### All to Ashes

**Summary**

Halfway through sixth year, Harry grows wings and learns he is a mythical being known as a Sunguard, a human phoenix who cannot be killed unless his mate dies or rejects him and whose power comes from his blood. The problem? Voldemort also has his blood, and Severus Snape, who detests him and has a perilous position in the war, is his mate.

**Notes**

**Warning: this fic has graphic rape scenes towards the end.** I'll put up a trigger warning on the chapter for those who can do without it. The story should still make sense if you skip the memory scenes (where the rapes occur).

So I'm almost finished with Discretion and Valor, but as I still have no working computer and no access to my existing works until I do, I started this. Which, as it's a trilogy, will keep me busy for awhile.

Fair warning, if the tags and above note didn't make it clear, this is a *much* darker story than Discretion and Valor. There is a metric ton of angst here and not much fluff. Be ready for a rough ride, though the ending of this book is hopeful, and the later installments have plenty of sweetness to balance out the angst.

This book is pre-slash. They don't get started on a relationship until the next installment,
though it's hinted that they're heading that way. And when they do, there is a third person involved (eventually). An OMC high elf, too. So... fair warning.

The Marauders, only excepting Remus, are absolutely evil here. James and Pettigrew in particular are utter bastards. You've been warned.

Rape victims in this book are treated much like my own experiences. In other words, like shit until there's someone with power to stand up for them.

Creature lore is heavy in this series. The house elves have an important role (for once).

With that out of the way, here goes nothing!
Chapter 1

Business as Usual

Harry's sixteenth birthday had come and gone, and Dumbledore had dropped him off at the Burrow after recruiting Slughorn's services, but for the first time in Harry's memory, he wished he had stayed just one day longer at the Dursleys'. He struggled to hide the evidence of his dreams—strange, amorphous blobs of colour and desire so strong he could taste it—but Ron was already awake and aware, unfortunately.

"Some dream, eh?" Ron waggled his eyebrows. "Heard you moaning all the way to the loo!"

Harry buried his head in his hands. "Oh gods. Please tell me no one else did."

"Eh, don't get so worked up about it, mate. There are at least five blokes in this house at any given time. We've all had our share of those dreams and woke up the house by it. Least you didn't scream someone's name, like I did the last time. Worst of it was, it was Eloise-bloody-Midgen! Hermione was visiting and heard it, and I thought I'd never live it down!"

Harry snickered over the memory. "Yeah, can't forget that. You blushed every time you saw Midgen for like a month at the start of last spring term. I'm positive she thought you fancied her."

"Merlin forbid, no. 'Mione is more than enough woman for me." Ron tossed him a pumpkin-orange towel from somewhere nearby. A dirty one, probably, but it would do to cover Harry's… little problem. "Anyway, don't get so het up about it, mate. Happens to all of us. Who did you dream of, though?"

Harry frowned. "That's the strange thing. I couldn't see anyone. I'm not even sure I was dreaming of a person at all. I just saw a lot of blurry shapes and colours, and knew I really wanted whatever it was for some odd reason." He scoffed. "Honestly, I think I'd prefer dreaming about Midgen to nothing at all."

Ron cocked his head. "Huh. That's odd. I usually at least get a suggestion of a girl, even if I don't always know which one."

Harry shrugged. "More of the strangeness of being me, I suppose."
"Reckon so. Long as you don't start dreaming of Aragog or something."

The shudder creeping down Harry's spine felt too much like spider legs on his flesh. "Dear gods, Ron. I say colours and shapes and you pull Aragog out of your hat?"

Ron snorted. "Just saying, it could be worse." He tossed a pillow at Harry. "For Merlin's sake, man, go wash up before it starts dripping."

There was a lovely mental image. With a blush that could have heated all of Ottery St. Catchpole, Harry dragged the towel around his waist and made a mad dash for the loo.

The dreams kept coming. Every night, he dreamed of the strange colours and shapes and an overwhelming sense of wanting... something. Thank Merlin, the dreams didn't always turn sexual, but they mystified Harry enough to engender concern. Still, at least the colours had started to come together into a cohesive... blob. They usually featured a lot of black, though the ones that did turn sexual only had one small patch of it amongst a giant swath of pale pink and cream.

At a loss and wondering if his friend might have experienced something like this, Harry mentioned his recurring dreams to Ron a few weeks into term.

"You never see anything but a blob of colours?"

Harry nodded. "Sometimes it's mostly a pale sandy sort of colour with some pink and black. Other times, it's half black, half white, and there's a pale blob at the top with some more black. Most of the time, though, it's almost all black but for a blob of cream and pale pink near the top."

"That's the strangest thing I've ever heard, mate. Maybe you should ask Trelawney."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Somehow, I don't think I need divination to know how that meeting would turn out."

Ron snorted and spoke in a wavering, high-pitched tone. "Oooh, Haarry! It's all so clear. I seeee... the Grim!"

Harry laughed. "See? Who needs the Sight when you've got us?"

Ron chuckled, but it faded into a wry frown. "Well, my next best suggestion is Hermione, mate."

Harry gulped. "Maybe I'll ask Trelawney after all."

By the time Harry got up the courage to ask Hermione about his dreams, he had begun to notice a roughly human form taking shape. So it was a someone he wanted and not a something, but that still didn't narrow it down much. He still had no idea which girl he'd taken to fantasising about every night.

Or if it was a girl at all.

Hermione tugged Harry into a corner and cast the Prince's muffling charm the minute he mentioned the dreams—so his book was good for something, apparently.

"Let me get this straight, Harry," she hissed, temper running high, "all fall, you've been having strange dreams about something or someone you really want, that you can neither stop nor explain, just like last year, and you haven't told the headmaster yet?"
Harry slumped against the wall, aghast. "You think it's…?"

"Honestly, Harry. I'm stunned that you didn't at least consider the possibility."

Harry frowned. Come to think of it, he should have considered it. Sirius hadn't been dead for six weeks when the first dream started.

Why hadn't he ever considered Voldemort as a potential source of his dreams? He rubbed his scar in dismay and wondered if being possessed in the Ministry had addled him somehow.

Wait. His scar.

Harry slumped in relief. "It's not Voldemort, 'Mione. I'm sure of that."

"How can you possibly be sure when you have no idea what or whom you desire?"

"It's definitely a whom, and I know because of my scar. It's never so much as twinged after these dreams. Dreams from Voldemort and visions and such always leave me feeling like my head's just been cracked like an egg. And Dumbledore said he thinks Riddle will back off from that method for a while anyway, since the last time he tried hurt him like hell, too."

Hermione's ire deflated like a popped balloon. "Oh. Oh, that's good then."

"Yeah." He gave her a worried look. "So you've no other ideas as to what they might be, then?"

She shrugged. "Not off the top of my head, but I'll help you research it."

"Hermione, when am I supposed to have time to research anything? I've got to get that memory from Slughorn, remember?"

She bit her lip. "All right. I'll see what I can find."

"Thanks, 'Mione. You're a lifesaver."

"Yes, I know."

Halloween came and went with no answers for Harry, but the morning after left him with new questions to ponder. He rolled into a sitting position and rubbed his aching shoulders. Merlin, should he still be hurting from Quidditch practice two days later? Maybe he had strained his back or something.

He grimaced as he stood, feeling the sticky evidence of another amorphous dream in his pants. Well, not so amorphous anymore. He now knew the person he wanted was tall and slim and had long black hair and fair skin. Everything else remained a mystery. Still, at this rate, maybe he would have some firm answers by Christmas.

He turned to grab the spare towel he had taken to keeping under his pillow for moments like this, but froze at the sight of his bed. A few downy red and orange feathers lay scattered on the sheets.

What in Merlin's name? Had Fawkes kept him company last night? Maybe the pillow had burst. Harry examined it, but he didn't see any evidence of a torn seam, and it looked to have cotton inside anyway.

Unable to work out an answer, Harry banished the feathers, grabbed his towel, and made his way to the loo.
The feathers appeared again a week later. This time, he hadn't practiced quidditch for three days, and despite his aches having vanished the second day, his shoulders hurt again that morning.

Harry could think of no other explanation than possible leftover injuries from defence class, and either a prank or Fawkes visiting him in the night for the feathers. Neither option made much sense.

With a niggling sense of worry, Harry grabbed his clothing and rushed to grab a quick bite before his early morning meeting with the headmaster.

Gods, Snape was a bastard. Did he really need to dig the knife in Harry's chest every free second?

Harry hid himself in Myrtle's loo after defence, staring at the broken tap which led to the Chamber of Secrets. Maybe if he grabbed the basilisk skin from there and gave it to Snape as a peace offering, the man might stop reminding him of his father's crimes every chance he got.

'Your sainted father, Potter, was an inhuman monster, and you are shaping up to be just like him! Did you enjoy it, him? Seeing my young body on display for your perusal... against my will?'

"I'm not a goddamn rapist," Harry told the sink, and winced at the plop-plop of tears dripping into the bowl. "I'm not...."

He would have to actually have touched someone before that was a remote possibility. His father, though... Harry couldn't deny the man had been an utter shite to treat Snape the way he had.

The memory of his father's last threat before Snape had hauled Harry out of the pensieve cracked across his ears like the sound of a gunshot. Was it rape to strip Snape down to his smalls? Maybe not, but if his father had carried out his threat... well, it still wasn't rape, but it crossed a line Harry didn't want to contemplate.

And the fear in Snape's face when Harry's father had said it... Merlin, but Harry had never seen anyone look so terrified.

The sink had gone shiny with his tears. Gods. His dad had been in the wrong that day, no denying that, but why did Snape have to take it out on Harry? He had never done a thing to hurt Snape.

Until he broke into the man's pensieve. Maybe it did count as some kind of assault to view his memories—and his body—without consent.

Shite. Harry wasn't sure of anything other than the fact that he probably owed Snape an apology, and that Snape would hex him if he dared try to offer it.

With a sigh, Harry dragged a hand across his wet cheeks and went to splash some water on his face, but froze at the sight of his hand. It was shiny from his tears—not simply wet, but... shimmering. Like mother of pearl in the light.

Harry gasped and jerked his head up. His face had the same shimmering, opalescent coating running down his cheeks, and, as he stared, gobsmacked, another tear wobbled and dropped.

A tear that looked just like Fawkes' tears.

"What the bloody fuck?"
Myrtle popped over a toilet stall and scowled. "Your mouth is even dirtier than the other boy who comes here to cry."

Harry whirled around. "Another boy?"

"Yes. He cries a lot about his mum and not wanting to do his task. But...." Myrtle wiped her glasses on her uniform, cocked her head, and frowned. "Why are your tears so strange?"

Harry wiped his face and hands until the strange sheen vanished. "I have no bloody idea."

He took a deep breath to steady himself, asked Myrtle not to mention his tears, and left.

He didn't mention them to anyone either. He had no idea what was happening to him, but he wasn't ready to deal with it. Not now.

Harry woke from another wet dream with a gasp. This time the images had been much clearer. He still didn't have a firm identity, but the person's gender was no longer in doubt.

Apparently, the person he wanted was a man.

Shite. Did that mean Harry was gay?

He bolted up, cringed at the small pile of down and fluff under his sore shoulders, banished the mess, and raced to the loo. The sun hadn't come up yet, so Harry leaned on the sink counter, staring at his wide-eyed reflection and struggling to come to terms with the mess his life had become.

Gay. Well, there was one more thing he couldn't tell anyone. Not least because he wasn't certain himself.

Harry splashed some water on his face and dried it off, but hesitated as a golden glint shone in his eyes. Dawn? No, the sun hadn't risen.

With a creeping sense of foreboding, Harry leaned in to investigate his reflection.

His eyes had developed a wide band of gold around the pupil.

"What the hell is happening to me?"

As the possible answers terrified him, Harry glamoured his eyes back to their normal green and went about his day. Or tried, at any rate.

What in Merlin's name was going on?

Christmas break should have been a time to relax, but three days in, Harry woke up in bone-crushing, soul-rending pain. He couldn't decide if he was glad no one was around to see what new strange thing had happened to him, or terrified that no one could call for help.

Writhing agony seared the skin of his back—fuck, was something moving under there? Images from a film Dudley had watched once while Harry was about filled his mind. Merlin help him, if an alien burst from his back, he'd do Voldemort a favour and kill them both himself.

With a white-hot surge of anguish and a crimson burst of blood, Harry screamed in pain and terror that his worst fears might have been realized. He lay face-down on the bed, quivering and trying
not to feel the heavy, sticky, warm things on his back, big as blankets and red with gore.

What the *fuck* had just happened to him?

After several moments of stillness, spent breathing through the pain and getting his fears back under control—aliens, really?—he mustered the courage to turn his head.

Wings. Merlin help him, he had *wings*. Giant, red feathered things no one could possibly miss.

"Fuck."

He couldn't hide anymore. Whatever was happening was too big for him to handle alone.

He thanked his lucky stars that all the sixth year girls but Hermione had gone home for Christmas break and struggled to find his wand.

Harry's fingers finally closed around the wood. With a shaky sigh, he struggled to form enough positive memories to produce the spell he needed.

Thank Merlin Ron had gone to breakfast early, judging by the state of his curtains. Harry really wasn't ready to face him, especially not like this. He wondered briefly why Ron didn't wake him, then decided he had more important things to worry about.

"*Expecto Patronum.*" His stag appeared and bowed. "Go get Hermione."

Prongs bowed again and cantered away.
"Harry?" Hermione's shriek rang in his ears and went through his aching head. "What happened? Are those…?"

"Wings," he gasped. "They burst out of me. Fuck, it hurts."

"Oh, Harry."

Hermione sat beside him cautiously and set to work with what healing spells she knew. By the time she finished patching him up and dabbing the torn flesh around his new wings with essence of dittany, Harry felt human again. Figuratively speaking.

He dragged himself to a seated position and rubbed his hands over his face. It shouldn't have surprised him to find tears on his cheeks after suffering pain like that, but the shimmer across his hands shocked him nonetheless.

"Merlin, Harry! What's wrong with your face? And… have your eyes changed, too?"

Apparently, he hadn't been able to maintain his glamour through the pain. Harry grimaced and braced himself for a tirade.

"I… my eyes started changing last month, and the shimmering stuff is my tears. They're strange. Like Fawkes' almost."

"Like phoenix tears?"

"Yeah, almost exactly like. Well, I don't know if they heal, but—"

"That's easy enough to test." She conjured a wide-necked phial. "Cry. I'll catch it and put it on your wings. If they feel better, well…"

He gaped. "You expect me to cry… just like that?"

She shrugged. "If your tears have healing powers, I suggest it's a skill you add to your repertoire. Especially considering we're in a war, you might be able to save lives by crying on demand."

He grimaced. "When you put it like that… but still, how? I mean, I don't cry that often unless something really hurts."

"Think of something that really hurts then. Merlin knows you've plenty of experience to draw on."

Harry wrapped his arms around his chest and blinked in shock when his wings wrapped around his upper arms, too. It didn't comfort him much, as he wasn't used to them and they still hurt like hell anyway.
"Merlin, this is so strange."

He shook his head and tried to think of the most hurtful things he could. His parents came up first, but Harry had grown accustomed to their loss years ago.

The Dursleys? That brought more of a hurtful reaction within him, but Harry had learned young that crying never brought him anything but more pain in that house, and the lesson stuck.

Sirius? Yes, that still hurt like hell.

And yet, another memory now overlapped and tinted his memories of the godfather he had loved grey.

"Who wants to see me take Snivellus' pants off?"

Harry drew his knees to his chest, ignoring the pain in his back. The images of Snape's terrified eyes haunted him. So familiar, somehow. And the adult Snape's face that day Harry had dared defend his father in an after-class tongue lashing reserved especially for him… gods.

"Your father was an inhuman monster…"

There had been rage in Snape's face, but it was the agonized twist of his lip, the hollow, haunted pain in his eyes, still sharp after two and a half decades, and the bitter aura of utter despair around his features that hurt Harry.

His father had broken Snape somehow.

And Harry had done it all over again by violating his pensieve.

A cool brush of glass rubbed his cheeks, then tepid liquid rushed along the join of the wing nearest Hermione. A second swipe and pour down his back coated the join of the other wing. So thinking of Snape made him cry? Fitting, he supposed, but his friends would never believe his tears sprung from a place of sympathy for the man.

Harry could never tell them either.

His tears ran slowly down his back, cool and tingling where they touched his broken skin.

And they healed him.

The pain vanished, and Harry found he could wrap his wings around himself with ease. Good thing, too, because he wanted to hide now.

"So it looks as though you'll be learning to cry on demand then," said Hermione.

Harry gave her a miserable look. "Apparently so."

After a rushed exit under glamours to the Room of Requirement, and a thorough explanation of everything that had happened to him in the past six months, Harry had expected Hermione to have a pat answer for him. She always did.

Until now.

"Well, you're clearly some kind of magical being. A magical creature like Veela or high elves. The problem is that I have no idea what."
The one time he really needed her to have the whole textbook memorized, and she was stumped. Go figure.

"What do we do, then?"

"Well, I'm going to go to the library and research magical creatures. Obviously."

Of course she was. The day Hermione overlooked the library when she needed answers was the day the world ended. Harry was positive of that.

"And me?"

She fixed him with a stern look. "You need to tell Ron. I know what I've found in textbooks, but he has all the benefit of magical knowledge passed down through history and legends. He has perspective and experience we don't."

Harry flinched. "I… but…." "Harry Potter, he's your best friend! He's not going to throw you away because you have wings!"

Harry drew his knees up to his chest. "He's done it for less."

She sighed and rubbed his shoulder. "Yes, but he learned his lesson. He was miserable about how he treated you for months, and even now, he still gets broken up about it sometimes."

Harry jerked up. "What? Really?"

"Yes, really. He knows he damaged your trust in him, and he's never quite been able to fix it. You're always hesitant to tell him new things, and he knows you're hiding something now. It's hurting him that you don't trust him enough to tell him."

Harry ducked in shame. "I didn't realize I was still holding it against him."

"It's tough to let go, sometimes, but it'll be okay. Ron loves you. Just go tell him."

Harry stared at his knees. "Hermione, that's not the problem. I do trust him with almost everything, even if I get a little scared sometimes. That's not him. It's… my past."

"Your relatives. We both know they're horrid to you. Are they abusive, Harry? I mean, beyond what Ron saw that night when he rescued you with the twins."

Harry tensed and stared at his knees.

"Harry?"

"I… it's not important, okay? After one more summer, I'm shot of them anyway. I'm fine."

"You are patently not fine, Harry, and you just gave a textbook answer of what an abused child would do."

"I'm not a child!"

"They never gave you the chance to be, did they?"

At the threat of looming tears, which he couldn't hope to hide any longer, Harry gave in. "Okay, Hermione. You win. They beat me, starved me, and forced me to live in a cupboard, and that
honestly hurts less than the complete and utter lack of love. They're horrible people, and I hate
them, but I don't want to talk about them right now, o-okay?"

His voice broke, and he covered his face in shaking hands. "Please. I can't. Not now."

Hermione caught him into a tight hug. She was shaking and sniffling. "Oh, Harry. I'm sorry."

"Don't, okay? Just… that isn't the problem now anyway."

"If their treatment of you is causing trouble with your ability to trust—"

"It's not that either, 'Mione."

She gave a frustrated huff. "Then what is your problem with telling him?"

Harry covered his suddenly flaming face with his hands. "The dreams. Don't you think that, if I am
a magical creature, there's a good possibility I'm dreaming about my mate?"

"Yes, and…?"

"And it's not a girl, Hermione!"

She snickered. "Of course it isn't. You're gay."

Harry stared, gobsmacked. "How the bloody hell did you know? I didn't even know until last
month!"


"But… I thought you were stuck on the chance that the Prince mightn't be a bloke?"

"Oh, I haven't ruled it out, but you have, and really, that says it all, doesn't it?"

Harry didn't know what to say to that.

"Tell him, Harry. He's not going to throw you away for being gay either."

Harry cringed and hugged his knees again. "Isn't he, though? I'm pretty sure he expects me to get
together with Ginny, but if these dreams really are about my mate—and the more I think of it, the
more positive I am that they are—then that's never going to happen."

Hermione nodded sadly. "Yes, I've been trying to gently guide Ginny away from you all term, but I
don't think she'll be able to move on. Not until she hears it from you."

Harry blanched. "She still…?"

"Well, you are rather a catch. Even I fancied you for a bit in second year."

Harry gaped. "What? Merlin. Please never say that to Ron. He's enough of a prat about you as is."

"You're not kidding." She patted Harry's knee. "Tell them, Harry. Both of them. They deserve to
hear this from you. And knowing you haven't likely got a choice in the matter will help both of
them accept it."

Harry stared at his knees. "I… I just don't want to hurt them."

"Then you need to buck up and tell them. Ron already knows you're hiding something. And don't
you remember how angry Cho was that you didn't give her a clear no and just strung her along all term?"

Angry enough to inspire Hermione's favorite avian curse. No, he wouldn't forget that anytime soon.

"And the longer you keep hiding it from Ron, the more hurt and angry he's going to be."

Harry sighed. "I guess you're right, but I still think he'll be angry."

"He'll get over it, Harry. He loves you."

"He mightn't when he works out that I hurt his dear little sister, never mind that I didn't mean to. You remember what he did to Dean after they broke up, right?"

"Yes, yes, but this is hardly the same thing. You didn't hurt anyone intentionally—"

"Neither did Dean."

"Well, if Ron does curse your bollocks off, you might just direct your tears of agony onto the wound."

Harry snorted. "Very funny. When he kills me, you're to get my books after I'm gone, not that you haven't read them all three times by now, but still—"

Hermione laughed and smacked him with a conjured pillow.
Ron sat on his bed when Harry came back to the dorm, his expression dark. "Have fun with Hermione all morning, did you?"

Harry rubbed his scar. Well, this was already off to a great start.

"No, Ron, fun is most definitely not the word for it."

Ron frowned. "Have you been arguing then?"

"No. Something… terrifying happened to me while you were at breakfast, and I needed her help to deal with it."

"Terrifying?" Ron jerked to his feet. "Bloody hell! Are you all right, mate?"

"Yes. And no. Look, I'm going to tell you about it, but we need Ginny first."

Ron gave him a sly smile. "Finally work out who you're dreaming about, then?"

Harry winced. "Er, no. But I did find out… something, so I need to talk to you both."

Ron gave him a bemused look, then shrugged and followed him out of the dorm.

A few minutes later, Harry sat in the Room of Requirement with the youngest Weasley siblings and struggled to find his bearings. "So, er… Ginny, to catch you up, I've been having these dreams, all term."

She grimaced. "Not like last year?"

Ron snorted. "Wrong kind of dream, Ginny."

She frowned, then understanding and a bright blush crossed her cheeks. The curious hope there made Harry want to pummel Ron.

"Well, er," he hurried to explain, "they're not all like that. And they're not like normal dreams even when they are."

Ginny frowned. "Um, maybe it's because I'm not a bloke, but I don't get it."

Harry raked a shaky hand through his hair. "Yeah. Best to start at the beginning."

"Tends to be advisable," said Ron with a smirk.

Harry doubted he would stay amused for long.

"A-anyway, at first, I didn't see anything but blobs of random colours. There was no shape, no form
at all, but somehow I wanted what was in those dreams, intensely. It wasn't always... er...." He blushed and coughed. "Like that. Sometimes I just felt... longing. Like I'm lonely for whatever it was."

Ginny tilted her head, her brow creased in thought. "Strange. You have no idea what it is?"

"Er... I didn't then, no."

Ron smirked again. "And now you've enough of an idea to fill in the pieces."

"No."

The smirk slid off Ron's face. "Why'd you ask Ginny here then?"

"Oh, bloody hell, Ron, I'm getting to that! This is hard enough as is."

Ron huffed and leaned back in his chair. "All right. Go on then."

"I'm trying." Harry took a deep breath. "Anyway, Ginny, as time went on, those colours came together and formed a person. And while I still don't know who they are, I do know... one thing."

Ginny fidgeted with her skirt. "And that is."

"It's... it's a bloke. I'm gay, apparently."

Ginny blanched and gave a soft, "Oh," but he barely heard it over the sound of Ron's roar.

"What?"

Harry rubbed his ears. "You heard me."

"Then... then what? You've just been stringing her along all year? For fun?"

Harry's heart cracked and fire ignited in his chest. "Fun? You think this is fun? Hermione had to bloody well drag me into telling you for just this reason!"

Ron snarled, "So you were just dragging us along all year. You made up that rubbish about the shapes, didn't you? I knew something weird was happening."

"Ron! For Merlin's sake, why would I make that up? If I wanted to fool you, don't you think I might have picked a less barmy story? For Merlin's sake, who gets off on dreams of colours?"

"Yeah, well, maybe you just couldn't think of anything better at first and had to stick with that story."

"Or maybe you might trust that your supposed best friend wouldn't lie to you about this and just found out the person was a bloke last month!"

Ron flinched, then dropped back into his seat with a huff. "Well, all right. But if you knew last month, why not tell me then?"

"Maybe because I had no bloody clue what it meant? I didn't know I was gay until the dreams kept coming and... I put some other bits into focus."

"Like what?"
Ron scoffed. "Well, that's no surprise."

Harry glared at the prat and blinked back tears. "And what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Just that you're not exactly keen on telling us much of anything at all this term, are you?"

"That's bollocks!"

"I know you've been hiding something all year. I reckon now I understand why, too."

An inferno boiled over in Harry's gut. Sparks crackled on his skin and his vision took on a golden tint.

Ginny and Ron jerked back, eyes wide, but they hadn't seen a hint of Harry's fury.

"You think I'm hiding something?" Harry jerked a hand across his face before they could see his tears.

"Harry?" Ginny's voice trembled, but Harry charged on.

"You're right. I have been hiding something, but it had nothing to do with Ginny." Harry spelled off his shirt and paced.

"Harry?" Ron reached out, but Harry batted his hand away.

"Maybe you think I'm an arsehole, maybe you have a point, I don't know. But I didn't mean to hurt you. I just didn't think you'd react well—"

Ron shouted, "Harry, your eyes!"

"—To how big of a freak I really am!"

"Look, mate. I'm sorry. I was out of turn. I don't think you're a—"

"No? Then take a good look! *Finite!*"

Harry's glamours dropped, and he spread his wings. Ginny blanched. Ron gaped.

"Now, do you get why I've been afraid to speak up?" Tears dripped off Harry's chin. "I'm terrified of what's happening to me!"

"Oh Merlin," Ginny breathed. "You're not human."

"No. And I kept it quiet because I was scared out of my bloody wits, okay? I didn't mean to hurt you, Ginny. I didn't even know you still."

At her shudder and gasp, he changed the topic.

"And I didn't know what was happening until this morning. That's why I needed Hermione. My wings came in—more like tore straight through my back—and I was hurt, badly. I needed her to heal me and help me tidy the mess, inside my head and out of it."

Ron's jaw dropped. "And I was… bloody hell, Harry, I'm sorry. I was a ruddy arse to you." He frowned. "Wait a tick, though. If your wings just came in, they ought to still be sore. Fleur's
apparently hurt her for a week."

Harry wiped a tear from his face and held it on his fingertip.

"Diffindo Minimus!"

A small cut appeared across the top of his opposite forearm. Harry rubbed the tear on the wound and watched as it sealed immediately, as if there had never been a cut there at all.

"My tears are apparently like phoenix tears. They heal. A lot."

"Phoenix tears?" Ron's eyes went wide and round. "Oh gods, I know what you are."

Harry froze. "You do? What is it? Me and Hermione are clueless!"

Ron stepped closer, eyes full of awe and wonder. Not the worshipping type, or Harry might have bolted. "Oh my gods, it all makes sense now."

Harry blinked more tears back and wiped his face. "Er… what? What does? Me being gay? My tears?"

"No, you prat. Well, yes, but that's not what I meant. Everything, Harry! Why you're still alive now. Why You-Know-Who couldn't possess you. Why you're resistant to Imperius. Why your magic is so strong. Why the basilisk venom didn't kill you on the spot. The prophecy. Even why Fawkes has a thing for you and you alone despite the fact that he's Dumbledore's familiar."

"Er… it does?"

"Yes, you berk! You're a Sunguard! You're a human phoenix! And those dreams, gods, I really was a berk. They're fate dreams. All creatures with predestined mates have them. Those dreams are meant to help you find them. Your mate, I mean."

Harry wrapped his wings around himself. "So that's what I've been seeing all this time? My mate?"

Ron gave Ginny a sad look. "Yeah. The only one you'll ever have."

Ginny ran out in tears.
Ron raced after Ginny, but by the time Harry had reapplied his glamours, spelled his shirt back on, and caught up to him a few corridors down, Ginny was long gone.

Ron leaned on his knees and panted. "Reckon we should let her calm down a bit?"

"Yeah. Maybe we should send Hermione in—"

"We need Hermione ourselves, mate. This is huge. She needs to understand."

Harry nodded. "All right, but, Ron, are you going to do this to me every time I don't follow your expectations? If my mate is, say, a Slytherin, are you going to call me a traitor and such?"

Ron flopped against the wall and rubbed his forehead. "Shite. You're right. I… I can't keep attacking you just because you're not as open as I am. Hell, I reckon I'd be scared to tell me, too. I really am sorry, Harry. And much as I highly doubt your mate is a Slytherin, I promise I won't go mental on you again for things you can't help."

"Even if it's Snape or something?"

"Urgh. If your mate is Snape, Harry, trust me, I'll be too busy pitying your rubbish lot in life to be angry."

Harry snorted and leaned against the wall beside him. "Well, the chances of that have got to be slim to none, right? Surely fate would at least pick someone who can 'tolerate my odious presence.'"

"Mate, you do realize that talking about the bat works like a ruddy summoning charm, right? Keep this up, and he'll swoop right up out of hell and give us both detentions for breathing in his general vicinity. After taking fifty points—apiece, of course."

"Let's just be glad fate isn't quite that cruel yet and go find Hermione, then."

Ron nodded and led Harry back towards the Room.

"Expecto Patronum!"

His Jack Russell ran a few circles around them, licked Harry's face, and plopped at Ron's feet, tail wagging madly.

"Go find Hermione and bring her to the Room of Requirement."

The terrier barked and dashed away.

Hermione pulled a small, Muggle-style notepad and biro from her vest pocket and perched the
Harry wanted to laugh at her preparedness to take notes over the bloody hols, for Merlin's sake, but knew better than to give in to the urge. Hermione would make him regret it instantly.

Instead, he tugged his knees to his chest and listened. Now wasn't the time to take the piss anyway.

"Well," said Ron, "it's like I said. They're human phoenixes."

Hermione paled. "Harry's immortal?"

Harry's gut dropped. Oh gods, no. Not that. He would have to watch everyone he loved die before him, over and over and—


"Hey, it's all right." Ron patted his shoulder. "You're not immortal… exactly."

"Exactly?" Harry struggled to keep his voice from becoming a screech. "Either I am or I'm not. Which is it?"

"You're not immortal," said Ron. "You'll live and die like every other human-type being….

"There's a but on the end of that statement. I can hear it."

Hermione's hand on Harry's back was the only thing keeping him out of a blind panic.

"Er… sorry, mate. There's two, actually. The first being that you're all but impossible to kill while you live. And the second being that you… you're probably going to live for a really long time, barring a catastrophe."

Harry rocked into his knees. "H-how long exactly?"

"Well… no one really knows. Sometimes it's a couple of centuries. Sometimes it's millennia. It depends, and we don't have that many records of Sunguards. There are only ever a handful of them alive anywhere, and, as far as I know, you're only one of about four to ever live in Europe. I think Merlin was the last, but he only lived about a hundred years. Lancelot was his mate, I think, or one of the knights, and after his mate was killed, he didn't want to go on."

"So I might live thousands of years after everyone I love is gone?"

Ron stared at his knees. "It's the same for a lot of semi-human races. High elves live even longer."

Then Harry would just have to find a few elves and befriend them so the constant loss of everyone he loved didn't drive him mad. The elves might be glad of a friend who would last awhile, too, come to think of it.

Hermione hugged him tight, tears in her eyes. "Oh, Harry. I'm so sorry. If we had known, maybe it would have been kinder to…." 

To leave him alone? After years spent wishing for friends that never came? For someone who cared and didn't call him Freak and Boy? Who didn't shove him in the dark cupboard so no one could see how horrible he was?

No. Even if they wouldn't live as long as he did, Harry would never regret loving them.
"Hush." He hugged her, too. "That's rubbish. I need you to keep me from running off half-cocked and getting myself killed every twenty minutes. And Ron to keep me sane between rounds of death-defying Gryffindor brainlessness. So don't let me hear you say that again."

Hermione laughed in spite of her tears. "Oh, I couldn't really... it's just that I don't want to leave you alone."

"I won't be. I'll have your kids and grandkids to remember you by. And even when I don't, having our bond and the memories we made will always be worth it."

"Oh, Harry!"

By the time she pulled away, none of them had dry eyes. Harry jokingly dropped a tear on their heads.

"All better!"

Ron snorted, then gave him a bemused look. "Er... believe it or not, it actually worked."

"What? I thought phoenix tears only healed physical wounds."

"Well, they aren't phoenix tears though, are they?" Hermione wiped her face and gave him a bright smile. "They're Sunguard tears, and I feel loads better, too. The grief is still there, but it's like your tears took all the hurtful parts away and only left behind the happiness of having you as long as we can."

"So I can heal emotionally, too."

Hermione rubbed her chin in thought. "Well, Ron and I were on the mend already. I think if it was a deeper wound, like a lifelong trauma or something, it would be harder to heal."

"Probably so, but at least we know what to do next time I start being a berk, mate," said Ron. "Just blubber on me and I'll be over my snit in seconds."

Harry laughed. "I'll keep it in mind." He crossed his arms over his knees again. "So Sunguards live a really long time, they're impossible to kill, their tears can heal physical and emotional grief, to varying extents, and they're really rare. What else do I need to know?"

Ron took a deep breath and sat tall. "Right. So Sunguards are a part of our legends. Whenever wizardkind, or rather, life in general is threatened, a Sunguard is born to combat it and heal the fabric of life."

"So no pressure or anything," Harry said in a dry tone.

"No more than you already have to cope with, mate."

Harry nodded. "Fair enough. Go on."

"According to the stories, Sunguards are mythical guardians of love and life sent to help us when we need it most. And I daresay we do right now, with an immortal maniac running around torturing people to death every two seconds."

Harry shuddered. "The prophecy. This is the power he knows not."

"I reckon so, mate. Sunguards are said to be three times as powerful as any other being on the planet."
Harry paled. "But… if I'm impossible to kill and ultra-powerful, what happens if I ever go bad? Will I destroy the world?"


"I'm serious, Ron. Absolute power corrupts."

"Well, for one, you don't have absolute power, mate. At the moment, we've not much at all between the three of us, or haven't you noticed that Mum and the Order are still determined to run every aspect of our lives?"

"Well, true, but I could take over with that kind of magical power, couldn't I?"

Ron patted his shoulder. "You could, but you won't. Maybe it's because of what you said, but Sunguards can't go bad. It goes against the core of their being. You don't have a capacity for evil or greed, Harry. It's just not in your biology."

"So my race won't let me become another Riddle?"

"That, and the fact that you have a conscience," Hermione said.

Harry relaxed and let down his knees. They were starting to cramp. "Okay. Well, that's good then." He froze. "Unless someone possesses me and forces me to take everyone else over."

"Not happening," said Ron. "Remember how you resisted the Imperius curse? There's a reason. Sunguards are the most powerful creatures alive due to the magic in their blood. Mind control spells can't hope to combat it."

Harry blanched. "Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken…?"

He grabbed Ron's hand. "You're positive my power is in my blood?"

"That's what all the legends say. That Sunguard blood is powerful enough to save lives. That's why you can't be killed and live so long, why you're resistant to mind control, and why there's no poison or curse that will stick for long. Your blood is life and light itself."

"Life and light…?"

"Yeah. Oh, and that's why Riddle can't touch you. Because you're too pure for evil to bear it, thanks to your blood."

Harry remembered a skeletal finger pressing into his scar in the graveyard and nearly retched. 'Oh gods. This is bad.'

Hermione grabbed their hands, her eyes bright. "Oh, Harry! This is wonderful! This means we can win."

Harry swallowed hard. "Don't count your galleons yet, Hermione. Ron, do Sunguards have any weaknesses?"

"Just one—their mate. If their mate rejects them, they get sick and die slowly as their immortality burns itself away. And if someone kills their mate, the Sunguard won't want to live any longer and their immunity and longevity vanishes in an instant. Then they have a normal lifespan and mortality like everyone else. Why? Until we're done with You-Know-Who, just keep your race and mate's identity a secret. That way no one knows who your weakness is and there's no risk. No
worries."

"Actually, Ron," Harry said, voice strained, "this means we're utterly fucked."

"What, why? You don't know who your mate is yet, so there's no way you could've already been rejected—and anyone who would turn you down is daft, mate. So what's the problem?"

Harry lifted his sleeve where Pettigrew had cut him in the graveyard long ago. "Who else has my blood running through his veins again? My virtually-immortal, immune to everything, impossible to kill blood?"

"Oh shite," Ron breathed, ghost-white.

"Yeah. Like I said. Utterly fucked."
Lucid Dreaming

Chapter Summary

I lost most of the ending for Discretion and Valor and can't restore it without a PC. 😞 We're going to try to get it fixed this weekend so I can try to get my work back, but if it doesn't work out, I'll just rewrite it. It was only three chapters.

So I'm just going to be working on this one for a bit. Sorry, folks!

Chapter 5

Lucid Dreaming

The day passed in a haze of worry and shock for Harry. He spent most of it trying to wrap his head around the fact that he was, in essence, a demigod, and the rest of it trying to keep his wings from bumping into people or getting in the way. Hermione was already researching ways to make them less cumbersome and constantly had her nose buried in this book or the other, even through meals.

Snape kept glaring at them, no doubt suspicious of their shell-shocked demeanour. Harry informed his friends not to make eye-contact with him and to do everything possible to think of other things when he was about. Dumbledore, too.

Ginny spent most of the day sniffling. What Harry saw of her anyway. She was clearly trying to avoid him, and Harry let her as much as possible.

Still, they had to make her aware of the danger.

After a fraught dinner, spent avoiding the too-shrewd gazes of both Snape and the headmaster, Hermione pulled Ginny aside and took her into the Room with the boys lagging behind.

"Ginny, I'm sorry to do this," said Hermione. "I know you're in pain. I just… we need you to promise not to tell anyone about Harry. Either his sexuality or his race."

Ginny stared out the window. "It's not really my business now anyway, is it?"

Hermione sighed. "I'm sorry, Ginny. It's just that Harry has just one weakness: his mate. If the wrong side works out that he's a Sunguard or who his mate is, they don't need to kill Harry anymore. All they have to do is kill his mate, and Harry dies."

Ginny flinched. "So it's like the secret about his visions or the prophecy. One word to the wrong person…"

"And we're all fucked," said Ron, "Harry most of all."

Ginny gave Harry a sad, longing look that made his chest ache and his belly squirm. "All right. Maybe I can't have you, Harry, but I still… care. I don't want to see you be hurt."
Harry's wings dropped, and he hung his head. "I'm sorry, Ginny. I didn't know."

She squeezed his hand. "It's not your fault. Just, if your mate treats you badly, tell me so I can set the worst bat bogey ever on the bastard."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, okay. But… wait."

Crying on demand. Well, he had to learn eventually, right?

He thought of Ginny's pain, of her shattered heart, but once again, it was the haunted look in Snape's eyes that made him weep.

Merlin, why? Of all the people to be broken up over….

Harry pushed it aside. If it worked, he really shouldn't complain.

Still… why had Snape looked at him like that? The thought of what dark secrets the man might be hiding left Harry's stomach in knots.

He lifted a tear off his cheek and dropped it on a bemused Ginny's head. "They heal. A bit, at least."

She slumped over and rubbed her chest. "Merlin. That's so much better. You could bottle that stuff and make a fortune."

Harry snorted. "Supply is somewhat limited."

"So charge double."

"You've been talking to the twins, haven't you?"

She chuckled, though it lacked true joy. His tears had helped, but they couldn't seal the wound in her heart.

"Are you going to be okay, Ginny?"

"Yeah. I just… need some time."

Harry winced. "I really am sorry."

"Don't be. It's not your fault." She patted his arm. "There are plenty of wizards out there. I'll find my own one day. Good luck with yours."

Harry gave her a wan smile. "Thanks."

But he had no intention of telling his mate. To be burned to death just for a simple no thanks? Forget it. It was better to stay alone.

And if no one knew who his mate was, no one could kill him to get to Harry.

Yeah. It was better for everyone involved if Harry stayed single forever. Even if the thought made something in him wither.

Better to wither than to burn.

Harry stared at his barely-started charms essay and struggled to make his sluggish brain focus.
Ever since learning the truth of his race and Voldemort's thievery of his powers, Harry hadn't been able to think of much beyond the penultimate line of the prophecy. "And either must die at the hand of the other... for neither can live while the other survives."

It was hopeless. Voldemort had fifty or so years of experience on Harry, an unknown number of horcruxes, a horde of minions to do his bidding, and now he had nearly immortal, undefeatable blood without the tempering effect of Harry's weaknesses.

In contrast, the entire goddamn wizarding world—save only Ron, Hermione, and, ironically, Snape—saw Harry as some kind of gods-given hero who came out of the womb knowing how to duel. They all expected him to fight a much more experienced master dark wizard and win at sixteen, alone. Worse, they turned vicious when he, of course, failed to live up to their ridiculous expectations.

Harry had nothing but his race to help him win, and Riddle had stolen that, too.

"Either must die at the hand of the other...."

But neither could die now, could they?

This war was never going to end.

Ron nudged his elbow. "Come on, mate. This is due Friday. 'Mione will have our arses if we don't at least have four paragraphs for her to check over by dinner."

It hardly seemed to matter anymore, but Harry tried to focus.

"For neither can live while the other survives."

Harry sure as hell couldn't.

Hermione had her nose buried in a book. That wasn't so unusual on its own. The fact that she had her nose buried in a book of illegal blood magic, however, left Harry feeling distinctly off-kilter.

"You really shouldn't be reading that here, you know," Harry whispered to his friend.

Hermione gave him a wry look. "We're in the library, Harry. Reading tends to be what people do here."

"We're also in public."

"So? No one can see through my glamours."

Harry huffed. "We can."

"You know what it is underneath. Glamours work off of a person's natural inclination to believe what they think is easiest. No one would dream of me reading this, so no one will see it."

"Snape would."

"Snape isn't here."

Harry huffed. "And if Dumbledore comes? He can see through charms, 'Mione."

"Dumbledore has his own library, one I daresay is more extensive than the school's. And, I'll
remind you, Dumbledore has us researching magic darker than this."

Touché. "Well, maybe, but—"

"Harry, honestly, your fretting is drawing more attention than my glamours."

Harry stared at his half-empty parchment. It was Thursday afternoon, and he still hadn't made much progress on his charms essay. What was the point now?

"I don't know why you're bothering anyway."

Hermione huffed in exasperation and cast a subtle *Muffliato.* "Because, Harry, overcoming the blood transference is the only way to beat him now."

"Overcoming blood that can't be killed?"

"There has to be a way."

"Not unless he has a predestined mate. Oh, wait, humans get to pick their own, don't they?"

Hermione sighed and put her book down. "All right, what's gotten your knickers in a twist, Harry? You've been moping about ever since we worked out your race, and honestly, it's driving me spare. What in Merlin's name is wrong?"

He shot her a dark glare. "Oh, nothing, 'Mione. I'm only prophesied to fight the biggest threat our world has ever known— *at sixteen* —and save the whole bloody world. Only it turns out that the bastard stole my unbeatable blood and is now immortal twice over. Oh, and even better, I have a fatal weakness, and he doesn't. What's to be upset about, really? It's only the end of all we know and love."

Ron snatched Harry's essay, rolled it up, and smacked Harry over the head with it. "Buck up, mate. We've been facing impossible odds together since we started at Hogwarts. It just wouldn't be the same without each new year dumping some crisis of mortal doom upon our heads."

Harry snorted in spite of himself. "True enough, I suppose."

Hermione nudged his shoulder. "He's right, Harry. And, besides, the prophecy said you had the power to win."

"It also said we both have to die at the hand of the other. No thanks."

Ron frowned. "But you've already done that, mate. When you were a baby. Botched killing curse backfired, didn't it? And don't phoenixes burn when they're hit with something lethal?"

"Pretty sure Dumbledore would've noticed a flaming baby."

Ron snickered. "Probably so. Still, wouldn't it be enough to fulfill the prophecy if your heart just stopped for a bit, then restarted? Don't they call that dying even if it isn't permanent? Either way, it mightn't mean that you literally burn."

"Until my mate rejects me or someone kills him, that is."

"Harry," Hermione chided, "stop being so fatalistic. It's not hopeless."

He fixed her with a bleak glare. "And you have the answers, then?"
"No, not yet, but that doesn't mean they don't exist."

At Harry's scoff, she tugged him around to face her and took his hands.

"Harry, I know it looks bleak right now, but don't give up. I could swear I've heard something about stealing blood that could help us. I know it's there, somewhere. I just have to find something to jog my memory."

"And if it isn't enough or you don't find it?"

"It's still not hopeless. Right now, the only information we have on Sunguards is through oral legends. Hogwarts only has the bare minimum of information on them that I've seen, and literary resources are hard to find outside of school when we're stuck here. I've asked Mum Weasley to pop around to Diagon Alley and pick up some owl order catalogues for me, but for the moment, our only resources are subjective. And you and I both know that legends tend to be exaggerated, especially concerning creatures."

Harry frowned. "What's your point?"

"My point is, Harry, that your blood might not be undefeatable. There may well be ways to overcome it that the legends don't include out of a desire to make Sunguards seem more impressive or just because it's not well-known. There is always a way, Harry, but if we give up, we've lost before we begin."

Harry let her words tumble around in his war-weary brain. Maybe she had a point. Harry was damned tired of facing insurmountable odds, and he couldn't see a way out now, but since when had he let that stop him? Where was his Gryffindor bravado?

He sighed and squeezed her fingers. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right. There has to be a way... somehow."

She patted his shoulder. "You just focus on finding his treasures. I'll do everything I can to find a way to overcome your blood." She huffed and raked a hand through her hair. "I know I've heard something about it. If I could just remember...."

"Keep trying, 'Mione," said Ron. "You're the smartest witch ever to walk these halls. If anyone can find the answer, it's you."

Hermione turned pink and gave him a bright smile. "Oh! I'm sure I'm not the brightest, but I'm glad you have faith in me."

"We both do." And Harry resolved to remember that sooner the next time he had a crisis. "Get back to your blood magic, 'Mione. I've got to get something done on this now that I can think again."

Ron handed Harry his essay with a dramatic flourish. "Now that you're not mired in doom and gloom, you mean?"

"Yeah, that." Harry opened his essay and grabbed his quill again. "Um... thanks, you two. Sorry I've been such a pill lately."

Hermione squeezed his wrist. "What are friends—"

Ron interjected with a fake cough, "Sidekicks."

"—For," Hermione finished with a chuckle.

"Damn straight," Ron agreed.

January came and went with no new information concerning the stolen blood or Harry's race, but they did find answers on the horcrux hunt, thanks to Aragog's timely demise.

Six. Bloody hell, what kind of monster split their soul once, let alone six times? Gods. It made Harry shudder every time he thought of it.

Shudder, and panic. How the hell was he supposed to do this even with Dumbledore's help, which grew more and more unreliable by the day? The man was almost never about, and Harry began to wonder if that curse in his arm was worse than he let on.

Then, just as pink hearts and fancy cards and love potions started making the rounds at Hogwarts—like hell Harry would so much as touch anything those tittering girls gave him—Hermione found something in the Room of Requirement. With any luck, whatever she had found would provide some information Harry could actually use.

He grinned as a silver otter summoned him from the common room. Ron met him at the door, following an otter of his own. Ron saluted and fell into step with Harry, and their twin otters merged into one.

Harry gave the otter a wry look. How the hell had Hermione managed to pull that trick off? Ron just shrugged and kept walking.

At least, he did until they caught a glimpse of Malfoy heading to the same place, polyjuiced goons in tow. Harry pressed a finger to his lips, banished the otter, and threw his invisibility cloak over them. They crept close, listening in, as Malfoy tried the way to the room, only to find the way blocked. He huffed and paced again, then a third time, and leaned against the wall when he couldn't break through.

"Damn it." Malfoy beat his fist against the wall once and shuddered. He looked terrible. Almost bad enough to make Harry pity him… if he hadn't nearly killed Katie Bell, maybe. Or stomped on Harry's nose and left him to suffer. Or—

Malfoy whimpered. "What am I going to do? I can't get it to work, but if I don't, he'll kill her. Gods. I have to get in there. There's no other time today."

He paced the door once more and slumped in desolation when it didn't give.

"I'm sorry, Mother. Hold on. I'll… try again later."

Two shiny tears ran down his face and jogged Harry's memory. "He cries a lot about his mum and not wanting to do his task…"

Hmm. Was Malfoy the boy Myrtle had mentioned? The one who had been crying in her loo?

Now Harry pitied him. Enough to hurry Hermione along in the room. Prat though he might be, Harry knew how much it hurt to lose one's mother.

Malfoy sighed and dragged himself away. Harry and Ron waited until he had gone completely to pace the door under Harry's cloak.
The door opened for them, and they found Hermione in a little reading nook with three beanbag chairs settled on a cosy rug. She sat curled up in one, a notebook perched on her knee and a gold-edged text open on her lap. Two walls of bookcases formed a corner behind her chair, one side with books covered in white and crimson and gold, and the other bearing books so dark and disturbing, Harry could hardly bear to look at them.

"All right, 'Mione. What have you got for us?"

Harry plopped in the chair in front of the dark books, knowing Ron wouldn't. The skin on his back prickled and crawled, but he ignored it. They were only books. Evil books, but still just books.

Hermione closed the book on her lap. "Well, so far the books I've found support the legends."

Harry slumped, heart sinking. "So it really is hopeless."

"No, you prat. I just haven't found the right books yet. I mean, one of them said Sunguards were all twelve feet tall with the bodies of gods, for Merlin's sake. And that's the standardised text on semi-human races!"

Harry looked down his scrawny, rather short frame. "Well, obviously someone is holding out on me."

Ron and Hermione laughed.

"Clearly," Ron said with a grin. "You're sure that's the standardised text, Hermione?"

"You're surprised? It's released by the Ministry." She scoffed. "It's utter rubbish. You should see what it said about werewolves. Or not, as I really would prefer that you don't set the Room on fire, Harry."

"Probably wise," Harry agreed, "but if all the books are rubbish, then what? How do we find answers if no one has them?"

"I didn't say all the books are rubbish, Harry. Many have been a lot closer to the truth." She sighed and slumped back into her seat. "The problem is that no one has seen a Sunguard for centuries. Not in Britain, at least. And those who live in other places are rather secretive, for good reason. There's one in Germany, one in Russia, and one in the states, but there are no others registered, and any other information on them is scarce."

Ron frowned. "I suppose just owling them is out?"

Hermione sighed. "I already tried. The owls all came back looking dazed, still carrying the same letters I sent them with, unopened. It's probably just from standard blood wards to keep out mad fans and such, but it makes it impossible for strangers to get in touch with them. And really, maybe it's for the best. Could you imagine how you would feel getting a letter from a stranger asking how to kill you?"

"Yeah, probably good they didn't see that then," said a wry Ron.

Harry huffed. "So we're stuck."

"I didn't expect the hunt for ways to defeat your blood to be easy, Harry. If it was readily available knowledge, the legends would reflect that. That doesn't mean the information doesn't exist."

Ron chimed in. "'S'like the horcruxes, Harry. Hard as hell to find, but we know they're out there. It's
just going to take time and hard work to find them."

The analogy lifted the clouds on Harry's spirit a bit. "All right. That does make sense."

"See? Even I can have a brainwave every now and then."

Harry made the room conjure a pillow just so he could toss it at the prat. Ron laughed and tossed it back. Harry went to throw again, but Hermione banished it.

"I did find some relevant information, if you two are finished playing?"

"We're all ears." Harry leaned forwards, at least as much as his beanbag would allow. "Well?"

"This book had some interesting information about Sunguards and their mates, and how magic flows between them. Apparently, because a Sunguard's magic is both so powerful and entrenched in fire and sunlight, they need a mate with an opposing core type to balance them. Someone with a dark or a cold core."

"Dark?" Harry cringed. "I won't be mating Lucius Malfoy or his lot anytime soon, thanks."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Not dark arts, you berk. Just darkness. Like the moon, water, or ice magic. If werewolves didn't have shorter than average lifespans due to their curse, they would be good mates for Sunguards because of their affinity with the moon. It has nothing to do with evil."

"Oh." Harry's heart slowed. "Okay. That I can deal with."

"Good. Now, the thing about a Sunguard's magic is that the mate acts as a sort of anchor for them. It's why they die without their mate. Their magic burns out of control if they're rejected and breaks if their bonded mate is killed."

"What happens if their mate dies naturally?"

Hermione grimaced. "The Sunguard dies, too, but it's at least a peaceful death. Your lifespan is tied irrevocably to your mate's because of the anchor thing. You need their influence to function properly."

"Well, that's grim. But at least it meant Harry might not be doomed to a millennium alone. "How is it that some Sunguards live so long if they need their mate to survive?"

"Well, their mates, in those cases, obviously weren't human. More like night elves, vampires, selkies, or some other long-lived race associated with ice, water, or darkness. In fact, this book suggests that Sunguards rarely have human mates."

"Oh. So I guess that kills my idea of us shacking up together and becoming a triad, yeah?"

Ron tossed another pillow at him. "Prat! I love you, you berk, but I'm having nothing to do with your arse, if you get my drift."

Harry grinned. "Hey, I could be a top, you know. Then it would be your arse on the line, so to speak."

Ron glared. "Not bloody likely."

Harry snorted. "I'm teasing. It seems my mate has black hair anyway, so you're off the hook."

"Thank Merlin for that."
Harry chuckled. "You were saying, 'Mione?"

She shook her head at him. "Berk. The only other interesting bit I've found so far is that because your mate acts as your magical anchor, you can't use your magic against him."

Harry blanched. "Why would I?"

"Duelling practice, maybe? There could be any number of reasons, but this book makes it clear that nothing offensive will work against your mate...." She gave him a grim look. "And you can't defend against him, either."

"So he could attack me...?"

"And there would be nothing you could do about it. Not magically, at least."

"Merlin. The bachelor life is sounding better and better by the minute."

"Hush, you. You don't know who your mate is yet, do you?"

Harry remembered last night's dream. Dark, soulful eyes, silky ebony hair, creamy pale skin over a lithe, wiry frame, legs to die for, and an arse he wanted nothing more than to squeeze in both hands. A sharp, angular profile. Elegant hands with long fingers.

Harry thought he should know, but he had no idea. And yet, he more he saw of his mate, the more uneasy he grew. Something told him when he finally did put the pieces together, he wouldn't be too happy about it.

Well, it was all moot anyway. After learning this, Harry's resolve to avoid his mate had just doubled.

Still, he did want to know. Just in case he might have the slightest chance of knowing what it meant to be loved.

"No, Hermione. Not yet."

She shrugged. "You've got time."

"Yeah." Too much and not enough.
The Phials Hit the Fan

Chapter Summary

Warning: implied past non-con, violence. Snape is more aggressive here than in canon, and so is Harry. I hope it's clear that Severus' bad memories and Harry's anger at his odd behavior are the cause of it.

Also, holy hell I am so sick right now. 😷 😌

Chapter 6

*The Phials Hit the Fan,*

Harry first noticed Malfoy's new obsession at lunch a week later, a few days prior to Valentine's day. The prat kept staring at Harry, watching every move he made. Merlin, every time Harry walked past him, Malfoy's stares crept down Harry's spine like slime. Ugh.

Considering the timing, Harry had the awful suspicion that the prat had somehow come to fancy him and wanted a date to the Valentine's ball. Gods, Harry would sooner lick flobberworm shite than date Malfoy. He had a predestined mate anyway, and his mate sure as hell wasn't blond.

The truth, however, turned out to be far worse.

Irritated with the constant staring, Harry turned on the prat the day of the ball and cornered him outside the Great Hall on his way to breakfast. Late, on purpose. His friends had already gone inside, and Harry had hoped that the lacquer-headed arsehole would have done, too.

No such luck. The fact that Malfoy had waited at the entrance for gods knew how long rubbed Harry the wrong way.

"What? What the hell is your fascination with me lately, Malfoy?"


"Oh, stow it. I've seen you staring at all hours of the day. You're worse than a ruddy infatuated first year! The answer is no, Malfoy, so don't bother—"

And then, Harry felt it. The push on his mind so much like Dumbledore's 'tea' sessions. Detentions with Snape. Occlumency lessons when Snape hadn't torn Harry's brain apart.

Oh gods. Malfoy was trying to use Legilimency on Harry. *Subtle* Legilimency that Harry wouldn't recognise if he hadn't had years of experience of having his brain poked and prodded by Hogwarts' resident mind mages.

And worse, Harry had secrets to hide now. Lethal secrets.

'Fuck!'
Without bothering to finish the confrontation, Harry cast a nonverbal, wandless *Protego*—had it come out orange?—and raced back to the solitude and safety of the dorms.

Oh gods. What was he supposed to do now? He had never learned to Occlude. Every time Snape pushed at Harry's shields, they still gave like butter under a hot knife.

Occlumency. Snape.

Damn. Looked like Harry was going to have to apologise to the man after all.

Merlin help him, this would not go well for him. Harry was sure of it.

---

He waited until the other students would have gone to Hogsmeade, right after breakfast. Ron and Hermione wouldn't go without him, but the rest of the students—including Malfoy—would be out of the castle. And with a ball that night, Snape wouldn't be on patrol duty in town. Dumbledore wasn't *that* suicidal.

With a deep breath in vain attempt to gather his scattered wits and courage, Harry picked himself off the common room sofa and made his way to Snape's office, stealthy as a cat. Or at least as much as he could manage.

Harry hyperventilated at the door. Gods, he was ten kinds of a fool. Snape would eat him alive and laugh at his bleeding corpse.

No. No, that was silly. Snape would be angry, sure, but Dumbledore wouldn't keep him on if he was truly dangerous… right?

Harry took another shaky breath. He just had to get in and get out before this turned into the nightmare instinct warned him it would be.

Now *that* was silly. This would be awful and he knew it.

And yet, there was the smallest chance Snape might help him when it was all over. Harry had to try, anyway. Lives depended on it.

---

Severus had hoped for a few blessed hours of peace and quiet before the chaos and vapidity of the Valentine's Day Ball—the worst of the lot, in his opinion—but he should have known such luck was not to be his. He had just settled down with a book and a cup of tea when his office bell rang. Oh, for Merlin's sake. Who in their right mind would disturb him today, of all days, when the flirting and cow's eyes and blatant snogging shattered his nerves and made him want to claw his way out of Hogwarts?

"Something had better be on fire."

He reached his office door just as whatever fool had come to poke the bear in its den knocked again.

"Enter," he growled.

And in walked the very last person he wanted to see on today of all days.

Harry fucking Potter. Brilliant.

The minute he saw those ridiculous spectacles and that messy hair, he found himself trapped in the
Moonlight shone on the lake as students made their way out of the ball in pairs, holding hands and snogging while the teachers were busy patrolling inside. Snow still covered the grounds and wetted the backside of Severus' trousers. He would have cast an Impervius charm if he could.

The wind was cold on his back, but Severus preferred it to the heat of the arm wrapped around his stiff shoulders and the gloved hand clutching his own.

"Beautiful, isn't it? You, me, the moon?"

The moonlight off a pair of outdated round spectacles just as a mouth moved in to kiss him. He didn't have the power to move away.

But he wanted to. Gods, how he wanted to.

Severus slammed his Occlumency shields into place. Had he known the brat was coming, he would have had them ready beforehand. He didn't want to remember. Didn't want to feel it again.

A trickle of cold shame dripped down his spine. He shoved it fiercely away. Just a few more months. A few more months, and he need never worry about seeing him again.

At least until the time came for them both to die.

Severus was ready.

He put on his sharpest glare and stalked to his desk. "What do you want, boy?"

Harry gulped at the look on Snape's face and the tone of his voice. Merlin, he'd certainly snapped out of it with a vengeance. Harry had been on the cusp of asking him if he was all right. Snape had looked haunted again, just for a moment. Trapped. Afraid.

His eyes held nothing so human now.

"I will not ask again, Potter. For what no doubt odious reason have to come to seek my company during the few blessed student-free hours I am allotted on this godsforsaken day?"

Harry winced. Damn. Apparently Snape hated Valentine's Day even more than Harry did. Bad timing, but there was no help for it.

"S-sir, I'm sorry to disturb yo—"

"Don't waste my time with false platitudes. What do you want, Potter?"

Harry swallowed hard. "Er… well, that's part of why I came. I owe you an apology, and I ne—"

"An apology." Snape's glare sharpened. "And which, pray tell, of your innumerable offenses am I to be treated to an apology for? Your abysmal potions performance? Your pathetic showing in defence? The moronic stunts you pull at least thrice a year? The enormity of your ego, which you have just proved can, in fact, grow even larger? What makes you think I care for your insipid
attempts at false platitudes, Potter?"

"It's not false! Do you imagine I would subject myself to this if I didn't mean it?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Ten points from Gryffindor for disrespect, and another ten for disturbing my well-earned rest."

Harry knew better than to protest. He ground his teeth and tried to bring his growing anger under control. Blowing up would do him no favours now.

"So, Mister Potter, you say you have grown a conscience and wish to apologise to me. Am I to assume you came here, now of all times, solely to make reparations? Am I then to gather by this… unlikely display of remorse, that you wish for nothing in return for your humble apologies?"

Harry flinched. Damn.

"As I thought."

Harry sighed and rubbed his scar. "Sir, you're right. I did come because I need help, too, but I really am sorry. If I had thought for a minute that you wouldn't hex me for trying, I'd have come at the start of the year."

Snape scoffed. "And what, I repeat, are you apologising for?"

Harry swallowed hard. "For… the pensieve. For breaking your trust."

Snape's expression wavered for a millisecond, then rage edged with a sharp cut of… terror? Desperation?—twisted his features into a picture of fury. "Do you truly expect me to fall for your tricks, Potter? Do you expect me to believe you didn't enjoy it? Do you?"

"Enjoy it? Enjoy watching my father and godfather bully you? No, sir. I was appalled."

"Balderdash. Do you wank to it, that image of me suspended and imprisoned for your amusement? Does it fulfil your twisted little fantasies?"

Snape was all but screaming now. Harry backed into a corner and returned his shouts to hide his fear.

"What the…? What in Merlin's name gives you the right to ask about my sex life, sir? It's private."

"And so were my memories! So is my body! But that did not stop you from ogling every inch, did it?"

"Who the hell do you think I am? I'm not a rapist! I'm a bloody virgin, for Merlin's sake!"

"Ten points for language!"

"You ought to be taking them from yourself for behaving so inappropriately! Gods!" Harry shuddered and rubbed his arms. "I… I don't want to talk about this with you. Can't you see it's too far?"

Snape's eyelid twitched. "Fine. What do you want, Potter?"

Harry took a deep breath and struggled to get his emotions under control. Snape's accusations hurt like hell, but if he cried now, even a little, the game was up.
"I… I need your help, sir. My-life is in danger. If I don't learn to Occlude, I'll be killed. I need you to—"

"So." Snape's voice was lethal. "That is what you are after. One memory wasn't enough to sate you, hmm? You need more. More images of me at your… father's mercy. Perhaps you wanted to finish the tale I interrupted, hmm? To see me broken? Is that what you wanted?"

Fire flickered to life in Harry's gut and spread like an inferno through his blood.

"No, you utter bastard. No, I can say without a doubt nothing about you turns me on, and if it did, your cruelty to me would crush the life out of any fancy before it could take its first breath."

"Fifty points from—"

Harry's temper snapped.

"Oh, just take the goddamn lot and be done with it! That's what you want, isn't it? To see me broken? Maybe it's you fantasising about my naked body, you fucking arse. Maybe I should be concerned about your deviant mind. Maybe—"

Snape crossed the room in a split second and had Harry pinned to the wall by his throat before he could blink. The man's wand shook as he aimed it at Harry's forehead.

"I want nothing to do with you, you egotistical sodding prick! You will not lay the blame for your twisted desires at my feet, never again, Potter!"

Harry could barely breathe. A whistling sound screamed within his ears as his magic built inside him. "You're hurting me." Sparks glowed and crackled on his skin. "Get the fuck off of me."

"Do you imagine I care? It is just desserts for all the time you… your father? No, you hurt me! For all I am concerned, the dark lord may have you and welcome! Fuck off and get out of my room, you snivelling prick!"

Harry's fury exploded. Fire and light and power burst from him in a storm that rocked the entire office. Snape was thrown back by the sheer concussive power of his anger, and every jar in the office exploded and sent shards of glass and foul smelling liquids everywhere.

Harry screamed as the glass tore into his wings, his face, his arms. It felt as though his skin had been scalded off. His arms had spared most of his face, and his glasses had shielded his eyes, but everything else had been cut to ribbons. Only his feet and legs had escaped the blast, thanks to the heavy denims and winter boots he had on.

Fuck. If his own magic had hurt him this badly, what had he done to Snape?

His heart pounded as he forced his shredded arms from his face. Blood dripped from every surface of his visible skin, crimson tendrils seeping into the mess of glass and shredded ingredients specimens below. Healing tears dripped from his face, but what if he couldn't save Snape? The man hadn't said a word, hadn't made a sound.

Was he dead?

Harry forced his tears away and dragged his eyes to Snape's form. The man stood across from Harry, leaning against his desk. He looked dazed from the shock, but other than that…

He hadn't a scratch.
Harry stared, uncomprehending, until the awful truth crept into his consciousness and turned his blood to ice. Harry's magic had nearly flayed the skin off Harry, but Snape hadn't been harmed at all. Oh gods, it was all coming together now. The failed Occlumency lessons, his pitiful duels in defence… Merlin help him.

Harry's magic hadn't hurt Snape because it couldn't hurt him. Snape was his anchor. His control. His mate.

Snape, a triple spy in the darkest war in Britain's history and a man in constant peril was Harry's mate. A man who loathed his existence. Whom Harry's family had abused. Even better, Snape would never be able to teach him to Occlude. Harry's barriers would never work on him.

Utterly fucked indeed.
Harry hardly noticed the pain as he used Snape's temporary shock to escape the office before anything else went horribly awry. He had probably left a trail of blood for Snape to track all the way to the dorm, but with any luck, he wouldn't be desperate enough to finish Harry off to enter Gryffindor tower.

Who was he kidding? When Snape snapped out of it, he would murder Harry for destroying his precious creepy crawly things, and never mind that he'd stripped off half his hide to do it, because Snape sure as hell wouldn't care. No, Snape would crawl over broken glass just to tear the rest of Harry to bits. Literally.

His mate. The only mate he would ever have.

So much for the chance to be loved.

He winced at the sting of salt in his shredded face and realised he was crying. Merlin knew he had cause to, but he couldn't give in to the need for emotional release now. He had to get to safety.

