The Syntax of Things
by Arrisha

Summary

A short-lived series of private lessons took place after Christmas in Harry Potter's fifth school year, during which Severus Snape attempted to teach Harry the skill of Occlumency. The lessons were finally cancelled when Harry was caught prying into Snape's memories, discovering the strangest things: there was a Prophecy about him, his dad was a bully, and Severus Snape had been in love with Harry's mum. Naturally, Harry now has a million questions. Snape would prefer to answer none.

The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes. The same question rises in every soul: "For what, for whom, must I kill and be killed?"

...Or, a classic approach to stubbornness.

Notes

The Mugglenet excerpt that inspired this story:

The memory that Harry saw [in his fifth year] isn’t the only memory Snape placed in the Pensieve; Snape has placed several memories in there (OotP 533). And I would argue that those memories are none other than The Prince’s Tale.
After all, Snape cannot be sure of which memories Harry has seen, since the one he catches Harry in is squarely in the middle of them all. And if Harry saw the other memories in The Prince’s Tale, the results would be catastrophic.

First of all, Harry would find out that Snape was in love with Lily. He would also learn that Snape has sworn to protect him, which would complicate things. Keep in mind that during the Occlumency lessons, Harry had not yet heard about the prophecy. So he would be quite full of questions. And then he would find out that Snape relayed it to Voldemort, which he did not take well when he found that out anyway. The damage that would come from Harry overhearing this exchange would be enormous.
"Who wants to see me take off Snivelly's pants?" asked James.

The small crowd cheered again, and with a swish of James' wand Snape's pants flew up to his knobby knees, leaving him exposed as he frantically tried to cover himself with his hands.

Lupin looked up at that, his face flushed, and he quickly shoved his book into his bag, preparing to leave.

"Where are you going, Moony?" asked Sirius, still laughing.

Lupin muttered an excuse Harry failed to hear, and as Snape fell to the ground again, struggling to wrap his robes around himself and get his pants up, the memory swirled.

Harry seemed to fly through shifting shapes and colours until his surroundings solidified. He stood on a hilltop, the wind whistling through the branches of a few leafless trees. Snape was there, but he was an older now, and he was panting, dropped to his knees in front of Albus Dumbledore.

"I—I come with a warning—no, a request—please—"

"What request could a Death Eater make of me?"

"The—the prophecy... the prediction... Trelawney..."

"Ah, yes," said Dumbledore. "How much did you relay to Lord Voldemort?"

"Everything—everything I heard!" said Snape. "That is why—it is for that reason—he thinks it means Lily Evans!"

"The prophecy did not refer to a woman," said Dumbledore. "It spoke of a boy born at the end of July—"

"You know what I mean! He thinks it means her son, he is going to hunt her down—kill them all—"

"If she means so much to you," said Dumbledore, "surely Lord Voldemort will spare her? Could you not ask for mercy for the mother, in exchange for the son?"

"I have—I have asked him—"

"You disgust me," said Dumbledore, and Harry had never heard so much contempt in his voice. "You do not care, then, about the deaths of her husband and child? They can die, as long as you have what you want?"

"Hide them all, then," Snape pleaded. "Keep her—them—safe. Please."

The hilltop faded, and Harry stood in Dumbledore's office, more horrified than ever.

Snape was slumped forward in a chair and Dumbledore was standing over him, looking grim.

"Her son lives. He has her eyes, precisely her eyes. You remember the shape and colour of Lily Evans's eyes, I am sure?"

"DON'T!" bellowed Snape. "Gone... dead..."
"Is this remorse, Severus?"

"I wish... I wish I were dead..."

"And what use would that be to anyone?" said Dumbledore coldly. "If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear."

Snape seemed to peer through a haze of pain, and Dumbledore's words appeared to take a long time to reach him.

"What—what do you mean?"

"You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lily's son."

"He does not need protection. The Dark Lord has gone—"

"The Dark Lord will return, and Harry Potter will be in terrible danger when he does."

There was a long pause, and slowly Snape regained control of himself. At last he said, "Very well. Very well. But never—never tell, Dumbledore! This must be between us! Swear it! I cannot bear... especially Potter's son... I want your word!"

"My word, Severus, that I shall never reveal the best of you?" Dumbledore sighed, looking down into Snape's ferocious, anguished face. "If you insist..."

Harry swirled and felt himself rise into the air; the office walls evaporated around him; he quickly floated through icy blackness and then, with a swooping feeling as though he had turned head-over-heels in midair, his feet hit the stone floor of Snape's dungeon.

Almost unconsciously, he took several steps back until his back crashed against the wall across the desk. He kept looking at the Pensieve as though everything he had just witnessed was going to jump out of it and devour him.

The door opened and Snape stormed in, scoffing at Harry's presence. "I told you we shall resume tomorrow, Potter. You may leave."

When Harry didn't answer, Snape opened his mouth to say something, but he didn't. Harry continued to glare over at the Pensieve as though everything he had just witnessed was going to jump out of it and devour him.

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When Harry didn't answer, Snape opened his mouth to say something, but he didn't. Harry continued to glare over at the Pensieve, shock stricken and absolutely still, and Snape followed his gaze to his desk.

His voice was a dangerous whisper when he talked, barely audible. "What did you do?" He looked aghast; his lips were shaking, his face was white. "What did you do, Potter?"

Harry swallowed, feeling his own legs shake. "What was the prophecy about?"

Snape launched himself on Harry and grasped his arm, shaking him savagely. "Oh you couldn't resist, could you, you little --"

"Answer me!" screamed Harry back, trying to free his arm. "It was your fault Voldemort killed my parents, wasn't it?" His heart was beating fast and darkness filled his chest, making it difficult for him to breath.

Snape grabbed him by the throat and squeezed, throwing him from him with all his might. Harry fell hard on to the dungeon floor and grunted.

"How much did you see?" Snape hissed, his eyes glistening with a madness Harry had never seen
"Everything," spat Harry, a million thoughts racing in his mind. "You led Voldemort to my parents — he found them because of you. You — and my mum and — and you betrayed her, and now you think you have the right to control my life and protect me, as if I ever asked you to! I DON'T NEED YOUR PROTECTION, SNAPE! YOU KILLED THEM! I NEVER MET THEM BECAUSE OF YOU!"

Snape walked up to him again and Harry got to his feet and as far from Snape as he could. Snape was faster, however, and he cornered Harry, his wand against Harry's neck. His lips were trembling and his expression was cold — tense in an inhuman, terrifying way.

"Not. Another. Word."

"What did you tell Voldemort? There's a prophecy about me, isn't it?"

Was this what Voldemort was planning to use against him this time? Was his fate already written, waiting for him to simply fulfil it?

Instead of answering, Snape threw him to the door and Harry crashed on it, too numb from the overall shock to feel the pain.

"You will not speak of what you saw. You will tell no one. Do you understand?"

Another tremendous question rose up to Harry's mind and he couldn't keep it back. Was Snape in love with his Mum? Did they have an affair before she married his dad?

"What about you and – "

"SHUT IT!" Snape kept his wand pointed at him and pressed his lips together as if holding back a nasty curse. "Now get out – and don't you dare step foot in this office ever again."

And as Harry wrenched the door open, a jar of dead cockroaches exploded over his head. He ran along the corridor, stopping only when he had put three floors between himself and Snape. Then he leaned against the wall, trembling.

He had no desire at all to return to the Gryffindor Tower so early, nor tell Ron and Hermione what he had just seen. Harry could handle being shouted at or having jars thrown at him; what was unbearable, however, was that now he knew that Dumbledore had been keeping a very important secret from him, and if Harry hadn't found out like this, no one would have ever told him.

Dumbledore didn't even talk to Harry anymore, and had been avoiding him since the school year started. Was Harry going to be killed by Voldemort? Was that the reason Dumbledore was avoiding him? Images of Snape begging Dumbledore to save his mum filled his head, and he hoped with all his might that there had never been anything between the two. Snape would have happily offered Harry to Voldemort to save her, as if people's lives were tradable, and could be exchanged.

His stomach turning, and with a really bad headache on the way, Harry run towards the Gargoyle.

He let his bag drop off his shoulders and shouted, "Sherbet lemon!"

Nothing happened.

He tried again. "Acid pops. Toffee Éclair. Cockroach clusters." His throat ached and he forced a neutral expression on his face, convincing himself that he wasn't close to tears.
"Fizzing Whizbee. Gryffindor. Chocolate cookies!" He banged his fist on the stone and shouted, beyond control. "WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?"

When he was met with nothing but the silence of the empty corridor, he grabbed his bag and left, a black hole nesting inside his soul where his trust for Dumbledore had previously been.

"Fuck you," he muttered.

"The connection between Potter and the Dark Lord's mind, how strong is it?" demanded Severus as soon as he wrenched open the door to Dumbledore's office.

"What happened?"

"I need to know."

"Its potential is unknown. As long as Voldemort remains unaware of it, the boy is safe; I cannot imagine the dreadful ways of manipulation he might think of once he knows."

Severus still panted heavily, his hand twitching around his wand. Dumbledore noticed it. "You know... A very interesting breakdown occurred outside my office half an hour ago, so I wonder, if it happens to have anything to do with your worries."

Severus collapsed on a chair and rested his forehead on his hand. "I left your brilliant Golden Boy alone in my office for ten minutes, and with a fascinating lack of any qualms he stuck his nose into my memories. He – knows. Everything."

Severus let out a hoarse laughter, and shook his head dismissively at Dumbledore's questioning face. "I'm dead, aren't I?"

Dumbledore didn't answer immediately, which was a clear enough answer by itself. "Even if Voldemort becomes aware of the nature of their connection," he finally said carefully, "it'll take time for him to explore the full extension of it. You are not alone, the Order will do its best to protect you, should your cover be revealed."

"Nonsense."

"Severus."

"Severus what?" he sneered. "Potter's arrogance will lead me to my torturous death, and next thing you'll witness will be him dancing around my grave. Do you think the Dark Lord will be interested in, I don't know, perhaps a casual conversation over it once he sees me kneeling before you and swearing loyalty? Do tell me, please."

Dumbledore nodded. "Are you sure he saw everything?"

"Yes," Severus hissed, deranged at the fact. "I threw him out and told him to never come near me again. And I do assure you, if it weren't for your foolish fondness of the boy, he would have been expelled from my class too."

"This shouldn't have happened. I expected you to be more careful..."

Severus said nothing.

"The lessons cannot stop, Severus, especially now, for your own good more than anything. We can't leave Harry's mind vulnerable to any possible future attacks. If we don't teach him, he'll endanger
"I must not," spat Severus, "and will not. This is beyond my dignity. Potter has shown a defiant disrespect to my privacy, and is constantly starving for information concerning his parents' lives. I will not sit there and have him ask questions I do not wish to answer, let alone give him the opportunity to mock me behind my back with his friends while I risk my life every day for him!" With that, he stood up and turned around, his cloak billowing behind him as he walked towards the door.

"Do it for Lily, Severus," Dumbledore said, and Severus hated him for it, knowing perfectly well how the man always manipulated him into his plans, using his pain and regret to force him follow with a bowed head.

Ignoring the Headmaster's order which was politely dressed up as a plea, he strode down to the cold dungeons, and at long last he locked himself into the safety of his rooms.

Harry looked over at Dumbledore, whose cheeks bloated around a large spoonful of milk and cheerios. As soon as he swallowed, he turned to Professor McGonagall and prattled humorously, a smile spreading underneath his white beard.

"He must have a reason, Harry, I'm sure of it," said Hermione.

"And what kind of reason would make Dumbledore treat Harry like that? That's a very cruel thing to do, if you ask me," argued Ron.

"Maybe," Hermione lowered her voice, "Maybe these memories were fake, and that's why Professor Snape kept them in the pesnieve during his practice with Harry - so in case of an unexpected accident they wouldn't blend in with his own. They could be part of some plan to mislead You-Know-Who. I mean, it's possible."

"Why mislead him into thinking he's a traitor, 'Mione?"

To that, Hermione didn't have an answer. Harry poked at his breakfast again, his stomach feeling full although he had barely eaten. The sight of food seemed of no interest to him, and he wished for the tenth time this week he had never told his friends about the incident with Snape's memories.

Although he appreciated their efforts to help, their concern was just another burden. Plus, it was obvious that with zero evidence they weren't getting anywhere. He carefully avoided sharing with them the fact that Snape was friends with his mum, as well as his confession that he loved her. It wasn't really important to tell them that Snape had sworn to Dumbledore to protect him either, and somehow he felt like this information shouldn't be shared.

So, after he banged on Dumbledore's door for about an hour and no one ever replied, exactly as he had guessed it would happen, he found himself sitting cross-legged in the Gryffindor common room repeating everything he had heard about that prophecy to Ron and Hermione.

Both of them had looked surprised, but it was Hermione who made the best assumption.

"Maybe the prophecy doesn't foresee that you die, but that you kill him," she told him. "And that's why he searched for you when you were an infant – he decided to kill you so he would be freed from the constant fear of a deadly enemy once and for all."

Only that this didn't make things better, and it would only mean that Harry should have to kill him first if he wanted to survive. His fate was connected with Voldemort's, and recalling the many
objections he was met with when he had requested to join the Order, he came to the conclusion that he was one of the few who didn't know anything about this prophecy. And as it seemed, Harry would have to fight Voldemort at some point of his life – a fact which no one thought of as important enough to discuss with him. Exhaling into his plate for a last time, he swung his backpack up onto his shoulders as at the same time the other students began standing up to head to their classes.

This time Dumbledore wouldn't get away. He'd been avoiding him for way too long for it to make any sense. Dumbledore was the only adult Harry could trust with his life while he was at Hogwarts. He walked past his friends in a hurry and run to the high table the moment Dumbledore was leaving through the stuff door just behind it. Snape gave him a filthy look as Harry followed towards the door, and with a push he found himself to a long dark hallway which the students didn't use often– and which was absolutely empty.

Harry stopped. He felt his eyes burning and once again his temper seemed to dominate the best of him; something was wrong and no one was feeling like telling him what that was. Was he dying already, and they didn't want him to know? Dread pulsated up to his face and he felt his cheeks heating up, unable to control his anger any longer.

He had the right to know what happened to his parents, and even more what was going to happen to himself. Dumbledore had lied to Harry about everything – he kept Snape in Hogwarts and let him teach the students even though he was responsible for his parents' deaths, and even though he would sacrifice Harry's and his dad's life for the sake of his mum's. That was how twisted the man was, and yet here he was. It wasn't likely that Harry was ever going to speak to Snape again, even if the man hadn't thrown him out of his office.

He didn't want people to protect him like he was a child. He didn't need Snape – of all people – to look after him and help him behind his back as though he was incapable of protecting himself on his own. He'd survived way too many dangers on his own to be considered immature or reckless, and this treatment was the last thing he deserved. What he needed was someone to tell him the truth and let him face it like a grown up instead of plotting around his life without even asking him. Disappointed, he took the path for his class.

Maybe the visions would show him more about it.
"I didn't see you yesterday," said Dumbledore when Severus placed the pile of marked O.W.L.S. on the Headmaster's desk. Severus scrunched his face and reached into his pocket to take out a folded piece of paper. The last thing he needed was to attend a staff meeting in Black's honour, and witness pitiful people wallow all over a dog's death.

"I was busy. This is a list of the students who failed to pass their examinations in Potions this year. Miss Johnson has been defiantly ignoring my warnings about her poor progress since the beginning of the year, and I have yet to receive a decent excuse for her consecutive absences. I owled her parents an hour ago."

Dumbledore opened a drawer and revealed a closed envelope with the name Severus Snape on it. At last, thought Severus.

Dumbledore wrote the date on the envelope and signed it. "Sirius was a kind man and a loyal friend, Severus. Don't let an old hatred poison your heart over his death."

Severus extended his hand waiting for the envelope.

He knew he looked impatient, but he'd been waiting for this particular summer break with obsessive longing; dealing with uninterested students, suspicious colleagues, and a Potter who was picking into his past while refusing to learn the basics in order to protect his own flesh, hadn't been exactly a pleasure. Still, on the other hand, this school year had brought along some enjoyable surprises as well. Black got what he deserved, the Minister eventually showed some dim traces of intelligence, and Dumbledore seemed to be on the right path searching for what he believed to be an essential weapon against the Dark Lord.

Severus had offered many times to help him, but Dumbledore had insisted that this was a job he had to do alone. Severus wasn't fooled; Dumbledore trusted him to spy on Voldemort and risk his own life for the greater good, but wouldn't share with him any crucial information when it came to it.

Dumbledore handed him over the envelope. "Here you are, Severus. In Muggle money, as you required."

Severus nodded politely and thanked the Headmaster, who smiled back and raised his hand.

"Ah, not so fast, Severus. There is something else I wanted to discuss with you. You'd better sit."

And when Dumbledore began a conversation with these words, Severus knew he was going to go berserk, and probably be forced into something he wouldn't like in the slightest. He seated himself nevertheless, and gritted his teeth with a tension which he felt would soon be very much justified.

Dumbledore toyed with his wand for a few seconds, as if seeing it for the first time in his life.

"Harry isn't safe anymore, not after what happened," he said. "Sirius was planning to take custody of him once the misunderstanding with the Ministry was resolved, but fate played a mean card on the boy, as you know."

Severus said nothing.
"The protection his blood relatives provide... is strong, and that is because of Lily's sacrifice. I believe Voldemort would not attempt to attack him in Surrey, but it is not his physical safety I am worried about. Voldemort has discovered their mental connection, and since he's already used it once to lure Harry to the Ministry, we have no reason to believe he will not attempt it again. The boy has been having visions, Severus. You are aware of it. In his dreams, he can see through Voldemort's eyes."

Severus felt a chill running down his spine. "I am aware of it. It's... phenomenal."

"And that is why he needs to learn how to build solid walls around his mind. You do understand that, should a small leak of where your true devotion lies made its way to the other end of this thread, Voldemort would want you out of the way, right?"

Of course he knew. The idea of death wasn't strange to him; there was a limit in how much pain and despair one can witness and cause, and how much fear then can experience upon it. These limits had been broken long ago for him, and the constant awareness of the dangers around him was as familiar as waking up in the morning.

He only wished that when the time came, he would leave the world having offered his best, and having done all he could to protect Lily's child.

As though reading his mind, Dumbledore continued. "This is why it is so important for Harry learn Occlumency - it is a necessity that simply cannot be ignored anymore. I do need you alive, as you understand."

"What?"

"I know this is too much of me to ask, Severus, but – "

"Wasn't the first fiasco more than enough?" He had sinned. Many times. But he didn't deserve this.

"It's the only way, I am afraid. We'll have to take advantage of the summer." Dumbledore said calmly.

"What is your plan this time, then? You want me to travel to Surrey daily to enjoy Potter's and Petunia's insufferable company, for how long, exactly? How many hours per day do you want me to sacrifice for this farce, pray tell?"

"Ah. Well, the good news now."

And Severus was ready to give a leg and a kidney if the news were actually good.

"No magic can be done in his home, since the Ministry would happily report it as underage magic, which would cause an unnecessary fuss. That's why I thought it might be best for Harry to stay with you for a while."

Severus felt the blood drain from his body and go straight up to a vein above his eye. A spasm followed, and his heart jumped before giving him the impression that it was being split in two. His lungs compressed in a way he had only seen described in health magazines. His mind whispered: heart attack.

"You - Albus, no. I can't."

"Now, now, Severus. You've worked with children half your life; I'm sure both of you will manage to get along for a couple of months."
"Two months," Severus repeated sharply. Dumbledore opened his mouth but was stopped.

"Has it crossed your brilliant mind, that I do not wish his pity – or even worse, his curiosity – burdening me? My privacy has already been disrespected and completely ignored. Potter has a wonderful home of his own to stay, and I am sure he will manage to survive until September as always. I am not his guardian, nor his friend, and I will NOT have him in my house!"

"I would teach him myself, Severus, but you know the priorities."

_The weapon_. So Dumbledore was going on an adventure and in the meantime Severus would have to babysit James Potter's spitting image of a son.

Severus sat back down and rubbed away an upcoming migraine. It was one of those times he did not really have a choice, and yet he was being expected to agree before his doom came. He wanted to say no, to decline and run away as fast as he could, pointing his middle finger to Dumbledore, to Potter, and to Voldemort too.

The problem was that all of them would follow him around like puppies until he did as commanded. And if he didn't, the puppies would transform to three – headed dogs. With venomous fangs. And a dragon tail.

"Are you aware of what kind of people visit my home usually? Death Eaters. Madmen. Ministry workers, all of whom happen to be both Death Eaters and madmen."

"I'm sure you will find a way, Severus. He won't be a problem to you, I can guarantee that."

"He will be asking questions, Dumbledore. Questions I do not wish to answer. What have I ever done that gave you the impression that I enjoy the company of children?"

Dumbledore's eyes sparkled. "This little cooperation of yours could turn out for the best. Do try and see him for who he really is, my boy. You might be surprised."

_Fuck you._

Severus nodded in defeat as he strode towards the door. "I'm not doing this for you, Dumbledore."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Thank Merlin you're not, my boy."
Wisdom: Settling In

Harry put his belongings into his trunk carefully. Hermione had decided to help him pack, although Harry suspected she was only doing it to keep a close eye to him.

"You will write to me, okay?" she asked, wariness not quite absent from her face. "You can even call me if you want to; I believe I gave you my number ages ago."

"I will," Harry said, shoving a pile of socks between his cloaks.

"Harry, no! Put the unwashed clothes in another bag and then into your trunk, otherwise the rest of your clothes will be dirtied too."

Hermione made a move of grabbing the shocks from his hand, but then frowned as if changing her mind and used her wand instead.

"Woah, Hermione, that's brilliant. Did you think of it on your own?" asked Ron, throwing out of his trunk a big pile of wrinkled and unwashed clothes to put them in another bag. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"And I could take the bus someday if you'd like. We could meet up in Surrey, I don't know, for a walk. My parents might let me." Ron eyed her carefully. "And of course Ron could come too, you know," she added.

Yes, I'd like that, thought Harry. Only I can't, and you're only saying it because you think Sirius' death has broken me.

He couldn't stand people talking about Sirius anymore, or treating him like that. He didn't want pity. He didn't want anything, and he was tired of playing over and over again inside his head the hopes and dreams he had allowed himself to have before Sirius' death.

It was foolish of him to believe that he could eventually have a family. Everyone he met and loved was immediately put in danger. He should have known better than hope for the family he never had.

Before Dumbledore called him into his office, finally telling Harry the truth, explaining about the Prophecy in Snape's memories and the reason Voldemort wanted Harry dead, Harry was convinced that Sirius' death was his fault.

"It is time," Dumbledore said, "for me to tell you what I should have told you years ago, Harry."

And Harry's heart pounded in his chest as he listened through it all. When Dumbledore finished, and Harry had shattered to pieces everything around him, Dumbledore said:

"This summer, Harry, I cannot let you return to your family. It is important for you to be trained, to learn how to defeat anyone who might try to use your mind again. You will stay with Professor Snape, and this time you will both take your Occlumency lessons very seriously."

After another emotional explosion, and when Harry had nothing else in his reach to break or shatter, his voice was hoarse from shouting, he accepted this new horrible fate and left.

He didn't manage to tell his friends, however, and Dumbledore insisted that keeping it a secret would be the wisest thing to do. And although he would have ignored Dumbledore's wishes and would have informed Ron and Hermione right away, somehow it was beyond embarrassing to announce that he would spend his summer with Snape.
Their worries would only triple – the man was a Death Eater – and certainly not a nice person, or someone trustworthy. Ron and Hermione would only be unbearably concerned about the Headmaster’s decision.

"So, why are you not taking the train again?" asked Ron, holding up into the air a pair of orange underpants.

"Christ!" Hermione turned her back to Ron and fiercely begun collecting Harry’s textbooks.

"Dumbledore wants me to stay some more, talk to me in private, you know." He tossed Hermione a sweater and she gave him a lethal look.

"That's nice, you can visit Hogsmeade alone then! Remember that girl who walks alone sometimes near the Three Broomsticks? The one with the blond hair? I've heard you can talk her into the craziest things."

Excitement lit up in Harry’s eyes and he grinned. "Such as?"

Hermione wiped the sweat off her forehead and stood up. "Unfortunately Ron, Harry does not care at all about what kind of crazy things that girl does," Harry mouthed I do behind her back, "and he knows perfectly well how stupid it would be to go to Hogsmeade alone. Am I right, Harry?"

"Absolutely," he assured her.

With that problem solved, Hermione left to prepare for the feast. The moment the sound of her steps faded, Harry made Ron tell him everything about that girl.

They met again outside the Fat Lady's portrait, and ran down the stairs to the Great Hall. The food was delicious, and Harry tried to eat as much as possible, not stopping even when his stomach felt ready to explode. If the Dursleys denied him food for two or three days in a row, he didn't dare to imagine what Snape would do to him. He'd better eat a good last meal in Hogwarts before he was thrown into starvation for good.

Anxiously, he wondered what kind of house Snape lived in, and images of dark castles with spiders, ghosts and bats filled his mind. Another image popped up, sadly more realistic, which had Harry locked up in just another cupboard, while in order to be let out he would have to memorise and repeat an entire volume of Advanced Potions. He grimaced at his food.

"It's not poisoned, not this time at least." Luna pointed at his plate. She had deliberately left Ravenclaw’s table to sit with Harry and his friends, but the prefects didn't seem to have noticed yet. "Sometimes though, the Headmaster puts funny things into the meals to test our behaviour. Did you know?"

Harry shook his head. "It's okay Luna, thanks. I already ate too much, I think."

She shrugged her shoulders and kept eating. Harry snorted to himself.

What if Snape had plans to torture him for real this time? The man always hated him and that was his only chance to act under Dumbledore's nose. Yet, there were still questions to be answered, and if Snape and his mum were dating in the past he wasn't really sure that he wanted to know about it.

"Mister Potter, a word."

Startled, Harry jumped up from his seat to see Snape standing just behind him, glaring down his
large nose. Snape strode off the Hall, and after Ron gave Harry a sympathetic look, Harry followed.

Snape stopped at the stairs outside and spoke coldly. "We are leaving tomorrow at two o'clock. You will by then have packed everything, and don't even think of being late, for I will not accept any of your poor excuses." His eyes promised death. "You are expected to wait for me outside the Headmaster's office alone. If anyone asks – "

"I know, I'm not stupid," interrupted Harry.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for your insolence. I trust that the House Cup winner hasn't been announced yet." Snape was staring right through Harry's eyes. "Now, do you have any belongings at your relatives' home that you would wish to have with you over the summer?"

Harry shook his head, but Snape didn't seem to believe him.

"Then think again, because I do not plan to Apparate around with an imbecile boy clutched on my back every time you're reminded of something that you need. You are being given the chance to visit Surrey tomorrow before we continue on to my house, and that's it. Do not expect me to bother again until September, even if what you forgot over is your own head."

Harry swallowed the bile that had stuck in his throat and grit his teeth. "No need to worry, sir. All my belongings are already into my trunk and can't wait to be moved to your place."

Harry knew that Snape was repulsed by that fact as much as he was. Snape quirked his lips in disgust and, after taking another ten points from Gryffindor, he left.

When the dinner was over, Harry and Ron played the last chess game of the year. Harry lost and let his forehead fall on the chessboard, the queen piercing his ear with a tiny sword as she tried to shove him away. Hermione had fallen asleep on the sofa while reading a muggle book.

He was expecting Ron to say something - probably bring up Sirius again, or ask Harry how he was planning to spend the summer. Ron loved to hear funny stories about Dudley, and although Harry kept the worst situations well hidden from his wizarding life, some of them he could share. Next year there would be none of them, though, and Harry was positively sure that Snape wasn't going to be an enjoyable housemate either.

He remembered Sirius promising him that they would live together someday. If Harry had been a little bit smarter, if he knew how to separate the real visions from the fake hallucinations Voldemort sent to him, if only he had trained better, now Sirius would be alive.

On top of everything, Harry couldn't help but blame Sirius just as much. His mind wandered from Kreacher to Sirius' mother and how Sirius should have stayed in the safety of the wards but instead just sneaked out while everybody had warned him not to.

When Ron collected the chess pieces in a silent understanding, Harry sat up and nodded good night before going to bed.

The next morning everybody was in a hurry. The youngest kids were shouting and running around, searching for clothes and books they had just realised were missing, while there were only a few hours left before the arrival of Hogwarts Express.

Ron couldn't find a particular pair of shoes, so he threw everything out of his trunk and put it back in scattered and in round piles. Dean was trying to organise where everybody was going to sit on the train in order to prevent the fuss upon boarding. Luna had already collected a stack of the Quibbler's
new issues in her arms, apparently hoping to sell some copies on the road, and somehow meandered her way into the Gryffindor tower.

As for Harry, he watched the panicked people around him dully, fascinated with their stampede, as he hadn't bothered getting up yet. He was so lost into his observation, that he was startled when Luna sat beside him and placed a Quibbler issue on his belly, patting it. "Here, it's free for you."

Harry opened it curiously and read: Ancient Runes came from space! What Muggle scientists support and how the secret was revealed. He pretended to be flattered by her gift and gave her a forced smile. "Oh. Thanks, Luna. I'm going to read it tonight, okay?"

"You don't need to force yourself to like it just now. It will find a way to amaze you in time, I'm sure of it. Have a nice summer, Harry." She left the dorm hopping, leaving Harry rolling his eyes.

Ron punched him on the side of his head lightly. "Are you going to wake up already or what?"

Harry rubbed his temple and got up lazily. He seriously thought he would do anything to have just another day in Hogwarts, but denying his upcoming future wasn't going to make it any better.

So he helped his friends, and punched Ron back on the ribs as soon as he caught him off guard, until they fell back to the bed wrestling. Eventually Ron forced Harry's head into a pillow case and they stopped.

"How immature can you two be!" gasped Hermione from the door.

Ron chuckled. "You've no idea."

She rolled her eyes and Harry escorted them to the Great Hall before they left. Hermione hugged him tightly, giving him a soft kiss on the cheek, which made Ron scrunch his face up and look away. He promised them that he'll be writing once a week, because that was that they wanted to hear, and he reassured them that everything was going to be alright.

As he watched them leave, the thestrals pulling the carriages away, he suddenly felt alone, so terribly alone and empty, as if no happiness would ever find its way to his soul again.

To make proof against that, he drew out his wand and cast the Patronus charm, thinking of his dad and mum. A silver stag spurted out of the tip of his wand and bounced around the bushes, running away to the forest.

Relieved, Harry licked his lips. If he was still able to conjure some tiny bits of happiness from within, he wasn't entirely lost. The stag returned soon, and shoved his head to Harry's hand demanding to be pet. The sensation wasn't exactly real, and reminded him of water more than actual flesh. His fingers slipped into the strange substance.

With a heavy heart, he returned to the castle and dragged his trunk down the stairs until he reached the Headmaster's office. He sat upon his trunk and waited for Snape, drumming his wand to his knee rhythmically.

Maybe Snape was indeed a vampire after all, thought Harry as he remembered Snape's pale skin. Or maybe he had a dungeon full of dead bodies, stored so he could drink their blood slowly at nights. And now he'd lock Harry in a cell as well, and make him watch as he'd fly around in his bat form, randomly picking his victims before attacking them.

Harry shuddered. He wasn't sure he could survive a whole summer of drinking nothing but human blood.
"Potter."

Harry looked up. "Um."

His utterance was met with an arched eyebrow.

"Um. Yes. Morning."

"Not anymore, unless you have completely lost your touch with reality. It's two in the afternoon."

"Oh. Alright."

Snape looked already annoyed, and his own denial about the situation was written all over his face.

"We are going to use the Floo network from the Headmaster's office which will transport us near my home. You are not permitted to talk to anybody but me, and if you disobey you will face the consequences. Am I clear, Potter?"

He pointed his wand at Harry and Harry had no time to protect himself when a spell hit him and he fell to the ground. Confused, he looked around until he realised that the charm wasn't directed at him. He put the now shrunk trunk into the pocket of his jeans.

Snape peered down at Harry, who quickly stood up. Dumbledore greeted them from his high-backed chair, but both of them responded with a grim face. He then pulled Snape aside for a last "word", but as much as Harry tried, he didn't manage to hear what Dumbledore told Snape.

"I'm sure you'll do wonderfully," said Dumbledore at last. Harry noticed Snape's wand hand twitching around thin air.

"Thank you, Headmaster. Please do keep your own vacations less adventurous than intended." And with that quizzical comment Snape activated the Floo. "Do I seem like I have all day, Potter?" he spat.

Harry glanced at Dumbledore sadly but walked over to Snape, his feet heavily brushing the carpet. Even facing Voldemort would be a less ghastly task to do, Harry thought as Snape wrapped his hand around his and squeezed.

"Ready?"

Harry nodded. "The Fox's Inn!" barked Snape, and suddenly the office was gone.

They landed in the fireplace of a small pub. Snape released his hand as soon as the swirling was gone, and Harry brushed his fingers on his shirt, as though to wipe off the touch. Then he took a look around, curiously. The place was a traditional alehouse, with six hand pumps serving beers across the counter. It seemed rustic, with scrubbed floorboards and small tables all around. There were no TV's or Gaming machines either, which indicated that the place was only for wizards. A man greeted Snape, upholding his beer. "Ah, Severus – at last, man! Who's that boy – home teaching now, are you?"

Harry kept his head down, hoping that no one would notice his scar, and the man was met with a deadly glare from Snape as they walked past him. Next thing Harry knew, he was standing in a dark neighbourhood with two endless rows of houses. He wondered if they were far from central London, plans to sneak away from Snape already forming in his mind.

"Follow me," Snape said.
He followed. The fog and the muddy street were making him uneasy. Snape's robes were being dipped into the mud too, now wet on the edges, as their feet made a plopping sound against the ground with every step they took.

The rain couldn't have stopped long ago, as the scent of the moisture was still in the air. Harry read a sign nailed on a brick wall on his left: *Spinner's End."

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Are you incapable or reading?"

"No, I mean – where exactly?"

Snape glared at him wryly for a moment. "Northern England."

"Oh. So you spend your summers here?"

"Usually."

"I didn't know you had a house of your own," Harry admitted. He shoved his hands into his sweatshirt to warm them up.

"So, using your endless wittiness, you cleverly reached the conclusion that I'm a clochard."

"A what?" Harry's eyebrows rose to his hairline.

"Homeless."

"Oh. No, I just thought you stayed at Hogwarts, you know." *Since you don't really seem to have a life*, he almost added.

Snape didn't answer.

A horrid thought crossed Harry's mind.

"Do you live alone?" If Snape had a wife and Harry was forced to live with both of them, he'd become a kosherd of his own, he decided.

"Not anymore, Potter. Obviously."

Oh. Right. As accustomed as he was to being unwanted, Harry couldn't help the awkwardness that overwhelmed him. It was obvious that Snape hated him, and the feeling was rather mutual.

Aunt Petunia wouldn't fumble through his brain, at least, and back in Surrey he knew that if he stayed silent and invisible for the best part of the day he would be granted with a peace of mind. Snape wasn't like that, though. Harry had no idea what Snape was like.

They stopped in front an old grey brick house, and Snape crossed the small yard, taking out a bunch of keys. As soon as the door opened, a smell of musty air hit Harry's nostrils and he realised the place hadn't been inhabited in a long time.

The door led to a small sitting room. Snape opened all the shutters immediately, letting the light stream in and bring into sight the clouds of dust that filled the room. The walls were completely covered in books shelves, and most of the books were bound in old black or brown leather. A threadbare sofa, an old armchair, and a rickety table stood grouped together in front of an ashy fireplace.
Snape disappeared behind a door, barking, "Stay there!"

Harry did, glancing around inquisitively. There was no central hallway to the house, but the living room had three identical doors surrounding it. The first one was hiding a staircase, from which Snape had gone upstairs. The second one was locked, and the third one led to a kitchen.

The kitchen was even smaller than the living room, with a wooden table in the corner and two chairs under it, linked together by a silver thread of cobweb. With a sigh of relief Harry saw the fridge and opened it, only to find it completely empty.

He searched the cabinets, one by one, finding plates, glasses, and some pots and pans, along with an empty box of biscuits. He took it out and threw it in the trash bin under the sink; checked the faucet's function, looked for sharp knives he could use just in case, and found a box with a basic sewing set and a small pouch with black buttons.

"Are you through sticking your nose where it doesn't belong, Potter?" Snape stood at the door, holding his dirtied cloak in a pile, while unbuttoning the first buttons of his coat. With a motion of his hand the drawer was magically banged close and Harry had barely time to draw his fingers away.

"I'll do laundry soon and that will be exclusively for my own clothes. You can wash yours when I'm done and I assure you, if you leave anything behind I will burn it."

"Then I'll just have to walk around naked, I guess."

Before Harry knew it, Snape had stridden over and grabbed him by the shirt front, pushing him against the counter violently. His breath was only inches from his face.

"I will say this once, you insolent brat, and you'd better listen carefully. This isn't Hogwarts nor your cozy Gryffindor House in which no one ever bothered to teach you respect. Unluckily for you, Dumbledore doesn't have the time to wipe your arse anymore, so do yourself a favour and behave. You will not talk back to me, you will not show cheek, and for the time being, Potter, you will— "

"Pretend I don't exist. I know."

Snape stared.

"Anything else, sir?"

Snape unclenched Harry's shirt and stepped back.

"Lunch is always served at one o'clock and dinner at eight; be late and you will not eat at all. We will practice Occlumency from six to seven. You are expected to do your focusing exercises every day before our lessons, otherwise I will not hesitate to kick you out and let you sleep on the streets. You are not permitted to leave the house without my accompaniment and you will not touch any of my belongings without permission. If you do so, I'll know."

Harry shrugged.

"Now, follow me."

They climbed up the small staircase, and it cricked with every step - finally leading them to a small hallway with another set of three doors.

Snape opened the first one and Harry walked in. The room was dark, and except from a single bed in the far end of it and a small nightstand, it was rather empty too.
Some shelves were nailed to the walls but no books or other items were placed upon them; a closet with several drawers was near the bed, and the curtains on the window were shredded. Harry wondered if this used to be Snape's room when he was a child, sure that many years must have had passed since the last time someone had slept in here.

He took out his trunk and restored it to its normal size. Snape considered the room for a moment. Then, "The bathroom is at the far end of the hallway. The other door leads to my own bedroom, which you will never enter despite your childish curiosity. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Yes sir."

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent."

Harry heard the bang of the door closing behind him and took off his glasses, falling to the bed face down and breathing his tension off. Excellent.
Harry rubbed his eyes lazily. The morning light penetrated the thin fabric of the curtains and filled the room, dim but enough to wake him up. He stretched and yawned, rolling onto his belly and scratching his nape.

The clock on the nightstand read eight o’clock. It was rather early, but familiar as he was with his Hogwarts schedule, he didn’t feel like sleeping again.

Considering that this was the first night sleeping under the same roof with Snape, it wasn’t as bad as he had imagined it. After settling in, Snape had left him alone and had locked himself into his bedroom until dinner time.

They met again in the kitchen, when Harry had already tidied his new room.

“We will begin your lessons tomorrow,” Snape informed him as they ate. “I suggest you clear your mind before bedtime, and make a habit out of it for the rest of the summer.”

Harry had tried to, but random thoughts kept popping into his mind just as they had at Hogwarts. Just when he’d start relaxing, he’d imagine Dudley’s disappointment when they’d tell him Harry wasn’t going back to Surrey this year. His gang would have already begun organising new ways of bullying him around, and with Harry’s absence Dudley would have no one to torture.

He knew Uncle Vernon would at least be the happiest of them all. He’d have no reason to shout and yell anymore, or to endure the sight of owls and wands where Dudley’s second room should have been. Without him in the house, the Dursleys would happily state that they were perfectly normal again, and Aunt Petunia wouldn’t need to cook for an extra person.

Thinking of food, Harry’s stomach growled. After going through his morning routine, he noiselessly went down to the kitchen, realising that Snape hadn’t woken up yet. The fridge was still empty, so he poured some water into a glass and went upstairs again.

Delving into his trunk, he found some biscuits Hermione had given him a week ago and began chewing on one as he wandered around the house.

He pushed the third door of the living room – and found it still locked.

“Alohomora,” he tried.

Nothing.

“Dissendium.”

Nothing.

He peeped into the key hole but it was too dark to make out anything. Moving to the books, Harry pulled out the largest one and read: *Hunting Werewolves.*

He opened a random page. Two sentences had been underlined with red ink, with a note saying show Dumbledore above them:

Although humane-like when away from the moonlight and between the lunar cycles, the species of werewolves are considered creatures far from the human kind. It is known that common wizard
emotions cannot be experienced in their full dimension by beasts and other dangerous creatures; it remains feasible though for those emotions to be exceptionally well feigned.

