The Unexpected Side Effect of Draught No. 9
by lovetoseverus

Summary

After the Battle of Hogwarts is over, Harry Potter feels restless and dazed by life, and struggles to find his path amid a sea of guilt and other demons of war. Who is he now if not The Chosen One? Help comes in the form of an unexpected friend, and an even more unexpected potion. Slash, SS/HP, brief CW/HP, RW/HG.

Notes

Disclaimer: The brilliant characters belong solely to J.K. Rowling. The plot and typos are my own. No profit is being made.
In The Beginning

The war was over and Voldemort was dead. While the celebrations and cautious optimism had spread to all corners of England – and beyond, no doubt – there was one young man left standing at the center of it all: The Chosen One.

And where once he had held a zest for life, a fearless sense of adventure, there now remained only confusion, exhaustion and loneliness. At times he felt a transient flood of happiness, of connection, as a friend or colleague shook his hand, pulled him into a hug or touched his arm reassuringly, but often that faded as quickly as it came.

Understandably, those around him were preoccupied with their families – possibly more protective now than ever, grateful that they were still alive themselves, not wanting to waste another minute with those they loved most. But being party to many and family to none, he felt like an outsider now, an echo of someone else’s life.

His eyes seemed to grow more glazed as the days passed, his life aimlessly charting itself with little to no input of his own. He had realized long ago, somewhat resentfully, that his existence had been towards one end, and one end only: to defeat the Dark Lord. But now that that was done, who was he? To what purpose should he serve? He knew nothing else.

When the post for the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor had opened up at Hogwarts, he was offered carte blanche to take over and do with it as he pleased. After all, many saw him as the foremost expert on such things, if his recent triumph was anything to show for it. Although the appointment seemed a logical fit for him, and offered with the best of intentions, he couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that people really didn’t get it at all. That they didn’t get him. After nearly eight years on the trail of Voldemort, he – Harry Potter – wanted to see what lay beyond the verdant green hills of his homeland. Away from Hogwarts, away from everything.

At least for a while.
Someone To Watch Over Me

“Potter.”

Harry looked up from his packing to see Severus Snape standing in the doorway of his bedroom in number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Harry had been living there since the downfall of the Dark Lord – the house was his now, after all – and had taken up residence in Sirius’ old room specifically for its familiar atmosphere and personal sense of nostalgia. Knowledge of who the room once belonged to would not be lost on Severus, but he’d never said anything about it.

In the time since Harry had witnessed Severus’ memories, he and the Potions Master had formed something of a friendship. It had been cautious and rocky at first, but only because Harry knew Severus’ trust would be hard won; transitioning from a life of constant deception and manipulation into one of easy conversation and openness did not happen overnight. But Severus had seemed to want to know Harry, too, and so they worked at it in earnest. Harry had always found his Potions professor interesting, even while in school, but had never had the chance to explore it due to the adversarial nature of their interactions.

After the war, Harry carried a nearly debilitating guilt about how he had treated Severus over the years – for not realizing the sacrifices Severus made in his name and for constantly jumping to conclusions about the man (and incorrect ones, at that). But now with all pretenses dropped between them, all former alliances dissolved, it was just the two men left, just as they were. Harry’s respect for the man he had once considered an enemy ran deep and he very much envied him his courage. Not that he was comfortable telling Severus this, but hoped it was implied at least. In fact, if Harry was being honest, the time spent with Severus was one of the only things that had kept him going in the months that followed the end of the war.

“Hi Severus,” he acknowledged with a quick glance over his shoulder, noting the man in question was leaning against the door jamb, his arms crossed in front of his chest. Harry never called him ‘Snape’ anymore. It felt too cavalier, if not a bit reminiscent of his youthful ways. He didn’t mind that Severus called him by his surname, though – it was something of a joke between them now.

“Going somewhere?”

Harry blanched. He hadn’t intended on notifying anyone in advance of his plans, even Severus, for he knew if he did there would be no end to the stream of objections raised. For a moment, he contemplated lying about his intentions, but quickly decided better of it. Something in his gut told him it would be in his best interest to be honest, at least with Severus. Harry stopped folding the trousers in his hands and turned around to sit on the edge of the bed. He dropped his gaze to his hands and considered them briefly before looking back up at Severus, whose face now bore signs of growing concern.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before, but I just need to get out of here for a while. I don’t know where I’m going to go yet, maybe somewhere out of England…” Harry said, his voice trailing off.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus’ gaze sharpened while Harry spoke, contemplating the announcement. He felt conflicted,
trapped somewhere between wanting to give the advice of a parent and wanting to give the advice of a friend. He knew Harry had been suffering immensely these past few months, although the young man rarely opened up about his true feelings on the matter – presumably because he wasn’t even sure how he felt about them yet – but nevertheless, Severus had been making it a point to keep a close eye on him.

“I have an offer I would like you to consider first,” Severus said finally.

Harry looked up. “What would that be?”

“A very rare, very complicated potion. It is called Sanctimonia Animadverto. Loosely translated, that means ‘virtual reality.’ As it happens, I have a knack for brewing it.” He paused, the ghost of a smirk on his lips. “I have been perfecting it for the last ten years, though most of that has been minor customizations.”

The quizzical look on Harry’s face was very telling: Potions really was not his thing. Severus sighed and walked over to sit down on the bed next to Harry. He decided to try a different tack.

“Have you ever seen the series Star Trek?”

Harry looked at him, agog. “I used to watch that show whenever I could steal time on my cousin’s telly! But how do you know of it?”

“I grew up with a Muggle father, Harry. He used to watch it. I don’t think he realized I did, however.” Severus considered that for a moment before resuming the conversation. “Regardless, do you recall a piece of technology they called the Holodeck?”

Harry sat up straighter, clearly eager to find out where this was heading. He nodded, his eyes alight with interest. Severus momentarily relished the view of Harry hanging on his every word, his handsome face only inches away – yet so far out of reach, he knew. He pushed the thought from his mind before continuing.

“Good. This will rather make the description of Sanctimonia Animadverto quite simple. Evochi, as the potion is commonly called, is similar in concept to a Holodeck, but without the technology and physical setup. It allows you to construct a virtual reality strictly within your mind, but feels every bit as real as anything on a Holodeck would. Or, indeed, anything in real life.”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry knew his mouth was open but did nothing to change that fact. He was listening so intently he almost forgot he had been packing his clothes and ready to leave England a few minutes ago. He blinked slowly and then swallowed. “So… this potion, Evochi…” Harry searched for what he wanted to ask but nothing was coming to him. Severus seemed to take that as his cue.

“Yes, this potion is my offer. Specifically, for me to administer it to you. You would stay at Hogwarts with me so that I may observe you while under its influence, which in turn gives me valuable research on its effects—” Harry made to object at this point but Severus held up his hand and continued. “Not to worry, it has been thoroughly tested. However, everyone responds differently to the stimuli created within the virtual reality, and as I cannot conduct this research on myself—”

“You’ve taken it before?” Harry blurted out.
“Of course. But as I cannot observe myself, you will have to make do as a substitute.” Severus looked at him sardonically.

Harry briefly acknowledged Severus’ remark with a grin and then became lost in thought, his face falling, suddenly remembering his plans to leave and get away from everything. The idea of returning to Hogwarts did not thrill him, yet Severus’ offer had certainly piqued his interest.

“Why are you offering this to me?” was what Harry heard himself say out loud, but what he was really thinking was, Why would this help anything?

“I thought you would never ask.”
Evochi

Severus didn’t waste any time jumping into the full explanation.

“The true power of Evochi is in its ability to provide experiences that reflect one’s deepest desires. It may be something large or small, mundane or adventurous. It is your choice.”

Harry felt as apprehensive of the notion as he was mesmerized by it. He still didn’t know what it had to do with his need to escape, and found himself looking at Severus, searching those black eyes for answers. After a few moments, though, he looked away, his mind once again returning to its conflicted thoughts.

“Harry, you are not like most people. Scarcely have you experienced what it means to have a normal life, doing the things your peers enjoy and take for granted. For the better part of a decade you carried a burden far heavier than anyone of your age should’ve been asked to do, yet you did it with such sense of purpose, such tenacity and conviction, that never once did I see you attempt to shirk that responsibility. I am not sure I would have been able to do all that, if the situation were reversed.”

Suddenly, it clicked, and Harry understood what Severus was offering him. And why. Harry felt his heart skip a beat at Severus’ uncanny ability to always know what he was thinking. While it was true Harry was pitiful at Occluding Severus, he thought he would have at least known if his thoughts were being invaded. Yet he felt nothing of the sort. Harry set the trousers he had been holding aside and turned his body towards Severus.

“So if I do this, come back to Hogwarts with you, and start taking this potion… it will… help me?”

Harry would have felt ridiculous adding ‘with my nightmares and sense of isolation’ so he opted to leave that off.

“That is my hope, yes.”

“How long can I take it?”

“No more than once a week. And for what duration, I do not know. I will have to monitor you. But I should think that six months will be sufficient for you to see improvement.”

“So the potion isn’t dangerous?” Harry was weighing all his options.

“Not in the way you are asking, no, but there are dangers with it, like all transformative substances. One is psychological and the other is physical. The psychological risk is in addiction to the substance, not entirely unlike what happens to those who put too much stock in what they see in the Mirror of Erised. Do you remember it?”

Harry nodded fervently. He had, and also remembered Dumbledore’s warnings about it too, which Severus just echoed.

“People have driven themselves mad by that mirror, and have done so too with Evochi. Although it
is very difficult to get your hands on either, both are dangerous when the person does not truly understand their purpose. Or their power.”

Harry shuddered lightly.

“The physical risk is the most important, though, so this I need you to hear.”

Harry wasn’t sure he liked the tone Severus had affected.

“Evochi works by subduing your conscious mind in favor of your subconscious. It is from there the virtual reality emerges, created by your own impulses. Since the mind interprets that new reality to be as real as anything you experience while in a conscious state, it is… theoretically possible to cause damage to yourself physically.”

Harry swallowed hard. “You mean if I fall off a cliff or something in a virtual reality, I could… I could die here even though I may just be sitting on a chair in your office?”

Severus waited for a moment and nodded solemnly. “Yes.”

Harry felt his heart jump and it raced wildly in his chest. He didn’t think anything could top the panic he’d felt at walking into the forest towards what he was sure was his imminent death, but the idea that a potion could take his life in such an innocuous and powerless manner was somehow far more frightening.

“Why? I mean, I don’t get—” He knew he was stammering but couldn’t make sense of it. Perhaps on some level, he didn’t want to make sense of it.

“The mind is very powerful, Harry.”

Harry looked up into Severus’ eyes, the weight behind them significant, and let those words settle over him. Slowly, his mind seemed to grasp the full implication and truth of it all.

Severus returned the gaze. “Very powerful.”
As Severus and Harry passed through the front doors of Hogwarts, Harry was met with an unpleasant rush of emotions. This was his first visit back since the end of the war. It was strange, surreal even, to be back in the place he had once so emphatically called home; a place he’d been convinced he’d never want to leave. Yet it was different now. The utter stillness in the air unnerved him, as though the great castle, with its ancient stone walls and finely-crafted archways, was holding its breath. Where once it used to whisper its proud history, now it had fallen silent – whether in reverence or suffering, Harry did not know.

He glanced towards the Great Hall as they passed, his heart thrumming away loudly in his ears as he looked into the expanse beyond the enormous, wooden doors. It was empty, save for the long rows of House tables, but his memory quickly filled in the painful visuals of his recent past: the battleground where Voldemort fell for the final time, the makeshift hospital where anyone with healing abilities worked tirelessly to do what they could, the temporary tomb for the tragic and unnecessary losses. Harry felt a lump rise in his throat and he swallowed hard to suppress it, blinking back the sting in his eyes as he turned his gaze away.

Severus suspected re-entering Hogwarts might be difficult for Harry – a fact he confirmed when he saw the look on Harry’s face – and promptly changed his course to the dungeons, leading them instead by way of a back route that involved stairs and passages he guessed Harry would not be familiar with.

Harry was scarcely paying attention, and followed along behind Severus without registering their path at all. His thoughts reeled on dizzily, his mind’s eye already on a tour of its own through the castle. This place held so many memories for him.

Harry wasn’t sure yet if he had made the right decision in agreeing to Severus’ offer of Evochi, but had confirmed at least one thing for himself when Severus was outlining the details for him back at Grimmauld Place: he liked Severus’ company. It was comforting, somehow, and provided him a solace he rarely found elsewhere as of late. In some unspoken manner, they both understood the way of things – and by extension, each other. And, truthfully, Harry didn’t have any better offers on the table – nowhere else to go – as much as he wanted to fancy himself a lone adventurer ready to take on whatever lay beyond the borders of England.

The summer was already beginning to fade and school would be back in session late September. The Board of Governors had decided to push back the start date to allow ample time for all the reconstruction initiatives, and although they still had a couple weeks left before the students returned, the repairs were already complete.

Harry’s attention snapped back to the present as they stopped outside the door to Severus’ private
quarters. After a wave of Severus’ wand, the door clicked open and he motioned for Harry to step inside. Harry had never been here before – Severus had always met him in Hogsmeade or at Grimmauld Place. Even when he was a student himself, Harry had only been as far as the Potions classroom. He knew Severus was an intensely private man who rarely allowed visitors, despite his quarters being property of Hogwarts and not his own personal estate. Still, Harry couldn’t help feeling a bit privileged to be afforded this intimate gesture.

As Harry looked around the small room, effectively the antechamber to the bedroom beyond, he was surprised by what he saw: a large wool rug covered most of the stone floor, gathering the sofa, two armchairs and a coffee table into a cozy grouping. An imposing iron fireplace stood sentry to one side, a small fire crackling away in its hearth. Combined with the metal sconces that dotted the walls, the room was bathed in a cozy, warm light. He realized then that just because Severus’ rooms were in the dungeon, it didn’t mean they had to feel like one.

He took a seat in one of the armchairs, closest to the fireplace, and made himself comfortable. Severus had stepped into an adjoining room as they entered and reappeared now wearing considerably less clothing: he had shed his teaching robes in favor of a white, button-down shirt, tucked neatly into a pair of black trousers that skimmed the sides of his lanky frame. Harry didn’t know why but his eyes were suddenly following Severus’ every movement. Severus’ body, pleasingly trim but with some evidence of muscle, particularly in his chest and arms, operated with an appealing fluidity and precision. Come to think of it, Harry realized he had never seen Severus without his teaching robes before…

As Severus sank into the sofa before him, his voice rang into the silence, startling Harry a bit. “Pokey!”

Harry felt his cheeks color slightly when he realized he had been staring, but was grateful for the distraction – and the fact that Severus had not seemed to notice his gaze. A small house elf Apparated into the room and bowed low, her nose touching the floor.

“Professor Snape, sir, how may Pokey assist you?”

“Tea and biscuits – two cups today.”

The elf’s large, orb-like eyes roved over to where Harry sat and she bowed in his direction, too, before speaking again. “Yes, sir, Pokey will bring Professor Snape and Harry Potter tea and biscuits!” She raised her tiny hand to snap her fingers, and with the faintest pop!, she was gone.

With feigned annoyance, Harry thought how nice it would have been for him, when he was a student, to be able to call a house elf to his dormitory whenever he wanted something from the kitchens – and to do so without the wrath of Hermione and her S.P.E.W. propaganda. Such was the luxury of being a professor, he supposed.

A few moments later, Pokey reappeared, carrying a silver tray with a teapot, two teacups and a plate of biscuits. She set it on the table between them and disappeared after making a cursory bow to the room. Severus sat forward and began pouring himself a cup, raising his eyes to Harry’s as if to confirm he wanted one, too. Harry did, and simply nodded once in return.

As they sat in silence, sipping their tea, Harry’s mind began to wander again. To his surprise, it wasn’t about Hogwarts and his many experiences here – it was about Evochi. He was quickly remembering why he had come here with Severus in the first place and found that his mind was eager to explore it further, instantly crowding itself with questions to ask. He set his tea down and grabbed a couple biscuits, then looked over at Severus.
“Would you mind if I asked you a few questions about Evochi?”

Severus looked up from his tea. “Not at all.”

Harry tried to pick a good starting point. “How many times have you used it?”

If Severus was surprised by the question, he said nothing to that effect. Instead, he sighed thoughtfully as he pursed his lips, casting his eyes upwards as though taking stock.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“Perhaps six or seven times. In the beginning it was mainly to ensure the potion I had brewed was successful – to see if it worked at all, in fact – but after that I used it normally.”

“What sorts of realities did you create?”

Severus narrowed his eyes slightly, feeling his heart stutter at the question. He remembered very clearly what realities he created – well, in truth, the one reality he created and merely visited multiple times – but had certainly not considered divulging this anyone else, much less Harry.

“Severus?”

“It was a rather private question, Potter.”

Something about the finality in Severus’ voice – and the sudden use of his surname – must have told Harry it had been a mistake to inquire. “I’m sorr—”

Severus held up his hand. “Do not apologize. You were merely curious, I understand.” He took a rather deliberate gulp of tea and swallowed hard. “Perhaps… I will be able to tell you one day.”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry blinked, weighing Severus’ response. Although he was sure this was the last thing Severus had intended, Harry found he couldn’t stop obsessing about what realities Severus would create with Evochi. He knew Severus had had a difficult childhood and endured a lot of strife while he was a student at Hogwarts. Harry’s mind then scanned quickly over all the other things he knew and had recently learned about Severus’ life. Suddenly, it hit him. Although he knew better, he couldn’t stop his brain-to-mouth filter sometimes, and the question tumbled out before he could stop himself.

“Was it about my mum? Lily?”

Severus froze and Harry regretted his behavior almost immediately. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I don’t know what I was thinking, you just asked me not to—”

“No,” Severus interrupted.

Harry stopped cold. “No…?”
“No, they were not about Lily. My realities.” Severus paused, taking a slow inhale of breath and closing his eyes briefly as he pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. Harry’s heart pounded in his chest while he held his breath, waiting for Severus to continue, hoping he hadn’t just ruined his chance of trying it for himself.

“I have no doubt if Evochi had been available in my youth, Lily would have become a part of those realities, but as it was, I didn’t learn of the potion until much later on, and how to brew it sometime after that. By the time I was creating my own realities, I had…” he paused, furrowing his brow as he cast his eyes downward. “I had a different focus.” Severus sighed, seeming to regret revealing even that much, but Harry scarcely noticed; he was busy processing what Severus had just said.

Harry had to admit this new revelation was only fueling his curiosities about the sorts of realities Severus might create, but found he stopped thinking about it almost at once as thoughts of his mother re-entered his mind. A heaviness settled around his heart as he remembered his last encounter with her in the Forbidden Forest. And with his dad, and Sirius and Remus, too. An urgent question forced its way out.

“So you can… add other people to the realities you create?”

“Yes. You may create whatever reality you want – and populate it, as it were, however you see fit.”

Feeling too transparent for his own liking, Harry looked away, his eyes drifting to an unfocused gaze. He could feel something deeply emotional transpiring and clenched his jaw, hoping it would be enough to stave it off.

“Harry?” Severus ventured, his tone somehow gentler.

Harry slowly moved his eyes to meet Severus’ but didn’t say anything. He could feel small pools of moisture gathering along his lower eyelids but he quickly rubbed his palms across his face and then looked away again. He was starting to understand how someone could drive themselves to madness with a substance like Evochi – creating realities, yet nothing is actually real once the potion wears off. Sure, your mind may think it is, but that’s a poor substitute for the part of you that isn’t satisfied with fleeting experiences. With fleeting people. Harry had already lost his parents once – well, four times, if you included the encounters in the Mirror of Erised, the duel with Voldemort in the graveyard and the Resurrection Stone – and wondered if he would have the heart to handle it again. Having never known them, Harry’s deepest desire had always been to talk to his parents. Just to talk. Or maybe more, if he could.

Perhaps sensing Harry’s inner turmoil, Severus leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees, intertwining his fingers. “Are you wondering what would happen if you create a reality with Evochi and put your parents into it? Or other people who you have lost?”

At Severus’ words, Harry dropped his head slightly, tears now running down his cheeks in earnest. He made no attempt to hide them this time, but they fueled a rising anger in him.

“What is the point of all this?” he asked suddenly. “This potion, these realities… it’s not real!” He had looked up while speaking, waving his hands about wildly to express his disenfranchised sentiments. “Sure, I could create a reality and put my parents in it so I could talk to them and, whatever, but it’s not really them, is it? They wouldn’t really be alive – they’d just be figments of my imagination!”

At this, Severus leaned over to place his hands gingerly on Harry’s flailing arms, trying to get him to sit back in his chair, clearly hoping the touch would have a calming effect. It did.
Severus’ touch temporarily broke Harry’s train of thought, diffusing much of his steam. He leaned back in his chair at Severus’ direction, panting a bit from the exertion of shouting. His face felt flushed and his cheeks were damp with tears. He was trying hard not to be mad at Severus for getting him excited about Evochi, but in his current state of mind, he could no longer see what possible benefit the potion might have.

Once he saw that Harry was calming down, Severus set out to clarify something. “You are correct, to a point. Nothing – no spell or potion – can bring back those we have lost, as I am sure you are aware.”

Harry nodded solemnly, wiping his palms across his cheeks again.

“Your parents would not be ‘real’ or ‘alive’ in this reality. But they would be in an Evochi-created reality. That is the distinction I believe you are missing.”

Harry blinked for a moment, as though allowing the words to make sense of themselves. “Wait. So… these realities I create, they aren’t just figments of my imagination? I’m not just… making it all up?”

“No. Your imagination is a layer of your conscious mind, not your subconscious. Evochi realities are created by the instincts, urges and desires of your subconscious mind. This potion isn’t a daydream. You do not sit back in a chair and think a scene into existence. That level of awareness is purely superficial and mind-invented. Because the subconscious can perceive things way beyond the reach or control of the conscious mind, what you achieve while under the influence of Evochi is something more akin to a higher consciousness. It is from that place that new, intensely vivid experiences can be created and explored.”

Harry suddenly felt quite foolish that he hadn’t grasped this concept when Severus first explained the potion to him; once again, he had been jumping to incorrect conclusions.

As his mind chewed on the possibilities again, Severus continued. “The reason you will remember the experience when you wake from the potion is because the last phase of the trance process transfers the experience into your conscious mind. Otherwise, this whole exercise would be pointless – you would never ‘remember’ anything, or at least not in the way you think about your memories now. The experience has to become part of you consciously before it has the potential to alter your existence.”

Harry had never heard Severus speak so esoterically before; it was almost poetic. To him, it had always seemed that Severus was only interested in things that required structure, logic and proven methods. He supposed Evochi had some of those elements, but this was certainly a new aspect to Severus’ personality he had never seen before. He decided that he very much liked it, and in fact made no attempt to hide the smile it affected.
Severus arched his left eyebrow at Harry’s reaction, then twitched the corner of his mouth into something passable as a grin. As he stood from the sofa, he reached into one of his trouser pockets and pulled out a small glass vial, holding it out for Harry to see. Its viscous contents undulated gracefully in the container, the soft light of the room accentuating the liquid’s shimmering, indigo hue. It struck Harry as looking remarkably like candy.

Licking his lips automatically, he asked, “What does it taste like?”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus found himself wondering that, too – although in his case, it wasn’t the potion he was admiring, it was Harry’s dazzled expression and moistened lips. He shook his head imperceptibly to rid himself of the thought.

“Enough questions, Potter. It is time you see for yourself.”

And with that, Severus re-pocketed the vial and motioned for Harry to follow him as he stepped through the adjoining door from the antechamber and into his private lab.
In Flux / Revelations

“Have a seat.”

Severus had pointed to a stool nestled under one of the wooden work tables. He gave his wand a quick flourish to illuminate the room, and then walked towards the back of the lab and into what appeared to be his private storeroom. Just before he stepped all the way inside, he leaned his head back out of the doorway and addressed Harry. “Wait there. I need to check on a rather… volatile potion I completed yesterday.” He paused, seeming to consider something. “Please, do not touch anything.”

Harry got the distinct impression Severus was unused to people in his private space and was struggling a bit with how much or how little to say. Harry grinned slightly, but nodded his assent, finding Severus’ meticulous nature rather humorous at this point. He also knew Severus was no doubt remembering Harry’s ineptitude for potion-making and wondering how much damage he could cause in the few minutes he would be unsupervised.

Harry pulled out the stool and sat down, resting his elbows on the marred surface of the table. As he glanced around, he took stock of his surroundings. The room was windowless and fairly small, but seemed more than adequate for one person to work. It was dimly lit, much like Severus’ quarters, and Harry was starting to sense the dungeons uniquely suited his former professor. Two large work tables stood parallel to each other in the center of the room, both with a stool or two underneath. The black stone walls were lined from floor to ceiling with miles of books and reference materials, glass containers and vials (some empty, others filled with strange-looking liquids, objects or insects), dried plants and herbs, and cauldrons of all shapes and sizes. Although everything clearly had its place, there was an aura of frequent use and well-worn familiarity about the space that he liked.

But above everything else, what Harry noticed most was the enticing scent the air carried; something he had detected upon entering the lab, too. He tilted his head back slightly and inhaled. He couldn’t place it exactly, wondering if perhaps it was a mixture of many things, considering all the potions that were brewed here. But it was familiar somehow… and intoxicating in a way he didn’t expect. He found it to be comforting and industrious and masculine… and arousing? Harry suddenly wanted more of it, and inhaled slowly, deeply, luxuriating in the scent.

At that moment, the storeroom door opened and Severus reappeared, now donning a black apron and dragon-hide gloves. In one hand, he carried a large, glass vial of something that looked like – though Harry could hardly believe his eyes – flameless fire. As his mind rapidly shifted from scents to potions, he heard himself blurt out a question into the silence.

“What is… that?”

Severus was heading towards Harry with the vial, the hint of a satisfied grin on his face, but continued past him in favor of a small storage enclosure on the back wall. As he swept by, a light rush of air tickled Harry’s nostrils. And then it hit him: Severus. The lingering scent in the room was Severus. Harry considered this new information for a moment, a fluttering sensation beginning to drum in the pit of his stomach. The last time a scent had captured his attention like this, it was the perfume of Ginny Weasley; hers, though, was sweetly reminiscent of exotic florals. But as that relationship had eventually dissolved, so too had his interest in anything floral – and truthfully, for women in general. Perhaps he had always known that, he wasn’t sure. It had just never seemed important, or relevant, and he had never really had the opportunity to explore it. But now… since the war was over, anyway… maybe he’d have a chance to see one way or another.
The sound of a door latching, combined with Severus’ deep voice, brought Harry back to the present. He quickly pushed the indulgent thoughts from his mind.

“That, Mr. Potter, is a fire balm. Something Madam Pomfrey requests of me on occasion. It is very difficult to produce accurately and can take up to six weeks to fully mature. I am very pleased to see this batch was successful.” Severus’ voice was laden with self-satisfaction.

Harry glanced over to the enclosure on the wall and then back up at Severus, his mind flooded with questions and feelings but finding none pertinent enough to ask or admit. He felt his cheeks flush lightly under Severus’ gaze and quickly averted his eyes.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus looked at Harry curiously, narrowing his eyes, wondering what had just transpired. It certainly did not seem to be about the fire balm. He continued to watch Harry as he shrugged the gloves off his hands and set them on the work table closest to him, removing the apron as well and draping it over the gloves. When Harry didn’t look back up at him, Severus became even more confused by his odd behavior.

“Harry?”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry had felt Severus’ gaze the whole time but wasn’t sure how to respond. He was distracted with the onslaught of confusing messages his brain – and groin – were sending him. He tried mentally blocking himself to the scent in the room, but now that he was acutely aware of it, it seemed to be seeping into every pore of his body. He paused for a moment longer, taking a deep breath and adjusting his body on the stool. “Just… thinking,” was all he managed.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Assuming Harry was nervous about Evochi, Severus nodded knowingly and pulled another stool over to sit next to him. “We can wait and do this another time if you are not ready. I fear I may have unduly pressured you.”

“No, that’s not it.” Harry paused again, seeming to steel himself. “I want to try it, you didn’t pressure me.”

Severus searched his eyes. “You are certain?” he asked, and Harry nodded, keeping his gaze fixed on Severus.

Severus sighed, feeling every bit like his consent in this case rallied against his better judgment, but could not decide why. Ultimately, he pushed the notion from his mind and walked over to the
entrance to the room. After assessing its layout, he pulled out his wand and addressed Harry.

“Step over here by me, I need to alter the room.”

Harry did as he was asked and walked over to stand next to Severus, surveying the room before them with what looked like a mixture of nervousness and curiosity. Severus pointed his wand at the closest of the two work tables and muttered a spell under his breath, instantly transfiguring it into something that resembled a large chaise. Severus nodded his head in its direction.

“Sit.”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry looked at Severus and then walked slowly over to the chaise, sitting tentatively on the edge of it. The dark gray fabric was smooth and soft under his fingertips.

“Make yourself comfortable. It is just a chair, it will not bite,” Severus mused.

Harry grimaced up at Severus and then looked around at the chaise. It wasn’t the chair he was worried about. His pulse quickened as a dawning realization hit him: although he had felt confident in his assertions, he really was quite nervous about trying Evochi. Deciding he could not turn back now, however, he swung his legs up and turned, stretching his body out and leaning back against the angled rise of the chair.

“Why a chaise?” he wondered aloud.

Severus had been gathering items from the shelves lining the walls before he stepped up to a black, high-backed chair and emptied his arms. Harry had not noticed the chair in the room and wondered if it had always been there. The elegance of its carved top rail and sloped armrests didn’t seem to fit with the heavy, rugged work tables.

“Did you wish to stand while under the influence of Evochi?” Severus asked simply, looking over his shoulder.

“Well, no, but why a chaise?”

“Why not a chaise? I assumed you would be more comfortable there than on a bed. If you would prefer that, I can conjure one.”

Harry felt his cheeks color slightly. “I need to be lying down for Evochi?”

“Not precisely, but it is safest that way. Once you are under Evochi’s influence, your conscious mind will be subdued completely, which means you will not have control over your physical body. If you were to be sitting on a stool or upright in a chair, you would slump onto the floor and likely injure yourself.”

Harry thought about this for a moment and then positioned himself squarely on the chaise, testing it by letting his whole body slacken. The chaise turned out to be more than adequate for the task, he found, wide enough to keep his arms and legs in place once he relaxed. Perhaps Severus did know what he was doing.
Severus had watched the whole thing transpire, an amused expression on his face. He might have chuckled had it not been for the fact that he’d done the very same thing before his first experience. He put a hand in his pocket then and ran a finger reverently along the vial holding Evochi, remembering, and then finally pulled it out to look at it properly as he walked over to Harry. He then summoned the high-back chair and positioned it next to the chaise before sitting down.

“I am giving you a half batch this time—”


Severus sighed. “As you have never used Evochi before, I need to observe its effects before I will feel comfortable administering a full dose. Honestly, Potter, did you not learn anything in my Potions class? You must always ease yourself into transformative substances.”

Harry blinked. “We talked about Evochi in your Potions class…?”

Severus rolled his eyes. “No, of course not. If I had, every one of you imbeciles would have whinged incessantly about it, begging me to teach you about its effects and how to brew it.”

At this, Harry laughed in earnest. “Would not!”

Severus arched an eyebrow, unconvinced, and muttered something noncommittal under his breath. “Anyway, I will start you with a half batch. Not to worry, the effects will be identical to a full batch. The only thing that changes is the time you spend under its influence. It will be—”

“—exactly half,” Harry interrupted, still smiling.

“Enough cheek, Potter,” Severus retorted, but he was fighting back his own smirk.

Harry was glad for the sudden levity in the conversation, as it was going a long way towards making him feel comfortable with the process he was about to undergo.

“So how does this work?”

Severus eyed him impatiently, as though he were just about to explain this if only Harry would have given him the chance. Harry clamped his mouth shut then and waited, crossing his arms in his lap. He found that his nervousness was making way for a burgeoning excitement and anticipation and didn’t want to delay anymore.

“The potion is ingested orally, but may also induce an altered state if the fumes are inhaled. Therefore, you must be careful not to smell it while you drink, or it may take effect before you’ve had a chance to finish swallowing.”

“It works that fast?” Harry asked incredulously.
“It can, yes. Either way, you do not want your body to relax completely before you are done swallowing. If the potion does not get the opportunity to spread everywhere throughout your body – well, the result may be unfortunate, to say the least.”

“What happens…?” Harry heard how quiet his voice had become and Severus’ brow furrowed.

“A partially or incorrectly ingested dose of Evochi could force you into a coma.”

Harry felt his heart skip a few beats before settling into a rapid pace. A question rose up in his mind but he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer – but his curiosity always got the best of him.

“A… permanent coma?”

Severus looked down at the vial in his hands. “Yes and no. It depends on many factors. There are not a lot of recorded cases of Evochi-induced comas, as you might imagine, but that has more to do with the scarcity of the substance than anything. The dangers are still inherent.” At this, Severus looked back up at Harry. “To further complicate matters, the medical community is, at best, barely aware of Evochi’s existence, and thus they have little experience treating the more ill effects. This is one of the reasons I will be studying and overseeing your usage. I am, I think, uniquely qualified – or as qualified as it is possible to be, given the circumstances.”

“Why does… I mean… how does it result in a coma?”

“I do not know precisely, but my belief is that it shifts you into a stasis between consciousness and subconsciousness. You would likely be aware, on some level, that you were alive and trapped inside the mind, yet completely unable to control the functions of the physical body or fully return to your consciousness.” Severus frowned. “The worst sort of existence.”

Harry shuddered. Sometimes he wondered if it wasn’t better to stay ignorant and regretted asking the question in the first place. Yet, at the same time, he was grateful to learn as much as he could going in. He knew it was not in his nature to shy away from things – especially those that had elements of uncertainty or danger – and so reaffirmed his decision to move ahead as planned.

After all, he knew Severus well enough by now to trust that he would be taken care of to the best of his former professor’s abilities. Which, thankfully, were considerable.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“Ready?” Severus’ voice was calm and even.

Harry leaned back and situated himself against the chaise, pressing his head firmly into the cushion as though to let his body – or the chair – know that he intended for everything to stay put exactly as it was now. He looked over at Severus when he was done and nodded, swallowing as his mouth went suddenly dry.

Severus pulled his chair closer and leaned over Harry. “Since this is a half dose, I estimate you will be under for thirty minutes.”

“Is that all?”

“Spare me the pout, Potter. Thirty minutes will be more than sufficient for your first try.”
But Harry was having a hard time believing that thirty minutes would be enough – for anything, really – or that it now meant a full dose would only last an hour. How could he create and experience a virtual reality in an hour?

Severus seemed to pick up on Harry’s discouragement. “Harry…” he started, causing Harry’s eyes to snap up to his own. “Do you generally remember your dreams upon waking?”

“Yes, I think so,” Harry replied.

“And do you sometimes have the sensation that a dream lasted for most of the night?”

Harry pondered this for a moment, then felt his face brighten at the realization. “Yeah…?”

“Then you will be displeased to learn that dreams rarely last beyond twenty to twenty-five minutes. It is merely your perception that leads you to believe otherwise. Time is irrelevant to the subconscious.” Harry made to speak but Severus cut across him. “A lot can happen in thirty minutes, Harry – even more so in an hour. You will come to find it is… plenty.”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus pulled out an empty glass vial and uncorked the Evochi, carefully pouring half of its contents into the new container. When he was done, he handed the new vial over to Harry, who first wrapped his hand around it so gingerly that he almost dropped it. Quickly tightening his grip, Harry held his breath as he kept the substance as far from his face as possible. Severus then re-corked his own vial of Evochi and placed it in a small metal rack below the arm of his chair.

Harry felt his gaze drift to the vial in his hands and was surprised by how warm it felt, the indigo surface of the liquid seeming to pulse at him, even in the dim light of the lab.

“Before I administer the potion, you will need to intentionally hold in your mind the reality you want to create before saying the incantation aloud.” At this Severus reached down and took possession of the vial Harry had been holding.

“There is a spell that goes with this potion, too?”

“Indeed. I did say Evochi was a very complicated substance, did I not? With that comes a certain amount of safeguards.”

“But I thought you said the potion could affect you just by smelling it, or put you into a coma if you don’t take it correctly? How would someone know there is a spell that goes with it, too?”

Severus appeared to smile at this, but it was pained and devoid of mirth. “They wouldn’t… necessarily. That is one of the reasons why the potion is so dangerous. And why it so hard to come by.”

Harry suddenly marveled at Severus – not only had he acquainted himself with the substance in the first place, but had also learned how to brew it successfully and master its subtle and exacting intricacies. Harry wasn’t sure he wanted to know how that whole process had transpired, but realized for the first time how dangerous the life of a Potions Master could be, often having to use oneself as a test subject simply in the name of research and advancement. With a shock, Harry also thought about all of the things that could have gone wrong over the years – but hadn’t – and regarded Severus now
with a renewed expression of awe.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus straightened in his chair when he saw the look of wonder Harry was giving him. He wasn’t sure what it meant, but still felt the familiar twisting in his core that said Harry was giving him that look again. Severus shifted uncomfortably, hoping the scant light in the room was dim enough to hide whatever tinge might dare to color his cheeks. He found the scrutiny unsettling.

“What?” Severus asked finally.

Harry’s eyes widened as he swallowed quickly, looking for all the world like he was back in a Potions classroom and had just been caught not paying attention. “Nothing!” was all he managed to say, although his voice was much higher than normal.

Severus sighed. “Well, if you are quite done with these antics, I would like to begin so we are not here all day.”

Harry blanched. “Sorry…”

Severus regretted his harshness almost immediately but was at a loss for how to take it back. Old habits died hard, it seemed. “No matter. Let us simply proceed.” He paused a moment then, mentally recalling the conversation and where they had left off. “Yes… the incantation.”

Harry sat up straighter, no doubt wanting to pay close attention to this part.

“First, fill your mind with the reality of what you want to create – not the details, the subconscious will fill that in once you are there. Simply decide on the structure of it, the framework, along with your intentions and any people you want to… see. Do this now.”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry nodded but felt his mouth go drier. Although he had followed Severus into his private lab earlier with the intention of talking to his parents again, now that he was here, moments away from his first experience with Evochi, he found that his resolve was fading fast. He was once again overcome with painful emotions and he quickly realized he would have to change his approach. At least this first time. Besides, he justified to himself, he only had a half hour – that was hardly enough time to do much with his parents. Perhaps in a future draught…

“Harry?”

Harry steeled his resolve for the second time that day, firmly holding his intention in his mind, having opted now for something much simpler and easier. This was his test run with Evochi, after all, and he wanted to get the hang of it first. “Yes. Done.”

But Severus had obviously seen the conflict on his face. “You are sure?” he prompted.

Harry nodded vigorously, hoping Severus would just continue before he could change his mind.
again. He closed his eyes in an attempt to steady his breathing. Why was he so nervous?

“Very well. Next you will say aloud the incantation, ‘prodeo quod strenuus sanctimonia animadverto’ and then I will administer the potion to you. Loosely translated, that means ‘activate the virtual reality.’”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry took a deep breath and looked directly into Severus’ eyes. Severus felt his heart skip a beat as he took in the meaning behind the young man’s lucid, green gaze: protect me, watch over me, bring me back safely. Severus found he could do nothing for a moment but stare back intently, feeling the connection between them tingling in every fiber of his being. Finally, he inclined his head slightly, confirming that he understood, and would do so – always, he realized.

When he found his voice again, he spoke.

“Now tip your head back. After you say the incantation, I will pour the contents of the vial into your mouth. Swallow once when I am done and then close your eyes. Let yourself relax into the sensation. I will be here the entire time.” He paused, contemplating the strange sentiment he was about to impart. “You will be fine,” he added. It felt foreign on his lips but he sensed it was needed.

He watched Harry exhale, his relief both visible and audible. Then he wet his lips with his tongue.

“Prodeo quod strenuus sanctimonia animadverto,” he stated carefully and clearly.

With that, Severus leaned over and poured the contents of the vial into Harry’s mouth, watching as the indigo fluid layered itself into thick ribbons on his tongue. When the last drop fell from the rim of the vial, he pulled his hand back and watched Harry swallow hard, a strange and surprised expression settling into his features. As his eyes slid closed, his head lolled a bit to the side and his body went limp. Severus smiled softly as he admired the handsome face before him. He remembered that sense of serenity, that bliss, and found he envied Harry for what he was about to experience.

Sighing, he leaned over and grabbed a black, leather-bound journal, glanced up at the clock on the wall, and then scribbled the start time and date on the first available page, his quill the only noise in the room.

Perhaps one day he would feel compelled to use Evochi again. Perhaps. If it didn’t cause him as much agony as it did joy. Unless… no. No! He mustn’t let himself dwell on fantasy, and dismissed the thought immediately.

Unless…
Draught No. 1

Harry heard himself say the incantation aloud but was concentrating so hard on the vial in Severus’ outstretched hand that he barely registered the fact it was him speaking. He opened his mouth then, accepting the first drop of Evochi, followed immediately by the rest of it, his tongue becoming laden with the surprisingly heavy, warm, viscous substance. After Severus tipped the empty vial upright again, Harry closed his mouth, his heart thumping nervously in his chest. Trying to follow Severus’ instructions as diligently as he could, he swallowed hard. The thick fluid coated his throat and he caught his first semblance of taste: a tangy licorice flavor laced with a subtle sweetness, reminiscent of blueberries. There was a medicinal and organic aftertaste to it as well but Harry was not familiar enough with potions to isolate any particular ingredient. And even if he had been well versed in this area, there would not have been time enough to think.

The room around him went dark as his eyelids shut wearily. Suddenly, he knew no space or time, had no particular physicality, and was robbed of all his senses save one: his mind. He existed merely as a thought? His memories seemed well enough intact, though, and as he roved through them, a sharp panic snatched his breath away. Had he just died? This sensation was remarkably familiar to his experience at King’s Cross station, with Dumbledore. But he hadn’t been dead there, either. So what was happening?

At that moment, the darkness lifted around him and he found that he was laying on something solid, amidst a bright but innocuous grey fog. It was slowly giving way to his sight… yet there was nothing to see. He blinked as he looked around, seeing no borders or boundaries to this place, and instinctively lifted his hands to his face. He was surprised when he touched his own skin, and felt himself touch his skin. Immediately he patted his hands down the rest of his body, finding it clothed exactly as it had been in Severus’ private lab: his careworn denims, his Gryffindor Quidditch t-shirt, his favorite zip-up jumper. More fog cleared around him then and his body came fully into view. But what was he laying on? As he sat up to look, he realized the futility of it: everything around him was nonexistent. Blank.

Then, a word forced its way into the front of his mind: Evochi.

Everything seemed to rush back to him in that moment and suddenly it all made sense. Harry quickly dismissed the notion that he was dead and instead remembered the reality he had wanted to create, his intentions, and allowed it to fill his mind and body completely. He wasn’t sure what else to do, but this place, whatever it was, seemed to be waiting for him.

And that’s when it happened.

As though watching an artist in time lapse, the space around him painted itself true in rapid succession, first with broad strokes and wide swaths of color, then the shapes and outlines of familiar objects, then every detail and nuance, all materializing before him with the speed and accuracy of a seasoned expert. All of his senses returned, the air filling his nostrils and lungs, the sunshine warming the dark hair on his head, the grass dewy beneath his fingertips. He felt his mouth open as he looked wide-eyed at the scene before him: the Quidditch pitch at Hogwarts never looked so magnificent. The oval stadium with its towering House-themed bleachers; the goal posts standing sentinel at either end of the field, their flags rippling gently in the summer breeze; and… and the most beautiful racing broom Harry had ever laid eyes on before, hovering a couple feet above the ground in the center of it all. The burnished wood handle of the broom seemed to wink at him as it glinted in the morning light; beckoning him, tempting him.

He got up and walked over to it, hesitating for a moment as though he fully expected it to be a
mirage that would disappear as soon as he tried to reach for it. But as his fingers outstretched, he felt them make contact with the smooth handle. Something inside of him soared. This was real! He wasted no time from there and ran his hand along the length of it, feeling the broom twitch eagerly under his touch. From the tip to the tail, it called to him.

Merlin, it was perfect.

Finally, he could resist no more, and with a deep breath, he mounted it.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Although it seemed such a simple thing, the sensation of flying and riding a broomstick had always been a source of pure, unadulterated joy for Harry. It was something that came naturally to him, effortless, even as an eleven-year-old – then just a bright-eyed child new to the Wizarding world. It was as though he was born to do it – that it was meant for him, and he for it. It had been an easy decision, selecting it as his starting point; his first foray into Evochi.

As he zoomed around the pitch, he closed his eyes and sat back on the broom, feeling the wind on his face refreshing him, lifting him, nourishing his wounded spirit. It had been so long since he had done this – even longer since he had allowed himself to enjoy it for the simple luxury that it was. The past year of his life had been so devoted to a singular cause, and he’d been so focused on succeeding that he’d not had the chance to partake in even the smallest pleasures of life. But here, in the solitude of his own creation, any and every possibility was open to him. Even something basic, like the bleachers surrounding him – empty as they currently were – were not a problem. Harry guessed that if he had wanted or needed a crowd, he merely had to think them into existence. The power of that was electrifying.

As he flew on, he leaned down over the broom, grasping the handle tightly with his hands. He felt his muscles remembering the mounts, the stances, the tension in all the right joints. He swerved, dove, climbed and turned, reacquainting himself with the sport, the mechanics.

Then out of the corner of his eye, he saw something catch the sunlight; a sharp, glimmering light. Without looking, without thinking, he knew the source immediately. His instincts were as sharp as they ever were and he turned the broom abruptly to the left, in the direction he had seen it, and sped up to chase the Snitch. The tiny, golden ball must not have anticipated Harry would be so quick, for it fluttered its wings indignantly and then streaked off ahead of him.

Harry grinned. He always did like the chase.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

As Harry leveled out his broom, the Snitch now seated firmly in his right hand, a familiar feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction washed over him. He knew he didn’t need Evochi to experience this particular reality, but still found there was a certain freedom and… magic… in being able to create it exactly as he wanted, down to the finest detail. Flying alone, early on a summer morning, no distractions, no responsibilities, no worries. Such an idyllic existence was something nigh unknown to him.
But it was also then that he thought about his time at Hogwarts, and the people there, and being Captain of his Quidditch team, and... and Voldemort. He felt guilty, somehow, indulging in this reality with all that had happened. His stomach clenched ruefully and a familiar impulse stung at the corners of his eyes. He promptly directed his broom to the ground near the edge of the field, and as his feet touched, he pitched himself forward onto his knees and landed softly on the grass. He was unable to stop the loud sob that forced itself from his mouth. He cupped his palms to his face and wept, his shoulders heaving. He cried for the people he’d loved and lost; for the family he never knew; for the friends that stood by him, through everything, no questions asked; for the sacrifices everyone had made in his name.

But mostly he cried for the simple fact that his life was now his, and his alone, now that all was said and done.

He wasn’t sure how long he had stayed like that – in fact, how long had he been here at all? – but finally the tears relented and he breathed deeply, as though it was the first time he had ever filled his lungs with air, hearing his breath hitch as he did so. Exhausted, he rolled onto his back and collapsed, feeling the wet grass dampen his shirt, his arms splaying out to his sides.

A lightness descended upon him then and he lie still for a moment, his cheeks still wet with tears, a salty tang on his lips. An irrepressible smile started to grace his lips. He thought he might start laughing then, but felt oddly embarrassed, as though it would be the most inappropriate and absurd thing to do in that situation. But he couldn’t help himself. The next thing he knew, he was clutching his sides, gripped with a giddiness he couldn’t explain, his peals of laughter echoing around the vast, empty stadium.

That was when Severus’ words whispered in his mind.

“...some might say avoidance, but I rather find it to have a healing effect.”

He stopped laughing then, his smile slowly fading in favor of the comprehension now settling in his mind – in fact, to every cell of his body. He didn’t know where his next realities might take him, but one thing was for certain: this was the most alive he’d felt in months. And if a potion could deliver that... well, then perhaps it was worth exploring more.

Thoughts of Severus began to appear in his mind as he remembered their conversation from earlier. He could even see Severus’ face above him now, and it seemed to be saying something – something that sounded vaguely like his name.

“Harry?” it seemed to whisper. It was Severus’ voice calling to him, but it still seemed so far away.

Harry blinked hard a few times and rubbed his eyes blearily, the stadium around him now rapidly starting to dissolve, replacing itself with the dimly lit bookshelves and potion-making accoutrements of Severus’ private lab. Harry’s eyes tried to focus on Severus’ face as they adjusted to the darkness in the room.

“Twenty-eight minutes,” Severus announced, as though that answered something. He sat back in his chair and closed his journal, watching as Harry looked slowly around the room, trying to get his bearings.

“Am I back?”

“Indeed,” answered Severus, looking both pleased and relieved.

Harry groaned while trying to sit up, half-slumped as he was in the chaise. His neck was stiff and the
movement sent a jolt of pain down his back. Rubbing at it morosely and grimacing, he felt the skin on his cheeks pull tight. He pressed a few fingers against his face; it was the dried tear tracks. He surreptitiously rubbed the evidence away.

He thought again about sitting up, but found his body still felt abnormally heavy, as though from lack of use – just like in the morning, upon waking. Except, if he had heard Severus right, his altered reality had lasted less than a half hour, whereas it was perhaps seven or more hours that he slept – and he was even more drained now than he ever was after sleeping.

Severus got up and moved his chair to the far side of the room before walking back over to where Harry was lying on the chaise. Leaning down, he braced one arm under Harry’s left elbow and motioned with his other hand for Harry to sit up. Harry did so, with Severus’ assistance, stretching stiffly as he went.

“Come, Potter. It is best we get some food and drink in you.”

And with that, Severus guided Harry out of the lab and into the antechamber of his quarters. Before he closed the door behind them, though, he turned back, eyeing the chaise across the room significantly, remembering. He knew if today was any indication, Harry was going to have quite a journey ahead of him.

With that thought now heavy on his mind, he flicked his wand just inside the entrance to the lab, watching it go dark as the door closed with a soft click. He turned back to face Harry, who was staring off to the side, a dazed expression on his face.

Severus sighed.

He hoped he was doing the right thing.
Interlude – A Brief History

Evochi is from the Italian verb *evocare*, which means to evoke or conjure.

Pronunciation: EH-vho-key

Behind the scenes in this story, Harry had asked Severus why the potion was called Evochi and if he knew of its origins. Severus did, of course.

The wizard credited with its invention was the noted Italian alchemist, Alessandro Gallo, c. 1824. To keep the potion under wraps, Alessandro had assigned it a common name to use whenever he referenced it in his lab notes and journals. Very few documents ever linked the name Evochi to its Latin namesake, *Sanctimonia Animadverto*, but if one was shrewd in their research (as Severus was) then it was simply a matter of connecting the volumes of information available on Evochi with the limited and obscure references to its Latin name – and formula – in only a handful of potions history tomes. Since making the correlation required knowledge of both names, it allowed the potion to stay comfortably out of sight from all but a learned and fastidious few. An intentional maneuver, no doubt – smart man, that Alessandro.

Since Severus frequently had his nose in a potions text of some kind while at Hogwarts (not to mention a mind capable of logging and analyzing vast amounts of information) he became curious about the potential link sometime during his sixth year. It took a few months to track down the rest of the required information in order to confirm his hypothesis, but he eventually did. Just as he prepared to start working with it, though, Voldemort’s fated murders of Lily and James Potter sent his world into a tailspin.

Shortly thereafter, in 1981, he accepted the appointment of Potions Master at Hogwarts. His thoughts of Evochi were dashed aside quickly and forgotten as he settled into his new post, busy with lesson plans, Head of House tasks, and his new identity as double-agent spy. Therefore, it would be many years later (seven, to be exact) before Severus would rediscover his old notes and interest in Evochi. When he did, he immediately dove into learning its craft, refusing to waste another seven years.

Yet, although he had a veritable treasure trove of ingredients, equipment and resources at his disposal at Hogwarts, it still took Severus about ten years – working only as his spare time allowed – to fully master the potion and all of its intricacies, testing and modifying and customizing it scrupulously until it was perfect. It was late into this working period, in 1996, when he finally administered his first full dose to himself, in the spring of Harry’s fifth year.
Harry sat at the Head Table in the Great Hall, absentmindedly pushing food around his plate with a fork. Severus, seated to his right, glanced over every few moments, trying to assess Harry’s state of mind, becoming increasingly concerned that he might actually be suffering from his first experience with Evochi.

The room around them was empty, save for a few members of the staff wandering in or out, so when Severus spoke, his voice seemed louder than normal as it cut through the silence.

“You’ve barely touched your food. Are you well?” he asked, watching Harry jump slightly at the sound.

“Yeah… I think so,” he answered, then sighed, lowering his gaze to his hands. “Does it always feel like this?”

Severus furrowed his brow. “Like what?”

Harry seemed to consider his answer for a moment. “Like this.” He drew a hand down the length of his body in one sweeping motion, though Severus had no idea what he was attempting to indicate by doing so. Harry seemed to notice this as well and then shook his head slightly. “I feel groggy and… heavy, like I just can’t snap out of it. I’m exhausted. I remember my reality and it was fine. Normal, I think. So why do I feel like this?”

Severus thought back to his first experience with Evochi and realized, with a surge of relief, that what Harry was describing was simply the after-effects of the potion, the recuperation phase, as opposed to some kind of adverse reaction. Although there was always the possibility of such a thing happening, he’d felt it unlikely with Evochi. It was one of the reasons he felt confident shepherding Harry through this process; that despite the potion’s potential consequences, it still had the power to help Harry like nothing else could. Severus was gambling on the fact that Harry wasn’t the type who thrived by talking his way through things, as traditional therapy demanded; rather, he felt Harry would do best by experiencing his way through them. Time would tell.

“I suggest we return to my quarters; I think you will be more comfortable there.” Severus gestured his head towards the center of the cavernous room to suggest that the Great Hall was not an ideal locale for a discussion of this, or any other, sort.

Harry looked up at him and then around the Hall, seeming to notice it for the first time since they’d arrived. “Yeah, sure…” he said with a yawn. He pushed his plate away and stood up, the legs of his chair scraping heavily against the floor. Severus stood as well and motioned for Harry to follow him out the staff door at the end of the Head Table.

Severus took a seat on the sofa in his antechamber; Harry again opted for the armchair closest to the fireplace. So much had happened in the last couple hours. And Severus, too, had experienced some firsts. Harry was not the first guest in his private quarters, certainly, but he was the only visitor Severus had ever fretted about. The worry proved completely unfounded, though, as the actual experience of having Harry in his midst was… unexpectedly comforting. He filed that away for later
It had also been his first time observing someone under the influence of Evochi. His mind’s eye remembered what he had seen with Harry. It was this, more than anything, that made him grateful he had experienced his own Evochi sessions unsupervised. He resolved himself to discussing it, but only if Harry asked.

Looking over at the young man seated across from him, Severus decided to offer a little more insight into what it meant to use Evochi – but chose his words carefully, just to be safe.

“What you are feeling is normal, Harry. Evochi is rather unique that way.”

Harry slumped back into his chair and snorted. “That’s what you call unique?”

Severus shot him a rather indignant look, causing Harry to quickly avert his eyes. He regretted it almost immediately, inwardly cursing the long-suffering habits of their teacher-student days.

“I am trying to help you, Harry.” Yet who, exactly, he was trying to convince, he did not know.

Harry sat forward and propped his forehead in his fingers, his elbows on his knees. “I know, I’m sorry, I’m just—”

“—disappointed,” Severus finished matter-of-factly.

Harry lifted his head and stared back at Severus, his mouth open slightly. He blinked slowly. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Always know what I am thinking!”

The corner of Severus’ mouth twitched slightly. He rather enjoyed the fact that, ever since their Occlumency lessons fifth year, Harry had seemed to grow increasingly paranoid about the notion that Severus could read his mind at will and without warning. And Severus did nothing to dispel this paranoia, of course, finding it a harmless and amusing sort of ruse. However, the gravity of Harry’s current situation warranted a serious response, and so Severus shelved his mischievous streak for now, the ghost of a smirk disappearing from his lips.

“It is all over your face. I know that look well.” Severus pressed his lips into a thin line as he contemplated his next admission. “It is how I used to feel after Evochi, too.”

When Harry’s eyes snapped back up to his, he knew it had been the right thing to say – in fact, it might have been exactly what Harry was hoping he’d say.

“It… it was?” Severus nodded once and Harry plowed on. “Why does it happen? I mean, I was only under for about thirty minutes – what is this going to be like after an hour?”

“I did tell you an hour would be plenty, did I not?”

“Well, sure, I guess… but you didn’t say why.”

Severus sighed. “I do not proclaim to understand every contingent of Evochi, Harry. Most of what I know is simply taken from my own experiences. Now that I get the opportunity to observe and study you, it will only round out my research.”

Harry sat up suddenly, the realization hitting his face before he spoke. “That’s right, you watched my
Severus blanched, furious with himself for offering up the very conversation he was hoping to avoid. He decided the only reasonable tactic was to try and ignore the question altogether. He resumed course with Harry’s previous query instead.

“The reason you feel so drained is because to the subconscious, you really did just experience everything that was in your session, and in exactly the manner it appeared to have happened. However, since the subconscious is more powerful than the conscious, it has the effect of magnifying the experience. You will feel it intensely; much more so than if you had simply experienced it here, in the conscious mind. What you are feeling now should pass within the hour.”

Harry had tried to interject while Severus was talking, but all of this new information had clearly derailed his intent. Instead, he just sat there, taking it all in.

“Vivid experiences in the mind create vivid experiences for the physical and mental faculties as well. It is all interrelated,” Severus continued. “This is also why I am not allowing you to take Evochi more than once per week. And, once I am satisfied it has had the desired effect, you will be ceasing it altogether.”

“Why? I thought you said it wasn’t dangerous?”

“It isn’t. Well, no more dangerous than your normal life—” At this, Severus caught his words and stopped abruptly, looking quickly at Harry, whose face had also frozen momentarily. Then, Harry began laughing in earnest. “You knew what I meant, I think,” Severus corrected, the faintest hint of a flush coloring his cheeks.

Harry was still chuckling as he nodded. “Yeah, I did.” He just grinned at Severus for a moment, amused by the fact that he had caught Severus in an unintentional joke of his own making, something his careful demeanor rarely allowed. Harry liked the way even a restrained smile warmed the features of Severus’ face – something Harry was also not accustomed to seeing, even with their newly-forged friendship – yet it suited Severus more than he knew.

Severus shifted uncomfortably, unsure of what to say, but hoped the skin behind his ears would soon be back to its normal color. Fortunately, Harry resumed his questions before the awkward moment could draw out any further.

“Is Evochi addictive?”

Grateful to be back on topic, Severus continued his explanation. “No, the substance itself is not addictive. However, it is easy to become addicted to the escapism, and for the mind to get too attached to the virtual realities. Similar to what I told you initially about the Mirror of Erised, there are also those who put too much stock in what they see with Evochi. After a while, it becomes difficult
to distinguish between physical reality and virtual reality. This overlap can create a dependency on the elixir, which in turn distorts both realities to the point where the mind slowly goes insane.”

Harry shuddered lightly. “So what effect are you hoping for me?” There was genuine curiosity in his voice even though his tone was quieter and more tentative now.

Severus realized then that Harry had never asked that question of him before. It struck him as odd, as that would have been one of his first questions had someone offered Evochi to him. Then again, his trust was given only under exceptional circumstances (and even then sometimes with restrictions), whereas Harry tended to trust people implicitly until they proved themselves unworthy of that trust. Foolish boy, Severus chided to himself, giving his head a small shake. Then again, it hadn’t just been anyone offering Evochi to him, had it?

Severus exited his thoughts and looked back over at Harry. He wasn’t sure he was ready to contemplate the meaning of Harry’s trust just yet. And as for his question, how forthright should Severus be? He decided to start with the least complicated answer.

“At a minimum, my hope is that Evochi will allow you to get away from the memory of the war for a while and enjoy a much-deserved respite.”

Severus watched a smile bloom on Harry’s face and was relieved the response placated him, at least for now, as he wasn’t sure he was prepared to elaborate on that yet, either.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus spoke from his seat on the sofa as Harry prepared to leave. “I shall see you next Sunday, then?”

“Yeah,” Harry affirmed with a nod, and was halfway out the door when Severus spoke again.

“Wait… Harry, is that your bag?”

Harry stopped and turned, looking in the direction Severus pointed. Discreetly, he reached over to pick up the backpack, a sheepish expression on his face. “What?” he finally asked, a wary tone to his voice.

“I did not see you bring that in. What is the bag for?” Then suddenly, it hit him. “Did you believe you were—”

—staying over, yeah.” Harry sighed, cutting off Severus in what seemed an effort to spare them both any more embarrassment. Harry’s face flushed as he looked traitorously at the bag, then dropped his gaze. “I wasn’t sure. You said I would stay at Hogwarts with you while I used Evochi, so I just assumed…” He cleared his throat. “Anyway, I already had it packed, so I just brought it with me.” He looked back up then, clearly assessing Severus’ reaction.

But Severus’ mind was spinning with this heady development; at the realization that Harry would have stayed in his quarters if that had been his meaning. He wondered then if Harry was expecting a new invitation. He managed to compose himself quickly, knowing that every second he waited was causing Harry to retreat a little more.

“You may stay, if that suits you,” Severus offered, although his voice was more tentative than he
intended. “I had only meant that you would stay here while under the influence of Evochi, to ensure that all goes as planned.” But no sooner had it left his mouth than his mind was already chastising him for voicing it. Regret pierced his insides when he saw the hurt flash across Harry’s face.

“No, it’s fine…” Harry recovered quickly. “I should be getting back to Grimmauld Place anyway. I’ll just head home after our Evochi sessions, that makes the most sense.” He slung the bag over his shoulder.

“Harry—”

“Don’t. It’s okay, really. I just misunderstood you, is all. I had wondered about the offer anyway – I mean, really? Stay here with you in your quarters?” He gave a soft snort of mock disbelief. Then, clearly not wanting to endure the humiliation for another second or give Severus a chance to respond, he forced a small smile and raised one hand briefly as a parting gesture. And with that, he swept from the doorway and was gone.

Severus’ lips were parted, words already perched on his tongue. There were things he wanted to say, had to say, but Harry would not hear them now. He sighed, frustrated with himself at the callous explanation he had just given Harry. It really spoke more to his own insecurities than the notion of Harry kipping on his sofa, even though not once in his nearly seventeen years of living at Hogwarts had anyone ever spent the night in his quarters. Any liaisons he had over the years had always been offsite (and always unfulfilling beyond the most basic physical release, he sadly recalled), conducting them as he did to avoid sullying the sanctuity that Hogwarts had become for him.

But for Harry? That was different. Very different. The anticipation of Harry’s visit to his quarters and lab had Severus fraught with a tension he didn’t quite understand, but the actual experience had deflated his concerns immediately with its natural ease and comfortable familiarity.

Severus also realized he had worked himself up for nothing about Evochi. Harry took it in strides. He took everything in strides. No doubt his life to this point had taught him the power of resilience and adaptability, and Severus very much admired him for it. In fact, these past few months of getting to know Harry had been some of the most surprising of his life. Not without their share of challenges, certainly, although that was probably more him than Harry, but he remembered early on the profound and disorienting realization that Harry was not in fact a miniature of his cocksure father, as he had always assumed; rather, Harry was more like his mother. That had rattled Severus more than anything else he had discovered. He hated being wrong about people, but also conceded Harry had never got a fair trial from him, either. It was times like this when he couldn’t help but lament on how different things might have been when Harry was a student if he hadn’t jumped to conclusions or let the strikingly similar physicality to James unhinge him.

He also knew he could stoke these regrets forever and still not change the past, so he let it go – again. Indeed, this was the main reason Severus had set himself earnestly to the task of getting to know Harry. If only he could make up for lost time, perhaps it would mollify his nagging conscience some and allow him to redeem his transgressions in Harry’s eyes. Or some of them, at least.

Yet no one was more surprised than Severus to find he really liked Harry – the young man he actually was, not the insolent child Severus thought he knew – and enjoyed being in his company, sometimes more than he dared to admit. And he knew it was self-serving in many ways to offer Evochi to Harry, but when he thought Harry might actually take off on some ill-fated traveling, he had panicked. He didn’t know how to tell Harry he wanted him to stay; needed him to stay. It was true, everything he had said about Evochi’s power to help Harry move past the shadows of his life, but the proximity and timeframe required to do so was also a convenient (and intentional) ploy to Severus’ favor. He loathed having to resort to manipulating circumstances in order to keep Harry
near him, but could not bear the thought of a rejection if he had outright requested that he stay.

Severus stood up from the sofa and walked over to a small cabinet near the fireplace, withdrawing a short tumbler and a bottle of Firewhiskey. Pouring himself a modest amount, he downed it in one gulp. He stood there a moment and closed his eyes, relishing the burn the amber liquid incited in his throat. The fact that he had already begun to crave Harry’s presence – more than just his presence, if he was being honest – was disconcerting. His walls of self-restraint were crumbling and he felt powerless to stop it.

He wasn’t used to the idea of sharing his space, or his life, with anyone. At least he hadn’t thought he needed it before now. However, he found the lonely void that Harry’s absence left behind was quickly warming him to the idea.
Draught No. 2

It was a week later, to the day, when Harry stepped through the door of the Potions classroom to find Severus seated at his desk, focused on the parchment before him, his quill scratching away vigorously. He didn’t look up and Harry got the sense that now would not be a good time to interrupt. He was a few minutes early anyway.

Harry glanced around the room before his eyes settled on the desk he had occupied as a student. As he walked over to it and slipped into the seat, a surge of memories filled his mind. However, unlike his first visit back to Hogwarts last week, this time he welcomed them. His fingers caressed the worn, wood surface of the desk, with its random stray gouges and ink stains, trying to remember how many of them were his. He smirked. As he cast his eyes to the left, he could almost feel Hermione sitting next to him again – usually with her arm in the air, pouncing on every question. Just beyond her would have been Ron. As he turned to look over his right shoulder, he could clearly see Draco there, his white-blond hair and haughty sneer staring back. Harry felt himself sigh, marveling at how much had changed; how much simpler things were then, even if it didn’t seem like it at the time.

Then there was his sixth year, with Professor Slughorn. It had seemed so strange not having Professor Snape for Potions that year, although he seemed to make up for it in spades with his rigorous Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Yet there had still been a piece of Severus that remained with Harry during that sixth year, although Harry didn’t realize or appreciate it until it was too late: the old Potions textbook bearing the now-infamous moniker of Half-Blood Prince. He wondered how – or if, honestly – things would have been different if he had known right away it was Severus’ book. And what ever became of it? Did it burn as he had feared? He liked to think that when cornered, Severus read the truth from his mind and saw to it to retrieve his prized possession. Or at least Harry hoped so, although he wasn’t sure why he felt so strongly that it should be so.

At this, Harry glanced up. Severus still appeared engrossed in his work. Harry watched him for a minute, noticing for the first time that Severus' brow furrowed in concentration and his lips pursed together as he wrote. His shoulder-length black hair had swung forward a bit to curtain his face as his head hovered over the parchment. The top of his head glinted in the scant light in the classroom and Harry wondered if it was because Severus’ hair was actually greasy… or because it was soft.

Harry tipped his head slightly as he took in Severus’ quill hand, the long, pale fingers wrapped gracefully around the stem. His hands were masculine, Harry realized, but also… quite elegant. The pallid skin was smooth-looking but lightly stained at the fingertips, no doubt from years of preparing potions ingredients. For some reason, Harry couldn’t help wondering what it would feel like to touch Severus’ hands, or to be touched by them – would they be warm? His body answered him with a familiar stir just south of his navel.

It was then that Severus spoke for the first time, even though he had not moved an inch or stopped writing.

“Yes…?”

Harry startled a bit and quickly shifted his glance away from Severus, feeling his cheeks flush with color. How does he do that? Irritation flashed through Harry – at being caught, yes, but also at not having the opportunity to just sit and take in the sight of his former professor for as long as he pleased. Severus was such an enigmatic man – one with many redeeming qualities, Harry knew, yet also one burdened with deep emotional wounds, if the little Harry knew of him was anything to go by.
It was hard getting Severus to open up. They had spent their fair share of time butting heads over the last few months, mostly when Severus’ insistence on being stubborn overlapped with Harry’s tendency to be impatient. Harry seemed to have a never-ending list of questions he wanted to ask Severus, but rarely got up the nerve (or had the opportunity) to ask more than a couple at a time. Yet the more he learned, the more he wanted to know.

When Severus finally put down his quill and rolled up the parchment, he daubed a small amount of red wax onto the open flap and firmly pressed a brass seal into it. Afterwards, he set the parchment aside, sighing with finality.

“I have been writing up that research for hours and was just about finished when you walked in – and then a connection I had not seen before occurred to me and had to record it before it was lost. I apologize for keeping you waiting.”

Harry shrugged noncommittally. “No problem.”

Severus refocused his eyes on Harry then and noticed for the first time where he was sitting. Looking pointedly at the desk and then back at Harry, he remarked, “Interesting choice, Potter. A coincidence, no doubt?”

Harry smirked by way of response. “I was feeling nostalgic.” Then he tipped his head. “Wait, how did you know this used to be my desk?”

At that, Severus’ breath hitched slightly, feeling a little caught out. Thankfully Harry was too far away to hear. To cover it, Severus offered a sardonic retort. “Perhaps it has something to do with the five years you sat there, steadfastly refusing to imbibe the subtle art of potion-making.” He raised an eyebrow then, something of a satisfied smirk teasing his lips as he prepared to needle further. “I do recall a fair number of cauldron mishaps from that general location, though it was often difficult to distinguish your failures from those of Mr. Longbottom’s.”

“Sod off,” Harry said with a grin. Then he began to laugh heartily, as though he couldn’t stop himself. It seemed the sort of laughter that had no real cause or purpose, yet kept itself going simply by existing in the first place, even long after the original joke had faded. On Harry, it also seemed to melt away the tension he’d been carrying in his shoulders.

Severus merely watched with some degree of amusement. He was not inclined at all to join in, though found a rare gratification in seeing Harry completely at ease and relaxed in his presence – such a stark juxtaposition in this setting particularly. Severus savored the handsome face of his young charge, the unbridled mirth there a soothing balm for his tortured soul. He often wished he was able to show his emotions with such abandon, but it was simply not in his nature. He had learned early on – too early – to suppress even his most basic expressions of… humanity.

Severus’ face fell as the weight of that word settled over him. He sighed, feeling trapped again by the same sense of hopelessness that had plagued him for years. Happiness was only for those far more naïve than him and he saw no point in entertaining the notion of achieving it, having long-ago accepted it was not something fated for his life. It was foolish to want something that was not deserved.
Except…

No.

He dismissed the thought immediately and looked back at Harry, who was calming but still chuckling at odd intervals, enjoying what was left of his fit of fancy. His face was flushed red from the exertion of laughing and his eyes sparkled – more than normal, if that was even possible. Severus indulged himself in the scene for only a moment longer and then cleared his throat loudly.

Harry suddenly ceased his laughing, as though he were a student being shushed by the teacher, but did not wipe the grin from his face when he looked back up at Severus. “Sorry.”

“No matter,” Severus responded with a dismissive wave of his hand. “It is good to see you can still entertain yourself in my classroom.”

Harry looked as though he was trying to figure out if it was a joke or not, and Severus took pity on him by switching gears.

“Are you ready to begin your next session?”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

The abrupt change in conversation caused Harry to steel his expression accordingly, but it felt a bit like the walls of the room were suddenly closing in on him. A flutter of nervousness stirred the pit of his stomach, reminding him again why he was there. He wished he could have said he was excited about his second dose of Evochi, but the reality was he felt more apprehensive now than he did before the first dose – and this one would be a full batch, a complete hour…

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

The heady scent of Severus’ private lab hit Harry’s nose as they entered the dark room. He had forgotten about this somehow. Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply, taking the essence of the room into his lungs. He felt his heartbeat steady itself and his nerves begin to abate in response to the familiar and safe surroundings. A soft glow beyond his eyelids interrupted his pensive moment, and as he opened them, he was not surprised to find that the room was now illuminated. He wandered automatically towards the large chaise situated near the opposite wall and sat down on it, leaning back to make himself comfortable.

Severus emerged from his storeroom and summoned his black chair as he walked towards Harry, a large vial of Evochi in his left hand. Harry found that the potion’s shimmering, indigo color was as mesmerizing as ever, and was grateful to feel a surge of excited anticipation spread through his body at the sight of it. He watched as Severus positioned his chair and sat down, arranging the other objects that had apparently come along with it.

Harry realized then that Severus was, once again, not wearing his teaching robes. Perhaps he never did in the off-season? Harry couldn’t be sure, for he had never interacted with Severus over a summer break, save for this last one after the war, but that was different. And when in public,
Severus always had his full contingent of robes on – perhaps to stand on ceremony for the sake of professionalism and position, or maybe just because he came across as rather intimidating in them. Harry smirked at the notion that it was probably the latter. It was just strange seeing Severus in black trousers and a black jumper inside Hogwarts. It suited him, but that particular wardrobe in the context of a school setting addled Harry’s thinking.

At this, Severus looked over at Harry. “What is it?”

Harry snapped his head up and wiped the expression off his face. “Oh, nothing…”

Severus arched an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced, but didn’t press further. “Are you prepared, then?” he asked after a moment.

Harry nodded. In truth, he’d had all week to think about it, yet the answer for what to do in this draught had come to him on his first day home at Grimmauld, when he was trying to forget his embarrassment over his parting interaction with Severus. Really, staying the night? As if Severus would have wanted him to do that! Harry tried not to cringe at the memory of it.

“Very well,” Severus acknowledged. “Shall we begin?”

Harry nodded again, pressing himself firmly into position on the chaise. He uttered the incantation, slowly and clearly, and then opened his mouth to feel the potion begin to layer itself onto his tongue. He closed his eyes, ready to give himself over to the sensation, ignoring the way his pulse was beating a steady rhythm in his ears. When he felt the last drop fall, he pressed his lips together and swallowed hard, feeling the odd warmth of the substance coat his throat. The last thing he remembered before his body completely slackened was his tongue rubbing the potion’s residue off his teeth.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry sat up on the hard surface, staring around at the blankness before him. This time his surroundings did not cause him anxiety because he realized right away it was an Evochi-induced reality. At that, he pulled forth in his mind the details of his intention for this draught and watched with great interest as the emptiness before him started to take shape. However, the scene that began to appear, although familiar, surprised him. He guessed it was because he had not been that specific as to the location he wanted (or had not selected one at all) and was curious why his mind had chosen this particular place.

The sandy beach beneath his fingers was damp from the morning’s high tide but simply sat glistening in the sunshine now. He stood up and looked out at the rough waters of the sea, white caps dancing across the tops of waves as they crashed and undulated back into the vast pool. The sound rushed into his ears and he relished the peacefulness of it, but knew he had more important business here and could not indulge it right now.

Turning around, he eyed the rocky cliff before him and the winding stone path that led to the top. He carefully made his way up, the soothing melody of the ocean behind him growing quieter with every step. It felt like summer. The sunshine was warm on his shoulders, and the steady breeze that lifted the hair off his forehead was rife with the lingering tang of salt.

As he reached the top of the path, he smiled as the full scene came into view: Shell Cottage.
The gabled roof of the modest structure was shingled in black and quite weather-worn, but looked sound enough, exactly as he had seen it for the first time – which was just earlier this year, he realized surreally. The tall, wild grasses blanketing the land swayed gently in the wind, lending a friendly-but-neglected feel to the setting, as if it was still unspoiled by man. Just beyond the house, a ring of large, mature trees dotted the landscape, framing and protecting it from the elements.

As Harry approached the cottage, he glanced over somewhat automatically to the grave where he had buried Dobby, the flowers around the perimeter now in full bloom. He felt a small pang of sadness run through him as he remembered, but only smiled wistfully, inclining his head a fraction in respect as he passed by. As he turned back to look at the front door, he half expected to see Bill and Fleur come running out to greet him, wide smiles on their faces. But they never appeared.

Someone else did, however.

Harry felt his pulse race and his face light up with joy as he took in the sight of the man before him, seeing him perhaps better-looking and more well-rested than he ever had in life. His black hair was still long and starting to gray; his face, clean-shaven but with a permanent shadow of stubble; his eyes, twinkling with adoration; his mouth, spread into that easy, comfortable smile. Harry whooped and ran the last few paces as the other man walked down the steps, away from the door, to meet him halfway.

“Sirius!” Harry yelled as he jumped into his arms, wrapping himself tightly around Sirius’ shoulders. When Sirius embraced him firmly in return, Harry felt his feet lift off the ground as they swung together in a wide circle. It had seemed to Harry that the two years they’d been separated by Sirius’ death had lasted an eternity, but now… here, in this space, it seemed only to have been the blink of an eye – truly as though Sirius had never left.

As Harry began to take in the situation more clearly, he realized he could feel the warmth of Sirius’ back beneath his arms and his Godfather’s breath against his neck. He was real! Flesh and blood! This revelation buoyed Harry’s emotions to the point where he thought his heart might burst at the sheer magnitude – and significance – of what he was experiencing.

When Harry felt his feet touch the ground again, he released his arms and stepped back slightly, eagerly taking in the man before him, a wide grin playing at his lips.

“Harry…” Sirius drawled affectionately, a warm smile softening the contours of his face. “God, it’s so good to see you. Come, come inside. I’ve got a surprise for you.”

Sirius hopped up the steps to the door and opened it wide, motioning for Harry to enter. Harry looked at him quizzically, wondering how it was possible that an inhabitant of his reality could suddenly control the action without his involvement. But he went along with it for now, curious to see what Sirius had in store for him, and decided that perhaps there was still a lot he didn’t know about Evochi.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus leaned back in his chair and eyed the clock on the wall. Harry was fifteen minutes into his second draught and already beaming like a child at the window of a sweets shop. He took in Harry’s placid but giddy features, relishing the fact he could look his fill without interruption or notice. He wondered what Harry was experiencing this time around, particularly in the few moments prior
when he had uttered the strangest noise and then his left foot had flopped onto the floor. Severus had reached down to gingerly grab Harry’s ankle and replace it back on the chaise. He knew for a fact that similar things had happened to him during his Evochi sessions – waking in strange positions, wondering how he got there – at least until the potion wore off enough for him to collect his faculties. He also recalled, with a pang of shame, his other, worse, outcomes.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry took a seat in the center of the small sofa and leaned back against the tattered quilt that was draped over the back. Small throw pillows were propped against the arms, and to his left and right he was flanked by two chairs, one with rockers along the bottom. It was just as he remembered it, except it seemed homier now – perhaps because the knowledge of what he was prophesised to do was no longer looming over him. The sunshine from outside streamed into the window above the kitchen sink and illuminated the faded, yellow counters. Harry smiled as he absorbed the nuances of the small cottage.

Upon entering, Sirius had ducked into a small room off the living area but reemerged now… with someone in tow. Harry had heard the door to the small room open and turned to look back over his shoulder at Sirius and—

“Remus?” Harry gasped. He turned and leaped fluidly over the top of the sofa, noting the casual, gentle smile on Remus’ face, before wrapping his arms around the man. Remus hugged him back, swaying them slightly. As they parted, Harry placed his hands on Remus’ upper arms and took in the man before him. Remus smiled shyly at the scrutiny and darted his eyes briefly over to Sirius, who was grinning broadly. Harry caught the glance and then paused for a moment, looking first at Sirius, and then back to Remus. He lowered his arms and stepped back slightly in order to see both of them together.

“Wait…” Harry started, something beginning to formulate in his mind. “You guys aren’t…”

At this, Sirius stepped closer and wrapped an arm around Remus’ shoulders, placing a soft, lingering kiss to his temple. Remus’ eyelids fluttered closed at the show of affection and he leaned into the touch, the same small smile set serenely on his lips.

Harry’s eyes went wide and he felt his mouth drop open. “No…” he breathed, but the corners of his lips seemed to disregard his shock completely and twitched into a wry smile. Harry lurched forward and wrapped his arms around both men. When he stood back again, he searched Sirius’ face first.

“You okay, Harry?” Sirius grinned.

Harry looked over at Remus next, the warm amber eyes there more peaceful-looking than he had ever remembered. Remus just lifted his eyebrows as he shrugged his shoulders and smiled. Seeming to want to make himself useful, or perhaps avoid an awkward pause, Remus looked at Harry and smiled. “Tea?” Without waiting for an answer, he scurried off towards the kitchen, the light clanking of a pot and teacups echoing into the small room.

Harry turned back to Sirius, still trying to process everything. “How long…?”

Sirius pulled him close, affectionately draping his arm around Harry’s shoulders. “Now that’s a good question. I think, if I’m being truthful… always.” He smiled earnestly and Harry beamed back at
Then, after a beat, “Did my parents know, too?”

Sirius grimaced with a smile. “I’m pretty sure everyone knew except me. I was such an idiot, Harry.”

Harry’s easy laughter filled the small room, and Sirius looked relieved at the response. Quickly, he shot a glance over to Remus, who seemed to be waiting for the confirmation, his expression tentative as he looked up through the fringe of his hair. Upon seeing Sirius’ look, he lifted his head fully and his face brightened. Then he turned promptly to grab the tray with tea and walked into the sitting area with it, transferring the three cups to the wooden trunk they used for a coffee table.

Harry and Sirius wandered over and sat next to each other on the small sofa. Sirius turned slightly towards Harry, one leg folded underneath him, his arm resting casually across the back. Remus opted for the rocking chair to their right, loosely crossing one leg over the other as he moved it back and forth slowly, cradling his teacup in his hands. Harry just leaned back against the cushions, sprawling his legs out in front of him, folding his arms behind his head.

Sirius lifted his teacup off the trunk as he spoke. “All right, Harry, let’s hear it. Start at the beginning. We want to know everything.” His eyes sparkled, alight with interest. After all, the story had been stopped abruptly for Sirius and he seemed keen to pick it up where he’d left off.

The laughter in the room trailed off suddenly when Sirius put his hand on Harry’s shoulder and inquired about the name he had just heard.

“Wait… did you just say Severus? Severus Snape? He… survived?”

Harry’s face sobered as he looked curiously at his Godfather. “Yeah, he did. Why?”

Sirius shook his head a bit. “So the old git managed to do it, then.”

“Don’t call him that,” Harry responded mournfully. “And he almost didn’t survive.”

Remus sat forward in his chair then, placing his empty teacup on the trunk before him. Of the two men, Harry knew only Remus would share his concern over Severus. Sirius knew this, too, and shot Remus an indignant look, but Remus ignored it.

Harry looked down, remembering Severus’ retelling of what had happened after Harry had left him in the Shrieking Shack. A familiar rush of guilt washed over him then, something he hadn’t felt this acutely in months. He remembered collecting Severus’ memories in a vial that Hermione had conjured for him, and then waited around long enough to heed Severus’ last request of him: simply to ‘Look at me...’ Then the body of his former professor had gone limp, his neck bleeding profusely from Nagini’s fatal bite. Or what he thought had been fatal.

“Harry…” Remus prodded gently, no doubt seeing the pain in Harry’s expression.

Harry looked up at Remus and took a deep breath. “After Severus was bitten by Nagini – that’s Voldemort’s snake – he collapsed onto the floor. The wound in his neck was so bad, I had no idea what to do. I assumed it was too late… and then he went limp.” Harry decided he would leave out
the more emotional details in this version. “So I left him there. I thought he was dead.”

Sirius was looking to the side, a slightly impatient look on his face. Remus was leaning towards Harry, listening intently, one of his hands resting gently on Harry’s knee. “Go on,” he urged.

“Later, when Severus told me the story, I… I couldn’t believe it.” Harry bit back the emotion that threatened anyway before continuing. “It was Fawkes!”

“Fawkes? You mean Dumbledore’s phoenix?” asked Remus incredulously.

Harry nodded, rubbing his eyes with his palms before replacing his glasses. “Yeah. Remember what Dumbledore told me? That I must have shown great loyalty to him in order to have summoned Fawkes? That means Severus must have shown Dumbledore the same loyalty in order for Fawkes to come to him, too.” He paused again, still fighting to maintain his composure. “Turns out phoenix tears are an extremely effective antidote to the Dark poison in Nagini’s fangs. Then the Healers at St. Mungo’s did the rest. It was several hours before Madam Pomfrey could retrieve him from the Shack, though.” Harry also decided to leave out the part about how Madam Pomfrey knew where to find Severus.

Sirius scoffed lightly and Remus glared at him briefly, a warning that told him to skip the theatrics, at least for now, for Harry’s benefit. Remus looked back at Harry and addressed him.

“So Severus has fully recovered then?”

Harry nodded. “As far as I can tell. He has a bit of a nasty scar on his neck, though, but if it’s bothering him he hasn’t told me.”

Remus tipped his head at that. “You two are… friendly?”

Harry considered this for a moment and then realized that talking about Severus in this manner probably did seem vastly out of context, particularly from the perspectives of Remus and Sirius. Harry didn’t feel like going into a lot of detail about it, though, especially as that would mean explaining how he came to know Severus’ back story and true allegiances in the first place. In the end, Harry only offered up the basics.

“Yeah, we became friends after the war was over, after Severus was out of the hospital. Neither of us had anyone else, really, so it just kinda happened.”

“That’s not true, Harry, you have lots of people that love you and consider you family,” Remus countered. At this, Sirius nodded in agreement and looked at Harry, too.

Harry dropped his head again, speaking into his chest. “I did… I mean I do. But you don’t know what it was like after the war. Everyone was dazed and sort of reeling from it all, and they all gathered their families together and stuck close to home. They invited me but I just didn’t feel like part of it for some reason. It didn’t feel the same after the war.”

Remus squeezed Harry’s knee gently, seeming to understand. Sirius leaned over then, looping his arm around Harry’s neck and drawing him close. Harry tensed at first but quickly relaxed into the embrace, feeling his head tuck underneath Sirius’ chin and a pair of lips press softly against the mop of black hair on his head. Harry felt the sentiment in the gestures of both Remus and Sirius – he did have family, people who loved him very much indeed. But the fact that Sirius and Remus only existed in this Evochi-induced construct meant their actions could not comfort him fully. At some point he would have to return to his life, his one true reality, and continue to make his way on his own. Sure, he would always have friends and people who cared for him – several sets of surrogate
parents, actually – but he realized he’d always been something of a loner; content, in that odd way, to be so self-reliant.

And then there was Severus. He understood because he was a loner, too. This was chief among the reasons that they got on so well, Harry thought. They didn’t bother rehashing the past or patronizing each other, it was entirely unnecessary. They could often comprehend the other with little more than a look. Perhaps with Severus, then, Harry might have something a family couldn’t offer.

He closed his eyes then, listening to the steady beat of Sirius’ heart against his ear. He turned onto his side and drew his arms and legs into himself as the temperature around him began to change. Soon, the quiet thrumming of the heartbeat started to fade from his mind, replaced by a warm hand pressing gently against his forearm and a deep voice calling his name. His mind seemed to move rapidly towards it.

Slowly opening his eyes, the grey fabric of the chaise came into focus and he blinked hard. When he looked up, he was surprised to see Severus’ contented expression staring back. It lasted for only a moment, though, and then everything went black.
As Harry woke, he opened his eyes to take in the soft lighting of room around him. Blinking a few times, he tried to take stock of his surroundings. What was this place? It seemed familiar but his brain was slow to the task of identifying it for him. He felt fuzzy, unable to discern what might have happened or how he came to be here. The room was quiet, though, and he seemed to be its only inhabitant.

Then, a visual of Sirius’ face swam by in his memory, along with a flash of Remus he couldn’t quite place. At this, he sat up with a start, a move he regretted instantly as the room began to sway before him, his pulse throbbing in his temples. He groaned and held his head.

He remembered Sirius’ heartbeat, and the sofa with the old quilt, and Remus drinking his tea and rocking gently in a chair, and… and Shell Cottage! All at once it flooded back into Harry’s mind: Evochi. He had just woken from his second draught of Evochi.

As he laid back down, he also realized where he was: Severus’ antechamber. He was lying on the sofa, a wool blanket covering him. But how had he got there? Where was the chaise? For that matter, where was Severus? He tried to rest his mind for a minute, but it seemed intent on bombarding him with an overwhelming mix of visuals. He sighed and closed his eyes, draping an arm over his forehead.

In his mind’s eye, he watched the whole scene replay before him. The ocean, the sand, the rocky cliff, the stone path, Dobby’s grave, the small cottage, Sirius together with Remus, their conversation… and the lightness that had filled Harry’s heart at seeing them both again. He missed them terribly, he realized, and desperately wished he could pull them into this reality, but knew it was not possible. Yet somehow, he understood that if he chose to do so, he could return to that particular Evochi reality and visit them any time. That fact alone might have offered him solace if it weren’t for his mind constantly trumpeting ‘but they’re gone’ like some goddamned mantra.

He sighed and sat up, albeit more slowly this time, and pulled the blanket off. As he swung his legs around, he put his feet on the floor and scrubbed his face with his palms. He wasn’t going to think about it anymore right now. He reached for his glasses on the coffee table and slipped them on, noting as he did so that they must have been removed at some point. He didn’t remember doing it, but then again, he didn’t remember much about his present situation. He needed to find Severus.

Harry made his way over to the nearest of the three doors in the antechamber – a room he quickly discovered was the bedroom. Tentatively, he poked his head inside. It was dark and appeared to be empty. Sensing he was alone, he took the opportunity to step fully into the bedroom and glance around. As he did so, he pushed the door open wide so the soft light from the antechamber could spill into the room, scantly illuminating the furnishings in a golden hue.

Almost at once, the same heady scent present in Severus’ private lab filled his nose. As he always seemed wont to do, Harry tilted his head back to breathe in the scent deeply and close his eyes for a moment. A small, contented smirk teased at the corners of his mouth and he was glad to have this indulgence in private. He still couldn’t decide if it was a cologne or soap or perhaps Severus’ natural scent, but was inclined toward the latter only because the smell didn’t have a perfumed or manufactured sort of aroma. But either way, he savored it. Opening his eyes again, he readjusted to the light in the room and looked around in earnest.

A large, four-poster bed stood near the left side of the room, anchored along the back wall. It looked imposing with its ornately-carved, mahogany columns and large headboard. A thick, black duvet
was draped across the mattress and green, velvet curtains were gathered on either side with silver tassels. *Slytherin's Head of House*, Harry reminded himself. He dragged the tips of his fingers along the surface of the bedding as he strolled slowly and was surprised at the luxuriousness of the fabric. He wasn’t sure what he had expected, exactly, but somehow the notion of a plush fabric in contrast to the often harsh man was a bit bemusing.

To the right of the bed was a nightstand, built from the same dark wood as the bed, and he could just make out a short stack of books next to the lamp. On top of the books was a pair of black reading glasses, one temple of which had been folded in towards the lenses. For a reason he didn’t understand, he was charmed by this discovery. *Severus wears reading glasses?* He found that oddly appealing and could almost picture him sitting in bed by lamplight, reading about potions. Or perhaps his secret penchant was for spy novels. Harry chuckled to himself but ignored the spines of the books. He rather liked some element of mystery there.

On the right wall was another doorway, presumably to the bathroom, along with an oversized armoire that matched the other pieces in the room. Harry had the sudden urge to peek inside of it but decided against it at the last minute, feeling somewhat guilty at his invasion of privacy already. It would likely be too dark to see much anyway, he reasoned, given that the wardrobe it contained was likely to be as black as the room that surrounded it.

Ducking back out of the bedroom, he pulled the door closed to the point he originally found it and headed next to the entrance of Severus’ private lab – the middle of the three doors in the antechamber. The final door, he noted, was the exit back out into the dungeon hallways. Pushing the heavy door to the lab open a crack, he peered inside. The lights were on and he heard the faint sound of glass tinkling somewhere out of sight. Assuming it was Severus making the noise, he walked fully into the room and let the door close softly behind him.

But as he stood there, he realized he didn’t know what to do next. Should he call Severus’ name into the silence? Or maybe walk back by the storeroom, where the sounds seemed to be coming from, to make his presence known? He cringed at the idea of startling Severus, fearing for his own safety as well as that of his former professor. What if Severus was working with a volatile potion and spilled it by accident because of Harry’s sudden appearance? Then again, Harry couldn’t remember ever seeing Severus startled by anything or anyone.

Then, an idea came to Harry – he would open and close the door again, this time letting it latch loudly, hoping that would be enough to herald his arrival. But as he reached over to open the door, a familiar voice rang out into the silence.

“Leaving so soon?”

Harry froze, his hand hovering above the knob. He turned slowly to look towards the storeroom and saw Severus’ head leaning out of the doorway looking back at him, an eyebrow arched inquisitively, a mused expression on his face. Confused, Harry just stood there for a moment before stuttering out his response.

“No— I… no.” He paused and took a breath. “Sorry, I didn’t want to startle you.”

Severus stepped out of the storeroom and into the lab to address him. “You wouldn’t have. I anticipated you would come looking for me when you woke so I charmed the door to inform me of your arrival.” The corners of his mouth twitched, likely at the dumbfounded look on Harry’s face.

“Oh,” was all Harry could think to respond as he looked away. Of course Severus would have thought of something like that! It was times like this when Harry felt so inexperienced.
“My apologies, Harry – old habit, I suppose. You don’t get to play Death Eater for the better part of two decades without learning to put eyes and ears everywhere, even for basic things.”

Harry looked up. Sometimes it was hard to remember Severus used to be a Death Eater; the man in front of him now, the one he was getting to know and had learned so much about in the last few months, hardly seemed capable of it. And perhaps he wouldn’t be, anymore. Harry decided he liked the idea of that and smiled slightly in spite of himself. Finally, he waved his hand dismissively.

“Don’t apologize, it was brilliant.”

At that, Harry thought he saw something soften in Severus’ eyes for a brief moment before he turned around to stack some vials and ingredients onto the shelf behind him. It was only then that Harry noticed something was amiss about the lab. Looking around, he saw that both work tables were once again situated in the center of the room, and the chaise was nowhere to be seen. Missing, too, was the large black chair Severus sat in during Evochi sessions.

“Um… Severus?” Harry ventured.

“Hmm?” came the somewhat distracted answer.

“Where is the chaise?”

“It transfigured back into the work table.”

“On its own?” Harry asked.

At that, Severus looked over. “It is no cause for concern. The transfiguration was only temporary, so it was expected. I will change it back to a chaise for your next Evochi session, but in the interim, I needed the work tables as they were.”

“Oh. Yeah, I suppose.” Harry flushed, feeling stupid. He pulled out a stool and sat down. “What time is it?”

“Nearly six.”

“Six!” Harry’s eyes went wide. “How long was I out?”

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Severus leaned against the edge of the other work table and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Approximately three hours, not including the hour that you were under the influence of Evochi.” He paused a moment, sizing up Harry’s reaction. “It is perfectly normal, Harry.”

“How did I get in there?” Harry asked while pointing vaguely in the direction of the antechamber.

Severus’ heart jumped into his throat, unprepared as he was for the question. “I carried you.”

“You carried me?”

“Yes.” Severus paused, cringing at his lack of justification. “If that makes you uncomfortable, I shall levitate you next time.”
“No, I mean, why did you have to carry me at all? I thought I was on the chaise?”

Severus merely blinked, now thoroughly off guard. He had fully expected an unfavorable reaction, but Harry wasn’t protesting the fact he was carried, and by Severus of all people.

“You were, for a while. After the Evochi wore off, you came to for a brief moment before falling into a heavy slumber. I anticipated it would happen so I had planned to let you rest while I worked in the lab. When I came back in to check on you not ten minutes later, you were lying on top of a work table. The chaise had transfigured back.”

Harry gave a small outburst of laughter, likely picturing what he must have looked like. Severus was relieved to see Harry wasn’t upset about his compromised circumstances, and smirked slightly as he recalled the contorted position he had found Harry in.

“Yes. Well, you would have been in a sorry state later if I had not moved you.”

Harry grinned back at him, realizing now – of course – that it was Severus who had covered him in a blanket and thought to remove his glasses. Harry wanted to acknowledge that but was afraid of embarrassing Severus, or deterring him from doing such things again in the future. In the end, he decided to keep it simple.

“Thanks, then,” Harry said, his grin softening into a smile.

Severus swallowed thickly, his throat constricting at the sentiment. Sometimes he found the warmth and sincerity in Harry’s smile almost too much to bear. He nodded curtly by way of a response and promptly turned away, walking back over to the shelves to resume his work of cataloging supplies and ingredients. He was grateful for the distraction, yet still felt a familiar sense of shame at how ill-equipped he was at handling tender moments. There was something about Harry that always made him want to try harder, but he never knew where to begin.

Harry, on the other hand, seemed to take this as his cue to leave and stood, pushing the stool back underneath the table as he did so. Severus felt his spine stiffen in anticipation of what Harry might do next, but deflated with disappointment when the door to the lab opened. He didn’t know what he had been be expecting, exactly, but felt like an right fool for expecting anything.

He turned his head towards Harry and waited for him to speak.

Harry paused at the door and looked back at Severus, his hand on the knob. For the briefest of
moments, the silence that hung between them was palpable, carrying with it an air of anticipation that Harry didn’t understand at first. It was almost if… no. It couldn’t be that. Severus didn’t feel that way about him. Did he? With his heart beating rapidly in his chest, Harry realized things could become awkward if he didn’t say something.

“So… see you next week, then?” It resembled an undignified squeak far too much for his liking.

“Yes,” Severus nodded, his gaze still fixed.

Harry was just about to step out into the antechamber, his skin now prickling excitedly, when he remembered something he had been meaning to ask since he’d arrived. As he turned back to Severus, though, he noticed that whatever had transpired between them before was now gone. He wondered briefly if he had been imagining it.

“Aren’t the students due back soon?”

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Severus felt like someone had slapped him. He had been so preoccupied with Harry this summer and working to restock the potions stores for Poppy that he hadn’t prepared – mentally or otherwise – for the start of a new term. He groaned to himself.

“Yes, the twenty-second of September; a little over a week from now. Which might present another challenge as well.”

Harry stepped back fully into the lab and let the door close. “What would that be?”

“How to get you in and out of the castle unnoticed.”

“Why would I need to do that?”

Severus stared at Harry as though it should be obvious why subtlety might be a blessing in this case. “Do you intend to answer for your presence each time your adoring public sees you inside this castle? I would think the sycophants alone would be enough of a reason.”

“The syco-what?” Harry asked.

Severus sighed. “Sycophants. People who would seek to befriend you simply to advance their own status.” He knew for himself that dealing with constant invasions of privacy and incessant fawning would be sheer torture. Yet Harry never seemed to welcome or invite the attention – in fact, he rather seemed to resent it.

Harry snorted and shrugged dismissively. “I’m used to it. Perhaps you forget I’ve been dealing with it for seven years already. If anything, I’d say it’s actually improved now that people have something else to think about aside from me!”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP
Severus’ countenance seemed to shift quickly between two poles before he looked squarely at Harry. “It is up to you, of course. You may come and go as you see fit, and if you decide at a later date you would like my assistance entering or leaving the castle unnoticed, I will make the necessary arrangements.”

For a moment, Harry wondered what that fleeting expression on Severus’ face had been about, but then got distracted thinking about what the arrangements would entail, knowing there were undoubtedly lots of things he didn’t know about Hogwarts, especially rules (and even passages) that might have changed since the end of the war. He decided he would just cross that bridge when, or if, he came to it. For now, he intended to enter and exit the castle just as he had done the last couple of weeks – in fact, as he had always done – through the front door. How could that possibly be problematic? he wondered.

Harry turned and opened the door to the lab again. He gave Severus a small smile, though it projected a confidence he didn’t feel, and left, waiting briefly on the other side of the door until it clicked closed behind him. Leaning back against it, several thoughts bored heavily into his mind. Why hadn’t he asked Severus the question he’d most wanted to, about how Sirius and Remus could control the action in his reality? He wondered if it was normal or not, and would that same thing happen if he conjured his parents in a future reality? Or returned to see Sirius and Remus again?

For a moment, Harry contemplated turning around and re-entering the lab, but then thought better of it. He had made a fool of himself in front of Severus enough times in recent memory that he didn’t want to add to that list today.

And then there was the matter of Hogwarts. School would be back in session soon; a school he hadn’t actually finished. Regret swept over him as he considered the implications of that. He had called this school home for six years – the best home he had ever had, to be precise – yet when he thought about finally completing his education here, he was met with a flurry of mixed emotions and realized he wasn’t prepared to confront it all just yet.

As he reached for the door that lead out of Severus’ quarters and into the dungeon hallways, a nervous tension and uneasiness settled into his body. Where were all these thoughts coming from? Were things really going to be different next week, and in the weeks following it? If so, how? Or was this all a side effect of Evochi?

Walking up the stairs and into the castle’s main foyer, Harry paused, eyeing the massive entrance that towered before him. He didn’t know why, but he got the feeling something was about to change. Taking a deep breath, he pushed open one of the heavy, wooden doors and stepped out into the waning sunshine of a mid-September dusk.

*Guess there is only one way to find out,* he thought resolutely.
Already a week had passed and it was late on Sunday morning. Harry was still in bed, having opted to sleep in much later than normal – if one can consider fitful tossing and turning as sleep, that is. In truth, he had been awake for hours but could not compel his limbs to move.

As he lie there in his bedroom in Grimmauld Place, he looked up at the ceiling with unfocused eyes, thinking. His stomach was aflutter with nervousness. The foreboding sense that something was going to change had plagued him all week, but now it felt nearly suffocating.

Glancing over at the clock, he could almost feel the seconds ticking away in tune with his heartbeat, the tiny red hand mocking him as it circled the white face. Harry turned his head away and scoffed. He knew he was being ridiculous, yet felt powerless to stop it. Although he had had many dangerous experiences in his life so far – most of them matters of grave peril, in fact – something about this particular sense felt different. Not worse, just… foreign.

Over the last few days, Harry had begun to wonder if it was being caused by Evochi. He had seriously considered asking Severus about it, but managed to talk himself out of doing so every time. He told himself he was just being paranoid. Severus knew what he was doing and if he had recommended one dose per week, then who was Harry to question it?

Reluctantly, he swung his legs out of bed and pressed his feet to the cold floor, the weight of his mind pounding against his forehead as he stood up. Slowly, he walked down the hall to the bathroom, his feet dragging as he went. Once again his life felt as though it had a momentum of its own; his mind, oddly disconnected, as though parts of it no longer belonged to him. It was unsettling to say the least, and was doing nothing to calm his nerves.

If he thought it an option, he would have turned promptly around and gone back to bed, pulling the covers over his head and willing the world away. But even if he was capable of that (which he wasn’t) there was still a part of him that wanted an answer to what was going on, and knew there was only one way to get it. Besides, Severus had owled a few days earlier to confirm their time for today (it had changed slightly due to a staff meeting) and he knew Severus would be expecting him.

With a heavy, resigned sigh, Harry reached into the shower and turned it on. When finally he felt the hot water splashing over his face, he closed his eyes, hoping with everything he had that he was doing the right thing.

It was the middle of their start-of-term staff meeting and already Severus’ thoughts were drifting. He was staring vacantly ahead, watching the events unfold before him but not truly seeing any of it. At least until Professor Sinistra began discussing the particulars of the Astronomy Tower and what had changed now that the reparations to the castle were complete.

The Astronomy Tower.

At those words, Severus’ eyes closed tightly, a reflex born from his pain-memory. If he never again had to set foot on that tower, it would be too soon. Even worse was the fact that, although he didn’t know it at the time, Harry had witnessed the whole event. To this day, they had only spoken of it.
once, and very briefly, each seeming to want to avoid the topic as much as the other. But Severus knew – or felt he knew, anyway – that Harry was not holding it against him. That arrangement had been one of the things Albus instructed him to provide Harry in his final memories, though Severus did not understand all the implications of it at the time.

The visual of Albus being launched off the tower by the curse Severus uttered – from his wand, always his wand – assaulted his mind. It was permanently etched there, in fact. He inwardly winced. It was times like this when Severus wished he had died from Nagini’s bite. It would have saved him from repeatedly reliving the moment, and every other painful one that preceded it; things he felt he’d been too helpless or cowardly to prevent.

Only one thing seemed to keep him going now, he realized: Harry. And it wasn’t just their Evochi sessions.

Really, what else was there for him? Or who? He had lost everyone else of import: his mother, the few friends he had gained at Hogwarts (namely Regulus, Remus and Lily), and Albus. But especially Lily and Albus. Perhaps it was because of them, and the promise he had made to both, that drove him to protect Harry’s life even now; that made him want to hang onto Harry for as long as he could. For without him, Severus would truly be alone.

Forcing the murk of his mind into the background, Severus returned his attention to the meeting. Headmistress McGonagall had just taken Professor Sinistra’s place at the front of the chamber room. He couldn’t imagine it was anything he needed to hear, and so let his thoughts drift once again, this time to his memories of last Sunday. He found he was looking forward to Sundays now in a way he never had before (it certainly was not for the staff meetings) and immediately thought of last week’s Evochi session. One aspect in particular slid right to the front of his mind.

It was a decision he had spent several minutes debating over with himself: should he or shouldn’t he? Harry had to be moved, that much was obvious – Severus couldn’t leave him sprawled on top of a hard, wooden table. Levitation was the most sensible answer, but somehow whenever he went to cast the charm, the urge to hold Harry overcame him. He knew it was unfair to take advantage of the situation, particularly since Harry could not protest, but Harry had a way of rendering all of Severus’ practiced self-control useless. In the end, Severus chose to carry him, even though he knew it might mean answering for it later. Selfish or not, he just wanted to, and ultimately that was reason enough for him.

Tucking one arm underneath Harry’s neck and the other under his knees, Severus pulled Harry towards him and then lifted him off the table. Harry’s weight felt comfortable in his arms and Severus found he had no trouble supporting him. He could feel the warmth of Harry’s body next to his chest and the toned muscles of Harry’s legs against his hand. As he walked slowly into the antechamber, Severus inhaled, gathering Harry’s scent into his nose: it was pleasant and fresh-smelling but had no discernible aroma that could be associated with a specific bath product or cologne. It was just Harry, and Severus filled his lungs with it.

When he reached the sofa, he gently – if not reluctantly – laid Harry down upon it and did his best to arrange Harry’s limbs into what he hoped was a suitable sleeping position. He then stood back and admired the young man for a minute, knowing that Harry was out cold and oblivious to anything that had just transpired. Severus remembered quite well the disorientation that followed an Evochi session and felt his antechamber would be the best place for Harry to awaken.

Just before he stepped away, Severus conjured a blanket to cover Harry and then reached down to remove his glasses, setting them aside on the coffee table.

The sudden rustling of parchment brought Severus’ mind back to the meeting and he glanced over at
the clock. Fifteen minutes remained and then he would be free to go and prepare for Harry’s third session. Minerva was addressing the staff while passing out something for review. Severus sighed and shifted in his chair, barely registering the fact that someone had just thrust a bundle of documents into his hand. He glared briefly at the offending colleague, and then looked down at the paperwork with unseeing eyes as images of Harry continued to flash through his mind.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry sat at the large, worn table in his kitchen, his elbows propped on the wooden surface, his chin resting in his palms. Kreacher was busy preparing food while he merely sat with his thoughts. He knew Kreacher preferred it that way – Harry was fairly clumsy in the kitchen and usually just got in the way. Besides, Harry was his rightful master now and Kreacher enjoyed being of service, particularly in the absence of any remaining lineage in what he still referred to as the Noble House of Black. Harry didn’t care what the elf called his house – he was just grateful for the company, at least as much as Kreacher could be, anyway.

