Feathers and Fireballs

Summary

While fleeing Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries, Harry is drenched by not one, but two different potions, which he forgets about when Sirius is killed. The potions do not forget about him, however, and in the middle of the summer, Harry is transformed into something else. The transformation has disastrous consequences.
Chapter One

He was such an idiot! Harry knew that he should have been expecting the ambush, especially given the visions he'd had. Of course if Voldemort had been sending him false visions of Sirius, then he would know that Harry would be visiting the Department of Mysteries.

But Harry, like an idiot, had dropped his guard when he’d realized that Sirius wasn’t actually being held captive, and the Death Eaters had gotten the best of him. Now he had to try and get his friends, who’d never really properly been in a battle before, out of the Department before they were killed. He didn’t know if he could manage it, but he was determined to give it his best shot.

What followed was a frantic nightmare, and Harry wasn’t all that surprised when things got destroyed in the ensuing battle. One of those things, a strange vial of something silvery that wasn’t quite the same shade or consistency of a Pensieve memory but was close, splashed all over Harry when it shattered from a curse. It was shockingly cold, cold enough to take his breath away.

Harry jerked away from the sensation, and managed to knock into the shelf on the opposite side of the aisle. Another vial of something red shattered and splashed all over him as well, and Harry winced and hoped that there was nothing in them that was actually dangerous to him even as the red potion burned his skin. The last thing he needed was to be poisoned.

Then Sirius happened, and his attempted duel with Voldemort, and the Headmaster told him about the prophecy. By the time Harry reached Madam Pomfrey, whatever had splashed him had soaked into his robes, dried, and no longer pained him, and Harry didn’t even really remember being splashed at all.

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Harry woke on midnight of July 31st, his scar burning terribly. His eyes shot open and he lifted a shaky hand to check it, but his hand came away clean. Then the heat began to bloom from his scar to encompass first his head, and then his entire body as he writhed in agony on the thin mattress.

Harry screamed. He was burning up! He twisted on the bed, drenched in sweat, unable to cool off, caught in a miasma of pain. He was going to die, he had to. Nobody could live through pain like this. Was it a curse? Had Voldemort done something? All Harry knew was that the heat was so intense that he was certain that this was it. This was going to be the end of him.
“Stop that screaming!” The bellow came from his uncle, who had burst into the room at some point.

Harry tried to quiet himself, but he couldn’t. The pain was so intense and he had no idea what was causing it. It was worse than the Cruciatus Curse, worse than the Blood Quill Umbridge had used on him last year.

A sharp, stinging slap to his face didn’t help matters, nor did Uncle Vernon screaming something unintelligible into his face.

And then, as suddenly as it all started, it just stopped. Harry’s body began to cool and he lay on the bed, soaked in his own sweat, panting. His uncle was on the bed on top of him, glaring down at him, his nostrils flaring out with every breath.

“Well now,” his uncle breathed, his voice softening. “There’s something different about you, boy.” He leaned in so that Harry could smell his breath, putrid and disgusting. Harry tried to jerk back, but he couldn’t actually get away. There was nowhere to go, after all. They were on the bed, and Harry wasn’t strong enough to physically fight the massive man. Uncle Vernon then reached down and ran a finger over Harry’s cheek in what was probably the first gentle touch Harry had ever received from a Dursley.

It made Harry’s skin crawl. “Wh-what are you doing?” he choked out, his voice hoarse from his earlier screams. “D-don’t touch me.” He tried to jerk his head away, but Uncle Vernon followed the movement to lay a more firm hand on Harry’s skin.

“You’ve done something strange to yourself with your freakish magic, haven’t you?” Vernon was almost absently petting him now, his gaze gone vague and distant.

“I haven’t,” Harry said quickly. He wasn’t sure what to do. He wasn’t strong enough to physically move his uncle, he knew that. Vernon was so much bigger and heavier than him that it would be impossible. He didn’t have his wand on him, and furthermore to do magic would get him thrown out of Hogwarts. He was well and truly defenseless.

“Oh yes, boy, I think you have,” Vernon almost crooned. He leaned down then and kissed Harry, wet and slobbering and disgusting. “You with your filthy magic, you must have done something, because you’re almost beautiful right now,” he said when he pulled back.

Harry panicked and started to struggle. “Get off of me!” he shouted, shoving ineffectively at his
uncle’s bulk. He struggled harder when he felt something hard poking at his leg where nothing hard belonged. Oh no. This wasn’t happening. It just… it wasn’t happening!

“I’m going to teach you why your magic is such a terrible thing,” Vernon said dreamily, like he was lost in a daze.

Harry screamed, and was relieved when he heard the door open again. He hoped that it was his Aunt, that she would do something about this. Surely she wouldn’t let Vernon do… this to him.

“Dad, what are you doing to the… oh,” Dudley cut off and let out a breathy moan.

Harry panicked and started to try even harder to get away, but all he did was manage to rip some of his clothes when Vernon’s hand closed around his shirt and Harry tried to jerk away. “Please don’t,” Harry begged, but it had no effect.

He realized then that getting away wasn’t going to happen, especially when he felt another set of hands on his legs. Harry gave up, closed his eyes, and went limp. He went away, someplace else, someplace where Vernon and Dudley weren’t… weren’t doing that to him.

When he came back to himself, the room was oddly silent and filled with the smell of something burning. The sun was high, judging by the level of light, and Harry was in a great deal of pain. He’d bled, judging by the red that stained his sheets when he slipped out of bed, and his legs gave out from under him. There was something…

Harry let out a shocked cry and scrambled back, heedless of the pain. There was a corpse on the floor by his bed, burnt down until it was just the skeleton left, the bones of which were still burning ever so slightly. That was doubtlessly what he’d smelled burning.

Harry forced himself to his feet and stumbled around the bed, only to freeze at the sight of another, smaller skeleton, still smoking. Harry shuddered at the sight. What had happened? Had someone attacked while they’d been… while they’d been on him? The amount of pain he was in made it clear that they’d succeeded in their goals, but what had happened after that? Why were Vernon and Dudley dead?

They must have been attacked by something, though Harry couldn’t imagine what. No magical creature that he knew of could breathe fire other than dragons, and that wouldn’t explain the black feathers that surrounded the corpses and littered the bed.
Harry staggered to the door and out into the hallway, thoughts of feathers and fire and magical creatures and hurt and blood tumbling chaotically in his head. He found Aunt Petunia staring at him from just outside. “Aunt Petunia,” he started, his voice trembling.

“You killed them, you wretched freak!” she shrieked, and flung something at his head. A paperweight, maybe, Harry wasn’t sure. He ducked it and staggered back into his room.

“I… I couldn’t have, Aunt Petunia, please, they were-”

She didn’t listen to his attempted protest. “You think I don’t know what they were doing to you?” She followed him into the room and flung something else at him.

This time it hit, mostly because Harry was too shocked to dodge. It struck him in the cheek and he fell to the ground, clutching at the already-bruising spot.

He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it when she started in on him again. “You freak, they were just getting some repayment for all that we’ve given you over the years! And you… My poor Dudders,” she said, and backed out of the room.

“They hurt me!” Harry shouted after her, his voice breaking on last word. He didn’t want to think about what they’d done, about how they’d… how they’d assaulted him. It hurt, and he was tired and confused and terrified and he felt like he would never be clean again. Maybe he wouldn’t.

“It doesn’t matter, freak! You’re a murderer,” Petunia shrieked back. “And I’ll see you locked away in that wizarding prison for this!” She slammed the door on him and Harry heard her stalk away.

Azkaban. She was going to try and get him sent to Azkaban. “No,” Harry breathed. He couldn’t… the dementors… he’d go mad, it wouldn’t take long at all. It wasn’t like he had many happy memories, after all.

“The Headmaster won’t let that happen,” he told himself, his voice shaking. Even in his frightened state, he knew that the Headmaster wouldn’t let Harry be locked away.

Won’t he? a tiny voice in the back of his mind asked. How will he stop them? You may have killed
two people this time, and it wasn’t even like you were defending anyone. You almost got expelled for just casting a Patronus last year. Do you think things have changed that much? It’s not like he ever protected you from Umbridge or anything.

Harry rubbed at the scar on the back of his hand. He couldn’t… he couldn’t count on Dumbledore to protect him, not when he still didn’t know what happened. And he couldn’t risk Azkaban. The thought of being stuck with dementors, all day, every day, for the foreseeable future? No, Harry couldn’t handle that.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. He couldn’t stay here and wait for answers while hoping for the best, that much was clear. He was out of options.

Harry opened Hedwig’s cage and his owl hooted and fluttered nervously at him. “It’s okay,” he breathed to her, knowing what he had to do. “It’s fine. Listen, girl, I need to go,” he said, his voice breaking on the last word. He couldn’t stop himself from crying a little as he continued with, “Go to Ron for me, okay? Stay with him. He’ll take care of you.” He stroked her snowy breast, then stepped away.

Hedwig flew to his shoulder and let out a reprimanding hoot. It was clear that his owl wasn’t planning on going anywhere.

Harry tried to push her off, but gently since he didn’t want to hurt her. “I can’t take care of you,” Harry tried. “I don’t know where I’ll be staying, it could be on the streets!”

His owl didn’t respond to that, just nibbled lightly on a strand of his hair and refused to be moved from her perch.

Harry surrendered, and instead focused on cleaning up a bit, using the cleanest bits of the sheet that he could fine. Once he was a bit more presentable, he tugged on some of his best Muggle clothes, then tested the door.

The locks the Dursleys normally kept on it had clearly not withstood his uncle slamming the door open last night, or maybe Aunt Petunia had forgotten to lock him in. Either way, the door was open. Harry crept out of the room and down the stairs, only to find that Aunt Petunia had apparently left. Maybe she’d gone to Mrs. Figg’s house to get in contact with the Aurors. It didn’t matter, and Harry knew he didn’t have much time to try and figure it out.
He opened the door to the cupboard under the stairs and grabbed his photo album, his Invisibility Cloak, and his money purse. Everything else, he left. He couldn’t take it all with him, not and run away successfully.

And he’d have to be smart this time, not like the summer before his third year. He couldn’t run to Diagon Alley first thing; he’d have to wait for the search for him to die down. He just hoped that he could manage in the Muggle world until it did. Harry slipped on his Cloak and left #4 Privet Drive for what would probably be the last time.

It wasn’t like Petunia would ever take him back after this, and that was assuming that Harry managed to avoid Azkaban.
A month later, Harry was miserable. Hogwarts was about to start, but he couldn’t go back to the school. He was a murderer; they wouldn’t want him.

Food wasn’t the problem, and neither was the fact that he couldn’t go back to school, really. He’d found that he could survive on what some restaurants threw away, and after the first few days of near-starvation it wasn’t even that humiliating to dig in the trash for his meal.

No, the problem was what happened when he got caught. The Invisibility Cloak helped, hiding him from everyone, but he couldn’t stay hidden all the time. Whenever he took the cloak off, and whenever he was found people… hurt him. Men, mostly, but sometimes a woman or two had done things to him. Sometimes Harry blanked out, and when that happened he would wake with a freshly burned skeleton by his side, surrounded by strange black feathers. Harry hated to kill them, because he was starting to realize that it wasn’t their fault. It was his.

Something was wrong with him, and Harry had no idea what.

He wondered if it was just Muggles affected by whatever was wrong with him, since he hadn’t actually tried to visit a wizarding establishment. The thought of willingly exposing himself to people… Harry shivered. What if wizards were just as affected as everyone else?

Still, he had to try. This was no kind of life. So Harry gathered what courage he had left, which wasn’t much, and made for the Leaky Cauldron. He stayed wrapped in his cloak, hoping that being invisible would help mask the effects of the strange attraction he now had. It seemed to work, for the most part, except that people’s eyes still glazed over when he got near them, they just couldn’t find him.

The Leaky Cauldron, which should have been nearly empty by the time that Harry reached it, was still mostly full. Harry hadn’t counted on the pre-Hogwarts rush, and didn’t know what he was going to do to try and get through the crowd.

Honestly, he wasn’t even sure what he would do once he was in the alley proper. Maybe he would visit the goblins and see if they had any advice? Or he could try to get to St. Mungo’s if it looked like wizards weren’t affected… surely someone would let him use their Floo, if he wasn’t a wanted criminal like he suspected he was. He was still considering his options when somebody, eyes already glazed over, bumped into him.
Harry jerked away, only to run into someone else. He stumbled back, trying to get out of the pub, only to find that he’d somehow made his way to the opposite side of the pub and was nowhere near the exit. He looked frantically around the room, realizing that he was very wrong and the wizards in the pub were definitely every bit as affected as the Muggles. If there was a hallway he could duck down or a way to get away from the crowd, then…

Harry reached for his wand, figuring if he was already a criminal then they were already looking for him anyway and he didn’t want this to happen again. It was knocked out of his hand in the crowd, and his cloak was torn from him suddenly. Harry struggled, he fought, he tried to grab his wand or his cloak so that he could hide, but none of it worked.

When he came back to himself, he was surrounded by more bodies than he could have ever imagined. Dozens of them were piled up in the pub, and his body ached in ways that he’d never imagined. Harry pulled on what was left of his tattered clothes and grabbed his cloak from the ground. It had been stomped on and dirtied but seemed to be in good shape.

His wand was gone, at least, he couldn’t find it. There were some pieces of wood on the floor that might have been his wand once upon a time, but… if they were, then there was nothing he could do. And if they weren’t, it didn’t matter. He couldn’t stay at the pub.

He had to leave. And he would have to hide from everyone, now. Nowhere was safe. Limping, frightened, and all alone, Harry left the wizarding world.

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A month after that saw the temperature dropping, and Harry wasn’t sure what he was going to do. “You sure you don’t want to go to Ron?” he asked Hedwig, who had landed on his shoulder. He was in the back corner of a filthy alley, wedged in between a dumpster and a wall, hoping that nobody would come back there. He would have thought that his disgusting state by now would deter people, but it never seemed to register when they were attacking him. It was like a haze came over them, like they’d been Imperiused or something.

He heard footsteps at the mouth of the alley and Harry wedged him back even further, if that were at all possible. The wall was cold and hard at his back, and Harry was terrified because there was nowhere to go. If whoever it was came into the alley, Harry would get hurt. It was going to happen. And he didn’t even have his wand to defend himself anymore...

“I know that you’re in there, Harry Potter,” a voice, strangely familiar, called to him.
Harry flinched and tried to make himself as small as possible, hoping that whoever it was would go away. He said nothing.

“Come now, child, hiding will do you no good at this point. I can assure you, we have this alley surrounded. You’ll not escape us.”

There was something so strange about that voice, like Harry knew it but didn’t all at the same time. It reminded him of someone, Harry realized, but he didn’t know who. He went to grab his wand, reflexively, before remembering that it wasn’t there anymore. There was nothing for him to grab, and no way to protect himself…

“We’re not going to hurt you,” the man continued. He took a single step into the alley. “I promise. My Lord was intrigued by your attack on the Leaky Cauldron, though he cannot imagine what happened to make you so angry with so many wizards.”

Harry’s heartbeat, already racing, kicked up even further. Death Eater. He was surrounded… Death Eaters had… How was he supposed to keep himself safe from them? At least… at least when they attacked him, if he went unconscious, he wouldn’t feel guilty about killing them. Well. As guilty, since he still hated the fact that he was hurting anyone at all.

“I didn’t mean to,” he said, his voice small. He flinched, then, because he hadn’t actually meant to answer the strange wizard.

“That makes more sense,” the wizard said. He took another step into the alley and Harry couldn’t stop the frightened noise that he made.

“Please stop,” Harry whimpered, hating himself for the way he was sounding. “I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

The wizard, much to Harry’s surprise, actually stopped when asked to. “I can assure you, I am an incredibly accomplished duellist. You would have a difficult time wounding me,” the man said.

“You’ll attack me,” Harry said, forcing the words out from between lips gone stiff with fear. He wasn’t sure why he wasn’t being attacked immediately, since others had been affected at a greater distance, but he knew that it was coming.
“I’m not here to attack you,” the man said. “As I said, my Lord has sent me to see if you might be amenable to opening negotiations, given recent events.”

“You will, though!” Harry tried to scrunch down even further into the disgusting little corner, but there really wasn’t anywhere else to go. “Everyone attacks me, and they… they hurt me, and I—” He cut off as a sob tore its way out of his throat. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a conversation with someone other than Hedwig, and he was frightened of letting it go on, but he was so lonely…

“I’m not going to hurt you,” the man said, his voice soft and warm and coaxing and so achingly similar to another voice that Harry had known once before. “I’m here to help you, if you’d like. To discuss truces, if not an actual ceasefire between my Lord and yourself.”

“What the hell is taking so-” The other voice, another man’s voice, cut off, and Harry heard the frightening sound of a breathy noise of desire. “Oh, oh my, why would you want to keep a sweet little morsel like this to yourself? Afraid of what a real man could show someone like him?”

Someone else entered the alley, then, only he didn’t stop where the first man had. Instead, he advanced on Harry like he was stalking his prey.

“Please don’t,” Harry begged, even though he knew it was useless.

“What the-” The strange man cut off and then shouted, “Stupefy!” The stunner shot out and hit the second Death Eater in the back, knocking him to the ground. “Okay, that’s… strange. Are you okay?”

Harry, trembling, stood up, still keeping his back to the wall. “I’m… okay. You… he…” Harry stopped and took a deep breath. “You aren’t affected by it.”

“No, it doesn’t seem like I am,” the man said. He sounded bemused, like he couldn’t figure out what was wrong. “Is it… does everyone react like that when they get close to you?”

Harry nodded, miserable. “It’s… and I can’t…” His breath hitched and another sob tore its way out of him. He curled his arms around his stomach to try and calm himself down, but it didn’t seem to be working. It wasn’t affecting the strange Death Eater, whatever it was. He couldn’t… maybe that meant there were others it wouldn’t work on?
“Right,” the Death Eater said. He stepped closer, stepping over the body of his companion without a second of hesitation, then came even closer to Harry.

Harry knew that he was filthy, that he was disgusting, but it didn’t seem to matter to the stranger, who held out his arms to him. “Come to me, little one, and let’s see if we can’t get this sorted out somehow. I will keep you safe until we can figure out what’s going on.”

Harry, shaking, took a step forward, then another, until he was within touching distance of the other wizard. Still, the stranger didn’t move, waiting patiently for Harry to come the rest of the way to him. “I… I don’t want to work for your Lord,” Harry said quietly, his voice still choked with tears. “So if that’s all that he wants, then please just kill me now. Because I can’t…” He couldn’t keep doing this. It was too much for him.

“My Lord has no interest in unwilling followers,” the man said, his arms still open for Harry to walk into if he so chose. “What he is interested in is finding a solution to his constant battling with you. If you would be willing to remove yourself from the battlefield, then my Lord is willing to allow you to do so.”

Harry shook with the desire to walk into the stranger’s arms. It had been so long since he’d known a kind touch… But… “But my friends,” he said weakly. “What about them? What about the Muggles?”

“The same Muggles who hurt you so much?” the man countered. “Come now, Harry. You know that you won’t be able to save everyone. And why should this all be on you, anyway? You’re so young, you’ve only just turned sixteen. Don’t you deserve a chance at peace sometime before you reach adulthood?”

Harry shivered at the words. “I-” He cut himself off. He wanted to say yes. He was so tired, felt so broken now. “I can’t”

“You can’t decide right now. That’s fine,” the man said with a nod. “Come with me, let me get you fed and cleaned, get you some decent sleep, and we can discuss your loyalties later.”

Harry bit his lip. It sounded so easy, and he was so tired of everything hurting so much… He took a final step forward, straight into the strange wizard’s arms. They folded around him, squeezing gently but firmly, and Harry couldn’t stop the next sob that tore from his throat.
Somebody else entered the alley, then, and the strange wizard didn’t even turn and look before shouting “Stupefy!” at whoever it was. Harry heard the thump as another body hit the pavement, then the stranger said, “Perhaps we should remove ourselves from this alley. May I Apparate you, little one?”

Harry nodded, shyly. “What’s your name?” he asked, just before the wizard did something and they were sucked through a straw to their destination, wherever it was.

“Regulus,” the man said when they landed at their destination. “Regulus Black. My older brother was your godfather.”

Harry’s heart kicked up yet again as the shock of the strange wizard’s identity, the awful method of travelling, and the stress of the past few months all hit him at once. He gasped for breath but couldn’t quite manage to get enough air, the world started to go dark at the edges, and then everything went black as he fell unconscious.
Chapter Three

Harry woke up feeling warm, curled up on something soft, covered in something softer. His eyes fluttered open and he blinked blearily up at a wooden ceiling, trying to make his eyes focus. Then he remembered what had happened before he lost consciousness and sat up, all thoughts of sleep vanishing.

The blanket fell away from him, revealing that he was still in his filthy clothes, still covered in who knew what, still reeking of alleys and other things. He was on the floor of the bedroom, on top of a comforter, covered in a sheet that had been stripped from one of the two beds in the room. It was a hotel room, by the looks of it, and the strange Death Eater, Regulus, was sitting on the stripped bed, thumbing through a book.

“You’re awake,” he said, not even looking up at Harry. “I thought you might want to be cleaned up, but then I thought that perhaps you’d rather handle that yourself. I wouldn’t blame you for not wanting anyone to touch you while you were unconscious.”

Harry shuddered at the thought. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“It’s not a problem.” Regulus nodded to someplace behind him. “The bathroom’s through there, if you’d like to make use of it. The door locks, so you don’t have to worry about my coming in without your permission.”

Harry hesitated. His wand was gone, so he couldn’t protect himself if something went wrong, but... he was scared, of course he was, but... but Regulus didn’t seem at all affected by whatever curse was on Harry. He’d not made a single threatening move towards him, nor had he seemed at all... lustful. Would it be safe?

It took him several minutes, but his desire to be clean won out over his fear of Regulus, who had so far been a perfect gentleman. Harry stood up, then glanced down at his clothes. “My clothes,” he started, because they would be just as filthy when he finished cleaning up as they were now, and Harry didn’t think he could stomach putting them back on, knowing what had happened in them.

“I guessed at your size, so things might not quite fit right, but there are some pajamas in the bathroom, waiting for you. I had my house elf pick them up for you.” Regulus turned another page in his book.
“Kreacher?” Harry asked, then flinched. What did it matter if the cruel little house elf worked for Regulus as well?

Regulus gave him a noncommittal hum for an answer.

“Thank you,” Harry whispered again, not sure of what else to say. He took a step backwards, then another, and another until his back hit the wall. Then he inched over until he passed through a doorway. Only then did he turn away from Regulus and flee into the bathroom itself.

There were the pajamas Regulus had mentioned, sitting on the closed toilet seat. They were black and, though Harry didn’t dare touch them for fear of making them filthy, they seemed to be made up of some kind of silky material. He bit his lip, then shook his head. Regulus hadn’t touched him, and he’d more than had the opportunity to do so. If nothing else, he could be certain that Regulus wasn’t going to try and… and use him the way that others had.

He started to strip with shaky fingers, getting the filthy clothes off of his filthy skin. He turned the shower to as hot as he could stand it, then slid under the water for the first time in months. It cascaded over him, coming away almost black at first. There was soap, wrapped in plastic, and a washcloth hanging on a rack with the towels just outside of the shower. Harry grabbed a washcloth and soaped it up, then got to work.

He was filthy and disgusting, and it took almost the entire bar of soap before he started to feel clean again. He washed his hair twice, noting with some small surprise that it was much longer than it should be. It reached past his shoulders while it was soaking wet, and Harry almost used the entire small bottle of shampoo before he was satisfied with it.

His skin still felt like it was crawling, but Harry could see where it was turning red from the constant scrubbing. He knew that he was clean, in spite of how he felt, so he forced himself to turn the water off. He stepped out of the shower and began to dry off, slowly and carefully.

Now that he was out of the shower and in the better light, he could see marks on his body that made him cringe. He couldn’t remember getting most of the bruises, especially not the ones on his wrists and ankles, but he knew what they were from. The cuts and scrapes from writhing on alley pavement, the bruising in the shape of fingers on his inner thighs, and the bite marks that littered his skin all told a sordid tale that made his stomach churn. Harry was almost grateful that he hadn’t eaten anything yet today because he might have thrown it up otherwise.

He put the shirt of the pajamas on first, then found the underwear underneath it, sandwiched between the shirt and the pants. Harry flushed, but pulled the stiff, clean boxers on, followed by the silky
pants. He felt... almost human again.

Harry slipped out of the bathroom and returned to the bedroom of what could only be a hotel room. “I wasn’t sure what to do with my old clothes,” Harry said.

Regulus finally looked up at him and his eyes widened ever so slightly. Harry took a nervous step back, but all that Regulus said was, “I’ll have my house elf handle them. Don’t worry about that.” He closed his book, but didn’t move. “Do you need medical attention?” he asked, his voice grave.

Harry shook his head. “I’m fine.” He ached, yes, and his body was littered with cuts and things, but he wasn’t hurt enough to need a healer or something like that. Besides, he didn’t know what he would do if the healer turned out to... no. He was fine.

Regulus’ eyes narrowed. “Now, then,” he said. “But Harry... Child, you were badly used during your time on the streets, were you not?”

Harry flinched back from the thought. “Yes.” He couldn’t force another word out, even if he’d wanted to. Which he didn’t particularly want to, anyway.

“Muggles... they carry diseases, Harry. I don’t know that you can catch them, your immune system and magic together should keep you safe, but you will need to be examined at some point relatively soon just to make sure.”

Harry shook his head. “I can’t,” he whispered. He started to back up again, so that his back was against the wall once more. “Please don’t ask me to.”

Regulus stared at him, his grey eyes assessing, then he nodded once, slowly. “Not immediately,” he said. “And when we do, I will stay with you every step of the way. I won’t let you be hurt again.” The promise fell between them like a vow, and Harry felt something in him ease at the words.

“Thank you.” Harry stepped away from the wall, then hesitantly crossed to the untouched bed. He sat on it gingerly, almost sinking down into its softness. “What happens if your Lord and I can’t come to an agreement?”

Regulus hesitated, fingering something that rested around his neck. “I think that you can,” he said. “But if you don’t, Harry, I think...” He stopped, then took a deep breath. “I think I would still try
to keep you safe.” He wrinkled his nose, then, as though the words had pained him. “Even if I can’t quite explain it.”

Harry shivered with the sudden, intense desire to go crawl into Regulus’ bed and hug the man. He’d started to move before he could get control of himself, and when he did he forced himself to sit back down on the bed. “I don’t know what’s happened to me,” Harry said into the stretching silence.

“Nor do I, though I’d imagine it has something to do with your changed appearance.”

Harry blinked. He hadn’t looked at himself in the mirror while he’d been in the bathroom, not wanting to look at himself and know what had been done to him. “I’ve changed?”

Regulus nodded. “I can’t begin to describe the changes properly, though I suppose the best way would be to say that you’ve gotten more… delicate. Your features, your bone structure, you appear to be more frail than you ever did, and I don’t think it’s malnutrition from being on the streets.” He paused, then said, “And speaking of, are you hungry?”

Harry opened his mouth to say no, then considered the question. Was he? His stomach was still churning, but that could partially be from hunger. He wasn’t certain, though. “Maybe?”

“Something light, then,” Regulus said. He snapped his fingers, and a house elf appeared. Not Kreacher, Harry was relieved to see. “Any requests?”

“Fruit,” Harry said immediately, then wondered where the word came from. He’d never been that fond of it before, but if he was being offered anything… all he wanted was fruit.

“Just fruit?” Regulus asked with raised eyebrows.

Harry nodded, a bit uncertain as to why he only wanted fruit. But it didn’t matter, fruit sounded wonderful to him.

“Go on, then,” Regulus said to the house elf, who disappeared with a small pop.

It was back moments later, a bowl of mixed fruit in hand, which it presented to Harry with a small
bow. “Does Master need anything else?” the elf asked.

“No, thank you,” Regulus said. “I’ll call if that changes.”

The elf bowed once more, then disappeared again.

Harry, meanwhile, stared down at the bowl of fruit, not even certain that he could begin to identify what was in it. Still… it glistened up at him, and with hesitant fingers he reached down and grabbed the fork, spearing a bite of something red and juicy looking. He raised it to his lips and let out a tiny noise of pleasure as he bit down into it. It tasted like heaven. Nothing else on this earth that Harry had ever had tasted as good as that fruit in that moment.

He felt like he blinked at it was gone, not even juices left at the bottom of the bowl. Regulus was watching him, a small smile on his face, and Harry felt himself flushing in embarrassment. “I was hungry,” he said, a bit defensively.

“I’d imagine you were,” Regulus said, not a hint of judgment in his voice. “Would you like more? I can call Tally back if you’d like.”

“No thank you,” Harry said quickly. He already felt a bit bloated from eating so much at once, even if it had been the most delicious thing he’d ever had in his life.

Regulus inclined his head. “Of course.” He glanced around the room, eyes lingering on the clock that proclaimed the time to be sometime after midnight, then said, “It is very late, and I would imagine that you haven’t slept well in a long time. Would you like to try and sleep?”

Harry froze. Now that he’d eaten, his eyelids were starting to grow heavy, but with those words a shot of adrenaline went through him. He forced himself to breathe deeply. Regulus wouldn’t hurt him, that much was clear. Everything in him demanded that he trust Regulus, told him that Regulus would never betray that trust. He took a deep breath and let it out, then repeated until his heart started to slow down.

“I can get another room if you’d like,” Regulus continued, as though entirely unaware of the panic he’d just put Harry through.

“No!” Like the request for fruit, the protest fell from Harry’s lips before he could think about what
he was saying. “Please don’t,” he continued, a bit more quietly. “I don’t… I don’t want to be alone.” What if someone came in?

“That’s fine,” Regulus said. He shifted on the stripped bed so that he was laying down, placing the book on the nightstand, spine up so that he didn’t lose his place. “I’m happy to stay right here the entire night.”

Harry hesitated, then shifted on his own bed so that he was lying down as well, facing Regulus. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep,” he said, his voice a bit shaky. His eyes were already getting heavy, though.

“That’s okay. But you should close your eyes and try to, just in case you can.” Regulus reached up towards the light between them, then hesitated. “Do you mind if I turn this off?”

Harry shook his head, and the light flicked off between them. He was almost certain that he wouldn’t manage to fall asleep, given that there was someone in the room with him, but he felt… he felt safe, for the first time in months, and his eyes fluttered closed, and Harry fell asleep.
Harry woke up to screaming. His eyes slammed open and he scrambled back on the bed, reaching for his wand which was, of course, a futile gesture as it had been broken. There was a Muggle woman writhing on the ground just beyond the door, which stood ajar, and Regulus was standing over him with a cruel expression on his face.

“Regulus?” Harry scooted back until he was as far away from the door as he could be.

“I left the sign up requesting that we not be disturbed, and this foolish little wretch came into the room anyway. She went right for you, Harry, and I promised you that I wouldn’t allow you to be injured.” Regulus lifted the curse after holding it for a moment more. “Now get,” he snarled to the Muggle.

She staggered to her feet, looking dazed and confused, her maid’s uniform in disarray from the writhing on the ground. She took a single step back, then her eyes glazed over when she caught sight of Harry once more. “But I have to have him,” she breathed, and stepped forward.

Harry let out a small cry and shoved himself back even further, though it was impossible with the wood of the headboard already pressed against his back.

Regulus’ eyes narrowed. “I was going to let you go, but not if you’re going to be stupid about it. Avada Kedavra!” he barked, and the woman dropped the second the green light hit her. “Foolish little Muggle,” he muttered. “Though I guess I can’t really say that, given that wizards seem to be just as affected.”

“You killed her,” Harry breathed, not sure if he was frightened or pleased. It felt like a strange combination of both, and he felt guilty for that small amount of pleasure. This wasn’t the woman’s fault, after all.

Regulus shrugged. “She wasn’t going to go away, so yes, and I don’t feel guilty about it. Do you think that I should?”

“I don’t…” Hermione would have wanted him to feel guilty. Ron would have been horrified. Everyone he’d ever known, in fact, would be telling him that he should feel awful for the poor little Muggle who’d been about to r… to assault him. “I don’t know,” Harry finally said, because he couldn’t quite bring himself to say that he didn’t.
Regulus sent a sharp look in his direction, but shook his head. “That’s fine,” he said. “You’ve been through a lot; nobody expects you to have your emotions entirely sorted out right now.”

Harry managed a weak smile. “Thanks,” he said. “Although… what now? We can’t just… just leave the body here, can we?”

“I don’t see why not. It’s not like we’re going to be here when anyone figures out that we’re the ones who killed her, if they even manage it. It looks to Muggles like a heart attack.” Regulus hesitated, then grinned. “In fact…” He crossed to the telephone on the help line and pressed a few numbers, then said frantically, “Please, you have to do something, the maid just stopped breathing and collapsed!”

There was a frantic flurry of activity in the minutes that followed, but it was, of course, useless for the medical personnel who arrived to attempt to revive her. Hotel management came by after the fuss had died down and comped their room because of the trauma of watching a woman die in front of them, and then they were alone in the room once more.

Harry saw none of it, instead hiding in the locked bathroom so that none of the Muggles or anyone else would catch sight of him and be affected by whatever curse was on him. Once they were gone, Regulus called him out of the bathroom. “I’ve checked us out with management and turned over my keycard. Once I leave, the door will automatically lock behind us. How are you feeling?”

“It was strange to hear all those voices and to have them all be unaffected by whatever is wrong with me,” Harry said honestly. “If sight is all that’s doing it, then do you think that I could just…” He trailed off. Voldemort didn’t know about his cloak yet, and he intended to keep it that way. “I mean, aren’t there cloaks that make people invisible? Couldn’t I get one of those?”

Regulus’ face softened into a small, sad smile. “Harry, I don’t think it’s just the sight of you,” he said gently. “I think that there’s a presence that you’re giving off, though I’ve not a clue how you managed to get yourself into this situation. It should be impossible.”

“Do you know what’s doing it?” Harry asked, his voice a bit shaky.

Regulus hesitated. “I think I do,” he said after a long silence. “But… we’d need it verified by a Healer, and I don’t think you’re ready for that right now.”
Harry flinched at the thought of letting someone else near him. Regulus hadn’t hurt him, but Harry had no idea how whatever it was wasn’t affecting him. “Do you… do you think maybe there might be a Healer that it has no effect on, like it has none on you?” he asked.

The Death Eater nodded. “I do, actually. Anyone who’s immune to the Imperius Curse should be immune to what you… to the effects of being around you, or if not entirely immune, perhaps immune enough to be able to control themselves. And… there could be people like me, also, who just don’t feel that kind of attraction to anyone.”

Harry frowned. “I don’t understand,” he said. “What do you think I am?”

“I could be wrong,” Regulus cautioned. He went to sit on his bed and stared at Harry for a long, silent moment. “Are you sure you want me guessing?”

“I don’t have any idea what’s wrong with me, and I’d rather have a guess than nothing at all.” Harry’s voice broke. “Do you know what it’s been like, these past two months? Knowing that there’s something wrong with me but not knowing what it was? Waking up surrounded by corpses and knowing that I’m the one who killed them after they… after they assaulted me?” He wiped angrily at the tears that started to fall.

“I don’t know what that’s like,” Regulus said immediately. “Of course I don’t.” He shifted to sit next to Harry and wrapped a slow, careful arm around Harry’s shoulders, giving him every chance to pull back as he did so.

Harry didn’t pull away, but instead nestled closer. “It’s awful. And to not have a clue what’s causing it…” Harry shuddered. “It’s the worst thing that’s ever happened to me, and that includes Sirius dying.”

“I am sorry for that,” Regulus said. “I never wanted my brother to die, and it broke my heart when I heard that he did.”

The two sat in silence for a long time, the silence warm and almost comfortable. Harry found himself cuddling even closer, so that he was practically in Regulus’ lap. He should have been frightened, panicked, but he wasn’t. Regulus’ hold was loose and careful, and Harry knew that he could get away at a second’s notice if he needed to. Furthermore, as close as he was, he could tell that Regulus wasn’t at all aroused by him. Maybe… maybe that was what he meant by not feeling attraction?
“So,” Regulus said, his voice almost a whisper. “I cannot be certain, because I’m no Healer, but I believe that you’ve somehow turned into a Veela.”

Harry blinked and pulled back slightly in surprise. “A… Veela? Like the mascots for the-”

“Yes, like those,” Regulus said.

Harry frowned. “But… but Fleur was a Veela, and she didn’t have this effect on anyone. And the mascots at the game, they had an effect on the crowds but nobody tried to… to assault them.”

“They didn’t, but those were fully grown Veela in full control of their allure. You… you are not fully grown, and you are definitely not in control of your allure, if I’m right. And Fleur may have been younger, but she also is only a quarter Veela if I remember correctly. Her allure wouldn’t be as strong as a full Veela’s.”

“How can I be a Veela?” Harry asked, confused. “My parents… I don’t think that either of them were, otherwise someone would have known, right?”

“There’s another problem with the fact that you might be a Veela,” Regulus said with a small smile. “Veela are exclusively female.”

“I’m not a girl!” Harry said hotly, his cheeks flushing.

“No, you aren’t,” Regulus agreed.

“But how can they be all women if there are Veela who are completely Veela?” Didn’t Veela need a man and a woman to reproduce, or did they do something else?

“I don’t know,” Regulus answered. “We know that they exist, of course, because we see full Veelas on rare occasions. The majority of them are quite secretive, actually, and little is known about proper Veela culture.” Regulus shrugged. “For all that we know, there could be male Veela out there and they might never be allowed to leave Veela society.”

Harry frowned and leaned closer to Regulus once more. “You really think I’m a Veela?” he asked
“The bodies?” Harry echoed, his whole body stiffening. He’d almost managed to forget that he now had a body count higher than his godfather had been accused of having. If he was ever caught, he’d go to Azkaban for sure.

“They were burnt,” Regulus said carefully. “And Veela can call fireballs. It all… it all fits, if we discount the fact that you’re male.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. “Well I am,” he said quickly. “I haven’t changed into a girl all of a sudden or anything, either.”

Regulus’ laugh was soft and warm and nothing like his older brother’s. “Of course you haven’t,” he said, still laughing. He squeezed Harry once, then released him and stood. “We should get out of here. I still need to report that I’ve successfully located you to my Lord.”

The words were like a bucket of ice over Harry’s head. “Please don’t,” he whispered before he could stop himself.

“Harry, I promise you, my Lord has changed his mind when it comes to you. Once you please come and meet him?” Regulus held out a hand to him. “We won’t go immediately, of course. I need some time to make you presentable. I would prefer to do that in the comfort of my home, which is where my Lord is currently staying.”

Harry bit his lip. He didn’t… he didn’t want to go to Voldemort, but what choice did he have? Regulus was the only one he’d met in two months who could be near him without wanting to hurt him. And if Regulus was right, then the number of people who could be close to him safely had to be astronomically rare. So few people were immune to being Imperiused…

But Regulus wasn’t interested in him like that, or anyone else he’d said. Regulus was safe, and he’d promised to keep Harry safe. “You swear that you won’t let him hurt me?” he asked, his voice coming out smaller than he’d thought possible. Once upon a time he hadn’t been such a coward, but
then, once upon a time he hadn’t been so badly used by so many people.

“I swear it to you,” Regulus said immediately. “I’ll offer you an oath on my magic if it will help you make your decision.”

Harry shook his head and took Regulus’ hand, using it to pull himself to his feet. “I trust you,” he said, the words coming slowly and painfully. “Please don’t make me regret it.”

“I swear to you that you won’t,” Regulus said. He wrapped his arms around Harry once more, slowly and carefully as he had last night, and held him for a moment. Then he said, “We’re going to Black Manor, Harry.”

Before Harry could react to the fact that there was a Black Manor other than #12 Grimmauld Place, he was pulled through the straw of a side-along Apparition.
Chapter Five

They landed in an empty entrance room and two house elves immediately appeared to greet them. “Master Regulus,” the first tiny little thing said with a small bow. “The Dark Lord wishes for an update on your progress.”

“Tell him that I’ve located the boy and am preparing him for a meeting with him at his earliest convenience,” Regulus said. The first house elf bowed and popped away, leaving the second standing silently, watching both Regulus and Harry. Regulus ignored the elf and instead turned and smiled at Harry. “Please, won’t you let me find you something more suitable to wear?”

Harry looked down at himself. He still wore the pajamas which, while comfortable, weren’t exactly suitable for meeting Dark Lords in. He nodded without saying a word, and before he could think about what he was doing, he stretched out a hand to Regulus.

Regulus, thankfully, didn’t make him feel stupid for the childish request. Instead, the Death Eater took Harry’s hand with a small smile and tugged gently on it. He said to the house elf they were leaving behind, “Also, if you could make sure the halls between here and my room are clear, I would appreciate that. I would so hate for you to have to get blood out of the carpeting again. I know that it’s terribly difficult, and I’d hate to make more work for you.”

“Oh, of course, Master Regulus,” the second elf said, disappearing with a small pop.

The halls, as they made their way swiftly through them, were empty. Harry heard people sometimes behind doors, heard a few startled shouts as things were knocked over or dropped as they passed the rooms where they heard voices, but nobody came out into the hallway. The one time someone made the mistake of doing so, Regulus cut him down without even a thought. He didn’t even pause to see if the Death Eater was still breathing as they passed. Regulus kept his wand out for the entirety of the rest of the journey.

Harry sagged with relief when they reached Regulus’ rooms, which were in a more private sector of the house. They hadn’t passed a room with anyone in it for at least three hallways, but Regulus still locked the door behind them. He then sagged and placed his wand back in his holster. “You’re a bit of trouble, aren’t you, Mr. Potter?” the Death Eater asked.

“Sorry,” Harry said quickly. “I can…” He bit back the offer to go. Go where? He couldn’t… he couldn’t go back to living on the streets like he’d been doing. Back to being assaulted every night and waking up with the charred remnants of corpses every morning. He just… he couldn’t.
When Regulus turned to face him, the man was smiling, his grey eyes soft and kind. “It’s fine,” he said. “I don’t know if you knew this about me, but in many ways I’m very much like my brother was. I adore trouble.”

Harry tentatively returned the smile. “Thank you so much for taking me in,” Harry said shyly. He looked around the large room they stood in and added awkwardly, “But I guess now I have to get ready for the meeting?”

“It won’t be terrible, I promise,” Regulus said gently. He took Harry’s hand once more and drew him into the bedroom. From the closet he pulled a set of dress robes out that were exactly Harry’s size. “I took the liberty of having my house elves pick up some necessities for you since we won’t be able to take you shopping for several weeks, at best. I hope you don’t mind.”

Harry shook his head and stepped forward to take the robes. “I appreciate it,” he said shyly. “Do you… I mean, I have some money with me, I can pay you back for them.”

Regulus laughed. “Oh, that’s quite kind of you, but I can assure you that I’m not in need of compensation. My family estate defaulted to me when Sirius died.”

“You know that Sirius thought you were dead, right?” Harry bit his lip as soon as he spoke, regretting the blunt words.

“I did,” Regulus said with a small sigh. “I wanted him to. I wanted the entire family to think that I was dead. There is… something that I’m responsible for, and it was simply easiest for everyone to believe that I had died.”

Harry’s brow furrowed and he opened his mouth to ask a question, then shut it with a snap. “But then why didn’t your inheritance go to someone else if the Ministry thinks you’re dead?” Because if everyone thought that Regulus was dead, then shouldn’t Sirius’ money have gone to whoever he’d left a will for it to go to?

“Oh.” Regulus cleared his throat and looked away. “Admittedly, that’s one of the reasons that I’d hoped my brother would survive, actually. Estates always pass along bloodlines, unless the heir has been ritually disowned. It’s not that uncommon to fake a death, and is often seen when there are blood feuds involved. So, even though everyone thought I was dead, the estate still automatically went to me. Now I have a seat on the Wizengamot and everything.” Regulus wrinkled his nose as he said it.
Harry couldn’t help a small laugh, even though the rules of inheritance didn’t make much sense to him. Regulus’ clear disgust was amusing, though. Finally, after he’d settled and the silence had stretched into something awkward, Harry asked, “So, is there a bathroom I should change in, or…” He trailed off.

Regulus immediately backed up several steps so that he was out of the bedroom. “Here is fine,” he said quickly. “Just leave your pajamas on the floor, the elves will clean them up, and let me know if you need help with anything.” He shut the door between them before Harry could so much as thank him.

Harry sighed. He didn’t want… he didn’t want to get undressed. It hadn’t been a problem with the bathroom because it had been so small and it had locked. This bedroom was bigger than the entire floor plan of their hotel room, maybe three times the size of it. Harry couldn’t make himself undo the pajamas until he’d checked every corner of the room to make sure that nobody was hiding there, and even so he changed as quickly as he could. The results of his speedy re-dressing probably made him look a bit sloppy, but he couldn’t be bothered to care.

He opened the door and presented himself to Regulus. “I’m finished,” he said. “Can we… can we just get this over with?”

Regulus frowned at him and immediately began to fiddle with Harry’s robes, fussing over them and straightening them. “We can,” he said finally, several minutes later. “My Lord is ready to see you whenever we’re ready to see him.”

Harry took a deep, shuddering breath, and nodded once. “Okay,” Harry said. “He won’t…” He trailed off.

Regulus immediately understood the question without Harry’s ever having to ask it. The Death Eater pulled Harry into a swift embrace and whispered in his ear, “I won’t leave you alone with him. I won’t let him hurt you.” Then, pulling back ever so slightly, he added, “Besides, if I’m right, he won’t even try. My Lord might be taken by surprise for a moment, but he’s always been able to fight off mental compulsions.”

Harry sagged and nodded. He held out his hand again, unable to stop himself from doing so even though he knew it was childish. Regulus, again, didn’t make him feel like a fool for doing so, and instead gently accepted the request and took his hand, using it to tug him from his rooms.
This walk was much shorter, and they ran into no one on the way. Regulus led him down one hall, took a left, then went up a flight of stairs. They eventually came to a door where Regulus tapped politely and Harry’s heart stopped when he heard the Dark Lord call out a sharp, “Enter!”

“My Lord,” Regulus said as he opened the door. Once they were in the room, he dropped to his knees and bowed his head.

Harry hovered at the doorway, trembling with the desire to flee. The Dark Lord had spotted him immediately and was staring at him with widened, slightly dazed eyes. He half stood, and Regulus shot to his feet and drew his wand swiftly. “My Lord, you asked me to bring you the Potter boy. To talk,” he said, emphasizing the final word.

Voldemort closed his eyes and shook himself like a dog shaking off water. When he opened his eyes after a long moment, they were completely clear. “I did, in fact, ask you to do that,” Voldemort said, as though he’d not almost risen and tried to hurt Harry. “You would draw your wand on me, Regulus?” the Dark Lord asked, sounding amused.

Regulus laughed. “I promised Harry that I wouldn’t allow him to be hurt like that again,” Regulus said with a small bow. “My Lord knows how seriously I take my promises.”

“I have always valued that in you, Regulus,” Voldemort said. “Well, boy, come in here and take a seat.” He inhaled deeply when Harry crept into the room and settled himself gingerly in the seat farthest from the Dark Lord and closest to the door. “You’ve quite an allure on you. I take it that’s where the bodies are coming from?”

“Y-yes,” Harry stammered. “I… they… and I…” He stopped and looked down, his cheeks flushed with shame.

“What Harry is trying to say is that they assault him, and Harry blacks out. When he wakes, they are charred to death.” Regulus stood smoothly and shifted so that he was standing at Harry’s back, both hands resting on Harry’s shoulders.

Harry glanced up in time to see Voldemort’s lips twitch into something like a smile. “Pity,” he said. “I’d hoped that you were starting to come around to my side of things. I suppose you’re not interested in raining destruction down upon my enemies?”

Harry didn’t even think about that. “No,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. Maybe he should
have thought about it, offered to do it anyway, but… “I’m so tired of fighting.” Harry looked down, but not before he caught Voldemort’s gaze sharpening at the words.

“Are you?” Voldemort asked. “Perhaps a pact of neutrality, then. You avoid the war and everything associated with it, you leave here and promise never to return, and I will no longer pursue you.”

Harry flinched and glanced helplessly at Regulus. “I don’t…” He trailed off, unable to figure out what he wanted to say. His distress was visible, he knew that, but he didn’t know what to do.

There was a flicker of movement in the shadows, and Harry realize that it had to be Voldemort’s snake. It seemed… rude not to greet her when he could, and had the benefit of distracting him from a painful conversation, so Harry hesitantly hissed a soft hello to the snake. Nagini immediately darted out of the shadows to stare at him. The room went completely silent, and when Harry hesitantly looked up, both Voldemort and Regulus were staring at him with their mouths gaping open.

Voldemort let out a sudden, vicious swear. “You…” Voldemort let out a long, slow breath. “Dumbledore is going to pay,” he hissed finally.

“My Lord?” Regulus asked, sounding confused. Harry was glad. That meant that he wasn’t the only one who had no idea what Voldemort was talking about.

“Harry,” Voldemort started, his voice softer and gentler than Harry had imagined he’d ever hear it. “Do you know what a horcrux is?”

Regulus breathed in sharply beside Harry, but said nothing. Harry just shook his head, because he’d never heard of them before.

“Of course you don’t. Dumbledore wouldn’t have wanted to risk you figuring it out.” Voldemort shook his head. “They’re pieces of soul, designed to keep a wizard alive as long as even just one small piece remains.” Voldemort stood, then, and slipped around the desk to kneel in front of Harry. “You shouldn’t be able to speak parseltongue, Harry. It was a gift exclusive to the Slytherin line.”

Regulus’ breath left him in a small hiss, like he knew where the Dark Lord was going. Harry was glad that he did, because he had no clue. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” he said quietly. He twisted his hands together, confused and a bit frightened. Voldemort was painfully close to him. It should
be hurting, but all he felt was warmth coming from the man.

“Harry, I…” Voldemort hesitated, and Harry was startled to see the Dark Lord looking lost for words. “I think that there’s a chance I made you into a horcrux the night I tried to kill you.” Voldemort reached out, then, and with careful fingers he traced the scar.

Once upon a time, the touch would have brought excruciating pain to Harry. Instead, this time, all he felt was warmth and a strange sense of belonging that brought tears to his eyes. Harry blinked rapidly, trying to clear away the tears before he could embarrass himself.

Voldemort leaned back and stood. “Regulus,” he said quietly, an air of command entering his voice.

“My Lord?” Regulus asked. His hands stayed on Harry’s shoulders and he was rubbing them gently, as though trying to soothe Harry.

“You’ve taken such excellent care of one of my horcruxes. I’d very much appreciate it if you would care for Harry as well. I believe that he would benefit from your kindness.” Voldemort circled his desk and settled behind it once more, looking for all the world like he hadn’t just knelt in front of Harry.

“It would be my honor, my Lord,” Regulus said swiftly. He bowed to Voldemort, then helped Harry to his feet. “I’m sure you’re exhausted, Harry. Let’s get you some more rest, and we can go from there.”

“I don’t…” Harry glanced from Regulus to the Dark Lord and back again. “I’m so confused,” he confessed, his voice shaking, even as he let Regulus pull him towards the door.

“What matters for now is that you’re safe here,” Voldemort said. He was tapping his wand against his desk, frowning. “I will not harm you, and neither will any of my Death Eaters. Regulus will make certain of it. You… you just focus on recovering from your time on the streets. Everything else can be handled later.”

Harry, still confused, allowed himself to be led from the room. He didn’t know what was happening, but… but he trusted Regulus, if nothing else. Regulus would keep him safe.
Chapter Six

The next few days were strange for Harry.

They were both some of the most peaceful days he’d ever passed, but also the most stressful at the same time. On the one hand, pretty much all he did was lounge around and eat as much fruit as he wanted, hand delivered either by Regulus or one of his house elves if Regulus was unavailable at a mealtime. On the other hand, sometimes his door would rattle and Regulus would… well, the door didn’t rattle so often after the first two days. It seemed that most of the other Death Eaters in residence at Black Manor had taken to avoiding the wing which housed Harry, Regulus, and the Dark Lord altogether.

“As they should have been doing in the first place,” Regulus said darkly when Harry mentioned it to him.

They were in Harry’s sitting room, with a roaring fire going in the fireplace. Harry was curled up in an armchair close to the fire, covered in a light blanket. He’d been cold, and Regulus had noticed his shivers and had both conjured the blanket and started the fire for him.

Harry smiled, hesitant and tentative. “Thank you for taking such good care of me,” he said shyly. He ducked his head when Regulus glanced at him and blinked up at Regulus through his bangs.

Regulus’ lips twitched. “You’ve thanked me so many times,” Regulus said. He reached out and stroked Harry’s hair, which had grown down to his shoulders. The touch was light and gentle and Harry couldn’t help but lean into it. “You don’t need to keep doing so.”

“Still, I-” Harry cut himself off and tried to make himself pull back from Regulus. He liked the gentle touches without any fear of… anything else, but that didn’t mean that Regulus did.

Regulus did nothing to hold Harry back, and instead straightened. “So, I’ve been doing some research into your… affliction.”

“That’s a nice way of putting it,” Harry said with a small laugh. He’d never thought that he would be able to laugh about those two months where everyone he’d come into contact with had… but Regulus made him feel safe. Even if it had only been a few weeks.
“From what I understand, there are those who would be able to speak with you about your experiences.”

Harry flinched back from the words. “I don’t want to talk about them,” he said quickly. “I don’t remember most of it, anyway, so why would I want to talk about it with a stranger?”

Regulus let out a noncommittal hum. “I think you should,” Regulus said finally. “We’ve a Mind Healer in our ranks, actually, a supporter more than a follower, who would be willing to speak with you and who should be immune to your allure. She would also be able to examine you and tell us once and for all whether you are a Veela or something else entirely.”

Harry ducked his head even further. “I don’t want to,” he said stubbornly. He made himself as small as he could in the chair, like he could stop Regulus from dragging him from it if the death eater truly wanted to do so.

Regulus sighed. “You know, my Lord entrusted your care to me. I could easily force you to go,” he said, annoyed.

Harry flinched and scooted further into the embrace of his chair. “Please don’t,” he said, his voice tiny.

“I’m not going to,” Regulus finally said with another small sigh. “But Harry, we really do need to figure out what’s going on with your allure. If we have confirmation that you’re a Veela, we can at least contact the Veela Court and see if they’ll give us the information we need. Maybe tell us how to put a stop to your allure so that you don’t have to be so afraid of people now.”

Harry bit his lip. That did make sense, he supposed. If nothing else, it would be good to know officially what was wrong with him… still… “You’ll stay with me the entire time?” Harry asked, his voice coming out smaller than he would have wanted.

He was ashamed of how frightened he was. How much he wanted to avoid crowds, how much he never wanted to meet a new person ever again. How much he needed Regulus to stay with him because he didn’t trust another person not to try anything. It made him flush with shame and he stared down at his hands as he waited for Regulus’ response.

“Harry,” Regulus breathed. Regulus knelt in front of him and covered Harry’s hands with his own, looking up into Harry’s eyes so that Harry couldn’t help but stare back. “I will say this as many
times as I must, but I promise you that I will never let anyone hurt you again. If our Healer reacts poorly in your presence, I’ll cut her down myself. Do you understand?”

Harry nodded, not sure that he trusted himself to speak, then slid off the chair and into Regulus’ lap. Regulus let out a startled noise, but shifted so that he was holding Harry close with ease. The Death Eater stroked Harry’s hair as Harry let himself cry a little bit against him, even as he hated letting himself break down. He was just so frightened all the time, no matter what, and sometimes it was just… it was just overwhelming.

“I’ve got you,” Regulus was murmuring, carding his fingers through Harry’s hair. “I won’t ever let anyone hurt you, I swear.”

Regulus held him until Harry had stopped crying, then slowly pulled back ever so slightly so that he could tip Harry’s chin up. “Better?” Regulus asked.

Harry nodded. “Sorry,” he whispered. He scrubbed at his face, trying to dry the tears with the ends of his sleeves.

Regulus pulled his hands away and summoned a cloth, which he used to dab at Harry’s cheeks. “You don’t have to apologize to me,” Regulus said softly as he helped clean Harry up. “You think you’re such a burden, but I promise that it’s a pleasure to care for you.”

“You must have wanted something more glamorous when you became a Death Eater,” Harry said, trying to joke. “Something more than getting a teenager’s snot all over your lovely robes.”

Regulus’ smile was sweet and warm. “No, actually. I wanted…” He hesitated, then laughed a bit self-deprecatingly. “I wanted someplace to belong. Actually, I’m not really the most suitable person to be a Death Eater. I don’t really want to purge the world of Muggles. I am, however, an excellent guardian for priceless artifacts and people, and my Lord saw that in me quickly.” Regulus paused again, then said, “He’s good at that. Figuring out how far we can be pushed, the best uses for us, that sort of thing. It’s why he’s never asked our Healer to join us formally; he knows that she won’t do it and it would put both her and her husband in an awkward position.”

“Dumbledore likes to push, I think,” Harry whispered. Because what else could have been the reason he’d been forced to compete in that damned tournament? If he hadn’t been made to compete, if they’d just investigated what he’d said rather than making him fight, then… And Umbridge. Her. Last year had…”
“I don’t know the man well enough to say,” Regulus said neutrally. He finished drying Harry’s face, then, and said, “Ready to talk to the Healer?”

Harry let out a small squeak. “Now?” He didn’t want to. He thought that he’d have more time, that he wouldn’t have to do it right away, that he could keep putting it off until he didn’t need to put it off anymore because miraculously all this had been resolved or… or something, at least.

Regulus’ smile said that he was on to Harry’s scheme. “Better to get the physical examination done now,” he said gently. “There are…” He hesitated, then soldiered on with a visible grimace. “As I said once before, there are Muggle diseases that can do a good deal of damage to a wizard’s magic if left unchecked.”

“You didn’t mention the damage to magic bit,” Harry said, his voice shaking at the thought. His magic… it was his, and the thought that something could damage it was terrifying.

Regulus nodded. “A few. Not many, but a few.” He stared deeply into Harry’s eyes, then, and asked, “So? Are you ready to get this over with? The physical exam shouldn’t take more than a few minutes.”

Harry bit his lip, then nodded once. “Yeah,” he said finally. He didn’t want to, but… but it was probably better to get it over with than to keep trying to put it off. He’d just get more and more worked up about it if he did.

Regulus helped him back into his chair, then opened the door to reveal Narcissa Malfoy waiting patiently on the other side. Draco’s mother swept into the room, took one look at Harry, and her eyes went glazed for only a second before they snapped back into focus.

“Well then,” she murmured to herself. “You are certainly emitting some kind of allure, aren’t you, Mr. Potter?” She glanced at Regulus. “Leave, cousin, and let me do my examinations.”

“No, please!” Harry burst out before he could stop himself. “He stays. Please.” The words were high with desperation, but he didn’t want to take them back and couldn’t bring himself to be embarrassed by them.

Mrs. Malfoy turned to look at him, her sharp blue eyes quick and assessing. “Very well,” she said after a moment’s silence. “Stay off to one side, Regulus.”
“Of course, Cissa,” he said quickly, and settled at the table where Harry often ate his fruit.

“Mr. Potter,” Mrs. Malfoy started. “May I cast some diagnostic charms on you? I’d like to get a baseline established and see if you’re currently in any way ill.”

Harry bit his lip and nodded once. “Yes, Mrs. Malfoy.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Narcissa, if you please. I’ll be treating you, and I don’t want you to feel awkward around me.”

Harry dipped his head into another nod and closed his eyes when she started to cast on him. He heard a few long strings of Latin and, driven to curiosity by the tingling feeling along both his skin and his magic, opened his eyes to peek at the spells that were hitting him. They were silvery green and flowed over his skin, overlapping with strange blue spells that seemed to sink into him at different points of his body. It was oddly beautiful, and Harry was enchanted by them. Finally, Narcissa stopped casting and closed her eyes, breathing in deeply.

“Is everything alright, Cissa?” Regulus asked.

“No,” she bit out, her nostrils flaring in a clear sign of agitation. “No, Reg, everything is not alright.” She took another deep breath. “As you suspected, Mr. Potter has, in fact, somehow become a Veela. Not a quarter or a half, as we normally see wandering in our society, but a full-blooded Veela. I don’t suppose that you have any idea how that might have happened?” This last was addressed to Harry.

Harry flinched at the level of scrutiny he was under and went back to staring at his hands. “I don’t know,” he said quickly. “I…” A hint of memory reared its head, finally, after months and months of forgetting about it, and Harry said, “There were potions. In the Department of Mysteries. Two of them. They landed on me, and I… then Sirius… so I forgot. They dried, and I didn’t think it mattered.”

Narcissa nodded once. “That could be it. Merlin knows we have no idea of the things they work on in that Department.” She took a deep breath. “Fortunately, Mr. Potter-”

“Harry,” Harry interrupted. He wasn’t… it made him think of being in school, and Harry had the sinking feeling that he’d never make it back to Hogwarts.
She nodded. “Fortunately, Harry, you didn’t contract any illnesses from your prolonged, involuntary contact with the Muggles.”

Harry sagged in relief. “Thank you,” he breathed. He shivered a bit and drew the blanket he’d abandoned to cuddle with Regulus back around himself.

“And unfortunately, there’s that.” Narcissa sighed. “Mr. Potter… Harry, you’re terribly malnourished. I’m sure that some of it is from your time on the streets, but the damage to your organs, to your immune system, it’s long-term. Whatever caused the damage had to have been a problem for an incredibly long time.”

Harry flushed. “The Dursleys… they didn’t like magic.” He bit his lip. “They didn’t like me.”

He heard Regulus hiss out a small oath and flinched.

“Okay,” Narcissa said. “Then… Regulus, you’ll want to have Harry eating three full meals each day, along with as many snacks as he’d like. As much fresh fruit as you can get him to eat, as often as he would like.”

Regulus nodded. “Of course,” he said. As of right now, Harry was pretty sure that he was managing about two meals a day, maybe a little bit less.

“If you’re unwilling to eat at a meal, Harry, I’d like you to try and eat a few pieces of fruit anyway. A handful of grapes, or something. Your magic is helping to keep you going, but at some point soon there’s a good chance that it’s going to give out on you. I’d imagine that you’re tired all the time, and that’s because of the malnutrition.” Narcissa paused and took a breath. “And… I am a certified Mind Healer as well, Harry. If you would ever like to speak of your experiences…”


Narcissa nodded. “Very well,” she said. “It would also be wise to write to the Veela Court and see if they have anything to say about a male Veela. If they don’t, perhaps they can give us some advice on how to train him to control his allure anyway.”

“Already planning on it, cousin-mine,” Regulus said with a small smile. “Thanks for helping us out,
Narcissa rolled her eyes and stepped back, holstering her wand in a smooth, practiced motion.
“Please. Patching up your foolish fellow Death Eaters after a brawl is frustrating. Helping a child
who has been badly treated by the world is a pleasure, Regulus.” She smiled at Harry, the
expression oddly gentle and not at all what he might have expected from the woman who’d raised
Draco Malfoy. “Regulus will contact me if you need anything else, but in the meantime I’ll be back
to see you in a few days. No strenuous activity until then, do you understand me? You could get
very sick if you aren’t careful.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you,” he said, and then she was gone in a sweep of robes, the door closing
quietly behind her.
Chapter Seven

The room was awkwardly silent in Narcissa’s wake as both Harry and Regulus stared at each other. Finally, wordlessly, Regulus got up and left the room.