Harry closed the book annoyed. The next books he opened were mostly about potions, although some of them were about history and psychology. The ones with titles referring to Dark Magic were blank inside, or couldn’t be opened at all.

Tiptoeing his way to Snape’s room, he slowly pushed on the door handle and peered in. Snape was sleeping on his stomach, his face hidden under a big pillow. He was half covered with a duvet, his grey nightshirt pulled up to reveal one hairy leg.

Opening the door a little more, Harry saw Snape’s desk, and wondered if the key to the locked door was there. He lifted his wand.

“Accio keys,” he whispered.

Many sounds occurred instantly. Drawers opened, while pens and other objects fell to the floor and rolled away. Bunches of keys slid and flew to his hands. Harry recognised the heavier set as the one Snape had used to unlock the outdoor yesterday, and along with them he now had in his hands a handful of some suitcase keys, a big golden key that looked rather fake, a link with the Hogwarts crest on it, and a smaller link with keys that looked like they were for drawers or cabinets.

“Wicked,” Harry whispered.

“Wicked,” repeated Snape. He was now sitting on the bed, and the only thing betraying that he had just woken up was his really messed up hair.

“Um. Good morning?” Harry tried.

“It’s a bad morning, Potter.” Kicking the duvet over, he strode towards Harry and yanked the keys from his hand. “I do not take defiance from anyone, and I will certainly not take it from you. However intelligent you might believe it is what you’re doing, it is not, and I assure you that pushing my buttons is not a game you can win. For the last time. Behave.”

Harry could almost sense a please in Snape’s voice.

His stomach growled again. “The fridge is empty and actually isn’t working at all; do you hide your food elsewhere? I have biscuits, but I'm running out. Want one?”

He offered him the small box and Snape looked at him as though he was inspecting a venomous bleeding cockroach.

Harry shrugged his shoulders, and Snape threw the keys on his bed and went to the wardrobe.

“Close the damned door and go get dressed. The market is twenty minutes away and I’d like to avoid the busy hours. Can you manage a notice-me-not on that hideous scar of yours?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Harry hated hearing comments about his scar. He pulled on his fringe reflexively, closed the door, and went to change his clothes.

The mini market was farther than Snape said, and it resembled a lot the suburban market back in Little Whinging. Harry and Snape both grabbed the same basket, and silently fought over it for a good few seconds. Snape won with a sneer, and Harry took another.
When they separated though, Harry didn’t know what to put inside. He didn’t have any money with him, and didn’t know if Snape was going to buy him anything that wasn’t necessary. He walked to the sweets’ corridor, and picked up a Frosties box and a new box of biscuits.

Dawdling around the gum packs and the large fridges, he noticed the newspapers’ bench and approached it, noticing that it had some Muggle cooking books, newspapers, and right behind them, porn magazines. Harry stared for a moment and went back to the sweets.

He met Snape at the cash desk, and realised that the man had made a rather wiser choice of products than Harry had. His basket had meat, pasta, milk, eggs, and vegetables.

Hesitantly, Harry put his own basket on the desk, but surprisingly Snape didn’t argue. When they returned to Snape’s home, Harry helped him store the food.

“Your living room is soaked in dust,” said Harry. “With all these books and stuff that you have in here it’s going to gather termites. Happened to my cousin’s room, once.”

Snape didn’t answer.

“Don’t you care that your house is filthy?” pressed Harry, his voice bitter on purpose. The place resembled an asylum. A small and dark one, precisely.

“Are your parents alive?” Why had he asked that?

“No.”

“Oh.” Harry’s mind drifted to the memory of the crying child he had once seen in Snape’s mind, while Snape’s parents were shouting at each other.

They made soup; it was awful, but they ate it in silence. Snape retired to his room shortly after it, warning Harry that he’d better do the same.

Harry washed the dishes and cleaned the table, trying to clear his mind as he did so. His scar hadn’t bothered him since the battle at the Ministry, but he knew that the throbbing pain would return once Voldemort grew angry with something or someone again.

Considering his upcoming Occlumency lessons, this was the worst time to think about Sirius. It didn’t matter; Snape was going to see all the memories that could make him vulnerable anyway.

He could do nothing about it. His skills in blocking Snape out of his mind were poor, and Snape was a master of Legilimency.

After washing his hands, he locked himself into his bedroom. He couldn’t concentrate for the life of him, and so to prevent himself from thinking, he slept.

A bang outside Harry’s door make him jump up.

“Potter!” Snape barked.

“Yes! Just a minute!” Harry ran to the door, still a bit light headed from sleeping, and crashed right on Snape’s sternum.

He backed up embarrassed, and looked up with what he hoped to be a neutral face. Before he had time to say something clever, Snape had already gone downstairs. Right. Now Harry was making a fool of himself too.
Biting his lip he followed, wand at hand. Once he reached the living room, Snape turned to face him.

“Although I am sure that you completely ignored my instructions to clear your mind, it is the Headmaster’s wish that we continue this farce.”

Harry nodded.

“When sleeping, your mind gets relaxed and thus becomes vulnerable to external penetration. You should remember that in the future. Now, do you even remember what Occlumency is?”

It occurred to Harry that Snape looked tired too. Still, his face was as controlled as always.

“It’s going to help me block Voldemort out of my mind,” Harry said impatiently.

“Occlumency is an ancient art, which has existed since the medieval times. It can prevent a trained Legilimens from accessing one's thoughts and feelings. A person who practices this art is known as an Occlumens, and his abilities in order to master it must be at least highly outstanding.”

The fact that Harry’s abilities were nowhere to be seen was left unsaid.

“Well, I’ve no talent at it.” As Harry was expecting, these lessons were going to make Snape furious, although he never understood why it always had to happen so quickly.

“You’ve no talent? Is this your new excuse to spare yourself the remorse, Potter? Is your lack of, as you put it, talent, making you sleep easier at nights?”

Harry shook his head but Snape didn’t stop.

“Had you tried in the least to focus when I was training you, the Dark Lord wouldn’t have planted visions in that foolish head of yours. I warned you this would happen and yet you completely neglected to follow my orders.” Snape took out his wand, his fingers slowly sliding over it.

“That’s not true, you were the one who kicked me out in the middle of the year! I was trying!”

“The results indicate so.”

Harry bit back a curse and squeezed his fist. “The results weren't my fault,” he spat. His heart was racing; he couldn’t remember getting this angry since Sirius’ death. His vision sparkled.

“Is that so? Or are you just afraid to face the truth?”

Something inside his sternum exploded. “Well, maybe you suck as a teacher, and that’s why you blame me instead. If we had continued the lessons Sirius would—”

“We are continuing them, Potter. Legilimens!”

Old memories came to the surface of Harry’s mind and he was unable to hold them back. Snape vanished from his vision, and he was now running away from Dudley, seeing his friends chasing him, shouting names… Sirius was falling behind the veil, slowly disappearing as Bellatrix’s shattering laughter echoed around… Ron was begging Hermione to let him copy her essay, in front of the fireplace in the common room…

Harry gasped and leaned forward. He had dropped to his knees, steadying himself with his hands on the carpet. He looked up, to see Snape sneering at him.

“Nonexistent progress. Why didn’t you fight me?” Snape asked coolly.
"I don’t – I wasn’t expecting it,” Harry spat, getting up from the floor.

“I thought so.” Snape was watching him closely. “Close your eyes for me.”

Sighing, Harry did.

“What do you feel?” Snape asked. His voice was coming closer, and Harry’s instinct warned him to step back.

“Nothing specific,” Harry responded.

“Don’t lie to me, Potter. Again. What do you feel?” Snape was walking around Harry, his steps heavy.

“Anger,” he said as he tried to determine Snape’s location in the room.

“Anger.”

Harry swallowed. “Yes.”

“Fear?”

He wasn’t going to admit that. “No. I just don’t want you inside my head.”

“Let go of all emotions. Clear your thoughts from the weaknesses that dominates you.” Snape stopped in front of him.

Harry shifted nervously. He wasn't being dominated by weaknesses.

“Legilimens!”

A woman was screaming, and her cries echoed inside his ears, overwhelming him with pain and fear and confusion, and Harry felt the Dementor taking his breath away, taking his voice, his vision, his life… Dumbledore twinkled an eye at him and Harry smiled, running to catch up with Ron and Hermione… The snitch was right there, all he had to do was come closer – right there – just a little bit – too fast…

“You’re not trying, Potter.”

Harry was barely listening as he panted hard. “I’ve told you I’m trying! If you don’t tell me how to do it I’ll never make it! What do you expect from me? Figure it out by accident while you just stand there and watch?”

Snape yanked Harry’s shirt and got him to his feet. “You are weak. You cannot block me if you don’t—“

Harry tried to free his shoulder. “Stop calling me that! Why don’t you just explain to me how to do it?”

Losing his patience, Harry dug his nails into Snape’s wrist to force him take off his hand. Snape did, and he scowled at the marks Harry left.

“Again. Concentrate.” Snape raised his wand. “One— Two— Legilimens!”

Harry raised his own wand too, and cast the only spell he knew would help him.
“Protego!”

Harry’s mind teemed with a new series of memories he could not recognise as his own. Having done this before, he gathered himself and searched for the memories he wanted. Having less than a couple of seconds to make this work, he focused and thought of his mother.

A teenage Snape was running in the Hogwarts corridors with a red haired girl… Snape was in Hogsmeade, drinking a hot cup of something with the same girl, who was taking a sip from his cup…

He was slammed against the wall with such force his breath was plucked from his lungs. Sliding to the floor, a painful gasp escaped his lips and looked up at Snape, who glared back with menace.

They looked at each other for some more, Harry not daring to move.

“You are not to use this charm again, you understand?” Snape seemed paler than usual, but his temper was all gone.

Harry considered it, a million questions behind his lips. He feared that if he spoke even the simplest of them, Snape would start shouting again.

“We will continue tomorrow. In the meantime…” Snape pulled a book out of a shelf and gave it to Harry. “It will help you get rid of emotion.”

“But I don’t want to get rid of emotion,” argued Harry, struggling back to his feet.

“You must.”

Snape avoided eye contact, and Harry ran upstairs.
“Is that blasted bird yours?” Severus asked. The morning had been quite peaceful until now, but then again, the boy had to wake up. Potter glanced at the owl sitting on the window ledge and grinned widely. His hair was a complete mess, Severus noticed as Potter ran to greet the bird; tangled and popping up to all directions.

“Hedwig!”

It was impressive, how the boy would experience agonising nightmares on a nightly basis - loud enough to cause uneasiness to whomever was close enough to listen - but in the morning he would seem to have no memory of his collapsing condition. In a way, it was as though his mind was seeking ways to protect itself from the horror. This made no difference to Severus however, who was forced to listen to Potter’s muffled screams until dawn.

Potter gave the stupid owl a biscuit and she spread her wings in appreciation while Severus took the letters from the window sill and threw them on the kitchen table. “It kept pecking at the pane all night, the insolent hen.” He took a sip of his morning tea and moved to the living room. “One must be suicidal to dare interrupt my sleep like that.”

Potter chuckled and followed, his letters at hand. Blasted child. Severus sat at his armchair while Potter opened his new box of biscuits and sat on the carpet, cross-legged. Thankfully, he kept a proper distance between the two of them. It occurred to him that proper distance should only be defined as two dimensions apart, but given the current circumstances he would have to endure a little closer than that. There were some people on this earth that avoiding them was probably the best thing one could do. Potter was at the top of Severus’ list.

Potter shifted a bit further away while still on the carpet. A rather ridiculous thing to do, after all, considering that Severus’ personal space had been invaded by Potter countless times already.

Severus took another sip and watched as Potter opened the first envelope impatiently. It was undoubtedly from those friends of his – letters inspired by unbearable sentimentalism to fill the boring, tiresome summertime. Since the day Potter had come here, a week and a half ago, he hadn’t stopped asking if there were any letters for him. And there weren’t, until now.

Watching Potter’s shy smile as he read his letter, Severus felt his bitterness take over. “Can’t Miss Granger endure your absence with some dignity, instead of worshiping you even when she’s vacating? How romantic the folly of true love must be.”

Potter looked up, his confusion quickly altering to blushing embarrassment. “Wha – hey! She’s not worshiping me! We’re just friends.”

Severus felt his own lips turn into a smirk. “Really? And here I thought that you’d somehow be less worthless in that aspect, at least. Once again it’s proved: fame isn’t everything.” Cliché, but it always worked with that kid. Severus hid his smirk behind his cup before Potter could catch more than a glimpse of it. The tea warmed his throat.

Potter was an easy one to read, and it was a matter of seconds for him to disappear to his room, gritting his teeth with furiousness. Severus waited.

“Says the man who spends his life in mouldy dungeons.”

The brat. “It’s my job, Potter. Do you think I live in Hogwarts because I find the decoration
admirable?” Or the staff, for that matter?

Potter shoved his letters into his pyjama pocket, probably deciding to read them when alone. “Well, it's not like living in Hogwarts stops you from having a life. You're just making up excuses. Professor McGonagall does visit Dumbledore’s rooms all the time, after all.”

And Severus spilled his hot tea all over his shirt front. “Damn!” He stood up, casting a cleaning spell on himself and undoing the first buttons of his shirt to wipe the tea from his collarbone. “Do remember whom you’re talking to, Potter!”

Potter seemed curious, if not amused. Severus’ many years of self–control had probably been leading up to this very moment.

“What? The gossip has been going around since even you were a student,” Potter argued, and Severus wondered about the allusion behind the world even.

The boy was a complete failure when it came to controlling emotions and, despite his cheerful glimmering, his plain statement about Dumbledore’s whereabouts was soaked into a vague bitterness which was difficult to identify. He wondered whether his trust for Dumbledore had been blunted to the extent of open disrespect for his person, or if Potter was just as nosy as always. Either way, he decided that the satisfaction of making him uncomfortable was too tempting for him to waste.

Well, Potter was going to find out at some point in his life anyway. “Unless Minerva has a cock, a possibility which I highly doubt, your theory is invalid.”

Severus was granted with the exact reaction he was anticipating: Potter’s eyes widened, a pink blush spreading over his cheeks. The insolent grin disappeared, now replaced by embarrassment. Perfection.

And while Potter was trying to determine whether the information he'd just been given was true or not, Severus decided to let him wonder. Better let Potter drown in his nosiness – the more, the better.

Against his better judgment, Severus decided that torturing the boy was rather amusing. Satisfied with himself, he opened the Prophet. The press was becoming less accurate as the years went by, and there were zero talented reporters to undertake the political predicament at the moment. With the Dark Lord back and the Ministry at the edge of the cliff, one would expect to see essential news at the front page, instead of all this nonsense concerning celebrities.

On the other hand, perhaps the Minister had foreboded the crucial information from slipping out. Negotiating would start any time soon again, and countless repentant Death Eaters of the past would appear to testify their faked innocence before they crawled back to their Lord’s feet. Unfolding the thread would take time – and surely more horrors would take place until then. Reading about parties and joyful events though wasn’t going to help the wizarding world be prepared, and if a war was on the way indeed, negligence of the press to publicise the ongoing situation would be at least sorely scandalous.

“Don't say a word about Dumbledore.”

Severus was startled. Was Potter still here? Why was he even talking to him? He’d been given a room for a reason.

Severus glared over the paper, annoyed to have his thoughts interrupted. “Go upstairs,” he quickly spat back.

Potter’s eyes narrowed. “Why would you say that? You have no right. Why would you say that?”
Ah. Like father, like son. “Does it offend you, Potter?”

“You have no right to speak ill of him. If he knew you said such a thing-”

"Forget about it boy, for Merlin's sake."

"How can you say he's - is it true? Has he told you?"

“Has he told me?” Of course he had. The man wouldn’t fit in a closet even if he tried. “The Headmaster and I have been friends for many years, Potter.”

Potter gaped again, blinking, and Severus realised the misunderstanding just a moment before Potter spoke.

“You – ”

“Friends. Do I look like a – ” He bit back the word faggot, failing to find a better one to fill in the blank. Let it be, he decided, and went back to his paper. His calmness didn’t last long.

“So, what do you do over the summer? Do you just stay inside and read?”

Severus sighed. “Don’t you have anything better to do, Potter?”

“Nope. Not really.”

“Find something.”

Potter chewed on another biscuit as he furrowed his eyebrows. “Can I go outside?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then there’s nothing I can do.”

It was official. He was babysitting an infant. And more so, a very bothersome one, shipped to him with a bolt stamp on the head. They weren’t going to survive this while Potter’s attempts to get along with him kept popping out of nowhere. The boy had to understand that the best solution for both of them was to shut his mouth until September.

And he’d learn the hard way. “Very well, then. The bathtub has grown mould all around and needs cleaning. Get rid of it and don’t you dare come downstairs again until it’s all removed and the porcelain is shining clean. No magic.”

He expected an objection he didn’t hear.

Dumbledore couldn’t be gay. Not that it changed anything – it didn’t, he hoped – but this news made him feel even more like he didn’t know Dumbledore at all. After a year of purposely avoiding him, Harry learnt to not expect his help and guidance as he once did. He had no reason to feel confused about it. Dumbledore was his professor, and had no business telling him about his sex life. Even if he did tell him, Harry wouldn’t know how to react or what to say, and there hadn’t been any conversations ever between them that could have brought up information like this.

The fact alone that Dumbledore could have a personal life outside Hogwarts was unsettling enough, and Harry grimaced at the idea of the man still having affairs. No, it didn’t change anything – at least he thought so.
He showered and went to his room to change, his clothes damp from his previous task. After having spent so many years of his life cleaning Aunt Petunia’s home, cleaning a tub wasn’t such a big deal. Working always helped him distract his mind, and distraction was the only thing he needed at the moment.

When he was done, he read the letters Hermione and Ron had sent him, and made a mental note to write back to them tomorrow. When Harry descended to the living room, Snape was just coming out of the mysterious door.

He looked at Harry suspiciously. “What?”

Harry held up a bottle of chlorine. “I’ve finished.”

“Finished what?”

“Cleaning,” said Harry. He went to the kitchen to leave the bottle and came back to the living room to lie face down on the sofa. Back at the Dursleys, he wasn’t less bored, but at least he was allowed to take a walk or sit in the yard if he wanted to. In here there was nothing to do. Snape hated talking at he hated Harry too, and Harry couldn’t confidently say that he hated the man any less. Living with him was pretty much like living with a bitter ghost.

And yet Harry didn’t like staying in his room alone. When he was alone, thinking was becoming too intense, too much, and images of Sirius sliding behind the veil would invade his mind again to haunt him. This grief was something new for him to fight – he never had to face a guilt as strong as this one. If Harry hadn’t been that naive, Sirius would be alive, and Harry would be living with him instead of Snape. Every minute in this house was reminding him of what he had done.

“Then move off to the rest of the rooms. The floor needs scrubbing too.”

Harry took off his glasses and let them slip on the floor. “Later.”

“Now, Potter. We have Occlumency later.”

“I’m not a house elf.”

Snape stood near him, and Harry heard an irritated exhale. “I will not have you idling on my couch. Get up.”

Harry buried his face into his arms. No matter how many hours he’d sleep, he never felt like getting enough rest these days. Once or twice he had woken up panting, and he was scared to bits at the realisation that he was screaming in his sleep. Snape hadn’t heard him, luckily.

“Ten minutes.”

“Potter.” The warning was clear in his voice. Away from Uncle Vernon’s hand though, Harry didn’t really care if he’d piss off Snape. He had put up with worse, and ignoring Snape’s orders was likely not going to bring him into bigger trouble than ignoring Vernon’s.

He felt something hit his head. “OUCH!”

Snape was holding a rolled-up Prophet. “Up, Potter.”

Harry did, but chose to spend his time in his bedroom instead of scrubbing Snape’s filthy floor. No matter how accustomed he was with those chores, it was one thing to let himself be humiliated in front of his Aunt, and completely different to do it in front of a professor. After the summer, he’d
have to face Snape in class again, and until then he had to maintain as much dignity as possible.

He stayed in his room, read again Ron and Hermione’s letters, slept, woke up, slept again, read the letters once more. When the time came for his Occlumency training, he felt like a ton of thoughts were already battling inside his head, and he was unable to push them away. Of course, Snape could tell.

“You’re not even trying, Potter.”

“I don’t know how to do it, damn you!”

“Manners.”

“Fuck manners!” He was exhausted; Snape’s magic was too strong. He could invade his mind by barely pushing in, and day after day Harry felt his resistances shatter instead of grow stronger. With every attempt to fight it, more memories would pop up in the surface, stranger and more private than the previous ones. This was becoming a torture, his mind slowly breaking under violent pressure. He couldn’t do it.

“How do you do it? Explain to me the steps you follow.”

“Should the Dark Lord decide to invade your mind and soul, Potter, you’d have no time to follow steps. You need to learn to do it instinctively.”

“It’s not working.” Harry sat at the chair’s armrest, rubbing his forehead. “There must be another way.”

“Pity we can’t create a new kind of magic just for you, isn’t it?”

Harry let his bum slip on the armchair and he rested back. His head swirled and he felt his stomach throbbing dangerously. “Could I go mad from this?”

“Not any more than you already are, I believe.” Snape walked over to him. “Get up. This is my seat.”

Harry chuckled into his hand and stood up only to fall onto the sofa again. Snape took his seat and looked as pathetic as Harry was, his fingers rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“You’re not making any progress. Your mind is failing again and again to keep up the slightest fight. I don’t even have to cast Legilimens to see your thoughts anymore, when we practice.”

Harry didn’t really like that. He tried to recall if he had thought of anything embarrassing during their lessons.

“I’m not going to trust my dreams and visions again, you know. Even if I see something… crucial, I won’t fall into Voldemort’s trap this time. Maybe these lessons aren’t necessary.”

Snape flinched and gave him a warning look. “Don’t say his name. He used your mind to merely project a couple of fake images, which he has done before to many victims. What makes you think it’ll be that easy next time? It’s possible that he’ll desire to completely take control of you.”

Snape seemed tired, and guilt caught a beat of Harry’s heart. The man was trying to help him, even though he despised him. He was wasting all of his free time with Harry for nothing. Disappointing Snape never seemed like one of the things that would make him feel ashamed. Somehow though, it did, and Harry still hadn’t found the right moment to bring up the subject of his promise to
Dumbledore to always protect him.

Harry stopped biting his lower lip, unable to recall when he'd started doing so. He looked up at Snape who was glaring back silently.

“Can we try again?”

Whatever thoughts were passing through his mind, Snape blinked them away. He sat further back to the chair, regaining his vigour. “We will, tomorrow.”

“Now. Please.”

Snape studied his face, as though considering something Harry couldn’t quite identify. Then, he sighed deeply. “Stand up.”

He closed his eyes, thinking of everything, all at once: his parents, Sirius, Ron, Hermione, Voldemort, Nagini, the screams he could hear when a Dementor was near him. He thought of his fear, his anger, how he could have saved Sirius if he was stronger. He thought of his Patronum. Of how Uncle Vernon would shout at him when he'd even breathe in his presence, and how many secrets Dumbledore kept and maybe was still keeping from him. He let his mind fill with every thought that concerned him, no matter how intense or uneasy it was. Then, he opened his eyes again, blinking them all into erasure.

“I’m ready.”

Snape raised his wand. “Legilimens!”

Nothing. Snape’s attack pushed into his mind, but it was like there was nothing there for him to see. After a moment of resisting, Harry let him in, inviting him in a dark nothingness. After a moment it wasn’t so hard for him to focus on it; he almost forgot where he was or who was attempting to read his thoughts. A sudden relaxation overwhelmed him, and he controlled the invasion steadily for a few moments.

The spell was drawn back and the room composed again around him. He was still on his feet though, instead of the floor. “Woah.”

The expression Snape wore was all new to Harry. If he didn’t know better, he’d assume that he had just seen a tiny quirk of pride at the corner of his lips.

“You… need work, Potter.”

Harry tried to convince himself he had not just heard a compliment.
Wisdom: Illusions

One of the most unexpected things Harry had discovered during his stay at Spinner's End, was that Snape was drinking. Regularly. He’d drink late at nights, when he’d assume Harry wasn’t likely to show up and attempt a conversation with him. Reading a book, or scribbling down potion recipes and other stuff he’d hide away right after, he more often than not had a glass of something with him. It was relaxing him, Harry had decided, and he usually respected the man's need to forget that they were now living together.

The single time Harry had gone downstairs late at night, to get a glass of water and eat some biscuits, Snape had glared warningly at home and told him to get lost. Harry was more than happy to do so, and after dully wishing him a good night he got out of sight.

Once or twice he attempted to spy on Snape; he never caught him do anything exciting though, and Harry had gone to bed skeptical about his professor’s life. What did the man do in his life apart from reading and writing? What did he do when he fancied to just have some fun? On the other hand, Harry doubted Snape was having fun, ever.

And when these thoughts occurred, it wasn’t strange for his mind to wander back to the memories he had seen in the Pensieve. The crying, pale face in Dumbledore’s office, stained with an ongoing pain which was unlike anything Harry had ever known. The affliction which was making his black eyes shine, the trembling hands, the pleas for forgiveness, were all crowding into his mind, leaving him wondering for the billionth time about Snape knowing his mum.

Snape was one of the many people that had known Harry’s parents. And since Harry had never had the chance to meet them, hearing about them always made his heart kick faster into his chest. He still didn’t know if it would do him any good to ask Snape about them though.

Learning more about what they were like was precious, and yet what he had seen about his father in Snape’s memories was not what he had imagined him to be at all – and now that Sirius was gone and couldn’t defend his best friend’s memory anymore, Harry was afraid of what else he might find out.

What he had seen in those memories, was an arrogant teenager, who’d bully and humiliate a classmate just to get the girls’ attention. As for his mother, Harry really had the impression that if he mentioned her to Snape he would most likely regret it.

So, he really tried not to ask him anything. Harry would stay in his room after dinner, and let Snape have his way with sinking into his heavy books and loneliness. Harry would roll around in his bed for hours, trying to sleep, or simply looking out the window, checking for street cats fighting with each other as he killed flies and mosquitos with his wand.

Tonight, though, it seemed that his insomnia had finally won over, and as he was walking around the old bed to brush off the tension, he grew incredibly bored.

Sensing already that he was making a mistake, but too proud to go back to his room, he descended and poured himself a glass of cold water from the fridge. Snape was sitting on his armchair in the living room, reading a book. Silently, Harry chose a random book from a shelf too and sat on the sofa.

The front cover said, *The Encyclopedia of Bat Eyes*. Harry sighed disappointedly. Well, it wasn’t the best of choices, but then again Snape wasn’t likely to have any comic books nearby.
“What do you think you’re doing now?” Snape had drawn his eyes from his book and was now prying on Harry.

Harry shrugged. “I couldn’t sleep. I… it just becomes impossible sometimes. I’ve been trying for the last three hours and I’m going a little crazy when I try so hard to sleep and can’t. It never happened so intensely before. So, I thought of sitting here for a while, read a book or something. I won’t bother you, promise.”

Snape seemed to consider it. “Very well.”

They both returned to their books, but Harry didn’t find anything interesting to read in his own. It was a potions record, as it turned out, and a very boring one too. He tried to make himself grow sleepy over it but failed miserably. He counted the letters of the words and the paragraphs of each page. Then he browsed it from the beginning to the end, hoping to find more notes for Dumbledore. He didn’t. His fingers brushed his scar as he rubbed his forehead, and he wondered if Snape’s Dark Mark was making him feel as miserable as Harry’s scar did most of the times.

Harry looked up at him, his face barely illuminated by the dim light of some candles and an old lamp behind him. His lips were pressed into a thin line, and his eyes were focused on his text. Whatever he was reading was surely far more interesting than bat eyes.

“I don’t understand Dumbledore,” Harry admitted bitterly, his voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t even trust you – for all I know you’re still a Death Eater and you deceived Dumbledore into trusting you – he didn’t even ask me if I want to be here.” He didn’t think, to be honest, that Dumbledore would abandon him alone with Snape if he suspected him to be a traitor, but then again Dumbledore could be wrong about that too.

Snape glared back at him, and his face was a blank mask.

“Only a big headed fool would question Dumbledore’s intentions.” he sneered lowly. “Of course, what could we expect from a Potter? You take pleasure from defying your superiors, there is no doubt.”

Harry scrunched his face. “He’s been wrong before. What if you are the one who questions his intentions? Have you told Voldemort I’m here?”

Snape turned a page and his lip quirked slightly upwards. “Don’t tempt me, Potter.”

Harry snorted. He turned a page too, to give the impression that he had comprehended his reading too. He couldn’t talk with Snape about his parents, but there was certainly another matter that was demanding to be discussed.

“Why did Dumbledore lie to me? I mean, about the Prophecy, and everything. All these years. I deserved to know. I was relying on him to tell me everything he knew.” He didn’t think, to be honest, that Dumbledore would abandon him alone with Snape if he suspected him to be a traitor, but then again Dumbledore could be wrong about that too.

“Sirius would be alive. I’d live with him instead of you. I’d have a family.” Harry waited for a reaction to that too, too curious to look away. What he got was only a peering gaze.

“I think he trusts you. A lot. He’s never going to trust me that much, I guess. If I knew Voldemort’s intentions all along…” Sirius would be alive. I’d live with him instead of you. I’d have a family. “I’m not a child. I know you think I am. But I’m not. I can fight him.” Harry waited for a reaction to that too, too curious to look away. What he got was only a peering gaze.
“It is foolish of you to expect a more respectful approach when you behave arrogantly and admire your fame. The Headmaster shares a surprising amount of information with you – an unnecessary risk, if you ask me. If I was Head of the Order, you wouldn’t even know its existence. Feel flattered.” Snape took his empty glass from the table and filled it again with firewhiskey. He turned another page. Harry didn’t think that Snape was actually reading either.

“Fame?” said Harry indignantly. “Do you even read the papers? They call me the next Dark Lord, propagating that I’m preparing an army along with Dumbledore to rule over England. Last year half the school thought I was paranoid and your precious Slytherins bullied me on a constant basis – and come to think of it they must have been doing it under your commands. There's nothing admirable in having people demand to know everything about you so they can spread around their stupid opinions.”

Fame was nothing. Harry had been fed up with it.

“Fame is a vapour,” Snape drawled. “It is not to be confused with success or honour – you see, the advantage of being known by people of whom you know nothing about, and for whom you care as little, is sadly useless to you.”

Every word only fuelled the fire that burned inside of him. Harry boiling anger at the thought of hearing that from someone who didn’t even know what success or honour were. *Dumbledore is wrong about you,* he was about to retort stubbornly, but his throat clenched around it as he realised how childish it would sound.

Dumbledore *had* been wrong in the past. Multiple times. About many people. “There’s no need for you to be worrying about fame, anyway.” Harry tried to bite back his malice but it slipped out along with his words. “I’ll have to face Voldemort, at some point. And I will. I won’t surrender. Or run away. I’m ready for it, either you think I'm stupid or not.” *You tell him that,* he added inwardly.

“I do hope you’ll be able to tell the difference between a hero and a foolish martyr by then, at least. And don’t say his name.”

“I don’t consider myself a hero,” Harry responded defensively. “I won’t consider myself a hero even when I’ll have already killed him.”

“Being so confident that you will indicates nothing but naivety and immaturity. The Dark Lord has skills you have not.” The words were slowly spitted out with a drawl. “The Headmaster overestimates your abilities. He tends to forget that human weakness is usually stronger than spells and magical defences. His faith to the undiluted good is far beyond me, and I insist on believing that he shouldn’t have used it on a teenage boy. Your sentiments surpassed your common sense this year – but it was to be expected.”

Harry felt his heart skip a beat. He certainly wasn’t hurt for being called a teenager. Especially by Snape, who’d called him much worse in the past. He thought of many possible answers - but all of them involved Sirius, and Harry had already decided that if he were to survive living with Snape he’d have to avoid subjects like this. Reminding himself how hateful Snape was wasn’t going to do any good.

“I don’t think I’m Dumbledore’s final plan, anyway. Maybe you are. You know much more than I do, and you’re closer to him than I am. Have you thought about it? Maybe I’m a cover, or something. Not that he'd tell me.”

“The more one knows about Albus Dumbledore, the more in danger one is. Let alone in despair. The responsibility is too heavy for your weak, young shoulders. Don’t ask for more than he already gives
Harry chuckled. “So, if you really know that much. What is Dumbledore doing over the summer?” Mental images of the old wizard wearing a swimsuit paraded in a row inside his mind, and he blinked them away in dread.

Snape closed his book defeated. He tossed it on the table and rested his head back on the cushions, sliding a bit lower on his seat. He stretched his legs and raised a hand to cover his closed eyes. “He’s on an adventure, as he idiotically chooses to call it. What he really does, if you ask me, is risking too much based on theories rather than evidential facts.” He let his hand fall down on the armrest. Leaning forward, he took another sip of his forgotten drink and savoured it before swallowing. “Wasting energy and being exposed like that during the Ministry’s worst period of provocation is unthinkable, and yet he tries with all his might to be removed from Hogwarts once and for good. Just wait and see.”

Harry wondered if Snape had let too much slip out accidentally. Judging by the way Snape was eyeing his glass reprovingly, he supposed he had.

“If Dumbledore is searching for something that might help us defeat Voldemort, then I want to join him,” Harry said.

Snape rolled his eyes. “Of course you do. By all means, Potter, do go and do it. How gallant you two must be, solving riddles together in the wild. And for the last time, don’t speak the Dark Lord’s name.” Snape snorted. “Superhuman Dumbledore. Superhuman Potter.”

Harry bit back a chuckle. “Um. Snape. I think you’re a bit drunk.”

“Mind your business,” Snape snapped.

“What do you mean by riddles?”

“Nothing of your concern. The Headmaster is simply searching for something that could… weaken the Dark Lord, potentially.”

“You mean, like a weapon. Like the Prophecy.”

Snape was sullen. “Fortunately, this has nothing to do with you. I’m sure he’ll tell you everything once he regards it necessary. Besides, your mind has been recently attacked to a point where you had completely lost the ability to tell the difference between visions and reality. What makes you think it wouldn’t be a fatal mistake for us to entrust you with crucial information?”

Harry couldn’t help but feel underprivileged, and his temper overwhelmed him. “You still kneel before Voldemort’s feet and yet you know more than I do.”

“If you ever become an Occlumens, we might have this conversation again. And don’t say his name.”

Harry was tired of hearing that. No matter how many people were being shocked by it, he wasn’t going to be a part of their hypocrisy. “What’s scaring you about his name? I see no reason hiding behind words. I’m not afraid of him.”

“There are worse things than fear, which I doubt you could ever stand to witness. Every name bears a past, and I would prefer to spare myself the memories the particular name brings along, especially when used irresponsibly by someone who does not know what he’s talking about.”
The last part was spat with a little more venom, Harry noticed. *I'm sorry*, he thought of saying, but it was a surrender he didn’t feel like offering. Maybe he indeed didn’t know what he was talking about. Perhaps Snape had seen some really awful things in his life, and he had connected Voldemort’s name with experiences he’d rather forget. It occurred to him that as a Death Eater, he might have done more than just witness.

“Fearing his name is like giving him power,” Harry pointed out.

“You have to grow up, Potter. This is bigger than you.” Snape sounded grim. Harry didn’t feel like a child – he didn’t know what growing up meant to Snape, but Harry had already lost too much to be considered a child. He had to prove this somehow – but words didn’t seem to work in such matters. And then again, he shouldn’t care about Snape’s opinion.

He stretched out his own legs and felt goose bumps running down his toes. He put his feet up on the sofa and sat cross-legged, ready to respond to Snape, when he looked up to find Snape staring back dangerously. “Feeling cozy, Potter?” he sneered.

“Yes, quite. Thanks,” answered Harry.

“You insolent brat, get your feet off my sofa this instant!”

Oh. Harry curled his toes as though to make a point of his shocks. “What? I’m not wearing shoes.” Snape glared hard before closing his eyes again.

Harry had left his wand upstairs and his hands were feeling empty, as though they didn’t know what to do with themselves. Sighing, he picked up Snape's book from the table. *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* was the title. He opened it and read a few lines.

“What’s that? Poetry??”

“Tch.” Snape didn’t open his eyes.

Harry chuckled. “You can’t scowl when you’re sleepy, Professor. Sorry.” He found a random excerpt and read it aloud: “Thus I die. Thus, thus, thus. Now I am dead, Now I am fled, My soul is in the sky. Tongue, lose thy light. Moon take thy flight. Now die, die, die, die. Gods, Snape. You’re a creep.”

“Manners, Potter.”

“What’s this story about?”

“Mm?”

“The book. What’s it about?”

“Illusions.”

Harry looked up from his text, only to see that Snape had slid even lower to the chair.

Harry cleared his throat. “Snape. I think you’re sleeping.”

“Am not.”

Harry didn’t know what to do with a sleepy Snape. He’d seen him angry, deranged, bitter, shouting. He’d seen him throw him out of his class, insult him, grab his arms and push him away with wrath.
He'd also seen him hold on his temper, eyes dangerously shining before a hurtful comment was spitted out, or before he simply walked away. He'd never seen him sleepy, though.

It seemed like crossing a very thin line – like knowing things he wasn’t supposed to know. He couldn’t bring himself to explain how Snape being human was one of them. Still, the uneasiness was making him stare awkwardly at his professor, not knowing what to make of the image before him.

It hadn’t been so difficult to come to terms with Remus outside school. Even though he was a werewolf and could have proven himself much more dangerous than Snape, Harry would spend massive amounts of time with him at Grimmauld Place without ever being perplexed. No, sleepy Remus was a picture his mind could comprehend. Sleepy Snape wasn’t.

It was the authority, Harry decided. His attitude was making it impossible for other people to think of him as a normal person. And the sneer. Definitely the sneer.

“What are you gawking at?” murmured Snape.

Harry blinked. “Um. Nothing. You were… Never mind. I think I should go to bed now. Goodnight. Sir.”

When he didn’t get a response, he ran.
Wisdom: Routines

Harry’s eyes were covered by the Sorting Hat… Not Slytherin, please, he whispered… “Is it true that you shouted at Professor Umbridge?” asked Professor McGonagall… “Yes,” Harry replied… Harry’s hair had overgrown during a single night again, and Uncle Vernon slapped him, deranged… Harry crouched into his cupboard as he saw him unbuckling his belt…

“Fuck,” spat Harry furiously. “Just give me a moment. I know I can do it.” He rubbed his temples hard.

“That was your uncle.” Snape frowned, and looked at him with concern.

“Yes. I did it the first time, I don’t know why it’s so difficult to do it again now. I’ll… concentrate more. Do it, I’m ready.”

“He’s been abusing you.”

What was wrong with Snape now? As though he weren’t coming from a difficult family as well. “Well, yeah, that memory was quite old. He’d caught me stealing food from the fridge and he was furious. It’s not a big deal.”

“Why was he taking off his belt?”

Harry burst into laughter, his cheeks turning red. “You thought – gods, no! He belted me. That was all. Nothing gross.”

“How often does that happen?”

Harry felt an itch of annoyance at Snape’s tactlessness but he decided to keep his nerve down. “Once or twice,” he lied. “I told you, it’s no big deal.”

After a moment, Snape nodded. "Focus."

They both raised their wands and glared at each other. Snape lifted his chin. “Legilimens!”

He was getting better at it.

He did get better at it at some point, at least.

He even thought he had mastered it for a while, and that he could get rid of Snape – but then he was back to failing again and he couldn’t seem to find a way to repeat what he had done when he’d pushed Snape out. Insomnia was making it worse; sleepiness was becoming impossible to approach, and when he’d eventually fall asleep his dreams would be so complicated and dark that he’d jump up from his bed and he’d prefer to stay awake until dawn.

He was proud he had blocked Snape out – but no matter how much he was now craving to see the acceptance in Snape’s eyes again, he couldn’t. An acceptance which meant Snape’s defeat. Which would indicate that Harry had proven himself better than what Snape thought him to be.

Now, it was as though he had never done it at all. He mentally shielded his mind as Snape’s spell pushed in violently, and Harry imagined it crushing on his skull and bouncing back. He thought of the carpet, the sofa, the Common Room’s sofa, Snape’s house, Uncle Vernon’s house, Snape himself, Dumbledore, Hogwarts, Voldemort. It was an insane train of thought, but it was what
occupied his daytime thoughts anyway.

“Pathetic.”

Harry collapsed on his hands and knees, gasping. After a moment, he sat back and wiped the sweat off his face with the hem of his t-shirt.

“I begin to believe that my entire life wouldn’t be enough to teach you how to do it.”

“But I did it!” Harry shouted. “I know I did it. You remem-”

“It was a coincidence. You’ve yet to willingly control it.”

“You remember that I did it! It wasn’t just coincidence. I just…” What were the right words? *Tried to impress you? Wanted to show you that I’m not an idiot so you would finally shut up?* “I concentrated. I don’t know how I did it, though. I don’t remember.”

