A Matter of Destiny

by WritingMyDeliverance

Summary

When Harry turns 16, he is shocked to discover that his mentor Severus is in a bonded relationship with Lucius Malfoy—and that Harry himself is a second bondmate to both of them! With Severus's spying now revealed to Lucius, and with the Boy Who Lived revealed to be their mate, how do they move forward? What does all this mean for the war?

Notes

This fic contains discussions of violence, physical injuries, nutrition and starvation recovery, and abuse and neglect. Individual chapters will carry specific warnings; take care of yourselves as needed, y'all.
An Itching Restlessness

The day before Harry Potter’s 16th birthday, Lucius Malfoy wandered his home restlessly. He could not have told you why this was, for he himself did not quite know. He couldn’t focus on business matters, for there was something like an itch under his skin. He spent an hour pacing in the library before lunch, and ate absentmindedly. When Narcissa asked him what was the matter, he simply shrugged, and she gazed at him quizzically. He didn’t try to explain further—he wasn’t sure he could, frankly. Something was going to happen, and that was all he knew.

Severus was in the grip of some experiment, and did not come up from the lab for lunch, so Lucius went down to make sure the man ate. When he entered the lab, he found Severus at his desk, eating a sandwich and scribbling in a journal, muttering to himself in between bites. He brushed a kiss to the top of his mate’s head, and the man smiled absently at him, before returning to his notes. Lucius sat nearby, observing his love fondly.

In truth, things were not well between them. Oh, Severus still seemed to love him, still understood him better than any other living being, still shared his bed, but there was some undefinable distance between them. Nothing Lucius could point to, but the return of the Dark Lord had disrupted the ease and joy of their bond somehow. Though Severus returned to him most weekends during the year, Lucius found their time together less rejuvenating than it should have been. The disruption began to affect his health, in fact, and had led him, the previous month, to withdraw from the Department of Mysteries earlier than the others; he spent the night in bed, dizzy and chilled.

Happily, this illness meant he had avoided capture and incarceration, though their lord had been displeased with him. His Severus had been back for the summer holidays by the time this displeasure was expressed, however, and so had fussed over Lucius for the entire day following, which had quite improved the blond’s mood. Still, there was something keeping their easy intimacy at bay, and Lucius wished he knew what it was, so he could fix it.

Having finished his sandwich, Severus cast a spell to banish any crumbs from his person, before turning back to the potions bench. He set his journal to one side and set three separate cauldrons on to boil. He was probably testing variations, then. Lucius loved watching Severus brew, because he was so intent, moved with such precision and mastery. When he made a discovery or solved a problem, his eyes lit up, and he looked so pleased that he reminded Lucius of the eager young man he’d been when they first bonded.

Severus at 16 had been a study in contradictions: eager for guidance yet fearful of betrayal, confident in his magic but so shy about his body, inscrutable in public yet privately shattered by the loss of his best friend and his mother. He was a halfblood chameleon, who had learned pureblood mannerisms and assimilated almost seamlessly into their culture. When Lucius had been compelled to his side on the younger man’s 16th birthday, he himself had been married to Narcissa for some four years, and was quite startled to find that he had a bondmate through his creature heritage. He was pleased to find that the scrawny, unhappy child Severus had been had become such an intelligent and fiery young man, and as they grew to know each other better, found himself falling deeply in love with the brilliant man.

Thinking back to that time, he came to a realization—he’d felt this itching restlessness before, on the day prior to Severus’s 16th birthday. What could it mean? Was something going to happen to Severus? Was something going to happen to their bond? He felt panic flash through him. What if it dissolved? He clutched at the edge of the desk, gasping and dizzy.
“Luc? Lucius? What’s wrong?” Severus was beside him in a flash, grasping his arm to keep him upright.

“Something’s happening. I—I don’t know—” Lucius clutched desperately to the other man, sucking in a shuddering breath. He barely noticed Severus vanishing the potions he’d been working on and guiding him up out of the potions lab. Dazed, he followed along until he found himself being settled on the edge of their bed. His grip on Severus’s arm tightened when the man made to move away. “Where are you going? Sev, what—”

“Hush, Luc, I was merely going to fetch you a calming draught,” his love soothed. He waved his hand and summoned the draught instead, holding it out for Lucius to take.

After drinking the potion, Lucius’s hitching breath evened, and his head cleared. “You wouldn’t leave me, would you?”

Severus was taken aback. “I would not leave you. I love you, Luc.” He sat beside him on the bed and studied his bondmate’s face. “What brought this on?”

“Something’s wrong between us, and it’s been making me ill.” His free hand fluttered vaguely in the air. “And then today I’ve been feeling so odd, restless and unable to focus, and then I remembered I felt just this way the day before you turned 16, and it occurred to me that maybe it was because something might be happening to our bond, and I just panicked.” He looked at Severus, and even the calming draught couldn’t keep the worry from his voice. “You won’t leave me?”

“Never, darling.” Severus brushed a kiss over his lips, and then another over his forehead. “Never,” he whispered again.

Lucius sagged into him, and Severus gently laid him down on the bed, stretching out beside him with a soft smile.

“But—your potions…I’m sorry.” Lucius felt guilty for dragging the man away and making him waste ingredients.

Severus shook his head. “Don’t be,” he said. “You are more important.” His thumb rubbed circles on the back of Lucius’s hand.

Lucius closed his eyes, relaxing into the moment with his bondmate. For a while, he just floated in the calm and the peaceful sensation of Severus soothing him. He almost thought he would doze off, but an hour later the calming draught had worn off, and the itching under his skin was building back up. When he shifted to sit up, Severus raised an eyebrow and followed him.

“It’s this restlessness,” he explained. “It’s like an itch I can’t scratch. I can’t focus on work, and I spent the morning pacing in the library. The last time it happened, I felt a pull in my chest starting at midnight, and when I apparated, it brought me to you.”

“I remember,” Severus said. “I was quite startled.”

“You hexed me, you mean!”

“Well, I was expecting it to be Potter and Black trying to get back at me for the mouse spleens,” he shivered as he remembered how Black had actually tried to get back at him for that. Lucius
squeezed his hand, guessing at the direction his thoughts had turned.

“I’m just glad you happened to be awake and in the entrance hall, because I wouldn’t have been able to get to you until breakfast if you’d been in your dorm. I didn’t have the password, obviously.”

Severus hummed agreement, giving him a contemplative look. “So, the last time you felt this, you were compelled to the side of your newly matured bondmate. What do you think it means that it’s happening again?”

“I don’t know,” Lucius huffed in frustration. “With you being gone all the time at school, and the disruption in our bond, I thought maybe you were going to leave me.”

Severus squeezed his hand. “I will not.” He studied Lucius’s face. “Have you considered that you may have a second mate?”

“Merlin, I hope not!” Lucius looked deeply unsettled by the possibility. “Whoever it was would be my son’s age! You were five years my junior, and even that was odd to navigate, with you still being in school…”

“Perhaps so,” Severus replied, “but you ought to consider it as possible, nevertheless.”

“Oh, fine.” Lucius thought for a moment. “Truthfully, I don’t think I want another. Having you has been so much more than I ever thought I could have. And now we’re old and set in our ways, and some young person wouldn’t suit us, would they?”

“Old?” Severus snorted. “Speak for yourself!”

“You admit to being set in your ways, though?”

“Well, that’s as may be…still the magic of the bond should ease the way somewhat. Without it, I’m sure you’d never have thought of me as anything special, but look at how well we’ve done together.”

Lucius brought Severus’s fingertips to his mouth and kissed each one. “You are special, though.”

“Flatterer. You’re biased,” Severus said, though he felt a pleased little flutter in his chest.

“Doesn’t make it untrue,” Lucius replied easily. “Anyway, we shall see what happens tonight. Perhaps we are fretting for nothing.”

Severus raised an eyebrow doubtfully, but decided to leave the conversation there; he had just had an idea for how to work off some of his love’s restless energy. He let a coy smirk spread across his face, before swooping in for a kiss. Lucius let out a happy grunt as he fell back against the bed, and responded enthusiastically to his proposed activity.

Severus was quite smug about it.
They were lying in bed. The house elves had removed the dinner trays and set a fire in the grate. The house was silent around them, but Severus and Lucius were not sleeping. They were waiting. They had not changed for bed, and as midnight approached, Lucius began to twitch gently in his bondmate’s arms. Magic ran like currents under his skin. He wanted to move, but he remained beside Severus until the hour struck.

Warmth blossomed in his chest, and Lucius sat up as the gentle tug on his magical core began. “It’s happening,” he whispered. They stood beside the bed, Lucius clasped one of Severus’s wrists, and—trusting to the bond magic—apparated them both away.

They landed on a concrete sidewalk, and looked around. Severus quirked one brow at his mate, who shrugged. The quiet suburb they stood in was painfully muggle, with identical little homes, neatly manicured lawns, and thoroughly utilitarian automobiles.

“What a dreadful place,” Lucius muttered, sneering.

“What now?” Severus asked.

His love pointed over the potions master’s shoulder. “That way.”

Severus turned and froze. The identical little house behind him had a shiny number four tacked to the wall beside the door. His eyes scanned the trimmed hedges and the smart black sedan in the driveway. He recognized this house, Merlin help them all.

Perhaps he was wrong, he thought desperately. What’s to say this wasn’t some other number 4? The universe could not possibly hate him so much as this. He couldn’t be standing on the pavement outside the Dursley home. He felt the manic urge to laugh, or possibly to cry.

He startled as Lucius wrapped an arm around his waist, and innocently pulled him towards the home. “Shall we?”

Abruptly, Lucius fetched up against the wards and was stopped in his tracks. Severus took two steps further before realizing his lover’s arm had dropped away. Severus had passed easily through the magical barrier, but his bondmate had not. Lucius eyed the translucent sheen of the wards, expression puzzled. Any hope that this was some other house died in Severus’s chest. He definitely felt closer to crying than laughing, now. How could he stop Lucius from taking the boy without betraying his true loyalties?

“Sev, what—” Severus retreated from his love, smiling reassuringly at the man, and turned away, thoughts racing as he continued up the path to the house. He needed a plan, fast.

“Alohomora,” he intoned quietly, and the deadbolt clicked open. He opened the door and slipped
in on silent feet. “Point me Harry Potter’s bedroom.” Rather than up the stairs, his wand pointed him towards the kitchen, but stopped at the hall cupboard instead. Severus eyed it in confusion, before spelling the lock on it open and pulling wide the cupboard door.

Inside sat Harry’s trunk. Off to one side was a folded up cot and a pile of rags. A little shelf above the trunk held a couple of broken toy soldiers, a handful of crayon stubs, and a chipped mug. On the back wall of the cupboard was a child’s sloppy drawing of a giant man on a flying motorcycle. Severus shrunk the trunk and stuck it in his pocket. He glanced around once more, and then noticed, scratched clumsily into an exposed beam were the words ‘Harry’s Room.’ He clenched his teeth together so tightly that he almost felt his jaw creak.

Shutting the cupboard door once more, he cast again. “Point me Harry Potter.” This time his wand led him back down the hall and up the stairs. He eyed the door his wand brought him to with some consternation.

The door had no fewer than four locks on it, and a pet flap opened at the bottom. He waved his wand to unlock the lot, and eased the door open, scanning the room warily until he spotted the boy prone on a bed. Harry was stretched out on his stomach, back exposed to the chilly air, one arm hanging off the side of the bed, the other tucked under his head. Severus bit back a curse and strode towards the bed.

“Harry,” he whispered. “Harry, wake up.” The boy didn’t even stir. Severus brushed a hand over his forehead and found it hot and sticky with sweat. Despite the scant light, he could tell the boy’s arms were a mass of bruises. His back was shredded, likely from the buckle end of a belt, and the wounds looked infected. Under the dried blood and bruising, his face was deathly pale, and his breathing was faint and wheezy. Severus swore under his breath; the boy was going nowhere under his own power tonight, which narrowed the options for his escape considerably.

He turned and surveyed the room. The owl cage was shrunk and dropped into his pocket. Harry’s glasses went into another pocket. He saw nothing else he thought the boy might care to take, and turned back to the bed. Rolling Harry’s body towards him, he tipped him gently into his arms. Despite the care he took, the boy’s breath caught as his professor’s arm touched his back, and he moaned helplessly. Severus felt his heart clench at the sound, which became a ragged cough, and then a breathless whimper.

He eased his way back out of the room and inched down the stairs as gently as possible. Harry seemed once more insensible to the world, for which Severus was deeply grateful. He stepped out the front door, and paused on the walkway. His love stood on the other side of the wards, eyes wide as they took in the body in his arms. Lucius reached a hand towards them, but was blocked once more by the wards.

“What is this?”

Severus stared at him in silence. He wasn’t entirely defenseless, but he couldn’t fight with Harry in his arms, and he couldn’t lay him on the ground without exacerbating his wounds, and he couldn’t hover him while dueling. If he took Harry to St Mungo’s, the boy would be in danger. Madame Pomfrey was not at Hogwarts, and Severus wasn’t sure he could get the boy to the castle in his present state, regardless. The Order’s headquarters had been abandoned until they could determine whether Harry or Bellatrix had inherited. His own potions and supplies were all at home in Malfoy Manor.

Harry shifted in his arms, shivering in the night chill. His whimper in the silence decided for Severus. He would take him home and heal him. He hoped Lucius wouldn’t turn him in until he
could get the boy out to safety, but Harry was dangerously ill and horribly injured, and he needed medical attention immediately. He took one step, then another, until he crossed back through the wards, where he could apparate. Without looking at Lucius, he spun away, cradling Harry to his chest.

Landing in their room in the manor, he gestured sharply with his head, and the door flung open to let him pass. He heard Lucius behind him, hurrying to match his stride as he swept down the hall and turned into a disused wing of the house. Here were rooms that once housed cousins and other relations of the Lord Malfoy; now they served as guest rooms for their infrequent visitors. He turned into the first suite he came across, choosing a room at random and jerking his head to magic the comforter and pillows off. He laid Harry on his stomach, exposing his back, and Lucius gasped at first sight of it.

Severus ignored his bondmate, drawing his wand to perform a diagnostic spell. His mouth tightened as red symbols flashed rapidly before him, and he began to summon potions and salves from his stores. Several potions were spelled directly into Harry’s stomach, and the boy groaned as two of his ribs visibly shifted back into their proper places. The potions master plucked a blue bottle from the air, ripped out the stopper, and visibly steeled himself before pouring it over Harry’s back. The reaction was instantaneous—the boy let out a single agonized howl, and thrashed violently for a moment. Just as suddenly, he stilled.

Lucius made a wounded noise, but Severus calmly let the antiseptic work, dabbing some on the split lip and eyebrow he could see. Once the solution on the boy’s back stopped bubbling, he slathered essence of murtlap over the wounds, and then a salve of dittany. The mass of wounds rapidly scabbed over, and he applied a bruise balm. Rolling Harry over to assess the damage to his front, he cleaned and treated the handful of wraparound wounds from the belt that licked the edges of too-prominent ribs and curled over one bony shoulder. He liberally applied bruise balm to the boy’s face, chest, and arms.

“Is that…Harry Potter?” Lucius whispered. A momentary stilling of his hands was the only sign the potions master gave that he had heard the words, and he did not respond to them.

When he had fixed the boy’s broken nose, he decided the rest could wait long enough for him to deal with Lucius. He drew the comforter up and onto the boy, tenderly tucking a pillow under his head. That done, he stood and gave his bondmate an inscrutable look, before tilting his head to indicate they should exit the room.

Lucius quietly shut the door behind them, and turned to find Severus’s wand leveled at his chest. “Severus, what are you doing?” he asked, spreading his empty hands in front of himself.

“I had hoped we would never come to this. Perhaps it was foolish of me, but I hoped that we would never be tested in this way.” He sneered lightly. “Mayhap I’ve spent too much time around Gryffindors of late. Regardless, I was happy here, and I let myself believe the war wouldn’t touch what we had.”

Lucius began, almost imperceptibly, to tremble. “What we had? I don’t—Severus?”

“I’m sorry, Lucius. I didn’t mean for this to happen. I know this has been hurting you since his return, and I never wanted that. Salazar help me, what have I done?”

“You said you wouldn’t leave me, Severus. You swore!” Lucius felt like he’d taken a bludger to the chest. He sucked in a harsh breath, eyes pleading. “You swore…”
“I know, my love. But I cannot let you hurt that boy. I am pledged to protect him, Lucius…even from you.” Severus looked like his heart was breaking. Nevertheless, his wand didn’t waver.

“I won’t hurt him—please, Severus.”

Severus snorted derisively. “How can I believe that? Merlin, I know you. Luc, my love, you are the Dark Lord’s man, through and through. But I haven’t been since the night he decided to target the Potters.”

“What?” Lucius gaped at him.

“Luc, you must have suspected my loyalties; I know he does. I am too useful to kill, for now, but my time is limited. I had a decade’s reprieve, but his return has put an expiration date on my life. I knew that when I agreed to spy on him again.”

“No!” His bondmate shook his head frantically, half-reaching for him. “I can’t accept that. I won’t lose you!”

Severus slowly lowered his wand. The silence stretched between them, until the potions master finally broke it, sounding resigned. “I am for Harry, Luc, and you for the Dark Lord. How could you keep me?”

“Don’t I get a say in this?” The blond man asked desperately. “The Dark Lord is not my bondmate, Sev. You are, and he—” Lucius gestured toward the bedroom in which Harry slept “—could be. You can’t keep him from me, Severus. You are not a cruel man, and I know you feel our bond with him forming already. Please, think what losing both of you would do to me. Stay.”

The man’s face twisted with rage, and his wand snapped up once more. “What, so you can turn him over to the Dark Lord?”

“I would never do that, Severus, no more than I would do it to you.”

“I can’t trust that.” The younger man’s voice came out slightly broken.

They watched each other for a long tense moment, and then Lucius drew his wand. Severus tensed, but the blond man pointed the tip at his own heart, and spoke. “I, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, swear on my magic that I shall not deliberately harm Harry Potter, nor shall I knowingly reveal his whereabouts to the Dark Lord or any of his servants, nor shall I willingly place Harry in a situation which I know will bring him to harm. Should I violate my word, may Lady Magic strike me down, and visit upon me the very harm to which I have subjected him. So mote it be.” A golden thread spun out of the wandtip, branching out to wrap around both of the man’s wrists, his throat, and his skull. The magic tendrils flared bright and then sank into his skin, disappearing.

It was Severus’s turn to gape at his lover. His wand-arm dropped, and Lucius stepped into his space. The blond man cupped his jaw and kissed him, first fiercely and then tenderly. When he pulled back, he dropped his hands to Severus’s shoulders and gripped hard.

“It will not lose you,” he snarled. Severus nodded, still gaping. “Good. I’m going to bed. I probably shouldn’t be there when he wakes. Go see to your patient, love.” Gently, he turned his lover and shoved him back towards the room where Harry lay. When the potions master looked back, Lucius only smiled at him and slipped out into the hallway.

Severus gazed at the door his love had left through, expression bemused. After a moment, he
shook himself and turned away from the sitting room, slipping back into the room Harry lay in. He had to finish tending the boy’s wounds. He could think about the rest later.

Chapter End Notes

I was a bit worried that Lucius is being quite out of character, but then I thought, f*** it, this is fanfiction, I can do what I want. Shrug.
Harry was thirsty. He could ignore the hunger gnawing at his insides, he had practice with that, but the thirst was harder to push away. He came to awareness slowly, and it took an embarrassingly long time for him to realize he wasn’t on his bed in Dudley’s 2nd bedroom. It shouldn’t have, since the pillow under his head felt like it was stuffed with goose down, and the sheets he lay on were wonderfully silky against his skin, but then again, he had been beaten quite badly just a day or so before.

Except that he didn’t feel like he usually felt after Uncle Vernon came down on him. He frowned. He felt quite good, actually—except for the thirst, Merlin! He groaned softly.

“Yes, you are awake?”

“Professor Snape?!” His voice rasped in his throat, and he fell into a coughing fit. The professor sat on the edge of the bed he was in and held out a goblet of water, which Harry gratefully accepted. When he had drained it, he peered blearily at the man, who took the empty cup and handed him his glasses. Harry slipped them on and looked at his professor, who was frowning severely at him.

“When I arranged to pick you up after your birthday, I didn’t imagine I’d find you quite so near death as I did.”

Harry flushed, ducking his head and wrapping his arms around himself.

Severus sighed. “Why did you not contact me?” he asked.

“Can’t cast a patronus without a wand. They locked up all my magical things as soon as I got home. He said if I tried to get at them, he’d burn it all. And he was monitoring my mail. The Order told them I should write at least every 3 days, but he read the letters before I sent them.”

The professor shut his eyes. He ought to have considered they might escalate to such restrictions. “I should have realized. I apologize.”

Harry shrugged uncomfortably. Turning away, he inspected the room, which was richly, though tastefully appointed. “Where are we?” Harry asked.

“…Ah. The answer to that question is a complicated one, I’m afraid.” Severus stood and moved to a chair nearby. He studied the boy for a long moment, and pursed his lips. “Harry…I ask that you listen to what I have to say before you react.”

Harry immediately began to feel nervous, but he nodded for his professor to continue.

“There are a great many things you do not know about me, I’m sure. Among them is the fact that I
am bonded to another wizard. In fact, very few people know this about me. He was ahead of me at Hogwarts, and though he was friendly to me when we met, we were not close until my 16th birthday, when his magic compelled him to apparate to my side. Though I was still a student and he was not, we were able to meet on weekends and get to know each other, and eventually we fell in love. He was a Death Eater.” Severus closed his eyes briefly, spine stiffening. “For him, and because I loathed my abusive muggle father, I was persuaded to join the Dark Lord’s service as well. I was not as bloodthirsty as some of his other followers, but I nevertheless participated with only minor reservations, until the Dark Lord learned of the prophecy. I secretly defected the night he announced we would target your family.”

Harry tilted his head curiously, but remained silent. Severus looked at him for a long moment.

“Your mother was my best friend. My only friend before Hogwarts. If I had a sister, she could not be more dear to me than your mother. I begged the headmaster to protect her, and your family went into hiding. For my sins, I became a spy for the Order. My lover knew nothing of this, for I was unsure whether he would betray me to the Dark Lord. But then the Dark Lord attacked you and disappeared. I told myself that my lover need never know the truth. Even when I resumed spying last year, I was resolved never to tell him.” His mouth twisted wryly. “Your damnable luck is ever throwing a wrench in my plans.”

Harry snorted. “Mine, too, you know.”

“Oh, I know.” Severus waved his words away, smirk dropping from his face. “Yesterday, his magic was restless, and at midnight it compelled him to the side of another. We had never considered the possibility of a third person, a second bondmate—why would we? Yet when the pull began, he took my hand and we followed the magic of the bond. When we landed, I immediately recognized the house.” Harry shivered. He didn’t like where this story was going.

“If you can believe it, I panicked. I didn’t want to fight him, but I couldn’t let him come near you. He was stopped by the wards, but I rushed in, ready to whisk you away, and found you terribly wounded. So I carried you out to where I could apparate. I admit that I hoped he wouldn’t recognize you—I barely recognized you. The longer you were around him, however, the likelier that he would realize your identity. Nevertheless, your medical needs were most pressing, and so I brought you here, to our home.” Severus shook his head. “I should not have, but I didn’t know where else to take you. Where would you be safe that I would have the appropriate potion stores on hand to treat you?” He gestured to his surroundings. “This is my only home, and so here we came. Once I had seen to your wounds, I spoke with him. Well, threatened may be a more accurate description. In any case, I revealed to him my work as a spy, and he swore on his magic not to hurt you or betray you to the Dark Lord.”

Harry sat still, stunned. His professor was in a relationship with another wizard, a Death Eater? Harry himself was a potential bondmate of the same wizard? And they were in that Death Eater’s house? He clenched his hands in his lap. Just his bloody luck!

“Harry,” Severus said. The boy looked up at him. “Do you trust me?”

He thought about this. This was the man who had mocked him in class and stalked him in the halls for over 4 years, who had hated and mistreated him for his father’s sins. This was also the man who had taught him occlumency, who constantly saved his life, even back in first year, who had tried to save Sirius, even though he’d hated him, and even though Sirius had almost killed him back when they were students.

“Well, I reckon I do.”
“Then trust that I would never willingly leave you in a situation where you were in danger. Trust that I would die before I let Lucius hurt you. And believe me when I say that he will not betray your location to the Dark Lord.” He snorted to himself. “I know Luc, and I can tell you that not even for the Dark Lord’s vengeance would he give up his magic.”

Harry bit his lip. Could he trust that? He looked at his professor, who simply looked back at him. The man said he would die to protect him, and Harry reckoned he actually would. His voice had the ring of solemn promise to it. And, honestly, Professor Snape had the best track record of anyone he knew when it came to keeping him safe. It didn’t seem likely the man would stop now, even if he did love this other wizard.

“Yeah, alright, that’s fine, I guess,” Harry said with a sigh. He thought back over his professor’s words, and then his brain stuttered abruptly to a halt. “Wait, Lucius? As in Lucius bloody Malfoy?” Severus nodded at his horror-stricken expression. “My bloody luck!”

His professor chuckled, his laughter startling Harry from his outrage. He heard it so rarely, and it always transformed the man’s face, so that he looked almost handsome. Harry found himself smiling in response.

Still smiling, Severus responded. “Yes, well, there’s nothing to be done about it now. And remember, you do not have to accept the bond. You are here under his roof with his protection, but your relationship with him need never develop into what he and I have with each other. You will not be forced.”

Harry nodded. That did make him feel a bit better. His bladder began to make demands on his attention, and he glanced down at himself to see he was wearing a soft white nightshirt. “Uh, who changed me?” he asked.

“I did. I removed your trousers while treating you, and wasn’t sure if you had anything suitable in your trunk, so I dressed you in one of my own shirts.”

“Oh.” Harry’s face flamed, and he coughed to cover his embarrassment. “Toilet?” he asked.

The professor pointed at the appropriate door. “There. I shall call Luc to join us when you return.”

He wasn’t sure how he felt about that, but he had said he trusted Professor Snape, and he would have to see the other man some time, he supposed. Shrugging, he went to relieve himself, and when he got back, sought out his trunk. He dug through it for something he felt comfortable wearing in front of Lucius Malfoy, but soon gave it up as a bad job. Even the best of Dudley’s castoffs were embarrassingly outsized and unappealing. His other options were last year’s school uniform, or the dress robes he wore to the Yule Ball in 4th year, which he discovered crumpled at the bottom of his trunk. Grimacing, he noted that, even though he hadn’t grown much, they no longer fit him.

He trudged over to the bed and sat on the edge, picking at the sleeve of Professor Snape’s nightshirt. The man looked up from a journal he’d been scribbling in, and raised an eyebrow. “I thought you were going to change?”

“I, uh, I don’t really have anything appropriate to wear,” Harry said.

“Very well.” Severus snapped his journal shut and waved his hand. A moment later, the door opened, and a shirt and trousers floated to his hand. He shook nonexistent wrinkles out of them,
and as they fluttered in his hands they resized. He handed them to Harry. “I shall step out.”

“Uh, thanks, sir.” The man waved his words off and walked out, shutting the door. Harry slipped the nightshirt off and pulled the trousers on. They were still too big, and hung low on his hips. He padded to the mirror beside the wardrobe and looked at his torso. The professor had done a good job healing him—Harry didn’t look healthy, precisely, but he did look as though he were injured more than a week prior, and the bruising on his face was nearly gone. He twisted to look at his back, which was a mass of scabs over scars and bruising, but looked loads better than he was sure it had the night before. Someone (likely the professor) had repaired the cracks in Harry’s glasses, too.

A knock on the door startled him from contemplating his own body. “Uh, just a minute,” he called, throwing on the shirt and buttoning it hastily. He tucked the tails in as he walked towards the door. When he opened it, Lucius stood on the other side. The blond gestured at the sitting room in invitation before strolling over to settle on the sofa beside Severus.

The professor looked Harry over critically, and then cast a spell on the trousers, which suddenly fit much better. Then he tucked his wand away with a small smile. Harry took a seat across from them, glancing around to get his bearings. The room had a fireplace, with a semi-circle of chairs, a sofa, and a tea table arranged near it. Off to one side stood a small table and several chairs. Four doors led off the room. One led to the bedroom Harry was staying in, and one presumably led to the hallway and the rest of the house. The other two might be more bedrooms, he guessed. He turned to the sofa to find Lucius and Severus patiently waiting for him to finish looking around.

“Um, thanks for having me in your home, Mister Malfoy,” Harry offered, feeling deeply self-conscious. He resisted the urge to pick at his sleeve cuffs.

The blond man smiled at him. “Harry, given our potential relationship, it would not be at all improper for you to refer to me as Lucius.”

Harry blushed at the reminder about the bond. “Well, then, thanks, L-Lucius.”

“You’re quite welcome.” Lucius coughed delicately. “I know that we have not seen eye to eye in the past—” Severus snorted at this “—but I want you to know that I hope to put all of that behind us. For better or worse, you are my potential bondmate, and my Severus is devoted to your safety. I am no longer your enemy.”

Harry nodded. He was unsure what to say to that, so he said nothing.

After a minute of awkward silence, Lucius spoke again. “Well, it’s nearly time for lunch. My wife and son do not yet know of your presence here, I’m afraid, and you are still recovering. We three will eat lunch here, and then you can open your birthday presents, Harry. What would you like to eat?”

“I—I’m not sure I can eat, just now,” Harry said quietly.

“Can’t eat? Why on terra not?” Lucius looked him over with concern. Harry blushed—he knew he looked starved, but that was just it—he couldn’t eat now because he had been starved. He glanced at his professor desperately.

Severus eyed him with understanding. “When’s the last time you ate, Harry?”

“Uh, what’s today?” he asked.
“It’s your birthday.”

“Oh. Uh, Monday morning.”

Lucius spluttered. “You haven’t eaten in two days?!

“Well, yeah.” Harry shrugged. “Would have been longer, but I snuck some milk and toast on Monday.” He picked nervously at the fabric of his trousers. “That’s what the beating was for, actually. Aunt Petunia yelled at me for taking food out of her precious Dudder’s mouth, and then Uncle Vernon had a go at me when he got home from work.” His mouth twisted derisively, though his voice was quiet.

When he peeked up through his fringe, Severus only looked tired and resigned. It was Lucius’s reaction that was surprising: the pale man had gotten even paler, except for two bright spots of red high on his cheeks, and was clenching his fists.

“You mean to tell me,” he said in a high, tight voice, “that your relatives starved you, and then your uncle beat you nearly to death because you took some food?”

Harry shrugged again. “Well, that and sassing my aunt.” Severus raised an eyebrow. “When she accused me of taking food out of my cousin’s mouth, I told her someone ought to, since Dudley won’t do it himself.” His professor snorted, the corner of his mouth twitching in amusement. Harry grinned at him for a moment, then sobered. “Of course, I know better than to talk back to her, even if Uncle Vernon’s not around. I guess the food made me forget myself or something.”

Lucius made an incoherent sound of rage. Severus dropped a hand on his shoulder. “Lucius,” he said, forbiddingly.

“But did you hear—”

“I did,” his bondmate responded. “And neither of us can do a thing about it, at the moment.”

“But—”

“You would render his protection against the Dark Lord inactive?” Severus shook him lightly. “Think, Lucius.”

“I—but—oh, very well.” He crossed his arms and glared at the floor. Harry fought against a smile. Lucius looked rather like a petulant Draco just then. Severus threw Harry a long-suffering glance, and the boy smirked back at him.

“So, birthday presents?” Harry asked, hoping to turn the conversation back away from his relatives.

Severus shook his head. “I do want you to eat something, Harry.” He opened his mouth, but the man cut him off. “Something light. Bread and broth?”

Harry shut his mouth, nodding reluctantly. “Okay, sir, I’ll try.”

His professor smiled. “Very good. And, under the circumstances, you probably ought to call me Severus,” he said. “But not in class.” His eyes narrowed.
“Yeah, alright.” Harry chuckled.

The man sniffed dismissively, though it was mostly for show, and turned away. “Mimi,” he called. A house elf in a neat pillow case appeared, bowing. “Lucius and I will be eating lunch here. Bring us servings of whatever Narcissa has ordered for the meal, and a serving of bread and beef broth for Harry.” The house elf bowed again, and disappeared.

Right, house elves. He’d have to get used to that again. Harry shifted uncomfortably, but before he could think about it much further, their food popped into being on the dining table. The three of them moved over to eat, Harry again seated across from the two men. Severus and Lucius talked over an experiment the potions master was working on. Harry wasn’t really paying attention, too focused on keeping his food down. His stomach was roiling, and he eventually set down his spoon and pushed the bowl away. He couldn’t eat anymore.

Severus noticed, of course, but he didn’t comment, merely continued eating. Now Lucius was telling a story about the Wizengamot, some inquiry to do with regulating cauldron production, that got entirely out of hand. It had apparently ended with three people needing calming draughts, someone having to be turned back from a porcupine, and a desk transformed into a goat that ate Dumbledore’s hat. Severus was smirking and adding cutting little remarks about the people being mentioned, making Lucius laugh.

It was odd watching them together, Harry thought. He’d never considered any of his professors in a relationship, and here he was seeing the evidence of Prof—Severus’s relationship with Mist—Lucius. It wasn’t at all what he would have expected if he’d thought about it. He’d seen some of the softer side of his professor in the last couple months of term, but Lucius had been cold and unpleasant during the handful of times Harry had been around him. Severus was proof that looks could be deceiving, of course, but their playful interactions just seemed deeply incongruous to him.

Perhaps it was being with his bondmate, or having time to experiment and brew potions, but here in Malfoy Manor the potions master looked younger. Freer, somehow. He rather liked this side of the man, Harry decided. And it was nice to see a different version of Lucius Malfoy, as well. He could admit that his view of the man was skewed. In his head, Lucius was almost cartoonishly villainous, and no one was so simple as that, not even Voldemort.

Oh, Harry feared and resented the Dark Lord, he did—but he also understood him to a certain extent. When he’d seen Tom Riddle’s memory of “discovering” Hagrid’s pet acromantula back in second year, he’d recognized that desperation not to leave the school. Harry had also asked his headmaster if he could stay at Hogwarts over the summer, and he had also been refused. If he’d been a different sort of person, he could even see himself becoming twisted by his upbringing, the way the Dark Lord obviously had been.

Severus was another example—from things he’d said, it seemed the man had grown up in a similar situation, and it had led him to take the Dark Mark. He’d turned spy for the love of a friend, but he might not have even been in that position if his childhood hadn’t been what it was. After all, Severus was a halfblood, like Harry, like Tom, even. If the only muggles you knew hated you and your magic, it was easy to hate them back, to hate them all. What might Harry have been, in another life?

Harry was shaken from his musings by the table clearing in front of him. Severus and Lucius had finished eating and were standing to return to the seating around the fireplace. Harry followed them as Lucius summoned Harry’s presents and spread them across the tea table. Severus reached into his pocket, drew out a box which resized in his hands, and placed it on the table beside the
rest. Both men looked at Harry expectantly, and he tried not to fidget under their eyes, still half caught up in his thoughts.

His eyes scanned over the pile of gifts. “I normally do this by myself at midnight,” he said hesitantly. “I’m not used to anyone else seeing.”

“Would you prefer that we go?” Severus asked.

Harry considered this, then shook his head. “It’s alright, you can stay. I’m just not used to it, is all.”

He looked uncertainly at the pile. His hands fluttered above a couple of packages, and then he plucked out what was almost definitely Hermione’s present—she always sent him some book or another. He was right, of course: in fact, she’d sent him several books. There was one on the history of dueling, a practical manual on dueling tactics, and one on ritual items that could be primed for use on a battlefield. She’d also included a separate packet containing sugar-free sweets and muggle snack foods.

Mrs Weasley sent a cake and a selection of homemade snacks, which made Harry beam. Ron sent him sweets and a couple of pranks. The twins also sent some sweets, but many more pranks, which Severus looked as though he badly wanted to confiscate. Harry smirked a little at him, turning back to the dwindling pile of packages.

Neville had got him a small knife and a volume about methods of harvesting various plants to increase their potency in potions. Luna had sent him a copy of the *Quibbler*, a strangely carved radish, and a whistle, for some reason. Hagrid’s gift included rock cakes, which Harry eyed with some consternation, and a rather nice little leather-covered journal, small enough to be carried in his pocket. A couple other folks he knew from Hogwarts had sent him cards and sweets. He beamed at the pile of gifts in front of him. He had good friends, even if they were sometimes a bit weird. He had no idea what the radish thing was meant to be, or what the whistle was for—he’d have to read Luna’s note to figure it out, but he didn’t want to do it right now, with the two men still watching him.

Finally, he pulled the gift from Severus closer to him. He glanced curiously up at the man, whose face was oddly blank, as though he wasn’t sure how Harry might react to whatever was inside. It was a small chest, sturdily constructed, with leather stretched across each side and stamped with celtic knotwork. Harry unlatched it, and stared in confusion at two stacks of leather-bound notebooks. He picked up one off the top, and noticed that each had a roman numeral stamped on the cover.

When he opened the cover, he almost dropped the book. On the inside, in green ink, a neat hand had written *Property of Lily Evans.* Harry reached in and opened the covers of the books at the top of each stack. Both had the same written inside. He flipped through the book he held and found pages of small, neat writing, occasionally broken by diagrams or drawings. He swallowed and looked up at Severus again.

“Your mother always kept a journal. She wrote about her thoughts and feelings, but also spells she crafted and potions experiments she conducted. She was something of a prodigy, your mother, and before I—” The man cut himself off, swallowing convulsively. “We used to experiment together. When she died, I stole into the home before everything could be removed to the vaults. I knew where she would keep such things hidden, and I selfishly took all that I found. There are 29 of them in there. To read them is to know as much of Lily as anyone has ever known—perhaps even more. Even I did not know her so well before I read them, and we were very close friends
from ages 7 to 15. You have expressed to me before that you wish to know more about her…”

“I—sir, Severus—thank you.” Harry’s throat was tight, like he might cry. He hugged the book to his chest.

“Thanks are not necessary, Harry. I have my memories of your mother, and while I have treasured these, it is time you had them. By rights, they are yours.” Severus looked uncomfortable, and his voice was thick.

They sat there in silence for a long time, until Harry sighed and placed the notebook in his hand reverently back in the chest, which he shut and latched. He would read the notebooks later, when he could be alone with them. He knew he would probably cry when he read them, and he didn’t want to do that in front of them. He swallowed and smiled.

“Cake?” he offered. Severus huffed out a little laugh, and conjured forks, plates, and a knife. Harry cut a piece for each of them (his own noticeably smaller than either of theirs), and they ate in comfortable silence.

“Do your friends normally send you so much food?” Lucius asked.

“Yeah. They don’t know all of it, not really, but they know my relatives don’t like to feed me a lot. It’s nice, you know. No matter how awful the Dursleys treated me, I knew there were people out there who cared about me, wanted me to be happy and healthy and all. Mrs Weasley usually sends a cake along, and Hermione sends me healthier snacks and such.” He shrugged. “I could hide them under the loose floorboard in my room and ration them out to last the rest of the summer, if I was careful about it…”

When Harry looked up, Severus’s face was blank, but his hand was wrapped once more around Lucius’s shoulder. The blond man was glowering into the fireplace, his hand twitching towards his wand. Severus leaned over to whisper in his bondmate’s ear. Lucius whipped his head around to argue with him, but Severus kept going until the blond gave a single furious nod. When Severus released him, Lucius stood abruptly, startling Harry. The man took a moment to visibly rein himself in, and said in a strange voice, “Happy birthday, Harry. If you’ll excuse me?” Harry nodded, eyes wide, and the man swept out of the room without another word.

“He’ll be off blowing up training golems for a while, I imagine,” Severus said. “Why don’t I help you move all of this into your room?”

“Uh, sure, thanks,” Harry said. Severus levitated the lot and floated everything into Harry’s room, settling the whole pile on top of the desk for him to sort through later. “You know, I’ve never had anyone get so mad over me before,” Harry said, once this was done.

“Have you told anyone this much about your relatives before?” The man asked mildly.

“I guess not. Well, I’ve told you some, but you’ve never got like that about it.”

“Not that you have seen, at least.” Harry blinked at him, eyebrows rising, and Severus sighed. “I am better at controlling my anger, when I choose. I have enough familiarity with abuse that it is not so shocking to me. It is unfathomable to Lucius that a child’s guardians might do to them what was done to you.”

Harry looked skeptical. “But he’s a death eater.”
“It’s not a rational response, it’s an emotional one. And you’ll notice that—with a handful of notable exceptions—” he glanced meaningfully at Harry’s scar “—the Dark Lord does not target children. That is not to say children do not come to harm as a result of his actions, but that is not generally his purpose. And there is another reason for Lucius’s anger. Harry, you and I are human, but Lucius is not entirely, and he feels the bond more strongly as a result. His instincts are pushing him to eliminate the danger to one of his mates, to protect you. It’s very hard for him to ignore that.”

“That, uh, that makes sense. Do you think—Should I not tell him any more about them?”

“That is for you to decide. You are free to tell him—or myself—as much or as little as you choose. Remember, however, that he did see you before I healed you last night, so I suspect he has a reasonable idea about some of it already.”

“I dunno about that, sir—Severus, I mean.” Harry shrugged. “They’ve had me for 14 years. A lot can happen in that time. Actually, I guess you know pretty much all of it, ‘cause of that time in the hospital wing last term. Which, I meant to ask, how does that work, the scan?”

“The comprehensive medical scan? It reads your magic. It can only detect physical damage, however. When you are physically injured, your magic doesn’t automatically heal you, but it does respond, and because it responds, it leaves an impression on your magical core, like a record. The scan reads those records.”

“That makes sense; thanks for explaining.”

“Do you have more questions for me? About the bond, anything else?”

Harry shook his head. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Then I shall take my leave. I have potions to brew. Please stay within this suite, and if you need me or Lucius, you may summon Mimi to fetch us.” With that, he left.

Harry drifted over to the desk. Caressing the chest full of his mother’s notebooks, Harry reluctantly drew away, picking up the notes and letters he had set aside. Carrying the stack over to his bed, he settled in to read.
“Let me see if I understand this: after discovering him to be your second bondmate, you and your lover rescued him from some unmentionable danger, brought him here, healed him, and are now harboring Harry Potter, sworn enemy of the Dark Lord, in our home? Correct? And you failed to inform me of this before tonight for what reason precisely?” Narcissa Malfoy smiled politely at the two men before her, who were watching her with the same uneasy expressions she imagined a shark’s prey might wear, had it the intelligence to do so.

“Now, Cissy, Harry has been recovering from extensive injuries he suffered before his birthday. We didn’t want to overwhelm him.” Lucius gulped as she turned the full force of her gaze upon him.

“And if the Dark Lord or another of his servants had arrived in our parlor without warning, I would not have known to lodge them in a different part of the house than your young man. I would not be prepared to utilize the right forms of misdirection to prevent him finding and slaughtering young Harry. I would not know to offer the appropriate excuses and usher off another of his servants. I might have unwittingly placed Harry right in his hands.” Lucius blanched. Narcissa’s smile fell away, and she spoke in an icy voice. “It is not only your necks on the line, boys, and I will remind you that my son lives in this house as well.”

Severus bowed his head, looking appropriately abashed. “My apologies, Narcissa—you are entirely correct, we ought to have brought you in sooner.”

Her sharp eyes studied him for a moment and then she waved his words away, turning to refresh her teacup. When she looked away from them, the two men sagged in relief. “Yes, well, it’s done now. What are your plans for the boy, now you have him here?”

Lucius and Severus exchanged a look. “Ah, if you had any suggestions, perhaps?” Lucius offered.

His wife rolled her eyes. “Honestly, you boys are ridiculous! I do realize this was an unforeseen turn of events, but you must have considered where to go from here?” She dismissed them with a cutting glance. “Perhaps not, then. Very well. We must decide on a story to explain Harry’s presence. Draco will get curious, and we should be prepared with excuses for the presence of a guest here. The boy will need an identity for leaving the house, which we’ll also need to have a story for, and the house elves should know to send his meals to his room. He’ll have to eat there until we decide what Draco ought to be told.” She absently tapped a nail on her teacup as she thought.

“A long lost cousin on the Black side, I think,” she said, at last. “We can come up with some explanation about losing track of him during the war, and just being reunited. His parents died in the fighting, and he was raised by a distant cousin of mine, a squib, who recently passed away. Being young and alone, he decided to reconnect with his family, and wrote to us. We were surprised to hear from him, but are quite pleased to welcome him back into the fold, etc.” She pursed her lips. “He’ll need instruction in pureblood manners and genealogical history. Draco will have to know the truth of his identity at some point, but perhaps we can delay that for a while, so that the boy may settle in.”

“Harry has been badly treated by his guardians, Cissy,” Severus said. “I’ve begun him on a potions regimen to correct what I can. He had several potions to address prior damage some
months back, but the past month has badly taxed his body and magic. He’ll be struggling to eat enough for some time, and I’ll be supplementing his nutrition until he’s sufficiently recovered.

He’s always been resilient, but do be careful with him, regardless. His burdens are many, and he’s still mourning the loss of his godfather.”

Narcissa frowned at his words, but only nodded in response. They sat in silence, and she studied the two men in front of her. They both looked oddly vulnerable, which was uncharacteristic of Severus, at least. Lucius always had a greater difficulty with concealing his emotions, but Severus usually had iron control. It was obvious, however, that he cared for the boy, and that the bond was already forming between the three of them. Clearly, there was no turning back now.

She set her cup and saucer down, folding her hands in her lap. “I will make the necessary arrangements to put his cover story in place.” It was a dismissal, but she softened it with a gentle smile for her husband and his first bondmate. “Congratulations, Luc, Sev.”

They inclined their heads in acceptance, standing almost as one. Severus bowed over her hand, Lucius pecked her on the cheek, and the two men withdrew, leaving her to her planning. She picked her tea back up, and let her mind run through the complexities she must resolve. There was much to be done.

The next morning, Narcissa turned up in Harry’s room after breakfast, and proceeded to rearrange just about everything, smiling all the while. “This is your room, after all, Harry. You should feel quite at home here.”

She examined him for a moment in silence, and then waved her wand, changing the color scheme of the room from its original crimson and grey to a rich blue and soothing cream, which she claimed suited him better. She told him to call her Cissy, and casually questioned him about his schooling as she sorted and situated his things into the most aesthetically pleasing arrangement.

He didn’t mind either way, honestly—it was the nicest bedroom he’d ever had before. His old room at the Dursley’s would easily have fit into the bathroom attached to the room he was staying in now. Still, the blue and cream coloring was rather nice, and he did like the newly darkened wood of the desk, chair, mantlepiece, and bedstead. Across from the door that led out into the sitting room, she transformed a pair of windows into a set of french doors that let out onto a small terrace. Another pair of windows became a little reading nook that overlooked the gardens on that side of the house.

“There, now—that’s better,” she said, beaming. Harry blinked owlishly at her. She turned to his trunk, and had it open before he could think to protest. She sent the books to the bookshelf beside his desk, where they lined themselves up neatly by subject. She banished crumpled parchment, broken quills, and chocolate frog wrappers, and began to pull out and sort through his clothes. Harry felt his cheeks burning as she tutted over her findings.

“Oh, you haven’t a thing to wear. No wonder you’ve been wearing Severus’s things. No, it’s not your fault, you clearly haven’t had the necessary feminine presence to arrange such details.” Within minutes, she had incinerated every scrap of clothing Harry had brought from the Dursleys. She also confiscated every one of his uniform robes that no longer fit and deposited them, along with his second-hand dress robes from the Yule Ball, into a basket for the charity shops. The woman was a whirlwind, and Harry half hoped that Severus or Lucius might come along to rescue him.

“Now,” she said, “you’ll need a new set of dress robes, I should think, trousers and shirts, new shoes, certainly, socks and underthings, and perhaps…seven robes for everyday wear.”
“Er, Lady Malfoy, do I really need all that?”

“Well, it’s a good start. And it’s Cissy, dear, remember.”

‘A good start?’ he mouthed incredulously at her back. Merlin, what had he gotten himself into?

“We’ll get your winterwear at the end of summer, with your school robes, so it’ll be the right size when you need it.” He twitched when she suddenly rounded on him.

“Uh, well, I don’t usually grow much,” he offered.

“Oh, you will, I’m sure. Severus assures me that he has already begun a potion regimen to correct the deficiencies arising from your previous…situation. If anyone knows his potions, it’s Severus, and he’ll soon have you sorted.” She beamed at him. “Now, I haven’t had a good project in a while, and Lucius owes me, so we’re going shopping today, you and I, which means you’ll need a disguise.”

She waved her wand, producing a heavy ring, which she offered him. Harry slipped it onto his left index finger, finding that it automatically resized itself to fit his hand, and as it did he felt magic wash over his features. Glancing in the mirror, he noted that he did not look at all like himself, with dark brown eyes and wavy dark brown hair falling around a pleasant but nondescript face. He was a great deal paler than usual—he tanned up a lot every summer—and he still probably looked too thin, but perhaps not quite so unhealthy. And a touch older; if he had to guess, he would say that the person in the mirror was about 20. He turned back to Narcissa and nodded at her. Looking pleased, she took his arm and led him from the room and into the rest of the house. Harry was sure that he’d get lost on his own—the manor was huge, and they passed loads of doors on their way to the main foyer.

“Lucius, I’m taking your young man out for the day!” Narcissa called out just before they reached the stairs. “We’ll be back before supper!” She did not slow down.

“Cissy, wha—” The blond man stuck his head out of his office, but was far too late to intervene. Harry smiled halfheartedly at the man as he was propelled swiftly down the stairs to a rather formal sitting room, near the front of the house. There, Narcissa tucked him into her side with only the barest pause, and flooed him to an unusually empty Leaky Cauldron. She came out gracefully, and her guiding hand on his arm also kept him from falling—apparently the trick was to walk out of the floor at the end, using the forward momentum of the travel to propel you easily forward and out of the way. Which sounded easy, but Harry was sure he’d fall on his face the next time he flooed alone, even knowing how to do it properly.

“Now, Cousin Corvus,” Narcissa said to him, “I know you’ve been out of society for a time, so I’d like to give you the pureblood education you ought to have had.” She looked at him expectantly, and he nodded.

“Yes, of course Lady—that is, yes, Cissy.”

“Excellent. I’ve ordered a selection of books for you, and we’ll get those while we’re in the Alley today. I want to get you a second wand, and a holster, as well. And clothes, of course. Is there anything else you need while we’re in the area, dear?”

“I don’t think so.”
“Let me know if you think of something. For now, off to Twilfitt and Tatting.” He let her usher him along to the shop, which he had never been into before. It seemed to offer rather more upscale robes than Madam Malkin’s, but also included a variety of other garments, including cardigans, waistcoats, shirts, and trousers. Once the shop attendant understood the visit was to outfit him, a measuring tape flitted about Harry, and then items flew off racks and swooped towards him, lining themselves up with his body one after the other. Narcissa made most of the decisions, chatting with the attendant about colors and cuts for a dizzying array of items.

Harry drifted around the shop, peering at various items and waiting for Narcissa to finish. It seemed odd to him that no one came in while they shopped, but the Alley had been rather more deserted than he’d expected it to be on a Sunday in August. Of course he was usually there after school lists had gone out, and all the Hogwarts students were shopping for the year. He wondered when their letters might go out—they usually came around his birthday, so it should be soon. While he was thinking, he was running his hands over the clothes, which were nicer than anything he’d ever owned. Many were in silks, cashmeres, velvets, and he loved the texture of them against his skin.

Despite Narcissa’s seeming inattention, she was watching him, and when he paid particular attention to an item, it made its way to her for inspection and approval. As he lingered over a grey cardigan in the softest wool he’d ever encountered in his life, it floated off the rack and onto the pile of things she had chosen for him. He turned to stare at the small mountain of items that she had chosen, shaking his head. He’d never owned half this much clothing in his life.

When their selections were totaled up, he balked at the price, but Narcissa calmly authorized a bank charge and accepted their shrunken packages from the attendant. “Corvus, dear, if it makes you feel better about it, this is your bondmate’s money. He should take care of you—Salazar knows he can afford to. And you certainly deserve to be taken care of, darling.” She patted his cheek and then folded her arm around his once more and swept him off to Mucks and Moore for toiletries, which she had decided he needed help purchasing. He wasn’t even sure what everything she bought was for, but wisely chose not to protest. Flourish and Blotts followed, where Harry wandered for half an hour, eventually choosing a couple of supplementary defense texts along with a book on healing magics.

“Lunch, now,” Narcissa said, once she’d paid for the books. She led him down the alley and turned in at a little restaurant he’d never really noticed before. It was quite chic, though he wasn’t as uncomfortable as he expected to be. She ordered for them both, and Harry was relieved to see she’d gotten him a small salad and a bowl of soup.

The two of them spoke little during their meal, but Harry didn’t find the silence uncomfortable. Though he was sure she could be intimidating, she had been solicitous about his comfort the whole outing. It was nice, too, to be out in public and not be recognized, to just be an ordinary young man to whom no one paid any particular interest. Beside Narcissa, he probably looked quite plain and boring. He smiled to himself at the thought—it rather suited him to be visible but unremarkable.

She raised an eyebrow, silently enquiring. He chuckled. “Just thinking how nice it is to be out in public without people bothering about me. In the magical world, anyway. People always think they know all about me from reading books or what’s in the paper.” He shrugged. “Makes it hard to just go about my business when strangers are always stopping me to shake my arm out of its socket or tell me off or whatever.”

She pursed her lips. “Some people have no manners,” she muttered tartly, and Harry laughed again. Narcissa gave him a sly grin, and returned to her food.
Once they had eaten, she drew him down the way to Ollivander’s for a second wand. When they walked in the door, the wandmaker stared intently at Harry for a long minute. Harry got the impression the man hadn’t been fooled by the disguise at all, but Ollivander didn’t say anything about it, just began passing him wands to try. It seemed to take even longer than the first time he’d bought one, but Narcissa watched patiently as the man kept bringing him wand after wand, until finally he waved one and it shot out brilliant golden beams of light. Holding it, Harry felt strange—larger almost, like he existed beyond the bounds of his own skin, like he could feel the currents of magic flowing in the air around him. The feeling faded after a minute or two, and he looked up to see Ollivander examining him, face inscrutable.

“I never thought I’d sell that one,” said the wandmaker. “It was made before I devoted myself to working only with supreme cores. Frankly, there aren’t many who do well with blackthorn, and I find the horned serpent horn really does require some affinity for snakes. How curious…14 inches, and quite rigid, too, so very unlike—but then, you’ve always been meant for great things, yes…” Harry shifted uncomfortably. He glanced uncertainly at Narcissa, but she wasn’t looking at him—her narrow gaze was fixed on the old man.

Ollivander seemed to come back to himself, shaking his head. “Well, as this is your second wand, that will be 25 galleons.”

“We’ll need two holsters, as well,” Narcissa said, indicating the ones she wanted—erumpent hide, to protect against tampering. One holster strapped onto his forearm, and she showed him how to send out a tiny pulse of his magic to release the mechanism securing the wand in place. Once released, he could flick the wand down and into his hand. Since he was in disguise, they put his new wand in the forearm holster.

The other holster was for his secondary wand; it strapped to his calf and would be concealed by his robes. It felt odd to have his faithful holly wand in the place of a backup, but he knew it was too recognizable to use in public. His new wand seemed almost to be humming with energy where it lay across his skin, and he ran his fingers absently along it as Narcissa paid. Then they were off, bidding Ollivander a good day and stepping back out into the sunny afternoon.

“One more stop, I think,” Narcissa said, leading him towards Gringotts. Harry’s eyebrows rose. So far, Narcissa had paid for all of their purchases with bank authorization slips. He wasn’t sure why this would be their last stop—if they were done for the day, why go to the bank? But he let himself be led up the steps without question. He gave a little half-bow to the goblin standing outside the doors as he passed, and then to the goblins just inside the doors. He thought each of them looked startled at his courtesy, but Narcissa continued to lead him inwards, so he couldn’t be sure.

He and Narcissa stepped up to an empty spot at the counter, and she greeted the goblin seated there, laying a small golden key on the counter. “Blessings of the day. I need to speak with Magrin regarding the Malfoy accounts.”

The goblin inspected her key suspiciously for a moment, then snapped out several words in Gobbledygook to another goblin nearby. The other goblin disappeared through a door, and the one behind the counter turned back to them, passing the key back to Narcissa. “You may have a seat over there, and an escort will come for you.” He pointed to the right, where several wingback chairs huddled before a fireplace.

Narcissa smiled at the goblin. “Many thanks.” She gave a slight bow, which Harry copied, and then walked to the leather chairs the goblin had indicated.
“Now, Corvus, the properly legal term for you in relation to Lucius is consort. As his consort, you are entitled to housing, food, and an allowance. While we are here, we shall be establishing a vault for you in your capacity as consort, and a monthly allowance of 300 galleons. You shall have sole access to this vault, and he will be unable to touch it. Should you ever dissolve your relationship with him, the vault will go with you, and he will not be entitled to ask for a knut of it back.”

Harry opened his mouth to object, and then closed it again at the bland look she was giving him. She smiled and continued. “Should you require more than is in your vault, you may ask Lucius, and he may choose to give you more, or not. Of course, as I said, he is obligated to provide for your necessities—clothes, food, shelter, and so on. You have rights he is legally bound to honor, but his instincts will also push him to desire your health and happiness. It’s a singular thing, the mate bond.” She smiled almost wistfully. “I have seen these past 20 years the way he cherishes Severus. It’s beautiful to observe them together.”

Harry wasn’t sure how to ask the question on his mind. “Are you—do you ever get…”

“What?” She asked. He nodded, a little surprised when she immediately shook her head. “I was raised knowing that my marriage would be an arranged one. My parents would choose an appropriate pureblood man for me, one which would bring our family the right connections in society, and I would marry him and produce an heir. It was never about romance for me. We had been married for almost four years when he discovered Severus was his mate, and Sev has been living with us ever since. In fact, I owe my Dragon’s existence to him—we struggled to conceive, and it was only his assistance with potions that prevented me from another dangerous miscarriage.”

“It doesn’t seem fair, though,” Harry said. “He’s got Severus, and maybe me too, now. What about you?”

She chuckled. “Well, this may come as a shock to you, but I have his written permission to seek lovers. I haven’t taken advantage of it much over the years, but it exists nevertheless.” Harry knew he was blushing again, but he was saved from having to make a reply by the arrival of a goblin who gestured sharply for them to follow. He stood and offered Narcissa his hand, and when she stood and took his arm they followed the goblin, who led them to a hallway opposite the one used to access the vaults.

The walls were marble, like the exterior of the building, and the many doors they passed were dark wood, each with a small brass plate stamped with the name of the goblin whose office it was. They walked for a surprisingly long time, turning several corners, until the finally reached a door that said ‘Magrin ag Threngar’ on its brass plate. The goblin knocked and opened the door, stepping back and gesturing for them to enter.

“Lady Malfoy,” said the goblin seated behind the desk. He gestured for Narcissa and Harry to sit down.

“Magrin. May good fortune cling to you and misfortune to your enemies,” Narcissa said.

“May the misfortune of your enemies bring you profit,” the goblin replied. “What business may I assist you with today?”

“I am here to open a new vault in the name of Harry Potter. It has recently been discovered that he is my husband’s bondmate. He needs a consort’s vault. The same arrangement as Severus Snape’s.”
“Very well.” The goblin produced a crystal and spoke raspily to it in the guttural language of the goblins. Then he placed the crystal into a shallow depression on the side of the desk, and it vanished. He looked back at them. “We shall have your new key momentarily. Is there anything else?”

“Yes, we shall also require a genealogy and an inheritance test.” Harry glanced over at Narcissa, who simply smiled placidly at him.

Magrin produced a bowl, snapping his fingers to fill it with some potion. A knife appeared before Harry. “Three drops of blood, if you please, Lord Potter.”

Harry frowned. “How did you—” The goblin just stared at him expectantly, so Harry picked up the knife and sliced the tip of one finger, allowing three drops to fall into the crimson potion.

When he pulled his hand away, Narcissa healed him. “Goblins can see through glamors, dear,” she murmured.

“Oh,” he said.

Magrin lay a blank parchment on the desk and then waved a hand towards the bowl. The potion lifted out and poured onto the parchment, being absorbed by the thick sheet. As soon as the bowl was empty, black lines began to spread across the parchment. Soon, Harry could see they formed a family tree going back three dozen generations. His mother’s side was a lot sparser than his father’s—it didn’t seem to fill in the names of muggles, but he was surprised to see a handful of squibs spread across her side of the tree.

On his dad’s side, he found that quite a few of the same last names cropped up repeatedly. He was related to just about every pureblood family he’d ever heard of, it seemed, but especially the Blacks. He was related to a couple of Prewetts, too, so Ron was a distant cousin of his, which was nice to know. He had a great-aunt some ways back with the maiden name Dumbledore, even. Apparently the Potters were just about as pureblooded and in-bred as the Malfoys—before his mum, anyway. Harry wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

“I’d like a copy of this in the main vault and one in Harry’s consort vault. Do you want one for the main Potter vault?”

Harry sat back reluctantly, nodding. “That’d be brilliant, thanks.”

“We’ll take a copy with us, of course, for your lessons. And the inheritance test?” The parchment rolled itself up and floated to Narcissa, who tucked it away somewhere.

Magrin snapped, and another potion filled the bowl, this one a shimmery silver. “One drop of blood, this time, Lord Potter.” Harry cut his finger once more, and let a drop fall into the potion. Another blank parchment was laid out on the desk, and the goblin directed the potion to pour onto it. Once again, black letters crawled across the surface. Harry leaned forward to read, his eye immediately catching on a line near the top.

“Hang on, Sirius?! What—” He turned to Narcissa, who was smiling smugly.

“It’s as I suspected. Sirius left the Black title and family holdings to you.”

“But how?” Harry asked.
“Blood adoption. That’s why he’s listed below James as your father. It’s passed through the male line, and since neither he nor Reggie had natural children before they died, it would have passed to Draco next—which it seems Sirius would rather have avoided. When it became clear Draco was no longer next to inherit, I wondered how he might have circumvented the rules of the entail. I was not close with him, but I knew my cousin was your godfather, and so I thought he might have desired to leave the estate to you.”

Harry turned back to the parchment. “So, I’ll be Lord Black? What about all the rest of these?” Below his parents’s names was a list of titles, followed by a long list of vaults and properties.

Magrin spoke. “When the last of a family dies, they may will the family holdings to a non-relative. If they do not, their estate is dissolved, and the assets revert to the Ministry.”

“All these people left stuff to me? Why?” Harry whispered.

“Many people lost much in the last war. However inadvertent it may have been, you ended that.”


“We’ll need copies of this kept with the genealogy, please.” The goblin nodded, and the parchment rolled itself up like the last one, and floated to Narcissa, disappearing into her robes.