Harry’s face crumpled. Regulus had looked so angry with him in that moment, and Harry couldn’t imagine what he’d do without the Death Eater at this point. Regulus took care of him, and if he was angry... surely he wouldn’t withhold food? That was a Dursley thing, it couldn’t be a Regulus thing, could it?

Harry stood and headed towards the door to the hallway, then froze with his hand on the knob. He couldn’t make himself open it. Regulus wasn’t there. What if somebody else was? Somebody who could hurt him could be on the other side of the door. They could be trying to get in right this very minute...

Harry stumbled back, shaking. He had been hungry, only slightly so, but now his appetite was gone like it had never been. He couldn’t imagine trying to eat with Regulus angry with him. He was tired and... and the doorknob was rattling. Somebody was using it.

Harry backed up several steps, staring in horror. He wanted his wand, even though he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to use it. Could he even bring himself to cast knowing that it might let the Ministry know where he was? It could land him in Azkaban, and Harry was terrified of the dementors, even more so now, with the memories that he didn’t quite have. It wasn’t like he could actively remember his mother’s death, after all, and the dementors brought that forward. Who was to say that he wouldn’t remember all of the assaults if he was exposed to dementors?

No, magic wasn’t an option, even if his wand hadn’t been destroyed. And the door was still rattling, which meant that someone who didn’t have permission to enter the rooms was definitely trying to get in. Normally Regulus would have arrived by now, alerted by some of the protections he had on Harry’s door, but he wasn’t coming. He was angry, so angry... was this Harry’s punishment?

He fled. There really wasn’t much of anywhere to go, but he fled to his bedroom, and then hid in the closet in the very back of the room. It was dark and small and he felt safe in there, because the Dursleys couldn’t fit into his cupboard. Nobody could get him if he was in his cupboard, and this wasn’t his cupboard but it was close.

He thought he heard footsteps in the room and went as still as he could, even holding in his breath for as long as he could. He didn’t want to be found. He couldn’t be found. What if he was found? He couldn’t run in here. Why had he let himself be cornered like this? He was an idiot!
The footsteps faded, but Harry didn’t dare move, barely dared to breathe. They could come back at any point. He wasn’t safe. He would never be safe, not with Regulus angry with him. He should stay where he was, because where he was was as close to safe as he could be without Regulus.

The thoughts in his mind chased themselves around and around in dizzying circles, and through it all Harry sat as still as he could, trying not to attract the attention of whoever was outside. He didn’t want to know. He was too afraid to look.

He couldn’t have said how long he stayed in his cupboard when he felt something slithering against his skin. Harry jerked back and let out a panicked little cry and immediately covered his mouth with his hands, his eyes wide with horror.

“~Why is the little shard hiding in the closet?~” The low hissing voice didn’t belong to Voldemort, but rather to his snake.

Harry let himself breathe again. “~Sorry,~” he told Nagini. “~Are you the only one here?~” He could have sworn that he heard footsteps…

“~Master is out in the sitting room, along with the one tasked with the care of two shards, yourself and the other,~” the snake hissed. “~Both are worried about the little shard. You should return with me so that they can stop worrying about you.~”

Harry blinked, though it hardly had any effect in the darkness. “~I’m fine,~” he told the snake. “~A bit shaky, but fine.~” He didn’t want to admit how frightened he’d been by the intruder, how unsettled he’d been when Regulus had left angry. He just wanted all of it to blow past him, to be over with and done.

“~If the little shard says so,~” Nagini hissed, then slithered towards the door. “~Come, little shard. Let us go and speak to the worried ones. Humans never settle well when they are concerned over something.~”

Harry let himself be coaxed to his feet, moving more slowly than he’d thought he’d need to. It was just that he ached, like he’d been sitting in the closet for an incredibly long time, but surely he couldn’t have been? It hadn’t been more than a few minutes, of that he was absolutely certain.

He could hear Voldemort and Regulus as he approached the sitting room. “Nagini will find him, my
“lord,” Regulus was saying. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have left his side when he was feeling so fragile.”

“Of course you shouldn’t have,” Voldemort snarled. “I swear, Regulus, if this weren’t the first time you’d misstepped so badly I would kill you for the infraction.” There was a pause, then Voldemort added, “And if he’s been harmed in any way, I still might.”

“I understand, my lord, and if he’s been harmed in any way I…” Regulus’ voice cut off abruptly and Harry was horrified to hear that it sounded like he was almost crying. “I am so sorry,” Regulus said.

Harry crept into the sitting room, feeling like the worst person in the world. “I’m sorry,” Harry said. Regulus did look like he was about to cry, though the expression faded into one of utter relief as soon as Harry presented himself.

“~The little shard was hiding in his closet.~” Nagini told Voldemort. “~He was unresponsive at first until my scales touched his skin. Then he was quite frightened.~”

Voldemort’s eyes narrowed. “Are you well, child?” Voldemort asked.

Harry blinked at the Dark Lord. “I am,” he said quickly. “I just… I… someone was trying to get in earlier, and I didn’t want to try and use my wand so I went and hid in the smallest place I could find. And then I heard him in the suite…” Harry shuddered and looked away.

“Regulus, I thought you were taking care of him!” Voldemort barked, drawing his wand.

Regulus didn’t move, but closed his eyes and went very still. Then, carefully, he said, “My wards on this suite don’t show any sign of intrusion.” The words were very soft, like he couldn’t believe that he was daring to speak them. “I swear, my lord, any person entering these rooms without my express permission sets off a cascade of alarms. Anyone foolish enough to enter the bedroom would find themselves quite dead before they could progress beyond the door.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “But I heard footsteps!” he protested. “And the door was rattling, like someone was there!” His breath started to come faster. Regulus didn’t believe him. Regulus thought he was lying. What would happen when Regulus stopped protecting him, because Regulus wouldn’t care about a liar, right?
Immediately two hands landed on his shoulders and Harry found himself staring into Regulus’ warm grey eyes. “I believe that you heard something,” Regulus said softly, gently. “But Harry, there’s a chance that you were imagining it. Because the wards show no sign of intrusion at all, and it’s impossible that someone would get past them without even the slightest sign being left behind. There would, at the very least, be something.”

“But I saw…” Harry began to tremble, unable to stop himself from shaking. Had he imagined the whole thing? He’d thought… he’d been so certain… what if he’d made it up? What if he’d hidden in his closet like a coward for no reason?

“Harry,” Regulus said, then stopped. He looked down and breathed in, but didn’t let go of Harry’s shoulders. “Harry, you might have had something like a flashback.” Regulus shifted one of his hands to stroke carefully through Harry’s hair, the gesture soothing and gentle. “You’ve been under an enormous amount of pressure in the past few months, and it’s no surprise that with the amount of terror you’ve experienced that there would be… there would be after effects, even now that you’re safe.”

“A flashback?” Harry asked dully. “I hid in the closet because of a flashback?” It made sense. Regulus always, always came when someone was at the door, and Harry couldn’t imagine that his anger at Harry would have made the man shirk his duty towards Harry. If he hadn’t come, it was likely because nobody had been there in the first place.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Regulus said softly, soothingly. He tugged Harry closer carefully, slowly, like he was trying to give him time to pull away. “It’s completely understandable.”

“Has Narcissa been to see the boy?” Voldemort asked, sounding horribly awkward.

Harry jumped. He’d honestly forgotten that the Dark Lord was there. His cheeks flamed with embarrassment and he shifted so that his face was buried in Regulus’ shirt to hide his shame. This was awful. Nowhere near the worst day of his life, but pretty awful all the same.

“She has,” Regulus said. “May I tell my lord about your time with her, Harry?”

Harry nodded wordlessly.

“Narcissa has seen Harry and has diagnosed him as incredibly malnourished. This is likely due in part to the time he spent on the streets, but is most definitely largely due to the way that his family
treated him before he accidentally killed two of them. He is a full Veela, which Narcissa claims we don’t often see outside of their private Courts. As I’ve no idea of the differences between full and half Veela, I couldn’t begin to say if she was correct or not. She has asked that Harry eat three full meals as often as he can be brought to do so, one of which Harry has already missed today, and would like Harry to begin seeing her for Mind Healing as soon as he feels ready for it.”

“He’ll start the Mind Healing now,” Voldemort said shortly. “Are there potions he should be taking?”

“Narcissa didn’t mention any,” Regulus said. Then he drew in a deep breath, sounding like he was trying to draw in his courage. “And with all due respect, my lord, Harry is to begin seeing her in her other capacity when he feels ready, not when we order him to do so.”

Harry’s eyes widened and he pulled away slightly so that he could stare up at Regulus. His guardian appeared to be braced for the impact of a painful curse, and Harry couldn’t blame him. He couldn’t imagine talking to Voldemort like that. Maybe once upon a time, before everything, but now? No.

Voldemort, however, let out a small chuckle. “You’re right, I suppose,” the Dark Lord said. “Harry, I would encourage you to consider seeing her, if only so that you can be less afraid.” Voldemort stood, then, and said, “I’ll take my leave. Regulus, if you lose him again we will be having words. Do you understand?”

“Of course, my lord,” Regulus said. He didn’t stand to bow, though it looked like he wanted to. Instead he stayed on the floor, holding Harry loosely enough that Harry could pull away if he wanted to but tightly enough to feel secure. “Are you hungry?” Regulus asked once the Dark Lord had left the room.

Harry shook his head. “But Narcissa did say that I should try to eat some grapes or something.”

“She did,” Regulus agreed. He snapped and, when Tally appeared, asked the house elf for some grapes, which were presented to him rather quickly already taken from their stem and cleaned in a small bowl. Regulus held the bowl in front of Harry and said, “Take one or two?”

Harry wrinkled his nose, but took one of the grapes and popped it into his mouth. In spite of the fact that he hadn’t thought he was hungry, he found himself finishing the grapes off in short order, devouring them more than eating them. Regulus handed him another small bowl of fruit just as he finished off the grapes, this bowl mixed, and Harry ate that too. Well, most of it. He left behind a few melon balls that he wasn’t quite in the mood for.
“Better?” Regulus asked softly. The whole time he hadn’t moved, keeping one arm around Harry’s waist even as he held the bowls of fruit with his other hand.

Harry nodded. Then, hesitantly, he whispered, “I’m sorry, you know. For not wanting to see Narcissa as a Mind Healer.”

“Harry, you don’t have to apologize for not being ready to talk about the things that have happened to you,” Regulus said. “I’m not upset with you.”

Harry stared down at the ground, blinking back the tears that were suddenly flooding his eyes. “You were angry when you left,” Harry said, his voice coming out more choked than he would have preferred. “I don’t know why else you would be angry with me, so I don’t understand—”

“I wasn’t angry with you,” Regulus said quickly. He set the almost empty bowl of fruit down and folded Harry back into a full embrace with both arms. “I was angry that anyone could have mistreated a child so badly, and I didn’t want to take that anger out on you. I left to blow off some steam, Harry, but I swear that I was never angry with you.”

Harry closed his eyes and soaked in the words, letting them warm him and soothe him. Regulus wasn’t mad at him. He wasn’t going to leave him. He wouldn’t have to try and survive without Regulus, because Regulus still cared for him.

A small part of him told him that this wasn’t normal, that he needed to get out now because something was very, very wrong. He couldn’t depend on one person like this. It was a terrible decision that was just going to get Harry hurt in the long run.

He ignored that part of him, and basked instead in the warmth of Regulus’ gentle words.
The next few days passed quietly, and Regulus stayed with Harry for most of those days. Harry found Regulus’ presence to be soothing, particularly when they were in direct contact. And Regulus never seemed to mind letting Harry snuggle up against him, so that made things easier.

Nagini came by to visit every now and again, and Harry was almost certain that the snake was taking news of him back to her master. Harry wanted to be offended, but found that he couldn’t quite manage it. At least Voldemort cared for his wellbeing, which was something that Dumbledore never seemed to have been concerned with.

They were even making him keep up his schoolwork, in a way. Regulus tutored him with textbooks, encouraging him to read each chapter thoroughly. He’d already promised Harry a quiz at the end of the first week of not-quite-classes, and swore that they were going to do what they could to get a wand for Harry since his first had been broken. Harry was looking forward to the security of having a wand once more, but hated the lessons.

School had never been his strong suit, and potions was the worst of it.

Harry sighed and snuggled closer to Regulus and went back to studying the book he’d been given. “Why do I have to do this, anyway?” he asked, frowning down at the textbook which still made no sense.

“In case you want to do something with yourself other than lounge about in your rooms all day,” Regulus responded promptly, as he’d done the first time Harry had questioned him and every other time since.

Harry trembled at the thought of not being in his rooms. “I don’t want to leave my rooms,” he said quickly.

“And nobody’s going to make you,” Regulus answered. He squeezed Harry gently, then loosened his grip. “But you might change your mind someday. Perhaps you’ll decide that you’d like to get a job or something after you get the allure under control.”

Harry shook his head. “I’ll never get my allure under control,” he said miserably. He knew that it wasn’t because he couldn’t do it; he was certain that he could if he put in enough practice. It was just that he was too frightened to try. What if... what if something happened to Regulus while they
were trying? What if he got knocked unconscious and couldn’t keep someone off of Harry? Harry shuddered at the thought.

“I know that it seems that way now,” Regulus said, his voice low and soothing. “But Harry, you know that I’ve contacted the Veela Court about you. We haven’t received any kind of response yet, but we’re expecting one any day now.”

Harry flinched. “I didn’t know you’d written to them,” he said, his voice shaking. “I don’t know that I’m ready-”

“You are,” Regulus said. He squeezed Harry again. “I won’t insist that you see Narcissa, because she can only help you if you want to be helped, but Harry, you are more than ready to learn more about your new species.”

Harry flinched at the chastising tone. “Sorry,” he whispered. “You’re right, I know that you’re right, I’m just… I’m just frightened. All the time, I’m frightened, and I’m not used to feeling like that.”

“I know,” Regulus said. He pressed a soft kiss to Harry’s forehead, then drew back slightly. “You know what I’ve found takes my mind off of the things that I fear?”

Harry blinked up at Regulus. “What?” he asked, a little confused.

“Studying.” Regulus’ lips twitched into a grin and his eyes lit up with amusement. “Studying always helps distract people from everything.”

“Except for studying,” Harry said slowly. But… it might work. So, in spite of the fact that he had no interest at all in learning about potions or anything of that nature, he settled back in to read his textbook, hoping that maybe some of it would sink in this time.

The summons came shortly after lunch, during which Harry had to force himself to eat a handful of grapes. There were other fruits in the fruit salad provided for him, but he didn’t want anything else. He wasn’t hungry. His stomach was in knots. Regulus had been gone for most of the day and, without him there, Harry couldn’t make himself feel safe no matter how much he tried.
It was hard to be hungry when he was too worried about someone coming through the door at any moment.

The summons came in the form of Nagini, slithering into the room. “~Master would like to see you, little shard.~”

Harry went very, very still. “~No,~” he said, carefully and clearly. “~Not without Regulus.~”

“~The halls are clear,~” Nagini hissed. She twined around his ankles and then climbed up his body. Harry stayed very still to allow her to do so. “~Regulus is in Master’s office, waiting for you. I will stay with you and keep you safe should anyone try and hurt you.~”

“~Why couldn’t Regulus come get me?~” Harry asked, well-aware of how plaintive he sounded and hating the tone. But he couldn’t help it. He didn’t want to try to leave the rooms without Regulus there to go with him. He didn’t even want to do it with Regulus there!

“~Regulus has been unable to leave the meeting,~” Nagini hissed. “~Come, little shard, the walk will not be long, and I swear that I will bite anyone who attempts to hurt you.~”

“~Promise?~” Harry asked, the hiss coming out small and frightened.

“~Promise,~” Nagini answered promptly. “~Come along, little shard. This way.~”

Harry sighed and surrendered and allowed himself to be guided by going in the direction that Nagini’s head pointed. True to the snake’s promise, the halls were clear and the walk was a short one. Harry stood awkwardly outside of the door to Voldemort’s office and wondered what he was supposed to do.

“~Knock, silly little shard,~” Nagini said, and there was a distinct sound of laughter in her hisses. Harry supposed he could have been embarrassed that she was laughing at him, but he wasn’t.

He lifted a shaky hand and tapped lightly on the door, only to hear a curt, “Enter!” from inside the office.
Harry crept into the room and something in him eased as soon as he spotted Regulus, sitting on the couch against the wall to the left of the door. Voldemort was behind his desk, looking more irritated than not, and in the seat on the opposite side of the desk was… the most ethereally beautiful creature that Harry had ever seen.

Her hair was long and white, her skin so pale as to be almost translucent. Her eyes were a deep, startling shade of blue, and her smile when she saw Harry was utterly incandescent. “I see that you were not lying to me,” the strange woman said to Voldemort, her words having only the slightest traces of an accent that Harry couldn’t identify.

Harry ignored her after looking her over and went to settle in next to Regulus. He wanted to cuddle close to his friend, but didn’t dare with a stranger in the room, and certainly not while Voldemort was watching. He was still embarrassed by his slip after the… the flashback, if that had truly been what it was.

“What reason would we have to lie?” Voldemort asked, scowling. “We already know that the Veela Court will not ally with us, and we’ve no intention of asking you to. Of course we hope for your neutrality, but surely you realize that lying to you will not gain us your cooperation.”

The woman shrugged. “Wizards are often fools,” she said bluntly. “Perhaps your lie was unintentional, had there been a lie, or perhaps you were merely lying for the sake of lying. It would not be the first time that a wizard sought to control our species with a calculated tale designed to gain our sympathies.”

“As you can see, Christelle, we told you no untruths,” Regulus said shortly, his irritation plain for Harry to see. “Now, will you help us, or no?”

“Help you?” The woman, Christelle, let out a tinkling, merry laugh. “Dear boys, we will do no such thing! Leaving such a precious thing as a male Veela in your care is simply unacceptable to the Veela Court. He will return with me and we shall take proper care of him.”

“I don’t know that I approve of that,” Voldemort said slowly. “The boy was raised a human, Christelle. Surely you understand that it would best serve him to stay in a more familiar setting? Harry’s been through a great deal in the past few months.”

Christelle’s eyes narrowed. “A great deal, meaning that foolish wizards unable to resist his unrestrained allure have assaulted him?” she asked, her words sharp and cutting. “A threat he’ll have
to deal with for the rest of his life, should he remain here. There are always those who resist, but some who never even make the attempt. A full Veela isn’t like a half-breed; their allure is much stronger. And male Veela have a notoriously difficult time controlling theirs.”

“Now that Harry is safe with us, surely you can understand how he might be reluctant to leave our care?” Voldemort asked, sounding almost coaxing. “He’s grown particularly attached to Regulus, as you can see. Surely it would be best for him to remain with the one friend he’s made since all of this began? Perhaps, if you were willing to allow Regulus into your Court—”

“I think not,” Christelle said sharply. “No humans may enter the Court, due to the danger they pose. Besides, it would do well for Harry to forget his human attachments as quickly as he can.” Her eyes raked over him appraisingly and Harry shuddered at the sight. “He’ll be quite popular with the other Veela as soon as he arrives. They’ll take such good care of him.”

Harry shuddered at the sound of the words. He wasn’t certain, had no way of knowing, but it sounded almost sexual. “I want to stay here,” Harry said quickly, hoping that his own wishes would be honored.

Christelle turned to him, her eyes gone soft and almost imploring. “But Harry, don’t you understand? I know that you’re frightened, traumatized right now, but the Court needs all of the male Veela it can get. We are a predominantly female race, you know, and our lines must continue in some way. Male Veela are essential to our society.”

She meant… she had really been implying… Harry’s eyes widened. “No!” he shouted before he could even think about it. He jerked away from Regulus and stood, trembling with a horrible combination of rage and fear. “You can’t take me anywhere!”

Something in him snapped, and he let out a strange, unearthly shriek. When he looked down at himself, he saw that fireballs had formed on the tips of the claws that his fingers had become, ready for him to let fly at any sign of a threat. Feathers had sprouted on his arms, thick and black. They weren’t quite wings, but they didn’t have to be. He could feel those on his back, having burst through his clothing somehow.

Christelle went very, very still, not even breathing. She then shifted, ever so slowly, so that she was out of the chair and kneeling on the floor. She lowered the upper half of her body so that it was pressed completely to the ground, and spread her arms out on either side of her, in a gesture that Harry somehow interpreted as one of complete submission.

Something in him eased, though he couldn’t have said what or why or how, and he blinked and then
he was cuddled up against Regulus once more, practically plastered against him, his fingers now fingers once more, the fireballs and feathers gone like they’d never been. The only sign that they’d existed in the first place was his torn shirt and a stray feather or two that drifted lazily through the air.

Christelle held the pose for several silent minutes, then slowly began to rise. Harry felt a thrum of anxiety when she took her seat once more, but the anxious feeling faded when she simply settled deeper into the chair.

“My sincerest apologies,” Christelle murmured into the silence. “I hadn’t realized that you’d already chosen a mate.”
Chapter Nine

The room was silent for what seemed like forever, then the Dark Lord said, carefully, “Christelle, I think that we all might appreciate something of an explanation here.”

Harry knew that he would. Chosen a mate? He hadn’t… had he? He’d never meant to, but… but was that why he felt so safe with Regulus? He glanced up at Regulus, trying to see what the other man thought of Christelle’s words. All he saw was startled confusion written all over Regulus’ face.

“Of course,” Christelle said with a graceful nod. “Harry, you feel safe with Regulus, yes? Panicky when he isn’t nearby? You need to be close to him, don’t you? That’s why you’re currently pressed so close to him, because I threatened to take you from him.”

Harry shrugged and didn’t say anything. He looked down at the ground and hoped that nobody pressed him for answers. What if he was mated to Regulus? What if Regulus was angry about it? He shivered and let out a small, miserable noise.

The Veela laughed quietly, the sound like bells tinkling. “I’ll take that response as a yes. These are all signs of a mating, and I was foolish not to recognize them earlier. I apologize for the distress that I may have caused to the both of you.” When Harry glanced up at her, she had an almost wistful smile on her face. “Of course, knowing that you are his mate, I promise that the Court would be more than willing to welcome you to our halls.”

“I can’t be Harry’s mate,” Regulus said. The words were slow and deliberate.

They caused something deep within Harry, a pain welling up inside of him. He couldn’t stop the keening noise from emerging from his throat at the words. His eyes welled with tears and, unable to think about what he was doing, he curled even closer to Regulus and buried his head in the man’s shoulder. A gentle hand stroked his hair, petting him, but that didn’t take away the ache from Regulus’ words.

“Have a care when it comes to saying things like that,” Christelle said sharply. “You could… being rejected by a mate is a terrible thing, even for a well-adjusted Veela. For your Harry, who is hardly well-adjusted and is certainly in poor health, it could kill him.”

“I’m not…” Regulus let out a frustrated growl. “I’m not saying that I mind being Harry’s mate,” he said after a beat of silence. He continued to stroke Harry’s hair as he spoke. “I’m saying that I
physically don’t think that I can be Harry’s mate. I’m asexual. Isn’t sex a part of being mated?”

“Ah.” Christelle didn’t answer immediately. Then, she said, “Perhaps this is a conversation best had without taking up Lord Voldemort’s time?”

“I actually do have other things to see to, if this conversation is going to be one of a personal nature.” There was the sound of a chair scraping back, and Voldemort added, “Please, feel free to use my office for as long as you need to, Christelle. Regulus, I’ll expect you to keep me updated with information that I need to know, and to take good care of Harry.”

“Of course, my Lord,” Regulus said. He continued to pet Harry, his touch slowly eating away at the miasma of hurt and fear and pain within him, that had spawned when he’d first said that he couldn’t possibly be Harry’s mate.

Harry heard the sound of the door closing, then Christelle cleared her throat. “It is not… it is not entirely uncommon for a male Veela, such as Harry, to have a mate who is asexual.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Regulus started.

“On the surface, you might think that it wouldn’t,” she agreed. “But the fact is, male Veela find it almost impossible to control their allure. It isn’t an easy task for the rest of us, of course, but for a male Veela, the task is like… it is like trying to hold back the tide. It’s the reason that so many of them never leave the Court. It simply isn’t safe for them among humans.”

“And so they wind up with mates who are asexual?” Regulus’ voice was politely disbelieving, the same way it had been the last time Harry had tried to convince him that he’d done his potions reading without having actually cracked open the book.

It hurt so much more, hearing it directed at himself, in a way. Harry didn’t make a sound this time, but couldn’t stop his hands from clenching in Regulus’ shirt.

“Yes,” Christelle said, her voice going strangely frosty. “Because they are safe, and are unaffected by the allure. I’m sorry, but are you ignorant of the fact that you’re hurting your mate with every word you speak right now?”

“I’m not…” Regulus sighed, and Harry flinched. He was doing this. He was distressing Regulus.
He needed to go. He should... He tried to slip off of Regulus’ lap, but a strong arm held him in place. “Can you give us a minute, Christelle? I think that Harry and I need to speak before I can continue this conversation.”

Harry stilled even as Christelle said, “Of course.” He heard the door close once again, then felt Regulus sigh once more. This time, when Harry tried to pull back, he wasn’t stopped.

“I’m sorry,” Harry offered into the silence of the office. He didn’t know what else to say. It wasn’t as though he’d chosen to mate with Regulus. He hadn’t even known that he’d done it! He wondered if there was a way to reverse it, so that Regulus wouldn’t have to deal with him forever. Or for however long being mated would last, anyway.

“Don’t apologize,” Regulus said immediately. He reached out to stroke a hand down Harry’s cheek. “If anything, I feel like I should be the one apologizing. I’m a lot older than you, after all.” He smiled at Harry, as though trying to coax a similar response from him.

Harry tried out a smile, but it was weak and shaky. “You’re stuck with me, though.”

“I don’t actually mind that,” Regulus said. “You’re a sweetheart, Harry. You haven’t done anything that I’m uncomfortable with, and I can’t imagine that you’re going to. I don’t mind being your mate. Even if I am far, far older than you.”

The hurt that had been swirling within him began to dissipate as soon as Regulus said that he didn’t mind being Harry’s mate. Harry began to relax, and hesitantly came to sit with Regulus on the couch once more. “I don’t mind that you’re older than me,” he said shyly.

“If you’re sure.” Regulus pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Then I don’t mind at all. Now, do you think we can call Christelle back in to continue this conversation?”

Harry wanted to shake his head, to curl up in Regulus’ arms and not think, but he nodded instead. “Yeah,” he said.

Regulus did something with his wand, and moments later the door opened and Christelle slid back into the office. She beamed at the sight of them curled up together on the couch. “You’ve resolved your difficulties?” she asked.
“Yes,” Harry said quietly. “He’s not angry with me for accidentally mating with him.”

“I’m so very glad to hear that,” she said, genuine warmth and joy making her voice gentle. “Now that that’s settled, we should discuss what you’ll need to know as Harry’s recovery progresses, and what you can expect as the bond between you deepens.”

“Yes, of course.” Regulus sat up straighter.

“He’ll need more physical contact,” she said with a nod. “What you’re doing now should be fine. Curling up together in bed, or on the couch, perhaps while reading, those sorts of things should be sufficient. For now, anyway. But we Veela, we are sexual creatures. Eventually, Harry will want to have sex, Regulus.”

Regulus wrinkled his nose, and Harry shuddered at the thought. “No!”

Christelle blinked in surprise, but then her expression turned a bit more sympathetic. “I understand that things have been difficult for you, Harry, but the fact is that, sooner or later, your biology is going to demand that you seek out a physical relationship of some kind or another.”

Harry shook his head. “I won’t.” He shuddered again and Regulus drew him closer. “I won’t.” The words turned desperate, almost pleading, and he turned to Regulus with wide eyes. “No one will make me, right?”

“No one will make you,” he said quietly. He smoothed Harry’s hair and tugged on him so that Harry was resting against him once more. “Harry… has had some bad experiences, recently. The thought of sex repulses him.”

“For now,” Christelle said. “I understand that. I’m telling you that, as Harry begins to recover from his considerable trauma, eventually he’s going to crave that level of physical closeness with somebody. There are a number of possible solutions to this problem, when it arises.”

Harry didn’t want to listen to this conversation, but he also couldn’t bring himself to leave Regulus’ side. So he just closed his eyes and hid his face in Regulus’ shirt once more and listened to the two of them talking.

“And what solutions might those be?”
“If you aren’t sex-repulsed, there’s always you,” Christelle said, her tone matter of fact. “If you are, then there are still two solutions remaining. One, that he goes off whenever he feels those urges and takes a different partner every time. This is the more common of the two solutions. Two, you two work together to find a secondary mate for Harry, one that both of you are content with. He, or she, becomes a permanent third in your relationship. You can understand how this second solution might be the more difficult of the three.”

“I can,” Regulus said. He continued to gently stroke Harry’s hair. “But I can also see the drawbacks of the first, particularly in Harry’s unique situation. I think that they’re very interesting solutions you’ve proposed, and Harry and I will have to think on them. Thank you, Christelle, for your assistance.” The words were a clear dismissal.

“Do you have any other questions for me, before I leave? I would be willing to stay if you need me to.” There was a reluctance in Christelle’s voice, in spite of her offer.

“Thank you, but no. I would ask that we be able to contact you again, should we have any further concerns.”

“Oh, of course!” Christelle laughed, a surprised little sound. “Particularly now that we know that Harry is, in fact, a full Veela. We won’t screen any letters related to him, and I’ve made some important medical information available to your Healers. I will also leave my Floo open to you, and only to you. I will be most vexed if your fellow Death Eaters begin to contact me for anything other than Harry.”

“I swear, knowledge of your Floo address will not be given to anyone who is not directly involved in Harry’s welfare, and we will use it only in the event of an emergency,” Regulus said. “Thank you so much, Christelle.”

“You are most welcome,” the Veela said. Harry felt the ghost of a strange touch in his hair and let out a small noise of protest, but the fingers were gone before the noise ended. Then he heard the door close once more.

“I don’t want to have sex with anyone,” Harry said with a shudder, once he was certain they were alone.

“Of course not,” Regulus said. He kissed Harry on the forehead once more, then pushed him gently off of his lap, so that Harry had no choice but to stand. Regulus followed him to his feet. “And if
that changes, we’ll deal with it together. And if it doesn’t, it certainly doesn’t mean that there’s anything wrong with you. It just means that you’ve been through a great deal.”

“What if…” Harry sighed and struggled to wrestle his thoughts under control. “What if… what if… what if I still don’t want to have sex with anyone, but my body does?”

Regulus closed his eyes. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. After a silent moment, he said, “Then I might suggest that you talk to Narcissa, like you’ve been putting off.” There was a gently teasing tone to the words, startling a small laugh out of Harry.

“I’ll think about it,” Harry said finally. He definitely didn’t want to be in a position where his body needed something and his brain couldn’t handle the thought of it, though he couldn’t imagine feeling that way about something as awful and disgusting as sex.

“That’s all that I ask of you,” Regulus said. He wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders and tugged him close, then said, “Now, perhaps we should give my Lord his office back before he thinks we’re trying to depose him as rulers of the Death Eaters.”

Harry couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped him. “I can’t even picture it,” he said through soft snickers.

He left the office with a smile on his face, Regulus’ arm around his shoulders, feeling safer and more settled than he had in a very long time. Maybe… maybe there was a chance that everything would be okay. A small chance, but… at least now he knew.

And Regulus didn’t hate being his mate, and that was a good thing.
The first week after Christelle left, things were… peaceful. They weren’t perfect, but for the most part they were okay. He had a panic attack once, one that had brought Regulus running, but it had only been the one. Then, much to Harry’s dismay, things had started to deteriorate.

Now, three weeks later, Harry was barely sleeping through the night, and not keeping much in the way of food down, when he could eat anything at all. Every night his nightmares got worse and worse, and he just didn’t know what he was going to do if he ever figured out why they were as bad as they were.

The things Harry saw in his dreams these days...

*Hands, on him, touching him, and Harry didn’t want it. He didn’t want them to be touching him, he just wanted them to go away! Why wouldn’t they all just go away?*

And then they did. Harry opened his eyes, sniffling, to find that he was standing in the middle of a sea of bodies, charred corpses that looked almost nothing like the humans they’d once been. But there were a few, close to him, whose faces he could still make out. Harry cried out at the sight of them.

Ron. Ron was one of those faces. Ginny. The twins. Hermione. He’d killed them!

Harry stumbled back, trying to get away. He tripped over another corpse. Luna’s corpse. Beside her was Neville, his hand still extended like he’d been trying to touch Harry.

Harry looked to the sky for answers, his heart breaking. That was when he realized. He hadn’t just been... outside, or wherever. He’d been in the Great Hall. The Sorting had been going on, judging by the way the Sorting Hat was calling out, asking for answers that would never come. There were children, all still in a line, none of them having made any move to try and touch him, and he’d burned them all.

“Male Veela have a difficult time controlling their allure.” Christelle’s voice rang in his head and Harry let out a shuddering cry, covering his face with his clawed hands. He could feel the wings on his back, the ones that marked him for the monster that he was. He hated himself.
He wished that he’d never survived Sirius’ death.

“Harry!”

Harry jerked awake, his breath coming in panicky little sobs. He couldn’t make it stop. He’d killed… he’d killed… He curled in on himself and tried to block out the images that were stuck in his head now. He’d killed Ron and Ginny and… and… and…

“It was a dream,” Regulus was saying to him, his voice low and gentle. Harry felt a weight settle on the side of the bed, behind him, felt a gentle hand land on his shoulder. “It was just a dream, Harry, I promise.”

“I killed them,” Harry breathed out, his voice barely sounding like his own. “Regulus, I killed them all. They’re dead and it’s my fault and I don’t deserve to be here right now, Regulus, don’t you understand?” He curled even tighter in on himself, drawing his knees up to his chest. He couldn’t stop crying, his whole body shaking with the force of his tears.

He felt Regulus shift away and it only made him cry harder. He wasn’t enough. He wasn’t good enough, and now Regulus was going to leave him, just like he should. He should go, and Harry should suffer for what he’d done. No. Suffering was too good for him. He should die.

“Take a deep breath for me, Harry,” Regulus said softly. Harry felt him sitting down again, this time in front of Harry. His hands were gentle as he pressed on Harry’s shoulders, forcing him to uncurl ever so slightly. “Come on, I need you to breathe for me.”

His mate was asking something of him, and Harry was powerless to resist the urge to do as was requested. He tried to take a deep breath, but found that he couldn’t. He couldn’t breathe in. He couldn’t make himself inhale. He tried, and every time he tried he just started to cry even harder. “Sorry,” he managed to gasp out, but even though he managed to get the word out it didn’t seem to help.

“It’s okay,” Regulus breathed. Harry knew that it wasn’t, though. He knew that Regulus was angry, and stressed, and he was only making it worse. He was a failure as a mate, and he should go away so that Regulus could find someone better.

Harry’s vision started to get a little bit grey around the edges. “Harry, I need you to try and take a breath for me. Just one breath, with me. Can you try for me?” When Harry nodded, Regulus
started to inhale.

Harry tried to copy him, but he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t make himself breathe in. He tried, he tried as hard as he could, but it wasn’t enough. Regulus closed his eyes, and Harry knew that this was it. Regulus would leave him, as he rightly should.

Then, carefully, Regulus said, “You need to calm down,” his voice softer and gentler than Harry had ever heard it. “But it looks like you’re having a panic attack and I don’t know that you can calm down without help. You’re going to hurt yourself if you don’t, and Harry, darling, I don’t want to see you do that. So I’m going to offer you the option of taking a calming potion. It wasn’t prepared with a Veela in mind, so we don’t know how it will affect you, but Christelle didn’t say anything about not giving you potions when we were talking earlier and Narcissa is on call if there’s a bad reaction.”

Harry tried to focus on Regulus’ words, but they weren’t really making sense to him. A panic attack? He didn’t… those came with flashbacks, didn’t they? He wasn’t… he didn’t know… what was wrong with him? Why couldn’t he breathe?

Regulus closed his eyes and inhaled loudly, the sound long and drawn out. Then, he held out a vial, which he pulled from his pocket. “Take this for me,” he said, his voice still low and soothing. He uncorked it and held it patiently for Harry.

Slowly, not at all certain that he actually wanted to, Harry moved to take the potion. When he tried to curl his fingers around it, he found that they wouldn’t quite obey him. And even if they would have, his hand was shaking too badly. Had he tried to hold the potion himself, it would have spilled everywhere. How pathetic was he? He couldn’t even do this one thing for his mate.

Regulus pulled Harry into his arms, helping him to sit up. Then he held the vial to Harry’s lips. “Drink for me,” Regulus said, still holding Harry close.

Harry drank. The effects, while not quite immediate, were rather quick. His breathing evened out and his hands slowly stopped shaking. He still felt like a wreck, though. His breathing, while slower, was still shaky, and tears were still falling from his eyes in spite of his best efforts to stop them.

Regulus didn’t seem to mind. He just held Harry close and rocked him, murmuring soft, soothing things to him. Harry gradually relaxed in his hold, his own arms coming up to curl around Regulus’ shoulders.
Then, just as he was thinking that the worst of it might pass, his vision greyed out and everything went dark.

ooOooOoo

“You gave a potion to a Veela without consulting me?” The voice was a familiar one, biting and acidic in a way that he knew so very well. He just… he couldn’t quite place it… who…

“I did what I had to! He wasn’t calming down!” Regulus snapped back. That voice Harry knew well. It made him smile.

“A panic attack won’t kill someone, but a potion administered improperly will!”

“I couldn’t let him suffer, Sev,” Regulus said, sounding tired. “You didn’t see him. He was… he was a wreck.”

Sev… Professor Snape. Harry let out a small noise at the realization. Snape was here. He sat up so quickly that his head spun, the world tilting madly around him.

“Stay down, Potter,” Snape snapped. “Merlin only knows what these fools have done to you.”

“That’s hardly fair, Severus.” The cultured, female voice, was less familiar than Snape’s and Regulus’, but still somewhat familiar. Harry turned his head slightly in the direction the voice had come from to see Narcissa seated by his side, a book in her hand. “I’ve been here the entire time. The boy was in no danger.”

Snape’s sneer was about the same as the kind he would shoot to Harry after Harry gave him an unsatisfactory answer in class, or the one he would send in Neville’s direction when the other boy melted a cauldron. “Perhaps not,” Snape said. “But you didn’t know that he wouldn’t be.”

“We were fully prepared to treat him if the worst should happen.” Narcissa stood in a fluid motion. “Now, would you mind if I examine my patient?”
Snape’s lips thinned. “Go ahead,” he said with a mocking bow. “And now that I am aware that you are mated to a full-blooded Veela, Black, I’ll be certain to provide you with potions appropriate for him.” Snape swept from the room like the great greasy bat that he was.

It wasn’t until after he’d been examined by Narcissa, until after he resting against a mound of pillows piled against the headboard, covered in several blankets, with instructions to rest and to avoid any kind of excitement for the next few days, that Harry realized something. “Snape wasn’t effected by me,” he said, unable to keep the wonder from his voice.

Regulus, who was sitting next to him with a small bowl of fruit that he was clearly hoping Harry would eat from, said, “Severus is a master Occlumens. He’s one of the few in the world to master that art.”

“And that means my allure won’t affect him?” Harry frowned down at his hands. He knew that Regulus wanted him to eat something, even if it was just a few of the pieces of fruit, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. His stomach churned at the very idea.

“It does.” Regulus set the bowl on the nightstand and reached out to take Harry’s hand. “Do you want to talk to me about your nightmare?”

Harry shuddered at the memory of his friends, dead. “No,” he said quickly. His voice shook.

“Harry,” Regulus started, then shook his head. “You know that I won’t make you talk about it, but I think you should. If not to me, then to someone else.”

“I… I killed them,” Harry said hoarsely, his voice shaking even more. He wasn’t sure if Regulus could understand the words, because his words weren’t quite working properly.

“Killed who?” Regulus shifted so that he was sitting next to Harry at the head of the bed, his back resting against Harry’s pillows, his side pressed to Harry’s. His arm slid between Harry’s back and the pillows, curling around him and pulling him close.

“My… my friends. In the dream, I killed them, and I… I…” Harry shuddered. “I saw their corpses. In my dreams.”

“Ahh.” Regulus said nothing more than that, but held Harry even closer.
The words, or lack thereof, were not quite what Harry had expected. He’d expected assurances that no such thing had happened, that it had just been a terrible dream, but… but those assurances didn’t come. Instead, Regulus just held him close, like he expected… like he was expecting…

“Regulus,” Harry started, his voice filled with horror. He’d been in Diagon Alley. He’d been in the alley when students had been shopping. He’d… he hadn’t… he wouldn’t have… “Regulus, did I?” His voice came out as little more than a hushed whisper.

He felt more than heard Regulus’ sigh. “You have to remember that you were not at all in control of yourself when you were assaulted in the alley.”

The words hit Harry like a blow. “Who?” he asked. He couldn’t bring himself to ask anything more. Who had he killed? Not everyone. Surely not everyone. Not like his dream had implied. He couldn’t have… he wouldn’t have! He wasn’t that kind of monster. He wasn’t… was he?

“I don’t know,” Regulus said softly. “I don’t know all of your friends. But I do know that the Weasleys were… affected by the…”

“Slaughter,” Harry breathed, his eyes filling with tears once more. “They were affected by the slaughter. Because that’s what it was. I slaughtered them.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Regulus said fiercely. He pulled Harry even closer, away from the pillows and into his lap. “You were not in your right mind. You were panicked and hurting and operating solely on instincts that you still don’t understand.”

“How many of the Weasleys-” Harry couldn’t bring himself to finish the question.

“Just their youngest son,” Regulus said. “And his parents. And…” He winced, then said, “And the Granger girl. That I know of as being particularly close to you.”

Harry let out a broken, shuddering cry that turned into a wail of grief. “I killed them,” he gasped out, unable to speak properly around the lump in his throat.

Regulus’ arms, impossibly, curled even tighter around him. One of his hands found its way to his
hair and began to stroke through it, gentle and soothing. “It wasn’t your fault,” Regulus breathed. “I swear to you that it wasn’t your fault.”

He’d killed them. They were dead and gone and it was Harry’s fault. He let out another harsh sob, then buried his head in Regulus’ shoulder and let the tears come. They were dead. He’d killed them. Regulus may say that it wasn’t his fault, and maybe it wasn’t, but that didn’t change the fact that he was the one who’d ended their lives.

In the back of his mind, hidden far away because of its unlikelihood, had been the idea that maybe, someday, he could find a way to reconcile with Ron and Hermione. That maybe they might forgive him for the killings, that they would understand his being mated to a Death Eater, that they would still be his friends. He’d known it would never happen, but he couldn’t stop himself from hoping…

And now it would never happen. Could never happen. Because he’d killed them.

Regulus stopped trying to tell him that it wasn’t his fault, and instead just held him close and let him cry. Eventually, Harry couldn’t have said when, he managed to cry himself to sleep in Regulus’ arms.
Severus knew the minute he saw the boy that he had a problem.

Albus had been going mad trying to find him. The whole world had, for that matter. Some assumed that Voldemort had him, but Severus had never made that mistake. He’d thought that he’d known the truth: if Voldemort had him, then Voldemort wouldn’t have been able to resist telling the rest of the world. He would have released the information. He would have gloated.

But… it seemed that nobody knew that Voldemort had him, which was… strange. From what Severus could understand, none of the Death Eaters aside from Regulus himself even knew that the Potter boy was there, for all that the ones who resided within Black Manor knew that certain wings were entirely off limits. Theirs wasn’t an order which questioned their leader, but… it was… strange....

And then Severus was let into the room with him, and Severus understood why. The allure rolling off of the boy, even now that he was unconscious from some kind of potions mishap, was phenomenally powerful. Severus, master Occlumens that he was, had to take a moment to brace himself against it. When he had it under control, he helped Narcissa to bring the boy around to consciousness.

Then he left, mind reeling. The Potter boy was a Veela now. How had it happened? Why? There was no Veela in either the Potter or the Evans lines, so…

He was distracted by a throat clearing, followed by the words, “Severus. A word?” Voldemort was, apparently, waiting for him outside of the room.

Severus didn’t dare question the Dark Lord, in spite of the way his heart started racing. He fell into step behind him and remained silent until they reached the Dark Lord’s office. There, he knelt for Voldemort and bowed his head. “How may I serve you, my Lord?”

“You can sit in the chair, for one thing,” the Dark Lord said. “And you can tell me about the search for the boy. How close is Dumbledore?”

Severus immediately shook his head. “The Headmaster remains clueless, my Lord. I was advising him that there was no chance that you had the boy, since you hadn’t announced anywhere that you
did. I hadn’t imagined that you would have the boy and not say anything, and I doubt the Headmaster would imagine that you would do so, either.”

Voldemort let out a noncommittal hum. “And what does he make of the corpses Potter left in his wake?”

That was… an interesting question. “He’s not sure,” he said honestly. “I don’t know that he realizes that Diagon Alley was Potter’s work, and I don’t believe that he thinks that the boy is responsible for the two Dursleys that died, either. From what I can understand, Albus is concerned that a third player has entered the battlefield, and that they are currently in possession of the boy.”

Voldemort’s lips twitched into something like a smile. “That, Severus, is excellent news.”

Severus waited. There was little chance that the information was all that the Dark Lord wanted from him, as it all could have waited until he gave one of his normal reports. He was, in the end, not disappointed.

“I think you know why I was reluctant to read you into this situation,” Voldemort said. He had a glass of wine in his hand, now, and was twirling it idly.

“My Lord?” Severus went very, very still. He didn’t know, did he? He couldn’t…

“You’ve always been more on Dumbledore’s side than my own, haven’t you, my double agent?” Voldemort’s gaze darted to his own, quick like the snake he so closely resembled. “You thought that I didn’t know, didn’t you?”

Severus released a shuddering breath. There were two options. He could deny everything and try to convince the Dark Lord that he was wrong, that he had never truly been on Dumbledore’s side, or… or he could confess. He could get it over with, and this entire dance would be over with.

It wasn’t like he’d ever expected to survive the first war, anyway. The time he’d had after it ended was, if it could be called such, a blessing.

“I have, my Lord,” he said honestly.
“And why have you been Dumbledore’s man?” Voldemort was staring at him, the gaze intense enough that Severus thought he might actually catch fire. He wasn’t blinking, either, which was even more unnerving.

“But you’ve shown an incredible interest in killing the Potter boy,” Severus said. “And I loved his mother very much. For her sake, I want to protect the child.” It hurt, more than anything he could say, that in the end Dumbledore expected him to kill the child. If he could do nothing else, Severus had believed that he would be able to see that Lily’s son survived the war. Now… now there was no chance of such a thing happening.

“And if I were to tell you that I have no intention of killing the boy?” Voldemort asked.

Severus couldn’t stop the soft, startled noise that escaped him. “My Lord, I would wonder what had changed,” he said honestly. “You’ve never spoken of a desire to spare him before now.”

“Did you interact with the boy while you were in there, Severus?” Voldemort asked.

“No, my Lord. He was unconscious for the most part.” Except for when he’d tried to sit up just before Severus had left, but they hadn’t really spoken.

“The boy is broken.” Voldemort’s lip curled and he shook his head. “He manifested as a Veela while in the Dursleys’ care. As near as we can tell, anyone that he killed before we found him had assaulted him. He has no control over the allure, and it has had disastrous results. He doesn’t even want to leave the room he shares with Regulus.”

“My Lord, with all due respect, while that is… a tragedy, I cannot imagine what that has to do with your sudden interest in sparing the boy.” And it was an absolute tragedy. If Severus were a different man, he would be heartbroken for the boy. As it was, the new knowledge served only to make the incident in Diagon Alley that much more horrifying.

“The Potter boy is no longer a threat to me, Severus. He cannot fulfil the prophecy. He’ll never fight again, most likely.” Voldemort shook his head once more. “And if Dumbledore were to get his hands on the boy, you know that he would try to push him into it.”

Severus closed his eyes. If the boy was as broken as Voldemort said… and he probably was, or would be as soon as he figured out that he’d killed two of his best friends, then he would likely never fight again, no matter how much healing he went through. And Dumbledore… Dumbledore
wouldn’t care. He would try to make Harry fight anyway, for the greater good.

Severus opened his eyes. “You know that I have, in the past, been more loyal to Dumbledore,” he started, but fell silent when the Dark Lord waved a hand at him.

“You’ve been more loyal to the boy, haven’t you?” Voldemort was smirking, now. “All that you’ve done against me, it’s been in the name of protecting the boy.”

Severus could tell that he was well and truly trapped. “Yes, my Lord,” he said, and bowed his head.

“Protecting that boy is now one of Regulus’ top priorities,” Voldemort said, almost casually.

The words hit Severus like a Blasting Curse and his eyes jerked up. Regulus… as far as Severus knew, he only had one priority, and that was the locket he wore around his neck. Severus had never mentioned it to the Headmaster, had held that one piece of information back. He’d known that once he’d told the Headmaster of Regulus, and of the locket, his delicately balanced life would come crashing down in one way or another.

Voldemort’s lips curled into a genuine smile. “Then you do know,” he said, nodding. “I thought you did. I see you, Severus, and the way you watch the locket Regulus bears for me, and I wondered if you knew. And now I know for sure.”

“My Lord, I-” Severus cut himself off. He didn’t know what else to say. It was almost certain now that the end was coming, that he was going to die right here in this chair. If he was lucky, then perhaps his Lord would be good enough to use a Killing Curse on him rather than torturing him to death.

The Dark Lord leaned forward. “You will swear an oath to me, Severus, right here and now, if your interest is to survive. You will swear to me that you will never act against the Potter boy, or myself, ever again. And then you will be publically killed in a raid, at which point you will retreat to the Black Manor, where you will attempt to instruct the Potter boy in controlling his allure as soon as he is ready for you to begin lessons with him. You will also instruct him in his standard school subjects, for the boy will need things to occupy his mind and he deserves a good teacher. And Severus, you will be a very good teacher.”

“The Potter boy hates me,” Severus said without thinking. It was no more than he deserved, given
the way that he’d treated the child during his time at Hogwarts, but it wouldn’t make teaching him easy.

“I think you will find that he will be more than willing to forgive you whatever past trespasses you’ve committed, once you apologize. As long as you treat him like the precious being he is from here on out, Severus. And if I hear otherwise-”

“You won’t,” Severus said. He took out his wand and made the oath.

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When he reported to the Headmaster, he told him nothing. And, less than a week later, he found himself legally dead and moving into Black Manor with nothing to do because the boy was nowhere near ready to begin his lessons.

That was fine. Severus would need time to try and figure out how to teach the child Occlumency, which was one of the only ways for a Veela to control their allure. He’d failed once at the task, but perhaps… perhaps there was a way.

He just had to figure out what it was.
Harry’s eyes stuck when he tried to open them. He stopped trying and instead reached up to rub at them, only to feel a hand blocking the motion. “Don’t,” Regulus said quietly. “They’re pretty swollen; rubbing at them is only going to make it worse.”

He felt a cool cloth gently stroking over his eyes, the motion slow and soothing. Harry let himself relax. Regulus was here, so he was safe. But… His breathing hitched. But he was a murderer. He’d let himself forget that over the past few days in Regulus’ care, and now it was all coming back. He was a murderer. He’d killed…

His breath hitched again. Regulus continued to stroke the cloth over his eyes, and then it stopped. “I know that you’re upset about your friends,” he started.

Harry flinched. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked, his voice coming out hoarser than he’d expected. It hurt to talk.

“When would you have liked me to do that?” Regulus’ voice was gentle, even. “When you’d just come off the streets and were practically feral? When you’d finally started to trust me? Harry, there was no good time to have that conversation.”

Harry couldn’t think of a response to that. Regulus… wasn’t wrong. So he stayed silent.

“Try opening your eyes again for me.” Regulus hand was resting on his forehead, now, the touch light but still grounding.

Harry blinked open his eyes. They still ached, but not as badly as they had. The lights in the bedroom were on, but were very dim. The curtains were closed, so he couldn’t tell what time it was. And Regulus was hovering over him, his eyes filled with concern. Harry tried out a smile, but it didn’t work. His face felt wrong when he smiled now that he knew…

His face must have done something, because Regulus immediately scooped him into his arms. “Please don’t cry again,” Regulus whispered in his ear. “I know that you’re upset, and I know that you probably can’t help it, but Narcissa’s going to kill me if I have to call her again.”

Harry was startled into letting out a small laugh. He brought his arms up to curl them around
Regulus’ shoulders and buried his face in the softness of his robes. Harry breathed in deeply and tried to get his breathing under control, trying not to cry once more. It wasn’t easy, and his breath still hitched, and he thought he might cry at any minute, but he managed. “I’m sorry to be such a problem,” he finally said around the lump in his throat.

“No, no, don’t apologize for being upset,” Regulus said. He held him for a minute longer, then released him and handed him a glass of water. “Drink this; hopefully your throat will stop hurting.”

Harry drank. He wasn’t feeling particularly thirsty, but the water did feel good as it slid down his throat. He closed his eyes and sighed. “I really killed them?” he asked, even though he knew the answer. Regulus wouldn’t have made that up.

“Technically, yes, although I would like to take this opportunity to remind you once again that what happened while you were under the influence of your instincts was not your fault.” Regulus smiled at him, the expression a little sad. “Christelle explained a bit more about Veela nature in her most recent letter to me. There was nothing you could have done once the assault started.”

Harry looked down and away. “She never said…” He stopped and cleared his throat. “She never said how I could start learning to control my allure.”

“Harry,” Regulus started. There was something in his voice, something sympathetic and very gentle, like he didn’t know how to say what he was about to.

Harry’s eyes darted up. “She said it was hard,” he said quickly. “Regulus, she didn’t say it was impossible, right?” Was he misremembering? He was pretty sure that she’d just said it was difficult.

Immediately Regulus’ hand landed in his hair, stroking through it gently. “She didn’t say it was impossible,” he agreed. “But she and I have been talking about it, and… Harry, you might not be able to manage it. It’s a mind art that is more difficult than Occlumency, and Sev reported to us your difficulty learning that.”

“I can still try!” Harry’s voice shook and he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Maybe not now, because… because the thought of leaving here still terrifies me, but someday I’m going to want to go outside. Interact with people other than you and the Dark Lord and Nagini. And Narcissa, I guess. So at some point I’m going to have to try, Regulus.”

“I know,” Regulus said quietly. “And when you’re ready to try, we’ve found someone who will
attempt to teach you here. If you’re unable to learn from him, and there is always a chance that you
won’t be able to work with him given your… mutual antipathy, then we’ll ask Christelle. If we need
to involve her, however, there is a good chance that you’ll have to travel to the Veela Court. The
good news is that, because I am your mate, I will be welcome with you.”

Mutual antipathy… Snape. He meant Snape. Harry shuddered at the thought of trying to learn from
the man once more, but didn’t object out loud. Instead, Harry dipped his head in a small nod.
“Okay,” he said.

“Okay,” Regulus responded. The two sat in silence for what felt like an eternity before Regulus
said, “Are you hungry? You’ve missed breakfast and lunch.”

Harry shook his head. “Not even a little bit,” he said with a small frown. “Will Narcissa kill you if I
don’t eat?” he asked, a slightly teasing tone entering his voice.

“I think you’re underestimating the amount of pain my cousin is willing to inflict upon me,” Regulus
said with a small grimace. “You’re her patient now, and she won’t take kindly to my disobeying her
orders and letting you get away with not eating. You’re already malnourished, you know.”

“I guess I could try to eat,” Harry said uncertainly. “Just a little bit, though. Don’t go wasting food
on me when I’m not even sure if I’ll keep it down.”

Regulus snapped his fingers and a small bowl of fruit immediately appeared in his hands.
Obviously, a house elf had been waiting to deliver that, and Harry wondered how long they’d been
stuck waiting, and what they would have done if Harry hadn’t wanted to eat at all. He handed the
bowl to Harry and watched him, intent. While Harry picked away at it, Regulus rested one hand on
Harry’s arm, the touch soothing.

It helped, but it was strange. Regulus had never… before, he’d never touched Harry this much. It
was weird, in fact, how it had started after… when had it started? Was it just now? Harry put the
bowl down, his appetite fleeing. “You don’t need to keep touching me,” he said uneasily. “I don’t
need your pity.”

Regulus’ hand didn’t move. “Actually, according to Christelle, I do need to keep touching you. I
don’t need to maintain constant contact with you, but the more I stay with you, the more frequently I
touch you, the more secure you’ll feel. She was very concerned when I Flooed her last night.”
“You…” Harry choked on air. “You called her last night? Why?”

Regulus just stared at him, one eyebrow going up in an expression that was eerily reminiscent of Snape’s. “Because you had a panic attack, and then I gave you a potion that made you pass out, and then I almost sent you into another panic attack,” he said, each word spoken as though Harry were something of an idiot. “I thought she might be able to advise me on what I should be doing, as your mate, to help you through this.”

“But you’re…” Harry cleared his throat and looked away. “You’re not interested in me, not like that. Isn’t that what you said?” Harry looked back up and his cheeks went pink.

Regulus blinked at him. “Not in a sexual way, no,” Regulus said slowly, like he was confused. “But… But Harry, sex isn’t all there is to a relationship. The sex is the only part I don’t like. I certainly don’t mind the touching, or the cuddling, or even the kissing, really. To a point. Sometimes kissing gets to be a bit much.”

Harry wasn’t certain that he entirely understood the difference, but the basic idea he was getting was, “So if I wanted to crawl into your lap right now, you’d be okay with that?” He was… every time he tried to stop thinking about Ron and Hermione and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, he’d remember again, and he just… he just… he needed…

“Come here,” Regulus said immediately. He tugged Harry into his lap and folded his arms around him. “You know that you’re my only concern. If this is what you need, I’m more than willing to let you have it.”

Harry relaxed against Regulus, hearing nothing dishonest in his mate’s voice. He could be here, with Regulus surrounding him, and it was safe. Nobody could hurt him. And, more importantly, Regulus wouldn’t let him hurt anyone else.

He was safe in Regulus’ arms.

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Harry woke up screaming, unable to stop himself. He’d seen them again. Their bodies, burned to a crisp, and it was all his fault. And this time, this time, standing over the bodies… Fred and George, and Hermione’s parents, and they were all so very angry with him.
Harry curled into Regulus’ arms with a gasping sob, his whole body heaving with the force of it. Regulus had taken to spending the night with Harry, mostly because Harry woke up more often than not with nightmares now that he knew… now that he knew what he’d really done.

Harry clung to him, helpless and desperate and trying as hard as he could to stop crying, because he knew that it worried Regulus, but he just… he couldn’t. He was a killer. A murderer. He should… it would be better if…

“I swear to Merlin that if you finish that thought I’m going to lock you in a room with Narcissa,” Regulus snarled, suddenly sounding angry with Harry for the first time in, well, ever.

Harry was shocked into stillness, his eyes going wide. He hadn’t even realized that he’d been talking out loud. “I’m sorry,” he finally said, sniffling horribly between every word. He felt like a wreck, like he was just ruining everything around him.

“Don’t” Regulus cut off with a small sigh. “You don’t have to be sorry, Harry,” Regulus finally said. “I know that you’re upset, and I know that you’re not thinking clearly. I just worry so much that I’m not enough to help you through this.”

“You are,” Harry said quickly. Then he winced, because he didn’t like to lie. As much as he wanted Regulus to be enough, to be all that he needed, it was becoming very clear that Regulus couldn’t help him through this. His mate, while fantastic, was no Mind Healer and… and Harry was starting to think that maybe, just maybe, he did need to see one.

“I’m not, Harry,” Regulus said. He pulled Harry to him and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “I’m not enough, and you and I both know it. You’re not… you’re losing weight, Harry. And the shadows under your eyes are awful. This isn’t good for you.”

A part of Harry wanted to just… let go. To tell Regulus that it was okay, because he didn’t want to be healthy. He wanted, very much, to be done hurting, and it seemed that as long as he was alive he was going to be hurting. But… but… but Regulus smiled so sweetly at him, and was always so very willing to protect him, in a way that nobody ever had before in his life. How would Regulus feel if Harry said something like that to him?

So he didn’t say it. Instead, reluctantly, Harry said, “I think maybe you’re right.” It was the last thing he wanted to do, but Regulus… Regulus wanted him to do this. And maybe it was time to listen to his mate, as little as he wanted to.
“Of course I’m right,” Regulus said with a small, smug smile. The expression faded quickly, returning to the perpetual look of concern he wore these days. “About what?”

Harry took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then nestled closer to Regulus. “I think I need to start seeing a Mind Healer.”

He felt the immediate effect his words had on Regulus in the sudden loss of tension that he hadn’t even realized Regulus was carrying. “I’m so glad to hear that,” he said quietly, sounding almost like… like…

Harry looked up to confirm and found that Regulus was, in fact, blinking back tears. The sight was something like a knife in the gut. “I’m sorry,” Harry whispered. He reached up and wiped at Regulus’ tears with ineffective fingers. “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“These are tears of relief, I’ll have you know,” Regulus said. He sniffed a little and the tears slowed, then stopped. “I’m very glad that you’re willing to speak with Narcissa.”

“Can you stay with me? When I do?” Harry didn’t want… she’d never hurt him, not when he’d had no choice but to see her for medical reasons, but he needed Regulus to be with him when he talked about what had happened.

“Of course I can,” Regulus said immediately. “Whatever you want.”

Harry relaxed into Regulus arms and closed his eyes. “Thank you,” he said quietly, not even sure about which of the million things Regulus had done for him that he was thanking him for.

He felt soft lips press against his forehead again. “You are, as always, most very welcome,” he heard Regulus whisper, and then Harry was drifting back to a sleep that would hopefully be nightmare free for the rest of the night.
Harry’s first visit with Narcissa was turning out to be an absolute disaster, and he knew it. She’d asked him a question, and Harry knew that he needed to talk to her, that she only had his best interests at heart, but he couldn’t manage to make himself say anything. They just sat there, in silence, until Narcissa finally let out a small sigh.

“He’s your father’s son, Harry. I’ve heard a lot about what happened.”

Harry flinched. “I don’t know how to answer the question,” he said honestly. “I don’t know what you want me to say.” She’d asked him about the Dursleys, or rather about his guardians since she didn’t know their names, and he… he didn’t want to answer, honestly. Didn’t know how to answer. They’d hated him; what more was there to say?

“Is the question too general for you?” she asked, frowning.

Harry shrugged. “Yes?” he tried. That seemed as though it made sense. The question was a general one. He wasn’t about to tell her things that she wasn’t interested in, like how many chores they made him do or things like that. Why would she care about things like that?

Narcissa blew out her breath. “Okay, let’s start with food,” she said finally. “You’re malnourished, more so than we can explain by your time on the streets. So, did your guardians feed you?”

Harry glanced down at his hands. Regulus was still in the room, but he was sitting slightly farther away than Harry was comfortable with. Instead of being able to hold his mate’s hand, he was knotting his own together. He tried to make himself stop. “They did,” he said quietly. They’d always fed him. He was always hungry, but they’d always given him something.