“Thank gods you have a reasonable excuse, then. You don’t know. You don’t remember. When the Dark Lord attempts to peer into that fragile mind of yours I suggest you beg him to give you a little more time to prepare yourself.” He raised his wand again just about time for Harry to cover his head with a hand.

“No, wait! I need a break.”

“There is no time for dawdling, Potter. *Legilimens!*”

If the man was trying to shatter Harry’s mind to pieces, he was certainly almost there. The headache that was already painfully pulsating into Harry’s skull spread over his eye muscles and jaw joints; with every attack it was less and less possible for him to fight back. Too tired to even try, he let an imaginary silver stag gambol around into his mind as though to hide his thoughts away. He imagined that he conjured his Patronus to protect himself from Snape’s attack. He mentally saw it hop out of his head and stand between him and Snape. He briefly thought of a scenario where an imaginary Patronus was enough to keep enemies out of one’s mind and how Harry would be praised for discovering such rare magic.

It didn’t work.

As he was still on the floor, what he had managed to do was to merely lean forward and gag. He shook his head to stop the whirling, but it only became worse. Slowly, he got up. “That’s enough. I can’t take any more - we have to stop. I’m feeling dizzy. Fuck.” He pressed his palm against the wall, bending down and closing his eyes. It occurred to him that Snape hadn’t spoken.

Harry turned to look at him. Snape was staring, his wand still half – raised. Harry blinked into focus. “All right?”

“How…” Harry waited. Snape didn’t go on for a long moment. “You can conjure a Patronus.”

“Yes, of course I can. Remus taught me.” He expected a bitter comment about his Patronus being a stag, but it never came.

Instead, “We will continue tomorrow. Go rest. If your headache insists there are painkillers in the bathroom’s cabinet.”

Harry nodded. He felt a bit unsure of Snape’s behaviour, but he didn’t want to provoke it. He left.
He belted me. Not a big deal. The little dark world Harry Potter was living in was beyond Severus’ logic. How could a sixteen year old boy be so used to this tolerance… and how couldn’t he? A part of himself interfered. Severus had been in his shoes. A pair of shoes, of which Severus had grown out of powerful instead of broken, if only for a single night in his life. If only to find the time to kneel before a Master who’d kill the woman he loved and promise him the world for his soul.

It made sense, because Muggles were insane, dangerous – they were animals that slapped and cursed and beat and belted. The Dark Lord had elegance; his belief was that wizards should not behave like Muggles. Severus couldn’t have helped himself. He had agreed. He had followed.

Potter was different in all aspects, and yet he passed for normal to those who didn’t look deep enough. Potter didn’t do well with power. Power seemed to consume him.

Concentrate. The word had gotten numb at the tip of his tongue, throwing it at Potter with every chance. Concentrate. As though Potter didn’t want it. As though he wasn't trying. His mind was filled with rubbish, rubbish that all of them had succeeded at throwing in and implanting, watering it daily with guilt and an outrageous sense of duty towards a war that had begun before the little brat was even born. Potter was trying to block him, but it was impossible. His mind was a mess of misery and of other emotions Severus couldn’t exactly name. The grief was never expressed. The pain had never been let out. The boy was drowning into his own soul.

“We will continue tomorrow. Go rest. If your headache insists there are painkillers in the bathroom's cabinet.”

Potter ran. Severus could hear his shoes thumping loudly on the stairs, bolting upstairs and slamming the bathroom’s door close. The ritual was known; Potter would throw water to his face, cold and plenty of it, and then he’d shower for a while. Washing off the tension. Probably washing Severus out of his mind. Perhaps the violation was too much for him to bear on a daily basis.

Nevertheless, it had to be done.

Severus couldn’t remember when this task became an obligation to him. He remembered quite clearly cursing the boy all the way to this place, and then all the way up to his old bedroom. Only it was inwardly. Potter knew none of it.

Dumbledore did. There was no need to insult the man inwardly. He had let his rage take control and shouted as Dumbledore deserved to be shouted at. And the old bastard had kindly smiled back. Of course. He knew Severus would take Potter in eventually. He knew that Severus had no control over the situation and that he’d sooner kill himself than ignore Dumbledore’s orders.

Severus turned the kitchen faucet on cruelly, and prayed for the hot water to come to him. Forcing the freezing water on the boy. He hoped Potter was still showering. Revenge. A childish one. He felt ridiculous and after a heartbeat he turned it off. Legilimency was an art, used to penetrate and control the mind. It was, in cases, stronger than the Imperius Curse, undetectable, and more delicate. Nevertheless, a dark art. Not meant to be used on children.

He didn’t actually pity Potter. And he certainly wasn’t worried about him. Perhaps it was just curiosity. He was Lily’s son, after all.

And then, there was Potter’s Patronus. Severus bit back a mirthless laugh, knowing that he would most likely let it snap free were he alone in the house. A stag. Of course, it was to be expected. It was his father’s Patronus too. Which caused his mother’s to be a doe. Which caused Severus’ to be a doe. Or maybe it was the other way around. It didn’t really matter. He imagined the look on Potter’s stupid face should he conjure his own Patronus in front of him.
Idiotic things, Patronuses. Absolutely idiotic. On the other hand, Potter had already seen so much when it came to Severus’ life. His Patronus wasn’t likely to reveal more. And Potter had yet to begin asking indiscreet questions. Severus assumed that he was just waiting for the proper timing to get his questions answered.

It'd never happen.

Steps again. Potter was now heading to his bedroom, where he would take a nap until dinnertime. Which meant that he would talk to his bird and do nothing at all. Routines. One could easily get used to them. Severus had. He once had a perfectly calming routine in his life and his home. A routine where sleeping at nights was an exquisite private pleasure, and not an ongoing dread that he might wake up to screams and cries.

A routine in which he was merely concerned about his own sleep deprivation, and thoughts about Potter staying awake and torturing himself with memories of the past would never cross his mind. A routine in which, most importantly of all, he would have no one to burden him with nonsensical babbling over the day, and Severus could happily sink into his own meditations and plans. Alone. Happy to be alone.

Sighing, he climbed up the stairs and knocked on Potter’s door twice.

“Just a sec!”

He waited. Potter opened the door, wearing his worn out tracksuit bottoms and holding a shirt. Severus had suddenly the suspicion that either Potter had been terrifyingly obese at some point in his life, or all his clothes belonged to someone else.

“The Headmaster requested to see me so I’ll be away for the afternoon. Do not expect me back until midnight, which is a far too late for you to be awake.” He made a pause to let the point sink in. “I assume you are not foolish enough to go through my belongings again. If you touch anything, I’ll know it. If you break or destroy something, you will pay for it. You are not to leave the house unless it’s burning itself down.”

Potter nodded, making a face. “Why can’t I come too?” He grabbed the towel from his bed and dried his hair, then passed it through his upper torso. At sixteen, James Potter was already a man. Harry Potter seemed most likely underdeveloped; his chest hair was probably the only thing on him indicating that he was experiencing puberty.

“You have no business coming, do as I said. And please, do try and not burn the house down on purpose.”

Severus turned around just in time to hear the furious bang of the door slamming closed. Now, off to Dumbledore. Uninvited.

The wonders of life; to be between Scylla and Charybdis.
Severus wouldn’t step out now even if Dumbledore was about to take a piss in the middle of the room.

“Severus. Where is Harry?”

“Safely locked into my property, in which he had no business being in the first place.” He glared. “You returned to Hogwarts and didn’t summon me. I thought it might have slipped your mind, so I decided to pay you a visit anyway.” Which pretty much meant, *if you believe I’ll keep on changing Potter’s diapers while you insist on keeping me in the dark you’re being sorely mistaken.*

Dumbledore sighed, as though he had the right to feel pushed. “Do you recognise this?”

Severus seated himself across Dumbledore and watched as the ring slowly descended to the desk. Severus dragged it across the desk with his wand. He hadn’t seen it again, but the artefact was known to him. Marvolo Gaunt’s ring. Made during the middle ages and belonged to one of the most powerful pureblood families.

“Where did you find it?” It should belong to Slytherin now.

“Little Hangleton. Quite a journey, really. And it seems to be carrying a rather rare gift on it.”

He dared Severus with his eyes to take a look. Severus picked it up carefully, and brushed a finger over it. He didn’t have the knowledge to tell if it was a Horcrux, and Dumbledore wouldn’t tell him anyway. The only reason Severus had figured out that Dumbledore was possibly searching for a Horcrux was that he never asked. “If it’s cursed it must be destroyed,” he said carefully.

“No, no, it can’t be destroyed. That would be tremendous. Come on Severus, you’re smart. Look again. It’s not cursed.”

The bastard was somehow enjoying this. He had discovered something quite fascinating, as it seemed, but Severus was impatient to get to the point. He looked again. He saw it. He let it fall on the table and his mouth dropped open. His hand remained on air, as though to grasp the realisation and beat it into explaining itself. It occurred to him that Dumbledore was still smiling, his game heading as planned. “It isn’t supposed to exist,” Severus muttered to himself. “It’s a mythical object. It never – existed.”

“But it does,” Dumbledore said, his eyes glittering. "Imagine the possibilities.” He took it from the table and stroked it lovingly with a finger. Severus had a feeling that the Resurrection Stone was almost purring at them.

“The possibilities? Do you wish me to begin from paranoia and depression or from the erratic suicide attempts? You should have known better than want – Merlin knows what, let alone saying this to me, of all people! What did you think you’d hear? Congratulations, perhaps? Have you lost your mind? It is your old age that makes your mind play oafish games or haven’t you thought that the Dark Lord must have somehow cursed the thing anyway to keep it to himself?”

It occurred to Severus that what had begun as forcing reason into Dumbledore was now a shouting outburst of vexation. He had gotten up from his chair at some point, although he couldn’t remember when.

Dumbledore kept holding the ring protectively. “I checked for curses and it is clear-”

“Of course it is, because whatever curse the Dark Lord might have put in it will immediately show up with the first detecting spell you’ll use!” Why did people around him kept putting themselves in danger? Why weren’t they letting him be calm for once? “Get rid of it. Destroy it and bury it
somewhere. It’s not safe to have it in your possession. You know better than that.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Perhaps… I’ll do an extended research first.”

Good enough. For now. “If you kill yourself over a temptation made for the weak, I’ll have to permanently occupy myself with James Potter’s son’s wellbeing alone. Which I doubt I deserve, despite my faults.”

At that, Dumbledore looked up in curiosity. He buried the ring in a drawer and locked it. “How are you getting along with Harry? Is everything all right?”

“Yes, our days together are fascinating. We actually can’t wait to get more,” he snarled.

From then on, the conversation wasn't led anywhere importantly. Severus explained Potter’s difficulties in Occlumency and emphasised that he could not keep this up forever without breaking the boy’s mind. Dumbledore seemed just curious to hear more. The Patronus didn’t seem to excite the fool either – he probably already knew that Potter could conjure one, but had no answer as to why a wizard who could produce so complicated magic could not manage to seal his mind.

Severus insisted that perhaps they should postpone the lessons until September, and focused hard on making Dumbledore understand the importance of the situation as it was. His attempts to change Dumbledore’s mind passed in vain, and he had the suspicion that he was as unwanted here as Potter was in his home. The feeling that Dumbledore was waiting for him to leave so he could inspect the ring more couldn't be brushed off. He promised Dumbledore to examine the ring further and see for himself if it was cursed. Dumbledore accepted to wait, but refused to give him the ring.

And while Dumbledore listened carefully to his horrid experience of roofing Harry bloody Potter, all the while Severus was becoming sure that Dumbledore wasn’t going to offer an alternative to the situation, nor help Severus out of it. He had to “get along” with Potter, as the Headmaster plainly chose to name it.

It simply wouldn’t happen.
Harry had been expecting to find the most bizarre things in Snape’s house. He was expecting bats and rats – haunted items, ghosts, rotten food, broken windows and filthy blankets. He’d been expecting all of those, and he wasn’t entirely wrong.

So, when he fumbled through Snape’s closet, he expected to find Death Eater cloaks, spare wands or bottles of poison, or even knives and daggers. What he didn’t expect though, was a stack of porn magazines.

And a big stack it was. He found them in a carton box – and he took them out dumbstruck. Shocking wasn’t exactly the right word.

It was unbelievable. None of them seemed to belong to him; the publication dates indicated they were at least two decades old. In the same box, numerous empty cigarette packs were rotting, and a single piece of broken glass was placed on top. Harry didn’t know what to make of it; he assumed it all belonged to his father, risking a wild guess.

He spread the magazines in front of him on the floor, carefully avoiding to directly touch them. With his wand, he opened the first one, and came face to face with a picture of a naked blond woman with long hair and large breasts. She was riding a broom, the wind pushing her hair back and revealing her firm body.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Harry muttered to himself. If only he could tell Ron about this. He was never going to believe Snape had porn in his house. Harry had trouble coping with it at the moment too.

The girl waved a hand at him before fondling her breasts with both hands. Harry closed the magazine somewhat embarrassed. He checked the clock. Snape was going to be back any time now. He had to hurry up.

He quickly stored the magazines back in place and was ready to leave, his hand clutching around the doorknob in the way out of Snape’s bedroom. Then, changing his mind, he ran back and took one of the issues with him. He rolled it up and shoved it under his shirt before disappearing to his room. There were too many magazines there for Snape to notice anyway. At least he hoped so.

Snape was back earlier than expected, and Harry silently thanked his luck for not proving a fool out of him. They ate soup in silence, and Harry tried to ignore the filthy glares Snape was granting him with. He forced himself to pretend he hadn’t noticed.

When Snape poured himself a glass of water and slammed the glass loudly on the table, Harry looked up. “You’re angry.”

“Mind your business, Potter.”

“I’ve no business to mind here, have I? I thought you’d tell me how it went. With Dumbledore.”

“We were discussing work. Keep your nose out of it.”

“You weren’t discussing work. You were discussing me,” he said confidently. “I bet you were telling him how I drive you mad with my poor progress and that you don’t want me here. And that I’m stupid. We both know you hate my staying with you, there’s no need to pretend.” He quickly added in a more restrained tone, “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have to, you know.”
“You don’t have to. You can always run away when I won’t be looking. I’ll tell it was an accident.” The exhortation was delivered with Snape’s familiar bitterness, but it somehow managed to creep deeper than that.

“It’s better here,” Harry conceded. It occurred to him that this shouldn’t have come out. Why had it? He filled his mouth with a spoonful, and only when he gulped down did he realize that he was tense. “I mean, you know. At least here I do learn something when I’m not locked in my room.”

“I’m not locking you,” Snape spat.

_Stupid. Stupid._ “I know.”

“And you’re not learning.”

“Well, I suck at Potions and Occlumency, the only two subjects I’m being taught exclusively by you. That has to mean something.”

“It means,” Snape snarled, “that you have no desire to learn whatsoever. Shielding the mind presupposes to have one in the first place.”

“Insulting your students isn’t exactly a teaching method. I’ve heard they’ve been looking for a new mascot at Zonko’s. Perhaps you should consider a career change.” He considered the idea of Snape dressed in red pants and matching suspenders trying to sell love potions and jelly beans.

“I might as well pursue the job. Poisoning little wrecks while they ignore my authority is going to be so much easier than trying to teach them. And speaking of jobs... what should I write on your report once you graduate, if ever? Should I mention that Potter’s astonishing need for attention is his only known quality, along with his thirst for fame? Of course, it may lead you up into becoming a mannequin, if anything.” A pause. “Ah. I forgot. You’re short.”

_Damn Snape for knowing exactly how to spot his insecurities._ “Well, I’ll just have to go up a stool and wait for people to come and dress me up, so it won’t matter. Besides, women prefer short men.”

“And how many women have preferred you so far, pray tell?” Snape arched a brow and Harry felt a heat rushing up to his face. His stare dropped to his bowl.

“I thought so.”

Harry bit his tongue and let a bitter retort travel back down his throat. He could ask Snape how many girls had preferred _him_. He betted the answer was none. Then again, it was a risk he might be sorry to take, considering the possibilities of Snape having dated his mum. But he couldn’t let his mind go through that again. It was pure torment.

What could his mum possibly see in Snape that’d make her find him any attractive at all? Harry watched him as he brought a napkin to his face and carefully wiped his thin lips. He wasn’t handsome.

His nose was large. His skin was pale. His hands – well. He didn’t have ugly hands. Quite the opposite. His fingers were long, with short and clean nails, and when he didn’t wear his coat it was quite obvious that he had firm forearms too. Harry wondered if the Dark Mark was still there. It had to be, he thought.

He was taller than Harry would ever be. And he had that way of just making people notice him. Sometimes it was hard to tell if he was snobbish and evil as everyone thought, or if he was just not a happy person. And Harry knew that being unhappy could make someone seem malicious and
aggressive, even if the only thing they wanted was be to be left alone. He knew that.

He’d learned it when Ron and Hermione were pushing matters too much. Or when Dumbledore did. Or Remus. Or everybody.

He remembered how Dumbledore had told him that his mother could always see the beauty in others. That she was kind, as Sirius and Remus would agree. What had she seen in Snape that Harry couldn’t? Harry had never come to terms with him. He never liked him or trusted him or even saw any reason to respect him. But then again, he had never really tried to. And their hatred had always been mutual. Not that Snape deserved any respect. He had led Harry’s parents to their death.

Puzzled, he shook the thoughts away. It was impossible. His mum couldn’t have wanted Snape, no matter how kind she might have been to him. No one could want Snape. Ever.

At least he thought so. Maybe… maybe he just needed to wash his hair regularly. Maybe that was it.

Despite himself, he suddenly hoped that Snape did have a girlfriend somewhere, and he was only hiding her from Harry. It would be sad for anyone to never feel beautiful or wanted. But his train of thought had gone a bit too far, he realised.

He looked up at Snape, who appeared to be lost into his own thoughts as well.

“What are you thinking about?” Harry asked. He regretted it as soon as he realised that this was the kind of question he’d ask Ron. Not a professor. And that he did most likely not want to know what Snape was thinking. At all.


In June? “You weren’t thinking that.”

Snape’s chest heaved for a second. He let a few seconds pass before he responded. “Indeed.”

“And you’re not going to tell me what you were thinking about.”

“No.”

His eyes weren’t just dark. There was something inhuman in them, a depth in which one could easily drown. They glimmered with an obscure curiosity as they narrowed, and a shiver ran down Harry’s spine.

“What are you thinking about, Mister Potter?”

At the word Mister Harry’s self – control shattered and was scattered to small pieces before his feet. Harry had been glaring back at Snape. Directly. Legilimency. Fuck.

He managed a shameless grin, as his last way out. “Your schedule, of course. I was wondering whether it’s going to include any lesson I might get around to actually master.”

Snape didn’t laugh. He was still peering at Harry, a long finger slowly stroking his glass of water. “I think you are tired. Perhaps you should retire.”

Harry nodded. “Right.” He swallowed around the strange lump in his throat with difficulty.

He stood up a bit quickly, left even quicker, and when he slumped on his bed, still clothed, shocks on, glasses thrown aside, he forced himself into a dreamless, sadly gruelling sleep.
“Cut like this,” Snape said. He took the knife from Harry’s hand and chopped the vegetables. “You need to work with sharper motions, otherwise you’ll ruin them.”

Harry nodded, but when Snape swept over to the oven, he changed his motions and continued chopping like he did at first. “Back at Aunt Petunia’s I used to cook all the time,” he said. “I know how to do it.”

Snape selected a couple of dishes and placed the potatoes on the cutting board. “I have some errands to run on Friday morning. Is it too much of me to ask, that you stay in your room this time?”

Harry stilled his hand. Surely Snape couldn’t have figured out that Harry had stolen from him. “What do you mean?”


“Oh.” So he hadn’t. “Are you going to see Dumbledore again?”

“No.” He took the vegetables from Harry and gave him the potatoes. “Chop them. Not like this, Potter. You’re not listening.”

“It’s better this way. Cubes instead of slices, I mean. They’re less likely to burn this way and at the same time they remain crispy.”

Snape gave him a peering look. “If you were as imaginative in Potions as you are with your stomach’s desires you might have had a chance in that Auror career after all.”

Harry chuckled. “You can always let me take Advanced Potions next year, you know.”

“I haven’t lost my mind yet. Besides, things might not be as you know them next year.” Harry noticed Snape’s back straightening at that; he was proud about something.

“Which means?” Harry furrowed his brow.

“You’ll see,” Snape smirked. He put the vegetables on the pan and closed the oven door.

“You still hope you’re going to get that Defence position, don’t you?” Harry smashed a potato accidentally and put it aside, grimacing.

“Let’s just say that it is more likely for me to be teaching Defence instead of Potions, from now on.” Snape leaned back to the table and crossed his hands over his chest.

“Aha,” muttered Harry. There was no chance Dumbledore was going to let Snape teach Dark Arts. Harry just knew it. “So, where are you going on Friday then?”

He finished chopping and opened the oven to place the potatoes in. Snape was staring back at Harry with no proof of discomfort, but he didn’t answer.

Harry opened his mouth to say something, but couldn’t find the right words. A nonsensical anger sparked before his eyes for a moment and then it was gone. He didn’t really think he wanted Snape in danger. Or anyone else. Not because of Harry, at least.

“Are you going to be alright?” he asked.

Snape continued staring for a long moment. Then he pushed Harry aside and turned on the oven. Snape swept over to the sink to wash his hands. “I doubt it. Your cooking is dreadful. But I do hope
that I’ll manage to survive it.”

He wasn’t going to talk about it. Harry decided not to push it. “And you’ll survive just as well teaching Potions again.”

“Potions,” spat Snape, “is a delicate art, which I have seen suffer under a kind of abuse only Hogwarts students can possibly inflict. I’ve only endured it because I could do nothing to change it. I cannot force intelligence upon anyone, as it seems.”

“You really hate your job,” said Harry. He washed his hands too and sat on a chair. “So, why do you stay? At Hogwarts. You could start your own business, or something.”

Snape sat across Harry and placed his wand on the table. He was always carrying it with him around the house, which was a bit stressful for Harry. “Besides the protection and the earnings the school provides me, I do not wish to prove myself useless.”

Harry tried to see the meaning behind that. Snape was a spy – at least, according to Dumbledore, thought Harry with some distrust – but Voldemort was thinking that he was spying on Dumbledore instead of the other way around. Which meant that if he stopped being near Dumbledore, Voldemort would have no reason to keep him alive. But that wasn’t the whole truth.

“You’re also staying to protect me.” Harry wondered if he was actually expecting Snape to admit this or to refuse it. Not that it’d make any difference. He should be used to people lying to him by now. The fact that Snape and Dumbledore had been hiding this from him did not annoy him as much as it hurt him. He never thought of Dumbledore as disingenuous. But it seemed that he didn’t regard Harry mature enough to share with him all that concerned him. Snape’s wishes were probably more important than Harry’s rights.

“Yes.”

“Even though you hate me,” Harry pressed.

Snape didn’t consider it but for the space of a heartbeat. “It is my duty to protect you, as I would do for all my students.”

Bollocks. “But you don’t hate me. You hate my father. And you want me safe for my mum’s sake. So for you I don’t even exist as a real person. You’re just using me to project them before you and act accordingly.” There. He’d said it. He’d said it.

“I assure you that you have won every last bit of my despising you on your own.”

“That’s because you’re only seeing what you want to see.” Harry eyed Snape’s wand, and he dragged it closer with a finger. He rolled it in his hand to take a better look. It was a nice wand, black and plain. Snape followed Harry’s motions with his eyes waringly.

“You are lowering the quality level of my class. This affects downright negatively the progress of the rest of the students, even though a few of them do make an effort to succeed.”

“That’s not it. Try something else,” Harry said.

“What do you think it is, Potter? That perhaps I keep on holding an unreasonable hatred directed especially to you? Who do you think you are? Your insolence is more than enough to make people sick of you.”

Harry nodded, his eyes round. It was the expression he was giving Ron when he wanted to
communicate that he didn’t take seriously a single word Ron was saying.

Snape pursed his lips, leaning closer. “You’re an arrogant child, seeking the attention and the admiration of others. You insist on wallowing about it, pretending to be the innocent little victim, and yet deep down you enjoy every minute of it.” His voice resembled a snake’s hiss.

“Like my father.”

“Your father didn’t have the burdened background you have. People fall for your supposed mythical powers, which I doubt are anything but coincidental, and you welcome their false impressions by purposely getting into trouble at every single opportunity.”

“Like my father.”

“Yes,” Snape hissed again. “You’ve been ignoring the school’s rules since you first stepped foot inside, holding on to the belief that somehow they do not apply to you, or that you are too good for them.”

“Like my father.” Harry couldn’t hide his grin anymore. Snape pressed his lips together until they turned white. He pretty much looked like a chided child.

“For Merlin’s sake, wipe that hideous smile off your face. You haven’t proved anything.” Snape held up a hand. “I’m not to blame if your father’s unfortunate genetics were strong.”

Harry rested his forehead on his hand. “You’re impossible. I quit.”

With the corner of his eye, Harry thought he saw Snape slightly quirking his lip. He could have imagined it. “Your father wouldn’t.”

Harry snorted at the table. Well, that was a start. He guessed so. Maybe someday he’d be able to talk to Snape without being driven mad. As his mind wandered through various similarities he had heard over the years that he shared with his Dad, a random question came up.

“Do you like quidditch?”

Snape took his wand and buried it back into his sleeve. Without his coat on it was a wonder how the wand stayed in place, so Harry guessed it was spelled to stick on his skin.

“It didn’t interest me as a student. Now I can only hope Slytherin may at least win the Quidditch Cup, as the House Cup is undoubtedly going to Gryffindor for your exciting existing techniques.”

Harry lifted his head up. “It’s only fair for Dumbledore to give us extra points! You take so many from us during the year for no reason at all that we’d never win without him.”

“Pity.”

“And our quidditch team is better than yours.”

“Your quidditch team is captained by a girl who looks like a man, your Head of House permits you daily training although it is against the school rules, and your team’s seeker has approximately ten degrees of myopia.”

“That’s only six!” protested Harry. “And I’m the best seeker my team has had in ages. At least I didn’t get in it because someone paid for it!”

“My team is skilful either way. My students are capable of getting by even while they regard their
more essential studies as their priority.”

“Your team sucks,” said Harry. “Your beaters must be the fattest boys in Hogwarts. It’s a miracle their brooms keep them up.”

“You will show respect to my –”

“You know it’s true!”

“– students, you little spoiled, audacious –”

“But it’s true! If you think I’m going to respect your little Death –”

“– kid, even if I have to force you –”

“– Eaters in training –”

“– to hold your tongue when you must!”

They were both standing up now, their faces inches apart from each other. A heavy scent of ash reached Harry’s nostrils and he wrinkled his nose, his eyes still locked with Snape’s. Snape wrinkled his own nose too.

“The food,” Harry said.

They both ran to the oven and kneeled down. They opened the door, the thick black smoke attacking them at once. Harry’s eyes stung and he coughed hard. Snape brought the bottom edge of his shirt up to cover his own mouth and nose, and Harry noticed a line of dark hair starting from his navel and continuing down his trousers. He stared for a moment and then he covered his nose with a hand as well. The smoke seemed to suck up his head like fog.

“Fuck!” said Harry.

Snape spelled the pan cold and dragged it out.

Well. It could have been worse. The vegetables had become cinder, but the potatoes were still somewhat visible. Harry turned to Snape.

“See? Cubes instead of slices. They survived.”

And Snape laughed. He really laughed. He shoved the pan at Harry’s lap.

“Give it a try, then.”

Harry did. And after a moment, he spit his mouthful back to the pan. He looked at Snape miserably, but Snape laughed again. Harry looked at the black melted potatoes that had spread themselves all over the pan and silently came to the conclusion that the utensil was ruined.

Snape balanced himself by abstractedly placing a hand on Harry’s head and got up, before striding over to the living room.

“Come on. We’ll order fast food.”
Wisdom: Observations

There was no other enjoyment like reading. Books were the quietest and most loyal of friends; they were the most accessible and wisest of counsellors, and the most patient of teachers. Books provided self-possession. Control. Knowledge. One could live several lives while reading. Good books and a wary conscience: this was what a good life was made of.

For books were the plane, and the train, and the road. They were the destination, and the journey. A journey which demanded silence and concentration. Submission; devotion to the pages and their meanings. Meanings one could only interpret with inner meditation and seclusion.

Meanings one could not interpret when a pair of feet were clattering down the staircase. Meanings impossible to even get a glimpse of when another person was coming into view in the same room with the reader. Intending to stay. Without asking for permission. Without feeling the need to.

Severus sighed. “Why must you bother me, Potter?”

Potter picked a random book from the bookcase, sat on the floor before the dormant hearth and shrugged. “Why must you bother me? I didn’t even talk to you.”

Wretched little monster. He ended up in the same room with Severus far too often lately. And it wasn’t a coincidence. Potter’s owl hadn’t brought him any letters since his first week here, so it seemed that his friends had at last seized their summer and forgotten about him for the time being. On the other hand, Potter’s nightmares hadn’t ceased, but they didn’t occur every night anymore. Although when they did they were loud enough to wake up the entire neighbourhood. Severus couldn’t define what exactly had changed, and he couldn’t bring himself to ask either, doubting that Potter had any idea about his own nightly horrors anyway.

“What’s Mirus Magus?”


Potter held up the book in question. “I know that. I mean, what does it mean? The title.”

“It means Wonderful Magic. And I suggest you leave that book aside instantly, as your comprehending level will probably miserably fail you in the understanding that this particular book demands.”

Severus watched until, after grimacing, Potter placed the book back to its place and searched through the titles to choose another one.

“Don’t you have anything interesting in here to do? Besides, you know. Books.” His tone was betraying that books didn’t appeal at all interesting to him. It wasn’t surprising.

“The invitation to scrub the floor is still open. Those damn biscuits of yours have filled my carpets with chocolate crumbs.”

His disgust was met with a daring sparkle in Potter’s eyes. “That’s not true, I’m always careful. Besides, you are the one who ate the last box.”

“Please, Potter, do find it in your heart to forgive me. When in my house, from now on, I will always ask for permission first.”
Potter snorted. “What’s behind that door?”

Severus turned a page.

“Do you hide any dead bodies in there?”

“I might begin to.”

“Right.”

Potter sat cross-legged again, a bit closer to him this time. Much closer. “Yes, do come closer, Potter. Don’t be shy, you can even sit on my lap if you want to,” he snarled. A wild blush attacked Potter’s cheeks and he quickly shifted a foot away. As much as he disliked intimacy, embarrassing Potter was a pleasurable way to pay back for it.

“You’d wish,” Potter said, annoyed.

And not for the first time, Potter’s cheek was unbelievable. The boy had no sense of modesty or manners. Talking back was not only defence these days. Potter was enjoying it.

Not that Severus was fond of surrendering either. As long as Potter continued this farce, he was determined to provoke him all the same. It was only right for him to have the last word. Especially with James Potter’s son.

This was his home. His student. His gibing. And he had never expected Potter to be able to carry it that far. Dumbledore should have foreseen that they’d insult each other until one of them broke apart. Potter would, but not yet. The boy’s mind was absolutely twisted.

“Perhaps I’d wish.” Here they were. Something nice for Potter to chew on, get scared of, and shut up.

But Potter grinned to his book, his hand methodically keeping notes on a piece of paper. “Now or later, then? You look impatient.”

And he had been taught well. “I might vomit.”

“What’s Cornus Florida?” Potter asked, his pen stilled.

“A plant that resembles you a lot. Commonly known as Nature’s Mistake.”

Potter wrote it down, and underlined it. “That wasn’t even clever,” he muttered without losing his concentration.

Concentration on what?

“Suddenly interested in Herbology, Potter, are we? What are you playing at?” He let his book aside, kneeling down and yanking the book from Potter’s hands.

“Hey!” Potter made a motion of taking it back, but Severus pushed him away. “Well, well… Wonders will never cease after all. Preparation instructions for a mind clearing potion. And you have the cheek to read this under my nose, even in front of my eyes. Is this how you plan on shielding your mind? With tricks?”

He snapped the book close, waiting for an answer. And not so surprisingly, Potter had one. And this time he wasn’t even embarrassed.
“Well I wasn’t going to hide it from you, obviously! Who do you think I was going to ask to brew me the potion? Or did you think I’d make it myself? I was just about to tell you.” He wasn’t lying. Which meant that he was an absolute imbecile.

“And you thought that I’d let you ensconce yourself into the easy solution. You thought that I’d simply give you another way out of your responsibilities.”

He was wasting his time. He should have accepted years ago that Potter had no interest in obeying the simplest of rules and let him torture himself over his inabilities until he voluntarily gave up. Only those who dared to fail greatly could ever achieve greatly. This blasted boy had no desire to try whatsoever.

Potter’s eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about? I don’t want it for our lessons. I want it so I can sleep better at night.”

Severus stared. Potter stared back. Severus’ chest clenched around something uncomfortable. He shifted, blinking twice at the book at his hand. “You’ve been having visions again.”

“Of course not. I’d tell you if I had. I just want to… avoid dreaming for a while.” His eyes averted, and Severus had to restrain himself from just digging into his mind and fishing out whatever the boy was hiding there.

“Potter.”

“It’s nothing, really. I just sleep better when I don’t dream. Sometimes I wake up with a headache and stuff, you know. And I just found that book, anyway. I wasn’t preparing anything. I guess I was just lucky.” He made an attempt at smiling, but quickly dropped it and went back to staring at the floor.

What did he want so intensely to get away from? “What are your nightmares about?”

Potter looked up and Severus was surprised at the hardness shadowing his features. “That doesn’t concern you.”

“And you’re absolutely sure they’re not visions.”

Potter nodded. “Yes. So, are you going to you brew it? Or is it difficult?”

No potion was difficult for him. This one though was unnecessary. “You may take a Dreamless Sleep potion from the bathroom cabinet, but that’s only for tonight. Take a second vial and I’ll know.”

Severus pulled himself up and threw the book on the sofa. Potter crinkled the paper on his hand, tossed it aside, and disappeared to the kitchen. If the Dark Lord had begun creeping into Potter’s mind again, it was possible that he already knew about their lessons. But why would he be keeping Severus alive, then?

He felt offended by the possibility of having to die cowardly. He was not ready to beg for his life. And Potter had to control his mind if they were to survive the war.

And yet, the boy had proved himself smarter than Severus thought. It was that clever glimpse that would instantly sparkle in his eyes – something that neither Lily nor James had. Something exclusively his own.

The way he’d smile when insulted, making a complete fool out of Severus. The way he’d always
find his way to him, with a daring curiosity-driven kindness that Severus had never come across before. The way he’d dirty his carpets and furniture with horrid biscuits, bringing this home to life for the first time in twenty years. Making it breathe. Make it inhale yougness again.

As disgusting as that was.

Severus treaded to the blurry window and watched. He needed to get groceries, but it was a bad afternoon to be outside with such a feeling in one's heart. The rain appeared cold, pitiless and increasing. The fog seemed to expand with the rain. The roadway was muddy; the pavement greasy; the street lamps burned dimly; and that dreary district of Spinner’ End looked its very gloomiest and worst.

But it wasn’t.
Something was wrong. At first, Harry thought he was just tired; so he left the magazine aside for another day. Then he tried again, and it kept happening. Or rather, it kept *not* happening.

So today it was his third attempt. And despite looking at the pictures, he didn’t physically react. At all. It was terrifying.

He threw the magazine aside and rubbed his forehead, staring at the ceiling and struggling to figure out what was happening. It wasn’t but a few days ago that he could hardly wait to find some time to study closely these moving images. He had no second thoughts or guilt about his theft. And he did watch them, late at night, once Snape was asleep and couldn’t bother him anymore. Which was normal. And he felt excited. Normal.

But not physically excited. Not normal.

His first assumption was that the issue was somehow spelled to destroy the reader’s hormones. But when he masturbated again, the way he always did all these years, which was with his own thoughts in the shower, he responded just fine. So he hadn’t been cursed.

He shot the magazine a dirty look and was suddenly reminded of all the alarming biological facts and scientific shite he had ever heard about this in his life. He snorted. *Scientific.* Maybe he was scientifically cursed.

Or perhaps he just wasn’t used to *looking* at stuff.

*Puberty is hell,* he thought. He kicked on his bedclothes annoyed.

When Harry woke up in the morning, he felt something ugly tightening his chest. With his eyes still closed, he mentally searched for the identity of the sentiment, going over the day before, and the possible obligations he might have forgot. Then, he opened his eyes and jumped out of the bed furiously.

Friday. Snape's *errands.* He willed his rage away, deciding that choking on it was not going to be helpful. He hadn’t felt this way since Sirius’ death. The memory that came along with the familiar stress was something he’d prefer to never recall again.

He did certainly not worry about Snape; it was the strength of the house wards that unnerved him. If something happened to Snape, Harry would be locked in here until someone discovered him. If ever. Waiting. Starving to death.

He dressed up quickly and opened the door to Snape’s bedroom. It was empty. Making a mental note to go through it again later, he checked the clock. And slammed his hand on the wall angrily. Almost noon. How many hours had he slept? His mind couldn’t have found a more inappropriate day to sleep through its worries.

“Snape!”

He ran down the stairs, but the kitchen and the living room were empty too. This wasn't fair. He was living with a murderer. Who was responsible for his parents’ death. Snape should be the dead one instead of his parents.
Kicking the armchair stubbornly, he went back upstairs to take a shower and brush his teeth. After what seemed like hours, he ended up in the living room with a glass of water and some biscuits. Waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting.

Could Voldemort have killed Snape? He didn’t have any reason to do so. He hoped. Not that Harry would be aware of any reason even if there was one. No one seemed to consider the possibility of actually sharing information with him. Memories of Voldemort raising his wand flashed and stretched in his mind. With his mood being so shaky, he doubted he could bring up Cedric’s death again now and chew over it. Thinking about what had already happened wasn’t going to help. He knew that. Reason wasn’t enough to keep Sirius or Cedric out of his mind though and he had always been weak when it came to his emotions.

Dumbledore trusted Snape for a reason. Harry fixed his jaw. If Dumbledore trusted Snape, Harry didn’t have any other option either. Even if he hated Snape all the same.

And if Snape was killed, Harry would have to go back to the Dursleys.

Once again, he shrugged stubbornly at his anger for being Snape the one he was living with instead of Sirius.

Stop.

Harry didn’t need any of them anyway. Going back to the Dursleys would be just as good. At least the Dursleys hadn’t killed anyone.

Perhaps he should contact Dumbledore. But if Snape was alright he’d be furious to know that Harry had made a fuss about it. Maybe he was having a crucial conversation with other Death Eaters or something. Maybe they were arguing and that was why he was late. Maybe they were plotting the new way to kill the Chosen One. Harry thought of going upstairs and taking his wand just in case, when someone knocked on the door. Hard.

Snape had keys.

Harry approached the door carefully. “Who’s there?” he asked, his voice croaky.

Whoever he was, he banged at the door again, harder. It was stupid to open to a stranger, and even more stupid to do so without his wand at hand. But Snape was gone, and this couldn’t be good, and maybe he was just lying on the other side of the door injured, unable to talk, and in need of immediate help.

It’d take less than a minute to fetch his wand. And his fingers twitched in agreement.

His impulse decided against it.

Swallowing the foul bile on his throat, Harry opened.

It wasn’t Snape. It wasn’t anyone he knew, in fact. The man at the door looked down at him with an unfocused look, and Harry thought that he looked rather drunk. There was a kind of people that passed by unnoticed, and Harry thought rather drunk. There was a kind of people that passed by unnoticed, and Harry knew that well; people who walked in the streets, head bowed, hands in pockets, and no one bothered to throw a second look at them or remember them by the end of the day. Like wizards under the strongest spells, that slipped and ran between unwitting muggles.
to reach their distant destination.

This man was the exact opposite. Harry thought he would have stopped to stare at him anywhere. And as much as Harry wanted to be the kind of person that inspired respect to strangers, as he looked up at the unreasonably disgusted glare peering at him, he felt small.

It was contradictory, because he didn’t look wealthy or powerful. Quite the opposite, Harry had the suspiciousness that he was a muggle.

“Hello?” said Harry.

The man didn’t respond. He looked at Harry from head to toe, as though trying to make out something. Harry shifted to his feet. Petunia would have had his head for mindlessly opening the door to beggars. The man pushed Harry aside and rushed into the house.

“Hey!” shouted Harry, rubbing his shoulder. The man strode into the living room and Harry followed behind him furiously, watching him pull random books from the bookcases and throw them on the floor.

“What do you think you're doing? Who are you? Get out of here!”

The man muttered something through his teeth and tossed aside the sofa’s cushions. Harry stood still, not knowing what to do. He sometimes thought that this was why he was such a troublesome person; he didn’t think.