Safe. Merlin, he wasn't safe in the tower either, was he? Granted, the upper years were all in Hogsmeade, but the first and second years wouldn't hesitate to spread the story of 'Harry Potter, the Wounded One' far and wide. He didn't know what the consequences of that story would be once Voldemort heard it, especially if they tracked the source of Harry's injuries to Snape, but he sure as bloody fuck didn't want to find out.

Not to mention Dumbledore would have questions for Harry once he heard of it. The kind of questions that came along with a cup of dosed tea and Legilimency probes.

Harry had a fair idea what the consequences of that meeting would be.

No, he couldn't risk the headmaster learning the truth about Harry or his mate. He would be better off facing Snape again. At least Snape would kill him quickly. Dumbledore would make him suffer before he sacrificed Harry. All for the greater good, of course.

Sometimes Harry wondered which of the war's lords was worse.

Harry careened around the corner for the Room of Requirement, thanked his lucky stars—the brave, lonely bastards—that no Slytherin first years were in sight for once, and paced before the door.
Severus gasped as his nightmares finally faded into the ether, where they belonged. He lifted a foot with intent to stagger to his desk, but froze as liquid sloshed and clung to the leather. If not for his high-powered Impervius charms, he would have been drenched, at least from the ankles down.

Bloody hell, had Potter made it rain in his office? He gathered enough presence of mind to look around and choked back a shout of dismay.

He was standing in a war zone. Fluids of every colour sloshed around his boots, smelling strongly of embalming solution. Various bits and bobs floated in the sea of death, and others decorated every surface of his office. Only his person had been spared, probably again thanks to the protective charms in his clothes. Every other surface glittered with the splattered remains of his potions specimens, and….

The fluid clinked and clattered when it moved. With a grim look at the sparkling mess, Severus lifted his foot from the fluid and caught some of it on the toe of his boot. As he turned it to the side, glass and shrapnel poured from his foot and splashed into the fluid below.

Dear gods. Potter hadn't flooded his office, he had bloody well destroyed it.

Rage flickered to life in Severus' gut and spread to his limbs like wildfire. This mess was a biohazard. Potter might have killed Severus in his rage, had Severus not possessed the forethought to cast shielding and Impervius charms on his clothes.

He would see the Potter brat expelled for this, or so help him, or he would take Albus up on charges. But, as Severus ordered his story for Albus, he realised he didn't have one. Not a complete story, at least. His memories of the past and present had congealed into a bigger mess than his office was, leaving him with nothing concrete but the barest facts.

Potter had come to his office. Potter had tried to apologise for the pensieve, not that Severus would let himself be taken in. Potter had asked to learn Occlumency again, and then, everything went hazy.

Was it Potter Senior or Harry who had asked him to stop being so inappropriate and stay off the topic of his sex life?

Oh that was most definitely Harry, and yet, Severus hadn't seen the boy standing there when he asked it.

Had James Potter called him a deviant and accused him of wanking to fantasies of his body? This time, Severus couldn't be sure.

And he couldn't remember anything after that at all. What the hell had happened to his office, and where was Potter?

He searched his office for clues as to the brat's whereabouts and froze at a dripping sound just ahead. There. Against the corner where Potter had stood.

Oh gods. The entire wall was crimson.

He tracked the source of the dripping sound—not his shelves, to his surprise, but his ceiling. He looked up and his gut clenched. Blood.
He called, horrified, for a house elf he knew of that had worked in the kitchens when he was a boy. He had taken a liking to her then and always asked for her when he needed help.

He wished there hadn't been a need to call her now.

"Hippa!"

The elf appeared and squealed at the mess. She snapped her fingers, and the office was pristine again.

Merlin, to have power like that….

He shook himself. "Thank you, Hippa." He cut across her typical emotional response to simple gratitude. "There is no time. I fear Mister Potter is gravely injured. Please check on his condition for me. Do not allow him to see you or approach if he is conscious. Report back to me immediately once you are certain he is not in immediate danger."

The elf's eyes widened and her ears drooped. "Yes, Master Snape. Hippa is going now."

He nodded in thanks and sat in his freshly-cleaned office chair to wait. His hands and knees trembled. What had happened? Had Severus destroyed his office or had Potter? It disturbed him terribly that he didn't remember.

Had he killed the boy? Gods. Was he a murderer— before Albus' end?

Hippa popped back into existence and made him jump. "Master Harry is conscious. He is being in the Come and Go Room with his friends, and Mistress Granger is being healing his wounds with essence of dittany, sir."

Severus breathed a sigh of relief. He hated the brat, of course, but he hadn't meant to hurt him.

"Thank you, Hippa. Please keep an eye on him and tell me if he is in need of further medical assistance when Miss Granger has finished."

The elf thanked him and apparated away.

So Potter wasn't in danger of expiring, at least, but fuck! What the hell had happened?

With no other option, Severus activated the recall charm on his office. He didn't like to use it as having external memories implanted into his mind was always jarring and left him disoriented for a while, but, in this case, he had no choice. He needed to see what had happened so, when Albus inevitably came calling, Severus would be prepared.

The scene played in his mind like a film. Potter's bumbling apology. Severus' violent reaction to the mention of his pensieve. From an outside perspective, it was clear enough that Severus had begun seeing James Potter in place of the son at that point, and it only worsened from there.

Severus' vicious, wildly inappropriate accusations. Potter backing into a corner as he fired them back.

Merlin. The boy was terrified. And Severus couldn't blame him.

Then, his gut dropped into his feet. Oh gods. He had mauled Harry. Pinned him to the wall by his throat—it would certainly bruise.

"You're hurting me. Get the fuck off me."
"Do you imagine I care? It is just desserts—" 

Severus gasped as Potter's eyes glowed like the sun. His form vibrated, he released a sharp cry… then everything in the office exploded. Potter screamed as the glass that spared Severus tore his skin to pieces.

The boy had taken one look at Severus, cried a few strangely thick tears, and staggered out of the office as if the hounds of hell bayed at his heels.

Severus ended the spell and collapsed into his chair. The sound of Potter's scream of agony rang in his ears, and the air still tasted heavy with the metallic grit of his blood. Gods.

No. Severus would not recommend expulsion, not today, but perhaps he oughtn't to be teaching if he couldn't separate his students from his abusers.

Oh, right. He wasn't here on merit, but rather to serve as the headmaster's pawn. Albus would keep him on so long as his outbursts didn't kill his boy weapon— until the proper time, at least—and Severus would reap his punishment by doling out justice for the lives Albus had manipulated and ruined.

For Harry's life. For Severus' own.

Twenty years, and his ghosts still hadn't ceased to haunt him. Twenty years, and he still hadn't found release.

Well, it would all be over, soon. In that, at least, Severus could find some small measure of peace.

A few detentions would suffice for this. Potter's outburst had been dangerous and harmful, but it was more Severus' fault than the boy's. He wrote a note outlining Potter's detention schedule for the next week and sent it along with Hippa.

With his task completed, Severus laid his head in his hands and struggled to rebuild his failing mental shields. Potter's screams reverberated inside them for a long, long time.

Hermione's shriek ricocheted off the walls as she entered the Room. "Harry!"

Harry had been crying like mad, and it hadn't been difficult given how much physical and emotional anguish he was in, but he still looked a mess, no doubt. His shirt lay in bloody tatters at his feet, both wings still hurt like hell, and he could hardly be expected to reach his own back. He had only healed part of his chest, too, and he suspected his scalp was bleeding though it didn't hurt nearly as much as his wings.

Hermione dashed over, tears in her eyes and Ron lagging behind. Ron's mouth gaped and his eyes bugged, then his face tightened in sheer rage.

"Who did this to you?"

Harry shook his head and winced. Damn. Still hurt to move. "My fault. Lost control of my magic. Blew up all of Snape's jars. This is the result."

Ron's lips twitched. "I shouldn't laugh because you're hurt, but the arsehole has had that coming for years. I hope you bloody well shredded his ugly arse."

"Ronald!" Hermione shot him a reproachful look. "That's horrid! The man is, undeniably, an utter
berk, but no one deserves to be cut to ribbons!"

"Oh, I'm sure I can think of a few who have worse coming," Harry muttered.

Hermione sighed and pulled a green vat out of her purse, a larger one than should have fit in her slim bag. "Hold still, Harry. This is essence of dittany. It's very helpful for healing wounds."

Ron raised an eyebrow. "And you just carry that around in your purse now, do you?"

"With a best friend as danger-prone as Harry?"

Harry snorted and grimaced at a shock of pain. "Yeah, can't say I blame you."

Hermione chuckled tearfully. "The truth is I've had all the essentials packed in here for months. I wasn't sure when we would have to leave for the horcruxes, so I've kept a supply of all the things we might need on hand at all times, as well as a few changes of clothing. Well, I could only store tinned food, but everything else—"

"Blimey," said Ron. "You've got an entire storage room in that?"

She huffed. "You're a pureblood, and you're shocked by things that are bigger on the inside than they appear?"

"Oh. Right."

"Anyway, this dittany should really help. People keep it on hand while they learn how to apparate in case they're splinched as it's so good at closing minor wounds."

"Good thing I'm not seriously injured or anything then," Harry said with a huff.

"Prat. You have a lot of wounds, yes, but as you didn't manage to blow any body parts off, dittany will do the trick. Of course, your tears can only help, too, but judging by the state of your eyes, you've been at it for awhile."

Harry lowered his head and sniffled. "Yeah. I c-can't seem to stop."

"Oh, Harry." Hermione turned him around and winced. "Merlin. Was it so awful?"

Harry sighed as her cool, gentle fingers began taking away his pain. "Yeah. And it's worse than you know."

"I believe it. Bad as this is, I can't imagine Professor Snape is in good shape. Is he in the Infirmary?"

Harry took a shaky breath. "That's the bad part. That glass went everywhere, Hermione. It even tore through the glamours and wards you put on my wings. Snape should have been torn to pieces, just as I was, but he wasn't hurt at all."

Hermione paused. "He… he wasn't?"

"No. Not a scratch. My magic didn't touch him."

Hermione gasped. The jar of dittany dropped and would have shattered had Ron not caught it and levitated it first.

"Wait. I don't understand." Ron handed the dittany back to Hermione. "How could your magic not
hit him, Harry?"

Harry gave Ron a grim look. "Remember that little conversation we had about not hating me for things I can't help after Ginny ran off during the hols? Well, it turns out I spoke too soon and fate really fucking hates my guts."

Ron made a sound like a dying animal and sank onto the sofa beside Harry. "It's Snape? It's really Snape?"

"Yeah. And that means we're even more fucked than I thought."

"Damn."
Computer is still a loss. We're in a tough spot all over. I'm trying though. Also, I have no idea if the fat lady's tip would actually work. It just sounded like something a witch from her time might have tried.

Chapter 8

Ron and Hermione squeezed in on a newly-healed Harry's sides, trying to offer him comfort after such a devastating blow. While he appreciated their efforts—and particularly that Ron had kept his word and hadn't lost the plot over the identity of Harry's mate—they didn't have time for this. He could grieve later. Unless they moved now, he mightn't live long enough to have the chance.

"Okay, you lot. We have to talk."

Ron rubbed Harry's shoulder, his touch light. "Mate, don't worry. I know you can't help it. I'm hacked off, but not at you."

Harry gave him a wan smile. Thanks, but that wasn't what I meant." He sighed and dropped his head into his hands. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have told you. Now you know, and now you're in as deep as I am."

"Harry," Hermione chided, "do shut up. We're your best friends, you prat. We want to be here."

"It's just the natural order of things, mate," said Ron. "Life buries you in shite, and we break out the shovels. It's what good sidekicks do."

Harry snorted. "What, shovel shite?"

"When it's on you? You bet."

Harry nudged his shoulder. "Thanks. I… without you two, I—" He took a shaky breath and blinked hard. "I'm glad you're with me."

"We always will be." Hermione took his hand. "Now, spit it out. How bad is it?"

"Bad. We all have to leave Hogwarts—tonight. And we can't come back as long as the war is on."

Hermione's breath left her in a rush. "Leave? But why?"

"Because, 'Mione, none of us know how to occlude and Malfoy is trying to break into my mind."
"What?" Hermione shuddered. "Oh gods."

"That's why he's been ogling you for days!" Ron leapt to his feet and paced. "I thought he just wanted a date to the dance, and that was bad enough, but…"

"But this is worse, yeah."

"Merlin." Ron sat beside Harry again with a huff. "It just keeps getting worse and worse."

Harry could only manage a weak nod.

Hermione squeezed Harry's hand. "That's why you ran off after that confrontation at breakfast. You caught him at it."

"Yeah, hard to miss what with being so used to Snape and Dumbledore picking my brains whenever the fancy hits."

Hermione winced. "So you ran straight from the common room after breakfast to Snape's office. And this happened when you asked him to teach you to occlude?"

"Exactly." Harry shuddered. "The things he said to me… ugh."

"Bastard," Ron spat.

He had been, yes, but Harry had the awful feeling that Snape hadn't been all there during that confrontation. The man had never been so violent before.

Still, either way….

"This means we have to leave. You two know now, so anyone with the ability to read thoughts could find out the truth. And as Snape is my mate, I'll never be able to learn to occlude from him when my shields don't keep him out. And the longer we stay here, the greater the chance is that someone will find out the truth about me and kill Snape to get to me, or Snape will find out and reject me out of spite. Either way, if we stay here, we're fucked."

Hermione sighed. "Well, maybe so, but don't you think we ought to try speaking to the headmaster before we leave Hogwarts?"

Harry growled. "Over my dead body. He'll force me to bond to Snape even though the man loathes me and I have no defence against him. He'll take my freedom in an instant—and Snape's, too, come to think of it—and he won't bat an eyelash if Snape beats me bloody for it."

Hermione gasped. "Harry! You don't really believe—"

"Or," he continued over her protests, "failing that, he'll lock me away in an ivory tower until it's time to march me out to Voldemort and sacrifice his little weapon for the greater fucking good."

Hermione covered a snuffle. "Do you really think…?"

"Sirius, Hermione. Sirius. He could have saved him if he would have just told me the goddamned prophecy and stopped leading me around by the nose."

"But he couldn't have known Sirius would be killed."

"Maybe not," said a grim-faced Ron, "but he knows about the Dursleys. He knows they're abusive, and he's never done a thing to stop it."
Harry wheeled around and gaped at him. "You knew?"

"Mate, I realise I'm not the quickest wand in the duel, but do give me some credit. People who love their kids don't starve them and their pets, lock them in like animals, lock their things away from them, or bar up their windows, and they sure as hell don't try to pull them out of a flying car hovering outside of a second story window when their kids try to escape. There wouldn't be a need to escape in the first place if those arseholes had ever given a shite about you."

Harry wrapped his arms around his chest. "But then why did you never say anything?"

"Harry, that's what I'm saying—we did tell him. Mum did. Dad did. The twins did. Ginny. I do every bloody year since second year, when we realised how bad it is there for you." Ron shook his head. "Hermione, Dumbledore doesn't care. He pats me on the head and tells me he'll take care of it, but he never does."

"So he really does know." Harry's stomach roiled and his chest had a Hagrid-sized hole in the middle. "All this time, he's known, and he left me there to suffer?"

Dark, bitter rage seethed in his blood and set his feathers on end. "The bastard knew, and he sat there in his little tower while they starved me? While they beat me until I bled? While Petunia bashed me with cast iron pans and Vernon shoved me into the burning hobs when their dinner, the dinner that I had to cook, but didn't get to fucking taste at five goddamn years old, wasn't perfect?"

Hermione breathed, "Oh, Harry...."

"Merlin," Ron choked. "I didn't even know it was that bad. What the fuck is he on about, leaving you with monsters like that?"

Harry gave a laugh tinged with mania and sobs. "I'll tell you why the bastard did it: to turn me into a goddamn living weapon against Voldemort! He wanted me strong, and he had to leave me with arseholes who hated me, because if I had guardians who cared about me, they might be a tad upset about Dumbledore setting me up against a dark wizard four times my age every goddamn year! They might have protested Occlumency with a teacher who hates me, and competing in tournaments for of age students as a minor, and teachers who tortured anyone who talked back, and —"

Hermione patted his arm and sniffled. "Okay. I get it. You... you're right. Blood wards or no, he could have done something about the abuse if he had ever cared at all." Her eyes flashed. "You're right. I can't believe how blind I've been." She slumped. "And that means there really is no other choice. We have to leave and strike out on our own before we're killed."

"Yeah. They'll never let me train seriously anyway. They all think I was born knowing how to fight. Bloody cowardly idiots. If we leave it up to them, we're all dead."

Ron leaned on his knees. "Right. So how are we doing this then?"

The rest of the school had gone to lunch, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione were busy packing their things into her little beaded purse. It had an undetectable expansion charm on it as well as a featherlight charm, and a good thing about the latter, too, because it was as big as a small house in there, and Hermione had nearly filled it to the brim with books and supplies. Handy, that.

Harry looked woefully at his worn, hand-me-down clothing. "Merlin. I need new things."

"Why haven't you ever bought them, Harry?" Hermione scowled at the lot. "These aren't even
"It's all Dudley's old things. And I haven't bought new because I can't. I only get a small monthly allowance and one trip to Gringotts a year or so. Dumbledore keeps my key the rest of the time."

Ron squawked, "What? But he can't do that, not unless he's your magical guardian. It's your vault. And especially with you being the heir to the Potter lordship and the last of the line, you should have full access anyway. How else are you to handle the affairs of your estate?"

Harry scowled. "I reckon Dumbledore's been 'handling things' just fine while he dangled me like a goddamn carrot in front of Voldemort's nose."

"That's theft, Harry," said Hermione, eyes blazing. "If he's been using your estate to serve his own interests without ever consulting you, he's stealing." A wicked smile crossed her face. "And it just so happens that goblins hate thieves. If we tell them all this, they'll have you emancipated on the spot. Which would not only allow you access to your vault, but in being declared a legal adult, you can use magic over the summer, too."

"Which means we would all be free to do as we like," said Harry with a grin. "Well, Ron has a couple more weeks, but we can manage that."

Hermione sighed. "Yes, but it's going to be tough to hide. Especially from Dumbledore."

"And Mum," Ron added.

Harry floated his raggedy clothing into Hermione's bag just in case their plans didn't go as hoped. "So what? Do we just keep moving? Make it harder to track us?"

"It's about all we can do, but even with that, I still think—"

A house elf popped into the room with a folded piece of parchment, and Hermione gave a little squeak of surprise.

"Er, hello," said Harry to the little female elf. "Er, what's your name?"

"Hippa, Master Potter. I has a letter for you."

Harry reached for it.

"Wait. We need to check it first." Hermione held him back and cast several spells at the parchment, stunning the elf. "Okay. It's clear. Sorry, Hippa. We can't be too careful with Harry's life, you know."

Harry snorted but didn't correct her. Not where an unknown elf might hear.

He took the letter and smiled. "Thanks, Hippa."

"Thanks for Hippa?" She wailed. "Oh, you is just as good as Master Snape."

Ron choked. "Er… yeah. Just as good." He boggled at a dumbstruck Harry, who shrugged.

"Um, thanks, Hippa. I'll just… read this now?"

She bowed and popped away, still sniffling.

"As good as Snape?" Ron scoffed. "What kind of butterbeer has she been getting into?"
"Maybe he's nicer to elves," said Hermione with a shrug. "Or maybe they're so used to being abused, simple manners seem like exorbitant kindnesses."

"Because Snape has those in abundance."

Harry tuned out their argument, mind churning over Hippa and what her appearance meant. He had no answers as to Snape's supposed thing for house elves, but her appearance had triggered… something in his mind.

"—And they just do whatever people tell them to, just like that! You don't think it's unfair?"

Ron groaned. "Hermione, for Merlin's sake, not now. We're in the middle of a life or death crisis here. Do you think we could maybe put the plight of house elves away, just for a minute, so we can pack and get the hell out before Dumbledore catches on?"

Hermione blushed. "Oh. Fair enough." She sighed and sorted Ron's socks into neat pairs with a flick of her wand. "For all the good it will do. I'm sure we'll be found. If only there was a way to ward a hideout that Dumbledore couldn't find."

Harry stared at the parchment he still hadn't opened, an idea forming in the back of his mind. "And they do whatever people tell them to.…" Hmm.

"I might know how," said Harry, "but for the moment, let's hurry and pack before the others get back." They hadn't time for another argument over house elf rights anyway.

"All right, but shouldn't you see what's in that letter, mate?" Ron grimaced. "The old goat might already be onto us."

Harry winced and opened the parchment. He did recognize the handwriting, but….

"It's not Dumbledore, it's Snape."

"Snape?" Ron pushed in close. "Budge over. What's he saying, mate?" He squinted at the letter. "Merlin, I can't make heads or tails of his scribbling. Just bloody like that Prince of yours."

Harry snorted. "It's an acquired skill, I reckon."

"Well, go on, then," said Hermione. "What does he want?"

"Probably to tell Harry he'll be expelled before morning." Ron smirked. "Joke's on him, eh?"

Harry shook his head. "Not if we don't get a bloody move on. They'll be back soon, and you know we won't have a better opportunity to escape for a long time."

"Right," said Hermione. "In that case, I'm going to keep packing. You read your love note."

"Oh I'm sure that's exactly what it is," Harry muttered, but he did read it.

And folded it in bemused silence when he had finished.

Ron nudged him. "Well?"

"Er… it's a detention schedule. Three nights a week for two weeks."

Hermione dropped the book she had been levitating into the bag. "Detention? After what you told us happened, I was positive he would want to see you boiled in oil."
"Wouldn't do him much good," said Ron.

Harry shuddered. "As it would still hurt like bloody hell, let's just avoid boiling cauldrons of oil anyway, yeah?"

Ron grimaced. "Fair enough. What do you make of that then? Why detention?"

Harry thought of the scene in the office and sighed. "I… I don't think everything is what it appears to be on the surface. I don't think he was seeing me at all towards the end. I think he was seeing…." He looked away. "Someone else."

"Like who?"

Harry shook his head. "I can't say. It… it's just not right to. But rest assured, Snape's been hurt before, and badly. I don't know all of the story, but… I don't think he was seeing me when he got so angry. I don't think he meant to hurt me."

"Merlin," Hermione breathed. "He still shouldn't have done it, but…"

Harry stared at the detention schedule. "Yeah. He's still an arse, but I don't think he's a monster. At least, not anymore."

Ron shook his head. "You two are barmy. And we don't have time to waste on this anyway. Come on, mate. Burn that and let's get packing."

Harry considered burning it, but… this was from his mate. Proof that Snape was at least a human being with a soul, even if he hated Harry with every fibre of his being. Maybe it was barmy—it was just a ruddy detention schedule, but the note at the beginning….

"I apologise for my behaviour this morning, Mister Potter. It was in no way appropriate for a professor to speak to a student in such a manner, and I should never have laid a hand on you with intent to harm. If you are in need of medical care, you should report to the Infirmary immediately. Your doting fans will wait. Your detentions, until you heal completely, will consist of writing lines, so come prepared to write."

It wasn't much of an apology, but after six years of none at all, it meant something to Harry. He tucked the note in the Prince's book and packed it in with the last of his things.

Hermione gave him an understanding smile and set the book on one of her in-purse shelves with care. "Right. Is that the last of it, then?"

Ron tossed in a bag of chocolate frogs. "It is now." He plucked three frogs off the top and shared them with his friends. "One for old times' sake?"

Harry sat on his bed, and Ron and Hermione snuggled into his sides. He wrapped his wings around them and watched his frog hop about until the charm faded. Merlin, but he would hate to leave this place behind.

Still, at least he wouldn't have to face the world outside of Hogwarts' walls alone. Not this time.
Harry, Ron, and Hermione had pretended to dress for the ball to avoid suspicion. Harry had on a comfortable tee under his dress robe and carried a heavy coat, scarf, hat, and gloves either on his arm or stuffed in his pockets. Thus arrayed, he turned to face his friends for the last time, at least as their dormmate.

Dean straightened his tie and held out his arms. "Well, how do I look?"

He had chosen to honour his Muggle heritage and wore a sharp grey suit with a red tie. Only the wizarding pocketwatch in his lapel pocket, his coming-of-age gift from his dad, announced his status as a wizard. It would draw the purebloods’ ire, no doubt, but Harry loved him all the more for being brave enough to wear it anyway.

"Damn, Dean. Shame you're straight, you know."

Dean gave him a lopsided grin. "So are you."

Neville looked over from where he was straightening Seamus' waistcoat for him. "Are you straight, Harry? I had the impression that… well… maybe I was wrong."

Harry bit his lip.

"S'all right, mate," said Seamus. "None of us are, well, you know, but we aren't going to hurt ye if ye are."

Neville nodded. "Yeah."

Harry knew it was a risk, but damn it, these were his brothers. If he couldn't trust them, who could he trust?

And after tonight, he wouldn't see them again for a long time. It felt… right to tell them. To give them this little piece of himself before the war took them down separate paths. Gods, he would miss them.

He sighed and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Er… yeah. I'm gay."

Dean knocked his shoulder, and Harry hurriedly moved his glamoured wing out of the way. "Anyone in particular you've got your eye on? Maybe we can scout him out for you."

Harry blinked hard and gave him a wobbly smile. "Thanks. No, not really. I just know girls don't do it for me. I've got to get the war behind me before I can even think about dating anyway. It's just too dangerous."

He wouldn't be there for them to help him, and his mate hated him anyway.

He swallowed hard. "Thanks, you lot. For accepting me. I… I'm glad you're my friends."

And fuck, he would miss them so much. He let his 'coming out' moment act as the excuse for his shaky voice and too-wet eyes, and returned hugs from them all.

"Hey, no need to get all teary-eyed, Harry." Neville patted his back. "We've all been through too much not to be friends now."

"Aye," Seamus said with a blush. "I was a duffer last year. Won't make that mistake again."

"Thanks," Harry said with a sniffle. He wiped his eyes hard before they could see his strange tears. "No hard feelings, Seamus. I'm just glad it's over now. We—"
The clock struck seven.

"Shite," said Dean. "We're late. Hurry up, you big oaf," he called to Ron, who was still in the loo.

"Go on without us," Ron said. "We'll catch up."

The others waved and left the dorm, and Ron came out of the loo with a shaky sigh. "Sorry, mate." He wiped his eyes, too. "I didn't have coming out as an excuse to cover my arse."

"Yeah."

Harry leaned against Ron's shoulder and ran his hand over his Gryffindor scarf. It was real. They were really leaving Hogwarts for good. Their belongings were packed, their animals forewarned of the move. They had told their owls earlier in the evening to follow them that night. Hermione would have Dobby bring Crookshanks as soon as they were settled. There was nothing left to do but leave.

Gods, in spite of all the hell he had lived through within these walls, he would miss this place dearly.

Ron sighed and stood tall. "Well, nothing for it, mate. Time to go."

"Yeah, but... hold on."

The set of dark blue robes the twins had picked out for Ron in fifth year, lengthened twice with Hermione's spellwork to cover his lanky frame, already needed to be let out again. "Recoquo Vestitus. There. Now you look good enough to eat."

Ron snorted. "We've had this discussion, mate. I know I'm irresistible and all that, but keep your cock well away from my block, thanks."

Harry laughed. "Wanker. You know, it's sad. You're my best friend, you know I'm never going to get my mate, and you won't even give me a pity shag."

"It's a cruel world for the Chosen One, isn't it?"

Harry's snort held no trace of mirth. "Damn straight."

Ron gave him a sad smile. "I would, you know. If it wasn't for 'Mione. You'd be the only one I ever trusted enough to... you know, if I wasn't completely in love with her."

Harry grabbed Ron into an honest hug. "I know. I'm really glad you're with me. You and 'Mione. I couldn't have faced it alone and stayed sane."

Ron sniffled and patted his back. "What're sidekicks for?"

Harry chuckled and wiped his eyes. "Sorry about that. What do you say we go pick up your girl and bust out of here, Gred and Forge style?"

"Probably wise to go with a few less fireworks," said Ron with a smirk. "As we're going incognito and all."

"Pity. Well, we can take comfort in the fact that Snape will set off several in our honour once he works out I won't be coming to detention."

Ron snickered. "Shame we won't be here to see his face. Anyway, let's go before 'Mione charges
the stairs."
"Get your coat and such."
"Yes, Mum."
"Merlin forbid."

Ron laughed and summoned his winter gear. He tucked and draped it in a similar manner to Harry and motioned to the stairs.

"Well, now or never, I guess."

Harry took one last look at the room, whispered a goodbye to his friends and Hogwarts, then turned his back on his childhood with a sigh. It hurt to leave this all behind, but it was time to grow up. He had a war to fight.

Hermione waited for them at the base of the stairs, eyes glimmering with unshed tears. Her pink gown floated around her like clouds, and she had used that sleek-eazy stuff on her hair again. She was beautiful, and judging by Ron's sharp intake of breath, Harry wasn't the only one to see it.

"Merlin, 'Mione," Ron said, cheeks glowing red. "You're gorgeous!"

"Took you long enough to notice," she quipped, but her cheeks had flushed and her eyes were bright.

Ron rubbed the back of his neck. "Er… it did at that, but I've got it now, haven't I? I hope."

She chuckled and laced her arm through his. "A perfect gentleman. Finally. Now you, Harry!"

She held out her other arm, and Harry laughed.

"We won't fit through the portrait hole like that."

Hermione chuckled. "Suit yourself." She led Ron through the portrait hole, Harry lagging behind and mentally wishing everything and everyone goodbye. The fat lady eyed them as they stepped through.

"Running a bit late, are we?"

Harry chuckled. "All my fault, I'm afraid. Took us hours to wrangle this mop into something semi presentable, and at the end of all that work, it still looks like a bird's nest."

The fat lady cocked her head. "Try a little olive oil and rosemary in your shampoo. It worked for me anyway."

"Can't hurt to try it. Thank you, ma'am. 'For everything you did for us.' He blinked hard. "Well, off we go then. Goodbye."

"Have a lovely evening, children." She waved, and Harry pushed her shut for the last time. The click as the portrait hole closed sounded louder than it should have in the quiet left behind.

Ron and Hermione both had tears in their eyes, too.

"So this is it, yeah?" Ron sniffled and rubbed his eyes. "Didn't think it would come so soon."
"Me neither," Hermione said. "I thought we would at least have the rest of this year."

Harry wrapped his wings and arms around his chest. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't be silly. I'm glad to be going with you. We both are. It's just tough to say goodbye."

Harry nodded and offered her his arm. "Together?"

"Always, mate," said Ron. "Now, which way are we going? You said you had an idea, Hermione?"

She nodded. "The Room. Come on."

Harry walked beside her to the Room of Requirement and stepped inside. It opened to what looked like a stable.

"Ah, it worked!" Hermione grinned. "Come on then, change into your coats. And turn around so I can put on a more sensible top."


"Wanker." Harry physically turned Ron around and tossed the boy's coat over his head. "Get dressed. We're on the clock now."

Ron extricated his head and grumbled, but obeyed.

Harry had to spell his tops and coats on now that he had wings, so he finished long before the others. He gave Hermione a minute or two before calling, "You ready, Hermione?"

"Er… almost. Just… these bloody ruffles."

Harry listened to her curse and fight with her dress, suppressing a grin, until Hermione called, "Ready! Finally! Merlin, those dresses are bloody ridiculous."

Ron smoothed a bit of hair her clothes had ruffled. "Still gorgeous without it."

She beamed. "Thank you. Now, give me your robes, gentlemen…"

They passed her their dress robes, and Hermione sent both sets into her beaded bag with a flick of her wand. "Right. That's that. Now, bundle up, put an Impervius charm on your glasses, Harry, and come outside."

Ron blinked. "Outside?"

Hermione grinned. "I told the Room to put us in the thestral stables. It's still on the grounds, so…."

"That's brilliant!"

Harry grinned. "Well done. Let's see if it worked."

"We can walk under your cloak if it didn't," said Hermione, "but this way I figured we would bypass any wards or alarms on the doors and the gates, and we could avoid the portraits."

Harry opened the door to the outside world and grinned at the sight of snow on the ground and a herd of thestrals hanging about nearby.
"Brilliant, 'Mione," he said and stepped into the paddock.
In Plain Sight

Chapter Summary

Sorry the chapter count jumped a lot. I'm writing this as I post, but that number should be pretty close to accurate. I have this just about fully drafted.

Chapter 9

In Plain Sight

Harry landed in a park inside the Wizarding side of Diagon Alley, cold, stiff, and achy, but free and alive. Hermione removed their disillusionment charms and glamoured their faces, then opened her bag.

"Hogwarts gear in here, boys. We can't be seen as students anymore."

Removing his Gryffindor scarf, tied over a sensible charcoal grey one, gave Harry a pang. He handed it to her and watched as she sent it flying to sit with Harry's things. She repeated the process with Ron's and her own, then closed her bag with a sigh.

"Goodbye, Hogwarts." She slung the bag over her shoulder and gave them a weary smile. "Well, we're free. Sort of."

Harry patted the neck of his thestral. "Go on home once you've had a rest. We won't be needing a ride back. Thank you for your help."

The thestrals bickered, nuzzled the teens' faces, and took flight.

"Guess they were missing home already," said Ron.

Harry kicked the ground. "I know the feeling."

Hermione rubbed his shoulder. "Come on. I've enough to put us up in the Leaky for the night and get us breakfast, then we'll set out in the morning. You said you know where we're going, Harry?"

"Well, not precisely where, but I know how. I'm too worn out to worry about it tonight, though. Let's just grab some dinner somewhere—I have enough for that at least—and hit the sack."

Hermione nodded. "There's a new Chinese place near Eeylops, or so Mum said. Want to try it?"

"Sounds good to me, as long as it's not too expensive."

Ron grunted agreement, and they set off for the restaurant.

The next day, Harry woke piled in with a friend on either side, his wings aching a bit from being used for blankets all night. He groaned and wriggled free.
"Ow. That's the last time I sleep in the middle."

Hermione sat up and rubbed her eyes. She was still wearing her jumper from the night before, though she had on a pair of track shorts instead of her trousers. "Mm. I slept fairly well, considering. Did we hurt your wings?"

"I think it's more from an awkward position being stuck in the middle." Harry stretched them out, drawing a gasp from Hermione.

"Oh, your wings are lovely, Harry! I didn't realise you had such a span."

"Well, they have to be big enough to haul me into the air, don't they? Otherwise, what's the point?"

"They're comfy," Ron muttered. "Com'e're and bring back the warmth."

Harry snorted. "No thanks. Not so comfy for me. Besides, they'll expect us to come to Diagon Alley. We've got to get me emancipated and get the hell out of here before we're caught."

"Fair enough. Did someone mention breakfast?"

"You think with your stomach first, Ron," said Hermione with a snort, "and your brain last."

Ron waggled his eyebrows. "And we all know what's in the middle."

"Prat!" Hermione smacked him with her pillow, making them all laugh.

Harry chuckled. "I'm glad this is still the same, even if we're not at school anymore."

"This will never change. Now go get dressed and brush your teeth, then we will, and once we're all freshened up, we'll go get breakfast and get you emancipated." She narrowed her eyes. "You are going to tell us your ideas on keeping us hidden then, right? The confusion of the dance will probably give us maybe another couple of hours of cover, but then we're going to have to dash to stay ahead of them."

Harry grimaced. "Better make breakfast quick, then. We still need a tent and food and such."

"First thing on the list once you're emancipated. Now, get moving."

"All right, all right."

Harry locked himself into the loo, grabbed his toothbrush, and brushed away.

After breakfast, Harry checked his watch and grimaced. Classes would start any minute. Their time was up.

He told Tom they had some last-minute packing up to do, then they would be on their way. Ron and Hermione exchanged a bemused look and followed Harry upstairs.

Harry paced the floor, thinking. "I need at least two I can trust. One to hide us and one to block them. I can't trust that treacherous little shite, so I need two more."

Dobby and...? The image of a house elf sobbing and hiccupping into a butterbeer came to mind. Winky. Would having a new family pull her out of her slump?

He supposed it couldn't hurt to try.
"Dobby," he called.

The house elf showed up in his usual odd getup, this time with heart stickers all over his jumper. Dobby cocked his head and stared at Harry, eyes narrowed, and Harry remembered he was under glamours.

"It's me, Dobby. Harry. It's too dangerous at school right now, so we had to leave before we're killed."

Dobby gasped and jumped back. "I is knowing it was you, Great Master Harry Potter, sir. I is just wondering why you is not in class, but… Dobby is sad to hear that you is in danger."

"Yeah. It was hard to leave, but we had to."

He dropped to one knee. "Listen, Dobby, we need help. Can you promise me you won't tell anyone where we are? Not even Dumbledore or our families? It's crucial that absolutely no one knows where we are."

"Dobby can do that. I promise not to be telling anyone where Harry or his friends are, unless you say I can."

"Good, thank you."

Harry waited for the customary emotional outburst to quiet and made a mental note not to thank Dobby again until they were safe, or out of Diagon Alley at least.

"Okay, now, Dobby, I need your help, if you can do it. Ron, Hermione, and I are about to leave Diagon Alley and set up elsewhere, but we need to stay hidden from everyone we don't specifically approve of. Can house elves ward us in like that? So well that even Dumbledore can't track us?"

"Harry!"

He ignored Hermione's reproachful tone. This wasn't the time to deal with her spew rubbish.

"Dobby can't, Master Harry Potter, sir. You is needing a bonded elf for wards that strong."

"A bonded elf could do it, though?"

"Harry, no," Hermione pleaded. He shot her a quelling look.

Dobby nodded. "If they is being loyal. I is not trusting your traitor elf to do it right."

Harry grimaced. "No, neither do I." He prepared himself for another tirade. "Dobby, I know you enjoy your freedom, and I won't ask you to give it up—"

"I is doing so gladly to help you survive, Master Harry."

Harry patted his head. "I know you would. You're a good friend."

Dobby wailed and hugged his knee. "Thank you, Master Harry, sir!"

He patted the elf's back. "I don't want to ask you to give up your freedom, but… Dobby, do you suppose if I offered Winky a home—"

"Harry! How could y—"
Ron interjected, "Hermione, stop. We keep telling you you've got house elves all wrong. Now is the time to listen and let Harry save our arses before none of us live long enough to help the house elves, or anyone at all!"

Hermione subsided with a dark glare and a sniffle. Harry knew they hadn't heard the end of it, but if he could at least buy them some time, then it was worth dealing with her sulking later.

"If I offered Winky a home, Dobby," Harry went on, "do you think I could trust her to keep us safe? Would she be happier with a new family?"

Dobby gave Hermione a glare. "You is being understanding house elves much better than Miss Fluffy."

Hermione squawked. "Fluffy?"

Harry barely suppressed a snort. "Er… I try to listen to what you want. Anyway, could we trust her? Help her?"

Dobby nodded. "House elves—well, except Dobby—house elves is needing a bonded family to be happy, Master Harry, sir. Winky is drinking because she is being lonely and hurting, but I think she is being loyal to you."

Harry sighed in relief. "Bring her here. Tell her someone wants to give her a home but don't say who."

Dobby popped away. While he was gone, Harry summoned Kreacher and interrupted his growling and muttering.

"Listen here, Kreacher. This is how it is going to be. You don't have to like me. You don't have to work for me. But you do have to be loyal to me and protect my safety and that of my allies. Any further attempts to circumvent your orders or betray us will end your service to the house of Black. You will be given clothes and turned out with dishonour, do you understand?"

"Harry," Hermione said, voice breaking, "what are you doing?"

"Do you understand, Kreacher?" Harry took off a sock and dangled it in front of the elf. "Your betrayal cost me my godfather. I am not bluffing. I have no use for a traitor in my service. Are you going to be loyal from here on out, or are you going to be disowned and turned out on the streets?"

Huge tears bubbled on Kreacher's lashes and dropped to the floor. He bowed his head and wailed. "I is being loyal, just please, master, no clothes!"

Harry put his sock back on and soothed the old elf with gentle healing light and pats on the back. "Okay. It's all right. As long as you don't try to hurt us anymore, you can stay. Just don't betray me again."

Kreacher sobbed and nodded. "Kreacher is doing master's will."

"You can do what you like, but you're not to speak to anyone about us at all except for me, Hermione, Ron, Dobby, or Winky."

Kreacher's ears drooped. "Yes, Master."

"Good. Keep those orders or else, Kreacher. I mean it."
"Y-yes, sir."

"All right. Go back to tracking Malfoy. No communication with him or his goons or anyone on the dark side whatsoever."

Kreacher bowed. "Yes, master."

"Go on."

Kreacher popped away and Harry rubbed his face. "Gods. Hermione, that was as pleasant for me as it was for you, but I had to do it to keep us safe. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," said Ron. "You had to."

"Yeah. I—"

Winky showed up with Dobby then, eyes huge and shining with hope and tears. "You is giving Winky a home, Master Harry? You is offering Winky a familial bond?"

Harry nodded and patted her head. "I need an elf to hide us from everyone and help us while we fight a war. Can you do that for me?"

"It's slavery," Hermione sobbed. "Don't. Please."

"Hermione, ask her what she wants. Ask her if she wants a home or to be free."

"They don't understand, Harry!"

"No, Miss Fluffy," said Dobby fiercely. "Is you who is not understanding. Dobby is able to be free because he is a quarter goblin, but full house elves like Winky fade without a home. You say she is free now but she is not. She is hurting, and you is wanting them all to suffer!"

Hermione gasped. "I-I don't want to hurt you. I'm trying to help you."

"Then you is needing to listen to what we need," said Winky with a scowl. "You is terrifying my friends with your hats. We is calling you the homebreaker, because you is trying so hard to make us homeless and alone."

"B-but, Winky, if you're free, you don't have to take orders, and you can dress how you like, and —"

"Hermione," said Ron, "you're not getting it. She's talking about a biological thing, not the mental pain of being afraid. Freedom according to your standards is literally killing her. She's not human, Hermione, and you can't expect her to be."

"Yes, exactly," said Dobby. "Master Ron is understanding. House elves is not able to be free. And you is needing to learn that and change your ways, Miss Fluffy, if you is wanting to help."

"We is not always having a good life and we is knowing it," said Winky, "but breaking our bonds is not helping us."

Hermione lowered her head. "Oh. I-I see. Then... okay. I... I'll try to listen better, Winky, Dobby. It just hurts me to see you suffering."

"We is not the ones to blame for that," said Dobby, and immediately started bashing his head into the table.
Harry caught him into a hug. "You're right. It's not your fault, and Hermione is going to listen from now on, isn't she?"

Hermione slumped in defeat. "Yes. I promise."

"Good. Now, let's get this bond done while we still have time." Harry turned to Winky. "Tell me what to do, please."

Winky bowed, and the bond begun
Free and Clear

Chapter Summary

Off to the bank, where strange secrets lie in wait for Harry and crew, and to a new home.

Chapter 10

Free and Clear

Once Harry bonded Winky into the Potter family, the elf happily took one of Harry's pillowcases to replace her tattered dress. Then, Harry asked her if there were any kinds of clothing he could offer her without making her lose her home.

Winky frowned. "Master cannot be giving me human-made clothes without breaking the bond, but if you is giving me fabric or fibres and supplies, Winky can be making her own to wear and not be losing her home."

"Can you? Brilliant. Will giving you laundry break your bonds?"

"If it is human-made."

"So you really need to make your own clothes, and maybe ours, too."

A wistful look filled both elves' eyes.

"It is being what house elves is best at," said Dobby, "but no one is remembering."

"Huh. So you like to make clothes then? Both of you?"

Winky nodded sadly. "Is being our favourite thing."

Harry smiled. "Well, it just so happens that almost all of my clothes are rubbish, and Ron probably wouldn't object to a wardrobe update as a favour to you, since you enjoy it so much. And to me, so I don't need to worry about him catching his death." He shot Ron a look that silenced the redhead's protests and pride.

The house elves looked at Ron with huge, pleading eyes, too, and Ron winced.

"Oh no, not the puppy dog eyes!"

Winky blinked. "Puppy…?" She looked at Dobby.

"Dobby is not understanding either."

Harry snorted. "Seriously, Ron, don't worry about it. I need support, you give me support. You need clothes, I'm giving you clothes. It's just the way friendship works."
Ron pouted. "It's a lot of money."

Harry gave him a wide-eyed, pleading look.

"Bloody hell, not you, too!" Ron huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. "Oh, all right. I know when I'm out-flanked. If you elves really enjoy sewing so much, I suppose I could use an update."

The elves squealed in delight.

Harry grinned. "Thanks, Ron. And, Winky, Dobby, I'll be happy to buy you loads of different fabrics and supplies so you can keep us, and yourselves, in good clothes." He frowned. "Is it bad to pay you for them? We would pay a human, but your kind don't seem to like it."

Winky shook her head adamantly. "No pay. I is wanting a family, not an employer."

Harry rubbed his chin. "I see. So if we pay you, it's like saying we don't care about you as family, but only as servants."

Winky nodded, eyes wide. "You is right. Most humans is not understanding."

Harry dropped his glamours. "I'm not human. I'm a Sunguard."

Dobby and Winky shared a wide-eyed look.

"A human of light!"

Winky nodded tearfully. "Maybe it is finally being time."

Dobby grinned. "Master Harry is being the best master Dobby ever has met. I think you is right."

Winky wiped her eyes. "We is knowing soon." She smiled and bowed to Harry. "I is being happy to make your clothing, master, and for your friends, too—"

"Not me," Hermione snapped. "I won't support this exercise in slave labour."

Harry rubbed his forehead. "Hermione, come off it. I'm not treating her like a slave and you know it."

She huffed and turned away.

"Just clothes for me and Ron and our elves then. Dobby, you can help too, if you like. Just try to… er… tone it down, yeah? Maybe ask Winky about patterns and styles, okay? We don't usually like to wear things that are really bright or flashy."

"Especially with us being on the run," said Ron. "We need to blend in as much as possible for safety's sake."

"You can still wear whatever you like though, Dobby." Harry grinned. "And I like your socks. They're brilliant."

"Same here, mate," said Ron with a chuckle. "Feel free to make us plenty of your favourites."

Dobby gave him a tearful smile. "Dobby is doing his best!"

"I know you will." Harry stood. "Okay. Winky, can you please make it so no one can recognize or find us? I'll need at least one goblin to know who I am, but no one else except us and Kreacher."
"Yes, Master, Winky is doing it right now. You is needing your wizard glamours on again first, though."

Harry gave Hermione the puppy dog eyes, too. She huffed and reapplied his glamours.

"Thanks, 'Mione. I know you hate it, but I'm trying to treat her well, and it really is the only hope we have."

Hermione relented with a sigh. "I know you won't abuse them. I just... I want them to be free."

"We is house elves, Miss Hermione, not humans," said Winky. "Freedom for us is not being the same as for you."

"But—"

"Later, Hermione," Ron said. "We need to get out of Diagon Alley first."

"Yeah." Harry looked to his new elf. "We're ready, Winky."

She snapped her fingers, and cool water rushed over Harry, though it left him dry and didn't hinder his breathing. He gasped and shivered a little.

"Ooh, that felt strange. Are we ready to go then, Winky?"

"Yes, Master Harry. You is being protected now."

"Brilliant. Thank you, Winky. Now, first Gringotts, then shopping. Winky, while we're at the bank, if you'll make us a list of everything you need to make us new wardrobes, keeping in mind that we won't be going to formal affairs for some time and we need to lie low, we'll buy it all when we're done. Well, assuming we can get me emancipated."

"Actually, mate," said Ron, "we'll have to go to one formal do. Bill and Fleur are getting married this summer, and on the run or not, I need to be there for my brother."

Harry nodded. "One formal set apiece then, and we might as well make it something we can wear again to other functions. Not too fancy, you know. Ron and I aren't big on frills."

Ron shot him a pained look. "Did you really need to bring that up?"

Harry smirked. "No more lace collars for you, right, Winky?"

Winky beamed. "Right!"

Ron grinned. "Thank Merlin!"

The goblins were furious when they learned that Harry's magical guardian and 'executor' had not only assumed control of Harry's Wizengamot seats, his lordship, and his vaults without ever consulting Harry, but had also abducted him and placed him in an abusive home without following any approved adoption procedures. They emancipated Harry immediately and asked if he would like to press charges.

Harry considered it. Merlin knew the arsehole deserved it, but said arsehole was also the only thing between Voldemort and Hogwarts. People would die if Dumbledore went to Azkaban now.

"Not at this time. Am I able to press charges later, after the war?"
The goblin nodded. "You have five years to come forward. After that, the case is considered abandoned and is placed in records. You may still be able to press charges later as you have a legitimate excuse for waiting, but it will be more difficult and a longer process."

"Thank you."

"Not at all, Mister Potter. Now, have you decided which property to use while you are undercover?"

Harry wrinkled his nose. "I haven't had much chance to look. We were planning on getting a tent and roughing it."

"For months?"

"Er…." Harry grimaced. "Yeah, now that you mention it, that's not ideal. We'll come back after we've had a chance to look at the list, then."

Goldclaw pushed a pair of golden spectacles up his nose. "If I may make a recommendation?"

Harry glanced to his friends.

"Go for it, Harry," Ron said. "Goblins know their stuff, and they don't betray paying clients."

Goldclaw acknowledged the comment with a nod.

"All right," said Harry. "What did you have in mind?"

Goldclaw pointed to a place halfway down the page-long list of estates under the Potter-Peverell mantle. "This, I think, would be ideal for three young warriors who need to lie low. It is a three bedroom cabin in the Forest of Dean."

Hermione interjected, "I know where that is. I can apparate us there if we decide to go with it." At the goblin's sharp look, Hermione blushed. "Oh! Sorry, sir. Do go on, please."

Goldclaw nodded. "As I was saying, it is situated near the middle of the forest, well out of the way of prying eyes. It has a basement potions lab, a fenced garden, orchard, and greenhouse, and a large parlour that could easily be converted into a training area."

Harry beamed. "That sounds brilliant. Is there room for house elves to have their own space, and is it warded?"

"It is warded with simple heritage wards. You will need to update and strengthen them. Your house elves can do that with ease. How many will be living there?"

"One certainly, potentially up to three."

"In that case, there should be enough room to create a living area in the attic." The goblin eyed him curiously. "Most humans do not concern themselves with where their house elves sleep."

"I'm not most humans, then."

Goldclaw smiled, or what passed for it with his race. "Indeed. Will you be using the cabin?"

"Yes, it sounds perfect."

"Excellent. We shall key Gringotts into the wards while you are purchasing supplies. Do you wish
to add anyone else?"

"No. Not at this time."

"The Ministry, for correspondence only?"

"Definitely not."

"Very well. We shall ensure it is ready for habitation before you arrive. The apparition coordinates are on the list."

"Thank you, sir."

"You are most welcome."

Upon arriving at his family vault, Harry realised Dumbledore had wanted him kept ignorant. Besides the piles of galleons hidden away, they found books of all sorts there, including books on soul magic and defence. There was even a small library of books on beings.

Maybe the answers to Harry's blood problems had been sitting here all along.

After fuming at the old man's stupidity for a good twenty minutes, Harry buckled down and helped his friends pack the entire library, plus a few enchanted heirlooms with protective charms, into Hermione's bag. They would probably need bookshelves in every room at the cabin, but by gods, they wouldn't be fighting blind any longer.

Then, Harry found his parents' wills hidden away in a dark corner, where Dumbledore had no doubt assumed they would remain unseen until they no longer mattered.

Harry found his dad's will first and scanned it. He would have to ask Goldclaw if the properties and items on it had been given out properly, but everything looked in order to him.

Until he reached the addendum at the bottom of the third page. The codicil concerning custody of Harry in the event of his parents' death, in particular. That, most certainly, had been ignored.

"In the case of my early demise," Harry read out loud, "I, James Fleamont Potter, grant custody of Harry James Potter, my only child at the time of this writing, to Lily Evans Potter. If she should follow me in death or otherwise become unable to care for him before Harry is of age, I then grant custody of Harry to his godfather, Sirius Arcturus Black. Should Sirius perish or be unable to care for him, my preferred list of caretakers is as follows: Remus Edward Lupin, Peter Mordred Pettigrew… ugh. And… what the hell?"

Ron and Hermione came barrelling over.

"What? What is it?" Hermione tried to read over his shoulder.

Harry stared at the words, hardly comprehending what he had just read. This… this made no sense whatsoever.

"I… Severus Tobias Snape. Dad wanted Snape to raise me if the others couldn't."

"Oh my god," Hermione breathed. "But… I thought…?"

"That Snape hated my father? He did. With a damn good reason, too. Shite, this… it can't be real, can it?"
Hermione shrugged. "Who knows. Obviously it wasn't followed. Perhaps it is a fake."

"Must be," said Ron, "but… if it is, it's a damn good one. That's the official Ministry seal for witnessed documents there at the bottom. I mean, he could have forged it, but…"

Harry shook his head and put the will back. "It can't be real. There's just no way."

Hermione took the will from him. "Then don't worry about it. Does your mum's seem legitimate?"

"I haven't looked yet." Harry picked up the documents, skimmed the irrelevant sections, and focused on her list for custody of himself. "Let's see. Should I suffer the fate I know awaits me and meet an early demise… oh gods. She knew?"

Hermione rubbed his shoulders. "Maybe they just… because they had to go into hiding and all…?"

Harry nodded and blinked hard. "Maybe." He took a deep breath and read on. "I, Lily Anne Potter, nee Evans, grant custody of my only son at the time of this writing to…"

He trailed off, shock ringing through him for what seemed like the hundredth time that day.

"What, mate?" Ron nudged him. "What's it say?"

"To… to Remus Edward Lupin."

Hermione gasped. "Not your father?"

"That's what it says. And her next choice is… holy fuck! Snape again!"

"Dear gods." Ron gave Harry a mystified look. "There's a hell of a story hidden here, isn't there?"

Harry swallowed a lump in his throat. "Apparently so. After Snape, she lists Mary Macdonald, Frank and Alice Longbottom, and her parents. Under that, there's another codicil.

"Under no condition is custody of my son to be granted to Petunia Evans Dursley and family, Albus Dumbledore, Peter Pettigrew, Sirius Black… what? Or… holy shite. Or James Potter? What the fuck was happening in my family?"

Ron shuddered and put the wills down. "Mate, those have to be rubbish. It's just too bloody weird."

"I have to admit, it seems strange to me as well." Hermione bit her lip.

"What?" Harry tossed the rubbish will away with a shudder and gave her a searching look. "What do you know, 'Mione?"

"I don't know anything. I have no way to prove that those wills aren't fake, but…" She frowned and picked up Lily's. "Have you ever heard the phrase 'truth is stranger than fiction'? If these are false, well, it just seems like people would pick something closer to the truth. These are so unbelievable I'm half afraid they're more likely to be true than otherwise."

A shiver itched at the base of Harry's neck and spread down his limbs.

"Oh, come off it, 'Mione," said Ron. "Snape was probably just having a go at Harry's dad and the goblins kept it for their records or something. Or they might have never found these prank versions. There's no way these are real."

Hermione frowned. "I suppose it's possible."
Harry shook his head and put them back where he had found them. "I'm with Ron. Those have to be a prank. And either way, we have no time to worry about it. We still have an entire house to furnish and fabric to buy for Winky and Dobby."

Hermione nodded cautiously. "Yes, that… I'm sure you're right." But she frowned as she returned to packing the library. Harry pretended he hadn't seen.

They were just a prank. Probably Sirius having a laugh. Yeah.

He shoved his worries aside and resumed clearing out the shelves.

After Gringotts supplied them with a second expandable bag for a nominal fee, Harry called Winky and asked for her list. The sheer amount of fabric and odds and ends on it confused the hell out of him, but if it made them happy, he was all for it. Maybe Kreacher would be less grumpy if Harry let him help.

Winky apparated him to a textile and sewing shop for the fabrics and supplies, and Harry loaded what seemed like half the store into their second bag. They set an account up for Winky for owl orders, asked Winky to make sure their names stayed private on the store's records and at the bank, and left with their haul. Winky could hardly stand still, she was so happy. Hermione frowned and smiled at her by turns.

With the clothing situation taken care of, they spent several hours filling their bag with furniture, linens, dishes, and everything else they could think of to outfit a new home for habitation. By the time they finished shopping, the sun had set.

Harry dragged himself down the forest path to their new home and forced himself to look up. Oh. Merlin, it was a sweet little place. A rustic log cabin with a red clay roof and ivy climbing the walls. What would be roses come summer decorated the path and front lawn, and fruit trees lined both sides of the yard, though they were only spidery bare branches at the moment. They were a little worse for wear, too, but with some pruning and care, Harry thought they might give a decent harvest. Certainly enough to supplement their meals.

Inside, the place was roomier than it looked from the outside, and everything had a charming rustic flair. The simple furnishings they had chosen, all in solid colors and finished wood, would fit right in. The place would look nothing like Petunia's frilly, flowery, overdone house, but Harry thought that an advantage rather than otherwise.

Petunia's frills and flowers had hidden dark secrets.

"Well, this will be a nice little home once we're done with it." But for tonight, Harry just wanted to drop face-first into the nearest bed and stay there till noon. "Dobby, Winky."

The elves appeared with happy grins.

"Let's get this place semi-ready for habitation and get some rest."

Not even Hermione had the energy to protest.
Potter didn't show up for Defence, nor did his devoted lap dogs. Severus assumed he skived off due to his injuries. The other two were likely helping him recover. He took an obligatory twenty points from Gryffindor and went about the lesson without mentioning it again.

But when Potter neither showed up for detention nor reported to the Infirmary that night, Severus' temper got the better of him. The fact that Albus hadn't approached him yet rankled, too. So the old man had made exceptions for Potters again, hmm? Poor little Harry Potter was too good for detention, was he?

To hell with that.

Severus burst into Albus' office thirty minutes into Potter's supposed detention time, half-expecting to find the brat there, weaving his tale of woe. Well, to be fair, Severus was in the wrong for much of what happened yesterday, but whose fault was it again that Severus had never been free to put the past behind him?

Right.

Albus looked up from a stack of paperwork as Severus slammed the door open and stalked inside.

"I do realise, Albus, that you have a propensity to favour the Potter line, but really, this habit of yours is getting old."

"Severus?" The old man blinked several times, one of his few tells revealing surprise, and that surprised Severus. Surely Albus knew by now, didn't he? He always knew.

"I am afraid I haven't the foggiest idea as to what you're referring to." The absence of his thrice-damned twinkle declared it as truth.

Well. There was a first time for everything, Severus supposed.

He huffed and shut the door. "Do you mean to tell me that Potter didn't come crying to you after the disastrous conclusion of the small errand you sent him on, yesterday, of all days?"

Albus stared. "I did not send Harry to you yesterday. Indeed, I am not so foolish as to send Harry to you anywhere near Valentine's Day for anything less than a dire emergency."

In retrospect, Severus probably should have thought of that.
"So you did not send the boy with the intent to resume Occlumency lessons?"

Albus' eyes widened slightly. Damn. It wasn't an act. The old man really had no clue what was going on.

Did that mean Potter hadn't complained? Why? It made no sense. Surely the odious offspring of James Potter would have leapt at the chance to have Severus sacked.

A little voice whispered, 'Perhaps, if Harry was anything like James,' but Severus shut it down hard. He couldn't afford to show any sympathy to a Potter. The last time he had been foolish enough to drop his guard, he had paid for it. Dearly.

"No, Severus, I did not. You proved to me quite thoroughly over the course of his fifth year that you are entirely unable to forgive Harry for sins he never committed."

Rage boiled in Severus' gut. "And whom, old man, do you imagine I should blame for that?"

Albus shuffled the parchment on his desk and put it away without acknowledging Severus' tacit accusation. "What, precisely, happened yesterday to have engendered this unprovoked attack upon my office door, in particular?"

Severus' eyelid twitched. "You shall answer for your cruelty one day, Albus."

"Yes, yes, and you shall be the one to dole out justice for my terrible crimes against humanity. Does that satisfy you?"

Severus occluded against a sharp wave of hurt and anger. Two could play that game.

"Immensely."

Albus' small frown was the only hint that Severus' repartee had hit home. "Then you should have no reason to complain."

"Oh, none whatsoever. Of course, you removed my ability to complain, so there is also that small injustice to consider."

"Severus, you know I had no choice. An innocent would have died."

"Did you forget I was sitting here when you explained your noble reasoning to Poppy, Albus?"

Albus' brow twitched. Point to Severus.

"Nevertheless, it was true then and it is true now that innocents would have died had I allowed you free rein. Saving lives was always my ultimate goal."

"How strange, then, that you should remove my ability to speak on the crimes heaped upon my person yet leave my ability to announce Lupin's creature status to all and sundry intact. It seems to me that if saving lives, Lupin's chief among them, was truly your motivation in silencing me, you would have also protected the truth of his lycanthropy, given that it was the primary reason for your concern in the first place."

Albus gave no sign at all that Severus' statement had affected him, and that was as good of a tell as any.

"You disgust me, old man."
"Well then, you should be pleased that you must only continue these charming little talks of ours for a few months longer. Tea, Severus?"

"No, thank you." Severus would be too tempted to throw it in the old bastard's face.

"Suit yourself. Now, why exactly did you burst into my office if not to share some of my delicious tea and lemon drops?"

Tea and lemon drops indeed.

"Potter did not report to his detention this evening, nor to class this morning. Granger and Weasley were also absent from class. I assumed it was more of your manipulations in favour of Potters at work."

"Hmm." Albus sipped his tea. "While we are on the topic of strange occurrences, how peculiar it is that Harry and his friends should have missed class this morning, and yet I am only hearing about my disgusting favouritism for his family line now." He picked out a lemon drop and held Severus' gaze as he popped it into his mouth. "I wonder, my dear boy, if I am the only one here tonight with secrets to hide."

Severus snarled, "My secrets are not the issue here, Albus. Where in the nine hells is your precious golden boy?"

There. That would distract the manipulative old goat.

Albus' face turned grim. "A fine question." He summoned a silver gadget from his bookshelf and frowned. "Hmm. He must still be in the castle. The alarms on the exits would have warned me."

Severus sucked in a sharp breath at the tacit implication that Albus had used illegal tracking charms upon a student.

But then, he shouldn't be surprised, should he?

Albus sent the gadget flying back to its shelf. "I think we must assume that whatever you did to engender your uncharacteristic display of sympathy for Harry and his friends this morning has frightened the boy enough to keep him from wishing to endure another dose of your company, but we shall see." He went to the floo and called the Gryffindor head. "Minerva, dear, have you seen Harry today? I have a small matter to discuss with him."

Severus couldn't see the woman with Albus' head in the way, but her derisive snort reassured him that he was not the only person wise to Albus' ploys.

"A small matter! The day you place any small burden upon that boy's shoulders will be a novel one indeed."

"Minerva."

She huffed. "No. I have seen none of them today. I assumed one of them had taken ill and the others were tending to them so as to avoid the Infirmary. Is there reason for concern?"

"Not yet. I will let you know if my own search reveals a problem."

"Humph. I'm sure you will."

Albus ended the call after a hurried goodbye and called for what Severus assumed must be a house
elf.

"Dobby."

The elf, if it was an elf, did not appear. Interesting.

Albus' frown deepened. "Kreacher."

Ah, now that name Severus recognised.

Again, nothing happened.

Albus' frown inched towards alarm. "Winky."

Another unfamiliar elf name. And another silence greeted their ears.

"Well, this is highly irregular." Albus summoned another gadget and paled. "Oh, this is...." A third object soared into his hands and drained what little colour remained from his features. "Oh, we are...." He dashed to his desk and rummaged in one of the drawers. "Shite."

The uncharacteristic vulgarity put Severus on edge. "What?"

Albus whirled on Severus. "What exactly did you do to him yesterday, Severus?"

Severus stood, bristling at the accusatory tone. "I? I simply refused to teach the brat occlumency again and ordered him out."

And hurt and threatened the boy, but Albus didn't need to know that, not when he was looking for someone to blame. Severus knew too well how Albus' sense of mercy and justice skewed.

"Your precious little golden boy is the one who destroyed my office and nearly killed me as a result!"

Albus' eyes turned sharp. "Did he? And what inspired him to such rage?"

"The boy is as unstable as a drunken goblin, and you dare to blame me for his magical outbursts? It is hardly my fault he is a perfect duplicate of his sainted father, and hardly my fault that you are as quick to dismiss the younger generation's crimes as you were for the elder. I—"

"Sit down, Severus!"

The sharp command, shouted in a tone Severus had never heard from the old bastard before, shocked him into compliance.

"I do not know what you have done to earn Harry's wrath this time, but whatever it was, you have gone too far. Harry is gone, do you understand me? He has somehow managed to slip by the wards undetected and escape Hogwarts, and the agents I placed upon his trail to ensure his safety are no longer responding to my commands."

Severus frowned. "Track the boy then. I have no doubt that you have placed locator charms upon him if you have already stooped so low as to key the exit wards to his signature."

Albus turned and paced. "There is no use denying it, I suppose. Not now. The fact is that I did place locator and tracking charms upon him, and a third charm alerting me to his presence in the castle, but they have all been nullified somehow. He is gone, Severus, and I haven't the slightest idea where he is. What's more, he has had himself emancipated, and his Gringotts key is no longer
in my possession, which means I have no further methods to utilise against this latest bid for independence."

Severus stared, horror creeping into his veins. "He was emancipated? But even I was refused when I sought my freedom. How could such a spoiled brat ever be—" He froze as the rest of Albus' words registered. "His key. You had his key?"

Albus huffed. "It is hardly the time to squabble over that now."

"Isn't it? How, precisely, did you come into possession of his key when he should have received it upon his first arrival to the wizarding world?"

Albus waved off his accusations. "I have ensured that Harry's funds and heritage remained safe."

"Oh, I am sure. I am also sure that you ensured the use of his funds and lordship to benefit the greater good."

"Severus, I am surprised at your lack of faith in me."

"Any faith I once had in you, old man, died a quick death in this very chair twenty years ago, and again two years after." He gave the old man a cruel smile. "Did you bind Potter to silence before he gave you the slip? I wonder, Albus, if you are not more concerned about that little oversight than the well-being of your boy weapon." He gave a sharp laugh. "Of course, that won't matter much in a few weeks, when the death of your magic renders the vows you forced me to take null and void, now will it?"

Albus raised an eyebrow. "And the immortality of the binder?"

Severus shrugged. "Is a phoenix truly immortal, Albus? I seem to recall standing witness to several death cycles over the years, right here in this office."

Albus faltered slightly. "And rebirth cycles. You will keep your secrets, whether you wish to or not."

Fawkes gave a low trill that, if Severus spoke avian, he imagined would contain several colorful phrases.

Severus gave the sparkling bird a searching look. "Will I, old man? It seems your familiar is rather displeased at being used as a tool now that your true motives behind forcing me into silence have become quite clear. I wonder, Albus, if he will continue to hold me to those vows after your death whether he is truly immortal or not."

Fawkes' chirrup and apologetic trill at Severus caused the old man's eyelid to twitch.

Albus' smile held an edge of steel. "You may have a point." He sat and sipped his tea. "But then, I do wonder whether anyone will believe the word of a death eater."

"Perhaps, perhaps not, but then, if Potter is truly the saint you have sung the praises of all these years, he might." Severus smiled just as coldly. "And I wonder, Albus, how many will believe their pet hero and boy saviour, assuming any of us live long enough for it to matter."