Magrin slid something across the desk. “Your key, Lord Potter.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, picking it up and slipping it into his pocket.

“And the contract,” the goblin said. A thin sheet of parchment appeared in front of Harry, and he leaned forward to read it over. He quickly realized it was rather beyond him—between the legal language and the interest calculations, he was entirely out of his depth. He glanced at Lady Malfoy, who was reading it over beside him.

She nodded in satisfaction. “That seems to be in order. Tap your wand-tip beside the seal at the bottom to sign it, Harry.” He drew his wand and did as she said, and his name appeared there: ‘Harrison James Potter, Lord Potter, Lord Black.’ The seal flashed crimson, and the parchment rolled itself up and disappeared.

“Very good,” said Magrin. “Is there anything else?”

“That is all for today, thank you,” said Narcissa, standing. “May the day bring you profit.”

“And you as well.”

Harry hurried to stand and bow to Magrin, offering Narcissa his arm and walking with her out of the office. In the hallway, a goblin materialized beside them, and they followed him back out of the maze of dark corridors. He disappeared as soon as they had reached the lobby, and the two of them swept over to the doors. Harry bowed to the goblins at the doors once more, and they returned his bow, eyes gleaming with interest.

“You behaved very well in there, Corvus,” Narcissa said once they were out on the street, patting his arm. “You did well looking to me for assistance when you were unsure. Remember, it is perfectly alright to look for help to those who know better than you, so long as you also trust your instincts.”
“Why do so many people treat the goblins terribly?” Harry asked. “I haven’t seen anyone else bow to them or greet them respectfully before, and the ones standing at the doors seem surprised when I do it.”

“Because they are fools,” Narcissa replied, distaste in her voice. “It is always good to behave respectfully towards those who hold the means to destroy you. Since the treaties following the last Goblin War, we have slowly but surely turned over our entire financial system to them. If they decided one day to ruin us all, they very well could.”

Harry shivered, imagining the chaos that would result. “Do you think they will?”

“Someday, perhaps. It is not in their nature to accept insult without retribution—but the Goblin Nation is both patient and canny. They will move when it benefits them most, and not a moment sooner. It is good, for your sake, that they do not care about human conflicts, for they will side with neither the ministry nor the Dark Lord.”

Harry thought about that for a moment. He’d never considered the goblins joining the war, and he was rather glad that it seemed they would not. Since they were on the subject, he decided to ask another question that had been bothering him. “Where are the female goblins? I’ve never seen one, I think.”

Narcissa chuckled. “You wouldn’t have, no. They do not work in the bank. It is very uncommon for wizard-kind to see them, for they are fiercely protected; goblins are matriarchal, and so it is only the males who must do this kind of work. There is a certain prestige to working in the bank, of course, as they make commissions on the services they provide, and positions are given only to those who can hold their temper in the face of discourtesy, but female goblins do not work with humans. Actually, many of them are spellcrafters and artisans.”

“Oh, that’s good to know,” Harry said.

“Indeed, one must know these sorts of things. It is good that you are asking such questions.” They walked leisurely down the street, which was less heavily trafficked, as the dinner hour approached. The Leaky Cauldron, though, was packed. They threaded their way through the tables to the fireplace. Narcissa placed two knuts on the mantelpiece, and a dish of floo powder appeared. She scooped out a small amount and tossed it into the fireplace, calling out “Malfoy Manor,” and tugging Harry with her as she stepped in. They were whisked away, and she shepherded him once more through a smooth arrival, beginning to laugh almost as soon as they had stopped moving.

Severus and Lucius sat beside each other on one of the sofas, several inches of space between them. They both seemed vaguely guilty, and were determinedly looking neither at each other nor at the pair that had just arrived. It was an utterly transparent attempt to appear nonchalant: Severus’s face was slightly flushed, while Lucius’s hair was mussed. The blond looked nothing less than thoroughly kissed, and the book he was pretending to read was upside down. Harry tilted his head to try and read the title, but it was too worn to make out from where he stood.

Narcissa arched a single brow delicately. “Here he is, then, returned safe and sound,” she said coolly. Lucius flushed at her words, but Severus seemed to gather himself then. Closing and setting aside his own book, he finally looked over at them.

“Did you enjoy your outing?” he asked.
Narcissa’s demeanor relaxed and she rolled her eyes. “Yes, we did, didn’t we?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “It was nice being in public without being recognized.” To be honest, Harry actually had enjoyed the whole day. It really had been nice to go unnoticed. He was still uncomfortable about how much money Narcissa had spent on him, but it wasn’t as though he could have stopped her, honestly. All the rest aside, it had got him out of his room in the manor, to which he’d been confined since he arrived. He never spent so much time indoors like this, not unless he was so badly injured the Dursleys didn’t want the neighbors seeing him. He’d been getting restless after just a few days of confinement, but now he had a ring that produced a glamor over his features, so maybe he could go flying or wander the grounds or something.

Severus nodded. “Good.” He turned back to Lucius, and plucked the book from his hands, looking unimpressed at the glare his mate sent him.

“Ah, yes, very good,” Lucius said, snatching at his book, which Severus was holding away from him. Harry fought down a laugh, which he was sure Lucius would not have appreciated, but Narcissa was far less careful of her husband’s pride.

She snorted. “Why don’t Harry and I go put away his things, and you two can go make yourselves presentable for dinner?”

Without waiting for a response, she swept out the door, Harry following behind her. As he shut the door, Harry heard Lucius indignantly squawk “Sev!” and Severus laugh in return.

Narcissa gave him a conspiratorial grin. “Those boys are ridiculous sometimes. I’d say this might teach them not to snog in front of the floo, but I don’t believe any such thing.” Harry snickered and followed her back to his room, trying to memorize the way.
Harry sipped his tea, reflecting on how differently this summer was turning out. He’d been living at Malfoy Manor for just over a week now, and it couldn’t be less like his time at the Dursley’s home—or even the times he’d stayed at the Burrow or the Order’s headquarters. For one thing, he was allowed to do magic! Harry grinned into his cup, remembering the conversation he’d had with Severus about it.

The morning after his trip to Diagon Alley with Narcissa, Harry had asked for some help shifting his desk closer to the terrace doors, and Severus had smirked in response. “You are now living in a wizarding household—there’s nothing to prevent you doing such charms yourself, as the trace will be unable to determine that you, and not an adult in your vicinity, have performed the magic in question.” He’d paused, raising an eyebrow. “I trust you shall not abuse the privilege, my little troublemaker?”

Harry had given him a falsely indignant look. “Hey, I don’t go looking for trouble, you know!” They had stared at each other for a long moment, Severus’s mouth twitching, and then they both began laughing.

Now that he knew Severus better, his sarcastic humor was more amusing than anything else. The two of them had grown closer in the last few months of term, but the relaxed environment of the man’s own home had facilitated an even closer relationship between them. Harry was rather grateful to have Severus there with him; he knew that he wouldn’t be adjusting to living in Malfoy Manor quite so calmly without his mentor’s help.

Harry glanced out the window and then cast *tempus*. It was actually just about dinner time, and he ought to check in with Severus and Lucius about whether he would be eating alone or not. The two men had tried to make sure at least one of them ate each meal with him, although he was no longer explicitly restricted to his rooms. Wearing the glamor ring Narcissa had given him, he had gone flying and been to get some books from the manor’s library, but he still stuck pretty close to his rooms; he wanted to avoid encountering Draco, who had been told only that he was a distant cousin visiting, and that he was not to be bothered. Luckily, the youngest Malfoy had thus far obeyed his parents, but Harry didn’t want to remind him of his presence, if he could avoid it.

Draining his teacup, he set it on the tray of tea things Mimi had brought him earlier. Marking his page, he put aside the book he’d been skimming—the one on ritual items that Hermione had given him—and went to see if Severus or Lucius were about. He found them sharing the sofa in the sitting room. Harry slipped over to one of the chairs nearby, absently pushing his hair out of his face—it was getting rather long, he mused. Perhaps he should ask Cissy about getting it cut.

He looked over at the other two, smiling at the comfortable picture they made. Lucius was holding hands with Severus, thumb gently rubbing across the back of his mate’s hand. Severus was reading a book propped on one knee, turning the pages with his free hand. Lucius had just turned to the side and was ordering their dinner from an elf.

Harry watched the courteous way he spoke to the elf, nothing abrupt or ominous about his manner. It stood in stark contrast to his treatment of Dobby back in Harry’s second year, and Harry frowned, thinking about the strange little elf. Dobby wasn’t like any other elf he’d met, not even the Malfoy elves he’d seen during his stay here. Mimi always looked healthy and clean,
nothing like Dobby had. Harry bit his lip. Maybe he should just ask about it.

Glancing up, he found Severus and Lucius both observing him. He froze; he hated people watching him.

Harry cleared his throat nervously. He should just ask. Yes, he would do that. “Uh, I was just remembering back in second year, and the whole thing with, that is, it turned out a house elf was trying to help me, only he kept getting me in trouble and hurting me, but I know he meant well…” Harry shook his head, he wasn’t making any sense. He cleared his throat again. “Sorry, uh, I was thinking about Dobby.”

“Dobby?” Lucius’s lip curled in disgust. “What does that good-for-nothing—” Harry cringed away from him, and Lucius instantly cut himself off, alarmed by how the boy curled in on himself, looking suddenly very young and very afraid. He looked as though he expected a blow at any minute.

“Harry?” Severus spoke softly. The boy jerked his head up to look at the man, eyes wide and face tight with fear. “What is happening in your head right now?”

“Uncle Vernon, he—if I don’t work fast enough…” Harry wrapped his arms round himself, eyes unfocused and distant. “Good-for-nothing freak, lazing about, have to earn my keep…” He drew his legs up onto his chair, and buried his head in his knees, eyes squeezed shut.

Severus and Lucius exchanged a look of consternation. This was the first time Lucius had seen anything like this, and Severus could tell that he was entirely out of his depth. After a moment, Severus rose and crossed carefully to Harry’s chair, crouching in front of him.

“Harry?” he asked. There was no response. “Harry? Can you look at me? Please?”

“It’s okay,” Harry said, voice muffled. “I’m okay. Just, suddenly, it was like Uncle Vernon was having a go at me. I’m okay.” He took a breath and slowly lowered his legs, arms still hugging his ribs. “I’m okay,” he repeated, more as a reassurance to himself than anything else.

Severus wasn’t sure how to proceed. Harry was closing off, and it was clear he wouldn’t say anything more in front of Lucius. As he was trying to decide what to do, their dinner arrived. They moved over to sit at the table, an uncomfortable silence hanging over them as they ate.

Harry mostly pushed the food around on his plate. His appetite was gone. He was still on pretty light fare, and Severus ate with him most meals, watching him like a hawk and providing him nutrient potions when he didn’t eat enough. He could feel the man’s eyes on him now, but he kept his gaze on his food.

When the two men were finishing up and it became clear that Harry would not be eating more that night, the potions master waved a hand, and a little brown bottle appeared beside his plate. Harry drank it down with a light grimace at the chalky texture, and followed the two men back to the sitting area. He still wouldn’t look up at either of them.

Lucius sighed. “Harry, I realize that my treatment of…that elf probably looks bad to you, but there are things you do not know about the situation.” He tried to catch Harry’s eye, but the boy still wouldn’t look directly at him. “Dobby is the child of one of my best elves, and I only kept him on as long as I did to avoid separating them. Perhaps I should not have treated him the way I did, but I admit I was losing patience with him. He resented his work here. He refused to keep himself or his space clean. His magic would not allow him to deliberately disobey direct orders, but he
frequently subverted my authority in front of the other elves, and it was beginning to upset them. It affected their bond to the family magic, and they felt compelled to punish him, which just upset them more.” He paused, wrestling down his frustration, and looked at Harry, whose gaze was fixed on the floor. “Will you look at me, Harry?”

Harry’s gaze darted up to his face, not quite meeting his eyes. Lucius’s expression was sorrowful. “I’m sorry that you witnessed my ill behavior towards him, and that it reminded you of your…past experiences,” he said. The boy just nodded, eyes dropping back down. Severus picked up Lucius’s hand, squeezing gently, and he gave his bondmate a grateful look.

“I’m feeling kind of tired,” Harry said, standing abruptly. “I’m going to go to bed, if that’s alright.”

“Of course,” Severus said immediately. “Good night, Harry.”

“Good night, sir,” he murmured, disappearing into his bedroom and shutting the door.

Lucius stared after him with a helpless frown. “How are we to overcome this, Sev? He has no reason to trust me, none at all.” He dropped his head onto his lover’s shoulder.

Severus pulled away and offered him a sad smile. “We’ll get through this, Luc. This is a new situation, for all of us. Give him time.” He stood, drawing Lucius up by the hand, and led him away to their rooms.

The blond man was uncharacteristically silent as they prepared for bed and lay down to sleep. Severus just held him close, carding a hand through his hair and thinking about all the invisible damage that had been done to Harry. If they could move past this tension, the bond might heal some of Harry’s past, as it had done for Severus. But could they move past it?

As Harry was getting dressed the next morning, there was a knock on his door. “Come in,” he called, and Severus entered, looking around until he spotted the younger man by his wardrobe. “How are you this morning, Harry?” Severus asked carefully.

“I’m fine, sir—Severus. Really.” Harry pulled on the soft grey cardigan Narcissa had bought for him. It was quickly becoming his favorite item of clothing, and he liked to wear it in the mornings, before the day warmed up. Unless he was outside in the sun, he tended to get a little chilled. Severus had explained it was a lingering effect of his time with the Dursleys, and that it would go away with time, as his body received the nutrients it needed to function.

“I’m glad to hear it. I wanted to invite you to brew with me after breakfast, if you wished. I will not help with your homework for the summer, of course, but you are welcome to use my lab for practice and experimentation, and I would welcome your assistance in preparing potions for the hospital wing.”

Harry grinned at him. “I’d love to help, s—Severus.” His look turned impish. “Who would have thought last summer you’d be asking me, of all people, to help in your lab? Not afraid I’ll blow us all up?”

The potions master growled playfully. “Impertinent brat!” Harry laughed. Severus wrapped an arm around his shoulders, giving him a brief squeeze, and the younger man smiled up at him, before pulling away and heading towards the door to the sitting room.
“No Lucius today?” Harry asked, as they sat at the table and their meal appeared before them.

Severus shook his head. “He’s eating with Narcissa and Draco this morning.”

“Because of last night?”

“Perhaps a bit,” Severus said, reluctantly. Noting Harry’s scowl, he said, “Do not worry about it. He shall be here tonight. I suspect he just wanted to give you some space this morning.” Harry acknowledged this with an uncomfortable shrug, and turned back to his food. They ate the rest of the meal in companionable silence.

When they were finished, Severus stood and gestured to the door. “Come,” he said, leading the way out of the room and to his lab, which was down a staircase leading off of the entry hall. A pair of heavy wooden doors opened onto a large brewing space, with a desk near the doors, several brewing stations in the center of the room, and a row of sinks lining one wall. Across from the sinks, a walk-in closet held his ingredient stores, and a solid cabinet held racks of completed potions and empty vials.

Severus pulled a book from his desk and opened it to the recipe for the draught of peace, handing it to Harry, along with a protective robe to cover his sweater and trousers. A second book opened on the recipe for a general antidote. They set up cauldrons at three of the brewing stations, and began preparing ingredients in easy silence.

“I wanted to talk to you about Lucius, actually,” Harry said hesitantly, after some minutes. Severus hummed to indicate he was listening. “You said he’s not quite human; what is he, then?”

Severus shook his head, pausing in his preparations. “At the risk of sounding pedantic, I believe I said that he’s not entirely human—that is to say, he’s not only human. It may seem like an odd point to belabor, but Lucius is very much human in many ways—however, I like to think of him as more than that, not less.” He smiled down at the roots he was methodically shredding.

“You love him a lot,” Harry murmured.

“I do. I’m sure you have surmised that my childhood…wasn’t the easiest. It took a long time for me to trust his love of me was genuine. In the process, I found myself falling for him. His attentiveness and care…being with him has been the best thing that ever happened to me, besides my friendship with your mother.” Harry smiled a little wistfully at that, but didn’t interrupt.

After a moment, Severus seemed to come back to himself. “However, we’ve gotten away from your question. Lucius is descended from one of the lilin.”

Harry frowned. Where had he heard the word before? It sounded familiar… His eyes widened. “What, like a demon?”

Severus shook his head. “That is what muggles mistakenly called them. They do have some of the characteristics attributed to angels, and full-blooded lilin have wings and prophetic visions, though Lucius has neither. The Malfoys have produced seers in the past, however.”

“Are there many lilin about?” Harry asked.

“On the contrary, it is quite rare to see them, especially in the British Isles. They are most frequently found in the Near East and the Mediterranean. I don’t know how they ended up in the Malfoy bloodline, but I’m sure Luc could tell you, in excruciating detail, if you’re curious.”
Severus rolled his eyes, and Harry chuckled.

“I think I’m good, thanks.” The younger man tapped 7 drops of hellebore syrup into the second cauldron, stirring anti-clockwise for seven full rotations, his face set in tense concentration. His frown cleared as the potion turned turquoise, and he set it to simmer. He turned to crushing snake fangs to go into the boil cure in the third cauldron. “So, other than seer abilities, what does lilin heritage do?”

“Luc is resistant to most fire magics, and has an affinity for certain classes of dark spells, particularly wasting curses. Some descendants of lilin have particular skill in the healing arts, and others are especially skilled in necromantic arts. Some have control of shadows, and can travel between them, rather like an undetectable form of apparation. And, of course, there are the bondmates. Not all descendants of lilin have bondmates, and my understanding is that having more than one bondmate is exceedingly rare.”

Severus paused to stir the bezoar into the general antidote he was brewing. When it turned green, he set his stirring rod aside and turned to face Harry, who was sprinkling small quantities of powdered porcupine quills into the draught of peace, watching the color for any change. Once it turned red, Harry stirred until the color shifted to orange, then added more powdered quill, and set it to simmering. Severus nodded approvingly, and began dicing the horned slugs for the boil cure.

“The bondmate is a person who is magically suited to the lilin, one whose destiny touches theirs, and whose temperament and character can serve as a balance to that of the lilin. The nascent bond becomes active when both parties reach maturity, but it must be reciprocal. In this case, he has already opened himself to you, however, it will not deepen until you fully commit yourself. You can consciously choose to refuse the bond, and if you do so, it will fade away.”

“What’s the bond mean for me?” Harry asked, mincing dandelion leaves for the antidote.

“Should you choose to accept it,” Severus emphasized, “it would lead to some very important changes in your life. He will be very protective of you, which would make it impossible for you to return to the Dursley home—now that he knows how they have treated you in the past, he would never allow you to live there.” He glanced over, seeing the glint in Harry’s eyes. “I do not say this to influence you to accept the bond, but it is one of the more immediate changes you would face.”

Harry nodded his understanding, handing the minced leaves over to be slowly stirred into the potion, turning it purple. Severus eyed the color change with satisfaction, and then continued. “Aside from his protective urges, the bond will encourage physical and emotional closeness between you. You and Luc are beginning from a very different place than Luc and I did; we were already something like friends when we discovered our bond, and though I was somewhat incredulous regarding my own attractiveness, I was quite aware of his.” He gave Harry a sly smile, and the younger man chuckled. “You would, eventually, likely wish to engage in… physical intimacy with him. The bond is romantic, emotional, magical, sexual, and physical.”

Severus slid the slugs he’d been dicing into the boil cure, and then accepted the porcupine quills Harry passed him, and dropped them in after. When the potion changed to a blue color, he stirred clockwise for 5 rotations, and it emitted pink steam. Setting aside the stirring rod, he doused the coals beneath the cauldron and left it to cool. Harry added the last pinches of powdered quill to the draught of peace; it turned a pearly white and let off a faint silver vapor. The younger man set that one to cool as well.

“For me, the hardest part was allowing myself to be emotionally open to him,” he told Harry. “I have always been more reserved than many around me, and once I…damaged my relationship
with your mother, I had no one in whom I could confide. Lucius can be secretive and sly with the best, but he tends towards more emotional openness than I, at least in part owing to his lilin heritage. He has very strong emotions, which can occasionally upset his control over his magic, and make him somewhat impetuous.”

Severus stirred the general antidote vigorously for a full minute, and then used a dropper to add a single drop of phoenix tears. The potion turned translucent, and he doused the coals. Harry helped him move the dishes and tools to the sinks against the wall, but when he moved to begin cleaning them, Severus shook his head, waving him over to the desk instead.

“The bond, once established, relies on a certain amount of continued openness. It is not that he cannot lie to me, but he finds it uncomfortable. This is another way the bond affects him more deeply. Unfortunately, my spying had a detrimental effect on him this past year—my inner conflict over hiding it from him caused me to withdraw, making him physically unwell for much of the year.” Severus grimaced and shook his head. “Our bond did not dissolve only because both of us remained committed to each other. It is a commitment, Harry, and not to be undertaken lightly. If you give yourself to the bond, you will gain a steadfast partner and passionate lover. If you later walk away, it will hurt him badly. Do not rush into this. For both our sakes, I counsel you to take time, to think carefully before you accept. You must be sure this is what you want.”

“I understand,” Harry said.

Severus nodded. “There is one thing more you should know,” he said. “If you commit to the bond, there is a ritual you may choose to undergo. It is sex magic and blood magic, and is therefore not generally approved of by the ministry. You would share a potion with him, take a ritual bath together, and then perform a sexual rite. It would solidify the bond between you, and possibly grant you a measure of the power that comes with his heritage.”

“Did you do it?” Harry asked.

“I did, yes. I gained some added skill in dark curses, and the ability to fly without a broom.” The younger man looked suitably impressed. Severus smirked. “Let’s finish up here and return to your rooms for lunch, hmm?”

They bottled the cooled potions and set the cauldrons in the sinks. Severus looked over the racks of potion and smiled down at Harry. “Good work, Harry,” he praised.

The younger man’s cheeks pinked up and he ducked his head. “Glad to help, s—Severus,” he replied.

When they arrived in Harry’s rooms, they found Luc on the sitting room sofa, staring into the empty fireplace. His shoulders tightened when he looked up at them, but he relaxed when Harry gave him a small smile of greeting.

“How was your brewing?” he asked lightly, accepting the kiss Sev offered him with a content hum

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“Harry helped me prepare several of the potions Poppy requires,” Severus replied, sitting beside his bondmate on the sofa. “I was able to answer his questions about our situation, as well. How was your morning?”

Lucius flapped a hand dismissively. “That idiot Fudge sent me a letter, fretting over his uncertain position under the new minister. Scrimgeour is considerably more wary of me than his
predecessor, though I am helped some by my fortuitous absence when aurors confronted the others at the ministry.” Severus squeezed his hand, and Lucius smiled to show all was forgiven. “That is neither here nor there, however. Suffice to say, my morning was taken up with odious correspondence. I’m much more pleased to spend my time with you.” He half-turned as he spoke, to include Harry, who was now sitting in the chair he had come to think of as ‘his.’ “Shall we call for lunch?”

Chapter End Notes

I struggled with what I wanted Luc to be for a while, hence the length of time since the previous chapter. I’ve settled that (and several other points) now.

My conception of the lilin draws on Jewish mythology, though it more closely reflects what has been written and believed about the sheydim, with my own twist on how they would manifest as a magical being in the wizarding world of Harry Potter. They are somewhat like veela, in that they are humanoid and can interbreed with humans, but are not human themselves. I decided not to go with veela partly because it’s a bit overdone in HP fandom, but also because little enough has been written about lilin/sheydim that I could easily mold them to the needs of this story. I hope the conversation between Severus and Harry about Luc’s heritage was not too unwieldy —I wanted it to feel like a more natural conversation than an infodump.
Harry had settled rather easily into life at Malfoy Manor. He quickly finished all of his homework, and then Severus insisted on looking it over and returned it all marked up with comments, so he had to do it all over again, but he didn’t even mind, once he was done—the comments had all been very helpful, and he was sure he’d get high marks on all of the essays when he turned them in. They’d finally told Draco he was there, though they did not reveal his potential bond with Lucius and Severus. The other boy was suspicious and spiteful, but after Narcissa had reprimanded him for sniping at Harry during dinner, Draco had decided that ignoring him was best, which Harry rather preferred himself.

The up-shot was that Harry could now wander and explore the house and go flying on the grounds as much as he liked, although he continued to keep the glamor ring with him, in case someone else showed up at the manor. He spent some mornings brewing with Severus in the lab, and some afternoons flying, and some days Cissy pulled him aside after lunch and gave him lessons in manners and deportment, and some days she pulled him aside and made him practice dueling.

It turned out that she had been the Slytherin Dueling Champion in her 6th and 7th years, because back then they’d had a proper dueling club. It also turned out that she was very, very good. She gave him instructions and told him about duels she’d fought, and made him practice drills against dummies, and then they had a practice duel, and at the end of each lesson he was collapsed on the floor, panting and dripping sweat. Narcissa, of course, wasn’t even winded.

“That’s enough for today,” she would say, hiding her smile behind one hand. He didn’t know why she bothered—he was quite aware he looked like a landed fish. She would help him to his feet, and usher him down the stairs to his room, leaving him there to shower and change. He told her one day not to bother hiding her smile, and she had burst out into lovely laughter. When she finally stopped, she called him saucy, and playfully shoved him towards the door.

On the days they weren’t dueling, she usually drilled him on the genealogy of the Potter and Black families. Once she was satisfied, she said, he would learn the Malfoy family tree. They talked about pureblood traditions and manners and the structure of the British wizarding world. Some were structured like lessons, and others were more casual conversations over tea. During one of these conversations, he’d asked her about getting his hair cut, and she’d shaken her head.

“You may, if you wish, Harry,” she said, “but it is most proper for you to grow it out now, as an adult and a lord. The long hair signifies your status as head of your family. Had you an heir, he would keep his hair shorter—shoulder length or less—until you passed on a title to him. This applies only to boys, of course—a girl may keep her hair as long or short as she wishes, though some girls choose to adhere to the tradition. Millicent Bulstrode, for example; that pageboy cut is not altogether flattering on her, sad to say, but she is her father’s sole heir, and very serious about the family business.”
Harry thought about this. “It seems hard on younger sons, that they can’t grow their hair as long as they like. Or the heir—wizards live so long…Oh, that must be why Mrs Weasley’s always after Bill about his hair! Though Mr Weasley doesn’t grow his hair out, so maybe not…”

Narcissa pursed her lips. “The Weasley family has abandoned a great many wizarding traditions, this among them.” She flicked one hand, as though casting aside the unpleasant topic, and nudged the scones towards Harry until he picked one. When he had taken a few bites, she took up her teacup to sip from it, looking satisfied. Harry self-consciously wiped his mouth and asked the question that her frosty reply had brought to mind.

“Uh, can I ask—I know there’s some kind of family feud between the Malfoys and the Weasleys—why? What happened?”

She studied him for a moment, and then nodded. “As you are now a member of our family, it is something you ought to know, though I warn you, it is a rather unpleasant story.” She raised an eyebrow enquiringly.

“I want to know, please,” Harry said.

“Very well.” She bowed her head, and set her tea down, seeming to gather herself. “Some generations back, a member of the Weasley family became enamored with a daughter of the Malfoys, but she was intended for another; on the strength of her mutual affection with her fiancé, and her sense of filial responsibility, she refused him. Caracticus Weasley was incensed, and resolved to have her regardless. He procured a strong love potion, and managed to dose Penelope Malfoy at a ball. They ran away together that very night, and he…took advantage of her compromised state.” She smiled sadly at Harry, who was gaping at her. “When she woke the next morning, the poor girl was shattered. She fled him and returned to her family. When her father demanded reparations for this violation, which was well within his rights, the head of the Weasley family refused and insisted instead that Caracticus and Penelope be married.” Harry made an incredulous noise at that.

Narcissa nodded. “Yes, he dared much. Of course, a marriage to her assaulter was considered incomprehensible by the girl’s parents, and her fiancé declared his intention to go through with marrying her, but Penelope was deeply damaged by the experience. She refused to eat or drink, out of fear, and soon fell into a coma. The Malfoys took the Weasleys to the Wizengamot, and were awarded a large sum for their injury, and that would have been the end of it, but one of Caracticus’s brothers challenged Penelope’s fiancé to a duel, claiming that the whole affair had been a plot to ruin the Weasleys. He slew the young man, Alexis Parkinson, and fled. The Weasley patriarch refused to admit any wrongdoing, and stood by the actions of his two sons; the family found themselves cut from much of pureblood society, as a result, losing a great deal of status and money, for which they blamed the Malfoys, naturally.”

“What—what happened to Penelope?” Harry asked hesitantly.

“She never woke. She had conceived, and the child survived to term and was delivered. He was blood adopted into the Parkinson family, for their lost son, and it was eventually decided that Penelope would pass on, with the help of a potion. Her parents were devastated by their loss, and the Malfoys and Weasleys have been enemies ever since.” Narcissa sighed, picking up her tea and warming it with a whispered charm.

Harry found his hands were clenched in his lap, and he relaxed them, wincing at the pins and needles that followed. Cissy didn’t comment on it, but glanced pointedly at his half-eaten scone
until he began to eat again. While he chewed, he thought about what she had told him. It really was an awful story, though he wasn’t quite sorry that he’d asked. He’d always gotten the impression from Ron that the families hated each other over the matter of blood purity—nothing like this. He wondered if Ron even knew. “Why haven’t I heard about this before?” he asked.

She smiled at him, as she always did when he asked questions like this. “They may remember it differently,” she replied. “That is, if they remember it at all. Light wizards, I find, are all too glad to deride us without much enquiry into the precise reasoning behind why. It is quite possible the contempt for our family spread among the Weasley cousins without any clear explanation of the entire affair.”

“But that’s—that’s ridiculous!” Harry exclaimed. It was exactly like what the Dursleys had done to him—they never came out and said why he was awful and contemptible and criminal, but they had the whole neighborhood eyeing him suspiciously almost as soon as he could walk.

“I agree, though others may not. It is true, also, that Malfoys have been openly associated with blood purity since shortly after the Statute of Secrecy was instituted. For many, that fact alone is enough to condemn us in their eyes.”

There was that. Harry shifted uncomfortably. He was himself a half-blood, but one of his best friends was muggleborn. And while the Dursleys were awful, he had nothing against muggles in general. Though, he wondered, how did Cissy and Lucius actually feel about muggles and muggleborns? Him being in their family might change things, surely—except Severus was also a half-blood… He glanced up at her through his lashes.

“Um, this may be rude, but—well, how do you feel about muggleborns?” He cringed. That was probably too blunt, but he did want to know.

She chuckled. “Not rude, precisely, but certainly tactless…However, it is rather an important question. I myself was raised in the Black family, whose motto is ’toujours pur,’ meaning ‘always pure.’”

He grimaced. “I remember,” he said.

“Yes, well, I have come to a more nuanced view of things as I’ve grown older, particularly since my marriage. The Malfoys have never been as fanatical as the Blacks, and thus are not nearly so inbred as my own family. They have thus missed out on the kind of maladies that plague many other pureblood families—perhaps you have heard of the Black madness? Too much marriage between close cousins, I’m afraid. No, you will actually find half-bloods scattered throughout the Malfoy family tree, though not so many as in families like the Weasleys.” She paused to pour another cup of tea, adding lemon to her taste. She eyed his plate significantly, and he picked out a sandwich to please her. She smiled and continued speaking.

“On the subject of muggleborns, I am ambivalent. On the one hand, we need the mixing of blood to keep our magic strong. Those of us from older families often struggle to conceive—I needed potions from Severus to carry Draco to term, as I told you before. On the other hand, muggleborn children do not easily understand our world, and there are serious cultural clashes that result from their presence. Families like the Weasleys may be willing to give up hundreds of years of tradition, but many others of us are not so ready to abandon our culture. Muggleborn children often object to the use of house elves, for example.’’

“Because they don’t understand about the magic involved,” Harry argued. “If all I knew of house elves was what I’d seen in my second year—an elf in a dirty pillowcase who hated and feared the
family he served, and who I saw being abused—I might have felt the same about them, too. But now that I know the magic behind the bond, and the fact that elves rely on their family’s magic to survive, I wouldn’t ever try to interfere in that bond. I’ve seen perfectly happy elves here and at Hogwarts, but most students never visit the kitchens there, and so muggleborns never get the chance to see that the bond can be more symbiotic. To them, it’s just a kind of slavery, see?”

Narcissa bowed her head. “As you say. But how do we address this cultural difference? Many blood purists are reactionaries, who see muggleborns trying to end longstanding traditions, and respond with hatred and disdain. How do we disrupt that pattern?”

“Wizard Studies!” Harry exclaimed, grinning. “We’ve got Muggle Studies at Hogwarts, which really ought to be mandatory, I think, so wizards can understand muggles and where muggleborns are coming from; we could just as easily add a course for muggleborn and muggle-raised students to understand the world they’re entering. There could be genealogy and politics and law. History of British magical culture, too, and holidays—Yule and Solstice and Samhain and all. A bit of geography of the magical world might be useful, but it’s probably not necessary. Wizarding world literature and fiction…I don’t think purebloods ever think about this, but those of us raised in the muggle world are dropped into all this with no preparation, and we either sink or we swim, and yes, many of us swim against the current, but it’s only because of culture shock. Severus figured it out, and Tom Riddle did, but most GRYFFINDORS care less about that sort of thing than SLYTHERINS, and it never would have occurred to me to go looking for such information. You could teach a class like that, I’ll bet—you’re really good at it!” Harry blushed under the appraising look she was giving him.

“That’s a very good idea, Harry,” she said. She narrowed her eyes, gaze focusing on the wall behind him as one finger tapped against her lips absently. “Yes, a very good idea…I wonder…” She suddenly refocused on him. “A future project, perhaps. Once this war has passed, let’s make it happen, shall we? With the combined force of the Malfoy, Black, Prince, and Potter families, who would dare tell us no?” He met her playful grin with one of his own.

They finished their tea and she sent him away to go fly off some energy. As he stood to go, she summoned a little loop of leather and handed it to him. “For your hair,” she said, and Harry beamed at her, immediately tying up his hair at the back of his head.

“Thanks, Cissy!” he chirped, and took off towards his suite to grab his broom.

Once he disappeared, she went looking for Severus and Lucius. She found them in Luc’s office, seated behind his desk, snogging. She smirked, clearing her throat delicately, and the two of them jerked apart, whipping around to look at her. When he saw her, Severus merely rolled his eyes, but her husband blushed. Admittedly, Narcissa delighted in surprising him in just this way: he always flushed so prettily at being caught in such an undignified position, especially now that Harry lived with them. She suspected it was because he was an only child—having two older sisters, she herself was rather unflappable in this regard.

She ignored the two men, turning to order tea from an elf as Severus moved off his bondmate’s lap and took up his own seat. Sev raised one eyebrow quizzically at her, and she smiled innocently in return.

“I thought we could talk about your young man. He’s off flying, and I’ve just had the most interesting conversation with him.” A tea tray appeared on the desk between them, and she poured each of them a cup, preparing them as preferred: hers with a dash of lemon, Luc’s with cream and sugar, and Sev’s with just a splash of cream. Once they each held a cup, she gave them a serious look. “Harry asked me about the blood feud with the Weasleys.”
Lucius grimaced. “What did you tell him?”

“The truth. I suspect he will try to confirm the information later, of course. Regardless, that topic led to another, and he asked me about my views on pureblood supremacy. You may wish to address your own beliefs with him later, but it was what followed that most interested me: when I told him that many blood purists objected to muggleborns trying to change our traditions, Harry suggested a new Hogwarts class. He said that muggle-raised witches and wizards suffer from culture shock, and suggested a Wizard Studies course for incoming students, as a companion to a required Muggle Studies course.”

Her husband looked intrigued. He glanced at Severus, who was nodding thoughtfully.

“I’ve done something like it on an individual basis for muggleborn or -raised students in my house, but Slytherin gets so few that it’s a rare duty. The idea is a sound one, though. What did he suggest for the curriculum?”

“Genealogy, politics, law, and traditional culture, such as holidays. Information about the house elf bond, too.” The men exchanged a concerned glance, and Sev reached over to squeeze Luc’s hand. “I was the one to bring up the topic of house elves,” she told them. “I don’t think he’s been dwelling on it.” They looked relieved to hear it, and she smiled.

It was easy to see that they very much wanted things to work out with Harry, and she thoroughly approved. Harry needed the kind of love and care the two older men could provide, and he added something indefinable to their dynamic. The age difference could have been a barrier, but she had seen them with him, and she suspected it wouldn’t be, not once the bond fully formed.

“I must say, I’m quite pleased with him,” she said. “He’s very inquisitive, and his instincts are good. I suspect he’s never been much encouraged to ask questions, but he looked to me quite a bit when we were in Diagon Alley last week, and when he gets up the courage to ask me something, he considers my answer carefully.” She eyed Severus, her expression arch. “I almost find myself wondering what happened to the Harry Potter I have heard so thoroughly excoriated in the past.”

Severus flushed subtly, glaring down at his cup. Narcissa laughed at him, and he transferred his glare to her; contrary to his hopes, this just made her laugh more. “Oh, I know you two have long since made your peace, Severus,” she said. “But you must allow a little teasing for how dreadfully you misjudged him.” He grunted noncommittally, and she rolled her eyes at him.

“How are his dueling lessons going, Cissy?” Lucius asked, a rather transparent attempt to change the subject, but she decided to let him get away with it. Teasing Severus was never as fun as teasing Lucius—he didn’t react quite so graciously, probably because of his father and those awful Gryffindor boys.

She took a sip of her tea before answering her husband’s question. “He’s magically very strong, though most of his repertoire is lighter stuff like the jelly-legs jinx. He picks up new spells quite easily though, so we’re working on expanding into the type of spellwork that would actually be useful in a duel like the one he was in last spring.”

“How is he physically?” Sev asked.

“Better than I expected. No tremors or muscle weakness, beyond what would be normal for someone after exercising. I know you said he was in a bad way before you healed him on his birthday, but he’s doing much better now—I’ve seen worse cases at St Mungo’s. He’s young and
resilient, and I think he’s bouncing back quite well.” She shared a satisfied smile with the potions master.

“He’s eaten at nearly every meal I’ve shared with him,” Severus said, “and I’ve been supplementing his nutrition with potions as needed. Mimi has been bringing him snacks from the approved list periodically throughout the day. I agree that he seems to be progressing rather well.”

“He’s still underweight, though,” Cissy said.

He nodded. “Yes, but he’s in a better place than he was even a week ago. He likely won’t reach a normal weight for his height until midway through the next term. Poppy said last term that he is unlikely to grow much taller, and I agree with her assessment. Though he assures me this summer was more severe than any before it, he has still been subjected to chronic undernutrition from his second year of childhood.” He clenched his jaw and glowered down into his teacup. There was a beat of silence, as they all considered just how they might punish the Dursleys for their mistreatment of Harry.

“He can never go back there,” Lucius said firmly. “Even if he doesn’t bond with us, he can never go back there.”

“Not after this summer,” Severus agreed. “I allowed Dumbledore to have his way this year, because he insisted that it was necessary in order to renew the blood protections, but not again. If he tries to send him back there next summer, I will show up at King’s Cross and take him away myself, Albus be damned.”

“Are you sure these protections even exist?” Narcissa enquired. “If his mother’s protection was founded on love, their obvious disdain for him is not likely to serve as a bolster—rather the opposite, one would think.”

“They exist,” Lucius said. “I was entirely barred from the property when we arrived there, though Severus was not. I don’t know how they function, but they exist.”

Sev hummed. “I think all members of the headmaster’s secret order are keyed into the wards, actually. Regardless, the protection is founded on the blood sacrifice, not the love. Proximity to Lily’s relations supposedly revitalizes the effect, though I reminded the headmaster that the Dark Lord used Harry’s blood for the resurrection ritual, which likely weakened the protection—not that he heeded my words.” He sneered.

“That meddling old fool…” Cissy pursed her lips, then shook her head decisively. “No matter—he shall return here next summer.”

Luc nodded. “I have some business to finish, and then Severus and I will fetch Harry in for dinner—I have a question for him.” Sev smiled encouragingly at his bondmate.

“I do believe he’ll agree, love.”

“I hope so…” Luc flashed a brief smile in return, and set aside his tea. “I hope you’ll excuse me, Cissy: I was distracted earlier, but I really do need to send off these notes as soon as possible; it’s regarding the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, which Dumbledore has yet to fill, despite it being a matter of mere weeks before the start of term. The Board of Governors are on the verge of appointing one of our own choosing, to prevent further interference by the Ministry; their last choice was…regrettable.” He sneered, remembering his discovery, through Severus, that Dolores Umbridge had routinely used a blood quill to punish Harry and several other students.
“I shall leave you to it, then,” Narcissa said, setting down her cup. “Until dinner.” She swept out of his office, turning in the direction of the library.

Severus leaned over and pressed a brief kiss to Lucius’s lips. “I have some notes to write up in my lab, if you don’t mind. I’ll return in half an hour and we’ll fetch him in.”

“Very well.”

True to his word, Sev returned almost precisely 35 minutes later to drag his bondmate away from the letters spread across his desk.

“The problem,” Luc told him as they strolled out onto the terrace, “is that there don’t seem to be many qualified instructors who are interested in the post. Our—the Dark Lord’s curse on the position appears to be holding strong: anyone who’s already had the post is usually dead, disinclined to return, or otherwise unsuitable—as a result, many qualified applicants would rather not chance it.” He shook his head, glaring at the ground as they strolled leisurely.

“I believe the Headmaster was hoping to give me the position this year,” Severus said. “He has some scheme requiring old Slughorn’s cooperation, so he planned for the man to come teach potions this year, freeing me up for the defense post. Our old professor refused, however, and has proven resistant to whatever inducements the headmaster has produced thus far.”

“Slughorn?” The blond scoffed. “That man hasn’t taught since you took over the post a decade and a half ago. And you still hold the distinction of being the only potions professor to never lose a single student at Hogwarts—no, the governors would never allow that, unless you were adamant about taking the post.” He eyed Severus with concern. “You don’t want it, do you?”

He shook his head. “No, though I am aware there is a persistent rumor I do.”

“Is there really? Well, you could probably leverage that for a pay raise, if you really wanted—the governors would surely authorize it if they feared losing you. Regardless, that still leaves us with no viable option for the defense post this year, and the term starting in less than three weeks!”

Severus looked around for Harry as he considered this, spotting him above the roses. Harry spotted him at the same time and waved, banking towards them in an easy loop. “Why don’t you take the post?” the potions master offered, waving back absently. “I know you’re entirely qualified. I’m quite sure you could get the other governors to support you. And I confess I would not be upset to share my quarters with you during the year; I do miss you when I’m off at school.” Lucius stopped walking, and Sev frowned when the grip on his hand pulled him up short. He raised an eyebrow, noting the blond’s blossoming smile.

“I miss you, too, love, though I know you try to visit as often as you can.” Luc leaned forward to kiss him. “I would love to join you at Hogwarts. But what about my position on the board?”

“Hmm…perhaps Narcissa could take it over? If she is amenable, of course.” He glanced up, watching Harry lazily corkscrew down towards them.

“Yes, that might work. Thank you, love; if the others agree, you’ll have saved us weeks of headaches.” He turned to Harry, who had just landed in front of them. “Hello, Harry. How was your fly?”

The boy beamed at them. “Great! I’ve always liked roses—I’ve never minded tending my aunt’s,
really—and the gardens here are lovely. What were you talking about?” He swung his broom onto his shoulder and followed as they turned back towards the house.

“The Defense professorship at Hogwarts.”

“Oh, do you know who it’ll be yet? Only, I want to be ready beforehand, in case this one tries to kill me, too.” Lucius looked appalled, and Harry chuckled.

“A decision has not yet been made,” Severus said.

The boy frowned. “That’s not usual is it?”

“It is not. The headmaster had intended to give me the position, and bring in a different potions master, but the other master has refused the post.”

“I dunno if the students would have been more disappointed to have you stay on for potions, or relieved you won’t be able to point your wand at us in defense,” Harry replied, cheekily.

“Brat,” Sev remarked fondly. “It is a good thing they shan’t learn about it, then, yes?”

“Not from me, anyway. But you know Hogwarts leaks like a sieve—I bet it’ll get out regardless.”

“You may be right.” The dark-haired man held the door open for both of them, and he and Luc followed Harry to his suite.

“I’ll just put my broom away,” Harry said. He ducked into his room and put his broom atop his trunk. He caught sight of himself in the mirror and noted his windswept hair, some of which had escaped its tie. He freed it, finger-combed it back to tie up again, and then eyed the rest of his reflection. He cast a freshening charm on his clothes—he’d learnt that one from Narcissa, and was rather pleased with the neatening effect it had on his shirt. He’d never had such nice clothes before, and he felt much more conscious of when they were dirty and clean than he had while wearing any of Dudley’s old cast-offs. Once he was happy with his appearance, he returned to the sitting room.

“All set,” he said.

“This is new,” Severus said, indicating his pulled-back hair.

“Oh, yeah—I asked Cissy about getting it cut, and she told me that I ought to grow it out, now that I’m a lord. I’m trying it out.” He put one hand to his hair self-consciously. “Uh, what do you think?”

“I think it looks good—and it may be easier to manage.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Well, if I don’t like it, I can always cut it later; easier to cut hair than to suddenly grow it out. Probably.” He frowned. He wasn’t sure if that was actually true, thinking about that time his aunt gave him a terrible haircut and he grew it all back overnight. That was likely just a bout of accidental magic, but there might be a charm or potion to grow hair that he just didn’t know about. Whatever, it wasn’t important. He raised his eyebrows. “Dinner? I could eat a hippogriff!”

He noticed then that Lucius seemed rather nervous, for some reason. When Harry peered at him curiously, he cleared his throat. “I was thinking, Harry, if you wouldn’t mind, that Severus and I
could take one of the rooms in your suite. I’d like to be closer to you,” he explained, looking uncertain what response he might get.

“Uh, sure, if you like,” Harry replied.

Luc beamed at him. “Lovely. We’ll move things in after dinner, then.” Sev bumped him with his shoulder, and the blond man grimaced. “Yes, yes, you did tell me so…” His bondmate just rolled his eyes at this faux peevishness, but he was smiling fondly, and he gave Luc a kiss.

“Dinner?” Severus said.

Harry nodded and returned the relieved smile that Lucius was giving him. As he followed the two men to the dining room, he thought it was a good thing he could use magic here, because that meant he could put up silencing wards around his bed; he resolved to do so after dinner. He wasn’t sure how much they’d be able to hear through the walls, but he didn’t want to upset their sleep if he had a particularly bad nightmare. Uncle Vernon was always furious when Harry was loud enough to wake him, and while he knew Luc and Sev wouldn’t hurt him, he didn’t want to disturb them.
Lucius sat by the desk in Severus’s lab, watching Severus and Harry brewing together. Sev was quizzing the younger man on potions theory while they prepared more potions for Madam Pomfrey’s stores at Hogwarts—sleeping draughts, pain relief potions, and skele-gro. While they worked, Harry told Lucius about the time he’d had to regrow all 30 of the bones in his arm and hand, because the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor had vanished them after a quidditch match. He laughed at the disgusted face the blond man made, turning back to the puffer-fish he was deboning.

“Of course,” Harry mused, “it was probably mostly Dobby’s fault. He’d charmed the bludger to go rogue, see, because he thought that if I got hurt, I’d have to leave the school. Mad little bugger almost killed me,” he shook his head, looking fondly exasperated, and set to work shredding comfrey leaves.

“How did you find this out?” Lucius asked.

“Hmm? Oh, he told me himself. Well, I guess you two wouldn’t know this story. So, over the summer before second year, this strange little thing—I’d never seen a house elf before—showed up in my room at the Dursley’s house, and admitted he’d been stealing my mail to convince me I’d been forgotten about, so I wouldn’t go back to Hogwarts. Which was a completely daft plan, of course, because wild thestrals couldn’t keep me away, not when the alternative was staying with my aunt and uncle all year. I told him so, and he did a charm in the house to get me in trouble, hoping I’d get expelled, but I only received a warning from the Improper Use of Magic Office. Almost got me killed then, too, because I hadn’t told my relatives I couldn’t do magic outside school, and then they knew because of the warning letter. Vernon was particularly gleeful about installing all those locks and the cat flap on the door of my room. But the Weasley twins and Ron came and rescued me—hauled the bars on the window clean out the wall—and I got to spend the rest of the summer at the Burrow with them.” He paused to pass the comfrey to Severus, and turned to dicing some kind of root. Before Lucius could prompt him, he continued.

“So I thought that was the end of it—this strange little creature had forgotten me, right? Nope! When I went to get on the train at King’s Cross for the start of term, he blocked the barrier until the Hogwarts Express had left. Ron and I had this terrible idea that we could get to school ourselves by stealing this muggle car his father had and flying it to school—barking mad, I know—and then we crashed into the Whomping Willow and almost died. I thought for sure we would be expelled, and then Severus would chop us up to use in potions!” He laughed and gave the potions master beside him a sly little grin.

Sev smirked at him. “I should have—would have saved me a lot of trouble over the years, let me tell you.”

“Yes, well, you missed your chance,” Harry said breezily. “Anyway, we didn’t know that Dobby had closed the barrier, and then the term started and I totally forgot about him, and then during the
first quidditch match that bludger went rogue and I had to spend the night in the hospital wing regrowing my bones because of bloody Lockhart, and in the middle of the night, Dobby showed up and tried to convince me to leave again, and of course I refused again, because I’d take skelegro over my relatives any day of the year. It was all for nothing, anyway—I stayed, obviously, and faced the monster and saved Ginny and destroyed the diary, and it all worked out in the end. And I didn’t see Dobby again until the end of the year, when he showed up with you, and you know the rest.”

“Why was he so determined to get you to leave?” Severus asked.

“He’d overheard Lucius talking about the diary, I guess. Not sure why he’d fixated on me, in particular, but he’s still a bit obsessed with me, to be honest. Pleased as punch to be free, and now he works at Hogwarts—for pay, even—and wears the most garish socks and vests and hats and things. I think his sense of fashion is worse than Dumbledore’s, but only just. That man…” Harry shook his head in disgust, muttering some sarcastic remark under his breath, and Severus laughed at him.

“Impertinent brat,” the man said, a fond smile on his face. “Don’t let Minerva hear you say that.”

Harry shuddered. “Oh, I know—she’d turn me into something dreadful for it! But really…I’m not an expert on clothes or anything, but even I can tell the headmaster’s fashion is a disaster.” He paused in his dicing. “Do you think I could sneak Cissy in to transfigure his wardrobe?”

“I don’t see how,” Severus said wryly. “Anyway, I’m sure she wouldn’t be the first to try.” He chuckled. “He does rather sear the eyes, doesn’t he? But he’s quite old—if he hasn’t changed yet, there’s little hope of it at this point, I’m afraid.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Harry conceded. “Very well—I’m only there for two more years, anyhow. But then I’ll be in the Order…” He sighed, adding valerian to the sleeping draught and stirring it. He waved his wand over it, and doused the coals beneath it.

“Will you tell me what actually happened then, in your second year?” Lucius asked hesitantly.

“Uh, sure, I guess.” Harry shrugged. He added the bones from the pufferfish to the skelegro, and stirred it to combine. “Okay, so, Dumbledore told you the diary belonged to Tom Riddle, who became the Dark Lord. Well, Ginny Weasley had been writing to him all year, and she was losing time and unexplainable things were happening to her, and she began to suspect that it was because of the diary, so she flushed it down a toilet. I found it and wrote in it a little, and Riddle showed me one of his memories, but then Ginny figured out I had it and stole it back—because of Malfoy, actually; that is, Draco. Anyway, Ginny was being possessed, I guess, and letting the basilisk out —”

“A basilisk?!” Lucius interrupted. He saw that Sev had stopped crushing whatever he’d been working on, and was also staring at Harry incredulously.

“Uh, yeah. I guess most people didn’t hear about that part.” He nudged Severus, who hurriedly finished crushing his ingredient and stirred it into the skelegro. “Well, anyway, she was letting the basilisk out, and the only reason no one died this time was because no one looked directly into its eyes. And then she disappeared into the chamber, and Ron and I decided to rescue her, because Hermione had figured out the monster was a basilisk, and that it was using the pipes to get around the school. I dunno how, though, because it was huge—had to be at least forty feet long by the time I killed it.”
Sev reared back from the last cauldron, to which he had been just about to add some kind of shredded cabbage. “It—you—what?!” He stood there, looking horrified, the cabbage in his hands twitching as he stared at Harry. The boy gave a sigh, guided the man’s hands over the cauldron again, and pulled them apart to dump the lot in. He leaned around Sev, who was still staring at him in horror, and gave the brew 3 clockwise stirs. Harry tapped the cauldron with his wand and then doused the coals. As all three potions were now done, he drew the man over towards the desk and pushed him into a seat. He spelled Sev’s hands clean, and then waved his wand to float the dishes and tools over to the sink.

“Where was I? Oh, right—the basilisk. So, Hermione figured it out, before she was petrified. We decided to get Lockhart to help us rescue Ginny—I really don’t know what we were thinking, that man was a disgrace to the name of wizard. Well, he admitted to being a fraud, and then he tried to memory charm us and run away, but I disarmed him. Thanks for teaching us that one, sir,” he said to Severus.

The man still looked gobsmacked, and only nodded faintly and murmured, “Don’t mention it.” Lucius would have been tempted to laugh if he weren’t just as horror-stricken by the account.

“We had figured out where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets was—dunno what it originally connected to, but nowadays it’s hidden behind a sink in the second floor girls’s toilets—and we took the useless lump with us, and pushed him down the pipe first, in case it was dangerous. There was a tunnel at the bottom, and when we got a little ways down it, Lockhart tackled Ron and stole his wand, only it had been broken by the Whomping Willow back at the start of year, when we crashed the car into it. When he tried to memory charm us, it backfired on him—couldn’t have happened to a more deserving git—and brought down a big chunk of the ceiling on him, too. I ended up separated from the two of them, and went on alone, and when I got to the Chamber, I found Ginny—only, she wouldn’t wake up. I dropped my wand, like an idiot, when I saw her. And there was the diary, and Tom Riddle, who was almost entirely corporeal, because he’d been stealing her life force, and he took my wand.” Harry shook his head in disgust.

“What then?” Severus asked, looking somewhat less shocked, but still a touch too pale. He took Harry’s hand, as though to reassure himself that the boy was alive and safe in front of him.

“Well, then he monologued about his brilliant plan, and told me he was the boy who became the Dark Lord—the diary version of him was only 16 years old. And then he called the basilisk, and Fawkes—the headmaster’s phoenix familiar—came and brought me the sorting hat, and he—Fawkes—pecked the basilisk’s eyes out, so it couldn’t kill me that way, and the hat dropped Gryffindor’s sword on my head, and I stabbed the basilisk, but it bit me, and then I was dying.” He winced as Sev’s hand tightened convulsively around his own; he could practically feel his bones grinding together. He eased his hand free, and rubbed it, continuing his tale.

“While Riddle was standing over me and gloating, Fawkes flew over and cried on the wound, and it healed up—still got a scar there—and then I took the fang that had snapped off in my arm and I stabbed the diary and it let out this awful wail and bled ink all over me, and Riddle disappeared. Ginny woke up, and we went back out to where Ron had cleared a hole in the cave-in, and we climbed through and Fawkes carried the three of us and Lockhart back up the pipe to the girl’s toilets, and then we went to find a professor.” The two men stared at him in silence, and he waited to see what they would do.

Finally, Severus pushed his sleeve up, and brushed his fingers over the puckered skin near his elbow. “I’ve a cream that will get rid of it, if you’d like,” he offered quietly.

Harry shook his head. “Nah, I don’t mind. Besides, I hear scars are sexy,” he joked. “Come on,
Lucius was unusually quiet while they did this, clearly thinking about his own role in the Chamber of Secrets debacle. When they were done and had set the cauldrons to washing themselves magically, Harry walked over and threaded his arm through one of the blond man’s, like Narcissa was always doing to him. He smiled up at the man, who looked startled but returned his smile.

“What do you think: is it a good story? Could I write it all up in a book and get published, like Lockhart?” Harry wiggled his eyebrows up and down, trying to get a laugh out of Luc. The man let out a little snicker.

Severus snorted. “I don’t doubt you could, if you were ever inclined to encourage your fame, which I have it on good authority you are not.”

“Pssh, I could be,” Harry said, grinning over his shoulder as he led Lucius from the lab. “I bet I could even beat out his record for Witch Weekly’s Most Charming Smile Award!” He put on a haughty air and smiled smugly for a moment, and then he burst out laughing.

Sev raised an eyebrow. “I believe you wanted lunch?” he said pointedly. Harry gestured for him to lead the way, and he did so with a roll of his eyes. The younger man shared a grin with Luc behind his back.

They ate lunch in Harry’s sitting room, and while they were dining, an owl swooped in and landed in front of the potions master. He took the letter and fed the owl some meat off his plate in return. Breaking the seal, he unrolled the letter, which was very short. It read:

Severus,
I must speak with you as soon as possible regarding an important matter for the upcoming term. If you would be so good as to visit me in my office as soon as you receive this letter, I’m sure we can resolve the matter speedily.
Albus

Sev snorted and handed the note to Lucius. The blond man read it over with some amusement. “He’s not very subtle, your headmaster,” Luc said, passing the note to Harry once he’d read it.

The boy rolled his eyes. “This is about me, isn’t it?” he asked.

Severus nodded. “Indeed. I am actually somewhat surprised that he managed to wait two weeks before contacting me.”

“Why would he? He’s never bothered checking in about me before,” Harry said.

“Sadly, I suspect it’s the matter of headquarters. We were unsure whether you had inherited, so meetings were suspended until we could be sure of somewhere to meet safely.” He eyed Harry speculatively. “Do you know if you’ve inherited the place?”

“I should have, I think. When we were at Gringotts, the inheritance test said I was Lord Black. How would I know if I got that particular house?” he asked.

“You could owl the goblins and ask, but it might be easier to see if you can call that wretched elf. As his new owner, his magic would require him to respond to your summons.”

The boy grimaced. “If I must. Kreacher?” he called out.
The stooped little elf appeared before him with a whoosh of displaced air.

“Huh. I’m a little disappointed that worked,” Harry mumbled. In a louder voice he said, “Hello, then, Kreacher. I guess I own you now.”

“What does the filthy little half-blood want with Kreacher? Oh, how Kreacher’s mistress would hate to see the House of Black soiled with such inferior blood. Kreacher wishes to be with Mistress Bellatrix, yes, not the half-blood.”

“What did you say, elf? You dare speak so to your master?!” Lucius was staring at the little creature with rage on his face. Kreacher cowered, but didn’t answer.

“Eh, he’s always like that,” Harry said, shaking his head. “Frankly, that’s probably as nice a thing as he’s ever said to me.” He frowned at the shivering elf in his dirty rags; Sirius had hated the thing and treated him badly, but Harry wasn’t like that—it reminded him too much of the Dursleys, to be honest. He thought about how to word what he wanted. “Kreacher, I want you to be dressed properly from now on. You shouldn’t wear rags like that—it reflects badly on the House of Black. And I want you to clean the house properly from now on.”

The elf sneered at him. “As Master wishes,” he grumbled mutinously. “Will there be anything else Master wants?”

“Actually, yes: I forbid you to speak to any witch or wizard other than me, unless you are carrying out a task I have explicitly set you. You are especially forbidden from talking to Bellatrix Lestrange.” He looked at Severus. “Anything else?” When he shook his head, Harry turned back to the elf. “That is all. Go back to the house and stay there until I call for you again.”

Kreacher glared balefully at him, and disappeared without another word.

The boy sighed. “That elf is so unpleasant… I hope he’ll behave himself, now.”

“You shouldn’t let him treat you like that, Harry,” Lucius said. “He can’t be allowed to subvert your authority.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s not like I’ve got other house elves, so it won’t disrupt the bond or anything.”

“I rather suspect you might, actually. The Potters were a wealthy pureblood family,” Sev reminded him.

“Oh. I, uh—that hadn’t occurred to me, actually.” Harry frowned. “Well, what do I do, then? I’m not going to kill him, and I can’t free him, or he’ll run off and tell Bellatrix all sorts of things about the Order.”

“You might give him to Narcissa,” Luc suggested. “She’s a pureblood, and a Black, originally. She’ll straighten him out, and she can keep him from communicating with her sister.”

“That’s a good idea; I’ll talk to her about that later, then.”

“I rather suspect the headmaster will object to our little spy going to one of the Malfoys,” said Severus.

“Well, what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. We’ll just say Kreacher’s died or I told him to stay out of sight in the house or something. Not like he was really cooking for anyone or anything.”
“That’s rather Slytherin of you; I must be a bad influence,” Sev said with a smirk.

“Well, if I hadn’t had a fight with Draco before the sorting, I might not have talked the hat out of putting me in Slytherin,” Harry said, grinning at the two men giving him incredulous looks. “Just think, I could have terrorized you from within your own house!”

The potions master snorted. “I could have kept a closer eye on you, I think you mean? Perhaps I might even have kept you from half the hare-brained schemes you’ve got up to over the years.”

The young man huffed. “I think you underestimate how easily trouble finds me. It’s not as though I go looking for it!”

“Except when you do?” He raised a single eyebrow, expression smug.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Have it your own way, then. What are you going to tell the headmaster about me?”

Severus frowned, looking back at the letter. “As little as possible. I’m highly displeased with his interference in your life.”

“Why? He’s always done it, hasn’t he?”

“Perhaps, but choosing to return you to those muggles once he knew about their past treatment of you was unconscionable.” A muscle jumped in the man’s jaw. “I told him what would happen, and he ignored me.”

“But you came and got me,” Harry said. “It’s worked out alright in the end.”

“Worked out?! You could have—” Sev cut himself off. Luc patted his hand, and the three sat in silence for several minutes.

Harry shifted uncomfortably. He hadn’t thought about how worried Severus had probably been at seeing him so badly injured. He was enough used to being badly hurt that it didn’t make so much an impression on him, but he must have been quite bad for his mentor to be so angry. “I’m sorry,” Harry said. “It must have been upsetting to you, seeing me like that.”

Severus nodded shortly, glaring at the note in his hand. “I’d better make an appearance,” he said, standing up with an expression of distaste. “If all goes well, I should return soon.” He dropped a kiss on Luc’s lips and squeezed Harry’s shoulder gently, before striding from the room. He took the stairs quickly, and soon found himself in the formal sitting room. Taking a handful of flopowder, he threw it down in the fireplace, and called out his destination and the password to allow him through: “Hogwarts, Headmaster’s Office—Acid Drops.” He strode into the green flames, elbows tucked in, spun wildly through the floo network, and stalked out the other end. The headmaster was sitting behind his desk.

“You wished to see me, Albus?” The potions master walked to the desk, but did not sit down.