“Did they feed you enough?” she asked.

Harry shook his head. He wouldn’t look at her. He couldn’t. Not at her and not at Regulus. He just… he couldn’t.
“How often did they feed you, and how much did they give you when they did?” Narcissa asked.

Harry continued to knot his hands together. One of his knuckles cracked from the force he was now using while trying to calm himself down. “Once a day. Soup, or a piece of bread with some butter, never both.” He shrugged. “It was food. It kept me from fainting with hunger.”

“Harry,” he heard Regulus breathe. Then, before he could look up, he felt someone settle on the couch next to him and his hands were taken. Regulus whispered, “Stop that,” and squeezed his hands gently.

“Did they feed you more when you were younger? When you were living with them all the time?” Narcissa’s voice was cool and calm, almost clinical.

It helped, almost as much as Regulus’ hands on his own. Something in Harry eased. She was being professional. It was almost like when he’d spoken with McGonagall about what he’d wanted to do in the future. He could do this. “No,” he said, his voice still a bit shaky. “They didn’t feed me more when I was younger. They might have fed me less, but it’s hard to remember. There were times when I was locked in my cupboard for a few days on end, particularly after bouts of accidental magic.”

“You mean your room?” Narcissa asked, her voice even. When Harry looked up, confused, her eyes were glinting with an expression that he couldn’t name. “When you were locked up after accidental magic, you mean that you were locked in your bedroom, right?”

Harry looked back down. Part of him wanted to lie, to tell her that yes, he definitely meant his bedroom, to move on from this conversation. To stop talking at all, because what good would talking do? What good did talking about his childhood do him now, when he was finally away from it? But… but he knew that it wasn’t going to do him any good to lie about what had happened. If there was some good that was going to come out of talking with Narcissa, then it would only come if he told the truth.

So instead of lying, he clenched his fingers around Regulus’ and said, “No, I meant my cupboard.” His voice shook, but he got the words out. “It’s where I slept when I was little. Up until my first letter from Hogwarts came, actually. Then they thought there might be wizards watching the house, watching the way they treated me, and they moved me to Dudley’s second bedroom.”

“Dudley, huh?” There was something dark in Regulus’ voice, something dangerous. “What’s Dudley’s last name, Harry?”
“He’s dead,” Harry said dully. “And so is my Uncle. The only one left is Aunt Petunia, and she’s lost enough, don’t you think?” He shifted so that he could lean against Regulus, and Regulus immediately pulled one hand free to curl his arm around Harry’s shoulders. “Please don’t go after her.”

“How did they die, Harry?” Narcissa asked.

Harry just stared at her. “I killed them,” he said. He thought she’d known that, but apparently not. “When I manifested my allure. They attacked me, and I killed them.” He hadn’t meant for the words to come out as angrily as they did, but that didn’t change the fact that he was practically snarling at the end, like he was ready to argue with her.

Narcissa closed her eyes and exhaled, the sound loud in the silence of the room. Finally, she opened her eyes and leaned forward. “Let me start by telling you that this is a safe space for you, Harry, and you are allowed to feel whatever it is that you need to when you’re here with me. If what you need to feel is anger, that’s okay. Do you understand me?”

The words were weighty, and they settled uncomfortably over Harry. He wanted nothing more than to get up and leave the room. Instead, he nodded. “I understand,” he said quietly.

“Very good,” she said. Then, quietly, Narcissa murmured, “You’ve been through so much in your short life. I can help you process it, help you move to a better place mentally, but we’re going to have to talk about some things that will make you uncomfortable.”

“Like my childhood,” Harry guessed.

Narcissa nodded. “If it’s as bad as I’m starting to suspect, then yes, like your childhood. Like the things that happened to you when your allure manifested. Like your years at Hogwarts. I know that none of them are things that you want to discuss, but I think that they’re things that you might need to discuss.”

Harry let out a shuddering sigh. “I don’t know how much I’ll be able to talk about,” he said slowly. Already his breath was coming a little bit faster. Already he wanted her out of the room, even knowing that she wasn’t a threat to him. Even after she’d demonstrated phenomenal control over her own response to his allure.
“That’s okay,” Narcissa said immediately. “You don’t have to be willing to talk to me for long periods of time. I think you’ll find, however, that the longer we work with one another, the more willing you’ll be to speak with me. And you are, at this moment, my only priority.”

Harry shivered and curled closer to Regulus. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to do this,” he confessed. “And if I fail, if I don’t get any better—”

“If you don’t get any better, that’s not failing,” Narcissa said, her voice low and soothing. “If you don’t get better, that’s a sign that we need to try something else. But Harry, if you give me a chance, I promise that I won’t stop until you’re ready for me to stop.”

Harry let out another shuddering sigh and relaxed a bit as Regulus’ hand tangled in his hair. “Then I guess we can work on it,” he said quietly. He didn’t know what good it would do, but everyone seemed to think that talking was going to serve as some kind of magical solution. He hoped they were right.

“Okay,” Narcissa said. She sat back in her chair. “Do you need a breather?” she asked. “That’s okay, too, you know. You can ask for five minutes whenever you need them, or you can tell me when you’re done for the day.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t need a breather, and I’m not done for the day.”

“Okay, then,” she said. “Tell me about your cupboard,” Narcissa said, sitting up a little bit straighter.

Harry took a deep breath. His cupboard, huh? “It was the cupboard under the stairs,” he started. If she wanted to know about the cupboard, he would tell her, but it was probably only going to give her more questions about the Dursleys.

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After the first meeting with Narcissa in her capacity as a Mind Healer, Harry hoped they would get better. He hoped that he would either adjust to talking with her about such personal things or they would move on to things that were less personal, but that didn’t happen. Neither of those things did, in fact.

Harry often found himself feeling raw after sessions with Narcissa, found himself feeling like being
around people was just too much. And it hurt, because even Regulus was too much when he got to feeling like that. So he would go and hide in his room and hope that things would stop hurting so much so that he could be done with all of it.

He wanted the Mind Healing to be over, but from what he understood of the process, they’d only just begun. “~I don’t know how long I can keep doing this,~” Harry hissed to Nagini, who was visiting him after one particularly rough session a few weeks after they’d started. They’d discussed what he could remember of the assaults and Harry… Harry didn’t want to be around anyone right then.

“~But this is good for you, is it not, little shard?~” Nagini was coiled around him, her tongue flicking out occasionally. Her touch was gentle, but Harry… Harry wanted something…

“~Yes,~” he said, but he wasn’t sure if it was. He wanted to say more, but it was about then that he realized what it was that he was missing. “~Nagini, do you know where they would have taken my owl?~”

How could he have forgotten about Hedwig? He’d been here for weeks and, while he was sure that Regulus wouldn’t have let anyone hurt her, he hadn’t gone to see her at all. What kind of owner was he, to have forgotten about his beautiful Hedwig?

“~To the Owlery, I suppose,~” Nagini said. She slithered to coil more tightly around him. “Little shard, would you like to go see her?~”

Harry stilled. He would like to see Hedwig. Now that he’d remembered forgetting her, and he felt terrible for forgetting her, he needed to go and see her. But… “~It’s not safe,~” he whispered. Still… He wanted to go see her.

“~I could get Regulus,~” Nagini hissed. “~He’s outside. He would go with you. Or I could take you. There aren’t that many Death Eaters who wander these halls. Black Manor is typically where they meet, not where they live.~”

“~And there are no meetings today?~” Harry started to stand, though he did so shakily. This was a very bad idea, he just knew it. If he went out there, even with Nagini and even with Regulus, something terrible could happen. He didn’t want something terrible to happen. He was tired of bad things happening to him.
“~None that I’m aware of, although Master doesn’t tell me everything,~” Nagini said. “~Or you could have your owl brought to you. I’m certain that Regulus would do that for you.~”

Harry knew that he would too. But… but… but he’d been in these rooms, as nice as they were, for weeks now. And he was safe there, but… but there was an entire house that he’d never explored. He wanted…

To his surprise, he found that he actually wanted to go and find Hedwig himself. It was strange, this sudden desire to go out and see if he could find his owl, but it was definitely something that he wanted. So Harry slipped out of the bedroom, Nagini still coiled around him. “~You won’t let anyone touch me?~” he asked the snake.

“~I would never,~” Nagini said immediately. “~And besides, little shard, I think you’re going to have company.~”

Regulus had stood the moment that Harry left his bedroom. “How are you feeling?” he asked, his voice low.

Harry had snapped at him before retreating to his bedroom, and winced at the memory of it. “Sorry,” he said. He shook his head when Regulus waved him off. “No, I know that I’m under a lot of stress, but I shouldn’t… you’re only trying to take care of me.”

“Yeah, but I know better than to try and get you to eat after a session with Narcissa. I’m sorry for trying to force the matter.” Regulus stepped forward and hugged Harry, the touch gentle. He kept enough of a distance that he didn’t squish Nagini, which the snake probably appreciated. “You going on an adventure?” Regulus asked when he stepped back, nodding at the snake.

“Actually,” Harry started, and took a deep breath. “Actually, Nagini promised to show me to the Owlery. Would you…” He cleared his throat and looked down. “Would you come with me? And… and Nagini, too?”

The snake squeezed him tighter, but gently so that she didn’t do him any damage. He assumed that was her way of saying yes. Regulus just smiled at him and said, “You don’t even have to ask.” He offered Harry his arm and said, “Shall we?”

Harry couldn’t help the small smile that crossed his lips. “Yeah,” he said, and took Regulus’ arm.
The first part of the walk was fine. It was every bit as quiet as the rare other times that Harry had left his suite of rooms, and Harry felt more than safe with Regulus at his side and Nagini coiled around him, hissing comfortingly every time Harry started to tense up. Regulus, too, would tug him closer until he relaxed, and would then pull back ever so slightly, so that Harry was practically walking with just Nagini. It was… almost nice, actually, especially being out of his rooms.

And then he turned a corner, and bumped into someone. Nagini let out a warning hiss, and Harry heard a small noise that sounded far too much like some of the noises he’d heard when others had felt his allure. Harry couldn’t have stopped what came next if he’d tried, not that he had the presence of mind to try. He fled blindly, not even sure where he was running to, in spite of Nagini’s attempts to stop him and Regulus calling after him, begging him to slow down.

Harry didn’t stop until he was alone, in the smallest space that he could find, curled up with only Nagini to hiss soft words of comfort to him. They didn’t help.
Chapter Thirteen

Harry gradually became aware of another sound, another voice speaking soft, gentle words of comfort to Harry. This voice was… familiar, but not familiar in tone. It was dark and deep and Harry knew that he knew it, just not… not in this context.

He came back to himself slowly, following the sound of the unfamiliarly familiar voice. He realized that he was wedged underneath a table of some kind, and that he barely fit. The other person with him, the one speaking such kind words to him, wasn’t under the table with him, but was instead in the doorway to the room the table was in, at a safe distance from Harry. And he wasn’t responding to the allure at all, which helped Harry to relax slowly, in spite of the fact that he didn’t know where Nagini had gone.

He finally gathered enough courage to glance at the person in the doorway and felt his heartbeat pick up once more. Snape. Snape was crouching in the doorway so that he was eye level with Harry, the expression on his face giving away nothing but concern. When he noticed that Harry was watching him, something that could almost be called a smile formed on the Potions Master’s face.

Harry swallowed. “Where,” he started, and was surprised to find that his voice was incredibly hoarse. How long had he been crying under the table?

“You made your way into my lab, Mr. Potter,” Snape said. His voice was still incredibly gentle, like he expected Harry to spook at any moment. And he might, given that he was pretty much trapped in the unfamiliar room. “There’s a glass of water beside you. It has a bit of a healing draught in it for your throat.”

Harry looked over. There was a glass of water there, close enough that Harry could reach it but not so close that he worried that Snape had done something to him while he was incapacitated. Harry reached for it and, when he had it, drained the entire glass.

Once it took effect, Harry said, “I’m sorry,” his voice shaking. Part of him wanted to get out from under the table, but the rest of him didn’t dare. He just held himself as still as he could and hoped that if he didn’t move, nothing bad would happen. Snape wouldn’t get mad at him, or worse, wouldn’t lose control of himself. As long as Harry stayed still, everything was fine.

“It’s more than fine, Mr. Potter,” Snape was saying. “You were clearly not yourself. I certainly cannot blame you for actions undertaken in the midst of extreme panic.”
Harry closed his eyes and let his head fall back to rest against one of the legs of the table. There was a time when Snape would have blamed him for such a thing, he was sure of it. When Snape wouldn’t have hesitated to snap at him, at the very least.

“You’re being nice,” Harry said finally into the silence. He wondered if Regulus knew where he was. If anyone was looking for him, or if… No. Regulus would be looking for him. Even if Snape did lose control of himself, Regulus would find him before anything too terrible could happen.

Harry believed that with everything in him. At least, he wanted to believe it.

“I’m not longer required to be anything other than nice to you,” Snape said, and Harry’s eyes flew open.

“What?” he asked, sharp with surprise.

“I was playing a role, Mr. Potter,” Snape said with a small sigh. “I couldn’t be seen to favor you, not when I was working as a double agent. And I always knew… Dumbledore and I both always knew that Voldemort would return. I would always be required to take up my role as spy once more.”

It was oddly casual, but Harry didn’t comment on that. Instead, he said, “And you’re here now, spying for Dumbledore?” Just saying the words out loud made Harry’s heart skip a few beats. “Please, Professor, you can’t take me back to him. I can’t… not now that I’ve killed…” Harry closed his eyes with a shudder. “Please.”

He heard Snape sigh. “I’m not taking you back,” he said. “I can’t. You… If you were to return to Dumbledore, Mr. Potter, he would try to make you fight. He would use whatever means available to him to force you to battle Voldemort, and he might even succeed. But it doesn’t look to me as though you’re particularly interested in fighting anyone anymore.”

Harry shook his head, feeling queasy at the very idea of trying to fight. He couldn’t… he wasn’t… he wasn’t the person he’d once been. “You’re right,” Harry finally said quietly. Then he opened his eyes once more and stared at the Professor. “Sir, can you tell me… did I…” Harry stopped himself. He wasn’t sure that he wanted to know the answer to his sudden question.

“Did you…” Snape trailed off expectantly. “Mr. Potter, I can’t answer your question if you don’t
“Did I kill any of my friends other than Ron and Hermione and Ron’s parents?” Harry asked, his voice small. He tried to speak louder, but he couldn’t quite manage it. He wasn’t even certain that he wanted to know the answer to his question. But Snape would probably be the only one who would know without Harry having to name each of his friends individually.

“To the best of my knowledge, no,” Snape said immediately. “Longbottom and the Lovegood girl both returned to Hogwarts, as did the youngest Weasley child. While I cannot be certain that you didn’t kill anyone else in your group of acquaintances, I believe that those three were the closest to you other than Granger and Weasley.”

Harry sagged in relief. “Thank you, sir,” he said. He shifted a bit, suddenly becoming aware of how very uncomfortable he was, wedged under the table the way that he was. He wanted to get out from under it, but… “Sir?” Harry asked, his voice shaking once more.

“Mr. Potter?” Snape asked in return.

“Are you…” Harry cleared his throat. “You’re not… you’re not affected by me.”

“No,” Snape said. There was no amusement in his voice in spite of the small smile on his face, just quiet certainty.

“Are you… are you like Regulus?” Maybe Harry could feel safe taking lessons from Snape if he was like Regulus. If he didn’t feel any kind of sexual desire…

But his hopes were dashed. “I am not,” Snape said. “I am just very much in control of myself. Occlumency helps me maintain that control.”

“Regulus said that I would learn from you,” Harry said. “I don’t… I don’t know that I can. It went very badly when we tried last year.”

“It did,” Snape said evenly. “It certainly had nothing to do with the way that you looked into my memories without my permission, or with the way you refused to try to learn.”
“I didn’t understand your instructions!” Harry snapped, then flinched, expecting… he didn’t know what he expected. But whatever it was, it never came.

“Then perhaps, if we were to try again, I would have to find a different way to explain myself to you,” Snape said. “Mr. Potter, things will be very different if you give me another chance to teach you.”

“Will they?” Harry asked. He wasn’t sure that he wanted to try, but… but wouldn’t it be nice to not have to worry about his allure? To be able to leave his rooms without what just happened happening again? Even if he never left his rooms again, which… honestly, he probably wasn’t going to leave his rooms for at least another month after this incident, but… to have the option open…

“I promise,” Snape said, his voice heavy. Weighted, like the promise meant something.

Harry sighed softly. “I’ll think about it,” was all that he said. He wasn’t quite willing to agree to lessons just yet, but… but he was willing to think about it.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Snape said. “I’m here. My duties at the moment are rather light, so I look forward to the chance to work with you.”

Harry’s brow furrowed as something else occurred to him. “But don’t you have to teach at Hogwarts, Professor?”

Snape’s smile wasn’t even subtle. “Not anymore, Mr. Potter,” he said. “Voldemort requested that I remain here, full time, so that I could teach you whenever you’re ready for me to begin. I am, as a matter of fact, legally dead. And…” Snape’s smile faded and his eyes darkened. “And, Mr. Potter, I will not be able to help you return to Dumbledore, if you should change your mind about staying here. I have burned that bridge behind me.”

“I understand,” Harry said quietly. He couldn’t imagine… not if Dumbledore wanted him to fight, and Harry genuinely believed Snape when he said that Dumbledore would demand exactly that. Not to mention… not to mention that Harry had killed too many people, too many friends, to want to go back to the Order of the Phoenix.

He knew that it was selfish of him, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to go back knowing that he would have to look people in the eye when he’d probably killed a friend of theirs.
“Why would he want to go back, anyway?” The voice, from the doorway behind Severus, made Harry light up. “And what have you done to yourself, wedged under that table the way you are? Sev, out of my way. I must collect my wayward mate.”

“My sincerest apologies, Regulus,” Snape said. He got to his feet and backed out of the room. “Mr. Potter, please do let me know when you’re ready to begin lessons. And know that Regulus is more than welcome to join us for them, provided that he doesn’t critique me as I’m attempting to teach.”

As Harry watched with something approaching shock, a hand appeared from the darkness behind Snape and ruffled the Potions Master’s hair as Snape attempted to exit the room.

Then he was briefly alone, before Regulus slipped into the room, a small smile on his face. “You okay?” his mate asked him, gentler than his earlier words had been.

“Shaky,” Harry answered. He started to try and shift out from under the table and realized something that made him wince. “And stuck. Very stuck.”

“Stuck we can do something about,” Regulus said. He lifted the table off of Harry at wandpoint, then settled it back down once Harry had crawled out from under it. “And shaky…” Regulus knelt in front of him and carefully gathered Harry into his arms.

Harry melted against him, the last of his tension draining away. “You came for me,” he said, snuggling closer to Regulus.

“Of course I did,” Regulus murmured to him. He began to carefully stroke Harry’s hair, gently running his fingers through it. “I handled the Death Eater who bumped into you, and trust me when I say that such a thing won’t be happening again, and then I started my search. I would likely still be looking had Nagini not come to find me. She led me here, then slithered off to do whatever it is that she does in her spare time.”

“I owe her a thank you,” Harry said. He was tired, now that he was safe in Regulus’ arms. Tired enough that his eyes were drooping in spite of the fact that he wasn’t even back in the safety of his rooms yet.

“You don’t,” Regulus said. He shifted Harry a bit, then asked, “You falling asleep on me?”
“I’m tired,” Harry said. “Panicking is exhausting.” The sentence made Regulus laugh, the sound almost like music to Harry, who didn’t get to hear it often enough.

“I see.” Regulus pulled back from him slightly and Harry couldn’t help but cling to him, not wanting to be let go. “I’m not… I just need to stand up, Harry, and I can’t do that if I’m holding you.” But Regulus stopped trying to pull away, and instead pulled Harry closer until Harry started to relax again.

“I’m sorry I’m such a mess,” Harry said quietly. His words were slurring now. He really was tired… and his arms and legs felt heavy… was he drifting off to sleep in the middle of Snape’s lab?

“You don’t need to apologize,” Regulus said gently. “Sev, could you give me a hand?”

“Is that wise?” Snape’s voice should have been enough to make Harry panic, but it wasn’t. Instead, Harry finally lost the fight with his eyes and let them slide all the way closed.

“Wise? Who even knows what wise is anymore?” Regulus drew away once more, but only slightly, and there was another set of hands on Harry’s shoulders, steadying him. He should be panicking about that, Harry knew that he should, but the other set of hands didn’t bother him. They were gentle and… and Harry felt safe. Like he did with Regulus, almost.

“Apparently neither of us,” Snape was saying.

Harry was then picked up and he curled closer to his mate, burying his head in Regulus’ neck. He felt himself starting to be moved, and that was okay. Regulus would take him back to his rooms, where he was safe.

Harry stopped fighting sleep and let it happen, and sleep dragged him away immediately.
Chapter Fourteen

Harry woke to the sound of someone murmuring softly, answered by another, deeper voice. The first voice was Regulus, that Harry knew, and the second… the second was Snape. Harry’s eyes flew open and he sat up, but only Regulus was in the room with him.

“Harry’s awake, so I should probably go,” Regulus said quietly. He was looking down at a mirror, and Harry realized that he was talking with Snape through the mirror the way that Sirius had wanted him to last year.

The way that he’d never done with Sirius. He’d never even tried, not until it was too late. And now he’d never be able to try again, because Sirius was dead and it was all his fault. And that… that wasn’t even something that he could blame on his instincts as a Veela, since he hadn’t been one when it happened. Sirius had died because he was a stupid teenager, not for any other reason.

Harry didn’t even realize he was sniffling until Regulus tugged him into his arms and said urgently, “And he’s crying, Sev, so I really do need to go.”

“Of course,” Harry heard Snape say, and then he heard nothing more from him, so he assumed that the mirror had gone dark.

But he didn’t really care if Snape did hear him crying. He’d killed his godfather! Not that Snape cared, given that he’d hated Sirius.

“What’s wrong, huh?” Regulus asked, his voice light and gentle. "These tears can’t be about what happened yesterday, can they? There’s no need to be upset over that! Severus and I both understand the way you panicked; there’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Harry shook his head and buried his head in Regulus’ shoulder. “You should hate me,” Harry choked out.

One of Regulus’ hands smoothed through his hair, the other curling around him and pulling him into Regulus’ lap. “Should I?” Regulus asked, sounding bemused. “Why should I do that?”

“I killed your brother,” Harry sobbed.
Regulus stilled, then his arms tightened around Harry. “You did no such thing,” he said quietly. “And I think you know that. My brother… his death was an accident, if anything.”

Harry flinched. “It was my fault,” he insisted through his tears, the words coming out choked. “If I hadn’t… if I’d been Occluding then Voldemort never would have been able to give me those visions, and I… I killed him!”

Regulus rocked him silently for a few minutes, then said quietly, “But Harry, listen to what you just said,” he whispered, his voice warm against Harry’s ear. “If Voldemort hadn’t sent you those visions. If we’re going to place the blame anywhere, we can start with the Dark Lord.”

Harry shook his head and closed his eyes. “It’s my fault,” he insisted. If he’d studied his Occlumency correctly, if he hadn’t just flown off the handle and decided to rescue Sirius on his own, if he’d just waited for word about whether Sirius was okay or not… There were so many things he could have, should have done differently! Why didn’t Regulus understand that?

“It’s not your fault,” Regulus said. “And even if it were, what does that change?”

The question, oddly enough, shocked Harry out of his tears. “What?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“If it is your fault that Sirius died, what does that change? Does it mean anything in the long run? Sirius is dead and he isn’t coming back.” Regulus’ words were harsh, but his tone was gentle. “And I knew my brother, not as well as I once did, but well enough. The last thing he would want is for you to blame yourself for what can undoubtedly be attributed to his own foolishness.”

“You don’t know that,” Harry said, but the protest was weak. “You weren’t there. You don’t even know what happened that night.”

Regulus leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to Harry’s forehead. “You forget who I am,” Regulus said gently. “I’m a Death Eater. Harry, and not just any Death Eater. I’m the one that the Dark Lord trusts to look after two of his most prized possessions.”

“I’m not a possession,” Harry protested automatically. He might be the Dark Lord’s horcrux, but that didn’t mean that Voldemort owned him or anything.
“You know what I mean,” Regulus said. He was stroking Harry’s hair, now, stroking it back from Harry’s face and, in the process, making Harry meet his gaze. “You know that you’re very precious to Voldemort, and that he trusts me with you because he trusts me. Do you think that he didn’t tell me about the battle at the Ministry?”

“He wasn’t there for Sirius’ death, either,” Harry whispered. But he was starting to doubt. Because Bellatrix had been there, Bellatrix had been the one to kill Sirius, and surely she would have told her Lord about it. Right?

“You’re right,” Regulus said. “But I was there when Bellatrix was giving her report. Harry, my stupid brother stopped in front of the Veil! What do you suppose he thought was going to happen, doing that in the middle of a duel with a Death Eater?”

Harry stilled and stared up at Regulus, his eyes widening. “What?” he asked, his voice shaky. What was Regulus implying?

Regulus took a deep breath, like he was steeling himself for something. Then he began to speak, his words plodding on, inexorable. “My brother had been locked up in the home of our parents, a house that he hated more than anything else, for almost a year when he went to that duel. You can’t possibly think that such a thing didn’t take a toll on his undoubtedly already fragile mental health, especially given that I doubt that Dumbledore let him have access to a Mind Healer.”

“You think that he wanted Bellatrix to hit him with that curse?” Harry asked. It made a certain, horrible kind of sense. Sirius had to have been depressed, and…

“I think that it’s possible,” Regulus said.

“So if I’d just…” Harry glanced at the mirror, now discarded on the nightstand, and let out a shaky breath. “If I’d called him, the way that he gave me the mirror for, then… then he might not have been so sad, right? And he might have lived?”

Regulus’ face fell. “Oh, Harry,” he breathed, and pulled Harry close once more. “No, Harry, it doesn’t work like that.”

Harry curled into him and rested his head on Regulus’ shoulder once more. “But if I’d called him on the mirror, he would have been less depressed, right?”
He felt Regulus draw in a sharp breath, then heard him release it in a sigh. “No, Harry,” he said. “While I’m sure Sirius would have enjoyed hearing from you, if he was actively suicidal there was nothing you could have done for him. You were fifteen, and none of the responsibility for this rests on your shoulders.”

Harry wasn’t entirely sure that he believed what Regulus was saying, but he found himself relaxing regardless. “You promise?” he finally asked, his voice tiny.

“I swear,” Regulus said. He held Harry for several long minutes, then asked with some amusement, “I don’t suppose you’re hungry, are you?”

Harry let out a small negative noise. “No,” he said. The thought of food made his stomach churn. “But thank you,” he added. Even if he hated the way that Regulus pushed him to eat, he still appreciated the fact that Regulus cared enough to do so.

“You’re most welcome,” Regulus said. He kissed him on the forehead once more, then drew back. “You know what might cheer you up, though?” he asked, his voice light enough that Harry was certain that he was faking.

“What?” Harry asked. He wasn’t entirely sure that he wanted to know. The last time Regulus had tried to cheer him up, they’d done more bookwork. It hadn’t been the most successful thing that Regulus had ever tried.

Regulus shifted Harry off of his lap, then stood and offered his hand to Harry. “Come with me,” he said, his grey eyes twinkling in amusement.

Harry stared at the hand, then looked back up at Regulus. “I don’t know,” he said slowly. “I’m not leaving our rooms.” He shivered. “Not ever.”

“I hope that you’ll change your mind, but I’m not asking you to leave our rooms. I’m asking you to come with me to the living room.” Regulus wiggled his fingers, and kept the motion up until Harry sighed and took his hand.

Harry let himself be hauled to his feet, then followed Regulus reluctantly from the room. He didn’t figure out what Regulus was trying to show him until he heard a soft hooting sound coming from the corner of the room closest to the bedroom door. Harry spun around to find Hedwig in a large, golden cage, flapping her wings and hooting insistently at him.
“Thank you,” Harry whispered to Regulus, his eyes tearing up. He crossed the room to her cage and immediately released her, letting her hop onto his finger. “Hey girl,” he said softly, stroking over her head with two fingers from his other hand. “Sorry I haven’t been by to see you since we got here. I’ve been pretty messed up.”

Hedwig hooted at him and, like she actually understood him, bowed her head into his touch in what could be a gesture of forgiveness. Harry laughed a little and hugged her carefully, then went back to running his fingers over her head. “I missed you,” he whispered to the owl.

She didn’t tolerate his petting for long, though, and eventually he had to put her back in her cage. He closed the door with a small, happy sigh, then turned around to find that Regulus had been watching him the entire time.

“What?” he asked defensively.

Regulus raised his eyebrows at him. “Do you want a cat?” Regulus asked. Then he hesitated. “Or a dog. Dogs are cuddly, so I hear.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked, genuinely confused. A dog? A cat? Why would he want a pet? He had Hedwig.

“You seemed to like holding her!” Regulus waved at the owl. “I thought you might be looking for something to cuddle with more often than you can with me, that’s all.”

Harry just stared at him, his eyebrows rising. “But I can cuddle with you whenever I want to,” Harry said. He walked over to Regulus, who was sitting on the couch, and crawled into his lap. “Like right now. You pretty much never tell me no.” Then Harry stilled in Regulus’ lap. “Unless you’re trying to say that you don’t want me to do this as often as I do,” he said, and started to pull back.

Immediately Regulus’ arms locked around him, tightly enough that Harry wriggled a bit until he loosened his grip. “I swear, it’s like you’re always looking for ways to think the worst things,” Regulus muttered. “No, I don’t mind you crawling into my lap whenever you want, and I enjoy cuddling with you, too. But sometimes I can’t be here, and if you get lonely, I thought that maybe you might like something furry to snuggle with.”
Harry frowned. The idea had never occurred to him. But… “I’m not so great at taking care of myself,” Harry said slowly. “As much as the idea of something furry to snuggle with does appeal to me, I don’t think that I should have an animal that I can’t take care of.”

Regulus tilted Harry’s face up and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. “I think that’s a very mature thing to say,” Regulus said, “But I also think that it’s something that would be more applicable if I weren’t here, and if we weren’t wizards. The house elves can take care of whatever pet we get for you, if you want one.”

Harry considered that idea, turning it over in his head. “Do you think that snakes are cuddly?” he asked finally. He enjoyed speaking with Nagini, and she never hesitated to wrap herself around him. Maybe a snake would be a good idea…

“I…” Regulus paused, his expression turning confused. “They’re not particularly furry,” he pointed out, making a strange face.

“No,” Harry said agreeably. “But I like them.”

“We can get you a snake if that’s what you want.” Regulus shrugged. “I don’t have a problem with one slithering around our rooms. And maybe Nagini would like the company.”

Harry smiled and leaned into Regulus’ embrace. “Good,” he said. And then, much to his genuine surprise as it wasn’t something that happened often, his stomach rumbled. “Hey, Regulus,” he said slowly, a little confused by the feeling.

“Yes?” Regulus asked, sounding a bit distracted. He’d probably gone back to his book.

“I think I’m hungry,” Harry said. “My stomach just growled.”

Regulus pushed him back ever so slightly to study his face, then smiled, the expression practically beaming. “I’m very glad to hear that,” he said honestly. He leaned down and kissed Harry again, another peck, then summoned the house elf and got Harry the largest platter of fruit that he’d ever given him.

Harry stared at the massive plate that appeared on the coffee table, then looked up at Regulus in disbelief. “I said I was hungry, not that I’d be able to eat all of that,” Harry said with a gesture at the
Regulus picked up a piece of pineapple and popped it into his mouth. He chewed, swallowed, then said, “Well, did it occur to you that I’m going to help you eat it?” he asked.

Harry blinked. “It hadn’t,” he said. Then he shrugged, smiled, and reached for a pitted cherry. He popped it into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

Things weren’t perfect. The thought of leaving his room once more filled him with a fair amount of terror, and he still wasn’t entirely certain that he believed that Sirius’ death hadn’t been his fault. He knew that he didn’t believe that the other deaths hadn’t been his fault, but…

But Harry was happy, and it was a strange feeling. But it was one that he was glad to have, even if he wasn’t sure if it would last.
Chapter Fifteen

Time, as it tended to do, passed. Harry continued his mind healing sessions with Narcissa, growing more and more confident in himself as he went. It was incredibly difficult for him to accept that he wasn’t responsible for the things that had happened when he wasn’t in control of his allure, but Narcissa was making it easier for him. Regulus helped as well, if only by being there for him always as a source of unending support.

Christmas came and went, the holiday sneaking up on Harry who hadn’t kept track of how long had passed since he’d surrendered to the Dark Lord. Regulus didn’t seem to mind that Harry hadn’t managed to purchase a gift for him, and the gift he gave Harry was rather silly. A stuffed basilisk, massive enough that Harry could literally curl up with it wrapped entirely around him. Regulus gave it to him because he claimed that he hadn’t found the right snake yet for Harry, whatever that meant. It was nice to cuddle with when Regulus couldn’t be there, even though it did sort of frighten him the first time he spotted it, which wasn’t exactly surprising given the events in his second year. Regulus hadn’t known about those events, though, so Harry didn’t blame him for the not exactly pleasant surprise.

Of course, Harry then had to tell him the story of the basilisk, which led to Regulus fussing over him relentlessly for the rest of Christmas. Harry was finding that Regulus was something of a mother hen and, although he once would have hated that, he found that he greatly appreciated it these days. It was nice to have someone worrying over him.

His mental health wasn’t the only thing that was improving. Although Harry would never be exactly large, with his strict eating schedule that was becoming easier and easier to enforce, Harry found that he was putting on a fair amount of weight. He would never be heavy, never be fat like Dudley, but he no longer could count all of his ribs when he lifted up his shirt. Harry found himself with more energy than he’d once had due to his improved eating, which Regulus thought was a good thing. Most of the time, anyway.

Harry wasn’t so sure. Not when it led to irritability, as he was finding that it so often did.

“I don’t want to stay here,” Harry bit out. He was pacing the length of their sitting room, back and forth, back and forth, trying to work off some of his energy.

Regulus sighed. “Then we could go out somewhere,” he suggested. “Not to Diagon Alley, obviously, or anywhere in Wizarding England, but we could go out to dinner.”

Harry shivered at the thought. “No!” The thought of going out somewhere, with actual people… he
knew that his allure was still in full effect. Narcissa still had to occasionally brace herself against it, although she generally managed with grace and dignity. And he’d run into a Death Eater a week ago, one who had actually tried to open the door to his rooms to get to him. Really tried, not just Harry having a flashback. The thought of going out in public with that looming over him…

“Why do you keep pushing that? Can’t you understand that I don’t want to go out around people?” Harry shivered again. “It’s almost like you want me to get hurt again!”

“Okay, okay,” Regulus said soothingly. He reached for Harry from where he was settled on the couch, watching, and Harry danced out of his reach. He didn’t want to be held. He didn’t want to be soothed. He didn’t know what he wanted, actually.

“I just… I feel…” Harry let out an explosive sigh and finally stopped moving, even though all of his energy felt like it was racing under his skin. He felt like his skin wasn’t enough to contain him, that’s what he felt. But that was a strange way to feel, and he thought that he would feel stupid for saying it out loud.

“You feel restless.” Regulus stood and started to pace himself, moving slowly back and forth. “You feel like you’re stuck here, but at the same time you can’t imagine leaving. The thought terrifies you.”

“Yes!” Harry shivered a little bit. “I don’t like feeling like this, Regulus. And I know that I’ve been snappy with you, and I’m so very sorry for that.”

Regulus smiled at him, the expression just a little bit tired. “It’s okay,” he said gently.

Harry flinched. “It’s not.” He flung himself onto the couch that Regulus had vacated. “I’ve been an absolute beast to you, and you need to stop letting me get away with that.” Harry’s eyes, nervous, darted from place to place until they finally landed on Regulus, who had come to kneel in front of him. “I don’t want to be mean to you.”

“But I understand where you’re coming from,” Regulus said carefully. He reached for Harry’s hands, and Harry let him take them. “You think that I didn’t feel like that when I first came to Black Manor to live in hiding? Do you think that it was easy for me to walk away from everything I’d ever known, with only a handful of people aware that I was still living?”

Harry shook his head. “No,” he whispered. He’d never even considered that, actually. Did that
make him a bad mate, that he’d never thought about what Regulus’ past had been like?

“It’s not an easy thing that you’ve done, and I’ll admit that I was concerned that you’d hit this point eventually. I… had other people that I could speak with, Severus for one, but you’ve pretty much only got me. That can’t be easy on you.” Regulus stroked his thumbs over the palms of Harry’s hands, gently massaging them.

“But that doesn’t give me any right to be an asshole to you!” Harry protested. “None of this is your fault. Whether you’d been the one to find me or not, I’d probably still be in a similar situation. It doesn’t matter how… antsy, I guess is the word, it doesn’t matter how antsy I feel, I don’t want to be mean to you, and you shouldn’t let me!”

Regulus just smiled a little bit, then leaned up and kissed him on the forehead. “The fact that you’re this worried about it means that we don’t have a real problem,” he said softly. “You think that you’re going to turn into some kind of monster because you’re dealing with bad moods these past few weeks?”

The words, said out loud like that, did sound ridiculous. Still, Harry nodded. “I’ve been unfair,” he said. He didn’t know how else to stress how bad he felt about the way that he’d been treating Regulus. “You didn’t deserve… I shouldn’t have said that. I know that if I went out with you that you would do everything in your power to keep me safe.”

“I would,” Regulus said. “And I knew that you didn’t mean it.” He stood and stretched, then said, “Why don’t we go for a walk? Just you and me, around the grounds. It’s late, so nobody should be out.”

Harry thought about it. The idea was… it was good. He liked it, but… “You promise that no one is out?” he asked, his voice very small. He hadn’t really left the rooms since he’d tried a few months ago, and he was willing to admit that that was very likely a large part of the problem.

“I promise that if anyone is out, I’ll make them leave you alone,” Regulus said. He held out his hand to Harry. “Come on. I might have a surprise for you if you’re willing to walk with me.”

Harry glanced up at him suspiciously, but allowed himself to be hauled to his feet. “A good surprise, right?” he asked warily. “And not one that’s going to frighten me, even accidentally?”

Regulus frowned. “I don’t think that it will,” he said doubtfully, and cast a look back at the bedroom
where Harry’s basilisk was on the bed. “But then again, I suppose that I didn’t think your pillow would startle you either.”

“Basilisks are terrifying,” Harry said with a nod. “As long as you aren’t taking me to see another stuffed basilisk, then I should be okay.”

“What if I were giving you a real basilisk?” When Harry’s eyes darted over to Regulus, the wizard had a genuinely curious expression on his face.

“Why would you do that?” Harry asked, a little bit horrified.

They left the room and started to walk, even as Regulus said, “Wouldn’t it be nice to have such a massive creature under your command? Just think, it could do a better job protecting you than I ever could.”

Harry shook his head, and shifted closer to Regulus when they entered an unfamiliar part of the building. “Only if it couldn’t kill me, too! That stare of theirs can kill anyone, whether they mean to or not. They can’t just turn it off, can they?”

Regulus shrugged. “I think there are some variants that can,” he said. “But I don’t know too much about it. Basilisk breeding is a pretty dangerous game, and not one that I’m inclined to enter into.”

“Regulus,” Harry started, then stopped. Both verbally because he wasn’t sure of what he wanted to say and physically because they were standing in front of a door that would lead them out onto the grounds of Black Manor. Harry hadn’t left his rooms often, but he had left them. He hadn’t left the manor… ever, not since he’d arrived. “I don’t know about going outside,” he said slowly.

“Harry, do you know what agoraphobia is?” Regulus asked. He didn’t open the door, didn’t even put his hand on the handle.

Harry shook his head. He started to back away from the door, not wanting to be anywhere near it.

Regulus let out a small noise that could be considered a sigh but was more of a sharp exhale. “It’s a fear of open spaces. You’ve been through a lot of trauma, and our rooms are safe to you. Right now, you’re linking the outdoors to danger.”
Harry swallowed. “Outside is dangerous,” he said. Outside was… it was where he’d been cornered the most frequently. He would probably never know how many people he’d been with against his will, how many people he’d burned to death, and most of those had happened outside. Where he’d had no defense.

“It has been, in the past,” Regulus agreed. He took Harry’s hand. “But I’m here with you now, Harry, and Narcissa and I both think that it would be good for you to try this tonight. When it’s just you and me, and nobody else is out on the grounds.”

Harry didn’t move, but he didn’t try to pull away from Regulus either. “You think that I’m… that I have agoraphobia?” he asked. He took a step closer to Regulus. He hated it when Regulus worried about him.

“I think that right now, you’re rightfully concerned about going outside because of the trauma you experienced,” Regulus said carefully. “I think that if you stay in our rooms for long enough, you might wind up not being able to leave them, even if you want to.”

Harry shivered. “So you think that I should try to go outside.” He didn’t want to. It was just about as close to the last thing that he wanted as he could get.

“I think that it wouldn’t hurt to try,” Regulus agreed with a nod. “If you can’t do it, then we’ll know that it’s something you’ll need to discuss with Narcissa.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. The last thing he wanted to do was have another thing to discuss with Narcissa. If he had to talk it over with her, she’d give him homework, likely things like, leave your room twice tomorrow or something like that. “Right then,” he said, and took a deep breath. “Outside it is.” He took a step forward, but paused before he could actually bring himself to open the door.

“Want me to open it?” Regulus asked. He rested one hand on the handle and waited for Harry to say okay.

Harry took another deep breath, closed his eyes, and exhaled. He opened them. Nothing would hurt him. Regulus was with him. He was safe. “Please,” he said finally.

Regulus opened the door. Harry braced himself but… nothing happened. He closed his eyes again
and let himself relax, then tried to take a step out the door. He couldn’t quite manage it. His heartbeat picked up and he felt himself starting to tremble. He backed up several steps, his heart racing. “Can’t,” he gasped out. He could see the dark outdoors, and just looking at it was making him feel sick. “Regulus, I can’t,” he said.

The door swung shut almost immediately. “Okay,” Regulus said gently. “Harry, it’s okay. I’m here with you, and nothing’s going to hurt you.” His voice was light and gentle, but his eyes, when Harry looked at him, were grave.

“So, I guess this is something that I’m going to be talking over with Narcissa,” Harry said with a small, shaky laugh. “Just when I think that I’m doing better…”

“You are doing so much better,” Regulus said quickly. “Don’t ever think that you aren’t. You made it out of our rooms, and you made it all the way here. You’ve been eating regularly and putting on weight. You’re doing better, Harry.”

“But not well,” Harry said flatly. He turned away from the door, which, even closed was making him nervous, and started back into the Manor.

“You’re doing so well,” Regulus argued. “Just because you’re not one hundred percent better doesn’t mean that you’re invalidating all of your other accomplishments.”

Harry just shook his head. He got what Regulus was saying, he really did, but… it was hard, to not get discouraged. Every time he took a step forward, it felt like something pushed him back. It wasn’t fair. He hadn’t done anything to deserve any of this.

His lip curled into a snarl as anger, hot and sudden and burning like phoenix flames, surged through him. “I hate this!” Harry screamed. He spun and struck at the only thing available that wasn’t alive, which was the wall. He pummeled it, punching it over and over again, screaming in fury the entire time.

He could hear Regulus in the background, dimly, telling him that everything was okay and that he just needed to calm down, but Harry couldn’t. It felt like everything he’d been keeping inside of himself was boiling over, finally. There was a storm he’d been keeping inside of him, he felt like, and now that he’d given it an outlet it was utterly uncontrollable.

But all storms eased, and this one was no exception. As the rage faded, Harry found himself sagging
against the wall, his head resting on the broken and bloodstained plaster, his breath coming in
heaving gasps. He was exhausted and, now that he was no longer hitting anything, his hands felt
like they were on fire.

“Better?” Regulus asked quietly.

Harry turned his head slightly to look at Regulus. His mate had gone white, his lips pressed tightly
together. His eyes were dark with concern, but he made no move to touch Harry. “Yeah,” Harry
said, his voice hoarse. He’d done a lot of screaming.

“We should get your hands looked at,” Regulus said. “And then I think that you need to speak with
Narcissa.”

Harry didn’t bother arguing. Regulus was right. “I’m sorry,” he said instead of protesting. “I… I
didn’t mean to?” He wasn’t even sure what he was apologizing for. Maybe for frightening
Regulus? Because it was pretty clear that Regulus had been frightened by his loss of temper.

“I’m not angry,” Regulus responded. “And I’m not frightened either, so stop thinking that. I’m just
worried about you. So… so let’s go and get you checked out, okay? Sev’s rooms are close, and I’d
rather your hand be looked at sooner rather than later.”

Again, Harry didn’t argue. He just allowed himself to be steered in the direction of Snape’s rooms,
his hands burning and his mind curiously quiet in a way that he couldn’t quite explain.
Chapter Sixteen

Snape wasn’t exactly thrilled to be bothered in the middle of the night, judging by the way he jerked his door open and the way that he glared at Regulus. “Do you even know what time it is?” he snarled, his voice dark and foreboding.

“Harry needed treatment and your rooms are closest,” Regulus said, and Harry had never felt more guilty because Regulus sounded absolutely exhausted.

Regulus took such good care of him, and Harry hated what he was putting his mate through. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, looking down at his wrecked hands. How long would it be before Regulus decided that he was too much trouble? Because he was, Harry knew that he was. He was more trouble than anything else, and he couldn’t imagine that Regulus was getting anything at all out of their relationship.

“It’s okay,” Snape said, his tone gentling. It was much more like the tone he’d used when Harry had been panicking inside of his lab, and Harry found himself relaxing at the sound of it. “Come in. We’ll see if we can’t get you fixed up.” Then he said, quietly, to Regulus, “But you know that I’m not a Healer. There’s a chance that we’ll still need to contact Narcissa.”

“Oh, we’re contacting Narcissa no matter what.” Regulus shook his head, and Harry felt his guilt soar. He was doing this. He was disrupting everyone’s schedules, and for what? Because he was afraid of going outside and couldn’t control his temper? What kind of Gryffindor was he, anyway? Weren’t they supposed to be brave?

He didn’t say anything out loud, just moved into the suite of rooms when Regulus gently encouraged him to do so with a hand on the small of his back. He didn’t look around Snape’s living room at all, just settled in a chair when he was bade to and hunched over his throbbing hands, watching the blood seep from his torn knuckles.

Snape left the room briefly, then returned with a few towels and a few jars of something. Creams or potions, Harry had no idea. He let Snape handle his hands, and the Professor was oddly gentle. His hands were deft as he wiped the blood from Harry’s knuckles, and his voice was gentle as he had Harry demonstrate his range of motion. “Nothing appears to be broken, at least,” Snape finally said. He patted Harry’s hands dry, then opened one of the jars he’d brought out.

The salve, when he rubbed it into Harry’s skin, was cool. His touch was gentle, but Harry still flinched because it hurt, even if he knew that Snape was being as careful as he could. “How did you injure yourself like this, Mr. Potter?” Snape asked as he worked.
Harry didn’t answer. He didn’t want to admit that he’d done it to himself. The thought made his cheeks heat with shame.

Regulus did answer, though. “He broke a wall,” Regulus said simply.

Snape’s hands stilled. “A wall?” he repeated. Then he glanced at Harry, who could feel his cheeks heating with embarrassment. “And did the wall get what it deserved, Mr. Potter?” The Professor sounded almost amused.

Harry hated it. His lip curled, but he didn’t say anything out loud.

A moment of silence passed, and then Snape’s hands began to move once more, rubbing the cream in carefully. “I apologize,” he said into the strained silence. “That was unkind of me.”

Harry still didn’t say anything. He wasn’t sure what he could say, what good it would do to say anything at all. Regulus was… he’d sounded so frustrated with him when he’d told Snape what he’d done. How long would it be until he was just too frustrated to continue working with Harry? Then where would he go?

He couldn’t have stopped the sniffle that escaped him if he’d tried, and Harry didn’t have the presence of mind to even try. He tried to cover it up by breathing in sharply, by closing his eyes and taking a few deep breaths, but his breath hitched with each breath he took. He swallowed to try and get rid of the lump in his throat, but it did nothing to help the burning behind his eyelids.

“How long would it be until he was just too frustrated to continue working with Harry? Then where would he go?”

“Sev, can we have a minute?” Regulus’ voice was quiet and calm, but Harry could still hear the undertone of utter frustration in it.

“You knock on my door in the middle of the night and you ask me for a minute?” Snape asked, but he almost sounded like he was joking. “Keep applying the salve, Reg. It’s working. Call me when all that’s left are bruises, because I have something that will take care of those as well.”

“Thanks,” Regulus murmured. Then Harry heard some rustling, and then he felt Regulus take his hands and resume the work that the Professor had stopped. Harry thought that he sounded almost amused as he asked, “Are you crying because you’re still panicking, because you didn’t like my letting Sev touch you, or for another reason?”
“This isn’t funny,” Harry choked out. His throat hurt, both from the screaming he’d done earlier in
the throes of his rage, but also from trying to speak around the huge lump in his throat.

“Harry, I don’t think that any of this is funny.” Regulus sounded sincere, and Harry opened his eyes
to look at him. His mate was frowning, staring down at Harry’s hands as he rubbed the cream into
his skin. “I’m very worried about you.”

“Are you afraid of me?” Harry asked.

“Are you afraid of…” Regulus’ hands stilled and he looked up to meet Harry’s eyes. “Harry, where would
you get that idea?”

“You saw what I did to that wall!” Harry pulled his hands back and curled in on himself, drawing
his knees up to his chest and putting his feet on the seat of the chair. He wrapped his arms around
his knees and buried his face in them. “That could have been you, just because I was throwing a
temper tantrum!”

“Okay, first of all, you have never once struck me in anger,” Regulus said. “Hey, Harry, look at me,
okay?” His hands landed on Harry’s cheek, and Harry felt a gentle pressure trying to get him to look
up, but Harry just shook his head and held himself still. The pressure eased. “You have never struck
me in anger, Harry. And secondly, even if you ever did physically injure me, I am more than
capable of protecting myself.”

“That’s not the point!” Harry snapped. “Just because you can take care of yourself doesn’t mean that
I get to… to lose my temper like that.” His hands were starting to hurt again, and Harry tried to
ignore the way that they were burning.

“You’re recovering, Harry,” Regulus said. “Outbursts of temper are bound to be expected, and I
don’t mind.”

Harry just shook his head. Regulus said he didn’t mind, but did he really not mind? How long until
he started to mind, until his frustrations got to be too much? What if he already hated Harry, but was
just staying because he didn’t have a choice? Either because of the bond or because of Voldemort?

“What’s this really about?” Regulus asked. Harry heard him shifting, then felt arms close around
him, strong and gentle and reassuring. “Come on, Harry. Tell me what’s really bothering you,
please. I can’t help if I don’t know.”

The silence stretched between them; Harry couldn’t have said for how long. He felt gentle hands stroking his hair, and Regulus rocked them both slowly. “How long will it be before you’re too frustrated with me to stay with me?” Harry finally asked, the words coming out in a choked whisper.

Regulus let out a small huff of air, the sound almost, but not quite, a laugh. “The mating bond between us pretty much guarantees that you’re stuck with me.”

It was the last thing that Harry wanted to hear. “I don’t want you to be stuck with me!” Harry cried. He jerked away from Regulus, who let him go immediately, and stood up. “I don’t want… I don’t want you to hate me because you’re stuck with me!”

Regulus surged to his feet and immediately captured Harry in his arms. “I will never hate you,” Regulus whispered in his ear, the words fierce in their sincerity. “I know that you’re hurting, and I know that you’re working so hard on getting better, and I know how frustrating this must be for you. Please, please don’t think that I’ll ever hate you for things that aren’t your fault.”

Harry trembled in his embrace, but gradually relaxed as the words sunk in. “You have to promise me,” Harry whispered, his throat aching with every word.

“Promise you what?” Regulus was rocking them again, back and forth, the motion gentle and hypnotic.

“If you ever get sick of me, Regulus, you have to promise that you’ll tell me. And that you’ll do something about it. You’ll go on a vacation or you’ll ask Voldemort to send you away. Something.” The words poured out of Harry, fast and desperate enough that he tripped over them as he spoke.

“I will never be sick of you,” Regulus said. And then, as though he could sense Harry’s coming objection, he added, “But if I ever am, I promise that I’ll do something about it.”

Harry relaxed, sagging in Regulus’ arms. “Okay,” he whispered. He let himself be settled into the chair once more, and let Regulus take his hands again to begin rubbing the cream on them once more. The motions were soothing and gentle, and Harry found that his eyes were drifting closed entirely against his will.
“Sev, all that’s left is the bruising,” Regulus called as he lowered Harry’s hands.

Harry didn’t even flinch when Snape came back into the room, not even when he felt the Potions Master take his hands once more. “They do look much better,” he heard Snape mutter. “But the cream for the bruising would be a good idea, I think. You still have your full range of motion, Mr. Potter?”

Harry didn’t answer out loud. He was tired, and didn’t want to talk anymore. Instead, he just curled his fingers into a fist, then let the tension drain from his hand.

“Very good.” He heard the sound of another jar being opened, breathed in the pungent tang of mint and other things in the air, then felt something so cool as to be almost freezing smeared over his knuckles. It still wasn’t enough to rouse him from his drowsy state of half-awareness, at least, not until he realized that Snape’s hand had shifted, and was running over the scars from the lines he’d written under Umbridge’s care. “Mr. Potter, what are these?”

Harry’s eyes snapped open and he jerked his hand back. “Nothing,” he said quickly. “Just scars. That’s all.”

“They were words,” Snape said, his dark eyes darkening further. “Mr. Potter, did someone use a Blood Quill on you?”

Regulus hissed in sharply, and Harry flinched at the sound. “Harry?” Regulus asked. Harry felt his hands land on Harry’s shoulders, but they didn’t squeeze. They just rubbed gently, the touch more grounding than anything else.

“I don’t…” He cleared his throat. “It doesn’t matter, does it? Nobody’s going to be allowed to hurt me like that again.”

Snape’s lips twitched. “While this is true, Mr. Potter, I would imagine that the Dark Lord would be incredibly interested to know if someone took a Blood Quill to one of his most favored pos…” He cut off abruptly, raised an eyebrow, then changed whatever word he’d been about to say. “One of his most favored allies.”

Harry shook his head. “Nobody cared when it was happening,” he muttered.
“I would imagine that nobody knew it was happening,” Regulus said. “Blood Quills are highly illegal, except under special circumstances.”

Harry frowned. “What are they normally used for?” he asked, a bit curious. What use could anyone have for a quill that made someone write in their own blood? The very idea seemed morbid.

“Oaths and contracts, mostly,” Snape said absently. Then his tone sharpened as he said, “But, Mr. Potter, we are not discussing the uses of Blood Quills. We are discussing their use on you, and who did it.”

Harry just shrugged. “It was Umbridge,” he said. “She had me writing lines with it last year. I must not tell lies , over and over again until she was satisfied.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Regulus said quietly. He rubbed Harry’s shoulders again, the motion slow and gentle and soothing. “Severus, how are his hands coming?”

“Better,” Snape said, and returned to massaging in this new cream. He added more of it, and again Harry was a little startled by the chill of it. But it felt nice, and his hands weren’t hurting anymore.

He relaxed back into the chair, let his eyes fall closed once more. Part of him wanted to ask what they were going to do with the knowledge, but the majority of him honestly couldn’t be bothered to care. He was so tired, probably from the rage he’d let out earlier, or maybe from worrying, or maybe just because he was tired.

He wasn’t surprised when he drifted off to sleep right there in Snape’s chair, Snape’s hands gently massaging his own, Regulus still stroking his shoulders. Well, he was, but only in the morning when he woke up, and only because he apparently trusted Snape enough to sleep in his presence. Twice now, actually, which was strange.

He had no idea what it meant, and he had too much on his mind for it to bother him for long. After all, he had a session with Narcissa coming up, and he really wasn’t looking forward to it at all.
“She wants me to try going outside,” Harry said to Regulus after his most recent session with Narcissa. It had been a few weeks since his most recent issue had cropped up, and Narcissa and he had discussed some of where his anxieties were coming from. She’d spoken of him just leaving the rooms more frequently, and he’d done that. He’d started taking walks with Regulus around the inner parts of the manor, but apparently that wasn’t enough for her.

“Right away?” Regulus asked. He sounded slightly dubious, but he didn’t sound like he totally disbelieved Harry. “I thought that we were trying this in baby steps.”

Harry shivered. Just the idea of opening the door… “She didn’t say that I need to actually leave the steps,” he muttered. He shivered again. “I don’t… Regulus, I don’t know that I can.”

“I think that you can,” Regulus said immediately. “I know that you can. I know how strong you are, Harry. But if you don’t want to do this right now, you don’t have to.”

“I don’t know where you got the idea that I’m strong,” Harry muttered.

At those words, his head was tipped up so that he had no choice but to look Regulus in the eyes. His mate’s grey eyes were dark with something Harry couldn’t name, but didn’t find particularly frightening. “I know that you’re strong because you’ve survived,” he said quietly, his words forceful. “You’ve been through terrible things, and you haven’t let any of it get to you. You’re still sane.”

Harry laughed. “Minus a few issues,” he said, his words a little bit choked.

Regulus tilted his head in acknowledgement of the point. “But who doesn’t have some of those?” He leaned down and kissed Harry quickly, a gentle peck, then pulled back. “Do you want to try tonight, or would you rather wait until morning?”

Harry shook his head. “Not morning,” he said quickly. He knew that there weren’t too many people who lived here, but he still didn’t want to run into anyone. Not while he still didn’t have any control over his allure.

“Would you feel better if we invited Severus along?” Regulus asked, his voice oddly neutral.
Harry blinked at him. “If we invited… why?” The weird thing wasn’t necessarily that Regulus had asked, although that was strange, it was that there was a kneejerk response within him that had wanted to say an immediate, “Please.” Where had that come from?

“That wasn’t a no,” Regulus pointed out, his words oddly gentle. Like he was expecting Harry to catch on to something, but Harry genuinely had no idea.

“He’s been… nice, these past few times when I’ve seen him,” Harry said slowly. He was trying to figure out what Regulus was saying, and it wasn’t quite clicking for him. “Understanding, even. And he’s… pretty vicious. I bet he could protect me if something went wrong, if you were hurt.”

“Very true.” Regulus shook his head and smiled, then ruffled Harry’s hair. “I’ll ask him if he’d like to join us for an evening stroll, then.”

Harry glanced at the clock that Regulus had started keeping in their rooms, given that Harry couldn’t just cast a spell to find out the time. He still didn’t have a wand, after all, and part of him desperately wanted one, but the larger part of him couldn’t imagine going to Diagon Alley or someplace similar to get one. “It’s almost eight,” he protested. “Don’t you think he has better things to do with his time?”

Regulus just laughed at him, his expression fondly amused. “I really don’t,” he said, and patted Harry on the head once more. It was a little patronizing, but Harry didn’t mind.

Regulus stood after shifting Harry off of his lap, and wandered into the bedroom. Harry heard the low murmur of voices from inside the room, and imagined that Regulus was likely using the mirror he’d seen the two of them talking on. Then, Regulus came out of the room and handed Harry a thick green winter cloak. “It’s very cold outside today,” he said. “It was snowing earlier, and I’m not sure if it stopped or not.”

Harry slipped it on, the very gesture making everything feel more real. They left their rooms, and Harry stuck as close to Regulus as he could while they walked to the Professor’s rooms, which meant that Regulus basically kept one arm around Harry’s shoulder the entire time. Severus was waiting outside of his door, wrapped in a warm, dark grey cloak, looking for all the world like he had nothing better to do than go on a walk in the dark and the cold.

Harry didn’t quite make it outside that first night. He made it up to the door once again, and in fact made it to opening the door himself. But he couldn’t quite make himself take a step over the
threshold, even if he did think that the snow that was still coming down was beautiful, and even if a part of him wanted to go play in it, as he might have once done. It didn’t matter, though. He still couldn’t get himself to leave the house.

But he didn’t panic, and he didn’t break the wall again. He didn’t hurt himself, and he didn’t frighten Regulus, and Severus didn’t even seem to mind being drawn out of his room for what was ultimately a fruitless exercise. It wasn’t perfect, but it was a start.

ooOooOoO

Time passed, and as it did, Harry grew more able to control his fear of the outdoors. It wasn’t easy, but by spring he was managing to stand on the steps for several minutes, and by summer he was successfully taking brief walks between Regulus and Severus. He was still terrified that something was going to go wrong, but nothing had. The fact that nothing had gone wrong and nobody had tried to hurt him certainly helped to ease his fears, even if they weren’t quite going away.

It was on a day in late summer that he finally managed to go outside during the daylight. He hadn’t done it successfully yet, and it was Narcissa’s last recommended step before she would declare him “good enough” at dealing with his agoraphobia. Which didn’t mean that she would no longer speak with him about it, but did mean that she would stop being so strict about regulating his attempts to go outside.

Harry wouldn’t say that being out in the daylight was his most favorite thing, but he did manage to not freak out and flee back to the indoors. It was close, and he knew that he had to be cutting off the circulation to Regulus’ hand because of how tightly he was clutching at it.

“You know that we won’t let anything hurt you,” Regulus was saying, his voice calm and soothing. “You know that Severus and I will take good care of you.”

Harry closed his eyes and forced himself to relax. “I know,” he muttered. He drew in a deep breath, held it, then slowly released it. It helped, and when he opened his eyes he was able to let go of Regulus’ hand. For all of a second, but he was able to let go.

“Perhaps what Mr. Potter needs is some kind of a distraction?” Severus offered, and when Harry glanced at him, the Potions Master was looking at Regulus with one eyebrow raised. “I believe you had something in mind if we should make it out this far.”
Regulus looked blank for a moment, then he brightened. “That’s right!” He took Harry’s hand once more and tugged on him lightly, leading them even further away from the manor. It was still in sight, but Harry wouldn’t exactly say that it was within sprinting distance anymore. Still… Regulus looked almost excited, and the last thing Harry wanted was to disappoint him.

He followed, and tried to focus on Regulus rather than how shaky he felt being as far from the house as he was. It got easier when he saw that they were approaching a shed of some kind. If nothing else, if he started to panic, he knew that nobody would judge him for hiding in there until he either calmed down or passed out. He relaxed slightly, and settled even more when Regulus unlocked the door to the shed.

“Wait here,” he said to Harry, and Harry froze when Regulus let go of his hand and disappeared into the shed. He heard a clatter from inside, and then heard Regulus swear softly, and he took a step towards the door.

“Are you okay?” Severus asked quietly, and Harry jumped. He’d almost forgotten that Severus was with them because he was so intent on the shed, and on the fact that Regulus had gone inside and left him all alone… “Mr. Potter!”

Harry jumped again, then turned to face Severus. He knew that his eyes were wide, and knew that his breath was coming a little more quickly than he would have liked. “Sorry,” he said, his voice breathier than it should have been.

“It’s quite all right,” Severus said. He reached forward and rested a gentle hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Just breathe. Everything’s fine.”