Albus paled. "Harry should not see—"

"What a monster his father was? I fear it is too late for that, Albus, and he already begins to doubt the tales of heroism and glory you have woven so carefully around James Potter's miserable hide.
Else, I daresay he would have confided in you long before this time last night, when it is clear he must have used the chaos of another of your trite social events to escape." Severus moved to the door. "Perhaps, old man, your lies and manipulations are not so foolproof as you believed, whether I ever have the chance to reveal the truth of you or not."

Fawkes gave a triumphant chirrup, and Albus slumped into his chair with a weary sigh.

"You may be right, Severus. I do not know. What I do know is this: if you do reveal the truth, an innocent life will be destroyed regardless of my intent."

"I am not so sure of that, old man. Lupin is not so friendless as he once was, and having the recommendation of the public's golden boy will surely aid him in winning their support. That said, an innocent life was destroyed in this office twenty years ago. Where was your concern then?"

Albus rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Find Harry, Severus. Without him, none of us shall live long enough to see if your threats are idle or not."

Severus jerked his head in a nod and slammed the door on his way out.

His mind reeled all the way to the gates. So all this time, Albus had been stringing Potter along as much as he had done Severus. To be denied his fortune… could it be that Potter wasn't the spoiled brat Severus had always believed him to be?

Images of a dark, lonely cupboard, tatty denims ten sizes too large, and scrawny, scarred ribs flayed his mind, but another memory superimposed them and drowned all semblance of sympathy.

"You didn't think I really cared, did you? Poor Snivellus, so desperate for a—"

"No!" Severus' sharp cry would have startled the life from his observers, had there been anyone within earshot. "No. I… I was not…"

He leaned against the gates, panting like a racehorse despite the health of his body and the measured pace of his usual stride. No. He would never forget what the last time he had trusted a Potter had cost him.

Albus had seen to that.

With a deep breath, Severus Occluded all feelings for Potter away, save only the need to locate the brat, and began his search. Potter had to have bypassed the wards somehow. If he could work out how, he would be that much closer to finding the little fool before his own stupidity did him in.

He told himself he did it for the sake of the war and for no other reason, and yet, when he came upon the tracking spell that Albus had woven into the gates and the front wall of the school, he dismantled it. He could think of no excuse for his rare bout of charity, either, beyond a small measure of concern for the boy's welfare.

Well, that was acceptable. He was no monster, unlike James Potter.

Besides, sticking it to Albus was reason enough
Too Close

Chapter Summary

Long chapter, but there wasn't a great place to break as all the sections are related.

Chapter 12

Too Close

Twelve days after the disappearance of Potter et al, Severus had to concede defeat. He had expected to find the boy's magical trail within a day or two and drag him back to Hogwarts, kicking and screaming, preferably. Instead, Severus had searched every bloody inch of the school and grounds, and could only conclude that Potter, Weasley, and Granger had fallen off the face of the earth.

How the bloody hell had they done it? Even house elves left apparition trails if one knew where to look, and thanks to his friendship with Hippa over the years, Severus did. He had even asked her to help him find them, and she had come back pulling her ears and beating her head on the ground, unsuccessful. He had been quick to relieve her of the order so she would cease harming herself and treated her injuries with care, but holy fuck! How the hell had Potter hidden himself so well, not even a house elf could find him?

Severus had exhausted all his resources he had, and as the days crept by without a whisper of their whereabouts, the sense that he would never find them until they wanted him to grew stronger and stronger. And that left everyone in dire trouble, perhaps Severus most of all.

He had known Potter would have little choice but to fall off the map after Riddle took over, but this independent run for the hills left Severus shaken. Had he truly frightened the boy so badly? Was it his fault Potter had left the wizarding world behind and taken his friends with him?

No. Some strange sense within him warned him that stronger forces than simple fear of an arguably abusive professor were at work here. Potter had faced worse before and never flinched.

Like someone else Severus knew.

Severus stared in the mirror, tracing the dark circles under his eyes and the sheen on his unwashed hair. The hooked nose and pursed lips, perpetually pulled into a scowl.

He had once looked so different. Hair shiny like the wing of a raven rather than the muck at the bottom of a cauldron. Complexion clear and pale as the moon rather than sallow and tired. Expression strong and defiant against his detractors and bullies rather than twisted in bitter loathing and suppressed rage.

He opened his mouth and grimaced. Gods, how foul. His teeth hadn't been straight since Black had pummeled his face into a near pulp in sixth year, but they had once been white. His nose had healed badly, too, but Severus had wanted it that way. He had let it all go on purpose, hoping his
undesirable features would make his tormentors leave him alone.

It hadn't worked, but Severus had never healed his appearance after their deaths. He had never recovered enough to try. They had shattered his strong spirit and crushed everything vital within him, but once, he had been so much more than this hollow shell of a man.

Severus recognized that spirit within the boy, the same spirit that had once drawn a brave little Gryffindor witch to befriend him, the same spirit that had made him a target of those lacking mettle of their own, the same spirit that still forced him to get up and face the day when he would rather stop fighting altogether. His fighting days would come to an end, soon, but before he fell into the silent embrace of death, he had a mission.

Harry wouldn't have run from Hogwarts, especially not with his friends in tow, because of Severus' attack. Frightening as it must have been, the boy was made of sterner stuff than that, and Merlin knew Granger wouldn't have left school for anything less than a life-or-death emergency.

What the hell had terrified them so badly?

And what was Severus supposed to do now?

With a shudder, he pushed away from the sink. He hadn't any answers, but he knew he wouldn't find them anytime soon, and failing to report that to the dark lord would see him dead long before his time.

No. He couldn't jeopardise his role now, not with Potter missing and Albus mere weeks from a horrific death. He would have to face the dark lord's inevitable wrath tonight so he lived to fight another day.

But fuck, he wasn't looking forward to it.

He dragged on his death eater robes and steeled himself for the horrors to come. His gut churned and cold sweat prickled his forehead. Ice pooled in his chest and the small of his back ached. His hands trembled around his buttons as he fastened his collar, but he did not balk. With a deep breath, he poured his power and emotional turmoil into his mental shields, and slowly, his panic stilled.

The silence and coldness of hard occlumency formed a shield around his treacherous thoughts and flailing spirit.

He would survive the pain. He always had.

Still, perhaps he would do well to take preventative measures.

"Hippa?"

The little elf appeared. Her ears drooped at the sight of his robes.

"Master Severus is going to see the dark one tonight?"

Severus nodded. "And my news is not good. I fear I may need your help desperately when I return. You remember the procedure?"

"Yes, master. I am not to retrieve Mistress Poppy unless you is about to die. I am to retrieve your emergency potions kit and feed you blood replenisher, nerve regeneration draught, level five pain reliever, and a level three healing draught if you is conscious, level four if you is delirious, and level five if you is unconscious. Then I am to treat your wounds, clean you, dress you, and watch over you while you is healing. Hippa is to let the headmaster know you is back and in no condition
to answer his questions once you is being stable. Then you is telling me what to do next when you is waking up."

Severus rubbed her head. "Well done. Will you watch for my portkey tonight, Hippa?"

"Yes, Master Severus. Hippa is being honoured to help you."

"Thank you."

Once her usual emotional response to his kindness had quieted, Severus summoned his mask and his courage, bid Hippa goodbye, and flooed into Albus' office. The old man sat at his desk, doing paperwork with his non-dominant hand. He looked up when Severus appeared and frowned.

"You still have had no luck, Severus?"

Severus ignored both the obvious question and falsely civil tone.

"I must report Potter's disappearance to the dark lord, Albus. There is no trace of him and nothing to follow. I do not imagine his response to such disappointing news will be favourable, so do refrain from interrogating me for at least one day."

Albus laid his quill aside with a shaking hand. "You have tried every method to find him?"

Severus sneered. "Every method that will leave your pet scapegoat free of an immediate one-way trip to Azkaban, at least until you finish the job you started twenty years ago."

Albus paled and rubbed his temples. "What do we do now, Severus? The entire war depends on him."

"That, Albus, is a problem for which you have only yourself to blame. And neither is it my job to tell you. I am your spy and your defence professor, not your confidant, and I do not accept either task for your benefit."

With that, Severus put on his mask and used his dark portkey to travel to the current hideout of the dark lord.

With a deep breath, he tightened his shields and prepared himself to face his other master.

Ten nights after leaving Hogwarts, Harry woke in agony. His chest felt as though someone had driven a Hagrid-sized fist through it and left him to bleed. He called for Dobby in a weak voice, and Dobby retrieved Winky.

Winky set her hand on Harry's chest and winced. "I is feeling your pain, master, but I cannot tell what is causing it. Winky is not knowing what to do."

Harry gasped out, "Hermione. Get 'Mione."

Winky vanished, and a moment later, Hermione sprinted into the room, Ron hot on her heels.

"Harry? Merlin! You look awful."

He glared through a surge of anguish. "Thanks for… pointing that out. I had… no idea."

Hermione huffed. "Well, you're obviously not dying if you're well enough to snark like that." But she dashed to his side anyway. "Winky said your chest hurts. Where? How?"
Harry described it as best as he could, but she was still frowning in confusion when he finished.

"I… I've never heard of anything like that. Still…." She sat beside him and pressed two fingers into the side of his throat. Harry knew enough about muggle medicine to stay still and quiet, but Ron didn't.

"Oi, 'Mione, what are you doing?"

"Trying to take his pulse, berk. Sit down and be quiet so I can keep count."

Ron subsided with a bemused glare and settled beside Harry. Hermione moved back after a moment, her face set in a frown.

Ron prompted, "Well?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea. Your pulse is fine, Harry." She laid her hand against his forehead and pursed her lips. "No fever either. How strange." She summoned a general healing potion from the meager supplies she had been able to brew thus far. "Drink."

Harry grimaced and choked down the potion. It did nothing for his pain. Nor did his tears help, when he forced a few in hopes of making the pain stop.

"I… I just don't know what else to do," Hermione half-wailed. "I've never heard of anything like it."

"I have," Ron said in a quiet voice. "It's magical, not physical."

Dobby nodded. "Dobby is thinking Master Ron is right."

Hermione winced. "Then… what?"

Ron shook his head grimly. "There isn't anything we can do from here. We have no way of working out the cause and no way of healing it even if we could. All we can do is wait it out."

Harry rubbed his chest, frowning. "Actually, it feels a bit better now."

Hermione sat and took Harry's hands. "We'll just stay with you then, until it's gone."

"Dobby is staying with his family, too." The elf crawled up and settled beside Hermione.

"Winky, too!" She climbed up beside Ron.

Harry gave them all a weak smile. "Thanks, you lot. I… it helps to know I'm not alone."

Hermione squeezed his hand. "Never again, okay?"

Harry blinked hard. "Yeah."

Ron patted Harry's wrist. "Well, since we're going to be here a while, would you summon my exploding snap cards and conjure a tray for us, 'Mione?"

She sniffled and gave him a slight smile. "Of course."

They played exploding snap for a while, and when they tired of that, Hermione summoned a deck of Muggle cards and taught them to play spades. The elves played the fourth position as a team and brought them snacks and drinks between hands. Ron entertained them all with stories of the twins'
pranks, and in this manner, they spent the night together.

Harry's pain slowly subsided, and by dawn, the last wave throbbed once and vanished. "Oh!" He rubbed his chest and sighed. "Oh, that's good. I think whatever it was is over, everyone. The pain is completely gone."

Hermione let slip a relieved sigh. "Thank Merlin. You terrified me."

"Not just you," Ron said with a shiver.

"Dobby is glad you are feeling better."

Winky nodded enthusiastically.

Harry grinned. "Thanks. All of you."

Ron squeezed his shoulder. "All part of a good sidekick's job."

Winky wrinkled her nose. "What is a sidekick?"

Ron laughed. "Well, Winky, it's like this….

Two days later, Harry had almost forgotten the pain of that night, but not the hours his friends had spent watching over him. The experience had bonded them all closer together.

Harry, working on his knees to prepare the back garden for spring, smiled and gripped another dead weed. The assurance of their loyalty and love gave him surcease amid the turmoil his life had become. His mate hated him and he couldn't show his face in public, but he had a family now. It gave him hope, at least, that his days mightn't be spent in lonely solitude after all.

By then, Hogwarts and the wizarding world as a whole was in an uproar concerning their disappearance, but the important people all knew they were safe. Well, Hermione had, to the boys' chagrin, Obliviated her parents and sent them packing to Australia, but the Weasleys had been notified of their situation.

Merlin, Harry's ears were still ringing from that conversation.

Still, it was over now. It had taken several rounds with a Molly howler to get the Weasley matriarch to see reason, and even then, Ron had had to send pictures of the fact that Hermione and the boys had separate rooms and promise to write every week, but she had finally relented. Harry had sent Molly a new owl as a peace offering so they could keep in touch without killing her beloved Errol, and the two letters they had sent thus far had quieted her ire, much to everyone's relief.

Harry looked up at the sound of approaching wings and winced at the sight of a fat brown barn owl flying his way. Chloe. Molly wasn't due to write them for three more days. Maybe she hadn't been as appeased as Harry thought.

He stood and wiped his dirty hands on his denims. He had kept a few of his old outfits for garden work, but Winky had insisted on making new ones instead. Harry had only convinced her to leave off using the new fabric by saying he didn't want to ruin it out in the dirt. He had cut all his old denims and tees down the seams for her, turning "clothes" into "scrap fabric," and so Winky had been safe to take them in and tailor them to his slim frame.
He had to admit, the workmanship was far superior to anything a human might have managed. Even with the tatty fabric as a base, he had never owned a more comfortable outfit. House elves knew their stuff as far as clothing went, for sure.

Harry set his weeder tool down and brushed off the knees of his denims. Garden work, it seemed, was one area house elves didn't have much skill, but he enjoyed working in the dirt. He thanked his many miserable days as a virtual child slave for teaching him plenty of useful household skills, if nothing else. Maybe he knew nothing of sewing or researching dark artefacts and legendary beings, but he could clean the house alongside the elves, prepare and maintain a garden and orchard, and use its bounty to supplement his cooking. He was content to leave the rest to the others.

Ron, who had learned to cook from his mum, helped with feeding them, too, and often worked in the dirt beside Harry. Those hours spent weeding and cutting back overgrowth together had bonded them as closer brothers, too.

Hermione didn't know how to garden or cook, but she helped keep the house clean and spent the time the others worked on the chores she couldn't with her nose buried in one of the books from the Potter vault. Harry reckoned she would have the entire library read by spring, which was good, as they needed her help to find the horcruxes.

It wasn't as if he could expect Dumbledore to help them, after all.

They had a comfortable life going there, with everyone pitching in as they were able. Harry had never been so content despite his many troubles. He truly hoped Molly wasn't about to shatter this little chunk of happiness they had carved out for themselves. Not that she could, but he could do without another rant.

Chloe landed on Harry's shoulder and held out her leg, which had a letter—a plain one, not a howler—and a miniaturised picnic basket attached. Harry opened his mouth to call for Ron when he realised the letter had his own name on it. Probably not a rant then.

"Huh. Wonder what she wants." Harry patted Chloe's chest. "Thanks, girl. Go help yourself to some food and rest. You know where the roost is."

She nuzzled his hair affectionately and flew off towards the back of the house. Harry opened the letter as he made his way back to the house, tray of gardening tools floating behind him. He was too bloody cold out here anyway, and it was nearly time for lunch.

Harry, dear, I think I must apologise for the howlers I sent you earlier. There was an Order meeting last night, and now I'm inclined to agree with you that you're better off where no one can get to you save those who care.

Severus had been summoned the night before the meeting, and it seems that madman took his inability to fulfil this week's insanity out on his hide. He's okay now, don't you worry, but what he had to say, well, it convinced me that the three of you were smart to leave Hogwarts when you did. I did not let on that I know you are safe for your sake, as I'm no longer certain of whom to trust.

Dear gods. Molly, as usual, wanted to shield their innocent ears from the truth, but she had let enough slip for Harry to fill in the pieces.
Voldemort, apparently, had some new dastardly plan to kidnap and kill Harry. One that he had expected Snape to carry out, and maybe Malfoy. One that probably employed the powers of mind mages. As he couldn't possibly complete said plan with Harry missing, Voldemort must have tortured Snape to the point of being in mortal danger.

And Harry had felt it.

Gods. He had come so close, and he hadn't even known. The idea that his life might just wink out with no warning left him cold.

Harry shuddered and took a few deep breaths. Snape was fine. He had managed to talk himself out of trouble this time, and he could do it again. Snape was a survivor if nothing else. Harry could take some comfort in that.

What on earth had Riddle wanted Snape and Malfoy to do anyway? Harry had no idea, but if it was bad enough to convince Molly Weasley to stop hounding them about leaving Hogwarts, then he didn't want to know.

With another shudder, he returned to his letter.

*I managed to get my hands on a sample lesson plan for all of the sixth year core classwork, and I'll send you assignments each week so you are, at least, learning something until it's safe to return. I'm still trying to find plans for your electives, but until then, I can at least help you with your core NEWTs.*

*Don't neglect them, children. Whether you receive your education at home or at Hogwarts, you'll need at least a good foundation in the core subjects to find jobs later in life. I'm happy to help you as much as I can, but please don't let the effort I'm putting in for you go to waste.*

*I thought you might be missing good Hogwarts food, so I've sent you several meals to keep you going. They're all under preservation charms—just peel back the cling film when you're ready for them, and they'll be hot and fresh again.*

*Do write again soon, and give the others my love, and yourself as well.*

*Love,*

*Molly*

*P.S. You can call me 'Mum' if you feel comfortable with it, dear. You may as well be one of my own anyway. I assure you, I don't mind.*

Harry folded the letter with a smile. Mum. Well, he could definitely use one, and Molly was as close as he had ever had to a mother. Perhaps he would try it out, if Ron didn't mind.

And he certainly wouldn't complain about having some of Molly's cooking to share about. She always made enough to feed an army, too, so his elves should be able to eat with them, if they liked. The effort to help them stay atop their classes was appreciated, too. Hermione would be
thrilled.

Harry called, "Oi, everyone. Molly sent us a letter and food."

Dobby was busy keeping Snape and Dumbledore off their scent, so he didn't come, but Winky stepped out of her new sewing room and into the kitchen, ears folded back in a display of worry.

"I is being making lunch soon."

Ron popped out of the study, Hermione in tow. "That's all right, Winky. If you had plans for lunch, we can still eat that and have one of Mum's meals for dinner. Wouldn't want all your effort to go to waste."

Winky beamed. "Thank you, Master Ron."

He patted her shoulder and slid into the chair closest to Harry. "What did she send, mate? And is there enough for everyone?"

Harry chuckled. "I'm sure. She always makes too much. I don't know what's in here yet, so let's have a look." He resized the basket and took the dishes out one by one. "Don't open them until we're ready to eat. It'll break the stasis charms."

"All right." Ron examined each one as Harry passed them over. "Looks like lasagne—ooh. Can't wait for that. Mum's is the best. Then we've got meat pies and mash, shepherd's pie and cottage pie, scrambled eggs and rashers, porridge and fruit salad, spaghetti and meatballs and salad, and a giant basket apiece of homemade bread, biscuits, rolls, and scones of all kinds. Oh, and a basket of fruit. Merlin, Mum. Didn't want us to go hungry, did she?"

Harry stared at the feast in awe. "How the bloody hell did she do all this in one day?"

Hermione frowned. "She must have used magic to speed the cooking time, but what do you mean in one day? It's been four since she last wrote."

Harry gave them a grim look and passed the letter around. Winky nearly cried when Ron gave it to her after he had finished.

"So, that episode the other night happened because Snape was so injured," said an ashen Ron.

Hermione gasped and put her hand over her mouth. "Oh my God. We almost lost you, Harry, and none of us even knew!"

"I know. It's terrifying." Harry shuddered and sank into the chair nearest him. "We need to do something to protect him. I wonder if I should take Kreacher off Malfoy and put him on Snape instead."

"We won't know what Malfoy's up to if you do," said Ron, "but if the alternative is you dying for no apparent reason... yeah, do it. To hell with Malfoy. You're more important."

"Yeah."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest and shivered. "I think you're right. We'll all be dead if I die."

Ron conjured a newspaper and smacked Harry across the head with it. "I didn't mean that, you prat. You're our brother. We'd all be lost without you. Winky, too."

Harry realised Winky was crying and gave her a hug. "Hey, it's okay. We'll get Kreacher to keep
him safe. I'll be all right."
"Winky is not wanting to lose her family. I is just finding you!"

Harry patted her back and conjured a handkerchief to mop up her face. "You won't. We'll protect him so I stay safe, okay?"

Winky nodded and hugged Harry's neck. "You is being the best family I is ever having."

"We try." Harry squeezed her shoulder. "Now, buck up and help us put up all this food, please. It's all right."

"I'll do that," Hermione said with a wince. "You don't have to, Winky."

Harry sighed. Ron pinched the bridge of his nose. Winky huffed and started levitating dishes into the pantry and cold box with or without Hermione's approval.

"Anyway," said Ron, "I reckon you should go ahead and put Kreacher on Snape now, Harry. Before some other catastrophe happens."

Hermione glared at him.

"Would you rather watch me burn to death on my own magic?" Harry's voice came out cold as steel.

Really, her stubbornness about this spew shite was getting old. If she paid any attention at all, she would know that Winky was free. She was far happier than Harry had ever seen her. Why Hermione thought it best for Winky's welfare to return her to the kind of depression that saw her nearly drink herself to death mystified him.

Hermione flinched. "O-of course not. It's just—"

"Do you have a better idea?"

She opened her mouth and closed it several times, then lowered her head in defeat. "No."

"Then if you don't want me to die, I suggest you get over your hangups about the elves. It's insulting, the way you're acting like I'm a slave driver by trying to make them happy."

She sniffled. "Not Kreacher."

"Kreacher is a damned treacherous little shite. I don't trust him here, for good reason."

"But you trust him with your life?"

Harry paused. That was a valid point.

"Touché. I'll ask if he wants to stay then, but really, stop whinging about the elf bonds and open your eyes. Yes, some of them are mistreated, but these elves aren't, and you're insulting them by acting like they are."

"Harry's right, Hermione," said Ron with a sigh. "You're helping the elves from the wrong place. The issue isn't the elf bonds, it's the humans who abuse it. Go after them already."

"But you two keep telling them what to do! And they don't have the freedom to refuse!"
Harry met Winky's eyes. "I told you to speak up if there's ever a problem with your orders, didn't I? That would also give you the right to refuse if you need to, for any reason."

Winky put her hands on her hips and glared at Hermione. "You did, Master Harry. Winky is remembering, but you is never asking me to do things I is not already wanting to do."

Hermione deflated with a sigh. "Oh all right. Maybe I am going about this the wrong way. I only seem to be making everyone angry as it is."

"Because you're not paying attention to what the elves need, Hermione," said Ron. "You need to sit down and listen to them if you want a chance in hell of helping them."

Hermione winced. "I… Merlin. You really think I haven't been listening?"

"Yes," said Harry, Winky, and Ron at once.

Hermione frowned and folded herself into a chair. "Oh. Well, I'm sorry then. That's not what I meant to do. I… I'll try to listen better, Winky."

"Winky is believing that when she sees it."

Harry and Ron snorted.

Hermione blinked. "You… you can say those things without hurting yourself?"

Winky scowled and crossed her arms. "Master Harry is giving me permission to say what I think, even if it is rude."

Hermione flinched. "Oh. I really have been thick about this whole situation, haven't I?"

"The thickest." Ron rubbed her hair and smiled. "But we know why, so you're forgiven. Just try to let up now, please?"

"Yes, yes, I promise."

"Thank Merlin." Harry summoned Kreacher and knelt before him. "Kreacher, Hermione pointed out something to me that I think I haven't been fair to you about. Would you like to stay here instead of Grimmauld Place?"

Kreacher scowled. "I is staying in my home."

"Fair enough, though we do have nice elf quarters here and a giant pile of fabric to make into clothes for us and yourself, if you like that sort of thing."

Kreacher's ears fanned back and his eyes widened. "Master Harry is letting Kreacher make his clothes?"

"If Winky doesn't mind sharing, why not? Quick as Ron and I run through them, I'm sure she could use the help."

"Winky is sharing!" She twirled her lacy, floral-print skirt. "Look what I is making. It is being so long since Winky has had things to sew with. Not since my last mistress died…...."

"You can sew as much as you want." Harry cocked his head in thought. "Actually, if you run out of things to make for us, maybe you could make some to sell, if that wouldn't be offensive. We could bring in some income that way and use it to buy food and more fabric for you."
Winky's eyes went wide and filled with tears. "You... you is letting Winky help the household?"

"Well, of course. That's what a family does, isn't it? We work together."

Winky rushed Harry's legs and hugged him tight. "Thank you!" By the rush of grateful babbling and tears by his knees, he gathered his little idea had been a hit. And by the look of longing in Kreacher's eyes, she wasn't the only one interested.

"Sure you want to stay all alone in Grimmauld Place, Kreacher?"

Kreacher hesitated. "Kreacher is loyal to the house of Black."

Harry smirked. "Welcome to it. I'm a Black through my great-grandmother, Dorea. Just found that out when we checked out my vault. I reckon she was probably blasted off of that ruddy family tree at Grimmauld for marrying a Potter, but that doesn't change her blood. Nor mine. So how about it?"

Kreacher's eyes widened. "Master Potter is a Black? A blood Black?"

"Yep."

Kreacher's ears drooped. "You is wanting Kreacher here? You is letting Kreacher help make clothes?"

Harry grinned. "Sure, much as we can sell."

"It's not like any of us can show our faces out there," said Ron. "If you elves can help us run an owl order boutique, I reckon we'd be able to break even rather than draining Harry dry."

Hermione said hesitantly, "This is something you want to do, right? Not something you're being forced into?"

The elves glared.

"We is wanting to make clothes," said Kreacher. "It is in our blood."

"If it is helping our family," said Winky, "we is happy to make them to sell. It is like the way it used to be...."

Harry frowned. "Winky?"

She shook herself. "Is nothing. We is wanting to help, Miss Fluffy. No one is twisting our ears."

She sighed. "Then... I'll help make the catalogues. Your mum could hand them out for us to get clients, Ron."

"And I'll handle the business part," said Harry with a grin. "Thanks, 'Mione."

She smiled back. "I just wanted them to be happy."

Winky huffed. "Winky is happy."

"Yes, I'm starting to see that. Well, tell me what kinds of clothing you two would like to make, and I'll work up a design for our catalogues."

"Include an eclectic section for Dobby," said Ron. "Luna would love it."
Hermione chuckled. "All right."

"Does that mean you're staying, Kreacher?" Harry gave the elf a hesitant smile. If this would secure his loyalty, it would be good for everyone.

Kreacher shuffled from foot to foot, then relented with a sigh. "Yes, Master Harry. Kreacher is staying with you."

"Brilliant. Then let's get you settled, and we'll get started."

Kreacher smiled.
Chapter Summary

So, the dr cut my pain medication in half with no warning or tapering. For the next few weeks, and probably until I can find a new doctor, I'm going to be very sick and in terrible pain, a lot of which affects my hands. It's also difficult to concentrate once my pain level starts approaching a 7/10 or so, and I'm there. So I'm going to do my best, but please be patient if I'm late on an update or my editing isn't the best. It's hard to remember things at this level of ouch.

Chapter 13

Locking in a Horcrux

A week later, the elves were sitting in the living room, working on clothes for their family and the budding business, while Harry and his friends debated horcruxes on the sofa.

"One of the memories Dumbledick showed me had this infatuated old woman in it." Harry sipped his peppermint tea and tried to recall the details. "Riddle was still really young, just out of Hogwarts, I think. His eyes had a glint of red in them, so I think he had already made one horcrux by that point."


"Yeah. He was a bully and a thief in the first memory, so it doesn't surprise me." Harry paused, gut twisting at a sudden flash of another memory he had seen.

His dad and Sirius hadn't been so far off, had they?

He swallowed against a lump in his throat and went on. "A-anyway, this old lady had a locket and a cup."

Kreacher, who was home while Snape worked on marking in the safety of his rooms, gasped and fixed huge eyes on Harry.

"Er… you okay, Kreacher?"

"Kreacher is… listening."

Harry frowned. "You can't tell this to anyone. Please. We'll all be killed and the war will never end."

His face twisted as if in pain, but it vanished the next instant. "Kreacher has already promised to keep this secret."

"Oh. Right, I suppose I did order you to keep your communication within the family." Harry shook his head. "Anyway, she had a locket and a cup. The locket of Slytherin and Hufflepuff's cup. I'm
positive the locket is a horcrux—he looked positively murderous when he saw it—but I'm not positive about the cup. Do you think he would have taken them both or just the locket?"

Hermione rubbed her necklace across her lips. "You know, it makes me think of these crime dramas Mum watches. Granted, not everything in them is close to accurate, but they do get some things right. And one thing I remember is that a lot of serial killers like to collect trophies. Sentimental things to mark their kills, so to speak."

Ron wrinkled his nose and curled his lip. "Lovely."

"Yes." Hermione shuddered. "It's an awful thing to think about, but considering the psychology of a serial killer, and the value of Hogwarts to this serial killer, I think it's highly unlikely he left it behind. That said, we should focus on the horcruxes we know of for certain."

"The locket." Harry frowned and ruffled his hair. "I haven't the foggiest idea of where it might be. The memories didn't give me any clues as to what happened after he stole the locket and probably the cup, only that he most likely did. I have no idea where to look."

"Kreacher knows."

Harry jumped up. "What? You do? Where is it?"

Kreacher hesitated. "Kreacher will be telling you, only… what is master going to do with it?"

"Destroy it, as soon as we work out how."

Kreacher's eyes filled. "Then Kreacher is being glad to pass on Master Regulus' last task onto you."

"Regulus?" Harry sat cross-legged in front of the elf, a friend piled in on either side and Winky in his lap. "Okay, Kreacher. Tell us what you know."

Harry, glamoured to be invisible and inaudible to anyone in the area except Mundungus Fletcher, made his way down Knockturn Alley and pretended not to see the odd wares and odder vendors lining both sides of the street. His friends flanked both sides, glamoured in a similar fashion. The glow of the setting sun silhouetted Harry's back and gave him a distinct advantage as they approached the dirty thief selling stolen wares on the corner of Knockturn and Hobbledon Street.

"Cauldrons, I got all kinds. Watches, knives, silver—Fletch you a good price!"

"Urgh," said Hermione. "Really, Dung. Couldn't you come up with a better pitch than that?"

Ron wrinkled his nose. "By the smell of him, I'd say he's doing good to be upright."

"The last part is debatable," said Harry.

Mundungus blinked. "What… wait. What're you lot doing here? Don't you know the whole… er… everyone's lookin' for ya?"

Harry snorted. "Let 'em. They'll be looking for a while yet."

"What makes you say that? I could just call 'em and—"

"And they would look right through us and tell you that you've been hitting the sauce too much," said Ron with a shrug. "Or maybe you haven't noticed that no one seems to care that the three missing heroes of the Light are strolling around Knocturn?"
Mundungus looked around and gulped. "Er… all right. So what're ya doin' here then?"

"Did I hear you say you're selling silver?" Harry conjured a throwing knife and dangled it between his fingers. It was for show, mostly, but it got Mundungus' attention. "That silver wouldn't happen to have the Black family crest on it, now would it?"

Mundungus turned as if he would make a run for it, but Kreacher froze him to the spot before he could take a step.

"Well done, Kreacher." Harry gave Mundungus a feral grin. "They're very powerful, house elves. People tend to overlook them, but I've learned one can't have too many friends in life. Right, Kreacher?"

Kreacher gave him a toothy grin. "Yes, master."

Harry pocketed his knife and pulled out his wand instead. "Here's how this is going to work, Dung. You're going to hand over everything you stole from Grimmauld Place to Kreacher—and I do mean everything—and tell no one that you saw us, and maybe I might not turn you inside out right here in the middle of the street. I reckon those hags over ther could make good use of your insides, and at a bargain, since they're all half pickled already. So?"

Kreacher snapped, and Mundungus could move his arms again. He piled up some silver in front of the elf.

"There. Take it."

Ron raised an eyebrow? "That's everything you stole from Grimmauld?"

Mundungus scowled and piled on a pocket watch and a few small items of jewellery. "There. That's all I've got. Now get lost."

Harry rubbed his chin. "I don't know, Dung. I don't think I trust you. How about you, Kreacher?"

Kreacher scowled. "I is not trusting the filthy dung thief either, master."

"Well, I guess that settles it, then. Kreacher, please summon every Black family item off of this pathetic excuse for a human being."

A veritable mountain of jewellery, chalices, and gods knew what else formed in front of them. Kreacher summoned the locket from the pile and held it out it to Harry.

"You will finish Master Regulus' task?"

Harry bowed his head. "On my honour."

Kreacher sniffled and let the locket fall into into a magically-sealed pouch at Harry's waist. Harry had had the elves make it to protect them from horcruxes. His own blood in the seal worked as proof against their evil.

"There you are, Kreacher. If you'll investigate that pile and give me a report of how much is missing, I'll make sure to take it out of his hide." Harry gave him a dark smile. "Or do you reckon I should just let the goblins have a go at him?"

"Goblins, Master Harry," said Kreacher with a devious grin. "They is much nastier in revenge."

Mundungus coughed. "N-no need for that. We can just let bygones be bygones, right?"
Harry cocked his head. "I might have given you a break, if your thievery hadn't almost cost us the entire goddamn war and set dementors on me and my cousin. Still, I suppose I could let it go… if you promise not to mention ever meeting us here today."

"I promise! Mum's the word."

"Hmm."

"Honest! You believe me, don't you?"

"Oh, we believe you," said a grinning Ron, "but she's the one you've got to watch out for."

"Er…."

Hermione whipped out her wand quicker than lightning. "Obliviate! You were mugged on the street. Too much alcohol. You didn't see their faces. You never saw us and have no idea what happened to the Black items. You're just on your way to the pub for a drink to drown your sorrows."

"Right. The… pub."

Mundungus tottered away.

"Merlin, remind me not to hack you off, 'Mione," said Ron with a grin.

"Harry was rather intimidating, too." Hermione chuckled. "I thought Dung would wet himself when you pulled out your knife."

Harry grinned. "Gift from Sirius. It seemed appropriate."

"It worked." Ron patted Kreacher's shoulder. "Well done, mate. You got us the locket back. I bet Regulus would be dead chuffed if he could see you now."

Kreacher sobbed and buried his face in Ron's knees. "Kreacher hopes so, Master Ron."

"I know so," said Harry. "Now, let's get out of here before we draw a crowd, glamours or no."

Kreacher snapped his fingers, and they vanished, along with the giant pile of Black heirlooms.
Bedtime Stories

Chapter Summary

A strange truth comes to light.

Chapter 14

Bedtime Stories

They celebrated Ron's birthday at the cottage with a giant cake decorated to look like the quidditch pitch. Harry had helped Winky make the spun sugar goalposts and fondant snitch, and he couldn't help but puff out his chest a bit as he watched the enchanted golden ball zoom about.

Ron's jaw nearly dropped off his face at the sight of it. "Cor blimey! You made this, Winky? This is wicked!"

Winky beamed. "Master Harry helped."

"A bit," Harry deflected. "Most of this baby is all Winky's doing. It's bloody brilliant, isn't it?"

Hermione smiled. "Well, I'm not one for quidditch, but even I have to admit this is positively lovely work. Well done, Winky, Harry."

"Maybe we should run an owl order bakery, too," said Ron with a laugh.

Harry groaned. "No thank you. Setting up one business incognito is difficult enough." He pulled out a chair for Winky and pushed her seat in for her. "Though I will say it's coming along. Goldclaw is worth his weight in… well, gold."

Ron snickered. "We should tell him that next time you meet."

"Please don't," said Hermione and Harry at once.

Ron chuckled. "Oi, give a man some credit. I'm not that stupid."

Harry chuckled. "Yes, well, since it's your birthday, I'll let that slide."

"Prat!"

Harry laughed. "All right, all right. Cake for the birthday boy first." He paused, mirth gone. "Ron, I'm really sorry. This… we should have been able to spend your coming of age at home. Your family should be here."

Ron nudged his arm. "Don't be a ponce. My family is here. And, well, if we had stayed at school, I'd not have had a party at all. So really, this is just fine with me. 'Sides, Mum and Dad sent me Uncle Gideon's pocketwatch for my coming of age gift with Chloe. I'm fine, you git. Other than being hungry, so cut that piece of art already. I just know it tastes as good as it looks."
Harry grinned. "All right. I guess that's fair."

"Wait!" Hermione fumbled a camera out of her pocket. "Pictures first, so we can send some to your mum."

"She'll be jealous like mad when she sees that cake," said Ron with a laugh.

"She'll send me a seven-tier snitch cake for mine," said Harry with a snort. "See if she doesn't."

"Ha ha, boys." Hermione aimed her camera. "Smile!"

Harry didn't have any trouble conjuring a smile, despite the lingering feeling that something was missing. Much as he would have loved to share this moment with a mate of his own, Snape would never care for him. Or even tolerate him. The thought ached, sometimes, but Harry just pushed it away and took the camera over from Hermione.

"Give the birthday boy a good snog for me. He won't let me have one, so you may as well give him a go."

Hermione laughed, then gave Ron a shy smile. "Do you… um… should I…?"

Ron's entire face went red. "Y-yeah."

Hermione tentatively brushed their lips together, and Harry was happy to have caught their first kiss on film.

Even if he would never know that joy himself.

After cake and presents, everyone lounged about the living room, including all three elves. Dobby had on Gryffindor colours and a party hat over one ear. He sat in a conjured beanbag chair by the fire and kept shooting Winky dazed looks.

Harry couldn't blame him. Winky looked as ravishing as a house elf could in her long, one-shoulder red gown with sparkles all over it and little ruby earrings in her ears. She was lovely for her kind, and Harry wondered if Dobby would make a go of it with her one day. He hoped so. He wanted them to be happy.

As Snape was safe in his quarters, Kreacher had joined in, too. He sat cross-legged on a cushion, dressed in one of their new suits. He looked much happier and healthier in it, and the smile on his face held none of the rancour it used to. Securing the locket for Regulus' last task and giving him a home had earned Harry the elf's unswerving devotion.

Thank Merlin, too, because having a house elf who hated him had been a catastrophe waiting to happen.

And Ron's happiness had set his eyes alight. He held Hermione in his lap and gave her besotted grins every few minutes, and her shy smiles shone like the sun.

Harry wasn't jealous. Really. Their happiness thrilled him, and he wished them every joy.

It was just hard to watch them without wishing for a mate of his own. One who didn't hate his existence.

Harry leaned on his knees and remembered his dreams. That night was the first time he had seen Severus' entire face—always Severus inside his head, even if Harry would never have the
opportunity to use his first name outside of it. The sight of Severus' expression, relaxed and open in his pleasure, combined with the image of his body—Merlin, if those dreams could be relied upon, Severus was bloody gorgeous under the robes—had made Harry orgasm instantly, harder than he had ever done in his life. He still felt the relaxing effects of it even now.

And he hated himself for it.

He couldn't control the dreams or stop them, but more and more, Harry felt uncomfortable seeing Severus in sexual situations, even in dreams. The words Snape had thrown at Harry that last day still left a taste of blood and gunpowder in Harry's mouth. It almost sounded like Snape had been—

"Oi, earth to Harry!"

At Ron's call, Harry came out of his thoughts with a jolt.

"Oh. Sorry, mate. Didn't hear you."

"I noticed. What were you thinking about so hard then?"

Harry flushed. "Er… believe it or not, Snape."

Ron grimaced. "Does the mate thing come with… a pull or attraction or something? Unless it's on both sides, that would be really bad news."

Harry shook his head. "I feel about the same way about him as I did when we left. Maybe a bit more, but I don't think there's anything forcing me to feel that way. I guess it's just… I don't know."

He sighed and stared at the ceiling. "It's your birthday, mate. You don't want my fucked up life bringing you down."

Hermione gave Ron a look. He nodded, and they both left his chair to plop down on either side of Harry.

"I'm not any less of your friend today than other days," said Ron. "So what is it?"

"I think I know." Hermione gave him a guilty look. "It's my fault, isn't it? You're lonely for your mate."

Harry nudged her shoulder. "It's no one's fault, 'Mione. I'm happy for you two. I just wish my own fate wasn't so bleak."

Hermione hugged him. "You'll never be alone, okay? Even if it's not the same, we won't leave you alone."

"We is not leaving you alone either." Winky hugged his knees.

Harry blinked hard and hugged them all. "Thanks, you lot. I couldn't ask for better friends."

"Yeah, we know," said Ron, and Harry laughed.

"I wonder what they're thinking," Hermione mused. "Snape and Dumbledore. We've been gone for weeks, and they haven't found so much as a hint. They must know about the Black heirlooms by now, so they must have some idea that we're safe, but none of them can find us. It has to be driving them spare."

"Oh, absolutely," said Ron with a snort. "None of them would guess that house elves are so powerful. Snape's too much of an arsehole and Dumbledore is too full of himself."
Harry gave his elves searching looks. "How did you lot manage to block him? We had no idea what to do."

The elves looked at each other, expressions worried and solemn.

"Dobby will tell Master Harry and his friends...." He shot Hermione a sidelong glance. "But it is a house elf secret. Dobby is trusting you not to use it against us."

Winky and Kreacher nodded.

"You bet, Dobby." Harry patted his shoulder. "You don't have to tell us if you don't want to. I was just curious."

"Dobby thinks we is needing to tell a wizard. A wizard we can trust. There are not many of those."

Harry nodded. "We're listening, then."

Dobby pulled his knees up to his chest. "Is because you asked us to."

Harry glanced at his friends, but they seemed as stumped as he was. "We don't understand, Dobby."

"We is... bound to humans' will. So when you is asking us to do things, our magic is making it work."

Harry frowned, trying to make sense of that, but it was Hermione who explained.

"The slavery thing. I told you they're slaves! You ask them to do something, and their magic warps reality to make it happen whether it's possible or not."

"Merlin. So because Winky is bound to me, her magic made wards no one could get through when I asked her to, because I asked her to?"

"That's about the size of it."

"Damn."

"Yes." She shuddered. "Gods. The damage wizards could do if this was ever made public knowledge. I see why you keep it secret, Dobby, and I promise we will, too. For everyone's sake."

The elves relaxed.

"Winky is relieved to hear that. We is trusting Master Harry and Master Ron, but we would not be telling you if they did not trust you."

Hermione squawked. "But I've been trying to help you all this time! I'm trying to end your slavery so you can cast what magic you want to."

"And that is being the point, Miss Fluffy. You is trying to make us be free. You is still not learning that house elves is not wanting to be free. At least, not as you see it. We is not humans."

Hermione cried. "But I've been trying to listen, like you said, and I'm just trying to help anyway. It... it's not right that you're abused and taken for granted and...."

Winky sighed and took over. "Miss Hermione, we is knowing that, but you is still pitying us for not wanting to be free. You is still wanting us to be likes you think we should, and how is that
different from the wizards who is thinking we should be their slaves?"

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but Harry stopped her.

"She's right, Hermione."

Hermione gave him a heartsick, betrayed look. "How can you say that? You know I'm not….

"No. You're not a bad person. You would never treat a house elf like a slave, but you still don't understand that they can't be freed like humans can be and thrive. No amount of talking and pleading and rationalizing is going to change that. They're not brainwashed slaves, they're a different species. And you still don't seem to get it."

Hermione sniffled and dropped her head. "All I want is for them to be treated fairly."

"We is knowing that, Miss Hermione," said Winky. "Is why we trusted you despite that you is not trusting us very well. You is at least having your heart in the right place, if your head is being nowhere near it."

Hermione sighed and wiped her face. "Okay. I promised I'd listen, and clearly, I'm not doing a good job yet. So how do I make life better for you without forcing you to be what you're not or hurting you? That's all I want here."

"You is needing to stop trying to convince us to be free," said Kreacher. "We is not able to be free. Like Master Harry is needing his mate's magic to keep his own from burning out, we is needing our masters' magic to thrive."

"That is being why I was drinking so much when I was given clothes," said Winky with a shudder. "The pain is driving me to it. If Master Harry had not adopted me when he did, I think I is being dead in another year, maybe."

Hermione grimaced. "No wonder the other elves were terrified of me then, if being… abandoned kills you slowly. Gods. So stop trying to make you think you have to be… homeless to be happy. Right. So what else can I do?"

Winky folded her legs and sat, knees primly tucked under the skirt of her dress. "I is being telling you a story, Miss Hermione, from a long, long time ago. Our mothers be telling it to us as babies so we's can face our fates with dignity, even when they is being hard."

Hermione summoned a biro and parchment and took notes.

"A long, long time ago, before your Ministry and Statute of Secrecy, house elves is being happy. We is living beside humans and serving them, as is our nature, and they is living beside us and offering us a home, food, and friendship. We is being seen as friends and advisors, not possessions. We is living in harmony with our families, like we is all friends and family here.

"Back then, we is all making our own clothes and our wizards' clothes from the silk we was growing in our forests. We is being better than wizards at making clothes, so they is choosing to wear ours. And wizards is being better at making homes, so we is choosing to live in theirs."

"Wait," said Hermione. "Please tell me about your forests."

"A long time ago, we is having vast forests where we is growing all sorts of things we like to use." The house elves all looked sad at Winky's mention of it. "There, we is growing sunsilk for clothes—it is so light and soft, warm in winter and cool in summer, and it is being strong, magic, and
beautiful. We is making the best clothes of anyone in the world. And we is having night plums for Plumberry Wine and jam, and we is having starberries for jewellery. They is being hard and shiny, and is making pretty gems we is once wearing and sharing with our humans, and we is having many other things that are gone now."

"Merlin," said a sorrowful Ron. "We ruined your forests, then?"

Winky's shoulders sagged. "Yes. A long, long time ago, many mean humans are coming, saying humans are weak to depend on house elves. Some began distancing themselves. They began making their own clothes. And some wanted only to share, like we do, but it is breaking the bond. They are learning they can banish a house elf by giving them clothes, and so many did so to be independent."

Hermione stared, heartsick. "It's not slavery, it's a symbiotic relationship. Or it used to be."

"Yes," said Winky with a smile. "We is being happy with our humans once. We is being better at cooking and cleaning, so we does that for them. But humans is being better at growing food and mining gems and building things. They is being better at fighting to defend us. They is being better at making and handling money. So we is wanting them to do that for the household, while we's make the clothes and wine, clean the house, and cook food. Sometimes, our humans also like to do those things and we would share, but we is always being the best at clothes and always being the provider of them."

"Sharing clothes made by a wizard is telling us we are not wanted. It is saying our skills are useless in the household. And so it is breaking our bonds and our hearts and leaving us homeless and broken without our family's magic."

Hermione wiped tears away. "And I tried to give them all clothes. They weren't even good ones!"

Harry looked to Dobby. "How come you aren't offended by clothes, Dobby? Is it the goblin thing?"

Dobby nodded. "Goblins is liking to collect all sorts of things from all sorts of people. I is thinking that is part of it, but also....." He cowered and twisted his ears. "My former master is being so cruel, Master Harry. Dobby is always being hurt. I is being so relieved to be free, that I is being happy to accept clothes, even if they is not like we can make."

Dobby moved as if to punish himself, but Harry caught him into a hug instead.

"I'm glad you're safe now."

Dobby sniffled and wept in Harry's shirt. "We is waiting for kind humans for so long, Master Harry. And you is so kind. You is giving us hope."

Harry hugged the little elf while he gathered his wits. "What about the self-punishment and subservience? It sounds to me like that wasn't a part of the original relationship."

Kreacher shuddered and rubbed his arms. "It was not, Master Harry."

Ron had to grab him to keep him from hurting himself. Winky couldn't answer either.

"Dobby?" Harry held the little elf. "Are you able to talk about it without being hurt?"

Dobby shuddered. "I is thinking not, but I is doing it anyway. It is being worth it."
"But—"

"We is being cursed, Master Harry."
Dobby twisted his ears and cringed, but when Harry tried to stop him, he leapt away and put a barrier up to keep them away.

"No! I is hurting myself because I cannot helps it, but I is thinking I is being the only house elf alive who can help us at all. I's have to do it, or we is never being restored."

Harry blinked back tears. "Okay, Dobby. Tell us what you need to. I'll fix you up as soon as you're done. Or while you're talking, if you'll let my magic through your barrier."

Hermione cried, "Harry!"

"I understand what it means to be the only one who can save my friends, Hermione," Harry said in a low, sad tone. "Let him do it. Let him be a hero for them. And I'll make sure he isn't broken for it, just like you two have always done for me."

Hermione sniffled and put her hand to her mouth, but at Ron's solemn nod, she sat back with a sob. "Just… make sure you keep him alive."

Harry nodded in grim determination. "Dobby, what will this curse do to you if you tell us about it?"

Dobby shuddered. "Poison. It is being poisoning me fast." He broke his own legs, and Harry healed them right away.

"Thank you, Master Harry."

Harry opened Hermione's bag. "Accio bezoar." A white stone zoomed into his palm. "Dobby, will these work on your kind?"

Dobby hesitated. "I is thinking so, but I is not sure. I am part goblin too."

Harry winced. "This might kill you."

"Master is facing possible death for his friends, too. I is choosing to take the risk to save my race, just as you is doing for yours."

Harry nodded. "Hermione, can you brew an antidote capable of healing Dobby from unknown poisons?"
She hesitated. "Can you tell us the name of the curse without activating the poison, Dobby?"

Dobby shook his head.

"Damn. Let me think. Curses that poison someone. That enslave a race. Merlin, I need more
details. What will the poison do?"

Dobby shuddered. "Dobby thinks I is not being able to tell you without starting it."

"Merlin," said Ron. "Don't tell us then. We'll just have to think of a way to make that bezoar work."

Hermione stared at the bezoar. "But what else is there that can cure unknown poisons?"

Harry gasped as a flash of memory flickered to life in his mind. Pain in his arm spreading to his entire body, venom with no antidote, and a flash of red and gold to save his life.

"I know what to do. Snape could probably make it a sure thing, but as he'd be more interested in flaying off my hide than helping me if I asked him, I'll just have to do my best. Come on, 'Mione. Need you to make sure I don't blow us all up."

Hermione frowned. "All right, but how?"


She froze. "Oh. Oh Merlin's pants! That might just work!"

"Yeah. It's the best shot we've got."

Dobby nodded. "I is hoping you can save me, Master Harry, but if not, I is willing to face death so my race has a chance."

Winky gave him a wide-eyed smile, and Dobby blushed.

Harry hugged him. "You're a hero, Dobby. And we'll make damn sure your race is freed from the curse, as soon as we can."

"You is having to fight your own battles first, master Harry."

"We can do both at the same time."

Dobby grinned. "I is knowing you will, Master Harry Potter, sir. You is a good Sunguard."

Harry nodded and swept Hermione into the lab.

Harry and Hermione returned with a special antidote containing a few of Harry's tears and blood. He wasn't sure how he felt about it, but if the antidote worked against an unknown curse that was powerful enough to enslave an entire race, then Harry would make _shelves_ of the stuff to help them in the battle to come. Even if it did feel strange to feed people things made of his own bodily fluids.

Then again, polyjuice potion used poisonous weeds and dead flies, so he supposed it could be worse.

"All right, Dobby," said Harry. "We have a special antidote here I'm betting has never been tried on anyone. Liquid bezoar, daisy roots, echinacea, and Sunguard… stuff." Harry gave a wry grimace.
"You're welcome."

While Dobby wailed in thanks, Ron took the silvery pearlescent phial and held it up to the sunlight. It reflected a million miniature rainbows, much like a prism. "Merlin. You invented it, Harry?"

He snorted. "Invented is hardly the word. More like mixed the most potent antidotes we had on hand that wouldn't blow up. Nothing special about it."

"Nothing special?" Ron grinned and gave him the bottle. "Well done. You should publish it."

"Considering it requires blood and tears from me," said Harry with a shudder, "please don't."

Ron blanched. "On second thought, let's not. I can just imagine what Snape would do with—" He cut himself off at the sight of Harry's face. "Um… let's just forget I said that."

Harry snorted bitterly. "Do you think he'd drain his mate's blood first or insult me until I cry buckets?"

Hermione huffed. "Honestly, Harry. Tears, obviously. It's a bit difficult to cry if you're dead."

Her venture into black humour made him feel a little better. "Maybe he'd do both, yeah? Probably be more efficient to drain me so painfully, I cry my eyeballs out at the same time. Maybe he can use those in potions, too."

Hermione snorted. "Well, they wouldn't go very far if he did. Sunguard eyes are rather uncommon ingredients."

Ron choked. "Um, could we maybe move the topic away from dissecting Harry and back to the elves? Or just about anything, really? Please?"

Harry and Hermione burst into laughter.

Ron gaped at them. "You two have gone as barmy as Dumbledore."


"I is thinking you must send Kreacher and Winky away," said Dobby. "So they is not hearing it. It's might hurt them, or they'd might be hurting me."

Harry winced. "Right. Winky, go keep an eye on Snape, please. Be careful. Kreacher, do the same thing, please, but your target is Lucius Malfoy. Don't communicate in any way, and don't be seen. Report back in an hour."

The elves nodded and popped away.

"Right. Ron, be ready with that potion. 'Mione, spells. As for me…" Harry summoned a knife and knelt by Dobby. "Okay. We're ready, Dobby."

Dobby nodded grimly. "We is cursed, like Dobby said." The self-torture began with a broken arm and only got worse from there. "The humans… back then, we is coexisting together happily. But then, the independent humans… some of them thought we is better as slaves than friends."

Harry healed another round of dire injuries and stopped Dobby. "Are you sure you want to…?"
"Dobby is doing his duty to our race, so we is able to be happy again."

Harry blinked down tears. He had to be able to see to help Dobby. "All right. Go on then."

Somehow, Dobby managed to get out a terrible story around his injuries. The independent humans who wanted the elves as slaves had first used giving clothes as a threat, and when that didn't control them enough, they gathered their most powerful wizards together and cursed the elven bloodline. The slaves could no longer access their forest and it soon became overgrown and lost. None of the enslaved house elves could access it, but their legends told of a union of people who would come one day to return them to their rightful state.

"And," Dobby choked out, "the prophecy said, a hero of house elves, a hero of the night, a hero of the moon, and a hero of light will see the plight of the… ugh… forsaken and forgotten. A family of light and forsaken build a… union of races and… turn the curse against itself… to save the Síoda and set… the forsaken… and forgotten… free."

Harry winced. "Damn. Another proph—"

Dobby began convulsing and foaming at the mouth.

"Ron!"

The stunned boy snapped out of his horror and forced the antidote down Dobby's throat. Hermione cast spells. Harry sliced a neat cut across his wrist and let a few drops fall into Dobby's mouth.

Then, they watched, holding their breath, until the house elf's eyes popped open again.

"Ooh. Dobby is not feeling well, Master Harry."

Harry scooped him into a careful hug. "You did it. You're a hero for your people now. You told us the story, and we'll make sure the curse is broken. Somehow."

"Yes," said a sniffling Hermione. "We'll set you free the right way this time. So you can be your proper selves again."

Dobby wailed in gratitude and hugged her. For once, no one begrudged him his intensely emotional reactions.
History Repeats Itself

Chapter Summary

Back to Sev for a bit.

Chapter 16

History Repeats Itself

Dobby's story gave Harry an idea on how to get information out of Dumbledore without putting himself in harm's way, but he wasn't sure he could use it. He turned the idea over in his head a few days, but eventually decided on the Gryffindor approach. After all, the elves had been given the right to say no.

Harry called his friends into the kitchen, less Kreacher, who was out guarding Snape.

"Dobby, you said your magic works so that whatever we ask for, you can do it?"

"Until they're free again at least," Hermione muttered.

"Don't, 'Mione," Ron said, eyes glued on the elf. "It might hurt him."

Hermione growled under her breath about the cruelty of mankind, but subsided about the curse.

Dobby gave Harry a nervous look. "Why is Master Harry asking?"

"I'm not going to make you relive that, Dobby. Don't worry. I'm just… debating on whether it's fair to ask you for help or not, knowing where it comes from."

"Dobby is wanting to helps, great Harry Potter, sir. Is making… a bad thing good."

Harry nodded. "You don't mind?"

"No, Master Harry."

"Thank you, Dobby. When we… fix things for you, we'll make sure the elves know who helped them find their… true places again."

"Actually, mate," said Ron, "that might be another thing we don't want published. A lot of You-Know-Who's lot and even a good portion of ours won't be happy about losing their slave labour. Might be safer to let the elves spread the word in their own way."

Harry winced. "Good point. Well, we'll know, anyway."

Dobby gave them a tearful grin. "That is being good enough for Dobby."

"You really are a hero, Dobby," said a suddenly sniffing Hermione. "Merlin, I'm so bloody proud
of you for standing up to everyone who stood in your way, and for standing up *for* your people. One day, Dobby, on my honour, one day, we'll make sure you get... your *other* freedom. Somehow.

"And, Winky, I'm proud of you, too, for teaching us about your race. Thank you, and thank you for standing up to me, when I was fighting for everything you *didn't* need or want. I promise, we won't stop until you have your forest again."

Dobby and Winky ran to her and cried in her knees.

Harry squeezed the elves' hands. "Hey, it's all right. We'll work to beat this together, okay? With a Sunguard and the two best humans ever on your side, I think we have a good chance of doing it."

Dobby sobbed and tackle-hugged Harry. "You is so good, Master Harry. You is *all* good."

Harry petted his head. "Thank you, Dobby. We try."

Dobby sniffled and wiped his eyes.

Ron patted his shoulder. "All right there, mate?"

"Dobby is better than ever. His friends have hope again."

"They sure do."

Winky wiped her eyes and gave Harry a searching look. "What did you be wanting us to do for you, Master Harry? Is might be better to ask Winky or Kreacher, since we is not being free elves."

Dobby nodded. "Dobby thinks Winky is right."

"All right." Harry knelt in front of Winky. "Well, the thing is, what I need to ask would need customized magic. Do you mind using it to help me end this war?"

Winky nodded fiercely. "You are our master and our friend. Winky is helping. Kreacher will be happy to helps, too."

Dobby nodded. "You is helping us, and you is not asking for selfish wants, either. You is asking for our help to save your race, like you is helping ours."

"It is being like it was long ago," said Winky with a wistful smile. "Humans and elves helping each other."

Harry cocked his head. "I didn't think of that, but you're right. It is rather like the legends. So, with that in mind, I am glad to accept your help, all of you. Thank you."

The elves bowed.

Winky said, "What is you needing from us, Master Harry?"

Harry sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. "I need a way to get a letter to Dumbledore. Ideally, one he can reply to just by writing on it under what I wrote, or on the back."

Hermione summoned a blank piece of parchment. "I know the charm for that. It's related to the protean charm I used for the DA coins."

"*Of course* you know it," said Harry with a laugh. "Are there any obscure charms you *don't* know?"
She handed the charmed parchment to him. "I don't know any to keep the headmaster or Fawkes from tracking us through that, wards or no."

Harry nodded, serious again. "And that, Winky, is what I need your help with."

Harry sat on the living room sofa with Winky and his friends piled around him. Dobby had gone to make sure Dumbledore behaved—whether he liked it or not—and Kreacher hadn't returned yet.

Harry poised his quill, took a deep breath, and began to write.

"Write on this to reply, Dumbledore. How do we destroy Tom's trinkets and what are they? Don't try to track us, or we'll block you from communicating with us at all, war or no war."

A few moments later, new words formed on the parchment in Dumbledore's loopy handwriting.

"Ah, hello, Harry. I must congratulate you on engineering such an ingenious method of communication, or, perhaps, I should be thanking Miss Granger. Well done. I must say that I am still quite disappointed in you. With so much at stake and danger at every corner, it is imperative that you and your friends return to Hogwarts immediately, where you are safe. I will even arrange to avoid the rather hefty loss of points such actions would generally incur, if you return now."

He signed with all of his names and titles, no doubt an attempt to remind them of his supposed authority.

Harry smirked. "Playing this just like we expected him to, isn't he?"

Hermione chuckled. "Rather so. Go on, then."

Harry wrote a new reply.

"It's adorable that you imagine I care about house points or your inflated ego when we're in the middle of a war. As for returning to Hogwarts, the answer is a resounding hell no. We've never been safe there no thanks to your manipulative streak, lax policy of keeping on murderers, assailants, and bullies, and poor hiring decisions. And I, personally, have never been safe anywhere no thanks to your cruelty. Hence the whole emancipation thing.

"No, Dumbledore, we won't be coming back there to be used as puppets and weapons any longer, nor will we put ourselves in harm's way from the mini-death eaters you refuse to expel and abusive teachers who are nearly as bad.

"So, either you help us, or you leave the one person who can end this to flounder alone
and hope to hell we get lucky, because none of us are stupid enough to trust our our lives to you any longer. You've bollocksed it all up about a hundred too many times now to ever earn our trust again.

"Once more, old man. Where are the horcruxes you know of and how do we destroy them? Keeping your cards close to your chest won't help anyone, so you had best help us if you want us to survive.

"What's right or what's easy, Dumbledore. Your words, your choice."

"Harry, I am shocked at your accusations. I have tried to protect you your entire life, and you say I placed you in danger? I am saddened that you think so little of me.

"Nevertheless, I must insist that you return to Hogwarts. There are many people who love you, and they would be quite devastated if something were to happen to you.

"There are death eaters everywhere, and Professor Snape has reported rumours of a secret force of kidnappers whose sole purpose is to hunt down supporters of the Light and Muggleborns and take them to Tom. As one of your dearest friends is both Muggleborn and a well-known fighter for the Light, I should think you would be more concerned for her safety.

"I shall see to it that your former rooms are prepared."

Hermione snorted. "Merlin's pants. He's really laying it on thick, isn't he?"

"Mum knows we're safe," Ron said with a shake of his head. "He's just using guilt as a weapon, the bastard."

Harry nearly pierced the parchment with the force of his reply.

"You can shove your guilt trips up your arse, old man. We aren't going to fall for it.

"As for the snatchers—yes, we know what they are. I told you trying to withhold information would do you no good. As for them, let me ask you this: have you been able to find us?

"We're not stupid. You lost your favourite toys. We're fully aware you've had Snape, King, and anyone else you can get your hands on searching for us. Tell me this: if you can't track us, what makes you think Riddle can?

"Trust me, if he could find us, he'd already have beaten in our door.

"No, you're just going to have to accept the fact that you no longer hold all the cards, Dumbledore. We are not your pawns. Our lives are our own. You will not order and shape them as you see fit any longer.

"We do, however, care for other lives that will be lost if you continue to try to manipulate us into being your living chess pieces again, so I suggest you give up on
the mind games and get over yourself.

"We got one over you this time. Get used to it and focus on what's important here: saving lives. Are you going to answer our questions, or will I be forced to destroy this parchment and cut off all lines of communication with you?"

Winky grinned. "Winky is thinking the old beard-twirler will not like that."

Harry snorted. "I think you're right.

Severus returned from a death eater rally and dragged himself to Albus' office to report. Merlin, why couldn't the old man consider that the form of… entertainment at death eater meetings did not leave Severus in the condition to climb up five flights of stairs and down seven? Was it truly such an inconvenience for the old bastard to come to him?

Severus sighed and spat out the password. Albus didn't meet in his office for convenience. He used it to establish his own dominance and authority over Severus. It was always about power with him, despite his affable demeanour with the rest of the world.

He entered the office at Albus' request and found the old man scribbling away at a piece of parchment. Severus took a seat and poured a healing potion into a cup of tea. By the time he had taken a sip or two, Albus would surely put his work away and demand every scrap of information Severus could wring from his tired, achy brain.

But Albus was still staring at the parchment in what appeared to be annoyed silence when Severus finished the cup. With a frown, he poured another, this time with a bit of honey to wash the taste of healing potions out of his mouth. "Should I return later?"

Albus gave him a sharp look. "I would like your report while your memory is clear, but first I must convince Harry to come home."

"Potter!" Tea abandoned, Severus jerked up and stalked to the desk. "What has that fool brat done now?" He took a memory snapshot of the entire parchment before Albus shoved it out of his reach. A few words formed in green ink as he watched it slide away—"What's it going to be, old man?"

"Do not be nosy, Severus. I am taking care of the situation. Please sit and have another cup of tea. With any luck, Harry shall be back before you are finished."

By the tone of the words his memory had formed, Severus doubted that.

"I shan't go rescue him, Albus. If he is caught by this folly, then on his head be it."

"Severus. Drink your tea."

Severus obeyed with a scowl and pieced together the fragments his snapshot had caught into a cohesive whole. In seconds, his mind had formed the body of what seemed to be a rather charged discussion. Or half of it anyway. The rest, he supposed, must have filled the other side of the parchment already.

"Harry, please. I do not know where you have acquired such low opinions of my
character, but, I assure you, I have only ever had your best interests at heart. You are much like a grandson to me, and—"

"Do you seriously think I'll fall for that bullshite? I know you knew how bad it was back there. You care a lot more for the prophecy and the so-called greater good than you do for anyone's life or well-being. Particularly that of your pet weapon."

"If, as you say, I did see you as a weapon—and I do not, my boy—I would care more for your safety and well-being, not less. I would need you to—"

"Survive long enough to kill Riddle? Guess what, Dumbledore. A person can survive and still suffer. There is a big difference between survival and thriving, and I have never had the liberty to do the latter until now."

Severus suppressed a snort of disgust. The pampered Potter brat wouldn't know suffering if it danced naked before him. Or… perhaps he wouldn't have before Umbridge. Gods, that hag. She deserved to be drawn and quartered for her treatment of Potter.

Even so, Potter didn't know suffering like Severus did, but he had hit the nail on the head about Albus' true feelings for him anyway, hadn't he?

"You have raised him like a pig for the slaughter."

Severus frowned into his tea and tried not to reveal a shiver of foreboding. He focused on the rest of the letter forming in his mind.

"Harry, all I want is for you to return to Hogwarts, where Severus and I can protect you."

"If by 'Severus' you mean Professor Snape, then you're barmier than I thought, and that is really saying something.

"Yes, Snape does spy for us, and I respect him for that. He risks his life with every moment of every day to make sure we survive the war. That takes a hell of a lot of courage. More than I have, I daresay."

Severus nearly dropped his cup. He barely hid a gape of utter shock in time. Potter, complimenting him? Calling him brave and honourable?

What the hell kind of alternate universe had he stepped into?
"But again, headmaster, that's where the difference between survival and thriving comes into play. Snape is a bloody hero for facing Riddle every day for us, but he also loathes me. He'd sooner eat rat shite than babysit me, and I have had more than enough of being compared to 'my sainted father' who was also, apparently, 'an inhuman monster.'

"I don't know how many of those words are true, but they hurt regardless, and I'm sick of hearing them. And, I'm sure, Professor Snape is sick of seeing me. So just leave the man alone already. He does enough without you piling more shite on top of his head."

Severus stared, gobsmacked. What the hell? Potter hated him… didn't he?

Only… this didn't sound like any version of hate Severus had ever encountered. More like resigned acceptance and respect. But that made no sense!

More words formed in his mind, and Severus shoved his confusion aside to focus on them. Anything but the sick, creeping sensation of guilt lying cold in the pit of his stomach, of shame burning his face and hollowing out his chest.

"And where do you get off saying you protected me, you barmy, lemon-addled bastard? You stole my inheritance and lordship and left me on my aunt's doorstep with nothing but a letter in the middle of the night, and in bloody winter, too! I was fifteen months old! And it's not as if you ever bothered to check on me, now is it? My aunt might have simply dropped me back into the streets and left me for dead, and you would have never known."

