into tears.

Dumbledore watched Harry with pain in his eyes. “Harry, do you wish to continue?”

Harry nodded. “I can’t remember all the words, though.”

“That is quite all right. Simply follow after me, as Severus did.”

Harry barely suppressed a flinch. Severus certainly hadn’t followed him entirely.

But Harry would. Even if their bond was unequal in the end, he wouldn’t hide. He loved Severus, and this moment might be the only opportunity he ever had to show it without terrifying his skittish bondmate. He would be strong. He would prove to Severus this moment, his trust was warranted.

Besides that, only absolute love and commitment would seal a soul bond now, with so much working against it. Harry would have to make up the difference for Severus’ indecision. And his love would keep the Horcrux from interfering too. Or so he hoped, at least.

He stood tall and gave Dumbledore a firm nod. Dumbledore gave him the vows, and Harry repeated them in a soft, steady voice echoing with resolution and determination. He would not let Severus down, even if his own heart was bleeding.

“I, Harry James Potter, take you, Severus Tobias Snape, as my soul-bonded mate, from this moment on and into eternity. I give to you my mind, my body, my soul, and my love, until the end of time. I vow to support you and protect you, to honour your commitment to me and to be faithful to you. I vow to cherish your gift to me—” He added on to the vows, “—however much or little that may be—and to honour you always.”

Tears slipped down Severus’ face. Harry brushed them away and continued in a voice soft with love and forgiveness. “Whatever may come, be it sorrow or joy, I offer everything I am to you, Severus, now and forever.” He wasn’t even close to the vows by this point, but the words spilled out of him, poured directly from his heart. “I take you as you are, accept you and cherish you, without condition, until the end of time. As long as I breathe, I am yours, Severus.”

“H-Harry,” Severus whispered, a plea in his tone.

Harry recognised he had said enough and went back to the traditional vows. “I commit myself to you as your soul-bonded mate now and forever, and will honour our bond always. So mote it be.”
He held his breath and prayed his devotion would be enough to seal their bond.

Dumbledore placed his palms atop and below Severus’ and Harry’s left hands, pressing them together. “Jungo haec animarium in amore et fides, aeternum.”

Golden light flashed over Harry’s heart and linked his to Severus’. Warmth and peace flooded him, taking away the sharp edge of broken hope and his fears, and the ever-present ache in his forehead eased. Thank Merlin, it had worked. And the warmth inside him… perhaps Severus couldn’t say the words—or even hear them outside of their vows—but he did care. The reflection of his affection in Harry’s heart was proof of it.

Severus reeled and swayed into Harry, head coming to rest on the younger man’s shoulder. “I c-can’t. Can’t—so… so much.”

“Ssh.” Harry stroked Severus’ hair and kissed his cheek. “It’s not a threat, Sev. I know your limits. I won’t push you beyond them.”

“I’m sorry,” Severus whispered against Harry’s neck. “Gods, I’m so sorry.”

“Sev, it’s okay. I said I accept you without condition. I meant it.”

Severus kissed Harry’s neck and withdrew, tears streaking his face, shaking with the force of Harry’s love. Fawkes trilled again, and slowly, Severus regained his usual composure.

“Forgive me,” he murmured.

“Nothing to forgive,” Harry said, and meant it. Severus had given him everything he could. That was enough.

Dumbledore gave Harry a look full of pain and pride. “My boy, if ever we need learn how to love, I think we must only look at you.”

Harry blushed and turned away. “M-might we just go on with the ceremony?”

“Of course.” Dumbledore held the rings out, one in each palm. “Severus, take this ring and repeat after me as you place it on Harry’s bonding finger.”

Severus took a deep breath and gathered the nearest ring in his hands. “With this ring, I take you, Harry, to be my bonded mate for all eternity.”

The ring, a simple gold band with a design similar to his Prince family pocketwatch, slipped over Harry’s knuckles—too big, but as it reached the base of his finger, magic resized it to fit neatly against his skin. He closed and opened his hand a few times, trying to get used to the strange sensation.

“And now you, Harry,” Dumbledore said.

With trembling hands, Harry picked up the other ring and slipped it over Severus’ finger. “With this ring, I take you, Severus, to be my bonded mate for all eternity.”

The ring resized for Severus, and the older man stared at it, his breath unsteady. His fear, wonder, and deep affection bled into Harry’s heart in equal measure. Harry simply held the man’s hand, hoping it would soothe him somehow.

Dumbledore chanted in Latin again. The light between the couple’s hearts intensified, and Harry
trembled under the onslaught of Severus’ soul-deep terror. He could almost—a flash of silvery-blonde hair and cold eyes flickered into his mind, but faded before Harry could determine much beyond that.

Lucius Malfoy? Was he the one who had broken Severus? That would explain Severus’ strong reaction the night Nagini had snuck into the school.

Merlin, but the world would be better off without that scum.

Severus gave Harry a frightened look, and Harry realised his anger must be bleeding through to the man. With a shake of his head and a reassuring smile, he slipped a hand into Severus’ hair and caressed him, leaning his head against the older man’s shoulder.

“Severus, Harry,” said Dumbledore after finishing his chant, “now it is time to seal your bond with a kiss.”

With a shaky sigh, Severus slipped a hand under Harry’s chin and tipped up his face. “Is it enough?”

Harry answered by leaning up on his toes and kissing Severus with as much love as he could show. Severus froze, then sighed into Harry’s kiss and slid his hand into the younger man’s hair, easing him closer. Harry forced back tears and the fear that Severus might never truly trust him, and simply let his love spill over the only way he could.

After a long, emotional kiss, Severus moved back and pressed his lips to Harry’s forehead, lingering against him.

“I pronounce you bonded mates under the family Prince,” said Dumbledore with a half-smile. “I hope it brings you joy… and healing.”

Severus trembled and held Harry closer. “So do I.”

Harry nodded against Severus’ chest and prayed for exactly that.
Chapter 38

Goodnight, Sleep Tight

“Congratulations,” said Luna from her corner. “It was a lovely bonding. The Aimelins quite enjoyed it.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand to soothe him. “Aimelins, Lu?”

“They appear whenever two pe—”

Neville cut across her explanation. “Anyway, congratulations, you two.”

Harry gave Neville a bemused look. Neville projected his thoughts to Harry, knowing by now the young man could read them if he was in proximity.

[They’re fairies that show up when true love is present. You’re ready, but Professor Snape…]}

Harry winced. [Yeah. Best not to mention that.]

And gods, didn’t it hurt?

He turned and buried his face against Severus’ shoulder so the man might not see his tears. ‘I love you, Severus. Will you ever be able to accept it?’

He sighed and moved back, ashamed of his moment of weakness. He had no idea if Severus could ever allow himself to love, but he was trying his best, and even if he never managed it, Harry had made a vow to love him anyway. And he would keep it. Somehow.

Though, to be honest, Harry wasn’t sure he could keep his vows without breaking to pieces. Still, he would try. By gods, he would try.

At the moment, however, he had more serious concerns.

He pulled Luna aside and whispered in her ear. “Lu… the Horcrux? I know soul bonds work to keep out darkness, but I’m afraid. Can you tell…?”

She nodded. “Your love completely warded it out of the bond. It’s a pure soul bond with no interference from Riddle.”

Harry slumped in relief. “Oh, thank Merlin. I was so afraid.
“It’s all right. Professor Snape… or Prince, rather, is fine too, but we’re worrying him.”

Harry nodded and moved back to his mate. “Sorry, Sev. I was asking about my scar.”

Severus winced. “Is it…?”

“It’s fine. It didn’t interfere in the bond.”

“Well, that is a relief.” Severus tipped Harry’s chin up and kissed him lightly. “We will find a way, Harry. I swear it.”

Harry sniffled, overcome with love, and laid his head against Severus’ chest. “I believe you.”

Severus stroked Harry’s hair, his emotions alternating between affection and worry.

“Well, everyone,” said Dumbledore with a knowing look, “it is now gone four and none of us have had much sleep. I will excuse the three of you students from classes tomorrow, but Severus… to excuse him at the same time could prove lethal.”

“I am used to teaching on little sleep,” Severus said with a wry laugh. “The students will simply have more than their fair share of surprise exams and study periods.”

Neville winced. “Well, that explains a lot.”

Severus gave a dark chuckle. “I fear I will be less than pleasant tomorrow. Be glad you are not in my class any longer, Mister Longbottom.”

Neville nodded wryly. “And not only because I’m saving on cauldrons, sir!”

A soft laugh escaped Severus. “Yes, I imagine the number of times you melted your cauldron did put a sizable dent in your inheritance.” He gave the boy a sad smile. “I… I do not believe it was entirely your fault, however.”

Neville’s cheeks pinked. “Oh. I….”

Severus laid a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you. For everything you have done for Harry, for me, thank you.” He bowed, and Neville’s breath caught. When Severus came up, the boy’s eyes had gone suspiciously wet.

“T-thank you, sir. I… it helps a lot.”

Severus nodded. “Please communicate my thanks to Thomas as well.”

“I will do, sir.”

Severus squeezed Neville’s shoulder and moved to Luna. He bowed to her as well. “I will not pretend I understand your methods, but you have also proved to be an incredible support to Harry and myself. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, sir.” She curtsied and laid a gentle hand on Severus’ wrist. “Trust Harry, sir. He is not the one who harmed you.”

Severus froze, eyes wide, breath stuttering. Harry caught his free hand and guided him away.

“Hey, Sev, look at me. You’re okay.”
Severus choked out, “D-do you know?”

“About your past?”

Severus nodded tersely.

“Only what you’ve told me, Sev. I don’t think Luna can help but know more about it, but she’s never told me.”

“It’s not my business to tell,” Luna said with a shake of her head. “I just try to sort out the Wrackspurts and Nargles and keep you out of the mists. It’s your place to work out the Gunglers and bring the Shadow-Keepers into the light.”

Severus stared, mouth slightly open in utter bemusement.

Harry snorted. “There’s that ‘plain sight’ thing the headmaster mentioned earlier. Luna’s very good at keeping secrets without trying.”

Severus closed his mouth with a click. “Ah, what did she say, precisely?”

“Um, translated,” said Neville with a wry smile, “she said it’s her job to help you stay happy, but it’s your place to talk about your pasts and your secrets.”

Harry gave a low laugh. “I’m telling you, Nev, we need that Luna-speak dictionary.”

Luna tittered. “Oh, come now. It’s quite easy once you learn to listen.”

“I beg to differ,” Severus said, bemused. “Lovegood, why do you refer to such mundane concepts in terms of… creatures?”

“Not creatures, sir. Spirits. And I speak of them often because they talk to me. I don’t know why they chose me as their medium, but I don’t mind. It means I always have plenty of friends, even when I didn’t have any friends at all.” She gave her classmates a warm smile. “Though since then, Harry, Dean, and Neville have been wonderful, and Ginny….” Luna’s shoulders drooped. “Well, she was a good friend until the Ticklebees took her over.”

“Ticklebees?”

“Spirits that make one focus on finding love,” Harry muttered to Severus. “In her case, at the cost of everything else.”

“Ah.” Severus wrapped an arm around Harry’s waist and drew him in closer. “I will protect you, Harry. I had thought her obsession had stopped, but now that I know she is still a problem, I will keep you safe.”

Harry tapped his throat. “I’ve protected myself. She won’t assault me again.”

Severus growled softly in his throat, sending a thrill of desire and affection through Harry. “No, she will not. You are mine now.”

Harry gave him a brilliant smile. “I think I’ve always been yours.”

“Would that I had seen it sooner.”

Severus brushed his lips across Harry’s forehead, and Harry melted into his arms. Gods, if Severus could stay affectionate like this, even if he never completely overcame his phobias, Harry could be
happy. Maybe it would be all right.

Severus turned back to Harry’s friends and gave them a hesitant smile. “At any rate, Miss Lovegood, I am grateful for your assistance with Harry. Even if I do not quite understand the way you speak, it is clear you have helped him through… the mists on more than one occasion.”

Luna beamed. “I try, sir. But do call me Luna. We’re all friends now, aren’t we?”

Severus gasped and went rigid. “I… I d-don’t know. Are we?”

Neville chuckled softly. “We just witnessed your bonding, sir. I reckon that puts us closer than student and professor. And we’re Harry’s family, so… well, I guess we’re yours too now.”

“And us,” said Winky, tugging Dobby to her side. “We’s your family too.”

Severus breathed, “F-family…” He would have fallen to his knees if Harry hadn’t caught him around the waist and held him up.


“I…” Severus closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Thank you,” he murmured, voice thick with emotion. “All of you. My husband and I are honoured to accept you into our family.”

A thrill curled around Harry’s heart and flooded him with joy. Severus’ husband. Yes. Even if it wasn’t perfect, the knowledge that he belonged to Severus now, without a doubt, filled him with pure joy, effervescent and spilling over from every pore. It would be okay. They would have their share of problems, yes, but what couple didn’t? They would overcome them together.

Harry had enough love for both of them. Didn’t he?

“Neville, Luna,” Dumbledore said with a gentle smile, “I, too, would like to express my gratitude for your love and acceptance towards these two men. One hundred points to the both of you for your faith, and to Dean as well, though he could not be here tonight.”

Neville gasped. “How are we going to explain that, sir?”

“Say you saved my life,” said Harry with a sad smile. “That you and Dean pulled me off the tower and Luna healed me.”

Neville gave him a sad smile. “We certainly tried. But you’re happier now, aren’t you? Will they believe it?”

Harry closed his eyes. “I’m happy with Sev. The moment I have to leave his side and go straight back into a battlefield… let’s just say it won’t be difficult to act miserable.”

Severus closed his eyes and clenched his fist at his side. Was he feeling Harry’s pain? A soul bond would certainly allow him to.

“I’m sorry, Sev.”

Severus kissed Harry’s cheek. “You have nothing to apologise for. But I believe Albus is correct. If I am to teach tomorrow, I must at least attempt to sleep soon. And we…”

He left his sentence unfinished, but Harry knew from his mind and heart what worry had overtaken him. They had four hours before classes started and had yet to consummate their bond.
Harry’s face flamed. “Yeah.” Mentally, he added, *[Sev, let’s… er… c-consummate the bond tomorrow. There’s just not enough time tonight.]*

Severus gave a short nod to indicate his understanding and held Harry tighter. “Albus, if you will help Luna and Mister Longbottom—”

“No, Neville, sir,” the boy said. “If you’re okay with it.”

Severus bowed. “Neville then. Albus, if you will help them back to their dorms safely, Harry and I will take our leave. May we use your floo?”

“Please do,” said Dumbledore. “I would much prefer that than having you be caught.”

Severus nodded and guided Harry to the hearth. “Come.”

Harry threw a pinch of floo powder into the fire and followed his husband back to their home.

Severus was reeling inside. He was bonded. Harry was his—had given him the full vows plus more of his own—and had promised Severus his love whether he could return it or not. And that after Severus had failed to promise him the same.

Merlin forgive him, he had tried, but in the end, his lips couldn’t form the words. Love had been poisoned for him.

Perhaps, if Harry could heal his heart, Severus could give his husband the full vows one day. As much as the idea terrified him, he hoped he could. Harry deserved more than his broken pieces.

But gods, everything had happened so fast. In one day, their entire lives had changed. They had lost Isuri, Severus had nearly lost Harry and Albus, then he had gained a husband, a house elf, and two friends, and found out Harry was a Telepath and a Horcrux all in twenty-four hours. Gods help him, he felt as though he had run an emotional marathon, and perhaps it was an apt description. The events of the past two days had wrung him out entirely.

Thank Merlin Harry had suggested they wait a day to consummate. Severus wasn’t sure he could begin to perform in this state.

Harry returned to his bed in the living room, his face a picture of sorrow. “Goodnight, Severus.”

Severus swallowed hard. “Harry, why are you sleeping there?”

Harry shuddered as if struck. “Do you want me to go back to my room then?”

“Merlin, no. I thought….” Severus’ eyes flicked to his bedroom door and away. Grief and shame washed over him, and deep disappointment. Gods, he had wanted Harry to sleep with him. Had he not learned his lesson the first time he had hoped for too much?

Harry’s breath hitched. “Sev?”

Closing his eyes and his heart, Severus turned away and spoke in a quiet, flat voice. One he hoped didn’t reveal the terrible shame turning his stomach to lead.
“I… if it is too disturbing for you to sleep near me, then you must allow me to set wards over you for
the night. Until we consummate the bond, I cannot protect your mind.”

Robes rustled, and a warm body moved to his side. “Sev….” Harry laid his head against Severus’
shoulder from behind and traced gentle fingertips up and down his side. “I only chose to sleep out
here because I thought you wouldn’t feel comfortable with me in your bed. Would you rather I sleep
with you?”

Severus breathed in deep, reaching for control. “You asked me to… to make this real. If you are
sleeping in another room, I… that is not a good start.”

Harry kissed Severus’ shoulder and wrapped his arms around the man’s waist, holding him close.
“Okay. I… I’d honestly rather be near you too, if you can bear it.”

Severus stilled. The feel of Harry’s body so near his own, the warmth of his husband’s breath down
his spine and the curve of a strong stomach against his bum sparked interest in his groin. Gods, it had
been so long since he had felt attraction, more than the base relief of physical needs. He had learned
long before to quell such wants—they only brought him pain. But maybe, just maybe, it was safe to
feel this way with Harry.

A chill spread down his spine. No. He had thought that way before, and then—

“Trust Harry, sir. He is not the one who harmed you.”

Severus released a shaky sigh. Maybe he could try. But not like this, not where he had no control
and couldn’t see Harry’s face. He wouldn’t be the passive victim—never again.

And perhaps he should take this one hurdle at a time. Simply sleeping in Harry’s arms would be
enough of a challenge for one night.

“Come, Harry. Let us go to bed.”

Harry hugged him tight for a moment, face pressed against Severus’ shoulder, trembling with
emotion.

“Okay,” he said in a rough voice. “Okay.”

Severus took Harry’s hand and led him to the bed. Winky had already turned down the sheets and
laid out fresh nightclothes for them. Severus picked up the midnight blue silk pyjamas she had
chosen for him and smiled. They were his favourites. She must have known somehow.

As he looked up, he realised his husband hadn’t moved from the position Severus had left him in
before. “Are you afraid, Harry?”

“N-not in the way you think.” Harry stared at his feet. “I just… don’t want to push you away. A-are
you sure you’re okay with this?”

Severus turned to his husband and saw him for the frightened young man he was. He set his pyjamas
on the bed once more and wrapped Harry in gentle arms.

“I am sure.”

Harry sighed and buried his face in Severus’ neck. “I’m so afraid.”

“I am too, Harry, but I am also trying. I… is it enough?”
“Yeah.” Harry kissed Severus’ throat, trailing soft lips up to his ear. “It gives me hope.” He kissed Severus’ earlobe and nibbled the edge, and a rush of heat sparked in Severus’ belly.

“Ah, Harry.”

“Mhm, does that feel good?”

Another gentle nibble stole Severus’ breath. “Y-yes.”

“Mm. Good to know.”

Harry suckled his earlobe and held Severus’ waist, hands trailing up and down his sides, and heat and dread pooled in Severus’ belly at once. Gods, it did feel good for Harry to kiss him this way, but….

Harry moved back and cupped Severus’ face. “You’re afraid?”

“I… I am.”

“Okay.” Harry nuzzled Severus’ cheek and moved back. “Come on, Sev. Let’s go to bed. We just have to undo the transfiguration to dress for it, right?”

Severus looked at his wedding robes and shook his head. “Let us… perhaps we could….” He couldn’t finish in words, but tried to let Harry hear what he couldn’t say. [They are too important to discard.]

Harry’s eyes lit up. “You want to keep our robes?”

“Yes.”

“Brilliant. I’ll just go change in the other room then.”

Harry picked up the set of pyjamas Winky had left for him and went into the living room. Severus stifled the temptation to ask him to stay. Even if he was curious if Harry’s bare body lived up to that of his dream image, they had no time tonight to play, and Severus wasn’t sure he could quell his arousal if Harry undressed in front of him after kissing him the way he had done a moment before.

So much for not being able to perform tonight. Merlin.

With a tiny shard of regret for missing out on Harry’s naked form, Severus removed his robe and hung it in his wardrobe. His bonding robe. Gods, he had never imagined he would have one. He couldn’t resist smoothing the satin folds once before he closed the doors.

His heart full of soft, warm feelings, he hung his dressing gown back on its hook on the door—Albus had left it alone at Severus’ request—and changed into clean pyjamas.

Hmm. Severus frowned at the garment. Harry needed a place for his dressing gown too.

With a wry smile, Severus transfigured the door to provide a second hook for Harry and climbed into bed. Harry knocked before he rejoined him a moment later, dressed in crimson silk pyjamas and with his bonding robes draped over his arm. A throb of heat centred between Severus’ legs and made his breath catch. Well, Harry was certainly playing to Severus’ desires that evening. Gods, he was lovely.

Harry hung his bonding robes on the door hook Severus had just made and gave him a shy smile. “C-can I join you?”
Severus’ cheeks burned. “May I. And yes, you may.”

Harry crawled into bed beside him and sought the comfort of Severus’ hand. “Will you hold me?”

Severus swallowed his lingering fears and drew Harry into his arms. “Are you well?”

“I feel better in your arms anyway.”

Severus held him closer. In the wake of their whirlwind wedding, he had forgotten Harry had lost everything beforehand. Gaining a husband would not heal the wounds of losing Isuri, his home, and his housemates.

And, Merlin, at the thought of Isuri, Severus had to fight back a wave of grief too. Gods, he missed her. It wasn’t right that she hadn’t lived to see this, her humans mated and trying to make their new relationship work. She would have been happy, Severus thought. He hoped she was content, wherever she was now.

With a sad sigh, he kissed Harry’s forehead and ran his hand through the young man’s curls. “I am here, Harry. I cannot replace what you have lost, but I am here.”

“It feels better when you touch me.” Harry caressed Severus’ cheek and gave him a searching look. “May I kiss you?”

Severus hesitated long enough to see deep pain fill Harry’s eyes and to remember Lucius had never asked, only taken what he wanted with no concern to Severus’ needs. No, Severus had always asked, and Lucius had always turned him down—unless he wanted something, of course. Severus couldn’t bear to do the same thing to this beautiful, loving man in his arms.

“It’s okay,” Harry murmured, voice dim. “I… I’ll just go to bed then.”

His smile as he let go of Severus’ face was a terrible sight, broken and bleeding, a ghost of the hope and joy Severus had seen at their bonding—at least until their vows.

No. Severus would not hurt Harry like this.

With a sigh, he slipped his hand into Harry’s curls and brought him close. “Be patient with me, Harry. Please.” And he brought their lips together.

Harry tensed against him, then slowly relaxed, a gentle hand coming to rest on Severus’ cheek. Sighing against Severus’ lips, he edged closer, legs tangling, breath mingling, hearts beating in time. A soft moan escaped Harry, and the sound went straight to Severus’ groin.

Oh gods. Harry enjoyed kissing him. It wasn’t a chore undertaken to achieve some dark end. Harry truly cared about him.

[Yeah,] the young man’s mental voice murmured, even as his tongue was busy tasting Severus’ lips. [Love kissing you. So soft, so warm. Please don’t stop.]

Severus wrapped his arm around Harry’s waist and held him close. “We must go to bed at some point.” But he didn’t want to stop either. Kissing someone who cared about him was… special. New.

With a soft sigh, he guided Harry still closer, until they lay flush against each other, and shared more soft, sweet kisses with his husband. Husband! Merlin, he could hardly believe it.
Severus pulled back with a pant. “That is more than a little disconcerting.”

Harry winced. “I-I’m sorry. I can’t help it.”

Severus shivered. “Harry, I… there are things I am not ready to reveal.”

“I know. It only pops into my head if you’re not blocking it. I’ve tested it with Luna and Neville. If people try to hide something from me, I can’t read it without forcibly breaking past their barriers, and I would never do that. With you being a natural Zopath, love, I doubt I could even if I did want to, but I don’t. I can’t break your trust like that.”

Severus cringed. “N-not yet. Please don’t—not ready for that.”


“Please don’t.”

“Okay.” Sorrow dimmed the light of Harry’s eyes, but he smiled nonetheless. “I won’t then. I’m sorry.”

A sharp surge of pain filtered through the bond and left Severus breathless. Dear gods, was this what Harry felt every time Severus let him down?

Severus winced and cuddled Harry close against him, trying to ease the young man’s pain. “Forgive me. I… I know I am being foolish, but I cannot—I am so afraid.”

Harry kissed Severus’ cheek and the tip of his nose. “I said I would accept what you can give, Severus. This is… far more than I’d hoped for. It’s all right.”

“Harry, I feel your pain. You are not ‘all right.’”

He cringed. “Damn it. I’m s-sorry. I don’t want to hurt you.”

A wave of cold horror and hot shame flooded the bond, and Severus reeled from the strange sensation. He struggled to gather his wits, then brought his distraught husband into a gentle kiss.

“Ssh. In time, we will work these things out, husband of mine.”


“Harry, what have I done?”

“It’s nothing. I’m just being silly, I suppose.” With a sigh, he raised his mental shields and dulled the pain through the bond, yet Severus still felt it, hovering behind the cold shadow of Occlumency. “Let’s just go to sleep, Sev.”

Harry turned his back, leaving Severus unsettled and trembling. Half-afraid he would be rebuffed, Severus slipped his arm around Harry’s waist, holding him lightly in case Harry pulled away. Harry tensed at his touch, and Severus jerked back, anguish and misery flooding him.

Dear gods. They hadn’t been bonded an hour and he’d already cocked it all up.

“Sev?” Harry leaned back and guided Severus’ arm around his waist again. “Hey, it’s okay. You can touch me.”
“I… I do not know what I have done wrong.”

Harry kissed Severus’ knuckles and shifted back against him. “Nothing. It’s okay. I’m right here.”

“Why are you in pain, Harry?”

“I… it’s just… it’s really nothing, Severus. I’m just being stupid, I reckon.”

Severus pressed a soft kiss against the nape of Harry’s neck. Harry stiffened, but another kiss against his neck had the young man melting in his arms. Severus traced Harry’s neck to his ear and whispered against quivering skin.

“Trust me, Harry. Please trust me.”

Harry sighed and relaxed in Severus’ embrace. “O-okay.”

Severus nuzzled Harry’s neck, breathing in his scent and taking pleasure in his husband’s reactions. Harry did want him, did care for him. It was heady and frightening and new, but most of all, it gave Severus hope he mightn’t be this stunted, broken man forever.

If anyone could heal him, Harry could.

Harry sighed and tugged Severus’ hand over his heart. “Sev’rus, I—” He cut himself off and shook his head. “I’m here for you, okay? I’ll take care of you, I swear.”

Severus pulled Harry closer. “I know, Harry. I know.”

Harry turned his head and gave him a gentle kiss. “Goodnight, Sev.”

Severus let Harry’s warmth and acceptance flow into him like a balm for his troubled spirit. “Goodnight, Harry.”

As he drifted off, hope and something softer, something tender and lovely warmed his heart. With Harry, it would be all right. He just had to take things slowly and remember that his husband cared about his well-being, and one day, maybe he could make Harry happy again.

Severus hoped he could. Merlin, he hoped.

—

Severus fell asleep quickly, no doubt exhausted by the emotional whirlwind of the past two days, but Harry could not rest. He traced his fingers idly over Severus’ hand, mind running over the events of the night.

Gods. He was bonded, a married man at eighteen. He didn’t mind. He’d known for months Severus was the only one he would ever love. Even so, he couldn’t decide if he was happy about the situation or devastated. True, he had Severus, he had the man as his husband, now and forever… but Severus didn’t love him. Couldn’t. Perhaps never would.

Nothing could take that pain away. Not the arm around Harry’s waist, the warm breath ruffling his hair, nor the feel of Severus’ legs entwined with his own. He had dreamed of sleeping like this, warm and safe within his husband’s arms, but in his dreams, Severus had loved him too. This imitation left him hollow.
In spite of his barriers and his vow to love Severus regardless, tears flowed down Harry’s face and wetted his pillow. Gods, he couldn’t bear it. On top of losing so much, Severus’ half-done vows ripped the soul from him.

Fuck. He wished Isuri was here to hold him together. Her unique perspective on his pain had pulled him through the fire many nights. But Isuri was gone, and no one could help him now.

Severus’ breathing stuttered and his arm tightened on Harry’s waist. Harry slammed his power into his shields, trying not to wake him, but Severus must have felt his pain regardless.

“Harry? Is something wrong?”

Harry forced his anguish back for Severus’ sake. The man was trying his best. Harry’s grief was his own fault for being so impatient.

With a sigh, he turned into Severus’ arms and laid his head against the older man’s chest. “I’m sorry, Sev. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Shh. I am here, Harry. But what is troubling you?”

Harry couldn’t tell him it was the inequality of their bond breaking his heart. Severus would be crushed.

“I… it’s just been a hard couple of days. And I really miss Isuri.” It was true, but using his half-truth lies against Severus felt wrong. Even if he only meant to spare him pain.

Severus closed his eyes, his grief obvious both within the bond and without. “I miss her too. I could not speak with her, but she was a good companion and she kept us safe.” He smoothed a gentle hand down Harry’s spine and up into his hair again. “Perhaps, in time, we will find a new snake familiar for you. I would feel better if you had one to guard you anyway. But I understand that you will need time to mourn Isuri first.”

“Don’t know that I want another one. I don’t want to kill another innocent snake.”

“You did nothing of the sort.” Severus held Harry’s face and brushed his tears away. “You gave her a wonderful life. It was unfortunately short, but while she lived with you, she was loved. It is not your fault.”

“It is. I kill everything I touch.”

Severus took Harry’s hand and placed it over his heart. “Do you feel that?”

“Hmm?”

“My heartbeat. I would not have one if not for you.”

“Oh.” Harry’s heart thumped and his stomach flipped. Merlin, it was true. If he hadn’t saved him, Severus would be dead now.

“Look.”

Severus unbuttoned his shirt with a spell, revealing the thin lines of old scars all over his torso and a vicious red mark crossing his breastbone and ribs. He turned onto his back, pulling his shirt open, and Harry leaned on his elbow beside the man, running gentle fingers over the shiny, red scar—the only mark of how close he had come to death.
Severus held Harry’s hand over his heart. “Do you see this? I would not have survived without your help. Nor Luna’s. You saved my life, Harry, and brought me hope and… and you.” He leaned up and kissed Harry softly. “You are the reason I am alive, and the reason I am… mostly whole.”

Harry traced the edges of Severus’ scar, watching the way his skin pulled taut and wrinkled with his breathing. Merlin, Harry had come so close to losing him before he had even known how good and wonderful Severus really was.

Severus trembled and swallowed hard. “Harry, I… I am sorry I cannot be more for you.”

Harry looked into Severus’ eyes and read his fear and uncertainty, as well as the warmth and budding desire his husband’s touch brought. Overall, he sensed deep-seated shame, a feeling of inadequacy Harry realised went deeper than Severus’ fears of love and touch.

He returned his gaze to Severus’ chest and understood. The man was scarred all over. He feared Harry would find him wanting because he hadn’t a perfect body.

Harry slowly pushed the flaps of Severus’ shirt open and off his belly. His husband’s breath hitched and his skin quivered under Harry’s touch—so Severus did feel something. The knowledge gave Harry surcease as he cautiously let his hands wander, tracing the lines of a lithe form and hard muscle and watching Severus’ face for signs of fear. As Severus’ building passion filled their bond, slowly overpowering his uncertainty and insecurity, heat blossomed in Harry’s belly and drove out the coldness of sorrow.

“You’re beautiful to me, Severus.”

Harry traced the centre valley of Severus’ abdomen, starting near the base of his ribs and trailing over a smooth stomach, the dip of his navel, and down through a soft trail of black hair. Severus gasped, his hips lifting slightly with Harry’s touch. A gasp of want, not fear. Harry stopped himself from sliding under the man’s waistband and caressing him by sheer force of will.

Severus’ voice came out small and breathless. “My scars do not repulse you?”

“You’re scars only prove how brave you are.” Harry pressed a gentle kiss to Severus’ chest. “You’re beautiful.”

Severus flushed. “I am not, but I am glad you find me so.”

“Mm-hmm, I do.” Harry lay beside him and pulled Severus into his arms. “Try to go to sleep, Sev. I’m… mostly okay now.”

Severus sighed and held Harry tight. “I am here, Harry. I know… it is not yet what you wish for, but I am here. And I am trying to put my fears behind me.”

“I know.” Harry kissed him softly. “It’s not your fault. I just… it’s hard, but I’m okay now. Go to sleep, Severus. I’m right here.”

“Yes.” Severus closed his eyes and snuggled close. “Do not leave my arms except to go to the loo. I need to keep you safe.”

Harry’s heart thumped. “Oh.” Perhaps Severus wasn’t as far off from loving him as he had thought. “A-all right.”

Comforted and full of renewed hope, Harry settled down and drifted off to sleep. With Severus so close and the bond humming between them, Harry had no further bad dreams.
Chapter Summary

*Warnings: Minor slash scene. Still pretty angsty. Fluff coming up in the next chapter.*

**Chapter 39**

*The First Day*

1 October

Severus’ alarm went off, waking him. He snuggled in closer to the strong body embracing him, taking comfort in the rare sensation of being held, then came alert with a jerk. What the hell? He didn’t have anyone to hold him, did he?

He gasped and bolted up, startling his partner awake. Green eyes met his, and a soft blush stole up Harry’s cheeks.

Oh shite. Severus had forgotten their bonding. He swallowed a wave of nervousness and lay beside his husband again.

“I am sorry for startling you, Harry.” He kissed the young man’s sleep-warmed temple and traced a hand down his cheek. “Good morning.”

Harry let slip a shaky sigh and turned into him. “I was afraid you would—afraid I’d wake up and it would all be a dream.”

“No.” Severus smoothed Harry’s ridiculously messy hair and chuckled to himself. “Merlin. And I thought your hair was a mess after you’ve combed it.”

“Oh, hush.” Harry buried his face in Severus’ chest, still bare from Harry’s gentle exploration the night before. “I can’t help it. Doesn’t seem to matter what I do to it—stupid hair has a mind of its own.”

Severus kissed his wild curls. “I find it rather fetching.” In his thoughts, he continued, ‘Especially knowing I am the only one who will see you like this from now on.’

Harry looked up and gave him a shy smile. “Yeah, you are.”

Severus grimaced. Damn. Telepath husband. Right. Somehow, he had failed to recall that Harry could hear his thoughts unless he shielded the hell out of them.

Harry winced and turned his face away. “S-sorry, Sev. I couldn’t tell you didn’t say that last part out loud.”

A frown creased Severus’ brow. “Harry, does that happen often?”
“Yeah. Since I came of age, it’s been driving me mad.” Harry shuddered. “Trust me. As a gay man, I do not want to be in Ron’s head.”

Severus snorted and burst into stifled laughter. “I’m assuming the female form abounds in his thoughts?”

“He has a running tally going for who has the best breasts. So far, Tara Talus is winning.”

“Talus? But she is a third year!”

“Yes, I know. Like I said, Ron’s mind is a dark place to be.”

Severus shuddered. “Remind me to run over consent and self-defence with my snakes soon.”

“Maybe not today, Sev. I don’t think he’d go that far, and you have to be in class soon anyway, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Severus sat and ran a hand through Harry’s hair, making it stand on end to his secret amusement—or not-so-secret, judging by the pout on Harry’s face. “Are you well?”

Harry gave him a hesitant smile. “Y-yeah. That you’re trying so hard to… to make this real, I… yeah. I feel a lot better than I did last night.”

Severus leaned down and gave him a soft kiss, morning breath or no. That his fears failed to resurface gave him hope. “It is real. Whether we had planned this or not, we are well and truly bonded.”

Harry blinked hard and gave Severus a warm smile. “Y-yeah. You’re right.” He sat and stretched. “I should get up too.”

Severus stood and moved to the wardrobe, but paused with his hand on the door. “You should? You are excused from classes today.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to get behind.”

Severus shook his head. “After what happened in your dorm last night, Harry, I do not feel safe letting you attend classes without Luna or Neville to protect you.”

“But—”

“Your dedication to academic achievement is admirable, but if you are killed or driven to suicide, I fear it will do you little good.”

Harry looked at him with pain in his eyes. “I wouldn’t top myself, Severus. Especially not now that we’re bonded. It would destroy you whether you… feel the way I do or not.”

Severus sat on the bed and brought Harry into his arms. “I know. I know you are strong and holding on for me, but I have never been so terrified as I was on that tower. You are still recovering, Harry. Please, for my sake, do not go to your classes alone.”

Harry sighed into his shoulder. “If you’re that worried about it, I won’t go.” He kissed Severus’ collarbone and nuzzled his neck, then sat up. “But I would like to at least do my potions lesson and some apprentice work. I’d be in the Infirmary all day that way, and no one will bother me there. And my room is right around the corner if they do.”

Severus gave him a tentative nod. “Promise me you will reach out to Madam Pomfrey or let me
know… ah, through your Telepathy if something goes wrong?”

Harry smiled shyly. “You really are protecting me.” He kissed Severus lightly. “Thank you.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s cheek. “You are mine to protect now.”


Severus gazed into Harry’s eyes, entranced by the soft love shining within—love for him. Merlin, it left him breathless. How could this truly be his? After a life of pain and abuse, how was it possible that fate had sent him such a beautiful, loving partner?

The colour on Harry’s cheeks deepened, his breath hitched, and he whispered Severus’ name. Severus couldn’t resist his siren call and kissed him tenderly.

[Please, Severus, please, don’t let this be a dream.]

Severus soothed his husband with a gentle caress and soft laps of his tongue. Harry slid his hands into Severus’ hair and melted into him, soft mewls low in his throat. Gods. Harry’s warm mouth tempted Severus, but he couldn’t allow himself the distraction.

Slowly, he moved back, hand still cupping Harry’s face. Harry was panting, lips parted and red, cheeks flushed, eyes dilated with desire. ‘Beautiful.’ Severus stole one more brief kiss and let him go.

“I must ready myself for classes or I will be late.”

Harry shook his head as if coming out of a daze. “L-late. Right.”

Severus returned to his wardrobe. “Do you intend to watch me dress?”

Harry made a strangled sound and dashed from the room, leaving Severus laughing to himself. Merlin, but the boy was so innocent.

He shook his head, guilt and worry settling in. After tonight, everything would change. Still, if it kept Harry safe and happy, then it was worth it.

Severus only hoped he could hold it together for the consummation and not disappoint Harry afterwards. He was trying, but fear still crippled him more often than he liked. Merlin forgive him. He wanted to love Harry. He wanted to give his husband a true marriage of equals.

And yet, he couldn’t forget the trauma of his past. Would he ever be able to move on?

A flash of red amongst the endless sea of black caught Severus’ eye. His bonding robes. With a secret smile, he traced the back of his hand down the cool satin. They had a lifetime to overcome his fears. In time, perhaps, Harry would be able to heal him. Until then, he would just keep trying to trust his bondmate and remember he was loved.

It would be all right. He would make sure of it.

Harry waited in the living room for Severus to finish dressing and smiled as his husband came out of the bedroom, dressed in his usual bat robes. Severus buttoned his cuffs as he came to Harry and
placed a gentle kiss on his forehead. His breath smelled of mint.

“You will be safe today, Harry?”

“Yeah.” Harry tiptoed and brushed Severus’ lips with his own. A shard of fear flickered in the bond, but warmth and wonder almost overwhelmed it. “It’s all right, Sev,” he whispered against the man’s mouth. “I’ll always protect you. You’re safe here.”

Severus sighed and brought Harry into his arms, holding him tight. “So are you, little one.”

“Mm. Feels a bit odd for you to call me that now.”

Severus chuckled. “It does, now that you mention it. A habit I shall work on breaking, for your sake.”

‘I wish I could call you something sweet.’ Harry stifled his pain in Severus’ chest and Occluded it from the bond. He would just have to be patient. They had time.

Severus brushed his lips against his husband’s forehead, and Harry relaxed into his caress. He could live like this. Severus’ affection was enough to stave the bleeding inside him, the pain of their unequal bond.

Even if he wished Severus meant more by it.

‘Enough,’ Harry chided himself. ‘He’s doing the best he can. I’ll just have to buck up and accept what he’s ready to give, like I promised him I would.’

To that end, Harry wrapped his arms around Severus’ neck and hugged him close, just breathing in his scent and taking comfort in it.

“Are you well, Harry?”

“N-not yet.” Harry kissed Severus softly and stepped back, holding the man’s face in gentle hands. “But I’m getting there. Just keep taking care of me like you have been doing, okay?”

“I will do my best, my Harry.”

Harry winced and turned away, a sharp burst of grief washing away all traces of joy. It shouldn’t hurt. It shouldn’t. Those endearments were proof Severus wanted to love him.

But the fact that Harry couldn’t return them, that Severus couldn’t bear to hear the same from Harry’s lips only served to remind the younger man of the inequality of their bond, of the glaring lack of reciprocity. And it hurt. Deep inside, it hurt.

The pain proved their bond hadn’t sealed equally. Severus wouldn’t have to endure it—Harry’s love would shelter him—but Harry… as long as Severus feared his love, he would suffer for it.

He wished he could ignore the pain inside. Wished he could accept what he had and endure. Wished he could just hear Severus call him fond names and not worry that he couldn’t do the same, but it hurt too much.

Trepidation trickled down Harry’s spine and into his gut. Would he be able to keep those vows he gave Severus last night? Would he be able to endure such a one-sided bond?

He looked up to find Severus watching him with eyes full of remorse and confusion. Severus lifted a trembling hand to Harry’s face, but stopped short and let it drop.
“I am sorry. I am not enough, am I?”

“I accept you without condition.”

Harry pushed his grief to the back of his mind and took Severus’ hands in his own. “No, it’s not your fault. I… I guess I just need some time to adjust.”

He doubted he would ever get used to the stark pain of his half-done bond, but for Severus’ sake, he would try.

With a sigh, he buried his face in Severus’ chest and held his husband tight. “I’m sorry, Sev. I’ll do better.”

A sharp wave of grief blasted through the bond and almost knocked Harry to his knees.

[He means he will try to get used to the fact that I cannot give him what he needs. He will learn to live with the pain. Gods. I… I don’t want him to suffer.]

Harry kissed Severus’ chest and stroked his cheek. “Ssh. It’s okay. Maybe we just need time to work these issues out.” Gods, he hoped so, for both of their sakes.

The sharp ache within him abated from both sides. Severus tucked Harry in his arms and nodded against his head.

“Perhaps you are right. We have only been bonded a few hours. I suppose it is to be expected that we will have some misunderstandings until we are more accustomed to our new relationship.”

Harry Occluded a surge of fear away. Somehow, he doubted it would be that simple. “Y-yeah. You’re right.”

Maybe he was. It was true they hadn’t had much time to learn what the other needed. And Severus was trying. Harry really needed to remember that.

Firming his resolve, Harry kissed his husband lightly and smoothed his mussed hair. “You need to finish getting ready for class, Sev. I’ll be okay.”

Severus nodded. “I know I am inadequate, Harry, but please try to give me time. I am trying so hard to… to be what you need.”


Severus chuckled. “Thank you. I think.” He kissed Harry’s forehead and cupped his cheek. “You will be well without me?”

His concern and gentle affection washed away the cold ache in Harry’s heart. “Yeah.” He gave Severus a soft smile. “I think I will be.”

“Good. And… perhaps this will reassure you.”

“Hmm?”

“Look at me, Harry. Let me see your lovely eyes.”

Harry swallowed hard and lifted his eyes to Severus’ intense gaze. “What is it, Sev?”
Severus moved back, hands encompassing Harry’s waist, dark eyes fixed on Harry’s face. He gazed at Harry for a long moment, saying nothing, just taking him in, and a fierce blush built on Harry’s cheeks. He opened his mouth to question his husband, but found it occupied the next instant. Severus clutched Harry against him and kissed him hard, tongue prodding deep and tasting Harry’s own.

Oh _gods_. Harry had never dreamed—sweet Merlin! Heat and water pooled in his belly, fire raced through his veins, and his toes curled in the carpet. Severus speared one hand into Harry’s curls, kissing him so insistently, he tipped him backwards with the force of it. His other hand crept down from the small of Harry’s back, over the swell of his arse and down to cup his cheek.

A garbled moan escaped Harry, and he rocked helplessly forwards, his fast-firming erection rubbing against Severus’ hip. Severus gasped against Harry’s lips and Harry winced, fearful he had terrified his partner, but a wave of fierce desire through the bond froze him in place.

“Yes,” Severus whispered. “You want me?” He rocked Harry against his thigh, flooding his younger partner with white-hot surges of pleasure.

“Gods, yes,” Harry panted against Severus’ neck. “Please, please… feels so good.”

Severus shivered and caressed Harry’s bum. “I am sorry, Harry. I haven’t the time. I only meant to kiss you, but… mm.” Another slow thrust set Harry mewling and arching in Severus’ arms. Severus gazed at him, dark eyes fiery with passion and a soft smile on his lips. “But you are intoxicating.” He kissed Harry with slow, gentle ardour and eased his husband back. “If it was not so dangerous, I would… but I cannot.”

Harry panted and held on to Severus’ robe for balance. “Gods. _Gods._”

Severus whispered in his ear, “Think of that through the day whenever you are feeling sorrowful, and know that tonight, I _will_ make you mine.”

Harry’s breath hitched at a sharp rush of arousal. ~Yesss.~ Damn, it had come out in Parseltongue.

Severus’ eyes lit with desire. “Yes, remember that feeling.” He kissed Harry once more and stepped back, leaning in as if he was reluctant to move away. “I will return to you after classes.”

Harry nodded, too dazed to speak.

Severus cast a few spells on both of them to clear up the signs of passion and disillusion their rings, then left after one more caress of Harry’s cheek. Harry stared after him, humming with arousal and his heart warm with hope. The touches, his affection, the fact that Severus had tried so damn hard to overcome his fears washed away Harry’s doubts. Maybe he was worrying over nothing. Maybe Severus just needed more time to adjust.

Time. Gods. The man had only known of Harry’s feelings for two days. In light of that, his warm affection and fierce attraction was a minor miracle.

With a sigh, Harry let his fears go, at least for the moment. They kept creeping up on him, but it would be all right soon. In the meantime, he had a little _problem_ to deal with.

He traced a fingertip over his still-firm erection and shivered. He gave the loo door a longing look, but the thought that Severus might feel his climax through the bond—while in the middle of teaching potential Death Eaters—gave him pause. No. Even if Harry _was_ having trouble coming back down from his high, he would not risk Severus’ life for a bloody wank.

Instead, he settled on the sofa with the darkest book on soul magic Severus possessed.
Reading about slavery bonds, vampiric thrall, and sacrifices for gaining the loyalty of Dementors—gods, Riddle was a sick puppy—sent his desire limping away. Before long, Harry was presentable again, if a little shaken. Dear Merlin, the things people did to one another! He shook his head, put the book away, and went to the loo. A nice hot shower and a little work in the Infirmary would be just the ticket to clear those godsawful images from his mind, and if that didn’t work, perhaps his potions lesson would.

Harry showered, brushed his teeth, and dressed in his apprentice robes. Feeling a little better, he gathered his belongings and headed for the floo.

Poppy jumped up, startled, when Harry entered the Infirmary, the Prince’s book and his potions gear in tow. “Harry? The headmaster said you wouldn’t be in classes today.”

“Well, I’m not, but I’d rather not miss everything entirely, if that’s okay.”

Poppy hesitated. “I… are you feeling well enough?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

She raised an eyebrow. “After Neville and Dean pulled you off of the Astronomy Tower, you’re fine?”

Harry cringed. Apparently Neville had already been hard at work spreading the story they had agreed upon the night before.

“Well, maybe not fine, but I need to do something, ma’am. I need to think about other things. And I don’t think I should be alone.”

Poppy gave him a sad smile. “I suppose that’s true. Well then, come and set up and we’ll start your lesson as soon as we’re finished cleaning the Infirmary. And I’d like you to spend some time talking to me today, if you’re able.”

Harry suppressed a flinch. Dear gods. He couldn’t tell her half of what was troubling him. Still, maybe simply discussing his earlier faux pas with Severus without actually mentioning their change in relationship would help him cope while keeping the entire truth under wraps. It was worth a shot, anyway.

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

Harry set up his brewing gear in his usual space and helped Poppy sanitize the area. At first, he took comfort from the familiar routine, but soon, depression set in. The mindless work gave him too much opportunity to think. Too much opportunity to grieve.

He sniffled and rubbed his neck, missing Isuri’s weight and quiet commentary. Merlin forgive him, he hadn’t meant to cause her pain. If he’d known she would die in his care, he would have just let Severus Banish her back to the rainforest. She might have found a mate by now and had a nest full of babies. Instead, she lay cold and lifeless in a sunny patch of the Forbidden Forest.

He stared at a squiggly scratch in the walls that reminded him of a snake’s slinky shape. ~Gods, I am so sorry, girl.~

He sniffled again and jerked his arm across his face. Fuck, it hurt.

The Infirmary doors opened and, at a familiar press of obsessive emotion, Harry dashed behind a nearby privacy screen. Merlin help him, he couldn’t deal with her.
Poppy frowned at him and went to greet the visitor. “Miss Weasley.” Her tone made it clear she was no more pleased than Harry to find the girl in her ward.

“Ma’am, might I see Harry for a moment?” Ginny sounded stressed and panicky, but damned if Harry would go anywhere near that bint after how she had treated him last night. Gods, he could still taste her.

“Miss Weasley,” Poppy chided, voice sharp with reproach, “there is nothing wrong with you, and I will not have you harassing my apprentice. He has made his wishes perfectly clear.”

Harry cringed and made himself small, pressing back against the wall and hiding in the darkest corner he could find on such short notice. Merlin, what was with her? Why couldn’t she get the picture?

“I… I just wanted to apologise,” Ginny said, sniffling.

“Well, I don’t think Harry needs to see you right now. He’s been through enough.”

He grimaced. ‘Understatement.’

“But—”

“Miss Weasley, I will remind you that sexual assault is a criminal offence. Be glad Harry has simply turned you away and not taken a warding order out on you. And with that settled, you are perfectly healthy and you have no right to speak to my apprentice. Please leave.”

“But I—”

“Now, Miss Weasley, before I summon the aurors about that warding order after all.”

Ginny gave a quiet sob and fled. The doors slammed behind her.

Poppy clucked her tongue and went to Harry’s corner. “Are you all right, child?”

Harry emerged from the shadows and shuddered. Gods, he was shaking all over.

“N-not really. What is her deal with me? Why can’t she take no for an answer?”

Poppy sighed and motioned him back to the beds they had yet to clean. “It could be any number of factors, Harry, but I have my suspicions.”

Harry guided his wand in careful strokes over the nearest bed, sanitising the sheets. “Enlighten me, because I’m at a loss.”

Poppy moved her own wand over the bed beside him. “In part, I believe her family is to blame. She is the youngest of seven and the only girl, and I believe because of that, they have spoiled her to some extent.”

“This goes way beyond being spoiled.”

Poppy grimaced. “Yes, I agree. You told me she was interested in you before her first year?”

He nodded and moved to the next bed. “The first time I came to the Burrow, she wouldn’t even talk to me, she was so nervous. She would run out of the room if I came in. I felt really bad about it.”

“Well, that sounds like typical pre-adolescent hero worship.” She clucked and shook her head. “I
suspect her brothers may have encouraged her interest, and that likely reinforced her infatuation, but I fear the true trigger was in her first year. I shudder to think what You-Know-Who may have told that girl in his pursuit for information about you. There is no telling what he may have done to manipulate her, to turn what would have been a normal, preadolescent fancy into something dark and sinister.”

Harry shuddered. “Oh dear gods. I could definitely see him twisting the facts to make her feel entitled to me—he’d do anything he thinks might get him closer to killing me. And he’s patient. And sadistic. Now that you mention it, I have no doubt that’s what ruined her.”

She gave him a sad nod. “I agree. And your sacrifice for her life and last-minute rescue from her abuser likely reinforced her beliefs and turned her fancy into true obsession.”

Harry winced. “That wasn’t my intent.”

“Of course not. You only meant to save her life. But to Ginny, you became her personal hero that day.”

“Ugh. I don’t mind being a hero for her but I don’t want to be her boyfriend.”

“Considering the situation, I can’t say I blame you.” Poppy fixed him with a curious look. “Harry, if you don’t mind, will you tell me if the rumours concerning your sexuality are true?”

His face went up in flames. “Dear gods, Poppy! W-why do you even care?”

She chuckled. “Not for whatever reason you’re imagining to turn you that colour.”

Harry grimaced. “It’s like talking to my grandmother about sex.”

She snorted. “I am not sure whether to be complimented or insulted. However, I asked for medical purposes, Harry. A homosexual man needs… ah, different education in terms of caring for himself and his partner to ensure their health.”

Harry groaned. “I-is there a book or something? Please?”

She laughed and moved on to the next bed. “I’ll give you one at the end of the day.”

He shook his head. “Merlin. T-thank you?”

She gave him a mock-stern look. “Young man, I’ll have you know I’m responsible for the sexual education of all students in this establishment, regardless of sexuality.” She paused. “You are certain you’re not bi or pansexual?”


“Ah. Then I believe the book I chose will be good for you.”

He ducked his head. “Could we talk about something else now? Anything else?”

“Of course.” She pointed to a bed a couple spots down from her. “You’ve sanitized that one five times now, Harry. Let’s move on.”

Harry rubbed his burning ears and went to the bed she had indicated. “Um, Poppy? I wanted to ask you something. My other instructor and I were talking about cleaning charms the other day and improving upon them. I… I haven’t had a chance to think about it since what with all the chaos the last couple of days, but I was wondering if it would be possible to alter one to clean out infection from a sick person.”
She paused halfway through cleaning her bed. “I would never have thought of it. Most infections respond well enough to the treatment we have now, but if such a charm could be altered to deal with the more difficult to treat illnesses, it might save lives. What gave you the idea?”

Harry moved on to the next bed and cast a silencing charm so he could speak freely. “The basilisk vaccine, actually. It has a Vanishing spell built-in—the special kind that won’t make it blow up, of course—so the moment the venom is introduced to the body, the vaccine kicks in and eradicates the poison.”

Poppy nodded. “Yes, I see. That was a brilliant piece of spellcraft, Harry. Well done.”

Harry flushed and smiled tentatively. “T-thanks. Sev and I make a good team, I think.”

“So it seems. But what do you need my help with as far as cleaning spells go?”

Harry grinned and dove into the conversation with a relish. He truly did love medical research. “Advice, mostly. And to verify that our hypothesis is medically sound. I was thinking we might be able to use the same spell matrix to create a specialised Vanishing spell for diseases. In theory, we’d only need to alter the nodes assigned to locate the venom to recognise bacteria or viruses instead—probably one spell for each—and then it should work. That matrix is already attuned to ignore the body’s vital systems, so it would just be a simple tweak, or it should be anyway, and then, the rest should follow.”

Poppy rubbed her chin in thought. “It sounds feasible, Harry. Of course, it will require extensive testing.”

“Yes, that’s what the Room is for. I thought we could start testing with Juno’s Disease. It only affects women, so Severus and I wouldn’t contract it during the testing phase, and as it’s incurable, we might just save a lot of lives if we can manage to find a way to combat it. But I need to know the specifics of how the disease works—anything you can tell me would help.”

Poppy launched into an explanation of the disease and how it worked, and Harry soon lost himself in their discussion. Before they had finished cleaning the Infirmary, he already had some good ideas to test for their spell matrix. Severus would be thrilled to have a new project—he did love working with Harry, even before they were bonded. As Harry worked, he wondered if their working relationship would change now that their personal one had developed. Would their projects become more… interesting with a soul bond between them? More exciting, perhaps?

He shivered and focused on cleaning the last bed. Best not to think of that now. He still hadn’t forgotten the thrill Severus had left him with that morning or the feel of his husband’s lithe body so hot and hard against his own—shit. He Occluded a sudden rush of arousal away and vowed to make Severus pay later for leaving him humming all day.

Just as he put his wand away and went to join Poppy by the potions station, the Infirmary doors opened. Harry, who was in full view of the doors and wouldn’t be able to hide, tensed in anticipation of another unwanted meeting with Ginny. Instead, a masculine voice he knew well greeted him. “Hullo, mate.”

Dean. Harry relaxed and turned, only to freeze again. He hadn’t come alone. Parvati, Hermione, and Ron were with him. The women stood on either side of Dean, and the redhead lagged behind, staring at his feet, his eyes rimmed in red and his cheeks pink. Harry read Ron’s thoughts and relaxed again. Remorse had all but strangled the boy. He wasn’t here to fight.
Poppy patted Harry’s shoulder and gave the newcomers a stern look. “I don’t think I need to tell the lot of you I will not tolerate fighting in the Infirmary.”

Hermione shook her head and wiped her eyes. “W-we’re not here for that.” She sniffled and ran to Harry. “Oh, Harry. I’m so sorry.” She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him, and Harry’s breath stilled.

“H-Hermione? What… why?”

She withdrew and rubbed tears from her cheeks. “Neville told us about… about the tower. Gods, Harry. I didn’t mean—I was just trying to defend you.” She lowered her head. “I didn’t before. I let you down when you needed me. And I was so afraid—I didn’t want to let you down again.” She ducked her head. “But I think I just hurt you anyway.”

Harry gave her a wan smile and squeezed her hand. “I know you meant to help. It’s okay. I’m f-fine.” That time, he chose the word on purpose. They needed to believe he wasn’t.

She winced. “Harry….”

He turned away. “It’s okay, Hermione. Thanks for sticking up for me. All three of you.”

The others shot Ron dirty looks.

Ron cringed and hugged his chest. “Harry, I… I reckon I was a right idiot yesterday.”

Harry stared at him but said nothing.

Ron coughed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Er… no, not just yesterday.”

“More like since the start of sixth year,” Dean muttered. “Just as soon as you stuck your head up Hermione’s—”

Poppy cleared her throat and shot him a stern look.

“Er… since you got stuck on Hermione,” Dean corrected. “Sorry, ma’am.”

Poppy nodded and laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. We’re okay.”

She squeezed his shoulder. “I’ll be in my office then. If you need me, call.”

“Thanks, ma’am.”

She nodded and left.

Harry fixed Ron with a piercing look. “Well? You were explaining why you’ve been an utter arsehole to me for the past year or so?”

Ron winced. “I… well, I….”

“I’m waiting.”

“I don’t know, mate. I don’t know what got into me. I just got so caught up in points and beating Slytherin, and then this mess with Ginny—I was wrong about that too.” Ron raked a hand through his hair. “It’s just, she’s always been the baby of the family, you know? I… I reckon we were all a
“A bit.” Harry tapped the pendant at his throat. “This is more than a bit.”

Ron dropped his head again. “I know. The headmaster and McGonagall showed up before breakfast today and told Ginny if she touched you again without consent, she would face suspension and criminal charges, and expulsion and a stint in Azkaban if it happened again after that. It terrified her, I think. She ran out of the dorm and I haven’t seen her since.”

“Before breakfast, huh?” Harry scoffed. “She ran straight here then. Poppy handled her and sent her packing but, Ron, I really think she needs therapy or something. This isn’t right. She’s obsessed and she’s scaring me to death.”

They all winced at his wording.

“I know.” Tears pooled on Ron’s lashes. “Harry, I… listen, I know I’ve been an idiot. But I never stopped caring about you even when I… gods, I’ve been such an arse.” He rubbed his face and sniffled. “I-I never meant to drive you to top yourself. I always thought of you like my brother.”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “Which one?”

Ron flinched at the subtle reminder of his abandonment. “I… Harry, I’m sorry. I didn’t really understand, but this morning, when Neville told us we’d nearly driven you to kill yourself and he and Dean barely saved you in time—I’ve never been so terrified in my life. I know I’ve been an idiot and I reckon you won’t forgive me for a long time—”

“If ever,” Dean muttered.

Ron winced. “B-but I had to try. I really am sorry, Harry.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. In Ron’s mind, anguish and remorse drowned his thoughts. Ron was feeling lost. The wool had been torn from his eyes and his entire world had crumbled around him. He could barely cope with such a high level of shame and devastation.

Harry gave him a curt nod, but said nothing else. Ron might have come to realise the extent of his crimes, but Harry wouldn’t forget the hurt anytime soon.

Ron’s shoulders slumped. “I… I guess I’ll go then.”

Harry watched him leave, torn and unsettled, but unable to reach out. Ron had shattered him over and over during the course of the past year. Harry would have liked to trust him again, but he wasn’t such a fool.

Dean sighed and went to his side. “Harry, mate… I’m sorry. I’ve been too involved with the team this term, I think. I… I meant to be there for you.”

Harry gave him a genuine smile. Dean had been there. He had only been more active in quidditch recently to heal the hurt from Ginny’s abandonment. Harry didn’t begrudge him that.

“You were, mate. It’s all right. I don’t blame you. Or anyone, really. It just… got to be too much.” Harry leaned over and whispered, “Mate, did Neville explain what happened last night? What really happened, I mean?”

Dean shook his head slightly. “There wasn’t time. He said there was… more, but you’d have to talk to me about it later.”
“Yeah. I’m going to be busy tonight, I think, but tomorrow I’ll meet you in the room after classes and catch you up, assuming there’s not another major catastrophe.”

Dean snorted and gave him a wry smile. “You do seem to attract them.” He took Harry’s hand. “Really, Harry. Are you okay?”

“Mostly. It’s just... the thing I have to tell you about still hurts, and Isuri...” Harry rubbed his neck and sniffled. “Gods, I miss her. She was my friend, not just a pet.”

Dean lowered his head. “Yeah. As messed up as he has been since fifth year, I never would have believed Seamus could do something so awful. If I had known, I’d have protected her, but he waited until we were all asleep. Or maybe she didn’t come back until then. I don’t know exactly what happened.”

Harry rubbed Dean’s shoulder. “It’s not your fault, mate. Don’t beat yourself up. I told her to go to Hermione’s room if he was back before I was, but maybe she thought he was asleep. I don’t know. I just wish I would’ve been there to save her.”

“We feel the same way about you,” Hermione said with a sniffle. “I’m sorry, Harry.”

Harry shook his head and hugged his chest. “Don’t. It’s just that it’s been hell the past few days and I... I guess I just broke. None of you are to blame.”

Parvati came forward, her dark eyes full of worry. “We’re all really scared for you, Harry. Even the prats who fought us yesterday didn’t want you to die. Are you okay?”

Harry rubbed his disillusioned ring and gave her a sad smile. “No. But I... I think I will be.”

Hermione held his hand. “That’s good. We’re here, you know.”

He squeezed her fingers, relieved that she had changed so much. At least he still had one of his first friends, even if she was no longer the one he confided everything to. She had tried so hard to help him since she had come to her senses. That was enough.

“Yeah. I know.”
Chapter 40

Two Hearts, One Body

Neville and Luna were waiting in Severus’ quarters when Harry flooed in from the Infirmary. They sat in one armchair, Luna perched on Neville’s lap and cozy against her boyfriend’s chest. Harry’s heart ached at the sight of them. The image of them cuddled so close drove it home to Harry—slammed the knowledge into him with the force of a freight train—Severus didn’t love him. Severus would never let him sit like that. Nor would he let Harry hold him in the same way.

“My body, my soul, and my trust....”

Would their bond ever grow into anything more?

He sighed and struggled to push his sudden insecurities aside. “Hey, guys. Where’s Sev?”

“In his lab,” said Neville with a wry smile. “I think he wanted to give us a few minutes to talk alone.”

Harry hoped that was it. He hoped Severus hadn’t left them alone because he didn’t want to be too near his husband.

‘Stop it,’ he chided himself. ‘Severus is doing his best.’

Luna gave him a sad smile. “Professor Snape cares for you, Harry. Things will work out in time. Just have faith in him.”

Her gentle reminder renewed his hope. “Y-yeah. I reckon you’re right. It’s just hard to believe when I know he isn’t where I am.”

Luna nodded. “I understand, but don’t give up hope. I have faith he’ll get there soon, once he can move past his fears.”

Harry sat on the sofa and leaned on his knees. “Can he move past them?”

“Be patient, Harry,” Neville said. “His entire life has completely changed in... what, thirty-six hours? The day before yesterday, he had no idea how you felt. You just have to give him time to adjust, mate. He’s been hurt before. Badly.”

Harry spelled off his shoes and Banished them to the rack, tugged his knees to his chest, and laid his head atop them. “I know,” he murmured. “I know. I’m trying and I feel like a cad for worrying like
this, especially when he was so good to me this morning. It's just been a hard day, I guess.”

Neville and Luna stood from their chair and sat on either side of him, rubbing gentle hands down his back.

“I’m scared,” Harry said in a tremulous voice. “What if he never loves me? Am I going to hurt like this for the rest of my life?”

Luna took Harry’s face in her hands. “Do you love him?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then love him.”

“I… I don’t understand.”

“Harry, love him as he is. What he can accept. What he can’t. Everyone is different, and all of us show affection in different ways. Professor Snape might not be able to bear the kind of love you want to show him yet, but that just means you learn what he can accept, what he can bear and what he enjoys, and you do that.”

Hope flooded his chest and a hesitant smile crossed his face. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. Merlin, I’m an idiot.”

She chuckled and let his shoulders go. “No, no. You’re just learning.”

“I guess so.”

The rest of the day passed in peaceful companionship. Severus had suspended Harry’s training until his mental health improved and no one had homework or essays to grade, so they spent the evening talking. Harry stayed at Severus’ side, curled up as close as he would allow, a tentative smile on his face. Severus talked as much as he could manage, but for the most part, wasn’t sure what to say. How was it possible that Harry’s friends cared enough about Severus to want to befriend him too?

He was bonded to a beautiful, loving young man and he had friends—family—who cared about him. Gods, he couldn’t help feeling as if he had fallen into a dream and, any moment, he would wake up the same lonely, broken man he had always been. But Harry’s hand in his, the way his hair tickled Severus’ chin when he snuggled close, the feel of his breath across Severus’ cheek when Harry kissed him—those sensations had to be more than a by-product of a miserable man’s overactive imagination. No dream had ever felt so real.

Harry whispered in Severus’ ear, “I’m here, Severus. They’re here. This is no dream.”

Severus shivered.

“I’ll never use your thoughts against you, Sev. It’s okay.”

Severus sighed and wrapped his arm around Harry’s waist. “I know.”

Harry nodded and tentatively placed his hand on Severus’ knee.
But rather than comforting him, Harry’s gentle touch launched Severus twenty years into the past.

A cultured voice whispered in his mind, “Oh yes, I see you want more, but this is all a lowly beggar like yourself can ever aspire to. Does it feel good when I touch you here? Good little pet.”

By the time the voice stopped, Harry had moved away entirely and sharp pain flooded his bond. Severus was tense and shaking. Neville looked at Harry with pity in his eyes. And Luna… as she watched Severus attempt to pull himself together, her silvery eyes held sorrow and too much understanding.

She stood and straightened her skirt. “I think it’s time Neville and I left for the evening. The two of you have much to talk about.”

By the way she fixed her eyes on Severus, he knew she meant him to talk. But at the mere thought, his throat closed up and his breath turned to ice in his lungs. No. He couldn’t. Not to Harry. Not to anyone. If they knew his deepest shame, Severus would never be able to look them in the eye again.

Luna stared at him a long moment as if to say, ‘You are looking at me,’ but she didn’t understand. She couldn’t. She hadn’t begun to experience what Severus had.

The girl gave a sad sigh and linked her arm through Neville’s. “Harry, will you check the map for us so we don’t leave right when the snakes slither by?”

Harry nodded and Summoned his father’s accursed map. “I… I solemnly swear I am up to no good.” Lines formed across the parchment, taking the shape of the castle and grounds. Harry tapped a corner of the map to make it zoom in and nodded after a moment. “You’re safe to go. No one is in this part of the dungeons but us.”

Luna smiled. “Good night, Harry, Severus.” She gave Harry a hug and whispered to him. Harry pulled back with tears in his eyes and a wan smile.

“I’ll try, Lu.”

“I know you will.” She patted his arm and moved back to Neville’s side.

“Harry, mate,” Neville said, uncertain, “are you going to be all right?”

Harry nodded, though he didn’t meet Neville’s eyes. “I’ll be f—okay.”

Neville shook his head. “Well, I’m here if you need me.” He looked to Severus and gave him a sad smile. “That goes for you too, sir.”

“Thank you,” Severus murmured, taken aback.

Neville patted his wrist lightly, a gentle touch to express concern without terrifying him. Severus gave him a wan smile and watched them leave, his heart torn. The door shutting behind them sounded louder than it should have in the silent room.

Harry stared at his knees, arms wrapped around his waist, head bowed. After a long moment of silence, he looked up at Severus and attempted to smile.

“It’s okay, you know. That you’re scared. I… I should just remember it and stop trying to touch you.”

Harry kept up his smile while he said it, but the blast of pain through his side of the bond nearly
knocked Severus to his knees. Severus took a deep breath to gather his wits and reached for Harry’s hand.

“It is not your fault,” he whispered, and laid Harry’s palm against his face. “Please, don’t stop trying. I know I am sometimes still afraid, but I… I need—”

Harry eased his hand back and closed his eyes. “Don’t force it, Sev. If you’re afraid of me, then I… I can’t hurt you.”

Severus brought his husband into his arms and held him tight. “Harry, don’t… please don’t stop touching me.”

Harry trembled in his arms, breath hitching and bond quivering with fear and terrible pain.

“Harry… Merlin, I am so sorry.” Severus sighed and buried his face in Harry’s curls. Maybe Luna was right. Even if he couldn’t tell Harry everything, he at least needed to explain what had happened before.

“It… when you touched my knee—I wasn’t reacting to you.”

Harry leaned back and frowned. “Sev? What do you mean? Luna and Neville stopped talking, so you couldn’t have been reacting to anything else.”

“It is… difficult to explain. Are there certain things, certain sensations or places that trigger bad memories for you?”

Harry winced. “Your pensieve. Grimmauld Place. The Dursleys’ house. Or the whole of that neighbourhood, really.”

“Yes. When you touched my knee, it brought up bad memories.”

Harry cringed and leapt away. “How can you tell me my touch is like the Dursleys’ for you and expect me to keep going? I can’t. I can’t be that terrible… can’t h-hurt you like….”

Tears slid down his face and he buried his head in his knees. “I’m sorry, Severus. I’ve tried so hard to be gentle with you. But if my touch makes you think of things like that, then I’ve done everything wrong.”

“Oh, Harry.” Severus stroked his hair and back. “Harry, it was only… I am not sure why that particular touch frightened me, but it does not happen often.” He thought behind steel-trap walls, ‘Not anymore, anyway.’

Harry stiffened, and Severus cringed with remorse.

“Harry, please. Don’t you remember this morning? I was not afraid then.”

Harry looked up. “I had no control this morning, Severus. You touched me. You led me.” He frowned and dropped his head. “I… oh. That’s what you need then. You need me not to touch you and just… you take control.” He lifted his face once more and smiled in spite of the tears on his lashes. “O-okay. I can try.”

Severus dropped his head into his hands. Gods help him. How had he managed to destroy Harry’s confidence in under a day?

“No,” he said in a voice strained with remorse. “Harry, no. That is not what I want. I admit I may
need more control until I am… better, but gods, I do not want you to withdraw and become an entirely passive partner because I am afraid.”

Harry winced and looked away. “Then I don’t know what to do. You tell me my touch terrifies you and yet you don’t want me to stop? Sev, I’m not a sadist.”

Severus took Harry’s hands and guided them to his face. “Harry, open your side of the bond. Use your Empathy powers. Tell me what I feel when you touch me.”

Harry shivered. “You… you’re not… afraid right now?”

Severus turned his face into Harry’s hand and kissed his palm. Slowly, he let his usual barriers fall—at least as much as he could do—and revealed his emotions to his husband. The soft, tingling feeling that followed every brush of Harry’s fingertips. His trust that this young man would take care of him, even when no one else had ever cared. The desire for more, to feel Harry’s touch all over his body. And his fear that Harry would stop forever, that Severus’ lingering trauma would drive his husband into some dark corner or break him into a thousand pieces. His fear that, at the worst possible moment, his memories would return and shatter Harry’s confidence forever. That his phobias would ruin everything.

He Occluded the fear that Harry would have control over him behind walls thicker than Hogwarts’ wards. In his heart, Severus knew Harry would never hurt him. He simply couldn’t banish the irrational fear that allowing himself to be vulnerable would leave him open to a broken heart, and none of that was Harry’s fault.

“Please,” Severus whispered, “don’t stop touching me. Even when I am afraid, I need to know you are there. I need….”

‘I need you.’

Harry gave a shuddering sigh and closed his eyes, sending trails of tears down his face. “Okay. But I need to understand. I need to know what scares you so I don’t do it again. And it would really help if you could tell me why.”

Severus froze. “H-Harry… I c-can’t.”

Harry bowed his head and nodded, not acknowledging the sharp wave of pain Severus’ inability to speak sent through the bond.

Severus clenched his fists in his robes, reeling with the stark agony of Harry’s grief. “I… Merlin, Harry, I am so sorry.”

Harry looked up, deep sorrow hidden behind a wave of acceptance. “It’s okay. If you can’t tell me, then I’ll just have to remember what you can bear and what you can’t do.” He frowned, then his sorrow faded, exasperation taking its place. “I’m sorry, Severus. I told you I’d be patient and accept you as you are, and yet I keep failing that vow.”

Severus wrapped his arm around Harry’s waist and brought him close. “No. You are doing the best you can. I know I am hurting you. I wish I could… I wish I were enough for you.”

Harry held Severus’ face, watching his eyes, and kissed him so softly, it felt as if a butterfly had landed on Severus’ lips.

“You are.” Resolution and love filled Harry’s gaze, washing away his pain. “You are, Sev. Even if it hurts sometimes, I still would rather be here with you than anywhere in the world. You’re still the
man I—” He cut himself off and gave Severus a soft smile instead. “It’s okay. I’m sorry I got so upset. This is just so much harder than I ever thought it would be, but I’ll get through it.”

Severus pulled him closer and brushed their lips together. “Be patient with me, Harry. So much has changed for me, so quickly, but I am trying to be what you need.”

“I know. I’m trying too.”

Severus whispered against Harry’s lips, “Then touch me. Show me what it is like when I am safe.”

Harry’s eyes filled with soft love and trust. “You’re always safe with me, Sev.”

Slowly, he leaned in, and sparks erupted in Severus’ blood at the first taste of his kiss. A soft tongue, gentle and hot, caressed Severus’ lips, and he opened to Harry like a flower in the sun. A quiet moan escaped him as tentative pressure stroked against Severus’ tongue, seeking but unhurried.

“Harry,” he whispered, breathless.

Gods, kissing had never felt like this, this slow build of heat and desire in his groin, of softer, sweeter emotions in his heart. Kissing had never felt safe. It had never been an expression of love, not for Severus.

Not for Harry, either, come to think of it.

Resolution firmed in Severus’ chest. He mightn’t be able to let go of the past today, but for Harry’s sake, he would one day. He would overcome it, and learn to love this man like he deserved.

‘I promise you, Harry. One day, I’ll make you happy again.’

With that thought in mind, Severus cupped Harry’s face and took control of their kiss, slipping his tongue into that sweet warmth and familiarising himself with every curve, every bump and crevice. Harry was his, and so help him, he would make sure his husband knew he was welcome in Severus’ life—and in his heart.

Harry’s hands slid into Severus’ hair, tangling around the strands, and his mental voice bled into Severus’ shields.

[So good, so soft. Please, need more. Need… something.]

Severus sensed the stark desire behind his words and laid Harry along the sofa with a growl. “You are mine.”

Harry panted against Severus’ lips. “Yeah, yours.”

“No one else will ever see you like this, feel you like this.”

“Yeah. Only want you.”

Severus kissed him fiercely, passion curling his toes in his boots, then hauled Harry into his arms, bridal-style.

“I believe I have yet to carry you over our threshold.”

Harry gave a breathless laugh. “I’m not a bride!”

“No, but you are my bondmate, and I want you to know I accept you.”
Harry gave him a tentative smile and held on tight. “Then take me home, Sev.”

Fire sparked in Severus’ belly, and he made his way to the bedroom, Harry safe within his arms. Harry wrapped his arms around Severus’ neck and held on tight, love and passion bright in his eyes. Just inside the bedroom, Severus lifted Harry higher and kissed him, teasing his tongue with gentle sucks and curious swipes, and kicked the door shut behind him.

“Sev,” Harry panted, his hand tangling into Severus’ hair. “Please.”

Severus suckled and licked his neck, tantalising him, and Harry tipped his head back with a moan.

“Yes, Harry,” Severus murmured. “Show me you enjoy me.”

“G-gods, so intense.”

Harry was shaking in Severus’ arms, squirming with each gentle kiss, soft mewls falling like rain from his lips. “Sev’rus….”

Dear gods, hearing his name in that passion-drenched tone was the most arousing experience of his life. How was it possible that Harry could simply speak his name and light Severus, a man with no lack of experience, ablaze with passion when every other lover had fallen abysmally short?

‘No other lover has ever loved you before.’

Yes, perhaps that was it. With a sigh and a vow to treat his new husband well, to make Harry’s first introduction to sex far more pleasurable than his own, Severus lay his partner upon the bed and cupped his face.

“Are you afraid?”

Harry gave him a shy smile. “Not afraid, not for myself. Only for you. And… well, I’ve never—it’s my first time, Sev.”

Severus brushed back Harry’s fringe and kissed his scar. “I know. I will do everything within my power to make sure you feel safe and happy with me.” He held Harry’s cheeks and brushed tears away. “I… I do care for you. More than anyone since….”

“Don’t think of that. There’s no one here but you and me, and… and you know how I feel for you.” Harry slipped his hands into Severus’ hair and held it back from his face. “All I want is to heal your broken pieces and make you happy.”

Severus kissed Harry with deep, tender affection. “You do make me happy, and you are healing me.”

“I-I’m glad, Severus.” Harry guided his head down gently and pressed a light kiss to Severus’ forehead. The touch flooded Severus’ heart with warmth and light, driving away the cold edge of fear.

“Sev, you’ve never been able to tell me why this terrifies you so much. Not just love, but touch.” Harry nuzzled his nose. “It’s okay. I won’t push you. But I can… make a guess at what happened from your fears. And I want you to know right now, I will never hurt you. I’ll never use touch as a weapon, never hold your fears against you, and I will never, ever force you into what you’re not ready for. You hold the reins here, Severus, not me. I’m yours, okay?”

Severus shivered, shocked Harry had been able to hit so close to the truth without being told. Even
so, he wasn’t ready to talk about it. Not tonight—and sure as hell not when he wanted to make love to Harry for the first time. No, that poison had no place here.

He quelled a sharp surge of alarm—gods, even thinking about it terrified him. How was he ever to talk about it?—and took Harry into a passionate kiss. He started out hard, needing the sharp edge of something fierce to drown out the past, but Harry gentled it quickly, his soft caresses and quiet mental whispers soothing Severus faster than he had believed possible.

[Ssh, you’re safe here, Severus. I’ll protect you. It’s okay.]

“Yes,” Severus said against Harry’s lips. “I only want to think of you tonight, my Harry.”

A surge of pain through the bond confused Severus, but he eased it with gentle kisses and promises of faith.

“You are safe here too, Harry. Please, do not hurt tonight. Please, let me heal you.”

Harry sighed and nodded, his expression soft. “Okay. I’ll try, Sev. Maybe, will you let me undress?”

Severus’ heart thumped and desire roared back to life in his veins. “If you wish, but I would rather undress you if that is acceptable?”

Harry closed his eyes and lifted his hands above his head. “I’m yours. Do as you wish with me.”

Severus moaned into Harry’s throat, the expression of submission and trust setting him ablaze with need. “Yes, yes. Trust your beautiful body to me. I will take care of you.”

“I know, Sev’rus.” Harry squirmed under a fresh assault on his neck. “Mhn, please.”

With a soft pant, Severus slipped Harry’s vest off over his head, hands encompassing and caressing his slender waist on the way up. Harry rocked into his touch, head tipped back and face flushed. He whimpered a bit when Severus brought him into an impassioned kiss, exploring him as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt.

[Gods, Sev’rus. Please, please touch me.]

Another first—no one had ever begged for his touch.

[Yes, want you. Want to feel you all over me. Please.]

Severus panted into Harry’s throat and pushed his shirt off his shoulders. Harry’s breath hitched and a rush of fear and uncertainty hit him through the bond. Severus understood too well.

He stood and gazed at Harry’s half-bare body as he removed his own robe, letting his desire show plainly in his eyes. Harry was still slender, but months of hard training and good food had brought him up to a healthy weight and given him a layer of wiry muscle. He had a figure much like Severus’ own, lithe and agile, but on a more compact scale.

Harry would probably never grow much beyond the six inches he had gained in the past year, but he was tall enough to kiss Severus. Tall enough to hold him, yet still small enough to carry. Small enough to seem younger than he was. And yet, the firm bulge at the front of Harry’s trousers gave evidence to the fact that Severus’ husband was every bit a mature, capable man.

Severus couldn’t stop a soft growl of pleasure. Gods damn. How had he ever gotten so lucky as to find someone like this to love him?
Harry gave him a tearful smile, and Severus knew his mate had heard his thoughts.

“Merlin, you are so beautiful, Harry. Every inch of you.”

Severus tossed his robe aside and made short work of his shirt too. He paused at the waistband of his trousers and gave his husband a searching look.

“Are you sure you want me, Harry?”

“Yeah. Please, Sev. Please. I can’t stand… been wanting you so long.”

Severus shivered and unfastened his belt. “How long?”

“Since maybe three weeks after the pensieve thing, I think, but I didn’t know it until the day before you caught that dream in my shields.”

Severus winced at the mention of two painful memories. He rubbed his hand through Harry’s hair and caressed his stubble-covered jaw. “You have truly wished for me so long? Even when I was hurting you?”

“I didn’t know it then, but yeah. That’s why it hurt so much more. I was already in…. ” Harry bit his lip and dropped his gaze, staring at the sheets.

Severus stilled, his heart racing and deep, soft warmth blossoming in his chest. How this boy, who had endured the worst side of Severus—and brought out the best of him too—could have loved him through it all mystified him, but he swore to his husband then he wouldn’t take his gift for granted. Gods, he truly had been lucky.

Maybe love wasn’t impossible for him after all, not with a man like this in his bed and in his life.

Severus kissed Harry softly. “You are incredible.”

Harry’s cheeks flushed and his lips parted. “Sev, please.”

“Mm.”

Harry’s desire and longing left Severus breathless. With a shiver, he stood again and unbuttoned his trousers. He opened his mouth to ask Harry if he was sure one more time, but stopped at the sight of his husband. Harry lay on his side, flushed and panting, his eyes locked on Severus’ zip and his fingers curled around the edge of the mattress. A surge of heat and desire through the bond quelled Severus’ sudden insecurity, and his erection jumped at the knowledge Harry found him attractive.

“Gorgeous,” Harry whispered, and lifted a shaking hand towards Severus’ bare stomach, but stopped short. “Oh. I’m sorry.”

Pain flickered in the bond, but Harry quickly squelched it and replaced his hand against the bed. Severus quivered at the realisation that he wanted Harry’s touch. He wanted to feel those gentle, strong hands on his body and let Harry’s love sanctify his shadows.

“Harry…..”

Gods, what had happened to him? What had changed between now and dinner? Maybe it was Harry’s submission, his willingness to let Severus lead him as he wished. Like this, Severus couldn’t be hurt. Harry was his to guide, if only for a few moments, and Harry was banking his own needs, holding back his desire to touch, to explore his husband’s body, so that Severus would feel safe.
Severus paused, the truth of the situation drowning him in a blast of icy regret. It was Harry’s first time, and he had sacrificed his right to touch so that his partner might feel safe.

Severus took a deep breath. No. That wouldn’t do. Harry wasn’t a submissive by nature—he had only offered his submission because he knew Severus needed control. He might come to regret this night forever if Severus took away his ability to participate.

Severus certainly regretted his own.

No. He wouldn’t hurt this sweet, gentle young man who had sacrificed so much for Severus’ happiness, not like Lucius had ruined Severus. He wanted to make their first time a beautiful experience they could cherish the rest of their lives, and that meant Harry needed to be able to touch him too.

Severus used their boot Banishing spell to remove his shoes, kicked off his socks, and slipped his trousers down his hips. Harry’s throat bobbed and his fingers tightened on the bed. Severus kicked his trousers aside and reached for Harry’s hands. Deliberately, he placed the young man’s palms on his waistband and stepped against the edge of the bed, bringing his pelvis so close to Harry’s face, his husband’s hot breath rushed against Severus’ clothed erection, electrifying him with the sensation.

“Ohh.” Struggling to keep his head clear, Severus slipped a hand into Harry’s hair. “Go on, Harry. Take those off.”

Harry panted, making Severus quiver and rock a little at the caress of his breath. “Y-you said you wanted me to submit.”

“You are. I told you what I wanted. Will you do it, Harry? Will you undress me?”

Harry moaned and grasped Severus’ waistband. The touch of his fingers on his bare hip tingled. Swallowing hard, Harry fixed his gaze on Severus’ obvious desire and slowly tugged Severus’ pants down his body.

Severus’ breath hitched as his erection sprang free and tapped Harry in the chin. Gods. He quivered and moaned softly, fierce need unravelling within him at the feel of Harry’s breath on his skin, the rasp of his stubble against his sensitive head.

“Sev’rus.”

Harry mewled, and Severus’ hips rocked closer on their own will. He couldn’t speak with Harry’s breath, his face so close to his body, but Harry heard his pleas nonetheless.

“You want me to touch you, Severus? You’re sure?”

A soft whimper escaped Severus’ control as he guided Harry’s hand to his pulsing shaft. “Please.”

Harry moaned softly and traced his fingertips along the underside of Severus’ erection, base to tip. Lightning and fire followed Harry’s touch, setting his nerve endings ablaze. Severus gave a stuttered gasp and followed the movement of his hand.

Harry looked up, his cheek rubbing against Severus’ head and drawing a moan from the older man.

“It feels good, Sev?”

Harry turned his face so his lips brushed the side of Severus’ shaft, sending shockwaves of sensation careening through his body. “Can I?”

“Fuck, Harry!”

A soft chuckle and gentle kiss against Severus’ tip reassured the man his husband had received his message loud and clear. Severus threw his head back and hissed at the touch, sinking both hands into Harry’s soft curls.

“Mm.” Harry’s soft moan against his head set Severus gasping, and he cried out at the soft kitten licks that followed. Hot, pulsing tension coiled tight in his groin, sparks trailing from Harry’s warm tongue and throughout his veins. Gods, he wanted more. Could hardly stand not to push, to rock into his husband’s sweet, tantalising mouth and claim it for his own, but Harry seemed content to tease.

“H-Harry, please.”

“Mm, was waiting for your permission.”

With a moan, Harry sucked his head inside and Severus almost lost control on the spot. Fuck! Wet heat and a curious, gentle tongue surrounded him, suckled and lapped at his most sensitive places, willingly giving him pleasure. Merlin, he was melting. Dying. Gods help him, he had never imagined this could feel so good.

Harry pulled back with a gasp. “Sev, you’ve never…?”

Severus panted, struggling to gain some semblance of control. “N-no. First one to… ghn, don’t stop.”

Harry gave him a bright smile. “Brilliant.” He opened his mouth and took Severus deep, as far as his sweet, hot mouth could bear.

Oh gods. Severus clutched Harry’s curls and gave a sharp cry. Dear sweet Merlin, he had never felt anything so intense. Harry sucked him hard and bobbed, and a sobbing sort of mewl escaped him. Damn, damn. So hot, so wet, so tight around him. He lost the battle to keep his hips from rocking into his husband’s mouth, but kept his thrusts slow and shallow so as not to hurt him.

[Love your taste, the way you feel. Gods, you’re so sexy.]

Severus whimpered and searched for some foothold in this white-hot world of pleasure he had fallen into. Fear had no place here—Harry’s love and desire for Severus drove everything else out.

[Yeah, it’s okay. You’re safe here. Just let me make you feel good.]

“Dear gods, Harry.” With a low moan, Severus eased back from Harry’s wet, red lips and tried to gather his wits. “I have to stop now, or I will not be able to complete the bonding tonight.” He leaned on his knees and trembled, overcome with lingering bolts of ecstasy. “Sweet Merlin. Y— you’re sure you have never done this?”

Harry gave him a wry laugh. “With who? Neville and Ron are both relentlessly straight, Seamus is an arsehole—and so is Ron lately, come to think of it—and by the time I was close enough to Dean and Blaise, I was already in…..” He closed his eyes and swallowed his words. “I was already yours.” He placed a soft kiss on Severus’ hip. “No, Sev. I’ve never touched anyone but you. And I never will.”

“Harry… oh, my Harry. I… gods.” His husband’s words filled Severus with fierce desire and an
intense wave of warm emotion. In spite of his fears, Severus found himself hoping it was love, or at least the start of it. Harry deserved love, deserved his everything.

Smiling with renewed hope, he guided Harry onto his back and kissed him with slow, fiery ardour. Maybe Severus wasn’t there yet, but Merlin, this deep, overpowering welling of affection gave him hope he would be someday, once Harry’s love healed his broken heart.

Harry slid his hand into Severus’ hair and pulled him closer, panting into his mouth. [Please. Touch me, Severus.]

Severus kissed down Harry’s throat, suckling and nibbling his ears like Harry had done for him, drawing sweet gasps and moans from his partner and bursts of sharp pleasure through the bond. Slowly, he slid his hand down Harry’s chest and circled his nipple. Harry gave a soft cry and arched into him.

“Sev,” he gasped out. “Mm, need… more.”

“Patience,” Severus murmured against Harry’s lips. “I intend to take my time.”

“Mm, not too much. I won’t… can’t hold out too much longer.”

Severus gave a low chuckle. “We shall see about that.”

“Oh gods!”

Harry couldn’t decide if he was in heaven or hell. Every touch of Severus’ mouth, of his fingers and tongue, the press of his weight on Harry’s body was utter pleasure, but Merlin help him, he ached for release. “Sev, please!”

His husband must have felt the urgency behind his tone, as he whispered a spell in Harry’s ear, and his constrained erection broke free, the cool breeze of the room brushing his overheated skin. Oh gods. Had he really…? Harry looked down and groaned. Severus had stripped him bare with hardly a word. And gods damn, did his husband’s skill and raw power ever turn him on.

“So brilliant,” Harry panted. “You’re so bloody sexy.”

Severus gave a breathless laugh. “You are no longer in a position to judge objectively, but I….” He gave Harry a soft smile. “I am glad you find me so. It is….” His voice continued in Harry’s mind. [It is the first time anyone has found my body attractive.]

“Mm, not just your body.” Harry held Severus’ cheeks, tucking the man’s hair behind his ears to see him better. “You’re lovely, Severus. Your eyes… your lips, these gorgeous high cheekbones—you’re beautiful.”

Severus shook his head, eyes shimmering. “I am not. My nose… my teeth—no.”

“Sev.” Harry kissed the tip of Severus’ nose and moved to his open mouth, kissing him deeply enough to lick the bottoms of his teeth. Severus gave a soft, strangled moan and settled his groin atop Harry’s, rocking into his still-raging erection. Harry jerked back with a cry and grabbed Severus’ hips, arching to meet his slow, steady thrusts.
“Oh _gods_. S-Sev, so good.” Harry gasped for breath and struggled to clear his head. Hadn’t he been trying to reassure his husband? “You… not perfect, true, but you’re beautiful to me. Every… ghn… inch—Merlin, Severus. Love your face. Your body. Your hair. Oh hell, don’t stop.”

Severus took both their erections in hand and stroked, slow and steady, and Harry jerked up, a sharp cry in his throat.

“Sev!”

“Mm, lovely.” Severus’ voice was low and dark with arousal. “Gods, Harry. You’re so magnificent.”

“Skinny and gawky and scarred.”

Severus traced his free hand up Harry’s side. “Not perfect, but beautiful to me.”

Harry cried out and scrabbled at Severus’ chest. “Please, please.”

Severus moaned and gave Harry one last thrust before moving back. “Not like that, my husband. Not this time.”

Harry whimpered, so dazed with need and arousal he couldn’t form a coherent plea. “D-don’t, need—please.”

Severus moved down Harry’s legs, sucking each nipple in turn before trailing kisses down the centre of his stomach. Harry thrashed and arched, desperate for some kind of friction, but found nothing.

“Not yet,” Severus whispered against his navel. “Let me… I need to make this feel safe again.”

Harry’s intense need muted as he realised his husband was trying to conquer some long-buried fear. He lifted a shaking hand to Severus’ hair and smoothed the mussed locks, struggling to quell a sharp surge of arousal at the sight of him hovering so close to his bobbing shaft.

“I’m here, Sev. You’re safe. It’s okay.”

Severus took Harry’s hand and kissed his palm, then took one of Harry’s fingers into his mouth, licking and sucking hard. Harry’s breath caught and his groin jumped at the sight.

“Sev,” he breathed. “Gods, so hot.”

Severus moved back with a shy smile. “Harry, I would like to—I want you to feel what I have, but… promise me something.”

“Anything, Sev. What do you need?”

“Do not push me down, please. Or push up too hard.”

Harry gulped, having an idea from his request what he planned to do and what it meant Severus might have endured in the past. “Yeah. I won’t hurt you, my h-husband.” He held his breath, terrified Severus would not even allow him _that_ small endearment. But Severus only gave him a hesitant smile and kissed the corner of Harry’s groin.

“Be careful with me, Harry,” he murmured, and tentatively pressed a kiss to the tip of Harry’s erection.

Harry jerked back, overcome with a sharp zing of pleasure through his entire body, and gasped out
his husband’s name. In Parseltongue.

Severus smirked. “Yes, it feels good, doesn’t it?”

Harry could only whimper as Severus’ soft, wet tongue lapped at his head, each stroke paralysing him with need. Oh dear gods, it was taking everything he had not to move. But fuck all if he would break his promise to Sev.

“P-please,” he choked out. “Can’t bear it.”

Severus moved back, worry in his eyes. “Should I stop?”

“Merlin, no!”

Severus chuckled against Harry’s tip and made him yelp. “Ah, I understand.” He paused, a sharp surge of fear building in him. Harry gathered his wits and petted Severus’ hair.

“It’s okay, Sev. You don’t have to do it if it bothers you.”

It must have been the right thing to say. Severus’ fear eased and he gave Harry a tentative smile.

“You are always so gentle with me.”

“I always will be, Sev’rus.”

The last of his fear vanished, and Severus buried Harry’s tip in the snug heat of his mouth. Harry could not help but arch up in surprise. Lightning and water surged through his veins, as well as the fear that he had hurt his husband.

“S-Sev, I’m—nngh—s-sorry. Are you—oh gods—okay?”

Severus rubbed his hand down Harry’s thigh and looked up, making eye-contact. [I am fine, Harry. I did not mean you cannot move. I only do not wish you to….]

He couldn’t finish in words, but Harry got flashes of dark memories, of a well-manicured hand tangled too-tightly in dark locks and slamming Severus’ head down, of sharp pain and the sensation that he would suffocate, tears running down his face and the fear that if he didn’t let the man have his way—even if it hurt—Severus would be left alone forever.

Rage and protectiveness surged to life in Harry’s chest, drowning out arousal. He slipped his hand into Severus’ and used the other to stroke his partner’s long hair.

“Never, Severus. I will never hurt you like that. Dear gods.”

Severus shuddered and pulled back. “I… I did not intend to show you.”

“Ssh. It’s okay, Severus. You’re safe, you’re adored, and nothing has changed except I want to protect you more.”

Severus pulled up, tears on his lashes. “I feel your anger.”

Harry sat up and brought Severus into a soft kiss, cradling his face and stroking his cheeks with his thumbs. “Yes, I am angry. I want to kill the bastard who hurt you. But I’m not angry with you, Sev. Never you.”

Severus relaxed and kissed Harry’s palms. “Then… should I try again?”
“Only if you feel safe. Only if you want to. You don’t need to earn my l—my care and devotion, my husband. I’m yours, always, no matter what.”

Severus’ eyes filled with soft warmth and deep trust. “Yes, I am beginning to see that.” He laid a gentle hand on Harry’s chest and guided him to lay back. “Forgive me for… well, darkening the mood.”

“Nothing to forgive, Sev. I’d much rather you tell me your fears and put things off for a bit than terrify and traumatise you by accident.”

Severus closed his eyes and took in a shaky breath. By the powerful rush of relief and affection surging through the bond, Harry gathered his husband had suffered this way too.

‘Gods, Sev. No wonder you’re so afraid of love. What did that shitehead do to you?’

Harry stroked Severus’ hair and hoped it soothed him, but before he could say or think anything else, Severus took his flagging erection into his mouth and sucked him back to life.

“Oh, oh gods!” Harry yowled and grabbed the sheets so he wouldn’t grab Severus’ hair. He wanted to touch his mate’s head, to caress and soothe him, but had no confidence he would be able to control his hands with a torrent of pleasure sucking every coherent thought from his brain. He couldn’t keep his hips from rocking a bit, but struggled against the urge to thrust.

“S-Sev, oh, s-sorry, can’t help—oh, please.”

Gentle hands pushed Harry’s thighs up and apart even as Severus was busy sucking Harry’s soul out. “Yes, yes! Sev!”

“Mmm.”

Severus’ low moan made Harry hiss and cry out—either in Parseltongue or gibberish, he wasn’t sure. Somewhere out of the corner of his eye, he saw a blue phial sail towards Severus’ outstretched hand. He couldn’t contain a shard of fear, knowing what came next, but Severus’ hands and mouth kept him too mired in ecstasy to care.

“Please, please.”

Severus took him deep inside, and Harry shrieked and thrashed about, even then being careful not to push up. Gods, it was so hard not to rock. Every instinct in his body begged him to thrust and claim more of Severus’ mouth for his own, but he denied the urge. He would not be the monster who ruined this for Severus all over again for a few seconds of transient pleasure.

“Sev’rus,” he sobbed, lost to his desire. “Please, I can’t…."

Severus moved back and licked Harry’s head. “Ssh. I have you, my Harry. Does it feel good.”

“Going to break,” Harry whimpered. “Break apart and… oh…."

A gentle fingertip, wet and cool, caressed his entrance.

“Sev,” he breathed. “Yeah, want you.”

“Mhn.” Severus buried a moan in Harry’s bollocks, shocking him with pleasure. His tongue tasted them next, and Harry arched up, giving in to his desires now that it would not hurt Severus.

“P-please,” he begged. “Can’t stand it. So good.”
Severus leaned back and rolled Harry’s sack with his hand instead.

“Ghn.” Harry rocked into him, mindless with need. “Sev….”

Severus kissed his thigh and rubbed his fingertip back and forth. “Harry, I’m going to cast a spell to clean and prepare you for intercourse.”

Harry whimpered. “Yeah, just… want you inside me.”

Severus shivered, breath hitching. “Gods, Harry. Never… it has never….” [Never been so intense. I am losing control.]

“Sev… spell.”

“Yes. Mundintus.”

Tingling sensations surged deep into Harry’s body and rubbed inside him. He arched up, thrashing under the spell’s pleasurable assault, and sobbed out Severus’ name. A second whisper against the head of Harry’s erection had him crying out.

“Lubricado.”

Harry whimpered at the cool, slick feeling inside him and pressed against Severus’ caressing finger.

“P-please, inside me now.”

“Mm, patience, my husband. You are not yet ready.”

“But the spell—”

“ Cleans and lubricates your passage. It does not stretch you. I would prefer to do so manually.” Severus’ thoughts continued, quiet and low, indicating he hadn’t meant them to transfer. [I will not deny him this moment of intimacy, not as I was denied.]

Harry closed his eyes, concern and love for his husband driving the sharpest edge of arousal back. ‘I swear, I won’t let him suffer like he has done in the past. I will do better by him. I will love these bad memories and his pain away, one day.’

Severus gently slipped his finger inside, his slow strokes never pressing too hard or too deep, and Harry gave a soft moan, desire returning with the feel of his husband preparing him.

“Yes, yes, you feel so good, Sev.”

Severus leaned up on his elbow and gave Harry a searching look. “You are not afraid?”

“No,” Harry panted. “Need more.”

Severus gave him a hesitant smile and lapped at the tip of Harry’s erection.

“Gah!” Harry pressed hard onto Severus’ finger, mewing helplessly under dual shocks of pleasure, and cried out when Severus sucked him inside.

“Oh, oh gods! S-S-Sev….”

He lost himself to pleasure. Harry sobbed and rocked onto Severus’ hand, keeping his thrusts slow and shallow for Severus’ sake. One finger became two, and then Severus crooked his fingers and
swiped something inside Harry that sent a jolt of ecstasy through his entire body.

“What… what was that?”

Severus smirked. “Your prostate gland. It does so enjoy to be stimulated.”

Harry whimpered as another stroke sapped the breath from him. “O-oh. More.”

Severus obliged, preparing Harry slowly.

Before long, Harry had gone almost incoherent with need. “P-please… can’t… take anymore. Need you.”

Severus removed his hand and slicked his erection. “You are sure?”

“Merlin, yes. Please, please.”

Gently, Severus slid inside Harry. With such care, there was no pain. Harry only felt full as Severus guided himself into his entrance, taking him inch by inch, until Harry’s body relaxed enough to let him slip all the way inside. Above him, Severus held Harry’s legs in shaking hands and lowered his head, biting his lip in a fierce struggle for control. Harry caressed Severus’ lip, and Severus sucked Harry’s finger into his mouth with a groan.

“So warm,” Severus panted out. “Harry, are you all right?”

“Yeah. You can move.”

“Oh, thank Merlin.”

With a drawn out moan, Severus gently pulled back and slowly pushed back in. Harry arched, feeling full, connected, and… and…. As Severus turned his head into Harry’s hand and pressed soft kisses onto his palm and wrist, Harry felt loved. Cherished. Another stroke filled him, and tears of joy and pleasure pooled on his lashes.

“Severus….”

Severus brought Harry into a tender kiss and tugged him into his arms. “Ssh. You are safe here. I will not hurt you.”

“I know.” Harry slid his hands into Severus’ hair and kissed him passionately. “I just… feel so much.”

“Ahh.”

Severus placed his hands by Harry’s head, rolled his mate’s hips up, and rocked into him slow and deep. Harry moaned and kissed Severus hard, clutching at his hair as the man made love to him, pressing deeper and deeper, the sounds he made growing more urgent with every thrust. Harry held on tight and lost himself in Severus’ kisses, the feeling of him deep inside, surging and falling to pieces with the movement of his mate.


Severus moaned softly. “I will not… hurt you. Will not be rough.”

“Doesn’t hurt. Feels so good I can’t stand it. Please, gods, need to feel you deeper.”
Severus growled and took Harry into a passionate kiss, at the same time pumping hard and fast into his mate.

“Yes, yes, like that!” Harry sobbed into Severus’ ear. “Mhn, Se-Sev—more.”

“Say my name,” Severus panted. “Say it. I need to… oh, gods.”

“Sev’rus!”

“Yes, Harry!”

Harry howled as Severus gripped his erection and pumped him hard, within and without. A few strokes later, his world whited out in an explosion of fire and light, and Severus cried out against his throat. Severus’ strokes stuttered, his face contorted with pleasure, and heat flooded Harry.

Harry stroked Severus’ cheek as he came, and when the man could breathe, Severus dropped a kiss into Harry’s palm. Severus opened dilated eyes to look at him, and the hesitant smile he’d been wearing dropped off his face.

“Harry?”

“Yeah?”

Severus withdrew carefully and cradled Harry’s face. It was only then Harry realised he’d been crying for some time.

“I… are you all right?”

Harry nodded and curled into Severus’ chest. “It’s okay, Sev. You didn’t hurt me. I’m just overwhelmed.”

“Ah. I was afraid.”

“It’s all right.”

Severus wrapped Harry into his arms and cast a cleaning charm, washing away the evidence of their lovemaking. “Are you in pain at all?”

“No. Not a bit.” He kissed Severus’ jaw and settled in to sleep as a cleaning spell washed over him. Harry smiled and hugged Severus closer.

“You’re brilliant, you know. I had no idea it could feel so good.”

Severus nuzzled Harry’s hair. “Yes, I… it was… I have never felt so….” [Cherished. So complete.]”

“Me too, Sev.” Harry cradled Severus close and ran his fingers through the man’s damp hair. “Did I… you weren’t afraid?”

Severus gave him a shy, warm smile. “No. You were gentle.” He kissed Harry softly. “Thank you.”

“Mm? For what?”

“For being patient and… and caring. For accepting my weaknesses and not pushing me into more than I could bear.” His mental voice continued, [For giving me a happy memory in the bedroom.]”

Harry closed his eyes around the prickling of tears and vowed, one day, he would give Severus
nothing but happy memories. Or at least make it so the bad ones didn’t hurt so much.


Severus kissed Harry lightly. “I see that, my Harry.” The name didn’t bring the pain it had before. Perhaps because Severus had at least allowed Harry to refer to him as his husband. Maybe he’d be open to other, more intimate names as their bond progressed. Harry could hope for it anyway.

“Let us sleep now,” Severus murmured. “I am exhausted after that.”

Harry chuckled softly. “Yeah, me too. Goodnight, Sev.”

“Goodnight.”

As Severus held him and stroked his hair, soft warmth and wonder flowing through his side of the bond, Harry relaxed and melted into his husband’s arms. Yes, they had a long way to go, but this gentle affection and the great effort Severus had put forth gave Harry hope that they would get there one day. Severus might not love him yet—or perhaps he just couldn’t admit it—but he cared, and his feelings for Harry ran deep. It was enough.

Harry buried his head in Severus’ chest and fell asleep with a smile on his face, the older man’s heartbeat acting as a perfect lullaby.
Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** severe abuse of a teenager, flashbacks of domestic violence. AN: Right, so since I got behind on updates, I'm putting up a bunch at once. And because I'm almost at the end of part II anyway. These chapters, especially the next one, are freaking angst city. But there's a light at the end of the tunnel. So, yeah, here we go. Also, I tried very hard to make this realistic and yet, gentle to Severus' recovery too. Hope it works.)

Chapter 41

Lost in Plain Sight

2 OCTOBER

Harry woke up snug and secure in Severus’ arms, body warm and heart troubled. Severus, still fast asleep, sighed and cuddled him close, his breath soothing against Harry’s neck. This was his favourite place to Harry traced over his fingers and wrists, more in love with him than he had ever been, and yet, his chest ached with worry and remorse. Severus had phobias of touch and love, but last night, they had consummated their marriage for the first time. It was wonderful and tender and loving, and Harry had adored every second, but had he pushed Severus too far, too fast? They had only been married a few days, after all. Was Severus ready for such a big step?

Gods, Harry hoped he hadn’t mistreated his husband.

Severus woke with a snuffle and clutched Harry tight. “Harry? What is it? Did you have nightmares?”

Harry turned into Severus’ arms and gave him a searching look. “Sev, have I been pushing you too hard?”

Severus blinked a few times and shook his head as if to clear it. “Ah… pushing me?”

“To accept me. To lo—care for me. To touch me. Have I been pushing you into things you aren’t ready for?”

Severus frowned and drew Harry in closer. “I do not understand where this is coming from. I told you at our bonding I wish us to be true bonded mates. I want to touch you and hold you and… and to care for you in the same way you care for me. It is only that I must overcome my fears first.” He gave Harry a wry smile. “To be honest, I had expected to be more afraid than I have been. Perhaps I am not as badly broken as I thought.”

A spark of foreboding flickered in Harry’s heart. “Or I haven’t been giving you time to process it.”

Severus winced. “I…. He slipped his hands into Harry’s. “I do not wish to dwell on the past, Harry. You are my future.”
“But if we don’t deal with it—”

“We will.”

Harry gave him a hesitant smile. “You’ll talk to me about it?”

Severus paled. “I… I don’t know if… if I can. But I….” He swallowed hard. “I will try. But not yet. Please, not yet. I am simply not ready to face it.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “Okay. We’ll wait.” He hoped Severus didn’t feel the burst of pain he tried to Occlude away. It really wasn’t Severus’ fault, and by gods, he needed to quit pushing the man into things he wasn’t ready for.

But Severus’ eyes filled with pain and remorse, and Harry knew he hadn’t Occluded as well as he’d hoped.

Harry kissed his forehead. “I’m sorry. It’s not your fault. Take your time and talk to me when you’re ready. I… I just want you to be able to trust me with anything, and it hurts a little that you can’t yet. But it’s not fair to expect you to open up about this so soon. I’m sorry. I should be able to stop worrying, but I’m not doing a good job of it.” He sighed against Severus’ cheek. “I’ll do better, Sev. I promise.”

Severus gave a soft mewl and clutched Harry close to him. “I do not wish you to hide your pain from me, Harry. Do not try to ‘do better.’ Tell me what troubles you.”

Harry didn’t dare mention the pain from the bond. Severus would be devastated, and he was doing the best he could. It wasn’t fair to pressure him into more—Harry had done enough damage with his impatience as it was.

“It’s just like I said, Severus. It just hurts that you can’t trust me completely yet, but don’t feel guilty. You’re doing so well. It’s not been long enough for you to trust me completely, and you’re honestly amazing me with how far you’ve come in such a short time.”

Worry and fear filled Severus’ eyes. “Is it enough?”

“Yes, Severus. You are more than enough.” Harry cupped his husband’s face and kissed him lightly. “Don’t be afraid, Sev. It’s okay. You really haven’t done anything wrong at all. You’ve been brilliant.” Harry sighed and slumped against Severus’ shoulder. “It’s me who keeps coming up short.”

Severus stroked Harry’s cheek. “Why do you imagine you are failing me?”

“I just….” Harry lifted his head and met his husband’s eyes. “I feel like I’m pressuring you. Like I’ve been too impatient and you’re going to be hurt by it. I’m sorry, Severus.”

“Harry….” Severus wrapped him up close and sighed. “Husband mine, listen to me. Everything that I have done with you has been my choice. You have not pushed me or pressured me into anything. It is true that sometimes my fears have hurt you, but you did not push me. You simply cannot hide your pain because of the nature of the bond between us, just as I cannot hide my fears. That is not pushing me. You have been understanding and gentle and patient. Your pain is not something you can help, and I do not blame you for it.” He kissed Harry’s forehead and brushed tears away. “Do not be angry with yourself, Harry. I am content.”

“Really?”
“Yes.”

Harry sighed and buried his face in Severus’ neck. “I’m just afraid we moved too fast. I’m afraid you’ll be set back by something. I just… I don’t want you to be hurt, and I really don’t want to be the one to do it.”

“If you feel we are moving too fast, we can always slow down. But I do not feel the need to do so. I am happy.”

Harry lifted his head once more, heart full of hope and wonder. “Severus, really? You’re happy with me?”

Severus smiled and kissed Harry softly, morning breath and all. “I am, husband mine. More so than I have ever been.”

Relief and love washed away the guilt freezing Harry’s heart. “Sev… that means so much to me. Knowing you’re happy. That’s… I dreamed of this. You happy in my arms and….” He bit his lip and dropped his head.

Severus kissed Harry once more, soothing his abused lip with gentle sweeps of his tongue. “I am not ready for that yet, my Harry, but we will get there one day. Are you able to be patient until then? To trust that I do care about you and I am trying to put my fears behind me?”

Harry gave him a soft, warm smile. “Yeah. Yeah, I can do. Thank you, Sev. I feel loads better now.”

“Good. I do not wish you to suffer in silence, Harry. Please, tell me when you are afraid or hurt. I want you to be happy too.”

Harry nuzzled Severus’ hair. “I think I am. Or at least, I’m on my way there.”

“Then there is nothing to worry about, husband mine. Let us not borrow troubles, Harry. We are doing well together, and that is good enough for me.”

Harry gave him a tentative smile. “Yeah, you’re right. Merlin knows we’ve enough problems without creating more.”

“True.” Severus sat up and stretched. “Come. It is past time for us to be up and moving. Let me use the loo, then you take the shower first. I have a bit of marking I need to finish before my morning classes.”

Harry nodded and smiled to himself. Severus was happy. Merlin, maybe Harry hadn’t been as much of a cad as he feared. Maybe it would be okay after all.

Gods, he hoped so.

Harry had been tempted to eat breakfast with his husband, but Neville had pointed out last night that the Death Eater students might get ideas if he stayed away too much longer, especially given the rumours about his absence. Thank Merlin it was the weekend. Severus had lab work to do, but Harry could always hide out in the Infirmary or work on revision if he needed to make himself scarce.

Harry came in a bit late, so everyone in the school was in attendance already. Joy. As he walked in,
all eyes turned to him and conversation dropped off. Gods, what he wouldn’t give to eat his breakfast like a normal person without being gawked at all morning.

He turned to give Malföy a glare—this was his fault, damn it, at least in part—but his usual seat was empty. Odd. Well, at least Harry wouldn’t have to endure his gloating for the next few hours.

Still, something about Malfoy’s absence left him unsettled.

Ron appeared to have drowned his sorrows in Lavender’s arms at the near end of the table, but he looked up and gave Harry a sad wave as he walked past. Harry shrugged it off. Ron had made his priorities clear over the last few months. A pretty witch would always come first in his book. It didn’t sting as much as it used to, whether because Ron had stopped treating Harry like dirt or because Harry cared less, he didn’t know. Either way, Harry wasn’t ready to trust him again yet. He gave the boy a curt nod and made his way down the table.

Neville and Luna were waiting at Harry’s usual spot, as well as Dean and Hermione. Ginny sat along the edge of the group, but Parvati had her pinned in on one side and Colin on the other.

Ginny cried his name as he passed, but Colin scowled and hexed her silent.

“He said to leave him alone! Listen, for Merlin’s sake.”

Harry nodded to the boy. “Colin, um… I…I’m sorry about yesterday.”

Colin shook his head. “It was my fault. I should have realised it would be a bad time. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Well, I’m better. But I hope you understand… I really can’t.”

Colin winced. “I figured by the way you ran out yesterday. It’s okay. I reckon you’ve got enough to deal with right now.”

Harry slumped in relief. “Yeah, yeah I really do. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. Just go before this bloody bint figures out how to break the charm.”

Harry glanced to Ginny’s red face and straining throat and nodded. “Reckon I’d better.” He shot the girl a dark glare and took his seat between Neville and Luna. “Morning, everyone.”

“Good morning,” said Hermione with a hesitant smile. “You look better today, Harry. Are you okay?”

Harry nodded. “Well, I’m better anyway.”

“That’s good,” said Neville with a smile.

Luna patted his shoulders. “The Aimelins are crowding out the Wrackspurts. You’ll be just fine in time.”

Harry grinned at her. “Lu, it’s amazing how much you can say without saying anything at all.”

She tittered and piled strawberries on her plate. “I say plenty. It’s only that most people have too many Taffytufts and Ticklebees in their ears to hear it.”

Harry snorted. “Well, it’s a good thing we have Nev to translate for you then.”
Hermione rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Taffytufts? What are those supposed to be?”

“You might tell me,” said Luna with a raised eyebrow. “You have more in your head than anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Well, I nev—”

“They’re spirits that make you focus on practical concerns,” said Neville, trying to stave off another argument between the girls, though they did tend to be rather one-sided.

“Sometimes at the cost of everything else,” said Harry, and Hermione subsided with a blush.

“Oh.” She gave Luna a wry look. “In that case, you might have a point.”

Luna shrugged. “You have less now than last year.”

“Good. I was stupid last year.”

Everyone looked to where Ron had left off snogging Lavender to shove his face.

“Well, I suppose love makes us do silly things sometimes,” Luna said with a shake of her head. “Especially Ron.”

The group burst into laughter.

“That’s the truth,” said Hermione with a smirk. “He didn’t know what he had!”