Harry’s breath slowed at the touch of Severus’ hand, and he was too busy being relieved to question the feeling of relief he got from the touch. He heard Regulus emerging from the shed, and turned around to see what he’d been so excited about, and his breath caught in his throat.

His Firebolt. Somehow, Regulus had his Firebolt, or one that looked very much like it. Harry reached for it with shaking hands. “How,” he started, but couldn’t quite manage to finish the question.

“I had a bit of help,” Regulus said. In his other hand, he had two much less fancy brooms, and one of them he offered to Severus. “I know that Sev and I probably can’t keep up with you, but we thought you might enjoy some time in the air. Sev tells me you used to love it.”
“I did,” Harry whispered. He clutched the broom to him, his eyes closed. Then he opened them and smiled. “I don’t know if I can,” he confessed. “Because it’s awfully open out there. But I think I’d like to try.”

“That’s all we can ask of you,” Regulus said.

“Thank you both,” Harry whispered. Then he climbed onto his broom and took off.

The feeling… it was indescribable. He hadn’t been up in the air since Umbridge had confiscated the broom at the start of his fifth year, and he hadn’t realized how much he missed it until he was actually flying once more. He closed his eyes and savored the feeling of freedom, of the wind rushing through his hair, through his feathers…

Feathers?

Harry opened his eyes. He was up relatively high, and that wasn’t a problem. The problem was that he’d apparently taken on his Veela form, which he hadn’t done since Christelle had frightened him all those months ago. He swallowed hard at the sight of the black feathers that he could just see from the corner of his eye. “Regulus?” he called, a little bit frightened.

“It’s okay,” Regulus said, from startlingly close by. He was up on Harry’s right, and when Harry glanced to his left, he found that Severus was flanking him as well. “We thought something like this might happen. I would have said, but I didn’t want to frighten you.”

Harry frowned at his wings. “I really wish you would stop waiting for things to happen to me before telling me that there was a chance that something would,” he complained. But it was a mild complaint. He supposed he would have rathered not know than to have Regulus warn him and have nothing happen, getting him all worked up over nothing.

“Sorry,” Regulus said, but he didn’t sound particularly sorry. “How does it feel to have them out?” he asked, and nodded at the wings.

Harry closed his eyes again, the wind stirring his feathers and making him feel… Light. Happy. “Free,” he whispered, and then he was steering his broom into what he knew would be a steep dive.

Neither Regulus nor Severus made any attempts to keep up with him as he soared through the skies
in a series of increasingly daring maneuvers. Rather, the two of them stayed seated on their brooms high up, watching Harry and talking quietly to one another. Harry was glad that Regulus had such a good friend in Severus, even if he hadn’t known how close the two were until Severus had started joining them on these daily walks. It was good that Regulus had friends who weren’t him.

Harry flew and flew until he was too tired to fly anymore, doing tricks and twists and dives and corkscrews just for the sheer joy of being able to do them. Finally, finally, his wings returned to their normal place, hidden away so that Harry wouldn’t always have a physical reminder of what he was, and Harry started for the ground. Regulus and Severus joined him, and as Harry handed off his broom to Regulus, he whispered, “Thank you both so much.”


“It would seem that you were right,” Severus said with a sigh. “As you always are.” Severus returned his broom to Regulus as well. “Let’s hope that this year is better than the last, shall we?” Severus added to Harry.

Harry’s eyes followed Regulus. “I think this year has been pretty great,” he whispered. “Panic attacks and agoraphobia and uncontrolled allure aside,” he added with a twist of his lips.

“We could start doing something about that allure of yours,” Severus said quietly, and when Harry glanced at him, the Potions Master looked almost hesitant. “If you’d like, of course. If you feel ready. I don’t want to pressure you in any way.”

Harry breathed out, a bit shakily. “I think… I think I’d like that,” he said honestly. He trusted Severus to be kinder with him than he’d been the last time he’d tried to learn from the man, and wasn’t… he wasn’t afraid at all of making the attempt.

Regulus came out of the shed, a cobweb in his hair. “Did I miss something?” he asked, and blew on the cobweb that was dangling just in front of his eye.

“You’re a mess,” Severus muttered, the tone of his voice more fond than anything else. He reached out and brushed the web from Regulus’ hair, his fingers quick and gentle, and Harry was almost certain that he saw Regulus tilt his head ever so slightly into the touch. But it was over before he could really analyze it, although it did make him wonder…
“Still didn’t answer my question,” Regulus said cheerfully. He hooked an arm around Harry’s shoulders and the three of them started walking.

“Harry’s agreed that it’s time to start working on containing his allure,” Severus said quietly, and Harry knew that he definitely wasn’t imagining the sense of… of pride, he thought he could hear in Severus’ voice. It made him smile.

“That’s great!” Regulus said enthusiastically. “I’m so proud of you,” he added to Harry.

Harry’s smile, impossibly, grew even further. He could do this, with Regulus and Severus. He knew that he could.
Chapter Eighteen

When the time came for Harry to actually begin learning to contain his allure, which was around twelve hours later the following day, Harry was infinitely more nervous than he had been. “I can’t do it,” he said to Regulus, who stood at his side by the Professor’s door.

“Yes you can,” Regulus responded immediately. “I have absolute faith in you, and you’ve never done anything to make me feel as though my faith in you is unwarranted.”

Harry shook his head. “This isn’t like anything else,” he insisted. “I tried learning to Occlude in my fifth year. My failure to do that is what got Sirius killed!”

“Yes, but you and Sev didn’t get along well at that time, right?” Regulus shifted, and then his hands landed on Harry’s shoulders and Harry found himself being forced to look Regulus in the eye. “You get along well, now. You like him, don’t you?”

The words, for some reason, made Harry’s cheeks heat. “I do,” he said quietly. “He’s been nothing but kind to me since he arrived.” Harry took a deep breath. “And I did say that I would try it, didn’t I?”

“You did,” Regulus agreed. “That means that it would be terribly rude for you to just turn around and walk away. Sev would be so disappointed! I know that he’s just dying for company!” This last was said in an overly exaggerated manner, and Harry just knew that the door to the Professor’s rooms had opened behind him.

“Ahh, yes, however would I live with the disappointment?” the Professor asked dryly behind him. “Do come in, Mr. Potter, unless you’ve changed your mind. I promise that I won’t bite.”

Harry forced himself to relax, taking deep, calming breaths. He counted as he did so, until he didn’t feel like he needed to run away. “Of course,” he said with a small, nervous smile. He turned around and tried to keep the smile on his face as he followed Severus into his office.

The Professor didn’t remain in his sitting room, but instead led Harry through to a room he’d never been in. It wasn’t the Professor’s bedroom, but rather appeared to be an office of some kind that had been repurposed. The room was filled with cushions scattered across plush carpeting. In the center of the room, a lit candle floated. The candle likely wasn’t the only source of the dim light that suffused the room, but it was the most noticeable.
“Pick a cushion,” Severus suggested. “And Regulus, please do choose a cushion as well. And then shut up.”

Harry glanced at his mate to see his face having a strange combination of smiling and pouting. “I feel like you have no faith in me,” Regulus was saying. “You never had faith in me. That makes me really sad, Sev.”

“Somehow, I’ll survive knowing that I’ve upset you.” Severus shook his head, then gestured to the cushions. “Mr. Potter, please?”

Harry started, but then headed further into the room. He settled on one of the cushions, surprised to sink into it. It was more comfortable than it looked, and he let himself relax. “Like this, sir?” he asked. He wanted to give this an honest chance, more of one than he’d given it last year. He had to try.

“However you’re most comfortable,” Severus said quietly. He settled across from Harry, into a lotus position, his hands resting on his knees. “You’ll want to be able to look at the candle for what we’re trying today, so make sure that you can see it comfortably.”

Harry shifted himself around a bit, then found what he thought might be a comfortable position. He wound up seated much like Severus was on the cushion, and found that staring at the candle wasn’t really that hard to do. “What do I do next?” Harry asked. He could see without craning his neck.

“First, I want you to start regulating your breathing. Can you do that for me?” Severus’ voice was low and soothing, and Harry felt something in him easing at the kind way in which he spoke. It was very different from his fifth year, and Harry knew that he would respond well to it.

“I can try,” he said. He closed his eyes and focused on breathing in and out, the way that he did when he was starting to have a panic attack and was trying to head it off. Once he’d settled into a rhythm, he opened his eyes once more.

“Very good.” Severus’ voice was low and almost hypnotic. “Now, I want you to focus on the candle. Not on not thinking, because that won’t work for you. Just let the candle fill your field of vision, until you can’t see anything else. Ready?”

Harry breathed out, then tried to focus on the candle. He stared at it until his eyes started to water,
then had to blink away the tears that formed, his eyes stinging. “That hurts,” he whispered.

There was a small snort of laughter beside him from Regulus that hurt more than the stinging in his eyes. “I don’t think you’re supposed to stop blinking,” Regulus said, amusement making his words light.

“Regulus!” Severus snapped. “Although he is correct that you may still blink, he should know better than to pick on someone attempting to master this difficult art. Given that he never did.”

“Ooh, ouch.” Regulus clutched at his chest and fell backwards, the gesture overdramatic. “Always going straight for the heart, Severus,” he added from his new position on the floor.

Harry couldn’t help but laugh at Regulus’ antics. Unfortunately, the laugh made him lose track of his breathing and he wound up having to start all over again. It took several minutes for him to settle back into the routine of breathing while focusing on the candle, and as soon as he did he felt Regulus shifting beside him, and then heard him let out a small giggle.

That set Harry off again. When he got control of himself, he tried once more. It wasn’t working, though. Harry was hyper aware of Regulus and, now that he couldn’t quite manage to do what Severus was asking of him, he was terrified that Severus would return to the Potions Master he’d once known and would yell at him. Or would maybe tell him that he truly was hopeless, and he’d be stuck with his uncontrolled allure forever.

The more thoughts crept in, the harder Harry found it to actually focus on the flame. Finally, just as he was about to actually start crying from the way that his frustrations were rising, Severus blew out the candle. “That’s enough for today,” he said quietly.

Harry sagged in relief. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’m trying!” The last thing he wanted was for Severus to think that he was trying to waste his time. Harry wasn’t. He was working as hard as he could. It just… wasn’t working.

“I know that you’re trying,” Severus said quietly. He stood up and crossed the room to kneel in front of Harry. “Occlumency isn’t easy, and containing your allure will be just as difficult, and will require just as much discipline. I know that I was unfair to you our first time around with these lessons, but I promise that I won’t do that to you again. So will you keep trying?”

Harry took a deep, shuddering breath. “I’ll keep trying,” he said, his voice just as soft as the
Professor’s. “Thank you, sir,” he added.

Severus lifted a hand, then dropped it before he could make contact with it. “Practice your breathing tonight, okay? We’ll try again in the morning.” Then he stood and nudged Regulus with his foot. “And Regulus? Do try to behave yourself tomorrow.”

Regulus winced. “I’m very sorry,” he said, but he was grinning, and he didn’t sound particularly contrite.

“I bet,” Severus said dryly. He shook his head. “Get out of my rooms, both of you. I’ll see you at the same time tomorrow.”

Harry hesitated. “You don’t want to come on our walk with us?” he asked. He and Regulus had planned one for after the lesson just in case Harry was keyed up, which he was, and he’d just assumed that Severus would be joining them.

Severus’ eyes widened ever so slightly, then he dipped his head in acknowledgement. “I would be pleased to do so,” he said. “Let me just put on shoes.”

While Severus was doing that, Regulus helped Harry to his feet. “I’m sorry that I was disruptive today,” he whispered to Harry, pulling him into a quick hug.

Harry just shook his head. “It’s fine.” It wasn’t, but he wasn’t sure what he could do about it. The only solution he could think of would be if Regulus were to stay outside during the training sessions, and he honestly wasn’t sure that he was ready for that. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Severus, it was just…

Actually, why wouldn’t that work? Maybe that really was the best idea, as little as Harry liked it. He considered it during the walk, even as Regulus and Severus sniped at each other playfully over Harry’s head. Maybe…

Maybe that would work. Maybe next time he would ask Regulus to wait outside.

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Although he still wasn’t certain that it was the best idea, Harry did ask Regulus to wait outside during his next training session with the Professor. Regulus just smiled at him, kissed him on the forehead, and told him that he’d be reading in Severus’ living room, and that Harry should just call if he needed him.

Harry swallowed hard, then followed Severus into the room with the cushions once more. This time, Severus had him settle in again, then presented him with a vial of something. “What’s this?” Harry asked, confused.

“You’re still very nervous,” Severus answered, sounding as though he was choosing his words carefully. “I think that a Calming Draught might help you relax a bit more, help you ease yourself into the state we’re looking for. And then, once you know what it feels like, perhaps you’ll find it easier to reach that state without the aid of a potion.”

Harry took a deep breath. Severus could be lying. The potion might be something other than just something to calm him; it could be something that would hurt him. But… But Severus wouldn’t do that to him, and Harry knew it. He took another deep breath, then took the potion.

He felt the effects as soon as it went down his throat. It was like a blanket covering him, cushioning him from his outside concerns and fears. Everything felt floaty and warm, a bit like it had when he’d been briefly held under the Imperius Curse in his fourth year. He found it easy to relax, easy to regulate his breathing, even easy to focus on the flame of the candle.

Severus talked him through a few exercises once he’d settled completely, mostly more breathing exercises. He asked a few strange, unrelated questions, questions about potions that Harry had to actually think about, and Harry managed to answer them without breaking free of his trance-like state. Harry wasn’t sure what good it was doing, but he felt as though he was starting to get it.

When he left Severus’ office that afternoon, it was with a small smile on his face. He wasn’t there yet, he knew that he wasn’t, but he felt much better about the possibility of getting there after this session than he had after his first with Severus. Regulus, upon seeing him exiting with a smile, grinned back, the expression broad and open.

“I’m proud of you,” Regulus told him.

Harry blinked, a bit confused and still under the effects of the calming potion. “Why?” he asked, the word stretching out.
“Because you’re still trying.” Regulus kissed him then, soft and sweet, and Harry smiled up at him. They started back to their rooms, then. Regulus stopped him outside of the door to their rooms once they’d reached it. “Harry,” he started, then stopped, looking a bit awkward.

Harry frowned. “What?” he asked. Regulus hadn’t seemed any different lately. What was wrong? Had he done something wrong that he didn’t know about yet?

“You remember asking for a snake, right?” Regulus was smiling, the expression a bit awkward on his face, like he wasn’t sure if he should be smiling or frowning.

“Yeah. You told me that you hadn’t found the right one yet,” Harry said slowly. “Did you find one?” He started to open the door to their quarters.

“Well… sort of,” Regulus said, and stopped him before he could actually open the door. “Really, I was waiting to give him to you not because I didn’t have him, but because he was still being hatched. It’s a very lengthy process, procuring the kind of snake that we wanted for you.”

“We?” Harry echoed, a suspicion forming in his mind. “And just how lengthy are we talking?”

Regulus shifted awkwardly and cleared his throat. “I may have mentioned to the Dark Lord that you were interested in a snake,” he said. “And he thought that you should have the best snake available. A strong snake. One that’s capable of protecting you from just about anything. Unless there are roosters nearby, but not conjured roosters, because those don’t have much of an effect.”

Harry breathed out. “Regulus,” he started, then stopped. He took another deep breath. “If I open the door to our rooms, am I going to find a basilisk?”

“You might find a basilisk variant,” Regulus hedged. “He’s a baby, so he’s smaller right now. He’ll stay smaller, but he’ll still be bigger than your pillow when he’s done growing. And he probably won’t live for a thousand years. And his stare is fatal, but only if you undo the warding on his eyes. The bite, though, that’s still just as dangerous as it always has been.”

Harry closed his eyes and started counting backwards, holding on to his instinctive fright at the thought of going anywhere near a basilisk. “I don’t need a basilisk,” he finally managed to say.

“Yes, but we’d already started to process of hatching him when I found out about your unfortunate
last dealings with the basilisk at Hogwarts. And by then it was too late.” Regulus took him by the hand. “I’m sorry?” he tried.

Harry opened his eyes. Regulus did look genuinely contrite, and at least he’d warned him before Harry had stepped into the room to find the basilisk. “It would be very poor form to refuse a present that the Dark Lord himself helped with, wouldn’t it?” he asked, resigned.

“It would,” Regulus agreed.

Harry sighed. It would seem that he had a basilisk for a pet snake now, though he wasn’t entirely certain what he was going to do with him. He was half expecting to be terrified by a monster as big as the one in the Chamber of Secrets when he opened the door, but was pleased to see that he was wrong.

In fact, Harry couldn’t help but laugh when he spotted the mighty king of the serpents in his room, curled up in his basket. He was actually really cute, Harry found. And at the sound of Harry’s laugh, the snake immediately shifted, looked up, then slithered over to Harry and up his leg, so that he could coil around Harry’s chest and rest his head on Harry’s shoulders.

“~Are you my human?~” he asked, sounding far too excited at the very idea.

“~I suppose so.~” Harry responded. He reached out to pet the basilisk, eyeing the beautiful warding near his eyes. The wards glowed a dull red that would be striking in the dark, and matched the crest that had barely formed on his head. “~Do you have a name?~” The snake really was quite beautiful, he supposed. And if he raised him, it wasn’t like he would turn out like the one from the Chamber.

The snake shook his head. “~You may call me whatever you’d like.~” he said. He nuzzled against Harry’s shoulder. “~I will protect you and take care of you. You’re my human.~”


His words made Regulus light up. “Shall we talk about how to care for him?” Regulus asked.

Harry smiled. “I’d like that,” he said. And then he said to the snake, “~How does Salazar sound to you? He was the biggest serpent ever to live in Hogwarts.~”
“~Sounds like a name I can live up to,~” Salazar hissed. “~This human is your mate? I will protect him as well.~”

Harry’s grin widened. “~Thank you,~” he said to the snake, who wasn’t yet as long as Nagini was. He knew that Salazar would be a force to be reckoned with one day, if he wasn’t already. To Regulus, he said, “Let’s discuss the care and feeding of my very own basilisk, shall we?”

“We had the breeder make up a pamphlet for you,” Regulus said, and headed into the bedroom. “I just have to find it!”

Harry smiled after him. A basilisk, of all things. He wasn’t sure that he needed Salazar, wasn’t entirely sure that a basilisk was a good idea, but he supposed that it wouldn’t hurt anything. As long as Salazar didn’t bite anyone who didn’t deserve biting.

And he supposed it would make him feel more secure, to have a snake whose venom could easily kill with him most of the time. In fact, Harry thought he might be able to get used to having that level of security. Regulus was very nice, but eventually Harry knew he’d have to go out without him, or Severus, or Nagini. Hopefully, he’d never have to leave Salazar behind.

“Not even five minutes and I’m already attached to you,” Harry muttered to the snake, who just hissed at him wordless pleasure as Harry stroked his crest. Right. A basilisk. He could totally do this.
Now that he had Salazar, the snake accompanied him everywhere. It had the unexpected side effect of making Harry actually feel safe when he went outside, as he knew that the basilisk would kill anyone who attempted to touch him inappropriately. While his stare was disabled, his venom definitely wasn’t.

Now that he had Salazar, he found that Severus wasn’t accompanying him and Regulus on walks anymore, and Harry wasn’t sure how he felt about that. A part of him, a large part of him that he’d never expected, missed having the Professor around. That part of him was largely contented with the lessons in containing his allure, which were going… better than he’d anticipated. He still wouldn’t say that he was doing well, but they weren’t the disaster he’d once feared they would be.

He was making progress, or at least, he thought he was. Narcissa seemed to agree, but then, she was an eternal optimist. It amazed him how she could think he was doing well when he still had the occasional panic attack while outside with Regulus, particularly if Regulus left him alone out there, even with Salazar with him.

“Knut for your thoughts?” Regulus asked, gliding up beside him.

They were in the middle of a late afternoon, early evening flying session, and Harry had gotten himself lost in thought as he stared in the general direction of the sun, which was lazily drifting towards the horizon. “Just… progress,” Harry said vaguely, with a wave of his hand.

“As in, the progress you’ve been making?” Regulus nudged him with an elbow, carefully so as not to jostle him from his broom or startle him.

Harry smiled and shook his head. “Progress everyone thinks I’m making,” he corrected. “I don’t know that I actually am.”

“You’re out here with me, aren’t you?” Regulus nudged him again, then started gliding towards the ground. As the sun was setting, and as Harry knew that Regulus wasn’t quite comfortable flying at night, Harry followed him.

“Yeah, but I still panic if you leave me alone, even though I have Salazar.” Harry petted the snake who was coiled around his waist with one finger. Salazar wasn’t fond of being up in the air, but he was less fond of Harry being away from him while he flew, so the snake tolerated it. And by
tolerated it, Harry meant that Salazar tended to bury his head in Harry’s robes and nap until it was over. “And we don’t know how I’m doing when it comes to containing my allure.”

“That’s very true.” Once they were on the ground, Regulus took Harry’s Firebolt and walked in the direction of the shed. “But Severus seems to think that you’re making progress. He’s said so, hasn’t he?”

“With Occlumency,” Harry muttered. “They’re not the same thing, are they?”

Regulus just shrugged. He disappeared long enough to put the two brooms away, then returned before Harry’s heartbeat could really start to pick up. Even though he knew he was safe, logically, he still had trouble remembering it. And Narcissa told him that was okay, that it would take time, but Harry couldn’t help being a little bit impatient. He wanted to be better now, not five years from now or however long it took.

“Severus invited us over for dinner,” Regulus was saying as they started walking back to the manor.

Harry shifted closer to him, so that he was tucked under Regulus’ arm as soon as Regulus lifted it for him. “That would be nice,” he said quietly. It would be very nice to be distracted from the thoughts that occasionally got stuck in his head. He knew that he would heal at his own pace, and that he was still improving, and there was nothing to do about it but keep working. He knew that.

“I’m glad you like the idea. I already told him yes.” Regulus kissed him on the forehead as they walked.

Harry rolled his eyes. “What would you have done if I’d said no? Or if I’d had a panic attack of some kind and couldn’t go?”

Regulus just shrugged again. “I would have told Severus that something came up, and he would have understood. He probably would have been worried about you, too.”

Harry stopped just before they could re-enter the house, as he remembered something that had been niggling at the back of his mind for two months now, ever since he’d started these lessons with Severus. “Regulus,” he started, and then stopped. He wasn’t sure how to ask the question that was on the tip of his tongue.
“Harry?” Regulus shifted to look at him, and when he saw that Harry didn’t appear to be planning on moving anytime soon, leaned against the entrance.

Harry took a deep breath. Maybe, like ripping off a bandaid, it would be better to just ask. “Were you and Severus involved?” he asked, his words blurred together as he rushed to get them out.

“Ah.” Regulus stopped speaking after the sound and closed his eyes.

Harry’s heart dropped. “You were,” he breathed. “Did I… did being with me…” He swallowed and felt tears welling up in his eyes. He closed them to try and ward off the tears, but it didn’t work. He felt a few squeeze through the corners of his eyes. “Regulus, did I break you two up?”

“What?” Hands landed on his shoulders, and then he was tugged into a rough embrace. “No, Harry, you didn’t break us up. We broke up long before you were in the picture,” Regulus whispered in his ear, holding him close.

“It’s just that you two get along so well,” Harry whispered, his breath hitching as he tried to bring himself back under control.

“Of course we do!” Regulus rocked him for a few minutes, then said, “We just had incompatible needs, that’s all. It’s a thing that happens sometimes. We’re still very good friends, as you’ve seen.”

“Did you love him?” Harry asked, his voice small. “Do you still love him?”

Regulus’ arms tightened around Harry, the embrace almost painful. “I love you,” he said.

Harry flinched. “That didn’t answer the question.” He opened his eyes so that he could glare at Regulus, and Regulus had the grace to look ashamed. “Did you? And do you still?”

Regulus sighed. “I did,” he said. Then he nodded, the gesture somewhat reluctant, and said, “And yes, of course I still do. But I love you very much as well, and I don’t want you to doubt that.”

“I’m sorry that it didn’t work out between you two.” Harry didn’t pull away from Regulus, and instead rested his head on Regulus’ shoulder. “He seems happy when he’s with you, and I never
thought I would see him happy. He used to be so angry all the time.”

“Some of that was a facade he had to maintain,” Regulus pointed out. “And I know that he’s never been exactly fond of children. Teaching first years…” Regulus shuddered. “Severus had to have hated that.”

“Then why would he do it?” Harry asked, indignant. “Because he was a pretty awful teacher, you know. Neville had nightmares about him!”

Regulus laughed, the sound light and cheerful. “I don’t know why he did it,” he told Harry. “That’s a conversation you should have with him, over dinner. Which we’re going to be late for if we don’t go.”

Harry stepped back and straightened his robes and brushed the tears from his eyes. As he did so, Salazar popped his head from Harry’s robes. “~Did you have to squish me?~” the snake asked.

“~Sorry,~” Harry hissed to him, and stroked him under the chin until Salazar had turned into a metaphorical puddle of snake goo under his touch. “~Forgive me?~”

“~Keep petting,~” the snake demanded, his eyes closed with pleasure.

Harry continued to do so until he reached the door to the Professor’s rooms, and once he’d done so, he stopped and Salazar resumed hiding in his robes as though he’d never been there. Severus was waiting for Regulus and Harry, and had the dining room table laid out for them. There was a fantastic spread of fresh fruit, while Regulus and Severus enjoyed some kind of chicken dish. Part of Harry missed eating meat, particularly since the chicken smelled amazing, but he was mostly content with his fruit.

If Harry was being honest, the entire meal felt more like a date than anything else. It was strange, interacting with Severus like this, but then, he supposed the walks were strange as well. The entire situation, he supposed, was a strange one, and Harry didn’t know what to do about that, if anything. He felt safe with the man, in a way that he only ever really felt safe with Regulus. Harry didn’t know how to feel about that, to be perfectly honest. He didn’t know if he was supposed to feel a certain way, or if he was, he didn’t know what that way was.

“Harry?” Severus asked, his voice soft and almost hesitant, oddly enough.
Harry realized that he’d been staring, and combined with his silence that was probably fairly unnerving. “I’m sorry, S… Severus.” He stumbled over the name, but then recovered quickly. “What were you saying?”

“You were just being quiet,” Severus responded. “Regulus and I were a bit concerned.”

Harry brightened immediately, even if he still had no idea what he was feeling or how he was supposed to be feeling. “I’m fine. Sorry. Just… distracted.”

The rest of the evening passed quietly, and although Harry tried to join the conversation occasionally, just so that they didn’t worry about him, he didn’t manage often. He was too distracted, too focused on the strange feelings and the fact that he had no idea what they meant. When they moved to the living room, Harry cuddled up on the couch with Regulus and let himself drift as the two older men enjoyed a nightcap.

Regulus offered a sip of his to Harry, but Harry just wrinkled his nose and looked away. It smelled… gross, actually. He didn’t know why people enjoyed alcohol, to be perfectly honest. It made people mean and if it tasted anything like it smelled, it couldn’t possibly be any good. But Regulus and Severus seemed to enjoy their drinks, and Harry was content to cuddle up against Regulus and let himself drift off to sleep.

His other side, though, felt oddly cold. Like he wanted someone else there, and Harry couldn’t figure out what that meant. And then he was asleep, and it didn’t matter.

ooOooOoo

When he woke, it was to the news that the Dark Lord wished to speak with him, as they hadn’t seen each other in several months. Meetings with Voldemort weren’t exactly common, but they did happen with some regularity. Harry understood that Voldemort was worried about his horcrux, and by extension, him, so he didn’t resent the man’s intrusions into his peaceful life with Regulus too much. Especially since he was certain that Voldemort could have just killed him rather than allowing him to stay with Regulus. It would have been well within his rights, since Harry had essentially surrendered to him.

He went to the meeting with Regulus by his side, although Regulus waited outside for him once Harry was given leave to enter Voldemort’s office. As Harry settled in the chair across from Voldemort’s desk, he felt Voldemort’s gaze boring into him.
“How are you feeling?” the Dark Lord asked.

“Better than I was,” Harry said honestly. “I’ve been going outside more, with Regulus and Severus. I’ve started flying again. I hadn’t realized how much I missed it, honestly.” He smiled a little at Salazar, who was coiled in his lap. “Salazar helps.”

Voldemort’s laugh was quiet, but genuine. “You named him Salazar. Fitting, I suppose, for the King of the Snakes. I’m glad that you like him.”

“I do,” Harry said. “I wasn’t sure at first, because of what happened in my second year, but I very much do like him.” He stroked along Salazar’s crest, which was the snake’s favorite place, and was rewarded with a happy hissing sound.

“And your lessons with Severus? The ones for containing your allure?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t really run into that many people at the manor. Or any, really, other than Severus and Regulus. And Narcissa, but she Occludes regularly. And… I think that you do?” He didn’t know for sure, but he imagined that Voldemort did.

Voldemort inclined his head. “Of course I do,” he said. “There is one way to find out, and it would satisfy some demands that I’m getting from the Veela Court as well.”

Harry flinched, the memories of Christelle telling him how very good he’d be for breeding still very prevalent in his memories of his last interaction with the Veela Court. “I don’t want to visit them,” he said quickly. That was the last thing he wanted to do, even if they would let Regulus go with him because he was his mate.

“Of course not,” Voldemort assured. “They would never dream of asking. I believe that Christelle knows how much she offended you the last time she was here. But she would like, if you’re willing, to have another visit with you. To check up on you and see how you’re doing.”

Harry shook his head, then winced and shrugged. “I guess it wouldn’t be a terrible thing,” he muttered, not exactly enthusiastic about the idea.

“She would be able to safely see how your control over your allure is coming,” Voldemort pointed out.
As little interest as he had in dealing with the representative for the Court again, that thought was tantalizing. His allure hadn’t affected her last time, after all, and she’d definitely noticed it. She would be able to tell him if he was doing better, wouldn’t she? Harry sighed. “I guess it’s not an awful idea,” he finally said. “I would meet with her, if she came.”

Voldemort’s smile was just a little creepy, but Harry supposed the noseless Dark Lord couldn’t help it. “Thank you, Harry,” he said with genuine sincerity. “Perhaps if you meet with her again, I’ll stop getting messages from the Court about how I’m holding you prisoner by forcing you to stay indoors all the time.”

Harry couldn’t help the small burst of laughter that escaped him. “And are you intimidated by their angry messages?” he asked, before he could think better of it.

Voldemort just rubbed at his forehead. “You underestimate the damage a flock of angry Veelas could do,” he told Harry. “Just thinking about them assaulting the Manor in a misguided attempt at freeing you…” Voldemort gave a small, theatrical shiver. “It would be an absolute disaster.”

“I wouldn’t want that to happen,” Harry said. “Like I said, I’ll meet with her.”

“Thank you,” Voldemort said once more. “I’ll let you know when Christelle will be here, but I would imagine that it would be within the next week.”

Harry nodded. “Was there anything else you wanted?” he asked hesitantly. Not that he minded these meetings, but spending the afternoon with the Dark Lord wasn’t exactly the way he most wanted to spend his time.

“No, not at all,” Voldemort said, and nodded at the door. “It’s beautiful outside, you should go enjoy the weather. I’m sure that Regulus would be delighted to fly with you once more today.”

“He hasn’t complained yet,” Harry said with a small, shy smile. “Thank you, sir, for letting me keep him.” Then he ducked out of the office before Voldemort could respond, and dragged Regulus back out to the brooms. Flying had always been one of his favorite activities, and now that it was one of the few things he could actually do with his spare time other than read, it was even more so.

He really was lucky that Regulus didn’t seem to mind spending almost as much time in the air as he did on the ground. Things would have been much more depressing if Regulus weren’t capable of
enjoying himself as they flew together.
Chapter Twenty

“I don’t want to meet with her,” Harry was saying to Regulus as he paced back and forth outside of Voldemort’s office.

“You don’t have to,” Regulus answered. He was leaning against the wall, watching Harry with tiredly amused eyes. “I’m sure that the Dark Lord could send her away, and I’m just as certain that he would, if you asked him to.”

Harry shook his head and went to lean against Regulus. “No,” he said quietly. “I mean, you’re right, he probably would, but I’d rather not ask him to. He’s given me so much since I first got here.” Harry stroked a finger over Salazar’s crest and tried to smile. His snake let out a hissing sound of happiness at the touch. Most snakes weren’t cuddly, and Harry had never imagined the one that he got would be, but Salazar certainly seemed to be. Maybe it would change as he got older…

“He wouldn’t give you things if he didn’t want to,” Regulus pointed out. He curled an arm around Harry’s shoulders and pulled him closer. “But I do think that he would appreciate it if you met with Christelle. I know that the Court has been putting a significant amount of pressure on him for several weeks now, trying to make sure that your recovery is progressing well.”

Harry opened his mouth to respond, to say that he knew, but before he could do so, Voldemort’s office door opened and the Dark Lord himself emerged. “Christelle is waiting in my office,” he said, with something approaching a smile on his face. “She’s asked to meet with you alone, Harry, if you’re comfortable with that.”

Harry froze. “She can’t…” He swallowed. He still couldn’t forget that she’d wanted him to breed. “She can’t force me to go back to the Court, can she? If I’m alone with her, I mean.”

Voldemort’s eyes widened ever so slightly. “No, she can’t,” he said. “The Floo in that room is currently sealed off. She would have to leave the room in order to take you off the grounds, and Regulus will be waiting out here if she should try anything.” Voldemort paused, then nodded at the snake coiled around Harry’s waist. “And I would imagine that Salazar would have some strenuous objections if she should attempt to lay a hand on you.”

Harry relaxed. “Of course,” he said. He hadn’t forgotten about Salazar, how could he, but it was easy to forget that he was much more dangerous than any other kind of snake, what with the fast-acting properties of his venom. “Thank you, sir,” he added, with a quick bow of his head.
“Thank me by going in there and showing that harpy that you’re doing well,” Voldemort said, a hint of exasperation creeping into his voice. “Maybe once you’ve done that she’ll stop harassing me constantly for updates on your condition.”

Harry couldn’t help a small giggle, but ducked into the room before anyone could comment on it. There was Christelle, looking just the same as she had several months ago, prim and perfect and very blonde, sitting in one of the chairs by Voldemort’s desk. She nodded for Harry to take the other, rather than the couch he’d used last time.

The last thing that Harry wanted was to be in range for her to touch him, but Regulus was outside and Salazar was wrapped around his waist, so he complied with her wordless request. “You wanted to see me?” he asked finally, as the silence stretched between them once he was seated.

“We wanted to check on you,” Christelle replied carefully. “You were in very poor condition when last we met. Your mate was refusing to acknowledge you as such, you were half-starved, and your mental state was, at best, fragile. It has now been several months, and we judged it more than enough time for progress of some kind to have been made. So yes, the Court wished for me to check on you once more.”

“Well, you can see me, can’t you?” Harry asked, aware that he was being rude but not quite able to stop himself. He wasn’t comfortable with her here, in his space. He didn’t like her, for all that she had been helpful last time.

Her lips quirked up. “I can, yes,” she said, her amusement clear in her voice. “You seem to be putting on some weight, and some muscle as well. Have you taken to some form of exercise?”

“Flying,” Harry said shortly. “Every day, for a few hours.” Or close enough to it, anyway. Regulus didn’t like him going out in the rain and was convinced that Harry would catch his death if he did. All the magic in the world wouldn’t convince Regulus that Harry would be fine with a few warming charms, even now that it was summer.

Christelle’s eyes widened in startled surprise. “In your Veela form?” she asked.

Harry shook his head once, then hesitated. He shrugged. “Sort of?” He looked anywhere but at her. “I mean, I can’t typically control when I shift into that form, not yet, but it always comes out when I’m on my broomstick.”
“I see.” Christelle leaned back in her chair. Harry heard the creak of it. “You’ll grow more accustomed to it as you use it more often,” she said. “If you ignore it, you’ll never get used to it.”

Harry just shrugged. He wasn’t particularly interested in getting used to the thing that had ruined his life. He knew that he was stuck with it, but that didn’t mean that he had to like his other form. “Can you tell if I’m any better at containing my allure?” he asked suddenly.

Christelle frowned at him. “Have you been working on it?” she asked. “You should know that, even if you have, there’s no shame in not managing to control it very well. It often takes decades of practice for a male Veela to be able to control theirs, and some never master the art.”

“My teacher is a Master Occlumens, if that changes your opinion. He’s been patient with me, and I think I’m starting to get the hang of it.”

Christelle’s eyes narrowed. “A Master… that might help you, yes,” she said slowly. She closed her eyes, and Harry felt something in the room shift. It didn’t particularly bother him, probably because a Veela’s allure had never really had any kind of effect on him. Then the strange sensation cut off once more, just as quickly as it started.

“Well?” he asked, when Christelle remained quiet.

She breathed out slowly. “I don’t know what to tell you,” she said finally.

“What does that mean?” Harry couldn’t help but think that, whatever it meant, it wasn’t anything good. Couldn’t he just get some good news once in his life? Why did everything have to be such a struggle?

“Your allure is very well contained.” She didn’t sound happy about it, though. In fact, if Harry had to classify how she sounded, he would guess that it was something like shell shocked. “If I didn’t know that you’d just come into your inheritance last year, I would have thought that you’d been Veela since birth.”

“Why is that such a bad thing?” Harry bit his lip. This was good news. He thought it was good news, anyway. Why was it so bad? It was strange, yes, but Harry could handle being strange.

“Harry,” she started, and then she stopped and took a deep breath. “Harry, tell me, you and your
Mate, your both very close, aren’t you? You don’t spend much time without him, do you?”

Harry shook his head. “Regulus goes everywhere with me,” he said slowly. “He goes flying with me every day, eats with me, spends… most of every day with me. The only times he doesn’t actually spend with me are when I’m with my Healer and when I’m working with the Professor on containing my allure.”

She breathed out, the sound shaky. “And Harry, can you tell me about your relationships with both of those other people?” she asked. “Are you… do you feel particularly attached to either of them?”

Harry frowned. Of course he did! Severus was one of his closest friends now, and Narcissa knew everything about him. Why wouldn’t he be close to them? “What are you really asking?” he asked, because he was almost certain that she was trying to dance around the question she actually wanted to ask of him. He didn’t like that, and would greatly prefer it if she would just spit it out. Whatever it was.

“One of the reasons that your allure seems to be so well contained, I think anyway, is that you seem to have chosen a second mate.”

The words were such a shock that they physically hurt Harry. “No I haven’t,” he said through numb lips. “I’m mated to Regulus. You said that I was mated to Regulus, and that… that… that if I ever wanted to… that I would need to…”

“I did say that,” she agreed carefully. She went very still, as though she thought that he was about to lose his temper with her again. Maybe he was. Harry honestly didn’t know. “And apparently I was wrong. I’ve never seen a Veela take on a secondary mate before. Perhaps… perhaps it’s because of the… the lingering trauma, perhaps your magic has found a solution so that you won’t have to worry as much about having random partners.”

“I’m never going to have sex!” Harry snapped, before he could stop himself.

Christelle didn’t flinch. “And that may very well be the case. But that doesn’t change the fact that you have a weak secondary mating bond with somebody, likely either your Healer or your teacher.”

“I don’t,” Harry said stubbornly. He stood up. “And I’m done talking about this,” he added, which probably wasn’t the most mature response he could come up with, but it was the only one he had. Secondary mate? She was full of it. She had to be full of it. Regulus was more than enough for
Christelle stood as well, but made no move to block him. “Harry,” she called, as Harry started for the door.

Harry, frustrated and confused and terrified as he was, still stopped with his hand on the door. “Yes?” he asked, his voice small.

“If I’m right,” she started. Then she stopped and took a deep breath. “Harry, please, if you do have a secondary mate, if that’s the reason your allure has settled the way that it has, please let me know. There are many, many male Veela who cannot leave Court because of their allure. If this is a way for us to help them…” She trailed off, but Harry knew what she was trying to say.

“You aren’t right,” he said clearly. Because she couldn’t be. It just didn’t add up in his head. She could not be right. He didn’t have a second mate. But… but… “If you are, I’ll let you know,” he muttered. Then he fled the room before she could say anything else.

Regulus shifted away from the wall as soon as he appeared. “How did it…” He trailed off as he caught sight of the look on Harry’s face. Harry didn’t know what he looked like, exactly, but he imagined it couldn’t be the best expression he’d ever worn. “Are you okay?” Regulus asked.

Harry shook his head and swallowed around the lump that was rising in his throat. Regulus was his mate. Nobody else. Regulus had given him so much, given him everything, how could Harry dishonor that by forming a mating bond with somebody else? What was wrong with him?

“What do you need?” Regulus asked urgently. He came forward and wrapped Harry in his arms.

For the first time ever, it didn’t help. Harry shook his head and jerked away, and caught sight of Regulus’ hurt eyes the moment he did so. The tears that were forming in Harry’s eyes spilled over, and he took off running. He heard Regulus shout for him behind him, but Harry didn’t stop until he’d reached his rooms. There, he fled into the bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

Harry crawled into bed and curled up around his stuffed basilisk, Salazar hissing worriedly at him even as the snake slithered out of the bed and onto the floor. Harry ignored the hissing and just buried his face in the stuffed snake’s soft body, and tried to stop crying. He couldn’t. It wasn’t working, no matter how hard he tried.
He heard the click of the door opening, then another click as it closed once more. He thought that Regulus had left, and was surprised to feel the bed dip behind him. Regulus curled around him, his arms coiling around Harry’s waist exactly where Salazar had been only seconds before. “I don’t know what’s wrong,” Regulus murmured into his ear. “But I’m here with you. We’ll work through this, whatever it is. I promise,” he breathed.

The words, kind as they were, only made Harry cry harder. Regulus stopped speaking, then, and just held him until Harry cried himself to sleep.
Chapter Twenty-One

Harry woke up, his face crusty from the tears he’d shed overnight, warm from Regulus’ arms staying curled around him for the duration of the evening. He sat up slowly and, as he did so, Regulus’ arms fell easily away and his mate sat up with him.

“Feeling any better?” Regulus asked quietly, carefully, like he wasn’t sure that he wanted Harry to answer. Like he genuinely didn’t know what to expect from Harry.

Harry didn’t know that he could answer the question. He had a second mate. Regulus wasn’t enough for him, rather than him not being enough for Regulus. How could he be such a monster? Harry let out a hitching sob, and supposed that stood as answer enough for Regulus, who just sighed and pulled him close once more.

“I’ll take that as a no,” he muttered, even as he began to run his fingers through Harry’s hair. “Can I help you in any way?”

Harry shook his head and allowed himself to bury his face in Regulus’ robes for several minutes before reluctantly drawing away. “I think I need some time to myself,” he whispered, not looking up at Regulus’ face as he said it.

He didn’t have to look up to know how upset Regulus was by the words, given the way he tensed and jerked back, almost reflexively. Then he felt Regulus’ arms relax, felt him stroke his hair one last time, and then his face was being tilted up. He blinked back some of his tears to try to bring Regulus’ face into focus. “I’m going to go to my office,” he said quietly. He didn’t sound at all upset, in spite of the way he’d jerked back only seconds before. “If you need me, send Salazar. I’ll come immediately, okay?”

Harry nodded. “You aren’t…” He swallowed. “You’re not mad at me?” He couldn’t help asking the question, even though Regulus had every right to be mad at him. He just didn’t know why he had that right, not yet.

Regulus’ smile was immediate and soothing. “Not at all,” he said softly, and pressed a soft kiss to Harry’s forehead. “Needing alone time is a perfectly healthy thing. If anything, I suppose I’m a little startled that you didn’t need it earlier. It was just… unexpected, that’s all.”

Harry tried out a smile, but he couldn’t quite hold the expression. “Okay,” he said. He sniffled a
little bit more, and felt Regulus’ arms spasm around him, as though he couldn’t quite bear to let Harry go. Then he heard Regulus take a deep breath and draw back.

“‘I’ll be in my office if you need me,’” Regulus said quietly. “‘It’s just a few halls down from here. Salazar should be able to find it with no difficulty.”

Harry nodded, and kept his head down until he heard Regulus leave the room. Then he let himself start crying again, curling into his massive basilisk pillow. He felt Salazar curl up on top of him, heard his snake hissing nonsensical soothing words. When the tears finally stopped again, Harry’s head was aching and his face was sore and hot. He didn’t know how long he’d cried, but he knew that it had been for a long time.

He slid out of bed and headed for the bathroom, where he washed his face with cool water. That helped with his aching face, but did little for his headache. “Probably dehydrated,” he muttered to himself, and snapped his fingers. He wasn’t hungry, but he probably should eat given that he hadn’t eaten anything last night. It was probably part of what was causing his headache.

When the house elf appeared, Harry asked for some fruit with a pitcher of water, and the house elf obliged immediately. Harry knew that he wouldn’t be able to eat all of the fruit she brought, but knew also that Regulus would be happy to see the remains of the meal. And the water would help with his dehydration. He hoped.

He drank a glass of water and nibbled on some fruit, and studiously didn’t focus on the fact that he should probably be trying to figure out who his second mate was. He knew that he didn’t want it to be Narcissa, if only because she was married, happily so, even if her husband was currently in Azkaban. That meant… that meant that he wanted it to be Severus.

Harry shivered. Did he? Did he want it to be Severus because he didn’t want it to be Narcissa, or did he want it to be Severus because of Severus? Did it really matter? Harry trusted him, possibly more than Narcissa given that he was willing to be alone with the man and he still felt antsy being around Narcissa without Regulus. Did that mean… did it really matter?

Harry shoved the still-full bowl of fruit away, the little appetite he’d had gone at the realization that he might know who his second mate was. He knew that he wasn’t going to be hungry until he knew for sure, and even then he might not be hungry since he still didn’t know how Regulus was going to react.

There was nothing for it. Before he could do anything else, before he could make any decisions, he had to find out who it was. Was it Severus, was it Narcissa, or was it someone completely
Harry took a deep breath, then retreated to the bedroom. He’d never tried meditating without Severus, but he was confident that he could do it. Either he would find his answers during the meditation, or he would calm himself enough that he’d be able to talk coherently with Regulus. One of those two things would happen, whether or not he was completely successful. He settled on the center of the bed in the lotus position, closed his eyes, and began the breathing exercises that Severus had taught him.

He could practically hear the Professor’s voice, whispering instructions to him in his deep, dark voice. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Harry’s breathing stabilized and his mind cleared, and he found himself looking at his own mindscape. But this wasn’t quite where he wanted to be. Yes, the walls were there, strong and holding, which meant that his allure was being contained. At least, that’s what he thought it meant. But he wasn’t looking for that, was he? No. He wanted to see his bond to Regulus, and to see if there was another one there. And if there was, he wanted to know who it led to.

He felt a sensation not unlike taking a Portkey, and his mindscape blurred around him. He found himself standing in a dark place, with two glowing strands in front of him. One was thick, strong, and a vibrant shade of white. Harry reached for it, and was hit with a sense of Regulus that was strong enough he almost believed his mate to be in his mind with him. It was warm and comforting and safe, and Harry wanted to just curl up inside of that light and let it wash over him forever. But he’d come with purpose, and so he turned to the second strand of light. This one was thinner, paler, far less vibrant. But it appeared to be growing, even as Harry reached for it. He was immediately hit with a sense of Severus, not quite as strong as the sense of Regulus, but strong in its own way. Harry still felt warm and comforted and safe, but there was something else there. Something darker, like a hunger. He didn’t know how to explain it, but it made him shiver with a feeling he couldn’t quite name.

Harry swallowed hard and closed his eyes and forced himself out of his own mindscape. He came back to himself to find Salazar puddled in his lap, hissing his concern. “~I’m okay,~” he told the snake, a bit shakily. At least he knew now who his second mate was. It was Severus. That was… that was good. He thought.

At least he knew that Severus and Regulus got along. That made it okay, right? He hoped. But there was nothing for it but to talk to Regulus about it. He wouldn’t know how Regulus felt until he spoke to his mate, and so so so Harry should do that.

He slid out of bed for the second time that day and walked to the door, where he paused with his hand on the handle. “~You’re coming, right, Salazar?~” he asked, a bit weakly.
Salazar immediately slithered up to curl around his waist. “~I would never leave you alone. And besides, your sense of smell is inferior. You’ll need mine in order to find that mate of yours.~”

“~You don’t know that’s who I’m looking for,~” Harry said weakly. “~I could be… I could be going to fly.~”

“~You’re not,~” Salazar hissed and then began to give Harry directions.

It didn’t take long to reach Regulus’ office, and once Harry was there he had to steel himself against a sudden, strong urge to flee. Fleeing would do no good at all. He had to… he had to tell Regulus. Regulus deserved to know that, somehow, Harry had found a second mate. He just… he really didn’t want Regulus to be upset with him, and he was so afraid…

“~The only way to find out is to ask him,~” Salazar pointed out, and Harry realized that he’d been hissing to the snake as he thought about what would happen if Regulus was angry.

“~Sorry, Salazar,~” Harry said, and then tapped on Regulus’ door. “Can I come in?” he called through the heavy wood to his mate.

“Harry!” Immediately the door swung open, and Harry found Regulus standing on the other side, wide-eyed with surprise. “I thought… I thought you would send Salazar if you needed something,” Regulus said, but stepped back to let him in. “Did you come with just Salazar?”

Harry nodded, and flushed when Regulus hugged him. “It’s not like I came by myself,” he said quietly, not letting himself fall into the embrace as he might have once done. He needed to tell Regulus, so that Regulus could either hate him or forgive him, and then maybe… maybe then he could relax.

“I’m still proud of you,” Regulus said, and began to back Harry towards something. Harry only realized it was a couch when his legs hit the seat of it and he sat down reflexively, then Regulus curled up to join him, pressing close to him. “Now. You’ve been upset about something, and I’m really hoping that you’re here to tell me what it is that you’ve been so upset about.”

Harry nodded and swallowed. “I saw Christelle yesterday, and it… it didn’t go well,” he said quietly. He wrapped his arms around Regulus and sighed as his mate melted into him, his head resting on Harry’s chest.
“I never would have guessed,” Regulus said dryly.

Harry fought down a small laugh. “She told me that… that I’d… that I’d started to form a secondary mate bond, and that she’d never seen that happen before. And I… and all I could think about was how much it would hurt you to know that I’d…” Harry couldn’t force the words out around the lump that was forming in his throat again. How much it would hurt Regulus to know that he wasn’t enough, was what he didn’t want to say, because it was terrible and cruel and not true, but the words were trying to come out of his mouth anyway.

“It doesn’t hurt me,” Regulus said quietly, carefully. He didn’t tense in Harry’s arms, didn’t try to pull away. “If anything, I’m happy that you’ll be getting something that I could never give you. We already knew that I wasn’t going to be enough for you, that eventually you’d need someone who could sate your more… carnal urges. If that comes with the security of another mating bond, Harry, I’m not at all upset.”

Harry’s arms tightened around Regulus as the rest of him sagged in relief. “You’re not mad?” he asked for the second time that day, his voice just as small. “You promise you’re not just saying that?”

“I swear that I’m not angry with you,” Regulus said, and shifted so that he was able to lean up and kiss Harry, the touch of their lips soft and sweet. “I could never be angry with you for something that isn’t your fault, that couldn’t be your fault. I do admit, I am a bit curious as to who it is, though.” And then he added with a genuine, mischievous grin, “It might be a bit awkward if it were my darling cousin Narcissa. She might be uncomfortable with that, given that she loves her husband very much and has a son your age.”

Harry shook his head, a small snort of laughter escaping him. He’d forgotten that Narcissa was Regulus’ cousin. “It’s Severus,” he said shyly.

Immediately, Regulus brightened. “Well, that’s wonderful then,” his mate said cheerfully. “You know that Severus and I are already good friends, and I know that he’ll take such good care of you, and that he’ll be more than able to fulfil those needs of yours that I can’t.” Harry flushed at the mention of his needs, and Regulus continued quickly. “And surely you’ve noticed how prickly the man is, which means that you’ll still have me for all the cuddles and comfort you could need.”

Harry couldn’t help the laughter that burst from his lips. “You’re right,” he managed to gasp out. He couldn’t quite imagine cuddling with the Professor, or crying himself sick in his arms like he’d done with Regulus. “Thanks for that,” he added, once he’d calmed down.
“Always a pleasure to lend a hand,” Regulus said cheerfully. “Although I do confess that you might be surprised by how cuddly Severus can be when he’s in the right mood for it.” After dropping that small bombshell, Regulus tugged a still-startled Harry to his feet. “Now. I think that we should probably go talk this over with him, and see how you feel after that. I think you’ll feel much better once we speak with him, don’t you?”

Harry wasn’t entirely sure that he liked that idea, but it did have some merit. He was still shaky, still a bit frightened, and more than a little confused. But surely, surely if Severus was his second mate, the Potions Master deserved to know it. And also, Harry knew that he wouldn’t truly be able to settle now that he’d figured it out until he’d also spoken with Severus.

So he nodded, and allowed himself to be towed off in the direction of Severus’ rooms, Regulus’ arm curled around him while leading the way.
Chapter Twenty-Two

The last thing that Harry wanted was to knock on the door, but he wasn’t in charge of that. Regulus was, and he wouldn’t be deterred. “I really do think that it would be better if you were to just get it out of the way. What’s the Muggle phrase? Like ripping off a bandaid, right?”

Harry sighed. “You’re not wrong,” he said glumly. But what if Severus hated him after he found out? What if… what if it went as badly as Harry feared that it would?

He didn’t want to tell Severus. How was he even supposed to try and have that conversation, anyway? He reached out and grabbed Regulus’ hand before his mate could knock. “Don’t!”

Regulus stilled. “Why?” he asked. He didn’t try to dislodge Harry’s hand.

“I don’t…” Harry cleared his throat. “I don’t know what to say to him. How to say it. If we should even say anything at all, really. What if he hates me?”

“He’s not going to hate you,” Regulus said immediately. “If I thought there was even the smallest chance of Severus reacting poorly, you know that I would go ahead of you and speak with him before you did.” Regulus dropped his hand, only to stroke his hand through Harry’s hair. “I promise you, I think he’ll take this well.”

“But you don’t know,” Harry said, and looked down. He bit his lip. There really was no way of knowing, not without actually talking to Severus. And Harry didn’t think that he could bring himself to do that.

“You could always ask me.” The voice came from behind them both, and Harry jumped. Regulus, though, just looked amused.

“Severus,” Regulus said with a nod. “Harry and I need to speak with you, regarding something rather sensitive and important.”

“I never would have guessed,” Severus said dryly. “Please, won’t the two of you join me in my rooms?” He stepped around them and opened the door, his head bowed. But even though Severus’
face was hidden, Harry could just barely make out the edge of a smile on the parts of Severus’ face that he could see.

“Thanks,” Regulus said cheerfully. He curled an arm around Harry’s shoulders once more and, when the door was opened for them, steered Harry into the room. Harry couldn’t have pulled away if he’d wanted to, and admittedly, he wanted to. If Regulus hadn’t been holding him, he was almost certain that he would have fled.

Severus allowed them a moment to settle on the couch, Regulus still holding on to Harry, and then asked, “Does anyone want any drinks?”

Harry shook his head. He didn’t think he could stomach anything right now. Regulus didn’t have that problem, but, out of respect for Harry’s desire to just get it over with if he was going to do it at all, he just shook his head. “We’re good,” Regulus said calmly. “Why don’t you go ahead and sit down? I think you’ll want to be seated for this.”

Severus’ eyes narrowed. “I don’t know that I like the direction this conversation is headed in,” he said grimly. He settled on the chair across from the couch, though, his face now set in a scowl. “Whatever it is, it would likely be best if you were to simply tell me.”

Harry took a deep breath. He opened his mouth, then he closed it again and he looked to Regulus, a bit helplessly. Regulus looked back at him, his eyebrows raised. Clearly, he intended for Harry to be the one to tell Severus. Harry opened his mouth once more, only to snap it closed again. “Please?” he asked Regulus, his voice soft and pleading.

Regulus shook his head. “You know that this isn’t something I should do for you,” he responded. He reached out and stroked Harry’s hair with a gentle hand. “I think you can do this. In fact, I know you can.”

Harry sighed and looked down at his hands. “I…” He took a deep breath. He couldn’t get anything else out. He knew that Regulus was right, that he had to be the one to tell Severus, but… but he just wasn’t managing it.

He heard Severus shift in his chair, and then was startled by gentle hands taking his own. Severus was kneeling in front of him, staring up at him. “Whatever it is, Harry, I won’t be angry with you,” the Potions Master said.
The words eased something in Harry, whether they were true or not. And he knew that there was a chance that they weren’t true, that even though Severus meant them now, he might not be able to stop himself from getting angry once he knew what Harry had to say. And if he did get angry, it wouldn’t necessarily be his fault. If there was one thing Harry had learned over the course of his sessions with Narcissa, it was that emotions were strange things that couldn’t always be controlled through logic.

So he took a deep breath and, even though he was still nervous, forced himself to speak. “You know that I had a meeting with Christelle yesterday, right? That she wanted to check up on me, and so I agreed to see her?”

Severus nodded, not moving from his position on the floor. “I did know that,” he confirmed. “And… from what I understand, it did not go well.” His eyes darted to Regulus as he spoke.

Harry made a face. “You two really need to stop talking about me behind my back,” he complained.

Regulus’ small snort of laughter made Harry’s cheeks flush. “We’ll try,” he said, but Harry doubted that they would. Severus certainly didn’t look like he was even considering the notion.

Harry let out a huffing breath, but didn’t pursue it any further. “Anyway. I met with Christelle, and it went badly, mostly because she told me something that I wasn’t expecting, something that I didn’t even know was possible.” Harry sighed and looked down at his hands, which were now safely entwined with Severus’. He couldn’t even twist them together, and settled for squeezing Severus’ hands instead.

“What did she tell you?” Severus asked, his voice infinitely patient. He still didn’t release Harry’s hands, and Harry found himself almost pathetically grateful for the point of connection.

Now that he knew about the second mating bond, he couldn’t forget about it. Severus’ touch felt just as safe as Regulus’ always did, and now it made perfect sense. He was Harry’s other mate, so of course he’d be safe for Harry to touch.

And he would probably take the news as well as Regulus had, which had been… well, Regulus hadn’t exactly taken it well at first, but if that was the extent of Severus’ reaction, Harry thought that he could probably handle it. “She told me that I was developing a second mating bond,” Harry said in a rush.
There was a beat of silence. “I didn’t think that was possible,” Severus said, and sat back on his heels. He didn’t release Harry’s hands, though, which Harry took to be a good sign. “Did you figure out who that secondary bond was with?”

Harry swallowed. “With you,” he whispered, and closed his eyes and didn’t look up. He couldn’t bring himself to.

He heard Severus breathe out, the soft exhalation the only indication of his surprise. “And what do you think of that, Harry?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper. His thumbs stroked over Harry’s hands, the gesture soothing, welcoming.

“I was glad that it was you and not someone else,” Harry confessed. Then he went silent. He didn’t know what else to say. He still couldn’t quite bring himself to open his eyes, and he knew that if Severus weren’t holding his hands they would be trembling.

“Then I’m glad that I’ll be there for you,” Severus said simply. He continued to stroke his thumbs over Harry’s hands, the touch just as soothing as it had been. “Harry, won’t you look at me?”

Harry exhaled and forced himself to open his eyes. Severus was still on the floor, still kneeling in front of him, and his expression was the warmest, the most open that Harry had ever seen. It was enough to make Harry’s cheeks flush ever so slightly. “Hi,” he whispered, not sure what else to say.

Severus’ lips curled into a smile. “Hello,” he responded. “Did you think that I’d be angry?”

“He was terrified of it,” Regulus said when Harry didn’t answer immediately. His hand was on Harry’s back, now, stroking soothingly. “He wasn’t sure he wanted to tell you at all.”

“I’m glad you did.” Severus shifted so that he was in a slightly different position, closer to Harry’s face. “May I kiss you, Harry?” he asked, his voice still soft and warm.

Harry shivered at the words, a shiver of… of want, the likes of which he’d never felt, going down his spine. “Y-yes?” He wasn’t entirely sure, but he thought that he might like that. It seemed different from the times Regulus had kissed him, and Severus hadn’t even done it yet.

There was just the slightest hint of amusement in Severus’ eyes as he asked, “Are you certain?”
Harry glanced to Regulus, who just smiled at him. “He won’t hurt you,” Regulus said. “And even if he did, I’m sitting right here. It’s not like I’d let him.”

Harry closed his eyes, then forced himself to open them. “Yes,” he said more firmly.

Severus shifted once more, then leaned up and pressed a kiss to his lips. It lasted far longer than Regulus’ kisses normally did, and Severus swiped gently at Harry’s bottom lip with his tongue. Harry, startled, parted his lips, and found that Severus explored his mouth with gentle licks, eventually coaxing Harry’s own tongue into playing.

When Severus withdrew, Harry was panting for breath, trembling, his cheeks pinked. “Thank you,” Severus murmured, and let go of his hands. He raised one hand to cup Harry’s cheek, then leaned up and kissed Harry once more, this one just a gentle touch of their lips, before pulling back.

Harry’s breath started to speed up, his cheeks heating until he was certain that they were bright pink. He looked down at Severus, who was staring up at him with that small smile, and he… he wanted, more than he’d ever wanted anything in his life. And he didn’t know what to do with the strange feeling welling up inside of him.

It was liquid and warm, yes, but it was so hungry, and Harry… Harry didn’t like that he felt like that. He didn’t know what it was, but he… he didn’t like it. It coursed through him, like fire, and he flinched away from it.

Immediately, he felt Severus draw back ever so slightly. “Harry?” His voice was sharp, concerned. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t…” Harry couldn’t breathe. He knew what he’d been feeling, and he never wanted to feel that. Lust. He was feeling lust. He wasn’t… he didn’t…

He couldn’t turn into that kind of monster. He refused. Christelle had warned him that it would happen, Narcissa had warned him as well, had tried to prepare him, but he hadn’t wanted to listen. He hadn’t wanted to believe that he would be capable of something so monstrous.

His breathing was speeding up as he tried to suck air into his lungs. It wasn’t working. He was… he was going to be… he didn’t want to want Severus like that! He didn’t even know if Severus would want him like that! What if he was like Regulus?
“It might have been too much for him,” Regulus said quietly. “Harry, can you breathe for us?” Regulus’ hand began to move on Harry’s breath, trying to give him something else to focus on, but Harry couldn’t manage to do what Regulus was asking.

“Should we…” Severus trailed off.

It was clear that Regulus knew what Severus was asking, even though Harry had no idea. “Yeah, do it,” Regulus said.

“Harry, can you drink this for me?” Severus asked after a moment, and Harry tried to focus on him, tried to take the vial from him so he could do what Severus was asking. But he couldn’t manage it. He tried to, because Severus was asking. His mate was asking, but he just… he just couldn’t.

“Sorry,” he managed to gasp out.

“It’s okay,” Severus said soothingly. “I’m just going to help you drink it, if that’s okay.”

Harry nodded, and Severus tipped the potion down his throat and stroked his throat until he swallowed. It was disgusting, and it burned going down, but Harry felt himself calming almost immediately, until he was resting against Regulus, his breathing slow and even.