Shite! Had Albus truly just dropped the boy on the Dursleys' stoop in the middle of the night? With a letter to explain? In November? Severus already knew the line about Potter's lordship and inheritance was true. Damn.

He squirmed internally. Something was off about this.

"Or maybe you would have known at that. I begin to wonder, sir, how you always manage to show up whenever I'm alone and in mortal danger. A few of those gadgets in your office are there for more than decorative purposes, yeah?"

Ugh. Potter was right on the money about that, too. Damn. The brat was far more perceptive than Severus had ever given him credit for.

Maybe he had better start. Severus couldn't hope to find Potter if he continually underestimated him.

Shaken, Severus let his attention focus on the next paragraph and wondered what revelations this one would bring.
"You don't care about me beyond the fact that you want me to live and die as your weapon against evil. If you did, you would know by the number of times I've cringed when you say it, I bloody well loathe being called anyone's 'boy.' Hear that as the only name you possess other than 'freak' for ten years, and it gets wearing."

Boy? Freak? What on earth did he mean by that? Had he truly heard nothing else for ten years?

"I know you knew how bad it was there."

He recalled the images he had seen in Occlumency—a dark cupboard with a flimsy nest in the floor and a tattered teddy bear. A walrus of a man towering over a small boy, demanding that he cook another set of eggs because the first hadn't been runny enough, then dumping the entire plate in the bin. The boy's tearful eyes had never left the plate. Harry-hunting. 'Bad blood will out.' A tissue for Christmas, probably used.

Merlin. Was it possible that, all this time, Severus had misjudged the boy? Had Harry been abused? It... couldn't be, could it?

A strident, proud voice rang in his ears, as clear then as it had been twenty-three years ago. "I think I should have the first go, since I brought him in."

Severus gasped silently and stiffened. Gods, not again. He slammed his Occlumency walls into place and buried the past where it belonged.

No. He couldn't fall prey to his emotions any longer. The last time he had been fool enough to try had scarred him irrevocably, inside and out.

Potter was just seeking pity and attention. Probably playing the guilt card to get out of trouble when Albus tracked him through the letter and dragged him home by force. And worse, Albus would probably fall for it.

Severus scowled at the thought that he had almost been taken in, too.

Again.

He strengthened his shields and redoubled his vows to never let himself doubt.

And yet... Harry Potter didn't act much like his father, did he? Maybe Severus was the fool to constantly compare the two.

Gods, he could hardly keep his thoughts straight. He grabbed at the next words as they formed, desperate for puzzle pieces that fit.

"Last chance, old man. One more attempt to manipulate us will send this letter up in flames and leave no trace for you to follow, and there won't be another forthcoming. No more games, no more lies. Where are the horcruxes you know of and how the bloody fuck do we find and destroy the rest?"
Horcruxes? Dear Merlin. So that was what lay in wait in Potter's scar, and what had killed Albus.

Until Severus had to finish the job, anyway.

He swallowed a cold lump in his throat. Gods. It was enough to make him pity the boy despite his renewed promise never to let emotion cloud his judgment again.

Shite. Maybe... maybe it was the other way around. Maybe his past was clouding his perception of the present. Maybe Harry didn't deserve such constant loathing and rancour.

He certainly didn't deserve the fate the two duelling lords had forced upon him. A weapon. A toy. A child soldier. A horcrux. A teenager.

An innocent boy whom Severus would have to send to his death.

Severus rested his head in shaking hands and forced tears back. He couldn't show emotion, not here. Albus would use anything Severus showed a thread of compassion for as a weapon against him, but fuck!

His fate hurt so much more when Harry was human than when Severus had seen him as his father's shadow.

That was it. The last of the letter he had seen. Severus watched Albus scribble another reply and winced. He saw no trace of humility, so he had to doubt Albus' words, whatever they were, would be anything the boy needed to hear.

Surely Harry was bluffing. He wouldn't throw away the war for foolish—

Severus jumped as the letter burst into flames. Well. Apparently, he had been wrong.

Really, he shouldn't have been surprised. He never should have doubted his experience and judgement. He had thought Harry had, at least, some little bit of honour, but no.

A Potter would always be in it for himself.

No, Severus was not surprised at all.

Even if his heart had curled in on itself when the letter burned. It was only because it was all in vain now. It had nothing to do with the fact that Potter had let him down.

Again.

Severus forced his tears back and his thoughts away from the past with a vengeance.

"Will..." He cleared his throat and tried again. "Will you hear my report now, Albus, or are we to go traipsing across the countryside and drag Potter et al back by their ears?"

Albus' cheeks turned faintly pink. Severus jolted. If he didn't know better....

"I will hear your report. Harry can wait a few moments while we discuss what you learned."

Well fuck. The old man had no idea where Potter was, then.

Now he was surprised. How the hell had the brat managed to outsmart Albus Dumbledore? Twice!

"Severus? Your report?"
Severus gathered his wits and dragged his memories of the rally to the forefront of his mind.
Secret Messages

Chapter Summary

Sev gets some hope. Sort of.

More angst and a picture for Christmas (assuming I can get it to work)! Happy holidays!

Edit: as always, I need a working pc to get the pic to embed like I wanted it to. I just put a link instead.

Chapter 17

Secret Messages

When Harry's first attempt at communication with the barmy old bastard, predictably, fell to the wayside, the group hashed out their options over tea and some of Winky's honey biscuits. The entire family had taken quite the liking to them.

"What about Bill?"

Harry dunked his biscuit in his tea. "What about him, Ron?"

Ron toyed with his own biscuit, a sign that not even his bottomless pit of a stomach could keep up with the speed of his thoughts. "Well, cursebreakers deal in all sorts of dark magic, don't they? Bill might know how to destroy horcruxes."

Hermione lifted her teacup for a sip, but stopped halfway to her mouth. "It's a valid idea."

"That would mean letting in one more person on a dangerous secret," Harry said with a frown.

"Yeah, but Bill isn't going to be facing off against You-Know-Who directly." Ron shoved his biscuit in his mouth all at once. "Heeth nod clof enuff to uff to be a rithk bethide."

Harry gave him a wry grin. "Try that again in English?"

Hermione dusted off her jumper. "And with less crumb spraying, please?"

Winky banished the mess.

"Thank you," said Harry with a chuckle.

Ron swallowed his biscuit and washed it down with some tea. "Sorry about that. I said he's not close enough to us to be a risk. He's my brother, yeah, but we don't exactly hang out all the time. You-Know-Who won't expect him to know our most dangerous secrets."

Harry tapped a biscuit on his plate, considering. "You're probably right about that. Voldemort
thinks we're out of contact with everyone besides, so he wouldn't think to scan Bill's thoughts, but are you sure Bill would know anything useful?"

"No, but it's better than burning our wands out here, isn't it?"

Harry translated the wizarding phrase to mean something like 'spinning our wheels' and nodded. "I suppose so."

Kreacher frowned from behind his own cup of tea, milky and sweetened with honey instead of sugar, like all the elves preferred it. "Master Bill might be knowing how to destroy a horcrux, but he is not knowing what the others are."

Dobby nodded. "You is needing Dumblies to help eventually, Masters and Mistress. No one else is knowing what the other horcruxes might be."

Harry sighed and let his shoulders droop. "I know, but what can we do? The old man is more concerned with getting his way than saving lives."

Winky stirred her tea with a tiny spoon and stared into the distance, brow tense with concentration. "Winky is thinking that is true with the last letter we is sending, but maybe is not true now. Dumblies was thinking he could manipulate us into playing his games, but now he is knowing better. Winky thinks if you is trying again, it is working better."

Hermione nodded. "But do it through Bill. That way he can be there to take him to task in person if Dumbledore tries to weasel his way out of it again."

"Sounds like a plan." Harry took another biscuit and shook his head wryly. "A better plan than we had before anyway."

"Yeah. I just hope it works." Ron shuddered. "Otherwise... we're out of luck."

Dobby twirled his ear and bit his lip. "Maybe not completely."

Harry motioned for him to continue.

"Master Harry's mate was there when Dumblies be getting his letter last time. Dumblies was not letting him read it, but...." Dobby frowned. "But Dobby thinks Master's mate is knowing what it said anyway."

"That could be bad," Ron said with a grimace. "Why do you think that if Dumbledore didn't let him read it?"

"His face, Master Ron. He is making many strange expressions, many scared and upset expressions, but nothing was happening in the office. And when Dumblies' letter burned, he is looking... devastated. Dobby was thinking he might cry for a minute, but he only made his face go blank again and told the headmaster about the death eaters' plotting."

"Devastated?" Harry winced. "I didn't intend to terrify him."

"Dobby is thinking he knows that, deep down, but is scared to know it, too." Dobby shuddered. "Master, Dobby is thinking your mate is hurting badly."

Harry set his biscuit down and stared at the milk swirling in his tea. It blurred into a pale brown blob. His chest felt as though the Whomping Willow had knocked a hole in it. Severus. His mate.
His mate was suffering.

And Harry couldn't do a damn thing about it.

"I'm sorry," he breathed, but Severus couldn't hear him. He wouldn't listen even if he could.

A silvery drop splashed into his tea and turned the top of it pearlescent. Harry pushed it aside. Ruined, just like any hope he had ever had of having a family when this was all over. His mate hated him.

Severus wouldn't let Harry help him when he was in pain. Harry couldn't hold him, couldn't soothe his grief, couldn't even sit by his side and offer the solace of a silent presence to be with him in his dark moments. Severus was Snape outside of the confines of Harry's mind, and Snape would never let a Potter see him in such a vulnerable state. He would never let Harry near him at all.

It hurt like hell, too.

Fuzzy, jumper-covered arms wrapped him up, and Harry buried his face in Hermione's sweet-smelling shoulder. She petted Harry's hair and sniffled.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I… I don't know how to fix this."

Harry sighed and pulled back. "There's nothing to be done. He doesn't trust me, 'Mione. Even if I offered to help, he would think I'm just trying to manipulate him." He shuddered. "Or worse. I don't want to traumatize him again."

Ron squeezed Harry's hand. "You know, if you wrote him a letter… nothing too much, not at first. Maybe just a note to let him know you're okay and you haven't given up? It won't fix the past, but at least he mightn't be so scared."

Harry let out a shaky breath. "Y-yeah. Yeah, I can do that. I mean, it wouldn't fix anything between us either, but it might make us both feel a little better, at least."

"Just don't expect hearts and flowers back, Harry," Hermione warned. "He's likely to be angry."

"I don't think I'll make a letter he can reply to." Harry shook his head. "No, it would only hurt me, and maybe him, too. A note is enough."

Hermione cleared a spot on the table and summoned her writing supplies. "Come on then. We'll help you write it so he doesn't go to bed terrified."

Harry gave her a teary-eyed smile. "Thanks. I… just, thanks."

Hermione squeezed his arm. "It's what friends do."

"Yeah." Ron scooted closer. "Now, I think it's probably best to keep it short and sweet. Snape doesn't like beating around the bush….

---

Severus sat before his fireplace, staring into a half-empty glass of firewhiskey and trying not to panic. Potter had burned the letter. The imprint of the flames had scarred the back of his retinas. It would probably haunt his dreams, too.

It shouldn't trouble him so much. It was only a letter, and the more he thought of it, the more he realised Potter might have been justified in burning it. Albus had spent too much time trying to convince Potter to trust him when any idiot could see that Potter had Albus' number. He should
have let go of his unrealistic expectations of unquestioning hero worship and just helped the boy.

Albus knew by now that Severus would never trust him again, after all. Why was it so hard to accept that Potter wouldn't either?

For Merlin's sake, Potter had obviously worked out that Albus had stolen his rightful inheritance and lordship. That alone was enough to destroy any semblance of rapport Albus might have built with him over the years. If any of Potter's other allegations had any merit… well, to put it bluntly, Albus was fucked.

His crimes had, finally, come back to bite him square in the arse, but it wouldn't be Albus who paid the price, would it?

Well, perhaps he would pay at that. He had, perhaps, three more months before the curse consumed him despite Severus' best efforts to control it.

Still, Albus wouldn't be here to see the war go on indefinitely. To see Severus perish. Potter. Minerva. They were all fucked now, no thanks to Albus' arrogance and Potter's short fuse and selfishness. Severus had sold everything but his soul to end the war, even down to working alongside one of the bastards who had broken him and pledging his service to another, and for nothing.

This was what came of trusting one's fate to a Potter. He should have known.

He downed the rest of his glass and poured another. That one, he slammed back all at once rather than mulling over it. It burned like hellfire, but Severus choked it down anyway. Anything to numb the pain.

He reached for the bottle, but it disappeared as soon as he touched it. Hippa. He had sent her away as soon as she finished treating his wounds, but she hadn't stopped watching over him.

He gave a tear-thick snort. What did it matter? What did anything matter now?

He sighed and set the tumbler on the table. Maybe Hippa was right. Maybe he was being too fatalistic. Potter had fought through every obstacle before now without balking. Albus' stubborn adherence to maintaining the reputation of a benevolent and wise leader—and his obsessive need to control everyone's fates—was annoying, to be sure, but it couldn't hold a candle to facing death down every single bloody year and coming out on top.

Potter had stood up to literal torture throughout the entire past year, though Severus hadn't known until after the Centaurs dragged Umbridge back. He had only found out after Albus interrogated her, or he would have put a stop to it sooner. Regardless, Potter had endured it without backing down from the truth even once. He had shown dedication and mettle even Severus could appreciate—and identify with, if he was honest with himself—so why should Potter turn his back on everything now simply because Albus was being stubborn and delusional?

No, Potter wouldn't abandon everyone he loved for something so foolish. Severus had only let his fears run rampant for a little while. A moment of self-pity and weakness anyone could forgive him for.

Well, if anyone cared.

Hippa, at least, cared enough to keep him from killing himself on whiskey and letting despair have its way with him. That had to mean something.
Even if it would mean nothing in the end.

"Thank you," he whispered to the air.

He leaned against his sofa and rubbed his aching temples. He swore his brain sloshed with the movement.

Yes, he had definitely had enough to drink.

A quiet pop ahead startled him. "Hippa?"

There was no answer, perhaps because Severus hadn't meant to call her, but rather to see if she had caused the noise.

He dragged his head up and forced his eyes open. It took a moment for the white blob that had just appeared on his coffee table to coalesce into a sheet of parchment, and longer still for the black streaks swirling on it to stabilise into legible words. A letter?

He scanned the parchment for curses and spells, but it came up clean. Still, he didn't quite trust his spellcasting at the moment.

"Hippa?"

The little elf popped into being next to him. "Is you needing help to bed, Master Severus?"

Severus huffed. "Not yet. Would you… ugh… please ensure that this… parchment is safe to read?"

Hippa waved her hand, and blue light surrounded the letter. "It has only a spell to keep its sender from being tracked, Master. Hippa cannot remove it, sir."

"That is well enough. Thank you."

She kept her expression of gratitude quiet in light of his obvious headache. Severus picked up the parchment when she calmed and forced his eyes to focus.

Professor Snape,

I know you're looking for me.

A bolt of shock pinged against Severus' ribcage and shot into the base of his spine. Potter. What the hell?
You won't find me until it's time to end this for good, sir, but I want you to also know I didn't leave Hogwarts out of cowardice.

My life was in terrible danger. I had no choice but to leave, and my friends came with me because, well, they're the only family I've got.

I'm still fighting, sir. I haven't, and won't, turn my back on my duty as long as Riddle is still here to make everyone's lives miserable.

I know you hate me, and have no expectations that this letter could possibly alter that one way or the other. I just thought you might need to know.

Sincerely,

H.

Severus stared at the letter, unable to make sense of the words. He didn't think it was the alcohol either.

Why in all the nine hells would Potter send such a letter to him? What could he possibly hope to gain? It wasn't as if Severus would fall for his tricks.

Wait. Tricks. Was this another letter he could reply to? Hippa hadn't detected such a charm, but it might have been hidden. Severus summoned a biro—too drunk for quills and ink—and wrote a reply.

"What the hell are you on about, Potter, and where in Merlin's name are you?"

But the parchment didn't change. After a few moments, Severus shoved it away in disgust.

So it wasn't a trick. Or at least not one meant to bring about any immediate outcome.

Did that mean Potter actually cared enough to make sure Severus knew he hadn't abandoned his cause?

Why? How? Severus would have expected a letter like this to go to Minerva or Molly, not himself.

Wait. That must be it. Potter must have sent some kind of note like this out to the entire Order. It wasn't some grand gesture for Severus alone, only a courtesy copy.

Still, the fact that Potter hadn't ignored him eased something tight and aching within Severus' chest, if only for a moment.

He leaned back with a sigh. Even if it had been for him alone, it wouldn't matter soon. The spell that killed Albus would finish Severus, too.

Severus dropped his head into his hands and stared at the letter for a long time.

***

Pen and ink drawing of Severus staring at Harry's letter.
Chapter Summary

Chapter count went up again. I'm working through the middle section and writing chapters I had only plotted out before, and some of them are coming out longer than anticipated. Yay writing fun.

Also, this book is dark af, fair warning. I just finished writing the scene after Charity Burbage's death and dear gods. Poor Sev.

So this chapter is pretty angsty (as is the whole damn story until like the last few paragraphs lol), but not quite as bad as what's right around the corner. So, I figured I'd put this up now and start the sucker punching after Christmas. You're welcome! 😊

Merry Angstmas, everyone! 😊

Chapter 18

Harry and his human friends piled onto the sofa, and Dobby and Winky hopped up into their laps. Harry held an excitable Winky steady as a screen of sorts formed in front of him, taking up the entirety of one wall. An image of Dumbledore's office filled the screen. It rankled Harry that the old bastard was actually in it, working on paperwork for something, when he hadn't been about for most of the year.

Harry frowned to himself. Then again, maybe Dumblefuck had just been holed up in his office all year trying to deal with the pain of his curse. Maybe he had simply not been well enough to attend meals in the great hall or putter about the castle.

Harry shook off a wave of foreboding. Sure, the old goat hadn't been especially forthcoming about it, but when was he ever? Still, Harry couldn't push aside the worry that maybe that curse was worse than Dumbledore let on.

"Doesn't look too good, does he?"

Ron's observation only redoubled Harry's worries. True, the arsehole had committed a lot of crimes he had yet to answer for, but what would happen to the school, to the Light, if Dumbledore died?

He didn't want to think of it.

One of the portraits said in a breathless voice, "Bill Weasley is at the gargoyle, sir."

Ah. So that was how the wily old bastard always knew. Anything to make himself seem all-powerful.
A chime sounded. Dumbledore put on his most benevolent smile. "Ah, come in, Bill. How pleasant to see you."

"Sneaky bastard," Ron muttered.

Harry had to agree.

Bill stepped into the office, expression hard. "Is it true?"

Dumbledore blinked several times. "Is what true, dear boy?"

Bill snarled and slammed the parchment Ron had sent that morning on the desk. "Is it true that you piled the task of finding You-Know-Who's horcruxes onto three sixteen-year-olds—?"

Dumbledore gasped. "You mustn't speak of—"

"So it is true. You sent three teenagers who have no bloody idea how to destroy them or what they are after horcruxes?" "Obliviate!"

The spell bounced off a horrified Bill and crashed into the portrait that had announced him. Served the interfering biddy right.

Bill took out his own wand and assumed a fighter's stance. "So that's how it's going to be, huh? Well, I don't know if I'll win, you twisted old bastard, but I sure as hell won't go down easy."

Dumbledore coughed nervously. "That should not have—well, there is no need for violence between allies."

"I'm not the one who attacked!"

"Bloody hypocritical arsehole," muttered Phineas Nigellus, but he was looking at Dumbledore when he said it.

Bill waved for the portrait to be silent. "What the hell is wrong with you, old man? You would attack one of your strongest fighters when you're cursed, and for what? To hide the knowledge of horcruxes from me? What makes you think an Obliviate would work on me when I have charms and talismans against offensive spells on me at all times?"

Dumbledore looked to his earring. "That's just for decoration, you piece of shite. Won't do you any good to try to remove it. Might get you thrown in Azkaban though, so I suggest you sit the fuck down and reconsider your priorities before I decide you've gone too barmy to be trusted with the secrets of the war and Obliviate you!"

Dumbledore rubbed his forehead and obeyed. "It was only for the greater good. You should never have known."

"I'm a ruddy cursebreaker, you idiot! Destroying dark magic is my job!"
Dumbledore sighed and summoned a teapot. "Sit down and have a cup of—"

"How stupid do you think I am, Dumbledore? You just tried to Obliviate me. I'll never trust you again, and I'm sure as hell not drinking your tea. Merlin knows what awful things you might put in it."

By the way his eyelid twitched slightly, Harry gathered that had been Dumbledore's backup plan. He tried lemon drops next, but Bill looked at him as if he had lost the plot.

"No, I don't want a bloody lemon drop, nor do I want any other substance you might have stashed away. Did you not just hear me say I don't trust you any longer? As soon as I leave this office, I'm going straight to Gringotts to make sure there are no strange spells or substances in me as is."

Dumbledore slumped in defeat. "Very well. What do you want from me?"

"The horcruxes. Now. What are they and how do we destroy them? Oh, and just to be sure you don't get up to any other tricks… Veritas Nimbus!"

A cloud of white mist formed in the office and vanished.

"I'd really appreciate it if you didn't attempt to bullshite me any longer," Bill said with a cold smile, "but at least now I'll have verifiable proof if you do."

Harry called, "Dobby."

The elf reappeared and gave Harry a questioning look.

"Keep protecting Bill, and make sure Dumblefuck can't beat that spell."

Dobby nodded and vanished.

Dumbledore was in the middle of another attempt to wriggle out of Bill's grasp. "—all friends here, after all. I'm sure such a tiring spell is not necessary."

The cloud around Dumbledore's mouth turned red. The old man stared at it in shock.

"My spell disagrees." Bill gave Dumbledore a smile like the edge of a scimitar. "What's the matter, old man? Disappointed that your attempt to evade me failed?"

"No, no, of course not. I—"

The air turned crimson again.

"Am I going to have to rip the truth out of your mind by force, Albus?"

Dumbledore frowned. "I am a master mind mage."

"And I'm a master legilimens. Also, I think we both have seen today that your powers aren't at their best. It's highly inadvisable to keep trying to slither out of this, Dumbledore. I'm getting more than a little angry with you, and a Weasley's magic is always more potent when they're full of righteous wrath. So? What's it going to be?"

"I'm afraid I don't know much more about the horcruxes than you do. I—" The cloud turned red again. "How…? I do not understand."

"Old man, you have ten seconds to stop lying and tell me what you know before I start tearing the
Dumbledore grimaced. "Oh, very well." He rubbed his forehead in weariness. "The truth is that I do not know, beyond a doubt, what his horcruxes are."

The mist stayed white, for once.

"But you have suspicions and evidence."

"Nothing solid, my boy. Only suppositions and—"

The mist turned red. Bill raised his wand.

"One more lie, old man, and I cast."

Dumbledore clutched at his teacup. "Can you not see I am trying to—"

"Legili—"

"Very well! On your head be it!" Dumbledore slumped onto his desk. "Evidence points to the artefacts of the Hogwarts founders. The locket of Slytherin. The cup of Hufflepuff. The diadem of Ravenclaw. Gryffindor has no remaining artefacts but the sword and the sorting hat, and I am certain that neither is a horcrux. Beyond that, I have already destroyed the ring of the Gaunt family, and Harry destroyed the journal of Tom Riddle's teenage self."

"That's five, old man. What's the sixth?"

Dumbledore hesitated. "Nagini, I think. For Harry to have seen through her eyes when she attacked your father, she must retain some aspect of Tom's being."

Bill frowned. "A living horcrux?"

"She is not the first." Dumbledore folded his hands in his lap. "I believe Riddle intended to use Harry's death to create his final horcrux. When his plans did not go as expected, he had little other choice but to use what he had available to create it. Nagini is what was left."

Bill nodded. "And the rest of my questions?"

Dumbledore sighed and gave in.

As Dumbledore didn't have a solid location for all the horcruxes, the others soon grew weary of watching him argue with Bill. Kreacher, who had nothing to do with Snape safe in his rooms, offered to stay and listen. Harry asked him to protect Bill and keep Dumbledore from lying in Dobby's stead, and the rest of the household went on with their day.

That night, Bill sent a letter. He spent three feet of parchment ranting on Dumbledore's idiocy and betrayal, not that Harry blamed him, and finally revealed what they had worked out between them.

"We don't know where the diadem is. It was lost for centuries, so how You-Know-Who
"Albus, bastard that he is, believes the locket is hidden in a cave. It's much too dangerous for you lot. There are inferi everywhere and blood curses and poison. You'd be best served leaving that one to Albus and myself or Snape."

"I'll handle the cup, too. We suspect it's in the Lestranges' vault, and that will take some hard negotiation to procure. I'm honestly not sure I have the funds for it. Let me get an initial figure from the goblins and we'll go from there. Believe me, it'll take me a while to even get to that point, so we've got time."

"As for dealing with any horcruxes you do find, you have to destroy it beyond magical repair. For that, you'll need basilisk venom, holy fire, or fiendfyre, and for Merlin's sake, be careful if you use any of them."

"Holy fire would be safest, but humans can't wield it, so I'm not sure how you're going to get your hands on it. The other two are extremely dangerous, so make sure to research both and ways to shield yourselves before you even think of wielding them. Fiendfyre, in particular, has a bad habit of turning on its caster. I can't ask you to promise to never use it, because we do have to destroy these godsawful things, but please, for the love of Merlin, find another way."

"Whatever you do, be careful. I want to see all three of you at the wedding. We set the date for August 1, Harry, so you can come celebrate your birthday here if you want and stay overnight for it."

"Holy fire, hmm?"

Harry gave Hermione a questioning look.

"Sunguards can wield holy fire after they're fully mature. You'll actually be immersed in it on your seventeenth birthday. It won't hurt you, but it will purify you and activate your full powers."

Harry gaped. "You mean I'm going to get stronger?"

Hermione shrugged. "I'm not sure if 'stronger' is the right word. Cores don't change overnight. You'll just be… more complete."

Ron shook his head. "Whatever it means for Harry, I can tell you what it means for us. In a few months, we'll have a safe, guaranteed way to destroy the horcruxes."

"I don't think I want Dumblefuck to know that," said Harry with a grim expression. "He'd go mad trying to find me and work out the truth, and he might succeed. Let's just make sure Bill knows to keep that detail between us. He won't hurt me for it."

Ron nodded. "Go on and write him then."

Harry took a charmed piece of parchment from Hermione.

"We know how to destroy them, then, or we will in a few months. Please make sure Dumblefuck never finds this out, and don't tell anyone else until I'm ready, but I'm not
human. That's why I left school, in part. I'll have holy fire after my 17th birthday, so we can destroy them once I'm fully mature.

"We already have the locket. It was at Grimmauld Place. Dungface nicked it along with everything else not nailed down, but we got it back. So it must be the diadem in the cave. And yeah, inferi and poison? That's in your wheelhouse and Snape's, for sure. That one's all yours.

"We can't stay over for my birthday. People will expect me to be there. They'll be watching.

"We will see you at the wedding, though. Hermione wants to know if it's okay to wear pale periwinkle, whatever the hell that is, or if it's too close to white. She's going to send a… switch along?"

"Swatch, you berk."

"A swatch then. Anyway, we'll see you there. Ask Fleur about the colour and how we should hide ourselves and get back to us. Love, and thanks for wrangling the wanker into shape."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione

Harry sent the letter along with Hermione's swatch and picked up a plain piece of parchment.

S,

We know how to defeat all the bits of him now and where most of them are. Just need you to keep him hopping a little longer. And thank you, for all you risk for us.

H.

Harry passed the letter to Kreacher. "Please take that to Snape. Don't be seen."

Kreacher bowed and popped away.

Severus stared at Potter's second note in utter confusion. Minerva's conversation through the day had made it clear Potter had sent her no such letter. Why had he sent them to him?

"Thank you for all you risk for us."

Severus traced his finger over the words and let out a shaky breath. In twenty years, no one had expressed anything other than suspicion and mistrust for his sacrifices. That the first display of gratitude he should ever witness came from the one student he had mistreated most….

He bowed his head and laid the letter on the table, hands shaking. It was bittersweet. Someone finally believed in him. Perhaps the most unlikely person of all.

And in a few short weeks, Severus would have to tear the veil away and become a monster to
everyone all over again. Including Potter.

No, not 'Potter,' Harry.

Potter had never been so kind, whatever he thought of himself.

Severus blinked back tears and sent the letter to his bookshelf. It was dangerous to keep it, but if he was to survive the next year, he would need it, this proof that someone, somewhere, had seen him for what he was, once.

He wedged the note into *One-Thousand and One Cures for the Weak and Infirm* and thought it ironically appropriate. It would certainly prove some sort of balm when he grew weary and desolate over the next few months.

With that, he lowered his head into his hands, blocked his floo and office door, and wept.

Fuck, but it hurt to be so alone.
Chapter 19

Shadows Close In

A knock reverberated in Severus' office like the toll of a funeral bell, and Severus struggled to contain a wave of panic. All month long, the dread of coming destruction had itched under his skin and turned his stomach cold, growing stronger with every passing day, until he felt it would consume him.

Today. His world would end today.

And its doom was at the door.

Severus took a shuddering breath and forced his terror into his mental shields. He would need every ounce of his cunning and strength to make it through this confrontation intact.

"Enter."

Severus hid the tremor in his hands by folding them on his desk. He kept his expression utterly blank as he met a pair of haunted grey eyes.

A pair of haunted grey eyes several decades older than the ones he had expected to see.

"Lucius?"

The once-dapper, elite wizard had seen better days. His clothes needed mending and the bags under his eyes could have held Severus' entire pharmacopoeia.

"Good afternoon, Severus." Lucius brushed fraying silver-blond hair behind his shoulders and sat before Severus' desk, sans invitation.

That, at least, hadn't changed.

Severus regarded the man with wary uncertainty. Lucius was an unknown variable.

Severus hated unknown variables.

"What, pray tell, is the purpose of this impromptu visit, Lucius?"

The man swallowed hard. If Severus didn't know better, he would think the man was just as terrified as himself.
Well, considering what Lucius stood to lose if it all went tits up, perhaps he was.

Lucius’ hands clenched into fists and released. A nervous habit rather than a sign of anger.

"Severus, in the years past, you have shown some… passing fondness for my son."

Severus acknowledged the comment with a slight nod.

"The… task he has been ordered to complete… the first part will happen tonight."

Severus’ heart clenched. Oh gods.

"I… if… there is any compassion for Draco in your heart remaining, I… would ask you to… protect him. Please." Lucius’ thoughts went on, though Severus sensed an occlumency wall between them. [And for the love of Merlin, stop him before he ruins what little hope of a future we have left. Before the dark lord destroys us all.] A massive jolt of dread and grief came with Lucius’ thoughts and convinced Severus he meant them.

Severus forced his expression steady despite the ringing shock thrumming through his veins. Stop Draco? Lucius wasn't loyal? What the hell?

Severus steadied his shields and his breath before he dared speak. "What would you have me do, Lucius? I have attempted to offer aid all term. He has spurned every attempt for fear I will steal his glory."

'Glory indeed.'

Lucius met his eyes, and for the first time in his memory, Severus saw something other than greed and lust for power behind them.

Something like courage. Well. Wonders never ceased.

"I think, Severus, that you and I both know what the cost of this madness will be, not just to the Malfoy line, but to Britain as a whole. Protect him, Severus. Protect him from madmen and soldiers, and protect him from himself. Please."

Severus gave him a calculating look. "One might think you are not as loyal as you appear, Lucius. One might, upon thinking this, take such information to the dark."

"But you won't, Severus, if for nothing more than loyalty to an old friend. Will you protect him?"

More of an acquaintance and training partner than friend, but it was true that Lucius had helped him at a time when he had no one else left.

Severus searched Lucius' motives for a trap, but intuition made it clear the man had no ill intent, and Severus had learned years ago never to doubt his instincts. He sighed and let his shoulders slump.

"If you had asked me directly after the start of this catastrophe, I might have been able to help, but now, it is far too late. The puppets are already in motion, and the dark is not the only side pulling the strings. I am trapped, Lucius. I can no more stop this madness than I can shift the world on its axis." He closed his eyes in grief. "But I have already vowed to protect your son, and I will uphold it as best as I am able, though it will cost me everything."

Lucius took a shuddering breath. "That is… more than I expected. Thank you, Severus. For what it
is worth."

Severus nodded. "Your wife… get her out while you can."

"I will not leave Draco behind, and neither will she."

"Then, Lucius, we can only pray that we are all alive to see the aftermath of this tragedy come morning."

"Yes." Lucius stood. "Good luck, Severus."

"We shall all need it."

Lucius bowed and left. Severus sank into his seat and buried his head in his hands.

Tonight. The world would come to a halt tonight.

In the quiet of his office, he shed a few silent tears and remembered the last child he had sworn to protect. This time, Severus promised himself, he wouldn't fail.

He couldn't afford to fail.

Gods help him. Gods help them all.

Severus jolted at a second knock upon his door. He braced himself for the meeting he had expected originally, swallowed a surge of terror, and forced his voice level.

"Enter."

"Good afternoon, my boy."

Again, not Draco. Severus begun to think he had placed too much faith in the boy's humanity and that he wouldn't see him today at all.

Not until 'the proper moment,' anyway. Not until all the chess pieces were in play and the trap was set for the black king.

Gods, the old man was a bastard.

Albus stepped into the office, twinkle diminished, and gave Severus a false smile. "Ah, Severus. I am glad you have not yet left to make preparations for the evening to come."

Severus snarled. His grip tightened around his quill, and he laid it aside before he destroyed the delicate instrument in his sudden fury.

"I have already sold my life, my freedom, and my voice in service of your noble cause, Albus."

Severus slammed the door behind the bastard and stood, glaring with all his strength. "I suppose even that is not enough for you now? Have you come to take my soul as well? Or, perhaps, you've simply come seeking a choice cut of steak?" He held out his arms and turned in a slow circle, lip curled in a sardonic sneer. "I'm afraid you'll find any selection I might offer to be tough and gamy, but then, such is the consequence of living life on the fringes of society as you have so generously ordained I should do. Should I also brew a potion to tenderize myself for your culinary convenience? Perhaps aid you in your choice of wine? I have heard a fine merlot goes well with charbroiled slave."
Albus raised an eyebrow. "I see your sarcasm is still in fine form, Severus, but I'm afraid I am still rather full from the chicken salad sandwich I had for lunch."

"Pity," Severus muttered. "What do you want now, Albus?"

"I simply stopped by to inform you that I shall not be in the castle until, perhaps, eight o'clock tonight."

Severus' hands curled into fists. "Now? You are leaving the castle now? When, in a few short hours, Draco Malfoy will be leading anywhere from ten to thirty death eaters directly onto school property? Have you made any attempt to warn the professors of trouble? The students?"

Albus frowned and stroked his beard. "I think you know why we cannot afford to warn the school."

Severus snarled. "I know why I cannot warn the school, but you have spent the past half a century building the reputation of an omnipotent, all-knowing grandfather wizard. No one would question you, if you were to suggest you have heard a rumour of trouble and put a few safety precautions in place. Unless, of course, you never had even as much decency as concerning yourself with your reputation alone would require, and are, instead, no better than any other power-hungry fool in the Ministry."

Albus' eyelid twitched. "My motivations are not the issue here, Severus. If Tom should trace the source of my forewarning back to you, we shall both perish, and all our work would be for naught."

Severus slammed his fist into the desktop. "The entire purpose of our work, Albus, is to protect the school. If we allow students to be slaughtered, what the hell is the point?"

Albus removed a lemon drop from his pocket. "There may, of course, be unavoidable losses. It is regrettable, but there is nothing else to be done." He popped the sweet in his mouth without showing so much of a glimmer of said regret. "If you are caught, there is nothing to stand between Riddle and Hogwarts after tonight."

"Tonight," Severus' fury choked him and turned the air around him silvery-violet. "So. You expect me to sit here and do nothing while students are slaughtered, all for the greater fucking good, while you gallivant across the country, and still you ask that small favour of me?"

"Yes, and you will do it." Albus laid all semblance of benevolence aside and fixed Severus with a cold scowl. "Or have you forgotten, Severus, whom it is that you serve?"

Several of Severus' replacement specimen jars exploded. A few shards of glass cut his cheek, but it was worth it to see Albus' beard dripping in embalmed ingredients.

"No, sir, I have not."

Severus served the school and the children first and Albus only because he was forced. Let the old fool believe he would go along with this plan of inaction. The arse wouldn't be there to know the truth.

"See that you do not forget it again." Albus banished the mess from his beard. "Until tonight, Severus, do remember to keep your silence."

A rush of molten fury stabbed Severus in the gut and set his aura sparking. Rage burning in his veins, he threw an inkpot at the door beside the bastard and watched it shatter. Red ink splattered Albus' face and robes, like the blood of Severus' life and innocence stained his hands.
"Get out of my sight, you disgusting, soulless, demon of a man! Get out, before I decide a few hours is too long to wait and carry out your orders this moment!"

Albus gave him one last frigid look and left, good riddance to him.

"Bastard!"

Severus summoned a specimen jar and threw it at the wall. It shattered and sprayed everywhere, but he hardly cared amidst such a blistering inferno of outrage and fury.

"Soulless… ruthless… heartless bastard!" Severus punctuated each word with a new jar thrown against any surface in range and finished his release with a scream of frustrated fury.

"Shite."

He sank into his office chair and rested his head in shaking hands. Tears stung his eyes, and he was too far gone to deny them release.

'You were right, you piece of rotten thestral shite. I will take great pleasure in ending your rule of cruelty under the guise of perceived goodness.'

Severus let himself grieve for a moment, then did what he always did when faced with a terrible situation no one should have to endure: he pulled himself up by his bootstraps and carried on. There was no time to fall to pieces like this, and gods forbid Draco or one of his other dark Slytherins should come now.

With a deep breath, Severus pulled his magic and focus back into his core and used his anger to fuel his mental shields. After a moment, the forced calm of hard occlumency eased his wild emotions, and Severus could breathe again.

Merlin, what a mess. He vanished the broken glass, ink, and splattered ingredients and cast an air freshening charm. With his office looking presentable again, Severus cleaned his boots, clothes, face, and hair, and winced at the sting of cleaning charms against his cut cheek and jaw. Ugh.

He summoned his medical kit and conjured a mirror. Six deep cuts marred the skin across his cheekbone and along the edge of his jaw. He wondered how he hadn't felt them since the first blast, but then, Severus rarely grew angry to the extent that his aura showed. That kind of anger could get him, or others, hurt.

He dabbed antiseptic on his cheek and winced at the burn. Hurt like this, perhaps?

The thought reminded him of the last time his jars had proved a threat. Strange how such a small loss of control should cut him when he had not been harmed in Harry's mass explosion a few months before. Perhaps he needed to renew the charms on his robe.

Later, perhaps. In a few short hours, it would hardly matter anyway.

He had bigger concerns.

To hell with Albus' ruthless unconcern. Perhaps he mightn't be able to save them all, but damned if Severus would sit back and do nothing.

With a snarl, Severus sat and gathered a piece of parchment and his writing supplies. He used his right hand to disguise his handwriting, a trick he had taught himself at the start of his career as a spy, and spelled the parchment so that no trace of his magic or identity would find its way into the
The old man is weakening and out of the castle. The dark knows. Make sure the students are safe before sundown.

Severus let the parchment roll up naturally and called for his house elf friend. "Hippa."

The elf did not appear immediately, and when she did, she had a black eye and several burned fingers.

"Hippa!" Severus grabbed his medical kit from the desk and raced to her side. "Merlin, what happened?"

Hippa gave him a dark grin missing one tooth. "The old headmaster is ordering us not to answer your calls today, but Hippa is not listening."

Severus snarled and slammed his fist into the side of his desk. "That sadistic, treacherous, murderous piece of flobberworm shite! Gods!" He measured a house elf sized dose of potion into a cup and gave it to his friend. "Thank you, Hippa." He began treating her burns with gentle care and a hitch in his breath. "Your loyalty to me may save many lives tonight, yours included."

Hippa shivered. "Oh, Master. What is you needing Hippa to do?"

"For the moment, wait until I have finished healing you. Then, I have a letter for you to deliver." He gave her a grim look. "Since I am not able to call you again today without causing you harm, I will tell you now: the death eaters will be in the castle tonight. Do what you can to protect the staff and students, all except for the miserable old bastard, and get your people who are unwilling or unable to fight to safety."

Hippa grimaced. "Hippa is doing as her true master says."

"Your friend, Hippa. I am your friend, not your master."

"Hippa is grateful to have you as her friend," she said through huge tears, "but I is serving you anyway, Master Severus."

He hugged her gently. "Thank you."

She buried a few tears on his shoulder. Severus shed a few on hers, too. Would she still want to serve him after tonight, when he had no choice but to make a stand for the wrong side? Would Severus lose his last friend for the monster who had hurt and enslaved them both?

Well, it didn't matter. Regardless of where Albus' morals skewed, Severus' demanded that student lives came before his own. And that meant he had to be in position to protect the school, even if that also meant he had to take the fall for the bastard who had endangered it in the first place.

At least he could say now, without a doubt, summoning up the necessary hatred to kill Albus Dumbledore in cold blood would not be a problem.

Severus went on treating her wounds, and, in the back of his mind, he seethed.
The relief in Draco's eyes when Minerva had announced an early curfew as a precautionary measure during a time of potential threat assured Severus that the boy was not beyond saving despite the fact that he had not warned Severus of the coming attack. Severus wondered, as he stood in the shadows of the astronomy tower and watched Draco face Albus down, if, somewhere deep down, Albus still cared about Draco's life. If, somewhere under the ruthlessness and brutal adherence to plots and plans no matter the cost, a shred of human compassion remained.

"Draco, you are not a killer."

No? The boy had attempted to kill his classmates all year. Slughorn certainly would have died on Draco's poisoned mead had the old fool not attempted to offer a cup to Severus first.

Severus sniffed at the cup Horace had just poured for him. Mead? It smelled of wormwood. With a shudder, he dumped it onto the floor and watched the flagstone smoke and turn black.

"Hmm. I find I am more of a firewhiskey kind of man at the moment."

Horace gaped at the ruined floor, mopped his brow, and gave a shaky nod. "Yes. Firewhiskey sounds wonderful right about now. Merlin."

Severus snorted and summoned a glass for the pompous idiot. And scanned it for poison twice before he passed it on.

The memory made him recall Albus' callous behaviour that afternoon and how many lives might have perished tonight had Severus and Hippa not gone against Albus' orders.

No. The old bastard didn't care about Draco or his life. This was no show of concern for a redeemable student gone far too close to the edge. He simply wanted to stay Draco's hand long enough for Severus to swoop in and ensure that his grand scheme would go as he wished.

For an instant Severus debated staying in the shadows and watching the old man's plotting turn to dust. Let someone else take the fall for this bastard. Severus certainly cared nothing for him.

No. Much as he would love to rub the arsehole's nose in it, Severus had vowed to end Albus' pain for more than the sake of a demented old man who viewed human lives as chess pieces.

Draco lowered Albus' wand. He, unlike the monster masquerading as a benevolent old man, still possessed some semblance of humanity.

Images of the past flickered through Severus' mind as he stepped into Draco's place. A boy with hazel eyes behind foolish spectacles and roguish good looks, leering, taunting. Cruelty, greed, and arrogance personified. "Who wants to see me take Snivellus' pants off?"

Another boy, pudgy and short with darting blue eyes, hiding in wait for his chance to pillage and steal and kill. "I'm not waiting my turn this time."

Another boy with brighter blue eyes and a shaggy black mane scowling, cursing, stripping the skin off Severus' hide. "You broke them! It's all your fault!"

A fourth boy with placid amber eyes who tried, at least, to save Severus while he could "It's okay
now, Severus. I have you."

A girl who hadn't believed Severus when he came to her for help, the way the trust and affection in her verdant eyes had shifted to wrath and outrage, and not for Severus' sake.

"Gryffindors don't do things like that, Sev! You're lying!"

And another pair of blue eyes, wrinkled and too keen, hiding behind a façade of kindness and concern. "I'm afraid, for the sake of everyone involved, we must keep these crimes a secret, my boy."

Those same eyes stared at him now, relief and a hint of triumph clear in their depths.

"Severus, please."

As Severus raised his wand, more images came to mind. A pair of brilliant green eyes, shimmering with tears of hurt and fury and terror, and a tousle-haired child standing up to Severus anyway. All defiance and bravado and honest pain.

He remembered the look in Harry's eyes the last day he had seen him. Fearful, desperate for help, and bleeding remorse. The past had obscured the truth of him that day, but when Severus stood face-to-face with true cruelty and ruthlessness and self-centred greed, he saw the purity and honour behind Harry's eyes.

"Thank you, sir, for all you do for us."

Harry wouldn't thank him for this. Not until the very end, perhaps, when Severus' memories tore away the veil of of Albus' version of truth.

But Severus would know. He would know who he had truly stepped into the breach to help, and he would know why.

And maybe that was enough.

Severus aimed at the old man's head and recalled every hurt, every injustice, every lie in pursuit of 'the greater good' that only ever seemed to benefit those Albus viewed as worthy, and perhaps just Albus. He remembered, and let his anger consume him.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The spell hurt as it exacted its cost upon him, a price paid in blood for blood, but Severus stayed stony and watched, impassive, as the greatest manipulator Britain had ever known went sailing head over feet off of the astronomy tower, aglow in a wash of brilliant green light.

It was over.

Or so he thought.

"Traitor."

The word, hissed in a tone of dark menace from the shadowed parapet ahead, set Severus' blood tingling and lifted the hairs on the back of his neck.

Fuck! Albus hadn't come to the tower alone.

A tall, strong man with long red hair, flashing blue eyes, and a fang earring stepped out of the
shadows, face twisted in pain and fury. "Fucking traitor!"

Bill Weasley. Shite!

"Decapullo!"

The decapitation curse? Dear gods. Bill wasn't playing games. Severus ducked, grabbed a whimpering Draco, and ran straight for the shadowed edge of the tower. With any luck, he could escape off the edge before Bill worked out his secret.

He dropped off the edge of the tower and took flight. Draco screamed, but the tower shrunk rapidly into the horizon behind him, and Severus dared to relax.

His relief was short-lived. Bill had tricks of his own.

The man conjured a zipline and handles and zoomed off the tower like a shot. He hit the ground running, and Severus scrambled to stay ahead of him. He dragged Draco's hand and made a mad dash for the gates, ducking and dodging curses as he went. Lethal curses. Fuck. If Bill caught either of them, they were done for.

Ten feet from the gates, a cutting curse hit Severus in the leg, and he toppled into the mud with a cry. Draco tore away for the gates like the coward he was, leaving Severus to die. Of course he had. Severus had only sacrificed everything to save his miserable hide.

Bill hit him with something else. Severus was sure it wasn't the Cruciatus, but it sure as hell hurt like it. He didn't die at the end of it, so at least it hadn't been immediately lethal.

"Traitor," Bill hissed. "I'll kill you where we stand, and I'd be justi—"

A burst of yellow light hit Bill in the chest and knocked him back. A house elf.

Hippa.

Severus knew she wouldn't let Bill die, but he still checked that the man was moving before he hobbled away towards the gates. Fuck. He could hardly breathe for pain, but unless he kept moving, Bill would finish him off before he—

A curse shot for his back. Severus dodged by use of intuition and the feel of the magic as it approached. He gave a quiet whimper of pain and despair. Fucking Albus! Of all the people to take with him on his little jaunt outside the castle that night, why the hell had he chosen one of the most dangerous members of the Order? Everything hinged on Severus' survival!

Unless Albus had played Severus all along. Unless Albus had wanted Severus to take his secrets to the grave.

Horror and tears blinded him, but he blinked them down viciously. No time for grief in the middle of a firefight.

"Decapu—shite!"

Severus glanced back at a screeching cry and caught a glimpse of a house elf riding a hippogriff. The beast slammed its hooves down in front of Bill, a yellow shield shot up between them, and Bill skidded to a halt.

A hippogriff? Merlin! How the hell had Hippa managed that?
Severus whipped back around and sprinted for the gates as best as he could. A curse exploded into the ground beside him, and Severus yelped.

Shite! Bill had broken through. No time for grace, then.

Heart thundering in his ears, Severus dove across the wardline, tucked his limbs in tight, and used the force of his tumble to apparate away.
Chapter Summary

Resolution to cliffie and angstfest incoming!

Chapter 20

Betrayed

Severus landed hard on his injured leg and crumpled to the floor of his childhood home. He could do nothing but breathe for a moment, lost in pain and terror as he was, but as the red haze eased from his mind, grief came crashing in.

Murderer. He was a murderer.

And despite the fact that the world was, probably, much better off without such a ruthless arsehole in charge of Hogwarts, and Albus' quick and painless death had been a mercy, no one would understand that now.

'Traitor!'

Severus breathed out harshly. "I did it for you. For all of you, and for Harry."

But no one would hear him. No one would care now, even if they could.

He let himself grieve for a moment, shuddering through the release of adrenaline, but he couldn't linger here. The Order knew where to find him, and the dark lord was waiting. The longer he tarried, the greater the risk either side would find and kill him.

Severus cast a temporary blood ward, blocking everyone but himself from entering the grounds. He didn't have the power to maintain it beyond the night, but it would do to keep him safe while he treated his injuries and gathered his wits. A dose of anti-\textit{Cruciatus} draught eased the residual tremors of whatever Bill had hit him with—maybe it had been the torture curse after all—and that allowed Severus to strip off his muddy clothes and check his leg.

Shit. Bill had cut a deep swathe from his ankle to just above the back of his knee. Half an inch deeper would have hamstringed him.

No doubt, that had been Bill's plan. Disable him and kill him once he was down. \textit{Fuck}.

Severus shuddered at how close he had come, healed his cut, and summoned a fresh outfit. He tied his hair back to keep it out of the way while it was wet and donned a spare cloak.

That was it. Time to face the music.

Severus took a few deep breaths, poured his grief and fear into his mental shields, and apparated to Wiltshire.
Lucius was waiting at the gates. "Severus," he whispered, and the rush of relief that came on the sound eased Severus' pain somewhat. "Thank Merlin. Are you injured?"

Severus shook his head. "I have already treated it."

"Ah. Draco—"

Severus scowled. "Has already arrived, I'm sure."

"Yes. The dark lord is awaiting your report. I…." He leaned on Severus' shoulder for an instant. "Thank you, and gods, forgive me."

Severus squeezed Lucius' arm briefly and followed him into the manor.

Harry had expected Kreacher back by midnight, when Snape generally ended his patrols and returned to his quarters, but the clock had just struck two, and Kreacher still hadn't returned for the night. Harry wouldn't sleep until he knew Snape was safe, so he sat at the kitchen table with his charms textbook and a strong pot of tea, watching and waiting. At least he hadn't felt that jolt of icy cold pain in his chest again, not since about nine in the evening. He could rest assured that Snape wasn't in mortal danger, small comfort that it was.

Still, Harry wouldn't relax until Kreacher came home.

The clock struck three before the elf dragged himself into the kitchen, ears drooping on his shoulders and fat tears on his face.

Harry's heart slammed into his feet. Oh gods.

"Kreacher?"

Kreacher flinched and swallowed hard. "K-Kreacher thinks master should… get the family before he is speaking."

Oh gods. What had happened?

Harry raced to the elf. "Kreacher, are you okay? Snape?"

"Kreacher is being well enough, and Master Snape is… not hurt, and Kreacher is leaving him in the care of his house elf friend, but…."

"Shite. I'll get the others."

Harry raced upstairs after his housemates, and in a few minutes, everyone had piled around the sofa in the living room.

"Okay, Kreacher," said Harry, heart hammering in dread. "What… what happened?"

"The…." Kreacher wiped a sheen of tears from his face. "The old headmaster… is dead."

"What?"

Hermione gasped out, "No ."

Harry leapt to his feet, terror ringing in his veins. Much as the bastard half deserved it, Dumbledore was the only thing between Riddle and Hogwarts. Without him, they were fucked.
And, somehow, Harry's gut told him this wasn't the last of the blows.

"Kreacher, how?"

Kreacher wiped tears from his face. "Draco… Malfoy let death eaters in the castle. Master Severus came… to the astronomy tower when he learned the old headmaster was there and… and….”

Kreacher choked back tears.

Harry whispered, "And…?"

"And he killed him! Master Severus is being killing the old headmaster!"

Harry sank to his knees. "No."

"Holy fuck!" Ron's horrified bellow rang in Harry's ears.

"Oh gods," Hermione breathed.

Winky buried her head in Dobby's shoulder with a little sob. Dobby had frozen, eyes wide and mouth gaping.

Harry made an inhuman noise of grief. "No-no-no! It… it can't be true!"

"K-Kreacher is sorry, Master. I… I is not understanding why! The old headmaster came to his office that day, and because Master Severus was afraid and upset, Kreacher is coming in to make sure he is safe.

"The old headmaster… he knew the castle would be under attack tonight. Master Severus is throwing his jars at him because the old goat is being too dirty to warn the school, so he is writing a letter to the tabby professor and disguising it. And he is telling the house elves to protect the students and teachers. Why… why is he going to such trouble to protect the school, then killing the headmaster? Kreacher does not understand."

Harry took a rasping, panting breath, and stood on shaking legs. He had gone numb. Cold. Everything inside him rang with the horror and stillness of death.

With a trembling hand, Harry patted Kreacher's head. "Thank you." He turned away.

Hermione called in a shattered voice, "Harry?"

"I… I need time."

She stood to follow anyway, but Ron held her shoulder and shook his head.

"Oh, Harry…"

Harry walked to the training room in a daze. Snape. A murderer. His mate had murdered the headmaster and the general of the light. The rest of Kreacher's news went unnoticed in the clang of those words, jarring Harry's skull.

Dumbledore was dead. And it was Snape's fault.

Harry conjured a training dummy on the other side of the room, grabbed Sirius' throwing knives, set them ablaze, and lobbed them at the dummy. They all went wide, so Harry torched the entire thing in a giant pulse of flame instead.
And beside him, his wings sparked.

"Traitor!"

Harry didn't stop training until dawn. He lost count of how many dummies went up in flames or exploded under the sheer magical force of his raw fury, but eventually, even Harry's reserves sputtered and weakened.

He staggered into the kitchen, avoided Ron and Hermione's questions, and dragged himself into his bedroom. As he passed his desk, he caught sight of his potions book. He had used Severus' note, folded neatly and treasured, as a bookmark for weeks.

What had gone wrong? What had he missed?

Tears blurred his vision as he opened his book and stared at the cover. 'Property of the Half-Blood Prince.' During the early weeks of term, the Prince had felt like his only friend. Harry had once wanted to find him after the war and see if they might be friends. Or maybe he had wanted more.

It would never happen now. His mate was a murderer, and not the Prince anyway.

With a stifled sob, Harry turned to the page with Severus' letter. The man had sounded… well, not gentle, but good. This note had given him hope at a time when he had none.

Maybe… was it possible it wasn't true? No. Kreacher had come to care deeply about Snape in the weeks he had spent watching over him. He would never lie about this.

Harry stared at the letter. "Why, Severus? Why?"

But neither the letter nor the Prince offered him any answers. Harry grabbed the letter and started to crumple it up, but in moving it away from the page, he caught sight of a sample of the Prince's writing just beneath it. And with Snape's letter so close….

"Oh my gods."

They wrote just the same.

"Oh gods. Ron, Hermione."

His friends rushed to his side at his call.

"What, Harry? What did you find?"

Hermione's eyes filled. "Did you find any proof it isn't true?"

Harry passed her the book. "No. But have a look at what I did find."

Hermione read the note. "Oh, Harry. I just… don't understand it. He sounds so human here. Why would he do it?"

"I… I don't know, but look at the writing in the book."

She scanned the page and gasped. "Merlin's pants."

"Yeah."
"What is it? Budge over. I want to see, too."

She slid the book and note over to Ron. He read them both and slumped into the nearest chair with a huff of shock.

"So all this time…?"

Harry snorted bitterly. "Yeah. All this time, I was fancying my mate, who is apparently a murderous arsehole and a traitor."

"Harry…"

Hermione attempted to comfort him, but he shrugged off her hands and shouted at the book instead.

"Arsehole!"

He threw the book and the note off the table. He might have tossed them in the fire had Snape's note about bezoars not contributed heavily to saving Dobby's life.

"Bloody fucking arsehole! Of all the fucked up shite… how is it I'm the most light-oriented type of semi-humans, I'm dependent on my mate to live, and it's that… that…"

Harry kicked the floor, released a string of expletives, and, when it did nothing to ease his pain, he sank onto the sofa with a shuddering sob.

"Why him? Of all people, why him?"

He dropped his head into his hands and wept.

Ron and Hermione dropped down on either side of him and rubbed his back, Winky laid her head against one knee, and Dobby against the other, but this time, their unwavering love had no power to comfort him.

"What's going to happen to me?"

His family had no answers, and neither did Harry.

Severus sat on his bed in Malfoy Manor, staring at the wall opposite in silence. Hippa had come long ago and warded his quarters against everyone but Lucius, and Severus had asked her to also ward them against spying or eavesdropping of any sort, so he knew he was safe enough to grieve.

Only, he had so much to mourn, he didn't know where to start.

He had lost his career. His home. His friends, not that he had many. His colleagues. The trust of the public. His freedom, not that he had ever known much of that, either. His safety. Again, not something he had had much chance to grow familiar with.

To his shock, a small part of him even mourned the old man who had betrayed him and forced him into this nightmare. Perhaps it proved he was still human, somewhere, under the cracks on his soul.

And yet, it was the memory of a letter he had secreted away in one of his potions books that broke the dam on his tears. "Thank you, sir, for everything you risk for us."

"I-I did it for you, Harry."
But Harry couldn't hear, and if he could, he wouldn't understand. The boy would soon lose all semblance of respect for him if he hadn't done already, and fuck, it hurt. It hurt that the one person who had ever even tried to see him for what he was would only see a demon now. Severus had no one left but Hippa.

The little house elf held his hand and sniffled beside him.

"Why did you save me, Hippa? Why come to me now?"

Hippa squeezed his fingers. "Because Hippa knows you is a good man, Master Severus, and Hippa is knowing the old headmaster was not. I is not understanding why, Master, but Hippa is not being blind either. I's can see you is heartbroken."

Severus stared at his knees, watching his tears pool on his trousers and bead off the slick fabric. "You are the only one left who does."

"Why is you doing it, Master?"

"He was dying anyway, Hippa. He forced me to kill him so that I would be given the position of headmaster when the dark lord takes over. He knew I would give my life to protect the students."

"Oh, Master. See, Hippa is right. You is a good man."

Severus gave a tear-thick snort. "I wonder now, though, if there wasn't more to it. Bill quite nearly killed me. I am sure if not for your help, he would have done. Perhaps the wily old bastard only wanted to make sure no one knew his dark secrets."

Hippa scowled. "Hippa is being relieved you is being headmaster soon, Master Severus. You is a much nicer one than the old man."

Severus shuddered. "Hippa, I will have to be cruel. I will not be able to be nice, or the dark lord will replace me. And then, Hogwarts' Muggleborns and light-oriented students will all be killed. Brutally." He choked back a sob. "I hate the thought of hurting them, but if I don't, they will die. Gods help me. Gods help them. We are all lost now."

Severus buried his head in his knees and wept, but a popping noise just ahead startled him before he could truly mourn.

A letter sat on the bed before his feet, bearing only one word in familiar handwriting.

"Why?"

"Master Severus? Who is being writing you?"

Harry. Severus stared at the note, heart blasted open and raw. He knew, if he wrote a reply, this time it would work.

But he had no answers. None he could give.

"Incendio."

The note burned to ash, much like what remained of his life.

"No one," he whispered, and let himself grieve.
Back in the Forest House, Harry watched his copy of the letter burn and promised himself never to think of his mate or what he could never have again.

He turned his back, struggled to ignore the bleeding ache in his heart, and put his copy of advanced potions away. He would borrow Ron's from now on so he had no reason to break his heart over and over.

No, he didn't need a mate. It wouldn't be easy, but he could live without love. He had done it before, after all.

"Come on, you lot." Harry's voice came out flat and subdued, but at least it didn't break. "We have work to do."

His friends followed him out, their shoulders slumped and their eyes hollow with grief.
Light in Darkness

Chapter Summary

A tiny bit of hope for the boys.

Also, I just finished another watercolor for this last night. I’ve made so much art for this story, which probably comes down to having the supplies for once and wanting to develop my watercolor skills. I think I’m up to 7 so far, plus 3 more for the later books. Hope you guys like pictures! 😊

Chapter 21

Light in Darkness

Harry read Bill's letter with a cold pit of anguish turning to lead in his stomach. 'No sign of remorse. Jumped off the tower like a great bat and took Draco Malfoy with him. No idea how the bastard didn't die. He… glided or something and ran like a coward. No sign of him.'

Traitor. Severus was truly a traitor.

Harry blinked back an ocean of icy tears and forced himself to keep reading.

Albus and I had just gotten back from investigating the cave when we saw the dark mark over the castle. It was this seaside cove close to the orphanage You-Know-Who grew up in. Horrid place.

The cave was... gods. I'm glad you didn't need to go, Harry. The area required a blood sacrifice to enter, and then the horcrux container was on a plinth in the middle of a lake full of inferi, and the horcrux itself in a basin of poison. Poison with no antidote that had to be drunk.

It wouldn't kill a house elf, so Albus summoned one of the Hogwarts elves to drink it and... and all but forced the poor thing. Frankly, it was horrible to watch. The poor sod was sobbing and begging him to stop and hurting himself for it, but Albus kept forcing it down his throat regardless. I tried to stop it, but what could I do? There was no other way.

I still feel like a monster for it regardless.

That poor elf is sick and traumatized. I've been trying to take care of him, but I'm not sure what to do.

And even worse, it was all for nothing. The diadem wasn't in the cave—it wasn't a
horcrux at all. Someone with the initials R. A. B. got to the locket first and left a copy and a note for You-Know-Who. I included a copy of it. It's a brilliant piece of work.

I have no doubt, whoever they were, they're dead now. Probably one of the inferi we fought last night, poor soul.

I know you lot have to be scared, so I'll cut to the chase. The bottom line is this: we still have no idea where the diadem is. We're one horcrux short of winning this damn thing, and that means we lose until we find it.

And it gets worse. Dumbledore was the only wizard who ever scared You-Know-Who. With him gone, there's nothing between that ugly bastard and Hogwarts. There's nothing between him and Britain either.

I'm glad you three had the sense to get out of dodge before the shite hit the fan, because it's about to get bad here. Really bad.

Watch your backs, and gods, I'm so sorry.

Love,

Bill

Harry read the note and wrote back that it was Regulus Black who sacrificed himself for the diadem. Gods. What a brave man.

He also sent Bill a note of reassurance not to blame himself for Dumbledore's death. It was Snape's fault, not Bill's.

And gods help him, it hurt so much.

He kept writing so as not to think of it.

Honesty, Dumbledore is such an arsehole, it doesn't surprise me in the least that he forced a house elf to take the poison. Kreacher told us that Snape had to warn the school of an attack because the old man didn't give a toss about anyone.

I... I don't understand that. Why warn the school, then kill the old goat, much as he probably had it coming? It makes no sense.

Harry took a shuddering breath and forced his attention back to what he could help with.

Anyway, the potions I'm sending should help the elf. The one that looks like a prism is called Aurora General Antidote and is a potent cure for most poisons. The opalescent
one is called Sunshine Elixir, and it's a powerful healing potion. The yellow one with a silvery sheen is called Dawn Elixir, and it's a potent mental healing potion. They're all my inventions. They have holy blood and tears: mine.

Keep that to yourself, please. I would be in incredible danger if anyone from the Dark worked it out.

At any rate, the potions should, at least, help the elf recover.

I'm also sending along a phial of my blood. Mad as it sounds, feed it to him or mix it in the potions. Trust me, it'll help. A lot.

And don't blame yourself, Bill. You were petrified, and none of us saw this coming.

We love you.

Harry

P.S. Whatever you do, don't kill Snape. Regardless of his guilt, the fact of the matter is if he dies, I die, too. And Kreacher… it just doesn't make sense, Bill. Just… try to keep the Order off his back, please. At least until we can think of a way to keep him out of trouble that won't hurt me.

He folded the letter, attached a bag full of potions and his blood, all carefully labelled and warded, and sent his reply with a subdued Hedwig.

Once she had gone, he picked up Bill's letter and called to his housemates. "Everyone, come into the living room. Bill sent us a letter."

The others came running. Hermione grabbed Harry's hands. "Did he… is there any hope?"

Harry closed his eyes and looked away.

Hermione gave a stifled sob. "Oh, Harry…"

Harry cringed. "Please, don't. I… we have more important things to focus on right now, and I… I need to move on."

In theory, at least, as there was nothing for him to move on to.

He forced his grief aside and stood tall. "Bill and Dumbledore investigated the cave before they went to the school last night, and the diadem wasn't in there. It turns out the cave they were searching was the underground lake Kreacher remembered. All they found was Regulus' locket and a note from Regulus telling Voldemort to go to hell, essentially."

He passed the note to Kreacher. Kreacher lowered his head and rubbed his chest.

"Kreacher, would you like me to ask Bill to send us the locket?"

Kreacher nodded and blinked great tears down his face. "Kreacher would like to be seeing it once more."

Harry patted his shoulder. "We'll send pig with a note in a bit. Hedwig already took my reply." He sank onto the arm of the sofa beside the house elf. "So, this means we're down a horcrux. We have
no leads on the diadem. Any suggestions?"

Hermione winced. "I… did Bill say where the cave was?"

"Near Cole Orphanage."

"You-Know-Who's orphanage?" Ron frowned. "Every hiding place he's picked so far has some kind of significance to him. The orphanage, the Gaunt house, his snake, and he left two with his favorite minions. So… I can't help but think this last place must also have a tie to him."

Hermione gasped. "Oh gods, it's so obvious. Voldemort has chosen artefacts from every founder save one. Where better to hide them but Hogwarts?"

"And Hogwarts has the biggest tie of all." Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "I think you must be right, Hermione, but that still leaves us with a problem. Hogwarts is huge. It could still take us weeks to find it, and we can't really go near the place until we're ready to fight. So what do we do?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not sure there's much else we can do, Harry."

Dobby piped up, "Dobby will looks for it!"

"Yeah, you do that, Dobby, please." Ron winced. "But be careful. The ring cursed Dumbledore, so if you do find it, don't touch it."

"Actually, Dobby, hold that thought." Harry looked to his bonded elves. "Winky, please find the diadem, if you're willing. Don't touch it. Just find it."

Winky screwed up her nose, winced, and started bashing her head on the table.

"Winky!" Harry caught her into his arms. "Shite, I'm so sorry. Are you hurt?"

She looked a bit dazed, so Harry summoned a house elf sized Sunshine Elixir for her. Winky took it in shaking hands.

"Winky is not being able to find it, Master Harry. It is being warded against house elves."

Harry winced. "If I asked you to break the wards?"

"Winky thinks she is not being able to do that either."

"Damn. Well, it's all right, Winky. Thank you. Are you still sore?"

"No, Master Harry. Your potion is fixing it."

"Good." Harry guided her back to Dobby with a sigh. "That means you probably can't find it either, Dobby, doesn't it?"