“Are you deaf? I told you to get out! I'm going to call the police!” he yelled again. He should hex him. But he didn’t know if he was allowed to use magic while Snape wasn’t home. And the last thing he wanted was be interrogated by the Ministry for living with Severus Snape, and even worse, for using magic while doing so too.

The man swept over and slapped Harry across the face.

“I will not take orders in my own house, boy! Who the hell are you?” the man asked. Harry’s eyes stung as he held his burning cheek. “Never mind... Look... Stay out of my business or help me out... There’s this ring... Blue stone... Wouldn't even notice it's missing... No harm no foul, right? Have you seen it? He hid it somewhere, didn’t he?”

Harry narrowed his eyes, studying the man’s features. There was a feeling of disbelief coming over him. It wasn't exactly fear, but something colder and much less intimate. Repulse, maybe. Harry felt the blood draining from his face.

“You’re his father.”

“Have you seen it?” the man repeated, walking past Harry to the armchair. Taking a dagger out of his pocket, he ripped apart the fabric and shoved his hand inside. He suddenly stopped his searching and looked up.

“You’re not his son, are you?”

Harry shook his head. “I - don't think he has children.” Harry watched, not knowing what to do.

“When is he coming back?”

“Soon! And you should leave. Now. Get out.”
“Let him go... fuck himself... What are you to him?”

"I - his student."

"Nothing to him, aren't you... And you have the nerve to be in here... in my house. My house! Bought it with my fucking money, to roof that whore... Thrown out of my own house... Right out of nowhere. Now where’s that damn thing, fuck…”

He was drunk. And he was destroying Snape’s house. And Snape was going to kill Harry for letting him in.

At that precise moment, a metallic sound was heard from the outdoor and Harry turned to see Snape Unlocking. The door opened and Snape slowly stepped in, holding the black pile of his curled up cloak along with his wand.

He looked at Harry and was ready to say something, when the other Snape swore again and something like more books being thrown down was heard. Harry’s blood ran cold as Snape gave him a deadly stare.

It was in the space of a heartbeat that Harry came down to the conclusion that it’d be wiser of him to not talk. Letting his cloak fall down, Snape quickly strode over to where the sound had come from, his shoes barely audible against the floor. Harry went closer too, the numbness finally wearing off his legs. Snape stopped a few feet away from where the man was, and after a long moment he raised his wand.

“You,” he breathed. “You dare… come here.”

His father snapped into laughter. “You… son-of-a-cunt… you have some humour after all.”

Snape remained at his spot, his hand twitching dangerously around his wand.

“You have been warned to never appear near this house again.” Only now Snape seemed to realise the chaos around him, and he slowly rounded the table. “What have you done?”

“You have something that belongs to me. I bought it for her, years ago. It’s mine now, I want it back.”

“After everything she’s suffered because of you,” hissed Snape.

His father laughed again. “I’m not here to go over the same bullshit again, Severus. There’s a ring somewhere here. With a blue stone on top. Do you remember it?”

Snape glared hard. “You want it back.”

The man nodded.

Snape nodded too.

They stared.

And stared.

Harry shifted again, fighting the urge to clear his throat.

After a long moment, Snape stormed over and grabbed the man by the shoulders. He pushed him against the wall with such savagery that the man's head was slammed back. Snape’s fists clenched
around his father’s shirt collar and he almost pulled him up.

His voice was barely above a whisper when he talked. “Get out of my sight. Or I’ll kill you.”

Obviously realising that he didn’t stand a chance in taking what he had come for, the man seemed to consider his options. He scanned the room with his eyes for a last time, and after brushing something invisible off his shirt, he spat on the floor, his eyes locked on Snape’s. He pushed once more past Harry, and slammed the door hard behind him.

Snape was still staring at the wall, as if his father hadn’t left at all. His wand was still at his hand, which was now hanging limp at his side.

In the complete silence of the room, Harry’s mind seemed to eventually awake, and he suddenly decided he should say something. Only, he didn’t know what. Somehow there weren’t words important enough to interrupt the moment, and even if they were, he doubted that Snape would want to hear them from him.

Harry was at last granted with a bizarre look, as though Snape realised for the first time that he had been in the room with them all along. He stared back, the usual defensive anger he had developed around Snape now absent from the pit of his stomach. Snape looked as though trying to determine whether Harry pitied him or was just satisfying his curiosity.

He did neither. And only now he could breathe away the worry that had overwhelmed him earlier – the fear that something bad might have happened. Snape was alive. Harry almost grinned.

Snape didn’t. Surprisingly uninterested in the ruined living room, he kicked the books on the floor dismissively and hurried upstairs. Harry folded his arms over his chest, sparing a moment to check if the opened books hid anything interesting inside. They didn’t, and the simplicity of Snape’s few belongings only made the situation more depressive. Snape’s life was indeed messed up too, after all. And it also looked like they weren’t going to practice Occlumency today either.

Thinking hard, Harry ran up and fetched his wand. He spelled the books back in place, and left on the table those who were ripped apart for later restoration.

He cast some spells at the sofa and the armchair too. Pushing the armchair back in place, he carefully picked up Snape's cloak. It was a plain robe, much like every other robe Snape wore; black, made of thin silk fabric, and it had the characteristic scent of Snape on it. It slipped easily between his fingers, and its folds shone darker at some parts. His hands were sweating again. He threw it over the armchair.

Against his better judgment, Harry silently climbed up the stairs and stood outside Snape’s bedroom. He thought hard; running back to his room, he left his wand, took his school notebook and a pen, and returned.

He knocked.
Right. As though Snape would answer. A part of him told Harry that he should wait outside; another part told him to just leave and forget the matter. He was entirely unconvinced by both options. Determined to not give a damn about Snape’s show of nonchalance, he stubbornly opened the door and walked in. Snape was there, sitting with his back against the headboard, his gaze peering at Harry as though contemplating with which way to kill him.

“What do you want, Potter?”

Harry took a look around and shrugged, pretending not to have been in the room again. “Had some questions,” he simply said. He didn’t think Snape was convinced. There was a small bookcase by the bed. Harry approached it curiously. It didn’t have more than five or six books on it, and they all looked old. He ran his finger across them, a layer of dust sticking on his finger.

“What are these? Your favourites?”

A pause. “The most important ones.”

“Potions?”

“Literature.”

Harry pulled out a book and observed it; it had no title or patterns on the cover. Inside, it was entirely empty, like a brand new notebook. He pushed it back in place disappointed. “Why are you spelling them blank?”

“They’re private. Obviously.”

Snape’s usual bitterness was not quite absent; it seemed to have taken a slight shift, however. He shrugged and looked around once more. Not finding any other surface in the room to sit, he collapsed on the other side of the bed, careful to stay as far from Snape as possible.

Snape turned his head to him, his gaze as dangerous as ever.

Harry ignored him. He took a moment to scowl at how this bed was way softer than the one Snape was making him sleep in, and then he stared at the ceiling. It was quite interesting, honestly. Two twisted pipes ran up the wall to disappear through a hole in the corner; the plaster had cracked at various places, and green patches of mould seemed to be growing at the most damaged spots.

“How old is this place?” Harry asked.

“Quite.”

“We have mould in my home too, you know. Aunt Petunia made me rub it clean once. It took me two days up in a ladder, with a brush and a bucket and all, but it was worth it. The place was shining clean afterwards.”

Snape didn’t answer. Harry toyed with the lace of his tracksuit awkwardly. The heaviness of the silence was distracting, like a thick rope tightening around him, threatening to crash his chest. Harry felt the urge to fill it with something useful before Snape kicked him out.

“My uncle is one of those men who sit in a room and you can feel it,” he said stupidly, picking up a
random thought. “It’s that… simmer, I think. He has that sense around him, like, some unpredictable force or something… that might break loose at any moment and do something terrible. He hates magic. I was raised up thinking my parents died in a car crash.”

Vulnerable. That was what he felt like for having spilled this out to Snape. And dumb. Definitely dumb.

“Get out. Now.”

“Why?”

Snape bolted up and rounded the bed before Harry could register what happened. “Why? You dare ask me why in my own room, my own house, Potter? Because I say so. Because I demand so. Because you’re utterly unwelcome here and because the last thing I would possibly endure is the sickening sympathy of a Potter. Your father enjoyed that too, with all his –”

“Oh leave my father out of it!”

“Did you enjoy what you saw, Potter? Did you help him?”

“What? No!” Harry sat up and stared as his patience gave away to a fiery rage.

Snape bared his teeth. “Liar.”

“I’m not! You… Look. Listen. I didn’t even know he was your father. He just stormed in, I didn’t know what to do.”

“What did he tell you?”


“What did he tell you, Potter?”

“Nothing, really. That he used to live here. Just that.”

Snape didn’t seem to have something to respond to that. He peered at him intensely before sitting down next to him.

Harry’s gaze caught Snape’s wand hand twitching and once again regretted not having his own wand with him. Although it was obvious to him, Harry felt the need to state something that perhaps wasn’t all that obvious to Snape. “You know, not all muggles are like him.”

Snape jerked his head as though shaking off an irritating fly. “Don’t be stupid.”

“When was the last time you saw him?” He wasn’t sure if he should ask that. He muscles tensed in a peculiar uneasiness and was once again reminded that one should never feel relaxed around Snape. His rage was so unpredictable. How could Dumbledore not have second thoughts about him?

“The summer after my seventh year. He tried to kick me out. He regretted it.”

“Oh,” Harry said a bit quickly. “I’m sorry.”

He shouldn’t have asked. The clock’s tick tocks reached Harry’s ears one by one, like distant but firm gunshots. Snape turned his head and looked at him. His eyes darkened and for a moment Harry was disoriented by their intensity. He cupped Harry’s chin firmly and turned his face towards the dim light of the window.
“What is this?” he asked roughly.

“What?” Harry’s hands almost flew up to his own face in worry, when he remembered the slap. Damn. Damn.

“Oh, that. It’s – nothing. I sort of – you know, fell.” The lie was pathetic, and Snape didn’t look like buying it either. He let go of his face with what looked like disgust and looked away.

Snape released a long breath. “Is it too much of me to ask that Dumbledore does not hear about this?”

Harry chuckled softly. If he wanted to embarrass Snape, he already had too much information to use against him, and his father would be the less private one to use. The thing was, if he wanted to embarrass Snape, he would have already done it.

“I’m not telling anyone.”

Snape nodded.

Something sparkled between Snape’s fingers as Snape unclenched his fist. It was a thin line of white light at first, like a shadow lining around his palm, faded and shaky, and it ended to a small silver ring with a tiny stone on top. Despite the feeling of anger that swept through him, Harry could not help but feel curious at the sight of it. He shifted closer and reached out carefully, his hand hovering over Snape’s.

“May I?” Harry slowly buried his hand between Snape’s and took the ring. Snape’s touch had warmed it up, and the size indicated that it was made for rather small fingers. Small diamonds were lined around it.

He brushed his thumb against it, savouring the strange sensation. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s stolen,” Snape said coldly before snatching it back. He threw it into the nightstand drawer and released a breath. “We will not practice today. Do your concentrating exercises and when you’re finished occupy yourself with something that does not involve me.”

Harry snorted. He reached for his notebook and threw it on Snape’s lap. If Snape thought that he was going to stay here alone all day long and continue feeling miserable about everything, he was mistaken. Harry had done this too many times for Sirius. It never worked.

Even if he was still doing it.

“That’s impossible. You see, I began writing my essays for September. It’s my birthday in two weeks and I want them all finished by then. You're gonna to have to check if I made any mistakes.”

Snape opened the notebook. Harry directed him to the right page.

“Common Defensive Theories?” Snape asked, scowling. “You failed in that?”

“I didn’t fail! I just need to write an extra scroll about it, I guess.”

Snape rolled his eyes and then squinted, trying to make out Harry’s poor handwriting.

“Very well. Question number one.”

“What are these? Your favourites?”
Yes. “The most important ones.”

“Potions?”

“Literature.”

Severus was painfully aware of the annoying voice addressing him and he mentally pushed it off. He damned himself for being unable to shut his ears against it.

While the boy was enjoying his little exploration around the place, Severus silently cursed both Potter and Tobias to rot in hell. Together, if possible; to have a chance and talk freely about ole Severus at last. He supposed he should be glad he had restrained his urge towards violence. It wouldn’t do to punch the shit out of the bastard again. Wizards like Severus didn’t do that. Sick drunks like Tobias did that. And to think that he wanted the ring. That he had the nerve to come and ask for it.

It was beyond any question, beyond any shadow of doubt, the only thing he ever offered to his wife without expecting something in return. The distinct line between what could be done with magic and what could not never interested Tobias much. He regarded it as some kind of god given gift. And of course, he wanted to take advantage of it.

It had taken him a few months to chew down the information and to accept that his wife was a witch. From then on, it was quite common to demand food or money out of nowhere. To get pissed and attack her because she wouldn’t give him what he wanted. It had to come down to a Ministry penalty, an interrogation, and a clear warning they’d confiscate her wand to eventually stop it. Apparently trying to transform muggle objects into money wasn’t as legal as Tobias would have liked.

There was Eileen’s theory too, of course, that contradicted every logical assumption. He wasn't always like that. He was kind once. Charming.

Bollocks.

Severus believed only what he saw. And Tobias was never kind, or charming, or even tolerable. But she wanted it that way, and she was too weak to see his faults. Or grow any dignity around him.

And she got depressed long before Severus started school.

Once her condition weakened her magic, it was up to Severus to do the job. But Severus didn’t, for he hated him, and at that point he hated his mother too, for her weakness, for her stubbornness to stay with Tobias although he was using her, for her insistence to deny the fact that she was a victim in his hands. She was better than him. She had always been better than him. But she was weak.

Severus was aware of the mattress sinking beside him and a body slumping against the pillows. A not so distant aspect of his conscience told him that he should yell at the boy, but he felt drained from all power. He decided to let him be.

There was that thing again. The boy had that fresh, fruity scent around him, which was making Severus dizzy whenever he smelled it; it was openly challenging him to fight down his most strong impulses to vomit. He had become quite used to it as the days passed by, and as he had never seen any perfume in the bathroom, he reckoned that this was just the way Harry Potter smelled.

“How old is this place?” Potter asked.

The question took him by surprise. He blinked as he counted.
“Quite.”

And now Potter was saying something again. And it occurred to him that he was supposed to be listening. I will not.

“Get out. Now.”

“Why?”

“Why? You dare ask me why in my own room, my own house, Potter? Because I say so. Because I demand so. Because you’re utterly unwelcome here and because the last think I would possibly endure is the sickening sympathy of a Potter. Your father enjoyed that too, with all his –”

“Oh leave my father out of it!”

“Did you enjoy what you saw, Potter? Did you help him?”

Potter wrinkled his forehead. “What? No!”

“Liar.”

Potter talked again, but Severus was not interested. His hand twitched around the ring, and he fought the urge to reach down and place the pillow against Potter’s babbling mouth until beautiful, divine silence filled the room again.

“What did he tell you?”

“Nothing.”

“What did he tell you, Potter?”

“Nothing, really. That he used to live here. Just that.”

It didn’t seem like he was going to get a better response. He sat down, defeated.

“You know, not all muggles are like him.”

And yet they were. “Don’t be stupid.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

Oh joy. More questions. Don’t answer that.

“The summer after my seventh year. He tried to kick me out. He regretted it.”

Bravo Severus. You are so rigorous after all.

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

Severus turned to look at him. His eyes locked with Potter’s and for a moment he was dumbstruck at the realisation that he was sitting on his bed with Harry bloody Potter beside him, and his glimmering green eyes were piercing his own with something that didn’t look quite like hate.

Then he saw something else. It wasn’t the slightly swollen skin that he noticed first, for it was not that bad; but the fading redness of fingers that covered his cheekbone were too familiar to miss.

He grasped Potter’s chin as panic rushed over him. “What is this?”
“What?”

Potter was unaware of it. And perhaps it was better if it stayed that way. He could spell it away before the boy went to a mirror. Bullshit. He’d need to wipe his memory too, but that would be even worse.

Potter’s eyes widened. And then averted. “Oh, that. It’s – nothing. I sort of – you know, fell.”

The same excuse always, wasn’t it?

He wouldn’t be able to explain this to Dumbledore. He had put protection spells all around the house to keep away every wizard alive, but it was a muggle that had made it in. Unprofessional. Inexcusable.

“Is it too much of me to ask that Dumbledore does not hear about this?”

Potter chuckled. It was a warm chuckle, one of someone who thought that the answer should be obvious.

“I’m not telling anyone.” The don’t worry behind it was almost too loud against the walls, and it crashed back along with memories of a forgotten sense of calmness. Lily had the gift of tranquilising one’s worries without ever talking directly about them. She would dig her way between the lines and soothe his deepest fears, without needing to know them, without having to understand them.

When he felt a hand between his own, he almost flinched.

“May I?” Potter asked.

He let him take the ring, although for the life of his he couldn’t explain why.

“We will not practice today. Do your concentrating exercises and when you’re finished occupy yourself with something that does not involve me.”

“That’s impossible.” Of course. “You see, I began writing my essays for September. It’s my birthday in two weeks and I want them all finished by then. You have to check if I made any mistakes.”

A notebook was thrown at him before he could argue, and he opened it.

Unbelievable.

“Common Defensive Theories? You failed in that?” Was the boy completely daft?

“I didn’t fail! I just need to write an extra scroll about it, I guess.”

Pathetic. Absurd. Laughable. It was the easiest lesson of his last year. With Umbridge teaching it, of course, it was a miracle that some students had managed to pass it after all. And something was telling him that Potter needed to be taught everything all over again. Damn professionalism. While at Severus’ care, Potter was strictly prohibited from being thickheaded.

“Very well. Question number one.”
Wisdom: Conceding

Closing his book, Severus waited for the boy to retire upstairs, only to have him continue staring at him from his rightful place on the floor. The unexpected event of Tobias’ sudden appearance a few days ago hadn’t seem to have troubled Potter much since, and most surprisingly, it hadn’t been mentioned again.

As for now, at the sight of the spineless brat defiantly occupying his carpet, it occurred to him that he shouldn’t have given permission to Potter to be out of his room unless necessary.

On second thought, he hadn’t given him permission.

Potter didn’t seem to mind.

“You were poking through my belongings again, were you not?”

Potter blinked and then shook his head. “No, why?”

The demonstration of innocence almost staggered him.

You shouldn’t talk to him. But he wasn’t. He was only insisting on reminding the boy the distinct lines he wasn’t allowed to cross. Mentioning them again and again. Despite Potter’s attitude, there was still a tiny chance that voicing the rules would make them easier to enforce.

Liar.

This will only encourage him.

“You attempted to break into the basement last night.”

Potter cleared his throat. “Oh. Er… I didn’t exactly do that. I only thought it’d be, not that I should, I just –”

“For your information,” Severus said, “I could hear you casting spells on my door last night. Didn’t you have anything better to do all night long aside from spying on me?”

The way Potter shrugged his shoulders inspired a new wave of anger.

“I’m sorry.” Good. “It’s just that…Sometimes it’s just better to stay awake over something, you know?” Bad.

“I don’t,” he retorted. He knew about the visions Potter had. The whole world knew. To some people, it was legend. To Severus… well. Another bothersome, horrid situation.

He nodded, impatient to get to the point. “And why is that you prefer to stay awake, then? I’m not going to ask twice, so speak up.”

“Have you ever had dreams…” Potter laughed softly and licked his lips, looking momentarily down. “Well, I don’t really know how to talk about this. Have you ever had dreams that are merely memories? Not exactly nightmares, just really bad dreams. Of people you know and you trust, but not in the way you really know them. Like your mind is stuck in a certain memory and can’t move past it.”

Potter searched his face. Bugger. “Does it look like vacationing the fact that you’re staying here,
“Potter?”

“This isn’t about training, I know –”

“What is it about, then? Traumas? You don’t have time for them.”

“Well I don’t control my dreams, you know!”

“You should. You should get over whatever keeps you back from succeeding. You enjoy your failures because they buy you time.”

“Oh, shut up, Snape. You know nothing. Nothing.”

Severus smirked. “Do I? Your mind is an open book, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes, thanks to you and your sodding mind games!”

Potter’s eyes were stubbornly fixed at the armchair’s legs again; Severus had to keep himself from snapping. Damn the boy for opening his heart to him without permission. And a very disturbing and delirious heart it was. Damn himself too for letting it happen, then. He should have been drugging himself unconscious since the day he brought the little monster here. It would spare him the honesty.

“Cute.”

Potter snorted. “Yeah. Never mind.” Pleased that confessions seemed to have come to an end, he granted Potter a reproving expression.

And he only regretted having done so when Potter went on. “It’s just that I feel too many different things for some situations that I don’t even know how I really feel about them. Like, one moment I don’t care about something, and the next one I do. And then I go to bed and I feel both caring and not caring, and it’s too hard to keep on thinking about it, so, I don’t know, I just snap. I have to get out of bed and do something or I’ll…” he trailed off, and Severus was amazed. He supposed there were still people that were being traumatised by death out there. He vaguely recalled himself being disoriented after grief too.

He had become what he was today at the age of twenty one. He did not need a reminder of what he was before. “The conflict between the will to deny the horrible events that have happened to you and the will to proclaim them aloud is going to drive you mad if you don’t come to terms with your own emotions. What has happened is past. Blaming yourself will only make you weaker.”

Potter stared. Severus choked on self-disgust. Dumbledore should be proud. The only thing that was left for him and Potter to do now was to get twin bracelets to celebrate their eternal friendship.

Here he was, for all the world to know: Harry Potter’s personal therapist.

“But that’s not the point. I know that. I just don’t know it all the time.”

Potter sat on the couch and Severus had barely time to register the change as one that indicated that the boy was interested in his opinion.

He gritted his teeth indignantly. “Your emotions have control of you. Train yourself to –”

“This isn’t Legilimency –”

“And this isn’t scolding. Train yourself to control your emotions. You have to admit your weaknesses to yourself in order to defeat them. Your grief causes panic. Panic is the worst enemy of
logic. You’re doing this to yourself.”

“I am trying,” Potter lied. Severus could see his frown now, and noticed that behind his glasses the skin was red. There was a dim light of questioning in Potter’s eyes as he lifted his head, and it occurred to Severus that he didn’t know what to make of it. “Well, I am! Okay. I’m not. But I have. It seems pointless, honestly.”

“Then you may as well become depressed. No one is going to stop you, and it’s entirely legal. Not to mention, extremely easy. All you have to do is pity yourself, something at which you are admittedly talented, for a change.”

“I’m not doing that! Look, forget it. I shouldn’t have told you.”

“You’re right. You shouldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t if you hadn’t pushed me.”

“You are my responsibility, Potter. I’m sadly obliged to protect you from harming yourself for the time being.”

The awkwardness was vivid between them again, and Severus noticed that it wasn’t only his usual disgust for children that was doing it. There was something on Potter’s expression that wouldn’t let him relax. He would call it maturity, were it on anyone else’s face. On that face, it could merely be sadness.

Severus didn’t care.

Although most likely, Potter had yet to find some time to mourn the dog’s loss. Oh for fuck’s sake. “Do you have any suicidal thoughts, then?”

Potter tilted his head. “What? No.”

“Then do yourself a favour and move on before you begin to.”

“And what do you know about it?”

Right. What did he? Apparently not much.

“What I know, is that once again I’m wasting my own sleep because of you. This is the last time, let me assure you.” After a moment, Potter nodded, but didn’t move. “Well, leave, then!”

Potter stood. Severus did too, and tried not to notice that the boy was smiling again. “Honestly, Professor. If you wanted to sleep you wouldn’t be sitting in the living room until dawn either.”

_Touché._

“So what if he kills me?”

Severus jolted to his senses. He was alarmingly aware of the nonchalance behind the question and horrifyingly aware that the boy didn’t seem hesitant to ask.

“Then he wins.”

And they were all damned to hell, Potter included. A shiver ran down his spine at the image of England under the Dark Lord’s dictatorship and he mentally cringed at the faint memory of himself,
ages ago, wishing just that with all his might.

He lowered his wand and slumped on his chair. “That will be all for today.”

“No, I mean…” Potter sat on the couch, sparing himself a moment to bend down and clear his head from the dizziness of Legilimency. He placed his own wand on the table. “If the Prophecy is right, he’s going to become immortal if I die. Is that right?”

“It doesn’t work that way, thankfully. And prophecies can be interpreted towards many conclusions.”

“Lies. Dumbledore has told me the truth, you know.”

“What this so called prophecy says should not concern you much. You are bonded with the Dark Lord’s soul because he’s marked you. This is irrelevant to all theories. It is a fact. Prophecy or not, he’s going to haunt you down. How it began is of little importance. The question is how it’s going to end.”

Potter didn’t look convinced. “And if it ends the wrong way?”

“Then you won’t be around to worry about it, will you?”

“Is that your advice?”

He hadn’t realised he was being asked for advice. “My advice,” he rubbed his forehead with a hand, “is to grow up. Predictions don’t exist.”

Severus believed in predictions, once. It was the worst mistake of his life.

Potter glared at him suspiciously and then his features softened. “You’re wrong. Predictions exist. I mean… there must be something like fate, or, things that can’t not happen, otherwise time turners wouldn’t be accurate to a certain continuum.”

Severus had a mind to ask him where his knowledge of time turners derived from when he remembered that he didn’t care. There was venom in his lungs. He blamed a long gone Potter for bequeathing a mischievous nature to the kid before him and for managing to produce it in general.

“Call yourself a hero, if it makes you feel any better, but you’re not. And until you become one, if ever, stop using predictions to pose as one.”

Chuckling was not the reaction he’d expect. “You’re impossible.”

Too, he silently agreed. This would require detention. Tradition had it that students did not think of their teachers as common people. Or desired to talk to them outside class, whatever the reason was. When it wasn’t annoying, it was simply tiresome.

Severus laughed. Apparently having a student under your own roof could change that.

A bit.
“You should be in bed.” Severus’ voice was drenched in bitterness. He suppressed a yawn as he stood and was immediately shocked at the sight of the sun rising somewhere outside the window. Severus should be in bed too.

“I figured... But it’s already morning, isn’t it? Besides, my bed is awful. I bet the mattress has bricks in it. Or spikes.”

Carried away by the thought of throwing the couch Potter was occupying in the trash and saving himself from this pest, Severus spelled the brandy bottle back to its place. It flew to the far end of the room and clanked against the wall before landing down.

“Why do you drink so much?”

Because it was summer. Because he was here. When in Hogwarts, he wasn’t allowed to drink. Something about staff regulations and professionalism. And Dumbledore keeping all the alcohol to himself. “Because.”

“Isn’t it bad for you?”

More than Potter? Hardly. He chose to respond with a noncommittal grunt, deciding to continue ignoring the personal questions he was being constantly asked.

“I could use a drink too, I think.”

“Naturally. I should probably help you destroy yourself even further, then.”

“Yeah, well. If I drink on my own volition it’s not your problem, is it? Can I?”

Long ago, Severus had given up questioning life’s dynamics and how they always ended up saving Potter’s arse. He wasn’t entirely convinced that the boy could be saved from Severus if he continued like this.

Patience, Dumbledore had said. Patience, indeed. “You can; you may not. And I'm well aware of my stock so don’t even think of trying to steal from me. You might find yourself regretting it. Painfully.”

Potter rolled his eyes. “You could've just said no.”

Severus grunted. “I wasn’t aware that you knew the meaning of the word.”

That look again. Why? He was aware since long ago that Potter’s mood was mysteriously flexible; it shifted from blue to ecstatic and then back to blue.

The reason was never clear to Severus. The boy was confusing. Dreadfully so. The corner of Potter’s mouth quirked upwards. “You know, sometimes you look at me as though I’ve grown a second head. It’s odd.”

Severus shrugged off a nostalgic longing to return to the days when he could scare Potter away with a single glare. And suddenly he was angry. “You don’t need a second head to make people look at you. Your exaggerating ego is rather enough; but I wouldn’t expect you to be anything else but your father’s son, so to speak.”
“Right. Don’t you ever get tired of being miserable?”

“Do you want me to give you a pat on the head or do you want me to tell you the truth?”

Potter shrugged and bit his lip, as he always did. “It doesn’t matter what you call it. You just seem so calm when you read. It’s a pity you don’t relax more often.”

“I appreciate your approval.”

Potter snorted. “I thought you would.”

For fuck’s sake. The ‘I demand that you show me respect’ that was tingling the tip of Severus’ tongue never came out. Secretly applauding himself for letting it go, he decided to go to bed. Ignore him. Pretend he doesn’t exist.

“Is it true? That I behave like my dad? Or do I just remind you of him because you… knew each other?”

“I’m sure that you’ve been told of your similarities before. You share the same contempt against courtesy as much as you share the same hair colour.”

“That’s not true! I… I’d never, you know, about… I’d never do that. What he did to you. I’d never do that. I don’t know why he did.”

Another charming declaration of nobility coming from someone who did not know what he was talking about. Why he did. Why wouldn’t he? It was Severus’ goddamn spell. Severus had used it on James first. He should have known that asking for trouble would finally cause it, but continuing the vendetta with the disgustingly spoiled Gryffindor boy was too good to stop.

“Snape?”

“Professor Snape, Potter.”

“You don’t want to answer. Got it.” He smiled. “I just don’t think my dad would do anything so mean without a reason.”

He would not. Severus being friends with Lily was reason enough. “I see.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

Severus stared at him contemptuously and then released his breath. “I will say this once, and you’d better remember it. Despite your undoubtedly wise view of my –”

“Yes, I know, I’m all wrong and I know nothing. Don’t start that. It’s so boring I might go to sleep after all.”

“Watch your mouth, you insolent twit!”

Potter threw himself back on the cushions and covered his face with his hands. He snorted at something Severus couldn’t quite grasp and was most certainly not interested in. There was nothing funny for him to snort at. And if he insisted on this insomniac marathon, Severus would have to eventually drug him. It was a wonder how he had managed to survive this far.

Potter pulled himself up. He shook his head. “Sorry. I shouldn’t… I was just thinking out loud.”
“I’m going to sleep. You may take a sleeping potion from the cabinet. Do try and sleep this time.”

Potter grunted, and Severus retired to his room to look stubbornly at the wall across the bed. He damned his tolerance towards the boy’s befriending tendencies and vowed to stop it before it got worse. He purged his mind of the terror that haunted him at the thought of possibly enjoying the boy’s absurd company and, an eternity later, he slept.

“Just so you know, I have kissed a girl. More than once,” said Harry as he spread the butter on his bread. He wasn’t going to let Snape think of him as someone completely inexperienced and incompetent, and he was tired of being daily told how everybody liked him just because of his fame. He’d prove himself better than Snape. All these insults should come to an end. “And a lot of girls prefer me, actually.”

It was a lie; that didn’t matter though.

Snape poured the hot tea into his cup and drank slowly. He ignored Harry’s own cup with an expressionless glance before putting the pot on the counter. “Fascinating,” he said indifferently. The morning light was piercing through the louvers; Snape seemed strangely calm.

Harry wanted a reaction. “Cho Chang was in love with me,” he blurted out.

“Cho Chang,” Snape repeated, as though trying to remember who she was. “Hm.”

And suddenly Harry was insecure again. “No, I… I was good at it, I suppose. I hope so.” Even though she was mourning over Cedric’s death and she was feeling pretty bad the whole time about dating him. He had all but fucked that up.

Then again, Harry doubted he could bear the constant reminder of how Cedric would be the one she’d date if Harry had died instead. “She was having a tough time,” he said carefully, “so something was just missing. She was crying a lot.”

“Then there were certainly missing much.”

“She wasn’t my type. Maybe that was it,” he spat irritably.

He thought about the magazine issue under his pillow, and how it completely failed to excite him. Maybe he didn’t have a type yet.

“And what do you know about girls?” he asked, realising too late that they were having the wrong conversation.

“You’d be surprised.” Snape emptied his teacup and avoided Harry’s gaze for a moment. “Have you done your exercises?”

Harry grinned. “As always, Professor.”

Snape spelled the cup away. He looked like he was suppressing a smile. “I can imagine.”

Harry failed to feel regret. “I will, alright? Right after breakfast.”

“After breakfast you will be annoying me endlessly until nighttime and then you will be delving into my books and scrolls. Be honest, Potter.”
“I delve into your books and scrolls during daytime too, actually. The light helps.”

Snape didn’t reply, but Harry laughed. It was odd, really, how Snape could not always frighten him with that glare anymore. Deep down, he was just another man doomed to be a teacher, and somehow, that came as a surprise, every time.

“What happened to your habit of relying solely to biscuits for your nourishment?”

“I’ve eaten them all,” Harry said.

His response was apparently not an appealing one to Snape, who scrunched his face slightly and checked his watch.

“I'll go to the grocery store soon. You may come.”

“Why am I never allowed outside without you?”

“Because.”

“Because what?”

Snape ignored him.

Harry bit on his bread stubbornly.

Pacing abjectly between the market’s corridors, Harry eyed Snape from a fine distance and saw him fill his basket with supplies. Harry hadn’t bothered with a basket this time; hands in his sweatshirt’s front pocket, he observed the random sauces and spices on the shelves, biting anxiously on his lower lip in suspense for what he was going to do.

When Snape disappeared behind the tall fridges, Harry approached the newspapers’ bench and sidetracked the numerous muggle newspapers. Quickly going through the porn covers right behind them, he found an issue with a quite different headline and a half–naked man posing on the front cover. Taking a determined look around, he rolled up the issue and shoved it hurriedly into his pocket. Putting his hands back in place, he took a moment to steel his feet, calm his burning face, and keep himself from fleeing.

When he made sure that no one had seen him, he went back to Snape.
Dear Severus,

If this is convenient to you, I shall use one of your own old formulas to ensure that my new acquisition is safe to use.

I would like to meet you on Thursday, so please kindly come along to my office at 8 p.m.

Yours sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

The next one:

Severus,

I hope you’ll agree to meet me this time, as you know how much I need your support in this. Although I have honestly questioned my own urge to contact you after all that has happened, I fail to see a reasonable excuse for your insistence on avoiding me. Only a fool would think to go against the flow at the moment. Don’t disappoint your allies; they’re not many.

You are the only one who can help Draco, my only, last hope, and despite everything else, I still have faith in you.

Longing to see you,

Narcissa

Severus shoved the letters into his pocket and opened the brandy. Fools. All of them, fools.

What did Narcissa think when she married Lucius? That they’d live happily ever after in a small cozy cottage somewhere in the countryside?

She knew he was a Death Eater from the very beginning; she accepted the mark too, just like her parents wanted her to, and had an heir for the sole purpose of their social prestige.

Lucius had quailed. The tasks upon his shoulders were not becoming any heavier, but his shoulders had weakened during the years of the Dark Lord’ absence. Lucius thought that when the Dark Lord returned, he would praise him for his loyalty, awarding him with respect and safety.

Hopefully, his cell in Azkaban would provide all the safety Lucius needed now.

And that’s why all of them were fools. Even Dumbledore was still failing to see the point. He was still failing to see that his boy wonder was just another kid. He couldn’t see past what Lucius saw in his son, what the Dark Lord saw in his followers, what Dumbledore himself had learned to see in everyone he knew: tools. Plans. Sacrifices. The greater fucking good.

He took a large sip of brandy and closed his eyes.

Among all the things that were buzzing into his head, Potter had to be one of them. And where had that wicked bugger gone now?

Severus walked over to the living room, slumped down in his seat and picked up a book.
It worked.

Harry breathed heavily, propping himself up on his elbows to look down at his crotch as he reached for his wand to clean himself up. The new magazine was still open to a random page on the pillow. Dread stressed his sweat, and with a sleeve he wiped off his upper lip and forehead.

Oh gods. It worked.

“I don’t get it.”

“Don’t get what?”

“This.”

Harry held his notebook up from where he was sitting on the floor. Snape leaned over and yanked it from his hand.

“What he says about the moonstones. It just doesn’t make sense, or it’s too advanced, maybe.”

“You’ve studied moonstones before, have you not?”

“Um. I forgot?”

Snape slid to kneel to the floor next to Harry. His sigh of irritation was hard to miss, but he did explain in detail what Harry couldn’t understand. He returned to his chair and Harry continued his reading, confused at how cooperative Snape was sometimes. Snape wasn’t a horrible teacher – he was just a horrible person, and that was somehow better.

And now he was doing that again.

Harry looked up just in time. “Is something wrong, sir?”

He would only call him sir or Professor when the occasion didn’t require it, and Snape would always twitch his eye at this new challenging mockery.

“No.” Snape filled his glass again and half – emptied it.

“You were staring.”

“I was not.”

Harry grinned. “Liar.”

And Snape smirked back almost right away.

“Careful, Potter. If you keep up the cheek I will be obliged to give you a fitting detention when we get back. One that will have you spending all of your Quidditch training hours in my office, perhaps.” His best venomous voice was covering an amused tone.

Exempt him from Quidditch? As if. McGonagall would chop off his head if he dared.

“And here I was starting to think that spending the whole summer together might be enough for you. But you can’t get enough of me.”
Daring. Arrogant. Exactly as Snape expected him to be. Only, now he looked like he did realise that it was just a pretence. It put a strange relief behind Harry’s actions.

“That incurable insolence of yours. Are you sure you’re not the one who’s asking for it, Potter?” he smirked faintly, and kept Harry’s eyes for a prolonged moment.

Harry was the first to look back to his text. “Perhaps I do.”

He frowned at his re-written moonstone summarisation in annoyance. Was this the best he could do?

At Snape’s satisfied grunt, he chuckled. He had lost.

He had won. And Potter was reading silently, at last.

It was a disappointment, honestly. Their sodding saviour was unable to solve out a simple exercise on Potion anomalies. Potter would lick his lips, chew on them, tap his pen on his paper for hours, if that was what it’d take, and then he’d rub his ruined forehead in determination to succeed at something that was entirely common.

Then he would look up at him, while he would still his features in a pathetic attempt to hide his scream for help with homework. A casual look; green eyes unblinking under the possibility of losing control.

He was too easy to read.

Of course, the boy needn’t know. If he wanted his help, he would have to ask for it. Every time he needed it. And he would have to be grateful every single one of those times. Besides, his worrisome face was fascinating to watch.

The flush reddening his cheeks, when he couldn’t help but ask the same sodding question – for the third, or fourth time – his anger when he’d spit a muttered thank you before going back to his despair.

It was all too good to lose. Too good to let go. He quickly found that the darkest parts of his soul were enjoying this too much, and it was harder and harder to pretend it wasn't becoming a habit. The morals enforced upon his position and age would have to take a part in this; keep him back from humiliating a student, exchanging insulting innuendos with him and allowing him to take a close look at his own bad habits.

As a matter of fact, he objectively emptied another glass of whiskey, the alcohol voluptuously burning his throat and sternum as it sank in. A student shouldn’t stay under the same roof with a teacher anyway. The fundamentals of this... farce were ill–built in the first place. He couldn't be bitter all day long. He was only human.

And the boy was frowning again.

And judging by the way he pushed his fingertips against his temples, he was tired too.

“Potter.” What? “It’s late. You may continue your studying tomorrow.” Why?

Potter nodded, giving a faint smile before mumbling a soft goodnight.

Severus’ anger was yearning to explode upon the impossible boy, searching almost maniacally to find something to blame him for. When he failed, and Potter was already upstairs, Severus directed his anger to himself and exhaled sharply.
You may continue your studying tomorrow.

Pathetic. Weak. It almost appeared as though he cared.
As soon as Severus found himself into Dumbledore’s office, he got to the point.

“He wants you dead.”

Dumbledore, of course, was not surprised. “I see.”

“He expects Draco to do it. He wants him to pay for his father's sins.”

Dumbledore's eyes sparkled with curiosity; he tilted his head and for a moment Severus thought he would smile. “Is that all, then? He assigned such an essential task to a helpless boy?”

“I imagine I will be required to carry out the job should Draco fail to do it,” he admitted.

There was a long moment of silence in which Severus fought the urge to curse the man and leave. Then Dumbledore nodded. And added nothing more. Blast his secrets and his plans. Whatever he was contemplating about, he wasn’t going to share with Severus just yet.

“How’s Harry?”

“He’s outside. It’s not just the Dark Lord’s thoughts that worry me but the inner cycle’s impatience as well. This isn’t a vague passing thought of his. He’s been preparing serious plans, this time. You are going to be in danger if you don't take this seriously.”

Narcissa would need his help well before the Dark Lord in this – and even if he continued ignoring her letters she would find a way to take what she wanted anyway. And then she’d seek revenge. And she’d find it. Bella was more than willing to parade with his head on a stick after all. It’d give her a taste of what she missed all these years. All Narcissa would ever need was her sister's help and he was doomed.

Of course, this didn’t matter much. Nothing mattered much when poor young Potter had to be fed, trained, and survive through the week without a new attack against him on his record. And the small talks with Dumbledore weren’t uncomfortable only for Severus, as it appeared. He’d almost dragged the boy back to Hogwarts for this visit. And Potter used almost every excuse he could think of to not come. But he did.