Harry chuckled. It was true enough. By now, the rumours of Ron’s infidelity issues were so rampant, the only girls who would take him were the type who wanted a quick shag against the wall and nothing else. It worked for them, Harry supposed, but that kind of thing wouldn’t lead to anything deeper. Certainly not like the bond he had with Severus.

Ron was missing out on the best life had to offer, in Harry’s opinion, for nothing more than a few minutes of transient pleasure.

He shook his head and piled his breakfast with a variety of foods, courtesy of Severus’ teachings. What Ron did with his sex life really wasn’t Harry’s business. Besides, he had other concerns.

“Hey guys, do you know where Malfoy is? Not that I’m missing his gloating or anything, but I figured he’d be here lording his victory over me by now, and it’s a little weird that he’s not taking advantage of the moment.”

Neville shrugged, but his expression held an edge of worry Harry didn’t like. “Well, the night he outed you, he disappeared after dinner.”

Hermione nodded. “Malfoy outed himself at the same time, actually. Yours was… well, I’m not convinced it wasn’t an accidental thing. He broke up with Pansy in a huge public screaming match, outed himself and told Pansy to stay away from him, shouted at Ginny to back off too because you were the same, and then he stormed off.”

“Merlin,” Harry breathed. “So he might not have even meant to hurt me.”

“That’s what I’m thinking. And the really strange thing is that no one’s seen him since that afternoon. Not even Blaise knows where he is, and they’re roommates.”

“Really?” Harry sipped his pumpkin juice, worry tight in his chest. “He’s not been in the dorms at
Dean nodded. “That’s what Blaise said.”

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. “So he’s off-campus then—I know he hasn’t been in the Room. Lu?”

“I am not getting anything either, Harry,” she said with a frown.

“That’s odd.”

“Yes. I don’t half like it myself.”

“Well, I suppose I’ll check the map later. Maybe he’s just lying low.”

“Maybe,” said Hermione, but she didn’t sound convinced. To be fair, Harry wasn’t either.

The arrival of the owls interrupted their conversation, and Harry put aside his worries. In all likelihood, Malfoy had just gone home to report his news to daddy-dearest. Which meant Harry would need to be alert to tricks against his sexuality now, not that he would ever fall into such a trap, not with Severus waiting at home.

Still, it wouldn’t hurt to have a cover story handy for anyone who asked him out. He’d have to talk to Severus about it later. Or he could just use the same excuse he had done with Colin. Considering the mess that was his life on any given day, no one would doubt it.

Still, maybe he could ask Severus for help coming up with a firmer excuse if his would-be pursuers proved persistent. Just to be safe.

Harry spotted his own snowy familiar among the flock and held his arm out for her. She dropped a note in his eggs as well as the Prophet, and Harry fished both out and cleaned them with a quick Tergeo.

“Hello there, girl.” He petted her wings and back. “Sorry I’ve not been up to see you in a while. It’s been… Merlin, it’s been an awful week.”

She nuzzled his collar and cocked her head, a questioning look in her eyes. Harry closed his eyes and lowered his head.

“Isuri… she’s d-dead, Hedwig. Finnigan killed her.”

Hedwig let out a horrid screech. As much as they had distrusted each other in the beginning, Hedwig had come to love Isuri as much as Harry. They had been comrades in arms at the Dursley’s, and that month spent keeping Harry safe and from despair had bonded them. And Solaris loved her too. Damn. He needed to go visit the owlery and tell him about Isuri too. Unless Severus had done already? Either way, Solaris and Hedwig could use his company.

“I’m sorry, girl,” Harry murmured, unsure if he was apologising to Hedwig or Isuri.

Hedwig climbed onto his shoulder and nuzzled his cheek, rubbing a tear away with her head.

“T-thanks, Hedwig. I’ll come to visit later, assuming some other catastrophe doesn’t keep me away. It’s been utterly mad.” He sniffled and petted her back. “Go on, and try to tell your friend about her, if you can?”

Hedwig gave a soft whoo, tugged Harry’s hair affectionately, and took to flight. Harry tracked her
form until she vanished through an open window and disappeared into the early morning sun.

Dean rubbed his back. “You okay, mate?”

“I… I’m fine, mostly. Just… missing her.”

Neville patted Harry’s shoulder. “Stay close to us, and to your friend. We’ll keep you sane through it, Harry.”

He gave him a wan smile of thanks and turned to his note, leaving the Prophet for when he could better cope with the day’s string of no-doubt bad—or at least annoying—news. He had just managed to get the parchment open when Neville’s muttered curse made him look back up.

A familiar decrepit owl fluttered down the length of the Gryffindor table, late as always, a red envelope clutched in his talons. Harry grimaced, not looking forward to Molly’s tirade in defence of her ‘sweet, innocent daughter,’ but the owl landed halfway down the table instead and toppled into Ginny’s breakfast.

“Oh Merlin,” he said with a groan and sank into his seat. A Molly-howler was never pleasant, even when it wasn’t bound to be about him. Neville rubbed Harry’s back in sympathy.

Ginny picked up the letter with shaking hands, her face almost as red as the envelope.

“GINEVRA MOLLY WEASLEY!”

The shrill tones of Molly’s screeching brought down a shower of dust from the rafters.

“When I advised you to pursue Harry last year,” the letter continued in an ear-splitting screech, “never once did you tell me that he had already refused your advances! There is a difference between pursuit and assault, and you, young lady, have gone so far over the line we’ve had a visit from the aurors! Your father is facing yet another inquiry at work, no thanks to your refusal to listen to reason, and you have traumatised a boy who used to think of you as a friend and who is already facing far too much! Harry is a dear boy and—”

Harry dropped his head on the table and covered his ears. “Merlin, strike me dead.”

Neville chuckled and rubbed Harry’s back. “I don’t think your friend would like that.”

“No, probably not.”

Hermione snorted wryly and gave Harry a sympathetic look. “It’ll be over soon. I hope.”

“Are you kidding me? This is Molly we’re talking about. She won’t stop until the ceiling falls down on us. At least then I’ll be spared the embarrassment, I suppose.”

Hermione gave him a dark look. “Considering what we just went through a couple days ago, that is not funny, Harry.”

Harry winced. “Shite. ‘Mione, I didn’t mean it. I’m just embarrassed.”

“I know. You just scared us, Harry. It’s okay. I—” A particularly loud screech cut her off, and she grimaced. “We’ll talk about it later.”

“Probably wise,” Dean agreed.

Meanwhile, the Howler still hadn’t let up.
“—Ashamed of you, young lady. Your father and I will be there to pick you up this afternoon. You’re going to be home with us for two weeks while we teach you the manners and respect you so obviously failed to understand in the past seventeen years under our direction, and no, you will not be allowed to communicate with Harry—or anyone else—for the duration. Pack up and so help me, if you shame our family like this again, I will break out my wooden spoon in front of the entire school!”

The letter took a breath as if panting and turned towards Ron. “And you, Ronald Bilius Weasley! Albus did not want to tell me of your behaviour, but your classmates have made it perfectly clear we have much to be ashamed of where you are concerned, too! What on earth possessed you to attack Harry for defending himself against unwanted advances? Have you never heard of respect? Of loyalty?”

Ron turned as crimson as his sister and sank into his seat, all thoughts of snogging and breasts cast aside, for once.

“And another thing, Ronald Weasley, we have taught you better than to tomcat around with the entire female population of Hogwarts! I am sick—sick to my stomach with you both!”

The letter continued on in this vein until Ron was sniffling with shame and misery. Harry didn’t pity him, though he might have done once. Molly had a point, and milder methods of imparting her wisdom into her children certainly hadn’t proved effective with these two. Maybe a healthy dose of embarrassment might bring it home to them that they’d gone far off the beaten path and needed to grow up before their immaturity got them killed. After all, a visit from the aurors might have given Voldemort’s crew plenty of reason to ‘apprehend’ Molly and Arthur had Kingsley and Tonks not been around to shield them.

No, he definitely didn’t pity those two. Though he wished he might have avoided a share of the shame himself. He hadn’t done anything to deserve it.

“Consider yourself lucky that we’ve decided Ginny needs two weeks alone to think on her failures, young man,” the howler went on, “or you’d be on the way home with her!”

The letter took a deep breath and mopped at its top with a singed corner. It turned to where Harry was trying to melt into the bench, and his stomach dropped into his feet.

“And, Harry, dear, I am so sorry about all this. I do hope you’re all right.”

The letter curled up and vanished in a puff of smoke. Ginny stared at it, eyes wet and wide as galleons, gave Harry one last, heartsick look, and dashed from the Great Hall in tears.

Harry thumped his forehead on the table and wondered if it was possible to actually die of embarrassment.

“Buck up, mate,” said Neville. “At least this means you won’t have to deal with Ginny or Finnigan for the next two weeks.”

“And maybe she’ll have learned some sense by the time she comes back,” said Hermione with a wan smile. “Though Seamus is probably a lost cause.”

Dean snorted. “Did none of you notice what she did to me while trying to get to Harry? And Michael Corner? And Andrew Waters? They’re both lost causes, if you ask me.”

Harry kept his agreement to himself and returned his attention to his note.
H,

I find I am already missing your presence. If you need me, you know how to get my attention. I am here for you.

S.

Harry’s irritation and shame vanished in an instant. Severus missed him and cared enough to let him know. He kept his eyes away from the head table lest he draw attention to his husband, but sent a wave of love and gratitude through their bond.

[Oh, Sev. I miss you too. Thank you.]

A rush of warm joy and relief answered him, and Harry cherished the feeling of Severus’ love, or as close to it as the man could come.

Maybe the morning hadn’t been so bad after all.

Dean and Hermione had gone to Hogsmeade together to stock up on supplies. Neville and Luna had plans to join them later, as soon as Harry was safely ensconced in the Infirmary.

As soon as the first-floor corridor cleared out, Neville nudged Harry in the shoulder and whispered, “Lu told me that note of yours drew clouds of Aimelins. So, what did he say?”

Harry’s cheeks burned. “Um, h-he said he missed me. And reminded me he was there for me if I needed him.”

Neville beamed. “Oh, mate, that’s brilliant. I really think he’s invested more in this than either of you thinks.”

Harry smiled to himself and lowered his head, almost afraid of such joy. “Y-yeah. He might be. I… last night—well, I don’t want to go into details without his permission, but he was so loving. So gentle. I… if I didn’t love him already, I would have fallen for him then.”

Luna gave him a bright smile. “See? I told you it would be all right. Just keep seeking out what works for you as a couple and don’t worry about anyone else.”

Harry nodded and took her advice to heart. “I’ll try.” He crossed his arms over his chest and watched his feet. “I think I have a better idea of what to avoid with him now. He still can’t talk about it, but I saw flashes…” He shuddered and hugged his chest. “And it’s no wonder he’s afraid. I just… I have to remember to be careful with him. He’s damaged and scared, but he’s trying so hard. I think, as long as I remember that, we’ll be okay.”

Luna patted Harry’s shoulder. “Remember it, Harry. He does care.”

“I know. I just wish he’d talk to me about it. It hurts that he doesn’t trust me.”
Luna stopped him and gave him a stern look. “And have you trusted him?”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“Have you told him of your life with the Dursleys? About the plate? About all the things that scare you as much as your friend’s past scares him?”

Harry stared, gobsmacked and stunned. “Shite.”

“Exactly. How can you expect him to open up to you and trust you when you haven’t given him the same trust?”

Harry gave a choked off whine and covered his head in his hands. “Oh gods, I’m an idiot. A total idiot. And I… fuck.”

“Harry… Merlin.” Luna hugged him and kissed his cheek. “You are not an idiot, nor do you need to be so hard on yourself. I am not attacking you. Only suggesting that you attempt to open up to your friend. Perhaps, if you are able to trust him and trust that he will still care for you in the end, then he will be able to do the same with greater ease. And either way, the two of you must learn to stop keeping secrets. They only come back to bite you in the arse later.”

Harry wiped his eyes and nodded, his expression downcast. “I didn’t think my past with the Dursleys—I mean, he’s already seen part of it through my memories. And it’s not really interfering in our relationship, so I thought it would be better to focus on him first.”

“Isn’t it, though?” Neville rubbed Harry’s back. “The Dursleys made you think of yourself as a freak. They crushed your self-confidence and made you feel worthless, like no one could ever love you. And don’t you think that insecurity might be making you more impatient? If you trusted in your own appeal, in your own worth, I don’t think you’d be half as scared that he would never come to care for you, especially given how good he’s been about it since that night.”

Harry winced and dropped his head. “Damn. That’s… damn. Bloody hell, you’re right.” He took a deep, shaky breath and clutched his books closer against his chest. “And I’m scared to talk about it too, just like he is. I really have bollixed this all up, haven’t I?”

“No, Harry.” Neville said with a wry smile. “You’ve only been in this a couple days. You’re both bound to make mistakes. The key is to recognise them when you do and learn how to overcome them together. You’ve already crossed the first hurdle. Now you’ve only to shore up your courage and talk to him when you’re ready. In time, he’ll talk to you too. And I do think it will help if he hears you talk and knows you’ve been hurt too. Then it won’t be so scary.”

Harry took a deep breath to calm himself. Gods. He really needed to do better by his poor husband.

“Y-yeah. Yeah, I think you’re right. Thanks, you two. I’ll keep that in mind.” He gave them a worried look. “I’m not sure I’m going to have time to talk to Dean for a while. My friend and I need to… well, I need to be with him and get things settled between us. Do you think you two could clue him in over the weekend?”

Luna frowned. “Harry, with something this big, I think it’s best he hears it from you.”

“Yeah,” Neville agreed. “He’d probably feel hurt otherwise.”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Right. Well, it might need to wait until Monday night then. I really need this weekend with him, you know. Just to… I don’t know. Be together. Try to get used to one another. Does that make sense?”
“Yeah. And Dean won’t mind waiting.” Neville patted his back. “It’s going to be okay, Harry. He really does care about you. It’s just going to take time to work out the kinks.”

The tight knot of tension writhing in Harry’s chest melted. “I... yeah. You’re right about that too. Thank you. Both of you.”

Luna opened the Infirmary door for Harry and kissed his cheek. “What are friends for?”

Harry smiled and returned her greeting. “I’ll see you two later then?”

Neville gave him a one-armed hug. “Sure. Send us a Patronus if you need anything else from Hogsmeade, mate.”

“Will do. Bye.” He waved to his friends and closed the Infirmary door behind him. “Right. I just have to be patient and have faith in him. It’s going to be okay.” With that, he took a deep breath to steady his nerves and stepped into the ward. “Poppy? Are you about?”

The woman scooted a stool back and popped her head out from behind a curtain. “Harry, dear, I could use your assistance if you have a moment. Would you get a pot of Skin Sealer from the storage cupboard? This young man here ran afoul of a Venomous Tentacula... or perhaps a hundred of them.”

Harry poked his head around the curtain and grimaced. All he could see of the boy was a thatch of brown hair and bright blue eyes full of tears. Everything else looked like raw meat.

“Dear Merlin! Right away, ma’am.”

Without another word, he dashed off to the Infirmary stores after the salve.

The Venomous Tentacula boy—Nate Aldridge, a fourth-year Hufflepuff—would be staying in the Infirmary for quite some time while his wounds healed and the venom left his system. He was in considerable pain, poor bloke, and Harry had trouble getting him to sleep even with the aid of potions and his powerful healing magic.

Once Harry had finally managed to put him to sleep, Poppy cast an Infirmary silencing field around the young man and led Harry away. Harry and Poppy could hear their patient if he awoke, but Nate would hear nothing outside of his bubble. With any luck, the unfortunate young man would be able to sleep for at least a few hours while the skin sealer worked on his injuries.

“No more, ma’am. He used all three jars.”

Harry winced. “Yeah, I thought so too. I’ll ask Nev for his opinion later, if you want.”

“That’s quite all right. I’ll ask Pomona in a moment. I’ve got to get more salve for him anyway.”

He looked up, a bemused frown crossing his face. “We don’t have anymore, ma’am. He used all three jars.”
“I know. I’ll have to ask Severus for a special brew. With any luck, he’ll be able to tailor it to Mister Aldridge’s needs.” Her expression darkened. “And perhaps point me to which Death-Eater-in-training students were loitering about the greenhouses this afternoon.”

Harry gave her a hesitant smile. “I can go ask Professor Snape, if you’d rather?”

“No, no. It’s too dangerous for you both, dear. I’ll take care of it. I’d rather you be here in case Nate wakes up anyway. Of the two of us, you have more raw healing power and nothing else will help him until Severus finishes a new batch of potions.”

“Oh. In that case, I’ll watch over him then.”

“Thank you, dear.” Poppy finished washing up and cast a sanitising charm over her clothing and Harry’s. “There we are. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Good luck, and send your Patronus if you run into any problems while I’m away.” She paused. “You can call it still?”

Harry gave her a wan smile. “Yes, ma’am. I’ve still some good memories left.” Like last night’s lovemaking. He could probably call a troupe of Patronuses on that memory alone.

“Thank goodness. Well, I’m off then.”

Poppy patted Harry’s shoulder and swept out of the Infirmary, leaving Harry to hold down the fort. He finished washing up and cleaned the scrub-down station, then headed back to sit near Nate in case the boy woke. A quick flick of his wrist Summoned Slytherin’s latest journal from his knapsack and Harry translated it under his breath while he waited.

Or he tried, rather. Gods, he missed Isuri’s help. It was so much more difficult without her ability to translate the words that had no English equivalent.

Really, he just missed Isuri. With a sniffle, he rubbed the place his friend used to sit and tried to focus on his book.

Maybe he needed a new snake familiar. Not that he wanted to replace Isuri—no one could replace her—but he did need help. And he felt naked in Hogwarts without her protection.

Harry closed his eyes in grief. Was it wrong to be considering a new familiar when Isuri hadn’t been dead for long? The cold pit of guilt in his stomach weighed him down like lead and brought forth a wave of quiet tears. Gods, he missed his friend, but the truth was he really did need a snake’s help to decipher Slytherin’s works and, he hoped, find a way to defeat Voldemort.

~I am so sorry, girl. I hope you understand.~

At the realisation that the snake most likely would think him barmy to be so miserable for her loss, a mad desire to laugh nearly overcame him. She hadn’t comprehended grief, not in the same way humans did. In her eyes, a need was a need and it should be filled. She couldn’t be there for him any longer and Harry needed a snake to help and protect him. He could almost hear her telling him to buck up and find a new familiar.

With a sad sigh, he vowed he would ask Severus about it tonight. Maybe if they talked about it beforehand, they could choose what kind of snake would be most beneficial and happiest with Harry.

The Infirmary doors opened, and he wiped his face and struggled to compose himself.

“J-just a moment,” he called.
With a deep breath, he Banished the book to his bag and went to greet their visitor. As soon as he did, he wished he’d just stayed hidden.

“Good lord, Ginny,” Harry growled. “What is it going to take to get it through your head? I’m gay.”

She sniffled and lowered her head. “H-Harry, I only wanted to apologise. I never meant to drive you to—gods. I… I’m so sorry.”

“If you’re really sorry, take a ruddy hint and leave me alone! I’m working, and there’s a very sick bloke here in need of my help. Take your obsession somewhere else. Please.”

Ginny hugged her chest. “I… I’ll go, but… are you okay?”

He glared. “Honestly, I was fine until you showed up. Just go, Ginny.”

With a desolate sniffle, she slumped her shoulders and dragged herself away. Harry let slip a sigh of relief when the doors closed behind her, but it didn’t last long. Not a moment later, they opened again.

“Ginny! I told you to leave.”

A male voice Harry knew too well replied, “Oi, Potter, is that any way to greet your patients?”

Malfoy. Harry turned, a snarl on his lips.

“I suppose you’re here to gloat? Well, don’t. I… Malfoy?”

The boy had a black eye and was cradling his wrist to his chest. By the angle, it looked broken. Harry sighed and motioned him into a bed near Nate so he could monitor the boy as he worked.

“Madam Pomfrey just went to ask for a customised brew from Snape, so you’re stuck with me. Sit down.”

Malfoy winced and hopped onto the table. “Potter, I….” He dropped his gaze. “Look, about outing you—I… I didn’t mean for it to be like this.”

Harry ignored him and cast a diagnostic. “Hmm. Broken wrist, and you’re banged up all over. What happened?”

“I really didn’t, Potter.” Malfoy sighed and looked away. “And I… fell down the moving staircases.”

Harry’s eyebrow shot up. “You’d be a lot more banged up had that happened.” He used his wand to Summon a bottle of Bone Mender, various healing potions, and supplies for a cast and sling. Neither Malfoy nor the Death Eaters needed to know about his wandless skills or his healing powers. “Are you all right, Malfoy? Other than the obvious, I mean?”

Malfoy scowled. “You just don’t want to believe anything I say, do you?”

Harry raised his other eyebrow. “And why should I? Or did you forget that you outed me already?”

Malfoy’s cheeks pinked and he ducked his head. “I… really didn’t mean—look, it was making me sick, okay?”

Harry caught a flash of Parkinson shoving her tongue down Malfoy’s throat despite his lack of consent and understood.
“Ginny. That’s why you stopped her the other night.”

“Yeah. It was disgusting, the way she kept hanging all over you even after you told her no, and she kept hurting other blokes for it too. It was driving me mad. Especially when she came after one of our own.”

“Waters.”

“Exactly. It was a matter of house pride.” Malfoy looked away and blushed slightly. “A-and even if it wasn’t, no one should have to go through that.”

Harry gave him a wry look. “So you outed me to get her off of me?”

Malfoy sighed. “Well, that was the idea anyway.”

Harry sorted through the potions. “Seems she’s more obsessed than either of us thought.”

“Apparently.”

“Drink.” Harry handed Malfoy the Bone Mender first, knowing it was the vilest of the mix. Better he vomit sooner rather than later if he was going to be sick.

Malfoy took the capful of potion with a wary look. “Why are you helping me, Potter? Aren’t you hacked off?”

“Furious, but no more than usual at you.”

Malfoy frowned and swallowed the potion. “Ugh! Dear sweet mother of Merlin, that’s foul!”

Harry chuckled and shook his head. “I think Snape does it on purpose. He gets some kind of twisted pleasure out of seeing us all gag.”

It was a necessary blind, but as Harry knew it was actually true, he didn’t feel bad about it. Severus did get an inordinate amount of entertainment from feeding students unflavoured, gag-inducing potions. Well, flavourings did carry risks of adverse effects or allergic reactions, so Severus might simply have chosen not to flavour his brews as a safety measure. Possibly.

Malfoy snorted and wiped his mouth. “You believe me then? About the Weaselette?”

“Doesn’t matter if I do or not. You outed me, yes, but half of my house turned their backs on me after six years of friendship. Honestly, your crimes don’t compare.”

At least, not those crimes.

Malfoy ducked his head, shame and remorse colouring his emotions.

Hmm. Maybe he wasn’t a hopeless case after all.

“Here.” Harry spoke in a gentler tone and handed him a pain reliever. “That should help you feel better. Then I’ve got a healing draught for you and some bruise paste.”

“R-right.”

Malfoy trembled, eyes closed and biting his lip as Harry applied the bruise paste to the boy’s cheek. Harry pretended not to notice the moisture welling on Malfoy’s eyelashes and not to feel an all-too-familiar keening loneliness. So Malfoy was as starved for affection as Harry and Severus had ever
been. Merlin. It certainly put the boy’s life in a new perspective. Maybe Malfoy wasn’t quite the pampered prince Harry had always imagined him to be.

But did that mean… had Lucius done this to his own son? It wouldn’t surprise Harry.

His heart panged. If Lucius had—if he had no compunctions about such cruelty with his own son, it shed too much light on what Severus had endured under his thumb.

Gods. Harry hated that pompous bastard more by the second. And he already couldn’t wait to remove the prick from society.

Some of his emotion must have shown on his face as Malfoy was watching him with a wary expression.

“Sorry,” Harry muttered. “Just hacked off at whoever did this to you.”

Malfoy paled. “I told you I fell down the stairs.”

“And I told you that’s a load of rubbish. If you fell down that staircase—down three floors or maybe more—I guarantee you, you wouldn’t be walking.”

Malfoy scowled. “Shows what you know! I did fall.”

“Suit yourself.” If Malfoy wasn’t ready to talk about it, there was nothing Harry could do to help him. “Are you bruised anywhere else you can’t reach on your own?”

A pink flush crept up Malfoy’s cheeks. “Er… my back’s pretty bad off, I think.”

“Right. I’ll have to take off your jumper then.”

Malfoy leered. “If you wanted to undress me, Potter, there was no need to wait until I’m too injured to have any fun.”

With a scowl, Harry flicked his wand to pull the curtains around the bed and aimed his wand at Malfoy’s wrist. “Ferula.”

That would cool his blood. Prat.

Malfoy winced as a splint wrapped itself around his injured wrist. “Ow, Potter! Fuck! You might have just turned me down.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I thought I just did. Hold still.” He checked to make sure the splint hadn’t injured Malfoy worse and, satisfied it would do until the Matron returned, removed Malfoy’s jumper and undershirt with another spell.

“That’s done then. Turn around.”

Malfoy grimaced as he moved, and Harry sucked in a sharp breath at the sight of his back. The boy was black and blue from the top of his neck down to his waist. Gods, what a mess. He barely resisted the urge to curse. Poppy wouldn’t like that, to be sure.

Harry started on the worst of Malfoy’s bruises, wincing in sympathy at his patient’s soft whine of pain.

“Sorry, Malfoy. I’m trying not to hurt you.”
“Just hurry,” Malfoy gritted out.

“All right.”

Harry set to work with a light touch, watching Malfoy’s reactions in case he had deeper injuries. A series of marks around the boy’s lower back sent his stomach careening into his feet.

“Odd. I didn’t think stairs left bruises shaped like boot prints.”

Malfoy cringed and hugged his knees. “Just… just don’t. I can’t.”

Harry laid a light hand on his shoulder. “Okay. If you can’t talk about it, I won’t push. But can you get away from the person doing this?”

Malfoy lowered his head and breathed, “No.”

So it probably was his father. Harry suppressed the urge to light something on fire. Preferably Lucius Malfoy’s arse. Actually, he might miss his hair more. Maybe Harry should start with that. Bloody arsehole.

“Merlin. Well, um, you know there are options at the school right? There are private rooms available and such, and some of the professors stay here over term so students in danger can stay if they need to. You don’t have to—”

Malfoy jerked away, an anguished scowl on his face. “Shut up! You don’t know what you’re talking about, Potter! Just let it go and do your bloody job.”

Harry sighed and applied the salve to one of the worst boot bruises. “Malfoy, this is part of my job. But I… look, I…” He shook his head and cut himself off. He couldn’t reveal his secrets to a mini-Death Eater, even if the boy did need help. “I just don’t like seeing anyone in pain like this, okay?”

Malfoy snorted. “Even your enemies, Potter?”

“Right now, you’re not my enemy. You’re my patient and you need help.”

Malfoy hesitated a moment, a broken, heartsick expression on his face. Then he sneered and turned away with a scoff.

“I’m fine, scarhead, other than the bruises. So treat them and get on with it. For Merlin’s sake, it’s like you think we’re friends or something.”

Harry sighed and applied the salve with a gentle touch. Malfoy wasn’t ready to talk—and Harry couldn’t trust him anyway—but maybe, if he showed the boy kindness in spite of their opposing alliances and rocky history, it might be enough to convince him he didn’t have to walk this dark path. Severus never talked about him, but Harry knew he cared about Malfoy. If Harry could bring the boy out of the darkness, it would certainly help his husband heal.

And maybe, he might save another lost Slytherin in the process. Merlin, he hoped so. Malfoy was a prat, for sure, but he didn’t deserve this.

“No, I don’t think that, Malfoy. But if you need one, I’m willing to listen.”

Malfoy stiffened. “Just… just g-get on with it, Potter.”

Harry nodded and returned to his work.
The rest of the day passed in relative quiet. Harry helped Poppy treat most of the patients who came throughout the day. Except for Nate, Malfoy was by far the worst injured. Harry had recommended that the boy stay overnight, but Malfoy just shook his head and stalked out.

After he had left, Harry said to Poppy, “You’re just letting him go?”

She nodded, her expression grim. “I think we all know who gave him those bruises. If I do not let him go, he may come back to me in pieces when the news gets out.”

Harry grimaced. “Merlin. Do you think he’s okay? I didn’t see any internal injuries on his diagnostic, but I’m always afraid I’m not doing them right.”

Poppy patted his shoulder. “My diagnostic gave me the same results. Don’t fret, child. You’re doing exceptionally well.”

Harry nodded. “Thanks. Um, do you need me for anything else?”

She shook her head. “Go on. You’re done in. But don’t forget to report that incident with Malfoy to Professor Snape before you turn in. It will need to be you as I didn’t see all of his injuries.”

Harry winced. “He’s going to be furious.”

“Yes, I imagine so. I am rather angry too. As foolish as that boy has been, no one deserves that kind of treatment.”

“Oh, I can think of at least three people who might,” Harry muttered in a dark tone.

Poppy snorted. “Yes, well, almost no one then.”

Harry chuckled and Summoned his knapsack. “True. Well, I’m off to Professor Snape’s office then. See you tomorrow, Poppy. Send me a Patronus if you need more help with Nate.”

“Of course, but let’s hope this brew of Severus’ does the trick. Goodnight, Harry.”

“Goodnight!”

Neville and Luna were waiting in Severus’ quarters when Harry flooed in from his room again, curled up in the same armchair. He sighed to himself and pushed a twinge of sorrow back. Severus really was putting forth an amazing effort, and they had come far for the short time they’d been married.

Harry just hoped this incident with Malfoy didn’t set the man back.

He tugged at his lapel, but decided to wait on removing his apprentice robes in case the Ministry needed to see his report about Malfoy. Instead, he sat on the sofa and flopped against the cushions. Merlin. Treating Nate and Malfoy back-to-back had really taken it out of him.

“Hey guys. Is Sev hiding in his lab again?”

Neville chuckled and nodded. “I think he feels odd about talking to us when you’re not around.”
“I guess that makes sense. We’re his students, you know? Or we were, at least. Severus doesn’t handle my marks any longer, but he still teaches me. And Merlin, the man is brilliant with potions. Spellcraft too.” Harry pouted. “Actually, I’m not sure there’s anything he’s not good at.”

“He’s not a people-person,” said Neville with a snort.

Harry laughed in spite of himself. “Oh, definitely not. Though he’s gotten much better, I think.”

“He has,” Luna said with a smile. “Your love has untangled almost all of the wrackspurts from his mind. The ones still there are buried deep, though, and will be difficult to work out.”

Harry glared at the fire. “Yeah. I think I know exactly what they’re there for, too.”

“Harry?” Neville gently set Luna off his lap and moved to his friend’s side. “Hey, are you angry at him?”

Harry shook his head. “Of course not. There’s a reason he can’t tell me, and like you said earlier, it’s not fair to expect him to talk when I haven’t. It just makes it hard to know how to heal him when I don’t know where he’s bleeding. Though, between last night and today, I think I have more of an idea where to look.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m angry at Malfoy.”

Neville huffed. “Jealous little prat. He just wanted a go with you.”

Harry choked. “Dear gods. Never say that to me again. I swear, it’s the second time I’ve heard it—today—and one was from Malfoy himself!”

Neville’s eyes widened. “What? You’re kidding! He came onto you again?”

Harry’s face flamed. “To be fair, I don’t think he was serious this time.” He rubbed his forehead and sighed, weary from sheer emotional exhaustion. “I wasn’t talking about Draco anyway. I’m hacked off at Lucius Malfoy.”

“Ah. I don’t blame you. I’m hacked off at that bastard most days. But what did he do this time, the shitehead?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t have absolute proof it was him. I’m just basing this off of things I… I’ve heard and seen, and what I saw on Draco in the Infirmary today.”

“The Infirmary? He came by?”

“Yeah. He had good reason to, trust me.”

Neville frowned. “Should we get Professor Snape for this?”

“Absolutely. He needs to know as his head of house and, as the one who treated Malfoy, it’s my duty to report it.”


Harry frowned. “I’ve never tried, but I suppose I could give it a go. I’ve always my Patronus if that doesn’t work. You’re sure he’s in his lab?”

“That’s what he said.”

“That’s where he is then, unless Malfoy went to him for help, which I doubt.” Harry focused on his
bond and followed it to his husband. “Merlin, I hope I’m doing this right.”

[Professor?]

A bolt of shock filtered through the bond, so Harry reckoned he’d connected to the right person. Still, just in case, he made sure not to be too familiar.

[Professor Snape, will you please come to your office, sir? Something… concerning happened in the Infirmary today. I need to report it to you.]

Severus couldn’t respond without eye contact, but Harry felt his worry and affirmation through their bond.

“I think he’s on his way,” Harry said with a wry smile.

A moment later, Severus came through the office door, his face a picture of concern. “Harry?”

Harry went to his husband and slipped his hand into Severus’. “Here, Sev.”

Severus checked him over visually and ran his free hand over Harry’s face. “You look well.”

“It wasn’t me who was hurt. It was one of your snakes.”

Severus winced. “Ah. That kind of report. In that case, we should handle it in my office for legality’s sake, public faces on.”

Harry nodded. “Can Lu and Nev wait here until we’re done?”

“Yes, of course. Let us handle the official documentation, and then we will ask Winky to bring dinner. She does seem to liven up after we give her tasks to do.” Severus looked to the couple smiling from the sofa. “That is, if you would like to stay?”

Neville grinned. “Did you really just invite us for dinner?”

A flush crept over Severus’ face. “Perhaps I overstepped my bounds.”

“Don’t make a big deal of it, Nev,” Harry fretted. “This is difficult for him.”

Neville flushed. “Oh, I was just happy. I’m sorry.”

“We’ll stay, sir,” said Luna with a beaming smile. “I would like to know what Harry thinks happened to Draco, as the Clarents aren’t being very cooperative at the moment.”

Severus went rigid. “Draco.” He closed his eyes. “I am not going to like this report at all, am I?”

Harry squeezed his hand. “No, Severus. I’m afraid it’s going to infuriate you.”

Severus sighed and leaned his head against Harry’s. “Stay with me?”

Harry kissed him lightly. “Always.”

“I….” Severus whispered in Harry’s ear, “Is it strange that I missed you today?”

Harry’s breath hitched and he buried his face in Severus’ neck. “No, Sev’rus. No, it’s lovely. I missed you too.”

Severus held him there for a long moment. “I am finding I do not mind this life so much. Having you
home with me is… I am enjoying it.”

Harry gave him a tearful smile. “Sev… gods. I… yeah. It’s brilliant.”

Severus withdrew with a sigh. “Come. Let us get this report over with.”

Harry nodded and obeyed.

Horror and shame warred for dominance within Severus. Abused. Draco was being abused again—worse than ever before—and Harry suspected Lucius’ hand behind it. Severus couldn’t bring himself to tell Harry he knew absolutely who had harmed Draco.

“Did I give you permission to touch me, little pet?”

Lucius’ disgust bowed Severus’ head in shame. Gods, all he had wanted was a bit of comfort. His mother was gone—he hadn’t even had the chance to say goodbye—and Merlin help him, everything hurt so much.

He should have known Lucius would reject him. Severus could never do anything right.

A sharp cuff caught the side of his face and sent him flying. Through a red haze of blood and pain, he stared into Lucius’ hate-filled eyes, seconds before a hard boot came down and sent a surge of crushing agony through his face.

“Well, it’s not as if your nose isn’t mangled already, now is it?”

Severus whimpered and curled into a ball.

“Professor!”

Harry’s panicked voice brought him out of the past with a jolt. Severus realised he had tears on his face and grimaced. He met Harry’s eyes and projected an apology before he snapped out, “What? Can’t you see I’ve no further use for you? Get out.”

Harry hesitated a moment, but obeyed… only to run back into the office ten seconds later and rush to Severus’ side. “Sev? Are you okay? What happened? I… I kept calling you.”

Harry reached for Severus’ face to wipe away his tears, but Severus jerked back.

“Don’t. I can’t.”

Harry let his hand fall and backed away, eyes full of confusion and hurt. “W-what did I do? I don’t understand.”

“I… I need a moment. Please.”

Harry crossed his arms over his waist and leaned against the wall, head bowed, shaking all over, and
pain tearing through his side of the bond.

Gods. Severus hadn’t meant to lash out, but those memories—he couldn’t bear the pain. Couldn’t let anyone close.

Maybe Harry had a point. Maybe he had moved too fast. Maybe he did need to take a step back and breathe.

But either way, he couldn’t leave his bondmate in this kind of agony.

“Harry, I’m sorry.”

Harry looked up and gave him a smile, brittle as broken glass and just as sharp. “It’s okay. I… I just meant to help you, but I should have remembered you need control.” He dropped his head again and another blast of pain sent Severus reeling.

“Harry…” Severus stood and went to the man, taking him into a hug. “Ssh. Peace, my Harry. It was not your fault.”

Harry sighed and buried his face in Severus’ chest. “I-I don’t want to hurt you, Sev. I swear I don’t.”

Severus stroked Harry’s curls and lamented his weaknesses. “I know.”

After that discussion, Severus hadn’t felt comfortable leaving Harry without protection. Severus wanted him to have a snake with lethal venom so it could kill if necessary, but also one that was not aggressive and would not attack without provocation. Harry would carry antivenin either way, of course, but both Harry and his new familiar needed to be able to protect themselves.

Harry just wanted his familiar to be safe this time. He couldn’t bear to lose another.

They reviewed some of Severus’ research with the basilisk vaccine and decided on an Eastern Green Mamba. The snake was not so lethal as to kill its targets before Harry had a chance to administer antivenin and get them to the Infirmary in case of an accidental attack, but it was certainly lethal enough to kill if Harry ran into Death Eaters or if Seamus took umbrage to Harry’s familiar again. Not that he would have a reason to, now that Harry wasn’t in the dorms, but neither Harry nor Severus wanted to take chances.

A moment later, Harry was talking down a scared, angry green mamba, taken from the rainforest just seconds before.

~I am sorry, little one,~ Harry soothed, hands out in a gesture of surrender. ~Neither my mate nor I mean you any harm. I am simply looking for a familiar and am in need of one who is strong. It is all right. You are safe.~

The snake’s tense posture eased and it covered its fangs once more. ~You speak.~

~Yes. I am only one of two humans who can, to the best of my knowledge.~

The bright green snake sniffed at Harry’s outstretched hand. Severus tensed, but did not interfere. The snake eyed Severus and flickered his tongue in and out, then returned his attention to Harry.
~You are wizards. I smell magic, on both of you.~

Harry gave the snake a hesitant smile. ~Yes. We are strong wizards. I am known as Harry, and in my last year of life-training….~

It was the closest approximation for “school” Parseltongue had. It indicated the phase when a young snake was learning to take care of themselves, just before their mums turned them loose. Snakes weren’t much on maternal instinct.

~…And this is my mate, Severus.~

The snake gave Severus a curious look. ~Tell your mate I will not attack as long as you do not hurt me.~

Harry translated into English. Severus relaxed and moved to Harry’s side, wrapping a strong arm around his shoulders. Harry leaned against him.

“Sev? Is it okay for me to touch you now?”

Severus flinched. “I… I do not know. I was afraid for you.”

Moving slowly, Harry kissed Severus’ hand. Severus accepted it, though his eyes held too much uncertainty for Harry’s comfort. Fear creeping into his heart, Harry swallowed a wave of grief and turned back to the mamba. ~D-do you have a name?~

~I am known as Jabardi.~

~Are you male or female?~

~Male.~

~Good. We were hoping for a male.~

Jabardi edged away. ~Snakes cannot mate with humans. And you are both males.~

Harry choked out a shocked laugh. ~Oh dear Merlin! I did not mean for mating. We wanted a male snake because they are less aggressive than females, usually, and your venom is deadly to my kind.~

~I will not bite unless I must or I am hunting.~

~Thank you.~ Harry took a deep breath. ~Jabardi, we took you from the rainforest because I am in danger from the other snake speaker. He wants to kill me and many, many other humans. He is an evil man who has torn his own… life-force into pieces so he will not die. I am… fated to kill this evil man to save us all, but I need help.~

Jabardi coiled tighter. ~Why do you wish for a snake to kill him? I think a wizard would be stronger. It is difficult for me to kill a wizard—they are hard to catch.~

~No, no. I do not wish you to kill anyone unless we are both in danger and there is no other choice. Severus and I will handle the evil wizards. I need you to help me read, um, leaf-towers in your tongue and keep me safe. It may be dangerous, but I will protect you to the best of my ability if you choose to stay with me. You are free to refuse. Severus will send you back to your home from before if you do not wish to stay.~

Jabardi hesitated. ~The rainforest is dangerous too. I will stay, as long as there is food to eat and a safe nest.~
Harry sighed and offered his arm to the snake. "I have a small rainforest nest for snakes. You may use it, or you may sleep anywhere in our quarters that you like. Or you may rest on me when I am carrying you. It is safe here."

He closed his eyes, wishing he could have offered Isuri the same protection. Gods, he missed her.

"Then I will stay."

"Ah, good. Thank you, Jabardi. Welcome to our nest."

Harry had already noted differences between his first and second snake. Besides their varying personalities, Isuri had been content to hang about Harry’s neck for much of the day, getting her exercise at night when the castle slept or curling up on Harry’s pillow. Jabardi had asked to sleep in the terrarium. Which might have something to do with the fact that Harry wasn’t sleeping alone anymore. Perhaps Jabardi felt awkward sleeping in the same place as two mated humans.

Come to think of it, Harry didn’t particularly want to share his bed with a snake when he had Severus’ body to keep him warm anyway. The thought set desire humming in his veins, but he stifled it quickly. Severus had been afraid earlier. It would be best to make sure he was okay before Harry even considered trying anything sexual.

Instead, he climbed into bed behind his husband and pressed a soft kiss to his shoulder. Severus sighed and relaxed into Harry, reaching back to take his hand.

"Severus, are you still scared?"

"Not at the moment."

"You’re sure?"

"Yes, Harry. I am well enough."

Harry checked their bond, and feeling no trace of fear, he thought a bit of romance might be safe, as long as he moved slow and gave his husband time to adjust, or to move away if he needed to.

"I’m glad. Tell me if you get scared." He gently swept his husband’s long hair out of the way and kissed the base of his neck, light, tantalising kisses that made Severus gasp and squirm. Harry smiled to himself as he worked his way up to Severus’ ear and toyed with the lobe. They would be all right. Severus was afraid, but he was trying, and—


Harry’s heart gave a painful thump and sank into the cold void of rejection. “Oh. I… I’m sorry.” With a deep breath, he pushed his pain back and let it go. It would be okay. Severus just needed more time.

He buried his face against Severus’ back instead and just hugged him. “I-it’s okay. I won’t push you, Sev.”

“H-Harry, I… I think I have to….”
Severus pulled out of his arms entirely and moved away, turning so he faced Harry with his knees pulled up. Harry sat, pain surging through his chest, and gave his husband a heartbroken look. This… this was not just turning him down for sex. This was telling Harry he couldn’t touch Severus at all. After everything they had gone through, after all the progress they had made, to be set back to square one hurt. Badly. Too much for Harry to suppress.

“Why, Severus? I d-don’t understand. What have I done?”

Severus closed his eyes and shuddered. “N-nothing. I’m sorry. I am so afraid.”

Harry offered his hand but did not touch. “I want to help you, Sev. I want to protect you and help you conquer your fears.”

But Severus didn’t take his hand. He lay on his edge of the bed, shaking all over and breathing hard.

Harry gave a quiet whine of grief and stood. “M-Merlin. If it’s that bad, I’ll just….” He went to his snake, curled up on a branch and watching everything play out. ~Jabardi, will you stay with me? I am… going to sleep in the other room by the fire.~

Jabardi lifted his head, flickering his tongue in and out. ~Why do you not stay with your mate, Master?~

A soft, broken whimper escaped him. ~He is afraid of me. So afraid. I just want to love him, but I cannot. He is so broken inside, and I do not know how to heal him. It hurts me to stay when he cannot bear to have me near.~

Jabardi gave a snakish sigh. ~I like the little rainforest, but I will stay with you tonight. I think you need me.~

Harry sniffled and held out his hand. ~Thank you, Jabardi.~

The snake settled around his neck and curled up. Harry petted his warm scales and went to the door. Tears blinded him, though he managed to keep from sobbing at least. It wasn’t Severus’ fault. It wasn’t. And he couldn’t let the man see how much it hurt.

“Goodnight, Severus,” he murmured, his voice shaky in spite of his effort to keep it steady. “I’m s-sorry. I’m trying so hard but… I guess I’m just not enough. Not yet. I’m sorry.”

Severus sucked in a sharp breath. [Like the dream—oh gods.] Out loud, he pleaded, “H-Harry… no. No, don’t leave me.”

Harry cringed. “I’m not. I’m just going to the other room, Sev.”

“But… why?”

“You’re terrified of me right now. I don’t know why, but I can’t bear it and… shite.” Harry wiped his face and gathered his strength. “I’m sorry. You can’t help it. I don’t blame you. I just… it hurts too much to stay when you’re so afraid of me.”

Severus sat, face white and tears on his lashes. “Please don’t go. Please.”

Harry choked back a sob. “But you don’t want me near.”

“I….” Severus’ head dropped, and Harry’s heart snapped in two.

“I-it’s okay, Sev. I’ll… just sleep on the s-sofa.”
Severus called him, but, resolve or no, Harry couldn’t bear any more. He turned on his heel and fled, burying his face in the sofa cushions so Severus wouldn’t have to hear him cry.

~Master… you are sad.~


Jabardi sighed and curled up on the cushion beside Harry. ~What is happening, Master? You said you are mates, but you do not act like mates.~

Harry gave a strangled whimper, struck through. ~I-I know.~

~Tell me, Master. What is wrong?~

Harry sighed and wiped his face. ~It is a long story….~

Severus stood on the other side of his bedroom door, silent tears streaking his face as he listened to Harry hissing at his snake—and the heartbroken sobs he couldn’t entirely stifle.

Three days. Three days bonded, and Harry was already sleeping on the sofa. Three days bonded, and Severus’ fears had already fucked everything up.

He wanted to go to Harry, to hold him and tell him everything would be okay, but every time he tried to move, his feet froze in place and his breath stuttered.

Every time he tried, images of his past choked him. Silver-blond hair overlapped black and grey eyes drowned out green. He couldn’t see Harry for the monster who still haunted him, even now.

Severus laid his head against the door and wept. “I am sorry, Harry. I am so sorry.”

But Harry was too far away to hear.
As you might have guessed by the title, this is the most angsty of these updates. Bring tissues.

Chapter 42

Rough Seas

31 OCTOBER

Harry woke to sharp cries of pain from Severus’ bedroom. Gods, every morning for a month. The man’s nightmares just wouldn’t stop. Harry dragged himself from the sofa and knocked on the door.

Voice dim, he called, “Severus, I’m coming in.”

Severus whimpered and crawled under the blankets. “C-can’t. I can’t bear it.”

Harry crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the door frame, knowing that meant Severus couldn’t let him approach. “What do you want me to do, Sev? I can’t keep watching you suffer like this.” He bowed his head and swallowed the sting of tears. “If… if it hurts you this much to be near me, maybe I should just… well, the Chamber used to block out the nightmares well enough. I reckon I could sleep there as well as here.”

Severus gave a muffled cry of pain. “Harry, no. No, don’t go. Don’t leave me.”

“But you’re miserable, Sev. I’m making you miserable.” Pain choked him, but Harry forced his words out anyway. “I don’t want to hurt you. I can’t stand it.”

“Harry…” Severus emerged from the covers, shaking from head-to-toe, and staggered to his husband. He stopped a metre short, his face contorted in shame and terror. “Please, I am so sorry. I do not want to… I….” He lifted his hand partway, but couldn’t close the distance.

Harry stared at Severus’ hand, tears blurring it into a flesh-coloured blob. “Sev, if I could heal you, if I could touch you and make things okay again, if something I could say or do would convince you that I care about you and I’ll never hurt you, then I would do it, in a heartbeat. But I can’t. I can’t help you. Everything I’ve tried only hurts you more.”

He gave Severus a sad smile. “And I lo—care about you too much to stand by and let you suffer like this.” He looked away, unable to hold his head up with his entire world crashing in. “I vowed I would accept whatever you could give me. Even… even if it’s nothing.”

“Harry, no….”

Harry forced back a sob and turned, so Severus needn’t see how much his reticence hurt. It wasn’t
his fault. Harry just wasn’t strong enough to heal him.

“I’m going back to the Chamber tonight, Severus. I can’t bear this any longer.”

With a sharp cry, Severus jerked forwards and grabbed Harry into his arms. His voice trembled with the power of his fear and his entire aura had gone icy, but he held Harry so tight, his racing heartbeat pounded against Harry’s own.

“No,” Severus choked out. “No! I let you go before, I w-watched you walk out of m-my life, and it n-nearly killed me. I know I am a-afraid. I do not know w-why it is so severe as of late. But I will not stand by and l-let you leave me again. I will n-not let go, t-terrified or not.”

Harry stood frozen, knowing any movement would petrify the man. He whispered, “What would you have me do? This isn’t like the bonding night, when you were scared but wanted me anyway. You’re shaking against me, your emotions are pure white with fear and not the tiniest spark of love, or even affection. You’re so terrified now, you’re one step from a breakdown. And a breakdown for you will be fatal.”

He swallowed tears and kept his voice low and steady, for Severus’ sake. “I won’t be the one to get you killed. If my presence is this disturbing, if being bonded to me is so terrifying, it risks your life, I have to leave.”

Severus buried his face into Harry’s shoulder. “No, no, Harry. I c-can’t lose you again. Please, please don’t leave me.”

Harry sighed and clenched his hands into fists to keep from hugging the man. Gods, he wanted so much to hold Severus and ease his pain, but he had learned the hard way that, in this state, his touch only hurt Severus more.

“Oh, Sev. I… I don’t want to leave either. I want to heal you and make everything better, but you can’t trust me, and it’s killing you for me to stay.” He struggled to hold back tears, desperately trying not to pressure the man despite his breaking heart. “It’s k-killing me too. I just want to hold you. To kiss you and drive your fears away.”

Hot, bitter tears tracked down his face without his consent. “But I c-can’t. I can’t touch you at all. I can hardly even be in the same room without sending you into a panic, and I don’t even know why!” He took several deep breaths, willing control into his voice. “I-I don’t know what I’ve done. I don’t know why you keep suffering like this. You’re blocking me so hard I can’t even hear your regular thoughts right now, let alone work out what fear is driving you to hate me like this.”

Severus choked out, “I don’t hate you! I haven’t since the night you saved my life the first time, Harry.”

“I don’t think that’s true, Sev. You hated me when you thought I had used your pain as a fantasy.”

Severus’ shoulders shook, a silent sob wracking his slender frame. “No, Harry. No. I was angry, but I couldn’t hate you. That died in me nearly a year ago, and I won’t resurrect it again.” A soft whimper escaped his shattered control. “Even if you d-do leave me.”

Grief blindsided Harry. “Oh, Sev. Don’t you understand? I’m not leaving because I want to or I don’t care about you—I’m leaving because I do care, so much I’d rather hurt myself than see you in pain, and if I don’t… it’s going to kill you!” He turned away and buried a broken sob in his hands. “Gods, if I could fix it—”

“Harry, please….” Severus turned him back around and held him tight. “I need you with me. Please,
Harry lifted his hands towards Severus’ waist, desperate to hold his beloved husband, his heart and body aching from their neglected bond, but he stopped short and clenched his hands into fists instead. He didn’t have permission, and Severus couldn’t grant it.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice breathless from struggling to control his pain. “Gods, I’m so sorry, Sev. I just want to hold you and make you feel better, and it hurts so much.”

Severus wept into Harry’s shoulder. “Then hold me. Hold me and chase the shadows away, if only for a moment.”

Harry’s breath lodged in his throat and his heart raced. “S-Sev? You… you want me to hold you again?”

Severus lifted his head to meet Harry’s gaze, and in those fathoms-deep dark eyes he adored, Harry saw as much love as fear. Severus truly did want his husband back, in spite of everything. He was only afraid.

“Harry, hold me—gently. I need you, I need to feel you touch me again, but let me hear your voice. Speak to me, remind me I am safe in your arms, and don’t stop. When it is silent, I… his voice takes over. When I cannot see you, I see him. And I cannot bear it. He hurt me so much, Harry, I am… everything inside me is still bleeding. I have never been able to heal.” He clutched Harry’s hair and held him tight. “But please, please don’t give up on me.”

Hope and fear mingling in his chest, Harry lightly touched his shaking hands to Severus’ shoulders. “I’m never going to give up on you, Severus. Never. I only want to keep you safe and happy.”

Tears streaked Severus’ cheeks and pooled under his chin. Harry wanted so much to kiss them away, but refrained. Just touching Severus’ shoulders was enough, for now.

“Then stay,” Severus said, voice thick with emotion. “Please. Stay with me and help me through this, Harry. You are…” [The only one who can. The only chance I have.]

“Okay.” Harry’s words came out shaky and broken, but he kept talking anyway, for Severus’ sake. “Okay, Sev. I’ll stay, if you really need me to.”

“Hold me, Harry,” Severus whispered. “Please. Let me be safe in your arms again.”

“Oh gods, Severus. I-I want that, too.” With a shuddering sigh, Harry eased his arms around his husband’s trembling back and held him lightly. “Ssh. It’s okay, Sev. It’s only me. Your husband, your Harry. I’m here. You’re safe. Always safe with me.” He gently cradled Severus against his body. “Merlin, I can’t hurt you, Sev. I lo—care for you so much. I just want to hold you until all your broken pieces come back together. I just want to be near you until mine heal, too.”

Slowly, Severus relaxed in his arms. “Yes. Yes, Harry. Like this.”

Hope overflowed inside Harry, welling effervescent and warm in his chest. “It’s helping, Sev? My voice?”

Severus laid his head on Harry’s shoulder. “Yes. I feel safer than I have done in weeks.”

Harry gave a soft cry and held Severus as close as he dared, tears of catharsis and love raining down his face. “Oh, Severus. Oh, thank the gods. I’ve missed you so much.”
“Yes, Harry. Oh, I missed you too. Keep talking, please. I need your voice.”

A half-laugh, half sob escaped Harry. “Anything. Anything to make you feel safe again.” He slipped a hand into Severus’ hair and breathed him in, shaking with the sheer power of his relief. “I’m here, Sev. I’m here. Your Harry. Your husband. I’ll protect you, sweetheart. I’ll—”

He cut himself off with a wince. Oh gods, the name had just slipped out. Merlin, he hoped it didn’t terrify Severus again.

Severus shuddered in his arms. “Harry… I’m so sorry. I can’t—please don’t.”

Harry closed his eyes, heart sinking. “I’m sorry. That was an accident. It just slipped out because I want to comfort you so much.”

Severus sighed and hugged Harry tight. “No. It is I who should apologise. I have hurt you so very much, and you are my husband. I should protect you, and I have only failed you.”

Harry shook his head slightly. “You haven’t. You’re just scared.”

“And my terror has all but driven us asunder.”

“Ssh. Don’t hurt yourself over it, Severus. It’s okay. I have no idea what happened to you other than the few little snatches you’ve let me see in your thoughts, but whatever it was, it’s completely trauma—”

Severus jerked back and went rigid. “I… no. D-don’t. Leave me be.”

“Severus?” A crack formed in Harry’s newly-healed heart. “Y-you don’t want me near?”

Severus stared as if he wasn’t seeing him. “Go! Leave me alone!”

“Oh.” With that, his soul split down the middle and left Harry staggering from the pain. He couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think. He only knew Severus had wanted him, and now he didn’t.

With a whimper all the Occlumency in the world couldn’t have stopped, Harry stepped back from his husband and closed his eyes around a scourge of tears. No. He couldn’t bear it. After coming so close, to have this small moment of affection so brutally torn away hurt worse than before.

“O-okay, Sev,” he forced out, his voice barely above a whisper. “I… I’ll just go to b-breakfast then.”

Breakfast. More like he would hole himself up in his Infirmary bedroom and cry. Fuck. He was so stupid. He should have known better than to mention Severus’ past. All he had done was traumatising his fragile husband all over again, and now, he thought he might die from the pain.

“I’m sorry, Sev,” Harry whispered, shaking with grief and anguish. “All I ever wanted to do was love you, and I’ve done everything all wrong.”

He had to go. Any moment, he was going to break down in sobs, and he didn’t want Severus to know the true extent of how much his fear devastated him.

Stifling his agony, he hissed to Jabardi, ~Watch over him for me, please.~

Jabardi poked his head out of his terrarium. ~I will, Master.~

~Thank you, friend. I… I must go.~
With a shattered sob, Harry Summoned his books and a change of clothing and dashed to the floo.

Severus came out of his flashbacks at the sound of someone knocking at his door. Gods. He didn’t have the strength to deal with anyone right now. But if it was a Death Eater—he thought to warn Harry, but when he looked up, he realised Harry had gone. Damn. Had he hurt him all over again? The thought left him sick with guilt and misery.

“Harry… gods, I’m sorry.”

The person at the door knocked again, and Severus struggled to breathe through the pain. No. It was no good. Everything hurt far too much for simple Occlumency to keep him out of despair.

With a quiet moan of anguish, he drained his emotions entirely, fixed his shields in place, and spelled away the evidence of his tears. He looked around the room, searching for any sign of Harry’s cohabitation, but his husband was good at hiding his tracks. A trick learned at the Dursleys’ hand, no doubt. The thought caused a surge of anger to break through his draining—Albus had let those shiteheads off too easy—but a trickle of worry followed in its wake.

Where had Harry gone? Had he left for the Chamber after all? His bedroom? Severus vaguely remembered telling his memories of Lucius to leave him be. Had Harry heard it and interpreted it as a request for him to leave?

Guilt sank his stomach like a stone despite his draining. Damn it. He hadn’t meant to hurt Harry again. After a month with hardly a brush of his hand, Severus couldn’t stand it any longer. He had grown accustomed to Harry’s gentle affection in the weeks since he had returned from his last summer at home and, in spite of his fears, he missed his husband dearly. He missed feeling Harry in his arms, in his bed, missed holding him when he wept, and being held in return.

The distance between them cut him down to his soul, and Severus couldn’t bear the pain much longer. He wanted his husband back. He wanted to go back to the way he had felt that first day, when Harry’s touch soothed instead of frightened him, when he had hope that Harry’s love could break through the trauma of his dark past, but the spectre of Lucius had other ideas. Every time Severus tried to reach out, his past traumas crippled him, rendering him paralysed and torn between desperate need for his husband’s love and terrible dread of the same thing.

Gods. He was an utter wreck. How Harry could still love him when Severus broke his heart more every other moment boggled the mind.

Something had to give, and soon, or Severus would lose his husband. Vows or no, no one could cope with this level of anguish for long.

With a heavy sigh, Severus went to the door and frowned at the empty corridor. Had they given up?

“Hello, sir,” said a dreamy, disembodied voice. “The Clarents have told me that it’s time for some outside intervention in your, ah, home life. If you would—?”

Severus growled in case anyone had overheard, “Go away and bother someone else with your oddball fantasies, Lovegood. My life is as I choose it to be.” Hurriedly, he whispered, “Get inside before we’re caught.”
The dreamy voice spoke from behind him, too soft to be overheard. “I’m already here.”

Severus shook his head in wry bemusement and shut the door. “Where is Neville?”

“Revelabis.” Luna appeared from the shadows. “Patching up Harry.”

Severus froze, panic crashing through his draining. “What? What happened? He is not on the tower again, is he?”

Luna shook her head. “No, no. He isn’t injured. At least, not physically. Spiritually, I’m afraid he’s in quite the state.”

Severus winced. “Spiritually? I do not understand.”

Clear silver eyes held his own. “You have a soul bond, sir. One that has been neglected for weeks.”

Legs too weak to support him, Severus sank into the sofa and swallowed a whimper. “I… have torn our souls?”

Luna gasped. “Oh, Merlin, no! The only way to tear a soul through a soul bond is to break it. And the only way to break it…” She shuddered. “Well, the two of you may have your problems, but I do hope you will not go so far as to actually murder each other.”

Severus blanched. “Sweet Circe. I would never hurt him.”

“I know. And neither would he hurt you.” Luna sat beside him and offered him her hand. “Sir, I think you need comfort now, if you want to take it.”

Blinking back tears, he laid his hand in hers. His lack of terror stunned him.

“Why am I not afraid with you?”

“Partially because Harry has helped you conquer your phobia of touch, for the most part.”

“But I am still terrified when Harry….”

“Yes, because you have not conquered your phobia of love and intimacy. You don’t fear me because I am neither a man nor in love with you.” She patted his hand. “I do care about you, sir, but not in the same way Harry does, and that is why you can touch me without fear.”

Severus’ chest hurt with the truth of her words. “So I am afraid of him because he…?”

“Because he loves you, yes.”

Severus sighed and dropped his head against the back of the sofa. “Gods, why? Why am I so afraid of the only man who has ever cared? I am a bloody fool.”

She rubbed his fingertips, a sad smile on her face. “Sir—”

“Severus. It is absurd to use my honorific when you are holding my hand. And acting as my therapist, apparently.”

She tittered. “Not your therapist, silly. Your friend. Your family. I care about you and want to see you well. That’s all.”

He swallowed a lump in his throat and squeezed her hand. “Thank you.” His voice came out rough.
“Not at all. Now, as I was saying, Severus, I think you’re not so much afraid of Harry’s love for you as you are afraid to feel it for him. You’re not afraid to be loved, you’re afraid to fall, and to find you’ve chosen an unworthy man again. You’re afraid to love and lose it, and you’re afraid of intimacy because to let someone too close leaves you vulnerable to the same kind of rejection. Am I close so far?”

Tears rolled down Severus’ cheeks and dripped into his collar. Oh gods. She had simply laid it out in black and white. He was afraid to fall, to lose himself to love, because what if he did and everything fell apart again? He was still bleeding from the first time, and Harry meant more to him than Lucius had ever done.

But did that mean he already loved Harry? Did that mean… it was too late?

His breath came short and his heart fluttered. Pain flooded his chest and his limbs went numb. No. No. He couldn’t—he would lose everything if he fell and—

Luna conjured a small paper bag and handed it to him. “Breathe into that, Severus. The Clarents seem to believe it will help you feel better.”

He gave the bag a bemused look but tried to obey. She guided his hands and corrected him until he had the bag’s top held in a fist and was breathing in and out of the bottom half. It did ease the pain in his chest, strange as it was. Perhaps it had a psychosomatic effect.

“There you are,” said Luna. “Now, as I understand, you’re afraid of falling for Harry because you’re afraid of being cast aside.”

Tears blinding him, Severus gave a slow nod.

“Because of what your father, Malfoy, and many others have said to you, you have come to believe you have no worth, no redeeming qualities, and no one will ever love you. It’s quite understandable that you would come to hold such a belief after enduring so many traumas, but none of that is true. Many people care for you and—”

A hiss by Severus’ foot arrested his attention. Harry’s snake lay coiled by his feet, his head prodding Severus’ leg. Severus extended his free arm and let the snake slither into his lap.

“—And it seems even your animal friends care for your well-being,” said Luna with a chuckle. “Hello, little one. You’re quite the beauty.”

Jabardi lowered his head in a bow-like motion.

“You’re very welcome. Now, Severus, we know you’re a man of logic. So let’s look at this rationally, shall we? You believe you have no worth. Well, that’s obviously untrue. Besides your worth as a human being, which we will get to in a moment, you’ve created many wonderful spells and potions, you’re a brilliant dueller and strategist, and you’re the best spy the war has. You don’t just have worth—you’re irreplaceable.”

Severus flushed. He had heard all of that from Harry, but somehow hearing it from a new source gave the words more weight. Was it possible he truly had something worthwhile to offer? Not only to Harry, but to the world? A cold knot of shame slowly unwound from his chest, one he had carried his entire life.

“That is… two people who believe me to be worth something, I suppose.”

Luna gave him a gentle smile. “Many more than two, Severus. The headmaster, while he is
manipulative and sometimes ruthless, loves you in his own way. Neville views you as an older brother, though he is still warming up to the idea that you like him too. Professor McGonagall loves you. Professor Flitwick likes you quite well too. Even Dean and Hermione have come to view you as a man worthy of respect. And Harry… Severus, Harry would die for you and not think twice. He would sacrifice everything—and has done—to see you happy."

She squeezed his hand and gave him a soft smile. “Do you know his love for you is so strong, it turned your souls golden at the bonding? His light spilled over into you and drove out all your shadows for a moment. It was so lovely.”

Severus let the paper bag fall and covered his face with his hand, struggling to keep back tears. “I… t-that cannot be. Why?”

Luna rubbed Severus’ arm gently. “Why does anyone love someone? There needn’t be a reason. They just do.”

An image flashed through his mind, a scene of a bruised and beaten Severus, perhaps seventeen years old, following Lucius around like a besotted puppy dog.

He grimaced and shuddered. No, love certainly didn’t need a reason.

“Severus, it’s not the same. Malfoy is a cruel, evil man who made you believe yourself a monster, but Harry doesn’t see you that way and neither do I.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Are you a Telepath as well, Luna?”

“No. I’m an Empath and a Medium, but not a Telepath. The Windsprites hear your thoughts and tell me those I need to know, but I can’t hear them myself like Harry does or speak into others’ minds.”

“Ah. Well, what are your Windsprites telling you, then?”

Luna rubbed his hand gently. “That you feel unworthy in spite of everything I’ve told you, but it’s not true, Severus. Your value to us is immeasurable, and not simply because of what you can offer. You’re a man of honour and bravery, intelligent and honest, and a gentle, loving soul underneath all your pain.”

She took both his hands and held them tight. “Don’t fear him. Don’t fear being that man, the best side of you. That’s the most beautiful thing about you—your loving heart in spite of everything you’ve endured.”

Severus freed his hands and wrapped his arms around his waist, rocking in a vain effort to comfort himself. “But I am afraid. Terrified. What if I fall and… and….”

“And Harry breaks your heart?”

He closed his eyes, two fat tears falling down, and nodded.

“Severus, look at it logically. Harry grew up in a home entirely devoid of love. No one held him. No one even touched him. Don’t you know how much he values love after growing up without it? Once he loves someone, he loves them for life no matter what. He even still loves Ron, and Ron has been awful to him. You know he’s not cruel like you fear. You know he’s a good man and he adores you, even with his pain.”

She gave him a searching look. “I think you’re afraid to let go. You don’t know what’s out there, what happens when you let go of the past and move on, and it’s terrifying you almost to the point of
madness.”

A whisper left his lips. “Yes.”

She turned his face and held his cheeks. “Listen to me, Severus. It’s okay to be afraid, but don’t let it steal all the beautiful things from your life. I….” She dropped her gaze and let her hands fall into her lap. “Like Harry, I’ve had precious little love in my life. My father… well, he loves me, of course, but we’re rather eccentric people to the outside world. People hear me speak to the spirits or warn them of something that hasn’t happened yet, and they’re afraid. They’re afraid to come too close.”

Her hands clenched into fists and tears dropped into her lap. “But Harry never feared me. Maybe he didn’t always understand, but he was never afraid of me. Neither were you, at least not because of my spirits. And I… I have so few true friends, Severus, that the thought of losing either of you isn’t a fate I can bear.”

Severus laid his hand over hers and held it tight. “And this—if I continue to let fear rule me—you foresee losing one of us?”

“Both of you.” She looked up, and her silver eyes ached with the impossible burden of too much sight. “Harry is a horcrux, Severus, and you’re soul-bonded to him. Without your love, he hasn’t a chance to survive the war. And without his love… neither do you.”

Severus sucked in a sharp breath. For so long, he’d been so focused on his own past, his own fears, that he had forgotten what his reticence would cost his husband in the end. Would cost **him**. He had no illusions as to his own safety. If Harry died in the war, Severus would crack down the middle and never recover.

“I… I have been a self-centred fool, haven’t I?”

“Oh, Severus. No, no, of course not. You’re only afraid.” She sighed and unclenched her fingers, wrapping them around his hand instead. “I understand. Really, I do. Malfoy made you feel worthless. He said such terrible things, did such terrible things to you, that now, you can’t possibly understand how Harry’s love for you could be real. How he could possibly love you more than that man hated you.”

Severus’ breath came out in a whining sound, so sharp and sudden was his pain. It was all true, but to **hear** it said so bluntly tore the heart from his chest.

“But, Severus, if you look at Harry, his behaviour and his faith to you, it’s impossible to see how his love could be anything but the truest, deepest bond in existence. He loved you even when you were cruel. He loved you when he believed there wasn’t a shred of hope you would ever see him as a human being, let alone return his feelings. And he loves you now, when you’re bonded but can’t bear to touch him, to be touched by him.” She cocked her head and wiped tears from her eyes. “He hasn’t pressured you for touch, has he? Or even asked for it?”

Severus shook his head. “He has let me know he **wants** to hold me, that he wishes he could ease my fears and pain, but he has never pushed.”

“And yet, his soul is in so much pain, his aura is red with it.”

Severus choked. “What? What does that mean?”

“Severus, it means Harry loves you enough to take the pain from both sides of the bond so you needn’t feel it while you’re struggling with your fears. It means he loves you so much, he’s enduring terrible anguish to protect you. And, Severus, that kind of love is so rare.”
“He… he is in pain?”

Luna nodded. “Terrible pain, but he won’t admit it for your sake.”

“Oh gods. I didn’t want to hurt him.”

“He knows.” She took his hands and held them tight. “Do you understand, Severus? Harry would rather hurt himself than see you in pain. He would rather suffer than let you hurt.” She tipped up his chin so he had to look into her eyes. “Harry isn’t Lucius Malfoy. That man—he was utterly cruel. He used your pain to further his goals. He shattered you to gain glory. And he broke you into pieces. But Harry is breaking himself into pieces so you don’t have to hurt any longer.”

Tears blurred Severus’ vision and streaked down his face. “W-why?”

“Because he loves you.”

“How? How could he love me, when I am… I….” He couldn’t finish, but he knew Luna would understand what he lacked the strength to say.

“Severus,” she said, her voice soothing and soft, “you’re not what Malfoy made you believe. Those things he said about you—they’re lies. Cruel, horrible lies. He is the one at fault. He is the monster. You are not to blame for his evil, and you are worthy of love.”

Severus closed his eyes and dropped his head. “You don’t understand. It wasn’t only Lucius. If he had been the only one to abuse me so terribly, perhaps I might have recovered long before now. But as it stands, every single time I have attempted a relationship—save only this one—it has ended in misery. I have been hurt terribly every time. And now… I am so broken. I fear, even if I am brave enough to let Harry in once again, I do not know how to love any longer. I fear my love will not be enough.”

“Well, that’s just silly.” Luna squeezed his hand to lessen the sting of her words. “Not that your abuse hurt you, of course. There is nothing funny about that. But you really think you don’t know how to love? Severus, your love for Harry is beautiful.”

Severus swallowed hard and ducked his head. “I… I do not understand. How can you say I love him well when I cannot even let him near me? When my lack of it is tearing him apart?”

“Well, I’ll admit there are some obstacles to overcome, but, Severus, you’ve given up everything for him. You’ve completely altered your personality, you’ve overcome at least one of your phobias, and you’ve even let others into your heart again. Like me. That’s incredible. And anyone with eyes can see it’s all down to how much you adore your husband and want him to be happy.”

Severus lowered his head. “I do want him to be happy, but I fear I cannot be what he needs. I am so… so stunted inside. And I do not know how to heal.”

She brushed his hair back and tucked it behind his ears, soothing his fractious emotions. “Severus, you’re afraid to heal. You’re afraid of what will happen when you leave behind this armour you’ve carried for so long and let your heart feel once more. And it’s okay to be scared, but you are capable of healing, of stepping past your fears and growing beyond them. Why, just look at how far you’ve come on your fear of touch. I’ve even touched your hair and face, and you’re not afraid.”

Severus gasped, stunned. “S-so you have. I… is it truly possible?”

“Yes, Severus. You’re a brave man, and Harry loves you enough to stand by you through all your struggles. His love and patience has already helped you to heal so much. You’re nothing like the
man you used to be. And now, it’s time to lay that man’s shadows and pain to rest for good. I believe in you.”

“I do not. I am not sure I can do what you ask of me.”

Luna hugged him, and Severus let her embrace soothe his fears.

“I’m sure, Severus. You can do this. You can defeat your fears, if you will only let yourself. And Harry and I will be here for you every step of the way.”

Severus swallowed hard and gave her a shaky nod. She was right. It was time to move past his phobias, once and for all, before they destroyed everything he loved.

“You… you are right. I will… move on. Somehow.”

She gave him a brilliant smile. “Oh, good! That makes me so happy, Severus.”

He shivered. “I am afraid still.”

“I know. You will be for some time, but you only need to let Harry love you and you’ll soon recover. It’s going to be okay.”

Severus wasn’t sure he believed her entirely, but he gave her a hesitant nod. He at least owed it to his husband to try.

Luna patted his hand. “You’re strong enough to do this, Severus. I have faith in you.”

Her words gave him surcease, even if he wasn’t sure he could live up them.

“There you are.” She held him in a piercing gaze. “Severus, will you also try to talk to Harry about why you’ve been so afraid in the first place? He needs to understand, and as long as you keep your past hidden, he can’t. I know he intends to talk to you about his own past as well, as soon as you are well enough to cope, if it helps.”

Severus’ heart slammed into his ribs. Talk? About this? Dear Merlin. Just the idea sent him into a panic.

“I-I don’t think I am able to speak of it. Not yet, at any rate, but for Harry’s sake, I…” He took a deep breath and held her hand tight. “I will try.”

“Good. Do that, Severus. He needs you.”

“I… I know.”

After his talk with Luna, Severus went for a long walk around the grounds. He wrestled with her words, with his fears, and with Harry’s indomitable love for him, trying to make some sort of sense of it all. Was he truly so worthy?

On a whim, he sprinted to the gates and apparated away, landing in a small churchyard cemetery near the Irish coast. He picked his way between the grave markers until he found the one he wanted: a small, white headstone with an engraving of oleander below a name he hadn’t seen in years.
Beloved wife. Paugh. And Severus certainly hadn’t shown her the love she deserved as a mother in her final days either. Gods, he hoped she had found some peace in the realm beyond.

As he sank to his knees before her headstone, tears chilling on his cheeks, he remembered Harry’s words from long ago.

“You can still talk to her, Severus. She just can’t talk back.”

Maybe it was past time he did.

“M-Mam….” The word came out raspy and raw, rusty like an old bicycle neglected to the elements for too long. Severus cleared his throat and clenched his hands in his robe, fighting for control.

“I… I am… a bonded man now.” He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, letting the words flow. “Soul-bonded, actually. I never imagined anyone would want to take that step with me, but Harry did. He… he l-oves me, Mam. And I can barely choke the words out.” He leaned on the earth; the prickling ache of icy grass gave him something to focus on, a counterpoint of control to the brokenness in his soul. “I am failing him. Just as… as I f-failed you.”

Tears slid down his face and chilled in the winter air. “Gods, Mam. I should have come. I should have come when you begged me and told Lucius to shove his fascist pureblood mania. I should have just shoved Lucius off a pier somewhere, and instead, I let you go to your grave without ever telling you… without ever saying… I love you too. Fuck!”

Severus dragged his hand across his face and knelt there, focusing on his breathing until he could speak without falling to pieces. “Do you know what happened to me? Do you know I am broken and bleeding and I cannot heal? I show a brave face to the world but inside, I am terrified! I am in danger all the time and… and I am too damaged to tell the one man who has ever truly loved me… that I love him as well. I am too damaged even to let him hold me, and he is breaking to pieces from the pain. Gods, so am I.”

He lowered his head over the grave, tears dripping into the grass. “Mam, how do I let it go? How do I move on and lay the past aside? How do I trust….”

Severus sighed and wiped his face. “That is how, isn’t it? I trust him. Entirely. I trust him not to hurt me. And Merlin, it’s mad not to. He has saved my life so many times, and saved my soul. Now, he is saving my heart, but I am so afraid to let him in. I am so afraid I am not worthy of him and just when I believe everything is well, I will lose him.”

He sat and drew his knees to his chest, ignoring the cold. “Mam, I… is it safe to love again? Is it safe to let him in when everyone else is gone?”

Severus sighed and tucked his head against his knees. “Gods, I don’t even know why I came here. I am so lost.”

He stared into the distance, listening to the wind on the nearby moors. The whistling grasses played a solemn sort of music, and if he listened closely, he thought he could hear his mother’s Irish lilt among the heather.

“Takin’ a risk, fallin’ in love—it’s never truly safe, Sev. But it is worth it, when it’s real. You were always worth it, me lad.”

Tears poured down his cheeks. Had he imagined her words? Was it just wishful thinking, his broken
heart supplying the words he wished he might have heard one more time?

Or was it real? It was Samhain. Was his mother with him, speaking to him from beyond?

“Mam?”

He listened, but only heard the whistling of the wind. With a sigh, he stood and brushed off his robes. On the off chance those he had loved and lost truly were listening, he had one more person he needed to talk to before he could go home.

Harry sat on the sofa in Severus’ quarters, knees tugged to his chest, rocking back and forth to quiet the searing anguish on his soul. Luna sat on one side, rubbing his shoulders, and Neville sat on his other, watching him with deep sorrow and concern in his hazel eyes.

Luna gave him a sad smile. “Harry, try to hold on. Believe in him. Severus does care.”

At her gentle encouragement, Harry crumpled, head buried in his hands and grief choking him.

“Gods, Lu. I’m trying. I’m trying so hard. But it hurts! It would be different if he just didn’t love me yet and I could show him how I felt. I think I could bear it then. But this… strangling feeling, like if I look at him the wrong way, he’ll break into a thousand pieces and throw me to the kerb like yesterday’s rubbish—I can’t stand it.”

“I’m sorry, mate,” Neville said, his voice echoing with pain. “I… I wish I knew how to help you both.”

“Oh, Nev. It’s not your fault. I just… I wish… that first day we were bonded—I was happy, mostly. I mean, some things hurt, but I had hope everything would be okay someday. And now… now I’m just struggling to breathe through the pain. Just trying to survive.”

Luna looked up briefly, as if she had seen one of her creatures, and returned to rubbing Harry’s back. “Harry, I know. I know you’re lost in the mists, but he does care for you. He is only afraid.”

“Yes, afraid of me, Luna. And damn it, it hurts.”

Severus returned from Godric’s hollow with a new purpose in mind. He hadn’t heard Lily like he had his mother, but after talking with her about his fears and asking for help, he sensed her love and forgiveness from beyond. And her wish for Severus to fix it, to heal her broken-hearted boy. Severus left the graveyard with a promise in his heart that he would spend the rest of the weekend making things right with his husband.

He loved Harry. He knew he loved him. Perhaps he still wasn’t ready to say it, but he could show him. He could leave his past with Lucius where it belonged and let Harry back into his heart.

Gods, but he needed to be safe in his husband’s arms again anyway. He couldn’t stand this terror and loneliness any longer.
Severus entered his quarters through his office, moving silently as usual. He started to call for Harry, but soft voices stopped him. He moved towards the living room and froze inside the kitchen at the sound of his name.

“Harry, try to hold on. Try to believe in him. Severus does care for you.”

Severus swallowed a surge of guilt and moved into the shadows, watching his husband rock himself for comfort and pour his heart out to his friends. Gods, Harry was in agony. His husband’s reflected pain left Severus’ chest hollow and aching and his stomach heavy and cold. Tears hovered on his lashes as he listened to Harry confess his darkest fears, saying all the things he couldn’t say to Severus. Revealing all the pain he held inside because Severus couldn’t bear the burden of his love.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said with a snuffle. “I’m sorry to bring you both down with me.”

Luna took Harry’s hand. “We’ll always follow you into the mists. How else would we drag you back out again?”

“Kicking and screaming if we have to,” Neville added.

Harry gave a weak chuckle. “Thanks.”

Neville rubbed Harry’s back and nodded. “Harry, is he trying? Does he want to love you?”

Harry let slip a shuddering sigh. “I… I don’t know. I mean, I know he’s trying, but whether he wants to love me… it might just be too terrifying for him.”

“Can you give him more time? I don’t know what happened exactly, but for something to cripple a man like Severus—it had to be big, Harry. He’s going to have a hard time recovering from something so traumatic, but I really think he does want to overcome it, for your sake.”

“I… I can try. It only hurts so much.”

Neville tugged Harry against his side and hugged the young man. “It'll be okay, mate. I know it will. You’re his entire world—we’ve all seen it. He loves you. He just needs a little more time to sort out his grief before he can be in love with you.”

Harry nodded and slumped onto his knees. “I know. I feel it—or I did once, before he blocked me out of the bond and out of his thoughts. He’s the only one who can block me, and he’s done it. Hard.” He gave an aborted sob and rubbed his chest. “Fuck, that hurts the worst. I miss it, feeling his love, his pain, knowing when he’s scared and when he’s happy.”

Distraught, Severus began slowly dismantling the shields he had erected around their bond link. He hadn’t realised it would hurt Harry so much to be without it, but then, perhaps he should have done. He missed feeling Harry’s love too, and even his pain. Severus had been a fool to close him out for so long.

“I just… I wish he’d let me in,” Harry murmured. “I wish he’d just talk to me and tell me why all this is so terrifying for him. I wish he could bear to be near me long enough for me to talk to him. Maybe then I’d have a chance to—” He cried out and buried his head in his knees. “Gods, all I want to do is heal him. Love him and make him happy again. And I can’t. I can’t even hold his hand while he’s suffering.”

He tore at his hair and made a strangled sound of frustration and anguish. “I c-can’t do anything! I just want to be a good husband, but I’m paralysed. One wrong move, and I’ll lose him forever. I’ll drive him mad with fear or drive him away, when all I want is… I just want my family back. I just
want… I… oh gods, it hurts.”

He drowned his grief in his knees, and Severus could bear his suffering no longer. Merlin forgive him, he had let this go on far too long. Harry was utterly desolate without him.

Severus stepped out of the shadows and, banishing his fears, opened his arms and his heart to his husband once more. “My Harry, oh, come here.”

Harry bolted up, all the colour draining from his face. “S-Sev? Oh fuck! Please—I just… I’m so sorry!”

“Ssh. I am not angry, only sorry that I have left you in such anguish for so long. Come. Let me hold you and ease your pain.”

Harry crossed the room in halting steps, shaking and tears heavy on his lashes. “You… you’re not… you w-want me near you?”

Unable to bear his grief another second, Severus closed the distance between them and wrapped Harry in his arms. “I am so sorry, my Harry. Please forgive me.”

Harry broke into helpless sobs and reached for Severus, but didn’t touch. “Please, Sev, I… please.”

“Ssh. It’s all right now.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead and guided his husband’s arms to circle his waist. “Touch me. I need you too.”

“Sev, I… I want to, but I can’t bear it if you push me away again.”

“I shan’t.” Severus cradled Harry’s head against his shoulder. “Peace, my husband. We will heal this. I promise you.”

Neville stood and guided Luna to the door. “Professor, Harry, we’ll let you two work this out.” He patted Severus’ wrist. “He… he really wants to help you, sir, if you can trust him.”

Severus remembered his ‘talk’ with his mother and firmed his resolution. “I know. I have done a terrible job of trusting him so far, but…..” He slipped a hand under Harry’s chin and brushed a soft, trembling kiss against his lips. “I swear to you, my Harry, I will do better by you from now on.”

Wide-eyed and shaking, Harry traced his lips with his fingers. “You kissed me.”

“Yes. I regret that I have left you in suffering for so long.” Severus kissed him once more and held him tight. “I am going to try to put my past behind me, for good. I cannot bear to watch you suffer so any longer, and I confess, I long for the same closeness and joy that you do. I miss you, Harry. Will you allow me one more chance to make you happy again?”

“Sev!” Harry held his hands near Severus’ face, eyes glimmering with hope and body shaking in his arms. “C-can I touch you?”

Severus laid his head against Harry’s hand and kissed his palm. His fears resurfaced for a moment, but he turned to look into his husband’s eyes—green, not grey, and full of love—and warmth drove the coldness from his heart.

“Touch me, Harry,” Severus whispered. “Touch me again and let me feel what you do.”

Tears spilled down Harry’s face, but joy and relief lit his eyes. “Severus….”

Neville squeezed Severus’ shoulder. “Well done, sir. Luna and I are proud of you for trying so hard.
I know you’re terrified, but he will never hurt you. He adores you.”

Severus closed his eyes and held Harry tighter. “I know.”

Neville patted his arm. “Good luck. Send a message through Harry’s DA coin if you need us, or his Patronus if he’s able to call it. Any time—we’ll come.”

“Thank you,” Severus murmured. “I am in your debt.”

“No, Severus,” Luna said with a gentle smile. “There’s no debt for helping each other. Not for family.”

Severus closed his eyes around a surge of emotion and nodded, not trusting his voice.

“We’ll see you both in the morning,” Neville said. “Goodnight.”

Severus and Harry bid them goodnight too, and they flooed away, leaving the Princes alone in the silence.

“Harry,” Severus murmured, voice rife with pain, “I am so sorry. I never meant to hurt you like this.”

Harry wrapped his arms around Severus’ neck. “Hold me, Sev. Please. Hold me so tight I can’t feel anything but you.”

Severus cradled Harry’s head against his shoulder and pressed him so tight, not a breath passed between them. “Ssh. I have you. You are safe now.”

With a shuddering sigh, Harry buried his face in Severus’ shoulder and wept.
Chapter Summary

*And the light is back on for the boys. For now, at least.*

**Chapter 43**

**Smoother Sailing**

When Harry could breathe through his tears, he guided Severus to the sofa and sat. Severus hovered in front of the sofa, looking uncertain, and Harry covered his face to hide his pain.

“You don’t even want to sit with me?”

Severus smoothed Harry’s hair. “That was not what I was unsure about. I… I want to… be closer. I am only a little afraid. Will you hold me too?”

Harry gave him a tearful smile and patted the cushion beside him. “It’s okay, Sev. I swear I won’t turn you away.”

Severus took a shaky breath and shook his head. “That is not where I want to sit.”

Harry winced. “Y-you can take the armchair if you’d rather.”

“No, Harry. Lean back a little.”

Harry obeyed, bemused and scared, and gasped as Severus sat astride his thighs. The older man looped his arm around Harry’s shoulders and trembled.

“A-am I too heavy?”

Harry gave a soft, stuttering sigh and wrapped his arms around his husband. Truth be told, Severus was heavy, but Harry would be damned before he pushed his beloved mate off of his lap. So his legs might go a bit numb. He didn’t care as long as he could hold Severus like this.

“No,” Harry murmured, voice low and thick with emotion. “You’re perfect, Sev. Stay right here and let me hold you, unless you’re afraid?”

Severus sighed into Harry’s hair. “I… think it will be some time before I am able to say I am not afraid at all, but I do not wish to move. I was only afraid you would not want me here.”

“I want you. I need you. However you want to be near me, I’m good. Just hold me and I’ll be all right again soon, I-I think.”

Severus winced. “Harry, I am sorry. I know I have damaged you. It is only that those shadows of my past have yet to relinquish me. I am fighting back, but I… I do not know if I am strong enough to defeat them completely.”
“Sev, can you talk to me? Can you tell me anything about why you’re so terrified?”

Severus shuddered and buried his face in his hands. “I-I am… I d-don’t think I am capable of it. N-not yet. But I am trying.”

Harry looked away, anguish blindsiding him. He felt like an arse for it, but he couldn’t help that it hurt.

“Harry, please.” Severus clutched at Harry’s hair. “I… gods, I don’t want to hurt you.” Tears flooded his eyes and dropped down his face. “P-perhaps I should let you go. I have done nothing but cause you suffering. I have failed you time and again, and all you have ever asked of me is a place to belong. Even when I try to heal you, I hurt you instead. I… I am poison.”

Harry’s heart shattered at his husband’s tears. Even in the midst of his darkest moments, Severus so rarely wept. Seeing him cry tore Harry’s soul to pieces. To know Severus blamed himself for Harry’s suffering hurt worse. Even if Severus’ fears had caused Harry’s pain, Harry had never blamed his husband. Severus couldn’t help it. And he had tried so hard, sacrificed so much to overcome his past. He just hadn’t managed it yet.

“Sev….” With a sigh, Harry held his husband tighter and kissed his cheek, though he had to lean up to reach him. “Ssh. You’re enough for me. It’s okay.”

Harry held Severus tight and hoped, one day, there would be no more need for such reassurances. He hoped, one day, Severus could love him too.

Harry’s well-meant words cut Severus to the quick. Enough? Even now, when Harry’s heart had split down the middle and Severus could not heal it, he insisted he could be content here. But gods, Harry’s anguish was bleeding Severus, tearing his spirit in pieces and ripping him hollow, and the knowledge that Severus’ phobias had caused him such suffering—fuck! He couldn’t stand it.

“No.” He struggled for mastery of his grief. “No, I am not enough, I feel it. I am trying, and I thought I had made some progress before the nightmares and Draco’s abuse set me back, but now…. Gods, Harry. I am so sorry.” He took several deep breaths until he gained some control over his runaway emotions. Zopathy helped, and when he could focus again, he took Harry’s face in shaking hands and pressed their foreheads together. “Harry, I can’t bear to leave you in this kind of suffering. What do you need? What can I do to heal you?”

Harry grimaced and shook his head hard. “I can’t. You’ll only withdraw even more. It hurts so much as is, and I don’t think I can’t bear it if you turn me out completely.”

Severus cradled Harry’s cheeks and tipped his chin back, brushing away tears and gazing into his eyes. Merlin, he had shattered his gentle, loving husband. Broken his heart to bits and left him bleeding.

No longer. Severus had to move on. Gods, it was hurting him too.

With a shaky sigh and a bolt of apprehension, Severus leaned in and touched his lips to Harry’s. Harry froze and mewled in fear and uncertainty.

White-hot anguish tearing through his heart, Severus jerked back and dropped his head into his hand.
He had waited too long. Harry couldn’t stand his touch any longer. And, gods, the pain of that knowledge would kill him.

“Sev?” Harry held a shaking hand over Severus’ cheek but did not touch him. “I… it’s okay. I wasn’t turning you away. I was only afraid I would terrify you.” He closed his eyes and sniffled. “I… I don’t know if I can survive if you open yourself to me and shut me out the next moment all over again. It hurts too much to have hope and….”

Severus cringed. “And to have it taken away. For me to take it away. Gods, Harry. How can you still care for me after all I have done to break you?”

Harry gave him a sad, understanding smile. “You haven’t broken me, Sev. I am in pieces, but it’s not your fault. And as far as caring for you goes—I don’t think I can help it. Ever since the day I realised you’re not the monster I thought you were, I’ve wanted to be the one to heal your broken heart. Even when it breaks mine.”

Tears slid down Severus’ face. “I do not want to break your heart any longer, my Harry. Please. Tell me how to heal this. How do I make you happy again? I miss your smile and your laughter. I want so much to go back to the joy and the hope we shared those early days. It is agony to see you in so much pain day after day, and I am hurting too. I miss you. So, tell me. What do you need from me, Harry? What can I do to make us a family again?”

With a shaky sigh, Harry slid his hand into Severus’ hair and held him close. “You won’t run?”

“No. I am as broken as you are and determined to heal it.”

“O-okay.” Harry took a deep breath and laid his head against Severus’ chest. “I… it’s only that everything feels so unequal, Sev. I can’t touch you, I can’t show you how I feel—it hurts. I… I care about you, I want to tell you the words—hell, I just want to be able to hug you again without terrifying you, but if I do, you’ll be shattered and… gods. I just want to be a good husband to you, but I can’t.”

Severus shivered, tears sliding into Harry’s hair. Everything Harry said left him shaking, but it was time to let it go. He wanted to let it go. Harry needed him, and Severus needed to break free of Lucius’ shackles. Over twenty-six years later, the bastard still ruled his life, and Severus was bloody sick of it.

No! Enough was enough. He wouldn’t be that man’s puppet any longer. Harry loved him—loved him—and all he wanted was the freedom to show it.

All he wanted was the freedom to love him… gods, Severus remembered what that had felt like.

Seventeen-year-old Severus followed Lucius like a puppy to their meeting place, a small flat in Muggle London. The wards blocked the flat from sight, and Lucius always apparated them in under invisibility charms. Severus looked down the street, glowing under the light of an almost-full moon, and wondered what it would feel like to walk up to their flat hand-in-hand. To kiss the man he loved. Or just to be accepted, rather than a pet and hanger-on.

“Lucius, could we… might we walk for a bit before we retire?” Severus motioned to the street and tried to hide his blush. Lucius would understand his wish.

Lucius scowled and turned his back. “And let the public see a pureblood of my standing hobnobbing with a half-blood boy? No, no. I am afraid we all have our roles to play, little pet, as much as we
might wish it otherwise. You must take what I allow you and be content.”

Struck through, Severus dropped his gaze and wondered if he would ever stop bleeding inside.

Severus clutched Harry close, shaking all over and tears tracking down his cheeks.

Fuck! After eighteen years of decrying the man and swearing off everything to do with Lucius Malfoy he possibly could, Severus had still managed to carry on the bastard’s legacy. Of course, he acted out of fear rather than malice, and he would never abuse Harry—never again—but Severus’ continual rejection had shattered his broken-hearted husband just the same.

Severus squared his shoulders and firmed his resolve. No. He would not let the past dictate his future any longer. He refused to hurt Harry another moment. He refused to let that power-hungry fool hurt him, too. Gods above, he was ready to move on, to put it behind him and let the future come as it may. He knew, whatever troubles might come, Harry would be there to catch him if he fell.

Severus took Harry’s hands and kissed his knuckles one by one, tears bleeding down his cheeks. “Oh, my Harry. Forgive me. I never intended to hurt you this way, never wanted to be so cruel, but I have done.”

“S-Sev, oh no. No, you haven’t been cruel.”

“Not intentionally, Harry, but I will not deny that I have hurt you nonetheless.”

“Sev, it’s okay. I’ve been a prat too sometimes. Don’t blame yourself.”

Severus took a deep breath and guided Harry’s hands to his face. “I feel it is my failings that have caused us so much pain.”

“No, Severus. No. Being afraid is not a failing. It’s not your fault. And you’re trying so hard. It’s okay. Please don’t hurt yourself over this. I’d rather just move on and try to heal each other, no blame, no anger. Just forgiveness and affection. Can we do that?”

Severus blinked down tears and laid his forehead against Harry’s. “There is much I have yet to overcome, my husband, but I will try, for you.”

He buried his face in Harry’s hair. “Oh gods, Harry. I never meant to—I’m so sorry. I will make it better. I swear it.” With a deep breath, he sat up and caressed Harry’s cheek, wiping his tears. “I think… I want you to call me by the name I forbid you at first. L-love. I want you to use it.”

Harry winced. “Um… maybe something else? Something less terrifying for you first?”

“Harry, I—”

“No, don’t force yourself. It’s all right.” Harry kissed him softly and caressed Severus’ hair. “Mm, if you can just touch me again, I think I’ll be okay soon. Holding you like this feels so good. I thought the first night I came home here and saw Luna sitting in Neville’s lap that you’d never allow this. It hurt so much, but knowing you’ve come so far is… it’s enough.” He nuzzled Severus’ neck. “Hmm. Could I call you—”

“Call me what you wanted to, Harry.” Severus traced a shaking hand down his husband’s face. “I am not one for asinine nicknames and perhaps that one, if I heard it more often, might help me overcome my fears.”
Tears shone on Harry’s lashes, but warmth flooded the bond. “You’re sure?”

“Yes. I need you to say it. I need to hear it.”

Harry gave a broken sigh and buried his face in Severus’ chest. “Oh, love.”

Severus fought a surge of fear and steeled himself. Damned if he would let Lucius ruin his marriage one more moment.

“You’re afraid,” Harry whispered, shaking.

“Yes.” Severus kissed Harry’s hair and held him close. “I will be until the associations of pain are gone. But I wish to move beyond my fears, my Harry. Will you help me? Just as you helped me with my fears of touch, will you help me overcome my fears of love?”

Harry gave him a tearful smile. “Anything, Sev. So long as you really want it.”

“I do. Help me. Teach me love is not poison. Touch me again, and remind me what your affection feels like.”

Harry blinked tears down his cheeks. “Gladly, love. Whatever it takes.”

With careful hesitation, his eyes locked on his mate’s, Harry brought Severus down into a soft, gentle kiss, the first real kiss Severus had felt in weeks. And, gods, it felt good. Harry’s warmth, his affection, his love washed away the fear that had been Severus’ constant companion ever since Draco’s abuse had forced him to remember the parts of his past he had tried to forget.

Severus sighed and wrapped his arms around Harry’s neck, letting his devotion drive away the cold brush of terror, the spectre of bad memories. He was safe here. Harry had endured so much to care for him, so much pain, so much sacrifice. That kind of love didn’t turn vicious.

Somewhere within him, something clicked in his heart. Harry wouldn’t turn Severus away or break his heart. No matter what happened, Harry loved him, for better or worse, and he had proved it over and over again.

Severus wanted to prove his love for Harry in return, even if he still feared the words.

With a soft sigh, he traced his tongue along the part of Harry’s lips and sampled his taste for the first time in too long. Harry tensed, then melted into him with a quiet moan. His strong hands settled on Severus’ hips and pulled him in close, his tongue meeting Severus’ and guiding him inside.

Severus held Harry tight and took courage from the warmth building in his heart. Slowly, he let down the last few walls around their bond, and Harry’s emotions came flooding in. Heat, love, wonder, and overpowering relief.

Harry’s mental voice, silent for so long, whispered into Severus’ mind. [Sev… oh, Sev. I can feel you again.]

Severus reeled at the wave of emotion pouring off Harry. Gods, his love was so strong, all-consuming and soul-deep, and all for him. The thought left him giddy.

[Please, love.] Harry whimpered even as he kissed the breath from Severus. [Please stay. Don’t push me away again after this. All I want to do is make you happy.]

Severus curled his hand around Harry’s head and chased his husband’s fears away with his love.
Never again would he close Harry out of their bond. His beloved husband would be welcome in his heart from now on, even on his dark days. Instead of turning away to take care of his setbacks on his own, Severus would rely on Harry and let his husband’s love help him heal.

[Oh, Severus. Yes. Need you so much.]

At the feel of Harry’s obvious interest pressing his thigh, Severus moved back and kissed the younger man’s forehead. It was too soon for that.

“Harry….” Severus laid his cheek atop Harry’s head and held him close. “Gods, I’ve missed you.”

“Oh, Sev. So have I, love. So much.” Harry kissed Severus’ cheek and buried his face in the man’s shoulder. “Do you think you’re going to be okay now?”

“I… not quite. I cannot say that I will not be afraid again in the future, but I will not push you away any longer. When I am afraid, I will let you comfort me, and find healing in your arms.” Severus kissed Harry’s hair and gathered his courage. His husband needed the freedom to love him, and it was about time Severus removed the taboo on that word, at least for Harry. “I am sorry I have hurt you so, my beautiful Harry. I promise I will be a proper husband to you from now on. Please be patient with me, and… and do not stop loving me.”

Harry gasped and bolted up, shock and wonder bright in his eyes. “Sev, you said it!”

“Yes.” Severus held Harry tight. “I am still… I am not sure if I am ready to hear it, but I will not deny your rights any longer.”

“I don’t want it to be an obligation, Severus.”

“It is not. I only wish you to be free to express your feelings. I am… I still have much to conquer, but I want so much to l-love you properly, my Harry.”

Harry gave a shaky little sob and clutched Severus’ face. “Oh gods. Oh, Sev, you do?”

“Yes, husband mine. I do.”

With a breathless murmur of Severus’ name, Harry brought him into an intense, seeking kiss, and Severus did not resist. He let Harry tip him back and lay him across the younger man’s lap, and though it frightened him, the tender way Harry held him calmed his fears too.

[It’s okay, love.] Harry murmured. [I’ll never hurt you. You’re safe.] He hesitated, then pulled away. “I’m sorry. I’ll stop.”

Severus turned Harry back towards him. “Don’t. Kiss me. I want to feel it.”

Harry’s eyes filled with love and shimmering tears. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, Sev.” Harry leaned Severus across his lap and touched their lips together, softly, gentle and slow. “Okay?”

Severus nodded and tugged him down once more, letting himself fall into the dizzying sensation of his husband’s kiss.

[Oh, Severus. Gods, I’ve missed this so much.]
Merlin, so had Severus. And as their kisses went on, as Harry tasted Severus’ lips and Severus let him in, he knew he was safe. The feeling of love and protectiveness through the bond was so intense, Severus’ fears hadn’t a chance to survive.

Severus relaxed, trusting his husband to support him, and melted into Harry’s arms. The warmth and joy through their bond grew so bright and overwhelming, tears slid down Severus’ temples and into his hair. Gods, Harry adored him. And if Severus could make him so happy just by letting his husband snog him senseless every now and again, well, that was fine with him. It felt good for Severus, too.

Already, his dark fears had begun to recede, now that he had acknowledged them and tried to put his trust in Harry. Lucius had no power over him any longer, and Harry’s love would help him heal. One day, it would be all right.

Harry came up drenched in tears and beaming all at once. “Oh, love. Are you okay? You’re not afraid?”

Severus gave him a tentative smile, relaxing in Harry’s arms, completely supported on his husband’s shoulder. “I am well. I trust you.”

And perhaps, for the first time since taking his vows, Severus knew it was true. He could trust this gentle, loving man with his heart. Harry would keep him safe.

Severus kissed Harry’s shoulder and caressed his face. “Are you ready for bed?”

“Mm-hmm. Might I hold you tonight, protect you?”

Severus gave him a shy smile. “I think I would like that, my Harry.”

Harry’s joy eclipsed the sun.
## Part III

### Chapter 44

**The New Plot**

26 NOVEMBER

Severus woke with a gasp, bitter, crawling memories of an abusive man still cold on his skin. His husband shifted beside him and lifted a hand so Severus could see it, holding his fingers just above Severus’ cheek without touching—this way, Severus had the choice of whether he wanted to accept Harry’s touch or not. He had no idea how Harry managed to remember this ritual every time Severus’ nightmares woke them up, but he did, and his conscientiousness melted Severus’ fears a little more each time.

“M’here, love,” Harry murmured, his voice slurred with sleep. “S’all right. Not gonna let anyone hurt you.”

Severus sighed and scooted close, laying his head on Harry’s shoulder for comfort. Now that he could accept his husband’s touch, their marriage had begun to heal. And nothing drove away the memory of Lucius’ torture like Harry’s love. Severus nestled in close and wrapped an arm around Harry’s waist.

Harry murmured, “Sev, c’n I hold you too?”

“Yes, my Harry. Hold me.”
Harry sighed and wrapped him in strong arms, holding him tight against a sleep-warmed body. An *aroused* body, judging by the morning erection poking Severus’ thigh.

“Sorry, love,” Harry muttered, shifting away from Severus’ legs. “You’re safe. Won’t push you. Just an occupational hazard of being a bloke.”

Severus chuckled softly.

Harry gasped and held him tight. “Oh, Sev! It’s been so long since I’ve heard you laugh. You really *are* healing.”

Severus kissed Harry’s shoulder and slipped his hand into his hair. “You are healing me.” He hugged his husband closer. “Thank you for understanding. I am afraid after those nightmares, the idea of sex is… I cannot bear it.”

“Ssh. It’s all right, love. I know you’ve been hurt that way before. I’d never come on to you when you’re scared.” Harry kissed Severus’ forehead. “And even if we’re in the middle of it and you get scared, I’ll stop right away and help you through it.”

Severus trembled and held Harry tight. “I….” He swallowed hard, trying to face his fears of talking about his past.

“He won’t understand unless you talk to him about it.”

He gathered his courage and used his Zopathy to drain a bit of his terror, hoping it would allow him to speak.

Harry leaned up, green eyes full of concern. “Sev? Love, what did I say? I had thought that would make you feel safer.”

Severus soothed his worried husband with a kiss. “It was not you. I am merely trying to… to gather my courage.” He buried his face in Harry’s shoulder and murmured, “What you said—that you would stop if I was afraid—I have never had that kind of… security.”

Harry froze, anger and horror flooding the bond. “Sev!”

Severus cringed, frightened. Had he misjudged? Would Harry reject him now?

“Oh, love.” Gentle warmth washed away the sharpness of Harry’s emotions and soft kisses fell on Severus’ brow. “Easy, Sev. I wasn’t angry at you. I was angry at the monsters who could dare hurt you in such a way and horrified that you had to suffer such terrible trauma.” He cradled Severus’ face and traced circles over his cheekbone. “It’s all right. You’re safe. Nothing has changed except that I know to be extra careful when we do make love. I will *never* turn you away for talking to me. Actually, I’m glad you did.”

Severus shivered. “Why would you be glad to hear such terrible things? To know I have been damaged?”

“Oh, love.” Gentle warmth washed away the sharpness of Harry’s emotions and soft kisses fell on Severus’ brow. “Easy, Sev. I wasn’t angry at you. I was angry at the monsters who could dare hurt you in such a way and horrified that you had to suffer such terrible trauma.” He cradled Severus’ face and traced circles over his cheekbone. “It’s all right. You’re safe. Nothing has changed except that I know to be extra careful when we do make love. I will *never* turn you away for talking to me. Actually, I’m glad you did.”

Severus shivered. “Why would you be glad to hear such terrible things? To know I have been damaged?”

“Sev, your trauma is not your fault, and of course I want to hear about your past, even if it hurts me to know you’ve been through hell.” Harry laid his forehead against Severus’ and closed his eyes, and the intimacy of his gesture eased Severus’ fear. “I don’t know where you’re bleeding yet, love. That’s why I like you to talk to me—well, and because you *need* to talk about it. When you tell me where it hurts, I know better how to heal you. Otherwise, I’m going in blind. So please, talk to me when you can, love. Tell me what hurts you. I’ll do my best to heal your pain.”
Relief washing away his insecurities, Severus cradled Harry’s body flush against his own and took his husband into a slow, tender kiss. Harry surged up with a soft sound of pleasure and slid his knee between Severus’ legs, tucking them even closer. Merlin, it felt good to be so held, so warm within his husband’s arms.

“Mm, Sev.”

Harry’s weight pressed on Severus’ shoulder, guiding him onto his back. Soft, wet heat caressed the part of Severus’ lips, and Severus gave a slight sound of distress. As much as he had come to enjoy Harry’s kisses, ceding control still scared the hell out of him.

Harry moved away. “Sorry, Sev. I didn’t mean to terrify you. Are you okay?”

To Severus’ surprise, he was. That Harry had honoured his promise to stop relieved him. Severus turned so he leaned over his husband instead, his hands on either side of Harry’s head.

“I am not ready to be led, husband mine, but if you will permit me, I will lead you.”

Harry closed his eyes and bit his lip. Severus feared he had hurt him again until a wave of heat and desire surged through the bond.

His voice came out a bit strained. “N-not sure that’s such a good idea, love. I’m….” [I want you, and it’s hard to control myself.]

Severus shivered, a thrill of desire and a shard of fear passing down his spine all at once. Merlin, he wanted his husband too, but….

“I don’t think you’re ready, Sev,” Harry murmured. “You’re doing so well lately. I… I can’t stand to lose this closeness again if we move too fast. As much as I want your body, I need your affection more.”

Severus sighed and nuzzled Harry’s cheek. “You are right. I am not ready, but…. He kissed Harry, keeping it chaste and light for his husband’s sake. “Your love and patience give me hope I will be soon.” He lay beside Harry again and held him close. “I miss you as well. The feel of you under me, the sounds you make, the way you feel when I am inside you.”

Harry hissed and arched up, eyes fiery and desire pulsing in his side of the bond. “Shite, Sev. It should be illegal to talk about sex in that dark chocolate voice of yours. Gods.”

Severus’ cheeks burned and a flutter filled his chest. “You enjoy my voice?”

“Oh, absolutely. I’m fairly sure you could make me… um…. Harry’s cheeks turned crimson. “C-come on your voice alone.”

Fire lit in Severus’ blood. “Oh? Well, we shall have to test that theory soon.”

Harry’s eyelids fluttered closed and a soft moan escaped him. “Gods, yes.”

A warm smile crossed Severus’ face. “You truly do desire me.”

“All the damn time. You’re so sexy, and you’re completely oblivious, which just makes you even sexier. Your body drives me mad. Want to kiss you all over, taste you.” Harry’s breath hitched and he exhaled slowly. “Got to… hah. Cold thoughts, Harry. Cold thoughts. Filch in a bikini. Umbridge in a tutu. Dumbledore….” He gave a dramatic shudder. “Well, that did it. Just had to think of the old man and I’m good. Bloody lemon drops.”
Severus took in Harry’s scowl and irritated mumbling, and mirth like he hadn’t felt in weeks filled him. He buried his face in Harry’s chest and burst into laughter—real, unrestrained laughter that shook his entire body. Beneath him, Harry gasped, and warmth and love filled the bond. His soft chuckles, thick with emotion, joined in a moment later.

“Beautiful, Sev,” Harry whispered. “So beautiful. Let me hear you laugh like that more often?”

Severus gave him a hesitant smile. “Now that we are healing, my husband, I think I can do. I will try at least.”

“Oh, love. I’m so happy.”

Tears burned Severus’ eyelids, but this time from joy. Gods, he had finally made Harry happy. And all he had to do was laugh! It was such a strange, but wonderful feeling to be so well-loved.

“So am I, my Harry. So am I.”

Harry ate his lunch absently, his mind on the sound of Severus’ joy that morning. It had been a long time since he had seen anything but beauty in Severus’ face, but his mirth had rendered him truly lovely. Merlin, Harry hoped he could make his husband happy more often. He wanted to see him laugh again. And again.

It was something to strive for, anyway.

A warm body settled beside him, and Harry looked up with a smile, expecting Neville. Instead, a brown-skinned boy with hazel eyes met his gaze. Blaise, and he looked terrified.

“Blaise? What’s the matter?”

“Harry, come with me. Please.”

Harry gave his barely-touched lunch a wry look, sighed, and stood to follow his friend. He could always go to the kitchens later.

“What’s going on?”

Blaise cast a silencing barrier and leaned in to whisper, “It’s Draco.”

Harry cringed. “Oh gods. How bad is it this time?”

“Bad. I… too bad. He needs to get the hell away.”

Harry nudged Blaise’s shoulder. “Faster then. And I’ll see what I can do to convince him, but… well, he’s not really listening.”

Blaise nodded, his expression sad, and moved a bit quicker. “He doesn’t want to believe it. He doesn’t want his father to be the monster that he is.”

“Gods, I understand that.”

“What?”
“Long story. One I can’t tell you without his victim’s permission. Just know that my dad wasn’t the shining star of honour the light likes to paint him as and know there’s a damn good reason I don’t like my surname.”

Blaise grimaced. “Dear gods. What—”

“It’s not really something I can talk about, Blaise. Besides, we’d best focus on Malfoy at the moment anyway. Where is he? The Infirmary?”

“No. He said he caught it for going the last time, so I took him to the empty classroom on the third floor. No one’s using it right now, as far as I know.”

Harry winced and picked up the pace. “I hope you’re right.”

They walked in silence the rest of the way to the classroom. Harry motioned for Blaise to come in beside him, but Blaise shook his head.

“It’s best that I don’t. It will draw attention to him. Attention he might not survive the next time.”

Harry winced. “True. Then go do your Slytherin magic and cover for us. I trust you.”

Blaise gave him a sad smile. “Thank you. Take care of him for me?”

“I promise.”

“Good luck.” Blaise bowed his head briefly, a sign of immense respect among his house, and left Harry reeling. Merlin, his status had certainly improved among the snakes during the past year.

How would it change if they knew he was bonded to their head of house?

He gathered his wits enough to return Blaise’s gesture and cleared all thoughts of Severus from his mind. He didn’t think Malfoy knew Legilimency, but he might be wrong. With a deep breath and a prayer that Malfoy wasn’t injured beyond his ability to heal, Harry tugged his knapsack higher on his shoulder and stepped into the room, resisting the urge to call out to his ‘patient’ in case of eavesdroppers.

The door shut behind him, and Harry warded it before he did anything else. If Malfoy was dying, Blaise would have used his house elves to get them there sooner.

“P-Potter, help me.”

Harry grimaced at the pain in Malfoy’s voice and braced himself. He turned and sucked in a sharp breath.

Malfoy lay on a conjured bed, blood matting his hair, bruises marring his pale skin from head-to-toe, and his left arm obviously out of joint. Harry performed a diagnostic anyway, just in case he had life-threatening injuries Harry couldn’t see on the surface. He didn’t, thank Merlin, but his shoulder would be hell to fix. Lucius had ripped every single tendon in his quest to hurt his son as much as possible.

Dear gods. Harry swallowed hard and hoped he had the skill to manage this, because he certainly couldn’t risk bringing in Poppy. Not if this was the result.

“Holy fuck, Malfoy!”

Malfoy gave a weak chuckle. “Must be bad to make you break your professionalism.”
Harry winced. “R-right. Let’s not tell Poppy about that, hmm?”

“Just help me. Please. Gods, it hurts.”

“Okay. Ssh. It’s going to be okay.” Harry blinked back a sharp sting at his own words. No, it wouldn’t be okay. Not for this boy. Not until he left home.

Harry forced himself to focus and snapped his fingers. “Winky!”

The elf appeared with a beaming smile that faded at the sight of Malfoy. “Oh, Master Harry! Is you needing your kit?”

“Yes, right away, please. As well as my casting supplies.”

“Yes, Master Harry.” She popped away and returned in an instant with Harry’s medical equipment.

“Thank you, Winky. I’ll need you to stand by, please. I need help to set this shoulder.”

Winky winced. “Master, I is not knowing human medicine.”

“That’s all right. I just need you to help me hold Malfoy still.”

Malfoy shuddered. “Potter….”

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Malfoy, I’m not going to lie to you—this will hurt. Your shoulder is dislocated. There’s no painless way to put it back in the socket, I’m afraid, and if I give you too much to dull the pain, I might damage the nerves putting it back in, and then you might lose the use of your arm. It’s going to be hell. But I’ll give you plenty of pain potions once it’s set and we know it’ll heal properly.”

Malfoy blinked hard, pale and shaking.

Harry sat by his side and laid a gentle hand against the boy’s hair. “Ssh. I’ll take care of you, I swear. I won’t leave you in pain.”

Malfoy turned into his touch and swallowed what sounded suspiciously like a whimper. “I… I’m so afraid.”

“I know.” Harry brushed the hair matted on his forehead back from his face. “Malfoy, please. You’ve got to get out of this before you’re killed. I’ve never seen abuse this bad.”

Malfoy closed his eyes, but couldn’t stop a stream of silent tears. “You don’t understand. I can’t.”

Harry sighed and withdrew his hand. He did understand, but until Malfoy did something about his loyalties, Harry couldn’t reveal it to him.

“Well, let’s just get you healed first, okay? We’ll talk about it more then.”

Malfoy sniffled and gave him a short nod. “Just hurry, Potter.”

“All right.” Harry set about administering what local anaesthetic he could without risking Malfoy’s arm. “Tell me what happened, if you can?”

Malfoy winced. “I-I can’t.”

But as Harry looked into the boy’s eyes, he had the feeling Malfoy wanted Harry to know. He
couldn’t speak without endangering his life, but he wanted Harry to understand. And before Harry knew what was happening or how to stop it, a scene out of Malfoy’s life implanted itself in his mind.

Draco stood before his father, back straight, head bowed deferentially as he had been trained. Panic and the urge to cry almost choked him, but if he showed either emotion, he would suffer. So he stood still, not moving, hardly breathing as his father dictated his orders to him.