Dobby turned his hands over and over. "There is being a chance, Master Harry. Because Dobby is part goblin, maybe…"

Ron cocked his head. "Will it hurt you to look?"

"No, Master Ron. Dobby doesn't think so."

"Well, then you're welcome to try," said Harry, "but after what happened to Winky, I'm not going
"Dobby is searching on his own, Master Harry."

"Thank you." Harry sank into the armchair with a sigh. "It's just never easy, is it?"

"Winning a war generally isn't," said Ron in a sorrowful voice. "I'm sorry, mate. I wish I had the answers."

Harry slumped back into his chair with a sigh. "Yeah. So do we all."

Lucius sat in Severus' quarters, sharing a bottle of scotch between them. Well, part of a bottle. Both men desperately needed something to take the edge off, but drinking to excess in the presence of the dark lord and all his minions—Pettigrew in particular—would get them killed.

Or worse.

Lucius sipped his scotch and stared at the ceiling. "So you are a spy."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You knew this."

"Allow me to rephrase: you are *their* spy while the entire world believes you to be Dark. A triple agent for the Light."

Severus stilled with his glass halfway to his mouth. "Why do you say this? I fulfilled the dark lord's plan, did I not?"

"Hmm. And you did *not* report my own change in loyalty."

"Perhaps, as you said, it is simply loyalty to a former friend, after a fashion."

"Or perhaps it is more."

Severus set his glass down and peered into Lucius' eyes. The man had his shields high, but Severus had other methods of finding the answers he needed.

Twenty years ago, he had learned the hard way never to doubt his intuition, and he refused to make the same mistake twice.

Severus sent a small tendril of his aura out and let it blend with Lucius'. The man tensed, eyes narrowed, but Severus' magic would not harm him. Perhaps Lucius sensed it, as the next moment, he relaxed and sipped his scotch.

"See for yourself then."

Hmm. How had Lucius sensed Severus' powers? No human ever had before, not even Albus. Strange.

Severus glanced to the man's silver blonde hair, an unusual colour indeed. Perhaps Lucius was not entirely human after all.

Regardless of his magical race, however, Severus' skills revealed one thing: his honesty. Whatever Lucius had been once, this harrowing year on the fringes of the dark lord's ranks had shaken him into a new person. Guile and greed had given way to disillusionment and remorse.
And determination. Hmm. Perhaps this Malfoy could be trusted after all. A surge of intuition confirmed it, and Severus let his powers go.

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, I am a triple agent."

Lucius set his glass down. His hands trembled, but he laid them flat on the table to hide it.

"I want in."

Severus nearly choked to death on his scotch. "P-pardon me?"

"I said I want in, Severus. I want to help you take this monster down before we are all destroyed for his bloodlust and greed."

Severus cleared his throat and blinked his watering eyes. Lucius cast a charm to ease his burning oesophagus and coughing.

"Thank you." Severus shook himself and forced his voice steady. "You do realise you are, most likely, signing your own death warrant? I know without a doubt my own death will come soon. Within the year, probably. I am ready for it. Hell, I will embrace it when it comes for me, but you have a family, Lucius."

Lucius closed his eyes. "He tortured Narcissa last night, Severus. She is not even involved in this war, and he tortured her for nothing more than boredom and to remind me of my disgrace. I had to watch her bleed, listen to her scream—the mother of my child and the only woman I have ever loved—for nothing more than one man's love of torture and power."

Severus swallowed hard. He had never been in love—no, the one time he had dared try for a romantic liaison had scarred him irrevocably—but he tried to imagine it then. He imagined someone he loved dearly suffering for his sins.

Gods help him, it hurt.

His mind traveled back in time, to a broken house and a friend he had once adored, dead along with his abuser, her tiny son left orphaned and forever scarred.

His breath hitched as he saw Harry kneeling in Narcissa's place, not because he wanted to submit—no, Harry would never kneel to the dark lord on his own will—but because the pain had forced him to seek a stronger ballast for his injured, bleeding legs. He imagined Harry stripped and humiliated, bleeding from every inch of his hide. He imagined the boy fighting anyway, struggling to stand on legs that wouldn't support him, refusing to bow, refusing to bend. In his mind, he heard the lash of the whip and the splatter of blood. The small, stifled keens of pain Harry couldn't help, but never a scream, not until the pain tore them, unwilling, from his throat. He saw the silver of tears streaking the blood on Harry's face, the blood under his fingernails from fighting not to show his vulnerability, and he saw him succumb to it, eventually, as they all did, in the end.

And his magic blazed. Fuck, no.

Perhaps Severus did not love the boy as Lucius loved his wife, but he had given twenty years of
his life for him anyway, and this past year had shaken Severus into a new person, too. A person capable of seeing Harry for the hero he was, regardless of his heritage. Severus would sooner die himself than watch Harry suffer for his sins.

He shook off his terrible imaginings and nodded to Lucius. "Then welcome to the Light, Lucius. Would that I could say the rest of it will open its arms to you, but we shall be fortunate to die quietly, much less receive a hero's welcome."

"I no longer care, Severus. I sacrificed the blood of far too many others to chase the fickle glory of power and prestige, and it has brought me and all whom I love to ruin. If I must suffer to erase the scourge that warped me from this world, if I must pay in blood to see the evil that broke my wife and son defeated, then it is nothing more than I deserve."

Severus raised his glass. "To heroism in darkness, no matter the cost."

Lucius shared the toast. "To dying as heroes, whatever the world believes of us."

Severus sipped his scotch and took some small comfort in knowing that, while the night was bleak and cold, he no longer had to face the darkness alone.
Harry is still lost in angst city, but he finally finds some hope for himself. And a shock.

Chapter 22

Harry's seventeenth birthday had come. Or rather, it would come in twenty minutes. He moved towards the back door with a grimace. At the stroke of midnight, he would be engulfed with holy fire, and he had no desire to set their cottage ablaze. Best to move outside and take to the air, where he wouldn't hurt anything.

He opened his mouth as he passed the entryway to the living room, thinking he should tell Ron and Hermione where he was going, but he snapped it shut again at the sight of them. Hermione sat in Ron's lap, straddling his hips. He had his hands under her blouse and stroking her waist, and she was unbuttoning his collar and snogging the life from him.

Definitely not the time to interrupt.

Ears and face on fire, Harry tiptoed away and wrote a note instead. He placed it on the table, weighted it with a mug, and slipped out of the house.

Gods. So Ron and Hermione had moved on to real snogging now. They wouldn't have sex anytime soon—Hermione had confessed to Harry that her parents had asked her to wait until her eighteenth birthday, at least, and she wanted to obey—but they had already come far closer to it than Harry ever would. Outside of his dreams, at any rate.

He wished he could shut them off. Making love to Severus all night and waking to the knowledge that he had betrayed them all was breaking Harry to bits, but according to all the resources he had seen, they would only stop when he and Severus both acknowledged the mate bond, for better or worse.

So, never.

Perhaps it wasn't all bad. Harry could pretend, for those few precious hours every night, that he had a mate and a family. He saw Severus' gentle side in his dreams and loved him for it.

If only the reality didn't hit him like a goddamn sledgehammer every morning, maybe the dreams would help him cope.

Harry shook his head viciously. He had sworn not to think about it anymore, hadn't he? It was only hurting him to dwell on it, and yet, his dreams refused to let him do anything else.
He hunched his shoulders and kicked at the ground. "Damn it, Severus, just leave me alone. Let me go on in peace if you're determined to be a bastard."

Was he, though? Kreacher's reports didn't always make sense. Kreacher couldn't find Severus' rooms, but he had found his house elf, and while Hippa wouldn't reveal Severus' secrets, she did tell Kreacher Severus was unhappy. And, even now, she insisted he was a worthy man. A *Hogwarts* elf.

Why? Severus had killed her headmaster. Why did she remain loyal to him and him alone?

Harry couldn't make the pieces fit, and it hurt like hell to try, so, most days, he did his best to ignore the gaping hole in his heart and the blatant inconsistencies in Severus' behaviour. It was easier to focus on other things, anything but his mate and his betrayal.

At least until something like this plunged him straight back into despair.

He shouldn't feel like this. He should be happy for his friends, but at the moment, he only felt the stark, bleeding void of his broken heart and bleak future.

"Happy birthday to me," he muttered to the night.

With a sigh, he dragged himself to the lawn beside the chicken coop. He placed a sight and sound ward around himself so his fire wouldn't scare them to death, sat on the dew-damp grass, and waited.

He glanced to his watch. Five minutes to midnight. Harry watched the seconds count down, remembering years past. He always ended up like this on his birthday, watching the minutes tick down alone. At least he could do so in his own house from now on, surrounded by flowers and trees and the beauty of nature.

There was some kind of joy in that, he supposed, if everything else felt hollow at the moment.

Ten… nine… eight…

Harry stood and spread his wings. Just as his watch hands aligned, he shot into the air.

His skin heated as white flames surrounded him. They started at his toes and worked their way up his body, leaving both his skin and his clothing unharmed. Then, the fire hit his scar, and all hell broke loose. *Literally*.

Agony ripped through his forehead, split his skull like a cleaver slammed between his eyes, and everything faded to a red-grey wash of pain. Somewhere inside him, he registered the whistling wind and his clothes whipping about in the flames. *Shite!* He flapped his wings just in time to turn a lethal drop into a tumble. He hit the ground hard enough to bruise and knock the wind out of him, but nothing had broken, at least.

He lay on his back, gasping air into his aching lungs, and tried to work out just what the fuck had happened to him. A vision? No, he couldn't see a thing beyond the night sky and white fire.

Then, with an unearthly shriek, a haze of black smoke rose from his forehead, writhed in the fire, and turned to ash.

Black smoke with red eyes and a noseless face.

"Holy fuck! I… I had a goddamn *horcrux* in my scar?"
Harry shuddered and folded in on himself. Oh gods. Oh *gods*. The night Riddle died the first time… part of his broken soul must have latched onto Harry when he fled. If Harry hadn't been a Sunguard, if he hadn't just been immolated in holy fire, he would have had to die to end the war. *Fuck.*

Harry pulled his knees to his chest as the flames flickered and faded into nothing, leaving no trace. The grass had even survived. It must have been some sort of spiritual fire.

But did that mean Harry was still a horcrux? No, probably not. They were bits of souls, after all.

Still, maybe he should test it.

He staggered to his feet and summoned the horcrux pouch they had made for the locket. His hands trembled as he levitated the locket out of the pouch and set it on one of the big stepping stones leading to their outdoor swinging two-seater.

The locket trembled, too.

Unnerved, Harry stepped back and swallowed bile. Gods. That vile thing really did have something human in it.

Harry's feathers fluffed in revulsion and dread, but he stood tall and aimed one hand at the locket, preparing to call his fire.

He stopped dead before he cast.

An image of Severus stepped out of the locket and gave him a twisted leer. "I killed Albus Dumbledore!" The imitation of Bellatrix's singsong chant after Sirius' death set Harry's nerves on edge.

"He deserved to die, really. You know he was far more ruthless than I."

Harry took a wobbly step back. "He was the leader of the Light! T-traitor!"

"You do not sound so certain, Potter. Admit it. You had begun to question his honour long ago." Severus gave him a sultry look. "We could be beautiful together, you and I."

Reality crashed into Harry with the force of the Hogwarts Express. He scowled and lifted his hand once more.

"Nice try, *Tom*, but the real Severus Snape would sooner eat flobberworm shite than come on to me. *Let the power of goodness, purity, and light burn away all evil!*" The latter came out in a foreign language; instinct suggested Greek. He would have to ask Hermione.

White fire formed on his fingertips and engulfed the locket horcrux.

'Take that, bastard.'

Riddle-Severus' scream cut Harry to the heart, and the cloud of red-eyed smoke after the false Severus vanished confirmed Harry's worries about his scar. Gods. At least Harry could rest assured that he was safe now, but hearing his mate scream like that, even knowing it wasn't really Severus… *fuck.*

He fell to his knees. The horcrux had melted into a twisted blob of metal and glass, destroyed beyond magical repair, just like Bill had said.
Harry stared at it, tears choking him. Glad as he was to have defeated one more horcrux, the images it had used against him haunted him.

"Why, Severus? Why?"

A sound of birdsong drifted to Harry's ears and eased his pain. Merlin. What kind of bird was that to lift him out of the blackest pits of despair with only a song?

Harry lifted his face and wiped his eyes. He followed the source of the sound to the top of their swing.

A phoenix. A familiar phoenix.

"F-Fawkes?"

The phoenix gave a sad trill and fluttered down to Harry's shoulder. His tail drooped and his head bowed. Harry had the distinct impression the bird was trying to apologise.

"Hey, it's all right. I know you didn't have much choice in your bond to the old man, and he must have been decent once."

Fawkes gave a sorrowful twitter.

"What are you doing here? Not that I'm not glad to see you, but I thought you would leave for good now that Dumbledore is…"

Fawkes ruffled his feathers and squawked in fury. Harry understood.

'Traitor.,'

"Yeah. He really had us all fooled, huh?"

Fawkes gave a low trill, feathers drooping.

"Yeah. I'm sorry, boy. It hurts me, too."

'More than you can possibly know.,'

Fawkes sighed.

Harry scratched under the bird's chin. "Why did you come, Fawkes? Are you just passing through."

The phoenix shook his head sharply.

"Oh." Harry's heart thumped. "Then… you're staying?"

Fawkes chirped and nuzzled Harry's cheek. Harry gulped.

"Oh. You're staying with me from now on, then? Is that why you came tonight?"

Fawkes chirped again and dropped a tear onto Harry's neck. A strange warmth went through him, and some instinctual knowledge told him to reciprocate.

Well, it wasn't as if Harry had any difficulty conjuring tears these days. His pain was good for something, he supposed.

He let a tear fall onto Fawkes' back. It absorbed on contact, and a golden chain of light linked
Harry's heart to Harry's. Harry rubbed the new warmth inside his chest with a smile of wonder.

"Wow. That's brilliant. About time something went right for a change, too."

His new familiar rubbed his cheek.

"I hope you're prepared to deal with a tantrum of epic proportions when Hedwig works out that she has to share me now."

Fawkes gave a twittering sort of laugh.

"You laugh now, but just wait."

Fawkes laughed again, rubbed Harry's cheek, and flew a few feet ahead, towards the boundary of the property. By the way he shimmied his feathers and called to Harry, the sunguard had the impression that Fawkes wanted Harry to follow him.

Harry hesitated. "It's dangerous out there for me, Fawkes. Are you sure it's safe?"

Fawkes puffed out his chest and flapped his wings, a protective gesture, Harry thought.

Harry sighed. "Oh, all right. But if we run into trouble, I'm blaming you."

Fawkes gave his birdy laugh and flew a few more steps ahead. In this manner, Harry followed him through the trees for what felt like hours. The bird led him to a grove of blackberry bushes and wild apple trees Harry had never seen before. He made a mental note of the location with the idea to come here armed with several harvesting baskets in the morning.

Then, he walked past the bushes and into the trees by a brook, and his heart leapt into his throat.

They weren't alone. A man, kneeling by the water, started and stood at their approach. Shite, he was tall!

Wait.

Oh Merlin. That was no man, not with that bow and those long, narrow ears. Pointed ears.

A high elf.

He turned to Harry, expression wary, and Harry's jaw dropped. White hair, glowing, blue-white eyes, and dark, dusky skin? What the hell kind of elf was he?

The elf's alarm melted into a cautious smile. "Ah, hello, Harry Potter. I am Xerides Delune, battlemaster of the night elves. Perhaps you would allow me the pleasure of your company as I escort you home?"

Colored pencil drawing of Xerides
Chapter Summary

Hope you guys like Xeri. He's going to stick around for a bit 😊

Chapter 23

Harry choked. Oh gods. Fawkes had led him straight to a night elf. A night elf who could break Harry like a twig by the look of him.

Shite!

"F-Fawkes?"

The phoenix trilled a gentle tune and hopped onto the elf's shoulder. Xerides gave the bird a gentle pat and smiled at Harry, though his expression held an edge of fear.

Fear? This powerful warrior of an elf feared a scrawny runt of a sunguard? How strange.

"I will not harm you, Harry."

"How do you know my name?"

"There are few who do not."

Harry couldn't deny that, though he hadn't imagined his bloody fame had stretched all the way to the high elves' ears. Damn.

"If you're here for an autograph, you're out of luck. I tend not to carry quills on forest jaunts."

Xerides laughed unabashedly. "You have an entire set of them on your back! But no, I am not here to pester you for your fame. At one time, I had more than enough of it myself. Not so much in recent years, when it is unsafe for my kind. Not among humans, at least."

Harry frowned. "All right. Why are you here then? And why did Fawkes lead me to you?"

Xerides' expression turned solemn. "I know of your mission, Sunbearer Potter, and I would like to help if you will allow it."

Harry froze. "And what mission is that?"

"You have no need to fear. I know of your race and mission only because the elder of the Night Clan is a powerful seer, and he warned me I would be needed. No one has betrayed you, and all I wish to do is help you fight your battles."
Harry sensed the elf's honesty and relaxed.

So he wanted to help? Gods knew they needed it. And an elf like this could surely train them, and do it well.

A night elf though. Harry had heard stories of them.

Then again, those same tales had been utterly wrong about him. Twelve feet tall indeed. This Xerides person towered over Harry. Merlin. He had to be six and a half feet if he was an inch.

Yet, despite his size and powerful frame, Xerides didn't give off a threatening aura. No, Harry got a sense of kindness and gentle patience from the elf, though he had no doubt Xerides could be a dire threat when he wanted to be.

So could Harry, come to think of it.

Right. Time to judge how much of what he knew of night elves had any merit. He examined the elf, who was waiting patiently on an answer, to see if the paintings in *One Hundred Semi-Human Beings and When to Avoid Them* at all matched the reality.

Harry craned his neck and started at the top. Xerides' eyes, for all that their moonlight glow covered any hint of iris or pupil, were beautiful. He followed the glow down the elf's high cheekbones and Greek nose to his hesitant smile.

For a warrior, he certainly acted shy.

His skin was far lighter than the paintings had portrayed, a dusky rose-brown colour rather than pitch black. A cool, muted tone, still light enough to show the faint blush on his cheeks, if only just. And his teeth looked human, no fangs in evidence.

Faint scars crisscrossed his skin here and there—not surprising of a warrior—but nothing suggested cruelty or a life of evil. His slim waist and strong legs lacked the ridiculously disproportionate characteristics of the paintings, and his hands, as the elf opened and closed them in what was clearly a nervous habit, bore no evidence of curved claws, but only neatly-trimmed fingernails.

Well, the paintings had clearly been rubbish.

Harry returned his gaze to the elf's face to find him biting his lip and blushing a sort of bright burgundy colour. Not red, not with his skintone, but it was definitely a blush. His ears had folded back, too, much like Dobby's did when he caught Winky watching him.

Oh damn. Did Xerides think…? Well, now Harry had gone and done it.

"Er… I wasn't, um…." No, that would only make the situation worse. "It's just that my books…." Oh, that was definitely a bad idea. "Uhm… n-never mind."

His ears burned as he turned away and called for one of his house elf friends. "Dobby!"

To his surprise, Dobby gasped at the sight of the warrior elf and raced to hug his legs. "Master Xerides! Dobby is not seeing you since he was an elfling!"

Xerides' eyelids crinkled at the corners. He had to bend nearly double to reach the house elf, but he patted Dobby's shoulder anyway and smiled at him.
"And how are you? I remember you were… quite fearful of your upcoming assignment when I saw you last. Was it quite as bad as you expected?"

Dobby shuddered. "No, it was being far worse."

Xerides' expression twisted in grief. "I am so sorry."

"It is being all right now, Master Xerides. Master Harry is saving me. I is a free elf now, but it does not hurt me like it is hurting my kin. Dobby is having too much goblin in him to suffer from being free."

Xerides gave Harry a respectful nod. "Thank you for helping him."

Harry snapped his gaping mouth shut. "Er… you're welcome? Are you two friends?"

"Dobby is knowing Battlemaster Xerides since he was tiny," said the house elf. "Dobby is living with the goblins before he is going to his former master, and Master Xerides is coming often to speak to us after he is done training his goblin clients. They is liking Master Xerides a lot, and so does Dobby. He will be helping Master Harry much if you is letting him."

Harry gave Xerides an assessing look. "Hmm. How do you intend to help me?"

Xerides inclined his head. "I am a famed warrior among my kin, Master Potter. As Dobby said, my job is to train new warriors. I can teach you and your allies to fight in ways no human has known for millennia. I ask only that you do not use these weapons against my kin or teach them to other humans without my consent."

Harry looked to Dobby.

"You's can trust him, Master Harry. Xerides is a good elf, like your Wheezy is a good human. We are being kin, you know. We can tell."

Harry sighed. "All right. But you might need those warrior skills to protect your arse, Xerides, when Hermione sees me bringing in a stranger."

Dobby shook his head. "Mistress Hermione is being too interested in learning about Master Xerides' race and history to attack. Master Ron is being the one you is needing to watch out for."

Xerides chuckled and followed Harry back to the house.

Dobby was, of course, correct.

"Oi! Mate, where have you been? We…." Ron, standing near the swing, gasped as he finally noticed Harry's companion. "What the hell? Who is… is that a night elf?"

Ron shot a light spell at Xerides, but the elf dodged it quicker than Harry would have given anyone credit for, and Harry stepped in front of the second volley.

"Ron. Cut it out. He's an ally."

Xerides' ears went back, a faint blush dusted his cheeks, and his eyes widened. He gave Harry a brief look of shock and wonder before returning his attention to Ron, but that glance made Harry wonder if anyone had ever stepped in the breach for his night elf companion.

Ron cried, "He's a bloody night elf! Don't you remember anything about them?"
No. Judging by Ron's behaviour, Xerides had probably never been protected at all. Or at least, not often, and not by humans, though Harry wasn't sure he counted as human anymore. Still, Xerides had to be used to being attacked and treated like shite, if this was how humans responded to the mere sight of him.

No wonder he had learned to fight.

"Yes, I remember," Harry said, voice steady and low. "And if you take two seconds to actually look at him, you might see the books are rubbish."

Ron hesitated. "Er…"

Harry gave Xerides an apologetic look. "I'm sorry about that, you know. It's just that I can't risk bringing anyone untrustworthy near our home."

Xerides' expression was gentle. "I had thought it must be something along those lines." But his ears fanned back anyway. From Harry's experiences of his house elf friends, he recognised the gesture as a sign of embarrassment, but not shame. His ears would have gone downwards, too, with a strictly negative emotion.

Ron huffed. "Well, why are you bringing in a night elf then if you know that? The books said—"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Those same books that said Sunguards were all twelve feet tall and built like gods?"

Ron flushed. "Er… well…."

"Enough, Ron," said Hermione. "If this night elf was anything like the books said, he would have already attacked. Especially after you attacked him. Twice!"

"I am well-used to such greetings from wizards," Xerides said in a soft, sorrowful tone. "At least within the past fifteen-hundred years."

Harry jolted. "Fifteen-hundred? Um… is it terribly rude to ask how old you are? Of course it is. Don't mind me."

Xerides chuckled. "I do not mind. I was born in the year 514 BC."

"So you're…?"

"Twenty-five-hundred and eleven years old," Hermione supplied. "Well, approximately. Timekeeping wasn't very accurate in ancient times. Gods, how much you must have seen! Not many of our historical records are accurate, but you were there. Oh, please talk to me. Tell me—"

Her eyes glowed with the pursuit of hidden knowledge, and Harry cut her off to spare Xerides an hours-long question and answer session.

"Not the time, 'Mione. Xerides is here to help us train for the war."

Xerides laughed softly. "Your house elf friend certainly had your companions, ah, pegged, as it were."

Harry snorted. "He did at that."

Hermione cocked her head. "What did you say, Dobby?"

Dobby grinned. "That you is being too interested in learning about Xerides to attack, but Master
Ron is being too interested in attacking to learn."

Ron flushed. "Well, what am I supposed to think? We're in danger, and everything I've ever heard says night elves are evil."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "The Ministry also wants everyone to believe werewolves are uncontrollable fiends who want to eat us all, and that vampires are entirely driven by bloodlust and will devour humans on sight."

Ron grimaced. "Well, they might have a point about vampires…"

"They don't. There was a vampire at Slughorn's Christmas do. I actually talked with him a bit. He was a bit odd, but nice, and he certainly didn't try to bite me on sight, nor did he use any of the girls as virgin blood sacrifices to power his coven."

Hermione snorted. "Of course not, though I'm not sure how many actually qualified—"

Harry shuddered. "More than I needed to know, thanks!"

Xerides laughed again. "Your friends are quite fun, Mister Potter, if not entirely friendly to my people."

"Harry, please."

"And Hermione."

Ron glared. Hermione elbowed him.

"Oh, fine. Call me Ron, then. But if you think I'm letting you anywhere near us in the training room…"

"Do your worst, Ron," said Harry wryly. "He's a twenty-five-hundred year old battlemaster. I reckon he can handle it."

Ron paled. "Harry, are you mad? He'll kill you and then—"

"Ron, really. Enough. If Xerides wanted to kill me, he had plenty of opportunity on the way over."

Xerides shook his head. "And there is not much I could do to kill a Sunguard regardless, at least not without finding his mate first, and I am positive neither of you are his mate."

"Unfortunately," Harry muttered.

Xerides shot him a bemused look.

"Long story." That Harry couldn't bear to get into with a virtual stranger anyway. "Look, it's been a rough day. I've already been doused in holy fire, killed two horcruxes—"

Hermione gasped. "Two?"

Ron hissed, "And don't you think we should keep that a bloody secret anyway?"

Harry rubbed his forehead. "Merlin. Fawkes."

His phoenix trilled and flew down from the trees, where he had been observing the confrontation. He landed on Harry's shoulder and nuzzled his cheek.
"Oh my god," Hermione breathed. "Harry, is it really…?"

"Yeah. Fawkes came to me a little while ago while you two were… uh… busy." Harry blushed, and so did his friends. "And, um, he led me right to Xerides. Dobby knows him, too, and says that elves have a sense about who of their kin is safe to trust. So I trusted Dobby, my phoenix, and my own eyes and brought Xerides here. And I'm sure he would appreciate it if we could move beyond the third degree and get to training before sunrise." Harry gave the night elf a searching look. "Forgive the question, as it's clear our only resources are rubbish, but is it true that night elves are burned by the sun?"

The corners of Xerides' eyes crinkled with mirth. "I imagine the same might be said of any of us if we stay within its light too long without protection."

Hermione laughed. "He got you there, Harry."

Harry grinned. "Fair enough. But you can be in sunlight for a while then without being hurt?"

"Yes, though my powers are far weaker during the day, and it is true that it will drain me if I stay out in the brightest hours of the day too long. In that state, too much direct sunlight can, indeed, burn me, but simply moving into the shade is enough to make do until my powers return."

"Your powers?"

"I am... not quite a squib in daylight hours, but my magic and strength is severely curtailed, so you are correct that we should train soon, before my power drains and your weariness comes down against you."

Harry nodded. "Thanks. We'll get right to it, then."

"Wait." Ron eyed the elf nervously. "Just... might we test him with some Veritaserum first? Please. You're my brother and my girlfriend. I wouldn't let anyone I wasn't sure of train you, night elf or human."

Xerides' ears dropped down and his posture tensed. Fear. Harry laid a gentle hand on his arm, but Xerides jolted so strongly, Harry wondered if his touch had burned him.

"Oh gods! Did I hurt you? Shite, it's because I'm a Sunguard, isn't it? Merlin. Will my blood or tears help or hurt you worse?"

At Harry's frightened babbling, Xerides looked up, expression soft and cheeks flushed.

"I am not injured. Forgive me. It has been so long since anyone save my Elder and cousin have touched me outside of battle, and even my cousin has been traveling for over a century. I was only startled, Harry."

Harry's heart panged. 'Filthy little freak, bringing your foul unnaturalness into our home. Stay away, Duddykins! Don't touch him, you nasty little deviant!' He took a harsh breath and struggled for control. "I understand. A bit."

Xerides' ears dropped again. "You do?"

"Yeah."

Hermione whispered, "Oh, Harry."
He pretended not to hear.

"Sorry, Xerides. I only meant to comfort you. You looked scared."

Ron scowled. "Afraid we'll find out your secrets?"

Hermione snapped, "Ron! Enough!"

"No," Xerides murmured, ears flat against his skull. "I am afraid your potion will poison me. I am not human, and my biology is not the same."

Harry winced. "Is there a way to tell? And do we even have Veritaserum?"

"I might have brewed some for questioning death eaters if necessary," said Hermione with a blush. "And if the sun drains his powers, I'm sure he's right and it will poison him. It has sunbloom in it."

Xerides shuddered. "It is lethal to my kind, then."

"Convenient," Ron muttered. "Can't handle anything good, can you?"

Xerides' head bowed and his cheeks flushed. This time, Harry was sure it was shame. Harry tentatively touched the night elf's hand. Xerides jumped and stared at his hand, but did not withdraw. Harry closed his fingers around Xerides' palm, and the flush on the elf's face darkened.

"Why?"

"Because he hurt you, and you needed to know you aren't alone."

"It is nothing I have not heard said before. And often, at that. For the past millennia, I have been reviled by every human I meet, save only your friend here."

"Oh," Hermione breathed. "Do you not have friends among your own kind, Xerides?"

"A few. And there is my cousin, Torasi, but I have not seen him in... it has been over a hundred years. Elves live so long, we tend to forget to keep in touch, and as I train many races, I am not in the Night Forest as often as I might like." His face flushed again. "Harry is the first person to touch me in a gentle manner in... I have forgotten how long. Decades, at the least."

Harry found himself wanting to share that kind of comfort with Xerides. Merlin knew he understood what it was to be entirely alone in the world.

Though he felt a little awkward about it, he didn't release Xerides' hand. Slowly, Xerides' fingers closed upon his own.

"Well, obviously he can bear something good." Hermione speared Ron with a dark look that boded ill for him later. "Or did you forget that evil can't bear to touch a Sunguard?"

"Oh!" Harry had certainly forgotten. Good barometer for testing new people, that.

Ron flushed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Oh. Right. Shite."

Hermione snorted. "Yes, you are in it deep right now."

"Peace," Xerides said, his voice soft. "I expected no less, and this..." He lifted Harry's hand, still held in his own. "Is a comfort I had not dreamed I would find. I am content. Please, do not fight over me. He is only trying to protect those he loves. It is a trait I respect rather than otherwise, even
when I am always on the other side of the experience. At least for the past thousand years or so.”

A sharp jolt of protectiveness surprised Harry. 'I don’t want him to be alone anymore.'

Xerides gave him a stunned look, then a shy smile, and Harry wondered if he had heard.

"Are you a mind mage by any chance?"

Xerides blushed and dropped his ears. "Forgive me. I did not intend to eavesdrop. It is difficult not to hear thoughts that carry strong emotion when I am not occluding. And I find I am loath to block my own emotional response at the moment."

Harry blushed. He let Xerides’ hand go, but stayed at his side.

"Thank you," the elf whispered. "I…." He shook his head and fanned his ears back. "Thank you."

Harry smiled. "You're welcome. Um, but will you teach me mind magic, too? Riddle is a powerful Legilimens, and he has a history of turning his mind mages against me."

In retrospect, maybe it was a blessing that Snape had refused to teach Harry. If he had ever uncovered the secret of Harry's race—or recognized himself in Harry's dreams—Merlin help them all.

"I would be happy to train you," Xerides said, "but deep trust is essential. It may, perhaps, be best to wait a while before we begin."

Harry already trusted him, but maybe not well enough, not yet. And he had no idea if Xerides felt at all the same.

"Fair enough. Then, shall we go to the training room and begin?"

Hermione stood akimbo and glared at Ron. "Yes, shall we?"

Ron sighed. "All right, all right. Let's go then."

Harry motioned Xerides to follow them inside and protected him from behind. Fawkes flew up to the night elf’s shoulder and hitched a ride with him.

"Well, there's as good a sign as any that we can trust him," said Harry. 'Though I already did.'

Xerides' ears swiveled back again, and Harry grinned at his shy embarrassment. Who knew a famed warrior could be such a teddy bear?

One training session later, Harry had revised his opinion. Thoroughly.

Xerides helped him up from where he had just blasted Harry into the far wall. "I think this is enough for one night. Are you injured?"

Harry groaned. "The good news is my tears of agony will heal it."

Xerides' ears dropped. "Forgive me. I tried to be gentle. I will—"

"That was going easy?" Ron grimaced. "Merlin save us. We're not going to survive training."

Xerides winced. "I…."
Harry inched his aching arm forwards and took Xerides' wrist. The elf jumped again, but some of the shame and fear left his eyes at Harry's touch.

"Easy, Xerides. Ron's just whinging, and I was trying to make a joke. We're a little banged up, yeah, but no one is seriously injured, and if your training keeps us alive, then a few bumps and bruises are definitely worth it. Besides, I really can heal us."

He staggered to Ron. "Diffindo Minimus!" The small cut in his wrist hurt, and Ron flinched at the drops of blood Harry let fall in his mouth, but the boy's bruises began to recede as soon as he swallowed.

"That is more than a little disturbing," said Ron with a shudder. "But it does work."

Hermione caught a few drops on her finger and swallowed without complaint. "Your blood doesn't taste of blood. It's like… oranges or something like it, believe it or not."

"Huh." Ron took another drop. "No, it tastes like cherries to me."

Harry tasted it and grimaced. "Tastes bloody to me. And it doesn't work much."

Xerides watched in interest. "Well, you are already full of your own blood."

Harry nodded. "Do you need…?"

The elf chuckled wryly. "No, Harry."

"That bad, were we? Sano."

The cut healed. Harry summoned a phial of a healing potion he had infused with his tears and blood. The blood wouldn't help, but his tears would. Strangely.

"You were as any warrior who has never had formal training would be," said Xerides. "Better, actually, than I had expected. You have a natural talent for battle, Harry, and that you have taken great pains to train your friends is obvious. Well done."

Harry flushed. "Thanks."

"That said, you all have quite a lot of room to grow. I shall return tomorrow night, I think. Until then, please rest."

"Yes, sir," said Harry. "But come the next night, please. Tomorrow is Ron's brother's wedding, and we'll all be exhausted when we get back."

Xerides nodded. "The night after, then."

"Thanks. You're bloody brutal on the battlefield, you know? I feel a hell of a lot safer knowing you're on our side."

Xerides smiled, revealing a hint of his shy nature outside of the training room. "I am glad, too."

Harry squeezed the elf's arm. "Thank you, Xerides. We learned loads. Now go home and rest before the sun rises, so you're not left vulnerable."

Xerides smiled brighter. "It is good to have someone who considers my needs. Thank you. I shall do as you have asked and meet you again two nights from now, at moonrise."
"Yeah. See you then."

Xerides bid them farewell and left. As soon as he had gone, Harry dragged himself to the living room and slumped onto the sofa with a groan.

"Dear gods, the man is an absolute *demon* in battle."

Ron snorted and dropped into the chair beside Harry. "Yeah, but he'll save our arses in the end."

"Glad you finally worked that out." Hermione sank into the sofa by Harry's feet, and he drew up his legs to give her room. "Well, now that training is over and none of us are dead, tell me what you meant earlier about destroying *two* horcruxes today."

Harry winced, called in their house elf friends, and started the story of his scar.

_Harry tries to work out if Xerides is trustworthy or not and embarrasses him. Pen and ink._
Holy Matrimony

Chapter Summary

Bill gets married. The Weasleys are fun. Angst is not.

Chapter 24

Holy Matrimony

The next morning, Harry apparated to the Burrow with his friends, elves included, though he worried about leaving Severus unguarded.

"Kreacher," he murmured as they made their way to the front door, "what's Severus up to?"

"Kreacher does not know, Master. He is in his hidden quarters at Malfoy Manor. Kreacher cannot enter them, but I am asking Master Severus' house elf friend to keep him safe while I's cannot. She is watching over him."

"Then you should be okay to stay for the wedding. You have a monitoring charm on him, right?"

Kreacher nodded. "Kreacher will know if he leaves his quarters or if anyone enters them."

"Good. Then let's not worry about him for a bit and go meet the family."

Kreacher nodded, and the group followed Harry inside.

"Oh, Ron!" Molly charged them at the door and swept her youngest son into a bone-crushing hug. "Merlin, how I have missed you!"

Ron's ears turned red. "I'm all right, Mum. Really. The cottage is safe."

She pulled back, tears on her lashes, and held his face. "Dear me, look how much you've grown! Any taller, young man, and I'll need a ladder to kiss you." She tiptoed to kiss his cheeks and let him go.

Ron returned her greeting, though he squirmed and turned crimson. "Er… thanks for feeding us and all that, Mum. Um… did we do all right on the preserves we sent?"

"Yes, the cherry was fantastic, especially."

She kissed Harry's cheek and swept him into a hug, and Harry's heart thumped. Oh. Was this what it felt like to have a mum?

Molly patted his cheek. "I hear we have you to thank for the harvest at your cottage this year, and quite a lot of its bounty. Well done, Harry, and I am so happy to see you looking so healthy. All that homegrown food is doing wonders for you."

Or any food at all, but Harry wouldn't say that out loud. By the pained smiles on his friends' faces, human and house elf alike, he gathered they were all thinking the same thing anyway.
Molly greeted Hermione in a similar manner and gave their house elves a warm welcome, if she looked bemused to see them.

"Where is everyone?" Ron looked in the kitchen and shook his head. "Merlin, the cake looks incredible, Mum."

Harry peeked at it and had to agree. The delicate, white and pale blue, seven-tiered masterpiece with flowers, fleur de lis, and enchanted fairies flitting about the entire confection would impress anyone. Fleur would love it.

"Why, thank you," Molly said, puffing up in pride.

Winky eyed the cake with a glint of challenge in her eyes, and Harry guessed they could expect Hermione's birthday cake in September to be a masterpiece. He shared a grin with Ron, and the redhead laughed.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at them. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Harry said with an innocent smile. He hoped it was innocent anyway. "The cake really is fantastic. Has Fleur seen it yet?"

Molly ushered them into the living room. "No, not yet. She's been trying to stay away from the main house as much as possible. Bad luck to see the bride before the wedding and all that, but she's relaxing that tradition to see you three before the ceremony. We're all so happy to have you home."

Harry warmed at her words. Home. Merlin, it felt wonderful to know he had a home with the Weasleys. Even if he couldn't hope to find any semblance of one with Severus now, at least he wouldn't be alone.

A gaggle of redheads and their partners filled the living room to bursting. Fred and Angelina held hands in one corner, and George and Alicia Spinnet chatted beside them. Ginny and Michael Corner, back together, apparently, talked a bit away from the others.

Fleur, dressed in a white slip gown, practically glowed with happiness. Bill stood beside her, his smile tinged with an edge of deep worry. Percy hadn't come, and Harry winced at the shadows his absence left behind. Poor Bill.

Harry waved at the doorway. "Um, hi everyone."

"Harry!"

Among a chorus of their names, the trio soon found themselves buried in hugs and kisses and laughter.

"Air," Harry gasped out with a laugh. "We can't breathe, you sods."

They all laughed and stepped back.

"Merlin, we missed you, mate." Fred nudged Harry's shoulder. "How's the truant life?"

Ron snorted. "Considering Mum has taken it in hand to teach us all in the absence of our professors, not nearly so fun as you might imagine."

Fred grinned. "Rotten luck there, mate."

"My condolences," George added.
"Boys," Molly chided. "If you had taken half the interest in your education that these three have, you might have a responsible position by now."

Fred shuddered. "Perish the thought!"

George gave her a horrified look. "Way to give us nightmares, Mum."

"Us? Responsible? The world would stop turning."

Harry laughed and hugged them both. "Merlin, I could have used you two to keep me from… well, I've missed you, too."

Fred's smile faded. "Harry? You all right?"

Hermione came to his rescue. "Are any of us now?" She shook her head. "Hard to keep a smile on when you're in the middle of a war, but we're not here to talk about that. Catch us up on what we've missed about the family."

Everyone began sharing their news, but after a while, discussion turned back to the war anyway.

"None of know where the Malfoys have gone," said Ginny with a scowl. "Not that we miss them or anything, but when there's a cockroach hanging about, I like to keep an eye on it."

Harry shuddered. "Oh, I know where they are. They're in hiding at their manor, and Riddle is using all three of them as the entertainment at the weekly business dinner."

Ginny huffed. "Serves them right."

"No." Harry closed his eyes, trying to banish the images of Lucius Malfoy pleading for Riddle to torture him in place of his son, only to suffer alongside him. "No one deserves that."

"Oh." Ginny sniffled. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"I… just… maybe we can change the subject? Please?"

"Sure," said George. "How does it feel to be a grown man now?"

Fred rested his elbow on Harry's head. "Well, mostly."

Harry snickered and shoved him off. "Oi! Just because you Weasleys all grow like trees….

Fred chuckled. "Our poor little Harry."

"A bush in a forest of redwoods."

"And somehow—"

"He still manages to steal the show!"

"Prats," Ron said with a laugh. "Leave off. Harry's fine as he is."

"Don't even think of using me as an armrest, too," Harry muttered.

Ron grinned. "I value my life."

"You'd better!"
The others laughed.

Molly squeezed Harry's shoulder. "I'm sorry that we couldn't give you a party, Harry. You were exactly right. The Ministry hovered about the edges of the property all day yesterday. We only managed to run the last of them off an hour or so before you arrived."

"I set stronger wards this morning," said Bill, "but I still don't entirely trust them. You three will need to be polyjuiced for the wedding, I'm afraid."

"We expected that, but..." Harry turned to his elf friends. "Winky, Kreacher, please ward the Burrow so no one but the wedding guests can enter. Make sure no one from the Ministry with ill intent, reporters, death eaters, snatchers, or any of their ilk can get in either."

Winky and Kreacher bowed and popped away.

"Kreacher certainly has cleaned up," said a bemused Molly. "However did you get him to behave properly? And why are they wearing clothes?"

"We got Kreacher to 'behave,'" said a glowering Hermione, "by treating him with kindness and respect. And as for their clothing, house elves can wear and touch clothing that they make themselves."

Ron nodded. "They see giving them human-made clothes as a sign that they aren't wanted, but they can wear elf-made things."

"They love to sew."

"They love to sew." Harry motioned to his wedding robes. "They certainly made short work of my rubbish wardrobe!"

"You look almost respectable now," said George with a wink.

"And how," agreed his twin.

Harry snorted. "Prats! Anyway, Molly, those catalogues we gave you a while back? For Forest House Fashion? That's our business. I handle the finances and inventory, Hermione handles the marketing side, and Ron handles the incoming orders and keeps our supply room topped off. The elves do the rest."

"Merlin!" Fred grinned. "All this time, we've been getting our new joke shirts and eclectic wear from you lot?"

Harry nodded to Dobby.

"Dobby loves making all the funny things for Masters Fred and George," said the elf with a huge grin. "It is keeping Dobby busy, when he is not helping Master Harry and friends with the war!"

The other elves reappeared. "And Winky is making all the dresses," she said with a beaming smile. "Winky is being so happy. It is being a dream come true to sew pretty things as much as Winky wants."

"Kreacher is making the men's clothes," said the elf, "and we is all sharing in making pretty clothing for the children. We is all being happy now."

"That's brilliant," said Ginny. "Luna loves your eclectic line. And I saved up so I could get my dress for the wedding from you." She spun about, showing off her pale yellow gown. "I half want to wear it all the time, it's so comfy."
"They're fantastic, aren't they?" Harry patted Dobby's shoulder. "We originally just started the idea to let them make clothes for themselves, but it just took off from there, and now we have a thriving business. We could use more staff, honestly."

"By Merlin, we know that feeling," said Angelina with a chuckle. "The twins get more business than I can keep up with."

"I wonder…." Fred looked at Winky with a frown. "Do all house elves like to sew?"

"Yes," said Winky. "It is once being what we is known for. And a sign of friendship between us and our families."

George rubbed his chin. "Fred, old boy, I think we haven't been as good to Daisy as we thought."

Fred nodded sadly. "So I see. Daisy!"

A young house elf with a Weasley-red mop of curls and a tea towel toga with the Wheezes logo appeared. "How is Daisy being helping master Fred?"

"This time, Daisy, I think we should help you." Fred patted the seat beside him. "Come here for a minute. Are you happy working with us?"

Daisy paled and grabbed Fred's hands. "Please don't be sending Daisy away! I is working harder! I —"

George rubbed her head. "Easy there. We couldn't manage without your help in inventory. We just… well, Harry and crew brought their elves to the wedding, and it made us think we haven't been doing right by you. Would you like to make some clothing for yourself? Some uniforms and everyday clothes, maybe?"

Daisy swayed. "Masters is letting Daisy make her clothes?"

"And for us, too," said Fred. "Though we're still going to import from Harry's business. Turns out those are all elf-made, Daisy, so you can touch them without being hurt."

"We didn't know you could wear clothes," said a chagrined George, "or we would have let you make yourself some sooner."

Daisy wailed and hugged their legs. "Oh, Daisy is being so happy! Thank you, Masters!"

Fred patted her head. "Do you maybe want to stay for the wedding?"

Daisy beamed through huge tears. "Daisy would be happy to stay!"

"Then it's settled."

Daisy practically vibrated with joy, but her smiles faded at the sight of Harry's well-dressed elves. She looked at her own bare feet and toga, and a shamed blush crossed her face.

Winky stepped forward and offered her hands. "Winky has a dress Daisy might borrow for today, if Master says it is okay?"

Harry patted her shoulder. "That's a great idea, Winky. Go ahead and deck her out."

Fred smiled. "Go on, Daisy. We'll get some fabric and supplies for you after the wedding so you can start making your own things soon."
Daisy hugged his legs and wailed in happiness. Winky led her away when she was more composed.

"You know, Harry," said Fred, "you could make a killing selling clothing for elves and goblins. Goblins love fancy things, and decent people would want to give their house elves clothes without hurting them, if they knew how. Minerva would probably buy uniforms for all the elves and a few day to day things, for example, and I think Hogwarts has over a hundred elves. That would keep your business in the green for a good, long while."

Harry grinned. "I'm sure they would love to help, but Minerva really ought to have her house elves make their own things. Like we said, house elves love to sew, and we already have more business than we can keep up with."

Fred grinned. "Our ickle Harrykins, all grown up and a fellow entrepreneur now." He wiped a fake tear from his eye. "I'm so proud."

"And ickle Ronniekins," said his twin, "finally doing something more profitable than—"

"Don't even think about it," said a glowering Ron.

The group laughed.

Fred grinned and clapped Harry's shoulder. "Seriously, well done, all of you. We'd be willing to give you our stamp of approval, as it were, if you wanted to branch out into house elf clothing."

"A joke shop?" Harry chuckled. "I'm not sure how much it would help, but thank you. We'll talk to them later and see how they feel about it. In the meantime, what else have we missed?"

Bill shook his head. "A lot. I reckon you had best get a wizarding wireless if you haven't already. With You-Know-Who trying to take over, Fred, George, and Lee have been working on getting a news station up and running."

"First password is 'Potter,' of course," said Fred with a wink. "But what we really need to discuss—"

"Is what in the world—"

"Was so bad—"

"That you managed to convince Hermione Granger of all people—"

"To quit Hogwarts and bail, Gred and Forge incognito mode?"

"Though you do get points for style!"

"And for keeping Dumbledore and Snape hopping all this time."

Harry chuckled wanly. "I reckon it's safe enough to reveal some of the truth now, with Dumbledore dead and Snape out of the Order." He stood and took a deep breath. "Revertis."

The Weasleys gasped as one as Harry's golden eyes and red wings made themselves visible.

"Sweet Merlin," Molly breathed, "are you really…?"

"A sunguard," said Ginny with a wan smile. "I've known since last Christmas."
"That's when my wings broke through," said Harry with an apologetic look.

"Mon dieu," said Fleur. "You are lovely, 'Arry. I'ave never seen anozer being before, other zan Professeur Firenze and ze Veela in my family." She spread her own silver-feathered wings and smiled. "We are truly family now, oui?"

Harry smiled back. "Yeah. But speaking of, shouldn't we be getting ready for the wedding?" He reapplied his glamours. "Please, tell no one what I am. All it would take is a little research to reveal my weakness. They don't have to kill me if they can find my mate."

Bill paled. "Dear gods. Harry, is it…?"

Harry nodded grimly.

"Shite." Bill rubbed his forehead with a shaking hand. "Harry…"

Harry hugged him. "It's okay. Well, not okay, but I'll survive."

Bill squeezed his shoulder. "Yes. You will. We'll… work something out."

Harry gave him a wan smile. "Thanks." He turned to the others, taking a moment to look at Michael and Alicia in particular. "Telling anyone what I am would put me in lethal danger. Do I have your vow that you'll keep it quiet, for my sake and that of everyone else?"

Michael nodded, eyes wide. "It's you, isn't it? You have to fight him. You're the only one who can."

Harry nodded. "Unfortunately so, but if anyone finds out who my mate is… well, it wouldn't be too hard to kill me that way."

Alicia shuddered. "Merlin forbid. We'll keep it quiet, Harry. We promise."

"Thank you."

Molly patted his shoulder. "We'll protect you, dear, and the rest of you, Harry is right about the time. We have three hours to get everything ready. Get moving, everyone!"

The Weasleys hopped to it, and Molly dished out their orders.

The wedding was lovely. Fleur had glowed all the way down the aisle, and despite a bit of controversy over her veela wings and heritage, the extended family had accepted her after a little grumbling.

The reception had been… enlightening, too. Harry locked himself in his room and sat on his bed, head in his hands. The more Aunt Muriel had shredded Dumbledore, the more Harry had thought of his mate and wondered if they had missed something. Had Dumbledore's death been the act of evil it appeared, or had Severus been trying to spare them a worse fate?

Harry tugged his copy of advanced potions out of the wardrobe and ran his fingers over the letter. His last tantrum had crinkled and crumpled the parchment, but Harry couldn't bear to throw it out.

With a shudder, he shoved it aside and yanked out a sheet of parchment. His quill shook as he wrote.
S,

_I don't understand you, sir. You killed Dumbledore, but protected the students. Why? Why did you kill him? Why protect the students? Please. I need to understand._

—H

"Kreacher!" The elf appeared with a bow, and Harry handed him the letter. "Please take that to Severus, if you safely can. Hide my trail."

Kreacher bowed and vanished, and Harry waited, staring at his potions book and trying not to fret himself into an early grave.

Kreacher reappeared a few moments later, ears drooping.

"You couldn't deliver it?"

Kreacher sniffled. "Kreacher is asking Hippa to take it to him in his quarters at Malfoy Manor. And… and Hippa is saying he is… burning it, Master."

Harry's heart snapped, but he pushed his pain aside, as he always did these days. "T-thank you for trying, Kreacher."

"Is Master well?"

"I… no. I need a moment. Please."

Kreacher bowed and left, expression grim with worry.

Harry laid his potions book in his lap and tried to read the letter one more time, to give himself some small measure of hope, but his tears blurred the letters.

"Why? Severus, why? Why did you kill him? Why do you hate me so much? And why, in all the realms, did my mate have to be the one man who will never accept me?"

Harry traced the handwriting on the note one more time, closed his book, and shoved it in the back of his wardrobe. It was best that he never take it out again. Even if Severus wasn't the monster the world thought him to be, the man hated him and always would. The second Harry's resolve weakened, the second he was stupid enough to tell Severus the truth was the second Harry would die a brutal death.

He muttered into his pillow, "I wish Xerides was my mate. Or Neville. Or Dean. Anyone other than Severus. And Xerides even has the right kind of magic to balance me."

Harry sniffled and curled into the blankets. "Stop, Harry. Just… stop. I can't have a mate. I… just can't. It's better to be alone."

Even if it tore the heart from him more and more every day.

With another little whimper, Harry buried his face in the pillow and waited for sleep to come.

Severus dragged himself back to his rooms in Malfoy Manor. Or rather, Lucius half-carried him there. Tears had started long ago, and in light of the agony wracking every inch of his body,
Severus hadn't the strength or will to care.

"It's not my fault the Weasleys warded us out," he muttered to Lucius as the man helped him onto his bed. "I do not know how they managed it any more than the dark lord does."

Lucius nodded. "I know. Rest, Severus. I will attempt to heal you."

Severus choked out, "I half wish you wouldn't."

"I know that, too, but I cannot do this alone."

Severus heaved a sigh. "Y-yes. I… thank you, Lucius. For helping me. I do not know if I could face this darkness alone either."

Lucius nodded and set about pouring healing potions into him.

"Thank all the gods they survived." Severus closed his eyes around tears and faded into unconsciousness.

---

Harry bolted up, chest icy cold and aching. Fawkes was twittering over him and dropping tears onto his chest, but they didn't help.

_Shit_. Severus.

"Kreacher!"

The elf appeared, eyes heavy with tears. "Kreacher is not being able to leave Master Severus for long, Master Harry."

Harry winced. "What happened?"

"The dark one is being angry that he is not able to attack the Burrow this evening, and he is blaming Master's mate. He is torturing him brutally. Master Severus is scared and bleeding and badly hurt. The master of the house is taking him to his hidden rooms."

"Dear gods." Harry cut his wrist and filled a phial with his blood. "Take this and a phial of Dawn Elixir and Sunshine Elixir to Severus after he's asleep, if Hippa will let you. Hurry."

Kreacher bowed and vanished. Harry called in the rest of the household, and everyone piled in to wait with cups of hot cocoa and a game of exploding snap.

Three hours passed before the pain faded and Kreacher returned.

Harry grabbed the elf's hand. "How is he, Kreacher? Do you know?"

Kreacher shuddered and nodded. "When Kreacher is bringing holy blood and potions to heal Master Severus, Hippa is showing him into the hidden rooms. I is still not being able to get into them alone, but she is letting Kreacher help heal him after the master of the house put him to bed and gave him potions."

Harry blinked. "_Lucius_ tried to help him? Hmm."

"Yes, but Master Severus is being too hurt for the master of the house to save, and he is being grateful to see us with help. Master Severus is being delirious with illness and pain, so Kreacher is trying to feed him our our potions. He is not wanting to take them, so Hippa is getting him to
Ron nodded. "So he's okay now?"

"He is sleeping normally and Hippa is watching over him, but…"

Harry's heart slammed into his ribs. "But what?"

Kreacher's ears folded back. "I is not being sure, Master, but Kreacher thinks Master Severus is being glad the Weasleys is not being hurt. He is saying things like, 'thank the gods they are safe,' many times while we is trying to heal him. He is never saying names, but Kreacher thinks Master Severus is being too ill to think beyond the present right now. Kreacher is thinking he must be talking of the Weasleys."

Harry hugged his chest and stared at the blanket. "It still doesn't excuse murder."

Hermione shook her head. "No, but what's going on with him, Harry? Why would he protect the school, then murder the headmaster, but not attack anyone else? Why would he go along with the attack on the Burrow, then be happy that it failed despite being brutally tortured for it? None of this makes any sense."

Harry stared at his wardrobe. "I… don't know, Hermione. All I know is it hurts, and I'm scared, and… I just don't want to think of it."

Ron waved the card deck around. "Another game then, mate?"

Harry smiled in relief. "Yeah, maybe a few more rounds to take our minds off things. Then we had better get some sleep so we can focus when Xerides comes again."

"Sounds like a plan." Ron dealt, and Harry let the game take his thoughts off his confusion and pain, if only for the moment.
Wiser Heads

Chapter Summary

Xerides helps Harry see what he couldn't on his own.

I edited this to remove the religious references. Some people don't understand them, others are probably going to be offended, and there's a high probability I got the details wrong anyway. So, just a heads up, Xeri's backstory has been tweaked a bit (mainly by changing Helios' mate's name and just dropping the stuff about Esther.)

Also, I'm working on floor plan drawings for the Forest House. I don't have the other floors finished (architectural drawing is a huge challenge for a disabled artist with a tremor), but the first floor is finished and linked now, if you're curious. And I now have *16* illustrations finished for this series alone, *without* including the other floor plans. 😊

Added the basement level!

Added the last two floors. Floor plan is finished!

Chapter 25

Wiser Heads

Xerides followed the faint trail of his own magic through the forest to the quaint cottage buried in the trees. The residents had done a good job of hiding the place. Too good. Xerides had been searching for months before Fawkes came to him.

Xerides staggered out of the trees. Another failure, and worse, he had tarried too long on his search and the dawn had sapped his strength. Well, he would still be a formidable foe should someone be foolish enough to challenge him, but he had neither the benefit of shadow walking to take him home, nor a safe place to sleep off the draining effects of daylight, always worst at the height of summer.

He had precious little time to search each night, and many long hours of weariness he had no choice but to wait out. And this night, he had spent too long chasing fairy trails that led to nothing, leaving himself vulnerable and alone in unfamiliar territory.

"Damn. Five months searching and nothing. It is like he has vanished off the face of the earth."

Xerides sighed and sat on a fallen log near the edge of the forest. "I can go no further today, not alone." He stared into the trees surrounding his clearing, uneasy at the stillness. If he had to spend the day in an unfamiliar forest, he would have liked to hear
the sounds of birdsong and chattering small creatures. Their presence meant no large hunters—or humans—roamed nearby. Their absence spelled danger.

"Perhaps I should give up this mad quest. I am continually placing myself in harm's way, and for nothing. Perhaps my scrying pool was incorrect and he is not within a forest at all."

Xerides rested his head in his hands. "If he is in a human city, it would be suicide to search for him there. Fates, what am I to do?"

He shook his head. Moping would accomplish nothing. As long as he remained trapped in this strange forest, he might as well take the time to harvest what plants and medicines he could from its bounty. He set about carefully cutting back leaves and stems without damaging plants beyond repair, digging up portions of roots but leaving the whole, and gathering samples of moss and fungi. He had just finished collecting the inner bark of an aspen tree when the trill of a bird made itself clear.

A lark? No. This was no ordinary bird. No muggle bird had the capacity to sing like that. He hadn't heard song like this away from home, where the night birds flitted about. Xerides looked up just as a fiery red and gold beauty landed on a tree nearby.

"Ages across, a phoenix!" Xerides stood and gazed at the visitor. "What brings you to me, little one? Your kin do not generally seek out mine. Or are you simply passing through?"

The phoenix trilled what sounded like a greeting and flew down to Xerides. The bird landed on his shoulder, and Xerides' breath stilled. Tingling wonder spread through his veins. Had this ever happened to a night elf? Not often, to be sure. Phoenixes preferred sunny companions. Light elves, sun elves, and....

His heart thumped. And sunguards.

Xerides swallowed a surge of fluttery nerves and eased one hand towards the beautiful creature. It did not fly away, and Xerides soon found himself petting his silky, hot feathers.

"Why have you chosen to visit me, sun bearer? Do you mean to take me to the new sunguard? To Harry Potter? Are you his familiar, little one?"

The phoenix gave a happy trill and offered his tail feathers. Xerides considered for half an instant, but he was vulnerable here, and phoenixes did not lie.

He took a deep breath and steadied his mental shields. "Very well. I will trust you, fire bearer."

The phoenix rubbed his cheek, and Xerides' heart rate slowed. With a nod, he took a firm hold of the bird's feathers and gasped as a sensation of lightness rushed over him. The next instant, they were soaring through the air, and Xerides used the last of his daytime magic to hide them from sight.

They flew for what seemed like both hours and mere moments to the weary elf, but soon, the phoenix alighted in a thick forest in the southeast of England, near the border of Wales. Xerides hadn't considered the sunguard would stray so far from Scotland. No wonder he hadn't found him.
The phoenix led him to a shaded clearing with plenty of cover and a bed of moss to use as a sleeping spot. A chorus of birdsong all around gave him some measure of safety, but had this been the bird’s only intent?

Xerides pressed against the nearby auras and gasped. The phoenix left a brand of fire against his cold, starlit core, but beyond it, he felt the faint presence of an aura bright as the sun.

"He is here."

The phoenix trilled, and Xerides curled up to sleep, content that he had, at last, found his quarry.

"Thank you, friend."

The phoenix alighted on the tree stump behind him, settled down, and trilled a soft lullaby. Xerides fell asleep in moments, for once plagued neither by the icy cold of loneliness or the horrors of his dreams.

After Xerides woke, the phoenix had brought them to a grove of wild blackberries and apple trees. A perfect dinner for a mostly vegetarian night elf and a herbivorous phoenix. Just as Xerides had finished washing the juice from his face and hands and spelling his mouth clean, Harry had come.

Xerides flushed at the memory of the way Harry had taken in every inch of his body. He had known long before Harry babbled out his half excuses that the sunguard had only been trying to reconcile his knowledge of night elves with the truth, but it hadn't felt like it to Xerides.

Well, there was no sense worrying about it. They all had more important things to focus on, and Harry's friendship was far more gift than Xerides had ever expected to receive.

Xerides entered the wards and looked about. Harry's aura felt closer than the house, but he wasn't in sight. A phoenix trill drew his attention, and he turned to find Fawkes flitting about between a line of fruit trees, and Harry flying above them, summoning the ripe fruits from the treetops.

Xerides watched with a smile. The moon shone on Harry's hair and skin, and his golden eyes glowed like stars. By the moon, Harry reminded him of Helios. How many years had it been now? Too many.

A gentle touch fell on his arm and shocked him out of his memories.

"Beautiful like that, isn't he?"

Hermione. Xerides gave her a hesitant smile.

"Ah, he is lovely, yes. Where is your mate?"

"Cleaning up after dinner with Winky, but…." She stared into his eyes as if searching for something.

"Have I said something I should not?"

Hermione gave him a wry smile and shook her head. "For a minute, I thought… but never mind it. Harry!"
'Thought what?' Xerides pushed it behind his mental shields. No matter.

Harry came out of the trees with a wan smile. "Xerides! You're a bit early, I think. Or I'm running late. Welcome back."

Xerides nodded. "Thank you. I am a little early, I think. How was the wedding?"

Harry's eyes filled with some heavy, dark pain. Fates, had it not gone well?

"It was lovely, if a little too exciting. Fleur didn't hide her ancestry when she walked down the aisle, and it set a lot of the family in a tizzy."

Xerides frowned. "Her ancestry?"

"She's a quarter veela. She doesn't have all the traits, but she does have the wings and the allure."

"Ah. I see." But if the wedding had gone well in spite of the controversy over the bride's race, what had made Harry look so sorrowful?

"Anyway, it was mostly peaceful, considering the death eaters tried to attack the Burrow." Harry chuckled, though the sound rang with sorrow. "None of them would ever think a house elf could stop them in their tracks."

"Lucius Malfoy might," said Hermione with a snicker.

"Remind me to ask Dobby to tell you that story sometime, Xerides." Harry gave him a wan smile. "Definitely one to remember, even if Lucius is… well, I'm not so sure about him anymore."

Xerides frowned. Something was wrong with Harry. "Perhaps you might show me the tale during mind magic lessons, when we begin them, but are you well?"

Harry's shoulders slumped. "No, honestly. I'm… the wedding, much as I'm happy for Bill and Fleur, was hard on me, but there isn't much I can do about it. I tried to…." His eyes glimmered too much. "There's no sense worrying about it. I can't fix it."

"Oh, Harry…." Hermione rubbed his shoulder and Harry gave her a wan smile.

"Thanks." He wiped his eyes and steadied his breath. "Let me carry these in and put them away, and we can start training."

Xerides hesitated. "If you are unwell…"

"There's nothing physically wrong with me, and training would get my mind off the rest for a while. I need to think about something else anyway."

Xerides took one of the baskets. "I shall help, if that is well with you and your house elf friends?"

Harry gave the night elf a searching look. "Of course, but do you remember how it used to be? For the house elves?"

"Remember, no. It changed before my birth, but I do know of their history."

Hermione took a basket of fruit and scoffed. "It's so horrid, what humans did to them."

"I am surprised they told you of it." Xerides frowned. "How did they tell you of it? The curse would have killed them."
Harry gave him a sheepish smile. "All our fault, I'm afraid." That dark shadow crossed his face again. "And my mate's. And Dobby's, of course."

"Dobby? He told you of it? How did he survive?"

"We call it Aurora General Antidote," Hermione said. "An experimental panacea against poisons with a liquified bezoar and Harry's blood and tears, among other things."

Harry grimaced. "Thank Merlin it's only the blood and tears that do it. Can you imagine how embarrassing it would have been if my se—"

Hermione clapped her hand over his mouth. "Harry. For Circe's sake, are you trying to offend?"

Harry choked. "Oops. Um... sorry, Xerides. I reckon you could've gone your entire life without hearing that, yeah?"

Xerides laughed unabashedly. "Harry, I train warriors for a living, not only elven warriors either. Trust me when I say I have heard far worse."

Harry gave him a wry grin, a little strained around the edges, but talking of other things did seem to help. "Well, at least I haven't scarred you for life then."

"Not yet, little warrior."

Harry chuckled and let Xerides and Hermione into the kitchen.

And Xerides stopped dead at the door.

Ron stood in front of the wireless, eyes wide and face ghost-white. The dishes lay in the sink behind him, unwashed. Dobby held a shaking Winky against his chest, and his eyes were wide and teary.

Oh, fates. This wasn't good.

"Shite." Harry set his basket on the counter and grabbed Ron's shoulders. "What? What is it?"

Ron pointed to the wireless and shook his head, apparently too horror-stricken to speak.

A man's voice came through the device. "And that ends our moment of silence and ritual of sending for the victims. I'm afraid we haven't time for more. With the Minister dead and You-Know-Who's minions in control of the Ministry, time is short for everyone. Anyone of Muggle descent would do well to get the hell out of Britain while you still can, or join the fight if you've a quick wand and an able body."

The man went on, but Xerides' focus centered on Harry, who sank to his knees in horror at the announcement.

"Oh gods, no," Harry breathed. "It's too soon. We aren't ready."

Xerides helped Harry back to his feet. "I will help you, if you let me."

Tears pooled on Harry's lashes, crystalline and shiny as starlight. "It won't do any good. Even if you train me to be as good as you, it won't help."

Xerides' ears dropped along with Harry's tears. Gods, he hated to see him cry.
"Why do you say that? The dark one is human. He will die when he is struck through, as any other human."

"Actually, Xerides," said a sniffling Hermione, "it's a lot more complicated than that."

Xerides guided Harry to the table and helped him into a chair, then did the same with the rest of the household. "Now, tell me what the issue is. Perhaps I might be able to help."

Harry watched Xerides' ears drop lower with every word from their mouths. Horcruxes. Three left, all either unreachable or their location unknown. Stolen sunguard blood. No weakness of a predestined mate, but a good chunk of Harry's power. No protection against Riddle's touch any longer.

"And it gets worse," Harry stared at the table. "My mate… we thought he was a spy for us, but then, he betrayed the Light." He winced. "At least, we thought he did, but Kreacher's reports don't line up. He's not acting very much like a traitor when he's alone, but either way… well, let's just say it's unlikely to work out."

Xerides frowned. "His behaviour when he is alone is more likely to represent his true loyalties than otherwise. He may still be a triple agent. And as to your latter statement, Harry, being mates are always a person one has a high degree of compatibility with."

Ron snorted. "Well, our Harry is the exception to every rule, isn't he?"

Harry's laugh came out hollow. "The sad thing is, Xerides, I think you're right. I think we might have been compatible once. And maybe in the deepest core of us, we still are, and that's why fate chose him for me."