As Kreacher turned and set a plate of food down in front of Harry, he pointed a long, wrinkled finger towards an envelope at the other end of the table. Puzzled, Harry reached over and grabbed it, wondering how he could have missed that. It must have arrived while he was in the shower, for Kreacher did not alert him earlier. The envelope was white and crisply folded, secured with a daub of brown wax that bore an ornate “W” insignia. The writing was instantly familiar, though – Hermione’s – and he opened it eagerly, glad for the distraction.

Ron and Hermione didn’t visit much, for they both found Grimmauld Place rather bleak and depressing. Instead, Harry generally visited their flat, now that they were living together, or met them somewhere in Hogsmeade. It had been several weeks since they’d hung out together, but normally they would just Floo-call. He couldn’t remember the last time he had received a letter from them. Therefore, it was with a small amount of trepidation that he unfolded the parchment and began to read.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus ducked down a back passage towards the dungeons to avoid any more chance meetings, for he had already been stopped twice by colleagues inquiring about something he considered utterly inconsequential. He was starting to resent the way other staff members, post-battle, seemed to be treading delicately with him – though whether it was because they were concerned for him or because they were fearful of him, he did not know.

Although Severus had been exonerated on all charges put against him and walked away with a clear name, there were still those within the Wizarding community who doubted the validity of it and were quite content to keep stirring the pot conspiratorially.

In fact, Minerva had just pulled him aside after the staff meeting to inform him of the complaints she had been receiving from a particularly vocal group of parents. She had leaned in close, so as to not be overheard, and rested her hand gently on his forearm.
“Severus, I am telling you this only so you may be aware of the situation.” She had paused then, seeming to size up his reaction. When he didn’t say anything, she continued. “I trust this means you won’t be giving any of your students a difficult time.” There was a stern quality to her tone.

This was hardly the first time Hogwarts had received a complaint about Severus, and they both knew it. Yet, his reputation for harassing students seemed to precede him, even now. Nonplussed, Severus simply arched an eyebrow by way of a response before turning on his heel to leave. Little did Minerva know, Severus had no intention of making trouble for any of his students this term. He’d rather lost his heart for it, actually – and for teaching, too, though he wondered if he’d ever had that to begin with.

Severus arrived at the door to his private quarters uninterrupted and entered quickly to ensure it stayed that way. Once inside, he leaned back against the door and sighed, hearing that small comfort of the latch clicking soundly into place. He would never give anyone, let alone some hypocritical parent, the satisfaction of running him off from a place he had called home for nearly two decades, even if he did have something to hide. And for once, he didn’t. Even the irony of that was ironic.

No, if he was going to leave his teaching post, it would be his decision, and his alone.

For now, though, none of that mattered. He glanced over at the mantle clock – Harry was scheduled to arrive in less than thirty minutes. He strode off in the direction of his bedroom to change out of his teaching robes, and then stepped into his private lab to prepare for the afternoon, pushing everything except Harry and Evochi from his mind.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“Married!”

Harry was shouting, the effect of which was much louder than he’d intended due to the echo in the room, and the hand that clutched Hermione’s letter flailed about wildly. “Just when the hell were they planning on telling me about this? I suppose they didn’t think it’d be important to tell me they were getting married before I received the announcement?”

Kreacher cowered slightly by the sink, watching Harry as though he didn’t understand a word of English, his crinkled, orb-like eyes wider than normal. It was doubtful he even knew what a wedding was, nor cared, but seemed to have learned that when Harry got upset it was best to just stay out of the way. What Harry didn’t know (and what Kreacher had neglected to mention, then or otherwise) was that both Ron and Hermione had been leaving him Floo messages for days…

As Harry stalked back and forth in the kitchen, errant magic emanated off of him, making the lights in the room flicker and crackle. If there had been someone else aside from Kreacher present, he might have continued his indignant rant, but as it was, his tirade was completely lost on an elf.

Glancing at the clock, he realized with a start that it was time to leave. He folded and pocketed the announcement, resolving to track down Hermione as soon as he could, and looked longingly at his untouched food as he hurried out of the kitchen.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP
After Apparating to Hogwarts, Harry entered the main gate and started to make his way up the grassy lawns, the blades beneath his shoes still slick with dew. Well into September now, the weather had started to grow colder and Harry pulled his arms around himself as he walked.

Just before he pushed open one of the large, entrance doors, he took a deep breath and attempted to clear his mind. He was unsuccessful. Sighing, he pushed open the door anyway, ready for the onslaught of students and questions he assumed would be awaiting him on the other side. But it never came. The foyer, for all its grandeur and scale, was eerily quiet. He poked his head into the Great Hall and saw that only a few students were present, talking amongst themselves in a small cluster. The Head Table was empty as well, save for one professor he did not recognize. A few of the castle’s ghosts floated overhead, swooping lazily through coats of armor and House flags that hung from the stone walls.

As Harry turned to leave, he caught sight of Headmistress McGonagall talking to a student. But not just any student – a familiar one with bushy, brown hair.

“Hermione?” he called incredulously, both flummoxed by and grateful for his timing.

At her name – and the familiar voice – Hermione turned quickly and nearly ran in Harry’s direction after excusing herself from the Headmistress.

“Harry!” she yelled happily, launching herself into his arms. After a hug, she stood back to look at him properly. “It seems like forever since I’ve seen you!” She smiled. “What are you doing here?”

Harry blinked for a minute, stunned into silence. “I was about to ask you that,” was all he managed.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Did I not tell you I am a student here again? I wanted to finish out my education at Hogwarts, you know, do it properly.”

“That’s not all you forgot to tell me,” he said sourly, pulling the folded announcement from his pocket and holding it up for her to see.

“You got it! Thank goodness! Isn’t it wonderful?” She lingered on the syllables of that last word, something of a sing-song sound to her voice. “Ron and I have been trying to reach you for days, we came back a bit early from Australia. When I was done here today, I was going to go visit you and make sure you were okay.” She paused then, eyeing him. “Are you okay?”

Harry’s emotions roiled as he considered her question. She and Ron had gone off to Australia for three weeks to retrieve her parents and bring them back to England, and also to get a nice vacation away from everything. It was right after they left that Harry had been considering his own explorative travels, thinking he’d have a head start before they’d be able to object, but then Severus had countered with the offer of Evochi. So much had happened in a few short weeks, he realized. He wanted to ask about Hermione’s parents and get caught up with his friends, but something kept bringing him back to the parchment in his hand.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going to get engaged?” He tried to keep his voice even but the indignant tone returned anyway.

Hermione frowned a bit, seeming to understand now. “I didn’t know either, Harry, Ron surprised me just before we left Australia. It was so romantic, though…” A wistful expression softened her features. When she saw that Harry didn’t seem to be sharing her joy, she steeled her face again. “I tried to tell you, Harry – we both did – but you weren’t responding to our Floo calls. I even tried to send a letter, but I fear we may have beat that owl home…”
“I didn’t get any messages from either you or Ron,” Harry accused.

“We left them with Kreacher. I guess you weren’t home when we tried to call. Did he not give them to you? And what have you been doing that you’re never at home?”

Harry wondered if he should be mad at Hermione for trying to blame Kreacher, or mad at Kreacher for not giving him his messages, but in the end it probably didn’t matter. He sighed and pushed his fingertips in behind his glasses, rubbing his eyes.

“Harry, I’m so sorry…” she said softly. “Really, I had no idea that the announcement would be the first you’d hear of it. Or at least I hoped it wouldn’t be. But Mrs. Weasley was so excited, she basically marched us into the house and made us sit at the table, hand-addressing envelopes for what seemed like hours. She insisted that it not be done by magic.” Hermione smoothed a hand along Harry’s arm in a manner that further conveyed her apology.

Deflating, Harry lowered the hand holding her announcement, unable to stave off the small grin that betrayed his changing mood. He knew how Molly could be and was picturing the entire scene in his head. He thought he might actually have laughed if it weren’t for the otherwise heavy thoughts weighing down his mind.

After a moment, he gestured to the castle at large and said, “Where is everyone, by the way?”

“Oh, the train doesn’t come in until Tuesday, and then classes start on Wednesday. The Headmistress appointed me Head Girl this year, so I was allowed to come a few days early and get settled.”

Harry nodded distractedly, then remembered why he was there.

“Shit, I have to go, I’m late! I’ll talk to you later!” he said as he ran off down the stairs, in the direction of the dungeons. As Hermione watched him go, a confused look on her face, he thought he could almost hear the questions she left lingering unspoken on the air.

Where are you going?

What are you late for?

Why are you heading to the dungeons?
Severus looked down at the potion bubbling away in his cauldron and carefully sprinkled ground dittany over the boiling surface of the liquid. Just as the mixture turned the desired shade of green, he tapped the base of the cauldron with his wand to reduce the heat to a simmer, and then scratched off a line in his journal with a long-feathered quill.

He was just about finished with the list of potions Poppy had requested of him two days prior. Obligations or not, he was grateful for tasks that kept him busy, particularly now – it meant less time to notice the clock on the wall reminding him that Harry was late.

He shouldn’t really be upset by this – Evochi was, after all, completely optional, and Harry was under no obligation to continue with it. Severus hadn’t even been concerned when the owl he sent earlier in the week, confirming the time, went unanswered. It was mostly rhetorical anyway. What would be unusual, though, is if Harry just stopped showing up without saying anything.

Severus sighed and got up from behind his work table. He resented the twinge of panic that began to stir in his mind. Surely if something had happened to Harry he would have heard by now? As he walked into his antechamber, he glanced around – hoping to find what, he didn’t know. Perhaps Harry. He scoffed at his ridiculousness, but also knew he did not idle well and needed to make himself useful.

Looking toward the mantle, he saw that Harry was now twenty minutes late. Before he could dwell on it, however, there was a knock at his door. Relief surged through him. But what if it wasn’t Harry? Pushing that thought from his mind, he marshaled his composure and approached the door. He paused for a moment with his hand on the knob and breathed in deeply in an effort to relax himself, holding the air in his lungs. As he swung the door open, he allowed himself a quiet exhale.

It was Harry.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry marched in without invitation and immediately began talking.

“Sorry I’m late, Professor,” he said hurriedly. “I got talking to Hermione upstairs and I lost track of time…”

“Severus,” came the response, just as the door was closed and warded.

Harry froze and looked over at Severus, then flushed slightly when he realized what he had said. Seeing Hermione at Hogwarts had put him in the mindset of being a student again, and his old habits – along with the requirement to use honorifics – had re-emerged. In many ways, he realized he still felt like a student, or at least that he still belonged here somehow.

“Oh, right. Sorry about that.”

Severus merely looked down the length of his nose at Harry, his face steeld and serious. When Harry swallowed thickly, Severus relaxed his expression, one of his brows inching towards his hairline.
“Never mind,” he said, clearly fighting a smirk. “Come, let’s get started.”

Bewildered, Harry stared back at Severus. *What was that all about?* he wondered. Chalking it up to his already surreal day, he merely followed Severus into the lab. As he walked, he noticed Severus’ clothes were casual again. Now that school was nearly back in session, he assumed Severus would be donning his teaching robes all the time. Perhaps that was only for outside his quarters, and off-hours this was more typical? Or could it be for Harry’s benefit? He didn’t dare indulge that thought. One thing rarely changed, though, which he noted with surprising interest: Severus’ attire was almost always black.

*He does look good in black,* Harry admitted to himself, watching as his former professor headed off to his stores at the back of the lab. After a moment, and with a small start, Harry realized his eyes had been following Severus’ arse the whole time.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

When Harry leaned back against the chaise, his stomach began to growl. He rubbed one of his hands over his abdomen and again lamented the fact he had to leave home without touching his lunch. He thought briefly about asking if Severus had any food, but decided against it when Severus walked back into the room carrying a familiar vial of indigo fluid, summoning his black chair to follow him as he approached.

While Severus prepped everything, Harry tried to make himself comfortable. Now that he was here, he thought his nerves would abate. They didn’t. He felt strangely unsettled about this session and tried to convince himself he was just being paranoid, but he still couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. At least Severus would be with him the whole time. That fact *did* actually provide some much-needed comfort, though it was like eating sugar for every meal – he knew it wouldn’t sustain him for long.

“Are you prepared?” came Severus’ query.

Harry nodded automatically and leaned his head back against the soft fabric of the chaise. He had just enough time to think, *Well, here goes nothing*, before he spoke the incantation aloud. Then the potion covered his tongue in warm, dense threads and rapidly sent him off to his subconscious.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

The thick forest surrounding Harry felt foreign at first but he imagined it would make sense soon enough, if his previous sessions with Evochi were anything to go by. It seemed to be just before dawn, the color of the scant light around him indicative of sunrise. He got up off the ground and brushed the leaves from his denims. The temperature in the air was cool and it sent gooseflesh spreading across his bare arms. He shivered, the foreboding sense he had hoped to escape by taking Evochi now more omnipresent than ever.

As he began to walk towards the only path in sight, he tried to search his mind. With a flutter of panic, he couldn’t recall what he had held in his mind as the Evochi had taken effect. What scene had he been picturing that it thought to bring him here? And where was here?
He reached over to touch a small tree, confirming for himself that this place was not a mirage. He cast his eyes about his surroundings, the scent of damp foliage filling his nostrils. Although his mind felt strangely blank, he got the sense that he was, indeed, in an Evochi reality.

Before long, the path he was following opened into a clearing and the sunlight began to peek over the edge of the horizon. Oddly, it did not warm the setting in the slightest – if anything, it only seemed to mock it. Harry glanced around, puzzled; he did not recognize this place at all. Towards the center of the clearing, he could just make out the profiles of two stone benches and decided to make his way closer to see if they jarred his memory. It was then that he wondered if Evochi had the ability to create places that didn’t exist in any other reality.

He took in more details as he walked. This place, wherever he was, was very still. There were no birds or wildlife to be seen despite the abundance of nature. As he approached the closer of the two benches, he caught a glimpse of something on the ground behind it. The nearer he got, the more it came into focus, until he was close enough to realize what it was.

A shoe.
But not just a shoe. A shoe still attached to a foot, and a leg.

Harry’s heartbeat began to pound in his throat and he stepped even closer, enough so that he could lean over the bench to see who was lying on the grass behind it. As he did so, and his eyes took in the familiar face before him, he clutched a hand to his chest in a vain attempt to keep the breath from escaping his lungs. The body before him was lying motionless; the gray eyes, lifeless; the strikingly handsome face still frozen in shock. Harry’s brain ground to a halt as fear gripped him. His voice, although little more than a hoarse whisper, cut loudly into the eerie silence.

“Cedric…?”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus could already tell something was different about this session. Suddenly alert, he sat up straighter in his chair and set his journal and quill aside, eyeing Harry carefully, calculatingly. Although something noteworthy was occurring, his instinct was to watch now and record the details later.

Harry was laying on the chaise as always, but his face had contorted into one of distress, where normally it would have been relaxed and placid. Evochi was an expression of the inner mind – the subconscious, not the physical body – even though physical reactions were possible, if not likely. But to see them so early in a session, and this one in particular, was troubling.

Concern furrowed Severus’ brow and he felt a rising panic in his throat at the thought that there might be something wrong with this particular dose of Evochi. Severus scrutinized Harry’s features and body closely, looking for any sign of a malformed potion, but found none. Not that he could do anything even if he had. The potion had to be allowed to wear off naturally – any attempt to interrupt an Evochi session with either potions or spells could have disastrous effects.

The absence of symptoms proved only a brief respite, though, for any relief Severus might have felt was quickly dashed when Harry suddenly whimpered in distress.

Severus quickly pushed his chair back and kneeled down on the floor next to the chaise, his
heartbeat racing in his chest, preparing for what he would later regard as one of the most agonizing fifty-three minutes of his life.

Despite every instinct in his body telling him not to, Harry reached down and touched Cedric’s forearm. It was cold and unyielding. He snapped his hand away quickly, more in confusion than in surprise. He wasn’t sure what he had been expecting, exactly, but his mind was reeling regardless. Harry sat on the edge of the stone bench and closed his eyes tightly, painfully. What did this mean? Why was Cedric here?

What was this place?

Harry forced himself to think about a time when Cedric was alive. The help they had given each other in the Tri-Wizard Tournament tasks, that fateful walk through the maze of hedges, the cup that was actually a Portkey, the graveyard…

Shouldn’t thinking about something create it in this reality? Harry wondered.

As Harry opened his eyes to see, he stared unfocused into the distance. His peripheral vision told him Cedric was still lying on the ground in exactly the same spot. And still dead. He felt his emotions go numb and refused to indulge whatever trick of Evochi this was.

It’s not real! he stubbornly chastised to himself.

But when he got off the stone bench and turned to walk away, his heel caught on something about the size and shape of a small log and he tripped backwards. As he landed on the grass, he caught sight of what it was: someone’s leg. But not just any someone. As Harry leaned forward, the stock-still but determined face of one Colin Creevey came into view. Harry scrambled backwards suddenly and got to his feet, his breathing ragged. Caught in between fear and anger, he looked around, trying desperately to make some sense of what was happening.

With the sun coming up a bit more now, it was starting to cast its light wider across the expanse of the clearing. He could just make out what looked like a doorway at one end – perhaps more of an archway, if he had to guess – put together with roughly-shaped stones. He took off towards it, half-running, half-walking. As the structure came fully into view, he found it hauntingly familiar. He stopped in his tracks, his heartbeat in his throat. In the center of the arch, floating gently in some non-existent breeze, was a sheer, tattered fabric that resembled a veil…

“No,” Harry breathed out loud. “No… no…”

With a hand out in front of him, as though to stop what he feared was about to happen, he made to step away from the opening and instead backed right into something solid. He shrieked in surprise and whipped around, finding himself face-to-face with Mad-Eye Moody. Eerily, Mad-Eye was standing upright but his head had drooped downward. His normal eye was closed while his magic eye still whirled in its socket. His skin was pallid and he, too, was rigid. If ever Harry needed the visual confirmation that Mad-Eye had perished in the flight to escape Voldemort, this was definitely it.

Wide-eyed and unable to speak, Harry swallowed into a dry throat. Then a light scuffling noise behind him made him jump again and as he turned, he saw a hand appear on the inner side of the
arch. Without moving or blinking, he watched as the hand become an arm, which became a shoulder, which became a head with straggly black hair, which became a man – who lingered in the archway for a moment and then started to fall forwards.

“Sirius!” Harry yelled and lunged for his Godfather, catching him as best he could. Barely able to hold on, he let them both slump to the ground as gingerly as he could manage with the momentum. He rolled Sirius onto his back and looked down into glassy, unfocused eyes.

“NO!” Harry cried. Desperately, he ran his hands over Sirius’ shoulders and chest, shaking him, not willing to let him go again, hoarsely crying out his name over and over again. But when Sirius didn’t respond, he knew the futility of his efforts. He bowed his head over the lifeless body before him, balling his fists tightly as a surge of anger seethed through him.

Then, to his left, another sound – this time of digging. In horror, he looked over to see the grass starting to push itself upwards, slowly at first and then more rapidly. As it gave way to the damp earth beneath it, he could just make out the semblance of long, thin, knobby fingers clawing towards the surface. He knew immediately what – or who – he would find once the digging had stopped, and could not bear the sight, or the wait. He stood up and ran away from that spot as fast as his feet would carry him. But when he neared the center of the clearing, he couldn’t help his morbid curiosity and looked back over his shoulder. Silhouetted against the barely-lit horizon, Harry could just make out the large, bat-like ears of Dobby before the diminutive figure of the elf collapsed onto the grass before him and moved no more.

Distraught and gasping for air, Harry tripped as he turned back around and landed hard on the grass on his knees. He dropped his head, coughing miserably to try and regain his breathing. He was beginning to see that running would do no good here. This was inescapable. Somehow his worst nightmare was playing out before his eyes and he was powerless to stop it.

Whatever happened to me creating the realities? he raged internally.

Confused and furious, he screamed into the deafening silence as loud as he could, his fists balled so tightly they turned white, his fingernails digging into his palms. All of the anger and pain coursing through him seemed to burn his lungs with the intensity and emotion. Instead of an echo, though, the clearing around him seemed to swallow the sound whole.

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Frustrated, and still panting from the exertion, Harry looked around with despair. All he wanted was an out.

Struck with an idea, he stood up and began walking towards the dense part of the forest where he had emerged initially. However, when he reached the path, his heart sunk even further at the sight before him. The bodies of three people were laying across the entrance to the trail. As he rushed up to them, he discovered it was Remus, Tonks and Fred Weasley.

Fred, with his wand still gripped tightly in his hand, seemed to be locked in an animated sort of stasis. Under entirely different circumstances it might have been comical, as he was smiling his trademark goofy grin. However, even with Fred’s contentedly closed eyes, it did little to soothe the sick feeling Harry got at gazing down upon him.

As Harry turned his attention to Remus and Tonks, he noticed they were lying just out of arm’s reach of each other, the fingers of Tonks’ right hand splayed open and reaching for Remus’. However, it was clear that they perished before achieving that final consolation; their faces, still frozen in pain and desperation; their hands, mere inches apart. This nearly destroyed Harry – so much so that he had to turn abruptly and race back towards the center of the clearing again. He wedged his fingertips in behind his glasses in a vain attempt to press the tears out of his eyes – anything to get some
distance. When his throat began constricting sharply, making breathing difficult, he stopped running. He knew it was only making the problem worse, but didn’t know how much more of this he could endure.

Just then, every hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Someone else was here. The presence was strong and familiar… and alive. Harry felt his heartbeat pound harder and all of his muscles tense. He moved his hands away from his eyes just as a silky voice cut through the silence.

“You are a fool, Harry Potter.”

Harry’s face drained of all its color but he did not turn around.

Out of nowhere, Voldemort’s pale, snake-like face appeared over Harry’s right shoulder, hovering near his ear. As Voldemort spoke again, now barely above a whisper, his voice sent chills down Harry’s spine.

“It is because of you that your poor, pathetic friends lie dead around you.”

Harry remained motionless for a moment, frozen in panic, Voldemort’s words heavy against his heart. The death of people he loved, particularly those fighting in his name, was a burden he steadfastly harbored; wore it like a scarlet letter, in fact. He lowered his head, resigning himself again to the inevitable truth. Then a light whooshing sound distracted him, and he turned his head to see the serene face of Albus Dumbledore come plainly into view.

Something in Harry’s heart leapt at the vision and he blinked several times to ensure it was real. The half-moon glasses, the twinkling blue eyes, the quirky, spangled robes: it was all exactly as he remembered it. Harry couldn’t seem to find his voice but felt a surge of safety and confidence return to his body at his old mentor’s presence.

At the arrival of their new guest, Voldemort turned and eyed Dumbledore carefully, an arrogant, smug expression on his face. He continued to stroll slowly, his wispy robes billowing ominously behind him, his bare feet starkly white against the dark green of the grass.

“Even your death was Harry’s fault,” he declared smoothly, his tone dripping with satisfaction.

“You’re wrong, Tom,” Dumbledore responded, his voice as calm and commanding as ever. “That was completely my doing… unfortunately,” he added thoughtfully.

Voldemort’s face wrinkled in disdain and he swept about with poorly-disguised agitation. Harry turned to watch the two of them just as Voldemort addressed him directly again, ignoring Dumbledore.

“How does it feel knowing all of these people died because of you, Harry?” Voldemort taunted, sweeping his arm in a wide gesture to indicate the whole clearing. “You were not able to save them!” Then he paused for a moment, sneering, and pointed his wand at the ground. Beneath the tip, a fragile, white, feathered body appeared. “Not even your pitiful owl.”

“Hedwig!” Harry cried out mournfully, kneeling down next to the motionless bird. He saw one wing was bent at an unnatural angle but tried to ignore it as he gently stroked the feathers on her face instead. His gaze snapped back up to Voldemort, now blazing with contempt and hatred, but still he felt crippled by the truth of Voldemort’s earlier words.

Then an Evochi-related question tumbled out of his mouth.

“Why aren’t you dead here, like the others?”
Voldemort let out a cold, mirthless laugh. “You didn’t kill me, Harry. You were never capable of killing me.”

“But you died, I saw it happen! Your curse rebounded…” Harry could hear the rising panic in his voice as a sliver of doubt fragmented his mind.

“You merely tricked me, Harry. One moment of boyish cleverness does not mean you defeated me.” He let out a bark of derisive laughter. “That would have taken considerable skill – skill which you do not possess. You always got by on luck, Harry, hiding behind wizards far greater than yourself; wizards who also saw fit to protect you, even from yourself.” At this, Voldemort shot an accusatory glare in Dumbledore’s direction.

Unperturbed by the obvious attempt to goad him, Dumbledore said nothing and merely looked back serenely, a small, resolute smile set on his lips. Apparently he saw no reason to justify himself or his actions to anyone, least of all to Voldemort.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes at Dumbledore but did not press further, then snapped his attention back to Harry, circling him slowly as though he were prey. Harry, now physically and emotionally drained, only stared vaguely in front of him. As Voldemort leaned down over Harry, he continued his verbal lambaste.

“Take a close look around you, Harry, for this is your past and your future. No matter what you do with your life, or how happy you try to become, I will always be there to destroy it for you. Or, if I am fortunate, you will do the work for me.”

Harry frowned miserably and put his face in his hands. He wasn’t sure he even had any fight left.

“Don’t you see? There is no hiding from this! It will follow you everywhere!”

Motion in front of him made Harry look up again, and when he did, he saw a small figure step behind Voldemort. Blinking to clear his eyes, Harry watched as the tiny fingers of a young child pulled back the robe by Voldemort’s leg and came fully into view. Voldemort’s mouth spread into an unsettling smile.

“It is time you meet your Godson, Harry.” As he spoke, the long, pale fingers of his left hand slowly caressed the top of the boy’s head. There was nothing sweet about it, though, only predatory.

Harry’s eyes widened as he took in the surprisingly familiar features of the future Teddy Lupin. He must have been about five years old. As Harry reached a hand out, he was crestfallen when Teddy’s face crumpled and the child turned away, tears beginning to fall down his cheeks. When he spoke, his voice was defiant and hurt.

“You killed my mommy and daddy!” Teddy wailed. It was the sorrow only an orphan could know. Utterly dismantled and defeated, Harry buckled onto the ground, half-choking on a sob that lodged in his throat.

Voldemort was having none of this, however. Immediately, he reached down and tightly wrapped his cold fingers around one of Harry’s ankles, yanking his leg out from under him, and began dragging his body across the grass.

In his panic and anger, Harry shouted at Voldemort while trying to wrestle his leg free.

“LET ME GO!”

But Voldemort was unrelenting and, for some reason, far stronger. In desperation, Harry flung his
ars out above his head and made to grab at the grass or anything else he could find, trying to halt his progress across the clearing. Without looking, he knew where they were headed: the arch with the veil. Yet the harder he kicked his leg, the more viselike Voldemort’s grip became. Tears streamed down Harry’s cheeks as he yelled anything and everything, frustrated by being completely defenseless and the fact that no amount of further creation on his part seemed to change the events in this particular reality.

All of his struggling seemed for naught. Exhausted and riddled with fear, Harry finally gave in and let his body slacken, whimpering as the grass now chafed painfully against the bare skin of his chest where his shirt had pulled up.

As they neared the arch, though, something remarkable began to transpire: the grass beneath Harry started to transform. The sky darkened. In the distance, the periphery of the clearing slowly started to disappear. It took a few seconds but suddenly Harry’s mind became hyper-aware of the situation and he knew – or hoped – that what he was witnessing was the end of his session.

He had never known such relief.

Yet, it seemed to be fading slower than normal, and he was still being pulled insistently towards the arch. What would happen if he and Voldemort reached the veil before this reality dissolved?

Feeling a renewed sense of purpose and adrenaline flood him, Harry mustered a strength and endurance he didn’t even know he had and began grabbing at the ground anew, hoping if not to stop his motion then at least to delay it long enough. Voldemort seemed to sense this, too, and picked up his pace in response.

When they reached the arch, Voldemort didn’t waste a precious moment. Out in front of him, Harry saw that the scene was almost completely gone, once again resembling a darkened lab – except for the ground he was laying on and the arch behind him. With a victorious grin, Voldemort backed through the veil and pulled Harry with him.

Or tried to, anyway.

With sheer tenacity, Harry grabbed the sides of the archway as hard as he could, screaming as the rough-cut stones cut into the soft flesh of his hands, the lower trunk of his body dangerously close to passing through the veil. But he held on with everything he had – and not a second too long – for once Voldemort was claimed into the veil, the hold on his ankle released at the same time his hold slipped, and he collapsed onto the ground.

Underneath his throbbing fingers, the texture of the arch changed dramatically. What was once masonry became a warm fabric. Then, as the scene completely evaporated before him, he felt like he was slipping backwards into something. Afraid the veil was still trying to claim him, he reached his hands out to grab at the material before him, panic-stricken. Tears welled in his eyes.

The deep timbre of a man’s voice called out to him but he couldn’t place the words. He knew it wasn’t Voldemort, though, so he tried to move his mind towards it. The tone was soothing and familiar somehow, and he kept hearing the same words over and over, whatever they were. Through the haze of disorientation, Harry was able to make out the fabric in more detail and clung to it for dear life, ignoring the pain from the wounds on his hands as he held it forcefully.

Eventually he came to realize the voice and the fabric were connected. Then he registered something wrapped snugly around him and railed against it briefly for fear of being trapped again. But the more he struggled, the tighter it held to him and the more fervently the voice whispered in his ear.
That soothing voice. It was so familiar. Harry felt drawn to its safety and its… tenderness?

He opened his eyes but had to blink several times when his vision was met with dimly-lit surroundings. All at once his senses seemed assaulted with inputs but he couldn’t make sense of them right away. At first it was just the subtle rocking motion he felt – so slight as to almost go undetected. Next, it was the warmth and comfort against his body. Whatever was wrapped around him was solid and protective. Then, a beguiling scent. He relished it filling his nostrils and lungs. Lastly, the voice.

Wait, that was his name! He had heard his name.

Harry.

His mind was slowly coming back to him.

“Relax, Harry, you are safe…” the voice had whispered softly.

It was a person he was with, speaking to him. He was in someone’s embrace. Someone who knew him and cared for him. He could feel a chin resting on his head and warm breath rustling his hair as the words were spoken. But where was he and what had happened?

As the room around him started to come into focus and his eyes adjusted better, he willed himself to release his grip slightly in order to identify the person holding him. He was afraid of letting go completely and so moved slowly and cautiously. Leaning his head back, he saw the pale skin of a man with long curtains of shiny, ebony hair. His eyes, black as night, were all at once intense and vulnerable, and they were fixed upon Harry with deep concern. The face was as familiar as the voice, and it was then his mind seemed to slide back into place, recognition and benediction co-mingling.

All he could do is whisper, his voice hoarse as though from lack of use. “Severus…?”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Upon hearing his name, Severus exhaled loudly and tightened his hold on Harry, trying desperately to keep from breaking down. He was okay! Something soared inside him, and without thinking, he leaned over, cradling Harry’s head underneath his chin.

Severus then shut his eyes tightly and lifted his face to the ceiling, sighing deeply. The slew of possible outcomes that had plagued him for the last hour started to fade into nothingness in his mind. In truth, there was only one outcome of them all that he could bear. He opened his eyes and looked down into Harry’s pools of emerald green.

This one.

Severus adjusted his arms so that he could run a hand over Harry’s forehead, smoothing the wayward hair out of his face that had been plastered there with sweat. As he did so, Harry’s eyes began to droop and his features relaxed, his head slumping into Severus’ shoulder and his grip loosened completely.

And just like that, he was out.
Harry’s body needed recuperating. It was an inevitability following any Evochi session. Severus expected it; planned for it, even. What he hadn’t anticipated, however, was having Harry end up in his lap barely half-way through the session, terrified and shivering, clinging to him so harshly that it had left bruises on Severus’ upper arms. All Severus could think to do was hold him for the remainder of the session, to keep him from hurting himself and hoping that on some level Harry knew he was there.

Severus looked down into Harry’s face, the dried tear tracks still visible on his cheeks, and remembered the awful sounds of torment and anguish that this session, whatever it was, had elicited from him. And how powerless Severus had been to stop it.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Shifting Harry in his lap, Severus reached into his pocket and pulled out his wand. Without saying a word, he cast a quick charm to levitate Harry and then stood up, smoothing out his trousers and jumper as Harry floated mid-air in front of him. When his fingers grazed something sticky on his sleeve, he abruptly pulled his hand away to examine it, feeling his heart skip a beat. He quickly grabbed Harry’s wrists and rotated them to examine his palms.

The wounds covered the whole of Harry’s hands: the palm and most of the undersides of his fingers. The skin was heavily scuffed and cracked open, the blood still glistening. The breath seemed to escape Severus’ lungs in a rush as he rubbed his fingertips along the gashes. Confused and horrified, he immediately pressed the tip of his wand into each of Harry’s hands to staunch the flow of blood, repairing the lesions as best he could. Then he turned and sent his Patronus to Poppy with a message to come quickly, but discreetly.

Opening the door to the lab, he stepped into the antechamber and then flicked his wand to summon Harry, who silently drifted into the room after him. He was barely settled on the sofa when the quick snap of flames in the fireplace heralded the arrival of Madam Pomfrey.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

As Severus looked up at her, their eyes met, and in them, Poppy saw a tortured gaze staring back. Satisfied she would get her fill of answers later, she walked over to kneel down beside Harry and began to work post-haste, intuitively aware that Harry’s wounds were, for certain, the lesser of the two things in the room that needed healing.
“What the *fuck* was that, Severus?”

Harry’s raised voice was edged with hysteria as he vaguely jabbed his finger in the direction of the lab. He had only been awake for fifteen minutes and already he was pacing the room, his brows pinched together, every muscle in his body drawn tight.

Severus knew there would only be a small window of time in which he could temper the situation before Harry went off on him fully. Well, that he could deal with, actually. It was Harry leaving and never returning that he preferred not to think about just yet. He knew he would have to choose his words carefully. Unfortunately, none were forthcoming.

Perching on the edge of the sofa, Severus succumbed to the events that still plagued his mind. No matter what he tried, he could not get the visuals of Harry out of his mind: those first signs of distress; having to literally wrap himself around Harry to keep him from doing physical harm to himself; discovering the scrapes and cuts that covered the entire undersides of his hands. The latter was probably the most disconcerting, as nothing like that had ever happened to him while using Evochi.

He had assumed something was wrong with the potion, that it had expired somehow or had been tainted by a foreign substance – already two circumstances he was prepared never to forgive himself for. Yet there was nothing he could have done. Interrupting the Evochi session could have been disastrous; even so, waiting for the potion to wear off naturally while not knowing how much damage was being done to Harry in the process was not much of an improvement. It was an excruciating reality to be faced with, and he couldn’t remember ever feeling so helpless in his life.

Even if it had been a reality Harry created, it certainly didn’t say much for the efficacy of his assistance. His goal had been for Harry to avoid negative experiences, not relive them. Harry had already seen more darkness and destruction than any eighteen-year-old should ever have had to deal with.

“Say something!” Harry yelled. He had stopped pacing and was now standing before Severus, his chest heaving from exertion.

The loud voice cutting into the silence pulled Severus roughly from his mind; startled, he glanced up to see the hurt and anger swathed across Harry’s normally placid face. Severus looked away, bowing his head forward and intertwining his hands loosely between his thighs. If only his mind would clear and allow him to grasp something – *anything* – he might yet salvage the situation.

“I thought you said taking that… that *potion*… would help me! Why would I ever want to use it again after this, after reliving my worst nightmares!”

Severus clenched ruefully at those words, his most dreaded suspicion confirmed. Yet, it gave him a starting point. “I know it may be hard, Harry, but it is critical that you tell me everything.”

“I can’t…”

“You must!”

“Why ‘must’ I do anything? Look where that’s got me!”

Severus paused meaningfully for a moment. “I only wish to help you.”
“Help me?” Harry snorted derisively. “Help me? Yes, you’ve said that all along. How is this supposed to help me, exactly? You don’t know what I saw… what happened to me!”

“Then tell me!”

Harry turned away, but not before a look of anguish passed over his features. “I can’t…” he said thickly. “I can’t. I can’t relive it again.” Rubbing his fingers along his forehead, he added, “I wish you could just take it out of my mind.”

“I could.” Something like hope buoyed inside Severus. “Let me inside your mind, and I will see what you saw.”

At these words, he sensed Harry had instinctively begun to Occlude his mind. Severus could have easily pushed past it, but would not proceed without Harry’s permission. Not this time. To force it would be to violate whatever remaining trust Harry had in him.

“No, then I’d have to relive it with you. I don’t want to go through that again…” Harry whimpered, his voice trailing off.

Severus realized he was completely at a loss for how to comfort Harry when he was conscious. Holding him during the Evochi session had seemed so easy, so natural. Yet Harry had practically jumped off the chaise – surely Severus wasn’t expected to just let him fall to the floor? Certainly not. But it wasn’t as though holding him meant anything.

Acute pangs of responsibility and guilt bombarded him. He knew if he didn’t get Harry to open up now about what happened, he might never, and then they’d be back to square one. Or worse than square one.

“Harry, please,” Severus said, almost pleading. “I cannot help you if I don’t know what happened. You will not be reliving it – it would be a visual, nothing more. You will be… safe.”

The words did not seem to comfort Harry, as he resumed his pacing, briskly turning back and forth. He was staring down at his upturned palms, fingering the light bandages wrapped around them. Suddenly he stopped and turned, his voice sounding frantic.

“What the hell made you think Evochi could help me? Did you know this would happen?”

Nothing in his life had prepared Severus for a moment like that: feeling pried open, completely out of his element, being pelted with questions and demands that would ask him to explain his motivations, his wishes – and ultimately, his desires. Standing trial with this accuser was akin to standing face-to-face with his life – literally – for Harry was both the bane and triumph of his existence.

Frustration seemed to coalesce with every other emotion Harry was feeling, because suddenly Harry lunged at him. “Dammit Severus! Answer me!”

Reacting quickly, Severus grabbed Harry’s arms and pinned them to his sides, detaining him before he could do either of them harm. “Potter! Harry. If you will kindly refrain from flailing at me I may attempt an explanation.”

“I don’t want to hear any more of your explanations! Don’t you see? There’s nothing you could have done! I almost went through the vei–” But Harry abruptly cut himself off, his breath hitching, and Severus was left wondering what he didn’t say. It had seemed significant. Then the resistance suddenly left Harry’s body and he slumped fully into Severus’ constraining embrace, a choked sob indeed revealing much deeper currents.
“I killed them all, Severus. Not by my hand, but they all died because of me.”

“What?”

“Friends, Hogwarts teachers, Aurors, people from the Ministry, everyone! If it hadn’t been for me, none of them would have died!”

Severus scoffed. “If it hadn’t been for you, many more would have died. They all fought willingly for the cause; for their own cause. Furthermore, while the deaths are regrettable, none of them died in vain. Need I remind you that you succeeded?”

Harry barked out a mirthless laugh. “Yeah, what a champ I am! I succeeded at getting loads of people killed!”

“They died fighting for what they believed in, Harry – for freedom from tyranny, for the fate of their world and the people they hold most dear. Everyone had their own reasons.”

Leaning back a bit, Harry jerked his head since his arms were still pinned. “Yes, I was the reason! It was because of me!” He was nearly shouting again.

Something snapped inside Severus. On a rational level, he knew Harry was just angry and confused, if not a bit traumatized by whatever had happened during his Evochi session, and was lashing out for answers. That he expected. What he resented was hearing Harry say a war that had started long before he was born – before a single word of that inscrutable prophecy had ever been uttered – was somehow his doing. To even insinuate such a thing was absurdly self-centered. In the span of five words, Harry had effectively dismissed every sacrifice Severus had made.

It was because of me.

Severus felt the implication of that like a slap to the face.

Livid, he pitched his voice dangerously low, his gaze turbulent. “The Dark Lord would have risen to power regardless, with or without you. Do not delude yourself into thinking any of this was your doing. Incredible as this may seem, Potter, not everything is about you.”

In an instant, he realized things he had thought safely dormant could resurface with astonishing ease. When he saw the look of betrayal on Harry’s face, dismay pierced his very core; he knew he had gone too far. Yet there it was, lingering in the air between them. He’d said it, and could not take it back now.

Slowly withdrawing himself from Severus’ grip, Harry stood back, wide-eyed for a moment before narrowing them sharply. He quickly wiped at the corners of his eyes and looked at Severus, a closed expression on his face.

“Well, I guess I know where you stand. I’ll just get out of your hair, then, shall I?”

Half paralyzed by panic and an unrelenting fury of thoughts, Severus found he had no reply; that he could only stare numbly at Harry’s back, watching the younger wizard’s swift, agitated retreat.

The last thing he heard was the sharp clang of the latch on his chamber door as it slammed closed, its echo rather more ominous and final-sounding than he had ever remembered it being.
Evidence of life after the war was starting to make itself known more and more each day – it had been surreptitiously appearing at first, but was now gaining momentum with each passing month. Much to the delight of nearby residents, the newest installment was a charming little restaurant in Hogsmeade called The Grecian. Although the proprietor, Mrs. Whitby, was of English heritage, she had a love for and fascination of all things Greek. Now that her children were all grown, she had decided it was high time to do her part in revitalizing the town she called home – a feat she apparently felt was best accomplished by copious amounts of delicious food, and a warm, welcoming establishment.

“A little touch of Greece in Scotland!” she had quipped in *The Prophet.*

The trend was an encouraging thing to see, and Harry hoped it finally meant the clouds were beginning to part to let some sunshine through. That maybe, just maybe, the war had actually *meant* something; that people were finding a way to be happy again, and resuming their lives now that the darkness had gone from their hearts.

For himself, Harry simply wished he could reclaim that sense of wonder and contentment he’d felt as an 11-year-old, when he had first looked upon the Wizarding world with wide eyes. Idealistic as it was, it should have been achievable, but he also knew that wars changed people; that the war had changed *him.* He was reminded of it every day, in fact, and carried the burden of that knowledge as though it were draped permanently across his shoulders.

Falling into step alongside Hermione, he walked with her in companionable silence on the path from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade. She had suggested The Grecian for lunch as a way to catch up before the new term started, and he had agreed, but requested they walk instead of Apparate. The fresh air did him good. However, he was so absorbed in his thoughts that he barely noticed when she stopped outside the small restaurant.

The exterior was just as subdued and unassuming as everything else on the high street, but when they entered, they were greeted by the delicate tinkling of a bell, the soft hum of conversation and the clanking of flatware. Even for a Tuesday afternoon, the place was absolutely brimming with patrons. As Harry peered into the sun-drenched space, he took in the fresh, colorful decor and the expansive ocean mural artwork that adorned nearly every available wall. There was something about tropical-looking places that always made him feel at peace – yet he didn’t know why that would be, as he’d never been to any.

Just then, a kindly-looking but stout little witch bustled into view, and nearly squeaked with delight when she laid eyes on her newest guests.

“Mr. Potter, I am so honored to have you! What a treat, what a treat!” she exclaimed, shaking his hand enthusiastically before turning to face Hermione. “And you must be Ms. Granger! Oh, happy day! Please, please, follow me, only the best table in the house will do!” As she hurried off, they rushed to keep up with her, barely dodging the waiters who were swooping in and out amongst the tables. Trays hovered magically behind them, precariously stacked with drinks, rustic breads, and simmering, aromatic dishes.

Their table was indeed nice: situated in a cozy alcove near the back of the restaurant, it was bathed in warm light from a small window to its right. Two cushioned chairs flanked a rounded expanse of polished wood that would have been comfortable enough for four people, let alone two. A heavy, striped curtain was pulled off to the left, held back with a golden rope and tassel. Mrs. Whitby
gestured to it in a silent question of whether or not they wanted the privacy.

Still a bit dazed from their reception, Harry looked slowly from her to the curtain and back again, and then shook his head minutely.

She smiled and pressed her hands together as though in prayer. “Very well. Please, do enjoy, and let me know if I may be of any assistance. I should very much like to think you will become regulars, Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger.” And with that, she nodded charitably and was gone.

Harry and Hermione only had a moment in which to share a look before a waiter appeared at their table, dressed in white from head to toe. He offered them both a serene smile as his quill poised itself above his parchment pad, ready to take their orders.

It was about fifteen minutes into their salads and bread when Harry realized he’d been completely neglecting Hermione. He guessed she’d been talking about her trip to Australia, but he’d been so lost in the events of Sunday past and the fight he’d had with Severus that he couldn’t concentrate on much else – including the food, which actually looked delicious. The sudden silence at their table had interrupted his thoughts, and he looked up.

Sure enough, Hermione was staring back at him, concern written all over her face. “What’s wrong, Harry? You’ve barely had a bite to eat and I doubt very much if you’ve heard a word I’ve said.”

“Sorry,” he sighed. “It’s just…” he trailed off, poking at some lettuce with his fork.

Hermione narrowed her eyes shrewdly. “Does this have anything to do with why you were heading to the dungeons a couple days ago? And why you have wounds on your hands?” she added, gesturing to his palms.

As though in reflex, Harry rotated his wrists at her mention and peered down at the gouges that were now almost healed. He touched his fingers to the raised areas of redness. Unsure of how many details he was prepared to divulge, particularly since he wasn’t the biggest fan of Evochi at the moment, he opted to answer her generically.

“Snape is helping me with some stuff. Some post-war stuff.” He motioned vaguely to his head.

If Hermione caught the use of Severus’ surname, she didn’t show it. “Ah,” was all she said, but Harry knew he hadn’t answered anything she would have been wondering about.

“So what happened?” she prompted.

Harry cringed, his mouth instantly forming into a frown. “I, uh… I sort of stormed out.” As he spoke, he felt regret lance through him again. He knew he had acted brashly, stupidly, and braced himself for the lecture he knew was coming.

Yet it didn’t. Instead, Hermione surprised him by softening her expression. “Why?”

Harry was about to respond when their entrees appeared. As the waiter reached to take Harry’s salad plate, however, he paused and then leaned over to speak discreetly.
“Are you finding everything to your satisfaction, sir?”

Startled, Harry turned to the waiter. “Oh. Yes. I guess I’m not that hungry. Sorry.”

“No apologies needed. Mrs. Whitby simply impressed upon me the importance of you having an exceptional experience here.”

Harry’s expression darkened. “Good for business, am I?”

“Harry!” Hermione hissed, looking as though she wanted to kick his leg under the table, but only just managed to stop herself. She turned to the waiter. “I’m so sorry, I’m sure he didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

Harry tried to cut in to say it was exactly how he hoped it sounded, but was stopped by a raised hand from the waiter. “Please, I fear I have given you the wrong impression. Mrs. Whitby is not using you as a beacon for business, I assure you – it is why she chose this specific table for you. She hopes her food and hospitality will speak for itself, and that every patron has a positive experience. She is, however, quite honored to have you, and asked that I see to your needs.” Then he turned to address Harry specifically. “When I saw your salad was untouched, I was concerned it had not met your expectations. I did not wish to upset you by my inquiry, only to correct something if it was amiss.”

Harry sighed and looked down at the table. \textit{Fuck}, he thought. The fight with Severus was closer to the surface than he had cared to acknowledge, especially if a waiter just trying to do his job could set him off like that. “I’m sorry.”

A hand touched Harry’s shoulder, causing him to stop and look up at the waiter. “Say no more. I will leave you to enjoy your entrees. If I can get you anything, please – don’t hesitate to ask.” After a gracious bow, he left.

Harry chanced a glance at Hermione. As expected, she looked scandalized. Crossing her arms over her chest, she leaned forward across the table, her jaw clenched.

“What happened between you and Severus?”

Leaning back in his chair, Harry removed his glasses and pressed his hands over his face, groaning angrily. He remained silent for several long moments, his chest rising and falling as he breathed. Finally, he ground out, “I don’t know.”

“Did you have a fight?”

He nodded, but was unable to elaborate. His emotions were growing uncomfortably tight, and he feared he would not be able to control himself if he spoke.

“Can you tell me what it was about?” Her voice was gentler again.

Dropping his hands, Harry replaced his glasses. “I’m not even sure I know.”

Hermione took a bite of her now-cooling lunch and chewed thoughtfully for a moment, sizing Harry up. “What did he say? Anything you are comfortable sharing?”

“That’s just it,” Harry sighed. “He didn’t really say anything.”

“Well, what were you hoping he’d say?”

“I don’t know, just… anything. Something to help me understand, I guess. I was so angry, and he just sat there like he couldn’t understand what I was on about!” His hand was going white from the
grip he had on his fork.

“Somehow I doubt that, Harry. You know how he gets when he is cornered.”

“Are you actually defending him? Whose side are you on?”

Hermione sighed. “I’m not trying to be on anyone’s side, Harry. I’m just trying to help you see that despite your newfound friendship with Severus, he’s still very much the same person in a lot of ways. He has never been very adept at dealing with emotion, has he?”

Harry shot a glare in her direction. “He told me it wasn’t all about me, and that I should just get over myself!”

“Well, okay, but that sort of proves my point, doesn’t it? When he’s angry, I’ll bet he says things he doesn’t really mean, just like you do. This souvlaki is excellent, by the way,” she added, holding up a skewer of meat and roasted vegetables.

Harry was about to defend himself when Hermione’s remark reminded him they were at lunch. He wondered if she had done that on purpose. Nevertheless, he pulled his plate closer and took a bite of his moussaka, the dish recommended to him by the waiter. The waning temperature didn’t seem to affect his enjoyment of it, for which he was grateful, and he closed his eyes for a moment to indulge in the taste. It was delicious – sort of like the Greek version of lasagna, if he had to place it. Not wanting to repeat the salad debacle, he consumed several more mouthfuls in quick succession, barely stopping to chew, discovering as he did so that he had actually been ravenous.

Arching her brow in a fair imitation of Severus, she asked, “So why not go back and hear him out?”

“No! Why should I be the one to take the first step?”

“You were the one who stormed out,” she stated matter-of-factly.

Harry huffed, his brows pinched together. Not wanting to say something he’d probably regret, he took a large gulp of water from his glass. As the cool liquid hit his throat, he swallowed and took a few deep breaths, feeling it calm him. He wasn’t even sure why he was so upset. He looked back over at Hermione while idly rubbing his forehead. “I know. I guess I’m just not sure what to think anymore. Everything got so confusing with him and I…” he sighed, drawing out the pause in order to change tactics. “How do I know if I can trust him?”

He knew Hermione wouldn’t understand all the implications of that question, although by now she could probably guess this was about more than just post-war stuff. Either way, she didn’t press. He took a few more bites of his lunch, absentlv wondering if he could even remember when he had last eaten.

“Harry,” she began, “Severus has been protecting you for your entire life – much to your mutual annoyance, it seems. He has saved you more times than I can count at the moment, and since the war, you’ve become friends. After all that, why would you suspect he has anything but your best interests in mind? Has he done something to give you that impression?”

Harry stopped chewing and looked at her as he considered that. She was right, as usual. He scowled. But why was it that he didn’t feel he could trust Severus? What was this really about? After all, Severus had never shown any indication of an agenda. Even as a spy, his motives had been transparent – if you knew where to look.

“No,” he finally answered, feeling incredibly stupid.
“For as long as I’ve known you, you’ve been impulsive and quick-tempered. You also have the tendency to jump to conclusions about Severus – incorrect ones, I might add.”

Harry sneered. “Thanks for the reminder.”

“You two are so much alike, you know, it’s quite scary at times.” She paused to contemplate him, her head tipped slightly to the side. “You’re like fire on fire. I’m not surprised you two butt heads. I also wouldn’t be surprised to find you were brilliant—” But she stopped mid-sentence and shook her head, drawing her lower lip into her mouth. It was a rather poor show of stifling a grin.

Harry’s eyebrows danced near his fringe as he absorbed her comments – and her cryptic behavior. He knew he felt a lot of confusing emotions where Severus was concerned, but wasn’t sure he was keen on sorting through those just yet, and certainly not with Hermione giving him that look. Letting his thoughts stew for a moment, he finished off his lunch, barely resisting the urge to drag his fingers through the pool of rich, creamy sauce on his plate and lick them clean.

Then it hit him. Maybe Severus wasn’t the issue. Maybe it was that he didn’t trust himself. Truth be told, he had not given Severus a fair chance to explain. He had been so afraid of what he would hear, that in that moment, he had wanted nothing more than to get as far away from the experience as possible. At the time, that included Severus, although now that he’d thought on it, Severus was the only thing about that experience that had made it palatable.

Harry froze suddenly and looked up at Hermione, only to find her staring back, seeming to realize something had just occurred for him.

“What is it?” she asked.

A long-familiar sense of foolishness rushed over him. Oh, how he wished he wasn’t so accustomed to that feeling. He took a deep breath and sighed slowly. “Nothing. Just that I’m an idiot.”

Done with her lunch now, Hermione nudged her plate forwards so she could lean on the edge of the table. Her thoughtful expression had returned, coupled with a sardonic smile. “And if I know Severus, he’s probably blaming himself for whatever happened. If you two would just get over your ridiculous stubbornness, then perhaps you’d finally get tog—”

But she stopped abruptly once again, this time looking as though she had just unwittingly cheated on an exam. Confused, Harry was about to ask what was going on when the waiter returned to refill their water glasses, inquire after their meal, and tempt them with dessert. Harry noted with relief that the waiter seemed pleased by his empty plate.

“I trust it was satisfactory?” the waiter ventured.

“More than satisfactory. Looking forward to next time, actually.” Harry paused for a moment before adding, “Thank you.”

The waiter squared his shoulders and lifted his chin slightly. “My pleasure,” he assured. Inclining his head nobly, he bade them farewell and disappeared into the kitchen.

Harry leaned back in his chair and draped one hand loosely over his full stomach, his expression blank.

“You okay?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah.” He nodded with a deep sigh. “It’s just been an interesting couple of days, is all.”
“So it would seem.” She deposited two Galleons, four Sickles and a Knut into the leather folio the waiter had left. Then, leaning closer, she grasped one of Harry’s hands. “It will work out okay. You’ll see.” She smiled reassuringly and squeezed his hand.

For some reason, her words seemed to help release the remaining tension in his body even if he wasn’t quite sure he could believe them. Maybe it was also this place, this restaurant. He liked it. The food was delicious, of course, but it felt safe somehow; protected. That thought comforted him for only a moment, though, before he realized The Grecian was not the only place he felt that way. Yet the other was not so much a place, but a person.

Suddenly, the overwhelming urge to leave hit him. He knew what he had to do and who he had to see. He just hoped it wasn’t too late.

On their way out, Harry was seized with one final impulse and quickly searched the crowded restaurant for Mrs. Whitby. When he spotted her well-coiffed brown curls near the front register, he wound his way through the pleasantly snug dining area and wrapped her in a big hug without so much as a word of preamble. For a moment, she seemed startled, but then quickly returned the gesture warmly, the brightness of her smile saying more than words ever could.

Standing upright again, Harry smiled down at her. “Thanks,” was all he said.

As they left the restaurant, Mrs. Whitby simply blinked after them, stunned. Glancing around for their waiter, she found him leaning against the back wall, looking back at her. He merely shrugged, a bewildered smile on his face.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus’ attention was diverted from his pre-term preparations by a hollow knock on the doorframe to his office. When he looked up, he felt a frisson of nervousness ripple through his stomach at the sight that met his eyes: there, clad in black denims and a blue t-shirt, was Harry. His jacket was hanging from his left hand and his right arm was crossed in front of him protectively, clasping his left. As welcome of a sight as this was, rarely could Severus recall seeing Harry look so uncertain.

The urge to pull him into the room and lock the door assaulted Severus’ mind, but he quickly pushed it aside. Instead, a tense moment passed between them as they took turns diverting their eyes. The silence was finally broken when they both began to speak at once.

“I wanted to—”

“I must apol—”

At the sound of them talking over each other, they stopped. Harry allowed himself a small smile, but it faded quickly when Severus simply gestured blandly for him to resume.

Severus knew he was being difficult, but he needed to know what Harry had come to say. Since last seeing him, not a moment had gone by when he hadn’t run through what had happened; not a moment spared when he hadn’t regretted what he’d said. It had felt like two months had gone by, rather than the two days it had actually been. But damned if he was going to put himself on the line first. No, it had to be Harry. He looked on with carefully-veiled interest and waited.

Harry took the cue, albeit hesitantly. “Do you mind if I come in?”
Severus gestured his assent by indicating the chair opposite his desk.

Harry closed and warded the door behind him, and came to stand behind the chair. At such close proximity, Severus could clearly see the outline of Harry’s chest and toned arms underneath the thin fabric of his t-shirt. Not that he was noticing, however. He would likely observe that about anyone standing before him, he assured himself.

After Harry draped his jacket over the back of the chair, he stepped around the front and perched on the edge. Another heavy pause filled the room, in which Harry steadfastly looked at his shoes.

Severus knew he could be a patient man when it was warranted, but was quickly finding this was not one of those times. “Was there something you wished to say?”

At this, Harry looked up and met his gaze. The conflict, hurt, anger and fear all danced clearly in those emerald depths. Harry wasn’t even bothering to shield it from view, if it was even possible he could. Something sliced through Severus’ heart then, and he dearly wished he was the type of person who could give Harry what he deserved – anything at all, as long as it would take that pain out of his eyes. But then Severus’ ego chided him for the impulse, a reminder that he would stand to lose the most if the friendship dissolved, and therefore it was imperative he not succumb to emotional vulnerabilities.

Harry’s sigh pulled him from his warring mind and he refocused his gaze. Harry had since looked away, and was now picking absently at a fingernail. Before Severus could think what to do next, Harry began to speak.

“I don’t know what’s going on… or what this all means.” He paused, swallowing thickly. “But I’ve realized I… I would like your help figuring it out. If you’re still willing, of course,” he added hastily. When he looked back up, his eyes were glassy.

Severus felt the air rush from his lungs. Even if he had been so inclined (which he wasn’t), he would not have been able to say ‘no’ after seeing inside those eyes. He found he had to look away for a moment, overwhelmed as he was with his own storm of emotions, but then looked back quickly, even before he was truly able. If he ever hoped to get back in Harry’s good graces, now would not be the time to alienate him simply because he was ill-equipped to deal with the situation. What he ended up saying surprised him, as though it was someone else speaking, but he realized he meant every word of it.

“I am willing, and will do whatever I can to help you, Harry.”

The relief Harry exhibited was palpable: with a loud exhale, his posture sagged, and he dropped his face into his hands. The choked sob he seemed intent on masking escaped regardless, and he sat there like that for a long moment, breathing hard. When he spoke, his voice was muffled by his hands, but Severus still heard it clearly.

“Oh, God, I thought I had really made a mess of it this time. I acted like such an arse. Thank you for not tossing me out on my ear.” At this, he looked up, his hands falling to his lap. “I don’t deserve it, but thank you.”

“‘Deserve’? Whatever are you on about?”

Harry blinked. “Aren’t you angry with me?”

“Why would I be angry with you?”

Harry at least had the decency to look sheepish. “Well, I did leave rather abruptly on Sunday. And I
didn’t give you much of an opportunity to speak, either. I guess I wasn’t ready to hear any patronizing explanations.”

Severus sighed, understanding now. “It is I who was a disservice to you, Harry. I was never angry with you, I was angry with myself. I was at a loss for how to admit my failings, and it caused me to say some regrettable things. I apologize.”

As Harry absorbed what Severus was saying, pieces of his earlier conversation with Hermione swam in his mind. He began to cringe and smirk in equal parts, realizing – of course – that she had had both his and Severus’ number the whole time.

“Do you find this amusing?”

The question startled Harry. “Oh, no… no.” He shook his head slightly. “It’s just… Hermione was right about you. About us, I mean. She said I had jumped to conclusions and that you would be blaming yourself.”

An eyebrow arched inquisitively. “You told Hermione of your Evochi sessions?”

“No! No, we were just having lunch and… well, I suppose she is able to read me like a book after all this time.” He sighed. “We just talked about the argument a bit. I told her I had been an idiot.”

“Indeed?” A smirk invaded Severus’ tone.

Harry seemed to fight a smirk, too, but eventually gave in, and they grinned at each other. The lightness and mirth had returned to Harry’s eyes, however briefly, and it filled Severus with a feeling he did not dare to name. He wished Harry could stay like that always, but knew the path ahead of them might be difficult. Rehashing painful memories and treating war trauma was a veritable minefield, yet it was crucial if Harry was ever to heal from his past.

If their present situation was teaching Severus anything, it was that he was now more determined than ever to see Harry through to the end of it; to make sure he got the future he deserved. Even if the process cost him Harry’s friendship, it would still be worth it. A small price to pay, in fact.

He then realized this was no longer solely about atonement. He still hoped to achieve some semblance of it, but it was not the driving force he once suspected it to be. Harry was under his skin now; had somehow managed to penetrate the carefully-constructed walls Severus had spent years and years perfecting. Damn him. Damn his kind eyes and patient generosity and tight shirts and perfect arse.

In the course of only a few short months, he had grown to care for Harry, and no one would ever be more surprised about that than him. However, though it pained him to think of a future without Harry, he also knew he could stake no particular claim in that area. Harry was free to make his own
choices, and that likely meant finding a nice witch to settle down with; someone who could give him the family he never had. He would certainly have no shortage of prospects.

Then Severus had the sudden, uncomfortable visual of a brood of little Potters boarding the train to Hogwarts, with Harry and his wife looking on, smiling proudly and waving. It was painfully domestic and intimate, and the profound sense of exclusion and envy that washed over Severus highlighted the inevitable: he would simply fade into the background of Harry’s life, forgotten.

Severus felt like someone had punched him in the gut. He stood forcibly, causing the legs of his chair to grate loudly against the stone floor.

“I will be taking tea in my quarters.”

Startled and noticeably confused, Harry turned and watched as Severus left the room without another word.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

It felt a bit like déjà vu.

Once again Harry found himself standing outside Severus’ door, preparing to knock, butterflies wreaking havoc on his stomach. He had no idea what the hell that whole scene had been about. One moment they were grinning at each other, the next Severus seemed lost in thought – about what, Harry could not even begin to guess – and then suddenly he was gone.

Harry hoped it wasn’t something he had done.

As he reached up to knock, his hand brushed the handle. To his surprise, the door clicked and swung open. Inside the antechamber, he could see Severus seated on the sofa, reading. The corner of the newspaper folded down as Severus glanced up at his visitor.

Questions were crowding Harry’s mind as he entered and shut the door behind him, but what came out first was, “How did you know I was outside your door?”

“I didn’t. You must have touched the handle.” When Harry only blinked in response, Severus elaborated. “I keyed my wards to accept your touch. While we were conducting Evochi sessions, I wanted you to be able to enter and exit as you saw fit.”

“Oh. Brilliant. Thank you.” He tried for a small smile, but Severus just shook the newspaper back into place in front of him.

“Did I do something to upset you?” Harry asked next, an undercurrent of anger going with it.

“No, I am just waiting for tea to arrive. Have a seat if you like.” There was something about the offhand, artificial tone that irritated Harry.

“No, I’d like you to answer my question first.”

At this, both sides of the newspaper folded down, revealing the penetrating glare Harry remembered from his not-so-distant youth. Harry just crossed his arms over his chest and glared back.

“What the hell is going on?” he finally demanded, when no answer seemed forthcoming from
Severus. “One minute we’re grinning and I’m thinking things are all right, and then the next you just take off. Is this some bizarre way of getting back at me for Sunday?”

Severus diverted his eyes, his jaw clenching. He crumpled his newspaper slowly and set it on the coffee table in front of him. Touching his wand to it lightly, he set it aflame. In a quick hiss of red and yellow, it popped out of existence.

In any other circumstance, Harry might have been impressed, but as it was, he was beginning to see red of his own sort. How long were they going to have to do this dance? Once again, he was reminded of something Hermione had said:

“You’re like fire on fire. I’m not surprised you two butt heads.”

Feeling his anger deflate a bit, he dropped into the nearest chair and looked over at Severus. Perhaps a new tactic was warranted. But how did one fight fire? Certainly not with more fire. Perhaps water, then. He cast his mind about for what that might entail when Severus seemed to pick up on the changed dynamic himself, and offered a shocking fact.

“I destroyed all the remaining vials of Evochi that were in my possession.”

“What? Why?”

Severus was tracing the contours of his wand with one hand, talking with a level of detachment that suggested his mind was still on weightier matters. “I assumed it had gone bad. It never occurred to me that Evochi would have a limited shelf life, particularly based on its ingredients. However, after what happened to you, I could only assume…”

Harry snorted. “Yes, so naturally you thought it was something you did.”

Severus’ gaze snapped up. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Harry lifted his hands as a show of surrender, sighing lightly. “Only that you tend to blame yourself when things go wrong, just as I said earlier. What I meant was, how can you be so sure the problem was the potion?”

But Severus was spared from answering as Pokey Apparated into the center of the room, carrying a tray with a late afternoon meal. After she laid everything out on the coffee table, she gave her customary bow to the room at large and disappeared.

Harry eyed the spread before them, watching as Severus filled a small plate with a variety of morsels and then began to eat. No doubt sensing the gaze, he motioned for Harry to help himself.

“I already ate. So how can you be sure the problem was the potion?” He found his question carried less bite and more curiosity now that the tension in the room had mellowed – a fact that Severus seemed to pick up on as well.

Severus finished whatever he was eating and pressed a napkin against his lips. “I suppose I don’t. But it seemed a logical explanation for what happened.”

Harry realized then he had no idea what Severus had actually witnessed – nor had he told Severus all that he had experienced – so it seemed they were both operating rather unscientifically. In reality, both ‘variables’ could have been to blame: a faulty potion combined with something Harry had done wrong. Or perhaps it had just been Harry. Maybe they would never know. But now that Severus had scrapped all the Evochi, he wasn’t sure where that left things.
He thought he should be relieved by the knowledge that no more existed, but something in the back of his mind was nettling at him. It felt like unfinished business somehow. He couldn’t believe he was about to ask this next question, as not two days ago he’d have been perfectly happy never hearing the word Evochi again. But now? Now something was different, and he couldn’t put his finger on it.

“Do you think I will be able to use Evochi again? Sometime?” He winced a bit at how ridiculous he felt asking, though if Severus was surprised at the question, it wasn’t evident on his face.

“If you wish. I merely said I had disposed of all the existing stock, not that I hadn’t intended to brew more. In fact, I have already begun a new batch. This should allow me to rule out an errant potion if any problems occur in a future session.”

Harry should have felt comforted by that, but was still hung up on the idea that the potion hadn’t been the issue at all. He didn’t know how to explain that, though. He made a mental note to ask Severus some questions about it – but another time, as he wasn’t sure he wanted those answers just yet.

“How long does it take to brew?”

“Approximately three weeks. I estimate it should be ready for you mid-October.”

Harry nodded vaguely, then drifted into his thoughts. If he barely registered Severus finishing up his meal and Banishing the tray with a flick of his wand, he definitely missed the look Severus was giving him. He wasn’t sure how long he sat there, or when he had slouched down into the cushions of the chair, but when Severus spoke again, that is where he found himself.

“Is something the matter?”

“Hmm? No, it’s just…” But before Harry could finish, he slipped back into his thoughts, pushing them around in his mind again. One in particular was really captivating him. So much so that a question about it tumbled out.

“Can two people be in the same Evochi reality at the same time? And see and experience the same things?”

Obviously struck by the question, Severus stared back speechlessly.

“What?” Harry asked.

Collecting himself, Severus sat up straighter on the sofa, his expression carrying equal parts shock and bemusement. “I am not sure what is more unsettling: you being the one to author such a notion, or me failing to consider it in the first place. Frankly, it is hard for me to reconcile either scenario.”

Harry couldn’t help it: even though he knew the dig was directed at him, he had to laugh. Smiling impishly, he chided, “See! I’m not as thick as you thought I was!” He found the sudden levity was erasing much of his tension, and he was grateful for the reprieve.

Severus smirked, the corners of his eyes softening. It was the closest thing to a proper laugh he seemed to allow himself, but nevertheless, he was clearly enjoying the moment.

Then, more seriously: “May I ask where this idea came from?” Harry sobered quickly.

“I dunno, actually. I was just thinking about how Voldemort used our link to plant images in my mind fifth year. It wasn’t Legilimency, strictly speaking, but then neither is Evochi. I was just wondering if you’d be able to join me during a session and experience the same things. Or I mean if
anyone could. Do that.” He felt his cheeks heat.

Severus arched his brow as his eyes flicked briefly over Harry’s face. “I haven’t a clue, actually. It is an intriguing notion, however, and the theory appears sound. I shall conduct the necessary research.” He paused, regarding Harry thoughtfully. “Some assistance might speed things along, if you are interested. You are certainly entitled, as the idea was yours.”

Harry couldn’t be positive, but he was pretty sure that was compliment. From Severus Snape. And about something vaguely intellectual. He found he couldn’t stop the sloppy grin from appearing on his face.

“I’d like that. Our regular schedule, then? This Sunday?”

Severus nodded. “Agreed, but with one modification, if I may. I would like to start our research by perusing the Black family library.”

Harry didn’t know why the thought of Severus visiting his home suddenly tingled something in his core. Severus had been there on several occasions over the summer and his presence had never elicited this reaction before. Severus was, in fact, keyed to the entrance wards, so his asking for permission was merely propriety, not necessity.

_It’s only research_, Harry mentally chastised. After all, the Black family library was reputed to be one of the oldest remaining collections of hard-to-find tomes and references on the Dark Arts – as well as those grayer, middle-of-the-road sorts of arts they were more likely after.

Deciding he should just ignore the feeling for now, Harry nodded back. “Of course, whatever you need.” But despite his best efforts, the butterflies began anew.
Turns out Harry needn’t have worried: Severus was either being a perfect gentleman, or his request to peruse the Grimmauld Place library had indeed just been about research, because nothing untoward happened outside of combing through books together and sharing afternoon meals.

Where had he even got the idea that there might be a subtext to Severus’ request? Clearly he needed to stop watching so much late night telly; it was giving him ideas that bore little or no resemblance to reality.

One thing was for sure, though: Harry had never been more grateful for keeping his mouth shut about something. He would have looked a right prat for putting himself out there, hinting there might be a different reason for Severus’ visits, only to find out he was sorely mistaken.

Harry excused himself to the kitchen for a bit, confused by his disappointment.

The third weekend of their research found Severus in his usual seat in the library, poring over another tome on questionable branches of magic. The Sunday afternoon light was just beginning to wane, and it cast a warm, bronze glow about the otherwise dreary room.

So far they’d only uncovered minor references to mind connections that might prove useful, but they were both determined to exhaust their resources before giving up. It should be possible for two people to share an Evochi session – the magic was already there, just in other areas. They had not searched the Hogwarts library yet, but Severus had spent a few minutes perusing his own personal one – not that he expected to find what they were looking for in his collection, as he was quite familiar with its contents by now and certainly would have remembered something like this.

His attention was diverted when the side doors to the room opened and Harry entered. He was carrying two cups of tea with a box of biscuits and a banana wedged under his arm. He set down the tea and then unloaded the rest.

Severus recognized the box of biscuits to be the one they had been working on for a couple weeks now. By his estimation, it should be nearly empty. “Would you prefer I left these for you?”

“Nah, go on. I’m sick of them.” Harry started peeling his banana.

Severus was horrified to discover he couldn’t turn his gaze away. He knew how ridiculously juvenile it was, wanting to watch Harry eat a banana, but he’d overheard enough of his students sniggering about it that he had to see for himself what they were on about.

Harry was standing in front of one of the largest bookshelves, his head tipped to the side, reading book spines. When he brought the banana to his mouth, he simply bit off the top portion and chewed, the muscles in his jaw flexing.

About to dismiss the notion as nothing more than childish humor, Severus stopped when Harry descended upon the banana again. This time he curled his mouth further down around it and tightened his lips, his cheeks hollowing ever so slightly, before removing another, larger portion.
Something south of Severus’ navel stirred traitorously at the visual, even though he knew the gesture was innocent.

All right, so maybe his students had a point.

“How about ‘The Sorcerer’s Praeface to Subliminal Nexus Pathways’?” Harry called out, mid-chew.

Severus startled irritably, feeling exposed. Fortunately, Harry had not bothered to turn around and await an answer, and so had not seen Severus watching him. When silence continued to pervade the room, however, Harry did stop and look over his shoulder.

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“Severus?”

“Hmm?”

“Everything okay?”

“Yes. I was merely reading.”

“What did you think of the subliminal one? Should I grab it?” He was pointing to a dusty, blue leather volume three shelves above him.

“Yes, that could potentially be useful.”

Harry nodded and wandered over to grab the stool, discarding his empty banana peel in the bin as he did so.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t even ask if you wanted one.”

“One what?” Severus glowered.

“A banana. I have more in the kitchen.”

His teeth clenching, Severus shook his head. “That will not be necessary.”

Harry shrugged and then moved to position the stool in front of the bookcase. Severus belatedly realized it was going to be woefully inadequate for the task – the shelf in question would be at the very top of Harry’s reach, let alone the book.

“Harry, are you or are you not a wizard?”

“Sorry?”

“Is there a reason you are not using your wand to retrieve that book?”

Harry looked over at Severus, then up at the shelf, then back again. “I dunno.” He laughed. “I guess it doesn’t always occur to me to use my wand. I didn’t grow up doing everything by magic.”

“Nor did I. However, I’ve since found that magic saves me the trouble of bodily harm should I think to embark upon ill-advised tasks with an ancient stool.”

Harry laughed again. “It’s not that bad.” He kicked it closer to the shelf and hopped on. “See? I can reach just fine.”

But instead of noticing the book Harry was stretching to grab, Severus was distracted by an altogether different view: the t-shirt Harry was wearing had pulled up to reveal a swathe of bare skin
just above the waistband of his denims. Severus tried to pull his gaze elsewhere, but failed completely when he noticed there were markings upon Harry’s flesh. They looked to be in the shape of feathers. If he didn’t know better, he would have guessed it was part of a… No, certainly not.

*Harry had a tattoo?*

“What?” he heard Harry say, but the voice sounded far away, as though it was outside his awareness.

“Severus?” Now the voice was right in front of him.

Dammit, he must have been thinking out loud! Severus looked up to meet the confusion on Harry’s face. “I was merely wondering if that was a tattoo I saw.”

“What? Oh!” Harry glanced down briefly as he pressed a palm to the right side of his body. “You mean this?”

“Presumably. What is it?”

“A phoenix. Would you like to see?” Harry’s face brightened, seeming eager to share.

Who was Severus to deny him?

Setting aside the book he’d retrieved, Harry grasped the hem of his t-shirt and pulled it off over his head. Turning to show Severus more of the right side of his body, he lifted his arm out of the way and smiled expectantly.

The smooth, pale skin of Harry’s body offered the perfect backdrop, and Severus found he couldn’t decide what to look at first. His eyes quickly traced the contours of a toned abdomen, dark denims resting on slim hips, and a trail of hair below the navel that disappeared under his waistband. Ignoring the renewed stir of interest from his own body, Severus focused his gaze on the tattoo.

If anything, his only surprise was in how big it was. The phoenix was set entirely in a blue-black ink, oriented in a way that showcased the plumage of its back and wings. The feathers he had glimpsed earlier were part of the tail, which started at Harry’s lower back and wrapped around to meet the winged torso that covered his side. The bird’s one visible eye was closed, its head bowed in a regal, serene pose against Harry’s rib cage. A halo of flames bordered the open wings like an aura.

“What do you think?” His grin was decidedly more cheeky than it had any right to be.

The tattoo was indeed beautifully rendered – its meticulous shading conveying the bird’s power, passion and integrity… rather like Harry himself, he considered – and he found the effect of it irrationally appealing. He looked away. “How long have you had it?”

Harry’s expression sobered. “I got it shortly after the war. After I left St. Mungo’s.”

“I would not have thought you the type. May I ask why?”

Harry reached for his t-shirt and shrugged back into it. “A lot of reasons, actually. It’s personal to me, of course, but it also marks the end of my journey in the war… sort of rising from the ashes and all that. The artist who designed it for me said the flames symbolize the fire in one’s spirit… the courage. Had to get a bit of Gryffindor in there, I suppose.” He smirked briefly as he pulled out a chair and sat down. “This probably sounds stupid, but I figured the discomfort and pain of getting a tattoo would sort of balance out the sacrifices and hurt people endured on my behalf. I owed them.”
It had never been more clear to Severus that Harry was suffering from survivor’s guilt, but despite his own expertise with that particular self-torture, he was not sure what else he could say that might prove helpful. He wouldn’t have listened to someone trying to talk him away from it, either. “You wanted a way to memorialize them.”

“Yeah. But it’s more than that. I think it will always be a reminder of why I did what I did, but I wanted…” He trailed off, dropping his eyes to his lap. For a moment he simply traced the threads in his denims with a forefinger. “It reminds me I still have my own life to live, too.”

Severus reflected on that. His feeling about tattoos was understandably biased after living with the Dark Mark for so long, but he had to admit Harry’s experience was altering his perspective a bit. It had been his choice to take the Mark, but it certainly had not been backed by something of great personal significance – quite the opposite, it had bound his freedom to a madman. Mercifully, the nagging pulse of its connection had died along with Voldemort, but the Mark itself, although faded now, was likely to remain a permanent fixture. He questioned whether he would ever consider a real tattoo. What in his life was important enough to affirm in such a way?

“Was it done by non-magical methods?” he heard himself ask.

“Yeah, a shop in Muggle London. Then George Weasley animated it.”

“It’s animated?” It had only been on display for a minute or two, but Severus did not recall seeing a single feather twitch.

Harry looked over, a sudden grin on his face. “Yeah. It’s not called ‘Phoenix Rising’ for nothing. It moves around.”

Severus blinked, uncomfortably aware of how much Harry’s eyes seemed to twinkle at that. He wondered under what circumstances the tattoo would move, and to where… and, of course, if it was sensitive to touch.

Reaching for his tea rather more forcefully than necessary, Severus nearly sloshed it on the book that lay open before him. Scowling, he brought it to his lips and took a slow drink. As the tepid liquid hit his throat, he felt his body begin to relax from the familiar sensation. However, his mind continued its unrelenting visual assault. Collecting the blue volume Harry had placed before him, he glanced at the gilded letters on the front cover. He hoped to hell Subliminal Nexus Pathways would be enough to distract him.

“Do you think we’ll find a way to do this? To link Evochi sessions, I mean?”

Severus was surprised to hear the hint of despair in Harry’s voice. “I cannot be certain.”

Harry pursed his lips as he gave a slow nod, his brow furrowed. “You said the next batch of Evochi will be ready soon?”

“Yes – by midweek coming up, I suspect.” Sensing where this was headed, Severus ventured, “Have you changed your mind about it?”

“No… I just…” Harry shrugged. “I just don’t want to repeat last time.”

“Harry, you are under no obligation—”

“—I know,” he interrupted. “It’s not that. It’s just… I can’t get this feeling out of my mind that I need to keep doing this, but I don’t know why.” He idly rolled a quill back and forth between two fingers. “It’s like looking for something without knowing what you’re supposed to be looking for, and not
finding it anyway. It's always just out of reach.”

“Perhaps an additional session will show you what you seek, then.”

Harry sighed, his gaze settling on Severus. “Are you still sure this will help me?”

Severus stared back. “That is my belief, yes.”

The searching look Harry gave him might have been unsettling had it not been for the resolve that followed it shortly thereafter. Harry leaned back in his chair and heaved another sigh. “Then I guess I’ll see you next Sunday.”
Something wasn’t right, he could feel it.

Not for nothing, Severus’ seventeen-year tenure as a spy had taught him to hone his senses and trust his instincts. Glancing up at the clock in his lab, he saw that once again Harry was late. A bubble of concern began to well within him, but he stamped it down quickly. No, this was different somehow. On a hunch, he strode through to his antechamber and wrenched open the door to his quarters.

There, filling a wide expanse of the dungeon hallway, was a cluster of at least a dozen Slytherin students. In the center of their tight knot stood Harry, the rising panic on his face obvious to someone who knew his expressions well, as Severus did. No fewer than three girls were trying to nudge each other out of the way to get closer to him, and one sixth-year Prefect was gazing at him with fiery adoration, a hand resting possessively on his upper arm in a way that was not lost on Severus.

Seized with a sudden surge of protectiveness, Severus marched into the hallway. No one seemed to notice him at all – at least not until he reached into the fray, grabbed Harry by the arm and pulled him out abruptly. Once Harry was safely inside his quarters, he turned and shooed the fan club away with a pointed reference to parchments not writing themselves, and then closed his door, warding it as always.

Harry just stood there, a stunned and somewhat vacant expression on his face. After a few moments, he slouched into the nearest chair, his eyes refocusing as he looked over at Severus.

“Thank you for that…”

Severus nodded curtly, feeling his ire mingle with envy. “Did I not warn you something like this could happen?”

“I can take care of myself,” Harry retorted indignantly.

“Clearly,” Severus intoned, nodding his head towards the front door to his quarters. “Nothing like a pack of students devouring you with questions and wandering hands to prove that.”

Harry sulked, looping his arms across his chest.

Severus sighed, rubbing his temple. “I am not suggesting you cannot handle your own affairs, Harry. Certainly you have proven yourself capable time and again. But the emotional repercussions of a war can cause people to behave uncharacteristically. This attention towards you should diminish with time, but for now, you are still being idolized by many.”

Everything about Harry’s posture and the way he covered his face with his hands suggested frustration and dejection. Severus remembered how he had long-accused Harry of seeking celebrity; of wanting the accolades and the adoring public. He now knew nothing could be farther from the truth, but it didn’t stop him recalling how stubborn and blind-to-the-truth he had been all those years. Perhaps it was both ironic and appropriate, then, that he should be the steward for Harry’s escapism and rehabilitation.

“Come, the lab is ready for you.”

Harry nodded glumly and stood, making his way to the door. Severus got there first and opened it for him.
“From now on, I will make arrangements for you to Floo directly from Grimmauld Place into my quarters.”

Harry’s gaze snapped up, the relief and gratitude written across every inch of his face.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

It was already the eighteenth of October, which meant it had been nearly a month to the day since Harry’s last session. Severus was no closer to learning what had happened to Harry, but at least knew no permanent damage had been done. For the time being, that was enough. He had no doubt the topic would come up again; he could almost read the questions and turmoil off Harry’s mind.

Perhaps that’s why Harry’s willingness to continue taking Evochi both surprised and confused him. Why would Harry choose to continue along a path where his most recent experiences were still haunting him? Severus could only guess. At the same time, he was pleased the sessions would give him a continued excuse to see Harry. He had grown accustomed to their Sunday routine.

Fortunately, that routine had also extended to their research in the Grimmauld Place library. Though, if Severus had hoped the personal venue would yield more insight into Harry’s motivations and hopes for future draughts of Evochi, he had been mistaken.

He had been to Harry’s home on multiple occasions over the summer (and to the house itself many times before that, for Order meetings) yet something about this time had been different, almost as though their dynamic was changing. At times Harry had even seemed nervous or fidgety. Perhaps that had just been boredom? Research was, after all, idle work – something for which Severus alone was suited. It didn’t help that after three weekends in a row poring over stacks of books too numerous to count, they had come away with only a few abstract ideas on how to connect two Evochi sessions. Their next course of action was to cross-reference their findings against Albus’ old library, but even then there was no guarantee they’d find anything.

For the moment, Severus pushed aside his thoughts and frustrations – they could wait. For now, he wished only to focus on Harry’s fourth session.

When he emerged from his storeroom with a vial of indigo-colored fluid in his hand, Harry was just getting comfortable on the chaise. The new batch of Evochi had finished four days prior, exactly as he predicted it would. Perhaps it was just a nod to his own accomplished hand, but this latest batch had proven easier to brew than he remembered. Had his skills really improved that much in two years? It seemed unlikely, but either way, he was not willing to take any chances with Harry. After his lessons had concluded for the week, Severus locked himself in his lab and administered a full dose to himself as a test.

The Evochi worked without incident.

He had even managed to convince himself that revisiting his oft-traveled virtual reality was simply for scientific comparison.

Feeling confident about the session Harry was about to embark upon, he situated himself into his usual chair and began prepping his materials. When he sensed Harry’s gaze, however, he turned, noting the concern in Harry’s eyes.

“Would you be more comfortable starting with a half dose?” he offered.
“No, the regular one is fine. I... I want to do an hour.” Harry sounded like he was still trying to convince himself.

Severus leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “Might I make a suggestion, then?”

Harry tilted his head up further, curious. “Sure.”

“Get out of Britain.”

“What?”

“I seem to recall you were packing for a trip this past August. For your Evochi session, perhaps you should revisit that intention.”

“I can do that?”

“Of course.”

“But where would I go?”

“Wherever you wished to go. You will be traveling in here,” Severus remarked, touching a fingertip to his forehead.

“How could it be in my mind if I’ve never been anywhere?”

“Your subconscious will supply much of it – just as it would if you were dreaming.”

Dreaming. Of course. Severus felt a sudden rush of inspiration. Why hadn’t he considered this before? Having Harry construct his Evochi session as a dreamscape instead of a virtual reality had the potential to be vastly therapeutic, particularly at this stage.

Harry was still chewing on the previous topic, however. “Yeah, but isn’t the whole point of visiting another place to see what it’s really like, and not just my perception of it?”

“Do you recall me describing Evochi’s true power?” Severus asked.

“Erm, I think so – something about reflecting inner thoughts?” Harry’s brows pinched together doubtfully.

“Close. More specifically, one’s deepest desires. People cannot often identify these consciously, as impulses are easily buried behind the clutter of their over-obligated and emotional minds. Evochi is one way to retrieve that information.”

Harry stared back as the realization settled over him. “So... so you mean I could figure out what mine is?”

“At least some of them, yes.” Severus was feeling rather pleased with himself.

“And knowing that will help me, you think?”

“I cannot imagine it would hurt. I would hope it offers clarity, perhaps even give you direction for this new life of yours you’ve been purporting.” Harry smiled at that. “Regardless, even if no answers are forthcoming, the dreamscape should still prove enjoyable since it reflects things you desire, even if you are not aware of them on a conscious level.”

“How would I create that reality if I don’t know what it is?”
“You don’t. That is perhaps the one catch. You must give up the ability to dictate the action so that your subconscious can show you your desires. It is the only way, unfortunately. You would have as much control over this type of reality as you would a dream – which is to say, none.”

Harry swallowed, his eyes darting to the side. He frowned, looking a little panicked.

“What is it?” Severus prodded.

“I think that’s what happened in my last session. I didn’t have any control. I can’t—”

“You misunderstand me,” Severus interrupted. “The dreamscape is something you will be consciously requesting; it is not left to chance. In that regard you will have control.” However, when this did not seem to sway Harry’s opinion, either, he decided to ask the one question that had been laying heavy on his mind.

“Do you trust me, Harry?”

Harry raised his eyes to meet Severus’ and he searched them for a moment. Finally, he said, “Yeah. I do.”

Severus barely had the chance to begin processing the surge of relief and vindication he felt at hearing those words before Harry plowed on again. “If these dreamscape are so great, why would people bother doing the virtual realities?”

“For control. While pleasurable, the dreamscape can only reveal your heart’s desires. There is no creation involved on your part, only observation and sensation. Wants, on the other hand, appear less transient and more attainable than desires, and therefore what people seek through the use of Evochi is the experience of obtaining those wants.”

“But they only get that stuff in their mind, though.”

“Irrelevant,” Severus remarked, waving a hand dismissively. “You know by now the virtual realities look and feel every bit as authentic as this reality, and when the potion wears off, the events are transferred to your conscious mind. In effect, the result is the same: you gain the experience of interacting with your wants even if you do not actually possess them. That is why this level of escapism can be addictive – quite literally, there is nothing to stop you from living entirely inside your mind.”

“Yeah…” Harry agreed, nodding slowly. Once again he looked lost in thought. It was short-lived, though, because he suddenly seemed resolved about something.

“Okay, so what do I have to do differently to create a dreamscape?”

Severus smiled inwardly, though his outward expression did not change. “You must do two things. First, quiet your mind and put your fears aside, at least for the moment. Your subconscious will provide the intent this time. Then use the amended incantation: ‘Prodeo quod strenuus somnium cupio.’”

“What does that mean?”

“I believe the approximate translation is ‘activate the desire dream.’”

Although the adjustments to do a dreamscape were minor, Severus could still see Harry was doubtful about the likelihood of his success. “You will do fine,” he assured.
Harry scrubbed his hands over his face. “I sincerely hope so,” he answered, smiling weakly.

If there was one thing Harry didn’t think he’d ever grow tired of, it was the feel of Evochi on his tongue. It seemed heavier than it had any right to be, its warm, molten threads a comfortable weight as it pinned his tongue to the bottom of his mouth. When he pinched his lips together to swallow, it flooded the inside of his mouth with a tangy, sweet, herbal flavor, and then coated the length of his throat before traveling down, down, down…

When he opened his eyes, it was to the usual grey mist.

He recognized it immediately as the pause before an Evochi reality forms, and was glad his awareness seemed to return quicker and quicker with each consecutive draught. As he waited for his surroundings to materialize, a worry struck him: what if he hadn’t done the dreamscape right? Would the mist still appear grey even if it wasn’t a regular virtual reality?

And just as it had always seemed to before, the Evochi answered him. The mist began to swirl around him, and almost at once, his senses were assaulted with inputs. Decidedly pleasurable inputs. He still had no idea where he was, but it was warm and comfortable and calm.

He exhaled soundly, his tension dissolving along with the mist.

The first thing he became aware of was the ceiling above him: it was thatched, comprised of an interwoven framework of palm fronds and the leaves of other, smaller plants. The shallow pitch was supported by a structure of round, polished branches that resembled bamboo.

A light breeze from the open window stirred up the sheer curtains that surrounded it, and he turned his head in time to catch a glimpse outside. The soft, filtered light was reminiscent of early morning, yet its yellow-blue hue was unlike anything he’d ever seen in Britain. A thin layer of fog hung loosely in the air, its wispy gaps revealing the bluest of blue skies beyond.

When the breeze returned stronger, the scent of it hit his nose and he inhaled greedily. It was heavy and full of life, much like the air right after a storm. In the distance, a chorus of insects or birds or wildlife – he wasn’t sure which – added their melodies to the mix of nature heralding the new day. He smiled, feeling more peaceful than he could ever remember feeling.

Then something strange happened.

He felt himself sit up, tossing aside a thin sheet before swinging his bare legs over the edge of what he now realized was a bed. Yet it was occurring without his thought or control. When he tried to move an arm, his head – anything – his body did not respond. A shiver of panic shot through him just as his sleep-thick voice called out a name to the room. It had come from his mouth, but it felt and sounded oddly disconnected. The name was also indistinct, but for some reason it made him think of Severus.

Then, a thought floated through his mind.

*There is no creation involved on your part, only observation and sensation.*

As his body walked over to the armoire and began dressing itself, he quickly cast about for what this
could mean. Perhaps in the dreamscape, he existed only as his mind, even though the body was also
his. It was like waking up in someone else’s life... except that the someone else was also him. It was
an eerie, disconcerting feeling that he knew would make him feel claustrophobic if he thought too
long on it.

Deciding he should just go along with it for now (not that he could see any other option), he watched
as he entered a small kitchen. In the center of the room was a square, wooden table with two
mismatched chairs flanking it. On its surface was a basket containing a sampling of breads and fruit,
and a single orchid perched in a clear glass of water.

He reached out to draw his fingers delicately around the petals of the flower and smiled. Underneath
the glass was a handwritten note that read:

*Left early to collect before sunrise.*

*Back this afternoon.*

Grabbing a bun and a plantain, he nibbled both on his way out the front door as he made his way
towards an expansive grove behind the hut. Now that he was outside, he could finally see how
secluded this location was. Nestled between a lush landscape of dense greenery and rolling
mountains, he dearly wished his physical self would turn in all directions so he could better admire
the view. Not that he’d had any doubts before, but this was certainly confirmation he was no longer
in Britain.

He bent to pick up a burlap sack and then took a few more paces before crouching next to a series of
spiky plants with a familiar-looking fruit on top: pineapples. Selecting several that must have been
ripe, he snapped them off the plant and placed them inside the sack. Before long, he was walking
back towards the hut, the sack of pineapples slung over his shoulder.

*I harvest pineapples?* he found himself thinking with some degree of bewilderment.

Then, a familiar mist descended and began to swirl around him. It was completely opaque, and he
recognized it immediately as something Evochi-generated. Feeling a new shiver of panic, he tried to
think if he had just done something wrong, or if an hour had gone by already – although if that were
true, he should be seeing the walls of Severus’ lab appear. But they didn’t.

Instead, the mist began to lift, and he found himself walking along a gravel, tree-lined path. In the far
distance, he could just make out what appeared to be a small village. The canopy of trees above him
were dense like those near the hut had been, and when they swayed gently in the breeze, the
sunshine would breach the gaps in the leaves and pepper the ground with rays of light. It was the
most magical non-magical thing he had ever seen.

A man he hadn’t noticed before was tending a garden on the side of the road, and as Harry
approached, he stood and tipped his hat above his brow, wiping at the sweat with the back of his
hand. When he smiled, it reached his whole face: the corners of his eyes wrinkled in a deep-set
pattern, his mouth turned up in a crooked tilt that lifted his bushy mustache.

“Buenos días, Harry!”

Harry inclined his head with a warm smile. “Those tomatoes ready yet?”

“Casi… I have for you mañana!”

“Great! I’ll see you tomorrow. Cheers, Hector.”

They waved at each other, and then Harry was gone in another swirl of grey mist.
Feeling a bit disoriented, Harry waited a moment to see if the scene would materialize again, and where it would take him this time. Perhaps this was normal for a dreamscape? He didn’t know. But one thing was for certain: it was more than a little unsettling, this ‘observing from the inside’ thing, and he wasn’t quite sure if he would ever get used to it.

When the mist lifted again, he saw that he was in a village marketplace. Colorful tents and stands surrounded him in every direction. Wood counters propped on plastic crates held fruits and flowers and handmade jewelry and woven textiles, while the open backs of Muggle trucks offered barrels of larger crops. Smaller carts on wheels sold juices and ice creams and raw meats and fresh fish.

_Was this village near an ocean?_ he absently wondered.

He wandered over to a table that was capped with a striped green awning and addressed a plump, matronly-looking woman with an apron around her middle. Strands of gray dotted the dark hair of her bun.

“Morning, Mrs. Santiago!”

She turned, smiling, and wrapped him in a big hug. He was strongly reminded of Mrs. Weasley.

“Mr. Harry! Bueno verle! Was not sure I seeing you this week.”

Harry set his sack on the table. It appeared he regularly sold alongside her oranges, limes, mangoes and plantains, for he began to unpack and arrange his pineapples.

“I had some that were fresh. Besides,” he added with a grin, “I’d miss you otherwise.”

With one hand on her hip, Mrs. Santiago lightly shook her head. “Oh, boy charmer, tu me alagas. Que voy a hacer contigo?”

The Harry that lived there chuckled. The Harry that was observing just blinked. He was already getting the sense that he had lived near the village long enough to become a part of it, but it seems he had also picked up some Spanish in the process. Well, one of them had.

“Harrrryyyyy!” The shrill outburst caused him to turn just in time to catch the young girl who had launched herself into his arms from a few steps away. She squealed happily when he pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“That’s sure a beautiful blue dress you’ve got on today, Elena.”

She smiled shyly, belying the twinkle in her eye, but then proceeded to hide her face in the crook of his neck. Harry chuckled fondly and cuddled her in closer.

“Harry?”

“Yes, love?”

She fumbled with the collar of his shirt while she spoke, avoiding his eyes. “You aren’t going to go away, are you?”

Harry got the sense they had this conversation regularly.

“I don’t plan on leaving anytime soon. I really like it here.” He bent his head back in an attempt to draw her gaze. Once he had it, he gave her a reassuring smile. “If I didn’t have you,” he added, his tone lighter, “who would help me with my shopping?” He gently ruffled the fringe of her black hair.
It was her turn to peck him on the cheek, which made her blush and giggle. Then, she suddenly seemed fit to bursting with exciting news.

“Guess what?” Her voice was sweetly musical.

“What?”

“When I grow up, I am going to marry you!”

Harry grinned as he bent to set her back on the ground. “Is that so?”

“Yes, and then… and then I can get to wear a really long dress!” She started hopping on her feet. “It will be white and very pretty and have lots of flowers on it. And a lot of cake!”

“You want cake on your dress?”

“No!” She giggled again, swatting at his arm. “I mean… not on my dress, but the cake would be to eat!” She threw her arms up triumphantly.

“Well that’s certainly a big plan for a seven-year-old.” Harry’s grin widened. He held out his hand to take hold of her smaller one and she beamed up at him. Picking up his shopping basket, he and Elena set off into the market.

As they walked, he noticed he received friendly smiles and handshakes at every turn. When he stopped to purchase something, the vendors would engage him in familiar conversation. Everyone seemed to know him; to accept him. That was when it hit him: this was a place, a life, that was just for him; where people accepted him for who he was – nothing more, nothing less. And although he had not yet seen evidence of other witches or wizards here, this place, wherever it was, was no less wondrous and magical because of it. Here it didn’t seem to matter that he had defeated Voldemort, or that he had been The Chosen One. Here, he was just… Harry.

The experience of that flooded him for a moment. It was euphoric and foreign and liberating and perfect. And for that brief window of time, the weight of seven years of prophecy and duty and struggle and darkness lifted, and he was left with only himself.

*Just Harry.*

Some time later, he found himself being led through an ornate, wrought-iron trellis. It opened into a church courtyard, and then to a building beyond. Above the door was a small, weather-worn sign that read: *St. Mary’s Orphanage.* As Elena hugged him goodbye and then ran off to play with the other children, he guessed she had probably lived her whole life in the care of the nuns. Yet, she was still a child of the village, just as they all were. That’s when he understood the true beauty of this place wasn’t the idyllic setting or the gentle way of life – it was that *everyone* was family.

He was left with that thought for only a minute before the grey mist began to swirl once again, and Harry was starting to feel like he was in a show on the telly. Nevertheless, as pleasurable as the last interlude had been, he found he was curious to see what would come next.

However, this time the mist changed. Instead of the opaque grey he was used to, it thinned out
considerably, becoming wispy and silvery-blue. The smoke-like tendrils that clung around him were instantly familiar. But wait, how was this even possible? How could this be… a memory?

As the vapor dispersed, the first thing he noticed was the heat emanating off the ground beneath him. He was sitting in coarse, dark sand. He grasped handfuls of it and watched as it sifted through the gaps in his fingers. Suddenly aware of what this must mean, he simultaneously became aware of his other senses and began to look around.

It instantly reminded him of the sorts of places one saw in a travel catalogue: a thick knot of palm trees claimed the majority of the shoreline, their leaves swaying lazily in the ocean breeze. In their wake, a pleasant *whishing* sound filled his ears. Above him, the sun’s radiant heat warmed his head and arms and legs, and when he stood up, it felt like it was wrapping him in welcome.

As he inhaled, he found he relished the soft bite of the salty air in his nostrils, and proceeded to fill his lungs to capacity. When he let out the breath slowly, he began to smile. A sense of peace and freedom spread through him as the reality of his situation settled: he was here, this was real.

Before he set out to explore, he turned briefly to face the ocean and bid his previous life farewell – for now, anyway. And, as though in response, the rolling, cerulean waters of the sea stretched outwards as far as his eye could see and tickled the very tip of the horizon.

Seeming to come faster now, the grey mist circled once again, now back to its normal opaque presence. When the scene re-materialized, he was walking up the path to the hut he had emerged from earlier. A low murmur of thunder sounded somewhere above him, and almost without warning, the sky opened up and tumbled rain onto his shoulders, his neck, and his upturned face. Instead of running for the cover of the front porch, as he suspected he might do, he remained standing where he was and let the water soak him from head to toe, his arms outstretched to either side. The water pelted his cheeks and forehead and chest and open palms. It felt remarkably cleansing.

Then, almost as quickly as it had started, the rain stopped. In its wake, the only sound to be heard was the slow drip of water off the thick leaves of the surrounding foliage. He found himself grinning as he shook the water out of his hair. Even though he was still just an observer, his physical self seemed to be having all the same ideas.

As he neared the front door to the hut, he began to see it with new eyes: this was *home*. He hadn’t noticed it earlier, but now that he had returned, something about it just felt right. Contentment and happiness washed over him, and he realized he hadn’t felt that in a long time – only once before, in fact: when he went to live at Hogwarts for the first time.

The feeling lingered as he turned the handle and entered, discovering in a blur of shapes and colors and sensations that someone else was already inside.

Instantly he was crowded back towards the door, two hands braced against it on either side of his face, until the pair of them pushed it closed with a click. Before he could get his bearings, he was being fed a piece of fresh mango, its sweet juice coating his lips and trickling down his chin. As their two bodies touched, he felt a warm tongue on his lips, licking at the fruit and the raindrops, before pressing inside to taste him. One hand dropped from the door to cup his head possessively; the other snaked behind him and squeezed his arse, urgently pulling his body forwards until he felt something hard press into his thigh. A frisson of arousal shot through Harry’s core, going first to his brain and then to his groin, and he gasped at the intensity of it. He pushed his hips out automatically, seeking purchase, friction, anything, as the lips devouring him slipped lower, suckling the bare expanse of his neck.

Whoever this person was – he assumed it was a man, as the strong hands and light burn of stubble
were more arousing than he would have imagined – had a non-descript sort of physicality that frustrated Harry. The white button-down shirt rolled at the sleeves and the dark hair was all he could decipher. Perhaps a native of the village? He wanted to know who it was; who could make him feel like this. He had never experienced anything like this before – passion, affection, desire, familiarity, possession. That had never happened with Ginny or Cho.

“Harry?” he heard, but it seemed both next to him and far away, as though the sound was all at once in his mind and something that had been carried in on the breeze. But the voice… the voice was familiar somehow. The tone was deep and melodic and it comforted him. He reached his mind out to it, just as he had before, wanting to hear it again, hoping to recapture the feeling.

And that’s when he recognized it.

“Severus.”

The hut around him slowly began to fade. The thatched roof that had started his dreamscape was the last thing he saw as it was replaced by the darkened ceiling and walls of the lab, followed by miles of books and cauldrons and implements replacing what had been a warm paradise – of more than one sort – only moments before.

To his surprise, he awoke feeling refreshed and awake, with his awareness intact. Too intact, perhaps, as he instantly became aware of three things: first, he had quite possibly awoken to the utterance of Severus’ name on his lips, something audible in this reality; second, he could now wiggle his fingers and toes, which meant he was right about the bizarre non-control thing being a characteristic of dreamscape; and finally, in his dreamscape, his lover was a man – and he had liked it.

No, he had really really liked it.

And that’s when he noticed it. All focus in the room suddenly shifted to it like a beacon of attention: he had an erection.

Oh, bloody hell.

Shifting slightly, he drew one of his knees up, hoping to disguise his body’s inconvenient arousal. Chancing a glance over at Severus, he swore he saw heat in those impenetrable, black eyes, but then suddenly it was gone, and it made him wonder if he had actually seen it at all. He blinked for a moment, watching as Severus merely stared back, one eyebrow raised in its typical, elegant arch.

Harry looked away, hoping to hide the fierce blush that was threatening to spread across his cheeks. It seemed there was no end to the ways in which he could make a fool of himself.

Yet even amid his embarrassment, one thought kept pushing through to the forefront of his mind: in the dreamscape, he had been with a man. Had been kissed by one, turned on by one, held captive by one.

And he couldn’t wait to feel it all over again.
When The Rules Changed

The knock was quiet, but it was enough to make Severus look up from his marking. Marcus Braham, one of his sixth-year Prefects – the very same Prefect he had seen huddled around Harry the day before, in fact – was standing in the doorway to his office.

“Professor Snape? May I speak to you for a moment?”

“Mr. Braham. Of course.” Severus nodded to the chair in front of his desk. He set down his quill and picked up his wand; with a flick, the door was closed and warded. Something about the look on his Prefect’s face told him this wasn’t going to be an academic visit.

Marcus perched hesitantly on the edge of his chair, looking uncertain but determined. Then, without preamble, he said, “This is probably none of my business, sir, but I couldn’t help noticing that Harry Potter disappeared into your private quarters yesterday, and didn’t re-emerge again for some time.” He swallowed nervously.

Severus managed to keep his expression neutral even as his stomach gave an inconvenient lurch. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned forward onto his desk. “I fail to see what business that is of yours.”

“I know, I’m sorry, it’s just…” Marcus stopped and looked down at his hands, looking uncharacteristically somber. Severus needed to hear where this was going, however, and so leaned back in his chair to wait it out.

After a long moment, Marcus took a deep breath and continued. “I was just wondering what you could tell me about him.”

“I’m not following.”

“When I saw him go into your quarters, I was afraid you two were, you know… together, or something.” A faint blush tinged his cheeks. “But then I thought about it and remembered you were just friends, having fought so closely together in the war. I really want to get to know him, but I’m pretty sure he doesn’t know I exist, and was hoping you could tell me what he’s like. If you don’t mind, that is. Sir.” Desperation rolled off of him in waves as he rambled.

Severus might have felt sorry for him if it weren’t for the uncomfortable thoughts that were bombarding his own mind. He had clearly been sloppy about his discretion – what had he been thinking, pulling Harry into his quarters in front of a group of students? Then there was the matter of he and Harry as a couple. What specifically had led Marcus to that assumption, and then why had he dismissed the notion so quickly? Severus couldn’t help feeling a little affronted that his nonexistent chances with Harry were so apparent to others. The young man sitting before him was athletic and attractive, his warm brown eyes, golden hair and easy smile sure to turn the head of even the most discerning witch – or wizard, he allowed. Yet, especially if he was of the ‘wizards only’ persuasion, why pursue Harry? Or was this merely hero worship? Marcus certainly wouldn’t be the first student at Hogwarts to exhibit signs of that particular affliction.

“What is this all in aid of?” Severus suddenly inquired, feeling more than a little perturbed.

Marcus sighed and put his face in his hands, looking embarrassed. Through his fingers, he uttered, “You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you.”

Impatience threatening to get the best of him, Severus pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his
eyes briefly. “Say what, exactly?”

Marcus dropped his hands. “That I have a crush on Harry Potter. There – I said it!” He barked out an uneasy laugh.

Severus felt a tingle of envy bloom in his chest, but ignored it in favor of studying his student. “I see,” was all he said.

“You’re friends with him, aren’t you?”

“Indeed,” Severus confirmed, surprised at how gratifying it felt to be able to say that. “I may be able to save you some trouble, however. Might I inquire as to your sexual preference?”

Marcus looked sheepish, his cheeks coloring deeper this time. “Erm… I’m gay. I thought you knew that.”

“No, I was not aware. I do not make it a habit to look for such things in my students.”

“But you’re gay, too, aren’t you?”

“I beg your pardon—”

“—No, no, that’s not what I meant! I’m sorry, sir, that came out wrong. It’s just… well, you asked first, so I thought it was okay to talk about it.” He carded a hand nervously through his hair.