“The Malfoy family has fallen in stature, no thanks to that snivelling traitor’s philandering, and that leaves us little choice but to use underhanded measures in our pursuit of glory. To that end, you will end your relationship with the Nott boy.”

Draco’s head whipped up and tears blurred his vision. He blinked them back furiously. “But—”

A hard cuff sent him reeling. “Do not contradict me!”

“Y-yes, sir,” Draco forced out, though his lips bled.

“Good. Now, as I was saying, you will end your relationship with the Nott boy—and once this mess is over and our proper position is restored, you will resume your contract with the Parkinson girl. I spent too much time and money securing you a proper bride for you to throw my hard work away for nothing but an unnatural fling.”

Draco swallowed the urge to scream. It wasn’t unnatural or a fling. He loved Theo, and Theo loved him. At least, Draco thought Theo loved him, even if he had never said it. A cold thread of uncertainty wrapped around his heart and pulled tight.

“However, for the time, we must use your inclinations to achieve our goals, however disgusting and improper they are.”

Draco dropped his head and closed his eyes to hold back his tears. His cheeks burned and cold lead sank into his gut. If this was his father’s opinion of his sexuality, would he ever truly be able to win his approval?

“When you return to school and after you leave Nott, you will begin befriending Harry Potter. You will pursue him. You will subjugate his will until he is yours entirely, your pet to direct and lead wherever you wish. Then, once you have him in your bed, you will bring him immediately to the Dark Lord.”

Draco couldn’t hold back his resistance any longer. “Father! P-Potter hates me!”

“Well then, I suppose you had better start winning him over now.”

“But—”

The end of Lucius’ cane struck Draco in the gut and left him wheezing. Draco doubled over, struggling not to retch, tears dripping down his cheeks.

“I did warn you.” Lucius rubbed his chin and cleared his throat. “Now, as to how you shall subjugate his will, you must start small or he will catch on. Pay him little compliments, but make sure there is always the thread of doubt that he has earned them....”

As Draco tried to breathe and listened to his father speak on the cruel, sociopathic ways to break Potter’s will and his own son’s heart, he despaired. A man who could speak so casually of
dominating another's will had no compassion left. No soul.

Draco would never be enough for him.

He looked up, begging fate for it not to be true, and met the eyes of his mother. She stood in the doorway behind them, tears streaking her face and her eyes full of sick, crushing anguish. She shook her head slightly, warning Draco not to speak out.

But he couldn’t help it. He couldn’t be this person.

“Father, no! I can’t! I can’t do that!”

Hatred burned in Lucius’ eyes. “We shall see, my dear son.” The next punch sent him crashing into the wall, and Draco’s consciousness dimmed into a red-grey haze of pain.

Harry pulled back with a gasp. Dear fucking gods. Lucius Malfoy was truly a sick individual to have hurt his son so badly. And gods! Listening to the man calmly list all the horrible ways Lucius wanted Draco to abuse Harry left him queasy. Fuck! His skin was positively crawling.

“Potter? Are you all right?”

Harry took a deep breath and forced his wayward emotions to quiet, at least for the moment. He would cry in Severus’ arms later. For now, he had to deal with Malfoy’s injuries.

“Yes, sorry. Just thinking of the best way to go about this.”

Malfoy grimaced. “You don’t know?”

“Of course I do. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t dare risk it. It’s just that there’s a lot of tendon damage and I don’t want to hurt you worse than I must.” Harry sighed and took a deep breath. “Well, best to get it over with. The sooner I set your arm, the sooner we can treat your pain.”

Malfoy gritted his teeth. “Don’t fuck it up.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Harry sat beside Malfoy and gently wiped tears and cold sweat from his face. Gods, the boy’s screams as Harry had set his shoulder would haunt him for years to come. Thank Merlin he had thought to cast heavy silencing wards beforehand. Otherwise, Malfoy would have brought the entire castle running.

Malfoy whimpered softly and turned into Harry’s hand, his face ashen and tears pouring down his cheeks. Harry leaned back, frightened Malfoy might really come on to him, but the wave of loneliness and pain that flooded his emotions the next moment felt too familiar. Malfoy didn’t want Harry as a lover—he was simply starved for affection and kind touches.

Harry brushed the boy’s hair from his face and wiped a new wave of tears away. “Do you need another potion?”
Malfoy shook his head slightly. “Just… I… never mind it.” He turned his face away, but Harry kept petting his hair and trying to soothe him.

“I don’t judge you for crying, you know. Given what you’ve endured, Malfoy, you have every right to be upset. It’s all right.”

“It’s… ’s not proper.”

“Who the bloody hell cares? I just had to practically reattach your arm. Of course you’re in pain and scared.” Harry rubbed his back gently, keeping well-away from his injured shoulder and fresh cast. “It’s okay. You don’t have to be ashamed to cry. Not with me.”

Malfoy gave a soft whimper and turned into Harry, burying his face in Harry’s thigh. Harry squirmed away and knelt beside him, guiding Malfoy to rest on his shoulder instead.

“I don’t really feel comfortable with having my legs touched, but you can hug me if you need to.”

Malfoy wept quietly into Harry’s shoulder. “Help me. Gods, help me. I’m so scared.”

“I know. I see it.” Harry stroked Malfoy’s hair and rubbed his uninjured shoulder. “It’s all right, for now anyway.” He shuddered. “Malfoy, please. You’ve got to get out of this before you’re killed. This is horrible.”

Malfoy glared, expression twisted with anguish and bitter disbelief. “Potter, why do you even care? Why are you being so gentle with me? I’ve been an arse to you for seven years and… I just don’t understand it. I… I expected half the school to know about my injuries the last time, but you never—why aren’t you gloating? Why aren’t you telling me I made my bed and now I should lie in it?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Have I ever been the type to gloat or rub it in?”

Malfoy opened his mouth and shut it again. “I… I thought you were once.”

“Yeah. I thought a lot of rubbish about you too. I don’t anymore. It’s called growing up, Malfoy. I’ve seen too much to hold silly schoolyard grudges any longer.”

Malfoy winced. “I… maybe you’re right.”

“Hmm.” Harry had no idea if Malfoy had said that out of a genuine desire to befriend him or in support of his father’s wishes, but if he wanted any chance of saving this lost snake, he would have to take a risk. “Well, I’m here, okay? If you do decide to talk. And no, I won’t gossip about it.” He scowled. “I know too well how it feels, and that’s when it won’t end up with me coming back to school in pieces.”

Malfoy winced. “You know.”

“I have a fair idea where you disappear to every weekend and why you come back like this, yes.” Harry touched the boy’s left arm lightly, hoping there was still a chance to keep the Dark Mark from branding him. “It doesn’t have to be this way. If you want out, I’ll help you.”

Malfoy stared at his arm for a long time. “I-I can’t. I… they’ll kill me. And everyone but you, Blaise, and Theo hates me.” His face contorted with grief. “And if I want to stay in one piece, Theo will hate me soon too.”

“Well, I can’t vouch for the rest of Gryffindor house, but the people I run with these days have learned to trust my judgment. I’ll keep you safe, if you need it.”
Malfoy shuddered and buried his face in Harry’s shoulder. “I can’t. I can’t.”

Harry rubbed Malfoy’s back, soothing his fears. “Okay. But I’m here if you change your mind.”

Tears wetted Harry’s collar. “Potter… t-thanks.”

Harry smoothed Malfoy’s hair and went back to healing him.

Harry’s telepathic message a moment before had worried Albus greatly. Draco Malfoy was in trouble, it seemed, but unable to escape. Well, they had known for years, but the abuse had never before been so bad as to require the intervention of a healer. He hoped this would be enough to pin Lucius’ wily arse to the wall, at last, but somehow, Albus doubted it. The name Malfoy carried too much political weight, too much money and power to deny. Nothing short of an airtight case and Draco’s cooperation—preferably Narcissa’s too—would give them any hope of a conviction. Even then, the bastard still might escape punishment.

Money talked, unfortunately. As did power.

Albus rubbed his beard and considered their options. When and if Harry defeated Tom, the boy would have enough influence to overturn Lucius’ political clout. Until then, Albus feared there was little to be done but prepare a safe place for Draco, just in case he did decide to switch loyalties.

Albus had a gut feeling he would. Harry’s kindness was a rare and precious gift to wary, abused Slytherins, and the world in general. He really did have a talent for love.

As Harry’s emotional signature neared his door, distress and worry heavy on his spirit, Albus said a little prayer that the boy’s devotion might save one more lost Slytherin and greeted his favourite lion.

“Hello, Harry. Do come in.”

Harry gave him a wry look as he opened the door. “I know how you’re doing that now, old man. One day, I’ll be able to do it myself, only I’ll be able to read your mind too, and then watch out.”

Albus chuckled and motioned to Harry’s chair. “Indeed you shall, and I do hope I am still around to see it. For now, please sit down. Is Mister Malfoy taken care of?”

“Yes, I healed him and Blaise is escorting him back to the dorms as we speak.”

“Ah, good. Well, Severus should be here once his class ends, and then we will begin the meeting.”

Albus frowned. “Which class did you miss to heal Mister Malfoy?”

“Spellcrafting.”

Albus gave a wry laugh. “Well, I believe one class will not harm you much there, but I will write a note for you regardless.”

Harry grumbled something under his breath about missing his favourite classes to deal with a pair of berk. Phineas snorted and gave Albus a cat-got-the-canary grin.

“Oh, do be quiet,” Albus muttered.
Harry smirked, but his mirth faded as his husband walked into the room, his eyes wide and full of terror.

“Harry?”

Harry went to Severus and wrapped him in a gentle hug. “It’s all right, love. I’m here.”

“I am afraid.”

“I know. It’s okay. If this sets you back again, we’ll work through it. Can you trust me this time to hold you together?”

Severus relaxed and rested his head against Harry’s. “Yes. I was a fool to…” His voice dropped to a whisper, and the words they shared out of Albus’ hearing seemed to heal their fears. They truly had come a long way.

Severus kissed his husband lightly. “Come, Harry. I believe we will pull through this.”

“Yeah.” Harry slipped his hand into Severus’ and guided him to their chairs. “Right. You’d best put your public face on, love.” He immediately released his husband and crossed his arms over his chest instead.

Severus nodded and morphed his features into a scowl. “Well? Get on with it, Potter. What mess has Draco landed himself in this time?”

Harry grimaced. “Blaise Zabini approached me at ten minutes past noon today, 26 November, 1998, and reported that Draco Malfoy had been attacked again….”

Albus listened to the report of Draco’s assault with a heavy heart. Gods, the poor child. If only he knew how to free the boy.

“Something has to be done,” Harry said at the end of his report. “Lucius is going to kill him soon at this rate, but he’s too afraid to leave.”

Severus sent Harry a wave of love powerful enough for Albus to benefit from its warmth as well, an effort to countermand his sharp words. “Use your brain, Potter. If there were a way to safely remove Draco from his home, the Headmaster would have already done so.”

Harry grimaced. “So we’re stuck? Legally, there’s nothing to be done?”

“Unfortunately,” said Albus with a sad nod, “Lucius Malfoy has rather deep pockets.”

Harry slumped. “You’re saying he’s bought out the Ministry.”

“Obviously, Potter,” Severus said with a roll of his eyes and another wave of comfort to his husband.

Harry groaned. “Then what can be done?”

“I am afraid you are his only hope, Harry,” said Albus, his eyes heavy with sorrow. “If you can convince Draco to leave, to come out against his father and testify in court—we may have a chance. A small one.”

“A small one! That bastard is breaking his bones and the best we can offer Draco is a maybe? If we’re lucky?”

“It… may be more feasible after the war, if certain parties were to assist….”
Harry’s features twisted into a grimace of disgust. “You’re asking me to use my bloody fame in
support of him. To sell myself out.”

“Hardly.” Albus sighed and rubbed his temples. “I believe all of us will need to speak out against
Lucius to have any hope of bringing him down. I know of no other way to combat his death-grip on
the Wizengamot, Harry. It will take every person with good reputation we can spare, and that only if
we time our case right.”

“You mean wait until after the war, when he’ll be exposed as a Death Eater and his influence will
have weakened.”

“And while ours is strongest,” said Albus with a nod.

Harry groaned. “Gods, I hate it, but if that’s the only way, I guess I don’t have a choice.” He sighed
and slumped back into his seat. “But we’re putting the cart before the horse. We have to win the war
first, and we may none of us survive.”

“Considering what we have to work with….” Severus shot Harry a scowl, though a wave of love
and apology backed it, “you may well be correct, Potter. I suppose there is a first time for
everything.” He stood and straightened his robes. “If you will handle the official report, Albus? My
next class begins in two minutes.”

Severus’ class was already twenty minutes late. Albus pretended as if he hadn’t noticed.

“Yes, yes, of course. Thank you, Severus.”

The man nodded and stalked out the door… only to dash back inside a moment later.

“Right,” he said with a shudder, “now that we have an official memory….” He took Harry’s hand in
his own and rubbed his husband’s palm. “Hold on to me. Please.”

Harry kissed Severus’ hand. “Of course, love. I’m here.”

Severus sighed and tugged Harry’s hand into his lap. “Is there anything else we need to know that
you could not say on the official report?”

Harry gave a grim nod. “ Loads.”

Harry held Severus’ hand tight and prayed to the gods this nightmare wouldn’t set him back. It was
most likely wishful thinking, but maybe if he kept a loving touch on his hand, somewhere safe and
not too intimate, Severus would be able to hold it together.

Gods, he hoped so. He wasn’t sure he could live through another month of being the unwilling
enemy.

He took a deep breath and rubbed Severus’ fingertips, steady and soft. “Okay. I know for a fact that
it’s Lucius doing this, because I saw it happen. I saw Draco’s memories.”

Severus froze. “You broke into his mind?”

“No. I know it would ruin the evidence. I don’t actually know how it happened, but I had the sense
that Malfoy wanted me to know. It was almost like reverse Legilimency, but without the spell. I don’t think it was conscious on his part—he was worried about me when I came to. It may well have been accidental magic.”

Harry closed his eyes and held Severus’ hand tighter. “The thing is, after seeing Draco’s memory, I found out it’s not the abuse that’s our biggest worry right now, though that’s certainly bad enough.”

Severus tensed. “What?”

“Sev… promise me you’ll try to hold on?”

Severus held Harry’s hand to his heart. “I will. What is the trouble, my Harry?”

Harry took some courage from his endearment—a reminder that Severus did care for him—and gathered his courage. He trembled all over as he finally forced out the words.

“L-Lucius ordered Draco to break up with Theodore Nott—called him unnatural and essentially demanded that he marry Parkinson after the war is over despite the fact that he’s gay and she’s assaulted him in the past. But the reason the prick wants to wait until after the war… he’s ordered Draco to come after me. Draco’s supposed t-to subjugate me, to train me like a bloody pet, and… and… once I am naked in his bed—never going to happen, but that was the plan—he’s to deliver me to Riddle.”

Severus went rigid, eyes wide and horror stark on his features.

“Sev,” Harry cried, “Sev, please, please don’t… I’m not going to. I… please.”

Severus whispered, “No, no! I won’t—leave me alone!”

Harry cringed and made to run, but Albus caught him by the wrist. “Wait. I do not think he is fully cognizant.”

“W-what?”

“Give him a moment to collect himself, child,” said Phineas. “This is his past speaking.”

With an uncertain nod, Harry pressed his knuckles to his lips and bit down, trembling and swallowing tears.

“Severus,” Albus called in a firm voice, “look around you. You are safe. You are protected. Harry is with you and will protect you from the horrors you fear.”

Fawkes trilled a delicate tune and, after a moment, Severus jerked his head up with a gasp.

“H-Harry!”

The fear, the shame in Severus’ voice cut Harry to the core. Oh gods. Would Severus push him away again?

Severus reached out shaking hands. “Harry, please.”

Harry went to him, his heart racing and hope replacing dread. “Sev, love, do you want me to hold you?”

“Please. I am… I need you.”
Harry let slip a broken sigh and sank into his husband’s arms, kissing tears away from the corners of his eyes. “I’m here, baby. It’s okay.” He winced at the pet name—another slip—and prayed Severus wouldn’t entirely hate it. Or him for using it.

Severus shivered and slid his hand into Harry’s curls. A silencing spell and a glamour surrounded them, and Severus pleaded with his husband, his voice broken and tremulous with fear.

“Stay. Stay with me. I know I… I have so many issues, but I am trying to overcome them. I am… please, do not leave me.”

“Oh, Sev.” Harry kissed a line from Severus’ forehead down to his lips and held him tight. “Ssh. I have no intention of leaving you—ever. You would have to tell me to go.”

“I do not want you to leave. Even when I am afraid, I do not want you to go.”

“Why did you say to then?”

“I-I did? I was not even aware of it, Harry.”

“Not… aware? Severus, what does that mean?”


Harry sighed and kissed Severus’ temple. “Okay. But I… why did you think I would leave you if you didn’t know you’d said it?”

Severus buried his face in Harry’s neck and held him tight. “I… I have so little to offer you. I have hurt you, time and time again, I am still struggling with my past and my own heart, and I am… so afraid of all the things that make a relationship worthwhile. Draco is—he has so much more, and I… I do not want to lose you.”

“Oh gods! Sev’rus.” Harry settled in the man’s lap and held his face. “Listen to me. Even if we weren’t soul bonded for eternity, my heart is yours. I don’t care what Draco has to offer—I’m not interested in the least. You are my husband. You are my bondmate. You are everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“How can you say that, when I am still so broken?”

“Broken or not, Severus, I….” Harry closed his eyes and pressed their foreheads together. “I….” Gods, he wanted to tell Severus he loved him, but given that the man had just resurfaced from his past, maybe it wasn’t the best time. “I a-adore you. Broken pieces and all.” He kissed Severus gently, cradling his face in gentle hands. “Please don’t be afraid, love. I’m yours. Now and always.”

Tears shone on Severus’ lashes. “You are so beautiful, so kind. You could do so much better than I.”

“There is no one better. Not for me, Sev. There’s only ever been you.”

Severus held Harry’s gaze, his eyes full of hope and love and desperate, keening longing. “Harry….” He breathed it against his husband’s lips and took Harry into a sweet, tender kiss, careless of their audience. “S-stay with me always?”

“Always, Sev. I’m yours.”

Severus cradled Harry close and sighed. “I am yours, too.”

Harry’s heart thumped and tears pooled in his eyes. “Oh, Sev. I’m so glad.”
Severus wrapped his arms around Harry’s waist and kissed his neck. “We should return to our discussion, but stay close to me. I need your warmth to drive out my fears.”

Harry laid his hands over Severus’. “I want you close too.”

Severus nodded and cancelled his spell. “I am well now, Albus, if you would like to proceed with our plans.”

“Hmm.” Albus gave Harry a searching look. “Harry, what do you wish to do?”

Harry shook his head. “If I had my way, I’d just throw Lucius in Azkaban and be done with it, but that’s not an option. Nor is killing the bastard, mercy though it may be. So I think… the only way to keep Draco in one piece is to pretend to go along with Lucius’ plans—to an extent. I have no plans of actually dating Malfoy—so you can abandon any thoughts of hearts and flowers, headmaster. I belong to Severus and Severus alone.”

Albus gave a wry chuckle. “So I have seen. Indeed, Harry, it would be far too much of a risk to make any true attempt at a relationship with Draco. Besides the fact that it would shatter your husband irrevocably—”

Severus’ arms tightened on Harry’s waist, and Harry stroked Severus’ hands in soothing circles.

“—There is also the fact that if Draco touches you with romantic intent, it will reveal your bond.” Albus rubbed his chest as if in pain and sighed. “Harry, what does Draco think of all this?”

“He doesn’t want to do it. He hates the idea of subjugating anyone and isn’t remotely interested in me. He’s in love with Nott.”

“Then, at least for now, it should be safe enough to pretend to be closer to him without actually venturing into romantic pursuits. As you are starting from a place of perceived mutual hatred, simply pretending to befriend him would most likely be enough to keep him relatively safe. At least until Riddle gets impatient, assuming he is also on board with this plan.”

“As far as I know, it’s all Lucius’ idea as he’s pissed that Severus took his place, but….” Harry fixed the old man with a sharp look. “Pretending to befriend him? You mean like you pretended to care about me for seventeen years?”

Albus winced. “Harry—”

“It won’t be pretend, sir. Not that part anyway. Malfoy needs friends. Actual friends who won’t hurt him. I won’t date him or do anything that would hurt Sev, but I do plan on being there for him. For real.”

“Harry, please. I only assumed you would not wish to truly befriend him as you have been rivals for so long. If you do wish to befriend him, that is certainly your choice.”

“Damn straight.”

Severus trembled and buried his face in Harry’s shoulder. The man wouldn’t voice his thoughts, but Harry heard them, nonetheless.

[I know I am not enough, but I… I do care so very much. Please don’t leave me, Harry.]

Harry kissed Severus’ hidden ring and held his hands tight. “Sev, I only plan to talk to him, sit with him, and be his friend. Any touching between us will be strictly platonic. I might hold his hand if
he’s terrified, and I petted his hair today when he broke down on my shoulder, but that’s it. I swear on my magic and my life, I will never be unfaithful to you, Severus.”

Golden light settled over Harry’s chest. Severus sucked in a sharp breath and closed his eyes, tears forming on his lashes. “You… you gave me a vow.”

“Yeah. I figured it might help you feel a bit more secure.”

Severus pressed a soft kiss to Harry’s nape. “I do not deserve you, but gods, I am so glad for your presence in my life.” He hugged Harry tight. “And I am proud of you. You are putting aside seven years of rivalry and mutual hatred—not to mention your allegiances in the war—to embrace a fellow student in need.”

Albus smiled. “Yes, fifty points to Gryffindor for your devotion, Harry. To both your new friend and your bondmate.” His smile slipped. “Something I admit you could teach me quite a lot about.” He sighed and lowered his head. “I, too, am proud of you for overcoming your past to befriend Draco. Really, your ability to forgive is quite remarkable, Harry.”

Harry frowned and bit his lip. It wasn’t simply his ability to forgive with Draco, but… could he talk about it? Should he?

“Tell him, Harry. It is not fair to ask him to speak when you won’t.”

Harry steeled himself and clutched Severus’ hands tight. Yes. It was past time to come clean. If he could face it, if he could prove that he knew pain too and trust Severus to still love him after all his shadows came to light, maybe one day, Severus could trust him enough to speak as well. At least, it might encourage him to try.

“Sir… you should know, there’s more to it than simple forgiveness. I… understand Malfoy. Far too well.”

Albus stilled. “Harry, what do you mean?”

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I… Sev, will you promise me, once I tell you this, you’ll stay with me? You’ll still… care for me and not a-abandon me or think I’m a stupid freak?”

Severus turned Harry so he sat astride the man’s thighs and caressed his husband’s cheek. “I consider you the most lovely, brave, wonderful person I have ever met, my Harry, and nothing will change that.” His expression sharpened. “Not even your monstrous relatives.”

Harry closed his eyes tight. “Then I think it’s time I tell you, Severus, how similar Malfoy’s life is to mine.” He fixed Albus with a glare. “It’s far past time the headmaster knew exactly what he left me to, time and time again, to make a weapon out of a child.” He turned into Severus’ arms and pressed his face into his husband’s cheek. “Just, keep touching me, love? Keep holding me? Please, let me know you’re here and nothing has changed.”

Severus’ breath hitched. “Oh, Harry. Is it truly so bad?”

Harry swallowed hard. “I’m not sure, but it’s bad enough. Hold me tight?”

Severus obliged, cradling Harry close. “I am here, beloved. And I always will be.”

Harry kissed Severus and started his tale. “First, you should know the Dursleys never showed me a scrap of love—at all. I was the freak, the boy, but never their nephew. Not even Harry. I didn’t even know I had a name until primary school….”
Severus was in tears long before Harry had finished his tale. He laid his head against Harry’s and held him tighter, struggling to maintain some semblance of composure, as Harry revealed just how miserable his childhood had been.

“Every Christmas, they left me out on purpose and mocked me for it, for my lack of love….”

Gods. Severus had thought his yearly pack of cigarettes and consignment store boxers had been terrible Christmas gifts, but to receive nothing at all? To sit in a cupboard and watch through the keyhole as his cousin was showered in gifts while none remained for him? And that hardly registered in comparison to the rest of the Dursleys’ abuses.

Severus wasn’t much on celebrations, but for Harry’s sake, he vowed that from then on out, every Christmas and birthday would be grand. Never again would his husband watch in silence while love touched everyone but him.

Perhaps, for Christmas this year, he might give Harry his love instead. Severus felt it. He knew he did. It was just a matter of gathering the courage to admit it. For a husband who had gone without love his entire life, perhaps there was no better gift, though Severus planned to fill their tree with more substantial presents as well.

Never again would Harry doubt his devotion. Severus would make sure of it, even if he hadn’t yet found the courage to speak the words.

“And then….” Harry breathed in a sharp sob. “There was the physical abuse.”

Severus’ arms tightened around Harry’s waist. Oh gods.

“Vernon liked to use his belt. Whenever I crossed his path or looked at him the wrong way, he would attack. And I… I bear the scars.”

Severus slipped his fingers under Harry’s jumper, tracing along the lines of pain across his lower back. [You are still beautiful.]

Harry sighed and leaned back against his husband, quivering with emotion. “Thank you, Sev.”

Severus kissed the nape of Harry’s neck and held him closer. “I am here, Harry.”

“I know. Couldn’t go on with this if you weren’t.” Harry took a shuddering breath and scrubbed his hand across his face. “Petunia liked to use her nails, and she scalded me every time she bathed me when I was very young. But her favourite—she really had a thing for frying pans. Heavy, cast-iron pans. Honestly, I’m lucky I came out of that situation without brain damage, but then, maybe she knew just how hard to hit, or maybe there was something in the blood wards that prevented abuse from becoming murder.”

Severus kissed Harry’s head and swallowed a wave of fury. Dear fucking gods, he should have killed that scrawny bitch when he’d had the chance.

“And Dudley, well, he stopped attacking me in fifth year. Actually, last summer, he fought for me. But until then, I was his favourite punching bag. Harry hunting was a grand pastime, where he and his bully friends hunted me down and beat me to a pulp. Most of the time I could outrun them, but
when I failed…”

He took a shuddering breath. “And the year before last, I was too upset over Sirius and Severus to really pay attention. They caught me. And they almost gang-raped me before Dudley snapped and beat the living shite out of both of his idiot friends. He hasn’t associated with them again since, but it scarred me—scarred us both—how close I came to….”

Severus wrapped Harry in his arms and kissed his husband’s cheek. “Never again, Harry. I will never let anyone hurt you.”

Harry turned and tugged Severus into a kiss tinged with fear and desperation. “You s-still want me… d-don’t you?”

Severus cradled Harry’s face and kissed him with every emotion he couldn’t yet admit. He let his tears flow and held Harry like the precious gift he was—damned if he would ever take this lovely man for granted again. He was fortunate Harry had survived long enough to be his. And fuck all if Severus would ever allow him to suffer again.

“More than ever, Harry,” he whispered against his husband’s lips. “I will never let you go.”

Harry sobbed and threw his arms around Severus’ neck. “So scared. I was so scared you would think I… maybe I deserved it and—”

“Harry! Dear gods. No one deserves that.”

“But I was… I’m just a freak and a weapon and—”

“Harry….” Albus’ voice came out broken.

Severus shot him a dark glare, but in light of his husband’s need, decided against ripping the old man to shreds, at least for the moment.

“No, Harry,” Severus whispered against his husband’s forehead. “Ssh. You are not a freak nor a weapon.” He spat the word like the poison it was. “You were a beautiful, kind, loving child that they abused. You did not deserve it. You deserved love and affection.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead softly. “They are the freaks to have hurt an innocent child so badly.”

Harry whimpered. “I… I haven’t even told you the worst of it yet.”

Severus cringed, dread and horror stabbing him through the gut. “Then tell me, my Harry. I swear, I will heal it, one day.”

Harry swallowed hard. “D-do you remember when Poppy did those full-body scans and she was so appalled? I had to take a lot of potions and medicines to repair my oesophagus and larynx. Both had old damage that had never healed correctly. The scar tissue was starting to make it hard to breathe. Might have killed me in a few years.”

A cold, sick sort of dread crept over Severus’ skin and raised the hairs along his nape.

“Y-your throat? Good gods. What did they do to you?”

Harry sobbed. “You remember how I lost the plot every time you mentioned the plate?”

All the blood drained from Severus’ face. “No,” he breathed, horror turning his blood to ice. “Harry, tell me it is not as bad as I think.”
Harry ducked his head and shuddered. “I don’t know. But that story—it’s the worst in my arsenal.” He buried his head in Severus’ neck, breathing raggedly and shaking hard. “I was seven years old. They hadn’t fed me for over two weeks—at all—and I was so hungry. I was literally starving. I was too weak to do the chores, and every muscle in my body hurt. And when I failed to complete my chore list that day, Vernon attacked me with his belt. By dinnertime, I was desperate.

“So I broke a plate at dinner on purpose. I made sure it had plenty of food. Of course, they made me toss it in the rubbish bin, but I had a plan.

“After they had gone to bed, I broke out of my cupboard—it was accidental magic, though I didn’t know it at the time. I just knew if I pushed the door a certain way, the lock would open, whether I could reach it or not. Anyway, I made my way into the kitchen and snuck into the rubbish bin. I found the food—I think it was chicken Alfredo—and picked some of it out. Until Hogwarts, it was probably the best thing I had ever tasted, rubbish and all.”

Dear Merlin. Severus closed his eyes and held Harry tight. To have been so hungry that spoiled, dirty food full of broken porcelain seemed appetizing—fuck, it was horrific.

“At first, I tried to pick out the porcelain shards. But then, I heard Vernon coming and knew I only had a few seconds to eat, so I shoved a big bite into my mouth before he caught me.”

Harry whimpered and rubbed his throat, pain and terror cold in his side of the bond. “Vernon came into the kitchen just as the shard I’d missed caught in my throat. It hurt. Fuck, it hurt so much. I really thought I was going to die. If not for my magic, I probably would have. It cut me so deep, and I was coughing up blood.”

“Dear gods,” Albus gasped out.

“And Vernon, he… he just stood there and laughed. ‘T-that’s what you get for stealing our food, freak!’” Harry sobbed into Severus’ neck. “I ended up throwing everything up and it hurt. Gods, it felt as though I had been ripped apart inside—I had been. I was screaming, begging for help, and he just… laughed. And made me clean up the mess. And beat me with his belt again before sending me to bed. It was weeks before I could swallow without agonizing pain.”

Severus stifled a sob of grief and held his husband tight. “Fuck, Harry. Fuck!” He buried his face in Harry’s hair and kissed his curls all over. “I will never let you suffer so again. Never. You will never be hungry, never be left in pain, never tormented. Gods damn, I cannot believe—how could I have ever thought you spoiled? You have been abused criminally!”

Harry nodded weakly and hid in Severus’ shoulder. “H-hurts to remember it. My throat hurts.”

Severus cradled Harry’s head against him and murmured a healing chant over the shaking young man, stroking gentle fingertips along his neck and jaw. After several moments like this, Harry broke into tears on Severus’ shoulder.

“Why, Sev’rus? Why were they so terrible? All I ever wanted was for them to love me, even just a little.”

Severus hid his tears in Harry’s hair and whispered, “Oh, my Harry. I don’t know. I truly don’t know. Even at my worst, I never could have….”

“I know, love,” Harry gasped out. “Sev, take me home. Please, please take me home. I can’t bear it.”

“Yes.” Severus stood and swept Harry into his arms, bridal style. “Albus, you and I will have much to discuss later.”
Albus cringed and lowered his head. Only then did Severus realise his beard and cheeks were wet with tears. Good. Severus hoped the stark realisation of what his manipulations had actually cost his pet weapon would shock him out of his meddling ways.

But somehow, he doubted it.

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Albus watched Severus carry his broken husband through the floo with silent tears streaming down his face. Dear Merlin. He had known Harry had suffered—known he was being abused—but to this extent? Sweet Circe, Albus’ manipulations might have killed Harry long before he even made it to Hogwarts!

Merlin forgive him. He had truly failed that dear, loving child. And lost his trust forever.

Albus couldn’t even deny he deserved it.

Phineas stared at him, expression cold with disapprobation. “Well? What do you have to say for yourself, old man?”

“For the greater good,” popped into his head, but no. The excuse felt flimsy and cruel. A human child—a child he loved—had nearly died in agony over and over again, had grown up without love, all for Albus’ obsession with the prophecy and the war.

There was no greater good here. No good at all.

Albus let his head drop and vowed to make a change. The price for his meddling was far too high and none of his usual excuses held water. He had no defence.

Nothing. He could say nothing for himself. Even an apology meant nothing in the face of such stark suffering.

He lowered his head into his hands and wept.

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Severus lay Harry on their bed and cradled the young man in his arms, wrapping him tight within his embrace. Harry wept into his husband’s chest. Severus held him the entire time, whispering his devotion and reassurance to his devastated bondmate.

“I am with you,” he murmured with a kiss to Harry’s curls. “Nothing will ever change it. You are safe. You are cared for.” Loved. He couldn’t say it, but he felt it. “You are home. And I will never let you suffer so again.”

Harry pulled back, face a blotchy mess and eyes red, but Severus still thought him lovely. “I’m s-sorry,” he gasped out, still hiccupping with residual sobs. “I didn’t mean to cry like this.”

“Ssh.” Severus kissed his husband, tears and all. “It is a wonder you have not broken down sooner with the trauma you endured. You are allowed to cry.”
"B-but I made a mess of you."

"I am far more concerned with you." Severus clutched Harry close to his heart. "Dear gods. You are the greatest gift in my life, and they might have stolen you from me before I ever realised." He held Harry tight and buried his face in the younger man’s hair. "I cannot lose you."

Harry sniffled and entwined his legs with Severus’. "I’m here."

"Thank Merlin for that." Severus kissed him and held his face. "I do not want to imagine a world without your light."

Tears slipped down Harry’s cheeks anew. "I feel the same about you, love."

Severus kissed him softly and held him close. "Stay. Stay near me. I need to feel your presence. I need to know you are safe."

Harry tucked his head under Severus’ chin and embraced him. "I’m here, Sev."

"Yes, no thanks to that barmy old goat."

Harry sighed into Severus’ throat. "You’re going to tear him a new one, aren’t you?"

"Of course. Perhaps literally."

Harry gave a dark laugh. "Really? Well, I suppose I know how to treat it if you do." He kissed Severus’ cheek. "But in all seriousness, don’t be too hard on him. He didn’t know it was that bad."

"Perhaps not, Harry, but had I heard your story—seen the evidence of it—at the height of my hatred for you, even then, I would have been utterly appalled. There is no acceptable level of child abuse."

Severus sighed and laid his head against Harry’s. "And yes, I do realise my hypocrisy in saying such a thing when I hurt you so badly. How you can forgive me… ."

"I just do, Sev. And as soon as you realised you were abusing me, you stopped."

"Yes, that is true, but the same cannot be said for Albus. You might have died, Harry! Died in agony before you even came to Hogwarts!” Tears blurred his vision as Severus cradled Harry close, needing to feel him secure within his arms, needing to feel his heartbeat. "I might have lost you before I found you. And that… that is unforgiveable."

Harry winced. "M-maybe I shouldn’t have told you."

Severus cupped Harry’s face. "Beloved, tell me. Whenever you hurt, whenever you are afraid, please tell me. I cannot read minds as you do, and I want so much to see you happy again. I think you will not be happy as long as you carry those dark secrets inside.” He lowered his head and
sighed. “I know I am not. After so many years, I cannot speak of my abuse without freezing in terror. I do not wish that fate for you.”

Harry hugged Severus tight. “Do you think you’ll ever be able to tell me? I was scared too, love, but I feel better after talking to you and knowing you still want me just the same.”

Severus shuddered. “N-not yet. But I am trying, Harry. The small flashes I have shown you or told you—I am trying.”

Harry nodded and kissed him lightly. “I just want you to be happy, Sev. To be whole again. I promise, if you ever want to talk, I’ll listen and I’ll… feel just the same when you’re done.”

Severus shivered and buried his face in Harry’s hair. “I… I will try. For you.”

“Thank you, love.”

Severus sighed and hoped Harry would still thank him when and if he ever did find the courage to speak. Still love him.

“I will, love. I promise you.”

Severus cradled Harry close and kissed his hair. “Stay close to me tonight, my Harry. I need to know you’re safe.”

“As if that’s a sacrifice.” Harry curled up in Severus’ lap and tuckered his head against the curve of Severus’ neck. “This is the only place I feel safe.”

“You are.”

‘My beloved, I swear you will always be safe here.’

Severus held him until Harry fell asleep in his arms, and joined him soon after, taking comfort in the feel of his heartbeat.
Chapter 45

29 November

Severus sat on the sofa, Harry’s head in his lap. Severus read a potions journal with one hand, and with the other, he caressed his husband’s hair and cheek, his heart overflowing with warmth. The young man had fallen asleep on his lap while working on one of Slytherin’s journals, and Severus had never felt so peaceful, so at ease in another’s presence. Merlin, how he hoped they would have many more of these sweet, domestic moments. He had longed for a love, a marriage like this his entire life.

Harry gave a soft sigh and turned into Severus’ thigh, curling his hand under his head. Severus gave him an indulgent smile and smoothed his wild curls. Gods, how he loved this man.

Without warning, Harry went rigid and jerked up.

“Harry?” Severus cupped his husband’s face and searched his eyes for trouble. “What is it? Did I wake you?”

Harry shook himself and shuddered. “No. Riddle did. Something—I couldn’t see much, but he’s really happy. I… I don’t like it.”

Severus brought Harry into his lap and held him tight. “I have you, my Harry. Close your mind and drive him out. Focus on your safe place and listen only to the sound of my voice.”

Harry sighed and obeyed, letting Severus guide him through the process of rebuilding his mental shields and driving the horcrux shard away from his own soul.

“Are you all right now, my Harry?”

Harry nodded and rested his head on Severus’ shoulder. “Mm. This is nice. You holding me like this. Don’t let go just yet?”

Severus held him tighter. “I am enjoying it too.”

“Sev….” Harry kissed his neck and slipped a gentle hand into the older man’s hair. “I-I’m really happy with you now. I know it’s not perfect yet, but it’s good.”
Severus kissed Harry’s temple. “Someday, we will work through our troubles and overcome them. Will you stay by my side until then?”

“Mm, always, love.”

Severus cradled Harry close and sighed, letting his warmth and love wash away all traces of fear and uncertainty. It truly did feel good to hold Harry in his lap.

At least, until a sharp, burning pain shot up his left arm and through his chest.

The Dark Lord. Oh gods. Why did he want Severus now?

“Ah! Let me up, Harry.”

Harry moved back, dread and fear cutting through his joy. “Sev? What is it?”

Severus closed his eyes against a surge of cold trepidation. “I am being summoned.”

Terror flooded Harry’s eyes. “B-but… why?”

“I do not know, but if I do not leave now, I may not live long enough to find out.”

With a mewl of fear, Harry scrambled to his feet and tugged Severus up. “Accio Severus Prince’s spy gear.” Severus’ Death Eater robes and white mask came sailing into Harry’s hands, followed by his portkey, charmed cloak, Harry’s invisibility cloak, and Severus’ potions belt. Harry helped him dress and tied on his charmed cloak. “I’ll be waiting for you at the gates, Sev. If anything happens, I’ll patch you back up and bring you home, okay? Just come home to me. I can’t lose you.”

Severus closed his eyes against the fear he mightn’t live long enough to give Harry the chance to save him. “I…I will try.”

Harry winced. “Please. I…I can’t…. He shuddered and handed Severus his mask. “Please, be careful.”

Severus gathered his husband close and kissed him, soothing him with his love. “I will.” He took comfort in Harry’s warmth, in his scent, and knew he had to take this opportunity to let his husband know the truth. He might not have another chance.

“Harry,” he murmured against his husband’s ear, voice thick and trembling with emotion, “I want you to know you have healed so much of my pain, and I am grateful for you, my… my love.”

Harry gasped and caught Severus’ face. “Your… oh, Sev, do you mean it?”

Severus closed his eyes and leaned into Harry’s touch. “I… I am not sure I can say the words yet, but…..” He sent a wave of pure love and trust through their bond. “Yes, Harry. I mean it.”

Tears tracked down Harry’s cheeks. He cradled Severus’ face in gentle hands and gave him the softest kiss he had ever known. “Come home to me. Please.”

“I will try, for your sake.” Severus removed his ring and placed it in Harry’s palm. “Keep it safe for me, beloved.”

Harry held his hand to his heart and nodded, tears pooling under his chin. “Sev, I lo—”

Severus shook his head and pressed a fingertip to Harry’s lips. “Not yet. I cannot Occlude if that is on my heart. I know you feel it, my husband. That is enough for now.”
“Okay.” Harry took a shaky breath and kissed Severus’ forehead, his eyes full of fear and resolution at once. “I’ll be waiting for you. Be safe, Sev.”

“I will do my best.”

With one final kiss, Severus gathered his courage tightly around him and swept away.

Harry paced by the gates, his heart hammering in his chest and his body aching with reflected pain. Severus was suffering. Suffering so badly he couldn’t block it from the bond, as he had done when the torture started. Tears poured down Harry’s face as he waited, medical kit already open and protected from the snow, hardly feeling the cold in his fear for his husband.

“All change, Harry?”

Harry shook his head, then remembered Neville couldn’t see it while he was under Severus’ obscuring spell. “No. He’s still in agony. Gods, I’m so afraid.”

A gentle, invisible hand fell on Harry’s wrist. “Remember your spells,” Luna said. “You can save him. Everything will be all right.”

Harry really hoped that was her Feathersprites talking. He paced again, wincing at a surge of fury from Riddle. Gods, what was happening? It was enough to make Harry want to lower his shields, just long enough to catch a glimpse—but no. On the off chance that Riddle could see into his mind when Harry connected, he couldn’t risk it. If Riddle discovered Severus and Harry were bonded, he would murder Severus on the spot, and he wouldn’t draw it out either. Not even their soul bond would save Severus from the killing curse.

Gods, Harry hoped Severus would survive whatever had pissed the bastard off this time.

Blue light flashed at his feet, and Harry’s heart sank into the snow. Severus’ emergency portkey. Oh gods! He dashed to the limp, unconscious form of his husband and gasped. It appeared Riddle had set the entire Inner Circle against Severus again, but this time, he hadn’t stopped until their whipping curses had torn into Severus’ flesh over and over, pendant and cloak or no. The man was bleeding from every surface of his body, he had stopped breathing, and his heart rate was failing.

“Jesus!” Harry sank to his knees, careless of the cold, and gathered his husband into his arms.

“Auxilium Spiritus! Sana Totalis! Sarcio Vulnera!”

He pressed his forehead to Severus’ and wept as he chanted, pouring his love and healing energy into his beloved husband, but Severus’ chest remained still.

“Please, Sev. Please breathe. I can’t make it without you.”

Beside him, Luna had taken up another strange chant. “Purifico Pulmonis... Purifico Pulmonis...”

Harry didn’t hesitate to join in, his tenor meshing in eerie harmony with hers. A soft baritone followed, and he looked to his left to find Neville chanting along with them, pale green light flowing on his lips. Love for his friends, for his husband, overwhelmed Harry, and he poured it into his
healing magic, watching as the light on his own breath turned brilliant white.

Severus sucked in a sharp breath and coughed, gasping for air, and Harry clutched him into a tearful embrace.

“Oh, Sev! Oh, thank Merlin.” He kissed his husband gently and resumed his healing, tears raining down his cheeks.

After a few long, tense moments, Severus’ eyes opened. “H-Harry?” The sound of his voice, weak and raspy as it was, had never been so welcome.

Harry choked back tears and held Severus’ face, gently stroking his cheeks. “I’m here, love. Just hold on. Now that you’re stable, we’re taking you home.”

Severus lifted a trembling hand to Harry’s cheek. “Thought… I would never… see you again.”

“Oh, Severus.” Harry lifted his husband into his arms, balancing him with some help from Neville. “I’m never letting you go. Never.”

Severus coughed and buried his face into Harry’s shoulder. “So much pain.”

“I know, love. We’re going home now.”

“Yes, home.”

Luna took Severus’ hand. “We have you, Severus. You’re going to be okay now.”

Severus squeezed her hand weakly and sank back into unconsciousness.

Harry called, “Winky!”

Their elf appeared and wailed at the sight of Severus. “Oh, oh, Master Severus! Oh, is you alive?”

Luna patted her head. “He’s alive. He’s quite seriously injured though, so we need you to take us to his quarters.”

Winky looked to Harry.

“Please, Winky. He’s heavy and hurt.”

Winky nodded and held out her hand. “I was needing permission from my master.” Luna took her hand and Severus’, and the elf popped them away.

Harry stayed at Severus’ side as much as he could the next day, though he couldn’t skip too many classes without making himself suspect. He skived off Care of Magical Creatures first thing to make sure Severus was healing well and taken care of, but he had to spend the next couple of hours in Defence, as much as he would rather have been at home. At least he knew Albus and Poppy would take care of the man in his absence, but still, he longed to be with Severus, to help him heal and watch over him, to protect him from any further pain.

He forced himself to pay attention as much as possible, but even so, barely passed an Acceptable for
the day. Professor Hestia Jones gave him several bemused looks here and there, but Harry couldn’t care. His heart lay suffering at home. What did it matter if his shields wavered or his jinxes didn’t hit with enough power? He just wanted to be near his ailing husband and because of this bloody war, he couldn’t.

Harry forced himself to eat lunch. Malfoy wasn’t in attendance, and it troubled him. He pulled Blaise aside after choking down some fruit and a turkey sandwich.

“Blaise, is Malfoy…?”
Blaise shook his head sadly. “He’s at home, I think.”

Harry winced. “Which means he’ll come back in pieces.”

“Unfortunately so, I’m afraid.”

“Damn. Just… send your elves or a Patronus after me when he gets back, okay?”
Blaise nodded and squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “Is your friend…?”

“He survived, but took a direct hit from Dolohov’s curse. His lungs are in a terrible state. I’m going now to check on him. I won’t be in History—will you let Binns know I’m taking care of a patient?”

“Sure thing. Good luck, Harry, and let him know we’re all on his side.”

Harry squeezed Blaise’s hand in thanks. “I will.”

Blaise’ eyes widened and he drew his hand back in surprise. “Harry?”

“What?”
Blaise shook himself and squeezed Harry’s hand once more, his expression bemused, then blank. “Hmm. It’s nothing. Just go take care of him for us.” His emotions jangled with shock and wonder, but Harry had no time to work out what had startled him, and Blaise had Occluded his thoughts.

With a shrug, Harry stepped back and slung his bag over his shoulder. “That’s the plan.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.” Harry raced to the nearest empty and unobserved alcove, cast his stealth spells, and dashed straight for home.

“—And there’s Harry right now,” Albus was saying as Harry stepped through the wards. “I’m sure he’s quite capable of caring for Severus on his own at this point. The worst part is over, after all.”

Poppy protested, “Albus, the man needs to be bathed, and—”

“And no offence, Poppy,” Harry said with a wry smile as entered the bedroom, “but he’d be much more at ease if I bathed him rather than a woman. Even a woman he likes. Usually.”

Poppy frowned. “I… it’s just so irregular. I’m not sure—”

“Poppy, please,” Severus murmured, his voice still raw and raspy. “Harry is correct. I would much prefer his assistance.”

She threw her hands up in exasperation. “You three are more trouble than you’re worth.”
Harry chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry, Poppy. But Sev is right. And besides, I need you on call in the Infirmary anyway. Malfoy is gone again, and you know when he comes back….”

“He’ll be in a right state, most likely in worse condition than before.” Poppy sighed and straightened her wimple. “Well, I suppose that leaves me little choice.” She fixed Harry with a stern glare. “You treat Severus with respect, understand? I know you’re his friend, but the man is quite reserved. You’ll need to be especially gentle.”

He nodded and Occluded hard, lest she worked out that Severus was more than used to Harry’s touch on his naked skin.

Beside him, Albus was looking prim and proper, much to Harry’s consternation. Gods, why didn’t he just hold a sign over his head. “I know something!”

Albus gave Poppy an innocent smile, and Harry barely refrained from smacking him. The barmy idiot.

Poppy narrowed her eyes and marched the old man out of the room. “I don’t know what you’re plotting, Albus, but I’ll have none of it! Severus needs time to heal without your schemes interfering with his recovery.”

Albus’ low chuckle accompanied them on the way out.

Harry closed his gaping mouth with a click. Huh. A deliberate ploy to distract Poppy? Well. It seemed Harry had given neither the headmaster’s intelligence nor his reputation for meddling enough credit. Manipulative old sod.

“Well, that’s done,” he said with a wry shake of his head. He crawled into the bed beside Severus and kissed his husband’s forehead. “How do you feel, love?”

“I have been better.”

“Yeah. Poppy said you got hit with Dolohov’s curse. It’s going to take time to heal even with the chant and our best efforts to live up to your ability with a cauldron.”

“The brew needs a touch more unicorn hair. Three more strands in each cauldron should do.”

Harry grimaced. “It had to be the most difficult ingredient. Well, I’ll ask Daphne to gather a bit more for us. She’s the only female virgin I know of at this point.”

Severus groaned. “Harry, I teach these children. I have wiped their noses. Do you truly imagine I wish to know the sordid details of their love lives?”

Harry laughed in spite of his worry and kissed Severus gently. “Would you settle for knowing the sordid details of mine?”

Severus chuckled, though it ended in a cough. “I know already. Yours is rather boring as of late.” He turned into Harry and stroked his cheek. “I am going to change that once I have the strength.”

Harry shivered in anticipation, a thrill of delight shimmying down his spine. “Ooh. I won’t object. I do miss your body. But I hope you understand it’s okay if you need more time, love.”

Severus slipped his knee in between Harry’s legs, drawing him closer. “No. I am… you know my heart, even if I am still afraid of the words. I am ready. I need you.” Tears pooled at the corners of his eyes. “I-I need you to wash away—to make me forget the pain. To… gods.” He buried his head in Harry’s shoulder, shaking with grief.
“Sev? Oh Merlin, love! What did I say?”

“It is not you.” Severus curled in closer, breath hitching and ragged. “It was Lucius who cursed me, and… I… I do not understand why that man has carried a vendetta against me for so long.”

Harry stroked Severus’ hair, his touch soft and loving. “I don’t know, love, but I’ll protect you as much as I can. I’ll be your shelter.”

“You are. I… oh, Harry. It hurts.”

“I know, Sev. I feel it. Tell me what happened, if you can. It might help you heal.”

“Y-yes.” Severus blinked back another wave of tears and tucked his head under Harry’s chin, clinging to his husband. “The meeting—they were gathering to discuss Lucius’ plan to subjugate your will. The Dark Lord came out in support of it and praised Lucius’ cunning. He advised every Death Eater there to aid Draco in his pursuit.”

Severus’ breath hitched, and he broke into a coughing fit.

Harry whispered healing chants over his husband. “Auxilium Spiritus… Sana Faucium… Purifico Pulmonis.”

After a few moments, Severus’ coughing stopped and his laboured breathing eased.

“Think your words to me, love,” Harry urged him. “I can hear them whether you use Legilimency or not, and you need to rest your voice.”

Severus nodded weakly. Harry brushed tears from his face and held him close.

“Okay, love. You said Riddle ordered the Death Eaters to support Draco.”

Severus sniffled and buried himself in Harry’s chest once more. [He marked him. Draco. He… I felt his fear, his anguish—Draco did not want to be marked, but he had no choice. They would have killed him had he refused.]

Harry closed his eyes, grief and guilt tormenting him. Gods. In spite of all his efforts, he had failed to spare Draco in the end. Damn it. He had tried so hard, but what good did trying do when Draco hadn’t wanted to leave?

Harry sighed and took comfort from Severus’ gentle touch and warmth. Draco was still alive—he hoped—and as long as the boy still breathed, there remained a chance to bring him out of the night. Harry would keep trying anyway. After all, Severus was marked and he had turned from the dark.

Firming his resolve, he tucked Severus closer and smoothed his hair. “I’m sorry, love. We both tried to spare him, but it’s not over yet. Maybe there’s a way to remove it, somehow.”

[I do not think so.]

“Well, we might find an answer in Slytherin’s journals. After all, Riddle must have found the spell to create it in them.”

[I think it more likely he modified one in existence or created it himself, in which case, we will never find the answer.]

“Unless we make a counter of our own.”
Severus nodded and held Harry tighter. *[That is a feasible idea. And one we should look into, but for the moment, I simply need you to hold me through this, my love.]*

“Okay. I’m here, Sev.” Harry kissed Severus’ hair and rubbed soothing hands down his back. “Tell me what’s hurting you. I’m listening.”

Severus sighed and clutched at Harry’s shirt. *[Yes. I… well, when the Dark Lord ordered us to help Draco subjugate you—I could not bear it. I could not! I had to—I resisted. Indeed, I would have done even if I still hated you. I claimed that such a pureblood line should not sully itself with the blood of a fool and a Potter—forgive me, beloved. You know I do not believe that any longer.]*

“It’s okay, Sev. I know you have to say terrible things about me to keep your skin on. I’d much rather you come home to me in one piece.”

Severus kissed Harry’s chest and the front of his neck up to his jawline, drawing a breathless murmur of pleasure from the young man.

“Oh, Sev….”

Severus nuzzled his neck. “You are so forgiving,” he whispered against Harry’s skin. “I do not deserve your love.”

“You do, and you have it regardless.” Harry tipped Severus’ head up and kissed tears away. “Ssh. It’s all right, love. What happened after you resisted? I’m assuming that’s when the torture started?”

Severus nodded. *[He used several Cruciatu curses to… teach me a lesson, and even the cloak and pendant combined cannot block all of the pain. It helped, however, and I suppose Lucius felt my punishment inadequate.]* He took a deep, shuddering breath, gave a weak cough, and clung to Harry’s chest.

*[S-so, he took the opportunity to remind the Dark Lord that Draco had been the one to reveal your sexuality when I should have learned of it first.]* He gave a broken, bitter laugh. *[He suggested I chose to hide it so that I might keep you for myself. A pet boy to use as my personal toy. And… and the Dark Lord… his wrath was terrible.]*

Tears dripped down Harry’s collar. *[Lucius has reclaimed his former place, and I have been demoted to the position I carried before, but I care nothing for status. I only…]* He looked up, his expression broken and his face wet with tears. “Why, Harry? Why is he so determined to shatter me beyond repair? Why is he so dead-set on destroying me?”

Harry brushed Severus’ tears away and opened his mouth to soothe him, but Severus went on in his thoughts, his mental voice tremulous and heavy with terrible grief.

*[Twenty-six years—he has been targeting me for over a bloody quarter of a century, and after all this time, his cruelty still cuts as deep as it did then. Why can he not simply leave me be and let me move on with my life?]*

Harry struggled to keep the sick horror creeping down his spine from his face and away from the bond. Twenty-six years. Dear gods. Severus had been twelve—a first year—when Malfoy had begun abusing him, and the twisted fucker had never stopped.

Mother of Merlin, no wonder Severus had so much trouble with love. Malfoy had warped it for him.

Harry suppressed a growl and his burning need to know more. Severus couldn’t bear it at the moment and Harry already had enough of an idea to form a rough picture anyway.
Gods, the world would be a better place without Lucius-fucking-Malfoy fouling it up. One day, Harry would make sure Malfoy paid for his crimes. Maybe a custom-made spell would put the bastard in his place for good. He had a few ideas already. The image of Lucius slamming his filthy cock down Severus’ throat flashed through his mind and fury sparked in his chest. Uncounterable castration would make for a great starting point.

Severus tensed and trembled in his arms. “Harry? H-how have I angered you?”

Harry shook himself out of his fantasies of revenge and cradled Severus in his arms. “Oh, love. Of course you haven’t. I was angry at Malfoy, not you. I swear, the bastard is worse than Riddle.”

Severus gave a bitter laugh and buried his head in Harry’s chest. “True enough. At least with the Dark Lord, what one sees is what one gets. But Malfoy hides his cruelty under a mask of beauty and status. By the time one realises he is fetid and evil to the core, it is too late.”

Harry had figured out quickly enough that the man was a piece of shite, but he kept that thought to himself. It would serve no purpose but to hurt Severus.

“I’m sorry, love. I’m sorry he hurt you so badly. I wish I could love it away.”

Severus sighed and trailed kisses down Harry’s throat. “You do. A little more every day. Keep loving me, Harry, even when I am weak and broken. I do not think I will ever recover without your love.”

Harry tipped Severus’ chin up gently and kissed him, soft and slow. “I promise.” He leaned back and stroked Severus’ hair from his face. “How does that bath sound now, love?”

Severus smiled wanly. “It sounds lovely. You will stay with me?”

“Yes, of course.” Harry cast Featherlight and stabilising charms on his husband and lifted him into his arms. “It’s going to be all right, Sev. We’ll get through this. You’ll see.”

Severus laid his head against Harry’s shoulder and closed his eyes. “I believe you.”

Harry blinked back tears at his words. Gods, such a small statement, and yet, to a man like Severus, it meant so much.

“Yeah,” he breathed, and carried Severus to the loo. “I do too.”

A wave of love and trust through Severus’ side of the bond made Harry glow.
So, since I had to split this (incredibly massive) chapter in half, the angst will return the next chapter, not this one. No warnings for this chapter, other than the fact that Seamus is still a total jerk. I had to break up one other chapter, but the rest are set, unless I decide to add one more scene (I've been debating on it, but I think the story works well enough without it). The next chapter is going up tonight too, and the one after if I can manage it. Just... be warned. The angst is strong with the next three chapters or so. XD

Chapter 46

Plans in Action

30 NOVEMBER

Harry had no choice but to spend a large part of his day around the castle, as much as he would have rather stayed with Severus and nursed him back to health. To be absent at the same time too often would draw notice, attention Severus couldn’t afford. Gods, Severus had already had so many close calls.

Besides, Severus was miserable enough without adding to his pain, not merely from his injuries but the fact that Malfoy had been the one to cause them. Riddle hadn’t wanted Severus to die—just to suffer, the sadistic fucker. Malfoy, however, had cast Dolohov’s curse as soon as the shields on Severus’ cloak and pendant weakened. Harry hoped the uppity little shite had earned himself several rounds of *Cruciatus* for it too.

He really needed to work on that custom spell for Malfoy. Castration plus the inability to access his magic sounded like a fair punishment for all the cruelty Lucius Malfoy had shown Harry’s mate. Not to mention, without his manhood and his magic, Malfoy was bound to lose status among the Wizengamot. If they showed him for the abusive monster he really was at the same time, they might have a chance of ensuring the prick actually got what he really deserved: a life sentence in Azkaban.

And that might do more good than simple revenge.

As Harry made his way into the Great Hall for lunch, he glanced to the Slytherin table and sighed at what he saw. Since Draco had broken up with Parkinson, he had sat with his boyfriend. But this time, he sat alone, head bowed and shoulders hunched with pain, and Nott had taken up with a sixth year Slytherin girl Harry didn’t know. By the way Nott had plastered himself to her side, it appeared he hadn’t taken the breakup nearly as hard as Draco. A quick scan of their emotions confirmed it: Nott couldn’t care less and Draco was devastated, doubly so in learning that the man he had given his heart to didn’t care a whit about it.

So it seemed Draco had done as his father ‘asked.’ Gods, Harry wished the boy would just leave, give up on his psychopath of a father and let himself be saved.
And yet, Harry knew how hard it was to let go of one’s preconceived notions about someone they loved dearly, in spite of all the signs. Hadn’t he seen enough of them in his godfather? Yet he had, until the day he saw Severus’ memories, chosen to ignore the evidence staring him in the face.

Under his breath, Harry muttered, “Sirius, you’re an utter arsehole,” just in case his spirit was listening.

He vowed he would never follow the same path and made his way to the Slytherin table, head held high. The snakes had grown accustomed to seeing Harry approach their domain over his year-long friendship with Blaise, Daphne, and Millicent, but this time, he only waved at his friends and passed them to stand beside Draco.

“Hey,” Harry said in a gentle voice, “might I sit with you?”

Draco whipped his head around, eyes sharp with disbelief, but the pink around their rims softened the impact. “What? What are you on about? We’re enemies!”

“Actually, I haven’t been yours for some time. I had thought you’d noticed.”

Malfoy sniffled. “I… w-why are you asking?”

Harry let his eyes drift to Nott, who was watching them with a cold smirk, and back to Draco. “It just looks like you could use a friend right now.”

Draco shuddered and dropped his gaze. “I… I suppose I do. But don’t sit here. If you do, you’ll drag the entire bloody pride in, and the other Slytherins—they’ll….”

Riot, most likely. Or fight them. No, Harry could do without that. “Right. Well, then do you want to sit with me? At the lions’ table?”

“Are you mad? They’ll gut me!”

“Well, you’d be safe with my group, but if you’d rather, we could just sit with Luna at the Ravenclaw table instead. The eagles won’t mind.”

The blonde waved them over, no doubt having received direction from her spirits, and Draco sighed. “A-all right. I guess… I really don’t want to be alone right now.”

“Yeah. I can see that.” Not to mention feel it, but Draco didn’t need to know that. Not until Harry could trust him not to reveal his secrets. He had a hunch it would happen, one day.

Visibly steeling himself, Draco stood and followed Harry to the Ravenclaw table. Harry sat across Luna and guided Draco to sit beside him.

“Hello, Harry, Draco,” said Luna with a dreamy smile. “I was wondering when the two of you would start putting the Pufferspines away for good.”

Draco gave her a wary look, but Harry just chuckled softly. “Where’s Neville when you need him?” Of course, Harry knew—Neville was watching over Severus for him. “We don’t know that one, Lu, and Malfoy isn’t used to your spirits yet.”

Draco frowned. “Spirits?”

“Oh, yes. I hear ever so many most days,” said Luna with a wry laugh. “And speaking of, Harry, your godfather did not like your little comment earlier. He got rather shouty with me.”
Harry sighed. “You prove me right more and more with every moment, Sirius.”

Luna winced and rubbed her ears. “You’re mad if you think I’m repeating that, Sirius Black.”

Draco made a strangled sound of shock. “The two of you are completely barmy!”

Luna chuckled. “Perhaps a bit.”

Hermione sat beside Luna and gave her a wry look. “Are we terrorizing Malfoy today, Luna?”

Luna tittered. “Not intentionally! But Mister Black wanted to box Harry’s ears again.”

“That man!” Hermione shook her head. “Utter berk.”

“Um….” Malfoy gave her a confused look. “W-what are you doing here, Granger? And why, in the name of all that’s holy, are we all treating the fact that a dead man is talking to Lovegood as if it’s a normal thing?”

“Oh, didn’t you know?” Luna chuckled to herself. “Do forgive me. Sometimes I get a bit too caught up in the other voices and forget about this realm. I’m a spiritual medium, Draco. The dead—and other spirit forms—talk to me. All the time, actually. It gets rather annoying when I am trying to focus.” She gave Harry her dreamy smile again. “And, to answer your earlier question before I forget, Harry, the Pufferspines make people proud and angry. They cause fights, more often than not, and laugh about it when they are over.”

“Can’t say I like those spirits too much then,” said Harry with a scowl. “Bet Sirius loves them.”

Luna grimaced and rubbed both ears this time. “Harry, might we leave off antagonising your godfather before he bursts my eardrums?”

Harry winced. “Sorry, Lu. I’ll give it a rest.”

At this juncture, Dean joined them too. “Why are we sitting in Ravenclaw today? And why is Malfoy with us?”

“Because I asked him to sit with me, and we’re here because it’s less dangerous than either Malfoy’s table or ours.”

Dean shrugged and sat on Harry’s other side. “Fair enough.” He leaned forwards and gave Malfoy a hesitant smile. “Um, I know there’s some bad blood between us all, but if Harry thinks you’re all right, then you’re welcome to sit with us whenever you want.”

Draco froze, eyes wide with shock and confusion. “W-why? Why would you… I mean…. ” A sharp glare twisted his features. “I don’t get it. What’s the trick? There has to be a trick!”

“Gryffindors don’t work like that. Usually. And neither does Luna.” Harry rubbed a gentle hand across Draco’s shoulder blades and smiled when he relaxed. “It’s all right. They’re not fighting you because they trust me.”

Hermione fixed Draco with a sharp glare. “Though I’ll stand for none of that blood purity nonsense, you hear me? Keep that rubbish to yourself.”

Draco’s cheeks pinked even as he stuck his nose in the air. “My opinions are my own, Granger. I’ll keep them as I see fit.”

And yet, his thoughts revealed that he had long since been questioning his father’s blood purist
views. All of the purebloods Draco knew except Blaise, the Greengrass girls, Neville, and a handful of others were monsters, and all of the supposed ‘mudbloods’ he knew were not only decent people, but had just as much power—if not more—than their pureblood counterparts. The contradictions had grown too obvious to ignore.

Harry rubbed Draco’s shoulders once more. “There’s no need to be defensive.” He shot Hermione a reproachful look. “I wouldn’t have brought him here if I believed he’d attack you or Dean.”

She sniffed. “Well, I do hope you’re right. I haven’t forgotten his prejudice, though.”

“Hmm. No, I suppose it is rather difficult to forget.” He squeezed Draco’s shoulder and let his hand drop. “But I, for one, forgive you, Malfoy. So long as you don’t hurt my friends again.”

“So will I,” said Dean with a tentative smile. “Um, but why did you come with Harry today? I didn’t think you got on.”

Draco lowered his head. “I… it’s… I—what does it matter? I just didn’t want to sit alone. Is that so terrible?”

As one, the rest of the group looked to Nott and flinched.

“Oh,” said Hermione, compassion washing away her distrust. “In that case… what did you think of Professor Stonewall’s lecture this morning? The idea of combining elemental magic into wards is fascinating, isn’t it? I imagine it would certainly keep intruders well away!”

“And alert every Muggle for miles,” said Draco with a grimace. “Well, if you’re near a Muggle area, that is.”

Harry nodded. “He’s right. It makes them a bit too impractical for everyday use, but if one also added a stealth spell into the magical weave….”

Before long, Harry and Hermione had drawn Draco deep enough into the discussion that the pain and betrayal in his emotional channel faded, if only for a moment. Harry gave Hermione a secret smile. She really had changed. It gave him hope that the lost Slytherin at his side might one day change, too.

Until then, Harry would be there for him, insofar as Draco would accept his friendship.

A week later, Harry made his way to the Great Hall with relief and worry playing havoc with his emotions. Severus’ curse had taken time and effort to heal, but once he could breathe and speak without effort and handle himself around their quarters, he had returned to teaching. Knowing Severus had pulled through eased Harry’s mind, but he feared for the man going back into teaching so soon after being attacked within an inch of his life and before he was fully recovered. Worse, Harry couldn’t attend Severus’ classes this time without risking the man’s life all over again. To that end, Neville, Hermione, Dean, and Luna switched off guarding the man while he worked.

By the end of his final class, Harry’s concentration had slipped so far he wondered if he might have just skived off for all the good attending Transfiguration had done that day. Minerva pulled him aside after class and handed him a stack of notes.
“I know your lack of attention was not due to ill-discipline today, Mister Potter. Here are the class notes. Go check on him, and revise those once you have eased your mind.”

Harry sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “T-thanks, ma’am. I’m sorry. If anything had gone wrong, the others would have shot me a Patronus in an instant. I know it. I… I just… I can’t help worrying.”

McGonagall gave him a searching look. “He truly means much to you, doesn’t he?”

“Er… y-yes, ma’am.” Harry wished he could tell the woman Severus was his everything, but he wasn’t sure how she would react. Maybe he could talk to Severus about it soon.

“Go on, then.”

Harry gave her a wan smile and dashed out of the classroom. At the first empty alcove, he cast his stealth spells and dashed off again, tearing towards Severus’ classroom office at top speed. The man had just entered himself when Harry came careening in, breathing hard and face flushed with the exertion. He counted it a victory that his five-floor sprint hadn’t winded him so badly as to rob him of speech. His training had done more good than teaching him to fight, it seemed.

The moment the door shut behind him, Harry called, “Sev? Are you okay?”

Severus jumped and almost dropped a stack of parchment rolls. He levitated them to his desk and cancelled Harry’s spells—in his haste, the young man had forgotten them.

“Harry… Merlin, you were truly afraid, weren’t you?”

Harry dashed into Severus’ arms and pressed his cheek against his chest, relieving the sharpest edge of his fears with the sound of Severus’ heartbeat. “Been terrified all day.” He slipped his hands up into Severus’ hair and sighed as the man’s scent and warmth drove away his worries.

“No one attempted anything. Though Draco.” Severus shivered and dropped his head atop his husband’s. “I suspect Lucius told him to attack me, with or without the Dark Lord’s approval. Draco was reading as afraid and defiant at once, and Parkinson… she seemed angry at the end of class. I do not know for certain, but I suspect she knew of the plan and will report to Lucius tonight that Draco did not follow orders.”

Harry grimaced. “Which means he’ll be out of the castle tomorrow.”

“Most likely.”

“Damn. Do you think I should have Poppy on standby?”

“I think it could not hurt to warn her of our suspicions.”

Harry nodded and stepped back. “I’ll tell her after dinner then. For now, let’s go ahead and get my training in, love—at least the parts where you needn’t move around too much. It’s the only time I have today to work with you.” He looked to the essays on Severus’ desk and frowned. “Unless you need this time for grading?”

“I will mark those after dinner, when it is quieter. Come. We shall retire to our quarters, though I believe we shall need to put your combat training aside for a few days yet. As well, now that our bond is healing, we must begin work on learning to use it to increase and combine our powers.”

Harry grinned. “I’m looking forward to that. Do you know what makes the bond grow—and our
Severus gave a low chuckle. “Yes, yes. I promise to make love to you as soon as I am better able to handle the exertion—I do not think I am there yet. However, you also must learn how to manipulate your own magic if you are to utilise mine, and that is what I would like us to work on tonight.”

“Fair enough. I still want to fly. If this gives me the control I need, I’m game.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “You are not doing this to fly.”

“No, but it helps to keep me grounded if I focus on a positive goal.”

“Ah. In that case, We shall train to fly and begin healing our bond tonight.”

Harry shivered. “Do you mean what I think you do?”

“I am not well enough for intercourse, but….” Severus dropped his voice into the timbre that curled Harry’s toes in his boots. “There are many, many other ways I am capable of bringing you pleasure.”

Harry’s breath hitched and a sharp wave of desire surged through both sides of the bond. “Don’t suppose we could just skip control training and go straight to the bond healing?”

Severus chuckled, still in that dark, molten tone. “Mm, for that, I believe I will need to teach you the value of patience all over again.”

Harry couldn’t stifle a soft moan. He wrapped his arms around Severus’ neck and kissed him with slow ardour. “Gods, do you have any idea how sexy you are?”

Severus gave him a shy smile. “Honestly, no. But I am relieved you find me so.” He kissed Harry’s forehead and eased the fire in his blood with gentle caresses. “If it were not so crucial that you learn to control your magic, my love—and so risky at this time of day—I would take you to bed this instant. But we must always remain conscious of the danger. If someone comes while we are training, I will be able to mop myself up and answer the door easily enough, but if we are… involved, it will be difficult.”

The reminder of the danger to Severus’ life cooled Harry’s ardour like a blast of cold water. “Shite, Sev. I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Ssh. I had trouble calming myself too. It’s quite all right. And it is my job to think of these details, so you may rely on me.”

Harry sighed and laid his head against Severus’ shoulder, love and warmth washing away his sudden fear. “Yeah. That sounds brilliant.”

Severus held him close until the last vestiges of desire calmed. “Now, are you able to train with me, beloved?”

Harry nodded, a soft smile on his face. “I love it when you call me that. And yes, I’m ready.” He slipped his hand into Severus’ and followed his husband into the training room.”

At dinner that night, Harry made his way to the Great Hall and back to Draco’s side. Again, they sat
with Luna so the boy wouldn’t be so alone, but Harry’s friends weren’t the only Gryffindors to follow this time. Seamus, Lavender, and Ron approached a moment after Harry had sat down, outrage clear in their eyes. Beside Harry, Draco stiffened, hand vibrating around his wand.

“Easy,” Harry whispered to the young man. “I won’t let them hurt you.”

Draco glared. “They’re your friends, Potter. Your housemates. I…I’m….”

“Actually, you’re more my friend these days than they are.”

Draco’s breath hitched. “I… w-what?”

“Lavender’s a bint, Finnigan murdered my familiar, and Ron is an arse these days. So yes, you’re more of a friend to me than they are.”

“Finnigan murdered your owl?”

“No, Isuri. My pit viper.” Harry closed his eyes in grief for his lost friend.

“You had a viper familiar?”

“Yes.”

Harry thought of revealing his current pet but decided against it in the interest of time—and Seamus was almost on top of them anyway. Damned if he would give the murderous bastard an opportunity to hurt another of his familiars. He tapped his shoulder twice, a signal for Jabardi to be on guard. A twitch of a tail against his neck let Harry know his glamoured familiar understood the warning.

“Anyway, just relax, Malfoy. They can’t break out into a hex war in the middle of the Great Hall, and they have no say dictating who I can and cannot talk to anyway.” He said the last part loud enough for the Gryffindors to hear and turned to glare at the trio.

Seamus cried, “What are you doing, Potter? Have you lost the plot?”

Harry gave the bastard a danger-laced smile. “No, the last time I checked, we’re somewhere near Edinburgh. And I really think you’ve no room to talk, considering you seem to think I’ll answer your questions after you bloody murdered my familiar, you utter monster. Or are you trying to enrage me to the point of revenge?”

Seamus paled and took a step back. Hermione nodded and crossed her arms over her chest.

Harry gave him a look of supreme disdain and scowled at Ron. “Was there a reason the three of you came to interrogate me and my friends, or are you just looking to start more rumours? I mean, it has been pretty quiet lately, but I would think talking to your little beetle friend would be more effective.”

Seamus paled and took a step back. Hermione nodded and crossed her arms over her chest.

Harry gave him a look of supreme disdain and scowled at Ron. “Was there a reason the three of you came to interrogate me and my friends, or are you just looking to start more rumours? I mean, it has been pretty quiet lately, but I would think talking to your little beetle friend would be more effective.”

Draco’s cheeks pinked and he turned away. Harry patted his shoulder to soothe him.

“Then again,” Harry continued once Malfoy had calmed, “maybe your angle about Potter the Rotter and his defection from the lions is getting rather old, Finnigan. Especially since you’re the ones who caused it in the first place. I take it The Prophet is looking for a new spin?”

Seamus clenched his fists and snarled. “Just because I’m the only one who sees you for what you are —”

Ron slapped a hand over Seamus’ mouth. “Enough. I agreed to come over here to talk to them and find out what’s going on. I didn’t agree to be your backup while you attack Harry for no good reason
again, you utter prick.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Hmm. So you have learned something then.”

Ron’s ears turned pink. “Mate, I… I never meant…” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. Guess so. But what the hell is going on, Harry? Greengrass is one thing—she’s been light-sidedsince first year—but why are you suddenly talking to Malfoy?”

“Honestly, Ron, what makes you think you have the right to ask? I choose my friends of my own will, and you’re really not in the position to question that any longer.”

Ron dropped his head, pink tingeing his forehead and cheeks.

“But out of respect for the friendship we used to have, I’ll tell you.”

Draco gasped and tensed beside him. Harry calmed him with a discreet brush of his wrist under the table.

“Malfoy’s been all right to me for a while. He looked lonely this morning so I asked him if he wanted to sit with us. That’s all there is to it. Really.”

“All right?” Lavender scowled. “He’s the one who outed you!”

“Yeah, and he did it because Ginny’s constant harassment was making him sick. Or did you forget that he also outed himself at the same time?”

Seamus scowled. “That’s what this is, isn’t it? You’re just trying to get in his pants, you bloody pouf!”

Draco gave Harry a wry look. “I actually have no idea which of us he’s talking to.”

Harry snorted in spite of himself. “Me, probably. He’s thought I’m a Dark Lord in training since fifth year.” He closed his eyes to hide his lingering pain. “I suppose knowing I’m gay just gave him one more reason to hate me.”

“Because he’s a bloody idiot as well as being an utter prick,” said Dean. Harry winced and opened his eyes to find Dean standing, facing his former best friend down with a cold glare. “Get lost, Finnigan. You’ve no right to harass us. Malfoy is welcome here.” The tone of his statement made it clear Seamus was not.

“So that’s how it’s going to be,” Seamus snarled. “Choosing the snakes over me, huh? They really have poisoned you. They—”

“Sod off!” Dean’s ice-blue and purple-streaked magic crackled on his skin, turning his eyes an eerie shade of indigo. “You’re the traitor here! You murdered Harry’s familiar and almost drove him off the tower, and you think you have the right to tell us what’s right from wrong? You’re sick! And I…” Tears formed on his lashes and his magic receded. “I’m ashamed to have ever called you a friend. Just go. Get away from me.”

Seamus opened his mouth to snarl back, but Ron dragged him away. “No. Dean’s… got a point.”

“Shut it!” Seamus ripped his arm away and shouted them down. “The lot of you have gone mad! Well, don’t blame me when Potter hands you over to You-Know-Who!”

McGonagall appeared behind Harry, lips pursed and eyes sharp with fury. “Finnigan, ten points from
Gryffindor, and I would like to see you in my office directly after dinner.”

Seamus scowled. “Yes, ma’am.” He turned on his heel and stalked away. Ron and Lavender followed, the former bowed in shame and the latter puffed up with irritation.

McGonagall sighed and gave Harry and his friends a commiserating look. “Are the rest of you well?”

Dean flopped back into his seat, ashen and shaking. “N-not really, but we’ll get there, ma’am.”

McGonagall patted Dean’s shoulder. “My office is always open if you need a friendly ear, Mister Thomas. That offer is good for the rest of you as well.”

Draco ducked his head and looked away. Harry sensed disbelief and confusion in his emotions but didn’t say anything. He wasn’t positive McGonagall had meant her offer for Draco either.

Dean gave her a wan smile. “W-we’ll be all right, ma’am. Thank you.”

She nodded and returned to the teachers’ dais.

As soon as she had gone, Harry brought his friend into a hug. “Dean, gods. I’m so—”

“Don’t apologise again, you wanker,” Dean said with a snort. “It’s not your fault.”

Harry pulled back with a weak chuckle. “S-sorry.”

“And now you’re apologising for apologising,” said Malfoy with a wry look. “You really do have some kind of martyr complex, don’t you?”

Harry laughed in spite of himself. “Maybe.” He laid a hand on Draco’s arm. “Are you okay?”

“I… I can’t fathom why you even care, but…. Malfoy looked towards the Gryffindor table and back to his plate. “I don’t understand, Potter. Why did you defend me? They’re right, you know. I’m not—you’d be better off without me.”

Harry shrugged. “I can tell the right sort for myself, remember?”

Draco’s mouth fell open, then he gave a soft laugh. “All right, all right. But don’t expect me to shake on it this time, Potter! The first time didn’t go so well, as I recall.”

Harry chuckled and went back to his meal.
9 DECEMBER

Severus paced his hearth, waiting for Harry to return. Blaise’s Patronus, sent over two hours before, had called Harry away from a cosy night reading by the fire with his husband and back into another battle for Draco’s life. Blaise hadn’t the control yet to have his Patronus carry detailed messages, but the fear in his voice for the few words he had managed—“Harry, Draco’s back. Hurt badly. Hurry!”—had left Severus cold with dread.

Harry had assured him he would give Severus a rundown of the situation telepathically if he had the ability to, but Severus hadn’t heard a word since Harry left. And that frightened him more. Dear gods, what had Lucius done to Draco? Harry’s side of the bond had been ringing with alarm since he left—it had to be bad. A sharp spike of worry and fear bled through the bond that instant and set Severus on edge. Had Draco taken a turn for the worse?

Harry’s mental voice echoed in Severus’ mind, thank Merlin. [Sev, I’m done. I’ll be there in a mo. Put on your public face and be in your office for me, love.]

Severus desperately tried to communicate his fear for the boy through the bond.

[He’s… mostly okay. He left before he was fully healed, but he’ll pull through.]

Disappointment and deep worry filtered into Severus’ chest—Harry’s emotions. What had happened? Well, he would find out in a moment. He drained his fear and concern and stalked into his office, scowling as if he couldn’t wait to be rid of a nuisance. In reality, his heart was pounding with the need to hold his husband and soothe his fears.

Still, they had to get the official part out of the way first, much as it annoyed him.

Harry followed public protocol as well, and once the man had seated himself, launched into his report.

“Thank you for seeing me so late, Professor Snape.” He took a deep, calming breath. “Right. So, I received a Patronus from Blaise Zabini two hours ago warning me that Draco Malfoy had returned from home seriously injured. I—”
“Time, Potter,” Severus snapped, sending his husband waves of warmth and love at the same time. “I do realise it is difficult to recall important details with your limited brain capacity, but these reports must have an accurate time and date to be official.”

Harry winced. “R-right. Sorry, sir. I’m a bit shaken up.”

“Do I look like I care, Potter?” Gods, he did. He wanted to hug Harry and help him through this. Severus closed his eyes, unable to meet his husband’s gaze while his role forced him to be cruel. “Just tell me the time and date you received the Patronus and get on with it.”

“Y-yes, sir.” Harry dropped his head and sniffled, and Severus couldn’t hold back a flinch. Gods, he hated this façade.

“I received Zabini’s Patronus at approximately fifteen minutes past nine PM, on the ninth of December, 1998, and, according to our established treatment plan for Draco’s safety, proceeded immediately to our usual meeting place in the empty third-floor Transfiguration classroom, alone and hidden under charms.”

Harry closed his eyes and gripped the arms of his chair. “W-when I arrived, Draco was lying on a conjured mattress on his left side. The right side of his torso, arms, and legs bore deep contusions and numerous lacerations. Blood had matted in his hair, and he had aspirated blood as well. I performed the standard diagnostic and discovered Malfoy had three broken ribs along his left side and internal bleeding, where the broken bones had torn his intercostal fascia and several blood vessels.”

Severus gasped. “Dear gods.”

“Yes, it was quite severe. I… at that point, I advised Draco that I would need to call in Madam Pomfrey, but he refused. He threatened to leave untreated if I did, which left me little choice but to attempt to treat it myself.” Harry ducked his head and took a shaky breath. “It was… terrifying, but I believe I sealed the bleed and repaired his injured fascia and blood vessels properly. His bones set well and should be healed within two days. He did not, however, allow me to treat the bruising fully before he left, against my advice.”

“And is it your opinion that Lucius Malfoy was the one to administer these injuries as well, Mister Potter?”

“It is, but Draco hasn’t come clean either way yet.”

“There is little to be done, then.” Severus waved his hand. “Leave me and report the situation to Madam Pomfrey. I will attend to the paperwork.”


“Oh, for Merlin’s sake. Just get out of my sight.”

Harry sighed and left the office. He waited thirty seconds to give Severus time to end the memory, then returned and dashed straight into his husband’s open arms.

“Forgive me, beloved,” Severus whispered into Harry’s hair. “I do try not to hurt you, but it is difficult when I must pretend to be such a bastard.”

“I know.” Harry buried his face in Severus’ chest. “C-can we lie down? I’m exhausted and scared and I need you to hold me. That was so… I was so afraid I’d kill him.”

“Ssh. It is over now, love. He is well. Come, I will heal you.”
“T-thanks, Sev.”

“It is nothing. Come.” Severus guided Harry towards the door to his quarters, but froze at a knock at his office door. “Go on through, Harry. I will handle it.”

Harry nodded and dashed into their quarters. Severus waited until the door shut and his footsteps faded before he called to his guest. “Enter.”

Blaise Zabini stepped into the office. “Sir? Do you have a moment?”

Severus frowned. “It is well after curfew, Mister Zabini.”

“Yes, but this is an emergency and I’m aware Harry might have left this office two minutes ago, if that.”

Severus froze. “What makes you believe Potter was here at all?”

“He had to report Draco’s injuries.” Blaise stared him down. “And, the two of you are closer than you would like the general populace to know.”

Severus gave the boy a piercing look. “Indeed?”

“Harry told me that you’re friends, and I do have eyes, sir. Regardless, I’m here to tell you two things. The first is that Draco is back in the dorms. He’s sleeping but in a lot of pain. Do you have any potions I might give him to ease his suffering until he heals properly?”

Severus Summoned a vat of bruise paste, three phials of general Healing Draught, level three, two phials of level two pain reliever, and a phial of Dreamless Sleep. “Apply the paste liberally over his bruises twice a day until they fade. Give him half a phial of Healing Draught every morning, and one spoonful of Dreamless Sleep each night if his sleep is troubled. He may take two spoons of the pain potion as he needs it every six hours. Tell him to be careful with it, as it can become addictive if overdone. If you need further assistance, ask Mister Potter.”

Blaise nodded. “Will do. Thank you.” He offered his hand for Severus to shake—his left, as his right was full of potions. Severus raised an eyebrow, but let the boy shake his hand.

A sly smile crossed Blaise’s face. He pocketed his potions and made for the door.

“Wait a moment, Mister Zabini,” Severus said, suspicion running high. “What was the other reason you came tonight?”

“Oh.” Blaise laid his hand on the doorknob and grinned. “Just a friendly piece of advice. Do tell Harry to be careful of that bonding ring. I won’t mention it, but there are some who might, if he happens to reveal his status to the wrong person.”

Severus sank into his seat with a gasp. “You know.”

“Yes. Congratulations, sir. And you might want to be careful of your own ring as well.”

Severus looked to his hand and flinched. “Damn. That is why you—Zabini, if you reveal that information….?”

“I know. It’s all right, sir. I’d never put your life or Harry’s at risk. Just be more careful, please? Both of you.”

Severus bowed in thanks and acknowledgment—his voice wouldn’t form the words.
“Right. Goodnight, sir. And let Harry know not to worry; I’ll take care of Draco tonight.”

Severus nodded and watched, stunned and shaking, as Blaise left and shut the door behind him. Dear gods. He hadn’t even considered a charm against feeling Harry’s bonding ring. Everything had been so mad, the possibility of discovery through touch had completely slipped his mind.

Well, that wouldn’t do. He stood and made his way into the bedroom on shaky legs. Harry was waiting for him, sitting on the edge of the bed in his red silk pyjama bottoms, his face ashen and eyes wide with worry.

“Oh, Sev! I felt your fear just now. Who was it? A Death Eater? Are you in danger? Did something happen to Draco? What’s going on?”

Severus sat beside his husband and hugged Harry tight. “Ssh. It was only Blaise. He came to ask for potions for Draco… and to warn you to be careful about revealing your bonding ring.”

Harry went rigid. “He knows?”

“He does. You must have touched his hand with your left recently. He felt it there and discovered the identity of your mate through deduction, I believe. And I, like a bloody fool, confirmed his suspicions when I allowed him to shake my hand.”

Harry grabbed Severus’ hands. “H-he won’t… it’s okay? He’s not going to…?”

“He congratulated us and swore not to reveal our bond.”

Tears flooded Harry’s eyes. “Oh gods. S-Sev, I… I’m so sorry! All this time, I might have gotten you killed because I’m too stupid to pay attention to where I stick my hands! Fuck! I’m s-so sorry!”

Severus tugged Harry into his lap and held him close. “Ssh. Peace, beloved. It is as much my fault. I should have charmed our rings against touch as well as sight.” He whispered a spell over both of their left hands, kissing Harry’s ring afterwards. “There. Now only those who know of their existence already can feel them. It will be all right, love.”

“B-but what if I’ve given us away to someone else? Someone we can’t trust?”

“If you had done, we would have known by now. It’s all right, Harry. We are safe now.”

Harry sniffled and curled into Severus’ side. “I… I was so afraid.”

“I know. It’s all right. No one will feel them now.”

“Y-you’re sure?”

“Yes, beloved.” Severus removed his robes, changed into a pair of black sleep trousers, and lay beside his husband once more. “Now, tell me what had you so troubled earlier?”

Harry sighed and buried his face in Severus’ chest. “Draco. I’ve never been so terrified in my life as I was when I patched him up—excepting only that time you were called last week and I could feel your pain. I was so afraid I would botch it up, and gods, I’m still afraid for him.”

“Blaise is taking care of him, love. I gave him several potions to treat Draco’s remaining injuries.”

Harry kissed Severus lightly. “Thank you, but that’s not what I meant. Bruises will heal, but do you know how hard it is to break a rib so it tears the intercostal fascia? The muscles around the ribcage are strong—they’re designed to keep the ribs from tearing apart if they break so the organs underneath.
them aren’t damaged in an accident. The kind of force required to break a rib so hard, it tears the muscles designed to keep them in place… it’s horrifying.

“And earlier, when his arm was dislocated, that fucker Lucius had torn every tendon and ligament in Draco’s shoulder. I basically had to reattach his arm—only the skin was intact. It… it was horrific. It’s still horrific. I begged him to leave the Death Eaters and come away from his father, but… but it only scared him. He got angry and ran off, and I… Merlin help him, I just don’t know what to do.”

Harry curled next to his husband and held Severus’ waist close, his expression troubled. “I’m so scared for him, Sev. The abuse keeps getting worse and… and….” He paused, confusion and worry marking his features. “Severus? What is it, love?”

Severus winced. Harry must have felt Severus’ intense jealousy and shame. Merlin forgive him, he was a fool to allow his fears to run away with him—Harry had given him a vow of fidelity, for Circe’s sake—but he couldn’t silence the creeping terror in his veins. Draco was a beautiful man, after all, and not damaged, not like Severus was at any rate. Maybe he could love Harry. Maybe he could offer Harry all the things Severus couldn’t.

Harry’s expression softened and gentle understanding filled his eyes. “Oh, Sev.” He cupped his hands around his husband’s jaw and leaned close, warm breath brushing the part of Severus’ lips. “My love, don’t be afraid.”

“I am sorry.”

He kissed Severus with soft, tender love, chasing his fears away. “It’s okay. You’re just scared, but you don’t have to be. You’re the only one I want. The only one I have ever, or will ever touch like this. Malfoy can’t hold a candle to you.”

Severus wrapped his arms around Harry’s waist and held him close. “Forgive me. I know it is foolish, but I cannot seem to help but worry. I cannot bear the thought of losing you.”

“Severus, I feel the same way about you, sweetheart.”

Merlin, Harry had a strange affinity for those odd pet names. Still, Severus didn’t mind. Even if they were rather asinine, he enjoyed hearing them. It reminded him that he was special to Harry, that those endearments, however silly they might be, belonged to him alone.

Severus gave him a hesitant smile. “I am glad.” His smile faded with the return of his insecurities. “It… it is only that I can offer you so little, Harry. I want you to be happy.”

Harry gently guided Severus onto his back and kissed him, soft and slow, soothing his fears with feather-light fingertips against his cheek. “I am happy,” he murmured as he moved back. “Will you… could I show you, love? Could I… um… make love to you? Er, well, I know you’re not ready to bottom, but just… can I kiss you, hold you, touch you—can I show you how happy I am in your arms? Maybe forget about all this for a moment?”

Severus swallowed hard. “You are asking for control.”

“Only if you feel comfortable allowing it. If not, I can let you take the reins, or we could just wait a bit longer. It’s up to you.”

Severus slipped his hands into Harry’s hair. “I miss your body and your touch, but I am terribly afraid to… I haven’t ceded control since….”

Harry blinked hard, his eyes wet. “Since he hurt you. Shattered you. It’s why you have so much
trouble trusting me to treat you well.”

Severus closed his eyes and hoped he had been able to conceal the darkest parts of his secrets, even if Harry could read the surface.

“Severus, it’s all right, love. If you can’t trust me to take control yet, then you can lead me.” Harry’s voice was soft and sad. “I only wanted to feel you. To make love to your body, the same way you made me feel the first time. I wanted to….” He shook his head. “Ah, never mind. As long as you’re happy, I don’t care who’s in control.”

A surge of grief flooded Harry’s side of the bond, Severus wondered if these sharp bursts of pain would ever stop. If he could ever give Harry what he needed.

“Harry….”

Harry shifted off of Severus’ thighs, moving to lie beside him instead, but Severus caught his wrist and brought him back.

“I… t-trust you,” Severus whispered, trembling all over.

Harry winced. “Damn it. Sev, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pressure you into that.”

“You haven’t, beloved. You cannot help what hurts you, and you did not push when I said I was uncomfortable.” Severus stroked Harry’s cheek. “I am afraid, Harry, but how will I ever learn to overcome my fears if I do not try? I do wish to feel your touch. I do want you to feel safe and happy in our bond. And I truly do wish to know what it means to… to give myself over to you.” He kissed Harry lightly. “You have not pressured me. I want this as well, it is only that I am… a little nervous and have past trauma which makes it difficult.”

A rush of affection and warmth replaced Harry’s pain. “Severus, are you sure? You don’t have to do this to make me happy, love.”

“I know. And yes, I am sure. I cannot—I need to top, Harry. But if you wish to… to t-touch me, I would like to feel it.”

Harry brought Severus into a tender kiss, exquisite in its slow, soft passion. “All right, Sev. I swear I won’t hurt you. And if you can’t bear it, just take over or ask me to stop, all right? The fact that you’re trusting me this much is….” His breath hitched and his eyes glimmered. “It’s good,” he murmured, his voice thick. “So good.”

“Yes,” Severus whispered. “I… touch me, beloved.”

Harry gave him a warm smile. “Yeah, all right.”

He leaned down and took Severus into a tender kiss, seeking kiss. Severus opened to him, quivering with alternating fear and the liberating sensation of putting his body in his lover’s hands.

[It’s all right, my Sev,] Harry murmured in Severus’ mind. [You’re safe, love. Let me in. Let me taste you and feel every lovely curve of your body react to me.]

Severus yielded to his husband with a soft murmur of pleasure.

“Harry,” he panted against his husband’s lips.

“Mm, Sev. You’re okay, baby. It’s all right.”
“Yes.” Severus leaned up and kissed Harry even as he trailed a hand down his husband’s back, murmuring incantations against his lips. In half an instant, Harry was naked and arching into his touch, and Severus bare beneath him.

“Oh gods,” Harry panted, leaning back to track his eyes down every inch of Severus’ form. “Merlin, yes. I’ve missed you so much. Missed your beautiful body.”

Severus gasped at the feel of Harry’s hand tracing his side and down his hips. Gentle fingers stroked the ridge under his erection, and a strangled moan escaped him. Dear gods, he was on fire and Harry had hardly touched him. Severus’ hips rocked into Harry’s hands of their own volition and his breath came out in a pant.

“Beautiful,” Harry whispered, and straddled Severus’ hips. “Okay, love?”

Severus rocked up, groaning at the feel of Harry’s hard shaft against his own, and cupped Harry’s face. “I’ve missed you.” He tugged Harry down into a soft kiss and panted against his lips. “Be gentle with me, let me know it’s you, and come back to my face if I am afraid, and I think I shall be well.”

“Come back to your face? You mean instead of….” Harry stroked Severus’ straining erection, wringing a breathless moan from his husband. “Instead of touching your body, moving up to kiss you and talk you down?”

“Yes,” Severus panted. “Yes, that should be… oh, Harry.”

Warm, firm pressure rubbed up and down his shaft, and Severus followed it with his hips, heat building in his core.

“Does it feel good, Sev? Do you feel safe when I touch you like this?”

Severus panted and gripped the sheets. “Yes, my love. So… ghn, so good.”

Harry shivered. “It feels good for me, too.” He gave Severus one more stroke and released him. “I want to take this slower, though. I want to spend my time making love to every inch of your body. I want you to know I don’t just want you, but my feelings, my desire for you runs deeper. I want you to feel loved, not simply satisfied.”

Severus blinked back a wave of strong emotion and traced his hands over Harry’s face. “Yes. I want to feel your love all over me.”

Harry gave a breathless moan and tipped his head back. “Gods damn, Sev. That voice of yours… mm.” He leaned down and kissed his husband’s forehead. “I want to make you feel good.”

“My Harry, you do. So good, but….”

With a soft pant, Severus snaked a hand down Harry’s body, unable to wait any longer. He wrapped his hand around Harry’s erection and stroked, passion engulfing him at the strangled sound of need his mate uttered. Harry rocked with his hand, eyes wide, lips parted and wet.

“Oh gods, Sev’rus.”

“Less talk, Harry.” Severus stroked again, slow and smooth, and Harry moaned as he withdrew his fingers.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, breathless. “Definitely would rather be snogging you.”
Harry leaned down, and Severus tensed as he kissed his throat, tilting his head back and suckling the soft flesh. A gentle hand against his cheek soothed him, and Harry moved back and met Severus’ eyes.

“Ssh. It’s all right, love. You’re allowing me to have the lead, but at a word from you, I’ll stop. You still have power. You’re still in control.”

Harry’s words drained the fear and tension from Severus’ body. He sighed and brought his mate into a gentle kiss.

“Make love to me, my Harry. I trust you.”

Harry’s eyes filled with molten fire. “Good.” He returned to Severus’ throat, tasting him, sucking his skin.

“No marks,” Severus panted. “I have to teach.”

Harry’s laugh tickled his throat and sent tugging sensations deep into his core. “I know, Sev. I won’t mark you. It’s all right.”

He traced his tongue over Severus’ Adam’s apple and sucked the centre, drawing a soft moan from the man. Harry leaned back and looked into Severus’ eyes.

“You’re all right?”

“Mhn, yes, I will tell you if I become afraid. Or, you may simply monitor my emotions through your Empathy.”

“All right, love. I’ll do that.”

Harry closed his eyes and returned his lips to Severus’ neck, making love to his throat and shoulders with gentle passion. He moved slowly, softly, as if he feared to break his husband, and murmured words of love and encouragement every so often. Severus had never felt anything like the powerful emotions and need such tender kisses brought. Harry’s touch left him reeling, helpless to resist, and aching for more of him.

A gentle tongue circled his nipple, and Severus arched up with a moan.

“Mm,” Harry murmured against his sensitive skin. “So good. So gorgeous.”

Severus’ token protest died in his throat as Harry sucked the hardening nub between his teeth and nipped, so gently Severus would not have known except for the sharp spike of arousal that shot to his core. He bucked and grabbed Harry’s head, sinking his fingers into those soft curls as Harry tantalised him with his tongue. Severus groaned as the young man switched sides and calloused fingertips took over where his mouth had left off.

“Harry!”

Harry sucked hard, making Severus arch with desire, and slowly moved his kisses down Severus’ body. Severus arched as wet heat teased his ribs, Harry’s soft tongue tracing the crevices and down through the creases of his defined belly. His beloved mate went lower still, tormenting Severus with sweet-sharp pleasure. Gentle, sucking kisses at the hollow of his hip left him writhing and bucking, helpless under a rush of fierce, almost ticklish zings of sheer pleasure.

“Ghn!” His voice came out in a sharp cry. “Please, please!”
Harry moaned against his sensitized skin, drawing a gasp from Severus. “Patience,” he whispered, a reminder of Severus’ words. Severus’ breath hitched at the thought of Harry spending so much time on his pleasure, and he rocked into Harry’s mouth beyond all control.

“Yes,” he gasped out. “More.”

“Mm, that I can do.”

Harry lapped at the crease of Severus’ legs and teased his bollocks, but instead of sucking him down as Severus wanted, the young man moved down to his feet and took one in hand.

Severus froze. Did Harry not want him? Surely it wouldn’t be like… like him again.

“H-Harry?”

“It’s all right, Sev.” Harry traced a gentle hand down his leg. “It’s just me, sweetheart.” He kissed Severus’ ankle softly. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, but… did I do something wrong?”

“Oh, Sev. No, love. Not at all. I just want to take my time, remember? To love you all over.”

Severus’ confused tension eased and warmth replaced his fear. “Mm, you still want me?”

Harry pressed another gentle kiss to the top of Severus’ arch. “Gods, Sev. Can’t you feel it in the bond? I want you so much I’m aching.”

Severus did feel Harry’s need, come to think of it. The knowledge reassured him, and he relaxed into Harry’s touch. “Ah, forgive me. I do feel it. Do go on.”

“Gladly.”

A gentle tongue teased Severus’ sole, and his breath hitched at the intimacy of the touch. No one had ever kissed his feet, for certain.

“Harry, why?”

Harry pressed soft kisses to each of Severus’ toes, sending heat and soft warmth through him. “Because I wanted to. Because I want you to feel loved. Every part of you.”

Severus’ cheeks reddened. Gods, how much he wanted a love like that, how long had he ached for such a feeling? But the thought of Harry making love to his feet left him feeling vulnerable and fearful of rejection. Who had ever loved his feet? Or any part of him, really? What if Harry found them disgusting? What if—

“Severus, ssh. It’s all right, love. I just wanted to kiss you everywhere.” Harry suckled Severus’ arch and drew a breathless pant from his husband.

“But they are feet, Harry! They are… are dirty and… and….” His protests died on a moan as Harry sucked his ankle and traced his tongue around the bump.

“Every part of you, Severus,” he whispered, flooding the older man with need, love, and tears all at once. Severus could only nod and let Harry do as he wished.

Harry stroked Severus’ thigh as he explored the man’s leg with his kisses, soft and hard, teasing and sensual at once. Severus lost himself to sensation, drowning in the riptide of Harry’s love. Merlin, he
couldn’t bear it. Tears pooled on his lashes as Harry started on the other leg, caressing with his hands as much as his mouth, and Severus closed his eyes against the storm.

“Oh, Sev.” Harry’s mental voice went on, and Severus wondered if the young man even knew he had projected his thoughts. [Oh gods. Every part of him is so… so perfect. Merlin, I love him so much I can’t bear it.]

Severus’ heart overflowed with warmth and deep emotion. Harry loved him. Gods, help him, Severus hadn’t dreamed it into existence, hadn’t imagined it—Harry loved him. He had known, but hearing the words—even whispered in Harry’s mind—washed away some dark fear he had carried for too long. Knowing, without a doubt, that Harry was his forever… tears blurred his vision and tracked down the sides of his face.

‘Oh, my Harry. Gods, I love you too.’

His breath hitched in a sob as Harry lavished kisses on his knee, a surprisingly sensitive place no one had ever cared to explore before, and Harry looked up, his eyes soft and concerned.

“Are you all right, Severus?”

Severus had no breath to speak. He simply reached for the man who had claimed the softest parts of his heart—and healed it—and pulled Harry into a tender, emotional kiss. Harry wiped tears from Severus’ cheeks and kissed his forehead.

“It’s all right, Severus,” Harry whispered against his lips. “You’re safe with me. I swear it.”

Severus blinked more tears down and cupped Harry’s face. His voice came out rough as he murmured, “I know, my love.”

Harry’s smile lit the room with radiance, and Severus’ breath caught. Merlin, what he wouldn’t give to be able to bring forth that beautiful smile every day. To see his husband truly happy. If only he could forget his past—dark, twisted abuse from a hateful man, abandonment from those he had loved, rough couplings with strangers who looked at him with thinly-veiled disgust—it would be easy to form the words. To let his husband know his love wasn’t in vain or unrequited. But he couldn’t forget. And he couldn’t speak, even though he wanted to.

Severus promised himself he would overcome those fears, and soon. However his past ‘relationships’ had ended, Harry adored him. The look in his eyes as he held Severus’ face and kissed every contour revealed his devotion, trust, and joy in his partner. Severus could hardly believe it was meant for him.

“Harry,” he murmured, tracing a thumb over his husband’s lips. “So beautiful.”

Harry shivered and sucked Severus’ thumb between his lips, tracing his tongue over the pad. Severus groaned at the intense sensation his kisses inspired and watched through passion-glazed eyes as Harry made love to his hand and up his arm. By the time Harry had moved on to his chest again, Severus was half-mad with desire.

“Harry, please, stop teasing.”

Harry lifted his lips from Severus’ nipple with a shy smile. “T-there’s… one more place I want to touch you first, if you can trust me enough.”

Severus gulped, having a fair idea of what Harry meant. “I can’t bottom, Harry. I can’t.”
Harry kissed him softly. “I know. I remember. But can you let me touch you there? Not to… take you….” He sucked in a sharp breath through his nose and Severus knew Harry didn’t mind the idea. “But just to make you feel good.”

Severus hesitated, fearful and uncertain, and Harry moved back with a shake of his head.

“Never mind. We can save that for another time, when you’re ready.”

Severus started to give Harry permission—Harry had been so loving, so gentle, he knew the man wouldn’t hurt him or push him too far—but the next instant the young man had engulfed half his erection in wet, silky heat. Severus’ eyes went wide, and he cried out as Harry’s gentle tongue and hard suction drove him to the brink of madness. He arched into Harry’s mouth and groaned as strong hands pinned his hips. Harry moaned around him, vibrating Severus with fierce sensation, and took him in as deep as he could bear.

The young man choked and pulled back. “D-damn. Sorry, love.”

“Ssh.” Severus stroked Harry’s hair and tried to gather his wits. “You… you do not need to take all of it. Only what is comfortable. U-use your hand to—oh Merlin!”

Harry wrapped a firm hand around the base of Severus’ erection and sucked the rest into his mouth, and Severus’ other hand shot to the young man’s hair.

“Yes, yes, like that! Oh, Harry.”

He rocked with his husband’s strokes, heat building fast in his belly and tingling in his bollocks. A strong hand rubbed the tightening sack, rolling his testes with a gentle touch, and Severus could bear no more. With a cry, he pulled out of Harry’s mouth and dragged his husband up into a searing kiss.

“Enough,” he gasped out. “Need to be inside you.”

Harry moaned and turned onto his back. “Yeah, take me, Severus. Missed feeling you deep.”

Severus choked back an intense wave of desire at Harry’s words. Gods, the young man had brought him too close to the edge. He could barely control himself as he spread Harry’s legs, cast the cleaning spell, and started preparing him with his tongue. A startled yelp answered his efforts.

“Sev’rus!”

Harry’s keening cry sent a shockwave of heat and desire through the older man, and he had to take a moment before he lost it right there. He panted against Harry’s thigh, tracing the young man’s rim with his fingertip instead, and struggled to bring his need back under control.

“Ghn,” Harry moaned, arching under Severus’ caressing finger. “Please, Sev. Please!”

Harry’s soft whimpers, breathless with desire, drew a moan from Severus’ throat.

“Gods, you are driving me mad, love,” Severus panted. “So… so intense.”

Harry smoothed Severus’ hair, breath hitching with his need. “Me too. Please, please, need to feel you inside me.”

With a groan wrung from the depths of his soul, Severus dropped his head once more and traced Harry’s rim with his tongue. Harry squealed and arched into him, shaking and writhing with desperate need. He cried out Severus’ name, and as the man teased him, slowly working his way...
inside, turned it into a chant, a breathless mantra of his lover’s name, interspersed with keening wails. Severus had never heard anything so arousing in his life. Gods, he could barely keep himself from tumbling over the edge as he pleasured his husband, inside and out.

“F-fuck,” Harry sobbed, his body following the deep strokes of Severus’ tongue. “Can’t take anymore, Sev. Want to come with you inside. Please, please—need you in me.”

Severus gave Harry’s entrance one last kiss, Summoned a pot of edible lubricant he had brewed when he had first bonded his Harry and worked one slick finger inside.

“Better, love?”

Harry sobbed and rocked into his finger. “More. Need you deeper.”

“Ssh. Be patient, my Harry. I will not hurt you.”

“Mhn, can hardly stand it. Feels so good.”

“Oh?” Severus traced around his finger with his tongue, enjoying the taste of strawberry lube as well as his husband’s intense shriek of pleasure.

“A-ah! Sev’rus!”

With a deep moan, Severus set to work preparing his husband, fingers and tongue alike. By the time he had two fingers inside his husband and his tongue stroking between them, Harry was screaming and begging for Severus to take him.

“Please, please, can’t take anymore. Need you, Sev’rus.”

Severus slipped out his fingers and speared Harry with his tongue a few more times. Harry sobbed and rocked on his strokes, his feet pounding the bed beside Severus’ shoulders and his head thrashing about.

“Severus, please!”

Harry’s cry rang with desperation, and Severus withdrew. He ran a soothing hand down Harry’s stomach as he slicked his erection—gods, even touching himself lightly was almost too much—and slowly pressed inside. Harry moaned and sobbed his name, body arching near double as he bore down on his mate, taking him deeper.

“Oh gods, Sev’rus—hurry!”

“Ssh. Slowly, love. I refuse to hurt you.”

“Doesn’t hurt—feels so good I’m going to die.”

“No dying. I need you.” Severus stroked Harry’s thighs, soothing him until he was fully-seated. “Ghn. Oh, gods, Harry. You feel so good.”

He dropped his head forwards, struggling to control himself. Harry’s silken heat wrapped him in sheer pleasure, and he wanted to take, wanted to thrust, but he held still until he felt Harry’s body relax around him. There.


“Kiss me,” Harry whispered. “Please, come.”
Severus cast a cleaning spell on his mouth and brought his husband into a deep, fiery kiss. Tears streaked Harry’s cheeks as Severus made slow, gentle love to him, an emotional release from sheer wonder and affection. The bond sang between them, flooding Severus’ chest with Harry’s devotion, with the words his careful husband feared to say aloud. Severus’ heart quivered at the feel of his husband’s all-encompassing emotions and shared his own, opening his side of the bond wide so Harry might feel what he couldn’t quite find the strength to say.

“Sev,” Harry gasped, more tears dripping down the sides of his face. “Oh, Sev’rus. Feel so much.”

“Yes, beloved. Want you to feel it.”

Harry gave a soft whimper of emotion and swept Severus into his arms, kissing him slow and deep, his love shining so bright, Severus thought he might never feel cold or alone again. His own vision blurred, he kissed Harry’s tears away and rocked him close, letting his heart and body speak for him as their bodies moved in time.

[Love you, Severus. Dear gods, I love you so much.]

Severus pressed his forehead against Harry’s, holding his husband’s cheek as he thrust inside with slow, gentle passion. [Yes, love me. Wash away the darkness of my past and make me whole again.]

Harry’s eyes glowed as he slipped his hands into Severus’ hair and held him close. “Okay,” he panted. “Will love all your pain away.”

Severus groaned, his eyelids fluttering shut as heat, love, and fierce desire drove his strokes deeper, faster. Harry threw his legs around Severus’ waist and arched up, sharp cries of passion gaining pitch with every thrust.

“Please, please,” Harry breathed.

Severus hooked his arms behind Harry’s knees and guided them over his shoulders, shifting his husband’s angle until….

“Oh fuck!”

Harry’s ringing shout and an intense surge of passion through the bond told Severus he had found the right place. With a soft cry of his own, Severus rocked into Harry’s prostate again and again, riding the waves of his pleasure to higher and higher peaks with each stroke.

“Sev’rus, yes!”

Harry’s warbling shout was his only warning. Wet heat surged against Severus’ belly and Harry’s body clenched around him, squeezing Severus’ erection and pulsing around him, sending him over the edge.

“Oh gods! Harry!” Climax surged through Severus with all the power of the heavens. He shouted his husband’s name and filled him, body quivering with fire and lightning and the wake of Harry’s love. Gods, gods, he was going to die, to shatter like this, and fuck all if he would even care.

Sex had never felt so good. Never until Harry.

With a soft cry, he flopped onto his husband’s chest and panted, still reeling from his pleasure.

When he came to, Harry was caressing Severus’ face and stroking his hair, his legs still wrapped tightly around Severus’ own.
“Gods,” Severus panted and withdrew with a groan. “Harry, you are exquisite.”

Harry smiled through a wave of tears and brought Severus up into his arms. “So are you, love. Merlin. I never imagined—never in my wildest dreams did I believe sex could be so good.”

A little thrill passed through Severus’ chest. “You enjoy it with me?”

“Oh, Sev! Can’t you tell? Look at me! I’m utterly wrecked.”

Severus chuckled softly and kissed Harry’s tears away, unsurprised to find his own face wet, too. “You are lovely. So lovely.”

Harry cuddled him close and gathered Severus’ face in tender hands. “So are you.” Tears of pure joy slipped down his face and trailed into his hair. “Oh, Severus. I know… you aren’t ready to say it. You don’t have to respond. But I can’t hold back any longer. I want you to know—I want you to hear it.” He kissed his husband’s face all over. “Gods, Severus. I love you so much, pet.”

Severus gasped at the name, all passion and good feelings evaporating in an instant. Memories slammed into him with the force of a freight train.


Severus looked up and froze. Lucius Malfoy lay beside him, pristine body and silvery hair glinting in the firelight, grey eyes hard and cold as ever. “My little pet,” the bastard drawled in that cold, unemotional tone. “Did you truly believe you were worthy of love?” With a smirk, Lucius grabbed Severus’ shoulders and pinned him down. “You are mine. You are my pet. No one else will ever love you. No one else will ever care. You are nothing without me, little pet. And you will never, never be anything more.”

Severus snarled and struggled out of his grip, fury and love for his husband breaking through the shackles of his past. “You are wrong! I am not yours, I will never be yours.”

A shocked voice called, “Severus? I… you don’t want me?”

“No! I am free, do you hear me?”

“But, Sev… you… I don’t understand.”

Severus snarled at Lucius and snapped out, “Then let me make it clear. You will not ruin me. You will not control me any longer! I am free of your poison, and you will never fool me again. You will never own me, never control me. Never again! Begone, and haunt me no more!”

A strangled cry sounded. “Severus… you… you really want me to leave?”

“Are you deaf as well as a fool? That is what I have just said, is it not? Begone!”

With a twisted scowl, Malfoy vanished into the night. Triumph surged through Severus. He had won! Malfoy was gone, and he would never torment Severus again. He was free to love Harry, to move on and be his own man. It would be all right.

At a rush of sharp pain through his chest, Severus came to with a jolt. He found himself lying in his bed, Harry’s warmth lingering on his skin and the scent of sex still thick in the air.

But Harry was gone, and the joy effervescent in their bond just moments before had turned to
horrible, crushing grief. Agony so sharp, Severus could hardly breathe.

Oh dear gods, what had happened? He had seen Malfoy and shouted at him, and… and wait, Malfoy? The bastard couldn’t get into Severus’ quarters. Severus had warded him out twenty years ago.

Horror and dread crashed over him like a tsunami. Oh fuck. He had flashed back, gotten lost in the past at the mention of his former title, and Harry… dear Merlin, Harry must have thought Severus had meant those harsh, unforgiving words for him. Harry must have believed…

“Harry!” Severus bolted to his feet, crying out for his husband. “Oh gods! Please—come back, beloved. I was not speaking to you.”

His cries rang unanswered in the silence. Tears blurred his vision, and Severus blinked them back, searching for his husband. If he could just find him… maybe it wasn’t too late to patch Harry’s broken heart. He thought to ask Jabardi for help, but when he looked to the snake’s terrarium, his heart sank like a stone. The snake was gone. The entire terrarium had vanished, as well as Harry’s books and wand. A search of the wardrobe revealed that most of his clothes had gone too, jerked off the hangers in a rush, the surrounding garments strewn every which way.

Severus’ disbelief and horror morphed into a sick, crushing weight of guilt and misery.

“No. Harry—where…?”

He turned and caught a glint of gold on Harry’s pillow. Despair and sickening guilt crushing out denial, Severus sank to his knees and cradled his husband’s wedding band in shaking hands.

Gone. Harry was gone. In the end, Malfoy had won after all. Severus’ demons had driven his beloved Harry away.

Severus’ heart snapped in two. “Oh gods, what have I done?”
Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** Discussion of PTSD, mentions of suicide, flashbacks, magic-induced self-harm (done under Imperius), angst city. The light of the end of the tunnel comes. Also, writing Severus' need and desire to talk to Harry while trying to be sensitive to his illness was difficult as hell. I rewrote this entire chapter about five times, so I hope I've gotten it at least close in the end.