“Yes, Severus, thank you for coming promptly.” The elderly wizard fixed him with a serious expression. “I confess that I had expected to hear from you much sooner. When members of the order did not hear from Harry for several days, they visited the Dursley home—as promised—only to be told that Harry and all of his belongings had disappeared the night before his birthday. Since you had secured permission to retrieve him on that date, I assured the others that this had
likely occurred, but I confess myself puzzled why neither of you have contacted any other member of the order since then.” He raised his eyebrows in mild reproof. “I’m sure this was an oversight on your part, though I would like an explanation.”

Severus met his gaze. “An explanation? Very well. Lupin told the boy’s relatives about Black’s death, no doubt hoping to win him some sympathy with those detestable…” He caught himself, taking a deep breath. “As a result of this knowledge, Harry’s uncle felt quite safe terrorizing him, and went so far as to bodily assault him two days before his birthday. I arrived the following evening to remove him from their home, and found him unconscious from life-threatening wounds. Had I not arrived when I did, the boy might have been dead of blood-poisoning within the week.” He let a sneer overtake his features. “Because you insisted he be returned to the tender mercies of Vernon and Petunia Dursley, your precious Golden Boy nearly died.”

“I—he—surely you exaggerate?” Dumbledore said, eyes wide.

“I do not!” Severus snarled. Drawing his wand, he conjured a vial and placed his wandtip to his temple. Concentrating on the memory he wished to show—starting with the point-me spell in the entranceway of the Dursley home, and ending with him picking Harry up to carry him outside—he drew his wand away, removing the silver string of memory and directing it to fill the vial in his hand. Once he was done, he held the vial out to the headmaster, glaring at him. “Take it,” he spat.

Dumbledore did so, grasping the vial clumsily in his curse-damaged hand, and summoning his pensieve with the other, directing it onto the flat expanse of his desk. He poured the memory in, and glanced up at Severus, whose glower had not abated. With obvious reluctance, the headmaster leaned forward into the memory.

In the silence that followed, the phoenix Fawkes chirped to draw Sev’s attention. When he looked at the bird, it trilled a short melody at him. He instantly felt some of his anger falling away and his spirits lifting. He gave the bird a wry little half-smile. “Cheater,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I won’t hurt him, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Fawkes bobbed his head back and forth with a bubbling noise like a laugh. “Hush, you—I don’t want to be nice to him today. He hurt Harry, badly.” The bird seemed to grow serious at that, cocking his head to one side and looking between Severus and the headmaster. When Fawkes looked back at him, he felt a light pressure brush across his mind. His eyes widened. Fawkes could read minds?

Before he could consider this further, the headmaster was withdrawing from the pensieve, and Severus fixed his features back into a glare—not hard, since he really was quite angry with the man. Dumbledore was refusing to meet his gaze however, staring instead down at his withered and blackened right hand where it rested on the desk before him.

“His uncle, you say?” The headmaster said.

“Yes, his uncle. Two of the boy’s ribs were broken, and his back, as you saw, was shredded—and already infected by the time I arrived. Circe knows they’ve never willingly sought medical help for him before; I’ve no expectation they would have done so this time, either.” His eyes bored into the hunched figure behind the desk. “And do you want to know his crime?” Severus hissed out. “After days of starvation, Harry dared to steal a glass of milk and some toast. From his family, the one you tasked with raising your precious pawn.”

Dumbledore finally met his eyes. “I only did what I thought was right, my boy,” he said softly. “Severus, please. You cannot believe me so heartless that I would willingly consign him to that level of brutality.” His gaze implored Severus for forgiveness, but the younger man was implacable.
“I told you not to return him there, Albus—I warned you.”

“Had I any idea this would be the result—”

“Would you have allowed him to go elsewhere for the summer holiday?” The potions master’s eyes narrowed.

“There are enchantments I could have cast to keep him safe from his uncle. Arrangements could have been made. I had no idea—”

The potions master swiped one hand through the air to silence him, expression thunderous. “I showed you the results of Poppy’s scan! You knew what he had suffered!”

“I thought perhaps his cousin—boys can be so rough, Severus, as you well know.”

“This is precisely why we have not been in communication with the order!” Severus drew himself up, occluding fiercely to regain control of his anger. He continued in a clipped voice. “The wolf thoughtlessly endangered him, and I will not allow you to do to that boy what was done to me as a student. Harry has written his friends to inform them that he is safe—and he is safe, Albus, though I will not be telling you where.”

“Is that really necessary, my boy? I merely wish to ensure he is protected from Voldemort—”

“And I, in turn, seek to protect him from you. You are too much the general to have care of him, I see that now.”

“I assure you that I am not a danger to Harry.”

“Are you not?” Severus sneered. “Do not press me on this, Albus, or you will soon find both of us beyond your reach. You know of my vow to Lily; I protect Harry for her sake—and for his own, now. I mean for him to survive this war.”

“Very well. I cannot say I’m happy with this arrangement…”

“You have my word that he is entirely safe, and that will have to be enough for you. You know I take my duty seriously, especially when it comes to children who have suffered abuse.” His tone was acidic.

Dumbledore sighed. “Your point is made, Severus. I look forward to seeing you and Harry in two weeks, when the new term begins.” He looked sorrowful, but the potions master refused to soften towards him. Without another word, Severus spun on his heel and stalked from the office, fuming.

The gall of the man, trying to guilt him into handing Harry over! His fists clenched as he stormed down the stairs and headed for the gates. As soon as he was beyond the wards, he spun into apparation, appearing in the dueling practice chambers on the second floor of the manor. He snapped out the charm that activated the golems, and four of them rushed him, shooting off low-level jinxes to incapacitate him. He deployed a shield spell and rolled away from them, catching two with a spell designed to eviscerate a human opponent.

The two golems he’d felled were replaced by another two as he jinxed a third one, blasting it away and into a wall. Before the fourth could reach him, he dropped under its guard and used a bone-breaking hex to knock its legs out. He blinded a fifth, collapsed the sixth one’s ribcage,
sliced the torso of a seventh one using a spell of his own design, and lashed the eighth with a whip of flames. As each golem was destroyed, the violence of their spells increased; he met them with the most deadly curses in his own arsenal.

He kept going until he was drenched in sweat and out of breath. Finally, he cancelled the animation on the golems, which reassembled themselves, undamaged, against the far wall. Turning away, he left for the bedrooms on the next floor down, where he showered quickly and got into fresh clothes.

Feeling much better for the duel and the change, he set off to find his bondmate. He checked the master suite and Luc’s office, both of which were empty. He didn’t see him on the terrace, and turned back into the house. He found the blond in the next place he checked, which was the library. Harry and Luc were both there, surrounded by old textbooks and stacks of parchment.

“How was your meeting?”

He shook his head. “Ghastly—I’ve just got out of the dueling chamber.”

“That bad?” Luc gave him a surprised look.

“Indeed. What is all this?”

“I’ve heard back from the other governors—I’ll be taking the defense post this year.” The blond man smiled at Sev, who settled with one hip on the table’s edge. “Jeffreys sent along the curricula from the past two decades, and Harry has been helping me decide what to cover for each year. Gupta, Lupin, and Moody—Crouch, rather—left quite useful notes, and Quirrell’s are not entirely unusable, but Umbridge and Fleetley’s syllabi are quite worthless. Lockhart’s notes are nonsensical, but I gather that one who’s read his books might have an easier time making sense of them. I haven’t looked through the rest yet.”

The potions master glanced over the stacks of parchment, trying to remember the professors that coincided with his tenure. “I doubt you’ll find anything coherent in Ayers’s notes—that man was rather too flighty for the job, frankly. I remember that Rey was competent, until her near-drowning, and Perrot had good ideas, though his lectures were a bit unorthodox. I was sorry to see Virtanen go, as well. I wasn’t there for Maes, Oliver, or Coelho, so I can’t say anything about them…Burrell was absolutely appalling from a student’s perspective; Norwood was a bland teacher, but not an objectionable one.” He shook his head. “Circe, I haven’t thought about Burrell in years—he was such a useless man, he could have given Lockhart a run for his money!”

“When I remember Burrell now…You complained about him all that term after we bonded.”

“He was almost as boring as Binns, totally convinced we only needed theory to pass our N.E.W.T.s, and had the disconcerting ability to trip and fall over absolutely nothing. Fell out a window the week before exams, silly man, and was too badly injured to finish out the term.” He rolled his eyes.

“Well, I don’t remember all that; I just knew the best way to stop hearing about him was to kiss you senseless.” Luc laughed, pulling him down for a kiss.

Sev smirked against his lips. “Probably still a good tactic, honestly,” he murmured between kisses. When they separated, he looked over at Harry, who was seated at the end of the cluttered table,
failing to hide a grin behind his book. “I see that smile, imp. What are you working on now that Luc’s not distracting you with dusty old notes?”

Harry glanced up from the book in his hands, expression innocent. “Advanced defense texts—this one’s pretty good, actually, not too dry. Remus mentioned it in his notes; it might be good for the upper years. What did Dumbledore do to anger you so badly, anyway?”

He groaned. “That man! He’s so convinced of his own moral rightness…When I arrived, he took me to task for not contacting him the moment I’d secured you, and when I showed him part of my memory of that night, he said that he didn’t realize how bad it was there!”

“I thought you showed him the scan results,” Harry said, closing his book with a frown.

“I did! He refuses to accept that his decision was wrong. Regardless, I told him that you were safe now, and that I would not reveal your location, which he obviously wasn’t pleased about, the manipulative bastard…”

“You’re not in trouble, are you?” The young man eyed him with concern.

“No.” Severus smirked. “I made a vow to your mother to protect you, a vow he has invoked in the past to ensure my compliance with his wishes, but I used it against him this time. He wanted us to get closer last year—he can hardly complain now that it’s worked.”

“That explains this letter,” the boy said, waving a piece of parchment at him until Severus leaned over and plucked it out of his hand.

“How in Salazar’s name—”

“Fawkes,” Harry answered. The potions master grunted, eyes scanning over the parchment.

_Dear Harry,_

_I hope that you are recovering well from the trying events of last year. I hope you know that you may contact me at any time, if you have need. There are a couple of matters which I must address with you before the term starts, particularly a number of items you inherited from your godfather: to wit, I must know if you are now owner of the Order’s headquarters and the elf Kreacher. Simply call the elf Kreacher with intent to summon him, and he will come to your side if you are his new master. Please let me know as soon as you can whether he responds. Additionally, I have some information relevant to the coming conflict which it would behoove you to know, information about our mutual acquaintance, Tom Riddle. I will be contacting you early in the term to discuss a suitable time for what should be an illuminating series of meetings._

_One last thing: I have received notice from the Board of Governors that they have seen fit to appoint the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor this year, given my inability to secure someone earlier in the holiday. This year’s DADA professor will be Lucius Malfoy, who I know you’ve had a contentious relationship with in the past. Given your willingness to sit through many detentions with Umbridge’s blood quill, I am concerned that you will find yourself in similar trouble this year. Under normal circumstances, I would trust Professor Snape to look out for you, but he may not be so unbiased in the case of Mr Malfoy, as the two of them are very close. Do try to avoid being alone with our new DADA professor, and if you cannot avoid a detention, please notify me, and I shall assign it to another professor._

_I look forward to seeing you in a fortnight, when the term begins._

_Regards,_

_A. Dumbledore_
Harry had been watching the stormy expression building on Sev’s face as he read, and shrugged when the man looked up at him incredulously. “Yeah. I thought his attempt to get me to distrust you was especially transparent. Only reason I didn’t set the thing on fire was I figured you’d want to read it for yourself.”

Severus looked over the note again, somewhat mollified by this. On the second reading, his attention caught on the second-to-last paragraph. “You said this morning that Tom Riddle was the Dark Lord’s name before his rise to power?” he asked. Harry nodded. “I wonder what Albus has to tell you about him. I was under the impression not much was known about his early life.”

Lucius was frowning. “Riddle’s not a pureblood name that I’ve heard before.”

“That’s probably because it’s a muggle name.” Harry looked back and forth between the two men, who were both staring at him, looking gobsmacked for the second time that day. “Didn’t the headmaster tell you, Sev? The Dark Lord’s a half-blood, like us. Well, like you—his mum’s the witch, but he’s named for his muggle father, Tom Riddle, and his mum’s father, Marvolo.”

“That could be Marvolo Gaunt,” Lucius said, consideringly. “They were direct descendants of Salazar Slytherin, but they all died out back in the 1930s—or so I had heard. The timing seems about right… I know there was a daughter, but she vanished around 1920 or so. Narcissa might know more.”

“If his mum was a Gaunt, that would make sense why he’s a parslemouth,” said Harry. “Riddle did say he was the heir of Slytherin. I don’t know how he learned that though—he was raised in a muggle orphanage.” Another stunned silence followed his words.

“He—I want to be sure I’ve understood: did you just say that a half-blood student raised in the muggle world became the Dark Lord?” Severus looked sickly fascinated at the revelation.

“Well, yeah. I gather it was a really awful orphanage,” Harry replied with a shrug. “And he was in Slytherin. I think he was like you, Sev—he learned all the pureblood stuff, the history and manners and all that, to get by.”

“That does make sense,” the man said, eyes narrowed in thought.

“How did he come to be called V-Vold…that name?” Luc asked.

Harry snagged a scrap of parchment and wrote out the name that he’d last seen in the Chamber of Secrets: *tom marvolo riddle*. Under that he wrote *i am lord voldemort*, and turned it so they could both see. “It’s a—what’s it called? Anagram?” Severus nodded again. “He said he made it up when he was a student, for his friends to use, as a way to distance himself from his muggle father. He wanted a name that other wizards would be afraid of.”

“Yes, well, the Taboo didn’t help,” Severus grumbled.

“The what?”

“During the last war, the Dark Lord laid a curse on his own name. If anyone uttered it aloud, he or the Death Eaters could apparate to that location, even through most protections, and attack everyone there. That’s why so few people say the name, even now. I wouldn’t be surprised if he renews the curse now that he’s been revealed again.”
Horror dawned on Harry’s face. “Dumbledore’s been encouraging me to say his name since my first year. The muggleborns…Hermione!”

“I’ve always considered his habit of encouraging that to be terribly reckless,” Severus sighed. “Perhaps you ought to write to Miss Granger about that tonight.” He shifted to the end of the table, where Harry was still looking pale and frightened, and gathered him into a hug. “Do not dwell on it. You know now, and you can inform your friends why it is important not to use his name. It is unlikely that the muggleborn students have any reason to say his name outside of the school year, and it may be that the name is not yet taboo once more.”

“I…yeah, you’re right. I just—I wish I knew before now. Merlin, to think what could have happened…” He shuddered and tucked his head against Sev’s neck. After a couple of minutes, he took a deep breath and drew back enough to look up into the man’s face. “I’m gonna go write Hermione now, actually. I’ll see you at dinner, yeah?”

“Very well.” Severus dropped a kiss on his hair and let him go. Harry gave him a wan smile and left the room. Sev turned to his bondmate, who was gathering up the parchments and texts around him.

“He’ll be alright. He’s just had a bit of a shock.” Lucius walked over to his bondmate and took his hand.

“I know, but…it’s Albus, again.” The man let out a frustrated groan. “I wish I could keep Harry away from him for good. Albus just sees him as a pawn in the war; he’s proven himself far too willing to gamble with the boy’s safety, and now he’s trying to drive us apart.”

“We won’t let him. The more he tries to wedge himself between the two of you, the more he will alienate Harry. The boy’s devoted to you, Sev—the way he looks at you…he won’t be driven away. It will be alright, love.”

Luc cast a levitation charm on the assorted parchments and books. “Come on, it’s almost dinner time. Let’s put these in my office.” He pressed a kiss to Sev’s mouth and then tugged him out of the library by one hand. Severus followed, hoping to Zeus the Allfather that his bondmate was right.
Be Glad That He Is Quick With a Shield

Chapter Notes

This chapter is ridiculously long, I know—10,148 words, in fact. It contains minor, canon-typical violence and a panic attack.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The day after Severus met with Dumbledore, he and Harry spent the entire day brewing together, eating lunch in the lab and only emerging for supper. When they entered the dining room, Harry was surprised to find Narcissa missing.

Luc noticed his puzzled look. “Cissy is off visiting one of her paramours, so it’s just the four of us, tonight,” he explained. Harry nodded, taking his usual seat next to Severus and across from Draco, who sat in the heir’s place at his father’s right side.

The meal appeared before them just a moment later, and they began to eat. It was, as usual, delicious, Harry thought—some kind of bite-sized hors d’oeuvre, followed by a delicately prepared fish in a white sauce. They talked quietly as they ate, and he listened to Luc telling Sev about his early thoughts for the DADA curriculum. Soon, they were onto the dessert course, a delicious mango sorbet, and Harry savored every bite.

Living in Malfoy Manor for the past couple of weeks had greatly expanded his palate. He was as happy eating bangers and mash, but he had to admit that nothing he’d eaten here had been bad, just very different and kind of fancy. He’d developed a love of the desserts whipped up by the Malfoy elves. Narcissa had sussed out his love for treacle tart and fruit sorbets rather quickly, and he’d happily found them appearing quite often with his tea and dinners. He’d caught Luc watching him enjoy these treats with a satisfied expression on his face that had made Harry blush—it was still odd having people he lived with be so happy to make him happy. His dorm-mates were teenage boys, after all, and the Dursleys were, well, the Dursleys. He definitely wasn’t used to so much affection, but he loved it. He smiled around his spoon, glancing up to find Luc watching him again with a pleased little smile of his own.

They lingered over dessert, but soon enough they had all finished. Sev was the first to stand. “I have to bottle the potions from this afternoon—they should be cool enough now,” he said to Harry, resting one hand for a moment on his shoulder. He pressed a quick kiss to Luc’s mouth and left the room.

Lucius stood as well, nodding at Harry and Draco. “I have some work to finish up in my office, boys. Have a good night.”

“Good night, father,” Draco said.

“Good night, Lucius,” Harry echoed. He gave Draco a polite nod, leaving the dining room through the entrance closest to his suite. He wanted to write a letter to Ron; their relationship had been a bit strained lately—the redhead hadn’t adjusted well to Harry’s improved relationship with Severus—but the prat was still his best friend. Once he was done writing, he thought he might read more of his mother’s journals. There was some fascinating spell theory in there, and he suspected that his marks in Transfiguration and Charms were going to improve vastly this year.
“Potter!” He turned, eyebrows shooting up in surprise. Draco had mostly been sullenly ignoring him since he’d found out Harry was living in the manor, but now he was bearing down on him with fire in his eyes. Harry resisted the urge to back away, standing his ground.

“He’s been brewing with you, hasn’t he?” The other boy spat. “That’s why I haven’t been allowed in the lab since July!”

“Uh…” Harry stared at him in alarm, eyeing the wand tightly clenched in the blond’s trembling hand.

“Bloody Boy Who Lived, got to have everything you want. Well, this is my home, and my father, and my godfather, and, and—you can’t have them! Sectumsempra!” Draco snarled, slashing his wand to shoot some spell at Harry, who snapped out a shield spell without even drawing his wand. A transparent blue dome appeared around him and the burst of white streaking towards him rebounded and hit Draco.

Harry watched in horror as three big gashes burst open on Draco’s chest, blood spraying as he went down with a shout. He stumbled towards the still figure, falling to his knees beside the other boy.

“Mimi!” he shouted, staring at Draco’s pale, blood-spattered face.

The elf appeared before him. “What can Mimi—Master Draco!”

“Get Severus, Mimi, get him and bring him here! Tell him Draco’s been hurt!” Harry’s hands fluttered uselessly in the air above the other boy’s chest, too afraid to touch him.

Moments later, Severus pounded up the nearby staircase and slid to his knees beside the both of them. His gaze took in the shell-shocked expression on Harry’s face and the familiar slashes of his own spell. Whipping out his wand, the man traced it over the wounds, repeatedly intoning “Vulnera sanentur” as he went. He watched the wounds begin to knit shut, and sighed in relief. The dark-haired boy at his side let out a strangled sort of sob. Before Sev could say a word, Harry had leapt up and disappeared down the hall towards his rooms.

Frowning, Severus waved his wand, hovering the still body of his godson. “Mimi,” he called. The elf appeared, wringing her hands. “Can you please clean this area, and then ask Lucius to meet me in Draco’s rooms?”

Bowin, the elf snapped her fingers and disappeared, vanishing the mess along with her. Severus walked down the hall, turning left towards the family quarters, with Draco silently floating behind him. Entering the heir’s suite, he pushed through the door to the boy’s room and tugged down the bedclothes. He gently deposited the unconscious boy on the bed, vanishing the tattered shirt and cleaning the drying blood off his face and torso. Sev summoned a blood-replenishing potion and a jar of dittany, spelling the first into the boy’s stomach and spreading the second liberally on the yet raw-looking wounds across the boy’s chest—the brown liquid would prevent major scarring. That done, he wiped his hands on a handkerchief and stood, spelling the bedclothes up and over Draco.

Lucius stuck his head into the room, looking confused. “Sev, what—”

Severus turned away from his godson, who was just beginning to stir, and walked to the door, stepping out and shutting it behind him. “There was some kind of incident between Harry and Draco earlier. Harry had a house elf fetch me from my potions laboratory, so that I could see to
your son’s wounds.” He didn’t look at the blond man, just stared down at his own hand, clenched around his wand.

Lucius’s stiffened in alarm. “Draco was hurt?”

A muscle jumped in Severus’s jaw. “Yes. I don’t know anything further, but I would conjecture that he attacked Harry and was injured in return. He’s been behaving abominably towards the boy since he learned of his presence here.” Severus finally looked up, fixing his lover with a brief but fierce glare, before turning away. “I’ve healed Draco, and there should be no lasting damage—perhaps a scar or two, but nothing more. I am going to look for Harry and make sure he was not also injured. You may wish to stay and speak with your son, as he seems to be waking.”

Without another word, Severus stalked away from Draco’s bedroom and out into the hall, heading briskly for the guest quarters. He was aware of Lucius following him, but he was too upset to further acknowledge his bondmate. He’d chastised Lucius in the past for his over-indulgent attitude toward the boy, but the man had failed to check his son’s more distasteful traits. Perhaps it was unjust to be so angry over Draco’s tendency towards jealousy and vengefulness—tendencies of which Severus himself was not innocent—but he was in no mood to be charitable: he was sure the incident was entirely his godson’s fault.

He knew that Draco knew of the slashing curse Severus had invented, and he was almost positive that Harry did not. That didn’t justify his anger towards Lucius, who couldn’t have known his son would behave quite so foolishly as this, but Severus was letting himself be angry at the other man anyway, because he wanted to be angry right now; so long as he was angry, he wasn’t scared—or so he told himself.

“He’s back in his rooms, I believe,” called one portrait as they approached her. “Went tearing by like a mad thing!” she continued, sneering her disapproval. Severus strode past without comment, his lips pressed firmly shut against the scathing retort on the tip of his tongue.

The two men continued in silence, until they reached the sitting room in Harry’s suite. Just outside the boy’s bedroom door, Severus stopped short and drew himself up, breathing deeply and packing his anger and fear away behind his occlumency shields. It would not do for Harry to see him angry—if the boy’s expression earlier was anything to go on, he was in a fragile state. Equanimity temporarily restored, Severus pushed open the door.

He immediately frowned; he didn’t see Harry anywhere. The bed and chair were both empty, as was the window-seat, and Harry’s broom was laid across the top of his trunk. Severus drew his wand and laid it across his palm. “Point me Harry Potter,” he said. The wand spun to point at the wardrobe standing against one wall. He ignored Lucius’s dismayed look and led the way over, dropping into a crouch before the large piece of furniture.

“Lumos,” Severus murmured, lighting the tip of his wand to see better in the dusk-shadowed room. Reaching out, he slowly drew one of the doors open. Inside hung several robes and a couple of cardigans; beneath them, hunched miserably in the corner, was Harry. It should have been a tight fit for him—the wardrobe wasn’t very big—but he was still uncomfortably small for his age. The boy was jammed as far back as he could get, legs folded under him, arms clenching around his ribs in that same sad parody of a hug. Blood was splattered across his shirt and trousers.

Trying to get a better view of the boy, Severus reached up to push the hanging robes aside. Harry flinched away from him and the potions master froze. Slowly lowering his arm, he spoke as gently as he could. “Harry, what happened?”
Shattered green eyes gazed up at him, but there was no response.

“Harry, I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s happened. I want to help you—will you let me?” Still no response. Severus changed tacks. “Are you hurt?”

After a long pause, the boy shook his head.

Well, that was something, at least. “Can you tell me what happened?” A listless shrug was the only reply. Severus pursed his lips. “Did you cast that spell?” Harry shook his head, beginning to tremble. Severus breathed in deeply, willing himself to remain calm. “What did Draco say to you, Harry?” He was unprepared for the boy’s response; at his words, Harry flew into a fit, shouting wildly and digging his fingers into his hair, pressing even further into the corner into which he’d wedged himself.

“Stupid bloody—aaah!” Harry stared through Severus as though he couldn’t see him. “No one ever—freaks don’t deserve—mustn’t fight back, can’t hurt him—he’ll be furious with me!” He ended on a distraught wail, pulling viciously at his own hair.

“Harry, no…” Severus laid his wand down and reached out, ignoring the way Harry flinched back so hard that his head smacked into the back wall of the wardrobe. He gently pried the boy’s hands loose, and lowered them to his lap, tangling their fingers together. “Don’t do that, please. Don’t hurt yourself.”

Harry stared at their joined hands, breathing in long jagged pulls and hiccupping sobs. Slowly, he curled down, pressing his forehead to the backs of his own hands. “Blood,” he whispered. “So much blood. I didn’t mean for—it was just a shield!” He choked on a sob.

Severus freed one hand to brush the boy’s hair back from his face. It was as he had suspected. “This isn’t the Dursley’s, Harry. We are not your relatives. We won’t be mad at you for defending yourself.”

Harry looked up at him, eyes flickering between Severus and the man behind him. “He’ll send me away! I’ve ruined everything…”

“I won’t, I promise.” Lucius spoke for the first time since they’d entered the room. Harry shrunk from his voice, pulling away from Severus’s hands, and Luc fell silent once more.

“Harry, please come out,” Severus said. “No one here is going to hurt you. We just want to make sure you are not injured.”

Harry didn’t acknowledge his words, but the boy’s gaze darted again to the blond man behind him.

Severus glanced over his shoulder at his bondmate. “Lucius, I need you to move back.”

Luc was obviously unhappy with the request, but he moved, drifting away to observe them from across the room. Severus turned back to the figure huddled on the floor of the wardrobe.

“There, now—he’s moved away, Harry. Will you come out and let me look you over?” Severus offered a hand to the boy.

After several long, silent moments, Harry scrambled forward, wrapping his arms around the
surprised potions master. Severus picked up the boy and carried him to the bed. When he tried to get Harry to release him, the boy’s arms tightened instead, so Severus sat on the bed with Harry in his lap and summoned his wand from the floor. He cast a diagnostic charm, and sighed in relief when it revealed no new damage. Deciding that the boy wasn’t likely to let him go, he shifted until he could relax against the headboard; Harry curled up in his arms.

Lucius moved the chair from Harry’s desk closer to the bed and sat down, watching them. The blond man wasn’t sure if Harry was still skittish, and decided to maintain his distance for the moment. He murmured a spell, and the candles around the room gently flickered to life, one after the other.

As the silence drew on, Harry visibly calmed in Severus’s arms, but made no move to separate from the man. “Better?” Sev asked. The boy nodded, then shrugged.

“Why did you hide in the wardrobe?” Lucius asked, voice soft. He was pleased to see the boy didn’t react negatively this time.

“Don’t have a cupboard,” Harry said. He shrugged again half-heartedly, though he seemed more lucid than he had before. “When I’m bad, I go to my cupboard. Or, I—I used to…”

Severus and Lucius processed that in silence.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Harry said quietly, when neither man spoke for several minutes. “The cupboard wasn’t—that bad, honestly. It was too small for Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia to fit; no one ever went in there but me. I was—I was safe in my cupboard…”

Severus’s grip on him tightened instinctually. “But it was wrong of them to put you there, Harry,” he said.

The boy nodded, forehead pressed to Severus’s shoulder. “I know, I do, but they still did it, and no one can change it now. I learned eventually that most children get bedrooms and not cupboards, but I was used to it by then. They didn’t move me into Dudley’s second bedroom until they saw my Hogwarts letter was addressed to my cupboard. And I always knew it wasn’t properly my room, it was still Dudley’s, somehow. The cupboard was always mine, though. It wasn’t normal, but it was all I had.”

Severus sighed. “Alright. Will you tell me what happened with Draco, then?”

Harry stiffened, his breath hitching, but he still answered. “He started shouting at me. I guess he is jealous of me, for, for having your attention this summer, both of you. He yelled some spell at me, and I put up a shield, and the spell rebounded on him. He was bleeding so much…” He buried his face in Severus’s chest, muffling his words. “I didn’t mean to hurt him.”

The man’s jaw clenched, but his voice remained gentle. “You did well, Harry. It wasn’t your fault he attacked you. I am most displeased with my godson at the moment. Do you know what that spell was?” Severus asked. Harry shook his head. “It is a dangerous dark arts spell. He could have killed you. Over a petty little issue of not receiving enough attention.” He narrowed his eyes at Lucius over Harry’s head.

The blond man swallowed, nodding. “I fear that your past reprimands regarding my son’s willful conduct have proven warranted, Severus. I will be dealing with him tomorrow. Now, however, it is getting late, and none of us are at our best. We should retire for the night.” He raised his eyebrows in silent question.
Severus shook his head. “I will stay here with Harry tonight,” he said, hand running soothingly over the boy’s back. He could tell that Harry was already half-asleep from the stress of the evening’s events.

“Very well. Good night, love; good night, Harry.” Lucius left, the door snicking shut quietly behind him.

Severus brushed Harry’s raven locks away from his face, stroking a hand over the gentle waves in his hair. They had been doing well—or so it had seemed. Harry was very good at hiding his trauma, rather like one of Severus’s snakes in that way. He fought a sigh. The boy had faced so much already, and there was more to come; how were they ever to heal him?

“You don’t have to,” Harry murmured, belatedly. “Don’t have to stay…”

“I want to,” Severus replied.

“Oh,” Harry said, voice tiny. “Okay.”

“Do you want a dreamless sleep draught?” The potions master asked.

“Please.” The draught was summoned with a murmur, and the boy drank it down. “Thank you, sir,” he said.

“Of course.” Severus didn’t comment on the honorific. He also did not let go, holding the boy in his arms and running a hand over his hair until he was sure he had slipped into sleep. With a wave of his wand, he switched Harry’s blood-spattered clothes for a nightshirt, and then laid him down and pulled the duvet over him. After a moment of hesitation, Sev transformed his own clothes into a nightshirt and lay down in the bed, leaving a significant gap between them.

He knew he was being silly, that Harry hadn’t been harmed at all, but he could admit—if only to himself—that he’d been scared. He’d been scared for the boy’s safety, and he wanted to be close, to reassure himself. Tomorrow, everything would be fine, but tonight he would assuage his own worries. He reached out a hand to brush Harry’s hair away from his face, and then doused the lights with a whispered word and closed his eyes to sleep.

Severus woke up in the middle of the night, confused. He wasn’t in his own bed. He listened to the light breathing beside him; not Luc? That was right, he remembered; he’d slept in Harry’s room. He shuddered, remembering how close to danger they’d come. Reaching out, he laid his hand on Harry’s arm. The boy shifted under his touch, but did not wake. Severus allowed the contact to comfort him, and Harry’s deep, even breathing quickly lulled him back to sleep.

The next time he awoke, the room was bathed in early morning light, and he found that he’d shifted in his sleep and wrapped himself around his bed-partner. The young man was nestled between his arms, and he’d spooned up against Harry’s back. Sev froze, hoping he wasn’t awake yet.

“He-hello, sir. Uh, Severus, I mean. Good morning?” Harry’s voice was small and uncertain.

Severus cleared his throat, schooled his features placid, and unwound his arms from the small frame in front of him. “Good morning, Harry,” he said, once he’d put some distance between them.
“Did, uh, did you sleep okay?”

“I slept well, thank you. And yourself?” He peered at Harry with concern.

The young man nodded. “The potion worked, of course. Thanks for that, for taking care of me.”

“Thank you for letting me take care of you,” Severus responded. He slid off the other side of the bed. “I shall let you get ready for the day. See you at breakfast.” He smiled and left, crossing to the room he and Luc were sharing in Harry’s suite, which he found empty. He frowned, wondering where his bondmate had gone, but began to prepare for the day—he would likely be at breakfast, and Sev could ask then.

He considered what to do about his morning erection, which he fervently hoped Harry had not noticed. With Luc gone, he decided to have a wank in the shower, and he couldn’t help imagining the young man as he’d just seen him, rumpled from sleep. With that pleasing image in mind, he stroked himself to completion, shuddering under the warm spray. After a moment, he speedily scrubbed himself down and went out to dress, mind turning to the day ahead. He wasn’t yet ready to see Draco, and he was still worried about Harry, though not quite so fearful as he’d been the night before. He considered the events of the previous evening with a frown. He wouldn’t be surprised if the young man drew away from Luc as a result of the incident. Last night he’d seemed terrified that he’d be hurt or sent away, simply for defending himself. Those blasted Dursleys… Sev gave his own reflection a frustrated glare as he buttoned his shirt. This could set them back. “Damnit,” he muttered.

When Sev left, Harry stared after him for a minute or two, thankful the other man hadn’t seemed to notice his erection, which hadn’t abated despite their awkward conversation. When he’d woken up in Sev’s arms, he’d felt the man pressed against his back, and his body had reacted. He knew the moment the man had awoken, too, as he’d gone stiff and still behind Harry. He thought about the taut length of Sev’s body, and palmed himself with a quiet groan. He buried his face in the pillows—he could smell the faint scent of herbs that he associated with the older man—and thrust into his hand, finishing quickly.

He lay still for long moments, just breathing, then his hand groped for his wand on the bedside table, and he muttered scourge to clean himself up. Dragging his way out of bed, he hurried through his shower and pulled on his clothes, nervous about breakfast in spite of himself. He wasn’t worried any more that Luc would send him away, but he wasn’t looking forward to seeing Draco again. Maybe he’d just eat in the sitting room instead. It wasn’t very Gryffindor of him, but he desperately wanted to hide in his rooms all day. With a sigh, he grabbed one of Lily’s journals and carried it out to the sofa; he’d read while he waited for the others.

As Harry and Sev were waking and preparing for the day, Lucius perched on the sofa in the sitting room of the heir’s suite, waiting. His face was set, expression stony, gaze cool. He stared at Draco’s bedroom door patiently, unmoving.

When Draco opened his door to leave for breakfast, he stilled at the forbidding expression on the man’s face. “Father?” he enquired tentatively, but received no response. He smoothed his robes nervously as the silence lengthened, trying not to squirm too obviously.

Finally, Lucius spoke. “I don’t think I have ever been so disappointed in you before,” he said coldly. Draco flinched like he’d been slapped. “You attacked a guest in our home. I promised Severus that I would do everything I could to keep Harry safe here, and you nearly killed him.” The boy hunched his shoulders. “And why? Because you’re jealous of our attention?”
“Why is he even here?” Draco muttered mulishly.

Luc pinched the bridge of his nose. It was too early to be dealing with this attitude, but he needed to get this out of the way. “I should have told you sooner, I suppose. Not that it in any way excuses your actions.” He took a deep breath. “On his birthday, through the magic of my heritage, we discovered that Harry is my second bondmate. At midnight, when he turned 16, Severus and I were drawn to the home of his relatives. We retrieved him and brought him here. We did not immediately tell you because we wanted him to have time to settle in and adjust, and because Severus feared—correctly, as it turns out—that you would react badly to his presence here.”

He studied the boy, who had gone pale when he mentioned that Harry was his bondmate. “Severus blames me for your ill behavior, and he is entirely right to do so. I have indulged you too much in the past, I see that now. I never thought it would lead to this, that you would attack one of my bondmates.” He folded his arms and leveled a quelling glare on his son.

“I’m sure you realize that Harry will play an important part in this war. Our side in the coming conflict has changed as a result of my newfound relationship to him, which is yet another reason that your actions last night have shamed me. Be glad, for your own sake, that Harry is quick with a shield. You have seen how I protect Severus; if you had hurt Harry, I cannot guarantee you would have been safe from me.” Draco gave him a horrified look, which he ignored. “As it is, you are unlikely to see Severus until his ire has cooled, and I am confining you to these rooms for the next week. I will notify the elves you will be taking your meals here.”

“But—” Luc narrowed his eyes, and the boy cut himself off. “Yes, Father,” he said meekly.

“Good. Do you wish for my death?” Lucius asked.

Draco paled further. “No, Father,” he muttered.

“Then I needn’t tell you that information about my relationship with Harry is to be kept secret. Or must I extract a vow to ensure your discretion?”

“No, sir.”

“Very well. You will stay in your rooms and consider how you might have behaved better, and what consequences your actions would have had if Harry had not been able to muster a shield against your ill-conceived attack. I will inform Severus and your mother about your punishment. The elves will bring you breakfast shortly.” He looked his son over. The boy looked young and lost. “If you require something from outside of these rooms, you may always summon an elf and request it. Rest assured that I shall know if you leave these rooms, and you will be punished.” He stood and left without another word.

Outside the sitting room door, Luc laid his hand on the wall and murmured the charm that would ward the door and warn him if Draco left. He clenched his jaw; he’d never thought he would need to use the wards on the heir’s suite—his own father never had—but perhaps Lucius should have done so sooner. Severus was right; he’d let Draco behave as he wished for too long. Now, it might be too late, of course...He was 16, nearly done with his schooling and potentially past the point of correction. He sighed and turned to the next door, which led to Narcissa’s suite.

He knocked on the outer door, pushing it open and peering into her sitting room. “Cissy?” he called.

Her bedroom door opened, and she stepped out. “Luc?”
“Will you join me and the others in Harry’s sitting room for breakfast? There was a bit of an incident last night, and we need to discuss it.”

“What about Draco?” she asked.

“He’ll be eating in his rooms. I’ll explain at breakfast.”

“Very well—I’ll be there presently.”

He nodded and left, heading back to the suite he and Sev were sharing with Harry. When he entered the sitting room, he found Harry curled up on the sofa, reading. As he walked in, Sev exited their room and moved directly to the dining table.

“I assume we’ll be eating here this morning?” he asked.

Luc nodded. “I thought it would be more comfortable for Harry. I’ve asked Narcissa to join us, so she may be apprised of recent events.”

She entered the room behind him just then, and walked past him to give Harry a kiss on the cheek. “Good morning, dear. Sleep well?”

He nodded. “Yes, thanks, Cissy. Did you have a good night?”

“Oh, yes. Marcos was quite happy to see me.” She smiled smugly. “He’s always so…enthusiastic.” She raised her eyebrows suggestively and Harry laughed, following her to the table.

“I’ve notified Emi that we will be eating here this morning, and breakfast should be ready shortly,” Narcissa informed them, once they were seated around the table. “Now, Luc, what did you need to tell me?”

“As I mentioned, there was an incident last night.” He glanced at Harry, who was staring somberly down at the table in front of him. Severus reached out and clasped the young man’s forearm, receiving a grateful smile in reply.

Sev spoke up. “Following dinner, Luc and I both went to finish up work before bed. Once we had left, Draco confronted Harry in the hallway outside the dining room and yelled at him. Evidently, he was jealous of the attention Luc and I have been paying Harry.” He sneered lightly. “He cast sectumsempra at Harry, who managed to throw up a shield charm; Draco was struck by his own curse when it rebounded. Harry called a house elf to fetch me, and I was able to heal Draco; he should not have any scars from this encounter, since I was able to reach him so soon after the curse hit. Unfortunately, Harry had an…episode, and it took a great deal to calm him afterwards.” He pursed his lips. “I confess I am quite disappointed in my godson at the moment.”

“We both are,” Lucius said. “I spoke with him this morning to inform him of his punishment. Draco is confined to his rooms for the next week. If he’s smart, he’ll use the time to come up with a suitable apology for his appalling behavior. I have already instructed the house elves to serve his meals to him there.” Harry, who had tensed when he mentioned punishment, relaxed minutely. Luc pursed his lips, but didn’t comment on it. Those wretched muggles had much to answer for; he would never leave his son to starve, even as angry as he was.

Narcissa listened to all of this gravely. When they were done, she turned to Harry and took his hand. “I apologize for our son’s deplorable actions. You were not injured, I hope?” He shook his
head, and she smiled. “Are you quite recovered from your fright?”

“Yeah, Severus took care of me,” Harry said, blushing. “I’m alright.”

“I’m very glad to hear it, though I’m afraid you’ll have to put up with a bit of mothering from me today.” She patted his hand.

“I—I don’t mind,” he murmured, peering shyly up at her through his lashes.

Just then, the house elf Emi appeared and snapped her fingers. The table filled with food. Cissy patted his hand and turned to address the elf. “That will be all for now, thank you, Emi.” The elf curtsied and disappeared.

Narcissa filled Harry’s plate, giving him two poached eggs, two crepes, and several melon slices. She gave an approving nod when he immediately started eating, and began to fill her own plate. The four of them ate quietly, and when they were done, Cissy turned back to Harry. “I am going to go have a word with my son, and then I’d like to take you out, dear. I have some errands to run, if you’ll consent to join me, and then I’ve a bit of a treat for you.”

“Sounds great,” he said.

“Excellent. I will return soon.” She gave Luc and Sev a regal nod, and swept out of the room, heading back to the family suites. When she reached her son’s, she knocked firmly on the sitting room door. Receiving no response, she let herself in and proceeded to his bedroom door, knocking again.

At his muffled “come in” she pushed the door open and repressed the urge to sigh. He was sitting on his bed, picking half-heartedly at the tray of food beside him. It was obvious he had been crying. She slipped into the room and walked over to sit on the foot of his bed. He stared at her, looking miserable.

“Your father told me what you did last night. That was badly done of you, Draco.” Narcissa frowned at the boy, who just sniffled piteously. “You could have killed Harry, or—as happened—been gravely injured when he defended himself. It is fortunate that he called for Severus so quickly, or you might have been left with permanent damage, perhaps even died. You were lucky.”

He huffed at her rebuke, glaring at her. She raised a single eyebrow, watching him coolly until he dropped his gaze to his lap.

“I raised you better than this. Brawling in the halls, attacking a houseguest—what were you thinking, to behave so boorishly?”

“He’s been brewing with Severus! I always brew with him at the end of summer.”

“It is Severus’s prerogative to ask Harry to help him instead of you. He may ask anyone for help that he wishes; you are not entitled to brew with him. You are being quite childish, in fact; if you choose to behave like a spoiled child, I can’t see him ever allowing you in his lab again.” He pouted, crossing his arms. “Don’t be sullen, darling, it is unbecoming. Now, you know you were wrong; why are you continuing to behave this way?”

Draco threw up his hands. “Potter gets everything he wants, and I have to put up with it at school, but this is my home! Why is everyone always fawning over him?”
“This jealousy is unwarranted: your father does not love you less because Harry is his bondmate. Severus does not love you less. But there is much you do not know about Harry.” Narcissa pursed her lips, considering her next words carefully. “If I hear that you have taunted him about any of what I am about to tell you, your father’s anger will be nothing to mine.” She gave him a forbidding look.

“Yes, Mother,” he said, shoulders hunching under her gaze.

“Very well. As you may know, Harry was raised by muggles after his parents were killed. What you have not yet been told is that they badly mistreated him. This summer, when Sev and Luc went to retrieve him on his birthday, they found him nearly dead. He was starved and beaten, not for the first time. Within that home, he was treated worse than a house elf. His relatives ensured he would have no friends in the area to whom he might escape. Hogwarts was his refuge from that for 10 months of the year, but he has faced many dangers of a different kind there—even as he dealt with petty, childish treatment from many of his peers.” She eyed her son. He looked intensely uncomfortable, his face flushing at her last words.

“Harry has never told me about any of the fights you two had at school,” she said, “but Severus has shared a few in the past, and you don’t come out very well in the telling. In addition to the fights you have instigated, he has had to deal with a dedicated smear campaign from the Ministry. He has faced the Dark Lord four of the last five years at Hogwarts, and narrowly escaped death by dementor’s kiss twice. His godfather—our cousin, Sirius Black—offered Harry a loving home away from his muggle relatives, but Sirius died in the Ministry battle, leaving Harry alone and once again consigning him to the violence of the muggles. You have always been secure in the knowledge you are loved by your parents and godfather, but he has never had that. You have had every advantage in life, never starved, nor punished with violence. Yet you begrudge him the affection of his bondmates, now that he has it? That is very selfish of you.”

Draco’s lip trembled, and he began to cry silently. She patted her lap, and he slid down on the bed to rest his head where she had indicated. She ran a hand over his hair, soothing him.

“Father said Severus will not see me,” he whispered.

She sighed. “Even Severus could not stay angry with you forever. But you must show him that you understand what you did was wrong, and that you comprehend the potential consequences of your thoughtlessness.” He nodded under her palm, hiccupping quietly. “Now, I’ll be gone from the manor for most of the day, but I shall return before dinner, and we can eat in your sitting room, yes?”

“Thank you, Mother,” he whispered.

“Of course, dear. I shall see you tonight.” She dropped a kiss to the top of his head and left. When she got back to Harry’s suite, she paused in the sitting room door, sensing the tension immediately.

Sev was standing rigidly by the fireplace, glaring into it; Harry was leaning forward in his chair frowning at Luc, who was sitting on the sofa wearing an expression of hopeless frustration. When Narcissa arrived, Harry gave her husband one last pointed look, and then stood and crossed to her, slipping the glamor ring on as he walked. “Are we going now?” he asked.

“Yes, that will be best,” she said, stepping back out of the room. When he followed, she threaded her arm around his and led him away.
They were going to Whimsic Alley in Bristol, and she guided him expertly through the floo to the Dizzy Oak, a local pub there. When they left the pub, Harry could see crowds of Sunday morning shoppers, and he almost reached up to flatten his hair over his scar, before remembering that he wore a glamor. Narcissa led him gently but purposefully down the street and into one of the shops; the sign above the door read *Guérin & Ghaliya Jewelers*.

The man behind the counter was short and thin, fastidiously dressed in well-tailored black robes. “Ah, Lady Malfoy,” he said.

“That’s beautiful,” Harry said.

“I commissioned it specially for him, and I think he’ll be quite pleased with it,” Cissy said. “It represents his bondmates.” Harry looked at her in surprise. He could see the cauldron for Severus, but he wasn’t sure how any of it related to him. She caught his look.

“The eyes,” she said, “and his special ability.” He considered this for a moment and then nodded — she was talking about him being a parseltongue. Narcissa had come across him talking to a snake during one of his afternoon flying sessions: the beautiful adder was draped over a branch in one of the apple trees, enjoying the sun before her evening hunt, and he was hovering nearby to admire her. The snake had been wary of another human, and soon disappeared into the foliage, but she’d seemed pleased when he asked to visit with her again.

Cissy was fascinated by parseltongue, and encouraged him to see it as a gift. The inclusion of a snake in the pin could have represented the Slytherin connection that Sev and Luc shared, which meant it wouldn’t draw much attention from anyone who didn’t know about him, but the four of them would know what it really meant. Harry was touched by the gesture, and he smiled at her. “I’m sure they’ll all love it,” he said.

“Thank you, dear.” She turned back to the man at the counter. “It is exactly as I wished — thank you,” she said. The man beamed at her words. She replaced the lid on the box she had shown him, and took the other box waiting there, though she did not open it. “Give my regards to your wife, Armand.”

“Of course, Lady Malfoy.” He bowed, and she nodded in return, taking Harry’s arm and leading him back out of the store.

“Let’s go to the bookshop, yes?” At his nod, she led him further down the street and into a shop that had *Liber Libre* painted on its window. She released his arm and he set off to look through the section on defensive magics.

He skimmed the titles, his eyebrows climbing at a few of them—some of them were pretty dark-leaning. Taking a step back, he ran his eyes quickly over the books nearest him, noting that none of the Ministry-approved propaganda texts were among them. In that case… He headed down the aisle to the books on healing. In his reading, he’d found a few references to special healing magic that only parselsmouths could use, but the books he had were sparse on details. This shop seemed...
to oppose the Ministry’s moralizing views—perhaps they might have a book on this.

Half an hour later, Harry was forced to admit defeat. He would be leaving with two informative texts on healing, but there didn’t seem to be a single book that dealt extensively in healing parselmagic. It made sense, he supposed, since the talent was pretty rare, but it was still disappointing. He ducked back into the section on defensive magic and browsed there for a little while. When Narcissa came to collect him, she looked over his selections, nodding her approval.

“I’ll be curious what you think of this one,” she said, holding up one of the books on healing. “It’s standard for apprentice mediwitches and mediwizards. Are you thinking about going into healing after school?”

Harry shrugged, expression pensive. “I think I might like it, if I can. I picked my N.E.W.T. classes assuming I’d become an auror, but I don’t really want to anymore. I think I chose that just because other people expected it, you know? I’m supposed to be this savior and hunt down dark wizards and support the ministry and all, but I never thought about what I wanted to do until Sev asked me about it back in June.”

“Well, I think it would be a waste of your time and talents to become an auror, though perhaps this administration will be less useless than the last one. If you want to go into healing, you should do it. You’re magically strong, bright, and inquisitive—you’d be a welcome addition to the profession. If you’d like, I can begin asking around for someone willing to apprentice you, without using your name of course.” She raised an eyebrow in question.

“We’ll see,” Harry said. “I have to survive this war first.” And how likely was that, really? His mouth twisted bitterly, and Cissy gave him a piercing stare. He was aware that he may have given away too much of his thoughts, and he gave her a little half-smile and headed towards the front counter to check out.

With their purchases paid for, they stepped back outside. Narcissa took his arm once more, and they strolled down Whimsic Alley, stopping occasionally to speak with an acquaintance of hers or to peruse a shop. Eventually, they entered a neat little restaurant and were seated on their patio. She ordered for both of them, and they chatted about her mediwitch apprenticeship. It had been interrupted by her first miscarriage, and she’d taken time off to ease the stress on her body. After Draco was born, she’d taken a few years to be with him, and then gone back to her old mentor, Artemisia Emrys, who’d been quite happy to resume her instruction. Once she’d completed training, she had taken a position with St Mungo’s, treating difficult spell damage cases and rare ailments. She liked cracking puzzles and piecing together the most effective treatment, she said. Harry listened to her discussing one of her more tricky consultations: her eyes were alight, and he could tell that she was passionate about her work. It was fascinating, and a medical apprenticeship really did appeal to him...at the same time, the prophecy loomed. No, he wouldn’t think about that now; he focused intently on her story.

After they’d eaten, she said, “Now, I promised you a surprise,” and pulled something from her robe, which resized in her hand to reveal the second box from the jeweler’s shop. She placed it on the table and slid it across to him. “I know your birthday has already passed, but we were not yet so acquainted as we are now, and I took the liberty of selecting a late birthday gift for you.”

Harry took the box, which was slim and covered in black silk fabric; he opened it to find a necklace on a black velvet pillow. It was a silver snake with emerald eyes, much like the one on Luc’s pin, head rising majestically from its coiled body. The pendant hung from a fine silver chain. He traced the snake’s body with one finger and looked up at her with shining eyes.
Narcissa smiled at him “It has protective spells laid into it, so it won’t be damaged by casual wear. I also had them make it into a portkey. If you ever have need, grasp it in your hand, say ‘Centifolia,’ and it will take you to your room in Malfoy Manor. The chain should be long enough that you can hide it inside your shirt or robes.”

“I—thank you,” he said, feeling a warm glow in his chest. It was beautiful, but it was also more than that: it was a promise that the manor was home, that he would be protected and cared for there. He pulled the necklace from the box and, with a little fumbling, got it fastened around his neck and tucked under his robe, where its comforting weight rested against his chest.

“Of course, dear; I’m glad you like it.” She laid several coins on the table, and stood, gesturing for his arm. “Now, have you ever had gelato?”

When they returned to the manor that afternoon, Narcissa kissed his cheek and left him at his suite, heading towards her own rooms. Harry could see through the open door that Luc and Sev were both elsewhere. He took his books into his room, and looked speculatively out the window. They’d had a summer storm the morning before, but the weather was fairly nice at the moment, and he decided to fly for a bit before supper. Pushing open the doors to the terrace, he hopped on his broom and took off from inside his room, heading immediately to the rose gardens. He liked the smell of them; he always felt peaceful around roses, and flying in gentle circles above them had become one of his favorite activities at the manor.

He drifted through the balmy air, making a few lazy loops around the roses, then dipping down to skim over the grass. He wove along a footpath that wound through a decorative copse of trees, circling back over the lawn and lapping the property. Malfoy Manor and its huge expanse of grounds were covered by layers of obscurig wards and a strong muggle-repelling charm, so he wasn’t afraid of being seen by anyone he shouldn’t. Harry flipped into a series of barrel rolls that took him further from the stone wall he’d been following. He shot up into the air, squinting against the sun, flying up and up, and then diving down, picking up speed until the last possible moment, when he smoothly pulled up, his feet just brushing the grass of the lawn. He grinned—flying was one of his favorite things about being a wizard. He slowed down until he was once again drifting gently.

Glancing around, he saw the albino peacocks strutting about near a distant fountain, and a pair of house elves working near the apple trees. The Morgan’s Sweet were ready for picking—Lucius told him they made a delicious, light cider—but the Mary Barnett and Bedwyn Beauty wouldn’t be ready until after they left for Hogwarts. Harry thought wistfully of the harvest that would occur in October—he kind of wished he could be at the manor for it, since he was sure the house elves cooked and baked a variety of delicious things from the apples. Perhaps Narcissa would send him some if he asked her…He wondered if Luc would miss all this when he was at Hogwarts. Harry was excited for his sixth year, but he also wished he could stay at the manor. Despite the short time he’d been there, he was coming to love the place, and he could see himself living there for the rest of his life.

Thinking about the blond man reminded him of their argument from that morning, and he felt his good mood deflating. He’d tried to argue Luc into letting Draco off his punishment early. Harry figured getting cut open was about enough punishment, but Sev had been livid. He’d said that Draco’s punishment was long overdue, and that letting him off early sent the wrong signal, because the other boy needed to learn that there were serious consequences to his actions. It had quickly gotten tense and awkward, and Harry had been glad to escape with Cissy to go shopping.

To be honest, he probably should have got Luc alone before asking him; he might have had a
better chance of convincing him, then. Sev was very protective, and while Harry appreciated it, he felt bad that it was damaging the man’s relationship to his godson. He should probably go see Draco, he thought, find out if he and the other boy could make it up. In fact, he decided, he’d go right now, before dinner.

He turned his broom back towards the house, and spotted Sev watching him from Luc’s office. He couldn’t tell what the man’s expression was from a distance, and thought he might still be angry, so Harry shot off towards his suite without acknowledging that he’d seen him. He put his broom away, and left the suite, creeping by Luc’s office door when he passed it.

When he reached the family wing, however, he hesitated. Maybe he should leave it later. Did he really want to see the other boy right now? He didn’t think Draco would physically attack him again, not now, but he might still be angry and Harry didn’t fancy another row, even one that didn’t come to wands.

“Are you a Gryffindor or not?” he muttered to himself. Screwing up his courage, he knocked on the door to the heir’s suite.

After a moment, Draco opened the door. When he saw who it was, the blond boy glared at him. “Come to gloat in person?” he snapped.

Harry took a deep breath. This had been a bad idea, obviously. “No. I tried to get your father to let you off early, actually.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah? Well, who asked you to do that, huh?” He crossed his arms. “Why are you even here, anyway? It obviously didn’t work, so piss off.”

Harry grimaced. “I’m here to tell you no hard feelings, and that I’m willing to make up if you are. Like it or not, I’m going to be living here now, and I would like us to be civil, for your parents’s sake. You don’t have to be my best friend, but your dad doesn’t deserve to have us fighting all the time.”

After a moment of petulant silence, the blond boy huffed. “Fine,” he snapped. “But I still don’t like you.”

Harry accepted this with a nod. “You’re not the only one. As long as we have an accord, it’s no skin off my nose.”

“I said fine, didn’t I? Now, bugger off.” With that, Draco firmly shut the door in his face. Harry turned away with a shrug, and jumped guiltily when he saw Severus standing at the end of the hallway, watching him.

“Uh, hi,” the young man said, shoulders drawing up tightly.

“How was your morning with Narcissa?” he enquired.

Harry exhaled silently in relief; Sev wasn’t mad at him for that morning. “It was nice. She didn’t
really have that many errands. We bought some books and had lunch and ate gelato. I think she mostly wanted to get me out of the house for a bit.”

“She did say she planned to fuss over you today,” Severus said, chuckling.

“Oh, she didn’t fuss, not really. Fussing would be too undignified; I don’t think Cissy’s ever been undignified in her life.”

“She does rather give that impression, doesn’t she? But I was there for Draco’s birth, and I assure you that there was quite a bit of swearing and screaming. She did look disgustingly well put-together once it was done, however.” Harry imagined a prim Narcissa sitting in bed holding a sleeping baby and waving away the mediwitches who hovered uncertainly nearby. He laughed. Severus smiled at him, but his expression sobered as they entered the sitting room.

“Can we talk about this morning?” the man asked, once they had taken seats.

Harry sighed. He really didn’t want to, but he knew they probably should. “Yeah, alright,” he said.

“Do you understand why I was so upset with your attempt to intercede on Draco’s behalf?” Sev asked.

“No really,” he admitted.

The potions master pursed his lips. “You are too cavalier with your own wellbeing. I understand that you are unused to having others express concern for you, but you cannot just brush off the serious danger you were in. Draco needs to serve his punishment so that he will not repeat his mistake.”

“But he was badly hurt—isn’t that enough of a punishment?”

“If he had been punished for past transgressions, perhaps it might be, but he must learn this lesson. You saw the damage the rebounded curse did to him: he might have killed you. He knew how dangerous that spell was, and still he cast it at you. Draco is nearly an adult—it is time for him to learn that such a serious action will have serious consequences. He cannot behave so unthinkingly again; the slaying of another marks one forever.” Sev took his hand. “Perhaps I cannot convince you this punishment is proportionate for your own sake alone, but consider how it would effect Luc if you died. I know that he is coming to care for you, and he would take it badly. And we both know I would not react at all well to your death. I…care deeply for you. I have lost much in my life, and I cannot bear to lose you as well.”

Harry silently studied him, a strange expression on his face, and then dropped his gaze down to their joined hands. “I—alright. I can understand that. I won’t ask Luc again.”

Severus pulled him into a hug and pressed a kiss to his forehead. Harry shivered a little in his arms, but smiled when Sev leaned back to look down at him. Before he could ask about it, Lucius entered the room.

“Oh, thank Merlin, you’ve made up,” the blond man said. “How was your day, Harry?”

“It was really great; after her errands, Cissy gave me a late birthday present and bought me hazelnut gelato.” He pulled away from Severus to tentatively offer Luc a hug; the man held him close for a long moment and then released him with a smile.
“I’m glad you had a good day. Are you ready for dinner?” The young man nodded, and they moved to settle around the table.

Despite having made up with Sev, Harry was visibly preoccupied through dinner. Severus tried not to fret about it, but after they’d eaten, Harry excused himself and disappeared into his room. He didn’t return before the two older men headed to bed, and Luc—yawning with exhaustion—practically had to pull his bondmate into bed with him. The blond man was soon more asleep than awake, but Sev couldn’t seem to settle down, too worried about the young man in the other room.

“I’ll just check on Harry before I sleep,” he eventually said, climbing back out of their bed and padding out into the sitting room, while Luc made sleepy noises of concern behind him. He crossed to the young man’s room, and knocked lightly. When he received no reply, he debated with himself over going back to bed or opening the door to make sure all was well. Deciding that he could apologize if Harry got upset at him, he turned the handle and eased the door open.

The room beyond was dark, but he could see fitful movement on the bed. He slipped into the room and walked over; as he got closer, he could see Harry thrashing atop the sheets. The duvet was shoved to the foot of the bed and his nightshirt had twisted and rucked up to reveal his belly and pants. His mouth was open, but there wasn’t any sound until Severus reached the bed and leaned over to shake Harry awake. As he passed through some kind of ward, Sev was abruptly able to hear the terrified moans the young man was making.

“Harry, wake up,” he said urgently. “Wake up.”

As soon as a hand touched his shoulder, Harry woke with a gasp. He let out a hitched breath, then another, and sagged into the mattress. He didn’t react to the man’s presence at first, merely lay still on his back, staring myopically into the dark and crying silently. “I’m sorry if I woke you,” he said, finally.

Sev brushed the hair back from his clammy forehead, sitting on the bed beside him. “You didn’t. How long have you been casting silencing charms around your bed?”

“Since you two moved into the other room,” Harry quietly admitted.


Harry’s breathing hitched, then his face screwed up and he rolled over to bury his head in Sev’s lap, sobbing into his nightshirt. The man let him cry, mumbling soothing words and running a hand up and down his back until he calmed.

“Will you come to our room for the rest of the night? Let me and Luc take care of you?” Sev asked, when his breathing had evened out.

He pulled back enough to look up at the man’s face. “But I’ll wake you up!” he exclaimed.

Severus squeezed his shoulder. “I’d rather have you wake me so I can help you back to sleep than lie in my bed wondering if you are over here suffering by yourself.” Harry had no response to this, so Sev drew him up until they were both standing beside the bed. He conjured a handkerchief and wiped away the evidence of tears on the young man’s face. “Come sleep with us tonight,” he said.

Harry nodded and allowed himself to be led to their room, where he was laid down and
sandwiched between Sev and a half-asleep Lucius. Although he expected to lie awake for hours, he was so emotionally exhausted that he soon drifted off to sleep, and slept soundly through the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve gone through and done minor edits to all the previous chapters, mostly grammar and such—nothing that changes the plot. No reason to go back and read the whole thing again, unless you really want to, but I thought I’d give y’all a heads up. Next chapter should be up pretty soon.
To his surprise, Harry found that he slept better sharing a bed with the two men. He’d gone to sleep in his own room the night after the first time, but when Severus checked on him and woke him from another nightmare, he was coaxed into their bed again. The night after that, Luc had stopped him from heading to his room with a plaintive look, and invited him to start the night with them instead. He’d hesitantly agreed, and after this third night of restful sleep, he’d followed them to their room without a word.

Each morning, Harry woke cuddled into the side of one of them, or wrapped in one or the other’s arms. Sev was usually not very verbal first thing in the morning, but he and Lucius often dropped a kiss on Harry’s head before he slipped out of bed to return to his original room and dress. In fact, they hugged and touched him a great deal, now: casual touches on his arms, gentle grasps on his hands, steering him with an arm around his waist, and so on. It was the most he’d ever been touched in his life—even Ron and Hermione never touched him so much. He found that he liked it; it made him feel cherished.

Occasionally, he or one of them had a morning erection, but none of them ever mentioned it. Sometimes, when Harry returned to his room, he would palm himself in the shower, shivery and uncertain and wanting. He would hurry to wash off, wishing he had the courage to move their relationship forward, because he was pretty sure this bond could be the best thing to ever happen to him.