No one had ever been offered a way out of Dumbledore’s chit chats.

“From Draco? I highly doubt it, my boy. His actions will be closely monitored as soon as he steps foot in the castle.”

_and me? What is going to happen to me? "And what am I supposed to do?"

“If he asks you… inform your Lord that you will serve him as you're ordered. He cannot harm me, Severus. Let him plan this out as he wishes. He'll be disappointed.”

The thumping of his heart increased. Reason was not going to calm it down. Patience wasn't either. And the vivid image of another upcoming death he’d be unable to stop was making his fingers twitch.

Severus was going to die. He would have to promise to kill the man – and when he wouldn’t, the Dark Lord would finish him. The day would come, eventually – and he couldn't care less for his
own depart, were it for the cause, were it for Lily – but this filthy death, this shameful, cowardice way to go was not the preferred one.

_Fuck it all. I’ll die before Potter learns Occlumency._ He almost laughed.

“As you wish, then.”

He exited the room fuming, and found Potter toying with his wand just outside.

“Your turn,” he rasped while climbing down the stairs.

“What is it?”

“Hm?”

“Spit it out.”

Potter shrugged and almost tripped into a puddle. “I’m just a bit… crestfallen, you know.”

He didn’t. In the flicker of shadows cast by the dim lights of the street, he imagined that he must be looking downright obnoxious, and Potter didn’t look like a happy person either. He silently cursed Dumbledore for whatever worry he’d planted into the boy’s thick head this time.

“What did he tell you?”

He kept Potter close by the shoulder, the droplets of rain dripping down from the transformed umbrella he was clutching at for dear life. _Damn the Trace too_, he decided as he quickened his pace. They could be using his own house’s Floo now, were the boy a year older. They wouldn’t need to walk a sodding mile in the rain.

“Why did he tell you?”

Ah. He allowed himself an internal chuckle, reassured that the sound of the rain would most likely overshadow it even if it escaped. It wouldn’t do to bark that this was none of Potter’s business. If he wanted answers, he’d have to give some of them himself. Or pretend to. “I was given instructions, mainly.”

He felt the boy’s shoulder tense under his grip and Severus silently questioned his fate; after countless torturous years of self-sacrifice and meritorious toil, he was finally rewarded with the honour of comforting Harry Potter.

Merlin help him.

“He wanted to know if you’ve been treating me well,” Potter admitted. “And he asked me if I improved.”

“Is that all?” he asked impatiently.

Potter’s face was focused on something invisible, somewhere between the far end of the street and his own shoes. His feet blindly followed Severus’. He was hiding something.

Severus unlocked the outdoor and watched as Potter immediately slumped to the floor to untie his shoes. Severus threw his drenched coat on a chair before casting a hot-air charm on both of them. Potter winced at the harshness of it and sat on the sofa.
“Go take a shower or you’ll catch your death,” Severus said as he approached the staircase. It occurred to him that the suggestion was absurd if he were to take a shower too just now. Torn between insisting on his demand and occupying the bathroom first, he was only vaguely aware of Potter mumbling something behind him.

“I beg your pardon?”

He turned to see the boy shaking his head frantically and making a face. “Is it really true? What you said about Dumbledore? Or were you just joking?”

“What did I say?”

“That he’s… you know. Gay. Were you joking?”

Perhaps the information was a bit too harsh for a young boy to handle, then.

“Mind your business, Potter.” Then, something occurred to him. “You didn’t mention this to the Headmaster, did you?”

Potter shook his head. “No. So. It’s true, then.” Potter met his eyes momentarily and then he looked away. “Doesn’t it bother you? That he’s gay?”

Severus glared at him as he tried to find his calm. He had caused this. And now Dumbledore would most likely have his head. “No. It does not concern me.”

“Don’t you think it’s… abnormal?”

The amount of things that were abnormal about Albus Dumbledore was so big, homosexuality was probably the last one to catch one’s eye. Still. He was not discussing this. Not behind Dumbledore’s back. Not with a child. “Are you through?”

There was a dim light of hesitation into his eyes as he looked up. His lower lip was chewed mercilessly for a second, and moments later he passed by Severus without looking at him.

“I’ll go first,” he mumbled, and disappeared.

“How close were you with my mum?”

Snape was sitting at his desk, organising what appeared to be the new Potions curriculum. Harry’s schoolbook was laying open across his own lap as he blurted out the question.

Snape grunted as though knowing that this was coming. “We were – friends.”

“Did she like you?”

“I don’t know, Potter, you tell me. Do you not like your friends?”

This wasn’t what he meant. “No, I mean – you know.”

Snape tapped his quill at the desk. “Such stupendous eloquence. I deeply hope that your vocabulary skills will continue to amaze us common humans for a long time to come.”

Harry grinned. “I’m not buying it, Snape.”

“Be silent.”
Harry gave a reproving look to his textbook and then smiled. “Just tell me, will you?” He took advantage of Snape’s momentary distraction to push. “I’m not telling anyone. I just want to know more. About her.”

“No.”

“Please.”

“I will not discuss Lily with you. Ever.”

Harry’s heart sunk into his stomach. What was it that he would not discuss? What had happened exactly? Whatever bond there was between him and his mum, he suddenly did not want to know about.

“Spare yourself the misery, Potter. As you already know, your mother made her choice a long time ago.”

What? “I didn’t – hey! It’s not that. You – I don’t mind, that is. I just want to know more about her. I didn’t - judge you.”

Perfect. Might as well dig a hole on the ground and stick his head in.

“I sincerely appreciate your consent. Is that all?”

Harry nodded. Snape dipped his quill into the ink and continued his work.

Harry ripped a page from his notebook and crinkled it before throwing it aside. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

"Has it occurred to you that once you’ve gotten answers to your curiosity, apologising for it does not count?”

Harry took the risk of shifting his eyes to him and was shocked at the sourness he was met with.

“Oh come on! Everyone seems well pleased to gabble for hours about my dad but I’ve no idea what my mum was like! I’m sorry if my curiosity displeases you, or if it disturbs your sitting alone and talking to no one all day long, but I think that I do have the right to know!”

Snape stood. “Get out.”

“Why?”

“Get out, Potter!”

Harry stood too, throwing his book on the desk angrily. “Do you still love her?”

"Out!"

"Were you a couple?"

“Speak another word and you –”

“Stop treating me like that!” he yelled. “I’m not a child! You can’t threaten me every time you’re brought to a deadlock - if you think I’ll quit thinking about some things if you ignore them long enough then you’re wrong!”
He held his chin high and did not flinch when Snape stepped closer. “Keep testing me, boy. Let's see what happens. I've seen your little secrets, all of them swirling around in your empty head. You think you know punishment? You think your little cupboard was the worst? Come on, test me! You might be getting away with your cheeky tone when it comes to Dumbledore, but I assure you that you do not want to defy my authority!"

Harry shifted to his feet, his face a breath away from Snape’s. He still loved her.

Snape jabbed Harry’s shoulder. Harry didn’t grunt.

“Now, get out of my sight and go weep under your pillow for all I care. If you wanted casual chit chats maybe you should have trained your dog better, he'd give you that were he around.”

He was aware of his fists clenching tightly as he felt tears coming up. “I hate you,” Harry breathed. "Good."

Once Harry was upstairs, he brushed his shoulder where Snape had jabbed him, and was aware of the spot still tingling at the memory of it.
Harry looked over at the desk. The summer was an awfully rainy one; the trickling noise of the rain was interrupted only by the regular refilling of Snape’s glass.

It occurred to Harry that Snape had almost finished a bottle tonight, but he kept correcting essays nonetheless.

Harry was occupying the sofa as usual, reading what seemed to be the most boring book in the world. He heard a groan and saw Snape rub his eyes keenly with two fingers. Harry realised that he hadn’t seen him leave the desk since the end of their Occlumency practice this evening.

Snape blinked his tiredness away and gulped another mouthful of alcohol. He corrected another page before taking a deep breath and shutting his eyes.

“Are you alright?” Harry asked.

“I’m tired of correcting nonsense.”

He looked so desperate that Harry almost pitied him. “Such as?”

“Step five,” Snape read. “I added powdered unicorn horn and waited for the potion to turn pink. When it didn’t,” he hissed, “I added pink ink. The potion turned pink.”

Harry snorted. “Who wrote that?”

“It would be unprofessional of me to say.”


“Well, it makes sense, then.”

“I wouldn’t expect a better response from you.”

And now Snape was rubbing his eyes again.

“Take a rest.”

“What for?”

“You’re tired.”

Snape nodded and refilled his glass, rubbing his face. He got up and stalked towards the sofa, feeling for the wall as if he thought it might escape him unless he kept in touch with it. His armchair escaped him indeed, and he almost collapsed onto Harry as he tripped over his feet.

“Fuck. Potter. Sorry.”

He landed next to him on the sofa with a grunt. His hair brushed Harry’s shoulder lightly.

“You’re pissed,” Harry said.

“One should always be pissed,” Snape murmured as he rested his head back on the cushions and slid lower.
Harry thought of shifting away, but he was already trapped at the end of the sofa. In the dim light of the room, Snape’s hand was twitching weakly around the glass resting on his thigh. His eyes were half – closed, his features relaxed in a state that Harry had never seen them before.

And his body was emitting a strange warmth.

“Some students are doomed to remain empty headed their whole lives, you know. No offence,” Snape said.

Harry adjusted himself slightly. “Whatever,” he murmured back. He really wanted to avoid a fight right now.

Snape raised his hand, rubbed his neck and winced, barring his teeth as he grunted. “Fuck.”

This was the exact moment Harry should go upstairs. Without thinking twice about it. Perhaps if he just left Snape here and went to sleep…

“You have a headache?” Harry asked, although he already knew the answer.

Snape hummed, either in agreement or disagreement; Harry couldn’t tell. Many minutes passed in silence; Harry waited, counting Snape's breaths, wondering whether he was asleep yet or not, staring at his own knees, squeezed in the sofa's corner, not daring, not allowing himself to turn and look at Snape. Without even knowing when, or why, Harry softly pushed Snape’s arm down and placed his own hand on Snape’s neck. It occurred to him that Snape was attempting a frown, but his face was too sleepy to wear it properly.

Unsure, Harry pushed Snape's hair aside. His heart was about to explode; his fingers slipped lower, and rubbed Snape's nape slowly. A part of him wanted to convince himself that what he was doing was a mere favour to the most miserable man alive; another part of himself was having an epiphany. He'd regret this tomorrow. He'd be disgusted.

He was aware of Snape holding his breath. “What are you doing?” he murmured.

“Nothing,” Harry said. Snape exhaled sharply and shut his eyes tightly, his lips slightly parting. It occurred to Harry that it was highly unlikely that anyone had ever done this to him before. And for a good reason too, probably. He continued out of wonder; unsure of why Snape hadn't stopped him yet. Thrilled that a Hogwarts Professor could actually exist outside school. Terrified at the pulsating skin against his fingers. Severus Snape had a heart.

Maybe he just pitied Snape. When he didn't wholeheartedly hate him.

Under the subsiding rain outside, the sound of a soft moan on the back of Snape’s throat was almost completely shadowed.

“Unbelievable,” Snape murmured, and Harry was curious to know what was unbelievable. Still, he couldn’t bring himself to ask, afraid that if Snape opened his eyes, the moment would fade away, and he would have to face his inappropriate action.

He didn’t talk. Instead, his movements soothed down and eventually stopped, his hand retreating as the dark hair fell once again to the shoulders beneath it.

Harry took the glass from Snape and placed it on the table, as Snape’s hand faintly attempted to curl around thin air. He should go now. Go before he did anything that would lead him to his early painful death. He chuckled to himself for a moment, and then looked back at Snape who was now sleeping with his head fallen back.
Frustrated with himself, Harry eventually went to his room.

“I can do this all night,” Severus informed him. The boy grunted, biting his own tongue as he looked up.

“Then do so. I quit.” He was about to throw his wand on the sofa when Severus raised his own again.

“Not in my lesson, Potter. Leg –”

“Stop it!”

“Try harder!”

“I am trying!” Potter kicked the carpet in vexation. He was trying. And he was failing. And no matter how hard they both insisted on avoiding this, he would always collapse in the end. It was a simple thing, really. Potter was just incapable of it.

“Your efforts are not nearly enough to contrive success. You keep using the same way to block me every day while instead you could be experimenting until the way that fits you finally occurred.”

“You think I didn’t try that? I tried fucking everything, it’s just not working, whatever I do! I could shove my head into a block of cement and my thoughts would still fly away!”

He barely resembled James when he was like this; drenched in sweat, his lips trembling from disappointment that he was trying to force into obstinate anger. Hair damp and stuck on his forehead, shirt damp too, and chest heaving as though all the air of the world had been sucked into him and was desperately kicking for its escape.

“Language, Potter.”

“Fuck language.”

And disappointment it was, always. For being *ridiculed* in front of Severus.

“If you enjoy being on your knees while I do this I will not object. Training is not over though. Prepare yourself.”

Potter stumbled up quickly.

Headstrong, always.

“Tomorrow.”

“Now, Potter.”

“I can’t!”

Deep breath. Lie. He needed a lie. It hovered inside his throat in demur for a second. “I saw improvement.”

And Potter’s eyes lit up, green and alive. Sparkling. *Green*. “You did?”

“Yes.”
Potter held his wand, keeping his back turned at Severus for a moment. Severus thought that the boy must have been smiling to himself. Or frowning. Then he turned.

“I’m ready. Do it.”

Severus smiled too. “Legimens.”

Now, that was better.
Severus had come to the frightening conclusion that the book on the boy’s lap was Sybill’s rubbish. He decided to ignore it for the time being, and poured himself a cup of hot tea, offering one to Potter as well.

Taking his usual seat, Severus appreciated the sweet silence. At last, Potter was beginning to learn to enjoy it too. Or so it seemed.

Until Potter cleared his throat hesitantly.

"I'm going to need your help with something. I think.” He looked up at Severus, expecting to be turned down. He was right to be expecting it.

“What is it?” Severus spat and silently damned himself. He was supposed to turn him down.

“Professor Trelawney has asked for an assignment, you know, her usual stuff. I need a partner for it, it could even be a Muggle, it says here. The other person doesn't even need to know what I'm doing.”

What could it be this time? It was a wonder they let that woman teach – her rare as hen’s teeth real prophecies were the only reason Dumbledore was still protecting her. That, and his preposterous choice of friends.

“A partner in what?”

“Well, it says I need to, you know, read someone's palm, so…” he trailed off so quickly that it was obvious that he believed he didn’t stand a chance. And he didn’t. Or he wouldn’t, under normal circumstances.

But Merlin help him, he was intrigued. This would make it hilariously easy to prove to Potter what a scam Divination was.

“Very well.”

He moved to the sofa and sat next to Potter, offering his hand. Potter took it, his expression completely dumb while doing so. As though afraid that Severus might change his mind at any moment, Potter quickly browsed through the pages and stopped.

He read something, underlined it, and stared at his palm, keeping it steeled with a grip on the wrist. After a minute of inspecting it as though he was faced with Yorick’s skull, his eyes darted again to the book and his index finger brushed the length of his palm.

Severus waited. And after a minute of deep thinking and eyebrow furrowing, Potter confidently stated, “You’re male.”

Severus arched a brow. “Your abilities leave me speechless.”

“Shut up.” Potter shrugged his shoulders and dragged Severus’ palm on his lap as he turned another page.

“I didn’t make it up, just wait.” Severus waited. “Now, see that line over here? It says so. That you’re male.”
Fascinating. All his life he was just waiting for Trelawney to let him know. Thank gods that he had finally found out the hidden truth that had been controlling his life.

“I'm male.”

“Yes. This is step one,” Potter mumbled, but didn't continue to whatever step two was.

“Is that all?”

“No, wait. I'm just making sure.”

“That I'm male? What do you want? Proof?”

A blush crossed Potter's cheeks as he continued reading. “Maybe.”

Before he could think that through, Potter scribbled down his discovery and opened Severus’ fist again. His fingers were warm. He really hoped that it’d occur to Potter to demonstrate his assignment under a fake name instead of Severus’.

Blowing their summer secret so stupidly would be tremendous. He was about to tell him so when Potter talked again.

“You're going to be lucky this week, also.”

This week? “And how, pray tell, are the lines of my palm going to change themselves once this week is over?”

“Oh. Right. Then I guess you’re a lucky person in general.”

Very. "Finally, someone noticed.”

“And this…” he pressed from Severus’ thumb downwards until he reached the middle of his palm, “shows that you will fall in love and that you will experience an unspeakable passion.”

Potter’s eyes urged him to check for himself, as though the said unspeakable passion was hovering over his palm. Severus looked at his hand, which was as it had always been, except that it wasn’t getting any younger. He spread his fingers.

“And here I thought that that was a scratch,” he responded wryly.

Potter chuckled, then wrote it all down. It occurred to him that perhaps Potter was putting some unnecessary faith in Dumbledore’s plans and Sibyll’s nonsense.

“You shouldn’t believe in fate, Potter.” The words slipped from his tongue before he could help it, and he watched as they slowly sank into Potter. Once registered, he also realised that Potter wasn’t thinking about palm reading anymore.

“The prophecy says –”

“It doesn’t matter what the prophecy says. No one can force you to sacrifice yourself for the sake of a seer’s prediction. You have no proof that the prophecy must be fulfilled.”

“If I don’t kill him he will kill me, and –”

“The Dark Lord tested his fate when he decided to look out for you – because he knew about the prophecy. If he hadn’t known, he wouldn’t have made it come true.”
"That doesn’t mean –"

"He made it happen. It didn’t exist before he decided to make it real."

"You can’t know that," he spat.

"What I know, is that people have the power to bring to life whatever they believe in if they’re obsessed enough. It was his own fear that led the Dark Lord to his downfall, and it is the people’s fear that still keeps him alive."

Their hands were still clasped together, and he carefully untangled his fingers from Potter’s grasp. Potter let go after resisting for a moment.

"I don't know why you're telling me this," Potter said. "It doesn’t mean I'll forgive you," he added quickly. "I'm never going to."

Forgiveness. Every time he almost forgave himself, the truth got a tighter hold of his throat and squeezed. It didn’t matter. Potter’s forgiveness would be useless. For some vain and idiotic reason, people had to forgive. It benefited the spirit, dug through the fanfare of the poor epiphany and blew new life into a dying soul. It was a sign of emotional maturity, most times. And some other times, accepting that what had been done could not be forgiven, was just as mature.

"I couldn't care less. I'm assisting you because I'm instructed to. Never forget this."

Potter looked up, uncertain. "Did you – know that – did you know that he’d kill me anyway?"

"Yes."

"But you didn’t care. You wanted to protect my mother only."

"Yes."

"You were happy my father died."

God yes.

"No. I – didn’t have time for it."

"Right." Potter pushed his fringe aside. "I don’t think respect is an honest thing, not in the way you expect me to show it," he said suddenly. "If I feel like saying something and then I have to cover it up and say it in another way, then I’m dishonest to you. How is that respect?"

"You must learn to express yourself properly."

"But what you call respect is just hypocrisy, can’t you see that? People use respect so they can keep themselves from becoming familiar with each other. It’s like someone who’s filling an empty space with something just to not leave it empty. That doesn’t mean that this is the only thing that can fill the space though."

Severus had a strange déjà vu. "Have you been reading Tolstoy?" He asked, inwardly panicked.

Potter blinked, distracted. "What’s that?"

Of course not. "Never mind."

"What’s that?"

"Never mind, Potter. My palm reading is waiting."
Potter eagerly reopened the book. It occurred to Severus that the pain, if anything happened to the boy, was supposed to be only for Lily’s sake.

Lily, who was gone – gone- while Harry Potter was still here. Alive. Drowning into deep thinking that was too much for his age, and too hard to bear. And still doing so in complete silence.

Potter didn’t want to die. Yet he was ready to do it, if he must. And that was making all the difference.

Severus landed his hand on Potter’s lap again, startling him. “Go on. I can’t wait to know the wonders that'll occur in my fascinating life. Tell me my fate.”

Respect was invented to cover the empty place where love should be. He choked. Pathetic. Utterly pathetic. Fuck fate. And fuck Tolstoy too.

Potter climbed down the stairs, his feet almost hopping as he landed on the floor with a loud thud.

“Morning.”

Why was he grinning now? Severus tossed him the biscuit box that was awaiting for him on the table. He caught it with reflexes only a seeker could have, and sat cross legged on the floor to open it. His hair had gone wild over the last month – it was impossible to imagine that it would ever manage to get even worse, but nevertheless it had. Severus looked at it repelled. A haircut would do.

Then again, a haircut had never helped his father’s hair. It occurred to him that Potter was studying him with the corner of his eye. Something was going on, and it wasn’t important in an actual important way. If Potter was grinning about it, it meant that he wasn’t in danger, and so it didn’t matter. To Potter though, it did.

And it shouldn’t matter either that Potter was expecting him to guess what that damn thing was. He certainly wasn’t going to fall into that childish trap and play his games. He was a grown man, and Potter eyeing him every few seconds instead of reading his homework was just not something he wanted to occupy himself with.

But it was distracting him.

“Dammit Potter, what is it?”

“Sweet sixteen, Harry, happy birthday!”

Severus choked and allowed himself a grunt. It occurred to him that for some traitorous reason it sounded more like a laugh.

“Congratulations. If you expect me to bake you a birthday cake, I suggest you forget about it.”

Sixteen years already. It was fascinating, how quickly time flew. Looking back, he could only find sparse strands of life in these years.

“Could've just said happy birthday,” Potter said, before he smiled again. “Besides, I’ve biscuits.”

Sixteen years of sacrifice that had led up to this: an ignorant orphaned boy sitting before his feet and happily eating chocolate biscuits. Years of mistakes, of crimes, of lying and regret, all of them devoted to this particular boy, who had already turned sixteen and was soon to be a man.

A man who’d hate Severus as much as his father did, as much as Lily hated him when she
befriended Potter, and as much as everyone else in the world probably still did.

None of this mattered. Potter would go back to Hogwarts and he’d forget how hard Severus had tried to protect his arse. He’d never understand the full extents of his offering, nor his pain as he had to go through looking at those eyes and dealing with that face daily into his own private space.

“Are you alright?”

He suddenly wasn’t. And what should he expect, anyway. Potter didn’t even acknowledge that he should respect him. He’d never recognise – never appreciate any of this. To him, Severus was nothing but a bitter bastard who was just making his life difficult.

“Snape?”

And for everybody alive except Dumbledore, he was scum too. And perhaps he was. He stood.

“I’m going out,” he spat, and grabbed his coat.

It had gone dark. Fuck. *Fuck.* What was he going to do? Stupid. Fuck. Stupid. It must have been something he said. Was it his birthday? What had he done wrong now?

Snape had been gone all day, and now it had gone dark.

Should he owl Dumbledore? And what should he tell him? *Snape disappeared, help, please?* Fuck. He checked behind the window curtain again and kicked the wall.

Snape could be in danger. He could be with Voldemort. Voldemort could have caught him – killed him – and why did that scare him so much?

“Fuck you, Snape!”

He was confused. That was all. Something was just not working well in his head. It was Snape’s own fault, probably. Legilimency had fucked up his mind for good this time – that was the only logical explanation. Damn it all. Why did Snape have to treat him like this? Why didn’t he tell him where he went? Memories of Sirius attacked him again. How he left his house. How he died because of it.

Maybe Snape was just punishing him for having been born. Maybe this was his birthday present. Or perhaps he had figured out what was going on with Harry and had freaked out. Well, *Harry was freaking out too.* Whenever he thought about it. And he tried to never think about it. And he certainly wouldn’t think about it right now.

He felt sad. He waited and waited and waited, and didn’t eat anything all day long. His anxiety only increased as time went by. This time something was really wrong.

And if Snape died... he checked out the window again. He wasn’t going to die just now. He wasn’t going to die after Harry had started getting used to him. Harry didn’t deserve this. He couldn’t take another loss this soon. It wasn't fair.

He exhaled sharply, reasoning himself. He should go take a shower and sleep. Or write to Ron. Or search the rooms for hidden treasures as he used to do until now.

Snape was looking after Harry because he had to. He would murder him on the spot, if that could bring his mum back. Hell, perhaps he’d murder him anyway.
Snape was not a good man.

*That’s a lie.*

Harry didn’t even like him.

*That’s an even worse lie.*

Fuck.

It was the magazine’s fault. He had to throw it away. Or better burn it.

The door cricked open. He was alive. The fucking bastard was alive.

“Where the hell have you been?!” Harry shouted before he could even see him.

“I beg your pardon?” Snape took off his coat and hanged it, walking past Harry and towards the stairs. Harry followed.

“I asked you a question! Answer me!”

Snape didn’t look back.

“I’m fucking here, Snape, are you deaf? Where. The fuck. Have you BEEN?”

“I was experiencing an unspeakable passion. Why are you not sleeping?” His voice was outrageously calm.

“Sleeping! You were missing goddamn you! I was worried sick, you locked me inside while you know I can't use magic, and you didn't even tell me why you left! What did you expect me to do?”

His throat burned from all the screaming, but he didn’t care. He yanked Snape’s arm to stop him just outside his room and he could feel his own panting throb into his ears. Snape looked at him from head to toe, but didn’t bother any further.

“Go to sleep.”

“You didn’t tell me where you went,” spat Harry, his lungs still aching. He’d take off his own eyes before he cried in front of Snape.

“Mind your business, Potter.” He turned to his bedroom door again, and Harry yanked at his arm harder, turning him viciously.

“Don’t you think that I deserve a fucking explanation?” he yelled. Snape was about to turn around again, but Harry pulled on his arm again. “FUCKING TELL ME!”

Scowling, Snape yanked his arm away and grabbed him by the collar, pushing him against the wall with a frightening strength, forcing him still. Harry’s back crashed hard against the solid surface, and Snape’s breath tickled his face.

“First I was in a brothel, having some fun with a twenty quid whore who deserved much less for her skills. Then I went to a bar, found my allies who would happily skin you alive to please the Dark Lord and discussed the misfortune of your existence. Is your curiosity satisfied or do you want more?”

Misery; that was it. Misery spread all over his heart, and surely he must have been bleeding
somewhere in his insides, otherwise this dizziness would be of no explanation.

He found himself holding his breath to steady it, afraid of the force that it would come out with should he leave it.

He stared. He stared up to the black eyes as his heart sank, kicking pathetically out of shame and something else. Then he pushed Snape away and he stumbled back with small steps, pathetic – pathetic – steps, gods, he’s enjoying your shock – and he turned away, looking everywhere but at Snape, thinking of anything but him, running to his room and closing the door, fighting the urge to drag something behind it to keep it closed forever.


He took a deep breath. And another one. And another one. I will not scream or shout, he repeated inwardly. I will not scream or shout.

He touched his chest. His heart was beating ridiculously fast, and then it almost stopped completely once Harry realised what was happening to him. No. He laughed. Hard. Oh no.

He laughed harder.
Wisdom: Professionalism

For a couple of days, Potter shut his mouth stubbornly.

He took his meals to his room, avoided Severus, and as soon as the Occlumency practice was over he’d run upstairs and leave him the hell alone. Even when Severus talked to him, his responses would be short and to the point.

Finally, the boy was learning.

Severus was calm again. Enjoying the silence.

But the silence could be enjoyed only during daylight hours. Potter’s nightmares were back, and were crueler than ever - harsh and ongoing until the boy would either wake up screaming or pass out. The second night, Severus crept into his room to wake him.

The whining was too much – he thought it might be a vision. When Potter woke up, the shadows on his face showed nothing familiar for Severus to read.

“Bad one?” Severus wasn’t familiar with comforting people.

“Go away, get out,” Potter had mumbled. He pushed Severus' hand away from his chest and shifted back; Severus slammed the door behind him after threatening to kick him out should this continue.

Once again, Potter was making a big deal out of something that did not concern him in the slightest, hoping to get attention. He’d have none of it. If he didn’t want to talk, they’d play this his way. No talking it was.

Until the third day, on which Potter talked.

“So, where is that place? That you visited the other day, I mean.”

"The bar?"

"No. The - you know."

The tension between them was heavy again; the warmth that had settled into the house had now vanished, leaving behind a cold emptiness.

“Interested?” Severus placed the plate with the bread slices on the table and took the juice out of the fridge.

“Maybe.”

Severus had to hand it to him; he was at least trying, although he couldn’t tell if Potter was doing it to annoy him or to fix things.

There was certainly nothing to be fixed. “You’re underage.”

Potter shred a tiny piece of his napkin. “Oh.”

Damn it all. Hogwarts should start already. He sat down and took a large bite of his steak.

“You lied to me, didn't you? You didn't really go to such a place.”
Ah. And here he thought that the boy would buy anything he gave him.

“Have I given you the impression that you are allowed to continue discussing this?”

“Who do you think you are, Snape?”

He was a man who couldn't care less about this very moment. Not spending Potter's birthday with him was the wisest decision he could've made. He'd taken a really long walk, almost caught a cold, and when he ended up at the pub that destroyed his father's life he decided to give it a try too.

The damp air and the long, tall alleys had helped him calm down nevertheless. He'd almost forgotten that the boy existed, when he came back to be reminded by having him screaming at his face.

“You do realise that you sound like a housewife that has been cheated on, no?”

Potter bit his lip, holding back his anger. No, not anger. Embarrassment.

“I was worried.”

“Why would you?”

A deep breath.

“Well, you shouldn’t.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Potter snapped. He banged his fist on the table and glared at him, his eyes glimmering dangerously. “I don’t want you to die on me!”

Die. On him.

He was aware of the fork being tightly squeezed inside his fist. He blinked and firmly cut another bite. A sigh was heard from nearby but he didn’t bother looking up.

Die on him. He never had anyone to die on.

“Have you finished you assignments?”

Potter snorted. “Everything besides potions. Are you going to help me?”

It would be highly unprofessional to help a student with an assignment he himself had assigned.

“Very well. After Occlumency.”

Severus damped his hair with a towel, tossing it on a chair. The water was perfect; he liked his showers burning hot, helping him drain off thoughts and worries.

Potter knocked.

“Wait there.”

He pulled on his nightgown and damped his hair once more. He opened.

Potter was in his pyjamas too. He held up a notebook. “My assignment?”

Right. Wait, now? “It’s late, we’ll work on it tomorrow.”
“I’m not really tired yet, are you?”

"Tomorrow, Potter."

"I only have a couple of questions, actually."

Bugger. “Come in.”

Potter walked in and sat on the bed. I did not say you could sit, he was ready to hiss, but chose against it. Sighing, he sat against the headboard too.

“Have you finished it?” he asked.

Potter handed him over the notebook. “Almost. Some parts confused me.”

Severus read the first page in silence. “Some of these excerpts are copied directly from the book. And your handwriting is getting worse.”

“It’s a draft, I’ll rewrite it on a papyrus scroll. If the book has it right why is copying it bad?”

“Because it highlights your laziness and encourages your cheating tendencies. Potions require creativity, among other things.”

Potter snorted. “Creativity in potions? I might blow up something.”

“And that will make you learn.”

“Now what?”

“Rewrite it.”

“You didn’t read all of it.”

“Rewrite it.”

Fuming, Potter sighed, and much to Severus’ surprise he took his pen out and took back the notebook. He was going to do it now?

“Just wait a minute. I can make the corrections and it’ll look right.”

Severus wanted to tell him that correcting a copied text was not going to make it right. Then he decided to let him do it, and face the large red TROLL written across it when back to Hogwarts.

He waited.

And he waited some more, until his back tingled and he made himself a little more comfortable. Then a little more. It seemed to take ages for Potter to finish up, and his pen on the paper was rhythmical and soft. There was a star drifting above him, or perhaps it was just a Lumos, while the smell of a herb garden attacked him—like fresh flowers dipped in water, in a nice china; perhaps on a sunny day, a china placed on a wide white window, somewhere, for someone.

His eyes flickered opened sometime later, but Potter had fallen asleep too, pen at hand, and Severus shut his eyes again, sleep taking him in so quietly, that it was like an elephant had been resting on top of his chest – and now had slowly sat up, and was finally padding away.
Morning was wonderful. Made of relaxation, calmness and tea; drenched in the priceless warmth of sunlight. Morning was a life given gift.

Its only drawback was that it came at such an inconvenient time of day. A time of day in which a man had to force himself cruelly awake and could not think beyond taking a piss.

There was something else too though. Like that body that was breathing evenly, attached to him.

His eyes snapped open.

Of course.

It occurred to him that this was a really pathetic dream for him to have. And then it occurred to him that it wasn’t a dream.

Potter was hugging him.

The last time someone hugged him was when Dumbledore took him back. He’d hugged him then, Severus sitting on a chair, Dumbledore hovering above him, squeezing his shoulder, telling him to look after Harry Potter, always.

That was a decent hug. A respectable one.

This one wasn’t.

The feeling was incomparable with anything else; it held a familiarity and yet it wasn’t something he’d ever wish in his life. Why did people have kids? The warmth of another body willingly clutched on his own was unnerving. This intimacy was the very reason Severus never wished for children.

If Potter could only see himself now, his hands wreathed around his most hated professor’s torso, his face a vivacious pink, he’d most likely Obliviate himself right away.

Still, his fingers clamped weakly on the back of Severus’ pyjama shirt. The dog’s death was certainly behind this. It’d caused issues. The boy’s mental stability had become weaker than anticipated, although Potter insisted on hiding it well.

And Severus couldn’t possibly feel more disgusted.

“Potter.”

His insolence was beyond control. He must have woken up at some point during the night – and instead of returning to his room, the little brat had sneaked under the bedclothes.

Bugger.

Harry hadn’t felt this cosy in ages; his heart was heated and his chest was tingly. For a second there he imagined that he was a baby in a womb – tiny and protected and safe – as if nothing mattered. He shifted closer – if only Snape could continue sleeping for the rest of the day – if he could continue be calm and nice like this…

“Potter.”
He opened his eyes. Snape was staring at him.


He was aware of his heart beating embarrassingly fast, impelling blood to all the wrong places.

He was hugging Snape. His face was barely an inch away from Snape’s nose. He considered saying something. He couldn’t.

It occurred to him that he should get up, but somehow he couldn’t manage to. Didn’t want to. He stared back at the dark depth of Snape’s eyes and realised that the man was experiencing some trouble appreciating this unexpected situation.

“Potter,” he croaked again.

“Snape.”

Snape parted his own lips too, but the anger that surely was building up inside him didn’t come out.

Instead, he muttered something else, his tone low and slightly panicked. “I could be imprisoned for this.”

Snape remained frozen, as though trying to make this new information sink in.

Harry chuckled. “Nah. Dumbledore will probably save you. You said he’s gay after all, right?”


How the hell had that slipped out?

At the mention of the word gay, Snape’s eye twitched dangerously. Then, before Harry could explain, he was viciously pushed aside. Snape got up and put on his outer robe, his back on Harry. Harry stretched out, yawned, put his glasses on and stared.

“I do not recall seeking your exceptional company or inviting you to my bed, why did you sleep here?”


“You wanted to sleep with me?” asked Snape coldly, searching through a pile of clothes for something.

“No, I was just sleepy.”

It was his wand that he was looking for. He let it on the night stand once he found it, rubbing his face with a hand and staring back at Harry.

“What you did is uncalled for. Absolutely unacceptable.”

“So what? No one knows.”

“That's not the point, Potter! Why didn’t you go to your room? Nothing has given you the right to cross the lines so light hearted but you nevertheless do so, every goddamn time!"

“I was sleepy,” Harry repeated stubbornly. He wasn't going to let Snape know that he felt the shame himself too.
Snape exhaled hard. “You will not play games with me. I don’t know how you interpret my hospitality, but you are certainly reaching the wrong assumptions. You find your way to my bedroom far too often lately, and for that there’s no denying. I assumed it is Black you're missing, but who knows, maybe you’re so twisted you simply want to see me sacked.”

Taken aback, Harry thought of anything he could defend himself with. It occurred to him that it was the first time in his life he was seeing Snape scared to death.

"Get out. Out!"

Harry got up to his knees, fumbling through the sheets for his pen and notebook. Snape found them first, and threw them to the corridor angrily, staying as far from Harry as possible.

Harry slumped lazily towards the kitchen.

“I’m hungry!” he said loudly, so he could be heard at the living room.

“Starve,” a voice barked back at him.

“We need groceries,” he mumbled to himself as he observed the fridge. Then, “Snape! What have you done to my snacks?”

“You didn’t pay for them, they were not yours,” Snape shouted back.

“You ate them!” He was starving. Those terrible soup meals were driving him mad. He went back to the living room. “Why did you eat them?”

“I was hungry. I was sleepy. I wanted to. I imagine these excuses are good enough for someone who uses them on a daily basis to justify every impulsive action of his.”

“Fine. Be difficult. I'll order pizza.”

“You’ll pay for it.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“Then you'll starve.”

Harry collapsed on the sofa, covering his head with a pillow. “You’re pathetic. You’re taking revenge.” he said through the fabric.

“I can’t hear you, Potter.”

He lifted the pillow slightly. “I said, you’re pathetic!”

Snape considered it. “I’m not. Order pizza.”

He was too lazy to get up. And too upset to order pizza. He breathed into the pillow until he became accustomed to the idea of actually starving to death in order to piss Snape off.

Someone knocked on the door and they both stood up at once. Snape took out his wand. Harry had his own upstairs; he looked at Snape for instructions.

“Up,” he whispered. “Whatever you hear, whatever happens, stay in your room. You understand?”
Harry stared.

“Whatever happens. Am I clear?”

What did that mean? He nodded.

“Go.”
Wisdom: The Vow

Harry closed his door and waited – for what, he didn’t know. A fight. Some sort of explosion. Snape getting killed by Voldemort. Voldemort climbing up the stairs and killing Harry.

Nothing happened. He was aware of steps and a female voice, but he could not make out the words. Counting under his breath, when a few minutes passed and Harry realised that the visitor wasn’t planning on leaving soon, he carefully opened the door again and tiptoed out. He reached the chairs and crouched down, wand at hand, trying to kneel as soundlessly as he could.

Someone laughed. And Harry knew that laughter. He knew it very well. Control your emotions, he remembered. But Bellatrix had killed Sirius and no self-control was enough for him to calm down.

"The Dark Lord is very angry," said Snape, barely audible. "He failed to hear the prophecy. You know as well as I do, Narcissa, that he does not forgive easily."

Another female voice wept and sobbed. "My only son... my only son..."

"You should be proud!" Bellatrix shrieked ruthlessly. "If I had sons, I would be glad to give them up to the service of the Dark Lord!"

They went on and on, failing to reach a conclusion as Harry bit his lip and tried to keep absolutely still. The hate he felt was blinding; it soaked into his skin and reached his bones, thundering like a crashing curse. It was her fault; Sirius was dead and she was still free, plotting and murdering and – Harry held his breath, trying to listen to every word.

"It might be possible... for me to help Draco," said Snape.

"Severus — oh, Severus — you would help him? Would you look after him, see he comes to no harm?"

"I can try."

"If you are there to protect him... Severus, will you swear it? Will you make the Unbreakable Vow?"

"The Unbreakable Vow?"

Bellatrix shrieked – it was a paranoid laugh – one of those Harry remembered too well. He could do it. He could run downstairs and cast the Killing Curse, point his wand at her face, or torture her, make her pay for all this pain, all this –

"Aren’t you listening, Narcissa? Oh, he’ll try, I’m sure... the usual empty words, the usual slithering out of action... oh, on the Dark Lord’s orders, of course!"

What the hell they were talking about? Why didn’t Harry know any of this? Unbreakable Vow. He’d never heard of it before. He had to get Snape out of this. How?

Harry got to his feet and tiptoed to the bathroom. He looked at his own face in the mirror, trying to think of something.

Think. Think.

Placing his wand in his pocket, he carefully unscrewed the water pipe until water began dripping onto the floor. Then, with all his body’s strength, he pulled the pipe away from the wall until it
broke.

*Just let this work.*

Water spilled onto the floor immediately. The pipe made a horrible sound, one that resembled much Bellatrix’s voice, and the water soon overflowed the floor.

Harry heard steps. He took his wand out again, ready to attack with all his might, but Snape had come up alone. His eyes darted from the flooded bathroom to Harry. His face promised murder.

He grabbed Harry by the arm. “What the hell are you doing?” he hissed to his ear.

“Saving your life,” Harry whispered back.

Snape spelled the floor dry and pointed at Harry’s bedroom with a finger before descending.

He must have used a spell, also, for Harry could not hear their conversation anymore. After some time, he heard the door banging close and he breathed again.

And after some more, Snape had Harry against the wall, grabbing him by the ear.

“Are you completely – utterly – astoundingly out of your mind, you stupid shit? Do you ever realise the risk –”

“Ouch!”