***AN: When I wrote this story, I didn’t know much about haphephobia and couldn’t find great resources. Since then, I’ve learned it manifests differently for most people than how I wrote it into Severus. Rather than causing true fear, touch tends to sicken and horrify true haphephobics, from what others haphephobia have told me. That said, I still believe Severus' portrayal to be accurate as his phobias aren’t his primary illness: PTSD is. He reacts to touch and intimacy like a person with PTSD would to a trigger, and that is exactly what they are to Severus in this story--triggers. I hope that helps explain why I wrote Sev the way I did.***

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 48

**Shattered**

10 DECEMBER

Severus struggled to Occlude Harry’s terrible pain from his side of the bond, fought to drain his emotions, but not even his natural powers could mute the ragged hole of grief inside him. **Gods.** He was such a fool. If only he had explained to Harry sooner—if only he had just told his husband about his past, or even warned him not to use that godawful name, none of this would have happened. Harry would still be in Severus’ quarters. He would still be whole. And Severus wouldn’t be slowly bleeding to death from his partner’s agony.

‘Harry, *please, please come home.*’ Severus prayed the boy had just gone to spend the night in the dorms—perhaps Neville would be able to talk some sense into him. But when Severus managed to drag himself to breakfast in spite of his grief, Harry was nowhere in sight.

‘Harry... gods, love. Where are you?’

Severus watched the doors out of the corner of his eye, forcing some kind of food into his stomach though he hardly registered what, and searched every late arrival for a black moptop and round spectacles.

But Harry didn’t come. Nor did Draco or Blaise. Severus guessed the Slytherins had taken a meal in
their rooms to give Draco more time to heal, but Harry… where was he?

Severus picked over his food, unable to eat much, and dragged himself out of the Great Hall without a word to anyone. He couldn’t talk regardless. The crushing anguish on his chest had sapped his breath, cut his voice down to nothing. Every ounce of strength he possessed went to keeping tears from his eyes, to keeping his face fixed in his typical scowl rather than allowing his expression to reveal the crushing desolation on his spirit.

‘Please, love. I am so sorry. Please come home.’

Lunch came and went in the same manner. He pretended to eat in silence, watching the door, waiting, but Harry never came. He pushed back his barely-touched plate and moved to leave, but Filius caught him before he stood.

“Severus,” he whispered, “have you seen Harry? He didn’t come to class this morning and none of his classmates know where he is.”

A wave of dread hit Severus in the gut, doubling him over in fear. He kept his worry from his expression only by the grace of Merlin and struggled to find the breath to answer through the crushing weight of his grief. He cast a silencing charm and forced his voice to work.

“I… there was a misunderstanding. I have been trying to find him, to set things right, but I… I do not know where he has gone. I had assumed he would have returned to the dorms, but it appears I was mistaken.”

And honestly, that was a foolish thought to begin with. Why would Harry return to the dorm with his new familiar when Finnigan had killed his first?

Gods, Severus’ pain had rendered him stupid, and that was bad for everyone.

“P-perhaps he is simply in his bedroom. I will… find out.”

“Yes, good luck. Oh, I do hope he’s all right.”

Severus shuddered, images of Harry’s body lying broken at the foot of the Astronomy Tower robbing him of breath. Oh gods. He wouldn’t! He couldn’t do it. Could he?

“Y-yes, Filius,” Severus choked out. “So do I.”

As soon as Severus could get away, he dashed straight to the base of the tower and, with his heart in his throat, examined the ground around it. Thank Merlin, he saw no signs of his husband.

As he turned back to the castle, he berated himself for his stupidity again. If Harry had died, Severus would know it. The bond would rip—tear down the middle—and leave Severus with an empty hole in his heart for as long as he lived.

Without Harry… he wasn’t sure he wanted to.

With a shaky sigh, Severus stalked back to the castle. Near the Infirmary, he cast his specialised stealth spells and made his way to Harry’s bedroom.
“Harry? Please, let me in.”

There was no answer.

“Please. It is dangerous for me to be here. I… what happened—it was not what you thought.”

The silence twisted Severus’ heart in two. “Harry, please.”

But only the sound of Severus’ own heartbeat answered. Tears blurring his vision, he cast *Homenum Revelio* and barely suppressed a whimper when it revealed nothing. Harry wasn’t there. He could have warded his door against the spell, but no. A scan of the wards revealed minimal protection beyond the standard Hogwarts password wards. Well, Harry didn’t live there, after all. He had placed a few decoy wards and one against theft, but nothing that would have blocked Severus’ spell.

Merlin help him, where had Harry gone?

Harry slammed down another useless journal and cursed. “Nothing. Not one godsdamned spell I can use.”

Jabardi poked his head up from Harry’s lap. ~Master, I am tired. We have been working all day.~

Harry sighed and motioned his familiar to the bed, ignoring his trembling and the stark pain rendering him helpless. As long as he kept working, the anguish wouldn’t destroy him. Maybe.

~Go sleep. I will work while you rest.~

Jabardi gave a little hiss of dismay. ~Master, do you humans not need to eat more than we snakes do? I have seen you eat three times a day or four, and you have gone without food for many hours now.~

~I am well enough, Jabardi.~

Gods, that was a lie if he’d ever told one. Harry’s entire being had come apart, torn at the seams.

“You won’t fool me again! Begone and torment me no more!”

Severus’ cruel words, coming so soon after Harry had given his all to the man, had ripped everything vital from his soul and left him a broken shell. Worse than Severus’ rejection had been the fact that he believed, even now, after everything Harry had done and sacrificed for him, that it was a trick. That Harry could be so cruel as to pretend to love him and use it against him. It had proved everything between them false, and now, Harry could barely breathe for the pain of his shattered bond.

He wanted to go home. He wanted so much to run to Severus’ arms and bury his face in the man’s chest, beg him to drive away his hurts, but he didn’t have a home any longer. Severus had thrown him out, cast him aside like used rubbish, and somehow Harry had to learn how to live on his own.

Well, as long as the soul bond allowed him to live without his mate, anyway. With his own side already imbalanced from Severus’ indecision at their bonding, Harry guessed he might have just enough time left to finish the war—if he could only find a bloody spell to draw in Riddle’s horcruxes. He’d researched bonding to hell and back, and Harry thought it was the key, but it wasn’t
enough alone. He needed a core spell to latch onto the horcrux pieces and give the bond something to work with. Otherwise, he’d only be bonding air.

To that end, he had holed himself up in Slytherin’s study and spent the entire day poring over book after book, hardly breaking to go to the loo, let alone eat, drink, or sleep. He had no time for that, and what was the point besides? Who would want to live with this kind of agony, day in and day out, and no hope of healing?

He sure as hell didn’t.

Maybe if he hadn’t bonded irrevocably to Severus, he might have felt differently. But with a bleak, unrelenting future of misery ahead of him—a short one, until the soul bond broke them both—no. He would rather sacrifice himself to the war so that Severus might live, even if it meant Severus lived with the pain of a broken bond forever.

The berk had brought it on himself, and at least that way, Severus would survive. And though Harry thought the man deserved some pain for using him so badly, he still couldn’t stand by and let the bond kill the man he loved, in spite of everything. He still couldn’t return the pain Severus heaped so liberally upon him.

Gods, he had been a fool to fall for such a man, but…. He remembered their lovemaking before the fallout and choked back tears. He had thought they were in love. Severus had even said… but then, he had shattered Harry to pieces. He didn’t understand. It made no sense. If he could stand to think of it, he might eventually come to some kind of conclusion about what had driven Severus’ rejection.

But it hurt too much. And it didn’t matter, regardless. Whatever Severus’ reasons, he had rejected Harry so cruelly, he would never be able to trust the man again. Their bond was broken, and Harry had no power to heal it. Thinking of his losses would only hurt him more.

With a sigh, Harry opened the next journal and settled in to read. Jabardi’s worried eyes followed him long into the night.

By the next morning, a desolate Severus had searched every corner of the castle—at least those he could reach. He dragged himself back to his quarters having not slept a wink, hoping beyond hope that he would find Harry waiting—perhaps angry, but there—but his desperate call went unanswered.

“Harry….” Severus sank onto his sofa and dropped his head into his hands. Gods. Just when everything had been so beautiful, he had gone and cocked it up all over again.

“I love you so much….” If only Harry had stopped there. If only Severus had not been conditioned to hate the endearment he had tacked on at the end.

If only Severus wasn’t such a fuck up.

“Harry… please. Please, come back to me. I… I love you too.”

Tears choked him. He loved Harry. With all of his being, Severus adored his husband.

And yet, Harry was gone. It was too late, too late to say those words he should have said weeks ago.
Too late to heal their unequal bond.

Severus vowed then and there, if Harry ever came home again, he would not waste another moment. He would tell his husband the truth of his heart then and there, if Harry would only give him one more chance to make things right.

But until then, Severus had nothing left but a broken marriage and a shattered heart, and with every passing moment, the hope that he would ever have the chance to repair it faded a little more.

“Harry… where are you?”

Severus lowered his head into his hands and wept.

Merlin help him, Harry had found the spell to apply the Dark Mark.

~…as each new symbol appears, speak the words of power until the blood-ink glows, then seal the snake mark with a gift of love — the blood of a mudblood. Then repeat the words of power — Morsmordre — until the mark links to the speaker source — life-force and core — of the marked.~

Harry cringed as he read, his hair standing on end at the horror of Voldemort’s additions to Slytherin’s texts. From what he could make out under Voldemort’s notes, the original snake mark had been intended to enable long-distance communication in a world without owl or Muggle post, a floo network, or telephones. Slytherin had marked each of his sons with a magical tattoo that enabled them to speak with each other no matter where they were, simply by pressing a finger to the mark with the intent to activate it.

Voldemort had twisted and perverted Slytherin’s invention by introducing blood and soul magic into the original spell. And that presented one hell of a problem. The Dark Mark tapped into the life-force and magic of its bearer, providing Voldemort with a potentially endless power reserve. The bastard could focus on the mark of a Death Eater of his choice and drain that person of all their life and power to supplement his own. Naturally, the bastard would focus on ‘traitors’ to his cause first… and that meant Severus and, potentially, Draco would die in the battle the moment Harry attempted to kill Riddle. And with their marriage broken, Harry doubted the soul bond would have enough power left by that point to sustain Severus’ life.

Harry had no choice but to invent a counter for this godsawful spell, or any marked spy would die in the battle—including the one man Harry had ever and would ever love.

“Godsdamn it! I didn’t need more complications.”

Jabardi looked up from Harry’s bed and hissed in worry. ~Master, much time has passed. Have you still not slept or eaten?~

Harry turned away. ~It does not matter. I will survive.~ For now.

~Master, you must rest. Please, will you not at least ask your elf to bring you food?~

Harry’s stomach roiled at the thought of putting anything into it. His insides had turned to broken glass and razor blades, and the idea of eating when everything hurt so much—no. He couldn’t bear the thought.
Well, truth be told, it had been a long time since he had felt the pain of prolonged hunger, but he would manage. He had to go on. Besides, he now had one more responsibility to manage before the end of the war—this time without Severus’ help. Somehow, he had to come up with a way to remove the Mark on his own.

Well, he might have better luck with that than finding a horcrux destroying spell. So far, Slytherin’s books had nothing at all of soul magic. Still, Harry knew the answer was here, somewhere. For the prophecy to be true, for Harry to be the Chosen One, his Parseltongue had to come into play. It was the only unique ability he had.

Wasn’t it?

Harry stared at the marking spell and chewed on his lip. He had skill with spellcrafting, didn’t he? Well, Severus usually handled the calculations and spell matrices, but Harry had learned loads from watching him over the past two years. Surely by now he knew enough to build his own matrices.

What if that was the power he knew not? Could he invent a spell to pull the horcruxes together, bind them, and destroy them? If he combined that with his skill in Parseltongue, that made it a unique skill to everyone but Riddle, didn’t it?

Resolution ringing within him, Harry stood and whipped out his wand. “Magicae illud… horcrux.”

A blood red spot appeared where Harry had pointed his wand and, satisfied, he began crafting a spell matrix based on that point, pausing every so often to scratch out his calculations on a spare bit of parchment. Jabardi slithered onto the desk chair and watched, his head slowly shifting back and forth in a gesture of worry.

Severus paced his living room, staring at the Marauder’s Map and desperately searching for Harry’s name. He had yet to find it, but he kept trying, hoping the man might show his face.

Harry had to be in the castle. Severus had already ransacked Grimmauld Place that morning, Molly would have contacted Albus had Harry come to the Burrow, and Harry would sooner perish than return to the Dursleys’ residence. He hadn’t been captured either—had the Dark Lord taken Harry prisoner, he would have called every Death Eater in to watch him die. That left only Hogwarts, but Severus still could not find him. And in so much agony, he hadn’t the ability to send his Patronus after Harry either.

His afternoon class had started ten minutes ago, but he couldn’t stop looking at the map. If he took his eyes off of it, he might miss Harry’s name. And Severus couldn’t let this stand. He couldn’t let Harry go on believing Severus hated him when he only wanted his husband back home. He couldn’t leave Harry suffering such terrible pain. The mere reflection of Harry’s agony had ripped Severus hollow and left him bleeding.

With his own grief and guilt added in, Severus wouldn’t last long. Already, he felt as though the
broken bond had crushed everything vital in his spirit, everything worth holding on for. It hurt so much, not even his Zopathy could touch his pain.

Gods, he couldn’t live like this. He couldn’t Occlude, couldn’t teach, couldn’t even go out in public lest someone saw his pain-ravaged face and gathered the cause of his grief. Something had to give. He would be killed if this kept up. And even if he somehow managed to avoid becoming the entertainment at the next Death Eater rally, his broken soul bond itself would kill him sooner rather than later.

Not that he wanted to live if this was the kind of pain he had to look forward to.

No. No. He couldn’t give up. He had to bring Harry back home. Somehow.

With a shaky sigh, Severus forced his head back up and scanned the map that had made his childhood hell one more time.

Neville, Luna, and Blaise stood in Severus’ living room, trying to hold the distraught man together and wracking their brains for places Harry might be. Severus suspected he already knew, but he didn’t want to believe it. He didn’t want Harry to be locked in the Chamber.

He had no hope of reaching him there.

“His name is not showing on this map.” The raspy, raw quality of Severus’ voice had not a shadow of his usual mellifluence. “I have watched all morning, but there is nothing. Not a whisper.”

“Severus,” said Neville, his expression torn. “You haven’t taught?”

Severus shook his head and scanned the map once more, hoping, praying he might catch Harry’s name this time. “I cannot. Not in such a state. I am usually unable to stop Occluding, but the tear in the soul bond has sapped my powers. I cannot Occlude at all.”

“Professor Snape is right,” Blaise said with a wince. “I can read him without so much as looking into his eyes. To teach right now—or even go into public—it would be suicide.”

“I would risk it,” Severus murmured, “if only I knew where he was! How? How is it possible that he can still be within the castle and never appear on the map once?”

“It’s possible the… er… the authors never found all the hidden places in the castle,” said Neville with a wince.

Severus glared at the parchment in question. “Somehow, I highly doubt that.”

“Well, there’s always the unplottable places….” Neville sighed and kicked at the floor. “But I’ve already searched all the ones we know of.”

“Daphne, Astoria, and Millie are searching too,” said Blaise, his expression grim, “but I don’t think they’re going to find him. I don’t think he wants to be found. Our Patronuses aren’t getting through. We’ve sent them over and over, but they just come back to us without delivering the message.” He shook his head and stared at his knees. “If I had known he would use that bloody spell, I’d never have told him about last week.”
Severus snapped, “Why did you, if you did not intend him to cut himself off from all possible avenues of communication?

Blaise’s eyes hardened with reproach. “Sir, I’m not your enemy. Please don’t treat me like one.”

Severus dropped his head and gave a strangled groan of misery. “Forgive me.”

“It’s okay,” Blaise said, his voice soft and sympathetic. “I know you’re in pain. And I only told him about the spell for his essay in Warding. Harry wanted to know about rare and dark wards to supplement his research, but there wasn’t much in the way of information available in the library. So I offered what I knew. I never meant him to turn us all away by it.”

“But he has done,” Severus said, his voice rife with pain. “And that means I have no way of reaching him, save this, and I am losing hope.” He stared harder at the map, as if willing Harry to appear would somehow disprove the growing possibility that Harry had hidden somewhere Severus could never follow.

“I have been asking the Clarents to find him too as our Patronuses aren’t working,” said Luna, her eyes unusually sombre, “but they can only tell me he has gone somewhere magic cannot reach.”

Severus’ heart sank like a stone. “No.”

She sat beside him and rubbed his back. “I’m sorry, Severus.”

“No. It cannot… I-I cannot reach him in the Chamber, Luna. None of us can.”

Blaise winced. “Not even the house elves?”

Severus dropped his head into his hands. “No. He is… I have lost him.”

Neville breathed, “Severus… oh gods, I’m so sorry.”

“Please,” Severus choked out, struggling to hold back tears. “Please, leave me be.”

Luna gave him a gentle hug. “We’ll keep looking. Perhaps the Clarents are mistaken.”

“No, I have been trying to deny the possibility… but it is true.” He bit back a cry of grief and bitter self-loathing. “Please. I need to be alone.”

Luna rubbed his shoulder and stood. “We’re here for you when you need us, Severus.” With that, she gathered the others and left Severus to the hollow reverberations of his broken heart.

Hours later, days later—Severus had lost track—he dragged himself to the floo and staggered into Albus’ office. The old man gave Severus one look, then Summoned a teapot and swept him up the stairs and into his private living room. Severus stumbled to the sofa and sank onto the cushions, drowning in anguish.

“I… I have lost him, Albus,” Severus murmured to his knees. “He is hiding in the Chamber. Unless he chooses to return to me of his own will, there is no hope. I cannot apologise, I cannot even send him a letter this time. With Fawkes in the middle of a burn cycle and our Patronuses warded away, the bond is my only means of communication, and Harry is no longer listening.” Severus dropped his
head into his hands and clutched at his hair. “A-Albus, what do I do? How do I heal this when all
methods are closed to me?”

Albus passed Severus a cup of tea—dosed, no doubt—before he would say a word. Severus sipped
and struggled not to weep.

“My boy, can you tell me what happened? I had thought you were doing better.”

Tears dropped into Severus’ tea and rippled the surface. He set the cup aside. Ruined, just like
everything else in his life.

“I… we made love, Albus. Everything was… beautiful. It was the single most healing experience of
my life, and I had begun to believe I would be whole again soon. He… he told me he loved me for
the first time, and I… if he had not also called me….” Severus choked back a wave of revulsion.
“—pet at the same time, I would have been happy. But the moment he used that name, I… Harry
vanished. I fell into the past, and Lucius appeared, standing over me. The bastard said I would never
be free, and I… I fought back. I told him I was never his and he would never trick me again, and bid
him to leave me.”

Tears blinded him and strangled his words. “But Harry heard it as if I was speaking to him, as if I
meant that he was unwelcome, that he had hurt me. He did not understand. And now he is gone,
believing I think him a monster and have used him this entire time.”

Albus said nothing. He simply sat beside his broken protégé and laid a hand on his shoulder. Severus
gave a shuddering sob and turned into the old man, crying on his shoulder. By the hitch in Albus’
breathing, he had stunned him. Severus didn’t have the strength to care.

“Severus…” Albus wrapped the younger man in a hug and held him tight. “He truly has done
wonders for you. A year ago, you could not even bear a pat on your shoulder, and see how far you
have come.”

Severus keened with grief. “Albus! What good does it do now, when I have lost him?”

Albus sighed and held Severus tight. “My boy, I do not believe all hope is lost. He must come out of
the Chamber sometime. And when he does, you must tell him the truth.”

“It will not be enough. I have apologised before—he will not believe me.”

“That is not what I mean. You must tell him the truth, Severus. That you are ill and where your
flashbacks and phobias originated. At least, you must tell him of your illness and what triggers your
flashbacks. He does not understand.”

Severus shuddered and buried his head in his hands. “I… I am so afraid.”

“More afraid of speaking than losing him?”

“N-no.”

“Then your choice is clear.”

Severus’ pain choked him. He curled into his knees, shaking and sick with shame. Albus was right.
Hadn’t he thought the same thing himself earlier? If he had only mentioned his aversion to that
godsawful nickname, Harry would never have used it and this terrible rift would never have
occurred. Harry would have been at home, revising before the hearth or reading wrapped in Severus’
arms. The first time he had spoken those words Severus had longed for all his life would have healed
his wounds, rather than ripped them both open. Maybe Severus would have even found the courage
to say it back, to give Harry the gift of his love once and for all.

And then, he knew.

Severus lifted his head, resolution settling in his heart. *That* was how to heal this, if Harry ever did
come back to him. Severus had to give him his all, his everything, no holds barred. He would have to
go to Harry on his knees and tell him he loved him, beg him to come home, and vow to give his
husband everything he had failed to promise him the first time.

And then, if Harry accepted that much, Severus would have to tell him of his past so this *never*
happened again. There could be no more secrets between them, no more hidden shadows. Severus
mightn’t be able to tell Harry what all of his triggers were—to be sure, he didn’t know himself—but
he had to explain that he had them and why. He couldn’t endure this again, and neither could Harry.

Even if Harry didn’t accept him back into his life, Severus would still tell him the truth of his past
and his flashbacks. Harry needed to understand. He had given everything, sacrificed so much for
Severus and, as Albus had pointed out, had healed him of so much pain. The least Severus could do
was to return Harry’s unselfish, unfailing love with his trust. And he wanted Harry to know. He
wanted to open himself fully to the only man who had ever loved him, even if he had lost him
forever.

Yes. It was past time. He had wavered enough.

He gave Albus a firm nod. “If it is at all possible to reach him again, I will tell him. I will give him
everything.” Severus’ voice broke. “I need him to come home. I cannot face this life without him.”

Albus blinked hard and tangled his hand with Severus’. “I know. Believe me, I know.”

Severus sniffled and leaned against Albus’ shoulder. For all the old man had done to hurt them both,
Severus still loved him.

“Child, I know it is not what you wish for, but you may stay here tonight, if it comforts you. I will
watch over you.”

Severus winced, tears dripping down his nose and onto his robes. “Who is watching over him,
Albus? Who does he have to ease his pain?”

Albus sighed and hugged Severus’ shoulders. “You, little one. Send him your love. Drain his pain, if
you are able, and send him your remorse and affection through the bond. Perhaps it will tempt him to
come to you. And even if it is not enough yet to bring him home, it may help foster forgiveness, if he
knows you love him and did not mean to hurt him so.”

“Albus, I am not a Telepath. I do not think I can communicate so much across the bond.”

“Try, Severus. Simply try. That is all we can do until he comes home again.” Albus gave his baby
familiar, a week old after his burning day, a sad smile. “Or at least until Fawkes is old enough to fly
again.”

“Unless he has also warded Fawkes away.”

Albus winced. “It is possible. But he cannot ward a link tied to his soul, Severus. He cannot ward
*you* away.”

Severus nodded and closed his eyes. “Y-yes. Perhaps it is not hopeless then.” He sniffled and turned
into Albus’ shoulder. “As much as I need the comfort, I think I must go home tonight, Albus. In case my attempts to reach out through the bond do draw Harry out of the shadows, I need to be where he can find me. I need to be near him.”

Albus smiled and patted Severus’ shoulder. “Then, if it is not an imposition, I will stay with you.”

Severus hugged the old man and nodded, overcome. “Please. Please do not leave me alone. The world is so dark and empty without him.”

“Well, then it is a good thing I wear such bright colours, hmm?”

Severus snorted in spite of himself. “The mystery is solved at last.”

“Hmm. You are closer to the truth than you know.” Albus stood and offered him his arm. “Come then, child, and let us return to your quarters so that we may be there when Harry comes home.”

“If, Albus.”

“When, Severus. I believe it is only a matter of time.”

Severus sniffled and took Albus’ hand. “This time, I hope your maudlin Gryffindor sentimentalism wins the day.”

Albus’ eyes filled with heavy sorrow. “So do I, my boy. So do I.”

~Master,~ pleaded Jabari for the tenth time in an hour, ~you must rest.~

Harry ignored him and tweaked a vertex again. A smell of smoke burned his eyelids and sparks scattered across the desktop, but he refused to quit. He was so close to the answer. Just a few more layers of magic, and he would have a working spell to test. Then, he would end this war once and for all, before the soul bond and his broken heart killed him.

He didn’t have time to waste.

~Please, Master. I am afraid for you.~

Harry frowned and nudged the magic vertex with his wand, attempting to slide it over about five degrees or so. Another rain of sparks shot out.

~Master, please stop. The magic… it smells bad. Dangerous. Please.~

Harry pretended he hadn’t heard.

Another wave of love and remorse flooded him through the bond—Severus’ heartbreak. Tears blinded Harry for a moment, but he ignored his husband too. The man had been trying all night to get his attention, but Harry wouldn’t be fooled so easily, not this time. His parting words still rang in Harry’s ears, still cut his heart to ribbons with every breath.

“Begone and haunt me no more.”

“I-I never wanted to haunt you, Severus. I only wanted to be….”
His voice broke off in a sob, but Harry jerked his hand across his face and viciously cut off his pain. No. He had no time for this, and Severus didn’t mean it anyway. A trick—that was all it was. Just like he had believed Harry capable of tricking him. With a sharp cry of anguish and frustration, he forced what power he had into Occlumency barriers, and soon, Severus’ belated attempts to communicate with him faded to a distant twinge. He could deal with that.

“No, back to work.”

~Master, no,~ Jabardi begged. ~Please stop. You are exhausted.~

~I can’t stop, Jabardi. I am sorry. I am too close to stop now.~

~No—Master, you must not—please. The magic stinks like death. I am afraid.~

Harry ignored him and pushed the vertex again, but his prodding caused such a wave of sparks, the desk caught fire. Shite! Maybe Jabardi had a point. Maybe he had better stop and recalculate before he burned down Slytherin’s study.

With a sigh, he extinguished the flames with a shaky smothering charm. He waved his hand over the desk to repair it, but his magic flickered and failed. He had no choice but to use his wand—and even then, it took three casts to make all the scorch marks disappear.

“Damn,” he muttered. ~Maybe you are right, Jabardi. It seems my magic is spent.~

Jabardi hissed a sigh. ~Yes, please sleep, Master. Restore your magic and try again in the morning, if you must. I will… take care of you tonight.~

Harry wondered about the hesitation but was too exhausted to push. He dragged himself to his bed, conjured at the start of his stay, and, just in case his despair proved too much for the Chamber’s innate protections, he dredged up the power to tie his wrist to the headboard. In this state, to attempt his complex warding charms might just do him in. His entire body hurt—he had pushed himself too close to magical exhaustion again.

And yet, the pain in his soul, his heart, dulled the pain of his body by comparison. As soon as he stopped working, it rushed back, all the more powerful for his forced delay.

Tears choked him, and Harry buried his face in his pillow. “Severus… why? I d-don’t understand.”

Jabardi curled up next to Harry. ~I think it was a misunderstanding, Master. Your mate loves you.~

Harry turned his head away. ~No. No, if he loved me, he would never have sent me away.~

~But, Master…~

~Please, Jabardi. I cannot bear to speak of it.~

~As you wish, Master. I am with you, if it helps.~

~Thank you.~

Harry stroked his familiar’s back, and slowly, the snake’s presence and warmth eased his pain enough to allow him to sleep. As Harry sank into dreams, he could have sworn he heard the Chamber door open, but as nothing but Jabardi, his dead familiar, and Fawkes—who was too young at the moment to fly—could get past the wards, he ignored it and let oblivion wash away his grief, if only for a moment.
“Oh my, look what the cat has dragged in. Harry Potter. How long it has been since I had the pleasure of your company. Hmm. You may have found a way to block me in the pass, but it seems your ploy has failed tonight.”

Harry whimpered. No. He was in the Chamber. The shields on the place should have blocked any external magic. Voldemort shouldn’t have been able to reach him.

Unless the first time the dreams had stopped had been more a result of the easing of his pain than the Chamber’s magic itself. Or perhaps, in his misery, his mind had reached out in search of comfort. Albus had said he believed Harry to be an unusually strong Telepath. Perhaps his mind had broken the anti-magic barriers on the strength of his ability and need alone.

Not that it would do him any good now.

Gods, he just wanted to go home, but he didn’t have one any longer.

“And now, we shall see what the night will bring. Up, Harry Potter. Up, and take revenge upon all those who have defied me! We will start with your dear Headmaster, hmm? Go on, kill… and clear the way for my divine rule!”

“You’re about as divine as the muck at the bottom of the pond,” Harry spat, smug that at least this time, he had remembered to restrain himself.

“Oh? We shall see about that. Up, up and fight my battles from within, my little soldier.”

Harry laughed bitterly. “Nice try, shite-for-brains. This time, I took precautions.”

“So you have, what, tied your hands? Handcuffed yourself? Bah. Foolish child, you are no match for a god such as myself.”

Against his will, Harry’s fingernails tore at the rope around his wrist, ripping more skin than fibre. It hurt, but Harry didn’t care. Let the pain come. It might even, for a moment, distract him from the raw, bleeding void in his soul. One could hope, anyway.

“Do your worst, fuckface.”

A surge of fury dragged Harry’s hand down his face instead, tearing into his skin. “We shall see, before the night is through, who has truly earned such a vulgar title.”

“Better hope you succeed before I wake up then, knobhead. When this little episode is over, I’m coming for you.”

A vicious laugh set Harry’s ears ringing and another slash across his face tore open his lips and nose, but he didn’t care. As long as the prick was angry and cocky and took his revenge on Harry, no one else would suffer his wrath. Harry could bear the pain.

Voldemort had nothing on his husband’s ability to hurt him, after all.

“Come on, you ugly motherfucker! Is that all you’ve got?”
Severus woke to an insistent hissing sound. Bolting up in a panic, fearful the Dark Lord had somehow found him out and broken into his quarters, he grabbed for his wand and leapt from the bed.

“Who’s there?”

Something bright green hissed and nudged his ankle. A quick Lumos revealed the one being Severus had wanted to see almost as much as his beloved husband. Severus sank to his knees and nearly wept in relief.

“Oh, Jabardi! Thank Merlin.” He petted the snake’s back and spoke in an urgent voice. “Jabardi, will you take me to Harry? Please! I never intended to hurt him like this, little one. It was all a terrible misunderstanding, but if he will not come to me, I will never have the chance to heal it without your help. Please. I love him, and I am so afraid I will lose him forever. I beg of you, help me bring him home.”

The snake nodded and led him out of the room. Albus was waiting in the living room, dressed in fluffy purple slippers and a yellow dressing gown and matching hat. “Severus?”

“Jabardi is here,” Severus motioned to the snake at his feet. “I am going to Harry now.”

Albus sighed and leaned down to the snake. “Thank you, little one. Severus has been most distraught without his mate.”

Jabardi gave an imitation of a bow and slithered towards the door, poking his head along the edges.

Severus winced. “I must go, Albus. For him to be so insistent—I fear for Harry.”

Albus nodded. “I will wait here for your return. Good luck, child.”

“Thank you.”

With a deep breath, Severus threw Harry’s cloak over himself, lifted Jabardi into his arms, and dashed to Myrtle’s Loo. Jabardi opened the doors, and Severus followed him into the Chamber beyond. A muffled cry sounded as he stepped into the main room and the acrid smell of dark magic set every hair on his body on end.

“Oh gods! Harry?”

He held his wand high, beam shining into the darkness of the Chamber, searching for his husband’s form. Jabardi slithered into the light and guided him to the left, and Severus followed the beast to a conjured bed in the corner furthest from where he had once slept side-by-side with Harry, when their friendship was still new.

The boy was thrashing on the sheets, clawing at ropes around his wrist and, when that failed, all over his face. Streaks of crimson followed his fingernails. Heart pounding in his throat, Severus lifted the wandlight high over Harry’s form and gave a strangled cry. Red and pink marked Harry’s face and arms all over, and his fingernails were jagged and torn, ripped past the quick and just as damaged as his face. His fingertips had blistered from rope burns, and his eyes had swollen shut with bruising.

“Dear gods!” Severus rushed to his husband and grabbed his tearing arm. “Oh Merlin! Harry, wake up! Stop, beloved! Please!”

Harry jolted awake and leapt up with a cry. “What—who?”
Severus cupped Harry’s face, healing magic bright on his fingertips. “Oh, love. I am so sorry.”

Harry wailed and covered his face with his hands. “Fuck! No! No, don’t. No, no. I c-can’t do this anymore.”

Severus held Harry tight, pouring healing magic into him even as he pleaded with his husband. “Merlin, I am so sorry, Harry. I will heal this—inside and out, if you will only trust me for a moment. Be still, love. Please.”

Harry smacked ineffectually at Severus’ chest, but whether his weakness stemmed from injury and exhaustion or reluctance to shove him away, Severus wasn’t sure.

“G-get off me,” Harry sobbed. “Let go!”

“Harry, ssh. Beloved, I swear I will explain, but you are injured. Please, let me heal you. I cannot bear to see you so hurt.” Severus drained Harry’s wild emotions, easing the burden of his grief and giving him a bit of peace. “There now, my Harry. Ssh. Breathe, and let me heal your wounds. I’m here. It’s all right now.”

“You don’t care,” Harry sobbed even as he buried his face in Severus’ shoulder. “Don’t want me.”

“Gods, I do. I do care, and I want you so much I cannot endure without you. Merlin, I am so sorry, Harry.”

“Don’t want it,” Harry whimpered. “Hurts so much. Hurts to love you.”

Severus stroked Harry’s wild hair and whispered healing charms over him, interspersed with kisses and soothing murmurs of affection.

“Ssh. Peace, my love. I know you are broken-hearted, but you misunderstood me that night. When I lashed out, when I shouted so violently the last night you were home with me, I was not speaking to you.”

Harry screamed in rage and pain and jerked loose. “That’s a bloody lie! I was the only one there. J-just leave me alone, Severus.”

Devastated at his rejection, Severus sank to his knees, willing to beg if that was what it took to make him stay. “Harry, please. I am telling the truth.” His voice broke. “Please, don’t l-leave me! I can’t stand this life without you.”

Harry tore at his hair and paced, releasing a strangled cry of frustration, pain, and fear, all of which tore into Severus through the bond. “That’s not what you s-said. You said I… I was trying to control you and—”

Severus tried to keep his voice calm despite his terror, to be a voice of reason to his distraught husband. “Harry, listen to me, love. I was talking to Lucius Malfoy, not you!”

Harry sniffled and pulled up short. “M-Malfoy? But he wasn’t—I don’t understand.”

“I… I….”

Severus dropped his head and clenched his fists, forcing back his fears—he had to explain, no matter how it terrified him to speak of it, or Harry would never understand. And Severus would never recover either, if he didn’t face his past and let himself grieve.
He took a deep breath and gathered his strength. “Harry, I am ill.”

Harry froze, eyes full of worry even in such grief and anger, and Severus’ heart latched onto hope. If Harry still loved him enough to worry, perhaps all was not lost.

“What do you mean, Severus?”

Severus clutched at his nightshirt, needing the ballast of something to hold onto. “I mean that Malfoy traumatised me so badly, I have a serious mental illness as a result. I should have told you sooner, but I have been so afraid to speak of it, so terrified of what misery revealing my darkest secrets might inflict upon us both.” He dropped his head and wrapped his arms around his waist, rocking into the scant comfort. “But nothing can be worse than this, being torn from you, and knowing it is my reticence that drove you away, knowing you believe I wanted you gone, when… when all I want is… for you to come home.”

Tears choked him, and Severus covered his face, struggling to breathe through his pain.

“Severus, I don’t understand.” The wild edge had gone from Harry’s voice, but distrust and fear dripped from his words. Severus’ heart twisted with the knowledge that he had put it there, that his refusal to be honest with his beloved husband had broken the trust of the one man who had stood by him through everything.

“I know. I have kept you in the dark for so long… but I cannot keep silent any longer. I have hurt you by it, and I… ever since that night you saved my life, I have only wanted to heal your pain.”

“Then explain it, Severus.”

Harry stepped a little closer, wary, but listening. It was enough to give Severus hope that maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t too late. He nodded and took a deep breath, struggling to find some semblance of calm.

“That night—I was in a flashback, love. Do you know what that is?”

Harry shook his head and winced at the pull on his remaining injuries.

“It is…” Severus closed his eyes and searched for the right words. “It is… difficult to explain. Think of it as falling into a pensieve memory, but without any control or the need for a pensieve. That night, I was lost in my past, and I could not find the way out. It is a symptom of my illness, love, and anything can trigger it.”

Severus shuddered and hugged his waist. “The name you called me after you said you loved me—I cannot bear it. It is my fault—I should have warned you that Malfoy used it as a weapon against me for years and I cannot stand to hear it. But I failed to warn you, and when you called me by it again….”

He broke down in bitter tears and covered his face. “Merlin help me, I-I was so lost in the past, I couldn’t even see you that night, Harry. I was not speaking to you—as far as I knew, you were not even there. I was trying to tell Malfoy he could not control me any longer, that he would never dictate my life again because I no longer belong to him.” He lifted his face and met his stunned husband’s tearful eyes. “I… I am yours.”

Harry’s breath hitched. “Mine?”

“Always, beloved, w-whether you still want me or not.” Tears blinded him, and Severus wept into his hands. “Please, Harry. Please come home.”
Harry knelt before Severus, but did not touch him. “I’m so scared, Sev.”

“I-I know.” Severus choked back a sob. “Harry, gods, I am so sorry. I’ve been so afraid to let you in. Afraid I would reveal my weakness and everything would fall apart. But it has regardless, and….”

He slipped a shaking hand under Harry’s chin and tipped the young man’s head up to meet his eyes. “And the past few days have proved to me that nothing—notthing—is more terrifying than losing you.” He struggled to hold back sobs and traced his thumb across his husband’s jaw, rough with four days of beard growth. “Harry, I will tell you. I will give you all of me, if you will only come back home.”

Harry winced and turned away. “Severus, I… I can’t do this again. I can’t come back only to have another massive misunderstanding like this next week. It hurts so much—look at me. Look what this has done to me!”

Severus dropped his head, shame crushing him. “I see it.” He smoothed healing hands over Harry’s cheeks, over his torn fingernails and bleeding arms. “How did you come to be so injured?”

Harry winced at the sting of tears over the cuts Severus hadn’t managed to heal yet. “Apparently the Chamber only blocks out the Imperius dreams when I’m not in despair.”

“Oh, love. I am so sorry.” Severus laid his forehead against Harry’s and slid his other hand into the young man’s hair. “It will not happen again. I will not let it. I… if you can forgive me, if you can only come home, I swear it will be different from now on.”

“Severus, I… I’m scared. And the bond hurts. It’s hurt for so long. Even when we were happy, it hurts sometimes. I… please. I love you, and I want to come home, but I’m scared, and it hurts.”

“The bond hurts you, love? It has never hurt me, excepting only when you are in pain.”

The look in Harry’s eyes was impossibly sad. “I love you, Severus. Of course the bond doesn’t hurt you. On your side, it’s whole.”

“Oh Merlin. You are bleeding because it is unequal.”

“Y-yeah. I guess that’s part of the reason why I’m so afraid you don’t really want me. Because I can feel it. Constantly.”

“Harry, I… that is not true. It was never true, not since we bonded. Not since you opened your heart to me.”

Severus took a shaky breath and cradled Harry’s head against his own. It was time. Harry had waited too long, and Severus would deny the truth of his heart no longer. Harry needed to hear the words, Severus’ commitment to him, to their life together as equals. And Severus wanted to say the words, to give him faith back and heal his broken heart. To be vulnerable before the one man he could trust never to hurt him for it and heal himself in turn.

He breathed in once, shaky and uncertain, and held on to his husband for ballast. Gods, if Harry rejected him now, he would never recover. Everything of worth in him would die.

But he had to try. For Harry’s sake, for his own, he had to try.

“My beautiful Harry,” Severus murmured, voice rough and broken, “I… I l-love you. Please don’t leave me.”

Harry gave a strangled cry and swayed into Severus’ arms. “S-Sev? It’s… true?”
“Yes. I love you beyond all reason. I think I have done for a few months, perhaps.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead and held him close. “I am sorry it took me so long to come to terms with it.”

Harry cried out and took Severus into a tender, tear-soaked kiss. “Sev’rus, oh Merlin! I love you so much.”

Severus whimpered and held Harry’s face. “Does this mean y-you will give me another chance? You will come home?”

Harry closed his eyes tight. “Will you tell me everything? At the least, everything I need to know to avoid this disaster again?”

“Yes. I swear it. I cannot bear to have you torn away from me again and… and to k-know, it is my fault.”

His voice broke, and Harry kissed away a fresh wave of tears. Severus’ breath hitched in desperate pain and hope, and he met Harry’s tear-salted lips with his own.

“Please, beloved. Please tell me I have not broken our bond beyond repair.”

Harry petted Severus’ hair, gingerly due to his injuries. “Sev, it sounds like it wasn’t your fault. It sounds like you’re sick and this only happened because of your illness. So I… I don’t think there’s anything to forgive. It was just a terrible misunderstanding.”

“Oh, Harry!” Relief wringing a sob from his throat, Severus caught his husband into a seeking, desperate kiss—and cringed at the taste of blood. “Oh, love. I am so sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Harry leaned against his shoulder. “Well, not okay, but it’s not your fault. I still love you. Just please don’t do this to me again. Don’t leave me in the dark and expect me to understand. I need to know the truth, at least about what makes you ill. I need to know where the landmines are to avoid them.”

Severus winced. “Harry, I… the nature of this illness—sometimes I do not even know myself what will trigger it until it happens.”

“Will you tell me the ones you do know?”

“Yes, love. I will tell you everything I know of my illness and… and what caused it. I promise. You shall have the truth, as soon as you are well enough to bear it.” Severus held Harry close, healing him and kissing his hair. “I love you, my Harry. And I am so sorry I hurt you so badly. I truly never meant those awful words for you, and I never wanted the bond to hurt you.”

Harry sniffled and sat up. “You really couldn’t see me, love?”

“Not at all. I did not realise what had happened until I came out of it and you were gone.” Severus closed his fingers around the ring in his pocket. “Finding your ring on the bed beside me—I have never been so desolate as I was in that moment.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologise for. It was my folly that caused you to be so hurt.”

“No, love. You were only sick. I’m sorry I didn’t understand.”

“You couldn’t have done, Harry. You have never heard of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, have
Harry frowned. “Maybe. I think I remember Hermione saying she thought I might have it myself once, but I never followed through with it. It was during fifth year, and I had so much to worry about then, I hadn’t any time to worry about whether I had a Muggle illness or not. Looks as though I should have done.”

“It is possible you have it as well. Most soldiers do, and your past was terrible enough to cause it, to be certain, even if the Dark Lord had not interfered in your life every spare moment. But I… it has been crippling for me. And it is unfair to hide it from you any longer.”

“Just tell me how to take care of you, Severus, and what to do when you do have those… flashbacks.”

“No. I need to tell you everything. I need to talk about it, or I will never be able to move on. Will you listen?”

Harry kissed Severus’ forehead and nodded. “If you want to talk about it. But other than needing to know how I need to take care of you, it’s not fair to pressure you to talk to me.”

“No, it is not pressure. I have held it back too long, for my own sake as well as yours.”

“Okay then. I’ll listen, Sev. Whatever you need to be happy.”

“Happy….” Severus cupped Harry’s still-bruised cheek. “And you… I wish you to be happy as well, my love.”

Severus took a few deep breaths to calm his sudden nerves. Heart pounding and breath coming fast, he held out Harry’s bonding ring in a shaking hand and caressed his cheek with the other.

“Harry, it is past time I gave you my true heart. Will you let me repair the damage I have done, beloved? Will you permit me to give you my full commitment now and accept me as the husband you should have had all along?”

Tears streaking his face, Harry nodded with a broken whisper of Severus’ name.

“Jabardi,” Severus called.

The snake slithered into Harry’s lap from the shadows and gave Severus a curious look.

“My friend, you have brought me back to Harry tonight. Thank you.”

Jabardi bobbed his head as if bowing.

“I need your help, little one. As a wizarding familiar, you are able to stand as a witness to our vows in lieu of a human. Will you witness our renewal ceremony?”

Jabardi nodded and slithered up Severus’ chest to rest around his neck as he often did with Harry. Severus had the feeling the snake had only chosen him so as not to aggravate Harry’s remaining injuries.

Severus brushed Harry’s fringe back and whispered healing chants across his scar. “I swear, when I have you home, I will heal you, beloved. Inside and out.”

Harry sniffled and kissed Severus lightly. “It didn’t hurt—not like losing you.”
Severus closed his eyes and held Harry’s cheek in a gentle palm. “Never again. You will never hurt like this again because of my ineptitude—I swear it.”

Harry leaned into Severus’ hand. “Sev, it’s okay. It’s not ineptitude and it’s not your fault. I just… I miss you.”

“I have missed you as well, so let us begin healing the breach, hmm?”

Harry nodded. With a sigh, Severus started his bonding chants and brushed his husband’s tears away before they could land in his wounds.

“Evoco vinculum inter nos…”

Severus continued the chant to awaken the bond between them, watching the magic glow golden in their hearts. As Harry had said, the light on his side was dim and pale, while the light on Severus’ heart shone so bright, he had to shield his eyes against it. Merlin, Harry truly had given his everything to Severus on the night their bond began, but Severus had held far too much back. No wonder Harry had suffered such fear, such insecurity and pain in their bond—it had barely sealed on his side at all.

Well, that wouldn’t do.

Having finished his chant, Severus laid a hand over the dim light on Harry’s chest and gave him a solemn kiss. “I swear, I will heal this, love. You need not suffer the pain of a half-sealed bond any longer.”

Tears wobbled on Harry’s lashes. “I was happy anyway.”

“I know. Your love is so powerful it filled the gap, but you needn’t carry the burden of both sides another moment.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead lightly and held his ring at the end of his bonding finger.

“I, Severus Tobias Snape Prince, take you, Harry James Potter Prince, as my soul-bonded mate, from this moment on and into eternity. I give you my mind, my body, my soul, and my love, until the end of time. I vow to support you and protect you, to honour your commitment to me and to be faithful to you. I vow to cherish your gift to me always, and to never forget the unconditional love and sacrifice you have shown me while I learned to conquer my fears.”

He kissed Harry’s tears away and wept a few of his own. “Here, in this place where our relationship was first born, I offer everything I am to you, my beloved. Whatever may come, be it sorrow or joy, now and forever, you have all of me. I take you as you are, accept you and cherish you, without condition, until the end of time.” He laid his forehead against Harry’s and whispered, “As long as I exist, I… I am yours.”

With a soft cry, Harry laid his head on Severus’ shoulder, shaking all over and weeping helplessly. “Oh gods, Severus!”

Severus caressed his husband’s hair, soothing him, and finished his vows. “I recommit myself to you as your soul-bonded mate now and forever, Harry Prince, and will honour our bond always. So mote it be.” With a quiet, tearful sigh, he slipped the ring onto Harry’s finger.

Jabardi hissed and bobbed his head, and his affirmation guided the magic to bind them together, completely this time. Golden light sprung to life on Harry’s chest, quite as brilliant as the glow on Severus’ own. Harry reeled back, eyes awash with pure, soul-deep love and glowing with the strength of their bond.
“Severus Tobias Prince,” he whispered, his voice thick and raspy, “I accept the renewal of your vows.”

The light sent a wave of Harry’s love back to Severus, and Severus gasped at an all-consuming rush of warmth and a sharp sting of anguish. He vowed he would take that pain away, so help him. Little by little, he would restore Harry’s faith in him and heal his broken heart.

He cupped Harry’s face and leaned in close. “We must kiss to seal the bond, but first, allow me to….” He traced his fingertips over Harry’s lips, sealing his remaining cuts with all the healing power he could muster. “There. I think it will not hurt you to kiss me now. Will you accept me again, my love?”

Harry threw his arms around Severus’ neck and kissed him hard, passion and adoration flowing in equal measure on his lips. The bond surged once more and settled, but Severus was almost too busy mapping his husband’s mouth to notice.

Harry pulled back with a pant and gripped Severus’ shoulders. “Sev, I love you. Take me home?”

Severus kissed his forehead. “Yes. Our quarters are too lonely without you.” He shrunk Harry’s belongings, Summoned them and placed them in his pockets, and Banished Harry’s conjured bed. “Now, we are ready. Lean on me, love. I will carry you.”

Harry sighed and nodded, relief and love warm in his side of the bond, and Severus swept his husband into his arms. With one more kiss to Harry’s sweet lips and a tearful sigh to feel him in his arms once more and flew his husband home.

Chapter End Notes

**Spell Notes:**

*Magicae Illud…: "Illuminate magic." Charm to reveal the spell matrix of a particular spell.*
Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** discussion of past sexual and domestic abuse. Severus finally opens up about his past, and it's a rough read, but after this, he's finally free to heal and on the same page as his husband.

*AN: I know they’re called Bipolar and Dissociative Identity Disorder now. At the time this fic took place, it was still Manic Depression and MPD.*

**Chapter 49**

*The Heart of the Matter*

Severus removed their invisibility spells as soon as the door their quarters shut behind him and carried Harry inside. “I have you, love. It’s all right now.”

Harry buried his face in Severus’ shoulder and held on tight. “Don’t let go. I need this.”

“I do as well. I—”

Albus called from the kitchen, “Severus, is Harry with you, my boy?”

Severus carried Harry into the kitchenette. “We are home.”

“Oh, thank Merlin.” Albus greeted them with a tearful smile. “Oh, my boys. I am so relieved. Harry, did Severus explain what happened at all to you?”

“Y-yes, some, but what are you doing here, Albus?”

The old man patted Harry’s shoulder. “I was here for Severus, child, both to comfort and protect him. It takes much to render a Zopath so crippled with despair, even his natural shields fail—especially a Zopath as powerful as Severus—but without you, Severus could not Occlude at all. I feared for his life, and I feared for you.”

Harry went rigid. “Sev, you haven’t been able to Occlude? Oh gods. Did they see? Are we in danger?”

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “Peace. The moment I realised my shields had failed, I returned to our quarters and stayed well out of the view of the public. I imagine the Dark Lord will question why I have not been teaching for the past four days, but a simple excuse of illness will satisfy him. Poppy will support me in that claim, once she knows I had no choice but to seek cover.”

“I will make an announcement at breakfast concerning your return to health,” said Albus with a nod. “With any luck, that will be enough to keep Tom at bay.”

“One can hope.” Severus shifted Harry higher in his arms. “Albus, Harry is injured, and I need to
care for him. His *Imperius* dreams returned in the Chamber, and it seems that the Dark Lord chose to force Harry into attacking himself when his plans failed.”

“I antagonised him on purpose,” Harry said with a blush. “I was so miserable, the pain hardly registered, and I thought… as long as he was hacked off and attacking me, he couldn’t do worse damage.”

Severus kissed Harry’s temple. “My brave Gryffindor.” He held Harry close. “I will not allow you to suffer so again, I swear it.”

Harry buried his face in Severus’ neck and sniffled. “I… I know.”

Harry’s trust in him, despite all he had suffered, broke and healed Severus at once. He shifted Harry still closer, ignoring the ache in his arms, and gave Albus a pleading look.

“Yes, I see.” Albus laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I am glad you are home, child.” He moved to the hearth. “Good luck, my boys, and if you need anything at all, do not hesitate to call me.”

“Thank you, Albus,” Severus said, his voice soft.

“Not at all. Goodnight, boys.”

They responded in kind, and Albus swept away through the floo.

“Now, I believe I have a promise to keep.” Severus kissed Harry’s curls. “Rest, beloved. I will take care of you now.”

Harry nodded and leaned back, vulnerability and fear rendering him small. “Sev? I love you.”

Ah. So he feared Severus had only said it to win him back and would not repeat it. Well, Severus had no intention of letting his husband doubt him ever again.

“I love you too, my Harry. So much.”

Harry’s breath hitched and tears of relief and joy dripped down his temples. “Severus….”

“I meant it, Harry. I meant every word I spoke in that Chamber. I will not let you suffer again. You are my husband in truth now, my equal and my bondmate for eternity, and I refuse to let you down one more time.” Severus held him tight. “You are mine, beloved, and I am yours.”

Harry buried his face in Severus’ shoulder and wept. “Oh, Sev! Oh, thank the gods. It’s been so hard.”

“No longer, love. Our bond will bring you no further pain, I swear it.” Severus kissed Harry’s curls. “Will you vow to me that, in the future, if we have another misunderstanding, you will stay and speak to me about it? Will you stay long enough to hear an explanation and work out our troubles between us?”

Harry sniffled and nodded. “I p-promise. I don’t want to run away again. I need you.”

“And I need you as well. These past four days have been utter hell. I cannot bear this life without you at my side.” Severus nuzzled Harry’s hair and kissed the top of his ear. “I love you, my Harry, beyond all reason. So, no matter what happens in the future, please know I want you here, with me, always, and I will never turn you out or hurt you with cruel words. My illness may force terrible things from me, but I swear, I will never say those words to you.”

Severus held him tighter. “Come, love. Let us care for your body, and then I believe we are overdue for a talk.”

“Y-yeah. That sounds good.”

Severus had healed all of Harry’s remaining injuries, fed him, bathed him, and carried him to bed, but Harry wouldn’t rest without answers.

“Severus, I need to understand. I need to know what’s happening. Please, talk to me, love.”

Severus sighed and climbed into bed beside Harry. “I would prefer you to sleep first, but… no. Perhaps it is for the best that we talk now, before it becomes too easy to push it aside.”

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’ and held him tight. “I’m listening. You said the name I called you… um, the _p_ name, it triggered your past?”

Severus nodded and closed his eyes. “I believe I am to the point that I can take pleasure in most endearments, but _never_ use that one. Please. It has been tainted for me.”

“All right. If you need me not to use it, I won’t. Are there any others I should avoid?”

Severus frowned, thinking hard. “Perhaps… do not use ‘little’ in reference to me. I do not think it would occur to you, but if it ever does, I fear I would not react well.”

“Okay. I won’t use that word then, but can you tell me why it hurts so much, Sev?”

Severus shivered. “Yes. I have let the truth go unspoken for far too long.” He curled into Harry’s embrace and tucked his head under the younger man’s chin, needing to feel protected. “T-this will be difficult.”

Harry held Severus tight and ran a gentle hand through his hair. “I’ve got you, love.”

Severus took a deep breath and a moment to gather his thoughts. “I think you are aware that I had a bit of a schoolboy crush on your mother?”

Harry grimaced. “Um….”

Severus snorted. “No fear, husband mine. It did not last beyond my first day as a Hogwarts student. Until then, I had thought myself relatively… typical in my desires. Then I saw him, and I realised nothing would work out with your mother after all.”

Harry frowned. “So you found out you were gay the first day of school? I didn’t have a clue until the end of the Triwizard when I realised I hadn’t been interested in Cho.”

Severus froze. “Diggory. You had feelings for him?”

“Didn’t understand it until it was _far_ too late. The nightmares that summer were terrible. Dudley would taunt me about my boyfriend and… ugh. It hurt so much that I couldn’t save him.”
“Do you still blame yourself?”

Harry sighed and turned his face into Severus’ shoulder. “I think, in a way, I probably always will, but I understand it better now after talking to you and Poppy. It’s survivor’s guilt.”

Severus nodded. “A feeling I understand too well.”

“I know.” Harry snuggled closer. “This boy you fancied… you’re talking about Malfoy, right?”

Severus closed his eyes. “Yes. He was a seventh year prefect at the time. He was... Merlin, I thought he was lovely back then. And, to be fair, he is decorative—but it is an illusion. Under the surface, he is as dark and ugly as they come.”

With a cringe, he clutched Harry tighter. “You do not hate me for it? Because it was Malfoy who broke me?”

“No, love. You can’t help it. What happened?”

Severus shivered. “For the entire first term, I walked about with stars in my eyes. I was never brave enough to approach him, but I watched. Always watching him, and hoping he would look back. In the second half of the year, he finally did.”

Harry cringed. “A seventh year and a first year?”

Severus raised an eyebrow at his mate.

Harry scowled. “Oh, come on. It’s not the same, love. I’m not a child and I wasn’t when we were bonded. I mean, I might have fallen in love with you when I was sixteen, but I didn’t act on it until I became an adult. You were twelve—no, thirteen, but barely!”

Severus nodded, trying to banish the pain of those early years. “Yes, I know. His interest in me—at that time—was purely platonic.”

“Still, it’s a bit odd for a seventh year to take interest in someone so much younger unless they’re related or family friends, don’t you think? Or if there’s some kind of tutoring thing, but still.”

“At the time? I was only giddy that he had finally noticed me. As an adult and with the benefit of hindsight, I completely agree.”

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’ hair, soothing him with a gentle touch. “So what happened?”

“You are aware of the Gilbroy-Newman potions contest, are you not?”

Harry nodded. “Not that I ever had interest in competing, but Hermione entered last year. Didn’t work out for her too well. It’s part of what finally dragged her head out of her arse.”

“Yes, I remember.” Severus closed his eyes. “In my case, my mother had trained me in potions secretly from the time I could walk, and by my first year, I had already developed several changes to Euphoria Elixir. The peppermint, for example.” He lowered his head. “A drop or two in my tea in the morning kept me from breaking apart under the strain of my home life and... and your family’s constant abuse.”

Harry cringed. “Oh, Sev. I’m so sorry.”

“Ssh. You are nothing like them.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “And it is nothing you have control over regardless. I only mentioned it because it is time I was fully honest with you.”
Harry sniffled and gave him a sad smile. “Okay. So, you’d altered the Euphoria Elixir.”

“Yes, and I entered my improved brew into the competition as a first year.” Severus’ face warmed slightly. “I was the youngest competitor ever to win it.”

“Dear Merlin, that’s incredible, Sev! Masters enter that competition!”

“I-I know. I couldn’t believe it myself, but the judges said my changes to the Elixir had made it viable as a medical treatment for depression. Prior to then, we hadn’t any effective treatments—we were only just learning of mood disorders at the time—and the side effects of Euphoria Elixir interfered too much with daily life to use it for anything more than a lark.”

“Oh, Severus. You mean, back when Poppy was treating me for it during sixth year—that was you? The medicine you invented as a child?”

Severus flushed to his ears and nodded.

Harry kissed him softly. “You’re amazing. Absolutely amazing.”

Severus held Harry tighter and let the warmth of his praise chase his fears away. “Mm, thank you, love, but I believe I should return to the story before it becomes too difficult to speak. I have let you go into this relationship blind for far too long.”

Harry nodded and stroked Severus’ hair. “Okay. So what happened next?”

“Well, my success with the contest gave me such a thrill, and it was wonderful to stick it to the self-proclaimed Marauders, to let them know I had worth of my own—not that they bothered themselves with such trifles.” Severus shuddered. “But, to my cost, Lucius did. My win drew his notice and he offered to tutor me in the subject.”

Harry frowned. “Tutor you? Did he actually do it?”

“Yes. It was proper tutelage, though not to the level I needed. Even as a seventh year, the bastard could barely keep up.”

Harry smirked. “That’s my Sev.”

Severus gave a wan chuckle. “Yes, well, at the time, I saw no harm in allowing him to ‘teach’ me regardless, so I spent all my spare time brewing and improving my skills. That is half the reason my schoolbooks are so marked over. I was constantly testing, making changes, altering formulas. It became almost an obsession, improving my skills in hopes he would notice. He did. And Lily noticed him. She knew of my feelings too and, like you, found his interest off-putting. Particularly as he was Slytherin to the core.”

Harry frowned. “There’s nothing wrong with being Slytherin, love.”

“Lily did not believe so. She thought I was a missort and belonged in Gryffindor with her. I did not bother to correct her. The hat laughed at me when I asked.”

Harry petted Severus’ hair. “Well, you might not have had Gryffindor qualities in first year, but I’ve seen some since. Your bravery, for instance, puts all the lions to shame.”

Severus kissed him lightly. “I do not think I am brave where I need to be. I was so afraid of your love, I hurt you. Over and over. And now I wish I had trusted you sooner.”
“Ssh. It’s over now, Sev. You were sick and scared and we’re fully bonded as equals now anyway. It’s going to be all right from now on.” Harry smoothed Severus’ hair and held him close. “So, what happened next? You said Mum was… less than happy about your interest in Malfoy. What did she do?”

“She warned me away from him. She gave many logical, mature reasons why Lucius should not have been interested in me and why my infatuation was dangerous. And I reacted like any other young boy being told something sensible for their own good.”

Harry snorted. “Yes, I can imagine how well that went over.”

Severus chuckled, though sadness tinged the tone. “When I did not listen to her, she began to distance herself. I assume she thought Malfoy would harm her if she stayed too close.” He shuddered. “She had the right of it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It is my own fault.” Severus breathed in Harry’s scent for strength. “After that, my infatuation only grew. I spent every spare minute studying either him or potions. And he led me on like a master. I know, looking back, he was aware of my infatuation. And he encouraged it. He fed me little drops of praise as if I were a dog at the lap of my owner.”

“Merlin,” Harry breathed.

Severus shivered. “After he graduated, my relationship with Lils healed for a time. He did not seek me out in all that time, but he did send letters asking on my progress, reminding me to stay true to my goals. And I did. Then, in my fifth year, he came back as a professorial assistant—in potions, no less.” He closed his eyes and shuddered. “And that was when my life began to tear apart at the seams.”

Harry shifted so Severus’ head rested on his shoulder and held him tight. Severus took comfort in Harry’s warmth and continued his story.

“At the time, Horace Slughorn was the potions professor for Hogwarts and head of Slytherin. He was a pitiful coward and pandered to anyone with fame and fortune, though he shied away from those with ties to the dark. At the time, Malfoy had not yet been shown to have ties to the Dark Lord, so his prestige made him a favourite with Slughorn.

“I, however, had no chance. I believe the bastard was jealous of my skills. When I took home the prize as a first year the same year he entered the competition… well, that combined with my poverty and lack of support, set the man against me. Despite my abilities, he never allowed me to assist in classes or offered an apprenticeship. I knew I deserved it, but as long as Slughorn taught at Hogwarts, it would never happen.”

Harry frowned. “How did you get your mastery then, love?”

“Slughorn retired two years before I graduated. I apprenticed under Professor Tabitha Greengrass—Daphne and Astoria’s grandmother. She was a medical researcher for St. Mungo’s, but took over the potions position for five years after Slughorn’s retirement. When I came seeking the defence position, Albus refused me—he knew my ties and knew I would have little choice but to hurt or be hurt—but Tabitha recommended me for the potions position instead. And so, she quite happily returned to St. Mungo’s, and here I am.”

“Oh.” Harry kissed him lightly. “It sounds like Madam Greengrass was on your side.”
Severus nodded. “It is one of the reasons why I am so fond of Daphne. I see my mastery professor in her, and I remember the first person other than Lily and my mother to show me kindness.” He closed his eyes and leaned on Harry’s shoulder. “She was the one who taught me to create spells, and everything I know about medical potioneering. She wrote me every week until her death five years after she left Hogwarts. Gods, I was desolate without her. She was my last support left, until Albus and Minerva wormed their way through my defences.”

“Oh, Sev.” Harry held him tighter. “You’re not alone any longer. And I’ll have to ask Luna to talk to her for us. To thank her for looking after her so well, and to tell her you loved her.”

“I truly did.” Severus sighed and buried his face into his shoulder. “And, as I failed you, as I failed my mother, Lily, and Regulus, I could not tell her either.”

“You were close to Sirius’ brother?”

“You might say that. Besides Lily, he was my only other friend.”

“Merlin! Why didn’t you ever tell me, sweetheart?”

Severus kissed Harry’s chest. “I feared it would hurt you. I did not wish to bring up bad memories.”

“What happened with Regulus?”

“Well, Regulus was two years behind us in school, so naturally, we were not as close as I was to Lily. I did care for him, however. He was the only other person I dated seriously after Lucius shattered me, but it did not last.”

“That?”

Severus closed his eyes against tears. “Regulus was, like myself, a Death Eater who had been… misled. He did not support the Dark Lord or his views, and in fact, was working to take him down from within. We were spies together, for a short while. One night, he told me he had found a piece of something incredibly evil in a cave, something he had to destroy before the Dark Lord could be defeated. He refused to let me go with him—he feared we would be caught. I never saw him again.

“I did not know what had happened to him for the longest time. After Lucius, and in the years that followed where I was abused and rejected by every man I sought out, I came to believe he had simply tired of me and abandoned me to fight the war alone, but I believe I have pieced together the truth since then.”

“What?”

“That evil object in a cave—I believe it was a horcrux. One of Riddle’s. And I believe Regulus must have died there, attempting to destroy it.” Severus closed his eyes in grief. “He was only nineteen.”

“Merlin.” Tears slipped down Harry’s face. “All this time, I’ve believed Sirius’ brother to be dark and evil, and it turns out he was a hero.” He sniffled and buried his face in Severus’ hair. “I… would you mind if I asked Luna for answers? For the truth?”

Severus shook his head. “On the contrary, it might heal us both to know what truly kept him from me all these years.”

“We’ll ask her as soon as we’re recovered then.” Harry kissed Severus’ forehead. “I got you sidetracked. Sorry, love. Can we get back to your story about Malfoy?”
“Yes, we must, before I lose my nerve.” Severus clutched Harry tighter for strength. “I believe I left off after telling you Lucius had become a professorial assistant in my fifth year?” Harry nodded, and Severus continued his tale. “Well, my feelings for him hadn’t changed—if anything, absence had turned my regard into something even more powerful. So, as soon as he returned, I asked to be his assistant. I believed, with Slughorn in control, it was the only way I would receive proper training in the subject until I could find a true master to teach me.”

Severus closed his eyes and sighed. “Instead, Lucius said he would like to get to know me better personally. He began taking me out on dates. Always Muggle. He told me it wouldn’t do for someone of his stature to be seen with a half-blood.”

“The bastard!”

Severus laughed bitterly. “You have no idea. He poisoned me. He would sprinkle praise with cruelty, and make it sound like he was doing me a favour the entire time. Touch became a system of reward and punishment. If I was a good little pet—” He snarled the name. “—I was rewarded with small touches. Never enough to sate the need for affection inside me. If I was not, I was forced to sit by and watch while he touched Narcissa Black the way I wanted him to touch me—she hated it quite as much as I did. But I, who had never had anyone but Lily and Mam, basked in what I could get.”

“Fuck!”

“Yes, he was quite a master sociopath.” Severus sniffled and trembled against Harry’s chest for a long moment. Harry caressed his face and arms and kissed his hair.

“Sev, I can’t show how much I love you in public yet, but know once the supreme bastard is in the ground, I am going to kiss you so hard in front of everyone and let them know you’re wanted.”

Severus’ breath hitched and his heart thumped. Gods, how long had he dreamed of that? Of being claimed, of being loved, and not someone’s dirty little secret?

“I… oh.”


“Please,” Severus breathed. “Please, show the world I am yours. I have longed—so many years—please…”

Harry smiled and cradled him close. “Okay, love. I will, as soon as it’s safe.”

“Yes, I… I would like that.” Severus snuggled close once more, taking comfort in his husband’s love. His acceptance, of both Severus’ weaknesses and strengths. His determination to help Severus grow above them and become a stronger, healthier man.

That was love. True devotion, like he had both longed for and feared all his life.

“Yes, Sev,” Harry murmured against his hair. “I love you. All of you.”

Severus sighed and held Harry tighter. “I know that now. Love is so… different, so pure with you. I have known for weeks that you are safe, but it was so difficult to let go of my old fears. I am not sure I am entirely past them even now, but I hope discussing them with you will help you understand and better prepare you to deal with them in the future.”

“I think it will, love. Can you go on?”
“Yes, I was merely distracted.” Severus took a deep breath and brought his focus back to his tale. “Well, at the time, Lily was still my closest friend, and Regulus my only other. She was to me what Neville is to you—Regulus was more like Blaise. We had a decent friendship, but did not share secrets. Lily was my true confidant, the one I leaned on in trouble, at least until Regulus and I became lovers.

“So, naturally, I told her about some of the ‘dates’ Malfoy and I enjoyed, but she was not as excited as I. She tried to warn me that his behaviour was abnormal. She knew something was amiss, even though at first, he was not overtly abusive. But I had already fallen too hard. I grew angry at her for trying to break up what I believed—what he taught me to believe—was the only chance I had for happiness.”

“Oh, Severus.” Harry kissed his husband’s forehead and caressed his cheek. “Gods. I want to kill the prick.”

Severus gave a dark laugh. “If you only knew.” He shuddered and tucked his head under Harry’s chin. “My relationship with Lils began to deteriorate. He poisoned me against her, using her Muggle descent as a weapon. And as Lils continued to hate him and try to break me free, I grew to resent her more and more. He led me to resent her. He wanted me alone and helpless…and mouldable.”

“Dear gods, Sev. So by the time that… thing in the pensieve happened…?”

“I had already been completely poisoned against her. That is why I lashed out.”

“Merlin.”

Severus snuggled closer, fighting the cold shame of his memories. “I went to him that night, after they had abused me, but he was cold. He told me I had acted unfit for my heritage and shamed him, and sent me home in tears. So I began to wonder if maybe Lils had the right of it. And I begged her forgiveness and help.”

Tears slipped down his face, over his nose and onto Harry’s chest. “But by then, it was too late. She wouldn’t take me back. She said she didn’t recognise me any longer, and since I wouldn’t listen to her anyway, maybe it was best that I didn’t waste my time associating with mudbloods.”

“Damn,” Harry whispered. “Severus….”

The pain and love in Harry’s voice healed some of Severus’ bleeding heart, and he held his husband a little tighter.

“She was only hurt, and with good reason—I was cruel to her and she had been trying to help me. If I had gone back to her again after that day, I believe she would have forgiven me. But, thanks to Lucius’ manipulations, I did not return. He used her anger to turn me against her. He made it seem inevitable, that it was a good thing, and that he was proud that I had finally cut ties with her.”

“Oh, Sev….”

Severus buried his face in Harry’s throat and shuddered. “Turning from her was perhaps the worst mistake of my early life. In losing her, I lost my strongest support, my only chance at freeing myself from Lucius’ manipulations. And with Lily gone, he no longer had a reason to hide the truth of his cruel nature.

“From then on, he began poisoning me in earnest. He said terrible things about me—such as I would never make it in the world as a potions master due to my status, or my looks, or my personality—and made it seem as though he had my best interests at heart. I’m only looking out for you, Severus. It’s
such a shame the world doesn’t see you as I do, but we must be pragmatic.’ Merlin, he was more manipulative than Albus at his worst.’

Harry nodded and wiped tears from his cheeks. “The headmaster is manipulative, but he really does have people’s best interests at heart. It’s just a toss-up as to whether he’s thinking of the good of a single person or that of the entire wizarding world at any given time, so sometimes the individuals get hurt. And he’s never been abusive—not personally anyway. He’s never… trained you like it sounds like Malfoy did, the bastard.”

Severus shivered. “Because Malfoy did not strike me—at least, not at first—I failed to recognize the abusive nature of our ‘relationship.’ The way he treated me after the pensieve incident and his continual degradation of my one friend had planted a seed of doubt, but I did not understand it. I was in too deep regardless. By that point, he had convinced me that no one else cared for my welfare. He even managed to turn me against my own mother before she died—you remember I told you of her final message?”

Harry nodded, tears streaking his face. “Yeah. What happened after that?”

“I… I simply chose to stay with him, to distance myself from my ‘blood traitor’ roots and attempt to grow beyond them, as he believed I should.” Severus took a shaky breath and held Harry tighter. “But when I received word that she had died, gods, I was devastated. I hadn’t meant to completely alienate her, to hurt her. I only…I do not even know what I wanted at the time.”

He gave a bitter laugh. “No, no, I do. I wanted him to notice me, to see that I was good. Instead, when I asked him to support me after her death, he claimed he had unavoidable business on the day of her funeral and left me to grieve her alone. In reality, he simply did not wish to be seen with me in public.”

Harry buried his face in Severus’ hair, his side of the bond sharp with grief and love. “Oh gods, Sev. I’m so sorry. I… gods, you deserve so much better.” He shuddered and kissed Severus lightly. “I swear to you, I’ll never treat you like that, love. I’ll heal your wounds as best as I can, if you’ll let me.”

Severus returned his affection with a soft, tender kiss of his own. “Ssh. I trust you.”

Tears streaked Harry’s cheeks. “After what you’ve just told me, I realise now how precious your trust really is.” He cradled Severus close. “I love you, Sev. I swear you’ll always be safe with me.”

Severus blinked back tears of his own and held Harry tight. “I know. I feel it, when you hold me. I see it when you look at me. I trust you because you love me.” He took a deep breath. “Do you wish to hear the rest?”

“Yes. Much as it hurts, I think you need to talk about it, love. Get it out of your system and all. And I need to know how to heal you.”

Severus murmured. “Your love heals me. I need nothing else.” He nuzzled Harry’s chest and breathed in his scent. “Well, from there, he began training me in combat—used it as an excuse to torture and beat me, rather—and led me towards the dark.” He shuddered and pressed closer. “Gods, I was so afraid. I invented that terrible curse in an effort to please him and spare myself pain, but he used it against me. I had not intended it to go beyond us. But when I took the mark, I learned all the Death Eaters already knew the curse and none but Lucius and myself knew the counter. He had broken my confidence and used that godsawful spell as a tool to gain more power, and so many perished as a result.”
Harry turned into Severus and cupped his face. “You understand the deaths caused by that curse are not your fault? Riddle would have killed them anyway and Malfoy was the one to give them the weapon.”

“I invented said weapon. I bear at least some share of the guilt.”

Harry kissed his forehead. “You invented it under duress, Severus. You’re not guilty.”

Severus turned his face away, disbelief and guilt weighing him down. “I... I think I should just continue my story.”

Harry gave him a sad smile and kissed Severus’ temple. “Okay, love. Whatever you need.” But he suppressed a wave of pain and worry through their bond, and Severus’ heart ached with remorse.

“I’m sorry, Harry.”

“Ssh. You don’t need to apologise, Sev. I’m just glad you’re talking about this finally. You’ve borne it in silence far too long.”

Severus swallowed hard and returned his head to Harry’s chest, letting the sound of his husband’s heartbeat soothe him. “Y-yes. And to that end, where was I? Ah, yes. As I said, Lucius was training me for the dark. I did not realise it at the time—he pretended that he was teaching me to defend myself. But he never taught me much at all, nor did he heal my injuries. And worse, he continued to pressure me into siding with the dark. Before my seventeenth birthday, he had convinced me to join the Death Eaters. Gods, I was so foolish—I never should have—but I believed him when he said they were simply a political group, like the idiot I was. Instead, I became a monster.”

“Oh gods. Severus, no.” Harry cupped his face and kissed his forehead. “You are not a monster or an idiot. You’re kind and brave and intelligent, and inno—”

Severus quivered and buried his face in Harry’s chest. “No. I am not innocent, Harry. Not for the spell and not for this.”

“You are.” Harry kissed the top of Severus’ head. “Let it go, Severus. It wasn’t your fault, love. He manipulated you into it from your first year. You had no chance against someone like that.”

“But I never should have—he was so evil, and I let him—”

“No.” Harry ran his fingers through Severus’ hair and cradled him close. “Sev, do you remember what you told me when I blamed myself for the visions?” He held Severus’ cheek and brushed tears away. “It’s not your fault, Severus. You were a little boy. He manipulated you. He used you. He held the wand. It’s okay. Forgive yourself, my Sev.”

Severus cried, “I can’t!” His voice dropped to a broken whisper. “I can’t. My spells killed people, Harry. And as a Death Eater spy, I have had to do terrible things. I am not innocent, much as I wish I could be.”

Harry tugged Severus a little higher and kissed him lightly. “Then know this, okay? I don’t believe you’re guilty, but even if you were, even if you did bear responsibility for Lucius’ and Riddle’s crimes, it changes nothing between us. I still believe you’re the most honourable, bravest, strongest man I’ve ever met, and I still love you beyond measure, guilty or not.”

Warmth, wonder, and tingling relief flooded Severus’ chest and spread throughout his body. “You... truly still love me?”
“Unconditionally. Nothing will change it.”

Severus melted into Harry’s embrace, cathartic tears sliding down his face. “Oh, Harry.” He buried his face in Harry’s neck and struggled to gain purchase on his grief.

Harry simply held him and murmured soft words of love and comfort. “Severus, your past is over and done with. The only reason I want you to talk about this at all is because I love you and I want you to be okay. I want you to move beyond it. And I also want to wring Malfoy’s neck for the pain he caused you.”

Severus lifted a tear-streaked face to look into Harry’s eyes. “How can you not blame me?”

“Because he started grooming you from the time you were thirteen years old, Severus! How would you have known? You were still a kid!” Harry kissed him softly. “It’s not your fault. He took advantage of a child, love, and used you for his own twisted ideals. He’s the monster here, not you. Never you.”

With a tearful smile, Severus nestled his head in the crook of Harry’s neck and snuggled close. Relief and love surged from the deepest core of him, healing old wounds and filling him with hope. Even now, Harry still loved him.

“I always will, Severus.”

Severus’ ears burned at the realisation he had broadcasted his thoughts.

“Ssh.” Harry kissed his forehead. “You’re safe here, love.”

Severus nodded and curled in close. “You still have not heard the worst of it.”

“Tell me then. Purge it from your soul, Sev, and I’ll heal you.”

“Yes. I believe I must if we are ever to be truly happy together.” Severus sniffled and continued in a soft, breaking voice. “For a time after Lucius brought me into the Dark Lord’s camp, I went to Death Eater meetings, but only the ones where they made their political plans. They would not wish to scare away new blood by showing them the dark underbelly of Riddle’s world, after all. I suspected there was more to the Death Eaters, but I could not prove it and… and I did not want to believe it. I did not want to believe Lucius would use me so badly, in spite of the evidence staring me in the face.”

Severus closed his eyes and swallowed a surge of tears. Gods, even now, it still hurt. “During that time, before I was marked, I… I came to Malfoy at night. I was so alone, and I loved him in spite of everything. I wanted him to love me. But as always, he mixed his twisted version of love with grooming, cruelty and false kindness.

“He set up a flat in Muggle London to use for our meetings as he couldn’t bear to be seen with me in public.” He shuddered and clutched at Harry’s hand, his anchor in the storm of his painful past. “And each time I met him, he would ask me to do something degrading—training, he said, for my new role. Then, he rewarded me by allowing me to perform sexual favours upon him.”

Harry grimaced. “That was no reward. It was rape, Sev.”

Severus shuddered. “I did not refuse him.”

“Love, he didn’t give you the option to refuse him. He was abusing you already, and he had convinced you that you were nothing without him. He used you, coerced you—and he hurt you.
That little flash I saw in your mind that day—gods, Sev. You were in so much pain. You couldn’t breathe and you were scared to death. Of course it was bloody rape!

Severus gave a broken sob. “I—it… I… it was?”

“Yes, love. Brutal, vicious rape I swear I’ll make the bastard pay for one day.”

Severus whimpered and wept into Harry’s neck. “Dear gods. I never realised. All this time, and I never put the pieces together… I truly am a fool.”

Harry kissed Severus’ forehead and cradled him close. “Love, you’re the most brilliant man I know, but even geniuses can be exploited. Ssh. You were a victim of a crime, Sev, but it doesn’t define you. You’re not a fool, you’re not weak, you’re not dirty, and you’re not to blame. You’re just my lovely, brave, innocent husband. And I still love you just the same.”

Severus keened in Harry’s shoulder and wept. “Oh gods, oh, Harry. It hurts.”

“I know, love. I know. I have you. Cry all you need to. I’m right here with you.”

Severus choked out, “I… I can’t believe I was so bloody thick! The bastard r-raped me, repeatedly, and t-treated it as a favour! As if I could never hope for more so I should be grateful he let me touch him, half-blooded as I was, even while he nearly suffocated me on his prick! H-how could I not see it?”

“Oh, Severus.” Harry’s voice broke, his pain clear through the bond. “Gods, love. It’s not your fault. You didn’t see it because you loved him. It makes us blind sometimes.” Harry held Severus’ face and kissed his tears away. “But listen to me. I swear to you, even if love completely blinds you to the person I am, I will never take advantage of you. I love you, Severus, and I want you to be happy. You’re safe now. I promise.”

Severus whimpered and leaned into Harry’s hands. “I l-love you too.”

Harry kissed Severus’ forehead and guided his husband to lie upon his chest again. “Go on, love. Get all this poison out of your spirit. Tell me everything he did to you so it can’t come up to bite us both again. Then, once you’ve purged everything, I’m going to take care of you and start healing all your wounds.”

Severus buried his face in Harry’s throat for a moment, overcome and struggling not to weep. Gods, he needed this. He needed Harry’s love and acceptance so much.

“I w-will try,” he choked out.

A moment of harsh breaths and quiet tears later, he had regained some control over his voice.

“T-the night I was marked, Lucius received praise for bringing me in. It seemed the Dark Lord had also heard of my first year win in the potions contest and wanted me for my skills in the art. And Lucius had spent years developing me, grooming me for just that purpose. I did not understand at the time—I was terrified and in pain, and I thought perhaps he had only wanted me to fit in, but still, everything seemed wrong.

“That night, I learned the truth of Riddle’s regime. And my heart shattered when I realised what Lucius had led me into—what he had trained me for. I went to him, still believing he cared about me somehow, and demanded answers. He pretended as if he had done this out of a desire to do what was best for me, but I knew it was a lie. I didn’t want to believe it, but I knew.”
He closed his eyes and tried to control his tears. “I demanded he prove it. I wanted to know he loved me once and for all. So he… he started to… ah, have sex with me—no. It was rape, as you have said, but I did not know it until now. He was rough and careless, nothing like you have always been. But he did not stop when I said I was frightened. He acted as though my fear proved I did not love him as much as I said, so I bit it back and let him move on.”

Harry growled out, “I’ll fucking murder the bastard.”

Severus just wanted the story to end, so he kept going. “He used a spell to prepare me and a Muggle condom on himself—because he did not wish to dirty his pure blood with my Muggle ancestry, the bastard—but stopped short as he went to enter me. He rubbed against me, called me a shameless slut and such, but he did not enter me.”

He curled into himself and hugged his waist. “Then he moved back, put on his trousers, and laughed at me. He said, ‘Did you truly believe I loved you? I have what I wanted. The charade is over.’ Then, when I begged him to stay, he told me his fiancée was waiting at home and would not appreciate him dallying with a filthy half-blood boy who did not know his own place.”

“Fuck!”

Severus turned into Harry and wept. “I felt as if my world had imploded then. Everything I knew was wrong. Everything I believed in was a lie. And the man I loved had only been using me all along. I was… it destroyed everything vital inside me, and after that, I lost everything else I loved too. First Lily, then Regulus, and then I… when I tried to find someone new, they all treated me terribly. They all looked at my face—the face Lucius ruined—as if I were dirty and disgusting.

“Before long, love became the enemy. It had only brought me pain, and so I feared it. From there, I developed a fear of touch. I stopped dating. Stopped seeking partners. I could not bear to feel their hands on me and know they thought me repulsive.”

He shuddered and curled up closer. “Then Tabitha died, and everything good in me withered to dust. With no one left to drag me from the ashes, I became the cold, miserable man who hurt you so much, until your love saved me.” Severus clutched at Harry’s shirt and wept. “Since then, you have taught me to love again, but inside, I am still broken, Harry. Even now, I am still bleeding. I begin to wonder if it will ever truly heal.”

Harry wrapped his arms and legs around Severus and held him tight. “It will, Severus. I swear it will. I adore you. I love you from your head to your toes. You’re beautiful and—don’t shake your head at me, you are.” He kissed Severus’ nose. “Yes, even that.”

“I am not—I am….”

“Severus, listen to me. You are beautiful, love. Inside and out. You are worthy of love and happiness and all the things he told you that you didn’t deserve. He’s a fucking psychopath, Sev. And absolutely evil beyond that. He used you from the time you were a child, built your sense of self-worth on lies, Sev, and tore it to pieces when he shattered you. And everyone after him only reinforced his abuse.”

Harry cupped Severus’ face and kissed his tears away. “Don’t let that twisted prick hurt you any longer. You’re worth more than a million of that fuckface. You’re gorgeous and brave and strong, and above all, you survived, Severus. You survived all that to come out stronger for it. He was wrong, love. Completely wrong. Don’t let him poison you anymore. Don’t let him hurt you. You deserve so much better than that.”
Severus buried his face in Harry’s shoulder. “I am not stronger. I am a disaster inside. I could not even trust you with my heart. I broke you in pieces—I am no better than he was.”

“No, Sev. Don’t compare yourself. It’s true we’ve had a lot of misunderstandings and pain, but since the day I saved your life in sixth year, you haven’t hurt me on purpose. It’s come from a place of terror, not malicious intent. And you did trust me with your heart. Even after everything he put you through, you still came to me on your knees and begged me to come home to you. You were so scared, but you still opened yourself to me and gave me your heart, when everyone before you had torn you apart.”

Harry cradled the back of Severus’ head and tilted his chin up. “That’s… it’s amazing, Severus. Knowing you love me so much, you trust me even after everything you lived through, I—” He choked back a sob and kissed Severus tenderly. “Gods, I can’t even breathe. I love you so much I….” Tears poured down his face and Harry clutched Severus tight. “You brave, lovely, beautiful man. Thank you.”

Severus whimpered and held Harry even closer. Brave, lovely, beautiful—he had never heard such words without a condition attached. Harry was the only one to love him like this, the only one to care about his deepest pain.

“Harry… it hurts.” Severus turned into his husband’s arms and wept, bitter, harsh tears that left him gasping.

But each tear pulled Lucius’ poison from his spirit. Each breathless cry ripped the taint from his soul and every quiet sob poured out the darkness he had carried so long. By the time he stopped, cradled in Harry’s arms and with his husband weeping silent tears into his hair, he felt a thousand tonnes lighter. He felt… free.

And a little lost. Who was he, if not that dark, lonely, miserable man Lucius had made him into?

“You’re my husband,” Harry murmured into his hair. “You’re the love of my life and my entire world. You’re a hero for the light and brave as a dragon. You’re a brilliant potions master, spellcrafter, dueller, and strategist. You’re a bit of a bookworm. You’re introverted and shy, but have a wicked sense of humour. Your sarcasm can’t be beat. Nor can your mind. Your spirit is pure and beautiful, and you’re my hope for the future.”

“H-Harry….” Was that true? Could he really be something so… good?

“You’re brilliant, Severus, in every sense of the word.” Harry kissed him softly, careless of his tears. “You’re all I said and more, and I’ll spend my life teaching you that. I’ll heal each and every wound inside you, until you understand how wonderful you really are.” He gave Severus a tearful smile. “And I’ll be happy doing it. Can you let me, Sev? Will you let me teach you how to love again, not just me, but the beautiful person that you are?”

Severus clasped Harry tight. “Merlin, I don’t deserve you.”

“You do, love. You absolutely do. Will you let me teach you that?”

Severus pressed their foreheads together. “I… y-yes. I will.”

“Thank you, love. I promise you’ll feel better soon.” Harry lay Severus on his back and, after giving the man a warning of his intent, Banished Severus’ dressing gown to the hook above the door, leaving him in the blue satin pyjamas Harry loved. “Let’s try to sleep now, if we can. I’m right here. We’ll take the rest of the weekend to heal and move past this.”
Severus nodded and tucked Harry into his arms. “Harry, I… there are some things that still frighten me, and I do not always know what they are until they happen. I… I am so afraid I will have another flashback and hurt you.”

Harry kissed his shoulder. “No, Sev. Now that I know what’s going on and I know you love me, I won’t react like I did the last time. I just didn’t understand what was happening. But I do now, so we’ll get through this together.” He frowned. “Sev, your illness—what is it exactly? Can it be treated?”

Severus turned into Harry’s arms. “Not with potions or spells. I have PTSD, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Flashbacks and nightmares are part and parcel of it. I cannot always see the reality of the present when I am lost in the past.” He held Harry tight. “I am so sorry. I ruined it—the first time you said you loved me out loud, and I ruined it.”


“I already take the modified Euphoria Elixir every day, and another treatment for reality breaks I developed ten years ago—I won the Gibroy-Newman competition for that, too, but it is unfortunately not as effective in PTSD as it is for other mental illnesses, like Schizophrenia, Manic-Depressive Disorder, or Multiple Personality Disorder. As for therapy, it is the usual recommended course of treatment, particularly for complex PTSD like I have—that means it was not a single traumatic episode that caused my illness, but a string of them. I do not know if I am able to attend therapy, however. I am unsure I can speak of my past with strangers. As well, a wizard or squib would turn me in to the aurors for my associations with the Death Eaters, and a Muggle would not be able to understand enough to help.”

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’ hair. “There’s always Poppy. Or, if you don’t feel comfortable with her, I need training in therapy still. Could you speak to me about it? I… I’m not sure I won’t bollix things up, but I’ll try to be there for you. And I’ll talk to Poppy about it too, to research your condition and learn how best to help you. Would that do?”

Severus kissed Harry softly. “I think it would be healing for us—for both of us. Perhaps it will finally seal the wounds inside us and give us a deeper bond.” He hugged Harry closer. “Will you help me through this, love, until I am whole again?”

“Yeah. I promise, Sev. I’ll be right here with you every step of the way.”

“And we will face our future together from now on, even if I still break from time to time?”

Harry linked his hand with Severus’ and squeezed. “Together, no matter what.”

Severus sighed and pressed a soft kiss to Harry’s forehead. “You are worth it. Worth every minute of anguish I endured to reach this moment. I love you.”

Harry kissed Severus tenderly. His gentle warmth burned away Severus’ pain and chased the shadows from his heart, leaving room only for the brilliant light of Harry’s devotion.

“I love you too, Severus,” Harry whispered against his lips. “And we’ll be okay one day. We’ll be happy and put all these shadows behind us. I promise.”

“Yes. I know we will, as long as you are with me.”

“Forever, love. Our souls are bonded for eternity, and now, our hearts are too.”
“Yes.” Severus pressed their foreheads together. “Thank you. For coming home, for understanding me, for holding me, for loving me.”

“Thank you for the same, Sev. I need you too.”

“You have me, beloved. All of me now.”

Harry gave him a soft smile. “Yeah. Can you sleep, love?”

“I think so. I feel… relieved, to have told you.”

“I’m glad. And I’m right here, okay? No matter what.”

“I know. I am here for you too.”

“Try to rest then, love. We’ve had a rough night.”

“Yes. Goodnight, my Harry.”

“Goodnight, my prince.”

Severus kissed Harry once more and settled for the night, at peace and healing for the first time in twenty-five years.
25 December

Harry woke with a thrum of excitement in his chest. Christmas was here—his first Christmas as a bonded man. With a bright smile, he snuggled back into his husband’s warm embrace and sighed, content to lie there and rest a few moments longer, if it meant he needn’t leave Severus’ arms.

At Harry’s wiggling, Severus gave a soft grunt and his morning erection pulsed against Harry’s bum. Mm. The idea of scooting back a little more, of teasing Severus awake with his body tempted Harry briefly, but he decided against it. Severus had made great strides in overcoming his phobias, but Harry doubted his progress stretched far enough to feel safe with a man coming onto him before he was awake enough to understand what was happening. He edged forward a bit so as not to terrify his husband and stroked Severus’ hands instead, musing on how far they had come in the past few weeks.

Renewing Severus’ vows and getting all their secrets out in the open had improved their relationship dramatically. Their bond hummed with love from both sides now, and the equality between them had taken away much of their uncertainty and fears. As well, Poppy had begun treating both Harry and Severus for PTSD on top of the hours Severus and Harry spent helping each other, and their sessions greatly improved understanding and communication between the men—even if Poppy didn’t know they were bonded. Some days, their sessions left them shaken and fearful, but Harry understood better how to take care of Severus after researching his illness, and Severus was so gentle and devoted, Harry never had to worry.

Even better, their bond had grown immensely over the past few weeks. Between sharing a love that had overcome so many trials and their ‘training’ sessions, their natural abilities had strengthened and grown into the bond, providing them with a powerful link to each other at all times.

Harry felt Severus wherever he roamed, every flicker of anger and sadness and joy, and sometimes even picked up his thoughts from across the castle, if enough emotion backed them. And when fear or pain overwhelmed the man, Harry could share his joy and love with him to ease his anguish.

Severus had a similar connection, though his worked differently thanks to his Zopathy. The bond and its strength also allowed Severus to feel Harry from anywhere in the castle, but rather than
projecting his joy and happiness into his mate when Harry needed a boost, he was able to drain Harry’s fear and pain.

Their abilities had come in handy with keeping their cover and protecting each other from afar, and steadying each other’s emotions in times of trouble brought them closer than ever before. And that, in turn, helped the bond to grow still stronger. Though fate kept them apart for most of the day, they were never far from the other. Harry’s stream of loving words to his mate throughout the day, and Severus’ steady flow of love and trust through their bond kept them happy, even when their need for cover kept them out of each other’s arms.

Merlin, Harry needed to make breakfast. He kissed Severus’ forehead and attempted to extricate himself without waking his mate. Severus gave a little snort and lifted his head.

“Harry? Where are you going, love?”

Harry kissed him lightly. “Just to the kitchens. It’s still really early, Sev. Go back to sleep. I’ll wake you when breakfast is ready.”

Severus pulled Harry into a gentle kiss, morning breath be damned. “Don’t stay away long.”

“Mm. I won’t.” Harry caressed Severus’ hair until his breathing regulated again. “There you are, love,” he whispered, and with one more kiss to Severus’ brow, he padded to the loo to ready himself for the day.

With so few present in the castle, Harry might have foregone his usual floo into his false bedroom and just left from Severus’ quarters, but he didn’t want to risk it. With his luck, this would be the day one of the few Junior Death Eaters still in attendance or Zacharias Smith—who had stayed over this term and was bloody mean enough to be a Death Eater, no Dark Mark necessary—decided to take a little walk around the dungeons. His Infirmary-side bedroom was closer to the kitchens anyway. With that thought in mind, he dressed and flooed to his room.

It was nice to be able to leave Jabardi in his terrarium for once and not worry about his anti-Ginny pendant. Jabardi preferred to rest in his own space, and Ginny had gone to the Burrow for Christmas anyway. Harry felt freer than he had in months as he made his way to the kitchens, whistling ‘Jingle Bells’ under his breath.

In all fairness, though, Ginny had changed. Ever since Molly’s howler and suspension, Ginny had become quiet and withdrawn. She stayed away from Harry and minded her own business, and the reprieve gave him room to breathe, thank Merlin. He had been ready to hex the bint.

It was a lucky thing, too. Had Ginny continued to touch him without his consent after Harry bonded to Severus, his bond would have given her a jolt and revealed his status long before he was ready. Worst-case scenario, the world might have learned the identity of Harry’s partner, and then Severus wouldn’t have lasted the night.

If her indiscretion ever caused Severus to be killed, Harry would have no qualms about killing her with his bare hands.

He shook off his grim thoughts and turned towards the second floor stairwell. He needn’t dwell on the past and rile himself up—especially not on Christmas. Ginny had finally come to her senses and Harry had no need to fight her off any longer.

Draco, though… if Harry didn’t know from his Telepathy that Draco didn’t want Harry and had no romantic designs on him whatsoever, he might have had to fight him off. As of late, the boy had
stayed close to Harry, almost to the point of following him about. To the outside world, it looked as though Draco fancied Harry and wanted his attentions. But to Draco, the boy simply had few other allies and wanted to stay close to Harry because he was one of the few people who had stood by him in spite of everything.

Harry didn’t mind. Draco didn’t take advantage and their close friendship kept the boy’s skin on. Besides, when Draco wasn’t with Harry, he stayed near Dean, and there, Harry detected sparks.

Dean’s instant welcome and gentle nature had endeared himself to Draco—and crumbled the latter’s remaining anti-Muggleborn views to dust as a result. And Dean liked Draco’s dry humour and his pale beauty, though Harry wasn’t absolutely certain the boy was ready to make the leap into a homosexual relationship. Dean was questioning his sexuality, but hadn’t yet decided one way or the other.

Harry shrugged to himself and turned towards the kitchens. It might work out, one day. He would encourage them in that manner, if they decided to act on their desires. They might be good for one another, and loving Dean would give Draco one hell of a reason to leave the Dark. Dean was one of Harry’s closest friends and battle partners, a Gryffindor, a Light supporter, and a Muggleborn. He was at the top of the Dark’s hit list. Dating Draco would give the Dark one more reason to want Dean dead.

If Draco didn’t want to protect Dean, didn’t see the good in him and hadn’t completely thrown out his blood-purist prejudice, Harry would have stepped in to protect his friend. But he sensed Draco’s dedication to the Dark wavering more every day, and especially when Dean sat near him in quiet, unobserved corners, their legs touching as they spoke of classwork, quidditch, and shared their dreams.

Dean was pulling Draco away from the Dark simply by being there.

Gods, Harry hoped it would be enough. Draco was suffering so much, and under his snarky shell, he had as tender a heart as Severus. He deserved far better than the life he had.

Harry frowned as he turned towards the kitchens and hoped his request for his parents’ spirits to watch over Draco had done some good. He hadn’t heard anything about him from Luna yet, so maybe Draco’s apparent willingness to follow Lucius’ directive had kept him relatively safe.

Harry said a little prayer for him and hoped the gift he had sent the boy would further keep his father appeased and away from his friend. After all, one did tend to send chocolates to romantic interests, though the letter Harry sent with them would hopefully dissuade Draco from that belief. Harry had also given him more practical gifts before term ended—bruise salve, pain potions, a book on personal wards, a silver pendant like Hermione had given Harry, and a special charmed galleon just for Draco. He could contact Harry whenever he needed help. He hadn’t used it yet either, so hopefully he was safe.

Harry sighed and pushed his worries away as he tickled the pear to enter the kitchens. Draco could contact him if he needed help, Ginny was far away, and his husband was waiting for a proper Christmas breakfast. For the moment, he had best focus on his cooking and leave his worries for another day.

The house elves squealed in greeting as Harry entered the kitchens. Dobby bounded to him and hugged his legs, wearing even more ridiculous getup than he had done last Christmas. He had an elf hat on each ear, mismatched Christmas elf shoes, and a Rudolph nose on top of his usual holiday gear. Harry choked back a laugh at the sight of him. Merlin.
“Happy Christmas, great master Harry Potter, sir!”

“Happy Christmas, Dobby.”

Harry patted his head and greeted Winky as well—who had dressed much more sensibly in a red, fur-lined pillowcase toga and a matching velvet tam. Kreacher hadn’t bothered to change out of his Hogwarts towel, but he had put a sprig of holly on the front. And he greeted Harry with a hesitant smile—one he had been more inclined to give ever since Harry and Severus had spoken to him about Regulus and promised to fulfil Regulus’ last wish for him.

“Happy Christmas, Winky, Kreacher.”

Winky hugged Harry and stepped back, beaming. “Is Master wanting to make breakfast for Master’s… friend again?” Both elves knew well not to mention his bondmate or marriage where the other elves could hear—and potentially spread word to human ears.

Harry nodded. “Yeah, I am.”

“We is being making you dinner then,” said Dobby with a grin.

Harry winced. “Dobby, my friend and I will have to go to the castle dinner tonight, for safety’s sake….” At Dobby’s disappointed expression, he resolved himself to eating heavy today and gave the elf a gentle smile. “But you can make lunch for us, if you’d like.”

“Winky is helping too,” she said.

“And I,” said Kreacher.

Harry chuckled. “Well, you won’t have much to do between the three of you.” A grin crossed his face. “Tell you what, how about you make enough for all of us? You lot included. You’re family too, and I’d like you to share a Christmas meal with us, if you’re interested.”

By the elves’ wails of happiness and gratitude, Harry gathered he would have three more guests that afternoon.

Harry returned from the kitchens carrying a basket full of edibles, and almost dropped it at the sight of his quarters. Fairy lights decorated every available surface, and the scent of cinnamon and pine filled the air. A huge Christmas tree and a mountain of brightly-coloured gifts took up one entire corner, and Severus had transfigured all his furniture to red and green velvet with fluffy white throw pillows and blankets.

Harry stood stock still, gaping in wonder. He had never seen Severus’ quarters look so… festive before.

“Happy Christmas, Harry,” called Severus from the kitchenette.

He emerged holding a cup of coffee and dressed in his midnight blue dressing gown and slippers. Harry’s eyes flickered from the grand Christmas tree, to their stockings hung by the fire, to the fairy lights Severus had hung all over, and tears prickled his eyelids.

“Sev… did you do all this for me?”
Severus took the basket from him with a kiss and a happy smile. “Of course.” His joy faded. “After you told us how… bleak your life was before, I could not bear to let the holidays go unnoticed. They are special to you, and so we will celebrate them.”

Harry levitated their breakfast to the table and brought his husband into a passionate kiss. “I love you.”

Severus nuzzled Harry’s nose. “I love you as well.” He hugged Harry close. “And that, my husband, is the best gift I have ever received—the ability to love again, and you.”

“Stop it,” said Harry with a laugh. “You’re going to make me cry on Christmas!”

Severus chuckled and kissed Harry lightly. “Well then, let us have breakfast together instead.”

Harry nodded and guided him to the table. “Sit! I’m serving since you did all this.”

Severus raised an eyebrow but obeyed, blushing a little when Harry pulled out his chair. “I am not a woman.”

“No, but you’re my husband and I wanted to show you I love you.”

“Ah. In that case, thank you, and know your sentiment is returned.”

Harry kissed his mate’s forehead, then set about plating a full English with plump cinnamon buns and spiced cider to drink. As always, Severus waited until Harry had served himself, then set in with a relish. He gave a little moan around one of the cinnamon buns—breaking one of his own rules of etiquette—and Harry grinned, thrilled he’d been able to garner such a reaction from his husband.

“Dear Merlin,” Severus muttered between bites. “How in all the heavens you manage to cook like this is beyond me. These are incredible.”

Harry’s cheeks glowed with the praise. “Thank you, love. I always try extra hard for you.”

“It shows!”

Severus said nothing else until he had cleaned his plate. Twice.

“That was delightful, Harry. Thank you.”

Harry beamed and finished off a cinnamon roll with a bit of cider. “Thanks! I’m just glad you like it.”

“I am fairly sure anyone with taste buds would like your cooking.” Severus poured himself a cup of cider and relaxed, a sigh escaping him. “Did you plan to invite the professors again today?”

“Mm, yes, but….” Harry set his cup down and met Severus’ eyes. “I want to ask you something first. Would you be all right if we, um… told Professor McGonagall about us? The truth?”

Severus froze. “You wish to reveal our bond to Minerva?”

“I think she’d be happy for us, once she knew it wasn’t illegal.”

“Are you sure, love?” Severus shrank in on himself a little. “You are her favourite lion. She may not be best pleased to know you have tied yourself to me.”

Harry moved to Severus and settled in his husband’s lap. “Did I ever tell you that I’ve only seen her
cry once?"

“Cry? What on earth does that have to do with anything?"

“Everything. The only time I’ve ever seen her cry was the first time I talked to her after you and I had become friends, and I told her of the progress I had made in getting closer to you. When she knew I’d managed to break through your walls and get you to open your heart to me, even a bit, she started to cry. I mean, this is Professor McGonagall we’re talking about, so it wasn’t much, but she did have tears in her eyes. She begged me to heal you, if I could.”

Harry kissed him softly. “I think I couldn’t give her a better Christmas gift than to let her know you’re happy, loved, and whole again.”

Severus blinked hard and clutched Harry closer. “She was truly so overcome?”

“Yeah. She loves you, Sev.”

Severus laid his head on Harry’s shoulder. “Then, yes, we may tell her. And perhaps Filius as well. We will need their support when the dust settles, I fear.”

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’ hair and kissed him tenderly. “Then get dressed, love, and I’ll go get the other professors. Is there anyone else you want to bring in?”

“Not at this time. All of your friends have gone to spend the holidays with their families and Poppy is gone to visit her sister in Aberdeen. I am not positive she would take the news well either, though we should tell her soon. Perhaps with Albus’ support. It is becoming more and more difficult to hide our bond when we are both in therapy with her.”

“Yeah, I agree.” Harry stood and stretched. “Well, I’m off, love.” He paused at the door and gave him a wry smile. “Oh, I forgot to tell you, Winky, Kreacher, and Dobby want to make us lunch today—we have to do the Christmas dinner for show later, but they wanted to do lunch. And I might have told them to cook enough for themselves, so they might join us. Is that all right?”

Severus gave a wry laugh. “That will be a rather loud lunch. But yes, of course. They are family too.”

Harry gave Severus a soft kiss. “Thank you. I’ll be back later, love.”

“Off with you then.”

Harry chuckled and dashed to the floo.

Severus watched Minerva’s face, heart racing, as Harry related the story of their bond. Filius was listening in curiosity, joy and worry apparent in his eyes, but Minerva… gods, Severus feared her reaction. He loved the old tabby, much as he teased her, and he couldn’t bear for her to hate him.

Anger twisted her expression, and Severus flinched.

“Minerva,” he said in a soft, plaintive voice, “please, listen. I understand your outrage, but it is not what you think.”
“It is illegal!”

“No,” said Filius, surprising Severus. “It isn’t, Minerva.”

She gave him a shocked look. “But he is a professor!”

“Yes, but not Harry’s professor. As Severus isn’t responsible for Harry’s grades and Harry is an adult—” Filius gave Severus a sharp look. “He was an adult when you bonded?”

“Yes,” said Harry with a wince. “We bonded October first of this year. I was well over eighteen.”

Filius’ expression softened. “That’s all right then. It’s perfectly legal, Minerva.”

She flopped back into her seat, stunned. “Merlin. I am a bit confused, though. Why not simply wait until Harry graduated?”

Harry shook his head. “We couldn’t. And Severus wasn’t able to cope with love at the time anyway.”

“If he was so afraid, why go through with it?”

“Well, it’s a long story.”

Harry left out the truth about his scar, but as he told her of his Imperius dreams and how despair had driven him too close to the edge, tears filled her eyes.

“Oh, child,” she whispered.

Harry blushed and carried on as if he hadn’t heard. He went on to speak of Severus’ fears, their unequal bond, and how love had resolved it.

“And our bond is whole now. Severus renewed his vows to me in the Chamber that night, we talked about his past and mine, and now… well, we’re fully-bonded as equals and love each other dearly.”

Minerva’s eyes settled on Severus. “You are truly in love?”

Severus allowed his emotions to show, only a little, but enough to communicate the fathoms-deep ocean of feeling hiding within him. Harry’s fingers tightened around his, and Severus bestowed a kiss upon his husband’s hand.

“Completely. He is my world, Minerva. My hope, my heart, my entire life. I adore him.”

“Oh, Severus!” A feminine form caught him into a hug and squeezed him tight. “I’m so happy for you.”

Severus gasped and went rigid, and Minerva pulled back, shame bowing her head.

“Oh, do forgive me, Severus. I was overcome.”

Severus reached up and embraced her lightly. “I do need warning from anyone other than Harry, but you did not hurt me.”

“Severus, oh.” Minerva hugged him tight and wept into his shoulder. “I am so very proud of how far you have come. Well done, and congratulations.”

Shock and wonder flooded Severus, and he blinked back tears of his own. “Thank you,” he said in
an emotion-roughened voice.

Beside Severus, Harry chirped, “Happy Christmas, Professor.”

Minerva snorted and pulled back, laughing and wiping her eyes. “Yes, it is indeed.” She hugged Harry too. “Well done, child, and thank you for bringing him back to us.”

Harry beamed. “You’re welcome!”

Minerva laughed and settled back on the sofa. “Now that we have shared our news, perhaps you are ready to exchange gifts?”

“I certainly am,” said Albus, and brought out a rainbow-coloured package with the gaudiest bow Severus had ever seen. “And I found the perfect paper for yours, Severus.”

Albus’ words from those dark hours after Harry had taken refuge within the Chamber echoed in Severus’ mind. Gods, the pain had nearly killed him, but in that moment, he had known he still had an ally left, someone willing to help him bring Harry home. It had given him hope when the darkness crushed him and leached all goodness and light from him.

“Albus, the world is so dark and empty without him.”

“Well, then it is a good thing I wear such bright colours, hmm?”

Severus accepted the gift with a smile and did not comment on the paper. “Thank you, Albus.”

The old man beamed.
Chapter Summary

**Warnings**: implied domestic violence (not Harry or Sev). A note about how this situation is handled: I am aware a normal school would be more proactive and would question Ginny and Smith right away. However, Hogwarts isn't a normal school— they're notoriously backwards—and they're also in the middle of a war. That's my reasoning for approaching the situation like this. Hopefully, it's believable.

***AN: This might be the last chapter I'm able to get up for a few weeks. I had to rush to the ER yesterday and found out I have severe gallstones—according to the scan results I read this morning, it's leading into choledocholithiasis and pancreatitis—and am going in for surgery probably Tuesday or Wednesday, unless it gets to the point of being an emergent thing. That's why I've been having trouble breathing—the pain is so bad, it's making it difficult to get a breath. So yeah, major surgery for me. Let's hope it isn't as messy as I'm expecting it to be.***

Chapter 51

15 January, 1999

Severus’ voice jarred Harry out of his study of Slytherin’s latest journal. “Love, I am off to class.” He knelt beside his husband, where Harry lay sprawled before the hearth with his snake. “I will see you after dinner?”

Harry raised himself on his elbows for a kiss. “Mm, yeah, unless the others want to revise a bit or train with me. I’ll let you know.”

“Very well.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead and stood. “Good luck, beloved.”

“You too.”

Severus ran his hand through Harry’s hair once and left through the door to his office. Harry watched him go, then turned back to his journal.

~All right, Jabardi. Where were we?~

The snake cocked his head and flickered his tongue. ~You were telling about Salazar’s young ones and the Fourth Muggle War.~

~Right. Let’s see here… ah. ‘Samuel returned from Nairn with no wounds in body, but his mind was greatly altered.’ Oh Merlin, was he cursed?~

Jabardi gave a hissing laugh and somehow managed to make it wry. ~They were fighting non-
magical humans, Master. Who would curse him?~

Harry chuckled sheepishly. ~Right. ‘I began experimental research today into the cause of Samuel’s descent into madness. I will not let my son remain so broken forever.’ Gods. Maybe it was simply the strain of war, of killing those who were helpless.~

~The non-magicals managed to kill many wizards for being helpless, Master.~

~Unfortunately true.~

With a sigh, Harry settled into the journal again. The next twenty pages or so detailed Samuel’s symptoms and his father’s experiments in search of a cause. When he finally found it, Harry’s heart jolted in surprise.

~‘The latest experiment into Samuel’s condition has rendered results, at last! It appears that the trauma of war—most likely, of killing—has damaged his… life-tie?’ Life-bond? What does that translate to, Jabardi?~

Jabardi hissed and cocked his head. ~It is the same tie you share with your mate.~

Harry paused. ~Tie? What do I share with Severus?~

~Your bond. You are mated on your life-ties.~

Harry froze, shock and the tingle of anticipation thrumming in his veins. ~Jabardi! You mean our life-ties, those are what Severus and I call sssoullsss?~ He switched to English. “Our soul bond?”

Jabardi nodded.

Harry let out a whoop and pumped his fist. “Yes!” He gave Jabardi a grateful pat. ~This might just be it, Jabardi! It is the first reference to soul magic I have seen in Slytherin’s journals, anyway.~

Jabardi hissed in excitement and curled on Harry’s shoulder, so he could look at the words at the same time. The snake couldn’t read, of course, but he liked to watch whenever Harry came across something thrilling. ~Hurry and read more, Master. Maybe we will find the answer today.~

~I certainly hope so!~ Harry returned to the journal and read on. ~‘Now that I am aware of the source of my son’s trouble, I will, I hope, be able to heal it soon. At least I shall try.’~

The next few pages detailed several failed soul magic experiments, as well as continued accounts of Muggle/wizard skirmishes, lesson plans, and Slytherin’s daily life, including a spell for diagnosing the state of the soul. Harry tested the spell on himself and grimaced at the reading of his scar.

‘Foreign soul fragment, dark, twisted, broken from the whole, embedded in forehead.’

“Gods. If I needed more proof I’m a horcrux….”

He hugged his shoulders, overcome with horror and dread. Fuck, but it was a terrible thought to know he had a piece of Voldemort stuck to him, and as long as it lived, so did the monster.

~Master,~ Jabardi hissed in his ear, ~do not be afraid. We are searching for the way to save you. Perhaps it is here, in this leaf-tower, maybe just beyond the next turn.~

At the same time, Harry’s dread drained away. Severus. The man’s love and concern filtered to Harry through the bond, relieving the icy press of terror.
Harry took a deep breath and nodded. ~Thank you, Jabardi.~ Mentally, he murmured, [Thanks, love. Had a bit of a breakthrough on the horcrux work. It rattled me.]

Severus’ thoughts echoed back. [Ten stirs widdershins and—I love you, Harry. We will work it out.]

[I know, love. I love you too. Go back to work, though. I’m okay now.]

[I am here if you need me.]

Thus reassured, Harry returned his focus to the book and continued reading. He recorded every word despite the indication of failure in each experiment—with the right tweaks, one of them still might help in their quest to destroy the horcruxes.

Then, in Slytherin’s sixth experiment, he found it.

~I have done it! Samuel is healed! His soul is as pure as before the battle at Dornoch. My latest experiment gathered the missing pieces of Samuel’s soul and reattached them to the whole, leaving him as healthy and human as he had been before this godsforsaken war began.~

Harry gasped and jerked up, wonder thrumming in his blood. “Oh my gods, I think this is it! Jabardi, we’ve found the key!”

Jabardi nudged Harry’s ear. ~The… diagnostic experiment said Samuel had only small pieces of life-tie missing. I think this spell is not strong enough for horcruxes.~

~No, most likely not, but it is a start! Severus and I can modify it, I think. I will need to research the nuances of soul healing….~

With a flick of his wrist, Harry Summoned every text of Slytherin’s and Severus’ that had to do with soul magic and stacked them up on the coffee table.

“How can Winky be helping Master Harry?”

“Winky, do you know if the headmaster is busy?”

“Winky will check.”

She popped away and back instantly. “He is being doing paperwork in his office, Master Harry.”

“Thanks, Winky. You’re sure no one else is with him?”

“Yes, Master. Well, his phoenix is being there, but no humans or elves.”

“Brilliant. Could you pop me up to his office, please?”
Winky nodded and brought Harry to the Headmaster’s office, startling the man out of his work.

“Harry?”

Harry gave him a sheepish smile. “Sorry, sir. I’m here on extremely sensitive business and I didn’t want to risk being followed.” He knelt down and patted Winky’s head. “Thank you. You can go about your day now. I think Severus has some books he wants organised if you’re bored. There should be a note in our personal library, but if not, you can always straighten mine up for me.”

She squealed in happiness and popped away. Harry chuckled and stood. “That elf really does like her busy work.”

“I am glad to see she is thriving in your care, Harry.” Albus Banished his paperwork to a nearby shelf. “Now, let me just…. A flick of his wrist covered and silenced all the portraits except Phineas—the only one Albus, Harry, and Severus trusted absolutely. “Now then. What was this business, Harry?”

“Soul magic.” Harry perched on the edge of his usual chair. “I need everything you have on it, right now.”

Dumbledore grimaced. “Harry, that is extremely dark magic and—”

“And do you want to win the war or not? None of us know where the bastard has his horcruxes hidden, and even if we did there’s a strong possibility we might be wrong or he’ll just make more for the ones we destroy. The war could go on indefinitely. But if I can tweak a soul healing spell to call in even horcrux-trapped bits and patch them onto the whole, then I can make him mortal without destroying them. And then, Sev or I can finish him off.”

Albus sighed and stroked his beard. “Soul magic. Dear Merlin, I would rather you not learn it, but…. His shoulders slumped. “You are correct. I have not been able to track his horcruxes, and without that information, there is nothing we can do.” He sat tall and fixed Harry with a sharp stare. “I have your word you will never use the books I will lend you for harm?”