He wondered, at such times, what they might look like unclothed, how those half-hard lengths that pressed into his back actually looked. He’d noticed that the two of them would disappear in the afternoon, at times, and come back an hour or so later looking slightly rumpled, or else damp from the shower. With him sharing their bed, he realized, they weren’t having sex at night, and it occurred to him to wonder now if perhaps they were used to doing so, if they would do so with him. That thought filled him with longing. They’d been patiently platonic with him, and he was grateful, but he found that he wanted more.

As the beginning of term approached, Harry realized he would actually miss this. He would miss the gentle teasing, and the warmth and safety of their shared bed. As he thought about this one morning, their room quiet in the pre-dawn light, he realized that he wanted all of it, for as long as he could have it. He propped himself on one elbow and looked down at Severus’s sleeping face, looked at Lucius where he lay half on top of his bondmate’s chest. They were beautiful, he thought, Lucius all fair skin and blond hair, Severus with black hair and yellow-tan skin. They were beautiful, and they wanted him, and he’d be a fool to turn them down.

That morning, once they had woken and greeted him, he stopped them before they could kiss his head. Instead, he pressed a soft, chaste kiss to each of their mouths, and then hastily retreated from the room, fighting a blush.
Lucius stared after him, clearly distracted as he began to dress.

“Is this too soon?” he asked the other man. “The term starts Monday, and I was hoping to do the ritual here... If we only had more time...” He shook his head. “No, he hasn’t said anything about the bond. I can feel it solidifying, but it’s only been a few weeks. The ritual will have to wait.” He buttoned the front of his robes, smoothing them nervously.

Severus hummed, buttoning his shirt. “He’ll let us know what he wants in his own time. I believe he’s accepted the bond, but he may not be ready to move to a more physical relationship.”

“He’s only 16,” the blond murmured, grimacing.

“As was I,” his bondmate reminded him, giving him a sidelong glance as he tucked in his shirttails and took up his cufflinks.

“Still, what if he’s not ready?” Lucius asked, gazing off towards the door with a frown on his face. He smoothed his robes again. “I don’t want him to feel pressured.”

“If he’s not ready, then we wait for him,” Severus said simply, brushing a kiss to his mate’s mouth. “Let’s go to breakfast, love. He’ll be wondering after us.”

When they entered the sitting room, he was waiting for them at the table, which was already laden with their meal. He stared at their clasped hands with a strange expression, until they separated to sit. Harry shook himself and smiled at them, snagging toast and eggs and a sausage for his plate. They both smiled at him, filling their own plates. The three of them ate in companionable silence, though Harry kept glancing at them through his lashes, clearly thinking about something.

“I—I want to bond with you,” he finally blurted out. “With both of you, if I can.”

Both men went eerily still at his words, and Harry’s gaze dropped to his food, face heating with embarrassment. He heard their utensils settle onto their plates, and he could practically feel their eyes on him.

“If—if you want, I mean,” he muttered. Merlin, he wished he could sink into the floor and disappear. His hands twisted together in his lap.

“If you want, I mean,” Severus asked him, some unknown emotion in his voice.

“Yes,” he said, voice firmer than the other two had expected. “I want this, I’m sure.” He gave a little gasp—it felt like something clicked into place at his words. He could feel a change in his magical core, a new sense of wholeness—not as though he’d been missing something all along, but like he had gained something he hadn’t known to want before. He bit his lip against a grin; he’d made the right choice. He looked up to see the two of them staring at him in wonder.

“I see that you are,” Severus murmured, awe-struck. Harry had chosen them with all of himself; his bonds with them had just solidified faster and more firmly than Sev and Luc’s had originally.

Lucius scrambled from his chair and swept the younger man up into a fierce hug. Harry startled at his sudden movement, but stopped Luc from drawing back by wrapping both arms around him and holding on, so they were hugging each other, and the blond man chuckled, his heart inexplicably light. He pressed a kiss to Harry’s lips, and beamed down at him. “Thank you,” he said, grey eyes soft and warm.
“Thank you,” the younger man whispered back, a shy smile on his lips.

“Are you two done eating?” Severus asked. “Perhaps we could move to the sitting area?” Harry nodded, and Lucius reluctantly let him go, but kept him tucked under his arm, and when they reached the sofa, Harry was pulled down to sit between the two of them.

Lucius held one of his hands reverently in both of his own. He pressed a kiss to Harry’s knuckles. “We should discuss what you want to happen next. I know Cissy already set up your consort vault. Will you move into the master suite with us?”

“We leave for Hogwarts in four days, Luc,” Severus reminded him.

“Right. Well, when we come back for winter holidays, perhaps?” he suggested. “What else?”

“The ritual,” Harry said. “I want to do the ritual, too—I want all of it.”

Lucius nodded, obviously reticent on this point. “Yes, the ritual…Sev told me that you two had talked about it. You know that it has a sexual component?” Harry nodded. “We were not sure how much, ah, experience you have had…”

“I haven’t had any, really,” Harry said, fighting the urge to duck his head. He should be able to talk about if he wanted to do it!

“That’s fine, Harry. We just want to make sure you have some experience before the formal setting of the ritual, so you know what to expect. The magic can be kind of intense, and it’s better to be as prepared as possible beforehand.”

Harry’s eyes widened, and he looked back and forth between them. The two of them had talked about him and sex? They’d been thinking about it, too? He felt himself flushing, equal parts embarrassed and pleased. “When can we do it?” he asked.

“At the holiday?” Severus suggested. “It really is best that you have had some experience before you undergo the ritual.”

“Could—could we do something today?” Harry asked. The two older men looked at each other over his head, and then down at him. “Please?” he said.

“This afternoon, if you wish,” Sev replied.

“And then maybe we could do the ritual before going to Hogwarts,” Harry said. “If it goes well, I mean.”

Lucius gave him a wary look. “Let’s see how it goes before deciding. You might decide you don’t like it,” he said.

“I don’t think that’s very likely,” Harry said, wrinkling his nose.

Severus laughed. “Perhaps not, then. We shall find out this afternoon, either way.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna go find Narcissa, then—I want to get an early start today. Diagon Alley is gonna be mad, now that the school list has finally gone out.” Harry shook his head. “I don’t know what Dumbledore was thinking, leaving it so late. He could have sent the list without the DADA book, and then had copies at the school or something.”
“Yes, well, that man always does things his own way,” Sev said wryly. “Until this afternoon, then.” Harry nodded, gave them each a kiss, and left.

“It should be you,” Lucius said as soon as they were alone. “He has the better relationship with you, and I know he trusts you more. I’ll work on my lesson plans, and you can go with him to our room and take care of him.”

The other man looked uncertain. “Are you sure? I don’t think he would object to your presence.”

Luc shook his head. “No, he likely would not, but I think he’ll be more comfortable with just you. We’ve made a lot of progress, Harry and I, but this is important and I want it to go well.”

Sev’s expression softened, and he took his bondmate’s face between his hands, and kissed him tenderly. “You’re a good man, Lucius, and I love you.” He drew the blond man up off the sofa. “Come on, I’m taking you back to bed.”

“What?”

“They’ll all be gone all morning, so let me take care of you.” He gave Luc a coy look, and then kissed him in quick little presses against his lips, tugging him by the hands and walking them backwards to their bedroom.

“Well,” the blond said between kisses, “if you insist.”

“Oh, I do.”

When the three of them came back together for lunch in their sitting room, Harry was obviously preoccupied during the meal, vacillating between worrying about the pall that hung over Diagon Alley and fretting about what would happen after they finished their meal. The older men noticed his nervous air, and Luc caught his eyes.

“Remember, you can say no to any part of this, Harry.” The blond man held his gaze. “We don’t need to do the ritual now—or ever, if you don’t want. You can say no; you set the pace.”

Harry startled from dour thoughts about the absence of Ollivander and Fortescue. He blinked as his brain caught up with the sudden topic shift. Right, this afternoon. They were trying to reassure him. He nodded, and found himself unexpectedly feeling better for the reminder. They were being so careful with him, and it warmed him inside that they cared so much for his comfort; it was part of why he felt ready to do this.

“Just—please promise me that you’ll tell us if you need things to slow down.” The blond man studied him with trepidation. Harry nodded again, and Lucius let it go for the rest of the meal. Severus drew him into a discussion about preparations for the upcoming term, and their younger bondmate found himself drawn into their conversation, feeling excited at the thought of having a competent professor again.

“You’ll probably be the best DADA teacher we’ve ever had,” he said.

“Only think, Luc,” Severus teased, “they’ve had so little proper instruction; just don’t use any unforgivables on them and let them actually practice a spell or two—you’re bound to be viewed favorably by the entire school after your first week of classes.”
“Well, Lupin wasn’t that bad, even though I know you don’t like him, Sev,” Harry said. “And Moody—well, Barty Crouch, Jr—was quite good, even though he turned out to be plotting my death. In fact, plotting or nearly causing my death seems to be a hobby of the DADA professors…” He pretended to think and playfully ticked off the years on his fingers. “Let’s see: the Dark Lord, the Dark Lord and Lockhart’s incompetence, werewolf professor and the dementors, the Dark Lord again, more dementors and the Dark Lord again—including this year, we’ve never had one that hasn’t done it, so you’re in good company.” He stifled a laugh at the uneasy expression his bondmate wore. “Well, I suppose yours is more of an honorable mention for trying to kill me twice before even becoming the DADA professor.” He decided to take pity on the blond man, who was now looking positively horrified by his words. “Anyway, I think you’ll do very well,” he offered, his diplomatic tone negated by his cheeky expression.

“You have a shockingly morbid sense of humor,” Severus stated, shaking his head in mock sorrow. Harry just shrugged, grinning, and went back to his food. Though he didn’t speak up again during the meal, the two older men thought he seemed much less tense than before.

After lunch, Luc dropped a kiss on Harry’s lips and one on Sev’s cheek before leaving for his office. Severus led Harry to their bedroom, and they settled on the edge of the bed, facing each other.

“No Lucius?” Harry asked, hands tangling in his lap. His nervousness had returned at the sight of their bed.

“We thought you might prefer just me, at first,” Severus said. His gaze held no judgement, and the younger man reluctantly nodded.

“I think I might, actually.” He sighed. “Is he upset?” He chewed his lip.

Sev shook his head, smiling to ease his worry. “He is not upset, Harry. He is a little concerned that we may be moving too fast, however—it’s not been a whole month since you came here. Neither of us want you to feel pressured.”

“But I don’t!” Harry exclaimed. “Honestly, you’ve both been really patient, and I appreciated the time to adjust to it all, but I want to do this.”

“I’m glad. Luc is simply very aware of the potential power dynamic between us. He is five years my senior, and I am 20 years yours.”

“I suppose,” Harry conceded reluctantly.

“Don’t fret about it. His worries will fade with time. Shall we start?” Sev asked gently.

Harry blew out a breath. “Right.” The younger man ducked his head shyly. “I—I really haven’t done anything before. I mean, I kissed someone once, and then this morning, but nothing else.”

Severus smiled down at him, grasping his face and gently tilting it up towards him. “There’s no shame in that, Harry. May I kiss you?”

“Uh, yeah.” He nodded, his eyes flicking to the older man’s lips. Now that he allowed himself to notice it, he found a kind of allure in the man’s face, especially when he was smiling, like now. He leaned into Severus, and the man curled down over him, slotting their mouths together. Harry sighed at the light pressure, his lips slipping open under the older man’s guidance. This was so much nicer than it had been with Cho. Severus’s mouth moved softly over his, and he laid his
hands on the man’s chest, and warm hands cupped his face, and Harry let his eyes slide shut.

After a few minutes of gentle exploration, the older man drew back, and Harry opened his eyes to look at him. He felt a smile stretching his face, and a blush heating his cheeks.

“Good?” Severus asked.


The older man chuckled at his answer. “That’s probably the first time I’ve been called that in this context, but I’m glad you are enjoying yourself.” He leaned in again, and Harry pushed up to meet him eagerly, smiling into his kisses when the older man wrapped one arm around his waist.

“Could get used to this,” he murmured, laughing breathlessly as Sev nibbled on his lip and began mouthing along his jaw. His laugh became a moan when teeth and lips closed on his earlobe. “Oh…I’ve been missing out,” he gasped.

“Mm. I like knowing I’m the one who gets to do this to you for the first time,” Severus murmured, breath ghosting over the damp spots on Harry’s skin and causing him to break out in gooseflesh.

“I’m glad it’s you,” Harry whispered, slipping his arms around the other man.

Sev laid him out on the bed and dipped down to suck on his neck, drawing a moan out of him. He felt himself growing hard, and cursed the blush that automatically stained his cheeks. His eyes had fallen shut, and he blinked them open when the older man drew back once more.

“May I?” Severus asked, resting a hand on the buttons of his shirt. Harry nodded, and the older man began to open his shirt. Once the buttons were undone, long, graceful hands skimmed his shirt from his shoulders. Harry tilted his hips, and his trousers were pushed down until he could shove them off with his feet. His pants followed. He toed off his socks, and just like that he was naked. He shivered at the suddenness of it.

He was self-conscious about his body, of course he was. He always dressed behind his curtains in his dorm at Hogwarts, and in his original room here at the manor. He had scars, and he knew he wasn’t that attractive, especially now. He’d always been small, and never put on much weight, even during the school year, but this summer he’d dropped below even his usual level of malnourishment. Despite a month of solid meals and potions, he was still far too scrawny in his own opinion, but Severus was looking at him reverently.

Harry bit his lip, bashful under that tender gaze. Sev’s thumb swept over his mouth, tugging his lower lip free from his teeth, and then followed the finger with his mouth, kissing Harry breathless again. “You’re beautiful,” he breathed, and Harry shuddered at the praise.

“Let me see you?” the younger man pleaded, and Sev shifted back, making quick work of the buttons on his shirt and trousers, and sliding his garments briskly from his body.

He watched hungrily as Severus removed his clothing. “I’ve—I’ve thought about this, in the shower,” he admitted shyly once the older man was naked and kneeling over him again. He reached up hesitantly to run his hands across Sev’s chest, over his shoulders and his back. He leaned up for another kiss, groaning happily into the other man’s mouth.

As they kissed, Severus slid one leg between Harry’s, and the younger man arched up to meet him. Both of them moaned at the friction, and the older man pressed down with his hips, Harry
gasping beneath him. He leaned down to kiss and suck at Harry’s neck, garnering the most delicious shiver, and began to rock his hips. The younger man moaned and writhed beneath him, eager and responsive.

“I’ve read about—will, will you…take me?” Harry asked, eyes falling shut under the sensations he felt.

Severus stilled, breathing against Harry’s throat. “The ritual doesn’t involve penetration. I needn’t—we can finish like this,” he said.

“Please? I—I want more,” Harry begged, arching his hips up to urge the other man on.

With a shudder of arousal, Sev murmured a charm against his skin, and then brushed his hand across Harry’s perineum, pressing one lubricated finger to his entrance.

It was a strange sensation, Harry thought, but not an unpleasant one. The first finger was soon joined by a second one, and they began to stretch him out. He had read enough about it to know that this was necessary, that if Sev didn’t stretch him first, attempting sex could result in pain and even injury. As the fingers stroked over his insides, it began to feel rather nice, and then lips returned to sucking on his neck, and that felt really nice. Sev’s other hand stroked across his skin, pinching and tweaking his nipples, which sent a shot of pleasure to his groin. He groaned, his hips beginning to jerk helplessly. He panted against the other man’s shoulder, and then Sev’s hand closed around his erection and began to stroke.

Harry felt his body grow taut, and heat pooled in his belly, and then he was shaking and flying apart and it was amazing. He panted, and Severus pressed kisses all over his face.

He moaned as he felt the fingers inside him pulling out, but he shifted until he could grab the other man’s wrist to still him. “Keep going?” he begged.

Dark eyes met his own, searching. “It can be uncomfortable—too much stimulation—”

The younger man shook his head. “I want to feel you in me. Please.”

Sev groaned at his words, dropping his head to rest against Harry’s shoulder. “Yes—yes, of course.” He sucked at Harry’s neck and his hand carefully went back to moving inside of him, and soon he was removing his fingers and using his hand to slick his erection with lubricant and sliding in, and he exhaled shakily, rocking his hips in little thrusts until he was fully seated. Harry was letting out soft gasping cries beneath him, and when he looked down the younger man was getting hard again.

“Beautiful,” Sev said again, and then he began to really move, Harry clinging to his shoulders and babbling unintelligibly—at one point, he slipped into breathy parseltongue, and Severus shivered. Despite the unpleasant associations the language had for him, it was lighting him up in this moment, with his young lover moving underneath him, meeting his thrusts urgently.

They moaned and moved against each other, and Harry thought it was the best thing he’d ever felt before, and he loved Severus so much. He pressed his face up and kissed him, clutching at his back as their hips slapped together and Sev plunged inside him and pulled out and thrust in again, and it was so wonderful, and he never wanted it to stop.

All too soon, it came to an end: Harry came with a keening cry, and Sev’s climax followed closely after. He sagged onto his elbows, and then rolled to one side and drew the younger man into his
arms.

They cuddled lazily in the afterglow. “I thought I might feel different, after,” Harry mused, fingers tracing lazily over Severus’s chest. “I’m not a virgin anymore.” The arm that circled his back squeezed him lightly, and he looked up into the older man’s dark eyes.

Severus shook his head. “Society builds this up into more than it is, I believe. You are not a different person than you were this morning, even though you have had sex. You’re quite as beautiful and good as you were then, just with a new experience.” He pressed a kiss to Harry’s lips and the younger man couldn’t stop the smile spreading across his face.

“You sap,” he teased, kissing back.

“Hmm, yes, it’s a terrible failing of mine. Ask Luc, he’ll tell you that I’m a secret romantic when I’m all shagged out.” Harry giggled at him, putting his head down on Sev’s chest. They were silent for several minutes, basking in their happiness at being together.

“What made you decide to accept the bond?” Severus finally asked. Green eyes glanced up at him, then back down at Harry’s hand where it rested on his chest.

“I’ll admit,” Harry said, “you were a big part of it. You’ve been protecting me and taking care of me, even before you liked me, even when I was an ungrateful little shite to you. I don’t think you realize how very much I wanted to impress you in my first year.” He chuckled. “And then you hated me, and I didn’t even know why...You can’t imagine my shock when I got to the end of all the protections on the philosopher’s stone, and there was Quirrell, claiming that you’d been protecting me from him in that first quidditch match! I could hardly believe it—you seemed to hate me so much.”

“I treated you wrongly,” Severus muttered.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter, now—no, you protected me. You cared that I lived, and you stood up to the Dark Lord for me, even if you didn’t know it was him at the time. And you kept doing it, year after year. I know how much werewolves terrify you, and you put yourself between Remus during his transformation and Hermione and Ron and I; you put yourself between us and him, even knowing you could be hurt or killed, and even though you didn’t like us.”

“It was my duty as a teacher!”

“There’s plenty of others who wouldn’t ever even consider that—Lockhart, for instance, or Umbridge.” Harry laughed at the sneer that crossed the man’s face. “Well, they’re obviously not the best of people, but that’s sort of my point. You took better care of me than any of my other professors, even McGonagall, who’s my Head of House, I mean, it’s sort of her job, isn’t it? But it’s always been you, instead. And then I saw that memory in your penseive, and I realized that my father bullied you for years, and I look so much like him, I understood then, of course you would hate me. But after that you didn’t anymore, you took me to get healed and you tried to get Dumbledore to take me from the Dursleys, and when he wouldn’t you taught me to protect myself, and then you healed me this summer and you’ve been so good to me, and you protected me from your bondmate until he vowed not to hurt me. And I know that I’m special for the war and all that rot, but you don’t care about that, you just care about me, Harry.”

The man frowned down at him, unsure how to respond to all of that. “Well, I hope you realize I would not stop protecting you if you decided not to bond with us,” he finally said.
The younger man shook his head. “No, I do know that, but that was only a part of it. You have to understand, when I was little, I thought that I was a monster. I had no idea why my relatives hated me. I didn’t know why I was different from Dudley, except that I wasn’t their son, and I thought maybe that was it, but even the adopted children I met in primary school didn’t live in cupboards or have the kinds of chores and beatings I had. So I figured it must have been something about me, that I really was some kind of awful freak, like they said…” He trailed off with a sigh.

Severus laid his hand over one of Harry’s where it rested on his chest, and squeezed his fingers. Harry smiled at him, and continued. “And then I found out I was a wizard, and they had known it, and that was why they hated me, because they were afraid. And I knew they were wrong about me, and I thought maybe now I could be normal. Only, I’m Harry bloody Potter, so of course I couldn’t. Everyone thinks they know so much about me, and that they have a right to know about me and pick me apart and own me. Ginny followed me about all during her first year, and it took me forever to realize she had the most awful little crush on me, but not really on me, she had a crush on this idea of me, this Boy Who Lived, who doesn’t even exist. And she knows that now, thank Merlin, but she’s not the only one who’s got like that about me. And there are always these wretched articles about Hermione ‘toying’ with my heart, like it’s impossible we could just be friends. And people turn on me when I don’t act like what they think I should, like when it turned out I’m a parselmouth, or when the Ministry was telling all those lies about me after the Triwizard Tournament. I’m not real to all those people. They don’t care about me, not really, but you do, and Lucius does, I think.”

“He does,” Severus murmured.

“Yeah, see?” Harry said. “You, you two—you’re offering me something I never thought I could have. You care about me, and you could love me, and it would be for just me, just Harry, not for the Boy Who Lived. He doesn’t matter to you, because he isn’t real, and you know that. You just see me, and you think I’m worth loving, and I didn’t expect anyone ever would, but you do. See?”

Severus nodded. He did see. He saw a young man who had been so damaged and hurt, over and over again, that he didn’t even realize how beautiful and worthy he really was. He saw a young man who didn’t realize that Luc and Sev felt they were the lucky ones, for being given the chance to love him, to show him he deserved to be loved. He saw resilience and strength and the tragic contradiction of youth with a justifiable world-weariness. He saw this, and all of it was Harry, who was watching him earnestly with luminous green eyes, and he was beautiful, so Severus kissed him again.

They broke apart long minutes later, breathing heavily, and Harry was staring at him adoringly, and Sev was sure he was just as bad. The younger man laid his head down again, and for a time the only sound in the room was their breath.

“I…I’ve never thought I would live through this war,” Harry admitted quietly. Severus’s arm clenched around his shoulders. “The prophecy says I have some power that the Dark Lord doesn’t know about. Professor Dumbledore says it’s love.”

“What?!” Severus gave him a scandalized look.

Harry shook his head. “It sounds daft to me. I mean, the Dark Lord has more than half a century on me, and I’m supposed to defeat him—with the power of love?” Harry shrugged. “Every time I’ve got away so far has been luck, really. My mother’s blood sacrifice, and some kind of luck. I always kind of figured he’ll kill me one of these times. But I can make it harder on him, take some
of his followers with me.” His jaw clenched, and he pressed his forehead to the older man’s chest.

Severus took a deep breath around the sudden lump in his throat, and spoke in a measured tone.

“Harry, you need to live. I need you to try and live through this mess. It’s all I’ve ever needed; it’s what I’ve been working towards since you were born. I vowed to your mother that I would protect you, and I will.”

“Of course I’ll try to live,” Harry said, looking up at him through damp lashes. “I will try. I just… don’t have many illusions that I’ll succeed.”

“You will if Luc and I have anything to say about it!” Severus growled, seizing his face in both hands and kissing him fiercely. Harry gave himself over to the warm slide of lips and tongues for long minutes.

When Severus finally drew back, Harry stared at him with eyes almost impossibly wide. “Am I—am I being selfish? To accept the bond, when I suspect I’ll succeed?”

Sev shook his head, refusing the suggestion. “You won’t die, Harry, don’t talk like that. You have years ahead of you; you’re too young to be so resigned to death.” It was immediately obvious that he’d said the wrong thing: Harry growled and rolled off of him. Severus scrambled to follow, trying to catch him around the waist, but Harry shoved him back.

“Don’t do that! Don’t treat me like a child! I know my chances against the Dark Lord are shite. I just—I’m just being realistic.” He swiped furiously at his eyes, clenching his jaw. “I just wanted to be loved, really loved, before I died in this stupid war! I just wanted—” He choked on a sob, and bolted from the room, leaving Severus staring after him, stunned.

An hour later, just before dinner, the door slammed open again, and Lucius stormed in. “What did you do, Severus!?”

Severus sat up from the bed, where he’d been lying since Harry left, staring at the ceiling. He had wanted to go after Harry, and he had wanted to break down crying, and he had wanted to curse Dumbledore six ways from Sunday, and he had wanted to storm into Riddle Manor and attack the Dark Lord, and he realized at least two of those things would be severely bad for his health, and so he had done nothing. (Well, he had cried, but only a little bit, and he had done it silently, in a kind of listless, broken way, because he felt broken himself. He had half hoped that it would make him feel better, but it had not.) He looked at the blond man bearing down on him with rage twisting his face, and Severus knew this was about Harry, of course it was, and he was so tired, and he didn’t want to deal with this, but he must. He said nothing.

Lucius stalked up to his bondmate where he sat on the bed. “Mimi told me that Harry has asked to eat dinner in his old bedroom tonight. I tried to talk to him, but he won’t come out of his room. Severus, what happened?” He grabbed his bondmate’s arms and shook him. “What did you do?!”

By the end, he was shouting.

“I’m afraid I’ve upset him, badly,” Severus said, voice dull.

The blond shook him again. “I knew it was too soon, damnit!”

“No, Luc—no, it wasn’t that.” Severus pried his bondmate’s hands from his arms and pulled him onto the bed beside him. “What do you know of the prophecy?” he asked.

Lucius, who had been working himself up to start shouting again, stopped and stared at him,
perplexed. “The—what does that have to do with anything?”

Severus smiled bitterly. “Everything.” He shook his head.

“I…don’t understand,” his mate said faintly.

“After the battle in the Department of Mysteries, Harry came to me for comfort. He’d just lost his godfather. However I felt about Sirius Black, he was, at that time, Harry’s surest chance at getting any kind of reprieve from his beastly relatives. He was also a link to Harry’s parents, someone who could tell him stories about what they were actually like, not the drivel that’s been published about how brave and selfless and heroic they were, but real stories. When he died, Harry lost so much, and he turned to me for comfort, because he trusted me, and because he knew I knew about the prophecy. Dumbledore, the fool, had taken him from the Ministry and immediately shown him the whole of the thing, in memory form.” Severus stopped then, and clenched his jaw until the possibility of either tears or violence had vanished, and then he continued.

“Harry told me the gist of the prophecy that night. He has some unknown power to defeat the Dark Lord, and he must kill him, or die himself. Dumbledore—” he spat the man’s name like a curse “—believes that power is love, which is, frankly, preposterous. Regardless, he’s convinced, and he’s managed to convince Harry, that only he can defeat the Dark Lord, using this mysterious power.”

Lucius looked appalled. “But he’s—the Dark Lord is near 60 years his elder. The magics he knows, his skill in dueling…Harry’s 16 years old, and he is supposed to—but how?” The blond man took a shaky breath.

“Trust me, love, I do not understand it either. But it cannot be denied that Harry has defied and escaped him far more times than anyone but Headmaster Dumbledore. I know not whether he can truly kill that monster, but the Dark Lord will surely not let him live in peace as long as there is even a chance that he could.” Severus rubbed at his forehead, exhausted from the weight of the day’s conversations. Still, he knew he must push on; Lucius needed to know this.

“After we had…coupled…I asked Harry what made him accept the bond. He told me that he knew we cared about him for himself, that we could love him for who he is as a person. He had never thought he would have that, because of those blasted muggles and that thrice-cursed myth of the Boy Who Lived.” He reached out and gripped his bondmate’s hands tightly in his own, steeling himself for what came next. “He told me that he never expected to live through the war, that he knew he would die at the Dark Lord’s wand. He asked if it was selfish to accept our love while expecting to die. When I told him he would not die, he grew angry with me, said I was treating him like a child. He said that he just wanted to know real love…before he dies in the war.” His throat seized up, and he could no longer speak without sobbing, so he stopped talking and folded forward, pressing his forehead to his and Luc’s joined hands.

Lucius felt like the world had dropped out from under him. It was that same fear he had felt when he thought Sev was leaving him, the night they had brought Harry home. When Severus said that he was living on borrowed time as a spy, Lucius had felt exactly this dizzy horror sweeping through him. He gasped for air, beginning to tremble. They sat like that for long minutes, Luc taut and Sev bowed.

“I don’t know what to do, Luc,” Severus finally whispered. “I swore to protect him, and now I’ve bonded with him, and I think I’m beginning to love him, and he thinks he will die in this war, and he might not be wrong, which is the worst of it all—he might not be wrong…”
“No,” Lucius choked out. “No, he is. He’s wrong, and Dumbledore’s wrong, and, and the—the bloody Dark Lord is wrong! We won’t let him die, love, we won’t.”

“Thank you,” came Harry’s voice from the doorway, startling both of them. Severus snapped upright, though he clutched to Luc’s hands still, and Lucius twisted sharply around. Harry flinched at their abrupt movements, but slipped into the room anyway, softly shutting the door behind him. He leaned against the doorframe for a moment, hugging his dressing gown around him, and then stepped resolutely forward until he stood an arm’s length from the bed. “That’s why I wanted to bond with you. You care for me as myself, even when I’m being silly and dramatic.”

Lucius wrapped him up in a hug, the way he had that morning. Harry saw Sev hanging back, and he reached a hand towards him when Luc let him go. Severus took his hand, and Harry leant over to wrap him in a tentative hug, which was fiercely returned. When they let go, they smiled at each other.

“Thank you, Sev, for everything. This afternoon was so beautiful, and I’m sorry I ruined it.”

“No, it was my fault. I should have been more sensitive. You were right, I was treating you like a child—”

“And then I behaved exactly like one!” Harry burst out. His cheeks were burning. “I—I shouldn’t have run off like that, it was childish.”

Lucius cut in before either of them could say anything further. “I think you both need to give yourselves more credit. Severus, you were justifiably upset at the thought of Harry dying. Harry, you needed some time to yourself. It’s been an emotional day—let’s not argue about it, please?” They both nodded. “Good. But Harry, it is not childish to take time to be alone when you are feeling emotional, nor is it weakness. I hope that you know you can talk with us about what you’re feeling, but never feel bad about withdrawing when you need space. Our relationship doesn’t mean we must be together all of the time.”

“I—alright,” Harry said. He relaxed into Lucius’s side, and the older man draped an arm around him.

Mimi appeared, dipping into a curtsy. “Will Master Harry still be wanting to eat in his old room?” she asked.

“Oh, uh…no, Mimi, I’ll eat at the table in the sitting room, with Severus and Lucius. Thank you.” She disappeared, and he snuggled under Luc’s arm for another minute or two, then stepped away, half-dragging Sev off the bed. “Come on, you need to eat,” he said.

“I believe that’s my line,” the older man said, raising an eyebrow. “It’s not as though missing a meal will kill me.”

“You’ve both missed far too many meals in your life,” Luc said, wrapping Sev in his dressing gown and then helping Harry pull him towards the sitting room. “You wouldn’t believe how many meals he’s skipped because he got caught up brewing,” he told the younger man.

“Oh, I definitely would,” Harry replied, eyeing Severus’s lank frame.

“Hestia help me, there’s two of them,” Sev muttered, and the other two laughed.
The morning of Luc’s birthday dawned bright and clear. Harry slid out of bed later than usual, but neither of the other two were yet awake.

Luc had been summoned to the Dark Lord’s side the night before, and had returned bemused. He had reported to Voldemort his position on staff at Hogwarts, and the response had been unexpected: the Dark Lord was pleased. Though Luc had been out of favor that summer for his early departure from the battle at the Ministry, he was now well-placed to spy on Headmaster Dumbledore. The rumored curse on the DADA professorship was revealed to be real, but Voldemort had told him where to find the focus object—a desiccated snake carcass concealed by a removable block of stone in the wall of the DADA office behind the professor’s desk; once the focus was destroyed, the curse would be ended.

Luc had shivered when he related it to his bondmates later. “He told me how to end the curse on the post, that he was pleased to have another spy in the school. My position will be vital to his future efforts, he said.”

The implications were troubling: it seemed the Dark Lord’s trust in Severus waned, and he was likely planning something big now that his resurrection had been revealed to the public. Ollivander and Fortescue had both disappeared from Diagon over the summer. Both Amelia Bones of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and Emmeline Vance, a member of the Order of the Phoenix, had been murdered by Death Eaters. There had been attacks on muggle areas, and Voldemort’s forces were moving into the open, harrying the Ministry and the Order with shocking effectiveness. The Dark Lord’s desire to have a second spy at Hogwarts was a sign that he had plans for the school, but he had revealed no hint of what those plans might be. Severus and Lucius had stayed up late, speculating and planning, and they were still at it when Harry and Narcissa had decided to go to sleep. It was unsurprising that the two men had not yet woken.

Thinking of his bondmates, Harry shook off the dour mood that had overtaken him. It was Luc’s birthday, and he’d arranged a surprise for him—now wasn’t the time for fretting. He just hoped the man was up before noon, because he had reservations at a place that Narcissa recommended in Paris. She would apparate them there, so as not to ruin the surprise, and they would have lunch. They would return to the manor for the rest of the afternoon, and have a family dinner. It was going to be a good day, he thought determinedly.

He pushed open the door to his original room, and headed for the bathroom. Once he finished showering, he dressed in the outfit he and Narcissa had laid out on his bed the previous afternoon. They had chosen one of his less casual robes—not formal dress robes, but a little too fine for everyday wear: a silky emerald green that brought out his eyes, in a flattering cut, with gold embroidery on the hem, cuffs, and yoke. He laced black dress shoes, nervously smoothed the front of his robe, and left his room in search of Narcissa.

He found her just exiting her own chambers. “Hello, Cissy,” he said.
She smiled at him. “Good morning, Harry. Are they still sleeping?”

“Yeah, I think so. I don’t know how late they got to sleep, but they were still out when I woke up.”

“We’ll start breakfast without them, then.”

“Oh, please—I could murder a cup of tea!”

She laughed at him and led the way to the family dining room. Draco’s door opened as they approached, and he slipped out to walk abreast with his mother. The blond boy had largely gone back to ignoring Harry after his punishment finished, and this morning was not an exception. Harry rolled his eyes behind him, but didn’t say anything.

Breakfast was a quiet affair, Harry thinking about his plans for the day, and Draco talking to Cissy about his N.E.W.T. subjects. By the time they’d finished eating, neither of his bondmates had shown themselves, and Harry frowned.

“You may have to wake him up, if he sleeps too late,” Narcissa mused.

“Yeah…If you’ll excuse me, I’m just gonna stick my head in and see if they’re still sleeping,” he said, rising at her nod. He self-consciously smoothed down his robes again, and returned to the suite. When he peeked into their room, he could see they were both firmly still asleep, and he stepped back out into the sitting room with a rueful smile. Perhaps he shouldn’t have gotten dressed for going out already—he was feeling nervous, and a bit of a fly might calm him down. Why had he decided on a lunch date? This was an awful idea—he was going to make a fool of himself at a fancy restaurant. What if Severus felt left out? He’d said yesterday he didn’t mind, but Harry still felt bad taking Luc off by himself.

He shook his head. No, he was being silly—Cissy had helped him arrange it, and she thought it was a good idea. Luc cared about him, so he would probably appreciate the thought. They were going to enjoy themselves, and it was only lunch, so Sev would barely have time to miss them. Nothing would go catastrophically wrong, it was going to be okay.

Harry wished rather wistfully that they had more time before the start of term. He’d just gotten this beautiful connection in his life, and now he would have to hide it. They left for Hogwarts in just two days, where Sev and Luc would share quarters, while Harry slept in Gryffindor Tower without them. He wasn’t looking forward to classes with either of them, since they would have to pretend to hate him in public. They had to play the role of spy now, both of them, and could not be seen to be friendly with him.

He flopped onto the sofa, his anxiety returning. Both of his newfound bondmates were in terrible danger, and he had to go to school and pretend nothing was wrong. He’d have to meet with the headmaster and pretend not to dislike him as the man tried to undermine the relationship between Harry and Sev. He’d have to pretend to dislike Luc and Sev. Then there was the rest of the school…the Daily Prophet wasn’t attacking him anymore, but who knew how long that would last? How would everyone act now they knew Voldemort had returned, that Harry had been telling the truth all along?

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Harry blew out a breath, trying to calm his thoughts. He took up the book he’d been reading the night before—Important Magical Discoveries of the Modern Age—and tried to focus on the pages until noon. It was actually pretty absorbing material, and
before he knew it the clock on the mantel struck 12:00. As he was marking his place and setting
the book aside, their shared bedroom door opened, and the two older men stepped out, dressed for
the day.

“Happy birthday, Luc,” he said, standing up to greet them.

“Thank you, darling. You look beautiful,” Lucius said, brushing a kiss onto his young bondmate’s
mouth.

Harry blushed. “Thank you. Are you hungry?”

“Famished. Shall we order lunch?”

He bit his lip. “Actually, I have reservations for the two of us. I thought we could have a date?”

Luc’s eyebrows rose, and he turned to Sev with a chuckle. “So that’s why you kicked me out of
bed.”

“Harry spoke with me yesterday. I believe he and Cissy have everything arranged for the day.”
Sev smirked. “Our young bondmate intends to pamper you, and I heartily approve.”

Harry nodded and stood on his toes to kiss Severus, who obligingly leaned down to meet him
“We’ll be back in a couple of hours,” he murmured.

Sev nodded. “I’ll see you then. Have a good time.” He took one of Harry’s hands and gave it a
little squeeze.

The younger man smiled at him, and then turned to Luc. “Come on; Cissy is going to take us.”

“If you tell me where we’re going, I can take us myself.”

“But then it wouldn’t be a surprise, would it?” Harry grinned at the slight pout his bondmate wore,
tugging at his hand to lead him to Cissy’s suite.

“Hello, boys—ready to leave?” she asked. He nodded, and she held out her arms.

“Oh, just a moment!” Harry pulled back. He took out the glamor ring and slipped it on, then
flicked his wand to wrap a silken blindfold around Luc’s eyes. “There—now we’re ready,” he
said, tucking his wand away, and guiding his bondmate to take one of her arms, before grasping
the other himself.

He braced for the unpleasant sensation of apparation, and they disappeared, re-appearing in what
he was fairly certain was a London alleyway, and then disappeared again—it took a couple jumps
to get to Paris, with her taking two people side-along. The second transit was somehow colder and
longer and more unpleasant, but then they landed in another alleyway. He swayed on his feet
when they stopped, but Narcissa steadied him, and he smiled at her and took up Luc’s arm.

“Thanks, Cissy.”

“Of course. Have a good time,” she said, before disapparating and leaving them alone.

“This way,” Harry said. He led his blindfolded bondmate down the alley. As they stepped out
onto the pavement, muggle street noises washed over them, and he glanced around before leading
Lucius down the street and through the unassuming little archway that led into Paris magique. The
area had strong muggle-repelling wards tied into it, and he felt the magic wash over him as they
walked in. Harry couldn’t read most of the signs, and most of the conversation happening around
him was in French, but he’d come with Cissy to make the reservation, and he knew where to go.
He stopped them outside the restaurant, and vanished the blindfold, peering at Luc’s face as he
took stock of their surroundings.

The blond man blinked as he gazed at the tasteful facade they stood before. “Aliments du Fay?
But they don’t offer lunch reservations.”

“Cissy arranged it,” Harry said. “Come on.”

Although the restaurant appeared to be closed, the double doors opened as they approached, and a
tall, portly wizard in sleek grey robes greeted them with a little bow as they entered.

“Bienvenue, Lord Malfoy, Monsieur Black—if you will follow me?” The host turned and led
them through a spacious restaurant, neat little tables set apart from each other and lit by slim,
floating tapers and a crystal chandelier (held together by magic, as far as Harry could tell)
hovering above the center of the room. He brought them to a private room and gestured for them
to enter, not batting an eye as Luc pulled Harry’s chair out for him. The host bowed again once
they were both seated, and left, shutting the door quietly.

Apparently, Narcissa had arranged a menu with the restaurant, because as soon as the wizard
disappeared their meal began: plates appeared before them, each holding a bite-size starter.

Luc exclaimed happily. “Ah!” At his bondmate’s confused look, he elaborated. “It’s an amuse
bouche, meant to prepare the palate. This is one of my favorites: foie gras with blueberry-ginger
chutney.” He ate his, clearly savoring it.

Harry followed suit. It was an interesting combination of flavors; it probably wouldn’t ever be a
favorite with him—he wasn’t very fond of ginger—but it wasn’t bad. The rest of the meal passed
pleasantly, Luc explaining what each dish was as it arrived. The portions were small, and the meal
was clearly structured to be an experience, an exploration of flavors: after the foie gras came
scallops in a thick sauce, followed by skate wing with caviar, poached char and grilled leeks, then
a small selection of cheeses, and finishing with veal sweetbreads in a lemon-caper sauce. Each
course was paired with a small glass of wine, which the younger man sipped curiously at. Dessert
was tiny dishes of salted caramel ice cream over a hazelnut pastry of some kind.

As they ate, he asked Luc about his childhood, listening avidly to everything, and telling a few
(tamer) stories of his time at Hogwarts in return. The older man was an engaging storyteller; his
voice wasn’t as deep or spell-binding as Sev’s, but there was still something about the way he
spoke that captivated his young bondmate. He was also very funny—Harry knew his own wit
was rather macabre, and Sev tended towards an occasionally over-harsh sarcasm, whereas Luc
had a more straightforward delivery that made little everyday anecdotes humorous, and Harry
spent much of the meal laughing, which seemed to please the blond man.

They lingered over dessert, but eventually Harry slipped his glamor ring back on, which he had
removed when it became clear they weren’t going to be disturbed, and stood, holding his hand out
to Luc. “Shall we return home?” he asked.

The older man’s eyes shone. “Thank you, darling—this was lovely.” He leaned down to press a
kiss to Harry’s mouth, and then took his young bondmate’s arm to escort him from the restaurant.
The host bowed as they exited, and Harry smiled and offered a murmured ‘merci,’ allowing Luc
to lead him out into the afternoon sun. They walked along the magical boulevard in a contented
silence, until they reached an apparation point. Luc tucked Harry against his side, wrapping an arm around his shoulders, and apparated them into their bedroom.

Harry smiled and removed his glamor ring. “Sev?” he called.

Hearing their return, Severus strode in from the sitting room. “Welcome back,” he said, kissing each of them in turn. “How was lunch?”

“It was wonderful,” Lucius said, beaming at Harry, who blushed.

“I’m glad. Shall we walk?” Sev offered.

The blond man gave him a quizzical look, but Harry immediately nodded. He folded his arm around one of Luc’s, took Sev’s hand, and nudged them towards the terrace doors. They strolled out into a warm, slightly windy afternoon, taking one of the walking paths across the lawn towards the shady trees that bordered the back of the property. They talked about the gardens, about what Sev would be taking with him from the potions garden, Harry’s favorite roses, and Luc’s pride in the apple trees.

Harry hadn’t realized at first how hands-on the Malfoys were in the maintenance of the property—Cissy oversaw the rose gardens and greenhouses, while Luc doted on the peacocks and doves, and managed care of the apples. Sev had his own section of garden for potions ingredients, separate from the produce of the kitchen garden and the plants in the greenhouses that were cultivated for sale. Harry had rather enjoyed discussing magical gardening techniques with them during the past few weeks—perhaps it was all the work he’d put into Petunia’s garden, but he always thought better of a person willing to do such work themselves. Even if the house elves helped quite a bit, Cissy and Luc weren’t afraid of getting a little dirty when they weren’t entertaining guests, and he liked that about them.

He shaded his eyes against the sun, watching his mates as they walked and talked beside him, wondering how the three of them looked together. Harry knew he was petite: quite thin, still, and very short compared to the other two (and almost everyone he knew, honestly)—he barely came up to the middle of Luc’s chest. Lucius was fit, with broad shoulders and a trim figure, tapering to a neat waist and muscular legs. Severus was half a head taller than Luc, with long, lean limbs, though he hid them well under his robes during the school year. The two older men were quite attractive—Harry wasn’t sure he deserved them, but they wanted him, and he wanted to be worthy of that. Luc’s eyes were fit up as he talked, and Sev was watching him with a small smile. He knew his own expression was probably the same, that he was probably smiling like an idiot, silly in love over the other two. It was funny where life took you, he thought—barely a month ago, he’d never have imagined such a moment between the three of them, and now he was living it.

A hissing voice overhead caught his attention as they wandered into the trees, and he glanced up, smile broadening into a grin. “I want you to meet someone,” Harry said to his bondmates. He reached up into the branches, and a black viper coiled down around his arm and draped across his shoulders; he hissed a greeting at her and smoothed a finger over her head.

Severus and Lucius watched warily as the meter-long adder preened under his hand. He turned back to them, drifting a little closer. “I made a friend during one of my afternoon flies. Regular snakes don’t have names, exactly—they recognize each other by scent. She’s not a magical snake, and she’s not my familiar, but she’s soaked in the ambient magic here enough to be a little different from the average snake. I’ve nicknamed her Onyx, which she thinks is a bit silly, but she likes me, so she’ll tolerate it.” He hissed something at her, and she turned her head to look at the
two older men, tongue flicking out to taste the air. She turned back to Harry scenting the air
around him as well, and then butted her head back under his hand until he began to pet her once
more.

They hissed back and forth a bit more, and Harry laughed. “I told her you’re my mates, and she
asked when you will give me hatchlings. She says that we must hurry or soon I’ll be too old for it.
Human biology rather escapes her, I think.” She hissed more and he nodded, replying and then
relaying her words to them. “She is going to bask more before her hunt.” Leaning forward to let
her slide from his arms, Harry bade her farewell, and she whisked off into the grass.

Standing back up, he grinned at his bondmates. “She likes you, Luc—says you take good care of
the trees, and leave the living things to themselves. She wished us a restful winter—she’ll be off to
hibernate for the season, soon.” Sev spelled Harry’s hands clean, and Luc plucked a bit of leaf
from his hair, dropping a kiss onto his mouth.

“Our little wood nymph—you are quite at home in nature, aren’t you?”

Harry shrugged easily. “Animals don’t usually hurt you for sport. I’ve always got along pretty
well with them, generally.” He smiled. “Let’s go back in—I want to do something.”

Luc quirked an eyebrow, but took Harry’s hand and followed him back towards the house, giving
Sev a curious look over one shoulder and getting a knowing smirk in reply. Their young
bondmate led them back through the terrace doors into their bedroom. Once inside, he turned on
Luc, unbuttoning the collar of his robes, kneeling to remove the blond man’s shoes, and then
lifting the hem of his robe as he stood.

Sev helped him pull Luc’s robe up and over his head, and Harry turned to drape it over a nearby
chair. Shucking his own robe, he laid it over the chair as well, slipping his necklace off and into
one of the robe’s pockets. He toed off his shoes, stripped off his underpants, and turned back to
the two older men, who were kissing. He stood up on the tips of his toes and each of them leaned
down to kiss him in turn. Then, he took Luc’s hand and tugged him towards their bed, biting his
lip against a grin as the older man gaped at him.

Sev looked on with a smirk as Harry pushed Luc down on the bed, kissing him fiercely. He made
quick work of his shirt and trousers, and then climbed onto the other side of the bed to join his
lovers.

Harry straddled the blond man, pressing him down into the pillows. Sucking at his neck, he curled
one hand into the man’s hair and dragged the other across his nipples, causing Luc to moan. He
grinned against the man’s skin, and kissed his way down Luc’s chest and belly until he could tug
his silky black underpants off. He stopped, biting his lip and looking down at Luc’s erection
where it draped across his hip. The man was longer and thinner than Sev in this area, and Harry
had only the barest idea what to do. He glanced up at his other bondmate where he sat against the
headboard, hand tangled in long blond hair, dark eyes watching intently.

“I don’t know how—will you help me?” he asked.

Sev’s lips curled into a pleased little smile, and he leaned forward, grasping both of Luc’s wrists
and pulling them up above his head.

“Take him into your hand,” he instructed, smile widening as Harry obeyed him. “Pump your fist,
slowly—don’t rush.” Luc shuddered at his touch, pushing his hips up, and without needing to be
told Harry pinned him down with his free hand. He glanced up and Sev nodded at him. “Yes,
that’s good. Now, wrap your lips around the tip—mind your teeth. Just like that, yes. Lave the tip
with your tongue. How does that feel, love?” he asked Luc, who groaned and craned his head up for a kiss. Sev obliged him, but only briefly, pulling back after a moment to watch their young bondmate once more.

“Look at him, Luc. Isn’t he beautiful like this?” The blond man groaned again, and he chuckled. “Suck on him, now,” he told Harry. “Keep pumping your hand and cover the rest with your mouth.”

The young man did this, experimentally pressing forward with his tongue, and then dragging his whole mouth up to suck on just the head, before dropping back down until his lips met the top of his fist. He glanced up to see Sev watching him hungrily. “Yes, you’ve got it. Very good…” the older man murmured.

Harry lost himself in the motion, reveling in the sounds Luc made in response to different speeds and pressures, tasting the salty fluid that began to leak from the tip. He felt powerful, knowing that his movements had reduced the aristocratic man to cries and moans of pleasure. Above him, Luc tugged against Sev’s hands where they gripped his wrists.

“Please,” he begged hoarsely. “Let me—I want to touch you, both of you.”

“I don’t know—do you deserve that? Have you earned it?” The darker man’s eyes sparkled as he teased his bondmate. Harry shivered, heat pooling in his belly at Sev’s silken voice; beneath him, Luc shivered as well.

“Please!” The blond man cried out.

“Mmm…very well.” Severus kissed him and released his wrists.

Instantly, Luc’s hands flew to touch them, one wrapping into Sev’s dark hair, the other twining through Harry’s locks. “I’m, ah! I—I’m getting close,” he panted, tugging on his younger bondmate’s hair until he disengaged with an obscene-sounding pop.

Harry nodded, squeezing the base of Luc’s erection in a move that he sometimes used on himself when he didn’t want to come yet. “Sev, I want—will you prepare me?” he asked.

“You don’t have to—” Luc began, but Harry leaned up to silence him with a hard kiss.

“I know,” he said. “I want to.” He brushed his hands over the man’s nipples and down his sides, making Luc shiver beneath him, before settling back into his previous spot as Severus slid down the bed and took up a position behind him. Harry sighed as the first cool finger slipped inside him. He mouthed over the pale hips under his hands, leaving love bites on the creamy skin there. He couldn’t help rocking his hips a little as Sev added another finger and began to thrust and spread them to open him up. He sighed and moaned, cheeks flushing even as he pushed back on that hand, greedy for more.

Once he’d worked up to four fingers, Sev decided he was ready and withdrew, kissing the small of his back and nudging Harry’s hip with one hand. Wasting no time, Harry clambered up and slung one leg over the blond man. Sev helped him position himself, and he released a long, slow breath as he sank down onto Lucius. The angle was very different from when he’d been with Sev for his first time, and his breath caught as he settled fully into Luc’s lap. He sat still for a moment, just feeling the intrusion, and then twitched his hips experimentally. His bondmate groaned beneath him, hips jerking, and he gasped, bracing himself against Luc’s chest with both hands.
“Sorry—sorry, love,” Luc panted out.

“No, it’s good,” Harry said. “Just surprised me, is all.” He rolled his hips a little, moaning at the
drag of flesh along his stretched hole. It took him a minute to catch the trick of it, but he was soon
riding his mate, letting out little cries between desperate kisses.

“Beautiful, so beautiful,” the blond man murmured, running skilled hands over his skin, closing a
fist around Harry’s erection and stroking, cradling his face in one warm palm and kissing him
back just as urgently.

Harry tried to hold out as long as possible, but the pleasure was too much, and soon he was
coming, spilling all over Luc’s hand and belly. He lost his rhythm, panting and jerking through his
orgasm, and collapsed onto the older man’s chest. He groaned as Luc pulled gently out of him and
guided his limp form off to the side. He lay curled there, on one side of the bed, watching Sev
give their bondmate a smoldering look. It seemed the other man had prepared himself already,
because he lay back, tilting his hips, and Luc immediately sank into him, both of them moaning
wantonly as he bottomed out.

The blond man set a fast pace, bracing himself on his forearms as he thrust. The sound of skin
slapping skin filled the room, and both men cried out, kissing sloppily, moaning and sighing. Harry watched, entranced at how easily they moved together, how beautiful they looked, Sev’s
dark figure folded under Luc’s pale one, long thighs squeezing around sturdy hips as their hair
swirled together on the bed. Merlin, but they were so lovely together—and they were his…

Luc didn’t last much longer, hips stuttering as he groaned and came. He pulled out, but continued
to curl around Sev, kissing him deeply as the other man stroked himself to completion. Once he
was done, Luc rolled to the side and stretched out on the bed between them. Sev conjured a damp
cloth to clean them off, and draped himself along Luc’s side when he was done. Harry scooted
closer to the blond man, as well, kissing him deeply.

“Happy birthday,” he said, smiling into the kiss.

“You’ll spoil me,” Luc murmured against Harry’s lips.

“Hmm, doubt it…I think I’m the one who’s going to end up spoiled. Do you know how beautiful
you two are together? And all mine,” he mused, kissing along Luc’s jaw until he could turn his
head and kiss Sev.

“All yours,” Severus agreed.

“I must be the luckiest man alive, to have both of you.” Luc nuzzled against Harry’s neck, and
kissed him again.

The three of them lay tangled together for a long time, basking in the afterglow. When the clock
struck the hour, however, Harry propped himself up on one arm. “We should get dressed. Cissy
won’t be happy with me if we miss dinner. She did help me plan lunch and all.”

Luc groaned. “If we must…”

Harry laughed and nudged him in the side, rolling away to climb off the bed and retrieve their
clothes. He dressed quickly, slipping his necklace back on, and turned to hand Luc his own robe.
The man gave a put-upon sigh, but he was grinning as he pulled his robes back on and buttoned
the collar. “Come on,” Harry said, taking Luc’s hand and heading towards the door.
They found Cissy waiting for them in the sitting room. She smiled and stood as they entered. “Happy birthday, Lucius, dear,” she said, kissing him on each cheek. She held up a small black box, and Harry recognized it as the one from Guérin & Ghaliya Jewelers. Luc took it and opened it, smiling when he saw the pin inside.

“Allow me,” Cissy said, taking up the pin when he nodded and attaching it to the breast of his robes. “There, now—I knew it would suit.”

“A lovely choice, as always,” Severus said, with a little bow of his head.

She bowed hers in return. “To supper?” she asked, turning to lead them to the dining room.

Chapter End Notes

I'm hoping to begin updating regularly now, on Wednesdays.
I Don't Know If I Can Do This

Chapter Notes

Some dialogue taken from Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince.

On the day they were to leave for Hogwarts, Luc’s wand alarm went off at 7:00, vibrating and beeping loudly. He fumbled under his pillow for it and silenced it with a groan, wishing he could go back to sleep. Instead, he gently nudged Sev, who grunted, raising his head to blink blearily at Luc, and then at Harry, who was already rolling from the bed to trudge into the bathroom. When Harry returned after a quick shower, Luc took his turn, and then Sev. By the time Sev returned, Harry was dressed and heading to breakfast, claiming a quick kiss from both of them. Luc lingered, and once Sev was dressed they headed out into the sitting room, where they found Harry drinking tea in front of a laden breakfast table.

With the help of several strong cups of tea and a hearty breakfast, they were all soon prepared for their day. Luc and Sev departed for the entrance hall, while Harry did a last sweep through his old room, making sure everything was packed or moved. The night before, he’d moved all the things he’d be leaving at the manor into the master suite, tucking them into drawers and hanging them on racks in his own section of the newly expanded walk-in closet there. Everything else had gone into his trunk, except a nightshirt and his toiletries, which he now packed, and one of his school robes, which he was wearing.

Satisfied that nothing was left behind, Harry shrunk and pocketed his trunk, before heading down to the entrance hall. He’d sent Hedwig along to the school already, so he wasn’t carrying anything—he wanted his wand arm free if there was any sort of attack. It wasn’t exactly likely, but the security precautions that had popped up in Diagon Alley had put him a bit on edge.

Downstairs, his bondmates were discussing something with Cissy in quiet tones, but they separated when they spotted him. “Do you have everything you plan to take with you?” Sev asked.

Harry nodded, sharing a grin with Luc over the man’s fretting.

“If he needs anything, he can send for it, Sev,” Narcissa said, a touch of laughter in her voice. “Owls and house elves will still exist when you all arrive at Hogwarts.”

“Yes, thank you, I believe I asked Harry,” Severus said peevishly. His young bondmate snickered and the older man leveled a fierce glare at him. Harry gave him the sweetest, most innocent look he could muster, and then moved into his space and kissed him. Reaching out, the young man snagged Lucius’s hand and pulled him in for a kiss of his own.

“I’m fine,” Harry promised earnestly. “Everything’s fine. I’ll see you both at school.”

Luc leaned in for one last kiss. “Have a good trip, love,” he murmured. Stepping back, he turned and disapparated, Sev following.

“You’d think they weren’t going to see you again for days, rather than hours,” Narcissa quipped;
Harry laughed. “Draco, dear, are you ready?” she called, as her son appeared on the stairs.

“Yes, mother.” Draco joined them, not even looking at Harry.

Harry tried not to frown—though he’d said they didn’t have to be best friends, he’d still hoped they could repair their frosty relationship, but it wasn’t looking very likely. Perhaps, he thought, they just needed some time, and Draco would see that he wasn’t losing anything just because Harry had bonded with his father and godfather.

Narcissa led them into the formal sitting room and over to the floo. “Draco, why don’t you go first?,” she said, offering the dish of floo powder. He scooped some into his hand and tossed it into the fire, calling out “King’s Cross!” and disappearing in a flash of green flames. Cissy turned to Harry, but did not yet hold out the dish. They would have to say their goodbyes here, because they couldn’t be seen together at the train station.

“Have a good term, dear,” she said. “Don’t forget to write. And all four of you must return for the Yule holiday—I want a proper family celebration with all of us here.”

“Thank you, Cissy,” he said. “For everything.”

“Of course.” She kissed each of his cheeks and briefly clasped one of his hands. Then she held out the floo powder.

Harry took some and tossed it into the flames. “King’s Cross,” he said, as clearly as he could, and the magic whisked him off towards the station. At the far end, he tried to exit smoothly, and only half managed it: he didn’t fall, but he stumbled; nevertheless, he considered it a success. Draco stood nearby, obviously waiting for his mother, with a bored expression on his face. Harry hurried past, pretending to ignore the other boy, and headed for the Hogwarts Express. The platform and train were both pretty empty, since it was so early—just turning 9:00 as he stepped on the train—and he set off to find a compartment.

Once he found a decently-sized one, Harry expanded his trunk to its normal size and floated it into the rack. It was still quite early, so he pulled out a book on arithmancy that he’d been reading, settling in to wait. It was an interesting subject, and he was a little sad that he had chosen divination instead—his mother’s journals revealed that she had gone the same route as Hermione and opted for arithmancy and ancient runes, which were wildly useful for spell invention. Arithmancy also aided greater understanding of the magical theory behind transfiguration and other spells. Since he hadn’t got O.W.L.s in them, he couldn’t take the N.E.W.T. level arithmancy and runes classes, but he was determined to work on both as a side project, his schedule allowing.

He’d managed to eke out an O on his Potions O.W.L., so he’d be continuing that, along with Charms, Transfiguration, Herbology, and DADA. He’d dropped History of Magic and Divination, having failed both, rather guiltily given up Care of Magical creatures (he liked Hagrid, but the class wasn’t doing him any good, frankly), and decided he didn’t need Astronomy either—even though it was useful for some higher level potions and magics, he needn’t take the N.E.W.T. class to study it, and would rather have the extra time he’d get by dropping it.

He pulled the quidditch captain’s badge out of his pocket, rubbing a thumb over it contemplatively, before pinning it to the front of his robes. This year was going to be complicated—he had N.E.W.T. level classes and quidditch, along with the mysterious meetings with Dumbledore, and he would have to find time to visit his bondmates on the sly. Luc wanted to continue his dueling instruction when they could—the Dark Lord was still around, after all.
He frowned down at the book in his lap, thinking about his last meeting with Dumbledore. Even though he’d been a bit steamed about it last year, Harry couldn’t really fault the headmaster’s reasoning for choosing another student for prefect over him, even if he personally felt that Dean or Neville might have been a better choice than Ron. The redhead was his best friend, but even he could admit that the boy wasn’t very responsible. He was loyal, and he could keep a secret, but he wasn’t a great role model by any stretch of the imagination. He took advantage of the privileges of being a prefect, but dodged much of the work involved, leaving poor Hermione to deal with it.

Speaking of work—there was a thought: he wouldn’t need to continue the DA this year—Lucius was going to be a competent professor. They wouldn’t need a secret club to get proper instruction, thankfully, so that was one less thing on his plate. Harry perked up, grinning to himself, and returned to his reading on the magical properties of the number seven.

After a while, the compartment door slid open. He looked up from his book and smiled at the delicate blonde girl standing in the compartment’s doorway.

“Hello, Harry,” she said in an airy voice.

“Hello, Luna,” he said, gesturing towards the seats across from him. “Come in.”

“Thank you.” She smiled and sat, her eyes skating over the air around him. “I see you had an especially eventful summer. Congratulations on your bonding.”

His mouth dropped open. “How did you…never mind—uh, thanks. Could you…”

“Oh, I won’t tell anyone,” she assured him. “Though some of them will be rather disappointed when it comes out.” She smiled at his confused expression and pulled out a copy of her father’s magazine. Before he could ask what she meant, the compartment door slid open again.

“Harry!” Neville beamed at him, and Harry waved him in. “How was your summer?”

“Better than expected. Yours?” He grinned and looked over his friend, who had gotten rather tan and undergone a growth spurt over the summer; he’d taken on that sort of gangly, awkward look that a lot of teenage boys have when they begin to grow in earnest.

“Yeah. Gran was really proud of me for the whole thing at the Ministry, said I honored my parents. She even got me a new wand! And we spent the holiday traveling, as a treat. I got some great clippings for our greenhouses…Hullo, Luna. How was your holiday?”

“Oh, lovely. My father and I went looking for freshwater plimpies. There’s an article on them in the latest Quibbler, if you’d like to read it.” She smiled absently at him.

To Harry’s surprise, Nev blushed. “I—uh, yeah, sure,” he said. He accepted the magazine she pulled out from her bag to hand to him, and blinked down at it. Harry turned to look out the window, hiding his grin. He could see Narcissa watching the train from the platform—the crowd had begun to thin as most of the students boarded the train. She gave him a slight nod, which he returned, and then she disapparated.

Harry tried to refocus on his book, but his attention was drawn by a group of fourth year girls standing outside their compartment, whispering and giggling. After a bit of back and forth, one of them stepped into the compartment, tossing long black hair over her shoulder.