Ron gasped. "Harry?"

Harry looked up, blinking tears down his face. "But it doesn't matter, none of it matters now. He hates me, he blames me for everything my father and godfather did to hurt him, and he's on the other side of the battlefield anyway."

Hermione gasped. "Harry… oh gods, what did they do to him?"

Harry shuddered and looked away. "I can't. I shouldn't have said that much."

Ron gulped. "How… how bad is it, mate?"

Harry stared at his hands. "Bad. I have this awful feeling like it might be even worse than I know, and what I know is already bad enough to have seen the lot of them in deep shite and Sirius—my godfather and father's best friend, Xerides—it was bad enough to see him expelled and in Azkaban, had the headmaster cared at all."

"Dear gods," Hermione breathed. "They broke him. Professor Snape. They're the ones he sees when he falls into the past and lashes out. And you look just like your dad!"

"That's about the size of it," said a tearful Harry. "He'll never be able to accept me now. And even if he could…"

"You'd be mated to a death eater," said Ron.

"Yeah. Even if we're not sure what the hell he's on about."
Xerides breathed in harshly. "Fates help us."

"So you see the mess I'm in, yeah?"

"Yes, but there is one problem with your story. Your mate cannot be evil."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "I... we aren't sure he is either, Xerides, but the fact is that he murdered the former headmaster in cold blood. It's rather hard to look past that, even if the rest of his behaviour has all of us flummoxed."

Xerides' ears fell a bit more. "That is... a problem, but he cannot be evil. It is magically impossible."

Ron cried, "Well, it's like we—"

Harry stopped him with a plaintive look and a hand across his chest. "Ron. Please. If there's even a chance, I need to know."

"But, how...?"

"I don't know," said Hermione, but Xerides has lived long enough to see it play out first-hand."

"I have." Xerides' expression took on an edge of grief. "Elder Urias sent me because I, of all the elves living, have more knowledge of battle, yes, but also of sunguards."

He stared into the distance, as if seeing something far into the past. "I never met Merlin. By then, the lies about my people had become too commonplace to risk approaching humans, and though I tried to reach him, he was never without an entourage of trained warriors. I might have defeated them—they were muggle warriors, after all—but the loss of life would have been great, and Merlin would hardly have seen me as an ally if I had killed his friends and lover. No, it was never safe to approach Merlin, but Helios? I knew him well."

"Helios?" Hermione's eyes boggled. "He wasn't a god?"

Xerides chuckled. "He used to laugh so hard at those stories."

Hermione smiled. "I can imagine." She shared a wry look with Harry, and he snorted.

"Well, I've not quite made it to god status yet, but who knows? With a little more effort, maybe in a thousand years, the world will be shouting 'mother of Harry' when they stub their toes. It's a goal to aim for anyway."

Ron and Hermione snorted. Xerides gave that full, unrestrained laughter that warmed Harry down to his core and drove the ice of his pain away, if only for a moment.

"You have a similar sense of humour, you and Helios." Xerides' eyes turned sad again. "He and his mate died thirteen-hundred years ago. We were dear friends, having grown up beside each other all those years ago. They were the last people to hug me and hold my hands, excepting... well..." He flushed. "It has been several centuries since I cared to try that, either." Something dark and painful passed over his face, but it faded before Harry worked up the courage to ask about it. "At any rate, without them, life has been lonely. I have had no one but Torasi, and he has been... traveling for too long."

Harry tugged Xerides' hand into his own. "Not anymore."
Xerides' ears moved back and his cheeks darkened further. "No." He took a shaky breath. "At any rate, I brought Helios up because we had believed the same of his mate. Ashti acted as a concubine of sorts for the armies of Persia. She carried food, water, and supplies, and was often passed about between soldier to soldier to meet their carnal needs, the demons. We believed, until she managed to escape during the second siege of Greece and beg our aid, that she went willingly and was an enemy of humanity and honour, but the Persians had captured her family, and the king had forced her into his bed as payment for their lives, then sold her to his armies when he tired of her. And even after she escaped, the Persian dynasty released false information about her, claiming she had gone willingly to the king's bed and betrayed him. Helios and Ashti were forced from their home to protect her, and as Torasi and I had no one else left, we went with them."


Xerides hesitantly rubbed Harry's fingers. "It was horrible for her. And I bring her story to light because it was then that Helios and I began to research what few histories of sunguard mates we could find, searching for discrepancies. And while we could not always prove or disprove the myths, that magic never chose evil people as a sunguard mate soon become readily apparent. Troubled people, yes. People who need the love and light of a sunguard's heart, absolutely, but never evil."

Harry blinked hard. "But you can't say I'm not the exception to the rule simply because it hasn't happened before."

"Perhaps not, Harry, but there is another point to consider, one Hermione reminded you of recently. Evil cannot bear to touch a sunguard. I cannot believe magic would make such a hopeless choice for you with that in mind."

Hermione gasped. "He's right. And Professor Snape has touched you, Harry. Without causing himself pain."

"Still a murderer," Ron pointed out.

"Maybe so, but..." Harry clung to Xerides' hand like a lifeline. "It doesn't entirely answer our questions, but thank you. I hope you're right."

Xerides nodded. "As do I, my friend."

"So what does this mean?" Ron crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. "We can't afford to treat Snape like an ally when he's acting as our enemy and refuses to respond when you reach out to him, Harry."

"If your mate is truly a triple agent in death eater territory," said Xerides, "responding to the advances of the other side might well put his life in danger. And our own."

Harry blanched. "S-so he might have just been trying to stay alive by burning my letters?"

"Yes, or to keep you alive, and sending him letters when he is surrounded by darkness on all sides is dangerous for both of you."

Harry winced. "I sent them with the house elves. They wouldn't have dared give them to him if Severus wasn't alone and somewhere safe."

"Hmm. Perhaps, but I think a triple agent would still have had little choice but to mistrust such advances. Particularly if he did not know of your house elves and precautions to keep him safe."
Harry covered his face in his hands. "Shite. No, he doesn't know. You… you really think he might be innocent?"

Xerides hesitated. "That… I cannot say. It is difficult to explain the murder of the Light's general, but I believe he is still good at his core regardless."

Harry gave him a wan smile and wiped his eyes. "Well, I guess we still don't have all the answers we need, and he still hates me either way, but it gives me a little hope to believe as you do, Xerides. I do wish… but it won't happen. Still, at least we might be able to keep him safe when this is all over."

Ron patted Harry's shoulder. "In that case, I reckon it couldn't hurt to look for more evidence that he's on our side, even if I don't understand."

"Kreacher is telling us," said Winky. "He is giving us proof, if we is patient. Winky is sure of it."

Harry gave her a wan smile. "Yeah, I think you're right. We'll ask what he's seen when he comes home to rest." He gave the house elves a worried look. "I… I don't like to ask you now when I know you're scared, but when Kreacher needs a break, Dobby, would you…?"

"Dobby is taking over for Kreacher when he is being tired or hungry, Master Harry."

Harry squeezed his hand. "I'm sorry. I know you would rather be with Winky. Thank you."

Dobby shook his head solemnly. "Winky is having other family here to help her when Dobby is gone, but if your mate dies, Winky is suffering without a home. Dobby is protecting her by protecting you, Master Harry."

"True," said Harry with a sniffle. "Though Ron and Hermione wouldn't let Winky and Kreacher suffer." He looked to his friends. "You won't, will you? You'll take care of them if the worst happens?"

Hermione blinked down tears and hugged Harry tight. "You… you little prat. Of course we will, but stop talking like that." She sat beside him again and wiped her face. "I know it seems bleak right now, but we'll work it out. Somehow."

Xerides tentatively laid his hand over Harry's. "I will help as much as I am able."

Harry turned his hand up and squeezed the night elf's. "In that case, maybe you could come earlier or stay later so we can strategise together. Your knowledge is worth as much as your training."

Xerides' ears dropped. "It is dangerous for me to travel during the sunlit hours."

Harry frowned. "Well… hmm." He looked to his best friends. "I'm sure Fawkes would help, but… Ron, would you mind sharing a room with me? Or maybe…?" He glanced to Hermione.

Ron's ears turned pink. "Oh. 'Mione, are you ready for that step yet?"

"If it means Harry lives? Of course I am."

"No, not just for Harry." Ron kissed her hand. "If you're not, Harry and I will bunk up. We're used to sharing anyway. No pressure."

She blushed. "I'm mostly ready. Will you promise to wait for… until I turn eighteen? It's only a few more months."
"Of course, but why eighteen?"

"Muggles don't recognise children as legal adults until then," said Harry. "She's trying to respect her parents' wishes even if they won't…"

"Remember it." Hermione nodded tearfully. "I do, though, so it's important to me to obey."

Ron kissed her cheek. "We'll wait for both of us then. Can you hold off till March?"

She gave him a tearful smile. "Yes, of course. Thank you, love."

"It's nothing. We get to sleep next to each other. Promising to wait is nothing."

"Glad to hear it." Harry turned to Xerides. "Well, there's a room available here now, if you want to stay."

Xerides' glowing eyes softened. "You would open your home to me? A virtual stranger and a race your people abhor?"

"My people abhor a lot of races. They're ignorant and blind, and they'll stay that way until someone teaches them the truth. And I reckon the stranger part is easy enough to fix with time."

Xerides' cheeks darkened and his ears flicked back. "I… I have always lived alone, save for when I was very young, when my parents and Torasi's died. And when Torasi's family…"

Another dark shadow of grief crossed his face. Merlin. What had their new companion lived through?

"At any rate," Xerides went on, "sharing a home will be a novel experience, and one I will cherish. Thank you."

"Winky will help Master Xerides move in when training is done," she offered.

"Dobby, too, unless I is guarding Master Harry's mate."

Xerides bowed. "I am honoured to accept your assistance." He stood and guided Harry to his feet. "And on that note, if you are all collected enough to cope, we should train now, while our strength holds. The war will not wait."

"Yeah," said Ron. "Let's go."

Xerides nodded and led the way.

Floor plan of the entry level of Forest House.

Basement level.

Forest House - Upper Stories.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Harry and Severus will be fighting the war from different fronts for a while yet.

Chapter 26

War Never Sleeps

Xerides trained his new housemates hard, and, when he caught the humans flagging, he trained Harry alone. The sunguard did well for his second day and in consideration of the dire shock they had endured that evening, but by two in the morning, Harry could bear no more. He collapsed, barely conscious, at Xerides' feet, and Xerides' heart stopped for an instant.

"Harry? Fates, have I killed you?"

The bundle of feathers at his feet laughed, then groaned. "Almost. Maybe we should just send you in against old Mouldy, yeah? You could train him to death."

Xerides chuckled and heaved Harry to his feet. "Your allies would kill me before I could get close enough, but thank you for the compliment. I think."

Harry laughed and winced. "Ugh. Ribs hurt."

"May I see? I may be able to help."

"Sure. I'm hot as… hell anyway. Hard work, running around… dodging your magic all night."

"That would be the point."

Harry gave a short, pained chuckle and spelled off his shirt.

And Xerides forgot to breathe.

Fates help him, the boy's entire side was black and blue, and a deep cut scored his abdomen, side, and all the way around his back. That slicing wind had hit home then. Harry had given no sign of pain beyond a small flinch.

Xerides had seen battle-hardened warriors give up for less than this.

"Sweet Nimue, Harry! Why did you not tell me you were so injured?"

Harry winced as Xerides pushed gingerly over his ribs. "Ah! Hurts. Damn. I guess… I didn't notice… until now."

Xerides stared. The boy had broken ribs and he hadn't noticed?
Harry turned his face away. "Don't, okay? I have to. Even if it hurts, I can't stop or he wins. It's always been that way."

Somehow, Xerides had the sense that Harry was speaking of more than Voldemort.

Hermione handed Xerides a pot of greenish salve. "Essence of dittany. It cleanses wounds and seals them at once. It won't hurt you, right, Xerides?"

"Dittany is not harmful to my kind, no. I think there are few such a healing plant could harm."

"Ah. You know your plants, then."

Xerides chuckled wryly. If she only knew.

"You might say that." He scooped some of the thin salve onto his fingers and brushed it over Harry's wound, starting in front. "Harry, I have watched stronger warriors fall prey to such injuries before."

"That's barely a scratch, Xerides."

"It is much worse than that, but I am speaking of your…." He sent starlight into Harry's chest and watched the image it formed atop his skin, revealing the damage inside, "Three broken ribs. That would make breathing exceptionally difficult, let alone fighting. How did you go on?"

Harry lifted his opposite shoulder in a half shrug. "I'm used to pain, I guess."

"Used to…?"

Ron slammed his fist into a wall. "Those evil, demented, soulless pieces of thestral shite!"

Xerides frowned. Who?

Harry winced. "Ron."

Ron huffed and sank into a conjured sofa against the far wall. "It's not right, Harry. They should be punished for what they did to—"

"Ron." Hermione's quiet reprimand stopped Ron's fuming, but Xerides wished it hadn't. What in the name of the fates was going on?

Then, he turned Harry to heal his back, and he knew.

Myriad white and red lines, thick and thin, scored and smooth, jagged and straight, crisscrossed his back and the skin leading under his waistband. Too old to be recent. Too new to have been solely a part of his distant past.

Used to pain. Yes, Xerides had no doubt of that.

He breathed deep to suppress a sharp surge of protective fury. By the tense set of Harry's shoulders and his trembling hands, he needed Xerides to be calm now. Normal. To reassure him that he wasn't damaged, that his abusers were the abnormality, not Harry.

Xerides applied the dittany to the small of Harry's back and ignored his sharp intake of breath.

"I would like you to practice learning your body's signals and limits. While it is true that in a dire situation, one must learn to ignore mild injuries if one expects to live, an injury like this could
severely hinder your ability to fight. It would be a simple thing to drink a potion between rounds or apply a splint with a spell. Ferula works well for wizards. Your pain tolerance is admirable, but you will perish if you do not also learn when to retreat and live to fight another day."

"He can't kill me, though."

"Did you not just tell me that he has sunguard blood now as well? He may indeed be able to kill you, if you press yourself too far."

Harry tensed, then slumped forwards. "We may as well call it in. He has all the advantages."

Ron snorted. "You berk. He's always had all the advantages, and that's never stopped you before. Why give up now?"

"I don't know. I—" Harry's voice broke. "Every time I think, 'this is it, we've got him,' it blows up in my face. Literally, sometimes. Every time we find an answer, he has three more problems for us to solve, and then our answer turns out to be rubbish, too." He jerked a hand across his eyes. "I reckon it's just getting hard to hold on."

Xerides stood and offered Harry his hand. "You are not alone."

"I'm scared."

Xerides nodded. "Even the bravest of warriors are not immune to fear, but remember that you do not face your demons alone. If you find it difficult to hold on, then we will hold you up. I will hold you up, too, if you allow it."

Harry looked up, desolate and afraid, and Xerides wished he knew how to heal him.

"Will you let us be your strength when you are weak, Harry? Will you let me help you?"

Harry gave him a tearful nod and rested his head on Xerides' chest.

Xerides' heart thumped and his breath stuttered, but he didn't dare move lest Harry think he was unwelcome at a time when his defenses had fallen.

"I-I am here, Harry."

Harry was too injured to hug him, but one arm wrapped around Xerides' back and tugged him close.

In that instant, Xerides knew something fundamental in his world had shifted. He didn't understand how yet, but he did know he would trek through hell to protect this rare, gentle person who would welcome even a night elf into his home and into his arms.

"We will defeat him together, Harry."

"All of us, mate," said Ron.

"To the end," Hermione agreed.

"We is helping, too," Winky chimed in. Dobby nodded.

Harry lifted his head and gave Xerides and his friends a warm, tear-streaked smile. "Thanks. All of you. I... you're right. I'll... try to remember... I'm not alone. Now, will someone... heal my bloody ribs, already? They hurt... like a son of a bitch."
"Physician, heal thyself," Hermione teased.

"Huh?"

Xerides chuckled. He wiped a tear from Harry's cheek, bringing forth a confused blush, and infused it with the protective emotions he felt towards his new friend and the strength of his own brand of healing. A brush of the liquid against Harry's broken ribs couldn't take all the bruising or pain away, but it certainly helped.

"Oh, that's better, Xerides," Harry said with a smile. "Thanks."

"Anytime. Now, hold still and I will set about treating these bruises and your pain." Xerides opened his field kit and pulled out several leaves in various stages of dryness, some he had collected from the forest just two days before.

"Oh…." Hermione's embarrassed squeak amused Xerides.

"Yes, 'Mione," said Ron with a grin, "I think he does know his plants."

Harry grinned, too, and Xerides' worry eased. Yes, Harry would be well, in time. They would see to it.

Xerides chuckled and began mixing a medicine for Harry.

Lucius knocked at Severus' door, for the time being at least, though his living quarters would soon change. Again.

"Enter."

Lucius came inside and shut the door. "Well, that you are now headmaster is good, as he has decreed that the Carrows are to teach Muggle Studies and Dark Arts—not defence—and ensure that 'proper discipline' is kept. I think we both know what that means."

Severus closed his eyes. "Damn. Of all the cruel, bloodthirsty arseholes…." He sighed and dropped into one of his chairs. "I cannot prevent every abuse or we shall all perish, but I will do all I can to protect them."

Lucius nodded and sat across him. "Be careful about it, Severus. He is also sending Pettigrew to spy on you and keep watch over the school."

Severus barely suppressed a retch. He did not manage to hide a shudder of revulsion.

"I will… be careful." He held Lucius' gaze. "Lucius, keep Draco well away from Pettigrew. For that matter, keep yourself and Narcissa away from him. The rat is far more dangerous than he appears. Never approach him alone. Never turn your back. Never underestimate him. Coward that he is, he knows dangerous spells that none but the caster can undo, and once you are in his thrall, gods help you."

Lucius' eyes blazed with silver light. "The rumors then—what they say he did to you—they are true?"

Severus closed his eyes and turned away. "It is not a subject I am prepared to discuss." Or remember. Ever. "Simply promise me you will warn your family to take care around the rat."

"The fucking monster!" Lucius' words came out in a harsh rasp. "I shall tear him limb from
Severus wheeled, shocked by both the swearing and the alteration of Lucius’ voice, and his heart dropped into his feet.

Lucius had sprouted silver wings, grown sharp claws, and his face had taken on the look of a bird of prey.

Oh fuck. He had gone full veela. Hacked off veela.

"Lucius." Severus called to him and cautiously held his shoulders. "Listen to me. You cannot attack him. If you reveal your race and your knowledge of his crimes, we shall all be killed, Draco included. Breathe. Look at me."

"It is abomination, Severus!"

"I know. Believe me, I know, but you cannot reveal your loathing of the rodent. Not yet. In time, Lucius, we shall, with luck, live to see them all killed, but if we move too soon, all is lost. Breathe with me. Pull your power in. Good. Occlumency, Lucius. Reestablish it and pull in your wings."

Lucius paled and snapped his wings back into his shoulders. "Please, tell no one."

"I shan't. Does Draco...?"

"No. Draco does not have enough of the veela gene to carry the traits. At least, I have seen no evidence of them."

"That is probably to the best. He is too quick-tempered for his own good."

"Indeed." Lucius took a shaky breath and rubbed his face. "Forgive me, Severus. Veela absolutely abhor that kind of crime."

"For Merlin's sake, don't think of it then. Just promise me you will warn your son and wife and keep your loathing for him quiet, at least until the proper moment."

"I promise, Severus."

"Thank you." Severus turned back to the window. "You are certain about your decision to aid me?"

"Two heads are better than one."

Severus shot him a wry look. "Are you aware that is a muggle idiom?"

Lucius frowned. "Is it? Well, it is apt enough either way."

Severus nodded approval. "They are not beasts. Most of them." He sat beside Lucius. "Then I will introduce you to my friend, on the condition that you promise never to abuse her. She has been my only true ally for some twenty years now. I will not take well to tales of hard use or cruelty."

Lucius gave him a hurt look. "I thought you had come to trust me."

"Lucius, Hippa is a house elf. Your history with them is less than encouraging."

Lucius flushed. "Ah." He dropped his head. "I... I promise. I shall treat her with the same respect I show to you."
"Thank you. Hippa!"

The house elf appeared with a wary look at Lucius, and Severus began outlining their plans.
A Cupful of Holy Fire

Chapter Summary

**Body horror warning.** The end of this chapter is *gruesome*. Just a heads up. Also, there are a few hints of Harry/Xeri in this chapter. Harry is oblivious. Actually, Xeri is, too. Nothing major. Harry and Severus still have to work apart for the time being, so Xeri is mainly just trying to hold Harry together and vice versa.

Also, added a watercolor painting of Xeri by daylight. His eyes only glow at night. And another level of Forest House in Chapter 25.

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**Chapter 27**

*A Cupful of Holy Fire*

Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Xerides were discussing ideas on how to retrieve Hufflepuff's cup when Goldclaw's head popped into the floo. The sun had not yet set, so Xerides' power was too low to hide or shield himself. Harry acted on instinct and shielded the night elf behind a bubble of light. Xerides ducked away from it.

"I don't think it'll hurt you." Harry reached into the shield and took Xerides' hand. "My intent is to protect you, not harm you, so whether this is sunlight or not, it shouldn't hurt."

Xerides tested it with a fingertip and nodded. His ears popped halfway up.

"Thank you, Harry. You should greet your guest now."

Harry nodded, but didn't release the elf's hand. "Hello, Master Goldclaw. I hope you'll keep my friend's presence here a secret?"

Goldclaw pushed his glasses up his nose. "A night elf. A warrior elf, I see. Actually… Battlemaster Delune?"

The night elf bowed. "Well met, Goblin Goldclaw. How are your cousins?"

"They are doing quite well in the king's guard, thanks to your training." Goldclaw fixed Harry with a wry look. "Your Ministry is not ours, Mister Potter, and goblins are not on unfriendly terms with the night races."

Harry dropped his shields and let Xerides' hand go, though he stayed next to the elf just in case. "Sorry about that. I wasn't certain, and I wanted him to be safe." He rubbed his neck and grinned sheepishly. "Not that he *needs* my protection, of course."

"I do," Xerides murmured. "The daylight is dangerous for my kind, and to know you would offer your protection is… good."
Harry rubbed his arm briefly. "Yeah, but now that we know he's safe, what's going on, Goblin Goldclaw? Is there a problem with my account?"

"Not a problem, no, but this box just came into your possession with the late Minister's bequests. It seemed the late headmaster left it to you, and Minister Scrimgeour kept the box for thirty days under the Decree of Justifiable Confiscation to check for dark artefacts. As there are none present, he had been attempting to pass it on, but could not locate you." He held out a small cardboard box, somewhat larger than a book. Harry took it through the fire with a bemused frown.

"Thanks, sir. Was there anything else?"

"Officially, no. Unofficially…." Goldclaw gave the night elf a respectful bow. "Your business with the cup of Hufflepuff? I suggest you tell your representative about Battlemaster Delune and find a way for him to attend the next negotiation session."

Harry looked between the goblin and his friend with a frown. "Is that okay with you, Xerides?"

"Yes, assuming I am safe."

"Fair enough." Harry turned back to Goldclaw. "Xerides is in danger from humans, particularly during the day. Can you make it so he has safe passage, say, two weeks from now?"

Goldclaw inclined his head. "At seven in the evening, so you have time to rest. Would that suit, Battlemaster?"

Xerides flicked his ears down. "The time is acceptable, yes, but would their representative work with me? Are they human?"

"Yes," said Goldclaw. "He is human. Bill is also a cursebreaker for us and has a veela for a wife. He is used to semi-human race types and knows the truth behind the Ministry-approved lies."

"And he's my oldest brother," said Ron. "The one who just got married, actually, so we do have an in."

Xerides' ears dropped lower. "You are certain of this?"

Goldclaw gave him a fierce grin. "You know full well that we goblins respect warriors, Battlemaster. Make it known that you are aiding Mister Potter, and your request will hold much more weight."

Xerides sighed. "Very well."

Harry stood in the kitchen with Xerides and tried to calm his terrified friend. Xerides' hand trembled in Harry's and his skin was cool to the touch.

Harry couldn't comfort him with words, not with Bill in the other room, but he knew one way the frightened night elf might find some peace.

Harry moved to stand in front of Xerides and tapped his temple. "Read me," he mouthed.

Xerides hesitated. [Are you certain?]

Harry nodded and pulled the memory of Xerides' support when Harry's faith had fallen apart to the forefront of his mind.
"You are not alone."

"I will hold you up, if you let me."

Xerides’ gentle presence left Harry’s mind, but a seed of connectedness remained. The elf took a shaky breath. His ears fanned back and his lips curved up in a shy smile.

[I have not had that kind of support from any but my cousin since Helios died. I would be glad to accept yours.]

Grinning, Harry slid his arm around Xerides' tense shoulders, though he had to reach for them.

"Ready?"

Xerides stood tall and occluded his fears away, and in seconds, a powerful warrior stood where a panicking elf had been moments before.

"Well done," Harry whispered. "Teach me to control myself that fast when I'm scared?"

Xerides nodded. [Among other things, I am ready now.]

Harry nudged him into his side. "Bill," he called, "I'm in the kitchen with our mentor, our trainer, and our friend, and I expect you to treat him with the same decency and respect you show everyone else, yeah?"

Bill called back, "Merlin, Harry. You sound like Mum! It's a little terrifying, if I'm honest. One Molly Weasley is enough."

Ron and Hermione snorted and chuckled.

"The man has a point, Harry," said Ron. "We already warned him that Xerides is a night elf. Just come in."

"Yeah, I won't hurt—wait, your friend is Battlemaster Delune?"

Harry rubbed Xerides' shoulders and guided him into the living room. "Yeah, but we call him Xerides." He gave the elf a worried look. "Should we be more formal?"

Xerides shook his head. "I am content with our current arrangement."

Harry grinned. "Great. Anyway, Bill, Goldclaw suggested taking Xerides to your next negotiation meeting about the cup. Can we trust you to bring him back to us in one piece?"

"Of course." Bill moved to the elf and held out his hand. "I'm Bill Weasley, Ron's oldest brother. It's an honour to meet you, sir. The goblins have no end of praise for your skills."

Xerides' ears flicked back, but his smile was genuine. "I, likewise, have heard much from Ron about you."

"All good, honest," said Ron.

Bill chuckled. "Oh I'm sure." He shook Xerides' hand. "So, tomorrow then?"

"Tomorrow."

As soon as Xerides stepped through the door to the forest retreat, a pile of red feathers and messy
black hair tackled him. If he hadn't seen the wings and felt Harry's arms catch him into a tight hug, he might have attacked.

"Xerides, you're home! Are you okay? They didn't attack you? You weren't seen?"

"Slow down, Harry," said Bill with a chuckle. "Let him breathe."

Harry stepped back, cheeks red and golden eyes warm with relief. "Sorry about that. But you are okay?"

Something long-since broken in Xerides shifted into a new alignment and healed. Harry was in danger until they destroyed all the horcruxes and their maker, and yet Xerides' safety was his first concern. Merlin, how long had it been since someone cared like this? And when had anyone but Torasi ever been there to welcome him home?

Xerides couldn't hold back a smile at the wave of warmth and wonder that rushed through him and patched the holes in his lonely soul.

"I am well, Harry, thank you. We encountered no trouble on our trip or in negotiations."

"Thank goodness," Hermione gave a wry chuckle. "That knucklehead has nearly worn a path in the carpet worrying for you, Xerides. It was adorable."

"Oi," Harry protested. "Are you supposed to call gods adorable? I mean, look how fearsome I am!" He flexed his slender arms, and Xerides laughed with the rest of them.

"You do so remind me of Helios."

"I'm honoured. Maybe we sunguards have similar personalities." A troubled expression crossed his face. "And maybe…."

"What?" Ron nudged Harry. "Maybe what?"

Harry shook himself. "Nothing really. Anyway, did you get the horcrux?"

Xerides had to commend Harry's skill at distraction, but he wasn't fooled. He had only ever seen that expression when Harry talked or thought about his mate. Still, if Harry wasn't ready to talk about it, Xerides would pretend he hadn't noticed.

"We did." Bill levitated the cup out of a pouch at his waist. "Don't touch it. There are some nasty curses on it I've not had the chance to remove yet."

Harry cocked his head. "Any that will hurt us if I destroy it?"

"No. Go ahead."

Harry nodded. "If you'll just set it on the flagstones for me?"

Bill floated the cup onto the stone walkway leading up to the front door. "All right. Ready when you are."

Harry whistled. "Fawkes, want to help this time?"

With a delighted trill, the phoenix flew out of a nearby cherry tree and alighted on Harry's wrist.

"Right. Let's just walk away from everyone. Stay back, please. Especially you, Xerides. I'm afraid
this might hurt you if you get too close. Too much light magic in it to be entirely safe for a night elf."

Xerides had been tempted to go to his side for a better view, but at Harry's warning, he stayed put.

"Time to barbecue a little bit of the bald berk, yeah, Fawkes? One… two… three!"

Harry lifted his hand opposite Fawkes, muttered an incantation in what Xerides recognized as ancient Greek with a strong British accent, and threw his head back and his arms and wings wide. At the same time, the phoenix gave a sharp cry and shot into the air.

Xerides' breath stilled as white fire and light sprung into existence around Harry and the bird, engulfing both in magic he hadn't witnessed for two millennia. Holy fire. Fates, it was beautiful.

Black smoke emerged from the horcrux, taking the form of a tall, angular man with black hair and eyes and a hooked nose.

"You cannot kill me, Potter."

Harry ignored the shade.

"You think you are my mate? I will never accept y—"

"Yeah? Considering you're a shade of Riddle, not my mate, thank you for that!"

Harry flung his fiery arms towards the horcrux, the phoenix gave another shrill cry, and the cup went up in flames. The shade screamed and vanished, and a fiery Harry sank to his knees. When the fire vanished from Harry's shaking form, Xerides found himself rushing forwards and catching the boy into his arms.

Harry was sobbing.

"Harry…."

"If he ever knows, if he ever realises the truth," Harry choked out, "that's what will happen to me. I'll burn."

Xerides held Harry tight and cradled the boy's head against his chest. He had no words, only the comfort of his embrace and presence.

Bill cursed. "Harry, gods. Of all people…."

Harry shuddered. "What's going to happen to us, Bill? Even if I survive, even if we win, what happens when this is all over? None of us are entirely sure what you saw on the tower is what it appeared to be, but the rest of the world is. If we can't keep him away from the Ministry…."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione breathed. Ron folded her into his arms and stood stone-faced, yet the glimmer at the corners of his eyes belied his calm.

Bill gasped. "Oh gods, no. Harry, we won't let it happen. There's got to be some way to keep you safe and him out of trouble."

"I'm honestly less sure by the day that Severus is getting into trouble to start with, but even if I'm right, he could still be killed at any moment, and he's not listening to me. How in Merlin's name are we supposed to keep either of us safe like this?"
"I... I don't know, but don't give up. We'll think of something."

"We will," Xerides murmured. "I shan't give you up so soon."

Harry buried his face in Xerides' chest and made the night elf's heart stutter and his cheeks catch fire. His belly filled with strange, fluttering sensations, and strong, protective devotion flooded his chest.

"Do not fear, Harry. I still believe your mate must be good at his core or fate would not have chosen him for you, but either way, we shan't let you perish. We will find a way."

Harry leaned back and wiped his eyes. "Thanks, Xerides."

"You are welcome, Harry."

"Severus, help me!"

Severus retched and sobbed into his en suite toilet, unsure if he would choke faster on bile or tears, but wishing they would both hurry it the fuck up and put him out of his misery. He couldn't banish the images from his mind. A wash of curly blonde hair dragging over Lucius' dinner table. Blank brown eyes, stunned into stillness, then wild with terror, then fixed on his face and pleading.

"Help me...."

A flash of green light, the thump of a body atop the wood. The grating hiss of Parseltongue.

The crunch of bones as Nagini detached her jaw and devoured Charity inch by inch. The tearing of flesh and gushing of fluids....

Severus gagged and retched again. He had no idea how he still had anything left within him to expel, but it must have come from somewhere. He dropped his head upon the seat with a desperate sob.

Oh gods. He had wanted, so much, to grab her and run, run where no one would find them, but no such place existed, and to do so would have cost Britain the war. He had done what he had to do, and yet, he would hear the gristly sounds, see the horror of Charity's slow demise for as long as he drew breath.

With every passing moment, he longed for the stillness of death more. To erase his memories. To take away the pain. Sleep. Eternal, dreamless sleep after a life full of nightmares sounded lovely.

A knock on the door announced Lucius' presence. No one else except Hippa could even see the entrance to Severus' rooms.

Severus groaned, unable to summon the energy to answer. Lucius let himself in anyway, not that it surprised Severus.

"Yes, I understand how you feel." Lucius' voice was rough and hoarse. He sounded little better than Severus.

A gentle hand guided Severus off of the toilet and onto the edge of the tub. Lucius handed him a wet flannel and a glass of water. Severus wiped his face and rinsed his mouth.

"Thank you." Merlin, he sounded horrid.
Lucius sat beside him. "Do you have a potion to selectively wipe memories from one's mind? I think I should like to forget the evening ever happened."

Severus stared at his knees. "I do not, and I would not use it if I did. Horrifying as it is, to forget it is to forget why we are fighting this war. Why we have chosen the path we have done. Charity deserves better than that."

Tears choked him. "I-I will never... never stop seeing it, Lucius."

Lucius shuddered and hugged his chest. Severus had never seen him look so small.

"No. Neither will I." Lucius stood and paced. "How is it possible I ever believed those monsters to have the right of things? Inhuman beasts cruel enough to feed humans to snakes and torture innocent women and children... even... even mine." He covered his face with a shaking hand. "Draco is scarred from serving as last weekend's entertainment, and I suppose it will be my turn again tonight. Gods. What did I see in them, Severus?"

Severus shrugged. "I think we were not seeing them, Lucius, or rather, we were trying not to see. They offered you power and prestige, and they offered me revenge. That is all we cared to see until they threatened what we could not bear to ignore."

"And this is where it has brought us." Lucius buried his face in a shaking hand. "I am so afraid of my turn to serve as the entertainment, Severus, but even so, it is better than watching Draco and Narcissa suffer in my place and for my sins every damned week."

"That is why I do what I do, Lucius. So those with purer souls, with happier lives do not have to suffer in my place."

Lucius sighed and sat down again. "Would that we had understood before it came to this."

Severus nodded and rested his head in his hands.

"I pray to all the fates I never have to see you hovering at the dark lord's dinner table, Harry. Even if I know your fate will follow soon after mine. Fuck, I hope the next life is kinder to us both."

Severus wiped tears from his face and stood. "Come. We had best do something about our voices and restore our shields before...."

Lucius shivered and gave a pained nod. Severus wished he had comfort for him, but none existed in this world of nightmares.

"Soon. Harry will end this hell soon."

Or at least he would pave the way.

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**Watercolor of Xerides by day**
Chapter 28

Through the Clouds

Autumn had come and gone with no answers. Ron and Hermione had already gone to bed, but Harry couldn't sleep. He was still sore from training, and his mind wouldn't let him rest anyway. He flew onto the roof of the house, brushed away the snow, heated the tile, and lay back in his bubble of warmth, watching the stars.

Fawkes and Hedwig joined him after a time. Harry beckoned the birds to snuggle on his chest, where he could pet them both and draw some comfort from their presence.

As they often did when Harry was alone, his thoughts drifted to Severus. It hurt to think about him. Even if Harry could work out the discrepancies between the headmaster's murder and Severus' behaviour afterwards—and he still had no viable explanation even if Severus had been acting as a triple agent—Severus would never accept him.

And yet, he was still Harry's mate.

He couldn't help worrying about him. Wishing things had been different. Wishing Severus cared about him, too.

But in six months of watching Severus, Kreacher hadn't found any undeniable evidence of his innocence, at least where Dumbledore was concerned. They knew by now that Severus diverted the Carrows from the students, and vice versa, as much as possible, that he had often Confunded them to keep them from assaulting children and assigned detentions with Hagrid when he had no choice but to punish the students, but having a conscience where his charges were concerned did nothing to prove his innocence in Dumbledore's death.

They knew he grieved and mourned when no one was about, but as he rarely spoke during those emotional releases, and Harry didn't feel comfortable having Kreacher watch him during those private moments of grief anyway, they had learned little by it.

They knew he had terrible nightmares and night terrors, but Harry had also asked Kreacher not to watch Severus while he was in his personal quarters unless he was injured, so they had no idea what he dreamed about.

They knew he was desperately unhappy and waiting to die, not that anyone would let him, but that still did not explain his loyalties.
And yet, Harry couldn't help but hope that all the conflicting evidence Kreacher had collected while trying to keep Severus alive would prove his mate's innocence somehow. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but he couldn't stop hoping that this would be the night that Kreacher uncovered the key. As Severus was fast asleep at the moment, and Kreacher had come home to rest, too, it wouldn't be. Still, Harry couldn't stop thinking of him.

A tread on the ground below startled Harry out of his thoughts. His pets took flight, Fawkes to a tree overhanging the house, and Hedwig for the owl roost. He missed their comforting warmth, but let them go.

A melodic, softspoken baritone called his name.

"I'm up here, Xeri."

Xerides scaled the side of the house like a cat—Merlin, that elf's pure physical prowess was something else. He gave Harry a sad sort of smile. "Long night?"

"Yeah."

Xerides removed his coat and lay beside Harry, though he had to position himself higher on the roof's gentle slope so his long legs wouldn't hang over the edge. Harry scooted higher to accommodate him.

With a wave of Xerides' hand, a blanket of the night sky, scattered with glimmering bits of stars, dropped over them and further drove back the bite of midwinter. Harry ran his hand over the surface and smiled at the soft texture beneath his fingertips. He didn't know how a blanket of night sky could feel like warm velvet, but it did.

"This is lovely, you know. Your magic. I can't understand why anyone would fear something so beautiful."

Xerides snorted. "My magic can also be lethal."

"So can mine."

"True." Xerides searched Harry's eyes. "Harry, why are you out here at two in the morning?"

"Same as usual, I suppose. Can't sleep."

"You are thinking of your mate again?"

Harry sighed. "Yeah. For all the good it will do."

Xerides went silent for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice came out hesitant. Uncertain.

"I have been thinking on the situation, too, and I keep coming back to the circumstances of the former headmaster's death."

"Yes, well, that would be the sticking point, wouldn't it? It's a bit difficult to excuse a man who murdered the general of the Light in cold blood, even if everything else he's doing makes me think he's more hero than villain."

"That is what is troubling me, Harry. I am not certain it was murder. I never have been."

Harry turned onto his side facing Xerides and gave him an incredulous look. "He blasted the man
off the tower with the killing curse when he was unarmed. How could it not be murder?"

"He killed him, yes, there is no denying that, but there are many reasons to kill someone, Harry, and not all of them are evil."

Harry's heart pounded and his fingers sought the comfort of Xerides' hand. Would this be the key he needed so desperately?

"Tell me, Xeri. Please."

Xerides nodded and squeezed Harry's hand. "Yes. Well, it seems to me it might have been an act of mercy, calculated to appear evil and place the headmaster's spy in a position of power over the school. A position he could then use to protect the students from the worst of the dark one's wrath, as we know he has done."

"But why kill Dumbledore if his goal was to protect the school? Dumbledore could have done that easier himself." Harry scowled. "Well, at least in appearance."

"Not if he was already dying, Harry."

Harry gasped. "Dying?"

"He was quite an old man. Perhaps he knew his time was near." Xerides sighed. "It is the only explanation I can think of that covers all the facts, at any rate."

Harry ran over his memories of the past year. Hadn't he wondered himself if Dumbledore's health was failing?

"The curse. You think it was fatal?"

Xerides jerked up. "Curse? What curse?"

Harry winced. "I... I thought I had told you."

"No. What curse?"

"I... I don't know. Dumbledore went after one of the horcruxes—the ring—and it cursed him. He came back with his arm all shriveled and black."

"Fates!"

"Yeah. He said Severus treated him to cure it, and Dumbledore never let on that it was killing him, but then, he was never exactly forthright."

"The curse. Show me. Bring up a memory of it, please."

Harry opened his mind to Xerides, thinking of the first time he had seen the curse as compared to the last. To his dismay, when he compared his memories with the aid of legilimency, which corrected details human minds naturally forgot, he could not deny the progression of the curse. By the week prior to the Valentine's Day ball, Dumbledore's hand had looked as though the skin was flaking off, like ashes curling away from charred embers.

"Merlin," Harry breathed.

Xerides' expression turned grim. "Indeed. That curse is familiar to me—the curse of *Ignis Triplex.*" At Harry's blank look, he explained further. "Triple Fire. Flesh, blood, and bone."
Harry gasped and shook away memories of the splash as Pettigrew's hand dropped into a boiling cauldron, the image of a horrifying half-serpentine man stepping out and scowling down his scrawny frame.

"That's probably it, considering. What does it do?"

"Quite literally sets fire to the flesh, blood, and bone. In most cases, it would burn a man to ash from the inside out within three days, but you said your mate attempted to treat it?"

"I… apparently so. I had thought before that it must have been a trick, but now….""

"Yes. If your headmaster lasted so long with the triple fire curse burning him to death, then I would say it was more miracle than trick." Xerides closed his eyes and shivered. "His death was absolutely a mercy."

"Merlin." Harry buried his face in Xerides' shoulder and shuddered. "Gods. How did he hide it? How did he go on as normal while in that kind of pain?"

Xerides stroked Harry's hair, soothing him down to his core. "One does what one must. And, I imagine, your mate's healing skills and potions must have eased it, at least in part."

"There's no cure for it, is there?"

"Not a cure we have access to any longer."

Harry looked up. "What?"

Xerides' eyes turned sad. "A potion made of starberries and moondew flowers would have once stopped it completely and healed the burned flesh, according to past elders in the nocturnal tribe. Now, there is no hope."

"Moondew and…." Harry winced. "They grew in the house elves' forest."

"They were once called the Síoda, after the fine silk that they cultivated. Their race has forgotten, but the term 'house elf' is actually derogatory. It implies they are elves—which they are, though a different species of elf—but only good as slaves. It is an insult both to high elves and the Síoda, but few recall it."

"Damn. Well, I'll be calling them by their proper name from now on. Merlin."

Xerides nodded and stared into the sky. "Their enslavement led to the loss of many beautiful gifts this world knows of only in legend. Living gems, clothing of sunlight and clouds, water that heals and turns back age—"

"The fountain of youth! It exists?"

"It did once, though it was a spring, not a fountain."

"And now it's all gone." Harry sighed and turned onto his back once more. "I begin to wonder if saving the human race is such a good idea after all."

Xerides chuckled. "Your cousins do have a formidable talent for destruction, that is true." He hugged Harry against his side. "But there is also art. Music. Books. Honour. Sacrifice. Love."

Harry remembered his mother's sacrifice, the way Ron and Hermione, and now Xerides and his house el—Síoda friends, stood by him in everything. And Severus… if Xerides was right and the
headmaster's death had been an act of mercy and protection… gods. It meant the man had given up everything for them.

Harry's heart lurched. "I… I need to talk to him. Just… I need to know. I need him to know he's not alone. I need to do something." He sat and made to fly down, but Xerides stopped him with a hand on his wrist.

"Take care, Harry. Your communication may put him in danger. Especially if you reveal his secrets."

"Damn. You're right." Harry sighed and flopped onto his back. "Much as I need to hear it from him, my answers aren't worth putting his life at risk. More than it already is, rather."

"Yes." Xerides lifted a tentative hand to Harry's hair. "You will work it out, in time. I am sure of it."

Harry shuddered. "I hope you're right."

Xerides sat and stared into the trees. "Yes. So do I."
April brought new life to Britain in spite of the war raging all around and sowed the seeds of change between the jonquils and the hyacinth. Harry and Xerides were 'spring cleaning' on Hermione's directive, but, while cleaning under Harry's bed, they had found a bag of items he had packed on his last day of Hogwarts, and sorting through them had distracted them from their purpose.

"This was the first pair of socks Dobby gave me after I cut him loose from the Malfoys. If I had known what I was doing to him, I'm not sure I would have gone through with it." Harry removed his footwear and pulled one of the vibrantly coloured socks over his ankle. "Maybe it's a good thing I didn't know. Dobby is a lot happier now." He pulled on the other one and wriggled his toes. "Despite the odd patterns, I have to admit I've never had more comfortable socks than what Dobby makes."

Xerides chuckled. "They do look comfortable. And bright."

Harry snorted. "Thank goodness my boots and trousers cover them in a fight, or the enemy would see me coming from a mile away. I do like them though, even if Hermione does think me mad for it."

"I should rather like a pair myself. Perhaps with plants and such instead of quidditch things."

Harry grinned. "Dobby will be thrilled." He put his shoes back on and levitated his dirty socks into the hamper. "Let's see what else is in here. Ah..." He pulled out an empty butterbeer bottle, miniaturised and charmed into a pendant. "I really should find a chain for this. Luna made it for me. The bottle was from the first time Seamus snuck alcohol into the dorm. I would only drink butterbeer because I didn't want to be too drunk in case the shite hit the fan, but the rest of them were passing around firewhiskey and scotch." Harry snorted and placed the pendant aside. "They made such fools of themselves. It's a memory I'm glad I wasn't drunk enough to forget."

Xerides chuckled. "I, too, choose to keep my wits about me when my soldiers indulge. The next morning, I try to convince them they said the most ridiculous things I can think of, and it works, more often than not."

Harry laughed. "You do have a playful side. Show me more of it sometimes, yeah?"

Xerides' cheeks flushed. "I have been too afraid of this being a dream. I suppose. It seems unreal that I have a family and a home after so many years with no one but Torasi."
Harry squeezed his hand. "You're home, Xeri. Even after the war, assuming we ever find the way to beat him, you're welcome here."

Xerides rubbed Harry's fingers. "We shall find it."

"I hope so." Harry dove in for the next item and gasped as it cut his finger. "Ah! Damn mirror. Cuts me every time, but I just can't bear to throw it out. Sano."

"Mirror?"

"Yeah." Harry reached into the bag with more caution and removed the shard of Sirius' mirror. "My godfather gave that to me. We used to talk through it, before he...."

Harry stared at his reflection in the shard. "Do you know, I used to love him absolutely, but knowing he abused my mate... it's been harder to justify that blind devotion lately."

"Love changes as we grow regardless. It is nothing to feel guilty o—" Xerides gasped as Harry passed him the shard.

"What? Did you see someone?"

"No. But the aura—I can use this as a scrying tool, Harry. A scrying tool to find the diadem. I would have done so sooner, but I needed something with a connection to you."

Harry froze, shock and wonder rushing through him. "You can do that? I didn't know you had the sight."

Xerides shook his head. "No night elf is a true seer. That is a gift of our cousins, the moon elves, and light elves in our daylight kin, but I do have some little talent for scrying. I may be able to divine the location of the diadem from this. The aura is right, but...." His ears drooped. "But if I use this to scry, it is quite likely the magic will consume it."

Harry stared at the mirror shard. "So if I give that up, we can find the diadem?"

"It is not guaranteed, but I believe so."

Harry squashed a wave of regret. "Do it. That thing is a safety hazard anyway, and it won't take away my memories regardless."

Xerides' ears dropped lower. "You... you are sure? It may not work, Harry. There may be protections, or we may not be able to pinpoint the place even with scrying, or—"

"But there's a chance, right?"

Xerides took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Then do it. We're fighting blind otherwise. This might, at least, narrow our options down."

Xerides' ears popped back into their natural position. "Very well. We shall try it on the next new moon, when my powers are strongest."

"Brilliant." Harry levitated the mirror shard into his nightstand drawer and warded it. "So it stays safe. Now, we had best put the rest of this away and get back to attacking the dust bunnies before Hermione comes in here swinging her broom."

Xerides chuckled and held the bag open for Harry.
The morning of their planned ritual, a letter came from Molly, or rather, through Molly.

"Oh my gods!"

At Harry's cry, the entire household came running, less Dobby, who was watching over Severus while Kreacher rested.

"What?" Hermione grabbed Harry's hand. "What happened? There was nothing on Potterwatch, so it must have happened in th—"

"It's good news, not bad." Harry grinned and passed her the letter. "I'm a godfather! Remus and Tonks just had a baby boy last week."

The humans and Síoda all cried out and squealed their congratulations. Xerides was more composed, but the light in his eyes made Harry happy.

"He was born April first at three in the morning. I… I forgot his weight and height, but it's in the letter. His name is Edward, but they're calling him Teddy for Tonks' dad. And…." His joy faded. "And Remus is sure he's a werewolf, too. That's why it wasn't on the wireless. Too dangerous for Teddy."

Hermione winced. "It's two weeks to the full moon. He's going to endure his first transformation at three weeks of age?"

"I know. Poor little tyke."

Ron nodded grimly. "Hopefully they'll have some wolfsbane to make it easier on him. But a godfather! Congratulations, Harry!"

Harry closed his eyes. "I want to be there for him. I want to know him, unlike my own family."

Xerides squeezed his shoulder. "You will be. Even if he must come here until the war ends, we shall find a way."

Harry grinned up at him. "Thanks. I'm so excited. Can we celebrate a bit before you rest for the day, Xeri?"

"A celebration of birth can only bring good fortune for our search tonight."

"Great! I really needed some good news for once."

"Kreacher is thinking we may have more soon," said the tired Síoda. "I is hoping so anyway."

"So do I," said several people at once.

Harry nodded solemnly, then beamed as he set about making a cake with Winky.

Harry knelt beside Xerides, watching the elf's glowing eyes for signs of recognition. He had been staring into the mirror shard for twenty minutes without blinking. Long enough that Harry might have tried healing his eyes if he hadn't known full well that Xerides had done this ritual alone before.

Dobby and Winky watched, hands intertwined, and beside them, Ron and Hermione sat in a similar position. As Severus was out patrolling the corridors in effort to keep as many of the students safe
as possible, Kreacher had gone with him.

By now, Severus knew a second house elf was protecting him, if not whom. He had taken to talking to Kreacher occasionally, mostly just asking what in the name of Merlin was he supposed to do now or expressing worry and fear. Sometimes guilt. Harry hated himself for listening in through his elf, but he had little other choice.

It wasn't as if Kreacher's presence could make Severus hate him more, after all, and he did tell Kreacher not to intrude on the man's personal moments as much as possible.

Harry emerged from his thoughts with a jolt at the sound of his name, called in an ethereal, distant tone.

"Xerides? I'm here. What is it?"

"Do you trust… me to be… your eyes?"

Be his eyes? Ah. Maybe Xerides wanted to show Harry what he was seeing.

"Yeah. I trust you."

Xerides pressed his palm to Harry's forehead, just over his scar. A jolt hit him as Xerides' cool, tingling magic joined with Harry's own and trailed down his optic nerves. A flash of light hit his brain, and, at first, he could see nothing. Then, Xerides' voice spoke again, in that strange, disconnected manner Harry typically associated with Luna.

Hmm. Maybe there was more to her strange creatures and uncanny knowledge than they knew. The thought flooded him with terror for his missing friend. Gods, he hoped she was safe, somehow.

"Open your mind to mine," Xerides murmured. "Trust me to guide what you see."

Harry tried to obey, but he had trouble letting the mental walls he had just learned to understand drop. Xerides sheltered Harry's other hand within his own and spoke within his mind, his voice soft and reassuring.

[You are safe, Harry. Let yourself fall—I will catch you.]

His encouragement eased Harry's fears and helped the link between their minds grow stronger. He felt a bit of a lurch as his magic eased his natural shields back, but Xerides was there to fill the gap. Harry slid forwards, unable to support himself with so much of his focus on his magic and their link, and Xerides scooped him into his arms, supporting Harry against his strong chest.

Within the warmth and comfort of Xerides' embrace, the last of Harry's shields dropped. Xerides' magic flooded the gap, and Harry shivered at the intimacy of it. If he had thought legilimency training engendered a bond of closeness and trust, it was nothing to sharing the entirety of his mind with Xerides, to being so deeply linked that their thoughts worked as one.

[Do not fear, Harry. You are as safe and welcome within my mind as you are in my heart.]

Harry's unease faded into a sense of trust and a deep communion of souls. Merlin, it was an incredible feeling. Every whisper of thought between them merged. Every emotion surged and abated between them.

He felt Xerides' patient trust and his own curiosity as one. He knew the warmth of Xerides' breath in his hair and his arms around him, and also felt the soft shelter of wings wrapped around his back.
and the weight of his head tucked under his chin, the ticklish caress of his hair against his neck and jaw. After a moment, even the timing of Xerides’ heartbeat and breathing soon synced with Harry’s own.

No. Harry had never known what intimacy meant until now.

There. We are fully linked. You should be able to see through my eyes now. Open them and look.

Had that thought come from Xerides or Harry? After a bit, Harry decided it didn't matter and opened their eyes. Lights and disjointed flashes entered his mind. Harry leaned into Xerides, let his magic guide him, and slowly, a full picture began to form.

Piles of discarded junk, stacked haphazardly this way and that. All manner of things, from intricately-folded love notes to crumpled balls of parchment, discarded old porn mags to pristine new books, bottles of every drink from butterbeer to beard of the dragon, scarves of every colour, jewellery, jumpers, and even a rickety old cabinet and a bust of a warlock. And sitting on the warlock’s head, atop a feathery blonde wig, was... .

The diadem!

His voice echoed in his head rather than his ears, but Harry dismissed it as part of the ritual and went with it.

Yes. Do you recognise the area? Your magic is bright here.

I... I'm sorry, I don't.

No trouble. We shall try going further out and see if anything triggers a memory.

Okay. How?

Just let me guide you.

Harry let Xerides act as his legs and walked away from the diadem under his direction, past piles of junk until they came to a door. Xerides opened it and guided both their presences through, and shock rang through Harry. Xerides’ body hair stood on end as a result of Harry’s emotions, and Harry felt the prickling tingles of it on his own skin, too.

There, on the opposite wall was a painting of trolls attempting to perform ballet.

The Room of Requirement!

You know where we are now?

Yes, Hogwarts!

That is wonderful news! I am going to guide you back to your own consciousness now and ease the link apart. Hold on.

Harry clung to Xerides' magic through a slow progression of blinking lights, then darkness. The next time Xerides spoke, Harry heard him with his ears again, and his voice sounded normal.

"Wake up, Harry. You have done well."

Harry opened his eyes to see his entire household hovering over him, expressions tense with worry.
"Harry! Are you okay?" Hermione snatched him up and made his head spin.

"Oof. Easy, 'Mione. Whatever magic that was left me a little woozy."

"Woozy? You just fainted dead away with no warning!"

Harry rubbed his aching head. "Didn't you hear Xeri say he was going to show me what he was seeing?"

She blushed. "Oh! I must have been too distracted."

Distracted, hmm? Harry shot Ron a wry look. "You couldn't wait twenty minutes?"

Ron coughed and gave him a sheepish grin. "Well, nothing was happening, so…"

"Right. Nothing important at all."

Ron shrugged. "When the mood strikes…"

"You're worse than a dog."

"Don't I know it!"

With a chuckle, Xerides handed Harry one of his own potions. Harry swallowed it and felt it begin to work immediately.

"Thanks, Xeri. How long was I out?"

"Perhaps ten minutes. The first time I used my scrying ability, it had a similar effect. The magic is exhausting." Xerides gave Harry an elven medicine, too. "That should help, I think."

Harry sipped the tea-like medicine, sweetened with a special kind of honey Xerides harvested on the full moons, and relaxed as it eased his pain. "Brilliant. That's much better, Xeri."

"Good."

Hermione nudged Harry's hand. "Well, go on then. The scrying—did it work?"

Harry grinned. "We found it. It was in the Room of Requirement this whole time!"

"Bloody hell," said Ron with a groan. "That means we can't do anything about it until we're ready to fight."

"At least we know where it is."

"True."

"So now there's nothing left to do but wait and search for answers about your blood, Harry," said Hermione with a sigh.

"And train," Xerides pointed out. "And once Harry and I are sufficiently recovered, we should do that while the moon is high."

"Slave driver," Harry teased, but he stood and followed the night elf to the training room with no other complaint.
Candles in the Night

Chapter Summary

Sev and Lucius take over for a bit. The catalyst to change has begun.

Added watercolor/digital painting of Lucius and Olivia.

Chapter 30

Candles in the Night

Not for the first time, Lucius thanked what few lucky stars he had that Severus had taught him the value and worth of their house elves. He took refuge under Lox's wards and, confident that no one would detect him under the aging elf's shields, he pressed his ear to the door and strained to catch every sound. The nasal whine of Pettigrew's stutter made Lucius' feathers bristle and his gut boil, but he kept his rage and his harpy form in check.

'Abomination, you shall meet your deserved end soon enough.'

He forced his wrath down and his attention back to the situation at hand.

"My lord," said Pettigrew, "the questioning of the mudblood and half-breed girl failed again."

The dark lord paused to hiss something to his vile pet, and Lucius took the opportunity to call his wife's house elf once more.

"Lox?" The whisper would not get past his shields, Lucius was certain of that.

The little house elf appeared and gave Lucius a cool look. Lucius had much to make up with their kind, but he had, at least, begun the process.

"Yes, Master?"

"Please make sure that foul snake of the dark lord's cannot sense me in any way, shape, or form."

Lox nodded. "Lox is already warding you from the snake, since the dark one talks to it."

Lucius sighed. "Thank you."

Lox gave him a suspicious look and vanished.

Perhaps one day, he would believe Lucius meant his reform. Until then, Lucius had other concerns. Nagini poked her head out of the door, poked the air with her tongue, and returned to her master. Lucius did not breathe until she had gone.

The dark lord gave a disgusted sigh, his displeasure clear. "Another failure. I begin to think
Augustus is correct and the brat's friends truthfully have no idea where he is. How unfortunate."
"Y-yes, my lord, unf-fortunate."

"I wonder, Peter, if there is any use in keeping you around now that I have worthier servants to do my bidding. Nagini is hungry, after all, and her dinner must come from somewhere."

A hiss and a man's terrified squeak sounded.

'Oh, I do hope she makes the demon suffer,' Lucius thought and stifled a snarl.

"M-m-master, wait! Please! I h-have an idea!"

"Hmm." He hissed to the snake. "I do hope it is worth wasting my time for, Peter."

"Y-yes, my lord. It's only that the b-brats m-might still be able to h-help us find Potter, e-even if they don't know."

The dark lord paused. "Go on."

"Well, we-we just received w-word that some of Greyback's p-pack are wavering in their l-loyalty to the Dark, b-but if we o-offer the c-captives to them, we might k-kill two birds with one c-curse, so to speak."

Lucius barely suppressed a retch. Oh gods. They were children, or close enough to it! What kind of monsters fed children to werewolves? Live children, more likely than not.

He shuddered and pressed his hand over his mouth so his nausea would not give him away.

"And how is that?" The dark lord snapped, "What purpose do the brats serve if they are dead?"

Pettigrew squeaked. "B-bait! Use them as b-bait! The Potter boy will c-come running to s-save them!"

Pettigrew's panicked squeaking stopped.

"Bait?" Footsteps crossed the floor. "Hmm. For once, a worthy idea from you. Very well. We shall use the Light's own tactics against them and announce the ultimatum on a wireless broadcast two nights from now."

Pettigrew wheezed, "Y-yes, my lord. You are so w-wise. The brat will n-not miss your message no matter w-what rock he is h-hiding under."

"Indeed. In the meantime, we shall make sure that the werewolves receive a well-tenderised meal upon the next full moon. We shall begin with the mudblood, yes? A poorer quality cut of meat will always require more… work to make it palatable. A fortnight's worth of it should make even mudblood meat taste well enough to the likes of Greyback."

Fuck. Even if Harry did come, two weeks of unrelenting torture would be too much for either of his friends to survive. They would be mad long before the werewolves ever had their say.

"Y-yes, Master. R-right away, Master."

Footsteps scurried towards the door, and Lucius pressed himself against the wall. A pale, sweaty Pettigrew scrambled past, and Lucius physically restrained himself from transforming and tearing the abomination limb from limb.
'Soon.'

It was enough to appease the harpy side, and, once Pettigrew had gone, Lucius dashed away to Severus' former rooms. The man had gone back to Hogwarts, but he still used these chambers when he had no choice but to stay at the manor, and so his powerful anti-spying wards remained.

Once the doors shut behind him, Lucius struggled to call upon his happiest memory. Draco's birth had been a harrowing experience, one both Narcissa and his son had barely survived, but that first sound of Draco's newborn mewl had left Lucius sobbing in relief and joy. He tried to pull it close then, the memory of the love and wonder that had rushed through him the first moment the healer lay his pale, but still breathing son in his arms and told him Narcissa would survive, too, but the thought of his wife and son covered in blood brought other, far less pleasant memories to mind.

Draco, at least at first, had broken quickly. "Papa, please!"

He held on much longer these days.

Narcissa held herself as stoic as she could, but eventually, even she broke and begged for her husband. "Lucius… help me."

He tried to spare them, every damn time he tried, but all it ever achieved was seeing them all suffer.

They had stopped screaming for each other now.

"No! Expecto Patronum!" Lucius forced his mind back to his few happy moments, but even with his best efforts, he only managed to produce the faintest hint of a mist.

"Damn."

He resigned himself to asking Hippa for help. Really, he was grateful they had her, but he needed to learn the Patronus spell. He needed it to defend himself and his family, and he needed it to prove he was worth something. To prove he had changed, if only in a small way.

Death eaters couldn't use them, after all. Patronuses didn't come to dark hearts.

Lucius thought of his son, his wife, of everything he stood to lose if dementors attacked before he learned the spell, and his spine stiffened.

No. He would do it this time. He would make it work, damn it, for their sake.

Once again, he called the memory of Draco's birth to mind and held it close, the sound of his little cry after three days of despair and a horrifying delivery, the wash of wonder and relief and love powerful enough to save his wife's life, too.

"Welcome to the world, little Dragon."

One day, he would save them. Together with Severus and Potter, they would defeat the darkness and set his family free. Even if it cost him his life, Lucius would be content with his fate, if only he could save them.

"His name… is Draco… Lucius… Malfoy."

The memory of Narcissa's gift to him, of sharing his name with his son despite her loathing of that trend, filled Lucius with such powerful love, he was certain he could call a flock of patronuses, if
only he had the magical reserves.

"Expecto Patronum!"

A cloud of silver burst from his wand and solidified before him. At first, he thought it would take the shape of one of his peacocks, but it shifted into something altogether different, and Lucius sank to his knees at the sight of it. A dove. His patronus—his, of all people—had taken the form of a dove. Peace. Purity. Innocence.

Every inch of his skin tingled. Oh gods. He choked back tears and fought for composure. There could be no greater proof that his entire being had changed. A dove.

Lucius wiped his face and forced himself to pull it together. He would lose control of the spell in a moment, and he hadn't time to waste. They were likely torturing Thomas that instant.

"I have a message…." He cleared his throat and swallowed several times. "For Severus Snape. Make sure he is completely unobserved when you approach, and do not let yourself be seen by anyone but Severus. Tell him the dark lord plans to use Thomas and Lovegood as bait to draw Potter out of hiding. In two days' time, he will announce his plan to… to feed them to Greyback and his pack upon the next full moon. And until then, he plans to torture them continuously. We must act now, before the pain breaks their minds or Potter truly does come blazing in to save them. Please, hurry."

The dove perched on his arm, and Lucius blinked back a surge of emotion. She cooed and cocked her head. Perhaps she wanted a name?

"Oh. Let me think… ah. I have it. Olivia. Will that do?"

She cooed and nuzzled his cheek—a tingling, cool sort of touch that warmed him within.

"Hurry, Olivia. We have little time."

The dove bobbed her head, shook out her wings, and flew away. Lucius stared after her for a long time, until Severus' doe cantered in.

"A dove, Lucius? You truly are a new man." The doe rubbed a fall of Lucius' tears away. "Prepare yourself then. It is too late to rescue them tonight, but tomorrow evening, as soon as the dark lord begins his rounds in London, we move. You know what to do. In the meantime, do your best to keep them sane and whole."

Lucius nodded to the doe. "Tell him I will be ready."

The doe bowed and bounded away, and Lucius gathered his fragmented wits. There was much to do before Severus came.

Severus, polyjuiced and glamoured to look like a relative of Lucius', followed his compatriot into the bowels of Malfoy Manor. The metallic grit of blood, dank mildew, stale sweat, and the tang of unwashed, ill human hung heavy in the air. Severus cast a surreptitious air freshening charm so he wouldn't retch.

Lucius laughed bitterly. "Vile, isn't it?"
"Yes. Utterly."

Lucius wrapped his arms around his chest and shuddered. "I had closed this area and warded it with the strongest spells I could find after Abraxas' death, and now….

It spoke worlds to Lucius' upbringing that the man referred to his own father by his forename. At least he had done for the past two years.

Severus rubbed Lucius' shoulder. "I am here." He whispered against the veela's ear, "Are there any captives other than our targets?"

Lucius shook his head slightly.

Thank Merlin for small favours. Severus had planned to empty the dungeons so no one left behind would act as replacement bait, but fewer captives to free meant fewer liabilities. He allowed himself a small sigh and walked the rest of the way to the torture chambers in silence. The sound monitor spells on the cells demanded careful discretion regardless. Riddle and most of his minions had gone to pillage and destroy, but to assume that meant he had left the cells unobserved was suicide.

"Here," Lucius whispered. "Be quick about it."

The veela unlocked the captives' cell with his bloodline override and waved Severus inside.

Severus hurried in, Lucius quick on his heels. As the door shut behind him, the captives forced themselves up and gave them both wary looks. Severus pressed a finger to his lips and held up his potions kit.

"We are not a threat," he whispered.

Their tense postures eased slightly, and Severus took an instant to assess their state of health. The goblin looked as though he had a broken arm, Ollivander lay, pale and grey, in the corner, and Lovegood trembled and rocked into her knees, but Thomas, by far, was in the worst shape. Severus barely recognised him under all the blood and bruising.

"By Merlin," Severus whispered. "Apollo, you said you had healed them." He didn't dare use Lucius' true name or speak above a whisper and prayed the captives had the sense to follow suit.

Lucius gave him a grim look and whispered back, "I did."

"Damn!" Severus knelt beside Thomas and opened his kit. "Thomas, look at me. Open your eyes, child."

"Who…?"

His voice rasped and wavered, but at least he had asked a coherent question.

"I am Darius, Apollo's cousin." Severus pointed to Lucius to make his meaning—and his warning—clear. "He has asked my aid here tonight, but we must be discreet and move quickly." Severus summoned several potions from his kit. "Will you trust me to help you?"

Thomas gave a hollow laugh. "Not much choice, is there?"

Severus wished he could rub the boy's shoulder or squeeze his hand, but it would only hurt him more.
"Unfortunately not, but I will not add to your pain." He levitated a bone mender to the goblin, a strong anti-\textit{Cruciatus} draught to Lovegood, and a powerful healing draught to Ollivander, then to Lovegood and the goblin. Once the others had their potions in hand, Severus gently lifted Thomas' head and helped him swallow the strongest healing draught he had in his possession. Thomas whimpered and whined in agony.

"I apologise. I know it hurts."

"Do you?"

Severus nodded sharply. "I have been at the end of his wand, too. Yes, I do."

Thomas choked back tears even as Severus fed him a powerful, non-narcotic pain reliever. "What… what's the point? If he's going to… to feed me to Greyback, I'd rather not be sane for it."