Severus knew whatever control he originally had over the conversation was now completely gone. It was a position he rarely found himself in, yet it seemed to be happening more and more frequently now that a certain Savior was in his life. It unsettled him to think that even the topic of Harry Potter could unravel him. Yet why should he care if a student (or several) had a crush on Harry? They were adolescents, after all – frivolous infatuations and sexual curiosity were to be expected, and he had seen plenty of both during his tenure as Head of House.

Still, something about this was hitting a little too close for comfort.

“My apologies, Mr. Braham. Perhaps I should not have broached the subject. However, since I have, I would prefer it if my preferences did not leave this office.”

“Too late.” Marcus grimaced.

When Severus only glared back, Marcus quickly clarified. “I’m pretty sure it’s only Slytherin House that knows, sir. I’ve known since first year.” He shrugged. “It’s not a big deal, though, it’s not like anyone thinks ill of you for it. It’s why I decided to come talk to you about this. Well, that, and because you know Harry.” He gave a small smile.

But Severus’ mind was elsewhere, trying to come to grips with the fact that his sexual orientation was somehow old news in Slytherin House. When had that happened? he wondered irascibly. Many of his colleagues knew, but at least he had been the one to tell them – anyway, it would have been absurd to think he could’ve kept that hidden while working alongside them for nearly twenty years. No, what disturbed him most was the notion that students in other Houses, or even people beyond the walls of Hogwarts, knew something he had not wished to divulge publicly.

Then, a startling thought: Did Harry know?

Not about to contemplate it further in the company of his student, he returned his attention to the conversation at hand. “I am not sure what you think I can do for you.”
Marcus seemed much more at ease now that his topic was out on the table. “Hook me up?” he suggested, grinning hopefully.

“That is not my place, nor would it be appropriate. In any case, I am not sure you are his type – you are clearly lacking the female gender.”

“I’d say that’s a good thing, then, considering he’s gay.”

Severus scoffed. “Preposterous.”

“Is it?”

“He dated Miss Weasley for quite awhile; prior to that, Miss Chang. Pray tell, Mr. Braham, what exactly led you to this insightful conclusion?” He pointedly arched his brow.

“ Dating girls doesn’t prove anything, Professor, except that he’s probably confused. I mean, let’s face it – he didn’t exactly have a normal childhood, did he? When would he have had time to sort out his sexuality? He was probably just dating girls because his friends did.”

“I am not in a position to speculate on Mr. Potter’s preferences – nor are you, I suspect. Do you offer no evidence?” Severus felt his pulse accelerate a bit at the question, not quite sure he wanted to hear Marcus’ answer.

Marcus sighed, shrugging slightly. “Not really, no. Just a feeling, I guess. He’s so hot, though,” he said with an emphatic groan. “And I’ll bet he’s a fantastic kis—”

“Thank you, that will be enough,” Severus interrupted, clearing his throat loudly. It had already taken him several days to cease speculation over the particulars of animated tattoos, let alone the image that accompanied it: Harry, bare-chested and grinning, standing inches from him in the Grimmauld Place library. The very last thing he needed on his mind right now was thoughts of Harry’s kissing prowess.

“Now, is there something else I may help you with this evening?” Then, after a beat, amended, “Something aside from Mr. Potter?”

Marcus smiled unapologetically.

“No, that was all, Professor. Thank you for listening, in any case.” He got up from his chair and started towards the entrance to the office as Severus removed the wards. Once the door was open, Marcus looked back. “But just in case there is an opportunity—”

“Mr. Braham,” Severus warned.

“Going!” In a flurry of smirking youth and black school robes, Marcus disappeared down the empty hallway.

Casting Tempus, Severus noted with relief that his office hours were complete for the evening. He needed time to think without being disturbed. Closing up his office, he made his way back to his private quarters; once there, he poured himself two fingers of his favorite scotch and sank into the
He immediately thought back to all of his recent encounters with Harry. Their friendship had emerged from a mutual understanding – of the war, of their respective obligations in it, of each other – after a paperwork mishap at St. Mungo’s had put them in the same recovery room. Harry had been there for observation, mainly, as the Healers were looking for signs of excessive stress and fatigue. But the conversation that had started that day, albeit a little begrudgingly on his side, was still, in large part, going on today. It was hard to believe that was only five months ago – a lot had happened since then.

Yet in all the time they had spent together, Harry had never given him any indication of being gay. Nor had he indicated he wasn’t, to be fair. He couldn’t even remember seeing Harry date anyone after he broke things off with Ginny. That had been right before he’d left on his Horcrux hunt, though; it would stand to reason Harry wasn’t emotionally ready for another relationship, particularly if his third Evochi session was anything to go by. Severus had also been right in thinking there would be no shortage of prospects. Since the start of term, he had already confiscated enough Prophets with photos of ‘The Boy Who Lived’ from groups of swooning girls to say with confidence the future wives’ club was alive and well.

Then he remembered the cluster of students that had stopped Harry in the hallway, and Marcus’ possessive grip and adoring gaze – something he couldn’t recall Harry reacting to one way or another. Then again, he had been surrounded; Severus doubted Harry would have noticed the actions of one specific person. But if it was true what Marcus suspected about Harry, then why shouldn’t they get a chance to be together... if it’s what they both wanted? Marcus was certainly closer in age to Harry, and attractive, and they’d have Quidditch in common.

Severus drained the rest of his tumbler and scoffed at his own sentimentality. Was he seriously playing the matchmaker here? He’d just sat and listened to one of his older students professing what – love? a crush? hero worship? – over someone for whom he knew he had his own designs. Yet even if Harry was gay, it certainly didn’t mean his chances were automatically improved.

Letting his head fall back against the cushions, Severus stared absently at the ceiling of his antechamber. As he sat there, idly stroking the large scar on his neck from Nagini’s bite, he felt something new begin to take hold of him: the irrepressible urge to covet the one good thing in his life.

Harry.

Visions of yesterday’s dreamscape session came to mind. Harry had looked so peaceful lying there, completely relaxed, off somewhere in the corners of his mind experiencing desirous things. Very desirous, obviously. The whimpered moan and subsequent arousal was not surprising – it stood to reason that a desire dream would show Harry at least some semblance of physical pleasure – yet bearing witness to it was an uncomfortable reality to be faced with. Severus had turned his head away, unable to watch, for the acute senses of exclusion and want washed over him again. He wondered who Harry was with in the dream, where he was, and what he was experiencing. It wasn’t until a loud snap had diverted his attention, his quill suddenly in two pieces, that he had noticed the time. Mercifully, Harry’s session had drawn to an end.

But if Severus was surprised to hear Harry wake with his name on his lips, it was nothing to the awkward tension that settled between them once Harry became aware of his erection. Severus had very nearly left his feelings on display, too, something which Harry seemed to have registered only moments before they were masked away. He was either losing his edge for subterfuge or his walls had just crumbled further. Perhaps both. Furthermore, Harry’s quick exit from the lab and polite-but-
hasty goodbye did nothing to improve his outlook.

Severus sighed and leaned forward onto his knees. As he set his tumbler down before him, he watched the yellow light from the wall sconces reflect against the ridged glass, casting soft shapes onto the wooden surface of the coffee table. The impulse to fight for Harry, to keep him in his life, surged through him again. But was he prepared to go after what he wanted, no matter the outcome?

Summoning the bottle of scotch, he poured another two fingers. Then, eyeing the glass thoughtfully, tipped the bottle again to add a third. Somehow the burn of the liquid hitting his throat made saying ‘yes’ less startling. It had also seemed to loosen the confines of his mind, the protections he had so carefully put in place to guard and obscure the underlying reason for it all.

*I am in love with you, Harry.*

It had slipped out before he could stop it, caught on the breath of a thought. He was surprised that it didn’t startle him; that he felt no shame in setting it loose, allowing it to linger on the air before him. It was the truth. *His* truth. And it was that realization, more than anything, that would make him remember this moment years later – for it was, in fact, the day the rules changed.
As he lie in the grass, the wet earth below him cooling his skin, a pair of warm hands smoothed up his legs. A grin stole across his face but he did not look down. The rain had just started, and he closed his eyes against the drops that twirled from the sky, pattering his bare face and chest and arms.

The questing fingers slowed, but did not stop, causing his body to tense and release in tune to their touch. His heartbeat stirred and he inhaled softly, knowing all too well what was coming next. This delicious torture was part of their routine, after all.

Lips and tongue followed the fingers now, tracing the ridges and hollows of his groin, mapping every inch of the sun-drenched skin. As the rain pooled, it was tasted and licked from the surface of his flesh, setting his senses afire. He shivered, opening his eyes to blink around the downpour.

Stealing a downwards glance, he saw a head dip lower, dark hair curtaining the face even as it fanned out against his abdomen. A hand and mouth were around him instantly, simultaneously, and he bucked up into the wet heat. He felt engulfed, surrounded; held on the very edge of ecstasy until he thought he could endure no more, and then, only then, was pushed headlong into white, searing lights, crying out in a moan of pleasure.

Harry awoke with a start, panting, his eyes snapping open. Casting his gaze about the room, he recognized it as his own; the bed he was lying on, empty; the scene he had just left, a dream. Frustrated and aroused, his skin still tingling with the touch of his phantom lover, he slid his hand down his abdomen and under the waistband of his pajama bottoms. His cock was hard and heavy, aching for release, and as he pressed his warm palm against the shaft, he sighed, nearly trembling with anticipation.

Closing his eyes, he wet his lips with his tongue, trying to redraw the scene in his mind, willing it to never end. It had been a man again – the same one from the dreamscape, in fact. Harry squirmed against his hand, wanting to go slow, to savor it, but he felt only an urgency that would not be subdued by any amount of bargaining. Remembering the feel of another body pressed to his, the other man’s passion evident, insistent, the intensity of Harry’s own arousal spiked. He began to stroke himself firmly, roughly, and came in matter of moments, groaning loudly into his pillow.

He had barely regained his breathing, his body pleasantly languid and flush, when his Floo went off. Startled, he bolted upright in bed, panting for another reason altogether. There, in the fireplace across from his bed, was the face of Severus Snape – who, for a fleeting moment, stared at him with a look Harry didn’t care to decipher before it slipped back to its neutral mask.

“I’ve disturbed you – I apologize. Perhaps I should call back.”

Harry scrubbed a hand over his face and willed himself not to blush at the picture he must make. “No, it’s all right, I’m awake.” He surreptitiously gathered the blankets around him, making sure his groin was covered and no evidence of his morning activities was visible on his chest. With a quick glance, he confirmed all was clear.

“I wondered if I might take a few moments of your time this afternoon, once my classes conclude. I know it is not our regular day, but I do not wish to wait with this.”
Curious, but too disoriented to press further, Harry simply nodded. “Yeah, of course. Should I just come through to your quarters?”

“That would be preferable. Four o’clock?”

“I’ll be there.”

With a nod, Severus closed the Floo call, and Harry flopped back onto his bed with a loud sigh. Glancing over at his clock, he saw it was twenty to nine.

Just then, the Floo went off a second time.

“Yes?” he answered mechanically.

“Harry?” It was Hermione’s voice. “Are you there?”

He sat up in bed again and caught Hermione’s gaze. She smiled.

“Did I wake you?”

“No, Severus did that.” Strictly speaking, this was not the truth, but he wasn’t about to share what had really happened with Hermione. But when he looked back over at her, he realized his mistake anyway: she was biting her lip, trying to stifle a smile.

“That’s not what I meant,” he sighed, which only made her grin in earnest.

“Whatsoever you say, Harry. Anyway, you really should consider closing your Floo.”

“And miss having you burst into my bedroom unannounced?” he teased.

“I’m not the one who left my Floo open.”

“Yeah, yeah. Shouldn’t you be at school?”

“He is. I’m in between classes at the moment, so I wanted to try and catch you. Ron and I are wondering if you’d like to join us for dinner. We want to talk to you about something.”

For the second time that morning, Harry’s curiosity was piqued, but he was still too fuzzy to process a response. He was never quite sure if he should be concerned when Hermione danced around things, but decided it was probably something good or she would have just come out and said it. “Yeah, great. When?”

“How about six… at The Grecian?” She smiled again, no doubt knowing her suggestion would be well-received given it was now one of Harry’s favorite places.

He was suddenly reminded that he’d already be at Hogwarts in the afternoon to visit Severus. “You don’t have to indulge me, we could just eat in the Great Hall.”

She shrugged. “We could, but Ron has been asking to go, and… well, you’ll understand soon enough. So… see you there?”

Harry rubbed his eyes with his fingertips. “Okay. Six. See you guys then.”

“Great! Bye, Harry.”

“Bye,” he answered, but Hermione had already disappeared.
Grabbing his wand, he flicked it at the fireplace, closing the Floo. He slumped back onto his bed and stared at the ceiling for a while, one arm draped over his forehead. He tried to think about the day ahead of him – of seeing Severus, and then Hermione and Ron, wondering what everyone wanted to talk to him about – but despite his best efforts, all thoughts kept leading back to one: the abstract visuals of a dark-haired man who could play his body like a fiddle.

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It was only half past three, but already Harry was feeling restless, having been staring at the clock for the last hour. He wanted to get on with his afternoon. The last time he had seen Severus, they had parted on a bit of an awkward note, and now the closer it got to four o’clock, the more he just wanted to get that next first visit over with. Finally making a decision, he hopped into his fireplace. After swirling in a green blur for what felt like an interminable amount of time, sitting rooms and shop fronts whizzing past his vision, the Floo finally deposited him in Severus’ antechamber, where he landed unceremoniously on his arse. Grumbling, Harry stood, dusting off his denims and t-shirt.

And my pride, he thought irritably.

Looking around, he saw that the antechamber was illuminated, but empty; he was half surprised not to see Severus reading on the sofa, waiting for him. However, he immediately became aware of the stirring, plaintive tones of music streaming out from the door to the bedroom. It seemed to fill the room around him, the notes tickling at Harry’s senses, luring him on to explore the source of the sound.

When he reached it, he could barely believe what he was seeing: there, seated on a cushioned bench, was Severus… playing a polished, black piano. As he struck each deep, lush chord with his left hand, his right found purchase in a mournful, sweeping melody. His head dipped in rhythm to the music, his hair falling forward to curtain his face. The result was beautiful and mesmerizing, and Harry found all he could do was stare, moving quietly to lean against the doorframe to the bedroom.

Something must have creaked or alerted Severus, for he immediately halted the song.

“Wait, no, don’t stop playing,” Harry pleaded, his voice barely above a whisper, as though talking at full volume would break the spell hanging over the room.

“Too late,” came the terse reply.

Harry frowned. “I didn’t know you played the piano.”

“You’re early.”

“I didn’t know you played the piano,” Harry repeated, ignoring Severus’ attempt at distraction.

Severus sighed and gently dropped his hands to his thighs. “Few do.” When Harry didn’t act appeased by his response, he continued. “I think only Minerva and Albus knew. Old meddlers were always trying to get me to play in public.”

A small grin pulled at Harry’s lips; he could only imagine those conversations. “Well why didn’t you? You’re very good.”
“Potter,” Severus started, exasperation evident in his tone. He paused then, pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers. “I don’t expect you to understand this.”

“Understand what? That you have a part of you that you’d rather not share? Something that, if you could just keep it to yourself long enough, then maybe you’d have one thing that’s all your own, unspoiled by the world?”

Severus’ head snapped up and he stared at Harry.

Harry plowed on, unfazed. “My entire life has been played out before the eyes of the Wizarding world. Believe me, I know what it means to want to hold onto something personal… something protected. It’s all I’ve got some days.”

Severus looked away. “I apologize. I... was quick to assume.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s okay, I’m used to it.” He paused to assess Severus while the makings of a sly grin graced his lips. “I would still like to hear you play, though. I mean for real. Since you did just insult me and all.”

Severus snorted and eyed Harry again. “Perhaps.”

“No, there’s no ‘perhaps’ about it. You owe me.” Harry marveled a bit at his audacity, but found it only made him grin wider. He watched as Severus’ eyebrow inched up towards his hairline. Before Severus could object, however, he rushed to continue. “If it makes you feel better, I won’t watch, just listen. You can play in here and I’ll sit out there.” He gestured to the sofa in the antechamber.

“You genuinely desire to hear me play?” Severus asked warily.

Harry pushed away from the doorframe and took a step into the room without breaking eye contact. “Yes. Really, I do.”

Severus eyed him, eyes narrowed, clearly attempting to discern his sincerity. He must have seen the confirmation he was seeking, because he gave a resigned sigh. “Very well. What would you like to hear?”

“What were you playing before? When I came in?”

“Elégie, third opus.” He turned back to face the keys. “Rachmaninoff.”

“Can you maybe play something that isn’t so brooding?”

Severus scowled. “What did you have in mind? Certainly not that rubbish your generation calls music.”

“No.” Harry snorted. “I was thinking something more classic, maybe George Harrison. Know anything?”

The eyebrow again. “You like George Harrison?”

“Yes. Why should that surprise you? I grew up with Muggle radio.”

“It’s not that. I simply took you for the type to fawn over the Weird Sisters, or some other such inanity.”

Harry laughed and approached the piano, leaning against its side. “Sadly, no. Much to the dismay of my friends, let me tell you.” Then he stopped, tilting his head to the side a bit. “You know, you
actually look a lot like George. Has anyone ever told you that before?”

Severus scoffed. “No.”

“Well, you do. Especially in his later Beatles years.”

“If you are quite done?”

Harry grinned. “Yes. Sorry, please proceed.” He wasn’t quite sure why Severus was resisting the comparison to George Harrison; he had meant it as a compliment. It was true that Severus seemed to have a low opinion of himself – Harry had picked up on that quite awhile ago – but he didn’t really understand why. Severus may not be traditionally handsome, but he was not unattractive…

He was pulled from his thoughts by Severus’ next words.

“I prefer classical, but, by virtue of ‘owing you one’, I shall indulge your up-tempo sensibilities for a moment.”

Harry watched as Severus’ hands stroked lightly over the keys, a bouncy, jazzy tune resulting from his practiced ministrations.

“My sensibilities? I’d say you know this one fairly well on your own,” Harry accused.

“Do you know it?”

“Yeah,” Harry enthused with a smile. “Love this one.”

As Harry listened, the incongruity of it all suddenly hit him, and several things he thought he knew about Severus were now having to be rewritten in his mind. He watched in awe and amusement at the fact Severus seemed to be enjoying himself with the iconic tune, his fingers deftly trilling the notes as though he really would have been more at home on a parlor stage versus the seclusion of his dungeon quarters.

Harry also understood why Minerva and Albus had encouraged him to play publicly – really, he was amazingly good – and performed by rote, too, as Harry had not yet seen a single sheet of music.

Eventually, the energy of the song became so infectious that Harry could not keep another thought in his mind, and the irresistible urge to sing along hit him. He followed the tune in his head until he could find his spot, and then sang the last verse in accompaniment to Severus’ playing:

“I wanna cross you off my list
But when you come knocking at my door
Fate seems to give my heart a twist
and I come running back for more.

“I should hate you
but I guess I love you
you got me in between
the devil and the deep blue sea.

“You got me in between
the devil and the deep
the devil and the deep blue sea.”

Harry found he couldn’t help moving in rhythm to the music, grinning widely around the words,
tapping out the beat of the song with soft thumps of his hand. As the song ended, he marked the final note with a nod of his head and then chuckled.

Severus sat for a moment before gently lowering the lid over the keys. “Your singing is appalling,” he deadpanned, to which Harry barked out a laugh.

“Yeah, I know. But it’s part of my charm.” He flashed a toothy smile.

Severus shook his head in amusement (or what passed for it on Severus’ face) and stood. With a flick of his wand, the bench nestled up against the piano while both retreated into a cabinet that was flush with the wall. When the doors closed around it, it was completely hidden from view.

“Ah, so that’s where you keep that! I knew I couldn’t remember seeing it in here.” But before the words had even left his tongue, Harry cringed, knowing he had just given himself away.

Severus looked suddenly uncomfortable. “You have been in here before?”

Harry kicked himself mentally. *Fuck!* he thought, and quickly blurted an explanation. “Only once, when I woke from an Evochi session and went looking for you. I just popped my head in, is all. It was dark, I didn’t see much, but I feel like I would have remembered a piano.” He felt his face flush. Getting the chance to look around Severus’ bedroom, even for a moment, had been an unexpected surprise – one he still thought about to this day.

Severus didn’t seem entirely convinced, but regardless, he let it go.

“Follow me, please,” he said, and Harry did, all the while hoping he hadn’t just ruined the delicate balance of trust he seemed to share with Severus.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“I believe I have done it.”

“Sorry?”

Severus emerged from behind his desk and pulled out the chair opposite Harry, joining him at the table. Gently pushing aside the open books, he set a new one down and pointed to a passage near the bottom of page about halfway through the book.

Harry leaned forward, narrowing his eyes to read. After a few moments, his head snapped up, eyebrows dancing near his hairline.

“So… this means… we can both do a session? We can link them?”

The hopefulness and excitement in Harry’s tone pinged tightly in Severus’ heart. “That is my hope, yes.”

“Brilliant! When can we try it?”

The smile Harry gave Severus (or the situation, he wasn’t sure) had somehow just made all the long days and hours of research worthwhile. “Soon. I wish to cross-reference a few points, but it seems sound. Shall we say Sunday, November the first?”
“Works for me. What session are we going to do?”

“Shy of anything dangerous, I will leave that up to you. I am simply following your lead.”

“Hmm, so no dragon hunting or anything?”

“No.”

Harry laughed. “Spoilsport.”

He scarcely avoided the rolled parchment that whisked past his head.

As they made the short trek back to Severus’ quarters from his classroom, and to the invitation of tea that had been on offer, Harry began thinking of his most recent Evochi session. He must have had quite the look of concentration on his face, for he noticed Severus kept glancing sideways at him.

“You are thinking again.”

Harry smirked. “Yes, I do that from time to time.”

“Imagine that.”

The sudden urge to give Severus a friendly shove came over him, but he stopped himself just in time, realizing that was more the type of thing he’d do with Ron; with Severus, that seemed too… well, he didn’t know what exactly, but he guessed Severus would not take well to having his personal space invaded like that, even in jest. He shook his head and grinned instead.

“I was just thinking about my last Evochi session. I can kind of understand why people would rather do the virtual realities. I mean, the dreamscape was great, but…”

“But?”

“But it was a little creepy. It was definitely me, but I was trapped inside my own head. I couldn’t create or control anything, just as you said, but I didn’t realize how weird that would be. I’m not sure I’d want to do that again.” He grimaced as Severus smirked. Bizarrely, it was an expression contained almost entirely in his eyes.

“Did you try a dreamscape once? Is that how you knew what I’d experience?”

Severus pushed the door to his quarters open with one arm and waited for Harry to precede him. “Indeed.”

The temptation to ask Severus what he had experienced pulled strongly at him, but Harry resisted – barely – knowing all too well he would probably be denied an answer. Reluctantly, he switched topics.

“So why didn’t I wake up groggy like the other sessions?” He suddenly had the acute and embarrassing memory of his post-dreamscape erection, but promptly pushed that from his mind, hoping Severus wouldn’t broach the topic either.
“In a dreamscape, you are effectively asleep the whole time, very much like a regular dream. Instead of performing the action, as you would in a virtual reality, you are simply observing – a comparatively idle activity which does not tire the mind or the body. Thus, you emerge from it feeling rested.”

“I did, I just thought something was wrong.” He felt his face heat slightly. Not wanting to give any more pause to the thing he knew they were both thinking about, he quickly moved on.

“Where did I go in my dreamscape?”

Harry was settling himself into a chair when he looked up. Severus directed a withering look at him, and Harry chuckled.

“Sorry, I mean is it a real place? Someplace that exists outside of my mind, too?”

“It is possible. However, if you would trouble yourself to include some semblance of detail with your vague line of questioning, it might assist me.”

Harry laughed deeply. “I’m really bollixing this up, aren’t I? Let me start again.”

“A splendid idea.”

“Have you always been this funny?” Harry asked, genuinely stunned.

“Focus, Potter.”

Harry smiled indulgently, but fully intended to return to his observation at some point. “Right. Well, I’m not sure if my description will help, but it was a tropical location. The locals had black hair and a medium tone to their skin. Sorry, I don’t know how else to explain that,” he hastened to add.

“Everyone spoke Spanish – including me.” He paused, realizing he was still confused by that. “I also harvested pineapples and sold them at a nearby village market. Oh, and there was a rainforest and a beach. And mountains.”

If Severus seemed surprised by his dreamscape locale, he didn’t show it, but then Severus didn’t typically give away much on his face. “Sounds like Central or South America.”

“But where would that have come from? I’ve never even been out of Britain!”

“I cannot be certain. Although the mind is powerful, you described this place with such consistency in fact that it makes me think the reference was not entirely mind-invented – perhaps a book, photograph or film is responsible. Can you not recall any tropical locations or visuals you may have seen?”

“Not really. I mean, I’m sure I’ve seen pictures of tropical places before, but nothing specific comes to mind. Nothing recent that I can think of, anyway.”

“Perhaps you will remember in time. Regardless, even if the location is make-believe, the message is not. Should you ever get the impulse to travel, you may want to start with someplace tropical.”

Harry smiled to himself, thinking about how nice that sounded. The notion of a vacation was so very foreign to him, but only two months ago, he was determined to set out on some solo travels. Perhaps after his Evochi sessions were over, he would revisit that.

“Pineapples, you said?”
Harry looked up. “Yeah. Why?”

“Intriguing.”

“Why is that intriguing?” Harry echoed.

“Pineapples are the international symbol of hospitality and graciousness. In the early American colonies, they were extremely hard to come by, so if your host had procured one, it meant they had spared no expense in welcoming you to their home. Being a harvester was often considered a rare and specialized craft, even though the fruits are actually quite easy to cultivate given the right conditions.”

“Um, okay. And?”

“It is intriguing that you should opt for such a unique profession.”

“You mean about as far away from Dark wizard chasing as it is possible to get?”

“Precisely.”

“No wonder I enjoyed it so much. The pineapples, I mean. Or at least I think I did.” Harry pondered it for a moment, feeling a sudden rush of pleasant thoughts enter his mind. He had enjoyed every aspect of his dreamscape life, as well as the people in it. And there it was: that same sinking feeling he got whenever he thought too long on all that he had experienced. There was a question begging to be asked, but he knew he didn’t want to hear the answer.

Still, he had to know.

“Do you think the place in my dreamscape exists for real? Exactly as I pictured it?”

Severus eyed him carefully, as though calculating what prompted the question. “Did you encounter people in the dreamscape who appeared to be special to you?”

Astute as always, then. Harry looked down, hoping he wasn’t blushing furiously. He wasn’t going to mention that one. “Yeah. One was a young girl named Elena. I think we went shopping every day in the village market. She was an orphan.”

Nodding, Severus set his teacup down. “Harry, you must know that any people or specifics you encountered were manifestations of your mind. It is not surprising that you would connect with an orphan given your own history. That is not to say this place does not exist somewhere in the world, but take caution not to lose yourself in the fantasy and forget the point of the exercise.”

Harry sighed. “I know. It was just so real,” he uttered mournfully, drawing out the last word. Frowning slightly, he leaned back into the cushions of the chair and lost himself in his thoughts.

For a while, they simply sat in companionable silence, Severus sipping his tea while Harry stared off into space, until another question that had been nagging at Harry earlier came back to him. He finally decided to voice it.

“How long have you been playing the piano?”

Severus looked up at the non-sequitur and stared at Harry. For a moment, it looked like he was preparing a scathing remark, but then his expression softened slightly. “Why are you so interested in this?”
For Harry’s part, he couldn’t understand why Severus was being so defensive about it – after all, they had just shared something of a duet (Severus playing, Harry singing) not forty minutes ago. Though, if he ever hoped to get an answer, he figured he’d have to try and smooth the ruffled feathers.

“I don’t know, to be honest. I suppose because you allowed me to see that side of yourself. And you’re really good. I’m actually shocked you didn’t just Obliviate me.”

“I still might.” Severus’ tone sounded dangerous, but when Harry looked up, he saw the light dancing behind Severus’ eyes.

_Ah, he’s joking. I think._

Harry tried to reassure himself with that not-so-reassuring thought before deciding to just laugh it off (though it came out more nervous-sounding than he would have liked). It did nothing to dampen his curiosity, though.

“So. How long have you been playing?”

“You are but a dog with a bone, Mr. Potter.”

“Yup.” Harry grinned, sensing the mood was lightening.

Severus sighed and briefly looked upwards in thought. When his gaze returned to Harry’s, he said, “Twenty-six years next month. I was a second-year student and had stayed at Hogwarts over Christmas break. One night, I was exploring a dungeon storeroom and happened upon the piano. I had never played an instrument before, but quickly discovered I had an ear for music and could replicate anything I heard. I began sneaking into that room to play on a regular basis. To say I was taken with it would be an understatement. Eventually I restored the piano, and it has been in my possession – and my quarters – ever since.”

“Wow, that’s amazing,” Harry breathed. “Do you think you could teach me sometime?” The question was out before he even knew what he was saying, somehow making him feel every bit the second year student Severus was when he found the piano.

“I have nothing to teach. I do not read music, so unless you have suddenly acquired an ear for it, I’m afraid I cannot help you.”

“Damn,” Harry said, and was surprised when he realized he meant it. Then he smiled, gesturing casually as he spoke. “Well, I do know loads of songs. I could always just sing along with you while you play…”

“Merlin help us.”

Harry threw his head back and laughed, the sound rich and deep in Severus’ small antechamber, both arms clutching his abdomen. He didn’t care a bit that it was at his own expense.

And from the corner of his eye, he would forever swear he could see the beginnings of a smile on Severus’ face.

_SHP-SSHP-SSHP_
“Harry! Lovely to see you!” a familiar voice exclaimed.

Harry was rooted to the spot just inside the door to The Grecian. The artwork and murals before him – all depicting tropical destinations and imagery he suspected was most likely Greece – had brought back Severus’ words about where his dreamscape imagery could have come from.

“Harry, dear, are you all right?” Mrs. Whitby had moved to stand next to him, her face a picture of concern.

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, he turned to look at her. When recognition returned to him, he smiled. “Yes. I was just… looking at your artwork. It’s… I like it.” He also remembered his first visit to the restaurant, and the feeling of contentment that had settled over him just being in the same room with all the vibrant decor.

Mrs. Whitby patted his arm. “Well, you enjoy it for as long as you wish. When you’re ready, Ms. Granger and Mr. Weasley are waiting for you at a table in the back.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks…” he said distractedly as she bustled away. Although Greece was definitely not the place he had visited in his dreamscape, if the murals and artwork were to be believed, it was certainly an option to consider. He smiled at the thought, and then headed for the back of the restaurant.

“Harry!” Hermione jumped out of her seat as he approached the table and wrapped him in a swift hug. He smiled back at her, and then gave Ron a nod before taking his seat across from them.

“Hey, mate,” Ron greeted.

“Let’s order first and then we can talk,” Hermione asserted, pushing a menu towards Harry. Ron already had his open on the table before him.

“Yeah, good, I’m starving,” Ron agreed.

“You’re always starving, Ronald.” Hermione rolled her eyes.

Ron shrugged at Harry before they both hid their faces – and their grins – behind their menus. Fortunately, Harry already knew what he wanted to order, so the gesture was, in fact, rather moot. It allowed his thoughts to wander.

His afternoon had been decidedly pleasant, if not a bit unexpected. Okay, a lot unexpected. He was still trying to reconcile the acerbic Potions professor with the man he had just spent the last couple of hours with. It was hard to believe they were even the same person.

Has he always been like that and I just never tried to see him as anything else? Or did I just see him as the person he wanted me to see?

Harry understood now, of course, that some of it had been essential for Dumbledore’s plan to succeed. If he and Severus had seemed on good terms with each other, Severus’ role as a spy could have been compromised, not to mention he may have lost favor with his Slytherins and their parents – something that might’ve proved equally as disastrous.

Yet underneath the noses of everyone, Severus had always protected Harry, even saved his life, right up until the very end. (Or what Harry had thought was the end, until a stroke of inspiration hit him after viewing the memories. He’d sent his Patronus to Madam Pomfrey, informing her of Severus’ whereabouts and the nature of his condition. Under the circumstances, she was the only one Harry felt he could trust. Severus had remained in Madam Pomfrey’s care until she outdid her usefulness,
and then had him transferred to St. Mungo’s for the duration of his recovery. It was there he had got stuck in a room with Harry…)

*So did he ever really hate me? Or was all of that just an act?*

“Harry?”

Ron’s voice caused him to snap his head up and notice the waitress, who wore a pleasant, expectant look on her face. Her quill was poised above her small notepad.

“Uhh, sorry. I'll have the moussaka. Must have got distracted by all the delicious things on the menu.” He smiled, and Hermione and Ron chuckled briefly along with the waitress. If any of them had been bothered by his lack of attention, he seemed to have smoothed it over well enough.

His thinking was to be halted now, anyway, for as soon as the waitress walked away, Hermione pounced.

“So, Harry…” she started, shooting a glance at Ron. “We wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Sure,” he said, taking a drink of his water.

But instead of talking, Ron and Hermione immediately started whispering under their breath at each other, and Harry found himself looking back and forth between them, trying to figure out what was going on. When finally the whispering slowed, they each urged the other to speak first, gesturing and making strange faces.

Eventually Harry grew impatient with the bizarre spectacle. “Oi!” he said, and they both stopped and looked up. “Will one of you just tell me what is going on, please?”

Hermione sighed and nudged Ron, who flushed.

“Uhh, mate, we were… I was wondering if you would be my Best Man. In the wedding.”

Harry blinked for a minute, trying to decide what had been so difficult about that. Was he missing something?

“Yes, of course I will. You asked that as though you expected me to say no.”

It was Hermione’s turn. “Well, we were afraid once we told you who the Maid of Honor was, you might.” She cleared her throat.

“I assumed you would ask Ginny,” Harry interjected matter-of-factly.

“Well, we did, and she accepted, but we’d completely understand if you would rather not be the Best Man since so many of the duties will be shared between you two.”

Harry shook his head. “Honestly, you two. It's fine. I’m totally fine with it.” Then he paused. “Unless Ginny has an objection to it?”

“No, no, she… well, she sounded a lot like you do right now, actually.” A faint pink dusted Hermione’s cheeks as she gave a small smile.

Ron had since flushed scarlet, which had the effect of hiding his freckles (no mean feat, it is worth mentioning). His lips were set in his lopsided, sheepish grin, and Harry found the only thing he could do was laugh.
“So this is what you two have been worried about? And the reason you had to get me out of Hogwarts, in case I reacted poorly and made a scene in front of Ginny?”

“Yes…” they answered in unison. Hermione was quick to apologize, though.

“I’m sorry we’ve been acting so silly, Harry. Honestly, we didn’t really know how you would feel about it. We haven’t talked to you very much since your relationship ended, and you haven’t offered any information, either, so…” She paused and took a deep breath. “We just didn’t want it to be awkward, for either of you.”

“Well, thanks, I appreciate that. But honestly, you have nothing to worry about. Ginny may have been heartbroken in the beginning” – Ron scowled slightly at this, Harry noticed – “but on some level we both knew it wasn’t going to work out. She knew it, and I knew it. I think the war changed all of us…” Harry finished, trailing off a bit.

A soft hand touched his, and when he looked up, Hermione was smiling at him. “As long as you’re okay with this.”

“Yes. You two are my best friends, and now you’re getting married! I had better be a part of it!” He grinned while looking at the pair of them.

He remembered he hadn’t been quite so pleased when he first received the invitation, but that had less to do with the actual event and more to do with it being sprung on him. He had always thought Ron would tell him in secret first before asking Hermione. Yet, knowing Ron as well as he did, he knew it wasn’t in his friend’s nature to plan ahead for anything (so why a marriage proposal would be any different, he didn’t know). Ron had always been a spontaneous person, but Australia must have been something special to inspire such a romantic overture.

*Perhaps I’ll visit one day and see for myself. Maybe I’ll even get engaged there.*

At that thought, images of Harry’s dark-haired dreamscape lover floated through his mind, and he was about to indulge himself in those remembered visuals when Hermione spoke again.

“There’s a few more details about the wedding I need to share. You may recall this from the invitation, but the date is November the twenty-first. About a month from now. Will that still work?”

Harry nodded while breaking off a hunk of bread and dragging it through the hummus.

“We are doing our bridal wardrobe through Madam Malkin’s, so I’ll need to make an appointment for you to be fitted for formal robes.” She could tell Harry was about to interject, and held up her hand. “I know you already own formal robes, but our wedding party is all coordinated together, so it’s important you get the ones we have picked out.”

“Okay,” Harry agreed as he chewed.

“There’s one last thing. We didn’t put this on the invitation because it was meant to be a surprise, so we’re in the process of sending out a follow-up piece to everyone with the specifics. We are doing the ceremony and reception together at the same location, and we’re hoping that no one will have a problem traveling a bit.”

“What do you mean?”

Ron suddenly grimaced – an expression Harry took to mean Hermione had probably just elbowed him. “Mum really wanted to set up the party tent in the back yard again, like we did for Bill’s wedding, but ‘Mione and I… well, we really wanted to get married where I proposed. So, we’re
doing everything in Australia.”

Just then, the waitress arrived at the table with their dinners, setting each plate down in turn, followed by a large salad to share and refills of their drinks.

Harry was grateful for the short reprieve; otherwise, he feared all he’d have been able to do in response was sit there, gaping like a fish.

Australia? … Australia!

The idea was as exciting as it was overwhelming. For a moment it brought to mind his feelings of heading to the Quidditch World Cup for the first time, yet this was completely different. It would be Harry’s first real trip outside of Britain, save for his recent dreamscape (though he doubted that really counted), and he had only just been thinking about visiting Australia not five minutes prior. The whole thing was quite surreal.

Once the waitress had stepped away from the table, Hermione looked over. “Harry? Say something.”

“Yeah. Wow, okay. Sorry, you just sort of stunned me with that one.”

They both smiled at him, but Hermione was most effusive about it. “Isn’t it just the most romantic thing ever?” She squeezed Ron’s hand, which made his ears go pink.

“It’s brilliant!” Harry beamed back at them.

As everyone picked up their forks and began to tuck into their food, Harry’s mind wandered to Australia again. It wasn’t just visiting he had been thinking about, it was about getting engaged. He wondered briefly if he would ever get that opportunity, particularly if this newfound interest in men panned out. He wasn’t sure what the rules were for gay marriages in Wizarding culture – he’d never had reason to pay attention to them before.

For a fleeting moment, he considered asking Hermione (he knew she’d know) but figured it would be obvious why he was asking, and decided against it. He also wasn’t sure if he was ready to have that conversation with (or in front of) Ron yet.

It was then he really lamented the fact that his lover – fake dreamscape lover, he chastised himself – wasn’t real, as it would have been nice to bring a guest to the wedding and share the trip with someone.

It was also then that Severus came to mind. Harry dismissed the idea quickly, though, citing the man’s teaching schedule as prohibitive for pre-holiday travel.

Besides, he wouldn’t want to accompany me to a wedding, of all things, Harry scoffed mentally.

As dinner rolled on, Ron and Hermione continued to make idle chit-chat, and Harry smiled and nodded along with them, half listening, half lost in thought.

“…. so I told George he should make them for the shop. We’ll see if he actually does it, though,” Ron was saying.

George.

Harry felt his thoughts pull him in the direction of the George Harrison song he and Severus had shared earlier, as well as the revelation of Severus-as-pianist. As the scene repainted itself in his mind, he saw Severus’ head dipping over the keys, the passionate intensity with which he played, his
black hair swinging forward to shield his face, his dark shirt rolled slightly at the sleeve…

Stealing a downwards glance, he saw a head dip lower, dark hair curtaining the face even as it fanned out against his abdomen. A hand and mouth were around him instantly, simultaneously, and he bucked up into the wet heat. He felt engulfed, surrounded; held on the very edge of ecstasy until he thought he could endure no more, and then, only then, was pushed headlong into white, searing lights, crying out in a moan of pleasure.

Harry felt a ripple of arousal go through his body and he clenched his teeth. Why did these visuals seem to assault him at the most inconvenient of times? He discreetly adjusted himself under the table and attempted to refocus on the conversation, hoping it would be enough to block out further thoughts of that morning’s dream, as well as imagining Severus in that capacity.

Ironically, and unhelpfully, his mind began supplying him with song lyrics.

_I wanna cross you off my list_  
_but when you come knocking at my door_

Hermione was giggling about something Ron had done and Harry watched absently. He remembered the feel of the polished piano underneath his fingertips, and the rich sound it had produced, seeming to wrap everywhere around his senses.

_Fate seems to give my heart a twist_  
_and I come running back for more._

Harry cleared his throat and took another drink, trying his best to focus on what Ron was talking about. But no matter what he did, his mind kept pushing him back into the welcoming depths of words and music… and Severus.

_I should hate you_  
_but I guess I love you_

Harry froze. _Surely not_, he thought wildly.

_you got me in between_  
_the devil and the deep blue sea._

He mentally panicked a bit, trying to force the lyrics from his mind.

_No, no, no, no_, he thought. _It can’t be._

Yet wouldn’t it be just like Severus to say things cryptically? Exactly the type of mysterious message that would make even professional code-breakers at the Ministry stand around scratching their heads?

For some reason, the thought of that amused Harry, and he began to chuckle.

“See, ‘Mione, I told you he’d think that was funny!”

Harry smiled, thanking his good fortune that he was still managing to keep up with the conversation (or at least giving the impression that he was) even though his thoughts were waging a war with his attention, and winning.

_That song was probably just one of the things in Severus’ repertoire. After all, I was the one to suggest George Harrison._
But that thought did little to calm him, and even less to silence the nagging voice in his head that continued its speculation.

*But what if that song wasn’t an accident?* Severus didn’t seem to be the type to act without carefully calculating every conceivable aspect of a situation, so maybe it was intended to deliver a message. *If so, then why this? Why now? What had changed?*

Harry had felt regard from the man before, but could not remember seeing any indication that Severus had developed softer feelings for him. And if so, how did Harry feel about it? He had to admit, after the afternoon he’d had, his perception of Severus was rapidly changing. Perhaps there were still other surprises waiting for him.

Harry was saved from further rumination as the waitress returned with the bill. Just as Hermione was starting to reach for it, Harry swatted her hand away.

“No you don’t.” He grabbed the folio and slipped money inside of it before either Ron or Hermione could try and negotiate it away from him, and then sent it right back with the waitress.

“You sneak,” Hermione said with a smile. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, thanks for dinner, mate!” Ron added.

“No problem. Congratulations officially!” Harry raised his glass in salute even though his mind was still miles away, busy with contemplations of song lyrics and marriage proposals and a certain tall, inscrutable Potions Master.

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He had seen Harry enter the restaurant – an unexpected, heart-pounding moment in which his conversation had stalled mid-sentence – but between the proprietor’s welcome and Harry’s fascination with something on the walls, he felt it would have been intruding to make an attempt at conversation. It was just as well, as Harry only lingered for another minute or two before retreating to the back of the restaurant, eventually disappearing behind a curtain that one of the waiters had pulled closed.

Although his own dinner was complete a half hour ago – his friends now gone, perplexed as to why he wished to stay behind without them – Marcus contented himself with sipping his water and twirling a straw between his fingers, hoping he’d get another glimpse of Harry. It was foolish and pathetic, he knew this all too well, but he felt compelled to stay, as if held there by some force.

Or at least that’s what he told himself.

When the curtain in the back finally opened, his heart nearly jumped out of his chest. He saw the table where Harry had been sitting with his friends; at present, the three of them were winding their way up to the front of the restaurant, laughing about something. Marcus noticed the comfortable familiarity Harry shared with them, and longed to be a part of it.

As was common, some of the patrons whispered and pointed discreetly as they walked, but Marcus suspected it was more for Harry than for the other two.

The proprietor stopped them near the register and beckoned Harry towards her with her arms. As he
leaned over the counter to give her a warm hug, Marcus couldn’t help but admire the view. Harry’s dark denims sat low on his hips, but as he stretched into the embrace, the fabric tightened around his arse. His t-shirt also rode up, revealing a swathe of bare skin around his lower back.

To Marcus’ shock, it revealed a glimpse of what looked like feathers, indelibly imprinted in a blue-black ink.

*Harry had a tattoo?*

A pang of desire snapped through Marcus at the newfound knowledge, and his hands clenched tightly in response, as though trying to ward off the impulse to go over and explore every inch of Harry’s body right then and there.

Thus, it was not surprising that he almost missed when the scene changed before him. Ron and Hermione had waved, leaving the restaurant together, but Harry remained, still chatting with the proprietor.

Knowing he may not get another opportunity like this, Marcus slowly rose from his seat and made his way to the counter. The proprietor saw him coming first, and gave him a knowing – if not patronizing – smile, but politely excused herself from the conversation just as Harry turned to look at him.

The electric green of his irises was even more stunning and hypnotic up close, and for a moment, it robbed Marcus of his ability to speak. Fortunately (for him), he recovered quickly, swallowing his nervousness and reminding himself to breathe.

“Hi. Harry. I… I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Marcus. Marcus Braham.” He extended a hand in greeting, hoping his slight tremble would not be visible.

To his utter delight, Harry accepted it. “Hello,” came the reply, before their hands were released. Harry had a strange, almost guarded look on his face, but Marcus was in no frame of mind to decode it.

With his pulse hammering in his ears, Marcus scanned about for some topic of conversation. He couldn’t believe it: in all that time he had sat at his table, waiting for this moment, it had never occurred to him to decide what to say to Harry should he get the chance to talk to him. Mercifully, an idea came quickly – one he knew would be common ground.

“Are you following the contenders for the Quidditch World Cup this year?”

Harry seemed a bit puzzled by the question, but answered regardless. “Some of my friends are, but I’ve been too busy.”

“Do you still play?”

“No really, no.”

“Thanks again, dear, I’ll see you next time!” The proprietor was waving at Harry from the door to the kitchen, her wide smile cementing the wrinkles around her eyes. Harry returned her smile, lifting his hand in parting, before returning his gaze to Marcus (though the smile had faded considerably when it settled back on him).

*She’s probably trying to rescue Harry from this conversation, Marcus thought irritably.*

He shifted back and forth on his feet, feeling the moment rapidly slipping away from him, and tried
desperately to save it. “Well, if you want to play again, let me know. A group of us have formed some inter-House teams and we get together on weekends. We’d love to have you,” he affirmed.

He cringed immediately at his choice of words, hoping it hadn’t come across nearly as needy and ridiculous as it sounded.

“Thanks for letting me know,” Harry answered.

“You don’t even have to play for Gryffindor if you don’t want.”

Harry’s eyebrows lifted slightly.

“Oh, you bleeding idiot! Why wouldn’t Harry want to play for Gryffindor?”

“Well, I should probably be going. Nice meeting you.” Harry offered a half smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, and then slipped out the door. The soft crack of Apparition could be heard just before the door clicked shut.

“It was nice meeting you, too…” Marcus said to himself, sighing wistfully, staring at the spot Harry had just vacated. He idly rubbed his hand, fancying he could still feel the touch of Harry’s warm palm in his.

Chapter End Notes

A special nod to George Harrison’s remake of “Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea” for inspiring portions of this chapter. It really is something of a Snarry anthem to me (as well as one helluva good song).

Also, the full name of the song Severus was playing is Elégie in E Flat Minor, Op. 3, No. 1, by Sergei Rachmaninoff (he may also be credited as Sergey/Rachmaninov).
Slipping past the large, timbered doors of the castle, Harry turned and followed the now-familiar path towards the dungeons. It was well past dinner time, so he wasn’t surprised to see the Great Hall empty except for a handful of students seated in clusters – studying, by the looks of it. Above them, a sea of jack-o-lanterns bobbed in the air, their flickering eyes and mouths creating an eerie, yet festive show. Harry smiled. Halloween at Hogwarts was just as he remembered it.

He passed a few students as he descended the stairs that led towards Severus’ office, but they paid him no mind, most likely because they weren’t expecting to see ‘Harry Potter’ at the school on a Thursday night. Although Harry had been instructed to Floo directly into Severus’ quarters, he didn’t feel comfortable dropping in on the man’s personal space unannounced, and so opted to take his chances with the students. Next time, he’d make sure to bring his invisibility cloak along, too, just in case.

When he reached Severus’ office, he slowed to a stop and peeked his head around the door. Severus was seated at his desk, head bent over his work, a quill scratching away furiously in his hand. Harry stepped into the scant light that was spilling into the hallway, and knocked on the heavy, wooden doorframe.

“Harry,” came the response, surprise evident in the higher lilt of Severus’ voice.

Harry smiled. “Mind if I come in?”

Severus blinked a moment. “Please,” he said, gesturing towards a chair, finally seeming to snap out of it. It was so rare to catch Severus off guard that Harry almost laughed at it, but decided instead to file it away as something to enjoy later, and hopefully repeat.

Harry walked up to the desk as the door closed behind him. “I was just on my way home tonight when I realized that our next session is only a few days away, and I… well, we’re linking this time, and I had a couple things I wanted to ask you about. Is this a good time?”

“Assuming whatever is on your mind can outwit these insufferable essays.”

Harry laughed. “I’ll take that as a ‘yes’.”

But before he could say anything else, they were interrupted by a loud knock at the door.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

On his way back to the Slytherin common room, Marcus shifted the books he was holding from one arm to another as he began mentally composing the essay he was about to write. He walked on distractedly, noticing a figure coming towards him, and instinctively moved to one side of the hallway to make room.

As the person passed him, he glanced over out of habit, but then looked straight ahead again. Surely Professor Flitwick can’t expect us to compare the properties of all of the —

He froze mid-thought.
Whipping his head around, he stared at the retreating form that was all at once out of place and instantly familiar: the distinct absence of school robes, the messy mop of black hair, that casual, yet purposeful walk.

**What was Harry doing here?**

Ignoring the excited thump of his heartbeat, Marcus continued watching Harry’s progress down the hallway, although he knew exactly where Harry was headed. There was only one logical reason for him to be in *this* hallway, after all. Sure enough, Harry stopped outside the open door of Professor Snape’s office and made himself known.

Marcus stood there for a moment, transfixed, before deciding to follow. When he arrived at the door, it was already closed.

Leaning over, he pressed his ear to it and heard… nothing. Either they had put up a silencing charm, or there was no talking going on. An uncomfortable surge of jealousy tightened his throat and he swallowed against it. He knew he had to get inside the office; he had to know. Searching his mind for a solution, he suddenly remembered it was still office hours, which meant a professor’s door must remain open – figuratively speaking, if not literally. With a swell of new confidence, Marcus rapped sharply on the door.

A moment later, it swung open, revealing Harry perched on the arm of a chair, facing Professor Snape’s desk. They both turned to look at Marcus.

“It was a silencing charm, then, he thought, somewhat embarrassed by his assumptions.

“Mr. Braham. What can I do for you?”

If Severus’ tone sounded flatter than normal, Marcus ignored it. He had a right to be there, too. “I apologize for interrupting, Professor.” He shot a furtive glance at Harry, who had since turned back around and was picking absently at a fingernail. “I just noticed the supplies of mugwort and anise were running low in the student cupboards, and thought they ought to be replenished before tomorrow’s classes.”

“I restocked anise only this afternoon.”

Marcus willed himself not to flush and scrambled for a response. “Well, it’s possible I wrote down the wrong one, but I distinctly remember two ingredients needed refilling.”

“Have you been proctoring potions labs tonight?”

“No, sir, not today – I only do those on Mondays.”

Severus eyed him carefully for a moment, and Marcus shifted uneasily. “Very well. Give me twenty minutes here and then I will assist.”

Marcus nodded but did not leave. When the silence stretched for an awkward moment, he realized there was nothing else for him to do; there were no more cards to play. He mumbled a ‘thanks’ as he stole a final look at Harry, and then reluctantly slipped from the office. He left the door open in the hopes that it would remain so, but that hope was quickly dashed as it clicked shut once again, silence reigning on the other side.

With a last, longing look at the door, he set off in the direction of the Potions classroom. Not only had Harry seemed to ignore his very presence, but now he had to go scale back the student supply of mugwort (at a minimum) in order to corroborate his tale. Marcus sighed, cursing himself and the
situation he had just created. Perhaps it was time for a change in tactics, as it certainly didn’t seem like he was going to get anywhere with Harry if he had to keep going through Professor Snape.

Marcus turned that thought over and over in his mind as he searched the storeroom for what he needed. He decided hyssop root and mugwort would be the two items running low, and so collected roughly half the supply of each and reluctantly destroyed them. He hated seeing good ingredients go to waste, but at least they were two of the most common (and inexpensive) to procure. Then, just as he was about to leave, another, smaller cabinet caught his eye. It was locked, but as a Potions tutor, Marcus knew what it contained – and why it was off-limits for students.

Well, generally off-limits, he justified.

Struck with an idea, he quickly looked over his shoulder to ensure he was still alone, and then Accio’d an old, dusty jar of salve from the top shelf. He had once accidentally witnessed Professor Snape fetch the cabinet’s small, ornate key from this container, and hoped it was still there. As the jar hit his palm, he heard a distinctive clanking sound, and smiled to himself.

After re-locking the little cabinet, he returned the jar to the top shelf and pocketed the small vial of greenish-brown sludge. He had only siphoned off a small amount – a quantity he hoped would pass undetected from his Professor’s considerably detailed cataloguing. Switching off the light, he stepped out into the classroom and closed the storeroom door. He assumed the twenty minutes were nearly up, which meant Professor Snape would be along soon, and he certainly didn’t want his plan to be over before it had started.

Seating himself on top of one of the desks, he waited, idly swinging his legs. He thought of Harry, and Professor Snape, and a grin played up his lips. Finally, it seemed his luck would be turning around.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Once the door to Severus’ office closed again, Harry shifted off the arm of the chair and into its seat. Somehow the interruption of a student had thrown him off kilter a bit, and left him feeling a bit like a student himself. It was not so very long ago that he was, after all. When he looked up, he thought, This is Severus. Not Professor Snape. Severus.

“I apologize for the interruption. You wished to ask me something?”

Harry cleared his throat and nodded. “Two things, actually. It’s about our session this Sunday.”

“Ah, yes. I anticipated you would have questions.”

“Well, I’ve just come from a robe fitting for Ron and Hermione’s wedding, and both their mums were there. I guess they like helping out with that kind of thing.”

“I imagine so. You are the Best Man, I presume?”

“Yes,” Harry said, smiling briefly. “But it… it also made me think about my mum. And…” He paused to swallow. “I think I’d like…” to know how it feels to have my mum helping me select robes for my wedding. “I mean…” His face heated slightly.

“You want to see your parents in your next session,” Severus finished.
Harry looked up, grateful for the rescue. “Yes,” he said with a sigh. “I would. But it’s our first attempt at linking, and you would be there too, and I would understand if you don’t—”

Severus forestalled the inevitable by raising his hand. “Stop.” He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. “I understand your reservation on this matter, as I have a history with both of your parents. However, I have already indicated I will follow your lead. The intent of this session is yours to choose.”

Harry blinked. “So… you’re really okay with this?”

“Yes.”

Harry let out the breath he didn’t even realize he’d been holding. “Okay. Good. Thank you,” he said, and Severus inclined his head.

“There’s just one problem, though. I’ve never met my parents. Not properly, anyway, as I was just a year old when they died. So if I were to create a virtual reality with them in it, my subconscious would have to make them up since I have nothing to go off of for memories and experiences, right?”

Severus seemed to ponder this for a moment. “A valid point – one I admit I hadn’t considered. Once again, Mr. Potter, you—”

“—actually use my brain for something other than Quidditch?”

“Must you always take the pleasure of my insults away?”

Harry laughed, knowing the sparkle behind Severus’ eyes was evidence of his teasing. He let the moment hang between them for a minute and then sobered slightly.

“So, do you think I could view your memories of my parents? Before going into our session?”

“That is perhaps not the wisest idea. I do not have the most unbiased view of your parents, as I am sure you are aware, and I fear that no matter how objective I attempt to make the memories, I may still color them unfavorably or influence your perception of them. It would be best to have someone else supply memories for you to view.”

“Okay, but who else is there? That’s still alive, I mean?”

“There is one who knew them well and could provide as neutral of a perspective as you are likely to get.”

“Dumbledore,” Harry answered automatically, though there had been no question. “You still have all his memories?”

“Yes. Well, perhaps it would be more accurate to say Minerva does. Albus’ penchant for collecting and archiving his memories should work well in our favor here. As he was instrumental in the protection of your parent’s home, I am certain there should be something contained in those vials we can use.”

Hope bloomed in Harry’s chest as he considered not only the chance to view Dumbledore’s memories of his parents, but also the opportunity to interact with them in an Evochi session – and the real versions, too, not just the versions his mind made up.

“Thank you.”
Severus nodded. “I shall look tomorrow, and if I find anything, I will owl them to you to view at your leisure. I only ask that you return them once you are done.”

“Of course… no problem.” Harry smiled, then got up and made his way to the door. A sudden feeling of nervousness developed in the pit of his stomach. After all these years of waiting to meet his parents, he didn’t want to be disappointed.

“So, Sunday, then?” he confirmed.

“Yes. Use the Floo,” Severus said, pointing at the fireplace in the corner.

“Yeah, I will, but… doesn’t it normally come out in your antechamber?”

Severus rolled his eyes. “When you leave now, use the Floo. I thought we had discussed you not wandering about the castle alone.”

Harry almost chuckled at hearing Severus’ classroom voice again. “I know, I just didn’t want to drop into your quarters unannounced since it isn’t our regular day. It seemed rude.” Then he grinned. “I mean, what if you had chosen tonight to wear your shamrock pajamas or something?”

To his credit, Severus’ expression did not change, though his amusement was evident in his response. “I will have you know tonight’s pair features a lovely set of unicorns.”

Harry laughed harder than he had in a long time. It felt good. When he finally caught his breath, he said, “Okay, understood: Floo from now on. Check.”

“Or if you must wander the castle alone, at least use that infernal cloak of yours,” Severus grumbled. Then he stopped and tapped a finger against his lips. “On second thought, bring that with you on Sunday. I should like to take a look at it; perhaps borrow it for a few days, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure.” Harry smiled and stepped into the fireplace. “Goodnight, Severus,” he teased in the cheekiest voice he could muster, before shouting his destination and disappearing in a whirl of green flames.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“So I never really asked – how did you figure this out?” Harry asked as they walked into Severus’ lab the following Sunday.

“An ancient tome on Legilimency that I procured from Albus’ library. Inside, I discovered several missives between himself and Gellert Grindelwald that described a theory of simultaneous mind connections. Their experiments detailed the process of casting in unison so that neither spell preempted the other.”

“They were trying to enter each other’s minds at the same time?”

“It appears so.”

“Why?”

“The documents did not say explicitly, but to hazard a guess, I would say they were attempting to heighten the efficacy of their wandless magic by co-mingling powers.”
Harry’s eyes widened. “Do you think they were successful?”

“I can only speculate. The correspondence ended abruptly, so whether there is more elsewhere or it was interrupted before its completion, I do not know.”

Harry exhaled soundly. “And Dumbledore was really good at Legilimency, wasn’t he?”

Severus nodded once. “He was a master Occlumens, yes – more subtle and nuanced than myself, it pains me to admit, though he did have a few more years in which to perfect the art.”

Harry snorted. “A few?” Then he started to laugh, and Severus gave him a sharp look.

“Sorry, I’m not laughing at you. It’s just… it’s so simple. I mean, why didn’t we think of using Legilimency sooner?”

Severus took out his wand and began rearranging the lab. “Something researchers are altogether too familiar with: lex parsimoniae. It is an easy trap in which to ensnare oneself, no matter how practiced the individual.”

“Er, what?” Harry asked.

“Occam’s Razor,” Severus clarified.

“Oh. Is that the thing that says the simplest answer is usually the right one?”

“Crudely defined, yes. The principle is to minimize new assumptions and trend toward simpler theories by building upon constructs of established knowledge.”

“Not reinventing the wheel, then.”

“Precisely. There are times when invention is warranted, but it’s not generally an advisable starting point. In our case, I knew the necessary magic existed in other areas, but failed to connect the dots, as it were.”

Harry smiled. “You’re still bloody brilliant anyway. I mean, has there ever been something you couldn’t figure out?”

A faint pink dusted Severus’ cheekbones, and he cleared his throat. “Of course. Many things.”

“Now you’re just being humble,” Harry said, making Severus scoff.

“Hardly. Now, sit,” he instructed, pointing at one of the newly-transfigured chaises. Harry did.

“So how does this work, exactly?”

Severus settled himself on the chaise opposite Harry’s. As he spoke, he Summoned some supplies and a vial containing a familiar indigo substance. “From your perspective, this will function very much the same as it always has. I am the only variable that has changed. As you are holding your intention for this session, I will enter your mind after you speak the incantation. Then we both consume our dose of the potion. This should allow for one creator and one observer.”

“Seems easy enough. Should that concern us?”

“Very astute, Mr. Potter.” Severus looked impressed. “The only danger I can predict is the potential for me to remain trapped inside your mind after the potion has worn off. Legilimency is performed with both skill and concentration; it is an intention, although a different sort than Evochi relies upon.
The potion should maintain the connection while we are both residing in your subconscious, but as it wears off, I may need to manually retract the link prior to entering the recuperation phase. It is a small window, but I believe it doable."

Harry swallowed. “You ‘believe’? What if you don’t remember when you first wake up? I mean, if you don’t disconnect…”

“Then you might be stuck with me, yes.” For a moment, Severus just sat there, taking in the horrified look on Harry’s face. Then he succumbed with a soft chuckle. “Forgive me, I should not be making light of this, but the look on your face was priceless.”

“Well yours would’ve been, too, if the situation were reversed!”

Severus appeared to reflect on this. “Quite true, I would perish the thought of you nattering on in my mind for all eternity. Having me trapped inside your mind, however, now that would be an improvement.”

“Ha, ha,” Harry mocked, yet he couldn’t help but grin. “Let me guess, I would ‘finally have something of use rolling around in my head’?”

Severus merely arched a brow, a smirk pulling at his lips.

“Git,” Harry said, laughing deeply.

“It is not I who presents such an easy target.”

“Yeah? Keep it up, and we will go dragon hunting!” Harry laughed good-naturedly and Severus scowled.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

It was a strange thing, indeed, seeing Severus lying across from him on a gray chaise identical to the one he was presently occupying. They had already gone through the preparation for this session, as it was quite a bit different than previous ones (and unprecedented, as far as they knew) and so Harry assumed they were both entering into this with some degree of trepidation.

Without warning, a vial of indigo fluid was thrust into his line of sight, and it distracted him from his thoughts.

“Given the experimental nature of what we are about to do, I decided it would be best to control as many variables as possible. To that end, I have split the contents of one vial into two, using the same instance of the potion for both of us. We will have thirty minutes.”

Harry frowned. “Are you cutting this short because it’s with my parents?”

“No.” Severus sighed, looking as though he was working hard to bite back a scathing remark. “I have already told you the subject matter is not an issue. As I have just explained, this is experimental, and as such, I am merely attempting to protect us both.”

“I know, it’s just this is the first time…” Harry paused, his face pinched together slightly. “This was to be with my parents.”
“Must I remind you that you may visit them again in a future draught?”

“Yeah, but would it be the same? I mean, will I need Dumbledore’s memories each time?”

“No.” Severus eyed him for a moment. “After this first meeting, you will come away with your own memories and experiences of them. It is that which you would draw upon for a future draught.”

“Oh.” Harry had a hard time hiding the smile that eventually tickled at the corners of his mouth. He knew the irritated look on Severus’ face wasn’t personal, but it was definitely betraying an internal struggle with the situation. Harry guessed if it were possible for Severus to test a dual session alone, he would have, but as that was obviously not an option, Severus would just have to accept Harry as his scientific partner.

“Hey,” he said, and Severus looked up. “Everything will be all right. You’ve been over this a dozen times, and theory will only get us so far, right? We just need to test it and see what happens.”

Severus closed his eyes briefly, taking a deep breath and letting it out soundly. He shifted the vial in his fingers until it was solid in his grip. “Very well. Shall we?”

“Yes,” Harry affirmed. “And I know this doesn’t change anything now, but I just think… I need to say it anyway.”

“What?”

“I trust you, Severus.”

The muscles in Severus’ jaw clenched and he looked away. Harry knew from experience that direct sentiments were sometimes hard for Severus to deal with, but the man’s eyes never lied. In them, Harry had seen surprise, gratitude and wonder moments before they were diverted. He smiled.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Opening his eyes with a deep breath, Severus began to take in his surroundings. With a start, he realized his body was not shrouded in the signature grey mist of an Evochi reality, but rather was seated before a blur of shapes, colors, and faces, all too fuzzy to properly identify. The longer he watched, the faster everything seemed to swirl around him, until suddenly it all stopped. Bizarrely, there was no sound, as if he was on the outside of whatever show was going on.

Then suddenly, something warm slid into his palm. With a gasp, he looked down and saw a familiar hand.

*Harry*!

With a pull, he felt his body lurching forward to squeeze through the mosaic he had been watching. It was a gauzy substance that felt cool and ticklish as he passed through it, and he shuddered once he was free of it. When the scene before him finally registered, he realized he was outdoors near the Quidditch pitch at Hogwarts. He blinked against the bright sunshine and then settled his gaze on the smiling face that came into view.

“Found you,” Harry said.
“Was I lost?” Severus asked.

Harry’s expression grew thoughtful. “I’m not sure, exactly. Maybe this is how it’s supposed to work. I woke up in the grey mist as always, and then the scene created itself. This,” he said, gesturing to the pitch around them. “But then when I didn’t see you, I thought the link didn’t work.”

“Then how did you know I was here?”

“I didn’t, not really. I just felt your presence. Something told me to reach my hand out for you, and when I did, you took it.”

Severus hummed and turned to look behind him. He was sure it was the direction he had come from, but now all he saw was the path back up to the castle.

“This is bizarre, isn’t it?” Harry asked, looking around for himself. “We’re both in my mind.”

“Why the Quidditch pitch?”

“What? Oh. I don’t know, I guess it’s just someplace that feels safe to me.”

“Indeed, this is better than all of us crowding into a parlor at Grimmauld.”

“All of us?”

Severus pointed over Harry’s shoulder until he spun around to look. There, at the opposite edge of the pitch, stood James and Lily Potter. Even at this distance they were unmistakeable. As they began to walk hand-in-hand towards he and Harry, Lily’s long, red hair swished about her shoulders while James’ smile stretched from ear to ear.

Severus turned his attention on Harry, who seemed rooted to the ground, frozen, as though unsure what he should do. His mouth was open slightly and moisture had already started to well in his eyes.

Severus reached out and gently touched Harry’s shoulder, which made him start and look over. “Go. I’ll join you once you’ve had a chance to get reacquainted.”

Harry nodded thickly, looking a bit dazed, and turned back to look at his parents. They waved. “Is this real?” he asked quietly.

Severus felt his heart twinge in sympathy. “Yes. In here, in this space, they are real.”

That seemed to be what Harry was afraid to hear, for his face suddenly crumpled and he covered it with a hand, letting out a choked sound. “I don’t know if I can do this,” he said, his voice slightly muffled by his palm. He looked panicked, as though he wanted nothing more than to escape in that moment.

“Of course you can,” Severus assured, though he feared he was rapidly going to be out of his element for this sort of thing.

“No, I mean… how can I say goodbye to them again? I can’t, I just can’t…” He started to turn away as he spoke (not that there was anywhere he could really go), but Severus caught him by the shoulders and stilled him. James and Lily had since reached the middle of the pitch and now seemed to be picking up the pace of their approach.

“Severus, please,” he begged. “I thought I could do this, but now seeing them here, for real, I…”

“Stop,” Severus said softly. Harry stood there with both hands over his face now, breathing hard.
Severus turned him back towards the pitch and gave him a push until he walked a few paces on his own. Then, without even realizing the space between them had gone, Severus watched as Harry was collected into the embrace of his parents, four arms wrapped tightly around him, their lips and faces pressed to his cheeks and hair.

“Oh, Harry, my sweet, sweet boy!” Lily cried, pulling him tight against her, and Severus tried to breathe past the sudden constriction in his chest. He could no longer see Harry’s face, but he waited as the two of them held each other for a long while, Harry’s chest heaving as he locked his arms around her. When they finally parted, Lily took a step back and grasped his shoulders. “Just look at you, you’re all grown up! And so handsome!” she gushed, laughing through the tears streaming generously down her cheeks. Joy and pride emanated from every fiber of her being. She cupped Harry’s face with her hands, wiping away the moisture with her thumbs as her eyes mapped everywhere, looking their fill.

Severus was just about to turn away, to give the three of them some privacy, when he noticed James stepping away and heading his direction. Severus felt his body tense, unsure of what this meant in Harry’s mind, but hoping to avoid a confrontation all the same.

James came to a stop within arms reach, looking, too, as though he was unsure of his welcome. Yet he seemed determined – if not for himself, then for Lily and Harry.

“Severus. Hello.” James offered his hand, a tentative smile set on his face.

Severus looked at the outstretched hand, then briefly skittered his eyes over to Harry and Lily, who were now watching – Lily had snuggled Harry close, one arm around his waist and her head tucked against his shoulder – before Severus looked back at James. Slowly, he drew his hand up and grasped the peace offering.

“You’ve done so much for our family, for Harry. Thank you. I know I was a prat to you all those years, and I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve it.” Then he seemed to relax minutely. “I’m glad I got a chance to tell you that.”

Severus released their hands and bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment. Although he knew this version of James was just a combination of Harry’s subconscious and Albus’ memories, it didn’t stop the hopeful swell of his heart that told him there was some truth to it.

“Thank you,” Severus said finally, unable to hide the surprise in his tone. When he looked back at Lily, she smiled fondly, a clear indication she approved of what James had just done. Then her free hand lifted and she gave Severus a small wave, as if adding, Hello, friend. I will come chat with you soon, but for now, I want to be with Harry.

It was a sentiment Severus understood perfectly.

As Lily turned them to start walking around the perimeter of the pitch, Harry looked over at Severus, a storm of unknowable emotions in his eyes. Severus knew this was difficult for him, but had also known from the very beginning of their sessions, perhaps even before that, that it was both inevitable and unavoidable. Even after the passage of seventeen years, Harry’s deepest desire was still to know his parents. And until he did, in whatever way feasible, it would forever block his ability to release the emptiness in his past.

When James caught up, he slung an arm around Harry’s shoulders, and he and Lily sandwiched their son between them. Even from a distance, Severus could tell they were having a conversation amid their silent moments of togetherness, but never once did they break contact with each other. They all seemed to need the reassurance and confirmation of one immutable fact: they were a family, perhaps
now more than ever – even if, like the first time, it was only to be short lived.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus had just stretched out his legs on the low bleachers near the field – he guessed they were part of the Evochi construct as he had no memory of them on the actual pitch – when he realized Harry, Lily and James were nowhere in sight. With a jolt of panic, he looked around, hoping the session was still going on and he wasn’t going to be stuck inside the Quidditch pitch of Harry’s mind in perpetuity.

*Wouldn’t that just be the fucking irony?* he sneered to himself.

But before his panic could get the best of him, two figures on brooms flew out from behind a corner of the stadium and whisked right over his head, kicking up the air around his face and shoulders. He ducked instinctively, but looked up just in time to see James brandishing a Snitch and Harry grinning over his shoulder at Severus. His face was excited, open, joyous; in a word: beautiful.

The shining eyes and flushed cheeks instantly brought to mind two Fridays ago when Severus had Floo’d Harry in the morning, and had clearly interrupted… *something*. (It didn’t take an Oxford scholar to recognize what the sweat-dampened hair and blown pupils meant, after all.) He had spent most of that morning trying to get the image of Harry pleasuring himself out of his head, without much success, wondering who, or what, Harry thought about when he did it.

A loud whoop from high above the pitch redirected his attention, and he looked up to see James racing his son for the Snitch. Severus watched as Harry dipped and swerved on his broom, easily matching – if not outpacing – his father, the muscles in his arms and legs commanding the broom to his every whim. He really was an impressive flyer. They both were, if Severus allowed himself to admit it.

When Harry emerged with the Snitch in his upraised hand, a triumphant expression on his face, Severus found he couldn’t keep his eyes on the prize – at least not *that* prize. He cared little for an irritating, golden ball; instead, he let his gaze tickle down Harry’s arm and over his toned chest, finally settling somewhere below his navel. The dark denims Harry favored showcased his body well, and as he stretched off his broom to crow about his victory, the material pulled tighter across his groin.

As his own body began to stir with interest, Severus looked away, only to see a flash of red hair appear. With a start, he realized Lily was making her way up the bleachers towards him. He felt a bit caught out, embarrassed that he had just been undressing her son with his eyes. Though why that should matter, he did not know. Harry was of age, even if his orientation was presently unaccounted for, and had already seen a more intimate side of Severus than Lily ever had. He had never shared his piano or songs with her – or with anyone else, to be precise. What did that say about Harry, then, that he had been able to walk right into Severus’ life, so easily and suddenly, and yet make it feel as though it was the most natural thing in the world?

“Hi Sev,” Lily said, smiling, once she reached the top. She leaned down and wrapped her arms around him and they shared a long embrace. “I thought I’d join you while the boys play their game.”

At her words, Severus looked up to see Harry releasing the Snitch again. It whizzed off to the other side of the pitch, out of sight for the moment. James and Harry grinned at each other and then
immediately took off after it, the chase beginning anew. They really did look quite similar from a distance.

Severus had tried many times over the years to convince himself that Harry was just a miniature James, but sure as he was, something about it had never quite fit. He’d since learned why, of course, but he’d also discovered that Harry was not a miniature Lily, either. No, Harry was his own person, unique from both his parents but representing many of their best combined traits.

When he looked back at Lily, she was smiling at him, and one trait in particular struck him just as it always did: those eyes. Yet he had seen Harry’s up close on enough occasions to realize they were actually different. Lily’s had a slightly more almond shape to them and her irises were flecked with gold. Harry’s, on the other hand, did not have the gold flecks, and the shape was rounder, more reminiscent of his father’s. But the green, the essence of them, that was very much the same.

Slipping her arm through his, Lily leaned ever-so-slightly against him, their thighs and hips touching. There was something familiar and comfortable about the way she settled in next to him, about how their conversation seemed to swallow up the twenty-year gap as though no time had passed at all. While they talked, he idly wondered if Lily would have given her blessing to a relationship between her son and her childhood friend. He didn’t care much for James’ opinion on the matter, though he would have liked to have seen the look on his face.

It was in that moment, the perfect moment – sitting beneath the warmth of a blindingly blue sky, the air fragrant with vanilla as it always seemed to be around Lily – when Severus realized that for however much he had missed this – Lily, her company, her smile – and he had – he was more relieved in the knowledge that he still had Harry.

For as much as Harry was, or ever could be ‘his’, anyway.

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Harry had no idea how long the session had lasted, but knew instinctively it was nearing its end. It had seemed much longer than thirty minutes, yet he doubted even thirty years would have been sufficient, so perhaps that wasn’t saying much.

His parents had gathered him close, seeming to sense their time was almost at an end, too, and they took turns hugging him and telling him that they loved him, always. Severus stood nearby, though probably out of earshot, respectfully giving them their goodbyes.

When Lily leaned close, cupping Harry’s face in her hands, he could see moisture pooling in her eyes. “I want you to know something, Harry. It’s important you understand this. All of this – this place, you, everything…”

His throat started to close as he stared back at her and he willed himself to breathe. “Yes?” he managed.

She paused significantly, then smiled through her tears. “It’s real to us,” she whispered.

Harry felt his brows draw together as he pulled his lower lip into his mouth. He bit down hard, not wanting the last few moments with his parents to be one of sadness. He allowed his sense of logic to distract him instead. “But how can that be? I mean, in my head this is real, but you don’t exist outside of this place. How can this be real to you?” He knew he sounded a little hysterical, but it was only
because he so desperately wanted to believe her.

Lily smiled gently. “It’s magic, darling,” she said, as though that explained everything. And perhaps it did.

In this construct, this place, his parents did exist. Even Severus had said so. Harry had wondered about it before, after meeting Sirius and Remus – what would happen if he returned to that scene at a later date? Would they remember? Was it possible that they existed as living, organic counterparts to his subconscious? He hoped so, for if they couldn’t remember, if it hadn’t been real to them, then it’d be like it’d never happened at all, and Harry didn’t think he could bear that.

Suddenly, like an exhale that had been waiting for the right moment, Severus’ lab began to appear around them, a drunken canvas of bookshelves and black walls poking oddly through the bright, summer sky above them.

A sickening weight returned to Harry’s stomach as he took one last, desperate look at his mum and dad. He wanted to memorize their faces, their smiles, the look in their eyes as they gazed upon him, the sound of them laughing together and the warmth of their embraces – even though every second he hated that he had to keep saying goodbye to them; that he would never, ever know the experience of waking from an Evochi session to join them for real life adventures.

Or just dinner. He would’ve been happy with dinner.

But he supposed, in the long run, even that would not have been enough. Just as he’d thought thirty years would seem like the snap of his fingers, so, too, would a meal or two… or two-hundred. But he would have taken it. Isolation and longing clawed at him then, threatening to drown him, but he forced himself to focus on the bittersweet joy he’d felt at getting at least this short time with them. He couldn’t let that slip away, not when it was the only thing he had.

Before long, all that was left in front of him was the lab’s shroud of near-darkness, its many layers of implements and books replacing the virtual flesh-and-blood that had been his parents. He felt their absence like a sharp stab, his mind struggling to reconcile the fact that moments ago they were standing in front of him, and now they simply ceased to exist.

Again.

Harry stared into the room, his gaze unfocused. He felt lifeless and numb. When his eyelids began to grow unbearably heavy, he knew it was almost time.

A movement to his left caught his eye, and he turned to see Severus’ wand pointed at his forehead, the man’s spell a mere whisper as it passed over his lips. Something brushed past his consciousness – the touch, the echo of Severus’ presence leaving him – and he realized then that he was now truly alone.

Severus’ wand hand fell away just as the room started to spin, and then everything faded quickly, and blessedly, to black.
Harry woke to the dimly-lit sight of Severus’ lab. It was quiet, almost eerily so, and he was alone. He ignored the way his heart began sinking into his chest, and instead trailed his unfocused eyes along the shelves closest to him, watching as the books and cauldrons and glass jars blurred together in a fuzz of gray, indistinct shapes.

*Where is Severus?* he wondered absently, the simple query momentarily distracting his mind from the remembered visuals of their session – a place where his emotions were still floating uncomfortably close to the surface. Sitting up slowly, he perched on the edge of the chaise and let the dizziness pass as he cradled his head in his hands, his elbows on his knees.

Before he could stop it, Harry’s mind began to pull him back into the memory of his parents, all at once resisting and giving in. He felt if he could just reach his mind out far enough, he’d again be able to hear the softness of his mum’s laugh, or the pride that flowed from his dad, or the warmth of both their smiles. They were feelings more than thoughts, as though Lily and James were real *somewhere*, but just beyond the tips of his grasp. Swallowing hard against the bitter taste of longing that rose in his throat, Harry forced his awareness back into the lab.

He startled when the door suddenly opened. A sliver of light crept up the floor towards him, widening to a large wedge as Severus entered. Harry squinted until Severus moved aside and let the door close softly behind him, once again plunging the room into near darkness.

Harry cleared his throat, his voice rough from disuse. “Did everything go okay?”

“Yes, unless your mind contains an exact duplicate of my quarters, then yes,” Severus said, amusement briefly coloring his tone. “There is one thing, however,” he added, and Harry froze, panic seizing his breath.

“What?” he asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

“It is seven o’clock.”

Harry’s brow furrowed in confusion. “And?”

“Do you not recall what time we started?”

Harry thought on it a minute, trying to remember when he’d arrived. “I think it was around three, wasn’t it?”

“It was.”

“Which was four hours ago,” Harry finished unnecessarily. “But I thought you said we were only going to do a half-hour session?”

“I did. I can only presume that linking created a circumstance I could not have foreseen, scientifically or otherwise.” Severus paused for a moment before clarifying, no doubt taking in the look of concern on Harry’s face. “The session time doubled.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. “So we split a potion in order to do thirty minutes, but since we were linked, it did an hour anyway?”

“It appears so.”
“And that’s why our recovery time was three hours instead of… however long it should have been?”

“Yes.”

Harry groaned, looking absently to the side. “God, no wonder! I thought that session seemed long, especially when the scene faded and your lab reappeared. It felt like that part was never going to end.” In truth, Harry wished the session itself could have gone on indefinitely, but the end of it, right before he faded to sleep, was excruciating. The lab had never seemed so cold and desolate once the warmth of his parents’ presence was gone; it had almost seemed to hold him there, dangling him about in some mockery of non-existence. He frowned at the memory, feeling the pain of loss settle like a lead weight in his heart.

“How long have you been awake?” he managed.

“Less than ten minutes.”

Harry nodded, relieved that the potion seemed to have affected them both similarly. Standing, he shook out his legs a bit and scrubbed a hand over his face. As casually as he could, he told Severus he was going to head home, citing exhaustion and a desire to sleep off the rest of the potion. Really, he just needed some time to think and didn’t want an audience. To his relief, Severus only looked at him briefly before nodding, then followed him into the antechamber. Harry shrugged back into his coat, then felt the contents of his inside left pocket.

“Oh, I almost forgot – here.”

Harry pulled out a long, silvery object and held it out for Severus. Their fingers brushed slightly as Severus accepted the invisibility cloak, sending a small thrill of connection zipping up Harry’s arm. Severus gasped lightly, so quiet as to almost be inaudible, but Harry knew he’d felt it, too. He looked up at Severus and saw something keen in that dark gaze, but didn’t know if it was in response to the cloak or their touch.

Harry recalled feeling something similar the first time he’d ever touched the cloak, the thrum of its imbued magic tickling at his senses while the fabric slid between his fingers. And he was sure he must have touched Severus’ hand at some point over the last six months, but couldn’t remember experiencing that charge before. Curious, but figuring he’d just make things awkward if he attempted to comment, he turned and hopped into the Floo instead. It was probably just the cloak, anyway.

With little more than a nod and a wave, he called out his destination and was gone.

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“Harry!”

At the sound of his name – and the familiar voice – Harry turned and spotted Hermione running towards him down the path leading away from Hogwarts. When she caught up, she stopped for a minute to catch her breath, her hand braced on his shoulder.

“Where are you going?” she finally asked.

“Dunno,” he said. He stuffed his hands inside the pockets of his coat and scrunched up his face, trying to encourage some feeling back into it from where it had got wind-blown by the chilly,
November air.

“Are you all right?” She leaned in, a concerned look on her face.

“I just needed some fresh air.” Harry looked back towards the castle, its many turrets and spires little more than a ghostly apparition in the early winter fog. “I didn’t even realize I was so close to Hogwarts.”

Hermione put her hands on his cheeks and rubbed them gently, no doubt trying to coax some warmth into them. “How long have you been out here? Your face is bright red!” When he didn’t answer, she merely regarded him speculatively, then looked up the road towards Hogsmeade. “There’s a new cafe that opened last week that serves some fancy coffees. Care to join me?”

He shrugged. “No thanks, I’d rather stay outside.”

“Okay,” she conceded, a soft smile on her face. “How about I join you, then?”

Harry looked over at Hermione and smiled half-heartedly, nodding. Not much got by her, but he loved her for it. On the one hand, he felt bad that he always seemed to be unloading his problems on her; on the other, he realized how sorely he needed her right now even if he didn’t know how to ask. He hadn’t slept at all and knew he must look like shite. At first the cold wind on his face had felt good, waking him up and reminding him he was still there; still alive. But after a time, his skin had got so cold that it just became itchy, and eventually he stopped feeling it altogether.

They began to walk the path in silence, two pairs of footprints stretching out behind them in the light dusting of snow. Harry stared absently into the distance, his mind overburdened with thoughts of his fifth session, his parents, and their fallen comrades in the war. Finally, he could go no further, and at the crest of the hill, he stopped and leaned against the stone half-wall behind them.

“How do you do it, Hermione?”

She stopped walking and sidled up beside him, her head tipped slightly. “How do I do what?”

“How do you…” Harry paused and took a deep breath. “How do you stop dwelling on the past and feeling guilty about everything? You make it look so easy. You get up every day and go to school and take care of things – and you’re getting married! – and I just can’t… I don’t even know what comes next anymore. I just feel like I’m…” He sighed, trailing off.

“Adrift?” Hermione supplied after a moment, and Harry looked up at her, the recognition of that anchoring his fractured thoughts.

“Yes… adrift. Like I can’t shake this nagging feeling that nothing is as it should be. That I’m not where I should be.”

“I’ve felt that way before,” she offered, and Harry looked over at her. She lifted herself onto the half-wall to sit, her feet no longer touching the ground. “I was an eleven-year-old girl, new to the Wizarding world. At the time, I wanted nothing more than to prove myself worthy in a place I wasn’t quite convinced I belonged; a place that forced me to rethink everything I had come to believe and know. I began studying ahead of everyone and reading anything I could get my hands on, but eventually I just fell back on the old habit of being a bossy know-it-all to hide the fact I felt utterly out of place.”

Harry stared at her in disbelief. “That’s not possible. You belong here more than anyone else I know. And you always seemed to know how to do everything! You still do!” he added emphatically, and she smiled at him.
“Perhaps. But it doesn’t change the fact those first couple of months were horrible for me.”

“So what changed? How did you find your place?”

Her smile grew wistful. “It was two friends, actually. Their extraordinary courage, selflessness and idiocy saved me from a mountain troll.” Harry’s mouth opened slightly, his breath caught in his throat. Hermione smiled gently at him. “We’re not designed to do this alone, Harry. Books and cleverness, that’s all fine and good, but it doesn’t mean much without people around to help you. People who care about you. You taught me that.”

Harry let her words wash over him, accompanied by a feeling of gratitude and awe; it was the same feeling he got whenever he thought of Hermione’s loyalty and bravery during the year leading to Voldemort’s defeat. And really, for all the years before that, too. She had never wavered in her support of him. And he couldn’t have done it – any of it – without her.

Yet it did bring to mind all those who had perished. “A lot of good that did for Fred and Remus and Sirius and the others.”

“Harry, you mustn’t feel guilty for that. There was nothing you could have done.”

“Then why do I feel so guilty? If it wasn’t my fault, then how do I get over it?” The flare of anger that rose in him tempered when Hermione’s hand touched his arm and began rubbing in a soothing fashion. He released the fist he had made, his fingers throbbing and numb in response.

“Well, how did you get over your guilt regarding Severus?”

Harry’s head snapped up, a glare perched and ready to go. But when he met her soft gaze, he realized she had not meant it as a challenge. Rather, the correlation deflated his anger. He sighed and considered her question.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “After I watched his memories, I saw I had been wrong about him all along. Sure, he didn’t treat me very well in school, but I understand that now. And besides, he kept saving my life.” Harry paused to reflect on the tumultuous relationship he had shared with Severus for seven years, and then on the one seemingly insignificant event – caused by a paperwork error, no less – that had changed everything.

“When we got stuck in a room together at St. Mungo’s,” Harry continued, “everything was different. I felt like I knew him in a way that I hadn’t before, that somehow I understood him. I thought he would understand me, too, so I took a chance and started talking to him. In the beginning I really just wanted to thank him for everything he had done, for all the sacrifices he’d made, but figured I should try something easy at first so he didn’t just toss me out on my arse. He might remember that part a bit differently, though.” A dark chuckle escaped Harry’s lips before he sobered again. “Then once I’d got to know him, I barely remembered the person I thought he was and only knew him as Severus. You know?”

“So all it really took was a change of perspective…”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah. I guess so.”

Hermione pursed her lips thoughtfully and hummed, but said nothing else.

As Harry lifted himself to sit on the half-wall next to her, a comfortable silence grew in the space between the two friends. His thoughts once again returned to his parents and the magic that had allowed him to have even the tiniest glimpse of what it may have been like to know them for real. He wondered if he were worse off now, knowing what he was missing; before, he hadn’t anything to
compare it to, not really. The dull ache of loss lanced through him again and he frowned, picking
absently at a loose rock below his fingers.

“I could have had a brother or sister, or maybe both,” he said eventually.

“What?”

“My parents. If they had lived, I would have grown up with them as a wizard, in a magical
household, knowing other magical kids. I might have even had a brother or sister of my own, instead
of an aunt and uncle who hated me.”

“Oh, Harry.” Hermione leaned closer and placed her hand back on his forearm.

“But if I had grown up with a family and not a famous name…” He paused to swallow. “I probably
wouldn’t be the same person. Maybe I wouldn’t even have been a Gryffindor.”

“Not like—” she started, but Harry interrupted.

“I might not have become friends with you or Ron.”

After a moment, she seemed to pick up his train of thought. She nodded. “It’s possible.”

“Voldemort might still be alive.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Everything might have been different.”

Harry exhaled soundly. “I don’t know why I’d never thought about this before. All I ever wanted
was to have my parents, but…”

“But what?”

“If they were alive, it could have changed everything. It’d be a whole other life I’d be getting and
I…” his voice hitched in a gasp as he tried to finish.

Suddenly, a new awareness seemed to descend upon his mind, a clarity of thought that washed over
him like a soft wind. It showed him the difficult things and the good things, the high moments and
low ones, flashes of a life not yet lived and visuals of the life he had; things he would not have been
open to seeing, let alone embracing, even fifteen minutes ago. His life may not be perfect, or even
what he expected, but he still had one – and it was his.

Almost as though Hermione had seen it, too, her next words put meaning to his jumble of thoughts
(as her words often did), translating a complex series of emotions into something he could
understand.

“There are times I think about that, too, Harry. What if I hadn’t received a letter from Hogwarts? It’s
not as though I have some rich history of magic in my family, as I’m sure you’re aware. Without that
letter, that one sheet of crested parchment, I never would have known about magic. I wouldn’t have
met you, or Ron, or helped defeat Voldemort. I would have stayed in the Muggle world and got a
job, and I might’ve even been happy, unaware this whole other life was out there waiting for me, this
whole other possibility.”

She paused and Harry watched her intently, his heart tapping against his ribcage. She gave a small
smile and turned to face him. “Were there times I wished I could’ve left it behind and become a
dentist like my parents? Yes. Definitely. But I also believe there was a reason for it, for all of it, even
if we don’t understand it. Nobody told us it would be easy, Harry, only that it’d be worth it.”
Knowing he had neither the words nor the emotional wherewithal to respond in that moment, Harry simply reached over and wrapped his arms around Hermione, hugging her so tightly against him that she eventually had to tap his arm so he’d relent a bit and allow her to breathe. Chuckling an apology, Harry released her, gratified when he saw complete understanding looking back at him in her misty, brown gaze.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

It was late afternoon on Wednesday when Harry decided he couldn’t take his self-imposed isolation any longer. Although barely three days had passed, he was feeling desperate to be in the presence of people again. Or perhaps just one person.

His conversation with Hermione had been enlightening in many ways, but had done little to alleviate the low-level tremors of stress that continued to wrack his body, setting his nerves on edge. He’d eaten very little over the last couple days and had slept even less – neither of which were helping his condition, he knew, but he’d had no appetite and could only manage to toss and turn in his bed. His mind had been unrelenting and cruel in its ability to keep him stuck, replaying the same scenes over and over again in his head.

The session with his parents had been his most difficult to date – not in seeing them, as that had felt very natural and comfortable once the initial reacquainting was done. No, it was that he had had to say goodbye to them again. Not just their apparitions or disembodied voices, as he had before, but the flesh-and-blood versions, with personalities and physical touch.

*The real versions,* his mind kept chiding him. *You were so close, nearly there, and yet you could not make them stay.*

Groaning in frustration, Harry rolled over and punched his pillow into a new shape, trying to get comfortable. If he could just sleep, perhaps then the visuals in his mind would subside, the voices would quiet, and the pain in his heart would melt away. At least for a while.

But it was no use. No amount of wishing changed his circumstances, no amount of bargaining brought him peace. The only thing familiar and constant was that sleep eluded him once again.

Even the fact that he could return and visit his parents in a future draught provided no relief, and at first that had shocked him; after all, he’d held on to the promise of that like a drowning man clings to air. But now he supposed it was really just his heart’s way of saying it couldn’t handle any more, not again. The pain was too intimate, too all-consuming. Perhaps it was better to just love his parents, but leave them in his distant past – to be remembered, and cherished as such, not repeatedly dredged up to torture his battered, lonely soul.

Getting out of bed, Harry stalked down the hall and into his bathroom. He wrenched open the cabinet and searched hastily amongst the glass vials and plastic containers, some Muggle, some Wizarding, until he found what he was looking for. Or thought he had, until he tipped the unstoppered vial upside down and realized it was empty.

“Shit,” he cursed aloud, gripping the vial so tight he thought it might break.

He was out of Dreamless Sleep.
Severus had barely entered his quarters after his last class of the day when his Floo roared to life. For a moment he thought it might be Minerva, until he turned to see it depositing Harry into his antechamber. A much worse for the wear Harry. Severus frowned to himself.

Harry looked up at him from underneath his fringe, dark circles tinting the undersides of his eyes. His tatty, gray, Gryffindor t-shirt and wrinkled denims only furthered the notion he was being plagued by an equally disheveled state of mind.

“I’ve come to ask a favor,” Harry managed, holding out a dusty, glass vial.

Severus peered at it briefly. It had only been three days since their last session, yet it was clear Harry wasn’t faring well. His face bore a look of weary resignation – an expression that had become eerily familiar in recent weeks – and he appeared weak, as though he wasn’t eating. And judging by his plea for Dreamless Sleep, not doing that, either.

Severus sighed. If he had learned one thing over the years, it was that Harry had a debilitating stubborn streak. Always the noble one, not wanting to place his burdens upon the shoulders of others; not one to ask for help or support even though his need was plain as day, written across every inch of his countenance. This wasn’t a search for potions, it was a cry of desperation.

It had been difficult to stand by and watch the industrious, ardent work of Harry’s denial repeatedly push his emotions aside, leaving in its wake the painted smile of a brave Gryffindor. He knew the pain that lingered below that mask was as real and scary as anything Harry had faced, made worse by the fact that every time they tried to push Harry’s recovery forward a step, they ended up sliding two steps back. Sometimes it frustrated Severus that more progress wasn’t being made, but he also knew a thing or two about being stubborn and self-sufficient, and that it would simply take time. Or perhaps a different tack.

“Harry, I am not giving you the potion.”

“What? Why? Please, I’m—”

“I know you are.” Severus interrupted. “I know.” But medicating yourself will only exacerbate the problem. “Sit,” he said, pointing at a chair. Harry had come to him for help, unwittingly or not, and by Merlin, he would receive it.

Dubiously, Harry looked between the furniture and Severus, seeming to battle the decision out in his mind. Eventually, whether out of pure exhaustion or willful acquiescence, he sat.

Harry made himself comfortable in the chair after refilling his glass again, and took several long drinks of water. He couldn’t remember having such a sustained thirst after his other sessions. Perhaps that was another side effect of linking, even though that session was now three days past. Either that or he really had been neglecting himself.

The conversation he had been having with Severus was interesting. He assumed when Severus had
asked him to stay that he was going to lecture Harry about something, but quite the opposite had occurred; instead, Harry’d got the chance to ask things he’d been wondering about for a while. Things like: whether or not Evochi can create places that don’t exist in real life (yes – in the absence of any intentional creation, Evochi creates its own settings, much like the subconscious mind does for dreams); if there was such a thing as the power of suggestion once someone was inside a session (no – at that point, the person is dwelling within the confines of the subconscious mind, whereas it’s the conscious mind that would hear and interpret someone’s whispered instructions); and why the potion had used Shell Cottage as the backdrop for his second draught (his mind picked someplace safe, familiar and convenient; it wasn’t ‘about’ the setting, only the interaction between himself and those he had invited there). Now, armed with a fresh glass of water, he was keen to continue.

“Can inhabitants of a virtual reality control the action?”

“Their own actions, yes, but not the setting itself,” Severus answered. “Again, it is similar in concept to a dream. Those with whom you interact will behave very much like their own person; that is to say, outside your intent or control.”

“But how does that work?”

Severus took a sip of his own drink. “It’s magic,” he remarked, and Harry snorted.

“Yeah, my mum said that, too.” At those words, they both stopped and looked at each other. And there it was: the opening. Now or never, Harry thought. “Can I ask you something about our linked session?”

“Yes,” Severus answered, a little too quickly. “The more I understand about your experience contrasted with my own, the more scientific observation I can record.” He Summoned his leather-bound journal and settled it across the thigh of his crossed leg, quill poised to write.

“Oh, I didn’t mean that sort of question.” Harry felt his cheeks go pink.

“Ah.” Severus closed the journal and set it aside, appearing to know exactly where this was headed. “Very well.”

“Did you enjoy seeing my mum again?” He was still surprised Severus had agreed to that particular linked session, knowing it might be difficult, but assumed the man had his own reasons.

Severus seemed to contemplate the question for a moment, and Harry wondered what was going through his mind. Finally, he said, “I did. It… answered some questions I had.”

“What were you two talking about? On the bleachers?”

Severus looked up, his gaze making a quick sweep over Harry’s body. “You, actually.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Is that so hard to imagine?”

“Well, no, I guess not. I just thought you would have talked about…” He shrugged slightly. “Something else.”

“Something else?”

Harry swallowed and braved the question he’d longed to ask for months, perhaps longer. “Were you… in love with her?”
The look on Severus’ face said he had been anticipating the inquiry for longer than their current conversation, and sure enough, his answer seemed readied. “I was infatuated with your mother because she was the first person to show unbidden kindness to me. That has proven to be a rare experience in my life – both prior to and after Lily. But to answer the question I think you are after, no, I never loved Lily romantically. I loved her as a sister, a friend, a confidante. My preference in the former has always been towards men.”

Harry started to nod, then spluttered into his water glass. “Wait, what?” he asked, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. “Sorry, I mean, I... you’re gay?”

“I believe that is the definition of a man who is romantically inclined towards other men, yes.”

Harry blinked.

“Does this come as a surprise to you?” Severus asked.

“Well, no… I don’t know, maybe. I guess I just never thought about it before. I think I always assumed you loved my mum.” Harry assessed Severus for a moment, once again having the off-kilter feeling that things he thought he knew about the man were now having to be rewritten. “Did she know? That you were gay, I mean?”

“Yes.”

“And she was okay with that?” He felt ridiculous asking, but he had to know.

“Yes, Harry. I am quite certain her compassion knew no bounds.”

Harry nodded his head, relieved to hear his mum didn’t seem to mind that her friends were gay. *Perhaps she wouldn’t have minded to know that her son was as well.*

“Was what?”

Harry looked up with a start. “What?” His heartbeat pounded in his ears as he realized he must have said that last bit out loud. He buried his face in his hands. *Shit.*

*Shit, shit, shit.*

“You just said ‘perhaps she wouldn’t have minded to know that her son was as well.’ Was what?” Severus’ gaze was altogether too keen for Harry’s tastes, and the intensity of it made him squirm. He refused to look up and spoke through his fingers instead.

“That I am… that I might be gay.” He finally chanced a look at Severus and was met with a loud sigh.

“Do stop hiding behind your hands and speak to me like an adult.”

Harry might have been annoyed at that, had their topic of conversation been something slightly less personal and revealing. As it was, this was not how Harry had imagined coming out – nor who he had imagined coming out to. Yet who else was there for him? Hermione? Ron? Hermione might be okay with it, but Ron… well, there wasn’t any way to be sure how his friend might react, and Harry wasn’t ready to take the chance just yet, particularly not so close to the wedding.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said as he dropped his hands. “I didn’t want… I didn’t mean for that to slip out.”

“Clearly.”
Harry snorted in amusement, unable to stop himself. He didn’t know why being mortified should be so funny, but for some reason Severus always seemed to take the tension out of weightier matters. Eventually Harry just decided to roll with it, and spread his arms in a wide gesture. “Surprise!” he announced sheepishly.

“Am I to assume this has been your only pronouncement?”

“Yeah, you’re my first.” Once he realized how that sounded, Harry blushed to the roots of his hair. “I mean…”

“I knew what you meant, Harry.” The corners of Severus’ eyes crinkled but he seemed to deny the impending smirk with a purse of his lips. Severus looked about to say something else, but Harry interrupted him, now wondering what his dad would have thought.

“Is that why my dad picked on you, do you think? Because you’re gay?”

Severus’ expression hardened a bit. “I do not believe so. My preferences were not widely known, either then or now, so I can only assume I was a target for other reasons. Your father grew up with every privilege, and as a youth, he acted exceedingly arrogant and entitled. I imagine he regarded my inferior upbringing with disdain. However, I do not wish to speculate his motivations.”

“Sorry.”

“They are not your deeds to apologize for. In any case, your father said as much to me during our encounter on the pitch.”

“He did? That’s what he was doing?”

Severus nodded in that formal way of his, his eyes closing in a long blink.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

There had also been one private moment neither Harry nor Lily had seen. For a minute, Severus got lost in his own memory.

“Oh... and Severus?”

Severus turned and looked back at James, but didn’t say anything. James walked closer, clearly intending to impart something additional, an odd look set on his face. “He does like you—”

“Who?” Severus spat defensively, feeling more than a little exposed and hating that he was no longer on level footing.

James smiled slightly. “He likes you, but it’s taking him a while to realize it. He has a lot he’s adjusting to at the moment.” Then, seeming to realize he wasn’t quite of his own mind, he tipped his head to the side, a funny smile on his face. “I think his subconscious wanted you to know that.”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP
Harry’s face broke into a smile, grateful to hear that his dad – that both his parents, actually – seemed to be the people that Remus and Dumbledore and Sirius had always told him they were. That had been Harry’s experience during the session, but he also knew that despite having seen Dumbledore’s memories of his parents, his subconscious manifestations were still just variations of the real thing. The extra validation from Severus went a long way in setting his mind at ease about it.

He thought again of Remus and Sirius, and their relationship in his second draught. He wasn’t sure if that was true to life or just something his mind had invented to ease his own transition. “Did anyone else… know about you?” Harry asked.

At first, he wasn’t sure if he’d spoken loud enough, as Severus just sat there, looking down at the drink in his hand and swirling its contents around in a slow circle. Worried that he had overstepped his bounds, Harry ventured out again cautiously.

“What?” he snapped.

“Er, sorry, I was just waiting for you to answer. You looked lost in thought there for a minute.”

“What was the question?”

“I wondered if anyone else knows about you… being gay.”

Severus adjusted his position on the sofa and crossed one leg over the other, ankle to knee. He seemed a little agitated. “Many of the Hogwarts staff, yes. And apparently all of Slytherin House.”

“Oh.” Harry wasn’t sure if that was supposed to be a joke or not, but decided to err on the side of caution and simply nodded.

“Have you known for a while?” Severus asked suddenly.

Startled by the abruptness of the question, Harry briefly regarded the man seated across from him. He’d known Severus long enough by now to spot certain behavioral tells, and immediately recognized this new defensiveness as self-protection. Though what had set Severus off, Harry could only guess. He shrugged. “I think I’ve probably always known. I was attracted to girls for a while, though. Or at least I thought I was.”

Severus nodded, probably remembering the witches Harry had been so publicly linked to during his time at Hogwarts. It would have been difficult for a member of the staff not to have noticed, actually. Harry cringed.

“Do you plan to tell anyone else?”

“You mean the Wizarding world?”

Severus sighed. “I was referring to your friends, but by all means, run an exposé in the Prophet and wait for the Howlers to descend. I imagine there will be queues of witches lined up to express their displeasure at no longer being able to slip their knickers into your closet.”

Despite the truth to Severus’ words, Harry couldn’t help but laugh.

“I am not attempting to be humorous, Potter, it is an inevitability. Wizarding culture is far more progressive about sexual preference than Muggle culture, but it is still not without its thorns. And for you, a veritable hero, it is an even higher pedestal from which you must fall. Our prying, haughty
Harry felt a stir of indignation at those words. “Well, they can bloody well go fuck themselves, then. I’ve done my duty, it’s my life now. If I want to shag a man, it’s my choice.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“I am not disagreeing with you, merely suggesting it would be wise to apply a modicum of deference in your approach.”

“A what?”

“You need not explain your choices to anyone, least of all the Wizarding public. However, when and if you choose to announce yourself or a relationship, it is important to consider the effect it will have on your life, as well as on that of your partner’s. It is not about flaunting your preference simply to be belligerent, or making a statement merely for the – how might you say it? – ‘two-finger salute’ factor.”

Harry knew Severus was trying to have a serious conversation, but his attempt at being hip was unexpectedly amusing. Harry reached over and grabbed the small bolster cushion from the chair next to him and tossed it at Severus’ head, who ducked just in time. The murderous look on Severus’ face spoke of a man who was wholly unaccustomed to silliness and play, as well as being uprooted in the middle of a conversation, and it made Harry laugh even harder.

“Lighten up, Severus, you’re too serious. I don’t ‘flaunt’ anything, and I’m not going to tell the Prophet I’m gay any time soon.”

“This, from the man who just finished telling me the Wizarding world could go fuck themselves.”

“Well, yeah.” Harry grinned as a low noise rumbled up from his stomach. “I may be reckless sometimes, but I’m not stupid.” He smoothed a palm over his belly. “I need to eat, I think. Are you hungry? I know this great little restaurant in Hogsmeade.”

Severus rolled his eyes.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry found himself utterly charmed by Severus’ reaction as they entered The Grecian, the normally stoic face usually closed to emotions like interest and wonder. Yet that’s exactly what Harry saw flash across the man’s countenance as his obsidian gaze scanned the bright murals, stone statues and Greek decor. It made Harry happy to know there were things like this that could cut through that steeled exterior and return a bit of light to Severus’ eyes.

As they approached the front counter, Mrs. Whitby emerged from the kitchens with her arms outstretched. “Kalós orísate!” she exclaimed. “Welcome!” With a wide smile set on her face, she gathered Harry into an embrace just as she always did, then turned to shake Severus’ hand, casting an approving glance over the two men as she did so. Surprised, Harry looked between himself and Severus as they were shown to a table. It was something Harry had never really considered before. He looked into a mirror as they passed, catching a glimpse of their reflection. They did look good together: all black hair, dark clothing and slender sinews, they struck an oddly impressive pair.

Snapping his napkin open and spreading it across his lap, Severus continued his perusal of the
restaurant while Harry watched him surreptitiously from behind his menu.

“This reminds me of a place I went to in Prague,” Severus observed.

Harry lowered his menu. “You’ve been to Prague?”

“Yes, Potter, I do leave the country from time to time.”

“I didn’t mean it like that, I just thought it was back when—”

“I gathered your meaning. It was a Potions conference, actually, and it happened well before the
Sorting Hat ever touched a hair of your head.” Seemingly eager to change the subject, he switched
gears. “How did you become acquainted with this place? The woman we met on the way in acted as
though you live here.”

Harry snorted. “Mrs. Whitby is the owner. I’m fairly certain if I didn’t have Kreacher cooking for
me, I would eat here every day. Hermione introduced me.”

“Ah.” Severus flipped open his menu and was silent for a while, his face mostly obscured by the
bright blue artwork on its cover. It occurred to Harry this was the first meal they’d had at a restaurant
since the summer, when they used to meet regularly at the old pub down the street. At the time, it
was one of the only remaining establishments in Hogsmeade, and not for the first time, Harry was
glad for all the rebuilding.

“What have you decided upon?” Severus’ question jostled Harry from his thoughts.