“Hi, Harry,” she said. “I’m Romilda Vane. Why don’t you join me and my friends in our
compartment? You don’t have to sit with these two—we’d be much better company, I’m sure.” She smiled at him in a way that was probably meant to be flirtatious, but mostly came across as haughty and off-putting.

“I’d rather stay here, actually—these are my friends.” Harry did not return her smile, although he also did not let on how irritating he found her.

“Oh. Okay.” She blinked at him for a moment, then awkwardly stepped back out into the hall, and walked off for another compartment, her friends trailing behind her.

“They think you should have cooler friends than us,” Luna said.

He frowned at her words. “Yeah, well, I don’t care what they think. They don’t know you, and they weren’t there at the Ministry, fighting alongside me. I couldn’t possibly have cooler friends than you.”

“That’s very nice of you to say, Harry.” Luna beamed at him over her copy of the Quibbler, showing off the strange multi-colored spectacles advertised on the front of the magazine. Neville gave him a smile of his own, before he went back to reading his own copy with a puzzled frown.

Soon, the warning whistle sounded and there was a last rush of students towards the doors. Minutes later, the Hogwarts Express began to pull out of King’s Cross. Harry turned back to his book, and the compartment was silent for the next half hour, until the door slid open and Ginny bounced in.

“Wotcher, Harry?” she said, grinning, and sat down by Harry.

“Hey, Ginny—how was your summer?”

“It was okay. Hermione came and stayed with us for most of it, and there were loads of the old crowd in and out. Dad took the security protocols the Ministry recommended really seriously, and that got a bit tedious by the end.” She grimaced. “But Bill stayed for a bit, too, and brought Phlegm, I mean Fleur, Delacour to come stay. She was insufferable—Mum can’t stand her, and I think she’s hoping Bill will go for Tonks instead. I dunno if that’ll happen, though—Tonks has been really weird since, uh…” She trailed off, looking uncomfortable. Harry gave her a curious look, but before he could ask about it an old witch peaked into their compartment.

“Anything off the trolley, dears?” she asked. Harry bought several chocolate frogs, a couple of licorice wands, and a pumpkin pasty. Neville bought a few cauldron cakes.

Harry handed Ginny a frog, and her grin returned. “Thanks. Did Ron tell you Dad’s got a promotion? He’s heading a new division, Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects.”

“That’s a mouthful.”

“Yeah, apparently there’s been loads of people selling fake protective amulets and such, taking people in, now that everyone knows You-Know-Who is back. Dad was a bit brokenhearted about leaving Misuse of Muggle Artefacts, but the Minister asked him personally, and he couldn’t say no, could he?”

“I suppose not,” Harry said. He was trying to figure out how to bring the topic back around to Tonks, but before he could, Ginny popped to her feet.
“Anyway, I just came around to say hi. I’m in with Dean and Seamus, further on—only, please don’t tell Ron if he doesn’t notice himself.” She opened the door, revealing Harry’s two best friends. Hermione was frowning at Ron, who grinned at his sister.

“Hiya, Gin,” he said.

“Ginny,” Hermione said.

“Ron, Mione,” she said. She raised an eyebrow until they moved out of the way, and then she smiled and disappeared down the train.

Hermione continued to frown severely at Ron, but the redhead ignored this and strolled past her to flop down by Harry. She huffed and took the empty seat by Luna. “I do wish you wouldn’t antagonize him, Ronald,” she said, obviously carrying on an argument they’d been having.

“Who?” Harry asked.

“Malfoy,” she said. Harry tried not to squirm. He hadn’t given much thought to Ron’s testy relationship with Draco, but it was even worse than his own had been—he was going to have to keep the two of them apart as much as he could. He fought back a sigh, and hoped Ron wouldn’t do anything stupid in front of Luc.

Ron snatched one of Harry’s chocolate frogs. “Malfoy was looking rather peaky the other day in Diagon Alley—I kind of hoped he’d got sick and had to stay home. Or maybe joined the junior Death Eater brigade at Durmstrang.”

“I hardly think You-Know-Who recruits students,” Mione said.

“Maybe not, but everyone knows Slytherin’s full of kids whose parents followed him in the last war, and they’re bound to join up after graduation. Right, Harry?”

“Even if that is true, Malfoy is a prefect now, and you shouldn’t be picking fights with him during meetings!” The bushy-haired witch crossed her arms, glaring.

“Leave off, Ron,” Harry said wearily. “We’re sixth years. And you’re a prefect—you’re supposed to set an example, yeah?”

Hermione nodded. “See? Harry agrees; it’s time to put this silly feud behind you. We fought You-Know-Who just a few months ago—I think we have bigger things to worry about than needling Malfoy.”

“Besides,” said Harry, “his father is the new Defense professor; you’ll get into loads of trouble if you fight with him in the halls or anything.”

The color drained from Ron’s face. “But he’s a death eater,” he squeaked. “We saw him at the Ministry and everything! How could Dumbledore let him teach at Hogwarts?”

“Wasn’t his choice, was it? He couldn’t find anyone to take the job, and the board of governors didn’t want the ministry interfering again, so they appointed one of their own.”

“Do—you think it’s a plot to get at you, like in fourth year?” Hermione asked, looking just as horrified as Ron.
Harry shook his head. “They’d hide it better, if that was the case. I don’t think this is something the Dark Lord came up with.” His friends all stared at him in shock. “What?”

“Since when do you say ‘the Dark Lord,’ mate?”

Damn. He’d slipped up already—he thought fast. “Since I had those private lessons with Snape, remember? He doesn’t like it when people say the name. And then this summer I learned about the Taboo.”

Hermione nodded. “You told me about that, but—the Dark Lord, Harry? Only Death Eaters say that.”

“Well, now I say it, too.” His tone was very final, and the others exchanged looks, but they let it drop.

“What’s up with your hair, then?” Ron asked after a moment of awkward silence.

“I’m growing it out,” Harry said. “I’m a Lord now, and it seemed proper.”

Mione’s eyebrows shot up. “Proper? What do you mean?”

“Many adult wizards, but especially Lords, grow their hair to show their status,” Neville said. “The heir of a family isn’t generally allowed to grow theirs out past shoulder-length until they inherit the title; it shows respect for the head of the family. I’ll have to grow my hair when I take up the Longbottom lordship.”

“But aren’t you now? I mean, it’s not like your, uh…” Hermione realized she was treading dangerously close to an uncomfortable topic. “That is, Harry’s doing his now—why wait?” she finished awkwardly.

Nev shook his head. “I can’t. I’m not a legal adult until next July; I’ll start growing it out then.”

Hermione frowned. “But then shouldn’t you…” She looked back at Harry.

“The moment I was forced to participate in the Triwizard Tournament I was declared a magical adult,” he said, mouth twisting bitterly. “Perks of having a madman after you, I guess.”

“Oh.” There was an awkward silence; the mood in the compartment had gotten heavy.

Harry hadn’t told them about the full prophecy yet, and he didn’t really want to do it now, especially not in front of Neville. He wanted to talk to the other boy privately, because the prophecy could have been about him, too—he deserved to know, after what happened to his parents. He stared down at his book, deep in thought.

“What are you reading, Harry?” Hermione asked. He held the book up, and she read the spine: New Theory of Numerology. “Oh, what do you think of it?”

“I think it’s a good introduction. It’s making me wish I’d gone for arithmancy instead of divination, actually—it sounds dead useful.”

“Yes, I think it is. It’s used a lot in altering and creating spells and rituals, though there’s a lot of theory before you get to that level. We’ll be starting the more advanced stuff this year, actually.”
He nodded. “I’ve been reading my mother’s old journals that I told you about, and she did brilliant things with it. The theory isn’t as difficult as I expected, so far; I’m thinking of making an independent study of it.”

“You’re not going swotty on me, are you?” Ron asked in consternation.

Harry shrugged. “Like I said, I read a lot this summer.”

“Well, you can’t take the arithmancy class,” Hermione said, “but I can give you my old notes. And I think you can actually petition to take the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s with your head of house’s permission. You’d have to study awful hard, though…” She considered him.

He nodded. “Yeah, I didn’t figure I’d be able to do the class, but I’d still like to have the knowledge, either way.”

She beamed at him. “I’m glad you’re taking your studies seriously this year, Harry. Remind me tomorrow and I’ll copy my notes for you.”

“Cheers.”

Ron groaned. “Ugh, she’s corrupted you, has she? Please tell me you haven’t read *Hogwarts: A History*, at least.”

“I did, actually,” Harry said.

“Mate, we swore!”

“Swore what exactly?” Hermione asked, eyes narrowing.

“Uh, nothing,” Ron said hurriedly.

She turned her waspish look on Harry, but it was much less scary than Severus’s dissecting gaze could be. Still, he didn’t have any reason not to tell her…

“Neither of us was going to read it before graduation,” he explained. “But I decided this summer that there wasn’t really a reason not to, so I did.”

She turned back to Ron, gesturing at Harry. “There, see? It wouldn’t *kill* you to read it.”

“You don’t know that,” the redhead muttered mutinously. He snatched another of Harry’s chocolate frogs and stuffed it in his mouth. “I’m gonna go find Ginny,” he said around his mouthful of chocolate, and left.

Hermione glared after him. “Now, really!” she exclaimed.

“So, uh, how’d you do on your O.W.L.s?” Harry asked, hoping to distract her. He succeeded, as she launched into a discussion of her scores—nine Os and an E—and then into her classes for the year, and her plans to prepare for the N.E.W.T.s. Neville gave him a despairing look from where he sat on the other side of Luna, and Harry gave a small shrug; at least she wasn’t ranting about Ron.

She wound down about half an hour later, saying that she had to go patrol for a bit, and left. He
and Neville began a discussion about his plans for the quidditch team that year, during which they both pretended not to notice the number of people strolling past their compartment to stare at him. Now that the Ministry had to admit that Voldemort had returned, Harry was suddenly popular again, beyond his circle of friends and the DA. What a load of shite. He was getting tired of being the wizarding world’s whipping boy, of being subjected to the fickle whims of people he’d never even met.

His growing irritation made it difficult to focus on the conversation, and the third time he’d needed Neville to repeat something, Harry shook his head and sat back with a sigh. “Sorry, I can’t really focus right now. I’m not…Uh, can we…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Neville said. “It’s alright. I’ll read more or something.”

“Thanks, Nev.” Harry gave his friend a small smile, and turned towards the window. He ended up staring out at the passing scenery for most of the rest of the trip, falling into a meditative state as the sun set and it became harder to see anything. He blinked back to awareness as the train began to slow, and they approached the lights of Hogsmeade Station. Glancing across the compartment, he noted that Luna and Neville were also in their uniforms, now. Harry tucked his book into one of the expanded pockets of his robes—he’d paid a bit extra to have them added to all of his robes, and they were absolutely worth it—and gestured for the others to precede him out of the compartment, where they followed the mass of students disembarking from the train. He saw Hagrid at the far end of the platform, but the man was facing away from him and calling for the first year students, so he turned towards the road, where the carriages and the skeletal thestrals waited.

Harry gazed absently at the creatures, remembering the strange flight to London, to the Ministry and the Dark Lord’s trap. It had been just over two months since then, yet his life had changed so much. He patted one of the thestrals on the neck before climbing into a carriage with Luna, Neville, and Hermione. Ron ended up sharing with Ginny, Dean, and Seamus, who he’d apparently spent most of the train ride with, once he’d left their compartment. The others in the carriage left Harry to his thoughts, Luna and Neville chatting about herbology and Hermione muttering to herself and scribbling notes on a scrap of parchment with a self-inking quill.

“What are you writing?” Harry asked her, when they reached Hogwarts and climbed out. She slipped the parchment and quill into her robe pocket and followed him up the steps.

Mione blinked at him. “Hmm? Oh, I need an arithmancy project for the term—we’re to research a class of spells and talk about the theory behind them, how they were created, all that. It’s to prepare us for our seventh year project, which is on spell alteration. I was just writing down some ideas about what I want to study.”

“Now I really wish I’d taken that class,” he said, smiling.

“Well, you’ll be studying it yourself—you’ll get there, I’m sure.”

“Yes, hopefully.”

They followed the mass of students streaming into the Great Hall, waving goodbye to Luna as she headed towards the Ravenclaw table. Harry sat down, and immediately found himself bracketed by Hermione on one side and Ron on the other. Neville sat across from him, with Ginny and Dean on one of his sides, and Katie Bell on his other.

“Hiya, Harry,” Katie said. She gestured at the captain’s badge on his robes. “I thought you’d get
that—congrats!"

"Cheers. I’ll catch you tomorrow to talk about trials, yeah?"

"Sure thing." She turned to talk to the girl on her other side—Evalyn, Harry thought. He looked around. Lavender was on Ron’s other side, and she was smiling at whatever he was saying. Hermione was talking to Ginny, who was leaning into Dean’s side. He looked around, searching out each member of the DA from the year before. A few of them spotted him looking and waved. Cho frowned at him, while Justin Finch-Fletchley and Anthony Goldstein nodded at him.

When he spotted Susan Bones, she was staring down at her plate, looking very pale and tired. Right, he thought, she’d lost her aunt over the summer. He wasn’t sure if he ought to say something to her—surely she’d be tired of platitudes by now. Hannah Abbot leaned over to ask her something, to which Susan nodded, and Harry turned away to keep picking out students. Draco was sitting at the Slytherin table, wearing a bored sneer and nodding along to something Parkinson was saying. When grey eyes swept in Harry’s direction, he hurriedly looked away.

Harry scanned his eyes down the head table, eyes lingering on Sev’s face, and then Luc’s. Despite his joking words that morning, he missed them already. It might have been because they were so recently bonded, or because he had gotten used to spending so much time with them, but it felt like he hadn’t seen them in ages, and now he couldn’t even smile at them. He was a little depressed to think that he’d be sleeping without them that night, too.

“You alright?” Neville asked him.

“What? Yeah, I’m fine,” Harry said, turning away from the head table. “Why do you ask?”

“You just looked kinda sad, I guess.”

“Nah, just tired.” He was saved from further conversation by the entrance of the first years, led by Professor McGonagall, who seemed to have recovered from her injury at the end of spring term. He tuned out the hat’s song and most of the sorting, clapping politely after every student went to their seat—even the Slytherins, which earned him a few strange looks from his own table that he pointedly ignored.

Soon, all of the first years were sitting with their new houses, and the headmaster stood. “Welcome and welcome back, students, to another year at Hogwarts. I know you’re far too hungry to pay attention to an old man’s speechmaking, so I’ll hold off until you’ve stuffed yourselves silly—get to it!”

Harry rolled his eyes as the platters and bowls around him filled with food. He supposed it was to the headmaster’s advantage for others to underestimate him, but he thought the barmy old man routine was a ridiculous affectation, especially now that Dumbledore didn’t have to contend with Fudge’s fear of being usurped. He filled his plate with chicken, roast potatoes, and greens, poured gravy on the lot, and set to eating, determinedly not looking towards the head table even once. He listened in on the conversations around him, speaking up when he had something to add, but mostly focusing on his food, until the dishes cleared and the desserts appeared. He picked at a piece of treacle tart, missing the fruit sorbets the Malfoy elves frequently made for him. He caught Neville sending him another worried look, and he forced himself to smile, taking a bite of his tart.

Soon enough even the desserts disappeared, and the headmaster stood to make his start of year announcements. “The very best of evenings to you!” he began, smiling broadly and spreading his arms wide. Gasps and whispers raced through the room as this revealed his right hand, twisted and
blackened. Dumbledore shook his sleeve down over the dead-looking appendage. “Nothing to worry about,” the man said. Harry shot an incredulous look at Severus, who was studiously watching the headmaster with a blank expression.

“What happened to his hand?” Hermione whispered, as Dumbledore talked.

“Looks like curse damage,” Harry murmured, thinking over his defense reading from the summer. “I don’t know when he got it, but if it looks like that right now, that means Madame Pomfrey probably couldn’t heal it. Maybe they’re working on a potion, and it’ll take a while to brew.” He thought this wasn’t actually very likely to be the case. He’d been brewing with Severus for the last month, so unless the curse damage had occurred that very day, nothing was being brewed for it.

“Well, let’s hope so,” Hermione said. “Although some old curses can’t be cured, and there are poisons without antidotes…” She glanced fretfully up at the headmaster, who was just finishing up something about Quidditch teams.

“We are pleased to welcome to our staff Lucius Malfoy,” Dumbledore said. “An esteemed member of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, he has graciously stepped in to instruct our Defense Against the Dark Arts class this year, and I’m sure he has much to teach you.” He led a short round of polite applause that was enthusiastic on the part of the Slytherins, and markedly lackluster on the part of the Gryffindors.

“Now,” he continued when the clapping had died down, “as everyone here knows, Lord Voldemort has returned, and he and his followers are once more gaining power and strength in the wizarding world. As a result, the wards and fortifications of our school have been strengthened, and I must ask you to abide by the rules and restrictions put in place by the staff—they are for your safety. In particular, please do not wander the halls after curfew, and do not leave the school grounds without express permission and a staff escort. Bear in mind, always, the safety of yourselves and others, and if you witness anything suspicious or untoward in the castle or on the grounds, please report it to the nearest prefect or staff member immediately.” Suddenly, he smiled. “That is all, and I shall not keep you from your warm and comfortable beds a moment longer—we must all be rested and ready for another year of learning—good night!”

Almost as soon as he’d finished speaking, the professors rose and filed through the staff door, and the students began to depart for their dorms, with deafening chatter and much scraping of benches. Hermione ran off to corral the first year Gryffindors, with Ron strolling along behind her. Harry let himself be swept along by the crowd, ignoring the stares and looks from other students, which had resumed when the headmaster mentioned the Dark Lord’s return. He frowned at the group of girls from the train, Romilda Vane and her friends, who were all hovering nearby, whispering behind their hands and giggling again. Vane gave him a winning smile when he looked at her, and he turned abruptly away, moving closer to Neville. He tried not to sigh—he just wanted this day to end.

When they got up their room, Harry flopped onto his bed, staring over at the empty spot where Ron’s bed normally sat. As prefects, Ron and Hermione had their own rooms, since they were out late for patrols. It was one of the reasons Harry had wanted the position—having his own room meant privacy getting changed and less of a chance one of the other boys would witness his nightmares. He rolled over and grabbed his nightshirt and got changed behind his curtains. Chucking his uniform on top of his trunk, he placed his glasses on the bedside table, cast a silencing spell on his curtains, and stuck his wand under his pillow.

Harry stared into the dark for a long time, listening to his own breathing in the quiet of his magically-silenced bed. The space felt too cold and lonely around him, and he closed his eyes,
sifting through his memories and pulling up the feeling of comfort and peace he felt with his bondmates. He curled up on one side and imagined he was back in bed with them: the quiet noises they made in their sleep, Luc’s breath on the back of his neck, Sev’s long arm draped heavy over both of them. He meditated on this scene until he could almost feel it around him, and let it lull him to sleep.

The first week of classes passed quickly. Harry soon settled back into the rhythm of life at Hogwarts. He’d been warned that N.E.W.T. classes were harder even than O.W.L. level, and the volumes of homework assigned in each class indicated this was not idle talk—though he had more free periods than ever, he used every one of them to work on homework, determined not to fall behind. He was grateful that he’d chosen to read supplemental texts in transfiguration, defense, potions, and charms over the summer, because the classes jumped immediately into demonstration and practice, with little discussion of theory. Sitting classes, reading ahead, and writing essays kept him busy during the day. Still, he missed his bondmates fiercely at night.

For his part, Lucius was relieved to discover that he was well-prepared: once he began teaching, he fell into it quite naturally. The Slytherin students were generally pleased at his presence, and the Gryffindors were almost universally wary, with the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws mostly reserving judgement for the time being, but there were no major confrontations in any of his classes, and he was sanguine.

Severus’s classes were much the same as they ever were. This meant that he determiniedly favored Slytherins, denigrated Gryffindors, delighted in his N.E.W.T. level classes, deplored his current O.W.L. students, and despaired over the newest batch of first years. As always, he resented Dumbledore for pairing the Slytherins and Gryffindors together in his classes, which the man insisted on doing every year in spite of his repeated warnings that it would end in disaster. When it arrived, Severus was glad to see the weekend, though he still had fifty-one summer assignments to grade.

Saturday evening found the two older men in their quarters after dinner, pressed together on the couch, where Luc had dragged Sev and pinned him down, in spite of his (admittedly token) protests.

“I have essays, love. Although your incompetent predecessor hadn’t the chance to assign summer work, not all of us are so lucky.”

“You worked on them all afternoon—surely you can take a break?” The blond man ducked his head to suck at the skin of his neck in the way he knew drove Severus wild.

“Stop that,” Severus groaned, half-heartedly pushing him away. “I’m just going to have to spell the marks away—unless your plan is to undermine my authority?”

Luc peered up through his lashes with false contrition. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Sev scoffed. “No, you aren’t.”

“No, you’re right, I’m not.” He smirked at his bondmate, who just rolled his eyes.

Just then, the outer door opened and shut, and Harry appeared from under his invisibility cloak. He tossed it on one of the chairs and crawled onto the sofa, wrapping his arms around the two older men. He could feel the tension draining out of him as they hugged him back, and he sighed into Luc’s shoulder.
“I don’t know if I can do this,” he confessed.

“Do what, love?” Luc asked, running fingers soothingly through his hair.

“Sleep alone. Pretend to hate you. Lie to my friends. Stay away during the week.” He shrugged helplessly. “Any of it. All of it. I know it’s necessary, but I—I miss you.”

“It’s not forever,” Sev murmured. “Just a few months between holidays, and after the summer is your last year.”

“And what about after that? If you’re both still spying, you’ll be staying here, and I can’t openly join you, but I don’t want to give you up for 10 months of the year…” Harry buried his face in Luc’s robes, letting them muffle his words. “I can’t give you up… I won’t.”

“You still have your glamor ring, love,” Luc reminded him. “It’s not ideal, but you can wear that to visit or stay with us. And we can always floo back to the manor and visit you—Sev did it for years.” The young man only grunted noncommittally and tucked himself even tighter against their sides.

The two older men exchanged a concerned look over his head. He seemed truly miserable, and there was little they could do to comfort him. His concerns were valid, and the separation would hit him hardest, since they would be together…

Severus leaned back, nudging Harry to sit up and look at him. “Shall we tell the headmaster about us? Then you needn’t worry about his interference.”

Harry cringed. “I don’t want Dumbledore trying to control this, though. He’ll meddle somehow, you know he will.”

“Perhaps,” Sev conceded, “but it may be less stressful for you if he knows.”

“How? I still can’t openly associate with you two.” This was true, and neither of them could refute it.

“I’ve been considering a defection,” Luc told him, instead. “In secret. My excuse was to be love of Severus and a fear for Draco—he’ll be of age to take the mark in June, and I can’t commit him to that, now—although our relationship was just the spur, if I’m being honest; the Dark Lord’s more… unstable than I’ve ever seen him. This isn’t like the last war, something’s wrong with him; I want my son safe. Draco could openly ‘run away’ next summer, and not fear being disowned: he’s the sole heir and there’s no other family to which I might pass the title. However, if Dumbledore knew about us, he would be much more willing to believe I am turning away from the Dark Lord’s service. That could make things easier on us, once he…” He trailed off, exchanging another look with Sev, who nodded with a sigh.

“Once he what?” Harry asked, looking between them in confusion.

“He’s dying,” Severus said, frowning. “The fool put on a cursed ring—he wouldn’t tell me the particulars, but I gather that the ring was important to him somehow, and he didn’t check it for curses before he stuck it on his finger. I was able to limit the curse damage to his hand, but it’s a temporary measure, at best. Within a year, he will die.”

The younger man blanched. “That silly old—what will the Order do without him? Are there plans being made?”
“Not yet. He’s keeping it close—you weren’t even to know, though, strictly speaking, I made no promise to keep it from you—and he hasn’t begun planning for a transition of power.”

Harry sighed. “Okay, that’s…no, sorry, that’s ridiculous.” He shook his head incredulously. “Is he mad?”

“I’m inclined to think so at the best of times, which these are not. Perhaps this is the reason he’s requested meetings with you, however: to pass on knowledge vital to the war effort.”

“He did promise last year to tell me everything, after the Department of Mysteries. Can’t say I believed he would, but maybe he’ll surprise me. Maybe dying’ll be the thing that spurs him to it…” He scrubbed his hands over his face. “Merlin, I’m tired.”

Lucius looked him over with concern. “You are looking a little peaked—are you well?”

“Just having trouble sleeping. I’m not adjusting well to being alone again.” He offered a wan smile.

“You should stay here tonight, and perhaps on Saturday nights from here on, if this continues,” the blond man said, looking to Sev for confirmation. The other man nodded, and they both looked at their young bondmate.

“I’ll have to leave early,” Harry murmured. “It’s a good thing my two best friends are prefects—Ron has his own room, and he’s the one who’d notice my being out of bed so much. Hermione’s too busy being responsible to pay me much mind.”

“Good,” Luc said. “Come to bed, then, love. We’ll have an early night.” He stood and pulled Harry to his feet.

“Yeah, alright,” the young man said, wrapping arms around him and leaning up for a kiss, before letting Luc lead him to the bedroom.

Chapter End Notes

I am aware that Gryffindor prefects do not have their own rooms in the books, but they do in my fic. Also, in my version, the magical contract making him a Triwizard Champion acknowledged him as an adult, because of the age requirement imposed by the Ministry, which means that in Order of the Phoenix, the ministry tacked on the charge related to the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery erroneously. No one commented on it because it hadn’t occurred to them that might be the case, and no one checked with the goblins, who would have known he had come into the title already, as a magical adult. This also means that Dumbledore has no legal control over where he spends his summers, incidentally, and Harry needn’t have gone to the Dursleys after all.
In spite of his own misgivings, Harry rose to his responsibilities, keeping his secrets and managing his schedule with grace. He captained the Gryffindor quidditch team, attended classes, completed his homework, and slipped off to spend evenings and weekend afternoons in Sev and Luc’s quarters. He spent plenty of his time there pressed against the side of one or the other, kissing contentedly, and when they weren’t exploring that aspect of their relationships, they had quiet conversations over tea. Severus sometimes checked over his homework, and Luc discussed his classes with him, and he began to open up to them about his nightmares, a little. Without their comforting presence in his bed at night, he’d returned to using silencing charms around his bed, and occasionally taking dreamless sleep when he really needed an uninterrupted night of sleep. Some weekend nights, he snuck down to their rooms after curfew and curled up between them, rising early to creep back into Gryffindor tower before the others were up. It wasn’t ideal by any stretch of the imagination, but it was workable.

The other students soon settled down as well, and he was glad not to be followed by stares and whispers when he walked through the halls. (Romilda Vane and her friends still whispered and giggled sometimes, but he didn’t know how to make them stop, so he doggedly ignored their behavior instead.) He’d held quidditch trials the second weekend of term, and settled on a pretty decent lineup: Katie, Ginny, Ron, and himself, plus Demelza Robins—a friend of Katie’s, Ritchie Coote—a rather weedy fourth year student with exceptionally good aim, and Jimmy Peakes—a scrappy, barrel-chested third year with a strong swing. (Afterwards, Luc had fussed over the goose-egg Peakes had given Harry in tryouts, until Sev rolled his eyes and gave Harry a healing potion.) Quidditch practices were scheduled for Tuesday and Thursday evenings, and he was pleased to see that the team appeared to be coming along quite easily.

Several of the old DA members had approached him to ask whether they’d be continuing this year, to which he’d responded with an unequivocal refusal. “We don’t need it,” he’d said when they asked why. “Professor Malfoy seems to know his stuff, and I really don’t have the time to be running a club, not with N.E.W.T. classes and the quidditch team.” Some responded with better grace than others, but no one tried to force the issue, even if they were wary about Lucius’s teaching.

On the whole, Harry was feeling good about the school year, with one exception: there had been a bit of a problem the first time Ron encountered Draco in the halls. The blond boy studiously ignored them, chatting easily with Zabini, but Ron couldn’t let it be, and he was mouthing off before Harry could stop him.

“Hey, Malfoy, bet you’re glad daddy’s here to help you cheat your way through, huh? Like father, like son.”

“Piss off, Weasel,” Draco snapped.
The redhead flushed and opened his mouth, but Harry stepped in. “Back off, Ron,” he said in an undertone. “You’ll get us in trouble!” His friend had rounded on him, but the door to the Defense classroom opened just then, and they filed in to begin class. Ron had stomped out when the period was over, and avoided Harry the rest of the day; when he finally cornered the other boy, pulling him into an alcove outside the Gryffindor Common Room, they had an embarrassingly loud row, and didn’t speak to each other again for over a fortnight. They made up eventually, but things were still not quite comfortable between them.

With everything else going on, Harry almost forgot about the headmaster’s plans to meet with him. The man was frequently missing from meals, and Sev told him Dumbledore was traveling on Order business. It wasn’t until mid-October that he finally received a note from the headmaster, delivered by a school owl, requesting Harry’s presence for their first meeting in his office that Saturday after dinner. He nodded at the man, who was present at the head table for once, and stuck the note in his bag. The next morning, he tucked it into his rolled up Defense essay, giving his homework a significant glance when he handed it to Lucius.

They were set to read a chapter from the books and then to work on silently casting jinxes and counter-jinxes with a partner. At the front of the room, Luc read some of the essays that had been handed in, and then he rose when they began practicing. He circulated around the room, observing each pair for a few moments and giving them pointers. When he reached Harry and Hermione, he sneered. “Stay after class, Mr Potter,” he snapped, before moving on.

“What a git,” Ron muttered behind his back.

“Something to say, Mr Weasley?” Lucius asked, turning towards him with one eyebrow raised.

The boy flushed a mottled red, but all he said was “No, professor.”

Luc pursed his lips and turned away, giving points to Marietta Edgecombe and Morag Macdougal, who had each successfully cast both the jinx and counter-jinx silently. When the class ended, Harry grabbed his bag and walked to the front of the classroom.

“I believe I only asked Mr Potter to stay after, Mr Weasley—run along,” Lucius said. Harry turned to see Ron hovering near the door, waiting for him. When the redhead had reluctantly sidled out the door, Luc spelled it shut and waved his wand to bring up a protective ward.

“You know he’s going to think you’re cursing me, right?” Harry said.

“It’ll give him a chance to practice silent counter-jinxes on you,” the older man said dismissively. His young bondmate just rolled his eyes, grinning. “Alright. What did you hold me back for?”

Luc frowned. “I want you to occlude during your meeting with the headmaster tomorrow night, and come to our rooms afterwards. I don’t trust that man, and I want to know what he’s up to.”

“I don’t think he’s going to hurt me,” Harry replied with a frown of his own.

“Just…indulge me, love. I want to make sure you’re safe.” Luc caressed the side of his face, brushing an escaped strand of hair back behind his ear.

“Okay.” The younger man leaned up on his toes to kiss his bondmate.
When he drew back, Luc followed, pressing their foreheads together for a long, silent moment. Finally, the older man reluctantly murmured, “You should go.”

“I know.” Harry sighed and stepped back, hitching his bag higher on his shoulder. “I’ll see you Saturday,” he said.

Luc waved his wand to dispel the ward on the door, and Harry gave him a last smile, before squaring his shoulders and walking out into the hall. He found Ron and Hermione waiting for him just outside.

“What was that about, mate?” the redhead asked.

“He just wanted to talk to me about my essay,” Harry said, purposefully vague. “Come on, we have to get to Transfiguration.” Ron didn’t appear mollified, but he fell into step with Hermione as they two of them followed Harry down the stairs to the other classroom.

Harry refused to elaborate on what Lucius had wanted, and he ended up dodging Ron’s questions by hiding in an alcove in the library during both of their afternoon free periods. He rose early on Saturday morning, eating breakfast before Ron woke, and then he and Hermione holed up in the library to work on their homework. Harry grabbed lunch from the kitchens instead of going to the Great Hall, and took it into the Room of Requirement with him, where he practiced dueling until dinnertime, trying to cast as many of his spells silently as possible.

He decided to eat with the others, since his two best friends seemed to be fighting about something again, and he was pretty sure Ron would ignore him as long as he was talking to Hermione. He was right: Ron stuffed his face and refused to acknowledge either of them, while Harry talked to Hermione about conjuration theory. They trooped up to the Gryffindor common room, and Ron chose to sit by the windows with Ginny and hassle her about spending so much time with Dean. Harry and Hermione sat by the fire, discussing some of the notes his mother had made in her journals from sixth year Transfiguration, and they both rolled their eyes when Ron was taken down by a bat-bogey hex that everyone but him knew was coming.

Soon, however, it was half-past seven, and time to head to his meeting with Dumbledore. Waving goodbye to Hermione, Harry made his way to the headmaster’s office. He murmured “fizzing whizbees” to the stone gargoyle, and rode the staircase up. When he reached the top, he paused to occlude his mind against intrusions, and knocked on the door, which immediately swung open to reveal Dumbledore sitting at his desk.

“Ah, Harry—right on time. Come in.”

“Good afternoon, sir,” Harry said. He took the seat that was offered, and gave the headmaster an expectant look.

“I imagine you are curious what you will be learning today,” said Dumbledore. “Knowledge is power, young Harry, so I will be imparting to you knowledge which I believe will enable you to fulfill the prophecy. In order to defeat him, you must understand how Tom Riddle became the man we now know as Voldemort.” He raised his wand and summoned his pensieve, directing it onto the wooden expanse between them.

Harry eyed the pensieve with some trepidation. Although he wouldn’t give up his much-altered relationship with Severus, his last journey into this stone basin had still been a deeply unpleasant experience.
Dumbledore noticed his reluctance. “Never fear, my boy,” he said. “This time, you enter the pensieve with me…and, even more unusually, with permission.”

Given how the headmaster treated Harry less like a person and more like a chess piece in the war, the familiar address rankled, but Harry simply nodded silently—even to him, it seemed a silly thing to be bothered by.

Unaware of the young man’s irritation, Professor Dumbledore poured the first memory out of a glass bottle, and gestured for him to enter it. “After you,” he said, smiling, and Harry leaned forward to push his face into the silvery substance and fall into Bob Ogden’s memory of meeting the Gaunts. It took him a few moments to realize that Morfin was speaking only in parseltongue, and he darted a glance at the headmaster, who was watching him for his reaction.

After watching it, Harry emerged from the memory with a frown on his face. “What happened to her? Merope?” He felt truly sorry for the young woman in that little hovel.

“She survived,” the headmaster replied. “Magical Law Enforcement arrived and subdued her father and brother, and they were subsequently sentenced to time in Azkaban. Marvolo served six months, for injuring the aurors, and Morfin received three years for the attack on a muggle—not his first, I might add.”

“Marvolo?” Harry said. “So that was…”

“Voldemort’s grandfather, mother, and uncle, yes. The muggle on the horse, Tom Riddle, was his father.”

“Those two married?” He gave the headmaster a skeptical look.

“Indeed. It is my own supposition that she employed a strong love potion to induce him to it, however. Mere months after they eloped, Riddle Sr returned to his family, claiming to have been ‘hoodwinked’ and ‘taken in’ by her. He would not dare say precisely what type of enchantment she used, as no one would believe it, of course. Most in the village assumed she had lied and claimed to be carrying his child to trick him into marriage.”

“Sorry, sir, but—didn’t she? Carry his child, I mean?”

“Yes, but not until after the marriage. The boy was born almost a year after their marriage—he was likely conceived shortly before his father left her. My guess is that she stopped dosing him once she was pregnant, hoping he would choose to stay with her. If that was the case, she was, of course, to be disappointed. Merope was left in London, pregnant and alone, desperate enough for money that she sold the locket you saw to Borgin and Burke’s. According to Mr Burke, she hadn’t an idea of its actual value, and so she took 10 galleons for it.”

“They only gave her 10? For Slytherin’s locket?!” Harry exclaimed.

“Caractacus Burke was not famed for his generosity, Harry.” Dumbledore tipped another memory into the pensieve, stirring it with his wand. “Regardless, Merope did not long survive the birth of her son, living just long enough to name him.” He gestured at the new layer of silver, and Harry leaned forward, and then he was falling into another memory.

This time, he was following a young Dumbledore, one whose long hair and beard were still auburn. Harry’s eyes widened as he took in the crushed velvet plum-colored suit in a rather flamboyant cut. He gave the real headmaster beside him an incredulous look, but didn’t actually
say anything, just followed the memory of the man to a grim little building behind an iron fence. A plaque beside the door gave the home’s name: *Wool’s Orphan Asylum*, and stated it was *est. 1879 - for the rearing and education of exposed and deserted children.* Upon knocking, they were admitted to the building and led to a shabby office by a Mrs Cole, who’d looked as flabbergasted by Dumbledore’s appearance as Harry felt—the man really wasn’t good at blending in with muggles.

With some prompting, Mrs Cole related Tom’s birth and her suspicions that he bullied the other students. Harry watched with concern as she put away 2/3 of a bottle of gin while she talked. Soon, however, she stood on surprisingly steady feet and led the young Dumbledore—and the two spectators—back out of her office and up two flights of stairs. She snapped admonishments and orders to passing children as they went, and Harry spotted a sullen teenager sweeping the first floor hallway. He reflected with a sinking heart on the appearance of the shabby hallway—though run-down, it was kept meticulously cleaned, it appeared, by the orphans who resided there. They looked, to his experienced eye, like they were decently fed, at least, but his gut still churned resentfully, and he glowered at Mrs Cole’s back.

They eventually stopped in front of a door which opened onto a small, grey bedroom that reminded Harry strongly of Dudley’s second bedroom. There, on the bed, sat Tom Riddle. Like Harry, he looked a little thin and underfed, though he was taller, and—like Harry—he resembled a younger version of his own father.

He’d been too young to really notice it before, but—having seen Tom’s parents, and taking a moment to study him now—Harry realized that the boy was rather good-looking, and that he got more attractive as he got older. He shivered at his own thoughts, and glanced back at the real Dumbledore beside him, who was intently studying Harry to see his reaction. Harry quickly averted his eyes and tightened his occlumency shield, turning back to the memory scene before him.

Tom was watching the bizarrely dressed man before him with narrowed eyes. When Dumbledore offered his hand, however, he shook it.

“How do you do, Tom? I am Professor Dumbledore,” the memory Dumbledore said.

Harry wasn’t surprised when he asked Dumbledore if he was from an asylum and come to take him away—it was the sort of thing the Dursleys would have threatened him with if they hadn’t known about magic; they’d told the entire neighborhood he went to St Brutus’s Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys, after all. He was a little shocked, however, by the young Tom’s use of power behind his command to tell the truth. Clearly, he’d figured some things out without the benefit of formal schooling. Harry wondered what else the boy could do.

He frowned at the roundabout way that Dumbledore was introducing Hogwarts. Of course, Hagrid had taken forever to get around to the task at hand, and he hadn’t told Harry most of what he’d needed to know, so perhaps all of the teachers were bad at introducing muggleborn and muggle-raised students to the wizarding world. Tom believed him about magic far quicker than Harry had, though, looking flushed and happy at this proof that he was special.

Harry stiffened in shock, however, when the young Dumbledore set Riddle’s wardrobe on fire. Almost as soon as Riddle leaped up to yell at him, the flames disappeared, but Harry was struggling to pay attention to the conversation before him. He tried desperately to compose himself, but he was sure his expression must give away his rage at the man’s callousness. Uncle Vernon had threatened to burn his things that summer to force his compliance with the Dursley’s abusive behavior, and here was Dumbledore, pretending to burn all of Riddle’s worldly
possessions. To what end?

He watched the professor manipulate the young Riddle with threats, admonishing him for theft. Harry’s stomach twisted. He had stolen before, himself, though most of it was things from the rubbish bins, things the Dursleys would rather throw out than let him have. He’d been able to repair some of it, like his alarm clock, and some of it had been things he could use broken—crayon stubs, toy soldiers. He’d also made off with most of Dudley’s books—his useless cousin never seemed to notice, and he certainly wasn’t reading them. What might Dumbledore have done to him if he’d gone to collect Harry on his eleventh birthday?

The memory of Dumbledore handed the young Riddle a bag of coins, instructed him on how to reach Diagon Alley, and gave him his school letter. As the auburn-haired professor turned to leave, the white-haired one at Harry’s side grasped his elbow, and they lifted out of the memory and landed back on the floor of his office.

“Sit down,” Dumbledore said.

Harry sat. “Why did you show me that?” he asked, voice tight.

Dumbledore blinked at his abrupt words. “I thought you might find it instructive. He revealed quite a bit about himself in that meeting, did he not? I confess myself curious what you thought of young Tom,” the headmaster prompted.

He was seething. “You made up your mind about him as soon as you spoke to him! You used legilimency on him, decided he was a bully, and then you bullied him yourself.”

“Bullied? I’m afraid I don’t understand, my boy,” Dumbledore was staring at him in unhappy surprise.

Harry realized his clenched hands were shaking in his lap. “You pretended to destroy his belongings. To scare him. When he asked you to show him some magic, you could have, I dunno, conjured water, or, or changed the color of his book cover, but you didn’t. You threatened him.”

“I merely wished to teach him a lesson.”

The young man laughed mirthlessly. “You taught him a lesson, alright, but not the one you wanted him to learn.”

The headmaster’s eyes narrowed calculatingly. “What do you mean?”

“You wanted him to learn that stealing is wrong. What he actually learned was that he needed more power to protect himself. Do you even understand what you did? You pretended to destroy the few precious objects he had to his name, and you made him determined to never be hurt like that again.” Harry shook his head. “You made him determined to hurt you the way you hurt him. You were wrong, sir, and what you did was wrong. No wonder he became a power-mad Dark Lord!”

“I’m afraid it’s…rather more complicated than that, Harry.” The headmaster ignored his scoff. “He had already been using his magic to control and harm others before my arrival, if you’ll recall.”

“Against bullies, I’d bet. Just like the Dursleys telling stories about me—that Mrs Cole couldn’t wait to be rid of him, and if she’d thought telling you about his magic would have stopped you
taking him, she wouldn’t have done it.”

“She was a muggle, Harry, they don’t understand what we can do. She probably didn’t want to appear mad—the elder Tom Riddle had the same problem when he escaped Merope Gaunt. In this case, you can hardly say she was incorrect—Tom likely had done all that she suspected he had.”

“I’ve lived with muggles, remember? I’m well aware what they do and don’t understand, Headmaster, and it doesn’t excuse abuse!”

“I would hardly consider the conditions at the orphanage abusive—”

“Well, I guess we have different ideas about what’s abuse, then,” Harry said, his tone venomous. “I saw how badly he wanted to escape that place when I had the diary back in second year. He’s not the only orphan who’s asked to stay here for the holidays and been denied.”

The headmaster stared at him, visibly shaken. “I—I’m sorry you feel that way, my boy. With regard to your own situation, you should know that I sent you to Petunia’s family with the best of intentions. Your mother’s protection—”

“Didn’t stop my uncle from almost killing me.” Harry clenched his jaw. “You were wrong about that, too.”

Dumbledore appeared unsure what to say to this, and they sat in silence for several long minutes. Finally, he spoke again. “I can admit that I have made mistakes, and that they have sometimes led to disastrous results.” He looked at his withered hand on the desk between them. “But this matter is not so clear as others. Voldemort was the end result of some very dark magics, ones which twisted the young Tom Riddle until he became the monster we now know.”

“But you couldn’t know that when you met him, and he was still only an 11 year old boy then—what dark magic could he possibly be doing?”

“It was not so much what he was doing as a thing which was done to him. As you saw, he refused further assistance from me, so I did not see Tom again until he arrived at the school. I had already resolved to keep an eye on him, and what I saw puzzled me greatly. He went into Slytherin, where—despite his unknown blood status—he was well-liked by the other students. He was polite to the other faculty members, who saw a quiet and intelligent boy, with a voracious mind. He had a talent for blending in, as well: soon he adopted both the muggle-hating stance and the aristocratic manners common among his peers. Despite his young age, he began to demonstrate advanced magics, to the delight of my colleagues, who considered him something of a prodigy, along the lines of your Miss Granger. It wasn’t until much later, that I recognized what had already begun before his arrival.” The headmaster looked over his glasses at Harry, who was listening mistrustfully.

“You see, whilst he was shopping for his school supplies, Tom went into Knockturn Alley—made his way to Borgin and Burke’s, in fact. There, he came into contact with a powerfully cursed item, one which corrupted his mind and magic over the coming months, turning him slowly but surely into the man who terrorized the wizarding world, until that fateful Hallowe’en.” Dumbledore stopped, examining Harry keenly to see what he made of this.

“What was the item?” the young man asked, eyes narrowed.

“An old grimoire, rather ironically, from a defunct wizarding line. It was very dark arts, and it ensnared him. By the time I realized what had happened, the damage was already done—his
magic and mind had become twisted and fractured. There was nothing I could do,” Dumbledore said, expression regretful.

Harry’s jaw clenched. “Did you try?” he bit out. The headmaster blinked at him, but did not respond—which was, Harry supposed, its own kind of answer. He pushed to his feet, fighting to keep the disgust off his face. “I think we’re done for today, sir. Have a good night,” he said curtly. Without waiting for a response, he turned and left, shooting a glare at the portrait of Phineas Nigellus, who was spluttering in outrage at his behavior.

Although it was nearing curfew and he hadn’t brought his cloak, Harry’s feet led him away from the Gryffindor common room; he turned instead to the stairs that would take him down to the ground floor. From there, he went to the dungeons, winding through them until he encountered the tapestry that hid the entrance to Severus’s rooms. Behind it, he laid his hand on the key stone, and when the door shimmered into view, he jerked down on the handle and shoved it open. He stormed into the sitting room beyond to find Sev and Luc sitting in the armchairs before the fire, reading.

Harry slammed the door behind him and erupted. “That bloody, meddling, bastard!” he shouted. His bondmates looked at him with alarm, and he struggled to rein in his temper enough to explain. When that proved impossible, he turned and stalked into the tiny kitchen, conjured a full tea service of intricately patterned and very delicate china, and began throwing piece after piece onto the ground, until he’d shattered every single cup and saucer, and hexed them into a fine porcelain dust. Then he cast *evanesco*, conjured another tea set, and did it all again. After the second destroyed tea set, he put the kettle on and glowered at it while it boiled, then he made a pot of tea. He turned to carry the pot and a cup into the sitting area, and found Sev and Luc standing in the doorway, watching him.

“That man,” he said in an even, measured tone, “is infuriating.” He walked between them into the sitting room, and set the pot down on the tea table. He turned back for cream and sugar, but Sev had already grabbed them, along with two extra cups.

Luc sat on the sofa, patting the cushion beside him. “What happened?” he asked.

Harry slumped into the seat, and Sev sat on his other side. “He showed me memories about Tom Riddle’s history.” He wrapped both hands around his cup of tea, staring moodily into the fire. “We had already guessed some of it—you were right, Luc, Marvolo Gaunt was Riddle’s grandfather. His mother was Merope, and his father was a wealthy muggle who lived nearby, also called Tom Riddle. Merope was infatuated with the muggle, and Dumbledore thinks she dosed him with love potions until she conceived, then stopped the potions. The elder Riddle abandoned her immediately, and she gave birth to her son in an orphanage and then died.” His jaw clenched. “The headmaster—” he made the word sound rather like a curse “—was the one to tell Riddle about magic and deliver his Hogwarts letter. That bloody orphanage…It was—the matron told Dumbledore that Riddle was a bully, so he went and pretended to destroy all of Riddle’s things, and threatened him! And then he tried to act like it was perfectly reasonable when I confronted him about it.”

He began to shake and so he thumped his cup abruptly down on the table, sloshing tea over his hands and the wooden surface. Severus silently siphoned the spilled liquid off with *tergeo* and Harry dropped his hands to his lap, clenching them tightly.

“He told me that Riddle found a cursed object in Knockturn Alley while he was school shopping, that it warped him permanently before Dumbledore even realized it, and he was so certain, like a first year student could just become evil forever and there was nothing he could have done to, to—
he could have—” He stopped and breathed deeply, struggling to put his rage and sorrow into words. There was a tight knot in his chest, and he was almost afraid to say the words that would release it.

“He was such a smug bastard, and I couldn’t—I couldn’t help thinking that it could have been me, that the Dursley’s could have got tired of me and left me at an orphanage, and then what? What if I hadn’t argued with the sorting hat about going into Slytherin? Would I still be his favorite little pawn? And if I wasn’t…” His breath hitched. “Would that be so bad?” And then he was crying, curling forward with a gasping little sob to press his face into his hands.

Arms wrapped around him from each side, and his bondmates held him, whispering soothing words and running gentle hands up and down his back, until he calmed enough to sit back up and breathe properly. He wiped at his eyes with a handkerchief Luc gave him.

“Sorry, I just…Riddle had his own bedroom and everything, and I didn’t mind my cupboard, I didn’t, but I always knew that no one there cared about me, that I wasn’t allowed a proper bedroom because I was an unlovable monster. I was almost jealous of him, in that memory—the Dursleys used to threaten me with the orphanage, but it didn’t seem that bad, not compared to my uncle almost killing me. And then Dumbledore came in and pretended to set his wardrobe on fire, and that’s what Uncle Vernon threatened to do to my school things over the summer, if I didn’t behave, and it was too much.” He scrubbed at his face with a shaky breath.

Sev leaned forward to pick up his cup, reheating the tea inside with a murmured charm. He passed it to Harry, who accepted it with a tremulous smile. They sat quietly for several minutes, Harry sipping his tea as the two older men considered what they had heard.

“Better now, love?” Luc finally asked.

“Yeah. I—” He sighed. “I don’t understand why he showed me that. Maybe he would have explained if I’d stayed, but I was so angry, and I didn’t want to destroy his office—I came close last spring, and I might have done it then if I didn’t have Sev to talk to after everything.” He drank the rest of his tea and set the cup down, with a rueful smile. “It was clear I wasn’t reacting the way he expected, too. I was occluding to keep him out, but I couldn’t keep my anger down any more.” He shook his head. “Guess it’s a good thing I never have to be a spy, because I’d obviously be rubbish at it.”

His bondmates both gave little snorts of surprised laughter. “I think I like you best as you are, love,” Luc said.

“And I,” Sev added.

“Thanks,” Harry said. “For being here, I mean. I—”

Just then, there was a burst of flames in the air above the fireplace, and all three men jumped up, training their wands on it. A trilling song filled the air, and the fire resolved into Fawkes, the headmaster’s phoenix familiar. The bird flew around the three of them and then settled on Harry’s shoulder, hot golden tail trailing down his back. Fawkes chattered comfortingly and began to groom him.

“Uh, hello, Fawkes,” Harry said, with a puzzled smile. The bird burbled a little noise and continued grooming him. “Okay, not that I’m upset, but why are you here? Do you have a note for me or something?”
Fawkes leaned forward into Harry’s field of vision and shook his head, a startlingly human gesture. Then, he opened his mouth and began crooning a song. Harry could feel his spirits lifting. He’d forgotten about phoenix song and its ability to modify moods. His anger at the headmaster dwindled, and he sat carefully, smiling as the phoenix hopped up onto the sofa’s back, still singing. The tension left Harry’s body as he listened; instead of being frustrated and enraged, he felt brave and happy and strong. Sev and Luc returned to their seats on either side of him, and he grinned at them.

After a couple of minutes, Fawkes stopped singing and made soothing noises at him. A yawn caught Harry by surprise, and he blinked sleepily at the bird. “Don’t know why I’m suddenly so tired,” he muttered. The phoenix burbled at him, sounding for all the world like he was laughing, and then he rose up and flamed away.

Sev smiled. “I imagine you’ve been under a lot of stress lately; now you’ve relaxed, it’s probably making you drowsy. Did you bring your invisibility cloak?” Harry shook his head languidly. “You’d better stay the night, then—if I’m seen escorting you back, I’ll have to take points from Gryffindor.”

“Yeah, okay,” Harry murmured, eyes drooping. “Don’t sleep as well by myself, anyway…”

Luc laughed and stood to scoop his young bondmate up in his arms. “Can walk,” the young man mumbled, not even opening his eyes to say it.

“Yes, I’m sure, but…indulge me, just this once.” He led the way to the bedroom, Sev banking the fire and spelling the lights off behind them as they went. Soon, they were all curled together in bed, Harry snug between his two older bondmates and drifting off to the sounds of their quiet conversation.
Following the disastrous first meeting with the headmaster, Harry avoided the man’s gaze at Sunday’s meals, unwilling to speak with him any time soon. He was glad that Dumbledore seemed to be spending a great deal of his time out of the castle, because he would likely not have to attend another meeting for some time. He would need the time to sort out his feelings, and he had more than enough on his plate as it was.

Despite making five solid saves at the team tryouts, Ron’s performance nerves had made a comeback, and as the first quidditch match of the year approached, he had begun to fumble during practices. Harry couldn’t seem to bolster his confidence, no matter what he tried, and during practice the Tuesday before the match, Ron actually punched Demelza Robins in the face and gave her a split lip. Harry fixed it with a quick *episkey*, but the rest of the practice was a bit of a disaster, nonetheless.

“I’m sure we’ll pound Slytherin on Saturday,” Harry said cheerfully at the end of practice, hoping to keep everyone’s spirits up. “See you back here on Thursday!”

Ron hung back, looking morose. “I played like a sack of dragon dung,” he said.

“You’re fine—your nerves are getting in the way, but you were the best keeper at team trials, and you helped us win last year! I kept you on for a reason, Ron.” He tried to pep up his friend all the way back to the dorms, and Ron did seem to be in a better mood…until they got to the hallway outside the common room entrance and found Ginny snogging Dean in a nearby alcove.

“Oi!” Ron shouted, and the two broke apart, looking around for the interruption. “I don’t want to find my own sister snogging people in public!” the boy said.

“Yeah, well, it’s not like there’s anyone around right now,” Ginny retorted. Ron’s faceflushed an unattractive red.

Dean gave Harry a smile of horrified embarrassment, and Harry made a sympathetic face back at him, mouthing an apology.

“Oh, let’s just go in the common room, Gin…” the dark-skinned boy tried.

“You go,” she said, shaking her head. “Ron and I need to have a word.” She gave her brother a ferocious glare.

Harry edged away from the siblings uneasily as Dean hesitantly moved towards the portrait of Lucretia Bole that guarded the common room. When the portrait opened, Dean tilted his head questioningly at Harry, who glanced at the other two and gave a quick shake of his head—he’d stay. Dean shrugged and entered, the portrait closing behind him, and Harry sidled to the edge of
the corridor, turning his back to give at least the illusion of privacy. He peered intently at a portrait of three witches—apparently sisters named Florentina, Gardenia, and Justina—chatting and laughing over generous glasses of wine.

Behind him, Ginny started in on her brother. “Right, let me be absolutely clear, once and for all: you don’t get a say in what I do, or with whom, brother mine! It’s none of your business—”

“Yes, actually, it is!” Ron interrupted. “You think I want people calling my sister a—” Harry whirled, making a frantic notion to stop talking, but his friend wasn’t looking at him.

“A what, Ronald?” Ginny snapped, whipping out her wand.

“I’m sure he doesn’t mean anything—” Harry blurted, but Ron cut him off.

“A slattern!”

Harry deflated, mouth dropping open.

“You’re just jealous, you—you miserable twat!” Ginny had tears in her eyes, but they appeared to be of fury—her shaking wand-hand was pointing at her brother, who had pulled his own wand out in response.

“Jealous of what?” Ron sneered.

“Not like anyone’s lining up to snog you! I can see why, too—you’re a real charmer.”

“What would you know? Just because I don’t do it in public—”

Ginny snorted. “Been kissing Pigwidgeon, have you? There’s not a girl here’d give you the time of day!”

Ron shot a spell at his sister, who side-stepped it, and Harry leapt between them, holding out placating hands towards the other boy.

“Whoa, hold on, you two!”

“Move it, Harry!” his friend snarled.

“Not on your life!”

“Harry snogged Cho Chang,” Ginny yelled from behind him. “Hermione snogged Viktor Krum! You’re the only one acting like it’s something dirty or disgusting, and it’s because you can’t get a date. You’re just a pathetic little boy!” Ron jerked towards her, and Harry grabbed his shoulders and pushed him back with both hands.

“Ginny, please stop,” he said evenly, not looking away from the other boy. “Please, just—go in the common room?”

“Unlike Dean, I wouldn’t go for a girl who’s a harlot, anyway!” Ron shouted, and Ginny’s retreating footsteps stopped.

“Please,” Harry called desperately.
There was a beat of silence, and then he heard her snarl, “Dilligrout.”

As soon as he heard the portrait shut again, Harry shoved Ron away from him with an expression of disgust. “You kiss your mother with that mouth?” he asked.

“You’re taking her side?” the redhead asked incredulously. “No, of course you are—not like we’re best mates or anything!”

“You tried to hex her! Ron, you’re a prefect!”

“Piss off,” the other boy said. “She was out of line!”

“Out of—bloody hell, mate! Between the two of you, I’m pretty sure she’s not the one who went too far.” He stared at Ron like he’d never seen him before.

“Forget it. Get out of my way, Potter.” The other boy shoved past him, thundering the password at a startled Lucretia, and storming into the common room, leaving his friend standing stock-still behind him.

After a couple of minutes, Harry turned and shuffled towards the portrait, feeling unaccountably exhausted. Lucretia smoothed her pink dress down as he approached.

“My word, that was quite an encounter,” she said, looking him up and down. “Are you quite well? That lad was terribly rude, if you ask me. Why, if he’d spoken to me like that, I’d have—”

Harry interrupted her. “I’m fine, ma’am. Dilligrout.” She blinked indignantly as the frame swung aside to let him in.

“I say!” he heard, before the portrait shut behind him.

There was no sign of Ginny or Ron in the common room, and went up to the sixth year boys’ dorm to get ready for bed. Knowing the other boy’s temper, he decided to let Ron alone the rest of the night—he probably wouldn’t answer his door right then anyway. He climbed into bed, sealing his curtains shut and running through occlumency exercises until he was calm enough to sleep.

The next day, however, Ron refused to acknowledge Harry in any way, not even looking in his direction if he didn’t have to, and ignoring any attempts to speak with him. And while the redhead boy had made up with Hermione on Sunday for their previous fight, Ginny’s words had killed their short-lived truce: Wednesday found Ron giving Hermione the cold shoulder and sneering at her by turns.

“Honestly, what is it I’m meant to have done now?” Hermione asked exasperatedly that evening, when Ron had snapped at her for inviting him to study with them in the library.

“Snogged Krum,” Harry said with a sigh.

She stopped in the middle of pulling out her notes to gape at him. “I—what? But that was ages ago!” she sputtered.

“Yeah, well, he caught Ginny snogging Dean after practice last night and called her a slag, so she told him he’s just mad everyone else has done it and he hasn’t. She said you snogged Krum, and now he’s upset.” He shrugged. “I suspect he really is jealous, you know.”
She scoffed. “Jealous? Of what?”

“That you were with another guy. He was impossible back then, too, remember?”

“Well, snapping at me and ignoring me isn’t making me want to be with him!” Hermione sniffed disdainfully.

“Would you really want to date him now, anyway?” Harry asked. “We’re two months into term, and he’s pushed around a bunch of the first years, openly antagonized both of the Malfoys, and been an awful prat to Ginny, Dean, and half the quidditch team. I’m not sure what’s gotten into him, but I honestly think you deserve better.” He felt a little guilty saying it, but Ron really had been behaving badly—the previous night’s little explosion was just the latest in a series of incidents.


“Ta,” Harry said, with a good-natured grin.

“No, I didn’t mean it that way, I meant…” He raised an eyebrow. “Okay, yes, I did kind of mean it that way, sorry. I know things have been hard for you lately, but you grew up a lot this summer, and I’m really proud of you.”

“Thanks, Mione.” He gave her a small, almost bittersweet smile. “Let’s get to work, yeah? Any more heartfelt emotion and I’ll turn into a girl or something!”

She rolled her eyes, tossing a quill at him, which he snatched from the air and twirled in his fingers. “Prat,” she said fondly.

Ron’s touchy attitude continued, unfortunately, into Thursday’s quidditch practice. He did even worse than he had at the last practice, and harangued the rest of the team so badly that Demelza left the field crying. Harry ended practice early, hanging back until the rest of the team were out of earshot before rounding on his keeper.

“I don’t care if you are mad at me or Ginny or anyone else—” he said in a quiet, furious voice “—you cannot treat the team like this. If you don’t get it together, I’m gonna have to pull you from the lineup!”

“You know what?” Ron snapped, glaring fiercely at him. “You won’t have to—I quit.”

Harry stiffened. “But—the Slytherin match is in two days!” he hissed, looking horrified.

Ron glowered at him, his house pride and hatred of Slytherin warring with his anger for a moment, and then he snarled, “Fine. I’ll play Saturday, but then I’m off the team.” He stomped off the pitch towards the Gryffindor changing rooms, once again leaving Harry to stare hopelessly after him.

On Saturday morning, Ron was still in a wretched mood, and he stomped down to breakfast without Harry and Hermione, who gave each other helpless looks behind his back. When they entered the Great Hall themselves, they found Lavender giving a surly Ron encouragement; they settled on a bench a little bit away from the two, and Harry ate grimly, getting up to leave with Ginny and Demelza as soon as they were both done. Hermione wished the three of them luck, and Harry nodded in return, a tight smile on his face.
“Weather looks good,” Ginny said. “And I heard Slytherin is down one of their regular chasers—Vaisey took a bludger to the head yesterday, can’t play.”

“Let’s hope our luck holds,” Harry said. “I have a feeling we’re going to need it…” He nodded at Katie as she jogged up to them, and then the three girls peeled off for their changing room. He entered the other side to find Peakes pulling the outer quidditch robe on over the rest of his uniform, and gave him a smile. Harry headed to his own locker, and pulled out his own gear. He got into the tight trousers, lacing them shut before buckling the pads onto his legs and over his thin undershirt; a knee-length crimson tunic went over the top of that, and then the open outer robe with his name and number on the back. Coote came in as he was lacing his boots, giving him a tense nod as he went to dress, and Harry nodded back, grabbing his gloves and heading outside to wait for the rest of the team to finish dressing.

Ron was the last one to arrive in the changing rooms, cutting it very close to the start of the match, but Harry made no comment on this. Once they were assembled, he said, “I have faith in our team this year, and I think we can win this game. Go out there and show them who they’re messing with!” Everyone except Ron gave him a determined nod, and they headed out onto the pitch, brooms in hand.

The Gryffindor side of the stadium roared their approval as the team came out, while the Slytherins jeered and hissed. The team lined up across from their sneering opponents, and Harry joined Madam Hooch and the Slytherin captain in the center.

“Captains, shake hands,” Hooch said, and they did, Urquhart doing his best to crush Harry’s hand before they stepped back. “Mount your brooms. On my whistle: three, two, one…” At the sharp blast, both teams rose into the air and took up their positions. The referee released the snitch and the bludgers, then tossed the quaffle up, and the game began.