Harry scowled. “What do you take me for, old man? I’m not the one who left a baby with magic-hating Muggles or let Severus be tortured on school property.”

Albus blushed. “Ah, p-perhaps that was a bit indelicate of me.” He sighed and waved his hand, Summoning three books from his inner chambers. “Harry, the magic in these books, ‘Secrets of the Darkest Art’ in particular, is most vile. You must be careful not to let it taint you.”

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Harry gave him a curt nod, more than a bit annoyed with Dumbledore’s high and mighty attitude. As if he hadn’t been studying dark magic for the past two years.

“Albus,” Phineas snapped, “do get off your high horse. It’s rather hypocritical of you to chide Harry against the dark considering all the dark things you have done in the name of the greater-bloody-good.”

Albus coughed and turned crimson. “Ah, well, I suppose you have a point.” He handed the books over with a sigh. “Very well, Harry. I will let you use these. Only do not let them out of Severus’ quarters for any reason.”

“How gracious of you,” said Phineas with a snort.

Albus winced. “I am only warning him to be careful.”
“Yes, yes,” Harry retorted. “I do have some sense, you know.” With a huff, he tucked the books under his arm. “Mind if I floo back? Wouldn’t want the books to be seen in the hallways, after all.”

Albus motioned to his fire. “Good luck, Harry.”

“Thanks.” Harry tossed in a pinch of floo powder. “Severus and Harry Prince’s private quarters, Hogwarts.”

The floo turned green, and Harry spun away.

He didn’t resurface from the books until dinnertime, and even then debated on staying home. The subject matter in ‘Secrets of the Darkest Art’ had left him more than a little queasy. But if he skipped dinner, Severus would also make him skip training the next day too, and Harry had no time for that. Voldemort would attack sometime before the end of the year—he was sure of it.

He had to be prepared to fight the bastard, or at least survive another battle. After all the headway he’d made with Severus, there was no way in hell he’d die and leave the man alone. Between their bond and his mother’s protection, Harry ought to be safe, but he wasn’t about to leave it to chance. Severus needed him.

So did Malfoy, come to think of it. The boy really had no one else to turn to.

Harry shook his head and Banished his books to his bedroom. He would study them later. He hadn’t been out all day and for all he knew, Malfoy was in pieces again. Either way, he needed to show his face. And his friends would want to know he had found a possible way to end the war.

He frowned as he flooed to his Infirmary side bedroom. He really needed to start the DA again. Hestia Jones was a decent professor and she knew her stuff, but she wasn’t teaching them to fight Death Eaters. She was teaching students to pass their NEWTs, and that wouldn’t keep them alive in the battle. Harry sighed. One more responsibility taking his time away from Sev, but they would manage. As long as he had his husband at night, they would hold it together. With any luck, it was only a short time longer before they could relax and put this chaos behind them for good.

Harry stumbled out of the grate—Merlin, would he never learn to land on his feet?—and grabbed his wand and anti-Ginny pendant. Once Harry had settled Jabardi around his neck and under his cloak, he cast a Notice-me-not and a mild warming charm on the mamba, then made his way to the Great Hall.

Ginny was walking to the hall as well, and despite his history with her, he couldn’t help but worry about the dark circles under her eyes. She looked like a ghost.

As Harry turned the corner, she lifted her head and winced. “H-hi, Harry,” she said, her voice barely a breath.

He raised an eyebrow and stood a fair distance away, a tap on his shoulder a subtle signal to Jabardi to be on alert. He hissed out of the corner of his mouth, ~The irritating female is hovering again.~

Jabardi hissed back, ~Should I show myself, master?~

~Not yet.~
“Harry,” Ginny said, hands up in a gesture of surrender, “I won’t come too close. I just want to apologise. I… you were right. I-I was… I don’t know, but it wasn’t good.”

Harry nodded, still wary. The girl had apologised before only to turn around and attach herself to him like a limpet.

“I… it was really stupid of me.” She sniffled and lowered her head. “Should be grateful you’re listening to me at all, given what I am.”

Harry frowned, worry prickling at the edges of his mind. Ginny had never been so self-deprecating before—not to the point of insulting herself even when she was ashamed of her behaviour. Something wasn’t right.

“Um, are you okay?”

She winced and jerked back as if he had hit her. “I’m f-fine!”

Harry took a step backwards out of sheer confusion. “All right, I guess.”

Tears formed in her eyes, and Harry relented in spite of his better judgment. His pendant and familiar would keep her far enough away from her that he could at least talk to her.

“Look, Ginny, you’ve been… well, really weird these past two years. It’s been more than a bit uncomfortable to be around you because you never learned the meaning of consent. But as long as you understand that now, I guess I don’t have to… uh, avoid you all the time.”

She gave him a wan smile. “Oh, that—I’m not sure—i-it’s just, Zacharias gets jealous and I… he might think….”

Zacharias? Dear gods, what was Ginny doing with him of all people?

“I didn’t mean that close.” Harry stared, bemused and on edge. “I still have my pendant and I won’t be getting rid of it until I know I can trust you again. That won’t be any time soon.”

Ginny sniffled and dropped her head. “Y-yeah. Like I said, I should be grateful you’re talking to me at all, stupid and useless as I am.”

He clenched his fist in his robe, alarm racing through him. Gods, her behaviour sounded so familiar. Had he done this to her with his refusal? No. Surely she couldn’t have been that fixated on him. Right?

Unable to deny his concern, he flicked through her surface thoughts and caught an image he did not like. One of a big, burly man hovering over the smaller woman in a threatening posture, tears streaking Ginny’s face.

Horror slammed into him like a sledgehammer. Oh gods. Was Smith abusing her?

“Harry? What’s the matter? Am I too close?”
“N-no, that’s not it.” He swallowed through a too-dry throat and attempted to gather his wits.
“Ginny, um, listen. We’re going to start the DA back up soon—or I am anyway—but, um, you
know if you need a place to crash or just to hang out, you can use the Room, right?”

She squeaked, eyes wide with terror. “Y-yeah, I know. I-I’m fine, though.”

“You don’t look it.”

“I said I’m fine!”

Harry reeled back at her vituperative rebuttal. “Okay. Merlin. It was just an offer.” He shook his
head and decided to talk to his ‘family’ about this. Lu would know what to do, and Sev might know
how to get her to open up. It was worth a shot anyway.

It would be better for someone like Neville or Luna to help her anyway. Harry didn’t want to give
her another hero worship complex.

“Harry? Are you okay?”

He shook himself. “Yeah, just thinking. Um, we can go to dinner together if you want. Just don’t
walk too close. The wards will block you out at arm’s reach.”

She nodded and lowered her head. “O-okay. I can’t get too close anyway. I don’t want to—” She
shook her head and cut herself off. “Never mind. We’ll be here till dessert if we keep talking.”

Harry gave a nervous laugh and led the way into the Great Hall, heart troubled. Merlin. How on
earth was he to handle this?

With a shake of his head, he whispered reassurance to his familiar and patted him back down.

“Oh, do you have a new snake, Harry?”

A hint of life returned to Ginny’s eyes. “Yeah. I miss Isuri still, but Jabardi is a good friend already.”
He hissed to his familiar. ~Will you show yourself for a moment? The girl who was irritating before
is not irritating now, and I think she is being hurt.~

Jabardi stuck his head out of Harry’s collar and sniffed the air, pinkish-black tongue flickering about.
~Yes, Master. I smell your mate’s healing oil and old bruises on her.~

Harry suppressed a grimace. ~Merlin.~

“Oh, he’s lovely, Harry,” said Ginny with a smile. “So bright! What kind of snake is he?”

“An Eastern Green Mamba.” He switched to Parseltongue. ~Jabardi, I cannot help her, but I cannot
leave her to suffer either. What do I do?~

~Ask your mate. He is wise.~

Harry nodded and petted the snake’s head. “Thank you, Jabardi.”

Ginny came a little closer, but as she appeared interested in his familiar and not him, Harry allowed
it. “Is he venomous?”

“Oh, absolutely. Mambas have the worst venom in the world, though green mambas aren’t as
venomous as the black variety. He’s still lethal though, so don’t agitate him. I carry around antivenin
in my pocket these days, but I’d rather not test it. And don’t tell anyone else about him.” His
expression darkened. “Especially not Finnigan.”

Ginny winced. “No, definitely not. I don’t want to put you through that again. Though I guess if Seamus did try to attack him, it sounds as though he can defend himself.”

“Yes, and I have him warded against attack, but it’s never a sure thing. And I can’t bear to lose another familiar.” He hissed to Jabardi and settled him back under his glamours before they turned into the Great Hall corridor. “Just don’t mention him.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Thanks.”

Harry opened the doors and let Ginny in ahead of him. The girl scurried off towards the Hufflepuff table, to Harry’s combined worry and relief. He watched her move to Zacharias Smith as he came inside. A spark of anger flashed in the older boy’s eyes as she sat down.

Damn. He hadn’t meant to get her in trouble.

Severus gave him an alarmed look from the head table, but Harry was quick to reassure him.

[It’s okay, love. She didn’t hurt me. Actually, I think she’s the one in trouble these days. Big trouble. I need to talk to you and the family about it after dinner.]

Severus scowled, a blind for the public, but Harry felt a wave of concern and affirmation through the bond.

[I love you, Sev. So much.]

Severus met his eyes briefly. [I love you too, my Harry.] He went back to his meal as if he hadn’t noticed anything, but the bond still hummed with his affection. Harry found it difficult to think of troubling things with Severus’ love wrapping him in warmth and comfort. Maybe Severus had done it on purpose.

With a secret smile, he sat beside Neville, who wasn’t with Luna tonight, and whispered to him, “I need you and Lu to meet me at home tonight. It’s important. I would ask Dean, but it’s about Ginny. I think it’ll hurt him to hear it.”

Neville nodded. “We’ll just bring our work with us if that’s all right with you and your friend?”

Harry frowned. "I'm not sure we'll have time to work on it. You might want to do it before you come."

“Will do. How are you two doing anyway?”

A soft blush stole up Harry’s cheeks, gaining a curious look from Hermione and a knowing smile from Dean. He should really tell her soon. She had earned his trust and eventually, she might figure the truth out on her own. It would be best to tell her when she could react without endangering anyone’s life. Maybe not tonight though—he wasn’t sure she would take it well, and he had enough to worry about.

“Really good. Things are much better.” He gave his friends a smile and looked around for Draco. He had chosen to sit with Blaise and Daphne for the moment, so Harry felt safe talking about his plans. “But I’ve got other things to talk about right now. Um, I want to start the DA again soon. Professor Jones is good, but she’s training us for tests, not Death Eaters, and we need to be ready to fight.”
Hermione nodded. “I still have my galleon. It won’t be hard to make new copies and get a sign-up sheet going around.”

“Good. And one more thing—I don’t want to block the Slytherins out this time. Obviously, we can’t train the Death Eaters. But the ones like Daphne, Millie, and Blaise should be allowed in. They need to be able to defend themselves as much as we do.”

Dean grimaced. “The other Gryffindors aren’t going to like that, Harry. Especially not Finnigan.”

“The other Gryffindors can kiss my arse. I’m teaching them, and those are my rules. If they don’t like it, they can train somewhere else.”

Dean chuckled. “All right then. Seamus can sod off anyway. He’s been an unmitigated arsehole the past three years, so he can train somewhere else too for all I care.” Even as he said it, pain flickered across his face.

Harry patted his hand. “I’m sorry, Dean. I never meant to tear you apart.”

“Harry! How many bloody times do I have to tell you it wasn’t your fault?”

Harry gave a wry laugh. “Probably for the rest of my life. I have a lot of trouble with guilt.”

“That’s the truth,” said Neville with a sad smile. “But you’re healing, I think.”

Harry nodded. “Slowly.”

Hermione squeezed Harry’s hand. “I’m glad, Harry. You’ve been miserable for so long, it’s good to see you starting to take joy in things again.” She sat back and crossed her arms over her chest, tapping one hand on her chin. “I’ll ask Daphne about the DA in potions tomorrow. She can talk to the other snakes. We’re only allowing light Slytherins?”

“Or neutral. So long as they have no intention of joining or helping the Death Eaters or causing trouble in the group, I’ll be glad to train them. We need all the help we can get, and I don’t want any of the students to die if we can prevent it. I want to teach the younger years self-defence too, even if I don’t train them to attack. It might save lives.”

Hermione nodded. “I’ll add a clause to the sign-up sheet then to prevent Death Eaters, and we’ll take lists for two classes: one for fourth years and below and one for fifth years and up. Sound good?”

“Yes, that’s perfect.” The food appeared at the table and Harry piled his plate. “All right, let’s eat. Hermione, I’ll leave the recruitment to you.”

“I’m all for that,” said Dean with a grin. He paused. “But… what about Draco, Harry? He’s really trying, and I know he doesn’t want to be….”

Harry rubbed his chin in thought. “Yeah. I don’t want to leave him without help, but as long as he’s reporting to the Death Eaters, I can’t feasibly let him into the DA.” He crossed his arms over his chest, considering. “On the other hand, I have the feeling Malfoy could teach us loads, once he sorts his loyalties once and for all. Maybe….” He glanced over his shoulder and sighed. “Maybe I could train him one-on-one. And just in self-defence until he works out his place in this war.”

Dean nodded. “Yeah, but can I help?”

Harry smiled. “You want to?”
“He’s all right now, and I….,” Dean closed his eyes and projected his thoughts. [And I’ve seen his bruises. He needs help, and he needs friends. I don’t think he’ll come away from the dark without us.]

Harry nodded. “Then you and I will train him personally, yeah?”

Dean relaxed and picked up his fork. “Sounds good! Now, let’s eat already.”

Harry chuckled and settled into his meal.

When Harry arrived with Luna and Neville, Severus was sitting in his armchair and Albus on the sofa. At the sight of Harry and his friends, Albus stood to leave, but Harry flagged him back down. “Wait. We might actually need your help for this, sir, if you’re not too busy.”

Albus shook his head and sat on the sofa again with a smile. “I always have time for my boys.”

Harry suppressed the urge to roll his eyes and went to greet his husband. “Hello, love. I missed you today.” He gave Severus a soft kiss and went to sit beside him, but Severus caught him by the wrist and tugged Harry into his lap.

“Sit with me,” Severus murmured in his ear. “I want you close.”

Harry gasped and froze in Severus’ arms, his eyes flooding fast. “S-Sev?”

Severus kissed Harry’s temple and held him close. “This was one of your dreams, was it not? This simple display of love?”

Harry nodded and relaxed against his husband, sniffling quietly. “Sev, thank you.”

“Ssh. It is nothing to thank me for. I am quite enjoying it myself.”

Harry sighed and tugged Severus’ arms around him. “Yeah. This is nice.”

Severus placed a series of gentle kisses at the base of Harry’s neck, sending thrills down his spine. Harry’s breath hitched and his head tipped back.

[N-not in front of them, Sev.]

Luna giggled. “Severus, you’re making the Halleywinklers come.”

Neville groaned and covered his face. “Please don’t ask me to translate that.”

Harry blushed and scooted around so he sat astride Severus instead. “Um, w-we should probably talk about the real reason I asked you to come anyway.”

Severus stroked Harry’s hip out of sight of the others and sent a surge of heat through Harry’s body. Gods, if Severus kept this up, Harry would be in a state soon.

“S-Sev…."

Severus wrapped his arms about Harry’s waist instead and whispered in his ear, “I missed you today.
too. Shall we see how many… Halleywinklers we can call up later?”

Harry’s face flamed. [Merlin, Sev! Please don’t make me hard in front of Albus.]

Severus chuckled and relented. “Very well. You said something about Miss Weasley?”

Neville gasped and went rigid. “Is she coming after you again, Harry?”

Harry shook his head, grim determination overcoming his arousal. “No. This time, I think she’s in trouble. She’s pale as a ghost and… she’s insulting herself. Plus she’s afraid of making Zacharias Smith jealous—and he’s always been a prat. How on earth did she get involved with him in the first place? Anyway, it… put me on edge, hearing her talk like that. I think… she’s being abused.”

Severus went rigid. “I see.”

Fury surged white-hot through Severus. He had no love lost for the Weasley chit, but no one deserved to be a punching bag for their mate.

Harry froze. “Sev? Are you angry at me?”

“Smith,” Severus gritted out.

Harry caressed his cheek and soothed his fury. [Ssh. I know, love. I know it brings up bad memories. Focus on me. I love you so much.]

Severus melted into Harry’s touch and soft words, and his rage muted to a simmer.

[There you are.]

Albus stroked his beard, a deep frown creasing his brow. “Did you find proof of his abuse in her mind, Harry?”

“I didn’t want to look too deep without her permission, but I caught a glimpse of him hovering over her and her crying. And Jabardi said he smelled your healing salve and bruises on her.”

Severus growled. “I will kill the little shite!”

“Severus,” Albus called. “Calm yourself, my boy.”

“Easy for you to say, old man,” Severus snapped. “What do you plan to do about this?”

Albus let slip a great sigh and folded his hands in his lap. “I… I think there is little I can do. The psychology of an abused partner is quite fragile. If I try to separate them by force, she may cling harder to him. If I try to punish him, it is quite likely he will retaliate against her. And us, for that matter.”

Harry cried, “What? But domestic violence is grounds for expulsion, isn’t it?”

Albus gave him a sad nod. “Indeed—if Miss Weasley comes forward. Otherwise, I am afraid I have no usable evidence. The Wizengamot does not accept the surface scans of a Telepath, and if Harry delves deeper without permission, the evidence becomes unusable again as it was obtained illegally.
Then we will not only lose the case against Mister Smith—and rest assured, the boy will sue—but Harry would be implicated as well. Especially in the current political climate, we will find ourselves in dire straits should we accuse him without undeniable proof.” He rubbed his temples and shook his head. “My hands are tied unless Ginevra confesses to her abuse of her own accord or Mister Smith is caught in the act.”

Neville grimaced. “And she’s not likely to talk if he’s poisoned her enough to make her believe she deserves it.”

Luna nodded, but Harry wondered how much she had heard. She seemed to be in her own world. Maybe her spirits were talking to her.

Neville hugged his chest. “Still, I don’t like it. Is there anything we can do to keep him away from her in the meantime?”

Harry stared at the wall, thinking hard. “Maybe… the DA? Could we pass a message along to all the trustworthy members and let them know Smith is a security risk and to keep him away from her?”

“You are speaking of a teenager, Harry,” said Severus, his voice soft and full of sorrow. “If you attempt to separate them by force, you will only serve to convince her that she must cling harder to him against the opposition. Indeed, she will see herself as a fighter against injustice rather than an abused woman in need of rescue.”

Harry nodded and slipped his hand into Severus’. “I think you would know best what to do. What do you think?”

Severus closed his eyes and leaned back against the chair, trying not to reveal too much even as he considered what might have saved him in the past. “Miss Weasley likely feels she has no one other than Smith to turn to. Her house has shunned her for her behaviour earlier in the year, and while she rather deserves it for her actions, he will use that against her. He will use it to convince her no one else cares and he is the only one who understands her needs, her worth, even while he tears her to shreds. He will make her feel as though no one can be trusted, no one has her best interests at heart, and the more you judge her—the more you treat her as if her situation is her own fault or act as though it is easily escapable, the more she will believe him.”

Neville winced. “It’s not easy, is it?”

“No. Perhaps if he were only hitting her, she could see he was the wrong kind of man. But her self-deprecatory behaviour indicates that he has also poisoned her mind. She is… ill, for lack of a better word. She cannot see what we see, because he has blinded her. No, if you make her feel as if this is her fault and she need only leave him and everything will be well, you will only damage her further.”

Severus tapped his lip in thought. “Furthermore, Harry cannot save her this time. She will place him on a pedestal once more and it will begin her obsession anew. However, she needs someone quite as understanding and forgiving as he is.”

He let down his hand and looked to Neville. “I’m afraid you won’t be able to help much as you have come down so hard on her for her treatment of my husband, though it may help if you show her she is forgiven. Harry can help in that capacity as well, though he will need to be cautious. And we, as her professors, will only be seen as the enemy either way. I certainly cannot help her, given how I have had to treat her house over the years. Which means, Luna, I believe her rescue will fall to you.”

Luna’s attention snapped back to the conversation at hand. Her eyes shimmered with tears, and Harry ached for her pain. Just like a part of him still loved Ron like a brother despite their divergent
lives, Luna still loved Ginny. They had been inseparable once. Knowing Ginny was suffering had to hurt her.

She gave Severus a wan smile and nodded. “I will do my best.”

“Good. As for you, Harry,” Severus continued, “do utilise the DA, but not as a method to keep them apart. Simply watch over her. Neville, keep her company when you are free and have the rest of your house do the same. Let her know you are there for her and that Smith is wrong in his assessment that no one cares—but also do not attack Smith, either in her sight or out of it. She will think of you as the enemy if you attack one she believes herself to be in love with. Instead, simply stay by her side, even if she attempts to drive you away. That is the best way to debunk the rubbish Smith has fed her and help her to come to the conclusion that she is better off without him on her own.”

Harry rubbed his chin, his mind whirling in the bond. “Sev, to that end, it might actually be beneficial if I challenge Smith. We don’t want her to attach herself to me, and putting the fear of god in him might keep her safe until we can get her out.”

Severus shook his head. “You are assuming he has a conscience, Harry. All attacking him is likely to do—at least until we have verifiable proof—is incite him to further cruelty. Miss Weasley will be the one who suffers from your attack, not Smith. And if she does see herself as a victim, well, you will soon begin to look like a hero to her again if you challenge her abuser.”

Harry shuddered. “Oh. Well, I don’t want to do that for sure.” He sighed and squeezed Severus’ hand. “We’ll do our best to support her, though I’m going to have to keep my distance.”

“See that you do. I have no intention of sharing you.”

Harry shivered at the possessive tone in his voice and another thrill of desire surged through the bond. “Damn it, Sev! Quit playing with the Halleywinklers. I have to revise tonight.”

Severus chuckled and kissed Harry’s cheek. “Then you had best go and revise now before I decide to throw everyone out and spend some quality time with my husband.”

“So!”

Severus’ laughter reverberated off the walls. Harry gave him a warm look.

“It’s good to see you laugh like that, Severus. I’m so glad you’re happy now.” He paused, his eyes going wide and a grin stretching over his face. “Oh, Merlin! Speaking of making you happy, I almost forgot—I found the key! Jabardi and I—we found the key to the horcrux spell!”

Severus’ fingers clenched around Harry’s waist and his breath came out in a rush. Oh gods! The key meant they had a chance. The key meant Harry would survive!

“What? How? What is it?”

Harry rubbed his fingers. “There’s a soul healing spell in Slytherin’s journals. It’s not powerful enough as is, but with some work, I really think it’ll work. We just need to make it stronger.”

Severus clutched Harry close, his emotions wild and tears threatening. “You found the key. You’re going to survive.”

“Well, with any luck.”
Severus caught Harry into a fierce kiss, all thought to their audience gone. Harry made a strangled sound of shock, then melted into him, tears streaking down his face. The bond sang with pleasure and relief, with the hope that someday, somehow, everything would be all right. Gods, Severus hoped so.

Albus’ voice drifted to Severus’ ears from somewhere far away. “Well, on that note, children, I believe Severus and Harry need some private time now. Goodnight, everyone.”

There was a mad rush for the floo, and Harry broke into laughter on Severus’ shoulder. “I think we scarred them for life.”

Severus chuckled softly. “Perhaps.” He tugged Harry close again. “And perhaps we should take advantage of that fact.”

“Mm, Slytherin opportunist.”

“Are you going to complain?”

“Not at all. Take me away, love.”

“My pleasure.”
Dangerous Mistakes

Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** mentions of domestic violence, fighting.

Well, I go in for gallbladder surgery bright and early tomorrow, and the doctors are worried. Since I have liver disease, they’re afraid going after my gallbladder will damage my liver further. I don’t know how long it will be before I can post again, so because of that, I’m giving you bunches while I can. Enjoy.

Chapter 52

Dangerous Mistakes

2 February

Pink hearts and flowers had already begun to make an appearance around the castle. Harry held them in as much disdain as always, and yet, he wanted to mark his first Valentine’s Day as a bonded man in some romantic fashion. Severus would sneer at hearts and cupids, but perhaps he wouldn’t mind a fresh bouquet of flowers—particularly rare, exotic flowers he could use in potions. Maybe Harry would get some of those Dewdrops of Diana just to be a smartarse.

Well, it wasn’t a bad idea, though Harry would find some other flower to give him. Teasing was all well and good, but reminding Severus of his former abusive behaviour might really hurt him. He would have to make do with some other ingredient bouquet. Severus needed a new clasp for his hair, too. A nice silver one would look good with his colouring. Hmm. Perhaps Harry could send Hedwig out after one later. If he ever found a minute to think.

With a sigh, he headed off from the DA meeting and straight to the empty classroom he had established as his meeting place for Malfoy. Gods, another night he wouldn’t be home until past midnight. He wouldn’t have much time to love his husband, hadn’t since the DA had started and Severus had begun stocking the Infirmary and Order in preparation for the ‘end of the year catastrophe.’ Between that, Harry’s and Severus’ work for school, and their work on the anti-horcrux charm, soul banishing curse, and Harry’s ‘special delivery’ for Lucius Malfoy, they hardly ever had a moment to spend together as a couple. Harry carried a dull ache in his chest most days, the sign that his distance from his husband was again straining the bond.

At least this time, he didn’t need to worry about it killing them. It would only drive them to a sexual frenzy if they didn’t do something about it soon.

Then again, if they lost control in public, that might just have the same effect in the end.

With a shudder, he made a note to train Draco earlier tomorrow and spend the rest of the night making love to Severus and settling their bond. He missed his husband anyway.

On the way up from the dungeons, Harry had the thought that he might stop in the Chamber and
grab the next few volumes of Slytherin’s works. If the man had expanded on his soul research during his life, it might help Harry develop his anti-horcrux spell. And the faster he finished it, the faster they could end the war and put this chaos behind them.

Well, if they survived.

Harry suppressed a shiver of foreboding and forced his attention back to the task at hand. They had to survive. He couldn’t stand this life without Severus, and Severus would go mad without him.

He turned towards Myrtle’s loo and froze outside the door. Quiet sniffs and sobs escaped the loo—nothing new, with the number of times Myrtle indulged in tears of self-pity—but this didn’t sound like the perpetually-sorrowful ghost. The absence of floods and ear-splitting wails was indication enough of a new presence, but the masculine quality of what few sounds did reach Harry’s ears convinced him he had stumbled on someone else releasing their grief. He hesitated, unsure if he should turn away and let them grieve in peace, but a soft whimper of pain decided him. He knew that voice.

“Draco.” Harry braced himself and stepped into the loo.

Draco leaned on the middle tap, tears dripping into the basin below, shoulders shaking with sobs. A dark purple bruise reached from his temple to his mouth, and crimson drops spilled from his lips, mixing with tears and turning the white porcelain pink. Harry winced and stood beside him.

“Hey,” he said in a soft, sad voice. “How bad is it this time?”

Draco winced. “N-not as bad.”

“Let me see.”

With a sniffle, Draco turned and let Harry run his diagnostics. Besides the obvious, Harry found only minor bruising on his left wrist. With a sigh, he conjured a seat for Draco and guided him into it, healing the boy with his usual gentle touch.

“Do you want to tell me why your dad beat the shite out of you this time?”

Draco sucked in a sharp breath. “You… how do you… I never said….”

“No. I figured it out for myself.” Harry healed Draco’s lip with gentle hands and gave him a dose of healing draught. “You know I care about you, right? I’ll protect you, if you let me.”

Draco dropped his head. “I know.”

“So why’d you get hit this time?”

“I… I’m not cruel enough, apparently.”

From that and his surface thoughts, Harry gleaned that Lucius had beat Draco because he wasn’t subjugating Harry’s will to his own, even if the other half of his plan appeared to have worked.

“Well, he’s right. You’re not. But that should be a good thing.” Harry brushed Draco’s hair back from his forehead and healed the bruise on his temple. “Please, Draco. Please, you’ve got to get away from this. It’s not as bad this time, but next time… I don’t know. It was so awful last time. I’m really scared for you.”

Draco scoffed, tears shining on his lashes, and brushed off Harry’s hand. “You don’t understand.
You can’t understand! The precious saviour has everyone bowing at his feet. The whole world wants you to succeed.” He jerked to his feet and paced, fury and despair sharp in his aura. “The whole world wants to see me burn! Even the other purebloods hate the Malfoys. I… I’m alone.”

“You’re not.” Harry laid a hand on Draco’s. “You’re not alone. Let me help you. Please. I… I understand far more than you realise.”

Draco snarled and ripped his hand away. “Bullshite! Golden boy, you have no idea what it means to be so… so trapped.”


“Just leave me alone, Potter!”

With a broken snarl, Draco pushed past Harry and ran out of the loo. Harry sighed and leaned against the wall, kicking himself for his insensitivity. Of course Draco would think him to be a pampered, adored saviour. The headmaster had encouraged that image so long, and Britain’s alternating hero worship and hatred did nothing to discourage it. Maybe he should talk more about his abuse—maybe if Draco realised Harry really did know, he would be more willing to accept his help.

And yet, until the boy gave some solid indication that he was ready to leave the Death Eaters, Harry couldn’t risk it. Gods. What could he do?

Myrtle popped her head above a stall and stared at Harry. “That didn’t go so well.”

Harry snorted wryly. “No. How long were you listening?”

“I’ve been here the whole time. Just because no one notices me….”

Harry shook his head. “Please don’t say anything about what you saw. Not about me and not about Draco. We could both be killed.”

Myrtle nodded. “I won’t. But if you are killed….” She tittered and turned red.

Harry fought an embarrassed blush and coughed into his hand. “Um… Myrtle, h-haven’t you heard the rumours about me?”

She smirked. “Of course, but I don’t care. I just want to look at you.”

Harry flushed to his ears and peeled himself off the wall. “Oh. Uh… t-thank you?” He edged away, revulsion churning in his gut. “I better go find Draco and make sure he’s okay. I’ll… see you later.”

After this, the next volumes of Slytherin’s works could wait until Myrtle wasn’t hanging about. Dear Merlin.

Harry searched for Draco manually through all the common places, but eventually had to assume the boy had gone back to his dorm room. He returned home, still worried. Severus was grading essays in his office, so Harry just gave his husband a brief kiss and a hello, and went to check his map for Draco. Seeing the boy’s name marker within the bounds of his room with Blaise alongside relieved Harry’s worry. Blaise would help him.
With a sigh, Harry guided his familiar off of his neck and laid the snake in his terrarium. ~Have a nap, Jabardi. Or you may play about the nest. I have work for school to do.~

Jabardi coiled up on his sunning rock. ~I will rest, Master.~

~Have a good sleep then.~ Harry magicked a bit of water into his terrarium and went to work on his latest essay for Transfiguration, a study of the effects of animal transfiguration on the human body. Harry had no doubt he would outscore the class on this essay. He hadn’t studied anatomy and physiology all year for nothing.

At least he needn’t worry about Hermione being angry with him about it any longer. He shared his notes with her now, too.

Just then, Harry’s DA coin went off with Hermione’s name, and he wondered if she had somehow heard his thoughts.

“Harry, go after Ron this instant! He heard me asking Parvati about her Zacharias watch, and he’s gone to—just hurry! We can’t catch him!”

“Shite!” Harry Summoned the map again. “Find Ronald Weasley!” The map flashed red over a pair of footprints racing down the fifth floor corridor towards the staircases, Hermione’s and Parvati’s tracks following at a fast clip.

“Damn! Jabardi, I’ve got to go!” He bolted to the floo, spat out the closest exit he could think of—‘Professor Flitwick’s Office, Hogwarts!’—and sprinted into the stunned professor’s office. “Sorry, sir! Emergency, gotta go!”

Harry dashed out of Flitwick’s office almost before he’d finished speaking and sprinted towards the staircases. He had to go down one floor to catch Ron, but as the boy had to go down three to reach the Hufflepuff dorms, Harry hoped he had enough time to find him before all hell broke loose.

But Ron wasn’t in the stairwell.

“What’s gone wrong now?” He prayed the girls had managed to stun the prat and jerked out his map again. Ron’s marker was still flashing red, in the hallway a few metres before the stairwell… and Smith’s marker stood just under it.

“Bloody hell! Mischief managed!” The map cleared, and Harry shoved it in his pocket before racing after his former best friend.

Severus’ worry flickered in the bond as Harry reached the stairwell.

[Sorry, love. Ron found out about Smith and he’s—] Harry gasped as voices—shouts—became audible just outside the stairwell. [Yes, they’re fighting! Send Professor McGonagall to the fifth floor outside the stairwell, please!]

A wave of affirmation spread through the bond, Severus’ assurance he would comply, and Harry sped off after the idiots. He turned the corner to find Smith cowering under a shower of fists, hexes, and curses even Harry had to appreciate. Damn. Ron had gone utterly mental. No wonder the girls couldn’t catch him.

“Harry!” Hermione called him and dragged his attention back to the situation at hand. “Help us! He’s too fast.”

“Right!” Harry ignored his wand and charged into the fray, grabbing Ron by the back of the neck
and slamming him down. A flick of his hand stunned him. “You idiot! What do you think you’re doing?”

Smith stood on shaky legs and rubbed a bloody lip. “I’ll make sure you pay for this unprovoked assault, Weasley. Potter, you saw it.”

Harry turned a snarl on Smith. “Get lost, you slimy bastard. I know what you’re doing to Ginny, so don’t try to act like I’m on your side.”

Smith scowled. “You know nothing. She’s fine.”

“Uh-huh. That’s why she’s wearing thicker makeup and smells of bruise paste these days, I’m sure.” Harry stabbed his wand between Smith’s eyes. “Last warning. Get lost.”

With his trainer and the best fighter in the school staring him down, Smith showed his true colours and sprinted off like the coward he was. Harry scowled after him, then woke Ron up and heaved him to his feet with a sigh.

Ron tried to fight him off. “Lemme go! The bastard’s hurting her!”

“Ron!” Harry grabbed him and threw him against the wall. “Listen, you bloody idiot. We know! We know he’s hurting her. We were trying to keep her safe and show her she had the strength to leave him on her own. And you just shot that all to hell and back by attacking him like this!”

Ron snarled. “I gotta—she’s my sister! Gotta get her away.”

Hermione shouted, “Stop, Ron! It has to be her choice or she’ll just go right back to him.”

“And she won’t leave now either,” said Parvati. “We’re doing all we can to protect her—why do you think we haven’t left them alone? But now we’re going to look like the enemy all because you can’t control your bloody temper!”

“But—”

“Mister Weasley,” came McGonagall’s sternest tones, “fighting is strictly prohibited at Hogwarts. You will serve a week’s worth of detentions with me, every night after dinner, and I am taking fifty points from Gryffindor.”

“But he’s beating my sister!”

McGonagall crossed her arms over her chest. “What proof do you have?”

Ron swallowed hard. “Well, I heard them talking about it, and she’s been wearing heavy makeup and bruise paste….”

“And you have definitive proof that Mister Smith is the one who harmed her?”

“I… well, it’s obvious, innit?”

McGonagall sighed. “No, Mister Weasley, it is not. Not to the Wizengamot. And until we have such proof—until Miss Weasley comes forward or Smith is caught in the act—attacking her abuser will only cause her to be injured further, if it is true that Smith is abusing her.”

“It is,” Harry said with a grim nod. “If the Wizengamot accepted Telepathic evidence, I’d have him, but they don’t. Which is why we were all trying to keep her safe by watching over her all the time.”
“Yes, I am aware,” said McGonagall. “Your friend reported the situation to the professors as soon as he became aware of it. We have been watching Smith ever since, but he has shown no overt signs of abuse—not in public at any rate. And now we will need to worry about Smith pressing charges against Mister Weasley.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. “Come, Weasley. I will attempt to explain the situation and our methods, and advise you on how to proceed in the future.”

“But—”

McGongall’s lips pursed. “That was not a request, Mister Weasley.”

Ron gulped. “Y-yes, ma’am.”

He followed her to her office, muttering under his breath, and Harry sighed and leaned against the wall.

Hermione leaned next to him. “Do you think she’ll be hurt more for this?”

“Probably. Let’s hope we can either prevent it or convince her to leave.”

“Yeah.” She stood and brushed off her skirt. “I’ll warn the DA to be on the watch for trouble. Can you keep an eye on the map for us?”

Harry nodded. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Thanks, Harry. See you later.” Hermione and Parvati left, and Harry leaned his head against the cool, rough stone.

Merlin, what a mess.

When Harry returned, Severus was waiting, pacing before the sofa with worry in his eyes. He rushed to Harry’s side as soon as he entered the flat and caught him into his arms.

“Are you hurt?”

Harry shook his head and hugged Severus tight. “It wasn’t hard to stop him. He was in a rage and a better fighter than Smith, but not better than me. Not to mention, he wasn’t paying attention. He did a lot of damage to Smith, though, and probably Ginny by proxy.” He snuggled into Severus’ arms. “What do we do now?”

“I think there is nothing we can do besides keep a watch over both of them, which I have already advised the professors to do.”

“So did Professor McGonagall. And Hermione’s warning the DA to do the same thing.”

“Let us hope that is enough.”

“Yeah.” Harry stepped back with a brief kiss. “I’m meant to be watching the map for them. I’ll—”

A knock sounded at Severus’ door. Harry winced.
“I’ll go into the bedroom, lo—”

Professor McGonagall called through the door. “Severus, it’s Minerva. Will you let me in?”

Harry sighed, relieved. “Or, I’ll just sit on the sofa.”

Severus chuckled and let the professor into their quarters. “Hello, Minerva. Are you here about Mister Weasley?”

“Yes.”

McGonagall closed the door behind her and sat in the armchair beside the sofa. Severus moved to his husband’s side and wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders. The gentle touch eased the ache of their strained bond a bit, and Harry breathed easier. He climbed into Severus’ lap to further ease his pain, and Severus clutched him tight.

“Forgive us,” Severus said, his voice low. “We have not had enough time together and our bond is aching. We need to be close.”

McGonagall nodded, a gentle smile on her face. “It’s no trouble, boys. I am only happy that you have come so far.” She sighed and rubbed her forehead. “If only every relationship could be so mutually loving. I am afraid Miss Weasley will suffer for this.”

“So are we all,” said Harry with a shudder. “What happened with Ron?”

“I believe I have explained the situation as well as I am able. He is still livid, but I think he understands now that further violence will only exacerbate the situation.” She shook her head sadly. “Would that we could simply separate them.”

“I fear it would break her mind,” said Severus with a wince. “She has already shown signs of mental illness.”

Harry nodded. “She’d just go after him harder, I think. I mean, we’ve all seen the extent of her perseverance.”

“Indeed.” McGonagall sighed. “Severus, what do we do?”

“I think we are already doing what we can.”

Harry sighed and leaned into Severus’ side. “I’m worried about her. And Draco, too. He’s so miserable, but he won’t leave. I keep trying, but he’s just not listening. He can’t let go of the hope his father will change one day. Gods. I… I don’t know what to do. I feel so helpless, with both of them.”

Severus kissed Harry’s hair. “Simply continue as you have been, beloved. Ginevra has other champions to secure her safety, and Draco is coming around. Perhaps you cannot see it, but from my the point of view and experience, he is making great strides towards independence. Your forgiveness will help him out of the darkness eventually. I am sure of it. As will Mister Thomas’.”

“Before or after his father murders him, Sev? That’s what I’m worried about.”

Severus shuddered and held Harry tighter. “Yes. So am I.”
Caught in the Act

Chapter Summary

Warnings: severe domestic violence. Severus is more open than typical for him, but he wants Poppy to know they're really in love for Harry's sake.

Chapter 53

Caught in the Act

4 February

The next day, Ginny came into the Great Hall with a coat of makeup so thick, Harry could have scraped it off with a spoon. He winced as she walked past, leaving an odour of bruise paste that set Jabardi hissing in discomfort and made Harry’s eyes water.

“Merlin,” Harry breathed.

A bit further down the Gryffindor table, Ron’s expression turned thunderous. He made to rise from his seat, but Parvati, Lavender, and Colin forced him right back into it.

“Sit down, Ron,” Colin snapped. “If you make a huge scene here, you’re just going to humiliate Ginny and drive her closer to the bastard.”

Ron muttered something about setting the twins on the arsehole if he wasn’t allowed to fight for her. Harry pretended he hadn’t heard. Smith had a healthy dose of Fred and George’s worst coming, and they were a hell of a lot more creative than just pummelling the berk. Not to mention sneaky enough to make sure Ginny never found out.

Those two would have made excellent Slytherins.

Speaking of, Harry started towards the Slytherin table, intent on grabbing Draco and asking him to sit with him, but the boy was nowhere in sight. Harry’s stomach dropped as he sat beside Luna and Neville, ensconced at the far end of the Gryffindor table that morning. Dean wasn’t about, and Hermione hadn’t arrived yet.

“Lu, is Draco…?”

She nodded, her eyes troubled. “Home again, I’m afraid.”

Harry grimaced. “Dear gods. He’s barely had time to recover from the last bout.”

“I know.” Luna rubbed her arms and shivered. “Harry, we will need to remain alert. The Feathersprites fear it will be quite bad this time.”

Harry shuddered. “How bad?”
“I cannot say for sure, but they are quite worried.”

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed a lump in his throat. “Merlin. Well, I… I’ll try to keep an eye on the map whenever I can. Will you listen for your spirits and let me know the second they know what’s going on?”

“Oh of course.” She straightened, resolution firm in her eyes. “In the meantime, we should practise our skills. I will research chants and emergency first aid. You practise trauma healing. Neville, please make sure Harry and his friend have plenty of high quality ingredients to make new medicines.”

Neville nodded. “I’ll bring what I have on hand by before lunch, and the rest after classes today. And I’ll tell Dean and Blaise to be on alert. Hermione too.”

“Thank you, love.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “And, Harry, do ask your mate to help you restock your apprentice kit, particularly for trauma work.”

Harry gave her a grim nod. “Done.”

Two days later, Harry was in Charms when the call for Draco came through on his DA coin.

‘Harry, Draco is at the gates, and the Feathersprites say he won’t survive long without immediate help.’

“Oh dear gods!” He jerked to his feet, slammed his books back into his bag, grabbed his knapsack and apprentice kit, and rushed to Flitwick. “So sorry, sir, I’ve got to run—medical emergency.” He whispered, “It’s Draco.”

Flitwick winced. “Go, child, and may Merlin guide your feet.”

“Thank you!” Harry slung his bag over his shoulder and dashed out of the classroom to a chorus of mutters and whispers.

Harry rushed to the gates as fast as his feet would carry him, terror cold in his veins. He had to hurry—faster! Draco would die if he didn’t pick up the pace. His feet flew, a stitch crept up his side, and his breath ran short, but by gods, he covered the distance to the Entrance Hall in record time. With a silent prayer to whoever was listening, Harry poured his magic and energy alike into his feet and bolted down the entrance path faster than he had ever done in his life.

Draco lay on his back, unconscious, just inside the gates. Under a mess of bruises and blood, his skin had gone bone white and his lips had a blue tinge. His breath came fast and shallow, and an unnatural gurgling sound with each exhalation sent Harry’s stomach tumbling into his feet.

Oh dear gods, Lucius had punctured Draco’s lung. With a little cry, Harry conjured a stretcher under the boy and started his chanting the second he came within range. ‘Auxilium Spiritus! Sarcio Vulnera! Purifico Pulmonis!’ He didn’t expect the last one to help, but in his terror, he was willing to try it.

He skidded to a halt beside the boy and levitated his stretcher, racing him towards the Infirmary even as he performed a diagnostic. Shite—yes, his lung was punctured, badly, and… damn! His spleen had ruptured too. Between both injuries, Draco was bleeding out and drowning in his own blood. He
needed emergency surgery that instant.

“Fuck!” Harry struggled to clear his mind and focused on his mate. As classes would end for the period in a moment—he hoped—Harry used his Telepathic link to communicate his needs.

[Love, Draco’s back and it’s worse than we thought. I need you to bring loads of trauma potions, surgical supplies, and especially Blood Replenishers to the Infirmary. We don’t keep as much as he’ll need on hand.]

Severus’ terror surged in the bond, but Harry felt a wave of affirmation too.

Harry levitated Draco’s stretcher, secured the boy, and raced towards the Infirmary. [Okay, Sev. We’re on our way.]

Luna met him at the Entrance Hall doors and raced beside him, chanting the same spells Harry was over Draco. Damn. Harry had half-hoped she would pull another miracle save out of her hat.

This time, it was up to him.

They ripped the Infirmary doors open and raced towards the private rooms in the back. “Poppy! Poppy, are you here?” The answering silence rang in his ears. “Merlin! Of all the times to be out of the Infirmary.”

Luna panted out, “The Clarents say she is in the kitchens. I will go after her, but perhaps you might contact her through your Telepathy at the same time.”

Harry grimaced. “She doesn’t know.”

“Now is hardly the time to worry about keeping it secret.”

Harry nodded, worry written all over his face. “Y-you’re right. I hope it doesn’t blow up in our faces.” He waved her off. “Go, hurry. I’ll try to contact her too.”

“The Clarents say he needs Blood Replenishers now.” With that, Luna turned and dashed out of the Infirmary.

Harry spelled a phial from his kit into Draco and checked his numbers. A low whistle escaped him. “Gods!” He took a deep breath and focused on the matron even as he spelled the potion into Draco’s stomach. [Poppy? This is Harry. Don’t be afraid. I’m a Telepath. We had to keep it secret because of the war, but this is urgent. I need you in the Infirmary this instant. Draco is back, and he has a punctured lung and ruptured spleen. I’m doing my best to stabilise him, but he needs surgery, right now.]

He felt Poppy’s confusion, then alarm, then resolution. With any luck, she had heard him and was on her way. Harry sighed and returned his attention to Draco, trying to keep him alive until Poppy and Severus arrived.

“Potter?” Severus called into the silence. “Where are you?”

“Here, sir.”

Severus appeared around the edge of Draco’s room bearing a box of supplies and cast a silencing charm. “Oh, love. How bad is it?”

Harry took the potions and supplies from his mate and set them beside the bed. Another quick
diagnostic relieved the sharpest edge of his terror.

“Bad. He’s stable at the moment, but it won’t last long without emergency surgery. His lung is punctured, and his spleen is ruptured and bleeding into the hole in his lung.”

“Dear gods,” Severus breathed.

“Yeah.”

Harry set a monitoring charm over Draco and, with one more check to make sure he was stable, ran into Severus’ arms. “I’m so scared. I’m not ready for this level of trauma, but I don’t think Poppy can handle such severe injuries on her own.”

Severus brought Harry into a gentle kiss. “I believe in you.”

“Thank you, love.”

Harry kissed Severus back, loving and slow, and tangled his fingers in his mate’s hair. Gods, he missed this, this feeling of his mate so close. A moan escaped him, and Harry pulled back with a gasp.

“Gotta stop, Sev. Draco needs help, and Poppy will be here any minute.”

A feminine voice from just inside the room turned his blood cold. “She is already here, Mister Potter, and waiting on an explanation.”

“Shite,” Harry breathed into Severus’ ear. “Love, what do we do?”

Severus shivered. “Just… trust me. Lean on me. Show her how much you love me while still being discreet. I will do the rest.”

Though Harry didn’t know what would happen, he did trust his husband. “All right.”

He allowed Severus to take the lead, but Gods, he was terrified. Poppy sounded furious, and if she said one word in the hearing of the wrong person….

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “Ssh. It will be all right.”

He tidied Harry’s hair and his own, then turned to face the woman. Poppy stood at the entrance of the room looking livid, a basket of supplies in one hand and her wand in the other. Severus lifted both hands showing he was unarmed, then returned one to Harry’s shoulder. Harry would have liked to be closer, but he feared irritating the woman further.

“I will tell you nothing here,” Severus whispered to the woman. “I think you know the risks to both my life and Harry’s if we reveal anything of the truth to the students—some of whom are Death Eaters in the making.”

“We’ve a patient to treat regardless,” said a brusque matron, “but don’t think you’ll escape explaining. I will go straight to the headmaster if you try to avoid it.”

Severus rubbed his lip. “We should anyway. Once we are finished with Draco, we shall speak of this with Albus and he can decide what to do. But I should warn you, he already knows of the situation between Potter and myself. As do Minerva and Filius.”

Harry nodded. “Albus was the one to suggest it, so by all means, go to him, Poppy.”
Poppy gaped. “A-Albus did? But you’re a student and—”

“Ssh,” Severus hissed. “Say nothing of it in public. You are not risking our livelihoods by doing so, but our lives.” He glared. “And I will remind you that Potter is no longer my student.”

“But—”

“Poppy, please,” Harry whispered. “You’re going to get us both killed if you can’t keep it together until we talk to the headmaster, and Draco’s going to die without help.”

The woman shook her head and pocketed her wand. “I cannot believe the lot of you.” She jerked out her arm with the basket of supplies. “There had better be a good reason.”

Fury sparked to life in Harry’s chest. “Beyond the fact that we love each other, is keeping me from murdering the headmaster or my friends in my sleep reason enough?”

She paled. “I… what do you—”

“Not here. I shouldn’t have said that much.”

Severus ran his hand through Harry’s curls. “No trouble, love. She is provoking you, but remember, you must hurry if we are to save Draco. I will go ahead to Albus’ office as my presence with you will only be detrimental, both in terms of the war and… other matters.” He kissed Harry lightly, ignoring Poppy’s squeal of outrage. She wouldn’t come between them, now or ever. “Good luck. I will see you in a moment.”

Harry touched Severus’ cheek. “You… you’ll stay, right?”

“Always.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead and swept away to the floo.

Harry sighed, then stood tall and glared at his teacher. “Now, Poppy,” he said in a hard-as-flint voice, “are we going to save Draco’s life or argue about what I can and cannot do as a consenting adult?”

Poppy sighed. “Obviously I’ve missed something along the way. Come then and we’ll go to rescue your… friend.”

“Hmm.” Harry took the supply basket and concealed it, tucking it into the same pocket that he had stashed the other shrunken supplies and potions. “Let’s go then.”

Thank Merlin, the surgery went well, but Harry had little time to relax afterwards. As soon as Draco was stable and recovering, Poppy set monitoring charms over him and dragged Harry to the floo. “Into the headmaster’s office with you, Harry.”

He shot her a dark look and jerked his arm away. “I’m not a recalcitrant child, so there’s no need to drag me. Merlin.” He tossed a pinch of floo powder into the flames. “Headmaster Dumbledore’s office, Hogwarts.” He staggered through into the office, Poppy close on his heels.

Albus greeted them with a genial smile. “Ah, Poppy, Harry. Welcome. How is Draco?”

“He survived, but it was far too close,” Harry said with a shuddering sigh. “We almost lost him on
the table more than once. Thank Merlin, he pulled through, and he should be all right once his injuries heal. He’ll be in recovery for two days to a week, depending on his ability to heal.”

Albus nodded. “Well done, Harry, Poppy. I am relieved you were able to save him.”

“Barely,” said a pale, shaking Harry.

“Harry….” Severus opened his arms and motioned to his lap. “Come.”

“Yes, we should make ourselves comfortable.” Albus tapped his wand and a cup of tea and plate of raspberry biscuits sailed into Harry’s hands. “There you are, my boy. Have a seat so that we might settle this… faux pas. I am afraid that the war does not sleep and, unfortunately, I have yet to learn the trick of how to be everywhere at once.”

Harry chuckled wanly and sipped at the dosed tea. “No time turners for you, sir?”

The old man shuddered. “Not so many to be sure.” He sent a plate of biscuits and a cup of tea to a pursed-lipped Poppy as well. “Now, do sit down, everyone.”

“Harry, love, it’s all right.” Severus patted his lap once more, and Harry stepped closer.

He cast Poppy a nervous glance, but in the end, his love for his husband won out over his fears. With a sigh, he set his tea aside, settled in Severus’ lap, and curled into his husband’s shoulder. “I was so scared he would die, Sev.”

Severus held Harry tight and kissed his curls. “Ssh. He did not. You did well.”

“That is entirely inappropriate,” Poppy squawked, but the headmaster cut her off.

“Nevertheless, you will control your anger and your tongue or I will have no choice but to Obliviate you.” Albus’ voice was cold as ice, and he was gratified to see the woman pale and sit down without another protest, setting her tea and biscuits on the desk, both untouched.

“Now,” Albus said in a softer tone, “as you can see, Poppy, Severus and Harry are bonded.”

She choked on air. “Bonded!”

“Yes, soul-bonded, actually.” Albus leaned back in his chair and steepled his hands. “As it so happens, ever since the incident at the Department of Mysteris at the end of Harry’s fifth year, Vold —”

“Professor,” Harry snapped, laying a gentle hand over Severus’ arm. “I’m aware you like to turn that tactic against true Death Eaters, but Severus doesn’t deserve it.”

Albus gave Severus an apologetic look. “Quite right. Forgive me, my boys. I’m afraid, in my anger over Lucius’ abhorrent abuse of his son, quite forgot the danger to Severus.” He turned back to the bemused matron. “As I was saying, Poppy, since Sirius’ unfortunate demise, Riddle has known he can take control of Harry’s link and possess him. He has been using Harry’s dreams to attempt to control him in his sleep. I am sure you recall how depressed Harry was after the death of his familiar this year?”

The matron nodded, her lips pursed. “I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”
Severus pinned her with a cold stare. “You are aware that depression lowers a person’s resistance to *Imperius*?”

She frowned and nodded again.

“The night before Harry went to the tower, he kissed me. He was already in love with me, but I, believing such a relationship to be illegal—and having a severe phobia of love—refused him. He returned to his dorm after breaking down in my arms and found his familiar had been murdered. You are aware of the events that followed the day afterwards. Due to Harry’s distress and my fear for his life, he stayed in my quarters that evening along with Neville, so it wouldn’t be seen as improper.”

“And, unfortunately,” said Albus with a sigh, “I made a grave error of judgment the same evening, which I do not believe Harry has informed you of in his sessions as of yet. Believing Harry would be encouraged by having a dream to live for, I led him to the Mirror of Erised.”

Poppy growled out, “Albus.”

Albus’ cheeks pinked. “I know, dear girl. It was foolish of me. I should have simply attempted to speak to him. But he did not trust me at the time—again, my own fault—so I came to the erroneous conclusion that the mirror was the only way to help him.”

“Instead, it broke me into bits,” said Harry with a shudder. “It was… a beautiful image. Severus and I bonded and in love. But knowing it was just a dream—that Sev didn’t love me and couldn’t—it destroyed me. I went back to Sev’s quarters in complete despair.”

Severus whispered in Harry’s ear, “I *did* love you then, my Harry. I did not comprehend it, but I loved you dearly.”

Harry turned into his arms and buried his chest in Severus’ shoulder with a sigh. “I know that now, Sev, but I didn’t then.”

“No,” said Severus, speaking loud enough for the others to hear again. “You could not know I had already fallen for you when I had just pushed you away and told you I did not believe myself capable of loving another. And so, Poppy, Harry’s despair… was truly an awful thing to behold. Due to his mental anguish, though Harry usually has strong resistance to mind control—a trait of Telepaths and Zopaths alike—that night, he was too distraught to fight. The Dark Lord took control of him through his dreams, entirely. I stopped Harry outside the headmaster’s office, and he was seconds from killing them both.”

“Dear Merlin,” Poppy breathed. “Took control? I’m not sure I understand how he could with you in Severus’ quarters, Harry. The school would have been up in arms had You-Know-Who entered the grounds.”

“Forgive me—we meant Riddle attempted to control him remotely,” Severus explained.

“I’ve been having nightmares since the end of fifth year,” Harry said with a shudder. “Riddle tries to cast *Imperius* on me and turn me into a murderer every single night. Until that night, I could throw off the curse. But in such despair, I was too weak.”

“Yes,” Severus said, “but as Harry and Neville had slept in my living room that evening, I discovered his absence quickly. With Neville’s aid, I tracked Harry to the corridor outside this office, petrified him halfway through a blasting curse, and revived him. After much discussion, we learned the secret of his *Imperius* dreams, then we engaged upon an experiment to discover what, precisely, was happening with Harry’s shields in the night. He is a superb Occlumens, so we needed to see
what was happening in his sleep.”

The headmaster took over. “Imagine our surprise, Poppy, when we discovered that Harry’s shields were failing not because of a lack of skill in mental magic, but because of an abundance of it. Harry is a natural Telepath.”

“Yes, I know,” Poppy said with a frown. “He contacted me mentally to warn me of Draco’s arrival and call me back to the Infirmary.”

Albus gave Harry a sad smile. “I see.” He stroked his beard and sighed. “In such times, Harry’s Telepathy does prove itself quite useful, but Tom found a way to use it against him. Because of his scar, Harry has an unbreakable link to Tom, and Harry’s natural Telepathic magic is so strong, he unconsciously links to anyone nearby in his sleep, including Tom. And so, the only way to prevent Tom from taking advantage of the situation and murdering me, Harry’s friends, or Harry himself was to bond him to a natural Zopath or Occlumens and have his partner shield him externally.”

Severus met her eyes with a level stare. “And I am a Zopath. The only one able to match Harry’s powers, as we are both exceptionally strong even for our races.”

“Well,” Albus agreed. “Severus was the only compatible candidate—the only other natural Occlumens I know of is Elphias Doge, and I believe you understand why he would not be a good fit?”

Poppy scowled. “The man is as old as you are, Albus.”

Albus chuckled. “Thank you, dear.”

She blushed. “Oh Merlin. That was rather rude of me. Forgive me, Albus.”

He waved her off. “Not at all, dear girl. You are quite distressed. It really is no trouble.” His expression turned grave. “But I think you can understand I had no choice but to bond my boys, besides the fact that they were already falling in love, of course. Harry had loved him for over a year, and Severus was falling, though he was afraid.

“At any rate, they decided on a full soul-bonding, as Harry feared someone might attempt to kill Severus as a way of controlling who Harry is involved with… and for other reasons I will not divulge at this time, not without Harry’s permission.”

Harry shuddered and shook his head. “Not today, sir. Not after Draco.”

Albus gave him a sad smile. “I do understand.” He turned back to Poppy. “Back to their story then, at the time, it was… a difficult bonding. Severus still feared his own heart, and his fear kept the bond from sealing entirely on Harry’s side. But I prayed love would, as they say, conquer all, and it has done. It has been a hard road for both of them, but they are in love now, and I, for one, will not deny them happiness inside a bond that neither had a choice about.”

“Severus did,” Harry said softly.

Severus kissed Harry’s temple. “The option to watch you die or go mad….” He cast a glance at Poppy. “—Or worse… that was not a choice. Even when I hated you, I would not have condemned you to such a terrible fate. I would have sooner bonded you even then than watch you suffer so.”

Harry smiled and buried his face in Severus’ neck. “I know, love.”

Severus held his husband close and traced a gentle hand down his back. “Poppy, we have made
every effort to be discreet, but our time has been so terribly stretched lately that I have hardly seen
Harry for five minutes this week, which is why you caught us in the situation you did earlier. The
pull is driving us both too close to the edge.”

“I feel better like this,” said a contented Harry. He sighed into Severus’ throat, kissed the stubble-
roughened skin under his jaw, and straightened. “Poppy, I’m happy for the first time in seventeen
years. For Sev, it’s been even longer. Can you be happy for me? For us?”

“And even if you cannot,” said Severus in a hard voice, “can you be discreet? One word to the
wrong person will condemn us both to death.”

“Without an oath that this stays between us,” said Albus in a quiet, but forceful tone, “I am afraid I
will need to Obliviate you, Poppy.”

She glared at Albus. “Of course I’m not going to go blathering on about it, but Merlin, I’m ashamed
of you, Albus. Manipulating them into a bond when Severus was phobic of love—you might have
condemned them both to a life with an empty hole in their spirits. Do you have any idea of what it
means to know your bondmate doesn’t love you in return?”

“Yes, actually,” Albus said in a low, sorrowful voice. “And I have lived with the pain for eighty
years. I confess, I had hopes those two would do better by each other than my ill-fated affair. Of
course, neither Harry nor Severus is a power-hungry fool, so they have already made better choices
than I.”

Three sets of eyes fixed on Albus.

Albus sighed. “Gellert was a lovely man before I saw the truth of him. By then, it was too late.”

Severus gasped. “Gellert? Dear gods, Albus! You are bonded to Grindelwald?”

Albus gave a sad nod. “A life bond rather than a soul bond, but it is close enough to cause me
intense pain at all hours of the day. It is why I dose my sweets.”


“Defeat him?” Albus had gone sheet-white. “Yes. I could not kill him, could not bring myself to kill
him, but I stripped his magic. And have lived with the pain of an unfulfilled bond ever since. So yes,
Poppy, I believe I am quite an expert on the situation.”

“That makes it even more foolhardy to have forced them together like this!” Poppy stood akimbo and
glared. “Albus Dumbledore, you and your bloody meddling. The odds were entirely stacked against
them. Severus was terrified of love—completely traumatised. And you thought it a good idea to
bond them to each other’s souls—for eternity?”

Albus winced. “I… I only wanted to give them the chance….”

“Humph! I cannot condone this. I canno—”

Severus’ gentle hand on Poppy’s arm stopped her tirade cold.

“Please. Poppy, you do not understand. Please listen without judgment.”

Poppy looked at Severus’ hand in wonder. “Severus… you’re touching me?”

He gave her a wry smile. “Harry helped me overcome my fears. Now, will you listen?”
Poppy glanced to Severus’ hand and back up to his face. “If he can do this for you, I suppose I had better.”

“Thank you.”

Severus took a deep breath, relieved he had stopped the matron’s anger, for now, at least. With a quiet sigh, he settled back into his chair and listened as Harry took over.

“Severus is right, Poppy,” Harry said, his expression soft. “Professor Dumbledore is a meddling old coot, but you haven’t seen Severus in private with me. You haven’t seen him conquer his phobias of touch and hold me like something precious. You didn’t see him take me into his arms and kiss me when I was afraid. I love him with everything I am, Poppy. I have done since I was sixteen. And, that night, Albus saw that Severus loved me too.”

“Harry is correct,” Severus murmured. “I was terrified, but Harry knew this and accepted me without condition regardless. He offered me the life I had always dreamed of beyond my phobias, and asked for nothing in return but my hand and protection.” He pressed a soft kiss to Harry’s temple. “He has healed me. I am no longer afraid. Not of him, not in any fashion.”

Harry breathed, “Severus….”

Severus kissed him lightly and turned back to the others. “Poppy, Albus saw the birth of our love, and he was simply attempting to give us a chance at happiness that night. We both wanted this bond, wanted each other. It was a long road to overcome my fears, but we have. I am whole again.”

“Please don’t be angry anymore, Poppy,” Harry said. “This is what we want.”

Poppy sighed and sank back into her chair. “You’re honestly happy, Harry?”

Severus trembled slightly and clutched Harry tighter. Gods, he had tried so hard to make up for the past. Had he done enough?

Harry turned in Severus’ lap and stroked a gentle hand down the man’s face. “Ssh, love. It’s all right. You’ve been wonderful to me.”

Severus sighed and laid his head against Harry’s, trying to show Poppy he did love his husband, just as much as Harry loved him. He adamantly refused to become that cold, unfeeling man again. At least when he was safe to show Harry the changes his love had wrought, Severus had vowed long ago to show his affection-starved partner all the love he needed.

Severus needed it too.

With a whisper of Harry’s name, Severus pressed a soft kiss to the top of Harry’s ear and held him closer.

“I love you too, Sev,” Harry murmured.

Severus closed his eyes and squeezed his husband tight. Harry’s gentle voice brushed across his cheek.

“You tell me, Poppy. Are we happy?”
She sighed. “Never in twenty-six years have I seen Severus act like this, Harry. If you’ve brought about such a change in him, then I must admit, it seems you are.”

“We are,” Severus murmured. “I must act as if I loathe him in public, but it… it grows more difficult to pretend every day. Especially when my words still cut too deep sometimes. I try not to hurt him, but it is not always avoidable.”

Harry kissed Severus lightly. “I know you don’t mean it, love. I hear your thoughts when you let me. I know you’d rather kiss me than snap at me. It’s okay, angel. One day this war will be over, and we can be as open as you want.”

Severus winced. “People will hurt you for your choice, Harry. They will abandon you because of me.”

“The only true friends I have left aren’t the type to judge, Sev. Neville actually likes you fairly well these days and Luna, well, she knows what it means to be judged unfairly. Besides, they already know. Hermione, Daphne, and Millie are the only ones who don’t, and they all respect and like you now that they know the truth about your nature. I think we’ll be okay.”

“What about the Weasleys, Harry?”

Harry shook his head sadly. “The ones who care about me will only want to make sure we’re happy and the others don’t matter. The twins will probably be excited, actually. They’ll want to pick your brains.”

Severus snorted. “Let them pick yours instead.”

“Now there’s an idea. Harry Potter-Snape, Weasleys Wizard Wheezes Charms Master extraordinaire.”

“What did I say about that ego of yours?”

Harry laughed. “Lately, you’ve been telling me to find one. I suppose I’m doing a good job of it if I already need to be taken down a peg.”

Severus chuckled and kissed Harry’s cheek. “So you are.”

Poppy sighed. “I am not sure I approve of this completely, but then, it does appear that you are happy, Harry, and that you had little choice in the matter.”

“I’m happy,” Harry replied. “It was rocky at first, but we’re doing all right now.”

Severus held him closer and nuzzled his cheek. “I am happy too, if it matters.”

Poppy huffed. “Of course it does.” She shook her head and gave Dumbledore a look. “You have some things to answer for, Albus, but at least it turned out well. I’m off to see to Mister Malfoy then, and yes, I’ll keep your secret. But the two of you must be more careful. You’re fortunate I was the only one who saw.”

Harry nodded. “We will.”

Poppy patted his shoulder and swept out of the Headmaster’s office.

“That… wasn’t as disastrous as I had imagined,” said Severus after a moment.

Harry nodded and kissed his husband. “While Poppy’s tending to Malfoy, let’s take some time for
each other. You have a free period now, right?"

Severus nodded. “I had intended to use it for grading, but you are right. We have not had enough
time together and the bond is strained.”

“I miss you too.”

Severus smiled against Harry’s cheek.

“Off with you, boys,” said Albus with a chuckle. “Go ease your bond and then you should return to
the Infirmary to help Poppy, Harry.”

Harry stood and offered his bonded a hand. Severus blushed faintly as he accepted and let Harry
help him to his feet.

“Let’s go then, love.”

Severus kissed Harry lightly and, once the younger man was disillusioned and muffled, led his
husband back to their quarters.
Chapter Summary

Warnings: slash, discussions of child abuse and murder.

Chapter 54

Reparations

Severus lay under his husband, naked and arching into his touch. Harry had decided this time he would find all the spots that drove Severus mad, and so far, he had done a damn good job. Severus cried out as his husband’s tongue traced down from his nipple to the creases of his belly and lower, tantalising the sensitive skin just above his straining erection. Fuck. He wasn’t sure how much more he could bear of this.

“H-Harry, lower, please!”

Harry gave him a wicked smile. “Okay.”

Severus groaned as Harry moved past his erection and affixed his kisses to the hollow of Severus’ hip. A lightning-sharp surge of ticklish-pleasure knocked the wind from Severus and he gave a strangled moan.

Harry teased him with the tip of his tongue, but that set Severus laughing.

“Tickles?”

“Merlin, yes.”

Harry chuckled. “You’re so adorable when you laugh like that.”

Severus’ cheeks burned. “I-I am not ado—”

Harry sucked the curve of Severus’ hip, and intense sensation ripped a squeal from the older man’s throat. He couldn’t even form words under such a sharp assault of ecstasy. He grabbed the sheets and jerked up, crying out at the maddening pleasure.

“Merlin!” Harry leaned back, a smile on his face. “This feels good, love?”


“Mm. That’s what I like to hear.” Harry’s head dropped, and sharp pleasure, so intense, it was almost painful, zinged throughout Severus’ body again. He shrieked and thrashed about, utterly lost to Harry’s touch.

“Mnh. G-go-gods!”
Gentle fingertips caressed Severus’ bollocks, light and teasing in counterpoint to the fiery pull of Harry’s kisses on his hip, and Severus almost came that instant.

“S-stop. Too much.”

Harry winced and pulled back, chagrined. “Oh, love. I’m sorry. Are you okay?”


Harry smiled. “Hmm.” He returned his gentle hand to Severus’ bollocks, and a strangled cry escaped the older man. He rocked up into Harry’s palm, unable to control himself, and Harry squeezed him gently, rolling and rubbing his skin, and Severus threw his head back with a whimper. So good. Just a bit more and….

“Severus,” Harry murmured, his eyes serious and watchful, “may I touch you? Here?”

His hand dropped a couple of inches and hovered just above Severus’ entrance. The idea of feeling touch there after so long avoiding it cooled his out-of-control ardour. Gods. Could he allow it? He was so afraid, but Harry had never hurt him. Instead, every touch, every caress had brought him intense pleasure.

Harry gave him a soft smile. “It’s okay, love. Maybe next time.”

He took Severus’ flagging erection into his mouth and white-hot pleasure strangled any response Severus might have given. He cried out and arched up beyond all control, clawing at the sheets so he wouldn’t grab Harry’s head. Oh gods! Dear mother of Merlin, he was melting inside Harry’s mouth. Hot and wet, a soft tongue stroked the ridge under his shaft, sending surges of ecstasy through him with each stroke.

A sense of déjà vu overcame him. Hadn’t this happened the last time they made love?

No. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Severus wanted this time to be different. He trusted Harry. Loved him. And he wanted to know what it felt like to be loved inside, to be taken by someone who adored him and would respect his body.

“H-Harry,” he forced out, “wait.”

Harry sucked as he pulled off and Severus groaned, head back, pleasure drowning him. Gods, Harry’s touch felt so good.

“What’s the matter, love?”

Severus had to take a moment to gather his wits. “Want to… inside me.”

Harry stilled, eyes wide. “Oh, Sev. Are you asking me to make love to you?”

“Mhn, gods, you are already, but yes.”

Harry’s eyes glimmered and a warm, loving smile crossed his face. “All right. Hand me a pillow.”

Severus obeyed and shivered as Harry gently slid the pillow under his hips. With a deep breath to calm himself, Severus slowly spread his thighs, revealing the one part of his body he had kept absolutely untouched in eighteen years. Even as he trembled at the thought of being so open, so vulnerable, intense desire and longing filled him. He wanted, needed Harry’s touch. He wanted Harry to wash away the past and sanctify him with his love.
Harry kissed the inside of Severus’ knee and stroked his thigh, his eyes gentle. “Are you okay, Sev?”

“A l-little afraid, but I want you.”

Harry moved up Severus’ body, sending shocks of pleasure through him as his stomach and shaft rubbed Severus’ erection. Harry rocked their hips together and moaned softly, his eyes dark with desire.

“Severus, you’re safe,” he whispered against his husband’s lips. “I love you.”

Severus grabbed Harry’s bum and rocked him into his body, surging up to meet him. Harry cried out and thrust into him, and shuddered with pleasure as Severus traced his fingertips down Harry’s cleft.

“Mhn, if you’d r-rather—oh, yes—make love to me, that’s… oh.” Severus traced Harry’s rim and the younger man arched into his fingers, moaning helplessly into his throat. “Yes, feels so good.”

Severus whispered his specialised cleaning and lubrication spell and slid his fingertip inside, then his whole finger, then two. Harry rocked into Severus’ fingers and hissed in Parseltongue. Gods, watching him fall apart like this was intoxicating. Severus nibbled Harry’s earlobe as he stroked the man’s prostate and received a sharp keen for his efforts.

“In me,” Harry cried. “Oh gods, inside me.”

Severus gently removed his fingers and shook his head. “Not this time, love. I want to feel it.”

Harry moaned. “Oh, damn. You’ve got me aching, Severus.”

Severus arched at the pleasure of those words. “Mhn. If you would rather not… I will take you, but I….”

Harry shook himself and kissed him lightly. “No, I was just whinging a bit. If you really want me to make love to you, I will. You’re sure?”

Severus cast a cleaning spell on his hands and cupped Harry’s face. “Beloved, seeing how you feel it when I am inside you—I wish to feel that too. Only be gentle.”

“I swear it.” Harry kissed Severus’ forehead and nuzzled his nose. “If you get scared, I’ll stop. I promise.”

Severus nodded and nuzzled Harry’s cheek. “The spell is Mundintus.”

Harry’s throat bobbed and his breath hitched. “R-right. Let me…. He leaned back on his knees and traced his fingertips down from Severus’ knee, watching his husband’s face as he drew closer and closer to Severus’ centre. Severus whimpered at a shock of sensation at the first brush of Harry’s fingertip against his entrance. Gods! It had hurt so much before, Severus hadn’t imagined being touched there could bring so much pleasure.

Harry drew back, hesitant. “Are you okay?”

“Y-yes. Feels good. More than I expected.”

Harry kissed and traced his tongue along the inside of Severus’ knee, lightly caressing Severus’ entrance at the same time. “I’m going to monitor your emotions, okay, love? That way I know the second you get scared. Is that all right?”

Severus closed his eyes and rocked his hips against Harry’s fingers. “Yes. Makes me feel safer.”
“You are safe with me, love. Always.” Harry’s fingertip traced gentle circles, tantalizing and teasing at the same time he soothed Severus and eased his fears. “Does it feel good, Sev?”

*Good?* Severus thought he might be on fire with need. “Ah… oh, yes. I need more.”

Harry kissed Severus’ knee. “Ssh. I’m taking this slowly. Don’t want you to be afraid.”

“I am not. Just want more.”

“I know. I feel it.”

Harry whispered the spell against Severus’ leg, and a rush of cool, tingling sensations flooded him, inside and out. He groaned and arched into Harry’s touch. With a tentative smile, Harry Summoned a pot of Severus’ lubricant formula and ran slick fingertips over his husband’s opening. Gentle pressure rubbed Severus’ centre at the same time Harry leaned down and lapped at his erection, and a cry escaped the older man.

“Oh gods, Harry!”

“Mm.” Harry moved with great care, slowly sliding one finger inside Severus. [*It’s all right, love. You’re safe, you’re loved.*]

“Mhgn, Harry, more.”

[*Patience, love. Let your body get used to this much first.*]

“N-need… feel empty. Aches.”

Harry kissed Severus’ hip and sat up, soothing Severus at the same time he thrust his finger inside and out in gentle strokes.

“I know. It’s the same way I feel every time you touch me here. Like I’ll die if you don’t fill me that moment. But you don’t rush things with me, and I won’t rush with you either. I can’t hurt you, Sev. I love you.”

Severus gave a soft sigh, warm with Harry’s love and solicitousness, and melted into the sheets. “As you wish, my love.”

Harry smiled and sank back down, taking Severus’ erection into his hot, wet mouth, and Severus cried out at the sudden sensation.

“Harry!”

[*I’ve got you, Sev. You’re safe.*]

“Ughn, I know. G-gods, please!”

[*Okay. I think you’re ready for a bit more.*]

“Yes, yes.” Severus panted it, anticipation and fiery desire robbing his breath.

Another fingertip slid inside, gentle and warm, and he surged into his husband’s touch. Gods, it was such a strange feeling to be so vulnerable—thrilling and a bit frightening, and yet, he found liberation in trusting his body completely to his partner. Harry prepared him with such gentle, tender care that Severus felt no pain, no fear, only intense love and pleasure. Tears pooled on his lashes as another wall fell down, another wound in his heart sealed. He would be all right, as long as Harry loved him.
Severus rocked onto Harry’s hand and cried out as a bolt of pleasure spread through his entire body.

“Dear gods! I knew, but I never im—” Another stroke to his prostate left him mewling, and he arched almost double. “Oh Merlin!”

Harry leaned back, fire in his eyes, and crooked his fingers. Severus’ hips lifted of their own volition and a sharp cry left his throat.

“Yes, yes!”

“Oh, Sev,” Harry said, breathless. “Gods, I want you.”

“Mhn, please. Need—need something.”

“Yeah. Can I… would you turn over for a bit?”

Severus hesitated. “I… I think I need to see your face.”

Harry nodded and gave him a gentle, reassuring smile. “Of course. I think I can manage what I had planned this way too.”

He leaned down so his breath brushed Severus’ oversensitive entrance. The warm air against him set his muscles pulsing and tingled deep within.

“Love,” Harry murmured, “can I kiss you?”

Severus understood from Harry’s location and the emotions in the bond what the man meant. A low moan escaped him. “Y-you want to?”

“Oh yes. I want you to feel what you make me feel.”

Severus gave a breathless pant. “Y-yes. Please.”

“Mn.” Soft, wet heat stroked around Harry’s fingers, and Severus gasped at a fierce assault of sensation. Water and lightning caressed him, branded him, wriggled inside. Dear fucking gods! He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, could do nothing but hold on for the ride. He howled and arched back, fists clutching the sheets, toes curled into the mattress, erection raging and wet.

“H-Ha-Harry!”

His keening cry echoed off the walls, and Severus might have been embarrassed at the volume of it if not for the torrent of ecstasy branding his body in fire.

[Can you pull your knees up, love?]

With a whimper, Severus obeyed, grabbing his own legs by his knees and revealing himself wholly to his mate. Harry’s tongue speared him between the man’s fingers, and Severus’ breath stopped. He struggled to find air as Harry caressed him deep inside, sliding in and out, wriggling, claiming him in a way he had never felt. With the return of his breath, a wail of need, of molten heat and mind-numbing desire tore itself from his throat. Sweet Circe, he was dying in pleasure, burning up on the tip of Harry’s tongue.

Harry moaned inside him, and Severus squealed at another wave of all-consuming pleasure. Gods, he had never made such embarrassing noises before, but then again, he had never felt such intense
sensation before either.

[Yes.] Harry chanted in his mind. [Feel so good around my tongue, my fingers. So hot, so tight. Love you. Love the way you feel. Love to hear you scream my name.]

Another firm thrust inside him left Severus wailing. He flailed about, dropping his knees, feet pounding the mattress beside his husband.

“Please,” Severus sobbed, “please, I can’t bear any more. Need… gods, take me, love.”

Slowly, Harry withdrew tongue and fingers alike, leaving Severus sweaty, panting, and aching to be filled.

“You’re sure, Sev?”

Severus moaned and reached for his husband. “Now, please.”

Harry nodded and slicked his erection. He hissed at the touch, neck cording with desire. “G-gods. I almost cut it too fine.”

Severus spread his legs so Harry could enter him… but froze at the first touch of his penis. Sudden, deep fear arrested him, and memories of a cruel man taunting, teasing, but never taking. Using his desire to humiliate him.

“So desperate for me, you little slut? Absolutely shameless, you are. Yes, beg for it, and perhaps I will deign to grant you your desires.”

“No,” Severus breathed. “No, don’t. Please.” He buried his face in his hands. “Please….”

Gentle hands caressed his cheeks and a soft tenor pierced the veil of dark memories. [Sev, love, listen to me. Listen to my voice. You’re safe, sweetheart. Come out of the past.]

Malfoy’s unctuous, cultured tones cut across Harry’s gentle call. “Stop deluding yourself! You’re mine, pet, always mine. No one will ever love you. No one will want you. You must find your pleasures only at my hand.”

“No,” Severus cried. “I will never let you touch me again!”

The hands left his face, but Harry’s voice continued in his mind. [Ssh. It’s okay. I love you, Severus. I love you so much.] A light, gentle kiss fell upon Severus’ forehead. [It’s only me, Severus—Harry, your husband. You’re home. You’re safe. You’re free of that monster. He can’t hurt you anymore. I swear I’ll protect you.]

“Harry….”

[Yes, Severus. I’m here.] Calloused, loving hands cradled his own. [Come home to me, love. Come back from the past and let me love your fears away.]

With a soft whimper, Severus turned to his husband’s voice and followed it out of the recesses of his mind. He opened his eyes to find Harry lying beside him, tears on his lashes and his eyes full of worry and shame.

“H-Harry? Why are you crying, beloved? Did I say something cruel to you?”

“No, love.” Harry kissed Severus’ hand. “I knew you weren’t talking to me.” Tears dripped off his nose. “Oh, Sev. Gods, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. Are you okay?”
“You did not hurt me. I only had a flashback.” Severus curled into Harry’s embrace and held him tight. “Thank you. You came after me. You saved me.”

“Yeah, I always will.”

“Hearing your voice helped ground me.” Severus buried his face into Harry’s shoulder. “But I… I am sorry. I think I ruined the mood.”

“No, never.” Harry stroked Severus’ hair and kissed his forehead. “I love you, Sev. If you need to stop, then we stop. It’s okay. I’d much rather you heal. We can always try again another day.”

Severus hesitated. “I… I do not want to give up.”

“We won’t. Next time, Sev. It’s all right.”

“I mean I still wish you to make love to me today.”

“I know you do, but….” Harry bit his lip, worry filling his eyes. “I don’t want you to push yourself, love. You made huge strides tonight just by letting me touch you there, letting me taste you. That’s enough.”

Severus winced. “But I am still, you are still….”

“It’s okay.” Harry kissed Severus’ forehead. “You’re not obligated. Do you understand me? You are never obligated to do anything with me. It’s okay.”

Severus sighed and laid his head on Harry’s shoulder. “You are too good to me.” He kissed Harry’s collarbone and gently guided his husband onto his back. “There is still the issue of healing our bond, however, so will you allow me to make love to you?”

Harry hesitated. “You don’t need to take me to heal the bond. Just what we’ve done so far has quieted it. You don’t have to do anything if you’re scared.”

“I wish, to, Harry. I want you.”

Harry cupped Severus’ face and searched his eyes. “You feel safe? You’re not scared?”

Severus kissed his palms. “I am well, love. You saved me. Perhaps I am simply not ready to bottom, but I do love you and I wish to be with you however I am able, if you want me to.”

Harry smiled tentatively. “All right. If you’re really okay, I’m game to try again.”

“As long as you are with me, I think I will be fine.”

“Yeah.” Harry kissed him softly. “Me too.”

*****

Harry stepped out of the loo, still drying his hair, and gave his husband a gentle kiss on the cheek. “What are you working on, love?”

Severus turned and kissed Harry lightly. “I’m examining the research you did in the Chamber. This soul binding spell.”

Harry grimaced. “I don’t think I would test it on anything living. Jabardi said the magic smells bad, and it set Slytherin’s desk on fire the last time I worked on it. To be fair, I was on the verge of
magical exhaustion at the time.”

Severus nodded. “Yes, the matrix is incomplete and incorrect, but the concept is feasible. We could do it. Perhaps combining it with that soul healing spell you found—I believe it will work, once we find a useable matrix.”

“Yeah, that would be the hard part.”

Severus chuckled. “Well, perhaps I will take a stab at it.” He brought Harry into a gentle kiss. “Are you headed back to the Infirmary?”

“Yeah. After this, I’ve got to talk to Malfoy. He has to leave home.” Harry hugged his shoulders. “Sev, do you think… I should tell him? About my past, maybe? Or the fact that I’m bonded?”

Severus shuddered. “If you do, be sure to make him swear a vow first.”

“Of course.” Harry’s shoulders slumped. “I just don’t know what else to do to convince him. I thought, maybe if he knew the truth, it might be enough.”

“There may be nothing we can do, love. In the end, it is his decision.”

“Yeah.” Harry stood tall and firmed his resolution. “Well, I’m going to try anyway. Good luck with that mess of a matrix.”

“Good luck with my mess of a snake.”

Harry gave Severus a sad smile. “I’ll need it.” He tugged on his apprentice robes, grabbed his knapsack and Jabardi, and flooed to his private bedroom. Madam Pomfrey was sanitizing one of the beds when Harry came into the Infirmary.

She gave Harry a wry look. “I hadn’t expected to see you until tomorrow. I’m assuming you’re feeling better?”

Harry coughed and forced himself not to say anything too damning. “I—I’m all right now, ma’am, but I came to check on Draco.”

Poppy’s eyes took on an edge of worry. “Ah. He is asleep at the moment, but his potions should be wearing off soon. He should wake within a half hour or so, if you would like to watch over him.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll monitor him. Do you have his chart?”

Poppy dug in her apron pocket and handed him a scroll from its depths. “He can have another pain potion just before dinner. He will need help feeding himself, I think—clear liquids, of course. He’s most likely feeling quite weak.”

“That would be less embarrassing for him coming from either me or Dean, I think.” Harry smiled to himself. Maybe he would send Dean in to help Draco eat supper. It might make Draco feel better anyway.

Poppy patted his shoulder. “Go on then. I’ll just finish up my reports for the day. You know how to contact me if you need help.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

“Nothing to thank me for.” Poppy squeezed Harry’s shoulder and walked away, closing her office door behind her.
With a deep breath to gather his wits, Harry made his way to Draco’s private room in the Infirmary and settled into the seat beside his bed.

The boy was still sleeping, so Harry tugged one of Slytherin’s journals from his knapsack and worked on the translation while he rested. He had just finished translating a potion to heal poor vision—he would definitely write that one down for Severus—when Malfoy twitched and moaned. Harry marked his place and replaced the book in his bag. By the time grey, unfocused eyes settled on his own, Harry was glaring.

“Is this really the life you want, Malfoy?”

Draco winced and hesitated. “What? I… where am I?”

“The Infirmary. Do you know that your father punc—”

Draco gasped and grabbed at Harry’s robe. “N-no time. Please, my mother saved me. She’s—he’ll hurt her. He might even—please! She needs help!”

Harry froze. “Oh dear gods.” He focused on the Headmaster’s emotions and knew he had found the right link when he sensed another Empathic mind. [Albus, Draco just woke up and told me Narcissa saved him from Lucius. He’s terrified Lucius will hurt, or maybe even kill her. She needs backup —now! No waffling!]

A moment later, a phoenix Patronus appeared in the Infirmary. “The Order has been notified of Mrs. Malfoy’s situation. Kingsley should be there in a moment with several aurors. I will let you know what we find when I am first able.”

Harry rubbed Draco’s shoulder. “There we are. It’s all right now.”

Draco stared at Harry. “H-how? You didn’t say anything.”

Harry snorted. “Trade secret. I promise he knows and the Order is after her this instant.”

Draco let slip a sigh of relief and clung to Harry’s arm. “I… I’m so scared.”

Harry petted his hair and sat beside the boy. “Yeah, I can’t say I blame you. Do you know your father ruptured your spleen and punctured your lung? You were bleeding out and drowning in it, Draco. Had I found you a minute later, I doubt I’d have been able to save you even with surgery.”

Draco paled. “You… but you’re an apprentice!”

“Madame Pomfrey was helping me the entire time. It took both of us to keep you alive, and even with two of us and the best potions Professor Snape could offer, we still almost lost you twice.” Harry hugged him gently. “I was so damn scared, Draco. So afraid for you.”

Draco’s breath hitched. He sniffled and laid his head on Harry’s shoulder. “I… I didn’t think anyone cared that much.”

“Well, that’s rubbish. My friends and I care a lot about you. We’d all be devastated if you died—and if you died in my care… gods. I’m not sure if I’d ever really recover.”

Draco hugged Harry as tight as he could, given the state of his body. “Harry, I… t-thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Harry leaned back and wiped his eyes. “You’re going to be all right, assuming you take it easy for a few days and let your organs heal. But don’t do this to me again, Draco. You
"have to get away. I might not be able to save you the next time."

"I know," Draco whispered. "But if I fail… ."

"Draco… ." Harry crossed his arms over his chest and sighed. "Look, I didn’t want to reveal this with you still in the dark, but I don’t think I’m going to have a choice. You’re just not going to believe me unless I come clean." He fixed Draco with a stern look. "I’ll let you in on the truth about me—secrets very few know—if you swear an oath never to reveal what I’m about to tell you to anyone who doesn’t already know. Especially anyone in Riddle’s ranks or close to them."

Draco frowned. "All right."

"I wasn’t born yesterday. Your oath."

Draco sighed and pointed his wand at his chest. "I, Draco Lucius Malfoy, hereby swear never to reveal the information Harry Potter is about to give me unless given explicit permission by the parties involved." Golden light settled on his chest and faded. "Satisfied?"

Harry gave him a curt nod. "Good. Now, here’s part of the secret: I know your mission. You’re supposed to seduce me, subjugate me, and bring me to Riddle once you have me in your bed. I also know you don’t want to do it."

Draco went ashen. "H-how? I’ve been Occluding it."

"Occlumency doesn’t work against a natural Telepath. Not often anyway, and even then, you’d better be using the best damn shields you’ve got against me or it’ll still leak through and that’s without me trying." Harry sighed. "I hate it, to be honest, but that’s the way it is. I can’t read the things you regard as deep, personal secrets unless you allow me to, but everything else drives me mad."

"But I did regard those plans as a secret, and I was shielding them."

"I know." Harry leaned on his knees. "When your arsehole of a father dislocated your arm, you projected your memories somehow. I thought a part of you wanted me to know—you were trying to warn me, or maybe crying out for help without saying anything and risking your life. Well, more than it already was at risk. I saw Lucius telling you what he had planned for me. And I’ve tried to make it look like I was falling without actually doing so since then, for your sake."

Draco sank onto the pillows with a wince. "Fuck."

Harry squeezed his shoulder gently. "Like I said, I’ve been playing along, but the thing is, Draco, even if you did want to follow the plan, your mission is doomed from the start. I’m already bonded—soul-bonded, actually—and my mate is aware of your mission too. He knows I need to befriend you to a point, but I can’t date you, Draco. I can’t touch you or be touched in a romantic manner without causing myself terrible pain and breaking my husband’s heart. And I sure as hell can’t go to bed with you."

Draco dropped his head and clutched at the sheets. "I… I couldn’t do it anyway, Harry. It’d be one thing if we liked each other, but the way they wanted me to use you… gods. I can’t."

"I know. I sense it, or I’d never have allowed you as close as I have done." Harry sat on the bed beside Draco and took his hand. "There is another way, Draco. You don’t have to follow that monster. You don’t have to go back home to be beaten to bits and shipped back here only to go through it again the next week." He squeezed Draco’s hand. "I’ll help you if you let me. I’ll get you out and protect you."
Bitter, heartbroken tears poured down Draco’s face. A wave of heartbreak from the boy left Harry’s chest throbbing with grief.

“He should be the one protecting me!” Draco’s voice rang with anguish.

Harry held the boy’s hand and nodded, heart bleeding with Draco’s pain.

“All my life, I’ve been trying to make him proud of me,” Draco murmured, tears heavy on his eyelashes. “I’ve done… I’ve been a prick and done things I hate myself for, all to make him look at me with something like pride.” His face contorted with grief. “But it’s never enough. He’ll never care about me, will he? I’m all alone.”

Harry eased Draco into a gentle hug. “You’re not alone. I care about you. Professor Snape cares about you. Dean, Neville, Hermione, and Luna care about you. Even the Headmaster cares.”

A pink blush painted Draco’s cheeks. “D-Dean does?”

Harry grinned. “You fancy him, hmm?”

Draco flushed to his ears. “You know.”

“It’s very difficult for me not to read emotions. I’m trying to learn how to turn it off, but I don’t know how yet. The headmaster believes the Telepathy trait is particularly strong in me and I might never be able to completely mute it. But I’ll never use it against you, I promise.”

Draco grimaced. “That’s… disconcerting.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t help it.”

Draco patted Harry’s hand. “It’s okay. You were the first person other than… than Mum and Blaise to be kind to me.” He closed his eyes and shuddered. “Gods, I hope she’s okay.”

“So do I. The Order is after her, so there’s hope.”

Draco buried his head in Harry’s shoulder. “I’m so scared for her. She’s the only family I have left.”

“I’ll go check on her situation as soon as I leave here, okay?”

“Promise?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Draco shivered. “I don’t want to be alone. W-will you ask Dean to come? Can you do it with your mind?”

“Yeah, I can.” Harry held Draco’s hand and searched for his friend. [Dean, it’s Harry. Sorry to bother you, but if you’re not busy, can you come to the Infirmary? Draco’s awake, but his mum’s in trouble, and he asked for you.]

He sensed a wave of simultaneous concern, shock, and a nervous sort of giddiness that gave Harry hope for the possibility of a real relationship between his friends. Perhaps Dean could bridge the gap for Draco and bring him out of the dark even if Harry couldn’t. Merlin, he hoped so.

Harry gave Draco a sad smile. “He’s on his way, I think. But, Draco, Dean loves hard. He doesn’t go into relationships lightly, as far as I know. If you two start dating, it’s going to kill him to see you come back every other week in pieces. Not to mention the Dark would kill him in a heartbeat.”
Draco sighed and dropped his head. “Y-yeah. Maybe you have a point. I don’t want to hurt him. And… my father—he almost killed me this time, didn’t he?”

Harry nodded grimly. It was the blunt truth.

“No one really understands how that feels,” Draco said with a sniffle.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “No one?”

Draco scoffed. “Oh please. You had life served to you on a silver platter.”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “Oh, yes. It’s been grand, thanks for asking. First, my parents were murdered by a madman when I was fifteen months old, and then I was given to be raised by wizard-hating Muggles who used every possible opportunity to squash the magic out of me, and that’s hardly even the start of it.”


“Yeah.” Harry sighed. “Draco, I know rumour says my life was peachy-keen, that I was a pampered saviour and such, but the truth is I was abused as badly as you have been.”

Draco paled. “There’s no way. It’s not true… is it?”

Harry stood and Banished his robes to a nearby chair, then lifted his shirt and turned his back to Draco, revealing his scars. “You tell me.”

A gentle hand touched his back, and Harry squirmed away.


Harry turned and sat beside Draco again. “My uncle’s belt. My aunt and uncle—they’re horrible people, Draco. I mean, they used me like a house elf from the time I was four years old. Even kept me in a cupboard like the elves. There were many times he beat me nearly to death, or Petunia almost killed me with a frying pan to the head, or I nearly died of starvation. And then, there was the time they left me out in the snow until you get pneumonia and told me there’s no need for a doctor because if I’m really a bloody freak, then I should be able to heal myself!”

Harry was panting with anger and grief by this point. “I could, of course, but that’s beside the point. If I hadn’t had the kind of raw healing power I do, I’d have died then. And then again when, while I was literally starving, I choked half-to-death on a piece of broken plate and tore my throat to shreds while my uncle….” Tears ran down his face. “He laughed at me. I was coughing up blood, screaming, begging for help, and he laughed and told me I deserved it, then finished me off with another beating with his belt before bed.”

“Fuck!” Draco grabbed Harry’s hand and held it tight. “Fuck, Harry! That’s inhuman!”

“I was seven years old.”

“Oh gods.” Draco blinked hard and rubbed Harry’s knuckles. “I… I’m sorry.”

“That’s not even the extent of it. After my godfather died, Vo—oh, sorry—Riddle decided it was a great idea to possess me every time I dream, forcing me to watch him torture people—and suffer the pain of their deaths, though Dumbledore believes that I’m only feeling a portion of their pain and not the whole of it—I’d be mad otherwise. Then Riddle took over my mind like a fucking Imperius and almost made me kill Dumbledore and myself, the night I lost so much earlier this year.
“For everyone’s safety and the sake of my own sanity, I had to soul bond with a Zopath so he could protect my mind externally. And it just so happened that I’d been in love with said Zopath since I was sixteen, but him? He was terrified. He had an actual phobia of love. I was so afraid the rest of my life would be broken and miserable. Thankfully, he loves me now and he’s almost overcome his fears, but we had a lot of hell to go through before we got to this point.”

He clenched his fists into his robes. “And then, there’s the bloody fame. It’s not as great as it’s cracked up to be, trust me. Imagine not even being able to go to Hogsmeade without getting mobbed by reporters who never report the truth and have zero respect for your privacy or well-being. Imagine that every other day there’s an article calling you mad and deranged, and the next day you’re hailed as a godsdamned saviour, the only one with the ability to save the world—never mind that you’re a teenager who didn’t even know about the magical world before Hogwarts.”

Harry dropped his head into his hands. “Shite, Draco. All I’ve ever wanted was to be loved. I am now, but then—Merlin. I thought I’d die alone and miserable at the ripe old age of eighteen, all because a fucking madman decided he wanted to off me before I have to off him. Even with everything I’m doing to prevent that, I still might.” He sank his head into his hands. “I understand your pain, Draco. Far too well.”

“Y-yeah. I see that now.” Draco closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “Harry, gods, I’m so sorry—for everything. I… I didn’t know.”

Harry took Draco’s hand again and squeezed. “It’s okay. It’s over now. Isn’t it? I mean, you can’t be my friend and then turn me over to the madman who killed my whole family, who’s obsessed with murdering me into the bargain, and has made my life a living hell for eighteen years.”

Draco winced. “N-no. I suppose not.”

Harry gasped. “You mean that? You’ll… leave?”

Draco shivered. “Yeah. But I’m fucking terrified about it. They’ll kill me. And…. ” Tears ran down his face. “And my own father will be first in line.”

“He’ll have to get through me and the entire Order first.” Harry rubbed a thumb over Draco’s knuckles. “Swear it? Swear an oath that you’ll renounce Voldemort and protect the lives of those on the Light side of the war, or at least not hurt them or sell information to the Death Eaters?”

Draco winced, but swore his oath. Harry breathed a huge sigh of relief when the light cleared.

“Thank Merlin. I’ve given you far too much information today.”

Draco nodded. “You’ve told me pretty much everything except who your husband is.”

“Yeah, and I definitely can’t tell you that. I can’t tell anyone. It’s just too dangerous. Not even Hermione knows. Actually, she doesn’t even know I’m bonded at all. Blaise, Luna, Dean, and Neville do, though.”

“You told Blaise but not Hermione?”

Harry snorted. “Not exactly. Blaise was upset the last time you were so injured, and I made the mistake of squeezing his hand with my left. He felt my bonding ring and worked out the rest on his own. I’ve put a charm on it since to keep it from being discovered by accident. You can only feel it if you already know it’s there.”

Draco touched Harry’s left ring finger and gave him a wry grin. “You really are bonded.”
“Yeah. Since the first of October.”

Draco winced. “The day I outed you.”

“It wasn’t just you. Within forty-eight hours, I’d been rejected by my husband—he was still afraid back then—and came back to the dorm just after it to find my familiar murdered by my dormmate. The next afternoon, I found I’d beenouted prematurely, had half the house turn against me because of it—including my former best mate—and Ginny assaulted me. Really assaulted me this time. She choked me on her slimy tongue.” He paused. “Though she’s been good about it since. Actually, I’ve hardly seen her at all this term.” He muttered under his breath about evil bastards.

Draco gave him a bemused look. “She’s been hanging around Hufflepuff more,” he said with a shrug. “At least, that’s what Blaise said.”

“She’s dating Zacharias Smith, the arsehole, but what’s Blaise doing in Hufflepuff?”

“Snogging Susan Bones, according to Daphne.”

Harry chortled. “Well done, Susan! Seems I’ll be sitting with Hermione in Ancient Magic again soon.”

Draco gave a weak laugh. “Yeah, maybe.”

Harry took Draco’s hands and held them tight. “Listen, you’re going to be okay now. I’ll protect you and so will my friends.” He cast a strong silencing charm. “And as soon as Dean gets here, I’ll let Professor Snape know about your decision and we’ll arrange protection for you with the Headmaster.”

Draco went ashen. “Potter! He’s a Death Eater! He’ll have me killed!”

Harry shook his head. “He’s a spy. And my dearest friend. Please don’t tell anyone that, though. You could get him killed.”

“You… you’re friends? And you’re sure he’s not just pretending to be close to you so he can tell the Dark Lord about you behind your back?”

“Positive. He can’t hide that from a Telepath. If he was lying to me, I’d know in an instant. I know he acts the snarky bastard in public, but once you get past that hard exterior, he’s gentle and honourable.”

“But… really, Professor Snape? You trust him?”

Harry smiled softly. “With my life. Literally, more often than not.”

Draco stared at him. “We’re talking about the same professor who’s made it his life’s work to make you miserable?”

Harry snorted. “Like I said, he’s a spy. He can’t show any liking for me in public or he’d be killed. Trust me, Draco. He’s a good man and he’ll be thrilled to know you’re out.”

Draco shivered. “Until the Dark Lord burns me to death through the mark or something.”

“Not going to happen. As it turns out, I know a way to remove it. Lucky for you, I found the original spell and Riddle’s notes in the Chamber, and I’m working on a counter for it. It’ll be finished soon, I think.”
Draco gaped. “You… Chamber… counter… how?”

“If you… Chamber… counter… how?”

“Parselmouth, remember? Most of the rooms in the Chamber can only be opened by a Parselmouth. I actually lived there for a month or so and explored it thoroughly over the past two years. With some help from my first snake familiar…” He paused, grief twangling his heart. “…And Luna, we sniffed out its secrets. Found a lot of other good stuff down there too.”

He shook his head. “Turns out Slytherin wasn’t actually a bad guy. Nothing like history made him out to be. He liked to research all kinds of magic—dark magic included—and he certainly didn’t like Muggles, but from what I can tell, he never hurt anyone without cause.”

“Merlin. I… how do you know all this about Slytherin? Even my home library doesn’t have that kind of information.”

“Accio Salazar Slytherin’s private journal, volume twenty-one.” The book Harry had been reading before zoomed out of his knapsack and into his hand. “I found his private study.”

Draco gasped and reached for the book. “He wrote this?”

“Yeah. I’m afraid it won’t do you much good unless you speak Parseltongue, though. At least, not until I finish the transcriptions.”

“Dear gods.” Draco turned a few pages and ran his fingers over the print. “Harry, this is amazing! You said you’re working on a transcription?”

“I have the first two finished. I’ll let you read them if you promise not to loan them out or sell them. Slytherin made us promise not to sell his work for personal gain. He said we could publish it, but the proceeds have to go to the school.”

“He said?”

“Luna’s a spiritual medium, remember? She asked him.”

“Oh.” Draco traced the cover with wonder in his eyes. “That’s brilliant. I’d like to read them if that’s all right.”

“Sure. I’ll bring the copies by later tonight.”

“Thanks.” Draco handed the book back to Harry and rubbed his left arm. “The mark… you’re sure you can really remove it?”

“Yes. I’m still working out the final kinks in the counter, but we’re almost there.” He sighed and patted the boy’s hand. “I’m sorry, Draco. I think I’ve pushed you too far after surgery. Are you in pain?”

Draco shook his head. “Not too bad.”

“Where does it hurt?”

Draco pointed to his stomach, right over his spleen, then over his broken ribs.

“Yeah, that’s going to be sore for a while. You can take another pain draught in about two hours.”

Draco sighed. “All right.” He looked at Harry and frowned. “You’re really good at this, you know.”

Harry gave a wry laugh. “I’m trying. Poppy is a good teacher. So is Professor Snape when he’s not
sniping at me.”

“That’s something I’d have to see to believe.”

Harry snorted. “All in good time.”

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As soon as Dean arrived, Harry stood to leave. “Madam Pomfrey is in her office, so you can call for her if Draco needs help, Dean. Or just send me a Patronus.”

Dean nodded and sank into the seat beside Draco’s bed. “Thanks, Harry. I’ll look after him now.”

Harry squeezed Dean’s shoulder and gave Draco a wry smile. [Good luck.]

Draco jolted and stared at Harry, eyes wide and mouth ajar.

“I did tell you I’m a Telepath. I meant it.”

Draco gave a nervous laugh. “Right. I didn’t realise it meant you could… talk in my head.”

“From across the castle if need be.” Harry patted his hand. “Take it easy, okay? Don’t move around too much. You’re still healing inside.”

“I’ll try.”

“I’ll make sure he doesn’t overdo,” Dean said with a nod.

“Thanks, mate.” Harry paused. “Oh, just so you know, Draco knows about my friendship with Professor Snape now, and he knows about my past and everything, so you don’t have to guard me so closely anymore. He knows about my other relationship too, but not about who’s in it.” He gave Dean a sad smile. [He’s ours to look after now. He swore to denounce the Death Eaters and leave home.]

Dean gasped, eyes shimmering. “Oh gods. Draco, you’re with us now? For good?”

Draco closed his eyes and gave Dean a tentative nod. “I-it hurts, though. I wanted… I just wanted F-Father to love me. But….” He stared at his stomach, tears streaking down his face. “He never will.”

“Oh, Draco.” Dean slipped his hand into Draco’s and held it tight. “I’m here. I care about you.”

Harry smiled to himself as the boy’s thoughts echoed in his mind. [So much more than you know.]

Harry decided he’d do well to leave them alone and moved to the door. “Well, I’m off, you two. Draco, I’ll let you know about your mum as soon as I know something.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Draco said, his voice subdued.

“Not at all.” Harry waved and made his way out of the Infirmary. [Severus, I need you to meet me in the headmaster’s office right away. We’ve had some interesting developments.]

Severus sent him a wave of affirmation, and Harry turned into the stairwell. [Albus, if you’re not busy, Sev and I are on the way to meet you about Draco.]

He sensed another wave of affirmation and headed up to the seventh floor. Albus already had tea and biscuits set out when Harry came in.
“Help yourself,” said Albus with a genial smile. “They aren’t altered at all.”

Harry nodded and swiped one of the lemon shortbread biscuits. A surreptitious scan revealed the old man had told the truth, at least about the biscuits. He poured himself a cup of tea, scanned it, and finding it free of calming draught or other additives, sipped at the beverage while he waited for his husband.

Albus raised an eyebrow. “Satisfied?”

“This time.”

Albus sighed. “Well, I suppose I do deserve it.”

Harry shrugged. “What’s the word on Narcissa?”

“Nothing yet. Kingsley sent me a Patronus just a moment ago stating the manor was deserted. They have found neither Lucius nor Narcissa at this juncture.”

Harry winced. “That… doesn’t sound good.”

“They may have simply… gone out.”

“After nearly beating Draco to death? I doubt it.”

Albus nodded gravely. “Perhaps Lucius is simply lying low. He may be operating under the belief that mortally injuring his son is too grave an offence for even his sterling reputation.”

“Let’s hope that’s all it is.”

“Indeed.” Albus turned to the door. “Come in, Severus. I was just updating Harry on Narcissa’s situation.” He repeated his information to Severus, who responded in a similar vein to Harry.

“Now,” said Albus, all vestiges of twinkle gone, “what is the situation with Draco, Harry?”

Harry took Severus’ hand. “I told Draco of my bond and my past—I didn’t mention your name, Sev—and swore him to a vow not to repeat it. Once he realised I understood, that I knew his secrets and his pain, he… he defected. He’s under our protection now, and as such, he’ll need a safe place to sleep. The dark Slytherins will come after his blood the first chance they get.”

Severus brought Harry into his lap. “He is ours now? He turned from his father?”

“It… hurt him to do it. But knowing his mother is in trouble, knowing Lucius nearly killed him—it hurt him too badly to stay. Yes, he’s on the side of the Light now.”

“Oh thank Merlin,” Severus breathed. He buried his head in Harry’s shoulder. “I have been so worried for that boy. And so worried for you.”

Harry leaned against his husband. “I know, Sev. The plan is over. Draco’s safe, and he’s just my friend now, no ploys, no plots. You have nothing to worry about.”

Severus clutched Harry tight. “Not quite. There is still the matter of keeping him safe and out of trouble.” He rubbed his chin. “I wonder. If I were to take him on as an apprentice—now that it is safe to do so without threatening the Light—it may prove of benefit to us both. Draco can help me make potions for the Infirmary and Order. It would give him something positive to focus on and free some of my time. Perhaps then you and I would be able to heal the bond without snogging in the middle of the Infirmary at least.”
Harry snorted. “Never in my life did I imagine I would hear Severus Snape Prince use a term like ‘snogging.’ But that’s a great idea, love. I’m sure Draco would be thrilled. He does love potions.”

Albus’ twinkle returned. “Yes, I agree. And in terms of his safety, Harry, are you using your bedroom?”

“For a blind, yes.” He narrowed his eyes. “Why are you asking?”

Albus hesitated. “Ah. I had thought we could set Draco up in it, but no. That wouldn’t do. You do not sleep in the room, true, but you still need it to keep your cover.” He rubbed his beard in thought. “Hmm. I do believe there is another empty room a few portraits down from yours. I will have Dobby clean it for him and place Draco there from now on, once he recovers enough to leave the Infirmary, of course.”

Harry groaned. “Albus, have you been overdosing on the lemon drops again? Dobby was a Malfoy family elf. Perhaps you might ask one of the other house elves to clean the room for him? One not traumatised by Lucius’ cruelty?”

Pink crept up Albus’ cheeks. “Oh dear. I am afraid I had quite forgotten that detail. You are right, of course. Though, if I may say so, I believe Dobby would be relieved to know Draco is safe and away from his father.”

“Well, I’ll tell him then, but for Merlin’s sake, don’t just throw him right back into taking orders for them.” Harry shuddered. “It’d be like asking me to clean the Dursleys’ house again.”

Albus winced. “Yes, I do see your point. In that case, I will allow you to inform Dobby about Draco. Perhaps you might also let Draco know about the room and Professor Snape’s offer now?”

Harry stood and gave his husband a kiss. “Right away, if that’s all right with you. He’s terrified for his mum.”

“With good reason,” said Severus in a dark voice. “I don’t like it, Harry.”

“Neither do I, love, but there’s still hope.” Harry kissed Severus’ forehead. “I’ll see you tonight?”

“Yes, after my office hours. I will need to speak to Draco first about the apprenticeship, and then I will be home.”

Harry frowned. “Sev, I don’t think you can advertise the fact that you’re taking in Draco as an apprentice the day he defects from the dark.”

“Unless I make it appear as though I am trying to wrangle him back into it, but no, I agree. It would be safer for everyone involved to keep it a secret, at least until the war is won.”

“My friends and I will help keep it quiet.” Harry slipped his hands into Severus’ hair and gave him a gentle, slow kiss. “I love you, Sev. I’ll be home later, okay?”

“I love you too.” Severus stroked Harry’s cheek. “Until tonight.”

“Yeah. See you later, love.” Harry waved to Albus, Phineas, and Fawkes and made his way out of the office, his heart conflicted. Joy for Draco’s loyalty and his possible apprenticeship gave Harry a thrill, but fear for his mother’s condition loomed over all like a shadow.

Deserted… why would Lucius desert the manor? He must have had a reason, and the horrifying possibility of what that reason might be left Harry’s blood cold.
Gods, he hoped Narcissa was okay. From all Severus had told him, she didn’t deserve the hand she’d been dealt. And if she died defending Draco—Merlin! Draco would never forgive himself.

He opened the Infirmary doors and froze, horror playing havoc with his spirit. Draco’s quiet sobs arrested him the moment he stepped inside. Oh gods. Had Dean refused him even in the midst of all this hell? Was Draco hurt?

Heart pounding, Harry dashed to Draco’s private room and steamed inside. Madam Pomfrey stood by the door, her expression sombre and her eyes wet. Draco had buried his head in Dean’s shoulder, weeping helplessly into the Gryffindor’s robe while Dean rubbed his back and murmured in his ear. Harry’s heart sank. Dean wouldn’t hold Draco if he had refused him. Something had gone terribly wrong.

‘Oh gods, don’t let it be about Narcissa.’

Harry rushed to Draco’s side and held the boy’s shoulder. “Draco! Dear Merlin, what’s happened? Are you in pain?”

Draco shook his head and buried his face in Dean’s robe. Dean stroked his hair and looked up, and Harry gasped to see he was crying as well.

“Oh gods. What’s gone wrong now?”

“His mum,” Dean said in a broken voice, confirming Harry’s worst fears. “Tonks was just here—they found Draco’s mum outside Wiltshire. Lucius… k-killed her for saving Draco’s life. She’s gone.”

Harry sank down the wall beside Draco’s bed, grief rocking him to his core. “Oh Merlin, no.”
Chapter 55

The Death of Innocence

7 February

Draco spent the first few days after his mother’s murder hiding in Harry’s bedroom, desolate and mired in guilt. Dean stayed by his side the entire time, even going so far as to skive off his classes. As a result, Draco learned by the second night that Harry didn’t live in his room, but only used it as a blind.

“Potter,” Draco said as he came through the floo early that morning, “where are you going every night?”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Er… to my husband.”

“Really? I didn’t think you lived together.”

“Yeah, we have to being soul bonded.” Harry gave a heavy sigh and frowned at the tracks of tears still streaming down Draco’s face. “As it happens, I need to talk to you about it. But maybe it’s not a good time, yeah?”

“It’s f-fine,” Draco muttered. “I just can’t seem to s-stop crying.”

Dean stroked Draco’s hair and rubbed his back. “I’m here, okay? I’m not going to leave your side.”

Draco turned and buried his face into Dean’s thigh, wrapping an arm around the boy’s waist from behind. Dean’s skin was too dark to show a blush, but his emotions revealed his surprise and attraction well enough to Harry. Harry smiled wanly. Maybe it would work out between them. Dean certainly seemed devoted even if they hadn’t spoken about a relationship yet, judging by the tenor of Draco’s thoughts.

“I’m glad you can help him, Dean,” Harry murmured and sank into the chair beside his bed. He took Draco’s free hand and held it tight. “I’ve been really worried about you for a long time.”

Draco sniffled and clutched Dean tighter. “I s–should’ve listened! You tried—if I’d only listened, she’d still be alive.”

Harry smoothed his hair. “Ssh. Don’t blame yourself. You only wanted your dad to love you. It’s
natural. I understand the feeling.”

Draco squeezed his hand. “I wouldn’t have believed it, but you do.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry, though. If I’d have realised your mum was in danger when we found you, I’d have sent the Order after her straight away. We didn’t know. Even Luna didn’t.”

Draco sniffled. “Where is Luna? I haven’t seen her the past couple of days.”

“She has the flu and didn’t want to get you sick on top of everything else,” Harry said with a sad smile. “She cares about you, though. She said she’s fighting the Wrackspurts around you from afar. Er… they cause grief, apparently.”

Draco gave a weak laugh. “T-that’s… good to know.”

Dean brushed tears from Draco’s cheeks, and the boy’s eyes fluttered closed. He turned into Dean’s hand and sighed against him, and a soft look filled Dean’s eyes.

Yes, they would be all right, soon. Dean’s love would heal Draco in time, just as Harry had healed Severus.

Severus. Merlin.

Harry rubbed his forehead. “Draco, if you’re sure you’re up to it, my husband asked me to tell you his identity where it’s safe and you can’t reveal him by accident, so I might as well do it now. But please, promise me you won’t say anything? His life would be in so much danger if the other side even caught a hint of this, and so would mine.”

Draco nodded and squeezed Harry’s hand. “You were the only one—until Dean—who tried to save me. I won’t forget it any time soon.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “I know. It’s just shocking, so… prepare yourself.”

Draco nodded, and Harry settled into his story.

Harry ended up asking Winky to bring them breakfast instead of going to the Great Hall. He skived off Care of Magical Creatures too, as did Dean. Harry didn’t worry about it much. Hagrid’s classes were safer away from his version of fluffy creatures, and Hagrid knew they were trying to help Draco heal anyway. He wouldn’t punish them for missing a class or two.

“I can’t believe it,” said Draco when Harry had finished. “Severus—Severus Snape—is your soul-bonded mate? And you love each other?”

“Yes, he is, and yes, we love each other dearly.”

Draco stared, gobsmacked. “Harry, come on. He loathed you.”

“He hasn’t since the first day of his suspension last year. I saved his life, and… well, I guess it took off from there.”

Draco shook his head bemusedly. “Why did you save him at all? He was horrid to you. I mean, I
know you’d never let him die, but Merlin, it sounds like you really went all out for him, Harry, what with hiding him in the Chamber and all. Why’d you do it?”

Harry flushed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Um, believe it or not, it’s because I’ve been in love with him since I was sixteen. I saw him for who he really was then, and I loved him for it. Severus fell later, but he loves me just as much now.”