“I’m not sure. I always order the same thing, but tonight I want to try something new.” Now that he
had opened his mind to other possibilities, the menu seemed full of choices, each as delicious-
sounding as the next. Tantalizing photographs of steaming, simmering dishes seemed to pulse off the
page at him – in fact, they might have actually done, as the plates in the pictures rotated slowly,
occasionally fading in and out to reveal something new. His mouth watered in response.

After the waitress appeared at their table, Harry looked up to see that both she and Severus were
watching him expectantly.

“Oh. I’ll have the roast lamb and vegetables. Without tomatoes, though, if I can.”

The waitress just nodded as Severus said, “You may put Mr. Potter’s tomatoes on my plate.” It
garnered a faint chuckle from her. “I shall have the eggplant moussaka and a glass of your house
red.”

“Very well. Thank you, gentlemen,” the waitress said, and bowed herself away from the table.
Meanwhile, Harry’s gaze snapped up to Severus, momentarily stunned.

“What?” Severus asked.

Harry just shook his head. “Nothing,” he answered, though privately he continued his assessment.
For the second time that night he found himself recalculating things he thought he knew about the
man. He couldn’t believe Severus had ordered moussaka. Maybe that should not have come as such
a surprise – it was a popular dish, after all, which meant many people ordered it. But there had just
been so many times during Harry’s youth when Severus hadn’t even seemed human (bat and
vampire jokes among his fellow students notwithstanding) that Harry was having trouble reconciling
the fact that Severus was, in fact, just a man underneath all those dark robes and bluster. And that he
liked moussaka, too.
When Harry looked up, he saw Severus was still staring at him, his brow arched in a manner that suggested he was not relenting without an explanation. Harry curled his hands around his water glass to distract himself.

“It’s just… you ordered moussaka.”

The brow remained arched. “Indeed. It has long been a favorite dish of mine, but Hogwarts so rarely delves into cuisine outside the British norms that it has been an age since I have tasted it. When I saw it was on the menu, there was no other choice for me. Is there an issue?”

“No, no issue. Just…” You keep surprising me. Harry held that dark gaze. “Moussaka is my favorite dish, too.”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

A forkful of dinner paused halfway between Severus’ plate and his mouth. “That would differ from what you have been doing all night, how?”

Harry stuck out his tongue. “You know what I mean – something personal.”

Severus sat back in his chair as he finished chewing and then took a drink of wine. “Very well,” he said with a mild, put-upon sigh.

“Are you fortifying yourself?” Harry chuckled, nodding his head at the wine glass.

“With your typical line of questioning, I may, in fact, need a whole bottle.”

“Ha, ha,” Harry mocked. “It’s not that big a thing. I only wanted to know if you’d ever thought about…” he paused, suddenly embarrassed at all the build-up surrounding his inquiry. He grabbed his water glass and took a swift drink. “I wondered if you’d ever thought about a family of your own one day. Kids.” He swallowed thickly, suddenly nervous about the answer but not understanding why.

It appeared, out of all the possible things Harry could have asked Severus in that moment, kids had not even made the list. At first Severus seemed taken aback, though not in a bad way. He’d set his wine gingerly on the table and then adjusted the napkin across his lap, seeming to marshal his thoughts. It was clear he didn’t like being knocked off-kilter, though much to Severus’ chagrin, Harry seemed to have a knack for it.

“I have never really considered it,” Severus admitted. “In my youth, it was generally understood that gay men did not have families. By the time culture – and Wizarding science – had evolved to the point of embracing such things, I was, by then, too established in my roles for Albus and the Dark Lord to take much notice. The timing was not conducive to developing the sort of relationship that may warrant such a discussion.”

Harry smiled ruefully. “No, I suppose not.” He also heard what Severus didn’t say: that he never expected to survive long enough to have to make the decision. Harry speared a potato with his fork, watching as Severus continued to turn the topic over in his mind. It looked as though he had not thought about it in a long time; or if he had, now that his circumstances had changed, so, too, had his
“But now…?” Harry asked tentatively.

Severus’ eyes snapped up, his gaze boring into Harry. “If the situation were right…” Severus paused and picked up his wine glass. “I may be open to the idea.”

Harry felt his stomach make that curious, little flutter it sometimes did, causing him to smile around the potato he popped into his mouth.

Sitting there across from Severus, watching him sip merlot and dip a piece of bread in the béchamel sauce that remained from his moussaka, Harry realized just how much he was enjoying the man’s company; how much safer and happier it made him feel to be in Severus’ presence. The thought sent a warm flood of contentment through his body, spreading gooseflesh across his arms.

“We should do this again,” Harry enthused. “Make it a standing da—meal, I mean.” He got the sudden visual of himself seated across the table from Severus many times in the future, for casual dinners, special occasions and anniversaries. He blinked, startled by the thought, and shook his head minutely. Where had that come from?

Though the truth was, out of all the dinner guests he had been hoping to have – namely, his parents – the one he did have was Severus, and that suited him just fine. More than fine, actually. There were too many consequences riding on the same scenario with his parents, anyway, and Severus was here, now, in this reality. He was real.

“If we must,” Severus answered, seeming to resist the smirk that tempted the corner of his lips.

Harry smiled. They’d come a long way since the summer; since St. Mungo’s. He still remembered one moment that first day, after he’d taken a chance on conversation with a recuperating Severus.

“Potter, kindly stop talking or I may never rid myself of this headache.”

“Oh, I’ll go get a nurse!”

“No, that’s not what I—” but Severus’ voice cut off when Harry hurriedly left the room in search of medical staff.

Harry chuckled at the memory and Severus looked up at him, half-heartedly scowling at Harry’s mild expression. Their interaction, their friendship, their dinner – it was all something of Harry’s own choosing. Perhaps he shouldn’t be so surprised to find that he relished it. After all, how many other choices had he truly got to make in his life? Severus understood that, and Harry remembered thinking about it before, a couple of months ago. Perhaps with Severus, he might have something his parents couldn’t offer: his own type of family.
Draught No. 6

Harry stood at the edge of the path that led out of the forest, the scent of damp foliage filling his nostrils. Around him, the brush and trees were overgrown and neglected, their leaves faded and wilting as though no light had penetrated this deep for some time.

A shiver of unease rippled through his body. He had thought he could do this, thought he was ready to face it all again, but now that he was here, he suddenly wanted nothing more than to change his mind, to run as far and as fast as his legs would carry him. What had he been thinking?

His heart began to beat rapidly against his ribcage and his breathing grew more shallow. It felt like the space around him was narrowing, closing in, trapping him like a feral animal. The constriction in his chest made him clutch at the area over his heart. He knew well the signs of panic, but had never been very good at diverting them.

Just as he was about to turn and bargain for some sort of respite, a warm palm pressed against the center of his back, between his shoulder blades. Like a magnet attracted to its pole, it had the effect of instantly centering and reassuring him, pulling his focus back to the task before him. He knew it was something he had to do, or at least something he should do, but neither reason made it more palatable. Regardless, they were stuck in this situation for an hour, and who was to say this session’s arch inhabitant wouldn’t just come into the forest and seek them out?

Closing his eyes, Harry filled his lungs deeply, willing his heartbeat and breathing to return to normal. He concentrated on the safe, powerful presence of the man behind him; his protector (always his protector, he realized) and felt a surge of determination flare in his chest. Harry marveled at the fact Severus had not yet uttered a single word; instead, everything he meant to convey had been communicated through that simple touch of his hand.

Stretching one leg out in front of him, and then the other, Harry finally set off, trudging down the path until it deposited him into the cold, lonely, desolate landscape of the clearing. It was just before dawn, the scant light a bleak, sickly hue. Utter stillness surrounded them. It was an ominous feeling, something that clung heavy and cold to his skin; that sense of foreboding, just like his first visit. Perhaps more so this time, now that he knew what to expect; knew what, and who, he would encounter.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“Harry, it is time.”

Harry had just stepped into Severus’ antechamber from the Floo, about to take his usual seat, when he looked up. “Time for what?”

Severus had been patient over the last two months waiting for Harry to broach the subject of his third draught and all that had happened. Perhaps too patient. He might have been willing to continue waiting, too, had it not been for their conversation about the draught with Harry’s parents four days prior. It was clear Harry wasn’t much further along emotionally than when they’d started Evochi at the end of summer; if anything, he seemed only to be adding to his burdens. If he buried himself much deeper, it could set the healing process back by a matter of months, or possibly never complete
At the risk of alienating Harry, or driving him away, Severus decided it was time to intervene. In a few minutes, they were scheduled to conduct another joint session, and Severus felt they ought to return to the original purpose for the potion: healing. Specifically, an attempt to tie up at least one loose end and give Harry the start of some closure.

“It is time to revisit your third draught, and whatever horrors you experienced there.”

As anticipated, Harry’s face fell, the eagerness he had brought with him gone in a flash. Instead, his features pinched inwards, contorting in pain, and he slumped into the chair. “I figured you would bring that up at some point.”

“It has been two months.”

“So? I’ve dealt with things for far longer.”

“Ignored them, you mean.”

Harry looked away, gritting his teeth. He was gripping the arms of the chair so tight his fingertips were turning white.

“Tell me what happened.”

But Harry just sat there, seeming to close in on himself more and more with each passing second. The silence stretched for a long time before Harry finally shook his head.

“I can’t. I can’t go back there.”

“Why?”

“I just can’t!” Harry said a bit louder, a distinct edge to his voice. He pressed his hands against his temples, his eyes unfocused as they stared at the floor.

Severus sighed, mainly to himself. He knew well enough by now that trying to out-maneuver Harry’s stubbornness would get him nowhere; if anything, that approach would only stand to run Harry off. Instead, Severus cast his mind about for other options. He walked to his sideboard and nearly poured the two of them a splash of scotch before remembering they were about to use Evochi. Mixing one mind-altering substance with another would certainly not be a wise idea.

He set the bottle down and turned back to the room. He was about to suggest rescheduling their session when Harry spoke again. His voice was so quiet that Severus had to strain to hear it. He wasn’t even sure Harry meant to say it out loud.

“What good will it do?”

Something thrilled inside Severus. It was an opening, a glimmer, and he was going to take it. He returned to the sofa, seating himself across from where Harry sat hunched over in his chair.

“It is the only way.”

“The only way for what?” If it was possible for Harry to look both wary and defensive, he was accomplishing it.

“To move past this. I fear that unless you continue doing dreamscape – which ultimately will be no help to you in the long run, shy of offering pleasurable interludes – you will eventually fall back into
whatever horrors you experienced in your third draught. Your subconscious has a desire to heal this, and so it will continue showing it to you, one way or another.”

Harry frowned, making what sounded like a frustrated grunt. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I was doing just fine until you had to go and bring this up.”

“‘Fine’ is a rather poor substitute for ‘well,’ Harry.”

“I don’t care!”

The anger was good; it meant Severus was hitting a nerve. He could see it swimming in Harry’s eyes and in the way he clenched his jaw. Perhaps a little more prodding would jostle something beneficial loose…

“Evochi can help, Harry, but you must let it. You must address these traumas, then let go of them.”

“Why should I? What are you hoping to accomplish by forcing this?” Harry had sat forward, thrusting an arm out emphatically.

“Resolution, healing. Am I wrong to think you should want that? That you deserve that?”

Harry looked back at Severus, his expression turbulent. “Yes, you keep saying that! I’ve done what you’ve instructed me to do and it doesn’t seem to be helping, by your own admission!” He was breathing heavily, clearly skittering that edge of hysteria.

“I only wish to help you, Harry. It is what I pledged to do for you four months ago, and I intend to keep that promise.”

For a moment, Severus thought Harry was going to rebuke him, but then he just slumped back into his chair with a sigh. He looked resigned, his anger seeming to deflate along with his posture. “I just can’t go back there,” he said. “Isn’t there another way?”

“None as effective, no.”

“But it’s not helping. Evochi doesn’t seem to be working for me.”

“On the contrary, your third draught seems to indicate it is working quite well. Perhaps too well.” Severus allowed himself the moment of levity to see if it would coax a smile from Harry, but when Harry’s somber expression did not even flicker in recognition, Severus resumed his thread. “To be precise, I believe it is the events of your third draught that are holding you back from experiencing more with Evochi.”

“More what?” Something about the notion of that must have caught Harry’s interest, for he stopped picking at his thumbnail and looked up.

“Freedom,” Severus said simply.

Harry’s gaze floated back down gradually, clearly absorbing the word, nulling the implications of it over in his mind. Eventually he sat forward in his chair, propping his elbows on his knees and cradling his head in his hands. He remained silent.

“Harry.”

When this earned him a green-eyed glance, Severus continued. “I will be with you this time. You will not be alone.”
Closing his eyes briefly, Harry sighed. After a long pause, he nodded his assent.

“Now, tell me what happened,” Severus instructed, and Harry finally did.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

It was the most natural, unnatural place Harry had ever been. Despite the abundance of nature, there was nothing but emptiness around them. No wildlife, no warmth, no pulse of life. Even the wan light that suffused the clearing was as cold as it had been the first time.

Harry felt more than heard Severus come to a stop next to him, and looked over to take note of his reaction. He was probably taking stock of their surroundings, developing an impromptu strategy, and committing details and escape plans to memory. Severus had been a man of war, a spy, and that had never been more apparent to Harry than in that moment. He was already holding his wand lightly sheathed in his hand – though how much he’d be able to use it here remained to be seen – looking every bit the man poised on the brink of battle, ready to fight.

Harry reached over and gently touched his arm, as if to say he didn’t need to be so readied, when he realized that Severus had survived as long as he had because of his considerable skill and instinct. Who was Harry to question it? Instead, he settled for a smile that was meant to console himself more so than Severus.

That’s when he saw it. Without turning he knew what it was. Knew who it was. Severus had seen them, too, but had not diverted his eyes from Harry’s. His gaze was strong and stable, seeming to imbue Harry with the strength necessary to get through this. Harry took a deep breath and steeled himself before turning to look at Remus and Tonks.

Immediately, he saw that something was wrong. He blinked several times, hoping to clear his vision, but the bodies before him did not change. They looked slightly translucent, as though their image, their color, had drained away. Harry suspected if the progression was allowed to continue (like on a third visit here, Merlin forbid) they would eventually become so insubstantial as to almost cease to exist. It was almost like they were… disappearing. He frowned.

“What is it?” Severus asked.

“Something’s off. The first time they looked normal. Well, dead, but normal. Now they just look… faded.”

Severus looked down at bodies. He considered them carefully, making a quiet humming noise and leaning over to touch one of Tonks’ arms. When he stood up again, his expression was pensive. “It appears you were attempting to erase this from your mind. It is good we are here now, before this construct becomes nonexistent.” Severus glanced up the path behind them. “I assume the forest was not so destitute before, either?”

Harry shook his head. “No. So what would have happened? If I had continued… hiding this?” he asked, not really sure he wanted to know the answer. Severus turned to look at him.

“You may never have healed from it. At the very least, it would have taken much more time and effort to access it.”

Harry swallowed, looking down at Remus and Tonks, trying to pretend their almost-touching fingers
weren’t breaking his heart all over again. To his right, Fred was lying just as motionless, his face still stuck in the same suspended animation.

Ignoring the way his throat was already tightening, Harry moved out into the clearing, directing Severus to each of their fallen comrades. Dobby was face down in the grass, half inside the hole from which he had climbed out of on Harry’s first visit, dirt caked under his long, pointy fingernails. Mad-Eye Moody was still standing where Harry had last seen him, his face as expressionless as before, his one good eye closed and the other spinning haphazardly in its magical socket. Apparently that would never get any less unsettling.

Then there was Colin, the ashen-faced youth, clutching his camera to his chest. Despite all his harmless pestering, Harry had always considered Colin’s optimism and enthusiasm for life infectious. Even now, in death, he was still a beacon of light in an otherwise grim landscape. Harry felt his expression soften at the thought. It buoyed his spirits slightly, though clearly it was only to be short-lived, for once he turned around, he came face-to-face with a snowy, white bird.

“Hedwig,” Harry whispered sadly. He knelt to gently stroke the downy feathers on the owl’s head. Harry missed his animal companion and friend so much. It seemed strange to think of her that way, but the fact was, she had been a constant and true friend, right until the very end. Somehow she had known that curse was heading for Harry and had intercepted it. She, too, had given her life for him. He frowned, feeling the corners of his eyes prickle.

Severus must have been sensing his train of thought, for it was then he spoke.

“Did you not say Albus and Teddy were participants in your original draught?”

Harry stood up and gave the clearing another cursory glance, his maudlin thoughts subsiding a bit. No doubt Severus’ intent. “Yeah, but they’re not here this time. I don’t know why. Or at least I don’t see them yet.” Somehow he was exceedingly glad for that, too.

Turning, he caught the ghostly shapes of the low, stone benches stationed near the center of the clearing. They approached the closer of the two, and the student who laid beyond it.

Taking in the handsome features there, still frozen in shock, Harry felt the old anger and injustice flow through his veins. Cedric was Hogwarts’ true champion. His face, though now pale and gaunt, bore smears of dirt. His shirt, Hufflepuff’s black and gold Tri-Wizard jersey, had suffered a similar fate. Small pieces of twigs had caught in this clothing and hair from when the maze had tried to immobilize him.

This is where it all started, Harry thought. But as he searched Cedric’s face, something remarkable happened: he found no such truth there.

“This was not the beginning,” Severus said, making Harry wonder if he had actually been privy to the thought or could just sense how Harry was feeling about it. They were both in his mind, after all. “It started long before this young man was ever born.”

And it was true. The first war had really got underway when his parents – and Severus – were barely out of Hogwarts. Long before Harry had been born, too…

A quiet snifflle somewhere to his left made Harry whip around, only to be met with the unexpected visual of a young child, maybe 4 or 5 years old. He was crouched next to the far side of the other stone bench, mostly out of sight.

“Who is the boy?” Harry whispered.
Severus turned towards him, his brow pinched in the center of his forehead. He gaze indicated he was searching the area near where Harry was standing.

“What boy?”

Confused, Harry turned back to where he’d seen the child. He definitely looked real. For a minute, Harry thought it might be Teddy. But as he got closer and a head of disheveled, black hair came into view, he froze, his heart thudding in his chest. Was this his father? Quickly rounding the corner of the bench, Harry stepped in front of the child to get a better view. Verdant eyes, full of pain, gazed up at him.

Not my father, then, he thought, his heart sinking. That looks more like…

He wasn’t sure what possessed him to lean over and extend his hand, but somehow it felt like the right thing to do. He hoped the gesture would encourage the child to take it – and he did, but as soon as that small palm slid into his larger one, something happened to his vision. It was like watching a telly that hadn’t been properly tuned to a channel, the picture cutting back and forth between two programs in flashes of static and imagery.

Shaking his head, he tried to clear the bizarre picture, but the signal just seemed to grow stronger and more intent. He was about to let go of the child’s hand, thinking that was the cause, when he suddenly saw a visual of himself. It was brief, but he recognized the roof of his old schoolhouse. He was probably eight or nine years old, wearing a hideously large shirt, looking down on Dudley’s gang with a triumphant grin. They watched him from the pavement below, their mouths open, fear and confusion mingling in their expressions.

Then, almost as soon as it had materialized, the image disappeared, only to be replaced by an image of a small bedroom, austere in its furnishings, dark paneling covering the two visible walls. A young boy about the same age as Harry was seated at the desk, making a tiny flame jump between his fingers. He looked mesmerized by it, but it was malice there that glittered behind those shrewd, calculating eyes. Harry recognized the boy at once, having seen him several times in Dumbledore’s memories. It was Tom Riddle.

Harry didn’t get much more time to think about it before the picture changed again. The visuals began to pick up speed now, switching back and forth between he and Voldemort in dizzying succession. It showed both their lives as a progression of events and interactions and magic, and the more he watched, the more he felt he understood.

He had seen Voldemort as a child, then just a boy called Tom; he had seen himself as a child, too, but more specifically, he had seen how their fates had been intertwined from the very beginning. They had both been orphaned, both half-bloods, both unsure of their place in the world – but both defiant and determined to make it their own. It was really only their choices that differed.

The child let go of Harry’s hand and it caused Harry to step backwards, stumbling a bit before catching his balance. Severus was there to steady him, asking if he was all right, wondering what had just happened, but all Harry could do was shake his head and try to make sense of everything. He had seen so many faces in that bizarre visual show, a blur of people he had known and who had perished, many of whom were currently lying all around him.

Suddenly, he got the feeling he was missing something. Or someone. Turning in all directions, Harry rapidly searched the clearing, inspecting each of the motionless forms more closely.

“Where’s Sirius?” he asked frantically, though more to himself than anything. His heart began to beat rapidly in his chest, a growing sense of dread gnawing at him.
His gaze snapped to the end of the clearing where the veil had been stationed last time. For a moment he thought it had gone missing. Then, in his horror, he realized it was not missing; rather, it had nearly quadrupled in size and now bookended one entire side of the clearing. The keystone and most of the arch’s sides had been hidden from view in the dim light. It was positively monstrous now – as if it hadn’t been horrifying enough at its normal size!

“Severus…” Harry pointed, his voice cracking as he spoke. He could just barely make out the fabric that hung limply from the top, but it was there, a patchy, ominous fog clinging to its outlines. “The veil…”

As though acknowledgment of the veil had suddenly brought it to life, he heard five words ring out from beyond it. They cut through the stillness, sending a shiver through him; there had always been something about that voice that turned his blood to ice.

“Ah, back again, I see.”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“Severus, it wasn’t your potion.”

Severus had just passed a dose of Evochi over to Harry, watching as the proffered vial was collected snugly into his grasp.

“Pardon me?”

“The reason my third session went wrong. Or not wrong, exactly, but just… doing what it did. You’re a brilliant potions master. It wasn’t your potion, it was me.”

Unsure what to say to that (but admittedly a bit flustered by the praise), Severus situated himself on the chaise opposite Harry’s and waited for him to continue.

“That was a tough week for me. I was having mixed feelings about returning to Hogwarts to finish school. It felt like my life was on autopilot again – more so than it usually is, anyway – but like I couldn’t control it even if I wanted to. Everybody around me was moving on and doing things, and there I was, still stuck in the same place as before. It was frustrating. When I got here that day, I had just seen Hermione for the first time since the war, and she was going to be getting married, and…”

Harry paused and looked down with a sigh. “Sorry I didn’t tell you about this earlier, I just felt lost and… stupid, I guess. And I didn’t really want to face that, either.”

“I was confident it would come out when it was time.”

“Even if you had to force it?” There was a slight spark of humor in Harry’s eyes.

“Even if I had to force it.”

Harry grinned slightly. “So do you think that’s why it happened? It was only my third draught, and the first two were fine.”

Severus briefly pursed his lips. “It certainly fits. Your mind’s desire to heal this, paired with exacerbating mental circumstances, would be a potent combination indeed. Often, delving into the subconscious means it simply takes over and pursues its own agenda.”
“No shit,” Harry agreed, grin still in place, though a little sadder this time. He began to trace what looked like the remnants of a small, faded scar on the inside of his palm. “What about the thing with my palms?” He looked back up at Severus.

Severus saw the anxiety resurface in Harry’s gaze; it mirrored his own vivid memory of that session. Being on the outside, watching it, he had been powerless to do anything, much less understand what was happening. It had been the most agonizing fifty-three minutes of his life, and he wished never to repeat it.

“You will recall I explained early on the mind interprets whatever is occurring in your session as reality; the body will go through the motions here.”

“Yeah, but how would I have cut them on something? I was sitting on this chaise.”

“The diagnosis from Madam Pomfrey indicated your wounds were caused by your fingernails digging into your palms – a physical manifestation of extreme distress and tension – coupled with a focused burst of magic from your body.”

Harry nodded, his gaze unfocused, seeming lost in a memory.

“I will have you know,” Severus added archly, “I got called to task over that. Despite no longer being a Hogwarts student, Poppy still seems to watch out for you a great deal.”

A small smile twisted the corner of Harry’s mouth for a moment, then faded. “What would have happened to me if I had gone through the veil? Would I have died?”

“That is a bit more perplexing. Most likely not. It is unclear what the veil in your mind actually is, or what functional purpose it serves, but I can only assume it would have put you into some kind of stuck existence within your mind. I do not believe it would have been a permanent state, but that is only a guess. Best not to test that theory, however.”

Harry snorted. “Agreed. But the other thing that was weird was I couldn’t change anything. I couldn’t affect the events that were happening or conjure a wand. And if I killed Voldemort, why was he still alive?”

“From what you tell me, you didn’t actually cast the killing curse; it was his own rebounded spell that killed him.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“Then perhaps Voldemort appeared alive to you because you were not the one who killed him.”

Harry seemed to ponder this. “Well, Dumbledore appeared alive, too, and I didn’t—” He stopped suddenly, seeming to swallow whatever he was about to say, though Severus thought it quite obvious. Still, Harry switched tacks, and Severus was grateful for it. “But he wouldn’t do anything. He just stood there and smiled. Why wouldn’t he help me?”

“Difficult to say. It may be that your mind’s perception was that since he did not help you then, during the war, he could not help you now, within your session.”

Harry looked down at the vial in his hand, watching how the light caught the indigo fluid as it undulated back and forth against the glass. Then, quietly, “This is going to haunt me until I face it again, isn’t it?”

Severus said nothing.
“Isn’t it?” Harry repeated after some time.

“I have never had much success with avoidance.”

Harry’s eyes gently closed and he took a deep, shuddering breath, letting the air out audibly. When his eyes reopened, he swallowed. “Okay, let’s do it. But so help me, if you’re wrong about this, I will hex you into next week.”

“You might try,” Severus remarked in a bored tone. The sudden levity made Harry bark out an anxious laugh and he smiled at his former professor.

“We will each take a half dose,” Severus continued, as though he hadn’t just been trying to lighten the mood. “Hold the intention tight in your mind, making sure the entirety of what you experienced last time is at the forefront. However, due to our limited timeframe—”

“Why can’t we do a full dose?”

Severus sighed. “As of this moment, only one joint session of Evochi has ever been documented: ours. We are about to do the second. I don’t yet know what short- or long-term effects a full dose of the potion may have while linked. We are combining not only the magic of two wizards, but also an exceptionally complex substance and an even more delicate spell. This is new territory in every sense of the word, and I will not risk harm to either one of us until I can predict with certainty that it is safe.”

Harry put his hands over his face. “God, I am the worst scientific partner ever.”

“Nonsense. Your line of thinking has proven insightful throughout this process so far, if for no other purpose than it gives me pause to confirm and validate my own reasoning.”

“Now you’re just being nice.”

Severus huffed out a breath, his look clearly stating how much credence he gave Harry’s assessment. “If we may proceed?”

Harry grinned slightly, but gestured for Severus to continue.

“Since our timeframe will be short, we should begin the session at its most critical point. Based on what you have told me, I would put that scene right before your initial confrontation with Voldemort.”

Harry’s expression sobered and he nodded. With a long, last look at Severus, he raised the vial close to his lips. “Just remember,” he said glumly, “you asked.”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Ah, back again, I see.

The words echoed in Harry’s mind. He turned and watched as Voldemort swept towards them, seeming to float across the grass, his bare feet scarcely touching the ground.

“What did you do with Sirius?”
“My, my, such impertinence,” Voldemort said, an air of disinterest in his voice. He was caressing his fingers lightly along the length of his wand, rotating it in his grasp as if to study and admire its lethal beauty.


“Nowhere he doesn’t belong. Those who dare disgrace the name of pureblood wizards shall be dealt with like the filthy dogs they are.”

Harry felt his anger ratchet up several notches, aware it was probably the exact reaction Voldemort was hoping to get from him. Still, it was Sirius. It wasn’t as though Sirius could really help him here, but Harry didn’t want anything to happen to him, either.

“What did you do to him? Did you take him into the veil?”

“You foolish boy, I live in the veil. And your precious Godfather? He’s there too.” At the look of dawning fury on Harry’s face, Voldemort gave an evil grin. “Oh yes, he’s there. You should hear how he screams when I twist my wand into his—”

Harry lunged, his blood fairly boiling beneath the surface of his skin. “LEAVE HIM ALONE!”

“Potter! Not like this!” Severus caught Harry just in time, wrapping his arms around him from behind, restraining his flailing limbs and halting his momentum.

“Let me go!” Harry growled, scrabbling at Severus’ hold. Voldemort’s laugh was cold and high.

“I see you’ve brought a little friend! Severus, my traitorous snake, how nice of you to join us.”

“Stop fighting me, Harry, he is only trying to provoke you! He knows Sirius is a vulnerable point!”

“Easy for you to say! What do you have to lose, exactly?”

“I should actually be thanking you, Harry,” Voldemort continued casually, as though they were simply taking tea on a Sunday afternoon. “Just look at the size of the veil you have created for me! Soon it will be large enough to encompass all of your mind, and then I will own you. Then you will never be free of me!”

“You,” Severus admitted.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still. Distracted and horrified by Voldemort’s description of the veil’s purpose, Harry almost missed the significance of Severus’ answer. Until he didn’t. He stopped his struggling and turned to look at Severus over his shoulder, a strange warmth settling in the pit of his stomach.

“Me?” he nearly whispered, appalled at how wobbly his voice sounded.

“How charmingly idealistic you are, Severus, to assume that a simple exchange between you and your young paramour actually informs you of something!” Voldemort sneered derisively before turning his attention on Harry. “And you, Potter. How does it feel having your spiteful, ex-professor embrace you? How nice it must be for you to warm both his bed and his heart.”

The words should have sent Harry’s hackles up, but they didn’t. They just felt off somehow. It was the sort of taunt a childhood bully might attempt, not a Dark Lord. Especially not this Dark Lord. Since when did Voldemort wax poetic about romance? Or call him ‘Potter’? A quick glance over his shoulder told him Severus had noticed it, too.
But if this… thing wasn’t Voldemort, then who was it? What was it? They were inside of an Evochi session. Was it possible an outside entity could penetrate that? He didn’t think so. Severus had indicated as much when he’d told him that not even a whisper from someone in the room where his body was located could affect what happened inside the session. Whatever this was, this Voldemort-like figure, it must have been something that originated inside Harry’s subconscious.

He eased himself out of Severus’ hold and looked closer at the figure before them. There was something both inconsistent and familiar about it – inconsistent with what he knew of Voldemort, and familiar in a way that only Harry could recognize. The figure seemed to ripple under his scrutiny, as though it were just a projection of something.

That’s when he understood. This version of Voldemort – the one who had just claimed to understand that most fragile and powerful of human emotions – was not actually Voldemort, nor a remnant of the Horcrux that had once inhabited Harry’s body. No, this was merely a shade of Harry himself; a dark side to his psyche. A vessel that represented all the turmoil and resentment he’d carried over never getting to know his parents, for being robbed of a normal life, and that the fate of so many others’ lives had been tied to the fate of his own. Who better than Voldemort to represent all his inner demons?

That had been the point of the prophecy, hadn’t it? Neither can live while the other survives. Like a switch finally moving into the on position, Harry understood the completeness of that statement for the first time. He cannot truly live unless he decides to let go – of the pain, of the guilt, of the darkness… of Voldemort.

It wasn’t Voldemort doing these things to me, it was me. It was always… me.

He stood there stock-still, blinking, letting the realization of that settle into his mind. Then, out of nowhere, the young boy appeared at his side. His posture was drawn inward and he was clutching the arm of a shabby, stuffed bear. Harry recognized him instantly this time; it seemed so obvious now. Looking down into those large, forlorn eyes, Harry saw what he had missed before: this was the very hurt, scared, pained version of his own spirit; the little boy inside of him that had been abandoned.

He is me.

He is me. He is me. He is me. Over and over it played, a rhythmic droning that thumped against his ears, growing louder and brighter with each repetition. It continued playing in Harry’s mind like a mantra until he could almost hear Severus’ voice saying it. And then he did hear Severus’ voice, but the word sounded different. It sounded more like his name. And then it was his name.

“HARRY!”

Coming quickly back to himself, Harry refocused on the scene before him, abruptly aware that Severus was now standing in front of Voldemort, his wand drawn.

“You are the master of the Elder Wand, are you not?” There was a sense of urgency to Severus’ voice Harry didn’t understand. What had he missed?

“Yes…”

“Then use it! Summon it, materialize it, and end this once and for all!”

“No, I… I can’t…”

“In Merlin’s name, why not?”
“Because I don’t seek that kind of power, I never have. I don’t want the Elder Wand. I don’t want to hold it, I don’t want to wield it. I wish it never existed!”

“But it alone has the power to destroy him!”

“No it doesn’t!” Harry blurted out, somewhat confused, until he realized it was actually true. This wasn’t about a wand or a spell. There had only ever been one thing that could touch Voldemort; only one thing that could destroy him. And only one thing that could heal Harry’s childhood wounds.

“You are a fool, Harry Potter!” Voldemort spat. “You claim this man as your champion? He murdered people in my name! He murdered your precious Dumbledore!”

“That was an act of mercy, not murder, though I wouldn’t expect you to know the difference.”

“Yet you still trust him!”

“Yes, I trust Severus with my life! And if I had something bigger than my life to give, I’d trust him with that, too!”

Voldemort sneered. “How positively Gryffindor of you. This man was responsible for something bigger than your life – your parents! – and he failed them, too.”

Harry actually snorted. “You would see it that way. At first I did blame him, when I was younger and had no reason to see otherwise. But eventually I learned about the sacrifices he’d made, and that it was actually you he’d duped. He gave you the prophecy because he was good at his job. He didn’t know what you were going to do with it, or even who it was about. You were the one who chose me, and it was your choice that marked my parents for death. And why? Because they tried to protect me! You were so lordly and powerful that you had to rely on surprise to kill them! An unarmed witch and wizard and their one-year-old son. How very brave of you.” It was Harry’s turn to sneer. “Severus was never a coward, Tom. You were.”

“Spare me the bleating for your pathetic little cause. You are an insolent, disrespectful boy who clearly needs to be taught his place in the order of things.”

“My place is right here, where it’s always been. The fact is, you needed me. The Death Eaters doubted your powers after I survived, after you were bested by a one-year-old boy. Imagine, the mighty Dark Lord falling at the hands of a child!” Voldemort bared his teeth in a hiss at Harry’s bitter laugh. “You needed me to gain back your followers. You needed what I could give you because you’re nothing unless you’re riding the coattails of other wizards!”

Harry felt the adrenaline as it surged through his veins, the power of his magic thrumming just under his skin. He wasn’t quite sure what was possessing him to verbally lambaste Voldemort in this way, but it felt good. Really good. Perhaps because it had been a long time coming – seventeen years, to be exact.

“I never needed you, you miserable little brat. You needed me. Without me, you had no purpose, no reason for existing. Even now, as others seek to laud you for your fulfillment of the prophecy, you merely reward them by living a lie. Deny it, Potter. You never killed me. You couldn’t. Your very identity is wrapped up in my name. Without me, you are nothing.”

Harry almost laughed at his ability to resist Voldemort’s insults. Even thirty minutes ago, those words would have viciously ripped him apart, destroying him with their brutal truth. Yet it wasn’t the truth, he knew that now. It was just a lie he’d decided to believe. Now, by acknowledging the source of his torment, its power and its hold over him had dissolved.
“You’re right, Tom, but only about one thing: I haven’t killed you. And I won’t. That’s too simple of a death, anyway, you don’t deserve it.”

Voldemort sniffed at Harry, his snake-like nostrils flaring. Undaunted, Harry approached him, deciding then and there it was going to be the final time.

“But I will defeat you.” Harry stepped closer still, his voice deadly calm. “This will end now.”

Voldemort’s sneer indicated how likely he thought that was, though his eyes continued to map Harry’s face, his wand perched deftly between the long, white fingers of his right hand.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry stood his ground, as poised and confident as Severus had ever seen him. He also saw the moment Voldemort’s command of the situation faltered; that flash of doubt that skittered across his red-eyed gaze. Perhaps it was something only a spy could have detected, but it was there, Severus was sure of it. Voldemort recovered quickly, of course, but by then it was too late – something had already shifted. The balance of power was hanging by a thread.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry briefly turned his head to look at the boy standing next to him, anticipating he would still see the scared, hurt version of himself. But the eyes that looked back at him were nothing of the sort. They were hopeful and growing more vibrant by the second, large and glassy and brilliantly green. The child seemed to be holding his breath, his small mouth open in anticipation. Surprised, Harry blinked at him for a moment, trying to figure out what had changed.

The child merely stared back, his eyes full of intent, his face gradually softening into a smile. Only it wasn’t a child’s smile. It was far too wise and knowing to hold either innocence or youth, yet it was because of that gaze that Harry knew he had the power to finish this. That in fact the only thing he had ever needed had been within him the entire time.

Bolstered by this newfound resolve, he turned slowly back to face Voldemort. “Goodbye, Tom.”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Voldemort pulled away as Harry leaned forward, his eyes rapidly trying to catalogue and anticipate Harry’s actions. However, it was clear nothing had prepared him for what Harry was about to do. Looping his arms around Voldemort’s shoulders, Harry closed the gap between them and collected him into an embrace.

The look of horror on Voldemort’s face was almost worth the price of admission, Severus decided, but he himself was so paralyzed with confusion and shock at this turn of events that he couldn’t think
what to say or do. And Harry’s face, though outwardly determined and calm, masked a much deeper
disgust and uncertainty. It took everything in Severus not to lunge forward and peel Harry off of
Voldemort, or yell and curse at whatever brash, idiotic thing Harry was attempting now.

He never got the chance to do either, though, for an anguished, piercing scream forcibly pulled
Severus from his thoughts. He looked over to see Harry standing before Voldemort, watching
closely as the once-corporeal, snake-like form began pinching in on itself in awkward, obtuse angles,
the skin seeming to disintegrate right before his eyes. It flaked and fell away, very much like a snake
shedding its skin, except in this case it wasn’t leaving anything behind. Voldemort was
deconstructing, losing height and substance and form until there was nothing left but a small pile of
ash at their feet.

The air around Harry whirled violently for a moment, nearly lifting him off his feet, rushing an angry
wind through his hair and kicking up the hem of his shirt. He moved to protect his face with an arm
until suddenly it all dissipated, leaving the entire clearing empty, cloaked in a deafening silence. Even
the ashes were gone.

As though dropped from invisible strings, Harry suddenly doubled over and fell to the ground,
landing hard on his hands and knees. Clutching handfuls of grass, he succumbed to a fierce bout of
dry heaves, coughing and trying to take in large breaths, which only made him cough harder.

Severus instinctively moved towards Harry. Crouching down, he placed a hand on Harry’s back,
waiting to feel the taut muscles relax under his touch. Severus stayed like that, his silent show of
solidarity – a full circle moment, he observed, ending as they had begun – until Harry’s breathing
evened out and the last of the shudders left his body.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

When Harry felt he could speak again, he looked over at Severus, who had since been regarding him
with an uncharacteristically open expression: confusion, shock – and more than a little awe, unless
Harry’s eyes had deceived him.

“It wasn’t about might against might,” Harry began to explain. “I thought so at first, but then I
realized…” He started coughing again and allowed Severus to help him up. As he brushed the grass
and earth from his hands, movement from his right caught his eye and he looked over at the bench in
the center of the clearing. The sun had now fully risen, and it was bathing the entire clearing in such
bright, warm light that Harry hardly recognized the place.

Perched upon one of the benches was the young boy, that spirit of Harry himself, engrossed with a
small replica of a Muggle dump truck. He was mimicking its motorized noises with his mouth while
steering it around the uneven stone.

“But then…?” Severus urged.

“A hunch,” Harry replied cryptically, not wanting to get into the full details right now. He had
already worked out that Severus could not see the child anyway.

As though sensing his audience, the boy stopped playing and looked up at Harry. For a moment, the
two just stared at one another.

“It was about love,” Harry said quietly, still feeling Severus’ eyes on him. He took a deep breath and
gave the boy a small smile. “It was always about love.”

The boy smiled back, beaming.

Holding the door open, Severus waited for Harry to exit the lab before following. At the front door of the antechamber, Harry stopped and turned.

“I can’t believe it’s done. Is it really done?”

“Only you can know that. Give yourself time.”

Harry hung his head slightly, still deep in thought. “That was… intense.”

“I do recall telling you the mind is powerful.”

“You did.”

“Very powerful.”

Harry nodded, then looked back up at Severus, who he discovered was giving him a strange look. He swallowed, feeling suddenly pinned by that obsidian gaze. “By the way, thank—”

But he never got to finish his sentence.

Severus seemed to close the distance between them within seconds, his eyes mapping Harry’s face even as he reached out his hands. Before Harry knew it, a solid length of body pressed him against the door, warm hands cupping his face, dry lips locking roughly against his own.

Harry grunted in surprise, the sound low in the back of his throat, something which only seemed to spur Severus on further. A heavy current of emotion pulsed between them and Harry gasped, still riding a wave of adrenaline from their session, its intensity, his success, this intimacy.

Severus was the first to pull back, looking somewhat horrified by the whole thing. Harry felt a little dazed as they stared at each other, the air thick and tense as it hung between them.

“I… I apologize,” Severus murmured, seeming only now to be coming back to himself.

Harry just blinked, trying to make sense of what was going on. Mentally, he was elsewhere, still processing his session, and somehow that made Severus kissing him even more surreal, as though his mind was playing tricks on him. Not in any state to decode this – but not wanting to embarrass himself or Severus, either – he reached back and fumbled with the handle of the door until it swung open. “No, it’s… I’m…” He licked his lips. “I mean, I’m leaving tomorrow morning for the wedding. Ron and Hermione. I told you, right? I should… I still have to pack…”

Without waiting for a response – or further tongue-tumbling on his part – Harry offered a quick wave and slipped out the door, letting it close softly behind him.
The dull thunk of Severus’ forehead making contact with the door echoed around his empty antechamber. He briefly traced his lower lip with a finger, remembering the kiss, one-sided though it was; the warmth of Harry’s body, the taste of his lips.

While he wished the circumstances were different and he could have felt Harry reciprocating (though he refused to consider the reasons why that didn’t happen), he also wished he had not been so weak as to give in to the temptation in the first place. Harry had not asked to be manhandled, after all, least of all by him.

Severus sighed, cursing himself for his foolishness. If once he’d thought his walls had merely been crumbling, he now knew he was standing in the middle of their ruins.
The Wedding

It was the most magnificent thing Harry could ever remember seeing.

He had barely been in Australia for twenty minutes and already he was standing on the secluded beach that stretched out before their cluster of cottages. Behind him, towering cliffs of jagged, layered rocks lined the far perimeter of the beach, creating a small cove that felt distinctly like a ‘down under’ embrace of welcome.

The waves lapped gently against the shore, and as he walked through them, the smooth sand shifted under his bare feet and slid between his toes. He watched as the water swirled around his ankles and then retreated back into the ocean, only to surge forward again on its next push inland. He watched it ebb and flow around him for a few minutes, mesmerized.

It was then that flashes of his dreamscape came to mind. Yet where that had only been a potion-induced manifestation, this place – Australia – was as real as it was possible to get. If he thought no one would see him, he might have dropped to his knees right then and kissed the sand he was walking on. Sure, there were coastal regions in Britain (one he had even seen when he was eleven, despite the dour circumstances at the time) but this was not that kind of beach, nor that kind of ocean.

*Only sunshine and magic could create something like this,* he decided, looking up and off into the distance. The soft bite of the ocean air tickled at his nose and he inhaled a lung-full, closing his eyes at the pure pleasure of it all. The sunshine – also so unlike the type he was used to in Britain – warmed his shoulders, already hinting at a temperature that was sure to be sweltering by midday.

“Hi, Harry,” Ginny called, smiling as she approached. She was wearing a deep blue, two-piece swim suit with some sort of flowing wrap draped around her waist. As she walked, the breeze kicked up her hair, whipping it around her shoulders in a thick tangle of red. She was barefoot, and carried a wide-brimmed hat in her hand.

Harry was struck by her beauty in that moment, and wondered, not for the first time, why he wasn’t attracted to her anymore. Was it possible to fall out of attraction with someone? Or was this just further proof he had realized his true sexuality? He turned back to the ocean, squinting as it filled his entire field of vision. He felt her gaze as she came to a stop next to him.

“Here,” she said after a moment, giggling. “Let me help. You’re going to wrinkle your face if you keep doing that.”

As he turned to look at her, she tapped her wand against his glasses, which made him flinch and draw his head back. Before he could question what she was doing, his lenses darkened to a smoky black, and for the first time since he’d arrived, his eyes relaxed in the sunlight.

“Oh. Thanks. Dunno why I didn’t think of that!” He took off his glasses to inspect the change and then promptly replaced them after being reminded how bright it was. He smiled at her.

Just then, Michael Corner walked over, carrying a beer in one hand and a couple of large towels in the other. He gently bussed Ginny’s cheek and then nodded amicably at Harry.

“Hey, Michael,” Harry said, reaching over to briefly shake hands with him. Ginny had pulled Harry aside the day before, amidst their final preparations, to let him know she and Michael had been dating for a couple months and wanted him to be her guest at the wedding – but only if it wouldn’t be awkward. Harry’d agreed easily, seeing no reason why Ginny should be alone just because he
didn’t have a date. He really wished everyone would stop tip-toeing around him.

As Ginny and Michael situated themselves on the beach, flipping open large towels atop the sand, Ron walked over and clapped Harry on the back. “So, where’s the Professor?”

“What?” Harry said with a start, his heart jumping into his throat.

“Relax, mate, no need to get your knickers in a twist. Hermione mentioned you have been working with Snape on something, and had this crazy idea he might come with you.” He reached into the bag he was holding and popped a couple of crisps into his mouth.

“Oh.” Harry chuckled uneasily, feeling some of the tension leave his body. Part of him wondered what everyone’s reactions would’ve been if he had brought Severus with him. “Yeah… I mean, no, it’s just me.”

“What are you two doing, anyway?” Ron asked as he chewed.

Harry turned back towards the ocean, unsure of what, or how much, to share. Sometimes he longed for the days when he could tell Ron anything, but something seemed different now. Maybe it was just Harry that had changed. “Can we talk about it later?” He gestured his hand discreetly, hoping to indicate that the others – while probably out of earshot – were not the ideal audience.

“Yeah, sure. Hey, did you see the shorts George’s wearing?” Ron’s grin widened as he looked around for his brother, and Harry knew he’d made the right decision to divert the conversation for another time. Ron was in a giddy, pre-wedding mode, not a heavy, post-war mode. “When the sun hits the back of them, they turn transparent and George ends up mooning everyone!” He started laughing.

Harry offered his best smile, but in truth his thoughts were already pulling him elsewhere. From a short distance away, he heard Mrs. Weasley’s cry of, “Oh, honestly, George!” followed by another chorus of laughter. Ron trotted over to join them.

Harry watched the Weasleys for a moment, feeling oddly separate from their camaraderie, and then turned away to walk along the beach. He had only gone a few paces when Hermione approached and sidled up next to him. “Harry, are you all right?”

He was staring at the impression of his foot in the sand, and how the water washed it into abstraction. “Yeah, just thinking,” he finally answered.

She nodded sagely. “Australia will do that to you.”

“I just can’t believe how different this is from home and Hogwarts... from everything. And how much I like it. I know I just arrived, but I think I could live here.”

Hermione looped her arm through Harry’s, her smile wistful. “I know the feeling.” Then, after a beat, “So what’s got you so deep in thought? Anything you want to talk about?”

Harry looked over at her and then glanced around to be sure they were alone. He wasn’t sure how many other opportunities he’d have to get Hermione by herself this week, and so decided it would be a good time to finally ask what he’d most wanted to know since the dinner with her and Ron nearly a month ago. “I do have a question – something I’m curious about.”

She nodded eagerly and he swallowed.

“How much do you know about Wizarding law? Specifically…” He lowered his voice out of habit.
“Gay marriage.”

Hermione blinked at him a few times before a knowing smile graced her lips.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m only asking for Mrs. Whitby. Well, I mean for her son. She was talking to me about it after our dinner that one night, after you and Ron left.”

“And you’re trying to figure out how it applies to you, too.”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding absently. “I mean no! I was just…” He sighed, painfully aware his cards had just been laid bare. He really must work on his brain-to-mouth filter.

She smiled gently at him. “It’s okay, Harry, I’ve known for a while now.”

“What – you have? How?”

They stopped walking and Hermione turned to stand in front of him. She chuckled. “Well, first off, you’re a terrible liar. And second, I’m not sure I could explain it if I tried. I just… knew.” At the slightly wild look in his eye, she rubbed his arm reassuringly. “I won’t tell anyone, Harry, don’t worry. It’s your information to share if you choose. And it doesn’t make any difference to me whether you’re attracted to men or women, only that you find someone who makes you happy. You deserve that.”

He couldn’t help the smile that stole onto his face and he let his shoulders relax.

“What about Ron, though? Do you think he knows?”

“I really doubt it – this is Ron we’re talking about.” They shared a conspiratorial snigger. “But I know why you’re asking. You want to know if he’ll mind; if it will change how he acts around you. Am I right?”

Harry bit his lip and nodded.

“Ron may be a lot of things, Harry, but he is a good man and a loyal friend. Your news may take him a little time to adjust to, but it’s only because he’s slow to acclimate to new things. I’m pretty sure Charlie is gay, so it’s not as though he’s never been confronted with it before. If anything, it might help him resolve his feelings about you and Ginny, and maybe he’ll finally let go of the idea that one day you two will be brothers-in-law.”

“Wait, that’s what he was so upset about?” Harry asked, agog.

“I think that was part of it, yes. He is also really protective of Ginny, so I think you got a bit of the big brother coming out, too.”

“I’ve practically been his brother for the last seven years. Isn’t that enough?”

Hermione smiled. “That is logical to your mind, Harry, but for his whole life, Ron has been the youngest boy in a long line of children. His robes, his books, his wand – even his familiar – were all hand-me-downs. He rarely got anything new, something that was just for him, until you came along. You were sort of his ‘thing’. I think on some level, he was looking forward to making that link official.”

“It’s not like I’m going anywhere, even if I’m not with Ginny.”

“He knows that, but… this was just his way of being sentimental, I suppose. Then again, maybe he’ll
just transfer that hope over to you and Charlie.” She giggled. “He’ll be at the wedding, you know. Charlie. He arrives tomorrow.”

“You wouldn’t…”

“No, I already told you I won’t say anything, but I just thought, you know…” She waggled her eyebrows at him.

Harry gave a nervous chuckle and slipped his arm around her shoulders companionably, hoping she wouldn’t notice the blush creeping up his ears and neck. As they continued on down the beach, he pulled her in closer until her head rested against him. They walked like that for a while before Harry slowed their pace and resumed their conversation.

“Well, now that you know about me,” he hedged, “I suppose I should tell you about something else, too.”

“Oh?” Hermione lifted her head to look at him.

Harry dropped his arm and stuffed his hands in the pockets of his shorts. “Yeah.” He swallowed, feeling Hermione’s gaze on him. He knew he’d never get this out if he turned to look at her, so he kept his eyes focused on the waves in the distance. “Before I left, I was working with Severus on something. In his lab.” He cast his mind about for a way to describe what they were doing without actually saying what they were doing. He wasn’t sure he was quite ready to divulge the particulars of Evochi yet, or what he’d experienced while using it, and so settled on something suitably generic. “And, well… finishing it was kind of a big deal.”

“Oh…” she encouraged.

Harry took a deep breath. “And after we were done, there was this moment… I’m not exactly sure what happened, but Severus kissed me. Or we kissed each other, I dunno.” Harry was gesturing helplessly, and knew his face must be scarlet by now. Braving a look at Hermione, he took in her expression: eyebrows dancing near her hairline, mouth open in an ‘o’ shape (but rapidly dissolving into a wide smile) and, for the moment, speechless.

“What?” he asked, feeling suddenly discomfited by his admission.

“Harry!” she exclaimed, having found her voice again. “That’s wonderful!”

Puzzled by her reaction (not that he’d known what to expect) he found all he could do was look back at her, his brows pinched together.

“Sorry, it’s just... I didn’t think it’d happen so… I mean–” She cleared her throat. “This is just such a big step for you! Severus is your first kiss after Ginny, and he’s a man!”

“Well spotted,” Harry said sarcastically, causing her to giggle.

“Oh, shut up, you know what I mean. It’s great that you – oh, never mind!” She squealed and hugged him tightly. “I’m just so happy for you!”

Easing out of her embrace, he said, “It was just a kiss, Hermione, we’re not picking out china patterns.”

He ducked the swat she aimed at his arm and they grinned at each other. Then Hermione suddenly leaned closer, a cheeky smile on her face. “So, how was it?”
The question caught Harry a little off guard. “I’m not sure – I don’t even know what I think about it yet.” Watching her face fall a little, he quickly regrouped. “I mean, it was nice. Good. A little weird, I suppose. It just happened so fast, and our work was kind of intense and disorienting, so I’m not sure if it was just to do with that or if it was… something else.”

Hermione briefly pursed her lips. “Would you be okay with it if it was ‘something else’?”

Harry thought on that a moment. Admittedly, he hadn’t had much time to think about what’d happened after his sixth draught, as once he’d left Severus’, he helped Ginny with the final wedding preparations, packed his own bag, and then departed for Australia the following morning. The whole thing had been a bit of a blur, really.

“I don’t know,” he answered honestly.

“Well, how did you two leave things?”

Harry laughed darkly. “Oh, probably the same way we leave everything. The kiss ended about as fast as it started and we both just sort of stared at each other for a second, and then I said I had to go, and left.”

“Did you tell him you were going to be gone all week?”

“Yeah, he knows about the wedding.”

“That’s something, at least.” Hermione looked like she wanted to slap her forehead – or his – but only just managed to resist. She shook her head. “What are we going to do with you?”

Harry grinned hopefully and shrugged, which caused her to mutter, “Boys!” under her breath. They both laughed.

“Come on, you,” she said finally, tugging his arm. “I want you to try the appetizers we brought for the reception.”

“But you haven’t answered my question!”

“Which question? Oh, about gay marriage?” At Harry’s nod, she turned thoughtful. “Right, we wouldn’t want to leave Mrs. Whitby’s son in the lurch.”

Harry cleared his throat. “Of course not.”

On their walk back to the main cottage, Harry listened with interest as Hermione explained that gay marriage was allowed; that marriage in Wizarding culture was, in fact, simply defined as a legal commitment between two people, but that no other personal characteristics (aside from both parties being the age of majority) were relevant. A bonding was a bonding, no matter the combination of genders.

Mrs. Whitby would be so relieved.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

The next afternoon found Harry standing waist deep in the ocean, wearing nothing but a pair of dark blue swim trunks. He had felt the power of the undertow even at this depth, and decided not to
venture out any farther in the water. Wizard or not, he was no match for Mother Nature.

From somewhere behind him, he heard a familiar laugh. When he turned, he saw Ginny standing on the shore, pointing, caught in a fit of giggles.

“What?” he asked, feeling suddenly paranoid, sweeping his gaze down his body to see if something was amiss.

“Sorry, it’s just…” She paused for a moment to compose herself, then grinned. “Did you know your tattoo is nearly on top of your head at this point?”

“It… what?” Harry started patting the top of his head and the back of his neck. He didn’t know what he was looking for, exactly, as the tattoo had no discernible texture to speak of. His actions spurred another bout of laughter from Ginny and he scowled. “What’s it doing?”

Her grin widened. “Let’s just say I don’t think your phoenix likes the cold water.”

“It’s not the only part of me,” Harry muttered to himself.

“When did Harry get a tattoo?” At the sound of Charlie’s voice, Harry couldn’t help turning around again, but then immediately realized his mistake. Charlie, the brother Harry had first met in fourth year and hadn’t seen since the end of the war, was now standing next to Ginny. He had on a pair of the same loud board shorts Ron favored, and he was shirtless; his broad, muscular chest and arms were covered in a smattering of tattoos and scars – large and unmistakably dragon-like. On both counts.

Despite the jarring temperature of the water, Harry’s cock twitched. There had always been something about Charlie he had found appealing, even before sexuality had entered the equation. Perhaps it was just the rugged, masculine air that followed him, or his fearlessness with dragons. Or maybe it was those warm brown eyes of his, unfailingly kind but always seeming alight with adventure and mischief. Or maybe it was all of it.

It was also then he noticed Charlie had slung an arm casually around Ginny, and the pair of them were eyeing him appreciatively, though each in their own way. To her credit, Ginny was more subtle about it, whereas Charlie was just unabashedly flirtatious.

“Oi!” he called, grinning. “Are you going to come here so I can say hello, or what?”

Harry felt his cheeks pink as he waded back out of the water, suddenly never more thankful for the cold temperature to keep his body in check. Charlie wasted no time wrapping him in a warm hug, and if it was a little cozier than he remembered experiencing before, he pretended not to notice.

“Walk with me, Harry.” Charlie waved at Ginny as he steered Harry in the opposite direction. They headed towards the rocky outcroppings that peppered the shoreline, and Harry noticed they’d soon be out of the line of sight of the cottages.

“How’ve you been?”

“What? Oh, good,” Harry answered, resisting the urge to look back over his shoulder at the disappearing landscape.

“Did I hear right that you have been working with Professor Snape?”

Harry marveled at the speed with which information traveled through the Weasley family. “Um, yeah.”
“Lucky you.”

“Sorry?”

Charlie shrugged slightly. “I’m not sure if you know this, but I sort of had a thing for him when I was at Hogwarts.”

Harry’s eyebrows lifted towards his hairline. “Really? Did anything… I mean, did he know?”

“Oh, he knew. I suppose you could say I’m not really known for my subtlety.” Charlie chuckled in spite of himself.

“What did you do?” Harry had half-turned towards Charlie while they walked, finding that he was inexplicably interested in what had happened. Perhaps it was because of his own recent experiences – and yes, the kiss, too – but there was something in hearing about Severus from other people’s points of view that he liked.

“I flirted shamelessly with him after class, and once even visited him during office hours to see if I could entice him further. He turned me down, the sexy bastard. But all that pent-up angst?” Charlie shook his head. “Man, he’d’ve been a great fuck.”

Harry coughed slightly, embarrassed that his body had reacted to Charlie’s assessment. He wasn’t sure if he was ready to think about Severus in that context, but couldn’t help wondering if there was any truth to it.

“You’re probably more his type, anyway.” Charlie swept his gaze briefly up and down Harry’s body as he spoke.

“Wh-what? Why would you say that?”

Charlie pulled gently on Harry’s elbow to steer him inside one of the alcoves. Sunlight streamed in from above, though its rays were interrupted in several places by heavy outcroppings of rock. The surf was subdued, but still echoed around them, and the sand was cooler under their feet. When he turned to face Harry again, he tipped his head to the side, his mouth spread in a wry smile.

“You really have no concept of your own appeal, do you? I mean, take this tattoo of yours, for instance.”

“My… tattoo?”

“Yes. Ink, particularly on you, is… well, it’s damned near irresistible, is what it is. Do you mind… can I take a closer look?” Charlie looked at him expectantly, his mouth set in that familiar Weasley grin.

“Um, sure. Yeah,” Harry answered, obediently lifting his right arm to allow for a better view.

“This is beautiful work…” Charlie enthused as he made a slow circle around Harry’s body. “The detail alone. I see I missed out by having one of my mates do all mine. Where’d you go for yours?”

“A shop in London – a Muggle one,” Harry added. “Rian was her name.”

“And a woman, too, very nice. This must have taken her a while to do.”

“Yeah. Four appointments. She was always impressed with how fast I healed in between visits.” They both grinned at that. Then Harry felt a warm finger trailing along his skin. He was fighting the
urge to wiggle out of the way when Charlie sucked in a breath.

“Blimey, you even animated it!”

Harry couldn’t help grinning at that. “Yeah, George did it for me, actually.”


“It… it’s what?” Harry turned his head and rotated his body, trying to get a look at what it was doing.

Charlie pointed. “It’s on your other side, now, I think.”

Confused, Harry turned and smoothed a palm over his left side, watching as the phoenix rippled contentedly under his touch. That was odd – it had never shied away from touch before. He wondered what that meant, or what it said about Charlie. True, the number of people who had come in direct contact with it so far was small – okay, nonexistent – but still, he couldn’t help wondering why it hadn’t let Charlie touch it. Maybe it had something to do with a person’s magical signature? He made a mental note to ask George about it after the wedding. When he looked up again, Charlie was regarding him curiously.

“I think it’s just being shy,” Harry offered with a small shrug.

“No harm done.” Charlie smiled. “You know, there was a time when I thought about animating some of mine, but I was afraid they would spook the dragons.” He pursed his lips for a moment. “Turns out dragons are a bit twitchy when it comes to unexpected movement.”

They both shared a knowing laugh over that. Then Harry walked closer to one of the jagged stone walls, inspecting their surroundings a bit. He was tracing a finger along a sediment pattern when Charlie spoke next.

“So, are all the boys from Hogwarts clamoring over you yet?”

“What?” Harry spluttered. “Did… did Hermione tell you?”

“Hermione? No. But she needn’t’ve bothered – it’s written all over you, love.”

Harry blushed.

“Sweet Merlin,” Charlie breathed, smiling gently. “If you keep doing that adorable blushing thing, you will be the undoing of me yet.”

“Sorry,” Harry said, then proceeded to blush even further at the attention. Charlie laughed, deep and hearty, and stepped closer to pull Harry into a friendly embrace.

When they parted, both of them caught the other’s gaze, their smiles slowly fading as a heated moment began to grow between them. They mapped each other’s faces with their eyes, both seeming to seek the same confirmation.

Then Harry looked directly at Charlie’s lips, and that proved to be his undoing. With his heart hammering in his ears, Harry leaned forward and pressed his mouth against those full lips, kissing lightly, as though asking a question.

Not surprisingly, Charlie answered.
Instantly, a warm body was pressed up against Harry’s and two hands found purchase in his hair, cradling his head. A tongue slipped along his lips and he opened his mouth, inviting Charlie in while they tangled and tasted each other. When his lower lip was captured between Charlie’s teeth, he gasped, and returned the kiss as best he was able. His tentativeness didn’t seem to matter to Charlie, who was focused on directing Harry’s head back and forth so his lips could rhythmically suck and nibble, occasionally darting a tongue in to explore Harry’s mouth.

Harry tried to focus on the kiss, he really did, but the soft tickle of breath from Charlie’s nose distracted him, and a moment later, his mind began to fill with academic thoughts.

How was he supposed to feel when kissing someone? Weak in the knees? Fiery tingles shooting down his spine? Immediate physical arousal? He wasn’t sure. He’d never felt that with Cho or Ginny, and had little else to compare it to given it was only his second kiss with a man (third, if he included his dreamscape lover, although once again he suspected that didn’t count – nor, probably, did the one with Severus, as that one had been born of, well, he didn’t know what exactly, but certainly not this same in-the-moment, proximity-attraction thing).

Right?

Confused, Harry pressed his palms against the solid chest before him and pushed Charlie away. “I… I can’t do this,” Harry whispered. “I’m sorry, I… I shouldn’t have kissed you.” He looked down at his feet and the sand – anywhere but at the man before him.

“It’s okay, Harry.” There was a touch to his chin. “Hey.”

Harry looked up slowly.

“You did nothing wrong,” Charlie explained. “It was just a moment; I felt it too. Truth be told, if you wouldn’t have kissed me, I would have kissed you.” He moved his hand to Harry’s shoulder. “It’s okay to be curious.”

Harry nodded, a grateful smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

“I wouldn’t have let it get too far, anyway – I know you aren’t interested in a quick shag.”

“It’s not that, it’s—”

“You don’t have to explain,” Charlie interrupted. “You owe me nothing. I’m not good for you, anyway. My life is in Romania and my work… well, it’s pretty much my life. It wouldn’t be fair to drag you into that, especially when I know enough about you to know you’ll want a partner. And you deserve that, Harry, please believe you do. It’ll be a lucky man indeed who gets your heart.”

Before Harry could respond – not that he knew what to say to any of that, anyway – Charlie grinned. “…as well as this tight little arse of yours,” he added with an appreciative grunt, punctuating his statement by sliding his palms over the buttocks in question and giving them a firm squeeze.

Harry gasped, his eyes going wide, and Charlie chuckled.

“What? Just because I would never take advantage of the situation doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate your… assets.” He winked.

Harry flushed again. Somehow, whenever he was around Charlie, he felt as though he reverted to the fourteen-year-old he’d been when they first met, despite the passage of four years and one war. He made a face he hoped was passable as a grin.
Charlie turned and flung an arm around Harry’s shoulders, then leaned in to nuzzle and lick his cheek. “Besides, if we don’t turn up at the cottages soon, everyone will think I’ve run off and had my wicked way with you.”

“Th-they would actually think that?” Harry squeaked, wiping off his cheek with the back of his hand.

“God, you’re so adorable.” Charlie laughed. “I’m just messing with you. No, they’re all so busy running around, charming magnolias in glass jars or some damn thing, I doubt they’d notice if a fucking dragon swooped in and landed on the wedding cake.”

For the first time since his interlude with Charlie began, Harry began to feel his body relax, and he laughed, the sound warm and familiar to his ears as it echoed around the small alcove.

“Though… it’s not too late, if you’d rather prove them right…” Charlie’s eyes very nearly glittered as his eyebrows bounced.

“Um,” Harry coughed, hoping he covered it well enough by clearing his throat. “I say let them wonder.”

Charlie nodded. “You got it, love,” he said, though Harry thought he could detect a twinge of disappointment in the tone.

For a moment they just looked at each other, smile matching smile, until an unspoken challenge skittered across their gazes. Simultaneously, they broke into a run, exiting the alcove and racing each other back along the coastline to the beachfront cottages.

Harry won.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

That evening, alone atop the coastline cliffs, Harry reflected on the kiss he had shared with Charlie. Truth be told, he’d been unable to think of much else all day. It was such a strange thing, and so unlike the others he had experienced. Kissing Charlie had been pleasant enough, even comfortable. But something had been missing. It wasn’t that Charlie felt like a brother – kissing Ron or the twins, sure – but he didn’t really know Charlie all that well, and there was sufficient distance in their relationship to make it decidedly not weird. So that wasn’t it.

And then there was the thing with his tattoo, how it seemed intent to get away from Charlie’s touch. At the time Harry had passed it off casually, citing the phoenix’s shyness, but instinctively he knew that was not true. Yet he wasn’t sure what it meant, exactly.

He briefly considered gender as a reason but dismissed that quickly. His dreamscape lover was a man and had given him a near-instant erection from the intensity of their kiss – something he had also never experienced with Ginny or Cho. And there seemed to have been a different kind of connection in the dreamscape, too, something he hadn’t felt with Charlie. In fact, he had only felt it one other time, brief though it was: when Severus had kissed him.

He remembered the way the moment seemed so charged, the surge of adrenaline and emotion arcing between them. He didn’t know if it had come from him, or from Severus, or from the aftermath of their session. Or even what it meant. Hell, he’d barely had time to process what was happening and
then it was over almost before it’d begun. It was only in reflecting upon it later that he realized it had stirred a reaction deep within him; had ignited something he’d never felt before.

When the sun began to sink into the horizon, Harry wrapped his arms around his legs and rested his chin on his knees. Maybe it was all in his head. Maybe it had just been a one-time thing with Severus; a fluke. Maybe he should try again with Charlie.

Maybe.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“Hello, Best Man.” Hermione smiled from where she sat in front of a mirror, applying something to her face with a small brush.

Harry closed the door softly behind him and walked into the room. He had half expected to find Ginny in here as well, but the room was empty except for the two of them. “Mrs. Weasley said you were looking for m—” he started, but cut himself off with a gasp as Hermione stood and turned towards him.

As she approached, the long, gathered layers of her white dress whished about her body. Her hair was pulled back into a loose bun, a few soft curls framing her face and a white flower tucked behind one ear. She turned once to show Harry the reverse, its elegantly-draped opening revealing the softly bronzed skin of her upper back, and then turned around to face him again. She looked like one of those goddess statues at The Grecian, the gown flattering every curve of her body and reflecting every watt of her glow. Harry had never seen her look more beautiful.

But perhaps more than her dress, it was the way she was carrying herself; her presence. Standing there in her wedding gown, a nervous-excited smile on her face, it occurred to Harry that she was exactly where she wanted to be. There was a certain contentment about her, a confidence in her decisions that she’d always had. This was no exception. She had a path, a purpose. A place. Harry felt a thrum of anxiety in his body as his restlessness resurfaced, and he wondered if he’d ever get to that point in his own life. Voldemort may not have been something he chose for himself, but at least it had given him a purpose. Now that it might finally be over, what else was there for him? What should he do now?

Hermione captured him in a hug and they squeezed each other firmly. When she pulled back from their embrace, she was practically beaming. “Thank you,” she said.

“For what?” he managed.

“For telling me how I look.” At his confusion, she clarified. “It was written all over your face, Harry, you didn’t need to say a word. Thank you,” she repeated. “Do you think that’s how Ron will react?”

“I dunno, but he’d better. Do you want me to Charm him, just in case?”

Hermione laughed deeply, sliding her hands around to the front of her dress. “Oh, thank you, I needed that,” she said, and Harry grinned.

A knock at the door interrupted them, followed by the voice of the minister announcing the ceremony was about to begin. Harry took that as his cue to leave the bride in favor of his place under the outdoor canopy. He leaned over and gently bussed Hermione’s cheek.
“Ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” she affirmed, her smile warm and bright. “And look at you, too! My God, Harry, you look amazing in those robes!” She stood back a bit and sized him up. The lightweight khaki attire Hermione had selected for him came with linen trousers and a matching shirt, both tailored to fit him perfectly, and around his shoulders was a white, linen scarf, draped in a ceremonial fashion.

He thanked her with a sly smile and got as far as the door when she spoke again.

“How’s it going?”

He stopped and looked back at her.

“It’ll happen for you, too. You’ll see.” She smiled softly, her fondness never more apparent.

It caused Harry’s throat to tighten and he pressed his lips into a thin line, blinking back the sting in the corners of his eyes. He nodded, but was unable to say anything else just then.

As Harry stood under the canopy, idly watching the last few guests take their seats, he began wondering about his own wedding. Would he wear a tuxedo? If so, would it be black or white? Or would he opt for robes? Or maybe neither of those? Would he conduct it outdoors or inside a church? Or perhaps he’d have it at Hogwarts?

He sighed. He might be getting a little ahead of himself; last time he checked, he didn’t even have someone to marry.

A hand on his back stirred him from his thoughts and he looked at Ron, who appeared a bit pale and nervous, but otherwise happy. Harry smiled reassuringly at him. He could always tell when Ron was happy – there was an eagerness behind his eyes, as though he couldn’t wait to get on with whatever was next. In that instant, Harry knew Hermione needn’t worry about Ron’s reaction to seeing Hermione standing before him in this place, in that dress, finally realizing a moment he was afraid he’d never see. Even Mrs. Weasley was already dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. Harry smiled to himself.

The ceremony turned out to be a picture of subdued elegance and romance. The wedding party – which consisted of only himself and Ginny – flanked Ron and Hermione underneath a trellis made from native, Australian wood. Thousands of tiny, sparkling lights spiraled their way up the pillars and onto the beams overhead. A sheer, white fabric was draped around them, fluttering in the ocean breeze, and on each corner of the canopy was a bouquet of peach and red flowers amid a backdrop of greenery.

Stretched out before them were two wide aisles of chairs, all covered in white fabric. The smiling,
expectant faces of the guests looked on with interest. Everyone was barefoot and dressed in smart, casual attire that ranged from Wizarding to Muggle fashion. George, he noticed, had found one of those Muggle t-shirts with the fake tuxedo artwork, and even mimicked straightening his bow-tie when Harry caught his eye. Harry stifled a smirk, and had to look away before he laughed.

It wasn’t until midway through the ceremony, while his back was to the guests, that Harry’s neck began to prickle. He guessed someone was looking at him, and rather intently, too. He had been doing the shade charm on his glasses every day, now that Ginny had turned him onto it, and he found that darkening them a bit more than she had done allowed the direction of his gaze to go unnoticed. This was particularly helpful when he wanted to look – at things, people, anything – without being noticed.

When he got a chance to turn around again, he let his gaze roam lazily over the seated guests, seeking out the source of that focus. He found it quickly, and wasn’t surprised when that person turned out to be Charlie. The redhead seemed to be alternating his view between Harry and the bride and groom, and as far as Harry could tell, Charlie wasn’t aware he was being watched in return.

Only two rows back from the front, Charlie’s handsome, rugged face was set into an easy grin – so reminiscent of all the other Weasley men, yet with enough of a twist in the corner to be uniquely Charlie. He had pulled his long hair back into a ponytail, and even shaved the stubble off his face. Dropping his eyes lower, Harry took in the white shirt he wore. The top few buttons were undone, and the fabric was semi-opaque. The shape and color of his broad, muscular chest could be seen underneath it, and it caused Harry’s cock to twitch at the memory of being pressed up against that body. He had to quickly force himself to look away and think about something else, lest he have an embarrassing and inconvenient development in the middle of the ceremony.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

The wedding reception was made all the more bittersweet by the fact it was the first big family event post-war, although it’s a point no one seemed to speak of directly. Mrs. Weasley spent most of the night wrapping everyone she could fit into a group hug, bouncing from one group to the next as if to confirm to herself that they were all still there, safe and happy and alive.

After she had released Harry and the others who had been near him, he turned around to find a smirking Charlie in front of him.

“Hi,” Harry said, a sly smile blooming on his lips.

“Hi, love,” Charlie answered, and then nodded his head to the right. “Mind if I show you something?”

There was something about the undercurrent of Charlie’s tone that sent a zip of electricity right to Harry’s groin. He then made the mistake of looking at Charlie’s shirt again, and swallowed thickly. He shot a quick glance over both shoulders.

“Don’t worry,” Charlie said, sweeping his eyes around at the guests busying themselves with food and merriment, “I doubt we’ll be missed for a few minutes.”

Harry followed Charlie’s gaze around the party and found he was inclined to agree – everyone seemed to be preoccupied with the festivities. He grinned when he spotted George and Angelina
dancing with silly, exaggerated movements, laughing together, and then decided to let himself be swept off to the alcove he and Charlie had visited earlier in the week, for he knew that’s where they were headed even though Charlie hadn’t specified.

A surge of anticipation and excitement swept over him, and he discreetly adjusted himself in his trousers as he swelled against the fabric, knowing they weren’t going to hide anything. They were barely inside the rocky entrance and Charlie’s hands were on him.

“I couldn’t keep my eyes off you in this damn outfit, the way the setting sun cast a golden hue to your skin…” He growled. “God, you looked positively edible. And now you’re reducing me to poetic declarations, for Circe’s sake! Is this okay, can I kiss you?” he asked, though it was mostly rhetorical given that his tongue was already probing Harry’s mouth.

Harry just nodded his head and pulled Charlie closer, hoping that if the nod was missed, his tongue sliding out to tangle with Charlie’s would answer the question. Charlie moaned, canting his hips against Harry’s interested cock.

“Could you… I mean, do you want…” Harry managed mid-kiss, then stopped. He didn’t think his helpless gesturing and babbling was working until he saw the heat and recognition ignite behind Charlie’s eyes.

Charlie took a step closer, gently pushing Harry back against the rocky wall, an aroused gleam in his eyes. “You want me to taste you, Harry, is that it?” he whispered, his tongue flicking against the shell of Harry’s ear.

Harry could not find his voice so he merely nodded his head fervently. Charlie nibbled his way down Harry’s neck and jaw, smoothing his hands down over the front of Harry’s shirt. Unfastening Harry’s trousers with one hand, he nipped at Harry’s ear again, his voice a low, seductive purr. “Will you let me suck your cock, Harry?”

Harry closed his eyes, a desperate whimper escaping as he nodded again. He wondered how his idle gazing during the ceremony had brought him to this point, so wanton and desperate; though, as Charlie slid to his knees, drawing Harry’s trousers down with him as we went, he realized he couldn’t be arsed to care.

One of Charlie’s hands rubbed Harry’s prick while the other cupped and squeezed his arse, negotiating Harry to full hardness. It didn’t take long, and then suddenly Charlie dove onto him, grasping the base of his cock with one hand while his mouth sucked in the head, mewling around it appreciatively.

Harry moaned, digging his fingers into the rocks behind him, barely registering Charlie’s murmured words.

“Mmm, gorgeous,” the redhead enthused. It was more reverence than Harry ever expected to hear with regards to a cock, but when a firm tongue traced the underside of his head and then swiped through the slit, he lost all ability to think coherently. His eyes nearly rolled back a moment later when he swore the head bumped the back of Charlie’s throat.

Yet despite his muzzy awareness, a thought still managed to thread through his mind. This was the first time he’d ever let a man do this for him. Even accounting for Ginny’s skill in this area, there was just something to be said for having a man do it; a man who understood exactly how every flick of the tongue felt, why the combination of pressure and suction and texture – oh, God, yes, just there – worked, and if they happened to add a little vibration or a particular fondle of the balls, then…
The more Harry thought about it, the more it aroused him, and suddenly he was overcome with the desire to see it, too.

Chancing a glance at the head bobbing below him, Harry’s world suddenly began to tilt, and instead of seeing the ginger hair and freckled face of Charlie, the visual was replaced with his dark-haired dreamscape lover. He closed his eyes, the remembered scene flooding his senses. Okay, so this wasn’t the grass in the middle of a downpour, but the rocky alcove of a secluded Australian beach was a damn good replacement.

Then, too soon, he felt the electrical surge in his body signaling the inevitable, and he mourned his ability to savor this, to draw it out longer. Perhaps it was because his lover was just that good, or maybe he needed to indulge himself more frequently to dampen his over-excitement; either way, he found himself tapping the shoulder below him, hoping it was enough of a signal. He wasn’t sure what the proper etiquette was.

It must have been okay, for the grip on his hips tightened suddenly, pinning him against the wall. There was a new urgency and feeling in the way that mouth worked him – coupled with the fact he couldn’t move – that meant not even the sight of Dolores Umbridge at that moment would have prevented his orgasm.

Harry’s eyes rolled back for real as he came and he had to bite his lip to stifle the groan. He may have been out of sight of the party, but he was not necessarily out of earshot. Vaguely, somewhere beyond the edges of his mind, he heard a low moan, almost a growl, and realized Charlie was attempting to milk every last drop from him.

Harry thought it was a miracle he was even still standing. He leaned heavily against the wall for support, panting, knowing what a picture he must make standing there, completely exposed from the waist down. He swallowed, wetting his lips with his tongue, and drew in several deep breaths. When his mind finally caught up with him, he opened his eyes.

“He’s just as delicious as I thought you’d be,” Charlie murmured, his eyes twinkling with satisfaction. His gaze swept up Harry’s body as he wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’ll go out first and you can follow whenever you’re ready. Might want to straighten your clothes and cast a cleansing charm, though.” Charlie made a move to leave, but paused at the entrance to the alcove and turned slightly. With a last look, he grinned, then slipped out to rejoin the throng of revelers.

Harry just stood there, his legs and arms very slowly regaining their feeling. He’d just had another interlude with his dreamscape lover, only… not. What did it mean that he had just been with a willing, flesh-and-blood man, and still he couldn’t stop his mind from automatically drifting to a figment of his imagination? Frustrated and still oddly aroused, Harry pulled up his trousers, took a moment to straighten himself, and then walked out of the alcove.

He decided he’d clean himself up later. For now, he wanted the reminder.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

All told, Harry’s time in Australia proved to be – at least to that point in his life – an unparalleled experience.

Surrounded by an ocean of blue waves on one side, and a sea of red hair from his adopted family on
the other, Harry felt he had somehow fallen into one of those sublime moments of life where everything had seemed just right. Not that he’d had a lot of those in his eighteen years, but maybe that’s what made them easier to spot – and appreciate.

The entire week had been a relaxed, jovial affair. Every morning had been filled with exploration and hiking to nearby towns, where they all spent time enjoying fresh fruits and breads and talking with locals. The evenings consisted of bonfires with roasted marshmallows and reminiscing – and, for Harry, watching the sunset alone while perched atop the surrounding cliffs.

The in-between times (those that didn’t involve wedding preparations, of course) were filled with swimming and sun-bathing, or pick-up games of Quidditch on the beach – an easy task considering most of the Weasley family played, as well as many of the guests. Those who didn’t cheered them on from the makeshift, sandy sidelines.

Yet despite the contentment he felt at being in Australia, he also knew one big thing was missing: someone to share it with. And what did it say that the one person he most wanted that to be was Severus? Harry was surprised how much he missed him; how much he was craving Severus’ presence. Even though they generally only saw one another on Sundays, Harry’s week away had felt much longer somehow. There had been several occasions during his stay when Harry had wanted to remark on something to Severus, only to remember he wasn’t there. It was those moments especially when Harry wished he would have at least extended an invite, or found some way to convince Severus to go, other people’s opinions (and school schedules) be damned.

Settling his pack on his shoulder, the rest of his belongings already shrunk into his pocket, Harry stepped up to the Portkey Mr. Weasley had prepared for him. Turning briefly, he gave farewell hugs to the remaining Weasleys and to Hermione (who was now a Weasley, he reminded himself) and thanked them all for everything.

As he took one last look at Australia, he couldn’t help think of Severus again. Severus had become such a prominent fixture in his life in such a short time, despite an association that had spanned nearly a decade, and the realization of that caused a now-familiar warmth to spread through his body. He didn’t know why he seemed to feel that more and more now when he thought of Severus, but he decided he very much liked it.

It was that thought he held in his mind as he grabbed the tatty old hairbrush, smiling as the pull behind his navel whisked him away.
Harry unbuttoned his Gryffindor Quidditch jersey and let it drop to the floor, his eyes never once leaving their target. Grabbing the bottom of his grey t-shirt next, he slipped it off over his head, revealing a toned chest and a smooth, flat stomach. Severus swallowed audibly as he stood, transfixed, his lips parting slightly.

Harry’s soft smile stretched into a lopsided and playful grin. He grabbed the front closure of his denims, but instead of undoing them, he simply hooked his thumb behind the waistband. Severus felt a flutter of desire stir his burgeoning arousal, imagining what lay underneath them and what he would like to do with it once he got his hands on Harry.

Reaching out, Severus hooked his own fingers behind the waistband of Harry’s denims, pulling him forward abruptly and into an embrace. Severus leaned down and pressed his lips to Harry’s, hungrily sucking Harry’s lower lip into his mouth, his whole body now singing with want.

He felt Harry’s hands circle his waist as he tangled his own into the thick, black hair. Harry inched closer, sneaking one of his warm, muscular thighs in between Severus’ legs, letting his body drift tantalizingly close. Severus took that as an invitation and pulled Harry tight to him, grinding absently against that firm thigh.

Inhaling deeply, Severus let the smell of Harry’s hair fill his nostrils. It was a sweaty, comfortable scent, hot from an afternoon of sunshine and Quidditch. He hardened further, his cock making itself known against the front of his trousers. He secretly wished Harry would unbutton him and slide one of those nimble hands around him, but he also wanted to take it slow so he could savor the experience and commit every detail to memory.

A faint pop! sounded somewhere in his consciousness, briefly distracting Severus from the task before him, and he was surprised to find that his eyes were closed. A sinking feeling he didn’t quite understand began to settle over him, which he rallied against in earnest when elements of the scene before him began to fade away.

A faint light appeared behind his eyelids, and as he became more and more conscious of that light, he thought he sensed a figure moving nearby, accompanied by a quiet, female voice. He made to open his eyes but immediately realized his grave mistake: he was waking up. And it had all been a dream.

Severus sat up suddenly, painfully aware that the reality now surrounding him didn’t include Harry at all, naked or otherwise, and noticed the figure moving in front of him was his house elf. He slumped back down onto the bed.

“Pokey is waking Professor Snape at six o’clock, sir, as Professor Snape requests.”

Severus grunted in response.

“I is bringing Professor Snape breakfast in bed, then?” the elf asked timidly.

Severus leaned up on one elbow and considered the elf for a minute, narrowing his eyes as he looked down his nose at her. There seemed to be a deafening silence hanging in the air – the space that only a dream can leave behind. He sighed deeply and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, but had to grab the sheets quickly to keep himself covered, realizing almost too late he was still erect.

“Professor Snape, sir…?” the house elf squeaked out, waiting for her instruction.
Severus sneered, not caring that it was an elf he directed it towards – an elf that took no interest in the affairs of humans and likely would not have understood his predicament anyway. Still, embarrassment had always caused him to act irrationally and he ended up unleashing some of his frustration on the poor, unsuspecting creature.

“Get out! You have done quite enough already!”

Pokey’s eyes grew large and horrified and she bowed repeatedly before Severus, murmuring her words almost like a chant. “Pokey is sorry to have offended Professor Snape, she is just wanting to help. Pokey has offended Professor Snape and must punish herself now—”

Severus cut her off, gritting his teeth. “You will do no such thing! Just. Leave.”

The house elf made a tiny squeak and wrung her hands over her ears nervously before scurrying into the antechamber and disappearing with the same faint pop! she’d arrived with.

Severus threw off his sheets and sat on the edge of his bed, putting his feet on the stone floor. The coldness of it jarred him awake, and he leaned forward to drop his forehead into his fingers, his elbows on his thighs, the curtains of his black hair swinging around to shroud his face. He sighed again. Another dream about Harry. He looked down at his erection with disgust, as though it had betrayed him.

It was a terrible thing to be lonely, he realized. Even worse was to pine for something unattainable and undeserved. His ill-fated attempt at a kiss with Harry had proven as much. The problem was, he’d had a taste of his desire; his temptation – and, foul beast that it was, was not taking kindly to being tamed.

Standing, he made his way to the bathroom, encouraging the door to slam with an abrupt shove. It suited his mood.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Back in his office, Severus shook off the memory again and tried to resume the work he had spread out on his desk. Piles of student essays were waiting for his pronouncement of their fate, his quill poised over them as though ready to strike. Re-focusing his eyes on the top parchment in the stack, he saw that a pool of ink had soaked into the fibrous paper, dripping from where his quill had hovered. He sighed and replaced the quill in its stand.

Harry was only two days into his trip to Australia and already Severus found he couldn’t stop thinking about it. He’d never been there himself but had always wanted to go. To top it off, neither had spoken about the kiss after last Sunday’s session – not that they’d really had an opportunity to do so – but Severus feared his impulsive behavior would only end up driving Harry away, that wedge of awkwardness eventually forcing him into the arms of someone else.

Scrubbing his face roughly with a hand, Severus sighed and got up from his desk. He needed a break. Sitting there was only inspiring a litany of disheartening and punitive thoughts, and he had had all he could take for one day.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP
Somehow Marcus had picked up on the fact that Harry tended to be around on Sundays and had begun hanging around Severus’ quarters. It seemed he was trying to avoid walking by too much, presumably to avoid arousing suspicion, but his tactic failed when, one afternoon late into Harry’s travels, Severus rounded the corner and nearly collided with him.

Surmising his Prefect’s proximity to his quarters on a day when he should be either patrolling the corridors or socializing with his peers, Severus looked down his nose at his sixth year.

“May I help you, Mr. Braham?”

“Oh, pardon me, sir. Yes. I…” Marcus swallowed. “I was wondering if you knew where I could find Hermione Granger.”

It would be an odd request for any of his students, least of all one who might stand to gain something by an association with someone so closely linked to Harry.

“I am afraid Ms. Granger has been gone all week – becoming the next Mrs. Weasley, I believe. What is it you require?”

A brief look of triumph crossed Marcus’ countenance, but he schooled it away quickly. Not quickly enough for Severus, however, who deduced its meaning quickly: Marcus had been trying to ascertain Harry’s whereabouts.

And I just offered it without pause. Sloppy, Severus, very sloppy.

“Well, she has been tutoring me in Charms, and I had hoped to meet up with her today to continue our work.”

Severus eyed him shrewdly, knowing perfectly well it was a bald-faced lie. As if his nearly twenty-year tenure as a professor hadn’t taught him how to spot one, the fact that Marcus was foolish enough to involve Hermione revealed his inexperience with subterfuge. Hermione was one of the most conscientious students Severus knew – and presently Head Girl – and if she had been tutoring a student, she most certainly would have informed that student of her pending absence from school and scheduled them accordingly.

For a brief moment, Severus considered calling Marcus’ bluff, but then decided better of it, as doing so would only make Marcus aware that Severus was onto him. No, better to let him trip himself up at another time.

“It appears you are out of luck for today.”

“Yes, sir, so it appears. Thank you, anyway.” Marcus nodded briefly and then walked back the way he had come.

As he disappeared down the hallway and out of sight, Severus couldn’t help feeling that, despite his unwitting efforts to abet Marcus in his plan, he felt some semblance of pride at the fact he had just been out-Slytherined by one of his own. Point to Marcus.

Savor it, my young victor, for it will surely be your last.
Two days later, a Tuesday, found Marcus standing to the side of the door to Professor Flitwick’s classroom, watching the seventh years file out. He was waiting for one student in particular who he had learned would be there.

If there was one thing Marcus prided himself on, it was his ability to strategize. He particularly excelled at it on the Quidditch pitch, as evidenced by the fact that Slytherin was currently unchallenged for this year’s Cup, but also knew it was what was keeping him one step ahead of Professor Snape.

“All right,” he called, quickly stepping over to her.

“Yes?” she answered, giving him a friendly but assessing gaze.

“Hello.” He stuck out his hand to shake hers. “I’m Marcus Braham, sixth-year Slytherin.”

She nodded. “A Prefect, yes – your name is familiar.”

Perhaps befriending her is not going to be as difficult as I thought. “Do you have a minute?”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

After five minutes of rambling, meaningless conversation, where Marcus said little aside from edging closer to the topic Hermione realized he really wanted to discuss, she decided to cut to the chase. “Let me just stop you right there,” she started. “What is it you want to ask about Harry? It’s clear you’re not really here to see me.”

Marcus looked stunned for a moment, though whether that was because she had just called him on his antics or because he was really unaware of his single-minded focus, she didn’t know. He looked away for a moment and then smiled. “Am I that obvious?”

“Yes.” She was slightly irritated but couldn’t help a small smile at the look on his face. “Let me guess: you think being friendly with me is a way to get to Harry, right?”

Marcus spluttered, shifting back and forth on his feet. “No, I—”

“Or that I will give up some gossip about my best friend? If so, I’ll save you the trouble on both counts – it’s not going to happen.”

“Wow. You are really protective of him.”

“Yes. Now, if there’s nothing else, I’d best be going. It was nice meeting you.”

“No, wait! Actually, there was something I wanted to ask. Not about Harry,” he added hastily.

“Yes?” She didn’t bother hiding her impatience.

“I was wondering if you would be willing to tutor me in Charms. Professor Flitwick says you are one of his best students.”

Hermione smiled shrewdly as she appraised him, trying to dissect his motivations. This was way too
convenient a request to be solely about academic achievement, even without their previous thread of conversation. Also, Marcus was a tutor himself and would be familiar with all the sixth and seventh year tutors. There were others – Margaret During, especially – that routinely outpaced Hermione in Charms. So why her? If it was a ploy to befriend her in the hopes of getting closer to Harry, she was already a step ahead of him. If it was to learn a charm or spell to use on Harry, she would also see that coming a mile away.

As she took in the expectant look on his face, she realized that even though there were other reasons driving his request, at least agreeing to help him academically would give her an opportunity to keep a closer eye on him – and that, for now, was enough.

“I do have a little time in my schedule. How about two nights a week, thirty minutes each, starting next Monday?”

“Yes, yes, that sounds great! Thank you!”

His overt enthusiasm about Charms confirmed he was excited for another reason entirely, and although she didn’t have a firm guess about what just yet, she at least felt reassured by the notion that she’d be there when it revealed itself.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

The bell above the door tinkled merrily as Harry entered. It was a Wednesday morning and Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes was quiet except for a whistled tune that carried about the shop. There were no customers in yet, far as Harry could tell – precisely what he’d hoped for when he’d made the decision to visit early. Besides, they’d only been back from Australia for a few days, and he assumed there would be a lot to do to reopen the shop after its short hiatus.

“Oi! Harry!” came a familiar voice. Harry looked up to see George standing in the loft of the store, rearranging products on a rather wonky, rotating shelf.

“Hi,” Harry called back, smiling.

George promptly slid down the railing of a spiral staircase and came to a stop in front of Harry, a wide grin set on his face.

“What brings you in? No, wait, don’t tell me!” He stood back and regarded Harry, then pointed at him with a snap of his fingers. “Ron must have told you about our newest product. Come in to see it, have you? Spiffing! You won’t believe what we—”

“No, I didn’t,” Harry interrupted with a chuckle, holding up his hand. “I mean, I’m sure it’s brilliant. I just hoped to have a word. Is this a good time?”

“Well, seeing as there ain’t no customers in here for me to charm Galleons from, I’m all yours.” He spread his arms magnanimously, then swept them to the side to indicate Harry should precede him to the office in the rear of the shop.

“Where’s Ron?” Harry asked as they walked.

“I’ve moved him to the afternoon shift. We split things up so I could pop over to the pub for a pint or two in the evening.”
“Ah,” Harry mused, somehow appreciating the new schedule even more now that it meant he and George would be alone. He also understood what it was George didn’t say: that he was moving on with his life after Fred’s death and wanted to get out and socialize with others. Idly, Harry wondered if it was Angelina he was going to meet, as they’d certainly looked cozy at the wedding.

The office was small, but brightly lit. The doorway was flanked by two thin desks, laden with boxes, papers, quills and what appeared to be the remnants of some of their more unsuccessful products. The orange walls were covered with sketches on parchment, hastily scribbled notes, shipping receipts and the occasional glossy pin-up witch that grinned seductively as she flashed her breasts.

Harry chose the seat closest to the back wall and George leaned against one of the desks, his hands curled around the edge of it to either side of his hips.

“So, what brings you in, Harry?”

“Um… I had a couple questions about my tattoo.”

“Cor,” George enthused. “On with it, then.” He leaned closer with an eager look, as if he was excited to impart insider secrets about one of his favorite projects – and perhaps he was.

“Well, I was wondering… when you animated it, did you… do anything else to it?”

“Might have.”

Harry noted the grin on George’s face and had to remind himself who he was talking to. Of course there would be ‘more to it’ – mischief was George’s middle name. He didn’t want this to turn into a guessing game, though, so he asked something more specific.

“Did you charm it so it reacts to people differently?”

“Yeah, o’course, Harry. It’s so you can steer clear of all the gits who just want a piece of your arse. Jolly fine thinking on my part, if I do say so myself.”

For a moment, Harry just sat there, stunned. “Oh. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“But what do the different reactions mean? I mean, which one—?”

“Should you be looking for?” George finished, sliding down the desk to sit closer to Harry. He leaned over conspiratorially and whispered, “The kind where the phoenix wants to bask in the person’s touch, where it seems to want to crawl off your skin and onto theirs.” He walked two fingers up the side of Harry’s arm as he spoke.

Harry swallowed. “What does it mean if it reacts that way?”

George sat upright again, his tone more conversational now. “That they’re a match for you.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. “But… how does it… how would you…?” He closed his mouth with a snap and George chuckled.

“Trade secret, that.”

Harry just shook his head. “You’re bloody brilliant, you know that?”

“That’s the word on the street, yeah. Ruddy gossips.” George flashed his teeth in a cheeky smile.
“Why didn’t you tell me about this earlier?”

George seemed to ponder this for a second and then shrugged. “Dunno, actually. I suppose I didn’t think about it. It wasn’t meant to be a secret.” Then he grinned and nudged Harry gently. “But if you’ve noticed different reactions, that means you’ve had people touching it, you old dog!”

“Yeah, but it’s not what you think. Not really, anyway.”

George waggled his eyebrows. “Whatever you say, Harry.”

“Sod off,” Harry teased with a grin. Then he sobered slightly. “So, could you touch it then? So I can see what it does?”

George grinned wickedly. “And put my hands all over The Boy Who Lived? Why, I thought you’d never ask!” At the look of alarm on Harry’s face, he laughed. “I’m only teasing, Harry. Your dangly bits are not my particular persuasion.” He winked, causing Harry to chuckle nervously.

“Come ‘ere, then,” George urged, beckoning with a gesture. “Let me show you.”

Harry stood up and began unbuttoning his shirt, willing away the embarrassment at being under so much scrutiny. Once the fabric fell open, it revealed his bare chest. The phoenix was resting its head against the right side of his rib cage, as normal, but its one visible eye was open. George stepped closer.

“Ready?” he asked, and Harry nodded, looking down at the hand hovering close to his skin. When George’s fingers made contact, the phoenix immediately arched into his touch, opening its wings in one sweeping, graceful gesture and then folding them again. Harry gasped in awe and looked up.

“Keep watching,” George instructed.

When Harry looked back down, the bird winked at him.

“It winked!” Harry exclaimed, then laughed.

“Yeah, I had to put my mark on it somehow, didn’t I? It recognizes me as the creator of the enchantment, so its reaction to me will be unique. You should ask a few others to do this so you can see how else it responds.”

“Like Ron and Hermione?”

George nodded. “It’ll acknowledge your friends, sure.”

“Is there ever an instance where it won’t move at all for someone?”

“Yeah, but just Muggles. It reacts when it detects a magical signature.”

Harry nodded and then tipped his head with a slight purse of his lips. “So what aren’t you telling me? There’s more, isn’t there?”

George smiled. “Perhaps, but you’ll have to discover it on your own. I’m not going to spoil all my punchlines.”

Harry wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that. “It’s not going to do anything embarrassing, is it? Like turn into a pink flamingo or something?”

For once, George’s expression grew serious. “No. My enhancements were for your benefit only. I’m
all for a good joke, as you well know, but I would never defile someone’s personal artwork. That’s sacred turf, that.” He nodded at Harry’s chest.

Something warmed inside Harry and he smiled. “Oh. Good. Cheers.”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry spent the rest of that afternoon trying to resist the urge to go track down his friends, but the need to know more about his tattoo’s reactions was driving him to distraction. When he finally felt he could wait no longer, he Apparated to Hogwarts. Luckily, he found both Ron and Hermione without too much effort. They were walking the grounds outside the castle, hand-in-hand. As Harry approached, he realized Ginny, Neville and Michael Corner were also with them, but had been obscured by the surrounding copse of trees at first glance.

Jackpot, he thought. He hoped asking people to touch him wouldn’t be weird; he just had to know, and this seemed like a good variety of people. He’d start with Ron and Hermione, as they would oblige him easily, and then see about asking the others.

Neville saw him approach first. “Harry!” came the surprised, warm greeting, followed by a swift hug.

“Hi, Neville!” Harry enthused, pleased to see his friend again for the first time in months. A chorus of other greetings occurred at the same time, and Harry nodded to everyone in turn.

“What brings you by, mate?” Ron asked.

Suddenly the sole focus of five pairs of eyes, Harry shifted nervously under their curious gazes, unsure if he would be able to ask anything at this point, much less this particular favor. He looked first to Hermione, who regarded him with an encouraging expression, and felt his confidence swell.

“I, um, have a quick favor to ask each of you, but you can say no if you want. It’d just be really helpful for me, if you wouldn’t mind.” He knew he was talking really fast, but when everyone started nodding their heads almost immediately, he allowed himself to relax a little.

“Of course, Harry, what is it?” Hermione offered.

Harry blushed slightly. “You all know about my tattoo, right?” Everyone but Michael and Neville nodded. “Well, I saw George earlier and he said the animation charm on it responds to people differently. So, I was just curious to see how it—”

“Say no more, Harry, let’s see,” Ron interrupted eagerly, rubbing his hands together. Apparently working at the shop had ignited a keen interest in seeing George’s specialty work.

As Harry slipped his wool coat off his shoulders and felt the chilly, November air breach the thin fabric of his shirt, he shivered, making a mental note to choose his venue better next time. Hermione must have caught the reaction, for she slipped her wand into her hand. With a large, arcing gesture and some mumbled words, a warming charm engulfed the lot of them.

She smiled with a shrug. “I wasn’t sure if the cold air would affect the reaction. I also included a subtle Notice-Me-Not charm so you won’t attract an audience while half-stripping in the middle of the grounds.” That garnered a few sniggers.
“Brilliant as ever, Hermione,” Harry said gratefully, to which she smiled.

Instead of removing his shirt completely, he just let it fall open and tucked it behind his shoulders. “All right, Ron,” he said. “You first.”

“What do I have to do?” Ron asked.

“Just touch it anywhere and we’ll see what it does.”

“Okay.” Ron stepped closer and everyone else craned their necks to see around him. He reached out a hand and touched four fingers to the neck of the phoenix. Harry held his breath.

As soon as Ron’s fingers made contact with his skin, the entirety of the phoenix glowed a deep blue and the majestic bird bowed its head. One of the girls gasped. Startled, Ron removed his fingers quickly, and the bird returned to its normal ink color and resting stance. Harry and Ron looked at each other and grinned.

“Blimey, did you see that? Did you feel anything?” Ron asked.

“Not really,” Harry said. “It was a little warm when it glowed, but not much. I think it’s supposed to be more of a visual thing, but I don’t know. That’s why I wanted you guys to test it.”

Hermione stepped over. “Can I try?” At Harry’s eager nod, she mimicked Ron and pressed four of her fingers below Harry’s ribs, right over the breast feathers of the phoenix. This time, it was everyone else who seemed to be holding their breath. However, if they were expecting something new, they were going to be disappointed, for as soon as Hermione’s fingers made contact with the tattoo, it simply glowed a deep blue and the bird bowed its head again in the same regal gesture.

“Huh,” Harry said, looking between Ron and Hermione. “I’m not sure why it was the same for both of you, but if it’s any help, that’s the first time I’ve ever seen that reaction.” He smiled hopefully while Hermione seemed to be contemplating it.

Ginny stepped up next. “Three’s the charm, right?” she asked. She practically had her palm against his side before he could even answer – something that Michael seemed to notice as well, judging by the slight scowl on his face.

Harry cleared his throat. “We’ll see.” But this time when he looked down to see what happened to the tattoo, he watched as it skittered away from Ginny’s touch and ended up somewhere on the back of his neck, according to Ron. Ginny seemed surprised, as did Harry, but then he remembered that was the same sort of reaction it had had to Charlie. At the time he only had a guess as to why it was reacting that way, but George’s explanation confirmed it: neither Charlie nor Ginny were a good match for him. He didn’t feel the need to tell Ginny that, though. No sense hurting her feelings any more than he probably already had.

“Why did it move away from me and not from Ron or Hermione?” she asked, a hint of a pout gracing her lips.

“I don’t know,” Harry lied. “George didn’t tell me what the reactions meant, only that it responds to people differently.” That much was true, at least.

Michael stepped forward now, whether out of curiosity about the tattoo or just to move Ginny away, Harry could only guess. Michael looked once at Harry to gain permission, and then at Harry’s nod, touched two fingers to the phoenix’s head. The bird promptly curled into a tight ball, tucking its long neck and head completely under a wing. It seemed to pulse once in a glow of dingy yellow, and then went still before returning to the blue-black ink.
 Somehow even more confused than before, Harry blinked at Michael and then shrugged. Ginny stood with her hands on her hips, clearly assessing the tattoo’s reaction to Michael, and then Harry’s reaction to both. Hermione, on the other hand, was tapping her lip with a thoughtful expression on her face.

“Let’s see what it does for Neville, now,” she said, as though she was on the brink of an explanation. Harry hoped whatever it was, she would wait to share it with him in private. He caught her eye briefly to try and convey this, and she nodded almost imperceptibly.

Neville walked over and stopped in front of Harry, his expression somewhat troubled. “What if it doesn’t respond to me?”

Harry couldn’t help but smile. “It will – it responds to everyone with a magical signature. Try it,” he encouraged.

Neville seemed dubious, but regardless, he reached out a hand and hovered it over Harry’s skin. After a quick look at Harry, he concentrated on Harry’s side, perhaps feeling that would be the most polite place to put his hand. Once again, everyone leaned close to see, their mouths open in anticipation. Harry looked down.

As Neville’s fingers made contact, the entire tattoo once again glowed a deep blue and the phoenix’s head bowed in formal acknowledgment. Neville removed his fingers quickly, also seeming somewhat startled by the result, as though he expected it to burn his skin or something. His face belied any fear, though – he was positively beaming.

“Did you see that? It did the same thing for me as it did for Ron and Hermione!”

Ron clapped Neville on the back while Harry noted Hermione’s expression: she had figured something out. He’d recognize that clever smile anywhere. Eager to hear what she had to say, Harry cast about for some sort of excuse to get her alone. Fortunately, he didn’t have to think long, as the group began to disperse on its own.

Michael announced he had to get to his next class, and beckoned Ginny to join him. She seemed to leave reluctantly, but they both gave a friendly wave as they walked off.

“Me, too, actually,” Neville agreed, and ran to catch up with Michael and Ginny after saying his goodbyes, which always involved encouraging Harry to visit more often.

“Ron, I’ll catch up with you later at the shop; I’ve got to go see the Headmistress now.”

“Yeah, okay,” Ron said, and gave Hermione a quick kiss. “Later, Harry,” he added, before jogging up the hill towards the others. Harry turned to Hermione.

“You don’t really have to see the Headmistress right now, do you?”

“Of course not,” she said. “I could tell you wanted to hear my theory on your tattoo, so I decided I’d better send Ron along without me. You’re welcome, by the way,” she added with a smirk.

Harry laughed. “Thanks!” He buttoned up his shirt and slipped his wool coat back on. “Can we go somewhere warmer, though?”

“Why do you never dress for the weather?” she admonished half-heartedly and Harry made a face.

“I dunno, I guess I just don’t think about it. I don’t like cold weather.”
"We can have a chat in the castle; it’ll be private. I just need to stop by my rooms first and pick up something.” They walked together up the sloping lawn towards Hogwarts’ main entrance.

Harry realized then he had never seen the quarters for Head Girl and Head Boy before, but had always been curious. Rumor had it they were just smaller versions of what the teachers received, and those he’d seen. Well, Severus’ he’d seen.

_Severus._

He was suddenly struck with an urgent and peculiar thought, and it made his heart skip a beat. What would happen if _Severus_ touched his tattoo?

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

After an impromptu tour of her quarters – small as they were, they were _hers_ – Hermione and Harry headed towards the staff lounge on the fourth floor. While Hermione was not technically staff, Headmistress McGonagall had invited her to use the room whenever she liked, knowing it was often a private space, and one well suited to quiet activities.

The room was empty, so they made themselves comfortable in two squashy armchairs near the fire. Hermione pulled out the book she had retrieved from her rooms and turned it so Harry could read the cover.

“_Farbentheorie_?” he asked. “What the hell is that?”

She chuckled. “It means ‘color theory’ in German. I borrowed it from the Durmstrang library last month to assist with some Potions work I was doing, and—”

“You speak German?” he interrupted.

“No, of course not. This is the English translated text, but the title remains in German.”

“Oh. Okay. So you think the colors of my tattoo mean something?”

“Definitely. In most cultures, color is central to the representation of ideology, politics, religion, and so forth. The same is true in Wizarding culture.”

Harry seemed to reflect on this. “That makes sense, I guess. Sort of like the four Hogwarts Houses.”

“Exactly. Those colors were not randomly chosen, there is a meaning behind each one.”

“So you think George used color theory magic? Is there such a thing?”

“Yes – it is used in Potions, especially for medicinal purposes, but it shows up in other disciplines, too.”

“Professor Trelawney was always going on about color in our auras,” Harry offered.

Hermione snorted and then opened the book on her lap. She consulted the index first and then began flipping busily through the pages.

Harry leaned closer, his eyes alternating between her and the book. “Well?”
“Just a theory,” she mused.

“What’s the theory, Granger?”