“– you are putting your life in with every stupidity you decide to act upon?”

“You’re hurting me!” Harry complained. He pushed at Snape hard, but it was useless.

"Kill yourself," said Snape coolly. "Do us all a favour and do it yourself before someone else kills you first. Either way you’ll end up where your sorry father did because of the same damn idiocy!"

Harry stopped writhing around. Their eyes met. Snape let go.

Sitting with his bum on the floor, his head resting against the wall, Harry refused to look up when Snape appeared again an hour later. He wished for the bastard to disappear again, but Snape knelt down too, staring at Harry for a long moment before he spoke.

“I demand responsibility from you,” Snape spat.

There was an interesting hole on the carpet, Harry noticed. It looked like a cigarette burn, or maybe magic. “What did they ask of you? What is Malfoy going to do?”

"That was a private conversation you were never meant to hear."

Harry choked around a snort. "Yeah, well, but I did. It's about Dumbledore, isn't it?"

"What?"

"I hate you."

Snape sighed. Most likely he was already losing his patience. "No one can harm Dumbledore. Is that clear?"

"You can."
“Don’t be an idiot, Potter.”

“You took a vow!”

Snape’s face was expressionless. “I did not.”

“Yeah, right.” Harry laughed, because there was nothing else he could do. And if someone had to die... Well. Better Snape than Dumbledore. At least Dumbledore loved Harry. At least Harry loved Dumbledore.

"She killed Sirius. I was there, but oh, why would you care, you're happy he died anyway. I bet you loved it."

Snape said nothing, which only proved that Harry was right.

“What did she want? Why did they visit you? I don't want to hear more lies, just tell me.”

“You shouldn’t have heard this conversation.”

“Snape!” His own voice was unrecognisable – too pitifully close to a sob.

“Draco's mother... believes her son is too young to take the Mark. Dumbledore, of course, wants me to interfere and ensure he doesn't take it at all. That is all. You needn't worry about the Headmaster, he’s safe, as always.”

And you? he almost asked. But then he was reminded that he didn't care.

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“Lumos.”

The tip of Harry's wand lit up, illuminating the white pillows. Outside the window, the moon reflected onto the window glass dimly. Harry turned to the Advice Squad page of the magazine and read a young boy’s question.

I've been going crazy over this for two years now, I think I'm beginning to have paranoia. I don't have any experiences. How do I know if I'm gay? I really don't want to be. Help.

The response letter was huge. It went through medical arguments and encouraging stories, to listing local communities and tips of self-awareness. Harry stopped at the conclusion point, which was brief and not very helpful.

You won’t know if you are gay unless you do something about it, and even then, you could be just curious. Personally, I think that if a man goes to the extent of kissing another man, and desires to repeat it, then he has to be sexually attracted to men. Only you can tell for sure, though.

Harry hoped that the boy who had written the letter had figured it out already; Harry certainly hadn’t.

“Nox.”
Severus had a migraine. He silently wondered how it was even possible for plain physical agony to be so intense. He had never imagined that such a torture could be endured. Yet here was he, both conscious and in the middle of the splitting torture.

Able not only to think, but to observe the process and make calculations about it. The invisible wire around his skull was closing in with faint cracking noises. How much farther could it shrink? Since he used the last painkiller, he hadn't brewed more. Foolish, to think that one could live with a Potter without needing painkillers. He cracked his neck, wishing for death. His death. Dumbledore's death. Voldemort's.

Making a mental note of all the deaths he should take care of, he pushed the thought aside and coughed hard.

“Are you alright?” Potter was sitting on the sofa, one leg up at the table. Filthy brat. Was he alright? When Dumbledore offered him a chance to repent, he did it with no desire to ever meet Lily’s son in his life.

“My head might just explode.”

For when he did meet Lily’s son, it was Potter’s son, and there was nothing loveable, nothing interesting for Severus to see. The years passed and he didn’t stop being Potter’s son. His father’s revolting ghost kept hovering over his head, shadowing him with his features, his wit, his memory.

“Oh. Did you take a pain killer?”

“I must brew one.”

“Oh.”

Such verbal fluency.

Damned boy. He was the centre of attention since the first moment, and there was no person in Hogwarts that would be displeased by his disobedience or lack of manners. Except Severus. Severus had seen what others didn’t. And as ironic as it was, now he could see again, what others had never seen.

He was determined to despise the boy. To help him for Lily’s sake. Liking him had not been in the plan. Enjoying his company had not been in the plan. Waking up with Potter curled up against his chest had certainly not been in the plan.

“You don’t look like you can brew anything at the moment.”

“Because I can’t.”

And responding to these urges towards familiarity was absolutely unacceptable. Not only sinful, not only depraved – but absolutely, thoroughly, downright wrong.

It was the circumstances. Spending too much time with someone was bound to break the ice, and when combined with brain activities – he coughed again. His brain had no activity at that moment.

“Could I brew it for you?”
“No, be silent.”

Sharing the bed with James Potter’s son. Now, this was a secret he would carry to his grave. He allowed himself a moment to think of Draco and his new task.

He decided that if his headache didn't stop within the next ten minutes he would throw himself under the nearest car.

“I have aspirins.”

Severus glared. Or he tried to.

“Aspirins, you know. For headaches and such. Muggle medicine, but even Madame Pomfrey has it. I must have some in my trunk, I’m going to check.”

Right. Aspirins. He was about to beg Potter to leave him alone with a good dozen of them, but the boy had already fled upstairs.

When the clock read nine and Snape hadn’t barked from downstairs that dinner was ready, Harry descended on his own.

Snape was just getting up from the sofa to pick up a bottle from the table. His face was flushed and his hair damp.

"Snape?"

Snape looked at him as if he'd never seen him before. It was a look of surprise, or maybe disbelief. "I remember..." he said, "I remember how Dumbledore was telling me about the Sodding Hat and I thought it impossible that you’d end up in Gryffindor. You contradicted me.”

Harry gave him a confused look. “Excuse me?”

Snape closed his eyes as though concentrating. "I excuse you. Leave.”

Harry stepped closer and placed his palm on Snape’s forehead. It wasn’t fever. “How much did you drink?”

Ignoring his question, Snape took another gulp straight from the bottle. His chest heaved dangerously.

“If you're still here, not enough.”

“Right,” Harry said with a straight face as he snaked his hand under Snape’s and snatched the bottle away. It was rather empty – Snape leaned forward to take it back but Harry stepped away.

“Harry. Give it back.”

“You’re talking nonsense,” Harry muttered.

“Give it back, Harry, for God's sake!” He still made no motion of standing. He seemed to try out the word, trying to figure out how it sounded on his tongue. “Harry. Harry, Harry.”

Harry gulped a bile of daring sentiment that was stuck inside his throat; it pitifully landed between his lungs. “You must... stop drinking this. You have a problem.”
Snape got up, coughing into his palm again. "It runs in the family."

Harry stood still, trying to figure out what was happening. Snape couldn’t be that pissed. It had only been a couple of hours after all. What had happened?

He glanced over at the table and noticed it. The aspirin pin box laid open next to an empty glass and Snape’s wand.

“You mixed aspirins with alcohol, didn't you?”

Snape shook his head. “Don’t worry; I won’t kill myself just yet. Maybe next week,” Snape said as he fumbled his way to the staircase. When he reached it he glared upstairs as though it was the stairs’ fault that it had so many steps. Grunting to himself, he took hold of the wall and sighed.

“Hadn’t you taken aspirins before? I thought you had!”

Snape looked at him as if he were dumb. “I’m a Master Potion, Potter,” he explained. “Why would I need it?”

Harry nodded once. “Um. Okay. Listen, you shouldn’t have mixed them with alcohol. You’re a bit drunk at the moment.”

Snape scratched the wall in an attempt to hold himself up. “And what are you going to do about it, hm? Want to know when I had my first drink? It’s an interesting story. Father had beaten the shit out of–”

He didn’t want to hear that. “No, you listen. You’re not well.”

Harry watched him as he attempted to climb up the stairs and stumbled over the first step before sitting down. That struck Snape as hilarious, for he broke into laughter.

And once he began, he couldn’t stop. He laughed until he was gasping for breath, shaking his head. He tried to move and stand up, swaying like he was following his vision’s spinning around the room. He tilted violently and he almost fell again, still grunting with laughter.

“I never get drunk – God - so fucking much.”

That was enough. Harry caught him, dragging him up to his feet. He placed Snape’s arm around his shoulders and steadied him.

“Snape, are you listening?”

“I’m not deaf.”

“Right. Come on.”

“No. You're lying.”

Snape’s breath smelled heavily of whiskey, and he was so close that Harry feared he might get drunk too. “Lying about what?”

Snape just looked at him, trying hard to focus his eyes. “You were there.”

Harry blinked. “I’m taking you back to your room, can you walk?

“I’m not crippled,” he snapped defensively.
He carried him to his bedroom carefully, Snape’s moves hindering rather than helping. The shoulder that was not being supported on Harry had sagged downwards, and his weight kept slithering through Harry’s grip on his arm.

Snape struggled, but Harry ignored him. This would be so much funnier if Ron was here. Only the pranks they could do...

“Be cooperative now.”

“Sod off.”

If a fully conscious and alert Snape could be bitter and stubborn, a drunk one was just impossible to get on with. Lifting Snape’s hand from his shoulders, he turned around to steady him before helping him to the bed. It didn’t work right.

Snape got hold of his shoulders and lost his balance at once. Harry fell on the bed and was immediately covered by Snape’s unconscious body.

“Mph.”

Not unconscious. Harry’s head sagged in the pillow as he stared up the ceiling. Snape shifted a little bit and stayed there.

Harry's life sucked.

And breathing was becoming more and more difficult as the seconds went by. A strand of dark hair fell on Harry's cheek. Was the man even breathing? His nose must have been buried into the pillow.

“Snape?”

Snape grunted in acknowledgment.

He placed his palms against Snape’s shoulders and pushed. “You’re suffocating me.” He pushed harder. How heavy was he exactly? He looked too thin to weigh that much.

With another firm push he rolled him over on his back and Harry sat back. Snape inhaled deeply, and it occurred to Harry that he hadn’t been able to breathe for some time.

Snape weakly tugged at his own coat’s collar. “Suffocating,” he agreed before bursting into low laughter. Pushing his hand away, Harry undid the first buttons of his coat and inner shirt. “That’ll do,” he said at last, but Snape had closed his eyes again.

“Snape?”

That was it; he had passed out. Harry rubbed his palms on his thighs, not knowing what to do next. Snape choked again and Harry poked him on the head.

“Snape!”

“Yes.”

“Should I owl Dumbledore?”

Something was funny about this question too, as it appeared, because Snape risked another series of coughing to express his laughter.
He couldn’t leave him like that. Sleep here again – no, Snape would be furious. It was Harry's fault. He should have warned him about drinking.

Maybe he should lift his head a little, just to make sure that he was going to be alright. Just that, and then he’d live. Still sitting next to him, he leaned over him to catch the pillow and slide it under his head. Snape showed his appreciation with a sigh of relief and nothing else. Well. He should leave. He should – Snape’s eyes snapped open.

Too close. He was too close. It occurred to him that he should back up now, and yet he couldn’t keep himself from staring – the black eyes, the parted lips, the tears of laughter that made the long eyelashes stick together. He stayed still as the darkness poured out of those eyes and seemed to fill the room and drown him in it.

It was a wonder, if Snape could understand who he was looking at - if his eyesight was blurred or steady – but he observed Harry’s face slowly, as though he had all the time in the world to do just that. Every second seemed to announce its departure with a soundless heaviness that lasted excruciatingly long. His lips could almost brush the skin –

Snape raised a hand, too certain, too quietly, and placed it on the back of Harry’s neck. And Harry was too startled to do anything, so he didn’t shift, or move, or speak, and he wanted to lick his lips but didn’t dare take his tongue out just now. Then Snape grasped him fiercely, as though a sudden sobriety had struck him - and Harry locked his eyes with Snape’s until both of them closed them together, slowly.

Harry leaned down.

Their lips barely met, and as Harry sampled the touch for a second, he couldn’t tell if this impossible emotion inside his chest had just spurted, or if it was something perpetual, something that knew how to hide all along but was aching alive and confident all the same. At first, the brush was so soft that he thought he had imagined it.

Once he parted his lips, Snape’s tongue attacked him so deeply that he didn’t know who was breathing for whom, but his mouth and tongue tasted like warm honey and fire water. It wasn’t exactly harsh; it was more like a whisper than a sound, more like the memory of a kiss than a real one, careful and measured and yet desperate.

A strong, gut-wrenching terror kicked into his stomach, but he ignored it defiantly as he slid into mindlessness, and all he felt was skin and teeth and wetness, and all he heard was their breathing, and a soft moan that had to be his own.

It ended too soon. Their lips parted as plainly as they had met, and Snape looked up at him for another long second before drifting to sleep. The hand on his neck crept on the sheets and stayed there.

Harry’s jeans were suddenly too tight. He allowed himself a minute of shock, and then a few more seconds of smiling like the idiot Snape always accused him of being.

Then he got up, promising himself that the panic would come later. He tucked Snape with a blanket and loosened another button on his shirt just in case, before fleeing to his room.

He suddenly knew what was missing with Cho.

Severus woke up in the middle of the night, sliding off his coat to sink better into the comfort of his bed. The window curtains had been pulled open – how absurd, he never opened the curtains – and
he knew that he should remember something - something should have frightened him to his death by now.

The moon looked like melted mozzarella to his bleary vision. Was he tired, intoxicated and in love? Or was he sober, asleep, and alone? His lips tingled with something – like the memory of a nice kiss, but prostitutes never kissed him, and the curtains were never opened.

He couldn’t tell whether he should stick to his awakening, or just let this comforting sensation lull him in sweet oblivion. One thing was for sure, there had been pain in him, too much pain, and now that pain had left with the suddenness of lighting.

The mozzarella cheese was swallowed wholly by a thick cloud of smoke, and it was surely the smoke of a well baked Italian pizza, with grilled ham and fresh warm tomato on top. He sniffed the air in expectation, and almost smelled it there, with the crust yeast and the peppers and the garlic pork and the happiness.

Oh, the happiness.
Wisdom: Answers

It had been coming to this since 1981. Dumbledore testified for him the first time, and the governor had believed him; severe crimes had been confessed and erased from his record in a single afternoon, marked as false accusations made by his enemies.

There would be less people in this trial, assuredly. Perhaps a colleague or two; Sibyll, to inform him of his grim upcoming future and offer him a shoulder to cry on; Pomfrey, to hand him over the necessary med kit and her vague support.

A random Ministry Healer too, most likely, to observe the damage inflicted on poor Harry's psyche after his wicked professor molested him. And that would be all.

He should ask Bellatrix for advice. A few decades in Azkaban couldn't be much worse than this anyway. He’d keep his mouth shut for the best part of the day. He'd befriend his inmates. He’d contact the right people; avoid the guards, accept the Dementors, and keep a safe distance from gangs until he created one of his own. And he'd not drop the soap.

Definitely not drop the soap.

As he stormed into the hallway, his robe billowing dramatically behind him, he wondered if there was any way he could tell Dumbledore without losing his trust forever. Maybe a written confession. An extended apology. His head was spinning mercilessly. He was aware of the tempting aspirins awaiting him just a floor away, offering themselves for his relief, promising to eliminate the stabbing pain... but no. He’d better die.

Many people had attempted to trap him in unfortunate situations in the past. In rare occasions, some of them had succeeded. He then had to face harsh consequences, often unimaginable. Still, nothing that couldn't be fixed.

Until now.

Falling into a trap created by Harry bloody Potter wasn’t in the plan. He didn’t remember it to be, when he agreed to Dumbledore’s wishes, he didn’t consider it possible when Potter was sorted into Gryffindor, accusing himself a saint. This was new.

Slamming the boy's door open, he raised his wand only to realise that torturing the boy would only worsen the problem. Yet the more he told himself to calm down, the more he wanted to kill him.

“Harry Potter.”

As soon as he appeared into sight, Potter threw his book aside and stood up. His lower lip was too red on a particular spot. Bugger all. His life was over.

“What have you done? Answer me!”

“Sir. You – you were very drunk. I think - you mixed aspirins with alcohol. I forgot to tell you that you shouldn’t.” His tone was far from apologetic. He looked up at him unsure, as though struggling to figure out something perplexed.

And all of a sudden, and with only probable purpose to drive him mad, Potter had miraculously remembered his manners. “It is sir now, isn’t it?”
He was about to scold him for the hideous look of confusion that seemed to have taken over his face when Potter took a step back. “Sir?”

“Sir?” Severus repeated in a hiss. “What is wrong with you?” he added, his voice louder. “Speak up, why the hell would you-”

"Sir, I..." "No,” he cut him short. "No explanations. Not even one. I told you you've been interpreting my generosity the wrong way and yet you still ignored my warnings to stay away. What you ventured to do upon me was low, too low even for your blessed father and his abominable gang, too low even for all the Gryffindor little cretins put together and forced to do their worst."

"I-"

"No talking. And all these questions - about Dumbledore’s life - I see now, how your little malfunctioning mind is simply completely broken, isn't it?" Severus stepped closer, making an effort to remind himself that this would get much worse if he hit the boy now. "Oh, but how he wanted to. "HE SHOULD HAVE KILLED YOU!" Severus yelled at last, beyond control. "HE SHOULD HAVE KILLED YOU WHEN HE COULD, OH YOU'RE WORSE THAN HIM, SO MUCH MORE TWISTED -"

Potter all but tilted his head. “You don't mean that.”

And now he was testing his patience by playing dumb. Severus took a very slow calming breath. Don’t hit him. You’re better than that. “You drugged me. You attacked me. Your father would be proud.”

“My f... no. No, what are you talking about? Drugged you? I didn’t know you were going to drink whiskey or whatever that thing was, you were supposed to know better than mixing pills with it. You are the Potions Master here, so don’t blame me!”

“Should I not blame you for assaulting me either, then?” he hissed.

“I didn't assault you,” Potter said defensively.

Severus opened his mouth, but nothing came out. That was it. He was done with Potters. That was enough. "You have ten minutes to pack your belongings and get out of my house. If you are still here after that I'll burn everything you possess, the bird included.”

Potter glared. “You're kicking me out?”

"Gladly so."

"Because we kissed.”

This was an ordeal. A tribulation sent from Hell to give him an idea of what damnation was going to taste like.

“We didn’t kiss, you moron,” he said. "I was out of my mind, severely intoxicated, and had no idea who you were!”

And inter alia, he had to suffer Potter’s wounded look too, before quickly switching to stubborn. The boy dared be hurt about it. The implication of Potter preferring him to be aware of whom he was kissing brought another torturous stab above his right eye.
“You knew it was me. You called me by my name, so stop pretend –”

“Shut it,” he hissed back. Suffering from a hangover that hadn’t completely erased the memories of shame wasn’t a helpful company in this battle either.

“Well I’m not a child anymore so stop treating me like that!”

"A child? You took me wrong; I have ceased to believe anything so noble about your person long ago. You are a ruthless, unprincipled pathetic faggot who cannot control himself over attacking someone at first chance, even if that means to take advantage of someone twice his age.”

Fuck Bellatrix. He’d ask Dolohov. A little voice in the back of his head protested that the best way of dealing with prison would be to drop the soap on purpose, become someone’s bitch and gain protection for the best part of the next decade.

Potter’s eyes narrowed. “If you’re going to be angry because you liked it, be angry with yourself. You kissed me back, you know. And you do know.”

He had most certainly not. His fingers twitched at the expectation of a slap he wouldn’t deliver. “You will pay for this,” he said stupidly.

The boy laughed. ‘Does ‘No, it doesn't bother me, it does not concern me,’ remind you anything? Or was it all lies?’

Severus stared. “It was lies. And from now on, you are expelled from all my classes. Pity that without them you can't be an Auror.”

It was wonderful to see that arrogant smile melt into terror. "You can't."

Watch me. He turned to leave.

"No, wait. Wait. You can't. It was a mistake, come on. I... you... you wanted it too, damn you, you can't punish me!” he shouted. "Will you just listen to me?"

Looking at the hallway in front of him, it was easier for Severus to keep his voice steady. “I was unwell, what’s your excuse?”

“What makes you think I’m going to hide behind an excuse?”

Touché.

He took a breath, to deliver his poison with calmness. “You should have been in Slytherin, but it appears that you are too vile even for the Dark Lord's house.”

“Well maybe I am, but you’re an arsehole.”

Severus turned. He took out his wand. "Repeat that."

Potter’s shoulders slumped as frustration crinkled his eyes and he shut them. He offered himself a moment of regaining control and passed his hand through his hair; Severus found himself traitorously glaring at the bitten lips again. He had done that. And no one would ever believe the truth. They’d say he had assaulted a student, and that’s where his life would end. It was his fault; blaming Potter was far easier though.

“Repeat it.”
“Leave it, Snape,” Potter muttered. When he strode out of the room, and when Severus heard the bathroom door slamming close, he punched the wall with his fist.

Yes, do go and weep like a snotty baby, and do suck on your thumb while you think about life’s unfairness, he thought of shouting. He decided against it.

Hours later, Severus became aware of a thudding noise that derived from the world outside his head. Cautiously opening one eye, he watched Potter dragging his trunk down the stairs and pulling it defiantly to the outdoor.

“Do you care to inform me of what in Merlin’s name are you doing now?” Severus asked. It was nearly midnight already; Potter had disappeared from sight the entire day - a good decision for both of them, surprisingly.

“I’m leaving,” Potter informed him.

“I thought you wanted me to listen to you.”

“Well, not anymore. See you in September.”

“And where are you going, pray tell?”

He shrugged, looking away. “I don’t know. At Ron’s.”

“You can’t apparate.”

“At some motel.”

“You don’t have any money.”

“I’ll be a kosher, then.”

Severus smirked. “What are you talking about?”

“I don’t need you, or your home, or your looking at me like I... like you hate me so much. Why live with someone who hates me? I’ll be a kosher.”

“You’ll be be Jewish food?”

He shook his head confidently. “Kosher, you know. I’ll be homeless.”

Despite himself, Severus laughed. “That’s clochard.”

“Even better.” Potter took hold of the doorknob, and Severus approached him, pushing his hand away and closing the door again. If only he could get rid of Harry Potter that easily.

“You’re not going anywhere. Sit down. We’re going to talk.”

Potter was sitting on one end of the sofa and Severus on the other, the silence clapping its presence into a painfully audible announcement. The rain had struck again, if only to twist the mood even more.

The boy glared fixedly at his fingers, clutched tightly around a hot cup of chocolate. Severus had one into his own hands as well, dark brown and steaming.
“After this conversation is over, we will never touch on this subject again.”

“Fine.”

“I expect you to move over this unspeakable accident, then, and not torture yourself too much cogitating about it. If you decide however to inform the Headmaster, I am ready to take responsibility of what happened.” He took a breath. “Still, it would be preferable if you didn’t.”

It was unbelievable that he had to beg Potter for his reputation. For his job. Despite the hell he was going through, he had to remain at Hogwarts. Without Dumbledore’s protection he was dead.

That with Dumbledore’s protection he was usually worse things than dead was entirely another matter.

Had the boy even grasped the severity of the danger?

Potter snorted. “I won’t tell anyone.”

Definitely not. And now he was chewing on his lip again, reddening that dreadful spot that Severus had been trying to forget since morning.

“Anything else you'd like to add?” he said impatiently.

“Yes.” Potter chewed on his lip some more, and after a quick glance at Severus he blinked at his hot chocolate. “I’m gay.”

Professor Snape molested me, I’m gay now.

So, being dead it was. “Don’t be stupid,” he said alarmed. "You're not.”

“I knew I was before that.”

Ah. So he was just making sure. He carefully dug through the forgotten details of his past, desperate to discover some clue of what he might have done so terribly wrong to deserve this.

“And you reached this assumption, how exactly?”

A wild blush attacked his cheeks and he looked up, panicked.

“Don’t answer that, I withdraw the question.”

His vow to protect Potter was about hardihood rather than predestination. The obstacles were getting harder and harder to pass through. How had he been dragged into this? He should have known better than let anyone embarrass him so personally. Potters did tend to cross these lines, of course.

As for this... this was the kind of conversation that benefited solely the one who had nothing to lose by talking. He had to put an end to it. Still, he reminded himself that convincing the boy to keep his mouth shut was wiser than kicking him out.

Just after one more question. Your curiosity will be the end of you. “It wouldn’t happen for this… discovery of yours to have occurred because of our cohabitation, would it?”

Say no.

Like a good boy, for fuck’s fucking buggering sake. Say no.
Potter swallowed. And then he chuckled. “You’re trying to ask if I fancy you.”

Ah. “I withdraw that question too.”

“Does it make you uncomfortable?”

No, it made him feel perfectly normal. The normality of it was so great that he could almost feel the bones of a particular dead man rising from his grave to travel all the way from Godric’s Hollow and sodomise him with his skull for daring touch his son.

He was aware of himself laughing, and he absently raised his hand to ease Potter’s confusion. If only he was as depraved as to take Potter to his bed! It would be his upmost retribution, his finest repayment to kick James back, and in the spunk that had spurted out of his very balls, precisely. Then, once Severus died, he’d let him know. I made a queer out of your only son. Beat that.

It occurred to him that taking Harry Potter to his bed shouldn’t sound like a good plan, despite the advantages. Fuck. The alcohol must have still been running into his bloodstream.

“What about you?” Potter asked. “You never liked a man?”

It was amazing how casually the question was phrased. I do like a man, which happens to be you. Your turn now, Professor! More aspirins would do. All of them would do. The absence of whiskey in his reach was making this entirely too real. Play along. Keep him calm unless you want Albus to destroy you.

“No, never.”

"A woman? Besides, you know."

Not really. And he never had sexual thoughts about Lily either, come to think of it. At first he was too shy to think of her improperly, and later on – well, she was dead. “This is becoming personal.”

“Then you can’t know for sure.”

The brat. He silently promised himself that if Potter kept this up he would politely escort him to the outdoor himself.

“For God’s sake, quit smiling like that or I’ll hex you.”

Potter hid his grin behind his cup, and it suddenly occurred to him that the boy wasn’t wearing shoes at all.

I’m leaving. See you in September.

Fool. Severus was a fool.

“I bet you’re flattered,” Potter said, his gaze intense.

Flattered, yes. Because the only person who ever fancied him was a sixteen year old boy that was experiencing puberty. “Could you be wrong about it?” he asked instead.

As Potter shook his head negatively, Severus watched his last strand of hope escape his chest and leave the room daintily. His consciousness protested against raising a hand and waving at it his last goodbye. This was certainly not going to solve itself within the next hour, then.

“Wrong... I don’t know, can I kiss you again?”
Severus glared.

The boy snorted. “I’m sorry. No, I don’t think I’m wrong, I’ve been thinking about it.”

He’d been thinking about it. Merlin knew what he had been thinking about. And he certainly didn’t want to know any of it. Let the dirty details’ interpretation for another therapist.

“It does make you uncomfortable.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

Gods. He _was_ a child. “What are you being sorry for exactly, Potter?”

Potter shrugged, but didn’t reply. “Well, you’ll get rid of me in a week, so you don’t have to worry. Sir.”

“Does anyone else know?”

Potter squirmed in his seat. “No, I haven’t told anyone. I mean, I’ve only been thinking about it quite recently.”

Too recently, Severus was afraid. “I see.”

This was surreal. He felt positively sure that if Voldemort jumped out of Potter’s head and started clapping his fingers and singing God Save the Queen, Severus would stand up and dance.

“I don’t think I’m going to. Ron would be furious.”

“Then I suggest you live your life as _Ron_ commands.”

Potter spat some chocolate on his shirt. No jacket on either. _Fool Severus._

“It’s not that, he’s just – you know, he’s the first friend I made in Hogwarts. I can’t even think of losing him.”

“You’re being absurd.” Then, “I suppose it is clear that should a conversation about this... situation of yours ever occur with your friends, my person would stay entirely out of it, yes?”

“Of course, what could I tell them? That I kissed Snape?”

Of course not. Unless Potter wanted them traumatised for life, this was a tale better left untold.

Potter eyed him worryingly. “You’re not going to use this against me, are you? Are you going to tell anyone? Why would you want me to tell my friends? So I’m left alone?”

He was already alone. “Do whatever you want,” he decided. Why did he even bother? This wasn’t his problem. “There are two types of secrets one should be aware of. The kind one wants to keep in, and the kind one doesn’t dare to let out.”

“And the kind one must keep in while letting out something else,” Potter added, and Severus watched his gaze fall from his face to his left arm.

“Yes. That too.”
“When you were born, I swore to murder your father.”

Harry considered that. “Oh.”

“I went to your home and hid behind a bush. When he got out, he was holding you wrapped in an orange blanket, and was babbling nonsense to you. You seemed brighter than him, honestly.”

Almost jealous that he couldn’t recall that memory, Harry snorted. “Shut up.”

“I couldn’t do it. Your mother came out in the yard too, and she hugged him –” Snape shut his eyes tightly, then opened them again, “and she was happy. I’d never understand it, never accept it – but she was happy. It was all that mattered.”

“You were a Death Eater.”

“Yes.”

“Did you…. Did you think that Muggles were filthy? Like all the Death Eaters think?”

“I thought them inferior. They are, in many ways.”

“What do you think of them now?”

Snape let a long moment pass quietly before he answered. “They are inferior.”

“But you don’t hate them anymore.” Harry held his breath.

“Hate them... Certainly not more than I hate wizards.”

Harry didn’t know how to respond to this. Snape never had a loving family, but then again, neither did Harry. “All my life I thought people who believed in magic were freaks. This is what they had told me to believe, so I believed it.”

“I can imagine,” Snape said nonchalantly.

Every silence was longer than the last one. What had his father been telling him when Harry was a baby? Perhaps that he’d teach him how to ride a broom when he’d grow up, or that they’d have great fun with Sirius and Remus once he got a little older. He faintly smiled at the mental picture of his dad throwing him the quaffle.

Would his dad be better than him in Quidditch? Would he let him win on purpose his first game, in the backyard? Would his mum shout at him, perhaps because they broke a window, or because they were late for dinner? How would it be to have experienced all these things? How different was he from Ron, Hermione, how much did they really know him and what he had gone through before his Hogwarts letter came?

“Have you had any visions lately?” asked Snape. Harry furrowed his brows. Of course, in real life the questions were always like this one. Snape continued. “Your scar is quite a legend among... people. It is said that you're able to feel it when he’s... in action.”

“And when he’s happy, and when he’s furious, and when he’s just troubled over something. I just learn to ignore it.”

Snape exhaled sharply. “You should not ignore it. You should fight it. Otherwise you’re pulling open doors for the Dark Lord that would take him years to break down on his own. You’re inviting him in.”
And what did it matter? They’d have to battle over their lives anyway, and only one of them would come out of it alive. He wasn’t going to avoid it, so why postpone it? It wouldn’t do to believe in a normal life or in a life at all, before this battle happened. It would be harder to go to Voldemort if he had things to live for left behind.

“The visions have stopped though,” Harry insisted.

“It could be temporary. You are aware that they might return once his powers are fully restored, are you not? The fact that he has now felt your fear has weakened him, but also enlightened him about your capacity to experience it and be affected by it.”

“That’s stupid. He must have felt fear before. He has been human too.”

The air was suddenly too thin for this conversation. He didn’t want to talk more about Voldemort. He emptied his cup with a last gulp. Over the last hour it had gone cold and light inside his hands, and as he placed it to the table it clacked softly.

“How did Dumbledore tell you? That he’s, you know. Gay.” It felt bizarre that Dumbledore could even have a sexual orientation.

Snape rolled his head towards him, his hair fallen back on the sofa cushions. He gave him a wary look and then he returned his focus on the ceiling. “That’s not a story for you to know.”

Why not? “Come on, tell me.”

“Potter.”

“I won’t tell.”

“That’s not the point.”

How did people come out? What did they say? How were they even sure that it wasn’t just a phase, or a mistake, or some curse or potion forced upon them? It was impossible for one to be sure. What if he told his friends and then he changed his mind? They’d never believe him. For all he knew he could be just making this up to kill his time. Or not.

It was difficult. He had to know what Dumbledore did. After all, he was the cleverest wizard alive. However he had done it, it had to be the right way. “I need to know.”

“Do you think I’d have survived so long in my circle if I spilled my knowledge whenever someone pressed the matters? I’m not going to tell you, boy.”


“Your bed,” Snape snapped. “I mean,” he added with a deep breath, “go to your bed, then.”

“Your head is still killing you, isn’t it?” Harry asked.

Snape arched his eyebrows and snorted, although his eyes were closed. “Don’t ask.”

“Would you like –”

“Careful, Potter.”

“No then,” Harry mumbled. He almost smiled. “Better not.”
Wisdom: Epilogue

“Have you packed?”

“I have,” Potter said. “Just give me a couple of minutes, there's something I need to do.”

“Now?”

“A minute.”

“Be quick.”

Severus Evanesco-ed the milk, the eggs, and whatever meat and vegetables had been left in the fridge. Opening the cabinet, he checked the plates, the glasses, and made sure that everything was in place. Just before leaving the kitchen, he stared fixedly at the battered biscuit box, and scowled at it before vanishing it too.

The living room was alright, or at least it seemed so. He closed the shutters, sliding the rusty locks in place and savouring the sight of the scourified carpet, the bottles of liquor he wasn’t allowed to bring to school, and the old sofa, with its absence of dustiness and the forming concavity on one end – mark of well-used cushions.

“I'm ready,” Harry said from the stairs. “Apparation?”

“No, walking. And then apparation.”

“It’s raining again,” Potter protested, making a face.

“Then you can drop out of school until raining stops.” Which would probably take forever in this hell of a place. Well; Potter hadn’t been the brightest star in Hogwarts anyway. “I’m leaving.”

“Hey!” Potter stumbled behind him, hopping on one foot as he struggled to shove the other into a shoe. “Give me a – what the – minute, ouch. Fuck.”

Severus rolled his eyes, and Potter surrendered and bended on one knee to solve the mazy enigma that was how to wear a shoe. When he succeeded, he stood up quite proud of himself.

“Really, Potter.”

“What?” Potter's cheeks were flushed. There was mockery in his eyes.

“You are absolutely childish.”

"Thanks." It wasn’t a compliment. Apparently Potter took it as one.

Never mind. In a few hours the boy was going to be someone else’s trouble.

“Have you got all your belongings?”

“I think so.”

“Your ridiculous Muggle clothing?”

“Ahah.”
“Think again, Potter. We’re not coming back anytime soon.”

Potter grinned. “That means that we are coming back?”

“I am,” Severus corrected strictly. “You most likely, and most hopefully, will never see this place again.”

It was amazing how easy had become to read Potter; how predictable he was when Severus used the right words. The guilt that had hit home had no reason to be there. He did most certainly not prefer a grinning Potter than a grim one. In fact, he preferred no Potter at all.

“Yeah. Who knows how next summer’s going to be like.” His voice carried an annoyed tone, and Severus couldn’t quite put his finger on it.

“For you?”

“For me,” Potter said, looking at his shoes as he swung his backpack onto his shoulders, “For you. For Dumbledore.”

“The only thing you should be worrying about, Potter, is the utter flop that our lessons have been.”

“Nah. I'll let you worry about that, thanks. Does Dumbledore know you drink?”

The boy did have talents, after all. “My sincere apologies for depriving you of the pleasure of ratting me out, but I do not drink where I teach. And you should certainly not be discussing this on my doorstep.”


“Move, now, I want to lock the door.”

“Fine. While you should thank me for ignoring every bitter thing you said, let alone having Bellatrix Lestrange in your house –”

“I do thank you from the depths of my heart for ignoring it in the safety of my warded walls so you can bring it up right out of them. Step aside.”

Severus locked, muttering the protection charms under his breath.

“All the things I bring up with you,” Potter whispered, as though that would make any difference, “the prophecy, my parents, the war... it's because Dumbledore is not going to tell me anything.”

Ah. Now Severus was the good one. How charming. “And I’m not either. Now hold your tongue Mister Potter and follow me.”

“Mister Potter,” he mocked. “That’s stupid.”

“That's stupid, sir,” he corrected. He wasn’t planning on having an unrestrained Potter obstruct his professional role in school with his audacity. He had allowed the boy too much freedom already. “And it’s your name, I am afraid. I am not to blame if it’s stupid, as you put it.”

Despite his anger, Potter snorted. His negative sentiments were always drifting away too quickly.

“How many points are you going to take from Gryffindor once we get back?” Potter asked, a faint smile on his face. Severus' umbrella wasn't nearly as large as it should. It wasn't the right place to use magic though.
“Zero. I'll wait for your house to reach a hundred, then I'll take all of them.” It was his old tactic, really, and he was only spilling it out because Potter wasn’t going to believe him anyway.

“That’s your old tactic. I meant how many you were going to take until you forgive yourself for letting me into your house,” he said.

Severus stared.

Potter laughed.

Harry had stolen many times in his life, and all of them were insignificant. When he was little, he used to steal food from the Dursleys because they wouldn’t give to him anything but leftovers, and sometimes he’d steal Dudley’s toys too. Once, and only once, he stole from the market in Little Whinging as well, hiding a delicious large chocolate inside his pants.

He’d stolen from the grocery shop of Spinner’s End too, and with Ron’s assistance he had copied an assignment from a Ravenclaw girl when he was thirteen.

But none of his stolen items were as unreasonable as Severus Snape’s silk black scarf. He folded it carefully inside a piled Gryffindor cloak and shoved it into his trunk. He didn’t know why he did it, and he usually felt bad for stealing when the reason wasn’t important enough. Checking the room for the last time, he swallowed and descended.

“I’m ready,” he said, and tried hard to kick away the certainty that he was going to miss this.

“No, walking. And then apparation.”

He didn’t know why he stole the scarf with the strong scent of thick ink and Snape. He only knew that this scent was somehow soothing him, and that was enough.

*End of Part One*
Dumbledore nodded as Severus finished his detailed report on Potter’s Occlumency failures.

“I see,” he said.

“What...” asked Snape, without hesitation, "what am I supposed to do now for my own protection? Merlin knows how much I’ve tried. I used all my techniques, and not just once. He won’t learn.”

“Time will show, Severus... Time will show.”

Time was something they did not have. Dumbledore knew this too, but insisted on ignoring all the dangers until proven necessary to face them bare handed. If they were to put their faith in Potter, they had to be at least a little more realistic about their expectations.

"He knows secrets," Severus reminded him. "He was asking questions. He has memories of himself asking me about Lily." He sounded furious. He could do nothing about it.

Dumbledore smiled. "What do you suggest?"

"Obliviation," he said strictly. He was prepared for this.

For Dumbledore's laughter, however, he wasn't. "Ah... you seem to forget you're not talking to your old master, sometimes." Severus almost told him that he wasn't aware he had a new one. "I kept your secret all these years, as I promised. I intended to take it to my grave. Surprising, that it slipped out of you in the end."

"He wasn't supposed to see those memories. I have every right to take them back."

"Hm." It was that expression on Dumbledore's face, that would piss Severus off more than anything. The one that implied that he was considering Severus' words. While he clearly wasn't. "Obliviation is a crime, is it not, Severus?"

"Yes, but -"

"I'm glad we agree, then."

The rage inside him fumed. Lily was his. Those memories belonged to him only. The boy had no right to know. His mind was vulnerable and constantly exposed to the Dark Lord. And there'd be no way to escape death if the Dark Lord knew Severus' true loyalty.

Dumbledore stared at him with an intense glare Severus knew too well. His expression was relaxed but unsettling all the same.

"Trying to read my mind, Headmaster?" he thought. "Not even he has managed to succeed at that, after all these years,” he said.

It wouldn’t do to inform Dumbledore that he kept his back to him as much as he did to the Dark Lord. Still, the monster that loyalty was had curled around him like a snake with a head on each end, and he’d surrender to his asphyxiation long before he decided to trust one end more than the other.

“Forgive me, Severus. It’s an old habit of a tired man, I suppose.” He suspected that the heads shared the same determination too. “It was a risk to have Harry outside the wards of his home for so long. I was hoping for the best, only.”
“If he hadn’t broken into my past he wouldn’t have been in need of this assistance in the first place,”
Severus insisted. “And still, he hasn’t learned anything. His mind is as thick as it’s always been, only
now it has my life in it as well.”

Dumbledore seemed thoughtful, but didn’t blame Potter as he should. “Voldemort will think twice
before searching into Harry’s mind again, that’s for sure. The last time cost him strength and magic;
the two most valuable things he has.”

Severus didn’t have to push. Dumbledore wanted him alive as much as Severus wanted himself to
live. The fact that he had trouble believing that he could be saved at all could wait.

“Is there anything else you believe I should be aware of?”

Severus shook his head a little too quickly. There was certainly nothing else that Dumbledore
should be aware of.