He felt his eyes drooping closed. He’d thought that it would just be a calming potion, but apparently it wasn’t. He drifted off to sleep, without even enough energy to be irritated that he’d been sedated.
When Harry woke up he was, rather predictably, not alone in the room, although he was alone in his bed. Except for Salazar, of course, who was hissing irritably at… Narcissa? Harry scrubbed at his eyes and sat up, his head still a bit woozy from the effects of the potion. Narcissa was settled on a chair next to the bed, ignoring Salazar and reading quietly.

She snapped her book closed the moment that Harry sat up. “How are you feeling?” she asked quietly, calmly.

Harry flinched at the soft words. “Never better,” he muttered. It was sarcasm, and she knew it to be, because she just stared at him until he looked down. “Pretty terrible,” he admitted. “I wasn’t…” He swallowed. “I wasn’t expecting…”

“I know,” she said quietly. “We did try to warn you, but I suppose there’s a large difference between being told that one day you’re going to eventually feel lust and actually feeling it for the first time.”

Harry shivered at her words and drew his knees up to his chest. “I don’t like it,” he whispered. He looked down at his knees, and then at Salazar when his snake wound himself around him. “I don’t… how do I make it stop?”

“Oh, Harry,” Narcissa whispered, her voice aching in sympathy. “You can’t just turn lust off, you know. It won’t go away just like that. It’s a perfectly natural progression of events, particularly now that you have Severus as a mate.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t want it.” He didn’t. The last thing he wanted was to feel that burning heat inside of him once more. Was that what they’d felt when they’d… when they’d…

He still didn’t remember most of his assaults. Over the months, bits and pieces had come back to him of some of them. He could remember fragments only, and never wanted to remember the full thing. Why would he want to feel something that they’d all felt before he’d killed them? The very thought of it… he found himself shivering again, the room growing unbearably cold suddenly.
“Harry!” Narcissa snapped. She shifted, and then Harry felt a warm blanket settle over his shoulders. “You’re allowed to feel whatever you need to feel here, you know that, but please don’t hurt yourself over this.”

Harry just blinked at her. Hurt himself? Is that what he’d been doing? That didn’t… “I don’t want to feel the burn,” he realized. That was why it had gotten cold. He’d lost control of his magic because he was afraid of the heat of lust, of the way that it would make him… of whether it would make him into a monster like…

“And I understand that,” Narcissa said. She didn’t settle back into her chair, but instead sat on the edge of Harry’s bed. “But Harry, darling, you’re going to feel lust. It’s part of being human.”

Harry looked down at Salazar and stroked a finger over his crest, making the snake hiss in contentment. “I’m not human,” he said flatly. “Not anymore.”

“It’s part of being a Veela too,” she said, not deterred in the least. “In fact, according to what I’ve learned from Christelle, it’s even more a part of being a Veela than a human. You’re not going to be able to shut off these emotions, you know.”

Harry continued to stare down at Salazar. “I can try,” he whispered. He shivered again, in spite of the heat of the blanket. “I can’t do this, Narcissa.” Why did anyone think he could? Maybe it would be best if he just… if he just…

“Stop that!” There was a sharp flare of heat, and then he felt pain bloom across his cheek. Harry flinched and looked up at Narcissa, his eyes wide with shock. She’d slapped him. She’d actually… she’d never done that before. “You stop that line of thought right there,” she said coldly. “I haven’t spent the past year working with you just for you to give up now, Harry Potter.”

Harry just shrugged and looked back down. “I’ve fought for so long,” he whispered. “And every time we make a step forward I seem to take another back. I can’t… I’m so tired of fighting.” He was. He felt like he’d been used up, like he was wrung out and just… just done. He wanted to be done, had never wanted to be done as badly as he did now.

“I understand,” she said softly, soothingly. “And perhaps hitting you wasn’t the appropriate response. I’m sorry for that. It’s just, Harry, I suppose that I’ve grown frustrated as well.”

Harry flinched. Those words hurt more than the small slap had, and he focused Salazar once more
and tried to blink back the tears that flooded his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“That’s not…” Narcissa let out a small sigh, an irritated noise that only made Harry huddle further in on himself. “That’s not what I meant,” she said finally. “I’m not frustrated with you. I never could be frustrated with you. I’m frustrated with the life you’ve led that’s led you to this point, and at the way you never seem to catch a break. I keep thinking that things will get easier for you, and they just… never do.” She touched his hair. “I’m sorry, Harry.”

Harry swallowed around the lump in his throat. “It’s okay,” he whispered. It wasn’t okay, but he got where she was coming from. He knew that she genuinely cared about him, and that was the important thing. She hadn’t meant to hurt him.

Narcissa breathed out slowly, like she was wrestling with her temper. “It isn’t okay,” she said quietly. “And I’m so sorry that you’ve led such a life that you genuinely seem to believe that it is.”

Harry didn’t know how to respond to those words, and Narcissa almost never made him talk when he didn’t know what to say. So he just stayed silent and focused on petting Salazar, who was always appreciative of his attentions.

“Let’s talk about your fears regarding Severus,” she suggested after the silence stretched into something uncomfortable. “You fear the lust, obviously, that you felt when he kissed you.”

Harry flinched again at the memory of that warm, creeping hunger that had spread through him. “It was awful,” he whispered. “I don’t… what if I turn out like they all were? What if I hurt them, or if I hurt Severus?” And, unspoken, there was another question. What if Severus hurt him? What if Severus didn’t stop when Harry said? What if...

“There is not a world that I can think of wherein you would turn into a rapist,” Narcissa said bluntly. “Not as you are, not with everything you’ve been through. So let’s work on wiping that fear out right now, because Harry, you’re still upset that you hurt people who hurt you.”

Harry shrugged. “They didn’t deserve to die.” It was one of the largest remaining points of contention between himself and Narcissa. Narcissa wanted for him to forgive himself for what he did to the men and women who’d attacked him, and Harry… Harry couldn’t. No matter what they’d done to him, he’d still killed them, and he didn’t think he’d ever forgive himself for that.

“So you say,” Narcissa said. “But Harry, that’s my point exactly. You’re never going to do to
someone what was done to you. And certainly you won’t do that to Severus, because you’d never want him to suffer the way that you have.”

Harry glanced up at her. Her eyes, soft and blue, were steady as she stared back at him. “You think so?” he asked, his voice small.

“I know so,” she promised. She reached out to him, gently touched his hair again, and Harry leaned into the touch. “You won’t ever hurt someone the way that you were hurt, least of all Severus. Because, Harry, I think that you’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

“I love Regulus,” Harry said immediately. He’d told her that numerous times, had in fact told her first before he’d ever dreamed of telling Regulus. Why would she…

“You can love more than one person at the same time,” she said calmly. “And Harry, that’s okay. I’m sure that neither Regulus nor Severus are going to mind that you love both of them.”

Harry looked away again. “If you say so,” he muttered. He wasn’t entirely sure that he believed what she was saying, as pretty as the words were.

“I do,” she said calmly. “What other fears do you have, Harry? What else concerns you about this new relationship with Severus? Surely it wasn’t just-”

“What if he hurts me?” Harry blurted out, interrupting her. He hated even thinking it, much less thinking it enough that it actually frightened him, but… but he did sort of think it, and he hated himself for it.

“He won’t,” Narcissa said immediately. “You fear your allure getting out of control, and Severus hurting you the way that so many others have?”

Harry couldn’t look at her as he nodded.

“That’s an understandable fear,” she said softly, gently. “Harry, nobody expects you to be immediately okay with this. Nobody expects that you’re just going to jump into bed with Severus, least of all Severus. But… but do keep in mind that Severus has been around you for months, and he’s never once hurt you, has he?”
Harry shook his head. “No,” he said quietly. “He’s been… he’s been very kind.”

“He loves you,” Narcissa whispered. “He won’t hurt you like that. I’d like to tell you that he’d never hurt you, that the two of you will never fight or bicker, but I think you know how unrealistic that statement would be. But I promise that he will never, ever hurt you like that.”

Harry closed his eyes and nodded. “Okay,” he whispered. He could accept that. Because Narcissa was right. Severus had had… many opportunities to hurt him in that way if he’d wanted to. He could have done it when Harry was first panicking in his office, when Regulus didn’t even know where he was, and he hadn’t. He’d been kind, and calm, and gentle, even then. He just… he just had to keep reminding himself of that.

“Thank you,” he added quietly.

Narcissa just smiled at him. “You don’t have to thank me,” she said. “Working with you is a pleasure, Harry.”

“Even when I can’t get my shit together?” Harry asked, a hint of humor, genuine humor, entering his voice.

“Even then,” she said. She stood, then, and said, “And now, if it’s okay, your two mates have been waiting outside while I spoke with you. I think they’d like the chance to speak with you as well, because Severus is quite concerned that he hurt you inadvertently.”

Harry flinched. “Yeah,” he muttered. He looked down at his hands, feeling immediately guilty for worrying both Severus and Regulus. He hated that he couldn’t control himself when he started to panic.

“And Harry?” Narcissa paused, and held the pause until he looked up at her once more, meeting her soft gaze. “Please be gentle with yourself. Remember that you’re still recovering, and that you’re allowed to be as upset as you need to be, whenever you need to be.”

And then she was gone, the door staying open behind her. Regulus came in first, followed several beats later by an incredibly hesitant Severus. Regulus settled on the bed next to Harry and reached immediately for one of Harry’s hands. Harry allowed it to be taken and offered his first mate a small, tired smile. “Hi,” he said, his cheeks flushing a little in embarrassment. “And hello, Severus,” he
added, offering him that same smile. If it was a bit more fragile, a bit more shy, well, there was nothing he could do about it.

“Hello,” Severus responded.

“How are you feeling?” Regulus asked. He rubbed at Harry’s hand with a gentle thumb.

“Better,” Harry said. He glanced at Severus again. “Embarrassed. I’m so sorry for panicking.” His cheeks heated again and he dropped his gaze once more.

He heard the soft whisper of movement, and then felt the other side of the bed dip. A gentle hand took his other hand, and Severus stroked over his hand the way that Regulus was. “It’s nothing to be sorry about,” Severus said softly, but firmly. “Your panic is understandable, Harry. I’m not at all offended, or upset.”

Harry smiled, a bit helplessly. He stared down at his lap because he wasn’t entirely sure of where else to look. “I’m glad,” he said, because he didn’t know what else to say.

Regulus shifted so that he was leaning against Harry, and when Harry glanced at him, he realized that his first mate looked exhausted. “Well, now that that’s all over with, I think it’s time for bed,” Regulus said with a small sigh. “It’s four o’clock in the morning,” he added.

Harry groaned and flopped back on the bed dramatically, displacing Salazar who immediately hissed his displeasure as he slithered off the bed. “And here I thought my days of waking Narcissa at all hours were over,” he groaned. He freed one of his hands, the one that Regulus held, and threw it over his eyes. At least that explained why he was still so tired.

“She doesn’t mind,” Regulus and Severus both said, in perfect stereo. When Regulus dissolved into tired laughter, Severus continued with, “There isn’t a single one of us, not Regulus, myself, or Narcissa, Harry, that would mind being woken at any hour to help you.”

Harry smiled at the words, and removed his hand so he could look at Severus. “Thanks,” he said quietly, a bit shyly.

Severus’ smile was oddly shy in return. “You are most welcome,” he said. He raised the hand that he still held to his lips and pressed a gentle kiss to it before releasing Harry. “I should let you and
Regulus get some sleep,” he said, and stood.

“Do you want to stay with us?” Harry asked, the words escaping him before he could stop to think about them.

Severus paused. “I… are you sure that you’ll be okay with that?” he asked, stumbling a bit over his words.

Now that he’d said it, now that he had the idea, Harry found that there was little he wanted more than to have Severus sleep with them. “Just to sleep,” he said quickly. “But yes. I think so.”

Severus closed his eyes while he appeared to consider. When he opened them, they were soft and warm. “I would like that,” he said. “Just make sure that you tell me if you change your mind.”

Harry nodded. “I will,” he said. He shifted in the bed so that he was closer to Regulus and patted the side opposite Regulus. “Do you need to change?” he asked, a bit belatedly.

“I can have a house elf bring me some things,” Severus said. “I’ll just do that in the living room. Why don’t you two get situated, and I’ll join you?”

Harry nodded, and Severus left the room, closing the door carefully behind him. Harry curled into Regulus and let his eyes slipped closed. “What if I need to change?” he heard Regulus ask quietly.

Harry just shook his head. He was almost certain that Regulus was already in his pajamas, because whatever he was wearing was softer than his normal clothes. “You don’t,” he said, a bit sleepily.

“You’re right,” he said. Harry felt his fingers carding through his hair as he started to drift off to sleep. “I’m proud of you, Harry.”

Harry let out a sleepy sound of inquiry.

“For asking Severus to stay,” Regulus clarified. “He was so worried that he’d hurt you.”
Harry heard the door creak open and then close once more. “Telling on me, Regulus?” Severus asked, and Harry heard some genuine amusement in his voice.

“Always, Sev,” Regulus answered. He sounded tired too, and Harry regretted once more that he’d driven Regulus to such levels of exhaustion. It seemed like all he did was stress Regulus out…

But before he could really start to dwell on it, before he could work himself up, he felt the bed dip once more, and then felt Severus slide under the covers. Severus pressed against his back, then, not so close as to be alarming, but close enough that Harry could feel his presence with every breath he took. It was… it was nice, and Harry felt himself spiraling down to sleep before he could really stop himself.

Chapter End Notes

Good news everyone! This story was outlined originally at 30 chapters (which I realize that you didn’t know), and so we were approaching the end. But I realized as I was writing chapter 27 (yes, I write ahead so that there’s not much of a gap in updates if my muse decides to wander away for a few weeks) that there was still so much more I could do with it, so you all are gonna get so much more. How much more, you ask? I have no idea. I’ve just started fixing up the outline. But more. That I promise.
When Harry woke the following morning, it was to the feeling of Severus’ long fingers carding their way through his hair, stroking and smoothing. It was similar to what Regulus tended to do when he wasn’t paying attention, but it felt slightly different. Different patterns, maybe, or different finger shapes, Harry didn’t really know. He knew that he enjoyed it, though, and found himself curling closer to Severus.

“Good morning,” Severus said.

“Morning,” Harry responded, a bit shyly. He felt amazing, well-rested and content in a way that… that he hadn’t felt in a very long time. It was… shockingly nice, actually.

“Regulus is getting you breakfast,” Severus said. “He didn’t think you’d mind being left alone with me.”

Harry shook his head. “It’s fine.” He shifted so that he was even closer to Severus, needing the contact. He felt like he’d felt when he’d first mated with Regulus, like he needed to be close to Severus at all times, just like he’d needed to be close to Regulus at all times. It was… there was something different about it, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on the differences.

“If you’re certain,” Severus murmured. He didn’t protest when Harry shifted so that he was practically sprawled on top of him, and in fact helped support Harry by curling an arm around him. “What are you doing?” he asked, sounding almost amused.

“Getting comfortable,” Harry answered.

“You never climb on me like that,” Regulus complained, but he didn’t actually sound sad. If anything, he sounded just as amused as Severus had.

Harry reached out with one hand towards Regulus and made a grabbing motion. “Come here then,” he suggested. “And I promise that I’ll climb all over you, too.”

“I could do that,” Regulus said, but made no move to come join Harry and Severus. “Or you could
get out of bed and have some breakfast.”

Harry sighed and didn’t move, letting his head droop to rest on Severus’ shoulder. “Or you could come back to bed,” Harry suggested. He wanted Regulus there as well, though he was having trouble articulating the reason. He didn’t even know if there was a reason, or if it was just something he… wanted.

“I could do that,” Regulus said again, and Harry smiled when he felt the bed dip beside him.

He sighed when Regulus curled close to him and Severus, becoming a warm, solid presence at his back. He didn’t know why he was so happy to have both of them as close as they were, but he was overwhelmingly content with both of them in the bed with him. Some unknown tension he couldn’t define released and he sagged and let his eyes drift closed once more.

“We can’t just stay in bed all day,” Regulus pointed out.

Harry opened one eye and glared at him. “We can,” he said, a bit stubbornly.

Severus let out a huff of air that might have been a chuckle. “Or we could go do something that might help you with your constant feelings of restlessness, more than reading potions books or going flying, even.”

Harry brightened. “Like what?” he asked. What could they possibly do that would be better than flying? There were only so many things he could do without a wand, after all, and he still didn’t have one of those.

“Like getting you a replacement wand,” Regulus said.

Harry froze. “No.” The word slipped out before he could think about it, but once he did think about it, he didn’t regret it.

Severus ran a hand through his hair. “Why not?” he asked.

“I’m not going out in public,” Harry responded immediately. The last time he’d been out, when he’d
tried to go to Diagon Alley… “I can’t.” He managed to go outside now, and hadn’t had a panic attack… well, hadn’t had an outdoor related panic attack in weeks, but that didn’t mean that he wanted to push himself. What if he freaked out in the middle of Diagon Alley?

“Of course you can,” Regulus said immediately. “Severus and I will be with you the entire time. You’ll be perfectly safe, and even if you start to have a poor reaction, we can remove you immediately. But I don’t think it’ll be the problem you think it will.”

Harry shivered, and then he couldn’t stop. “Don’t ask me to,” he begged. He hid his face in Severus’ shoulder, although he didn’t think that Severus would be any nicer about this than Regulus was being.

“I think that this is something that you need to do, Harry,” Severus said gently. “Just think, you could have a wand again. You could defend yourself without having to rely on Regulus or myself.”

“Which isn’t to say that Severus and I won’t always be here, because of course we will, but we think you would feel better if you could keep yourself safe. I hear that you’re quite the duellist.” Regulus stroked Harry’s back as he spoke, the touch soothing and careful.

Harry shuddereded again. “This is the worst,” he complained, not moving to lift his head from Severus’ shoulder.

“What is?” Regulus asked.

“Having two of you to push me out of my comfort zone,” Harry muttered. Now he lifted his head, but only to glare at both of them even as Regulus’ lips twitched, as though he was trying to contain his smile. Harry’s eyes narrowed, and Regulus abruptly rolled over, but not before Harry heard his soft snickers. “I hate you,” Harry announced even as he shifted away from Severus.

“That’s not very friendly,” Regulus said through his snickers.

“Regulus,” Severus said in a scolding tone. “What Regulus means to say is that we understand how stressful this will be for you, Harry, but we promise that we’ll be with you every step of the way. You’ve seen how violent Regulus can be in his defense of you, and I’m sure you trust that I’m equally capable.”
Harry sighed. “I do trust you,” he said, looking down. “Both of you.” Then he grimaced. “Which is, I guess, why I’m letting the two of you talk me into this. I want it known that I’m strongly objecting.”

“Our objections are noted,” Regulus said with an amused sort of graveness.

Harry’s eyes narrowed again. “And I don’t want to go to Diagon Alley,” he added. Because he didn’t think he could handle it if he was expected to. Of course, he didn’t know what other wandmakers existed out there, but surely there had to be some.

Regulus looked genuinely surprised by his words. “Of course we’re not going to take you to Diagon Alley,” he said, with soft gentleness. “Harry, we both understand that you’re in no way ready for such a trip.” It went unsaid, though Harry could clearly hear it in the undertone of Regulus’ words, that there was a good chance that Harry would never be ready for such a trip after what had happened the last time he’d been there.

“Besides, technically Regulus and I are both still dead,” Severus said. “We can’t take you to Diagon Alley. It will have to be someplace else. We were actually thinking of a place near Durmstrang, since there are more supporters in that area than not.”

Harry sighed and relaxed. He wasn’t being asked to brave Diagon Alley, at least, not yet. “Okay,” he said quietly. “I think I can manage that. But you… you both promise that you won’t let anyone hurt me if my allure does get out of control, right?”

“Of course,” Severus said immediately.

“Absolutely,” Regulus agreed.

Harry nodded once and wrapped his arms around himself. He didn’t like this idea, but… but a wand sounded like a good idea. He’d almost forgotten what it was like to have one of his own. And it would be nice to be able to check the time on his own again, since Regulus kept forgetting to put in a Muggle clock for Harry. Aside from the fact that it would be nice to start practicing magic once more.

Okay, fine. Apparently, he was going to go and get a wand.
The three of them landed in the middle of a semi-crowded commons area, close to a large fountain. Harry immediately shifted so that he had his back to the fountain and was facing the people of the area. He heard Salazar hissing from where he’d curled around his shoulders, and Harry lifted one hand to remind himself that the snake was still there. His other hand was held by Regulus, who had his wand out in his other hand. Severus, on his other side, looked just as willing to hex anyone that moved oddly.

Nobody did, though. Sure, there were a few stares, but most people just continued moving as they had been, and Harry imagined that the few stares he did get weren’t related to his allure, but were related either to his identity or to the large snake coiled around his shoulders. And those who did stare didn’t linger, either, and didn’t attempt to follow them when Regulus gently tugged on Harry’s hand to get him moving.

Harry walked in between Regulus and Severus, so tense that he thought a strong wind might be enough to shatter him. He hated this. He was so on edge, waiting for something terrible to happen. The fact that nothing was happening wasn’t even enough to settle him down. He was so sure that something was going to go wrong…

But it didn’t. In fact, everything went fine, right up until they ducked into a small, out of the way shop that Harry didn’t quite manage to catch the name of. The shop was… eerily reminiscent of Ollivander’s, although Harry knew that wasn’t where he was.

The young man that approached from the shadows seemed more amused than anything else to see them there. “Here for your second wand, Mr. Potter?” he asked, his grey eyes twinkling in a way that was reminiscent of Dumbledore’s perpetual twinkle. His long black hair was tied back in a low-hanging ponytail.

“You know who I am?” Harry asked, startled.

The young man just winked at him and handed him a box. “I think you’ll find that this wand will suit the nature you’ve found yourself with these days.”

Harry took the box and opened it. It was a long, slender wand that was an odd color. It was almost a red, but was probably more brown than not in different lighting. He touched it with trembling fingers, then lifted the wand. His magic practically sang with joy and a sound like wind chimes went off as soft blue and green sparks leapt from its tip. “Oh,” he breathed. He hadn’t had a wand in forever, and this one… this one might just be perfect.
“Yeah, I think that’s a good fit for you,” the wandmaker, or who Harry thought was the wandmaker, said. “Rosewood and unicorn hair, freely given from a mare’s head. It’s a wand that would be well-suited for a healer of any kind, while you would have found your last wand to be suited to war. But you, Mr. Potter, are clearly no longer suited to such things.”

Harry’s eyes darted up, but the strange wandmaker, who was managing to be at least as strange as Ollivander, had his back to Harry and was fidgeting with something.

“The cost of the wand?” Severus asked abruptly, a bit stiffly.

“Oh, that.” The wandmaker waved his hand airily, like it didn’t matter. Maybe it didn’t, Harry didn’t know. “Six Galleons,” he said. “Drop it in the box on your way out, or if you’re Apparating, just put it wherever. I’ll find it eventually.”

Regulus let out a small snort of laughter that he covered up with a cough. He set the requested amount on the counter beside the wandmaker, who was already wandering away, his eyes gone vague. “Shall we?” he asked. “Unless, Harry, you feel up to exploring—”

“No.” Harry glared at Regulus. He’d done this, he’d come out to get a wand, and he had that. He didn’t want to risk exploring and having something happen, like his control over his allure fading or a panic attack starting.

“Don’t tease him, Regulus,” Severus said with a long-suffering sigh. “Harry, if you would take my arm, I’ll Apparate us back to the Manor.”

Harry did so, and then got to enjoy the dizzying feeling of Apparating, which he’d hated each and every time it had been done with him. They reappeared in his rooms, Regulus appearing shortly after them.

Harry flopped back on the bed, his wand still in his hand. He brought it up to his face so he could study it. He’d been wrong. It really did have a reddish tint that was more prominent now that he was in more direct light. He smiled at it and let his hand fall back to the bed. Then he sat up, to see both Regulus and Severus watching him with what could only be called soppy expressions.

He wrinkled his nose at them. “Do you think I could be a healer?” he asked, in an effort to distract them.
“I don’t see why not,” Regulus said immediately. “I think you can be anything you put your mind to.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “I think you’re going to need to do some more work on your potions,” he said. “But otherwise, yes, I think something can be worked out. Perhaps Narcissa would be willing to take you as an apprentice.”

Harry blinked, then he beamed. “You think so?” he asked.

“She does seem inordinately fond of you,” Regulus said with a nod. “I don’t see why not.”

Harry flopped back on the bed again and studied his wand once more. His wand. Those words had a nice ring to them. He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed having one until he had it back again.
Chapter Twenty-Five

Harry didn’t quite have the nerve to take up his normal session time with Narcissa with his questions about being a Healer, so he waited until after they were finished with the normal, therapeutic part of the conversation. Yes, he’d went outside yesterday, yes, he was happy to have a wand, yes, he was adjusting to having Severus as his mate as well.

That last one required a bit more conversation than Harry preferred, but he had to admit that at the end of it he did feel much better.

It was when Narcissa was gathering her things to leave that Harry finally had the confidence to say, “Can I ask you a question that has nothing to do with my therapy?” He didn’t look up as he said it. He didn’t want to see her face when she told him that she didn’t think he could handle it.

Narcissa immediately stilled, he could hear her stop moving. “You know that you can ask me anything,” she said gently. “Although, you know that I reserve the right to not answer, depending on how personal the question is.”

Harry swallowed. “It shouldn’t be personal,” he said. Then he fell silent, trying to gather his courage. If she said no… well, Harry would think of something else to do with himself eventually, but he’d genuinely liked the idea when it had been posed to him three days ago.

A delicately manicured hand landed on his shoulder. “You won’t get an answer unless you ask,” Narcissa pointed out.

“I was just… wondering…” Harry stopped and took a deep breath. “I was wondering if maybe you’d ever thought about taking an apprentice. You know, in healing.” He swallowed and his eyes darted up to search her face.

She didn’t look utterly disgusted with the idea, which Harry supposed was a good thing. In fact, she looked more thoughtful than anything else. “Is that something you think you would be interested in?” she asked, and raised one finger to her lips to tap at them.

Harry nodded. “Yeah,” he said. He drew his new wand and fidgeted with it for a bit. “I… when I got the wand, the wandmaker said that it was good for healing. And ever since he said that, I haven’t been able to let go of the idea. I know that I’m probably the last person you’d ever think of
to be a Healer, but I-

“I think you’d be very good at it,” Narcissa interrupted, and Harry glanced at her face once more. She was smiling, the expression warm and gentle. “I think that you would be compassionate with your patients, and that you would be a particularly good Mind Healer if that’s what you want to do. But Harry…” She trailed off and sighed.

Harry flinched. Here it came. The bad news, because there was always bad news. “Yeah?” he asked. He looked down again. He didn’t want to be looking at her when she said that she wouldn’t teach him.

“I’d be happy to teach you, but you need a lot of base knowledge to start with that, while I could teach it, would not be my preference. The subjects at Hogwarts were chosen for a reason, and you would need an excellent grasp of several of them before you could truly be a Healer.”

Harry sagged in relief. “I know that,” he said. He smiled a little as he looked back up at her. “I didn’t mean that I wanted you to try and teach me now, because I know that I’m not ready. I just meant that, when you thought I was ready and I thought I was ready…”

“When both of those things are true, I would be thrilled to take you on as an apprentice,” Narcissa said firmly. She reached out and ruffled his hair, her touch light and gentle. “There are few people I know of who will be as well-suited to the career as you will.”

Harry beamed at her. “I think I’m going to as Severus to teach me potions,” he said, a bit shyly. “I know that we didn’t work together so well when he was teaching it at Hogwarts, but things are different now, and I think I’ll be better able to manage it.” He hoped so, anyway. He knew that he wouldn’t be able to handle it if Severus snapped at him the way he’d done at Hogwarts. There were still many, many things that could send Harry into a tailspin, and undeserved anger was definitely one of those things.

“I’m sure he’ll be delighted to work with you.” Narcissa tousled his hair once more, then pulled back. “You’ll have to tell me how it goes the next time I meet with you, okay?”

Harry just smiled at her and waved. “Okay,” he agreed as he waved.

Narcissa vanished from the room with a small pop, and Harry leaned back in his seat and sighed. Then he stood, stretched, and left the study where he’d taken to having his therapy sessions.
Severus and Regulus were in the living room, curled up together, each one reading a different book.

Harry hesitated only for a moment before climbing between them, snuggling in before either one could really react.

Regulus let out a small huff of laughter, then curled an arm around him and pressed a kiss to Harry’s forehead. “Good session?” he asked.

Harry nodded. “It was.” He fidgeted a bit more, shifting around until he was comfortable and ignoring the small noises Severus made when he was accidentally jabbed with one of Harry’s pointy elbows. “Narcissa and I talked about me maybe becoming a Healer,” he added once he was settled.

“And what did she say?” Severus asked. He caught Harry’s hand when Harry started to fidget once more, and Harry hid a small smile behind a quiet cough.

“She said that she’d be happy to take me on, but I have to learn a lot of the information that would normally be taught at Hogwarts first. And so I told her that I was going to ask you, Severus, if you would teach me some things. Maybe about potions. And other things.”

He heard Severus sigh, the sound long and drawn out. “You know that the only reason Voldemort decided not to kill me when he discovered my treachery was because he wanted me to do just that?” Severus asked.

Harry jerked his head around to stare at Severus, his eyes wide. “What?” he asked, his voice hushed. He hadn’t known that Severus had been so close to death.

“The Dark Lord wished for me to teach you things other than Occlumency,” Severus said. “I was the best candidate for such a thing, in spite of our… rather unfortunate history. It is, in fact, expected of me to teach you anything you wish to know that I am capable of teaching.”

Harry blinked up at him, a little bit hurt, though he couldn’t explain why. “Oh,” he said, his voice tiny. That meant that Severus wasn’t working with him because he wanted to, but rather because he had to. What else wasn’t he doing because he wanted to?

“What Severus means to say is that he’d be delighted to teach you anything you want to know,” Regulus interrupted, and there was something irritated in his voice that made Harry flinch. “Isn’t that
Severus straightened, his whole body going tense. “Of course that’s what I... Ah. I see.” Severus shifted Harry so that he was facing Severus, so that he was seated more in Regulus’ lap and could see more easily. “Harry, I’ll admit that I wasn’t thrilled about the prospect of teaching you at first,” he said carefully.

Harry looked down. “I know,” he whispered. How could Severus have been thrilled to teach him when Harry had so very much not wanted to be taught by him? The two had never gotten along well, not before Harry’s transformation. But things had gotten so much better that it was easy to forget about the bad times they’d gone through.

“It’s been a very long time since I’ve resented being asked to stay and teach you,” Severus whispered. He leaned in, cupping Harry’s cheek with one hand, forcing Harry to look up, to meet his gaze. “It’s one of the best parts of my day, now, working with you, and Occlumency isn’t even one of my favorite things to study. I can’t imagine how much I’ll enjoy the chance to teach you something that I’m truly enthusiastic about.”

Harry sighed and relaxed, a small smile blooming on his face. “I’m glad,” he said, and ducked his head again, a bit shyly. “Thanks.” Then he laughed a little and added, “But you know that no matter how enthusiastic you are, there’s still a good chance that I just won’t get the subject material, right? I’ve always been awful at potions.”

Severus tilted his head up once more. “That’s why we’re going to start over with the basics,” he said, then leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to Harry’s lips.

“You two are disgusting,” Regulus said, interrupting the moment. “Kissing in my lap? Gross!”

Severus chuckled, then leaned over Harry and kissed Regulus as well. “Better, you brat?”

“Nope.” Regulus’ arms tightened briefly around Harry. “I need one from Harry, too.”

Harry shifted and twisted in Regulus’ arms to press a quick kiss to Regulus’ lips before drawing back. “Now are you happy?” he asked, lightly teasing.

Regulus let out a considering hum. “I don’t know,” he said. “I think I’m feeling a bit uneven.
Maybe Severus should kiss me again?"

“I feel like this might be a never ending cycle,” Harry muttered as Severus kissed Regulus again obediently. And then, of course, Regulus suggested that Harry kiss him once more as well.

Instead of doing so, Harry thwacked him over the head with one of the decorative pillows they kept on the sofa, and the couch exploded in the following pillow fight as a result of a stray spell that nobody would admit to firing. Nobody was harmed, but Harry laughed until his sides and stomach ached and it hurt to move.

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Even though Harry knew that it wasn’t going to be the same as it had been in the past, Harry couldn’t shake the feeling of dread that consumed him as he headed for Severus’ lab. Regulus had offered to go with him, but Harry had turned him down. He’d thought that he could do this, thought that he trusted Severus enough to understand that things were very different from the way they’d once been, but apparently he was wrong. Apparently he didn’t trust Severus at all, which he knew wasn’t fair.

Still, he made himself keep going, Salazar hissing encouragement to him from where he was curled around Harry’s waist. And when he reached the door to Severus’ lab, he made himself tap politely and wait for a response to enter the room.

Severus took one look at him and frowned, the expression far less severe than even his most neutral expression at Hogwarts. Being here had, oddly enough, softened the potions professor. Or maybe it was the fact that he was now mated to Harry that softened his demeanor.

Either way, Severus crossed the room and touched him gently on the cheek. “Nervous?” he asked, his tone as calming as it normally was in his Occlumency lessons.

Harry relaxed at the familiar, gentle voice. “Yeah,” he said, and laughed a little shakily. “I don’t know why. It’s not like I don’t trust you to be kind to me while we’re working. You’ve been perfect about Occlumency, and that went terribly the first time around.”

“But it was just for one year that we had trouble with that,” Severus pointed out. “I taught you potions for the entirety of your time at Hogwarts, and it never went well. It’s hard to forget about things like that when we’re entering new territory.”
Harry nodded. “Thanks for being patient with me,” he said, and leaned forward so that his head rested against Severus’ chest.

“It’s never a problem,” Severus responded. He curled his arms around Harry, and Harry sighed and started to relax even more.

Things weren’t the way they’d once been. Severus liked him a lot, maybe even loved him, and would never treat him the way that he’d once done while they were at Hogwarts. This Severus was a very different Severus, and honestly, he knew that he was a very different Harry as well. He’d survived much worse than glares from a Potions Master when he’d made a mistake on a potion.

Harry took a deep breath, then pulled away. He offered Severus a shy smile and said, “Well, I guess we should get to work then.”

Severus’ returning smile was soft and affectionate, and he stroked his hand over Harry’s cheek with gentle kindness. “Okay.”

By the end of the lesson, Harry was convinced of two things: One, that he would never be a Potions Master like Severus, and two, that Severus had a great capacity for both patience and kindness when he was moved to indulge in them. The patience was demonstrated when Harry blew up his cauldron, showering them both with near-boiling potion, and the kindness was demonstrated when he helped calm Harry down and helped him clean up, and only gently scolded him for the mistake which caused the accident.

Harry wasn’t sure if he would ever master potions, but he was sure that he was willing to try again after that.
Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Notes

Two characters die in this chapter. They aren’t main characters in this fanfic, but they were in the original series. Please don’t say that you weren’t warned, also, please don’t yell at me because of who I kill. I’ve had a very bad week and I probably won’t react well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Harry’s lessons in potion making went well enough that Regulus and Severus decided to add a few more ‘classes’ to his schedule. Harry might have resented it, but Regulus was working with him on duelling, and Harry had always adored Defense Against the Dark Arts. If Regulus taught him a few actual Dark Arts, well, Harry didn’t mind that either. It wasn’t like he was required to use them or anything.

And those additional lessons went just as well, and Harry was almost starting to forget that life hadn’t always been like this. That he hadn’t always had two very attentive mates who would come whenever he needed them, the very minute he needed them. It was so easy to forget that there was a war going on outside of the walls of Black Manor, and Harry certainly didn’t struggle to remember.

If he tried to force himself to remember, as sometimes he thought that he ought to do, he only thought about the fact that he couldn’t fight. That he would never be the hero that Dumbledore had wanted him to be, and then he’d wind up crying, and that only worried Regulus and Severus. Because he did feel so very guilty that he wasn’t out there fighting, that he wasn’t trying to kill Voldemort anymore. Because he knew that Voldemort was a monster, it was just that he happened to like Harry, now, and had a use for him. Harry knew that was the only thing that had spared his life.

The thoughts made him uncomfortable, so instead of thinking them he threw himself into finishing up his most recent potion. Besides, distraction and potion making never went together, and Harry knew better than to let himself be too distracted. He’d already blown up Severus’ lab once in the past two weeks, in addition to the time he’d blown it up when he’d just started learning again, and he didn’t think that Severus would take kindly to him doing it a second time.

“What are you thinking about over there, laughing like that?” Severus didn’t sound bothered or anything, in fact, if Harry had to guess, he thought that the Potions Master was more amused than
Harry finished stirring in his final ingredient, not letting himself get distracted in spite of his own amusement, then turned off the heat. He continued to stir the potion as it cooled and, as he did so, looked up and offered Severus a genuine smile. “I was thinking that you probably wouldn’t be happy with me if I blew your lab up a second time in as many weeks,” he said cheerfully. He kept his rod moving, as leaving the potion to cool without stirring would have some kind of terrible effect. It probably wouldn’t explode, though…

Severus just arched an eyebrow at him. “You might not have realized, but I’ve been rather careful to not assign you any potions that can explode right now,” he said, his lips twitching.

Harry wrinkled his nose at Severus and stuck his tongue out. “I think it’s impressive that I’ve only blown up two potions,” he said, and then returned his attention to stirring the potion. Just because this one wouldn’t explode, especially now that it was only cooling, didn’t mean that he wanted to mess it up on the last stage. That was one of the most frustrating things to happen in potion-making, Harry had found.

After he’d set his rod down and poured the potion into separate glass vials for Severus to examine later, Harry found strong arms curling around him from behind. He jumped a little, then tilted his head back so that he could look up at Severus. “Hi,” he said, a little confused, and a little unsure of what Severus was doing hugging him. He wasn’t nearly as touchy as Regulus was, although Harry didn’t mind the sudden affection.

Severus just smiled down at him, the expression soft and warm. “I am very proud of the fact that you’ve only blown up two potions,” he said. “I don’t want you to think that I’m not.”

Harry smiled back, warmth blooming within him. “Thanks,” he said, a bit shyly. He knew that he was blushing because his cheeks were hot to the touch. “And thanks for taking the time to teach me,” he added, even though he knew that he didn’t have to.

Severus just leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to his cheek before pulling away. “You know that it’s my pleasure,” he said as he withdrew. “Now, don’t you have lessons with Regulus in a few minutes?”

Harry shrugged. “He likes me to eat first,” he said. “Do you want to have lunch with me?” He liked eating with Severus, or with Regulus, honestly. Both were nice. Eating alone was never any fun.
Severus’ face fell ever so slightly. “I can’t,” he said, and sounded honestly dismayed. “I have a brew of my own that I need to tend to, and it’s going to take a few hours.” He nodded to a cauldron simmering in the corner, his nose wrinkling ever so slightly.

Harry just shrugged. “Then I’ll see you for dinner with Regulus,” he said firmly. It was one of the things that they were doing now, making sure to eat at least one meal a day together. Narcissa said it helped with communication and closeness, and Harry just genuinely enjoyed doing it.

“Of course,” Severus agreed. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to Harry’s forehead, then backed away as a small chime sounded. “I really do need to work on this,” he said regretfully.

“Then I’ll head over to Regulus,” Harry said with a small sigh. He took a few steps back, then hissed for Salazar, who’d been left curled up on a small pillow by the door placed there for that very purpose. The small basilisk immediately rushed up his leg and curled around his waist, hissing his pleasure at being close to Harry.

“I’ll see you later this evening,” Severus called after him as the door closed.

Harry left Severus’ rooms with a smile on his lips and a slight bounce in his step. He headed off in the direction of his rooms, but froze when he heard the sound of heavy, fast-moving footsteps and shouting. What was that? He looked down the corridor in front of him, but the sound didn’t seem to be coming from that direction. Nervously, Harry drew his wand.

Salazar, picking up on his nerves, perked up and let out a low, irritable hiss. “~Are the stupid stinking humans scaring you?~” the snake asked. He shifted on Harry so that he was wrapped around Harry’s chest, his head resting on Harry’s shoulder, his body leaving Harry’s arms completely free so that Harry could move without difficulty. It was a position he tended to take when Harry was feeling particularly insecure.

“I’m okay,” Harry said quickly. Then he realized that he’d said it in English, and repeated himself in parseltongue. Salazar hissed out his disbelief, but didn’t actually say anything out loud.

Harry started walking once more, but didn’t put his wand away. He could still hear the shouting, and it was making him terribly nervous. Part of him wanted to turn around and retreat to Severus’ lab, but the rest of him wanted to continue forward. Needed to, actually. He wasn’t afraid of this. He wasn’t. He just… he didn’t like it, that was all. The noise was making him tense, and he could practically smell the fear in the air.
He rounded a corner and froze, two wands pointed at his face. And behind the wands... behind the wands were two very familiar faces. Harry’s throat closed up and his eyes widened. He took a startled step back, at the same time as they started to drop their wands. But then Salazar reared his head and hissed out a threat, a warning, and both wands snapped back up.

“~It’s okay,~” Harry said to Salazar, even though he wasn’t sure that it was.

The twins both flinched at the sound of parseltongue. “Harry,” one of them started. Harry couldn’t even begin to guess which one was which. They both looked horrible, pale and fragile and disheveled, and injured like they’d been... like they’d been...

Harry shied away from the thought. “Hi,” he said, a bit lamely, because he didn’t know what else to say.

“Where’ve you been?” the other twin asked, even as the first turned to watch the corridor behind him. “I mean, obviously you’ve been here, but how did you get away from your guards?”

“Unless the snake is his guard,” the first twin pointed out. “George, by the way, in case you can’t tell. Since, you know, you haven’t seen us in forever.”

“George!” Fred snapped. “Come on, you don’t know what Harry’s been going through. These Death Eaters... who knows what they’ve done to him?”

Harry swallowed. Because that was the problem, wasn’t it? The Death Eaters hadn’t done anything to him, anything other than love him and take care of him. Voldemort had given him better care just by sending Regulus after him than Dumbledore ever had, when he really thought about it.

“Please, look at him!” George whipped around, forgetting to watch the corridor behind him. “He’s well dressed, well fed, he’s even got a snake fucking draped over him that fucking obeys his commands! Does he look like he’s a prisoner to you?”

Harry took another step back, and both wands snapped up once more. It was clear that Fred was being swayed by George’s harsh words. “You don’t understand,” Harry tried. “Things were... things were very bad for me. And Regulus-”
“Isn’t he dead?” Fred interrupted. He was staring at Harry through wounded eyes. “And Harry, are you saying that you’re here of your own free will?”

Harry shook his head, then nodded, then shrugged, a bit helplessly. “I’m not… I’m not the hero that Dumbledore wanted me to be,” he said, and his throat ached as he spoke. “If I’d gone back to him, if he’d even figured out what was wrong with me, he’d have tried to make me fight, and I have trouble just leaving this house anymore,” Harry whispered.

“What do you mean if he’d figured out what was wrong with you?” Fred’s wand had started to lower once more, though George’s remained unwaveringly pointed at Harry’s forehead.

“I mean that… that some time over the summer, the one when I disappeared, I mean, not this most recent one…” Harry had to stop to clear his throat. When he could, he started once more. “I changed. I started letting off this… this allure, and it didn’t matter what I did, whether I hid under my Cloak or hid in dark alleys or didn’t bathe or… it didn’t matter. People would… attack me, and I…” Harry shuddered and curled his arms around himself.

“And you… what?” There was something vicious in George’s voice, something cold and hard and angry, like he knew what Harry was going to say. Maybe he did; Harry didn’t know.

“And when they did, I would black out, and then I would wake up and they’d be burnt to cinders. I tried going to Diagon Alley once, because I knew that I needed help, and…” Harry shuddered and took another step backwards.

There was anger now on both of the twins’ faces. Fred, particularly, looked like Harry had betrayed him on purpose. “You killed our family,” Fred said, his voice dull and broken. He raised his wand once more, like it was more of a habit than anything else.

“You turned to the Dark,” George added. “Dumbledore might think that we need you, but I don’t. We don’t need any traitors working for us, and we don’t need anybody who would murder their best friends either.”

The curse flew from George’s lips before Harry could even think about what was happening. It was sheer luck that George didn’t realize that Salazar was a basilisk, that the curse hit Salazar’s scales. But Fred’s infuriated, broken, “Crucio!” didn’t miss.

Harry went down with a scream of pain, writhing in agony, the pain burning and spreading and
terrible and awful and he was going to die and… and it stopped.

Harry could hear things, could hear a gurgling sound, a desperate voice pleading that abruptly cut off, and he struggled to sit up. The twins were on the ground, Salazar between them, both of them bleeding from vicious bite marks in their arms that had torn chunks from their flesh.

Harry let out a harsh, startled sob, his hand coming up to cover his mouth. He was horrified. The twins were dead. They’d been friends to him, brothers even, and now they were nothing. They were dead, and they’d cursed him, and they’d hated him before he died, and he was a monster, wasn’t he, for turning the other way while Voldemort continued to wreak havoc.

His limbs were still twitching from the effects of the curse and he couldn’t manage to stop himself from crying when he heard someone moving behind him. “Oh, bloody hell,” an oddly familiar voice snarled, and Bellatrix Lestrange stepped into view. She scowled down at Harry, and at the bodies that Harry couldn’t look away from, and at the snake between them.

“What the fuck do I do with this mess?” she asked herself, and Harry couldn’t answer. He made himself as small as he could, his nerves still singing from pain, and hoped that he would wake up soon and this would be a terrible nightmare.

He didn’t think that he would get his wish.

Chapter End Notes

I’m very sorry that I didn’t do many review responses this week. As I said before, it’s been a rough one. I’ll try to respond to the reviews for this chapter, but the end-of-semester crunch is killing me and I won’t make any promises. Just know that I read and appreciated each and every review from all of you.
Harry shivered on the floor as Bellatrix paced back and forth, muttering to herself. He couldn’t make out what she was saying, but he knew that she was angry. He didn’t think she was angry with him, but then, how could he tell?

He was angry with himself. There were two more of the Weasley family, dead on the floor. Two more of the people he’d looked up to, the people who’d taken him in when he had no one, and now they were dead. Just like their parents. Just like Ron and… and…

Harry didn’t try to stifle the sob that worked its way out of him. He curled in on himself even more tightly. Salazar was hissing to him, but he couldn’t quite make out the words, if there even were any words to be made out. He might just be hissing nonsensically, because sometimes he did that. Harry didn’t know. It was comforting, though, and Salazar was coiled tightly around him once more, squeezing occasionally.

“You, snake!” Bellatrix snapped. “Do you understand English?”

Salazar just hissed back at her, and Harry thought that maybe he heard an expression of assent somewhere in there.

“Oh, well, I don’t understand snake, so that was spectacularly unhelpful,” she muttered. She knelt in front of Harry, but made no moves to touch him. “If you do understand me, can you go and fetch either Regulus or Severus? The boy won’t settle down for me, and I’m not stupid enough to try to get him to do so. We don’t exactly get along.”

Harry didn’t know what happened after that. He registered Bellatrix’s words, knew that they made sense, but when he felt Salazar begin to unwind from him, he let out a desperate cry and tried to clutch at the snake. He didn’t want him to leave. He didn’t want to be alone with Bellatrix, with the bodies of two people he’d once called friends.

His sobs increased in both volume and intensity, and he scrambled away when Bellatrix reached for him. He didn’t want her anywhere near him. She’d murdered his godfather! And she hated him as much as he hated her, probably.
He heard rapidly approaching footsteps from the direction he’d come from, and Severus skidded to a stop in the middle of the room. Harry watched through his tears as Severus took in the scene, all color fading from his face. “Get those bodies out of here,” Severus snapped to Bellatrix. “And then go and get Regulus.”

“I will,” Bellatrix said. She stood and backed away from Harry.

“And Bellatrix?” Severus offered her a grim little smile. “Thank you.”

Bellatrix nodded once, sharply, and then levitated both of the bodies. The twins. “He’s a wreck. Good luck,” she said as she left.

Salazar returned to Harry, then, curling around him tightly once more. His head rested on Harry’s shoulder, hissing softly and sweetly to him, trying to settle him down. It helped, sort of. At least, Harry thought it helped.

“Are they…” Harry swallowed to try and clear the lump from his throat. “Are they going to be returned to their family?” Harry asked, the words choked off. His tears were stopping, now, but he wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. He felt curiously numb, like everything was happening to someone else, not to him.

“Harry…” Severus knelt in front of him, blocking his view of the floor where Fred and George had died. “Harry, you don’t want to dwell on things like that.” He reached out for Harry, and Harry didn’t flinch away. He just sat there passively and let Severus pet him like he was some kind of animal.

“That means that they aren’t,” Harry muttered. “I’m not an idiot. If they were, you would have told me that immediately.” The thought broke his heart. For the Weasleys, what was left of them anyway, who’d already lost so much to lose something else… and then to not even know for sure what had happened? That was… that was terrible.

“That isn’t what that means,” Severus said quickly. “In all honesty, I don’t know what will happen to their bodies. I’d like to tell you that they will be, because I know how much it would comfort you to know that, but I honestly don’t know.”

Harry just stared at Severus. “Oh.”
If they weren’t given back to the Weasleys, what would happen to them? Would they be cremated, their bodies turned to ash that would blow away on the wind? Would they be thrown in some room and left to rot, worms eating away at their bodies? Would they be frozen, maybe? Kept in a cold room, like a freezer, until no one even remembered their names?

“Harry, whatever it is that you’re thinking about, I need you to stop and look at me,” Severus said insistently. Harry didn’t understand what the fuss was, but he tried to comply. Severus looked concerned, his brow furrowed and his eyes dark with worry. His lips were pulled into a frown that didn’t improve when Harry followed his instructions. “Harry, please,” Severus started.

“What happened?” Harry hadn’t even heard Regulus approach, but he recognized his voice. Part of him, a small part that felt like it had been buried in dozens of soft, thick blankets, was incredibly pleased to have both of his mates present at once, just as he always was.

“The Weasley twins are-”

Regulus cut him off immediately. “I saw them. Did Harry… was he here for it?”

“I think… I mean, I’m not certain, but I think that he was part of it. I wasn’t here for the actual incident. Salazar came and got me.”

“Fuck,” Regulus muttered. He dropped to his knees beside Harry and ran a hand through Harry’s hair. “Harry, sweetheart, can you tell us what happened?”

“We argued,” Harry said. “Sort of. They realized that I wasn’t a prisoner, and they got very angry with me. Then they realized that I killed their parents, that I killed… and they didn’t take it well. One of the twins hit me with a Cruciatatus Curse. The other aimed something more fatal at me, and the curse hit Salazar’s scales. Salazar didn’t take it well, and killed them both.”

Harry felt curiously little as he spoke out loud. His mind was… not quite blank, but fairly close. He blinked lazily at Regulus, whose face had fallen at some point while Harry was speaking. “It’s not… Salazar was just looking out for me,” he said quickly. He put a protective hand over the snake’s head. “He just wanted to make sure that I was okay.”

“Nobody’s mad at Salazar,” Regulus said quietly. He reached out for Harry, but flinched back when Salazar hissed at him. “Harry, can I hug you?” he asked.
Harry just blinked at him. “Why?” he asked. “I’m okay.” He tried to stand up, but found that his limbs wouldn’t quite cooperate with him.

“Do you know how long you were under the Cruciatus?” Severus asked, his voice barely above a whisper. He was gripping his wand in his hand, his fingers white knuckled. Harry wasn’t sure why. They weren’t in danger anymore. Salazar had taken care of the threat. They were safe now.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. His hands were shaking, he realized, and he was starting to feel very cold. He wasn’t sure why. It had to be warm in the hall. Salazar would be cold otherwise, and his snake didn’t seem to be cold at all.

“He needs a few potions,” Severus muttered. “Will you be okay with him?”

“I’ll be fine,” Regulus said. He shifted position, so that he was sitting across from Harry, close enough that Harry could feel the warmth of him, but not quite touching him. “Go on. Harry and I will be right here, won’t we?” His voice was curiously gentle as he addressed Harry, like he thought that Harry was more fragile than he actually was.

“We can be,” Harry said neutrally. He shifted slightly so that he could rest his head against the wall behind him. He was very tired, but when he closed his eyes he saw the twins faces as they’d died. He shivered and opened them. He was fine. Just tired.

“I’ll be back quickly,” Severus said. He brushed a hand over Regulus’ hair as he stood, then touched Harry carefully on the hair as well, ignoring the way that Salazar hissed at him for doing so. He headed off in the direction he’d come from, practically running.

“Harry,” Regulus started, but stopped when Harry focused on him. “I really want to hold you,” Regulus muttered. He raked a hand through his hair. “Would you let me?”

Harry didn’t think that he needed to be held, but if that was what Regulus needed… he didn’t want to ever deny one of his mates something that they needed, not when it was within his power to give. He shifted, making Salazar hiss in irritation. “~I’m going to Regulus,~” he informed the snake. “~He wants to hold me.~”

“~Go on, then,~” the snake hissed. He didn’t uncurl from around Harry, but instead shifted so that he wouldn’t be crushed when Harry crawled into Regulus’ lap.
And that was exactly what Harry did. He crawled right into Regulus’ lap and buried his head in his mate’s shoulder. He was tired, so tired, but he didn’t dare close his eyes. He didn’t want to see the twins, dead, ever again. He knew he wouldn’t have a choice, that at some point he’d have to face the image that was haunting him, if only because Narcissa would probably make him, but that didn’t mean he had to deal with it right at that moment.

He shuddered, and this time he felt it. He felt the pain in his body, the way that his nerves were still singing from the pain of the Cruciatus. He whimpered and felt his arms close spasmodically around Regulus’ waist.

“You okay?” Regulus asked quickly.

Harry shuddered in his arms. “I hurt,” he whispered. Why was he just starting to hurt now? What was happening? He could feel tears welling up in his eyes and tried to blink them away. Why was he crying again? The twins had died, they were casualties of war. They were… they were probably just two of many… and… “How many others?” he asked urgently. He pulled away from Regulus.

“How many others what?” Regulus asked blankly. He didn’t try to force Harry to stay in his arms, though he did leave his hands on him.

Harry didn’t care about that. They were warm, anchoring him. That was good, because he felt like he could fly away at any given moment. “How many others have died?” he asked, and knew that his voice was coming out shriller than he would have liked. He sounded like he was hysterical. Maybe he was. He didn’t know.

“What are you talking about?” Regulus asked. He lifted one hand from where it rested on Harry’s waist and cupped Harry’s cheek. “I don’t understand your question,” he said.

“How many people have the Death Eaters killed since the war started? How many people have died while I’ve been hiding away in here like the worst kind of coward? How many more are going to die while I just sit here, safe and sound?”

“I can’t answer that,” Regulus said slowly. “I don’t... Harry, I haven’t exactly been involved in the war.” He touched the locket that still rested in the center of his chest. “My job has been to guard the locket, and now to guard you. I don’t even know how the war has been going, much less exact casualty numbers.”
“It’s a lot, though, isn’t it?” Harry shook his head. “I can’t…” He took a deep breath. “I can’t… I can’t just do nothing while people are dying, Regulus! What kind of monster am I? Fred and George were-

“Don’t you dare say that they were right,” Regulus snarled. His lips curled back and he looked almost feral. “They weren’t right. You aren’t a monster! Yes, things are terrible now, and people are dying, but Harry, that doesn’t mean that it’s your fault! There’s no saying that you would have been able to defeat the Dark Lord anyway.”

“I could have tried,” Harry started. Then he stopped. He closed his eyes and thought about what he’d just said, and forced the images of the twins away. Could he have tried? In the state he’d been in after the Department of Mysteries, could he really have tried to fight? He’d been an absolute wreck.

Yes, he was doing better now, but that didn’t mean that he wanted to fight. That didn’t even mean that he could fight. He didn’t… and the only way to…

Severus returned before he could get his thoughts straightened out. He had three potions in hand and wore a grim expression. “One for the nerve damage caused by the Cruciatius Curse,” he said bluntly, and knelt in front of Harry. He handed the vial to Harry, who drank it without any argument. “One for the pain, because I know that you’re hurting.”

Harry was hurting, but the physical pain was nothing compared to the turmoil within his mind and his heart. He’d ignored the fact that Voldemort was killing innocent people for so long… could he really keep doing that?

“Harry, please,” Severus said insistently. “Take the potion.”

Harry didn’t want the pain potion. Part of him felt like he deserved the pain he was currently feeling, because he was a terrible person who’d turned his back on suffering for his own personal gain. The rest of him, the part of him that listened to Narcissa most of the time, told him that he was being ridiculous, and nobody deserved to suffer.

He took the potion from Severus and downed it in one gulp. He crawled back to Regulus’ arms, because he really wanted his mate to hold him right then. It would be better with both of them, but there was still that third potion in Severus’ hand.
“A sedative,” Severus said softly. “You don’t need to take it, but you might feel better if you do.”

Harry didn’t even think about it. He welcomed the oblivion a pain potion would bring him, and took it without protest. “You’ll both stay with me?” he asked, his words soft and slightly slurred with the immediate effects of the potion.

“Of course,” Regulus responded immediately. “Right, Severus?”

“Absolutely,” Severus promised.

Harry felt one set of lips brush against his forehead, followed by a set brushing against his lips, and then he let himself surrender to the sedative.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! Unfortunately, I’ve run out of chapters to post for this fic and finals are happening in two weeks. This means that I’m entering my final week of classes, and I have numerous projects to do. Because of that, there will be no updates next week, and they will resume on the following Friday, two weeks from today. Thank you all so much for your kind words and your understanding; I sincerely appreciate it.

But! Since you’ve all been so patient, I thought I might give you a small hint about what’s to come. Due to the extended nature of the story, there’s a chance (and by a chance I mean that it may already be in the new outline) that Harry will be getting a third mate. Any guesses?
Chapter Twenty-Eight

When Harry woke, he was briefly disoriented. He was laying on something warm and soft and so, so comfortable, surrounded by warm forms on either side of him. It took him a few minutes to connect this new place to his bedroom, mostly because he felt like he’d only just been in the hallway staring at the corpses of Fred and George Weasley.

He didn’t want to think about the fact that he’d watched them die. That Salazar had killed them on his behalf. That they were casualties of a war that he’d chosen to ignore because he felt too broken to fight. That their deaths were his fault.

He let out a small, shuddering cry, and immediately felt Regulus curl closer to him, almost like it was instinctive. Regulus didn’t say anything, though Severus muttered a quiet, soothing sound that Harry couldn’t quite catch. It was pretty clear that both of them were asleep.

That was fine, he didn’t begrudge them their rest. He hoped that they were sleeping well, that they’d be well-rested when they woke up.

“Are you awake?” The voice was unexpected, and familiar though Harry had never heard it in this room before.

Harry’s eyes, which had just started to close, snapped open. “Yes,” he said, his voice soft and hesitant. What was Voldemort doing in his room? Why had Severus and Regulus… well, that was a foolish question, wasn’t it? Of course Severus and Regulus wouldn’t be able to bar him from the room. He was their Dark Lord.

“Can we speak?” Voldemort asked, his voice oddly diffident. “Face to face, I mean. If you don’t mind.”

Harry wasn’t sure if he could extricate himself from Regulus’ and Severus’ grasps without waking them, but he figured that he could try. “I’d rather not wake them,” he muttered. “But we’ll give it a shot.” It took some maneuvering, and some careful shifting around, but Harry eventually managed to slip from their arms and out of bed. He found himself wearing his pajamas, his softest pair, and he smiled at the idea of them choosing them for him so that he would have the most comfort.

His mates took such good care of him, and he truly felt lucky to have them. Even if the
circumstances leading up to their mating hadn’t been… ideal. And wasn’t that an understatement?

“Shall we go out into your sitting room?” Voldemort suggested. He gestured with one hand towards the other room, and Harry nodded once and followed him out of the bedroom.

There was a small bowl of fruit out on the coffee table, there always was. Even though Harry wasn’t sure if he was hungry or not, he grabbed a pear from the bowl and fidgeted with it, shifting it from hand to hand as he settled on the sofa. “What did you want to talk about?” Harry asked finally, as the silence between himself and Voldemort stretched.

Voldemort cleared his throat and shifted, visibly uncomfortable. “I owe you an apology,” he said finally, and settled into the chair across from Harry. While Harry was still trying to recover from the surprise that came with that statement, Voldemort clarified with, “For bringing the Weasley twins here. I should have thought more about what effect it would have on you if they escaped.”

Harry frowned and looked down at the pear in his hands. “Are you apologizing for capturing them, or are you apologizing for bringing them here where I would know that you captured them?” He wasn’t sure, and he thought that was an incredibly important distinction.

“I shouldn’t have brought them here, but I will not apologize for capturing them in the first place,” Voldemort said firmly. “The Weasley family, much reduced though it is, has been incredibly prominent in the war. I know that they’re your friends, but I cannot excuse them from the war just for that reason.”

Harry closed his eyes against the weight of the words. “I know that,” he said quickly, quietly, his voice shaking. “I know that you can’t just… just let them… I know. But I can’t… you killed them. I mean… I killed them, and I don’t think that you’re sad about it.” Harry stared down at the pear, turning it over and over in his hands. Looking for flaws in the skin was serving as a good distraction so that he wouldn’t have to look up at Voldemort.

“Of course I’m not sad,” Voldemort said, sounding almost confused. “As soon as I brought them to the manor, their fates were decided. I can’t bring people here and then let them go, Harry. That rather defeats the purpose of a secret hideout.” Then he let out a small laugh, the sound chilling. “Besides, I already got all the information I needed from them.”

Harry shivered at the flippancy in Voldemort’s voice. Because the Dark Lord had been so kind to him in his time here at Black Manor, Harry had found it easy to forget that Voldemort was, in fact, sort of a psychopath. In fact, there was probably no sort of about it. Voldemort was a psychopath, a mass murderer, and a terrorist. And Harry was only safe here because Voldemort liked him, and
because he was Voldemort’s horcrux.

“Lives shouldn’t be expendable like that,” he whispered, before he even knew what he was doing. Then he made his voice strengthen. “Lives shouldn’t be thrown away just for a few bits of information.”

“It wasn’t a few bits,” Voldemort said. He sounded slightly irritated now. “It was significant information. I now know where the Order is headquartered, or have a general idea of it.”

Harry shook his head. “I could have… well, I couldn’t have said, because it’s protected, but I could have found a way, and nobody would have had to die!” He looked up at Voldemort and found that the Dark Lord was looking more confused than anything else, like he genuinely couldn’t understand the source of Harry’s frustration. Maybe he couldn’t; Harry didn’t know.

“I’ll make sure that my… that no prisoners ever make their way into your presence again,” Voldemort said firmly, nodding once. “I was already thinking about it, given that I suspected that you would be distressed if one of them managed to find you, but I never imagined that you would be this upset about it. It won’t happen again.”

“Because you’re going to stop hurting people for information?” Harry asked hopefully, even though he doubted that was the case.