“Well, there’s more to it than just color, isn’t there? The tattoo reacts to people differently, and sometimes without the addition of color – like what happened for Ginny. The only thing I can figure is that somehow George spelled it to determine a person’s inner motivations, or perhaps their standing with you or something, and then have the phoenix reflect that in its pose or actions.”

“And?”

“And I really have no idea how he did that. I’m sorry, Harry, you’ll have to get that out of him if you really want to know.”

“No, I meant what do the colors mean?”

“Oh. Well, from what I saw, it looks like the tattoo is confirming that myself, Ron and Neville are all loyal to you. That’s what dark blue signifies. Also, the bird bowed to us formally, which is an acknowledgment of respect. For Michael, there was a brief glow of yellow while the bird tucked itself away. Yellow is an attention-seeking color, so I suppose given your history with Ginny, he might feel like he’s competing for her attention. It could also be jealousy. Your tattoo didn’t skirt his touch, though, but it did become sort of unavailable. That might suggest he’s neutral to you. He’s neither loyal nor adversarial, he’s just… there. If that makes any sense. And Ginny… well, based on what you told me about Charlie, I’d say that neither of them are a good fit for you. A phoenix running away is a pretty good sign, I should think.”

Harry blinked. “You got all that from this afternoon?”

“Most of it, yes. It seems fairly logical, really, and I already knew a bit about what different colors mean.”

“So aside from blue, what other colors would be good?”

“Red or orange, or a blend of the two. Or any shade of purple.” She grinned again, although this time it was sly.

“Why, what would that mean?”

“Well, purple combines the loyalty of blue and the energy of red, so that’d be quite lovely to see. And the reds and oranges themselves mean desire, passion, sex, pleasure… love.”

As predicted, Harry blushed.

“I take it you haven’t seen that reaction yet,” she said.

He cleared his throat and turned to watch the flames flicker in the fireplace. “No.”

Hermione smiled gently at him even though he couldn’t see it. “You will, Harry. I know you will.”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Letting the slippery material of Harry’s invisibility cloak cascade over his fingers, Severus smiled
slightly to himself. He couldn’t believe Harry had just handed it over without even so much as a
‘what do you plan to do with it?’, but then Severus wasn’t just anyone asking, was he? Perhaps
Harry did trust him as much as he professed to during his sixth draught; his impassioned defense had
certainly seemed earnest, and when had he ever known Harry to behave otherwise?

Inspecting the garment carefully, Severus discovered the cloak was like nothing he had ever seen
before. Exquisite in its simplicity, it had a virtually seamless and weightless construction. And it was
impenetrable, too, apparently. Professional curiosity having got the best of him, Severus tossed a
variety of increasingly caustic hexes at it. The cloak absorbed them all with not even the slightest
mark visible on the fabric – if the material could even be called a fabric.

He knew the lore of the Deathly Hallows, of course, and Dumbledore had said Harry had an
invisibility cloak in his possession during his years at Hogwarts, but Severus never imagined the two
might be one and the same. Moreover, he never expected he’d get the chance to experience it
firsthand. It had been a stroke of good fortune that Harry had reminded him of its existence when he
did.

Severus swung the cloak in a loose arc around his shoulders and let it cover his body. All but his
head instantly disappeared. As he moved from side to side, the noise of the material was nearly
imperceptible; his breathing would be louder. For lack of a better word, it was perfect.

After covering his head, Severus slipped out of his quarters and into the hallway. Although it was
blessedly free of students, he still cast a cushioning charm on his feet so the telltale clack of his boots
on the stone floors would be silenced as well. It was eerie, in a way, to move about in near silence. It
felt ghostly; powerful.

The makings of a smirk turned up one corner of Severus’ mouth.

As he headed up a back passage to the fourth floor, he saw Professor Sprout reaching for the door to
the staff lounge. Severus knew in order to enter the room, he’d have to slip in behind her, and so
hurried on ahead. He managed to trail her close enough to remain undetected, but his gig was almost
up when his shoulder grazed the closing door, causing it to slow enough that it almost came to a halt.
Pomona didn’t seem to notice, however, and pushed the door closed as though nothing was amiss.
Severus let out a slow breath.

A few other teachers had gathered by the coffee and tea service, sampling the afternoon’s pastries
and chatting amiably about their classes. It was the reason Severus rarely made an appearance here –
the last thing he wanted to do was discuss his classes after an entire day of being subjected to them in
person.

Pressing himself against a far wall, so as to ensure no one bumped into him accidentally – invisible or
not, he was still a solid form underneath the cloak – he watched his fill of colleague interaction with a
certain detached amusement.

The more he observed, the more a particular thought kept forcing its way in. He’d had the thought
before, but it seemed to be getting stronger and more insistent with time. His role as a teacher was
feeling increasingly separate from him; disparate and foreign. It was no secret he was not passionate
about his job – had never been, in fact – but until this school year, it had simply been a necessity;
he’d never had the luxury to indulge such malcontent thoughts before.

A shuffle of teachers near him interrupted his ruminating and he saw they were all getting ready to
leave. A quick glance at the clock on the wall told him it was likely for dinner. Severus turned to take
inventory of the room and noticed only Professor Domhall would remain.
He made a quick decision to exit along with the large group and positioned himself just beyond their trailing wake. However, when he passed the back side of the fireplace, he stopped when he heard what sounded like Harry’s voice. Stepping around the far corner of the fireplace, an area that had previously been out of sight came into view. Sure enough, it was Harry. He was draped comfortably across a chair in front of the fire, talking with Hermione.

It was good to see him again, though the irony of spying on Harry with his own invisibility cloak was not lost on Severus. Still, as he stood there greedily looking his fill, he decided Australia must have been good for Harry. The bronzed skin and relaxed smile were a welcome sight, if not a stark contrast, to the emotionally overwrought and exhausted Harry he’d seen barely a few weeks ago. He seemed more content and robust now – and more alluring, if that were even possible.

The diminishing voices of his colleagues signaled Severus’ time was up, and he rushed to catch them. He only got a few steps before he froze again, this time at the name on Hermione’s tongue.

“Do you know Marcus Braham?” she asked Harry and he looked up at her.

“Who?”

Severus grinned in a self-satisfied manner. Unfortunately, it was only to be short-lived.

“Oh wait, yeah. He introduced himself to me in Hogsmeade once. Is he the one who plays Quidditch for Slytherin? The blonde bloke – the one the girls are always mooning over?”

“And the boys,” Hermione added casually.

Harry blinked. “He’s gay?”

“Apparently.”

“Huh,” Harry added, drifting in thought.

Severus scowled, but was forced to slip out of the lounge when Professor Domhall stood to make his exit. It was his last window of opportunity – one that didn’t come with a high risk of discovery, at least. There was no telling how long he’d have to stay to wait out Harry and Hermione, and, magic castle or not, doors that appeared to open on their own would garner attention.

Once free of the lounge, Severus stalked off in the direction of his office, casting his mind about for some sort of distraction that would prevent him from going to throttle his Prefect.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“Remember when we talked in Australia, and I told you Severus and I were working on something?”

“Yes?” Hermione sat forward, clearly interested.

Harry had wanted to tell her sooner, but knew with the wedding preparation (and then the actual wedding) Hermione had had enough things on her mind. But now, being alone with her in the lounge, it seemed like the right time. He proceeded to explain Evochi, and how he came to try it in the first place (although Hermione wasn’t impressed that he had been planning to leave England on
his own), how Severus had hoped it would help Harry heal from the emotional effects of the war, as well as allowing him to meet his parents. He described what he’d experienced in his six sessions so far (though he skimmed over the two about Voldemort for the time being) and recounted some of the scientific conversations – including, and especially, the ones where he had contributed something to the process.

Harry couldn’t help noting the look on Hermione’s face as he spoke: for the first time in recent memory, Harry was teaching *her* something. It was, in fact, the first time he had told anyone about Evochi, and it had gone much better than he had anticipated. He had been expecting a lecture, but received only her rapt attention and warm encouragement. And, if he wasn’t mistaken, more than little awe for Severus. It gave Harry the confidence to consider telling Ron as well – at some point.

“Would you like to join me on my next session?” he asked.

For a moment, Hermione just sat there, speechless. “Really? I could do that?”

Harry smiled. “Yeah, really. I can see you’re interested, and honestly, Evochi’s the sort of thing you have to experience to understand. It isn’t something you can get from a book.”

“Oh, Harry, I’d love to!” she squealed. “Thank you!”

He would later swear that Hermione bounced for the remainder of the afternoon, though she would ardently deny it.
As he opened the door to Severus’ lab, Harry felt a gentle rush of air tickle his nose. It’d been two weeks since his last visit, but somehow that had been enough time to make the scent he’d come to associate with Severus seem new again. Almost by reflex, he filled his lungs with it while his brain once again tried to identify its layers.

It had a somewhat herbal, stale aspect to it (though he suspected that was more to do with the castle itself, and the fact that the lab did not appear to have any ventilation) but the rest… that was all masculine. He didn’t know how else to define it. There was something distinct about the way a man smelled that Harry liked; there was a firmness, a roughness to it, whereas with women, even their texture tended to be softer, subtler.

When Hermione nudged him gently away from the door so that she could close it, he realized he’d barely got two steps inside. He didn’t know why the scent always drove him to distraction, but he decided he’d just enjoy it for now and maybe analyze it later. He was already a bit nervous about how Severus was going to act around him, after their halted kiss and his subsequently abrupt exit. Harry could hear Severus in his stockroom in the back, and so he simply made his way across the room to where two identical chaise lounges had been arranged. If Hermione noticed how well he seemed to know his way around, she didn’t say anything.

When Severus emerged, Hermione was the first to speak. “Did you get my owl?” Harry looked up, but quickly realized she had been speaking to Severus.

“Indeed. Welcome,” Severus said as he turned to acknowledge their guest. “I assume Harry has shared the particulars with you?”

“Yes, sir, he did, and I’m quite excited – thank you for allowing me take part.” Since Harry was busy situating himself on a chaise, he missed the brief look Hermione and Severus shared, in which he nodded minutely and she offered a small, knowing smile.

“In here, you may call me Severus,” he said, more to the room than anything, as though nothing out of the ordinary had just transpired between them. He pointed his wand at a small cabinet that stood in one of the corners. A moment later, it was the black, high-backed chair Harry had come to associate with their Evochi sessions.

“Ha! So you do transfigure that chair from something!”

“Pardon me?” Severus asked, turning.

Harry flushed slightly. “Oh, um, nothing.” When Severus kept staring at him, a single brow arched over his left eye, Harry explained. “I’ve always wondered where you get that chair from, because I never see it in here when the lab is normal. When the lab is just a lab, I mean. Never mind.” He waved a hand dismissively and shook his head.

Hermione giggled. “Oh, Harry, you’re so cute.”


Severus had since resumed his preparations, his back to the room. Since Harry couldn’t see his face, he had no idea how to read the man. He knew Severus wasn’t going to say anything about the kiss in front of Hermione, but even so, Harry thought he was acting a bit more professorial than the situation

Draught No. 7
called for. But this was probably how it was going to be: Severus would just pretend the kiss had never happened. Disappointed, Harry sighed to himself.

“Because after everything that’s happened in your life,” Hermione explained, pulling Harry back to the conversation, “you can still look at magic with a sense of child-like curiosity and wonder.”

Harry pouted for a minute before smiling, realizing it was most likely a compliment. “Thanks. I think.”

She punched his arm lightly. “You ‘think’?”

They chuckled together as Severus walked over, two vials in one hand and his leather-bound journal in the other. “While these linked sessions are still under observation,” he started, “I will continue to split one instance of the potion into two doses. As we now know, you will have one hour.”

Harry could tell by the look on Hermione’s face that she still had some trepidation about the session, despite him answering all of her questions (and then some) before their arrival. In truth, anything he had told her was also for him, as he was feeling something of the same.

This would be his first time on the outside of a linked session, the observer position, and he was linking with a first-time Evochi user. It would also be the first time he had used Legilimency on Hermione – the very thing that had dictated who would get which role in the first place. To top it off, Hermione had been very tight-lipped about her intention for the draught, so on almost every level possible, Harry didn’t know what to expect.

Still, despite all the unknowns, he was excited Hermione would get to experience the potion firsthand. He gave her a reassuring smile as he pulled out his wand and mentally prepared himself for the delicate intrusion he was about to make. Regardless of the outcome, though, he knew Severus would be there watching over the session, and that, more than anything, gave him the confidence to proceed.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry opened his eyes, blinking rapidly against a bright light above him. He instinctively drew up a hand to shield his face, squinting as his surroundings began to materialize. He was sitting in a long, institutional-looking hallway, and it was empty except for him.

With a start, he realized the grey mist he was accustomed to waking in was nowhere to be seen; moreover, this place had seemed to instantly appear, versus drawing itself out as was the norm for an Evochi construct. Stamping down the panic that was threatening to rise in his chest, he focused instead on noting another detail: the hallway was lined with doors, mostly uniform in nature, except the odd one here or there in color. If he didn’t know better, he would have guessed it was some kind of identification system, as no other signage or markings were visible. Even the walls were blank.

But perhaps even more disconcerting was the fact that all around him, everywhere, a deafening silence hung in the air, as though not another single, living thing existed. The white noise it left behind filled his ears. It was eerie.

Just then, a door to his right opened, and he jumped as Hermione stuck her head out.

“Harry! There you are! Oh, thank goodness, I wasn’t sure if I was ever going to find you!”
“Blimey, Hermione, you scared the shit out of me!” Harry gasped, his hand clutched to his chest.

“Sorry!” she exclaimed, flustered but smiling. She reached out a hand to help him up. He couldn’t begrudge her too much, though, as despite his heart pounding in his ears, he was beyond relieved to see her.

“What is this place?” he asked.

Instead of answering, Hermione simply held open the door she had come through and gestured. Together they left the hallway in favor of… another hallway. She seemed to know where she was going, though, so Harry just followed, trying to take in everything as they went – not that the view changed much.

At the junction of one corner, after several right and left turns that Harry had lost track of, he spotted a small, pink door, tucked away out of plain sight. The knob was nearly pulsing.

“Hey, look at this.” He walked closer and was just about to touch the knob when Hermione turned around and squeaked, her eyes going wide. “No, no, that’s definitely not the one we want!” she said hurriedly, grabbing his arm and pulling him away from it.

“But wait, it’s pulsing! Can’t you see it?” He pointed at it as she dragged him along.

“Yes, Harry, I saw it.” She blushed, and Harry grew even more confused. This was a place of hallways upon hallways, strange, pink doors, and at the moment, no forthcoming answers.

As they walked on, they passed no less than a dozen other doors, all closed and unmarked, just like every other one Harry had seen. He began to wonder if they were simply going in circles. The click of their footfalls on the polished, tile floor had been the only evidence of their presence, although even that echo seemed to bounce once before being absorbed into the absolute stillness that surrounded them.

“Hermione?” he tried again.

“Hang on, I’ll explain everything in a minute. I think I might have made this more complicated than it needed to be.”

Harry snorted, a retort or two about the inner-workings of Hermione’s brain coming to mind (Severus must be rubbing off on him), but he held his tongue. Instead, he said, “You do realize you can just create something else, something easier, right?”

Hermione stopped and turned slightly, as though contemplating it, a finger pressed to her lips. After a moment of looking in both directions, she shook her head and said, “No, I thought about that, but since we’re linked together right now, I was concerned that restructuring the setting might kick you out while it adjusts, and then I’d have to go find you again – if it lets you back in at all.”

“Oh. I hadn’t–”

“Wait!” she exclaimed. “I get it! Never mind, it’s this way.” She began to stride forward with purpose this time, and Harry had to trot to keep up.

After making two more turns down equally similar hallways, they finally stopped outside a large, black door. Immediately, Harry noticed it was different from all the rest. For starters, there was a plaque next to it on the wall, giving it the distinction of being the only marked door Harry had seen. Leaning closer, he saw there was a small, spherical shape etched into it – and nothing else. He traced his finger around the circular outline, feeling the indents and ridges that marked the surface.
Quizzically, he looked up at Hermione, who was now smiling broadly.

“This is an observatory, Harry.”

Harry blinked. “An observatory? For what?”

“Why don’t you open the door and find out?” Her smile softened, causing her eyes to sparkle with regard. He’d seen that look on her before – it was usually in moments when they were sharing something just between the two of them.

The handle was cold when he wrapped his fingers around it, but it was unlocked, and he followed the path of it as it swung open. It deposited him in a darkened room and it took his eyes a moment to adjust. The carpet and walls were black, and the small sconces that dotted his line of vision were attached low on the room’s support columns, the faint, yellow light illuminating only the floor.

Stretched out before him, on the opposite side of the room, was an entire wall of curved windows that touched both the floor and the ceiling. Beyond it, outside, sat an inky, black backdrop. He was just about to ask Hermione what he was supposed to be observing when he felt himself take a step closer to the windows. And then another. And then a rim of glowing blue appeared.

He inhaled sharply and held his breath, his mouth dropping open. No… it couldn’t be…

Quickly making his way past the furniture in the room, his pulse racing in his throat, he watched as the view in front of him filled itself with an ethereal landscape – a vast orb of luminescence that glowed with blues and greens and wisps of white – until he was right next to the window, fingers pressed to the cold glass, staring spellbound at the most unbelievable sight he could imagine.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“Oh my God,” Harry breathed. “We’re in… how did you… that’s Earth!” He looked a bit like a fish gulping for air.

Hermione smiled and wandered over to the window, coming to a stop next to him. “It is, yes. Do you like it?”

“Do I like it? What the hell kind of a question is that?” He turned to look back out the window. “It’s fucking brilliant!” Distractedly, he traced the shape of the globe through the glass, his finger leaving a faint smudge on the window as he went. When his forehead pressed to the glass with a light thump, he seemed to content himself with staring his fill, his face an absolute picture of awe and wonder and disbelief.

Hermione just watched him, wondering what was going through his mind, occasionally looking out the window to admire the view herself. Harry’s eyes seemed to be trying to map everything at once.

“Look, there’s South America!” Harry announced abruptly, his finger pressed against the glass. “And right about in there, in that little thin part above South America…” But he trailed off before he finished his sentence. Hermione couldn’t figure out what it was he had recognized, especially at this distance, or why that area of the world would be noteworthy or familiar to him, but before she could ask, he had moved on to comment on how big the Atlantic Ocean was. Then he seemed to vibrate with excitement when he realized he could almost make out western Europe.
It wasn’t that the planet was moving rapidly or visibly – or that their observatory station was – but rather the weather patterns in Earth’s atmosphere were changing just enough to keep hiding and revealing things, almost as if the session was trying to guide their exploration. It seemed to be working, for Harry’s next pronouncement was predictable.

“Hey, there’s Britain!”

She observed him with interest, the way his eyes continually scanned everywhere they could reach, trying to take it all in. After a few minutes on Britain, though, his expression started to lose some of its earlier excitement and his gaze shifted to the side. It looked as though something had just occurred to him. She tipped her head at him, about to ask what it was, when he spoke.

“I never would have thought to do this,” he said. “I would have missed seeing this because I don’t think this big.”

“You don’t know that. You’ve only had the ability to create Evochi realities for three months, right? You might’ve thought of this eventually.”

“No, it’s not that, it’s…”

Hermione watched as Harry’s face fell further, dark brows pinching together in the center of his forehead. The joyous countenance he’d held only moments ago was now gone.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“What is it, Harry?”

“Oh my God.”

“What? What’s wrong?”

He looked down at the floor with a pained expression, his temple still pressed against the glass. “You were right. Severus was right. Everyone told me but I wouldn’t listen.”

“Harry, what are you talking about?”

“The war, Voldemort, all of it… it was always much bigger than me.” He turned back to the window and looked at the Earth again, his mind a blur of connections he hadn’t bothered to consider before. Never before had he felt so small, so insignificant. He was just one person on an entire planet. And Britain was just one tiny place amongst the whole.

“Harry?” Hermione asked quietly, reaching over to lay her hand on his arm.

“The Earth doesn’t revolve around me. How was I ever so stupid to think that any of this was about me?”

Hermione frowned. “Because you were a child, Harry. It was the singular focus of your life for seven years. It was the singular focus of most of the adults in your life for seventeen years, which meant that even if you were keen to forget it, someone was always there to remind you. What other conclusion do you think an eleven-year-old boy could have come to?”

“I don’t know. At least that the world didn’t revolve around me. I mean, look, I’m not even on the
planet and it’s still moving! It’s getting on just fine without me.” He laughed darkly.

“It’s just a matter of perspective, Harry. Why do you think Dumbledore placed you with your relatives? I’m sure you know countless families in the Wizarding world would’ve loved to have taken you in, but Dumbledore wanted you to grow up away from all that.”

“He told me my mother’s sacrifice created an old magic protection and that I’d be safe there; it’s why I had to go back every year, even for a short time – at least until I was seventeen.”

Hermione smiled gently. “And did Dumbledore only ever do things for one reason? Surely you must realize he was far more strategic than that.”

“Well, I do now. At the time it was just hard to think about what I’d done to deserve the Dursleys as my lot in life.”

She frowned again. “I’m not sure he knew what they’d be like, but your mother’s protection was obviously the most important thing. That, and growing up away from magic and your famous name prepared you for what you were prophecised to do.”

“Yes, the pig for slaughter. I know.”

“Oh, Harry,” she said, stepping closer and putting an arm around his shoulders. She pulled him into her and squeezed gently, and they stayed like that for a while.

“Why did I never see this before?” he asked finally, his voice small. Angrily, he tried to blink away the moisture collecting in his eyes.

“Maybe you weren’t meant to. Did you ever think of that?”

He looked over at her. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” she started, a thoughtful tone to her voice, “if you had seen the world like this back then, Voldemort might have seemed insignificant, too. You might have written him off as irrelevant, or as someone else’s battle, and refused to face him. My point is, if you had had this revelation then, would Voldemort still have seemed worth fighting?”

Harry’s gaze dropped as he considered her words. If it wasn’t just about him, then it really had been everyone’s battle. Everyone had been in it for their own reasons. They might have died trying to support Harry in his quest, in trying to help shoulder his burden, but in the end, their deaths were never that simple. They died fighting for what they believed in, for their place in the world. They would have done it, with or without a prophecy; with or without Harry.

“As unfair as it was, I think you needed to grow up somewhat isolated. You needed to develop that fighting spirit. Otherwise, you may not have been the victor, and that… that is not something I’d like to think about.” Hermione smoothed Harry’s hair back from his forehead and squeezed him tighter against her.

What she said was true. Despite not being able to save everyone, despite all the manipulations, the odds stacked against him… despite everything, Harry had won. He had defeated Voldemort. He’d done what he set out to do. He’d even defeated the shade of his psyche that manifested as Voldemort, though that was his private victory. But surely all this success was for a purpose. Surely it meant something – if not always to him, then maybe to all those who had survived and were rebuilding their lives in a new world.

This world, Harry thought, touching his finger to the glass.
That was when he noticed it. A quiet gasp caught in the back of his throat. Even though Britain was only one small place, it was all connected. It formed a whole. From this vantage point, he couldn’t tell where one country ended and another began, for the lines on a map weren’t actually on the ground. Voldemort’s tyranny could have easily stretched outwards once he had conquered his native land. It had always been so much bigger than Harry.

Maybe what he’d done had really been for himself, then.

Harry shuddered, the sort of sensation that often accompanied his realizations, and it caused a lightness to settle that he hadn’t felt in a long, long time. It was as though someone had just reached inside of him and lifted out the heaviness surrounding his heart. He looked back at the Earth. It was rotating so slowly as to almost be imperceptible, but it was moving, he was sure of it. There was a fundamental momentum there, even if it was small. It meant life went on.

And this time, he wanted to go with it – but on his terms.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus leaned back in his chair and stretched, crossing his legs at the ankle. The black, leather-bound journal he used for notes and research about Evochi was open across his lap.

So far, Harry and Hermione’s linked session looked very much like a regular session, at least from the outside. Regardless, the observational research he was getting was invaluable, and Severus found himself considering publication of his findings once this process with Harry was complete (though all participant names and session details would be kept confidential, of course). The allure of pioneering an uncharted area of Potionry was nearly too much for him to resist.

After annotating another series of thoughts, he looked up and noticed a new development.

Sitting up more abruptly than he intended, he had to grab for the journal, which threatened to slide off his leg. Although Harry had made no sound – as Severus knew he sometimes did – he had what appeared to be two, thin trails of tears running down his cheeks. It could mean only one thing.

Breakthrough.

Severus looked at Hermione, whose expression had not changed. She still wore the same small, relaxed smile on her face. She had told him what she had planned for Harry; had sent it by owl in advance of her arrival today. Although she hadn’t been too specific, she said she planned to continue the work Severus had started in helping Harry heal from the war. She had picked an activity they could both enjoy, but something that would – how did she say it – adjust his perspective.

Always too clever by half, Severus mused, offering her his silent compliments.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

After the waitress walked away, Harry’s mocha and Hermione’s cappuccino puffing thin clouds of steam over the rims of fancy, white mugs, Harry leaned back onto the table and resumed the
“So, explain to me why there were so many bloody doors in your Evochi setting.”

Hermione looked sheepish. “I’m sorry about that. We were actually in my mind. I was concerned that making up a location in space might be unpredictable or unsafe, and I didn’t want to risk either of our lives if something went wrong. Oh, shush,” she said at Harry’s wry expression. “I’ve not done this before and didn’t want to take any chances.”

“So that maze of hallways and doors – that was your mind?”

“Yes. I wanted to conduct the session in a place I was familiar with and that I could control, so I built the whole thing in my mind. It’s just that once I got there, it confused me, because I’m not used to navigating it in person, as it were.”

“Why didn’t you just mark the doors or something?” Harry asked, savoring a slow sip of his coffee, his hands curled around the mug for warmth.

“Well, normally I don’t need to, as it’s my subconscious accessing all those things. My mind knows where everything is, it’s just that I don’t… if that makes any sense.”

“Erm, I think so.” Then Harry remembered something else. “So what was that little pink door—” He stopped suddenly, his mouth forming an ‘o’ shape as understanding hit him. “I almost opened your —”


“Well, I know, but I couldn’t help it! It was pulsing at me!”

“It wasn’t pulsing at you, it was just pulsing in general.” She regarded him speculatively, then laughed. “I take back what I said earlier about you being curious. It’s no longer a compliment!” They laughed together.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

After whiling away the afternoon over their coffee and shared conversation, they wandered out of Hogsmeade’s newest cafe and into the street, the cold November air a sharp contrast to the coziness of the shop.

“See you later, then?” Harry asked as he buttoned up his coat.

Hermione nodded and stepped closer to him. Her eyes mapped his face and he felt a little awkward under her scrutiny.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She smiled. “It’s just, you look… different.”

“I do? How?”

“I don’t know, exactly.” She tipped her head slightly, her smile growing. “You just do. Anyway,
thanks for letting me join you today. Maybe we can try it again sometime – where you can choose the session,” she added hastily.

“I’d like that.”

Hermione leaned up on her tip-toes and wrapped Harry in a warm embrace. When they parted, he smiled at her.

“Thanks again.”

“For what? I didn’t do anything…” Her smile was sly as she wiggled her fingers in a wave, then turned on the spot and Apparated away. The light snow spun and whirled in the space where she had been standing, then fluttered back to the ground.

Harry nodded to his friend in absentia while a rare, content smile slid onto his face. Not ready to go home just yet, he turned and began to walk down the path away from Hogsmeade and into the little village of houses beyond. The crisp air clarified some things, resetting him, and with a deep breath, he eagerly filled his lungs with what felt like the promise of tomorrow.
Disguises

It had been an exhausting day and an even more exhausting week. Severus’ thoughts about his career kept resurfacing and he wondered again why he was still teaching. It had never been a career he loved – nor wanted, though circumstances had been what they were at the time; he’d had no choice but to accept it. And the position had proven itself worthwhile…

But now that the war was over, there was nothing – and no one – holding him at Hogwarts.

Well, save one.

Yet Harry was no more bound by Hogwarts than he was, and since Severus’ career choice had little bearing on their current interaction – friendship? relationship? whatever it was – he couldn’t even argue that Harry was the one keeping him there. But if he did leave, where would he go? What would he do?

Would Harry still visit?

With no answers forthcoming, Severus made his way back to his quarters instead. He had been looking forward to his planned evening alone, catching up on research, finishing the damnable crossword from last week’s Potions Weekly, and nursing his favorite bottle of scotch.

At the last minute, he decided to make a short diversion to Filch’s office to retrieve the updated detention register so he wouldn’t have to stop in the morning. The very last thing he expected to see when he crossed through the entrance hall was Harry – holding a baby in his arms. Well, a toddler, anyway. The riot of bright blue hair suggested it must be Lupin’s offspring.

Severus froze and watched for a moment, knowing he was still out of Harry’s eye line. He recalled the last time he had thought such things about Harry, of thinking of him with a wife, standing at King’s Cross, waving goodbye to their brood of little Potters, and realized how far they’d come since that time; how much he’d learned. Yet one thing remained as certain as the day he’d first met Harry: at some point, Harry was going to want a family of his own. Even if their conversations had not revealed it, it was currently written plain as day across every inch of him. The way his finger gently caressed Teddy’s cheek as he spoke softly to him, the way he instinctively moved to keep the child from leaping wildly from his arms, the way he matched Teddy’s enthusiasm as he explained what was happening inside the animated House point hourglasses.

Almost automatically, Severus switched directions and walked until he was within paces of Harry.

“Kidnapping children now, are we, Mr. Potter?” he drawled, allowing amusement to color his tone.

Harry turned at the sound of Severus’ voice and smiled, a bashful sort of grin, and then strode towards him. It was then Severus noticed he was dressed head-to-toe in black: leather shoes, tailored wool trousers, and a smart, collared jumper. Only the light, golden hue to his face, neck and hands provided any sort of contrast. It was true Severus had always had a penchant for black, but to see Harry draped in it was almost too much to endure; he looked sinful. Severus swallowed his desire.

“Hi,” Harry said, a tinge of something almost like shyness to his voice. Severus furrowed his brow slightly, confused. What would Harry have to be nervous about?

Then Harry jerked his head out of the way as Teddy flailed excitedly and the moment was gone. He grasped the child’s wayward arm and gently pinned it to his side. “Sorry, he’s really restless for some reason. I think he likes it here. I’m sure he wants to run around, but I’m afraid if I let him down, I’ll
never find him again!”

“That is probably wise; Hogwarts is no place for a toddler.”

“Aww, come on, Severus. Just think of all the interesting things he could do in your lab, for example!”

Severus watched a cheeky smile bloom on Harry’s face, but gave away nothing himself as he deadpanned, “A fair point. Even at such a tender age, I am sure Lupin’s offspring could out-brew you in Potions.”

Harry laughed. “Oh, piss off,” he said, mostly under his breath, but his eyes were twinkling. Severus allowed himself a small smirk.

It was then their interaction began to garner looks from students filing past them into the Great Hall. Many turned to look over their shoulders at Harry and Teddy, some tripping over each other as they did, no doubt wondering why they were there. Come to think of it, Severus wondered that, too.

“As much as I appreciate you darkening my doorstep, I assume you are not here to see me,” he remarked with a brief nod at Teddy.

Harry smiled. “No, Headmistress McGonagall invited us. Said it would be good to get Teddy out of Andromeda’s house for a while, and have him socialize with other people.” He paused, a slight tip to his head. “Come to think of it, I’m not quite sure she wasn’t really referring to me.”

Severus subdued the urge to snort. “That sounds like Minerva. She even requested you dress for the occasion, I see.”

Harry flushed slightly, then looked down to briefly assess his outfit. “No, that was me. I figured a t-shirt might not be appropriate at the Head Table. I almost wore robes, but they felt too… I dunno, official or something.”

With the corridor around them quieting, Harry peered into the Hall and noticed it was nearly full. The last few students were rushing past them, clutching books and backpacks, while the unmistakable hum of pre-dinner conversation filled the cavernous room. Harry adjusted Teddy to his other hip as he nodded towards the front. “Should we go in, do you think?”

“By all means.” Severus gestured for Harry to precede him into the Great Hall, and Harry smiled and walked on ahead. And if Severus found he got to appreciate Harry’s arse in those slim-fitted trousers of his, it was merely circumstance in his favor.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“Severus! I didn’t expect to see you at dinner! I thought you were taking the night off for research?”

Severus’ gaze darted briefly to Harry, who was arranging Teddy in the highchair Minerva had transfigured for him – merely a blur of wiggling arms and legs by now – before looking back at the Headmistress. “Plans change,” was all he offered.

Minerva smiled indulgently at him and he scowled. Fortunately, no one aside from the pair of them seemed to have heard or seen the exchange; everyone else was too busy seating themselves and
greeting Harry and Teddy.

When Severus turned to make his way to his usual seat, Harry stopped him and indicated the seat to his left. Indeed, it was the only one open, though despite the necessity, something still thrilled inside Severus at Harry’s invite. To Harry’s right sat Teddy, and then Minerva at the center of the table. Professor Sprout had happily given up her seat for Harry, who moved to the opposite side of Minerva, next to Madam Pomfrey.

Before long, the food appeared, and Severus decided to scan the Slytherin table for Marcus. He wanted to see the moment his wayward student noticed Harry was in attendance for dinner, as well as the new seating arrangements. He didn’t have to wait long – nor was he disappointed by the reaction.

Marcus had been conversing amicably with his classmates when he suddenly froze and stared at the Head Table. His actions were abrupt enough that several of the students around him turned to follow his gaze. Although Severus couldn’t hear what they were saying from this distance, he could surmise from their body language and some lip-reading: Who are you looking at? Is that Harry Potter? Is that his kid?

Marcus appeared to collect himself quickly, at least to the eyes of his friends, but Severus was not fooled. Still more than a little distracted, Marcus continued to look up at Harry as often as he dared, clearly not wishing to invite an inquiry from those around him should they catch him staring. After several glances, Severus finally caught Marcus’ gaze. They looked at each other for a long moment, in which Marcus narrowed his eyes, and Severus was struck with an idea.

Leaning over close to Harry, Severus draped an arm across the back of his chair and whispered something in his ear. As predicted, Harry laughed at the off-color remark, and then had to turn quickly back to Teddy, who was trying to drink unaided from Harry’s water glass. As Severus righted himself in his chair, he looked over at Marcus, and then eventually back down to his food. He knew he had been successful when he could feel the daggers Marcus was glaring at him from across the Hall.

Point to Severus, he thought, smirking to himself.

“Da, da, da…” Teddy babbled while grasping a green bean and holding it up, chubby fingers waving it in front of Harry’s face.

Harry smiled. “Yes, thank you. Here, let’s eat more of your dinner,” he said, collecting the bean and simultaneously trying to coax small bits of chicken into the child’s mouth. As Teddy chewed the food around Harry’s fingers, he turned his hair green, patting his palms on the table in delight.

The smooth, masculine tone to Harry’s chuckle flooded Severus with an unexpected frisson of desire, and he was forced to take a large drink of wine to stave off the impulse to lean over, in front of the entire Hall, and taste that sound right from Harry’s mouth.

“Harry,” Minerva started, “this evening is the annual December social for staff. I have invited Hermione – as well as Patrick, the Head Boy – and we’d love to have you join us as well. Can we expect you in the staff lounge at seven?”

“Oh,” Harry said, glancing between the Headmistress and Teddy. “I’d like to, but…”

“We’ll see to it that Teddy is taken care of while you attend,” Minerva assured him.

Harry smiled, looking weary but relieved. “Okay, great, thank you.” For a moment he seemed about
ready to glance at Severus. “I’ll see you in the lounge, then.” Then Harry leaned closer to Severus. Quietly, he asked, “Will you be at the party?”

Startled, and once again feeling the plans he had made for himself slide easily to the side – disconcerting, really – Severus managed a sharp nod. Something relaxed in Harry’s posture, though Severus hadn’t realized he’d been tense before.

“Good. There’s something I wanted to tell you, anyway.” Harry darted a quick smile before having to turn back to Teddy.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Dinner had been a charming affair, but Harry was exhausted by the end of it. “That was an adventure,” he remarked with a small laugh, picking the remaining bits of food off the front of his jumper.

Hermione trailed several paces behind Harry and Severus, Teddy asleep in her arms. His face was tucked into her shoulder, one arm dangling limply down by her side. His cheeks had a rosy flush to them and his cherubic mouth was slightly open. Harry smiled at the look on Hermione’s face, knowing it was only a matter of time before she and Ron started having kids of their own.

“You were remarkably calm with him,” Severus observed as they walked.

“I’ve done it before,” Harry said. “Though it seems to get more and more challenging the older he gets.”

“I am not sure I would have the patience.”

Harry regarded Severus closely. “Then you underestimate yourself,” he said seriously.

Severus looked about ready to scoff when Harry suddenly stopped walking, having realized the third pair of footsteps in their group – the distinctive clack of women’s shoes – had fallen away. Turning, he saw Hermione had indeed stopped, a strange look on her face. Immediately Harry rushed back to her, thinking something was wrong with Teddy, but she shook her head minutely, obviously reading the concern on his face.

“What’s wrong, then?” Harry whispered.

Hermione gently lifted Teddy away from her body and held him out for Harry, who settled him against his body as well as he could, given how awkward a 10-month-old’s sleeping form was to arrange. “I’m sorry, Harry, I’ve… just remembered something I need to do,” she whispered back. Severus had since appeared at their side, his face a picture of concern. “I’ll catch up with you two at the party.” She nodded and was off.

Harry blinked after her and then turned to share an equally confused look with Severus.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP
When Hermione finally rounded the last corner, moving against the flow of students heading back to their common rooms, she spotted Harry standing up against a wall, his palms flat against the stone. He was panting slightly, a rather wild-eyed look on his face. Grabbing his sleeve, she yanked him into the nearest classroom and immediately warded them inside for privacy. Without preamble, she turned her wand on his face.

“Who are you?”

“Don’t hurt me!” His hands came up in front of his face in a protective gesture, prompting Hermione to lean closer.

“Then start talking.”

As though on command, the long-familiar countenance of her best friend began dissolving into the blonde hair, brown eyes and panicked expression of Marcus Braham.

“I should have known,” she muttered angrily. She flicked her wand at a nearby chair and it skittered across the floor towards them. When it bumped into the backs of Marcus’ knees, it caused him to sit down hard in an inelegant sprawl. “Explain yourself!” she demanded.

“Can you please put down your wand first? I promise, I’ll tell you everything. Just… please don’t hex me!”

Hermione sighed. With her wand still grasped in her hand, she crossed her arms over her chest instead and began tapping her foot against the flagstone floor.

“Thank you,” he acknowledged, and righted himself on the chair. He took a deep breath and exhaled. However, Hermione was beyond impatient.

“Do I even want to know how you managed to get a sample of Harry’s hair?” She held up her hand just as Marcus opened his mouth. “Never mind, don’t answer that, I don’t want to know. What were you doing Polyjuiced as Harry?”

“I was going to see Professor Snape.”

“And what were you planning to do if you reached him?”

Marcus at least had the grace to look sheepish and he hung his head. “I was going to tell him off.”

Hermione sighed, having guessed as much. “Not that this is any consolation, but he would never have bought it.”

“What do you mean? I was Harry!”

“Not in the details.” She nodded her head at his attire. “For starters, your clothing is all different.”

Marcus looked down with surprise, plucking lightly at his robe. Apparently, this was the first time he’d made that particular realization. “He would notice that?”

“Without a doubt, yes.”

“Why would it matter what I’m wearing, though?”

Hermione chuckled mirthlessly. “You really have no idea who you’re dealing with, do you?”

“Sure I do – Professor Snape’s my Head of House.”
“And?”

“And what?”

“And he is one of the Wizarding world’s foremost Potions Masters, with a resume that includes seventeen years as a spy. It was – and is – his job to notice details, no matter how small or insignificant they might seem to you. Even if you could have convinced him why your clothing had changed since dinner and learned the specific gait to Harry’s step, the very second your voice hit his ears he would have known you were an impostor.”

Predictably, Marcus’ eyes went wide. He stared off into the room at large, his gaze unfocused. When he finally came back to himself, he pressed his hands over his face. “Oh my God, I can’t believe I almost marched into Professor Snape’s office thinking I could convince him, of all people, to leave me alone! I mean, to leave Harry alone!” He dropped his hands and gestured in a pleading manner. “Look at me, I’m not even thinking rationally anymore!” he exclaimed with a squeak.

Hermione regarded him for a second before deciding to pull over a chair and sit down across from him.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry and Severus walked the rest of the way to Madam Pomfrey’s office in silence, Harry with his mind on whatever Hermione had run off to do. It wasn’t like her to forget something and her behavior had him concerned. He was so distracted, in fact, that he barely realized when they had arrived outside the hospital wing, and stopped only when Severus cleared his throat.

“Thanks,” Harry said, an embarrassed smile on his face. Severus then left him to get Teddy settled, citing a need to attend to a few things of his own prior to the staff get-together.

Harry pushed open the familiar double doors, the sterile scent that permeated medical facilities tickling at his nose.

“Harry!” Madam Pomfrey called cheerfully, though immediately quieted her voice when she saw Teddy was asleep. “Right this way, I’ve transformed one of the beds into a crib. Teddy can stay here until you’re done at the party.”

“Aren’t you going?” Harry asked.

“Of course, but only for a while. Marion and I will each take a turn, as someone has to be here to staff the hospital wing at all times.” Remembering the many visits and near-misses he had in this very room, Harry nodded in silent agreement.

“If he wakes up—”

“—we’ll take care of him,” Poppy said, smiling at Harry like she might a new parent. Harry settled Teddy in the crib and brushed his hand over the toddler’s hair, smoothing it away from his face.

“Should I owl Andromeda and let her know we’ll be home late?”

“She’s already been notified and is fine with it. Between you and me, I think she is enjoying her evening to herself.” Poppy smiled.
Harry laughed softly. “I’m starting to understand that.” He looked back down at Teddy and tucked the blanket around his tiny shoulders. “It’s hard work. I know I haven’t taken care of him that much yet, but I don’t mind it. Sometimes when I’m around him, I forget he’s not actually my son.”

Poppy reached out and touched the side of Harry’s upper arm. “You’ll have kids of your own someday, Harry, and when you do, they’ll be lucky to have you as a father.”

He looked up at her and smiled softly. “Thanks,” he said, a tendril of warmth spreading through him at the thought.

After she walked back to her office, Harry took the opportunity to watch the peacefully sleeping form of his Godson. He didn’t understand why, but it was one of his favorite things to do.

Eventually, he slipped out of the hospital wing with a silent wave to Madam Pomfrey, and made his way towards the staff lounge.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Marcus watched as Hermione sat down across from him. “Professor Snape would have killed me,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“Not likely,” Hermione said. “He may be a lot of things, but a murderer is not one of them. And luckily for you, killing students is generally frowned upon.” She managed a small smirk at that. “However, I’m quite sure he would have stripped you of all your titles and privileges, and likely suspended you. Or transferred you to the Kurgan Academy.”

“What’s that?”

“An all-girls boarding school in Siberia.”

Hermione watched, bemused, as the tension suddenly melted out of Marcus’ body and he began to laugh, the sort of off-pitch release that skirts the edge of hysteria. “I’d probably deserve it,” he said between breaths.

More than anything, Hermione was relieved she hadn’t been imagining things. While walking towards the hospital wing, Teddy asleep in her arms, she had seen Harry walk out of a parallel corridor towards the dungeons. Yet Harry – the real Harry – had been walking in front of her alongside Severus. She knew better than to involve either Harry or Severus at that point, and so had made her excuses to get away and investigate.

“Do you know, on my walk down here,” Marcus continued after a beat, “one person threatened me under their breath as I passed, one girl hugged me before I could realize what was happening, a young boy stood gaping at me and then proceeded to drop his books, I’m almost certain someone grabbed my arse – well, Harry’s arse, you know what I mean – and my friend Albert Hobbins shook my hand and thanked me!”

“Harry doesn’t stop being famous simply because the war is over.”

“Yeah, but is it always like that?”

She nodded. “Yes. It’s everything – the allies, the adversaries, the doe-eyes, the glares, the reverence,
the fear, being equally liked and disliked…” She was ticking them off on her fingers as she went.
“But regardless of what people think of him, one thing’s a constant: he’s always the center of
attention.”

Marcus groaned, his posture visibly sagging. “That’s what I was afraid you’d say.”

Hermione eyed him, trying to surmise the reason for his reaction, and took a brief mental inventory
of the things she knew about him: Quidditch captain, Prefect, Potions tutor, Slytherin – in essence,
smart and popular. She drifted her eyes over his seated form.  *Plus well-groomed and handsome,* she
conceded. Suddenly, she understood his lament. “That’s what it means to be with Harry – his partner
will probably never be the public face of the relationship.”

“If he marries, it’ll be two Mr. Potters? The other person will just become ‘The One Who Married
Harry Potter’?”

Hermione shrugged with a nod. “I’ve never thought about it before, but yes, quite likely.”

“Fuck,” Marcus muttered.

“I don’t think he’s ever going to notice you, anyway, Marcus. I’m pretty sure he has his heart set on
someone else.”

“It’s Professor Snape, isn’t it?”

Taken aback, Hermione regarded him speculatively. “That’s not for me to say; only Harry can
decide when – or if – he shares his relationships with the world.”

“But how does he know who he wants if he hasn’t dated a lot of people yet?”

“You mean he hasn’t dated you yet.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

A quiet, nervous laugh escaped Marcus’ lips. “Well, yeah. Can you blame me? He’s bloody
gorgeous!”

“So you are just after him for his name, then.”

“No, I’m not!” Marcus looked defensive for a moment, then frowned. “I just wanted to be the one
who won his heart.”

“No,” Hermione countered. “You wanted to be ‘The Boy Who Landed The Boy Who Lived’.”

“That’s not true, you’re putting words in my mouth!”

Despite Marcus’ indignant denial, Hermione wasn’t fooled. “You can’t collect someone like a
trophy, Marcus! Harry is a man with his own needs and desires, and deserves to be with someone
who can give him those things; who loves him for who he is and not for his celebrity.”

“But did you see how he was dressed tonight? He doesn’t play fair!” Marcus pouted, effectively
confirming his culpability by side-stepping the accusation.

Hermione stifled a snort. “I did. Though to be frank, I highly doubt it was for your benefit.”
It looked a bit like Hermione had just slapped him, the realization of that fact striking a hard expression on his face. “Well, I certainly hope he noticed, then. He’d be a bloody blind fool if he missed it,” Marcus added spitefully.

Even without stating a name, Hermione knew they were both referring to Severus. She recalled observing the man at dinner, and how charmed she’d been that Severus had only had eyes for one person in that entire Hall. It was so unlike him, the acerbic professor she had once known, to be so obvious with his regard. Perhaps it was the different atmosphere, the lack of threat to his life – to both his and Harry’s – that had allowed him to relax his guard. She wondered if Harry had noticed yet.

She was stirred from her thoughts by Marcus. “So that’s it, then? I just have to let him go?”

Hermione thought for a moment on how to answer that. It was true she wanted Severus and Harry to have a chance to be together – had seen the possibility of that trajectory long ago, in fact, as intense feelings often run a fine line between desire and loathing – without someone like Marcus trying to interfere. But at the same time, who was she to say that Harry and Marcus wouldn’t be compatible, once they got to know each other? Hermione shook her head to rid herself of the thought; Marcus had proved his motivations would likely always be misguided where Harry was concerned.

Before she had a chance to weigh in on the matter, Marcus seemed to resolve his own question. He pressed his hands over his face. “Ugh. I know this is really shallow of me, but I’m…” He removed his hands and looked up at her. “I’m used to being the popular one.” He gave an unapologetic smile. “Well, then I think you have your answer, as I certainly don’t see Harry’s reality changing any time soon.” She glanced at her watch and noticed it was nearing time for the staff party. “I am expected elsewhere now, I must go.” She stood to leave.

Marcus suddenly sobered. “Wait… you aren’t going to file a report or discipline action against me, are you?”

Hermione eyed him. As Head Girl, it was perfectly within her rights – and duty – to do so, yet she also knew she wasn’t above using the situation to her advantage. Or, rather, to Harry and Severus’ advantage. After all, for whatever other failings Marcus had, Hermione could plainly see dishonesty wasn’t one of them – at least when pressed for the truth, which she supposed was as much as she could ask from anyone.

“I’m willing to make a deal with you.”

“Yes?” he asked eagerly, obviously keen to keep his name off detention registers – and away from other, worse fates.

“If you agree, I will expect a Wizard’s Oath to ensure your end of the bargain is met, and met satisfactorily. Once that’s done, I will consider this resolved. No one else will have to know or become involved.”

Marcus swallowed with a nod, but looked relieved. “Okay. What do I have to do?”

“Confess. To both Harry and Professor Snape.”

“C-confess?”

“Yes. Your Polyjuice stunt, your plans, all of it. Though I will allow you to tailor your explanation to
each of them, as I get the sense that Harry wasn’t even aware you liked him.”

Marcus bowed his head, speaking into his chest. “I doubt it,” he said miserably. He sighed, seeming to contemplate his options while Hermione held out her hand, palm up. He lifted his gaze, his expression one of confused inquiry.

“I’ll need your Polyjuice, too.”

“I don’t have any more! I only took a small amount so Professor Snape wouldn’t get suspicious. I swear!”

Fortunately for Marcus, he continued to wear his earnestness (if not naivety) on his sleeve. “Fine,” she said. Then she pointed her wand towards Marcus while softly incanting under her breath. “Do we have an agreement?”

He heaved a resigned sigh, his jaw jutting out stubbornly. “Yes,” he muttered, and touched the tip of his wand to the end of Hermione’s. For a brief moment, both ends glowed a piercingly bright gold and then faded to nothing.

Another glance at her watch told Hermione it was nearly seven. “Good news,” she announced. “I know where to find Harry. You can start now.”

She wished she could’ve had a camera at that moment to capture the look on Marcus’ face.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

“Hermione!” Harry called, feeling a surge of relief at seeing her approach. He rushed over, but came to a stop when he realized she was not alone.

“Hi, Harry, you remember Marcus Braham, don’t you?” she said, just as Marcus stepped up beside her.

Confused, Harry acknowledged him with a distracted nod and then looked back at Hermione. “What happened before? Why did you have to leave so fast?”

“It was probably because of—” Marcus started to explain, but Hermione interrupted.

“I found someone else to test your tattoo, Harry. I’ve been working on refining my theory a bit more and when I saw Marcus walk by, I remembered he and I had discussed it. I’m curious what the reaction will be.”

Marcus turned to look at her, his mouth open as though to object, seemingly confused. Harry found himself looking back and forth between the pair of them, definitely confused. Something didn’t quite add up, but he didn’t know what it was.

“You want to do this now?” was all he could think to ask.

Hermione looked agitated. “Yes. It’s as good a time as any, given that I’m never sure when I’m going to see you.”

“Okay, okay,” Harry said. For some reason, he felt the need to ensure they were alone, and glanced up and down the hallway first. Then he pulled up the corner of his jumper, baring the flesh around
his ribs and the phoenix presently resting there.

Marcus’ eyes went wide for a moment and then glanced suspiciously between Harry and Hermione.

“Just touch my tattoo with a finger,” Harry instructed, but Marcus did not move. He looked torn, as though he thought it might be a trick.

“Why, what will happen?” he asked warily.

“One of two things,” Hermione said. “If the tattoo responds to your touch, then that’s good—”

“But if it doesn’t?” Marcus interrupted.

“Then it will avoid you, which basically means Harry should, too. It’s been enchanted to discern who is a good match for Harry… and who isn’t.”

Marcus seemed to ignore the emphasis she put on that last part. “All right,” he said, his stubbornness and determination evident. “I want to try.”

Harry couldn’t figure out why Hermione had just explained all that, and looked over at her just as Marcus reached a hand out. Somehow, Harry knew what was about to happen. He couldn’t explain how he knew, but as his gaze met Hermione’s, he realized she knew it, too. Sure enough, as Marcus’ hand – not just a finger, Harry noted with some degree of surprise – pressed against his side, the phoenix practically disappeared from his skin. At Hermione’s snort, Harry looked down to see that the bird was wrapped around his neck like a collar, its head buried underneath the feathers of its tail.

“Wait, let me try again, I don’t think I actually touched it!” Marcus exclaimed, but Hermione caught his hand as it headed for the phoenix’s current location.

“No, you definitely touched it. It only moves when people touch it.” She released Marcus’ hand, which fell slowly to his side. He looked absolutely crestfallen, and Harry grew even more confused than before.

“Sorry, Marcus,” Hermione said, though there was an odd quality to her voice that suggested she was saying more than just her words. Harry looked at Marcus and saw something flash across his eyes, but couldn’t decipher it. Then Hermione turned to him. “We’d better go, Harry, it’s after seven.”

“Wait… Hermione,” Marcus started, and she stopped and turned.

“Yes, I will consider this part complete,” she replied cryptically.

Marcus blinked. “But you changed what I was—”

“It wasn’t for your benefit, let me assure you,” Hermione continued. “Your other task, however… remains unchanged.”

As she turned and walked away, pulling Harry with her, he leaned over with an urgent whisper. “What was all that about?”

“It’s a long story,” she answered with a sigh, waving him off. “So, did you get Teddy settled all right?”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP
Heading to the party from the dungeons, Severus found he couldn’t keep his mind off whatever it was Harry had wanted to tell him. He’d seemed excited about it, but Severus had no context to work from, and didn’t like that he couldn’t anticipate the topic or purpose. He surmised it was something personal, as Harry had had ample opportunities at dinner – and during their walk to the infirmary – to discuss it, yet he hadn’t. But he supposed Harry had been distracted enough with Teddy that any attempt at normal conversation would have proved too difficult.

Preoccupied as he was, Severus almost didn’t notice when he turned down one of the back corridors that led to the lounge and nearly came face-to-face with the very object of his preoccupation. Unfortunately, Harry wasn’t alone. Halting abruptly, before he could be seen, Severus pulled back behind a large column at the junction of two walls.

What was Harry doing in the hallway with Marcus?

He couldn’t quite make out what they were saying, but as he peered at them from around the corner, he noticed Hermione was there as well. Harry was standing with his back mostly to Severus’ position, Hermione to the side, and Marcus across from the two of them.

He didn’t need to see the look on Harry’s face to know what was going on – Marcus’ was telling enough. There was an unmistakable gleam in his eyes, and when he leaned closer to Harry, he appeared to slide a hand up underneath Harry’s jumper. Hermione merely looked on, a small, knowing smile on her face. Harry did not flinch or back away from it; if anything, his body language seemed to encourage it.

That was it; Severus had seen enough. He turned away and stalked off, taking the shortcut to the staff lounge instead – any route that would put him as far away as possible from the remembered visual of that traitorous hand touching Harry’s body. And Harry allowing it.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

It was a good thing Hermione had confided in her about Marcus, because from her vantage point at the end of the hall, it certainly didn’t seem to be over. Ginny had been on her way to Michael’s room in Ravenclaw when she’d caught sight of Hermione leading Marcus along a hallway towards the fourth floor. His body language suggested he wanted to be anywhere but there, so, curious what Hermione was up to, Ginny followed them. Stopping short of where they met up with Harry, she watched from a distance. She couldn’t hear what was said, and her view of Harry was mostly blocked by Marcus, but she still caught enough of the exchange to get the gist: Hermione was letting Harry’s tattoo do the talking. Though what the reaction was, she couldn’t see.

After Hermione and Harry turned to leave, Marcus watched them until they were out of sight, then turned to leave as well. He got as far as the back dungeon stairwell when Ginny stepped out in front of him.

In a blur of carefully-timed movement and one well-placed spell, she had Marcus’ wand in her pocket, his back up against the wall, and the point of her own wand pressed into his chest within a matter of seconds. He blinked for a moment, clearly disoriented, before leveling a glare at her.

“You wouldn’t,” Marcus challenged, clearly trying to sound confident as he looked between Ginny’s
Ginny grinned at the sufficiently terrorized look in his eyes, pleased that her reputation had preceded her. “Wouldn’t what?” she asked casually. He swallowed hard, staring back at her.

“Fine, so you would. What do you want?”

Relaxing her wand hand, Ginny took a step back. “I want you to leave Harry alone.”

Marcus gave a little snort of hysterical laughter. “God, what is it with you women?”

“I might ask the same of you. I’m not the one who’s being pathetic and stalking him.”

“No, you’re just pining for him in private.”

Ginny gritted her teeth but otherwise gave away nothing on her face, refusing him the pleasure of knowing he had hit a nerve. Fishing around in her pocket, she withdrew Marcus’ wand and held it for him, handle facing out. She sneered. “Here. You might need this in case any women try to overtake you again. Or small children, I hear they’re surprisingly lethal.”

Irritated, Marcus snatched his wand out of her hand. “Spare me the dramatics. It’s not like we’re still at war or anything.”

“Is that so?”

“Voldemort is dead, Ginny.”

Her laugh was cold. “Yes, because Voldemort was always the only threat. There won’t ever be anyone else who’d love nothing more than to take his place; to get Harry’s head on a platter. No one left who might seek revenge by bringing the hero down a peg… or twenty?”

Marcus opened his mouth to say something, then closed it with a snap.

“Exactly,” Ginny said, sniffling disdainfully. She eyed him up and down, her lips pursed. “You have no clue what it means to be in a relationship with Harry. You wouldn’t last ten seconds protecting him! I had you up against the wall, disarmed and begging for mercy in half that; imagine what a Death Eater would do. But do you know the worst part?” She stood with her hands on her hips, her gaze fierce. “Harry does anything he can to protect the people he loves – which usually includes putting himself in harm’s way, the daft idiot – but the point is, if he loved you, he would be prepared to die for you. What could you possibly offer him in return?”

Marcus glared at her again. “Just because you took me by surprise doesn’t mean I wouldn’t be able to protect him!”

Ginny laughed again. “Oh, right, my mistake. I forgot Death Eaters tend to announce themselves first, then attack.” Her comment made Marcus bristle even more, and she knew she’d made her point.

“So, what, you’re just going to play his personal bodyguard now?”

“If that’s what it takes, yes. Just do us both a favor and leave him alone.”

Marcus stepped away from the wall and straightened his robes back into place. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I was just about to do that, so you can call off your search party.”

“Good. That’s settled, then.”
She slipped her wand back into its holster and was about to leave when Marcus stopped her. “Why do you care, anyway? Didn’t he dump you?”

Her gaze hardened. “Not that it’s any of your business, but it was a mutual decision. I love him. I always have, but he’s gone and decided that he prefers men, and obviously I can’t compete with that. But I’m certainly not about to stand by and watch him shack up with the wrong sort.”

“And I suppose I’m the wrong sort.”

Ginny turned on her heel, flashing a sardonic smile over her shoulder. “Goodbye, Marcus.”

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

When they arrived at the party, Harry and Hermione had barely cleared the doorway when Hermione waved to the new Muggle Studies professor and excused herself to go join the conversation already in progress. Far from being offended, Harry simply breathed a sigh of relief that he’d be able to talk to Severus alone without having to make awkward excuses.

At the thought of Severus, he felt a bubble of excitement well up in his chest; he’d been looking forward to sharing what he’d realized in his seventh draught since shortly after it had happened, but just hadn’t found the right opportunity. When he learned Severus was attending the party as well, he hoped it would prove the right venue.

He noticed the staff lounge was modestly decorated for Christmas; it appeared they saved the true splendor of the holiday for the Great Hall, and rightly so, Harry supposed – at least there it could be enjoyed by everyone. The lounge itself was dimly lit, its candle sconces and chandeliers flickering a soft, cheery light about the room. It almost didn’t seem like the same room he and Hermione had discussed color theory in a week and a half ago.

Harry nodded to everyone as he wound his way through the room, and shook a couple hands, but otherwise kept his eyes scanning for his target. He finally found Severus leaning against the far wall, a sour expression on his face. Harry chuckled to himself, guessing that was the man’s way of discouraging small talk from his colleagues.

As Harry approached, he realized Severus had left him at the hospital wing in order to go change his clothes. Instead of his usual teaching robes, he now wore charcoal trousers and a black, button-down shirt. With a quick glance around the room, Harry realized this was commonplace: no one appeared to be wearing robes. He was now doubly glad he had opted to forgo them as well. No wonder Severus had commented on his attire.

But if Harry thought sharing his revelation was going to be easy, he had guessed wrong. Terribly wrong. Sidling up next to Severus, leaning against the wall next to him, he tried a couple different times to broach his topic and was disheartened by the lack of response each time. Confused, he tried for the third time to press on with his story, only to be met with a scowl. Finally, Severus interrupted him.

“Should you not be telling this to your boyfriend instead?”

“No, I wanted to tell—wait, my what?”

“Don’t play coy, Potter. I saw you two in the hallway just now. It is what you came to tell me, is it
“You saw who? What are you talking about?” Harry cast his mind about, trying to figure out what Severus could be referring to. “Oh, you mean you saw me with Hermione and Mark—something?”

“Marcus Braham, yes,” Severus confirmed, looking disgusted at the mere mention of the name.

Harry’s brow furrowed. “Marcus isn’t my boyfriend. I don’t even know him.”

Severus held up a hand, clearly in an attempt to forestall any further conversation on the topic, then reached out and grabbed a tumbler of Firewhiskey from a bypassing tray. He settled his gaze on the party, avoiding Harry’s.

“What is this about?” Harry pleaded, leaning into Severus’ eye line. “Does this have something to do with…” he lowered his voice, “the kiss?”

Severus suddenly turned and grabbed Harry’s elbow, guiding him forcefully – but discreetly – out of the lounge, down the hall, and into an empty classroom. Harry couldn’t figure out what was going on. It’s not as though he had been talking loud enough to be overheard. Was it because Severus didn’t want the other professors to know of their association? Though that didn’t make much sense, given they had just sat next to one another over dinner, chatting amiably, in front of the entire Hall.

Harry shook off Severus’ grip once the classroom door had closed behind them. “What the hell is going on?” he asked, his anger now sufficiently stoked.

“I was attempting to save you from embarrassing yourself in front of the staff.”

Harry scoffed. “Me? What about you?”

Severus’ eyes darted briefly to the side and he took a large swig of his drink.

“Severus, I’m not dating Marcus.”

“So you merely allow yourself to be groped by any hormonally-charged lout who shows a shred of interest in you, then?”

Harry recoiled, appalled. “That’s hardly fair! And believe me, that wasn’t what it looked like!”

“Kindly cease your explanations, Potter.”

Harry clenched his jaw in frustration, feeling the sting in Severus’ words more than he had for a long time. “I don’t even know how you managed to see it in the first place! Why do you even care?” he snapped.

The sudden, ear-splitting cacophony of glass breaking made Harry cover his head with his arms. It was only after a few thundering, tense heartbeats that he realized the source of the sound was Severus, who had thrown his tumbler against the wall with a surprising amount of force. The fine crystal was no match for the unyielding stone surface, and it shattered upon impact, sending a rain of shards flying. Harry blinked owlishly at Severus, who merely stood staring at the wall, one hand clenched into a tight fist, his breathing hard.

The clatter had apparently stirred up a ghost, for one floated through the wall and into their classroom then, brandishing an armful of scrolls and a flickering lantern. He seemed oddly oblivious to their presence, and continued his path into the adjacent room, his mumbled cursing trailing the eerie silence of his gliding.
“I am sorry you had to see that,” Severus finally said, his expression vacant. For a minute Harry thought he was referring to the ghost. “I do not know what has got into me. Perhaps it is time I retire for the evening.” He sighed deeply and closed his eyes for a moment. Then, with a flick of his wand, the pieces of glass that were once his tumbler were instantly Banished. No evidence of where it had struck the wall, nor its amber contents dripping over the jagged stones, remained.

Harry desperately tried to make sense of what had just happened, looking back and forth between Severus and the wall. They had been talking about Marcus and boyfriends and the kiss and why Severus didn’t want to hear Harry’s story and—

Wait.

Harry’s heart skipped a beat as it hit him. *Severus is jealous! But of what?* he thought wildly. *Marcus? That couldn’t be. Unless…* Harry blinked. *Unless Severus really does like me. That explains why he’d act this way – he was afraid Marcus had got to me first, that our kiss was a mistake…*

Severus slipped his wand back into his sleeve and turned to leave. He got as far as the door before Harry spoke.

“Severus, wait…” Harry started, but was unsure of what else to say. He stepped closer instead, his mind’s eye flashing a quick succession of visuals: him singing at the piano while Severus played, the lyrics of that song still echoing in his consciousness; the hours they’d spent together in Severus’ antechamber, absorbed in conversation or pre-session discussion; the revelation of Severus being gay, something Harry knew was not an announcement he made lightly; the kiss they had shared, such as it was. He suddenly saw a myriad of connections and patterns he had missed previously: the way Severus always seemed to dote on him, protect him, make him feel safe; the way Severus’ demeanor and expression often changed the minute Harry entered the room; the fact Severus agreed to do things Harry never thought he’d do, simply because Harry had asked. Harry couldn’t believe what an idiot he was for having missed all this – despite his own distractions and burdened mind, despite everything.

Severus swayed forward then, looming slightly over him. He was so close that Harry could almost taste the Firewhiskey on his breath. Harry wondered exactly how much of it Severus had had that evening.

When he looked up at Severus, it felt like the room – indeed the entire castle – suddenly narrowed itself to just the two of them. Their eyes met and Harry felt himself being pinned by the intensity of Severus’ gaze. A frisson of electricity zipped up Harry’s spine and he swallowed thickly, his lips parting. As Severus lowered his eyes to look at Harry’s mouth, the air began to crackle around them. This was nothing like their spontaneous, in-the-moment kiss after his sixth draught; this felt different, and Harry found he was welcoming it in a way that surprised him. He remembered thinking about it in Australia, wondering if that same feeling he’d had a hint of would always suffuse their interactions. Now, finding himself confronted with that possibility again, he wanted nothing more than to find out what it would feel like to kiss Severus for real.

With his pulse in his throat, Harry looked back and forth between Severus’ lips and his eyes, waiting, wondering, seeking. He felt like a trapped animal, unsure whether his captor was going to strike or devour or possess… or…

Retreat? *Wait, no!*

“Goodnight,” Severus whispered, and was gone.
No!

Adrenaline and disappointment and a host of other emotions were pulsing under every inch of Harry’s skin, and he stared after Severus, the spot he’d just vacated somehow still vibrating with want. The air around him seemed to deflate rapidly and Harry gasped, clutching at the wall beside him.

No…
Onward and Upward

“Mr. Braham.”

Of all the people Severus had hoped would be knocking on his door on a Saturday morning, Marcus did not even make the list. As it was, he was still nursing a headache from his overindulgence the night before.

“I’m sorry for interrupting you so early, sir, but I needed to talk to you.”

“This cannot wait?” Severus asked impatiently.

“No, sir, it really can’t. Please.” Marcus’ face was a picture of desperation.

Severus sighed. “Very well.” He moved aside and invited Marcus into his antechamber. He settled into his sofa and gestured for Marcus to take the chair by the fire – where Harry usually sat, he belatedly realized. With a tiny shake of his head, he cleared his thoughts and focused on his Prefect.

Marcus rubbed his palms against the tops of his thighs for a moment before looking up. “I don’t mean to be blunt, sir, but in this case I must. I… I know you are in love with Harry. Please, don’t deny it,” he added quickly, raising his hands in front of him, obviously trying to forestall the objection – or possibly the hex – he saw perched on Severus’ tongue. “That’s actually what I’ve come to talk to you about.”

Severus narrowed his eyes. He did not care to speculate on how Marcus had come to this conclusion, but could tell by the pleading look he was being given that there was more to say and Severus should hear him out. He pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh, closing his eyes for a long moment. Then, softly, “Go on.”

Marcus took a deep breath. “Good. Well, I guess I should start at the beginning…”

Severus sat and listened as Marcus came clean about his crush-turned-obsession with Harry, about how he’d been jealous of all the time Severus got to spend with him, and how angry he felt at being blocked at every turn. He confessed to stealing a small amount of Polyjuice, what his plans for it were, what he experienced while Polyjuiced as Harry, and ultimately his painful realization that being ‘The Boy Who Landed The Boy Who Lived’ would not be anything like he had fantasized it would be. Instead of being lauded for his catch, he would simply become eclipsed by Harry’s fame and fade into the background of the partnership, likely stripped of any identity outside of ‘Harry Potter’s boyfriend’. And, unfortunately for him, he wasn’t prepared to give up his status.

When Marcus had finished talking, he looked down. His face was bright red and he appeared on the verge of tears. Despite all the antics he had pulled, Severus still felt a tug of sympathy for him. He could certainly relate to the irresistible pull of Harry, anyway.

“I just needed you to know that, and I’m sorry, Professor. Harry’s yours. I won’t… I mean, I don’t think… I don’t think he’s the one for me.” It was clear to Severus that this particular admission had been the most difficult so far. Marcus’ expression was sour, as though the words themselves were distasteful to think, much less say.

For Severus’ part, he merely contemplated the entire confession for a short while – the silence stretching almost to the point of awkwardness – before asking about the one thing he was perhaps most unclear about. “One question, Mr. Braham.”
“Yes, sir, anything at all.”

Severus leaned forward, peering down his nose at Marcus. “What were you doing with your hand under Harry’s shirt last night?”

Marcus’ eyes went wide for a moment, as though he was surprised Severus knew about that, and then looked off to the side. “Touching his tattoo,” he muttered. “Hermione said if it moved away from me I wouldn’t be a good fit for him, or something.”

Severus’ worst fears seemed to be laying themselves out at his feet one by one. Not only had he sorely misjudged the interaction he’d overseen, but he’d erroneously assumed Marcus and Harry were dating (something Harry had also insisted was untrue, his mind supplied him unhelpfully). Severus sighed to himself. He had indeed made a colossal arse of himself, and this time the damage may not be reversible.

“And how did it react?” he managed.

Marcus gave a sad smile. “It practically disappeared. I think it ended up around his neck.”

Severus briefly considered how the tattoo might react to his own touch but then discarded the thought promptly. He couldn’t imagine it would be very favorable at the moment. Then Marcus looked up suddenly, something akin to hope blooming on his face.

“Is it possible it could have lied? Like a trick?”

Even with the little Severus knew about Harry’s tattoo, it did not change his answer. “No. Magic cannot lie. Its very nature is to be reactive – to a wizard’s intent, to its immediate environment, to the combination of other forces or elements – but there is no cognition behind it. It is something we simply borrow from the Earth to wield; we can no more fool it than create it.”

“Fuck. Er, I mean…” Marcus’ cheeks burned and he put his hands over his face. “Sorry, sir.”

Severus merely arched a brow, regarding his Prefect with a detached sort of amusement. Though why he should find humor in this, he wasn’t sure – perhaps because something already felt like it was shifting in his favor. Even if the reaction from Harry’s tattoo could not be interpreted that literally, Marcus had still taken on the task of removing himself from the equation. Severus sensed there was more to it, something that had forced Marcus to do what he did, but there was no point exploring that now. He sat back in his chair and folded his hands across his lap, regarding his errant student for a few moments before speaking.

“Did you stop by this morning to turn in your essay, Mr. Braham?”

Marcus’ head shot up. “What? Did you not just hear everything I—” Then he stopped, his eyes drifting to Severus’ arched brow and look of mild inquiry. Severus saw the exact moment when understanding hit him.

“Oh! No, sir, that one’s not due until Tuesday.”

“So it is,” Severus observed, pursing his lips. “Then I suppose that concludes our business here. Good day to you, Mr. Braham.”

Marcus stood tentatively and glanced around, as though he could not believe his luck. Then he bowed slightly. “Thank you, sir. Good day. And… good luck with Harry.” Despite his brave effort to deliver a conspiratorial smile, it only came out as wistful.
With the illicit thrill of Harry’s name lingering on the air to mark the moment, Severus’ quarters – and life – seemed once again as they should be. He felt the corner of his mouth tempt him into a smile, the traitorous thing, but he stamped it down easily enough.

Though even if resisting mirth was not his habit, the weight of what lay before him would have made quick work of it. He had an apology to make – something that was probably too little, too late already. Still, he owed Harry at least that courtesy, even if the sole outcome was his own catharsis. However, the prospect of facing Harry was too much; a letter would have to do.

Sliding open a drawer, Severus selected a fresh piece of parchment and picked up his black quill, ignoring the way it seemed to lay heavy with shame in his hand. He held it for a while like that, hovering until the ink nearly dripped – the embarrassment over what he’d done still rankling – before he pressed it to the fibrous paper and began to write.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry sat at the kitchen table in Grimmauld Place, one elbow on the table, his head propped in his hand. He was picking idly at his breakfast, pushing eggs around his plate with a fork. Thoughts of the night before continued to replay over and over in his mind and he tried to figure out how he could have done things differently; if there had been an outcome in there, any kind of possibility, that would have allowed him to kiss Severus instead of just sending him away.

Harry knew it would have been foolish to run after him. There were few things that would drive Severus underground faster than forcing an issue like this, and anyway, Harry was still sorting through his own feelings on the matter. Everything he thought he’d known about his relationship with Severus was being challenged. If he had gone after him, what would he have said? Or done? And how much would Severus have remembered, anyway? He had seemed a bit… impaired.

Harry was distracted from his thoughts by a loud clatter in the adjoining room, followed by the indignant squawk of an owl. Or was that Kreacher’s voice? The answer came readily as a large, tawny owl swooped into the room and landed on the table, upending the salt shaker and scattering a pile of Quidditch books. Startled, Harry looked over at Kreacher, who was running into the kitchen after it, a frying pan in one hand and a broom in the other.

“I am sorry, Master, but Kreacher was unable to catch the owl. It has been charmed for safe delivery.”

Harry hid his surprised bark of laughter behind a snort. “It’s okay, it looks like it’s just a letter.” The elf huffed and wandered back out of the room.

Leaning over, Harry untied the rolled parchment from the owl’s leg and offered up a piece of his bacon in return. The bird snapped at it impatiently, its beak nearly catching Harry’s skin, and then took off with a great whoosh of wings.

“Geez, you don’t have to take off my finger,” Harry grumbled.

Unrolling the parchment, he found a short letter penned in a familiar, angular scrawl. Suddenly, the owl made sense.

Mr. Potter,
Harry cringed at the formality, already feeling his heart sink. He continued.

*I will keep this brief. It has come to my attention that my assumptions about you and Mr. Braham were incorrect. Furthermore, my behavior at the party last night was both regrettable and inexcusable, and for this I must apologize. I fear I have done you another great disservice and would understand if you wished to cease your Evochi sessions.*

*A response from you is not required. I merely wished to express my regret, and hope this missive finds you in better stead than our evening prior.*

- SS

Harry set the letter down and heaved a sigh of relief. Severus was just being Severus, and he could deal with that. He pulled his breakfast plate closer, his appetite now returning full force. He took several bites of egg and marmalade toast, and washed it down with coffee, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Then he dug around under the scattered mess of his kitchen table until he found a spare quill. Flattening out the parchment, he wrote a quick response. From his perspective, not much needed to be said.

*Severus,*

*I thought we agreed you were going to stop calling me Mr. Potter.*

*See you tomorrow at our normal time.*

*Harry*

When the parchment came back that afternoon, it contained only one line:

*Did you even read the letter?*

Harry chuckled and grabbed his quill again.

*Yes, Severus, I read the letter.*

*I forgive you.*

He contemplated adding ‘you git’ to the end but decided not to press his luck. He knew what it was probably costing Severus to apologize without the expectation of a response, and besides, Harry likely had a few of his own things to apologize for as well.

He rolled up the parchment and attached it to the Hogwarts owl that had waited, realizing belatedly it had been busy helping itself to the remnants of his breakfast. He shooed it away with a hand and it took off through the kitchen window.

This time Harry didn’t receive a response. But then he hadn’t really expected to, either.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

The following afternoon, a Sunday, found Harry draped across a chair in the Potions classroom, his feet propped on the desk before him. He was nursing a mug of hot cocoa while Severus was catching up on some idle work at his desk. The air between them carried a polite, if not awkward sort
of tension, but if Harry seemed content to pretend the staff party hadn’t happened, Severus saw no reason to broach the topic, either. He supposed they’d said as much to each other with their owl correspondence the day before, anyway.

When Harry had arrived, he’d announced his intent to take a week off from his sessions, but asked if he could still stay anyway. Without their normal schedule in place, Severus decided to use the time to catch up on some projects he had been neglecting, and so invited Harry to join him in his classroom instead. It had the added benefit of giving him something to do with his hands (and to a lesser degree, his mind) as he doubted neither one of them would have been comfortable in his antechamber for long.

Yet even without this issue between them, Severus could tell Harry still had a lot on his mind; there were times, like now, where he seemed almost doubled over with the weight of it. Regardless, it was important that Severus let him air things on his own time.

As it happened, it barely took ten minutes.

“If I did another dreamscape, would I go back to the same place as before?”

“Not necessarily,” Severus answered, curious about what had prompted this particular topic again. “Dreamscapes reflect your desires at the moment you embark upon the session, but desires can change over time. Similarly, the potion may identify different or additional desires.” He paused, pursing his lips as he considered Harry. “You might, however, recreate the experience inside a regular Evochi session. It would be driven by your subconscious mind instead of your desires, but at least you would have control over the entire event.”

A flare of something like hope skittered across Harry’s gaze before his eyes returned to a dull curiosity. “Yeah, I guess… but would it be the same?”

“The same as what?”

Harry seemed as though he was willing himself not to blush, but was unsuccessful. He looked down at his shoes.

“Harry, it does not do to dwell on—”

“I know, all right?” Harry interrupted. “I know. I get that I shouldn’t… I just can’t stop thinking about it.” He sighed heavily, twining his fingers together around the mug in his hands. “It was just… really nice.”

Not for the first time, Harry’s comment made Severus wonder what he had experienced in his dreamscape session that he didn’t think he could replicate in reality. What was it that Harry desired so much?

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

By evening, the tension had lifted considerably, much to Harry’s relief. After a light meal in Severus’ quarters, they once again made themselves comfortable in the Potions classroom, their rapport seeming almost back to normal again. Or as normal as it ever got for them, anyway. Harry made himself another mug of steaming cocoa in an attempt to take the winter chill out of the dungeons and sat back down at the desk he’d occupied earlier.
“Ever since I can remember, I’ve been ‘The Chosen One’,” he mused. “It’s weird to think that part of my life is over, even if other people can’t see past it. But now who am I? What do I do now?”

“Have you never thought about what you might want to do as a career?”

“Not really.” Harry shrugged. “I suppose I didn’t think I would live long enough to have one.”

“Touché,” Severus conceded.

“You’ve had to guide your students into jobs over the years, right? I mean, what are some of the options?”

Severus seemed to contemplate him for a moment before opening a drawer in his desk. He pulled out a sheaf of parchments encased in a brown folio and levitated it across his desk, over to where Harry was sitting.

Harry sat back in his chair with the documents and read the cover: *Hogwarts Career Mapping by R. Strathwaite.* Across the bottom, in smaller letters, it read: *Compiled 1990.* Eight years had transpired since these documents were created. With increasing interest, Harry opened the folio, quickly discovering it was a long list of careers – both Wizarding and Muggle. They were split into three sections: *From Hogwarts, From University and From Training Corps.* Until now, it had never occurred to him there were so many different things to do. He looked up at Severus.

“These are all things witches and wizards can do after they’ve completed school?”

Severus affirmed with a nod. “It is by no means all-inclusive, but it should get you started.”

Harry began reading down the list, a finger guiding his spot as he went. He spoke aloud when something intrigued him.

“Artist, wand-maker – there’s a special mark after that one, what does that mean? Ohhh,” he said reverently, drawing out the sound, “a private investigator! Brilliant! Or a curse-breaker, warding specialist or Healer.” A smile began to play at his lips. For the first time in months – perhaps ever – his life seemed to be stretching out in front of him, overflowing with opportunities. It welcomed his exploration and choice in a way he assumed others always enjoyed but he’d had yet to experience.

“Philanthropist?” he asked next.

“A person who promotes the welfare of others, usually through monetary means.”

“I know what it is, I only meant I was surprised it was considered a career. You’re a bloody dictionary, you know that?”

Severus sneered, though it was only half-hearted, and Harry laughed.

“Okay, how about this: a Hippogriff racer, magical creature breeder or broom-maker? Hang on, there’s that special mark again, this time after broom-maker. What does that mean?”

“You might trouble yourself to scan the bottom of the page for an answer.”

“Oh. Right. It says, ‘Marked careers require demonstrated mastery or inherited magical traits.’” He thought back to the wand-maker listing and Mr. Ollivander came to mind. He agreed it would definitely be the type of position that required someone with a special talent – and not the kind you could teach. Still, it was interesting. He turned the page again.
“Auror!” he exclaimed with a snort. “Fat chance of that!”

“You would not consider it?”

“Ugh, no,” Harry groaned. “I mean, I think everyone always assumed I would become an Auror, but honestly, the thought of chasing Dark wizards until I’m old and requiring broom assistance doesn’t appeal in the slightest.”

“Broom… assistance?”

“Yeah, you know, when I can’t walk on my own, I’ll have to ride a broom to get around.”

Severus rolled his eyes.

Harry was already scanning the top of the next page when his smile turned sly. “I could always be a singer. That’s listed here.”

Severus hummed with disinterest while shuffling a stack of parchments into order. “Perhaps you have forgotten the point of this exercise is to select a career in which you have a reasonable hope of success.”

“Hey!” Harry said with a laugh, though he knew perfectly well Severus was right – his singing was appalling. He suddenly got the mental image of himself wearing some flashy outfit, performing on stage in front of a crowd of adoring fans, and then immediately discarded it with a small shake of his head. He had no idea where he got these notions from, but that was definitely not what he wanted. He turned the page again.

“A barber or craftsman? Why would a witch or wizard want to do that?”

“For the artistic satisfaction, I presume – much like many of the Muggle jobs on that list. Just because one has magic at his or her disposal does not mean it automatically leads to fulfilling work.”

Harry blinked. “Huh. I never thought about it like that before,” he admitted. “I guess I just assumed if you lived in the Wizarding world, you did a Wizarding job. Are there are lot of witches and wizards who do Muggle jobs?”

“Many, yes.”

Harry turned his attention back to the page in front of him, pursing his lips thoughtfully. “I could be a potter.”

Severus looked up but said nothing.

“You know, a pottery-maker. I’d be the potter Harry Potter. Or Harry Potter, potter.” Harry grinned, making a comma gesture in mid-air.

“Hilarious,” came the droll response, though Harry could hear the tiniest hint of amusement in it. He laughed and turned another page.

“Okay, how about a speaker, vacation tour guide or writer, then?”

“What about them?”

“I mean for me. What do you think?”

“My opinion is irrelevant. This is your path to choose.”
“I know,” Harry sighed, his mood sobering. “It’s just… I’m not even sure where to start. A lot of these jobs sound great, but how do I know what I’d be good at? I’ve never done anything.” At Severus’ quelling look, he quickly clarified. “I mean, I’ve never done anything else, like a trade skill or something.”

“I have it on good authority – if the Headmistress is to be believed – that you are a passable Quidditch player.”

Harry snorted, then looked back down at the career list. “Yeah, I guess. Don’t get me wrong, Quidditch is fun. I just don’t think I’d want to play it professionally.”

“Whyever not?”

Harry fiddled with the corner of the page he was on, folding it back and forth in a small triangle shape. For a long moment, he said nothing, unsure whether or not he wanted to state his reasons out loud. When he finally looked up, it was to see Severus giving him that shrewd, penetrative stare that meant he was trying to figure him out. And by the look on Severus’ face, it seemed he already had. Harry sighed. Might as well say it, then.

“I don’t want to be in the public eye anymore. I never wanted it, actually. If I played Quidditch, I’d always—”

“No need to explain,” Severus interrupted, one of his hands partially raised off the surface of his desk. “Forgive my pressing on the matter, I had not thought it through to that consequence.”

“It’s okay, it was a fair question. This is stuff I need to be thinking about, right?”

“Perhaps, but you do not need to make a decision today. There is time.”

Harry nodded. “I just want to make sure that no matter what I pick, I’m able to get the job based on what I can do and not because of my name.”

“You do not need anyone’s approval to pursue work of your choosing, Harry. You are a powerful wizard with a powerful name. If you wished it, you could use both to carve out your own career.”

Harry fought back a shy smile as a familiar feeling of warmth flooded his stomach. “You mean like work for myself?”

“Yes. Is that such a strange notion? I imagine you could not invent enough ways to spend the combined fortunes at your disposal in the Potter and Black family vaults, nor do I see you as a man content to rest on his laurels, merely watching as the world goes by.”

“No, you’re right, I think I’d go mad. But what would I do, exactly?”

“If I had all the answers, this conversation would be moot, would it not?” Harry bit his lip to stifle the smirk that threatened while Severus continued. “What do you like to do?”

Harry thought about it for a moment, letting his mind drift back to times in his life when he enjoyed what he was doing, no matter the activity. “I like helping people.”

“Clearly. Anything more specific?”

“I like seeing the moment when people get excited or happy about something; when they understand it. Like when I’m explaining things, or showing them something, or telling a story.” Then he smiled at Severus. “I suppose I could always be a teacher.”
“You say that as though you do not believe yourself a competent or able candidate. Have you considered finishing your Hogwarts education?”

“Not really. I did consider it for a bit, but I don’t think I’m really the academic sort. I doubt I would’ve even got this far if it wasn’t for Hermione.”

Harry reflected on his statement as a comfortable silence descended upon them. The decision of whether or not to return to Hogwarts and finish his schooling had plagued him for months, but in the end he realized this was not the time for it, if he ever returned to it at all. He’d had so much on his mind – about the war, about everything – that getting his NEWTs just hadn’t seemed important. What would he have used them for, anyway? He didn’t know, and figured until he did, there was no point burdening Hermione with helping him prepare for it. Ron had decided not to return, too, opting to help George run the shop, but then Ron had never been all that academically-minded, either.

Harry looked up at Severus, who had since gone back to scratching notes on a curled parchment, and decided it was time to turn the inquiry on him.

“So what job do you really want to do? And don’t say teaching, because I know you hate it.”

To Harry’s surprise, Severus didn’t object to the accusation. Instead, his answer seemed readied. So not the first time he’s thought about this, then.

“Research. Publication. Developing new potions for rare ailments or conditions, or refining those that already exist. Ideally somewhere outside of Britain where I can source my own ingredients.”

Harry blinked, a bemused expression on his face. For some reason he had never considered that Severus would want to do a job that helps people, although now that Harry knows him as well as he does, he shouldn’t really be surprised. Research and publication suited Severus’ meticulous nature, and likely his need for intellectual stimulation as well. And even if it was less about helping other people and more about Severus’ own edification, it still charmed Harry to think of him getting to do exactly what he wanted to do, and on his terms as well.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Monday afternoon, after his classes had concluded for the day, Severus returned to his office. Staring absently at the parchments on his desk, he watched as their words slid in and out of focus. The drudgery of his job was grating on him more than usual, and his instinct was telling him that regardless of what happened elsewhere in his life, this would be his final year as Potions Master – or anything else – at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It wasn’t about paying his dues, or serving time as recompense for all that had happened in the past. That much was understood, anyway, and had since been forgiven.

No, it was because he was now living in a rather peculiar reality. One he had not planned on having, but one in which he’d woken to find himself very much alive, anyway. There was a part of him that didn’t dare trust in what he had been given, this second chance of sorts. At every turn, he fully expected some duty to resurface, some old debt to be called forth for payment. His life had always seemed to be a sacrifice for one thing or another; why should it be any different now? Yet there was still that other part of him, albeit the smaller, more cautiously hopeful side, that couldn’t help wondering what his life might be like, what it could become, if he was actually allowed to live it.
He remembered back to the day when that sterile, chemical scent had first tinged his nose. It was not at all what he expected the afterlife to smell like – not that he’d held out hope he was slated for the pleasant variety, anyway. The scent was instantly followed by a flurry of voices, the words of which he couldn’t immediately grasp, and then hands prodding him, as though they were checking for something. Gradually, more and more senses came back to him. When he finally managed to open his eyes, he had to blink straight away, for the lights above him were piercingly bright against the darkness he had grown accustomed to.

It was a fitting metaphor, he supposed.

And then who better to continue forcibly drawing him out than Harry – the Beacon of Light in the Wizarding world, their media darling and hero extraordinaire. Three titles he quickly realized Harry hated, and was desperately trying to hide from. It was one way to explain Harry’s continued existence at St. Mungo’s, at least, despite being formally released with a clean bill of health. Severus never did figure out how Harry had ended up in his room, occupying the bed across from him for better than a month. He’d been told it was a paperwork error, with all manner of medical staff apologizing for it, yet it never did seem to get corrected…

He also remembered his initial conversations with Harry – stilted as they were, they were simply meant to satisfy his curiosities about what had happened the night of Voldemort’s defeat. But then he’d learned how Harry had walked into the forest, prepared to sacrifice himself; that in fact his willingness to do so had created a protection for his friends – indeed for all those fighting on behalf of Hogwarts – similar to what Lily had done for Harry all those many years ago. How he had been knocked unconscious by the killing curse and spoke with Albus at King’s Cross, and how he’d been given a choice to move on or come back, even though he knew what awaited him if he should return. How it really had been Voldemort’s choices that ended it. And how Harry had somehow managed to come out victorious without true bloodshed on his hands.

Severus had also told Harry his own story of survival, about how Fawkes seemed to materialize after the last echo of green eyes faded from his mind. How the phoenix tears stopped the bleeding and closed the wound, lifting the Dark curse with an evil-sounding hiss. How Madam Pomfrey had appeared shortly thereafter (a side story Harry recounted about how he’d had the idea to send his Patronus to the Mediwitch after viewing Severus’ memories, an admission that left the two of them silent and avoiding each other’s gaze until a nurse bustled in, fortuitously appearing to check Severus’ vitals). And though Severus couldn’t speak when Madam Pomfrey had arrived, her training had obviously taught her how to identify the healing from phoenix tears. The skyward benediction she offered in thanks – to Albus or his loyalties, whichever had been responsible – was still firmly etched into his mind’s eye, more indelible than any other memory from that time.

But it was after all the academic stuff was out of the way when things really began to change. Harry had been getting more and more bold in his approach; Severus more yielding. One conversation in particular had been a turning point in their interaction.

Harry sighed, his posture deflating. His anger seemed to go along with it. “Look, I’m not going to argue with you about this, but the fact is, you didn’t kill my parents. It wasn’t your fault. Voldemort killed them because they were trying to protect me. It was me he wanted. You know as well as I do the prophecy could have meant Neville. It was Voldemort’s choices that marked my parents for death, not yours.” He held up his hand to forestall Severus’ objection. “I don’t blame you for telling Voldemort about the prophecy – about any of it. You were just doing what you thought was right, you had no idea what he was going to do with the information. And as far as I can tell, you didn’t even realize who the prophecy was about. So if you’re going to preach to me about letting go of the past, then you need to start doing the same.”
Severus had opened his mouth to say something – he wasn’t sure what, but he had something suitably scathing perched on the end of his tongue, he was sure of it – yet when words failed him, he closed his mouth with a snap and narrowed his eyes. Harry had since looked away, his brows pinched together in the center of his forehead, once again lost in his own thoughts and memories.

Harry had always managed to squirm in underneath Severus’ defenses, though, hadn’t he? And it wasn’t the first time he had impressed Severus with the depth of his understanding, either. Most people, it seemed, underestimated Harry. He was far more shrewd and aware than people gave him credit for, Severus included. No one seemed to doubt his prowess with a wand, but few acknowledged the particular emotional complexity that was Harry Potter. He wasn’t intellectually-oriented, like his precocious, high-achieving friend; he was intuitively-oriented. He felt life. It had taken Severus a long time to grasp that about him; to understand that it wasn’t a weakness or deficit in any way. In fact, it was an enviable trait, just one Severus was far too pragmatic to embrace. He needed quantitative figures and logic, things he could grasp through scientific means. He led from his mind, whereas Harry…

Harry led from his heart.

He’d long respected Harry’s resilience and adaptability – and his fool-hardy courage – even if it was only in the privacy of his own mind that he acknowledged it. But it was after this new realization at St. Mungo’s, with Harry seated across from him, a white rook pressed against his lips as he contemplated his next (and ultimately fatal) chess move, when Severus’ respect turned to admiration. And perhaps a little more.

Physically, Harry’d grown into a very attractive young man, now that Severus allowed himself to see it. No longer the coltish boy with gangly limbs, Harry had become a streamlined beauty with the compact, lithe build of an athlete. How could he not have, with the combined genetics of an admittedly handsome father, a beautiful mother and regular bouts of Quidditch?

As for the rest, they’d discovered (quite to the surprise of both) that without their long-suffering adversarial habit or the need to guard their roles, their dynamic together was actually quite natural. Both had seen and done unpleasant things in the war (more so Severus, he was sure) but they felt no need to talk about them. It was as though their separate pasts became shared; understood in a way that Severus had not experienced with anyone else, save Albus.

The knocking sound seemed oddly distant and hollow, as though it were not part of the memory.

“Professor?”

Severus startled slightly, ushering away the guilty indulgence of his thoughts to see Hermione’s face peering around the door to his office.

“May I come in for a minute?”

At his nod, she entered his office and seated herself in the chair opposite his desk.

“I just wanted to thank you again for letting me participate in Harry’s Evochi session. It was great getting to see a new area of magic firsthand – while also helping Harry, too, of course.”

“I am glad you enjoyed it, though it is Harry you should be thanking. He is free to choose how to spend his sessions.”

Hermione smiled slightly, as though she was simply humoring him. “Well, then thank you for everything you’ve done for him. I’ve certainly noticed a difference, and it’s so good to see.”
Severus merely nodded. “As much as I may appreciate this line of flattery, I assume this is not the topic you have come to talk to me about.”

“No. Well, I did actually want to tell you those things, but I also…” She hung her head for a moment, her fingers tracing the edge of the book in her lap. When she looked back up, her gaze held the fierce determination Severus had long associated with her. “I never had a chance to tell you how sorry I am that I didn’t do more for you. That day in the Shack. It was unfair of me to judge you that way and I’m sorry. I didn’t know all that you had done, not until Harry told us what he’d learned from your memories.”

“Few knew. That was by design, as I am sure you can appreciate.”

She nodded. “Yes, but we watched that horrible snake try to kill you, and did nothing!”

“And what would you have done? You were neither properly equipped with medicinal supplies nor in any position to believe I was worth saving.”

Hermione gaped. “Sir, that’s not—”

Severus forestalled her with a hand. “I appreciate what you are trying to do, but it is unnecessary. The fact is, Mr. Potter had the foresight to call for assistance from Madam Pomfrey that night. The rest is, as they say, history.”

“He… he did that?”

Severus’ brow arched. “You did not know?”

“No…” Hermione looked stunned, as though her mind was in the process of rewriting things she thought she knew about something, or someone. “How?”

“Patronus.”

“Brilliant, Harry,” she uttered quietly, clearly very much in awe of her friend. She shook her head, seeming to release the breath she had been holding, and gave a soft smile. “So everything worked out all right in the end.”

“Unless you are all avoiding the awkward conversation of telling me that I am, in fact, a ghost, I would say that yes, things often seem to.”

Hermione giggled. “I suppose you’re right, sir. Thank you.” Severus bowed his head and she stood to leave. When she neared the door, she stopped and turned.

“You know, you really are a good man.”

For a moment, Severus considered a well-patterned retort, but then thought better of it. He allowed his expression to relax slightly. “You are not the first to accuse me of that, though I cannot fathom where these notions come from. Regardless, I fear for my reputation should news of that get out.”

Hermione giggled again. “Not to worry, sir, your secret is safe with me.”

“Thank you, Ms. Granger.”

“Weasley.”

Severus was just about to turn back to the work on his desk but looked up at the seemingly incongruous name. “Pardon?”
“Sorry, just that I am actually Mrs. Weasley now.” A faint tinge mottled her cheeks.

“Of course, my apologies. Mrs. Weasley. In either case, thank you Hermione.” Her expression brightened at the use of her first name, no doubt relishing the informality it implied. It was only later that he’d wonder if the small liberty he’d just taken had paved the way for the boldness of her next statement, or if it’d actually been the reason for her visit all along.

“I hope you won’t mind me saying this, but…” She leaned back into the room, one hand anchoring her to the door frame, and lowered her voice. “You would have my vote if you ever wanted… more with Harry. I think you’d be very good for him.”

Something in Severus’ stomach flipped nervously at the recognition of her words and he fought back the fluster that crept up his throat. He knew he’d not masked it quickly enough when the light twinkled behind Hermione’s eyes. Blasted girl! It was the reason he loathed being unprepared for things – he could not adequately protect himself on unknown terrain. Still, the look on Hermione’s face suggested her opinion of him had not changed despite her discovery; if anything, she seemed quite pleased. He sighed, acutely aware that his lack of response was tantamount to a confession. “If only it were up to us,” he acknowledged.

“Yes. Though he may yet surprise you,” Hermione said, the twinkle still in her eyes. For some reason, it made Severus think back to his conversation with Marcus, and how his Prefect had also guessed where his regards lay. “Shall I even bother asking how it is that everyone is happening upon this information? Is there a placard above my office door that I am unable to see?”

“Oh everyone?” she asked.

“Yes. You and one of my Prefects. Merlin knows who else.”

“Ahh, so Marcus has been to see you. Good.”

Severus eyed her shrewdly, connecting the pieces together in his head. “It was you who sent him, then.” She merely smiled, but said nothing. “Did he relay my feelings about Harry to you?”

“No…” She paused for a moment, letting her smile curl into a grin. “I just pride myself on being an insufferable know-it-all. Sir,” she added wryly.

Before he could respond, she slipped out with a small wave, letting the door close behind her. Severus snorted. Yes, blasted girl, indeed. And blasted Boy Who Lived! If he wasn’t careful, they were both going to be his undoing.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Later that evening, while comfortably ensconced in his antechamber, Severus looked up to see the flames in his fireplace blaze suddenly, their glow a bright green. The Floo had been activated. Knowing there were only a few who had access, and probably only one who would call upon him at this hour, Severus felt his heart skip a beat.

But instead of the black hair and green eyes he anticipated, out popped a somewhat wrinkled bit of parchment. It fluttered around in a loose circle after the fireplace ejected it, the edges a bit singed, until it settled before him on the coffee table.
Unfurling it carefully, Severus read:

*Is it all right if I do another session this weekend?*

Severus caught himself a bit in surprise. He wasn’t sure where they had left this particular topic. Harry had said he wanted to take a week off, but then hadn’t mentioned anything else about Evochi during their day together yesterday – and Severus wasn’t about to make any more assumptions. He scribbled out the least complicated answer.

*If you wish to continue using Evochi, yes.*

The Floo had barely accepted his parchment before the flames hissed again and a response came flying out.

*I told you I did. See you Sunday, then!*

*Harry*

Severus looked down at the paper, noting Harry’s obvious excitement at returning for another session. The easy forgiveness he had bestowed still seemed unbelievable, but then he was dealing with Harry, and nothing had ever prepared him for that. It was likely that nothing ever would.
“Prodeo quod strenuus sanctimonia animadverto.”

It never got any easier to say, but thankfully Harry had managed to get through the incantation without issue, just as he had every other time. It was a small victory, but an important one – to the degree that careful pronunciation could prevent him from getting stuck in some unreachable corner of his mind, he was keen to pay close attention to it.

Seconds after the spell words left his mouth, the distinct tang of Evochi hit his tastebuds, and he curled his tongue around its thick ribbons until the last drop fell from the lip of the vial. Then he swallowed hard, the imperceptible touch of the potion’s magic working so quickly that he barely had time to lower his arm before his eyes closed and everything went dark.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

It was disorienting waking to something the eyes couldn’t focus on, but Harry knew the construct’s grey mist was only temporary. He closed his eyes while waiting for the scene around him to paint itself true. For a brief, heart-stopping minute, he couldn’t remember what it was he had held in his mind before imbibing the potion, but then it quickly came back to him: to give himself the experience of being happy. A place with no wars hanging over his head, no prophecies to fulfill, no friends or students or general Wizarding public to save. He wanted to see what life could be like without those things. He hoped the intention wasn’t too vague, but figured it’d be hard to go wrong if happiness was on the docket.

Suddenly, Harry felt the scene shift below him and he opened his eyes. He was lying on something comfortable, and above him he could just make out the drape of a red, velvet canopy. It didn’t take long to realize where he was, and he smiled. How many times had he opened his eyes to this exact visual, after all? Turning his head towards the window, he watched as dust motes danced in the sun beams streaming in through the stained glass. It looked to be about midday, the warm light bathing the hardwood floors and heavy furnishings in a cozy, multi-color glow.

His dormitory in Gryffindor tower was just as he remembered it.

Getting out of bed, Harry began to take in his old room, raking his gaze greedily over a place he hadn’t realized he’d missed so much. He walked slowly around the room, letting his fingers glide idly along the wood post of a bed or the cluttered surface of a nightstand. Memories began to flood him: echoes of voices and laughter rang in his ears and remembered visuals of Neville, Seamus, Dean and Ron appeared in his mind’s eye. It felt like only yesterday he was here, returning from dinner amid some on-going, boisterous conversation, or just after a Quidditch match, celebrating yet another Gryffindor victory with his friends. But it also felt like a lifetime ago. And in some ways, it had been. He was no longer that person, that boy who had last called Hogwarts his home eighteen long months ago.

He sighed, a wave of nostalgia settling over him. That part of his life was over now, never to be reclaimed. Would he even if he could? He doubted it. So then why had the potion sent him here? True, he had been happy at Hogwarts, but that was in the past now.
Sitting down on his bed again, he considered the objects next to it. His trunk was there – the ‘HP’ carved into the end as familiar as the first time he’d seen it – but the closer he looked at the rest, the more he noticed there were some details that didn’t seem quite right, yet he couldn’t place why. It was little things, like an object he had no recollection of or an article of clothing he’d never worn, but the differences were there. Confused, he began to wonder if this was even his room. Perhaps this construct wasn’t a memory after all, as he’d initially assumed.

He was just about to explore more when a noise from outside the door pulled his attention. Moving towards it, he stepped out onto the staircase and peered over the railing. The common room seemed empty, but he could tell someone was there.

“Hello?” Harry ventured, slowly descending the steps.

“Yeah, down here,” came the response. “Have you seen a stole, by chance?” The voice was male and so eerily familiar that it sent a shiver of recognition up Harry’s back. If he didn’t know better, he could’ve sworn it was…

Jumping down the last few steps, Harry rounded the corner and came into full view of the room, but froze abruptly when he realized he was standing face-to-face with… himself.

“You made it.” It was like looking into a mirror, only that mirror was now talking to him. Harry blinked.

“I… what? Where am I?”

“Surely you recognize this place.”

“Well, yeah, I just meant… why am I here? Why are there… two of us?”

Harry’s doppelgänger just smiled and pushed the cushion he had been holding back into place on the sofa. Then he knelt down to look underneath the massive frame.

“Harry? You in here?” The voice was loud but distant, as though it was coming from somewhere in the vicinity of the portrait hole.

“Yeah, come in, there’s someone I want you to meet!”

Okay, but the ceremony is about to star—”

Harry turned towards the entrance to the room just as a young man – a student, he assumed – barreled into the room and stopped mid-sentence, blinking owlishly as he looked back and forth between the two Harrys.

“Harry? You in here?” The voice was loud but distant, as though it was coming from somewhere in the vicinity of the portrait hole.

“Yeah, come in, there’s someone I want you to meet!”

“Okay, but the ceremony is about to star—”

Harry turned towards the entrance to the room just as a young man – a student, he assumed – barreled into the room and stopped mid-sentence, blinking owlishly as he looked back and forth between the two Harrys.

“Harry, what is going—”

Harry – the other Harry – just grinned. Harry decided to think of him as ‘Potter’ from now on so he could make sense of their interaction in his head.

“Dev, I want you to meet Harry. He’s from another reality. Harry, this is Devon Glyn. My boyfriend.”

Surprised, Harry turned to stare at Devon. He was trying hard to appear like he wasn’t blatantly sizing him up, but wasn’t sure how successful he was. Curiosity and confusion were nearly overwhelming him already, and now he was adding to the list by wondering who Devon was – he knew of no such person in his own time.
Dressed in a striped shirt and denims, Devon stood slightly taller than Potter but had a similar, lean build. His brown hair was set in a soft, tousled style, longer in front and swept full across his forehead, just above his brows. Below that glinted a pair of grey-blue eyes, sociable and warm, the corners wrinkling due to his wry smile. Harry could see the appeal right away. In a word, he was adorable.

Fortunately, Devon didn’t seem fazed by the attention at all, and rather seemed to be doing some assessing of his own. Apparently he was amused by this development, whereas the implications of it were just starting to hit Harry. So I’m gay in this reality, too.

“It’s another you,” Devon said with a small chuckle, as though he was the one dreaming but had just decided to go along with it for now.

“No, he’s not me, he’s his own Harry.” The two Harrys exchanged a glance, and Potter smiled encouragingly.

“Is he staying? Are you staying?” Devon corrected himself as he turned to address his question at Harry.

The words may have been in Turkish for all Harry understood of it. His mind was fuzzy beyond measure and he tried desperately to make sense of everything. He didn’t even know where ‘here’ was yet, or why he was being shown this scene for his session. “Staying?” was all he could manage.

“Ha! Found it!” Potter exclaimed, brandishing a piece of fabric in one hand as he got up off the floor. Then he turned to Harry. “Yes, stay. We’ve got to get outside for the ceremony, but I’ll come back when it’s over.” He pushed the knot of his tie upwards to tighten it, then smoothed his hands down the front of his Gryffindor robes, settling the fabric he’d just found around his shoulders. It appeared to be an ornamental sash of some kind; it bore the House crest, but was too fancy to be a scarf.

“Ceremony?” Harry asked, blinking, still unable to find his footing. Were they getting married?

“Yeah, this prat thinks the Governors are actually going to let him graduate,” Devon remarked, jabbing a thumb towards Potter. His voice was laden with amusement, his face split into a wide smile.

Harry felt his brows creep up his forehead, and then suddenly there were two hands on his shoulders. “Harry.” His attention jerked back to the face before him, identical green eyes swimming in his vision. “I know this is a lot to take in at once. Just stay here for a bit and get your bearings, and I’ll come back up when we’re done. Okay?”

Harry nodded after a moment. “Okay.”

The portrait door had barely closed over the entrance to the common room when Harry fell back against the over-stuffed sofa. He stayed like that for a while, just breathing deeply and trying to think. If Potter was graduating, then that must make this the end of his seventh year. Harry had never considered that students actually graduated from Hogwarts before, or took part in some formal celebration, and for a brief moment, he lamented the fact he would probably never experience that himself.

Yet Devon didn’t appear to be graduating, as he hadn’t been dressed in formal attire, or even school robes. Or maybe that wasn’t required? Perhaps Devon wasn’t even a wizard? But if he wasn’t, how was he able to get around inside – or even see – Hogwarts?

The headache that had been looming ever since Harry had found himself face-to-face with, well,
himself, came back full force, and his mind thumped in tune to its rhythmic throb. He closed his eyes, hoping to ease the pain and make way for clarity, but instead, the world just went grey.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

When Harry woke, feeling as though only minutes had passed – and it was quite possible that’s all that had transpired given how an Evochi construct interpreted time – it was to the soft sound of hushed voices from somewhere across the room. His headache seemed to have passed, and his mind felt open and calm. In case it wouldn’t be inclined to stay that way, he decided to slowly ease himself back into the scene before him. Without moving, Harry continued to feign sleep, merely slitting his eyes open to peer at the two figures talking. It was Devon and Potter.