Draco sat and rubbed his red-rimmed eyes. “Is that why you looked like a ghost at the beginning of sixth year? Because you loved him and he was still treating you like shite?”

“That was a big part of it, yes, but Ron and Hermione were also being berks, as was the entire house, plus I had those dreams and visions to contend with, and I was trying to reconcile the godfather I loved and lost… with the monster I saw in Severus’ pensieve.”

“What?” Both Dean and Draco looked at him in shock this time, but Harry waved them off.

“Don’t ask me for details—I can’t talk about it without Sev’s permission—but Sirius… seeing him the way I did at the end of fifth year, it altered me forever. They were bullies—Sirius and my dad—awful, horrible bullies, and… I don’t know. I fell in love with the version of Severus I saw then, and after we were friends, I loved him as an adult too.” He gave a wry laugh. “I guess it doesn’t make a lot of sense, but that’s what happened.”

Draco gave him a searching look. “And you’re happy with him?”

“Well, we weren’t, not for a long time. Severus was… broken inside. But he’s healing, and we’re doing well, now that I understand how to take care of him better and he knows how to take care of me.”

Draco sighed and sat up. “Had I not seen Severus like I have the past few days—gentle and caring—I wouldn’t have believed you. But he’s been kind to me, and… I… I wish I had known sooner. I wish I’d come to him instead of….”

Tears slid down his cheeks, and Harry took Draco into a gentle hug. “I’m here, Draco. I’m sorry I couldn’t sa—”

“It’s not your fault, Harry,” Draco choked out. “It just hurts so much.”

“I’m here for you.”

Dean laid his head on Draco’s back and stroked his hair. “So am I.”

Draco’s cheeks flushed, and he turned so Dean held him instead. “Dean… stay with me? Please? I… I can’t bear it without you.”

His emotions soft and warm, Dean brushed his lips across Draco’s cheek. Draco’s breath hitched and his blush deepened.

“I’ll stay,” Dean whispered. “It’s where I want to be anyway.”

Draco shivered and held Dean tight, one hand wrapped around Dean’s short, fuzzy hair and the other pressing his waist closer. Dean looked over Draco’s shoulder and met Harry’s eyes.

*[He needs us, Harry.]*

Harry nodded and rubbed Draco’s back. He ended up missing Transfiguration, too.
By lunchtime, Dean and Harry’s care had Draco recovered enough to try eating in the Great Hall. The boy wasn’t hungry, but he wanted to face the school and show them that he would rally, one day. To that end, Harry and Dean stayed by his side, one by each shoulder. As they made their way to lunch, Harry contacted the rest of his friends telepathically, and they soon surrounded Draco in support and love, including a mostly recovered Luna. The boy sniffled and leaned on Dean’s arm as they chose their seats at the far end of the Gryffindor table, where Harry and his friends could protect Draco from any vengeful dark-sided—or bigoted—opportunist.

As soon as they seated themselves, Daphne, Astoria, Blaise, and Millicent approached the Gryffindor table, each with their heads bowed.

“Draco,” said Daphne, her eyes full of compassion, “Merlin, I’m so sorry about your mum.” She dropped into a deep bow. “May love and blessings flow from my family to yours during this time of sorrow.”

Astoria bowed too. “Yes, I’m sorry about your mum too. The family Greengrass offers our alliance and support to you during your time of loss and in the future.”

Draco took both girls’ hands and returned their bows. Tears shimmered in his eyes as he said in a breaking voice, “I accept your blessings on my family and offer the same to yours.” He sat tall and firmed his shoulders, resolution replacing grief. “The family Malfoy—what is left of it at any rate—thanks you for your condolences and recognises the family Greengrass’ alliance.”

Luna stood and repeated both rituals with Draco, murmuring at the end, “Your mum wants you to know she’s proud of you.”

Draco’s breath caught and his eyes watered. “But I… it’s my fault!”

Luna took him into a tight hug. “No, Draco. She wanted to save you. She wanted you to be protected. She’s happier now, that she’s free of him, and wants you to be happy too.”

“I… oh gods.” Draco covered his face and struggled not to weep. Dean took him from Luna’s embrace and held him close, whispering faith and encouragement in his ear.

After a long moment, Draco pulled himself together and said in a broken voice, “Luna, t-the family Malfoy thanks you for your condolences—and your m-message—and recognises the family Lovegood’s alliance.”

Luna thanked him with another hug and took her seat.

Harry leaned towards Neville and whispered telepathically, [What are they doing? It seems like there’s more to this than just an offer of condolences.]

[There is,] Neville replied, broadcasting his thoughts so Harry could read them. [It’s a pureblood ritual. Well, two rituals, really. The girls offered him their support and condolences in his grief for his mother, but more importantly, they just allied houses. That little ritual just let all the dark-sided Slytherins and other purebloods know that Draco is now under the protection of the Greengrass and Lovegood families, and any damage done to him will be considered as damage against one of their own.]
Harry gave him a barely perceptible nod. *[Merlin. That’s brilliant. I think he’ll need it.]*

*Yes. And I’m about to place him under the protection of the Longbottoms. You should offer your alliance too—even if our families are small, our names hold a lot of weight.]*

*Thanks, Nev. I will.*

Neville stood and bowed to Draco. “Your mother was a hero, to have given her life for you. May love and blessings flow from my family to yours during this time of sorrow. The family Longbottom also offers our alliance and support to you during your time of loss and in the future.”

Draco gave Neville a smile edged with tears and returned his alliance as well. Then, it was Harry’s turn. He bowed to Draco and gave his alliance, but when it came time for the family name, he whispered his surname in Draco’s ear.

“The family… Prince… offers our alliance and support to you during your time of loss and in the future.”

Draco’s eyes widened. He whispered, “Prince?”

“Yes. My true surname.”

His eyes flickered to Severus and back to Harry. “All right.” He took Harry’s hand and bowed back. “The family Malfoy thanks you for your condolences and recognises the family Potter’s—” He mouthed, “Prince’s,” and raised his voice again, “alliance.”

Harry smiled and sat beside Draco again, love and pride warming him throughout. It was the first time he had used his bonded name for anything. A quick glance at the staff table showed Severus watching him with his public scowl, but his heart overflowing with love.

*I love you, Severus Prince.*

The man’s lips twiched into a small smile despite himself. *I love you, Harry Prince.*

Hearing his true name gave Harry a thrill, and he ducked to hide his blush.

A voice he hadn’t expected to hear had him bolting up, alarm washing away all his joy.

“Malfoy…”

Ron stood near Draco, his cheeks pink and his eyes sad. “Harry, it’s all right, mate. I’m not going to hurt him.”

Harry relaxed and gave Ron a nod, though he stayed standing.

Ron rubbed the back of his neck and flushed. “Er, well, I can’t speak for my family with that whole blood feud thing, Malfoy, but Dean told me what happened with your mum, and gods, I… I was so wrong about her. About both of you. I’m really sorry.”

Draco gave Dean a worried look.

Dean squeezed Draco’s hand. “It’s okay. I’d never have told him if he hadn’t changed.”

Draco nodded and turned to face Ron with his pureblood mask of strength firmly in place. “Thank you, Weasley. And I, too, must apologise for my treatment of you and your family during the years that I… I was… blinded by Lucius’ influence.” His refusal to acknowledge the man as his father was
lost on no one. “I accept your apologies and offer a clean slate to you, that we might meet in the
future on friendlier terms.”

Ron nodded. “I offer the same. And….” He took a deep breath and straightened. “May love and
blessings flow from my heart to yours during this time of sorrow. I cannot offer you the Weasleys’
alliance without the consent of our head of family, but I offer you mine, and my support during your
time of loss and in the future.”

Harry’s breath caught in his throat and his heart warmed. “Oh, Ron….”

The boy gave Harry a sad smile. “It’s the right thing to do.”

Tears blurred Harry’s vision. “Y-yeah.”

Beside Ron, Ginny approached, though she kept her distance out of respect for Harry. She looked
weary and sad, and the heavy coat of makeup on her face made Harry wince.

“I can’t speak for our family either,” she said in a tired voice, “but I offer you my alliance and
support as well, Malfoy.”

A stunned Draco took their hands and bowed. “I-I accept your blessings and offer the same to you.
The family Malfoy thanks you for your condolences and recognises your alliance. And please, do
call me Draco.”

Ron nodded. “You’ve the same right for me.”

“And me as well,” offered Ginny.

“Thank you.”

Ron and Ginny bowed and stepped back, and Dean moved into their place, nervousness and love
fierce on his heart. He offered his hands to Draco and bowed, trembling all over.

“Draco, I-I don’t have a pureblood name, obviously, but if you’ll take it, I offer you my support and
alliance too, and I know my family will welcome you, if you want us.” He lowered his voice and
whispered, “If you want me, I’ll welcome you, into my heart and my family alike. I’ll love you,
Draco, if you let me.”

Draco’s breath hitched, and he pulled Dean into his arms, eyes alight with pure joy. Harry couldn’t
hear what he whispered, but it made Dean smile. Dean kissed Draco’s cheek as he pulled back and
settled beside him again, his hand at the small of Draco’s back.

Harry’s heart soared for his friends. About damn time.

He patted Draco’s shoulder and opened his mouth to whisper congratulations in his ear, but a snarled
shout of disgust cut him off and raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

“Oi! What is wrong with you lot?”

Seamus. Gods. Did that prat have to ruin every beautiful moment?

With a groan, Harry turned and glared at the bigoted arsehole. “No one asked your opinion,
Finnigan.”

Seamus snorted. “Yeah, ‘cause the lot of you are all too busy kissing Slytherins’ arses to listen.”
Draco and the Slytherins around the table tensed and laid a hand on their wands.

“Shut up, you idiot,” Dean snapped. “Haven’t you any respect? Don’t you know his mum just died?”

Seamus scoffed. “And good riddance to bad rubbish, too!”

“Rubbish?”

The entire group stood and faced Seamus down. Harry was gratified to see the prat flinch.

“The only rubbish I see fouling up the air here is you,” Daphne snarled back, eyes fierce with fury. “Get lost!”

“And like I’d listen to you, Greengrass! You’re one of them!”

“And proud of it,” Daphne fired back.

“As she should be,” said Luna with a nod. “The spirits stand in support of us.”

Daphne blinked. “Er… well, that’s… good to know?”

Harry snorted. “Sure is.”

Seamus scowled. “You’re barmy, Lovegood!”

“And proud of it,” she returned with a titter, making Harry’s allies laugh.

“The lot of you have gone mad,” Seamus cried, gesticulating wildly. “Allying with Malfoy for Merlin’s sake! He’s disgusting!”

Harry drew his wand, but Draco himself laid a hand on his arm and shook his head.

[Breathe. He’s not worth it, Harry.]

Harry closed his eyes and let his arm fall.

Draco squeezed his hand. [Thanks. I’ll handle him from here.]

Harry nodded and stepped back.

“Oi, Finnigan!” Tears slipped down Draco’s cheeks even as white and blue arcs of magic crackled in his eyes. “Do you even have any idea why my mother is dead? Or are you just assuming because she was a Malfoy, she must be evil?”

“Hit it on the head there,” Seamus snarled. “Malfoys are evil—”

Without warning, Colin reared back and punched him square in the jaw. Seamus went flying into the table, and Colin loomed over him, his magic glowing yellow-green all over his body.

“Shut it already, you bloody idiot! You make us all look bad.”

Harry’s allies and half the Gryffindor table cheered. He shot the head table a glance to find all the teachers had looked away and were pretending not to have seen anything. Except Severus, of course, who looked supremely satisfied. Apparently Harry wasn’t the only one fed up with Seamus’ behaviour.
He gave Colin an appreciative grin. “Good show, Colin!”

Colin shook out his fist. “He’s had it coming for years now, the wanker.”

Seamus glared and wiped his mouth. “I’m just tryin’ to warn you lot about—”

Magic sizzling around her form, Hermione whipped out her wand and silenced Seamus. “Sit down and shut up before I start hexing, you ignoramus! Honestly, you call yourself a wizard and you can’t even show the minimum of respect for someone who’s just lost their mum? Pathetic.”

She turned to Draco, and the boy flinched, no doubt expecting a diatribe of his own. To be fair, she did look rather intimidating with her magic arcing through her hair and her eyes glowing yellow and orange. As she fixed her gaze on Draco, her magic sank back into her skin and sympathy softened her features.

“How do you feel?”

“Easy, Draco. I’m angry at that dolt, not you.” She took his hand and squeezed. “Tell us what happened, if you want to and you can bear it. Not all of us know.”

“Some of us do,” said Dean, rubbing Draco’s back. “It’s just not our place to say.”

“Well, I’ll say it,” said Draco, his eyes still blazing blue with fury. “You have it partially right, Finnigan. One Malfoy is an utter psychopathic bastard, but it’s neither me nor my mother.”

“Understatement,” Harry muttered under his breath.

Draco shot him a searching look, but decided not to press. He turned back to Seamus and wrapped his arms around his waist for comfort. “Lucius is a horror of a human being, but mum never wanted to be mixed up with his ilk. It was an arranged marriage, and he’s made every minute of her life hell from the day she took his name. He made mine hell too, and I… I thought, maybe if I could make him happy… he’d stop hurting us.”

Tears slipped down his cheeks. “But he never did. Even if I managed to do what he asked, he always wanted more. There was always some flaw, and I never could please him no matter what I did. I ended up getting drawn into the Death Eaters because he offered me—like a bloody sacrifice—he dragged me there without my consent and told me I would bear the Mark like a proper Malfoy. I had no choice, but I thought, maybe if I went along with it, it might get him off our backs.”

Draco gave a bitter laugh. “But I should have known it would only make things worse. Harry, tell this shitehead what condition you found me in the first time you healed me, about two months before they forced the mark on me?”

Harry shuddered at the memory. He rubbed the boy’s shoulder and arm, relieved that his touch bled some of the young man’s pain away. Dean, of course, had more power to heal him, but Draco trusted Harry more than anyone and had never forgotten his loyalty during his dark hours. Harry had become a brother to him, in some ways.

Harry didn’t mind. He and Draco had a hell of a lot more in common than Harry did with Ron, and Draco didn’t abandon true friends once he made them. He knew all too well how rare they were.

With a sigh, Harry closed his eyes, remembering the day he had realised Draco wasn’t just a spoiled prat, but a human being in desperate need of help.

“Draco came into the Infirmary while Pomfrey was away with a broken wrist, a black eye, a cut above his forehead, and some of the worst bruising on his back—some shaped like boots—that I’ve yet seen.”
“And that was just the first time Lucius’ rage got out of control,” Draco said with a sniffle. “He’s been angry ever since… he lost his place in the Inner Circle to someone else.”

To Severus, but Harry wasn’t about to say that.

“And I suppose he thought that by offering me to the Dark Lord,” Draco continued, “I could bring him more glory. But I didn’t want to do it. I didn’t want to kill people and torture them or… or…. He covered a retch and whimpered. “You have no idea what those animals do. No one here does except for me. Well, and Harry and Neville.”

And Severus too, but again, it wasn’t worth Harry’s life to say it.

“Every time I failed to bring him glory,” Draco went on, “every time I failed to bring Harry to the red-eyed menace, never mind that Harry’s a far better fighter and I didn’t want to hurt him, Father went into a murderous rage. The last time, a few days ago, he caught the thought in my mind that I wanted out of the dark, and he nearly killed me for it. He ruptured my spleen and broke my ribs into my lungs. I would have died in a few moments, had…” Tears dripped down his face. “Had Mum not intervened.”

Parvati, sitting near Hermione, gasped and put her hand to her mouth. “Oh gods. You’re saying she…”?

He nodded and closed his eyes, sending more tears down his cheeks. “She knew he would kill her for it, but she saved me anyway. She cast a physical shield around me, healed me as best as she could in two seconds, and ordered a house elf to bring me to school. He didn’t know where to bring me though, so he just dropped me off at the gates. Neville, Luna, and Harry were there to save my life… but while I was in surgery and unconscious, there was no one to save Mum.”

He covered his face with a shaking hand. “She gave her life to save mine. She died to protect me. And I….” Draco stood tall and stuck out his chin, his eyes once again turning white with rage. “I won’t have you belittling her or demeaning her sacrifice, Finnigan! Mum was a hero in a horrible situation, and she saved me. It’s my fault she’s dead. I… I just wanted….”

He broke down in quiet, bitter sobs, and Dean wrapped him in a tight embrace. “Draco, ssh. That’s rubbish. It’s not your fault—you didn’t hurt her. Lucius did. It’s his fault—no one else’s. Don’t blame yourself.”

“I c-can’t help it. If I hadn’t been such a fool, she would still be alive.”

“No, Draco,” said Harry softly. “No. You’re not a fool. You’re hurting, broken inside. It’s Lucius’ fault she’s gone, not yours. You had no control. He hit her. He hurt you.” Harry looked to his husband and murmured, “He held the wand. It’s not your fault.”

Draco sniffled and took Harry’s hand even as he nuzzled further into Dean’s neck. “T-thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

The others formed a protective circle around Draco and blocked the still-Silenced Seamus from sight.

“Get out of here, Finnigan,” Dean snapped, holding Draco tight. “You’re not welcome here.”

Seamus’ eyes widened, shocked at the repetition of his own abuse, but the next instant, a scowl marred his features. He finally broke free of the silencing spell and growled out, “Fine then! Cuddle up with the snakes if you must, but don’t blame me when they bite!” He turned on his heel and stormed away.
Ron gave Harry an apologetic look. “I… I’ll try to talk to him. He’s really….” He sighed and shook his head. “I don’t know what good it will do, but I’ll try.”

Harry nodded. “Thanks.”

Ron gave him a wan smile and followed the prat out of the Great Hall.

No one else bothered Draco during lunch, at least not overtly. Harry had expected more trouble, to be honest. He had at least expected to find the junior Death Eaters glaring at Draco, but besides Seamus, no one seemed interested beyond mild curiosity.

Strange.

Unsettled, Harry scanned the Great Hall for faces of those he knew served Riddle’s regime. Parkinson, Nott, Moon… and thus, he noticed the irregularity among the students at the same time Luna looked up, eyes wary and face ashen.

Harry stood and laid a hand on Draco’s shoulder. “Lu, did you catch it too?”

She nodded. “The Junior Death Eaters are not here. It is difficult for the Clarents and Feathersprites to communicate with me while I am still recovering, but they know something is wrong.”

Harry’s heart slammed into his ribs. “The Junior Death Eaters are students, though. There’s nowhere else they could be but—”

“Hogsmeade!” Hermione leapt up and grabbed Harry’s shoulder, her DA coin clutched tight in a shaking hand and flashing red. “Oh gods, Harry! The town—it’s under attack, and Ron and Seamus are there—Honeydukes! They’ve been captured—there’s no time!”

“Shite!” Harry shot a telepathic message to Severus. “The Professors know. Luna, get back to bed. Dean, take Draco and get him to safety—we all know they’re after him.”

“No,” said Luna, face set. “I’m well enough to fight.”

“And I’m not letting them scare me,” Draco said with a glare.

“But—”

“We don’t have time to argue, Harry,” Hermione cried. “They’re already torturing them!”

“Shite!” Harry grabbed Draco’s hand. “Stay right beside me and Dean.” Draco nodded. “Good. The rest of you, fall into battle ranks! Corridor formation—remember to give each other space and stagger your positions. Let’s go!”

With that, Harry and the nearby DA members rushed out of the Great Hall just as Albus stood to warn the school of the attack.
Harry emerged from the Honeydukes tunnel with his allies, Draco close at his side and Dean guarding them both. Neville came up on Harry’s right, eyes narrowed and wand held in a steady hand.

He whispered, “Where are they?”

Harry opened his mouth to whisper back, but a muffled, masculine scream answered for him. “Above us, apparently. Okay, everyone fall into form for an ambush. This ladder here leads into the storeroom. From the sound of the screams, the attackers are in the front of the store.”

A thud and a shriek above them verified his theory.

“Yes, definitely the front room. So this is what we’re going to do: first, everyone silence your movements and climb up to the next floor. Draco and Dean need to stick to my side like glue, but the rest of you fall into the swan style battle formation. Then, we’re going to ambush the main room and take them down by surprise. Stealth is everything until we reach them, then go all out, but don’t neglect your shields. Stun anything standing, but if you see someone you know without a doubt is a Death Eater, don’t be afraid to curse! Also, be aware, I have a new snake familiar, and his venom is lethal.”

Jabardi slithered down Harry’s left arm and poked his head out of the sleeve, baring his fangs. ~I am ready, Master.~

Harry petted him briefly in response. “This is Jabardi. He’ll be fighting with me, but he won’t hurt any of you. And I’ll be using my powers as a Telepath to keep everyone alive, so don’t lose your concentration if I speak into your mind. Understood?”

Several hushed yesses and nods answered him.

“Good. Now, everyone ready?”

Another round of affirmatives.

“Good. Silence your movements now.” Harry let them cast their spells and laid his hands on the ladder. “Okay, everyone, time to go up!”

Harry led the group up the ladder, moving with speed and grace acquired from long hours of training with his husband. He raced to take position by the door, hidden just within the shadows, as his allies took position behind him. A blast of red light and a cry from around a shelf just ahead announced their enemies’ position. Muffled shouts and sounds of pain and anger followed, as did a veritable storm of curse lights. Merlin, Harry hoped that was Ron putting the bastards through their paces. Whatever else he could say about the redhead, he could fight with the best of them.

Harry stretched out an arm and held his friends back. ~Jabardi, how many are there?~

The snake sniffed the air and hissed. ~I smell many unfamiliar scents, but there are six touched with dark magic.~

Harry sighed. They could handle six, he hoped. He projected his thoughts to his allies. [At least six enemies present. We go in on three. Try to stay out of sight and hearing until the enemies are in view.] He lifted a hand with three fingers up so everyone could see, even if they mightn’t be able to hear. [One… two… three!]

With a silent snarl, Harry grabbed Draco’s free hand and dashed into the storefront. As Harry rounded the corner, a gravelly voice he recognised as that of Travers gave a winded sort of laugh. At
least he could be sure Ron had made the fight to capture them a damn good one.

“Where’s your little friend, blood traitor? Hiding in the shadows like a coward?”

Ron returned a bitter laugh marred with pain. “Some spies you have. Or didn’t you know Harry hasn’t been my friend for over a year?” The words cut Harry to the quick until he caught the tenor of Ron’s emotions and realised the boy was bluffing, trying to distract them while he calculated his next move.

Avery barked a laugh. “Nice try, scum! We’ve seen you two are thick as thieves. He’ll be here.”

[Ron, don’t panic.] Harry felt his friend jolt, but he didn’t reveal his fear out loud. [I’m here with part of the DA and the teachers are on the way.]

Ron’s thoughts cried, [How? How are you…?]

Yaxley snorted. “He’s probably already here. We just have to wait, boys.”

[I’m a Telepath.] Harry sent to Ron.

Bellatrix’s cackle set Harry’s teeth on edge. Mad bitch.

[Just keep bluffing, Ron. We’re just around the shelves, I think.] A powerful wave of relief surged through Ron. [Hurry. I think Seamus is really hurt.]

[Okay. Just stay calm.]

Ron’s aura filled with resolution. The next moment, his breathless laugh guided Harry to his position. “You’re idiots, all of you.”

Bellatrix shrieked, “Crucio!”

Ron’s screams struck Harry through the heart. Fuck! Perhaps they weren’t friendly any longer, but he still couldn’t let Ron suffer like this. He clutched Draco’s sleeve and moved faster.

“That will teach you to insult your superiors, blood traitor brat!”

The red light stopped, and Ron’s harsh breaths filled the air. His broken, wheezing laughs raised the hair on the back of Harry’s neck. Surely he hadn’t gone mad so soon?

“If y-you had any halfway decent spies,” Ron choked out, “they’d have told you by now that we both fucked up royally with Harry. Seamus has been an utter arsehole to him for two years, and I got lost in quidditch and girls and stupid things and forgot I was supposed to s-stand by him.” His voice broke, but he kept on anyway. “So, like I said, you’re all fucking idiots!”

Travers snarled, “Flagellum!”

Ron screamed and whimpered, but continued his harsh laughter. “Go on then. Kill me. Won’t do you a bit of fucking good. Harry’s not coming for me, and serve us both right.”

“First intelligent thing you’ve said all this time,” Yaxley snapped. Harry came around the corner of a shelf just in time to see the bastard raise his wand.

In his mind, Harry whispered, ‘Flagrante!’ Yaxley’s wand went up in flames and set his sleeve on fire too. The man let out a harrowing scream and flailed about.
“He’s here!” Bellatrix cackled and chanted, “Come out, come out, wherever you are, little Potty!”

‘Prince,’ Harry’s mind supplied irreverently, and he leapt out from behind the shelf, the DA at his back. “Now!”

His allies wasted no time on banter with the idiots, but went straight to cursing. At the same time, the Professors burst through the door with several aurors in tow—sans Severus, as he couldn’t feasibly be seen leading an attack against Death Eaters, but Harry felt his presence nearby. The man was hiding in the shadows, no doubt, helping Harry dispatch his foes without ever revealing his position. Harry sent him a wave of love in between curses and cornered a shocked Bellatrix.

“Got you now, bitch.”

She sent a Crucio at him, but Harry sidestepped it easily.

“Nice try, you twisted piece of shite.”

Bellatrix gave her cackle, but an edge of panic crept into her voice as her back hit a heavy shelf full of sweets. “Oh, how sweet! Wee little potty thinks he will avenge his dogfather, how touching.”

“Thinks?” Harry jerked his wand down and slashed the bitch’s face open. A light cut, but enough to let her know he meant business. Another spell had her wand sailing into his hands.

With a manic grin, Bellatrix swiped at her face and licked the blood from her fingers. “You missed, little baby potty!” She cackled and jabbed a sharp-nailed finger at his face. “You can’t kill me, little boy! Dumbledore’s little golden boy could never—”

Harry jerked his hand forward as if he meant to punch her, but the real threat came in the curse that followed. “Gladius!” A giant sword shot out of his fist and pierced the bitch’s skull, pinning her to the shelf. She died without a cry, a shocked expression frozen on her face, and Sirius was avenged.

“That’s the problem with you Death Eaters,” Harry panted, fury and adrenaline still fiery in his veins. “You never shut up!”

A spurt of blood pulsed from Bellatrix’s slack mouth, and Harry backed away, nausea and horror creeping in as adrenaline faded. Oh gods. Oh gods. He was a killer.

With a whimper, he turned his back on her corpse and ran back towards the battle. He would break down later. Right now, his friends needed him.

“Harry!”

Draco’s panicked cry brought him running. Yaxley had recovered, apparently, and had a grotesquely burned arm wrapped around the boy’s neck and a vicious dagger poking into his temple.

“Draco! Oh gods!” Harry stepped towards him, but Yaxley poked the dagger harder, sending a trail of red down Draco’s face, and Harry stopped cold.

“Ah-ah-ah,” Yaxley taunted. “Don’t come any closer. Maybe I can’t curse you, but I can sure as hell kill your little friend.”

Harry racked his brains for a solution, ignoring Yaxley’s continued monologue. The rest of the Death Eaters were either down or they had apparated out, but Harry feared he mightn’t be able to get a curse off in time to save Draco before Yaxley killed him.
“Draco!” Dean’s stricken shriek cut Harry to the core. “Let him go, you sick bastard!”

“Don’t,” Hermione called. She grabbed Dean from behind and held him back. “Don’t attack! He’ll kill him.”


Draco whimpered. “Dean, I… if I don’t make it, I… I love you.”

Yaxley gave a rasping laugh. “Oh, I’m sure the Dark Lord will love that little titbit. Fall in love with a mudblood did you, you filthy little ponce? Yes, he’ll love exterminating you.”

“No!” Dean shrieked. “Stop it! Take me, but let him go!”

“Don’t,” Draco cried. “Stay back!”

Harry gripped his wand tighter, struggling to think through a wave of panic and grief. Gods, how did he save him? If he cursed Yaxley, even a wandless, wordless curse might not hit him in time. If one of his allies could perhaps get behind the man, maybe they could incapacitate him, but a quick glance showed that everyone who had come with him was in view, wands trained on Yaxley but restrained for fear of hurting Draco. The teachers too.

Severus sent Harry a wave of comfort and from somewhere, the thought came, [Be calm. It will be all right.]

Harry’s heart raced and his eyes widened. He tried to find Severus without making it obvious he was searching, but the man had hidden himself too well. Perhaps he had used Harry’s cloak.

[Sev, be careful.]

[I always am.]

Yaxley dragged a struggling Draco towards the door, laughing harshly. “That’s right, little golden boy. You just tell your brat friends to back down, give me the traitor, and maybe we’ll let the rest of you live. For now. I’m sure my lord will be pleased with the plaything I’ve brought him.”

Dean struggled against Hermione and Neville, but they held him back.

“Let me go!”

“You can’t,” Hermione cried, tears streaming down her face. “He’ll kill you both.”

“That’s right, you little fools,” Yaxley snarled, eyes mad. “You can’t do anything. He’s mine now! And the Dark Lord will reward me well for—” He sucked in a sharp breath and went rigid. “I—”

The knife fell from his hand and clattered to the floor, and Draco kicked free of the bastard. He dashed straight into Dean’s arms and wept into his shoulder.

“So scared,” he choked out. “Was so scared I would leave you alone.”

Dean answered by catching his boyfriend into a tearful, passionate kiss. Draco melted in his arms and clung to him, whimpers mixing with gasping breaths.

Harry flicked his eyes back to Yaxley, prepared to curse him, but there was no need. The man had crumpled to the ground, dead, with the same sword that Harry had conjured to kill Bellatrix sticking out of his back.
Harry shuddered and turned away, tears threatening now that the worst of the threat had gone.

[Sev, I’m a killer. I killed her.]

Severus whispered back, [She would have killed you had your positions been reversed. I love you, Harry. I will always love you.]

Invisible, warm arms wrapped around Harry from behind and a soft kiss fell on his cheek. Harry didn’t dare turn into Severus’ arms though the temptation nearly overwhelmed him. He couldn’t risk revealing Severus’ love for him in mixed company.

“Dead.” Kingsley’s low voice rumbled over the crowd. “Someone stabbed him from behind, but who?”

Albus shook his head. “I believe we know the answer to that question already, old friend.”

Kingsley scowled. “Hmm. Yes, that wouldn’t surprise me a bit.” He stood and dusted off his hands. “Well, there’s little left to do here. We’ve the ones who didn’t die or escape subdued and the others scarpered. Good work, everyone.”

Albus laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Your actions, harsh as they were, saved lives, child. When the guilt weighs you down, remember that.”

‘The greater good.’ Harry scoffed, though tears ruined the effect, and leaned back into his still-invisible husband.

“I—yeah. I guess you’re right.” It wasn’t worth arguing here. He sniffled and wiped his face. “Come on, everyone. Let’s get out of here and let the aurors do their job.”

The DA nodded and started back towards Hogwarts, but Ron’s shaky cry called Harry’s attention to his one-time best friend. “Harry! Wait, don’t—Seamus is… we need help!”

Heart hammering, Harry raced to Ron’s side, and his heart leapt into his throat. Finnigan stared at him, barely conscious, his breathing laboured from a stab wound through his lung. Every breath gurgled, and bubbles of blood trailed down his lips. Fuck, even the murderous bastard didn’t deserve to die like this.

“Shite!” Harry knelt beside the boy and laid his hands over his ribs. “Someone call Poppy and tell her to set up an OR! Sarcio Vulnera! Purifico Pulmonis!” Harry’s magic flickered. Guilt, grief, and hatred for the arsehole under his hands had rendered his healing powers weak. “Oh gods, not now. I can’t—I have to…” But try as he might, Harry couldn’t conjure the amount of love he needed to make his healing powers work. Not now, not with Finnigan.

“I can’t… I can’t heal him.”

As Albus sent Poppy an urgent Patronus, Severus sent a powerful wave of love and magic to his husband, overwhelming his fear and grief.

[Think of me, beloved. Healing magic simply requires love in general, not necessarily love for the person you are healing. Think of me instead, my Harry, feel my love for you, and let it sanctify you. I love you. Nothing—nothing—will ever alter my heart towards you, my beautiful Harry.]

Severus’ unconditional love flooded him, driving the shadows of guilt away—at least for the moment—and Harry tried again even as tears poured down his face.
“S-Sarcio Vulnera... Purifico Pulmonis...” This time, his healing light came out white tinged with gold—the colour of their soul bond—and drowned Seamus in radiance. The boy coughed and spluttered, but the wound in his chest closed, and his laboured breathing eased.

Harry blinked, staring at the smooth skin where a horrible wound had been before. “Did I... heal it?” He shook himself and performed a diagnostic. Seamus would need potions and a few days in the hospital wing, but Harry’s spell had healed the worst damage and spared his former friend the need for a dangerous surgery.

Gods. He had no idea their soul bond could be this powerful. Maybe they had a chance against Voldemort after all.

“Merlin.” Harry stood and wiped his face. “He’ll be all right now. Mobilicorpus.” Ron and Seamus gasped as Harry’s spell formed stretchers under them and levitated them in the air. “I’ll take them to the Infirmary. Luna, Neville, help me? Hermione, stay with Dean and Draco and get them to the Infirmary too. Do we have any other casualties?”

Luna shook her head. “A few bumps and bruises, but Seamus and Ron are the worst.”

Kingsley gave her a bemused look. “How do you know?”

“She does,” Harry said without elaborating further. “Thanks, Lu. Come on. I need a little help keeping them calm and guiding the stretchers to Hogwarts.”

“Sure, Harry.”

Severus’ hand slipped into his husband’s. [I am with you.]

Harry clung to the warmth of Severus’ hand and guided Seamus and Ron towards the doors. The DA kept mostly silent on the trek, each lost in their thoughts and trying to recover from the horrors of battle. Gods, they were all still eighteen. Seventeen for Ginny and Colin. Too damn young to see death up close.

Neville came up beside Harry, walking on the opposite side to Severus. “Are you all right, mate?”

“Honestly? No. I... Bellatrix, I...”

“Yeah. I saw the aftermath. Um... Lu, can you?”

She nodded and took over the Mobilicorpus charm, holding both stretchers steady as their patients watched. “Got it, love.”

“Thanks, Lu.” With a broken cry, Neville grabbed Harry into a tearful hug. “Thank you, Harry. Gods, I know it hurts you, but thank you so much. She’ll never take anyone else’s family away ever again.”

Harry’s breath caught in a sob, and he hugged Neville back fiercely. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Ssh. You’ve nothing to apologise for. It’s all right. You did the right thing.”

“It doesn’t feel like it.” Harry sniffled and tried to pull himself together. “It hurts. Killing. I... I don’t think this war is going to leave me in one piece even if we do win.”

Neville took Harry’s hand and squeezed. “Maybe not, mate, but you won’t be alone. We’ll just put each other together again, yeah?”
Severus projected, *[However long it takes, I will heal your broken pieces, my love.]*

With a tearful sigh, Harry brought both men’s hands closer to his waist and nodded. “Y-yeah. We will.”

They walked in silence a little longer, Severus and Neville lending Harry strength. As they turned into the gates, a weak, broken voice from the level of Harry’s chest arrested him.

“H-Harry? I… thanks.”

Seamus. Harry nodded, but said nothing. He had saved the boy in honour of the friendship they used to have and because he wasn’t a monster, but he hadn’t forgotten what the bastard’s hatred had cost him. He petted his snake, glad Jabardi had the good sense to hide under his sleeve when Harry wasn’t fighting.

“About time he took his head out of his arse,” Neville muttered, and Harry choked back the mad urge to laugh.

“Yeah,” said Ron with a sniffle. “And me too.”

Harry squeezed Ron’s shoulder. “Thanks. For distracting them and fighting so hard. I think… it would’ve been worse if you hadn’t.”

“Was just tryin’ to keep our skins on.”

“Well, you did that.”

Neville rubbed Harry’s back. “Come on. Let’s get them to safety.”

“Right.” Harry wiped his eyes and followed, resolution steeling him against the molten core of grief in his chest. It would be all right, as long as he had his friends and Severus beside him. They would get through this.

He wasn’t willing to consider the alternative.
Chapter 56

Redemption

14 FEBRUARY

A much-recovered Harry lounged with a cup of too-sweet fizzy punch, watching over the dancers at the Cupid’s Ball. Seamus and Ron had recovered too and the village had repaired the damage, so Hogwarts had embraced the ball as a statement of normality—a way of telling the Death Eaters they could pillage and destroy, but life went on. Albus’ speech earlier in the week about not letting violence and evil steal their joy had gone a long way in aiding the students’ attitude towards the situation, even if Harry did find it somewhat hypocritical.

Honeydukes had cleaned up their store, and they had reopened just two days before, boasting new Valentine’s sweets and a line of chocolates with the DA’s title on them and a lightning bolt, in honour of their rescue. Harry was just relieved they hadn’t pasted his face all over them, though he bet they wouldn’t want his scar on their sweets if they knew what it really represented.

Shortly after the attack, aurors had taken three assailants into custody and pronounced Bellatrix and Yaxley dead on the scene. The questioning afterwards had scarred Harry, having to relive the fear, the thrill of killing Bellatrix, and the shock and horror of the aftermath, but Kingsley had been gentle and understanding.

The Ministry had, of course, tried to take Harry to trial, but the aurors and Albus headed it off, showing Bellatrix’s Dark Mark and mounting one hell of a defence to keep Harry from court. And when Dumbledore threatened to come after the Ministry itself if they could not see that Harry had killed the bitch in defence of others, they had changed their tune quickly enough. The matter dropped, and Albus secured a document proclaiming Harry’s innocence before two days had passed, but Harry wouldn’t forget the ordeal anytime soon.

Still, he was glad to be free and home, and to know nothing had changed in his marriage or friendships. His heart still ached, but Severus was healing him, a step at a time. Merlin, he wished he could be with Severus tonight, even just to talk with him if they couldn’t dance, but as that wasn’t an option, simply watching his friends have a good time kept him from thinking too hard on his recent trauma.
Anthony Goldstein had Hermione in his arms, twirling her about with a shy smile on his face. Harry saluted them with his cup. Anthony was a good chap, and his intelligence and ethic meshed well with hers. They mightn’t work out—who knew?—but they’d surely be a damn sight better together than Hermione and Ron. He wished them luck.

Blaise and Susan danced together nearby, both laughing and obviously in love. Harry hoped they did well together. Beside them, Millie and Ernie looked happy too.

Love was in the air, he supposed. Or perhaps in the punch. The Weasley twins had just released a new line of temporary love potions yesterday, after all. He gave his cup a wary look and decided he’d had enough for one night.

Then again, not everyone had chosen to partner up. Daphne sat on the edge of the festivities, punch cup in hand, talking quietly with Ron. As Ron had abandoned his womanizing ways after his mother put him in his place and was still recovering anyway—and Daphne didn’t trust him as far as she could throw him—they simply talked. Still, at least they looked as though they were making headway. Their thoughts revealed that Ron was talking about Slytherin House and trying to overcome his prejudice.

Well, good for him. Maybe Daphne could help him, though Ron’s words and bravery while he faced down the Death Eaters had removed much of Harry’s irritation with the man. Perhaps they mightn’t be best friends again, but knowing that Ron regretted his actions and had obviously changed helped smooth the way for a new friendship. At least he and Ron were talking again, and that was a start.

At the next table over, Ginny had left off dancing with her overbearing boyfriend to chat with Parvati and Padma instead. The girls’ playful chatter had brought a bit of life back to the weary woman’s eyes, and Harry hoped they could help her. Maybe encourage her to get away from the arsehole.

The thought brought his attention around to Draco, and his worries fizzled out in a soft glow of happiness for his newest friend. Draco danced with Dean, his head resting on Dean’s shoulder and Dean’s fingers threaded in Draco’s hair. Draco had recovered well after his close call in Honeydukes, and his love had helped Dean overcome his trauma too. As they swayed to the music, wrapped in each other and oblivious to the world, the warmth of their emotions and the strength of their bond left Harry grinning. His heart swelled with hope and relief. They were good for one another, and their love had brought them a long way towards healing their wounds.

But Harry’s joy faded at the sight of unfriendly eyes watching the couple. Crabbe and Goyle hulked nearby, cracking their knuckles and muttering under their breath. They annoyed Harry, but the pure hatred in Parkinson’s eyes set the hair on the back of his neck rising. He sent the bitch a glare, not that she noticed for all she was drilling holes in the back of Draco’s head, and made a mental note to have the DA protect Draco and Dean, at least until Parkinson moved on.

A wave of reassurance washed over him from nearby, and he looked in the direction of its source to find Luna and Neville had positioned themselves between the oblivious lovers and Parkinson. Neville gave Harry a nod over her shoulder, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. They would keep Draco and Dean safe. Harry caught sight of a dark figure looming near and his fears eased further. He should have realised Severus would see the threat before Harry did.

With that thought in mind, he leaned back in his chair and relaxed.
Harry flooed into his quarters, yawning and ready for the day to be over already. Merlin, the dance had dragged on for ages. He might have enjoyed it more had his partner been able to share it with him, but as it was, he had tired of sitting still and doing nothing long before curfew. Had he not worried for Dean’s and Draco’s safety, he would have skipped out early, but with Parkinson glaring like that and her aura bubbling red with hatred, Harry hadn’t thought it safe. Her loathing was so fierce, before the end of the night, every DA member present had noticed Parkinson’s fixation, and most had taken a protective stance—for Dean’s sake, if not for Draco yet.

Well, they would learn to trust him soon, Harry hoped. Draco’s tearful declaration at Honeydukes had convinced many of them the boy was genuine, and Dean’s obvious love for him and Harry’s staunch support during DA meetings had begun work on the rest. At least the others had stopped actively shunning him—even Finnigan, not that Harry wanted anything to do with the bastard. The rest would come in time.

For now, Harry was just glad the ball was over and Draco and Dean were out of danger. He hadn’t been able to spend much time with Severus, but he tried not to let it bother him. Maybe his first Valentine’s Day as a bonded man hadn’t turned out like he’d wanted, but next year, they wouldn’t have Hogwarts and a war holding them back, with any luck.

With another yawn, Harry tugged off his tie and stumbled into the bedroom, half-asleep already. A silken voice greeted him from the vicinity of the bed.

“I do hope you are not too tired to partake of my gift to you, beloved.”

Harry’s energy perked up at the sound of that tone—as did other parts of him. He lifted his head and locked his eyes on his mate, and his breath lodged in his throat.

Severus lay on his side on their bed, propped up on his elbow, and stark naked save for a silky red tie around his neck. A bottle of champagne hovered on ice near his head and a box of chocolates sat nearby, open, with a red rose atop them.

“Sweet mother of Merlin,” Harry breathed.

Severus’ dark chuckle vibrated in Harry’s belly, and his eyes snapped back to Severus’ fiery gaze. Severus drew him in like a moth to the flame, and fuck all if he minded being burned.

“Come, Harry,” Severus said in that low tone that made Harry’s toes curl. “Come and spend the evening with me.”

“Gods damn, Sev,” Harry said with a shiver. “You’re gorgeous, but how? When? You were chaperoning!”

Severus chuckled darkly. “A certain barmy old man owed me a few hundred favours.”

Harry laughed. “Well, that works out nicely for me. But, uh, wait….” He blushed and started towards the wardrobe. “I got you something too. It’s just—”

“Later, Harry,” Severus Banished the champagne, but left the chocolates. “Come. I had planned on sharing gifts too, but now I am more interested in you.”

“Ohh.” Harry shivered in delight and threw off his clothing in record time, garnering a soft laugh from his partner.

“I take it that is well with you?”
Harry spelled off his boots and leapt onto the bed, scattering a few chocolates from the box. “Yes, it’s brilliant.”

Severus chuckled as Harry took him into a deep kiss, threading his tie through his fingers and kissing down his throat around the silk.

“Mm, this was an inspired idea,” Harry murmured against Severus’ quivering skin. “You’re so damn sexy.”

“Nnh. I had hoped… you would find it so.”

“You. I find you sexy.” Harry gently eased Severus onto his back and caressed his face. “Are you afraid at all, love?”

“No. Open your Empathetic powers, Harry. I trust you.”

Harry obeyed and sighed at the warm rush of Severus’ love. And squealed as Severus moved his hand away from the small of Harry’s back and licked melted chocolate from his fingers.

“Oh dear. Seems as though I have made a mess. I suppose I shall have to tidy it up.”

A guttural moan escaped Harry. Dear Gods. He’d never imagined Severus would feel safe enough to play like this.

“Oh fuck, yes.”

“Mm, such dirty words.” Severus swiped Harry’s mouth with chocolate and licked it away. “And now you are clean again.”

Harry buried a moan in Severus’ throat and shuddered, desire already raging with hardly a touch. “Christ, Severus.”

Severus laughed again. “Well, not quite, but perhaps I can save your soul tonight, hmm?”

Harry leaned back on his knees and plucked a truffle from the tray, tracing it lightly down Severus’ belly. “Mm, maybe. Or maybe I might just save yours.”

“Mm—oh!” Severus arched as Harry squeezed chocolate filling over the end of his fierce erection. “Ah. I would not mind, but it seems you have a mess to tidy first.”

“That was the plan.” Harry dropped, and Severus cried out his name.

Hours, moments later—who knew in the height of pleasure?—Severus pulled out of Harry’s mouth just before his second release of the night became an inevitable thing. “W-wait.”

Harry sat back on his heels, lips red, breathing hard. “Is anything the matter, Sev?”

“No.” Severus took a moment to gather his wits. “It is only that tonight, I wish to try again. To feel you inside me.”

Harry’s breath hitched. “Oh, love. Are you sure?”
“You made me feel wonderful the first time we tried. If not for my memories… well, I am sorry.”

“There’s nothing to apologise for, love.”

“Mm, because of that, because of your love for me and the gentle way you treated me when I was afraid before, I think it will not be a problem this time.”

Harry smoothed his husband’s hair and kissed him lightly. “If it is, don’t be ashamed, okay? I love you either way, and whether you need to top, or need time to cool off and gather your wits, or just need me to hold you, I’m just happy that you’re trying. It’s enough for me, sweetheart.”

Severus gave a low chuckle. “I am not sweet.”

“You are to me.” Harry paused. “Do you hate the name?”

“No. Besides the one I have warned you against, I find I enjoy hearing them. Do not limit yourself, Harry. If you wish to call me a loving name, then do so. The days that I will deny you the right to express your love are past.”

Harry sighed and kissed Severus’ forehead. “I’m glad.” He nuzzled his mate’s nose and gave him a loving, deep kiss, pulling back with a pant. “You’ll tell me if you need me to stop?”

“Yes, beloved.” Severus kissed Harry’s hand. “I believe you will know.”

“Yeah. If it’s like last time, definitely.”

“Let us hope it is not.”


Severus relaxed into his husband’s tender encouragement and sighed at the first touch of his fingertip. Unlike last time, he expected the warm rush of sensation and the cool slickness of his strokes. He expected the wave of fiery heat as Harry’s mouth sank onto his shaft once more. He knew what to expect when Harry dropped lower and tasted him around and between his gentle fingers.

Even so, the intensity of the sensation still ripped a squeal from his throat and set him thrashing. Gods, he couldn’t bear it. The feel of him inside, so deep, so warm and cool at once—fuck!

“H-Ha-Harry! Too close!”

Gently, Harry withdrew and lapped at the crease of Severus’ knee, where a shiny streak of melted chocolate remained.

“You’re ready inside, Sev,” Harry murmured. “Do you want me?”

“Yes. But come here. Let me see your lovely face while you enter me.”

After casting a quick mouth-cleaning spell, Harry crawled up Severus’ body and leaned on one hand over him, holding his husband captive in his gaze. “Watch me, Sev. Look into my eyes. I’m right here. I adore you. You’re going to be okay.”

Severus tangled his hands in Harry’s hair, hoping the texture difference to Lucius’ would help ground him in the present.
“Yes, it’s me, love. It’s only your husband. I’m going to try to go inside now, okay?”

Severus nodded and braced himself.

“No, love. Don’t tense. Ssh.” Harry kissed him softly. “It’s okay. Even if you get scared again, I’ll take care of you. It’s all right.”

Slowly, Harry’s gentle kisses and love eased Severus’ fears.

“One more time, Sev. Just relax and keep your eyes on my face.”

“Yes,” Severus breathed. “Need to… make it safe.”

“I’m sure going to try, love.” Harry touched the tip of his erection to Severus’ entrance and waited. Severus couldn’t help tensing, fearful of falling into the past, but he only felt a flicker of fear at the first touch. Harry didn’t push, just stayed still against him, and his husband’s face remained steady this time.

Severus relaxed with a sigh. It would be all right.

Harry gave him a searching look, concern evident in his eyes. “Okay, Sev?”

Severus nodded and clutched Harry’s hair, too full of anticipation and nervousness to speak. Gentle pressure pushed against him, and slowly, Harry’s tip slid inside. Severus winced, expecting pain, but only felt heat and fullness. Harry was treating him with gentleness and respect, and it didn’t hurt, thank Merlin. Love had made this easy, comfortable for him.

Harry didn’t move until Severus relaxed again and the fear eased from his expression.

“There you are, love. It’s okay.” Harry gave him another kiss and sank a little deeper. A twinge of discomfort shocked Severus, and Harry’s green eyes wavered.

“Slut… shameless… slu—”

[No,] Harry said, voice firm and reassuring. [You are not what that demon said. You’re lovely and brave and beautiful.] He paused. [Sev, can you hear me, love?]

He could. This time, though the past still pressed close, he still saw Harry’s face, still heard Harry’s voice, and knew he was safe within his husband’s arms.

“Yes. I am having… flashbacks, but not as severe as before.”

Harry moved as if to withdraw, but Severus cried out.

“No, stay!”

Harry froze, uncertain. “You want me inside you, love?”

“Y-yes. I am… a bit afraid, but I still see you. Help me drive it away, so I only feel you.”

Harry winced. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’re not, beloved. You’re not. You are being exceedingly slow and gentle. Only keep talking to me. Let me hear your voice.”

“Okay.” Harry took a deep breath. “Gods, you feel so good.” He kissed Severus softly and gentle
pressure guided him a little further inside. “So warm, so tight. Love the way you feel. Love the way your heart feels too. So soft and loving. Gods, Severus. I love you so much.”

Tears slid down Severus’ face. Little by little, Harry was driving his demons away.

“Oh, Sev. I can’t hurt you, love. I’ll stop.”

“Don’t! I am not hurt.”

“But you’re crying.”

Severus kissed Harry passionately. “Do you not feel my emotions, love?”

“Yeah.” Harry moaned and slid inside a little more. “It feels good? You like the feel of me inside you?”

“Mghn. Yes, it is pleasurable in a way I have never experienced.” The last of Lucius’ spectre disappeared, and Severus sighed in relief. “Take me.”

Harry groaned into Severus’ neck. “Gods, yes.”

He pulled back and slowly pressed back in, and a fiery streak of pleasure followed him. Severus rocked his hips up to meet Harry, a moan low in his throat, and shivered at the feel of his mate buried all the way inside.

“Ghn. So deep, Harry.”

“Yes, yes,” Harry gasped, his eyes wide with sheer ecstasy. “Gods damn, Sev. I’m not going to last.”

“Oh, touch me. Take me with you.”

Harry gave a strangled cry and wrapped Severus’ erection with his lubricant-covered hand. Severus moaned at the dual sensation and rocked with Harry’s strokes, forwards into those slick fingers and backwards into his hard erection and heavy bollocks. Gods, no matter what he did, he couldn’t escape the sweet sensation of Harry’s body, not for an instant. He careened towards ecstasy, Harry’s name on his lips, and let pleasure sweep him away.

Then, Harry shifted his hips upwards a little, changed the depth of his angle, and a surge of fire rushed through Severus. He gave a garbled cry and arched up, clawing at the sheets.

“Harry!”

“That’s the ticket.”

Another thrust set him seeing stars, and another, and another, and Severus could do nothing but hold on to the sheets and pray he survived the onslaught of pleasure in one piece. Surely he was too old, too broken to hold so much sensation at once.

“G-gods!” His fists twisted in the sheets, his toes curled, and his hips arched off the bed. Fire and water surged through him, branding him, claiming him, and Severus opened himself to the siege.

“Se-Sev’rus!”

Harry’s stuttered cry and sharp burst of pleasure through the bond sent Severus tumbling over the edge, and he came with a shout, ecstasy rendering him paralysed and helpless to do anything but lie still in its wake.
Harry collapsed atop him with a groan and panted harshly into Severus’ chest. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead and a chocolate smear decorated one cheek. A rosy flush painted his face and throat and spread lower, blending with the heat on Severus’ own sweat-damp skin. Severus unclenched one hand from the sheets and brushed his fingers through Harry’s hair, smoothing his wild curls and watching them spring up again under his touch.

Gods. Harry had truly made love to him. And Severus had felt nothing but pleasure. Nothing but joy in his husband’s love for him. Tears of happiness and relief built on his lashes, and Severus caught Harry into a fierce hug.

“We did it,” he breathed, his voice broken. “I… I think I am free.”

Harry kissed Severus’ tears away and nuzzled his nose. “I don’t think this illness ever sets you free entirely, but we sure as hell made some good progress tonight, didn’t we? I think you’ll be okay from now on, love. We’ll still have bad times, but we’ll get through them.”

Severus laid his palm against Harry’s. “Together?”

Harry intertwined their fingers and smiled, tears bright in his own eyes. “Together.”
Chapter 57

Preparing for Battle

15 FEBRUARY

Harry left for breakfast the next morning with a smile on his face. Gods, last night had been amazing. He had worried Severus wouldn’t be able to bear it for a moment, but then the man had rallied, and gods! They had spent most of the night simply loving each other. Harry had even gotten a turn with Severus inside him, pounding him into the mattress and claiming him hard, making him howl with pleasure.

Gods, just the thought had him breathing fast and stiffening, despite his lack of sleep.

“Down boy,” he muttered to himself, and blushed when he realised his bedroom wasn’t empty. Dean and Draco sat on his fake bed, both looking smug, though Draco’s eyes still held too much sorrow. Harry wondered if it would ever completely fade.

“Uh….”

“Well, someone had a good time last night,” said Dean with a laugh.

“Hush, you,” Harry said, face flaming.

“Oh, don’t play the blushing virgin, Harry,” Draco teased. “It was your first Valentine’s Day together.” A wicked glint filled his eyes. “Merlin, you look knackered. So, how long did he keep you up exactly? Is he as hot in the sack as rumour tells?”

“Draco!” Face on fire, Harry smacked the boy with a pillow. “Mind your own business. What my husband and I do ‘in the sack’ is private information, thank you very much. And we weren’t up… that late.” A giant yawn chose that moment to crawl its way out of him, and Harry flushed harder.

Draco and Dean burst into laughter.

“Well, that says it all,” said Dean with a chuckle.

Draco clapped Harry on the shoulder. “Well done, Potter!”

“Oh, shut it.” Harry turned to the door, half-wishing he had a paper bag to put over his head. “Wait, why are the two of you here anyway?”

Draco’s mirth faded in an instant. He shrank back and wrapped his arms around his chest, his distress
obvious. “The way Parkinson was staring at me at the ball—gods. I’m not even an Empath, and I could feel her hatred. I didn’t feel safe on my own, so Dean and I crashed here.”

Harry squeezed Draco’s shoulder. “Anytime you need a place to run, feel free to hide out here. The room is warded against intruders, and I never use it anyway.”

“Well, I really should tell the girls anyway. If Blaise can figure it out on his own, so can they. I’d rather them do it somewhere they can shout about it without getting us both killed.”

“True,” said Draco with a grim nod. “And to that effect, I’d recommend telling them sooner rather than later. I have the sneaking suspicion Daphne already knows something’s up.”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Maybe so.” He sighed and hefted his knapsack over his shoulder. “Well, let’s just get through breakfast first. Sev will worry if I show up late.”

Dean pretended to swoon. “Ah, true love.”

Harry snorted and moved to the door. “You’d better believe it.”

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Hermione rounded on Harry as soon as he entered the Great Hall. To her credit, she did so with much more consideration than the last time she had accosted him concerning his whereabouts.

“Harry,” she whispered, “where were you last night? I know you weren’t in your room.” She blushed and looked to her feet. “I… I’m not going to shout at you or anything. I’m just worried. It’s so risky to wander these days. Were you at least somewhere safe?”

Harry nodded. “Um… I was with my friend.”

“Your other friend? At midnight?”

“Yeah. I… uh… stayed the night.”

“Really.” She narrowed her eyes. “You’re not being honest.”

He sighed and dropped his head. [No, but I can’t tell you the truth here. Too many ears. I’ve been meaning to tell you anyway. I guess… just let me check with Sev really quick…]

He warned his husband about the situation and asked his advice.

[Okay. Sev says we should all meet tonight in his quarters after detention hours, but we’ll have to go through my bedroom to keep him safe. It’s connected to the floo network.]

“Really? Why would you need… um… that kind of connection?”
“Long story, Hermione. One I really can’t get into here.”

She nodded and led him towards the Gryffindor table. “Well, I can wait. It’s not that long.” Insecurity and regret flooded her aura and turned it sea-grey. “But you will tell me, right? You do trust me again?”

Harry gave her a gentle hug and chose a seat in the middle of their usual spot so Draco could sit beside him, if he chose to. “You’ve been brilliant this past term. Of course I do.”

She sighed and dropped into the seat on Harry’s left. “Thanks. I… I really have tried to make it up to you.”

“I know. It’s okay. It’s just a dangerous secret so we kept it to a need-to-know basis. But as it happens, you need to know now. And we’ve got to talk about war plans anyway. Just wait until it’s safe, please?”

“Oh.” She scooped some scrambled eggs onto her plate. “So, do you think our essays for Ancient Magic will score us the top spot again this round?”

Harry chuckled softly. “Well, you could fit what I know about gnomes into a thimble, but I think Millie made up for it! I had no idea they kept rock gardens. I always wondered what those rock towers by Molly’s orchard were. Now I know.” He set his knapsack down at the end of the Gryffindor table and settled near the middle of their chosen ‘spot.’ “We should be fine, though Millie might win the day this time.”

Hermione sat behind him with a rueful expression. “She might at that.”

Harry’s other friends joined him and settled in their usual spot, Draco between Harry and Dean, and Luna and Neville across from him.

“Draco,” said Harry as soon as the boy was within earshot, “will you please tell Daphne, Blaise, and Millie to meet us in my room at nine tonight? It’s time to come clean, I think.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “Do I look like an owl?”

“With that pointy nose, perhaps a bit.”

“Oi! You’re supposed to be my friend, Potter!”

Harry laughed and tugged Draco into the seat beside him. “I am. Friends tease each other sometimes. I don’t mean it. I’m just winding you up.”

Draco glared. “I am not a toy.”

Harry snorted. “All right, all right. So, will you tell them then?”

Draco gave a put-upon sigh. “Yes, yes. The things I do for you, Harry.”

Harry chuckled and started filling his plate. “Thanks.”

By the time all of Harry’s friends had gathered in his bedroom, they hardly had space to stand.
“Well, now that everyone’s here, we’re going to discuss this in my friend’s quarters. It’s just too small in here for this many people.”

“Hear hear,” said Draco, who was fanning himself against a wall.

Harry snorted. “Drama queen.”

“Takes one to know one, Potter.”

Harry smirked. “Perhaps it does. So on that note, let me lead the way.” He tossed a pinch of floo powder into the fireplace. “Professor Severus Prince’s quarters, Hogwarts.”

The three women not in the know whispered to each other, “Prince?”

Harry motioned to the flames. “Draco, after you.”

“You had best hope that name works, Harry,” Draco grumbled.

“I use it all the time. Go through.”

Draco sighed and stepped into the flames. Dean followed, then Daphne, and soon Harry had sent everyone through but Hermione.

Harry took her arm before she could floo away. “Hermione, listen. What you’re going to hear tonight will… challenge your ethics and such. Promise me you’ll listen with an open mind, or at the least, not endanger Severus and me?”

She frowned. “Harry… are you okay?”

“Brilliant. Really. Other than… what happened at Honeydukes, I’m better than I’ve ever been in my life, but I won’t be for long if I have to lose another friend. So please, promise me.”

She tugged Harry into a hug. “Of course I will. I love you—you’re the little brother I’ve never had. Whatever happens, we’ll be all right.”

Harry pulled back with his eyes wet. “O-okay. Thanks, Hermione, and I love you too.”

She squeezed his hand. “Well then, we have nothing to worry about.”

“Hah. You say that now.” With a sigh, he tossed a pinch of floo powder into the flames. “Professor Severus Prince’s quarters.”

Hermione stepped into the flames and vanished. Harry followed, heart hammering and palms sweaty. Gods, he hoped she would keep her promise. He knew without a doubt the others would keep quiet, but Hermione still adhered rigidly to the rules, even if she had loosened up a bit about grades and her obsession with achievement. Harry worried she would take the Muggle view of things rather than magical—which would have forbidden Harry from bonding to Severus at all, let alone while studying at Severus’ school.

Well, he would just have to explain it to her and hope it made sense. He really didn’t want to have to Obliviate her if he could avoid it.

He called out his home grate, took a deep breath, and stepped into the flames. On the other side, Hermione stood beside the hearth near Millie, both looking a bit uncomfortable. Daphne, Dean, and Blaise were talking in the living room, where Albus, Poppy, Flitwick, and McGonagall had already made themselves comfortable with tea and biscuits. Severus stood in the kitchenette, one arm around
his waist and the other hand at his mouth, his eyes wide with worry and his aura dark with fear. Neville, Draco, and Luna stood near him, each trying to soothe him in their own way, but Harry knew what the man really needed.

“Sev, I’m here.” He went to Severus and slipped his hands in the older man’s hair, ignoring Hermione’s squeak and Daphne’s gasp. “Hey, it’s okay.” He rubbed his thumbs across Severus’ cheeks and gave him a gentle smile. “Do you remember how I promised you I’d show the world? Well, this isn’t much of the world, but it’s a start.”

Severus’ eyes softened and a slow smile spread across his face. “Show them then.”

Harry leaned up and took him into a soft, loving kiss. Hermione squealed, Millie let out a soft cry, and Luna giggled.

When Harry leaned back, Severus had tears on his lashes.

“Harry….”

“I told you I’m proud to be yours, Severus,” Harry said, not bothering to lower his voice. “I meant it.”

Severus sighed against Harry’s fringe and held him tight. “Thank you,” he whispered, his voice unsteady.

“Mm, it’s nothing.” He kissed Severus’ ear. “Are you okay, love?”

“I am … well. I never imagined that dream would come to pass.”

Harry kissed him once more, ignoring Hermione’s increasing spluttering. “I love you. I’ll do everything I can to make all your dreams come true, if I’m able.”

Severus kissed Harry’s fringe, drawing a round of gasps. “I love you as well, and I will do the same.” He breathed Harry in for a moment, then released him with a sigh. “I think we must explain now.”

Harry gave a dark chuckle and turned to his friends. “Yeah, probably so.”

He took Severus’ left hand in his own, pressing a kiss to the back, and whispered against his knuckles, “Sanguis Revelio.” The magic took a drop of each of their blood to confirm their identity, sealed the wounds, and their bonding rings appeared. Hermione, Daphne, and Millie sank onto the nearest sofa with a communal gasp.

Hermione gasped out, “B-bonded? You’re bonded to Professor Snape?”

“Soul-bonded,” Harry said softly and guided Severus to the armchair. With a soft smile, Severus sat and pulled Harry into his lap. Oh. Oh Merlin! Harry gasped and froze in Severus’ arms, his eyes flooding fast.

Severus murmured against Harry’s ear, “I am not ashamed of you either.”

Harry nodded and relaxed against his husband, blinking hard. “Sev, thank you.”

Hermione leapt to her feet and paced. “Bonded. Bonded, Harry? I… I don’t understand. Why? Why now? And how can you all act like this is okay? Harry is bonded to his professor!”

Albus shook his head. “Miss Granger, do calm yourself. Their bond is entirely legal.”
“Legal?” She shot him a dark glare. “And what strings did you pull to make that happen, hmm? It can’t be legal. Professor Snape is Harry’s professor, and that’s against the laws of both the Ministry and Hogwarts! It’s written out quite plainly in Hogwarts: A History.”

Minerva and Poppy fixed Albus with identical smirks.

“Well, she’s certainly got your number, Albus,” said Poppy with a wry snort.

Albus cleared his throat. “Now, now, ladies. Perhaps I may have been… ah, prone to manipulation in the past, but I do hope I have made some strides in overcoming it.” He gave Harry and Severus a sad smile. “My folly cost the people I love far too much.”

Harry acknowledged the admission with a nod, but stayed silent. He would rather not dredge up his past when dealing with an irate Hermione on a moral rampage.

Albus sighed. “At any rate, as it happens, Miss Granger, you are incorrect on both counts. I have done nothing to alter the rules. You see, child, if Severus was Harry’s professor still, you are correct that it would be illegal. But as Severus has no control over Harry’s marks, nor does he teach Harry in any official Hogwarts subject—additional potions and defence tuition aside—he is not actually Harry’s professor, but simply a professor at Harry’s school.”

Hermione stopped pacing and lifted her hand to her chin, a posture indicating stress and worry. “I… I don’t understand. Wouldn’t that mean he still has authority over Harry?”

Flitwick took over the explanation. “Not as concerns the laws. The rules do not prohibit bonding between an adult student and professor, Miss Granger, as long as the professor is not in charge of the student’s grades.”

Daphne gave Flitwick a shocked look. “You knew, sir?”

Millie looked around the room and frowned. “Er… did all of you know?”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck and gave a nervous laugh. “Um, yeah. Everyone but you, Daph, and ‘Mione. I was hesitant to tell Hermione because of, well, this. And the others, well, they all either figured it out on their own—” He nodded towards Blaise. “—Or we had little other choice but to tell them.” He waved to Draco. “Had to tell him to save his life.”

“We could not afford to be flippant with revealing our bond,” Severus said, his voice grim. “One word to the wrong person, and I will be killed.”

Daphne sighed. “Well, I guess that does make sense. And at least you are telling us, though I’d have liked to know sooner. I’ve worried about you for the longest time, Professor. I would have been glad to know you had someone to love you and heal your heart.”

A rush of shock and wonder pulsed in Severus’ side of the bond. “Oh Merlin. If I had realised, I would have told you. Forgive me.”

Hermione let her breath out in a huff. “I… I just… how is this possible? It’s illegal for a student to marry a professor at their school in the Muggle world.”

“But this is not the Muggle world,” said Albus, genial as ever but with a sharp look in his eye. “Perhaps you have forgotten that in the Muggle world, it is also illegal for two men to marry at all. Do you believe that law to be just?”

Hermione’s cheeks pinked. “No. Er… no, clearly, it’s not just at all.”
“Well then, why should this law be any different? Harry was an adult when he bonded to Severus, and Severus has no control over Harry’s grades. There is nothing untoward or illegal about it. If there was, I would not have allowed it. We could not have dared risk it.”

Daphne frowned. “Risk it?”

“Yes. You see, when the war is over, even if we win, the Wizengamot will be looking for any excuse possible to incarcerate Severus simply because they carry a grudge against him. We cannot afford to give them any legal grounds to do so.”

“And Sev needs people to support him,” Draco added, his expression cold. “So what’s it going to be, Hermione? Rules that don’t exist or your supposed friends?”

She dropped her head, a dull flush creeping up her face. “There was no need to come at me like that. I was just trying to understand.”

“Have more faith that others besides you understand the rules,” said Neville, gentle but firm. “You should have realised Harry would never do anything to hurt Severus.”

“Hermione, please.” Harry’s plaintive whisper hit her straight through the heart, judging by the cold blue colour of her aura.

She winced and closed her eyes. “H-Harry….” A shiver passed over her, then she opened tearful brown eyes and gave him a shaky nod. “You… you’re right. I did promise. I’m sorry, Harry. I just wasn’t expecting this.”

Harry smiled hesitantly, relief washing over him. “So you won’t report us or anything?”

“Of course not.” She sat again and wrapped her arms around her waist. “But I… there is one thing I’m still worried about. With what the headmaster said about the Wizengamot’s grudge against Professor Snape, I would have thought you would have waited to bond until after graduation, Harry. It would have been safer for you both.”

Severus shook his head. “If not for the many other factors involved, you would be correct, but as it happens, we had little other choice but to bond.”

“No choice?” Hermione glared at Albus. “What did you do?”

With a wince, Albus sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “My heavens, I truly have made a mess of things, haven’t I?”

Minerva patted his shoulder. “As long as you see it, there is hope to change.”

With a squeeze of her hand, Albus rallied. “Thank you, dear girl.” He gave Hermione a sad smile. “I won’t deny that I rather deserved that remark, but the truth is that I did not force them into this. Indeed, if I had, I fear Severus would have broken beyond all recognition. Ah, no, not just Severus. It would have ruined them both. No, child, I was not the one to drive them to such a choice.”

“Riddle took our choices away,” said Harry. “But before you get the wrong idea, Sev and I both went into this of our own will. I’ve been in love with him since I was sixteen, and Sev—”

Daphne choked out, “What? But he was awful to you, Harry!”

Severus buried his face in Harry’s shoulder, guilt churning cold and heavy in his aura. Harry kissed Severus’ hands and pulled them tighter around his waist.
“That didn’t… well, no. It mattered, but I loved him anyway. You see, I saw the truth of him at the end of fifth year—how lonely, how broken he was—and… I couldn’t stand it. His pain—it was my family’s fault. They were the ones to break him, at least partway, and I… gods, I was so miserable with guilt. Add in the fact that I had fallen in love with a younger version of a man who hated me—yeah, that was a rough time for me, I won’t deny it.”

Severus clutched Harry tighter and whispered, “I am so sorry, beloved. So terribly sorry.”

“Oh, Sev. Ssh. I know you regret it. It’s all right.” Harry leaned back into his arms and kissed his trembling lips. “It’s over now, and our love is so strong. I’m not even afraid to fight him anymore. Your love saved Finnigan, even though we’re both still furious at him. Finnigan. I know you can save me too. I believe in you.”

Severus kissed Harry’s scar. “I will, or I will die trying. My life means nothing without you.”

“Wait,” Hermione said, eyes wide with fear. “Save you? Die trying? Harry, what are you talking about?”

Harry closed his eyes and leaned into Severus for strength. “Hermione… well, all of you. None of you really know the whole truth tonight except Sev, Luna, Neville, Dean, and Albus.”

“We’re here for you, Harry,” said Neville, his smile determined.

“Every step of the way,” said Luna. “I’ll fight right alongside Severus, when the time comes.”

Harry closed his eyes, love and gratitude rushing through him. “T-thanks. Both of you. All of you. I… we can’t do this without you.”

Draco nodded, his eyes grim. “Tell us, Harry. We’ll help, if we can.”

Harry shook his head slightly. “If only you could, but in this, only Severus and Luna have any ability to fight for me, and even Luna’s ability is negligible. Sev is the only one who can really save me.”

“Harry,” said Daphne, “what’s going on? We’re all scared.”

“I’m sorry.” He took a deep breath and held his husband’s hands tight. “You all know I have to destroy the horcruxes before we have any hope of defeating Riddle?”

Hermione gulped. “Y-yes?”

He touched his scar, shuddering at the feel of dark magic there. “There’s a reason why the prophecy said ‘neither can live while the other survives.’ Unless Sev and I can manage to pull all Riddle’s horcruxes into him without… well, without collateral damage, I have to die in the final confrontation. And even if we do manage it, I might still die—or worse—if Sev can’t save me.”

“What?”

“Harry, that’s mad!”

He ignored the shocked protests of his friends and kept going. “It’s not mad, it’s the blunt truth. You see, as soon as we finish the soul-healing spell and use it against Riddle, Severus and Luna will have to fight for my life that instant—for my soul—because… because my scar….” His breath hitched and tears ran down his face. “It’s a horcrux.”
Never had Severus’ quarters been so loud. On all sides, an outcry of horror and denial resounded off the walls.

“What?”

“No!”

“That’s not funny, Harry,” Draco choked out. “It’s not funny at all!”

Harry wiped tears from his face. “Do you really think I would joke about something so terrible?”

Draco cringed and dropped his head. “No. Gods, no.”

Dean took Draco into his arms and held him tight, his eyes shimmering and wet.

“Oh, Harry,” Poppy whispered, hand over her mouth. “Oh child, tell me it isn’t true.”

Harry lowered his head. “I can’t.”

Millie sniffled and wiped her eyes. “Harry, I don’t understand. What does this mean?”

Harry grimaced and lifted his face, revealing the streams of tears pouring down his face.

“Oh, Harry.” Severus cradled Harry against his chest and gently brushed his tears away.

The gentle touch eased Harry’s pain, and slowly, he rallied. “It means, Millie, that a piece of Riddle’s mangled soul b-broke off the night he tried to kill me and latched onto the only living soul in the room—me. It lodged in my scar. That’s why I have visions and such. And now, unless I can finish the horcrux destroying spell before the final battle, I’ll have no choice but to die, or Riddle will live forever.”

Granger breathed, “Harry, no. You… you can’t. I won’t let you sacrifice yourself.”

“No indeed.” Heart bleeding with the mere thought, eyes stinging with the horrifying possibility of losing everything he loved for the greater good, of losing the one man who had ever loved him back, Severus clutched his husband tight and turned him, that he might taste his husband’s lips with all the love and desperation overwhelming him.

“No,” he murmured against Harry’s mouth. “I refuse to let you die.”

“What choice do we have,” said a white-faced Draco, “if Harry truly is a horcrux? Unless he dies… the war will never end!”

“No!” Severus cradled a weeping Harry in his arms, trying to send him waves of love and healing through the bond. “Draco, there is another way. Harry and I have not yet managed to make the soul healing spell powerful enough at this juncture, but with any luck, by the time the Dark Lord attacks, we will have strengthened it enough to pull horcrux pieces from their containers and attach them to the whole.”

“And once all of Riddle’s soul pieces are back in his body,” said Neville, picking up the explanation for Severus, “Riddle will be mortal again.”

“We know that,” said Granger, her tone slightly sharp, “but how does that help Harry?”
Severus forgave her for her short temper. He was terrified for Harry too.

“Well, that should be it, shouldn’t it?” Daphne gave them a hopeful look. “Once you cast the spell, Harry’s horcrux piece should break away and then, all that’s left is to kill the Dark Lord!”

Harry shuddered. “If only it were that easy. The danger is, with a spell this powerful and a horcrux piece that’s been woven into my own soul for seventeen years, the spell might just pull out my soul with it.”

“Oh dear gods,” said Minerva, her usual composure shaken and tears on her lashes. “Oh, child, no. Such a fate is….”

“Yeah.” Harry shuddered and rubbed his arms. “I’d end up either dead, or worse—like Barty Crouch Jr.”

“Merlin forbid,” Filius breathed.

Poppy conjured a handkerchief and sobbed into it. Minerva patted her back and gave Filius a grim look.

“Is this… horrific possibility, is it accurate, Filius?”

Filius gave her a grim nod. “I am afraid it is a legitimate concern, based on what I know of soul magic.” He smiled wanly. “And now I understand why you say Severus can save you, Harry. Your bond—it truly is your only hope.”

“Yes.” Harry sat and wiped his face. “Bonded souls, by nature, fight to protect their mates. As well, they block out darkness and death, and allow nothing foreign to interfere. So our only hope, and part of the reason we chose this path, is that our bond might be able to save me. With Severus fighting for my life, with his soul linked to mine and our bond blocking the horcrux soul piece from mingling with my own soul, he can pull me back if the spell tries to take me with it; he can keep me where I belong.”

“But if he fails, the spell might kill you both,” said Draco, shaking all over.

“It is a possibility I am prepared to face,” said Severus, grim, but determined. “I will gladly die for Harry, but I am doing everything within my power to prevent such a fate. I will fight with everything I have to keep him here, to keep him safe.”

Granger sat tall, resolution filling her eyes. “What can we do to help you, sir?”

Severus held Harry close and pressed his cheek against his mate’s. “There is little you can do to assist me in fighting for Harry besides lend me power and shield me, but assuming the spell works and I am able to save us both, we will need your support afterwards. The moment I begin to fight for Harry, it is quite possible that the Order will learn the truth, that we are bonded. And if they do, they may come against us. We will need people to stand by us and protect us, as the fight for Harry’s life may very well incapacitate us both, even if we are successful.”

Harry nodded, slowly so as not to hurt Severus. “The more we have standing with us in that moment, the better our chances that we’ll come out of the battle whole.” He closed his eyes, sending a fresh rain of tears down his face. “If they put Severus in Azkaban… we’ll both go mad.”

Severus gently brushed Harry’s tears away and tucked him closer against his body. “Yes. So we need all of you to stand by us at the end and protect us.”
“And you must keep this absolutely secret until then,” Albus said, his expression grim. “One word of any of this to the wrong person, one flash of memory at the wrong time, and both Harry and Severus will die before we have a chance to fight.”

“Tell no one who is not in this room,” Severus warned. “Phineas Black and a few of the other portraits in Albus’ office, Dobby, Kreacher, and Winky—who is also our family elf now—all know of everything we have spoken of here tonight, but no one else does. Do not reveal our bond or the truth of Harry’s scar and Occlude the details of everything we have disclosed to you in public. Please.”

Granger gasped. “Well, of course we’ll Occlude it and keep your secrets, but—” She gave Harry a scandalised look. “You enslaved Winky again?”

Harry snorted through his tears. “Hermione, you and your spew rubbish. Look, I get that you want to help the house elves, and that’s not a bad thing, but like Professor Origa already told you, you’re starting in the wrong place. House elves don’t want to be free. Well, with the exception of a very rare few, like Dobby. They need a home and a family to feel safe and happy, ‘Mione. It’s not conditioning—it’s a biological drive. And that’s why we took Winky in. We needed a Prince elf to break through the wards over Severus’ family bonding rings, and Winky needed a home. She’s much happier now, though she can’t be convinced to wear a uniform.”

Winky popped in, her hands on her hips, white and pink striped toga flaring out behind her. “Is not befitting a proper house elf’s station, Master Harry. And I is happy with my pretty pillowcase togas. Masters let me pick one with pink ruffles and spots, and one with blue flowers and lace, and more too—and Winky is liking them all very much.” She fixed Granger with a glare. “If you is wanting to be helping the house elves, you has best be learning about them first. We are not slaves—we are family. And we’s like to work.”

Granger’s mouth shut with a click. “Oh. W-well, I’m glad to see you have some spirit back, Winky.”

Winky nodded. “I is happy now. Winky has a home again.”

Harry patted her shoulder. “Yes, you do. Would you like to talk to Hermione about your race and maybe steer her in the right direction to make some positive changes for your people? I do agree with her that the conditions most house elves live in are deplorable, but I think change needs to start with the wizards keeping them, not the elves. What do you think, Winky?”

She nodded vigorously and gave him a beaming smile. “See, you is understanding us well. And you is right.” She shivered and hugged her chest. “I … I is not liking to speak badly of my former masters, but they were not … nice to Winky like Master Harry and Master Severus are. They did not let Winky have pretty pink togas or give me a room of my own. They did not ask what Winky wants at all.”

Granger gave her a determined smile. “Winky, if you’d like to help me learn more about your kind and how to make life better for your people, I’d love to work with you.”

“I is being happy to help,” Winky agreed.

“Good to know,” Thomas said with a grin. “Spew was driving me mad.”

Granger huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s S.P.E.W., not spew.”

Harry snorted. “Everyone in the UK knows that, ’Mione. Could we move on now?”

Granger blushed. “Oh, yes, yes. Sorry.”
“It’s all right. Anything to stop hearing about spew.”

“S.P—”

“We know,” said most of the other students at once. Luna tittered.

Granger sighed. “Oh, very well. I suppose we really should focus on the war at the moment anyway. We all know he’s going to attack soon, Harry. So what do we do? We’re not ready.”

Harry shuddered. “No. Like I said, Severus and I have yet to finish the soul-healing spell, and then, we still need to test this soul banishing charm of Slytherin’s.”


“Manikins in the Room of Requirement,” said Severus. “It is not absolutely accurate, but we cannot use that spell against anything living.”

“Merlin, I’d say not,” said Millicent. “Isn’t it extremely dark magic?”

Harry gave her a grim nod. “All soul magic is dark, except healing. However, consider that we’re not casting the spell to kill him—we’ll do that another way. A humane way. No, we’re only using it after he’s dead to make sure the bastard can’t come back in case the horcrux banishment spell doesn’t catch… um… everything. When you consider that, it’s not as dark as it could be.”

Severus understood that by everything, Harry meant the horcrux in his own scar. Gods help him, Severus prayed his husband would survive. He had to. Severus couldn’t endure without him. He buried his face in Harry’s back and breathed him in, reassuring himself with the scent and feel of his husband’s life.

“Yes, I agree,” said Granger, “and honestly, I don’t think we’re going to win this war by sticking strictly to light magic anyway. We’re going to have to get our hands dirty before the day is done, if we want to survive.”

All eyes turned to her.


She gave him a sharp-edged smile. “I seem to remember a time when I broke the rules on your face.”

Draco rubbed his jaw with a wince. “You’ve a mean left hook, too.”

Her expression softened. “Knowing what I do now, I wish I hadn’t. You were suffering enough.”

“Don’t. I was a berk. I had it coming.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “But that aside, what’s the problem with the soul healing spell, Harry? From what you and Dean have told me, you’ve been working on it for ages. What’s keeping you from finishing it?”

“Time,” said Severus with a sigh. “Harry and I simply don’t have enough of it to finish the spells. We must be careful not to be seen working together, which severely limits the time we have to work. Besides that, Harry is also training for combat, working on his apprenticeship, training the DA, and studying for his NEWTs, and I am teaching, playing spy, training Harry, and creating potions and supplies for the Infirmary, the Order, and the upcoming battle. Not to mention the fact that Harry and I must spend some time each day, ah, in each other’s company or the bond will become… a security risk. With all that in mind, we are simply too busy to finish the spells.”
“Well, I can help with the potions, Master Prince,” said Draco with a firm nod. “More, I mean. I have more time to spare if you need it.”

“So can I,” said Granger. “I mightn’t be able to win the Gilbroy-Newman contest, but I can surely make potions of high enough quality to keep us alive in battle.”

“I can help too,” said Daphne.

“And me,” said Luna.

“As can I,” offered Blaise.

“I’m not too shabby with a cauldron these days myself,” said Harry with a wink.

Severus chuckled. “We are doing this so that the two of us have fewer responsibilities, Harry. But I will accept the help of any of you who would wish to offer it. Merlin knows I am having trouble meeting the demands of three organisations at once with everything else I must attend to, even with Draco’s help.”

“I’ll help with training the DA too,” said Draco. “I know moves they don’t. Moves they’ll need to know to survive. If Blaise, Millie, and I took over for a few weeks, then Harry could have a break from that too, at least long enough to finish the spell.”

“Do so,” said Severus with a nod. “And thank you.”

“It’s the least I can do for….” Draco lowered his head, grief colouring his expression. “He saved me. I won’t forget it. I only wish….”

Thomas wrapped Draco in his arms and kissed his temple. “I know, love. We all do.” Over Draco’s head, he murmured, “I’ll help Draco train the DA too. They mightn’t accept his leadership, even a temporary one, unless one of the core members stands behind him.”

“I will too,” said Granger. “And I can give us plenty of new spells to work on.”

“That’s good,” said Harry, smiling hesitantly. “That will help loads. And I’ll come along the first week so they understand what’s at stake—what we can safely reveal of it anyway—and why you’re taking over, Draco. With any luck, that will nip most of the whinging in the bud.”

“One can hope,” said Draco, though he looked as sceptical as Severus felt.

Granger gave him a grim smile. “You leave the DA to me. I’ll wrangle them back in line.”

Harry snorted. “Go for it, Hermione. You’re downright scary when you’re angry.”

She chuckled, but her mirth faded fast. “I… I’d like to help you study too, Harry. Um, that is, if you want. I don’t mean making schedules and choking you on revision. Just help.”

“As long as you don’t go mad about it like last year,” Harry said with a tired smile, “I’d welcome some help. Merlin knows I’m drowning at the moment.”

“Then we’ll all help you as we have time,” said Daphne. “You definitely need it.”

“Hey!”

She chuckled. “I didn’t mean that, Harry. Just that you’re overwhelmed. We all know you’re brilliant.”
Harry’s cheeks flushed. “Oh. R-really? You lot think that?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Potter, come on. We’d all probably have been poisoned by now if not for your work with Severus on the basilisk vaccine. Yes, we all think you’re brilliant. Can we focus now?”

Harry gave a wry chuckle and rubbed the back of his neck. “Good point. And on that note, I think Sev and I might be able to finish those spells now. With everyone lightening our load, we should have enough time both to work on the spell and heal our bond each night before it becomes a problem again. Thank you, everyone. Your help might just be enough to save all of our hides.”

Severus held Harry tighter and prayed they could save one hide in particular.

Blaise crossed his arms across his chest. “So that’s our plan then? Help you and Professor Snape as much as we can so you have time to work?”

“And train the DA,” Harry said with a nod. “We need them to get serious. The battle’s coming soon. And I think putting Draco in charge for a few weeks might be just the ticket. They’ll balk at first, but between the attack in Hogsmeade and this, it might also bring it home to them that this isn’t a game any longer.”

“Understood,” said Blaise. “All of us will try to impress that upon them as well.”

“Thank you. We’re going to need all the help we can get in the end, especially if Riddle attacks the school.”

“True enough,” said Daphne with a shudder. “Gods, I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“So do we all,” said a grim-faced Poppy.

“If it does,” said Millicent, her eyes fierce, “we’ll be ready for them. More so than they’ll expect, I think.”

“That’s the hope,” Harry agreed.

The room went silent for a moment, as everyone digested their plans and strengthened their resolve.

Albus broke the silence with a yawn. “Oh, do forgive me. Even generals need their rest, I’m afraid. Especially generals in their second century of life.” He placed his tea cup on the table and pushed his glasses up on his nose. “And with that in mind, if no one has anything else to add, I believe we should all be getting to bed. Besides the fact that teenagers need quite as much rest as old men, the longer we stay here, the more suspicions we raise.”

“He’s right,” said Blaise with a frown. “We’ll all miss curfew unless we hurry, and that would be exceptionally out of character for Hermione, Daphne, and me. We’ll draw attention.”

“Then, by all means,” said Minerva, “do hurry back to your dorms.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Blaise, and started for the floo. “Harry, Professor Snape, good luck. We’ll do everything we can to help you.”

Severus bowed his head in a sign of gratitude and respect. Blaise’s eyes filled with wonder, then hardened with resolve.

“Right. Daph, Millie, come on, we’d best hurry. Goodnight, everyone.”
Through a round of returned farewells, Luna called out, sudden fear making her already protuberant eyes seem to pop from her skull.

“Oh! Do wait, please. The Clarents and Feathersprites are talking and… oh.” Silvery tears pooled in her eyes. “I know she has not endeared herself to us, but Ginny was my best friend once, and the spirits are warning me she is in quite as much danger as….” Her eyes flickered to Draco, and everyone in the room drew in a gasp as one. “Please, will you help me protect her? I… I am quite disappointed in her behaviour, but I still—” Her words cut off, and she covered her face in an uncharacteristic display of high emotion. Merlin, she must have truly been terrified.

Neville hugged her tight and kissed her hair. “I will, Lu. We all will, right? For Luna’s sake?” His plaintive look melted even Severus’ heart.

“Absolutely,” said Draco, his eyes flashing with fury. “Like hell if I’ll stand by and let it happen again, even if Weasley is a bint.”

Minerva cried, “Mister Malfoy!”

Draco shuddered. “Don’t call me that. Take points if you must, but please don’t call me that.”

She blushed. “Oh. I will try to remember, but do watch your tongue.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Minerva stood, brushing off her skirts and heaving a heavy sigh. “Miss Lovegood, I will warn the professors that Ginevra needs careful monitoring. As for the rest of you, off with you now. It is ten minutes to curfew.”

Blaise winced. “Merlin, we’ve got to go.” He moved to the fireplace and called, “Harry Prince’s private room.” In a flash of green light, he was gone, the others following in his wake.

Once everyone had left but Luna, Neville, and Granger, Harry took Luna into a tight hug. “Don’t be afraid, okay? You just keep your DA coin on you, watch her aura, and listen to your spirits. I’ll keep the map on me too and watch her aura too. Between the two of us, we should be able to monitor her safety better than most. Just tell me the second you know she’s in trouble, and I’ll send someone in to help. Or go myself if I must. Much as I’d rather not deal with her obsession again, I won’t let her be killed.”

Luna sniffled and returned Harry’s hug. “Thank you. You’re such a good friend, Harry.”

Harry kissed her cheek. “You saved us, Lu. Severus and I. You’ve been by our sides every single step of the way. I won’t forget it.”

She drew back and wiped her eyes. “Neville and I must hurry, but… I’ll do what you said, Harry. Perhaps it will be enough to prevent another… another tragedy.”

“I’ll keep an eye on her too, Luna.” Granger rubbed Luna’s back and smoothed her hair. “I can watch over her in the dorms, and I’ll let Parvati and Lavender know that she’s in trouble. Much of a prat as Lavender is about most things, she does care about Ginny. We’ll all help keep her safe, okay?”

“I, too, will do everything within my power to protect her,” said Severus. “I have little love lost for Miss Weasley, but you have been here for me in my darkest hours, Luna, and for Harry as well. I would not wish to see you hurt.”
Luna hugged Severus and kissed his cheek, and Severus stunned them all by returning her gesture.

“Thank you.” She pulled back, wiping her eyes. “All of you. I….I… am grateful to have such good friends.”

Neville kissed her lightly. “It’s going to be all right, Lu. You’ll see.”

Luna gave him a wan smile. “I hope so, love.”

“So do we all,” Granger agreed.

“We’d better go now,” Luna said, wiping her eyes.

“We’ll walk you back to the dorm,” said Granger.

Luna blinked. “But you will be late.”

“It’s not important.” Granger gave Harry a sad smile. “Not nearly as important as standing by your friends.”

Relief surged through Severus at her tacit acceptance. Thank Merlin, it would be all right now.

Luna smiled through tears. “Yes, you’re right, Hermione.” She wiped her face. “Well then, if you’re coming with me to Ravenclaw, we should hurry before Filch begins his rounds. Goodnight, Harry, Severus.”

“I’ll let you know how she’s doing in the morning,” Neville said. “Goodnight.”

Harry and Severus bid them farewell, and watched as they vanished into the flames. Harry curled into Severus’ arms, worry aching in his side of the bond.

“Sev, do you think we’ll be okay? All of us?”

“I can make no promises, love, but….” Severus held Harry’s face. “When I look at you, when I see how far we have come, when I think of everything we have overcome to make it to this point, I have to believe there is more waiting for us than a bitter end. You give me faith to believe in the future, Harry. Our future. And I will not let it go without a fight.”

Harry smiled through a film of tears and buried his head in Severus’ chest. “Me neither.”
Ultimatum

Chapter Summary

Short, but action-packed chapter this time. Only six left! I'm going to miss this story when it's done.

Chapter 58

Ultimatum

21 February

The DA had been tailing Ginny for a week, never leaving the girl alone, but Harry had a gut feeling trouble would strike soon. Frustration, jealousy, and rage centred in Smith’s thoughts constantly, and Ginny was beginning to resent her ever-present guard. Before long, Smith would corner her, but he didn’t know what to do to prevent it. Maybe he could try talking to her. Or better yet, ask Luna to. Probably, Luna had already tried, but it couldn’t hurt to try again.

He mused on the situation all the way back to his room, struggling to think of a way to help her without becoming her unwilling hero again.

But Ginny was waiting at Harry’s door, hunched over and trembling. Blood spattered her shirt and what he could see of her skin had bruises and cuts all over. Dear gods, what had Smith done to her?

“Ginny? Merlin, what happened?”

She looked up, and Harry flinched. She had a black eye, a cut lip, and he suspected a broken nose.

“Dear gods.”

“C-can you heal me, Harry? I can’t go to Pomfrey.”

“Uh… yeah, but tell me what happened.” He cast a diagnostic and thanked Merlin she only had superficial injuries, besides her broken nose, and that was an easy fix. “Episkey.”

Ginny flinched and rubbed her nose. “T-thanks.”

“Thank me by talking. Who did this to you?”

She winced and turned away. “N-no one. I just fell down the moving staircases.”

Harry grimaced. Well, he’d heard that one before.

“Ginny, there’s no way these injuries came from falling down the stairs. The pattern is completely inconsistent, not to mention you’d have more broken than your nose. Sarcio Vulnera. Now, are you going to tell me who did this to you, or do I need to start guessing? I guarantee it won’t take me long.”
She cringed and turned away. “O-okay. I got in a fight. With… Nott. He’s stronger than he looks.”

“Ginny, you do remember I’m a Telepath, right? I know you’re lying.” Harry sighed and leaned against his door. “Look, I know you’re scared, but you don’t have to stay with Smith. Whatever rubbish he’s planted in your head is just that: rubbish. The prat is a total sociopath. And you need to get away from him before he kills you. This is as bad as Draco when he first came to the Infirmary.”

Ginny sniffled and wiped her eyes. “It wasn’t Zach! I… I really did get in a fight.”

“I’ll bet if I asked Nott about that, he’d have some choice words for me.”

“Don’t, okay! Just, don’t. I can’t talk about it.”

Harry sighed. “Ginny, the school can get him away from you. There are laws. But we have to have hard evidence first. You have to come forward, or we have to catch him. So… if you can’t tell me, can I look into your mind?”

“No! You don’t understand. I can’t. I can’t.”

Harry sighed. Draco all over again. “Then what do you want me to do, Ginny? I’m not going to just stand here and heal you every time he beats the shite out of you just for you to go right back to him. That’s not fair to anyone.”

She sniffled and stared at her feet. “I… I broke up with him anyway.”

Harry blinked. “Really? You broke it off?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Oh thank the gods.”

Ginny gave him a doe-eyed look. “Harry, I’m scared. Could I stay with you?”

Harry choked, horror screeching down his spine like nails on a chalkboard. “After what you did to me before? Not a chance in hell.”

She sniffled and dropped her head. “Oh. I… I just need a safe place, and Draco stays here sometimes, so I thought—”

“And Draco’s never stuck his tongue down my throat without consent. You are not going to stay in my room. Ever.” He shuddered and moved towards the door to his room. “Come on. If you need a safe place, the headmaster can offer you that.”

“But… why are we going to your room for that?” The hope in her eyes turned Harry’s stomach.

“Ginny, my room has a floo connection, and you’re in no shape to walk up seven storeys. Don’t get any ideas.”

She winced and turned away. “Oh. A-all right then. Let’s go.”

Harry nodded and let her into his room, whispering the password so she wouldn’t hear, though he caught her straining to listen anyway. Gods. Well, he would change it as soon as the girl had gone. He could let Dean and Draco know the new password by Telepathy, and the rest of his friends could wait for one night.

Ants crawled down Harry’s spine as he knelt before the fire, floo powder in one hand and his wand
in the other. He cast a shield around himself and tossed the powder into the fire. “Albus Dumbledore’s office, Hogwarts.” The flames turned green, and Harry stuck his head inside. “Sir? Are you busy?” The formal form of address would let the headmaster know Harry had come on business, and not alone.

Albus looked up from a stack of parchment at his desk and gave Harry a genial smile. “Ah, hello, Mister Potter.” Thank Merlin the old man was quick on the uptake, whatever else Harry could say about him. “What can I do for you this evening?”

“Sir, I have Ginny Weasley with me. She’s quite obviously been attacked, though she won’t admit to the name of her abuser, and she requested healing and a safe place to stay. I recommended that she see you for help.”

“Ah, I see. Well then, send her through. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you, sir.” Harry stood, keeping his toe in the fire to keep the connection active. “All right, Ginny. Go on.”

She gave him a hurt look. “You’re not going with me?”

“No, Ginny. Given how you’ve acted tonight, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

She sniffled and blinked down tears. “Is it so terrible to wish for comfort?”

“By asking to stay in my room? After assaulting me a few months ago? Yes, it’s more than a little alarming.”

She ducked her head and crossed her arms over her chest. “O-oh. Then… then I’ll just go.”

He motioned to the flames, and Ginny stepped through in tears. Harry shuddered when the floo had closed behind her. Gods. The girl would never give up, would she?

He sighed and moved to his door. There was no time to worry about it. It was twenty minutes to curfew and Harry had a password to change and a report to make to his head of house.

“It’s just never easy, is it?”

Jabardi answered, ~Not for you, Master.~

Harry snorted. True enough.

[Severus,] said Harry through their bond, [I need you in Professor McGongall’s office, public face on. Pretend to be having tea with her or something. I’ve another report to make, for Ginny this time.]

A wave of anger and worry passed to Harry, then a sense of affirmation, and Harry set about changing his password to give Severus time to make it to the office before him.

With Harry’s official report done, he had climbed into Severus’ lap for comfort. “She was creepy again, Sev. She wanted to sleep in my room. I don’t like it. We’re going to have to do something to make it clear to her that I’m off the market, but I’m at a loss. She just won’t take no for an answer.”
Severus tensed, fury and protectiveness fierce in his side of the bond. “Did she assault you?”

“No. She didn’t touch me. Just said some worrying things.”

Minerva sighed. “I will attempt to impress upon her again that you are not interested and she must respect your wishes.”

“And if she doesn’t listen?”

“That depends, Harry. There is little we can do to prevent harassment besides issuing punishments, but if she touches you again without consent, we may need to take legal action.”

“If she touches me without consent, we’re going to have bigger problems,” said Harry with a shudder. “She’ll get shocked because of my bond, and then we’ll be in trouble.”

Severus held him closer. “In that case, Harry, I believe you had best reactivate the wards on your pendant.”

“Yeah, I think so.” Harry sighed. “Though I don’t like it. She does need help. Just… not like this.”

“Well, if the need arises, you may always turn them off again, but for now, I believe caution is necessary, for both of our sakes.”

“I know.” Harry crossed his arms around his chest and brought his mind back around to the original problem, now that he had a solution for her returning obsession. “What do we do about her abuse in the meantime? Do we have enough to investigate Smith?”

“With a clean Ministry, absolutely,” said McGonagall with a sigh. “In the state it is now, I fear without concrete evidence, Smith’s family will contest the investigation and bribe their way out of it. Then the Weasleys may find themselves in a bind if he countersues. He will have more resources, and with Miss Weasley unwilling to come forward, we would lose.”

“So what do we do?”

“Now is the time to utilise your DA to keep Smith away from Weasley,” said Severus. “Have them sit on him and stay with her as much as possible. He cannot be allowed to retaliate, or Luna’s fears may just come to pass before we can help her. He is already far too dangerous.”

Harry huffed. “It’s just not right that we can’t expel the berk when we know he’s doing it! There ought to be some sort of protection in place for victims in this situation. It’s not right.”

McGonagall rubbed her lips, her expression pensive. “Protection. Hmm.”

Severus frowned. “Do you have an idea, Minerva?”

“None that will help Miss Weasley, I’m afraid, but Harry is right that we need to have better protections in place for victims of domestic violence. Perhaps an education centre on the grounds, or a safehouse only accessible to victims.”

Harry cocked his head. “It’s a good idea, but how would you make the latter? The victims could easily give their abusers the passwords, or they could learn them.”

“How else do we do things at Hogwarts, Harry?” McGonagall chuckled. “With magic, of course. An intent ward and a more complex ward against abusers specifically would be enough to keep them out.”
“Oh. Then let’s do it.”

“Well, I must speak to Albus about it first, but I do believe he will allow it.”

“He’d better,” Harry growled.

“In the meantime,” said Severus, “let us return home and get some sleep, Harry. We will alert your DA first thing in the morning. Ginevra will be safe for the evening, at least.”

“All right,” said Harry with a frown. “I… I’m just worried. Is it enough?”

“I hope so, love.”

Harry sighed and stood. No use fretting about it now. For the moment, at least, he had done all he could.

2 March

Draco had taken over the DA for the evening, and Hermione was handling Severus’ workload for the Infirmary. With their time freed up for research, Severus and Harry sat in the living room, poring over Harry’s transcriptions of Slytherin’s journals, books on power amplification, and bonding spells. The horcrux removal spell’s matrix hovered in the air before them, incomplete still, but gaining headway now that they had time to work.

Harry nudged one of the nodes with his finger. “Sev, what if we moved this a bit to the north? Do you think it might break the power barrier? Or at least weaken it?”

Severus stared at the node in question, running the figures in his head. “Hmm. Perhaps. What gave you the idea?”

“This book here says that power control flows from the southern side of the matrix. So if we moved the power node north, maybe it would let us increase the spell’s natural limits.”

“Let me see that.”

Harry turned the book so Severus could read it, and he leaned over his husband’s shoulder, frowning as he assimilated the information.

“Hmm. I was unaware of this. Let us try a small adjustment and see what happens.”

“Be careful.”

“Yes, I am calculating as I go.” Severus pushed the power node ten degrees north, then adjusted several nodes around it until he felt he had compensated for the change. He took a deep breath, shielded Harry and himself, and activated the spell matrix. It wouldn’t cast the spell, but it would give them an indication of its power level and workability based on its reactions.

The matrix glowed yellow-green, a brighter colour than Severus had ever seen for this particular spell. The lack of minor explosions or sparks indicated a solid working matrix, and its colour proved the power had increased quite a bit.

Harry grinned. “Sev! I think we’ve got it.”
“Well, not yet,” Severus said with a guarded smile. “We shall have to increase its power level as much as possible without rendering it unstable, and yet, we must make certain it only latches onto one soul at a time. A spell of this power level could be disastrous if we do not contain it.”

Harry shuddered. “Yeah, let’s not unleash a giant Dementor bomb on everyone, hmm?”

Severus snorted. “Precisely why we test it first.” He pushed the node a little further to the north, frowning as the matrix sparked, an indication of instability. “Hmm. Perhaps if I….” Some quick adjustments to the surrounding nodes stabilised the matrix again, and a second test gave back a pale green glow, almost white, but a thread of red down the middle suggested Severus’ calculations needed work.

“Ah! We are getting there, Harry! This will not do as is, but I believe I can solve the problem given some time to record the node locations and work out a stabilising formula.”

Harry grinned. “You think it’ll work?”

“I have hope. Now, help me write down the node locations, love.”

“Sure.”

Severus began checking vertices and charting their coordinates, buzzing with excitement. This was it, the key they had been lacking. Given some time to adjust the power level and bring the spell effect limiters up to the maximum—so it touched no one’s soul but the Dark Lord’s—they should have a working horcrux-healing spell within the month. Then, they could finish their alterations to the soul banishing spell, and all would be ready for battle.

Hope flickered to life in Severus’ chest. It would be all right now. Harry would survive. He would make sure of it.

As he pressed his quill to the paper, ready to record the next coordinate, a bolt of fiery pain shot up his left arm and into his shoulder. Severus gasped and clapped his hand over his arm, dread coursing through him and washing all vestiges of joy away.

“Sev?” Harry looked up and grimaced. “Accio Severus’ spy gear!” Within moments, he had helped Severus into his Death Eater uniform and tied his invisibility cloak over Severus’ cloak of protection—a new one Harry had gotten him after Riddle shredded the first—his pendant, and emergency portkey. Tears pooled on his lashes as Harry tiptoed and brought Severus into a kiss. “Please be careful, and come home to me in one piece.”

Severus cupped Harry’s face and kissed his forehead. “I love you. Completely.”

“I love you too, sweetheart.” He hugged Severus tight and breathed deep against his chest. “I-I don’t want to let you go.”

“You must, love. He will know I am disloyal if I do not leave soon.”

Harry nodded and backed up, tears streaking his face. “I’m sorry. I should be stronger. Just… stay safe and keep your head down, love. I need you.”

Severus caressed Harry’s cheek and kissed him one last time. “I swear it. You will be at the gates?”

“As always.”

“Then I shall see you there when I return.”
“Hopefully not by portkey this time.”

“Yes.” Severus stole one more passionate kiss. “I must go. Be strong.”

“I will, love. G-good luck.”

With a last, longing look at his husband, Severus turned away and dashed for the gates.

Harry paced in front of the gates, hidden under invisibility wards while Neville, Luna, Draco, and Dean kept him sane. Or at least out of complete madness.

“Harry, don’t worry. Lily and the Clarents are telling me he is safe.”

Harry shuddered and hugged his arms. “I feel his pain, Luna.”

She winced. “Oh. Perhaps they are mistaken then. Does it feel like last time?”

Harry took a calming breath and stopped pacing long enough to take stock of his lover’s state. He did feel Severus’ pain like an ache in his bones, like sparks in his nerves—the remnants of the Cruciatus—but otherwise, he could find nothing amiss besides a few sharp cuts across his shoulders.

“No,” Harry said, a sigh of relief escaping him. “No, he’s been hit with the Cruciatus, and maybe a whipping curse, but it’s not like last time. He’s in pain, but not dying. He’s scared though.”

Dean grimaced. “Considering, I’d be scared too.”

“No. I mean… more than usual. He’s terrified, but I can’t tell—I can’t hear his thoughts from so far away.”

“He’ll tell us what’s wrong when he comes back, Harry,” Luna soothed. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Merlin, I hope you’re right.”

Harry resumed pacing and fiddled with his anti-Ginny pendant, active again after her alarming comments last week. To his relief, she hadn’t hounded him. At least, she hadn’t after he caught her trying to break into his room and warned her another attempt would mean a visit from the aurors.

Gods, he hated being so hard on her when she was in pain, but Harry couldn’t be her hero and she needed to learn that. He knew of no other way to teach her than to be firm.

Another twinge through the bond set Harry’s mind careening back to his husband’s condition. He winced through the pain of another shared Cruciatus, but this time, it ended soon. Gods, Harry wanted his husband home. He couldn’t stand waiting here, helpless, while Severus faced down the darkest bastard who’d ever walked the earth.

Neville called, “Is he all right, Harry?”

“Another Cruciatus. A light one. So far, he seems—”

A wave of cold dread poured through Severus’ side of the bond, and Harry froze, heart pounding and breath lodged in his throat. He gasped as another, stronger pain curse rocked him and dropped
him to his knees, and tears pooled on his lashes. “Sev….”

Draco knelt in the snow beside Harry and braced him up. “What is it? Is he hurt?”

“Riddle is… angry. Severus is so scared. He’s terrified. And now I’m scared too.” Harry whimpered and buried his face in Draco’s shoulder. “I can’t lose him. I can’t! I’ll die without him!”

And it wasn’t exaggeration. Without Severus, Harry had no hope to survive the final battle. Not that he would want to live without his soulmate.

Draco hugged Harry and dragged him back to the sofa. “Come on. Sit down and try to breathe. Severus has come through worse, and he has his portkey. It’s going to be okay.”

The pain curse stopped, leaving echoes in Harry’s body, but at least no further torture followed. Severus’ dread remained and closed in on panic, and Harry clenched his fingers in his trousers just to have something to hold onto.

“Sev… please be safe. Please.”

A wave of relief flickered through the bond, but Harry hardly had time to process it before a pop of apparition announced his mate’s return.

“Severus!”

Harry dashed to the staggering man and caught him up, steadying him in strong arms. The man had a cut lip, his muscles twitched like mad from the Cruciatus, and his back was sticky with blood, but otherwise, he seemed all right.

“Love, I’ve got you. Here. Accio Anti-Cruciatus Draught!” The potion sailed out of Harry’s kit and into his hand. He popped the cork with his thumb and helped his ailing husband to drink it all, then repeated the process with a healing draught and a curse cleaner potion. That done, he murmured healing chants over Severus’ back and breathed them into his lips, but Severus pulled away long before he was fully healed.

“We will finish the rest later, Harry,” Severus said, his voice shaky. “We must get to Albus right away.”

“Why, Sev? What has you so terrified?”

Severus closed his eyes and leaned against his mate, shaking all over—and not from the Cruciatus this time. “Harry, Scrimgeour is dead. The Dark Lord and his cronies tortured and killed him last night. The Ministry has fallen, Umbridge is beginning Muggleborn extermination trials, and you are now listed as public enemy of the state number one. Draco is also wanted for treason.”

“Fuck me,” Draco said, ice white and shaking.

“But that is not what terrified me, horrible as it is.” Severus clasped Harry’s shoulders and held him tight. “We have three weeks. That is all. In twenty-one days, the Dark Lord will attack Hogwarts with all his armies.”

“Dear gods,” Harry breathed.
Chaos in the Order

Chapter Summary

No warnings. A bit early, but as I left you with a short chapter and a cliffie last time, I figured I should go ahead and update.

Chapter 59

Chaos in the Order

3 March

“Do be quiet!” Albus’ voice rang out over the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, silencing the cacophony of confusion and worry in the Order members. Harry watched them settle down, half-amused, half-irritated, and wished he had such power to shut them up with three words.

“Albus,” said Molly, her expression torn, “I really think Harry and the children should not be here for this meeting. They’re just too you—”

“Molly, with all due respect,” said Harry, eyes sharp, “I am *not* a child, and I practically never have been. I’m an adult, and I’ve been training in dark magic, combat, and war tactics for over a year.”

Tears shone on her lashes. “B-but you’re just eighteen, and—”

“I understand your fears, but you’re being a bit ridiculous. I’m a legal adult now, and for Merlin’s sake, I *killed* a Death Eater under a week ago. Ron faced them down and bluffed them into distraction—so we could sneak up on them. Despite our personal issues in the past, I watched him grow up that day. He’s earned his right to be here too. And Hermione, Dean, Draco, Neville, Luna, Blaise, Daphne, and Millie were all right by my side for most of that attack. Hell, Draco kept his cool while being threatened with death. Even Ginny and Astoria have proven themselves capable adults, for the most part. No, Molly. We’re not children, and your stubborn refusal to let us grow up is hindering us in the war. For the sake of us all, sit down and see us as the equals we are.”

“Well said, Harry,” said Severus, stunning the rest of the Order into silence. Severus snorted. “We have three weeks before the final battle, or what we hope will be the final battle. As such, I believe it is time the rest of you understood my true… regard for Harry. Or did you believe the fact that he chose his seat next to me was by accident?”

“Severus and I have been close friends since December of my sixth year,” said Harry with a nod. “And I’ve been right in the thick of battle planning with Albus and Severus since then as well, and the rest of the younger crowd has helped us through me at varying points over the year too, so I’ll hear no more objections as to my suitability as a full member of the Order, nor my peers.”

Molly pursed her lips and dabbed at her eyes, but said nothing else, to Harry’s relief.
“You…” Tonks’ hair turned blue with surprise. “You two… are friends? And you have been all this time?”

Harry chuckled. “Good actors, aren’t we? Yes. I’m closer to Severus than anyone.” Remus’ eyes sharpened and fixed on him, but Harry ignored him. He slipped his hand over his mate’s and squeezed his fingers, and Severus turned his palm up to accept his touch. That silenced the Order—again.

“Dear gods,” Arthur breathed. “Harry, you can touch him?”

Harry nodded. “I’ve helped him overcome his haphephobia to some extent. I still wouldn’t advise touching him without asking permission first, but he’s come a long way.”

Severus bowed his head in agreement.

“Well,” said Bill with a grin, “that’s proof enough for me.”

“Knew you had a bit of prankster in you, Harry-my-lad,” said George with a grin. At least, Harry thought it was George.

The other twin smirked. “Maybe you could pick the professor’s brains for us.”

“We’ve been dying to ask him for prank potions advice for years!”

Harry snorted. “Maybe later, boys. We’ve much more serious things to discuss tonight.” He noticed Remus glaring at his hand, still clasping his husband’s, and released Severus for the time being. Best not to give the others any ideas. Not yet, anyway.

“Harry is correct,” Severus said, expression grim. “The situation is quite dire. By this time tomorrow, the entirety of Britain will know that Harry and Draco are ‘wanted’ by the Ministry. And as I am, ostensibly, in a position to kidnap them both, if I am to remain alive—as well as Harry and Draco, of course—they will both need to go into hiding. Harry already has quarters within my chambers—”

Molly started to protest, but Severus shut her up with a dark glare.

“—Established on nights when his so-called friends….” He fixed Ron and Ginny with a sharp look. “—Betrayed or assaulted him. He needed a safe place, and my quarters offered a sanctuary no one unaware of our friendship would dare seek him out.”

Molly squeaked and subsided, a blush creeping up her face. Ginny and Ron lowered their heads, shame obvious on their features.

Remus snapped, “And you don’t think that’s a bit inappropriate?”

“Actually,” said Harry, eyes and voice sharp, “I really think you have no right to speak on that one way or another. And no, we don’t.”

Remus blinked, hurt apparent in his eyes, then fixed Severus with a dark glare. “What did you do to him?”

“He was there for me when I needed him. That simple.” Harry’s unwavering stare forced Remus into submission—for the moment.

Severus gave the glaring werewolf a disdainful look and turned back to the others with a scowl. “As I was saying, Harry already has a sanctuary in my quarters. And, as he and Draco have become
friends over the past few months and my rooms are highly warded, I believe they will both be safe with me. Albus, are you able to ask Hogwarts to expand my rooms again?”

Albus had never done so in the first place, but Missus Weasley, and Remus in particular, didn’t need to know that.

“Of course, Severus; however, I believe we must also consider the safety of Harry’s Muggleborn friends. Miss Granger and Mister Thomas are in quite as much danger from the anti-Muggleborn ploys the Ministry has adopted as of late. Might I impose upon you to also protect their safety?”

Severus frowned. “I am uncertain that is wise. I would, of course, prefer them to be safe, but my quarters are not large enough even with adaptations to house so many. As well, I fear that will raise tensions among us, and we cannot afford to squabble amongst ourselves with the final battle so close.”

“Hmm, yes, I do see your point.” Albus folded his hands in front of his beard and moved them slowly back and forth, brow creased in thought. “Ah, I believe I have a solution. What if I asked Hogwarts to provide separate flats for each student, and for yourself? You would each have a kitchen, loo, bedroom, study, and a small living area, but they would all connect to your original main room. This way, it seems to me everyone could enjoy the safety and protection of your personal quarters, Severus, but without the need for constant contact.”

Severus nodded. “That, I am amenable to.”

Albus clapped his hands once. “It shall be done then. As for those of our Order members who are also professors, I do hope you realise that this new decree means Harry and his friends will need to go into hiding, entirely. They will not be able to attend classes or even meal times. I ask that you discreetly provide them with their assignments care of Neville, Luna, Blaise, Daphne, or Millicent.

“As well, we will need to protect our other Muggleborn students, and perhaps those seen to be key figures of the Light, but I will not ask Severus to house more. Instead, I will create separate dorms for each gender, for the time being, so that they may at least have a safe place to sleep. Would our professors present be willing to stay in their respective gender’s dorm to help safeguard the at-risk students?”

“Of course,” said McGonagall.

The newer Order professors, Vector, Sprout, Sinistra, Stonewall, and Flitwick, all agreed with her.

“I’ll need ter stay out in my hut,” said Hagrid apologetically. “The castle ain’t much built fer men of my size, see, and I can’t leave Fang ter fend fer himself.”

Severus nodded. “That’s quite all right, Hagrid. I believe we have enough guards with those who have spoken already. Albus, I will help ward the Muggleborn dorms as soon as I am able. After the meeting, perhaps.”

“Thank you, Severus,” said Albus. “I will ask Hogwarts to begin creating the dorms as soon as we return. However, our list of tasks does not end there. We must also increase the wards over the school and gather in-house protection during mealtimes and such. Kingsley, could I impose upon you for a few trustworthy aurors to protect our students? Undercover, of course, as we cannot let the dark know that we are aware of their plans of attack. The Prophet and Harry’s former susceptibility to visions will provide enough cover to hide our students at risk from the dark, but our deeper protections and plans of attack must be done in secret.”
Kingsley nodded. “Tonks would be excellent in that capacity, and I have several others to spare, so long as Robards doesn’t catch wind of it.”