Harry began to fly the perimeter of the pitch, scanning for the snitch and keeping an eye on Draco, who was lapping the pitch in the opposite direction. Then, the commentary started.

“There they go. I think I’m not the only one surprised at the Gryffindor lineup this year—a lot of us thought that Ronald Weasley’s spotty record as keeper would get him booted, but I suppose there are benefits to being friends with the team captain…” Harry craned his neck to look into the commentator’s box, where he saw Zacharias Smith, one of the Hufflepuff chasers. Smith was a pompous twit, and Harry heartily disliked him. He scowled and turned back to scanning for the snitch.

“Here’s Slytherin’s first goal attempt, Urquhart coming down the pitch, he shoots—and Weasley saves; well, he’s bound to get lucky sometimes, I suppose.” Harry breathed a sigh of relief as Gryffindor took possession and flew for the Slytherin goals. “Gryffindor tries for a goal, now. Robins underhands the quaffle to Weasley—another friend of the captain’s, I believe—and Weasley shoots; oh, Richelieu misses, hard luck…”

The game continued, Smith taking every opportunity to imply that Ginny and Ron didn’t deserve their spots, though his focus shifted mainly to Ron after Ginny scored her fourth goal half an hour into the game. Ron, however, was doing almost as badly as he had in practice, missing more shots than he stopped, and Slytherin began to pull ahead. Urquhart, Zabini, and Harper were not as effective together as their usual lineup, nor as effective as the Gryffindor chasers, but they didn’t need to be: Ron’s lack of confidence combined with his anger and resentment to make his technique sloppy, and an hour into the game Harry began to look for the snitch in earnest—at this rate, they were going to lose the match.
“Coote isn’t quite the build for a beater, it’s usual for them to have more muscle; not sure why Potter went that route…”

“Hit a bludger at him!” Harry called to Coote, who just grinned and hit towards Harper instead; Harry heard the dull thunk of a bludger finding its mark, and chuckled to himself. He glanced around to find Malfoy marking him several feet down and a few broom-lengths back.

“…and Weasley misses again—a poor showing from the Gryffindor keeper this year…” The Slytherins cheered, and Harry grimaced as a section of the crowd began to sing ‘Weasley is Our King,’ the awful song that had been so effective at denting Ron’s confidence during the previous year; the rest of the Slytherins soon took up singing as well.

Harry glanced over at Ron; even from across the field, he could tell the boy was red in the face and glaring at the crowd. His heart sank—if Gryffindor’s keeper had played haphazardly before, experience told him that it was about to get embarrassingly bad. While their chasers were still scoring on Slytherin, the other team’s keeper was half capable—and though Harper wasn’t as good as Vaisey, Ron’s increasingly sloppy performance made it a moot point.

Things went pretty much as expected, after that: Slytherin pulled even further ahead in the scoring, and Harry scanned frantically for the snitch, which had made a couple of brief appearances, leading the two seekers on a merry chase before disappearing once more. Two hours in, he was glancing over the field, trying to gauge whether to call a time-out, when Draco suddenly shot directly up towards him. Harry’s head whipped around and he spotted the snitch shooting away. Leaning over the handle of his broom, he put on a burst of speed to try and catch up with the thing. He didn’t know how close the blond seeker was behind him, couldn’t look back to check or he would risk losing his glinting golden prize.

The snitch arced around and down, and Harry found himself almost shoulder to shoulder with his rival, but then the little ball swooped to one side, and he executed a barrel roll that gave him the opportunity to snatch it from the air. He dropped down and held the snitch aloft.

“…and Potter has caught the snitch, bringing 150 points to his team. Unfortunately for Gryffindor, Weasley’s performance means that Slytherin take the match, 280-270.” Gryffindor’s cheering gave way to cries of consternation, but the sound was soon eclipsed by shouts of approval from the Slytherin stands.

Harry groaned. Well, at least he’d got the snitch instead of Draco—no need for their victory to have been even more embarrassing than this. Most of the rest of the team joined him on the ground, although Ron landed across the pitch and stalked towards the changing rooms, and Ginny zipped by overhead, crashing into the commentator’s box with a loud crunching sound. He glanced up with concern, but she soon spiraled down to join them. “Forgot to brake,” she said, and they gave each other strained smiles.

The team trudged off the pitch to go change, Harry already considering the beaters drills he was going to need to put Peakes and Coote through. The chasers had worked together rather well, but his young beaters hadn’t run the kind of tight interference that might have helped win the game despite a compromised keeper. Unfortunately, they lacked the intuitive teamwork and skill of the Weasley twins. That could be fixed with time, however, and though defeat was galling, they weren’t out of the running for the Quidditch Cup just yet.

Back in Gryffindor Tower, the mood was angry, and more than one student shot Ron a glare when he stormed through the crowd towards the dorms. Harry could tell the team was similarly inclined to resent Ron for the loss, and he sighed heavily, glancing around for someone in
particular. When he spotted him, he called out, “McLaggen!” and strode over.

“Thought I might be seeing you,” the older boy said with a smirk. “Bet you wish you’d gone with me instead, eh?”

“None of that,” Harry said. “Ron got his spot fair and square, and you know it. Ron’s already resigned from the team, and I’d like you to replace him, but I’m warning you now: you need to treat the rest of the team with respect or you’re out, and I’ll hold full trials for the position instead. I want us to win our next match, and that means we need to work as a team. Deal?” He stuck out a hand.

McLaggen pursed his lips, but he reached out anyway. “Deal,” he said, and they shook on it.

“Good. Practice is Tuesday and Thursday after dinner—I’ll see you on the pitch.” With that, Harry turned away and headed back towards the team, who were sat in a miserable huddle on the edge of the room. He gave them a pained smile. “What a mess, yeah?”

There was a burst of startled laughter at that, and he plopped down onto an empty chair. “Still, you all did great, honestly. Chasers, you worked really well together; keep up the good work. Jimmy, Ritchie, I’ll be working you through beaters drills on Tuesday, to fix some technique issues and go over strategies for working together and compensating for potential weak spots. Ron’s off the team, and I’m bringing on McLaggen—I know he’s a stuffed shirt, but he was Ron’s closest competition at team trials. We have plenty of time to tighten things up before our next match. Now, get some rest—you deserve it, after working so hard.” He met the gaze of each team member until they nodded, and then stood up to head for his dorm.

In the sixth year boys’s room, he packed his school bag so he could study after lunch. He planned to disappear into Sev and Luc’s rooms until dinner, and then sneak back there after curfew and sleep with them. He found a small, but genuine smile cross his face at the thought of his bondmates; everything else might be a mess, but he could take comfort with them, and maybe they could advise him on the issues with Ron.

Despite everything with Ron, the term wasn’t actually going too badly, but Hallowe’en was always another matter. Although Harry spent the night after the match with his bondmates, Sunday dawned to the burning of Luc’s mark; Harry crept despondently up to Gryffindor Tower, while Luc flooed home, where he could apparate and follow the call to the Dark Lord’s side. After making an appearance at breakfast, Harry disappeared back into the dungeons with his homework, though he mostly waited anxiously by the grate until, shortly before lunch, Lucius stumbled out of the fireplace and sagged onto the sofa. Harry hopped up from his spot on the floor and hurried over, hovering near him.

“What happened, are you okay?” he asked, alarmed at Luc’s uncharacteristic lack of grace.

“I’m fine, darling,” Luc said with a brittle smile. “Just tired from occluding.”

Sev strode in from his private lab, then, the lines of tension around his eyes easing at the sight of the other man. “Cruciatus?” he asked.

“No, although he tore into my mind for intelligence on Dumbledore. He didn’t see anything important,” he assured them, “but layering my shields and occluding without appearing to do so was more taxing than I anticipated.” He held a hand towards each of them. “Come here, my loves.” They moved to his sides, Severus summoning a potion into his empty hand as he went.
“Headache draught,” he explained, pressing it into Luc’s palm.

“Ah, yes, thank you.” The blond man emptied the vial, sighing as the potion did its work. He rested his head back against the sofa for a moment, and then opened his eyes to look at his bondmates. “I think it’s time to speak with the headmaster about my situation,” he said. “He ought to know about the attack planned for Samhain.”

“Is it that bad?” Severus asked.

Luc hesitated, gaze darting to their younger bondmate and then away. “I believe so,” he said.

Harry felt his stomach swoop unnervingly. “What is it?” he asked fearfully.

“Darling, it’s…quite unpleasant. Are you sure…”

“Please, I want to know, if it’s bad.”

“I—yes, that may be best. Very well…the Dark Lord has several attacks planned for that night, to occur simultaneously. There are three targets: somewhere in muggle London, Ottery St Catchpole, and Godric’s Hollow. I will be leading the attack on Ottery St Catchpole, but those going to Godric’s Hollow have a special task that I wish to see thwarted. There are some…arcane magics which require the use of…earthly remains. With the right family member’s body, it is possible to track, incapacitate, and perhaps even kill an individual. The Death Eaters attacking Godric’s Hollow have been ordered to retrieve—”

“My parents,” Harry whispered, aghast.

Luc nodded solemnly. “Just so.”

Severus’s expression was grim. “I see. Yes, I think you are correct—we had better tell Headmaster Dumbledore immediately.”

Harry bit his lip. “Can we have lunch together first? Here? Only, I don’t think I should see him, not yet, and I ought to be seen studying in the library this afternoon, but I miss you both so much and I want to…”

“Yes, of course, love.” Luc wrapped an arm around him. “The news for Dumbledore will keep for an hour or two.”

They sat together at a small dining table conjured for the purpose, Harry between the other two, and the house elves brought them a meal. The younger man listened to Luc and Sev discuss mundane matters, letting their voices soothe his agitation away as they spoke about Peeves and house points and a prank war between a group of fourth years—two Hufflepuffs, a Slytherin, and three Gryffindors had apparently decided to carry on the Weasley twins’s work in their absence. The professors were a mix of horrified, exasperated, and amused; while Severus and Minerva were most likely to take points for mischief-making, others found excuses to return them—Filius for brilliant spellwork, and Pomona for interhouse cooperation. In staff meetings, she cited the sorting hat’s song, which had been about false divisions and uniting in the face of a threat to “magic herself.” Severus sneered in irritation, but Lucius found the whole thing rather amusing.

After lunch, they separated with one last kiss, Harry headed for the library through a couple of hidden passages and shortcuts, while Sev and Luc took a back staircase to the seventh floor, and made for the headmaster’s tower.
“Drooble’s Best,” Severus intoned with distaste, and the gargoyle shuffled aside to let them pass. They stepped onto the moving staircase, and when they reached the office door, Sev rapped sharply on the wood.

“Come in,” called the headmaster, and the door swung open with a push. “Severus, to what—Ah, hello, Professor Malfoy.”

Sev resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the man’s abrupt coldness. “We must have a word with you, headmaster, about an urgent matter.” He conjured seats for both of them, and they sat. “This—Albus, this matter is highly sensitive; may I ward our conversation against prying ears?”

The older man frowned at him. “You may, although the portraits owe me their strict loyalty.”

“That may be, but certain information must be protected.” He cast muffliato and layered visum obfuscate over it, then tucked his wand away. Turning to Luc, he nodded for him to take the lead.

“I wish to defect,” the blond man stated.

Dumbledore’s gaze darted towards the potions master, then returned to Lucius, who he examined through narrowed eyes. “By your willingness to speak before him, I must assume you know of Severus’s work as my spy.” Luc nodded. “Very well, then I must ask: why?”

“Why have I not betrayed him to the Dark Lord? Or why do I wish to defect?”

“Both.”

“How much do you know of lilin, Headmaster?”

The man’s eyes widened, shooting once more to Severus. “Less than I ought, perhaps; please, enlighten me.”

“I am of lilin descent. As you may now suspect, Severus is my bondmate; we have been together since his 16th birthday, and we are both naturally and ritually bound to each other. Because of my nature, I am fiercely protective of him, and would put his life before my own without a thought. I must confess, I never suspected Sev of anything less than absolute devotion to the Dark Lord’s cause, even as he grew distant in the year since the Triwizard Tournament and the resurrection of our—of him. In fact, had he not revealed it to me, I may never have guessed, though it had begun to interfere with our bond.” Sev laid a hand on his forearm in silent apology, and he smiled briefly at his love. “My bondmate’s revelation put me in an uncomfortable position, but the choice wasn’t actually a hard one, once I began to consider it. I am sure you have noticed the Dark Lord’s growing instability…”

“I have,” Dumbledore said, raising an eyebrow.

“I began in his service a fervent follower, believing in blood purity and the need to separate the two worlds. To a certain extent, I still believe that wizards and muggles ought to be kept apart as much as possible, though I acknowledge that the strictest purebloods are dying out, by our own folly. However, even I can see that this is not what drives him any longer. How many pureblood lines did he end in the last war, branding them blood traitors when they opposed his ideals? And now, since his rebirth? There are so few witches and wizards in Britain…we have never been a large population, and slaughtering each other will only speed the end of our society. I cannot follow through on this madness; I only wish I had not committed myself and my love to it, so long
“And so you wish now to defect? For the preservation of wizarding society?”

“That is not all…Headmaster, I shall be blunt: I have a family to protect. My son reaches magical maturity in seven months, and he will be expected to take the mark. I refuse to sell Draco into the Dark Lord’s service for the chance of his fickle favor. You have the means to protect my boy.” He looked at the bearded old man, who gazed back at him impassively. Luc decided to change tacks.

“There are signs the Dark Lord begins to mistrust Severus, which is a dangerous position to be in. I have greater access to him now, which means better intelligence, and may take some of his attention from my love. I was called today to discuss the plans for Samhain, while Sev was not. I am to lead one of three strike forces that night.”

“I see. You wish to barter this information to me for the protection of your family?”

“I wish to join you in fighting the Dark Lord.”

“Surely you don’t expect me to trust you without proof?”

“Samhain will be my proof, Headmaster. You will see then I speak the truth.”

“Perhaps. Yet, I confess myself curious: what precipitated Severus’s disclosure about his spying?” The two men exchanged a look, and Dumbledore regarded them in silence, letting the question hang in the air.

Finally, Sev nodded. Luc turned back to the headmaster. “I have said already that Severus is my bondmate. Not all lilin-descended wizards and witches have one, and I have cherished him for twenty years, never wanting another. This summer, however, magic blessed me with a second bondmate, an occurrence so rare that I never considered it might happen. As with Severus, upon my new mate’s sixteenth birthday I was drawn to his side. Severus entered the home to retrieve him, and—discovering him badly injured—apparated him to our home for emergency medical care. He was so bloody and bruised that it took me some time to recognize him; once I had, Severus held me at wandpoint until I swore a vow on my magic not to harm him.”

“You speak of Harry Potter?” Dumbledore asked stiffly.

“Yes.”

There was a long moment of stillness, the old man watching the two before him. Then, the headmaster looked at Severus, who nodded and pressed his wandtip to his temple in silent offer. The heavy stone pensieve floated to rest gently on the desk, and the potions master pulled a copied strand of memory out, depositing it in the basin, and then repeated the action with another memory. He considered briefly, and then added a third.

“May I?” Luc asked, gesturing towards his own head. At Dumbledore’s wary nod, he drew his wand and copied two memories of his own, adding them to the swirling grey vapor in the pensieve. Returning his wand to its holster, he gestured. “Shall we?” He pushed a hand into the vapor and fell forward into mist. Landing on his feet, he watched the blankness around him resolve as the other two men landed beside him.

They were in Malfoy Manor, he noticed. Before them, Severus was standing with his wand pointed at Lucius’s chest; the blond man raised his hands placatingly.
“I cannot let you hurt that boy,” the memory Severus declared firmly. “I am pledged to protect him, Lucius…even from you.”

“I won’t hurt him—please, Severus.” Luc watched the remembered version of himself pleading for his life in the face of Severus’s anger and heartbreak. He took his lover’s hand as they watched the argument, thinking of the fear and despair he had felt then.

“…you are the Dark Lord’s man, through and through. But I haven’t been since the night he decided to target the Potters…you must have suspected my loyalties; I know he does…”

“…I won’t lose you…the Dark Lord is not my bondmate, Sev…”

“…I can’t trust that…”

Sev squeezed his hand as the memory Lucius drew his wand and made his vow. “I, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, swear on my magic that I shall not deliberately harm Harry Potter, nor shall I knowingly reveal his whereabouts to the Dark Lord or any of his servants, nor shall I willingly place Harry in a situation which I know will bring him to harm. Should I violate my word, may Lady Magic strike me down, and visit upon me the very harm to which I have subjected him. So mote it be.” Golden light shone briefly on his skin, indicating that the vow had taken hold. As Lucius moved forward to kiss his bondmate, the darkness swirled in, and then retreated to reveal a different scene.

Now they were in the manor’s potions lab. Lucius sat at the desk, watching Harry and Severus preparing potions for the hospital wing. “…but that’s why we add the cabbage, right?” Harry was saying.

Severus nodded. “Correct. Now, what purpose does valerian serve in Dreamless Sleep?”

“It’s a sedative,” the young man declared.

“Anything else?”

“Uh…stress relief…oh! It helps suppress nightmares?”

“In essence, though that effect is a secondary one. Let’s start, shall we?”

Luc saw the headmaster peering over Harry’s shoulder as the young man began to work. “Skelegro?” the old man asked.

Sev nodded. “And an analgesic; he assisted me with preparing many of the potions I delivered to Madam Pomfrey this year.”

“This stuff is pretty unpleasant,” Harry said. “I had to drink a bunch of it in second year, and it was vile. Oh, did you ever hear that story?” he asked Lucius, glancing over his shoulder. The blond man shook his head.

“That was the year Lockhart was the Defense professor, though he was probably the most useless one I’ve ever had—at least we read theory in Umbridge’s class, even if it was all sanitized. Instead, he had us performing dramatic reenactments from his books, and the first exam asked silly things like, ‘what is Gilderoy Lockhart’s favorite color?’ Anyway, it was the first quidditch match of the season, right? Slytherin-Gryffindor, and it’s always really intense, on account of the rivalry
between the houses. We were up against the brand new brooms that Slytherin had, and Oliver—the Gryffindor captain, Oliver Wood—had been training us hard; we were determined to win, no matter what. ‘Get to that snitch before Malfoy, or die trying,’ he said to me. That’s why we kept playing, even though it became clear immediately that one of the bludgers was stuck on me somehow. Fred and George would hit the thing away from me, and it would just veer back around again.” He paused to stir one of the cauldrons before continuing.

“So there’s me, flying like mad to get away from this thing, and it’s raining, and our beaters are stuck trying to keep me from getting hurt, and so we’re getting slaughtered. We call a time-out, and I tell the Weasley twins to focus on guarding the rest of the team, that I’ll deal with the tampered bludger myself, and now the rest of the team gets mad at Oliver because I won’t let us forfeit the game. But we get back in the air, and I’m flying like a loon, trying not to get hit by the blasted thing, and Malfoy—Draco, I mean—he’s laughing at me, and then I spot the snitch right above his head! And while I’m distracted, the bludger gets me in the arm, like, I can feel my arm break, and I almost fall off my broom, but I pull it together enough to wheel around and head for Draco. He didn’t even realize the snitch was there until I grabbed it! So we won, and then I crashed into the pitch. When I came around, Lockhart was standing over me, and before I could stop him, he tried to heal my arm, only he’s a useless git, so instead he vanished my bones. Instead of a regular arm, now I had this weird, fleshy thing, kind of like a glove filled with gelatin, just bendy and disgusting.” He glanced back at Lucius, who looked sickly fascinated. Harry chuckled and continued deboning his puffer-fish.

“Madam Pomfrey was livid. I had to drink a beaker of Skele-gro and spend the night in the hospital wing regrowing all 30 of the bones in my arm and hand, and I was so mad at Lockhart. Of course, it was probably mostly Dobby’s fault. He’d charmed the bludger to go rogue, see, because he thought that if I got hurt, I’d have to leave the school. Mad little bugger almost killed me.”

“How did you find this out?” Lucius asked.

“Hmm? Oh, he told me himself. Well, I guess you two wouldn’t know this story…” Harry explained the strange little house elf’s actions that year, and Luc watched the memory with a smile. His bondmates worked well together in the lab, and Harry looked happy and comfortable in his surroundings, which was perhaps why Sev had chosen this memory to show the headmaster.

“…Ron and I had this terrible idea that we could get to school ourselves by stealing this muggle car his father had and flying it to school—barking mad, I know—and then we crashed into the Whomping Willow and almost died. I thought for sure we would be expelled, and then Severus would chop us up to use in potions!” Harry wore a sly grin.

“I should have—would have saved me a lot of trouble over the years, let me tell you,” Severus teased.

“Yes, well, you missed your chance.” Sev and Luc both laughed, and even Dumbledore looked amused at the cheeky response.

Harry began dicing leaves as he finished his story. “…it was all for nothing, anyway—I stayed, obviously, and faced the monster and saved Ginny and destroyed the diary, and it all worked out in the end. And I didn’t see Dobby again until the end of the year, when he showed up with you, and you know the rest.”

The scene faded, and another appeared. This was one Luc had chosen: in the memory, he was sitting on the sofa in the heir’s suite, waiting for his son to enter.
Luc turned to the headmaster. “I have often over-indulged my son, and Sev has chastised me in the past for failing to discipline him as I ought. Narcissa miscarried twice before Draco, and it was only potions brewed by Severus that allowed her to carry him to term. Unfortunately, this has left him rather spoiled, and he was angry at losing our attention this summer. He attacked Harry and was struck by his own rebounding spell when Harry shielded himself. Once he was healed, I punished him for his actions.” As he finished speaking, Draco emerged from his bedroom, pulling up short at the sight of him.

Lucius’s voice was cold when he spoke. “I don’t think I have ever been so disappointed in you before. You attacked a guest in our home. I promised Severus that I would do everything I could to keep Harry safe here, and you nearly killed him. And why? Because you’re jealous of our attention?”

Observing from the outside, Luc found himself closely watching his sullen son’s responses. He had been far too angry to consider it at the time, but he wondered now how best to repair the relationship between the two young men. Based on stories each had told about the other, Draco’s jealousy went back to their first year at Hogwarts. Harry seemed entirely willing to forgive and forget, and if Draco could let go of his pride, they might even become friends. Perhaps he was being too optimistic, but Luc selfishly wanted them to get along—he cared for both of them, albeit in different ways.

The memory Lucius was speaking, visibly frustrated at his son’s rudeness. “…Severus blames me for your ill behavior, and he is entirely right to do so. I have indulged you too much in the past, I see that now. I never thought it would lead to this, that you would attack one of my bondmates.” He was glaring at his son. “I’m sure you realize that Harry will play an important part in this war. Our side in the coming conflict has changed as a result of my newfound relationship to him, which is yet another reason that your actions last night have shamed me. Be glad, for your own sake, that Harry is quick with a shield. You have seen how I protect Severus; if you had hurt Harry, I cannot guarantee you would have been safe from me.”

“…yes, Father.” Draco was visibly cowed by his father’s cold demeanor.

“…information about my relationship with Harry is to be kept secret. Or must I extract a vow to ensure your discretion?”

“No, sir.”

“Very well. You will stay in your rooms and consider how you might have behaved better, and what consequences your actions would have had if Harry had not been able to muster a shield against your ill-conceived attack.” Soon after, Lucius swept from the room, leaving his son to stew. The scene went dark, and was replaced by another.

Harry, Lucius, and Severus were sitting at breakfast, quietly eating until Harry blurted out, “I—I want to bond with you. With both of you, if I can. If—if you want, I mean.” The young man seemed uncertain of his reception, especially when neither of the other men spoke immediately. His hands wrung together in his lap, and he stared down at his plate, blushing.

“Are you sure, Harry?” Severus asked him. Luc could see a spark of joy growing in his lover’s eyes, while hope and concern warred on the memory Lucius’s face.

“Yes,” Harry said firmly. “I want this, I’m sure.” Then he gave a small gasp and bit his lip, half-grinning as the magic affirmed their bond. The younger man finally looked up at his bondmates,
who were both staring at him in wonder and joy.

“\nI see that you are,” Severus murmured, and Lucius jumped from his seat, rounding the table to pick Harry up and hug him close. Luc remembered how happy he’d been in that moment, especially when Harry hugged him back. He leaned into Sev’s shoulder, smiling as Sev dropped a kiss on his head. In front of them, the memory Lucius was laughing and kissing Harry, who returned his joyous grin with a shy smile.

The scene dissolved, revealing the last memory. Harry and Lucius were standing in front of Aliments du Fay for his birthday lunch. Harry tugged the older man forward by his hand, and the doors opened before them.

“Bienvenue, Lord Malfoy, Monsieur Black—if you will follow me?” The grey-robed host greeted them as they entered, and turned to lead them to the private dining room where they would be eating. As soon as he left them, food began to appear on the table. Lucius explained each course as it came, what the accompanying wine was and why it was chosen for that dish. Harry asked him to tell stories of his childhood and shared several stories of his time at Hogwarts, and the two of them talked and laughed all the way from the foie gras starters to the caramel ice cream and hazelnut gaufrettes. Finally, Harry slipped his glamor ring on and stood, signaling the end of the meal.

“Shall we return home?” he asked, holding a hand out to Lucius, who joined him with a kiss, taking his arm to lead him from the restaurant. The host bowed as they passed. “Merci,” Harry said. They strolled out and down the streets of Paris Magique, enjoying the warm afternoon as they walked. When they reached an apparition point, Lucius pulled Harry close and apparated them away.

As they reappeared in their bedroom, the scene dissolved, and the three viewers found themselves sitting around the headmaster’s desk once more. The older man leaned back in his chair, stroking his beard in silence.

At last, Dumbledore spoke. “May I ask why Harry has not joined us in this meeting? His presence would only help to confirm your trustworthiness, and would, I admit, make my mind easier about accepting your story.”

Sev and Luc exchanged another glance. Lucius answered. “He believes it would be, well, unwise for him to meet with you so soon after last weekend’s… difficulty. He is still rather angry with you, I’m afraid.”

The headmaster nodded unhappily. “It appears that you both have a better rapport with the young man than I do. It was not my intention to…very well, we shall move on, then. What can you tell me about Samhain?”

They moved into discussion of the planned attacks, and while Lucius was not so naive as to believe that Dumbledore now trusted him, he thought that might come with time. Luc just hoped the old man could respect their relationship with Harry and not seek to undermine it any longer—he didn’t want to see what Harry would do if Dumbledore tried to interfere again.
He’ll Need the Hospital Wing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

On Samhain, Harry was a mess of nervous energy. He couldn’t explain why—with the information that Lucius had brought the Order, they were far better prepared for Voldemort’s attacks than usual. Still, he couldn’t seem to calm himself. He had canceled quidditch practice because of the Hallowe’en Feast, but he spent his afternoon free period and the hour before dinner flying drills, until he felt too cold, tired, and hungry to fret. After a quick shower, he headed to the feast, slipping into a seat between Hermione and Neville, who both turned and smiled at him.

“Hullo, Harry,” Neville said.

“Neville, ‘Mione.” Smiling back at them, Harry piled food onto his plate, listening to the chatter and clatter of the celebration in the Great Hall. Flying had given him an uncharacteristically large appetite, and he focused on eating, nodding along to a story Neville was telling. On his other side, Hermione was laughing at something Ginny had said. Harry glanced around, seeing most of the quidditch team seated nearby. McLaggen was off with a different group, he noted, and Ron was sitting with Lavender near the middle of the table.

Luna had come over to sit on Neville’s other side, and she began telling a story that left the young man looking somewhat bemused. Harry resisted the urge to laugh at his friend, looking beyond the Gryffindor table. He smiled at a few of the former DA members, and spotted Draco holding court among his yearmates. He rolled his eyes at the blond’s supercilious behavior, a yet too-clumsy imitation of Lucius’s natural poise.

With this thought, he glanced up at the staff table, where Luc and Sev were sitting with their heads bent together. Luc was wearing a restrained smile, but Harry thought he looked tense; Sev was listening seriously to him, sipping occasionally from a goblet of wine he held. The headmaster was present, sitting nearby and looking utterly unconcerned as he spoke with Professor McGonagall. Harry let his eyes run along the table, taking in Flitwick’s jovial conversation with Professor Vector, and Professor Burbage’s animated discussion with Hagrid. When the large man glanced over and saluted him with his tankard, he waved and then turned back to the talk around him.

“The thing about jakkalbams is they’re so shy,” Luna was saying to Neville. “My father has been trying to get a picture of them for ages—”

“—and I’d love to get in with the Harpies, of course—” Ginny said to a nodding Katie as Dean refilled her juice. Harry smiled to himself; Ron’s objections notwithstanding, he thought Ginny and Dean were rather a good couple. Across the table, Demelza was clutching her sides as she laughed helplessly at Ritchie’s exaggerated impression of Zacharias Smith getting bowled over by Ginny at the end of the last quidditch match.

Harry glanced at Hermione, who was muttering and scribbling notes to herself, even as she nibbled on a pasty she held in her other hand. That was ‘Mione all over, he mused—celebration and feasting all around her, and she was working out stray thoughts for her schoolwork. He shook his head fondly, and nudged his friend, who raised her head to blink owlishly at him. He raised an eyebrow, and after a moment, she began to look a little sheepish.

“I was just, er…I’ll, uh, put this away, shall I?” she offered.
He slung an arm around her shoulders and dropped a brotherly kiss onto her head. “Never change, ‘Mione,” he said, chuckling at her playful glare.

After the feast, Harry followed the mass of his fellow Gryffindors up to the tower. He settled on the couch, Hermione leaning her head on his shoulder as conversations eddied around them. The friends shared a companionable silence, staring into the fire until they both found themselves blinking drowsily, and then Harry excused himself to his dorm, giving Hermione a hug and a grateful smile before he went up.

Once he was in bed, however, he found himself dwelling on the Dark Lord’s plans for the night. Right now, Order members were probably fighting to protect his parent’s graves, or battling the Death Eaters in Ottery St Catchpole. Was Luna’s father safe? And the Weasleys? He stared into the dark above his bed, rolled to one side and then the other, wrapped his arms around one of his pillows, and tried meditating, but when he imagined his bondmates around him it reminded him that Lucius was out there, playing his role as a loyal Death Eater: this was the first big test of Luc’s ability to serve as a double agent. Harry chewed on his lip, worrying about his bondmate’s safety against the Order’s fighters, or how he might be found out as a traitor at any moment. He shivered and buried his face in a pillow, wishing he could spend the night with Sev—the older man could likely soothe his concerns, since he’d been a spy for years, and not even Luc had suspected.

Harry spent most of the night tossing and turning, startling awake at the small sounds his dormmates made, until he managed to fall into a deeper sleep an hour or so before dawn, so exhausted that he slept through the others getting ready and leaving for breakfast.

When there was no sign of him shortly before classes were to start, Neville decided to check on him. “Harry?” he called.

The dark-haired young man startled awake, shoving the blankets off his head. “Neville?”

“Yes, I’m up, Neville.” He cast tempus, then scrambled out of bed, shooting past the other boy to grab his glasses—he had ten minutes to dress and get to Charms. “Fuck! Uh, thanks for waking me,” he tossed over his shoulder as he ran for the toilets.

“No problem!” Neville called after him. “I’ll just wait in the common room.”

“No, I’m gonna be late—go on without me!” He used a charm to clean his teeth as he ran back into the dorm room, grabbing a uniform and using a switching spell to swap it for his night shirt. He pulled on clean socks and boxers, then fished his shoes out of the cupboard and stuffed his feet into them. He threw his completed Charms essay into his bag, and stuffed the texts for his classes in after it, slinging the strap over his shoulder as he burst from the dorm and clattered down the stairs, passing through the almost-deserted common room and out into the halls of the school. He cursed under his breath all the way down to the Charms corridor on the third floor. He stopped just outside the classroom, taking a moment to quiet his breathing, and then pulled the door open and slipped inside.

Flitwick spotted him as he took a seat in the back row. “Three points from Gryffindor, Mr Potter. Now, as I was saying…” The diminutive professor returned to his lecture as Harry sank down in his seat.
At the front of the room, he could see Hermione peeking curiously back at him, but he didn’t meet her gaze. He half-heartedly paid attention to Flitwick’s words, but as the period wore on he began to worry about their next class: Defense. Having missed breakfast, Harry hadn’t seen if Luc was at breakfast, and now some of the worry and tension from the night before began to come back. What if he’d been hurt? Would Harry have been told? Surely Sev would have contacted him somehow… Of course, he’d slept in, so he would have missed an owl, and it wouldn’t have been safe to send a patronus to Harry in the dorms.

Harry was distracted through most of Charms, and when they were dismissed he was the first one out the door, hurrying down the stairs to Defense Against the Dark Arts. He waited impatiently for the door to open, ignoring the curious look Hermione was giving him, and hurried into the classroom when they were let in. He was somewhat relieved to see Lucius standing at the front of the room. As he slid into a seat, he ran his gaze over his bondmate, looking for any sign of injury. Other than looking a bit tired, there was none that he could discern, but he didn’t fully relax until class ended. Luckily, there was only a short lecture, and then they were set to reading the next chapter in their books. Lucius told them to write down any questions they had and bring them to the next class, and then he sat at his desk and marked essays. Harry hung back when the rest of the class filed out, casually sending Hermione on without him.

“T’ll catch up to you.” She nodded, looking over her own essay as she left, and Lucius spelled the door shut behind her. Once wards were in place, Harry hurried over to his bondmate, running his hands over him. “Are you okay? You weren’t injured?”

“I’m perfectly fine, beloved.”

“Good, that’s good.” Harry pulled the older man down for a kiss, then wrapped both arms around him and pressed his face into Luc’s robes, breathing in his scent. “You’re alright. Yes, good… okay. I have to go to Transfiguration. But you will tell me about what happened, if I come around tomorrow afternoon?”

Luc nodded, lifting Harry’s chin and kissing him again. “I promise. Go on, love—go to class.”

Harry gave his bondmate one last kiss and then stuffed his essay into his bag and took off for the door, breaking into a jog once he was in the hall. He made it downstairs and into the Transfiguration classroom just in time, sliding into a seat beside Hermione just before Professor McGonagall shut the door to start the class.

Later, as they were looking into mirrors and trying to alter the shapes of their own noses, Hermione murmured, “Are you okay, Harry? Only, you’ve been acting kind of oddly since the quidditch match, and you missed breakfast this morning…”

“I’m fine,” Harry whispered. “It’s something to do with the old crowd.” He gave her a significant look before turning back to his spellwork.

She nodded, eyes on her mirror. “Ah, okay. There was something in the Prophet this morning. Can we talk about it during our free period later?”

“Yeah.”

They spent the rest of the class period focusing on their spells, until McGonagall passed back their essays and dismissed them for lunch. Harry and Hermione were the last out of the classroom, discussing their grades and the application of theory in human transfiguration as they walked.
towards the Great Hall.

“Okay, but in my mum’s notes, she—uh oh…” Harry was interrupted by the echoes of a familiar voice shouting. He exchanged an alarmed look with Hermione and they took off down the hall by silent agreement. The two of them rounded the corner to see a red-faced Ron shouting at a coolly expressionless Draco.

“—bet you can’t wait to join them, you slimy snake!”

“Ron, stop!” Harry said, grabbing his erstwhile friend by the arm.

The redhead wheeled to face him, snarling. “Fuck off, Potter!” He shoved at Harry, sending him stumbling into Neville, who had been hovering nervously nearby. Ron whipped out his wand and hurled a cutting curse at Draco, who was rushing to bring his wand up even as Harry leaped between them, shield popping into place. The invisible barrier flared blue as Ron’s curse clipped the edge of it, enough of it getting by to leave thin slices across Harry’s cheekbone and along Draco’s ear.

Harry shouted, “**Expelliarmus!**” and snagged Ron’s wand as it sailed towards him. The other boy howled and dove at him, bowling him over. Both wands flew out of Harry’s hands as his head smacked into the stone floor of the entrance hall, dazing him. The redhead slammed a fist into his face, and Harry cried out, stars bursting behind his eyes as his nose and glasses both broke. Ron hit him again, even as Harry brought his hands up to try and push him away, and then again. The other boy was shouting something about a traitor, but Harry couldn’t really process his words around the pain.

“Stop it, Ronald!” Hermione cried from somewhere off to the side.

“Mr Weasley!” “**Stupefy!**” “Harry!” “Draco!” Ron suddenly slumped forward, and then was hauled unceremoniously off a woozy Harry. Someone was shouting nearby, voice carrying over the hubbub of students and echoing around the entrance hall.

Harry squinted at the blurry shape leaning over him. Severus, maybe? He tried to move, but that set off an awful bout of vertigo; he half-rolled to the side, vomiting acid from an empty stomach.

“**Evanesco.** A concussion at the very least, if I’m not mistaken—he’ll need the hospital wing.” “Mr Malfoy, as well, I think. Will you take them, Severus?” “Here’s his wand, sir, and Ron’s.” “Thank you, Miss Granger.” Harry knew the voices around him, but he couldn’t see more than blobs of color, swirling together sickeningly in his fuzzy vision. Disoriented and in pain, he moaned and passed out.

Severus frowned down at his injured bondmate. Harry seemed to have passed out, which might have been a mercy—the trip to the hospital wing was sure to be unpleasant in his incapacitated state, but it was also deeply worrying. A concussion was dangerous, even in the wizarding world, and one bad enough to render him insensible was cause for concern. He passed Ronald’s wand to Minerva, and pocketed Harry’s before conjuring a stretcher and floating the unconscious young man onto it.

“With me, Mr Malfoy,” he said, and turned towards the stair, students scattering out of his path as he went. He kept one hand wrapped around the nearest pole of the stretcher all the way up the grand staircase and down the first floor corridor that led to the hospital wing. He spelled the heavy doors open in front of him, and Madam Pomfrey appeared from her office.
“How can I—Oh, Mr Potter, what now? You can put him there, Severus. You may take the next bed, Mr Malfoy.” She hurried to Harry’s side, wand out and scanning as soon as Severus had him settled on the blankets. “That’s a nasty concussion—he’ll need to stay tonight for observation,” she said to Severus, who was looking over the diagnostic report and summoning potions from the stores, directing them onto the bedside table. Keeping hold of one jar, he turned to the neighboring bed, wand appearing in his hand.

“I’ll see to Mr Malfoy, Poppy,” he said over his shoulder. He cast his own diagnostic and, finding no curse residue or further damage, healed the cut on Draco’s ear with a murmured *episkey*. He smeared a small amount of dittany salve on the scar and stoppered the jar once more. He gave the young man’s shoulder a squeeze, and turned back to Harry’s bed.

Madam Pomfrey nodded her thanks to Severus, wiping the dittany from her own hands. “I’ve fixed the break in his nose, as well as the split eyebrow and the gash on his cheek. I can’t do aught for that eye; an oculist will need to attend him as soon as possible to prevent permanent damage. However, it’s the concussion which worries me.” She turned back to Harry, who was awake once more, and squinting up at her. “How are you feeling, Mr Potter?”

“I—a bit dizzy, I think. What’s wrong with my eye? There’s weird spots…”

“Retinal tear. Nothing to worry too much over—I’ll call St Mungo’s for a specialist, and we’ll have you right as rain before you know it. Are you nauseous?”

“Not really? How’d I get here?”

The two adults exchanged a concerned look. “You were injured in a fight outside the Great Hall,” Severus answered. “Do you remember Mr Weasley attacking you?”

“Why would he—was it about quidditch?”

“Samhain, actually,” Draco interjected from the next bed.

“Huh. Is he alright?” Harry asked.

“Not once I’m done with him,” Severus muttered dourly. Raising his voice, he answered the question. “Mr Weasley was not injured in the altercation, but you will be remaining in the hospital wing overnight. Is there anything you require from your dorm?”

“Oh, I’m sure ‘Mione will bring it ‘round,” Harry replied, gesturing vaguely with one hand. “Is Malfoy staying, too?”

“I don’t believe so, though I shall defer to Poppy’s judgement. If there’s nothing else, I shall go discover what is being done about this…incident.”

“Bye, Sev—I mean, Professor,” the young man murmured. Severus brushed comforting fingers down his bondmate’s arm, and then left, robes snapping behind him.

“You are free to go, Mr Malfoy,” Madam Pomfrey said.

“Thank you, madam,” Draco said, and slipped out behind the professor.

“Now, Mr Potter, you have a concussion. You may experience dizziness, vomiting, exhaustion, and confusion. I will be monitoring you with spells for the rest of the day and overnight, but if you
start to feel very ill, call for me—with this type of injury, we cannot be too careful. Ailments of the mind are not so easily corrected as those of the body.” She conjured a patch for his eye, slipping it around his head and settling it into place as she spoke. “I don’t want you to touch your eye before the oculist sees to it. This patch is charmed to keep you from injuring it further.”

“Okay,” Harry said, squinting at her with his good eye. His glasses were missing—they’d likely been broken in the fight. He idly wondered where they were, and whether they were salvageable. If not, perhaps Sev would take him to get new ones…

“Do you think you could eat something, Harry? I can send to the kitchens for lunch, since I assume you were unable to eat before you were injured. Something light, I should think.”

“I can try,” he said. She nodded and went to the fireplace to order his meal from the kitchens.

When it arrived, his lunch was chicken soup with a couple of rolls and a ginger tisane. He grimaced and drank as much of the ginger tea as he could manage, and followed that with most of the soup and half of a roll. Once he started to feel full, he pushed the food away, and the tray vanished from his lap. He scooted down on the bed, deciding to take a nap—he was exhausted from staying up all night, and from his injuries. Madam Pomfrey roused him at the dinner hour, asked a series of questions to check his brain functions, and ordered a similarly light meal.

As predicted, Hermione slipped in to visit with Harry just as he was finishing his dinner. She dropped his bookbag on the floor in front of his nightstand and sat in the chair by his bed. He smiled at her, setting his fork down, and the tray on his lap vanished.

“Ron’s lost his prefect status,” she blurted out immediately.

He nodded. “That’s not a surprise—he’s been doing rather a poor job of it lately.”

“I know, but Professor McGonagall won’t be assigning a new one until the Christmas holidays, and that leaves us down one…never mind, you don’t need to worry about that. He lost 150 points, anyway, for fighting and using magic in the halls and injuring two students. Professor Malfoy was furious—that cutting curse could have been fatal, he said. But you got 15 points from Professor Sprout for defending another student, and Professor Snape gave me 10 because I went for a professor.”

“Huh. Has he ever given Gryffindor points before?”

Hermione giggled. “I honestly can’t recall,” she said. The two friends grinned at each other, although Hermione soon sobered. “Are you okay, Harry? I mean, really?”

He shrugged. “I’m staying overnight for a concussion, and there’s gonna be a specialist here tomorrow because of my eye being messed up somehow, but I feel okay. Not even nauseous anymore.”

“And how are you mentally?” she asked, biting her lip.

Harry frowned at her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean Ron used to be your best friend, and now he’s sent you to the hospital wing. You were right to stop him fighting with Malfoy, and he shouldn’t have attacked you like that!”

“Yeah, but Ron’s always had a temper, and he hates Slytherins. And I know there was supposed
to be an attack on Ottery St Catchpole last night…”

“There was, actually—that’s what was in the paper this morning; but how did you know? You’re not still seeing things from…You-Know-Who, are you?”

“Nothing like that,” he hurried to assure her. “But you know who I spent the summer with? He told me about it.”

“Oh, of course, I understand.” She smiled, relieved that he was still successfully blocking the visions. “Well, I brought the paper, in case you still wanted to talk about it.”

“Yeah, please—I was up half the night worrying.”

“Alright, so it says that there were attacks on three locations: Ottery St Catchpole, Godric’s Hollow, and the muggle Prime Minister’s home. Godric’s Hollow was stormed by a Death Eater force…aurors arrived to find unnamed magical citizens defending the graveyard—the old crowd, I assume—and several Death Eaters were captured: Wormtail—” a kind of bittersweet gladness jolted through Harry “—Simon Robards, and Evan Rosier…the writer speculates on why they might have attacked there…” She trailed off, glancing up at him uncertainly.

“They’re trying to steal my mum and dad’s bodies so the Dark Lord can use them in spells to find or hurt me,” Harry supplied.

“Right, they weren’t that specific, but yes. Okay, um…well, Ottery St Catchpole was attacked at the same time: Analiese Diggory was injured, but healers at St Mungo’s expect a full recovery. The Fawcett home was destroyed, though they were away visiting relatives at the time…oh, I’d noticed Samantha wasn’t at dinner—she’s one of the Ravenclaws in my Runes class, remember? The Burrow was also damaged, and Bill was hurt, though not badly…Mr Weasley is quoted thanking the aurors for their speedy response…Silas Seaward was captured; Alecto Carrow was captured, but her brother is still at large, after killing three aurors to escape.”

“Guess that explains why Ron’s so mad,” Harry mused. He held up his hands to ward off Hermione’s righteous indignation. “Not that it excuses him…”

“No, it does not,” she snapped. “Anyway, the article finishes up by noting that because of the violence this summer, the muggle heads of state have magical protection in place, and the Prime Minister was removed to a safe location as soon as the attack started. Part of his home was destroyed, but the muggles are being told there was a gas line explosion.”

Harry reflected on the news. “Well, it could have been worse,” he said, nodding carefully.

Hermione frowned at him. “Harry, are you sure you’re okay? You’re kind of lisping…”

He dismissively flapped one hand. “Always had a lisp.”

“What? I’ve never heard you lisp before.”

“Well, you wouldn’t, ’cause I trained it away; Dursleys didn’t like it. Think it’s a parselmouth thing, actually—Riddle had it, too…” Harry trailed off with a yawn.

Madam Pomfrey swept over, wand out. “Visitor hours are over. You can see him again in the morning, Miss Granger.” She scanned him with her wand, and then firmly tucked his blankets around him.
“Bye, Harry,” Hermione said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Night, ‘Mione,” Harry replied, blinking myopically in her direction. She picked up her bag and left, the sound of her footsteps cut off by the heavy doors of the hospital wing swinging shut behind her. Once she was gone, Madam Pomfrey disappeared back into her office, and Harry quickly drifted off to sleep.

Hours later, a hand nudged his shoulder. “Potter. Potter!”

Harry roused a bit, squinting at him in the dim light. “Hmm? Malfoy? What’re you—”

“Why did you protect me, Potter?” Draco demanded in a tense whisper.

“Wha—? Oh, Ron’s jus’ upset…iss’not your fault; you’d nothing to do with th’attack las’ night…” He yawned, his words slurring together.

“But Weasley’s your friend.” The blond examined him through narrowed eyes.

“Is he? I don’ think, not anymore…” He trailed off wistfully.

“Why, then? Is it because of my father?” Draco hissed.

“You should talk to your father,” Harry murmured, eyelid sweeping over his uncovered eye in long, slow blinks. “Loves you, ya know? Mus’ be…nice…”

“No, don’t—damn you, Potter, why?”

“Was…was the righ’ thing…to do.”

Draco shook his head in disgust. “Gryffindors. Fine, go back to sleep, then.”

“G’night, Draco.” His breathing almost immediately dropped back into the soft rhythm of sleep.

The other young man examined him for a long moment, and then turned away. Just before he left the hospital wing, he paused and whispered, “Goodnight…Harry.” Then he was gone, leaving the injured Gryffindor to his rest.

Madam Pomfrey woke Harry early the next morning, repeating the questioning process from the evening before. Then, she introduced him to the oculist, a short, thin little man named Gerald Comstock who wore utilitarian brown-colored robes. The wizard had an efficient manner, and very shortly had repaired the retinal tear. He also produced a pair of spectacles and attuned them to Harry’s current vision needs, warning him that the charm was temporary, and that he would need to follow-up for a permanent pair of replacement eyeglasses.

When Comstock had left, Madam Pomfrey returned and walked Harry through a series of exercises to test his reflexes, balance, and coordination. After performing well on all of them, the young man turned pleading eyes on the matron, who pursed her lips. She performed one last scan on him, and then nodded reluctantly. He beamed and leaned over to grab his bookbag, but as he turned to leave she raised one warning finger.

“If you notice any important knowledge or skills missing, I want you to come see me; it may indicate more serious damage than we thought.” She raised one eyebrow sternly.
Harry nodded. “I will, Madam Pomfrey; thank you.”

“Very well, off with you.” She shooed him away, and he left before she could change her mind, making his way carefully down the stairs towards the dungeons. He used the shortcuts he’d learnt to avoid the higher traffic areas, and came out a short way from Sev and Luc’s quarters. He took a quick look around before darting down the hall to the tapestry that hid the entrance. Ducking through it, he pressed his hand to the correct stone on the wall and opened the door that appeared in response.

“Harry!” Lucius rose to greet him when he entered, concern on his face. He seemed to have been waiting restlessly for the younger man to appear: there was an abandoned tea service, a plate of scones, two piles of essays, and several open books scattered on the sofa and tea table. “How are you?” he asked as he ushered his bondmate towards the couch, flicking his wand to gather the books and parchments and send them off to the bedroom.

“I’m feeling alright, honest,” Harry said, smiling as Luc fussed over him. He pulled the man down onto the couch with him, and gently pushed him over until he could lie on top of him—being smaller had its perks. Harry drew his bondmate into a deep kiss, and then drew back, smiling down at the blond man. “See? I’m fine.”

“Well, it would appear Poppy let you out of the hospital wing before you drove her mad with your restlessness,” Sev said with a chuckle, setting a fresh pot of tea on the table and leaning over the two of them to claim his own kiss, which Harry gladly gave him.

“She did, yeah. Oh, that reminds me! Can I get permission to go visit an oculist, do you think? Only, these glasses are temporary, and I don’t think my old ones survived yesterday’s…uh, disagreement.”

“They did not,” Severus confirmed, scowling. “Mr Weasley is most fortunate that neither Luc nor myself are in charge of his punishment. That aside, I shall speak with the headmaster and determine when an escort may be arranged. It will likely be someone from the Order; Miss Tonks or the wolf, perhaps.”

Harry frowned at this reference to Remus, but let it pass. Instead, he dropped another kiss on Luc’s mouth and then sat up, sliding off of his bondmate and reaching for a cup.

The blond man sat up as well, nodding, when Harry offered him a cup. “Cissy sent you a basket of apples, by the way—they’re in the kitchen.”

“She remembered!” The young man beamed, shuffling over to make room for Sev on the sofa.

“Of course—did you expect anything less?” The potions master smirked.

A shadow passed over Harry’s expression, but he covered it by rolling his eyes. “You’re the one always reminding me she’s not perfect—but always outside her hearing, I notice,” he teased.

“Of course. I value all of my body parts.”

There was a beat of silence, and then all three of them were laughing, releasing the tension of worry and anger that had built up over the last few days. Harry burrowed into Luc’s side, and the blond draped an arm over him. Samhain was past, and the three of them were together—all else could wait.
Y’all, I am so, so sorry for dropping off the face of the earth there. I had a medical emergency, and then I was recovering from that, and then I had a week-long trip to check out the grad school I’ll be going to in the fall. This fic just fell off the top of my list, but I am going to try and get back to it now that things have settled down again. I hope you'll stick with me—I have plans for this fic, I promise!
The rest of the term sped past quickly, and it was with immense gratitude that Harry passed in his final exam for the term. He was tired of dodging the packs of girls trying to corner him under the mistletoe in the hallways, and things in Gryffindor had been tense for the last month. The situation with Ron hadn’t improved: Harry was willing to forgive him, but Hermione refused and so did Ginny.

“Absolutely not!”

“Come on, Ginny, he’s your brother—you have to live with him over the summer.”

“I bloody well do not. I’ll bet the twins would love an assistant!”

Harry raised an eyebrow skeptically, and then shrugged. “I tried.”

“I don’t know why you’re so ready to forgive and forget, Harry,” Hermione said. “You’re the one who has the most reason to be angry with him.”

“It just doesn’t seem worth holding onto. I’ve got the Dark Lord to contend with, and all. Besides, Ron was just being himself.”

Ginny scoffed. “Yes, he was, and that’s exactly the problem. He’s always like this, and it’s time he grew up!” She glared daggers at her brother where he sat with Lavender at the far side of the common room.

Hermione sighed. “Harry, what happens the next time you disagree with him? He was clearly in the wrong, and he still attacked you and Malfoy. Even if you forgive him, you must realize that you’ll never be friends like you were—it won’t work.”

Harry said nothing—he couldn’t argue with her logic, and Ron’s own behavior underscored her point. The redheaded boy had been throwing vicious looks at him and Ginny since Mrs Weasley had sent him a howler the Sunday after Samhain—it had been over a month, but Harry knew that Ron could nurse a grudge indefinitely. To make matters worse, half of Gryffindor had openly sided with them, and Ron’s massive point loss meant that even those who weren’t furious with him for attacking Harry still looked on him unfavorably. The quidditch team was being particularly hostile towards the redheaded boy—well, except for Cormac McLaggen, but he’d only lasted two weeks on the team anyway.

The pompous seventh year had been Ron’s closest competition at the team trials: both had saved five goals, but then McLaggen fumbled his last goal during the chasers-only game that followed. Still, the older boy was insufferable, and he’d spent as much practice time trying to instruct the other members on their own positions as he did guarding the hoops. Towards the end of his third practice he’d wrested Peakes’s bat away from him, attempting to show him the ‘proper’ way to hit
a bludger; instead, he succeeded only in knocking Harry off his broom and sending him to the hospital wing with a cracked skull.

“Mr Potter? What is it this time?” Madam Pomfrey tutted as she bustled over, wand in hand.

“McLaggen knocked him off his broom at practice,” Jimmy volunteered as he and Katie deposited their captain on the closest bed.

“’M okay,” Harry insisted sluggishly. The hospital wing matron looked thoroughly unimpressed.

“Young man, this is your second concussion in as many weeks. You are risking permanent damage, and I’m of half a mind to ban you from that infernal sport!” She took in Harry’s stricken look, and her demeanor softened. “I won’t, not yet…but you’d better not get another concussion before the winter holidays!”

Needless to say, McLaggen had been summarily dismissed from the team. When Harry was released Friday morning, with strict instructions to be extra careful, he got a note from Severus, who had forced a calming draught on their bondmate to prevent him either storming the hospital wing to check on Harry or hunting down McLaggen. Harry had been sure to visit Luc and Sev the following morning to reassure them.

“I’m fine, Luc, I promise. We’re going to be extra careful in practices from now on, and McLaggen is off the team. Everything’s fine.”

“Fine?! That little fool could have killed you! In fact, I ought to—”

“You can’t kill him, love,” Sev placidly interrupted from his seat across the room, not even bothering to turn around. He was seated at the desk in the corner of their bedroom, grading papers.

“But he—”

“No.”

“But I could just—”

“No. Some of our allies would be quite put out if you murdered a student.”

“Oh, very well…” Luc pouted, arm tightening around Harry’s waist, while their young bondmate tried very hard not to snicker.

Luc had manhandled the younger man into bed the moment he’d appeared in their rooms, and was presently sitting atop the coverlet with his back against the headboard. Harry sat across the blond man’s lap. He didn’t mind being cuddled, honestly—he’d been missing the physical closeness from the summer more and more as the term went on. He rested his head on the blond man’s chest, and listened to the two older men bantering, until he remembered an idea he’d been meaning to bring up. He sat up in his lover’s arms.

“We should do the bonding ritual after Yule. As the light returns, you know?” He smiled at Luc.

“Are you sure?” Luc asked.

“Yes! As sure as I’ve ever been about anything. I want this, all of it. Please?” Harry looked up at him, eyes wide and sincere. The older man huffed a soft little laugh.
“Alright, after Yule, then. We’ll spend the holiday at the manor, and complete the ritual after Yule.”

“Cissy will be pleased,” Sev commented, glancing up from his work, a small smile on his face. He remembered his own bonding ritual fondly. As if hearing his thoughts, Luc met his eyes, returning his smile, before dropping a kiss on Harry’s lips.

They spent the rest of the day together, with Luc keeping close to a fondly exasperated Harry. The older man let him off his lap long enough for them to eat lunch, and then pulled Harry right back into his arms, where the young man promptly fell asleep.

“His nightmares must still be bothering him,” Sev murmured, slipping carefully onto his side of the bed. He brushed Harry’s dark hair back from his face, examining the young wizard for signs of exhaustion.

“There’s so much pressure on him,” Luc said, frowning as he watched their young bondmate sleep against him.

“I know, love. But he also has us to lean on. We’ll bring him through this.”

Harry slept through dinner, and awoke feeling groggy at ten o’clock. Sev called for food from the kitchens, and once he’d eaten Luc and Sev pulled him back to the bed, where he soon slipped into a heavy, dreamless sleep that lasted the entire night. He felt unusually refreshed the next day, and Hermione laughed at his cheerfulness at the breakfast table.

“Well, someone had a good night,” she teased.

He shrugged, returning her smile. “I slept well.”

“Any particular reason?” she asked.

“No! I’m still recovering from that concussion McLaggen gave me, is all.”

“A couple people were speculating about where you were all day yesterday…” She raised an eyebrow, watching him squirm for a moment. Then she turned back to buttering her toast. “I told them to mind their own business.”

Being on the outs with Ron left him spending much more time alone with Hermione, and Harry had been worried that she would figure out something was going on with his weekend disappearances. It seemed that she had, but wasn’t going to press for information yet.

“Thanks,” he said.

She shrugged, took a bite of toast, and pulled out a notebook. He laughed and nudged her gently with his elbow.

“Never change, ‘Mione,” he said.

“Oh, I won’t,” she said tartly, hiding her smile behind her notes.

Down a team member once again, the Gryffindor team had held tryouts for the keeper position the following weekend, and Harry had eventually settled on Evalyn Bainbridge, another of Katie’s
friends who had tried out at her urging. He’d chosen Natalie McDonald as a reserve keeper—just in case, he said, but the team quickly agreed they’d been having terrible luck with keepers so far, and that it made sense. He’d also brought Dean on as a reserve chaser, and—starting at the next practice—trained him and McDonald along with the rest of the team.

Harry had arranged them into teams with two chasers, one beater, and a keeper apiece, and played them against each other in practices. This new set-up helped the team bond and allowed him to assess their strengths and weaknesses. He’d asked them to watch their counterparts in the Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw game at the end of November, and they’d brought some good insights to the next practice. He was still glad there was plenty of time before the next Gryffindor game—working hard, they would be able to get in fighting shape by then.

He and Draco seemed to have come to a kind of truce since Harry had defended him against Ron. They weren’t friends, not yet, but it seemed like they might be able to get there. Of course, they couldn’t openly become friends anyway, but Draco was a little less cold to him in public, greeting him with neutral nods when they passed in the halls. They didn’t speak to each other, but Draco was no longer pretending he didn’t exist, which Harry felt was actually pretty good progress.

He was surprised to receive a letter from the new Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour. The man requested to meet with him at Hogwarts over the holiday break. The Ministry was, of course, very sorry for the things they had said about him, and would Harry meet with him, in light of “the growing threat to national safety?”

Harry was instantly suspicious. What motive could the Ministry have for reaching out to him now? He was still in school, after all—there was little he could do about the growing war while he remained a student. After consulting with Sev and Luc, he sent a politely non-committal reply: he was gratified to receive the apology, but he would be spending the holidays away from school, in a secret location he was unwilling to compromise, for reasons the Minister would surely understand.

The only truly worrying event before the holidays was the weekend that Severus was called to the Dark Lord’s side. He left before dinner on a Friday in mid-November and returned very early Monday morning, grey with exhaustion. He went first to Dumbledore, who heard his report and then canceled his classes for the day and sent him to bed. When Harry turned up that evening, Sev told his bondmates that he’d been brewing almost the entire time, testing variations that would weaponize several potions the Dark Lord wanted to use in combat. None could be aerosolized, luckily, but there were still quite a few dangerous possibilities.

“I don’t want you worrying about this,” he told Harry, who grimaced. “I mean it, love. I can render inert some of the stock I give him, and I can make antidotes for the Order to carry. We’ve dealt with this before.”

“Okay,” Harry said. Severus knew this was likely all he would get, so he changed the subject.

Finally, the holidays arrived and it was time to leave for the manor. For the first time, Harry was leaving Hogwarts for the winter holidays, and he was both excited and relieved to be going; Ron’s sullen attitude was beginning to wear on him. Both Neville and Hermione were leaving to spend the break with their families, which left Harry free to leave with his bondmates. He had a bag packed and had given out his presents to friends already; he’d told Hermione he’d be at the same ‘safe house’ that he’d spent the summer in.

He couldn’t help thinking of the previous winter, even though it pained him. Mr Weasley attacked, in danger, then saved by Harry’s connection to Voldemort…the horrible night vigil in
Grimmauld Place, St Mungo’s with the Weasleys, and Christmas with Sirius. Save for the battle at the Department of Mysteries, it was the last time he’d seen his godfather. He stared morosely into the fireplace, tin of floo powder in hand.

“Ready to go, love?” Luc asked.

“Hmm? Oh, yes, sorry.” Harry shook himself out of his dark thoughts, and collected a small handful of the powder, passing the tin to his bondmate. He tossed the glinting green dust into the flames, called out “Malfoy Manor,” and stepped in, elbows tucked to his sides.

He only stumbled a bit on the way out of the other end, where he found Narcissa waiting. He stepped away from the fireplace, beaming at her.

“Welcome home, Harry, dear,” she said, flicking her wand to clean him of soot, and then drawing him into a hug.

“Hullo, Cissy. Thanks again for the apples!”

“As I said, it was no trouble at all. I know you were so looking forward to the harvest. How was the end of term?”

“Couldn’t come soon enough, honestly. I’ve missed it here, and things have been a bit tense since Samhain.”

“So I heard. Hello, Severus.”

“Cissy.” The tall man acknowledged her with a nod. He stepped fluidly out of the path and banished the soot from his own robes as Luc followed him out of the flames.

“Hello, Cissy.”

“Hello, dear. Draco’s gone to his room to freshen up before lunch.”

“I believe I shall as well,” Luc said.

“I’ll be in my lab until lunch,” Sev said, kissing Harry and offering Narcissa a small bow.

“I’ll send someone after you if you don’t emerge on your own. You’ve been gone for months, dear—I expect you at lunch.” He smirked at her and swept from the room, and she chuckled.

“Nope. Madam Pomfrey fixed me right up, though she almost tried to ban me from quidditch after the second one.”

“The second…concussion?” Narcissa pursed her lips.

“Oh, uh, yeah…” Harry forgot he hadn’t told her about that in his letters, and it seemed that neither of his bondmates had either. “Just a quidditch accident the second time,” he assured her.

“Of course it was that silly sport…Well, your new glasses suit you quite well.”

“They do, don’t they? The oculist’s assistant was really helpful picking the frames! And I can see so much better now, which is making school much easier.”
Cissy frowned. “Were you having a great deal of trouble seeing before?”

“Oh, not that much—I mean, I got by well enough. Er, that is…yes?”

“Why did you never say anything? We could have replaced your glasses long before now.”

“I guess I didn’t realize it was so bad.” Harry shrugged. “It’s just always been like that.”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.”I don’t suppose you’d ever seen an oculist before?” He shook his head. “But then…how did you get your first pair of glasses?”