He felt guilty spying on them, inadvertent though it was, but was curious and wanted to observe them for a minute. Devon was holding a gilded, leather-bound folio in front of him, and Potter was alternating his gaze between it and Devon’s face, the corner of his mouth quirked. Harry thought he heard the word ‘congratulations’ before Potter reached out and pulled Devon towards him by the shirt, the look on his face requiring no further explanation.

Sure enough, Devon leaned closer, whispering something very close to Potter’s mouth. Their foreheads were touching and Potter was grinning in response. Then, in the span of a breath, Devon closed the remaining distance and pressed his lips and body against his boyfriend.

It was gentle at first, the soft tugging of a lip between teeth, smiles not-so-hidden behind their physical affection. But when Devon wound his arms around Potter’s neck, things shifted. The space between them became charged, a controlled explosion of mutual desire, and they seemed to fall into one another. It made their breathing harder, their kisses deeper, and their tongues more insistent. Harry felt the breath catch in the back of his throat. Was it normal to be turned on by watching… yourself? God, do I look like that when I kiss someone? He bit his lip to try and keep the rest of his body from taking notice. Devon and Potter’s movements looked like a choreographed dance, something that spoke of their long-practiced familiarity and affection for each other, and Harry felt utterly pinned by it.

But what would he do if this… progressed? Should he interrupt or try to sneak out? Would he end up watching, unable to turn away? He sat there for a moment, trying to decide what to do, when it suddenly dawned on him that kissing was their destination. They were making no move to leave the wall for somewhere more suitable, no clothing was being unbuttoned or cast aside – nothing more than lips and tongues and hands were even involved. Their actions weren’t a precursor to something else, something more, as it’d always been for Harry. It made him wonder why he’d never just indulged in kissing. It seemed a simple, enjoyable intimacy, but it had never really captured him, and so he’d always moved beyond it quickly. Or maybe he just hadn’t found the right person yet, as Devon and Potter clearly had.

But the longer Harry watched, the more he began to realize the two men before him were in love. It was written across every movement, every smile, every touch. So this is what being in love looks like for me. The beauty of it, the want he experienced at seeing it play out before him, made the lingering ache in his chest deepen.

He knew he shouldn’t feel sorry for himself, though. Finding someone to spend a night with hadn’t even been on his radar, much less someone to spend his life with. Plus, he’d already had an inkling
that his next ‘task’ after Evochi would be precisely that, anyway. He knew it was time to turn the
tables on himself, to carve out his own life. That included finding someone to love – and someone
who would love him, not his name, in return.

Who is my Devon? he wondered.

With a deep inhale, Harry slowly stretched his limbs and gave notice to the fact he was waking. He
was amused to watch as Potter and Devon sprang apart, their lips and faces flushed, shy smiles
appearing on their faces.

“Don’t stop on my account,” Harry said with a lazy drawl, and they all shared a laugh.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Sprawling themselves across the squashy, common room furniture, Harry and his counterpart
munched away at some food one of the House elves had brought up. The room was still oddly
devoid of other students, but Harry assumed they were simply elsewhere in the castle, or perhaps
outside, enjoying the graduation festivities. Devon had disappeared, too, ostensibly to join them.
Harry was glad for the time alone with Potter, though, as answering questions about where he’d
come from and why there were two Harrys was not how he wanted to spend the rest of his session.
There were other, much more important things on his mind.

“How did you and Devon meet?”

Potter sat back in his chair and finished chewing his sandwich. “It was my third year. We quickly
became friends but didn’t start going out until fourth year. Well, my fourth year, his third.” Which
explained why Devon wasn’t graduating along with him – he still had one year to go.

“You’ve been in a relationship for three years?” Harry boggled. He’d had friendships and
associations with teachers for longer than that, of course, but never a romantic relationship. His
longest had been Ginny, and that had only lasted five months, all told. Then again, he supposed he’d
had plenty of other things to be worrying about in his life aside from girls. Or boys.

“Almost four, actually,” Potter amended with a smile, and Harry shook his head. Four
years? He
couldn’t quite get his head around that much time.

“You must really love each other,” he observed lamely, watching as a bit of color infused Potter’s
cheeks.

“Yeah.” Potter rubbed his palms over his thighs and then looked up at Harry with a soft smile. “It’s
weird. Sometimes you just meet someone and everything… fits. Like they were always supposed to
be a part of your life, only you just had to bump into them. And then once they are there, everything
feels right in a way you can’t explain, like there’s this private world that exists just for the two of
you, something that people on the outside can never be a part of, not truly. And you know you’ll
never have that same thing with anyone else. You know?”

A jolt of recognition zipped through Harry at those words, causing a flutter to stir his stomach. He
did know, actually. He nodded as memories of his interactions with Severus sprang to mind. Even
during the years they’d been at odds, there was still a certain rightness to knowing Severus was
around, as though something wouldn’t have fit otherwise. He had been a constant for Harry, and one
of the few. It was only in the recent months of getting to know the man that Harry had developed an
awareness of it, along with a desire, a need, for it to not change. Being with Severus had always felt different than with anyone else in his life, but until now, Harry hadn’t considered why. Maybe it was because he and Severus shared what Potter described, something that no one else could touch, or perhaps even understand.

Harry mused on it a moment longer before returning his thoughts to the relationship before him. “Is Devon…” Harry paused, trying to think how to ask his question. It felt like a delicate topic. “I don’t know of him in my reality.”

“Nope. He doesn’t exist there.”

The somewhat cryptic and terse nature of the response only served to make Harry more curious, but it seemed it was all Potter was going to say on the subject. Reluctantly, Harry let it go, nodding instead. “You said Devon was in Hufflepuff?”

“Yeah.” Potter’s mild expression was back. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, just that Gryffindor and Slytherin are usually grouped together for classes, so how did—”

“Oh. Yeah, I met Devon playing Quidditch. He’s the Seeker for Hufflepuff. A damn good one, too, though I think I might be a shade faster.” There was nothing boastful at all in Potter’s smile, only evidence of the good-natured competition that must exist between them. It made Harry chuckle.

“You mean Hufflepuff is the team to beat in the House Cup, not Slytherin?” he asked incredulously.

“Slytherin? No. Poor Robinson, he took a Bludger to the knee a few weeks ago – he’s their Seeker – and they lost the match. He’s fine now, of course, but that game decided their fate in the tournament. It ended up Gryffindor against Hufflepuff, but I caught the Snitch in the end.” Potter pursed his lips, looking skeptical. “Part of me still thinks Devon just let me have it – some rubbish about it being my last official game at Hogwarts or something.”

Harry grinned at the look on Potter’s face – he knew it well, but just wasn’t used to seeing it from this vantage point. It was such a strange thing to talk to yourself, see yourself, yet know the you sitting across from you isn’t actually you – rather, he’s his own person, with his own unique history and experiences. Harry shook his head minutely to clear the bizarre thought. Then something Potter had just said prodded at his mind. The Seeker for Slytherin was Robinson?

“Isn’t Draco the Slytherin Seeker?”

“Draco?” Potter asked, his brow furrowed. “You mean Draco Malfoy?”

Harry nodded, but wasn’t sure he liked the pause his inquiry had caused. He wondered what had become of Draco in this reality.

“Draco was the Slytherin Seeker years ago, but he transferred to Durmstrang his fourth year, right after the Tri-Wizard Tournament. I think his father thought he was too good for Hogwarts or something, the ponce.”

“Wait, you had the Tri-Wizard Tournament here?”

Potter blinked. “Yes. Does that surprise you?”

It probably shouldn’t have, but Harry recalled the reason they’d had it in his reality: something about Dumbledore wanting to re-establish magical bonds and encourage cooperation amongst those on the side of Light. Though, Harry supposed even without that need, the event could still be held simply
because of its rich history or that tradition dictated it.

“Did you participate?” Harry ventured cautiously. This made Potter laugh.

“God, no. I was only fourth year at the time, so I wasn’t eligible, but I’m quite sure I wouldn’t’ve done it even as a seventh year.” His eyes glinted with amusement. “Those tasks are bloody crazy!”

Harry grimaced in recognition, but decided not to mention anything about his involvement in his own Tri-Wizard Tournament. It was too long of a story, anyway, and not what he wanted to talk about.

“Who was Hogwarts’ Champion?”

“Cedric Diggory,” Potter answered. “Brave chap that he is.”

Harry caught the tense immediately. Is. That meant he was still alive here! Pleased, Harry nodded, even while he felt that familiar pang of regret, for the Cedric in his reality never got the chance to see what else might have been. “Did he win?”

“Nah, the Durmstrang Champion did. Which means, of course, that a rematch is definitely in order.”

Potter popped a crisp into his mouth and leaned back in his chair again. He settled his feet on the table before him, crossed his legs at the ankle, and grinned.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Once comfortably sated from their simple meal, Potter suggested they head down to the Quidditch pitch. Curious to see more of this place, Harry agreed easily, and wasn’t surprised to discover that it, too, was empty except for the two of them. He could almost feel the brush of magic around them as they walked through the castle and out onto the grounds, as though either Evochi (or Potter) was orchestrating things to avoid populated areas or places where they might encounter other people. Regardless of how it was happening, Harry was grateful for the seclusion, as he still had more questions.

Situating themselves on the bleachers towards one end of the field, Harry squinted into the waning sun as he looked over at Potter.

“Do you know what you’re going to do when you leave Hogwarts?” he asked.

Potter tipped his head. “Yeah, it’s something we usually decide on by the time we take our OWLs. Is that not the same for you?”

“It is for some,” Harry hedged. “I just haven’t figured it out yet, I suppose.” It brought to mind his conversation with Severus about this very thing, even though he still didn’t feel much closer to having an answer for himself. Still, something about Potter’s expression seemed keen all of a sudden, as though he understood far more than he was letting on.

Hoping to divert the attention off himself and that feeling of utter transparency – though how much could you really hide from yourself, anyway? – Harry repeated his question, realizing his curiosity about the answer had only grown. “What are you planning to do, then?”

In response, Potter seemed to draw himself up to his full height in a somewhat exaggerated fashion.
It reminded Harry of Fred and George. “You are looking at the next purveyor of fine, handmade brooms. And other Quidditch supplies,” Potter added, as though he would have offended something – or someone – by not including that bit.

*He sounds like an advert,* Harry thought with a grin, but aloud he enthused, “Brilliant!” It wasn’t a job he’d ever considered for himself (he wouldn’t have the foggiest idea where to even start) but the more he thought about it, the more he loved the idea for his counterpart. “So, you’ll make the Potter 3000, then?” he asked, only half joking.

“Not exactly.” Potter grinned, then turned thoughtful. “I was actually planning to name my line of brooms after my Granddad’s family – something in our Peverell lineage.”

And there it was: that sinking feeling that always seemed to accompany mentions of Harry’s family, even though this time it wasn’t his, strictly speaking. But if Potter knew his grandparents – or at least one grandfather – that must also mean…

Something must have shown on his face, for Potter slid closer to him on the bench.

“Harry,” he started, but Harry’s eyes were already distant and unfocused. “There’s something I didn’t tell you. I know what this is, this place, and why you’re here.”

So Harry *had* been right – Potter knew more than he was letting on. But perhaps that shouldn’t be entirely unexpected, given that a construct had to originate in Harry’s mind somewhere; therefore, it stood to reason his counterpart – or any version of himself or anyone else he might meet – would also be privy to the same information, knowledge or history. He sighed.

“Harry, this is a… glimpse.”

“A what?”

“A glimpse. An… alternate outcome.”

“Like an alternate reality?”

Potter shrugged. “I guess you could call it that, yeah.”

“So your parents are alive here. Lily and James.” Harry looked up at him expectantly and caught Potter’s furrowed brow and sad smile. His expression was uncertain, as though he had been avoiding the topic for this very reason.

Finally, he said, “Yes.”

“And you represent how things would’ve happened if I’d grown up with them.” It wasn’t a question.

“One possibility, yes,” Potter agreed, and Harry nodded.

Then, after a beat, he asked, “And Sirius? Is he here?”

“Uncle Sirius?” Potter’s face split into a smile. “Oh, yes.”

Harry couldn’t help but find the smile infectious, and mirrored it with one of his own. Potter bent one of his knees and looped his arm around it, leaning against his upraised leg.

“When I was little, I used to love helping Sirius work on his motorbike. He used to sneak me out of the house at night and we’d go for long rides. It was brilliant. Pretty sure my parents would’ve killed him if they’d realized he was doing it.”
Harry grinned, not the least bit surprised by this revelation.

“That Sirius started traveling and living in all these different places, so I didn’t see him as much. He owled regularly, but I wasn’t allowed to read all of his letters, so I can only imagine the exploits he put into them. Eventually, he married Marguerite. That was also the year he sent me a kangaroo for my birthday.” Potter laughed. “I was only able to hide it in the house for a couple days before Mum and Dad found out. I’m pretty sure Dad thought it was hilarious, but Mum didn’t approve and made him go return it. Sirius was always pulling stunts.” The grin on Potter’s face indicated he was enjoying the memories this spawned.

For the first time during the session, Harry really looked at his counterpart. He saw the easy grace and contentment there, traits he knew he also shared even if he’d not had much reason to access them yet. But this was definitely James’ son. Pleasant, though, not arrogant; a child who’d grown up in a loving, Wizarding home, clearly never wanting for anything. Yet despite their disparate upbringings, Harry realized he and Potter were fundamentally alike. At their core, they were still the same person. If nothing else, this seemed to indicate that having parents would not have altered the essence of who he was. Or is. And that he could still have the things Potter had, if he wanted them.

Now that he thought on it, he wondered how much else was the same.

“Are you friends with Ron and Hermione here? Close friends, I mean?”


Something warmed inside Harry at the thought. “Good.” He was glad to know that people who were special to him in his own reality were also special here. Then, an urgent thought struck him. “Is Professor Snape here?”

“Here? As in Hogwarts?” Potter asked, and Harry nodded. “No… but I think you probably mean Dr. Snape, anyway, don’t you?” The same disorienting feeling as before came over Harry, like when he had asked about Draco.

“‘Doctor’?” he echoed, not sure he’d heard correctly.

Potter smirked. “I take it that’s not what you expected to hear. Yes, here he’s one of the preeminent researchers at the Hamburg Institute of Science. He develops new variants of rare and complex medicinal potions. He also publishes a lot, and I think is the acting editor for the Journal of Modern Potions.”

Harry smiled. That sounded like Severus. “So he never taught at Hogwarts?”

“No that I’m aware of. I think he taught at a Muggle university, though.”

“He taught Potions at a Muggle university?”

The question made Potter laugh. “No, it was probably just chemistry or something like that, but I think it’s the cooperation between Muggle and Wizarding science that has led to many of the advancements. Understanding things from multiple sides and all that.”

Harry pondered this for a moment. It was something that’d never made sense to him in his own reality: why the Wizarding world insisted on its separation from the Muggle world. Sure, Muggles may not take kindly to the knowledge that magic really did exist, at least not at first, but so much stood to be gained for humankind with an alliance or cooperation of some sort. Harry nodded, deciding he really liked that aspect of this reality. Still, it would have been strange not having Severus at Hogwarts, though.
“How do you know so much about Severus, then, if he never taught here?”

“‘Severus’?” Potter asked, raising an eyebrow, presumably at Harry’s casual use of the name. Harry blushed.

“Er, yeah, sorry. In my reality, he’s a professor at Hogwarts, and we’re sort of… friends.”

“Ah,” Potter said, then pressed his lips together for a moment as though he was trying to stifle a smirk. “We study him and his work in Potions class.”

Harry could only imagine Severus’ reaction to being part of the Hogwarts curriculum, having a ‘bunch of dunderheads drooling on the books, merely attempting to grasp the subtle art and exact science that is potion-making.’ Harry chuckled to himself. Though, given Severus’ recent admission about what he’d actually like to do with his career, perhaps that’d be exactly the sort of notoriety he’d relish. He certainly deserved the accolades.

Yet the revelation had also introduced a startling possibility: if Severus had never come to teach at Hogwarts, then that meant he’d never begged for Dumbledore’s protection. And if he hadn’t needed Dumbledore’s protection, then that probably meant he had never been a spy. Which meant…

Now that Harry thought to look for it, he realized Potter didn’t have a lightning bolt scar on his forehead. Maybe there hadn’t even been a prophecy, or perhaps it had been Neville…

“Is Voldemort a part of this reality?” Harry asked suddenly.

Potter's expression sobered. “I was wondering when you were going to ask about that.”

“Is he alive or dead?”

Potter paused. “Neither,” he said thoughtfully, then gestured wide, presumably to indicate the entire reality they were inhabiting. “This is simply the absence of Voldemort.”

“So he never existed?”

“No here.”

Harry blinked for a moment, trying to work out how Tom Riddle may have been eradicated as a child or young adult, or perhaps it was that he had never been born at all, or if he had survived, how different his life must have been that it hadn’t driven him to become Voldemort.

Then he thought of the Voldemort in his sixth draught, and what that had represented, and also of himself as that little boy. He turned back to Potter, almost as though he was seeing him again for the first time. He tipped his head, narrowing his eyes slightly. “Are you a part of me?”

“Very good,” Potter said, the smile on his face rife with delight. “I’m what you might call the light side of your psyche.”

“So why couldn’t I have met you first, then?” Harry grumbled, thinking how different his sessions might’ve been if he’d seen himself happy first before having to confront Voldemort. Twice.

“Because I was lost,” Potter said, his smile fading.

Something about the look on Potter’s face reminded Harry of Dumbledore just then. It was that somber expression of a wise mentor, the sort built from compassion and a little sadness – one Harry had seen often and knew well. All that was missing was the half-moon spectacles and the long, white
“Lost?”

“Yes. You had yet to embrace me. You didn’t think you deserved your happiness, your light, your privilege.” Potter’s gaze seemed to pierce right through him as he pressed a finger gently against Harry’s forehead. “I was here.” Then he moved his finger to point at Harry’s heart. “Instead of here.”

Harry swallowed, his gaze flicking away for a moment before returning to Potter. “And now?”

Potter smiled once again. “I think I’ll let you work that one out on your own.”

Instinctively, Harry knew his hour was almost up, and decided to start making his way around the pitch. Even though it was only part of a construct in his mind, he still relished the fact that it looked the same as the one in his own reality, and the one he had visited in many of his other Evochi sessions. He had only gone a short distance before he suddenly turned, realizing belatedly that Potter had been trailing along behind him the whole time. Potter was watching him, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his robes, a knowing smile set on his face.

“This is a world without Voldemort,” Harry observed.

“Yes. But now so is yours, thanks in no small part to you,” Potter pointed out.

Until then, it was something Harry hadn’t spent a lot of time thinking about. But it was true, and on more than one level. He had done his part freeing the Wizarding world from the tyranny of Voldemort, and had also managed to eradicate the manifestation of Voldemort in his mind – evidence of his own emotional healing, if Severus was to be believed. But it wasn’t until this moment, standing next to his alternate reality doppelgänger, that he finally heard those words as he never had before: I now live in a world without Voldemort.

Harry didn’t know why it had taken so long to see this – after all the virtual realities, the dreamscape, and now this alternate reality (as well as lots of guidance and support from both Hermione and Severus) – here he was. Finally. He got it.

He couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across his face. It was followed by a little puff of laughter, the sort of giddy sound only a rush of relief can bring. Everything seemed to be in its right place here: the people, the places, the events. With a start, he realized that was also true of his own reality – the important ones, anyway – but it’d taken a comparison such as this in order to see it.

Out of nowhere, Devon appeared by Potter’s side, smiling at the pair of them. Without turning his head, Potter wrapped an arm around Devon’s waist and pulled him close, then extended his hand to Harry. Looking at the two men before him, Harry felt a wave of happiness sweep over him – a sense of rightness – and he grasped the proffered hand warmly.

“Thanks. For everything,” Harry said.

“My pleasure.” Potter smiled. “I wish we could meet again.”

“Me too,” Harry agreed, but couldn’t bring himself to feel bad about that because he sensed it
wouldn’t be needed. It made him think back to September, when he had just started down this path. *Maybe the potion has done what it needed to do,* he wondered. *Maybe it’s trying to tell me I’m done.* He remembered Severus saying six months would be sufficient for him to see improvement. And he’d been right, to an extent, though it’d only taken four. And it had done more than ‘improvement,’ too, if Harry was any judge of it.

“Hey, great meeting you, Harry.” It was Devon who extended his hand this time, which Harry accepted gratefully. “Best to you.”

Harry nodded in acknowledgment and they smiled at each other. Not for the first time, he wondered if Devon had existed in his own reality, if he would have fallen for him just as his counterpart had. There was an easy, comfortable interaction there that made him happy. Well, Potter was happy, but Harry certainly felt it by extension. *Somewhere* he was happy, and that gave him hope.

It was then the expanse of blue sky above them began to darken, white clouds giving way to tall bookshelves and black walls. Implements and cauldrons and books began to appear, giving the odd impression they were floating mid-air, punctuating the placid summer landscape around them. It meant only one thing: the end of the session was at hand.

Looking back at Devon and Potter, Harry watched as they began to walk away, their backs half-turned to him. Devon had one arm slung casually around Potter’s shoulders and they were in the clutches of a shared joke, mirth evident on both their faces.

That’s when Harry realized what the potion had done for him. He had requested it give him the experience of being happy, thinking he’d see what his future might hold. Instead, the potion had shown him a parallel reality, a place where Voldemort had never existed. But perhaps the two timelines weren’t that different after all.

The cornerstones of his own identity, the things he’d feared losing the most – being a wizard, attending Hogwarts, living in Gryffindor, befriending Ron and Hermione, playing Quidditch (and, if he was honest, having Severus in there *somewhere*) – hadn’t changed simply because Voldemort opted not to exist. Moreover, the people and feelings and events he’d experienced while under the influence of Evochi had since become part of his mind, part of his memories, part of *him,* and he couldn’t go back to the way things were. They had changed him, even if it had all been in his head. Maybe that was the point of it, of all the sessions: it wasn’t the external factors that shaped reality, it was the internal ones.

It was strange for Harry to think of his life as a blank canvas now, to take the brush perched over it and paint it anew – much like Evochi’s brush had been doing for him all along. He wondered if it would be as simple as thinking something into existence, or letting go of things that no longer suited him, or nurturing things that did. For several months, his life had seemed the epitome of the grey mist: formless, fathomless, directionless. But now he saw it for what it was: a beginning. Electricity thrummed through him at this realization, and it tingled across his body and down to his fingers. It was a power that had nothing to do with magic, or at least not *that* kind of magic. This time, he wouldn’t need a wand, only… choices.

His mind registered a smooth, suede texture, and he fancied he could feel the fabric of the chaise beneath him. He remembered thinking that over the course of his sessions he became more and more aware of what he was doing, and what he was inside of, with each subsequent draught. Perhaps the wall between his conscious and subconscious mind was blurring; thinning. Perhaps it was that awareness that would give him clarity outside of the potion’s effects, too.

Coming back to himself, Harry saw that very little of the construct now remained. The grass below him was black as stone, the lab around him almost a lab again – except for the two people in front of
him. While he still could, he drank in one last look, noting the warm smile on Potter’s face that echoed his own in return.

Then Potter turned back towards Devon and their hands instinctively found one another. As their fingers firmly entwined, the space around them began to fade quickly, growing dim and insubstantial as though they were being swept away with a retreating fog. Then, almost as suddenly, they were gone. It was like a mirage that had once again become one with its surroundings… or perhaps might never have been there at all.
Harry wasn’t sure when he figured out that his feelings for Severus were changing.

He wasn’t even sure what his feelings were changing to, only that there was a growing sense of comfort there, an awareness that he was happier and more content when Severus was around; that more and more now, something just felt out of place when he wasn’t in the man’s presence.

So many things had happened over the last week and a half – really, over the last few months – that Harry could barely remember where one thing began and another ended, or even where he was in the middle of it all. He kept thinking about his life, watching as it played out before his mind’s eye: a continuous parade of memories and conversations and draughts, each one blurring into the next until eventually they all just became a circle.

But mostly he thought about Severus.

Harry sighed and stared unfocused at the ceiling. It was late afternoon on a Wednesday and, like so many days before it, he’d done little to pass the time except grab a bite to eat from the kitchen and then pace around the drawing room, looking out the window, before giving up and returning to his bed. He was growing more and more restless with his life, but in the absence of a new path – hell, anything to do – he often found himself alone, with only his thoughts for company. Sometimes it was frustrating being the only one of his friends who didn’t have something to be getting on with: school, or teaching, or work of some kind. But he also knew that was mostly by his own design. Ever since he’d started with Evochi, he’d put lots of decisions on hold. He also guessed there’d be some emotional sorting out to do once he was finished, but he just hadn’t anticipated it would be so… confusing.

He reached over and grabbed a reddish-brown ball off his nightstand. It was about the size of an orange, and he rolled it against his fingers for a moment before lobbing it at the wall opposite his bed. It hit with a thump and then bounced back towards him. The ball was a rubberized miniature of a Bludger he’d accidentally nicked from George’s office. He’d played with it while George had animated his tattoo, and then found it was still in his pocket when he’d returned home that evening. At the time, he’d just shrugged, making a mental note to bring it back to George later. That was five months ago.

Harry leaned back against his pillows in order to vary the location of his aim. He liked the rhythmic sound it made as it bounced off the wall, and the feel of its smooth, almost sticky texture as it landed back in his palm. It helped him to think. And anyways, he figured if George had needed it back, he would have asked for it by now.

Thump.

Harry’s eighth session had only been three days ago, and already he couldn’t get it out of his mind. At the time it had filled him with such a sense of purpose – of hope – that his spirits had been buoyed for the first time in… too long. He’d thought he was happy, or at least getting happier, but returning to the empty and colder-than-he’d-left-it Grimmauld had made quick work of that optimism, reminding him all too painfully that his doppelgänger’s life was not his. That in fact ‘Potter’ had simply been a shade of his psyche, not some separate person with a separate life somewhere. And that there was no such person as Devon, either. Well, presumably, anyway – something still nettled in the back of Harry’s mind about that.

Thump.
At least he felt like he’d finally arrived at a place where he was content with his sexuality. Then again, he supposed his dreamscape, the interlude with Charlie, and seeing a version of himself with Devon had helped paved the way for that, at least mentally. Yet he also knew, instinctively, that it wasn’t a new thing. It had always been there, but just didn’t have a reason to surface until after he’d got together with Ginny.

*Thump.*

In many ways, she had been a logical choice for him. Dating her was an exercise in stability and familiarity, things that had kept him grounded and sane in the months leading up to the war. She had made Harry feel things he’d never felt before. And he had been attracted to her – it had just waned quickly, morphing into something more akin to the affection one carries for a family member; a sister. Or maybe it had just taken some catching up on his part to realize that comfort and attraction were two different things.

*Thump.*

To top it off, mornings kept finding Harry waking up on the tail end of some erotic dream. It had started out as a rather pleasant routine, but when the remembered touch of phantom hands began haunting his waking hours, too, the dreams quickly became a mockery of his life, serving only to underscore his loneliness. It was times like that he could barely suppress the urge to sneer at himself. Imagine: Harry Potter, hero of the Wizarding world, alone. Who would’ve even thought it possible?

*THUMP.*

The force of Harry’s throw caused the ball to bounce off two walls, slam the door of his armoire closed, dribble halfway across the floor, and finally roll to a stop next to the nightstand. Harry lay there a second before leaning over to pick it up again.

Being alone certainly wasn’t because of a lack of options, he reminded himself. He knew there were many who’d happily take up the cause to be his companion, especially for a night, but he also knew those people only wanted his celebrity. He couldn’t just go and pick up some random bloke in a pub like his friends could. As soon as one of them spotted his scar, he’d no longer be Harry, he’d become *Harry Potter*, this fantasy person who could never live up to their expectations.

*Thump.*

No, he needed someone who could see past all that, who knew his celebrity was simply the result of something that had happened to him outside of his choice or control – and as a baby, no less. He needed someone who knew him for him.

*You need Severus,* his mind offered.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment, tightly squeezing the ball in his hand. The truth was, that very sentiment had been repeating itself like a mantra in his head for days now. It was the reason he’d been spending so much time lost in his thoughts; the reason he couldn’t sit still or even sleep well. Every time he let his mind wander freely, it somehow came back to Severus – things they’d talked about, meals they’d shared, draughts they’d done… and the revelation Harry’d made during the staff party about Severus’ jealousy over him. But what did it all mean?

Harry chucked the ball out the door to his bedroom, listening as it ricocheted its way down the stairwell and into the lower floor. It satisfied him somehow to know that the clatter would inject some life into the house, however temporary. Then, suddenly struck with an idea, Harry patted his hands around in the sheets piled on his bed until he located a thin, charcoal notebook underneath his duvet.
He pulled it out and began flipping through the pages, hoping some of his more recent passages would shed some light on the situation.

The fact that Harry kept a journal was something not even Ron or Hermione knew about. He didn’t write in it every day, and when he did, his notes were often little more than abstract ideas or senses about things. He had begun the practice during the long months that preceded the war, when they were Horcrux hunting and jumping from one survival instinct to the next. Unloading his thoughts periodically had helped him to keep his head clear.

It was only now, as he read over his scribbled notes, that he noticed a pattern forming. There were entries about Severus, but that wasn’t what surprised him. After all, he’d spent quite a bit of time with the man over the last six months – it stood to reason Severus would make an appearance in there somewhere. No, what surprised Harry was how many entries about Severus there were, and that the amount of them had increased sharply in the last month – a time frame that seemed to fit with the kiss after Harry’s sixth draught.

Not for the first time, Harry was glad that winning the war against Voldemort hadn’t involved a romantic test of any kind, or he’d have failed miserably, leaving the state of Wizarding Britain in limbo simply because he was incapable of picking up on or interpreting relationship cues. Harry snorted at himself.

But there was more to it, too. He knew that. The kiss may have opened his eyes on some level – awoken something in him that he wanted to explore further – but it was all the hours he’d spent with Severus, really getting to know the man, that had changed the nature of his journal entries. Harry could barely remember the professor he’d had while he was at Hogwarts. He wasn’t even sure that person existed anymore. Now it was just Severus – his friend, his mentor, his… his… what, exactly?

That was the real question, wasn’t it?

Harry looked back down at the journal in his hands. He’d never before connected what he was writing with how he felt – he’d done it simply to unburden his mind at random intervals. But now he could see it had been there all along, laid out before him in the abstract passages of his journal. Somewhere along the way, senses had become feelings, feelings had become thoughts, thoughts had become realizations.

Somewhere along the way, Severus had become very important to him.

Circumstances had brought them together in a way Harry couldn’t have anticipated. He guessed the same was true for Severus. If someone would have told him a year ago that he’d be friends with Severus now, that he’d actively seek out the man and miss his company when they were apart, he’d have thought them mad.

But was Harry prepared to try and make a move, to see if there was something more between them? The mere thought of that sent a tendril of nervous energy through Harry’s stomach. Then again, Severus had seemed to make his feelings known in his own way, although shepherding Harry through a rehab process and protecting him – well, he’d always done the latter, hadn’t he? Was it possible Severus had had these feelings for awhile? If so, for how long? Was it just as likely Harry was misinterpreting them?

No, he didn’t think Severus’ behavior was entirely platonic. Ron and Hermione, and a host of other Hogwarts teachers, had looked out for him for years, too, and none had ever tried to kiss him after an intense, shared experience. Or hid possible messages in song lyrics. Or acted jealous when potential suitors were afoot, no matter how unlikely a match it would have been.
Harry sighed and closed the cover of his journal. For so long, he had just been reacting to his life, unsure of where to start or even what he wanted, most days not even trusting or believing it was actually his to live. And it wasn’t that he knew those answers now any better than he did then, but one thing seemed certain: he was never going to find out if he didn’t at least get out of bed.

But first, there was one thing he had to do.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

It was the dinner hour at Hogwarts, and Harry had chosen that time to visit because he knew everyone would be congregated in the Great Hall. Sure enough, as he entered the library, only a few straggling students remained. Some clearly had no intention of moving any time soon, books piled six or seven high next to them, studious and exhausted expressions on their faces. One student rushed past him out the door, presumably on her way down to eat. End-of-term exams were near, and then students would be off for two weeks for their holiday break.

Heading to the counter, Harry watched as the stern, elderly face of the librarian swam into view. How was it that she always seemed to know when someone was there? It was eerie. To top it off, Harry wasn’t quite sure what he was looking for, and didn’t really want to ask for specifics, so he settled on inquiring after historical records of witches and wizards who had lived previously.

Madam Pince gave him the once over, looking down the length of her nose through the glasses perched there, before abruptly turning and walking over to a row of shelves behind the counter. Harry watched as she selected an old, crusty-looking book that was barely two inches thick. When she returned, she set it on the counter and pushed it slightly in Harry’s direction. Her peevish expression hadn’t changed, though. Maybe it never did.

Harry glanced at the cover. “Um, thanks, but I’m not sure this is the book I’m looking for. I need something that has historical records that go back several years. Well, more than several, actually—”

“And that is what I have given you,” she snapped. “Now, is there anything else you require?”

Harry looked down at the book again and then back to her face. Her expression was making him rethink another attempt. “No, I guess this will be it. Thanks.”

She nodded rather brusquely and ushered off. Harry briefly considered going to locate Hermione, as she knew how to navigate the library (and had always seemed to have a better rapport with the tetchy librarian) but knew this was something he ought to do on his own – she wouldn’t approve, he was sure of it.

Selecting an out-of-the-way table, Harry sat down and deposited the book before him, its thud quite a bit heavier sounding than he would have expected. Intrigued, he pulled it closer and inspected its cover: British Wizarding Society Public Records, d. 1207-1998, 177th Edition, Compiled by Gemma Eales, Ministry of Magic Registration Secretary.

Almost 800 years in one book? Harry thought. That’s daft. But when he opened the cover, he realized the joke was on him. It was a Wizarding book, of course! He guessed the thickness was simply to accommodate the lengthy title on its spine, whereas its heft (a thought he confirmed in short order) was to keep it laying flat while open. He shook his head at himself. Even after all this time, he still wasn’t used to magic cropping up everywhere.

He flipped through a few of the pages, but stopped when an acute sense of déjà vu settled over him. This wasn’t the first time he’d sat before a book with blank pages, awaiting the unknown. For a moment, he wondered if he needed to write in it, like Riddle’s journal, but then figured Madam Pince
would have his head if he tried it. Even though he was currently out of sight from the front desk, she’d still know… somehow.

Fortunately, that’s when he noticed the surface of the pages seemed to shimmer at him, though it was so slight that it barely caught the ambient light in the room. It reminded him of a Pensieve with memories in it. He wondered…

Taking stock of his surroundings, he turned his head to see who was around. He had chosen his table wisely, for the only other person he could see had their back to him. Bracing his hands on either side of the book, Harry closed his eyes for a brief moment, hoping he was doing the right thing, and then tipped his head into the center where the pages met the binding. He expected to feel the cool press of paper against his forehead, but instead felt only vapor. It tickled his face as it engulfed him, and he could only assume he’d passed through it correctly when he landed on his feet in the middle of a dark room. Or he guessed it was a room. Everywhere around him was nearly black; there was no definition to the ceiling or walls or floor.

A sudden scraping sound made him jump and he whipped around and watched as an illuminated, wooden podium slid along the floor and creaked to a stop before him. A tattered piece of parchment was affixed to one corner; it had clearly been there awhile, as the edges were now going brown with age. He could just barely make out the inscription. It read: Please state your inquiry clearly.

Blinking, Harry looked around at the nothingness that surrounded him. What the hell, he thought with a shrug. ‘I would like to look up a wizard,” he said, his voice sounding too loud as it rang out into the silence. He felt a bit foolish talking to an inanimate object, but it seemed to have worked when the letters on the parchment began rearranging themselves. It now read: Please state a full name.

“Oh, um…” He decided to start in an easy place. “Harry James Potter?” he offered, unsure of what to expect.

If he’d thought the process had been a little unsettling so far, it had done nothing to prepare him for what happened next. To start, the scraping noise that’d heralded the arrival of the podium sounded again, and he watched it retreat backwards into the expanse of black before him. Then, a great lurching sound erupted around him – his only warning before enormous bookcases began whizzing past him at lightning speed. He was too shocked to move, and feared what might have happened had he taken a step to either side, anyway. He blinked his eyes against the on-rushing of air until the units began to slow, and then finally stop.

When he was satisfied the bookshelves weren’t going to move again, he turned his head to look at them. They appeared to be made from some kind of thick, knotty wood, and bore elegant carvings along their facing edges and supports. Every square inch, floor to ceiling (or as far up as he could see, anyway) was packed with books – thousands and thousands of tiny little books, uniform in height and with thin spines. They looked like journals…

Before him, a small metal piece swung out from the end of a shelf, creaking from disuse. Amid its rusty patina, the placard read: Po-Pz / 1980 / 20th Century. From the shelf in front of Harry, almost at eye level, a blue booklet suddenly ejected itself. Surprised, he juggled it between his hands until he caught it properly.

He looked down at the cover. It was dusty, but there, unmistakably in gold foil, it read:

*Harry James Potter*

*b. 31-July-1980*

*d."
Wizard (Half-Blood)

For a moment, his eyes remained fixed to the ‘d.’ line, realizing it could have been filled in earlier this year if things had gone a little differently. He shuddered and quickly replaced his booklet back on the shelf; he didn’t want to think about that right now. The booklet had barely left his fingers when the podium appeared again, this time seeming to materialize out of thin air but still bearing its former instruction. Harry decided to try another easy one.

“Hermione Jean Granger,” he called out, wanting to make sure he got the hang of this before going further.

The shelves shifted again, rumbling and groaning as though they moved only with great effort. This time when they stopped, the placard read: Go-Gz / 1979 / 20th Century. As before, a booklet ejected itself, but Harry was ready this time and caught it easily. Hers (Hermione Jean Granger, b. 19-September-1979, d., Witch (Muggle-Born)) was yellow and slightly thicker than his own. Smiling slightly, he replaced it and tried a third name. The shelves shifted forward several rungs until Ron’s red booklet (Ronald Bilius Weasley, b. 1-March-1980, d., Wizard (Pure-Blood)) flew out at him.

Curious about what the different colored books meant, he called out Severus’ name to the podium next. His booklet (Severus Tobias Snape, b. 9-January-1960, d., Wizard (Half-Blood)) was blue, just as Harry’s had been. Sure enough, the colors seemed to represent the person’s blood heritage, though Harry wondered why the cataloging system even bothered with that given the sheer magnitude of books in the archive. Unless there was a need to run a certain query… Harry dismissed the thought with a small shake of his head. There were many things about the magical world he still didn’t understand, and suddenly got the feeling there were many more he was probably better off not knowing. He replaced Severus’ book on the shelf and turned his attention back to his task.

Feeling bolstered by his initial searches, Harry took a deep breath and readied himself for the next name he was going to call out; the reason he was there in the first place. He closed his eyes as he intoned to the stale air, “Devon Glyn.”

However, the bookshelves remained still. It caused Harry to open his eyes and see that the podium had appeared again. At first he wondered if he hadn’t spoken the name clearly enough, or if a middle name was always required, but then he noticed something new had appeared on the parchment. Leaning closer, he saw it was giving him two choices: 1804 or 1922. Not sure which to select, he decided to start with 1804.

This time the podium remained where it stood while the bookshelves began their usual, breakneck arrangement. When they were done, the placard that emerged read: Ga-Gn / 1804 / 19th Century. However, the red booklet that ejected itself had an unfamiliar name on the cover: Devon Glastonbury. Harry furrowed his brow, a sinking feeling beginning to stir his stomach, but he decided to ignore it for the time being. Instead, he replaced the booklet and turned back to the podium, calling out 1922 next. The shelves shuffled for a while this time, and when they finally stopped (Ma-Mn / 1922 / 20th Century), Harry once again grabbed the red booklet and read its cover: Devon MacGuinley.

It was then that the words of Harry’s doppelgänger echoed in his mind: No, he doesn’t exist in your reality. And it seemed Potter had been right: there did not appear to be anyone named Devon Glyn in this timeline. Furthermore, only two people in recorded Wizarding history even seemed to match the name Devon and the four letters of his surname. Harry’s heart sank further. Perhaps the reason Devon wasn’t in this time was because…

Making a hasty decision, Harry called out, “Please show me any wizards with the surname Glyn, from…” – he did a quick calculation in his head – “1950 on.” He wasn’t sure if this type of query
would be allowed, but when the massive bookshelves jostled about into a new arrangement around him, he supposed it had been a fairly straightforward search.

The placard that slid into view was smudged with dust (no wonder, with all the shuffling about these shelves do) and he brushed at it with his fingers. It was labeled: Ga-Gn / 1959 / 20th Century. He righted the blue booklet that leapt into his hands and read:

Joseph Duncan Glyn
b. 4-April-1959
d. 14-January-1981
Wizard (Half-Blood)

Although Harry hadn’t been tempted to open the booklets for anyone else, not really wanting to know what it said outside of the information on the cover, very little would have prevented him from doing so with Mr. Glyn’s book. As it happened, the first page was fairly innocuous – it indicated he had married a witch named Fiona, who appeared to be a year younger. Her information was listed as well, with a cross-reference to her maiden name and pertinent dates.

It was the next discovery that caused Harry’s breath to catch in his throat. Joseph and Fiona were both in their early twenties when they died, and within two days of each other. It was also earlier in the same year Harry’s parents died – timing that fit with the first war against Voldemort. Harry wondered if they’d been part of the resistance… and lost. Since they were both relatively young, that probably meant they hadn’t yet started a family.

Thinking back to his eighth draught, Harry recalled that Devon had been a year behind Potter. If Devon’s parents had survived, he likely would have been born sometime in late 1981, or possibly early 1982. Had Fiona been pregnant at the time of her death? Harry certainly hoped not. He slid the book back into its spot on the shelf, refusing to think about another life that may have been robbed by Voldemort.

No, he doesn’t exist in your reality.

Harry sighed.

Yet what would he have done if Devon had existed? It wasn’t like he could just go look him up and say, “Hey, you and I were together in a figment of my imagination. There’s this potion, you see…” Harry snorted and shook his head. He wasn’t even sure he would want that relationship even if Devon had existed. But he couldn’t shake the feeling of seeing Potter – of seeing himself – happy. And in love. He wanted that, perhaps now more than anything.

So what was he doing here, then, looking up non-existent people in dusty books? Why had the potion shown him a relationship he could never have?

Something warm squeezed Harry’s shoulder and he jumped. It felt like a hand, yet when he turned to look, there was nothing there. Above him, he saw only a muted, white fog. Something must have triggered an exit, though, for he suddenly felt his consciousness pass back through the archive’s confines and leave him squinting in the light of the library. A familiar face came into view.

“How’d you know I was here?”

“I’m surprised you even know where the library is.”

“Ha bloody ha. No, really.”

A sly grin graced her face as she reached into her robes and pulled out a thick, folded parchment.
The corners were bent and the whole thing looked a little worse for the wear, but Harry recognized it instantly: The Marauder’s Map.

“That’s where that’s been? You’ve had it all this time? I thought I lost that!”

She handed it to him. “I just found it in my bag. It’s probably an unfair advantage for Head Girl, don’t you think?” Her tone carried a note of mock concern and Harry laughed.

“Only if they know about it,” he said, and they grinned at each other.

“What were you looking up?” Hermione asked, nodding her head at the book Harry had just closed with a snap. He gave her a look and she smiled. “I don’t want to know, do I?”

“No,” he said, then pulled the book against his chest and stood up.

“I thought you were sleeping at first, you had your head so close to the pages.”

“No, I was just… reading.” Harry knew he probably looked guilty as hell, but Hermione seemed to accept the answer, or at least had the grace not to press further. This was not the venue for that discussion.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Thirty minutes later, at some clothing boutique in Muggle London that Harry barely remembered navigating to, Hermione emerged from a dressing room and stepped onto a small, carpeted dais in front of where he was sitting. He absently registered that it was the fourth or fifth time she’d done that, but the first in which she’d spoken to him.

“What do you think of this one?”

Harry started slightly; Hermione knew perfectly well he hadn’t been paying attention. Regardless, she just stood there, looking at him from her vantage point in the mirror, a look of mild inquiry on her face.

“Uh, nice, I guess, but I don’t know the criteria. What’s this for again?”

Hermione sighed. “The Ministry Ball this Christmas. I’m meeting with Chancellor Montgomery in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures next week, and since I’m a top candidate for the job, I’m invited to the party. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley will be there, too. So, it’s not too much?” She twirled this time, apparently to watch how the dress flared out along the bottom.

“I don’t know, I’m useless at this stuff. Why didn’t you bring Ginny? I thought that’s what girls do together, they pick out each other’s clothes and stuff.”

Hermione shrugged without taking her eyes off herself in the mirror. “You looked like you could use a change of scenery.” She turned to look over her shoulder to examine how the dress fit in the back.

“Yes. I think I’ll get this one.”

With that, she disappeared back into the dressing room, and Harry slipped easily back into his thoughts. Little did he know, he would be next on the docket. After a pointed reference to his careworn, too-casual attire, Hermione directed him to the men’s department and conspired with the clerk to outfit him in something appropriate for the holidays. When he argued that the Weasleys weren’t a formal bunch, and wouldn’t care about his old denims, she cryptically remarked that a new outfit might come in handy in case of a special occasion. Before he could ask what she was talking about, she stepped away with the clerk to settle the bill. Eventually he gave up trying to figure
Hermione out and accepted the new outfit, realizing it had looked quite nice on him and he was probably due.

With their purchases shrunken and stowed in their pockets, Harry and Hermione decided to take a walk through one of central London’s public parks. The weather was pleasant enough for mid-December, and although there were lots of other people about, few spared more than a glance for the two friends. They were probably all Muggles, anyhow, so Harry and Hermione had the rare opportunity to enjoy some privacy.

After a particularly long stretch of silence, Harry took a deep breath. “I met myself in my eighth draught.”

Hermione brushed some snow off a park bench before she sat and looked up at Harry. “Oh? What happened?”

Sitting down next to her, he replied, “It was a version of me, sort of like an alternate reality. He was in this long-term relationship with a bloke named Devon. He told me Devon didn’t exist in real life, but like an idiot, I went to look him up anyway. That’s what I was doing when you found me in the library.” Harry sighed and looked away, watching the pigeons peck at the ground in a futile search for food. He was surprised when he heard Hermione’s giggle.

“Oh, Harry, that’s not stupid! I would have done the same thing!”

He looked over at her. “No, you wouldn’t. You aren’t nearly so pathetic.” This set them both to laughing. When the mood sobered again, he added, “I don’t know why I did it, really. It just felt like unfinished business somehow, like if I let it slip away without investigating it, it would mean I couldn’t move on with my life. I just had to know.” He shook his head. “God, that sounds so stupid.”

“Not at all. If I’d seen myself in a situation like that, I’d’ve wanted to know who the person was, too. I have experienced Evochi, if you recall, and I know how real it feels. There’s nothing wrong with being curious, at least.”

“Right. Curious, or obsessing over a figment of my imagination?”

“Well, what was it about him that made you want to look him up?”

“Why does it matter? He doesn’t exist.”

“That’s not the point. What’s important is what he represents for you. Maybe the potion was trying to tell you something even if your interpretation isn’t right.”

“Like what? That I’m alone and unhappy and wish I wasn’t? Or that I probably just need to get laid?”

Hermione swatted his arm. “Harry!”

“What? It’s the truth. The last time I was with someone… well, really with someone, was Ginny. That was almost a year ago now. Sometimes it feels like I’m always going to be alone.”

“Oh, stop,” she admonished, “now you’re just feeling sorry for yourself. You’ll find someone.”

“But how?”
“Well, you could start by telling him how you feel.”

“What? Who?” Harry really wished his heart would stay put in his chest and not keep jumping into his throat whenever Severus’ name came up. For even though Hermione hadn’t specified, Harry knew they were both thinking of the same person. Had he really been that obvious? He supposed he wouldn’t have been able to hide it from Hermione, anyway; not much got by her. He sighed. “I don’t even know how I feel.”

“Harry, you’ve only just had the experience of seeing yourself – you know what I mean – in a happy relationship with another guy. I’d wager it’s the first time you’ve ever seen yourself happy like that, period, and in a scenario you may not have anticipated. My point is, this is new for you. You’ll figure it out, just give yourself a little time.”

Harry didn’t know what to say to that, so he just nodded. Then Hermione stood up and leaned into his eyeline, her eyes twinkling a bit. That look never boded well for him.

“What?” he asked, somewhat warily, as her grin turned cheeky.

“You’ll get your Prince.”

“Oh, God, don’t start with that again! I do not have a crush on the Half-Blood Prince!”

“Whatever you say, Harry.”

With a laugh, she ducked behind some trees for cover, only just managing to avoid the snowball that Harry had cobbled together and thrown at her back.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

After they Apparated back to Hogwarts, Hermione stepped through the ward on Hogwarts’ main gate, but stopped once she realized Harry had not followed her through.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Even though Harry knew Devon wasn’t an option for him, it’d still had the effect of giving him more questions than answers. Over the last several days he’d wondered ceaselessly about relationships, the next phase of his life, what he really desires and how he should go about getting it, what he wants to do as a career, where he wants to live, who he should spend his life with, if he will marry, and if he should revisit his plans for solo travel and go to a tropical destination like his dreamscape told him.

He took a deep breath. “All I ever wanted was to have a normal life, and now that I can have one, I don’t even know where to start. Is it bad that I kind of miss it?”

“Miss what? Voldemort?” Hermione looked a little aghast.

“No, not him.” Harry grimaced. “Just the adventure, I suppose. It was exciting. For so many years, it was all I knew.” He wasn’t even going to discuss the irony of feeling a little lost now that the Voldemort in his psyche was gone, too.

“You did have an extraordinary childhood,” Hermione agreed. “Maybe that’s where your unsettled feelings have been coming from. Now that the war’s over, this might all feel a little anti-climatic. The world doesn’t need saving anymore.”

“And I’m okay with that. Honestly!”
She regarded him closely. “Are you?”

Harry’s knee-jerk reaction was to say ‘yes’ but then he thought about it. It was true that he didn’t want a repeat of Voldemort or the war or even anything remotely like it, but he also couldn’t shake the nagging feeling in the back of his mind that told him he still didn’t quite fit yet. “I guess I don’t really know what normal looks like. What if it’s boring? What if I don’t like it?”

Hermione smiled, an expression that seemed just shy of a giggle. “Oh, Harry. There isn’t some template out there that dictates what a normal life is. It’s whatever you decide to make of it. And for the first time, the choice is actually yours!”

Harry frowned. “I know, that’s sort of what freaks me out.”

“Well, have you tried to talk to Severus about it?”

“What? Why would I do that?” Once again, Harry’s heart stuttered to life inside his chest and Hermione smiled in that knowing way of hers.

“You’re not the only one trying to rebuild a life now that the war is over, Harry. There’s someone else who’s probably still coming to terms with the fact he survived when he didn’t expect to.”

Shocked, Harry looked over at her. He’d never really considered that before, that other people might be having a hard time finding their place in a changed world, just as he was. And specifically a certain someone.

“You spent the bulk of your formative years either chasing Dark wizards or avoiding them,” she continued. “For better or worse, it narrowed the focus of your life – sometimes to the point where you couldn’t see anything else. Maybe you just didn’t dare hope for anything else. But now that it’s all done, maybe…”

“What?”

“Maybe it’s time to just focus on you. What do you want?”

Harry knew the answer without having to think about it. “Someone to share it with,” he said simply. “I mean, you and Ron have each other now, and I…” Harry trailed off with a sigh and gave the cuff of each of his coat sleeves a sharp tug. “I think I just need something to do. I’m going nuts at home by myself.”

Hermione pulled her coat tighter around herself, staving off a shiver. “Do you want to come in, then?” She indicated Hogwarts with a nod of her head. “We can talk more inside.”

“No, I meant a job. I need something to do with my life.”

“I thought you wanted to be an Auror? Or play Quidditch?”

“Yeah, I did for awhile, but I don’t think they’re for me anymore.” He waved a hand dismissively, suddenly realizing this was not the conversation he wanted to have, or at least not who he wanted to have it with. “Anyway, we can talk about this later. I think I’m just going to head home.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Go on, I’ll be fine.”

Hermione looked unconvincing, but leaned over and gave Harry a quick hug anyway. “Okay, well…
thanks for coming with me today. Talk to you soon?” Harry nodded and she turned and made her way up the path towards the front doors.

He watched her for a few moments, fighting with the impulse to follow, or go home, or go… somewhere. Well, he knew where he wanted to go, but now that he was here, he felt silly imposing on the man. Severus was probably relaxing after a long day of teaching and wouldn’t want to be disturbed, anyway.

Harry looked down at the path beneath his feet and the outline of where his shoes had pressed into the snow. To his left was the direction of Grimmauld Place – one Apparition hop and he’d be at home in the company of an old elf and the rhythmic droning of his thoughts. Again. To his right were the snow-covered rooftops of Hogsmeade, which promised a delicious meal and warm hospitality. That certainly had more merit than an empty house, but the fact he would be doing it alone (and that it would be his fourth trip in less than a week) suddenly made him feel even more lonely.

Then he looked back up at the castle, the small windows that dotted the towers seeming to twinkle at him, and considered a third option. Maybe it was time to make a different choice and see where it took him – the choice to do what he wants to do, consequences and all. If his life really was that blank canvas he’d seen in his eighth draught, then the burden of action lie with him.

Making his decision, Harry pulled the thick sheaf of parchments from his pocket and tapped his wand against it. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Like an inkwell that had been upended, dark blotchy stains spread from the center outwards until the lines, contours and passageways of Hogwarts came into sharp relief. Trying to remember where in the bundle of paper he would find the dungeons, Harry lifted several flaps until he located the stairwell he had become quite familiar with over the last few months. From there, his finger traveled down the hallway, walking through it in his mind’s eye, until he located the correct classroom. Sure enough – there, in perfect detail, was a tiny set of footprints above a rippling banner. It read: Severus Snape.

A smile tugged at the corner of Harry’s mouth. He didn’t know why the nudge was telling him to go, but ultimately it was feelings, not reasons, that made him decide. For as long as he could remember, that was just how he was wired. Words and journals and thoughts could no longer define his state of mind. He just needed to see Severus.
Bring Me Close

Harry poked his head around the doorframe of the Potions classroom. What struck him immediately was not that Severus was standing with his back to Harry, shuffling through parchments on his desk, but that music was playing softly in the background. At first, Harry wondered if the piano had been relocated, but quickly dismissed that given it wasn’t a piano he was hearing. It was rock music. And not just any rock music, but rock music he recognized.

“Hang on. You like the Buzzcocks?”

Severus startled almost imperceptibly, then turned to look at Harry, a sardonic expression on his face. “My preference for classical music does not preclude me from enjoying, and occasionally needing, other types of music, Mr. Potter.”

“Yeah, but still. Next you’re going to tell me you also like Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin.”

“As a matter of interest, no. I am not opposed to either, strictly speaking, I simply find both to be a bit commercial.” Severus sent some books back to their spots on a shelf behind his desk and shrunk the parchments he was holding to palm-sized. “I much prefer the likes of Cockney Rebel, Sex Pistols or the Angelic Upstarts.”

Harry blinked, his mouth dropping open. Who was this man? If Harry thought he was simply having to rewrite the things he thought he knew about Severus before, now he’d just gone and thrown out the entire book. “Sorry, it’s just… I never really pictured you liking punk music.”

“I am a child of the seventies, Potter, and I grew up in a northern, industrial town. Aside from news drivel, there wasn’t much else on.”

Harry bit his lip to stifle a grin. There was something oddly endearing about the way Severus snarked, but he didn’t dare point that out. Instead, he walked over to inspect the old gramophone – very similar to the one Remus had used, he noted – but was confused to discover it was not actually playing a record.

“Um, Severus?” He prodded a finger in the direction of the crank. “How is this even working? Nothing’s moving.”

Severus finished levitating a stack of cauldrons to a shelf in the back of the classroom while simultaneously sorting and cleaning various metal implements. “As it has been charmed to pick up a nearby Muggle radio station, the horn is all I require. It is something every first year Slytherin learns.” He turned to look at Harry properly. “Do you mean to tell me you were unaware of this spell? I should think the elevation in Gryffindor Tower alone would make it exceptionally suited for such a task.”

Harry shrugged. “It was only records we listened to, as far as I know. We didn’t resort to tricks like you Slytherins.” His grin dissolved into a laugh at the withering look Severus gave him.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Hopping up to sit on an out-of-the-way desk, Harry obliged the request to occupy himself for a few
minutes while Severus finished his tasks from a day of teaching. Without the distraction of their music conversation, however, Harry’s thoughts from earlier came flooding back – in particular, one that Hermione had put there less than a half hour ago: *There’s someone else who’s probably still coming to terms with the fact he survived when he didn’t expect to.*

It was true, Harry realized. Severus was free now – he could go anywhere, do anything. He’d already said he wanted to do Potions research, presumably in a career of his own devising, so why was he still teaching at Hogwarts? Was he just sticking to a familiar routine until he could figure out where he fit next, too? Or was there something else keeping him at the school that Harry didn’t know about?

And then there was the song he’d heard when he arrived. He wondered what sort of day Severus had had to make him need *any* kind of music while still in his classroom. Harry couldn’t remember hearing such a thing from any of his other professors (well, save Remus), but he supposed he’d never really made social visits to their classrooms, either. Maybe music was a normal occurrence. Or maybe it indicated something more trying than a regular day of work was transpiring for Severus.

Harry watched the man move around his classroom for a minute, walking in and out of his storeroom, sending things back to designated spots on shelves, and giving orders to his house elf. It didn’t *seem* like Severus was just going through the motions, but then again, he had been a spy for nearly two decades. If he wanted people to see things a certain way, then that is all they would see.

It was a subterfuge Harry was altogether too familiar with. For seven years, he had blindly accepted the man as the formidable and acerbic Potions Master, the pair of them nurturing their animosity often and at will. It had been easy for Harry to believe someone hated him even if he didn’t understand the reasons why – the Dursleys had shown him this was possible more times than he wished to count.

He’d never really had a reason to see Professor Snape any other way, or even consider that the nature of their interactions might’ve been designed exactly that way in order to ensure the greatest chance of survival – and triumph – in the war. Harry had been too busy assuming he already knew everything.

That is, until the day he stood over Dumbledore’s Pensieve, having just witnessed Severus’ memories, when he realized he hadn’t known *anything.* Humbled and embarrassed and trembling, Harry stared into the depths of the basin’s shimmering surface and tried to compel his lungs to work. It was as though someone had just knocked all the air out of his body: every piece of resentment, blame and well-worn hostility had deflated instantly, rushing from him with force.

And what it left behind had challenged everything Harry thought he knew about Severus Snape.

Thinking back on it, the only real surprise for Harry was in how easy it’d been to let all of the old emotions go. Perhaps it was because he had never *really* believed Severus’ role as the evil Death Eater was as straightforward as it seemed. Or maybe Harry had simply *hoped* it was all an act, for to be wrong about Severus meant he would’ve been wrong about trusting Dumbledore, and that was not something he was prepared to contemplate.

Then came his fortuitous stint at St. Mungo’s. Harry couldn’t explain *why* he’d been so happy to be stuck in a room with Severus. Perhaps it was to confirm the man had survived, or to assuage his own guilt, or to get answers to questions he didn’t even know how to ask yet. It’s just that, once he and Severus had started talking, Harry’d found a certain comfort with him and a surprising desire to keep the conversation going. Having Severus there felt like a reassurance that everything was going to be okay. At the time, Harry wanted that to hold on to. He *needed* that. And maybe he’d just got too comfortable, because he didn’t want to let it go, even now.
Sure, it wasn’t always easy being Severus’ friend. It would probably never be easy, but Harry wasn’t sure that’s what he wanted, anyway. Nice people rarely pushed him anywhere worthwhile.

After all, Severus was the reason Harry was even sitting there at all, indulging these very thoughts. Sure, he’d fought the man’s interference at first. Oh, yes. Harry wanted to forget – Voldemort, the war, those who had died, what he may or may not have been responsible for – all of it. But Severus hadn’t allowed him to wallow in guilt or other self-indulgent, destructive emotions. He saw through every excuse and flimsy story. Harry had been forced to look deeper, to see there was more – more than he had ever been asked to access before. And it had been difficult at times, scary even, but there had also been an innate comfort in knowing that Severus would be there every step of the way; that for once, the outcome wasn’t resting on Harry’s shoulders alone. It was a security he hadn’t found elsewhere, not even with Ron and Hermione, for no one seemed to understand Harry the way Severus did.

That’s when it struck him – what the feeling was that had been following him for awhile now. It was capability. Harry felt more capable with Severus in his life, as though anything would be possible as long as Severus was there with him. It was more than just a sense of safety and security, too – it’s what made him feel powerful, challenged, alive. And it wasn’t as though he couldn’t manage those things on his own, but there was something comforting – almost liberating – about letting someone else take charge of them once in awhile, too.

Idly, Harry wondered if Severus would be too proud to accept the same help in return.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Settling into his usual chair by the fireplace, Harry closed his eyes for a moment and focused on the ambient heat coming from the hearth. Ever since he’d set foot in Severus’ antechamber, and watched Severus remove his outer robes, he’d felt a surge of nerves stir his stomach. He didn’t know why he was feeling this way – he’d been there dozens of times by now. It was just… something seemed different now, as though after nearly six months of interaction he didn’t know how to act around Severus anymore.

He mentally scolded himself. *Now is not the time to turn into a gawky teenager, Harry. Buck up!*

Was he just interested in Severus because he’d discovered Severus might have feelings for him? He didn’t think so, but then he wasn’t sure what this was. A normal progression of feelings based on the amount of time they’d spent together? A sympathetic connection because of their shared experience of war? Infatuation?

He looked over at Severus, who was unloading the items in his hands into the bookcase near the front door. Harry could still visualize the slender lines of the man’s body as he’d seen it over the summer, clad in a crisp white shirt and black trousers. He remembered liking how Severus moved with such fluidity and precision; how every action seemed so intentional, every movement so carefully placed. Harry didn’t know why, but there was something about that that made his mind wander into darkly alluring places. Specifically, if that characteristic intensity and grace would make Severus as formidable a lover as Charlie had mused. Not so long ago, Harry wasn’t ready to think about Severus like that. Now he couldn’t seem to think of anything else.

Why was it that people began to look different the longer you knew them? How did physical things that were once unremarkable – or possibly even unattractive – somehow become assets? Even
though nothing about the man had fundamentally changed, Harry only saw those long-fingered hands as graceful now, that shiny hair as something that begged to be touched, that prominent nose as part of Severus’ distinctive character. Harry imagined how it would feel to have the tip of it sliding down his body, following the wake of a hot tongue. His groin twitched suddenly, which forced him to squirm, and gooseflesh rippled across his back and arms. God, what is my problem? It didn’t seem fair to be virtually undressing Severus in his home, and without his knowledge.

“Are you well?” Severus’ voice cut through Harry’s thoughts and he jumped.

“Er, yeah, I was just—” obsessing over my former professor. Harry was gesturing uselessly, unsure of what he even wanted to convey, not noticing that one hand was moving vaguely across his stomach.

Severus took one look at him and sighed. “You have not eaten dinner yet, have you?”

Before Harry could answer, Severus’ house elf seemed to reappear in the center of the room, nodding furiously at the whispered instructions she was given, and then disappeared just as quickly. Now that Harry thought of it, he was rather hungry. “Thanks,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck just under his hairline and giving a lopsided smile.

“Tea?” Severus asked.

Harry surprised himself by declining, nodding instead towards the decanter on the sideboard. Severus raised a brow but said nothing. He simply extracted two tumblers from the cupboard, poured a generous splash of scotch into each, and handed one over. Harry accepted his drink gratefully, but his large and overeager sip immediately set him to coughing.

“I’m fine,” Harry managed in response to the look Severus gave him. “Swallowed wrong.” He cleared his throat a couple times before handing the tumbler back to Severus. “Here. I don’t know what I was thinking, I don’t drink this stuff.”

Severus snorted and deposited the glass on the sideboard. Then he walked into his bedroom, only to emerge again a few moments later, carrying something under his left arm. “Incidentally, how was Australia?” he asked. “I have never been.”

Harry looked up. The question instantly triggered a rush of things he hadn’t thought about for a while; specifically, how much he’d missed Severus during that trip and how his brief trysts with Charlie had only made his curiosity about Severus grow. “It was amazing. I wish you had— I mean, I… you should definitely go some day.” Harry felt his cheeks heat but hoped it wasn’t too visible in the soft firelight.

Severus stepped closer. “Perhaps I shall,” he said, giving Harry an odd look. Then a shimmering fabric was filling Harry’s field of vision. “I regret I must return this to you, though I am grateful to have made its acquaintance. It is… truly a magnificent piece.”

Harry reached for his invisibility cloak, but was unsure of what to say. He wasn’t used to feeling so off kilter around Severus. Then he noticed the way Severus gazed down at him, those dark irises deepening somehow, inviting Harry to wade into their forbidden depths. “Thanks,” he croaked.

At Severus’ curt nod, the fire that’d been in his eyes seemed to go out like a light; whatever had been building was now gone. It was times like that when Harry thought he must be crazy for wanting to try his hand at a relationship with Severus. It was a lot like trying to woo a dragon out of its den with nothing to offer except yourself – on a platter. One wrong move (or maybe just one move in general) and you’d find yourself singed to within an inch of your life. Few people could flay as viciously or
as quickly as Severus.

Still, something told Harry that wouldn’t be the case for him. In all the time he’d spent with Severus over the last several months, he’d learned some things. Namely, the stronger Severus felt about something, the more prickly he became. He always seemed at his emotional worst when he felt vulnerable about something. And what would be more vulnerable for him than a relationship with the Savior of the Wizarding world, of all people?

Harry frowned slightly.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Once full from the delicious Hogwarts meal, Harry leaned back in his chair and draped an arm over his abdomen. The combination of a warm fire, hot food and the cooling under his collar had thankfully shifted the energy in the room back to a place of comfortable familiarity, allowing Harry to get his feet under him again. Severus had also excused himself a few times while Harry was eating, disappearing into his bedroom or his lab, which also helped.

Being in the antechamber alone had reminded Harry of Evochi, and he wondered how many times he’d occupied this same chair over the last four months. It was certainly odd being on this end of all those sessions – so much had happened in such a short period of time. It had been like wading through a condensed version of the last ten years of his life. And he had thought he was done, too – a sentiment Severus seemed to echo after his eighth draught – which is why Harry was surprised when Severus walked back in from his lab and held out a small, glass vial.

“If you are interested, a small amount remains. Thirty minutes, if I had to guess.”

Harry eyed the indigo substance and then looked back up at Severus. “Are you sure you don’t need it for anything?”

“Not as such, no. I do have one request, however. Might you be willing to share the subjects of your previous draughts? It would assist me in identifying patterns and charting your overall progress.”

“Oh, sure,” Harry said. He made himself more comfortable in the chair while Severus took his usual spot on the sofa. As Harry spoke, he ticked his sessions off on his fingers.

“Um, my first was just me on the Quidditch pitch, flying around on a broom. I wasn’t sure I was ready for anything, so I just chose something easy.”

“I think it was also the first time I had really thought about the end of the war. I didn’t want to think about it, it just sort of hit me.” Harry frowned, then added, “It kept finding me no matter how much I tried to ignore it.” He didn’t know if he was sharing that for the betterment of science or because he just felt at ease talking to Severus. He supposed it was a little bit of both.

“The second one I visited Sirius and Remus. In my session, they were… in a relationship together.” Harry bit his lip slightly. “I don’t know if that was true to life or just to help me come to terms with… my own stuff.” He waited to see if there was any reaction to that, hoping Severus would give him an indication either way about whether Sirius and Remus had ever been in a relationship, but the man merely kept on writing.
Taking a chance, Harry asked, “Did Sirius and Remus ever... date?”

Severus didn’t even look up from his writing when he answered, “Remus was a good student, but quiet socially. I believe he took a girl to a school dance once, though that neither proves nor disproves anything. Sirius was a cocksure womanizer, or at least wished for everyone to think as much. Beyond that, I cannot say.”

Harry fought the urge to laugh. Severus really held no affection for Sirius whatsoever. The reverse also seemed to be true, given Sirius’ reaction to hearing that Severus had survived the war and was now helping Harry. It made Harry wonder if the animosity between them went deeper than the one incident he’d seen in Severus’ memories. It certainly seemed so. He filed the thought away for later.

“My third session – well, you know all about that one.” Severus nodded but said nothing else, his quill still moving quickly as he jotted notes in his journal. “My fourth was the dreamscape, where I went someplace tropical. I met a little orphan girl and... I was in a relationship with a man.” He felt more comfortable revealing that now that he and Severus had fewer secrets between them.

“And that is where you also harvested pineapples?”

“Yeah.” Harry smiled, unable to help himself. “Though I still don’t understand that one.”

Severus looked up from his journal. “Is that not something you would consider doing as a career?” His interest seemed genuine and it made Harry laugh.

“I don’t know, maybe. Is that even a career? Where would I start?”

“At the beginning.”

Harry shot him a baleful look. “Gee, thanks, that’s so helpful.”

“I was not attempting to be glib, Harry. You said yourself you do not feel skilled in any particular trade aside from ‘Dark wizard chasing,’ yet you do not wish to pursue that as a career. Likewise with Quidditch. While that does leave a plethora of other options, each one will likely find you precisely where I indicated: at the beginning. There is no shame in that; everyone must start somewhere.”

“Okay, then, but how? I don’t even know the first thing about it!”

“So learn the first thing. You may discover the second and third things interest you as well, or that you have some talent or skill in an area you had previously not thought to explore. You may surprise yourself.”

Harry thought on it for a moment. “Maybe. I’m still not sure the pineapples are for me, but I get what you’re saying.” He reached for his glass and took a drink, but didn’t realize it was scotch until it hit the back of his throat, causing him to cough harshly once again.

“Ugh, how did my drink get back over here?”

The ghost of a smirk twisted the corner of Severus’ mouth. “Yours didn’t. You are presently sampling mine.”

Sure enough, a quick glance at the sideboard revealed the other glass was still there. “Oh, sorry,” Harry said, flustered. He slid the tumbler away from him and back towards Severus, and turned instead to fetch the water glass that had been on his other side. He gulped half of it down, trying to wash away the caustic trail the alcohol had left in his throat. He had no idea how Severus could drink that stuff.
Yet for some reason, the fact that he’d just taken a drink from Severus’ glass – a strangely intimate thing – made him wonder what the scotch would taste like on the man’s tongue, if Harry were to kiss him right now. Would it have the same sharp bite, or would it be tempered by Severus’ mouth? Would Harry just walk over to the sofa and slowly insinuate himself across the man’s lap? Would he say something suitably cheesy, like, ‘I’d rather share your scotch this way’? Harry shook his head and pressed a palm against his forehead, trying to rid himself of the distracting thought. Not here, not here, not here. He forced himself to get back on topic.

“Anyway, my fifth session was with you and my parents. The sixth one you know about as well, as you were there.” Harry shifted in his chair, feeling that he ought to skim by that one quickly so as to not draw attention to the fact that a kiss had followed it – or worse, let it drum up more visuals in his mind. Visuals that might cause a very inconvenient reaction in him.

However, right as he was about to move on to his seventh session, he realized it was something he had wanted to tell Severus for a while, before they’d had their fight about Marcus, and he still hadn’t had the opportunity to do so. “The seventh was with Hermione and she took me to an observatory in her mind so that I could see the Earth from space.” He paused, hoping his segue would be delicate enough. “Remember at the staff party when I wanted to tell you something?” Seeing the slight tightening in Severus’ jaw, he quickly continued. “That’s what I wanted to share. I realized during that session that Voldemort had always been much bigger than me, and that if we had not stopped him, his tyranny could have spread to other countries as well.”

“Indeed,” Severus agreed after a moment, a somber expression on his face.

“Sorry for not listening the first hundred times you tried to thump that into my head.” Harry looked down at the glass in his hand and swirled the water around, a mirror of what the thoughts and memories were doing inside his head. He could feel the weight of Severus’ eyes on him, but wasn’t sure he could handle whatever the accompanying expression was right now. He gave it a moment to pass before resuming their conversation.

“In my eighth draught, I asked it to show me being happy. I wasn’t quite sure what it was going to do, but I was running out of ideas. I had hoped it would show me the future.” Harry finally chanced a look at Severus, and to his relief, the man had resumed writing, his quill scratching away feverishly.

“And did it?” came the query.

“Did it what?” Harry asked, confused.

“Show you the future.”

“Oh. No. At least I don’t think it did. I woke up in Gryffindor Tower, on my bed, yet it wasn’t my bed. Turns out there was a duplicate of me in that session – he later described himself as a shade of my psyche – and he also had a boyfriend. They seemed very happy together, but they… they don’t exist in this time. Well, I do as me, obviously, but not his boyfriend.” Harry thought briefly about his adventure with the historical records and the fact he’d gone looking for someone he’d been told did not exist. Even then he knew he should be standing two-footed in his own life, not hanging onto subconscious ideals, but part of him had just had to know.

“And now…” Harry reached over and picked up the small vial Severus had set on the coffee table and looked at the potion for what he realized may be the last time. “My ninth. What should I do for this last session?” He held it up as he spoke, watching the viscous substance glint in the light, as mesmerizing as it ever was.
“Is there nothing else you would like to experience?”

Predictably, lurid thoughts began flooding Harry’s mind, visuals of dreams and fantasies and things he hoped to experience one day. He quickly closed his eyes in hopes of warding them off. Yes, there were lots of things he’d like to experience, but he didn’t figure they were the sort of thing you’d use Evochi for. He shrugged.

“Perhaps you should ask the potion if you are done, then, or if it has anything else to show you.”

Harry opened his eyes and looked at Severus. “I can do that?”

“You have been communicating with your subconscious this entire time, have you not?”

“Well, I guess, but you make it sound like I could just have a chat with it if I wanted to.”

“Again, it appears you have already done so, and on more than one occasion.”

Harry considered that for a moment, thinking back to the draughts where he met and spoke with both the dark and light sides of his psyche. It was true: he had conversed with his subconscious, he just hadn’t thought about it quite like that before. It was the part Harry had been most afraid of, actually. For the longest time, he felt the stuff he’d buried was best if it remained so – that reliving whatever was there would simply be too painful or counter-productive. Until the day he learned the irony of that: that his continual efforts to keep those feelings buried only kept him in the very state of misery he was trying to avoid. It was only by allowing them to surface that he could be free of them; that in fact the answers he’d been looking for had been there within him all along.

“How does that even work?”

“Interacting with your subconscious?” Severus asked, and Harry nodded. “The subconscious is a repository of all your imprinting – that which you wish to store or repress, as well as experiences you could not consciously process at the time they occurred. Dreams are one way to access this; regressive therapy is another. In the Muggle world, this might be hypnosis or psychotherapy. In our world, we have any number of spells or potions to accomplish the same thing, even if they weren’t originally designed to be therapeutic.”

“Like Evochi?” Harry asked, though it wasn’t really a question.

“Like Evochi,” Severus confirmed with a nod.

Harry shook his head and smiled. “How do you know so much about this stuff?”

“Psychology and anatomy were required components of my Potions Mastery. Understanding ingredients, chemical interactions and proper brewing techniques are only half the equation. You must also understand the vehicle you intend to apply them to. In this case, the human body – a multi-faceted and complex subject, to be sure.”

Of course it made sense now that it was explained to him. No wonder Severus had always said the art and science of potion-making. Harry could only imagine all the variables involved in producing potions for a human. He felt a sudden, newfound respect for potion-making – and for Severus.

“Okay,” Harry said, now resolved. “I’ll ask the potion. Do you have… I mean, should I use this now?” He held up the vial.

Severus glanced at the clock. “Unfortunately, no. End of term exams begin tomorrow and I have yet to prepare.”
Harry sat forward more eagerly than he intended. “Do you need any help?” he asked, but then thought immediately of how useless he always was in Potions – at least without the Prince’s (Severus’) book – and grimaced. “Never mind, I’m sure you don’t need me in the way. We can do this later. Should I come back on Sunday?”

Severus looked like he had been about to say something, his mouth slightly open, but stopped short when Harry redirected things. It took him a second to regroup. “Sunday will be fine,” he said. “You may enter the castle in whichever manner you see fit, as well – the students will be gone on holiday by then.”

“Oh,” Harry said, then smiled. “Good.” In just four short days, he would have Severus to himself in the school. The mere thought of that twisted his insides in a pleasing manner, though he wasn’t sure why it should.

He handed the vial of Evochi back and made his way to the fireplace, wondering what would become of his ninth and final draught. Was he really done? Was there anything else he needed to know? It was both scary and exciting to think that he would soon be embarking on the next phase of his life, something that had always seemed like a series of hazy images and even hazier unknowns – except for some traveling. He knew he’d at least be doing that. He also wanted to make sure that no matter what was to come, Severus would still be there with him… in some capacity.

Harry smiled to himself at the knowledge that somehow his decisions now included Severus.

Stepping into the Floo, he grabbed a handful of powder and was about to toss it when something occurred to him. He turned to look at Severus over his shoulder.

“Why did you decide to help me? Way back in August, I mean. You always seem to be looking after my interests.”

If Severus was surprised by the question, he didn’t show it. He simply leaned back against the sofa, his arms gracefully crossing his chest. “Someone ought to, as it is clear you cannot look after them on your own.” There was a wry tone to his voice that made Harry laugh, and even though Harry’d been the one to ask the question, he still flipped a casual, two-fingered gesture in response.

The last thing he saw before the room swirled away was how much one, small smile could change Severus’ entire face. It wasn’t until Harry landed back at Grimmauld, brushing the soot off his sleeves, that he realized why. It was an expression he’d only seen on the man one other time, the rarity of it making it all the more memorable. It was from Severus’ memories, when he and Lily were kids, sharing their magic and friendship with each other.

That small smile was how Severus looked when he was happy.
That Sunday, Harry slipped past the towering front doors of Hogwarts and made his way down to the dungeons. Severus had been right: the castle was quiet. Even though a term was still in session, the school felt very different when it wasn't filled with students.

Harry slowed his steps and closed his eyes for a moment, absorbing his surroundings: the faint rumbling of giant staircases swiveling about somewhere above him; the metallic tinge to the air from the oil used in the castle's many fire-burning sconces; the way he could almost feel the low thrum of energy that came from the stones all around him, as though there was sentience inside the walls of the castle. And perhaps there was. He figured little would surprise him about magic at this point.

As he began walking again, he heard the portraits and ghosts chattering with each other about how they planned to spend their holiday now that the students had gone home. It was something Harry had never really thought about when he was a student – that the teachers (and the castle's other inhabitants) would be glad for holidays when everything grew quiet and they were all left to their own devices. Harry smirked, thinking he now understood.

"Harry…?"

Startled, Harry spun around, his smirk quickly fading. There was something familiar about that voice, but it wasn't until a student in Slytherin robes emerged from a shadowed corner of the hallway, allowing his face to become illuminated by the dungeon torches, that Harry realized why.

"It's Sunday," Marcus Braham said.

Harry's brow furrowed. "It is," he agreed. He resumed his pace and had just about reached the door to Severus' quarters when Marcus stopped him again.

"I thought I might find you here today. You're usually here on Sundays."

Harry stared back at him, confused by the direction the conversation was going. "I thought all the students had gone home already?" he asked.

"They did, but Prefects can stay longer if they choose. I wanted to be sure I could wish you a Happy Christmas in person."

"Er, thanks," Harry said. "You, too," he added, mostly to be polite. He took a couple more steps, which positioned him in front of Severus' door. He was about to knock when Marcus stopped him again.

"Everyone told me to let this go, but I can't. You see, I never actually asked you. Seems silly now, of course, to think that I listened to others try and tell me what's best for me. They just don't understand."

"Understand what?" The question was out before Harry could stop himself, and he inwardly cursed himself for his persistent curiosity. Something told him he didn't want to know the answer.

"Us," Marcus said, as though it should be obvious. "How great we'd be together. Just think of the—"

"Wait, hang on. What are you talking about?"

"You and me. We're both smart and popular, and we have loads in common. And I could protect
you, too! I know we'd be great together, I just know it. We could even unite Gryffindor and Slytherin!"

Harry blinked. If the conversation had seemed surreal before, it had now just gone completely off the rails. Protection? Uniting Houses? What?

In one quick movement, Marcus leaned forward and tried to angle for a kiss, but Harry was too fast for him.

"Get off me! What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry… sorry," Marcus said, seemingly flustered, "I just… I thought if I showed you—"

"No," Harry interrupted, "there's nothing to show me. I know you won't believe me, but it's not me you want, it's the idea of me. They're not the same thing."

"No, it is you, Harry. Please, just give me a chance! I won't try that again, I promise, I just… I'd like to take you out to dinner and—"

"There's someone else, okay?" Harry realized his voice was nearing a shout, and calmed himself for a moment before continuing. "This isn't going to happen. I'm already… there's someone else. Sorry."

Indeed, it looked as though someone had just slapped Marcus across the face. "You're… you're," he stammered, looking completely bewildered and stunned. "Who?"

Thoughts of Harry's dreamscape lover crossed his mind, which morphed into Severus' face, before Harry forced its likeness back into the abstract comfort of his dreamscape lover. "No one you know," was all he offered.

Marcus simply stood there and stared back, his gaze now flicking between Harry and the door to Severus' quarters. When the realization of whose door it was finally hit him, Marcus' features hardened. "Well, he'll certainly be happy to hear you've come around," he spat.

"Who?" Harry urged again, his words finally seeming to bring the Slytherin out of his stupor. Marcus stared at Harry, then gave Severus a rather pointed look, then looked back at Harry. "No one I know," he said reproachfully, and then abruptly turned and ran off down the hallway.

"What in Merlin's name is going on—" came a third voice, but cut off as the door to Severus' quarters was wrenched open. Startled, Harry yanked his hand away, feeling like a student who'd been caught out. In the doorway stood Severus, clad in a full contingent of teacher's robes, his disdain radiating off him in waves.

"What are you still doing here?" Severus asked of Marcus. Marcus didn't deign to reply, however. It was almost as though he hadn't heard the question, as he just kept staring at Harry, looking like a puppy who'd been kicked.

"Who?" Harry urged again, his words finally seeming to bring the Slytherin out of his stupor. Marcus stared at Harry, then gave Severus a rather pointed look, then looked back at Harry. "No one I know," he said reproachfully, and then abruptly turned and ran off down the hallway.

Severus turned to Harry, not bothering to hide his agitation. "What was all that about? Are you unharmed?"

Harry, still a bit stunned by the whole encounter, merely nodded – though he wasn't sure what he was affirming, exactly. He was finding himself distracted with a most intriguing thought: had Marcus really just indicated that Severus had been waiting for him to come around? That perhaps the
overtures Harry had seen to date were as far as Severus had been willing to let himself go without further encouragement? Harry couldn't even begin to guess how Marcus had come by this information, but it did seem to fit.

Harry turned back to look at Severus. The man struck an impressive figure in the doorway, all storm and indignation, and Harry wondered if Severus hadn't just confirmed Marcus' observation himself. He felt utterly charmed (and a little excited) by Severus' show of anger and possessiveness. And even with the possibility he was misinterpreting things, Harry still couldn't stop the warmth from curling in his chest.

"Yeah. I'm good," Harry said as he followed Severus through the door, smiling to the man's back.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

It was strangely nostalgic, Harry thought, to be sitting on the gray chaise in Severus' lab for what would probably be the final time. Making himself more comfortable, he unbuttoned his outer shirt (his favorite blue-green plaid), revealing his gray Quidditch t-shirt underneath. He settled his limbs into place and leaned his head back against the headrest. Tightening his grip on the small glass vial in his hand, he focused on his intent for this session.

*Is there anything else I need to know?* he asked his subconscious, or the potion, or the room at large – whichever one was responsible for delivering the message. This would only be a 30-minute session, but Harry knew from experience a lot could happen even in that short amount of time. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, thinking back on all his other sessions. They really did feel like things he'd experienced – as vivid and memory-laden as anything else in his real life – versus things he'd just made up in his head. It made him wonder how much progress he'd actually made, and how that progress looked to Severus when they'd discussed it earlier in the week. *Was* he done?

As ever, there was only one way to find out.

Lifting the vial as though toasting this final occasion, Harry gave Severus a small smile before he pressed it against his lips, downed the potion and recited the incantation.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

When the grey mist dissipated, Harry found himself in the middle of a darkened room. Although his eyes were still adjusting to the low light, he knew he was at Hogwarts. The rough-hewn floor beneath him was instantly familiar, as were the stone columns that supported the ceiling's vaulted arches.

But even without that, the row of mullioned windows to his left, awash in blue from the moonlight streaming through them, would have confirmed it. And this wasn't just anywhere at Hogwarts, either, but a very specific room indeed. Harry stood up and looked around the edge of one of the columns. Sure enough – there, partially in shadow, stood an ornate gilded mirror that rested on two clawed feet.

The Mirror of Erised.
Hadn't Severus once compared Evochi to the Mirror of Erised? Now here he was, standing in front of that very mirror while inside of an Evochi construct. Wasn't that a bit like a potion within a potion? A desire within a desire?

Stepping closer, Harry discovered he could still make out the inscription carved along the top: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi*. He remembered what it said, too – it whispered itself in his head like a long-forgotten voice: *I show not your face but your heart's desire.*

It some ways, it was like coming back to the beginning. Once again he'd found himself in front of this mirror, a boy standing on the edge of two worlds: the one he had known, and the one he was about to know. When he was eleven, that gap had been huge. It had spanned from Muggles to magic, from a cupboard under the stairs to a castle, from an ordinary existence to one where almost every fantastical thing he never dared to hope for actually existed. Some days he still felt like he was going to wake up and discover it had all been a dream.

Harry snorted in spite of himself. *It would make one hell of a story, though,* he thought.

Now, at eighteen, he was standing on that edge once again. The gap was different now, perhaps smaller, but this world – the one free of Voldemort and prophecy – was just as unknown to him. What could he expect this time?

Gazing at the surface of the mirror, Harry noticed it remained foggy, despite him being only inches away from it. Normally an image appeared immediately, but he wondered if a potion-induced version would have its own properties.

Then, out of nowhere, a long-familiar voice floated into the room.

"Lovely to see you again, Harry."

Harry whipped around to locate the source. There, slowly approaching him with a casual walk, was Dumbledore, looking every bit the same as he had the first time Harry had seen him. Dumbledore smiled as he approached, spreading his arms to invite a warm embrace.

Harry returned the gesture, surprised at how much he relished it. He hadn't realized until that moment how much he'd missed his old mentor; how, in some ways, it had almost seemed a lifetime ago that they'd talked at King's Cross station.

Holding Harry at arm's length, Dumbledore said, "You are not the Chosen One anymore. No longer must you do what everyone requires of you. I am as guilty of that as anyone, Harry, and for that I apologize. Your obligation is only to yourself now. It is time for you to live your own life – and I, for one, am excited to see what you do with it."

Harry smiled, not quite sure what had prompted all that, but was pleased to go along with it all the same.

"I see you've found the mirror," Dumbledore continued, a pleased tone to his voice.

"Yeah. It doesn't seem to be working, though – it hasn't shown me anything yet."

"Ah," said Dumbledore, walking closer to the towering structure, "now that is a simple matter of knowing how this particular mirror works. It is indeed a bit different than the one you remember. Do you know the significance of the number four, Harry?"

"Erm, in what context, exactly?"
"In every context." Dumbledore smiled in that paternal fashion of his and perched his half-moon spectacles on the end of his nose. When he next fixed his gaze on Harry, he was looking over the tops of the delicate, gold rims. "Four is everywhere around us. Can you think of nothing that fits this?"

Harry considered that for a moment. "Well, there's four Houses at Hogwarts," he offered.

"Excellent, my boy! What else?"

Biting his bottom lip, Harry tried to come up with more. "There's four positions on a Quidditch team." It caused Dumbledore to chuckle and Harry grinned. "Not what you were after, I suppose."

"Not precisely." Dumbledore walked a slow circle around Harry. "Allow me to guide you to a more fundamental meaning. Four is found in eastern and western religions, arithmancy, astronomy, mathematics, and even mythology. Consider the four seasons, four directions, four winds and four elements. It is a powerful and magical number." He paused. "There were even four Beatles."

"The Beatles were wizards?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as a small, metal bowl appeared in his hand. "Lemon drop?"

Harry opened his mouth to respond but then snapped it shut. Then he opened it again to say… he knew not what. Confused, he looked down at the bowl in Dumbledore's hand. "Er, no thanks. So—"

"Four also represents the essence of self," Dumbledore continued, now pacing behind the mirror. "Body, mind, heart and spirit. If you have manifested this mirror, it is because you wished to uproot yourself from your complacency; to force awareness into your life. As such, the mirror will reveal itself when you are ready."

"Ready for what?" Harry asked, but Dumbledore had already turned and was fading out of the scene. "Wait! It will reveal what?"

But it was no use, Dumbledore had already gone. Harry turned back to the mirror. He stepped closer to inspect it in more detail, brushing his fingers across the surface, making light dust trails in their wake.

"I'm ready," he said to the mirror, though he had no idea what compelled him to say that or what he might be ready for. He traced his finger down the ornately-carved frame, his nose almost to the glass. For several long moments, nothing happened, and Harry found his eyes searching every corner of the mirror for a sign, movement, anything. An image of some kind had always appeared immediately whenever he had encountered the mirror before. Then again, this wasn't the real mirror, it was a manifestation inside his mind, created by a potion as well as his own impulses. Dumbledore had already hinted it probably wouldn't work like he had experienced before.

When Harry made to step away, however, the murky surface of the mirror started to swirl, its cloud-like fog tumbling and folding in on itself before finally dissolving, revealing a highly-polished, gleaming reflection of… himself.

"Me?" he asked no one in particular, his nose wrinkling slightly. "That's my big reveal?"

"Sometimes that which is closest to us is the hardest to see." Startled, Harry looked around, but saw he was still alone. It had been Dumbledore's voice, but it sounded tinny and far away, as though it was coming from inside the mirror. Eventually Harry decided to just roll with it – perhaps disembodied voices was a feature of this mirror.
"I just see myself," Harry said. "Or I need to see myself." His reflection-self was standing so close to the mirror that the tip of his nose was white from where it was pressed against the surface. Again the mirror spoke to him, still in Dumbledore’s eerily detached voice.

"Perhaps what you need most is to choose. To be your own person, to live your own life."

"Well, sure, but isn't that what everyone wants? I hardly needed a potion to tell me that."

"Didn't you?"

As Dumbledore said it, the top of the mirror began to liquefy before Harry's eyes, its letters morphing and dancing about in an animated fashion until they settled into a new arrangement. It now read: *Evol esorup ytilibats ytiliuqnart.*

Seeing the first few letters instantly made Harry think of Evochi, but he quickly dismissed that, knowing all too well the trick was to read the inscription backwards. Narrowing his eyes, he followed the letters, silently spelling them out to himself. But instead of the words being split at odd intervals, as before, he quickly discovered these were clean breaks. It left him with four words.

**Four.**

Before he had a chance to speak them aloud, Dumbledore strolled out from behind the giant mirror and leaned against its edge. "You see four words, I presume?"

Harry jumped, unsure whether he was going to get used to this disappearing and reappearing act. He looked back at his old mentor, curiosity and confusion warring a bit. "Yeah. You can see them, too?"

"I cannot, no. Much like the reflection, only the person using the mirror can view its messages."

"Then how did you know it was showing me four words?"

Dumbledore just smiled at him for a moment. "I believe the more important question is what the four words are."

Once again Harry traced the words with his eyes, letting them flow through his mind fully formed: *Tranquility, stability, purpose, love.*

Harry didn't know why, but he couldn't help smiling at that. Maybe because (for once) it seemed the pronouncement of his fate was going to be a good thing for him, for he could hardly see going wrong with those four particular words. Then again, he was currently inside of an Evochi construct. Would the words carry through to his real life, or were they just something for him to experience inside a session? A sliver of doubt crept in.

"Professor, are these words for real life, or is this just… in my head?" he asked.

"Of course it's all in your head, Harry, but does that make it any less real?"

Harry stared at him. "You've said that to me before, when I met you at King's Cross."

Dumbledore considered that for a moment, a slight tip to his head. "So I did." He smiled. "It may please you to know it is as true now as it was then."

It was strange for Harry to think it had already been six months since that conversation; it seemed like yesterday. He had been at a crossroads then, about to make a choice that would forever alter his future. He wondered if the same thing was transpiring for this session, too, as it had a similar sense of
"Why are you always with me at the end of things?" Harry asked.

"End?" queried Dumbledore. He looked around the room with mild interest. "My dear boy, what makes you think this is the end?"

"Well, it's probably my last Evochi session."

"Endings, beginnings – such curious notions, aren't they? And so often mistaken for one another, I find." Dumbledore chose another yellow candy from the bowl in his hand, inspected it briefly, and then popped it into his mouth. "Perhaps I am merely here for the beginnings."

Harry's eyes widened and he stared at his old mentor. Beginnings? This is a beginning? The notion of that began expanding itself in his mind until it seemingly clicked some switch of understanding into place. He looked back up at the four words written across the top of the mirror. If those were real, then the end of this session represented a beginning. The end of the war had represented a beginning, too, even if he hadn't been sure what to do next. Hell, leaving the Dursleys' when he was eleven had been a beginning, and a huge one at that.

Perhaps all endings represented beginnings.

Still, needing to be absolutely sure, Harry turned to Dumbledore. "So the four words are where I should begin? That's what I should focus on?"

Dumbledore's smile widened, his eyes twinkling. "Yes, Harry. And of those, which do you desire most, above all?"

"Love," Harry echoed aloud and Dumbledore smiled at him.

"And the pathway to love is…"

"Pathway? I don't know. What do you mean by a pathway?" Harry studied himself in the mirror, but didn't see his reflection move. "You're making it seem really obvious, like it's right in front of my…"

Harry broke off with a gasp as it finally registered what his reflection was doing. "Nose," he finished. "The pathway is right in front of my nose."

"He is, yes," Dumbledore said mildly.

Harry turned at the sound of the voice, but found the room empty again. He looked quickly over both shoulders, but saw only the dark, stone room and the silhouette of the great mirror, limned as it was in moonlight.

"He?"

Harry's heart started to beat a little faster. Did Dumbledore mean…?

Harry considered the four words in contrast to his dreamscape, the one session that had seemed to best answer his desires for him since the control had been out of his hands. He had appeared to lead a stable, purposeful life there. It was tranquil, and he was surrounded by love.

No wonder he had spent so much time reliving that session in his mind, and pining for it in his heart. That's when an urgent thought began to take root. Evochi sessions were not just about showing
desires, they were also about \textit{active creation}. Even in the dreamscape, where he was merely the observer, the potion had constructed multiple scenes for him in one session. Harry almost laughed. Why had it never occurred to him to try this before? There he was, in the middle of a magical potion that would let him create whatever he wanted, and he was still standing in a construct of Hogwarts waiting for the answers to come to him. Why not go to \textit{them}?

He may not be able to shift into a dreamscape from within a regular session, but he could recreate that scenario, just as Severus suggested. At least then he'd be able to control the action. But would it work to revisit a former session like that, especially when the original had been a dreamscape? Could he really just switch locales with nothing more than the power of his thoughts?

Guessing he was only minutes away from the end of his session, he closed his eyes and focused on the visual he'd become so familiar with over the last two months: the path leading up to his cottage in the tropics, with mountains to the east, and the fragrant air all around him, heavy with the promise of rain. Instinctively, he filled his lungs with it, relishing he could almost feel the warm breeze ruffling the hair on his head.

When a drop of water hit him squarely on the nose, his eyes shot open – only to realize the scene before him was exactly as he'd just been visualizing. It had worked! Either that or he was just hallucinating. He wasn't always sure there was a lot of difference where Evochi was concerned.

A low rumble of thunder drifted overhead and he looked up as more droplets pattered his face, first in quick succession, then in a downpour. He let out a giddy laugh and ran towards the quaint home, leaping up the three steps, turning the knob, and barreling through the front door all in one smooth motion – for this time, he was prepared for what was about to happen.

Sure enough, he was immediately grabbed and pushed back against the door, a piece of ripe fruit pressed between his lips and a hot tongue lapping the sweetened juice pooling at the corner of his mouth. Harry dove into the kiss with gusto this time, feeling every inch of his body singing with want, wishing with all his might that this didn't have to be a session and he could wake to this for real. But before he lost himself too much to the sensations, he remembered the reason he was there, and abruptly pushed the man back.

"Wait… please, I have to see you. Show me who you are." Harry's hands pressed against the warm, firm chest, the linen of the man's shirt feeling oddly luxurious beneath his fingertips. "\textit{Look at me}," Harry heard himself whisper, tilting his head to try and look underneath the dark strands of hair to the face beyond. His heart was practically beating out of his chest – with anticipation, with nerves, with the urgency only a diminishing session could instill – as this was the man he'd been imagining in a variety of contexts for weeks; the man he hadn't been able to get out of his head ever since he'd first experienced the dreamscape.

But just as the man started to look up – he saw a prominent nose and strong cheekbones – the cottage scene dissolved away and the mirror came back into focus, as though someone had abruptly changed the channel.

\textit{No! No! Not yet!}

Desperate, Harry grabbed ahold of the mirror, willing it to show him something, anything, his eyes roving across every square inch of it. He needed to be sure! But the construct began fading rapidly, bookshelves and implements appearing all around him, until little more than the mirror remained. The surface of it swirled a bit before showing an image of a man with jet black hair, the man he had kissed, to the lab poking its way into the scene, to Harry's reflection standing nose to nose with the glass, to Severus, to the lab again, until he finally realized the image of Severus had been a part of the lab. Or had it been part of the mirror?
When Harry emerged from his session and opened his eyes, it was to see Severus look up from his journal, the strands of his hair parting to expose... a prominent nose, strong cheekbones and dark, intent eyes. Harry gasped as Severus' gaze landed on him. It was the mirror image of what he had just seen in his session – or knew he would have seen, had the image not disappeared so fast. This was the man from the cottage. The identity of his fake dreamscape lover was in fact not a fake at all. It was Severus.

It had always been Severus.

"Oh, God," Harry breathed, his eyes mapping Severus' face and body. "It was... you were the..."

Severus sat up straighter, looking at Harry in alarm. "What is it?"

Harry waved him off, almost wishing it had been a regular dose for this session, instead of just half, so it would have knocked him out properly upon waking. Instead, he just sat there, groggy but aware – all too aware. He slid off the chaise and stumbled towards the door, just needing to get out of the room to think for a minute.

"Loo," was all he could think to say. If there had been a response, it was swallowed by the sound of the closing door.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Bracing his hands on either side of Severus' bathroom sink, Harry looked up at his reflection, watching the water drip from his fringe from where he'd splashed it on his face. He took a deep breath, his mind a whirlwind of thoughts.

His mysterious dreamscape lover had been Severus all along.

Severus, who liked Star Trek and Greek food and was really funny when you got to know him and who played the piano when he didn't think anyone was watching.

Severus.

Harry hadn't been expecting that. He hadn't expected to see Severus in the mirror, as though in answer to his question. He hadn't expected he had a pathway to anything, much less a pathway to love. He hadn't expected he would even live long enough to get to explore even half of what he'd done in his sessions, or that he'd feel this way so quickly, and about a man no less – especially this particular man. Then again, he never expected a lot of things, but life had always had a way of steering him in a direction that was right for him. And for reasons he couldn't explain, there had always been a certain rightness to having Severus around. When he tried to put that together in his head, it still seemed strange. Yet strangely right. So perhaps not so very unexpected after all.

Tranquility.

Severus had already been his pathway to many things. The man who had been there for him since the beginning, who had protected him and watched out for him even when he hadn't been allowed to show his regard – regard that Harry now understood had probably been there all along. The professor who taught him at Hogwarts. The spy who aided the side of the Light. The Death Eater who played his role so well, not even Voldemort himself suspected. The comrade-in-arms who repeatedly saved Harry's life. The man who came out the other side of all that and ended up across
the table from Harry at the old pub in Hogsmeade. The mentor who shepherded him through Evochi. The friend who listened, and helped in whatever way he knew how.

*Stability.*

And Severus had survived the war, too, all because of Harry. He supposed he could feel guilty for that, interrupting yet another plan of Severus’, but maybe there was a grander purpose at work here that neither of them could see from their vantage point. Harry liked to believe that, at least. It was more than just wanting to believe the best about people. It was about believing there was a reason he was here at all; a reason he had survived. A reason they had *both* survived. But *why?*

Maybe they were supposed to be here for each other. Could life really be that synchronous? If it was, then his thoughts about having his own kind of family with Severus weren’t that far off. They could build something with each other that neither could find alone. All Harry had to do was write a new story. And help Severus write his, too.

*Purpose.*

He remembered how good he and Severus had looked together when they dined recently at The Grecian, how Mrs. Whitby had been the one to point that out even though she’d not said a word. Harry remembered wishing Severus could have accompanied him to Australia for Ron and Hermione’s wedding. He remembered their post-draught kiss, and how much he’d thought about it with ever-increasing curiosity. What would a second one be like? Was it just the illicit thrill that made the first so exciting, or would it always feel that way? He remembered wondering what his tattoo’s reaction to Severus would be. He remembered St. Mungo’s, and their early summer of dinners at the old pub in Hogsmeade, their Evochi sessions, their conversations. He remembered *everything*, sharp and crisp as sunlight.

It had all been there, right in front of his nose the entire time.

Maybe it was one event that was the turning point. Maybe it was a million little things. All he knew was that everything was rushing together in his mind now, like a puzzle intent on completing itself at last, though what he saw once it was done didn’t surprise him – not like he supposed it ought to. His heart pounded at the realization, at finally making sense of it. *So this* is what it feels like. Or maybe he had known for a long time but was so unused to the feeling or experience that he had only just named it now.

*Love.*

For Harry, there was no other such immutable truth as that: he was in love with Severus.
It was well after nine o'clock on Thursday – Christmas Eve, in fact – when Severus was finally able to make his way back to his quarters after the impromptu offer of dinner from Headmistress McGonagall, Professors Flitwick and Sprout, and Madam Pomfrey. It had been pleasant enough, but now he merely wished to retreat to his quarters for the duration of the holiday and enjoy the solitude that winter break afforded him.

However, when he opened the door to his rooms, he was greeted by an unexpected sight: there, pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace, was Harry. One hand was shoved in his pocket, the other was gripping a wrapped package with a red bow on top. If Severus didn't know better, he would have guessed Harry was nervous about something – though what that could be, he had no idea. Had it been anyone else, Severus' wand would have been drawn and mid-hex faster than one could say 'mistletoe'.

For want of something to do, Severus unbuttoned his outer robe and draped it over the back of the chair nearest to him. Turning slightly, he closed and warded the door.

"Sorry I didn't tell you I was coming," Harry said quickly. "I thought you'd be here, but when you weren't, I just decided to wait. Hope that's okay."

Severus nodded. "I expected you would be with the Weasleys, celebrating the holiday."

"Well, they did invite me, but… I wanted to give you this first." He held out the package so Severus could take it.

The silver paper shone in the soft light as he rotated the box to inspect the hastily-knotted, velvet bow. Receiving a gift was most unexpected, and Severus, rusty with the practice, felt suddenly discomfited. "I… thank you. I do not have—"

"That's okay," Harry interrupted. "I know we didn't discuss exchanging gifts or anything, I just wanted to thank you for everything you've done for me. And not just the last few months, but… well, for all of it, really. I—"

Severus raised a hand to forestall further gushing. "You are welcome." Harry bit his lip and nodded, then slowly raised his eyes, a question there Severus couldn't decipher.

"Would you like me to open this now?" he offered, trying to find his footing in this unprecedented exchange.

"No, you don't have to," Harry said, somewhat distracted. He seemed to be fidgeting back and forth on his feet and concern lanced through Severus.

"Is everything all right?"

"What? Oh. Yeah. I just wanted to see you. I've been trying to find a reason to stop over here for days, but I kept losing the nerve."

Severus' brows pinched together. "The nerve? Whatever for?" He ignored the way his heart began tapping itself against his chest. Harry took a step closer and everything seemed to narrow to that one point of focus before him: tousled hair, sparkling eyes, moistened lips.

Harry looked as though he was trying to discern something, mapping Severus' face with his eyes.
Then he leaned up on his toes, pausing for one heightened moment. "For this."

The press of Harry's lips was tentative and light, but still Severus gasped – the temptation, the want, flared inside him instantly. Harry's mouth was the only thing that had actually made contact; his body was still hovering just out of range. It was maddening for Severus to be this close to him, to feel the warmth he radiated, yet not be able to grab and hold and take. He was long past the point where he had any self control where Harry was concerned. There were no more walls to rely on, no more defenses to erect, no more logic to dissuade him; he'd no more be able to resist this than a starving man would deny a scrap of food.

Yet theirs was not the sort of association where one party simply took liberties such as this. Then again, hadn't he done this very thing to Harry, after his sixth draught? And why? Was it because he'd been glad for Harry? Or had he just been glad for himself?

A slight movement against Severus’ lips brought his mind back to the matter before him. He didn't know what this was, but one thing was for sure: he refused to play the fool. He pushed Harry back, ignoring the way Harry's lips parted in surprise. "I will not be your experiment."

Harry's eyes opened. "… My what?"

"I do not wish to be used as an experiment while you discover who, or what, it is you really want."

"Wait, that's not what this is." Harry sighed. "That's not what this is about."

"Oh?" Severus crossed his arms in front of his chest and cursed his beating heart, for he was sure its frantic thumping must be audible from outside his body by now.

"Just because I haven't been with a man before doesn't mean I don't know what I want."

Severus wanted to run, to scream, to claw his way out of this absurd reality he had somehow found himself in. This was not happening; could not be happening. Severus Snape was not the sort of man who got what he wanted in life. This was just some cruel daydream sent by his subconscious to taunt his foolishly-held desires. Someone must have slipped something into his soup at dinner. Yes, that made sense; certainly more sense than the fact Harry had actually come to him; had just kissed him.

"Convenience, Mr. Potter, that is all."

"Convenience?" Harry snorted, a hard edge to his voice. "You think this is about convenience? This is anything but convenient! If that's all I wanted, I could just go shag that Marcus guy, or all the other people you seem to think are lined up outside my door. But guess what? I don't want any of them, I want you! How fucking inconvenient for me!"

As Harry roughly pushed past him, several things assaulted Severus at once: an alluring cologne or aftershave, the scent of which was damn near edible; the realization that a dream-induced Harry wouldn't storm out on him, yet this one was about to; the absence of Harry's typical care-worn attire, something he'd swapped for an elegant look: black trousers, a tailored, button-down shirt and black leather shoes; the sense-memory of Harry's lips pressing against his own; the simple fact that it would be the height of stupidity to let Harry walk out that door – now, or ever again.

"Harry."

"Don't. I already feel like a first class idiot, okay? Can we just forget this happened, please?"

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP
Harry had already tightened his fingers around the knob when he heard it. The sound had an almost plaintive quality to it, as though Severus hadn't intended to say it out loud.