“I’ll handle Robards,” said Moody.

“Uh…” Bill gave him a worried look. “Are you sure about that, Mad-Eye? Doesn’t Robards think you a bit… paranoid?”

Moody barked a laugh. “Of course he does. But even Robards knows I take You-Know-Who and his minions damn serious. He won’t doubt me, not about this.”

Kingsley nodded. “Moody’s right. And we’ll be there to back him up regardless.”

“So long as you make sure Robards doesn’t tip off the rest of the Ministry,” said Harry with a grim expression. “One word to the wrong person, and we lose our spy. And my dearest friend. Anyone who endangers his life—at all—will answer to me.”

He fixed his eyes on Remus as he spoke, and triumphed internally at the way the man blanched and sank into his seat a bit.

“Understood,” said Kingsley with a nod. “We’ll make sure Robards knows lives are at stake. We can’t vow him to silence, though. He needs the freedom to prepare our forces in secret. We’ll make sure he knows to make it sound like a drill or something, so the dark doesn’t get wind, but we can’t just keep quiet about it and not prepare for battle.”

“That’s fine, King. Just make sure the aurors don’t know the date of attack or where they’re going to hit, and Severus should be okay.”

Severus nodded. “That is safe enough to keep me in one piece, I believe.”

Kingsley didn’t look at Severus. “That’s what we’ll do then.”

“Thanks, King.” Harry shot him a wry look. “And don’t treat Severus like rubbish anymore. He’s really changed, so I’d appreciate it if you at least gave him the chance to prove it.”

Kingsley gave Harry a wry smile. “Well, I’ll try, Harry. That’s all I can promise.”

Harry stared at Remus once more. “Thank you. It’s the mature thing to do.”

Remus glared at Harry, but Harry turned away and looked to Albus.

“Right then. Now that we’ve discussed safety and preparing the aurors for an attack, we need to discuss our plans for the battle. Albus?”

Albus folded his hands on the table and nodded. “Quite right, my boy. Now, many of us are already aware that Harry and Severus are working on a particular spell to take down Tom—and they are the only two who can utilise it, so please do not protest, Molly. Harry’s need to go into hiding will actually benefit them in that area, as until recently, Harry and Severus had too many combined responsibilities to continue their research.”

Molly choked. “Albus, I… how is this possible? Harry isn’t a spellcrafter.”

Harry snorted. “Who do you think invented the basilisk venom vaccine, Molly? You can thank Severus and me for that. So please, do stop treating me like a child.”

Her eyes boggled. “That… you did that, Harry? But you’re just a boy! When—how?”
He narrowed his eyes, anger rising. “I haven’t been a boy in years, age notwithstanding.”

“Now, see here, young man. Your tone is quite disre—”

“And he has a right to be,” Hermione chided. “You’re making the same mistakes I did, Missus Weasley, discounting his strength and intelligence because he doesn’t broadcast it like I did. And that’s just going to end up hurting you in the end. He’s much smarter than you know.”

Harry gave her a wan smile. “Thanks, Hermione.”

Molly stood and placed her hands on her hips. “The lot of you have been given far too much leniency, as far as I can see. You’re children! Albus, I must protest their presence—”

“Your protest is duly noted,” said Albus, eyes hard. “And also denied. They have proven their worth.”

She fell into her seat, flabbergasted. “But, but, Albus! Surely you agree that we should shield them from the darkness of the world—”

Harry stood and stared the woman down. “What part of dark visions, fighting Voldemort since I was twelve, and killing a bloody Death Eater last month did you not understand, Molly? None of us are children. None of us. And Draco and I, especially, have already seen far more darkness than you could ever imagine.”

“That’s quite enough out of you, young man! Why, I have half a mind to—”

“Sit down, woman!” Severus’ force ten glare and sharp reproach rang across the room. “While I do appreciate that you are trying to protect them, you seem to have forgotten that in under three weeks’ time, the Dark Lord and all his lackeys will be upon us all. This is war, Molly, not children’s games, and Harry and his peers have grown up surrounded by it. We do not have time to squabble!”

“Well, I never!” Molly puffed up, ready to fight, but Arthur’s hand on her arm silenced her.

“He’s right, Molly,” he said, his voice firmer than Harry had ever heard it. “They’re right. You’re treating a boy we regard as our son as if he hasn’t the intelligence to take care of himself, when he’s obviously grown up under our noses. So have they all. Please, be quiet and listen.”

“A-Arthur,” Molly breathed. “I… but I only want to…. ”

“No. You must let them be adults now, Molly, and stop trying to dictate their lives. You are their mother, for some of them, but you’re not their conscience. Sit down and let us prepare for war. Like Severus said, we haven’t time to argue amongst ourselves.”

Molly ducked her head and murmured an apology.

“Thank you,” Harry said, irritation heavy in his tone. “Now, as Severus and Albus were saying, we do have a plan for the final battle, and while I can’t give you the details—it’s just too dangerous—I can give you the gist. Getting right to it, Severus and I have the basis for a spell to take down Voldemort, and we need time to finish it…”

Harry rubbed his forehead and leaned against the table. He might have banged his head against it if
such an immature action wouldn’t have cost him status and influence within the Order. Gods, as much as Molly’s coddling had irritated him, at least he knew she meant well and only wanted to keep him safe. The rest of the Order, on the other hand, were just cowards. They had all but driven him mad—Doge, especially, made Harry want to strangle something. The old crowd had become far too used to Albus’ former tactics—wait to be attacked, use nothing but light magic, take prisoners instead of kill, and so on.

Harry had other ideas.

“We know that Riddle plans to attack Hogwarts in three weeks,” he said, settling into his role as a leader with ease. “And we’ll be sitting ducks if we let that happen.”

“But Albus will be there,” said Doge, his moustache quivering. “You-Know-Who won’t last long against Albus!”

Harry snorted. “What makes you think we can count on that? Remember, Riddle owns the Ministry now. They ran Albus out of the school in fifth year—rest assured, they’ll try to do it again.”

“But—”

Severus spoke over Doge’s objection. “Harry is correct. I have myself seen flashes of the Dark Lord’s plans. He does indeed intend to take Albus out of the game beforehand, and he has the means to do it with Umbridge and Thicknesse running the Ministry.”

“But how? Albus hasn’t done anything wrong!”

“Do you honestly believe that matters to them? Don’t be a fool.” Severus crossed his arms over his chest. “And by this time tomorrow, Albus will have technically broken the law several times over. For all that he can be a ruthless bastard at times, he would sooner die himself than offer our Muggleborn students up as sacrifices to Umbridge’s blood fascism. He will block the Ministry from interfering and, as we have already discussed, protect our students. As a result, the Dark Lord will have him arrested for refusing Ministry access to our Muggleborn population, probably within the week.”

“Exactly,” said Harry. “And while we, of course, will do everything possible to break Albus out before the battle, we might not be able to manage it. So we can’t count on Albus being here to scare Riddle away.”

Doge paled. “But… but then we will be helpless!”

Harry rolled his eyes. “And what am I then, flobberworm snot?”

Severus snorted. “I believe you at least rate as chopped liver, Harry.”

Harry chuckled. “At least that.”

Doge blushed and tugged at his moustache. “Oh, do forgive me, Harry. That’s not at all what I meant to suggest. It’s only that you’re still just a boy, and you don’t have Albus’ power, and—”

Harry crossed his arms over his chest and used Severus’ flight spell to soar into the air, wandless. He made one circuit around the kitchen and settled back into his seat. “What was that about not having power again?”

Severus gave him his public half-smile. “Lovely control, Harry. Well done.”
Harry nodded, grinning inwardly at the gobsmacked faces of the old crowd. “You taught me well, Sev.”

“Yes, and I am proud of you.” [My beloved. You are so beautiful.]

Harry fought back a blush and beamed. “T-thank you.” [So are you.]

[I am glad you believe so, at least.]

A stunned Ron choked out, “H-how long have you been able to fly, mate?”

Harry brought his attention back to the Order with a laugh. “Since first year, like all of us. But without a broom, about a month. Severus created the spell, and he’s been training me to develop the power and control to use it. I’d have taught the DA too, but as of now, no one else has both the power reserves and control to manage it.”

“That’s brilliant, Harry,” said Charlie with a grin. “That would sure come in handy on the reserve!”

“I bet.” Harry turned back to the Order, all traces of mirth gone from his expression. “Now, after what you just saw, are any of you going to deny that I have power and skills Riddle won’t expect?”

“Well, no, of course,” said Sturgis Podmore. “But how much good will flying do against You-Know-Who?”

“Did you not see me fighting at Honeydukes last month? Did you not see all of us?” Harry turned to his husband with a heavy sigh. “Sev, they’re not going to let it rest until we prove it to them. Do we do this here or in the living room?”

Severus grimaced. “We will level either room if we try it. Grimmauld Place does not have the wards my training room does. Perhaps you could show the others a memory of our last training session instead? The spell is Legilimens Appareo.”

Doge cried out, “Severus! Do be serious. Harry is too inexperienced to dare attempt such an advanced spell!”

Harry gave the old man an unimpressed look. “Am I? Hmm.” He lifted a hand and aimed at the centre of the room. “Just like a telly screen, right, Severus?”

“Precisely.”

“Then right here will do. Legilimens Appareo!” The screen appeared in front of Harry and showed an image of him fighting Albus with all he had—and knocking the old man onto his arse.

Memory-Harry caught Albus’ wand and called, “My duel today, old man!”

Albus rose to his feet and brushed off his robes. “Indeed it is. Well done, Harry. You give me hope that we will win this war in spite of the odds.”

Harry handed him his wand. “We’ll need it, sir.”

“Finite.” The real Harry raised his eyebrow at a flabbergasted Doge. “Too inexperienced, am I? Did you somehow manage to forget that I’m a bloody Telepath?”
Doge blushed and looked away.

Harry turned to the Order and held each of their gazes in turn. “I’m a warrior, not a child. Albus saw to that starting from the time I was fifteen months old.” He ignored the shocked cries of outrage and held up a hand. “It’s the truth. And the lot of you need to understand something regardless: my peers and I are young, yes, but we’ve grown up on a diet of war. Besides that, I’ve trained them as well as aurors—just ask Mad-eye.”

“He’s tellin’ the truth,” the gruff auror said. “Most of those ‘kids’ have passed the tests to join the corps. No trainin’ needed, besides the laws and rules and such. And barring the bit about procedure, which he wouldn’t learn without several years’ experience on the field, Potter is at the level of a senior auror. He’s as good a fighter as Kingsley or Snape.”

Kingsley whistled. “Merlin, kid. You sure you don’t want to join the corps?”

Harry chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. “Thanks, King, but no. I prefer to save lives rather than… well, hurt people. Even people who have it coming.”

Kingsley nodded. “Understood, but know if you ever tire of St. Mungo’s, there’s a place for you on my team.”

Harry flushed. “T-thanks. Really.” Even if he would never take the man up on his offer, Kingsley’s confidence in him felt good. “But back to the matter at hand, you all heard Mad-Eye. The DA and I are soldiers. Not children, soldiers. We’re skilled in advanced defence, Muggle and wizarding combat techniques, stealth, basic field healing, Occlumency, and wandless magic.”

Harry moved to stand behind his nearest friends and listed their skills one-by-one.

“Draco and Daphne are a brilliant duellists, and Draco knows all the Death Eaters’ moves too. Dean’s shielding skills are incredible. Ron and Millie can beat the snot out of anyone, and they don’t even need wands to do it. Hermione is the best ranged caster we’ve got—in the entire Order, not just the DA. She’s dead accurate, not to mention the fact that only Severus and Albus can match her knowledge of obscure spells. Then there’s Neville and Blaise—they’re both calm and level-headed, and that gives them an edge in battle when the rest of us are running on adrenaline and fear. And Luna—well, she knows what the Death Eaters are up to before they do. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg.”

Harry straightened to his full height—a respectable height these days, though he would never achieve Severus’ lanky grace. “I may be young, but I’ve trained an army, and I won’t have you old crowd treating us like useless babies. I won’t have you disparaging my ability to fight or to lead, especially not when all of you have dumped the entire responsibility of this war on my shoulders since before I was tall enough to reach your waists.” He fixed Doge with a stone-hard glare. “So, now that it’s finally time for me to fulfil the prophecy and take my place in this war like you’ve been goading me to do all along, sit down, shut up, and let me do my damn job.”

Most of the older members of the Order ducked their heads in shame.

“Well said, Harry,” Severus said, his eyes alight with pride and not a small amount of amusement. Harry squeezed his mate’s shoulder and ignored Remus’ quiet snarl.

With a glance at Albus, who encouraged him with a nod, Harry paced behind Severus and tapped his wand against his side. “Now, as I was saying before I had to prove our worth—again—if Riddle comes after Hogwarts, we’ll find ourselves in the middle of a siege. And that’s going to mean massive losses for the Light.”
“But if we bring in Albus,” Doge protested.

Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Oh, for Merlin’s sake, Doge! Of course we’re not just going to let Albus sit in a Ministry holding cell while the school is under attack if we have any choice about it at all. We have aurors undercover and we’ll do our best to get him out should it come to that. But you can’t depend on Albus—or me, for that matter—to save the day against hundreds of Death Eaters and gods knows how many dark creatures. Even if we can get Albus here to fight, and counting Severus in the mix as he’ll be fighting at my side, we’re still only three men. Three powerful men, perhaps, but we do have limits, and a siege will push us past them. Even counting every fighter on the side of the Light, we’ll still be past our limits.”

“That’s preposterous,” Doge started, but Albus waved a hand to silence him.

“What’s more,” Harry continued doggedly, “Riddle’s too cowardly to show his face in battle until he’s sure he’s going to win. That’s why he’s always tried to corner me one-on-one and scarpered whenever the cavalry comes running—he’s a coward. A twisted, evil, powerful coward, but a coward nonetheless. You can rest assured, if he attacks Hogwarts, he won’t poke his head out of his hidey-hole until we’re all good and exhausted.

“Even worse, with the kind of numbers Riddle has backing his army and control of the Ministry, he can hold us at Hogwarts pretty much indefinitely. Which means, simply put, even if we do manage to survive Riddle’s initial assault, we’ll eventually be starved out.”

Doge protested—as usual. “But the house elves—”

Harry cut him off with a snort. “Even house elves have to get their food from somewhere, Doge, and the wards on the Chamber of Secrets prove it’s possible to keep them from apparating in or out. Riddle may well know those wards—he’s had access to the Chamber longer than we have, after all, and the notes I found on the spell for the Dark Mark prove he’s also had access to Slytherin’s journals.”

Severus stood beside Harry and laid his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Everything Harry has said is the likely truth. If we wait until Riddle attacks Hogwarts, we will soon find ourselves in a dire situation with no end in sight.”

Doge started another protest. “That’s simply ridiculous! You have no idea—”

“Elphias.” Albus’ sharp tone drew his sycophant up short. “Enough. Severus and Harry have analysed the situation more than anyone other than myself, and I have come to the same conclusions they have. You would do well to give them some credit.”

A bright blush spread up the old man’s cheeks. “Oh. Um… m-my apologies.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, irritation apparent in his tone.

McGonagall met their eyes head on, though her face had gone white. “So what is our plan then, boys? What do we do, if setting up a defence isn’t an option?”

Harry shook his head. “We should still set up a defence, ma’am. Letting Riddle launch a siege on Hogwarts certainly isn’t ideal, but we might not have a choice in the end.”

“Yes, however…” Severus stood tall and assumed his most imposing stance. “If we brought the battle to the Dark Lord before his planned attack, then we may not need to fall back on such a desperate plan.”
The Order broke into complete chaos.

“Bring the battle to him? Are you mad?”

“He’ll kill us all!”

And of course, Doge’s protest rang the loudest. “We can’t do that—it’s not Light.”

Harry gave a wry laugh. “Merlin, Doge. Do you imagine the spell I’m using to keep Riddle from being resurrected again—one that has to Banish his soul—is Light?”

Doge gulped and subsided.

Harry shook his head at the old man and moved on. “You lot need to wake up. This is a war, not teatime. We’re not going to win by sitting on our collective arses and waiting for Riddle to attack, nor will we survive very long by using light magic alone. We’re going to have to fight back and get our hands dirty if we want to win. We’re going to have to attack—pre-emptively—while Riddle is unprepared for it, or we’re going to die.”

Doge cried, “But if we do that, then we’re no better than—”

“Than what?” Harry stared him down, posture tense. “I fought back last month. I killed Bellatrix Lestrange. Not in defence, but in attack. Does that make me evil then?”

“Oh, Harry, no,” Molly said, her eyes wet. “No, she cornered you, dearie. You had no choice but to —”

“Legilimens Appareo!”

Harry flicked his wrist toward the centre of the room, creating a new screen.

In his memories, Harry knocked Bellatrix’s wand out of her hand and advanced on the woman until she stood with her back to a wall of chocolates.

“Oh, how sweet! Wee little potty thinks he will avenge his dogfather, how touching.”

“Thinks?”

Harry jerked his wand down and slashed the bitch’s face open. A second flick had her wand sailing into his hands. As her blood stained her robes, the woman taunted him, screaming that he could never kill, but Harry drew his arm back, a curse on his lips….

“Finite,” Harry murmured, and the memory vanished, leaving the room utterly still. He stared the others down, his expression hard as stone. “I won’t make you watch her death—it’s quite gruesome and the images haunt me enough in my nightmares without reliving them now—but don’t pretend I had no choice. She was disarmed when I killed her, but even now, if I had the choice to do it all over again, I would do the same thing.”

Harry stared the Order down. “You act as though fighting back, as though fighting to protect our home, our lives puts us on the same level as the Death Eaters.” He turned to Moody and glared. “Did you treat your junior aurors like monsters when they had to kill in the line of duty?”
Moody gave him a wry grin. “Don’t look at me, laddie. I’m on your side.”

Harry gave the gruff auror a curt nod and turned to Kingsley instead. “And you?”

Kingsley shook his head. “Of course not. But then, I know we have to fight back to win. Anyone with auror robes does.”

Tonks nodded her support, too.

“Thanks.” Harry turned back to the Order and wrapped his arms around his chest. “So, it’s like this. We have a choice here. We fight back—we kill or capture the Death Eaters and Riddle before they kill us—or we die.”

Podmore protested, “Harry, killing You-Know-Who is, of course, necessary. He’s an inhuman fiend, but—”

Neville stood and slammed his hands down on the table. “And so was Bellatrix! Or, did you forget that she’s the reason my parents aren’t here today to argue with us? Did you somehow forget that she tortured them into madness and laughed the entire time?”

“Neville,” Harry breathed, aching for his friend’s pain.

The room went silent, and Neville’s voice quieted, though it retained an edge of steel. “Bellatrix was a monster, and besides the fact that it hurt Harry to do it, I’m glad she’s dead.”

Harry took a deep breath and tried to keep his emotions under control. Severus’ hand on his shoulder was a firm support, even as Remus looked at Harry as if he had never seen him before. Harry struggled to ignore the sharp pain of betrayal and looked away.

Molly sniffled and wiped her eyes. “H-Harry, I’m sorry. About… Bellatrix. I didn’t mean to imply you were like… those monsters. I only wanted to shield you. You… you’re like my son, Harry, and I couldn’t stand the thought of you bearing that pain. I’m so sorry, dear.”

Harry nodded. “I know.” He lowered his head and clenched his fists, letting his grief show. “You’re right, Molly. I won’t deny that killing her… it shattered me. I’m forever altered, and I’ll see her death in my nightmares for years to come.” He looked up and tears rolled down his cheeks, but he didn’t wipe them away. The Order needed to see he wasn’t a monster. “But I’m willing to bear the pain so that no other innocents die by her hand. I’m willing to shoulder the guilt so others don’t have to.”

Harry’s voice broke, and Severus guided the young man into his arms. Harry turned his face into Severus’ shoulder and breathed him in, seeking shelter in his embrace.

“Ssh,” Severus whispered. “I have you, beloved. I am here.”

Severus’ low, soothing voice resonated over Harry’s head. “Harry has shown you his hard side, but do not imagine for a moment that he is cruel. His remorse over killing that evil woman is extreme. I have seen him weeping for the blood he shed that day, seen him broken with grief, not only for her, but for the blood he knows we all must shed to survive. Harry is not a cold-blooded killer. None of us are—that is what separates us from the Death Eaters, not a stubborn refusal to fight back. I….”

Severus paused and stiffened. [Harry, the wolf is furious. I think we must…] 

With a sigh, Harry squeezed Severus once and moved away. “Sorry, Sev.”
“Do not trouble yourself. I am here when you need me.” Severus turned back to the Order and held the gazes of his comrades. “As I said, we are not heartless killers, and yet, today, we have a choice before us: fight, or perish. Though I wish I need never ask such a thing of you, the war necessitates it.”

“We need two teams,” Harry said, ignoring Remus’ glare and the pain it caused him—he couldn’t afford to break down now. “One to defend Hogwarts… and one, to attack the Death Eaters and Riddle head-on.”

“Obviously, Harry and I will fight the Death Eaters,” said Severus. “Our plan is to launch a pre-emptive attack prior to the date of the Hogwarts siege and, fate willing, kill them—or at least incapacitate them—before they kill us. We cannot do this alone, however; and so we must ask those of you who are willing, to fight with us.”

“But,” Harry said, his voice firm again. “If you do fight with us that day, you’re not to hold back. These people are evil, murderous bastards, and we will need to meet them with lethal force. Of course, if you can take someone out of commission without killing them or risking our lives, then, by all means, do it. But the hard truth of a fight like this is that it’s easier and safer to kill our enemies than to disable them. And holding back might mean one of us dies—or even all of us.”

Severus nodded. “We won’t force any of you into such a battle. The price is quite high for those of us with a conscience and a soul. Those of you who cannot stomach the idea of launching an offensive or fighting to kill will still be of use to us in guarding Hogwarts. But if you feel you can stand with us at the end, if you are prepared for what we must face, then please, stand with us now and help us drive the evil from our land.”

The DA stood as one and positioned themselves around Harry and Severus.

“We’re with you,” said Dean, brown eyes resolute with determination.

“We’ve been your backup from the beginning, Harry,” said Neville in a quiet, but unyielding tone. “We’re not abandoning you now. Nor you, Severus.”

“To the end together,” said Hermione.

“I’ve been a prat,” Ron murmured to Harry, “but I’ll start making it up now, if you’ll let me. I’ll stand with you, all the way, mate.”

Harry blinked hard and took Ron’s hand. “Thank you.” He released Ron and gave each of his friends a bright smile. “All of you.”

Severus bowed in gratitude.

“Albus,” said Molly, her eyes teary, “I-I still don’t think this is a good idea. They aren’t prepared for the truth of battle. They’re just too young to understand, and—”

Albus stood and patted Molly’s shoulder. “Your love and care is beautiful, Molly.” He moved to stand beside Severus. “But I am afraid I agree with the students. It is time to act before we are all destroyed in our relentless pursuit of pacifism. To that end, I will also fight beside Severus and Harry, though I also regret the inevitable loss of life to both sides. Will you—any of you—join us?”

Tonks, Moody, and Kingsley shared a look, then stood as one and moved to stand beside the DA.

“Wouldn’t miss a fight like that,” Moody said with a gruesome grin.
“Count us in,” said Tonks, her hair going brilliant orange.

Charlie came next. “Reckon those Death Eaters better watch out for my stunners, eh, Harry?”

Harry snorted. “If they work on dragons, I’d hate to see what they’d do to a human.”

Bill stood and took his place beside his brothers. “Seems we’ll find out soon enough.”

Fleur smiled at her husband. “You are so brave, mon amour.” She rubbed her rounded belly and shook her head. “I zink, for ze bébé’s sake, I must stay be’ind. I will ‘elp in ze Infirmary ‘ere. I am no good for fighting so round like I ‘ave become.”

Severus nodded. “Please do. We would, of course, rather you keep your little one safe from harm.”

“Yes, definitely,” Harry agreed. “Molly would gut me if I got her first grandbaby hurt!”

Molly snorted through tears.

Professor Vector stood and gave Harry an apologetic look. “I am not much for duelling either, and that’s on a good day. I’d only cause you trouble on the battlefield. I will help strengthen the wards of the castle and work to defend it in what ways I can instead, but I’m sorry. I do support you.”

Harry nodded. “That’s fine, ma’am. If that’s where you feel you’ll be able to help the most, then go for it. We do need defenders as well as attackers, so please don’t feel guilty for staying behind.”

Vector gave him a wry smile. “I believe you have more authority than I at the moment, sir.”

Harry shuddered. “Ugh. Just Harry is fine. Please.”

Severus chuckled and patted his mate’s shoulder.

Albus looked the group over. “Are any others willing to fight with us? We will need more than this.”

McGonagall stood, Flitwick, Stonewall, Hagrid, and Sprout close on her heels.

“We will fight,” said the Transfiguration professor.

“Wouldn’t leave ye behind, Harry,” said Hagrid, black eyes crinkling.

“You’d be surprised what I can do with plants,” said Sprout with a grin.

Stonewall smirked. “Keep your plants. I know nothing of them, but dwarves are rather good with weapons.”

Flitwick gave the man a grin, the darkness behind it revealing a hint of his non-human ancestry. “As it happens, so are goblins. Perhaps a little friendly wager is in order, eh, Sam?”

Stonewall gave a robust laugh and clapped Flitwick on the shoulder. “Sounds like a plan, friend. We will see which race wins the day.” The two men stood near Severus, both intimidating despite their lack of height.

“I’ll stay behind and help Septima,” said Sinistra, moving to sit beside the Arithmancy professor.

“I’m no fighter, and between the two of us, we should be able to make the wards hold quite a while.”

Severus bowed to them. “Thank you. Will anyone else stand with us?”
Arthur gave his wife a sad smile and moved to Harry’s side, giving him a gentle hug. “I support you, son, no matter what.”

Harry smiled, tears creeping up his lashes. “Thank you.”

“Arthur?” Molly’s voice wobbled. “You… you’re going to fight?”

“My children are fighting,” he said in a quiet, but firm voice. “I can do no less than stand with them.”

Molly sniffled into her handkerchief. “A-Albus, you’re certain there’s no other way?”

“Absolutely,” Albus said in a grave voice. “We should have taken more aggressive action sooner. Tom would not have the country in the death-grip he does now if we had fought back before now, but perhaps it serves us well. The Dark believes us to be complete pacifists and will not expect us. With that in mind, and for the sake of us all, I will go into battle with Severus and Harry when the time comes, and we will see how well the Dark is prepared for a counterstrike.”

“They won’t be,” said Draco with a grim nod. “Like you said, sir, they think we won’t attack because it goes against our principles. This is our best chance to win.”

Harry turned to his surrogate mother, his voice gentle. “What do you want to do, Molly? If you can’t bring yourself to fight with us, it’s okay. You don’t have to. We do still need people to guard the castle against a siege.”

She twisted her handkerchief in her hands. “It… it’s not what I want to do….”

“None of us want it,” said Hermione. “We’re not dark. We’re going to take as many as we can alive, but we can’t be afraid to fight back either. It’s okay if you don’t want to come with us, Missus Weasley, but please remember that the rest of us are doing this to save lives, not end them. We’re fighting to protect those who can’t.”

“And to stop the bloodshed,” said Neville. “It won’t end until we kill Riddle and either kill or capture the Death Eaters. So they’ve left us little choice but to fight, for our lives….” He pulled Luna into his arms. “And for our futures.”

Luna nodded. “The Gatekeepers are gathering to protect us, and the Laochra stand with us too.”

“The guardians of death and spiritual warriors,” Neville explained before anyone could ask.

“Good to know,” said Severus, giving the girl a smile. Luna grinned back.

Harry stepped forward. “What will you do, Molly? We won’t judge you either way.”

She sighed and moved to take Harry into a hug. “You’ve truly grown into a strong man, Harry. I am proud of you, even if I wanted you to stay little longer than you have done.”

“I know, Mum Weasley. I know you just wanted to keep me safe. It’s okay.”

She wiped her eyes and straightened her shoulders. “Right. And I’d be best able to do that fighting with you. So, I’ll come as well.”

“Thank you.” Harry gave Remus a piercing look. “And you, Remus? Will you fight for what’s right this time?” The tacit implication that the man never had done before left a threat like the scent of gunpowder in the air.

The werewolf’s eyelid twitched. “I’ll defend the castle.”
Harry turned away. “Fair enough.” He looked to Albus. “Well, I think this is it. Besides our other DA members, this is our strike team.”

Albus nodded. “With so many, I believe we should have enough to overwhelm them, if we move quickly. I would like to divide your DA into two groups, Harry: those with skills at warding and healing I would like to stay behind and help with the castle defence.”

“Understood. I’ll give you a list as soon as I can, though some of those healers are trained as field medics, and they’ll be with us on the battlefield.”

“Yes, of course.” Albus turned to face the group once more. “And now, as it is well past curfew for our students, I think we must rest and regroup for the evening. We professors must also prepare the Muggleborn dorms without delay, though it will mean a late night for us. Would you assist us, Harry? You are quite the formidable wizard these days.”

Harry nodded. “Sure, but I think you should also add Luna, Neville, and Hermione to that group. Hermione knows more spells than god, Neville is a powerhouse defender and excellent with earth-based shielding, and Luna has… unique abilities that might protect them in ways the Death Eaters won’t expect. Come to think of it, Dean, Daphne, and Draco are great warders too. And Millie’s and Ron’s raw power could only help.”

“Hmm, yes, I think that is an excellent suggestion.” Albus turned back to the Order. “With that settled, I will leave you with this.” He moved to the centre of the room so he stood between both groups. “Whether you have decided to remain behind and defend Hogwarts or join the attack, I ask you all to consider your strengths and weaknesses in the coming days. What skills can you offer towards the coming battles? What knowledge? Please have that list ready by the next Order meeting in two days, and we will discuss ranks and placement. Dismissed, and do try and get some rest.”

The Order shuffled out, chattering amongst themselves in small groups, each struggling to come to grips with what lay before them. Merlin, Harry hoped he wouldn’t let them down.

Severus hand slipped into Harry’s and held him tight, and Harry sighed, taking comfort from his husband. As long as Severus stood with him, they would be all right. He believed in his husband, and Severus believed in him.

Gods, he hoped it would be enough.
Chapter 60

Nobody’s Hero

Harry said goodnight to the DA and the Weasleys, but remained after they had gone to discuss the results of the meeting with Severus and Albus.

“Well done,” Albus said to the younger man once the room had quieted. “You showed true leadership tonight, Harry. I am proud of the man you have become.”

Harry’s cheeks flushed. In spite of his chequered history with the old man, Albus’ praise still affected him deeply.

“Yes, I suppose I am rather overdue in letting you come into your own. Still, you have done well in spite of my interference.” Albus gave Severus a wry look. “And I believe I know who we can thank for that.”

Severus chuckled and squeezed Harry’s shoulder “I refuse to take all the blame, Albus. Neville, Luna, and Thomas had their say too.”

Harry snorted. “I suppose they all did.” His mirth faded. “Albus, this is all well and good, but Sev and I still haven’t finished the soul spell. What if… we’re not ready in time?”

Albus squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “I have faith that you will be, but if not, then at least this attack should slow their advance. Perhaps it will buy you time to work, if nothing else.”

Harry winced. “Buying time with people’s lives is too high a price.”

“Yes, but there is little else we can do.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s back. “We will finish it, Harry. I believe in you.”

Harry sighed and leaned into his husband’s touch. “Yeah. M-maybe you’re right.” He shook his head. “Either way, I can’t give up. I’ll use this time in isolation with the others to work hard at it. Maybe with fresh eyes, we can figure out how to balance the power structure in time.”
“That is my hope,” said Albus.

“Yeah. I….” Harry looked up to realise everyone had left but Remus, and the werewolf’s glare had focused solely on Severus. Harry glared back. “Albus, I think I had better settle this with Remus now.”

Albus gave the werewolf a disapproving look. “So I see. Do you wish me to stay?”

“No. Sev and I should do this alone. Unless, Severus, do you need him to support you?”

Severus shook his head. “I have the feeling Lupin is waiting for Albus to leave.”

Albus sighed and patted Harry and Severus’ shoulders. “Good luck, boys, and do try to keep the violence to a minimum.”

Harry snorted. “No promises.”

Albus chuckled and left, not without a quiet word to Remus. The werewolf snarled at him, and Harry gathered his courage for the coming confrontation. Severus’ hand, held discreetly at the small of Harry’s back, gave him strength to stand tall, even as a growling Remus made his way over to them.

“You lied to the Order.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Did I?”

Remus shot Severus a dark glare. “The two of you aren’t just friends.” He spat the word like poison.

“And if we aren’t?” Harry’s sharp tone brought the werewolf’s attention back to him. “I fail to see how our relationship is any of your business, Remus.”

“Your parents would be furious! I—”

“Actually,” said Severus, “Luna has spoken with the spirits of Harry’s parents on several occasions, and they are supportive of us, though that support was indeed hard-earned.”

Remus blinked, caught off-guard by Severus’ uncharacteristic acknowledgement of what his own senses couldn’t explain—and, of course, the Potters.

“Even if they weren’t, it wouldn’t matter.” Harry’s voice might have frozen the sun. “I’m an adult and perfectly capable of choosing a partner for myself.”

“I won’t stand for it, Harry,” Remus growled. “He’s twice your age, he’s a Death Eater, he’s—”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, in a voice that indicated the opposite, “what gave you the idea that you have the right to question it again?”

“I’m your—”

“That was a rhetorical question, wolf,” Severus snapped.

“Shut up! You have no right to—”

“Actually, Remus,” said Harry, fire building in his blood, “you’re the one with no rights here. What Severus and I do, the extent of our relationship, or whether anyone approves or not—none of it is any of your business. Even if you had made any effort to be a part of my life since Sirius’ death, it
wouldn’t be any of your business, but especially since you abandoned me and left me to grieve alone, you have no say here. What makes you think I would listen to a word you say when your actions over the past two years have proven you to be an utter spineless coward over and over again?”

Remus reeled back, stunned at Harry’s blunt words, but his anger took over the next instant. “So that’s how it’s going to be, hmm? You’re choosing Snape over me? Well, I won’t stand by and do nothing. This is illegal, and I’ll see to it you’re in Azkaban before the week is out, Sn—”

Harry jabbed his wand between Remus’ eyes, magic crackling on his skin and tears in his eyes. “You will do nothing, do you understand me? This isn’t a game. This isn’t school where you can stand by and let Severus be assaulted and get away with nothing but a fucking detention for your betrayal. Nothing about our bond—yes, bond—is illegal, but if you turn Severus into a Ministry that Riddle controls, we both die. That’s right, you utter spineless lump, both of us. I’m a fucking horcrux. My scar—Riddle’s soul is attached to it. And without the protection of our soul bond, without Sev to fight for me at the final battle, we both die, or I become like Barty Crouch.”

Remus froze, eyes wide with horror. “H-horcrux… that’s—no! It’s madness! He’s turned you against me, that’s all. And you can’t listen to him. It’s not true, Harry.”

“It is. I’ve had it verified by magic and other sources you wouldn’t understand. I am a horcrux, and without Severus, I’ll die—or worse. But just so you know, I’m in this bond with him because we love each other, and I loved him long before I had any inkling of the truth of my scar.”

Remus reeled, eyes wide in shock. “But… but that’s just… how?”

“How does anyone fall in love? I saw traits I liked, and I loved him for them.” Harry’s eyes hardened. “And really, you only have yourself to blame. Had you not stood by while Dad and Sirius assaulted him, had I not seen him scared and crying and abandoned by anyone who could help, I might never have seen the human being behind his hard masks. And that was what led me to love him. So really, I suppose I should thank you for being such an arsehole. Indirectly, your cowardice brought me the greatest gift I’ve ever known.”

Remus choked. “I never would have—”

“I don’t care. You abandoned me years ago. Your opinion has no merit here.”

Harry blinked tears down his face. Severus gently brushed them away, stunning Remus with his compassion.

“What?” Severus scowled. “I suppose you thought I mistreated him? I’ll have you know, wolf, I love him entirely, as much as Harry loves me—I must, or the soul bond would never have taken hold.”

“He knows. He just doesn’t care.” Harry jabbed his wand in Remus’ chest, eyes and voice hard despite the tears on his face. “You have two choices now, Remus. Either you swear this instant that you’ll keep our relationship a complete secret, or I’ll Obliviate you right here and cut you out of my life permanently. What’s it going to be?”

Remus gasped. “Harry! You wouldn’t!”

Green and blue arced around Harry in a fantastic display of fury and power. “Oblivi—”

Severus clapped his hand over Harry’s mouth, careless of the wild magic surrounding him, and knocked his wand away. “Don’t. Don’t be the one to erase his memory. If it must be done, I will do it. You will never recover from the loss otherwise.”
As Harry’s magic sank back into his skin, he slumped and struggled to contain a whimper of pain. “S-Sev….”

Severus scooped Harry into a one-armed hug, pressing his wand against Remus’ chest so quickly, the wolf had no time to blink, let alone block him.

“You have hurt my husband terribly, wolf,” Severus said in a voice barely above a snarl, “both today and over the past two years. I have held him at night when he wondered what he had done to drive you away or if you would ever admit your complicity to the abuse I suffered at your friends’ hands. I have watched him sigh over the post, knowing you had sent him nothing, that you did not care enough to send him so much as a postcard. I have watched him agonize over the pathetic gifts you sent at Christmas and his birthday, wondering if he should even accept them from a man so unsupportive as you have been or send them back to you in tatters. I advised him to accept them as they might have proven practical—but now, I wish I hadn’t.”

His wand dug deeper and a spark shot out, making Remus wince at the stream of smoke from his tatty robe. “You may doubt Harry’s ability to remove your memory, but I assure you, I have no such compunctions. So what is your decision, wolf? Will you let prejudice and cowardice destroy your last link to Harry and his family, or will you finally put your bias aside and be the man your godson needs you to be?”

Remus swallowed hard, eyes wide. “You… you’re hurting him, aren’t you?”

Harry gave a bitter snort. “He’s saving me, Remus. The only one hurting me is you.”

Remus grimaced. “Just… Harry, just tell me, is he really being good to you?”

“If you had made any effort at all to be a part of my life these past two years, you would already know the answer to that question. But since you haven’t, I’ll give you the gist. He loves me beyond measure, down to sacrificing his life and health for me, and I love him enough to die for him, should I ever need to. Oh, and don’t bother going to Albus, by the way. He’s the one who bonded us.”

Harry snorted. “Actually, half the Order knows by now, including McGonagall and Flitwick, and they support us too.”

Remus’ jaw dropped. “A-Albus bonded you? And the Order…?”

Severus nodded. “Ask him yourself. In private.”

“We did tell you it was legal,” said Harry with a shake of his head.

“We have little time to argue with you, Lupin,” Severus said, his voice hard. “What will you do? Your oath or your memory?”

Remus slumped in defeat. “I… I don’t… I don’t want to lose you, Harry.”

Anger bubbled back to life in Harry’s belly. “Really? You could have fooled me, what with abandoning me at the darkest time of my life, then acting like you have the right to tell me who to love and insulting my husband.”

Remus winced. “It’s just… I don’t understand. Snape’s always been so terrible to you.”

“But that it’s any of your business, but for the past two years, he’s been my rock and my dearest friend.” Harry’s magic sparked on his breath again. “And either way, you’ve never seemed to care until now.”
Remus hung his head. “You… you’re right. I… I suppose I really have let you down.” He looked up and glared at Severus. “I… I’ll swear your oath on one condition: just… treat him well. Please.”

Severus’ eyes flashed. “With the exception of one terrible misunderstanding in his sixth year that has since been resolved, ever since the day he saved my life and taught me the meaning of love and forgiveness, I have cherished him and tried to treat him with the respect he deserves. Can you say the same?”

Remus winced. “I… no.”

“Then do not ask conditions of me, particularly when I have done everything possible to ensure his happiness, even down to overcoming my phobias while you have run from yours.”

“Just swear your oath and get out of my sight, Remus,” Harry snapped. “I’ve had enough of you to last me another two years.”

Remus cringed. “Harry, I’ll try to do better. Really.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

By the time Severus and Harry had finished with Remus, the werewolf left the Order meeting room a tearful mess. Part of Harry couldn’t reconcile his guilt for hurting the man so badly, but the bigger part of him knew they had done nothing but make Remus confront his failures. Maybe it would do him some good.

“Harry,” said Severus as they entered the castle—under a Notice-Me-Not, of course, “I believe we should join the professors separately in case there are non-Order students out after curfew. Do you need me to stay with you, love?”

Harry shook his head. “I’ll be all right. Well, maybe not all right, but I can manage for a few minutes. I need to drop off my books anyway.”

Severus nodded and kissed Harry on the forehead. “You are so strong. I love you.”

“I love you too, Sev.” Harry leaned up and gave his husband a gentle kiss. “Go on. I’ll just drop off my knapsack and join you. The Headmaster’s office?”

“As far as I know. Check your map if you are uncertain.”

“Sure. It’s in my bag anyway.”

“Very well. I will see you in a moment.”

“Yeah. Be right there.”

Harry waved and watched his husband walk away, then turned back towards their quarters at a sprint. As he turned down the path to the dungeons, his pocket heated and vibrated, and it took Harry a second to remember his DA coin. Probably just Neville checking to make sure he’d arrived home all right. With a wry smile, he pulled it from his pocket and checked the front.

The instant he saw it, his smile dropped off his face. The text was red, not green—an emergency.
Damn!

“Help—Myrtle’s Loo—Zach.”

Harry’s heart stilled. Oh gods, it was Ginny, and Smith had her cornered. Briefly, he considered his options. Harry was no doubt the closest to the loo at the moment, but if he rushed in there now and saved Ginny, he might make matters worse for the girl in the long run.

The coin vibrated once more. “Hurry!”

With a groan for his miserable luck, Harry pocketed the coin, shouldered his bag, and raced towards the loo. Gods, he was the worst possible person to rescue her at a time like this, but no one else would reach her in time. He muttered a prayer under his breath that his actions wouldn’t renew her obsession and dashed around the corner, silencing his steps along the way. He needed evidence, after all, if he meant to take Smith down at last, and that meant he had to catch the arsehole unawares.

Smith had thrown a hasty ward over the loo, but Harry bypassed it in twenty seconds. He had trained against Severus’ and Albus’ wards. Nothing a student could do—except maybe Neville or Hermione—would keep him out for long.

As he passed through the barrier, Ginny’s screams nearly rendered him deaf.

“Help! Please, I don’t—Zach, I said I don’t *want* it!”

Harry’s heart sank like a stone. Oh gods.

[Sev, I need you and the professors in Myrtle’s Loo immediately. Smith has Ginny here, and I think he’s raping her or he’s about to.] Severus’ thoughts came back with a surge of horror and fury, audible due to his high emotions. [I’ll kill the little shite!]

“Shut up, you lying bitch,” Smith’s voice continued.

[Sev, I’m on it. Just get Albus and McGonagall here. I’ll get Poppy.]

[Understood.]

Ginny cried, “Get off me, Zach!”

“You should be grateful I’m touching you at all, pathetic as you are,” Smith ground out. “But you’re mine. I chose you, and that means I own you. You do what I say when I say it.”

Harry’s lip curled in disgust. What a fucking bastard. Wand out, he followed the voices to the handicapped stall.

Ginny sobbed, “I said *stop*, Zach! Please!”

“No! You’re mine, and I’ll prove it whether you want it or not.”

Well, that was enough to put the bastard away for good. Harry flicked his wrist and sent the stall door flying off its hinges, revealing a scene out of his nightmares.

Smith had a battered Ginny smashed face-first into the wall, one hand pinning her by her head, the other fumbling his erection out of his trousers. Ginny’s skirt lay bunched up around her ankles, soaked through, and her knickers hung around her knees. Smith was inches away from taking her—
clearly against her will—and Harry saw red.

“Get the fuck off her, Smith! She said no!”

Smith didn’t release her and gave Harry a simpering smile. “You’ve got it all wrong. You see, she asked me to enact a fantasy, and—”

Harry snarled and forced Smith to drop her hair, then petrified him and slammed him against the wall opposite.

“C-come on, Harry,” Smith said, voice wobbly. “We’re all friends here, right?”

“Silencio!”

Smith fell silent, though he struggled against the spell, and Harry stepped close enough to feel his breath.

“Get this straight, Smith. I know you’ve been abusing her. And with this evidence, I have every right to perform a full Telepathic scan of your mind. When I’m finished taking care of Ginny, I’ll know every dark secret you’re hiding, you utter piece of s—legally—and don’t think we’ll let you off easy. Or did you forget that Ginny has six older brothers, all but one of whom are trained to fight like aurors?”

A wet patch appeared at the front of Smith’s pants.

“You disgust me,” Harry spat. He turned his back on the frozen, silenced arsehole and went to check on Ginny, knocking on the edge of the stall first.

“Ginny? Are you decent?”

She sniffled and choked out a yes, and Harry moved around the doorway. Ginny sat on the toilet in her wet skirt, arms wrapped around her chest and shaking from head to toe. Blood dribbled down her chin and stained her school shirt, and one eye had already swollen shut.

“Merlin,” Harry breathed. “Did he penetrate you?”

She shook her head. “Y-you came just in time.” The doe-eyed look she gave him set Harry’s teeth on edge.

“R-right. That’s good, at least.” He took a step back and raked his hand through his hair, trying to get his bearings. “Stay there. I’ll get Poppy.”

Ginny cringed. “N-no. Can’t you heal me?”

“No. Not this time. Smith nearly raped you, Ginny. He’s going to Azkaban for this, and that means Poppy has to heal you and collect evidence against him.”

Tears slipped down her face. “B-but, but Mum… she’ll….”

Harry searched her eyes. “Mum Weasley? Is that why you’ve been afraid to talk? You’re afraid of how she’ll take it?”

Tears dripped down her face, and she gave him a jerky nod.

“Merlin, Ginny! Mum Weasley would never hurt you. You saw her tonight—she’s the most protective woman out there. She’ll be furious, yes, but not at you. She loves you.”
Ginny ducked her head, shame and tears making her small. “Y-you’re sure?”

“Positive.”

“Then… o-okay.”

“There you are. Now, wait just a tick while I get Poppy.”

At that moment, Severus, McGonagall, Sprout, and Albus ran into the loo, each wearing grim expressions and with their wands out.

McGonagall cried, “What is the meaning of this?”

Harry held his hands out to soothe them. “It’s all right. I stopped Smith before he could penetrate her, and he’s petrified and silenced.” He snarled. “Didn’t think Ginny needed to hear him try to weasel his way out of punishment. But this time, he’s done it. I have every right now to perform a full Telepathic scan on his mind.”

“That you do,” said Albus, his eyes crackling with hard fury. In that moment, Harry knew why Voldemort feared him above any other wizard—except, perhaps, Harry himself.

“We shall perform a scan shortly,” Albus continued. “First, is Miss Weasley well?”

“Hardly. Let me just contact Poppy.”

“I have already taken the liberty of doing so, Mister Potter,” said Severus. “She is on her way, as are the aurors.”

By aurors, Harry gleaned that Severus meant Kingsley, Moody, and Tonks. Any other aurors would put Harry at risk too.

He slumped against the stall in relief. “Thank Merlin.”

“Indeed, Mister Potter,” said Severus with a scowl at Smith. “It appears your arrival was quite providential, as you have managed to prevent a tragedy tonight.”

“Right.” Harry straightened and moved towards Smith, lips curled in a sneer of revulsion and utter hatred. “Well then, let’s just get to the scan, shall we?”

Severus jerked Harry back, but the move was gentler than it appeared. It helped that Harry had read his intent in his mind and expected it.

“Do not be a dunderhead, Potter. As much as I would also like to rip into this scum’s brain and tear out his secrets, we must wait until the aurors arrive and have Mister Smith in custody, then request to administer the scan under auror supervision. It must be done in a professional manner, with regard to fair treatment of the accused as well as the victim. Otherwise, Smith would have grounds for a countersuit.”

By the wave of fear and disappointment running through Smith, Harry gathered the prick had counted on his captors being unaware of said law. Obviously, he had forgotten Severus’ meticulous nature.

Harry nodded, though it took all his resolve not to simply force Smith’s secrets out of him that moment. “Understood, sir. Then I’ll just wait here for the aurors to arrive.” Mentally, he added, [Sev, even with only our Order aurors present, how on earth are we to take my report and keep me safe?]
Will they even count my evidence, given that I’m an enemy of the state and the Ministry is in Riddle’s control?

“That would be to the best,” said Albus. “You will need to give testimony as well, Harry. Of course, we shall have to ensure such evidence is taken in a manner that will not compromise your safety.”

The old man looked him in the eyes. [You will only be dealing with the Order aurors, and we will keep your identity absolutely secret in the official records. Smith will be placed under Fidelius so he cannot reveal your identity either.]

Harry nodded, though he wasn’t certain Albus would be able to keep such promises. [Let’s hope you’re right, old man.]

[Indeed.] Severus agreed.

Out loud, Harry said, “Yes, sir. Oh, we’ll also need to question Myrtle. She might have seen the attack too.”

“Yes, a wise plan. I will seek her out while we wait.”

“Thank you, sir.” Preparing himself for a gruelling night—they still had to set the dorm wards, too—Harry leaned against the wall near the entrance to the Chamber and settled in to wait.

Thank Merlin the next morning was a Saturday. Severus could barely drag himself awake by noon, so tired was he after the events in Myrtle’s loo, several hours of questioning by the aurors, and the rest of the night spent warding new dorms for Hogwarts’ Muggleborns and other at-risk students. They had increased security on the usual dorms too, and as a result, he and Harry hadn’t made it into bed until just before dawn.

He peeled his eyes open and groaned, exhausted with both lack of sleep and the heavy use of magic the dorms had required.

Harry murmured something unintelligible in his ear and snuggled closer, burying his head in Severus’ neck. Warmth and love spread through Severus’ chest, and he slipped his hand through his husband’s hair, watching Harry sleep and enjoying a rare moment of peace.

“You are so lovely,” he whispered.

Harry groaned and buried his face into Severus’ hair. “S’too early.”

Severus chuckled and kissed Harry’s temple. “It is past noon.”

Harry gasped and bolted up. “Noon? Shite! I’ve got to get up and get started on that spell.”

Severus caught Harry up as he attempted to dash out of bed. “Not before taking care of your needs, husband mine. An hour or so to eat and refresh yourself will not decide the war.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Perhaps not, but I do love you and I wish you to be healthy.”

Harry sighed and rubbed his face. “I reckon you’re right. It’ll be harder to think without taking care
of myself.” He stood and padded into the loo, with Severus just behind. At this point in their marriage, sharing the loo had become commonplace.

While Severus relieved himself, Harry tried speaking around a mouthful of toothpaste. “M’word ’bout Gin.”

“If you must speak to me while brushing your teeth,” Severus said with a chuckle, “you might use your mental abilities.”

Harry barely contained a snort. [I’m worried about Ginny.]

“Yes, last night must have been quite traumatising for her.”

A frown crossed Harry’s features. [That’s not what I meant, Sev. Well, of course I’m worried about her recovery, but it’s just that I was the one who saved her, Sev. I was the only one close enough. And now… what’s going to happen?]

Severus grimaced and nudged Harry aside so he could wash his hands. “I do not know. I fear she may attach herself to you again.”

Harry nodded. [What do I do?]

Severus used the time it took to scrub and dry his hands to think. “If she is truly so attached and she still refuses to take no for an answer, then you may have little other choice but to reveal our bond, beloved.”

Harry spat in the sink and rinsed out his mouth. “No. I can’t do it, Sev. She’ll go into a jealous rage and hurt you.”

“I never said you had to reveal whom you bonded to.” Severus stroked Harry’s hair. “Ginevra, for all that she is ill, is not a cruel person. I believe it will be all right.”

Harry stared at his husband in the mirror, his emotions edged with worry. “I… Sev, I don’t think I can take that chance. If I reveal our bond, then we have to do something to protect us. Maybe a Fidelius, like we did on Smith last night.” He wrapped his arms around his chest and bit his lip. “But even with that, I don’t know. If she even utters one syllable, it might still be enough to get us in trouble.”

“Perhaps if we covered the secret of our relationship under a Fidelius and you swore Ginevra to a vow of silence at once, you would feel safer?”

Harry sighed and pressed his head into Severus’ chest, breathing deeply. “Yeah. That… that would do, I think.” He looked up and met Severus’ eyes. “Can we ask Albus to help us with it tonight? I hate to ask him when I know he’s exhausted, but we need help.”

Severus nodded. “He may be too tired tonight, but perhaps tomorrow morning will be soon enough.”

Harry released his breath in a sigh and hugged his husband tight. “Yeah. I can avoid her that long, I think. I’ve got to get to work on the spell anyway.”

“Good. Then, after I have brushed my teeth, let us shower together in the interest of time and we shall order breakfast for everyone when we have finished.” Severus frowned. “Or lunch, rather.”

Harry smirked. “If we shower together, I’m not sure we’ll be saving much time.”
Severus chuckled darkly. “You would be surprised, beloved.”

Harry grinned. “You’re on.”

Feeling much refreshed after their shower and a bit of lovemaking, Harry followed Severus into the living room and greeted his friends, all of whom had gathered around the living room table. Ron had apparently joined them, and he gaped like a fish when Severus and Harry came out of the bedroom together, their hair still damp.

“You two are… together?”

Harry shot Dean a dirty look. “Did you bring him in without warning him?”

Dean coughed. “Er, no. Ron came by earlier and wanted to help with the spell. We didn’t hear you two, so we thought Severus was in the lab. We would’ve said something first if we’d known. I’m sorry.”

Harry shook his head and sat beside Draco with a sigh. “No help for it now. Yes, Ron, we’re together. Severus and I have been soul bonded since October.”

Ron eyes nearly popped from his skull. “Soul bonded? Merlin! Really?”

Severus sat beside Harry and draped his arm around his husband’s shoulders. “Yes. And we are quite in love, so there is no reason to look so worried.”

Ron coughed, a sheepish blush creeping up his face. “Er, s-sorry about that, sir. It’s just that you two hate each other so much—er—hated? Well, it’s just… a little hard to reconcile.” He looked to Harry, concern evident in his eyes. “You’re really happy?”

Harry nodded. “He’s wonderful, Ron. Absolutely wonderful.”

Ron nodded, visibly pushing his misgivings aside, and offered Severus his hand. “In that case, I reckon I ought to try to make amends. Er, I’m sorry for being such a prat, sir. To you, and to Harry.”

Severus shook the boy’s hand, a wry smile on his lips and relief clear in his eyes. “I must say I am rather stunned. Of all the people we have told—other than Neville and Luna—you are the one to take the news the best.”

“Hey now,” said Daphne with a snort. “As I recall, I believe I wished you well.”

Severus chuckled and gave the girl a smile. “So you did. Welcome to the group, Ronald. I will treat you with respect, as long as you offer the same courtesy to my husband and myself.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Severus. The lot of Harry’s friends call me Severus. Now that you are in on our secret, I see no reason why you may not also partake of the same privilege.” Severus’ eyes hardened. “So long as you never hurt my husband the way you have done in the past again.”

Ron flushed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Y-yes, sir… er, Severus. I know I mucked it up between us. I won’t do it again.” He bowed to the man according to pureblood traditions. “Please
call me Ron though. I’m not fond of Ronald.”

“Very well, Ron. Have a seat.”

Ron nodded and returned to his place between Dean and Millicent.

Millicent greeted them with a smile. “Morning you two—or afternoon, rather. How late were you up working on the dorm wards?”

“We were up past dawn,” said Severus with a grimace, “but I admit it was not only because of the wards.” He closed his eyes. “Ron, I am afraid your sister was attacked last night.”

He paled and jerked to his feet. “What? Where is she? Is she in the Infirmary? St. Mungo’s? Is she alive?”

“Calm down,” Harry said, easing the boy back to his seat. “I found her and saved her just in time.”

He grimaced. “Smith was inches away from raping her—”

Cries broke out all around the room.

“What!”

“No!”

“Oh gods, is she okay?”

“Easy,” Harry shouted. “Easy. Ginny’s all right—well, mostly. She’s a bit roughed up, but I stopped Smith before he could do worse. He’s been expelled, and he’s in Ministry custody now, awaiting trial. And the memories I took from his mind will make sure he goes straight to Azkaban.”

“Harry,” Hermione cautioned, “not illegally, right?”

“No. We requested an official scan with aurors present, though we had to conceal my identity no thanks to the mess with Riddle and all that rot. At any rate, since I had unquestionable evidence of abuse, he couldn’t contest it. He’s definitely looking at hard time he won’t be able to bribe his way out of, if I have anything to say about it.”

Ron stood, panic evident in his emotions and stance. “I… I have to see her.”

“All right,” said Harry. “She’s in the infirmary. Molly and Arthur are probably with her. Just don’t go after Smith, okay? He’s in big trouble now, but any illegal action we take against him would give him grounds to claim mistrial. We have to be very careful. Promise me you won’t run off half-cocked and avenge her?”

Daphne, Draco, and Dean stood.

“We’ll go with him, as support and to make sure he stays calm,” said Dean.

“Thanks,” Harry replied, relieved. “I’d really appreciate it. Just don’t mention me, okay? I’m not going anywhere near her for a while. I might upset her illness again.”

Daphne nodded. “Understood. Good luck with the spell.”

“We’ll need it.” He watched the others leave, his heart heavy and worry weighing him down.

Hermione met his eyes after the door shut behind them, concern creasing her brow. “Harry, you
saved Ginny last night? Do you think she’ll… be obsessed again?”

“That’s why I’m staying away. I hope not. I hope she recovers instead, but with the way she looked at me last night, I’m afraid I’m hoping for too much.” He shook his head sadly. “Gods, I never wanted to hurt her.”

Luna squeezed his hand. “She will be well again in time. She’s clinging so hard because she doesn’t want to face hard truths about herself, but in time, she will recover.”

Severus frowned. “Are your Feathersprites saying that?”

Luna nodded. “It will be all right. Simply follow the plan you have already made, and she will come to her senses in time.”

Severus sighed and clutched his husband close. “Thank Merlin.”

“Definitely,” Harry agreed. “And with that settled, we should try to focus on this matrix. We’re trying to make this spell more powerful, but every time we push the power node past this point, the whole matrix destabilises. Any suggestions?”

Hermione peered at the matrix, her eyes gleaming with the thrill of pursuing knowledge. “Well, perhaps if we moved the control key a bit to the west…”

Three days later, Harry felt his companions had made some progress with the soul spell. At least they had worked out how to increase its power to some extent, though he sensed they still needed more before it would work on horcruxes that might be anywhere on the continent—or scattered over the globe. Hermione, Draco, and Severus had a knack for understanding the calculations and science of the matrix, and Ron, Dean, and Blaise brought new perspective and strategic advice. With Harry’s ability for innovation and thinking out of the box, they made for a formidable team. The others helped as they could, sometimes offering moral support, sometimes advice or pointing out issues and possibilities the others had missed.

All in all, he was proud of their progress, and had begun to hope they might just win the war after all.

That evening, Harry had put aside the soul spell for a while, and instead had resumed work on his ‘surprise’ for Malfoy while the others had gone to Hermione’s flat to revise before bed. Given that he wasn’t good with calculations and he couldn’t ask anyone else to work on the spell with him, he hadn’t made much progress and doubted he would have it ready before the battle, but at least it gave him something else to think about for a few minutes. And the change of pace might give him ideas.

Severus entered their living room with a deep frown on his face. “Harry, love, Poppy is asking for you in the Infirmary. Ginevra wishes to see you.”

Harry grimaced. “She’s obsessed again, isn’t she?”

“I fear that is the case. Just recall what Luna said, and do be careful to remain hidden on the way. Even over such a short distance, the school is no longer safe, not for you. Take Jabardi, too.”

Harry stood and wrapped his arms around Severus’ waist. “Damn. I really don’t want to do this.”
Severus’ gentle fingers stroked through Harry’s hair, soothing him. “I know, my Harry, but it is the only way she will heal. She needs to know that you are permanently beyond her reach. And I need to know you are safe.”

Harry closed his eyes and nodded. “All right. Just… wait up for me? I’ll probably need to talk when we’re done.”

Severus stroked Harry’s cheek. “You will be fine. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Harry kissed his husband, gathered up his snake, and moved to the hearth. “I’ll be back later, okay?”

“Do not forget to conceal yourself.”

“Right. Obscurus, Silencio Motus.” Harry disappeared and his movements fell silent. “See you, Sev.”

“Be careful, beloved.”

“I promise.”

With nervous flutters in his chest and pain in his heart, Harry flooed to his bedroom, and from there, trudged to the Infirmary, wand out in case someone noticed him in spite of his precautions. No one so much as glanced his way, however; and soon Harry found himself staring at a star-struck Ginny while she asked Poppy if he had come yet.

With a sigh, Harry stepped behind the girl’s curtains and removed his spells. “Hullo,” he whispered, then set about silencing and warding the girl’s room. “Right. Now that that’s taken care of…” He turned to face Ginny, misery that he would need to hurt her dragging his posture down. “Hey. How are you?”

She gave him a besotted smile. “Much better now.”

Poppy sighed and moved to Harry’s side. “I am sorry, Harry. I have tried to speak to her, but she’s quite insistent.”

Harry gave her a wan smile. “It’s okay. I’ve talked to… the other person involved, and we’ve come to the decision that she needs to know the truth.”

Poppy frowned and whispered, “Harry, she may retaliate.”

“I’m not telling her who. Just what.”

“If she reveals the what, that may well be enough for the world to figure out the who.”

“I know. We… we have a plan in place to protect him. Will you help me?”

She sighed and patted his shoulder. “Of course.”

“Thanks.” Harry moved to Ginny’s bedside, staying just beyond the range of his anti-Ginny wards, and gave her a grim look. “Look, Ginny, we need to talk. I really don’t want to do this now, but you’re not leaving me much of a choice.”

Ginny shook her head wildly. “Harry—no. Don’t deny it again! It’s not—there must be something there—I feel it!”
Harry rubbed his brow, already distressed. “Ginny, no. What you’re feeling is obsession, not love. Nothing about this is healthy. Neither what you feel for me nor what you went through with Smith. And it has to stop.”

Poppy squeezed Harry’s shoulder in support. “Child, Harry is exactly right. What you have done is gone from one unhealthy attachment straight into another, and right back to the first the moment that relationship ended. It’s a symptom of co-dependency and obsessive love disorder. I’m afraid I’ll need to see you for therapy twice a week from here on out, Miss Weasley, or at least until I’m sure you’re able to form healthy relationships on your own.”

She sat and stuck out her lip. “I… it’s not unhealthy. Harry saved me, Madam Pomfrey! He had to feel something, or why would he care?”

Harry groaned. “Ginny, come on. I would have saved Lucius Malfoy if I caught him in that situation, and other than Riddle himself, there’s no one I hate more than Lucius Malfoy.”

Poppy snorted. “Yes, and with good reason.”

“But… but that just can’t be, Harry,” Ginny insisted, eyes wide with stubborn hope. “I feel—I know you feel it. I… why won’t you at least try? Am I really so awful?”

Harry rubbed at his face, frustrated and worried. “Damn it. I really didn’t want to have to do this.”

He sighed and flopped into the chair a short distance from Ginny’s bed, slumping onto his knees. “There’s no help for it, I guess. Though, gods, by the time we actually go to war, the entire Order is going to know anyway.”

Poppy snorted. “Half of them already do.”

“Yeah, so I told Remus the other night when he threw a wobbly over my life choices.”

Poppy patted Harry’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, child. I didn’t intend to bring up painful memories.”

“It’s not your fault. Remus was the one being a berk. And we set him straight anyway.”

“Good. It’s past time someone did.”

“Definitely.”

Ginny looked between them, confusion and worry clear on her features. “What are you talking about, Harry?”

He sat up and gave her a stern look. “I’ll explain, but before I say a word, I need your vow that you will reveal nothing of what I’m about to tell you to anyone outside this room. At least two innocent people will die if you do.”

She shrunk back and bit her lip. “Um… w-what kind of vow?”

Harry’s eyebrow shot up. “You’re mentally unstable and lives are on the line—mine included. I’m not risking everything on a weak oath. The truth is protected already by a Fidelius, but if you even try to speak, you’ll lose your magic. Are we clear?”

Ginny swallowed hard. “So you’re the Secret Keeper?”

“There’s one other, but yes. No one but the two of us can reveal the truth to those who don’t already know.”
“Then why do I need to swear a vow?”

“Because if you reveal one syllable of my status, it might be enough to get people killed! Will you swear it or not?”

Ginny sighed. “If it’s really that important, then I suppose I’d better.”

“Good. Poppy, will you witness it?”

She nodded and guided Ginny through a vow of silence, sworn upon her magic.

“There you are, Harry,” Poppy said with a nod.

“Thanks.” He turned to Ginny, expression hard. “Now, you want the truth. The truth is I cannot—not now or ever—be involved with you romantically in any way whatsoever.”

Ginny grimaced. “No, it’s not true. I know you feel it.” She reached for his hand, but the wards held her back. “Harry, won’t you let me try?”

Poppy gave Harry a questioning look. “Allowing her to touch your hand might drive the point home faster than any other way.”

Harry grimaced. “Is that fair to the other person involved?”

“I don’t see a problem with it. It is not as if you have any romantic intent.”

“Maybe, but regardless of my intent, we both know hers, and I took a vow never to be unfaithful. It might kill me.”

Poppy paled. “Let us not test it that way, then.”

“No. This should do well enough.” He cancelled the spells on his ring and held his hand up, near the edge of his wards, revealing his secret.

Ginny gave a little yelp and clasped at the covers. “Harry, w-what—why?”

“This is the reason—one of them anyway—that I can’t date you.” He deactivated his wards and took a step forwards so she might see a bit better. “That is my husband’s ring.”

She gasped and covered her mouth. “No. No it… can’t be.” A hesitant look of hope passed over her face. “B-but if it’s just your husband, you c-could get it annulled, right?”

Harry reeled back, horrified that she would go so far. “Dear fucking Merlin!”

Poppy thwacked him on the back of his head. “Harry! You’re supposed to be acting as my apprentice.”

He rubbed his head and grimaced. “S-sorry, Poppy, but I can’t—gods! It’s unreal.”

Jabardi poked his head out of Harry’s collar. ~Master, your heart is racing and you reek of fear. Are you safe?~

Poppy gave the snake a wary look and took a step back.

Harry petted the snake’s head. ~Yes, sorry, Jabardi. The irritating pest female terrified me, but I am not in danger. She is just ill. You may rest.~
Jabardi licked Harry’s cheek and settled down again. Harry straightened his cloak over the snake and gave Ginny an incredulous look. “Now that he’s situated, did you really just ask me to divorce my husband just so you could get a shot with me? And you don’t think this is unhealthy?”

She blushed. “I… well, it’s true, isn’t it? You can get it annulled, and then we’ll be happy together!”

Harry stepped away, horror raising the hair on the back of his neck. “Poppy, she really needs that therapy.”

“Hmm. I agree, but perhaps for the moment you should explain to her why divorce is not, nor will it ever be, a possibility?”

Harry shuddered and crossed his arms over his chest. “Yeah, but the idea that she would even ask… I can’t—it’s appalling.”

Ginny sniffled and lowered her head. “I… I’m sorry. I just… I love you so much.”

“No, Ginny. No. This isn’t love. Love is sacrifice, not selfishness. You would accept that I’m happy with my husband if you really loved me, because you would want me to be happy. What you feel is called obsession, and it’s terrifying me.”

She sobbed. “So because I want to fight for you, I don’t love you?”

“You’re not fighting for me, you’re fighting against me.”

Face twisted in a defiant glare, Ginny sat up and cried, “No, Harry! I do, I do love you!”

Harry glared back and spoke in an unyielding tone. “Ginny, listen to me. Even if you did, it doesn’t matter. I can’t be with you. I am soul-bonded. There is absolutely no way to dissolve my bond, and I wouldn’t either way. I’m happy where I am.”

She flopped onto the pillows, all the colour draining from her face. “S-soul bonded? There’s really no way…?”

Harry shook his head in grim resolution. “None at all. I’m bonded for eternity, and if there was a way, I would never be interested in a female, and particularly not one who doesn’t seem too keen on taking my wishes into consideration.”

“Soul-bonded. I can’t believe it.” Her face twisted into a vicious grimace. “Who is he? Who is the man who took you from me?”

Harry shook his head in grim resolution. “None at all. I’m bonded for eternity, and if there was a way, I would never be interested in a female, and particularly not one who doesn’t seem too keen on taking my wishes into consideration.”

“Soul-bonded. I can’t believe it.” Her face twisted into a vicious grimace. “Who is he? Who is the man who took you from me?”

Harry stepped back again, shaking all over. “Ginny, if you think I’m stupid enough to tell you when it’s clear you’re in a jealous rage, you’re madder than I thought. I love my husband dearly.”

She winced and gave a bitter snort.

Her denial sparked his temper. “Oh, and let’s just clear this up now: I was never yours! Never! I have never loved you, never given you even the slightest indication that I wanted a relationship with you. You just took hero worship to the next level and decided I belong with you—with or without my consent—and now I’m really considering that warding order after all.”

Ginny paled further and sank back onto the pillows. “No, no, don’t. Dad would lose his job and… I can’t. I can’t do that to my family.”

“But you could do it to me?” Harry gave her a heartsick look. “Don’t you understand that if you tried
to trap me into a relationship against my will you’d be no better than the scum I just rescued you from?"

“He is correct,” said Poppy, her expression stern.

Tears poured down Ginny’s cheeks. “Oh. I… I… if that’s true….” She grabbed her hair and wailed. “Maybe I am broken. Maybe I do need help if, if I’m just hurting people I care about and making them terrified of me.”

“Yes,” Harry said, some of the horror easing from his veins. “You really, really do need it. I’m terrified for you. And for my family, for that matter.”

She winced and nodded, twisting her hands in her shirt. “O-okay. Then I’ll… c-come to therapy. And I won’t say anything about your… h-husband, Harry.”

He gave her a curt nod. “Thank you. I hope you understand that, from now on, I won’t be able to associate with you beyond planning for the war. Not until you’re healthy again. I don’t want to set you back, and I don’t want to put me or my family at risk.”

She grimaced. “That’s not what I wanted. I just… I don’t know. Everything is so mixed up and I feel so worthless and alone.”

“That’s not a good place to start a relationship from,” Harry said in a gentler voice than he would have thought himself capable of under the circumstances. “You need to heal yourself first before you even consider it.”

She sniffled and dropped her head. “Maybe you’re right. I… I guess I’m just as stupid as Zach thought.”

“No,” said Poppy gently. “You are unwell, however, and in need of treatment. Harry needs to return home now, especially given the danger he’s in, but perhaps you’d be willing to stay here and talk to me for a bit, Miss Weasley?”

Ginny nodded, and Harry could have kissed Poppy for the reprieve. He refrained lest he set Ginny back further—or, gods forbid, gave her the idea he was bonded to the matron. He suppressed a shudder at the thought and stepped towards the curtain.

“Ginny, I’m really sorry about all this. I never wanted to break your heart.”

She gave him a wan smile. “Well, I think it’s my fault. But… maybe it’ll be okay soon.”

He nodded. “I hope so.” Dear gods, he hoped so. This infatuation was getting old. And utterly terrifying.

“Thank you, Harry,” said Poppy with a smile. “Go home to your husband. I’ll take it from here.”

Harry sighed, relief making him weak. “Yeah. T-thanks, ma’am.”

“Off with you now. I’ll teach you to give therapy with someone who isn’t a conflict of interest.”

“Sounds like a great idea!”

He reset his charms, bolted like the hounds of hell were on his heels, and didn’t stop until he was home again.

“Hello, love,” Severus greeted him from the kitchenette.
“H-hi.”

Harry removed Jabardi from his neck and placed him in his terrarium, then dashed straight into Severus’ arms with enough force to send him toppling backward a step.

Severus smoothed Harry’s hair and held him tight against his chest. “I take it the meeting did not go as smoothly as you hoped?”

“N-not at all.” Harry grabbed Severus’ face and kissed him hard. “Make love to me. Make me feel you all night. Need you.”

Severus gasped for breath and clutched at his husband. “Gods. As much as I would like that, I think perhaps we should talk about what happened in the Infirmary first.”

Harry grimaced. “You’re safe. I didn’t reveal your identity and had her swear a vow before I spoke at all. Ginny agreed to therapy after terrifying me half out of my wits. That’s the run down. I’ll give you every excruciating detail later, but right now, I need you to make me feel safe again.”

Severus hesitated, but at Harry’s pleading look, relented and swept his husband into his arms. “As you wish, husband mine.”

Harry clung to Severus’ neck, feeling at ease for the first time since Poppy had called him.
Chapter Summary

**Warnings:** Mentions of past child abuse, domestic abuse. Discussions of dark magic.

**AN:** We're coming to the home stretch now, everyone. I'm excited and also sad to see this story end. Hope you enjoy the final chapters!

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**Chapter 61**

*The Last Days*

**18 MARCH**

“Severus?”

Harry’s soft call brought Severus out of his brewing-haze, as Harry called it. He looked up from his nearly-completed healing draught and turned to the door. “Yes, love? Are you all right?”

Harry poked his head into the lab. “Go ahead and finish up. I just wanted to talk to you about something.”

Severus nodded. “I will be with you shortly then.”

“Get lost, scarhead,” said Draco from his place beside Severus with a wink. “We’re working.”

Harry snorted. “*He* is. I’m not so sure about you.”

Draco chuckled and waved him off. “We’re nearly finished.” He frowned. “Is what you need to talk of personal?”

Harry winced. “Very.”

“Then I’ll just head to my ‘flat’ when we’re done here. I’ve some work yet to do on my Charms essay anyway.”

“I’ll help with it later.”

“Thanks, Harry.”

Harry waved and disappeared into the private flat he shared with Severus.

“Right,” Severus said, back to business. “We’ve still fifteen stirs and the hellebore to go, Draco, so get back to work.”

“Yes, sir.”
A few moments later, Severus changed out of his lab gear, washed up, and joined his husband on their bed, spelling off his boots along the way. “Harry? Is anything wrong?”

Harry frowned and curled into his husband’s side. “Not wrong, per se. Just worrying. I was thinking of your flashbacks and the battle. We both know Lucius is going to be there. How are you going to handle it? Especially if he comes at you when you’re fighting for me, it could be disastrous if you fall into the past then.”

Severus closed his eyes. “When I am in the Death Eaters’ camp, I occlude so fiercely, flashbacks are rare. With my emotions entirely drained, I cannot feel enough fear to fall into the past.”

“Yes, but you’re not going to be able to do that during the battle. You’ll have to throw everything you have into saving me. So what do we do?”

Severus sighed and hugged Harry tight. “I will fight for you regardless. Keep talking to me, if you can. It will help.”

“And if I can’t?”

Severus grimaced. “I… I don’t know, Harry. I will do everything I can to prevent it.”

Harry kissed Severus softly. “Even if that does happen, I won’t ever blame you for it. You can’t help it. But neither do I want to lose my soul, so I have a… suggestion. I don’t think you’re going to like it, but I think it’s necessary if we both want to survive.”

Severus held Harry against his side, needing to feel his warmth to keep himself grounded. “Y-yes?”

Harry sighed. “It’s… the name, Sev. I think we need to work on getting you more used to hearing it and not falling immediately into flashbacks.”

Severus’ breath accelerated and his heart raced. “I… I can’t. Please, don’t ask me.”

Harry winced. “Okay. If you really can’t bear it, I won’t force you. But I’m scared I’ll lose you. I’m scared you’ll freeze up and be killed. And then… I won’t have any hope either.”

Severus closed his eyes and held Harry close to him. Gods, the idea of losing Harry, of failing him, that hurt and terrified him far more than any stupid moniker. Perhaps he did need to try if Harry was the cost—and he was. Severus knew it damn well.

Gods, if his illness cost him his soulmate and eternal love, Severus would never forgive himself.

No. Damned if he would let his fears cost him everything he had fought so hard for. He remembered the man he had become before Harry shone the light of love in his life, and he never wanted to become that person again. He liked smiling, laughing, holding his partner tight and making love to
him in the wee hours. Talking with him about everything, good and bad, and sharing in Harry’s troubles and joys too.

It had taken nearly forty years and one hell of a struggle to get here, but he finally had a family and a home. He had friends who cared about him. And he had love. So much, sometimes he didn’t know how to cope with it. Harry had showered his life with blessings and devotion in such incredible abundance, he had changed Severus at his core. Severus had become a new person thanks to his husband’s patience and love. A person he liked. A person who might even deserve all the love Harry bestowed so liberally upon him.

[I do love you, Sev. And I always will, either way.]

Severus closed his eyes and tugged Harry close. Gods, he had such a wonderful life with Harry.

And fuck all if he would let all his joy burn to ash over a stupid endearment.

No. He could do this, for Harry, for the life he loved, for himself, he could face this one last fear and break Malfoy’s hold over him forever.

‘No more chains. I am free of him. It is time to lay the last of my fears to rest.’

With a sigh, he pressed a kiss to Harry’s hair and held him tighter. “Harry, I… you are right. I will do it, but this is quite likely to devastate me. Will you… care for me afterwards?”

Harry turned in his arms and kissed his husband with gentle, tender affection. “Merlin, Sev. Of course I will. Actually, I thought that maybe, if we could associate the name with a positive memory, then it might make it easier to bear and less terrible to overcome.”

Severus released a sigh, relief warm and tingling in his veins. “Yes, that may help. What kind of positive memory?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe since Malfoy used touch as a weapon against you, do you think it would help if I kiss you at the same time? If I hold you close and, in the same breath I use the name, tell you how much I love you and cherish you? Or maybe… during sex?”

Severus shuddered. “Not sex. I fear I would flashback to the… assaults if you used it at the same time, and then we would have two issues to deal with.”

“Understood. So… just gentle touches, then? Or do you have a better idea?”

Severus looked into Harry’s eyes. “Your idea may well be the best, but remind me that I am with you. Let me see your eyes, tell me your name, and that might help me stay grounded in the present.”

Harry traced a hand down Severus’ cheek. “Whatever you need, love. Do you want to try now?”

“With our lives on the line, beloved, I think we have little other choice.”

Harry climbed into Severus’ lap, facing him, and wrapped his legs around the man’s waist. He slipped his hands into Severus’ hair and kissed his forehead, caressing his husband’s face and soothing his fears. Soft lips brushed over Severus’ hairline, his nose, his eyelids, his lips, until love and peace replaced all traces of dread.

“Severus, I love you so much, sweetheart. I adore you. You’re safe with me—Harry—your husband.” He leaned back so Severus could see his eyes and held his husband’s face in tender, caressing hands. “I’m here, p-pet.”
Severus jolted at a terrible wave of fear and painful associations, but Harry’s love kept him from falling into the past.

“Ssh. I know it hurts, baby. I’m so sorry. If I could just forget it and never use that name again, I would. But I love you far too much to let you be killed. I can’t lose you.” Harry kissed Severus’ forehead once more and turned his face up to kiss his mouth as well. “It’s okay. You’re safe here.”

Severus brought Harry into a gentle, loving kiss. “Keep going. I managed to stay in the present, but I fear I need more practise.”

Harry’s sigh of relief ruffled Severus’ hair. “Thank Merlin. Okay, Sev. Look into my eyes. Feel how much I love you through the bond, pet. It’s going to be okay.”

Another jolt, less powerful this time, told Severus this mad plan was working, and he rested his head against Harry’s shoulder, relief warm and tingling through his veins. He would be all right, in time. Lucius wouldn’t hurt him any longer—Harry would see to that.

“Good,” Severus murmured. “Once more.”

Three days before their scheduled attack, Severus responded to Harry’s call to join him in their private living room. Draco was already on the sofa.

“Harry? What is it, love?”

Harry motioned to the seat beside Draco. “Sit, Severus. I have… one more thing to do to protect you two before we go to battle.”

Severus nodded and obeyed. “What do you have planned?”

“You’ll see.” Harry knelt between them and laid his hand over both their left forearms. “Okay, both of you, be still and don’t be afraid, okay? I’m going to help you.”

Draco and Severus gave each other bemused looks.

Draco whispered, “Do you have any idea what he means, Severus?”

Severus shrugged. “Not even through the bond.”

“Yes, well, it’s supposed to be a surprise,” said Harry with a snort. “Okay, this might hurt a little, but I promise I’ll do my best to make it quick and easy.”

Severus’ heart thumped. “Harry?”

The sibilant hisses of Parseltongue washed over him, and Severus went rigid at a thrum of magic through his arm. What on earth was Harry doing? He looked down and gasped at the sight of dark tendrils hovering over his skin and Draco’s. Harry’s face set in fierce concentration as he battled the aura of malevolence back into the ether.

Draco opened his mouth to cry out, but Severus clapped his free hand over the boy’s lips, fearful any interference with Harry’s continuing incantations would prove disastrous.
The darkness disappeared, and another powerful wave of magic shot through Severus’ arm, down to his chest, and spread like warmth and light through his body.

Harry slumped over, resting his head on Severus’ lap with a groan.

Severus’ heart skipped, fear for his husband quickly driving him towards panic. “Harry? Harry, answer me! Are you all right?”

After a moment, Harry dragged his head up and mumbled, “I’m fine. Just tired.”

Severus tugged his husband into his lap and winced at his dazed expression. “Merlin. What did you do, love?”

Harry gave Severus a tired smile. “I did it. Had to—they were tied to your magic and life force. Can’t lose you in the battle. Love you, so I removed them.”

Draco stared, bemused. “Harry, what on earth are you talking about?”

Severus’ heart and breath stilled. “R-removed them?” His eyes flickered to his wrist, impossible hope and wonder setting his heart fluttering. “Oh, love. Is it truly possible?”

Harry was too tired to respond verbally, but the bright smile on his face was answer enough.

Draco tugged on Severus’ sleeve. “Removed what, Severus? What’s going on?”

Severus began unbuttoning his left cuff. “Check your Mark.”


[See for yourself,] the too-pleased man replied, and Draco tore his sleeves open, careless of the buttons.

“Oh gods.” Draco stared at pale, unblemished skin, and tears pooled on his lashes. “It’s gone. It’s really gone.”

Heart thundering, Severus jerked his sleeve up the rest of the way and gasped at the sight of his own unmarked arm. “I… we are free.”

“Yes, pet,” Harry said aloud, apparently having caught his breath. He cupped Severus’ face, relieving the residual sting from the name. “You’re free, safe, and loved.”

Tears streaming unchecked down his face, Severus brought his husband into a loving kiss. “Thank you,” he whispered, voice rough with emotion. “I thought it would taint me forever. I thought… his Mark… my failures—but you have saved me. Saved us.”

Harry shot Draco a pained look and rubbed Severus’ cheek. “Ssh. It’s over now, love. Neither Lucius nor Riddle will ever hurt you again.”

Draco went ashen and slumped against the sofa. “W-what did my arsehole of a father do to him?”

Harry shook his head against Severus’ shoulder, clearly too tired to sit up. “It’s not my place to say.” He turned Severus’ face towards him with a trembling hand. “Look at me, love. Removing this—it’s just a symbol. I know it means a lot to you, Sev, and I’m glad I could take it away, but even if I’d never found that spell, you were always pure.”

Severus swallowed a sob. “Harry….”
Harry brushed a fresh wave of tears away. “Lucius bears the guilt for that brand on your arm. You were an innocent—you still are. And I want you to know that… with or without the Mark, you’re a good man who deserves happiness and joy and all the love the world can give you.” He leaned up to kiss his husband, though he couldn’t hold the pose long. “And I promise, Sev, I’ll spend my life making up for all those years you went without.”

Severus clutched Harry’s face and brought him into a fierce, emotional kiss. “Merlin, I love you.”

Harry kissed his hair. “I love you too.” He brushed Severus’ cheek and settled against his shoulder, closing his eyes in obvious exhaustion. [You know, if you feel up to it, you might talk about… some of what you went through with Draco. You have… things in common. It might heal you—both of you—to talk about it.]

Severus gave the distraught blonde a searching look. “I suppose, Harry, if anyone other than you deserves to know the truth, it is the son of the man who broke me.”

Draco winced. “That’s what we have in common then? He used you?”

“He did. We shall talk about it if you are willing.”

Draco nodded and leaned on his knees. “We probably should.”

Severus held Harry closer. “Harry, will you stay with us? I think… we will need a healthy perspective, as we have both been damaged.”

[You’re doing pretty well on your own these days, love, but of course I’ll stay.] Harry yawned and turned into Severus’ shoulder. [Just not sure how long I can stay awake. That really took it out of me.]

Severus lifted a hand. “Accio Pepper-Up Potion and Magic Replenishing Draught.” The potions sailed into his hands one at a time, and Severus fed them to his husband with gentle care. Once the steam cleared from his ears, Harry sat up, colour back in his cheeks and his eyes more alert.

“Merlin, you’re brilliant, Sev.”

Severus chuckled and stroked Harry’s temple. “I am not the one who just revoked an unbreakable, customised dark spell without so much as a twinge for its victims.”

Harry grinned. “It didn’t hurt?”

“No at all.”

“Good to know. Luna and ‘Mione said it shouldn’t, but I was scared. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Mostly.” Severus tugged Harry closer. “But I think you are right. If Draco and I are to face Lucius without regrets in the battle, we must work out our pasts beforehand.”

Harry nodded, solemn once more. “Yeah. Draco, is it okay if I stay like this? Sev will need me close, and I can reach you from here too.”

“I don’t care,” said Draco in a dull voice. “I just… I wish… I really miss Mum.”

Harry leaned over and hugged Draco tight. “I know. I’m so sorry I couldn’t save her.”

“Hush. You couldn’t have known. No one did. It’s just… we’re probably going to kill father tomorrow morning. Not that he doesn’t deserve it, but still. What does that leave me? I’ll be
completely alone.”

Harry moved back and took Draco’s hand instead. “No, you won’t. Dean loves you. And you have me and Severus, Neville and Luna, and Hermione, and everyone else. Even Ginny and Ron have come to their senses as of late, and thank Merlin for that. You can talk to any of us, okay? You can even crash on our sofa in here if you want. I’m sure Sev won’t mind.”

“I do not mind at all,” Severus murmured. “Draco, you are welcome with us.”

Draco gave him a miserable look. “How can you say that? How can you look at me and not see… him? I can’t even look and not see it.”

Severus rubbed Draco’s shoulder. “You are not him. You have a conscience and a heart, and you care about others.”

“But I was so cruel for so long.”

Severus’ eyebrow shot up. “Are you actually bemoaning your former cruel nature to me?”

Draco snorted in spite of himself, though tears drowned it. “G-good point.”

“Draco, Lucius groomed me as a child to be what he wanted me to be. He raised you in the same manipulative, destructive manner. We were cruel because he wanted us to be. We were broken because he shattered our hearts.” Severus gripped Draco’s shoulders. “But we are also better men than he is, and we are stronger than he knows. Show me your courage.”

Draco sniffled and wiped his eyes. “You’re right. Now is not the time to sit around crying like a bloody fool. I won’t let him win.”

Harry patted his shoulder. “It’s okay to cry, but don’t doubt for a moment that you’re a good man, Draco. You broke through your father’s conditioning to become the friend of half-bloods, Muggleborns, and Gryffindors, and you’re facing him down like a hero. I think you’ve earned a bit of your pride back, mate. You’re all right.”


The man nodded and held Harry tight again, wrapping his other arm around Draco’s shoulders. “I think it will do us both good to lay our demons to rest. Then we can face him at the battle and know we are making the right choice.”

Draco sat a little taller and nodded, determination and hope replacing the despair in his eyes. “Right. Well, for me, I guess it started when I was four or so….”

20 MARCH

Severus spent most of the day talking with Draco, working out their fears and shared pain. By the time he walked into the final Order meeting before the battle, Harry at his side, he believed himself as ready to face Lucius and reclaim his life as he would ever be. Harry’s love had helped Severus to overcome the most crippling traumas of his past, and while he would still have trouble every now and then, Poppy had pronounced him recovered. She still wanted to see him for therapy once a month, but he had come a long way, and he had faith that he would survive tomorrow without freezing, even if Lucius did attempt to use his past abuse as a weapon against him.
Draco, too, had made great strides, though he was far from healed. Still, he would have Dean and the DA to look out for him. Severus wouldn’t be able to. He had a battle of his own to fight.

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand as they stepped into the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. “Are you ready for this?”

Severus gave him a gentle smile. “I am. Thank you for standing by me.”

“I always will.”

Severus wished he could kiss his husband, but he couldn’t risk it in front of the Order. Instead, he traced his thumb over Harry’s knuckles and sent a wave of love through their bond.

[I love you too, Sev.]

Severus smiled and released his husband’s hand. “Come. With Albus in the holding cells, you and I will need to sit at the head of the table.” He pulled out a seat for Harry even as the young man groaned.

“We’re taking the lead, then.”

“Yes. Perhaps it will mean less resistance from the old crowd. At least, that is the hope.”

Harry sighed and sank into the chair Severus had offered him. “I’ll do it gladly if it means they stop bickering for five minutes.”

Severus chuckled and settled into the chair beside Harry, two seats down from Albus’ usual place. Harry would need to be seen as the primary leader this time to give his DA credence. He hoped their ploy worked—Merlin knew they didn’t have time to argue.

While the rest of the Order trickled in, mostly in groups of twos and threes, Molly came to Harry and hugged him to her bosom.

“I just wanted to say I’m proud of you, son,” she said with a kiss to his cheek. “You’ve become quite the leader as of late.”

Harry gave her a wan smile. “I’d rather not be, but it has to be done.”

“Yes, I know.”

At this point, Kingsley tapped Harry on the shoulder and whispered, “Everyone is here but Albus and Tonks, as she’s guarding him. Much as I wish we could do this as usual, you need to start the meeting.”

Harry nodded, his expression grim. “Let’s hope they listen to me.”

“Yes.”

Kingsley moved to his proper seat, and Harry stood, Severus mirroring his actions.

“Everyone, please take your seats,” Harry said. “I know you’re all used to Albus calling the shots, and I’d much rather he be here myself, but as we can’t afford to break Albus out of the Ministry holding cells too soon, I’m afraid we’ll have to make do without him for the moment.”

Doge opened his mouth as if he would protest, but a sharp look from Minerva shut him up. Everyone else moved to their places without trouble, and in the face of such a unified front, Doge had little
other choice but to follow, though he looked singularly disgruntled about it.

“Thank you,” Harry said without acknowledging Doge’s immaturity. “Now, as you know, this is our last meeting before the attack on the Death Eaters, and though we’re all familiar with the plan by this point, it would do us all good to go over it one last time and make sure we’ve all the kinks worked out.

“First, all of you are aware that, earlier in the year, Lucius Malfoy attempted to ensnare me into a false relationship with Draco, advising him to subjugate me and, eventually, transport me to Riddle when I was… ahem… indisposed.”

Draco flushed and dropped his head. Dean rubbed his back to comfort him.

“Draco has never subjugated me or even attempted it,” Harry continued with a smile at his friend, “but we’re going to use that plan as our way into the Death Eater hideout. Three days prior, Draco sent a letter to Lucius Malfoy claiming that he’s since come to see the error of his ways and plans to trick me into appearing at Riddle’s side when I’m alone.”

Doge snapped, “And who’s to say that’s not his plan after all?”

Draco winced, then stood and glared at the old man. “Does this convince you?” He jerked down his sleeve, revealing his bare left arm. “If I were to go to this meeting as a Death Eater with my mark gone and obviously in love with Dean—a Muggleborn—they’d kill me on the spot.”

Doge spluttered, “How? You… we know you had the mark!”

“Yes. But Harry removed it.” Severus revealed his own arm, bare as the day he was born, and the Order sucked in a breath as one.


Harry gave the man a wry smile. “I told you two weeks ago I found Riddle’s notes on the original marking spell in the Chamber. I just reversed the spell matrix, with help from Hermione, Daphne, and Luna.”

Doge called, “But—”

Harry slammed his hands on the table. “Doge, enough! Let me make this clear: this is the last Order meeting before the battle. We don’t have time for arguments and interruptions, and anyone who feels the urge to continually cause them can see themselves out.”

The old man opened his mouth to fight, again, but every eye in the Order glared at him the next moment, and he subsided with a grimace.

“Just… get on with it then,” he muttered.

“Quite a good idea,” Severus said with a roll of his eyes. “As Harry was saying, Draco has pretended to betray us, having supposedly turned back to the dark at the realisation of what remaining light would cost him, and just last night, received a portkey with instructions from his father to use it at a specific time: the night they plan to attack Hogwarts, one hour before the battle.”

“However,” Harry said, taking up the thread from his husband, “we’re obviously not going to follow those instructions. Instead, we’re going to use his portkey to get us all into the hideout on the morning of our attack. As even Severus isn’t sure where Riddle has camped out this time, this is our only way in.”
Severus held up a black velvet sack with several clinking objects. “Your portkeys and protective charms are in this bag.” He removed a ring for himself and slid it onto his right ring finger. “Besides the portkey attuned to the master ring—” He gave Harry a ruby ring from his pocket, and Harry slid it onto the same finger. “—These all have charms to protect against most curses, magical and standard fire, poisons, and Muggle weapons. They are not perfect, and they will most certainly not stop the Unforgiveables, but they will give us an unanticipated advantage that might save lives. Take a ring and pass them on.”

He handed the bag to Minerva, sitting next to him, and observed as she removed a ring and placed it above her wedding band. Her husband had died in the first war, but Minerva had never taken off her ring. Severus squeezed her shoulder in comfort, then resumed his briefing.

“Do not remove your portkey ring for any reason,” Severus went on. “The password is as discussed in the previous meeting. The password will not work until Harry has activated his master ring—it is the only way to be sure to bypass the hideout’s wards—but do be careful not to speak it by accident regardless.”

Harry waited until several people had taken a ring before he took over. “While you’re getting your portkeys, let’s go over the plan of attack. First, Draco will use Malfoy’s portkey to transport me to Riddle’s location. We will pretend that he took advantage of me as I came out of the shower to bring me to Riddle while I was indisposed. Of course, I will be dressed for battle under several glamours, but Riddle and the Death Eaters won’t see that. With any luck, it will be enough to keep Draco from being punished.”

“The Dark Lord will be too distracted by your presence to care whether Draco broke their original plans or not,” said Severus with a shake of his head.

“That’s the hope anyway,” Harry agreed with a shudder.

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulder to soothe him. “He will. It will be all right.”

“Thank you, Sev.”

“Not at all.”

Severus turned back to the others but left his hand on his husband’s shoulder. “Once Harry is in, Draco will pretend to subdue him, and Harry will use the false attack as a cover to rub his ring behind his back. The moment he does this, our rings will glow with a green light and grow hot. At that instant—or two minutes after Draco disappears, in case something does not go to plan—we are to speak the password. You are to follow that instant and immediately attack the nearest Death Eaters. No hesitation, no holding back. We cannot give them even a moment to prepare, but must use the advantage of surprise to overwhelm them quickly, and we fight to kill.”

Several Order members winced, but as the ones who did weren’t on their attack team, Severus did not chide them for it.

“My ring is keyed to drop me directly beside Harry no matter who or what might be in the way. Once I arrive, Harry and I will immediately begin fighting our way to Riddle.”

“And since Severus will be seen as a traitor,” said Harry, his eyes sharp, “we’ll have the steepest opposition. I expect anyone not fighting for their neck to protect us—and Draco as well. Anyone who has a problem with that can leave the attack group. Now.”

No one moved.
“Severus has proved his worth,” Kingsley said with a wry smile. “I might not like the man much, but I won’t let him be killed, Harry. Most of us feel the same.”

“Not all of us,” said Minerva with a scowl. “I happen to like Severus quite a lot. And I will defend him, as well as Draco and Harry, to the best of my capabilities.”

“We all will,” said Bill with a fierce nod.

“Thank you,” Harry replied, a smile warming his features. “Now, once Severus and I engage Voldemort, this is where things are going to get tricky. Sev and I have finished the spells to take him down and banish his soul permanently, but they take time and an immense amount of power to cast.” He closed his eyes and tensed. “There’s also a possibility I may be incapacitated when we use them. Or both of us. So we need to take down as many of the Death Eaters as possible first and, hopefully, free up people to guard us.”

“When Harry has a clear shot and a team of fighters to keep us safe,” said Severus, “he will begin the first spell to make Voldemort mortal once more.” The fact that he could say the name without flinching inspired shock and awe among his colleagues, which he pretended not to notice. “During this spell, I will have to stay by Harry’s side and fight to keep him safe. The spell we must use… is quite draining.”

He didn’t dare risk alerting the Order to the truth. Besides the fact that Voldemort might read their intent in the minds of anyone who didn’t know Occlumency—thank Merlin, everyone who knew at least had rudimentary ability with the skill—the Order, and Molly in particular, would riot if they knew the true risk to Harry’s life.

Lupin opened his mouth as if to protest, a worried look in his eyes, but Severus silenced him with a sharp glare. At the same time, Harry’s voice echoed in both of their minds.

[Remus, enough of the Order and DA know the truth to protect us, should the worst happen. If we reveal it here, they’ll all go mad.]

Lupin frowned, clearly unsettled about lying to the others about such a grave situation, but there was no time to deal with the fallout the truth would cause. The Order—and Britain at large—had put Harry on a pedestal for years. They wouldn’t let him fight if they knew the truth, and as much as Severus might want to keep his mate from battle, he knew they had no choice if the war was ever to end.

Severus closed his eyes and struggled not to panic, terrified for his role and the dire responsibility laid on his shoulders. If Harry lost his soul, if their bond lay broken for eternity because of Severus’ failures, he would go utterly mad.

A gentle hand closed on his own. Bright green eyes full of trust looked into his own. “I believe in you.” [I love you, and whatever happens, know I will never blame my fate on you.]

Severus closed his eyes tighter so the Order might not witness him weep.

Harry held his hand and carried on, his voice strong despite the heavy burden destiny had placed upon his shoulders. “This spell—none of us can perform it but Severus and myself. I am the only one with a connection to Riddle, and he’s the only one with a strong enough connection to me to anchor me. So please, don’t try to interfere or hold us back. Just help us. Keep us safe. Keep the Death Eaters out of our hair while we fight him. That’s the best way you can help us.”

Minerva’s hand fell on Severus’ shoulder, light and unobtrusive, but comforting for all that. “I will
protect you to the end.”

“Hear, hear,” cried the twins.

The DA called, “To the end!”

Severus bowed his head, overwhelmed by their show of support. Harry’s hand on his own helped him recoup, and when he spoke again, only the slightest quiver of emotion rocked his voice. Even that was enough to render Molly Weasley positively soft.

“Thank you. With that said, we must move on to the next stage of our plan. Once the first spell to make Riddle mortal is completed, we will, assuming Harry and I are able, kill him. We will use whatever means we have available, and there are many. Besides spells, Harry will also carry both the Sword of Gryffindor, which has aligned itself to him, and a standard sword in case that one fails. I, as well, will be armed, as will any of you with weapons skill. If I am disarmed or my sword fails, I will also carry a poisoned dagger. If that fails, then there is Harry’s familiar.”

Several people paled and grimaced at the reminder of Harry’s venomous pet.

“Oh, do buck up,” Severus said with a roll of his eyes. “Jabardi will never harm anyone without a damn good reason, and Harry carries antivenin at all times in case of an accident. There’s no reason to act like a lot of ninnies.”

Harry snorted. “Yes, what Sev said. Jabardi is trained to attack Death Eaters, either on my command or if someone trying to kill us gets too close. Other than that, he’s quite friendly. Even Ron’s learned to like him, and Ron hates snakes.”

“Most of them,” said Ron with a shudder, “but Jabardi’s all right.” He grimaced. “As long as he stays in his space, mind.”

Harry chuckled. “He knows. We need to move on, though. As Severus was saying, we’ve prepared several different ways to take out Riddle in varying scenarios, but if, for some reason, we should both be incapacitated once our soul spell is over, then, by all means, kill the bloody bastard! Don’t stand there and run around with your tails between your legs.

“There’s a reason I’m slated as the only one who can fight him—because I’m the only one who can make him mortal. But, once I’m done, that doesn’t mean he can’t be topped with a quick cutting curse or a ruddy rock to the head. Just make sure he’s good and dead. And when Severus and I come to, if we are knocked out, we’ll finish the soul banishing spell then. Else, we’ll use the spell as soon as he’s dead.”

Podmore asked, “Why not use the spell to kill him?”

Harry shuddered. “Merlin, no. Even for Voldemort, I’m not that inhumane.”

“When used on a living human,” said Severus in a grim voice, “the spell is equivalent to the Dementor’s Kiss, only much more painful, or so we suspect. Obviously, we have not tested it on a living subject. On a dead target, there is nothing left within them to feel the pain. Indeed, their soul should already be gone to the realm beyond and thus, the spell would not work at all. We are only using it on Voldemort to ensure that every piece of his soul, which he has taken measures to anchor to this realm even in the event of his apparent death, is completely gone from this realm. We are using it to ensure that no one else is ever able to resurrect him.”

The old man’s face twisted into a grimace. “F-fair enough.”
Severus nodded and continued, ignoring his colleague’s increased discomfiture. “Once he is down and his soul banished, the marked Death Eaters will, most likely, be incapacitated. Their mark is tied into Voldemort’s life force and magic. When he dies, they will be drained; however, it is only temporary, so do make sure you bind and capture those still living before they come to and finish us off.”

“Understood,” said Stonewall. “We’ll make sure they stay out of trouble, eh, Filius?”

Filius chuckled grimly. “Indeed.”

Severus didn’t want to know what the half-dwarf and quarter-goblin had planned for their enemies. Both races had… reputations. With a suppressed shudder, he turned back to the Order and continued the meeting.

“Now that we’ve gone over the plan, we must make sure everything is ready for the battle. Lupin, are the castle defenders prepared for a siege?”

Lupin nodded. “We’re ready to fight.”

“Sturgis, the kitchens and loo are stocked?”

“Yes, Severus. We’ve gathered enough food, water, and supplies to hold for a month. Beyond that, we’ll have to pray we learn how to remove the anti-house elf wards in time, or find a way to bring in relief from outside.”

“There are secret tunnels to Hogwarts that might come in handy in such a situation,” said Harry grimly, “but you’ll have to be careful. Pettigrew knows of most of them, and that means Riddle does too.”

Podmore winced. “Do we have guards on those tunnels?”

Lupin nodded. “We warded the hell out of them last week, remember? Or did you think we were casting spells over the one-eyed witch for the fun of it?”

Podmore blushed. “Ah. Well, that is good to know.”

“Indeed.” Severus turned to the matron. “Poppy, is the Infirmary prepared?”

“As well as it can be. Between you, Draco, and your helpers, I’ve enough potions to last through a siege three times over. Besides that, I’ve called in a personal friend—sworn to an oath of secrecy—to help me gather aid from St. Mungo’s Sunday morning and during their planned siege, if our attack fails.”

Severus nodded to her as well. “Well done. Shacklebolt, is your team ready?”

“We have all the Order-sworn and Light-loyal aurors prepared for battle. As promised, they don’t know the date and time, only that we’re aware Riddle is planning something and we need all hands on deck. I’ve arranged a ‘practise drill’ to take place early Sunday morning, so they’ll be ready and armed in time for the fight as well.”

Severus tossed the auror a bag. “Portkeys for the aurors. Don’t hand them out until five minutes before the attack and make sure none of them… slink away. They will not work unless we call for backup—the rings will flash red and activate if Minerva, Harry, or myself deem the battle too intense for us to handle alone. The details of our attack and method of dispatch need to be kept within the Order and DA as much as possible, for Harry’s sake. You are to come to our aid regardless,
however, as soon as the battle begins. Robards knows what to do?"

“He does,” said Shacklebolt as he pocketed the portkeys. “The aurors are ready, Snape.”

“Good. Harry, your DA troops are ready for battle as well?”

Harry gave him a wry smile. “You’re fully aware of their capabilities. And yes, we are. We’ve trained for years for this day.”

“So have we all.”

“True.” Harry took over for Severus. “Professor Vector, what’s the situation with the castle wards?”

“As strong as we can make them,” said the Arithmancy professor. “We’ve used runic and Arithmantic formulas to make them all but impossible to break. At least, so we hope.”

“Well done. And Kingsley, one more thing. We’re ready to bust Albus out the morning of? He knows what to expect and to get plenty of rest the night before? Tonks is aware of the plan and ready to go?”

Kingsley nodded. “Tonks nicked his wand last week without problems, and Fawkes is going to break him out so the Ministry doesn’t suspect us. And not even Ministry wards can prevent a phoenix apparition. Nothing can do, not that I know of.”

“Thank Merlin for that,” said Harry with a grin. He looked out on his colleagues and took a deep breath. “Well, I think that’s it then. That’s everything we can prepare beforehand. Does anyone have any questions?”

Ron met Harry’s eyes. “Mate, I think your plan is a good one—with Draco and all. But don’t you think there’s a good chance You-Know-Who knows it’s a ploy?”

Harry nodded. “We considered that. The thing is he won’t be expecting us the day before the battle regardless. He won’t expect us to launch a pre-emptive counterstrike at all. And even if, by some off chance, he is prepared for the attack tomorrow, Riddle still doesn’t know I’ve been training an army or duelling with Albus and Severus for two years. He’ll be expecting a group of badly-trained kids, not an entire army’s worth of fighters. So even if he’s wise to our game, we’ll still have much more power than he’s prepared for.”

“And what if he disables you before you can activate the portkey? Then what do we do?”

“Severus knows to come if I haven’t called him after two minutes,” said Harry, grim-faced. “But how is he to find you?”

“We’ve set the rings so, should I be unable to rub mine, the magic linking Severus’ ring to mine will lock on to my location regardless after two minutes, even if I’m across the globe. Then Severus’ will glow red, and you are to go on his word. Should I need you there sooner, I’ll attempt to reach Severus through my telepathy, and Severus will follow the link between our minds to my side and activate my ring himself.”

Ron grimaced. “Mate… that might not be enough.”

Harry nodded. “I know. We’ll just have to hope I can keep him talking until the two minutes is up. You know how he loves to brag, so that shouldn’t be so hard.” Harry’s mental voice spoke to Severus and Ron at once. [Don’t forget our bond, Ron. Sev should know if I’m in trouble.]
Ron relaxed marginally and nodded. “That’s true. All right, mate. I trust you.”

Severus felt how powerfully those words affected his mate, even if he didn’t show much on his face.

“Thank you. Are there any other questions?”

No one spoke, and after a moment of silence, Minerva stood and bowed to Harry and Severus.

“Whatever happens, boys, I’m proud of you. You’ve taught us all the meaning of courage and strength, and I am honoured to fight at your side.”

Severus blinked back his emotions and bowed as well, expression stony to hide his strong reactions to her faith in him. Beside him, Harry bowed too.

“Thank you,” Harry said, his voice rough. “We feel the same way. And I believe—no, I know—with courage and devotion like this, we can only prevail.” He wiped his eyes and gave them all a tearful smile, his strength undiminished by the emotion behind it. “Well done, everyone. Go home, rest up, and try not to think too much on what’s coming. We’ll get through this together. I believe in you.”

That night, no one in the Order left with dry eyes.

In the final hours before the battle, Severus spent hours worshipping his husband’s body, praying with everything in him it wouldn’t be the last time. After they sated their desires and fed their bond with many rounds of desperate, emotional lovemaking, Severus guided his husband into the bath and lay with him in the water, relaxing and trying to wrap his mind around the enormity of what they faced come morning.

Time kept slipping away, and fuck, Severus wished it would slow down. In just a few short hours, he would have to fight for the soul of the one he loved, and despite his faith in Harry and their bond, dear gods, he was terrified. The thought of losing him made his skin crawl with panic, and each time the thought fluttered through his mind that this might be the last time he felt his husband so close, Severus clutched him tighter. He never wanted to let go.

Harry’s muffled voice interrupted another fearful embrace, and Severus moved back so his husband could speak.

“What did you say, love?”

“I asked… well, if we survive this tomorrow, do you think you’ll want to start a family?”

Severus froze, remembering the dream he had seen on their bonding night. “Harry, it is not possible for two men to have children together.”

Harry gave him a bemused look. “Have children together? You mean like… yours and mine? Dear Merlin, as nice as it sounds, where on earth did you get that idea? We’re men! At least one of us would have to have the proper equipment.”

Severus flushed to his ears and broke into laughter. “A silly dream, I suppose.” He kissed Harry’s neck and murmured into his ear, “You meant adoption, I take it?”

“Yeah. I figure there are probably a lot of orphans in need of homes now no thanks to Riddle’s
warmongering. Would you… I mean, I understand if you don’t want to, but…?”

“Mm.” Severus held Harry close. “I would like to have a public bonding ceremony first so the world will recognise that our children bear the Prince name, but yes, I would like to have a family with you, my love.”

Harry gasped and turned around, grabbing Severus’ face. “What? Really?”

“Yes.” Severus kissed Harry softly. “I dreamed of having a family of my own once. It died when I was marked. I believed I would die alone and hated and did not want to pass my stigma onto my children. But now—now with that taint gone and a beautiful man in my life to help me raise them, yes, I would love to adopt, beloved.”

“Sev!” Harry kissed Severus passionately. “I love you. I love you so much.”

Severus gave a breathless laugh. “I love you too, but I hope you are not expecting another repeat performance. I have already outdone my record by far.”

Harry laughed and settled in Severus’ arms. “No, no. I think even I’m oversexed at the moment.”

“Oversexed? I do not think that word means what you think it means.”

Harry snorted and splashed Severus’ chest. “Stop it. You’re always quoting that bloody film. Never knew you were a fan.”

Severus adopted an expression of innocent confusion. “I am quoting a film?”

Harry broke into helpless laughter. “Oh gods, that’s right. You’ve been in the wizarding world for the past twenty or so years exclusively. There’s no way you would have seen it. Unless, did you make some cinema runs about ten years ago?”

Severus grimaced. “Can you imagine me in a dirty, smelly, over-populous cinema?”

“Er… now that you mention it, not so much.”

“Hmm.” Severus settled Harry against him once more. “What film am I quoting?”

“‘The Princess Bride.’ Er, when the man says, ‘as you wish,’ it means he loves her.”

“Oh? Well, I suppose that part is accurate at least. I do love you.” And, when their bond was still new, he had often used the quote to tell Harry he loved him without saying the words.

Harry chuckled. “I love you too. We’ll have to figure out how to watch it someday. Maybe Arthur knows how to fix a DVD player to work in the wizarding world.”

Severus smirked. “Or we could simply watch the copy I have at Spinner’s End.”

“The copy you have…?” Harry smacked him across the chest playfully, splashing water and bubbles everywhere. “Oi! You cheat!”

Severus laughed and held him tight. “Forgive me. I could not resist.”

Harry chuckled and kissed his cheek. “Nothing to forgive. Though now I know you have a devious sense of humour, I wonder what else you might have been pulling my leg about.”

Severus laughed softly against Harry’s hair, but his mirth faded fast. “I hope I have the chance to
play with you often in the future, my love.”

Harry sobered. “So do I.”

Severus held him close. “This time tomorrow, the war will all be a bad dream.”

“How can you be so sure? So many things could go wrong. What if we cocked up the spells, or we
don’t have enough power to drag all his horcruxes back into him? What if we get attacked in the
middle of it? What if I bloody miss trying to kill him and then we’re all screwed? What if—”

Severus pressed a gentle finger to his lips. “Ssh. If I am honest, I am afraid too, but I do have faith
we will survive.”

“Why?”

“Because I believe in you.”

Harry sighed and kissed Severus’ fingertip. “Well, I believe in you too, so maybe you’re right.”

Severus nodded and kissed his husband until the tension left his body. “We will be all right, Harry.
I… I believe it. I have to.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean.”

Harry lazed in the bath, playing with his husband’s chest and wishing this moment could last forever.
Or even just a little longer. Anything not to have to face the grim reality of the dawn.

But time marched on, and no man could deny it passage. Not even men with time turners.

“Come,” Severus murmured. “We should get some sleep soon.”

Harry sighed and tried to bring some levity to the situation, that the darkness might not overwhelm
him. “Not to mention, your fingers look like prunes.”

Severus poked Harry in the ribs with said fingers and made him laugh.

Harry squirmed away and climbed out of the tub. He hadn’t made it to the towels before fear settled
in again. “Severus, we’re going to be okay, right? It’s going to be all right?”

Severus stepped out of the tub too and took his wet, naked husband into his arms. “No one can
promise the future, beloved, not even Luna. But I believe in you, and I believe we will have many
more moments like this to share with our family.”

“Maybe not like this, considering we’re both naked.”

Severus snorted. “Merlin. I try to comfort you and suddenly you are a joker.”

Harry buried his face in Severus’ chest and stifled a laugh. “Maybe I need to be. If I’m laughing, I’m
not crying.”

Severus nodded and held Harry tight. “Yes. I… I understand.”
Harry sighed and Summoned Severus’ towel off the rack. “Come on, love. It’s already late. We’d better try to get some sleep or we’ll be too tired to manage the spellwork tomorrow.”

“Yes. You’re sure Jabardi is fed?”

“Yeah. Everything’s ready. I’m just so scared.”

“I know. I am too.” Severus guided Harry to bed. “Lie down with me, love, and for just a few hours, allow me to give you pleasant dreams.”

“You always do. Your Zopathy is amazing.”

Severus chuckled. “I feel the same about you. Your powers of Telepathy have saved our hides more than once.” He snuggled close and kissed Harry’s forehead. “How strange that I should have bonded to my opposite, but I am happy.” He buried his face in Harry’s hair and shivered. “I might never have known happiness if not for you. I… I am grateful, for everything you have giv—”

Harry stopped him with a tearful kiss. “Don’t. Don’t say goodbye. We’ll be here to say these things after it’s all over.”

Severus blinked tears of his own down his face and nodded, his emotions heavy with fear and love. Gods, Harry couldn’t bear it, knowing how terrified Severus was.

Well, maybe he couldn’t take the edge of panic from his emotions like Severus could do for him, but he could flood his husband with love and peace. Maybe they would give each other pleasant dreams, at least until they had to face their nightmares.

Severus drained Harry’s fear and Occluded it away, and Harry used the peace and love Severus’ skills gave him to return the favour, projecting his positive emotions through the bond to his husband.

Severus gave a soft sigh and sank into the pillows. “Thank you.”

“Mm, me too.”

Harry settled into Severus’ arms, at ease in Severus’ love, at least for the moment. Severus draped the cover over them and tucked Harry in close against his chest.

“Let us rest easy tonight. Tomorrow is soon enough to face our troubles.”

“All right, my Sev.” Harry snuggled into his husband’s arms and, cradled in the warmth of his love and his arms, soon fell fast asleep.
Out of the Shadows

Chapter Summary


AN: Hey, guys. Sorry I've been shit about responding to comments. I've just not been well enough with the recovery from hell. But I'm finally back on the path to being... as healthy as I can be, as a chronically-ill person. Anyway, hope the battle delivers. Strap in, everyone. Here we go.

Chapter 62

Out of the Shadows

21 MARCH

Harry walked into the Order’s waiting room looking like the strong warrior Severus had trained him to be, but feeling a total wreck. This was it. The moment had come. In just thirty minutes, Harry would lead his team to Voldemort, for better or worse. In thirty short minutes, Harry would fight for his soul and for the lives of everyone he loved.

Had Severus not stood beside him, the warmth of his body and love feeding Harry strength, he wasn’t sure he could have marched into Grimmauld Place with a smile on his face.

The Order and DA had gathered in the living room—magically-enlarged to hold their entire army. They stood in their battle armour, some with weapons, others with medical kits, and others with nothing more than their wands, but everyone wore the same expression of tense apprehension. Wizards had feared even to speak Riddle’s name for fifty years, and the prospect of facing him head-on was daunting. Their fear and alarm nearly choked the young Telepath, and Luna, in her corner furthest away from the others, looked to be sick.