“Because I’m going to move our headquarters,” Voldemort countered. “Granted, most in the Ministry seem to suspect that we’re working out of Malfoy Manor already, but they don’t know for certain. I intend to take most of my Death Eaters to Malfoy Manor over the next few weeks, making the transition gradually so as not to arouse any suspicions with a sudden influx of people. And then you’ll be safe here, in Black Manor, with Regulus and Severus to keep you company.” Then Voldemort smiled and nodded towards Salazar, who had come to sit on the couch beside Harry while Harry had been focused on what Voldemort was saying. “And Salazar, of course.”

Harry shook his head, even as he reached out to stroke his snake. He set aside the pear and invited Salazar into his lap. The snake came willingly. “I don’t want you to do that,” he said quietly. He focused on running his fingers over Salazar’s crest, focused on the wordless hisses that Salazar let out in pleasure with every stroke.

“Don’t want me to… what, leave?” Voldemort let out a small laugh, the sound filled with disbelief. “Harry, I can’t stay. Not when running the war is going to put you in danger. You hold something… something immeasurably precious to me, and I cannot allow you to come to harm if I can prevent it.”
“Then stop taking prisoners!” Harry snapped, the words coming out far louder than he’d intended. “Find another way.”

Voldemort let out another harsh laugh, this one far louder. “Stop taking prisoners? Little boy, do you have any idea of how war works? I cannot simply stop taking prisoners, as you say! I need the information that they provide. So we’ll move to Malfoy Manor and—”

“What if I don’t want you to go?” Harry asked, desperate. He could tell, he didn’t know how, but he knew that he was at a turning point in everything. If he let Voldemort leave Black Manor, then things were going to change, and he didn’t think that they were going to change for the better. He’d ignored the war for too long. How many people had died while he’d been playing house with Regulus and Severus? What could he have done differently to change the tides of the war from this side of things?

“That isn’t your choice to make,” Voldemort snapped. “I do this for your safety, Harry. Surely you can appreciate that, can’t you?”

Harry shook his head. “Gryffindor,” he said sharply. “We’re not… we’re not as concerned for our own safety as we should be.” Except for when they were broken by multiple rapes, not that Harry wanted to think about that very much.

“It’s my job to be concerned for you,” Voldemort said. And then he shook his head. “But if you really want me to stay, I suppose it won’t hurt for me to do so for a handful more days.”

Harry let out a small sigh of relief. He had a few more days. A week, hopefully, but probably no more. He just knew that he could do something to convince Voldemort to do… something differently. He hoped. “Thank you,” he breathed.

“Don’t thank me,” Voldemort snapped. “I’m only staying for a handful of days so that you don’t damage yourself further, psychologically, torturing yourself for my decisions. Narcissa says you’ve been making great progress, and I’m certain that it’s already been set back by this unfortunate incident today. I wouldn’t want to set it back further by making you feel even more helpless.”

With those confusing words, before Harry had the chance to respond, Voldemort stood in a fluid motion and stalked out of the room, his footsteps loud on the floor. The door slammed behind him. If Regulus and Severus hadn’t been awake already, if they hadn’t woken up when Harry had shouted, they were probably awake now.
Harry sighed, stood, and went back into the bedroom. He was unsurprised to find that Regulus and Severus were both sitting up, leaning against the headboard, their heads close together. They were talking softly, but both fell silent when Harry entered the room.

“How are you feeling?” Regulus asked him quietly. “Do we need to call Narcissa?”

Harry swallowed. It probably wasn’t a bad idea, but… “I think I’m okay for tonight,” he said quietly. “I’ll talk to her tomorrow, during my normal session with her.” He wasn’t sure if he would sleep again, of course, but he didn’t think that he was on the verge of freaking out again either.

“Did you eat anything?” Severus asked. He shifted away from Regulus, leaving just enough room for Harry to slide into bed between them if he so desired.

Harry did want to, and did so without a word of protest. Once he was snuggled between the two of them, safe and warm, with Salazar curled up on his lap, Harry said, “I held a pear while I was talking to Voldemort, but I didn’t manage to convince myself to eat it. I’m sorry, I tried.”

“It’s okay,” Regulus said, although Harry knew that it really wasn’t. “Just promise that you’ll try to get something down in the morning?”

Harry shrugged. “Can’t,” he said honestly. The chances of him being able to eat after what had just happened… he shivered, then pressed his face into Severus’ shoulder, trying to block out the image of the twins and their lifeless stares.

“Okay,” Severus said immediately, the words soft and soothing.

Harry felt gentle fingers begin to toy with his hair, and didn’t know if they belonged to Severus or to Regulus. But they were soothing, and so was the sound of Severus’ voice as he murmured things quiet and low into Harry’s ear, and Harry found himself drifting off to sleep almost before he knew what to do with himself.
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Harry woke the next morning with a sense of purpose, a sense of purpose that was delayed only by a meeting with Narcissa to see how he was truly doing. She seemed genuinely surprised that Harry wasn’t more broken up by his grief about the Weasley twins, and Harry found himself struggling to explain himself to her.

It wasn’t that he wasn’t sad, because he absolutely was. The twins, he believed, were some of the last ties left to the life he’d left behind, and now they were gone. They’d been good people, and now they were dead. And he felt terrible about that. But… but mourning them, and he was mourning them, wouldn’t help. He had to do something, because otherwise their deaths would mean nothing. When he tried to explain it to Narcissa, she seemed to understand.

“But Harry,” she started, and then shook her head a bit. “I just… I’m very concerned that what you want to happen might not work out.”

Harry swallowed. “You mean that I might not convince Voldemort to change his mind?” He let out a small, bitter little laugh. “I know, Narcissa. But I still have to try.”

She sighed. “Okay,” she said. “In that case, let me know if I can help you in any way. And Harry…” She stopped and shook her head. “The Weasley twins’ deaths were not your fault.”

Harry bit his lip. “If you say so,” he whispered. He couldn’t accept that. They’d died because of him, because they’d been attacking him. But they’d only attacked him because he’d killed their family, and maybe Harry had been stupid for confessing to that, but…

It didn’t matter. What was done was done and there was nothing he could do about it now. Not even a time turner would help at this point. He drew in a deep, shuddering breath. “Are you done with me for the day?” he asked Narcissa.

She was watching him closely, almost scrutinizing him. “I don’t know that you’re doing as well as you’d like to be,” she pointed out. When Harry just looked at her, she shook her head again with a small smile. “Call me if you need me,” she said, and stood up. She stepped forward and gave him a quick hug, leaving behind a lingering smell of floral perfume when she left the room.

Harry sighed and took off his glasses. He rubbed at his eyes, then put his glasses back on, stood up,
and left in search of Regulus. His mate was in the sitting room, reading, a piece of fruit in his hand that he was ignoring.

Harry took the apple from him and bit into it, knowing that the conversation would go better if he was eating something. Then Regulus wouldn’t be more focused on his health than his questions, which could only be a good thing.

Regulus didn’t protest the loss of his apple and actually smiled at Harry. “Good to see that you’re eating something,” he said. He leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to Harry’s forehead, then his smile grew when Harry clambered into his lap. He set his book aside and curled his arms around Harry, pulling him closer.

“I want to talk about the war,” Harry said quietly. He burrowed as close as he could and savored being so close to one of his mates. Regulus was always willing to hold him, and Severus was most of the time as long as it didn’t interfere with his brewing. Even so, even knowing that Regulus would never have pushed him away, something in Harry eased at the contact.

“What do you want to know?” Regulus asked carefully.

“Why it started.” Harry looked up at Regulus, who was staring down at him with a carefully neutral expression on his face. “I know what it is now, what with it being a blood war and all, but did it start out that way? Was it always like this?”

Regulus sighed. “I don’t know,” he said quietly. “By the time I was old enough to join, it was very much a war over blood purity, purebloods versus everyone else. I believe that, at least at first, there was a great deal of concern over declining pureblood rights, and that’s at least how the discontent that led to the Death Eaters began.”

Harry blinked. He wriggled a bit so that he could look at Regulus more comfortably, then asked, “What sorts of rights were the purebloods upset about?”

Regulus shrugged. “I don’t…” He sighed, blowing the air out through his teeth. “Maybe the restriction on when we’re allowed to start using magic? If you think about it, not being allowed to use magic until eleven is to protect Muggleborn children, and to make sure that purebloods are on an even playing field when they get to Hogwarts.”

“But that doesn’t work,” Harry said without thinking.
Regulus nodded. “It doesn’t,” he agreed. “Those raised in the wizarding world, both purebloods and halfbloods, can still learn the magical theory behind magic before their Muggleborn counterparts. They can still learn the proper ways to prepare potions ingredients, they can still learn certain types of Divination if they have the gift, they can even learn how to cast runes. So the restrictions, as well meaning as they might be, are useless in the long run.”

“Unless more is restricted,” Harry said, now growing thoughtful. “Unless the Ministry starts to restrict what things parents are allowed to teach their children, but they wouldn’t be able to do that, would they?”

“Bills were introduced, I believe,” Regulus said quietly. “By Dumbledore, and more by his supporters. They didn’t pass, of course, because the Wizengamot is still made up of a majority of purebloods, but that majority grows smaller each day.”

Harry let out a small noise as he considered that issue. It was something he couldn’t do anything about, of course. He couldn’t do anything to change an entire government. “That sucks,” was his final conclusion. He scowled down at his half-eaten apple and forced himself to take another bite, in spite of the fact that his appetite really wasn’t that high.

“There’s probably more information in the library. I think Hogwarts used to teach other types of magic, too, but those were gotten rid of because they were making Muggleborns uncomfortable. But that would have been long before my time.” Regulus shrugged and held Harry closer. “I’m sorry I can’t be of more help.”

“If I really wanted to, I could go research in the library,” Harry said with a small sigh. “But I don’t know what good it would do. There’s nothing I can do to change an entire government’s mind.”

Regulus scoffed. “You’re joking, right? You’ve possibly inherited the Black seat on the Wizengamot, at least until I reveal myself as alive, and you definitely have control of the Potter seat. It isn’t much, but with your name and everything, you could probably make some changes to the way the government is run.”

Harry blinked at Regulus. “That’s... an interesting idea,” he said slowly. He wasn’t sure if it would actually do anything about the deaths happening now, but it was more of an idea than he’d had earlier.

He finished off his apple and hopped off of Regulus’ lap. “Thank you,” he said, with more cheer.
than he’d had when he sat down.

Regulus just smiled at him, a bit bemused. “Any time,” he said. He tugged Harry to him and gave him a quick hug and a soft kiss on the lips, then released him. “Where are you headed? To the library?”

Harry hesitated, then shook his head. He wanted to go see Severus, because something in him was pushing him to go visit his other mate. “I’m gonna go visit Sev in his lab.” He hesitated, then moved towards the door. He didn’t open it, though, and just stared at it for what felt like an eternity. Salazar, curled around his waist, let out a few encouraging hisses.

Regulus shifted on the couch, like he was getting ready to stand up. “Do you want me to walk you there?” he asked carefully.

They’d moved past that a long time ago, but then the Weasley twins had attacked him and… Harry took a deep breath. “No,” he said quietly, carefully. “I think I’ll be okay.”

He slipped out of the room and headed off towards Severus’ lab, Salazar hissing quiet reassurances the entire way. If he was gripping his wand tightly enough that his knuckles were white, well, Harry was glad that he didn’t run into any people on the way, and glad that Severus seemed to be in the middle of brewing something and did see how tightly Harry was clutching his wand when he arrived.

Severus finished whatever he was stirring and turned to Harry with a small smile after adjusting the height of the flame below his cauldron. “Hello, Harry,” he said, and opened his arms.

Harry immediately darted to his embrace and nestled closer, his whole body trembling from the strain of walking the halls. “That was hard,” he muttered into Severus’ robes.

“I’m very proud of you,” Severus responded. He didn’t sound like he was mocking, but then, he hadn’t mocked Harry in a very long time. “Did you come to work on your potions, or just to keep me company for a bit?”

“The second,” Harry said. He leaned against Severus and continued to do so as Severus practically dragged him over to the couch in the corner of the office. He then crawled into Severus’ lap, just like he’d crawled into Regulus’ lap. “How busy are you?”
“The potion can simmer for the next twenty minutes or so, but then I’m afraid that I’ll have to kick you out for a few hours,” Severus said quietly. “I’m sorry, had I known you were coming, I would have—”

“It’s fine,” Harry said dismissively. He had questions for Severus. He wanted to know what he thought of the war, why he’d turned traitor and why he’d turned back again, those sorts of things, but he supposed they didn’t matter much in the long run. Except… “Why did you join the Death Eaters?”

Severus let out a small huff of air. “That… is an incredibly difficult question,” he muttered. “Because it has to do with your mother, and I fear that answering it will… make things a bit awkward.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed and he sat up. “Yeah, but now you have to answer it,” he pointed out. “You can’t just tell me something like that and then not answer it. I didn’t even know that you knew my mother!”

“She was my best friend, when we were growing up,” Severus said with a sigh. “And… well, we had a terrible fight while we were students in Hogwarts together, I called her a Mudblood, and I joined the Dark Lord. And she went on to marry your father.”

There was something in Severus’ tone that made Harry’s nose wrinkle. “Severus, were you in love with my mother?” he asked, more than a little horrified.

Severus’ cheeks pinked. “That’s neither here nor there,” he said stiffly.

“I don’t know,” Harry said, his eyes wide. “I think that’s kind of important. Doesn’t that make what’s between us… awkward?” He wasn’t sure what he thought about Severus having been in love with his mother, but he couldn’t imagine that it didn’t color the way that Severus thought about him, at least in some way.

“In a way, yes,” Severus said. He reached down and brushed Harry’s hair away from his forehead, the touch gentle and careful. “But I never dated your mother, and my affections for her were never returned, even when we were friends. And you, Harry, are nothing like your mother, so if you’re frightened that you’re serving as some kind of substitute—”

Harry grimaced. “Well, I wasn’t, but now that you mention it,” he muttered. He shuddered a little. “Thanks for that image.”
Severus chuckled, then leaned down and kissed Harry. “I love you,” he said quietly, firmly. “And whatever it was that I may have felt for your mother in the past, I can assure you, it pales in comparison to the depths of my affection for you.”

Harry melted into Severus arms and leaned up for another kiss. He was indulged, but before Harry could get a third, a timer dinged and Severus pulled back with a sigh. “And that means that I need to return to my work,” he said.

Harry got off of his lap. “Have fun.” He headed for the door, his wand already gripped tightly in his hand. He opened the door, then said mischievously, “And don’t pine too much for my mother while you’re working!”

Then he darted away, laughing.

He bumped into someone as he sprinted, though, and fell back, landing on his butt. Harry let out a squeak of fear until he realized that Salazar wasn’t hissing threateningly. He looked up, and found himself staring at a highly amused Voldemort.

“Going somewhere?” the Dark Lord asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Just back to my rooms,” Harry said honestly. “I was visiting Severus. I wanted to talk to him about the war, and his opinions of it, but he was in the middle of a delicate potion.”

“I will escort you,” Voldemort said, not responding to the rest of Harry’s statements, and not making his offer a question. He extended a hand to Harry and helped him to his feet.

“Thanks,” Harry said, a bit awkwardly. He brushed off his robes and started walking, and Voldemort fell into step beside him. The silence stretched uncomfortably until they’d reached the door to Harry’s suite. Then, Harry blurted out, “You know, dictatorships never last.”

“I beg your pardon?” Voldemort looked down at him, a frown forming on his face.

“Dictatorships. Like the one that you’re trying to set up. They don’t last.” Harry shuffled his feet, then looked up and met Voldemort’s red eyes. “Historically speaking, someone comes along to
topple them, or the people revolt. They just… they don’t work in the long run.”

Voldemort huffed, the sound irritated. “And what would you have me do instead, child? Would you have me do nothing, and watch as my followers rights’ are eroded and our customs are destroyed because they make Muggleborns uncomfortable?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “I’m not a genius when it comes to tactics or battle plans or whatever. I just know that dictatorships never work out in the long run, and you should probably decide if you want to spend the rest of your life at war or if you want to put the effort into finding another way.” He hesitated, then added, “And if you weren’t at war anymore, you wouldn’t have to move away.”

Then he ducked into his room and closed the door, and tried not to focus on why the thought of Voldemort moving away had his heart racing in his chest.

He didn’t want to think about that at all.
Dictatorships didn’t work. What did the boy know, saying that dictatorships didn’t work? Who was he to say such a thing, anyway?

Voldemort shook the thought away and turned his back on Harry’s door. Still…

Still, he never had heard of a successful dictatorship, now that the boy brought it to his attention. Voldemort’s lip curled in a snarl and he stalked off in the direction of his office. He tried to shove the boy’s words to the back of his mind, tried to ignore them, but…

But he was right, wasn’t he? And if what Voldemort was building would be destroyed in the years to come, then was it even worth building at all? With all of the effort he’d put into winning this war, the thought was… horrifying. The lives he’d taken, the battles he’d fought in, the idea that it could all be for nothing…

Voldemort collapsed at his desk with a sigh. It could, in fact, all be for nothing. Harry was right. Dictatorships didn’t work, and if he ruled through terror, eventually people would grow tired of being terrified. It wouldn’t work, not in the long run. He had to find another way, and he’d known that for a long time. He’d just been… avoiding that fact.

But what other way was there? His best political allies were too well known as his supporters, so he couldn’t possibly take the world through the Wizengamot… unless…

No. Voldemort discarded the idea as quickly as it had sprung up. He couldn’t use Harry politically, not until he could be absolutely certain that it was safe for him. The thought of getting Harry killed through his own ambitions was an even worse thought than losing everything he’d been working for.

Not to mention, there was little chance that Harry was of sound mind enough for such a venture. The damage he’d sustained before coming to Black Manor… there was no way that he would be capable of the maneuverings a political position would require.

He tapped his wand against his desk and considered the options before him. The school year was almost over, and the Malfoy boy had yet to complete the task that Voldemort had set before him. But… perhaps that wasn’t such a terrible thing. If the Malfoy boy’s hands were clean…
Voldemort’s eyes narrowed and he sat up straight. He summoned Lucius to his office and waited, impatiently, for the man to arrive.

Lucius appeared in a flurry of robes, his eyes wary as he dropped into a low bow. “My Lord has need of me?” he asked.

“Your son still hasn’t succeeded in killing Dumbledore,” Voldemort pointed out.

Lucius flinched. “He has not, no,” he agreed. “But I know that he is hard at work, and if my Lord would just grant him until the end of the school year, I’m certain that Draco can manage to complete both of his tasks.”

“Actually, Lucius, I want you to tell your son to stop working on both items,” Voldemort said slowly.

“My Lord?” Lucius sounded confused, but when Voldemort twitched his wand in his direction, Lucius quickly bowed his head once more. “It shall be as you command,” he said quickly.

“And Lucius?” Voldemort still wasn’t sure that he was making the right decision, but… he thought that perhaps maybe this might work, if he could only arrange it properly. Besides, Dumbledore wouldn’t be a problem for much longer, given that he’d triggered the curse on the ring. And Hogwarts could be his without the need for a siege, if Voldemort played his cards right.

“My Lord?”

“Your son will spend the summer here, at Black Manor. Make sure that he understands that he is required to treat my guest with the highest of courtesies, or the consequences will be dire.” Lucius knew exactly who Voldemort’s guest was; every Death Eater who had need to visit Black Manor knew that Harry was staying there. And they all knew to avoid Harry unless it was a dire emergency, as had happened with Bella the other day.

“I will deliver the message, my Lord,” Lucius breathed. “May I ask… May I ask my Lord what has changed his mind about my son’s fate?”
Voldemort smirked. “Someone pointed out to me recently that dictatorships never last for long,” he said. “He challenged me to find another way, and that’s what I intend to do.”

Lucius looked confused, but didn’t ask any further questions about Voldemort’s thought process. “Is there anything else that I can do for my Lord?” he asked instead.

“I would say that you could prepare to give up your seats on the Wizengamot, but since you are, technically, still an escapee of Azkaban, can Draco not take the seats without your permission?” Voldemort tapped his wand against his desk once more, the gesture an idle habit that was the result of being more lost in thought than anything else.

Lucius’ swallow was audible. “He can, my Lord. Should I tell him to prepare to take my seat?”

Voldemort dropped his wand. “I will decide that after meeting with him over the summer,” he said finally. “Now get out. Deliver my messages, and pray that your son manages to follow these orders.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Lucius practically fled from his office, and Voldemort didn’t bother to contain his quiet laugh. If nothing else, he could delight in the fear his Death Eaters retained of him. He thought that perhaps Harry wouldn’t approve, and quickly shook the thought away.

Why did he care so much about what the boy thought of him? He didn’t need Harry to like him just because he bore a part of his soul. He just needed Harry to be alive and well, physically speaking. Even his mental state shouldn’t matter so much to Voldemort. And yet… and yet it did, very much so.

Why?

Voldemort groaned and rubbed at his eyes. Wondering about it would do no good, he knew that. Besides, what did it matter why he worried over Harry’s mental status? “It matters because you’re letting it affect the way you run your war,” he muttered to himself.

“~Master should know that talking to himself is a sign of insanity,~” Nagini hissed to him.
Voldemort slumped in his chair and let her climb him so that she could coil on the desk in front of him. “~Then I fear that I am going mad,~” he said to his snake. He stroked one finger along her scales and smiled a little when she let out a pleased hiss.

“~Can I help?~”

She was a good snake, always ready and willing to help in whatever way she could. But this time, Voldemort didn’t think that there was much anyone could do. He didn’t quite understand the problem himself, after all.

“~Probably not,~” he said finally. “~I’m still not entirely certain what’s wrong myself, so I can’t exactly ask you to help me fix it.~”

“~Just know that I am always happy to eat someone, if that would help you in any way,~” Nagini hissed. She didn’t move from his desk, and Voldemort let out a small laugh.

“~Thank you, my darling one,~” he said to her. He petted her quietly for several more minutes, then stood and stretched. “~I think I’m going to take the rest of the day and try and figure out what’s wrong with me.~” Perhaps spending the day resting in a quiet place, away from the stresses of his office might help him get his mind off of Harry.

“~That sounds like a good idea,~” Nagini agreed. She slithered off of the desk and over to the door, where she waited for him like a dog might wait for their owner. “~You have not taken a day for yourself in a very long time. These things, I understand, begin to wear on you humans.~”

“~Unfortunately, they do,~” Voldemort agreed. “~We can’t be like snakes, who worry only over food and warmth and sleep.~”

“~You need someone to take care of you, like I have,~” Nagini suggested, her voice sly. “~I don’t even have to worry about those things anymore, in case you’ve missed it. I am well-fed, I can sleep when I wish, and I am always as warm as I want to be.~”

Voldemort laughed out loud, unexpectedly amused by the thought of himself with a caretaker like Nagini had. “~That does sound like a good idea,~” he mused to the snake. “~I could let someone else run this awful war, let someone else figure out what to do since the war doesn’t seem to be working.~”
“~Now you have the right idea,~” Nagini practically sang as they left his office and headed for his suite of rooms, which wasn’t far off.

Voldemort pushed the idea away as a fanciful one even as he settled in his most comfortable chair with a good book, one that had nothing to do with the war or anything else, for the rest of the day.

Unfortunately, the distraction wasn’t quite enough to get Harry out of his head, and Voldemort still couldn’t begin to explain that.
Chapter Thirty

The end of the week came, and Voldemort didn’t leave. Harry wasn’t sure why, and he wasn’t sure that Voldemort would tell him if he went and asked, but… but Harry was curious, and he wanted to know if Voldemort would be leaving. The small place inside of him that he was pretending didn’t exist still ached at the very idea of Voldemort going anywhere.

So he gathered up Salazar who, at this point, was almost too heavy to carry, and headed for Voldemort’s office. He tapped on the door, not really expecting much in the way of an answer, and was surprised when he was bid enter by the Dark Lord.

“Harry,” Voldemort said evenly. He didn’t seem to be surprised, and instead leaned back in his chair and gestured at the chair opposite the desk. “What can I do for you?”

Harry settled hesitantly. “I…” He swallowed. “You didn’t leave,” he said quietly. He stroked Salazar’s head and looked down at the snake rather than meeting Voldemort’s eyes.

“No,” Voldemort responded. “I thought about what you said, and my first inclination was to discard your words as the harshly spoken opinion of a teenager. But…” Voldemort fell silent.

Harry glanced up at him. Voldemort’s face was contorted in a grimace, like he found something incredibly distasteful about whatever he had been planning to say. “But?” Harry prodded after the silence continued.

“But… as much as it galls me to admit it, you were right,” Voldemort muttered. “And I knew it. This war wasn’t going the way I wanted it to, and it never would have. Any progress I made with it would have been wiped out as soon as I died. Not, of course, that it is my intention to die, given… well.” Voldemort nodded at Harry.

Harry looked down. “But do you really want to risk everything you’ve ever wanted on the idea that your horcruxes will always be there?” he asked.

“No,” Voldemort said. He let out a heavy sigh. “Like I said, I’ve acknowledged that you’re right,
and now I’m going to be making some changes to the way things are happening.”

“Does that mean that you’re staying?” Harry asked, a bit shyly. He looked down again, so that he couldn’t see Voldemort’s face.

“Yes, Harry, that means that I’m staying.” Voldemort snorted, the sound inelegant and oddly out of place. “Don’t think that this means that you’ll get your way every time you want something from me, though. It just so happens that this time, you were right. You won’t always be.”

Harry shook his head. “Of course I won’t,” he said, and looked up with a smile tugging on his lips. “I’m just a teenager, and now I’m not even a teenager who’s finished his sixth year at Hogwarts. I probably won’t ever graduate from school. What I know is, comparatively, very small.”

Voldemort looked away. “We could find a way for you to—”

“No you can’t,” Harry said calmly. “I don’t…” He took a deep breath, and tried not to think about what it would be like to go back to Hogwarts without Ron or Hermione, with all of those people surrounding him all of the time. “I don’t even want to go back,” he said, his voice small.

Voldemort’s face softened. “Of course you don’t,” he said. “I’m sorry for the things that you’ve gone through.”

Harry offered Voldemort a shaky smile. “Thanks,” he whispered. He looked back down at Salazar, who’d slithered off his lap and was harassing Nagini. He couldn’t be sure, but he was almost positive that his snake had a crush on her, and Nagini wasn’t interested at all. “I should…” He swallowed. “I should go. It’s almost time for my potions lessons with Severus.”

“How are those working out?” Voldemort asked. “And you’re no trouble. You can stay as long as you’d like.”

Harry felt a warmth well within him, and he ignored it as best he could. “They’re going well,” he said quickly. “They go better when I’m not late, but thank you for the offer.”

“Of course,” Voldemort said, and nodded at him. “If you need to go, then please, don’t let me keep you.”
Harry nodded and said to Salazar, “~We’re leaving, if you can pry yourself away from Nagini.~”

“~Please, by all means, get rid of this obnoxious little child.~” Nagini hissed. She was curled into as small a ball as she could be, her body looped and coiled and her head hidden.

“~Rude.~” Salazar hissed back. “~You’ll miss me when I don’t come visit you anymore.~”

“~I really won’t,~” Nagini shot back. “~Take good care of the little shard. Stop flirting with me.~”

“~I’m capable of both!~” Salazar seemed offended, and when he coiled himself around Harry, he seemed almost hurt.

“Should we worry about that?” Harry asked, a bit amused. He stroked Salazar as he spoke, so that the snake knew that Harry wasn’t angry with him or anything.

“I wouldn’t even begin to know what to do about it,” Voldemort said honestly. “So I don’t know what good worrying would do.”

Harry laughed. “That’s fair.” He stood up and turned to leave, then stopped. “Thank you for staying.”

“It’s not a problem,” Voldemort responded gently. “But Harry, you should be aware, because I’m staying here for the duration of the summer, Draco Malfoy will be joining us. I have things I need to do, and he’ll be playing a rather important part in my new plan.”

Harry froze. “He won’t…” He swallowed. “He won’t…” He couldn’t get the words out. Malfoy had been little more than an annoyance while they’d been at Hogwarts, but here… Malfoy could be much more than an annoyance, and Harry didn’t think he’d be able to deal with that.

“He won’t hurt you,” Voldemort said immediately. “He’ll be instructed on the proper way to treat you, and if he violates the rules I set for him, I can assure you that the consequences will be most unpleasant.” Voldemort glanced at his snake. “Assuming, of course, he lives to see any consequences.”
Harry nodded once. “Thank you,” he whispered. He left the office before he could say anything else, and tried not to think about it as fleeing.

He distracted himself during the short walk to Severus’ office by talking to Salazar about his crush on Nagini. It didn’t seem to be a romantic interest so much as Salazar wanted to be her friend, and Nagini had no interest in that, either. He hoped that his snake wasn’t about to get his heart broken, but there wasn’t much he could do. He just told Salazar that he couldn’t make someone be friends with him, which only made the snake sulk even more.

By the time Harry got to Severus’ office, between not focusing on whatever was happening with Voldemort, trying not to think about Malfoy’s impending arrival, and worrying over Salazar and Nagini, he was emotionally wrung out.

Some of it must have shown on his face, because Severus almost dropped a vial of the potion he was pouring out of its cauldron. “What on earth is the matter with you?” Severus asked. “You look awful.”

There was something out of place about Severus, but Harry couldn’t quite figure it out, and he wasn’t in the mood to try. “My snake has a crush on Nagini,” Harry said. He walked straight to Severus and let his head fall to rest against Severus’ chest. “And Malfoy’s coming for the summer, which I don’t want to happen but I can’t very well protest.”

“Poor thing,” Severus said, a hint of laughter in his voice. He finished what he was doing, then wrapped an arm around Harry’s waist and pulled him closer. “Do you want to skip lessons today?”

Harry did want to. He wanted nothing more than to cuddle up against Severus and not move for… well, forever. With Regulus, if he was willing to join them. But… “Isn’t that a bad idea?” he asked, his voice small.

“It’s not,” Severus answered. He pressed a kiss to Harry’s forehead. “It isn’t like we’re in a rush to get you through these lessons. You can take all the time in the world, if you need to.”

Harry sighed and let himself sag further against Severus. “Then yes, please,” he said. He didn’t protest when he was maneuvered from the lab and into Severus’ living room, where Severus settled on the couch and tugged Harry into his lap. “Can Regulus join us?”
Severus hesitated. “Regulus… isn’t here right now,” he said quietly, carefully.

Harry blinked and sat up straight, pulling away from Severus. “What do you mean, he’s not here?” He didn’t think that Regulus left the manor, aside from when he’d gone out to find Harry for Voldemort. And that, he’d thought, was a special case because of what was happening.

“He’s on a mission,” Severus said. He tugged, and Harry reluctantly allowed himself to be settled against Severus once more. “Sometimes, when Dumbledore is getting too close to finding a horcrux, Regulus goes out and moves it. It’s… complicated.”

Harry blinked at Severus and finally figured out what was off about Severus. His second mate was currently wearing the locket that Regulus normally did. “He’s in danger when he does these things?” Harry asked, his voice small. He leaned closer and buried his face in Severus’ neck. He couldn’t think of any other reason for Regulus to hand off that locket. He took such good care of it…

“Not really,” Severus said, and flinched when Harry gave him a dirty look. “Of course there’s some danger, there always is when Regulus leaves the manor. But for the most part, no. He’s safe. He just has to… move some things, set a few traps, that sort of thing. He’s done it once or twice before, and Dumbledore hasn’t ever gotten close to him. As far as I know, Dumbledore isn’t even aware that it’s happening.”

Harry swallowed and let his eyes drift closed. “If you say so,” he muttered.

Severus tilted his head up, forcing Harry to look into his eyes. “I wouldn’t lie to you,” he said quietly, calmly. “Not about this. If Regulus were in danger, I swear that I would tell you.”

Harry smiled, a bit shyly. “Okay,” he whispered. He leaned up, hesitantly, and kissed Severus lightly on the lips. “I believe you,” he said when he pulled back.

Severus smiled back. “Good,” he murmured. He leaned in and kissed Harry, and Harry shivered at the second touch of their lips. “I wouldn’t lie to you,” Severus continued when he pulled back. “Not about that, not about anything.”

“I know you wouldn’t.” Harry pressed closer to Severus, his heart starting to pound. He could feel that awful feeling rising inside of him, the lust that he hated. “I trust you,” he said. And then he swallowed and his heart stopped. He trusted Severus. As much as he trusted Regulus, which meant
that he trusted him quite a lot. “I trust you,” he breathed, the words shaky.

“I know that you do,” Severus said. His brow furrowed. “Harry, are you okay?”

Harry nodded, then shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. He shifted closer, and his body thrilled at the contact. He didn’t like that. Wasn’t sure if he liked it. It felt good, being so close to Severus, but... but the things that lust made people do...

Severus ran his fingers through Harry’s hair. “Do you want to pull back?” he asked. His voice was neutral, like it didn’t bother him either way. Harry wasn’t surprised that he’d figured out the problem; Severus was brilliant about most things.

“I don’t know,” he said again. He really didn’t. He wanted... his body wanted, and he wasn’t... he wasn’t opposed. He didn’t think he was opposed, anyway. He didn’t know. Harry leaned up and kissed Severus again, and this time, when Severus licked at the seam of Harry’s lips, he opened his mouth and let Severus’ tongue tangle with his own.

It felt good. It felt very good, and Harry found himself crawling into Severus’ lap, straddling him, his body responding to the kiss in a way that was both thrilling and frightening. He didn’t pull back, though. He trusted Severus.

Severus, however, did pull back, gasping for breath. He pressed his forehead to Harry’s, and Harry felt his hardness beneath him. “You need to tell me if you want to stop, or if you want to continue,” Severus said, his voice curiously rough.

Harry shuddered at the sound. “I don’t think I want to stop,” Harry said, and leaned in for another kiss. He pulled back when Severus thrust against him, and it sent a jolt of pleasure through him. “I trust you,” he breathed, and then his lips were seized in another kiss.

They stayed on the couch, their kisses growing more frantic, Severus’ hand sliding under Harry’s robe to stroke the bare skin of his back while the other stayed tangled in his hair, Harry’s hands knotting in Severus’ robes, both gasping for breath in between their heated kisses. When Harry reached his peak, Severus followed him over the edge with a low cry.

Harry didn’t know what to do with himself after, but that was okay. Severus held him close, soothed him with soft kisses and gentle words, and Harry found himself relaxing in his arms and falling into a half-asleep state. Severus didn’t mind, and continued to hold him close until that half-asleep state
turned into a fully-asleep one.

Chapter End Notes

For the record, that's as graphic as this story's going to get my friends.
Harry didn’t know how long Severus let him nap against him on the couch, but didn’t imagine it was very long before he was being jostled gently. “Harry, you can’t sleep like this,” Severus murmured in his ear.

Harry grumbled incoherently and snuggled obstinately closer. “Can,” he muttered when Severus jostled him again. He was tired.

“Harry, you’ll get sticky,” Severus said, and Harry was sure that he wasn’t imagining the huff of laughter in his mate’s voice. He opened his eyes just to glare at him, and found that Severus was grinning down at him, his eyes warm and soft. “Come on, you. Let’s get you into the bath, okay?”

Harry didn’t particularly want to go to the bath, and he definitely wasn’t interested in being awake. He wasn’t entirely sure of what to do with himself now that he was awake, after all. “I don’t…” He stopped and swallowed. He didn’t know…

“It’s okay,” Severus said, his voice soft and coaxing. “You don’t have to do anything special. We just need to get you cleaned up. Maybe you’ll feel better after a soak in the tub?”

Harry wrinkled his nose, but finally allowed himself to be talked into getting up and going into Severus’ bathroom. He waited while Severus filled the bathtub, the massive marble monstrosity as big as the one in his rooms with Regulus, and then stripped out of his clothes while Severus had his back turned and got into the water, which was just on the right side of being too hot.

Severus was right, Harry realized to his own chagrin. The water was nice, and it did feel good to be out of his… soiled… clothing. “You were right,” Harry said with a small sigh. He shifted in the water, which went up to his shoulders, so that he could see what Severus was doing.

“Of course I was,” Severus said with a haughty little sniff that was ruined by the smile on his face. “Now, shall I leave you to it?”

A flare of panic rose within Harry at the idea of Severus going anywhere. “Don’t go!” He reached
for Severus, heedless of his soaking wet arm, and relaxed immediately when Severus took his hand. “Please.” He couldn’t explain why he didn’t want Severus out of his sight, but he... just... he just didn’t.

“I can stay,” Severus said immediately. He settled on the floor next to the tub, grimacing when his robes got wet. “Although, I do admit that this isn’t exactly comfortable.”

Harry took a deep breath. “You could join me,” he said, his voice tiny. Somehow, being naked with Severus felt like a bigger step than the one they’d just taken, but it also felt... right. And he didn’t want Severus to leave, and he didn’t want him to be uncomfortable. It seemed that was the best option.

“Is that what you want?” Severus asked gently. He made no move to get up off of the floor, but instead watched Harry patiently. “I’m more than okay sitting here while you bathe.”

Harry shook his head. Now that he’d said it, he thought that maybe he might be willing to take that step. “No, I’m sure. Join me.” This time, the words were firm enough to almost be an order.

Severus raised an eyebrow at him, but stood and began to strip out of his robes. Harry didn’t turn away, but Severus didn’t seem to mind. He just undressed and, when he was finished, slid into the water across from Harry, their naked legs touching under the water.

Harry shivered a little bit, then hesitantly moved through the water so that he was sitting next to Severus, his arm and leg brushing against Severus’. “This is nice,” he said quietly, a little shakily. It was nice, and he felt perfectly safe, but he was still nervous and he couldn’t begin to explain why.

“It is,” Severus agreed. He didn’t protest when Harry touched his chest, the touch careful and more exploratory than anything else. “What are you up to?” he asked, laughter in his voice.

“Just... touching,” Harry said, and felt himself relaxing. Severus wouldn’t hurt him. He hadn’t, not since he’d come to Black Manor. “Exploring,” he said honestly. He touched Severus again, finding Severus’ chest to be slightly hairier than his own. “You’re different from me.”

“I’m much older than you,” Severus pointed out. He held himself still for Harry’s exploration, not protesting. He did, however, squirm away when Harry’s fingers danced over his ribs under the water. “Don’t do that,” he said with a laugh.
Harry grinned up at him, feeling mischievous. “Ticklish?” he asked, and stroked lightly over Severus’ ribs once again.

Severus couldn’t stop his laugh that time, and splashed water at Harry. “Very,” he said, still laughing. “So don’t do that unless you’d like me to return the favor.”

Harry stopped and blinked at him. “I don’t know if I’m ticklish,” he said quietly. He frowned. Nobody had ever tried before. Not the Dursleys, not Ron or Hermione or… or anyone. Was he?

Severus’ smile faded, but didn’t disappear. “I’m sure we’ll find out at some point,” he said quietly. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Harry’s forehead. “Now, are you done picking on me?”

Harry considered the matter, then nodded and snuggled close to Severus, no longer bothered by their mutual nudity.

They soaked in the bath until the water went cold for the second time and their fingers were wrinkled terribly. Then Severus drained the water while Harry dried off and pulled on a pair of pajamas that a kind elf had left for him. Harry left the bathroom while Severus dressed and had just picked up a grape to munch on when Regulus walked into the room and blinked at him.

“Pajamas at this time of day?” Regulus asked, his voice lightly teasing. “That, Harry, is the height of sloth.”

Harry stuck his tongue out. “I’ve had a very trying day, thank you very much.” He ate his grape and, when he’d finished chewing, added, “Besides, I just got out of the bath.”

“Oh, you did, did you?” Regulus asked. He came close to Harry and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Did you have a potions mishap?”

Harry shook his head. “We skipped lessons today,” he said, and grabbed another grape. He was actually feeling hungry, so when he finished that one, he picked up an apple.

At that moment, Severus emerged from the bathroom and raised an eyebrow at Regulus. “Successful mission?” he asked.
Regulus glanced from Harry to Severus and back, his eyes widening. “Very,” he said. “I got the diadem successfully out of…” He glanced back at Harry once more and cleared his throat. “Well. It’s moved. What were the two of you up to in the bathroom?”

“Finding out that Severus is very ticklish,” Harry said, his cheeks heating. He knew he had to look like a tomato, but he just kept working on eating the apple in his hand.

“And that Harry doesn’t know if he’s ticklish or not,” Severus added, voice studiously bland.

Regulus’ eyebrows went up. “And you’re feeling okay?” he asked Harry.


Regulus pulled him close. “I’m glad,” he said, and pressed a swift kiss to Harry’s lips before pulling back. He crossed to Severus, gave him a hug and a quick kiss as well, then leaned close and whispered something in his ear that Harry couldn’t catch. Severus’ cheeks, however, went as red as Harry’s felt. When Regulus pulled away, he was grinning wickedly.

“What did you say?” Harry asked curiously.

“He’s being a brat,” Severus responded. He rolled his eyes at Regulus. “Should I get lunch from the elves?” He asked, in what was clearly an attempt to change the subject.

Harry finished off his apple and nodded. “I could eat some more fruit,” he said. “Maybe a salad? With some citrusy things?”

He was pretty sure that Severus and Regulus exchanged a look that he didn’t catch, but that was okay. He was hungry, and with the way that they were always nagging at him to eat, they should probably be happy that he was actually indulging for once.

Food arrived quickly, and the fruit salad that Harry was given did, indeed, have lots of citrusy things. Little oranges and pineapples and some coconut, which wasn’t citrus but was very good. He hummed happily as he ate his salad and cuddled close to Regulus, who immediately wrapped an arm around his shoulders to hold him closer.
“This is nice,” Severus said. “We really should try to eat lunch together more often.”

Harry let out an agreeable hum, but frowned when their lunch was interrupted by the appearance of a house elf, who bowed low. “Master Harry has a letter,” the elf squeaked, the letter held in both hands.

“Has it been checked for charms and curses?” Severus asked sharply, holding up a hand to stop Harry from touching the letter.

The elf let out a little squeak. “Master Harry’s letter was delivered first to Master Dark Lord. Mimsy doesn’t know what Master Dark Lord did with the letter, but Mimsy is being told to deliver the letter to Master Harry.”

“Thank you, Mimsy,” Harry said, and took the letter. Voldemort would have checked the letter over for curses, compulsions, or charms before giving it to him. He’d probably checked it for potions, too, assuming that there were potions which could be applied to paper that would still affect him.

Mimsy let out another little squeak, bowed again, and popped away.

Harry opened the letter and frowned at the contents. “It’s from Christelle,” he said, his nose wrinkling. He really didn’t like that woman, in spite of the fact that she’d technically helped him both times she’d been there to visit him.

“What does she want?” Regulus asked. He didn’t make any move to read over Harry’s shoulder, or to take the letter from him.

“The last time she was here, she told me…” Harry cleared his throat and glanced up at Severus. “She thought that I had a second mating bond, and I was… less than receptive to the idea at the time. She wanted me to look into it, and see if maybe that’s why my allure was under such good control.”

Severus blinked. “Your Occlumency should be what’s doing it,” he said slowly. “Although I suppose it is possible that the mating bond has something to do with it.”
“Especially given that Severus is such a good Occlumens,” Regulus muttered. “That’s… interesting. What are you going to tell her?”

Harry shook his head. “Honestly, I hadn’t thought about what she’d asked of me until right now. I guess… I guess I could go into a trance tomorrow and see what my shields are looking like, and what my bond with Severus looks like. When I went into the trance last time, it was a lot smaller and more fragile than the one I had with Regulus, probably because it was just starting to form.”

Severus nodded. “That could be a good idea,” he said. “Would you mind terribly if I stayed on hand, just in case you wander too far into your mind and have trouble making it out?”

“Is that a possibility?” Harry asked. He hadn’t even considered it the last time he’d been exploring inside his own mind.

“It is, though admittedly not a likely one,” Severus said. His lips quirked into a self-deprecating smile. “I would just feel more comfortable if I could be there, keeping an eye on you.”

Harry nodded. “That’s fine.” He didn’t think he’d have any trouble going into a trance with Severus around. After all, that was how he’d learned in the first place. He glanced at Regulus, who was frowning. “Are you okay with that?” he asked. “I’d really like to be able to let her know once and for all. Even if I don’t like her, if Occlumency can help other Veela control their allure…”

“Of course I’m okay with that,” Regulus said. He tugged him close and kissed his forehead. “Just be careful, okay?”

Harry nodded again. “I’m always careful,” he said cheerfully. Then he flinched, remembering all the times at Hogwarts when he’d been anything but careful. “I mean, I’m always careful now,” he amended.

“Thank you for that amendment,” Severus said dryly. “Because I was wondering if I’d misremembered the young man who went into the Chamber of Secrets to save a little girl’s life. Or who fought off a troll. Or who—”

“Yes, yes, I wasn’t always careful,” Harry said hastily, waving off Severus’ words. “I’m not that person, anymore, though.” He swallowed and looked down at his fruit salad, some of his joy disappearing. “I think I’m starting to like who I am now, though.”
Regulus kissed him again. “I’m glad to hear that.” He glanced over at Severus.

“As am I,” Severus said immediately. He reached out for Harry and took his hand. “I like the person you’re turning into, very much.”

Harry smiled. “Thank you,” he said, a bit shyly. He took another bite of his fruit and relaxed. The rest of the day was a quiet one, and Harry found himself sticking close to Severus for the day, cuddled up on the couch with him while Regulus read in the chair across from them.

Chapter End Notes

lastcrazyhorn, I hope you liked the first part of the chapter!
Harry took a deep breath and settled into his cushion. Severus was sitting across from him, not staring at him, but reading a book. He’d wanted to keep an eye on Harry, and Harry was fine with that, he just didn’t want the man staring at him while he slipped into his own head.

It took him several minutes to get into the right headspace to slide into a trance. He was a bit worried about what he’d find in his head, whether he would find the answers that Christelle sought, or not. And if he did find the answers, what if they weren’t the ones he wanted to find? What if he couldn’t find them at all, and she didn’t accept that?

Harry forced himself to pull his thoughts away from that path. There were a million things that could go wrong, but there always were. He didn’t need to worry about what could go wrong, not now. He needed to focus on getting inside of his own head, and he didn’t want to ask Severus for a calming potion. He could do this on his own, and had, in fact, done this on his own in much worse conditions.

He closed his eyes and focused, and then he found himself standing in his own mindscape once more.

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and focused on the barrier that held his allure inside of him. It looked much like it always did, and felt much the same. Harry relaxed almost immediately. Whether or not he was maintaining it or something else was causing it, it was there, and that was something. Not that he’d doubted it was there, but…

He shook his head. “Focus, Harry,” he said to himself. He approached the barrier and touched it with a hand that only trembled slightly.

Immediately, his mind was overwhelmed with a sense of Severus, and Harry knew that he wasn’t the one maintaining the barrier. He didn’t know how Severus was doing it, didn’t know if Severus would be able to explain it, but he was definitely the one keeping Harry’s allure in check.

Harry sagged. It wasn’t the answer he’d hoped for, but it was an answer, and he supposed that was as good as it was going to get. He drew in a deep breath and prepared to leave his mindscape, then
stopped halfway through the process of waking himself up. Did he want to…

Yes, yes he did want to.

Instead of making his way out of his mind, he travelled deeper within, to the core of his mind where he’d found the bonds to Regulus and Severus once before. The last time he’d been there, Severus’ bond had been a fragile, sickly thing. He wanted to see if it had changed now that he was actually in a relationship with the man, wanted to see if it had progressed to being the healthy thing that Regulus’ bond was.

The dark place in his mind was far brighter than it had been before, and that was largely because both of the bonds were now thick, healthy, and glowing brightly. Harry touched one, and got an immediate sense of Regulus and his love for Harry. It was soft and gentle and warm, soothing like stepping into a warm bath.

Harry pulled his hand back and then carefully reached for the second bond. Immediately, he felt Severus, whose feelings for Harry felt a bit more like fire, hot and dangerous but still so very warm. Protective, too, in a way that Regulus wasn’t quite. Harry wondered about that, but before he could touch his bond with Regulus again, something drew his attention.

A flicker of light out of the corner of his eye. Harry turned around and his heart dropped. “No,” he breathed. There was a third bond there. It was thin, thinner even than his bond with Severus had been when he’d first discovered it, but it was definitely there.

He couldn’t stop the tears from forming in his eyes. Why? Who was it with? It wasn’t fair! Every time he thought he had a handle on the things that had happened to him, every time he adjusted to the changes that had come over the past year, something else went wrong!

With trembling fingers, he reached for the third bond. He couldn’t sense much, didn’t know who it went to, but it was very different from what he could feel from Regulus or Severus. This bond was cooler, perhaps even cold. There was affection there, but it was distant, like it was removed or was being filtered through something.

Harry pulled his hand away, feeling sick. Who could it be?

And then the sickness turned to anger. This wasn’t fair! His life was finally settling down, and this was what he had to deal with, again? Harry swiped at the bond, rage blooming inside of him. He
tried to grab onto it, to rip it from his mind, but as soon as he yanked on it, he shrieked in pain and was forced to let go.

He wrenched himself from within his own mind and emerged, panting, tears in his eyes, lying on his back in Severus’ meditation room. He didn’t try to move, didn’t try to sit up or anything, just stayed on his back and stared up at the ceiling.

“Harry?” Severus asked softly. Harry didn’t look at Severus when his mate knelt next to him. “What’s wrong?”

“What isn’t?” Harry asked bitterly. He made himself sit up, his jaw clenched. “Why is it that every time I think I know what’s going on, something else happens to me?” he asked, and his words came out more plaintively than angrily.

“Because life is awful sometimes,” Severus said immediately. He reached out and stroked Harry’s hair. “Regulus is outside in the living room. Maybe we could talk about whatever it is with him?”

Harry leaned into the hand that Severus had left on his head and sat silently for a few seconds. Then he nodded, the motion taking everything out of him. “Yeah,” he said tiredly. “Let’s go see Regulus, see if we can’t figure this out.”

He got up, his body feeling heavier than it had in a long time, and left the room. Regulus was sitting on the couch, reading a book of some kind. Harry took it from him, put it on the table, and crawled into Regulus’ lap. He buried his head in Regulus’ neck.

“Hey there,” Regulus breathed. He held Harry close and asked, “I take it that your mindscape visit didn’t go quite the way you wanted it to?”

Harry shook his head. “No,” he said tiredly.

Severus settled on the couch behind him, next to Regulus, and rested a gentle hand on Harry’s back. “You know that Regulus and I are here for you, no matter what you found.”

Harry sighed and kept his head buried in Regulus’ neck for what felt like forever. Neither Regulus nor Severus pushed him, although he knew that both of them were worried for him. It seemed like that was all he did sometimes, worry his mates. He wondered if whoever belonged to the third bond
would be able to stand that about him or not.

He wondered if he’d hurt them when he’d tried to rip out the bond. Merlin knew that it had hurt Harry, and he found himself hoping that he hadn’t injured whoever the poor sod was on the other side of the bond. He let out a hitching sob, and felt Regulus’ arms tighten around him, and Severus’ hands began to move on his back, stroking and soothing.

He opened his eyes and pulled back slightly. “I found a third bond,” he said quietly, dully. “I don’t know who it goes to. I tried to rip it out, but…”

“Harry,” Regulus breathed. He stroked his fingers over Harry’s cheeks, catching his tears.

“Is that when you screamed?” Severus asked softly, his hands stilling on Harry’s shoulders. He shifted so that his chest was pressed against Harry’s back.

Harry shrugged. He hadn’t realized that he’d screamed out loud, but it made sense. “Probably,” he said. “It didn’t work, and it hurt. Looking back, it was a pretty dumb decision, wasn’t it?”

“It probably wasn’t the smartest thing you’ve ever done, no,” Severus agreed. He pressed a soft kiss to the back of Harry’s neck, making Harry shiver a little. “But I’ve known you to make more foolish mistakes in the past.”

Harry couldn’t help the slightly soggy laugh that escaped him at that. “That’s fair,” he said tiredly. He buried his head in Regulus’ neck once more and let his eyes drift closed. He was exhausted, like he hadn’t been in a long time. He sort of just wanted to go to sleep, but he wasn’t done talking about what he’d found yet.

And, much as he disliked her, Christelle and her people deserved to know what he’d figured out about the barrier that kept his allure in check.

“I did some investigating on my shields, too,” Harry said. He didn’t move from where his head was buried in Regulus’ neck.

Severus hands began to move again, in long, soothing strokes. “And what did you find?” he asked softly.
“It’s not mine,” Harry answered. His eyes were drifting closed, and he didn’t struggle to keep them open. He didn’t have the energy to fight the sleep that was pulling at him. “It feels too much like you, Severus. I think that you’re the one maintaining the shield. Not me.”

Severus continued to stroke his back. “That’s okay, Harry,” he murmured, his voice low and almost hypnotic. “I don’t mind maintaining them, if that’s what I’m doing. I’m just glad that I can be of assistance in that way. It’s no burden, I can assure you.”

Harry was sure that he was saying more, but he drifted off to sleep before Severus was finished.

ooOOooOOoo

Harry woke up halfway, though he couldn’t say how long he’d been asleep. He could hear the soft murmur of Severus and Regulus speaking, and he struggled to stay awake, to wake up fully, when he realized that they were talking about the third bond.

“What are we going to do about that?” Severus asked softly.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Regulus answered.

They were lying in bed now. Harry supposed they’d moved him at some point, though he obviously hadn’t woken up when they’d done so. He wanted to let himself sink back into sleep, since the bed was so comfortable, and he was surrounded by Regulus and Severus, but he fought to keep listening. He needed to know what they thought.

“There’s a chance that we aren’t going to like whoever it is,” Severus whispered.

“Do you think you know who it is?” Regulus asked sharply.

There was a moment of silence, then Severus muttered, “I think I have some indication. And if it is who I think it is, things are going to change. They can’t help but change, because we… don’t have the same kind of relationship with him that we do with each other.”
There was another long pause, and Harry struggled not to drift off during it. Then, he heard Regulus breathe out, “Merlin,” like he’d just had some kind of revelation. “That would… not be the best thing in the world, would it?”

“No,” Severus said grimly. “But we’re with Harry no matter what, aren’t we?”

“Of course,” Regulus said immediately. “Even if it’s…”

Regulus shivered, and Harry let out a small sound of distress. If they knew who it was, if they didn’t like him, would that ruin everything between them?

That was the last thing that Harry wanted.


Harry found himself relaxing at the warm, gentle words, at the way that Severus pressed soft kisses to the top of his head, and was powerless to resist the call of sleep once more.

ooOOooOOoo

A banging on the door startled Harry from his sleep, and this time he was truly awake. He sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

Regulus slid out of bed. “I’ll go see who it is,” he said. He didn’t look at all tired, and judging by the light in the room, Harry had only been out for a few hours. It wasn’t even evening yet.

He leaned into Severus while he waited for Regulus. “You think you know who my third mate is?” he asked softly.

“I do,” Severus said quietly. He stroked Harry’s hair, and Harry leaned into the touch. “And I think that if you thought about it, you would have a pretty good idea as to who it is.”

Harry shook his head and let his eyes slip closed, even though he wasn’t tired. “You and Regulus
are the only people I really spend time with, other than Salazar and Narcissa. And I don’t think it’s
my snake, and I know it isn’t Narcissa.”

She’d spent enough time with him, healing him and helping him to work through some of the horrors
of the past year, that he knew that he would recognize her in his head.

“Yes, but those aren’t really the only two options, are they?” Severus asked softly.

Before Harry could answer, he heard Regulus saying, “Of course, my lord, you’re more than
welcome to come and verify his well-being. Please, won’t you come into our bedroom?” The last
was said through gritted teeth.

Voldemort, apparently, didn’t care about the disrespect in Regulus’ voice. He crossed the room and
settled on the edge of the bed closest to Harry, his hairless brow furrowed in concern. “Are you
quite all right, Harry?” he asked. He sounded irritated.

Harry just stared at him. He opened his mouth, then closed it, his eyes widening.

“Harry,” Voldemort said, a bit impatiently. “I don’t have all day, and trust me when I say that
worrying about you is not particularly how I enjoy spending my time. I know that you were in pain
earlier, so I’ll thank you to tell me now: Are you feeling well?”

Harry swallowed. “Yes,” he said, the word small. He leaned back into Severus and closed his eyes.
“I’m okay. Just… tired.”

Voldemort let out a small noise and his weight disappeared from the bed. “In the future, please do let
me know that you’re all right after you suffer an upset like that. I’ve never had a… well, a horcrux
like you, and I wasn’t expecting to be able to feel some of the things that you do. We’ll have to
make some adjustments while we figure out how this works. Good afternoon, everyone.”

Harry waited until the door was closed behind him, until Regulus had returned to the bed and taken
Harry back in his arms, and then he whispered, “It isn’t because I’m a horcrux, is it?”

“Probably not,” Regulus said softly. He pressed a kiss to Harry’s forehead. “We’ll figure this out,
don’t worry.”
“He’s going to hate me, isn’t he?” Maybe that was why the bond felt so cold, because Voldemort would never accept it.

“We don’t know that,” Severus said immediately. “And yes, this will take some adjustment on all of our parts, but we’ll find a way to make it work, Harry.”

Harry shook his head. “You’ll try, but what if you can’t?”

Severus hugged him close, and Regulus said, “We can make it work, because we all have something in common that will help us figure this mess out.”

Harry blinked at him. “What?”

Severus said, “We all care very much about you, and want you to be happy. And, before you ask, yes, that’s exactly what the Dark Lord wants for you.”

Harry supposed that, given the way things had gone since he’d arrived at Black Manor, he couldn’t really argue with that.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone!

Just a head’s up, updates for the month of July will be sporadic. I’m working on this story and Prized this month, along with something original, but I’ve got a lot of events coming up (like a convention where I’m going to be selling my original works, and a week-long family trip that I can’t get out of), and I don’t know when I’ll be able to post anything.

So, updates may not happen on Fridays this month, and they probably won’t happen every week, but they will still be happening. Thanks for your patience!
The next day, Harry found himself doing everything in his power to ignore the fact that he had some kind of bond, potentially a mating bond, with Voldemort. It wasn’t like Voldemort would be interested in pursuing a relationship with him, anyway, and he wasn’t interested in finding out if Voldemort was interested.

So for now, the bond could be ignored.

Harry hoped.

And besides, there were a million other things to worry about, like figuring out if Severus really was the one maintaining his shields or not. But when Harry went to Severus to propose an experiment, he was startled when his second mate’s response was an immediate, harsh, “Absolutely not.”

Regulus snorted. “Saw that coming,” he muttered.

Harry frowned at Regulus, then turned his gaze on Severus. “Why not?” he asked, a bit plaintively. He wasn’t used to being denied by his mates, especially not for something that was as important as this. He had to find out, once and for all, if he was maintaining his own shields.

Yes, they felt like Severus, but maybe that was because Severus had been the one to teach Harry to build them! Or maybe, maybe Severus was maintaining his shields, but Harry could form his own once Severus dropped the ones that he was keeping in place for him? There were so many possibilities that he hadn’t considered the previous day because he’d been so worried about…

About whatever he’d been worried about. He wasn’t thinking about it. Period.

“Because the manor isn’t as deserted as it normally is, and I refuse to experiment with your allure when there are so many people here,” Severus said once he’d finished sifting ingredients into his cauldron. He lowered the heat and turned to Harry with a small frown. “Perhaps when the summer is over, we’ll begin experimenting.”
Harry blinked. “There are more people here?” he asked, a bit confused. Had he known that more people were coming? He felt like maybe it had been mentioned before…

“Draco is here,” Regulus said softly, carefully. “I believe that our lord mentioned it to you, but it’s possible that you forgot given the stress you’ve been under.”

Now that Regulus mentioned it… Harry scowled. “I did forget,” he muttered. He glanced at the door they’d just come in through, then looked back at Severus. “Will he be in here all the time, harassing you?” There was something ugly rising inside of him, something that made him uncomfortable. “Making potions with you?”

“He will not,” Severus said swiftly. He reached out and tugged Harry into a loose embrace, and Harry went willingly. “I believe that his time will be spent in meetings with those who are far more politically inclined than myself.”

“Like Voldemort?” The words, dark with jealousy, slipped out before Harry could stop them. He groaned and thumped his head on Severus’ shoulder.

Regulus chuckled and pressed himself against Harry’s back. “Yes, he’ll probably be in meetings with the Dark Lord quite frequently.”

Harry gritted his teeth against the wave of jealousy that rose within him. “Why am I upset about that?” he asked. He dug his head further into Severus’ shoulder.

“Because you’re a Veela.” That was both of his mates, in unison.

Harry jerked out of their combined embrace and glared fiercely at them. “Don’t do that,” he snapped. “And that’s a terrible answer, anyway. I should be more than capable of rising above my instinctive responses, and that’s even if I’m acknowledging the third bond. Which I’m not. Because it doesn’t exist and doesn’t mean anything anyway.” Harry let out an irritated huff and backed up a step.

He felt like he had too much energy, like he was too big for his skin. He wanted nothing more than to go to Voldemort’s office and discuss the strange third bond, and at the same time he hated the very idea of acknowledging it. It wasn’t supposed to exist! It wasn’t fair!
He forced down the feelings of frustration, of anger, and jealousy (because there was nothing to be jealous of, because there was no third bond). “I want to go flying,” he said abruptly. He needed to be out of this room, out of his own room, out of the manor… It wasn’t a feeling he felt often, but right in that moment, it was an overwhelming need.

Severus glanced back at his potion and winced. “I can’t go with you,” he said. “Regulus?”

“Of course,” Regulus said with a smile. He extended a hand to Harry. “You okay with just me going out with you?”

It wasn’t ideal, and Harry wasn’t certain that he’d be okay at all. Severus was always, always there when he went outside. But he’d have Salazar, and Regulus was more than capable of protecting him if he needed it. And besides, he had a wand now, and he was very, very good at defense.

And Harry thought he might lose his mind if he stayed inside for one more minute, even though he didn’t know why he was feeling that way all of a sudden. “Yeah,” he muttered. He took Regulus’ hand and let himself be reeled back in to Regulus’ embrace.

He pulled away only slightly to press a quick, shy kiss to Severus’ lips, before wrapping himself around Regulus’ arm and clinging as they walked away.

ooOOooOOoo

Harry took to the skies with a glee he hadn’t felt in a very long time. It felt like he’d been cooped up inside the manor for years, instead of just for a few days. Like he’d wasted away inside for half of his life, like he’d been locked in the cupboard under the stairs again, and was finally tasting freedom for the first time.

His wings burst from his skin as he urged his broom higher and higher, and Harry didn’t even mind having them out. He was too busy delighting in the feel of the wind running through his hair and his feathers, and the cool, wet feeling of bursting through a cloud.

He went up until his lungs began to ache, until he strained to catch his breath and until his fingers were almost numb around the handle of his broomstick, and then he whirled his broom around and went into a steep dive, the air rushing around him and the ground rushing up towards him at what would be an alarming speed to many people, but to Harry it was just what he needed.
He pulled out of it to the sound of Regulus shouting, either in fear or encouragement or exhilaration, and the feel of the grass brushing against the tips of his outstretched fingers. Harry let out an almost maniacal laugh and soared into a series of loops, bringing his momentum down into something a bit more manageable before levelling off into a series of lazy, horizontal figure eights.

“Harry, please don’t do things like that!” Regulus shouted up to him. “I think you took a century off of my life!”

“Do you even have a century left?” Harry called down to him, then dodged the resulting minor jinx. “That’s not nice, Regulus!”