Severus brushed the boy's tears away and held his face. He did not dare explain aloud, but he nudged into Thomas's mind. He showed him plans to free them and pleaded with him to be quiet and compliant.

Thomas gasped, eyes wide. "You… really?"

Severus nodded. "Be still, Thomas. You are still in poor condition."

Thomas clutched his hand. "Thank you," he whispered. Severus nodded and set about getting Ollivander fit to travel, too.

In five minutes, he had done all he dared. None of the captives were in good shape, but, bar Thomas, they could all walk, and Severus could bear Thomas' weight.

"It is enough. There is no time for more."

Lucius nodded. "Everyone…." He left his phrase unfinished but took Lovegood's hand and motioned for the others to do the same. Ollivander took Lovegood's other hand, and the goblin clasped his fingers around Ollivander's with a sneer of distaste. They all looked at Thomas with a frown.

"Darius will take care of it," Lucius whispered. "Be still."

A wave of his wand disillusioned them all. Severus added custom stealth spells of his own. They weren't perfect—they would fail with certain wizards, particularly wizards with a non-human ancestry—but few could see past them, and none of the death eaters could. Well, none of the true death eaters at any rate. Severus knew that much from experience.

He made a mental note to avoid Draco and bent to pick up Thomas, but a sharp challenge from the goblin stayed his hand.

"What? Why have you done this, wizards?" His tone made it clear there would be consequences if they didn't explain, and fast. Even injured, goblins were nothing to trifle with in a fight. Severus struggled to think of a way to tell him that would not put them in danger—the goblin would see legilimency as an attack—but Lovegood came to his rescue first.

"To help us, of course."

The goblin hesitated. "But…."
"You know why you can trust me, Griphook. You know I would know if it wasn't safe."

Would she? Hmm. Severus wondered if the girl shared his gift for intuition. It might explain her odd personality, if she saw and sensed things few others could.

Lovegood looked directly at him, stealth spells or no. Merlin. Did she have non-human blood?

"Kin often share similar gifts, sir."

Bloody hell, the girl was a seer. And wait, *kin*? As far as he knew, neither the Malfoys nor the Princes had any relation to the Lovegoods. He stared, bemused, then decided this wasn't the time to worry about it. Maybe Lovegood knew things he didn't. Clearly, she had stronger intuition than even Severus himself did, so perhaps she saw family ties he was unaware of.

'She must be something more than human to have such powerful sight.'

Merlin. How had someone who saw so clearly ended up *here*? Then again, his intuition hadn't protected him much at her age, had it?

He gave her a short nod, and, after a sip of his potion in case this went beyond the hour mark, he knelt beside Thomas. A finger against his lips warned the others to keep silent.

Gently, he eased Thomas into his arms, and the boy gave a stifled whine of pain.

"Forgive me," Severus whispered. "Are you able to stay silent?"

Thomas nodded and grimaced. "If my life and their lives depend on it? Yes."

"Good."

Severus cast a *Muffliato Quietus* on him just in case. It still muffled sound, but the alterations he had made to the spell base as an adult reduced the buzzing noise to the sound of a gentle breeze. Few would detect it now.

"We have done all we can, Apollo. We must leave before we are found."

Lucius whispered, "Come. Hurry."

Severus used his mental magic skills to help keep Lucius and the others in sight and followed the group out of the dungeons, trying his best not to jar Thomas. The boy buried his face in Severus' shoulder to stifle the sounds of pain he couldn't help, and Severus wished he could comfort him. He sent what wandless healing he could spare into the boy and hoped it helped, at least a little.

The sound of voices ahead stopped the group in their tracks. Lucius guided everyone to press against the wall.

"I'm *coming*, Uncle. Merlin!"

Draco. Severus' heart crashed into his ribs. He hardly dared breathe as the door to the dungeons opened and Rodolphus Lestrange stepped inside. His hollow, cold eyes scanned the hall and stared ahead. That one, at least, hadn't seen them.

"Hurry it up, brat. I know I heard voices."

Draco stepped inside, face pinched in a scowl and eyes blank to conceal his terror. Severus felt it anyway.
"I said I'm coming. Give me five seconds to…." His eyes landed directly on Lucius and went wide. Severus' breath stilled. Oh gods.

"To...?" Lestrange huffed. "One might think you were stalling, Draco."

"To catch up, you ruddy bastard." Draco looked away as if he hadn't seen them and limped after his uncle, the motion exaggerated a bit. "For fuck's sake, you know our lord tortured me two days ago. I'm still injured, you fucking arsehole."

A bluff. Severus and Hippa had healed him the same night. Merlin, Draco was covering for them. Relief nearly sent Severus to his knees, but he occluded it away before anyone sensed it.

A curse shot over Lestrange's shoulder. Draco ducked, barely.

"Not so injured you can't move."

"It's my leg that's hurt, bastard."

Lestrange scowled. "Hurry it up, or I'll hurt the other one."

A powerful wave of rage emanated from the veela.

[Lucius. Calm yourself before we are all killed.]

Lucius' rage quieted, though Severus still sensed him seething. He ignored it. His training had taught him to sense emotions in others much faster than most. Lucius had occluded well enough to keep Lestrange out, at least.

"Fine, you utter prick. I'm coming." Draco limped to the corner a few yards away, trailing behind his uncle, and made a shooing gesture behind his back just before moving out of sight.

[Run.] The boy wasn't a telepath, but Severus heard his terrified urging anyway.

Lucius shuddered, clutched Lovegood's hand, and dashed as fast as their injured captives could follow to the exit. Severus doubled the strength of his muffling spell and followed, praying Draco could delay his uncle long enough for Severus and the others to make it to the wardline.

Lucius led them through a tunnel Severus had never seen, one lined with dust, cobwebs, and torches that lit automatically as they passed, and Severus jogged behind. Poor Thomas couldn't help whimpering, but he did his best to silence it, and Severus helped as much as he could.

A set of rickety stairs and a rusted trap door opened onto the Malfoy grounds, near a hidden gate at the back of the property. Lucius held it open for them.

"We are all out," Severus whispered as he cleared the stairs and stepped into the cool, spring night.

Lucius shut the door and warded it. "Hurry." He dragged them on towards the gate. "If we don't make it past the wardline before they seal the manor…." 

"Yes." Severus shuddered and ran as fast as he could.

Just as Severus, the last in their group, stepped through the gate, a siren went off at the manor.

"Lucius! Now!"

The veela clamped his free hand onto Severus' arm, and Severus apparated the entire group away.
"Fuck," Thomas choked out, tears strangling him.

"Ssh. You are safe now." Severus lay him upon the grassy ground, amidst a patch of heather and vervain, and set to work healing the damage their escape had done. He levitated more healing and pain relief potions to the others and watched Thomas' skin creep back towards its normal umber shade.

"Merlin, that was too close." Lucius knelt beside him. "I… do you suppose Draco will be well?"

"He cannot be accused. He was nowhere near the cells."

"What shall we say?"

"That Potter must have done it. The dark lord will double his efforts to find the boy and forget about us, and no one shall find Potter until he is ready to be found. Trust me on that."

"I hope you are right." Lucius took a healing potion from the kit and fed it to Ollivander. "Where are we?"

"In a park in Cokeworth, near my childhood home. As no one ever comes here at night, it was the safest place I could think of on the spot."

"Cokeworth?" Lucius stared, eyes wide. "You brought all six of us so far in one side-along apparition? With no portkey or assistance and while carrying an injured captive? Without splinching us into pieces?"

Severus gave a wry laugh. "Adrenaline is a wonderful aid to powerful magic, Lucius. Besides, I have always been more powerful at night. It served us well this time."

Lovegood smiled at him. "Like I am more powerful in the daylight."

Severus gave her a searching look, curious, but they had no time for idle questions. "Perhaps." He turned back to Lucius. "You must contact Bill Weasley. He is the closest trustworthy person, but I cannot call him. He will recognise my patronus in an instant."

Lucius grimaced. "Ah. Merlin, I am not able to call it consistently yet, but I shall try."

"Your happiest memory. Focus on it, and do not let your sorrow taint it. There is hope, Lucius, that they, at least, will see those moments again one day. This is what we are fighting for."

Lucius steeled himself and nodded. "Yes. You are right. I will do this so, one day, Draco may know the joy of seeing his child enter the world safely, too."

Severus squeezed Lucius' shoulder. "Yes. Think of that, and pour it into the spell."

"Right." Lucius took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and lifted his wand. "Expecto Patronum!"

A silver dove emerged from his wand.

Lucius' patronus form amazed Severus. A dove, of all things. Innocence, purity, and peace, for the Malfoy lord?

Then again, this Lucius had been reborn, in a sense. Perhaps it did fit him after all.

Lucius breathed a sigh and let his posture slump slightly. "Thank Merlin. Olivia, please tell Bill Weasley that I come as an ally with several captives of the dark. We are in the park in Cokeworth,
and they need his help and shelter. Guide him to the captives, but not to Darius or myself." He waved to Severus to make his meaning clear. "Go. Hurry."

The dove flew away.

Lucius murmured, "Do you suppose he will come?"

Severus' voice came out in a grim tone. "I do, but not alone. We must make ourselves scarce."

Lucius hesitated.

[We will not leave them unprotected.]

Lucius nodded and let Severus apparate him away. They landed in the shadows perhaps twenty yards from the stunned, worried captives.

"Now, we wait."

Thomas gasped out, "Oh, gods! Did they really leave us here with no protection and no wands?"

Lovegood knelt next to Thomas and rubbed his shoulder. "No. They are watching over us. They simply cannot risk being seen."

"Seen?"

Griphook huffed. "Clearly, those two wizards are spies. If they are found here by either side, they will die. Slowly."

"Are you… Malfoy, a spy? Really?"

"Yes, and we must help them keep their identities secret," said Ollivander. "They risked their lives to save us. We must protect theirs in turn."

Thomas shuddered. "Save us. Merlin, before I was captured, I would have thought Malfoy would be the one torturing me for You-Know-Who. I don't get it. He's such an arse, or he was, but now…? I mean, I'm amazed he can even call a patronus, but spying? Risking his life to save ours? It boggles the mind."

Luna smiled weakly. "Don't you see, Dean? Light always shines brightest in the dark."

Lucius grabbed Severus' wrist and took a shaky breath. Severus understood. He blinked hard and carried her words to heart.

Shine brightest in the dark. Well, he would sure as hell try.

Birth of Olivia - watercolor and digital media.
Chapter Summary

I used two kinds of accents in Elvish.

Grave accents (à, è, ì, ò, ù) denote a short vowel sound instead of a long one (ex: Brèda = BREH-dah, not BREE-dah. Velìth = vel-ITH (like in wind), not vel-EETH or vel-ĪTH (like in ice)).

Acute accents (á, é, í, ó, ú, ý) simply indicate a stressed syllable. (ex: Gová: go-VAH, Nàlì: Nai-EE-dah.)

It's an attempt to make Elvish easier to hear in your heads, but if it doesn't help, feel free to toss the accents out the window and pronounce it however your brain wants to. It's not as if this tiny snippet of a language has any practical use anywhere outside of this story anyway. I might just be a *tad* too obsessed with worldbuilding lol.

Also, the next few updates might be slower than usual depending on my health. I have a spinal procedure Wednesday, but unless they fix my prescription, I'm also looking at 3+ weeks of hellish pain levels, no meds, and opiate withdrawal. It's their screw up, so they *should* fix it, but my experience with pain drs is that the patients don't matter. Ugh. Let's hope this new dr actually gives a shit. 😊

Anyway, enjoy.

Chapter 31

Before the Dawn

Lucius stood in his usual place in the dark lord's circle and hoped he had occluded well enough to hide the wave of panic strangling him. Beside him, Severus looked as cold and disaffected as ever, but Severus had lied to the demented old bastard for years. Lucius had neither his experience nor his strength at mind magic. And Draco… gods help them if Riddle read Lucius' impulsive, hot-tempered son. His boy didn't have the maturity or temperament for mind magic, and it showed.

Merlin, he hoped what strength they did have between them would be enough to pull through this night without causing the deaths of everyone he loved.

The dark lord paced by, red eyes piercing the night like embers in the darkness. The sweep of the dark lord's robe on the tile floors put Lucius in mind of Abraxas' wheezing final breaths. He prayed his own would last through the night and let none of his terror show on his face.

'Merlin help us now.'

The dark lord's frigid tenor clawed at Lucius' ears. "A mudblood, a subhuman, an old man, and a half-breed brat. How difficult is it to babysit four unworthy captives…." Riddle turned his wand on
them and snarled, eyes red as the blood on his hands. "For two godsdamned weeks?"

No one breathed.

"A fortnight! That is all I asked of you. To support me as I lead magical Britain into a new era, and to watch over four injured, weakling captives for a fortnight, and did you manage it? No. Once again, my plans are foiled due to your incompetence." His eyes glowed brighter, and the volume of his voice dropped to a lethal hiss. "Or your treachery."

A chill of dread crawled under Lucius' skin, but he managed to repress a shiver. Fuck, this would not be pretty.

A skeletal hand whipped around and aimed at Severus. "Last to arrive, hm? A spy in enemy territory, too. Can you ever truly be trusted?"

Severus showed no hint of fear. "My lord, my loyalty is to you and you alone."

"Hm. We shall see. Legilimens!"

Severus reeled back under the force of his assault, but remained on his feet. Lucius didn't dare hold him up in a room full of liabilities and monsters, but he clutched the man's sleeve out of sight of the others. It was the only support he could offer him.

Riddle pulled back with a hiss. "A clever story, my dear Severus, but can anyone verify your whereabouts?"

Severus simply inclined his head, giving no sign of the splitting migraine Lucius knew must be ravaging his brain. "The Hogwarts house elves and Amycus, my lord."

'Amicus? Ah. Severus must have planted false memories. Always two steps ahead.'

The dark lord turned his wand on Amycus. "Well?"

"Er… we was disciplinin' the unruly brats, my lord. Snape sent me on when the call came and took care of the little brats himself."

"We shall see. Legilimens!"

Lucius gripped Severus' sleeve out of sight of the others, hoping to Merlin his cover held up.

Riddle drew back with a scowl. "Very well. It seems you are innocent… this time."

Lucius' surge of relief was short-lived.

The dark lord turned back to the circle, eyes scanning the group. "Who sounded the alarm?"

Lucius stiffened and suppressed a gasp. 'Draco…'

"I did, my lord." Rodolphus pushed out his chest in pride. "Draco and I were listening to the charms. I swore I heard people whispering, then that subhuman git shouted something, so we rushed to the dungeons straight away. They were already gone before we got there."

"Crucio! You should have been faster then!"

Lucius watched his brother-in-law writhe about with a sense of bitter vindication. 'Next time you attempt to curse my son, I will kill you myself.'
Severus tugged Lucius' sleeve discreetly, and Lucius pulled his anger back and restored his shields. Merlin, he couldn't afford to let his guard down now.

Riddle let Rodolphus up and broke into his mind without warning. Rodolphus dropped again, felled by the force of the dark lord's legilimency, and Lucius prayed the bastard hadn't seen Draco gaping at the captives in the hall.

Riddle shoved him back with another *Crucio*. "So you are innocent of treachery, at least, if you are still incompetent." He kicked Rodolphus away, but Lucius' relief and satisfaction vanished as he found himself staring down the business end of the dark lord's wand.

Lucius poured all his fear and anger into the strength of his shields and pulled forth a set of innocuous memories. If he pretended to have been at the Ministry when the alarm sounded, it might be enough of a cover to explain his delay in arrival… maybe.

"And you, Lucius? Where were you when the captives escaped?"

Lucius focused on the images he wanted Riddle to see and opened his mouth to speak….

But his wife beat him to it.

"We were together when the alarm sounded, my lord."

Lucius suppressed a gasp at Narcissa's words. Oh, gods.

Riddle turned his wand on her, and Lucius' heart dropped.

'Cissa, what are you playing at?'

"Together?" The dark lord's voice held a scourge of distrust.

The woman held her head high. "We are married, sire. We had to dress and tidy ourselves at the sound of the siren, so that is why we arrived late." Her eyes met her husband's briefly, and Lucius understood.

She knew. She knew Lucius had freed the captives, and she had offered the dark lord the only titbit juicy enough to potentially distract his attention from the truth.

'Oh, Cissa.'

Severus' fingers wrapped around Lucius' wrist. *[Steady.]*

Lucius reined in his wild emotions as best as he could and clung to Severus' arm out of sight of the others.

"I see." The leer on the dark lord's face turned Lucius' stomach. "Or I shall see momentarily. *Legilimens!*"

A surge of rage sparked in Lucius' gut. How *dare* he? He had no right to view their naked bodies! The veela in him itched to scratch the arsehole's eyes out, but as they would all die if he gave in to the urge, he held back.

At least until he sensed a foreign wave of magic on Narcissa beyond the dark lord's legilimency.

A quiet growl of threat escaped him. It was only luck that Riddle was too distracted to notice.
Lucius shot Severus a shocked look and whispered, "How?"

"I am not sure. I have a talent for instinctive magic, and it is guiding me. I am not positive I am able to do this twice after expending so much magic earlier in the evening, however; so do try to keep your harpy in check."

Lucius gave him a discreet nod and forced himself not to intervene.

Riddle came out of Narcissa's memories with a sneer. "Abraxas must have been blind."

Lucius went rigid and clutched Severus' sleeve.

"He seemed to think your husband a man of uncommon beauty. One I might find... tolerable."

Severus' breath caught. [Gods.] His hand curled around Lucius' arm and held him in place. [Do not rise to the bait.]

Lucius swallowed tears of humiliation and rage and held himself stoic. He no longer cared what the monster thought of him, of course, but he might have gone without ever hearing of that nightmare again.

"I see nothing uncommon nor beautiful here," said Riddle with a scowl.

Lucius suppressed a snort. Thank Merlin for small favours, then.

"Wouldn't you agree, Narcissa?"

Narcissa held herself stoic and met the dark lord's gaze head on. "I do not."

Lucius gasped. "Cissa, no."

Riddle's eyes glowed brighter. "What did you say?"

Narcissa didn't flinch. "My lord is entitled to his opinion, of course, but I, as Lucius' wife and the mother of his child, do not share it."

Lucius' chest panged. "Cissa..."

"Crucio!"

Lucius bit back a cry as his wife dropped for his defence of him. "No, no, please."

Severus dragged him back. "Quiet. It will only be worse for all of you."

Lucius bit into his knuckles until he tasted blood and dug his fingers into Severus' wrist. The man bore it without a flinch and kept up a steady stream of mental encouragement.

[Steady. Hold on to me. It will end soon.]

Lucius barely heard him over the sound of his wife's screams.

"Crucio!"

Severus dropped to his knees this time, and Lucius reeled at a wave of anguish for his fellow spy's suffering, one as strong as he had endured for his wife. They were brothers-in-arms, comrades, and
as of late, friends. Severus' pain hurt Lucius down to his soul, and he wept at the knowledge that he could do nothing to stop it.

'I am so sorry.'

"Please…"

Severus screamed, and Lucius had no idea if the pain had torn the sound unwilling from his throat, or if Severus had let his iron control drop on purpose to cover the sound of Lucius' grief.

'Forgive me.'

He struggled to bring himself under control, but on his next breath, that familiar dark wand turned on him. It was only to be expected. By the rage in Riddle's face, they would all suffer before the night ended. Lucius barely had time to brace himself before the first wave of bone-melting, soul-tearing agony struck.

"Crucio!"

Xerides aimed an ice spell at Harry, watching the sunguard's technique with a careful eye. Fates, but he had come a long way over the past ten months. The two humans had long since reached their limit, and even Harry had a cut across one cheek and a black eye from an earlier bout of hand-to-hand, but the boy still had fight left in him regardless.

"Come on, Xeri!"

Xerides grinned and decided to train the boy in earnest. He readied a volley of powerful spells, his fists, and his feet, and launched a fierce attack. Harry wouldn't be able to dodge it all, but it would teach him, and Xerides hadn't used anything that would truly hurt.

Harry ducked under a darkness arrow, leapt over an ice wave, and flew over a cutting wind. Xerides' fist caught him in the ribs as he landed, but Harry moved with the force of his blow to mitigate the damage and parried with a roundhouse kick and a blast of fire. Xerides dodged and shielded himself and went to return fire with a blast of ice, but, at that instant, Harry gave a sharp cry and dropped to his knees.

"Fates!" Xerides dashed to him and grabbed his shoulders, pouring night healing into him. "Harry? Oh, I am so sorry. What hurts? Where have I injured you?"

Harry wheezed, "Not… me." He rubbed his chest and panted. "D-Dobby!"

The Síoda appeared, took one look at Harry, and gasped. "Dobby is being checking on Master's mate and Kreacher right away!"

"T-take elixirs to… Kreacher… or Hippa… just in case. And…." He cut his wrist with a shaky minor severing curse and let the blood drain into a phial. A few added tears would keep it from coagulating and help Severus heal. "You know what to do with that."

"Yes, Master." Dobby corked the phial, healed Harry's cut, and popped away.

Xerides brushed Harry's fringe back and cupped a hand powered with healing magic around his black eye. "Severus is injured?"

"Y-yeah. Badly, if I feel it, too."
Xerides scooped Harry into his arms, carrying him bridal-style. Harry gave a little squawk of surprise and indignation.

"Oi! I can… walk. Maybe."

Xerides huffed. "You are clearly weakened. I shall carry you to bed."

"Need a ruddy… shower first."

"You have charms, do you not? You will have to make do with that tonight."

Hermione aimed a cleaning and laundering charm at Harry. "There you are."

Harry squawked again and covered his face. "Dear Merlin. D-Did you really need to do that while Xeri is carrying me?"

"Oh, stop whinging." Hermione gave him a worried look. "We have bigger problems."

Harry rubbed his chest and grimaced. "Right. Xeri?"

The elf nodded and carried Harry up two flights of stairs to his bedroom. He set Harry upon the bed and brushed his fringe back.

"Lie there. I will care for your injuries and try to ease your pain."

Harry nodded and gave Xerides a wry, pained smile. "How are you not even winded? It's just not fair."

Xerides chuckled, though his mirth faded fast. "I am twice your size. Your weight is no trouble." He made his medical kit appear and began mixing a medicine for Harry. "I will help as much as I am able."

"Nothing will fix it until Severus is out of danger." Harry shuddered. "Gods. I hope he'll be okay."

"So do we all. And not just for your sake anymore." Ron helped Harry take a Sunshine Elixir and sat beside him. "How… how bad is it, mate? Like last time, or…?"

Harry winced. "More like the first time. It's bad, Ron." He whimpered and covered his face. "Gods help me, I'm so terrified. Severus, hold on. Please, hold on."

Xerides added windberry honey to sweeten the medical mixture and boost its healing properties and helped Harry drink it. Artemis help him, but he was terrified, too. He had never met Severus, of course, but through Harry's mental training and Kreacher's reports, he felt like a friend to Xerides anyway.

'Fates, Severus. I hope you will be well.'

Ron tucked his knees to his chest. "Merlin. You know, Harry, I used to worry when this happened because I was terrified of losing you. Now I'm terrified of losing you both. I never thought I'd say it, but the bat deserves better than this. And… and I don't want him to be hurt."

Hermione nodded and sat beside her boyfriend. "He's done so much for us, and all while convincing everybody around us that he's evil. I… I'm scared for him, too."

Harry whimpered into his hands. "He doesn't know, 'Mione. Xerides taught us he's a triple agent and a hero. We all care about him now, and I…." His voice broke. "He's my mate. And he's all
alone and suffering, and he still thinks I hate him!"

Hermione winced. "It isn't safe to…"

"I know, but I just… he needs to know, 'Mione. All he's got is his secret spy and his strange friendship with Malfoy."

"There is a good possibility they are the same person," Xerides pointed out.

"Malfoy? A spy?" Ron wrinkled his nose. "Not bloody likely."

"We all thought that about Severus, too." Hermione rubbed Harry's hand. "What do you want to do, then? We can't just write him like we did Dumbledore. We know Pettigrew is spying on him, and Riddle might have all sorts of charms on Severus' office. Maybe even his quarters."

Harry grimaced and rubbed his chest. "He made his quarters at Malfoy Manor safe, didn't he?"

"Well, yes, but that was a warded home, not Hogwarts. The wards at the school won't allow for the same level of secrecy."

"I have to do something, Hermione. Even a little thing, just so he knows he's not alone." She bit her lip. "I… I just don't see how, Harry."

"Winky is making it safe," said the Síoda. "If you is telling Winky to make your letter so no one can see, I is doing it."

"And we already know Hippa is keeping the rat away from Severus," Ron added. "So is Kreacher, for that matter."

Harry looked between them and nodded. "Then as soon as he's better, I'm writing him."

Hermione winced. "Just… just be careful, okay? Even with all our precautions, there's still a risk. Don't give out your name or mention details anyone but Severus would know, and don't let him do it either."

Harry slumped in relief, then gave a little cry of pain. "Oh gods. He's being hurt again."

Xerides settled on the bed, eased Harry into his arms with his back to the elf's chest, and tucked healing-charged hands under Harry's wings and over his friend's heart. "I will help you cope until he is safe again."

Harry grimaced. "Er… thanks, Xeri, but it won't help, like I said."

"I will not stop trying."

Harry nodded and clutched at his wrists. "Long as you… don't drain yourself. I… it might help me be less scared anyway."

Hermione gave them a curious look. "I'll make sure he doesn't hurt himself, Harry." Her eyes flicked between Harry and Xerides, and an expression of deep concern crossed her features. "We… we're here for you both, okay?" Her gaze, as it fell upon Xerides, held deep sympathy and compassion. "What?"
Harry gave her a wan smile. "Yeah. Thanks."

Xerides wondered what had troubled her about him when Harry and Severus were in danger, but then Harry gave a whimper of fear and anguish, and Xerides decided it didn't matter. Harry needed all his attention at the moment.

"I am here, Harry. I will help you."

Harry gave a sniffling sigh. "Thanks, Xeri. It helps keep me from falling to pieces, even if… ugh… it can't help the pain."

Xerides nodded and did what he could to ease Harry's agony and fear. Fates, but he wished he could help Severus, too.

'We are safe here, but Severus is suffering. Gods, how I wish we could open our home to him and keep him safe here, but then Harry might die. By Diana, what a mess.'

Heart bleeding for the spy he could do so little to protect, Xerides held Harry tight and fought to heal the ones he could.

Harry spent an hour of anguish and terror in Xerides' arms, struggling not to give in to the panic he couldn't hold at bay. Then, Dobby returned, and all else vanished in a wave of dread and desperation.

"Dobby! Oh gods! How is he?"

"He is badly injured and bleeding, but he is healing now, Master Harry. Dobby has left him in Hippa and Kreacher's care so I's can tell you he is safe."

Harry let out a shaky sigh. "Oh, thank Merlin."

He buried a few helpless tears in Xerides' chest, and the elf held him tight and whispered soothing things into his hair. Big, strong hands rubbed Harry's back under his wings and cradled his head close, and a smaller hand squeezed his shoulder. Hermione.

"It's all right now, Harry. He's going to be okay." She sniffled, too. "Thank God."

"Yeah," Ron agreed, voice unsteady. "Dobby, what happened? How did Snape get so hurt?"

Dobby grimaced. "The dark one is torturing the entire inner circle and Dobby's former masters." His ears drooped. "Dobby was thinking it would be good to see his former master receive some of the pain he is causing me, but Dobby was wrong. It was not good to see. Not at all."

Xerides shuddered and reached out to squeeze the Síoda's shoulder. "Vengeance hurts us, too, yes?"

"Y-yes, Master Xerides." Dobby hugged his chest. "Dobby is never seeing Lucius act like that."

Harry glanced to Xerides and frowned. Hmm.

"It is possible that they are the same person."

Could Malfoy be the spy after all?

"Like what, Dobby?"
"He… he is pleading for the dark one to torture him instead of his son and wife, like we is seeing before, but this time he is also being upset over Master Severus' pain. Dobby is never seeing him sacrifice for anyone but his wife and son before."

"Merlin," Ron breathed. "He… he offered himself in exchange for Severus?"

Dobby shook his head. "No, Master, he is only crying for him and pleading for him to be spared, as he is for his family, but it is being strange to see him care at all."

Harry winced. "Merlin." He sat up, though it hurt, and wiped his face. "A-and the Malfoys? What state are they in, or could you tell?"

Dobby shuddered. "Dobby is thinking the Lady Malfoy and Draco will pull through with Lox and Rena's help, but the dark one is torturing Lucius three times as hard for his defiance. Dobby is not sure he is surviving without help."

Harry looked at Dobby, remembered the scars on his back and ears, and shook his head. Best not to send him on this mission.

"Winky, will you take care of the Malfoys tonight? Lucius in particular? Don't stay if anyone tries to hurt or threaten you, okay? Just heal them as best as you can without endangering your life or theirs."

Winky bowed. "Should Winky be taking potions or blood?"

Harry hesitated. "Yes, but only for Lucius and only if he is unconscious and unobserved. I think the other two will be well enough with their own treatment. Just make sure they pull through, okay? Unless it's dangerous for you, of course."

Winky nodded. "Winky is doing her best."

Dobby took her hands. "Please, be careful. It is being dangerous there."

"Right," Ron added. "Don't let anyone see or hear you, Winky."

"Winky is doing as Masters and Dobby say." She gave Dobby a kiss to reassure him and vanished.

"I hope you know what you're doing, mate," said Ron with a wry grimace. "Malfoy? Really?"

"I think Xeri might be right about him, Ron. I think he might be the spy, but either way, he tried to save Severus. I have to… it's only fair."

Ron sighed. "I suppose you have a point, but I still think it's barmy."

"No more so than anything else we've done so far," Hermione frowned and turned back to Dobby. "Why is Riddle so angry?"

"Because his bait is escaping," said Dobby."

"Bait?" Harry flinched. "Me. He wanted to use something—or, more likely, someone—to get to me."

"He is not able to do it," said Dobby. "They is escaping."

Harry wrapped his arms around his waist and shuddered. "Thank the gods, but how? How in the bloody hell did they escape Riddle?"
"You're asking?" Ron snorted. "Come off it, mate. You've practically made a career of escaping the bastard's clutches every bloody end of term."

Harry shuddered. "Never without a cost."

Ron's mirth faded. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right. Sorry, mate."

Harry waved him off. "Do you have any idea how the 'bait' escaped, Dobby?"

The Síoda hesitated. "I… Dobby is not sure. I is thinking Kreacher knows, but he is too busy trying to save Master Severus. I is not wanting to distract him."

"That's okay. Thank you. We'll just ask Kreacher when he gets back. Thank Merlin they escaped."

Harry took Hermione's hand. "Do you… do you think it might be Dean and Luna?"

"Most likely so," she said, eyes brimming. "If they were prisoners, Riddle knows you would fight through hell to save them."

Ron breathed in harshly. "Fuck, I hope you're right, 'Mione."

"Y-yes." Harry wiped his eyes. "And I'm starting to feel a bit better, so they must be making progress with Severus."

"Well then…." Ron held up a hand, and a deck of cards zoomed into his palm. "Snap to keep us all from losing our minds worrying about him?"

Harry stared at the cards. "I can't. Not this time." Tears blurred his vision. "We're safe here. We're all safe and warm and no one is being tortured or traumatized, but Severus… he's suffering. I can't play a bloody card game while my mate is hovering on the edge of death and there's nothing —nothing—I can do about it!"

Tears tracked down his face. "I can't stop thinking about it. I can't protect him, and fuck, I need him home. At least, I need to know he's safe."

Ron banished the cards and hugged Harry. "I'm sorry, mate. Should've thought of that myself."

Harry sniffled and wiped his face. "M-maybe, maybe will you all just sit with me and talk to me? At least until I know he'll be okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

Xerides pulled Harry back to lean against his chest again. "I have you. I will keep healing you while we speak. It will be all right, Harry. He is, at least, on the mend."

Harry's smile held worlds of grief. "For now."

Xerides flinched. "Yes. Forgive me."

Harry sighed and leaned into his embrace. He felt safer there, but that only hurt him for Severus more.

"I'm sorry, love. I'm so sorry I can't spare you this hell."

But no apology would ever be enough, and Harry knew it.
Xerides wasn't sure when Harry had fallen asleep against his chest, but he was glad of it. The sunguard's desolation and guilt had cut them all to the quick, and Harry desperately needed rest anyway.

Xerides thought of moving away, but he was loath to wake Harry when the boy's pain, both physical and emotional, would make sleep difficult. No, best to watch over him for the night instead. He wasn't tired, of course, but Harry needed him, and Xerides wanted to be there.

"That's sweet."

Xerides looked up at Hermione's soft murmur. "Hmm?"

"You're watching over him, aren't you?"

"Ah… yes?"

She kissed his cheek, and Xerides' face burned.

"Blushing? You must be the most adorable warrior night elf ever," she said with a quiet chuckle.

Ron raised an eyebrow. "Should I be concerned?"

"Of course not, you ninny." She gave Harry a sad look. "I'm sure Xeri isn't interested in me."

Ron glanced between them. "Er…?"

"Nothing. Come on, Ron. Let's go before we wake Harry up. He's had a terrible night." She looked back to a bemused Xerides. "You'll call us if you need to move or if he takes a turn?"

Xerides bowed. "Of course."

"Thanks, Xeri. Goodnight.""Gová naída," he replied.

"Elvish is so lovely. Will you teach us more?"

"Could be useful, too," said Ron. "Especially in battle. If no one but our allies know what we're saying…"

"And none of the death eaters will have gone to the trouble of learning a 'subhuman' language." Hermione's scowl and air quotes made her opinions of their bigotry clear. "I think you're right. Especially since it takes time to learn telepathy, time we don't have, and we can't afford to risk attempting to make eye contact in the middle of battle anyway. A basic grasp of commands and replies in Elvish might save all of our lives."

Xerides nodded. "I will teach you, but do let Harry rest now."

"Gová naída, then," Hermione said, pronouncing it carefully. Ron's attempt was less accurate, but close enough for a first try.

"Góva velíth—well done."

They smiled and left him to watch over Harry.
Without a Doubt

Chapter Summary

They fixed my pain meds and gave me an epidural, which seems to be helping my legs a bit, so here's a new chappie slightly early in celebration! ❤

Edit: Here's a new chappie... after I save my art supply box from the paint water my toddler just dumped in it. Good thing I use watercolors! 😊 Boy moms ftw!

Edit 2: procedure gave me a CSF leak, because it just couldn't be that easy without kicking me in the head. Literally. OW.

Chapter 32

Without a Doubt

Lucius woke to the sight of an unfamiliar house elf tending his wounds. His wife stood beside the bed, one hand pressed to her mouth and her fair complexion blanched to white.

"C-Cissa?"

"Lucius!" Narcissa staggered to his side and brushed his hair from his face. "Oh, thank the gods. I had begun to fear you mightn't ever wake up."

Lucius groaned. "Ah. Merlin. Wha—what did he do to me?"

Narcissa shuddered. "I think you do not want to know. For now, rest, mon amour. I will care for you."

"Yes, but… Draco?"

"He is recovering well."

"Severus?"

Narcissa winced. "That, I cannot answer. He is not at the Manor. He was not in a good state when he left, however. I am amazed he had the strength to apparate at all."

"He is not apparating," said the unknown elf. "My friend house elf is taking him home and taking care of him."

Lucius blinked and focused on the elf. "Your… friend? Who are you?"

Winky bowed. "I is being Winky, Master Malfoy. My master is asking me to take care of you."

Lucius stared at the little elf, taking in her neat navy dress and flats. "You are not a free elf?"
"House elves can be wearing and taking clothes they is making themselves. Master is letting us make our own and theirs so we can be family and not slaves."

"Ah." A shamed, sorrowful expression crossed Narcissa's face. "I did not know. And it is too risky to allow our elves to dress themselves with the dark lord in residence."

Lucius dragged his hand to hers. "After the war, my love."

"You are so sure it will end well for us?"

"Severus believes it will. I believe him."

Narcissa squeezed his hand. "After the war, then."

"Yes." Lucius gave the house elf a weak smile. "Thank you for helping me, but who is your master?"

Winky pursed her lips. "Winky is not allowed to say. And Winky is not saying even if she was."

"Hm." Narcissa stared at her. "You used to work in Barty Crouch's manor, did you not?"

Winky scowled. "He is being treating Winky like rubbish. Winky is much happier now."

"I am glad to hear it. Your master must be a kind person, yes?"

"The kindest person Winky said, voice soft and reverent."

"Your… master… asked you not to tell us who he is," said Lucius. "We shan't ask you to hurt yourself for our idle curiosity then. Tell him we are grateful, please?"

Winky nodded. "Master is being worried you would hurt me. He is being glad to know you is gentle."

Lucius winced. "Your master… he will keep that to himself, yes?"

"Yes, Master Malfoy. He is knowing to guard your secrets. And Winky is telling him you is asking him to. Will you also be keeping Winky's secrets? Even from your spy friend?"

Lucius paled. "You know of him?"

"Master is being watching over him for a long time. We is not hurting him. We is knowing to keep his secrets. You is not to tell him that either. He is being hurting us if you do, and we is only trying to keep him safe."

Lucius nodded and winced at a surge of pain. "Ah. If you think I must. He would not hurt you, though."

"He might hurt my master, if he knew, even if he is not meaning to. Please, Winky was not supposed to let you see her at all. And if your friend learns who my family is… I am afraid."

Severus might hurt them? Lucius didn't understand, but for the house elf's sake and that of his unknown benefactor, he agreed.

"Thank you, Winky. I promise to keep your secrets."

"I will as well," said Narcissa. "Please, tell your master we are… I am… so very grateful."
"Winky will do so."

The little elf carried on treating his wounds, and Lucius rejoiced that at least one person knew the truth of them and wanted to help. Merlin, but his was a lonely road. Two more allies in the dark of night, even if he had to keep them secret, gave him hope that he might just survive this nightmare intact after all.

'Thank you, friend, whoever you are.'

Harry spent the rest of the night and much of the day in pain, a worried Xerides keeping watch. Near lunchtime, the pain finally abated, and the night elf dragged himself to bed after a snack and a request to wake him if Harry took a turn again or Kreacher returned.

Harry rested in the living room and studied the Prince's book. It wasn't doing much to keep his mind off his fears for his mate, but he couldn't focus on much else. Ron and Hermione kept him company, each working on potions, too, just to keep Harry sane.

"You know," Harry said into the silence, "you're going to think I'm mad, but I half want to try for a mastery in this."

"Potions?" Hermione gave him a sad smile. "For Severus?"

"Well, partially, but it's actually fascinating even if Severus wasn't my mate. And the Prince helped me understand a lot of the theory behind it, ironically. Then there are my healing potions. I can't release the recipe, but if I distribute even a small amount of them, they could save a lot of lives. I need to have a mastery before people trust me to do that, though, and I want to do it anyway so I know how to make them better. I mean, I did try to use proper potions technique when I made them, but if I understood the theory better, I'm sure they could be improved."

Hermione's smile lost its sorrowful edge. "That's a wonderful idea, Harry. And sunguards are suited to healing, so potions work would be a good choice for you if you actually enjoy it."

Harry shrugged. "When Severus isn't tearing my head off, it's like cooking, only more useful. And I like to cook."

"True. And Molly says you show a lot of promise in the art now that you're not so scared and second-guessing your every move. Your natural intuition in brewing is starting to come out now that you're away from Hogwarts."

"Yeah, though I still feel miles behind the crowd."

She sat beside him and summoned her notes. "I'm planning on going into law and justice, but having a firm grasp on potions is useful for everyday life no matter what you do for a living. We'll study together, okay? At least until you're ready to start your mastery."

"Me too," said Ron, "though I mightn't be much help. Potions are definitely not my forte."

Harry smiled wanly. "Thanks, you lot. I'll need all the help I can get, for sure."

Hermione nudged his side. "Hush. That's your past talking. You've gotten O's on every assignment lately, even the ones the Prince didn't take notes on. You'll be fine."

"I'm glad you think so." It hurt that his mate would never know, but at least Harry could honour him in some small way. Even if he never noticed.
Ron closed his book with a sigh. "So much for all of going into the auror corps, yeah?"

Harry winced. "Mate, I don't think I'm safe doing anything in the public eye even if I did trust the Ministry, and I don't."

"No, you're right." Ron flopped on Harry's other side. "I don't know if I want to do it anymore either. I don't want to leave 'Mione alone if anything goes wrong on a mission, and, well, like you said, I'm not stupid enough to trust the Ministry." He stared at his feet. "I don't know what else I can do, though. I thought about being a cursebreaker like Bill, but he's really smart, you know? I'm... well, I'm not stupid, but I'm not brilliant either."

"I think you're smart enough where you want to be, Ron." Harry gave a wry snort. "You certainly beat the stuffing out of me every time we play chess."

"That's not exactly something I can turn into a career, though."

"It is, actually," said Hermione. "Strategy and planning. Tactics. You're good at it. And all of that would be essential for a cursebreaker."

Ron toyed with his jumper and stared at his knees. "I mean, you might be right, but Bill took twelve NEWTs, 'Mione. Even if I'm good at planning my next move, I'm nowhere near that level of academic excellence."

Hermione shrugged. "And Bill is just one cursebreaker. Others have different skills to bring to the table, and theirs are no less valuable. Besides, if you ask him, I'm sure he would be happy to help. He might even take you on as an apprentice."

Ron smiled and let his jumper alone. "You... really think so?"

"I do, and I think you'd be good at it, too, but you have to put the effort in, Ron. You mightn't be another Nostradamus, but you're clever enough when you apply yourself. So don't waste his time lazing about if you are going to do it."

Ron squeezed his fist and nodded. "Yeah. You're right. And I think... yeah. I think I want to try. Mate, is it all right if I floo Bill? I really do want to talk to him, and as Xeri is asleep, it won't hurt anything if Fleur sees us. She probably wouldn't mind him anyway, seeing as how she's not human."

Harry nodded. "I trust them. Go on."

Ron grinned and dashed to the hearth. "Shell Cottage, Tinworth, England." The fire flared green, and Ron stuck his head in the flames. "Bill? Are you...?" Ron bolted up so fast, he nearly dashed his head on the mantel. "Oh my gods! Luna?"

Harry gasped and grabbed Hermione's hand. "Merlin!"

Hermione made a squeaking sound and clung tight to Harry's fingers.

"Oh, hello, Ron," came Luna's dreamy alto. "The tidebumblers told me you would call soon. I'm glad I came in here to wait. I've missed you so. Dean will be happy to see you, too."

Ron's voice broke. "Oh, Luna! Bloody hell, I'm so glad you're safe."

"They're okay," Harry breathed, tears choking him. "Oh, gods, they're okay."
Hermione gave a quiet sob and covered her face with her hands. "Oh, thank God."

Harry told Dobby to do what he could to keep them hidden and to warn Xeri away from the living room if he woke up, then everyone rushed through the floo to greet their friends.

"Luna!" Harry swept her off her feet and into a hug, but he set her back down at her wince. "Oh, thank fuck you're okay. We were bloody terrified."

Luna squeezed his hand. "Well, we all have some recovering to do yet, especially Dean and Garrick, but we'll be well enough soon."

"Garrick?" Hermione frowned. "As in Garrick Ollivander?"

"Yes, we were held captive with him and a goblin called Griphook."

Harry frowned. Where had he heard that name before?

"Oh! I know Griphook. He was the goblin who showed me to my vault the first time. I'm glad he's okay."

"He'll be pleased to hear that, and shocked that you remember him after so long, but come. Let's go see Dean. He's worried about you, too."

Harry gripped her hand and followed her to a different part of the house, where Fleur was tending to a battered Dean. The boy was bruised and scratched all over, and it looked as though he hadn't seen a solid meal in a month, but oh, gods, Harry was so fucking glad to see him.

"'Arry?" Fleur stood, surprise on her features. "What are you… oh, and Ron and 'Ermione, too. Why are you 'ere? It is dangerous for you."

"Sorry, Fleur." Harry rushed to give her a hug. "We shouldn't have just barged in like this, but Ron wanted to talk to Bill, and when we saw Luna, we couldn't just… we missed them so much."

Fleur's expression softened. "Ah, I see. Come and visit zen, but it is not safe to stay long. I zink, even with ze Fidelius, you are in danger."

Harry nodded. "Dobby is hiding us as best as he can, but you're right. We can't stay too long."

"Harry?" Dean opened his eyes and turned his head with a groan. "Is that you, mate?"

Harry sniffled and sat in a chair beside Dean's bed. "Yeah, it's me. Ron and 'Mione, too. Oh, gods. Dean, I was so fucking terrified for you. Merlin, I'm so glad you're safe."

Dean squeezed his hand weakly. "So am I."

Hermione gave a wet laugh and wiped her eyes. "Hello, Dean. I'm so relieved to see you in one piece."

"For the most part anyway," said a grim Dean.

"Y-yeah." Ron knelt beside the bed and took his hand gently. "You gonna be all right, mate?"

Dean grimaced. "Eventually."

"Here." Harry held up a crystalline phial. "This potion is my invention. It's a powerful healing
draught called Sunshine Elixir. I'll help you take it if you trust me."

Dean gaped. "You… invented potions, mate? I thought you hated it."

"No, just being yelled at all the time. I actually enjoy brewing. And yes, I invented it. Will you take some?"

Dean nodded weakly. "Yeah, I trust you, mate."

"Thanks." Harry tipped his friend's head up and helped him swallow the potion. "It should start working immediately, but with this level of injury, you'll need it for at least five more days, I think. I'll send Dobby over with a supply for you and the others once I can brew enough to spare. I at least have one here for everyone with me."

Fleur summoned a basket. "I will take zem and give zem to ze uzzers while you are catching up. Zis is tres magnifique, 'Arry. Well done."

Harry smiled. "Merci, Fleur. You might have trouble getting Griphook to take that."

Luna smiled. "I'll help. He trusts me."

Fleur squeezed her arm. "I will try first so you may visit, but if 'e will not take it, we will try again later."

"Yes, that sounds good."

Fleur nodded and swept away, potions in tow. Harry handed one to Luna and watched her take it.

"Better, Lu?"

She beamed. "Much. What a fantastic gift you have, Harry."

Somehow, he had the sense she wasn't referring to his skill in brewing. "Er… yeah. Thank you."

Hermione sniffled and wiped her face. "How are you two here? What happened? We were all afraid you were dead, and now…." She buried a sob in her hands. "Oh, I'm so glad you're safe."

Dean hesitated. "Luna and I can tell you lot, but if we do, you have to promise to keep it a secret. They would be killed if…." 

Harry nodded. "Cross our hearts, mate."

Ron gave him a bemused look. "Er… yeah. We'll keep it quiet."

"Muggle saying, Ron," Hermione supplied. "And of course we'll keep your secrets, Dean."

Harry rubbed tears away and discreetly pushed them onto Dean's hand. "What happened, mate? Please."

"Right. Well, it's like this…."
Harry stared, shocked at his lack of attire. "Er… Xeri?"

Xerides yawned and rubbed his eyes. "What is happening?" He stillled and held Harry's gaze. "Harry?" His ears flared out and his eyes took on a glint of… interest?

Hmm. That was a new reaction. Harry had no idea what it meant either.

Ron gave them both bemused looks. "Er… we have news about the spy and our friends, Xeri."

"R-right." Harry flushed and conjured a quilt for the elf. That was rather distracting. "Sorry. You surprised me, Xeri."

Xerides gave him a wry smile and wrapped the quilt around his shoulders. The strange look had faded from his features. "As you did for me by waking me halfway through my rest. What happened, Harry? Is Severus well?"

"Kreacher isn't back yet," said Harry with a shiver of worry. "But I'm not in pain, so he's out of danger, at least."

Bill paled. "Harry, you feel it when Severus is hurt?"

"Only when it's bad enough to threaten his life." Harry shuddered and hugged his chest. "I need him to survive, so my core goes wonky when his is flickering."

"Damn." Bill rubbed his face and sat beside the elf with a grimace. "Merlin, Harry. That's bloody terrifying."

"That is why I am in such a state." Xerides waved to his form. "I was up with Harry most of the morning, and I was still sleeping when you called. I had not expected company either. My apologies."

Bill waved him off. "It's nothing. This is your home, and we have much more important things to discuss anyway."

"Yeah."

Harry settled on the sofa across from Xerides and Bill, and his human friends squeezed in on both sides. Dobby settled on a conjured cushion by Harry's feet.

"Right. So, to bring you up to speed, Xeri, we discovered Dean and Luna at Bill's house by accident while you were sleeping and rushed in to check on them. They're both injured, Dean especially, but they're recovering, along with Garrick Ollivander and Griphook."

Xerides nodded. "I am familiar with both. Garrick is a half-vampire and familiar with the night races. And I have met Griphook before in my visits to the goblin kingdom."

"Ollivander isn't human?" Ron snorted. "Well, that explains a lot."

Harry shivered at the memory of their first meeting. "Y-yeah. He talked to me when I was there. He told me about wands, that a wand's loyalty can be won more easily by disarming its master in a true battle situation rather than by killing its owner." He shrugged. "I mean, it's useful information, but I'm not sure how it applies."

Hermione shook his head. "Riddle must know something. We know he tortured Ollivander in effort to learn about a wand he wants. So it must have had something to do with that. Ollivander was
probably trying to warn you."

"Warn me of what, though?"

"Just make damn sure you keep hold of your wand, mate," said Ron. "That's what I got out of it."

"Yeah. I… yeah. That makes sense." Harry shook himself. "Anyway, it's less Ollivander's story than Dean and Luna's that we need to be concerned about." He related the tale they had shared with them, of the Malfoys' midnight rescue and narrow escape. "But Bill said there's a problem with their story, so he came along with us to talk about it."

Xerides took a deep breath. "I see. Thank the fates your friends are well. You have all been troubled over their disappearance for weeks."

"Yeah," Harry said with a smile. "I've got to brew a batch of Elixir for them when we're done, but they're all recovering. Still, what do you think of their story, Xeri?"

The elf rubbed his chin. "I think there can be no doubt now that Lucius is Severus' spy."

"It certainly seems that way," said Harry.

"Spy?" At Bill's confused look, Hermione gave him the gist of their conclusions about Severus and Kreacher's observations of Harry's mate. Bill whistled at the end of her tale.

"Holy fuck. All this time, he's been a triple agent? He's… he's been breaking himself to bits to save us all, and everyone thinks he's a monster?"

Harry nodded grimly. "But we can't tell the Order. We don't know if any of them are spies, and even if they aren't, we can't tell anyone who doesn't know occlumency until the war is over, or at least until Severus is out of danger."

Bill rubbed a hand over his face and gave a shaky sigh. "Right. Well, technically, I'm not an occlumens, but as I have protection against mental intrusions on me at all times, it should be safe enough to talk to me."

"Yeah, you already know our other dangerous secrets anyway," said Ron.

"True. And this… well, I think I know what was wrong now."

Xerides motioned Bill on.

Bill crossed his arms over his chest. "It's just, pureblood families are all rather close, or at least we all know each other, for the most part. And while Malfoy does have a cousin named Darius out there, he isn't British. He's Hungarian, and his accent shows it. So I'm positive that wasn't Darius in the dungeons."

"Severus," Harry breathed. "He must have used polyjuice or glamours to do it. Merlin."

"Yeah." Bill dropped his head into his hands. "Fuck. He's a hero, and I almost killed him. I almost… both of you would have… fuck."

Harry sat by the man and rubbed his back. "It's not your fault. You didn't know, and we're both okay."

"For now. He's in danger, Harry. All the damn time. He's not just taking his own life into his hands either, and he doesn't know." Bill took Harry's hands. "You have to tell him, Harry. At least he
needs to understand that you need him alive."

Harry blinked hard. "I… I can't tell him he's my mate, but, I can tell him the rest. Maybe. If I can think of a way to word it so the rest isn't obvious."

"Try, Harry. He's damn near suicidal. He needs support, and if he doesn't understand…"

"Yeah." Harry shivered and hugged his waist. "I… I'll try, Bill. As soon as he wakes up. That's all I can do."

Bill squeezed Harry's hands. "I know what you mean."
Chapter 33

The last sunlight of the day cast long shadows and sharp slices of vermilion across Harry’s cauldron. He added a pinch of moondew to the half-finished healing base within, one of Xerides’ suggested changes, and stirred the silvery petals in until they disappeared from view.

"Three stirs clockwise… and four anticlockwise. There we are."

Harry had no trouble understanding why Severus enjoyed brewing these days. Now that no one would shout at him for breathing the wrong way, he found the process relaxing, too.

A low voice called from the living room and nearly startled him into dropping his stirring rod.

"Masters, Kreacher is home!"

Harry's stomach lurched. "Severus…"

Harry turned off his potion—adding moondew was the last step in creating the base for all his specialised healing potions anyway. It would be fine waiting until he could finish it later.

"Coming, Kreacher!"

He spelled off his lab gear, spelled his hands and face clean, too, and rushed out of the lab and into the living room. Ron came in from the kitchen at the same time, a blue apron tied on over his jumper and denims.

Harry dashed to the elf and dropped to one knee. "Kreacher! Oh, thank Merlin. Is Severus okay?"

Kreacher nodded. "He is much better, Master. Hippa is watching over him, so Kreacher is coming home with news." The old elf gave him a bright grin. "Master, Kreacher is finally knowing who Master Severus is loyal to."

Harry shared a bemused look with Ron. "Loyal to… but we already know, don't we?"

Kreacher grinned. "No, Master, you is not understanding. We is all knowing he is loyal to the Light, yes, but now Kreacher is also knowing—it is for you, Master. He is being loyal to Master Harry above all others."

Harry reeled back, all the breath gone from him in a powerful rush of shock and wonder. "He… but he hates me." Tears welled in his eyes. "I-I know he does. Doesn't he?"
Kreacher's ears drooped. "Kreacher is thinking Master Severus is not hating Master Harry at all, but he is still being loyal either way."

Behind them, Ron called, "Oi! Everyone! Kreacher's got news."

Xerides came in from the bedroom and Hermione from the back lawn with Winky.

"Winky has news, too," said Hermione with a shake of her head, "but let's hear Kreacher's first since we already knew a lot of what Winky has to report."

"Right." Harry waved everyone to the sofas, and they all piled in. "First, Kreacher says Severus is doing better, and Hippa is looking after him now. Winky, are the Malfoys okay?"

Winky shook her head. "They is still injured, but on the mend. Lox is saying he is skilled enough to take care of Master Lucius from now on, so Winky is coming home."

"Thank Merlin. No one threatened you?"

Winky hesitated. "No, Master, but Winky is not being able to follow orders completely. Narcissa would not leave Lucius' side, and so Winky had no choice but to break the order not to show herself. Master Lucius was near death, and his mate and síoda did not know how to save him." Her ears drooped. "Winky is not able to not hurt herself for it either."

She revealed burned, blistered hands, and Harry cursed.

"Merlin, Winky!" Harry knelt before her and filled a cup with blood for her. "Drink it, please. I'm so sorry. We didn't want you to be hurt."

She sniffled and drank without complaint. "I know, Masters. Winky tried not to, but….

"The you-know-what forced you to anyway." Ron sighed. "I'm sorry, Winky. We'll get you fixed up."

"Yeah." Harry summoned a síoda-sized potion for her, too. "Did Lucius see you?"

Winky nodded. "He is….

Dobby winced and hugged her shoulders. "Is Winky well? He is not hurting you?"

She looked to her mate and frowned. "Winky was being afraid when Lucius woke up because she knows he is hurting her Dobby, but Winky is safe. I am thinking Lucius is very changed, Masters. He is thanking Winky and telling her not to hurt herself. He is also saying to tell my masters thank you and saying they will let their síoda make clothing after the war, when it is being safe. Master Harry, he is not sounding like the man Dobby is warning Winky about at all."

Hermione shook her head sadly. "I think he isn't, Winky. We learned while you were gone that Lucius saved Luna and Dean from Riddle's torture chambers with Severus. He sent a dove patronus to Bill to get help, of all things, and really, that says it all."

"It does?" Harry frowned. "I mean, we know he's changed, but what does his patronus form have to do with it?"

"He couldn't cast one if he was still evil to start with, but a dove in particular… they're signs of innocence, Harry. Rebirth. Someone with a dove patronus is a person who was cruel once, but has since burned all the darkness inside them away to be reborn, after a fashion. I think, knowing what
we do now, he could only have a dove. Severus probably has one, too."

"No, Mistress Hermione." Kreacher looked straight at Harry, and Harry's heart thumped. "Master Severus has a patronus like his mate."

"He… he has a stag?" Harry blinked hard. "I….

"Not a stag, Master. A doe. The mate of the stag."

Harry dropped his head into his hands and struggled to breathe through a powerful wave of mingled grief and devotion. "Oh. Oh, gods. Severus….

Ron rubbed his shoulders. "It's all right, mate. Maybe this means there's hope, right?"

"Fuck. Fuck, I can't.…." A strangled sob escaped his control, and Xerides swept Harry into his arms.

"Ssh. Harry, this is good news."

"It… it might just be the mate bond, though. It might not be anything conscious on his part."

Kreacher shifted from foot to foot, ears low. "Kreacher is not being able to say either way, Master, but Kreacher is knowing he is devoted regardless."

"He is…?" Harry lifted his face and wiped streams of tears away. "How? What—did you see it?"

Kreacher nodded. "When Master Severus woke, he is breaking down on Hippa. He said he is scared. Kreacher was afraid to leave because he is still so weak, so Kreacher is hearing it all. And… and he said he is scared because you are not there, Master. He says he is scared because he cannot find you, and he cannot hope to help you fight this war if he cannot find you."

"Oh, gods," Harry choked out. "Severus wants me there. Oh, Merlin help me, I wish I could…."

Xerides rubbed Harry's back. "Yes. Perhaps we might offer him sanctuary here?"

"If only we could, but then Severus might find out about the mate bond and kill me, even if he doesn't mean to. And you, Xeri. If he doesn't accept you…." Harry shook his head. "It would put him at risk, too. Riddle expects him at the school. If he's not there every night—no. I… much as I wish we could bring him home, it's just not safe for anyone, at least not until Riddle is dead and we have some time to talk to him."

Xerides sighed and slumped in defeat. "You are correct, of course. It only troubles me to think of him stranded and fearful without his mate."

"Y-yeah. I don't know how much of it I can heal, or how much he's willing to let me heal, but I'll try my best as soon as we can." Harry rubbed his face and took a deep, steadying breath. "Did you have anything else to report, Kreacher?"

The Síoda nodded. "Master Severus is saying he is wanting to give you the sword, Master."

Harry stared, bemused. "The… the sword? What sword?" He froze. "Wait, do you mean the sword of Gryffindor?"

"Yes, Master, that sword. He is saying tonight that the last headmaster said you would need it for your quest, and he is frightened because time is running out."
"I would need the sword of Gryffindor for horcruxes?" Harry looked to his human friends, but they seemed as confused as he was.

"The sword of Gryffindor…." Xerides rubbed Harry's back. "Goblin made, was it not?"

"Oh, yes, I believe so," said Hermione. "Hogwarts: a History has some interesting information on it. I'll get it."

Xerides waved her down. "I believe I know what we need to know. Harry, you said you used the sword to slay a mad basilisk in your second year?"

"Y-yeah. Why?"

"Goblin-forged metal imbibes what makes it stronger. That sword is infused with basilisk venom now. And if you did not have your own method of dealing with horcruxes, it would be the only feasible option available to us for destroying them."

Harry gasped. "Oh, gods. He's trying to help me destroy the horcruxes. He doesn't know I have my own way, and he's terrified." Tears choked him. "Oh, Severus."

Xerides caught his shoulders. "Tell him, Harry. Now is the time. Tell him we have already completed most of the task Dumbledore set before you. Ease his mind. He has had no one but his spy and his sioda friend to help him for over a year, and it is clear he is frightened."

"Y-yeah." Harry sniffled. "Hermione, I need some charmed parchment. Winky, will you take it to him, please, and make sure no one but us and Severus can see it or interact with the parchment at all?"

Winky bowed. "Is you wanting to hide your trail, Master?"

Harry glanced to Xerides. "Probably best to, for now. Yes, please hide my trail. It's not time yet to attack."

"Yes, Master Harry."

Hermione handed Harry a piece of parchment and a self-inking quill. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Harry set the parchment on a conjured table and began to write.

Severus sat in his office and slumped onto his desk, exhausted. The Carrows had forced him out of bed and after a group of innocents, bloody demons. They had long since gone, thank Merlin, and Severus had managed enough strength to Confund them into accepting a 'torture session' with Hagrid as punishment, but Severus hadn't bothered to crawl back into bed yet. Everything in him still hurt, and he could hardly focus on anything regardless.

Gods, he was so tired, so miserable. He wanted it to end, but until he found Harry and ensured the destruction of the horcruxes, he couldn't give in to his desperation.

'Almost over.'

The knowledge didn't help much. Nothing would end until he found Harry.

He groaned and racked his brains for any possible location he hadn't searched. He had tried every place that had any hint of meaning or connection to the boy or his odious family, and his hope had long since worn thin. How in the bloody hell had the goddamned 'Chosen One,' Hero of the Light
Extraordinaire, the Order's pet boy weapon, and 'Undesirable number one,' managed to fall off the face of the Earth?

Everyone and their mother was desperate to find the boy. Both sides of the war kept trying to outdo each other in rewards for his safe return… or bounty. The reward had climbed to two million galleons on both sides at Severus’ last check. Gods, it terrified him, the lengths the public was willing to go to just to find one boy.

And Harry! Would it kill him to make an appearance every now and then so the public would stop auctioning off their valuables, limbs, and firstborn children?

And so Severus might have the slightest sliver of hope that this was not all in vain? He hadn't taken the fall for Albus' sake, after all.

Not that it would matter in the end. When the smoke cleared over the final battlefield, they would both be dead. After almost forty years of hell, Severus had nothing but a brutal, lonely death waiting around the horizon, and so did Harry.

Fuck. He hoped the other side would welcome them. Merlin knew they deserved at least that small joy.

Severus dropped his head onto his desk just as a sheet of parchment appeared below him. He jerked up, heart hammering against his ribs. The last time he had seen a message like this….

'Harry?'

Severus cast several anti-spying wards in addition to his usual spells and locked the door. "Hippa?"

She appeared with a bow. "Is Master needing help to bed?"

"No, I am well enough to walk, but I need you to check this letter for me. Please make sure no one can interact with it but myself."

"Letter?" Albus' portrait tried to look over Severus' shoulder. "What letter?"

Severus moved in front of the nosy bastard. "Hippa?"

Hippa stared at his desk and tugged her ear, expression bemused. "Hippa does not see a letter, Master."

"Hmm. Perhaps it is already keyed to me." He held up the parchment. "Still nothing?"

"No, Master. Hippa sees nothing but your hand."

"Thank Merlin. Thank you, Hippa. That was all I needed."

She bowed and popped away, and Severus eased back into his chair, ignoring Albus' demands for information.

'Professor,

'This letter is warded carefully so no one but you can see it or interact with it at all, but just in case, please be careful not to reveal my name or any crucial details. Just write under me to reply when you're ready.
'We know you’re on our side. Don’t ask how, for everyone's sake, but we know. As for me, the last time I spoke to you in person, I made a fairly stupid request of you, circumstances being what they are, and nearly killed myself on those damn jars. 

'I'm sorry about that, by the way—'

Severus summoned a quill and ink and overwrote the boy.

'There is no time for apologies. Where are you?’

'I'm sorry, sir. I can't tell you that. There may be others watching despite all my precautions against it. Just in case, it's safer for both of us that I don't give you any more information than you need to know. '

Severus' quill nearly scratched through the parchment in his anger and desperation.

'I need to know where the hell you are! I must give you—'

'Stop, Professor. For your own sake. No, you don't need to give me anything. I found my own way of completing the task I was set. All the pieces I can reach until it's time to return to Hogwarts have already been destroyed. You need only worry about preparing the castle for war.’

'You cannot simply cut those… artefacts with a cutting curse. You must destroy them

'We know, Professor. Holy fire will do the job just as well.’

Holy fire? Sweet Circe! How in Merlin's name had Potter gotten his hands on that?

'Only the most powerful of holy creatures can use holy fire, and you most certainly do not qualify.'

'Sir, trust me, that's another question you don't want me to answer. We'll both die if it
reaches the wrong ears.'

•

'And where, dare I ask, have you suddenly learned to be so circumspect?'

•

'From a dear friend whose life depends on keeping secrets. Much like ours do at the moment.

'For now, sir, I only want you to know the mission is as finished as it's going to be until the final showdown. I'll warn you the same way when we overcome the last obstacle between us and victory.

'Until then, know that we, at least, know how much you've sacrificed to give us half a chance, Professor. It hardly means anything compared to what you've done, but thank you. Merlin, thank you for everything you did for us. You're a hero, sir. A far braver one than I. Yes, I mean that.'

Severus stared at the words, heart thrumming and hands shaking. Oh, gods. A hero. Harry thought of him as a hero. How? After all he had done, how could he possibly…?

'I… you truly mean…?'

•

'Every word, sir. I have to go before I put you in more danger than you're already in, but know I'm on your side. I'll help you as best as I can.

'Until we speak again, be ready. The next time I contact you, it'll be time to end it, once and for all.

'And, sir, I know it's miserable, but please keep fighting. Please hold on. I swear you're not alone, and I need you to survive.'

Before Severus could reply, the parchment vanished, leaving him staring, gobsmacked, at the surface of his desk. Harry… knew? He knew Severus was an ally and… he was trying to keep him safe? Calling him a hero? Begging him to survive?

"We know how much you've sacrificed to give us half a chance."

Severus' eyelids burned and his chest ached. 'No one knows. But the thought that he is, at least, acknowledging my sacrifices….'

It hurt. It healed him, and it hurt, because if Harry truly knew what this war and pureblood supremacy—on both sides—had cost him, he wouldn't be so quick to trust him. He would hate Severus, just as Severus had hated him all along, at least until last spring, when everything had changed for them both.
How much had he truly hated *Harry* Potter and how much had been hatred left over for ghosts
Severus had never been free to forget? Would their lives have been different if Severus had ever
had the chance to heal?

He leaned his head against the desk and let a few bitter tears fall. It was too late to worry about it
either way. He might have been able to save Harry if he had been given the time, but he hadn't any,
and either way, he couldn't afford to let his defenses drop this late in the game.

No, their paths were set. Much as he wished he might give the boy, at least, some kind of future. A
better future than his own.

Harry had never deserved this. Neither had Severus.

He could do nothing to alter it. Nothing to save them, either of them. All he could do, in the end,
was grant Harry the dignity of a hero's death.

If only his own would be seen the same way.

'We know you're on our side, sir.'

At least two people would know. No, four and a house elf or two. And that was more hope than he
had had the night before.

Severus stood, jerked a hand across his face, and dragged himself to his bedroom, ignoring the old
man's incessant pestering to be let in on his secrets. No, Albus had forfeited the right to Severus'
trust twenty-one years ago, and Severus had more than earned at least one night of rest without
nightmares.

He showered, changed into his nightshirt, and summoned a bottle of Dreamless Sleep, but before
he climbed into bed, he went to his private bookshelf and tugged out *1001 Cures for the Weak and
Infirm*. His fingers found the bookmarked page with the practised ease of a hundred sleepless
nights.

'Thank you, for all you risk for us.'