“Severus,” Harry murmured, “can you do something?”

Severus grimaced. “For so many? I fear you need more than the aid of a Zopath.”

“Right.”

Harry stood tall and threw his shoulders back. They needed to see a leader. Albus, of course, would have words of wisdom for them when he arrived, but Albus wasn’t there, and he hadn’t borne the weight of prophecy for seventeen years anyway. No, this battle was Harry’s. And he would be damned before he let his friends down, even if that meant he had to step into a role he would rather have left to someone else.

“All right, you lot,” he said, his voice strong and unwavering. “I know everyone’s scared. Merlin, you’d be mad not to be. But this, this moment….” He cast the twins and Oliver Wood an impish look. “This is it, everyone. The big one. The—”
The twins finished in tandem. “The one we’ve all been waiting for!”

Oliver snorted. “That sounds rather familiar, mate.”

George called, “It should do!”

Fred finished. “We only heard it every quidditch match, practise, and scrimmage for three years.”

Harry’s laughter made the others chuckle. After all, if the bloody Chosen One was confident enough to joke, it would be all right, wouldn’t it?

He silently cursed the burden fate had laid on his shoulders but, despite his resigned irritation, plastered a grin on his face. “No sad faces right now, all right? We’ve trained for this day for years, and victory is finally within our grasp.”

Everyone hung on his words. Even Finnigan looked at him as someone worthy of respect. Harry didn’t look back. The bastard might have overcome his prejudice, but he had still cost Harry his familiar. He was only here at all because they needed every able body in the coming battle. If Harry had his way, Finnigan would’ve been out on his arse in sixth year, but as he didn’t, he would deal with the prat if it meant one more person he truly cared about survived.

“So of course, we can’t pretend the situation isn’t a dangerous one,” Harry continued. “I hope to Merlin we all pull through this intact, but the possibility remains… we might not. We’re attacking the Death Eaters first this time, but that doesn’t guarantee victory or that we’ll be able to win without losing lives. We must acknowledge that fact, but—” He stood tall and held eye contact with those he sensed were suffering most. “—Don’t let it rule you. Don’t forget, we have the advantage today. This time, we’re not helpless victims caught unawares—we call the shots. We’re in charge. We are warriors, and we have weapons and training Voldemort would never expect in a thousand years. We are the soldiers of the Light, and we’re ready for this!”

Bill called back, “Hell yes, we are!” His mother thwacked him in the back of the head, but Bill just grinned.

“That’s right,” Harry said with a chuckle. “We’re the best damn army out there, and we have reason to go into this with pride.” Molly shot him a look, but didn’t interfere.

Harry bowed to them, emotion rendering his voice rough. “And I want all of you to know, whatever happens out there today, I’m honoured to have fought with all of you.” He looked up and gave them a brilliant, tear-edged grin. “Now, buck up and sharpen those swords. We have a Dark Lord to beat the snot out of.”

The twins raised their wands in salute. “Hear, hear,” said one.

The other cried, “Old Mouldy won’t know what hit ‘im, mate!”

“For Light,” said Luna, her silver eyes shining.

“And for love,” Severus finished, his face soft and his hand held discreetly at Harry’s back.

Harry couldn’t resist giving the man a warm smile. “Yes. For light and for love, two things Voldemort and the Death Eaters will never understand and cannot protect themselves against. He’ll never understand that a mother fighting for her children, a brother protecting his siblings, a friend fighting for their best mate is far more powerful than a greedy megalomaniac with nothing but the quest for power to motivate him. Because we do understand, we are stronger than him. We are the Light, and before this day is done, the sun will rise on the shadows of Britain and remember us as the...
heroes who made her shine again!"

A rowdy cheer broke out, and Harry leaned against Severus’ hand with a sad smile. “Well,” he murmured, “how did I do for my first war speech?”

“Admirably well, I’d say. At least they do not look as though they are going to their own funerals any longer, and Luna is smiling again.”

“At least that.”

A soft-spoken voice at his shoulder caught Harry off-guard. “Sirius would be so proud of you, if he could see you now.”

Harry turned, heart aching and eyes stinging, to see a contrite Remus standing behind him, head bowed and hands folded in front of him.

“I’m proud of you too,” the werewolf said, his voice wavering.

Harry choked back a lump in his throat. “Remus?”

“I’m sorry,” Remus said, tears shining on his eyes. “I missed it. Over the past two years, you’ve grown into a wonderful young man—a general and a hero—and I… I missed it. Harry, I know… I know it means nothing. I know it’s not enough. But I’m so sorry I haven’t been here for you.” Tears slid down his face. “And if we both make it through this day, I’ll be damned sure to make it up to you in the future.”

Harry swallowed hard and closed his eyes, breathing harshly until he was sure he could speak without breaking. “And Severus?”

Remus held Severus’ gaze, then lowered himself into a bow. “I deeply regret how I have hurt you in the past and… how I treated you recently. Both of you.” He stood and offered the man a hand. “Will you accept my apologies, for Harry’s sake, if not my own?”

Severus fixed the werewolf with a piercing gaze, for a moment, acting as though he would refuse. But just when Remus began to lower his hand, Severus shook it firmly.

“I will. For Harry’s sake, as you have said, but also because today is the day we face our fates. Too much is at stake to hold grudges.”

Harry looked at Finnigan and sighed. “Right.” He let his anger go. He mightn’t ever forgive the man for Isuri, but for this one day, he would regard Finnigan as a comrade in arms, if not a friend. They were, at last, fighting on the same side. Harry could honour that, for now.

There was no room for hatred among allies on the battlefield.

Remus nodded and rubbed a hand across his eyes. “Yes. I… I agree. And, with that in mind, I… I want to fight with you today, at the hideout, I mean. I need to be there, to protect you, Harry. I’ve failed you for so long, and I want to begin setting things right, if you’ll let me.”

Harry searched his eyes. “Are you sure? It’s going to be dangerous.”

“I know, but you’re facing far worse danger, and I can’t let you go into that alone without at least trying to help.”

Severus squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “I believe we have room in the second attack group.”
Harry sighed and nodded. “Go stand with McGonagall then. Let her know you’re joining her squadron and Sev and I have approved it. She’ll find a place for you.”

Remus gave him a sad smile and a hug. “Thank you, Harry. Good luck.”

“To you as well,” Severus said with a nod.

Remus returned it and moved to address McGonagall.

Harry watched him settle in and turned to Severus. “Are we ready then?”

“Not quite. We need Albus.” Severus raised his voice. “Tonks, I believe it is time to fetch our figurehead from his… quarters.”

Tonks nodded and gave a shrill whistle. A moment later, Albus appeared in a burst of flame, looking a little worse for the wear, but whole nonetheless.

“Ah, how nice it is to be able to stretch my legs at last,” the old man said with a chuckle.

Tonks snorted and removed the man’s anti-magic cuffs and shackles. “I bet.” She pulled a familiar wand from his pocket and handed it to Albus. “There you are, sir.”

Albus took the wand with a smile. “Ah, I had missed this.”

“Glad we could nick it for you before they snapped it, the bloody wankers. Anyway, your duelling robes and boots are in the small bedroom just around the corner.”

“Thank you, my dear. Now, with a bit of a stretch and perhaps a strong cup of tea, I believe I am ready to fight. Well, once I change out of these lovely Ministry-provided… robes, of course.” He indicated the bright orange jumpsuit the aurors had forced him into with a wry smile.

“Dobby be getting the headmaster’s favourite tea and sweeties,” said the elf. Harry caught a glimpse of him dancing around Albus’ feet and burst into laughter. Dobby had Luna’s roaring lion on his head—silenced, thankfully.

“Now that’s the spirit,” Harry said, still chuckling. “Lions for the win, eh?”

Severus snorted. “Not all of us are lions, I will remind you.”

Harry nodded wryly. “You’re brave as one, but yeah. I’m more than half-Slytherin myself these days, I think.”

“You are,” said Ron, “but there’s nothing wrong with that.”

Beside him, Daphne shot him a bright smile. “About time you figured that out, Weasley!”

Ron gave a nervous laugh and rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, better late than never, right?”

Daphne chuckled. “Right.” She took his hand and led him off somewhere, and Harry wondered if those two would make a go of it someday. Daphne might be able to tame him. It was an interesting match to be certain.

With a shake of his head, Harry returned his thoughts to the battle. There would be time for matchmaking later—so he hoped, anyway. Harry caught sight of Poppy and motioned her over. “Are the healers on standby?”
She nodded. “I came to inform you that we’re all ready at the castle when you are.”

Harry motioned for Draco. “No time like the present.”

Draco grimaced. “I disagree, Potter. A few more moments would be grand.”

Harry looked to Albus, who was still in his jumpsuit and trying to recover his wits, and nodded. “A moment, then. But once the headmaster collects himself, we’re off.”

Draco shuddered and clasped Harry’s arm. “It… it’s going to be okay, right?”

Harry closed his eyes. “None of us can promise you that. Not even Lu. But I can promise you I’m not going down without one hell of a fight.”

George cried, “Damn straight!”

Fred pumped his fist in the air and whooped. “Give ‘em hell, Harry!”

Molly cried, “Boys! At least pretend to have a civil tongue between the lot of you!”

Harry laughed to himself, his heart full of warmth and pride. Whatever fate he met in the battlefield, he would never regret knowing these wonderful, weird, lovely people.

“For light, and for love,” he murmured, and Severus’ arm around his shoulders gave him strength to believe it.

A few moments later, Kingsley sent Harry a message on his DA coin indicating the auror team was briefed and ready for battle. Which meant, if Harry intended to prevent any unforeseen treachery, he had to go now.

“Draco,” he called, his voice steady despite the numb terror that had settled on him. “It’s time.”

A hush fell over the troops.

“Everyone,” said Severus, “take your places. We are leaving for battle as soon as Harry’s ring goes off, or, if that fails, as soon as I apparate to him. Should I be required to intervene, my ring will send the portkey coordinates to yours as soon as I land. Do not dally.” He locked eyes with the fearful blond on Dean’s arm. “Draco.”

Draco gulped and stepped near, Dean at his side. They brought each other into a fierce kiss, and Harry found himself wishing he could bid his husband goodbye in the same manner.

As if he had understood Harry’s thoughts, Severus ran a gentle hand down Harry’s face, careless of their potential audience. “Be careful, my Harry,” he whispered.

“I promise. I have vows to keep.”

Severus hugged him tight and stepped back. “I am with you.”

“I know.”
Harry took a deep breath and began glamouring his clothing so it appeared he had stepped out of the shower with nothing but a robe on his bare body. Severus’ eyes gleamed at the sight of him, but the man managed to control himself in light of the grim situation.

“Right,” Harry said once he looked properly indisposed. “Grab my arm and take me away, Draco.”

Draco shuddered. “That sounds inappropriately romantic for what we’re going into.”

Harry snorted and shook his head. “Come on. The aurors already know. We’ve got to hurry in case there’s a spy Kingsley missed.”

“May Merlin guard our souls.” Draco took a deep breath and pressed the quill portkey into Harry’s palm. “Victory,” he said, and the world shifted around them.

Harry stumbled into Voldemort’s dining room, Draco clutching his arm and smirking as if he had just won the lottery, despite the rush of fear flooding his aura.

“I’ve brought you a present for breakfast, my lord,” said Draco with an obsequious bow, playing his part to perfection.

Harry acted stunned and clutched his ‘robe’ tight over his chest, thanking Merlin Severus’ bond with him blocked the usual pain from his scar this time. He could fight like this, as long as Severus was all right.

“Well, well, well,” said Voldemort, standing from his breakfast with a narrow-eyed stare. “Harry Potter. What a surprise.”

Harry growled out, “Draco, you bastard! You tricked me!”

Draco smirked. “Of course. You didn’t truly believe I cared for you, did you?”

Harry shrieked and moved as if to punch Draco, but the boy blocked it as discussed. He twisted Harry’s arm behind his back and pretended to subdue him, and Harry struggled to reach his portkey.

But before his fingers connected, Riddle knocked him back and pinned his wrists to the wall with raw magic.

Harry’s heart slammed into his ribs and his breath lodged in his throat. Oh fuck. This was bad. Merlin, he hoped he could keep Riddle talking, or failing that, reach Severus across the bond from so far away.

Riddle jerked the rat out of his seat and pressed a finger to the traitor’s mark. “We should all be present for this, don’t you think?”

Draco had gone pale, but he nodded. “Of course, my lord.”

Harry gasped and struggled against the magic, straining to reach his husband. Shite-shite-shite! Forget talking. If he couldn’t find Severus in time, Riddle would have him surrounded and then it would be too late.

“Harry Potter,” Riddle hissed, starting his usual monologue. “I am going to enjoy thissss.”

Harry fired off some defiant comment, but his attention was on his bond. His husband’s alarm turned it cold and trembling. Severus knew he was in danger, but until Harry connected or the link between their rings merged in two minutes, the man had nothing to follow.
'Come on, come on…'

As the Death Eaters began apparating in, Harry broke through Riddle’s spells enough to follow his bond. He had to hope his magic could reach far enough, or that Draco could keep Riddle talking long enough. Just another minute or so….

Riddle paused in his monologue and gave Harry a vicious leer. “Now, what should I do with such a specimen? It seems, since you have dressed so appropriately, I should allow my most loyal a bit of a… reward, hmm?”

Harry’s heart lurched. Oh gods, he was out of time.

“Lucius,” Riddle called and beckoned the worst of his followers forwards.

The blonde man stalked to Harry’s side, a predatory smirk on his smug face. Fuck! One touch, and….

“My, my, my. So underdressed for a party, Potter.” He shot Draco a disdainful look. “Disgusting as my son’s… appetites are, I must admit he does have rather good taste.”

Heart thundering in his chest, Harry slammed his magic into the bond and could have cried out in relief. As his mental link pushed past the last boundary in his bond to Severus, he screamed, [Sev! Hurry! Malfoy is about to—help me!]

A shockwave of horror assaulted him, and just as Lucius’ fingertip touched Harry’s ‘bare’ chest, Severus apparated almost on top of him. Lucius gasped and reeled back, grabbing his hand where Harry’s bond had shocked the arsehole.

“My lord! The Potter boy is—”

Severus reared back and punched Lucius square in the face. “Hands off my mate,” he whispered, his voice lethal.

Lucius’ eyes widened, but he had no time to speak before the Order apparated in and all hell broke loose.

“Traitors!” Voldemort screamed.

Albus apparated in and engaged him immediately, curse lights flying. “Ah, hello, Tom. How nice to see you again.”

How that man could stay so bloody congenial in the middle of a fight for his life, Harry would never understand.

A shield settled over Harry and Severus, maintained by whoever wasn’t fighting. The sight of it relieved Harry—that meant his army outnumbered the Death Eaters, at least for the moment. Severus used the brief respite to face Lucius down, standing protectively in front of his husband and baring his teeth in a vicious snarl. “I will kill you today, you fiend.”

Lucius sat up and wiped blood from his lip. “Oh? On the contrary, I believe you will soon find you cannot hurt me, little pet.”

Judging by the sneer on his face, Lucius had expected the word to freeze Severus, and Harry was doubly glad they had trained Severus to bear it. Severus’ eyelid twitched, but instead of falling into the past, he responded with a cutting curse right across Malfoy’s cultured nose.
“The hell I can’t!”

Shocked, Lucius staggered back and touched his bleeding nose. His face twisted into a snarl, but before he could react, a controlled blasting curse sent Malfoy flying into the wall at their left. Serve him right.

Hermione called from somewhere ahead, “Severus! Get your head in the game!”

“Right,” Severus muttered and turned to his husband, releasing his bonds and cancelling his glamours. “Are you well?”

“Fine, but we need to go after Riddle now. The others can’t keep protecting us long.” He pointed to the shield above them, and Severus nodded.

“Stay close,” Severus muttered, but Harry hardly needed the warning. They had prepared for this every day for over a year. He was ready.

The shield wavered and dropped, and Harry surged into battle. His training kicked in as he ducked curses and fired them back left and right, shutting out everything but the need to survive, the need to protect Severus, and his mission to close in on Voldemort. Albus’ battle with the bastard rang out ahead, curse lights flashing and Albus’ thundering voice a beacon for their feet. Harry fought his way towards it, struggling not to slip on the blood-coated floor. His stomach roiled at the gore around him, the smells and the screams, but he pressed on. Such was the reality of battle, when one fought to kill.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw a silver-blonde arsehole point his wand at his husband. [Sev, duck!]

Severus obeyed without thought, and the curse crashed into the wall behind them, leaving a crater. Harry returned fire with Sectumsempra. Lucius barely dodged it, but Pettigrew caught it in the face, and Harry triumphed to know he had avenged his family at last. The guilt would come later. For now, he had to focus.

A wave of alarm shot through the bond, and Severus thoughts echoed in Harry’s mind. [Move, love!]

Harry leapt over a bonebreaking hex aimed at his legs just in time. Behind him, Padma Patil went down, but before he could blink, Hannah Abbott was atop her with a Ferula to bind her broken ankle and a portkey straight to the Infirmary.

Harry hoped Hannah would be safe too, but he had no time to guard her. Rodolphus engaged him just then, eyes wild with fury for his deceased wife, and it was all Harry could do to keep himself in one piece. The bastard dropped from a fire curse to the face a moment later, and Harry looked up to find a grim-faced Neville staring at him. Harry nodded in thanks, and Neville vanished back into the fray.

“Your sssoldiersss are not as Light as they claim, old man,” came a hissing voice from just beyond, and Harry pushed through the last wave of Death Eaters guarding Riddle.

“Actually,” Harry fired back, “I think they’re a damn sight Lighter than you.”

“Harry Potter,” the red-eyed fiend hissed.

Severus stepped up beside his husband, eyes hard with cold resolution. “Gods you’re an ugly bastard.”
Harry choked back a laugh. “Now, Severus?”

“What? I’ve always wanted to say it.”

Albus stepped back to allow them to engage Riddle. “Good luck, boys.” A shield of phoenix fire settled over the four men, and both men locked their eyes and wands on Riddle.

“Sssoeveruss. You will pay for thisss.”

Severus shuddered. “I have never cursed the structure of my name more than when you mangle it, Tom.” Mentally, he added, [I am draining his positive emotions. Your turn.]

Riddle’s face morphed into something twisted with rage and madness. “Traitor!” The inhuman scream set Harry’s hair on end, and he used that horror to project his fear into Riddle.

Harry smirked at the utter confusion and alarm on the snake-bastard’s face. It was working. “That’s right, shitehead. He’s mine. He’s always been mine.”

[Dear Merlin, Harry,] said Severus in his mind, obviously not pleased with the thought of belonging to a twelve-year-old.

Harry snorted, but then all mirth faded.

“Enough!” Riddle’s natural mind-magic came into play, and their emotion altering spells dropped. “I should have known you for a Zopath! Who else could hide from me so well?”

“You would be surprised,” Severus shot back.

Riddle snarled. “Fools! You think you can alter me? I am the greatest wizard ever to walk this earth —”

[And there’s the monologue,] Harry muttered mentally. [It’s time, Sev, while he’s busy boasting. Are you ready to fight for me?]

Severus slipped his hand into Harry’s and laced their fingers. [I am now. Begin, and may Merlin guard our souls.]

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand and took a deep breath. [Albus, cover us.]

The old man nodded and deflected a curse from Riddle. Harry drew all his power to the fore, taking what Severus offered as well, until his body crackled with green and indigo light—the colours of their combined magic. Gold wove its way in as well, their bond’s light, and Riddle’s eyes widened.

“So thisss is what Luciusss tried to warn me about. Your betrayal runsss deeper than I realised, Sssoeveruss.”

Severus ignored him and ducked a killing curse. Someone went down behind them. Harry prayed it was a Death Eater and focused on the soul-healing spell.

[Severus, I love you. If I don’t m-make it—]

[No goodbyes,] Severus reminded him, and Harry squeezed his hand once more. Gods, Harry hoped he had the chance to tell him everything he wanted to say when this was all over.

[Gods, watch over us now,] he prayed, and began the spell. “Sana Anima Omnium!”
Harry watched as if from a distance as Riddle’s eyes widened and bits of blackened, screaming soul flew in from every direction and sank into his body.

“Salva Anima Omnium!”

The man stopped cursing them and sank to his knees, screaming as his soul mended itself without his consent.

“Restauro Anima Omnium!”

With the final portion of the spell, white-hot pain ripped through Harry’s skull and tore a shriek from his throat. A portion of red-tinged soul extricated itself from his forehead and began to float away. Harry thought for an instant Severus mightn’t need to fight for him at all, but then, shrill screaming flooded his head and the coldness of Dementors settled on him.

“No, not Harry! Please, don’t kill Harry!”

[Sev!]

His husband was already there, strong arms holding him, soft kisses on his hair anchoring him to the life he knew and loved.

Sirius’ last laugh reverberated in his mind and Harry’s own screams. “Sirius, no!” Would it be the last thing he heard?

“He is mine,” Severus snarled. “I will not let you have him!”

“Who wants to see me take Sniv—”

The voices cut off, and new words filled his mind, in his father’s voice. “No. I am no longer that boy.” More arms surrounded Harry—more than he could possibly explain—and the soul-crushing pain in his head lessened. “That’s it, son. Fight. Don’t let him win.”

Another voice, feminine and loving, filled Harry’s ears and his heart at once. “Hold onto Sev, baby. Let his love keep you anchored here. It’s not your time yet.”

“Mum… Dad….“ Dear Merlin, his parents had come to fight for his soul.

Severus held Harry tighter, tensing for a blow.

“Relax, Snape,” James said. “You’re good for him, though I never thought I’d say it. And he needs you. Just hold onto him and fight for him, all right?”

Severus let slip a shaky sigh into Harry’s hair and anchored them all in place. [Hold on, beloved. I have you. Hold on to me.]


“It’s okay, Sev. I know. I forgave you ages ago. Just focus on Harry now.”

[Y-yes.]

Severus’ tears—hot, wet, and real—dripped onto Harry’s neck and brought him further from the brink.
Severus called, [That’s it, beloved. Fight! We are almost there.]

Another voice, far more relaxed and less manic than Harry had ever heard it, echoed in his ears. “Snape, keep him safe for me. Take care of him.”


With his mind quickly becoming his own again, Harry whispered, [Mum, Dad, Sirius… what are you doing here?]

“They are not alone,” said a masculine voice Harry didn’t recognise. He looked up to find a youthful face much like Sirius’ and an elderly woman standing just behind him. Both looked to Severus with eyes full of deep love.

[Regulus,] Harry breathed. [Madam Greengrass.]

“Yes.” Regulus lifted a spiritual hand to Severus’ cheek. “I am sorry. I never meant to hurt you so.”

Tears streamed down Severus’ face. [I know. I forgive you. But I am… Harry and I…]

“I know. Love him, hold him, be happy, Severus. That is all I ever wanted for you. I am sorry I could not stay long enough to share it with you, but glad that he is here to bring you the joy you have always deserved.”

Severus turned into his hand once, then lifted his face. [Are you at peace?]

“Yes. Go on in joy, Severus. I am only glad to know you are so well-loved.”

[Thank you.] Harry gave him a tearful smile. [Thank you for letting him go, for loving him as well as you do. I promise I’ll take care of him.]

Regulus brushed Harry’s fringe back with a gentle smile. “You do. Better than I have done. Guard him always.”

[I swear it.]

Regulus bowed in gratitude and moved back so Tabitha might have her say.

Tears streaked the woman’s cheeks, raining between the creases of age and a life full of laughter. “I am so proud of you, Severus. You’ve become such a wonderful man. And I’m so glad to see you have a family to love you now.”

Severus buried his face in her shoulder, just for a moment. [I love you, Tabby. I’m sorry I was never brave enough to tell you while you lived.]

“Bless you, I knew that, little one. The words were just poison to you then, but you’ve come so far now. I know you’re going to be fine. Harry will help you.” Her eyes turned steely. “And so, we’re going to help you keep him at your side. We’re fighting with you.”

Another woman materialised from the ether, one Harry recognised from the photo on Severus’ mantel. “My little Sev.” A gentle kiss fell on his forehead. “I’m sorry I couldn’t stay to see you grow into a man, but I’m so proud of what you’ve become.”

Severus’ voice came out shattered. [Mum… oh gods, Mum. I love you. I miss you.]

She hugged him tight. “I’m with you, baby. I’m always with you.” She gave Harry a tearful smile.
“And you, you beautiful, brave, wonderful boy. Merlin, thank you. You saved him. I’ll never be able to thank you enough for that.”

Harry returned her embrace and sniffled. [I love him so much.]

“I’ve seen, little one.” She cupped Harry’s face and held him steady. “Keep that love strong in your heart. Hold it close and let it grow until it shines in every corner of your soul. Riddle’s evil is nothing to that kind of power.”


“Voldemort hasn’t a chance if we all stand together against him,” Eileen agreed, and moved back to embrace her son.

Sirius wrapped an arm around Harry and the other around Severus. “We’re with you. Every step of the way.”

“All of us,” James agreed.

“Fight, boys,” said Lily, her eyes fierce with love and protectiveness. “Fight, and show this bastard that love will always win out over evil.”

[Mum,] Harry breathed. [We’ll fight, but I don’t understand. Why are you all here? I thought we’d have to fight alone.]

“We’re your Laochra,” said Lily with a gentle laugh. “Yours and Severus’, gathered together. We’ll always fight for you.”

[And tell Remus he was right when you get back, pup.] Sirius said softly. [I am bloody proud of you.]

“Oh gods.” Tears ran down Harry’s face as love and wonder washed over him.

A shrill scream rang in his head, the sound of Riddle’s fury and fear. “Nooo!”

But the love of Harry’s family, of his mate, of Albus, and of his friends proved too much for the horcrux, and the last bit of Voldemort’s soul broke from him with an almighty crack, leaving Harry winded, but whole. His knees wobbled and his entire body ached, but by gods, he was alive!

Severus cupped Harry’s face, eyes red-rimmed with tears and wide with terror. “Love, are you in there? Are you safe?”

Harry responded with a fierce kiss, not caring who saw, and hugged his husband tight. Severus returned it with a sob of relief, but pulled back fast.

“We must finish it.”

Harry nodded and wiped his face. “They fought for us, Sev.”

“I know. I heard them too.”

“So let’s do this, for them.”

Severus’ hand laced with his husband’s. “Yes. Open your power to me. We will end this together.”
Harry raised his wand towards the kneeling Riddle. The man was on his knees, human again and furious.

“You!” Riddle’s eyes, green once more, focused on Harry. “What have you done to me?”

“Made you mortal so I can kill you,” Harry replied, voice cold and dark.

Riddle’s eyes focused on Severus. “We shall see about that.” He lifted his sleeve and pressed his finger to the mark, his mouth twisted in a triumphant leer, but it fell off his face the next instant. “What… what is this? Why is it not working?”

Severus pulled back his sleeve, revealing his bare arm. “You are not the only one who can alter spells in Parseltongue.”

Riddle howled and surged forwards, fury overcoming reason, but Harry was ready.

“Sectumsempra!”

Beside him, Severus had understood his intent and spoke the same words. Two curses hit Riddle’s neck at the same time. His head severed from his body in a great surge of blood and bone. Harry flinched away, expecting to be drenched, but nothing hit him. Bemused, he turned to see a purple shield covering himself, Severus, and Albus.

“I would so hate to lose these robes to a mess such as that,” said the old man with a grim smile, speaking over the wails of the Death Eaters on the other side. “I assumed you would feel the same way.”

Harry shuddered. “Yes, indeed.” He took in the gore around him and retched. “Gods.”

“Tergeo,” Severus muttered, and the mess nearest them vanished.

“T-thanks for that,” Harry muttered, still queasy.

Severus braced him up. “Harry, come. Pull yourself together. I know you are tired, but we are not finished.”

“Right.” Harry gathered his wits and drew what remained of his magic into his palms. His body protested and his knees trembled, but he managed to stay upright, though he suspected when this spell ended, he would have nothing left.

“Exilium anima malum, in aeternum!”

Severus called the same chant out beside him, and dark green light left their palms. It surrounded Riddle’s dead body and sank into his flesh with a loud sucking sound. An ear-splitting squeal pierced the air, a black fog left Riddle’s body and vanished, and then… silence fell.

Harry stood beside Severus, leaning into his husband’s side and panting. “Is it over?”

Albus raised a hand towards the corpse. White fire burned all traces of the body away, leaving neither smoke nor ash behind. “Now it is over,” he said with grim finality.

Relief knocked Harry to his knees. “He’s gone. It’s really over,” he choked through sobs of sheer relief.

Severus hauled Harry to his feet and brought him into a passionate kiss. Harry threw his arms and legs around his husband and responded in turn, and only Albus’ mirthful, “Oh my,” brought him
back to the present.

“Er, boys,” came Neville’s voice from Harry’s left. “Y-your shield is down.”

Harry moved back, confused as to what the man meant, and drew in a sharp breath. Albus had let the fire shield down just as Harry leapt into his husband’s arms, and the entire Order and DA was staring at them, eyes round and jaws dragging the floor.

Draco called, “Get a room, you two,” and those who knew Harry’s secret laughed.

Hermione came near and grabbed Harry’s hands. “Is it over? Is he… gone?”

“It is over,” Severus answered, and a cheer went up—at least from those not too stunned to give it.

“Ding dong, the prick is dead,” the twins sang in chorus, complete with can-can kicks, and Harry burst into breathless laughter.

“Yeah, he’s dead. It’s over.”

Severus’ eyes trailed across the room and hardened. “Almost.”

“What?” Harry looked up to see his husband moving across the room towards a downed man with a fall of silver blonde hair, and his heart lurched.

“Sev!” He called, but his voice was too breathless, too weak to reach him, and he hadn’t the magic left to use his Telepathy. “Sev, please.” He struggled to get to his husband, but his legs gave out, and he staggered into Hermione instead.

Hermione steadied him. “Harry? What’s wrong?”

“Sev! Stop him!”

She looked to the man. “Stop what?”

Damn it. She didn’t understand. She couldn’t. No one but Luna, Neville, Draco, Albus, and Harry knew the truth about his husband.

“Severus,” Albus called, but the man wasn’t listening.

Severus grabbed Lucius by the hair, turned the bastard onto his back, and stepped on his chest. His eyes were wild as he pointed his wand at the man’s head.

Lucius coughed and snarled, “Here to give me a farewell kiss, pet?”

Severus’ eyes filled with sheer hatred. “On the contrary, I am here to force you to answer for your crimes, you fucking monster!”

Harry hardly had the voice to cry out, but he tried. “Sev, no. Not like this.”

Hermione cried, “Draco!”

“Avala K—”

A blonde streak barrelled across the room and knocked Severus back. “No!” Draco pulled the man away. “Stop, Severus. Stop.”
“Come to save your father, Draco?” Lucius staggered to his knees and sneered. “So you are not entirely beyond—”

Draco punched the bastard so hard, a tooth went flying. “Merlin, I’ve wanted to do that for a long time.” He shook out his hand and kicked Lucius in the gut for good measure, sending the bastard tumbling onto his back. “Save you, you utter shitehead? After everything you’ve done to me? After what you did to Mum? Fuck that. I simply happen to think a quick death is too good for you.”

After one more well-placed kick, he turned to Severus and eased his wand arm down. “Come on. You’re better than this. You’re better than him.”

Severus stared at the bleeding, bruised, snivelling shell of a man and all murderous intent drained out of his aura. He slumped over and gave the boy a terse nod, and Harry sobbed in relief. Oh, thank Merlin.

“There you are, Severus,” Draco murmured. “Come away now. Don’t let him poison you any longer. He’s not worth it, and Harry needs you.”

Severus squeezed Draco’s hand. “Thank you.”

“I… it’s for the best.”

“I know.”

The men turned their back and walked away, and there, they made their mistake. Lucius sneered, and Harry’s eyes widened as a wandtip poked out of his cane.

“Sev! Draco! Behind you!” In his terror, adrenaline gave his voice strength, and both men whipped around.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Unable to move, unable to think, Harry watched, helpless, as sickly green light shot from Malfoy’s cane and speeded towards the man he loved and his brother-in-arms. They had no time. Exhausted as they were, they had no chance to dodge a curse that fast, and not even his bond to Severus would save his lover from the killing curse.

Harry would be forced to watch either his husband or his brother die. A scream ripped from his throat, an inhuman sound of terror. “No!”

The light hit Draco straight in the forehead, rebounded off him, and struck Lucius in the heart. The elder Malfoy slumped back, dead, his face perpetually frozen in shock.

“Draco!”

Draco dropped like a doll, and Harry’s heart shattered. “No. Oh gods, no.”

Beside him, Hermione was crying too.

A broken mewl of grief on his lips, Severus sank to his knees beside Draco and cradled the boy close. “Oh, fuck! Draco—no, I… forgive me!”

Dean’s sharp cry of horror tore Harry to pieces. The boy raced to his lover and jerked him from Severus’ arms, weeping helplessly over him.

“Draco, Draco, please. I love you. Don’t leave me.”

“Draco!” Dean moved back, shock and wonder on his features. “You… you’re alive?”

Draco groaned and leaned on Dean’s shoulder. “Feel like I’ve been hit by a lorry, but I’m alive.”

“H-how? I… I saw the curse hit you. How are you…?”

Severus stood, his expression filled with awe. “Narcissa. She must have performed the bond of blood before her death. The same ritual that saved Harry’s life and protected him from the Dark Lord’s curse.”

Every eye fixed on Harry, then turned back to Draco.

“Mum?” Draco’s voice wobbled. “Mum saved me?”

“Yeah.” Dean pushed Draco’s hair off his forehead and gave a soft laugh. “She did. You have a scar too now. Looks a bit like a sword.”

Draco groaned. “Oh, lovely.”

“Ah, buck up, scarhead,” said Ron, and Draco gave a weak laugh.

“Damn. You’re never going to let me live that down now, are you?”

“Nope.”

Draco laughed, but tears broke it up. “I… I was so scared. Dean, bond with me, will you? I’d like to make an honest man of you before anything else tries to kill me.”

Dean answered with a tearful laugh and a passionate kiss.

Harry forced his voice to work. He was flagging, his knees shaking, and Merlin, he wanted his husband close. Everything had just been too much.

“S-Sev… please!”

Severus winced and rushed to his husband’s side. “I am here, Harry.”

Harry collapsed in Severus’ arms, too exhausted to support himself. “S’over now. All over.”

“Yes.” Severus lifted Harry into his arms, bridal-style, and cradled him to his chest. “He is gone, Malfoy is no more, and the Death Eaters are incapacitated.” He frowned. “Shacklebolt, not everyone with a Dark Mark was loyal. I would advise you to ensure they all have fair trials.”

Kingsley nodded, though his expression was wry. “Exactly how long have you and Harry been… involved?”

Molly’s eyes sharpened. “Yes, I believe I would like the answer to that question as well.”

Severus snarled. “Merlin, woman! Do you truly believe me so depraved as to bond with a minor?”

Molly blushed and subsided.

Arthur gasped. “Bond? You’re bonded?”

“Soul-bonded, yes, but this is neither the time nor the place to discuss it. I will remind you that we
are surrounded by Death Eaters who could, at any moment, recuperate their strength. Lucius has already proven that they are still dangerous. Cease your gaping and do your jobs.” He swept Harry closer to his chest, his imperious expression daring anyone to challenge him. “I am taking my husband to the Infirmary. Dean, I suggest you do the same.”

Harry groaned, not looking forward to the matron’s poking and prodding, and sank into his husband’s arms.

Some hours later, Severus watched over his husband in his Infirmary room, relieved to be rid of their scores of gratitude-crazed well-wishers and stunned Order members alike. Thank Merlin Poppy had placed Harry in a private room and banned further visitors, or the man wouldn’t have had any peace even with the aid of Severus’ improved Dreamless Sleep formula.

A soft voice called from the bed. “Sev?”

Severus turned to his husband and brushed his hair off his face. “I am here, love. Are you in pain?”

“No, I’m fine.” Harry took Severus’ hand and held it tight, desperate fear clear in his eyes. “How many?”

Severus winced. The dead. “Love, are you certain you’re in the condition…?”

“I’m fine, Severus. Just tired. Tell me, please, so I don’t drive myself mad worrying.”

“Very well.” Severus sighed and settled into the chair beside Harry’s bed. “The Death Eaters’ numbers have been cut in half. I do not know the names of all we killed, but there are many. Pettigrew, the Lestranges, Dolohov, and Avery among them.”

“I… I don’t know whether to feel relieved about that or guilty.”

“Both, I suppose. It is difficult not to regret taking lives, even when said lives would take ours without a blink.”

Harry’s hand tightened on Severus’. “Yeah. And the Light?”

Severus sighed. “There were a few injuries among our Order members. Among the most serious is William Weasley. Greyback caught him across the face before Arthur could stop him, but he will pull through.”

“Greyback?” Harry’s heart sank like a stone. “Bill’s a werewolf now?”

“No. Greyback was not transformed. Poppy believes William may show some minor traits of Lycanthropy, and the scars may never fade entirely, but he is not a werewolf.”

“Oh, thank Merlin.”

Severus stroked Harry’s hair, and the young man turned into his touch with a sigh.

“And the DA?”

Severus winced. “Luna… I am sorry to say, was severely injured. She will bear a scar across her
eyes, and Poppy is uncertain as to whether she will ever regain her sight. Luna has said that the spirits will help her see if she cannot use her physical eyes, however; so perhaps it is not as bad as it could have been.”

Harry’s breath hitched in a sob. “Oh gods. Lu….”

“She will survive, Harry, and she is taking the news well. It is… difficult, but she will endure. We will help her.”


“He is quite understandably distraught, but uninjured, and he has not left Luna’s side.”

“Thank Merlin. What about the rest?”

“Finnigan lost his legs, but he will survive.”

Harry’s expression twisted, a muddle of emotions contorting his features. “Oh. I… how will he manage?”

“There are wizarding wheelchairs and the like. He will not be without aid.”

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head slowly. “I don’t know how to feel.”

“No one can tell you that, love. My own emotions are… mixed.”

“Yeah.” Harry leaned into his husband and the guilt on his side of the bond lessened. “I’m glad I’m not alone in that, at least. What about the others?”

“Their injuries were not as serious. Millie has a broken leg, Blaise’s hand was crushed, and someone hit Colin Creevey with a cutting curse across the face, but all will recover, though Creevey will have a scar. There were other minor injuries, but those were the only ones Poppy saw fit to mention.”

“Padma?”

“She is well.”

Harry sighed in relief. “Thank goodness.” He took his husband’s hands and held his gaze. “Sev… I know you’re holding back, love. Who did we lose?”

Severus dropped his head and clutched Harry’s hand tight. “There were three deaths that I am aware of at this time.”

Harry closed his eyes against a surge of grief. “Who?”

“Of the DA, Lavender Brown and Andrew Kirke.”

Harry’s breath caught. “Both Gryffindors.”

“They fought like lions, too. They will be honoured at a feast tomorrow evening.”

Harry let a trail of tears fall and buried his head into Severus’ hand. “I’m s-sorry.”

“Ssh. You did not fail them, love. They fought as adults and members of the Order. And if not for their aid—and all of your DA—I fear the loss of life would have been much greater.” Severus pressed a gentle kiss to Harry’s forehead. “You did well, my Harry, and now, we may go on in
peace, knowing Voldemort will never again terrorise another soul.”

Harry gave him a tearful smile. “We’re free?”

“We are.”

“Thank Merlin, but, Severus… who was the third person?”

Severus closed his eyes, guilt and grief that he would have to break his husband’s heart choking him. Praying his next words would not send his husband into a despair he could never recover from, Severus clutched Harry tight against his chest and struggled to keep his voice even.

“F-forgive me. The other was… it was… Lupin.”

Harry froze, and his breath escaped him in a broken sob. “R-Remus is gone?”

Severus held him tighter and nodded against his cheek. “I am so sorry.”

“W-what happened? Remus—how?”

Severus closed his eyes and cradled Harry close. “He… he saw Greyback attack Bill. Arthur blasted the fiend off with a curse, but as werewolves are difficult to kill, the bastard only snarled and came for us. He… it was me, Harry. Greyback was heading straight for me, and Lupin leapt in front of him to stop him. Lupin caught him with a silver dagger, but the blade cut them both, and… there was nothing Poppy could do. He left a message for you. He says he will watch over you from the other side and not to grieve him too long. He is with family.”

“Oh gods. Oh, Severus.”

Harry buried his face in Severus’ shoulder and wept, anguished, broken sobs that tore the heart from Severus’ chest. And yet, Severus sensed it was healthy grief. Harry would recover one day, so long as Severus stayed by his husband’s side.

“I am with you, beloved,” Severus whispered. “And I always will be.”

Harry clung to his husband’s neck and wept until his tears ran dry.

That evening, Severus and Harry lay in bed at the Infirmary. Poppy wanted to keep Harry under observation for one night to ensure the horcrux removal hadn’t damaged him, and Severus had taken advantage of the fact to hide out with his husband and avoid the parties breaking out in every corner of the castle. Harry’s grief had quieted to soft snifflies, Severus’ Zopathy aiding in keeping him relatively content.

“Sev? Um… has anyone come by?”

“Hmm, yes, quite the entourage while you were sleeping. Poppy shooed them away.”

“Oh. I was afraid. I thought they mightn’t want to see me. Because… they know.”

“No, they love you.” Severus slid his arm about his husband and held him close. “We did make quite the stir, however.”
“Yeah. How did the others take it? Or have you seen them yet?”

“I’m not sure about the DA, but I have faith that Hermione and Draco will wrangle them into shape if they resist. As for the Order…” Severus chuckled darkly. “Albus told them the truth of our marriage and what we risked in fighting Riddle today, though he did not explain about the horcrux in your scar—only that your soul was at risk during the spellcasting and you needed me to save you. And once Shacklebolt realised half of us knew before the battle and approved of the match, and Doge understood we had done nothing illegal, they accepted it. At least, that is what Albus said.”

Harry gave him a tentative smile. “Mum Weasley… she’s not angry?”

“Not about our bond, though she is quite irate that we put ourselves at such risk without telling her. I imagine she will come to bend our ears about it once Poppy allows you visitors.”

“Oh joy,” said Harry with a grimace.

Severus chuckled. “Once I proved to her that I love you beyond all measure, Molly was ecstatic that we are happy, though she has threatened me with disembowelment if I do not provide her with the opportunity to give you a proper bonding ceremony soon.”

Harry scowled. “There was nothing wrong with the one we had.”

“There was. I let you down that day.” Severus cupped Harry’s face and kissed him softly. “I, too, would like a ceremony where we can announce our love to the world and I can see you whole and smiling.”

Harry gave him a wan smile and curled up close. “Yeah. That does sound good.” He kissed Severus’ chest and sighed. “Does that mean we’re out?”

Severus shook his head. “Only among the Order and DA. Minerva and Albus asked them to be discreet until we choose to reveal our bond, and we are still protected under Fidelius, so they will have little other choice, regardless. The Death Eaters cannot reveal our relationship without permission either for the same reason.”

Harry nodded. “What do you think we should do?”

“I believe it best to keep our bond quiet until the dust settles. Perhaps after you graduate, we can reveal the truth of it then. It is not so long until then, after all.”

A devious smirk crossed Harry’s face. “Hmm. I like that idea. Don’t forget, I still plan to let the entire world know I’m yours someday.”

Severus’ heart filled with joy and peace. Harry loved him, and they could go on with their lives now without the shadow of war and prophecy hanging over their heads. They finally had a future to plan for, dreams to build and cherish, and Severus couldn’t wait to begin.

He kissed Harry’s forehead and cuddled his husband close. “I am looking forward to it.”
Chapter Summary

Just the epilogue left! I'm going to miss this story. I don't have anything ready to post after this one for a while, so I'll be spending some time wrangling Rescue Me into shape and working on the next installment of Lords of the Realm. I'm also working on a time travel AU where they actually change the past on purpose (gasp!) and a story with Severus as a yokai and Harry's best friend. Naturally, that changes canon drastically, though I've put in as much of the original story as possible and simply altered Harry's reactions. For now, though, I hope you enjoy the last Hogwarts chapter for our boys.

Chapter 63

Into the Light

20 APRIL

Harry left the theory classroom and turned towards the stairwells, listening to his friends’ jovial chattering with a smile on his face. He wasn’t as prone to laughter as they were, but their joy and carefree banter made him happy. They had mostly healed since the battle, too giddy in the relief that they had won and the dark would torment their world no longer to grieve overmuch.

Harry didn’t begrudge them their exuberance, but neither did he feel it. The war was over, true, but they had lost too much before its end. And without the threat of Voldemort hanging over his head—dictating his every move, rather—Harry had lost his purpose, like a ship adrift at sea with neither rudder nor oar. He didn’t burden his friends much with his troubles—one of them could truly understand his listlessness, and he didn’t want to suffocate their joy regardless—but he knew of two men who might understand. And as Severus had class at this hour, Harry decided to beg off his friends and visit the only other man who had lived and breathed the war as much as Harry and Severus had done.

They let him go without a fuss, their smiles tinged with concern, and Harry’s chest panged with the knowledge that he had worried them these past few weeks. In time, he promised himself, he would find his purpose again and share in their relief, but until then, he felt the need of a bit of grandfatherly advice, now that the headmaster had left his meddling days behind him. Of course, with the war over, the headmaster had little reason to manipulate him these days, but still, the old man had made an effort to change. Perhaps it was time Harry acknowledged it.

“There is too much at stake to hold grudges.”

Harry closed his eyes around a sudden spike of grief. It still hurt that just as he had begun to reconcile with Remus, the man had died. They hadn’t had the luxury of a second chance. And so few did, when he thought of it. So many others had given their lives in this mad war. Others would never be the same.
He thought of Luna’s sightless silver eyes, always hidden behind a colourful scarf with dangling medallions along the fringe. He thought of Bill, who liked his meat a bit too far on the rare side these days, whose temper simmered too close to the surface for him to control more often than not, and whose roguish good looks had given way to a visage as scarred as Mad-Eye’s. He thought of Draco, orphaned and struggling to make his way on his own when he had lived his entire life prior to the final year of the war at the whim of a monster. He thought of Finnigan, struggling to learn to navigate in a wheelchair and make do as a double amputee. He thought of the seats at the student tables left empty in honour of those who would never again fill their places. He thought of everyone who had suffered and lost in this war and knew he had been fortunate.

Still, he couldn’t push aside the feeling that he needed something to fight for. Maybe he should have taken King up on his offer for a place on his team after all.

Harry sighed at the maudlin turn his thoughts had taken and stopped in front of the gargoyle. Maybe all he needed was a good shake and a kick in the rear. He supposed he would find out soon enough.

“Mars Bars… Drooble’s Best… Cockroach Clusters…” The gargoyle leapt aside at ‘blood pops,’ and Harry made his way up the stairs. For once, Albus didn’t greet him at the door, and as he raised his hand to knock, he understood why. A wave of despair and grief choked him, so thick and clawing it stole his breath. He caught snatches of thoughts—’Raise him alone… what if he’s one too?’—and debated the merits of turning around and asking Albus for advice later. But the person’s pain had rooted him to the spot, and Albus sensed him before he could make a clean escape anyway.

“Ah, Harry,” the old man called through the door, “I do believe you might be able to help us both, if you would please come through?”

Harry frowned and poked his head into the door. A woman with mousy brown hair and red robes sat hunched on her chair, her back to him. He didn’t recognise her. “Sir? I… I just wanted a word, but I can come back later.”

The headmaster shook his head and waved Harry into a seat next to the grieving woman. “Nonsense. As I’ve said, I hope you might be able to offer your assistance. A fresh perspective, if you will.”

Harry gave the woman a bemused look and did a double take. He’d never seen her so subdued, so drab, but he definitely recognised the woman crying her heart out next to him. “Tonks? Dear gods, what’s wrong? Are your parents all right? King? What’s happened?”

“No one is injured, Harry,” Albus said, his voice gentle. “Here, have a spot of tea—no calming draught unless you wish for it—and a raspberry biscuit. Dobby made them fresh this morning.”

Harry took the teacup from the old man, but barely gave it a cursory glance before setting it aside. “Tonks? What is it? Is there anything I can do?”

She took in a shuddering breath and sat up, one arm wrapped protectively around her middle. “I… maybe. Now that I think of it, maybe Remy would’ve liked you to….” She sniffled and wiped her eyes. “It’s just… did you know that Remus and I were married?”

Harry choked. “What? When? How? And why did no one tell me?”

“Well, with the anti-werewolf legislation and all, it wasn’t something we could afford to talk about much. We eloped in January of this year in the Muggle part of Edinburgh and kept it secret from anyone not involved in the ceremony.”

She raked a hand through her hair, so atypically lifeless, and gave a heavy sigh. “You should have
been there, to be honest, but I couldn’t convince him to face up to his past. He was so afraid you
would want nothing to do with him, and me, by association, that he decided he’d rather avoid you.”
A tearful smile crossed her face, a painful thing. “I’m glad he conquered his fears in the end, even
if….”

Harry took the woman into a tight hug. “I’m so sorry. If I’d known….”

“I know. It’s all right. He wanted to be there for you. And Severus… I’m not sure he would have
seen Greyback in time if Remy hadn’t stopped him. He was too busy keeping Rookwood off your
back. And after what Severus told us after the battle…” She shuddered. “We might have all died if
he hadn’t been there to save you.”

Harry rubbed her back, blinking tears of his own down. “It doesn’t diminish your right to grieve. Or
to be angry with me. Merlin knows I would be, if someone had endangered Sev and gotten him
killed.”

“Harry!” Tonks pulled back, her hair going fiery red and anger sharp in her eyes. “I won’t hear you
saying that again! Remus was a fully-grown man with a mind of his own. You neither endangered
him nor got him killed.”

Harry hugged his waist, willing back a surge of guilt. “M-maybe, but I didn’t mean for you to be so
miserable either. I’m sorry.”

“Hush. I’m not upset about Remus. Or at least, not only upset about Remus. Not today.”

Harry frowned. “You’re not? Then… what’s wrong, Tonks? I don’t understand—wait.” Raise him
alone… what if he’s one, too? He gulped and grabbed Tonks’ hand. “Wait, are you pregnant?”

She let her breath out in a rush. “Y-yeah. I just found out today. I’m six weeks along.”

Harry gasped. “Oh Merlin! You… you’re going to have a baby? Remus’ baby?”

She gave him a weak glare and rubbed her eyes. “Yes. And… and what does that mean for us? I’m a
single mum, unwed by wizarding standards, widowed at twenty-five by everyone else’s, and my
child’s father is a werewolf. I’m so afraid, Harry. For both of us. The little one—what’s going to
happen to him n—”

“Him? You already know the gender? I thought those kinds of tests took longer.”

Tonks gave him a wan smile. “For Muggles, yes. But wizards can know the gender three days after
conception, if they’re lucky enough to know of their pregnancy so soon. King tested me last night—
it’s a little boy, and perfectly healthy so far.”

“Oh! Congratulations, Tonks!” He frowned. “But I don’t understand why you’re so upset if he’s
healthy. Is it because Remus isn’t here to help?”

“In part. But it’s more—Remus was a werewolf, Harry. What’s going to happen to the little one if he
has traits? And even if he doesn’t, even if he’s a perfect little human, wizarding society will scorn
him if the truth of his heritage ever gets out. They might even kill him! And me—they might throw
me in Azkaban! Gods, what am I supposed to do?”

Harry slumped against the back of his seat, horror setting his hair on end. “That can’t be true, can it?
No one would be so cruel as to tear a baby from a perfectly good mum and kill him just because he
might have a few traits of Lycanthropy? Hell, even if he’s a full werewolf, who would do such a
thing?”
Albus gave him a knowing look from behind the desk. “Can you think of no one who would leap at the chance to exterminate the ‘spawn’ of a dark creature and imprison his wife?”

Harry clenched his right hand reflexively, turning the red scars along the edge of his hand white. “Umbridge. Tell me that hag is in Azkaban.”

“Yes. Not at the moment. And Umbridge is not the only chimaera in hippogriff’s feathers among the wizarding justice system. There are many like her who believe werewolves should all be exterminated.”

“But that’s madness! I mean, Remus wasn’t perfect, sure, but he didn’t deserve to die! He didn’t deserve to be hunted like a wild animal and denied the right to freedom and his family! And his son sure as hell hasn’t done anything to deserve it.”

“But without change within the core of the Ministry, I’m afraid that Tonks’ fears are unfortunately justified.” Albus pushed his spectacles higher on his nose and gave Harry a wan smile. “It seems the work of the Light never truly ends, does it?”

Harry sucked in a sharp breath. “Oh.” He looked to Tonks, cradling her belly and fighting tears, to the portraits of ancient headmasters and headmistresses, some feigning sleep, some watching Tonks with pity in their eyes and some openly scowling. Phineas gave him a knowing look and a nod, and resolution settled on Harry’s shoulders like a cloak.

“I imagine if someone who had some little bit of influence fought for change within the Ministry,” said Harry, his expression hard, “someone like a war hero or two, we might see the end of these antiquated and unfair laws about werewolves, hmm?”

Albus’ eyes twinkled. “Indeed. And we might even do something about that lingering bit of anti-Muggleborn prejudice among the Wizengamot while we’re at it.”

Harry gave him a feral grin. “Oh, I’ll leave them to Hermione. They won’t know what hit them by the time she’s done with them.”

Phineas snorted. “I believe it.”

“You do? Well then, I say she’s got it in the bag.”

Phineas sent him a glare, but Harry just chuckled, relieved to have something to fight for again and a purpose for his life once more.

He stood and took Tonks’ hands. “You just keep your baby safe and his father’s identity an Order secret for now. Hang out with your mum or at Grimmauld Place and pamper yourself until that little one comes. In the meantime, I have a wicked witch and a few flying monkeys to send straight to hell.”

Albus’ lips twitched. Tonks snorted.

“I’m probably the only Black descendant to ever understand that reference,” she said with a wry smile. “Except for Mum, of course.”

Judging by Phineas’ blank expression, she had a point.

Harry laughed and hugged her. “It’s going to be okay. You’ll see. You do your part to keep him safe, and I’ll do mine.”
Tonks gave him a fierce hug. “Thank you, Harry. Merlin, thank you.”

He felt as though he should be thanking her. “Nothing to thank me for. It’s just the right thing to do, isn’t it? We still have a war to win, after all, even if it isn’t against Death Eaters and Riddle any longer.”

A spark of life filled her eyes, and her hair took on its usual vibrant pink hue. “Y—you’re right. And I’ll fight with you, so my baby can grow up happy and free.”

“There you go.” Harry squeezed his shoulder and stood. “I’d best be getting along, especially if I’m going to have the DA help me ensure Umbridge and the rest of her ilk gets their due. We’ve got evidence to gather and a case to build.”

Albus’ eyes twinkled. “Ah, but didn’t you need to speak to me about something, Harry?”

Harry gave him a wry smile. “Not anymore.”

“Well then, good luck, Harry, and know my door is always open.”

“Thank you, Albus.”

Harry left the office with his head held high and a new light in his heart. Maybe the war had ended, but the battle for equality in wizarding Britain had just begun.

2 MAY

His last class of the day had just let out, though the seventh years outside the DA still had to attend their Potions lesson. Harry mused on his progress on cleaning up the Ministry on the way to the dungeons. Umbridge’s trial had been last week, and with the massive amount of evidence Harry and his peers had compiled against her—not to mention the instructors—he had little doubt the bitch would go away for life. And while Harry had argued fiercely against the Dementor’s Kiss, even for the captured Death Eaters, he recognised the need for a permanent punishment for people like Umbridge and Malfoy senior. Well, Malfoy had taken his punishment into his own hands, but for the rest of them, something more lasting than life in a Dementor-free Azkaban needed to be done. Not least because without the evil beasts sucking the life from the prisoners, the place had become far easier to escape.

Luna and Neville came around a corner, his arm around her waist and the same dreamy smile on her face, though her eyes would never be the same. She nodded to Harry, setting the medallions on her eye scarf jingling, and patted his shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Harry. The Crinklewinks say good news is on the way.”

Her ‘journalist’ spirits. Harry gave her a wry smile. “Good to know. Reckon I’ll hear about it before the end of the day?”

“Mm, I think—probably very soon. But the Windsprites are worried for Draco. The Panwhinglers are running amok in the Slytherin dorms.”

Telepathic spirits and spirits who caused disloyalty among former allies. Harry grimaced at the implications. “You’re saying the Dark Slytherins are plotting something, then?”

“Yes, exactly.”
Neville grinned. “Are you sure you need me to write a Luna-speak dictionary, mate?”

Harry snorted. “Reckon I’ve heard it enough to understand it on my own by now. Though you might still write it for the rest of the world.”

“But then where would be the mystery in that?” Luna tittered and draped her arm through Harry’s. “A blind medium must have some aura of intrigue about her, you know, or else no one takes her seriously.”

Harry squeezed her arm. “No one could doubt you now, Lu.”

“Well, some do, but life’s too short to worry about them. Are you on your way home?”

Harry nodded. “Unless you think I need a detour?”

“Hmm. Yes, the Crinklewinks say there’s news for you in the owlery, and Ginny wants a word along the way.”

“Ginny?” Harry grimaced. “Don’t tell me she’s gotten into the Ticklebees again.”

“Oh, they’re quite thick, but this time, the Aimelins are present too.”

Harry’s heart thumped. “So you’re saying they’re not for me?”

“You really have learned to understand me.” She beamed. “I’m honoured.”

Harry kissed her cheek and extricated himself. “Thanks, Lu. I’ll go see what she wants then. Talk to you later?”

“Yes, we’ll see each other again during dinner.”

Harry chuckled and shook his head wryly. “You know, Lu, some would say going blind has made you see better.”

“Well, they do say when one loses one sense, the others grow to compensate. Perhaps I’ve only learned to listen better in the absence of my sight.”

“You always knew how to listen,” said Neville, his voice soft with love, and Harry agreed wholeheartedly.

“That you have, Lu, and we owe you our lives for it.”

“Oh, tosh. No debts between family, remember?” Luna kissed Harry’s cheek. “Off with you now. The Crinklewinks won’t wait forever, and neither will Professor Vector, I’m afraid.”

Harry laughed and headed back towards the staircases. As Luna had predicted, Ginny met him on the fifth floor landing and motioned him over.

“Harry? Um, I’m not going to harass you or anything, so you needn’t be afraid.”

Harry nodded. “Luna already told me your Ticklebees have… er, switched alliances, so to speak. What’s going on?”

A pink flush spread up her cheeks. “That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about. Um, you know I’ve been talking to Madam Pomfrey since you told me your secret?”
Harry nodded. “It seems to have done you worlds of good.”

“Y-yeah.” She took a deep breath and raked a hand through her hair. “Well, first, I want to apologise —really apologise this time. I was awful to you. And you had every right to throw me in Azkaban for it. I… I’m really grateful you didn’t.”

He gave her a hesitant smile. “Well, you were sick, Ginny. Poppy and I talked about it the day after the tower incident last term. Between ourselves, we figured that godsawful journal in your first year had done a number on you. So, I guess I just wanted you to get better instead of punishing you.”

She winced, tears forming on her lashes. “I-it did. He used every weapon in the book, literally, but it wasn’t just that, Harry. Poppy helped me wade through all the rubbish he put in my head, yes, and I hope I’m better now, but under it… it turns out I was more afraid of Mum than I ever was of Riddle.”

“Molly? Dear gods, why? I mean, she’s overbearing, of course, and she’ll probably still baby us when we’re old and grey, but Merlin, she loves you. She loves pretty much everyone.”

“I know. And that’s… it’s part of why—I just didn’t want to disappoint her. She wants grandchildren so much, and I thought… well, I didn’t want to let her down.”

Harry cocked his head, bemused. “But you don’t need me to make grandkids. I mean, you would have a lot better luck with a bloke who’s not gay to start.”

She snorted. “And there’s the problem, Harry. I’m gay too.”


She gave him a wry smile. “Exactly how I felt when Poppy finally made me own up to it. I kept obsessing over you because I didn’t want to be gay, Harry. I wanted to be straight, and I wanted to make Mum happy. But I was just denying the truth, and I ended up hurting you both along the way, not to mention that whole debacle with Zacharias. And… and I hurt Katie, too.”

Harry gaped. “Wait, Katie Bell? You’re seeing her?”

Ginny blushed and gave him a tentative nod. “And it’s already much better. There’s no tension to be what I’m not, we already have loads in common, and she’s good to me. Though it took a firm talking to from Mum to give me the courage to finally ask her.”

“You’ve told her then? Molly?”

“Yeah. Yeah, she was furious, but not because I’m gay. Because I didn’t trust her.” She grimaced. “I’m pretty sure I’ll be on ghoul duty for the next three years because of that alone.”

Harry chuckled. “Well, at least she didn’t toss you out on your ear like you were afraid of.”

“True. And, thanks, Harry. For being so understanding. I know I don’t deserve it.”

Harry shrugged. “I guess it’s not so much about deserving it as it just doesn’t seem that important any longer, you know? I mean, I’ve faced Dark Lords and Death Eaters and literally fought for my own soul. After that, I’m just glad it’s over now and we’re both alive.”

“Yeah.” Ginny gave him a sly smile and whispered, “Really though, Professor Snape? How on earth did that happen?”
Harry burst into laughter. “It’s a long story, Gin. Really long. I’ll tell you sometime when I’m not on another mission. Luna sent me to the owlery after the Crinklewinks. I’m hoping it’s information on the verdict against Umbridge.”

Ginny’s eyes flashed. “That hag deserves the worst the Ministry can dump on her and then some.” She smirked. “Reckon I should ask Firenze if he fancies a bit of quidditch with Umbridge as the quaffle?”

Harry remembered a similar mistake on Hermione’s part and grimaced. “I would really, really advise you not to do that. Centaurs don’t much like being used as ploys for justice against our criminals.” She blanched. “Merlin. Now that you put it that way….”

“Yeah. Best not to mention it in his hearing.” Harry gave her a little smile. “I’m glad you’re doing better, Ginny. Really. Best of luck to you and Katie.”

She smiled back, the light in her eyes genuine. “Thanks. I’ll let her know you’re okay. She was worried you’d hold a grudge against her because of our history.”

“Not at all. I’m relieved.”

“Great. I’ll see you later then, Harry.”

“Yes, later.”

Harry chuckled all the way to the owlery. Ginny was a lesbian. Well. That was a shock.

Hedwig nipped his ear and landed on his shoulder as soon as he arrived. “Hello, girl. Do you have something for me?”

Hedwig cocked her head, bemused. Harry hadn’t much time to wonder about it before Solaris landed on his other shoulder and nuzzled his hair, and curious about the commotion, Jabardi poked his head out of Harry’s cloak. The owls, used to Harry’s companion by now, simply ignored the snake and groomed Harry’s messy hair.

“Oi! I know it looks like a bird’s nest, but it’s not actually a nest, I’ll have you know.”

The owls gave hooting chuckles and moved to his outstretched wrists.

“So there’s no post for me? Odd. Luna said there would be news.”

Almost before he finished his sentence, a shrill screech sounded behind him and nearly sent him flying from the owlery windows in shock.

“Sweet mother of Merlin, what the hell was that?”

He turned and found a less-than-amused screech owl staring at him, a letter bearing the crest of the Minister of Magic in her talons. Ah, so this was Eva, Kingsley’s new owl.

“Oh! Sorry about that, girl. You startled the life from me.”

As the bird simply stretched her wings and shot away, he took that as a decided no. With a shrug, he
tore open the parchment and read. A devious smirk settled over his features as he reached the end of the letter.

“Merlin, that’s brilliant. She’ll go utterly mad!”

Jabardi nosed the parchment. ~Master, what has you so pleased?~

Harry’s ability with Parseltongue had remained after the battle. Severus surmised that he had used it so long with Isuri and Jabardi, the ability had imprinted itself into his magical core independent of the horcrux’s presence. Luna, however, had another explanation.

“Well, Salazar made you his heir, didn’t he? Of course you would inherit his abilities.”

Harry stared, stunned. “But… how can he? I mean, is that possible?”

“He passed you the ability of your own right when you inherited his study. How else would you read his works and publish the truth once you had finished your mission?”

Harry grinned. “Now that makes more sense. He gave it to me so I could rebuild his reputation, huh? Once a Slytherin, always a Slytherin.”

“Well, what else can one expect from its founder?”

~Master?~ Jabardi’s quiet hiss brought Harry back to the present.

~Yes, I am here, Jabardi. Just excited! The evil hag got her sentence handed down today. I am off to tell Severus. Please hide yourself again.~

Jabardi gave a snakish imitation of a shrug and curled up under Harry’s cloak again. ~After this, I would like to hunt, Master.~

~Sure. I can let you down outside the owlery if you wish.~

~I would rather protect you while you are going around the dark snake children.~

Harry frowned. ~Ah, I forgot he has class now. Well, I will wait in his office instead.~

~In that case, Master, will you take me to the forest first?~

~Of course.~

Severus observed Parkinson out of the corner of his eye as the rest of his students worked on their Clear sight Potions and added a pinch of lavender sprigs to his own cauldron. Though Severus usually abstained from brewing during class unless he had a practical demonstration planned, this time he had decided to brew one himself with the intent of giving a phial to Harry after class.

Really, he should have done before the battle. Had anything happened to Harry’s glasses, it might
have been disastrous. But with their concern over souls and horcruxes and battle positions, it had simply slipped his mind until later when Luna’s injury cropped up in his nightmares. It haunted him that he hadn’t been able to spare her. Still, she seemed to manage well enough without her sight, and soon Harry would have no need for his spectacles any longer, unless he chose to wear them for sentimental purposes.

He added a dash of fire fairy dust with a wry smile. Merlin, he had been an arse to Harry at the start of his sixth year. Of course he wouldn’t know where to find fire fairy hair or what it did. Not even most masters did, but Severus had made a habit of absorbing knowledge wherever it could be found, and as a result, had learned many lessons of ingredients and combinations of them that many in his field never did. The addition of dust in this potion, for instance, would sharpen Harry’s vision beyond perfect and make its alterations permanent, whereas the students’ versions would only last a week at best.

Being a master had its advantages, to be sure.

Just as he finished the potion and set it in stasis to cool, a sharp motion from the direction of Parkinson’s cauldron caught his eye. On instinct, he sent a wave of magic where whatever she had thrown would be, if she had thrown something, and borrowed from their bonded core to give the magic substance. As he suspected, the field of solid magic closed around an object headed for Draco’s cauldron.

“Miss Parkinson, I believe I have already made the consequences of altering your peers’ potions clear twice to you this term. However, since it appears that the lesson has yet to sink in through that thick skull of yours, I believe a harsher form of discipline is in order. To start with, twenty points from Slytherin, and perhaps more, depending on what object you have used to defy my direct orders.”

Parkinson’s scowl slipped and she shrank in her seat, setting Severus’ nerves on edge. Oh Merlin. What had the little bint done?

He floated the ‘addition’ to him and saw red. It wouldn’t have killed Draco, but it certainly would have weakened him. And, no doubt, she had been counting on that.

Harry’s panicked voice broke through as Severus stared at the asphodel in his palm. [Sev, love, are you okay? What’s wrong?]

Harry’s presence reverberated from a shorter distance than Severus had expected while he taught. If he didn’t know better, he would have thought Harry was in his office. Well, at least he needn’t worry about Harry being able to hear his thoughts in response.

[All is well. There was an… incident in class, but no one is hurt and I have it in hand.]

[Oh, thank Merlin.]

Harry left him alone so Severus might concentrate on his class, and Severus thanked all the deities he had such a considerate partner. Harry’s side of the bond radiated excitement, so he knew the boy had something he wanted to gush about, but he still allowed Severus to finish his work first. And thank Merlin for that, because Parkinson had just used up the last of Severus’ patience.

“Miss Parkinson,” he said in his darkest tones, “have I failed to clarify the consequences of continuing to alter your peers’ potions while under my tuition?”

Parkinson glared and stuck out her lip. “You can’t do anything to me, sir.”
“Can’t I?” Severus opened his palm and let the asphodel in his hand float in front of him. “Tell me, class, can any of you identify this flower?”

As suspected, Granger’s hand went up. Thanks to Harry’s study groups, she wasn’t the only one, but old habits died hard.

“Yes, Miss Granger?”

“Asphodel, sir. A form of lily.”

“Very good, five points to Gryffindor.” He set the lily away from his own cauldron—far away. “And now, can any of you tell me what asphodel does when added to a nearly complete brew of Clearsight potion?”

Parkinson paled and shrank into her seat. Gods, what an idiot. Had she honestly expected Severus not to know? He was not a world-renowned potions master for nothing. Well, perhaps she had hoped with his own potion to tend, he wouldn’t have the presence of mind to catch her at her usual misbehaviour. Another foolish mistake. Severus often tended ten cauldrons at once—one hardly registered.

“I see that Miss Parkinson is not unaware of its affects. Draco, I know you have no doubt revised this potion thoroughly before class. Perhaps you can tell me about the interactions of asphodel and Clearsight potion?”

Draco’s voice came out shaky. “Y-yes, sir. The asphodel interacts with the Bundimun secretion. It causes localised fumes to emit from the cauldron and renders whoever breathes them temporarily blind and magically weak.”

“Excellent, five points to Slytherin, though I am afraid they will not last long.”

Draco nodded, too shaken to snark back, and settled into Dean’s open arms. Severus left his care to Mister Thomas and fixed Parkinson with a cold glare.

“One might think, Miss Parkinson, given your history with Draco and those who fought for the winning side—” He barely resisted a smirk at her sudden spark of impotent fury. “—That this was premeditated. One might surmise, Miss Parkinson, that you chose this herb intentionally to weaken Draco. One might then suspect, Miss Parkinson, that you have some grand plan of revenge.”

Parkinson stayed still and didn’t flinch, but the paling of her complexion with each sentence confirmed Severus’ suspicions as well as if she had shouted it. He Banished the lily to an empty phial and stalked to Parkinson’s desk. He slammed his hands down on either side of her cauldron and leaned in to give his words and glare maximum effect.

“I do not tolerate murderous whelps in my classroom, or in the school, for that matter.” He leaned back and Vanished her potion. “Though it pains me to do this, your ill-advised prank has just cost Slytherin house a hundred and fifty points and landed you in detention for the rest of the year—with Filch.”

“You can’t do that!”

Severus gave her a cruel smile. “Oh, I assure you I can.”

She scoffed and went to pack up and storm off.

“I am not finished with you yet, Parkinson. You will sit down this instant.”
She stood defiantly and glared.

“Very well. Since you obviously believe yourself above your instructor and the rules I have set down for your own safety, I see no reason to continue teaching you. You are finished in this class. You will receive a troll grade for the year, which disqualifies you for the Potions NEWT unless you receive private tuition.”

She screeched, “You can’t throw me out!”

He raised an eyebrow. “I will remind you that this classroom is not a democracy, Miss Parkinson. I can remove you if I see fit, and I do. Pack up your supplies and leave this instant, and you are not to return. You will report straight to the headmaster for further discipline when you leave. Get out of my sight.”

Parkinson shouted, “My father will hear of this!”

Severus gave her his darkest, most lethal smirk. “As your father is well on his way to a lifetime sentence in Azkaban, I’m afraid you’ll find he is quite busy worrying about his own affairs. Out, Parkinson, before I decide I would be better served in asking the aurors to remove you.”

Parkinson’s lip trembled. “Traitor! When our lord comes back, he’ll get you!”

He gave her an uncharacteristic grin, which set her more on edge than anything. “I do so hate to be the bearer of bad news, but as Potter and I made quite sure to Banish Voldemort to the underworld before the headmaster burned his corpse to ash with holy fire, I’m happy to inform you he is quite dead this time with no hope of return. Out, Miss Parkinson. Now.”

With a sniffle, she dashed out of the classroom, leaving her books and cauldron, and slammed the door behind her. Severus ignored her mess and returned to his desk. “I apologise for the interruption. The threat has been neutralised and you are safe. Please return to your cauldrons before your potions are ruined.”

“T-thank you, sir,” Draco murmured.

Severus nodded outwardly and met the blonde’s eyes. [Do watch your back, Draco. I am certain that was part of a larger plan of revenge. I will ask the headmaster to investigate, but it will take time. Do not travel the halls alone.]

Draco gave him a barely perceptible nod and moved closer to his fiancé. Severus sent a Patronus to the headmaster warning him of Parkinson’s imminent arrival and his suspicions, then focused his attention back on his classroom and hoped the rest of the day would pass without incident.

By the time Severus finished his class, he was in dire need of a break. At least the girl would cause him no further headaches. Albus had suspended her for the rest of term and warned her any that further acts of violence upon Draco or any other student would see her expelled. Whether she passed any of her NEWTs at this point was anyone’s guess, but the girl had brought it on herself. Thank Merlin, she was no longer Severus’ concern.

When he arrived in his office, Harry was sitting in the professor’s chair and revising for what looked to be Transfiguration homework. He grinned at the sight of Severus, and his love and simple joy at
seeing him was balm to the harried man’s soul.

“Hello, love.” Harry stood and greeted him with a soft kiss. “Are you all right? I’ve been worried.”

Severus held Harry close, letting his scent and warmth renew his battered spirit. “Better now.”

Harry chuckled into his chest and nestled his head on Severus’ shoulder. “Mm. I always miss you during the day.”

“It is good for us to have some little time apart to follow our own lives, but I miss you as well.”

Severus kissed the top of Harry’s ear. “Not that I am complaining, but what are you doing here?”

“I’ll get to that in a minute. What happened in class that’s had you so irritated for the past hour or so?”

Severus moved back with a growl. “Parkinson attempted to poison Draco with a potion that would have blinded him and weakened his magic temporarily. I had to deal with her.”

Harry grimaced. “She has plans to hurt him, doesn’t she?”

“Of course, but as she has been suspended indefinitely, I do not see how she will carry them out.”

“Good to know, but it still couldn’t hurt to have the DA tail Draco for a while, just to be safe. She was, more than likely, not the only person involved.”

“Yes, I think that is a good idea.” Severus kissed Harry lightly and reclaimed his seat, tugging his husband into his lap. “Not that I am complaining, but why are you here and not in our quarters, beloved?”

Harry gave him a wicked grin. “I couldn’t wait to show you this. It’s from Kingsley—an inside report on Umbridge’s sentencing before it hits the papers tomorrow.”

Severus smirked. “Indeed? Do tell.”

Harry handed him the letter, and Severus let loose a full-bodied laugh at the end of it. “Oh dear Merlin, the man is devious! Stripped of her magic and forced to work as a Muggle zoo janitor! So Shacklebolt does have a Slytherin side after all.”

“It really is the perfect punishment for someone who believes her magic puts her above Muggles and creatures of any kind,” said Harry with a snort. “Technically though, it was Amelia Bones who decided her fate.”

“But we both know who whispered this lovely suggestion in her ear.”

“Of course. And serve the bitch right, though I do pity the Muggles who have to put up with her from now on.”

“Agreed, but at least she can do little harm without the aid of her magic.”

“So we hope anyway. And Parkinson won’t be able to gloat long—her parents are up next for trial.”

Severus nodded. “True, but I worry the Wizengamot will not punish them as harshly as they deserve. The Parkinson name carries too much political weight.”

Harry grinned deviously. “Oh, they’ll get what’s coming to them all right. Read the rest of the letter.”
Severus frowned and returned his attention to the latter paragraphs of Kingsley’s note.

*Just wanted to let you know, kiddo, that the laws regarding the Wizengamot and conflicts of interest passed. They’re no longer allowed to make judgments against anyone with any ties whatsoever to the judging body. Instead, we will do as you and Hermione suggested and bring in an impartial body of citizens to hear the case and decide their sentence. Amelia has limited power to veto said punishment if it proves unjust, but only if there is reasonable doubt of the judges’ impartiality. Well done, kid. We finally have a working justice system again.*

Severus gave Harry a warm smile and a soft kiss. “Merlin, I am so very proud of you. Soon, we shall have an honest Ministry again and a healthy society, and it is all down to you. Well done, beloved.”

Harry flushed to his ears. “N-not just me, Severus. I had loads of help.”

“Perhaps, but as your husband, I have the right to praise you how I see fit.”

Harry grinned. “I guess if that’s your line of reasoning, I can be convinced to go along with it.”

Severus chuckled and held his husband tight. “Oh, I shall do my share of ‘convincing’ tonight. I wager you will not be inclined to argue when I am finished with you.”

Harry’s eyes gleamed. “You’re on.”

Severus smirked. “I know.” He guided Harry to sit in his lap and sighed into his hair, drawing peace from his husband’s presence. Gods, it felt so good to know all the monsters that had haunted their pasts would soon be put away for good, unable to hurt anyone ever again.

Or almost all of them.

He traced gentle fingers over Harry’s lower back, feeling the ridges of old scars marring that lovely flesh, and resolve settled in his spirit. Harry still had demons to face, still had monsters to put away for the good of the world—and his own.

“Harry, there is something I have been meaning to speak to you about for some time now.”

“Hmm?”

Harry sounded sleepy and content. Severus hated to disturb him, but it had to be done.

“It is about your relatives.”

Harry cringed. “Why must we bring them up now? I was so cosy.”

“Forgive me. It is only this, beloved. Those monsters were abhorrently cruel to you. I think it is not only unfair to you not to at least attempt to take them to trial for what they have done, but perhaps a danger to others.”

“They won’t stay around magical people long enough to hurt them, and they don’t care about anyone else.”
Severus raised an eyebrow. “Is that true, love? Do you imagine that they would not harm others who
do not fit their idea of ‘normality?’ Such as homosexuals, for example?”

Harry winced. “I… well, I’ve never seen them hurt a gay person, at least not physically, but…..”

“But you and I both know there is a high likelihood of it. Truly, it does not matter either way. They
hurt you, and they should answer for their crimes against you regardless.”

Harry squirmed and looked away. “They’re… I mean, they probably won’t hurt anyone else, so does
it really matter?”

“Harry, Dudley has a fairly high chance of having magical children.”

Harry winced. “Well, Dudley isn’t really talking to them now either, so…..”

Severus sighed. “Beloved, those two are cruel enough that I would fear they may harm his children
should they prove to be magical just to avoid the stigma of having wizarding grandchildren, whether
he is speaking to them or not. But even if they do not, even if they never harm anyone again, ask
yourself this. If they were my aunt and uncle, if I had grown up in their cupboard under the stairs and
bore scars from Dursley Senior’s belt, if I had had to have my oesophagus magically-repaired from
their horrific cruelty and shameful neglect, would you be willing to stand by and let them walk free?
Would you be able to accept the fact that they may or may not harm another as justice for me?”

Harry sucked in a harsh breath. “I…..” He froze, unable or unwilling to answer, but Severus couldn’t
leave it unsettled. For Harry’s sake, he had to at least try.

“Harry, if you could, what would you do to my father? Would you recommend justice for him?”

Harry clutched at Severus’ shirt. “Yes,” he breathed.

“Then why should your relatives be allowed to escape it?”

“They… but…..” Harry shuddered. “Damn. You have a point.” He curled into Severus’ chest and
shivered against him. “I really don’t want to get into it again, Severus.”

“I know. But you deserve justice, love. And so do they.”

Harry said nothing for a long moment, his hand tangled in Severus’ robe and his breath falling harsh
and rapid against Severus’ throat.

“You… you’ll stay with me, right? In the trial?”

Severus kissed Harry’s temple. “Every step of the way, love.”

Harry sighed and nuzzled closer. “Then, okay. I’ll… I’ll do it. But can we get through the bonding
ceremony first? I don’t want to think about anything hard until after that. I don’t want anything sad to
shadow it.”

“Yes. Whatever you want.”

“Okay.” Harry rubbed his thumb across the nape of Severus’ neck. “Sev? Thanks.”

Severus held him closer. “You are welcome, my love.”
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With Parkinson gone and the DA keeping watch over the other dark Slytherins, the rest of the year passed quietly. Severus led his classes with a stern, but fair demeanour and won the respect of his students before long. He enjoyed teaching again, and had already decided to remain on one more year while Harry finished his apprenticeship. Afterwards, they would leave Hogwarts together and begin their lives as a true bonded couple.

Molly had already begun preparing for the bonding ceremony, set to take place on the Princes’ first anniversary. Both men were excited to see their plans beginning to bear fruit. It would be a grand affair when the medical apprentice and the potions master wed in Hogwarts’ Great Hall, but the students weren’t to know until a month prior to the ceremony. Minerva had already decided they would have a ball that night in honour of her favourite boys’ bonding, and not even Severus could begrudge her the concession. He wanted to celebrate, to come out of his shell and show off his husband to the world, just this once. Indeed, he doubted the well-meaning women who had claimed a spot in his family tree would allow anything less.

Harry, having studied so much prior to the war, had little to do in class, and so used his spare time to wrangle Britain and the Ministry into shape. And Merlin, Severus loved watching him come into his own. Harry still wanted to go into medicine, but the man had made it his mission to tidy Britain and its government’s mess in the meantime. And as the ‘Boy-Who-Lived-To-Kick-Voldemort’s-Arne,’ as Harry so liked to describe himself when referring to his numerous titles, Britain believed he could do no wrong. Harry hadn’t hesitated to utilise that fame to save them from themselves, and Severus couldn’t have been prouder of his little snake in the lions’ den.

Once Harry had helped to establish a working justice system, he moved on to setting up an internal affairs office at the Ministry and set them to sniffing out corruption. Percy Weasley, who had come home and asked to help the Light after Scrimgeour’s death, led the office with Angelina and three retired aurors—not the paranoid Mad-Eye, to be sure—and Severus had to admit the man was doing a damn good job. His critical eye and near fanatic attention to every law and regulation ever known served him well in his current position, and Percy enjoyed the work, which was good for everyone involved—except corrupt Ministry officials, of course.

And thanks to Harry’s and Granger’s tireless efforts, the Ministry would function without corruption soon, Severus hoped, or at least not such rampant fraudulence that a dark lord could rise unchallenged and plunge the country into war for the fourth time in six decades. Oh, there would always be evil, but now they at least had a working government to help fight back. And that knowledge gave Severus the peace of mind to finally relax after twenty years of war.

It was about damn time.

The night before graduation, Severus sneaked a peek at Harry’s scores. He had passed his NEWTs with flying colours, all O’s and E’s. His Defence scores broke the records—the highest recorded in five-hundred years—and his Charms and Theory scores had placed him solidly at the top of his class for each of those subjects. Granger was still valedictorian—no one had ever doubted that—but Harry had done exceedingly well, and Severus felt he might burst with pride. He couldn’t wait to see Harry’s face when his letter came that evening.

For the moment, he had to get through Harry’s graduation and whatever the man had planned to reveal them to the public. He knew Harry had some grand gesture up his sleeve, and Severus worried he might produce something the Weasley twins had inspired. To that end, he pulled his husband aside just before the ceremony and gave him a brief kiss.
“I know you’ve something planned, love. I trust you, but promise me that whatever tomfoolery you have in the works will not….” He hesitated and lowered his head. “I am… not good with pranks, Harry.”

Harry kissed Severus gently. “I know, Sev. I’ll never hurt or humiliate you. I promise.”

Severus nuzzled his nose. “Forgive me. I only did not wish to ruin your plans with my fears.”

“I know. I feel it.” Harry smoothed Severus’ hair and held his face. “I know you better than anyone, love, and I love that soft, vulnerable side of you under your tough outer shell. I want to protect that part of you and keep it safe. To keep you safe and happy, forever.”

Severus responded with a warm smile, brighter than he had ever shown before the end of the war. “I love you as well, my Harry. Now, off with you. Much later, and you’ll not have time for breakfast before the ceremony.”

Harry chuckled and kissed his husband lightly. “I’ll see you later, love. Have a good day.”

“It’s always a good day when I have fewer dunderheads to teach.”

Harry snorted and flooed into his student bedroom.

Reassured, Severus finished his preparations for his own place in the ceremony. One more year of this, then Harry would be finished with his apprenticeship and they could go on into their lives together, find somewhere new to lay down roots.

He was looking forward to it.

“Harry James Potter.”

Severus watched, his nerves on edge, as Harry went through the line of teachers to shake hands and receive his diploma from Albus. As Severus was the youngest professor on staff, he was also the last in line, save only for Albus himself. Harry shook everyone’s hand with a smile and a thank you on his lips, and smirked when he came to Severus.

“Hello, Harry. Congratulations, and well done.”

Harry beamed. “Thank you, Severus. Oh, and you’re looking particularly hot today.”

Severus flushed to his ears. “I… what?”

“I think it’s time I showed the world what you mean to me.” Harry lifted a hand towards Severus’ cheek and stopped just short. “That is, if you want me to.”

Severus’ heart thumped and tender warmth flooded his chest, spreading throughout his entire body. “Show them.”

Gentle palms cupped Severus’ face and ears. Harry leaned up on his toes, and Severus bent to meet him, sighing as Harry’s soft, warm lips found his own. He almost forgot this was the fulfilment of a long-cherished dream, so lost was he in the feel of his husband’s kiss.
Severus wrapped his arms around Harry and pulled the younger man flush against him. Even through the hands over his ears, he heard the murmurs, the cries of shock, but he ignored them. Much as he had wanted Harry to stake his claim and show the world his love, this moment was for them and their future together.

On Severus’ left, Sinistra gave a soft, “Oh my,” and Severus broke the kiss with a low chuckle.

The school had gone deathly quiet. Harry met Severus’ eyes, a sheepish expression on his face. “Okay, Sev?”

“I….” Severus gave Harry a soft smile and kissed his forehead. “Yes. I am. Thank you. This is—ah, lovely.”

Harry laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “I wanted to make you happy.”

“You have done, beloved.”

“Dear Merlin,” Sinistra said, her voice weak. “Severus… how long?”

Severus brushed Harry’s cheek with his hand. “Since October.”

“That’s not on,” someone shouted.

“He snogged the greasy git!”

“He snogged a professor!”

“And the professor snogged him back,” Severus said with a snort.

Harry chuckled and buried his face against Severus’ chest. Severus tucked Harry into his arms and held him tight, glaring stone-faced at the shouting students.

“Enough!” Albus’ fierce shout shut them up in a hurry. “Thank you,” he continued in his usual placid tones. “Now, I believe you can all see that Professor Snape and Harry are in love. As Severus is no longer Harry’s professor, nor has he been since early in Harry’s sixth year, their relationship is perfectly legal, and the rest is none of our concern.”

He pushed his spectacles up his nose and looked out over the student body with a solemn expression. “However, I will say this much on the subject. Their love for one another gave them the strength to defeat Voldemort. It is the purest, most honest love I have seen in many a year. And we are all here today because of it.

“Still, their relationship, their union is their own. We are not privy to their choices, and I will remind you that simply because both of these men defeated Voldemort—yes, they fought him together—and you view only one of them as a hero and celebrity, that does not give you the right to dictate Harry’s life or choices. Their love is their right, and anyone who disparages it will answer to me.”

The muttering and whispering stopped, and a stunned silence settled on the crowd. In the lull, Albus turned to Harry and Severus and laid his hands on their shoulders. “Harry, Severus, good luck, my boys. With the world’s belief that Harry’s fame somehow gives them the right to decide whom he does and does not love, I fear you both shall need it.”

Severus snorted. “Let the howlers come. He is my choice.” He leaned down and wrapped Harry in
his arms. “I love you, my Harry. Stay here with me. I fear for your life if you return to that mob.”

Harry nodded and tucked himself into Severus’ side. “M’gonna protect you too.”

Severus nodded and ran his hand through Harry’s hair. “Yes. Stay close.”

“Okay, love. Not like it’s a chore or anything.”

Severus chuckled. “Albus, his diploma?”

Albus blushed. “Dear me, I’d quite forgotten in all the excitement. Here you are, my boy.” He handed Harry his diploma and winked. “And excellent work on your NEWTs, Harry. Your defence scores, in particular, are the best I’ve seen in, well, ever.”

Harry beamed. “Merlin! That’s a high compliment indeed. Thank you, sir.” He took the diploma and held it close to his chest.

Severus wrapped his arm around Harry’s waist and waited for the next student.

“Has everyone forgotten we are still in the middle of the graduation ceremony?” Minerva gave Severus a wink. “Congratulations, you two, and on with the show. Oliver Rivers!”

Severus chuckled softly and stroked Harry’s side. “You are mine now,” he whispered to his husband. “Everyone knows it. Or they will by tomorrow morning.”

“Good,” Harry whispered back. “I’m tired of hiding.”

Severus smiled at his husband and watched Rivers make his way down the line. The Ravenclaw stared at Severus like his eyes were going to pop out of his head when he saw Harry beside him, leaning against Severus’ side and smirking in amusement.

“Problem, Rivers?”

The boy gulped and held out his hand. Severus shook it, and Harry laughed as the boy darted away to Albus as fast as his legs would carry him.

“I think we shocked them, love,” Harry whispered.

“Hmm. You even surprised me a little. I shall have to punish you later.”

“Really?”

Severus gave a dark laugh. “Oh, I’m sure I can find several cauldrons in need of cleaning now that the term has ended.”

Harry smirked. “Worth it. Totally worth it.”

Severus couldn’t hold back a chuckle.

“Sophie Roper!”

The Hufflepuff girl went through her professors as if nothing strange had happened. Severus hoped the rest of them would too, though he was not to be so lucky. Never in his life had he been the recipient of so many glares and dark looks.

“Never did I imagine that I would have the most popular bondmate of everyone in his year,” Severus
whispered against Harry’s ear.


“Mm.” Severus pressed a kiss to the top of Harry’s ear. “Either way, you belong to me.”

“I do,” Harry whispered. “And you’re mine.”

“Indeed.”

The ceremony went without a hitch until Lisa Turpin went through.

“You were supposed to be mine,” she spat at Harry.

He raised an eyebrow. “I barely even know you. And I’m gay, so no. Not interested in the least. Wrong equipment.”

“I believe you’ll be needing your diploma, Miss Turpin,” Albus said, his voice mild and his eyes hard.

She huffed and took her diploma, thankfully without making more of a scene.

“Ronald Weasley!”

Ron simply shook both their hands and grinned. “Honoured to have fought with you, mate, and you, professor.”

Severus nodded in return. “Likewise.”

“Go on, then,” said Harry with a grin. “You’re finally done with classwork!”

“Until Kingsley gets his claws in me,” said Ron with a weary sigh.

Harry clapped him on the back. “You’ll enjoy it then.”

“One can only hope.” Ron moved on, and so did Minerva.

“Blaise Zabini!”

Blaise walked through the others, then offered Severus his hand with a grin at Harry.

“Congratulations, sir. And to you, Harry, though I’ve already said so once.”

Harry grinned back. “Thanks again anyway.”

Blaise gave Harry a quick hug. “Good luck, both of you. And thank you, for everything you’ve done for us.”

“Oh, tosh. You helped, remember?”

Blaise chuckled. “Say that a bit louder so they hear it.”

Harry snickered. “You mean spread a bit of my fame around, huh? Take it and welcome. And good luck to you as well. I’ll miss you.”

Blaise nodded and took his diploma from Albus. “We’ll be seeing each other soon. You’re invited to the wedding, as it happens.”
“You finally asked Susan?”

“Yes. Didn’t want to risk another catastrophe!”

Harry chuckled. “Congratulations.”

Albus patted Blaise’s shoulder. “From me as well. We must move on though, so if you are finished talking, please move along so that we can finish the ceremony, Mister Zabini.”

“Right. Thank you, sir, and it was an honour learning under you and fighting with you all.”

“You are most welcome.”

Blaise bowed and moved to the end of the line. Harry smiled and laid his head on Severus’ shoulder, which was just fine with Severus. He had no intention of allowing Harry to move even if he was supposed to be with the other students.

“Congratulations to the graduating class of 1998,” said Minerva with a wry smile. “A class with more trials and tribulations than any other, and yet, who have remained strong and done us all proud.” She swept forward in a bow to the students. “Well done, and good fortune to you all.”

Harry gasped and clutched at Severus as all the teachers—including Harry’s husband—repeated the gesture, bowing to the students.

Severus bowed for more than their accomplishments. He bowed in apology, and vowed that the next year he taught—his last year—he would go out on a positive note.

When he rose again, Harry pulled the man into his arms and kissed him softly. “They know, love. They know.”

Severus leaned down to his husband, moving so their foreheads were pressed together and their breath mingled. Just as he went to close his eyes, a camera went off in the crowd.

Harry gave Severus a wry smile. “And that would be Colin. I think I know what picture will be in the Prophet tomorrow.”

Severus snorted. “Perhaps we should call your lovely reporter friend here and give her an interview before she mangles the facts.”

Harry groaned. “Gods I hate that woman, but I suppose you’re right.”

“Think of it this way. Despite her appalling tendency towards blatant sentimentalism, the public views her as honest and forthright. She will sop up the forbidden romance and secret love angle and turn our story into the romance of the century. And then, perhaps, we shall have fewer detractors than otherwise.”

Harry gave him a wry smile. “Slytherin to the end, hmm?”

“You knew this when you bonded to me.”

“True.” Harry wrapped his arm around Severus’ waist and beamed. “All right. We’ll give her our story after lunch, then we’ll do a little house hunting before the offices close. Sound good?”

“Building a future with you? It sounds lovely, my Harry.”

“Brilliant.”
The next morning, Harry kissed Severus’ forehead and crawled out of bed, letting the man sleep in. He certainly had the right to be exhausted after all their hard work yesterday. With any luck, Harry would find its dividends in the morning Prophet. He yawned and reached for his glasses, only to remember with a jolt of enthusiasm that he didn’t need them any longer. For the thousandth time in a day, he praised Severus’ amazing potions skills and grinned like a loon. The world was so clear now. He had no doubt he would be able to see the snitch from halfway across the grounds when next he played. Draco would be furious.

With a quiet snicker, he extricated himself from their bed and made his way to the living room—once again their only living room as the other students had either returned home, or in Draco’s case, to their Hogwarts rooms. Dean was staying with Draco, at least until they found a flat to rent. Not surprisingly, Draco had no desire to return to Malfoy Manor and was already in the process of selling it. He didn’t want to keep much of his former life at all, much to the shock of the pureblooded bigots. Draco had already decided to take Dean’s last name and let the Malfoy line fade into infamy. Harry supported his decision wholeheartedly. Besides, he had given up his last name too.

With that thought in mind, he asked Winky for a pot of tea and breakfast for himself and Severus. Just as he Summoned the Prophet, Severus came out of the bedroom, hair mussed and yawning. Harry gave him a warm smile. As much as he adored the cool and collected persona Severus showed to the outside world, he liked this side of Severus best, the side only Harry ever saw.

Severus muttered something about too bloody early by half and dropped onto the sofa beside Harry. He curled up against his husband like a cat and laid his head on Harry’s shoulder, garnering a soft chuckle from the younger man. Severus would never be a morning person, not when he had the freedom to act naturally.

“Morning, love.” Harry kissed Severus lightly and slid his arm around the man’s back. “Are you awake enough to see how badly Rita mangled our story?”

Severus blinked and sat up. “It’s out? What am I saying? Of course it is. Probably outsell every other Prophet in history. That woman had to be a Slytherin.”

Harry snorted and snuggled his husband closer. “Oh, absolutely. But let’s see how she did, hmm?”

Severus nodded and took one side of the paper while Harry held the other. As predicted, the photo Colin had snapped of their embrace had made the front page. Harry fully intended to frame it.

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**Secret Romance of the Century: Harry Potter Finds his Prince**

*Everyone around Britain—and around the world—knows by now that Harry Potter has fulfilled the Prophecy made before his birth and ended the reign of You-Know-Who. What everyone doesn’t know is that he used his soul bond with his husband to do it, and his husband had as much to do with You-Know-Who’s demise as Harry himself—if not more.*
Who is his husband, you ask? None other than Professor Severus Snape.

If you’re younger than thirty, you most likely know Master Prince, nee Snape, as the harsh Potions professor at Hogwarts. However, it seems the acerbic man led a secret life few knew of. Professor Prince was, for over eighteen years, the Light’s chief spy in You-Know-Who’s camp. He pretended to be cruel and ruthless while at the same time undermining Riddle’s plans, helping the Order of the Phoenix to stay ahead of him, and keeping his vow to protect Harry Potter Prince at all costs.

Severus snorted. “I did not do well at keeping that vow.”

Harry kissed Severus softly. “Without you, I would be worse than dead. You kept your vow and then some.”

Severus shivered and hugged Harry tighter. “We came too close.”

“I know. I don’t want to think of it. Thank Merlin our Laochra were there to help.”

Severus leaned against Harry’s side, a shuddering sigh rippling his frame. “I will… never forget that moment.”

“It was… terrifying and beautiful all at the same time. I’m glad you got to talk to them too. You really needed to.”

Severus turned Harry’s chin towards him and kissed him lightly. “You do know that whatever was between Regulus and I in the past, you are my only now?”

“Yes, love. I know. I trust you, and don’t forget that I can feel how much you love me at any given moment. It’s okay. I’m glad you got to say goodbye and get some resolution.”

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead and sighed into his fringe. “You are truly a wonderful man, my Harry.”

“So are you.” Harry leaned back and gave him a wry smile. “Let’s keep reading now, yeah?”

“As you wish.”

Severus settled in beside Harry again and read on. The next few paragraphs gave the history of Severus’ spying and their roles in the war—less the information about horcruxes and the specifics of Harry’s customised soul spells. Harry skimmed those and moved on to the meat of the story.

This reporter thought Harry and Severus had finished their tale at the end of their story about the defeat of You-Know-Who, but they had another surprise in store. It seems that during the last six months of the war, our duo of heroes had fallen in love and bonded in secret. Their love had to be hidden from everyone but those they could trust with their lives—if anyone had known Severus had any positive emotion towards Harry at all, let alone the depth of feeling he obviously harbours for his husband, they would both have been killed long before the end of the war.
So the Princes, bonded under Severus’ magical line, had to pretend to loathe each other in public, while in private, they were very much in love. It was a difficult time for our heroes, and this reporter’s heart aches at the thought of how much it must have hurt not to be able to show their true feelings for one another.

Severus snorted again. “What did I tell you, Harry? Britain will sop this up with their morning tea and swoon over their poor, dear, pet heroes for weeks. Perhaps this might even head off the howlers.”

“One can only hope.” Harry laid his head on Severus’ and read the article with a smile on his face. Rita had milked every drop of romance out of what they had shared with her, but Harry thought their true love story was better. Perhaps not so clean-cut and linear as Rita’s version, but more real. Honest. And, after all, it was theirs.

He folded the paper once they had finished and set it aside.

“Well, my Prince,” he said, lips twitching with mirth, “are you ready to move on to the next chapter of our dashing and impossibly romantic love story?”

Severus chuckled and kissed Harry with all the love in his heart. “Of course. We will keep the Prophet in business for a long time.”

“Damn straight.”
Epilogue - Thirteen Years Later

Chapter Summary

I almost made you wait, but then I decided this is a short chapter anyway and it's been a long time coming. This wraps up Longing of the Soul, and I hope you've all enjoyed it. See you again when I have something else ready to post!

Chapter 64

Epilogue—Thirteen Years Later

Harry called up the stairs, “Lukas Andrew Prince, get your lazy bum down here this instant! We’re due on the platform in five minutes, and you’ve yet to finish packing!”

Their oldest son, a dark-haired imp adopted three years after the end of the war, poked his curly head outside his bedroom. “Dad, I’m just… er… double-checking things. I’ll be right down.” His expression looked a bit too innocent for Harry’s liking.

“Uh-huh. I wasn’t born yesterday, Lukas.”

“Nor was I.” Severus materialised behind Lukas and made him squeak in surprise. “Translated, that means you are trying to see how many Weasley products you can fit in your trunk without being caught.”

Lukas didn’t flinch, but the pink flush spreading up his round cheeks gave him away. “Papa! I remember you warned me against those.”

“And as that is neither affirmation or denial of my statement, I will assume it is correct.” Severus produced a burlap sack and held it out. “Go on then.”

Lukas muttered mutinously and removed a veritable mountain of joke and prank products from his pockets, dropping them into Severus’ bag. Both parents had enough experience of the boy to know he had more hidden, but they chose to feign ignorance. Harry didn’t want to deny him the opportunity to have fun, after all, and neither did Severus. Still, they would also prefer that he not be expelled right out of the gate.

“There you are, Papa,” Lukas said with a scowl. “Can I finish packing now?”

“May I, and watch that attitude, young man, or your father and I may decide you are best served by walking to Hogwarts.”

Severus would never follow through on that threat, but the effect it had on Lukas made Harry struggle to hold in a laugh.

“Yes, Papa! I’m going!” Lukas dashed back into the bedroom and had his trunk out the door in ten seconds flat. “I’m ready, see? So I can still ride the train, right?”
Severus chuckled and ruffled the boy’s hair. “Of course.” He frowned and looked about. “But where is your sister?”

“Hiding, I think,” said Harry. “Mia, come out, little one. Don’t you want to see Teddy? He’ll be at the train station too.”

Mia, their eight-year-old daughter and a shy little blonde, had a bit of a childhood crush on Teddy Lupin, Tonks’ Metamorphagus son. Luring her with promises of meeting the young man never failed to draw her out of hiding.

Well, almost never.

After a moment of silence, Harry Summoned the map he had made for their home and checked for her name. Ah. The orchard. No wonder she hadn’t come.

“She’s outside, Severus. I’ll get her, if you can just help Lukas finish up. I’ll get Kiko from the owl roost for him too.”

“Of course, beloved.”

Severus helped their son levitate his trunk down the stairs while Harry ducked out after their wayward daughter. He found her hiding under a tree heavy with ripe red apples, bright golden hair flowing in the breeze. He picked an apple from the tree, polished it on his shirt, and held it out to the little girl.

“Hey there, sunshine.”

Mia muttered into her hands. Her aura flickered with fear and uncertainty, so Harry sat beside her and laid the apple on her knee.

“Want to tell your daddy what’s wrong, little love?”

She sniffled and tugged at her skirt. “I… I’m afraid. There’s so many people. What if they’re mean to me?”

“No one is going to be mean to you,” Harry replied, a bit of protectiveness seeping into his tone. “Did you forget who your fathers are? No one’s stupid enough to pick on our kids. Not even Crabbe and Goyle’s lot, and that’s saying something.”

Mia giggled into her hands, but her mirth faded fast. “Will Uncle Draco be there?”

“Not today, sweetheart. He’s tending Papa’s apothecary while we get Lukas ready for school, but we can visit him and Uncle Dean later. Fiona and Felix will be home too.” Dean and Draco’s adorable—and rambunctious—twins had brown skin, black hair, and hazel eyes full of as much mischief as the Weasley set. They had three years before they started Hogwarts yet, and Mia adored them.

“Yeah.” Only this time, her usual enthusiasm for seeing Teddy and the twins fell flat.

“Mia, honey, what’s the matter?”

Fat tears formed in the little girl’s big, blue eyes. “I… I just… I don’t want Lukas to go, Daddy! I don’t want to be alone!”

Harry’s heart panged. He wrapped his daughter in his arms and kissed her head. “I know,
sweetheart. But Lukas will be home every other weekend, and you have plenty of friends to keep you from being too lonely in the meantime.”

“But it’s not the same. They’re not family, Daddy. At least, they’re not here all the time. I… I just don’t want to be alone.”

Harry hugged her tighter. “Well, as it happens, we wanted to talk to the both of you about this the first student-parent weekend, but I suppose now is as good a time as any. Come on. Let’s get some apples for Lukas and Papa and we’ll let you in on a little secret your Papa and I have been planning for a while.”

Mia smiled hesitantly. “You have a surprise for us?”

“Yes, baby. Now go get your Papa.”

Mia giggled and dashed away, her apple in hand. Harry Summoned three more apples from the tree and followed at a more sedate pace, though he detoured to the roost to pick up Lukas’ pet cat. The black half-kneazle liked to rest near the sunny spot and chatter at their owls. Harry sometimes wondered if she could understand them.

Severus met him by the gate and kissed him briefly, love warm in his touch. “Everything is well, love?”

Harry passed Kiko to Lukas and nodded. “She’s all right, though worried about being alone with Lukas so far away. So I thought we might share our surprise with her sooner than planned. Is that all right with you?”

Severus glanced to their son, who had set Kiko at his feet and was busy trying to stuff handfuls of prank products into his pockets.

“Lukas.”

The boy stiffened and dropped a handful of Canary Creams. Kiko sniffed one and let out a yowl of mistrust. Smart cat.

Lukas stuck his hands behind his back and gulped. “Y-yes, Papa?”

“Leave off the pranks for a moment and come here.”

Lukas frowned, no doubt bemused that Severus hadn’t scolded him about his illicit joke products, and went to his father’s side. “What is it? Am I in trouble?”

Severus looped an arm around the boy’s shoulders. “No. Your dad and I simply wish to discuss something of importance with you both.” He dropped to one knee and opened his arms to Mia. “Come, little one.”

She rocketed into his arms and laid her head on his shoulder. “I don’t wanna be lonely, Papa!”

“I know. And… well, do you know that potion your Papa has been testing with Uncle Draco for the past year or so? The secret potion? I think it’s time to tell you about it.”

“Okay, Daddy. What?”

Severus gave Harry a look full of deep, abiding love. Harry slipped his hand into his husband’s hair and let his touch soothe his nervous mate.
Severus leaned into the caress and took a deep breath. “Well, you see, Mia, since your father and I are both male, we cannot have children together… ah, the usual way. But this potion makes that possible. It takes of our magic and… other things….”

Severus flushed bright pink and Harry struggled not to giggle. Other things indeed.

“Anyway, it blends magic and part of our genes to create a healthy embryo, which will then grow to be a baby inside of a surrogate—a woman willing to bear the child for us, as our bodies cannot hold babies. Do you understand so far?”

Mia scrunched up her nose. “I think so. Your potion means you and Daddy can have a baby, but a girl has to carry it?”

“Yes, exactly.”

The penny dropped for Lukas. “Wait, wait. Are you saying you and Dad are going to have a baby?”

Mia gasped, her eyes going as round as saucers. “A baby brother or sister?”

Severus patted her head. “A little sister. She will be here in five months.”

Mia squealed and threw her arms around Severus. “Papa! Oh, a sister! Can I name her? Can I play with her? Will we be friends?”

Harry chuckled and pried her away from Severus so he could breathe. “Hold on there, Princess. She has to grow before you can play with her. Little babies are fragile. Remember when Kara was born? Remember how Aunt Luna showed you how to hold her and told you to be very gentle?”

Mia nodded vigorously. “I remember! I'll be good, Daddy! I promise.”

“Good. I know you will, princess.” Harry gave their son a worried look. “And Lukas, how do you feel about this?”

Lukas shook himself as if coming out of a daze. “I… I guess it’s okay. But does that mean… I mean, she’s yours, not like us.” He waved a hand to indicate himself and Mia.

Severus frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, she’s not adopted.”

Severus gave his son a stern look. “I will have you know, Lukas Andrew Prince, that the fact that you do not carry your fathers’ genes does not make you any less ours. You have been our son since you were two. That has not changed and never will.”

Lukas sniffled. “Well, yeah, but if you have one of your own—”

“It will change nothing. You are our own, too.”

“But….”

Harry knelt in front of their son and held his shoulders. “Listen to me, Luke. You’re always going to be our son, okay? And your father and I know more than anyone that blood doesn’t make a family. There’s a reason you’ve never met my aunt and uncle and never will do. Aunt Petunia might have a blood tie to me, but she treated me like rubbish.”

“But you get along fine with Uncle Dudley.”
“Well, I do now, but not for a long time when we were growing up. My aunt and uncle raised me, but they’re horrible people, and they hurt Dudley too. And that should tell you that blood doesn’t always act like family.”

“The same is true for my father,” said Severus in a soft, sad voice. “He was abysmally cruel to me, though Mother was always kind.”

Harry slipped his arm around Severus’ shoulders and tugged the man against his side, knowing talking about his past always hurt Severus.

“That’s right,” Harry said, in part to spare Severus from the need to elaborate. “And then look at Granny Weasley! She’s no relation to any of us at all, but she’s adopted all of us into her clan—you’re as much her grandchildren as Louis, Victoire, and Dominique. So, you see, it’s not blood that makes us family, but our bonds.” Harry squeezed Lukas’ shoulders. “And nothing will ever change our bond to you or to Mia, you understand?”

Lukas gave him a tearful nod. “Promise?”

“I promise.”

“So do I,” said Severus with a sad smile. “We love you, little one. As much as ever. We simply wanted another child and chose to utilise a different method this time.”

Mia held out her apple to Lukas. “Do you want this, Luke? It might make you feel a little better.”

Lukas took the apple with a tentative smile. “Thanks, Mia.” He hugged his sister and gave his parents a firm nod. “Okay. Then, as long as we’re still your kids too, I’m happy about having a new little sister. Maybe next time you can try for a brother though.”

Severus choked. “Next time?”

Harry laughed and stood, brushing off his denims. “Let’s get through this baby first before we plan for another one.” He chuckled and helped Severus to his feet. “And we’d better go. We’re going to be late. Sev, do you have the portkey, love?”

Severus held out a broken hairbrush. “Right here.”

“Oh. Everyone touch a part of the hairbrush and don’t let go.” Harry picked up Lukas’ pet in one arm, placing his other hand on the brush head, and watched to make sure both of his children had a firm grip on its handle. “Ready? One… two… three! Portus.”

The brush glowed blue, the world shifted and tugged him along with a jerk, and Harry landed on the platform of the Hogwarts Express. Severus caught him before he could fall on his arse and brought his husband close against his side.

Grabbing a stunned Kiko from his father, Lukas called out to his soon-to-be classmate and was off like a shot. “Teddy! Teddy, guess what? I’m going to be a big brother again!”

Mia wailed and ran after him. “No fair, Luke! I was going to tell him!”

Harry chuckled and laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “We’ve done pretty well by them, don’t you think?”

“Mm. And by ourselves.” Severus placed a kiss on the top of Harry’s head. “I am happy, love. We have built a beautiful life together, and I am excited to meet our little Celia.”
“So am I.” Harry turned and caught Severus into a tender kiss. “I love you, you know.”

Severus chuckled softly. “I am an old man.”

“Bah. Those few silver threads only make you sexier.”

“I love you too, husband mine.”

Harry pulled his husband in for a kiss and sighed against his lips. Yes, *this* was where he belonged. Severus’ fingers threaded through Harry’s curls and wrapped around his waist, and—

“Dad! Papa!” Lukas’ outraged cry rang throughout the platform, drawing far more notice than Harry and Severus’ gentle kisses had done. “Not in front of my friends!”

Harry broke the kiss laughing. Severus’ joy was softer, quieter, but his emotions radiated happiness and love. Harry slipped his arm around Severus’ waist and sighed, contentment rich in his heart. Merlin knew they still had their share of troubles, and memories of the war still pressed in too close in the dark of the night sometimes, but they had sure come a long way. They had beaten back the evil of the world, and made their community a better, happier place for it.

Children like Teddy, like Millie’s half-vampiric son, Bill’s Veela daughters, and Hannah Abbott’s half-dwarf children could grow up peacefully, without fear of being treated like *creatures*. Harry’s kids needn’t fear the stigma of Severus’ dark past either. The world had become less judgmental, less fixated on heritage and blood and purity of lineage. Thank Merlin for that, too. With a community focused on making sure everyone had a place of their own, people were happy. And happy people didn’t grow up to become dark lords—or at least the sane ones didn’t.

Harry smiled as Luna’s emotional signature approached. “Lu and Nev are coming, Sev.”

Severus chuckled. “If I didn’t know better by now, I would think you had Feathersprites of your own.”

Harry didn’t have time to answer before Luna caught him in a warm hug.

Luna murmured, “You felt me coming, then?”

“Oh course.”

Harry kissed her cheek, taking care not to catch her eye scarf. She didn’t wear it at home, but in public, she used one to keep strangers from grimacing away from her scars. Severus was working on a potion to reduce them and, he hoped, restore her sight one day, but until then, Luna’s spirits kept her safe enough. Harry wondered if she would even want her sight back if Severus managed to create the potion for her.

“Yes, I would,” Luna said without missing a beat. “I would like to see what my little girl looks like through my own eyes, but I’m content to wait. Even if I never see her here, I will one day.”

Neville ran his hand through her hair and gave her a bright smile. “You will, love. I have faith that between Severus and Draco’s brewing abilities, Harry’s medical knowledge, and the quality of my greenhouse, we’ll work it out soon. I mean, look what we did for Mum and Dad! I never thought I’d have my parents back, but there you are.”

Ah, the *Animamentis* cure. Slytherin’s early soul magic experiments had inspired it, and years of study and careful magic and potions manipulation had perfected it. In the end, the cure for *Cruciatus*-induced madness worked much like the basilisk vaccine in that it was part-potion, part-spell. It
tapped into soul magic—only healing magic, so there was no risk—and the power of the afflicted person’s own soul could usually overcome their madness and heal their minds. It didn’t always work, but thank Merlin, the cure had proved to be a lifesaver for Frank and Alice.

“They were able to see Kara’s birth, at least,” said Luna with a smile. “I am glad. It’s always lucky to have grandparents at a baby’s birth.”

“Well, it’s a good thing we can count on Molly to commandeer everything about Celia’s birth from the nappies to the midwife, then,” said Severus with a chuckle.

“Midwife?” Harry snorted. “Mum is the midwife.”

Luna laughed. “Then we’re in the best of hands.”

“True.” Severus greeted the Longbottoms with a hug and an air kiss for each. “How is little Celia? Is she kicking still?”

“Oh, quite often. I believe she is a little quidditch player in the making.”

Severus shot Harry a mock glare.

Harry chuckled. “Don’t give me that look. You’d love her if she turned out to be the seeker for the Cannons.”

Severus gave him a soft smile. “I would at that.” He laughed and pulled Harry against him again. “Ah, a new baby on the way. I am so happy. Merlin, just look at us, my Harry. We are so different from those broken men who took half-done vows so long ago. And yet, I would not change a thing, except to trust you sooner.”

Harry kissed Severus, lightly this time so as not to embarrass their children. “I’d do it all again for you, you know. For you, our children, and our extended family.” He looped an arm over Luna’s shoulders. “I’ve never regretted a day.”

“Then I suppose I have done well by you,” Severus murmured.

“You have, love.”

Harry laid his head on Severus’ shoulder, watching his children play with their friends and his oldest son prepare to embark on his own adventures at Hogwarts. He leaned his head on his husband’s shoulder and smiled, a little bittersweet for the son he would miss, but still happy. He had been fortunate, he thought, to find this after so many years of anguish and strife.

The world was peaceful and quiet again, and his family loved him. Harry held Severus closer and closed his eyes. And he had Severus. In his heart and soul and his being, he would always have Severus. And Severus would always have him.

Harry looked up at his son’s call.

“Dad! Papa! They’re calling us onto the train.” Lukas hugged Harry tight and kissed his cheek. “I’ll miss you. You promise you won’t be upset if I’m in Slytherin?”

“Not at all, or did you forget your Papa was head of Slytherin house?”

Lukas gave a nervous chuckle. “Um… oops?”

Severus ruffled his hair. “There is no chance in all the realms that you are a Slytherin. You are a
Gryffindor, through and through. But if, by some strange whim of fate, you should find yourself with the snakes, know we will be as proud of you for wearing green as we would for any other colour.”

“Especially your Papa, Lukas,” said Neville with a wink.

Harry snorted. “I happen to quite like Slytherins myself, thank you.”

Severus smirked. “And thank Merlin for that, as you’re bonded to one for eternity.”

Harry gave Severus a warm smile. “I’m perfectly okay with that.”

“As am I, my Harry. As am I.”

~~ Fin ~~

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