“You called me old!” his mate shot back. “That wasn’t nice either, especially after you scared the century that I absolutely had left off of my life!”

Harry considered that for a second, then dove straight at Regulus, only to pull up into a dead stop only seconds before colliding with him. Regulus glowered at him, unimpressed, and Harry just smiled back. He leaned forward and pressed a chaste kiss to Regulus’ lips, then took off once more.

“You could come up here with me!” he called down after completing another hair-raising dive.

“I think you’re a bit too energetic for me today,” Regulus answered. He settled on the grass with a blanket provided by a house elf and a book brought by that same house elf. “If it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll be keeping my feet on the ground.”

Harry wrinkled his nose in Regulus’ general direction and went into another series of figure-eights. He’d almost decided to stop for the day when he spotted someone headed towards him, not on a broom but on the ground. He thought for a moment that it was Severus, but realized only seconds later that whoever it was happened to be too blonde to be Severus.

And Harry recognized that particular shade of blonde, and he wasn’t at all sure that he was willing to speak to either of the two people he knew with hair in that color. He landed and moved closer to Regulus, just in time to figure out that it was the younger Malfoy, not the older one, who was approaching.

Regulus snapped his book shut and stood up, his hand resting on his wand with easy familiarity. “Can I help you, Draco?” he asked, his voice polite, but still with an edge to it.
“I wanted to speak with Potter,” Malfoy said, his voice oddly subdued. There were dark shadows under his eyes, and his shoulders had a slump to them. He almost looked defeated, which wasn’t an expression that Harry was used to seeing on Malfoy’s face.

Regulus glanced back at Harry, and Harry gave a minute shake of his head. He didn’t like Malfoy, and didn’t want to know what he wanted to say. “If it’s all the same, I think he’d rather not,” Regulus said.

Malfoy drew in a deep breath, like he was going to argue, and then stopped. He glanced at Harry, something unreadable in his grey eyes, then he backed up a step. “Of course,” Malfoy said, his voice even. “If you change your mind, Potter, I’d like to talk to you at some point, whenever or however you’re comfortable.”

Harry swallowed. Regulus could keep him safe, and Malfoy… No. He didn’t want to speak with Malfoy. “I won’t,” he said shortly, sharply. He looked away, and by the time he looked up again, Malfoy was gone.

“You know,” Regulus started, only to stop when Harry just stared at him. “What?”

“If you’re going to speak out in Malfoy’s defense, I’d rather you not,” Harry said quietly. Malfoy had been responsible for years of torment, and Harry didn’t want to think about talking to him, or playing nicely with him.

So was Severus, though, a little voice whispered in his head. Harry grimaced. While technically true, he knew that Severus would never hurt him. Not now, not since he’d become Harry’s mate. He trusted Severus as much as he trusted Regulus, and since coming to Black Manor, Severus had done nothing to lose that trust.

“I know that you’d rather I not,” Regulus said, pulling Harry from his thoughts. “But sometimes, as your mate, it’s my job to say things that you don’t like to hear.”

Harry opened his mouth to object, thinking that maybe that wasn’t really one of his mates’ jobs, but closed it with a snap and nodded his head, reluctantly. “Okay,” he muttered. “Let’s hear it.” Because as much as he didn’t want to hear it, and as much as Regulus and Severus let him make his own choices, they were still older than him, and had a lifetime’s worth of experiences that Harry didn’t.
“All of the other… young adults who came to the manor for the summer have been instructed in how to treat you while they’re here. One of those instructions would have included leaving you alone unless you said otherwise, meaning that Draco took a great risk in coming to see you today.” Regulus spoke softly, calmly, and held his arms out to Harry while he spoke.

Harry didn’t hesitate to cuddle up to him, and followed him down to rest against him on the blanket. “Okay,” he said, acknowledging that he was paying attention.

“Whatever he wants might be important,” Regulus said. He ran his fingers through Harry’s hair, and Harry leaned into the touch. “And besides, he’s around your age. Harry, he could be a good friend to you, if you gave him the chance.”

Harry snorted. “That’s not likely to happen.” He couldn’t set aside so many years of antagonism that easily, no matter what had happened with Severus.

“Not likely, but it could,” Regulus murmured. He pressed a kiss to Harry’s forehead. “Just something to think about.”

Harry sighed. “I’ll think on it,” he said finally, reluctantly. “But not right now.” He pulled away. “Come fly with me?”

Regulus groaned. “You know, I used to love flying,” he muttered, but got to his feet and held out his hand for Harry. “And then I got mated to this strange air sprite that likes to treat the sky like his personal amusement park…”

“And you still love it, you just like to gripe about it,” Harry teased, taking to the air once more.

Regulus followed, and Harry spent the rest of the afternoon playing in the sun, avoiding any unpleasant thoughts of bonds and Malfoys.

Chapter End Notes

And, back from vacation and the convention. Vacation was boring, convention was terrible. Here’s a new chapter!
Also, it occurs to me that I don’t think I’ve mentioned that I have a tumblr you all can find me at. I can be found as wizardingwordsmit if anyone is interested.
“I need your help,” Harry said. He didn’t look up from his hands, which were knotted together. “I need to figure out if I’m maintaining my shields on my own or if Severus is doing it for me.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Narcissa said, “And how would you like for me to help you?” She knelt in front of Harry so that he had no choice but to look into her eyes. “I’m willing, of course, but I’m not sure how I can be of assistance.”

“Severus thinks it’s too dangerous to experiment with so many people around,” Harry said with a small sigh. “Because the manor is more full than it normally is, what with the other… the kids. Even if they aren’t kids.” He let out a huff of air. “The other people who happen to be my age wandering around. He’s worried about them.”

Narcissa pursed her lips. “It is a concern,” she said gently. “But I think that Regulus would be more than capable of fending off anyone who happens to be drawn in by your allure. My question to you is this: why do you need my help with it?”

“You’re an Occlumens,” Harry said. “We’ve already established that you’re pretty much immune to my allure, but maybe you could tell if it was active or not when Severus tries to withdraw his protection from me?”

Narcissa considered it, her eyes going vague. Then she shrugged. “I’ve heard worse ideas in my time,” she said. She stood up and held out her hand to Harry. “I assume that you want my help to get Severus to agree that it’s a good idea?”

Harry winced as he took her hand and let himself be hauled to his feet. “It would probably help,” he said. There was a good chance that Severus would be angry that he was bringing it up again, and with backup, but Harry had to know. Not because he didn’t trust Severus, because he did, but… he just… he needed to know. For certain, and he could only find out for sure through an experiment.

Narcissa smiled at him, her expression warm and gentle. “It would be my pleasure,” she said cheerfully. As they left the bedroom, Regulus stood to greet them, and Narcissa said, “Come along, Regulus.”
Regulus fell into step with them and wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders. As Harry nestled close, Regulus asked, “Where are we going?”

Harry swallowed. “To ask Severus if he’ll try the experiment,” he whispered. Regulus hadn’t been surprised when Severus had said no the other day, so did that mean that he didn’t want to find out? Harry supposed that he couldn’t blame either of his mates, because they just wanted to keep him safe, and normally Harry was perfectly happy with that arrangement.

But this… this was important. Even if he couldn’t do anything about the results of the experiment, Harry knew that he needed to know.

He let out a shaky sigh as they entered Severus’ lab once more. The Potions Master glanced up at them, but finished pouring out a potion with an even hand before setting down the ladle and turning his full attention to them.

“You want to ask me about experimenting with your shields,” he said flatly. He glanced at Narcissa, then back to Harry. “And this time, you brought backup.”

“I did,” Harry said. “Because this is important to me. And I know that you don’t want to try the experiment while the manor is as full as it is, but Severus, I think that I need to know. Please.”

Severus sighed and glanced at Regulus. Harry followed his gaze, to catch the end of a shrug from Regulus. There was a long silence, then Severus heaved another sigh. “Fine,” he muttered. He ushered Harry and Narcissa through the door to his living room, and then further into his meditation room. “Regulus, stay on the door please.”

“Of course,” Regulus said. “I won’t leave it, and I can assure you that no one will get past me.” There was no cheer in his tone, just a grim sort of certainty.

Harry drew in a deep breath and settled on his normal cushion, his heart beating rapidly. He was nervous, frightened, and excited all at once. If he was wrong, if he was the one maintaining his shields… he thought that it would be a relief. But he didn’t think that he was wrong. He was almost certain that Severus was the one doing it, but… he did need to be certain. He deserved to know for sure what was keeping him safe.

“Harry,” Severus began, then stopped. He glanced at Narcissa. “Are you sure that you want to
know?” he asked, gently.

Harry let out a shaky sigh. “I need to know,” he said again. “And I’m prepared to find out that I was right, and that you’re the one keeping me safe. I trust you.”

Severus smiled, the expression thin and not at all cheerful, then turned to Narcissa. “And are you ready for this? Your shields are secure?”

Narcissa rolled her eyes. “Severus, my shields are always up around Harry.” She smiled a little. “I remember how hard his allure hit me the one time I wasn’t expecting it. Trust me, I’ve no inclination to feel such a thing for him ever again, no offense to you intended, Harry.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. “None taken,” he said. He drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them after a long pause, he said, “Can we do this?” His voice came out more plaintive than resolved, but Severus didn’t comment on it.

Instead, he just nodded. “Very well,” he said quietly. He closed his eyes and concentrated, and everything was fine for a long moment.

Then Harry felt the feeling of something… like being doused in cold water, and then he heard Narcissa let out a small gasp. He glanced at her, and found that her cheeks had pinked up and she was staring at him, before she blinked and jerked her eyes away. The flush faded from her cheeks and she cleared her throat.

She cleared her throat a second time before speaking. “Harry, I have to confess that I forgot exactly how strong your allure is when it isn’t being contained.”

Harry let out a shaky laugh. He was safe in this room, he knew that, so he wasn’t frightened. It was just… unnerving, to be without shielding for the first time in forever. “I’m glad you’re good at ignoring it, then,” he muttered. He drew in a deep breath. “Should I try to raise my own shields while we’re in here?” he asked, his voice waiving only slightly. He’d been prepared for this, after all.

“If Narcissa is willing to wait while you try,” Severus said, and Harry was surprised to hear a bit of strain in his voice.
He glanced at his mate and found that Severus’ eyes were focused determinedly on the ground, and he had a slight sheen of sweat over his skin. His breathing was a little shallow, and his cheeks were flushed. When Severus’ eyes met his, Harry realized that Severus was… wanting. Him.

Harry swallowed and looked down again, his own cheeks heating up uncomfortably.

“I’m more than willing to wait,” Narcissa said. She let out a small, tinkling laugh. “But are you okay, Severus?”

“I’ll be fine,” he said shortly, sharply. “Harry, please, if you would try to build a shield the way that I taught you?”

Harry nodded, then closed his eyes and focused inward. He managed to partially build a shield before it collapsed on him. He let out a small noise of irritation, then tried once more. Again, he made it a little less than halfway before it shattered around him. He tried a third time, and it fell apart at exactly the same place.

He couldn’t do it.

He drew in a deep breath. “I can’t,” he said quietly, tiredly. It took more out of him than he liked, trying to build those shields. “I tried three times, Severus, and it fell apart each time at the exact same place.”

Severus made a small, sympathetic noise, and then Harry shivered as he was wrapped in the mental equivalent of a warm blanket. Severus’ shields descended around him once more, and Harry sagged in exhaustion, falling into Severus’ waiting embrace. “I’m sorry that you couldn’t,” Severus murmured to him.

Harry smiled, tired. “It’s okay,” he said. “I thought that might happen.”

“I can, at the very least, confirm that your allure is now shielded fully once more,” Narcissa said softly. She stood and stretched. “And now, if you’re feeling okay about what happened, I’m going to go find my son and see trouble he’s been getting into this summer.”

“Thank you, Narcissa,” Harry said. “Can you send Regulus in when you go?”
“It would be my pleasure,” Narcissa said.

Harry felt a gentle hand brush over the back of his head, stirring his hair, and then heard the door close. It opened once more a few seconds later, and then closed again, and a warm body pressed against Harry’s back.

“No luck?” Regulus murmured.

“Severus is the one maintaining my shields,” Harry said tiredly. “I can’t seem to raise them on my own. They failed at the same time every time.” He let his eyes fall closed. “And I think I need a nap,” he added, a little belatedly, his words slow and thick with exhaustion.

“You take your nap, then,” Regulus said. He pressed a kiss to the back of Harry’s head.

“We’ll be right here when you wake up,” Severus added. “If you need to talk about your shields, or anything else.”

Harry made a small noise of assent, and then he drifted off to sleep.

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Harry didn’t want to talk about his shields when he woke up. He wanted to be distracted, not because he was worried about his shields, but because he wanted to focus on something other than himself, and his shields, and his bonds, and everything.

Unfortunately, he knew that Christelle was waiting on a response to her inquiry about his shields, and he knew that he needed to talk to her about the third bond. That wasn’t a bond and didn’t exist, anyway. So, after waking, he settled himself at a desk in Severus’ lab and wrote a letter to her, asking her to come to Black Manor to meet with him in person. He didn’t want to put certain things in a letter, and he was sure that she would understand.

With that unpleasant task out of the way, Harry was left trying to think of something to do that would take his mind off of everything. His eyes lit on a cauldron, and Harry realized that he hadn’t actually worked with potions in a few days, and so, even though he hated potions, he asked Severus if they
could work together on brewing something that would take his mind off of things. Severus was more than happy to oblige, and the two spent the rest of their afternoon working together on a very intricate potion that would create a boundary that could not be crossed by spirits, and would last only until touched by air that had touched a full moon.

Harry wasn’t quite sure how that last bit worked, but it didn’t matter. The potion was, for him, purely an intellectual exercise.

When it was over, the potion brewed successfully and decanted into three small glass vials (a project in and of itself that took about twenty minutes, as it had to be poured very slowly so that it didn’t lose its potency), Harry left Severus’ lab and returned to his rooms, Salazar following behind him. His basilisk was finally done growing, and was just a bit too large to carry everywhere, so he slithered beside Harry more often than not.

On his way there, he was surprised to see Malfoy, Zabini, and a girl that he didn’t recognize walking towards him. The only other time he’d seen someone on his walk from Severus’ lab to his room had been when he’d run into the Weasley twins. Since then, the corridors in that area had been deserted.

He supposed that Malfoy and his friends hadn’t gotten the memo.

He swallowed. The girl glanced from Malfoy to him, then started towards him, a determined look on her face. She stopped, though, when Malfoy caught her by the arm, and turned back to him with a questioning look on her face.

“Not now, Astoria,” Malfoy said quietly. “I’m sure that Potter has things to do, and would rather we left him alone.”

Harry swallowed when the girl glanced back at him, then shrugged and fell back in step with Malfoy and Zabini with a reply that he couldn’t quite catch.

Once they were out of sight, Harry relaxed. He never thought he’d be grateful to Malfoy, but he was… he was grateful that he’d interfered. Maybe… maybe talking to him wouldn’t be such a bad idea…

Chapter End Notes
Happy birthday to Harry! I was gonna make everyone wait until Friday and restart my weekly updates, but in honor of Harry’s birthday, I figured I’d do two updates this week. Friday updates resume this week.
Chapter Thirty-Five

Maybe talking to Malfoy wasn’t such a terrible idea, but that didn’t mean that Harry was inclined to just walk up to him and ask to speak with him. Not in front of other people, where Malfoy could, theoretically, humiliate him.

And Harry wasn’t even sure that it wasn’t such a terrible idea, but… he was many things, but a coward had never been one. So it was that, after his weekly session with Narcissa, he asked her to deliver a message to her son.

“To Draco?” Narcissa’s eyebrows went up. “Of course I will, but I find myself curious as to what you’d like to speak to him about.”

Harry shrugged. “He asked to talk to me a few days ago,” he said. He looked down at his hands. “He seemed upset about something, and I… wasn’t inclined to talk to anyone outside of Regulus, Severus, and yourself. But… I guess it couldn’t hurt to talk to him, right?”

Narcissa studied him for a moment, then nodded. “I think it would be good for you, to have friends your age again.”

Harry flinched. He’d had perfectly good friends his own age, before he’d killed them in Diagon Alley. “Yeah,” he muttered, because he knew that wasn’t what Narcissa meant.

“Harry,” Narcissa started, and then fell silent. There was a long pause, and then she said, “I’ll let him know that you’d like to speak with him. Did you have any particular time in mind?”

Harry shrugged. “It isn’t like I’m busy,” he said. He hesitated, then added, “And I don’t know what he’s doing here, so he might be more busy than I am. Just… whenever he’s free, I guess.”

Narcissa laughed quietly. “You might see him later today, then,” she said. Her voice took on a lightly teasing lilt. “You know, he was rather obsessed with you after you turned down his friendship when you were in your first year. Once you extend your metaphorical hand, you might find it hard to shake him.”
Harry just looked at her, one eyebrow raising as he did his best to imitate one of Severus’ most unamused expressions. “You really think I’d have a hard time getting my mates to see to it that he leaves me alone if I need to?”

Narcissa raised a hand to her lips and let out a sound that could only be described as a giggle. “Harry, darling, you’re not nearly as intimidating as Severus.” She ruffled his hair, then stood. “I’ll be off, then. I’ll make sure to deliver your message to Draco, okay?”

“Thanks, Narcissa,” Harry said. He escorted her to the door, then closed and locked it behind her.

Neither Regulus nor Severus were in the manor that day, and Harry was always more careful when they were gone. Not because anybody tested the wards, not for a very long time, but because he worried anyway.

He found one of the novels that he was in the middle of and settled on the couch with Salazar, and started to read. He’d mostly finished the story when there was a tapping on the door, an almost timid sound.

Harry looked up, eyes narrowed, and grabbed his wand from his holster. It probably wasn’t anybody coming to hurt him, but… he crept to the door and asked, “Who’s there?”

“Draco Malfoy,” came the clear response. “Mother said that you were willing to speak with me when I had time, and I thought that I should come before you changed your mind, or before I… lost my nerve.” The last was slightly less clear, like he’d muttered it.

Harry exhaled sharply, then unlocked the door and opened it. “Come in,” he said, slightly less than gracious.

Malfoy hesitated before crossing the threshold. “If now isn’t a good time,” he started.

Harry drew in a deep breath and forced himself to let it out slowly. “No, it’s fine,” he said. He backed up a step. It wasn’t like he couldn’t take Malfoy if it came to that, after all. And he had Salazar, who was alert and hissing threateningly in Malfoy’s general direction. “~Stop that,~” he said absently as he closed the door behind Malfoy.

“~You’re very tense,~” Salazar protested. “~I could bite him for you, if you’d like.~”
“~I would not like,~” Harry said sharply. He settled on the couch once more and drew his legs up, settling his feet near Salazar’s coiled body. Salazar immediately slithered forward to pool in Harry’s lap, as much of him as would fit. His weight was comforting, and the bulk of his body was between Harry and Malfoy.

“You have a basilisk,” Malfoy said, his silver eyes wide with surprise. He didn’t sit, but instead remained standing in the center of the room. “I hadn’t realized that was what it was.”

“He,” Harry corrected. “Salazar is a he, and yes, he’s a variety of basilisk. He’s getting big, but I think he’s close to as large as he’s going to get.” Harry ran his fingers over Salazar’s crest. “What did you want to talk about, Malfoy?”

Malfoy clasped his hands behind his back and visibly steeled himself. “I wanted to… to…” Malfoy let out an irritated huff of air. “I wanted to thank you.”

“To… thank me?” Harry’s eyes widened. “For what?” What could he have done that merited Malfoy’s thanks?

“You…” Malfoy let out another huff of air. “You don’t know all of this, but things… changed, after you disappeared. There were things that my lord had planned for our sixth year, but you weren’t at Hogwarts and nobody knew what had happened to you, and so everything was… put on hold. It was strange, and nobody really knew… anything. And then our seventh year started, and you were still gone, and the Dark Lord gave me tasks that I had no chance of completing.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “What tasks were those?” This was the most he’d learned about the war since he’d come to Black Manor, and if Malfoy was willing to tell him about it…

“There were two of them,” Malfoy said. “Getting a large group of Death Eaters into Hogwarts, and killing… killing Dumbledore. The first was impossible. I’d managed to get one Death Eater in and out before, but… one isn’t a large force. And the second?” Malfoy laughed, the sound bitter. “The Dark Lord himself hadn’t managed to kill Dumbledore, so how could I succeed?”

Harry swallowed. “And of course Voldemort wouldn’t have been merciful if you failed,” he said. Because Voldemort was many things, but Harry knew that merciful wasn’t one of them, no matter how kind he was to Harry. “I’m… sorry.” He didn’t know what else to say.
But Malfoy just shrugged. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “I don’t know what you said or did, but towards the end of the school year, I received word that I was to stop my attempts and wait for further instructions. And then I was brought here after the end of the school year, where I was told…” Malfoy stopped talking and laughed. “Well, it sounds ridiculous, so I’d rather not speak of it. But the Dark Lord told me that it was you who pointed out that he needed to find another way, which means that you saved my life. So… thank you.”

Harry stared at him. Harry… had saved Malfoy’s life, and he hadn’t even known it. The very idea… had he saved anyone else? He hadn’t even realized that Voldemort had been planning on killing Dumbledore, but of course he was. It made sense, didn’t it? “You’re welcome,” he said slowly. He looked down at his hands, which were still petting Salazar, then back up at Malfoy. “It wasn’t what I’d intended, but I’m glad to have helped.”

“I just thought that you deserved to know,” Malfoy said into the silence that fell between them. “I suppose I’ll be going, then.”

Harry hesitated, then when Malfoy’s hand was on the door to his suite, Harry called, “Wait!” and then winced and bit his lip.

Malfoy paused, though, and turned back around. “Yes?”

Harry swallowed. “You…” He took a deep breath. “Are you… busy? Right now, I mean?”

Malfoy took a step back into the sitting room. “Not at all,” he said. “I waited until I had a few hours free to come and see you.”

Harry looked down at Salazar again. “You could…” He swallowed again, his throat dry. “You could sit, and we could… talk? Maybe?” Merlin, he was always so awkward with people, and the past two years hadn’t helped him with that at all.

Malfoy came further into the room and settled in one of the chairs. “I’d like that,” he said. “What would you like to talk about?”

Harry opened his mouth, then shrugged, a little helplessly. What could he talk about? Everything he knew about the outside world was essentially two years out of date. He didn’t even keep up with the news, so…
“Shall I tell you about the fantastic defense teachers you missed in your absence?” Malfoy… no, Draco asked, a hint of amusement in his voice. “First we had Severus, which… well, I’m sure you know how that turned out. I’m sure he would have been fantastic, but he disappeared less than halfway through the school year, and then we got this old hag, and I do mean a literal hag. I can’t even remember her name at this point…”

Harry let Draco’s voice wash over him, and as he did so, he started to relax, until he was laughing, protesting the outlandish description of one of the exercises that Draco was describing. And when Draco left, which he did only when Regulus came back from wherever he’d been, Harry thought that maybe he might have made a friend of the other boy.

Well, that wasn’t quite right, was it? Draco was a Hogwarts graduate, now. Harry supposed that made him a man more than a boy, and wasn’t that a strange thought? For that matter…

Harry was a legal adult, too, or would be soon. He didn’t actually know the wizarding age of majority. That was an even stranger thought, one that Harry didn’t quite know what to do with. So he ignored it in favor of cuddling with Regulus and peppering him with questions about his adventure, most of which Regulus dodged, likely in the interest of not worrying Harry.

Part of Harry worried about that, because he didn’t want Regulus to be doing anything dangerous, but the rest of him was just pleased that Regulus was as capable as he was.

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Three days later, Harry was dealing with an excess of energy outside once more, flinging himself gleefully through the air on his broomstick, his wings out once again. He almost wanted to try flying with just his wings, but thought that he might give either Severus or Regulus a small heart attack if he didn’t warn them first, and if he warned them, then there was a chance they’d say something silly like, “Maybe we should wait and get you a Veela instructor.”

Harry thought it was easier to just stay on his broomstick, no matter how boring it was when neither one of them would fly with him. Which they wouldn’t when he was in the kind of mood he was in.

And then he spotted that same bright, shiny blonde hair that he’d seen a few days ago headed out to him, and this time, Draco had a broomstick in hand, and something closed within his other.

“Potter,” Draco called up to him once he was within shouting distance.
Harry hesitated, then dove down to speak to him. “What’s up?” he asked. He nodded at Draco’s broom. “Looking to do some flying?” He couldn’t disguise his glee at the thought. Draco had never been much of a challenge, Seeker-wise, but he was decent on a broomstick. And, if nothing else, it would be less boring than flying by himself.

“I was thinking about it,” Draco said. He opened his other hand, revealing a Snitch that fluttered its wings madly at Harry. “Care to make it a bit more interesting?”

Harry didn’t hesitate. “Absolutely,” he said. He nodded towards Regulus, who had stood when Draco had approached, his book abandoned on the conjured blanket. “Give it to Regulus, then join me in the air. He can let it go for us.”

“Did I agree to do that?” Regulus wondered aloud, even as he came forward to take the Snitch.

Severus abandoned his book as well, and watched them both. “Please don’t kill yourselves up there,” he said with a small sigh. “I’d hate to explain it to the Dark Lord, and to your parents, Mr. Malfoy.”

“We’ll be fine,” Harry said dismissively, and took to the air once more.

Draco followed him, and moments later, Regulus called out that he’d released the Snitch, and the two of them had better be careful as they careened around the pitch.

It was the most fun Harry’d had in a very long time, and even though Draco called foul about the fact that he’d caught the Snitch with his feathers instead of his hands, Harry didn’t regret a bit of it.
Chapter Thirty-Six

When Harry finally got his response from Christelle, it was in the form of Regulus, frowning at him. “You asked Christelle to come back?” he asked. His brow was furrowed in concern. “You’re that concerned about the bond?”

Harry swallowed and looked down at his feet. “It isn’t just the… the bond that doesn’t exist with Voldemort. It’s not just that at all. It’s also because I need to talk to her about the shields, and the fact that Severus is the one that maintains them, and…” He swallowed again. And he wanted to ask her why he kept bonding with people, even though he suspected that she wouldn’t have an answer for him.

Regulus sighed. “Those are good reasons,” he said. “And I don’t mind her being here, I just wish that you’d given me a bit of a warning.” He tugged Harry into his arms and held him loosely.

Harry leaned into him. “But you do have a warning,” he said, not really protesting or anything. “She hasn’t even written back to confirm that she’s coming.”

“Harry, you asked her for her to meet you with no explanation,” Regulus said gently. “She’s already here. She came as soon as she received your letter, and didn’t want to waste time by sending an owl in response.”

Harry looked up at Regulus, confused. “Why would she rush like that?” he asked. That didn’t make sense. What he had to ask her wasn’t exactly urgent, so he wasn’t sure…

“Because, although you haven’t met many members of the Veela Court, you are incredibly important to them,” Severus said. He took Harry’s hand and squeezed it. “Male Veela always are. She likely fears that you are being mistreated in some way, thus her rush to get here and find out what you wanted or needed.”

Harry blinked. “I didn’t mean to worry her,” he muttered. He didn’t like Christelle, but he would never put any undue stress on her. Guilt welled within him and he shrunk in on himself. “I’ll have to apologize when I meet with her.”

There was a moment of silence, and Harry just knew that Regulus and Severus were communicating over his head. They did that, sometimes. He ignored them, though, and waited a minute before
pulling away. “Where are we meeting with her?” he asked. He wouldn’t keep Christelle waiting any longer than he already had, not if there was a chance that he’d interrupted something important.

“She thought that you might feel more secure meeting with her in our sitting room,” Regulus said carefully. He didn’t let go of Harry, and seemed like he was bracing for a bad reaction from him.

But Harry… thought that it might work. Maybe if he was in his own space, he wouldn’t feel so inclined to be snippy with her. Their past meetings hadn’t exactly gone well, after all. “Yeah,” he said with a small sigh. That might work.

He settled on the couch, in the center, and waited for his two mates to join him. Severus did first, and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. Harry immediately leaned into him and relaxed. Regulus went to the door, opened it, and invited Christelle in. Once he’d ushered her into a seat, he settled on Harry’s other side and drew his hand into his lap.

Christelle smiled briefly at the sight, then sobered almost immediately. She leaned forward in her seat and met Harry’s eyes. “You asked me to come and speak with you in person,” she said. “I am here, and I am willing to listen to whatever it is that you have to say. Know that if you are being mistreated in some way, the Veela Court will not tolerate that behavior, no matter who it comes from.”

Harry swallowed. “That’s not why I asked you to come,” he said, his voice shaking a little. He had to clear his throat; the guilt almost overwhelming. “I didn’t know that sending my letter with so little information would be so alarming, or I would have made sure to tell you that everything was fine and I just had some questions, and some information.”

Christelle sagged in her seat, the tension draining from her almost immediately. “I cannot say how relieved I am to hear you say that,” she breathed. “While we would fight for you, Harry, I must admit that I had no idea how we were going to fight the Dark Lord.”

Harry let out a helpless, surprised little laugh. “Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to worry anybody, and I hope that I didn’t pull you from something more important.”

Christelle’s smile was soft and almost reassuring. “You didn’t pull me from anything important, no. And I would rather misunderstand and be here when you don’t need me than not be here when I am needed.”
Harry blinked and looked down at the carpet. “Thanks,” he muttered, a little awkward. He wasn’t used to someone who wasn’t connected to him in any way caring about his wellbeing. It was a strange sensation, but Harry thought he might like it.

“So,” Christelle said, and now her voice sounded calmer, more cheerful. “You have called me here, and I have come, and though my haste was perhaps unwarranted, you have things you need to speak with me about, and I would gladly hear them.”

Harry drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yeah,” he muttered. He sat up straight and forced himself to meet Christelle’s gaze. “The thing is, we figured out how my allure is being contained, and I remember you saying that it was a thing that most male Veela have a problem with, so I thought you might like to know how we’re doing it.”

Christelle’s eyes widened ever so slightly. “Yes,” she breathed. Then she cleared her throat. “Such knowledge would be… of immeasurable benefit to the Veela Court, and we would be grateful beyond your imagination if you could provide us with that information.” She looked away, then met Harry’s eyes once more. “We are prepared to provide you with—”

Harry shook his head and waved off her words. “I don’t want anything for the information,” he said quickly. He didn’t want to use this for leverage, didn’t want to hold it over anyone’s heads. “Severus is the one maintaining my shields, since he’s a Master Occlumens. I don’t know if it’s because he’s my mate, or if he would be able to do it for any Veela, but that’s how it’s happening.”

Christelle’s face, which had begun to brighten, fell. “But that means that it probably isn’t replicable,” she said, looking dispondent.

“There might be ways,” Severus said, speaking up for the first time. “You could find someone to train some of your people in Occlumency, both mates of male Veela and others, and see if the shields I use on Harry can be replicated.”

“Proper training in Occlumency takes years, Severus,” Christelle responded with a tone that could only be described as chastising. “Where in the world are we going to find a Master of Occlumency willing to work exclusively with the Veela Court for such a lengthy time?” Her eyes narrowed, and she smiled, the expression sly. “Unless, of course, you’re volunteering.”

“I’m not,” Severus said immediately. He pulled Harry ever so slightly closer.
“Harry’s already expressed a disinterest in visiting with the Veela Court,” Regulus said. When Harry glanced at him, he found that Regulus’ frown was severe and left no room for argument. “And it would be cruel to ask Severus to leave his side for the length of time such training would take.”

Harry nodded, and then frowned. “Wait,” he said, and looked at Severus. “If Occlumency training takes years, then how do we know that I can’t do this on my own?”

Severus stroked Harry’s hair back from his forehead and pressed a soft kiss to it, before drawing back. “There is a chance you might still learn,” he allowed, frowning. “But Harry, you should have been able to create a full basic shield by now. It’s one of the first things that humans learn to do, and takes only a handful of months.”

Harry sighed. “Okay,” he said, a bit disappointed. It wasn’t that he minded relying on Severus, it was just… he’d sort of hoped…

“I suppose that we can begin searching for an Occlumency instructor for some volunteers,” Christelle said, drawing Harry’s attention back to her. “Perhaps you have some recommendations for us, Severus?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “I’ll ask around with my contacts,” he said noncommittally.

Christelle cleared her throat. “Thank you,” she said. Then she turned her attention back to Harry. “And thank you for the information, even if it wasn’t quite the information we’d hoped for.”

Harry nodded. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you something better,” he said.

“Some information is better than none, even if it’s not good news,” Christelle said. She was silent for a moment. Then, quietly, she said, “But I don’t think that’s the only reason that I was brought here. This information, while sensitive, could be given in a letter. Was there something else you needed from me, Harry?”

Harry swallowed and looked down at his hands. Regulus still held one, but the other rested awkwardly in his lap. “I think I might…” He swallowed again. He couldn’t force the words out. He drew in another deep breath, then said, “There seems to be a third bond forming in my core, and I… I don’t know if it’s another mating bond, or why it’s forming, and I hoped…” He swallowed again and blinked back the tears that were forming rapidly. He didn’t want to cry, and he wasn’t
sad. He was just… frustrated, that was all.

“I could take a look,” Christelle said. Her voice was softer, gentler. “I am a fair hand at Legilimency, and if it’s okay with you, Harry, I’d like to actually travel into your mind, into your core. I’d like to see if I can examine this possible third bond at the source.”

Harry shivered. He didn’t want Christelle in his mind, alone, and didn’t know that he cared to go in with her. He trusted her not to lie to him, but he didn’t know that he trusted her inside of his head. He looked to Severus, hopeful that his mate could come up with a solution.

Severus stared down at him, then pressed another soft kiss to his forehead. “I think that, while Harry is uncomfortable with that idea, it might be the best solution,” he said softly.

Harry’s eyes closed. He didn’t like it, not at all, but if Severus thought it was a good idea…

“I will go in with you,” Severus continued. “I’m sure that Harry would feel better that way.”

“Yeah,” Harry muttered. He still didn’t like the idea, but… but he knew that he needed to know, for all that he was busy pretending that the third bond didn’t exist. He might never do anything with the information, but he needed to know.

“That would work,” Christelle said. She looked at Harry, then asked, “Would you like to come with us?”

Harry shook his head and curled closer to Severus. He didn’t want to, and he was getting nervous about the entire endeavor. He knew that he needed to know, knew that it would be a good idea to do this, he just…

“Then let’s get you comfortable,” Severus suggested. He looked at Regulus, and Harry followed his gaze.

Regulus blinked at them both, but then shifted on the couch so that his back was to the arm and his leg was up on the couch. “Come lean on me, love,” he suggested to Harry.
Harry immediately crawled to lean against him, and sighed when Regulus closed his arms around him. He wriggled a little bit before he was comfortable, and wound up on his side, his ear pressed over Regulus’ beating heart.

“Okay, Harry, are you ready?” Severus asked. “I’m going to go first, and then Christelle will join me. I’ll make certain that she does nothing other than look at the things that need examining, okay?”

Harry hated the idea of Christelle in his mind, but he nodded anyway. “Yeah,” he said again. He forced himself to keep his eyes open and meet Severus’ eyes.

Severus cast first, and then Christelle joined him. Severus’ mind felt familiar against his own, while Christelle’s was foreign, and sharp. Harry didn’t like the feel of her in his head, but forced himself to tolerate it. This was a good thing, no matter how little he liked it. She would find out once and for all whether or not the third strand was really a bond.

It seemed like it took forever, and Regulus did his best to distract Harry with soft words and soothing touches. Harry let himself be soothed, but it didn’t work as well as Regulus probably would have liked. In the end, he wound up hiding his face in Regulus’ shirt and closing his eyes while Regulus ran gentle hands over his back in slow, rhythmic movements.

And then it was over, and Christelle and Severus emerged from his mind with small gasps. Severus immediately shifted off of the couch to sit in front of Harry, as though placing a barrier between himself and Christelle, and took Harry’s hands in his own. His eyes were dark with concern, his lips tugged into a frown.

“You do have a third bond forming,” Christelle said into the silence. “It does seem different in some way, and I admit that I’ve never seen one quite like it. But it is very definitely a mating bond. All the right markers are there, for all that it’s quite strange.”

Harry let out a shuddering sigh. Of course he had a mating bond forming with Voldemort. Why couldn’t his life ever be easy? Whenever he thought it was looking up…

“And there’s more,” Severus said, slowly. “I confess that I thought about asking Christelle not to tell you this information, Harry, and you probably won’t thank me for that impulse. My only intention would have been to protect you.” Severus stroked his thumbs over Harry’s hands and squeezed them tightly.
Harry swallowed. That didn’t sound good, either. “Okay,” he said, uncertainly. He didn’t know that he wanted to hear whatever it was that Christelle had to say.

“I took a look at the place where all of your bonds come from,” Christelle said softly. “In normal Veela, there’s… a well, if you will, and the bond they form with their mate is like water being drawn from that well. Once that bond forms, the well is closed, and nothing can draw from it other than that bond. No other mate can be found. Are you following me?”

Harry didn’t like where this was going. “I am,” he said. He swallowed around the lump that was forming in his throat. This really didn’t seem like it was going to be good news.

“Your well, Harry, never closed. It’s still as open as it likely was when you had no mates at all, and that means that you can continue to form mating bonds. It might never close, or it might close after you solidify your third bond. We don’t know, because we’ve never seen anything like this. It might have something to do with the nature of your transformation, but there’s simply no way of knowing.”

Harry’s heart dropped. No way of knowing what was happening to him, how many mates he would have in the end, or who those mates would be. Assuming that the three he had weren’t enough, that was to say. He swallowed, and thought that his expression had to be pretty grim, judging by the alarmed looks he was getting from Severus, Regulus, and Christelle.

She opened her mouth, but Harry cut her off with a wave of his hand. “Thank you for the information,” he said quietly. “I think I’m going to go lie down, if that’s okay?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, but instead stood and retreated to the bedroom. He closed the door firmly behind him, locked it, and curled up in bed.

Only then did he let the tears that had been threatening since they’d emerged start to fall. And once they started, they didn’t stop, and Harry couldn’t bring himself to care.
“Harry, aren’t you hungry?” Regulus asked softly from the doorway.

Harry didn’t answer him. He wasn’t hungry. He just rolled onto his side and curled even more tightly in on himself. He wanted Regulus to go away.

“Can I sit with you?” Regulus asked. He didn’t leave the doorway.

Harry didn’t answer out loud, but he did curl even tighter in on himself. He didn’t want Regulus to come sit with him. He didn’t want to be consoled. Why didn’t anyone else understand how terrible the news he’d received was? Why couldn’t Severus and Regulus accept that he needed to be sad for a while?

“I guess that’s a no,” Regulus muttered. He backed up a step, and the door began to close.

Harry let himself relax.

It was short-lived, however, because Regulus slammed the door open and marched into the darkened room. As he did so, he cast a vicious “Lumos!” which brightened the room.

Harry flinched from the light and closed his eyes. He didn’t verbally protest Regulus’ presence, but he didn’t move to welcome him, either. He couldn’t be bothered to do either thing.

“I’ve had just about enough of this, Harry,” Regulus snapped.

Harry felt the bed dip. He kept his eyes closed and fought the urge to bury his head beneath his pillow. Regulus wouldn’t be amused, and might be inspired to either take the pillow away or transfigure it into something unpleasant. He’d done it once before.

“Listen, I get that you’re upset,” Regulus growled. “But Harry, you have to understand that we’re worried about you, and we’d like to help you through this if you’d just give us a chance.” Regulus
touched Harry’s back, his hand feather-light and gentle. “Severus and I, we love you, and if you happen to find more mates, you know that we’ll figure out a way to work it out. To accept them, so that you can have a good life with—”

“I don’t want any other mates!” Harry shouted. His voice was hoarse from not speaking, and from the crying he’d done when he was alone.

“If you need to be angry, it’s okay to be angry,” Regulus said. “But lying in the dark like this, Harry, it’s not healthy. Don’t you want to go outside?”

Harry didn’t speak again. He didn’t have anything to say. He was so tired of trying, of getting his feet under himself and having things go right for once, and then having them jerked out from under him.

He was done trying.

Eventually, Regulus let out a tired, sad sigh. “Very well.” He stood, and Harry heard the sound of his footsteps receding. The room darkened once more, though before the light could go out entirely, Regulus said, “We still love you, Harry.”

ooOOoooOOoo

Harry didn’t know how long he’d been staring up at the ceiling in the lightless room when the door opened again. He blinked at the sudden assault of light on his sensitive eyes, then just closed them and rolled away from the door once more.

The door didn’t close, but nobody spoke to Harry, either, so that was at least a plus. The silence stretched, but the light was enough to make him uncomfortable. He didn’t want the light there. He wanted it gone. He needed to be in the dark, because everything…

Everything was awful.

Harry sniffled, and muffled the sound into his pillow. It was already wet with the tears he’d been crying earlier, so it wouldn’t hurt for him to cry a little more into it.
There was a soft sound, like silk rustling against silk, and Harry felt the bed dip, then felt something rest on his stomach. He looked down, and found himself looking into Salazar’s mournful eyes. He’d never thought a snake could look mournful, but there was Salazar, staring up at him.

“~I’m okay,~” Harry hissed to the basilisk. He wasn’t okay, but he didn’t want to upset his snake. Who knew who Salazar would offer to bite for him?

“~No you aren’t,~” Salazar responded. He didn’t say anything else, just coiled up on Harry’s stomach, a warm and comforting weight.

At least Harry couldn’t bond with him, not like that. He was certain that mating bonds didn’t extend that far out of the Veela species.

Eventually, a shadow fell over the light coming from the door. Severus stuck his head into the room, then let out a small sigh. He closed the door, leaving Harry mostly alone again.

ooOOooOOoo

“I told Regulus that you should be left alone to come out of this on your own,” Severus murmured from the doorway. At least the light was off this time so that it didn’t hurt Harry’s eyes.

Salazar hissed something threatening at Severus nonetheless. Harry quieted his basilisk, then said, “I should be left alone.” It was what he wanted, after all.

“I said that four days ago, Harry. Are you even eating?”

When he was hungry, yes. Which, admittedly, wasn’t often. He thought maybe he’d had one cup of fruit the entire time he’d been in the room. “I am,” Harry said. He left out the rest of that thought. In spite of how little motivation he had, how much he wasn’t hungry and didn’t want to leave his bedroom, he didn’t want to worry his mates unduly.

“Of course you are,” Severus muttered. “Harry, please, don’t you think this is a little extreme?”

“Extreme?” Harry asked, a flicker of anger stirring inside of him. “You think this is extreme?” He
sat up, dislodging Salazar, who’d stayed mostly curled up on top of him since he’d arrived in Harry’s room.

Severus raised an eyebrow at him. “We do, yes,” he said.

“What should I do, Severus?” Harry asked, his voice sharp with a venom he hadn’t realized he’d felt. “Should I go out and bond myself to as many people as I can, in the hopes that eventually this… this curse subsides? Should I continue merrily on my way, pretending like nothing’s wrong, like there isn’t a chance that anyone could be my next partner for the rest of my life? Is that what I should be doing instead?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Severus snapped. “I understand that you’re upset, Regulus and I both get that, but you can’t keep shutting us out like this. Harry, it isn’t healthy.”

Harry just collapsed back into the bed’s warm, safe embrace. “Go away, Severus,” he said dully. “I’m tired.”

Severus didn’t respond, but the door didn’t slam closed. It shut more softly, and Harry rolled onto his side, his back to the door once more. He let himself start to cry again, because he didn’t know what else to do.

Salazar’s body curled around his own was of little comfort.

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The door banged open, startling Harry from the doze he’d finally drifted into. No lights were turned on, but Narcissa swept into the room anyway. She pulled back the curtains that Harry had closed, revealing that it was almost noon, and it was a beautiful day outside. The light shone in, and Harry flinched away from it with an unhappy noise.

“That’s enough,” Narcissa said sharply. “I don’t know what Regulus and Severus were thinking, letting you get away with this ridiculous behavior, but I won’t have any more of it, Harry.”

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Narcissa cut him off with a shake of her head. “No. You don’t get to backslide like this, not over something so… so…”
“Say it’s trivial,” Harry hissed. He sat up and glared at her. “Go on, say it. Tell me that what I’m afraid of is trivial, and see what happens.”

“When have I ever called your fears trivial?” Narcissa asked with a small sigh. She sat on the bed with Harry, not waiting for permission. She seemed… disappointed in him, and Harry hated to admit it, but the thought hurt.

“You haven’t,” he admitted, begrudgingly.

“No, I haven’t.” She brushed his hair back from his forehead, her touch gentle and soothing.

Motherly, almost, in a way that he hadn’t had since Molly Weasley had… had died, in a fire of Harry’s making, whether or not it had been his fault. Harry couldn’t help but lean into that gentle touch. “So what were you going to say?”

“I was going to call it manageable,” Narcissa responded. She withdrew her hand. “This isn’t the end of the world that you’ve been making it out to be. Realistically speaking, your magic has to recognize at some point that you can’t sustain so many mating bonds.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Harry asked. “What if I have hundreds of mates before I die? Do you have any idea of how awful that would be?”

Narcissa laughed, the sound loud and vibrant. “Harry, please. Consider, if you would, the mates that you already have. There’s Regulus, who rescued you from a terrible fate and stayed by your side for weeks at a time before the mating bond was ever confirmed. And then there’s Severus, who also spent many, many hours of time at your side before you felt the bond, hours during which you were vulnerable with him in a way that you aren’t with most people. And of course we cannot forget the Dark Lord, with whom you already shared a unique bond of another kind.” Narcissa stopped speaking and stared at Harry expectantly.

Harry breathed out a small sigh. He thought he understood what she was saying, and to be honest, it wasn’t really all that much better than just living out his life in his darkened room. “So you’re saying that as long as I don’t get close to anybody, that I should be fine?” he asked, his voice small.

Narcissa’s eyes narrowed. “That isn’t what I’m saying, Harry Potter, so don’t you dare use my words as an excuse to not socialize with people when the opportunity arises.”
“Then I don’t know what you’re saying!” Harry snapped. He got out of bed for the first time in
what felt like forever, and started to pace back and forth. “If I bond with people who get close to me,
then shouldn’t I try not to get too close?” Wasn’t that what she was saying? “I like having just
Severus and Regulus,” he added plaintively.

“First of all, you don’t have just Severus and Regulus anymore, and you should probably try to
remember that,” Narcissa said. “And secondly, doesn’t that sound like a lonely life to you, Harry?”
Her voice softened. “Don’t you want to make a friend or two?”

Not if it meant bonding to someone else. Severus was incredibly understanding of his… incredibly
low sexual appetite, and had never brought up what had happened between them earlier in the year,
but who was to say that any other mate would be?

Harry just looked away from her.

“Besides,” Narcissa said, her voice going soft and coaxing. “You’re very close to me, and no bond
has formed.”

“Yet,” Harry muttered. He ignored the flicker of hope her words caused. It was true that they hadn’t
bonded, but maybe it was only a matter of time.

“You see me as off limits,” Narcissa said. “I don’t know for sure, but that’s my theory. I’m off
limits to you, because I’m already married. I’ve worked with you since before Severus entered the
picture, and I dare say I was much closer to you than he was for far longer. And you never once
tried to bond with me, because I’ve been married the entire time you’ve known me.”

It was… an interesting theory, Harry supposed. “So if I know someone’s off limits,” he muttered,
brightening a little bit. “You really think that’s it?”

Narcissa shrugged. “I don’t know for sure, but it’s as good a theory as any.” Her lips twitched, and
she added, “And if you’d like to know, my son is very much off limits. He’s absolutely besotted
with Astoria, and cannot wait until their wedding, which won’t be for another year.”

“Right,” Harry muttered. If he saw people as off limits… maybe it was worth a try. “Okay.” He
drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Thank you, Narcissa,” he said quietly.
Narcissa just rolled her eyes at him. “Harry, darling, it’s my job to keep you in good mental health.”
Her smile softened into something teasing as she added, “You could try to make my job less difficult, of course. I would appreciate it.”

“I’ll get right on that,” Harry said dryly. He stretched, then raked a hand over his face. “How angry are Severus and Regulus?” He didn’t move towards the door.

Narcissa’s eyes narrowed. “They’re not thrilled with your decision to shut them out,” she said. “And don’t think for a minute that we won’t be talking about that later.”

Harry winced. “Right.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t suppose you’ll help mediate the conversation?” He didn’t move towards the door, even though he wanted to.

“Do you need me to?” Narcissa asked evenly. “Because I will, if that’s what you need.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t,” he said. “Unless you just want to apologize on my behalf?” At Narcissa’s narrow-eyed stare, Harry shrugged. “It was worth a shot.”

He took a deep breath and left the bedroom for the first time in a week. Narcissa followed him from the room, and swept out the door while Harry studied his mates. Severus and Regulus were on the couch, cuddled up close together, and both of them looked awful. Regulus had deep shadows under his eyes, and Severus looked like he’d lost some weight that he could ill-afford to spare. Harry didn’t want to know what he looked like, but he couldn’t imagine he was any better.

He sighed and went to stand in front of them, drawing their gaze. He waited until they were both looking at him, and then he simply said, “I’m sorry.”

Regulus’ eyes searched his face, and he relaxed minutely. “Thank you, Harry,” he said. He shifted away from Severus only slightly, making room for Harry to settle between them.

“This cannot happen again,” Severus murmured. He didn’t prevent Harry from settling there, and his embrace was as tight as Regulus’ was when they both hugged him.

“I know,” Harry said. “Narcissa and I are going to talk about it.”
“Good.” Regulus pressed a kiss to his forehead. “We worried about you.”

“I know,” Harry said again. “I’m really sorry.”

“As long as you understand that it’s something you need to work on,” Severus said softly, “Then everything will be fine.”

Harry nodded and closed his eyes. Into the easy silence that fell between them, his stomach growled, and for the first time since he’d gotten the news about his ability to still find mates, Harry laughed, and felt something like optimism bloom inside of him.

Everything would be fine, eventually. He knew it.
Harry refused to let himself fall back into wallowing in despair. Narcissa was right. It was stupid for him to backslide so far over something that was, hopefully, manageable. And he would never know if it was manageable if he didn’t at least make an attempt at making proper friends with someone.

Like Draco.

Which led to Harry being where he was, in the middle of a common area in Black Manor, being stared at by what felt like a thousand Death Eaters, all of whom had gone completely silent. Harry had never been more grateful for Salazar’s presence than in that moment, and he wished that he could still carry the snake everywhere. Basilisk armor sounded like something he needed.

But then Bellatrix deliberately turned her back on him and returned to the conversation she’d been in the middle of, her voice slightly louder and sharper than it actually needed to be, given that she seemed to be extolling the virtues of a type of chocolate. Her return to her conversation was apparently some kind of symbol, though, and the other Death Eaters in the room returned to their respective conversations. All of them were louder than they were, and Harry noticed a small pocket of silence following him as he moved through the move, but it was better than it had been. He supposed that was all he could ask for.

He found the person he was seeking within a few minutes, and then he stopped and scowled, because Draco wasn’t sitting by himself. He was lounging on a couch, and had his feet propped up in a girl’s lap. Probably Astoria, Harry thought. At least, he was pretty sure that was the girl Draco had warned against approaching him a few weeks ago. And Blaise was there, sitting on the other side of the chess set on the small coffee table in front of the couch, reading a book.

Well, he hadn’t thought the trip out very well, had he? He should have waited until he would be sure that Draco would be alone, because Harry didn’t know if he was welcome when Draco was visiting with other people.

He half-turned away, then stopped and steeled himself. He drew in a deep, shaky breath. He told himself that he could absolutely go talk to Draco, and then he stepped forward, close enough to the group that he drew their attention.

“You’re more than welcome to sit with us, Potter,” Blaise said, his voice perfectly polite. He didn’t even look up from his book.
“Please,” Astoria added. She shoved Draco’s feet off of her lap. “Draco might even sit up and act like a civilized human being.”

Draco heaved a heavy sigh, like he was being asked to move the world instead of his body, but sat up and settled back on the couch. “Seriously, please sit. You look… well,” Draco said, almost cautiously.

Harry could imagine how he looked, and he doubted that ‘well’ was a word that anyone could realistically use to describe him at the moment. He’d forced himself to leave the room the very next day after Narcissa’s visit, because if he hadn’t then he knew that he wouldn’t. He’d dropped weight, again, during the time he’d locked himself in his room, and he knew that he looked almost skeletal.

“I was sick,” he said simply, because saying that was much easier than telling the truth. He couldn’t imagine what they would think of him, complaining about his capacity to bond with anyone if he spent enough time with them and his magic didn’t think they were off limits.

Instead of trying to explain himself, Harry settled into the remaining chair near the chess board.

“Are you feeling better?” Blaise asked. He closed his book after marking his place.

“Much, thank you,” Harry said. He shifted awkwardly in his chair. It wasn’t that it was uncomfortable, it was just that… well, he didn’t know what to do with himself. It had been so long since he’d interacted with a group of people who weren’t Severus and Regulus…

“That’s good,” Astoria said sweetly. She smiled at Harry, the expression soft and gentle. “Would you like to play a game of chess with me?”

The offer was kind, but… “I’m terrible at chess,” Harry muttered. He looked down at his hands. He didn’t know how he felt about losing terribly in front of all the Death Eaters in the room. And he didn’t bother to try fooling himself. Even if they didn’t seem like they were looking at him, he knew that they were.

Astoria’s laugh was like tinkling bells. “I’m sure that you aren’t that bad,” she said immediately. She set the pieces up with a tap of her wand. “And even if you are, I’m not that great at chess myself. Perhaps we’ll be more evenly matched than I am when I play with either Blaise or Draco.”
“You can’t possibly be worse than Astoria,” Draco said offhandedly, and got hit in the shoulder for his trouble. “Hey!”

“You shouldn’t be rude to me, darling,” Astoria said primly. “I might decide to make you fulfil your marriage contract with my sister instead of me. And then what will you do?”

“Live a life of misery, for you’re the light of my life,” Draco said quickly. “And of course you’re beauty, grace, and everything perfect all wrapped up in one, and I would never say anything awful about you ever.”

“Now you’re overdoing it.” Astoria winked at Harry. “You just need to learn the happy medium of compliments, Draco darling.”

“I’ll work on that.” Draco sounded like there was little in the world that he wanted to do less.

Harry couldn’t help laughing. Something in him eased, and he relaxed ever so slightly in his chair. He realized that his relaxation was followed by something easing in Blaise and Draco as well. He hadn’t even realized that they’d known he wasn’t perfectly calm.

Harry wondered if it was a Slytherin trait to be so observant, but distracted himself from the thought by making his first move. Astoria took hers with little thought, and soon Harry was absorbed in the game. Astoria was definitely an opponent closer to his level than Ron had ever been, but Harry was certain that he was still going to lose.

And then he made a move, and Blaise yelped, “How could you do that?” in a truly scandalized tone.

“Merlin, Harry, I never thought I’d meet someone who was actually worse than Astoria,” Draco said, clearly agreeing with Blaise.

“Both of you are horrible,” Astoria said, wrinkling her nose. She made her next move, taking one of Harry’s pawns. One of his last remaining pawns, actually.

Now he had only five pieces left on the board, while Astoria still had almost half of her own.
Blaise stopped Harry before he could make a move, frowning at the board. “Have you considered —”

“What Blaise Zabini, if you tell Harry how to beat me, if he even can at this point, I will kill you,” Astoria hissed.

When Harry glanced up at her, instead of staring at the board, he found her staring at Blaise, practically boring holes into his head with her eyes. Blaise just raised his hands in a gesture of surrender and leaned back in his chair.

“I don’t need help to win,” Harry said confidently, even though he was pretty sure that winning was impossible. He moved his rook and took one of Astoria’s pawns.

Twin groans came from Draco and Blaise, and while Harry glanced between them, confused, Astoria put his King in checkmate. He’d lost, which really wasn’t any surprise to him.

“Like I said,” he said easily. “I’m terrible at chess. Anyone want to play a game of Exploding Snap?” There was a deck on the small shelf attached to the bottom of the table, along with a handful of other games that Harry had never heard of.

“If it means we don’t have to watch you cruelly murder any more chess pieces, please,” Blaise said. He got the deck as Draco moved to put away the chess set.

“Seriously, Potter, you need remedial lessons in chess. What kind of strategist are you?” Draco finished boxing up the chess set with Astoria’s help and put it on the shelf.

“I’m no kind of strategist,” Harry said. “And I don’t have to be.” He resisted the urge to childishly stick his tongue out at Draco, and instead set the cards to shuffling. “I am, however, very good at this game.”

As much as anyone could be good at a game that involved a significant amount of luck, anyway.

ooOooOooOoo
Harry ate dinner alone that night, because Regulus was out of the Manor doing something that Harry wasn’t allowed to know about and Severus was in the middle of a potion that had to be made at a very specific time. Even though he was tired after forcing himself to go out and socialize, Harry still forced himself to wait up for at least one of the two to return.

Regulus got there first, and swept Harry up into a warm embrace. “I thought you’d be in bed,” Regulus murmured, because it was after midnight, and Harry didn’t typically stay up late.

Harry smiled and relaxed in his mate’s arms. “I wanted to wait for at least one of you,” he said, and cuddled closer.

“Well, I’m here now,” Regulus whispered in his ear, and pressed a kiss to his temple. “Why don’t you go lie down? I’ll just take a quick shower and join you.”

That sounded wonderful, and Harry moved to obey the suggestion before he could even think about it. He really was tired.

He crawled into bed, and was joined relatively quickly by Regulus, who wrapped himself around Harry. “I stopped in to talk to Severus before coming home,” Regulus murmured. “The potion is apparently more tricky than he remembers, and he won’t actually be able to come home until closer to three in the morning.”

Harry sighed. “That’s sad,” he said. He wanted to snuggle with both of his mates, but then again, it had been a very long time since he’d been able to cuddle with just Regulus. So he snuggled even closer and pressed a quick, shy kiss to Regulus’ lips. “I love you,” he whispered softly, and closed his eyes.

He didn’t say the words nearly often enough.

He heard Regulus’ breath catch. “I love you too,” Regulus murmured back, once he’d started breathing again.

Harry’s eyes drifted closed, but even though he was almost exhausted, he still couldn’t manage to go to sleep. Regulus’ breathing evened out, and Harry knew that he took forever to go to sleep. Why couldn’t Harry sleep? He was so tired...
Maybe because he hadn’t seen Voldemort in forever, and he was one of Harry’s… And then he shoved the thought away. No, that wasn’t it. Voldemort had no effect on his being able to sleep.

In fact…

After making certain that Regulus was asleep, Harry sent himself into a trance and entered his core, where he could see his bonds with Regulus and Severus. They were both beautiful, thriving in spite of Harry’s poor behavior during the past week. When Harry reached out to touch them, he could feel Severus’ and Regulus’ affection for him, and it warmed him down to his soul.

Then he turned to the third bond. It was thin, almost anemic in appearance. It hadn’t grown and, unless Harry was mistaken, it actually looked to have withered at least a little bit. That meant… if it could wither, then…

Harry felt a flare of hope as he emerged from within his own mind. If the bond with Voldemort could wither, then Harry would be able to starve it out. He could be free of it, and he wouldn’t need to worry about what to tell Voldemort or how to approach him at all.

He could starve the bond.

His stomach roiled, and Harry wondered if it was connected to his thinking about destroying the bond. He shoved the thoughts off to the side, just in case. It wasn’t like he needed to think about something in order to starve it, after all. Instead closed his eyes and focused on how warm and safe he felt in Regulus’ arms.

He fell asleep with a smile on his face.
Chapter Thirty-Nine

Harry woke up feeling fine. He went about his day as he normally would, which meant that he went and worked on a potion with Severus, then did some studying with Regulus and worked on some charms. He ate lunch, and almost regretted it because his stomach didn’t seem to want to behave, but other than that, Harry felt perfectly normal.

He received a message from Draco via a house elf shortly thereafter, asking him if he wanted some private tutoring in chess. Harry’s first instinct was to say no, but then he realized that it was a good way to both socialize and not leave his room, so he invited Draco to join him while they played a game or two.

Draco was endlessly patient during the first game, walking him through the strategy behind all of Harry’s possible moves. It made the game last for what felt like forever, but Harry didn’t mind. He was enjoying himself, surprisingly enough. Ron had always just defeated him at chess; he’d never bothered to help Harry try to improve.

Unfortunately, during the second game, Harry grew distracted by the return of the discomfort in his stomach. He’d just moved a pawn when it got bad, and he couldn’t help but gag, and then immediately covered his mouth and hoped that he wouldn’t throw up in front of Draco.

“You okay?” Draco asked, his eyes narrowing. He frowned at Harry. “Should I call someone?”

“I’m fine,” Harry said quickly, blushing. He looked down at the chess board and stubbornly ignored the way that his stomach protested… whatever it was protesting.

“Are you sure?” Draco pressed, his hands hovering like he wanted to use them to grip Harry’s shoulders.

“I’m sure,” Harry said, a little irritated. He wasn’t a child; he didn’t need people to second-guess him all the time. If he said he was fine, then he was fine. Why didn’t Draco believe him?

“Okay,” Draco said, doubtful. But he made his next move, and then explained to Harry that he’d left his queen open, and Harry should probably take it.
Harry moved to do so, knowing that the queen was one of the more important pieces on the board, but before he could actually move the piece, the queasiness returned, and this time gagging wasn’t enough. He threw up all over himself, much to his embarrassment.

“Oh, fuck!” Draco summoned a house elf after his exclamation. Harry heard him doing it, heard him giving orders to the elf to get Regulus or Severus or both, and Harry wanted to stop him, but he couldn’t stop gagging, even though there was nothing in his stomach already. He really hadn’t eaten much earlier in the day, and he wondered if he was getting sick.

By the time it stopped, he had tears running down his cheeks, he was a mess, and he wanted nothing more than to go die of humiliation. It wasn’t the throwing up that was the problem, it was the fact that he’d done it in front of Draco. But Draco didn’t seem bothered by it. “May I spell you clean?” he asked, his face studiously neutral.

Harry sighed. If he tried to stand, the mess in his lap would go everywhere. If there was a spell that would fix it… “Yeah,” he muttered, his voice hoarse. “And then I’m still going to go take a shower, no offense.”

“None taken,” Draco said, and spelled him clean with a wave of his wand. “Do you need help getting to the bathroom?”

For a moment, just a moment, Harry panicked. He didn’t want Draco anywhere near him when he was getting undressed. What if his allure… and then he got himself under control. He was already alone with Draco, and clothing had never stopped anyone who was going to attack him before. His allure was contained, and even if it wasn’t, he didn’t think Draco was going to do anything.

“Yeah,” he finally muttered, because he was a little shaky after throwing up.

Draco helped him into the bathroom, and Harry closed the door behind him. He locked it, too, because he needed to, whether or not he trusted Draco. He stripped down, still shaky, and took a quick shower. By the time he came out, dressed in a new set of robes, Regulus and Severus were in the sitting room, both of them looking frazzled and worried.

“What happened?” Regulus asked immediately. He crossed to Harry and pulled him into his arms.