"No."

Harry froze, half-turning. "What?"

"No. Not this time."

Before Harry knew it, Severus was moving towards him; in a heartbeat it seemed like he was right there. Harry turned to face him but couldn't do anything except stand there, trapped by what he saw in that darkening gaze. The closer Severus got, the more Harry's pulse pounded against his ears, the less air there seemed to be in the room. Severus set the gift aside and then looked down into Harry's face. He was so, so close.

"Why are you doing this?"

Harry swallowed. "Doing what?"

Severus seemed unable to articulate his thoughts; a circumstance that might have been more unsettling if Harry's weren't spinning feverishly as well. "Initiating," Severus finally settled on. To Harry's own surprise, he had an answer ready.

"Because you never would have. I know that now."

"So this is merely pity, then?"

"No!" Harry said, his sigh a sharp exhale. "No. God, do you always have to be so bloody difficult?" As he stared at Severus, an idea began taking root. He quickly brought all his feelings, his intent, to the forefront of his mind. "If you don't believe me, look for yourself. My mind is open."

Severus turned his head, averting his eyes. "I will not intrude upon you like that."

"Then you will just have to trust me."

Harry knew Severus was waging an internal war with himself; it was evident in the way his body was turning in. This was probably one of those make-or-break moments, too, and Harry couldn't bear the thought of breaking it. Not when he was so close to finding out if there really was something between them. Harry put a hand against Severus' cheek to draw his attention back, and was relieved when he allowed it.

"And the Weasleys?" Severus asked, as though some part of him was still stalling. "Surely you do not want to deny them the pleasure of your company."

Harry slid his hands up Severus' forearms and stopped just above the elbow, feeling the warmth of the man's body through the fabric of his robes. Why had Severus always seemed so cold? Perhaps it was the forbidding and stern visage he so often wore that had made him seem so distant and inhuman at times. Just like the revelation of seeing Severus' bedroom, touching him now – albeit through his clothes – was reframing the Severus in Harry's mind as a hot-blooded, tempting male. The mere thought of that made him squirm, now more than ever wanting to peel away the layers of clothing and see what lie beneath them. "I'd much rather have the pleasure of yours," Harry said.

Their gazes met then, each likely asking the same question. Harry hoped to hell they came up with the same answer, too, because he wasn't prepared to deal with the alternative. Truth be told, he hadn't even considered there might be an alternative.
A slight puff of breath across Harry's cheek made him refocus on the face swimming before him. Severus was so close now he was filling Harry's entire field of vision. The anticipation of what might be next had every nerve in his body on high alert, attuned to the proximity of the man before him. There was no way he could back down from this now – he wanted to know. He had been imagining this, waiting for this, for too long. He wanted to lean forward and complete the kiss himself, but knew it had to be Severus who decided this time.

That's when Severus' lips pressed against his own. It started innocently enough, a chaste touch, and Harry waited for Severus to deepen it. There was already something heady about being this close to him – the illicit thrill of it all, his former professor, his former nemesis. It should be taboo, it should be wrong, except that nothing before had ever felt this right. Something about those thin lips against his own, that nose pressing into his cheek, that light scratch of stubble against his chin. It was so… so sensory, so comfortable – everything he never imagined a real first kiss with Severus could be.

As Harry slowly pulled his head back, wanting to see the man's face, wanting to know this was real, Severus' mouth held Harry's bottom lip in between his own, releasing it gently while he seemed to surface from the moment himself. It was so painfully tender, the longing so evident in that simple gesture, that it made Harry's heart ache.

He immediately threw his arms around Severus' neck and leaned up and kissed so hard that neither one of them could breathe for a moment. In response, Severus' arms encircled Harry's back, holding their two bodies together, and Harry melted into the embrace. He managed to speak in the few spaces where his lips lifted from Severus'.

"I feel like… I've been waiting for this… for a long time."

"For a kiss?" Severus looked annoyed.

"No, for you." Maybe that wasn't a sufficient answer, but all Harry could think about was how much he wanted this man: smart and dangerous and sarcastic and sexy as hell. It was everything Harry wanted but never knew to look for. He leaned forward to kiss Severus again, but Severus pulled his head back.

"And how much time is that?"

Harry wrinkled his nose. "I don't know – a month maybe?"

"You have no concept of a long time."

Harry wanted to ask what Severus meant – rather, to confirm it meant what he thought it meant – but he didn't want questions to ruin whatever this was that was building between them. He didn't want to give Severus a chance to say no or get away. And he definitely didn't want to wait another second to experience what was next.

Unable to help himself, Harry rolled his hips against whatever part of Severus was nearest to him. That seemed to be their undoing, for Severus suddenly pressed his body back against Harry's, pushing them both against the door to his quarters. Cupping Harry's face, Severus slid his tongue into Harry's mouth, and the two battled for dominance, tasting each other at last.

Severus' kisses were intense and galvanic, and for the first time, Harry really felt the power of the man's magic. It thrummed just like his own but with a banked sort of control his had never had, as though it wasn't just memories Severus held in check with his mind. The longer they kissed, though, the more that barrier loosened, and their two energies began to mix. The potency of it prickled along Harry's skin and he whimpered, tightening his grip on Severus' arms, handfuls of wool robes in his
Already lost in a haze of sensation, Harry barely noticed when a firm thigh insinuated itself between his legs. It wasn't until two hands on his arse yanked him snug against it, guiding him to rub, that he understood. His trousers grew unbearably tight as he hardened against them, but he didn't care – it was so mind-blowing finally getting a chance to do this with Severus – something, anything – that all he could do was throw his head back and groan in appreciation.

Severus took immediate advantage, his mouth everywhere: trailing along Harry's jaw, licking the column of his neck, nipping the spot just behind his ear. Then he shifted his hands, one holding Harry's back, the other still clutching an arse cheek, and ground their bodies together.

That was all it took.

Harry stiffened in the embrace, clenching Severus' upper arms tight enough to leave bruises, and came with a ragged moan. Severus all but devoured the sound from Harry's mouth, still holding Harry's body tight against his own, letting their movement together slow, and finally stop.

When they finally broke for air, Harry just stood there panting, his face buried in Severus' neck, until Severus stepped back.

Harry looked down at his trousers and the wet spot that covered the area to the left of his zip, and rubbed at it ineffectually. "Ugh, shit… sorry," he said, suddenly wishing for the ground to swallow him whole. All he could think was that he had just come in his trousers, his new trousers, in Severus' quarters, while rubbing himself off against the man's thigh. He pulled out his wand to cast a Scourgify, but a warm hand closed around his wrist, stopping him.

"It is not a problem," Severus said. There was satisfaction underlining his voice – satisfaction and something that sounded like smoky heat; a catch Harry hadn't heard before. Surprised, he looked up at Severus. There, unmistakeable even in those dark eyes, was desire.

Severus shifted his body slightly until something firm was pressing against Harry's abdomen; a development Harry had missed in his haze of getting off: Severus was hard. Electricity shot through Harry, renewing his body's interest, and he pressed his lips against Severus' mouth, letting his relief show, asking a question, making another apology – he wasn't sure.

"Perhaps we should just take them off," Severus said, and he sounded so reasonable that for a moment, Harry didn't register the long, deft fingers closing around him, outlining the shape of his cock through his trousers. Harry's breath hitched. There was no mistaking that intent and he understood the invitation for what it was. He also knew if he accepted it, there would be no going back.

Harry ran his mind over what had just happened, and what had brought him here, and if he still wanted to proceed. He had to make sure it wasn't just his prick saying yes, yes, yes. He cared too much for Severus to mess around with him (as if he was even that kind of person, anyway) on the off chance Severus had been right about Harry just wanting some experience and Severus was, by proximity, the most convenient or safest choice.

But then Harry remembered that amazing kiss and how he felt about what just happened and could feel a swell of emotion in his chest. This man – this fragile, acerbic man – was who he wanted to be with; was who he wanted to have more than a quick shag with. Maybe a lifetime of shags – no, not just shags. More. Maybe everything more. The visual of dinners and anniversaries and shared laughter played through his mind's eye again. He saw them as more than just two men. He saw them as a couple; as a family.
Harry reached down and took Severus' hand. It was warm and a little clammy, and in fascination, he turned it over and trailed a fingertip along each of Severus' fingers, feeling a slight tremble when he reached the palm (though he didn't dare remark on that). It was the first time he'd ever touched Severus like this, with intent and interest and something more than functional utility, and he found it both comforting and arousing. Suddenly, he couldn't wait to feel those hands in other places; he wanted Severus to touch him, to feel him. *Everywhere.*

Harry looked up to see Severus watching him in return, the fight or flight response openly warring in his eyes. Harry guessed Severus was way out of his element and, despite his obvious interest, was looking for a way to escape the discomfort of his vulnerability. But Harry was determined to see it through, and to protect whatever this was between them. He may not have a special potion to offer, but he was damned well going to make sure this would always be more than just a victory shag between two comrades on the Christmas after Voldemort fell.

Decision made, Harry took a step back towards the bedroom and pulled Severus with him.

The wall sconces flared to life, along with the fireplace near the foot of the bed, once they entered Severus' bedroom. Somehow the large, four-poster bed, with its ornate columns and stately headboard, looked different than the other times Harry had seen it. The whole room felt different somehow. Perhaps it was because his dynamic with Severus had changed – or was about to change – that Harry no longer felt like an intruder in this room.

He did note the black duvet was still the same, as were the green velvet curtains drawn back on either side with silver tassels. Now more than ever Harry wanted to feel the bedding; wanted to luxuriate in it. He commented on the softness of it as he trailed his fingers along the edge. "I didn't expect it to be so… nice."

For Severus' part, he merely looked confused for a moment, until Harry's meaning sank in. "Ah. You were assuming a coffin, then, provided that rumor still persists."

Harry smiled, trying not to look as guilty as he felt. "Yeah, I might have heard that one." The truth was, Harry had been surprised about a great many things when it came to Severus, not the least of which was the reality of his personal quarters: cozy, well-appointed and masculine, if not a bit simple. Though that said more about Severus' tastes than it did about what the school could actually offer. Still, it was vastly better than Harry's dreary rooms at Grimmauld, and those weren't even in a castle dungeon.

"Head of House does afford one certain privileges," Severus remarked, "although the comforts hardly negate the fact that one must also teach adolescents." He said it so deadpan that Harry almost didn't realize it was a joke. He laughed, though it grew a little more nervous-sounding when the moment passed with increasing silence.

It was such a strange thing to see Severus like this, so subdued, the uncertainty stamped all over him. They were both standing on the cusp of something new, something Harry doubted they could come back from if it went sideways, yet both still wanting to try. It wasn't about convenience, it was about so much more. Something that had been developing beneath Harry's nose for the better part of a year, something he could only appreciate now for what it was. And seeing that look on Severus' face, his expression as uneasy as Harry had ever seen it, he knew Severus felt it, too.

"So, um..." Harry cleared his throat. "How should we..." He knew he was gesturing uselessly, but having Severus standing several paces from him, neither moving nor talking, was not helping to ease the tension.
"Have you done this before?"

"I'm not a virgin," Harry protested, earning him a slightly irritated look from Severus.

"Have you ever been with a man?"

Harry thought briefly about Charlie but decided it was probably not what Severus was referring to.

"Well, no."

"Then you are in this."

"I'm not a complete idiot, though," Harry said, squaring his jaw. "I get the concept, at least."

Severus allowed himself a moment to consider the youthful defiance Harry was exhibiting. It was both charming and sobering, reminding him that Harry had had little in the way of a proper growing up. Harry had always seemed eleven-going-on-thirty; then again, being forced from a downtrodden and neglectful childhood right into the spotlight, the sole target of Wizarding Britain's most dangerous megalomaniac in an age, had forced him to grow up rather quickly. At least in some ways. In this – sex – Harry still seemed like any other eighteen-year-old with scant few notches in the bedpost, and little in the way of experience aside from his own hand.

As it was, Harry was already so amped with nerves and anticipation he was practically vibrating, and it was all Severus could do not to give in and take what was being offered, right there against the wall, or over the chair in the corner, or any of the other inappropriate but titillating places his cock told him would work just fine. But just as he'd done countless times before, Severus was intent on protecting him in this; on giving Harry the first time he deserved.

But Harry didn't seem to idle well, and clearly wanted his soiled clothes off. He kicked off his shoes, unbuckled his belt, slid his trousers down, and had almost got them free of his legs when he looked up at Severus and stopped. He must have read the directive in Severus' eyes.

"Should I put them back on?"

"No," Severus murmured. "But if I may, I should like to do the rest."

Harry nodded, his cheeks pinking, and Severus wondered if he knew how irresistible he was when he blushed. He was obviously a little shy about the notion of being undressed, but Severus was not deterred. He intended to go as slow as he liked, revealing his good fortune one layer at a time.

Severus removed the round metal glasses, setting them on the nightstand. Harry's eyes looked like gleaming emeralds in the firelight, an effect that was enhanced by the dark eggplant shirt he was wearing (as if he needed his eyes to be any more obvious).

Harry's body went taut when Severus brought his fingers to Harry's collar and slipped the first pearl button free. "There are a lot of buttons on this shirt," he observed, hoping a bit of humor might ease some of the anticipatory tension he'd created. It seemed to have worked when Harry smiled and gave Severus' waistcoat a pointed look.

"You are one to talk."

Severus let a smirk curl the corner of his mouth as he slipped the shirt off Harry's shoulders, followed by the white undershirt and black socks, until all that was left were fitted boxer-briefs. They were the same deep purple as his shirt. Severus took his time with those, sliding them down with both hands
skimming Harry's hips and thighs, the lingering traces of soap and cologne and the salty-sweet musk of sex filling his nose. It was intoxicating.

Severus finally let his eyes look their fill. The lean muscle on Harry's compact, five-foot-eight frame made Severus silently thank Quidditch, a sport for which he had previously held no esteem.

The scrutiny, admiring though it had been, seemed to have quelled Harry's arousal a bit, so when Severus gave him a gentle push to lay back on the bed, Harry's cock merely lay heavy against his thigh.

No longer a boy, no – Harry was every inch a young man. Practically everything about him was begging to be worshipped. It was the sweetest sort of torture that existed, resisting the urge to touch him, to pleasure him, to consume him, when every part of Severus' body wanted nothing more than to oblige. He was no longer surprised by how painfully he desired it. Seeing Harry like this, sprawled across his bed like a veritable buffet of tantalizing flesh, he knew it was worth whatever wait he had endured.

Severus moved a few paces away from the bed under the guise of collecting something from his cabinet, but in truth he just needed to take a deep breath. Or twenty.

"Now you," Harry said, though his voice was not as sure as his command.

Severus looked over and saw Harry palming himself gently, his eyes glowing with arousal as they tracked Severus' movement across the room.

"Stop that," Severus managed, his voice a bit thick even to his own ears.

"Sorry, I…” Harry laid his arm down next to him on the bed, a flush spreading across his chest and neck. "I can't help it, I've never felt like this before. It's like… it's like I can't contain it!" He squirmed, clearly finding it hard not to touch himself. "I'm so bloody horny right now!"

Severus smirked to himself. "I am afraid that will only get worse before it gets better," he said aloud. He moved back to the bed and leaned over Harry, dropping a kiss on that beckoning mouth. Harry was a surprisingly good kisser – responsive and passionate, he arched up into the contact and tried to pull Severus down on top of him.

But Severus held off and pushed Harry back down against the duvet, one hand on his shoulder. "Let's get you cleaned up a bit first, shall we?"

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Before Harry knew it, he was being pulled towards the edge of the bed with Severus' hands around his waist. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a fluttering motion under Severus' fingers, and knew instinctively it was the wings of his phoenix. He'd almost forgotten it was there. Severus must have noticed the same thing, for he abruptly released his grip, his eyes wide.

"Wait, do that again," Harry said.

"Do what?"

"Touch my tattoo."

For a brief moment, Severus looked uncertain, as though doing so would only result in an undesirable outcome for him. "Why, what will happen?"
"I'm not sure." Harry felt a little breathless with excitement, realizing he had been wondering this very thing for a while now, ever since he'd first tested the tattoo's reactions with his friends. But what if, this time, it didn't do what George said it should?

What if it **did**?

Severus was hovering a finger just above Harry's skin, his expression a mix of wariness and curiosity. "Like this?"

"No, your whole hand, the palm."

Severus looked into Harry's eyes, as though seeking one last confirmation, and then curled his hand around that smooth, firm side.

Harry's heart began to beat faster as he waited and watched… but nothing was happening. George had said other features were embedded in the tattoo, though Harry hadn't experienced any of them yet, aside from the tattoo relocating itself and changing color.

That's when he felt it: a warmth that spiraled out underneath his skin, everywhere, like a slow, smoldering fire simmering just below the surface. Harry gasped sharply and Severus yanked his hand away again, but Harry reached out and grabbed his wrist. "No, it's okay, I just… I didn't expect that." He pressed Severus' hand back against his body and leaned up on his elbows to see what was happening.

The warm tingling sensation returned, quicker this time, and Harry shivered as it sent ripples of electricity up his body. "**God**…" he breathed, closing his eyes. When next he opened them, the phoenix was rippling under Severus' touch, and Severus was watching it with rapt fascination. Sliding his palm across Harry's chest and abdomen, they both marveled at the way the bird followed his touch, the aura of flames that surrounded the wings now glowing and pulsing in a halo of searing colors. It was setting Harry's senses alight as nothing had ever done before.

"Is this all right?" Severus asked, and Harry nodded.

"Yeah, it's good." He grinned, more out of relief than surprise, now that he was of mind to think about it. "Very good."

Harry wondered if the tattoo was mirroring his internal thoughts. He reached up and put his arms around Severus' shoulders, pulling him close for a kiss – a spontaneous one he hadn't intended to initiate but just felt like the right thing to do – while the warmth continued to spread out underneath his skin. When Severus' body made contact with Harry's, the phoenix effectively trapped between them, Harry's breath hitched, stolen for a moment by a wave of arousal that tingled the tips of his fingers and toes.

He didn't know how the tattoo was doing that, but it felt good and he suddenly wanted more of it, more of Severus, more of everything.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus marveled at his ability to incite such a response in Harry – including the tattoo's reaction. He vaguely remembered what Marcus had said about it – that it had practically disappeared, skirting his touch. Severus still wasn't sure what that meant exactly, but figured that a glowing, pulsing tattoo following his every move was bound to mean the opposite, or at least something good, and decided he was pleased with the reaction.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP
It was surreal – and unbearably arousing – for Harry to see this particular man standing in the vee of his legs, bent over him, his cock disappearing into that thin-lipped mouth. His professor... only not. How long had it been since Harry had thought of him like that? Months, probably. Now he was just... Severus. His friend, his mentor, his... lover? What was this thing they were embarking upon? Was it even a thing?

A firm tongue laving at the head of his cock, mapping every contour and crevice, told him maybe he didn't care right now, and he dropped his head back and sighed in pleasure. Harry had suspected Severus would be as meticulous and thorough in this as he was in everything else.

He was not disappointed.

Nor, it seemed, was he going to be allowed to come again. Severus repeatedly brought him to the edge, teetering him there for what felt like days, with his maddeningly slow licks and low hums of satisfaction, before moving off to nip and kiss his abdomen or the tops of his thighs – anywhere except where Harry most wanted that mouth.

Then suddenly, it all stopped. Harry opened his eyes just as Severus knelt up on the bed, prowling over him.

Oh. Oh. Harry swallowed, nervous excitement lancing through him. It was time. "Is that your own?" he asked, for want of a small distraction, nodding at the bottle of lube that had appeared in Severus' hand.

"Of course."

"What makes it so good?"

"That it was I who made it."

Harry laughed, but it quickly dissolved into a gasp when he felt his arse become thoroughly slicked. "Oh! I was expecting that to be really cold!" he said, to which Severus only quirked a brow, looking smug.

Severus removed his finger and then generously coated himself with the lube. Harry's first glimpse revealed Severus' cock was long and lean, much like the man himself, though that knowledge did little to calm his nerves. What if he didn't end up liking this? What if Severus' cock was too big to fit?

Grasping Harry's legs, Severus draped them over his thighs and moved closer to position himself.

"Wait, don't you have to... prepare me or something?"

"I will. There is more than one way to do it, and I thought you might enjoy this method for your first time."

Harry tried to concentrate on the word 'enjoy' but he couldn't help himself. "Will it hurt?"

"It shouldn't if it is done slowly. Uncomfortable, yes, perhaps odd. But you will know the moment that changes."

Harry nodded, biting his lip, but soon found himself sucking in a breath as something warm and rigid nudged his opening.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP
As Severus felt the head of his prick breach Harry, he went slowly, assessing Harry's reaction: the sharp inhale of breath, the fingers clenching the sheets, the line that formed between his brows. Another small push and Harry panted, his eyes open wide, his body taut as a bow.

"Wait, I don't think it's going to—" Harry clenched around the intrusion, one hand moving to grip Severus' forearm so tight he'd undoubtedly leave marks.

Severus pressed a palm flat against his chest. "Relax, Harry. Take a deep breath. It will pass in a minute, just breathe through it. If it helps, bear down against me."

"I'm trying…"

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No, it's just…"

"I know. Just breathe."

Harry nodded and took several long, measured breaths. Severus pulled back slowly and pushed in to the same spot as before. A small grunt escaped Harry’s lips. Severus repeated the movement, several very shallow thrusts, just enough to encircle the head of his cock and nothing else. He continued doing that for a few minutes, each time pushing in a tiny bit further, and then a tiny bit further, and then a tiny bit further still – ever so patiently – until finally, Harry's eyes hooded with desire.

It was a moment Severus would not soon forget: the way that tense expression melted into a frisson of raw sensation, the way those once-gritted teeth parted so he could exhale a low moan, the way those eyes momentarily rolled into the back of his head. It was exquisite to watch.

"Wow," Harry whispered, his eyes opening and immediately seeking out Severus.

"Indeed," Severus agreed. He looked down at the face below him, awash in golds and reds from the firelight, the glint in those green eyes not quite so innocent anymore. The uncertainty was gone, and in its place was determination, desire, need.

Severus obliged and pushed in further, just as slowly as before, his hands cupping Harry's hips. Before Harry had a chance to react, Severus slid out and back in again, only slightly deeper strokes, forcing himself to concentrate on Harry's pleasure and preparation instead of who he was with or the fact this was actually happening. He certainly didn't want it to be over too soon, especially if this was going to be his only chance to be with Harry.

Severus leaned over and wrapped his mouth around one of Harry's nipples, feeling it pebble under the flick of his tongue, and then blew a puff of air across it. Harry inhaled sharply and looked down, as though he hadn't realized something as inconsequential as a nipple could possibly hold that much sensation. It was as though no one had ever taken him to this place before – and, Severus realized belatedly, it was quite likely that no one ever had.

Bracing himself on his elbows, the two of them chest to chest, Severus slowly buried himself deep in the furnace of Harry's body. It had been a long time since he had done this, and even longer since he'd felt… regard for the person he was doing it with. For so many years, sex had simply been a way to take the edge off; a paid rendezvous that was as discreet as it was disappointing, with nothing more than base physical release on offer.

But with Harry… well, it was always going to be different with Harry, wasn’t it?

Severus' fingers worked their way into that wild nest of raven hair, discovering it was even softer
than he had imagined. Clutching it in his grasp, he cradled Harry's head, keeping his hips moving in a smooth, steady slide, in and out, focusing on both their pleasure, Harry's melody of softly-exerted moans his reward.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry was surprised at how open and calm his mind felt as he absorbed every detail of their encounter. Their bodies felt so in sync, as though they were communicating through magic, this hypnotic and magnetic pulse between them. He became hyper-aware of things like the texture of Severus' skin, the light ridges of old scars, the dewy flesh on his lower back, the play of muscle in his shoulders, the individual knobs of his spine. Harry smoothed over all of it reverently, reading Severus' body with his fingers.

He thought it should be weird, being with Severus like this, yet it wasn't weird at all. In some ways, it felt like they'd been doing this for years. Was it because he had got to know the man? Or was it because there had always been this thing – something – in between them?

So far the night had already exceeded Harry's wildest imagination (but not his wildest fantasies…) and he relished the fact that Severus' dark, brooding personality translated to a focused and intense lover in bed.

But quiet.

Harry could see him struggling to remain so, seemingly unwilling to let any emotion or reactions show. He cupped Severus' face with his hands. "It's okay to moan, you know, I won't think less of you for it."

Severus merely stared at him for a moment, then turned his head and sucked one of Harry's fingers into his mouth. Harry gasped, squirming against the body fluidly penetrating his own, and Severus looked satisfied, a little smile on his face – an expression more open and private than anything he'd ever shown before.

Close enough, Harry thought.

He wanted to see more, though, to see Severus unravel when he came, and wondered what else he could do to continue erasing that impenetrable mask from Severus' face.

Experimentally, Harry squeezed himself around Severus, and avidly watched for a reaction. Severus grunted and his eyes shot open, quickly finding Harry and fixing him with a weak glare. Harry chuckled, glad he could call at least one shot while sprawled underneath Severus, being subjected to the most glorious sensations he'd ever experienced.

"Potter, if you do that again, your fun will be over before it has even begun."

Harry chuckled again, this time almost a giggle, unaware that doing so meant he was likely squeezing down on Severus again. In response, Severus grabbed Harry's hips, hard enough to make soft furrows in his skin, and began to pound into him mercilessly.

Harry's grin quickly dissolved, his mouth opening in a silent cry of delight.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry's hands sought out Severus, smoothing up his chest, snaking around his shoulders, beckoning his face closer. When he obliged, Harry attached his lips, moaning into Severus' mouth while trying to hang on through the thrusts that rocked his body. Harry curled his legs around Severus and held
Severus plunged deeper, somehow unable to stop himself and his better sense from taking it slow anymore. Harry didn't seem to be minding either way, his legs tightening around Severus' hips, locking together at the ankle and pulling himself even closer. Instinctively Harry arched his back, pushing himself onto Severus' cock with each in-stroke, his moans growing ever more desperate.

"Ungh… ohgodohgod… don't stop…" he panted near Severus' ear.

Severus reached down between their bodies and palmed Harry's shaft, giving him several swift tugs. That was all it took before Severus' hand was covered in wet heat, Harry's muscles clenching in tune to the pulses, yanking Severus' orgasm from him without warning. Holding tightly to Harry's hips, he buried himself as deep as he could go, milking every ounce of feeling from their coupling, Harry moaning and moving back against him the entire time.

Of course Harry would be an enthusiastic lover; he did everything with gusto.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus woke to an unusual situation: he was not alone in his bed. It was a circumstance that had occurred only a handful of other times in his thirty-eight years.

He was also hard. Achingly hard. It was likely what woke him, he realized.

Rolling his head to the left, he spotted the probable cause of his arousal: Harry Potter was in his bed. Willingly. Had even initiated the interlude, incredible as that still seemed. And asked if he could stay – as much as one can ask as they're falling into a lassitude-induced slumber, anyway.

Severus glanced over at the clock on his nightstand. It was nearing three.

The fire in the hearth had gone down, but Harry's skin still shone golden, the soft, flickering light tickling along every contour of his shoulders and back. He was lying on his stomach, his arms folded underneath his head. The pillow was pushed up against the headboard and his face was turned towards the center of the room, away from Severus. Harry's breathing was even and quiet, reminiscent of a deep sleep.

Sliding the sheet off, Severus admired Harry's naked form: the curve of his buttocks, the play of lean muscle in his back and shoulders, the two dimples above his pelvis that positively begged for a tongue. For a long while Severus resisted the urge to touch him, somehow fearing that doing so would end the mirage.

Severus thought about how many others would love nothing more than to have Harry in this position in their beds, enjoying the taste of his lips, the warm weight of his cock, the firm planes of his flesh. Severus had had that, once so far. And if this was to be his only chance to be with Harry, he wanted to have it again. To touch him, to feel him, to invoke those wicked little sounds he makes. Harry's body was addictive, his pleasure a drug.

Severus made his decision (or rather his body made it for him) and he leaned over Harry, lightly trailing his nose along the sleep-warmed body, the slight tang of sweat and sex and something altogether Harry filling his nostrils. On his second pass, he switched to his mouth, relishing the earthy chemistry on his tongue. He had always loved the taste of a man. (And, as he was quickly discovering, the taste of this young man in particular.)

Draping himself lightly over Harry's body, he let his cock nestle in between Harry's legs. Harry stirred just as Severus leaned forward and nipped lightly at his neck and shoulders, a muffled gasp
escaping as Severus pressed both of their hips into the mattress.

Then Severus leaned off to the side to slide a finger in between Harry's cheeks and found his prone, satiated form still relaxed and pliant. Harry squeaked in a soft, sleepy tone and turned his head, blinking in the scant light. He was still mostly asleep, but was clearly surfacing from the fog of slumber as Severus' finger breached him.

Severus hadn't really asked the question, but Harry answered readily: he pushed back against Severus' hand, making it clear what he wanted Severus to be getting on with. "Yes," came the whispered plea.

Severus almost came untouched.

Reaching over to grab the lube, he slicked up his cock and then mounted Harry, settling himself at the junction of thigh and buttock, his knees to the outside of Harry's hips. He nuded the head of his cock against Harry's entrance and paused as Harry tensed, his fingers drawing the sheets around him into a clutch. He seemed rather awake now.

Severus' hands cupped and kneaded Harry's arse as he slowly pressed in, moving in slow, shallow strokes until he could be sure it was comfortable. He braced himself against Harry's hips and watched his cock disappear and reappear between the smooth, firm globes of Harry's arse. That visual alone was almost more than he could handle, so he shut his eyes to savor the feeling instead. He was not going to last long either way.

Then Harry bucked his hips up in counterpoint, squeezing around Severus' cock, and the last shreds of control were undone. Severus' body grew taut and he buried himself to the hilt, coming deep in Harry's arse, grunting out Harry's name before collapsing forward onto the warm body below him, breathing hard. Below him, Harry merely gave a sleepy grin, trying to look at Severus from over his shoulder.

Once Severus' awareness returned to him, he slowly lifted himself off and then tried to roll Harry over onto his back. Met with an immovable resistance, he slipped a hand underneath Harry instead, circling his fingers around Harry's half-hard cock and giving it an experimental pull. Harry gasped but shifted out of Severus' grasp.

"To'rrow," he slurred, reaching out for Severus' arm and tugging it to indicate Severus should lay down next to him. "Mm'sleep."

Severus gazed down at him even though Harry had already turned his head away. "Soon," he answered, barely above a whisper. "Soon." Leaning back over the half-slumbering form, he let his long, nimble fingers lightly massage the warm flesh of Harry's back. Harry made a quiet, pleased noise, almost a purr, but started to drift off before long. That's when Severus remembered something.

"Harry," he whispered, rocking him gently.

"Mm," came the drowsy response.

"I have not opened your gift yet."

"S'kay…" Harry murmured.

"What did you get me?"

"Can't tell… you open… see…" Harry tried, but faded quicker this time, and was asleep before he had even finished his sentence.
Curiosity had already got the best of Severus so he went into his antechamber in search of the gift. He found it on the floor near the front door. The dance of yellow flames from the fireplace was reflected in the silver paper, and the red bow on top looked a little more squished than when it had been presented, but it was otherwise intact. He thought again about leaving it there until morning, when Harry could present it to him properly, but instead he picked it up and cradled it in his hands for a moment.

*Harry brought me a gift.* That it was such an unusual experience – receiving gifts from others – made him frown. He wondered what Harry had selected for him. The box wasn't big enough for a Quidditch broom, he thought with a snort.

Taking a seat on his sofa, Severus put the gift on his lap and gently pulled the corner of the bow, watching as the velvet unraveled itself. Slipping a finger underneath the taped edge of the paper, Severus tore at it gently until it was unwrapped. The box itself was black and shiny, but otherwise had no visible markings. After a pause, he lifted the lid and peered inside, and let out a small gasp of recognition.

Set amidst some scrunched tissue paper was a delicate arrangement of Pavé du Faubourg. It was the most decadent, dark chocolate ganache, lightly infused with fine, fragrant herbs. It had been Severus' favorite indulgence since he was a child, when he'd traveled to Paris with his mother on one of their rare – if only – trips.

*How in Merlin's name had Harry known?*

Unable to resist, Severus reached in to select one. With his fingers trembling slightly, he pressed his lips around one end and bit off a small portion. The burst of flavor and smooth, rich chocolate trickled over his tongue, and he sighed with a soft moan, closing his eyes. He had so few indulgences in life, but this was one.

Harry was rapidly becoming the second, though Severus knew it would not do to become accustomed to either. Harry was eighteen and craving new experiences, which included exploration of his newfound sexual awakening. It's not that Severus didn't want to believe him, it's just that… he couldn't. His was not the kind of life that was measured by its pleasures, and it would be futile to wish otherwise.

He replaced the lid on the box while he savored the remaining part, licking where it had melted slightly against his fingers.

When he came back to bed, he couldn't resist leaning over and kissing Harry. He hadn't intended on waking him, only to say a silent thank you (and, if he were honest, to steal another kiss while he still could) but Harry stirred at the contact and looked up at Severus blearily.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

"You taste like chocolate," Harry murmured, a tongue running over his lips. Then he froze, blinking, his eyes suddenly going wide. He leaned up on an elbow. "You taste like chocolate! You opened my gift! Do you like them?" he asked eagerly, though his expression was still lax from sleep.

"As if you need to ask."

Harry grinned. "Have you eaten them all yet?"

"Of course not, they must be savored," Severus admonished, looking slightly scandalized. "Eight pieces should last me quite a while."
Harry snorted with a small shake of his head. "Only you. I can get more, you know. Just enjoy them! Actually, go get them, I've been dying to try one."

Severus hesitated, as though reluctant to share, but then went to fetch the box. When he returned, Harry selected a piece with a delicate white criss-crossing pattern across the top. Biting off a corner, Harry let the chocolate ooze over his tongue, the bouquet of flavors following swiftly behind. "Mmm," he murmured. "These are good!" He popped the other part into his mouth and leaned back on the bed, closing his eyes to savor the rich taste, his tongue tracing across his teeth to capture it all. When he opened his eyes again, it was to see Severus watching him, hunger in that dark gaze.

Harry stared back for a moment, then slid his tongue slowly and deliberately across his lips. "Did you want a taste?"

Severus moved so fast Harry barely saw it happen. One moment he was standing next to the bed, the next he was prowling over Harry. He leaned down and captured Harry's mouth in a kiss, his tongue seeming to taste and probe every inch of it. Harry relished the sensation of being consumed in such a way, of sharing Severus' gift with him in such an unexpected manner. He also decided if this was the outcome, he might just have to add these chocolates to his favorites list as well. And order a crate of them next time.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry woke the following morning to a soft light filtering into the room, visible beyond his closed eyes. He knew it was morning but was too content enjoying the warmth and comfort of the bed he was in that he didn't want to spoil it by waking fully. He rolled over and tucked the blankets back underneath his chin, stretching out his legs, a lazy smile on his face.

Then it suddenly occurred to him exactly whose bed he was in and his eyes shot open. Sitting up, he looked around, but the other half of the bed was empty and Severus was nowhere to be seen. Harry couldn't hear anything going on outside the bedroom door, either, and wondered if the man was even in his quarters at all.

Pushing back the duvet, Harry swung his legs around to get up, but yelped when his toes touched the stone floor. Sure enough, there was no fire going in the hearth, so the room was probably back to its typical frigid dungeon temperature. Harry was half-tempted to crawl back under the covers and stay there until Severus came to fetch him, but in the end, his curiosity won out. Where had Severus gone? Was this… it?

Reaching over to grab his glasses, Harry noticed a small, folded note on the nightstand. He picked it up and read the now-familiar scrawl:

Feel free to use the bath if you wish.

Well, that seemed promising. Or at least more promising than being asked to leave in some unceremonious fashion, without even getting to say Good morning, or Thank you, that was the most amazing night of my life.

With a hopeful little kick in his step, Harry padded quickly across the icy floor and into the bathroom.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

The cool, dry air of the dungeons proved to be no deterrent for Harry, who emerged from his hot shower, wrapped a towel around his waist, and braved the jarring temperature to go in search of
Severus. He didn't have to look long – Harry found him in the antechamber, seated at a small, makeshift table. What looked like a full English was laid out before him, and he was sipping coffee.

"There is breakfast here if you wish," Severus said, his attention on a newspaper that lay half-folded in front of him. Something about his voice sounded oddly formal and distant, and Harry frowned.

Was this how it was going to be? An anomaly they'd enjoyed but now it was back to just being friends – or whatever it was they were doing before?

Seeing Severus sitting there in his trousers and button-down shirt, and thinking about what had transpired between them in the last twelve hours, stirred something within Harry (and in more than just his groin). He didn't want to leave yet, but they hadn't discussed what came next. He had no idea what the proper etiquette was, and besides, this was Severus. Those rules probably wouldn't apply anyway.

Still, Harry needed to know. He didn't want this to just be a one-off, a curiosity on both their parts. No one else had ever made him feel like this – in or out of bed. Admittedly, the 'in bed' side of his list was short, but that didn't matter. He wanted to see where this could lead with Severus first.

He knew conversation would be a bad idea; he'd probably say something stupid, muck it all up, and be out on his arse in the hallway – wearing only a towel – before he could even finish his sentence. Instead, he decided to try something Severus might appreciate. Something a little more… Slytherin.

Harry took a few more steps into the room – enough that Severus finally looked up, those obsidian eyes widening as they took in Harry's half-naked form. It seemed Harry had rendered him speechless, at least for the moment. Upping the ante, Harry undid the towel and let it fall to the floor. Even from several paces away, Harry could see the way Severus' throat bobbed. Bolstered by that small success, Harry closed the distance between them and insinuated himself across Severus' lap, straddling those black-clad thighs. Before Severus could say anything, Harry leaned in and kissed him. He tasted of coffee and eggs and… tomatoes? No matter, Harry wanted it all.

Cupping Severus' head, Harry took control. He loved the feel of Severus' hair between his fingers, especially now, when it was still a little wet from the shower, and last night, when it had curtained their faces any time Severus leaned over him. It made Harry feel like there was nothing else in the world except the two of them.

That notion of solitude was short lived, however, when the Floo suddenly went off.

"Severus? Are you there?" It was Minerva. Fortunately, they were seated just outside the range of vision of the fireplace, or she would have got an eyeful.

"Yes, Headmistress?"

"Oh, thank goodness, you are there! I didn't see you at breakfast!"

"I had a bit of a lie-in today. Hardly cause for concern, is it?"

She chuckled. "Of course not. And I should say, good for you! It has always been my failing to look after you, Severus, even though I know you are a grown man and don't need my coddling. I had simply wondered if you would like to share some cider on this fine morning, to ring in the holiday. Shall I come through?"

Harry was unperturbed about the interruption and leaned forward to press his nose to Severus' neck, absently wondering if he would be able to bask in the underlying aroma that was there; the scent that he had come to know as distinctly Severus. It was there, he discovered, but subtle, as though it had
only just started to mature on the skin. Perhaps standing all day above a simmering cauldron cemented it. It was also mixed with the lingering tang of soap Severus used. It smelled good enough to lick.

"I will be finishing up here soon—" Severus coughed as Harry's tongue slid along his neck. "Might I join you in your office instead?"

"Certainly, if that suits you. I shall meet you there, then." She closed the call without waiting for a response.

"Potter…" Severus warned, weak though was its delivery. "You are insatiable."

Harry couldn’t help but press his hips against Severus' abdomen, rejoicing a bit at the fact that he hadn't been thrown out yet; that Severus still seemed to be interested even if he was presently resisting Harry's unsubtle advances. "I think it's just the effect you have on me." He grinned, but it was the truth as far as he knew. Granted he had only had sex with Ginny prior to this, but still – he could not remember ever feeling this way before.

Instead of scratching an itch, being around Severus had only seemed to breed more itches. Harry thought of all the things he could try with Severus, finally getting to experience the stuff in those magazines Fred and George had given him years ago – the ones with the nude wizards fondling their pricks, fondling each other's, penetrating each other, filling every available orifice, their ambitious positions, both with the assistance of magic and without… Harry squirmed at the remembered visuals. At the time he had innocently assumed wizard porn was always about men, but now realized Fred and George may have known something about him that had taken him a while to realize about himself.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

"When did you get so uninhibited?" Severus asked, thinking back to the way Harry walked in, naked except for a towel, followed by the brazen act of dropping it and then situating himself across Severus' lap.

"I didn’t say I'd never done anything, just… not with a man." Harry sat back to look at Severus' face. "Is it a problem?"

_The only 'problem' is that I can't keep my prick buried in you twenty-four hours a day. "Not as such, no."

Frustrated, yet feeling that his body had already started to respond, Severus threaded a hand through Harry's wet hair and pulled back, exposing a shower-damp neck. Severus dove in and began sucking and nipping his teeth along Harry's flesh, especially that spot right behind his ear, which – yes, _there we go_ – caused Harry's hips to wriggle most effectively across Severus' lap.

Not surprisingly, the little incubus was already hard.

Severus couldn’t remember wanting of something – or someone – this much before. Harry had been having this effect on him for some time, this inability to focus and think with reason, but now having tasted of his desire, Harry had become like a drug that had somehow worked his way under Severus' skin – this need to be near him, to pleasure him, it was almost too much to bear. It was sexual chemistry unlike he had ever experienced before, like two ends of a circuit igniting to form an intense and irreversible charge.

However, he’d just promised to go meet Minerva. If he delayed, she’d only check on him again.
Meddling old witch. Reluctantly, he shooed a pouting Harry off his lap, waited for him to dress and hop into the Floo, and then headed upstairs to the Headmistress' office.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

For what felt like the hundredth time, Severus refocused his eyes on Minerva. She was talking about… actually, he had no idea what she was talking about. He was finding it nearly impossible to keep up with the conversation. No matter where he looked or how hard he tried to focus, visuals of his night (and morning) with Harry kept assaulting his mind's eye. It didn't help that everything in Minerva's office seemed to remind him of Harry: the Quidditch broom leaning by the door, the Gryffindor afghan draped over the wingback in the corner, even the bloody book about Scottish Pottery on her desk. He heaved a sigh.

"Severus…?"

"My apologies, Minerva. I am afraid there is something I must attend to. Would you mind reconvening at a later time?"

The Headmistress set down her cup of cider, a concerned look on her face. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, nothing to worry about. I've just remembered something I neglected to do this morning."

"Very well. Shall I owl for you later?"

"That would be fine," Severus answered with a nod. He strode to the fireplace and grabbed a handful of Floo powder. "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place!" he stated as he tossed it in. He found he was wholly unconcerned about stating his destination aloud, about whether or not Minerva might put two and two together, and about what Harry might think of the unannounced visit.

When Severus arrived, Harry was curled up on the divan in the library, flipping through a Quidditch magazine. Startled, he looked up, watching Severus stride out of the fireplace towards him (his eyes widening with each step closer), no doubt taken aback by the look of hunger in Severus' eyes and the way he was being advanced upon like prey. The magazine dropped to the floor, seemingly forgotten.

"Fuck…" Harry breathed.

"That is the general idea, yes," Severus growled.

He grabbed Harry by his t-shirt and dragged him to his feet, instantly thrusting his tongue into that surprised, open mouth. At Harry's whimper, Severus deepened the kiss even more, somehow feeling that even possessing him right now would not be enough.

Hastily, Severus leaned over and swept all the books off the table in the library, deftly lifting Harry and placing him on top of it. With a push, Harry was on his back and Severus had already unbuttoned the denims, pulling them off the lithe frame in an impressively efficient manner. He cursed under his breath at the sight that presented itself: Harry had opted to forgo underwear of any sort and his clearly-interested cock sprang to attention.

Severus all but dove onto him then, capturing the soft glans in his mouth. He swiped a wet tongue through the slit and sucked tightly around the head, causing Harry to arch off the table in a gasp of expletives.

As Severus worked his mouth around Harry's cock, he undid his own trousers and coaxed himself to full hardness. It did not take long.
"Do you have any lube in this Godforsaken house?" he asked, switching to stroke Harry with his hand instead.

"Yea… ye… yes," Harry finally managed. "Bedroom."

With a tidy flick of Severus' wand, an object could be heard banging itself through a doorway somewhere above them and then down the stairs, finally smacking itself into Severus' palm. He moved his wand to Harry's arse and pointed the tip near his entrance, whispering a standard muscle relaxant spell. By the look on Harry's face, he'd felt exactly what Severus had done.

Liberally coating his cock with the clear, viscous gel, Severus stepped closer, pulling Harry towards him by his legs. It had the effect of nearly pushing his cock in without any assistance of his own.

"Driving me to distraction," Severus started, his voice very near a growl.

"Wha—"

"Can't even enjoy my favorite cider—"

Harry gasped as Severus thrust inside, his fingers scrabbling for purchase along the wood surface of the table.

"—without constantly thinking about—" Severus' groin pressed firm against the warm curve of Harry's arse, drawing a soft groan out of him. "—fucking you." Severus leaned down and nipped at Harry's jaw and earlobe, pausing for only a moment. "Am I hurting you?"

"N-n-no…" Harry managed.

"Good. Hold onto me."

Severus quickly found his rhythm, anchoring one hand on Harry's hip and using the other to pull Harry's cock in tune to his thrusts. Harry's grip was going white where he held the table and Severus was sure his own hands were leaving bruises in Harry's skin.

"Oh… oh… oh… oh… ohmygod… Severusssss..." Harry hissed between clenched teeth, dragging out the sibilants until it almost sounded like Parseltongue. Perhaps it was.

Unashamed by how much that turned him on, Severus decided to reward Harry, and canted his hips downward, looking for the correct angle. He felt Harry's reaction more than heard it, the barely-there nails on Harry's fingers scraping broad runnels across his back.

"Ungh! What was… what was that?" he asked between pants.

"Pros—tate," Severus said while switching to smooth, forceful stokes.

It was rough and frantic and uncontrollable and absolutely glorious. Harry screamed his release, pulling at Severus' back, obviously trying to hold them together, closer, seeking more contact as the pleasure soared through him. Severus followed almost immediately, pulsing in tune to the clenches around his cock, the visual of a flush and sweaty Harry with ribbons of come streaked across his chest burning itself into his retinas.

It took some time, but eventually they both regained enough awareness to move, relocating themselves to the worn, patterned divan in the corner. They laid there in silence for a long while, nothing more than a tangle of sweaty limbs and the slow evening of breath.
It was then that Severus knew – knew it as sure as he knew his own name: he was ruined.

Three times with Harry would never be enough. A lifetime might never be enough. Severus had seen Providence and tasted of its forbidden bounty. He knew better than to hang his hat on such fantasy, for Harry was the spoil of kings, not mortals. But, ridiculous fool that he was, Severus had no choice but to follow it, tragic end or not. Down, down, down he fell, into those verdant eyes, into that trusting heart and perfect arse, into the unbelievable rightness of being by Harry's side. Always.

The only thing he could hope for, futile as it may be, was that Harry would be there to catch him as he fell.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

The first thing Severus noted upon waking was that someone had started a fire for them. The room felt cozy and languid, or perhaps that was just the young man curled up in his arms.

Harry chose that moment to yawn and stretch. "Hi," he said. He looked sated and adorably debauched, a lopsided – and almost shy – grin set on his face.

For some reason, the look of awe in Harry's eyes made Severus uncomfortable. He sat up more abruptly than he intended, but then carefully untangled himself and stood. Harry seemed to take that as his cue to go find where his denims had gone off to, and Severus did up his own trousers and tucked his shirt back in. Once they had both righted themselves, Harry walked over to stand in front of Severus.

"Um… would you… I mean, you don't have to if you don't want to, but I was just wondering…"

"We should make lunch."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Kreacher can make us lunch. Kreacher!" he called to the room at large. Within moments, the curmudgeonly old elf appeared in the middle of the library and left soon after, tasked with Harry's instructions.

"I've sort of lost track of the date. What day is it?" Harry asked.

"Friday. Christmas, in fact."

"Oh. Happy Christmas, then." Harry smiled. "So, um…"

"Come, Potter – show me the kitchen," Severus said, before Harry could spit out whatever amorously misguided thing he was undoubtedly preparing to say.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

After lunch, as they sat in the Grimmauld kitchen, Harry held a mug of hot cocoa with both hands, sitting with his knees up before him. He grimaced slightly, sore in places he didn't even realize he had. It was a pleasant ache, but still, he may have to rethink these wooden chairs.

Severus must have seen something on Harry's face, for he finally broke the silence. "What?"

"I didn't know it could be like that."

"Like what?" Severus asked, somewhat guarded.

"I dunno," Harry started, unsure of what he even wanted to say about it. "It wasn't like that with Gin—" He paused. "It was never like that before. Not rough, exactly, but…"
"I believe 'primal' is the word you are searching for."

"Yeah. Primal." Harry scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed, looking down into his mug. "It was really intense. Amazing," he added quickly, just in case Severus would think he hadn't enjoyed it. "I've just never experienced anything like that before."

"I apologize if I hurt you."

Harry looked up. "No, I liked it. More than liked it." He felt his cheeks heat. "In fact, now I think I understand what Hermione meant. She said you and I would be like fire on fire – that we'd be brilliant if we would just…" He bit his lip.

"Fuck?"

Harry let out a nervous chuckle, though his cock twitched at hearing that word from Severus' mouth. "Well, I was going to say get together, but yeah, I suppose that was somewhere in there, too."

"That girl was always far too clever for her own good," Severus said, the faintest sneer ghosting his features, and Harry grinned.

"You're just sour because it means she's usually a step ahead of you!"

He laughed at Severus' scowl.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry put down the fork he had been fiddling with and broke the silence once again. "So, um… would you like to stay the night?"

Severus looked around the kitchen for a brief moment, as though only just remembering they were at Grimmauld Place and not Hogwarts.

"I must return to Hogwarts. My responsibilities to the school are not diminished simply because it is Christmas."

"Oh." Harry let that sink in for a minute, then furrowed his brow. "But it's a holiday. Don't you get any time off?"

"I do," Severus said cryptically. Then he folded his napkin and stood, making his way to the fireplace in the corner. He briefly searched for something before turning to address Harry, agitation evident in his tone. "I do not see your Floo powder."

Harry pointed to a drawer to the left of the iron grate. He watched as Severus extracted a small box, removed the lid, and reached inside to grab a handful of the glittery, silver dust.

"Wait," Harry said suddenly, hopping up and moving over to the fireplace as well. "Is this… are you leaving because of Grimmauld – because it reminds you too much of the war? Or Sirius?"

Severus stared at him for a moment, his gaze mapping Harry's face. There was a certain melancholy behind his eyes that Harry didn't understand. Then, softly, "No."

"So…" Harry took another step forward, sensing he had to grab for what he wanted lest things get left at some indecipherable stage, or worse, dissolve entirely. "Do you mind… can I come back to Hogwarts with you? To stay the night?" The churning and knotting of his stomach was offset only by the pounding of his heart.
By way of an answer, Severus merely placed the box of Floo powder in Harry's hand, arched a brow, and then disappeared in a whirl of green flames.

Harry stood there a moment, watching the empty fireplace, before deciding to take that as a 'yes'.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

After a glass of wine (which Harry discovered he liked much better than scotch) and a surprisingly long and animated discussion that spanned Muggle television shows, House rivalries, and Roman history, Harry watched as Severus left the antechamber for the bedroom. He wasn't sure what tonight's protocol should be. The last time they'd been in Severus' bedroom, it was under decidedly different circumstances. He didn't want Severus to feel like all of their interactions in there had to be about sex, but he figured asking for clarification would just make things awkward. Or was he supposed to sleep on the sofa? Distracted with his line of thought, he didn't even notice Severus standing in the doorway, staring at him.

"Were you still planning to join me?" Severus asked, some of his earlier agitation back.

Harry's head shot up. "Oh. Yeah!" he said, slightly embarrassed at the speed with which he jumped out of his chair. He slowed his pace to something more casual as he walked by Severus and into the bedroom.

Once there, Harry was treated to a cozy and inviting sight: the lamps on either side of the bed were on, the blankets were turned down, and a small fire was crackling quietly beyond the hearth. Harry felt like he was at home, or at least somewhere he'd want to call home, but quickly stamped it down. As much as he may have wanted it, he knew he was getting ahead of himself. This was only his second night with Severus. He still didn't know how things would go, and if the invitation would extend itself to Saturday night, too. Or any other night, for that matter.

When Severus closed himself in the bathroom, Harry took that as his cue to undress. In a fit of optimism, he removed everything. Stashing his clothes on a nearby chair, he slipped naked into bed on the side nearest to the center of the room. It was where he had awoken that morning, so he figured it was a safe bet. Sure enough, once Severus re-emerged (wearing a nightshirt, Harry noted), he slipped into bed on the other side. With the lights still on, the two laid in silence like that for a few minutes, the tension in the room seeming to increase with each second that ticked by.

Finally, Harry said, "Can I kiss you goodnight?"

Severus turned his head to look at Harry and something passed through their gazes – an understanding, a release, a plea. Suddenly, the tension was gone and they were back on familiar ground. Wasting no time, Harry slid across the bed on his stomach, leaned up and settled his lips against Severus'.

They kissed like that for awhile, in long, lazy strokes, each mapping the shape of the other's mouth. Neither of them seemed in a hurry to finish or move on to something else, despite Harry's cock already pressing insistently into the mattress. He paid it no mind. Instead, he thought about Devon and Potter and how they had simply indulged in kissing for kissing's sake. For some reason, that's all Harry wanted this to be, too. But with one modification.

Harry pulled gently at Severus' nightshirt. "Can you take this off? I want to feel you. Just your skin," he added hastily, so Severus wouldn't think he was after more than what they were already doing. To his surprise, Severus pulled it off over his head and let it fall to the floor without comment. Harry grinned.
Prior to yesterday, he had never slept in a bed with anyone, especially not naked, but the feel of warm skin pressing against warm skin was something he was rapidly growing accustomed to – the intimate proximity, the intertwined limbs, even the luxurious black duvet. He didn't want to give any of it up. In fact, he was having a hard time imagining ever going back to his cold, lonely bed at Grimmauld.

He leaned his head down for another drugging kiss, but lifted it again after a short time. "God."

"What?"

"I never thought kissing could be like this. I didn't really like it before. It was okay but it never felt like this."

"Clearly you were kissing the wrong person." Severus' pleasant baritone sent shivers down Harry's spine. It was almost as though he could feel the vibration of it as much as he could hear the sound. If that was what happened to Severus' voice when it was compromised by lust, Harry never wanted him to stop talking.

When he moved to get comfortable again, resting his chest against Severus', he caught a flash of something on the inside of Severus' left arm. Harry knew what it was without having to ask: the Dark Mark. Suddenly curious, he held Severus' arm out and looked his fill, eventually tracing the shape of the Mark with his finger.

Severus obviously found both actions unsettling, for he pulled his arm out of Harry's grasp and folded it tightly against his chest.

"Just let me look, will you?" Harry said, reaching for the arm again. But Severus wouldn't budge. Unfazed, Harry moved further up Severus' body and licked the indent of his throat instead, just below his Adam's apple, before eyeing the jagged scar that ran diagonally up that pale neck. Severus made a little moue of distress when Harry's tongue made contact with it, licking across its ridge.

"They're just scars," Harry said. "Haven't you ever been curious about mine?" He lifted the hair off his forehead to let Severus see his lightning bolt.

"No," Severus said, pushing Harry's hair back down to cover it. "They are things best left to the dregs of history annals and dusty memories, ideally forgotten."

"Why? They're just something that's a part of us now – something we didn't ask for."

"Not quite," Severus muttered, indicating his arm. "I chose this one."

"So? That was a long time ago. How long are you going to beat yourself up over it?" At first Harry worried that he had gone too far, but Severus must have heard the good-natured exasperation in his question, for he responded in kind.

"Probably until I'm old and gray and wrinkled beyond recognition. Well, older and grayer, anyway."

"You're not old and gray!" Harry said, smoothing his hands over Severus' hair. "Or wrinkled." His hands moved to caress the sides of Severus' face. "And anyways, those things would just look distinguished on you."

Severus snorted.

"I'm serious!" Harry affirmed. He looked down into Severus' face, admiring those once-severe features for a moment, then returned his attention to Severus' arm. "This doesn't matter to me. It's a
mark of something that happened in your life, but it isn't who you are."

"How would you know?"

Harry knew the question was intended to sound mysterious, or perhaps menacing, but all he heard was the insecurity behind it. "A Death Eater wouldn't secretly protect me my entire life, or share memories that would give me an advantage in the war, or offer me Esovchi – at least not without adding poison to it first. Besides, the fact that you had to ask the question means you're bluffing, so you can stop trying to scare me away – it's not going to work." He smiled at the glower on Severus' face.

Harry re-situated himself, settling his chin on top of Severus' bent arm. "So, will you let me see it?"

Severus closed his eyes and sighed, but eventually lifted his arm away from his chest. Harry smiled. Grasping it, he leaned forwards and placed a series of soft kisses along the underside, most of them intentionally over the Dark Mark. He could tell it was taking everything in Severus not to jerk his arm away again, but the longer Harry kissed, the more it seemed to smooth the pained expression on Severus' face. Harry guessed this intimacy was something that Severus had never granted another single living person, and something inside of Harry thrilled at that.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Sunlight began streaming through the charmed window of Severus' dungeon quarters, its artificial rays peppering the bed in a soft light. It was Saturday morning, but still early yet. Severus blinked and took a deep breath before rolling onto his side… only to see that Harry was already awake and lying on his side, staring back. Harry's eyes looked luminous in the dim light, but began to darken as they stared at one another. The air prickled between them.

Severus rolled onto his back. "Come here."

Harry edged over to him, looking down into his face with a questioning expression. Severus slid a hand between Harry's thighs and gently pulled one leg up so that it would land astride him on the bed. Harry caught on quickly and straddled himself more comfortably across Severus' abdomen. After propping his head up with another pillow, Severus smirked.

"You will have to slide closer if you expect me to fellate you."

A small gasp escaped from Harry's throat as he realized what Severus intended to do. He inched himself upwards, Severus' arms to the outsides of his thighs, until Harry stopped just short of Severus' chin.

Severus guided one of Harry's hands back to grasp his cock. "Pretend it's your own," he instructed.

"Oh, God," Harry uttered, the arousal evident in his voice.

With two hands cupping Harry's arse, Severus pulled him closer until Harry's cock was pressed against his lips.

"How am I supposed to concentrate while you're doing that?" Harry whined, trying to angle himself for a better grip on his task.

"Not my problem," Severus said, and proceeded to swallow Harry whole. He watched the planes of Harry's belly contract as the air rushed from his lungs, enjoying the exquisitely close view of the body spread across his chest. He once again mapped the shape and texture of Harry's cock as it lay heavy against his tongue, and then laved at the warm, nuzzly texture of his balls.
Harry hissed in pleasure, his eyes pinched shut, but still managed to do an admirable job with his own task, pulling Severus' cock in counterpoint to the ministrations on his own (though Severus would have understood had he not been successful, as fine-tuned attention to one's cock does nothing to improve one's motor skills and concentration). What turned him on most, though, was having Harry in his mouth like this – so willing, so responsive, so exposed. It was a heady feeling.

And unfortunately short lived. After only a scant few minutes, Harry's rhythm stuttered and he froze, sending hot spurts down Severus' throat. Severus licked him clean while he took his own cock in hand, deftly finishing the task he knew Harry would no longer have mind to complete.

Afterwards, Harry lay panting by Severus' side, one arm dangling off the edge of the bed. A sloppy grin stole across his face.

"God, what a way to wake up."

Severus snorted, finding he couldn't agree more. What he did ignore was the lingering pang of dread that had been trying its damnedest to steal his fleeting contentment ever since Harry had first appeared in his quarters on Christmas Eve. He knew he shouldn't have gone down this path, shouldn't have indulged himself, for there was no way he was ever going to be able to go back to the way things were before. And it was too much to hope he wouldn't have to.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

It had been strange spending the day without Harry.

Actually, it had been rather appalling. Appalling how quickly he'd adapted to having Harry in his midst, appalling how acutely he'd felt Harry's absence once he was gone, appalling how much attention he'd been giving the clock since then and why wouldn't the bloody thing just move faster for once?

Severus sighed and, for the fifth time in nearly as many minutes, tried to refocus on the cauldron bubbling away before him. It contained an experimental potion, one he'd slated for the holidays since he had uninterrupted time to work on it – that is, until Harry had shown up two days prior and made quick work of that so-called uninterrupted time.

Not that Severus was complaining… exactly.

He just wasn't used to feeling so off-kilter, though that had been happening a lot ever since Harry had become a regular fixture in his life. Yet this was different. Severus couldn't seem to concentrate, or think about anything else aside from the feel of Harry in his arms, the way he breathed, moved, moaned, smiled; the fabric of his shirt that first night, cotton sateen against smooth, unmarred flesh, the firm body underneath that was so warm, so alive, so eager to experience; the feeling of being the one surrounding him, tasting him, giving him pleasure, keeping him safe.

Severus remembered the undisguised relief on Harry's face just before he'd left that morning, right after they'd had their short but necessary conversation.

"I was afraid you were going to say no, that's why I kept asking. So... I can stay again tonight?"

"Yes." Stay forever.

Severus hoped he hadn't said that last bit out loud, but he may as well have. Harry's expression had lit with such happiness – tinged with a shyness that was most becoming – before hopping into the fireplace and taking all the warmth in the room with him.
He'd gone off to visit the Weasleys, presumably before they sent out a search party for him, since he'd skipped the family's Christmas Eve celebration in favor of spending it with his ex-professor. And not just spending it, but spending it in flagrante delicto. Severus still found himself smirking slightly at that, though he couldn't imagine news of it would have gone over well, had they all known.

Nor with the haughty public. They'd have demanded Severus' head once they'd learned he'd defiled their precious hero. Never mind that Harry was the one who'd instigated it. They wouldn't want to hear how prettily he'd moaned when Severus swallowed his cock, or how he'd begged to be taken, eyes dark and lustful, searching out his Potions Master. No. They, like so many before them, would simply assume the worst: Severus must have put him under some spell, for how could Harry, so desirous and eligible and revered, ever see fit to hold company with a Death Eater, especially one like Severus?

(Admittedly, Severus never could understand what they meant by that. Especially one like him? Clearly they hadn't met many Death Eaters – he had been positively charming by comparison.)

Severus cast a stasis charm on the potion before him, resisting the temptation to levitate it against the wall in a fit of pique. What the fuck was he playing at, taking what Harry offered? It was madness; something that would unquestionably end in the same spectacular fashion as the concoction before him, had he indeed sent it flying. Harry was eighteen, and it was common knowledge eighteen-year-olds only thought with their pricks. How could he possibly be discerning right now, and truly know what he wants or needs?

You were eighteen once, too. It was the year you took the Mark.

Yes, case in point, Severus sneered at himself.

Yet in the end, he knew none of that mattered. Whatever resolve he could muster up in the time Harry was out would simply dissolve the moment Harry came back, for Severus had already gone and opened Pandora's box. And thrown away the lid.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Sure enough, Severus' afternoon mood was shoved to distant memory the minute Harry stepped out of the Floo and into his quarters again, just as he'd known it would. Appalling. No – doubly appalling.

He was actually surprised to see Harry back so soon – he assumed Harry would stay with the Weasleys through dinner, or possibly even late into the evening. Before Severus could remark on it, Harry asked him if he'd like to eat in the Great Hall, saying the Headmistress had extended an invite to them both.

Severus didn't want to think about how she'd known to invite them together; then again, he couldn't honestly pretend it was any great mystery. Minerva was a bright and observant woman. Seeing Harry in the castle when the students were away meant he was probably visiting a member of the staff. And then there was the fact that Severus had abruptly ended his meeting with her the day before and traveled directly to Harry's house. With the Order no longer in place, there wasn't an obvious reason for him to be there. Aside from the one reason, that is: Harry.

Speaking of only thinking with one's prick... Severus sighed. He was starting to feel like he was eighteen himself.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP
Two hours later (and pleasantly full from the delicious Hogwarts meal – the elves always outdid themselves for the few staff and students who remained over the holidays), Severus put down the book he was reading and turned to Harry. They were lying in bed and he'd felt those green eyes on him repeatedly over the last ten minutes.

Harry stared back, and must have understood the cue in Severus' gaze, for he finally voiced whatever it was that had him so distracted. "Can I ask you something… um, personal? Well, it's sort of personal."

Severus met the question with only the arch of an eyebrow and Harry swallowed, seeming to steel himself. "I think by now you are aware I was using your old Potions textbook during my sixth year, right?"

Severus' expression sobered. "Yes."

"Well, my friends thought it was a bad influence on me because of what I did to Draco. And I know that was really stupid, but I… I had got really attached to that book, and to the idea of the—" He paused, clearing his throat quietly. "I didn't want to give it up, but they told me I had to, so we put it in the Room of Requirement." Harry looked at Severus cautiously. "I really wanted to go back and get it, but during the battle, that room sort of went up in flames. I'm sorry."

"Your sentiment is unnecessary, as the book is currently in my possession."

Harry blinked. "What? How is that possible?"

"You are familiar with Accio, are you not?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't make sense. How did you even know it was there? And you can't Accio things from the Room of Requirement, I tried that with Ravenclaw's diadem and it didn't work!"

"And you were the rightful owner of the diadem, were you?"

Harry opened his mouth to speak, then closed it with a snap. His eyebrows drew together. "Well, no. But I've used Accio before to get things that weren't mine."

"Most assuredly you have, though I assume those objects were not property of the Room of Requirement at the time." He watched the realization bloom on Harry's face, and was not disappointed when Harry's eyes widened, his mouth forming the rough approximation of an 'o'.

"Of course!" Harry breathed. "That's all part of the specific magic of the castle, isn't it?"

"Ten points to Gryffindor," Severus deadpanned. "Piss off," Harry said, though a small bark of laughter revealed his amusement. "All this time I've wanted nothing more than for you to have your book back, but I thought it was destroyed. And here I come to find that you've had it the whole time! How did you even know where to find it?"

Severus tapped Harry's forehead with a finger. "You bloody sneak, you read it from my mind, didn't you?"

"Miss Weasley's, actually. During one of her charming oppositions to me as Headmaster."

"Did she know you were doing it? Reading her mind?"

"Doubtful, given that my intrusion lasted only a few seconds. She was brandishing the knowledge so
close to surface of her mind that she may as well have been yelling it at me. It took very little effort to retrieve it."


Reverently, Harry traced a finger over the spine and cover before opening it, perusing its long-familiar pages. Severus leaned closer to him on the bed and looked over his shoulder.

"Be gentle with it. You almost destroyed it once."

"I didn't 'almost destroy' it, it was removed from my possession. And it wasn't me who set the Fiendfyre, that was one of your Slytherins."

"Be that as it may," Severus muttered irritably, "I would appreciate it if you did not paw at my textbook."

Harry closed it with a light snap and moved his arm away so the book was out of Severus' reach. "Or what?"

"Incarcerous."

Without warning, Harry's arms flew above his head and were secured together at the wrist by a silken rope. The abrupt motion caused him to drop the book, which lay on the pillow next to his ear. Somewhat wild-eyed, he looked up at Severus, who had since gently set the book aside and was settling himself over Harry's body, one leg on either side of his hips. One more elegant hand motion and Harry's boxer-briefs were gone, too.

"Wait, that was – you just did that wandless!"

"You are naked and prone, tied to the bed, vulnerable to my every whim – and all you can think of is that it was wandless?"

"Well, yeah." Harry blushed. "Wandless magic is hot." As he tugged at his restraints, they both looked down to see that Harry's cock definitely agreed.

"What do we have here?" Severus murmured, trailing a lone finger down Harry's bare chest. "Seems that Mr. Potter has a kink for bondage."

"I'm not the only one," Harry retorted, letting his eyes sweep Severus' body. "And let's not forget about my tattoo. I've seen how you look at it." He grinned triumphantly.

"Mmm, true. Such a beautiful design, and an even more tempting canvas." Severus smoothed his palms up the sides of Harry's torso, his left hand passing over the phoenix. When his fingers made contact with it, the entire bird rippled and began to coil around his touch. "And so responsive, too." As he stroked his hand around Harry's chest, the phoenix followed him, nearly snake-like in its ability to slither and undulate across all that smooth, golden flesh.

"I wonder…" Severus mused before leaning over and flicking his tongue at the inked feathers, tracing the contours of Harry's abdomen in the process. Harry whimpered and thrust his hips up, but Severus remained purposefully out of reach, watching as the tattoo pulsed a fiery, red-orange glow wherever it was wet under his tongue. "Yes, definitely intriguing," he observed.

Severus mouthed along the head and neck of the bird, his approach unhurried, carefully lavishing his
attention to both flesh and ink alike. Pausing to see the effect it was having, he watched the phoenix pulse again, chasing his fingers down the side of Harry's body, still suffused in that same red-orange glow as though a trail of liquid fire had gone along with it.

Harry gasped and writhed beneath him. "Oh God, what is it do—" but cut himself off when warm, wet heat suddenly engulfed his cock. "Ohfuck! Severus!"

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

"What a decadent life you lead, Mr. Potter. We have not moved from this bed since eight o'clock the evening prior, if memory serves. Are you planning to get up any time today?"

Harry turned the page of his comic without looking up. "I don't exactly see you rushing to get up, and it's your bed."

Severus made a gruff noise and snapped the newspaper back up before him. Harry grinned and leaned over, resting his head against Severus' shoulder.

"What are you reading?" Severus asked.

Harry tilted his head up and then turned the comic so Severus could see the cover. "February Men. George introduced me. It's about a Squib named Bastien Capper, but everyone just calls him Cap. And no one knows he's a Squib except his partner, Valentine Pips, who's a wizard. He's the one who does all the magic so no one will find out about Cap. They're curse breakers, see, so it's their job to save Wizopolis from the evil-doers."

"Valentine?"

"Out of everything I just said, that's what you take out of it?" Harry shook his head, but chuckled in spite of himself. "His real name's Adam, but he goes by Valentine. Or Vale, for short."

"I see. And I presume there is a story behind the nickname?"

"There is."

"But not one I would be interested to know?"

"Probably not." Harry grinned. "Though the best part about this series is that all the action sequences in each issue are animated. And any panels where they kiss."

Severus squinted at the page. "They're gay?"

"Yeah. That's part of the appeal – well, at least for me. But they're also really funny and Cap is brilliant at figuring out puzzles. That's why he does curse breaking even though he can't do magic. And Vale couldn't deduce his way out of a telephone box, but he's amazing at dismantling magical traps." Harry paused, sneaking a glance at Severus. Then, in what he obviously thought was an off-hand manner, added, "They're… good together."

Severus hummed – a distracted sort of noise that was not quite disinterest and not quite confirmation – and went back to his paper, though the letters were so fuzzy and indistinct now that it was merely texture for his thoughts. He felt more than heard Harry's quiet sigh, and waited until Harry went back to his comic before refocusing on the article before him.

A while later, Harry turned to him again, back to his usual chipper self. "Does anyone ever call you 'Sevvie'?" he asked.
"None that would live to admit it."

Harry laughed. "Okay, I'll take that as a 'no'. Don't you have any nicknames?"

Severus lowered his newspaper and turned his head to regard Harry. "Do you find 'Severus' so troubling to remember?"

"No, but I was just thinking if I shouted your name in the heat of passion or something, what I would be allowed to say."

Severus pursed his lips and then folded his paper primly. "If such a circumstance were to occur, you may call me 'sir' or 'master'."

Harry immediately lost himself in a fit of laughter and the conversation only devolved from there, with Severus trying his damnedest to stave off the chuckle that threatened. Curses. He couldn't believe he was actually enjoying himself, having a playful conversation, being moderately domestic, laughing…

Severus almost felt normal, or what he supposed normal ought to feel like. It reminded him once again there was life outside these walls; that there might yet be some purpose to his existence beyond felling Voldemort and absolving his many transgressions. It wasn't that he thought himself a martyr; rather, he'd just never had a compelling reason to consider that other options might be open to him. Until, perhaps, now.

Harry seemed to think they were good together, based on his unsubtle allusion to the men in the comic. But good how? Physically? It was true, the sex was incredible, but that could continue even without the trappings of a romantic entanglement. Yet even as Severus had asked the question, he knew the futility of it. There was no 'how' question to ask because he already knew the answer: Harry thought they were good everything. As someone ruled by his heart, he didn't know how to give except with his whole self. He would also be expecting that in return. And he should have it – he deserved that.

Severus just wasn't sure if he was the right person to give it to him.

Then again, how many others could? It was a rare person indeed who truly understood what it meant to be with Harry; the sacrifices they'd be making to their own personal lives by choosing to be with him.

Luckily for Severus, he didn't care about that, or the other external social endeavors to which most of the world subscribed. He was ideally suited for a life in the background – preferred it, actually – content to remain the protector, buffering the advances of the Wizarding world in regards to Harry's fame (and his own infamy). One might even argue that, having done precisely that job for the last seven years, he was uniquely qualified.

Except being with Harry was not a job. It was a privilege. Which meant the only question Severus really needed to ask was: do I deserve it? Sometimes having options was a precarious thing.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry was really starting to understand the appeal of the dungeons. The temperature was manageable with magic and fireplaces; for the rest, it felt like a safe, protected bubble where the rest of the world couldn't intrude: quiet, peaceful and secluded. Or maybe that was just anywhere Severus was.

"I can't believe it's already Sunday," Harry lamented. "I mean, I know the students are still on
holiday for another week, but you said you need that time to prepare the second term, so it just feels like…” He trailed off. "Anyway, I wish the weekend could go on for longer, that's all. Can we stay in today?"

"Potter, we have scarcely left my quarters as it is."

"I know, it's just…” I'm afraid if I leave, I'll break whatever spell this is; that reality will re-emerge and you'll change your mind. I don't want to risk it.

Harry was charmed when Severus sat down across from him and unpacked the chess board, just like they used to do while sharing a room at St. Mungo's. It didn't end up being a long distraction, though – it only took seventeen moves for Severus to win.

"I see your chess skills have not improved."

"No, I'm still as hopeless as ever," Harry agreed with a grin. "You'll have to play Ron sometime if you ever want a proper opponent." He folded up the board and then poked a bishop, two pawns and a rook so they'd get back into their fitted slots. They grumbled slightly, but eventually settled in, and Harry closed the box. He turned back to Severus.

"What did you usually do on Sundays before you started helping me?"

"Graded essays."

"Oh, that sounds exciting. Live a little. Let's do my version of a Sunday."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Dare I ask what stimulating and juvenile activities that might entail?"

"Hey, don't knock it until you've tried it!" Harry grinned. "I, um, eat pizza and ice cream and watch old films."

"Potter, how you are not laid up in hospital with any number of dietary-related conditions is beyond me," Severus remarked, to which Harry let out an amused snort.

"I'm eighteen, remember?"

Indeed, that was one of the things Severus constantly forgot about his young paramour, for even during his Hogwarts years, Harry always seemed so separate from his contemporaries. Then again, he had seen and experienced things that most adults could scarcely have imagined, let alone other students. "Very well. Assuming I agree to this, exactly how do you propose we conduct these charming activities?"

"Leave it to me." Harry's grin curled into a smirk as he hopped into the Floo and was whisked out of sight by a brief roar of green flames. Severus could only sit there, shaking his head, wondering what he'd got himself into this time.

When Harry returned some forty minutes later, arms laden with food and entertainment, the light behind his eyes was as bright as Severus had ever seen it. He remembered thinking he'd do whatever he could to keep that there, too, so if it meant indulging Harry in a little Muggle therapy, he would make every effort to enjoy the ridiculous endeavor.

That he ended up having one of the best days of his life – a fact which continued to occupy his thoughts, even days later – was completely beside the point.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP
Harry's eyelids drooped and he smiled slightly. "Can I stay until morning?" he asked through a yawn, curling up against Severus. They had just enjoyed a particularly athletic bout of sex and, as seemed Harry's habit, he started to fall asleep almost immediately. "Want to… stay…"

Severus gently brushed the hair off Harry's forehead, admiring the beautiful, sated face, his heart feeling more at peace than he could remember in recent years, perhaps ever. It had been the most amazing four days of his life and he wished it never to end. But, Christmas or not, and despite Harry's continual requests to stay, he refused to indulge thoughts of where it might go.

He had already been weak giving in to his desires, in saying yes, in spending that time with Harry as though they were an item, partners, more than just two friends. And doing what, taking the edge off? Seeking physical comfort in one another? Making the holidays a little less lonely?

In seven days, the students would return from their holiday break to start the new term. Then what? Severus would be back to teaching classes, deducting House points and grading insufferable essays, but what would happen when Harry went home? Should they talk about what happened this weekend? Or about what's next? Was there even a next? Severus was ill-suited for this type of conversation, and wasn't keen to conduct one with Harry, of all people.

There were times Severus wasn't sure his weary, inexperienced heart was up to the challenge of being with Harry; other times Severus knew it would simply wither away to nothing without him. He'd been right: nothing had ever prepared him to deal with Harry, but he supposed if he were allowed to, he'd be happy spending the rest of his life trying to figure it out.

Severus gently rubbed his thumb over that infamous scar, thinking he now understood what Harry had been on about. They were just marks on skin. That little lightning bolt, symbolic though it may be to others, didn't define who Harry was, or what was possible for him. It didn't limit him any more than the various marks and scars adorning Severus' body should for his own life.

The fact was, his involvement with the Dark Lord – that delicate precipice he had danced upon for so many years – had eventually revealed itself to be a crucial and highly valuable role. One that had made all the difference in the end, especially for Harry. From that perspective alone, how could he ever consider his decision to become a Death Eater a mistake? Choices weren't always easy, and they were rarely without sacrifice, but it was what it was. It was war.

Laying down on his side, Severus moved in close behind Harry and curled around his back. He ignored the way Harry snuggled back against him – he was asleep, it didn't mean anything. It's just what people did when you wrapped your arms around them.

Severus laid like that a long time – minutes, perhaps hours – refusing his body the sleep it was so desperately trying to take from him. Somewhere inside his mind, a small voice kept chiding him: It's just a dream! You'll wake up tomorrow and you'll find it was all just a dream.

Instinctively, he clutched Harry tighter. It felt real, but then didn't the best dreams always feel that way?

When his eyelids began to droop mercilessly, sleep finally overruling him, he briefly considered a Pepper-Up potion before deciding to just succumb to the slumber. He would have to sleep eventually; perhaps it was best to get the disappointment out of the way now.

Tucking his head close to Harry's, Severus buried his nose in the soft nest of raven hair and inhaled the scent, committing it to memory for all time. If this was only to be real for this moment, then so be it. At least he would have the memory.
"Harry," he whispered, his benediction, his plea, his hope.

Reaching down for the bedding, Severus indulged a final whim and let his hand trail down the side of Harry's body, enjoying the way the phoenix fluttered at his touch. It wasn't until he was pulling the duvet up over them that he noticed the tattoo had moved to the front of Harry's chest.

Surprised, Severus leaned over the sleeping form beside him and watched as it began circling the area over Harry's heart. Gradually, the crease between Harry’s brows relaxed and a tiny smile appeared on his lips, though he did not otherwise stir. Around and around the phoenix went, slowly and with mesmerizing fluidity, until Severus could resist no more and pressed his hand over Harry's heart. The bird stopped moving instantly and opened its wings in a majestic arc, framing Severus' hand, the entire thing infused with the glow of a familiar, indigo hue.

And wasn't that a curious thing.
It had been two days since Harry had last seen or heard from Severus. Two days since he'd woken up in that large, warm bed, his arms and legs curled around a long, lean body. Two days since he'd dressed from their incredible weekend together and left through the Floo, Severus' shuttered expression haunting his mind's eye ever since.

He knew Severus had requested the time to prepare for second term, but why did that mean Harry couldn't stay with him at night – at least while the students were still on break? He missed the conversations and the reading in bed and taking meals together and waking up with someone beside him. And, yes, he missed the sex, too. But mainly he missed the company; he missed Severus.

Harry rolled over in bed and sighed. He already wasn't sleeping well, unable to stop wondering when or if he should make contact. Then again, Severus hadn't instigated their interaction the first time, so how likely was it he'd do so this time? In retrospect, perhaps it had been foolhardy to get so attached to the man. Sure, they had been getting along for months now, but Harry never imagined it would extend to the bedroom, or even to the simple joys of domestic companionship. Who would've guessed they even had this compatibility together?

Harry had also been wanking a lot, trying to take the edge off the flow of desire that hit him whenever visuals of their weekend assaulted his memory. Which, unfortunately, was most of the time. (He was afraid if he wanked much more, he'd rub it clean off.) He'd even turned down a request to meet up with Ron and Hermione, saying he was busy but that he'd catch up with them later. Harry scoffed. *Busy.* If busy meant obsessing and thinking and reliving, then yes, he was busy. He just wasn't ready to talk about this with his friends yet – not until he had any clue if there was even something to talk about. All he knew was that Severus had awoken something within him, and whatever it was, it was refusing to be unheard, unfelt, unseen.

But a relationship was an entirely different thing than seeking pleasure in one another. Maybe it hadn't meant the same thing to Severus as it did to Harry? Was it possible Severus had just used the circumstances to satisfy his own urges? Somehow Harry didn't think so. Severus was the least impulsive person he knew, and didn't act until he had every conceivable aspect of a situation anticipated: the risks minimized, the odds calculated, any and all protections put into place.

If anything, it was probably that Severus thought things were moving too fast. It would certainly explain why he'd pulled back and not contacted Harry since they'd parted Monday morning. He definitely seemed the type to throw himself into his work when he didn't want to deal with something in the harsh light of day, where emotions could crowd in on him.

Harry snorted. What was he thinking, wanting to get involved with Severus Snape – easily the most guarded, suspicious and challenging person he'd ever met?

*That is exactly why,* his inner voice reminded him.

And it was true. It was what had attracted Harry to him in the first place. Life would never be boring with Severus and there was a certain security to that knowledge. There was just a certain security to Severus, period. Harry also liked how alive he felt around the man – being challenged and pushed, and made to try and do and strive.

When he was a student he used to hate that, but back then he'd assumed the censure was done to single him out or belittle him in some way. Now, after getting to know the man, Harry saw the other layers he'd missed before. It was never just as straightforward as trying to get Harry to hate him – that
was far too simple a motivation. Severus could've just ignored Harry completely, or favored Slytherins without antagonizing him, or acted cold and distant – any of those things would have yielded the same result: distaste for the man.

No. Instead, his Professor embarked upon the kind of personalized goading that ultimately gave Harry thicker skin, made him tougher and stronger and…

More prepared.

Harry almost laughed. Even back then, Severus was protecting him – albeit in his own way. Severus had *always* protected him, and Harry knew now he always would.

Yet Harry wasn't about to let Severus do all the work, for it was really the give and take between them that he anticipated most – an invigorating clash of fortitude and stubbornness; a grand tug-of-war where each person pitted their strengths against the other's: the brilliant and cunning strategist versus the resilient and nurturing crusader.

Together, they really *were* a potent combination, Harry realized. One he couldn't imagine ever giving up, now that he'd had a taste of what might be possible.

A quiet knock sounded at his door and Harry's heart skipped a beat. He kicked the sheets off his bed and hurried to the door, but had barely got it open when he nearly collided with Kreacher.

"Master is receiving post from the Muggles," the elf intoned, holding up a plain, brown box.

"What?" Harry grabbed it, wondering why on earth the Dursleys would be sending him anything. He certainly didn't need any broken coat hangers or used socks. In fact, he hadn't even heard from them since they'd been relocated during the war, so how would they even have his address?

Curious – if not a bit suspicious – Harry inspected the box more closely, using his wand to test for possible hexes. When it came up clear, he gave the label a closer look. In small print he hadn't noticed before (indeed, it may have been his wand that revealed it), it indicated the sender was 'S. Prince' at an unfamiliar address in London.

A flutter of nerves and excitement stirred Harry's stomach. *Was this from Severus?* "Why didn't he just Owl it?" Harry wondered aloud, but Kreacher had already turned to shuffle off, a bored shrug his only reply.

Harry sat back down on his bed and immediately tore open the box. Inside was a smaller box, this one long and narrow and dark green. There, stamped in gold foil along the top, read *Harrods*. Even for as sheltered and non-fashion-minded as Harry was, even *he* had heard of Harrods.

Was this a message from Severus? Did Severus miss Harry as much as Harry missed him? Already halfway down his rose-lined path of hopeful thoughts, Harry had to force himself to stop his romanticizing. This was probably just a belated Christmas present – a mark of proper etiquette, too, given Harry had presented Severus with one.

Setting the box top aside, Harry pulled back the tissue. Inside was the softest scarf he'd ever felt (a lambswool/cashmere blend, the tag said) in striped tones of slate blue, plum and dark gray. He thought it would look really sharp with his formal winter cloak, as well as the black peacoat he usually favored.

He unfolded the small piece of parchment and read the simple note:

*Just looking after your interests.*
Harry let out a delighted sort of laugh, remembering their conversation about this barely two weeks ago. *You always have,* he thought more seriously. He couldn't recall ever mentioning to Severus that he hated the cold weather, though…

Slipping the scarf out of the box, Harry put it around his shoulders, looping one end around his neck. It seemed to warm him instantly and he found himself fingerling the material again, wondering if perhaps Severus had put a charm on it.

When he found he still had it on hours later – despite being indoors the whole time – he convinced himself it was only because he had forgotten to take it off.

By nighttime, Harry couldn't stand it anymore. It was just past eleven and he had already been lying in bed staring at the ceiling for almost an hour, despite being exhausted from his previous two nights of fitful sleep. He'd been right: his bed *was* cold and lonely without Severus. They had just spent a little over three days together, scarcely leaving the other's side, and now the two days since had seemed like two weeks. Harry felt Severus' absence so keenly it was like he'd loaned out a limb to someone and they'd not had the courtesy to give it back yet.

Harry got out of bed and walked over to his Floo, not even bothering to put something on over his t-shirt and pajama bottoms. When he emerged at his destination, the room was dark. The only light he saw was a soft yellow glow coming from the bedroom door, which was almost closed. Within moments, Severus appeared in the doorway, squinting into the dark at his intruder. He didn't seem at all surprised to see Harry standing in his antechamber.

"I can't sleep," Harry said, rather lamely.

Severus looked at Harry for what seemed like an hour, but was probably only a few seconds. Harry could see he was wearing his nightshirt and was likely on his way to bed himself. Harry felt immediately out of place.

"Sorry, I shouldn't be bugging you. I'll go." He had almost turned back to the fireplace when he saw Severus open the bedroom door wide, then walk out of view towards his side of the bed. Harry stood there a moment, blinking, before his relief spurred him into action. For even though Severus hadn't said a word, the invitation was clear.

Harry woke up the following morning – Thursday, if his internal calendar was on track – alone in bed again. This didn't surprise him, nor did it unduly upset him. He knew Severus was going to be working this week, and he was fine with that as long as it meant they could be together at night. At least he hoped that's what being back in Severus' quarters meant. Getting up, he used the loo quick, donned the robe he found hanging on the back of the bathroom door, and went in search of Severus. He didn't have to look long.

Harry poked his head around the door to the lab, which stood slightly ajar. "Morning," he said quietly, smiling at the scene before him.

Severus had looked up briefly at the intrusion but did not seem to mind. He was chopping some plant-like ingredient with the speed and efficiency of a trained chef, then using the blade of his knife to scoop the pieces into a small bowl.
"I didn't get a chance to tell you this last night, but thank you for the scarf," Harry said. "I love it."

Severus gave a slight incline of his head. "You are welcome. I might say the same thing about my chocolates."

Their gazes met briefly and Harry flushed. Then Severus turned back to his work, adding some sort of blue, pulverized powder to the largest of the four cauldrons in front of him and stirring it clockwise three times, before sprinkling in some of the plant pieces he had just cut up, the mixture changing from a sickly yellow to a dull gold.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Harry asked, coming further into the room.

"No," Severus said, counting out what looked like twelve beetle eyes and scooping them into the littlest cauldron. "But you may watch." He stirred it to combine the ingredients. "Silently."

Harry laughed, but was relieved that he would be able to stay all the same. He pulled out a stool and sat, becoming almost instantly distracted by those long-fingered hands at work. They moved so gracefully, a mesmerizing dance of economy and precision, ingredients and tools, timing and technique.

Harry could barely handle one cauldron at a time, let alone four, and Severus was moving amongst them effortlessly, chopping here, stirring there, attending to each one's needs simultaneously. Harry would have needed three extra arms for all that, and maybe another set of eyes. But he supposed that's what it looked like when a Master was at work. He'd never really had cause to see it before, as his professor had never worked in front of the class like this, only stalked around them all like a disapproving vulture, looking for his next kill, or perhaps just ways to take points.

After several minutes of observing, Harry leaned closer to the worktable, nodding at the cauldron closest to him. "Volubilis, right?"

Severus gave a distracted nod.

"I could tell because of how you prepared the mint. The sprigs have to be minced, not chopped." Severus' eyes snapped up in surprise, but Harry just shrugged with an impish smile. The potion had been one of Harry's favorites, memorably annotated as it had been in the Prince's book. He also knew that adding in the stems along with the leaves increased the duration of the potion's effect, and told Severus as much.

"My, my, it seems something of my teaching did manage to stick in that head of yours after all."

Harry grinned, hearing the good-natured sarcasm in Severus' voice. "Sort of. It was from your Potions textbook, actually. Your notes were, er, really good. Slughorn thought I was a genius."

Severus snorted. "And you saw no reason to disabuse him of this notion?"

"Of course not," Harry said with a laugh. "It was the first time I'd ever done well in Potions and it was actually kinda fun. Besides, Hermione was nearly going spare trying to figure out how I was doing it. That book saved my arse – I wasn't about to give it up."

Severus looked approving, one eyebrow arched. "You would have made a worthy Slytherin, I daresay."

Harry smiled slightly, looking down at his feet as he bounced them against the legs of his stool. "The Hat wanted to put me there, you know."
"And you did not see fit to accept that choice?" Severus said, a slight edge to his voice, causing Harry to look up again.

"Not once I'd learned it was the House Voldemort was in, and that it'd turned out more evil wizards than all of the other Houses combined. I begged the Hat to put me somewhere else — anywhere else — and it chose Gryffindor."

Severus hummed, still looking a little annoyed, but his features eventually relaxed. "I suppose that was probably for the best. It would have been more difficult to maintain my pretense if I'd had you underfoot all the time."

Harry grinned. "Is that some back-handed Slytherin way of saying you'd've liked me sooner if I'd been in your House?"

"Have a high opinion of yourself, do you?"

"Do you always have to go and spoil my fun?"

Severus smirked before turning back to his work, siphoning off one of the cooled potions into a series of empty vials. Once corked and labeled, he turned to the other cauldrons, putting lids on two of them, and then in the last, added two more ingredients: something small and wiggly followed by a dry, brown leaf. Severus watched until both items had dissolved into the mixture and then put a lid on that one, too.

Moving to the table behind him, Severus picked up his quill and leaned over a journal that had been laid open on the marred wood surface, marking down some notes.

Harry couldn't help but let his eyes trail down that slender body to the slim hips and pert backside, sheathed as they were in black trousers. He thought it was probably a good thing Severus had worn robes while being a teacher, something much more voluminous and loose-fitting, or he may have found himself appreciating the view much sooner. Slipping off his stool, Harry approached slowly, his fingers itching to touch, to be closer to this man.

"I wanted to thank you for the scarf," Harry said.

Severus stood up straight and turned. "I believe you already did."

"No, I mean… properly." Harry let his gaze sweep Severus' body appreciatively.

"Clumsy, Mr. Potter."

But Harry just laughed. He knew he was crap at seduction, or even flirting, having never really done either before, or at least not done them well.

"I can't help it, I just want—I just want to touch you…" He trailed off, pressing a palm tentatively against the front of Severus' trousers, satisfied to hear the hitch in Severus' breathing. When his touch wasn't refused, he slid down the zip, opened the placket and insinuated a hand inside, surprising himself at his own brazenness.
Severus just stood there, frozen, as though he was waiting to see what Harry was going to do while knowing full well exactly what Harry was going to do.

By the time Harry had pulled Severus' trousers and boxers down, he could see Severus was already half-hard. Harry grinned. Severus would never be able to talk his way out of this one now, not when the proof of his interest was staring Harry in the face.

It occurred to Harry that in all their weekend together, he had not really done anything for Severus – especially not this, something so quintessentially male, something Severus had already done for Harry multiple times.

_Time to fix that_, Harry thought. Then he amended that thought in his head, realizing it wasn't about evening up some score, but rather about wanting to bring Severus pleasure. He wanted Severus to feel what he, Harry, had felt.

Sinking to his knees, Harry took hold of Severus' bare hips and leaned in. He started by licking around the head of Severus' cock, his tongue trailing every curve of the top and underside, mapping out what pleasure Severus enjoyed. Then he took Severus in as far as he could go, burying his nose in the dark patch of fur at its base and inhaling the earthy musk, relishing the weight of that warm, velvety cock in his mouth. He felt himself grow hard in response, unencumbered as it was by the simple robe he wore, and began to suck with enthusiasm, guiding his untutored actions by what others had done for him that he'd liked.

Chancing a glance upwards, Harry saw Severus was leaning slightly against the worktable behind him, his fingers curled so tightly around the top that his knuckles were turning white. But it was really the look on Severus' face that got Harry going. Those usually sharp features were twisted into something so blissful it almost resembled agony. Harry loved that he was responsible for that look; that his mouth could be a vessel, a gateway, to bring about that sort of pleasure in another – particularly when Harry licked just… there. The answering gasp from somewhere above him made him smirk around the flesh filling his mouth.

Before long, fingers curled around Harry's shoulder, at first trying to push him away, and then when it was clear Harry wasn't going to budge, a tightening grasp told Harry the man was close.

Severus' orgasm still came as a bit of a shock, but only because Harry was so engrossed in what he was doing. He began to swallow as soon as he felt the warm, bitter fluid hit the back of his throat, determined not to spill a drop (he figured Severus would have his hide for making a mess in his lab). Harry kept licking and suckling until Severus reached down and hauled him to his feet. Before he could protest, Severus captured his lips in a demanding kiss, his tongue probing Harry's mouth as though seeking out the taste of himself, his appreciation clear in the low, satisfied moans he was making. Harry thought it was probably the hottest thing he'd ever experienced.

_SSHP-SSHP-SSHP_

After pulling the zip back up on Severus' trousers, Harry grasped the man's hands and beckoned him to follow. Something in Harry's expression must have convinced him, for he allowed Harry to pull him out of the lab and into the antechamber, where Harry urged him to sit on the sofa. He poured a drink for Severus from the decanter on the sideboard and then flopped down next to him, earning him a weak glare for his troubles (even post-orgasmic, the man clearly didn't appreciate being jostled about).

Severus settled into a relaxed slump, his head back and his eyes closed – a far cry from his usual formal posture. Harry used the opportunity to press the heel of his palm against his groin, trying to will his erection away, but it did no good. Instead, he shifted in his seat so he could cross one leg.
over the other, hoping that would hide it sufficiently. Perhaps it hadn't been a good idea to don
Severus' robe earlier – it didn't cover much. He just didn't want to spoil what he'd done by making
Severus feel like reciprocating was a condition of it. Instead, Harry cast about for a change of topic,
one that would shift his thoughts completely, or at least shift them *upwards*. He considered several
topics until a curious one floated to the top. He had no idea what reminded him of it, but he realized
he'd been wondering about it for ages.

"You never told me what you did in your Evochi sessions."

If Severus seemed surprised by the statement, he didn't show it. He merely opened his eyes and
stared at the glass tumbler he was balancing on his knee. "No. Doing so would have revealed things
about me I did not wish to divulge."

Harry nodded, having half expected that answer. "So, do you still wish to, er, *not* divulge them?"
Severus looked confused, likely at Harry's convoluted question, and took another long drink from his
scotch. Harry forged ahead cautiously. "You said it wasn't my mum, so I just wondered… was it…
me?"

"No."

"Oh," said Harry, trying not to feel disappointed. Even though he knew he shouldn't, he couldn't
help sifting through what he remembered of Severus' memories, trying to figure out what or who the
sessions could have been about. The memory of Severus and Lily as kids struck him even though
Severus had already said they weren't about her. And certainly not about Petunia – dear Merlin.
Eventually he decided to let it go, sensing he wasn't going to get an answer to the question anyway.
But it did bring to mind something else: Severus must have lived by the Evans' in his youth, since the
park where they'd first met was near his mum's house.

Harry refocused on Severus' antechamber then, looking around with interest. In some ways it was as
though he was seeing it again for the first time. He wondered if Severus went anywhere over the
summer holidays or if he stayed at Hogwarts. Did he have someplace he called home outside of these
quarters?

"Your house in Spinner's End, was that your childhood home?"

Severus looked over, a crease between his brows. "Yes." He seemed to be holding back the 'Why?'
with some effort.

"Where is it located?"

"Cokeworth."

Harry sat for a moment, processing the information. "So my mum grew up in Cokeworth," he said,
mostly to himself. "And so did you."

"This is the first time you have thought about this?" Severus asked.

"Well, yeah, I guess. The only house I knew of was the one in Godric's Hollow, so it just seems
weird."

"What does?"

"That you knew my mum when she was young." At Severus' increasingly agitated look, Harry
clarified. "It's hard to explain, but there's times when you're just my friend, or mentor, or... lover," he
said hesitantly. "And other times you were my teacher and a Death Eater and the one who told
Voldemort about the prophecy. I dunno, sometimes it's hard to reconcile those are all the same person."

Severus took another drink, the hint of a sneer on his face. "I see. So who am I now, if not all those things?"

Harry regarded him closely for a moment, then gave a small, one-shouldered shrug. "Now you're just Severus – a man with a past that no longer matters and a future open in front of him, same as me."

"Same as you," Severus muttered, shaking his head. His eyes were downcast for a moment, his lips pursed. Then he set his tumbler on the coffee table, stood, and walked into his bedroom without saying another word.

Harry blinked, his heart beating sharply inside his chest. What had just happened? What had he said? He quickly ran through their conversation in his mind, trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong. Was Severus' youth still a sore subject for him? Was Voldemort? Unsure of what to do next, Harry remained on the sofa, watching the flames flicker and jump in the fireplace, the bright oranges and whites searing his retinas until he couldn't focus anymore.

Finally, when he felt he'd given Severus enough time, he got up and walked to the bedroom door. With a gentle push, he eased it open far enough to see that Severus was sitting on the edge of the bed, his head bowed and hair curtaining his face.

"I'm sorry if I said something stupid, I didn't mean to upset you," Harry said quietly.

The silence stretched between them for a minute, with Harry standing awkwardly by the door, when Severus spoke.

"I am unaccustomed to sharing my life with others. In fact, 'unaccustomed' may be a rather generous word. There is no need for you to apologize, I understand your curiosity."

Harry closed the door to the bedroom with a soft click and then moved to sit next to Severus on the bed. He stayed within arm's reach but not touching, wanting to give Severus the space if he needed it. They remained like that for a while, in silence, until Harry wondered if perhaps this wasn't the right time at all.

"You don't have to talk about this if you don't want to," he said.

Harry could hear Severus inhale and then let it out quickly. He raised his head.

"The last time I loved someone, I lost him. You never met him, but you knew his brother."

Harry stared at Severus for only a moment before the name came to mind. "Regulus," he breathed, more out of some sense memory than conscious thought. "You loved Regulus Black."

"Yes," Severus said.

"And that's why you hate Sirius so much, isn't it?" Harry continued, suddenly understanding. "He must have found out about you two somehow." Several things began fitting together in Harry's mind. He knew there'd been more to the animosity than what he'd seen in Severus' memories. "What did he do?"

"Got their mother involved. Despite not being a proponent of the family's pureblood ideology, Sirius still did not want a 'dirty half-blood' like me tainting his brother, and offered news of our relationship as a bargaining chip to reinstate his own good graces. After that, Regulus and I were no longer
allowed to see each other – something they enforced with a loathsome bit of restraint magic. That's when Regulus made it his mission to end the blood purity mania, and set out to destroy the Dark Lord alone."

Harry sighed with a frown. "I know. I'm sorry he wasn't successful."

Severus' head snapped up. "What do you mean you 'know'?"

Harry started. "Well, only because of the note he left behind when he stole Voldemort's locket. It was a Horcrux. I didn't know who he was to you, though."

Severus' brow furrowed, as though he was trying to work out all that Harry had said. Perhaps Severus didn't know about the Horcruxes, or the locket, or the manner in which Regulus had died. Harry assumed he'd been overtaken by the Inferi after ingesting too much of whatever potion Dumbledore had also been made to drink. A potion that had likely been made by Severus in service to the Dark Lord, though Harry doubted he knew what its intended use would be, or that it would one day poison his lover's mind – and later, his mentor's.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, though which part of it he was sorry about, he wasn't sure. Maybe all of it. It was just hard getting his head around the fact that Sirius had effectively destroyed Severus' relationship. "I can't believe he did that," Harry said, knowing Severus would get which 'he' he was referring to.

"You knew a different Sirius. Eleven years in Azkaban will change a man."

Severus looked down at the floor and sighed again. "The war against the Dark Lord claimed everyone I cared about: my mother, Regulus, Lily, Albus."

"Except me."

Severus turned to look at Harry, their eyes meeting, and Harry gave him a soft smile. "Right? The war didn't claim me. Or you. There must be a reason for that."

"Yes," Severus said. "Sheer dumb luck."

Harry let out a bark of laughter, though it was really just a marker of his tension, not his amusement. Severus brushed his fingers across the top of where Harry's hand was pressed into the duvet. "Forgive me if I do not seem eager to rush in, Potter. I do not have the best track record."

Harry frowned at the use of his surname. He knew by now that whenever that came out, Severus was using it to distance himself from his emotional discomfort; from Harry – which, as Harry was rapidly discovering, were often one and the same. Hoping to halt that retreat, Harry threaded his fingers through Severus' and squeezed, holding on tight.

Severus looked at their joined hands, his jaw clenching, then turned away. "What are you doing with me?"

"Sorry?" Harry asked.

Severus sighed. "Why are you wasting yourself on me? It would be more prudent for you to go out and find yourself a suitable partner – someone younger and…" He stopped short but Harry could guess at what he left unsaid: handsome, unsullied, befitting of a Savior. It was all rubbish as far as Harry was concerned, and he felt a flicker of an old anger ignite within his chest.
"When are you going to believe me when I say I want to be here? That I choose you?"

"It is not much of a choice when I am the only one you have be around in months. My proximity alone is—"

"—If you so much as utter the word 'convenient' again," Harry said through gritted teeth, "so help me God, I will hex you into next week."

But Severus just continued as though he hadn't heard. "You have not explored beyond the boundaries of Britain yet, to see what the world holds, what your options are…"

Exasperated, Harry turned his body to face Severus properly. "So what, do I need to go shag my way across Europe and then come back in order to convince you that you're the one I want to be with?"

"But how do you know?" Severus snapped. "You haven't been with anyone else!"

Harry bristled a bit at this, knowing he had been with someone else – Ginny – but didn't argue the point because he figured Severus was only referring to men. And a blow job from Charlie didn't count, if for no other reason than he knew he and Charlie were not relationship material.

Harry sat back, his chest tightening as though being slowly squeezed. "You're right, I haven't been with another man, but sex is not the only marker of a relationship, Severus. And maybe there is someone else out there I could be compatible with." When Severus turned to stare at him, his expression a mixture of hurt and shock, Harry felt his anger abate slightly. "Is that what you want? To send me away in search of someone else so I can get more experience first?"

Severus looked away again, his expression pained. "I have been foolish to indulge myself this way," he muttered, mostly under his breath. Before Harry could respond – and Harry had plenty to say, for he had been going over and over this part in his head, ready for just such a refusal – Severus got up, gave his wand an agitated flick, and sat down at the piano bench once it had emerged from its cupboard in the wall.

The music started without preamble, and despite no further indication of Severus' feelings on his face, the song was telling, and Harry belatedly realized this was one of the ways in which Severus communicated. The melody was stirring, both triumphant and melancholy, and it seemed that Severus was playing the keys harder than was absolutely necessary. Maybe the song required it? Harry didn't know. Watching for a moment, Harry felt something shiver down his spine: a feeling, a hunch, and instantly he knew why Severus was playing this particular song.

Harry moved over to the edge of the piano and leaned against it, putting his weight on his forearms. He listened for a bit longer, enough to confirm his suspicion. Yes, he was sure of it.

Severus was afraid of being happy.

Up until now, it had all been about Harry: his pleasure, his initiation, his desires. Severus had only done what he thought would make Harry happy, but spared none for himself. In fact, he actively seemed to be pushing the experience away, likely because he thought himself undeserving. What did Harry have to do to convince this man?

Returning his attention to Severus, Harry realized the answer was staring him in the face. Harry needed to communicate with Severus the way he did best, just as Severus was trying to do with Harry. Now was not the time for talking, or even for music. Now was the time to show him.

Turning, Harry hoisted himself up on the edge of the piano and then swung his legs around to the
front. He dropped his bare feet gently to the keys, clouding Severus' song with a discordant clang of new notes. So obstinate was Severus that he continued trying to play around Harry's feet, until Harry slid his arse down onto the keyboard and wound his arms around Severus' shoulders and neck.

Severus finally had to stop, and when he looked up at Harry, it was with a weak glare. For a fleeting moment, his gaze was filled with uncertainty, vulnerability and pain, and it clenched so tightly at Harry's heart that it made his whole body ache for this man. Then it was gone, replaced by that closed, flat look that was altogether too familiar.

"No," Harry whispered, cupping Severus' face with both hands. "Don't keep doing this. Don't keep hiding."

Severus tried to wrench his head out of Harry's grasp, but it only made Harry grip tighter. He circled his legs around Severus' body, locking his ankles together to further drive home his point that he wasn't going anywhere (and wasn't about to let Severus go, either). He knew if Severus really wanted to free himself, he could, but Harry felt no such inclination from him, despite the warring emotions he had just witnessed.

"Severus," he said, and this time Severus looked up at him. "Don't go. I couldn't bear it if… not after this, not after everything. Please…" His breath hitched, but he swallowed against it, determined to maintain his composure. Harry knew he was at a disadvantage with words – he had always been more of a physical creature – so instead, he put everything he had and felt into a kiss.

His first touch against Severus' lips was chaste but firm, a statement, and when he was not refused, he pulled Severus' face to his and deepened it immeasurably, crushing their mouths together. Sliding his tongue along those thin lips, he felt Severus begin to respond in kind, and then tightened his hold, the heat and emotion beginning to arc between them. He felt Severus' arms encircle his body, clinging so tightly as to almost be painful. With a gasp that was part pleasure, part constriction, Harry murmured against Severus' lips amid a series of kisses, "I love you, Severus. I love you so much."

Squeezing his arms around Severus to reinforce his point, he felt one of their bodies shudder. He wasn't sure whose it was, so he drew back for a moment and looked into Severus' eyes. For the second time in almost as many minutes, his heart ached at what he saw. Severus' gaze was watery and the dullness had gone from his eyes. In its place was an openness, a hope, unlike anything he had ever seen from the man before. In that moment, Harry finally understood: after all this time, after all they had been through – the last several days, months, perhaps years – Severus had never once let himself believe.