“No, Headmaster, that is all.”

The blue eyes sparkled curiously, and kept studying Severus’ face with what seemed to be
enjoyment. Severus found himself torn between goggling his own eyes in challenging stubbornness
and punching Dumbledore in the face.

“What?” he snapped eventually. This was getting old. “With all respect, I have a schedule to prepare.
I would like to be excused now.”

"Not yet."

Severus sighed. "I've told you everything you need to know." Should he go through their nutrition
routine as well?

“Have you?” chanted Dumbledore. How was this the most powerful wizard in the world? And more
precisely, why? “I was under the impression that inappropriate intimacy between my teachers and
students is, in fact, something I need to know, when I rule a school.”

*Bugger. Fine. Fuck. Kill me now.*

Of all the right things that battled on the tip of his tongue to be heard, like, *what the boy wants
concerns no one but himself, for certainly I do not want anything from him, and, the only thing that I
can think of me growing towards him is utter repulse*, his mind chose the most sorry one to blurt out.

“He talked.” *Bravo. You might as well slap a CHILD MOLESTER sticker on your forehead and
parade around the castle for the entire world to see.*

“Severus…”

“He garbled the truth, whatever he told you. Your precious boy intoxicated me so he could make a
quick check on his sexuality on my expense. I assure you that he did regret it.”

He did not, but it didn’t matter. If Dumbledore assumed that Potter had been already punished
accordingly, he would save him a precious amount of time. However, something was telling him that
this was not where Dumbledore was planning on directing this conversation.

“You claim that he intoxicated you?” Dumbledore looked like he was almost enjoying this. Severus
didn’t. At all.
He had. Intoxicated. Him.

Damn. It did sound stupid when said aloud. He had been worrying that it would, but his common sense had reassured him that he was not going to speak of this aloud in this lifetime anyway.

Obviously, he had been wrong. Thank Gryffindors for digging out all the wrong secrets.

“I had certainly not drunk that much. I assure you I can control myself. It was his fault.”

“That you didn’t control yourself?”

What kind of game was this? And why had the boy talked? He should insist that they bring him here to see if he'd still have the nerve to blame Severus.

Instead, he grunted. “What did he tell you?” He passed a hand through his hair. "I swear, if he lied..."

"What he told me, is between him and me. And what you tell me is between me and you. Tell me what happened."

"Nothing happened! I was home; I had every right to relax. Do you think it was easy for me, spending every living moment with him? Having to look at his face again and again? I have nothing to apologise for.” Now, that was better. It occurred to him that the more he talked the more it sounded like he was apologising. Dumbledore didn't respond, and after a moment Severus felt that the silence was working against him. "He kissed me. I was too drunk to understand what was happening. The next morning I told him to get out and get lost. The only reason I didn't kick him out right then and there was you.” Feeling the weight eventually lifting off his chest, Severus could only wait for his fate to be decided.

"Did he attempt it again, after that incident?"

Severus lifted his gaze. "He wouldn't dare."

Dumbledore nodded. He seemed skeptical for a while and Severus preferred to stare at the floor as the silence became longer and longer. "I did everything you asked of me," he added eventually. It was humiliating, having to remind Dumbledore that he was loyal. Even now, after everything, he was still being questioned.

"And I hope you will continue doing so. For her, yes?"

"Yes."

“What you did for me this summer was precious. I have never doubted you. I can only think about Harry, now, however."

Dumbledore's tone was conversational; his words weren't. Severus knew the signs.

"What about him?"

"Don't you get it, Severus? He's young. Confused. Intrigued, perhaps."

_How can you say that?_ A voice in Severus' head spat. Another one whispered that if he wanted to get out of this idiotic situation he had to be docile.

"I hate to break it to you, Headmaster, but Harry Potter isn't the first teenager to break through to this world nor the first one to be intrigued or confused. I fail to see how these undeniably shattering
"They have not. And this is why it is time for you to distance yourself from Harry now. It would be preferable if you kept your interactions outside class to the minimum, for the time being. As you can barely stand the boy, I can imagine you'll agree.'

Of all the things that had annoyed him in the past within this office, this had to be the top one. Was this a punishment? Had Dumbledore imagined that he wanted to be near the boy? Did he think, in that conspiring brain of his, that Severus would be hurt if his interactions with Potter stopped?

"And what if I don't?"

Dumbledore smiled, still studying Severus’ face. “Do you want to fight against me, Severus?”

“This is insane.” *Protect him, but keep on hating him. Guard him, but don’t like him. Obey, but don’t ask.* His thoughts were interrupted by a mental punch in his gut before they reached the *see but don’t touch* part. “No, not insane,” he corrected. “It's outrageous. You can’t believe that I would be that kind of person or that I’d betray you like that.”

Bullshit. He’d been worse and he’d betrayed more important people.

Dumbledore looked down. He did believe it. After everything Severus had done, his life depended on a blasted kiss. Fuck punishments. He was going to strangle Potter.

“I do trust you, Severus.” *But?* “But this is entirely different. It is essential for Harry to remain unharmed. I do not want him damaged, Severus, as I would not want any other student to be in such trouble.”

If this was the nice to way to say that Severus had damaged an underage boy, he preferred the ugly one. “I do not touch students,” he hissed. “You should be ashamed of even accusing me of such filth. How would you…”

Filled with bitterness, he watched the red fowl flapping happily beside Dumbledore’s head and crossed his fingers to witness it defecating on the Headmaster’s head at least once before he died.

“Explain it to me, then,” Dumbledore said calmly.

“What’s the point? You’ve already made your assumptions.”

“I wish to understand. I was expecting you to give Harry a hard time, Severus, but not -”

"Not what? He's a liar. He's just like his father. Don’t you think that I’m utterly disgusted of what he did as well?"

“My boy…” The *boy* crap again. Severus wasn’t a boy. And he certainly wasn’t attracted to the actual boy Dumbledore was trying desperately to protect from him. “It’s my duty to look after Harry’s best interests. He’s been through many disappointments, and one can only take as much before he breaks.”

The man before him had guaranteed Severus’ innocence in a courtroom while he was aware of at least half of Severus’ crimes. It was something that had never been mentioned again, and he had never been treated as a criminal in Hogwarts, by no one. Apparently kissing Dumbledore’s precious collectible boy toy wasn’t something that could be forgiven as easily as murder.

“Of course, Headmaster,” he mocked.
“He was happy to come back.”

No. He wasn’t. He was going to be an insomniac mess. He was going to be angry and once again abandoned by someone he was cautious to trust in the first place, but nevertheless did.

Severus resolved that giving a damn was beyond his personal apprehension. Sure, the boy was happy to come back. And he was going to be fine.

“Your decision to remove the brat from my care could not have made me happier. I am relieved from the dirty work, and please spare me any repetitions of it. Now, if you’re through.”

“Not yet, Severus. I believe we should talk about Draco.”

Oh joy. The torment never ends.
The first important thing Harry did when he came back to Hogwarts, was to take a shower. He unpacked his things, enjoyed the warmth of the common room, and made sure that all his assignments were ready, clean, and that the ink hadn’t been smudged. Dumbledore invited him to his office, greeted him, checked his progress, and then asked him all kinds of questions.

When they had finished, Harry went to Snape’s quarters, knocked on the door, then banged at the door, and eventually left.

He met his friends the day after, and told them some awkward lies about his summer holidays. He listened to their family adventures and ate with them at the Great Hall. They endured Dumbledore’s regular speech together, clapped their hands at the announcement of the new Potions Professor named Horace Slughorn, commented on Snape’s satisfied expression as he eventually became the Dark Arts Professor, and watched as the Sorting Hat decided the destiny of excited small children who couldn’t wait to be sorted.

It was when both of his friends were busy eating a delicious chocolate cake that Harry took a better look at Snape, who was eating next to Dumbledore on the large wooden table. Harry suddenly remembered who Snape was, and what he, along with all his friends and classmates, used to think about him. Hermione dragged him and Ron to the Tower early, and they stayed awake until morning, small chatting and giggling over nothing in particular.

The second important thing Harry did, when he woke up in the middle of his third night back, drenched in sweat and panting his strange terror away, was to open his trunk and take out the silk dark scarf. He felt regret, regret for everything he had thought about over the summer, everything he had dared to talk about, and more than anything, he felt stupid for believing that he felt the unspeakable things he had thought he felt.

Unable to take it back, unable to make Snape forget Harry’s humiliation over what he had done, he decided to do the only thing he could do to make this up to himself. So he grabbed his Invisibility Cloak and walked to the Fat Lady’s portrait, determined to throw the scarf away or even burn it. He met Ginny just behind the portrait. He stared at her stupidly, and she smiled at him softly, and Harry was well aware of her feelings towards him and even more aware of that terror growing stronger and stronger inside him with every day that passed.

So the third important thing Harry did, was to kiss Ginny. She was trembling and willing to lean into the kiss as though she was expecting it her whole life, and she kissed back with a passion that Harry didn’t have. She told him that she felt surprised, afterwards, and Harry felt terrible, but instead he told her that she shouldn’t be, because she was a beautiful, wonderful girl. It made it easier that on that he didn’t have to lie.

A week later, the whole school knew that they were dating. Behind the South Tower's darkest corner, where no one could see them, she rubbed her body against him, and thankfully, as she was rubbing, Harry had managed a moan and had hugged her tighter.

He tried to not think of how much he hated it, and how much he was beginning to blame her too inside his mind for hating it.

Ginny began to sit next to him during lunch after that night. As they couldn’t keep it a secret forever, Ginny had told Ron herself the day right after their first kiss. She was pulling happily on Harry’s sleeve as she was hugging his arm, and she announced that they were now in a relationship, and
although Harry hadn’t noticed how matters turned to something serious, he had nodded dully in agreement.

Ron wasn’t happy about it, but then he had a talk with Hermione, and he was.

With the weight of guilt haunting his chest, he forbade his mind from thinking how he had dragged himself into this and he kept going.

Harry’s grades were as stable as they’d always been, and he was almost glad that he was back to his friends and classmates. Back to the safety that Hogwarts offered, along with the familiar sense of being home, being happy and being okay. Almost glad that he was back to his life.

And yet, Hogwarts didn’t feel home anymore. The chambers were too big and chaotic, and no matter how many people where in them they always felt cold, unbearably cold and echoing.

Lying was new to him. He'd never lied to his friends before, and he'd never imagined that he would do it to save his own arse. Until now, he was sure that he was not that kind of person. When he looked in the mirror, he didn’t see a bad friend, a traitor, he didn’t see a bad person at all, but nonetheless he knew he was, because he had never taken advantage of a friend for his own benefit as long as he lived and now he was doing just that.

And whenever Ginny was stroking his arm and kissing his cheek he would bite down waves of shame and nausea and something else, aching, unidentified.
“What's the git up to this time?” Ron mumbled.

“What?”

“Bloody Snape.”

Harry looked up at the high table and watched as Snape cut his steak firmly.

“He was looking at us,” Ron explained. “A whole minute. The creep.”

Harry shrugged at his plate; just when he thought that he was left in peace, Ron’s nudge startled him again. “Now, Harry! He’s doing it again!”

If Snape was looking at him, he was determined to have Harry miss it every time. It occurred to him that Ron’s attempts to have Harry notice were too obvious for Snape not to notice. He couldn’t keep himself from always giving Snape a laugh, could he?

He reasoned himself that Snape had always been looking at him. If a fly flew its way to the dungeons and fell in a potion, Snape would watch him and blame him and take points, because somehow it had to be his fault. This was how it had always been. Nothing new.

He was aware of holding his breath, and he forced himself to calm down.

“Oh Ron,” Hermione bent her head to take a better look of his face. “You have sauce all over your face again.”

Harry snorted. He mentally went through the rest of his daily schedule and scrunched his face as he was reminded of Ginny waiting for him after the Quidditch practice. He used to like Ginny, as a person. She didn’t deserve this.

Pushing himself to forget his worries, he shook his head as Hermione scolded Ron for his eating habits while Ron nodded absently and continued eating with the same eagerness he always had.

He was looking at him. Of course he was looking at him. He was probably thinking of how he had allowed such a little pervert into his house for so long. Harry felt something like envy inside his stomach. Snape still had his personal space, a place where he could act and talk however he wanted, away from all his friends and all the curious people. It was stupid to think that Snape missed him.

“Harry, what's wrong?” Hermione asked.

“What, I'm eating like a pig too?” Harry beamed quite honestly. Ron mouthed "traitor" at him behind her back.

"I just thought you seemed skeptical."

Harry shook his head dismissively. "No, I'm just sleepy. Terribly sleepy, actually."

The lies came easily, he noticed. He didn’t even mind. His days were passing dully, more slowly than ever, and every moment of joy was unrealistic, sparse.

When he couldn’t sleep, he'd think of too many things. When he'd fall asleep, he wouldn't want to wake up. He had come to the conclusion that he was having a much better time asleep, without the
sadness and the happiness bothering him.

It was almost like when waking up from a nightmare, relieved. Only he had woken up into a nightmare, and for some reason it was a blissful one. Or it should be.

“I’m going to worry more if you two don’t finish your meal soon. Hurry up, we're going to be late,” she said. Hermione's voice was coming from miles away.

“Right, Charms,” Harry said. "We’d better run, I wrote an excellent essay.”

“You copied my essay. Let’s go.”

Harry laughed, and he wondered how a fake laughter would look in a mirror. Could he be fooled by it?

“I copied it too,” said Ron and laughed.

Sometimes he thought that he had imagined it all.

Potter was bent over his examination sheet, a confused look on his face as he was trying to figure out what had gone wrong. Of course, all of it was wrong.

“Mister Potter.” He looked up. “Get yourself a new scroll from my desk and start over. Your scroll has so many scribbles the text is barely locatable.”

Potter nodded dully at his desk, and Severus had to mentally slap his hand away from the impulse to grasp Potter’s chin and tilt his head up.

The boy wouldn’t look at him. He hardly ever raised his head in his classroom anymore. Apparently Potter didn’t find it necessary to face him.

Not after he kept knocking on his door for a week and his efforts to meet him had passed in vain. Thank Merlin it had taken Severus only a week to get rid of him. What did he think, anyway? That this would continue?

“But I asked for a new scroll half an hour ago and you told me no and to correct this one. Sir.”

Right. Now Severus was the one to be scolded, wasn’t he?

Well.

Certainly not in his class. And not in this lifetime.“Ten points from Gryffindor for insolence.”

He was aware of a female voice yelping somewhere behind Potter and he defiantly ignored it as he returned to his desk.

Severus decided to occupy himself with the construction of a teaching schedule for the second year class, when he was startled by Potter snatching a scroll from the stack before him and going back to his seat.

*Another ten points for your cheek. For not looking up in humility when I talk sense into you. For not respecting me as I deserve to.*

*And another hundred, Potter, for daring to be angry at me.*
Pursuing his lips, Severus marked the most difficult pages of the book laid open before him. If that damned position was cursed, he had less than a year to teach these dunderheads something useful. Might as well teach them everything he’d teach them in a full seven year curriculum.

Potter had lost weight. The corner of his eye kept twitching towards the boy, and he pressed his quill down harder. Why teach the nature of the unforgivable only to sixth year students? Eleven years old was a fine age to start learning. This was education, after all.

It didn’t make sense. Potter was eating as much as his friends. No, perhaps less. But it had to do.

Perhaps he should suggest that his meals were soaked in some traceless sleeping potions and some vitamins once a week or two; of course, that would be wrong. It'd be exactly what Potter hated. Good.

A lot of vitamins would do. He was disgusted with himself for not having thought about it sooner.

Potter muttered something through his teeth and Severus was sure it was a curse. He was tempted to challenge him into repeating it out loud, just to have him look him in the eye with that raging spark again.

Where was his cheek now? Where was his temper?

Why did he care, again?

Of course, it was professionalism. His actions were inspired by true devotion to his position and duty.

The bell rang and the brainless brood that was now called Hogwarts students spurted out of the class in relief. It occurred to him that the fact that his students hated him shouldn’t be pleasing him that much.

With all the students gone, he shrugged off the suspicion that something wasn’t right and stood. All students gone, but Potter.

Severus shivered in horror as Potter looked up at him, eventually.

“The class is dismissed, Mister Potter.”

“I noticed.”

Contemptuous little brat. How dared he look him like that? Why was he calm? Why wasn’t he arrogant?

Potter wasn’t even blinking.

“What do you want, then?”

If Severus looked as terrified as he felt, he'd better run away and hide. Forever. Under a rock.

Potter stood too, swinging his bag unto his shoulders and stepping closer. He was suddenly inspired to do something, and Severus could tell that it wasn’t going to be clever.

“Why did you cancel our lessons again?”

Was that how the story had ended up to his sensitive ears? He almost laughed. “Because I have better things to do and because I’ve been busy.” Truth was, because Potter had spilled his guts to
Dumbledore.

Daft, ridiculous child.

“No. I want the truth.”

Then he’d get another lie. “Because the Headmaster owes me a salary that I have yet to receive. Dismissed.”

Severus watched closely as the boy’s inspiration turned to guilt. He suddenly recalled a sense of nostalgia from the time when Potter would lock himself in a toilet stall and scream off his denial of having to practice Occlumency again. Of course, Severus wasn’t supposed to know this.

“You were being paid. To have me in your home.”

_Praise the gods, he has finally figured it out._ Regaining his full weight that had struck home again, he decided that being a complete bastard wasn’t a bad thing. Better end this farce for good.

“Of course I was. What did you think? I don’t enjoy babysitting mentally unstable children, no ones does.”

All in all, this had to do it. His sanity was all Potter had; with the wizarding world against him and the press ridiculing him on a daily basis it was only a wonder that he himself hadn’t bought his being nuts too.

“Right,” Potter snapped. “Because you think I’m so stupid I’ll forget what my question was about if you insult me well enough.”

Severus mentally bowed to the scene they were making and clapped his applause in admiral. For the last time, Potter wasn’t going to have control over this. It occurred to him that he was falling into his own trap.

At least, Potter was angry.

“I believe I responded to your question, and I do not make a habit of repeating myself. Get out.”

What Potter hadn’t grasped yet, was that his mental stability had only been shaken by those whom the boy had trusted. Involuntary or not.

“You didn’t respond to anything, not really!” Were they still on this? “You thought it was a waste of time, right? You thought I’d never make it and you didn’t even think of telling me yourself! I am trying, you know. I’ve been emptying my mind for some time now.”

“Practicing? When?” If Dumbledore was teaching Potter himself and Severus wasn’t aware of it – well, that would be too much. He scowled off his wistfulness for a particular bottle of scotch hidden numerous miles away.

“At night, usually. It takes a while to completely achieve it. Especially when I’m not very tired.”

The words stuck together and Severus’ comprehending found its place in the world. This could only mean one thing. He watched Potter, his fragile skin, pale and thin, the green eyes behind the hideous glasses, the bony shoulders that did not make sense for a Quidditch player.

“You haven’t been sleeping.” As soon as he said the words, he wanted to reel them back into his mouth and forget that they were ever formed. It wasn’t the first time he swore to avoid displaying emotion to the outer world. It was however, the first time that concern had hit the peak of the
dangerous sentiments he should not let out.

“I have. It’s just not – forget it.”

Potter left, and Severus played the scene inside his head again. He laughed.
He hadn’t burned it, but he’d forgotten that he still had it.

It occurred to him that to an observing eye, the scarf wasn’t a completely unrecognisable piece of cloth. He buried it into a shirt again, and shoved it in the bottom of his trunk.

Lying back down on his bed, Harry firmly closed the curtains and relished into the darkness that surrounded him. He breathed in. Breathed out. Breathed in.

Opening the strange Advanced Potions Making book he had discovered only a few weeks ago, he slowly trailed his fingers over the Prince’s notes. The handwriting was turned and flawless, scribed with the same black ink that had crossed off most of the book’s original paragraphs.

Furrowing his brows, he turned the pages one after another, looking for clues. A name. A date. Something. He’d ask Slughorn, if he wasn’t afraid that he’d take it away from him. He’d ask Dumbledore too, but Dumbledore seemed determined to not let a single minute of their meetings be wasted. Tom Riddle’s memories were crucial; Harry had to see them all. He had to understand them all.

“Are you awake, mate?”

Harry blinked at Ron’s sleepy voice. “Yeah.”

“Reading that thing again?”

“Aha.”

“I was thinking.”

Prince. Images of knights with white horses popped into Harry’s mind and he couldn’t help but entertain the mental image of an actual Prince hiding somewhere in the castle. The textbook’s yellowish pages indicated that it was old, and Harry wondered if it was someone he knew, or if Remus or Snape knew anything about it.

Dumbledore would.

Suddenly, he was certain that no one could know.

“Harry?”

“Yes,” Harry said absently.

It was a strange nickname for one to have. It had to be someone clever enough to create all these spells and potions. Someone who, if he was still alive, was now probably powerful. And beautiful too, Harry hoped. He lowly chuckled to himself. That prince image with the horse and all that had stuck into his mind was really irritating.

“If you don’t want to talk just say so. I wanted to say something important, and I’m not going to say it if you’re not listening.”

Harry sighed. “What is it, Ron?”

“If you hurt Ginny, I’ll hate you.”
Harry closed the book. He didn’t open the curtains.

“I don’t want to hate you,” Ron added quietly, his bravery fading into uncertainty. He’d been thinking hard, Harry realised. Long silences weren’t something Ron did. And if he was thinking about it...

“Why are you telling me this now?” he asked with a hint of panic.

A breath was released sharply, and Harry held his own.

“I don’t know, because she’s my little sister, maybe? If you – well. Hermione said –”

Harry’s thumb caressed the hardcover as the tension intensified. Had Ron found out? Impossible. One part of Harry's mind told him that whatever had once possessed him was now over. He was normal, with Ginny, and happy. Another part of his mind drifted far away still, wondering if the book at hand was abandoned or even cursed.

“I can overlook that you’re kissing her,” Ron said. “But if you do more than that – you can’t hurt her. She’s been getting on the family’s nerves talking about you since she was eleven. Do you get what that means? You’re not just a boyfriend to her. I don’t know if she loves you but she cares about you. Everyone knows that.”

Harry nodded, even though Ron couldn’t see it. He loved Ginny. He loved her with all his heart, just as he loved Ron and Fred and George and their parents. The Weasleys were his family. The only family he ever had.

“I know, Ron.”

“You’re reading that book again, aren’t you? You’re not paying attention. I told you I wanted you to listen to me.”

“I'm not reading. I'm listening.”

And he did. But he preferred not to. He doubted that he could ever think about Ginny again without that weight of guilt inside him. The pages fell open again on his lap and he saw a note about a spell called Muffliato.

“Forget it. Goodnight, Harry.”

“Night, Ron.” Harry's hypocrisy disgusted him. He hated treating Ron like that. He hated failing in being normal in all aspects of his life. He was trying. Why was he only making it worse for himself? Harry’s life was so empty that he now needed a potions book to fill it.

He closed it with a thump. Nothing felt important anymore. Or interesting.

He breathed in. Breathed out. Where calmness used to be, there now was a ripped open hole, which he found himself constantly poking at in the daytime, and falling in at night.

He missed Snape.

Like hell.

Longbottom’s face was priceless.

As Severus watched him scratch his temple with his quill and goggle his watering eyes, he felt a hint
of sadness for the fact that sketching had never been his calling. If it had, Longbottom's utter disappointment would have been the ultimate moment he’d enjoy to capture in the finest detail, so he could look at it later on and have a laugh whenever he felt grim.

“Ten minutes,” he announced.

It was beyond him, how Severus was doomed to still teach in these horrid dark classrooms. He pictured old Slughorn comfortably sitting in his Potions classroom just a few floors below, and he mentally summoned whatever Hogwarts ghost might have been listening to go and haunt him. People who chose Hogwarts over their freedom were always being haunted by something. Duty, promises, honour, ghosts. Severus was teaching Defence, and everything was still the same. His release from the dungeons only added to the irony that his life was.

Twenty days for the end of term. Two and a half months without Potter giving him a headache. It was… acceptable. No. It was good. And it would have been better, if Potter had shown the slightest indication of mental improvement.

A teenage boy suffering from unholy nightmares should seek professional help - but of course Potter’s nightmares weren’t the kind one could talk about with a therapist.

He doubted there was a therapist out there that could even speak the Dark Lord’s name.

As though you can.

“Time is up. Hand over your papers.”

He extended his hand as he walked between the desks. These snotty children would be the adults of this world someday. Hopefully, Severus wouldn’t live long enough to see it.

Potter pushed his paper to the edge of the desk with abandonment, and Severus allowed himself a quick glance before passing on to the next student. Well, blank should be considered wiser than wrong. Only it wasn’t. And this was supposed to be the easiest test Severus had constructed in the last decade.

Damn you, Dumbledore. He needs help.

And Severus needed his job, despite Lily’s boy collapsing from day to day.

Hell? No.

Retribution.

“Everything is alright, Severus.”

Of course everything was alright. Except Potter. The boy couldn’t concentrate over a forty five minute lesson without sweating, let alone cope with all the expectations of his other classes and that bloody obsession with the most predictable flying sport in the world.

“He is unwell.”

“Don’t be so worried, Severus; he’ll sort everything out - in time.”

Severus sneered as he pushed a parchment towards Dumbledore. “His grades.”

Sliding his half-moon glasses down the bridge of his nose, Dumbledore checked the grades with his
hands casually clasped together, and Severus swore that if he didn’t see anything wrong with them he’d simply hex him.

“Harry’s grades were never better, honestly. The difference is that you are now aware of them. Perhaps it’s also that you now care.”

Care? It wasn’t interest. And if Dumbledore thought he was going to fish out of him any imaginary sentiments using empty innuendos, he’d have to try harder than that. Severus was a spy. A good one. When he needn’t be one for Dumbledore, he was one for himself.

“You think I care for him?”

Dumbledore’s narrowed eyes peering at him didn’t please him. At all. “Lily?”

Severus’ heart dropped at the mention of her name. He carefully packed his emotions away and cleared his face from all expressions. He did not need to nod or speak to communicate his affirmation.


He told himself that it only made sense, how abruptly he stood up at that. One could not stand be insulted.

Unfairness had many faces, he decided. This was a cruel one. Cruel and utterly unexpected.

As he glared back at Dumbledore’s unaffected face, he was struck with the impression that only James Potter could have been behind this, behind something so repugnant, so unspeakable, and his vision momentarily blanked with the certainty that yes, it was, it had to be James’ plan, James who was still laughing at his face through it all.

“I hope you are not implying what I think you do, Headmaster, because if you do –”

“You care, Severus. It is only reasonable.”
To Be a Fool: Shifting

Time, that was the right word.

Time had been ticking away like a clock bomb since the very first moment; it was a matter of time to let it all go. Only that now that it was happening he didn’t know how to react to it.

“Just tell me who she is, okay? I can...” Ginny’s voice broke a little and she swallowed, “I’ll understand. Just tell me who she is.”

“There’s no one else, Ginny, I just – look, I like you. A lot. I- I’m sorry.”

He was sorry. He was sorrier than she thought.

“You’re lying to me,” Ginny whispered, her tone close to a sob. “Why are you lying to me? I never lied to you.”

“I’m not, listen to me.”

“I will not! I will not stand to be thrown away like that! I cannot know that you’re lying and pretend that I don’t, just to make it easier for you! Just be honest with me. I deserve your honesty, dammit!”

It hurt. It hurt so much. “Ginny, I’m sorry.”

“Who is she!”

Harry shook his head, tugging at his Gryffindor scarf and tossing it on the carpet. He stared at the hearth, one hand on his hair, the other closed in a tight fist.

He’d lose Ron. He’d lose Ginny. He’d probably lose Hermione too. And it was going to be on the papers for at least a couple of weeks.

It did not matter. He was losing himself so gradually that he’d barely noticed. Lies weren’t his thing. He couldn’t.

The loneliest moment in someone’s life, Harry reckoned, was when they were watching their whole world fall apart, and all they could do was stare blankly.

It occurred to him that Ginny was still talking.

“You were lying to me, weren’t you? You wouldn’t even kiss me most of the time, am I so boring to you? Do I mean nothing to you? Give me a reason, Harry, and I’ll drop it. Give me a reason I can believe and I’ll never bring this up again.”

“I’m gay.”

The silk shifting of nothingness swiftly rounding a corner was too familiar to miss. Out again.

Severus smiled inwardly at the irony of being the one to catch him in the act once again. The sound of steps led him to a small tower, cold and unused.

He didn’t move closer, but he heard the cloak falling off and then the silence kept up for what seemed to be a lifetime. Without a Lumos or a candle, the place was annoyingly dark. The moonlight offered little help to this. When it was clear that the boy wasn’t returning to his dormitory anytime
soon, Severus walked forward.

“Potter.”

Potter was slumped on the stone floor, toying with his wand with a three-fingered hand. One of his shoulders and half a leg were missing too. He looked up in surprise and then, as though he remembered he shouldn’t, he looked back at his feet and stood up.

“Take that thing off, it’s disturbing. Explain yourself.”

“Explain what?” His voice cracked.

So did Severus’ sternum. “Explain why you are not where you’re supposed to be. Wandering overnight is not allowed in this school, I am afraid. It appears that Potters have little respect for rules, however.”

Potter snorted. His head was bowed, but a shadow on his face was darker than the rest.

“Look at me.”

No response.

“Look at me, Potter.”

“No, let go.”

He strode over to Potter and gripped his face, even as the boy grunted. His left eye had a perfectly round purple bruise around it. Severus sneered off his fear and he freed Potter harsher than intended.

“Who did this to you?”

Potter shrugged. “Have you encountered Mister Malfoy this evening, perhaps?”

The boy raised his head, confused. “Malfoy?” It wasn’t him, then? “No, why?”

“Who did this to you?”

“No one, and stop that.” His hand was pushed away and for the life of his Severus couldn’t remembered when he had grabbed him again. “I guess I deserved it anyway.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Potter pressed his lips to a thin line and watched the dark sky, ignoring Severus. Well, if he thought that he’d get away with silence, he was being mistaken. Severus took advantage of it and went on. “If this is my students’ deed, you have no right to conceal it from me.”

“It wasn’t a Slytherin. Leave it. Go annoy someone else.”

Between the impulse to take points and shake the boy until all his secrets fell on his feet, he realised that this was supposed to be his line. Thank Merlin for giving the boy a proper role model to look up to.

Potter hugged his half visible torso, making his silhouette entirely surreal. The moonlight was making him look just a little bit more alive.

He should take a hundred points for Potter’s insolence. No manners, no respect, no obedience to
Severus’ authority.

He hated Potter. At this moment, he truly hated him.

*Go annoy someone else.*

And leave him wallow in his self-pity until morning?

“I doubt it. Follow me.”
Whatever had happened, Potter did not want to talk about it, and Severus found that he was rather relieved about that.

Spared from the terror of dealing with the boy's emotions, he relaxed on his sofa as he thought of happy little things, like the dismissal from his professional duties that he'd assuredly receive from Dumbledore quite soon.

Potter sat on the other end of the sofa, one shoed foot on the cushions and one on the carpet. He thought of the curses that would make Potter's legs stick permanently to the ground and waited for the babbling to begin.

They sat in silence for a long time. Severus distantly pictured his exquisite bottles left back home with internal longing, and for a dreadful moment he was faced with the fact that deep down he was just as fond of drinking as Tobias was.

Well, only on summers.

"Are you planning on appearing with a swollen eye in the Great Hall tomorrow?" he asked.

"I'll use a charm."

Severus figured that there was alcohol in this room after all. Potter eyed it first, a dark red bottle between the dusty books on the bookcase, and Severus inwardly cursed himself for not having thought of it earlier. *Of course. Wine is alcohol too.* The particular bottle had remained on that shelf for so long, he'd stopped considering it anything but decorative.

It would remain. Decorative.

"Stop doing that. If you want to drink, drink."

He was staring at the bottle. Brilliant. He reminded himself that Potter and alcohol was a bad combination.

"Why did you bring me here?" Potter asked.

*Because, despite the Headmaster's endless optimism,* "You cannot continue like this."

Putter shrugged off what looked like vexation. "I'm fine."

"You've been wandering around the corridors again, you rarely sleep, and your grades are below average. Why?"

"I'm fine." Professionalism indicated that there should be a reprimand here. He searched for the right words and failed. Eventually, the flashes of anger in Potter's face took control and he exploded.

"You know what. Everyone keeps asking and asking if I'm fine, yet the only thing I hear when they do is their absolute conviction that I'm weak. I'm not crazy and I don't need to be protected all the time, you know. Why are you keeping me here?"

"You are free to leave whenever you wish to."

"Fine." But he didn't leave.
“I will not allow you to play the fine card on me, so cease using it. Neither will I witness you take a downfall because you desire to torture yourself over your weaknesses - yes, your weaknesses - instead of focusing on your strengths.”

Potter shook his head frantically. “You don't get to tell me your assumptions of what I do, no. I don’t feel sorry for myself, I don’t wallow in sadness or depression or whatever you think I suffer from this week, and I don’t need to be watched over twenty four seven just in case something unbelievable happens to me.”

“If you let life control you, life will break you. You may now think that if you push yourself enough, you’ll be strong and nothing will disturb your peace of mind.” Severus shifted straighter to his seat. “When you’ll succeed on that however, you will not know what to do with this prosperity.” Potter licked his lips, ready to respond. Always ready to respond before he’d heard the point. “The normality you’re seeking isn’t real, and you won’t find it. It doesn’t exist. You can be swallowed up by just another ordinary façade for all I care, but don’t be surprised when real madness strikes you.”

There. He had finished. Potter closed his eyes and Severus was momentarily impressed by his ability to come up with something actually helpful. And then shocked at the realisation that he wouldn’t have come up with it if he didn’t mean it.

Indeed.

“What am I supposed to do, then? Be a mess because I won’t stop thinking of what hurts me? I thought you wanted me to get rid of emotion.”

Were he capable of speaking openly, he’d tell Potter that emotion was something people would never get rid of. One could always fight it, if he chose to, but emotion would just alternate a little bit and that was all.

Instead, “Yes, when you practice Occlumency. Not at all times.”


Yes, because I don’t have one, Severus thought of saying. Potter’s gaze deepened at that. Were he anyone else but Potter, Severus would think that he was trying to read his mind. He reflexively guarded his thoughts and was stunned with surprise at Potter’s soft chuckle. “You know what, I bet you can’t even show emotion to yourself.”

Severus swallowed. He was offended. Aghast. Provoked. Furious with himself for allowing Potter into his chambers despite the reasons against it and deranged at him for taking advantage of his generosity so he could kick back.

He certainly wasn’t hurt.

A dangerous urge to tear the encounter down with a memorable bitter remark was immediately pushed aside, and he nodded his head in what he believed to be a stern agreement to the boy’s statement.

Not true, was the right answer.

But close enough.

“What I do hardly concerns you. It is you we are talking about.”
Potter grimaced. “Thanks. As though I’m not put under the microscope already.” Severus opened his mouth to retort, but he wasn’t quick enough. “Look, Professor. It is one thing to receive help and another to be subjected under special assistance. When you say that everybody admires me while they shouldn’t, you’re right. Sometimes all I want is – to be sixteen.”

Potter stared fixedly on him. With one and a half eye, more precisely. Damn. That blasted bruise was disturbing.

“You are the Chosen One. You can’t. Choose something else.”

“Be left alone?”

With Dumbledore pulling his threads like a puppet? Most likely they’d turn into a noose the moment he’d even think of escaping. “I highly doubt that you would like that.”

“Yeah.” Potter snorted. “I guess I wouldn’t.”
“Thanks, Hermione. It’s perfect.”

Hermione smiled. “The ink is magical, so it never trails off as you write. You just need to re-cast the spell once in a while.”

Harry hugged her, feeling bad for not having thought of buying her something too. “I’ll give you yours after we come back, I promise.”

“It’s alright, I know.”

He’d just thought they’d be at Burrow for Christmas. He hadn’t imagined that they’d exchange gifts so soon.

“If you need anything, and I mean anything –”

“Hermione, don’t start.” He smiled faintly at her and with the corner of his eye he could see Ron fuming.

“He’s staring,” he informed her.

Hermione rose to her full height, her shoulders square. “He will be well pleased to know that I do not care about what he does. Besides, his lovely sweetheart is waiting for him just behind him.”

She was right, Lavender Brown was there, although Harry didn’t know how she knew it with her back turned to Ron. He placed the peacock feathered quill into his bag and sat on the couch. As much as he didn’t want to look at Ron, his eyes seemed to have a will of their own, almost pushing themselves up to him. The Common Room was full of people and music, once again; but the prospect of Christmas Holidays had never again been so unpleasant.

He passed a hand through his hair in awkwardness. Hermione sat beside him, her hand on his back.

“He’s being stupid. Ignore him.” Her features were still as a stone, and Harry found it hard to tell whether she was saying this to him or to herself.

“I know.”

Harry had never imagined that they’d split up that easily. Them, who had met each other when they were too small and curious about this new big world and yet together they had managed to succeed on things none of them could’ve have accomplished alone. They had imagined their lives together, just the three of them, after school was finished and after Voldemort was gone, promising they’d always be together. Always.

They’d made a promise, that they’d stick together no matter the difficulties, whatever may come.

Now Hermione wouldn’t speak to Ron because of Lavender, and Ron wouldn’t speak to Harry for Ginny’s sake. And Harry found himself barely fond of speaking to anyone in general.

Being with Hermione wasn’t the same anymore. The missing part of their trio was just too perceptible to ignore. And painful.

“Harry.” He looked up. “You can still go, you know. It’s Mrs. Weasley who invited you, not Ron. It might help you solve this out if you spend some time together. This has happened before.”
Yes. When they’d fought over Quidditch and the Triwizard. Not over taking advantage of Ron’s sister. “I’ll think about it.” He wouldn’t, but he was tired of discussing this. Tired of having done this. Tired of having stopped it.

Then he remembered of something that he hadn’t told her. He lowered his voice. “Oh. By the way. I think Dumbledore liked the fact that I’m staying. He has tasked me with something and he said it’s going to be helpful if I stay anyway.”

Hermione shifted in her seat, giving him a serious look. “Does it have to do with You – Know – Who?”

It had, but it would take him a lot of time to explain it all. Across the room, right next to the stairs leading to the dorms, Ron was now kissing Lavender with his eyes wide open in excitement. He hoped Hermione wouldn’t notice it just yet. “With Slughorn, actually. He wants me to make him trust me. Dumbledore believes that Slughorn knows something crucial that can help the Order, but he’s afraid to spill it out for some reason.”

Scrunching her face a bit, Hermione seemed to consider it. Despite the open friendliness Slughorn often demonstrated, it was hard to oversee his surprise when Muggleborn students excelled in his class. Hermione had noticed too, and Harry could tell that it hurt her.

"What about the memories?"

"I asked him if he's going to show me more over the holidays, he's not even sure if he's going to be in Hogwarts though."

Hermione nodded, still concerned. "Hogwarts will be unguarded, then."

Harry snorted. "No, not really. Dumbledore comes and goes all the time, doesn't he?"

"And how are you going to make Slughorn trust you?"

This was something he hadn't thought of yet. "Dunno."

“He's a Slytherin. If you are going to lie to him please remember that he’s probably good at detecting lies, and if Dumbledore hasn’t found the information he seeks yet then he must be a strong Occlumens too. And, most importantly,” she made a small pause for emphasis, “don’t forget that he’s a Professor.”

Harry chuckled. And then took her hand in his own in appreciation for everything she had done for him. For a moment neither of them talked, and Harry wondered in dread whose side Hermione would have taken if Ron had fallen for her instead of Lavender.

“So, good luck with it. And please give that copy back to Slughorn as soon as you can. You're coming to the party tomorrow, right?” Harry nodded just as he felt a soft kiss on his cheek. There was no way he was going to return the Prince's book. “Happy Holidays.”

Harry smiled. “Happy Holidays.”

“McLaggen?” Ron asked, his eyes wide.

Seamus shrugged as he slumped back to his bed. Next to his own bed, Harry struggled with his formal robe and did what he knew best: pretend he didn't exist. He wished he could join the conversation as much as he wished he wasn't part of the scene at all.
“Well, if she didn’t want you to know she wouldn’t have told Fay to keep it a secret, honestly,” Seamus said.

Harry could imagine Ron’s features muddling as though his whole life was a strange lie. “She snogged Krum, she’s gonna snog McLaggen too?”

“Dating doesn’t necessarily mean snogging,” Seamus pointed out. “Or maybe it does,” he added, confused.

“It does,” Ron confirmed.

“I thought you didn’t care, right?”

“But I don’t. I’m just sad for her, you know. Her poor life choices.”

“Life choices,” Harry muttered under his nose in amusement. He observed his tie in the mirror and shoved his wand and invisibility cloak in his pockets. Then, somehow finding the courage, he stopped right in front of them before leaving the room. “You know, if you wanted to come tonight, I’m sure Slughorn wouldn’t mind. It’s just a few days before Christmas after all. It’s not like he’s going to tell you to get lost because you’re not in the club.”