Harry went willingly. “I threw up,” he admitted. Draco was still sitting with the chess set, and he shot him a dirty look. “I didn’t want him to call you. I’m fine.”
“Forgive me for erring on the side of caution,” Draco said, not sounding the least bit apologetic. “And you were also too busy throwing up to express an opinion, and I’m not at all ashamed to admit that I took advantage of that fact.”

Harry resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at the other man. Then he gave in and did it anyway, making Draco snort with laughter. “I’m fine,” he said again to Regulus and Severus. He pulled away from Regulus’ embrace and went to hug Severus. “Really. You two didn’t need to worry.”

“Of course you are,” Severus said, and returned the embrace. “Still, I think it would be for the best if you go lie down.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’m fine,” he said again. “I don’t need to lie down, I just… I got queasy, that’s all. It happens. I’m okay.”

“You’ll have to forgive us if we’d like Narcissa to confirm that,” Regulus said.

Harry turned and glared at him. “I don’t need Narcissa to come!” He also glared at Draco. “This is your fault,” he growled.

Draco just shrugged. “I know nothing of medical issues, but I know that people who are perfectly healthy don’t tend to just suddenly throw up. So forgive me for being concerned that my new friend, who already doesn’t look the healthiest, seems to be getting sick.”

When Draco put it that way, Harry felt like an absolute asshole. He deflated, all of the fight gone. “Right,” he muttered. “I guess that makes sense.” He sighed and pulled away from Severus as well. “I’ll just… go lie down, I guess.”

“Thank you,” Regulus breathed. He came close and pressed a kiss to Harry’s forehead. “Do you want us to keep you company?”

Harry wanted nothing more, but he shook his head. “Better not,” he said regretfully. “Not until Narcissa can confirm that I’m not contagious, or whatever.” He didn’t think he was, didn’t even really think that he was sick, but it was better to be safe than sorry, he supposed.

Besides, the only thing it would cost him to submit to an examination was a half a day of boredom,
and in the scheme of things, it wasn’t terrible. There was a time not long ago when he would have been happy to spend the entire day in bed, not leaving his bedroom, and Harry supposed he should just be pleased that he’d progressed far beyond that point.

He settled in his bed with a book, propped up on some pillows, and hoped that when Narcissa came, she verified that nothing was wrong with him, and it was just a random bout of queasiness.

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Because it was nothing urgent, Narcissa didn’t come until around dinner time. She’d been busy with something else, and Harry hadn’t wanted to pull her away just because he didn’t feel like being stuck in bed.

Her examination was brief but thorough and involved a number of diagnostic spells. She scowled at all of them and asked, “And how are you feeling right now?”

Harry sighed. “I feel fine,” he said. He wasn’t the slightest bit queasy, and he was almost certain that whatever had happened, it had been a one-time thing. Maybe he’d just eaten some bad fruit for lunch or something, he didn’t know.

“No dizziness, queasiness, general ickiness?” she pressed. She was still studying the results of one of the spells, her lips pursed into a fierce frown.

“Nothing,” Harry said.

“Hmm.” She dispelled the results with a flick of her wand. “According to my examination, you’re perfectly fine, but… I admit that I’m concerned. I don’t like the look of your skin, to be honest. I hesitate to say that you’re jaundiced, but…”

Harry shrugged and looked down at his arm. It did look a bit strange, almost yellowish, but he didn’t actually feel bad, so he didn’t know why it looked like that. “What do you want to do?” he asked, studying his own skin. Now that she’d pointed it out, it was a little unnerving, actually.

“Let’s get you a fruit salad and see how you do with that,” Narcissa said after a long moment. “If you’re fine, we’ll keep an eye on your skin, see if anything changes, that sort of thing. If not, I think we’re going to have to write Christelle and see if there are any diseases that wouldn’t show up on a
normal set of diagnostic charms.”

Harry sighed. This whole thing was ridiculous. He was fine, he knew that he was. “Okay,” he agreed, because he wasn’t going to make anyone worry about him, even though he knew that he didn’t need all this fussing.

“Would you like Severus and Regulus to be with you while you eat?” she asked, summoning a house elf to get the mentioned fruit salad.

Harry shook his head. Throwing up in front of Draco had been humiliating enough; if it happened in front of Severus and Regulus, Harry didn’t think he’d be able to bear the embarrassment. “I’d really rather try this alone,” he said.

Narcissa smiled at him like she knew exactly what he meant, and she probably did. He couldn’t imagine that many of her patients, whatever ones she had since he knew almost nothing about her practice, wanted to be ill in front of their spouses. Which was a weird way to think of his mates, but Harry supposed it applied, for all that they’d never had a formal ceremony.

The elf arrived with the small bowl of fruit salad, all fruits that Harry ate frequently and all ones that would be relatively gentle on his stomach, and departed as soon as Harry had it in his hands. He ate slowly, taking his time so that he would know immediately if he started to feel sick, and he finished the bowl without feeling any kind of queasiness at all.

He beamed at Narcissa. “See?” He set the bowl on the nightstand. “I’m fine. There’s no need to worry about anything.”

Narcissa hesitated. “Let’s just give it a minute,” she said, frowning. “Do you mind if I keep a diagnostic charm up just in case?”

Harry sighed and shrugged, and they sat in silence after Narcissa cast her spell. He saw something shift in the spell after several minutes, and that was the only warning he had before his stomach violently expelled the fruit salad he’d just eaten.

Narcissa was much faster with her wand than her son, and did something so that the vomit never actually went anywhere and didn’t make a mess. When Harry was done, she helped him to the bathroom so that he could brush his teeth, then made him settle back in the bed. “I’m going to write the Veela Court,” she said as soon as he was leaning back against the pillows once more.
“It’s just a stomach bug!” Harry protested. There was no need to involve the Veela Court in this; he was going to be fine.

“It isn’t,” Narcissa said patiently. She fluffed the pillows behind his back. “The spell caught your queasiness, which was how I kept you as clean as I did, but it hasn’t caught an underlying cause. Anything wrong with you should be showing up on that diagnostic charm, Harry.”

Harry let out a small sigh and leaned further back into the pillows. “And I bet you want me to stay in bed until you find out, right?”

She smiled, the expression warm with sympathy. “Of course I do,” she said. She brushed his hair back from his forehead in a motherly gesture, then stood up. “But the good news is that you’re probably not contagious, so you can have all the company you want in here.”

She left, sending Regulus and Severus in to see him. Well, at least he wouldn’t be lonely, not if they could keep him company.

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The next three days should have been peaceful, but instead they wound up being terrifying, because Harry’s sudden illness didn’t stop at queasiness. It was fine for the first day, when he couldn’t really eat anything. He drank some fruit juice, and that helped stave off the gnawing hunger that was becoming a problem for Harry, but he didn’t dare eat anything solid.

He’d gone without food for longer periods of time, but not for a few years. He wasn’t used to the hunger, and for all that he knew that it would be over as soon as he was feeling better, it was still an unpleasant thing to have to readjust to.

Draco came to distract him with chess, and Severus and Regulus stayed with him almost constantly. It wasn’t as terrible as it could have been.

Then, on the second day, Harry found that he had a new symptom to report when Narcissa came by to check on him; he was dizzy. And it wasn’t just a little bit of dizziness, it was that the world felt like it was going to spin off its axis. He felt queasy all the time by that point, as well, probably exacerbated by his dizziness. He wasn’t even keeping the fruit juice down anymore.
On the third day, Harry found it difficult to actually sit up. He still made himself do it, made himself play a round of chess with Draco, and he knew that he must be in terrible shape because Draco let him win the game.

And then Voldemort burst into Harry’s bedroom, a scrap of parchment clutched in his hands, and he hissed out, “What is Christelle talking about, asking if Harry did anything about that third bond? Is that the cause of Harry’s illness?”

And Harry’s heart dropped. Because now there was no way he could ignore the third bond, not if it was causing his sickness. He didn’t want to die over pretending like it didn’t exist.
“Would you all mind if I was alone with Voldemort?” Harry asked, his voice shaking. This was a conversation he’d been dreading for so long, and to have it happening now… He didn’t know how he was going to deal with it. But he knew he didn’t want to have the conversation with Regulus, Severus, and Narcissa in the room with him.

Draco left immediately when Harry asked. There was no doubt in Harry’s mind that the blonde was fleeing, because Voldemort looked furious.

“If you’d like,” Severus said quietly. He reached out and ran a gentle hand through Harry’s hair, then stood and left the room, his robes billowing behind him.

Harry wondered idly if he practiced that, or if it came naturally to him.

“We’ll be right outside if you need us,” Regulus murmured. He kissed Harry on the cheek, then held the door open for Narcissa before following her out of the room.

Voldemort’s eyes narrowed. “Is there any particular reason you need to be alone with me?” he asked.

Harry drew in a shuddering breath. “Because we should talk,” he said, and sat up. The room spun around him, and he felt himself tilting to the side. Before he could correct himself, Voldemort lunged forward and caught him, steadying him. “About the third bond.”

“So you do have a third mate.” Voldemort patted Harry lightly on the shoulder and helped settle him against the headboard. “You needn’t be ashamed of it, Harry. Whatever it is that you need, I want you to have.”

Harry laughed. Would Voldemort still think that once he knew who Harry’s third mate was? Somehow, Harry didn’t think so.

“Was something I said funny?” Voldemort didn’t move away from him, keeping a hand resting on Harry’s shoulder. “I can assure you, it isn’t my intention to seem insincere. You… mean a great deal to me, given that you’re my… I mean, aside from that.” Voldemort stumbled to a stop and frowned.
“Thank you,” Harry said. He knew what Voldemort was trying to say, and it didn’t exactly make things better, but it did help.

“I’m just making this worse, aren’t I?” Voldemort sighed. He raked a hand over his bald head. “Harry, if there’s something that you need to tell me, I’d appreciate if you just spit it out. Like, for instance, if you bonded with Bellatrix, you should know that I wouldn’t be angry with you. Disappointed, because I do need her for combat missions and I wouldn’t be comfortable sending her out on them, but not angry.”

Harry let out another bark of hysterical laughter. Bonding with Bellatrix? That was… He found that he couldn’t stop laughing, his whole body shaking with it. Tears fell from his eyes, and he couldn’t catch his breath. His sides burned, and at some point, he was pretty sure that he stopped laughing and started crying.

In some ways, he thought it might be better if he’d bonded with Bellatrix. She probably would have killed him to put him out of his misery.

“Harry!” Voldemort tapped him sharply on the side of his face, and when Harry still didn’t stop laughing or crying or whatever it was that he was doing, he backed up a step. “I’m going to get Narcissa.”

Harry’s hand shot out and he grabbed Voldemort’s wrist before the Dark Lord could pull away. “Don’t go,” he managed to wheeze out.

Voldemort stilled. “Then would you please endeavor to calm yourself and explain to me what’s going on?” He sounded absolutely exasperated.

Harry drew in a deep, gasping breath. He let out, then managed another. Now that he had his hand on Voldemort’s wrist, the worst of the dizziness was starting to abate. It wasn’t gone, not completely, but it was better than it had been. Was that because he was in contact with his bondmate?

He got the image of Voldemort snuggling with him while they tried to bring his body back to a normal equilibrium and let out another hysterical laugh. The thought was ludicrous. Why would Voldemort even want to cuddle with him like that? He just… he couldn’t picture it.
And once he was laughing again, he couldn’t make it stop. Again.

This time, Voldemort really did pull away. “I’ll be back,” he said shortly. “We’ll still speak, but I don’t think you’ll be able to talk to me like this.”

Harry tried to bring himself under control again, but didn’t manage it. Narcissa entered the room after a small knock and sighed at the sight of him. “Would you like a calming potion?” she asked. “I don’t think you’re going to be able to calm down on your own.”

Harry covered his eyes with his hands. “Would it stay down?” he managed to choke out.

“I don’t know,” Narcissa admitted. “But I think that it would be better to try than not. Perhaps it will stay down long enough for you to have your conversation with our lord.”

Harry didn’t think he was going to be that lucky, but he nodded anyway. “Yeah, then,” he said. He wiped the tears from his eyes with shaking fingers and swallowed the potion that was handed to him immediately.

A sense of calm started to settle over him like a warm blanket. He was still both amused and upset at the same time, but it wasn’t to the extent that it had been. He was relaxing, his aching sides finally being given a break. He didn’t know how long he’d been laughing or crying, but it felt like a small eternity.

And the best part was that the potion didn’t come back up.

“Better?” Narcissa asked. She smoothed Harry’s hair away from his face.

“Better,” Harry agreed. “Thank you.” He drew in another deep breath, and this time he managed to hold it for a few seconds before exhaling just as slowly as he’d breathed in.

“Okay.” Narcissa smoothed his hair back once more, then stepped back. “I’m going to send the Dark Lord in again. Are you ready?”

No, Harry really wasn’t. He didn’t think he’d ever be ready for the conversation that was about to
happen. But he nodded anyway, because it was time. He’d put it off for so long that it had apparently made him sick, so he was going to have to talk to Voldemort.

Narcissa left, and Voldemort entered the room once more. He hovered awkwardly by the door, like he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to be doing now that they were alone once more.

Harry couldn’t help smiling. How were they mates? There was no kind of chemistry between them! Still, he patted his bed. “Come sit with me?” he asked. He’d felt better, if only a little bit, while Voldemort had been close to him. Now he was queasy and dizzy again, and felt like he might throw up at any moment.

Voldemort let out a put-upon sigh, but settled on the bed next to Harry. He was perched awkwardly, like he intended to run away as soon as he was able to do so.

“As you’ve surmised from Christelle’s letter, I do indeed have a third mate,” Harry started. He swallowed. This was it. There was no more chickening out. He had to tell Voldemort, and the time was now.

“Yes, and I wish you would have told me,” Voldemort said. There was a little growl to his voice, a sound of absolute exasperation. “I would have made things work, Harry.”

Harry sighed and sagged back against the pillows that supported him. “You’re my third mate, Voldemort,” he said quietly. He’d thought that saying it would make it feel even more real, but he was surprised to find that wasn’t the case. It still felt strangely surreal. Still, it felt good to put the words out there, to just say them. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he’d told Voldemort about the bond.

There was a moment of silence, and then Voldemort reached for him and touched him gently on the cheek, like Severus and Regulus did so frequently. Harry didn’t necessarily like it, but he tolerated it. Then Voldemort used his hand to tilt Harry’s head up, and then he pressed a soft kiss to Harry’s lips.

It felt nothing like when Severus or Regulus did it. This was cold, almost clinical, and Harry found himself flinching back from it. Then he cringed, because it couldn’t be flattering to Voldemort to have Harry flinching away from him. “Sorry,” he muttered, and braced himself for another kiss.

“Don’t apologize,” Voldemort said, almost absently. “If you didn’t enjoy the kiss, I’d rather not be
kissing you.”

Harry sagged a little, the relief sharp and strong. “I really didn’t,” he said awkwardly. If he didn’t like kissing Voldemort, and he didn’t feel romantically inclined towards him… Well, it would make things very difficult between them, wouldn’t it? Especially if Voldemort was interested in him?

“I didn’t either,” Voldemort said. He leaned back against the bed, so that his arm was still in contact with Harry. “I thought perhaps I might be able to manage it with you, but romance and sex have never been something I’ve particularly cared for, and the little interest that I have has never been directed towards a man.”

“Oh.” Harry wasn’t offended, was still relieved, but he didn’t know what to do with that. If he didn’t want Voldemort, and Voldemort didn’t want him, then what was he supposed to do? How were they mates? Even Regulus, who was asexual, still loved him. But Harry was getting the impression that Voldemort just… didn’t feel that way about anyone.

How was that going to work?

“I’m more than willing to spend time with you, of course,” Voldemort said. He shifted, but only so that he could wrap an arm around Harry’s shoulders.

Harry leaned into the touch and found that his dizziness really was going away. It wasn’t gone entirely, but it was much better than it had been only hours earlier.

“In fact,” Voldemort continued when Harry said nothing, “I’ve been wanting to spend more time with you lately. If nothing else, this gives me an excuse to do just that. You are, and will likely always be, incredibly important to me, Harry.”

“You’re not angry?” Harry asked into the silence that stretched between them after Voldemort’s oddly kind words.

“Not at all,” Voldemort said. And then he drew in a small, sharp breath. “Well. I am angry that you chose to risk your own well-being rather than letting me know about this sooner. I don’t want you to make yourself sick over things like this. But I’m not angry about the bond.”

“I was so afraid,” Harry confessed, his voice a hushed whisper.
Voldemort let out a curious hum.

“I thought that you might be angry with me for bonding with you. That you would try to take control of my relationship with Severus and Regulus, or that…” Harry trailed off. He didn’t want to talk about the worst of his fears, that Voldemort would somehow lose control of his emotions under the force of Harry’s allure and the influence of the mating bond.

It seemed ridiculous to think of now, in light of the conversation they’d just had.

“How could I ever be angry with you for something that wasn’t your fault?” Voldemort pressed a kiss to Harry’s forehead, but it wasn’t the same kind that Regulus or Severus might have done. This felt… more friendly, less intimate.

Harry didn’t really know how to describe it, but he didn’t hate it, and it didn’t make him want to recoil.

Silence stretched between them, comfortable and calm. Then, quietly, Voldemort asked, “This is helping you, having me close like this?”

Harry closed his eyes and focused on how he really felt. The dizziness was still there, but it was fading fast. The nausea, on the other hand, didn’t seem to be going anywhere. But it wasn’t getting worse, and Harry thought that it would probably go away if he just spend more time with Voldemort.

“Yes,” he said finally. “It’s helping.”

“Then…” Voldemort sighed and summoned a house elf, then asked for the work on his desk to be brought to him. “I suppose I’ll work from here, at least until you’re feeling better.”

Harry smiled. “Thank you,” he said quietly. He leaned against Voldemort as the house elf brought him his work, and let his eyes flutter closed.

He drifted off to sleep leaning against his newest mate, and hoped that when he woke up, he would feel better. Maybe things could be that easy for him just once in his life.
Two days later, Harry wasn’t quite recovered completely from his decision to not tell Voldemort about their bond and the illness that had ensued, but he was doing much better. He was allowed to leave the bed, and as such spent a significant amount of time cuddled up against Voldemort on the couch.

Harry had thought it would be awkward, and to a certain extent, it very much was. Neither Regulus nor Severus seemed comfortable displaying any sort of affection for Harry in front of their lord, and Harry supposed he couldn’t blame them. Still, he missed being kissed by both of them, and found himself looking forward to the time when the last of his nausea finally faded away and he was able to cuddle with his two other mates.

“I’m sorry that I make them uncomfortable,” Voldemort said quietly, his chin resting on Harry’s forehead. “I don’t know how I can fix that.”

Harry sighed and shook his head. “It’s not your fault,” he said, even though it kind of was Voldemort’s fault. He was incredibly intimidating, and Harry didn’t blame his mates for being nervous around him. Harry was still a little nervous around the man, after all.

Voldemort chuckled, the sound rich. “I’m sure that it is my fault,” he said. He shifted so that his chin was no longer resting on Harry’s head. “However, fortunately, you seem to be feeling better every day.”

“Yeah,” Harry said with a small sigh. “I’m gonna check on the bond.” He didn’t wait for a response, but instead closed his eyes and entered his own mind.

A process that once would have taken him hours even with the aid of a calming potion was now the work of minutes. He found his bonds and, for the first time, found that he was pleased with the way that his bond with Voldemort was growing. It was nowhere near as thick as the ones he shared with Regulus and Severus, but it was far thicker than it had been. It looked… healthy, Harry thought.

When he emerged, he found a small bowl of fruit salad waiting for him. He didn’t particularly want to eat, but didn’t protest it either. He had to eat slowly, because he was still terribly nauseous, but at least it stayed down as long as he didn’t do anything to aggravate his nausea.
“How is the bond doing?” Voldemort asked after Harry had worked his way through the bowl.

“Better,” Harry said. He closed his eyes and shifted closer. “It’s thicker, much healthier than it was. It’s still not as thick as the others, but it’s definitely looking better.”

“We haven’t been bonded for nearly as long,” Voldemort said. He ran a hand through Harry’s hair, the gesture idle. It was more like he was petting Nagini than a person, and Harry found himself entertained by the thought.

“That’s true,” he said happily. He wriggled on the couch a little bit, trying to get comfortable, then summoned one of his books from across the room. He was recovering, he was keeping food down again, and things were looking up. What more could he ask for?

Other than mates who weren’t avoiding any room that Voldemort occupied, anyway. But that was okay. They would work things out, Harry knew it. It just might take a little bit of time.

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“How has your nausea been?” Narcissa asked, only two days after that.

“Nonexistent,” Harry said honestly. He still wasn’t quite up to eating as much as he’d been before his illness, which still wasn’t as much as he’d been eating before his depressive episode, but he was eating again, and regularly. Given his persistent issues with food, Harry supposed that was as good as he could hope to be doing.

“And when the Dark Lord leaves your side?” Narcissa asked.

“It’s still fine,” Harry said. He practically beamed at her. “Really, I don’t feel sick at all anymore.”

“You certainly look better than you did,” she said, studying him.

“He’s got most of his energy back,” Regulus chimed in, a bit unexpectedly. Harry hadn’t even realized that he and Severus were standing in the doorway, not that he minded.
“Very good.” Narcissa stood and smiled a little, the expression warm. “In that case, I will tentatively clear you to resume your normal activities.” Before Harry could cheer, she added, “Although I would much prefer it if you didn’t start flying just yet.”

“But I—”

“I know that you haven’t been flying in several weeks,” Narcissa said, raising one hand. “And I’m sorry, because I know that it’s one of your favorite activities. But Harry, you’re still very underweight, and I really do think it would be for the best if you avoid strenuous physical activities.”

Harry sighed, but knew that she was right. “Fine,” he muttered. He didn’t like it, but he’d lost a significant amount of weight that he really couldn’t afford to lose over the past few weeks. If Narcissa thought it was for the best that he not fly, he knew that he should honor that.

It wasn’t like she enjoyed taking away all of his fun activities, Harry knew that.

It was still frustrating, though.

“If Harry is recovered enough, then I think I’m going to go to my office,” Voldemort said. It sounded like he was more than ready to flee, given the eager tone to his voice.

“I think that Harry has sufficiently recovered,” Narcissa said. Before Voldemort could stand, however, she held up one hand. “Provided that the two of you maintain semi-regular contact. I don’t know how your bond is going to work, and the Veela Court has never heard of one like the one you two share. So semi-regular contact, which I will define as at least once every other day. How does that sound?”

“Sounds good,” Harry said immediately. He didn’t want to seem eager, but he’d really missed Regulus and Severus, for all that he could understand their reluctance.

“That is acceptable,” Voldemort said. He stood and stretched. “Harry, come see me in my office tomorrow? We can work out the particulars then.”

“Of course,” Harry said immediately.
Voldemort practically fled, although Harry knew that few would ever dare to describe it as such. Still, the sight of it made him smile, and the expression only widened when he was practically swarmed by Regulus and Severus, both of whom pressed kisses to his cheeks, his forehead, and his lips.

By the time they’d pulled back, Narcissa had left as well, her laughter trailing behind her like bells.

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Although he wasn’t cleared to fly yet, Harry was encouraged to go outside. He didn’t like going alone, though, even if he trusted that Severus could keep his allure in check whether he was with him or not. So it was that Harry, upon finding himself alone for the day three days after being freed from his bed, decided that he wanted to go on a picnic, and invited Draco, Astoria, and Blaise to join him.

At first, Harry had planned on inviting only Draco, but had decided that was ridiculous. Astoria and Blaise had been perfectly nice when they’d played chess together, and it was high time that he started making friends with people other than his mates, his therapist and healer, and Draco.

So he asked them to join him, and was pleased to find them waiting for him at the spot he’d chosen, all settled on the blanket he’d had a house elf set out, a basket between the three of them.

“What’s the occasion?” Astoria asked as Harry settled with them.

“I’m celebrating my freedom,” Harry said honestly. “And I wanted to go outside, but sometimes I…” He stopped himself. They didn’t know much about him, about the reason he’d never returned to Hogwarts, about why he might not like going outside. And he wasn’t sure that he was ready to have that conversation with anyone.

“Were you ill again?” Blaise asked, his voice courteously curious.

Harry swallowed. If he was going to be friends with them… “I was,” he said, and offered no further information.

Nobody pushed him, and Harry was grateful for it. Conversation shifted to something lighter, more
cheerful, involving Blaise’s ongoing courtship of one Theodore Nott, and how poorly it was going because apparently Nott was quite oblivious. Astoria and Draco teased him gently, and Harry listened with some amusement to Blaise’s various attempts.

As they spoke, the basket was opened and Draco and Astoria distributed some food to everyone. Harry sighed at the sight and smell of bacon, one of the few non-fruit foods that he genuinely missed, but concentrated on his fruit salad. There was more than enough for everyone to have some, and Harry wasn’t even all that hungry anyway.

It didn’t take long, however, for one of the keen-eyed Slytherins to notice that he wasn’t eating anything other than his fruit.

“Have you switched over to a strange form of vegetarianism?” Blaise asked, curiosity clear in his voice.

Harry winced. “I guess you could say that.” He’d only managed to eat about half of the fruit on his plate and knew that he wasn’t going to be finishing it.

“Well. Apparently he’d have to tell them something, because they were all very observant. It was just a matter of what he was going to say…”

Harry swallowed. “You know that I didn’t go back to Hogwarts, right?”

Astoria snorted indelicately. “Literally everyone knows that,” she told Harry, her lips curling into a smile. “The entire world knows it. The Ministry looked for you for a long time, you know. And Dumbledore lost his mind when you disappeared. It was… quite the show for a while.”

Harry laughed a little, but didn’t feel particularly amused. His expression must have shown it, because the others sobered as well. “I… don’t know if this ever got out, but at the end of fifth year, I snuck into the Department of Mysteries.” At the startled exclamations, Harry held up his hand. He’d never get through this if they interrupted him, and suddenly he knew that he wanted to tell them. To tell people what he’d been through of his own volition.

When Astoria, Blaise, and Draco had fallen silent, Harry cleared his throat and continued. “During
my time there, I was doused with two potions. I forgot all about them after my godfather died, and then in the summer, something… happened. It was… pretty terrible, and I didn’t know what was happening to me or why people were suddenly… attacking… me, and I fled. I tried, once, to get to Diagon Alley to try to get help, and…” Harry swallowed. “And that’s when the Weasleys and a lot of other people died. It wasn’t until Regulus found me and brought me in that I learned that I’d been turned into a Veela somehow by the potions.”

“Merlin,” Draco breathed. He looked pale. “You know that the Malfoy family has Veela ancestry? That’s terrifying, Harry.”

Harry’s laugh was bitter. “You have no idea,” he said. His voice came out hollow, and he looked down so that they wouldn’t see what was surely a terrible expression on his face. “Severus and Regulus are my mates, and I was sick because I was denying my third mating bond. But I’ve stopped denying it, and I’m doing much better now.”

Silence fell when he stopped talking, a silence that stretched past uncomfortable and into torturous territory. Harry wanted to get up, to flee, and was just about to do so when Astoria cleared her throat. “And now you’re stuck eating only fruit?” she asked with a tone of exaggerated disgust.

Harry relaxed. “Just fruit,” he agreed. “Fruit juice, as long as it doesn’t have any added sugars or anything, and fruit. Fruit salad, diced fruit, solid fruit, pureed fruit…”

“Merlin, that’s disgusting,” Blaise said, looking a little green. “Can you eat other things at all?”

Harry shrugged. “I managed when I was… you know, on the streets, but I never felt well. It could be that I can, but it’s just really bad for me. I haven’t tried it.”

“Imagine having to give up bacon,” Draco said with a theatrical shudder.

The mood lightened, and Harry spent the rest of the meal laughing at the ridiculous antics of the other three as they tried to figure out whether they would rather give up bacon or give up a series of increasingly ludicrous things, like air. He knew they were just trying to distract him, and Harry greatly appreciated their kindness in doing so.

It was a good meal, and by the end of it, Harry was almost glad that he’d finally told his friends. Because they were his friends, Harry decided. And that could only be a good thing, having friends.
A week after his recovery from attempting to starve the bond, an idea which Harry was now willing to acknowledge had been absolutely ridiculous, he received a note from Voldemort asking him to meet in his office, outside of the normal time they’d taken to spending together. Harry didn’t know what it was about, but he was inclined to believe it was important, so he gathered Salazar and headed off to the office.

Voldemort was waiting for him. He had papers on his desk, but was ignoring them in favor of frowning at nothing. At first, Harry thought that he was frowning at him, but it quickly became apparent that Voldemort was just frowning at the air when he didn’t respond to Harry entering his office at all. It was like he didn’t even register that Harry was there.

Harry cleared his throat. “You wanted to see me?” he ventured, curious. He slid further into the office, closing the door behind him, and headed to the couch that had quickly become one of his favorite places to sit.

Voldemort jumped, his chair clattering to the ground with him in it. Apparently, he’d been leaning back on it. “I did,” he said after clearing his throat. He didn’t acknowledge his fall, and Harry wasn’t foolish enough to do it either. “I need to talk with you about something.”

Harry had gathered that much, but he didn’t say it. Instead, he smiled. “Well, here I am,” he said, and leaned back into the couch.

Voldemort hesitated, then stood and joined him on the couch. He wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders and tugged him closer. “I wanted to talk to you about the war,” he said quietly, his voice turning more grave than it had been.

Harry swallowed. “What about it?” he asked. Normally, Voldemort did his absolute best to keep Harry away from any kind of information about the war and its progress, and Harry appreciated that. For the most part, he didn’t want to know what was going on out there.

If he knew, he might feel as though he had to do something about it, and he didn’t think he had that in him any more. He wasn’t that person, not after everything he’d been through. And he knew that it made him selfish, and he didn’t know what to do about that. Narcissa told him that it was okay for him to take care of himself instead of others, but…
Harry sighed and closed his eyes.

And then Voldemort spoke. “It’s… ever since our conversation about the normal fate of dictators, I’ve been thinking about what I’m going to do at the end of the war, how I would keep control once I had it.”

Harry remembered that conversation. Voldemort had been planning to leave him, and Harry hadn’t been able to bear the idea of it. Maybe that had been when the bond between them had formed…

Either way, Harry remembered. “You wouldn’t be able to,” he said, and snuggled closer to Voldemort. “You would try, but eventually someone would come along and topple your empire. Maybe not until after you were dead, but it would happen.”

“Right.” Voldemort exhaled sharply. “Not that I plan on dying any time soon, mind you. But you’re right. Even if I could successfully conquer the wizarding world, I wouldn’t be able to keep my hold on it, and in the end, I would probably manage to make things worse. You don’t know how long I’ve been wrestling with that fact.”

Harry smiled at him. He knew how hard it was to question things he’d once taken as fact. “I’m proud of you,” he said honestly.

Voldemort glanced down at him and his lips twitched a little. “Thank you,” he said sincerely. “I’ve come up with another plan, but I’m afraid that I’m not entirely certain that I can make it work without your support.”

Harry blinked at him. “You know that I would support any kind of more peaceful solution to the war,” he said. Because Voldemort should know that. Harry had thought he’d made it pretty clear that he didn’t like the fact that people were still fighting and dying.

Voldemort closed his eyes, as though Harry had something that pained him. “That’s not what I meant,” he said gently. “I know that you think you would do anything to see the war end peacefully, but Harry, I might need your public support.”

Harry froze, his heart starting to pound. He let out a small sound, an uncomfortable one, and pulled back ever so slightly. “I don’t—” He cut himself off.
“You don’t know if you can do that,” Voldemort said. “I know. I understand, believe it or not. I don’t know if you can do it either, but I thought that I would raise the issue with you now, just in case.”

Harry looked down and swallowed the worst of his fear. This was still in the hypothetical stages; it wasn’t something that Voldemort was asking him to do immediately. “What would you need my support for?” he asked.

“I plan on taking control of the wizarding world in a much more subtle way,” Voldemort responded. “Through Draco Malfoy, actually, who has yet to take the Dark Mark properly.”

Harry frowned and thought about Voldemort’s words. Draco didn’t have the Dark Mark yet? He’d thought… well, then again, he’d never really looked at Draco’s arms. He supposed that it could be true, and Voldemort had no reason to lie to him.

“How?” he finally asked, once the silence had stretched.

“Draco has a seat on the Wizengamot, one that he’s inherited from his father, who can no longer serve, considering that he is an escaped Azkaban convict. Draco will take that seat, and through there, he’ll work on gaining support from our shakier allies, and perhaps gaining support from less loyal Light families.” Voldemort took a long, slow breath, then reached for Harry.

Harry hesitated, but let himself be pulled close once more. He snuggled up against him.

“Once he’s done that, and spent a year or two making the best possible decisions as a Wizengamot member, he’ll put his name out there for Minister for Magic, whereupon he’ll have control over the bulk of the government. He’ll put our people into positions of power, and we’ll go from there, bringing the Ministry under our control from the inside out.”

Harry shivered a little. It was a good plan, but the fervency with which Voldemort spoke was a little disconcerting. He still sounded like a Dark Lord, which Harry supposed only made sense since he was one. “And you need my support for that?” That was the one part that didn’t make sense.

“I don’t know that we need your support,” Voldemort hedged. “It would certainly make completing the plan infinitely easier, however. As it stands, we don’t have too many allies that would be considered incorruptible, and you would fit that category quite nicely. Not to mention, you have a
significant amount of political capital that you’ve never bothered to expend.”

“That’s because I don’t know how to expend it,” Harry muttered. He looked away, forcing himself to stay relaxed even though it was difficult. He didn’t like the idea of what Voldemort was suggesting, and wasn’t sure that would ever change. Being in the public eye… Harry shivered at the very thought.

“You don’t like the idea,” Voldemort said. He sounded disappointed, and that… it hurt.

“I didn’t say that,” Harry found himself saying, and then immediately regretted saying it.

“You didn’t have to.” Voldemort stroked his hair, but then slowly encouraged Harry to get off the couch with gentle hands on his shoulders. “I don’t need you to make a decision now,” he said carefully. “I just wanted to put the idea in your mind so that you could begin thinking it over, that’s all.”

Harry looked down and swallowed. “Okay,” he said slowly. “I’ll think it over.” He backed up a few steps, trying not to look like he was fleeing, because he wasn’t. He just… he didn’t know what he was going to do, honestly.

“That’s all I’m asking of you,” Voldemort said. He stood up and pulled Harry into a loose hug, then released him. “Go on, now. I’m sure you have other things you’d planned to do with your time.”

Harry hadn’t really had much planned, and would have been more than content to spend more time with Voldemort, but he thought that if he stayed, they would wind up talking more about the new plan. Harry knew that he wouldn’t do well if they discussed it even more, so he left with a quiet goodbye and a small smile.

Then he went to Severus’ lab, where he busied himself with an intricate practice potion and tried to ignore the thoughts that were spinning through his head. Some of his distress must have shown, because by the time he finished what he was working on, both Regulus and Severus were in the office, watching him.

He hunched his shoulders defensively. “What?” he asked.

“You seem tense,” Severus said. “And you were very eager to distract yourself when you first came
Harry frowned. “Yeah,” he muttered. He left Severus’ lab and headed into his sitting room, followed immediately by both of his other mates. He flopped onto the couch and made himself relax with a deep breath. “Voldemort wanted to talk to me earlier.”

“About what?” Regulus asked neutrally. He settled in front of Harry, his head resting against Harry’s knee, while Severus sat next to him on the couch.

“He wanted to talk to me about maybe publically supporting Draco for Minister when it came time for that,” Harry said slowly. The request was starting to sink in, and he realized that the time for his public support probably wouldn’t come for several years. If that was the case… maybe he could do it? Maybe?

“What?” There was something sharp in Severus’ voice, something cold and angry that made Harry flinch. Immediately, Severus gentled his tone. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I just don’t know how good an idea it would be for you to expose yourself to the Wizengamot. You’re…” He stopped talking.

“Fragile,” Regulus said bluntly. “The word that Severus is looking for is fragile, and as much as I love you, Harry, because you know that I do, that we both do, I think it’s a terrible idea.”

Harry had been thinking it was a bad idea as well, but he had to admit that their immediate rejection made his hackles rise. “I could totally do it!” he protested. “It wouldn’t be for a few years, right? I could be better by then, couldn’t I?”

“Harry,” Regulus breathed. He shifted so that he was kneeling, and took Harry’s face in his hands. “My darling Harry, you would need to start working now for something like that to work. You couldn’t just come out of the woodwork a week from the election and start supporting him; you’d have to be there from the beginning. That’s just how politics work.”

Harry’s heart dropped. “Oh,” he said, his voice small. He hadn’t loved the idea of doing it anyway, and the thought of starting immediately… “Voldemort said it wouldn’t have to be right away.”

“Not right away, as in tomorrow, but it would need to be within the year,” Severus said. He stroked his fingers through Harry’s hair. “If it’s something you really want to do, you know that Regulus and I will support you. But… I stand with Regulus on this. I think it’s a very bad idea.”
Harry sighed. He did too, really. It was just... “I’ll think about it,” he said finally. Because he wanted to think about it, to look inside of himself and see if there was any way that he could manage to do it, to help Voldemort. Because Voldemort had helped him so much.

And he didn’t want anyone else to die, not if there was something he could do about it.

Severus turned his head and kissed him softly, sweetly, his lips lingering after the kiss ended. Harry flushed and leaned into him, his heart starting to beat faster for a different reason. It had been a long time since he’d wanted anything... physical, but right at that moment, a distraction sounded like a wonderful idea.

Regulus made a small noise and stood. “I’m going to go… wander. I’ll come back later,” he said quickly, then disappeared from the room as quickly as Apparating.

Severus chuckled softly, then leaned in for another kiss. Harry’s cheeks flushed and he responded as ardently as he knew how to, and was very pleased to be distracted until dinner time, when Regulus rejoined them.
“~I don’t know what to do,~” he mused to Salazar, several days later. “~Severus and Regulus made valid points, but I can’t help but feel like it’s my duty to involve myself if it means that fewer people will die.~”

Salazar blinked up at him. “~You’re allowed to be selfish,~” the snake pointed out. “~In fact, I think that your mates would like it if you were a little more selfish.~”

Harry didn’t know that he agreed with that. Regulus and Severus might appreciate it, sure, but he wasn’t sure that Voldemort would. Being selfish in this instance, after all, was directly contrary to his wishes. Harry couldn’t both be selfish and help him with his plan to get Draco elected as Minister for Magic.

He sighed. “~Thanks,~” he muttered, even though he wasn’t entirely sure that Salazar had been helpful.

His basilisk let out a wordless hiss of comfort, then coiled around him and squeezed gently, reminding Harry that he wasn’t alone. Which he knew he wasn’t; he never would be. He had three mates, and the chances of any of them dying were pretty slim, given how careful they all were.

Harry knew that he needed to think more on this, and stewing on it inside wasn’t helping. He thought that maybe there was a chance that a change of scene might do it, so he stood, stretched, and left his room. Regulus and Severus were having a meeting with Voldemort that they’d all asked Harry to stay away from, so none of them could accompany him.

He was pretty sure that they were discussing the ins and outs of their changed relationship, because for all that he and Voldemort didn’t seem to have a romantic bond, they did have a bond. It couldn’t be easy for Voldemort to adjust to being connected in that way to two of his followers.

Harry could sympathize. It would be a difficult adjustment for all three of them, but at least none of his mates seemed inclined to leave him over it.

So it was okay that they were meeting without him. Harry was more than secure in the knowledge that Salazar could protect him while he wandered. After all, as little as he liked to think of it, Salazar had definitely successfully protected him against the twins. It still made his heart break that it had
been necessary to protect him from the twins, but there was nothing he could do about it. They hadn’t been willing to listen, and Narcissa had drilled into his mind that he was in no way responsible for their hot-headed behavior.

They headed outside, and from there, they wandered aimlessly. Harry thought briefly about going to the field with his broom, because he always thought better when he was on it, but he elected not to because of Salazar. The snake hated being in the air, and Harry didn’t want to leave him behind. He was feeling jumpy, even if there was no logical reason for it.

Instead, he wandered in the opposite direction, heading off to an area he’d never visited. He still didn’t go outside all that often, and typically when he did, he headed to the field with his broom. He’d never really explored the outside of the manor, and supposed that now was as good as time as any.

He found an area that didn’t seem to be well-kept, although there was a narrow path along the back of the house. Beyond that, there seemed to be a patch of woods that Harry elected to stay out of. Who knew what monsters lurked in there? Maybe dementors, maybe other things. The thought made Harry shiver, and he walked quickly through that side of the manor. Unfortunately, he discovered that the other side of the manor was pretty much the same, a thickly wooded area that looked more ominous than not.

He didn’t know why he was surprised to see it, given that he’d seen the woods from the sky when he’d been flying, but he was. Harry went quickly through that area, until he reached the front of the manor. There, the woods opened abruptly into a perfectly groomed lawn with what looked like a hedge maze off to one side.

Harry had, admittedly, had terrible experiences with hedge mazes in the past, but found himself curious about this one. He started into it, and hoped that he didn’t get himself hopelessly lost. At least if he did, he supposed that he could use a spell that would get him out, unlike during the Triwizard Tournament. And there were unlikely to be any monsters lurking to eat him. At least, he hoped there weren’t.

He found no monsters, although he did find several flowerbeds in hidden corners, and lots of statues as well. It was a fun venture, but it wasn’t helping him to think about his problem. Rather, it was distracting him from the issue, which he supposed worked just as well.

As he continued through the maze, he found that he was hearing voices, and not in the frightening way that he’d heard them in his second year. No, he was pretty sure that he could hear Astoria and Draco talking, and wondered where they were in the maze. He supposed that he would probably run into them at some point, but he tried not to listen in on their conversation.
They didn’t know he was there, and it would be rude to listen in on them without a reason. Not that Harry was above listening at keyholes, but it seemed like a bad idea to do to people he was trying to befriend.

He turned left once, and it seemed to him that their voices grew louder when he did so. When he turned left again, he found himself at a dead end. Harry sighed, then backtracked and took the right path, and this time he emerged into what could only be the center of the hedge maze. It was a beautiful garden, with a fountain in the middle and a handful of marble benches scattered throughout the wandering paths of flowers.

Now that Harry had found the center, he could see that there was a path from the center that appeared to lead straight out of the maze. “That makes sense,” he muttered to himself.

“Harry!” Astoria stood from one of the benches and crossed the garden to greet him. “You’re looking much better,” she said, and gave him a quick hug.

Harry wasn’t used to such casual intimacy, and so he froze in her embrace, and by the time he realized that wasn’t the proper response, she was already flitting away from him and back to Draco. “Won’t you join us?” Draco asked.

Harry hesitated. “You two seemed to be in the middle of a conversation.” Then he winced. “Not that I was listening, because I wasn’t, I was just wandering, but I couldn’t help but hear the two of you talking, and I—”

“It’s okay!” Draco laughed a little. “We know that you wouldn’t listen in on our conversation on purpose. You’re entirely too much of a Gryffindor for something like that.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. Too much of a— what did that even mean? “Like I’m too much of a Gryffindor to have gotten you to take me and… and Ron into the Slytherin common room once upon a time?”

Draco frowned, considering it. “I never let the two of you into the common room,” he said slowly, like he wasn’t actually sure about his answer.

“Sure you did,” Harry said, going to sit with them on the bench closest to them. “It was in our second year. Hermione brewed us the Polyjuice Potion, and you let Ron and I in as Crabbe and
Goyle. We had a whole conversation, during which you thoroughly convinced us that you weren’t the Heir of Slytherin.”

Draco opened his mouth, then closed it. His eyes went distant, like he was trying to remember, and then he said, “You know, I think I recall that conversation.”

Harry laughed a little. “It was interesting, definitely. Hermione… she would have been with us, but she got a bit of fur from Parkinson’s cat instead of hair from Parkinson herself.”

Draco laughed as well. “Wait, is that why she disappeared before she got petrified? Because of the failed potion?”

Harry nodded, still chuckling. “She was mortified. And trying to think up a reason for her to be half-transformed was… interesting. I don’t… I don’t actually remember what excuse she wound up giving, but whatever it was, I don’t think she got in much trouble.”

“Impressive,” Astoria murmured.

Silence fell, not an awkward or uncomfortable one, but not quite one that Harry would call comfortable either. He still didn’t know what he was going to do about Voldemort’s plan, and as nice as it was to be distracted from thinking about it, he knew that he couldn’t put it off forever.

Voldemort deserved an answer, preferably one that Harry was certain of.

He sighed and his shoulders slumped. “So, Draco, I hear that you’re going to be Minister for Magic.”

Draco groaned. “Oh, Merlin, please don’t start with that,” he muttered. “I don’t see how it’s going to work, and now that the Dark Lord has it in his mind that it’s the solution to all of his problems…” He shook his head. “I think he’s going to be disappointed, and I’m not looking forward to the fallout when he is.”

“He had a thought about maybe helping to get you elected,” Harry said slowly. “And I’m… torn. I don’t want to reject the idea out of hand, but I admit that I’m not thrilled with going through with it.”
“Tell me about it,” Draco suggested. “If you want to, that is. Perhaps Astoria and I can help you figure out what you want to do.”

Harry looked down at the flowers, then smiled a little as Salazar slithered up the leg of the bench and pooled himself next to Harry, resting his head in Harry’s lap. “He wants me to return to the public eye.”

Draco’s immediate hiss of displeasure was almost comforting to Harry. “And what do you think of that?” he asked, his tone studiously neutral, as though he hadn’t just given his opinion away with that little hiss.

Harry shrugged. “I’m not really thrilled with the idea,” he admitted. “I’ve never liked being famous, and I hate it when I’m interviewed. Fourth year, during the Tournament, was hell for me. Rita Skeeter is honestly the absolute worst.”

Astoria let out a sympathetic noise. “Harry, if that’s how you feel about fame, maybe stepping out into the public eye isn’t the best option for you.”

“I know,” Harry muttered, a little glum. “But I—”

“Feel like it’s your job to save everyone all of the time?” Draco asked, before Harry could finish his sentence.

Harry winced. “That wasn’t quite what I was going to say,” he said. “But… you aren’t wrong.” It was a consistent problem that he had, owing to his upbringing with the Dursleys and the consistent lack of an adult that he could rely on. At least, that’s what Narcissa told him.

“Of course we aren’t,” Astoria said with a little sniff. “There is another option, though, one that I’m surprised that the Dark Lord hasn’t considered.”

Harry glanced at her. He didn’t know anything about politics, so it didn’t surprise him that there were options that he knew nothing about. “Oh?”

“You could appear a handful of times in public, making it clear that you’re more than fine and you’re in complete control of yourself, and then you could designate a proxy voter. Someone who could speak your mind to the Wizengamot and could act on your behalf.”
Harry hesitated. “But…” He stopped. It might work, he supposed. He didn’t understand enough about politics to know for sure, but… No. “Dumbledore,” he said glumly. “He would probably want to prove that it was me with a ton of tests, and I don’t know that I can handle that.”

“Fair,” Astoria acknowledged with a nod. “And you’d still have to be in the public for a while, at least until they learn to recognize that you’re actually you, and that you’re consenting to give your votes to someone else.”

“It’s another option at least,” Harry said with a small sigh. “Thanks, Astoria. Draco.” He stood up, getting ready to continue his wandering. He’d taken enough of their time.

He’d made it to the end of the garden before Draco caught up with him. “Harry,” the blonde said, catching him by the wrist.

The motion startled Harry, but not enough that he actually went for his wand. It was enough for Salazar to hiss warningly at Draco, however, and Harry shushed the snake absently. “What’s up?”

Draco looked him in the eyes, his expression intent, and said clearly, “I just want to make sure that you know that you don’t have to do anything. You don’t have to open yourself back up to the public, and anything that goes wrong with the Dark Lord’s plan will not be your fault, whether or not you choose to do it. Okay?”


Draco let him go and stepped back a little. “It’s just that you seem so much happier these days,” he said. “And, quite frankly, you deserve a little bit of happiness.”

Harry nodded a little, not sure what to say from there, and excused himself from the conversation. He still didn’t know what he was going to do, not for sure, but he had another option. And it was nice to know that there was at least a few people other than Regulus and Severus who wouldn’t be angry with him for not going along with Voldemort’s plan.

If that was what he chose to do. He still hadn’t decided.
Harry settled next to Regulus on the couch an hour or so after his conversation with Draco and Astoria. Severus was there as well, sitting in the armchair, reading quietly. Harry leaned into Regulus and let his eyes flutter closed, breathing deeply.

“How are you feeling?” Regulus asked quietly. He held Harry a little closer.

“I ran into Draco and Astoria while I was wandering today,” Harry said with a small sigh. “We talked about Voldemort’s proposition, and whether or not I really wanted to step back into the public eye once more.”

“I thought you’d decided that you weren’t going to do it,” Severus muttered. He closed his book and gave Harry his full attention.

Harry shook his head. “You both thought it was a bad idea, and I’m inclined to agree, but I hadn’t made a final decision.” He looked down at his hands. “There’s a part of me that thinks that I should do whatever I can to help minimize casualties in the war, since I’m not doing anything else.”

“That part of you comes from being raised to save the world,” Severus said. He abandoned his seat to kneel in front of Harry. “You need to understand that Albus always intended for you to sacrifice yourself so that the world could be saved. He never wanted…” Severus trailed off and shook his head. “I think that you should talk it over with Narcissa before you make any major decisions.”

“Unless I’m deciding not to do it,” Harry said. Because he was on to Regulus and Severus. They both wanted him to avoid going out into the public because it would cause him a significant amount of stress. That was fair. Harry wanted to avoid being put under that same stress.

“Unless you’re deciding not to do it,” Regulus agreed. He kissed Harry’s forehead and squeezed him. “But even then, honestly, you should talk it over with Narcissa. I don’t want you to regret whatever decision you make two or three years down the line.”

“Astoria did have another possible solution.” Harry shifted on the couch so that he was a little more comfortable, tucked more neatly under Regulus’ arm.
“Oh?” Severus came up to join them both on the couch, putting Harry in one of his favorite places: between them.

“She suggested that I return to the public eye only long enough to get them to accept that it really is me, and then I turn my votes over to someone that I trust, someone who wouldn’t raise too many objections from the ever-observant public.” Harry didn’t hate the idea, but he still didn’t know that it would work. Not with Dumbledore still around.

“Dumbledore,” Regulus pointed out with a small sigh, echoing Harry’s thoughts. “It wouldn’t work. He’d be too eager to get his hands on you, and who knows what he would put you through?”

“Yes, but Dumbledore isn’t going to be around forever,” Severus said slowly. “He’s getting old, and unless I’m very mistaken, I think he triggered one of the traps on one of the Dark Lord’s decoy horcruxes. He might be dying even as we speak.”

Harry perked up a little bit. “Then maybe it would work, if he dies,” he said. If Dumbledore was dead, then… maybe it would be safe for him to return to the public eye just long enough to designate a proxy voter.

“Maybe,” Regulus said, but he didn’t seem like he believed it. “Or maybe Dumbledore will have someone twice as paranoid, like Moody, replace him.”

Harry sighed and shifted, squirming to get a little more comfortable, and so that he was in contact with Severus as well. “So what I’m hearing is that it’s probably a good idea to wait and see, and maybe consider going through with the proxy-voter plan once we see who replaces Dumbledore if and when he dies.”

“If I were the one making the decision, that’s what I would do,” Severus said. He gathered Harry’s feet, drawing them into his lap, and began to rub the tension from them that Harry hadn’t even realized was there.

“I think that seems like the best compromise,” Regulus agreed. He rubbed Harry’s shoulders.

The two of them seemed to be conspiring to turn him into jelly, but Harry was okay with that, especially since he would have to go to Voldemort the next day and tell him about his decision. Because Regulus was right; it did seem like the best possible compromise.
The next day, Harry found himself standing outside of Voldemort’s office, nervous to go in for the first time in what felt like a small eternity. Their relationship, the closer form of it that they’d engaged in since Voldemort had learned of the third bond, was still new, and Harry couldn’t help but feel like it was fragile, like he might damage it by walking away from this idea of his, no matter how temporary that walking away turned out to be.

But the more that the thought about it, the less he knew whether or not he could tolerate being back in the public eye. He’d already hated it before his allure, and the thought of going through an interview with someone like Rita Skeeter while also worrying about his allure, worrying about his non-human nature coming out… he didn’t think it would work.

Maybe, maybe when Dumbledore was no longer an issue… But until then, Harry was secure enough to say that it couldn’t happen. It had taken him a few days to get there, but he acknowledged that Severus and Regulus were right, that he couldn’t go through with stepping back into the spotlight.

Steeling himself for whatever reaction Voldemort would have, Harry raised his hand and knocked. He’d intended for it to be strong, authoritative, but instead it came out weak, almost fragile. He wondered if Voldemort had even heard it, given that the response wasn’t immediately, but before he could knock again, he heard Voldemort bark out, “Enter!”

Harry slipped into the room and closed the door behind him. “Hi,” he said, a little lamely. Voldemort didn’t seem to be in the best mood; maybe it would be a good idea for him to go away and come back another time…

But Voldemort brightened as soon as he saw Harry. “How are you?” the Dark Lord asked, leaving his desk behind to cross the room. He pulled Harry into a tight embrace, then ushered him over to the couch, where he settled and coaxed Harry into leaning against him.

Harry sighed and snuggled closer, some of the tension draining from him. “Not great,” he said honestly. “I’ve been thinking about the idea that you proposed, and I…” He stopped. He couldn’t bring himself to say that he didn’t want to do it, not now that it was time to actually admit it.

“You don’t like the idea,” Voldemort said. It was said conversationally, like it didn’t bother him one way or another, but Harry thought he could hear an undertone of hurt in his voice.
“It isn’t that I don’t like it,” Harry said quickly, trying to soothe the hurt he thought he heard. “It’s just that I don’t think that I can do it. I don’t know that I’m in that good of a place, and even if I were, there’s still the matter of Dumbledore and how he would react if I were to suddenly just reappear, taking my seat on the Wizengamot.” He swallowed and closed his eyes, burying his face in Voldemort’s shoulder. If Voldemort was angry, Harry didn’t want to see.

He wasn’t expecting to feel long fingers threading through his hair. “It’s okay,” Voldemort said soothingly. “I won’t deny that I was hoping you would say yes, because of course you know that I was. But I really do think that we can get this plan to work without you. And there is still so much time for you to change your mind, if you ever feel well enough, or if Dumbledore dies.”

Harry wanted to let it go at that, because Voldemort wasn’t angry, but… “But there’s a good chance that I won’t change my mind,” he said quietly, his voice small. “And I don’t want you to say that you’re okay with me coming to this conclusion while still hoping that I’ll change my mind. Because… because I don’t know that I ever will.”

“Oh, Harry,” Voldemort breathed. He pressed a kiss to Harry’s forehead and tugged him closer. “I don’t want you to worry about that at all. All I want from you is to be happy. If you can do that while helping, I thought I would give you the option. But if you can’t, if all you can do is be here in the Manor with me and Regulus and Severus, that’s absolutely okay too. I never want you to think otherwise.”

Harry shivered a little and closed his eyes against the tears that were trying to form. “Thank you,” he said thickly.

They stayed where they were for what felt like a small eternity, and then Voldemort asked lightly, “So. How are your lessons in potions going? Still thinking of maybe learning the healing arts at some point?”

Harry recognized the attempt at lightening the conversation for what it was, and he laughed a little soggily and pulled back slightly. “Potions are going well,” he said. “I’m much better than I used to be. It helps that Severus is much more patient with me than he ever was at Hogwarts. And I’m working on learning a few new charms. Not proper healing spells, not yet, but a few diagnostic ones.”

Voldemort smiled at him. “I’m glad to hear that,” he said. He smoothed Harry’s hair back from his face. “And what of your outdoor trips? You’re still doing those, right?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Still flying regularly. I was thinking of getting together a small
Quidditch game with Draco, Astoria, and Blaise the next time the weather is really nice.” He missed Quidditch, and he was sure there was some variation of Quidditch that they could play that would only need teams of two.

If nothing else, he supposed that he could race all of them to catch the Snitch.

“That sounds like fun,” Voldemort said. He stroked Harry’s hair again. “Let me know when you do it. Perhaps we could arrange for a picnic lunch that day, with Regulus and Severus as well.”

Harry brightened at the idea. “And Narcissa?”

“Of course!”

Harry smiled and leaned back in, snuggling close. “That sounds like fun,” he said. Now that the tension was leaving him from worrying about Voldemort’s reaction, he was getting a little tired. Or… a lot tired, actually, because he hadn’t exactly slept well the night before.

“Are you falling asleep on me?” Voldemort asked. Harry thought that maybe there might be an undertone of panic to his voice, but he couldn’t be bothered by it.

He was warm, and comfortable, and his mate wasn’t angry with him. So he just let out an agreeable hum and let himself drift off.

When he woke briefly a bit later, Voldemort was sitting there as though he’d been frozen, obviously too frightened to move and disturb Harry. Harry could have been nice, taken pity on him, and gone back to his room, but instead he just let out a small hum, closed his eyes once more, and went back to sleep.

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A week later, everything came together for the small Quidditch match and the picnic. As Narcissa, Severus, Voldemort, and Regulus watched from the ground, Harry engaged in increasingly more dramatic aerial stunts as he completely ignored the objective of the game, which was, of course, to catch the Snitch before everyone else.
Astoria seemed to be taking her queue from him, and was practically asleep on her broom. Blaise and Draco were taking it the most seriously, both of them flying in searching patterns over the area in which the Snitch could fly.

It was an accident that Harry spotted the Snitch behind Astoria’s head, but it was no accident that his competitive streak flared up and he sped off after it. He flew like his life depended on it, reaching for the Snitch and hoping he’d catch it before Astoria could realize it was there.

It wasn’t until he had the Snitch in his hand and was soaring up and up in a celebratory spiral that he realized he’d left his broom behind at some point and was now flying through the use of his wings instead. The feeling was amazing, better than almost anything Harry had ever felt in his life.

He was loved, he had friends, and he was happy.

For the first time in his life, Harry felt like he was truly free.
Twelve years ago, Harry Potter was turned into a Veela by accidentally exposing himself to a set of potions in the Department of Mysteries while he tried to rescue his godfather from a threat that turned out to be a trap. Shortly after that, his life had gone even further to hell than it already had been.

Twelve years ago, Harry had never imagined that he would be having the conversation he currently was.

“Okay, and know that I respect your opinion, but you’re wearing pants when you go out and play with Scorpius,” Harry said, exasperated.

The ever-stubborn Sirius stared back up at him, his green eyes defiant. Harry had never imagined that he’d have a child of his own, not when his three mates had turned out to be male (and Merlin, he didn’t have any words for how grateful he was to have never found a fourth, and to have Christelle tell him that his ‘well’ seemed to have finally closed), but when Regulus had raised the issue of finding a surrogate, Harry had considered it. He’d always thought he’d be a good father…

And then Severus had pointed out that he need never have intimate contact with the woman, something that had lingered in the back of Harry’s mind as a bad idea, and Harry had almost immediately been on board. After all, Regulus wouldn’t have raised the issue if he also didn’t want a child running around, and Severus would have protested rather than helping with the idea.

So he found a suitable woman, or rather, Voldemort did, and now Harry had a son. Who was adorable, and sweet, and terribly stubborn.

“But it’s too hot for pants!” Sirius protested, his pout absolutely adorable on his five-year-old baby face. “I don’t want to wear them!”

“Well, then I guess you don’t want to go and play with Scorpius at his birthday party,” Harry said, as unsympathetically as he could.

“Yes I do!” Sirius protested. “Daddy, please?”
“You will wear pants, or we won’t go,” Harry said, as reasonably as he could. “Scorpius can’t have a half-dressed friend at his party; the public would lose their minds and wonder what I was doing with you.”

The press was unavoidable, as it turned out, once Draco became Minister for Magic. Harry had managed to avoid stepping into the public eye for the most part, but he’d needed to do it in the end, if only briefly, to help Regulus ‘return to life,’ claim the Black family fortune, and then announce that he was married to him.

The resulting flurry of press was enough that Harry regretted almost every decision he’d ever made in his life, but after it was over, he was left mostly alone as Regulus took control of both the Black family seats and the Potter ones. And in the end, it had been enough to get Draco elected as Minister for Magic, if only just barely.

Things had pulled together after that, and as Harry watched in astonishment, Voldemort assumed control of the government without any further bloodshed. Yes, Draco was at the helm, and occasionally did things that Voldemort didn’t agree with, but for the most part, the Dark Lord had successfully won the war.

It was mindblowing.

“But pants are stupid!” Sirius shouted, and flung a pillow at Harry. This had the benefit of drawing Harry’s attention away from the past, and back to the child in front of him, who was now red-faced from his temper tantrum.

Harry picked the pillow up off the ground and sighed. “Then I guess we’re not going,” he said. He backed away from Sirius, who proceeded to wail in childish fury.

He went out into the living room and found Bellatrix staring at the door, an expression of mingled disgust and horror on her face. Her stomach was distended, and she looked like she was ready to give birth at any minute. “Is this what I have to look forward to?” she asked, the horror on her face comical.

Harry laughed, leaning against the wall. It had taken him the longest time to come to terms with her, given that she’d been the reason that Sirius the first had died in the first place, but he’d managed. It had been impossible not to manage when her husband had died and, not a week later, Voldemort had married her.
“Don’t you laugh at me,” the witch snarled, her fingers inching towards her wand. She’d never curse Harry, but that didn’t stop her from making the threat.

“All children are different,” Harry responded, and then fell silent when a sudden silence fell from Sirius’ room. “Some of them are mischievous, and some of them aren’t. But if your child is anything like you and Voldemort, I can’t imagine how it would be anything else.”

Bellatrix let out a groan and flopped back on her chair just as Sirius emerged from his bedroom, wearing the requested pants. “Well, at least you have him mildly well trained,” she muttered.

Harry laughed again and scooped Sirius up, cradling him easily on his hip. They weren’t sure yet what Harry’s Veela state would mean for the child, but they were ready to deal with it if it did turn out to be inheritable. “He’s not a dog,” he said to Bellatrix.

Sirius hugged him, cuddling close. “I’m sorry I yelled,” he said. “And I’m sorry I threw the pillow. Salazar said it was mean.”

“It was mean,” Harry agreed. “Thank you for apologizing.”

“He said you shouldn’t let me go to the party since I was mean,” Sirius continued. “It’s okay if I can’t go, Daddy. I’m sorry.”

And didn’t it just figure that the one adult in the entire Manor who wasn’t an absolute pushover was his darling basilisk? He supposed that Salazar had enough practice with the clutches he and Nagini had raised together. “I don’t know about that,” Harry said, and pressed a kiss to his son’s forehead. “I think we can still go as soon as your other fathers get home.”

As strange as it was, with Regulus working as a full member of the Wizengamot and Severus taking on the occasional potions apprentice, with Voldemort and Bellatrix married with a child of their own on the way, and with Harry himself occasionally taking a patient or two as a fully-certified Healer, this was his life, and he was happy with it.

It was something he’d never imagined twelve years ago, not just because it was so strange, but because he simply didn’t have the framework in place, emotionally, to begin to dream of a life like his.
But now that he had it, he wouldn’t have it any other way.

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