“My aunt pulled them out of a bargain bin of reading spectacles at the shops, once she’d got tired of my teachers complaining that I needed some.” He blinked at Narcissa, who was staring at him intently.

After a moment, her expression smoothed out. “Well, no matter—you have them now, and that’s most important.” They moved onto discussing more pleasant matters after that, but Harry had a feeling the conversation wasn’t over, merely postponed until Cissy figured out whatever was puzzling her.

He was surprised how easy it was to return to Malfoy Manor. Though he had only lived there for a month before leaving for Hogwarts, the manor had already become his home away from Hogwarts. The Burrow had always been Ron’s family’s home, and Grimmauld Place was like something out of a nightmare, even as cleaned up as they’d gotten it, but Malfoy Manor had a place for him that the Dursleys never had.

The first week of the holidays, he received a second letter from the Minister, this one much more forthright than the previous one. Scrimgeour felt Harry owed it to the people, who perceived him as ‘the Chosen One,’ to stand by the Ministry and give them a boost. A few public appearances, perhaps, letters to the paper, that sort of thing…Pop into the Ministry a time or two, visit the auror offices, let the people know he supports the Ministry’s efforts. It was his ‘duty.’

Harry set the letter on fire, spent the afternoon blowing up dummies in the dueling chamber, and then sent back a reply which said only that he would be unable to oblige until the Ministry began to seriously combat the Death Eater threat, rather than disseminating half-hearted self-defense pamphlets and locking up innocent people like Stan Shunpike. He did not receive a third letter.

After that, Luc and Cissy both seemed determined to keep him occupied as much as possible. The family prepared donations for St Mungo’s, visited Whimsic Alley to purchase their gifts for friends and family, and Luc even took Harry out with him to cut the yule log. (They may have gotten a touch distracted and made out against a tree until Harry’s warming charm wore off and he began to get chilly. Sev smirked at them when they returned, but Harry wasn’t embarrassed. Well, not very embarrassed, anyway.)

Now that he and Draco were patching together a decent relationship, it was even better than the summer, and the two young men spent several afternoons racing their brooms together in the chill air. Narcissa supervised a couple of dueling sessions between them, and they both assisted Severus in his laboratory as he brewed replacements for the Hogwarts hospital wing. Harry liked to watch the older man and his godson, who had a more affectionate relationship at home. Sometimes it made him wistful for the relationship he never got to have with his own godfather, but he wasn’t given much free time to brood.
Cissy even involved him in planning the Yule Ball, sort of. Mostly, she had him tasting things, listening to her explain traditions, and nodding along as she configured and reconfigured the decoration scheme on scale models of the ballroom. She also took him to be fitted for new dress robes. As he’d predicted during the summer, he truly hadn’t grown much, but she still insisted he needed special robes for the occasion. As usual, she made all of the decisions while he listened and watched fabric samples flit about. When the completed robes had arrived by owl post, Cissy had him try them on for fit.

He had to admit they were quite striking. He’d ended up with dove grey silk robes in a traditional silhouette. The torso was fitted, with a skirt that flared at his hips and fell to his ankles. The sleeves were full and gathered at the wrist. The robes were double breasted, for a slightly more modern look, and featured tiny crows on the metal buttons, a nod to the Black coat of arms. When Harry returned to their bedroom to change clothes, Luc followed him with an almost hungry expression.

“Mind you don’t ruin his robes before the ball, dear,” Cissy called after them. Harry wondered if he could die from mortification.

He didn’t, of course, and Luc certainly had enough self-control to whisk the robes out of harm’s way the second he took them off. When they emerged at dinner time, Harry found he wasn’t even bothered by the knowing smirks that Cissy and Sev wore.

The next day, Harry helped Sev to prepare the potion they would use in the bonding ritual. The brewing took most of a day and was quite tricky. Harry was rather nervous, but Severus waved off his concerns.

“I trust you with my lab,” was all the older man said. Harry needed a moment to compose himself, after that, which his bondmate clearly found endearing and amusing in equal measure.

Luckily, once the younger man pulled himself together, everything went off without a hitch. While they worked, Sev told him a little more about his experience of the ritual. At the end of the day, they had a honey-colored potion that smelled wonderful, like apples and ginger and cinnamon. From the notes on it, he knew that the spicy scent represented Lucius to him, while Luc would smell whatever he associated with Harry. With the potion made, Harry found himself looking forward to Yule, though its proximity to the ball put a bit of a damper on his excitement.

The Malfoy’s Yule Ball was huge, from what he understood. It traditionally fell on December 20th, leaving the 21st for family observance, and it was attended by most of the older families, a veritable who’s who of the wealthy and powerful. Harry would be attending as Corvus Black, because it would be exceedingly odd that the newly discovered cousin not attend the social event of the season, especially since he lived in the manor. He understood this, and he didn’t try to talk his way out of it, but if he had his choice he’d rather have spent the evening in the library working on holiday essays.

The family had an early supper on the night of the ball, and then returned to their rooms to dress. Harry pulled on his dress robes and made sure he wore his glamor ring before he headed downstairs to the ballroom. He felt uncomfortably rich in these robes, and was eternally grateful that Ron would probably never see him wearing them.

“Don’t fuss, dear, you look lovely,” Narcissa said when she saw him nervously smoothing his robes. Her robes were a compliment to his: dove grey silk with a fitted bodice and a floor-length skirt which flared sensuously from just above her hips. The sleeves were fitted, and both the sleeves and neck were secured with small pearl buttons. Her long black hair was spelled blond on the top and sides, pulled back and secured in an intricate knot at the back of her head, braided and
pinned and twisted and fanned until it looked something like a rose corsage. As usual, she looked stunning, and he told her so. She smiled at him.

“Thank you, darling. Over there, if you would,” she instructed a nearby elf hanging garlands. A chamber ensemble tuned their instruments in the corner, and Harry spotted Mimi directing several of the kitchen elves as they set up hors d’oeuvres and drinks at the far end of the room.

“Can I help with anything?” Harry asked.

“Oh, I think we have things well in hand, Corvus. A touch higher, please, Lulu; yes, there.”

Harry wandered off, finding Severus seated in a chair near one wall. The older man wore black velvet robes cut in the same style as his regular teaching robes: a sleeveless, open outer robe over a close-fitting inner robe held shut at wrists and neck by dozens of tiny black velvet covered buttons. Sev looked up from the book in his hand with a small smile and a nod.

“I ought to have brought something to read,” the younger man said, taking the seat next to his bondmate.

“Hmm. I am here because it is expected of me, but until I am surrounded by politicians and my more…unsavory colleagues, I choose to do something useful with my time. Cissy will, of course, come along and admonish me once guests begin to arrive.”

As Harry was considering fetching a book of his own, one of his advanced defense texts landed in his lap. He looked up and around, and found Mimi smiling knowingly at him from her place by the tables. He nodded his thanks at her, and she returned to preparing the presentation of the food.

Just as Severus predicted, Cissy came along with a pleasant but pointed smile to make them stop reading just before the first guests began to arrive. Sev sneered, his public mask already in place, but his book disappeared into a pocket nevertheless. As soon as Harry marked his place and shut his book, it vanished, presumably sent back to his room by Mimi or another of the elves. He stood and let Cissy steer him across the room to greet the minister. He checked the disdain that wanted to overtake his features, reminding himself that it would probably greatly inconvenience the family if he alienated the man, and that long-lost cousin Corvus had no reason for antipathy towards Scrimgeour. Instead, he pasted a polite smile on his face, bowed the precisely correct degree that Narcissa had drilled into him over the summer, and made politely meaningless small talk until Cissy excused them to go greet another guest. She gently squeezed his arm to express her approval as they walked over to greet the new arrivals.

The next hour was an exhausting procession of distant cousins, Ministry employees, and pureblood patriarchs, each of whom warranted a specific type of greeting and a different set of manners. Finally, Cissy released him with a knowing smile. He kissed her cheek and then all but fled to the doors which led outside. Slipping out, he sighed and leaned against the stone balustrade that enclosed the terrace, looking out onto the grounds.

“You lasted longer than I expected.” Harry turned to see Severus strolling towards him. The younger man shrugged.

“It would have been odd to leave sooner, but I just really needed some air.”

“Hmm. Well, enjoy the reprieve—the toast will come in an hour or so, and they’ll expect you for that.”
He sighed and slumped a little. “Yeah, alright.”

Sev settled against the balustrade beside him, facing back towards the house. “It will be over soon enough, love,” he murmured, expression carefully impassive.

Harry glanced back at the wall of windows that made up that end of the ballroom. The orchestra could be faintly heard from outside, and he could see that a fair number of the attendees were engaged in some kind of dance that stretched in two lines down the center of the room, couples moving together and then apart, taking new partners for several motions, and returning to their original partner. It was very grand to watch, very old-fashioned and dignified.

After the nearest couple peeled away to the far end of the line, they began the same set of actions again, and Harry realized it wasn’t so complex as he’d thought. He considered finding someone to partner for a dance. Cissy had taught him the manners appropriate for various situations that might arise during a ball, but none of the actual dances, and he was glad to see that they were easier than he’d anticipated. He turned to watch, darting a glance at Sev beside him.

The older man wore no expression, but his eyes were soft, the way they got when the three bondmates were alone, and Harry scanned the crowd for Luc. He spotted the blond man midway down the double line of dancers, Narcissa across from him. As the hosts, it would have been their duty to open the dance, and they did so with aplomb, looking effortlessly refined as they moved smoothly through the steps. He hadn’t seen his older bondmate since just after dinner—Luc had dressed and then gone to the floo to greet guests as they entered. The man looked as lovely as his wife, in shot silk robes of black that gleamed green as the light played over their surface. His long blond hair was pulled back with a simple black ribbon, and it fanned out behind him as he turned and bowed.

Sev chuckled beside him. “He is stunning, isn’t he?” Harry gave him a bashful smile. “Don’t worry, it is in his nature to be both admirable and alluring; none will think it unusual that you watch him.” They watched the dance proceed until Luc and Cissy reached the near end once again, finishing with a curtsy and bow to polite applause from their fellow dancers. The Malfoys departed the dance floor for drinks and mingling. Another dance began, and Harry saw Luc casting about for someone.

“That is my cue,” Sev declared, straightening. He offered a bow appropriate for a cousin who was a friendly acquaintance, which the young man returned, and strode towards the double doors, letting himself back into the ballroom. Harry saw Luc spot him, the blond man’s smile becoming more genuine as the lank man approached. He accepted the glass of wine that Sev held out for him, and the dark-haired man leaned towards him to listen to his words. Severus gave a small nod, and gestured in Harry’s direction. Luc laughed, glancing over the wall of windows until he spotted their disguised love through the doors, and raised his glass in a small salute. Harry shook his head fondly.

He stood outside for another half hour, listening to the faint strains of chamber music and muted chatter. The terrace was layered in warming charms, and the air around him was comfortable and still. Snow gently fell on the lawn of the estate. It was tranquil, he decided. At last, however, Draco stepped out and nodded politely at him.

“My mother has asked that I invite you to return for the toast, Cousin.”

Harry nodded back at him. “Thank you, Draco.” He took a deep breath and straightened.

“If it’s any consolation, you will likely be allowed to retire for the night soon afterwards, if you
desire,” Draco offered.

“That obvious, is it?” Draco raised his eyebrows, looking thoroughly unimpressed at this slight to his intelligence. Harry nodded, chuckling. “Yes, alright, noted. Shall we?”

They stepped into the ballroom, Draco taking up two flutes of champagne from a tray being held by Emi, one of the house elves, and passing one to Harry. A handful of minutes later, the current dance finished, and the guests politely applauded the dancers and musicians. Then, as if drawn to them, the crowd turned to look at Lucius and Narcissa, who stood on the stairs leading to the balcony above. Each of them held their own glass of champagne.

“Good evening, and Yuletide greetings,” Lucius said. “We are glad you have joined us as we honor our traditions. Once more, we bring light to the darkness of midwinter. We remember that this cold season will end, that soon enough summer will be upon us again. Much may change in this world, but the seasons will continue, constant in their turning. No matter the threats we face, no matter the dangers which creep upon us, we can observe the passing of the seasons as our ancestors did. We allow none to turn us from what is right and true. We hold to our traditions, for they remind us from whence we came. How great is our society, and how wise! We honor the blood of our ancestors, and we are honored by it. In these dark times, it commands us to celebrate and cleave to the wisdom we have received from them. Those who would destroy us will fall away in the face of our strength. And so we toast: may Lady Magic bless us and our families in the year to come!”

Glasses rose into the air, and a chorus of murmuring voices replied, “So mote it be.”

Harry drank with the others, musing on the ambiguity of Luc’s words. It was a masterful speech—the Death Eaters in the room could find no fault with it, yet it would also allow the minister to believe that Lucius remained on the correct side of the war. Not for the first time, he thought about the complexity he’d brought into the older man’s life. Spying was dangerous and difficult work, and Luc had been forced to it by their relationship. He wouldn’t give his bondmate up for anything, and he knew Luc loved him, but Harry did wonder whether he sometimes regretted the complications which came along with the bond. For better or worse, Harry was an important figure in the war, if only because the Dark Lord and Dumbledore had decided it was so.

He frowned at the empty glass in his hand, until it was plucked free. “Whatever you’re thinking about, stop now,” Cissy said. “It is your turn to dance with me.”

“Dance? But I—”

She smiled sweetly at him. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“I meant, I would be honored.” He bowed.

“I thought you might,” she said, taking his arm when he offered it. Harry led her to the dance floor, and they took up places across from each other as the music began once more.

He picked up the steps fairly easily, even if he felt awkward and clumsy beside Cissy. He made it through the entire twenty minute set without falling over, which was better than he’d expected, but before he could escape, she’d handed him off to some diplomat’s daughter. The young woman spoke heavily accented English, and seemed uninterested in small talk, so they passed much of the next set in uncomfortable silence. He bowed to her at the end and was just about to leave when Daphne Greengrass slipped into her spot and claimed him for the next dance. She was charming and witty at least, and the set passed quickly. Still, he was relieved when Luc came over at the end
“I’m afraid I must steal your partner, Miss Greengrass,” the blond man said.

“Of course, my lord,” she said, with a curtsy and a dimpled smile.

“It was a pleasure, Miss Greengrass” Harry said, bowing over her hand. He followed Lucius off the floor, and the blond man handed him a glass of water.

“I thought you might appreciate the chance to escape,” Luc said.

“Merlin, yes—thank you!” He almost hugged his bondmate, before remembering that they were in public, and it might be a little out of character.

“Go on, then.” The older man chuckled at his enthusiastic response, and Harry took off, climbing the nearest staircase to the balcony above, and then slipping out the doors to the first floor. He strode quickly off to the master suite before someone could spot him and draw him back to the ball; luckily, he saw no one else, and was soon safely ensconced in their private sitting room, working on holiday homework. Sev joined him an hour or so later, but Harry fell asleep before Luc returned for the night.

After staying up for the ball, the family slept in the next morning. Harry, Luc, and Sev ate a late breakfast in their sitting room, and read quietly for the rest of the morning. They met up with Cissy and Draco for a mid-afternoon lunch, after which they exchanged holiday gifts. (Harry was amused to discover that he and Draco had each purchased for the other a broom care kit, because it was the most neutral gift they could think up. He gave Draco a wry grin, which the blond young man returned with a smirk.)

For Narcissa, Harry had found a magical snake that was bred to hold a shape for long periods of time, for the purposes of serving as jewelry. The idea had actually come from a footnote in a book about snake mythology that he’d read over the summer, but he’d had to owl order away to India for the gift. He had been surprised to learn that many Indian wizards were far more comfortable with snakes and snake imagery than British wizards, and valued parseltongue as a magical gift. He had been hesitant about purchasing a living creature from so far away, but the snake he ordered came under a strong sleeping charm in a sturdy black box layered with so many protective charms it almost seemed to shimmer.

Cissy gave him a bemused look when he slid carefully onto the seat next to her and placed the box in his lap.

“This is a really particular gift,” he explained, lifting the lid away.

She beamed when she saw the silver snake lying inside the box. “Oh, Harry, it’s lovely!”

He reached in and ran his finger over the snake’s head. “Come here, little one, let me introduce you to the woman I told you of.” The slim creature wrapped around his fingers, and he lifted her out. “Her name is Shashi. It’s a traditional name for the moon,” he explained to Narcissa.

“Shashi,” Cissy repeated, enchanted by the silver snake coiling around Harry’s hand.

“She’ll hold any shape you set her in for hours at a time. May I?” When she nodded, he leaned over and draped Shashi around her neck. The snake settled languidly across Narcissa’s skin, wrapping the end of her tail just behind her head to anchor herself in place. “She likes to be
stroked, if you want to. There’s a warming stone in the box, for when you aren’t wearing her, and she eats scrap metal and minerals. If you feed her a lot of one kind of metal—like gold or bronze—she’ll take on a different hue.”

“Thank you, Harry, this is a wonderful gift.” Narcissa accepted the box from him and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

He ducked his head with a small smile. “I’m glad you like it,” he said.

Sev gave Harry several texts on potions used in healing. Severus and Narcissa had decided that he would begin basic instruction in healing with them over the next summer, circumstances allowing. He had been reading as much as he could in his spare time, growing increasingly fascinated by the history of the field. Harry found himself looking forward to the summer for the first time he could remember.

From Luc, he received a pair of texts about parseltongue. One was from Ireland, and rather old—it was a translation of a text which pre-dated English influence. The other was slightly more problematic.

“It’s…not entirely legal to possess a copy of this text. There are few concrete consequences—perhaps confiscation and a fine—but the Ministry does include it on a list of proscribed texts. It would be best that you keep this one in our room here, rather than take it to school with you.” He smiled at Harry, who was brushing his fingers over the leather cover of the book, excitement on his face.

“I heard this book couldn’t be found anymore…” He looked up at Luc, beaming. “Thank you!”

“Anything for you, love,” the blond man said.

For Luc, Harry had purchased a simple silver cuff with a snake motif. He’d matched it to the pin that Cissy had given his bondmate over the summer. For Sev, he’d retrieved several old books from the Potter vaults, two histories of potion-making, and a potions journal written by a member of the Prince family and posthumously published in the 1700s. Both older men thanked him with kisses, which Draco pretended not to see.

After dinner, they held a simple ritual, and then Luc lit the yule log. They sat in the family parlor before the fire, chatting quietly or reading for several hours after dinner. Harry’s anxiety had grown as the day went on, and he found it difficult to focus on his book that evening. He was trying to read one of the texts on healing potions which Severus had given him, but his attention kept straying.

Since the bonding ritual required they spend the night apart from each other, Harry would be sleeping in the room that had been his when he first arrived at the manor. He had already laid out his nightshirt, but he wished he could stay in their shared bed instead. What if Luc changed his mind about bonding with him? What if one of them overslept? What if something happened to the potion they were to drink? What if an emergency occurred during the night and they were forced to forgo the ritual? The next advantageous time when they would be at the manor would be midsummer—they certainly wouldn’t be able to leave Hogwarts for Beltane… He chewed at the edge of one of his nails, book forgotten in his lap.

Harry jumped as a hand reached out and tugged his fingers away from his mouth. He blinked at Severus, who was seated beside him on one of the sofas.
“There is nothing to fret over, Harry,” the older man said to him. “However, I know you well enough to know you will anyway. Would it help if I shared your bed this night?” Harry nodded fervently. “Then I shall. Since you are not reading, why don’t you go prepare for sleep? I will follow soon.”

“Thank you,” Harry whispered. After bidding goodnight to the others, he retreated to his old room. Setting his book on the bedside table, he dressed for sleep and climbed into bed. Taking up his book again, he flipped back to the start and tried to read more, but gave it up when Severus slipped into the room half an hour later, also dressed in nightclothes. The older man slid under the covers on the other side of the bed, and lay down facing him, arm held out invitingly. Harry snuggled under it, settling into his bondmate’s embrace.

“That’s it, love—relax,” Sev murmured, pressing a kiss to the back of his neck. “I’ll make sure you’re up in plenty of time.”

True to his word, Severus woke Harry at six-thirty the next morning, helping him into the unadorned white robe he would wear to the ritual room. Harry removed his snake necklace, gave his bondmate a quick kiss, and hurried down the stairs to the ground floor, and then further down to the potions laboratory. There, he dispelled the stasis charm over the ritual potion and ladled the amber liquid into a crystal goblet, which he carried down the hall into the ritual chamber. He set the goblet and his wand onto the marble altar, which already held a small knife and Luc’s wand.

He heard Luc step up behind him and turned to smile at his bondmate. Like Harry, the older man wore only a plain white robe, and his long blond hair was hanging free around his face.

Luc reached forward and took his hands, touching him for the first time since sunset the night before, and beginning the ritual. “I greet thee at this place of magic and ask thee to join with me for all of time,” he said.

“I joyfully consent,” Harry replied. “In the name of Lady Magic, I promise thee my devotion, and beg that thee cherish it.”

“I promise to do so with all my heart and all my soul and all my magic. In the name of Lady Magic, I promise thee my devotion, and beg that thee cherish it.”

“I promise to do so with all my heart and all my soul and all my magic. As the sun rises, I commit myself to thee.”

“As the sun rises, I commit myself to thee. All that is mine now be thine as well. Thy magic join with mine own, that thou may partake of the gifts of my line.”

“All that is mine now be thine as well. Thy magic join with mine own, that thou may partake of the gifts of my line. So mote it be.”

“So mote it be.” Luc smiled at Harry, releasing his hands and reaching for the knife on the altar. He sliced his finger and let six drops of blood fall into the potion. Withdrawing his hand, he passed the knife to Harry, who sliced his own finger and dripped six drops of his own blood in. At the last drop, the amber potion turned an opalescent ruby color. Luc took up the goblet and sipped from it. He passed it to Harry, who took a sip and passed it back. They went back and forth until the goblet was empty.

Next, they slipped their robes off, and walked to the bath Luc had prepared for them in a stone pool. Walking down the steps, they submerged themselves in the steaming water. Then, Luc
reverently washed Harry’s body with a soft cloth. When he was finished, Harry took up his own cloth and washed the older man’s body. Both rinsed off, and they climbed back out of the pool and sat on the stone bench nearby.

“Are you ready?” Luc murmured, brushing Harry’s damp hair back from his face.

“Yes, yes, please, yes,” Harry said, kneeling on the bench to brush his lips over his bondmate’s face.

Luc tugged him over and guided him down until Harry straddled the older man’s hips. Once he was settled, Lucius took them both in hand and squeezed, causing his young mate to gasp and cling to him, shuddering. Harry thrust helplessly and moaned at the heat and the pressure, and everything seemed too big, and they were having sex, but he also felt a connection between their magical cores, and it was deeply, deeply intimate in a way that went beyond sex. Magic crackled along his skin where they touched, and he pulled Luc’s face down towards him, capturing his mouth in a fierce kiss.

When he desperately needed to breathe, Harry broke away, pressing his face to Luc’s chest and panting against his skin as the older man continued to pump them both in his grip. “Luc,” he whimpered.

“Yes, love, that’s it, come on,” the older man coaxed.

The torches on the walls suddenly flared brightly, and their skin seemed to take on a fiery glow as the light died down once more. Harry arched against his lover, gripping tightly to Luc’s shoulders as he came. With a gasp, the older man followed him into orgasm, and they slumped together, breathing hard.

After a moment, Luc pulled back enough to swipe his hand through their combined fluids and rub it across both their chests and bellies, kissing the younger man tenderly as he shuddered through aftershocks.

“That was amazing.” Harry whispered reverently. “I can feel your magic…”

“And I feel yours.” Luc wrapped him in his arms.

The younger man giggled, laughter bubbling up uncontrollably from inside him. He was so, so happy. Everything felt right and whole and wonderful. “It’s perfect,” he said, smiling at the older man.

“Beautiful,” Luc murmured. “You’re so beautiful.”

Harry laughed again. “I love you,” he whispered.

Lucius sucked in his breath, and Harry pulled back a little to look at him. The older man had tears in his eyes, but he was beaming. Harry realized what he had said, and he thought maybe he should feel embarrassed or something, but he was too dazzled to be anything less than utterly happy.

“I love you,” he said again. He took hold of his bonded’s face, and drew him down into a kiss.

“I love you,” Luc said against his lips.
Harry wondered if he could die of happiness. Of course, he didn’t.

Chapter End Notes

Who has two thumbs and unrealistic expectations about how long it takes to write? This one right here. I apologize for the long time between chapters, once again. I had a lot of trouble on this one, and I’m sorry if it sucks. I basically just had to get it out, so I can move on to the next part of the story. I think it’s probably still kind of choppy. On the plus side, it’s a touch long, because there was no good place to stop it, so I hope y’all enjoy that. The next chapter will be shorter, and almost certainly out sooner than this one was.

Also, I don’t remember where I first read the magical-snake-as-jewelry thing, but I’ll link to it in a note when I find the fic again—it’s a really good one.
I Hate Bloody Prophecies...

Chapter Notes

I am going to stop promising that I will update with any kind of regularity, because I keep letting you down. I’m so so sorry, and I hope that this fic is worth the wait for you. This chapter was thorny for me, and I’ve been caught up in my research. I haven’t forgotten you, though, and I promise that I haven’t abandoned this fic—I’ll just be a little slow updating.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry’s eyes blinked open, and he frowned into the dark, trying to figure out what had woken him. His hand crept beneath a pillow and clutched his wand. He lay, unmoving, listening for any sound. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

He rolled carefully to the edge of the bed to grab his glasses off the nightstand, and peered around at the gloom beyond their bed. It was quiet and still, except for the soft breathing of his bondmates, who slept on behind him. He turned to look at them, his expression softening. Sev was curled around Luc’s back, face shoved against the nape of the blond’s neck. Luc had one arm flung out, fitting into the space that was normally beneath Harry’s neck when he lay pressed against the older man.

Their relationship was still so amazing to Harry. He could feel lingering warmth in his chest from the bonding ritual he and Luc had performed the day before. Raised almost entirely without love, and yet here were two beautiful men who loved him fiercely. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he was content to watch them sleep for several long minutes.

Eventually, he whispered the tempus charm, frowning at the floating red letters that appeared: it was just after 4am—far too early to be awake, frankly. But he wasn’t sleepy, and it was much too late to take a sleeping potion, if he wanted to be functional in the morning.

With no hope of sleeping further, Harry decided to head to the library. He’d been meaning to look up some information for his transfiguration essay, and now was as good a time as any, since he was up. He summoned his slippers and a dressing gown, and padded out of the bedroom, shutting the door silently behind him. He slipped through the sitting room and out into the hall, rounding a corner and then another, letting himself quietly into the upper level of the library and lighting the candles with a murmured spell.

Knowing roughly where to look, he set off for the correct shelves, browsing until he found a couple of tomes that seemed likely. Grabbing both books, he took them over to one of the tables to go through. Summoning parchment and a quill, he reached for the first book. Just then, the whisper of fabric on wood sounded behind him, and Harry whipped around, wand at the ready. The spell on his lips died, and his eyebrows shot up at the sight before him.

It was Luna, of all people. She wore a white nightgown, a shawl trailing from one shoulder. Her skin was glowing faintly, and her hair fluttered, though there was no breeze in the room. She seemed almost wrapped in power, magic distorting the air around her like summer haze. Her eyes were a milky white, without irises or pupils.
“Luna?” he whispered hesitantly. What was happening? How on earth had she gotten into the manor?

She didn’t seem to hear his words, but her hand snapped out and closed around his wrist. He flinched—her fingers were icy, and her grip was like an iron band. “Luna?!” he said louder, beginning to panic. She opened her mouth, and he got the unsettling impression that her blank eyes were intent on his face.

She spoke in a strange voice—deep and emotionless. “Lady Magic wakes in conflict. Her chosen Champion approaches, guided by hunter and scavenger, destined to turn back the tide of war. He carries the power of flame in his core; he will restore balance. Though he bears the cursed mark, he will fly above the white king and the serpent, and his blood shall sing triumph. Magic’s Champion will turn back the tide of war…”

Harry’s heart sank. He knew the signs; that was a prophecy. Hecate save him from prophecies!

As suddenly as she’d grabbed him, Luna’s fingers released his wrist. She swayed on her feet, her eyes shut, and she collapsed to the floor. Harry dropped to his knees beside her, unsure if he should actually touch her. Was she alright? Had she hit her head? He called up the memory of the bonding ritual and used it to cast. “Expecto patronum!”

The silver mist that shot out didn’t take the familiar stag shape, however; in a burst of translucent flame, a phoenix appeared, swooping above Harry, who just stared at it for a long moment. At last it settled and hovered before him, wings pumping, and he shook himself. “Uh, for Severus Snape. Please come to the library—it’s urgent.” The bird disappeared, and he hoped it was able to wake his bondmate because he didn’t know what to do with Luna.

He stared at her for a minute or two, and then he took her wrist to check her pulse. She didn’t look injured or sick, her breathing seemed fine, and her heart rate was calm and steady. As he was checking the temperature of her forehead, her eyes opened, and she looked up at him.

“Hello, Harry,” she said. “What are you doing here? And where is here?”

“Uh, Malfoy Manor. Luna, do you remember anything that just happened?”

“I suppose that depends on what just happened. I remember lying in my bed, reading about crumple-horned snorkacks, and I suppose I fell asleep at some point, and then I woke up here.”

Harry sighed. “Okay. That’s—uh, okay.”

At that moment, Severus stumbled into the room, gaze scanning the room, wand at the ready. “Harry?” he called.

The younger man popped up enough to be visible over the tables. “Over here.”

His bondmate swept to his side, blinking in surprise when he spotted Luna. “Miss Lovegood, dare I ask what you are doing here at—tempus—a quarter to five in the morning?”

“Prophecy,” Harry said dourly.

“I’m sure I shall regret asking, but…elaborate, please.”

“I came in for some books to work on my holiday homework, and she appeared behind me and
gave a prophecy and then fainted. I think she’s fine, now she’s woken up, but I was worried she might have hit her head.”

Severus murmured a diagnostic spell. “I’m not seeing any signs of injury.”

“Oh, good,” Luna said. “That would have been inconvenient. May I stand, now?”

“Sorry, yeah—let me help you.” Harry stood and offered a hand, pulling Luna to her feet. Her skin was still very cold, and he picked up her shawl, which had fallen off at some point, and tucked it around her shoulders and arms, murmuring a warming charm. “I know it’s a bit early, but do you want tea or breakfast or something?”

“That would be lovely, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Mimi,” Harry called. The elf appeared in front of him, rather more bright-eyed and alert than he expected her to be.

“Good morning, Master Harry; how can Mimi be helping?”

“Good morning, Mimi. Could you bring breakfast for three to the master suite sitting room?”

“Better make it four, and I’ll wake Luc,” Severus said. Mimi nodded and disappeared.

“Do you think that’s necessary?” Harry asked.

“Miss Lovegood came through the wards, somehow, and delivered a prophecy; he’ll want to know.”

“Fair enough. Luna?” He offered her his arm, and she tucked her hand around his elbow with a smile.

“Thank you, Harry.”

He led them back to the master suite, and Sev disappeared into their bedroom. Harry pulled a seat out for Luna, and then took a seat beside her. Tea appeared before them, and he poured for them both. Minutes later, Lucius and Severus emerged from the bedroom, wearing dressing gowns, and joined them at the table.

Luna popped up and gave a little curtsy. “Congratulations on your bonding, Cousin Lucius,” she said.

“I—thank you?” Luc looked at Harry, who shook his head.

“She’s known since the start of fall term—saw it in my magic, she said.”

“Ah, that’s…amazing, actually; what a fascinating talent.”

“Thank you. I share it with my father, but I think that this prophecy may come from my mother’s side of the family.”

“You may be right—there have been seers in the family before, though not recently.”

Luc and Sev took their seats, and Harry passed them each a cup of tea, made to their taste. They
talked about inconsequential things for several minutes, until a spread of fruit, omelets, sausage, and toast appeared on the table. They each filled their plates, Severus nudging the sausages towards Harry and nodding with approval when the young man placed two beside his fruit and porridge. The room was quiet as they ate.

Once they had all finished, Lucius stood, transfiguring his nightclothes into a proper robe, and offered Luna his arm. “I can return you home now, Cousin, and explain the incident to your father, if you wish.”

“Oh, I doubt he’s even aware I’m gone,” she said, smiling up at him. “He’s been off hunting for fresh water plimpies, and there’s an issue of the *Quibbler* due out next week. No, he’s not very likely to have noticed I wasn’t abed this morning, but I’d just as soon return now, regardless.” She wrapped her hands around his forearm, and turned to look at Harry, who was smiling fondly at her, and Severus, who looked faintly alarmed. “I’ll see you back at Hogwarts, Harry, Professor.”

“Bye, Luna,” Harry said.

“Good day, Miss Lovegood.”

She nodded cheerily at both of them, and Lucius apparated them away with a crack. In the silence that followed, Harry felt his lips twitching, until he couldn’t hold back anymore, and he burst out laughing. Severus watched with a bemused expression as he tried vainly to suppress the giggling that had overtaken him. Finally, the older man rolled his eyes and stood, rounding the table to scoop Harry up into his arms, and carrying him into their bedroom.

It being just past six in the morning, Harry and Sev showered and dressed, greeting Lucius with laughter and kisses upon his return. The blond man looked rather perplexed by his visit to the Lovegood home, but he was happy enough to be kissed. Once he had taken his turn in the shower and gotten properly dressed for the day, Luc waved for Harry to follow him, and headed down to the family vaults in the cellars.

“This is a good time to reconcile your new status with the wards,” he said as they descended the stairs. “There will always be some items that only the head of the family will be able to remove from these rooms, but as one of my consorts you are included in all family magics, and can enter these vaults without me to retrieve a great majority of the items stored here.”

“Alright,” Harry said, as they stopped before an iron-bound wooden door. “What do I do?”

“Stand here, and your hand goes there, yes, precisely.” The older man drew his wand and laid the tip of it on the back of Harry’s left hand, which was pressed against the door about a hand’s width above the wrought iron handle. The wand-tip began to glow, and the young man shivered as he felt a strange magic questing over his skin. Luc began to chant quietly, and Harry squinted against the growing light as sigils upon the door flared to life.

“Now,” Luc said, “place your other hand upon the door pull, and push your magic through your arm as if you were using a wand.”

Harry complied, and bit back a gasp as the handle sliced his palm. A second later, a comforting rush of magic flowed up his arm, and the door swung silently open. Harry let go, and looked down at his hand, finding it already healed.

Lucius intertwined their fingers and pressed a kiss to the skin of his palm. “Now you shall always be able to access these vaults. Come, my love.” He tugged Harry forward through the door and as
they entered several floating candelabras caught flame, lighting the room.

It was a long hall stretching away from them. A series of arches subdivided the space, with deep shelves set against the walls between. Luc led Harry to an alcove midway down, and passed his hand through a shimmering blue veil, which dissipated at his touch. Behind it sat a familiar stone basin, and shelves above and below were filled with vials of swirling silver liquid.

“This is the Malfoy family pensieve,” Luc said, waving his wand to hover the bowl before them. “It’s been with us for generations. I do not rightly know which of our ancestors created it, but there are memories here reaching back before the construction of the manor, to our origins in France.”

“That’s amazing—may I…?”

“You are welcome to view any of them you wish, darling.” The older man favored Harry with a beatific smile. “What’s mine is yours, now.”

A rush of magic passed between them through the still-fresh bond, and Harry bit his lip against a giggle. Luc tugged his hand so that he looked up, and pressed a tender kiss to his lips. “I love you, dear one,” he whispered, when they separated.

“I love you,” Harry replied.

When they returned to their suite, pensieve floating in the air before them, Severus smirked. “I was wondering if I might have to come fetch you back,” he said.

Harry made a face, and both older men laughed at him. “Yes, it’s all very funny; can we get this over with?”

Luc directed the pensieve to rest on the dining table, and Harry concentrated and pulled a memory strand from his temple to drop into the basin. Bracing himself, he gestured for the other two to join him, and they each pressed their face into the liquid memory.

It was a strange sensation, Harry reflected, to stare at one’s own back. He looked expectantly to the spot he knew Luna would appear in, and, sure enough, she whirled into existence a moment later. For a second, her ghostly gaze seemed to settle on him, the real him, and he stiffened, but she only turned and stepped towards the memory Harry, who twisted around, wand out.

Shivering at the eeriness of her glassy white eyes, he also turned to look at himself, barely resisting the urge to burst out laughing at the mix of horror and disgust on his memory self’s face as he realized what was happening. Then, Luna finished speaking and collapsed, and the memory was over; the three of them were whisked back to the surface.

After a moment to order his thoughts, Harry scribbled down Luna’s words: *Lady Magic wakes in conflict. Her chosen Champion approaches, guided by hunter and scavenger, destined to turn back the tide of war. He carries the power of flame in his core; he will restore balance. Though he bears the cursed mark, he will fly above the white king and the serpent, and his blood shall sing triumph*. Glancing over them, he sighed and poured himself another cup of tea. “I hate bloody prophecies,” he muttered.

“Hmm. It’s clear that this prophecy is also about you—it mentions a cursed mark, and ending the war,” Severus said, after a moment. “I believe the white king and the serpent refer to the two more traditional sides: Dumbledore and the Dark Lord; you stand between them, bringing balance? You
don’t have the ludicrous prejudice against Dark magics many Light wizards hold…”

“What does it mean, ‘Her chosen Champion approaches?’ The last time a prophecy said that I hadn’t been born yet.”

“Perhaps your magical maturity? Or it refers to a physical place you’ll be going? A confrontation with the Dark Lord?”

“Could be anything, couldn’t it? That’s not helpful. It’s hard to tell how much of this is metaphorical…” Harry grimaced. “How about this ‘hunter and scavenger,’ then? Any ideas there?”

“The scavenger might be Mundungus, though that seems highly unlikely…” Severus sneered. “Perhaps ‘hunter’ refers to the wolf.”

“Severus.” Harry frowned at the older man.

“Lupin, then. Regardless, such an interpretation leaves much to be desired. I think it is not mere conjecture to state that Lucius and I are far more mentors to you than either Dung or…Lupin.”

Lucius straightened in his seat, expression thoughtful. Drawing his wand, he cast his patronus. A silvery raven shot out of his wand and circled the group of them, before settling in the air just above Severus’s left shoulder and attempting to groom him with its beak. Severus raised an eyebrow at Luc, who just laughed.

Taking up his own wand, Severus cast the spell, and his own patronus emerged. It looked like some kind of hawk to Harry; definitely a bird of prey, though he wasn’t sure what kind. It swept through the air and settled on the table before Luc, puffing up its chest and letting out a silent shriek.

“Yes, you’ve made your point, love,” the blond said. He turned to Harry. “Severus is an animagus. Our bondmate takes the shape of a raven. Once we bonded, my patronus adopted the same form.”

Their younger bondmate grinned. “Is that how you always manage to catch students breaking rules? Hang on a tick—Hermione said I was being silly, but I thought there was a black bird following me during the last Hogsmeade weekend…”

Severus pursed his lips, and Lucius began to chuckle again. “Oh, Sev, did you really?” the blond man asked.

“It seemed prudent to have additional security for Harry.”

“What, you don’t trust Dung and Tonks to keep me safe?” Harry asked, quirking an eyebrow. Severus leveled an unimpressed glare on him, and Harry chuckled. “Yeah, fair enough. Tonks is an auror, though.”

“Somehow,” Severus muttered, glaring into his cup of coffee. “Regardless, this brings up the issue of your own patronus, Harry. I had it on good authority you produced a stag, but I was summoned by a bird this morning. Do you know when it changed?”

The younger man shook his head. “I haven’t used it since I taught the spell to the DA last year. It could have been any time since the end of the year. Maybe it’s because of the bonding ritual?”
“That’s certainly a possibility,” Severus agreed.

“This line about flame in your core may refer to our bonding, as well,” Luc said, tapping a finger on the younger man’s notes. “Lilin are resistant to fire magics, and that may have passed to you when we shared blood and connected our cores.”

Harry nodded. “That makes sense. Oh, maybe that’s the ‘power the Dark Lord knows not,’ from the other prophecy…” He perked up a little.

“Perhaps,” Sev agreed. He stared at the pensieve, his brow furrowed in thought.

“Love?” Luc brushed a hand down Severus’s arm.

He sighed. “I am well. You must agree, however, that this is a disquieting turn of events. It is my understanding that the events of this morning go beyond the manner in which most prophecy is delivered. A child who has not yet been tutored in the art of apparation passing through the wards of this manor? How is such a thing even possible?”

Harry shrugged. “Magic, of course.”

Sev scoffed. “That’s hardly a satisfactory explanation.”

“I suspect it’s the only one we’ll get,” Luc said.

“You may be correct,” Sev conceded with a sigh. “Very well. I have some brewing to complete for Poppy’s stores, if either of you care to join me. I’ve had enough of divination for a morning.”

“I’ve had enough to last a lifetime,” Harry murmured, eyeing the pensieve with distaste. He banished the twisting silver of the copied memory, and stood.

“Enough of that, then, my loves—go brew.” Luc brushed kisses over both of their mouths, and then pushed them playfully towards the door. Needing no further prompting, Sev and Harry departed for the laboratory, already discussing the potions that were needed.

As soon as the door shut behind the two other men, the fond smile dropped from the blond man’s face. He sighed heavily into the silence. What was to come? Would they all survive? He wouldn’t give up either of his bondmates for anything, but Harry bore the mark of destiny, and Luc could admit, if only to himself, that he was afraid. This newest prophecy seemed to promise victory, but at what price? What would this destiny cost his young love?

Chapter End Notes

I love Luna. I have no idea how to write Luna. Hope she wasn’t too out of character for you.

I have started drafting the next few chapters, but I don't know when they'll post, sorry. Rest assured that I will keep working on this fic, though. I know where it's going, and I have (at the very least) notes and outlines for the next 7 chapters, so I do plan to finish it.
The rest of the break passed without further incident, and soon the four men—Draco, Harry, Luc, and Sev—were flooing back to the castle for the new term. Narcissa saw them off, dropping kisses on the cheeks of the younger two, and reminding Draco to comport himself well.

“Yes, of course, Mother,” the blond said.

She raised an eyebrow, but let him go without further comment, turning to Harry. “Now, dear, you will be careful, won’t you?”

“I will try, Cissy,” Harry said, “but I seem fated to find trouble.”

“Yes, you do. Very well, then—keep your wits about you, and if you require anything at all, please do write me.”

Harry nodded, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and then flooed through to Luc and Sev’s quarters. Draco had gone off to settle in his dorms, and after being thoroughly kissed by both of his mates Harry followed suit. From the corridor outside their suite, he ducked into a hidden passage which led to the ground floor, and then clattered up the staircases to the Gryffindor tower, though he was distracted more than once by light flashing in his peripheral vision.

As the magic of the bonding ritual had settled, he’d started to notice the ambient magic all around him. It seemed that he’d always had the ability without realizing—Narcissa had smugly told him it was called magesight—but it had previously been a bit of a shimmer out of the corner of his eye, a glint off the surface of a magical item that disappeared quickly, or an occasional warping in the air as someone gathered power to cast a spell. Since his bonding the ability had grown far stronger, and now it was almost constant—every enchanted object glowed in his sight. That was fine in the manor, but Hogwarts was awash in magic: every single wall, carpet, staircase, and portrait gleamed. Harry just hoped he could learn to control the magesight soon, because it was already starting to strain his eyes, and he probably looked rather twitchy.

Finally, he reached the portrait outside the Gryffindor common room. Bowing, he greeted the woman in the pink gown with a smile. “Hello, ma’am.”

“Hello, young man,” Lucretia responded. “How was your break?”

“That’s lovely, dear. Meet any nice young ladies? Or lads?”

He could feel his face heating, very aware that there were love bites peeking above his collar. “Er, no, ma’am. That is, I’m already seeing someone.”

“Oh ho!” Her eyes sparkled with interest. “Well, I hope she—or he…?”

“Just so. I hope he treats you well.”
“Eheh, thank you, ma’am. Er, I’m just going to, uh, wiggentreer bark.”

Lucretia tittered as her portrait swung open. “See you later, dear!”

“Yeah, see you,” he said, and hurried through the portrait hole, bright red in the face. The common room on the other side of the passage was practically deserted—just a couple of seventh years revising in one of the corners, and four firsties playing gobstones in front of the fire. None of them looked up at him, and he continued on through and up the stairs to the dorms, slinging his rucksack onto his trunk and flopping onto his bed.

“Hullo, Dean,” he said. “Have a good break?”

The other boy glanced up from the sketch in his lap and grinned. “Yeah, pretty good. Ginny and I went to Hogsmeade a couple of times, and the Christmas Feast was brilliant, as usual. How about you?”

“Mine was great. It was nice to get away from it all, you know?”

“I bet. I was just glad Ron went home for it—he can hold a grudge, that one.”

Harry snorted. “Tell me about it,” he muttered.

“Er, I wanted to ask you about that, actually. Are you gonna be okay with him coming back in here once we get a new sixth year prefect?”

“I don’t know.” He sighed. “I’d be willing to let the whole thing go, forgive and forget…but Ron doesn’t work like that. Like you said, he hoards grudges like a dragon’s clutch. And since Mrs Weasley called him home, he’s probably going to be spitting mad when he gets back. She’ll have loaded him down with chores and told him off, and she means well, but…”

“But he’ll just dig his heels in.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, maybe you can ask McGonagall to sort it out. I’m sure she’d understand why, after Halloween…”

“Yeah, maybe.” Harry frowned. Normally, he hated asking for anything special for himself, but he didn’t fancy another concussion, and if Ron hurt him again there was no telling how his mates might react. He bit his lip. It wasn’t even that unreasonable to ask for different arrangements, given what had happened. Still, he couldn’t help hoping that Ron would get over it and make up, like in fourth year. Of course, at this point, that seemed about as likely as the rest of the Death Eaters defecting en masse. He grimaced and pulled a pillow over his face—why did Ron have to go and make things so complicated? He let himself brood until Dean interrupted.

“Coming to lunch?”

Harry pushed the pillow up to see his dorm-mate standing over him, one eyebrow quirked. “May as well,” he sighed, pushing himself up.

Dean clapped him on the shoulder. “No need to look so down, mate—I’m sure things’ll all work out.”
He snorted. “Sure—there’s a first time for everything, I s’pose…” The other boy just laughed.

Despite the souring of his mood, Harry was glad to be back at Hogwarts, and he found the journey down to the Great Hall lifting his spirits. Maybe Dean was right, and things would work themselves out. He laughed at the Gryffindor firsties who jostled and skipped down the halls ahead of them until they spotted McGonagall waiting outside the Great Hall, and practically froze under her sharp gaze. She raised an eyebrow and twitched her head at them, and Harry snickered as they continued much more sedately into the hall.

“Hello, Mr Potter,” the professor said. “How was your holiday?

“It was brilliant. I hope you had a good holiday as well, ma’am.”

She bowed her head in acknowledgement. “After you have finished your lunch, I would like to see you in my office—there are several important things we must discuss.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. She nodded, and he walked into the hall, Dean at his elbow.

“See, I told you things would work out,” the other boy said, grinning as he reached for a sandwich. Harry rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t help smiling back. Scanning the room, he noted that the vast majority of students had gone home for the holidays, leaving only a few first years at the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor tables, and a handful of seventh years at all four tables, all of whom were obviously revising at the tables as they ate.

Turning his gaze towards the head of the hall, he spotted Hagrid, who beamed and waved merrily at him. Harry waved back, and then surveyed the rest of the staff table. Most of the professors were there, talking quietly amongst themselves, which made sense, as all the professors who had left for the break were returning that day to prepare for the next term. Dumbledore was absent, however, which Harry couldn’t bring himself to regret. He’d have to meet with the headmaster again at some point, but he wasn’t exactly in a hurry to do so.

“Hey, Harry!”

“Hey, Ginny. How was your holiday?”

She elbowed into the spot between him and Dean, and Harry shifted over with another roll of his eyes. She just grinned at him. “It was pretty great, especially since the sour prat went home. It was actually pretty quiet around here, which was nice.”

“I bet. You two ready to get back to quidditch?” They both nodded. “Good. We need to get our keepers into shape if we want to win the Cup.”

“We’re not out of the running yet,” Ginny said.

“Exactly.”

They spent the rest of the meal strategizing quietly, and Harry began to feel optimistic that they really could get the Cup. Once they’d all finished eating, Ginny and Dean walked him to the transfiguration corridor and said they’d meet him back at the tower. Professor McGonagall’s office door was open, so he knocked on the doorframe and she glanced up from her papers.

“Ah, Mr Potter, please come in.” She waved him forward, and he entered, shutting the door and
walking over to the seat in front of her desk. “Now, I’m sure you have guessed the reason for this meeting.”

“It’s about Ron moving back into our dorm room, isn’t it?”

“In part. As you know, Mr Weasley’s behavior has led me to revoke his prefect status, leaving your year short-handed. I wanted to offer you the position, as I originally intended it to be yours.”

Harry blinked at her. “Me?”

She raised her eyebrows at his skepticism. “You are popular among your peers, and your tendency to rush off half-cocked has, thankfully, fallen away since your first year. Additionally, I am well aware of the defense club you organized last year along with Miss Granger. The two of you worked together quite well, displaying leadership skills, creativity, and knowledge, while maintaining steady grades, managing your extra-curricular activities, and navigating the interference of our previous Defense instructor. You support the younger years, abhor bullying and abuse, and many of the other students look to you for guidance. I think you would make an excellent prefect.”

He considered her words. Even if she were overestimating his maturity at the beginning of fifth year, he couldn’t argue against her points regarding their defense association. He also couldn’t think of a reason to say no—being a prefect would solve so many problems. He would have his own room, and a legitimate reason to be out of the dorms at night. He already spent much of his free time either with his bondmates or studying with Hermione, and prefect rounds didn’t start until well after dinner, so it wouldn’t interfere with quidditch practices.

“Thank you, ma’am—I’d be honored.”

She nodded firmly and laid the prefect’s badge on the desk between them. “Very good. Your belongings will be moved to your new room shortly. The first prefect meeting of the term is tomorrow evening, following dinner. Miss Granger can guide you to the meeting room, and fill you in on your duties. And Mr Potter?” She smiled somewhat wistfully. “Your mother would be proud.”

Harry clutched at the badge and swallowed thickly. “I—thank you.” She nodded to dismiss him, and he left for Gryffindor Tower.

When he got back to the 6th year boys’s room, he found that his things had already been moved out. Dean was sitting cross-legged on his own bed, working on the sketch from earlier, and Ginny was stretched out on her stomach at the end of the bed, flipping through the latest issue of *Quidditch Monthly*. They both glanced up when he entered, spotting the badge he’d already pinned to his sweater.

Ginny bounced up and wrapped him in an exuberant hug. “Congratulations, Harry—you’re gonna do great!”

Dean gave an approving nod. “You deserve it, mate.”

“Thanks.” Harry perched on Dean’s trunk, as Ginny flopped back onto the bed. “It’s gonna be weird not rooming with you guys anymore, though.”

“What, you’re gonna miss Seamus’s snoring?”
He laughed. “No, I guess not. Just...we’re almost done at school. Everything’s changing.”

“It’s good, though, isn’t it?” Ginny asked. “You’ll go off and become an auror, and I’ll play quidditch, and Hermione will take over the Ministry of Magic, and Dean’ll start his business. It’ll be good.”

“Um, well, I’m not joining the aurors. I want to become a healer.”

“Wow! That...makes a lot of sense, actually.” Dean gave him a measuring look. “I bet you’ll be really good at healing.”

“Yeah, you’re great at taking care of people.” Ginny patted his ankle.

Harry felt his cheeks warm at the praise, and ducked his head. “Someone has to.” He took Ginny’s hand and then reached out to Dean, who set his art aside and scooted down to clasp his other hand. “Thanks for being my friends. I really appreciate all your support, especially this past couple of years.”

“Always,” Ginny said.

Dean nodded. “I know we’ve never been especially close before this year, but you’ve put up with a lot, and you still try and help everyone else, even when we don’t deserve it. And, well...I know you’ve saved Ginny’s life before, and I don’t wanna know what You-Know-Who would do to me and my family if he were in control, and you’ve stopped him coming back a bunch of times, and you taught us proper defense last year, and you brought me onto the Gryffindor team. So, I’m standing by you from now on.”

Clearing his throat against a sudden lump of emotion, Harry squeezed both of their hands to convey his gratitude. Letting go after a moment, he grinned at Dean. “So, what are you working on?”

The other young man lit up and started explaining the sketches for several inventions. It was fascinating, and they spent the rest of the afternoon talking about the boutique Dean wanted to start after graduation, making and selling limited-batch magical crafts and luxury goods. By the time they had to leave for dinner, Harry was seriously considering offering his friend the seed money to start his venture up—he had some really solid ideas already.

After dinner, Harry collected some supplies from his trunk, and snuck off to Myrtle’s bathroom, listening hard for any sign of occupancy. This was almost certainly the least used bathroom in the school, and most of the students wouldn’t be arriving until the next day, so it should be deserted. It seemed luck was on his side: the weeping ghost who haunted the room was nowhere to be found. He strode to the sinks and hissed to reveal the pipe that led down to the Chamber of Secrets, staring contemplatively into the gloom. After a moment of thought, he asked for stairs in Parseltongue, and was relieved to see the slippery hole turn into a steep flight of steps. He walked forward, lit his wand, and ordered the entrance to close behind him, before continuing into the tunnel below. At the bottom, he vanished the rodent bones that littered the floor, squinting against the spell-light. Blinking after-images from his vision, he set off down the hall towards the main chamber.

When he encountered the first shed skin, he set down the basket he was carrying, slipped off his pack, and withdrew a silk bag and a small knife. He cut the skin width-wise into a bunch of foot-long sections, carefully stacking them beside him. When it had been all cut up, he rolled the whole
stack gently into a loose tube, and pulled the silk bag down around it. Drawing the cord to shut the bag, he stuck it into his basket, sheathed his knife, picked up pack and basket, and continued down the tunnel.

Reaching the caved-in part, he eyed the hole at the top. Despite not having grown as much as he might wish, Harry definitely wouldn’t fit back through the space Ron had cleared in second year. Of course, he’d expected that, and had gone looking for useful spells in the manor’s library. He murmured a series of incantations, waving his wand through the motions until he’d reinforced the tunnel walls and ceiling, shifting the dirt and stone off the floor bit by bit and smoothing it back into place. Once he finished, he eased his way past, exhaling when everything held.

Continuing on down the hallway, he passed massive shed skins and smaller collections of bones, turning and turning, until the tunnel ended and he stood before the stretch of wall with a pair of snakes carved on it. Their emerald eyes gleamed in his wand’s light. They had seemed terrifying to his 12 year old self, but he paused now for a moment to admire the craftwork that had gone into them—they truly did resemble living serpents. Running a finger along one, he marveled at the lifelike feel, for while it appeared to be stone it felt very much like living snakeskin. He would have to return and see if he could puzzle out the magic that had gone into creating this door, but he had a task to occupy him now, and it would take long enough on its own, so he reluctantly stepped back.

“Open,” he commanded, and just as they had last time the snakes slid apart, the wall splitting down the center and receding to either side. Unsure what he would find inside, Harry walked forward into Slytherin’s Chamber of Secrets.

He’d guessed there would be some kind of preservation magic on the chamber, and was relieved to find he was correct: the basilisk looked exactly as it had the night he slew it, its ruined eye sockets and gaping jaws ghastly. He glanced over to where he had almost died, and saw, sure enough, a gleaming patch of red that could only be his blood. Next to it was the pool of ink from Riddle’s diary, still damp. With a grimace, he cast scourgify on both, watching with relief as ink and blood alike were scoured away.

That done, Harry turned back to the basilisk corpse, shivering at the way it almost seemed to move in the flickering torchlight. His research had indicated that he must harvest the ingredients without magic, using cleansed containers and tools specifically prepared for the task; he’d owl ordered everything he would need before the holidays. He set down the large basket he’d brought with him, and lowered his pack to the floor. Opening the pack, he pulled on his gloves, and withdrew a syringe, an antique Victorian affair, metal and glass with a long needle-tip. From the basket he pulled out several wide-mouth ceramic jars, which he placed on the floor nearby, and a tall glass bottle, which he tucked under one arm.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped up to the corpse. With his free hand, he palpated the skin behind one of the ruined eyes, trying not to look to closely at the eye itself. He wasn’t normally squeamish about dead animals, but it was rather different when the animal you were looking at had come very close to killing you. When he found what he sought, he uncapped the needle and plunged the tip into the basilisk’s venom sac, pulling back on the plunger to fill his syringe. He emptied the venom carefully into the bottle, repeating the process until it was nearly full. Corking it, he placed the bottle into the basket. He capped the syringe, returning to his bag and swapping it out for a long, curved knife.

Picking up one of the jars, he traveled further down the basilisk’s body, away from the head, and delicately began to carve strips of skin and flesh off the side of the corpse, coiling them into the jar. The chamber was eerily quiet around him, and he was glad when all four jars had been filled
and capped. He wiped his knife and sheathed it, placing it and his gloves into the basket with the bottle and jars, and covering the lot with a sheet of canvas.

He stood up and took a last look around, preparing to leave, but something odd caught his eye. He’d never examined the massive statue of Salazar Slytherin before, but he realized with a jolt that a stone archway was faintly carved into the folds of his robe, off to the side from where Harry now stood. He lowered his bag back to the ground beside the basket, and walked around the great stone feet of the statue until he was standing very close to the archway. He traced the carving with his fingers; it seemed to be of a piece with the stone around it, but it looked like a doorway. He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

“Open,” he hissed. Light began to gleam around the edges of the arch, racing along the runes carved there, and then the patch of stone shimmered and swung inward like a door. He grinned triumphantly. It might have required something fancy, like what Tom Riddle had said to release the basilisk, but it seemed unlikely, as this would have been Slytherin’s own secret chamber. It was more likely that a simple ‘open’ would suffice, and that Riddle was just being a dramatic bastard when he’d called out “Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts four!”

Harry peered cautiously into the room beyond and found a plain sitting room, ancient furniture strangely free of dust. Two large frames hung on the far wall, although they were empty. A desk was pushed up against the wall to his right, the chair pushed out as though its occupant had just rushed off. To his left, the room let out into a narrow hallway. He cast a couple of detection spells and then, finding nothing harmful, ventured further into the chambers.

The first door opened on an old privy, clearly from the original construction of the castle. The door across the hall led to a potions lab, which definitely showed signs of use from the past hundred years. Riddle must have practiced his potions there, which wasn’t a bad idea, though Harry likely wouldn’t need it—one of the perks of being bonded to the school’s Potions Master. Finding nothing particularly useful or interesting, he moved on.

The next room over was a bedchamber, and this looked as though it hadn’t been much used in centuries. The next door along opened unexpectedly on a treasure trove: a library, lined with shelves bowing under the weight of ancient texts. Harry stood gaping for a long moment, then hurried in, passing a reverent hand over the books, some of which had strange printing on the spines. There was Latin, something he was pretty sure was Greek, Welsh, a few that were probably Gaelic, and at least two different pictorial languages. His fingers itched to page through the ones he might be able to read…his latin was probably good enough to muddle through, and he wasn’t afraid of trying to puzzle out the Old English.

He found his eye drawn to several books whose titles seemed to swim in an out of focus. When he looked directly at them, it was like reading modern English, but when he looked from the corner of his eye they seemed to be in some sort of pictorial script. Could this be a written form of parseltongue? He drew one off the shelf and let out a soft whoop as he read the title page—it was about parslemagic! He quickly opened several of the others, until he found one devoted to healing, and one to potions. He didn’t have time to go through the rest, but now he knew they were here, and he would definitely come back for them.

Hugging the books to his chest, he stepped back out into the hallway, and turned back towards the sitting room. The portrait frames were still empty, and he wondered whether they worked any longer. With one last look around, he stepped back out into the main chamber.

“Close,” he hissed, and the stone door swung shut, sealing the room away and fading back into the surrounding stone. He crossed back to his things, slipped the three tomes into his pack, and
gathered up the bag and basket. With one last look around, he left, skirting the basilisk corpse and sealing the main door behind him.

On his way out, he stopped to collect another shed skin. After rolling the whole thing up as gently as he could, he slipped the roll into a large silk bag, and drew the string shut to close it. He lashed the bag onto the top of his pack, and then set off towards the stairs. By the time he reached the bathroom at the top of the pipe, he was sweaty and tired; luckily, he was almost done for the night. He hissed so that the sink rose up to block the entrance once more, and then headed for the tower.

Once in his room, he emptied the bag and basket, lining up jars and bags of ingredients on his desk. The rolled up skin he set aside, as well as one of the jars of flesh. After a moment of consideration, he put a third of the basilisk skin sections with them. Then, he emptied a quarter of the venom into a spare jar, capped it, and set it with the rest of the ingredients he was reserving for himself. The remaining ingredients were packed back into the basket, and covered once more with the canvas.

He stashed his share away in his trunk and tucked the basket into the corner of his wardrobe, draping his invisibility cloak over the canvas to hide the whole thing, since he couldn’t use any magic on the jars and such. It was Saturday, Severus’s birthday was on Thursday, and the basket would almost certainly be safe until Friday, when Harry planned to visit his mates and gift the rare ingredients to Sev.

With the basket hidden, he found himself suddenly exhausted, and decided to organize his desk and wardrobe in the morning. Stifling a yawn, he changed into his pyjamas, brushed his teeth, and fell into bed.

Chapter End Notes

I do apologize for how very long it has been since my last update. I’ve settled in at my new uni and begun grad school, which means acres of reading every day. That said, I renew my promise: this story will continue, though I’m unsure how long it will take to complete. I’m determined to get the whole thing done, but I don’t want to rush it, so I hope you will stick with me!
The Influence of Mars

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The day after Harry visited the Chamber of Secrets, the rest of the students poured into the castle, filling it up with noise and movement. Harry stood in the Entrance Hall, glasses tinted to reduce the glare of light in his eyes. Ginny and Dean waited with him to greet Hermione, Luna, and Neville, and the rest of the quidditch team. Students streamed in from the carriages, laughing and chattering, and Harry waved at several of the DA members as they passed.

“Neville!” he called, and his friend ducked out of the crowd and came towards him, Luna trailing serenely along behind.

“Hey, have a good holiday?” The taller boy asked.

“Yeah, it was the best. How was yours?” Harry nodded at Luna, who smiled at him.

“It was good.” Neville blushed and beamed as Luna took his hand.

Before Harry could ask about this development, Hermione slid through the crowd and threw her arms around his neck. “Harry! How was your holiday?”

He hugged her back, grinning into her hair. “It was brilliant! How was yours?”

“Oh, wonderful. It was lovely to see my parents, of course, and we got invited to spend New Year’s with Viktor. And I got ever so many books!”

“That’s great! How’s Viktor?”

“Busy with quidditch, of course, but we’ve been writing back and forth a lot, and he said he wanted to see me again, and so he had my whole family out to meet his family at this gorgeous little place in Paris, Aliments du Fay, and the food was to die for!”