He no longer needed to see the note to remember its words, but looking at it calmed him.
Reminded him of his purpose. He traced a familiar path over the words with a fingertip that knew
every indentation, every curve of the letters, each flaw and imperfection in Harry's strokes. He
wouldn't be able to keep Harry's last letter, and it was probably for the best, but now, this little note
seemed so much sweeter.

"He knows. He trusts me. I will not face the dark night alone."

He blinked a few tears down his face, closed the book, and put it away. As he leaned against the
shelf and wiped his face, a shudder of relief passed over him. It would be much easier to share the
final truth with the boy if Harry already trusted him.

A pang of remorse stabbed his heart. "Forgive me, Harry. Would that I could spare you this fate."

Perhaps, at least, Severus could wait for him on the other side. Perhaps they could walk together
into the peace of the world beyond. The thought gave him hope, at least.

With a quiet sniffle, Severus mopped himself up, downed his potion, and let himself fall upon the
pillows, for once comforted that at least a handful of people saw him as he truly was.
'You were wrong, Albus. I have no idea how, but, in the end, even Harry has seen through your smokescreens and lies.'

"We will both die heroes," he murmured.

At least to one, small part of the world.
Chapter Summary

And the war is in full-swing. Also, changes on other fronts abound. Internally, at least.

Elvish phrase "va telol" = "my friend."

Chapter 34

Gift of the Willing

Harry sat on the porch one May morning, watching the sunrise with his friends. He sat on the steps with Xerides, red wings wrapped around them like the blankets their friends cuddled under nearby.

Ron and Hermione leaned on the banister beside Harry, both snuggled under their duvet. March had since come and gone, and Ron had given himself to his girlfriend with a small ring and a promise that no one else would ever share in his gift to her. Hermione wore the little sapphire ring he had given her with joy, taking pride in the fact that he called her his raven in the lion's den. A reminder that Ravenclaw used eagles as their mascots did no good.

"Nah, you're a raven. They're smarter than eagles."

Hermione rather liked being a raven despite her protests, Harry thought.

Dobby, too, sat cuddled up with Winky at the bottom of the steps. Kreacher sat under his own blanket beside them, and Harry wondered if the old síoda felt as lonely as he did sometimes, with love blossoming all around but none left for him. Xerides might, at least, still find a lover someday, but Harry was bound to a man who might never accept him, and Kreacher was nearing the end of his lifespan.

Well, the old elf still might find love one day, Harry supposed, if he ever had time to look.

"Kreacher," he murmured, "did you ever want to find a mate of your own?"

Kreacher shook his head. "Kreacher had a mate, Master. She is going on to the Summerland long before you is born. Her name was being Ellie." His ears drooped. "Without her, without Master Regulus, Kreacher was growing lonely and sad. I is being angry for years." He gave Harry a smile edged with tears. "Now, when we is meeting again, Kreacher can tell her he is getting to be part of a real family before his time ends. I is being able to tell her our elflings will live in a better world, someday."

Harry blinked hard. "Damn straight you can. What are your elflings' names, Kreacher?"

"Tiffy, Kumie, and Lox. They is all being Black síoda. Kumie is going with Andromeda. Lox is being Narcissa's. They is being happy." His ears drooped. "But Tiffy is not. She is a Lestrange síoda now."
Harry shuddered. "If there is any way to save her, Kreacher, we will. You're sure Lox is okay there, though? The Malfoys certainly didn't treat Dobby well, and even with Lucius turning his life around, that trauma goes deep."

"Dobby was being Lucius' elf, Master Harry," said Dobby. "Lox is being Narcissa's friend since she was a little girl. Narcissa is not letting Lucius mistreat him. And Lox is saying that Lucius is being much kinder to the síoda, so he is happier, though Dobby is not sure he can believe it."

"I understand, Dobby. You have a right to be wary of him, though I do think he's changed. It's tough to forgive that kind of abuse." Harry shuddered and crossed his arms over his chest. "But even if Lucius is being good to the síoda, even if his new personality is completely genuine, we can't say the same for Riddle. None of them are safe there, síoda or human. Still, with any luck, we'll change that soon." He traced the scar where Pettigrew had cut him three years before. "If we could just overcome the blood…"

Xerides draped his arm over Harry's shoulders and tugged him to rest against his side. "A way must exist, Harry. We will find it, soon. I feel it coming closer each day."

Ron gave Xerides a searching look. "Is that optimism or your instincts talking?"

"Both. The vibrations in the air are changing rapidly. The time is coming. I think, before the blossoms fall from our cherry trees, we shall find the way."

Harry stared at his bright pink cherry trees. "That's going to be within a fortnight, Xeri."

"Yes. The time is coming, soon."

"Merlin." Harry snuggled in closer. "Best enjoy the peace and quiet while we can, then."

"Hmm. Yes, our preparations are set. The three of you have learned much. You are all skilled warriors, and I have faith the battle shall be ours, when it comes. For now, let us enjoy these quiet moments before the dawn."

Harry nodded, and the others fell into a peaceful silence. On the horizon ahead, the sun painted the sky above the trees bright pink, then red, then vermillion. As the first rays of orange and gold peeked through the leaves, the moonlit glow of Xerides' eyes faded to pale blue and winked out, leaving silvery blue irises and black pupils visible in its wake. Xerides slumped a bit, his weight leaning harder into Harry's side than it had a moment ago.

"Does it hurt, Xeri?"

"Hmm?"

"When the sun rises."

"Ah. No. It merely feels as though my energy has run short. Much as you feel at approximately four in the morning every night."

Harry chuckled. "I've never slept well."

"Neither did Helios. Perhaps sunguards need less."

"You might be right. Just three hours and I'm good, generally."

"We know," said Ron with a snort. "So does Snape, for that matter. I swear the man had a second
sense about when you'd be out walking the halls."

Harry's heart ached for his mate. "Yes, well, Severus understands insomnia too well."

"Yes he does, poor man," Hermione agreed with a shudder. "Come to think of it, you don't really
sleep much either, Xerides, for all that we sleep at different times."

Xerides nodded. "High elves need far less sleep than humans."

"Ah. That makes sense then. You two always seem to be awake no matter the hour. Ron and I can
barely keep u—"

Her comment died on a long gasp. Harry followed her wide-eyed gaze to a flash of white and gold
between the trees.

"What in Merlin's name?"

"Unicorns," Hermione breathed.

Harry jerked to his feet. "What? Here? In a Muggle wood?"

"They have been known to roam them." Xerides stood, too. "Merlin, it is a mare and twin foals. If
there is a more auspicious sign, I do not know of o—"

They fell silent, hardly daring to breathe, as the unicorn stepped into the clearing just beyond the
gate. Her twins frolicked in between the trees, but they cantered to their mother's side at the mare's
quiet whinny.

The mare nuzzled her foals, whickering to them, then stepped onto the pathway of the house. She
bowed and made a beckoning gesture with her horn, and Harry's heart skidded to a halt.

Xerides pushed Harry forwards. "Her business here can only be with you, Harry. None of us can
approach her."

Harry blinked. "Why not, Xeri? You're a good person. Is it just the night magic?"

Winky gave him a wry grin. "Is not being magic that makes you the only one who is being able to
approach her, Master. You is being the only innocent among us."

At Harry's blank look, a flushing Xerides whispered, "Virgins, Harry. None of us qualify any
longer but you."

Harry felt his face might catch fire. "Oh. I'm such an idiot. Of course it's that."

The unicorn whinnied.

Xerides nudged him forwards gently. "Go. Whatever business she has here can only aid us."

Harry swallowed hard and nodded. "Right." He prayed Xerides was right and slowly approached
the beautiful creature, hands out in a gesture of surrender, wings folded and quivering at his back.

"Nice unicorn," he muttered. "Please don't gore me."

She whinnied what sounded like a laugh, and Harry felt a little safer. He approached until he stood
directly before her and gasped as the unicorn nuzzled his face.
"Oh." Something sweet and warm flooded his heart. "Hello to you, too. What in Merlin's name are you doing all the way out here though? It's dangerous for you and your babies if the Muggles see you."

The unicorn gave a sad whicker and bowed. Harry wondered if he was supposed to bow back, but then he realised the unicorn was dragging the tip of her horn across her leg.

"Oh! You've hurt yourself. You're bleeding. Let me...." He froze as the unicorn rubbed her horn in the silvery blood and lifted her head, so the shining tip was mere millimetres from Harry's lips. "Er...."

Xerides gasped. "Ages across, the willing blood."

"Oh my god," Hermione breathed.

"Drink it," Xerides urged. "It is a rare gift. Drink it."

Harry choked out, "Drink her blood?"

Ron nodded, eyes wide. "No more than you do to us every night."

Hermione called, "They're right, Harry. Hurry!"

The unicorn huffed, dipped her horn in her blood again, and held it out to Harry once more. This time, Harry made himself lean forwards and open his mouth. She rubbed the side of her horn tip on his lips, smearing them with several drops of cooling, sticky fluid, and Harry forced his tongue to swipe across it. To his surprise, it tasted sweet and light.

"Thank you?"

He watched, stunned, as the unicorn cut her other leg and repeated the ritual. He swallowed faster this time. The unicorn fed him her blood seven times, from seven cuts, then bowed to him.

"Um, thank you." Harry bowed back. "May I heal you now?"

She nodded, and Harry cut his own wrist. He offered it to her, and winced at the sweep of her tongue. Her wounds sealed in moments, leaving no trail of blood behind, and she healed Harry with a glow of light from her horn.

"Thank you."

She offered her neck for pats.

"You're a beautiful girl, but you had best get your babies out of here before a hunter finds you."

The unicorn whinnied and nudged Harry's head with her own. She ushered her foals to the edge of the clearing, bowed to Harry once more, and disappeared between the trees.

Harry walked on shaky legs back to the porch, where his companions watched with wide eyes. Xerides had tears running down his face, and Harry's heart stilled.

"Xeri! Hey, are you okay?"

Xerides caught him into a hug. "Thank you. I never imagined I would see something so beautiful."

Harry wasn't sure how that gory ritual counted as beautiful, but he returned the shaking night elf's
embrace regardless.

"Ssh. None of that. You're a lovely person, Xeri. I'm positive she knew it."

Xerides kissed Harry's cheek and stepped away. "Thank you."

"Yeah. You okay?"

"I was only overwhelmed." Xerides wiped his face and gave Harry a beaming smile. "Oh, va teloi, you have no idea what just happened, do you?"

"Not in the least."

"The rite of willing blood," said Hermione, her voice breathless. "I never imagined I'd live to see it…." She sniffled and wiped her face. "Gods. It's incredible."

Harry frowned and wrapped his wings around himself, feeling exposed and vulnerable. "What in the world is everyone so emotional for?"

"What just happened," said Ron, and even his voice wobbled, "hasn't happened for hundreds of years, Harry. It's an incredibly rare, incredibly precious gift."

Harry sank against the railing, stunned. "A gift?"

"The rite of willing blood." Xerides wiped his eyes once more. "Life, Harry. She just blessed you with life."

"So that means I won't die if Severus throws me to the wolves?"

Hermione winced. "No. It means you have the power to heal now, even wounds so dire a person is halfway to death, though it comes at a cost. The more dire the injury, the more blood it will take from you to heal it, and that will weaken you in more than one way. Still, it should be safe enough with potions."

"Er… but couldn't I heal with my blood already?"

"Yeah, but that unicorn just tripled the power of it, mate," said Ron. "I reckon there's not much you couldn't heal now, as long as you get there in time and have the potions on hand to restore yourself."

"I'll brew more blood replenishers and always carry a couple with me from now on then." Harry stared at the scar he had stroked earlier. "Shite. 'Mione, tell me Riddle won't gain this power, too."

Hermione snorted. "No, Harry. He took your blood before the unicorn blessed you, you dolt, and it wasn't…. She gave another stuttered gasp, and her eyes widened.

"What?" Harry looked behind him, wondering if some other mythical beast had just paid them a visit, but the clearing was empty. "What, Hermione?"

"Willing," she breathed. "It wasn't willing. He took it by force. Oh my god, that's it!"

"What?"

Beside her, Ron gasped and went rigid. "Holy shite!"

And Xerides, too, sank back to the stairs, some foreign swear word on his tongue. Greek or Elvish,
probably. He tended to slip into one or the other when he was upset, not that it happened often.

Harry understood. Chills raced over his skin as he recalled that nightmarish detention from his first year and the lessons learned afterwards.

"But it is a half life, a cursed life...."

He choked out, "Oh, gods!"

Hermione squealed and clapped her hands. "I knew there was something I forgot that I needed to remember! Quirrell! That ritual, when Riddle stole your blood, Harry, remember how you said he seemed shocked and disgusted when he stepped out of the cauldron? I think it was supposed to return him to a fully-human body, but it failed. It failed because the 'blood of the enemy, forcibly taken' was like unicorn blood!"

Harry's heart thumped. "So that means Riddle cursed himself?"

"Yes!" She squealed and clapped her hands, eyes gleaming. "Oh, it's just too ironic! He stole holy blood for his resurrection ritual and cursed himself to die! Karma at its finest!"

Harry gripped her hands in effort to bring her back down to earth. "So you're saying we can beat him."

"No, you daft sod, I'm saying you were more powerful all along!"

Harry nodded and called upon the quiet of the forest to calm himself. Dread and excitement rushed through him in equal measure, and he needed that calm now to focus. Nature. Quiet. The peace of their forest home.

Elves didn't occlude anything like how Severus had taught Harry—or tried to teach him anyway—but their methods worked better for someone so attuned to nature, elf or no, and soon, Harry's wild emotions abated. He centred himself among the trees and let the breath of life soothe his fractious spirit and quiet his apprehension. When he could think clearly, he took a deep breath and gathered his courage close.

It was time to end it. Finally.

"Hermione, I need another piece of charmed parchment. Xeri, if you'll gather what healing and protective herbs we have on hand and in the forest before you rest, it would help keep us safe. Fawkes, please help him and protect him."

The phoenix trilled and flew down to Xerides' shoulder.

"Thank you. Ron, I need you to get in touch with your family. Tell everyone in the Order that we need them to gather somewhere safe. I'm not sure where that is at the moment, so just take Molly's best suggestion."

Ron nodded grimly. "We're doing this today then."

"Before anyone else dies." Harry took Xerides' hand. "We move in as soon as your power returns. The rest of us will have to go to the castle before nightfall and prepare, but just send Fawkes once you're able to join us and in position, and I'll know without giving you away."

Xerides squeezed his fingers. "I will gather everything I am able in the meantime and prepare what remedies I can. And poison for my arrows, too."
"Thanks, Xeri, but wait for me before you go, please. I'm not through with you yet."

Xerides nodded and stepped aside.

"Harry." Hermione offered him a roll of parchment. "It's ready."

"Thanks." He took the scroll and tucked it into his pocket for the time being, shielded against damage. "Now that's done, please get the cauldrons and phials ready, Mione. We're making new Sunshine Elixir for everyone in the Order and DA. Dobby, Winky, help her where you can. Xeri can take over once he's back and has had time to rest."

"Sunshine Elixir for the entire…?" Hermione winced. "My god, Harry, that's over a hundred people! You can't weaken yourself like that."

"But—"

"She is right, Harry." Xerides held the sunguard's shoulders. "For the sake of those who depend upon you, do not risk yourself so."

Harry blinked hard. "But people will die."

"People are going to die regardless, Harry." Hermione's eyes glimmered, too. "I know it's awful, but that's just the reality we have to face. Your blood isn't proof against death, Harry, not even with unicorn blood added in. We can't save them all."

Harry's wings drooped. "We… we can help, can't we? At least our family? And we can store a few extra potions for emergencies?"

She gave a relieved sigh. "As long as you promise to take a blood replenisher and rest after, yes. Eat some iron-rich food and drink some juice, too. If you do that, then we can make enough potion for Ron's family, ours, yours, and a few extra. And you can give blood on the battlefield in dire emergencies, so long as you keep taking blood replenisher, but we can't hope to make enough elixirs for the whole Order and DA, and there might be a spy anyway."

"We have to make one for Severus at least."

Hermione hesitated. "Do you think he would take it though? He's so careful about that."

Harry swallowed against a surge of dread. "Probably not, but I still have to try."

She stared at the parchment in Harry's pocket and sighed. "He thinks you don't have any potions skills, but he might have some little trust in mine. It's not fair—you've far surpassed me now—but he might take it if you say I helped. I think it's the best hope we have anyway."

"Y-yeah. I will, then." Harry raked his hand through his hair. "Go on then. Kreacher, help me get this letter to Severus. The rest of you get moving. We don't have much time."

His family nodded and left for their various tasks. After they had gone, Harry led Xerides to the gates and took his hands.

"You're going to be more vulnerable than they are, at least until tonight." He slit his wrist and held it out to the stunned elf. "Please. I need to know my family, at least, will be safe."

Xerides ducked his head and pressed his lips to Harry's wrist.

'What? Why like this?'
Harry gasped at the brush of a soft, hot tongue against his skin. It didn't hurt. Oh. Sweet Merlin, no, pain was the furthest thing from his mind at that moment. Heat and water burst to life in his veins and electricity surged in his chest. Another brush made his skin flush and his pulse race. 

_Gods._ Xerides sucked his skin, just a little, and Harry whimpered at the heat.

Bloody hell. Shouldn't it have hurt?

Xerides came up, lips red, and a pink tongue licked the residue away. Harry squirmed. Merlin. He had expected Xerides to take a few drops from the air or wipe a stream onto his fingertip, not drink directly from his wrist. Harry couldn't deny it left him panting and molten inside either.

_Shit._ This… he couldn't. It wasn't fair to Severus. Even if Severus might never accept him, Harry couldn't do this.

Xerides had to know that, right? He had grown up with Helios. Surely he understood the mate bond?

No. Xerides wouldn't hurt him like that. It couldn't be what Harry had thought.

Could it?

Xerides whispered a healing charm and kissed another drop of blood away from Harry's skin. Oh _hell_. Maybe there _was_ more going on here than a ritual to keep his friend alive.

_Gods,_ he hoped not. Harry wasn't free to be _in_ love with Xerides, but he loved the night elf dearly anyway. In some ways, he had grown closer to him than even Ron or Hermione. Perhaps because Harry's childhood friends were now spending more time together and less tagging along at his side, Xerides had filled the void left behind. Harry adored him, and the idea of breaking his heart sickened him to his core.

"X-Xeri?"

Xerides released him, face flushed and ears fanned back. "Somehow, it is even sweeter from the source."

Harry gave him an uncertain smile. "I'm almost jealous. Are you okay? Did it help at all?"

"I feel much stronger. Thank you for your gift. I…" He backed away and gave Harry a tear-edged smile. "Thank you."

Harry nodded. "Come home safe, all right?"

Xerides' cheeks darkened again. "Yes. Now, go and warn your mate while there is still time."

Harry sighed inwardly, almost weak at the power of his relief. Oh, thank _Merlin._ Xerides _did_ know and wasn't attempting to supplant Severus. Not that he could, but the elf's acceptance of the situation reassured Harry that he had nothing to worry over.

The sudden surge of desire must have been a side effect of drinking directly from him, a bit like the allure vampires held over their bonded mates, but in reverse. Or something along those lines, anyway.

It was all right. Xerides would be okay, and so would Harry and Severus.

Assuming they all survived the night, anyway.
"Right. Be careful out there, Xeri."

Xerides gave him a grim nod. "Hurry and warn Severus before he leaves his quarters."

"Yeah, will do. Thanks!"

With a quick hug and a farewell, Harry rushed back into the house, summoning a quill along the way.

Xerides watched Harry leave, head still spinning. The instant Harry had offered him his blood, Xerides had acted on instinct and drank. And the instant he heard Harry's gasp and sensed the pulse beneath his tongue quicken, his entire world had tilted. He knew, at last, what those strange feelings were whenever Harry touched him.

Xerides was in love with him. After two and a half millennia without a mate, he had finally found someone who spoke to his heart.

He turned away from the house with a shiver. No. It couldn't be. Perhaps, after Harry had won his destined mate, they could work something out then, but for now, Xerides couldn't allow such emotions to interfere. They had a war to fight, and Harry's mate had to be his first concern. Harry needed Severus, and, whether he knew it or not, Severus needed Harry. Regardless of his heart, Xerides would have to focus on helping his friend win the love of his core match and anchor before they could begin to worry about where he fit into the arrangement.

If he fit at all.

With a sigh, Xerides promised the star-crossed pair that he would help and protect them, whether he ever had a place with them or not, and held out his hand to Fawkes.

"I know where we might find a healthy crop of wild goldenvine, if you do not mind giving me a lift?"

Fawkes presented his tail feathers, and they were off.
Battle Preparations

Chapter Summary

You had to know it wouldn't be *that* easy. 😊

Also, tomorrow is my little man's first day of preschool. I am in maximum mom mode right now, lol. There may be tears in the morning. 🙃.signIn

Chapter 35

Battle Preparations

Severus woke at the sound of a low voice calling his name. A house elf stood at the foot of his bed, dressed in neat trousers, pointed black shoes, and a suit vest and dress shirt like Severus himself wore under his robes. A free elf? He looked familiar, but Severus couldn't place him.

By the light pouring through his windows, the sun had just risen. Damn. He was running late then.

"Thank you for waking me," Severus muttered. "Please leave now so I may dress."

The elf held out a piece of parchment. "Master is asking me to give this to you first. It is urgent."

Severus blinked. "Master? You are not free?"

"A house elf may wear clothing we is making ourselves. Master is kind enough to listen and learn."

He held out the parchment again. "He is leaving a message for you."

Severus held the blanket high as he reached out for the parchment. The elf's ears dropped back.

"You is scared. Kreacher is leaving this here where you can be taking it after Kreacher is gone."

"Kreacher? That nasty little demon from Grimmauld Place? That means the parchment is from...."

Severus called, "Wait!"

The elf had already gone. On Severus' bed, he had left the parchment and a strange, opalescent potion Severus had never seen before. What in Merlin's name?

He grabbed the parchment and set the phial aside. No way in hell would he be taking that until he knew what it was.

*Professor,*

_The last obstacle has been defeated. Our side is aware. The battle begins tonight, and all of our forces will be prepared. Please neutralise as many threats as you safely can_
and ensure the students are evacuated before moonrise. At least those under sixteen among them.

The potion is a unique healing remedy my bookish friend and I developed. Yes, me. I promise it won't poison you. I'm fairly sure it couldn't poison you if it tried. It has willingly-given unicorn blood in it—

Severus dropped the parchment with a gasp of shock. Willingly-given? How the bloody hell…? First holy fire, then this? What in Merlin's name had Harry been up to over the past year?

With shaking hands, Severus picked up the parchment again and continued reading.

Yes, you read that correctly. A unicorn and her twin foals visited us this morning. That potion is part of the result. Everyone on our side, or at least as many as we can, will receive a phial as well. It will protect you and extend your life, though it isn't proof against everything. It will at least help.

Please, take it. I know you have no reason to trust me, but I do care about you. You deserve to live, sir. Please take it, and promise me you'll survive.

—H.

Severus blinked tears down his face and sat on the bed. No. This couldn't be real. Harry couldn't care this much. No one but Hippa had ever cared like this.

And… wait. House elves… Kreacher was Harry's elf, wasn't he?

Severus went rigid as all the pieces came together. How Harry had avoided capture and evaded Severus at every turn. The strange help and care from a house elf who refused to show itself. An elf other than Hippa.

All along, it had been Harry's little spy, hadn't it?

Fury raged through him. Fuck, he had been such a fool. Of course no Potter would believe in him, not without taking the truth for themselves.

Severus scratched a reply in scathing red ink.

'Go to hell, Potter, and take your pet spy with you.'

He picked up the potion with intent to throw it against the wall, but paused. If this truly had unicorn blood….

A few shaky sentences had formed on the parchment, and more came after as he read the first.
'I sent Kreacher for two purposes only: to keep you alive and to determine if we could trust you. I never allowed him in your personal quarters unless you were in dire need of help. He never stayed in the same room when you were mourning or otherwise expressing personal things I shouldn't hear. He guards your privacy as best as he can given the situation.

'I know it's still a breach, and I am sorry for that, but letting you die or face this war alone isn't an option I'm willing to embrace.

'Maybe it wasn't fair of me. Maybe it was wrong. I honestly don't know, but even if you hate me for it, sir, even if you never forgive me, I will never regret keeping you safe. I will never regret protecting you.

'Loathe me if you want. It changes nothing of my own loyalty. I can live with your hatred as long as you survive. And either way, Professor, please take that potion. You're in as much danger as I am, and I need you to live. Please.'

Tears blurring his vision, Severus scoffed and thought to burn the parchment, too, but he paused when an idea occurred to him. He couldn't take that potion. He knew full well he had to die that night—and gods knew he was ready for it, too—for Riddle to believe he had control of the Elder Wand, but Minerva... she might survive, as well as the innocents, if Severus gave her the first part of this letter and the potion. It would provide the perfect excuse to warn the school about the coming attack without ever giving away who had originally received the note or who had delivered it to Minerva.

Assuming that potion could be trusted, at any rate.

Severus scanned the potion and set the list his spell generated aside. Then, he used a complex charm to borrow the magical signature on the letter, used that to duplicate the parts he needed, leaving out the postscripts and any reference to himself, and used a bit of spellotape to attach the potion to the parchment, much like a student might do.

He watched the original letter vanish, but not his altered copy, and smirked. "Didn't think to ward your notes against duplication, did you, boy?"

With a sneer, he turned back to his copied letter. He couldn't help running a fingertip down the potion with a shudder of regret.

Lying little spy or not, Potter had cared about him enough to give him this. Perhaps, he was the only person to ever truly care.

'Gryffindors don't do things like that, Severus! Stop lying!'

He had never lied to Lily, but she hadn't had enough faith in him to believe him worth saving regardless. Her son, however....

Severus closed his eyes on a fierce ache. It didn't matter any longer. He couldn't survive. He couldn't use this potion.

He didn't even want to.

He buried his pain under miles of Occlumency shields and checked the potion results.
Ingredients:

Holy blood, willingly given
Holy blood, willingly given
Holy tears, willingly given
Phoenix tears, willingly given
Echinacea
Dittany
Horklump juice

Severus continued reading the list with wide eyes. Two doses of holy blood? Holy tears and phoenix tears? Merlin. He had no idea how Harry had gotten his hands on half of those ingredients, but that the potion would heal regardless of preparation methods was clear enough. It might keep Minerva alive, at any rate.

"Hippa."

The little elf appeared wearing a black dress with the Hogwarts crest, sensible flats, black stockings, and a grey jacket bordered with rings of fabric in all four house colours.

Apparently the trend of dressing house elves was catching.

"That is a lovely uniform," he said, happy the elf could find some joy in her life, if only a little.

Hippa beamed. "Hippa is making it herself."

"It suits you."

She bowed and wiped tears away. If Severus had been dressed, she would have hugged him, but this little elf knew him too well to touch him otherwise.

"Master is so kind."

Severus bowed his head. "Please take this to Minerva. Do not tell her I sent it. Do not let yourself be seen at all."

He paused. "And, Hippa, please warn your people that war is coming to the castle tonight. Get them to safety, when the time comes, and tonight… I want you to protect the students. Not me."

Hippa's ears drooped. "But, Master Severus—"

"Please, Hippa. They need you more. If you must protect me then…." He rubbed his chin. "Make it impossible for other house elves to find me. It might help, a little."

He hoped she would forgive him that white lie eventually.

Hippa hesitated. "Master is certain?"
"Yes. I have tasks I must complete alone, Hippa, and the students need all the help they can get."

Hippa sniffled. "Hippa is doing as Master asks, but, please. Be careful, Master Severus."

He knelt and gave her a hug. "Thank you. You are the one true friend I have ever known."

She hugged him back. "Hippa is always being Master's friend… right?"

"Yes. Until he drew his last breath. "Go now, Hippa. Please. Time is short."

Hippa wiped her eyes, bowed, and popped away with Harry's altered letter. He stared after her, heart aching.

'Forgive me, my friend. That is one promise I cannot give.'

He pulled his wits around him like a cloak. Neutralise the threats, hmm? Well, he knew of two in particular he had been itching to 'sack' for months.

It was time to put his stealth training to good use.

He summoned his clothes and a couple of lethal poisons, disillusioned himself, and left his quarters.

'Ready or not, Alecto, here I come.'

Harry gathered his closest friends from the DA, those he trusted with his life, and took them back into the Room of Requirement, into the room of endless junk. "We're looking for a tarnished silver and sapphire tiara on top of a bust of an old warlock, but wait before you head out."

He took a deep breath. "I know you lot are wondering why I left last year. The truth is I had a secret that would have gotten me killed if anyone had known, and Malfoy was trying to break into my mind. I had no choice but to leave to protect us all, but now the time has come to let you all in on it."

He held the confused, anxious gazes of his friends. Dean. Neville. Seamus. Luna. Ginny and Michael, too, but they already knew. Ron and Hermione flanked Harry. Xerides hadn't sent Fawkes yet, but then, they still had an hour to go before nightfall. The síoda were about, too, preparing for battle. Only Severus was missing, but Harry didn't dare seek him out yet. Not with the entire castle believing him to be a traitor.

His army was all here. All who could be, at any rate.

"Right. So this is why I left. Revertis!"

His glamours dropped, revealing his wings and golden eyes. Seamus cursed. Dean gasped. Luna beamed. Neville dropped to his knees.

Harry hoisted Neville to his feet. "Oi, none of that. I'm still one of you."


Harry flushed crimson. "Er… thanks?"

"You look just like a crimson crumdinger," said Luna with a bright smile. "There's magic in their
"Well, that explains Snape, then," said Ginny with a snort. "He must have a whole wing shoved up his arse."

The tension broke, and the group laughed. If Harry, Hermione, and Ron didn't join in, no one noticed. Well, except Luna. The smile she gave Harry had an edge of both sadness and reassurance.

Bloody hell. She couldn't know, could she?

Harry shook off his worries and focused on the task at hand. If Luna did know, somehow, she would never betray him, and if she didn't, there was no use getting het up over nothing.

"Well, here's the thing, you lot." He unbuttoned his sleeve as he talked. "I'm a sunguard, and my race's blood is literal life and light. What's more, a unicorn gave me her blood willingly this morning, so, long story short—Diffindo Minimus—my blood can help keep you all alive."

He drained a few drops into a small bowl and handed it to Ginny. "Drink. I know it sounds disgusting, but it's not, and it'll keep you safe." He handed another bowl to Michael, then Dean, then Neville, and paused as he realised none of them had touched theirs.

"For Merlin's sake," Ron said with a huff. "It's just blood."

He grabbed Harry's wrist and licked a trail of crimson away. Harry grimaced. It certainly had felt different when Xerides had kissed the blood from his arm, but this wasn't the time to worry about it.

"Just drink the damn blood and get over it," Ron said. "Trust me, there are far worse things in potions."

As Harry healed the first cut and made a new one for the others, Ginny shrugged and downed hers. She blinked and stared at the red-tinged bowl.

"How in Merlin's name does your blood taste of strawberries?"

Harry shrugged. "Ron says it tastes of cherries. 'Mione, oranges. Xe… another friend swears it's like honeysuckle nectar. I have no idea, but I promise it works."

Ginny gave a little shiver. "Merlin, so it does. I feel a million times stronger." She grinned. "Open a blood bank for vampires, and you'd make a killing, Harry."

Ron and Harry snorted.

"Apt terminology," Hermione said with a giggle, "but as it would kill Harry, let's just shelve that idea for now."

"Yes, let's," Harry agreed. "And the rest of you, suck it up and drink."

Michael snorted. "More apt terminology. You're like a reverse vampire."

Harry grinned. "Yeah, yeah. Seriously, you lot, buck up. We don't have time to stall. I have to kill this tiara before Riddle shows up, or he'll never die."

At that, the others grimaced and downed their blood offerings, then made varying expressions of shock.
Seamus licked his bowl. "Mango," he explained with a shrug. "Me favourite, and I never seem to have enough." He shot Harry a playful leer.

"I wouldn't advise stealing it," Harry said dryly. "Riddle did, and look what happened to him."

Seamus grimaced. "Aye, well, I think I'd like to keep me nose and me hair on, if it's all the same to you." His comment set off a round of giggles.

"Right," said Harry. "Time to split up and look. I'm taking to the air, so don't be surprised if you see me fly past. DA, out."

He considered changing the name, but opted to keep it as it still served as a giant two-fingered salute for the Ministry, and they hadn't time for lengthy explanations. He had more important things to worry about anyway. He shot into the air and hovered over the piles of junk, searching for the tiara. After a minute of gaping and admiring his flight, the others split up and started their own search.

Somehow, despite Harry's bird's eye view, Neville found it first.

"Harry, I think I've got it."

The others came rushing after the sound of his voice, mostly reaching Neville at the same time as Harry had been at the opposite end of the hall.

And there it was, the tiara on a chipped bust of an ugly, old warlock.

"Right. Stand back." Harry called a blast of holy fire and shot it at the diadem… just as another voice came within hearing range.

"The cabinet is this way. We can get out of… what the hell? Fire?"

"Malfy."

Expression grim, Hermione turned to find the new threat.

The rest of the DA followed her as one and moved into a semicircle around Harry. Harry rushed to reapply his glamours, but not fast enough.

Malfy, Crabbe, and Goyle crashed into their clearing and gaped. Malfy stepped back, eyes panicky, but the gorillas moved in for the attack.

"So that's your big secret?" Crabbe sneered. "You're a bloody bird?"

"Ugly one, too," Goyle added.

Beside them, Malfy went ashen and scrambled backwards. Of the lot, Harry bet only the pointy-chinned prat knew what Harry's wings and golden eyes meant, but shite, that was bad enough.

"Expelliarmus!" The stunned Malfy's wand sailed into Harry's hand, but the others evaded it.

Damn. He'd been hoping to avoid a fight.

"Still up to the same tricks, Potter?" Crabbe leered. "Here, let me show you a new one of mine." He spat some guttural incantation that made Hermione cry out and hiss a rapid summoning charm for brooms.

"Get them out, Harry!"

Black fire with the face of a snarling wolf shot out of Crabbe's wand, heading straight for the still-
burning horcrux. Harry yelped in shock as his holy fire shot straight through his chest to combat the demonic flames. It didn't hurt, but it did give Harry some clue as to how bad this was about to get. He was immune to holy fire, but his friends weren't, and that black shite would most definitely burn him.

With a cry, he snatched up Neville and shot as fast as his wings would carry him towards the entrance. Neville shrieked in terror and cursed in three languages, but at least he wasn't dead.

Ron and Hermione zipped by on a broom as Harry went back for the others, then Ginny and Michael followed on another broom, and Luna shot past on… something. Merlin, was that a flying carpet? Must have been hidden in the junk piles. Leave it to a Ravenclaw to recognise it in an emergency.

Seamus screamed and tried to climb a dresser as the flames licked at his ankles. Harry grabbed him, flew him out, and dropped him, smoking trousers and all, in Hermione's arms.

"Elixir, now!"

He didn't wait to see if she obeyed. He had trained with her enough to know she would.

Dean had climbed up onto a wardrobe to avoid the flames. Crabbe was burning to death, caught in his own curse, just as Bill had warned them Fiendfyre was apt to do. Harry winced and turned away. He could do nothing to save him.

"Come on." He grabbed a sobbing Dean up and shot towards the entrance.

"That's everyone," Ron panted.

"No, it bloody well isn't!" Harry shot back for the last two living humans in the room. "You know we can't leave them!"

"Damn it, Harry! If we die for the likes of Goyle, I'm going to kill you!"

Harry glanced back to see Ron shooting from his broom and sailing towards him. "Promises, promises." He snatched up a screaming Malfoy and watched as Ron dragged Goyle onto his broom.

"He's dead," Malfoy whimpered. "Dead…"

Harry rubbed his back slightly, all he dared risk. Lucius might be a spy, but no one knew Draco's loyalties.

"I'm sorry," murmured. "I have you. You're okay."

Draco buried his face in Harry's shoulder and shuddered.

"That's what happens when you summon ruddy Fiendfyre in a closed-off space where holy fire is already doing its bit!" Ron shouted at Goyle and dumped him unceremoniously to the floor outside the room. "You're lucky we have Harry and 'Mione, or we'd all be dead. Idiots."

"Enough, Ron." Harry set Malfoy down with more gentleness. "That's it. I can't get Crabbe out of that blaze."

"Don't you dare try." Hermione shut the door to the Room of Requirement just as a burst of holy fire shaped like a phoenix obliterated a Voldemort-shaped blast of black flames heading for the
door. The door vanished just in time.

"F*ck," she gasped, startling the nearby Gryffindors. "What? That was ruddy terrifying! Can't a girl curse when she escapes her doom by mere milliseconds?"

Ron grinned and draped his arm around her shoulders. "That's my girl."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Git." She knelt over Seamus and winced. "Harry, the potion wasn't enough. He's still burned."

"Shite." Harry knelt over his friend, slit his wrist, and held it to his face. "Go on, then."

Seamus didn't protest. Harry squirmed at the odd feeling of his tongue on his skin, but shoved his discomfort behind his Occlumency shields anyway and summoned some tears for his friend. Listening to Malfoy and Dean cry in fear and horror over what they had witnessed made them come fast. He pulled back from Seamus and dropped his tears over the skin where it was still burned. The wounds sealed and the charred flesh regrew, pink and tender, but perfectly healed.

"Thank Merlin." Harry grabbed Dean into a hug and dropped tears on his head. "He's okay. Seamus will be okay."

Dean shuddered. "Crabbe… the fire… ate him, Harry. Just… swallowed him whole."

"Dear fucking gods." Harry went to Malfoy and rubbed tears on his wet cheek. "They heal. Ssh."

Malfoy whimpered and covered his face in his hands. Luna brought him into her arms.

Harry flung a few tears at Goyle, too. Malfoy hadn't been trying to attack, but Goyle was still very much an enemy. Still, Harry couldn't listen to him sob his heart out and not be affected. Even if it was his own fault.

Luna petted Malfoy's hair. "You had no idea we were here, did you?"

"N-no. I-I was just trying to get them out."

Harry restored his glamours and gave Malfoy a searching look. Hmm. No, by his behaviour, he doubted Malfoy was loyal. Still, it was as much for his safety as Harry's own that he couldn't reveal the truth.

Riddle would kill the boy if he saw Malfoy standing by in horror as his horcrux went up in flames, after all.

Harry aimed his wand at Goyle and Malfoy. "Obliviate. Crabbe set the Room on fire and killed himself by his own curse. We saved you on brooms. You know nothing else. You saw nothing else. You're just on your way to lock yourselves up with the other traitors so you don't die." He grabbed Malfoy and whispered, "There's a secret tunnel to Hogsmeade behind the one-eyed witch on the third floor. Password is Dissendium. Be careful. Pettigrew knows about it."

Malfoy shuddered. "Tunnel…?"

"Yes. If you want out, go. Quickly. But do it alone and under disillusionment charms. Goyle will be safe in the dungeons. You might not." He gave the boy his wand back. "Hurry."

"Y-yeah."
Harry watched Malfoy lead Goyle away and huffed. "Damn. A nightmare of a battle already, and the bastard isn't even here yet."

"Yeah, that was utterly horrific," Ron agreed with a shudder.

Harry went to Seamus, who was leaning on Dean's shoulders and testing his legs. "You two get to the Infirmary. Ginny, Michael, go with them to make sure they get there safely. Neville, Luna, come here."

His friends obeyed.

"Nev, Luna," Harry whispered, "you saw that tiara, right? What was inside it?"


"Close enough. He put bits of himself in his pet snake, too. Spread it around the DA and Order, we have to kill the ruddy snake before I can kill Riddle. Let them know he'll be here soon if he's not already."

Neville nodded. "On my way. Where are you lot going?"

"To secure the secret passages. Be careful."

"Same to you."

Luna murmured, "No need to watch out for the Carrows, Harry. The headmaster already finished them off."

Neville whirled around and gaped at her. "He… what?"

"Severus is innocent, Nev," Harry said with a shake of his head. "I don't have time to talk about it, though."

"I'll explain," said Luna with a smile.

"Just be careful no one outside of our trust hears," Hermione warned her. "If it gets back to Riddle…"

"Yes. I will keep all three eyes open."

Ron blinked. "Er… that's… good?"

Harry snorted. "You do that, Luna. Good luck, both of you."

"Um… yeah, good luck." Neville led Luna away, hissing under his breath. "Innocent? How does that follow?"

Harry left the explanations up to Luna and led his friends away. They had no time to waste. Goyle would report the attack to his master as soon as the haze of Obliviation wore off, if he hadn't done already. Merlin, he hoped Malfoy could get out of the castle before this horror of a night got any worse.

Either way, Harry couldn't dally. Time was almost up.

"Let's go."
Harry turned towards the staircases, his friends on his heels.
WARNING: This chapter is intense. First, the boys are in the middle of a war, so death and graphic injuries abound. But also, one of them is damn near raped. So... yeah. Strap in, kiddos. This one is a wild ride.

Elvish: nuróda. Curse word for a vile arsehole, if context didn't make it obvious. Also, Xeri swears a bit more in this one, and remember he's from ancient Greece, so he swears mostly by the Greek pantheon (also Roman sometimes, too, as he lived through that era as well).

AN: my little man seems to be doing well in school so far! Yay!

Chapter 36

Casualties of War

The battle had begun. Harry fought beside what remnants of his loved ones he had been able to find and searched for his mate. The twins walked ahead of them, lobbing battle-ready pranks into the crowd, and his faithful 'sidekicks' flanked him, as always. Dobby and Winky had joined the síoda battalion. Xerides fought the battle on the fringes, making good use of his archery skills and searching for Harry's mate. Kreacher was searching for Severus, too.

Damn it. Why had Severus decided to hide himself now? He had made himself more difficult to track after working out Harry's house elf secrets, but Harry couldn't let him stay hidden. Everyone's lives depended on his safety.

Percy came out of nowhere and joined their group. Harry was happy to see him, but he only listened to the brothers' reunion with one ear. Where the hell was Severus?

"Did you just make a joke, Percy? I can't believe it. You...."

Harry gasped as a wave of dark magic entered his sensory range, careening towards them at a lethal pace.

"DOWN!"

Everyone dropped, but Fred, caught mid-sentence and off-guard, hadn't been fast enough to avoid the blast of stone and fire that burst from the wall just ahead.

"Fred!"

George's sharp cries blended with the ringing in Harry's ears and a tingling numbness in his head, but he forced himself to react. Fred lay, eyes glassy and neck bent at an unnatural angle, at a screaming George's feet.
Harry didn't need to conjure tears for this. Was he already dead? Oh, gods, Harry had no idea if his blood was powerful enough to save him now, but, *fuck*, he had to try.

"*Diffindo!*" Harry opened a deep cut down the length of his arm and poured his blood over Fred's neck. He spelled some into the man's stomach, too, terrified moving even his jaw would finish him off.

Percy cried, "Harry! What the *hell* are you doing?"

Hermione tugged Percy back, her face shiny with tears. "T-trying to save his life. It might be… I don't know if even Harry can save him, but he's his only chance right now."

Percy choked out, "But his neck…."

"We know," Ron sobbed. "Oh, gods, Harry, please, please let it be enough."

Harry sealed his wound at a sharp wave of dizziness and summoned a blood replenisher. He couldn't spare any more until the potion did its work, but, Merlin, he hoped what he had been able to give would be enough.

A small movement registered below him. Fred's head had eased back into its rightful place. The man made a breathy whine and his eyes blinked, and Harry cried out in relief.

"He's alive! Gods help me, he's alive!"

Ron caught Harry into a tearful embrace and kissed his cheek. "You saved him. Fuck, you saved him."

Harry wept, too, but he kept enough presence of mind to shield them and stop George when he went to hug his twin.

"*Don't!*" Harry's sharp cry stopped George cold. "Don't move him. I've healed him, but his neck is most likely still in a fragile state. Move him, and he might die. *Immobulus!*" He conjured a stretcher and strapped Fred to it, taking great care not to move his spinal column at all.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!* Winky!"

His house elf appeared, dressed for battle and a little worse for wear, but healthy. "Please take Fred and George to the Infirmary. Be extremely careful not to alter Fred's position at all and warn Madam Pomfrey or whatever healer tends him that his neck was broken before they treat him."

Winky winced. "Winky will do as master says." Fred, George, and Winky vanished.

"Are the rest of you all right to go on?" Harry pulled Ron to his feet. "Do you need to go?"

Ron wiped his face. "Don't be a sod. George is with him. You need me more."

"Thanks, mate."

"Always."

Percy said in an unsteady voice, "W-would someone please explain what the *hell* just happened?"

Hermione grabbed his arm. "On the way. We have to find Harry's mate, but you can come along, as long as you promise never to tell anyone outside of our family group what you're about to hear."

Percy gave her a vow, and Harry led them on through the rubble, this time with both eyes on the
Severus had done all he could to make the last battle more difficult for the dark lord while he had the chance. The Carrows were dead. The house elves either helping in the Infirmary, defending the soldiers, battling the dark, or holding the wards. The younger students had been evacuated to Beauxbatons or sent home. Harry and Neville's defence group had turned into warriors and, along with the Order, they had entered the fray and driven the enemy into a temporary armistice.

Severus had done what he could to aid them from the shadows. Now, he had only to find Potter and wait to be struck down. He hoped, at least, that his death would be quick.

He leaned against a tree for a moment, watching the Whomping Willow beat the air just ahead. Hadn't he already done this once, all those years ago? If he closed his eyes, he saw the ghosts of that dark day as clear as they had been twenty years ago.

A scrawny, miserable, wraith of a boy staggered past, all stringy hair and tears. He had stopped caring about his appearance long ago, and some part of him had hoped that making himself ugly would turn their attentions elsewhere. It hadn't worked. Nothing had. No matter what he did, his abusers followed him.

Was it his fault? He didn't know. Their accusations and falsehoods twisted his brain into a mess of shame and terror that he was truly becoming what they claimed him to be, until one more moment on this earth was one too many.

"Don't go down there, traitor! You don't deserve to know!"

But Black had calculated what words would draw the opposite effect from his victim, and Severus knew it. The Willow's startling stillness made that clear, however crafty Black imagined himself to be.

Severus didn't stop.

Black smirked as Severus stumbled into the opened tunnel in the tree roots, the full moon lighting his way.

Twenty years later, Severus walked the same path, with the light of the moon serving as his only witness. He didn't know if death waited at its terminus or if Potter did, but he knew he would die at some point tonight, and that had dragged his memories out of the past, clawing and screaming their way through his shields.

If fate had any mercy left for him, it would be the last time.

An all-too-familiar sensation washed over him, and Severus froze. In fear, right? It had to be horror holding him prisoner, not that godawful spell. Or a flashback.

Gods help him, let it be another flashback.

A nasally laugh sounded nearby, and Severus' nerve broke. No. No. Oh, Merlin save him, no!

"Miss me, Sevvie?"
The rat stepped out of the willow, and Severus whimpered in sheer terror. His limbs refused to move. He couldn't escape, or fight, or kill the rat bastard.

Fuck! This wasn't supposed to happen again! Not this close to the end, not ever! Albus had stopped it!

But Albus was dead now, wasn't he? Without his life and core to sustain his spells, Albus' magic could hold neither Severus nor his abusers prisoner any longer.

Pettigrew gave a whuffing sort of snicker that made Severus' blood congeal. "You did good keeping me away as long as you have, but you see I got there in the end, didn't I?"

Severus' heart pounded like a timpani in his ears. His fingers struggled to claw through his bonds and close on his wand, but even with twenty years of experience on his teen self, he still couldn't break through that horrific spell.

Only Pettigrew could release him now, and the rat wouldn't set him free until he had good and finished with Severus, and who knew when that might be? Maybe never, now that he had no reason to pretend.

Tears poured down his face, and Severus was too fucking terrified to care.

"Wondering how I found you?" Pettigrew gave that nasally laugh that still made Severus want to vomit. "That handy little tracking charm I put on you at the last rally served me well. You didn't even feel it."

Not over the pain of ten rounds of the *Cruciatus*, no.

A stubby hand traced down his back, and Severus screamed. It broke his glamours, too, but fuck if he cared. Let the light kill him. Anything to break out of this horror before he suffered again.

"Scream all you want. No one is near us. *Homenum Revelio!*" No lights showed, not even in the distance, and Severus whimpered in horror.

'Oh gods. Someone. Please!'

"I've been waiting to seal my revenge. A nice long time, but it will be worth it, won't it, Sevvie?" The rat whispered against his ear, and Severus fought furiously to jerk away.

His muscles stayed frozen.

Pettigrew snickered. "Now, no one will stop me. Ever."

"*Help me!*" Severus screamed with all his power, all semblance of dignity tossed aside in his desperation, and prayed, for once in his life, that someone, anyone, would hear.

And that someone would *care*.

Xerides heard a masculine scream of sheer, unadulterated terror, and his blood congealed in his veins. Fates, someone was in dire trouble. Someone who sounded *familiar*. Oh, gods, no!

"*Help me!*"

He dashed to the source of the sound, keeping to the shadows, and his heart nearly stopped at the scene he stumbled upon.
Harry's mate stood frozen, tears raining down his face, eyes wide and darting about wildly. Worse, a man Xerides knew from Harry's memories was touching Severus' back and terrifying him.

Then, the rat voiced a threat that made bile rise in Xerides' throat.

"You're going to be my little toy forever…." 

Oh, fuck, no. Over Xerides' dead body.

He raced between the willow's boughs—the tree would not hurt what it recognised as a friend of nature—and positioned himself behind Severus' attacker.

"Now, be a good little boy and bend over for me, Sevvie."

The rat pushed Severus forwards at the neck, and Severus could do nothing but shudder and cry out. The foul rat must have had some kind of paralysis charm on him.

Dear gods, no. Xerides couldn't let this atrocity happen.

He placed a poisoned arrow to the string and took aim. Pettigrew reached for a sobbing Severus' robes.

'To Hades with you, nuróda!' Xerides let his arrow fly. He guided its path with the winds and watched it hit home.

Pettigrew dropped, writhing in shock and anguish as Xerides' poisons stilled his heart. Death came with far more speed than the rat deserved.

As soon as Pettigrew's movements faded to the twitches of poison-induced rigor mortis, Severus dropped to his knees in gasping, shuddering sobs. Xerides guarded him, but did not dare approach. The sight of a night elf helping him would only terrify Severus more, much as it broke the elf's heart to be so helpless.

After a few moments, Severus collected himself and wiped his face with shaking hands.


Xerides shuddered. 'Yes, by the fates, yes it was. Thank Zeus I was within range.'

Severus dragged himself to his knees and leaned against a nearby maple tree, struggling to get his bearings. "What… how?" He turned and set eyes on the stiff corpse. "An arrow? Merlin, straight to the heart? Shite. And…." He sniffed. "Linnato seed oil?"

Xerides' breath caught. How in the name of Artemis had he recognised it? Linnato had no smell. It was why his kind used it. Lethal, untraceable, undetectable.

To everyone but this man, apparently.

"That is an elven poison," Severus muttered. "What the fuck just happened here?"

He glanced around, and Xerides hurried to shut his glowing eyes, but not fast enough. Severus caught a glimpse, and at this range, Xerides' night aura wouldn't blend with the backdrop of a starry sky.

Severus gasped. "Oh, gods… no, I-I must be going mad."
He gave a whimper, and the sound of his footsteps came rapidly closer. Xerides dashed out of the way just in time to avoid the panicking man. Fates, that was too close.

Xerides watched the Willow's branches stop fighting and a tunnel open at its roots. He guarded Severus until he disappeared from view and waited until the tunnel closed behind him.

"Fawkes. Bring your sunguard and his companions here straight away, please."

The phoenix trilled and vanished in a blast of fire. Xerides incinerated the rat's corpse while he waited.

"Good riddance, foul beast."

Severus raced down the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack, half hoping the werewolf would meet him at the end of it.

Oh, gods. Pettigrew had tried to rape him, right there on the battlefield. Fuck. Only the kindness of his unknown benefactor had spared him.

It couldn't have been a night elf, could it? All known literature painted them as rabid beasts.

Then again, it said the same for werewolves, and Lupin hadn't been all bad, had he? And a human couldn't possibly have saved him. Pettigrew's spell would have revealed any humans in range, certainly one within range of a longbow.

Merlin. What the hell had happened back there?

Severus didn't check his pace until he made it into the Shack. It was empty. He sank onto the tatty bed and buried his head in his hands. Gods, he had come so close. He couldn't help a few tears of grief and sheer emotional release.

It was over now. For better or worse, all his tormentors save one were dead, and Potter would soon pave the way for that one's death, too.

Perhaps because his memories hovered so close, Severus could not help a strong flinch and a little cry of dismay at the sound of the dark lord's voice calling his name.

He pulled himself together by sheer force of will and slammed his mental shields into place with all the power of his fear, a formidable defence indeed. Riddle entered the room, his snake floating behind him in a protective golden bubble, and paused at the doorway.

"What troubles you, Severus? Are you not pleased that our enemies will fall this night?"

'Mine, at least.' He hid the thought behind steel trap walls and stood, wiping his face.

The time had come to put on a show. Thank Merlin, it would be the last time he ever had to play the fool, but, gods, he hoped he could stall the bastard for time. He couldn't die yet, not until Potter knew the truth.

"Forgive me, my lord. Pettigrew ambushed me outside the tunnel and thought, without your lordship's ever-present watchfulness, it was an opportune moment to renew his assaults upon my person which were so frequent in my youth. I am afraid I was rather shaken."

Voldemort nodded, expression full of false sympathy. "I see. I do hope you put him in his place."
Severus' face tightened with true fury. 'How dare you?'

He somehow managed to pass his anger off as vindication, but doubted the arsehole had been entirely fooled.

It didn't matter. The curtain call had come. Severus' blood calmed at the sheer relief that this grand stage play of horror had nearly reached its end. He only had to delay his death one last time, and then this parody of suffering would all be over.

"He will do no more harm."

Voldemort nodded. "A fitting fate for one so disloyal."

'If you only knew.'

Severus concealed his morbid amusement behind his mental shields and set the stage for his final performance. "If my lord permits, I shall seek out the boy for you, and you may avenge the loss of your servant upon his person, as well as his myriad greater sins."

Merlin, he hoped it would be enough to distract the bastard from his wand problem.

'Hurry it up, Potter. Time is running out.'

For both of them.
A Bond of Trust

Chapter Summary

Harry to the rescue! Also, minor character death. Canonical, sort of. And a watercolor of Sev and Harry!

Chapter 37

A Bond of Trust

Harry wept with Remus over Tonks' still form. Merlin forgive him, he had done everything he could to save her, but he had simply come too late. Remus had barely survived as it was.

"Dora," Remus cried out in agony, rocking his dead wife's body against his chest. "Oh gods, Dora! Come back! I can't do this without you."

Harry sobbed on Remus' shoulder. "I'm sorry. I'm so bloody sorry."

Remus caught him into a desperate hug. "You aren't to blame, cub. We did everything we could. It just… gods, it hurts to lose her. And how do I go on alone?"

Ron knelt before him and took Remus' shoulders. "Listen, you're not alone. You've got us. I know it's not the same, but you're not without help. And Teddy needs his dad. So you've got to go on. You've got to hold on for his sake. We're all right behind you."

Remus shuddered and nodded. "Right. Teddy. I can't leave him alone."

"That's it." Ron squeezed his shoulders. "You hold on to your baby right now, love on him and know you still have something beautiful to keep fighting for, even when it hurts."

Hermione sobbed, "Oh, Ron…"

Harry grabbed his friend's hand. "Thank you," he choked out, unable to find words beyond a simple expression of gratitude.

Ron just brought Harry and Remus both into his arms, Tonks' still form cradled between them.

Thank Merlin the supreme bastard had called for an armistice. Harry and his friends would have been sitting ducks out here, lost in grief, but he couldn't stop crying.

The sound of phoenix apparition, however, brought him out of grief and into panic in a hurry. "Fawkes? Is Xeri…?"

The phoenix gave a low trill and wriggled his tail feathers.

"I know." Harry wiped his face and dropped his tears on Remus' head. It wouldn't heal him entirely, but it might help him face his future as a widower and a single father a bit easier.

"Percy, we have to—take care of him, please."

Percy gave him a sorrowful nod. "I'll keep him safe."

Harry squeezed his arm. "Thank you. I… Ron, 'Mione, let's go."

Ron hugged his brother and took Harry's hand. Hermione took Ron's, and once Harry had a firm grip, he grabbed Fawkes' tail.

The phoenix dropped them outside the Whomping Willow, where a grave Xerides stood with his bow in hand.

"Xeri!" Harry rushed to him and grabbed his wrists. "Are you okay?"

Xerides shuddered. "I am uninjured, but your mate is not. He was nearly… nearly assaulted outside the tree's reach. I killed the monster responsible—the rat—but Severus has run down this tunnel like a man out of his head with terror, and I fear what will become of him if we are not swift to act."

Harry gasped. "Oh, gods! Come on. Lumos!"

He pressed the knot in the willow and guided his friends into the tunnel at a run, but something about the elf's story didn't sit well with him. "Wait a minute. Pettigrew—the biggest coward in the death eaters' ranks—attacked Severus, and you had to kill the rat bastard? And Severus ran off like a bat out of hell? That… doesn't seem right. Why didn't Severus just kill Pettigrew himself?"

"Harry, Severus was petrified. And I did not say Pettigrew attacked him with intent to kill, I said he assaulted Severus, or would have if I had not killed him first."

Harry skidded to a halt, horror crashing through his veins. On either side, Ron and Hermione did, too.

"Oh my gods," Hermione breathed. "Xeri, what kind of assault?"

Xerides gave Harry a grim look. "Your mate was quite nearly raped, Harry, right here on the battlefield."

"Fuck," Harry cried. "Severus!"

With that, he tore off down the tunnel at top speed. Even Xerides had trouble keeping pace, but as he neared the shack, everyone stopped dead.

Severus wasn't the only person inside.

"I regret it."

Harry heard sounds of a struggle and raced for the entrance as fast as his legs would go. The icy pain in his heart terrified him. Oh shite, what had happened?

He stepped into the shack just as the door to Hogsmeade closed behind the evil bastard. Severus lay in the middle of the floor, eyes wide in terror and pain and blood gushing from a hole in his throat.
Harry gasped, "No," and dashed to his side. "No!"

"H-Harry…." Severus could barely whisper. Harry clamped his hand down over the wound and poured tears over him. "No. Don't die on me. You can't die."

Something in Severus' eyes softened. Silvery tears dripped from his eyes and drifted up, mist in the air. "T-take it."

Hermione was already bottling the memories. "Ron! Sunshine Elixir, now!"

Ron tossed her a phial. Harry snatched it out of the air and spelled it right into Severus' stomach. The wound closed, but the ache in Harry's chest didn't fade.

"Fuck, he's still dying. Sir, hold on. You've got to hold on. Diffindo!" Harry winced at the pain tearing down his arm, but the ice in his chest hurt worse.

Severus muttered, "Look… at… me."

Harry obeyed, though he could barely see through tears.

Severus' eyes widened. "Sun… angel…."

Oh no. Harry's glamours had fallen. He was running out of time.

"Severus, listen to me. I know it sounds strange, but you have to drink this. My blood. Please."

Harry held his bleeding arm out to the man. Perhaps Severus wasn't entirely coherent, or perhaps, deep down, he trusted Harry more than he was willing to admit, as the next instant, Harry felt a soft tongue lapping at his torn skin and gentle suction on the wound. It should have hurt like hell, but somehow, he only felt warmth and a wave of deep trust and affection surge through him. Maybe the healing properties in his own blood dulled the pain.

"It's all right now." Harry stroked Severus' gory hair and murmured what reassurance he could offer. "I'm here, love. It's all over now. You're going to be okay."

As Severus drank from him, Harry watched the man's face heal in wonder. The long-since crooked and broken nose realigned itself into its proper shape. Still aquiline, but a healthy form of it. His sallow skin shifted to pale cream, though the dark circles and pallor of dire health did not fade. And his teeth, resting against Harry's skin without biting, shifted and rearranged themselves into their proper positions. The greasy roughness vanished from Severus' hair, too, leaving it sleek and shiny, though still a mess from all the carnage.

Dear gods. Without twenty years of damage on his face, he looked completely different.

Harry stroked the man's face softly. "So lovely. Gods. Have you been hiding under your pain all this time?" He brushed tears away. "No longer. I swear, I'll keep you safe from now on."

Severus whimpered. His body slumped, and his hold on Harry's wrist weakened.

Harry made a strangled cry of despair and clutched him tight. "No! Stay with me, Severus! Hold on, love. You have to hold on. Please… please don't leave me."

Severus wove his fingers into Harry's hair, sucked once more, and fell unconscious with a groan.

Harry whimpered and sealed his wound. "I… why? Why didn't it work?" Heat began to build under his skin, and terror made the blood underneath turn icy. "Oh, gods, I'm gonna burn!"
Xerides ran past him, silvery phial in hand. He guided the liquid directly into Severus' bloodstream, and Harry understood, at last.

Poison. Severus had been poisoned.

"Shite!" Harry fumbled for another Aurora Antidote, but stopped as the burning in his skin and the ache in his chest abated.

"Oh. Oh, gods. He's going to be okay." Harry buried his face in Severus' chest and wept, careless of the blood soaking his robes. "Don't you ever fucking terrify me like that again, you utter bastard." The sobs on each word lessened their effect.

Hermione wept, too. "So close. Merlin, so close. We would have lost you both. Xeri… oh gods, thank you."

The night elf hugged her and passed her into her ashen boyfriend's arms, then knelt beside Harry and smoothed the Sunguard's hair.

"Ssh. He will live now, Harry. I will watch over him."

Harry shuddered and pulled himself together. "N-no, we need you out there. Kreacher!"

His elf appeared and wailed. "Oh! Kreacher is failing his mission! Oh, Master!"

Harry called, "Kreacher! It's okay. Severus had a close call and terrified us all half out of our wits, but he's alive. I need you to take him to his quarters and watch over him with Hippa, all right? Give him some Aurora General Antidote and the new batch of Sunshine Elixir if he takes a turn, or call me if it gets bad. Just keep him safe, okay?"

Kreacher bowed and wiped his face. "Kreacher and Hippa will be taking good care of him, Master, but Kreacher is thinking you must call her first. Kreacher is not able to find her either."

Harry nodded and restored his glamours. "Hippa?"

The elf appeared with a squeak. Blood streaked one cheek and her blue eyes were wide with horror.

"Oh, Master Harry! You is calling me just in time! Hippa was almost…." Her eyes settled on Severus' limp form, and a wail and a screech escaped her. "No! Master, you is lying to Hippa! You said you is being safe!"

Harry caught the distraught síoda into a hug. "Ssh. He's alive, Hippa. Nagini attacked him, and we almost lost him, but we were able to neutralise the venom and stop the bleeding. He's still in bad shape, but not dying anymore. Will you take care of him for me, please? With Kreacher?"

"Hippa is being glad to help." She hugged Harry. "Thank you, Master."

Harry patted her shoulder. "I'll always protect him." He hesitated. "Hippa, he's… not in a good state mentally. Don't let him hurt himself, please. If he's miserable, I swear, I'll help."

Hippa nodded solemnly. "Hippa promises to keep him safe."

"Thank you. Whenever you're ready, Hippa, Kreacher."

"Wait, síoda," Xerides said, expression grim.

Hippa gasped at the sight of him. "Oh! You is a night elf! You are helping Master Harry?"
Xerides nodded. "I saved Severus tonight, too, from a vicious rat."

Hippa paled. "Pettigrew! Oh no. Hippa could not protect him." Tears flooded her eyes. "You saved him?"

"Yes, but, Hippa, Kreacher, please take great care not to touch Severus without consent. He was nearly raped tonight, and it has no doubt traumatised him. Be gentle."

Kreacher's ears went down to his shoulders. 'Sun forbid! Kreacher is being very gentle."

"Thank you, Kreacher." Harry brushed Severus' hair out of his face, but after Xerides' warning, refrained from kissing his forehead as he had wanted to. "Be safe, love."

Hippa breathed in sharply. She gave Harry such a dark look, he faltered.

"Hippa? I…."

Well, maybe she simply wanted to protect Severus from advances he couldn't consent to while unconscious. Harry would never hurt him like that, but Hippa didn't know him well enough to be sure of him.

Harry forced himself to move away and crossed his arms over his chest. "O-okay. Get him out of here before anyone else tries to hurt him, please."

"Yes, Master Harry."

Kreacher apparated Severus away. Hippa stared at Harry a while longer, her fierce gaze turning to something like sorrow and pity.

"Hippa will guard him well, Master Harry."

He smiled wanly. "T-thanks, Hippa."

She bowed and vanished, and Harry buried his face in Xerides' chest.

"Hurts. Hurts for him and for me."

Xerides held Harry and stroked his hair. "We will heal him. I promise, Harry."

Harry sniffled and gave him a smile full of terrible pain. "If he'll let us."

Xerides nodded sadly. "Somehow, we will find a way. Perhaps our efforts here will have gone some way towards softening his resentment. He did, after all, trust you enough to touch you and drink from your wrist."

Harry sniffled and let the hope of Xerides' words bolster him. "Y-yeah. Yeah, you might be right." He wiped his face and took a shaky breath. "We have to kill the bastard responsible for this before any sort of healing can come regardless."

"You should view these memories first, just in case," said Hermione. "Clearly, he wanted you to see them."

Harry nodded. He took the phial and breathed the mist in, letting Severus' memories play within the shelter of his mind.

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Harry breathed out the foreign memories on a snarl and trapped them within the phial once more. "That evil, manipulative, twisted, utter piece of horse shite!"

Everyone stared.

"Harry?" Hermione hesitated. "I… I thought we had established the headmaster's innocence. Why are you angry at him?"

"Not Severus, Dumbledore! Oh my gods, the lengths that bastard went to, just to make us all his pawns. He forced Severus to spy instead of giving him shelter. He forced him to be silent about something that hurt him terribly, too, for years. It wasn't clear what it was, but that Severus was miserable and betrayed was obvious. And, to top it all off, he wants me to march to my own death tonight, happy as you please, his dear little pet weapon sacrifice for the greater-fucking-good!"

Xerides' arms tightened around him. "No. No, we shan't give you up."

Harry gave him a sad smile. "It's okay. It's not necessary. My holy fire killed the horcrux in my scar already. It's just… the level of callousness as Dumbledore told this to Severus last year was appalling. Severus hated me then, without a doubt, yet he was the one to take Dumbledore to task. He said Dumbledore had raised me like a pig for the slaughter, and fuck! He was right!" Tears blurred Harry's vision. "He was right."

Xerides turned Harry back into his embrace. "We shall set it right, Harry. The man was a demon to have treated you and your mate so badly, but we shall set it right tonight. We shall end this, once and for all. Are you able to go on, for Severus' sake?"

Harry took a deep breath and stood tall, shoulders squared. "Not just Severus. For all of us. So we can live without their poison mucking up our lives."

"That's it," Hermione said with a nod. "We can do this, Harry. I believe in us."

Ron grinned, though blood, ash, and tears stained his cheeks. "This is it, mate. The big one. The one we've all been—"

"Oh, stow it, you." Harry chuckled. "You're right, though. Come on. Let's give 'em hell. For Severus, for Fred, and for Tonks."

Ron's grin turned into a look of resolve. "Damn straight."

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Watercolor of Harry struggling to save Severus.

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