"You thought I'd leave, didn't you? You thought we'd shag and I'd get what I wanted and then leave?" Harry didn't wait for Severus to respond. "I can't believe you think I'd give that away so easily. I wanted it to be you. Please, Severus." He pressed their foreheads together, blinking away the pricking at the corners of his eyes. "I want you. I've wanted you for longer than I even realized."

"You are an idiot."

Harry laughed, part hysteria, part relief. "I know I'm an idiot! But I get there in the end, don't I?"

Severus attempted a sneer, or what would have passed for one a few weeks ago, but now only came across as a pained sort of fondness. Harry stared back as those dark eyes bore into him, heavy with feeling, and felt a palpable shift of energy in the room. He shivered, suddenly needing this man to not change his mind, to not give up on him. Ever.

Lurching forward, Harry closed the scant distance between them and captured Severus' mouth in another kiss – this one a searing thing with tongues and shared breath and a heated sort of urgency.
"Severus," Harry mewled, "fuck me. Fuck me now. Please… I need you, I need to feel you…” he begged.

Severus growled and grasped Harry's hips, mouthing along Harry’s jaw with his teeth.

"Please…” Harry whimpered.

Severus stood up and unzipped his trousers, and Harry's hands were on him, coaxing that beautiful cock to hardness. Harry swiped his tongue along his lips automatically, wanting to taste him again, but knew something more physical was needed. Severus untied the knot of Harry's robe, flung the garment open, and pointed his wand at Harry's arse. A lubrication and stretching spell was not a preferred method of preparation, but now was not the time to attempt the usual, drawn-out particulars.

Harry squirmed on the piano keys, more discordant notes ringing into the bedroom as he watched hungrily, waiting to be taken, needing the confirmation that Severus was still there, was still his.

Severus tossed his wand onto the bed and roughly gripped Harry's hips, positioning himself near Harry's entrance. Holding this breath, Harry watched as Severus slid closer and closer, feeling himself filled and stretched as he was slowly impaled on Severus' cock.

Once fully seated, they both paused to breathe for a moment, and then Severus looked into Harry's eyes, dark with intensity and unfathomable desire. Harry swallowed a gasp, panting lightly in anticipation, and leaned back on his elbows. It was uncomfortable, the edge of the piano digging into the ridge of his spine, but he didn't care. Severus didn't seem to, either, for he started thrusting into Harry with soft sounds of exertion, his eyes pinched shut and his lips slightly parted.

Harry grunted with each in-stroke, his own cock erect and needy again. He knew Severus would be in no state to attend to it, so he gingerly shifted his balance onto one elbow, circling a palm around his shaft and fist ing in time with Severus' unrelenting thrusts. Throwing his head back, Harry made contact with the top of the piano. Fortunately, the ripples of pleasure coursing through his body drowned out that sharp stab of pain. He let the weight of his head rest there, finding it actually eased some of the tension in his back. Using that leverage, he arched into Severus, trying to angle himself better. Severus seemed to catch the motion, for he tightened his hold on Harry and canted his own hips downward, resuming his thrusting with increased fervor.

The energy and magic and connection that flowed between them was so intense, so electric, so incendiary, that it pushed Harry's emotions up higher and higher until they sat simmering just below the surface, volatile and molten, ready to erupt at any moment.

Severus’ orgasm hit first, a guttural groan wrenched from his throat as Harry's channel was flooded with warmth. Harry clenched in response, drawing another moan from Severus, and then felt his own climax overtake him, the world whit ing out until all that was left was that fierce and desperate feeling – the one that told him his heart would shatter if Severus ever left him – amplifying tenfold until it felt like it was going to burn him up from the inside. He gasped, willing his heart and lungs to keep up with the demands of his drained body, and then he lost himself to it, wave after wave of emotion exploding from him, tears streaming down his face.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Coming back to himself, Severus lifted his head from the warm, sweaty shoulder he was pressed against. Harry grunted at the movement and Severus realized they were still slumped against the piano, the unyielding wood probably cutting into Harry's back. Standing up, he lifted Harry off the piano, using one arm to coax Harry’s legs around his waist. Stumbling a bit, Severus managed to get
them to the bed, where they collapsed together into a sticky, sweaty mess.

Harry buried his face in Severus' neck, shuddering softly, and Severus pulled Harry closer to him, feeling the body that was already half-draped over him cling even tighter, nearly to the point of discomfort.

It wasn't until Harry had come back to himself, and moved so he could lift his head, that Severus noticed Harry's cheeks were damp, his eyes rimmed in red. It was clear how much their coupling had affected him; how intense the emotional release had been. How much longer could Severus pretend he didn't know the truth of Harry's feelings for him?

Harry quickly dried his face with the back of his hand and cleared his throat, though his voice was soft when he spoke.

"The Weasleys are having a New Year's party tonight. Will you come with me? I know you're doing your work this week, but can you just leave it for one night?"

Severus felt himself start to object, but Harry cut across him.

"Please, Severus – I really want you to be there with me."

"As what?"

"As my guest," Harry said, as though it should be obvious. "I know being public with this kind of stuff is not your thing, and I respect that. I do. But they're not just anyone, they're my family, and… well, I don't mind them knowing, is all. I'd like them to."

"Know what, exactly?" Severus ventured.

Harry looked at Severus for a moment, then directed his attention to a small crease in the sheet below him, smoothing it out with a finger. He gave a slight shrug. "How I feel about you. That… we're together." He looked up again. "I'm not wrong, am I?"

Those eyes were worse than a puppy's and Severus knew they would be his undoing – in this, and likely in a great many other things. He sighed. "No, you are not wrong," he said, and Harry's smile was back. "Though I would prefer to accompany you as a colleague so that our interaction may remain professional."

"They would never believe that."

Severus scoffed. "Two men are perfectly capable of being friends and party guests without having subtext."

"Yes, but not us two men. Most of the Weasleys don't even know we've been meeting for the past six months. They probably still think I ha—that we don't get along." Harry flushed slightly.

Severus knew what Harry had just side-stepped: that Harry used to hate him. He also knew he couldn't take it personally, for he had built his life around that very protection. While Severus was within the Dark Lord's camp, it had been essential for Harry to harbor antagonistic feelings towards his Potions Master. Any such softening of interaction between them could have been disastrous for the cause; for Harry.

Still, Severus couldn't help reflecting on how much had changed in six months. Or eight months, really, if one included the time in hospital after the end of the war, which Severus did. Not only had he helped Harry get on a path to recovery and embark on a friendship with his erstwhile student –
and later, a glorious weekend of debauchery – but he was presently entrenched in a conversation that had just used the word 'us' and included a party invitation – which, for all intents and purposes, would likely be their coming out to Harry's friends and family. And they had only been sleeping together for a week.

Yet if that was supposed to be too much, too soon, then why did it feel just the opposite to Severus?

Unable to account for this wholly unexpected feeling, Severus smoothed it over with a put-upon sigh. Not surprisingly, Harry still heard the acquiescence in it, and his face lit in a beatific smile.

"If we may keep things… understated, I would be grateful," Severus said, though in truth he was already warming to the idea of being with Harry in a semi-public place – and in the Weasley house, no less. There ought to be some poetic irony to that, he thought with relish.

"I'll try," Harry was saying, a hesitant grin on his face. "Though I can't promise I won't pull you into a broom cupboard and snog you senseless. It is New Year's, after all – begin as you mean to go on, and all that rot."

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

The last vestiges of dinner had been cleared from the table, and yet the air was still rife with forced politeness and stilted conversation. Not that Severus had been to many Weasley parties, but he assumed they were not usually as subdued as all this. Harry had seemed on edge all evening, too, casting one too many nervous looks towards the end of the table for Severus' tastes. He hadn't wanted to make things awkward for Harry, but it seemed his presence was doing a tidy job of that anyway.

He imagined Harry standing up and sharing his announcement as an ice-breaker: 'Guess what everybody, I'm gay, and I've chosen this ex-Death Eater slash all-around snarky git as my lover. Okay? Okay.' Cue polite applause. Severus snorted into his glass of wine and everyone looked up.

He couldn't help but marvel at the absurd reality he was now living – one that put him in some kind of sexual-romantic relationship with Harry Potter (of all people), at the kitchen table at The Burrow (of all places), contemplating a way to lighten the mood (of all things). Still, he'd had enough of those uneasy looks from his teaching days at Hogwarts, and knew it was up to him to fix it.

"My apologies, Arthur, Molly, various ex-students of mine… but for a New Year's party, the mood is far too somber in here, and I fear I may be the cause of it. Perhaps it would help if I shared a quick tale?" He tilted his wine glass, swirling the merlot around the base of the goblet. It was a rhetorical question, and they all knew it.

"A blind wizard walks into a pub, finds his way to a stool, and sits down. He signals for the barkeep, and in a rather loud voice, says, 'How would you like to hear a Hufflepuff joke?' The entire bar goes silent and the barkeep says, 'Sir, I will be honest with you. You are speaking to a former Hufflepuff, the man behind you is an Auror from Hufflepuff, and the woman to your right is a Hufflepuff dueling champion. We all have our wands drawn. Do you really want to continue?' The blind wizard is silent for a moment before he curtly replies, 'No, I do not. Not if I am going to have to explain it three times.'"

George was the first to laugh, almost spraying his drink across the table. Harry's eyes went as big as saucers, as though he couldn't believe Severus was even aware of such humor, let alone capable of voicing it – and at a Weasley party, no less. Molly hid her shock behind her hand, though it was fairly short-lived, for the slow wave of laughter that swept across the table soon became raucous.
"Oh yeah?" Harry said. "I've got one, too! A Hufflepuff, a Gryffindor and a Ravenclaw get stranded in the desert. They stumble upon a lamp and a genie pops out and says he will grant them each one wish. The Gryffindor says, 'I wish I was back at Hogwarts,' and poof, he is gone. The Ravenclaw says, 'I wish I was back home with my family,' and poof, she disappears, too. Then the Hufflepuff says, 'Aww man, I wish my friends were still here.'"

Harry grinned like a fool as another round of laughter erupted, and this continued for a few minutes until several others had chimed in with their own favorite joke, the tension lessening and the laughter increasing the further around the table they went.

Harry looked over at Severus, his eyes sparkling with mirth and gratitude, and Severus knew he'd made the right decision. Playfully, Harry piffed a peanut at him and Severus ducked, smirking into his glass of wine. Severus immediately felt eight pairs of eyes swiveling between them. Gradually, those looks became knowing. And Severus, to his inestimable surprise, found he didn't care. Let them think what they like.

Aloud, however, he said, "Mind yourselves, or I shall be forced to start in on the Gryffindor jokes!" which earned him a fresh wave of laughter and more smiles than he'd ever had reason to account for before.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

As the countdown to midnight neared its conclusion, everyone shouted in unison, "Four!… Three!… Two!…" Before Severus knew it, Harry was making a beeline towards him from across the room. He had barely heard the shouts of "… One! Happy New Year!" before Harry grabbed him and pressed their mouths together, wrapping his arms around Severus' neck, effectively confirming the question that had been lingering on everyone's minds since dinner.

For once, Severus ignored all the reasons why he should resist – the fact was, at that moment, he wanted it. He pulled Harry into a rather proprietary embrace, one arm tight around Harry's back, the other grabbing an arse cheek, and visibly slid his tongue into the kiss. If Harry was going to make this a declaration, Severus may as well stake his claim for all and sundry, too.

He heard Ronald's gasp, Hermione's squeal and Molly's exclamation, the woman's hands flying to her ample bosom in shock. George wolf-whistled and sent a charmed firecracker around the room, fizzing and popping overhead, and Arthur merely laughed, looking proud. Even Ginevra seemed to take it in stride, a begrudging sort of approval on her face.

Harry didn't let up until at least twenty seconds into the New Year, then seemed to remember himself all at once and pulled back quickly, smiling at everyone even as a fierce blush crept up his cheeks. Sneaking a hand down to his side, he laced his fingers with Severus', and, with the merest of sideways glances, lifted their joined hands as if to say, 'Yes, we are.'

Severus was careful to keep his expression neutral through the blur of congratulations and excited murmurings, trying to act as though he announced this sort of thing every day, but inside he felt like he was flying.

For the rest of the night Severus barely left Harry's side, always with a hand at the small of his back or a touch against his arm. More than once he felt Harry press back against him, as though he'd found the empty spot and discovered he fit perfectly.

Severus knew the contentment he was feeling was more than just the warmth of the drinks he'd imbibed, for this had an entirely different feel to it – something as foreign as it was wonderful, though not something he felt the need to name just then.
They had barely stepped out of the Floo and Harry had already attached himself to Severus.

"God, I've wanted you all night," Harry said breathlessly. "All those little touches were driving me mad! And that kiss!" He had already removed his shirt and was starting in on Severus' when he heard the spell.

"Mobilicorpus."

Without warning, Harry's feet were yanked out from under him and he found himself flat on his back, floating in mid-air. "Hey, wait a minute!" he protested, but Severus simply leaned over him, the ghost of a smirk on his face.

"I have plans," was all he offered, and with two small flicks of his wand, Harry led the way into the bedroom, bobbing through the air.

Severus unbuttoned his shirt and trousers, but left them on, and Harry – desperate as he was to move, to touch – tried to reposition himself, but his limbs and torso were pinned as though by invisible ropes. His cock pressed insistently into the front of his denims, and he tried to squirm to give himself some friction, but Severus had clearly seen to that, too. The only thing Harry could move was his head.

Lying down on the bed, Severus made himself comfortable and then flicked his wand again, floating Harry closer until he was hovering above the man, his feet somewhere north of Severus' head. Then Harry began rotating slowly, as though being turned on a spit, until he found himself looking down at Severus' groin, the 'plans' suddenly becoming clear. The fact that they were both still mostly clothed only added to the appeal, and Harry shivered with anticipation.

Lowering Harry down until he could almost reach Severus with his tongue, the man all but purred, "One advantage of being a wizard, Mr. Potter, is that I may retain full range of motion during soixante-neuf, while you may simultaneously relax and put that sinfully appealing mouth to good use."

Harry groaned, feeling himself grow harder. "Shame they don't teach this use of levitation in Charms," he said, earning a soft chuckle from Severus. Then he felt his flies being opened, followed by a rush of cool air against his cock, and then the tight suction of slippery, wet heat.

Harry gasped, then felt Severus' cock bump against his own lips. Once again he thanked his lucky stars that magic existed. His last thought, before he set himself eagerly to his task, was to wonder at all the other ways magic could be put to use in the bedroom. He would enjoy returning to that thought later, he knew. Again, and again, and again…

Harry never really did leave Severus' side again – at least not at night.

Alternating between Hogwarts on weekdays and Grimmauld Place on weekends, Severus figured he'd had more sex in the last twenty days than he'd had in the last twenty years. It was making him feel like an teenager again, or at least more alive than he could ever remember feeling. But he supposed part of that was just being around Harry – seeing him every day, instead of just on Sundays, had been a surprisingly pleasant addition to his routine; had given him something to work towards each day, making the tedium of his job that much more palatable.

Severus may not have expected to share his life – his bed – with anyone, but now that he had Harry
in his bed, he was getting used to waking in the morning with a warm body wrapped around his back, a morning erection poking his backside, an arm curled snug around his chest. It was... nice. So nice, in fact, that he frequently caught himself in the middle of a class or staff meeting, counting the hours and minutes left until the evening when he could have Harry back in his arms again, buried sweetly deep inside his young lover's body.

Pathetic, Severus, his inner voice chided.

And it wasn't so very long ago that he may have even heeded that cynical voice, making a swift retreat to the safety of his isolation – a protection he'd depended upon for nearly two decades. But now, as he watched that sleeping form in his bed, the tousled hair dark against the white of his pillow, and remembered the pleading nature of that breathless voice and the muscular hands grabbing and pulling at his own flesh, Severus knew it was anything but pathetic. Foolish, perhaps, but then there were worse things to saddle oneself with. Love was not one of them.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

The following weekend, Harry walked into the kitchen at Grimmauld to see Severus already awake and cooking breakfast. He was surprised to discover they were both shirtless and barefoot. Perhaps Harry wasn't the only one who felt comfortable with the situation, the house, or the relationship. Or perhaps all three. He smiled and stretched, feeling like he could get used to this.

"I can't remember the last time I slept this good."

"I am hardly inclined to feel flattered by that, Mr. Potter, given the amount of sex we have indulged in over the last twenty-four hours."

Harry bit his lip, but a grin stretched past it. "No, I mean – well, yeah, there is that – but I meant it's nice sharing a bed with someone. With you. I think I sleep better that way, knowing you're there."

"I see your sentimental streak is still as appalling as ever."

Harry laughed and walked closer, snuggling up behind Severus and letting his naked torso press against Severus' equally naked back. When he wasn't rebuffed (he rather thought he felt Severus relax into the contact), he smiled to himself and closed his eyes, pressing his nose to a warm shoulder and inhaling that sleep-warmed scent. He loved the feel of Severus' body, the tall, lean frame, wiry muscles and firm buttocks. A feeling of rightness swelled in his chest, and he knew then he'd never felt this way about anyone else before.

"Would you mind not accosting me whilst I cook breakfast?" Severus asked, though his tone was far from angry.

"Sorry," Harry said, though he wasn't really, and moved over to lean against the counter instead. He peered into the pans on the stove – one frying bacon and sausages and the other scrambling eggs – and felt his stomach growl agreeably.

"You mentioned once that your tattoo was imbued with different reactions," Severus remarked.

Harry pulled two coffee mugs out of the cupboard and turned back towards the stove. "Yeah, though I'm not sure how many there are or if I've even seen them all yet. Why?"

Severus pointed at Harry's chest with the spatula still in his hand and Harry looked down.

"Whoa. What the…?" Startled, Harry watched closely, fascinated by the way the tattoo was making a slow, sinewy circle around his heart. Before he could say anything else, Severus reached over and
pressed his palm against Harry's chest. The bird immediately stopped and opened its wings in a majestic arc, the entire thing infused with an indigo glow. Harry gasped just as Severus pulled his hand back.

"How did you know to do that?" Harry asked.

"I have seen that reaction once before."

Harry blinked. "When?"

"Sunday night of our first weekend together, after you had gone to sleep."

"What color was it?"

"Indigo, same as now."

Harry froze, Hermione's words from weeks ago echoing in his mind: *You will see that reaction, Harry. I know you will.*

"What is it?" Severus prodded.

"Did it only turn that color after you touched it?"

"I believe so. Why?"

"The colors themselves have meanings. Hermione told me purple is the loyalty of blue and the passion of red. If it only turned that color when you touched it, then it's about you." Harry tried to keep the sloppy grin from stealing across his face but was unsuccessful. "It must mean that you love me and want to be with me."

"And you believe a tattoo that one of the Weasley twins charmed?"

"It hasn't been wrong yet."

Severus harrumphed, but Harry just laughed and walked closer, pulling the man into a kiss. When they parted, Harry leaned back with a sly grin on his face. "So when did you realize you loved me?"

Severus rolled his eyes. For a moment it seemed as though he wasn't going to answer, having turned back to the pans, flipping bacon and sausages and stirring the eggs, but then he stopped with a sigh. "I believe it happened at St. Mungo's."

Harry's eyes went wide. "… What?"

"You were imposing yourself upon my life once again. Nothing I wasn't used to, or so I thought. But then I realized you had viewed my memories, things I had not told a soul before – certainly things I would not have parted with if I had considered the possibility of surviving the war – and yet there you sat, forlorn yet talkative in your hospital bed, treating me very much as you would treat anyone you held in esteem. I admit to feeling quite disoriented by it. There were several times I swore I had woken to some bizarre, alternate reality, or had actually died and realized my fate was to listen to you natter on for all eternity."

"Very funny," Harry said. "No, really."

Severus set down his utensils and turned to Harry. "But even I could not deny the pleasure of your company, your confidence and your respect. It was almost as though you considered me a… friend."
"After viewing your memories, I realized you had always been one."

"Yes, a Gryffindor would think that." Severus collected Harry into a warm embrace as he spoke, however, belying his words.

Harry smiled and fingered the tips of Severus' hair before leaning in, his face in the crook of Severus' neck, breathing in the scent of his lover – something that could make his groin twitch and his heart sigh all in the same breath. When Severus finally looked down at him, Harry tipped his head back.

"Want to know when it happened for me?"

"No," Severus said.

Harry laughed. "Git. It was my dreamscape. The relationship was with you, only I didn't realize it until later."

Something like reckoning appeared on Severus' face. "In your ninth draught. That is why you left the room so quickly."

"Yeah." Harry flushed slightly, still feeling sheepish about that, even though Severus hadn't known the cause of it at the time.

"What happened in that session, if I may ask?"

Harry gave him a quick run-down of the events of his ninth, describing the Mirror of Erised and how it had worked differently than the real one, how Dumbledore had joined him for part of it, helping him to understand what he was seeing, and how he had changed locales and visited the cottage from his dreamscape at the end.

"You know what's odd, though," Harry started, thinking back on it, "the Dumbledore I talked to seemed like… himself. He was familiar, but there was also something inconsistent about it. I can't explain it. He just didn't seem like my other draught participants."

"It is possible the Albus you saw was not, in fact, a figment of your subconscious. He has appeared to you before like that, has he not?" Severus turned back to the stove and began dishing up their food.

"Yeah, after Voldemort's spell hit me." Dumbledore had felt strangely independent from his subconscious then, too, as though the spectre of the man he'd chatted with really had been Dumbledore versus something he'd just made up in his head. "So he was actually in my session with me?"

"It is possible, yes."

"How'd he do that?"

Severus shrugged, looking genuinely perplexed. "I cannot say. Albus was indeed a man of many mysteries." He pushed a plate of food into Harry's hands and took his own over to the table to sit down.

Harry smiled to himself, realizing he liked the notion of that. There was a certain symmetry to the fact that Dumbledore always seemed to be with him for the beginnings: in his ninth draught, in King's Cross at the end of the war, and even that fateful night when he was placed on the doorstep of number four, Privet Drive.

"How did you learn about the dreamscapes, anyway?" Harry asked, realizing he'd meant to ask this
on several occasions but kept forgetting. He filled the two coffee cups and went over to sit down across from Severus.

"It was part of Alessandro's notes."

"Oh. So are there any other kinds of sessions, then, aside from the dreamscapes and the regular ones?"

"No. None that were documented, at any rate. Why?"

"Just curious." Harry shrugged, then grinned. "Wanted to be sure I got my money's worth, is all."

"Greedy brat," Severus replied, though amusement glinted in his dark eyes. He reached for the pepper shaker and shook it liberally over his eggs.

"It doesn't hurt that you've also given me the greatest sex of my life," Harry said, tucking into his eggs.

"Ah, yes, the real reason you have stayed with me."

"True, I'm afraid." Harry grinned.

"While I assume that was meant to be a compliment, I understand the sum total of your experience to that point was Miss Weasley; therefore, I shall not give your assessment too much credence."

Harry flushed. "And her brother, too. But we didn't do… that."

"Which brother?"

"Charlie. Do you remember him?"

Severus nodded. "Mm, yes, I recall. Persistent little bugger."

"Yeah, he said that… he thought…” Harry bit his lip. "He told me he thought you'd be a great fuck."

"Why, that impertinent little—"

"No, no," Harry said, trying to placate Severus but finding it difficult not to laugh. "No, it's okay. He was – he was right." Severus harrumphed but somehow still managed to seem pleased with the assessment.

"So why didn't you ever take him into your quarters and ravish him? Didn't you find him attractive?"

"He was my student, Harry. Despite Charlie being of age, there are still rules of propriety all staff members are expected to follow. I understand that rules are a foreign concept for you—"

"But I'm your student, too."

"Not since the war you haven't been."

"So if things had been different and I had approached you before the war, you would have turned me down?"

"Yes."

"Even if you had liked me back?"
"I didn't say it would be an easy decision, but yes, I would have."

"Wow." Harry reflected on that a moment. "So did you know this was going to happen, then? Us, I mean?"

"I presume you are referring to my suggestion that you take Evochi?" Harry nodded. "Then no. If I had known, I assure you I would have doubled your dose early on."

Once Harry realized what Severus meant, he started to laugh. Severus just lifted a brow and took a drink of his coffee, letting a small smirk settle into the corner of his mouth.

"So that's what you were hoping to do with Evochi? Just get me in bed?" Harry laughed at his own joke.

"No, you imbecile, it was to help you heal from the trauma of war. The fact that I also, at present, have your delectable arse in my bed is merely an unforeseen perk."

Harry grinned back at him. "Well, not technically. I mean, right now we're nowhere near your bed."

"That is easily remedied."

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

"Why can't you just levitate me? We are wizards, you know." Harry was astride Severus, balancing himself on his feet and riding Severus' cock. Even with the assistance of Severus' hands on the undersides of his thighs, the muscles in his legs kept getting tired and cramping.

"Because then there would be no gravity to—" Severus emphasized his meaning by thrusting up into Harry at the same time as he pulled Harry's body down against him "—bring you back down."

Harry hissed in pleasure and tightened his hold on Severus' arms. "Okay, okay, you might…" — he took a moment to catch his breath — "have a point."

Harry had asked if a man could be ridden like a broom and Severus looked at him in confusion.

"You know, if I am straddled over you like I'm sitting on a broom and you're, you know…"

"Fucking you?"

Harry blushed, wondering if he'd ever get used to hearing that word from Severus' mouth. "Yeah. Can we try that?"

"If you would not mind indulging me on something."

"Sure, anything," Harry breathed.

"I should like to watch you… pleasuring yourself."

Harry felt a shiver of arousal shoot through him at the thought of doing that while Severus watched, and even more aroused at the fact that Severus had even made his wish known. "At the same time, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Done." Harry pulled the book out of Severus' hands and set it on the nightstand, then straddled the man, peering down at him with a grin. "You're really hot in glasses, you know that?"
Severus rolled his eyes. "Says the teenager with the lust-addled mind."

"No, I'm serious. Can you, maybe, leave those on?" Harry bit his lip, his expression keen.

"Got a kink for men in glasses, Potter?"

"Dunno. Let's find out," Harry said with a wink.

"Here, switch your position," Severus instructed, helping Harry move from a crouched stance to one that had his knees pressing into the duvet. "You may kneel while you… finish that," he added, his voice tight and skin flushed as he eyed Harry's cock. It was one of Harry's favorite looks on him. The glasses only added to it.

Harry decided to put on a bit of a show, gently riding Severus while stroking himself in an alternating rhythm – a series of quick strokes followed by some slow and languid ones, wanting Severus to feel what he was doing even though the man was only watching. For Severus' part, he remained transfixed, looking his fill, his gaze alert, intense and hungry. Harry thought there was something decidedly hot about doing this with an audience, particularly when that person's gaze looked like it was going to burst into flames if it projected any more heat.

As soon as Harry finished, Severus looped his arms underneath Harry's knees, drew his own knees up underneath Harry, and in one smooth motion, flipped them both around to settle Harry on his back. Severus took his time licking Harry clean, suckling and nipping at his skin, before lifting Harry's legs and putting them on his shoulders.

Severus' face went slack with pleasure once he seated himself back inside Harry and began making slow circles with his hips. He cupped Harry's ankle, kissing and nuzzling the inside of his leg, his eyes closed while he explored. Harry found the tenderness of the gesture inexplicably erotic and marveled at how he, his body, was causing these reactions.

Severus gradually increased the pace until he was thrusting vigorously, his face pinched in concentration, his glasses slipping down his sweat-slicked nose. Harry grinned in a lazy, debauched fashion and pushed the glasses back up, comically trying to line up his finger with the bridge while he gave his body over to Severus' pleasure.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

"Some paperwork error that must have been."

They were lying in bed, enjoying their afterglow, when the statement came out of nowhere. Harry froze.

"What do you mean?"

"Despite half the medical staff at St. Mungo's apologizing for the mishap, no one ever seemed able to correct it. A situation that should have lasted mere hours, or perhaps a day at most, saw you sharing my hospital room for over a month. If that was an error, I am the worst spy on the planet."

A dusting of color infused Harry's cheeks.

"As I suspected," Severus said. "What I don't understand is why."

Harry shrugged. "I dunno. I just didn't think it was right to leave you there by yourself to recover. At first it really was an error. They came in to tell me I was being transferred to an observational room since they needed the space in my ward for other people. Once I realized where it put me, and that
you didn't hex me on the spot, I decided I wanted to stay for awhile. I thought it was only going to be a couple days, so I told the nurse to fix the books, but not tell you. I knew you wouldn't approve." Harry smiled grimly. "I'm not sure she did, either, but I figured if they were going to grant me some special status, I wasn't above using it to my advantage. But then once you started talking to me…" He shrugged again, more emphatic this time. "I told her to keep doing it until you were released."

"I have been alone most of my life, Harry. I assure you, it would have been no great hardship to remain in the room by myself."

Harry looked down, twining his feet in the blankets bunched at the end of the bed. "Maybe it was me who didn't want to be alone," he murmured.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

"Why did you return to teaching after you left St. Mungo's?" Harry asked.

They had been silent for awhile, each likely thinking about the days and weeks after the war, now that they'd started talking about it. Severus was mapping the curvature of Harry's bare hip with his finger, something Harry found both comforting and oddly sensual.

"What else was there for me? I was not yet convinced the Wizarding world believed my role in the war or my non-complicity in Albus' death, and felt more time at Hogwarts would convey my intent better than any explanation I could give. It was a convenient opening until I figured out what was next."

"But you hate it. The job, I mean."

"Yes. It has served its purpose, however. Sometimes we must do things that are unpleasant to make way for things that are not. To that end, I have already put in motion an exit plan for myself. I wished to see you through your Evochi sessions and finish out this school year, but come the end of June, I will let my contract lapse. At that time, the post of Potions Master will become available."

Harry's head snapped up. "Wait, what? You're leaving?"

"I admit this is not how I imagined telling you, but the opening just presented itself in our conversation. I apologize if this comes as an unwelcome surprise for you."

"But where will you go? What will you do?" Panic lanced through Harry as he imagined all sorts of possible answers. He wasn't sure how to ask more questions without digging into the man's private life, things which were probably none of his business anyway, but still, he couldn't help feeling like Severus was slipping away.

"Variables." "You mean… me?" Harry ventured, holding his breath.

Severus grabbed another pillow and put it under his head, fluffing it until he was comfortable. "Perhaps," he finally allowed, and Harry broke into a smile.
"I think we should make it official."

"It?"

"Us." A slow smile stretched across Harry's face. "We already have the compatibility. We just… make sense together."

"Yes, Potter, our shared love of Greek food and science fiction, apparently."

Harry chuckled, but then redoubled his efforts. "You deserve to be happy, Severus. You don't have to keep carrying this misguided sense of guilt about the war or your role or what happened to my parents. What's done is done, that part of our lives is over. Somehow we both got a second chance, so we need to wipe the slate clean and start fresh, today. Sure, we don't have everything figured out yet, but we can—"

"Harry." There was something about Severus' tone that kept him from protesting the interruption. "All right."

"All right?"

"All right. I believe we should try this."

"You believe…" Harry stopped as a bright smile lit his face. "We should? I mean, of course we should! Yes!" He nearly launched into Severus' arms, but caught himself just in time. He couldn't help it – he hadn't felt this excited since… well, he didn't think he'd ever felt this excited before. It was like winning a Quidditch game, or finally mastering some new spell, or getting to eat treacle tart for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Or maybe all those things together. Times one hundred.

Leave it to Severus to ruin his giddy mood, though.

"Are you prepared for what is to come?"

"What do you mean?"

Severus took a deep breath. "Going public."

Harry frowned. "I don't know. I don't think I'm ever prepared for anything in my life. I wish everyone would just bugger the fuck off, though."

"Did you intend to merely step out with me and let that speak for itself?"

"Would you be okay with that if I did? It seemed to go okay at the Weasley party. They all accepted it just fine. Hermione even hugged you!"

"Something emboldened by the evening's copious libations, I'm sure," Severus remarked, and Harry smiled. "They are also your surrogate family and love you as one of their own. It is their nature to be supportive of such choices, even if they do not agree. The public, however, will not grant you the same courtesy."

"Well I don't care what they think!"

"It is easy to say that from the comfort of one's bed, Harry, but I have dealt with the ire of the Wizarding world for nigh on twenty years; I daresay the backlash to such an announcement will be swift and fervent. The journalists will seek to vilify me, accuse me of having you under some
enchantment, and possibly make things difficult for us. I am not sure my reputation can get much worse, but you certainly don't deserve it."

Harry slid closer and pressed his body against Severus' side, putting an arm around Severus' chest as though simply embracing him would shield them from that fate.

"That's why I want to leave Britain. If I stay here, I'm always going to be under their microscope for something. I don't want to be the reason they sell newspapers and have remembrance balls. I just want my own life now. Haven't I earned that?"

"I should say so."

"And so have you! My God, you've done more for them than they'll ever know, the ungrateful pricks!"

"Says the stalwart champion himself," Severus mocked, placing a hand over his heart.

"I'm serious!" Harry said, steeling his expression. He sat up in bed, looking down at Severus' face. "Come away with me. Leave Britain – before they have the chance to poke their noses in. Will you do that?" He paused, tucking a stray lock of hair behind Severus' ear. "Will you have me?"

Severus looked back at Harry, his eyes softening. Harry was beginning to learn that was an expression only he would ever get to see. "Only if I can keep you."

Relief and happiness flooded Harry and he grinned. "Deal."

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

~ Five Months Later (June 1999) ~

The war was over and Voldemort was dead. Although the celebrations had long since finished, and the optimism (no longer cautious) had spread across England and beyond, there was still one man left standing at the center of it all. Except this time, he was no longer The Chosen One. Now he was just… Harry.

He had realized long ago, somewhat resentfully, that his existence had been towards one end, and one end only: to defeat the Dark Lord. But now that that was done, it was time to reclaim his life. It would no longer aimlessly chart itself. It would no longer unfold at the whims of a prophecy. Now it was time for him to discover a new purpose: living.

After six years at Hogwarts, seven years on the trail of Voldemort, and nine draughts of Evochi, Harry wanted to take his hard-won freedom – and his partner, Severus Snape (and how strange was it to be able to say that!) – and see what lay beyond the verdant green hills of his homeland. Away from Hogwarts, away from everything.

Perhaps for good.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry leaned closer to Severus, his eyes alight with mischief and happiness. "How do you feel about Costa Rica?"

Severus blinked once, his expression bland. "They have sunshine there."

Harry's laugh seemed to fill the room around them. "Oh, come on," he said with a grin, tugging
Severus' sleeve. "You'll love it."

"And how is it that you have become so familiar with Central America – a place, unless I am very much mistaken, you have never been?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you? It's where I went in my dreamscape. I figured it out."

"I see."

Despite Harry's blinding smile, Severus made no attempt to avert his eyes. Instead, he let himself fall into those sparkling, green depths, their effusive warmth and love surrounding him, beckoning him. "If we must," he added, feigning a put-upon sigh.

"You said yourself you wanted to be able to source your own potions ingredients. Wouldn't a rainforest be ideal for that?"

"Perhaps."

"And mountains? And an ocean?"

"It would seem you have been paying attention, Mr. Potter. Ten points to Gryffindor," Severus remarked dryly, as though he was still begrudgingly giving them.

But when two arms wound their way around his neck, and two of the softest, sweetest lips he'd ever tasted pressed against his mouth, Severus knew, without a doubt, he would always follow wherever Harry might lead.

As long as it was onwards.
Epilogue: The Storyteller

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter contains mpreg, though it's non-graphic and mostly of the academic sort (with a bit of romanticizing thrown in for good measure). Even if it's not something you generally like, I encourage you to read on anyway. I may just convince you – at least of this variety. ;)

~ Five Years Later (June 2004) ~

Severus Snape was not the type of man who routinely took inventory of his life. For so many years, there had been nothing worth taking inventory of. He had never had a future before, only duty, and could not precisely remember a day when he was truly free to make his own choices. Aside from the one day I made the worst choice, he thought, rubbing his left forearm absentmindedly.

Nevertheless, despite this unfamiliar territory, cataloging and reviewing the more recent events of his life was precisely where Severus found himself early one morning. And not just any morning, but a Saturday – five years later, almost to the day, when he'd uprooted his life in Britain and followed his young lover to the sunny climes of Costa Rica.

Severus had awoken early, as had long been his habit. It was still dark outside, the sun barely a rim of red-orange as it tickled the peaks of the mountains to the east. The house around him was quiet – only the rhythmic tick of the grandfather clock in the foyer punctuated the silence.

On mornings such as these, Severus typically made himself a steeped, herbal tea. His stomach was not yet attuned to the stronger brew he preferred at midday; instead, he'd discovered the herbal variety was quite gentle and could often lull him back to sleep for another hour or two. Today, however, he had skipped his tea in favor of sitting on the sofa in the great room, his head back against its cushions, admiring what he could see of the ceiling's soaring vault – an arch that rose fifteen feet above him at its highest point – for the hundredth, or perhaps thousandth, time.

There were moments, like now, when he would wonder what had gotten into him. It was madness that he had picked up his life and moved halfway across the world to be with someone he'd only been dating a short time, if what they'd been doing could even be called dating. Indulging their baser instincts, more like, and he'd never made a relationship out of that before. In fact, he had never really made a relationship out of anything before, let alone acted rash and spontaneous. He'd always thought his nature far too calculating. So then why had he done it? And aside from his occasional struggle with it, why hadn't he regretted it? Everything about it was as far from 'Severus Snape' as it was possible to be. By that very principle alone he should hate it.

Except he didn't. The staggering, bewildering, damning truth was that he loved it.

So much so that he'd spent those early months alternately consumed with anger and terror because he knew – knew – how transient it all was, how fucking impossible it all was, and why couldn't the bloody universe just hurry up and take it all away from him already so he could get back to familiar ground?

In his forty-some years, he'd never really allowed himself to discover who he was or what he really
wanted. He had long ago hidden his true self away, shoving it down to where it would never see the
light of day. It was Albus' words that had nearly undone that, the day Severus had changed his
allegiances. It's why he'd made the old man promise to never reveal the best of him. The 'best of him'
wasn't what others wanted. They wanted his expertise, his potions, his cunning, his apparent lack of
scruples. They didn't care about the man behind it. Severus was but an empty shell, a soldier on
demand, his worth defined solely by his usefulness to others. It was why he'd worked to make
himself as indispensable as possible: it was the only place he could exercise any control. However,
after too many years of that, it was easy to convince himself it was his only option, and so stopped
believing anything else was possible.

That is, until a certain pair of green eyes set their sights on him, lit up the dark corners of Severus'
tenuous existence, and then refused to let go.

Severus sighed, still feeling out of his depth with the gift of that devotion – something that,
inexplicably, still showed no signs of waning. He closed his eyes and let the visuals of the last five
years begin to play against the backs of his eyelids, just as they seemed wont to do: a flurry of color,
of sound, of emotion… of Harry.

It had always been about Harry, hadn't it?

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

{ Five Years Earlier / June 1999 }

Putting in his resignation from Hogwarts had naturally stirred Minerva's curiosity, though they both
knew she already knew he was running off to parts unknown with Harry. She never asked about it
directly, but she needn't have: clever woman that she was, she'd had a beat on them since the very
beginning, likely before Severus himself could even admit it was happening. Still, with barely a quirk
of her lips and a twinkle in her eyes that was so like Albus’, she conveyed her approval and
congratulations all the same, and it pleased Severus to know he wouldn't have to provide a tedious
explanation to prove he wasn't taking advantage of her Gryffindor Golden Boy.

"The heart wants what the heart wants, Severus," was all she'd said, though Severus knew what she
really meant: 'It's okay to want to be with Harry; it's okay to live your life; it's okay to be happy; it's
okay.'

Severus had sneered. The heart does what it damn well pleases, indeed. It was precisely why he'd
always avoided following the treacherous organ in the past. He could not have afforded the
pursuance of whims when his life and livelihood depended on his ability to demonstrate loyalty on
demand; to deceive when necessary; to manipulate circumstances – and people – in his favor.
Loneliness was simply the cross one bore in a life of servitude, and he had long ago accepted it. Or
thought he had, until Harry had shown up and forced him to reconsider his options and his solitary
existence.

Still, Minerva's approval meant something to him. She had always been a respected colleague and
friend, and occasionally, though he was loathe to admit it, a much-appreciated maternal influence.
He'd hated having to deceive her during the war, but thankfully she had shown her trademark
resilience and welcomed him back once the truth of his role had come to light.

The move to Costa Rica had still been a big adjustment, rife with insecurities on Severus' part. He'd
spent the first several weeks inadvertently retreating within himself, questioning reality, occasionally
arguing with Harry over their circumstances. Severus was not accustomed to getting what he wanted
in life, and stubbornly held fast to the belief he did not deserve it, even then, and that it was only a
matter of time until something came along and took it all away from him.
That was how things happened in his life. *Don't put your love and trust in anything, for it will just be used against you.* The few people he'd become close to in his life had all died or left him in some way. The fact that he was now with the one person who kept on *living*, despite the incredible odds, was inescapably ironic.

Yet a relationship with Harry was never just him – it was a package deal. You got Hermione and the staff of Hogwarts and a sea of ginger-haired, smiling Weasleys. You also got the prying public, ready to idolize him as Marcus did, as well as a long line of eligible young men ready and willing to take Severus' spot if he fucked things up.

It's probably why the chiding voice in his head always sounded like his mother:

"If you want to see your worst fear become a self-fulfilling prophecy, yes, Severus, by all means, keep being an arsehole and trying to push away the very person you'd give your existence for. And to think they always said you were smart!"

"If you do nothing else, at least trust that Harry knows his own heart. It shouldn't matter *why* he chose you. The point is, he *did*. So make good use of it, for your sake *and* for his."

And Harry had said – and demonstrated – his feelings for Severus over and over: in the back room of their favorite pub, in the garden behind the Weasley's home (they neglected to tell Molly why one of her topiary statues never quite stood correctly again), and in the Room of Requirement during the last few months of Severus' tenure at Hogwarts (it was always interesting what the great castle deemed a requirement…). The way Harry kissed him, clung to him, *looked* at him, told Severus there was nothing dishonest or transient about those feelings – something Harry further proved with an outburst one day.

"Stop treating me like some treasure to be won!" Harry was pacing back and forth in their rented cottage, clearly agitated, though it seemed directed mostly at himself. "I'm a person, just like anyone else. We both deserve to be happy, so if we can do that together, then fantastic. If not, just tell me now so we can not have this conversation for the next however-many years." He paused and lifted his arms to the sides, then seemed to deflate. He sighed. "I'm not 'too good' for you. Shit, half the time I'm sitting here wondering what you're doing with *me*—"

Severus had grabbed him then and kissed him until they were both breathless, and they'd had sex up against the wall in a frantic, heated exchange. It was inelegant and awkward, Severus taking an elbow to the head for his efforts and Harry getting his zipper stuck in a frustrating tangle of fabric, but ultimately neither one of them cared. The only thing that mattered in that moment was that they had both chosen each other.

And that, Severus realized, was the only thing he'd ever really needed to know. Suddenly, all of the reasons he was fighting – all the uncertainties and fears that cluttered his mind and his heart – seemed to fade away. Which meant there was only one thing left to do: close his eyes and jump.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

{ Two Months Later / August 1999 }

Severus still hadn't got used to the idea that he could touch Harry whenever the impulse struck. Maybe he never would.

Yet Harry seemed to enjoy the stray touches – as well as the not so stray ones – seeming to lean into Severus' touch, always keen to soak up any affection bestowed on him. And Harry reciprocated in kind. At first he was more hesitant, as though unsure of his welcome, but grew accustomed to it
quickly, and soon the touches became almost automatic: a hand that slid along Severus' lower back as Harry walked behind him, a touch to his sleeve when he leaned in to say something, a sneaky kiss or grope after the lights went down in the old film house they frequented.

Now, standing in the doorway to the kitchen, watching Harry cooking at the stove, Severus was never more glad for the fact he hadn't let his personal demons fuck things up between them. Not because Harry was in the process of making dinner for him, but because Harry was there at all, that Harry wanted to be with him, that Harry was so fucking edible it made his chest ache.

As Harry bent to grab a pan out of a bottom cupboard, Severus let his eyes travel down Harry's backside, admiring that glorious arse. That pair of extra-snug denims had repeatedly drove Severus to distraction, and only now did he wonder if that was intentional. A wave of arousal hit him and he gritted his teeth, suddenly overcome with the urge to touch, to feel, to have.

Sidling up behind Harry, he grabbed Harry's upper arms and leaned over to nibble his way up the line of exposed neck, to just below the ear, pressing their bodies together against the stove.

"God, I'm never going to get anything done if this is how you're going to say hello," Harry said breathlessly.

Then Severus caught a glimpse of what was cooking in the pot, paused, Accio'ed the chopped tomatoes from the fridge, and dropped them in.

"Hey, what are you doing? I don't like tomatoes!"

"Do not fret. I shall eat your share, but they are best when they simmer along with the other ingredients."

"Pollute, more like," Harry muttered.

Severus ignored that in favor of releasing his grip so he could make two flicks – one of his wrist, the method by which he slid his wand into his palm, and the second to spell the pot on the stove. The flame and its bubbling contents froze instantly in place, as though someone had hit 'pause' on them.

"What did you just do to my beef stew?"

"If you had paid attention in Potions, you would recognize that as a standard stasis spell. It cannot be used on caustic or potentially explosive substances, but I assumed dinner would be neither. Though perhaps I should have asked?" He leaned back so Harry could see the speculative look on his face.

"Oi!" Harry said with a laugh. "See if I cook for you again!"

In response, Severus dropped to his knees and yanked Harry's denims and underwear down with him, exposing two firm buttocks. "Dessert first, I should think," Severus murmured, rubbing his cheek along that warm flesh, enjoying the soapy, male scent that clung to Harry's skin, then placed gentle bites everywhere he could reach.

When Severus' prodigious nose made its way into the crease between those smooth globes, Harry gasped, clutching the counter hard with his free hand. "Severus, what are you—" he started, but it trailed off into a moan when Severus' probing tongue became insistent, mapping out its destination and then finally pushing inside. It was high time he introduced Harry to rimming.

"Bed," Harry managed, obviously guessing where this was going and not wanting to be vertical when every nerve in his body was about to become liquified with sensation.
The crack of side-along Apparition happened so fast that the wooden stirring spoon that’d been in Harry's other hand remained behind, standing upright on the counter for a few seconds before dropping into the sink with a clatter.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

{ One Month Later / September 1999 }

A few months after they'd arrived, Harry had approached one of the local schools and offered to volunteer for something. He'd remembered the young Costa Rican orphan from his dreamscape and thought it would be fun to work with kids.

Sometimes, Severus had to remind himself that Harry was just a newly-minted nineteen-year-old. So often Severus thought of him as older – and in many ways, he was, having long ago been robbed of his childhood. Therefore, it shouldn't have surprised him that Harry would enjoy an activity centered around children – something whimsical, carefree and playful, since he experienced scant amounts of it when he was a child.

Severus envied him that freedom. He didn't think he could do it, but was glad Harry could. If Harry wanted to play, then so be it. It was the least the world owed him.

It turned out the school had been looking for a native English-speaking teacher. It wasn't a problem that Harry didn't speak Spanish, as the school taught a bilingual curriculum. But since Harry didn't feel ready (or qualified) to teach, they made him a teacher's aide instead, and had him take over story time to read books to the children. What better way to teach kids English than through stories?

The school also insisted on paying him for his time, and Harry eventually gave up trying to talk them out of it – they wouldn't budge. So, he just worked around it, giving all the money he earned back to the school under the name of an anonymous donor. He'd vary the amounts every month so it didn't match up one-to-one, and some months he'd even let a little of his own converted Wizarding money make its way into the cheque. Between the war subsidies from the Ministry and the combined Potter and Black vaults, Harry already felt like he was drowning in a fortune he couldn't hope to spend. He'd only wanted a new purpose for his life, not more money.

Ironically, he would later earn lots and lots of it, and other accolades besides, simply by following that new purpose. Even though Harry didn't want to be famous for anything anymore, attention like that seemed inevitable for him, as though he was someone who was just destined to end up in the public eye in some fashion or another, whether it was with Wizards or Muggles.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

{ Three Months Later / December 1999 }

 Barely three months into his gig as teacher's aide, Harry rushed home one afternoon, flushed from the exertion, and could barely get the words out fast enough.

"I'm going to write a book!"

Severus blinked at him, trying but unable to process this news. "Pardon?"

"A book! I'm going to write a children's book!"

"I'm afraid you've lost me, Mr. Potter. Would it trouble you to start at the beginning?"

Harry laughed and pulled Severus over to sit with him on the sofa.
In listening to Harry recount his day, Severus couldn't help but notice he was practically vibrating with excitement, so full of promise about this new idea that had clearly captured him.

The school didn't have a lot of children's books in English, so one day, after exhausting their collection, Harry found himself in front of a room full of expectant faces without anything left to read. Not wanting to disappoint even one of those kids, Harry decided to just wing it and began making up a story instead.

Afterwards, the teacher praised him for having such a wonderful imagination, asking how he'd come up with the tale about the three wizards who escaped from a goblin bank on the back of a dragon. Harry had just smiled and shrugged.

"When I told her it'd be wand lore and spiders the size of cars next time, Mrs. Sánchez just smiled and said, 'What notions you have, Harry!' And in my head I'm thinking notions?" Harry snorted in amusement and then shook his head. "But I suppose to someone in the Muggle world, my life would read like a fantasy story.

"When she asked if I'd ever considered writing children's stories, I sort of froze. But days later I was still thinking about it, and then the more and more I thought about it, the more I decided I really wanted to give it a try. Who knows, maybe I'll be rubbish at it, but it was fun watching those kids' faces as I recounted the daring adventures of the three young wizards."

Maybe Harry couldn't tell people there was such a thing as magic, but he could let the children revel in the concept. He'd already found a way to inject a bit of magic into the books he read – making the moon glow or making the animals or characters run from one page to another – without making it appear as though the books were doing something on their own. To start, he wore long-sleeved shirts so he could hide his wand against his forearm, but eventually mastered a few wandless spells for the effects he favored most. It would seem to a Muggle adult that they were a trick of the light, or a hidden pull embedded in the page that made it happen. But to the children… they knew better. And they loved being in on it. You only had to see that glint in their eyes to know it was something they inherently understood and kept secret, as though telling the adults would ruin its effect. The magic would wear off as the children grew, anyway, but to the extent Harry could keep it alive for the younger ones, he was keen to do it.

It's what had caused Severus to stop by the school one afternoon, unannounced, and observe Harry in his element. Severus had stood and watched from outside the library, peering around the door. The scene before him had instantly brought to mind one conversation in particular.

"They don't ask anything of me," Harry said. "They don't look at me like they're waiting for me to save them."

"Yet you continue to do so every day."

"What do you mean?"

Severus lowered the book he was reading and fixed Harry with a fond, if not a little exasperated, expression. "Because you let them be who they want to be. You do not dispel their belief in magic, you encourage it. You, Mr. Potter, stir their imaginations. And what is the world to a child if not a wondrous place of exploration and imagination?"

Harry blinked, then his face split into a slow smile. "Why, Severus Snape, I never knew you were such a romantic."

Severus scoffed. "Just because I had nothing so nice as a happy childhood does not mean I am so
blind or bitter as to not see how it should be. I did teach adolescents for nearly two decades."

"Yeah, but these are little children, well before the age of Hogwarts."

"Precisely why magic is all the more important."

Harry stared at Severus for a long moment, then walked over and kissed him. "God, I love you."

Severus offered his customary arched brow, then brought his book back up. "As you should."

Harry laughed. "It wouldn't kill you to say it back sometimes, you know."

"Perhaps not, but do you think it worth the risk?" Severus asked, a smile forming in earnest now.

Harry shook his head and smiled back, then wandered out of the room.

Severus returned his attention to the reading nook where Harry was seated before the children – all of whom were leaning forward on their knees to better see the picture book Harry was reading from – and felt a flush of contentment that, despite its welcome, still felt strange to him. Being happy was not a feeling he was accustomed to, but ever since Harry had become a steady fixture in his life, the feeling had become more and more commonplace.

And despite his discomfort with emotional declarations, he hoped Harry knew he was loved beyond all reason or measure; that Harry felt it in the warmth of Severus' gaze and in the intensity of his affections, even if Severus could never hope to express it adequately with words. Even with the three simplest ones.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

"It is remarkable what you do," Severus observed.

"They think it's all made up, don't they? It's easy and accessible for me to write about my world, and if it gives other people an escape, well, that's why they're reading, isn't it? To escape into a world not their own?"

"Yes, but why do you write it? You are not escaping, you are reliving."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. It exorcises things, I guess. I see things differently when I write them. And I can twist things for the sake of the story. It's sort of like how memory gets after a time – sometimes you can't remember the bad stuff, or you've blocked it out, but you remember the essence of it and how you felt. That's sort of what I'm doing with these. It's my life, only… edited."

Severus gave him an assessing glance. "Sounds as though this could be quite cathartic for you."

"I'm told people often write what they know." Harry smiled.

"Then why did you pick 'Alejandro' for the name of the boy at the center of your stories?"

"Because it's fun to say?" Harry laughed at the expression on Severus' face. "It also means 'protector of mankind' so I thought it was appropriate."

Severus hummed. "If you are not careful, your young protagonist may develop a hero complex just like his creator."

Harry flipped two fingers at Severus and they smirked at each other.
"You do realize by publishing books, you will still be in the public eye," Severus continued.

Harry looked a little sheepish. "Not… exactly." Severus' arched brow prompted him to continue. "I'm not using my name."

"Why not?" They had agreed long ago, when they were selecting names for their respective careers, that if the name Potter was going to remain golden in Wizarding society, they may as well use it when it was advantageous to do so.

"Because I just want to tell stories and add a little magic to the lives of children. It's not about me, or at least not about my name. It's about the kids."

"Then what name do you plan to use?"

"I decided it'd be easiest if I kept my initials, so some part of it still felt connected to me, so I chose… Hazel Porter."

A crease formed between Severus' brows even though a large part of him was relieved Harry hadn't planned on using 'Snape.' Severus wanted Harry's books to have their own chance at success, not be sullied by a past that wasn't his. "A woman's name? Whyever for?"

Harry shrugged. "I just want my work to speak for itself. Besides, this way I also have a convenient excuse to turn down public appearances, if it should ever come to that."

Severus blinked, but his expression eventually shifted towards approving. "That is actually… quite clever."

"Careful, that almost sounded like a compliment!"

At this, Severus seemed unable to help himself and an uncharacteristic chuckle slipped out.

"So what about you?" Harry countered. "What have you picked? If you used Snape, you could get work much faster. At least in some circles."

"Precisely – in some circles. Most likely not the circles I'd prefer, however. Much like you, I wish for my work to stand on its own merits, and if that means taking the long road to earning my place with a name no one has heard of, then so be it. At least then I would know I had earned it."

Harry nodded. "Yeah." His pinched expression conveyed his deep understanding of this particular issue. "Does this mean you aren't going to use Potter, then, either?"

"I did consider it, but decided not to for precisely the same reason as you – although there is clout, I would forever wonder if people were taking me for my work or for my name. Or for you."

"So what are you going to use, then?"

"Samuel Prince. Similar to you, I opted for a first name with a familiar initial. The surname allows me to maintain a connection to the maternal side of my lineage, which, in its day, was a respected name in Wizarding society. It became slightly out of favor in my mother's day, but I should like to see it restored, at least in professional circles."

Harry got a funny little smile on his face, the sort that meant he was wading around in his memories about something, and Severus couldn't resist prodding. "What?"

Harry's head shot up. "Oh, nothing." He smiled again, clearly enjoying a private joke with himself.
"It's just something Hermione said to me one time. She said…” He bit his lip. "She said I'd get my Prince one day."

Severus shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Women," he muttered and Harry laughed.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

{ Five Months Later / May 2000 }

After almost a year of living in Costa Rica, Harry and Severus realized the cottage they had been renting was starting to show its ill-fitting features more than its beneficial ones, and decided to look for a home they could purchase instead. Their relocation (and relationship, Severus noted to himself) had been successful enough to inspire them both to take that next step and put down roots of their own.

However, after trailing along after a realtor for what seemed like weeks, getting no closer to finding a house they could both agree on, it was suggested that they think about building one instead. It was something Severus had never considered before, that he could have an entire house created to his exact specifications. There mere idea of it seemed so… extravagant. He was a practical and frugal man. Living at Hogwarts for all but the first ten years of his life, where everything he required in order to live and to work was provided, left him wanting for very little. He rarely spent money on anything that wasn't related to his job, and had even turned down the more luxurious provisions offered to Head of House because the standard furnishings had suited him just fine.

But being offered things was entirely different than being able to create things.

Fast forward to sitting in the office of a local architect and builder who was happily jotting down the list Harry was giving him. Severus was fine letting Harry run with most of the particulars as long as he could have one room all to himself: his lab. It would be situated in the basement level of their home and comprise almost 800 square feet of space.

Designing it had been an act of pure pleasure on Severus' part, even surprising Harry with how much he'd thought about it. Then again, he'd done potions work for twenty years – one picked up a few what-to-dos and what-not-to-dos during that time, as well as a handful of would-love-to-haves. There was a lot more that went into a lab than just a bunch of equipment and a couple of tables – though, in Harry's defense, he'd only ever seen a classroom lab, not a professional one.

In working with the builder, Severus mapped out both open and closed shelving, three kinds of temperature storage, fixed and mobile workspaces, customizable lighting, proper ventilation and climate control, and, his biggest indulgence, a double-tiered, wood-burning oven that would allow him to hang up to four cauldrons in the fire at once. A research library would sit at one end of the space, an enclosed room with floor to ceiling bookcases, comfortable seating and a faux window that Severus would later charm to show him the view outside.

The house was not grand by anyone's standards, but it was spacious and modern and light – the complete antithesis of an ancient castle in the Scottish highlands. In fact, no one was more surprised than Severus to discover that he was actually well-suited to the warm, tropical climate, and liked it as much as Harry, despite dwelling mostly underground for the better part of two decades. Any complaint he might have had initially about all the sunshine was completely offset by the absolute goldmine of potions ingredients that could be found in the rich and varied landscape – much of which they could even find on their own property.

But his favorite part, aside from the custom-tailored lab, was the master bedroom. It boasted an entire wall of glass doors that, once fully opened, made the large outdoor balcony a natural extension of
their living space. That had been the architect's idea; probably his best.

They had considered several plots of land upon which to build, but settled on one that was so private and secluded, they could barely even see the roofline of their nearest neighbor. The property was surrounded by lush, mature trees, fertile soil (perfect for gardening), and had a magnificent view of the mountains to the east. Harry had seemed immediately attached to it, as though he had always known it. At the time, Severus had assumed it was just because they'd found the right place, but later he'd wondered if it was because it reminded Harry of what he'd seen in his dreamscape. Either way, it was perfectly suited for them, and he doubted even a potion could have done better.

Severus had insisted on paying his half, matching Harry Galleon for Galleon on the purchase of the land and the house. He'd become a circus performer before he'd see himself become a kept man. Besides, his non-existent spending habits during his tenure at Hogwarts had left him with a very tidy sum in the bank. Investing in a new life for himself was a rather poetic and fitting use for it, he decided.

They were at too long of a distance to be connected to the British Floo network, but that was probably just as well – neither Severus nor Harry could imagine what a trans-continental trip would feel like after banging about the inside of that system for an interminable amount of time. It made their home more secure, too. It's why they had selected a Muggle architect and builder, and why Severus made the home Unplottable when it was finished.

Maybe it was just his ingrained paranoia, or perhaps old habits really did die hard. All he knew was that nothing and no one was going to ruin the fresh start they'd made for themselves.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

{ Seven Months Later / January 2001 }

It was shortly after Severus' birthday (and an unrelated week-long visit from Teddy – then, almost three years old), when Harry started dancing around the topic of having children. Severus wasn't aware of all the options, but the topic had been coming up with such increasing frequency that he finally began researching it.

It took the better part of a month, and a visit to Berlin to see one of the best Wizarding fertility specialists in Europe, to decide on a course of action. Harry would be the carrier. He was younger, fitter, had more potent magic (though he liked to deny it), and, most importantly (at least to Severus), didn't mind the idea of being pregnant – all of which would add to their chances of a successful, full-term baby.

"You do realize there is no guarantee—" Severus had begun.

"There isn't in regular pregnancy, either, some people can't conceive at all and—"

"If you would let me finish."

Harry bit his lip and smiled. "Yes. Sorry."

"Wizard pregnancies are considered high risk for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is because they are magically induced and carried. Unless you failed to grasp basic biology, you will know you do not currently possess the necessary equipment."

"But it's possible?"

"Yes, Harry, it is possible. However, the success rate is only forty percent, sometimes less. Are you
"Sure you would not rather use a surrogate?"

"No, because then the baby wouldn't be ours. You said yourself I'd have to carry it if we wanted the child to have both our DNA."

Severus nodded, anticipating that answer. "Come here and sit, please. It is important you have more information before making a final decision." Harry nodded and moved to sit next to Severus on the sofa. Severus turned so he could face Harry more directly.

"What do you know about this process?"

"Not much," Harry admitted. "Only that I have to carry the baby because I'm younger and more of a fit magically. And because I actually want to."

Severus nodded, once again grateful for the circumstances being what they were. It'd be a cold day in Hades before he would consider lugging a baby around in his abdomen for months on end. "I shall give you a quick overview, then.

"The spell temporarily implants a womb inside the carrier that will be used to incubate the baby and mimic the necessary hormones. If the womb believes it is inside a female body, biology will take its course. In our case, your sperm will be transformed into the egg and mine will fertilize it. If we were to use a surrogate, one of us would have to fertilize a real egg; otherwise, our surrogate's body would simply reject it.

"Ironically, the majority of complications in a wizard pregnancy aren't due to the pregnancy itself. It is because male bodies were not built with a womb in mind, and therefore pregnancy can interfere with organs or bodily functions, and in order to save the wizard, the womb would be lost. However, if all goes well and the fetus reaches thirty-seven weeks, the womb is magically removed, a process similar to selective Apparition, and the baby is birthed."

"That's amazing," Harry said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Isn't it? That this is even possible?"

"Very much so. It is encouraging to see how far the magical sciences have come. I imagine there would be many a female Muggle who would love nothing more than to foist this particular task on her husband. Alas, not yet." The two grinned at each other.

"Next, we must consider chromosomes," Severus continued, and Harry nodded. "Women are represented by the combination XX and men by XY.

"As men, we both have an equal chance of passing either an X or a Y into the mix. Women can only ever pass an X. Thus, in a normal conception between a man and a woman, there are only two possible combinations: XX or XY. In a conception between two men, however, a third option is possible: YY."

"And YY is…?"

"Not viable."

"Oh."

"Indeed. This means we would have one chance for a daughter, two chances for a son, and one chance for a non-viable result. Add to that a challenging success rate, and you will see it is not merely because you do not have a uterus that makes this proposition so risky – the physical and hormonal aspects can all be magically synthesized. The problem is men are not genetically predisposed to pregnancy."
"But can't they check for the YY combination after conception? So we'd know right away if it wasn't going to work?"

"Nothing so quick, no. The gender of a fetus cannot be accurately determined until at least the twelfth week, though it is generally advisable to wait until sometime between the sixteenth and twentieth week before attempting the test."

Harry exhaled, a frown on his face. "That'd already be halfway through, then."

"Yes. Magic can only take us so far, Harry. At some point biology must take over, regardless of one's gender." Severus grasped one of Harry's hands in his, rubbing a thumb idly along Harry's knuckles. "Now that you understand more about this process and are aware of the risks, what would you like to do?"

Harry swallowed, looking away for a moment. Severus knew what he was going to decide, but it was important that Harry got there on his own. Sure enough, when Harry turned back to look at him, that long-familiar resolve and determination tightening the features of his face, he said, "I want to try."

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

{ Two Months Later / March 2001 }

Severus remembered the night (as if he could forget) when he'd laid Harry across the pillows, face down, arse in the air, the required potions on the nightstand and their wands within reach. Wizard pregnancy was a complicated bit of magic, but they had practiced it once before (theory only) so as to be as prepared as possible. Severus was nothing if not a thorough researcher and scientist, but he was also a dutiful partner. He didn't want to see the look on Harry's face, that light of hope and anticipation draining from behind those verdant eyes, if they failed.

There were still other options – wizard adoption the best prospect among them – but he knew Harry longed for a child of his own; a biological child. And Severus, too, who had initially been wary of adding his genes to the mix – tainting it, he'd called it – had eventually been convinced that when the day came, he would be glad the child was his, too. After all, both men were the last of their bloodlines, so without perpetuating their DNA (specifically, without having at least one son between them), those lines would end with Harry and Severus.

"Are you a wizard or not?" Harry laughed at the glare Severus threw his way.

The final portion of the spell required a position that was difficult to achieve with gravity pulling on their bodies, and Harry had been unsubtly alluding to the fact that magic would make it easier.

"Mind yourself, Mr. Potter, or I shall flip you upside down and have my way with you, baby or not."

Harry squirmed at the thinly veiled threat. "Promise?" he said, wriggling his hips invitingly. Merlin, Severus was losing his touch; he couldn't even properly intimidate Harry anymore. Severus sighed to himself and decided he'd have his way later regardless, after the baby spell was done. An extra attempt might well increase their odds of fertilization, anyway.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

{ Six Months Later / September 2001 }

Severus could remember nothing in his forty-one years as beautiful as a pregnant Harry.
Standing in the doorway to their bedroom, he admired the sleeping form of his young lover lying amidst the crisp white sheets and filtered morning sun. In this light, you could almost see the aura of magic that seemed to surround Harry now, as though offering tangible evidence that both body and magic were alive with the process of creation. Severus always used to think women were being entirely too sentimental with their notion of a pregnancy glow, but he had to admit that whether or not Muggles ever had it, Harry surely did.

Harry had started showing quite a bit after only three months, likely because his body was not built for bearing a child and therefore it had nowhere to go except for out, and had cast glamours on himself when he ventured into the village. The villagers had warmly and eagerly accepted he and Severus (both as individuals and as a couple), but he didn't think a non-magical community would take a pregnant man at face value.

But now, at just past the six month mark, the swell of Harry's belly was so big that he really only felt comfortable sleeping on his side (and didn't venture into the village much anymore because it wasn't comfortable to walk or stand for long periods, and also didn't trust his magic to hold the glamour long enough).

Approaching the bed, Severus set the teacups down on the nightstand. The morning ritual included bringing Harry tea in bed – a special blend Severus had developed that included a mild calmative to help Harry with nausea – and waking him with lips against whatever exposed skin he could find, slowly mapping his way down until he was kissing the soft, protruding belly that held his unborn child.

The surge of protectiveness he felt always surprised him, never having believed he could feel this way. Then again, he went from never imagining kids as part of his life and thinking a family was out of the question, to starting a relationship with Harry where it was an inevitable conclusion that kids would be part of his future.

Still, it didn't stop him marveling at the notion that Harry – Harry Potter – was pregnant. With his child. Correction: with their child. In less than three months, they were going to be fathers. Parents. A family. Most days Severus was still trying to convince himself he hadn't walked into a dream – or if he had, he hoped he never walked out of it.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Also vividly etched into his mind was the day when, just over six months through the pregnancy, they were put on a whole new course. They were lazing in bed after the slow, languid sex they often enjoyed in the morning (less vigorous than Harry would have liked but as vigorous as Severus was prepared to get) when Severus rubbed a palm around the swell of Harry's belly, waiting for the baby to kick. While the movement during their couplings generally lulled the baby to sleep, the kicks could be quite excitable post-orgasm.

What Severus had felt caused him to sit straight up in bed, a maneuver he regretted in hindsight for the panic it caused Harry. It had just been so unexpected. It took him a few moments to try and make sense of it: a child with two magical signatures? Was this some sort of Horcrux remnant? Or some other forgotten piece of Voldemort's soul? Each idea seemed as crazy as the next. Unless…

Severus focused enough to take in the look of alarm on Harry's face.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Perhaps nothing. I merely thought I felt…” Severus put his hands back around Harry's belly and concentrated again, his eyes going wide when he confirmed it. "Yes. I did."
“What? Severus, you’re freaking me out here. What’s going on?”

Severus looked down at Harry, who had since propped himself up on his elbows, and said, "I felt two magical signatures. I thought I was imagining it, but I assure you, I am not."

For a moment, Harry just stared at him. Then reckoning hit and he pressed his own palms against his belly. "Are you saying… Does that mean…?"

Severus pursed his lips, unsure how Harry might react to this news. "Yes. There seems to be more than one baby. I believe you might be pregnant with twins."

"Twins? But how could that be?"

"The same way it happens in a normal pregnancy, I presume: either one egg splits and creates two fetuses, or two eggs become fertilized. I would hazard a guess the latter is our particular situation, as we created and implanted multiple eggs in the hopes of seeing one take."

Watching Harry's face travel through the host of emotions was something to behold: shock, awe, disbelief, confusion, wonder. It eventually settled on joy – absolute, unmitigated joy. Severus blinked. It wasn't the reaction he was expecting, but then he had to remember this was Harry. Harry, who had been longing for a family of his own ever since he was a young boy himself, suddenly found out he was carrying not one baby, but two. And not just two babies, but twins. Of course he would be overjoyed.

They later confirmed it with a visit to Dr. Hauscher, the Healer monitoring their care. (Aside from being the foremost expert in Wizard pregnancy, her obstetrics clinic could be counted on for its utmost discretion. The last thing they needed was for anyone in Britain – particularly the media – to get word that The Boy Who Lived was pregnant.)

"Your magical bond together must really be something," Dr. Hauscher said with a smile, "to have produced two successful fertilizations – a boy and a girl, to be exact." Harry perked up at that and sent a shy, wondering smile in Severus' direction.

"Why didn't you say something on one of our other visits?" Harry asked her. "More importantly, why didn't I notice?"

"Multiple fertilizations are not uncommon, but most Wizard pregnancies will only support one to full term. We tend not to set expectations for our patients until the outcome can be accurately predicted. As for the magical signatures, those manifest around the twenty-fifth week, so it is normal at this stage to begin noticing them. However, there is something we should discuss. Mr. Potter, Mr. Snape, please, have a seat." She gestured to the two chairs opposite her desk.

Harry and Severus exchanged a nervous glance, but sat as directed. Harry reached over for Severus' hand and held it tightly. Dr. Hauscher opened the folder in front of her and pulled out two documents, presenting each one to her patients in turn.

"At this stage in the pregnancy, we do two versions of the same test. This image" – she referenced the black and white photograph of what looked like two blurry fetuses in a womb – "was the Muggle sonogram. As you can see, there are two babies. Both heartbeats were strong and everything seemed quite in order."

Harry sagged in relief, but there was still tension in the way he held Severus' hand, for they both knew there was another sheet on the desk to review.

"It was this test, our magi-thermetic scan" – now the doctor pulled the second sheet closer, this one
showing a colored version of the sonogram that Severus thought resembled infrared – "that revealed something of import. I believe it is why you didn't notice the presence of the second child until just recently. One of your babies is exhibiting what we call a potencia non aestus condition. The boy, by the looks of it."

"What? What does that mean?" asked Harry. He turned a panicked look on Severus.

"A Squib," Severus clarified, giving Harry's hand what he hoped was a comforting squeeze.
"Recessive magic."

Harry blinked, his brows pinching together. He picked up the picture and looked at it, the shape of one baby quite distinct against the black background. It was filled with a brilliant array of purples and golds and reds, gently animating itself in what looked like slow thrums of energy. The other shape, while still baby-like, was little more than a dark outline with a greenish cast to it, swirling like a thick fog.

Seeing what he and Harry were likely noticing, Dr. Hauscher said, "The green indicates there is a magical signature but no core. This means the child will be able to see and interact with the magical world, but will never possess any magical abilities nor be able to wield a wand." She paused and looked at the two men over the tops of her glasses. "I am very sorry if this was not the news you were hoping for."

Harry stared at the image a bit longer, then swallowed. "Will he be okay, though?"

"At this point, all indications point to yes, as the rest of his development appears normal."

Harry nodded, but it was clearly an automatic response, for his face did not show the same acceptance. He glanced at the picture again and then looked back up at the doctor. "Does this happen a lot?"

Likely sensing what Harry was really asking, Dr. Hauscher leaned forward onto her elbows. "You did not cause this, Mr. Potter. There is nothing you could have done differently to prevent it. The unfortunate fact is that male pregnancy is rife with unfavorable statistics. What this does mean, however, is you will have to make some changes for the rest of your pregnancy, and follow my instructions explicitly if you wish to increase the odds of carrying both your babies to full term."

Harry nodded seriously and then looked over at Severus, the stress of the conversation evident on his face. Emotions seemed to chase one another across his expressive features until they all stopped and jumbled together in the form of a big question mark. At first Harry remained silent, perhaps afraid to know the answer, but eventually gave in. "Does it matter to you? A Squib?" he asked tentatively.

Severus slid forward on his chair and reached over to Harry, placing his hands protectively around that swollen, protruding belly. He waited until he had Harry's gaze before he spoke. "Not in the slightest. It is healthy children we are after, Harry, nothing more."

Harry's relief was palpable and he gave a tired smile. He placed his hands over Severus' so they could hold his belly together, and his eyes fairly glowed with love and pride. Then he turned back to the doctor. "But the girl?" he asked. "She'll still be magical?"

"Yes," Dr. Hauscher said with a smile. "In more ways than one, I suspect."

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

{ Two Months Later / November 2001 }
Dr. Hauscher had given Harry position restrictions for the remainder of his pregnancy – not bed rest, per se, but he needed to remain lying on his back or his side, not sitting up or standing for long periods, so as to not put pressure on the implanted womb or the babies inside it.

This was just as well, since Harry was tired most of the time and didn't have the energy to do much aside from walking between his two 'perches' (their bed and the chaise in the great room) and using the loo. His magic was dampened and out of reach, too, as though the majority of it was being absorbed up with the task of creating two babies.

He did keep his notebook handy, though. Even when he didn't have the energy to do anything else, he would grab his notebook and jot down the stories in his head. He once told Severus it felt like a never-ending stream of things. Seems that once he'd opened up the chapters of his life and started writing about them, they were all keen to be heard.

Harry was also given a regular regimen of potions, which Severus was only too happy to brew (after muttering about the sub-standard quality from the hospital, not properly understanding the science behind things). Although he was no stranger to delicate potions, these were different; more was riding on their success. This was about a family – something which Harry likely held more dear than his own life.

In fact, Harry was convinced he only got through his pregnancy because of a cautious Healer, Severus' superior potions and a Hogwarts house-elf that waited on him hand and foot (a favor from Minerva – aside from the Weasleys, she was the only other person they'd told their news to). Her congratulations had arrived in the form of Tulley, a diminutive elf in a crisp pillowcase that bore the Hogwarts crest. He was an older elf, but very eager to help. And really, elven magic was a wonder all on its own.

The babies were born two weeks early, on the twenty-second of November – appropriately under the sign of the Centaur – at the very capable hands of Dr. Hauscher. She had traveled in, along with her medi-staff of three specialists, to conduct the births at home in Costa Rica, since magical transport was too dangerous in Harry's high-risk state.

A tetchy and dangerous spell, selective surgical Apparition required utmost precision and skill – one false step in the procedure and a liver or kidney (or other delicate tissue, nerve or muscle) could be removed along with the womb, something that could have dire complications. One does not simply 'put things back' into the body, even with access to magic. Thankfully, none was needed, as the womb was removed free and clear. Both babies were healthy, weighing a little over five pounds each, their heads covered in whorls of black, downy hair.

The elder twin by two minutes, Evan Samuel Potter was the first to be birthed. They'd come up with the first name together, both wishing to honor Harry's mother. Severus decided his contribution would be Samuel, his professional working name – one that not only had a great reputation in Potions circles, but one that also felt more personal and familial than Tobias ever had. No point saddling the child with smears of that name's history.

Severus leaned over to place a kiss first on the newborn's head, then one to Harry's temple. Harry gave him a tired smile and went back to staring at their new baby.

"He's so small," Harry said in awe, his voice barely above a whisper. "I can't believe…" He shook his head as though trying to separate the jumble of thoughts that were no doubt barraging his mind. His eyes lifted to meet Severus'. "I can't believe he's ours. I can't believe we have a son!"

"And a daughter," Severus said, accepting the newest bundle of blankets from Dr. Hauscher. Severus watched the baby scrunch up her face, her little fists balling tightly around her eyes, as
though annoyed at how bright it was in the room. Even mere minutes old, Severus already felt a kinship with her and had to resist the urge to laugh.

He leaned down over the bed so he and Harry could look at her together. "May I introduce, Elena Katherine Potter."

It had been Harry who’d requested the name Elena. Severus found he rather liked the sound of it and had no predisposition towards anything else, so he’d said yes. When Harry’s face brightened and his body sagged in relief, it was clear he’d been concerned how Severus might react. As if Severus could have denied him anything at that point.

Once again, Severus chose the middle name, this time for his maternal great-grandmother. She had passed away when Severus was only six years old, but he still remembered her vividly. Well into her nineties when he’d known her, she was a feisty witch with a wicked sense of humor and a loose tongue. Her favorite pastime was telling stories that were not at all appropriate for children, so naturally Severus was very fond of her.

Somehow, he sensed that Elena was going to prove to be a worthy namesake.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Harry was severely taxed after the births, so Severus had to kick into high gear for the first couple of weeks.

Dr. Hauscher had supplied them with a new potion and rest regimen, all with the hopes of restoring Harry’s natural equilibrium as quickly as possible. His magical core had been heavily depleted – maintaining a womb for two babies for months on end had taken a lot out of him, both physically and magically. And until he healed, he was forbidden from doing magic of any kind – no easy feat, considering it was almost an instinctual reaction for a wizard to use it. Even more so when there were two new babies in the house.

All Severus could say was thank Merlin for that Hogwarts house-elf. By the end of those two weeks, he was ready to collapse into bed next to Harry and never move again. How he’d ever thought a classroom full of eleven-year-olds was hard work was beyond him – they couldn't hold a candle to a couple of infants.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

{ One Month Later / December 2001 }

A month in, they were both still recovering and resting and decided to lay low for the holiday. Tulley had taken it upon himself to decorate a large evergreen in the corner of their great room (which really meant Minerva would not hear of them going without – ever the traditionalist, she was). Severus wanted to abhor the gaudy thing, but in reality, that small token of Hogwarts cheer reminded him of the brighter moments he’d had while growing up within the castle’s hallowed walls. Besides, the babies were mesmerized by the twinkling lights and shiny baubles, and anything that held a child’s attention that long was worth keeping.

Letting their dinner simmer on the stove for a minute, Severus stepped away to peek his head around the door to see Harry draped across the chaise by the windows, one baby in his arms and the other between his legs. Harry marveled at their tiny fingers, kissing them one by one until the babies giggled and curled their hands away from his mouth – something that never failed to make Harry laugh with delight. He was so in love with those two babies; so in love with the fact that they had created them together, that the look of awe and wonder he often wore had almost become etched
onto his face.

Severus stepped back into the kitchen before he disturbed the scene, reflecting on what his life had become. That was Christmas enough for him that year.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

{ One Year Later / December 2002 }

The following year, they traveled back to Britain for Christmas – their first visit since they'd left the country three and a half years earlier. They were going to stay at a Muggle hotel (to avoid being seen by anyone in the Wizarding world) but Molly insisted they be houseguests at The Burrow instead. Severus knew there would be no point in arguing – especially now that they had two little ones in tow.

The kids, who were just over a year old, spent the holiday getting passed around from one Weasley to the next, two little heads of black hair amongst a sea of red. Molly was in her element, even though they weren't her first grandchildren (the eldest Weasley and his French wife had already seen to that). And Lupin's offspring was there, too, even though he was no more related to the Weasleys than Evan and Elena were. Or even Harry, for that matter. But to Molly, that was irrelevant. She had always chosen her family as she wished and that was simply that.

What bemused Severus even more was that that family had now extended to include him. It seemed having children had given him two families of his own. For someone who'd thought he'd never even have one, that was a staggering thought.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

As early as six months old, Elena had shown signs of magic. Harry had been the one feeding her a bottle one night when he looked down and noticed that she had turned the feet of her one-piece pajamas blue. By the time she had reached her first birthday, she was routinely making objects react to her whims, no matter how conscious of it she was. Although Severus and Harry had been assured it was perfectly normal, they couldn't help feeling that the strength and clarity of her accidental magic meant she was likely going to be a powerful witch when she was older. Harry liked to say it was the reason Evan hadn't gotten any magic: Elena had monopolized the womb and taken it all for herself. Severus had merely smirked at that – a Slytherin in their midst, to be sure. It certainly suited her rebel-without-a-cause personality.

Evan was the opposite. Gentle and observant, he was always curious as to what people were doing (especially his papa). He loved sitting with Severus and reading stories, which, at a year old, consisted of Severus holding the book and reading while Evan sucked on the fingers of one hand and pointed at the pictures with his other. He also liked to watch Severus brew. Secured in his baby chair at one end of the work table, Evan's eyes would track the vials and decanters and small bowls as their contents made their way into the cauldrons. Severus found he enjoyed the quiet company, and would sometimes even charm the steam to turn colors just to elicit coos from his audience.

Being at the Weasley house now, with its kooky angles and tactile decor, meant the kids wanted to crawl around and explore everything. They were getting good at pulling themselves up while holding onto furniture or people while their inquisitive eyes tried to take in every inch of their colorful surroundings.

That was where their physical differences were most pronounced: Evan's eyes were dark brown while Elena's were deep hazel – which only looked brown until you saw them in the light, then they sparkled with olive green and mischief. Their hair was different, too. Evan seemed to have inherited
Harry's unkempt mop, while Elena's was sleek and straight, reminiscent of Severus' except that hers was often split into two short, wispy pigtails.

Their vocabulary was still limited to a few simple words and sounds, but Elena was always babbling away, as though testing out this mysterious new tool she had been given and trying to shake its secrets loose. Her favorite thing to say was "Me!" – which would have been cute except she also understood its context, using vocal inflection to distinguish it between a noun, a verb and a demand.

Yes, she was going to be a handful, alright.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Severus had just come back from changing Elena's diaper and was cuddling her close, nuzzling her cheek with his nose, when someone near him spoke.

"I never would have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

Severus' head shot up and he looked at Molly, who had somehow appeared right next to him. "Excuse me?"

"Having children has positively mellowed you, Severus Snape," Molly patted a hand on Severus' forearm and gave him a motherly smile. "Oh, it is so good to see," she said, almost to herself, and then wandered back into the kitchen.

Severus stared after her, the scowl on his face lasting only until he looked over at Harry, who was staring at him from across the room. He'd obviously heard the exchange. Severus also knew that look. It said two things loud and clear: I love you and I want you.

Now.

Severus sighed, glancing down at the yawning baby in his arms. What exactly did Harry expect him to do? He supposed he could pass her along to the many sets of waiting arms in the room or perhaps transfigure a chair into a temporary crib. Still mid-thought, Severus looked up again to see Harry laughing at him, likely at having guessed what was occurring. Severus huffed and went to find a comfortable seat in which to rock Elena to sleep, ignoring Harry's affectionate and amused expression. He loved that look, but knew if he dwelled on it, more than his dignity would suffer. (They had already christened more than enough Weasley property for Severus' tastes.)

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

One evening after the children had all gone to bed and the adults were gathered in the sitting room, enjoying glasses of wine and a variety of concurrent conversations, Severus overheard Hermione asking Harry if his tattoo had had any reaction to the pregnancy (since new magical signatures were evident within his body during that time) and if he'd tested the tattoo with the children yet. Severus also heard what she didn't ask: since Evan was a Squib, would it react for him?

Unfazed, Harry had launched into an answer, explaining that for the entire duration of his pregnancy, the phoenix had relocated itself to his abdomen, centered over his belly button. The wings had spread wide and the aura of flames that used to surround them changed to a white glow (purity, innocence, masculine divine). Severus remembered thinking how apropos that was.

As for Evan, being a Squib didn't factor into it – it was a magical signature that made the tattoo react, not a magical core, and the core was the only piece Evan was missing. Whenever he'd touch it, the phoenix would glow green (balance, harmony, healing). For Elena… well, naturally it would have a different reaction for her. She could make it dance.
Six Months Later / June 2003

It was later the following year, once school was out again for the season, when Harry decided he wanted to have a place to sell his stories, along with other books he'd like to hand-select and import from all over the world. Even though it was only Muggles who lived in their village (or perhaps because of that), Harry wanted to open the kids up to experiences beyond their immediate environment; to expand their access to include stories of all kinds.

He named the shop Pineapple Cove. The logo was an illustrated rendering of a pineapple, split up the middle and laid open like a book, with words scribbled on its 'pages'. The wooden sign positioned over the bookshop's front door had been painted a bright cheery yellow to match, and the small brass bell that rang when the door opened only added to the shop's quaint, charming feel.

The school had tried to talk Harry into becoming a full-fledged teacher, but he'd politely declined, saying he first wanted to try his hand at opening his own bookshop. In lieu of the fact he wouldn't be able to do story time at the school anymore, he made an arrangement that allowed kids to come to his shop and check out books for free, just like a library. Of course, as it turned out, the kids rarely left the shop with the books – they seemed to prefer taking up residence in the squashy beanbags Harry had stuffed in nooks and crannies all over the store: between bookshelves, in the loft space over the cash register, and even in the front window – reading until their parents came to collect them.

Harry referred to these regulars as his "other" kids. And the kids, in turn, had adopted Harry right back. It was the sweetest sort of symbiotic relationship that existed. Many had seen Harry reading his stories in person at the school. Many had begged their parents to check one out from his shop. Others asked Harry every time they saw him when his next book was coming out.

Children, as it happened, were always ready for more magic.

Ironically, the proprietor of the tea and coffee shop next door was a Welshman who had relocated to Costa Rica some twenty years earlier, and was excited to be in business next to a fellow Brit.

On the day he'd stopped over to introduce himself, Severus had caught bits and pieces of the conversation while carrying in boxes of books. One exchange in particular had always stuck with him. The man (Alan, was his name – a kindly gentleman with graying hair and an expansive waistline) had asked Harry, "You're a young fellow to already be opening a shop of your own. How did you land on this line of work?"

And in response, Harry had said, "I didn't, really. I sort of fell into it by accident." He'd paused and smiled to himself then, clearly recalling something with a fond association, and then looked back at Alan. "Sometimes I think the right things find us. Story of my life, basically."

It was also the year Harry finally bought himself a laptop – a little silver thing with a glowing white apple on the cover. Hermione had suggested typing after he complained about being unable to decipher his horrible handwriting ('Hippogriff scratches,' he'd called it.) Severus had asked Harry why he didn't get one with a pineapple instead of an apple and Harry had just laughed at him, then kissed him, then laughed some more.

Severus didn't see why it was funny – he'd thought it a valid suggestion – but was happy to let Harry
soothe his ego with kisses nonetheless. He had no interest in computers, or really any of the Muggle
gadgets that Harry often become enamored with. He preferred his crisp parchment, his leather-bound
journals, his elegant, long-feathered quills. Harry thought it was charming, and made no move to try
and update Severus. ('It just seems more you that way, I dunno."

"I could always write you a book," Harry offered one day.

"Your children's stories would hardly satisfy an adult's tastes."

"That's not true, I have lots of adult customers."

"Who are likely shopping for their children, yes."

"Well, you read all my books."

"Only because they are yours, Harry. And they are good. They are just not Baxter, Silverberg,
Stross or Banks."

Harry had nodded, likely knowing he couldn't compete with the well-worn, yet meticulously cared
for, science fiction classics Severus favored. "Fair enough," he said with a smile, then added, "So,
you're saying I should write science fiction instead?"

Severus paused, pursing his lips. "Only if that is your wish. I might even be coerced into reading
those without your provocation."

"Git," Harry said with a fond sort of chuckle and Severus smirked.

Harry would often sit in bed late at night, tapping away quietly on his laptop with his tongue stuck
out the corner of his mouth, the light from the screen giving his features a soft, bluish cast. Severus
would lay in bed next to him, pretending to be asleep, watching with a fond sort of amusement as the
words flowed onto the page.

He was always struck by the visual of it, too, for Severus could think of nothing else – aside from
becoming a father – that had ever made Harry look quite so much at home.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

{ Present Day / June 2004 }

The soft bonging of the grandfather clock in the foyer stirred Severus from his thoughts.

Five o'clock already. He couldn't believe he'd been sitting there for an hour already, lost in a sea of
his thoughts, taking a mental inventory of the last five years of his life. Within minutes, the sun
crested the mountains and painted a swathe of light up the floor and over the tops of his pale feet.

The vaulted ceiling above him was now fully illuminated by the day's early light and Severus took a
moment to sit up and glance around at the rest of the room, now that he could see it all: white walls
merging seamlessly with white ceilings, soaring vaults and sun-drenched windows, native Almendro
wood floors in a warm chestnut-brown, and a fireplace mantel that had been decorated with photos
of Harry and himself and their two children – all evidence of the surreal existence he now called
home.

Even though Severus was living it, it was still nearly incomprehensible at times. If someone would've
even suggested such a thing were possible for him, he would have thought them quite delusional. He
never even pictured himself alive at this point, much less here. Yet now that he was here – to fresh
air and sunshine, to warm breezes and cleansing downpours, to a family of his own – he knew it was precisely where he was meant to be.

He stood and stretched. Soon it would be time for the rest of the house to be waking, for they were expecting guests that afternoon: Ron and Hermione were traveling in, their first visit since the opening of the bookshop – and one other big milestone – the month before.

Almost automatically, Severus pressed his left thumb against the underside of his fourth finger, fancying he could still feel the warmth of the runic magic that had hovered there. He'd married Harry at dusk, standing in the middle of Harry's new bookshop, beneath the glittering gold of bonding magic and the temporarily magicked ceiling of an expansive blue and orange sky.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

Hermione gave a sharp intake of breath as she walked slowly around the black grand piano that stood prominently in the center of the great room, the polished surface shining from the floor-to-ceiling windows that backdropped it.

"I bought it for Severus as a wedding gift."

"It's beautiful," Hermione enthused. Then she glanced over her shoulder and lowered her voice to a whisper. "This must have cost a fortune!"

Harry just smiled. "It did, but it was worth every Galleon just to see the look on his face when I gave it to him. You should see how he babies it – he practically caresses it. Come to think of it, I wouldn't be surprised if there was some kind of protective charm around it. He doesn't like the kids banging on the keys, and that's all they're interested in doing at the moment." Harry chuckled, letting his delight be evident.

Hermione grinned. "I imagine. It's a wonderful gift. Does he play it a lot?"

"Only when he thinks I'm not listening." They both laughed.

In truth, listening to Severus play was still one of Harry's favorite things to do. He was sure he wasn't fooling Severus with his attempts at stealth, but he always stayed out of view, listening instead from the den or when he was puttering around in the kitchen. The sound was rich and immersive and he swore it imbued every corner of the house with music. It would have been hard not to listen. But, he knew Severus didn't like an audience (or a vocal accompaniment, Harry snickered to himself) and so he respected Severus' space when the man wanted to lose himself in his music. Otherwise he was afraid Severus would squirrel the piano away in his basement lab and then Harry wouldn't get to enjoy the music or the way it looked in the room.

"I thought you said Severus had a piano at Hogwarts? He didn't bring that one?"

"No, he left it behind. I think he felt it belonged to the castle and that it should be there for someone else to find one day. Besides, if you ask me, he was due for an upgrade." Hermione smiled as Harry continued.

"He doesn't like it when I spend money on him, though I can't tell if that's just because he's so bloody independent or because he thinks the money is my Dad's or Sirius'. When I told him I have more money than I know what to do with, he just said, 'You don't have to spend it all before you're thirty, you twit.'" Harry smiled, then shrugged. "You know Severus, he hates being coddled – even when he's not and just thinks he is. So I just try to do things for him that I know he'd never do for himself because he's either too proud or too cheap."
They shared another knowing laugh and then Harry escorted her outside, where Ron was already playing with the twins.

"I wonder what Severus would see in a dreamscape," Harry wondered aloud.

Hermione was sitting next to him on their porch swing. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Isn't what obvious?"

She turned to look at him. "I'm pretty sure he already has everything he desires, Harry."

Feeling his cheeks flush at the thought, Harry looked down at his knees. "Oh," he answered softly, unable to keep the smile from stealing across his face. They continued to watch Severus a bit longer, rooting around in the garden, carefully assessing and selecting herbs for their evening meal in that precise way of his. A sense of happiness and contentment settled over him and his smile widened. "Good."

Despite Hermione's assertion, however, Harry couldn't let the dreamscape question go. He had to hear it from Severus himself. During a rare moment in the morning when it was just the two of them, Harry set down his coffee and took a deep breath. "What would you see in a dreamscape?"

Severus looked up from the newspaper he had been reading and stared at Harry for a moment, as though mentally sorting through the question he was just asked. "Imbecile," he said, then went back to reading the article before him.

"Wha—?" Stung and a little confused, Harry leaned over the table and pressed the newspaper away from Severus' face, but Severus simply fixed him with the same disinterested stare. "But you didn't even answer my – oh." Harry sat back suddenly and smiled. "You'd see this, wouldn't you?"

"Imbecile."

Harry felt the warmth and affection in Severus' tone as the newspaper snapped back into place, and he couldn't help the delighted chuckle that escaped.

The following evening, after getting the table set for dinner, Harry and Hermione made their way to the great room to wait for the 'chefs' to finish cooking. Hermione had asked why they chose to get bonded now, after the children were already three, and not before. Harry had a ready answer.

"We wanted to wait until they were old enough to participate, so it could be about all of us; our family. I'm sorry that it excluded you and Ron, and the rest of the Weasleys," he said quickly, "but I think it was the first thing in my life that was really just for me. For Severus, too."

"I totally understand that, Harry, and I am not upset at all. Really. It's about time you two got to call the shots on something!" Her smile was gentle, and as he looked back at his friend of nearly fourteen years, he exhaled, feeling the tension he'd been expecting to meet melt away. He pulled her into a hug.

"Thank you," was all he could bring himself to say, feeling the emotions too close to the surface. When they separated, Hermione smiled again, though this time it was decidedly more mischievous.
"That doesn't exempt you from telling me the story, however!" she said, her grin widening. She settled herself comfortably on the sofa opposite Harry. "Now, start at the beginning – and don't leave out any details!" She curled her hands around a mug of steaming tea while Harry recounted the tale.

He'd always thought his bonding would happen in Australia (or that he'd want it to) but realized later there was a certain symmetry to it being held in Costa Rica. It tied them more permanently and poetically to the land, to the home and family they'd built, and to the life they had finally started to live. Besides, as a destination, it was still tropical. And magical.

It had been the day before the bookshop was due to open to the public. Harry had arranged for Severus to meet him there early so he could surprise him with the completion of the shop. The kids would join them later. Harry wanted his family to christen the shop publicly by being his first 'customers.' He had ideas for how to christen the shop privately once everyone but Severus cleared out.

However, when he arrived, the print version of his latest book was waiting for him in a box on the doorstep – a synchronous event he hadn't planned, but was delighted by the timing of nonetheless, for it was really the ahead-of-schedule appearance of the book that inspired him to expand his surprise of "Look, the shop's finished!" to an overture of "Will you marry me?"

The book was the first in a new series that told the on-going adventures of two men who had settled into their respective careers as a magical chemist and a clay artist, and who were also navigating the triumphs and pitfalls of a life shared together. It was called The Alchemist and the Potter. He hoped Severus wouldn't mind being written about, even with the allusions as abstract as they were, but he wanted to explore the mostly-fictitious world of two gay men. Mainly he wanted to write about new things, things from where he was now, since there were only a few adventures left from his childhood he hadn't yet written about. Harry wanted to start a new chapter – in more ways than one.

There hadn't been an engagement period, per se, unless you counted a proposal that lasted a minute or two, followed by the decision to conduct the ceremony later that same day.

Severus didn't want to give people a chance to fawn over him or Harry (or over them as a couple), and didn't want the grotesquery of decorations, flowers and all that 'useless, sentimental crap' – a description which had set Harry to laughing. He was fine letting Severus set the tone for it; he didn't care what they did, so long as he had Severus and the kids there with him.

Indeed, only seven people were present: Severus, Harry, the children, an officiant and one witness for each of them, who turned out to be Harry's colleagues from school and who Severus also knew. One of them had even offered to play a song during the ceremony, so Harry had conferred with him in private, keeping the request a secret. The result was "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea" on ukulele. Harry thought it turned out very sweet, and Severus pretended not to be affected by it. Harry had just laughed and kissed him.

They'd kept their wardrobe simple and selected items from their own closet: black trousers with white button-down shirts. It felt ceremonial without being too formal. They let the kids choose their own clothes – Evan picked green shorts and a blue Spider-Man t-shirt; Elena opted for a yellow sundress – but then Harry outfitted them in matching black and white sneakers. It was his way of tying the kids into the ceremony while still being practical, since they were just going to be running around the shop anyway.

"We decided not to do wedding rings. Too traditional," Harry explained. "Instead…” He stopped and grinned, a faint blush tingling his cheeks.

"What?" Hermione prodded.
"Well, I already had a tattoo, and it turns out Severus really likes it, so we just added to it." He showed her the small, intertwined rings emblazoned on the chest of the phoenix, the edges of the bands marked in runic symbols that signified their bonding commitment. "He wasn't too keen on getting a similar tattoo for himself, though, so he agreed to get something pierced instead."

Hermione's eyes went wide and she leaned forward, her expression rapt. "He didn't!"

Harry's grin widened. "Oh, yes, he most certainly did."

Hermione slipped a hand over Harry's forearm, grasping it lightly. When she spoke, it was barely above a whisper. "Where?"

In response, Harry just kept grinning, his eyes nearly glittering. Eventually, Hermione squeaked, her expression owlish. "Oh my God! There?" Her reaction made it sound like she was somewhere between aghast and intrigued.

"There," Harry affirmed. Then he leaned closer in order to whisper back. "It's hot as hell, too, let me tell you. We have to be careful with some things, but going slow just heightens the whole experience, so I can hardly complain. I especially like threading my tongue through it."

She smacked his arm. "Harry James Potter!"

"What?" He laughed, shielding his face from her friendly swats. "You should tell Ron to get one, then you'll understand!"

"I would nev—" she started, but then paused thoughtfully. "Does it hurt to get one? Wait, what am I even saying! Harry!"

She began to laugh with him as she continued her mock assault until they both tipped over, collapsing into a heap on the floor. Harry tried to catch his breath as he clutched his sides, while Hermione pressed her face into his shoulder, shaking with laughter.

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

"What in the…?" Ron froze as he entered the great room, Severus swerving out from behind him just in time. They were both carrying dishes and platters still steaming from the oven.

"Do you need directions to our dining room, Mr. Weasley? I did not just spent the last hour and a half cooking with you so that you may render this meal—" He broke off suddenly as he lined up his gaze with Ron's and took in the scene before him. Harry and Hermione were entangled on the floor, caught up in what appeared to be a fresh round of hysterics. They were laughing so hard they had tears streaming down their cheeks, their faces flushed red.

"Proceed, Mr. Weasley. It appears our respective others will be out of commission for a while."

SSHP-SSHP-SSHP

"Harry, you have the most ridiculously beautiful children," Hermione observed, shaking her head in disbelief.

Harry smiled, leaning over the edge of the crib to admire the sleeping toddlers. Trailing a finger along one round, dimpled cheek, his expression went impossibly soft. "Yeah, they're something, aren't they?"

"My genes, naturally," Severus deadpanned as he entered the room, carrying a bottle of wine and
three glasses.

Hermione barked out a laugh, then immediately clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. "Sorry!" she whispered, casting an anxious glance at the children. She missed Severus' smirk as he began to pour a measure for each of them.

"Don't worry," Harry said with a smile, "they're good sleepers. I think it's all this fresh air." He motioned to an open window in the room, but Hermione knew the gesture meant this place – Costa Rica – in general. She found herself automatically sniffing at the breeze, relishing the subtle hint of spice that always seemed to infuse the lush, evening air.

When Severus approached, laden with three glasses of wine, he handed one to Hermione with a small incline of his head, and then approached his husband. Looping an arm around Harry's shoulders from behind, he leaned in and pressed a warm kiss to the exposed neck. Instinctively, Harry snuggled back into the embrace, grasping the proffered glass as he did so.

Hermione found herself smiling at the comfortable domesticity that Harry and Severus shared; at their family, their love. Who would have guessed? she thought with some degree of amusement and wonder. Glancing down at the children, their raven locks charmingly mussed against their foreheads, she watched as they slept on peacefully, completely unaware of the incredible journey their parents had taken to get to this moment.

Raising her glass minutely, Hermione silently toasted them. After savoring a small sip, she lingered only a moment longer before slipping from the room to give them a little time together. It was about time to go rouse Ron, anyway, as he'd fallen asleep on the sofa shortly after dinner.

One day, though, Hermione hoped Harry and Severus would gather their family around – grandchildren on their laps and their children, spouses and friends draped across every available seat or flat surface, lingering in the corners of the room or leaning against doorways (wherever there was space) – while they took turns telling their story. She could already picture it: all eyes would be riveted to the front, the younger ones lying on the floor with their chins in their hands, the adults somewhere behind them bearing fond, knowing smiles, and they'd all be listening raptly, held captive by every word, as though they were under the thrall of some magic.

And perhaps they would be, Hermione thought with a smile.

It was just one of those kinds of stories.

~ Fin ~
I can't tell you how exhilarating it is for me to finally be able to click the radio button next to 'Complete' for this story! (Excuse me while I flail indignantly off camera.) It has been a long, crazy journey – 6 years, 7 months and 28 days to be exact. I set out to write a 12,000 word story based off an idea that came to me in a dream, and while the story that developed still holds true to that original idea, it clearly became so much more (and so much longer!) than I ever imagined it could be. But hey, who's counting when the difference is plus or minus 150,000 words, right?

My goal was simply to use canon as a jumping off point (while staying as canon-compliant as possible) to explore one way in which 'Snarry' could have happened. Not that I personally needed convincing, of course, but just for, you know, posterity.

I hope you enjoyed it!

~ lovetoseverus
25 November, 2015

THANK YOU TO…

It really does take a small village to pull off a story of this size. It would not have been possible without the following people:

**JaseFinley**
for being patient with me throughout the entire creation of this story. For years he faithfully listened as I read every chapter out loud, asked me insightful questions that helped fine-tune the narrative, and provided spot-on plot wrangling when I was stuck on some detail. As my unofficial beta, he is the unsung hero of this story. And after enduring Snarry romance for 30-some chapters, he's now holding out for the cross-over het fic I promised him as recompense. I suppose he's earned it.

**SnapesFavorite**
for her all-things-German assistance, her heartfelt support and commiseration over what it's like to build and write a story of this size (and if you're not reading hers, you should – it's called *In This World For You*), her insight on some tricky plot sequencing, and her thoughtful read-through of the chapter I now call the Weekend of Debauchery (since my intrepid listener, JaseFinley, said he didn't want anything to do with all that 'foolish wand waving'). We are truly cut from the same fanfic cloth, my dear, and I have absolutely relished sharing The Snarry with you. Next we work on finishing your fic, yes? :)

**Glockgal**
for the beautiful, inspired artwork. As a gift to myself (and to preemptively celebrate the accomplishment of finishing this fic) I commissioned two pieces, wherein Glock deftly and marvelously captured my vision. One is an illustration with four characters that should require no introduction; the other is a gorgeous watercolor painting that has since become the cover art for this story. You may find and ogle both at my fandom website or Facebook page (links are in my profile).

**WordsConsumeHer**
for her unwavering support of this story, generalized ass-kicking, plot prodding and pineapple upside-down cake. ;)
Gingertart
for her excellent "George-voice" and seriously impressive knowledge of sci-fi literature and music of the 1970s.

ChooseToLive and Louise
for listening to me talk about this story repeatedly throughout its entire development (even as they patiently waited for me to complete it so they could read it all in one go – cheaters!). Thank you both for your support even though you had no clue what I was talking about.

Sheankelor
for keeping me company during some long-haul writing spurts with amusing conversation about the questionable habits of conservative ladies, the unabridged history of Sailor Moon, and a certain little red ball (psssst, he gave it back to George before they moved).

classyblue
for just being her.

The bands and musicians
who put their music into the world, making it possible for me to dwell in a wide variety of emotional states to tap into the heart of my characters or a scene; for inspiring chapter titles or providing songs for Harry and Severus to share (especially Rachmaninoff and George Harrison); and for truly giving me a soundtrack to this fic.

HP fans the world over
who put their favorite Potter jokes on the interwebs for me to steal for Chapter 32. Credit and thanks goes to their creators.

My favorite Snarry authors
for giving Harry something to do other than become an Auror. I absolutely relish stories where he does unusual work (while still plausible and in character, of course) and my favorite Snarry fics read like a who's who of interesting or exotic jobs. The careers Harry considers in Chapter 26 ("Onward and Upward") were directly inspired by and borrowed from these stories, and as such, I offer those authors my thanks and admiration.

All my loyal readers
for sticking with me throughout this story's long and hiatus-filled journey. I am so grateful for your feedback, your enthusiasm and your patience. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I've had a blast, and I hope we meet again!

and finally, to J.K. Rowling
for, well, everything.

IF YOU WANT MORE…

Be sure to check out One-Dose Potions: Outtakes from the Draught No. 9 Universe, a collection of one-shots and scenes – basically, all the little extras that didn't fit into the main story. This is not really a sequel, or even anything linear, it's just a place where I can continue to play with the characters and the world. Some are ideas I wanted to explore but didn't get a chance to, others were scenes I had written but had to cut, and the rest will just be new stuff – little vignettes and highlights of their life. Posts will be sporadic at best, though, so grab an alert if you'd like to get notified when new things appear.
ARTWORK…

Aside from the two pieces of fanart I commissioned for this story, there is another that you MUST see. It has nothing to do with my fic – in theory – yet when I found it for the first time, I gasped in shock… and recognition… and delight… and a million other emotions. It's not "exact" (the ages/look of the kids isn't quite right), but it may as well have been done for my story anyway because it's perfect and amazing and my heart swells every time I see it. You'll understand soon enough: http://anastasiamantihora.deviantart.com/art/That-orange-day-293121901

(If the link doesn't work or display correctly, Google search for "AnastasiaMantihora That Orange Day" and you should find it in her deviantART gallery. Her work is amazing, so please drop some comment love on her! And while you're there, I suppose you could also make a case for her piece "Primavera" being an abstract from my fic, but now I'm probably just being greedy.)

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eBOOK…

If you had previously downloaded a copy of this story, do it again now that the story is complete. I edited every chapter at multiple intervals the entire time I was writing it, so to ensure you have the most recent version, grab a fresh copy. I recommend visiting my account at Archive of Our Own (AO3), as they have an awesome tool for exporting a story as a PDF, EPUB or MOBI file. Or, if you prefer a snazzy PDF in book layout (with artwork!), I will make that available at my fandom website once I'm done putting it together.

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AND IF YOU'VE MADE IT THIS FAR DOWN THE PAGE…

I shall reward you with a piece of useless trivia: this story includes words or phrases from Spanish, German, Greek, French, English and (fake) Latin, with Muggle, Wizarding and British slang, and a little bit of house-elf speak. I also used elements of color theory, numerology, spirituality, psychology, biology, geography, literature, mathematics and astrology. Oh, and I made some very unsubtle references to a classic sci-fi TV show, a popular computer company, and a handful of sci-fi authors, music bands and worldly cuisines.

Clearly I am an overachiever.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!