Harry nodded, trying not to blush when he thought about the restaurant where he’d taken Luc for the older man’s birthday. “That’s great, Mione—I’m glad you had a good time. Are you and Viktor going to give it another go?”

“Well, I don’t think it’s quite the right time, considering all that’s going on just now. But in the future, who knows?” She finally seemed to look at him properly. “What happened to your glasses?”

He waved a hand dismissively. “It’s nothing, just a medical thing for a little while.”

His best friend’s eyes narrowed. “What medical thing?”

“Nothing, really!” he insisted. “Hey, Katie, how were the hols?”

The seventh-year slung her arm around his shoulders, grinning brightly. “Brilliant! You?”

“Good, yeah.”
“Hiya, Harry!” The elder of Gryffindor’s beaters bounded up, his partner following at a more sedate pace.

“Hey, Ritchie, Jimmy.” He reached out for a high-five with each of his beaters.

“Hey, Harry—oof!” Jimmy stumbled into Harry as Ron shoved past, fuming.

“Alright there?” Harry asked, setting the boy back on his feet.

“Fine, thanks.”

“Let’s go in,” Ginny said, frowning after her brother until Dean took her hand. She smiled at her boyfriend, and turned towards the Great Hall. The rest of the team followed, and Harry pretended not to see Hermione scrutinizing him.

Soon, all of the students were settled at their tables, eating and catching up. Scanning along the head table, Harry saw that Dumbledore had returned from wherever he’d been, and was speaking with Professor McGonagall. Seeing the Gryffindor head of house, he remembered the prefect meeting.

“Hey, Mione?” he said.

“Hmm?”

“Professor McGonagall said to ask you where the prefect meeting is tonight. She said you could tell me what to expect.”

His friend looked up from her notebook and blinked owlishly at him for a moment, before her mind seemed to catch up with what he’d said. “You mean…?” He twitched his open robe lapel so that the prefect badge showed. “Oh, Harry, congratulations!” She squealed and threw her arms around him. He barely had time to save her inkpot, which had gone flying.

“Thanks,” he said, handing over the ink. She accepted it with a light blush on her face, and immediately launched into an explanation of their duties, most of which he was familiar with from her and Ron’s time as prefects over the past year and a half. Nevertheless, he listened and tried to commit as much of it as possible to memory, determined to do a good job.

Once dinner wound down, the students were dismissed to their dorms, and Hermione led him to the prefect meeting room, one of the rarely-used classrooms on the ground floor. Hannah Abbot and Padma Patil walked in after them, and within a minute or two Draco had entered. A couple of Ravenclaw fifth years trailed in, and then Ainsley Hawlett, the Head Girl, cleared her throat and started the meeting.

“Professor McGonagall notified me there would be a change to our roster following the break. Welcome, Potter—your head of house assures me you will perform your duties responsibly.” He nodded, and she beamed at him. “Excellent! Well, we’ll do a quick refresher and then divvy up our rounds and such. Then we can discuss events and news for the upcoming term.”

The others all nodded and she launched into a rapid review of his duties, much like the one Hermione had already given him. Harry tried to stay focused, but as the meeting went on his head began to pound from overstimulation. He squinted against the gleaming of the walls, and rubbed at his forehead.
Hermione peered at him with a frown and leaned over to murmur in his ear. “Are you alright, Harry?”

“Headache,” he grunted.

“Perhaps you’d better go and see Madam Pomfrey.”

“I did,” he fibbed. “She said they’ll go away on their own, and to see her if they haven’t disappeared in a couple of weeks.”

“Is this the ‘medical thing’ you were talking about?” He nodded.

Just then, the meeting came to an end, the other prefects standing to trickle out and head towards their individual common rooms. Running a hand over his face, Harry followed Hermione back to the entrance hall and up the stairs towards Gryffindor Tower. They quietly bade each other a good night, and Harry trudged to his room, collapsing gratefully onto his bed. Before he could do more than slither out of his robe and jeans, he was sinking into sleep.

He woke up grogy the next morning, with thready winter light shining into his room. A hastily cast tempus assured him that he hadn’t slept in too late, and he gathered his things to prepare for the day. After a quick shower, he headed down to breakfast, bag slung over his shoulder and nose in a book.

It was still early enough that breakfast was just getting underway, but Harry still had to break up a fight on the stairs near the Charms corridor, and he rolled his eyes at the two second-year Ravenclaws, who looked torn between consternation at losing points and hero-worship at being spoken to by Harry Potter. He ushered them down the stairs to breakfast and slid into a spot at the Gryffindor table next to Hermione, who was chewing absently on the end of a quill and frowning down at her notes. He propped his book open and began to eat. Gradually, the hall got louder around him, as he finished eating and downed his second cup of tea.

“Hullo, Harry!” Ginny said cheerfully, dropping into a seat across from Hermione and grabbing a scone.

“Morning, Gin. Hey, Dean.”

The other boy nodded at him. “Did you see sign-ups for apparation lessons have gone up?”

“We talked about it in the prefect meeting last night,” Hermione said, glancing up from her notes. “Have you signed up?”

“Yeah! I can’t wait—I’ve been looking forward to it since third year.” Dean grinned. Harry let the conversation wash over him, glancing around the rest of the hall. His mates were powering through their first cups of tea for the day. Sev was glaring at a raucous group of Hufflepuffs, while Luc stared blankly out into the hall, hands clutching his teacup. Harry turned away, fighting the fond smile that wanted to spread across his face. It wouldn’t do to be caught giving a besotted smile towards the staff table.

He scanned the other tables, giving Draco a discreet nod when their eyes met. Draco responded with a long, slow blink, and then broke his gaze. Casting a lazy tempus, Harry shut his book and nudged Hermione, who absently glanced at him, still chewing her quill.

“I’m gonna head to class a bit early. See you later, yeah?” She nodded, turning back to her notes,
and he grinned fondly at his friend’s distraction. Slinging his bag over his shoulder, he stood and set off for Transfiguration, contemplating his plans for the day.

Classes went well enough, but that night brought his first prefect patrol, and with it came a most unsettling encounter. He’d patrolled the first part of his rounds with Tim Finn, a good-natured 7th year Gryffindor he’d met in passing, but Tim soon felt he was doing well enough to finish his rounds on his own, and they’d parted on the third floor, Tim heading off to the library to revise for his N.E.W.T.s, and Harry continuing his patrol. After a quick sweep of the dungeons, he started back up the main stairs, but was startled by a voice behind him.

“Harry Potter.”

He turned to see Firenze the centaur.

“Professor. How may I help you?”

“It is, perhaps, how I can help you that is most important. The influence of Mars grows on this world. My people do not interfere in the affairs of humans, but when Mother Magic calls, we must answer.”

Harry felt a prickling on the back of his neck. He didn’t like where this was going.

“We have long read your fate in the stars, but now great powers begin to gather, and you will soon come into your own as Her Champion. My herd—centaurs of the Dark Forest—bade me approach you with an offer of alliance: so long as you carry out Her will, our warriors will stand at your back.”

He stared at the centaur for a long moment, frozen in shock. “I…thank you. What must I do to call upon your aid?”

Firenze shook his head. “When you have need, my father will know, and they will come.”

“Do you know when it might be?” Harry asked.

“I cannot say. The stars are not so clear in such respects. Nevertheless, our bows are yours, and our staves. Your maturation approaches, and with it comes war, but you will have allies in the coming conflict. Mother Magic will make it so.”

Harry held back a frustrated sigh. Of course, nothing could be easy, could it? He straightened and drew on his lessons with Narcissa for a formal reply. “I accept the offer of allyship made by the Dark Forest herd. Please convey my gratitude to your council, and bring me terms of alliance that meet with their approval. Should a formal meeting be desired, I request that you notify me at earliest convenience so a suitable time and place may be arranged.”

The professor nodded. “As representative of the centaur herd of the Dark Forest, I acknowledge the words of Magic’s Champion and commit to continuing as intermediary. I shall return to you with terms.”

“Then, may Lady Magic bless our endeavor.”

“So mote it be.” Firenze gave a slow bow, one foreleg stretched out before him in a courtly manner.
He returned the centaur’s bow and watched him leave, already thinking about how he would tell Luc and Sev about this. They probably wouldn’t like it; heck, he didn’t like it—the whole thing reminded him too much of the prophecy he’d received over the holidays. He hurried through the rest of his rounds, and then disappeared under his cloak and slipped down to his bondmates’s room. This was sure to be an interesting conversation.

As predicted, Severus expressed concern over the timing of Firenze’s approach, while Lucius looked downright alarmed at the portents hinted at by the centaur representative. Eventually, however, they decided there was little they could do until they had received the terms of alliance, and Harry claimed fiery kisses with his bondmates and stole off to bed.

Firenze brought him terms on Thursday of that week, and by the following Monday he had a formal alliance with the Dark Forest herd. He was pleased to have the business completed so quickly, as the term was soon in full swing, and Harry’s schedule kept him on the run. He was now more grateful than ever that he had eliminated extraneous classes and given up the DA; between class sessions, homework, quidditch practice, apparation lessons, and prefect rounds, he was hard pressed to spend time with Sev and Luc, let alone tutor half the school in defense. With advice from his mates and the added concentration lent him by his occlumency, Harry found apparation relatively easy, which was more relieving than he would admit—it was one less thing for him to fret over.

He’d intensified Gryffindor’s quidditch practices, and it had begun to pay off in the improved coordination of his chasers and beaters. Bainbridge and McDonald were also both improving as keepers, thank Merlin, and Harry was feeling rather sanguine about their chances of recovering from the embarrassment of their previous game. If things continued as they were, they’d be well prepared to trounce Hufflepuff in February’s match.

With everything going on, Harry didn’t have a chance to return to the library in the Chamber of Secrets for several weeks. His gifts had been a wild success with Severus, who had dragged him to the bedroom and ravished him thoroughly to convey his thanks. (Harry had, indeed, felt exceedingly thanked.) As the days passed, however, he found his mind increasingly wandering back to the library and its tempting promises, and when he had a Sunday afternoon to himself near the end of the month he slipped away to the Chamber and back into Slytherin’s quarters.

Pushing the sitting room door shut behind him, he strode forward, excited to delve further into the rare and priceless tomes he’d glimpsed before, when a voice startled him into whipping out his wand and dropping into a dueling stance.

“I say—a visitor, Artemisia!”

Harry slowly rose out of his half-crouch, taking in the sitting room portraits, which had been empty upon his last visit. Now, they held a vaguely familiar man and a lovely woman he’d never seen before.

“Welcome, young man. It has been so long since an heir entered these chambers. I am Salazar Slytherin, and this is my lovely wife, Artemisia.” The man in the painting gave him a bow of respect. “May we know your name?”

“Harry. Potter. Er, hello.” He realized his mouth was hanging open, and he hurriedly closed it. “Sorry, I just—you’re Slytherin? You don’t look anything like your statue.”

“Yes, not sure how that happened, frankly.”
“It was Godric, dear, remember?” Artemisia offered Harry a gentle smile. “A prank, if you’ll believe it.”

“Ah, I do recall now. Never mind—well met, young Harry. Are you Tom’s child, then? Or grandchild?”

Harry involuntarily grimaced. “What? No!”

“I had thought he was of the last family known to be my descendants.”

Shaking his head, Harry cast back to his lessons from the summer. “Um, well, we’re both of the Peverells, and I know they came from you, sir.”

“Please, call me Sal—there’s no need for such formality amongst family.”

“Right. Thanks. Well, anyway, Tom is from a different branch of Peverells than my father. And he’s been trying to kill me for about the last 17 years, so we’re not exactly close.”

“Tom? Thomas Riddle? Trying to kill you? Whatever for?”

“Um, see, there’s this prophecy that says that I’m the only one who can kill him, and he’s gone a bit…mad.”

Artemisia shook her head. “He was such a nice young lad when he was here as a child. I can’t understand how this could happen.”

“If you believe Dumbledore, he was corrupted by a dark grimoire he found before his first year. The headmaster claims the damage was irreversible by the time he realized what was happening.”

Harry’s lip curled with disdain.

“But you do not believe it?” Salazar peered intently at him.

He shrugged, slumping into the chair at the nearby desk. “I don’t know what to believe. But I don’t trust the man like I used to. His handling of abuse leaves something to be desired.” Absently, he rubbed his hand over the scar Umbridge’s blood quill had left on his hand. Shaking off his thoughts, he looked back at the portraits. Salazar was watching him closely. “Anyway, Tom is a Dark Lord now, and determined to kill me so he can take over the wizarding world.”

“And you oppose him?”

“I do. It’s not right, what he does: killing off wizards that don’t agree with him. He hates muggles—can’t say I blame him, after the childhood he had—but it’s ludicrous to want to kill all of them, just because he was bullied. And it’s not the fault of muggleborns they don’t have magical parents.”

“Kill all muggles? What a strange idea…” Artemisia frowned.

“He seems to think he’s continuing your work, Salazar.” Harry peeked up at the man through his lashes, watching keenly for his reaction.

Sal reared back in surprise. “My work? What—how—I don’t…”

“So you don’t wish to kill muggleborns, then?”
“No! I’ll admit I was not keen to have them at the school, but only because they exposed us to muggles who were too dangerous to know of us. I felt that unless they were given up to magical families, we oughtn’t risk our charges by allowing muggles to know of the castle. But to kill them all? Never. The very idea is preposterous!”

“I’m glad to hear you say it, sir. I’m afraid your legacy has been wildly distorted, however.”

“It would seem so. Tell me, young Harry, of the world today. We have missed much, it seems, since Tom’s last visit here.”

“Yes, and tell us of your own life, child.” Artemisia smiled encouragingly. “How came you to discover the chamber?”

“Right, well, that’s a bit of a long story. It goes back to Hallowe’en of my second year. Actually, I guess it started in Diagon Alley when I went to buy my school supplies, and one of Tom’s followers slipped a dangerous magical artifact into the cauldron of a first year student. It was a diary, one which belonged to Tom during his time at Hogwarts…”

He launched into the tale of the petrifications and the basilisk. The two portraits were shocked to hear of Moaning Myrtle’s death, Tom Riddle’s deeds after graduating, and his treatment of Harry. They were horrified when he told them the events of his second year, and what he knew of Tom’s rise to power, and Salazar offered a shell-shocked apology to Harry, which the young man waved off.

“You’re not responsible for anything he did, Sal.”

“Still, I feel as though I must hold some fault for this mess.”

Harry could tell this was an argument that could continue for some while, and he let the matter rest for the time being—perhaps he could convince the portrait at a later date. With some gentle prodding from his ancestress, he related some of the particulars of his own upbringing, which did well enough distracting Salazar from his own guilt. The man was furious to learn of the blatant abuse by his young descendant’s muggle relatives, and the role the current headmaster had played in the whole mess.

“This is precisely what I feared of the muggles,” Sal growled. “They seek to destroy what they cannot understand, and do immeasurable damage to our most precious resource.”

“I’m not the only one, either. Tom was raised in that awful orphanage, and one of my mates was raised by his abusive muggle father and his witch mother, until the man killed her.” The young man glowered. “And Dumbledore always sends us back.”

“Clearly, something needs to be done about that man,” Artemisia said.

“No need— he’s dying. He’ll be gone soon enough.”

“Well, that’s a relief, dear. Now, let us discuss something more pleasant.” His ancestress smiled sweetly at him, a mischievous glint entering her eyes. “Tell us about your…mates, you said?”

“Er, yeah.” Harry blushed, ducking his head.

Artemisia coaxed the story out of him, marveling at the magic of the bond, and congratulating him
on finding such obviously well-suited bondmates. Eventually, the three of them lapsed into a contemplative silence, and the young man took the opportunity to poke curiously through the drawers of the desk at which he sat. He hadn’t paid much attention to the thing when he’d last entered the rooms, and he wondered whether there would be anything interesting here. He still planned to take a longer browse through the library, but at a later date—it was getting a bit late, and Harry was pretty sure he had missed dinner. He’d have to stop by the kitchens on the way back to the tower…

His roving hands brushed a sheaf of parchment shoved towards the back of one of the drawers, and he drew it out for a better look. The pages were clearly something from Tom’s era—the parchment felt far too modern to date from the founders’s time.

Harry peered curiously at the parchment pages. His interest was quickly caught by a sketch that resembled a rough version of the Dark Mark. His eyes scanned over the words, and a thrill rushed through him. These were notes on the creation of the brands! If he was reading them right, he was fairly certain he could figure out how to remove Sev and Luc’s Marks.

He shot to his feet, gave Sal and Artemisia a hurried goodbye, and rushed down to his bondmate’s quarters, bursting in to find them both grading papers in their sitting room.

“I can remove the Mark!”

Luc’s eyebrows shot up. “What? How?”

“Tom left notes in the hidden rooms of the Chamber! I went down there for more books from the library, and the empty portraits in the front room weren’t empty. They’re of Slytherin and his wife Artemisia, and he’s not at all like the legends say—Slytherin, I mean—and we spent hours talking, and then I found these notes Tom left behind on how he planned to create the Mark, and I can unravel the spells behind it with parselmagic!” He triumphantly smacked the papers onto the tea table and looked back and forth between the two older men, practically bursting with elation.

Sev looked at him for a long time, seemingly stunned into silence, as a slow grin overtook Luc’s face. The blond man leapt to his feet and wrapped an arm around their young mate, swinging him up into the air.

“You are brilliant, and I adore you!” Lucius set Harry back on his feet and kissed him breathless, then spun away to Severus, who still seemed to be in shock.

“You could…remove…the Mark?”

The blond man knelt before the older of his two lovers, grasping his face and brushing dark hair from his eyes. “Just think of it, love. You could be free…” He brushed a tender kiss over Sev’s lips, and the man drew a shuddering breath, pressing into the hands that cradled his cheeks.

“We. We could be free…” Sev returned fiercely.

Harry watched his bondmates together, heart aching with love for them. He was so much younger than them both, and he marveled once again that they wanted him, that he got to keep them until he died, that they were his for as close to forever as they could get. He still didn’t always believe he would survive this war, but for now the only thing that mattered was the joy he could bring to these two men.

Luc darted a glance over his shoulder. “And it’s all because of our little love.”
“Mmm…Shall we show him our appreciation?” Sev purred.

“What an excellent idea.” The blond man turned to stalk across the room, eyes burning with desire, the younger of the two only a step behind.

A shiver of arousal curling from his spine, Harry tipped his head back as Lucius wrapped around his front. A moan slipped from his lips as Severus sandwiched him in from behind, and warm lips attacked both sides of his throat.

“Come to bed, darling,” Luc murmured against his skin, lips curling into a pleased little smirk as Harry nodded and pressed against him. The young man stumbled along to the bedroom, running his hands over his two older lovers, who seemed determined to drive him wild with passion before even getting him fully undressed and under the covers. He couldn’t find it in him to complain, when the blond man was sucking marks into the skin of his collarbone, while the other man stroked sensuous hands over his body to strip off his clothes. With a sigh of surrender, Harry let himself be gently and lovingly taken to bed.

Later, Lucius fed him dinner from a tray brought by the house elves, while Harry explained what his cursory look had told him so far. He’d been overjoyed to realize he could remove the brands, but the notes had also included some ominous news. They had known the Dark Marks were slave marks of some kind, and that the pain of the summoning could be invoked as punishment, but the other magics involved were particularly horrifying: through the brands, Voldemort was able to draw on the magic of his servants, draining them to make himself stronger and, if he wanted, even to kill them.

Luc and Sev had exchanged dark looks when he revealed this news. If their spying were ever discovered, the Dark Lord need not even be in front of them to cause them pain and death. With this new knowledge, the stakes had been raised.

“But I can stop it,” Harry insisted. “I can interrupt it, I think. I need to go over these notes more, and there’s a couple of books I might need to consult, but I can fix this, I will fix this. This godforsaken war has taken too much, and I won’t let it have you! He thinks you’re his, but not anymore…you’re mine.” His green eyes were alight with fury and promise, and Sev banished the dinner tray with a flick of one hand so he could press the younger man into the pillows and prove that he very much was Harry’s, indeed.

Pursuant to impressing upon the young man their adoration, the two older men thoroughly wore Harry out, and then curled around their sleeping love, following him into a well-deserved rest. Luc’s wand woke them at an obscene hour the next morning, and Harry grumblingly shuffled off to his dorm for another couple hours of sleep before breakfast.

As scary as the new information about the brands was, Harry nevertheless found himself unusually hopeful that week. He continued to be busy—between coursework, quidditch, and his prefectship—but he found the knowledge gave him more courage. Here, finally, was something he could contribute to the war, something he could give to his mates. Here was vital information that could help the war effort, and he’d been the one to discover it. He felt buoyed by the thought.

Voldemort had no way to know they had this information, and they might even be able to use it to erode his power base, somehow. More research was needed, of course, but Harry couldn’t help feeling like things were finally going right, for once. He was getting a handle on his new schedule, the quidditch team was really coming along, and he had even discovered a kind of family in Salazar and Artemisia, who had made him promise to visit again when he had the time. He felt
good. In fact, everything in his life seemed to be going astonishingly well…right up until the first Hogsmeade trip of the term.

The day had started off well enough, but almost instantly took a turn for the worse. As Hermione, Neville, Luna, and Harry entered the village, they encountered Mundungus Fletcher, who, it seemed, had taken advantage of Sirius’s death and Kreacher’s absence in the mouldering Black family townhouse to pilfer the family’s belongings. In a fit of rage, Harry almost throttled the man, but Hermione spelled them apart. Neville managed to wrestle the case of stolen goods from the wretched little man, but couldn’t hold him long enough to summon an authority figure. Occluding fiercely, Harry fought down his ire, shrunk and pocketed Dung’s suitcase, and followed his friends to the Three Broomsticks for a butterbeer.

“All right, Harry?” Neville muttered.

“I’d rather not discuss it just now."

The other young man let it go, and they were soon settled at a table with a round of drinks to warm their hands. Harry stared broodingly into his mug, while Luna and Neville had another of their strange conversations. Hermione shrugged at her friend’s moodiness and wandered off to talk to Niall Roshan, the Head Boy. Ginny and Dean bustled in from the cold, and threaded through the crowd to join their friends.

“Wotcher, Harry?” Ginny chirped. “Budge up, then.”

Scooting over on his bench, Harry soon found himself drawn into planning for the next weekend’s quidditch match against Hufflepuff. In spite of himself, he began to feel better, and even let Ginny drag him to Honeyduke’s. The place was packed, and the three of them tumbled back out with their pockets full of purchases, breath fogging the air as they laughed.

“Oh, hey, there’s Katie,” Ginny said. “Oi, Katie!”

The older girl was having a hushed, furious conversation with someone in a Hufflepuff scarf, but pulled back when she saw them approaching. The other young woman reached for something in her hands, and Katie reared away and snapped, “Leave off, Leanne!”

Harry exchanged a worried look with the other two, so he missed Leanne’s second attempt to snatch the package, but he could hardly miss the aftermath: the Hufflepuff fell on her bum with a grunt as Katie flew into the air. The Gryffindor chaser hung in the air for a long moment—arms outstretched, face blank—and then she began to scream. Leanne started screaming as well, and latched onto her friend’s ankle, trying to pull her down. Whipping out his wand, Harry sent his patronus off towards the pub, and bolted for the pair.

“Gin, head to the school, find a teacher!” he cried, and the girl took off past the two screaming women. As Harry and Dean reached the pair, Katie fell out of the air and bowled them over.

They managed to stop her head hitting the cobbles, but could barely hold their teammate’s thrashing body. Hermione thundered down the street, Niall and a Hufflepuff prefect on her heels.

“What is it, what happened?”

“Something’s wrong, Mione!”

“No, don’t!” screeched Leanne, but she was too late—the Hufflepuff prefect had already reached
the thing that Katie had dropped, and picked it up. With a shriek, the prefect was flung onto her back, and began to seize, her hands clamped around the package, bloody tears streaming from her sightless eyes.

“Dean, help me!” Harry called, and the dark-skinned young man flung himself across the prefect’s legs. Flinging off his cloak, Harry wrapped it around his hands and pried the package away from the imperiled woman, who continued to scream even as he unhooked her fingers from the chain in her hands and bundled the whole thing up in his cloak.

“Melinda…Sweet Circe!” Niall cried, and Harry swore. With her hands freed, the girl had begun to claw her own face, and he shoved the wad of cloak and package into Hermione’s arms, so he could wrestle her bloodied fingers away.

“Oh, thank Merlin,” Hermione said, as footsteps pounded towards them.

“Stupefy!” The prefect—Melinda—stilled below them, and Harry had never been more glad to hear his mate’s voice. He looked up to see Hagrid scoop a sobbing, writhing Katie into his arms and pelt back in the direction of the school, as Severus halted above them. The two young men pulled back, and the professor lifted the stunned girl into his arms and took off after the half-giant. Harry retrieved his cloak and sprinted after them, leaving the others to deal with the hysterical Leanne.

As they reached the school steps, Hagrid bellowed to clear a path, and thundered up the marble staircase to the first floor, the other two men close behind him.

“Poppy!” Severus cried as they entered the infirmary.

The mediwitch burst out of her office and took charge. “Put her there, Rubeus, and here, Severus! Mr Potter, are you injured?”

“No, ma’am, but I think a cursed object did this—I have it here in my cloak.”

“Give it to Severus, then, please.” She turned away from him, wand flashing through a series of diagnostic spells. “Out of the way, Rubeus, thank you.”

Harry stepped over to the opposite side of the room, and carefully unrolled his cloak, making sure not to expose his hands. As the package was revealed, he realized it was a garish opal necklace. Sev cast a revealing spell on it and hissed his surprise.

“You did well not to touch it—this is indeed heavily cursed.” The older man conjured a wooden box and held it out so he could tip the necklace in. The young man sighed with relief as his bondmate closed the lid on the box and latched it. “Ten points to Gryffindor for poise under pressure,” Sev continued in an undertone.

“Will you tell me later?” Harry whispered. His mate gave a small nod. “Okay. I’d better go make sure everyone else is okay.”

Sev nodded once more, eyes fierce, and then strode over to Madam Pomfrey, who turned to brief him. “I’ve stabilized them for now, but we must analyze the curse…”

Harry withdrew and headed for the entrance hall. As he reached it, Niall and Dean led a wilting Leanne in from the cold. They’d met up with Ginny on the way, and Hermione was quietly catching her up on the events that had followed her departure. Professor McGonagall marched
towards the group as Harry joined them, and surveyed them gravely.

“Professor Hagrid informs me that you all witnessed the incident?” They nodded. “Very well. Follow me to my office.”

She led the group up the stairs to the Transfiguration hall and ushered them into her office, where she conjured chairs enough for all of them to sit. Niall helped the quivering Leanne to a seat and sat beside her, patting her hand gently as she cried.

“Well, what happened?” Professor McGonagall prompted.

After an awkward silence, Harry realized that Hermione, Ginny, and Dean were all looking at him to explain. He cleared his throat, and the professor’s assessing gaze settled on him.

“I don’t rightly know all the particulars, Professor, but I can tell you some of it. Ginny and Dean and I left Hermione in the Three Broomsticks talking to Niall, and headed to Honeyduke’s for sweets. We had just decided to head to Scrivenshaft’s for ink and quills and such, but then we saw Katie and Miss…uh, Leanne arguing about something. Katie dropped a package and flew into the air, and then she started screaming. I sent a patronus for Hermione, Ginny went to fetch a professor, and Dean and I tried to help get Katie down. She fell on us and started flailing, and Hermione and Niall and, uh, Melissa?”

“Melinda Bobbin, ma’am,” Niall said.

“Right, Melinda. Well, she ran up with Niall and Hermione, and then she picked up the package Katie had dropped, and then she started having a seizure and crying blood, so I used my cloak to pull the package away from her, and then we had to stop her clawing her own eyes out. Then Hagrid—Professor Hagrid, I mean—and Professor Snape came and took the girls to the hospital wing, and I took the necklace—the package was a cursed necklace, ma’am—and took it up there, too, and gave it to Professor Snape. Then, I came to find the others and make sure everyone was alright, and then you came and got us.” He looked at the others to make sure he hadn’t forgot anything. They shrugged. “And that’s all I know, ma’am,” he finished.

“Thank you, Mr Potter. Miss Duncan, perhaps you can elucidate the matter further?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the sniffling young woman said. “Katie and I were in the pub, and we had just decided to go to Tomes and Scrolls, but she came back from the bathroom acting kind of funny and holding this queer package, and she said we had to come back to the school because she had to give it to someone here. She said it was a surprise, that she had to deliver it, and her face was so odd—oh, oh no, I think she must have been imperiused!” Her sobbing took over for a moment.

Professor McGonagall floated a handkerchief over to her, and the wailing woman tried to get herself back under control. After a couple of minutes, she wiped her face and blew her nose and sat up a little straighter, though she continued to sniffle.

“Did she tell you who the package was from, Leanne?” Niall asked gently.

“No, she wouldn’t, only said she had to deliver it. I said she was being stupid, and she oughtn’t bring it back here, but she wouldn’t listen to me. So then I tried to take it from her, and the paper ripped, and, and—” She dissolved into a fresh bout of tears, flinging herself at the Head Boy, who patted her back consolingly.

“This is grave, indeed. Well, ten points to Hufflepuff, Miss Duncan, for being sensible enough to try and stop your friend. Let’s see, fifteen points to Mr Potter, for keeping a cool head in an
emergency and summoning help. Five points to Ravenclaw and fifteen points to Gryffindor for assisting him, Misters and Misses Weasley, Granger, Thomas, and Roshan. Mister Roshan, why don’t you escort Miss Duncan to get a calming draught from the mediwitch?”

“Yes, ma’am. Come on, Leanne.” Niall helped the girl up and led her from the room.

Professor McGonagall turned to the four remaining students. “I must ask you not to reveal today’s events to others. The staff will make an announcement at dinner, once we have more information, but it would not do to alarm the students unnecessarily. I trust I may rely on your discretion?” She surveyed the four Gryffindors, who nodded their acquiescence. She returned the nod. “Thank you all for what you did today. Who knows which unfortunate soul was the target of this attack—perhaps Miss Bell will reveal it to us, once she is well again—but I fear the consequences may have been very grave if whoever enchanted the girl had succeeded in their aim.”

“It was all Harry, ma’am,” Ginny piped up. “He sent for the others and had me run to get someone, and Hermione said he was the one who stopped anyone else touching the thing.”

Harry rubbed at the back of his neck. “I’m sure anyone else would have done it if they’d recognized the danger.”

The professor smiled warmly at him. “I knew making you prefect was the right choice, Mr Potter. You’re performing admirably.”

He blushed and ducked his head. “I’m just glad I could help,” he mumbled.

She nodded and dismissed them with one final caution not to tell anyone else what had happened. They headed for Gryffindor Tower to dispose of their purchases. As they reached the portrait, Harry stiffened.

“Bugger!” He ignored Hermione’s scandalized look and turned to Dean. “Well, you’re on first string, mate. With the game so close, we have to operate on the assumption Katie won’t be up to full strength until we know otherwise.” He scowled. “This clumsy bollocksing assassination attempt is a disaster…Poor Katie. And that poor Melinda girl…”

“They’ll be okay. Madam Pomfrey knows her stuff, Harry, and I bet all the professors will work on that necklace. I’m sure Professor Dumbledore will be able to figure out what’s going on.”

Harry resisted the urge to scoff at the mention of the headmaster. Instead, he sighed. “I’m sure you’re right, Mione.” After lunch, however, he slipped away to his mates’ quarters, anxious for news.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all had a lovely holiday season, whatever you may or may not celebrate. Here’s another chapter for y’all—hope you like it! I have drafts for the next four chapters half done at the moment. I’m in the midst of winter break, and I hope to get some solid work on this fic done before classes resume.

Yes, I wrote ‘apparation’ and not ‘apparition.’ I know that ‘apparition’ is canon, but I disagree with JK Rowling on a lot of things, and this is one of them. If you apparate,
should it not be called apparation? And isn’t an apparition a vision or ghostly figure? Anyway, it’s my story, so I’ll spell it how I want.

Oh, also, I stupidly left half my story bible back in my storage unit when I moved for grad school, and so I’m missing some details I had planned out, like the schedule of quidditch games and Harry’s weekly course schedule. I’ve been trying to be really careful not to contradict details of his schedule from earlier chapters, but if you spot an inconsistency, please do drop me a comment and let me know!
A month into the term, and several days after the disastrous Hogsmeade visit, Harry finally received a note from the headmaster requesting another meeting. Though he personally wished he could simply never speak to the meddlesome old man again, Severus and Lucius convinced him that the information could be useful. If nothing else, they reminded him, Dumbledore thought it was useful, and it wouldn’t do to alienate the man, if they could help it; though he would be dead soon enough, he was presently still the de facto head of their side of the war.

Reluctantly, then, Harry left the Great Hall after dinner, headed up to the headmaster’s tower, gave the password—‘licorice wands’—and trudged up the stairs with an exasperated roll of his eyes. He knocked on the door to the headmaster’s office and pushed it open when he was bade to enter.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” he said, coldly polite.

“Ah, yes, thank you for coming, my boy.” The young man tried not to grimace; he still didn’t like when Dumbledore called him that. “Now, before we begin, I was wondering if we could discuss the end of our last meeting.”

Harry didn’t stop his expression from twisting this time, but nodded. He wanted to get this over with, but he was well aware that Dumbledore always did things his own way.

“I confess that I did not expect for you to believe my behavior towards Tom inappropriate, nor did I anticipate the vehemence of your reaction.”

Alright, sir.”

“Harry, I apologize if you found my actions to be callous. I will only say in my defense that I may have suffered a touch of the arrogance common to young people.”

Alright, sir,” Harry said again, expression giving nothing away. “Do you have another memory for us to view?”

“All in good time, my boy. I wanted first to draw your attention to some details from the last memory that pertain to the ultimate aim of these meetings.”

“Which is what, sir?”

“Preparing you to fight Voldemort, of course. Now, in my conversation with him, he gave indications that he had gained some measure of control over his magic before I came to him. You
objected to my assertion that he bullied the other students, and there is no knowing which of us is
correct about his time there, but the stories—the strangled rabbit, the boy and girl who entered the
cave with Tom on the summer outing—were highly suggestive; it seemed he was using his power
to frighten, punish, and control the other children.” Harry’s eyes narrowed, but he did not
comment on this characterization of events.

“As well, he admitted to being a parselmouth, though this did not concern me so much as his
apparent instincts for cruelty, secrecy, and domination. Other things to note: his disdain for the
commonness of the name ‘Tom,’ which he shed, as you know, some few years later—taking up
the sobriquet ‘Lord Voldemort’ among a select group of peers, and carrying it forth into the world
when he left these halls. His mistrust of me, and his self-sufficient nature: he refused my aid,
preferring to ask directions and shop on his own rather than be under my supervision. Though
some Death Eaters believe themselves to be his confidant, Voldemort trusts no one with his
secrets, and he operates alone; he has no friends in this world.” He paused for a moment to let
Harry consider his words.

“And one last thing, before we go on to this next memory: he collects trophies. You remember the
box of stolen items? He kept…mementos, if you will, of his deeds at the orphanage; this magpie-
like tendency continued during and after his time at Hogwarts, and will be very important for what
you are learning here.”

Dumbledore swirled the memories in the stone basin with his wand. “We are skipping a fair
amount of his life. When we last met, you watched him at eleven years old, receiving his
Hogwarts letter. He came to the school, and though I watched him here, I saw no sign he was
having trouble in his house, nor causing it. Nevertheless, I continued to watch him, and I did
eventually discover the effects of the dark grimoire on his magic, but not until after the memory
we are about to watch, which takes place during the summer between his fifth and sixth years.”
The old man waved his hand to indicate that they ought to enter the pensieve, and Harry
grudgingly stood to lean over the bowl.

When he landed on his feet in the memory, he was shocked to see the Gaunt home looking even
more run down and abandoned than before, the floor grubby, cobwebs swamping the corners and
ceiling, crusted dishes and rotting food on the table. He gave a shiver of distaste. Peering
somewhat curiously at the huddled, filthy man sitting near the only light source in the room, he
wondered if the man was dead, but at a knock on the door behind them, the man shot up,
clutching a knife and a wand. Harry glanced over as the door creaked open, and saw the familiar
figure of a sixteen year old Tom Riddle. He gave another shiver as he realized once again that
Tom had been quite attractive in his youth.

The man in the nearby armchair jerked out of his seat, startling Harry into shying away as he
kicked empty bottles around and lurched towards the tall, pale young man standing in the
doorway.

“Stop,” Riddle commanded, and Harry recognized the sibilant undertones of parseltongue. He
darted a glance at Dumbledore, who was watching him keenly.

“You speak it?” Came the baffled attacker’s response, also in parseltongue. Tom and the man—
Morfin Gaunt, apparently, though Harry would never have recognized him in his matted,
disheveled state—discussed information that Harry already knew from the headmaster, and he
wondered why they were watching this memory. As Morfin staggered back to his chair, and
darkness eclipsed the room. The headmaster clasped his arm and they rose back out of the
pensieve.
“The next morning,” Dumbledore said, “Morfin awoke on the floor with no memory of anything that came after what you just saw. His ring, which he inherited from his father, was gone, and he was soon visited by the Ministry’s Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He was questioned about the murder of three muggles—Tom Riddle, Sr, and his parents—by means of the killing curse; he confessed plainly to all three, and his wand showed evidence of having cast the spells. Morfin was taken off to Azkaban without a fight, lamenting only the loss of his father’s ring. The only words he ever reportedly said after that were ‘he’ll kill me for losing his ring.’ He died in prison, and was buried there.”

“So, Riddle took the ring he’d inherited from Marvolo.” Harry frowned. He still wasn’t sure how any of this was relevant to his defeat of the Dark Lord.

“He did indeed, my boy. As I said—”

“Don’t call me that,” the young man snapped.

Dumbledore blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Don’t call me that. I’m not your boy, and we really don’t have that kind of relationship. Sir.”

“I—well…I apologize, then. I meant no harm, my—Harry.” The young man narrowed his eyes, but did not further object. Somewhat flustered, the headmaster continued. “As I was saying, Tom kept reminders of his ancestry and his deeds. He also became fascinated with artifacts associated with the founders of Hogwarts. As you noted at our last meeting, Tom had asked to stay over the holidays more than once, and was denied. I believe he saw the school as the best and closest thing to a true home that he had experienced.”

Harry nodded, face impassive, though his gut churned at the reminder of how similar his and Riddle’s childhoods had been.

“True, also, is that Hogwarts is an ancient and venerable stronghold of magic, of which it may be impossible to ever fully learn the secrets; nevertheless, Tom did his best to learn all that he could during his time here. He ended his tenure as a Hogwarts student with exceptional grades—the top of his class—having received an award for special services to the school in his sixth year, and having been appointed Head Boy in his seventh. Much was expected of him, but he did not seem interested in a Ministry career. Perhaps it is unsurprising, therefore, that his first application upon graduation was to Headmaster Dippet, whom he hoped would be willing to hire him on to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, for which he held a passion.”

Harry felt his eyebrows raise incredulously. The Dark Lord had wanted to teach at Hogwarts? In the same class that Harry himself was best at, and which he had himself unofficially taught during his fifth year? He couldn’t help the slight shiver that passed through him at this fresh similarity between them.

Dumbledore continued, seemingly unaware of Harry’s turmoil. “Armando, while sympathetic to young Tom’s feelings, counseled him to return in a few years’ time, when he had more life experience. By the time he returned, however, I was headmaster, and I would never have consented to hire him—which he well knew, although it did not stop him applying once more. But I am getting ahead of my tale.”

The headmaster tipped another memory into the pensieve. “This next memory comes from a house elf named Hokey. After leaving Hogwarts, Tom Riddle became a shop assistant at Borgin & Burkes, where he proved both canny and exceedingly persuasive. Very soon, he was being tasked
with visiting elderly witches and wizards to persuade them to sell their…darker heirlooms, a role at which he excelled.”

Despite himself, Harry snorted. “I’ll bet he did,” he muttered.

Bowing his head briefly in acknowledgement, Dumbledore gestured at the swirling silver of the memory. “Shall we visit with Hepzibah Smith?”

Once more, Harry sunk into the silver mist in the pensieve, emerging this time in a sitting room stuffed with curio cases holding lacquered boxes, ancient tomes, and crystal orbs, interspersed with large plants sprouting from elaborate brass pots. An older witch dabbed rouge on her face as an elderly house elf laced satin slippers onto her feet. The woman wore a ginger monstrosity of a wig on her head and astonishing pink robes, and the whole effect was so mind-bogglingly odd that Harry stared at her for a long moment, wondering if she were perhaps related to Dumbledore.

The elf complimented her mistress’s appearance, and then disappeared to lead an adult Tom Riddle into the room, looking even more handsome than he had at sixteen. Picking his way through the room, Riddle bowed over the old witch’s hand and produced a bouquet of roses.

“I brought you flowers,” he said with a charming little smile.

Lady Hepzibah Smith preened and summoned the house elf, who brought them tea cakes, while the older witch offered Riddle a seat and fussed over him. She seemed a little infatuated with the boy, despite the age difference, and perfectly willing to let him charm and flatter her. When he began to discuss business, she waved it off.

“Now, now, not so fast, or I’ll think you’re only here for my trinkets!”

“I am only a poor assistant, ma’am, who must do as he is told. Mr Burke wishes me to enquire—”

She interrupted again, once more dismissing his business, and enticing him to view something else, an item she stated she would not sell. “You, Tom, you’ll appreciate it for its history, not how many galleons you can get for it.” Once more, she called for her elf, who brought two large leather cases to them, wending her way through the clutter of the room. Hokey gave the cases to her mistress, who beamed slyly at Riddle. “I think you’ll like this, Tom…”

Lady Smith opened the topmost case, revealing a golden cup with two delicate handles on its sides. Harry tilted his head, and then darted a startled glance at the headmaster. “So this is really…?” Dumbledore nodded as Riddle lifted the cup from its silken bed.

Riddle gazed at the cup with a greedy expression. The older witch watched him with a similarly covetous look.

“A badger,” the young man murmured, examining the treasure he held. “Then this was…”

“Helga Hufflepuff’s, of course!” Lady Smith chortled with glee. “This has been handed down in my family for generations. You know we’re descendants.” The young man’s eyes slid up to her face, then back to the cup. “Lovely, isn’t it? And it’s rumored to hold all sorts of powers, too, but I don’t know about that; I like to keep it nice and safe, here in its box…” She scooped the cup back out of Riddle’s palm and settled it back in place, shutting and latching the case tightly.

“Now, I think you’ll like this one even more, Tom. I bought it off Burke some time ago, and I’m sure he’s salivating to get it back once I’ve gone.” She popped the clasp on this second, flatter
box, and opened it to reveal a heavy golden locket bearing an ornate, stylized ‘S,’ resembling a serpent reared to strike. Harry narrowed his eyes, feeling shock bolt through him. He’d seen this locket just two weeks back, hanging around Sal’s neck in his portrait! He looked at Riddle, who was holding the locket reverently to the light.

“Slytherin’s mark,” Riddle said softly. Lady Smith seemed delighted by the young man’s transfixed gaze. She prattled on about Burke swindling it from a desperate, simple woman that Riddle must have realized had been his mother; the budding dark lord’s eyes flashed scarlet, and his fingers tightened on the locket’s chain, though he did not interrupt, and he did not refuse to return the locket to its case. As Lady Smith sent the items back with her elf, Dumbledore once more guided Harry up and out of the memory.

“Two days later, Hepzibah Smith was discovered dead,” the headmaster said. “Her house elf was convicted for accidental poisoning. Her family soon discovered the items were missing, but it took them some time to confirm they were truly gone, given the older woman’s propensity for secreting things away. Before they were certain, Tom Riddle had resigned his position at Borgin & Burke’s, and vanished. He was not seen again for some time.”

“He risked everything to gain those objects,” Harry said. “Because he was obsessed.”

“Yes. Obsessed with Hogwarts, and its founders. Obsessed with his family, which he knew descended from Slytherin by that time.”

“I could see taking the locket—that was his, by rights—but why the cup?”

“That is highly germane to our discussion, but I request that you hold off on that question for now. I promise an explanation will come soon.”

Harry hid his irritation. Of course the headmaster could never speak plainly or answer a damn question…

“Ten years after his visit with Hepzibah, her death, and Hokey’s conviction, Tom returned to Hogwarts. I do not fully know what the intervening years held for him, but by the time he returned, he was well on the way to becoming the powerful and dangerous dark lord with whom you are familiar. His expressed purpose for returning was to seek a teaching post, but I suspect he had other, more ominous ends in coming here.” The old wizard gestured, and Harry followed him into the memory.

Looking around, he could see that the office was almost identical to its present state. The memory version of Dumbledore sat behind his desk, looking slightly less worn than the current one, and with both hands (naturally) whole and unblemished. At a knock on the door, he bade someone enter, and Harry turned to see a greatly altered version of the dark lord.

The intervening years, it seemed, had not been kind to Tom Riddle, at least in appearance. His once handsome face looked melted and waxy, and his eyes were now a striking blood red where the whites ought to have been. His skin was unnaturally white, made more stark by the black expanse of his cloak. He sat when invited, and made polite discussion for a moment.

When Dumbledore turned the discussion to business, however, things chilled. The headmaster made a jovial remark about old teachers and youthful beginnings, but it was clear to all in the room (remembered and present-day) that he was refusing to allow more things than simply Riddle’s chosen name. The two danced around each other for several minutes, neither willing to give ground. At last, Riddle addressed his purpose.
“I have returned to request what Professor Dippet once told me to gain experience for. I am sure you know that I have done and seen a great many things of which no other wizard could teach your students.”

“I have indeed heard such things about you. I shudder to think even half of those rumors true.”

“Greatness inspires envy, envy engenders spite, spite spawns lies.”

“You call it greatness, what you have been doing?”

“I do. Experimentation, exploration…I have pushed the boundaries of magic, pushed them beyond all others, perhaps…”

“Of some magics. Not all, Tom.”

Riddle smiled a tight little smile, more a leer than anything. It was not a pleasant thing to behold. “I have seen nothing yet, Dumbledore, which bears out your assertion that love holds more power than any magic.”

The headmaster steepled his fingers after several more careful exchanges, and peered intently at Riddle. “Let us speak plainly. Why have you come to me, requesting a job we both know you do not truly want?”

“But I do want it,” Riddle answered, surprise passing over his features. “I want it very much.”

“I doubt that. You want to return here, but you do not want to teach. You never have. What do you want? Be direct for once, perhaps.”

The man across the desk from him sneered. “If you do not want to give me a job—”

“Oh course I don’t,” the headmaster interjected. “And I don’t believe you expected I would. But you came to ask nevertheless. Why?”

Riddle and Dumbledore stood, the younger of the two ugly with rage, and Harry thought he might attack the headmaster when the old wizard reminded him of the burning wardrobe from his first year visit. Instead, he turned with a snap of his cloak and left the room. The two viewers rose from the memory and returned to their own seats on either side of the desk.

“Was it still the Defense post he wanted, then?” Harry asked, staring at the pensieve as he thought over the scene he had witnessed.

“Most assuredly—I did not see him to the gates, and we know now it is no coincidence that, since I refused to hire him, we have been unable to keep any Defense professor beyond a single year.”

The young man shivered at the reminder, glad that Luc had destroyed the focus object for the curse on the DADA position. He hadn’t been sorry to see the back of Umbridge, the hateful little toad, but he knew that some of the previous professors had been hurt or killed in some pretty gruesome ways.

Thinking about the Dark Lord’s curse, Harry glanced at the headmaster’s blackened hand, and the ring it still bore. “If Tom stole Marvolo’s ring, how’d you get it?” he asked.
“Ah. That is a matter which must wait for our next meeting, if you will consent to return on Sunday next? I fear we are running short of time.”

Harry frowned, getting the sense that the headmaster’s words did not refer only to that evening. He nodded. “Sunday next, then. Goodnight, sir.”

“Goodnight, Mr Potter. Good luck in Saturday’s quidditch match.”

Giving another curt nod, the young man left the room and headed directly for a hidden passage which would take him to the dungeons. He had prefect rounds on Mondays and Fridays—the least popular days to patrol, which he’d been happy enough to take on—so his evening was his own, it being a Wednesday.

Once in the dungeons, he slipped down the halls and behind the tapestry which hid the door to his bondmates’s quarters. He used the keystone and pushed the door open to find his mates settled on the sofa. Luc was sitting sideways, leaning into Sev, whose hand was absently stroking through his blond hair as they both read their own books. The two older men looked up at him as he shut the door, and set their reading aside.

“How did it go?” Luc asked, sitting up properly and turning to make room for their young lover on the sofa while Sev summoned tea things from the kitchen.

“Better than last time,” Harry said, dropping into the spot between them with a sigh. “He’s still talking around the central purpose for the meetings, but he said the next one should be the last.” He accepted a cup from Sev and began to tell them what the headmaster had shown him of Tom Riddle’s life after Hogwarts. Luc and Sev listened intently with troubled expressions. When he was finished, Severus poured them each a fresh cup of tea.

“I confess, I am still puzzled as to his aim with these meetings. So far, he has spent a great deal of time showing you memories of events that he could simply have related to you.”

“Well, he said they’re meant to help me defeat the Dark Lord.” He shrugged. “I don’t see how, though. It actually would be more convenient if he would just tell me, but he’s kind of a dramatic bastard, isn’t he? They both are, really, him and the Dark Lord.”

Sev spluttered into his cup of tea, while Luc barked a laugh. “They are, aren’t they?” the blond man said.

Harry gave a sly half-smile at having startled his mates, but his expression soon sobered once more. “Dumbledore really dislikes Slytherins, doesn’t he?” he mused.

“You didn’t seem to mind so much in your first year, when he awarded Gryffindor the House Cup at the end of year feast,” Sev reminded him gently.

The young wizard frowned down at his cup. “Yeah, well, I was a child—he doesn’t have the same excuse.”

“No, he does not.”

“It’s not right, he ought to be unbiased. He’s the headmaster—he shouldn’t mistreat one of the houses like that!”

“You, of all people, know that people do not always do what they ought.” Sev’s voice was soft as
he refilled his young lover’s cup.

“Yeah, I know. He’s just insufferable, talking about ‘the greater good’ all the time, prattling on about the power of love and all that tripe…bloody hypocrite.” The younger man sighed.

“Hmm…enough about him, then,” Luc said after a moment. “What do you say to a bit of a cuddle before you head up to bed?”

Harry laughed. “I don’t think anyone would believe me if I told them how much of a softie you are when we’re alone.”

“I miss you, darling, you know that.” The blond man pouted playfully.

“I do know that. I miss you, too.” The younger man gave his mate a chaste kiss, and then stood. “Come on, then.”

He soon found himself pressed between the two older wizards on their bed, exchanging quick, gentle kisses with Luc; which soon became messy, open-mouthed kisses; which turned into filthy noises and shameless rutting and shuddering orgasms. After they’d cleaned back up a bit, Harry gave a soft sigh.

“I love you, both of you. You know that, right?”

“Oh course, darling. And we love you.”

“We do.” Sev brushed his lips softly over the back of the younger man’s neck. “And we will be here for you, whenever you need us.”

“Thank you.” Harry really was terribly lucky to have such wonderful mates in his life, and he knew it. Not for the first time, he thanked magic and the universe for giving him Luc and Sev on his birthday. They had saved his life, and given him what he’d never thought he could have.

Eventually he peeled himself away from them and trudged up to the tower. He put the finishing touches on an essay for the next morning’s Transfiguration class and then rolled into bed, falling asleep with a smile and the taste of his lovers on his lips.

The rest of the week passed quickly, and soon it was Saturday morning, and Gryffindor’s second quidditch match of the year. Harry’s mage-sight had settled down enough by then that he could remove the tint from the lenses of his glasses—and it was a good thing, too, since the sky was darkly overcast that morning, and he wasn’t sure he’d have been able to see properly if he hadn’t changed them back.

After a hasty breakfast in the Great Hall and a fierce pep talk in the changing rooms, they squared off against Hufflepuff on the field, and Harry was relieved to see the practice drills had paid off. His beaters were working together much better than the previous game, his chasers had a tight strategy in place, and Bainbridge performed well in the keeper position, if not spectacularly. Katie was still gone, but Dean was filling in quite well, and Harry knew he’d be moving the boy into her spot permanently when she graduated at the end of the year.

With the team so much improved, they managed to pick up a healthy lead early on and keep it up, so that by the time Harry caught the snitch—drifting slowly towards the Hufflepuff seeker (a fourth year by the last name of Derek) and then dropping down to snatch the tiny gold ball right from under her broom—they’d built a substantial cushion of points and were firmly back in the
running for the Quidditch Cup.

With much back-slapping and cheering, the whole team went for showers, and then returned to Gryffindor Tower, were a victory party was well under way. Each member of the team was announced with a flourish and rousingly toasted by the gathered crowd, and Harry couldn’t stop grinning as goblets of butterbeer and plates of food were pressed on all of them. Someone must have made a run to the kitchens, because the common room tables were loaded with platters of food.

Even Hermione had stopped studying long enough to join in, and was sat on one of the couches having a spirited discussion with Finn, the 7th year prefect. She gave a cheery wave when she saw him looking her way, and Finn turned, giving him a friendly nod before Mione drew him back into the conversation. Nearby, Neville was sat chatting with Kirke, and Lavender and Parvati were giggling about something.

Everyone was milling about and talking and eating, and there was a burst of laughter in one corner as a couple of second years pelted each other with balled up parchment. It was nice, and Harry was glad that everyone seemed in high spirits; after the necklace incident with Katie, and the increasingly dour newspaper reports about attacks and mysterious disappearances, they could all use a little fun. There was war brewing, no doubt, but at least for this afternoon they were all just schoolchildren, celebrating a sports win.

The sounds of the party washed around him, and he smiled and half-listened to Seamus and Dean laughing over some prank one of the fourth years had pulled off in the spirit of Fred and George. Gradually, however, a fog began to settle over his mind as he listened and his skin grew clammy and tight. He swallowed back a wave of bile, wiping at the sweat on his forehead.

Dean, standing closer, noticed something was wrong before Seamus did. “Hey, are you feeling alright, mate? You’re looking a little off.”

Harry stared hazily down at his goblet. “This punch tastes kind of funny…”

The darker skinned boy reached out to clasp his shoulder, alarm flooding him as his captain shuddered. “Why don’t you sit down?”

“I think I…need some air…” The dizzy young man groped for a table to set down his punch; the goblet tipped and clattered off the tea table he had heedlessly dropped it on. He turned and staggered towards the portrait hole, trying to escape the press of bodies around him.

“Gin, gimme a hand here. Something’s wrong!” Dean clasped Harry’s elbow and steered him more directly. Ginny took one look at them and began to clear a path.

“Coming through, we need to get out! Move it, Roberts, Hooper! Out of the way, please!”

“Ginny, what’s going on?” Hermione called.

“Harry needs the hospital wing. He’s taken ill or something!” Ginny got tired of pushing and whipped out her wand, but before she could do more than that, a wave of power pushed people to either side of her. Hermione marched over through the grumbling crowd, wand aloft. Ginny gave her a firm nod of thanks, and fell back to Harry’s other side. He looked even worse than he had a moment before, and was now slumped against Dean, face pale except for the green tinge around his lips. She drew his arm over her shoulder to stabilize him, watched Dean do the same with his other arm, and then coaxed her friend forwards.
Hermione sent off a patronus, and pushed the portrait hole open to let them out. “Madam Pomfrey will be waiting,” she said. “Hurry!”

“Cedric, no…” Harry moaned between them, and Ginny met Dean’s wide eyes. What was happening? “Run, Cedric…” The sick young man gasped out a sob and sagged between them.

Just then, Professor McGonagall swept around the corner ahead of them. “Shouldn’t you be off celebrating with—Miss Weasley, Mr Thomas, what in Harimella’s name has happened!?”

“It’s Harry, ma’am, he’s really sick!”

The professor whipped out her wand. “Mobilicorpus!” Ginny and Dean let go of Harry, and he floated into the air and shot off after their Head of House, who had grasped her robe’s skirts in one hand to lift the hem and taken off at a sprint. Exchanging a glance, they ran after the two, and arrived at the hospital wing several minutes later to find their friend laid out on a bed, whimpering and writhing as the matron furiously cast spells. McGonagall’s hair was in disarray, and she spun towards them as soon as they entered.

“Quickly: what happened to him?” she demanded.

Ginny looked at Dean, who shook his head. “We were just chatting at the victory party in the common room, and all of a sudden he got this real queer look on his face. He said the punch tasted odd, and then he dropped his goblet and started to head for the portrait. Said something about needing air, but he could barely walk. Is he gonna be alright?”

“What was in the punch?”

“I dunno, but it tasted fine to me.”

Professor McGonagall sent off a patronus; within minutes, the floo flared and Professor Snape strode out.

“Minerva, your message said something about an emergency—Harry!” He took an aborted step towards the bed, then stilled, gaze flicking towards the two wide-eyed Gryffindors standing by the doors and then seeming to dismiss them. “What has happened?”

“Mr Potter took suddenly ill during the victory party, after drinking something. Mr Thomas does not know what, other than Mr Potter complained of an odd taste in his punch.”

“Malfoy’s hurt—Severus!” Harry jerked into a sitting position, and began to look around frantically, his eyes glazed. “Where are you? Draco’s dying! So much blood…” Madam Pomfrey tried to get him to lie down again, but he fought her hands. “No, you don’t understand, I didn’t mean to hurt him!”

“Please, lie back, Mr Potter—Harry!”

“Quirrell’s got the basilisk, and he’s already killed Cedric…Ginny’s in danger, we have to help her! Please, Luc…in the Chamber…” The redhead witch bit her lip. Harry was definitely hallucinating, mixing up all the bad things that happened to him into some kind of super-nightmare. He sounded terrified, and she ached for him.

Professor Snape strode to the bed, wand out, and began his own diagnostics. After a moment, he
summoned a vial and siphoned a small amount of blood from Harry’s elbow, before disappearing back through the floo. Harry moaned and began scratching at his arm, tearing at the skin until he drew blood. Madam Pomfrey dropped onto the bed behind him, and wrapped her arms around him to pin his hands to his sides, and he began to sob. “No, please, I’ll be good. Please, don’t send me back there! I’ll be good, please…”

Professor McGonagall lowered herself shakily onto the nearest bed, gaze locked on the young man struggling against Madam Pomfrey’s hold. Ginny and Dean exchanged a helpless look. Whatever was happening to Harry, none of the adults seemed to know how to deal with it, and that in itself was worrisome.

For several minutes, the hospital wing was silent except for their friend’s crying, but Harry soon grew agitated again, and started calling out for his godfather.

“Sirius, don’t go to the Ministry, it’s a trap! No, don’t leave me, Sirius! Sirius!”

Ginny reached for Dean’s hand, shivering as she remembered the flight through the Department of Mysteries the previous spring, and Harry’s devastation at the loss. She jerked as the fireplace burst into green flame once more, and Professor Snape rushed past them to the bed where Madam Pomfrey continued to cling to the thrashing figure. The professor reached for Harry’s face and tipped a potion into his mouth, coaxing him to swallow it. As he drank more and more of it, Harry began to calm, collapsing in Madam Pomfrey’s arms as he finished the entire draught. He blinked hazy green eyes at the professor standing over him. “Severus, what…”

“Shh, all is well, but you must rest now.” He held another potion to the young man’s lips, and Harry swallowed without hesitation. His eyes fluttered shut immediately, and he fell into exhausted sleep.

Madam Pomfrey sighed and eased out from behind him, accepting Professor Snape’s help in laying him down. She replaced his clothes with a nightshirt, pulled the blankets up over him, and drew the curtain around his bed shut.

“Severus, what was this?”

Professor Snape snarled. “He was having an adverse reaction to a love potion. Some wretched little miscreant must have slipped it to him in the Gryffindor common room.”

“What?!” Professor McGonagall flew to her feet, fire in her eyes. “Who would dare—this is unconscionable—oh, when I get my hands on them! Mr Thomas, Miss Weasley, back to the common room. Tell the prefects to gather the students for a house meeting, but do not tell them what about. Rest assured the culprit will be found and dealt with, Severus.”

With a last lingering look towards the bed their friend lay in, the two students left the hospital wing. As they walked, Ginny racked her brain trying to figure out who might have tried to dose Harry. When they reached the common room, her suspicions abruptly crystalized. The party had ended in their absence, and she glared around until she spotted a group of fourth years huddled near a window. As she marched towards them, Romilda Vane broke from the group and scuttled towards the dorm stairs with a frightened cry.

“Immobulus!” Ginny hissed, smirking viciously as the girl froze and toppled onto her face.

“Gin?” Hermione raised her eyebrows, staring curiously at the girl downed by the spell.
“House meeting, Mione. McGonagall is coming to talk to us about something important.”

“What does that have to do with her?”

“I’m not meant to say. But the Head wants you and the other prefects to gather the whole house here in the common room.”

Hermione sighed. “Very well. I hope you know what you’re doing… Tim, Rhiannon! Get the others, we have a house meeting!” She strode off, calling to the other prefects, while Ginny crossed to where Vane lay on the carpet. She toed the girl over, and eyed her fearful expression with satisfaction. Crouching, she whispered to the immobilized girl. “You little bitch. You’d better watch your back. Harry is practically a Weasley, and we are very, very protective of our family…” She sneered at the faint whimper Vane let out.

“You sure it’s her, Gin?” Dean asked quietly.

“Oh, I’m sure.” Ginny stood, eyes hard with distaste. “She’s been sniffing around all year, trying to get her grubby little paws on him—oh good, Professor McGonagall’s here.” She waved to catch the professor’s attention and pointed at the girl she had captured.

“Miss Weasley, I did not send you back to confront the culprit yourself.” McGonagall looked mildly reproachful, but nothing more, so Ginny figured she probably wasn’t actually in trouble.

“She made a run for it when she saw me, Professor. I was worried she was going to destroy evidence up in her dorm or something.” She gave the professor her most guileless look.

“Very well. I shall deal with things from here.” She turned to release the girl, who immediately began to babble that it was all a mistake. Ginny gave Vane her most malevolent glare, and turned on her heel, striding towards where Hermione was gathering the students. She felt a fierce pride at the sound of the wretched girl beginning to cry, but she knew Vane wasn’t nearly as sorry as she would be by the time Ginny got done with her. She began composing a letter to the twins in her head, absently leaning against Dean as she contemplated her revenge.

Chapter End Notes

I finally remembered the fic that had the magical snake jewelry in it, which I mentioned back in the notes to chapter 15! It’s Snakes and Lions by GatewayGirl: https://archiveofourown.org/works/9425093/chapters/21334130 and I highly recommend it, if you like Drarry, Good Slytherins, realistic magical trans processes, and morally-grey!Harry Potter.

Anyway, classes are starting back up on Monday, so I’ll be busy again. I have the next four chapters partially written, but I don’t know when I’ll be posting next.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!