It was one of those silences that could only break with humiliation. How much time of silent staring was considered a clear "fuck off" answer though?

"Never mind."

His steps were loud against the cold stones of the corridors; so loud they could almost muffle his self-loath.

“Remind me what other subjects you’re taking, Harry?” asked Slughorn.

The party was just like Harry expected it; not boring enough for him to retire but not interesting enough for him to wish to ever repeat it. If it wasn’t for Dumbledore’s request to befriend Slughorn, he wouldn’t be here.

“Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Transfiguration, Herbology...”

“All the subjects required, in short, for an Auror,” interrupted Snape, with a cold sneer.

“Yeah, well, that’s what I’d like to do,” retorted Harry.

“And a great one you’ll make too!” Slughorn said with enthusiasm. Harry gave him an honest smile.

“I don’t think you should be an Auror, Harry,” Luna argued. “The Aurors are part of the Rotfang Conspiracy, I thought everyone knew that. They’re working to bring down the Ministry of Magic from within using a combination of Dark Magic and gum disease.”

Harry almost choked on his drink as he laughed. He was about to make a comment on her newest conspiracy theory when Filch and Draco Malfoy appeared; Filch was dragging him by the ear – Malfoy’s face was red with embarrassment.

“Professor Slughorn,” Filch panted, “I discovered this boy lurking in an upstairs corridor. He claims to have been invited to your party and to have been delayed in setting out. Did you issue him with an invitation?”
Malfoy pushed himself away from Filch and looked at him in disgust, rubbing his ear.

“All right, I wasn’t invited!” he yelled. “I was trying to gatecrash, happy?”

“No, I’m not! You’re in trouble, you are! Didn’t the headmaster say that nighttime prowling’s out, unless you’ve got permission, didn’t he, eh?”

“That’s all right, Argus, that’s all right,” said Slughorn. “It’s Christmas, and it’s not a crime to want to come to a party. Just this once, we’ll forget any punishment; you may stay, Draco.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

Harry could explain Filch’s obvious disappointment, but what he couldn’t explain was Malfoy’s trembling shoulders and Snape’s intense stare.

“It’s nothing, nothing,” said Slughorn, smiling. “I did know your grandfather, after all…”

“He always spoke very highly of you, sir,” said Malfoy. “Said you were the best potion-maker he’d ever known…”

Harry stared at Malfoy. As used as he was to Malfoy’s arse kissing, he realised that this time Malfoy wasn’t much into it. He almost looked like he wanted to flee the scene and disappear. But why would he want that if he was trying to sneak into the party uninvited?

“I’d like a word with you, Draco,” said Snape abruptly.

“Oh, now, Severus,” said Slughorn, placing a hand on Snape’s shoulder, “it’s Christmas, don’t be too hard —”

“I’m his Head of House, and I shall decide how hard, or otherwise, to be,” said Snape coldly. “Follow me, Draco.”

They left, Snape leading the way, Malfoy looking resentful.

Harry stood there for a moment, undecided, and then he suddenly said, “I’ll be back in a bit, Luna — er — bathroom.”

He ran out of the party and away from the office. The corridor was seemingly empty; the loud music could still be heard as he pulled his cloak out of his pocket and threw it over himself. Malfoy and Snape were nowhere to be seen. Carefully, Harry strode down the corridor, pressing his ear against all the doors he was passing by. At last, he found them. His ears were still ringing from the loud music, but Snape’s angry voice was unmistakable. Harry held his breath, and listened.
He was supposed to meet Slughorn tonight, like he had done yesterday night and the night before that. Slughorn would offer him a glass of something, and they would sit by the fire and chat about things that either bored Harry or annoyed him. Once again, Harry found himself spending Christmas in the freezing grounds of Hogwarts – this time without his friends to keep him company. Slughorn was more than willing to invite him over, and Harry was beginning to think that the man was rather lonely to prefer the castle and Harry’s company to proper holidays.

Slughorn never admitted how fond he was of pureblood wizards, but his insistence to associate with them betrayed his true interests. And no matter how much Harry was trying to reel their small talk to Voldemort, he couldn’t.

Buttoning up his shirt, he descended from the Gryffindor tower and followed his own steps away. He had to bear it, if he wanted Slughorn to trust him enough. It felt like duty - he wasn't going to disappoint Dumbledore.

The night was cold, and Hermione wasn’t here, and Ron wasn’t going to be here ever again.

Not in the way he wanted him to. Not in the way he ought to. And after all these years of knowing each other, he was surprised to feel nothing but a dim acknowledgement of the fact that nothing was going to be the same from now on.

He tried to care. He couldn’t. If only he could, just for one night, to stop cultivating this ball of messy worries inside his stomach, if he could leave aside Voldemort, prophecies, tasks, he would be just fine. Absolutely happy.

Just for a night.

The feeling was too familiar to let go. He tried not to care. He couldn’t do that either. The way everything tunnelled into him made his soul feel small.

It was already Christmas.

When he found himself outside a door that wasn’t Slughorn’s, he didn’t care. He knocked.

Severus preferred his decorations kept to a minimum.

As he opened the wine bottle, he decided to drink to Potter’s unprecedented prudence. Days had passed and he hadn’t even heard Potter’s name. Not a single mention of it.

Not from Dumbledore, not from Minerva, and thank Merlin, not from Poppy. God save the Boy Who Lived from sliding off his broomstick again. Now, that would be a suitable death. The History textbooks would have a nice version of it someday.

To Dumbledore too, then. For giving him the Defence position and forbidding him to teach anything but what the Ministry allowed. For keeping an eye on him as though he’d suddenly cast the Avada
Kedavra on his own students. For saying nothing about the Horcruxes but insisting on learning everything about Draco’s motives.

But he trusted Severus.

Of course he trusted him.

The glass filled and emptied. *It's holidays, it doesn't count.* Christmas was a hateful word. Another feast for the fools, for families to gather together and laugh and giggle while they hate each other, for children to whine and let their snot run down their faces because they wanted something they could not have. And they always wanted something they could not have.

Stupid, childish Christmas wishes; all of them impossible. Ludicrous to the very end. Like a puppy that would never die, or a doll with voice and thoughts, or a father that would not send his wife to hospital on Christmas’ eve.

Stupid wishes.

He was suddenly annoyed by his own displeasure. The throbbing of his thoughts deepened, so loud that... it wasn’t a throbbing. Someone was knocking.

He could only hope that it was a Slytherin. Then he was reminded that the few Slytherins that had stayed for the holidays had most likely no desire to seek their Head of House tonight. And if it wasn’t a Slytherin, there was only one other possibility.

“Potter.”

“Um. Hullo?”

For the life of his, he couldn’t imagine why Harry Potter would visit him on Christmas.

“What do you want?”

“Um. Are you busy?”

It was not the proper time to judge whether busy was the fitting word for someone who had happily decided to sink himself into self-loathing and life-cursing dilemmas. Constructive it wasn’t, but it cleared a mind from wit and common sense, leaving the pure anger lurking inside to take control.

An anger he would swear that was right there a moment ago.

“Yes. What do you want?”

“I had an appointment with Professor Slughorn.”

“And?”

“May I come in?”

He slightly stepped aside, determined to not directly answer Potter’s request if he could help it.

Accepting an invasion was one thing. Offering an invitation was another. A few days of silence. This was all Potter could do.

Severus watched as the boy took a seat without being told to. Severus sat on the other end of the sofa, refilling his glass. He was vaguely reminded of some subconscious warning about alcohol
around the boy, but right now, he couldn't care less.

“Well?”

“What?”

Was Potter trying to drive him mad? “I am waiting to hear why you're here.”

“Um. Well. I thought of coming here because I didn’t want to spend Christmas with professor Slughorn, actually. To be honest, I didn’t think of it exactly, I was just pissed off about having to, I guess, and then it just happened. I reckon I decided it somewhere if the middle of walking and I didn’t even know it until it was already done. So I just knocked and hoped you weren’t sleeping or working or something. Why? Is that wine?”

He didn’t want. To spend Christmas. With Slughorn.

Severus laughed. Hard. Inwardly. He hadn’t the faintest idea what was happening outwardly, and he wouldn’t care to stop it even if the Dark Lord himself entered the room and split Potter in evenly cut pieces.

So Potter wanted to spend Christmas with him.

He became aware of the mental wards around his safe universe beginning to crack, and that he was snorting. How to fix this? He stopped.

“You have an appointment. Go where you’re expected.” He was about to stand up, but his reflexes weren’t as good. Or his balance. Something was holding him back. He realised it was Potter’s hand. On him. On his arm.

Freezing on spot had never occurred to him that strongly. “What are you doing?”

“I won't stay long, I just came to say Merry Christmas and I'll leave. He doesn’t expect me yet.”

Severus swallowed what seemed to be a stone resting on his throat. “When does he expect you?”

A pause. “At ten.”

He could just as well write *I’m lying* on his forehead.

It would be a disgrace to his whole life as a double agent to pretend he had bought this. And it would serve Potter right to throw a tantrum at him and kick him out for daring seek his company after all the bitterness and the vice he had forced upon the boy.

For having not let go of his arm even after what seemed a whole minute to hell.

For still hoping to sedu–

*Stop.*

This wasn’t happening.

"So. Can I stay?"

Potter grinned. And eventually took his damned hand away. “Cool. So, do you have any books here?”

Habits die hard, this everyone knew.
Severus couldn’t recall when this one began.

An hour passed. And then another one. By the third one, Potter was yawning.
The book on his lap was finally something that looked like he could actually read, and not just pretend to. The regular turning of the pages irritated Severus to no end; his gaze lost into the gleaming hearth, he repeatedly failed to summon the hate he was planning to compose tonight.

It took concentration for one to lose himself into the past. Concentration and abandonment impossible to relish in the presence of others. He snorted at his drink.

Frustrated for failing to be frustrated. The things Potter could cause.

“Can I have some?” Potter eyed the bottle, now half empty. No, not half empty. Half full.

“Absolutely not.”

“Slughorn gives me.”

Severus couldn’t believe that Potter had the cheek to mention Horace again. Would it hurt him that much to help Severus save some of his dignity? Was it that hard for him to just mind?

It was provocation. It was a plan to destroy him - a brilliant, cunning plan to bare him from everything that he was. Potter had lied to him so he could stay. Then he stayed far more than he promised to, and now he didn’t even resist reminding him so.

“Then by all means, go to Slughorn.” That had to be Professor Slughorn. Well. Pity. Next time, maybe.

“Nah.”

Taking the bottle, Potter tried a sip. As soon as he swallowed, an impressive cough struck him, and he bent forward as his face turned red.

“Slughorn gives you,” Severus muttered, snatching the bottle from Potter’s hand. He then sneered off his new depravation. Drinking with a student who couldn’t handle a sip of wine. And not just any student.

“He does,” Potter protested, shrugging off his embarrassment. Then he looked up in curiosity.

“What’s your Patronus?”

Why did he care? Severus returned the look, guarded against something he was failing to define. Potter slid a bit lower on the cushions.

“A bat,” he lied.

And Potter grinned. “I knew it.”

He knew nothing, or, he should know nothing. Or maybe he already knew too much. Disgustingly sleepy as he was, Potter fell in the mood of asking questions. He furrowed his brows and made a
Slapping his hand was a good idea. Only it would contain physical contact. Which was a bad idea. He let Potter take the bottle and sighed off his surrender. This time, he managed not to choke himself.

As much as Severus wanted to put his feet on the table and stretch out, he pulled himself together. Apparently, he couldn’t be himself even in his own chambers anymore.

“What memory could bring up a bat? Or is it just your favourite animal?”

Nosy, insufferable child. “Favourite animal.”

“Hm. My favourite is owls. I hate dogs, though.”

Severus was aware that there was some memory that he should connect this to, but wasn’t sure.

“I hate dogs too,” he spat. *And am very glad they passed away.*

Why was his glass empty? And why was Potter filling it for him? He drank.

“I told my friends,” Potter said. He told his friends about dogs? “I lost them.”

Realisation hit in. Oh. He had come out. Severus was almost impressed. “Define *lost them*.”

“Ron wanted to kill me. He said I was a trickster.”

“He was wrong.”

“I was going out with his sister.”

“Then he was right.” So that was how the black eye had occurred. Potter had managed to turn his world upside down once again. And who was picking up the ruins?

“I know.”

Was his friend who had hit him or Ginevra Weasley? “Is this the whole version of the events?”

Potter hid his smile behind the upturned bottle. After a moment, “No.” It was the *I’m not going to tell you* kind of no. Severus was quite glad about it.

The bottle hit Severus on the ribs as Potter yawned and stretched out. Severus took it, and watched as, with an unprecedented dumb look across his face, Potter put his feet on the table.

“I think I need the lessons again,” Potter said. Unfortunately, all Severus could hear was *I’m officially homosexual now. I need a good spanking, Professor!* Choking on his drink, Severus gulped forcefully. “Discuss it with the Headmaster, then.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I’ve heard that you're particularly fond of opening your heart to him lately. I believe he’ll assist you.”

“What does that mean?”

*Yes, what does it? If it wasn’t for Dumbledore's absolute need of him, Severus would have gone*
through the Board of Governors for child enticement the second he let Potter into his bedroom. Considering his dubious past and the strained Ministry record, he would probably already be in Azkaban by now.

Then again, “If you wanted our lessons to continue you should have held your tongue. Apparently that is one of the many things you have yet to accomplish.”

"What are you talking about?" Potter frowned.

"I told you, Potter, I warned you, I would be blamed for your stupidity should word of what you did ever come out. Come to think of it, perhaps that was your agenda all along."


“Really? Please, do fascinate me, then. I can’t wait to hear your subversive excuse of how you didn’t tell him.”

“But I didn’t.”

"The very first day we came back."

Potter stared. "I didn't tell him anything. He tested my improvement, you know, Occlumency. He cast Legilimency on me so he could see how I resist. He saw that time I fell asleep on your bed, not – you know. He didn’t see anything else. I told him it wasn’t your fault. I didn't say anything."

He was fascinated. Dazzled. Humiliated. Livid with submission to his one true master, and at the same time still respective enough as to not light his office on fire and vanish. Fuck it. He’d burn the entire castle someday.

He raised his glass. To Dumbledore’s maliciously wickedness. To Potter’s outstanding demonstration of maturity. To himself, who had divulged his newest sins to Dumbledore, completely unaware of his own stupidity.

It was Severus who had told him. Potter hadn’t talked. He felt betrayed. Thwarted.

Potter hadn’t talked.

He felt happy. There was one foolish thing in the world that Potter hadn’t done. It was a start.

“It was Malfoy who cursed that girl, wasn't he?"

He raised an eyebrow and Potter sneered. Damned boy.

“Of course not.”

Severus watched as the arrogance faded to hesitation. “I followed you… After Slughorn’s party last week."

A dilemma: Should I kill myself or have a cup of coffee? The answer was always in between. Alcohol. “Go on,” he said carefully. He would have snorted at his own terror, but it’d cause trouble. More trouble.

“I heard you. Why does he think you’re trying to steal his glory?"

He had to silently applaud Potter for his arrogance. Eavesdropping, and then demanding to know the details he failed to catch. “Is this why you came here tonight?”
The rush of emotions that ran over Potter’s face nearly had Severus roll his eyes. He found himself too stunned at the realisation that the only reason the boy was here was to extend the nature of the little dark secret that was born last summer under the most bizarre of circumstances.

*In your own house. So you can have another unthinkable bad experience in Spinner’s End, this time with a Potter.*

“No. But I want to know. And don’t tell me it’s not my business because somehow it obviously is.”

Some part of Severus’ mind insisted that he should inform Dumbledore immediately that Potter once again was aware of things he shouldn’t. *It can wait,* the traitorous part of his mind argued, and he decided to be lured by that. The boy looked at him as though there was a conversation going on. There wasn’t.

“Change the subject, or leave. And if you ever stick your nose again where it doesn’t belong I’ll Obliviate myself out of your little brain once and for all.”

At last. Fear. How satisfying it was to watch that face suffer. He resolved not to speak until Potter was entirely panicked, but the moment never came.

“You can’t blackmail me with that.”

Severus sneered. *Watch me.*

Potter glared. “I’ll only change the subject because I want to.”

The word “child” echoed so loudly in Severus’ head that the distinct impression that life loved to torture him became suddenly his only realm.

"But just so you know. You can't just drag Malfoy out of a party like that and expect people not to have questions."

"I quite understand your inability to judge -"

"I know. I was just curious, because of what you said."

"What did I say?"

"That you're his Head of House and you shall decide how hard, or otherwise, to be. So I wanted to see. How hard you'd be." Potter looked at him steadily, even while blushing.

*For fuck's sake.* Severus banged his glass on the table with all his might. "Say *anything* like this again, and I mean *anything,*” he hissed, "show lack of respect one more time, and I'll personally see that you get expelled. Then you'll see how *hard* I can be."

"Kay."

Potter leaned back and rested his head on the cushions again. Silently damning himself, Severus rested his head back too and sighed, looking at the ceiling. May Dumbledore rot in hell. May he rot entangled with the Dark Lord’s limbs above a fuming, burning cauldron. One that’d be under Longbottom’s constant supervision.

Severus’ eye was twitching. He rolled his head. Potter was staring at him. His eyes were beaming, searching too deep for something that wasn’t a thought or a memory.

Potter was a problem, one of those that no matter how hard one ignores, they keep growing until
they become the elephant in the room, and even then they demand to be fed and grow more. Suddenly, being sacked wasn’t his most frightening nightmare regarding Potter.

Potter’s stare wasn’t intense. It wasn’t challenging or contesting, or made to provoke him. What it was, was a close to sleep state of "I can barely focus but damn, look at you" and yet aware of every quick flickering of Severus’ own eyes.

It went on for a moment. Two.

“What?” Severus croaked.

“Didn’t it mean anything to you?”

Severus rolled his head back to watch the ceiling. The memory of the accident he refused to name kissing called to mind and he dismissed it. It had become an all too common occurrence to find himself terror stricken whenever he’d be reminded of it. The boy’s total disregard at his attempts to wipe it off their history would never cease to leave him speechless. He considered it.

Mean anything. Of course not.

What could it mean?

“No, Potter. Nothing.”

Potter chuckled. Severus sighed.

Wait.

Chuckled?

Potter didn’t believe him.

Fool Severus.

Chapter End Notes

This is a very special chapter, as it was the first one I ever wrote for this story. It is also the longest so far. Please let me know what you think. Even if you don't usually write reviews, I would love to see even a short comment, if you've been following the story.
Severus had to literally *push* him to the door. Potter yawned and stopped still two steps before he reached it, his head falling back against Severus’ chest. Startled, Severus stepped back and Potter swayed on his feet.

“What time is it?” he murmured.

Almost morning, and Potter shouldn’t have slept on his sofa. “Don’t ask.”

“Right.”

“Potter.”

“Yeah.”

“If you are to exit the Tower again after curfew, I ought to inform your Head of House. This is not something I am willing to permit.”

*And why not very well inform her now?*

“Inform her now. I don't think I'll stop it.”

The irony was too great.

No. The frustration was greater.

“Besides, Professor, I think Dumbledore knows. I mean, he doesn’t mind, I think.”

Of course he didn’t. It definitely was a joyful hobby of Dumbledore's to expose the Wonder Boy to all possible new adventures.

“The Headmaster knows,” he corrected, “and I know too. Be assured, though, that I am not going to turn a blind eye to it.” *So, against Dumbledore, “As your Professor, I forbid you to wander around without written permission from Professor McGonagall or the Headmaster himself.” Well done. End of discussion.*

“However,” *end of discussion* “if you find yourself experiencing the same trouble sleeping, you shall immediately seek a staff member.”

Potter shrugged as he stepped outside the chambers. “It’s not right to wake up the professors whenever I want to, and I’m not going to do it,” he said. “Anyway. I won’t sneak out again, I’m sorry. For getting you into trouble, I mean. Professor.”

“Potter.” *end of discussion* “I might give you permission to exit your dormitory when you need to, I repeat, only when you absolutely need to and cannot do otherwise,” *ENDOFDISCUSSION ENDOFDISCUSSION ENDOFDISCUSSION ENDOFDISCUSSION* “if you commit yourself to contact your Head of House or come to me instead of roam the corridors.”

*Guilty as charged.*

*My neck. Here. Take it. Please kill me now.*

Potter looked confused. “Are you sure?”
Severus nodded.

*It is only reasonable.*

---

Harry did receive a present from Mrs. Weasley.

It came with a freezing Hedwig, who hooted and cleared her feathers frantically as she rested on the tower window. The present had been nicely wrapped with dark red paper and a large yellow bow on the top.

The gift card read *Happy New Year, Harry!* on it, and Harry touched the letters with his fingers. It was a box with chocolate sweets, he figured quickly, and he ate most of them while sitting on his bed. Hedwig watched him, so it was just right that he offered her one. It turned out that she didn’t like sweets.

And although grateful, and even a bit surprised, Harry couldn’t help but admit that this wasn’t a present that Mrs. Weasley would have chosen.

Perhaps she wasn’t planning on buying him a present at all, but had changed her mind last moment. Aunt Petunia would always buy presents for neighbours she didn’t like anymore, or for neighbours that she never liked, with only intent to appear nice and to “shut the mouths of those who can’t wait to receive nothing so they can have a reason to badmouth her.”

Mrs. Weasley certainly wasn’t like that, but it made sense to buy him something just to pretend that as a mother she was above school fights.

Getting his Cloak, Harry descended to the Great Hall and found it empty. The hovering candles had been burned short, a faint smell of fir and earth coming from their melting figures. Fragile and dying, their light flickered sadly as it illuminated the stones.

It wasn’t a cold night, or at least, not as cold as he’d expected it to be. Sitting down before the wide hearth, he lit it with his wand and watched the flames dance on the old ashes.

He heard steps. Pulling his Cloak back over his head, he held his breath and tiptoed his way towards the hall. The sobering voice was talking too fast for Harry to make out the words, and as he stepped closer he saw that it was Malfoy, with his eyes filled with tears and his back pressed against the wall by – by him, of course.

“Let me help you, Draco. I am closer to him than you are... You don’t have to be alone in this - I know things that you don’t.”

“Well tell them to me, then!”

“Fool! The school is empty, and you chose such a day to do it? What were you thinking? He greeted you half an hour ago. Trelawney saw you. Filch saw you. He’s already suspicious.”

“I wrote Dumbledore,” Malfoy said tentatively. “Yesterday morning. I said I had a fight with my family and wished to spend the rest of the Holidays here. I know what I’m doing.”

It was too dark for Harry to make out their faces.

“You wrote him? Wrote him? There is no wonder the Dark Lord puts so little faith in you,” Snape said.
“He - he does?”

“You left proof, idiot.” Snape’s hissing was low, but apparently enough to make Malfoy choke around a sob again. “Potter’s here too,” he said, spitting Harry’s name with disgust, and Harry froze. “He didn’t leave the castle for the Holidays but no one cares. Why is my staying suspicious and his isn’t? Why do you want me to be scared instead of take action?”

“Potter is an orphan. The Headmaster takes pity on him. He won’t take on you.”

Something broke inside Harry’s sternum and he held his breath. Gritting his teeth, he willed the sentiment away.

“Now tell me, who would be more likely blamed for any suspicious events, Potter or you?

"The Dark Lord-"

"Keep your voice down!"

"The Dark Lord would never let Dumbledore touch me. Leave me alone, Snape."

"The Dark Lord will punish you and your father, if you fail. And who will take care of your mother, then? You might think you can do this alone, but you know you can't afford the risk of failing, Draco.” Then calmer, "Let me guide you, like I've always done. Only I understand your determination. I know this is your moment, your turn to finally prove who you are. And accepting guidance is a sign of wisdom, not weakness."

“I have a plan, it’s good... You can’t tell me what to do! I know what I’m doing, I must – I must –” Malfoy’s voice trailed off.

“Is your father aware of your mission?” After a pause, “Go back to your room. I have given a promise to your mother to help you do it right, and I’m not going to violate it.”

When Malfoy was gone, Snape stood on spot and waited. It occurred to Harry that he was counting through his teeth, seconds or steps or something, and after a couple of minutes he talked.

“Take that blasted thing off.”

For a brief moment Harry allowed himself the impossible hope that Snape was talking to himself, and was not aware of his presence before him. However, the silk sound of Snape’s voice was burdened with a temper that Harry feared it might burst if he didn’t do as he was told.

“How did you know?” he asked as he pulled the Cloak off his head and wrinkled it into a pile.

“You’re breathing too loud.”

“Are you going to Dumbledore? Can I come too?”

“I was going to my chambers, as a matter of fact. And you are not welcome.”

“What? Malfoy basically told you – you must tell Dumbledore – what if he’s... what is his mission? What is he planning to do? You can’t just ignore this like that! You must tell him!”

“Are you aware of how disgustingly annoying you are, boy?”

“If you’re not going to do something about it, I will.”
Snape bared his teeth as he strode close and grabbed Harry by the neck. Harry yelped. Snape narrowed his eyes, which in the dark of the night looked barely human.

“If you stick your nose in this we will both die, and it won’t be quick. I assure you that even if we don’t have to face the consequences of your endless stupidity, I will personally see that you have a slow and painful end. I will watch it happen,” he hissed.

And for the first time in months, Harry was afraid of Snape. The old certainty that Snape would definitely kill Harry if he could, was now back.

Snape pushed Harry back and turned around to leave. When he had reached the far end of the corridor, Harry heard the first clank from the Clock Tower.

“Happy New Year, then!” he said loudly, making sure that his voice sounded confident.

And although he didn’t get an answer, when he returned to his fire lit hearth in the Great Hall and sat on the stone floor, he found that the Gryffindor hourglass was slightly emptier than before. Shaking his head, he chuckled.

“What are you playing at?”

“Nothing, I’m not lying.”

“Give me that.” Severus snatched the Potions test from Potter’s hands and looked at it. And then he read it carefully. “You cheated.”

“I didn’t. Ask me anything you want.”

No, thank you. Letting Potter rub this on Severus’ face wouldn’t happen easily. Even better, it wouldn’t happen at all. Horace was being soft on the boy, and was falsely letting him believe that he was actually becoming good at Potions.

Horace was a stupid man, a fact which was known since Severus’ days as a student. He was the one to teach Severus the basics, but he had no knowledge beyond that. Severus knew what crept into the souls of those who secretly admired the Dark Arts while publicly pretended otherwise.

The boy’s complicated past was exciting Horace. He wanted to unfold it. Know it. And suddenly Potter was good at Potions. The invisible middle finger that had risen between Severus’ eyes was so tangible that his hands twitched at the temptation to grab and break it.

“You’re squinting,” said Potter, confused between grinning and beginning to worry.

“I’m reading,” Severus responded strictly.

While he was failing to teach Potter the simplest things, the boy was succeeding rather enthusiastically on everything others were teaching him. And here Severus had thought that Potter’s new motivation would make him pay some more attention in his class.

Stop.

“I didn’t cheat. You don’t believe me?”

“It is irrelevant, your Potions progress does no longer concern me. You failed in my exams and this is what you should be worrying about. If you look forward to taking Defence next year I suggest that you study harder. Or should I say just study?”
The fact that he'd failed a Defence exam shouldn’t be enough to turn Potter into a big eyed puppy. Then again, it was Severus’ fault that the boy had knocked on his door on a Sunday evening to show him a test.

Apparently only when you absolutely need to and cannot do otherwise was poorly comprehended. Still, he did make a habit of apologising every time before stepping in, as though skinning his guilt off himself before moving ahead to shamelessly share time with Severus was going to benefit Severus in the slightest.

At least, Potter’s sleep had gotten better. Or so he said.

“You graded the tests?”

“Yesterday evening.”

“How did I do?”

“How did you do, Potter? You handed me over a blank sheet!”

“I didn’t! I wrote three paragraphs for question five.”

Yes, although all it needed was a ten word answer. “You wrote three paragraphs on a subject irrelevant to the question.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “Yeah, I liked that subject better.”

“Then you will like your grade just as well.”

It was Potter who was running the school now, wasn’t it? It should be second nature for Severus to kneel before him and kiss his hem. Hooray for the masters. For the strong ones.

Perhaps he should host Potter a party. Gather the staff, the portraits, Filch, and make an accountable announcement of who was now the boss. He made a mental note of visiting Hogsmeade for conical hats and party horns first thing tomorrow morning.

Potter fished a book out of his bag. Severus did certainly not remember him bringing his bag with him, and was momentarily startled at the boy’s nerve to bring books along for what was supposed to be a quick visit. Packing away the horrifying assumption, he cleared his throat and waved his wand at the hearth, renewing the fire.

Potter’s Defence book was viciously thrown on his lap and he winced when it hit the wrong spot.

“Tell me what I don’t get, then. Tell me on what page the question's answer was or at least what kind of answer you were expecting. You have to stop waiting for me to guess what you mean for me to do when I don’t do it right, because it doesn’t work that way. I could be trying for years and with what you do I would still be ten steps behind and lost. And I still haven’t forgotten how you abandoned my lessons just when I was starting to get better.”

If he hadn’t abandoned them he’d have to fight for them, and fighting was not something he did unless he cared. Putting an effort so he could be burdened with Potter’s suffering companion again would be suspiciously excessive, let alone absolutely unwelcome.

His dislike for Potter was not going to change, not because of some tête a têtes that could only be described as a nightmare, not because he was just kind enough to fulfil Dumbledore’s plans, and not because Potter wanted it.
Severus disliked him. Abhorred him.

He stood.

“Get up.”

Potter did, although furrowing his brows. “What, here? Now?”

“Yes. I believe you said you’ve improved.”

Potter took out his wand and smiled, and all Severus could do was smirk back as he raised his own.

“Legimens.”
“You should move in. It’s a shame for those poor muscles of yours to get jaded, going up and down
the stairs every time you fancy a date with me. Oh, let me guess, you just might.”

Potter rolled his eyes and passed under Severus’ arm to get in the room. Rolled his eyes. Instead of
being ashamed. Severus closed the door. “If you somehow missed to consider it, I might desire some
privacy without your existence bothering me. Not that this should stop you from harassing me or
being a pain in” the arse “the neck, but it should at least make you feel obliged to disappear once in a
while.”

“You could pretend that you weren’t here and let me knock until I got bored,” Potter offered as he
sat on the sofa and took out a textbook. Translation: I don’t give a fuck if you don’t want me here,
here I am, deal with it, bring drinks, fuck off.


Even when reminding Potter that his thoughtful offer to assuage his sleepless nights was not in fact
an open invitation to sleepovers, he was incapable of adding the respectable amount of bitterness to
his words. He’d caused this to himself. And thus was being hit by a new wave of self-loathing.

It was the boy who insisted on spending time with him, yet that was not an excuse a wise person
would buy - and it did definitely not justify Severus’ permission to continue it. He was the adult here.
The professional. The one with the power.

The one that was standing still and staring.

“Professor?”

Blinking the horrors of reality away, he sat. And recalled something objectionable and rather nerve
racking. “What happened in Minerva’s class today?”

Potter shrugged and turned a page. “I don’t want to talk about it.” Then, "God, does everyone
know?"

Yes. “No, she informed me privately. Do you care to explain?”

It occurred to Severus that Potter had come here to escape from just that, and now he looked close to
breaking down. “Again? I was at Dumbledore’s office only two hours ago, sir, if you wanted to
listen to my apologies you should have come by and watch like half the students were trying to.
They were waiting just outside.”

He’d heard so. His Slytherins had laid it on thick, and in a matter of hours the school was bloating
with all kind of rumours and cliché descriptions of it. Right now, the tale had it that Potter
was snorting up lacewing flies in class or something. “I am aware, but what I haven’t heard yet is
your side of the story.”

thing I did this time, and how much I fucked it up. I... did. I can’t take it back or anything so there’s
no point in choking on it.”

“Language.”
“Yes,” he spat. And after sharply exhaling, he tiredly agreed, “Language.”

“Is the fact that you were caught sleeping in class so uneventful to you, then? I was under the impression that you were planning on becoming an Auror,” a job that you won’t stand hearing about once – if – you kill the Dark Lord and get done with it “and that since Christmas you’ve been sleeping well. For your own good, I deeply hope that you weren’t fooling me.”

The real question was: *Am I wasting my time on you?*

“No. Of course not, I – I wouldn’t do that. I think.”

He thought. How brilliant.

“I feel so embarrassed, actually. I don’t know how I’ll ever face her again." Leaving the book aside, Potter made a face before chuckling. "The last nights have been bad, that is all. You know, second term, everyone’s back, I guess I was stressed. When I don’t sleep at night I have to sleep at day, don’t I? And I wasn't planning on falling asleep anyway. My eyes were just closing. I told Dumbledore, though. McGonagall said she had to poke me with her wand to wake me up.”

Why was James Potter's son sharing this with him?

Ah. He'd asked.

A mistake to never be done again.

"She must be thinking that I don't respect her at all, and I do. Respect her. She was the first person I ever respected here. I fucked up. Messed up. Language. Sorry.”

Severus could feel his graveness and panic contort his features and was briefly besieged with a sympathy that had no place in his insides and should be instantly dismantled.

The hell with it.

“This is not an excuse, and you well know it.”

Potter nodded.

Severus went on. “The Headmaster is worried but cannot be occupied with your so-called... condition at the moment. You may now think that you’ve been through great pains but you have not. Life is cruel. A man only becomes what he believes himself to be, never what others believe of him. Do you want to be weak?”

Potter rolled his eyes. “I told you, I visited Dumbledore, I don't-"

"Do you want to be weak?"

No response. And then the boy was angry. Staring at something on the carpet, pressing his lips together.

"Do you want to be weak?"

"No."

“Hm. And yet you are.”

“I’m –”
“If you keep on telling yourself that there are certain things that you can’t do, then you will undoubtedly end up incapable of doing them. On the contrary, if you have the belief that you can do them, you shall acquire the capacity to do so even if you may not have had it at the beginning. You are falling behind for what, Potter? For Weasley? For Black?”

“Don’t.” Potter looked away, but at the sight of his fingers slightly trembling Severus took the courage to go on. He’d break him. If no one else dared to do it, he had to.

“Do you really think Black would take you in, then? Do you think you’d be a happy little family together? He never wanted children, Potter. He never liked you. He was only seeing your father in you, and was hoping for you to be like him so he could live again what he lost when your father died and he was sent to Azkaban. He’d either make a bully out of you or he’d be utterly disappointed in his best friend’s son.”

Potter shook his head, but said nothing. His eyes were glimmering.

“It is true, and you know it. Just as you know that despite everyone telling you that Diggory’s death wasn’t your fault, in fact it was.”

Potter shifted in his seat. Severus was fast. “Why share the prize? You could for once take something for yourself, but your kindness wouldn’t allow it. I’ve heard the story, you know. Everyone has. How you could’ve been faster, but didn’t. How you could have saved him. Why didn’t you, exactly? Were you too startled? Too afraid? Too weak?”

“Shut up,” Potter muttered, his voice barely above the faintest whisper. "There was nothing I could have done. Nothing. You'd... know that. If you were there. There was absolutely nothing I could have done."

*My point exactly.* The corner of Severus’ mouth twitched. Potter rubbed his face, looking away.

Done with this, Severus fetched the wine and poured himself a glass. Potter gulped what was left in the bottle and then handed it over to Severus.

“You’re a very sad bastard, you know.”

“Cheers.”
“I need a break.”

“You begged for this, changing your mind already?”

Potter nodded impatiently, still on his knees. A drop of sweat fell from his upper lip and he slowly stood, his knees trembling as he let himself collapse on the sofa.

“I did better. I did, didn’t I?”

Did better, by shielding his mind for five seconds. The melioration was too fascinating for Severus to bear. Practicing was supposed to alert Potter’s consciousness and prepare him for unpredictable attacks and possible impetuous outbursts. There was no denying, however, that he was becoming weaker and weaker every time he found himself ridiculously splayed on the floor like an acromantula in pain.

“It’s not enough.”

Potter mumbled something under his breath that Severus didn’t catch, but couldn’t have been anything better than “fuck off” anyway.

“Language.”


“You’re being childish.”

“Then let me be.”

Why the hell he had agreed to teach Potter, he didn’t know. It was bad enough that Dumbledore had forced him do it once; continuing by free will and behind Dumbledore’s back was not only reckless, but scandalous. They would get caught, sooner or later, for there was no way around it. Potter’s excuse would be the spontaneous spirit of his adolescent soul and his infamous nonchalance regarding rules.

As for Severus, there would be no such excuse for that matter, and his assistance would be seen as recruiting the boy to the Dark Arts. Or breaking his mind. Or fucking with it. Which in honest was all that was happening.

“Five minutes, Potter.”

“I need at least ten. Shush, I’m focusing.”

“Why, Potter. Do you wish me out of my chambers as well? Perhaps I should ask for permission the next time I desire to be in my sitting room.” However displeasing it was, Potter was spending half the night here anyway. Severus should demand rent. Or at least obedient servitude for a year. If Potter lived to see the end of the year, of course.

The positive end of this swaying thread was that at least he was exhausting Potter so mercilessly that the boy had no other option but drop dead asleep right after.

“Shhh,” Potter repeated, closing his eyes. His shirt was damp, stuck on his chest and armpits. How could a skinny boy sweat like a whale, was beyond Severus’s understanding. The boy had no fat to
burn. He was most likely wasting his muscles away.

Tired as he was, Potter huffed and grabbed his head in his hands, squeezing. Headaches were a common side effect after extensive use of mind controlling spells. Confusion was another, as well as dizziness and nonsensical verbalism.

At least the last part was attached to Potter since birth, so Severus would have a sin less to shoulder after this mutual torment was over.

“I’m ready.”

*I’m not.* Digging into that abused mind again? What for?

He mentally went through the list of horrors he was about to see and shivered in terror. Raise his wand, to watch the deaths of innocents. To watch the despair of the night and the pretence of the day, the disapproval and the hoot in the eyes of people he did not care about, tensing further at the reminder that Potter did. To see himself through Potter’s eyes and draw back frightened to death, or, as Potter would finely put it, *scared shitless.*

Because he didn’t want to know.

He didn’t.

And Potter’s manipulated psyche had ceased to amuse him centuries ago.

“*Legimens!*”

Potter did resist. The impedance was there, vivid and brushing near his magic as he pushed ever so lightly and then viciously into Potter’s scrambled blend of a brain. There were images he could not quite make sense out of; rooms and trees and mouths talking, laughing, chewing. Severus was in there too, but he found that he didn’t care, for it didn’t matter, and Potter was falling on his knees again holding his stomach as though it would drop on the floor if he just let it go.

“That will be enough for tonight. Get up.”

A gargling sound escaped Potter’s throat and he brought his hand to his mouth, spitting some blood on it. Looking at his own blood wide eyed, Potter tilted his head up for help, and all Severus could do was look back down in dread and let the chilling terror that attacked him stab his lungs. He closed his mouth just as Potter opened his to let more blood out.

“I - sir.”

Severus quickly kneeled down, not knowing what to do. What had happened? *Poppy. Not Poppy. Dumbledore. Bugger not Dumbledore I’m dead I’m sacked I’m dead -*

“Potter! Talk! Get up!”

Potter got hold of his shoulder as he covered his mouth with the other hand. He coughed hard, more blood spilling out, and his forehead landed on Severus’ chest.

“Potter!”

“Fuck.”

“Potter!”
He became aware of his vocabulary having been suddenly limited to a point where he could not prove himself helpful or even merely intelligent, and being willing to assist didn’t make any difference to his uselessly kneeling there and watching Potter throw up his blood.

“Can you talk? Potter! Get on your feet!”

“I’m…” choking to death? Blacking out? Dying? “…fine.”

The hero was fine. Just a tiny accident, nothing to worry about. An artery, yes. Split up due to exhaustion while being taught illegal dark arts. Yes, Professor Snape was with me the whole time.

He should begin composing his apology. Somehow, “it was an accident” did not sound very convincing for mindlessly breaking down the Wizarding World’s last hope.

“Get up.”

Trying to calm his own rapidly beating heart, Severus helped him to the couch and fetched a napkin. Potter accepted it and cleared his jaw.

“I bit my tongue,” he said with a hesitant look of shame on his face.

He’d bitten his tongue.

Severus was quite amused with his luck.

Under pressure, he’d admit that his sins were haunting him gracefully, and whatever deities were supervising his debts had to be pleased with his humility. Then again, he was most likely cursed. Were this a mystery he cared to solve, he was sure he’d find at least one voodoo doll resembling himself under a pentacle in someone’s house, with a Potter doll carefully pinned on him. It made sense.

“This is getting dangerous for your health. You already -”

“No.”

“Should the Headmaster -”

“No, we’re not quitting again. I want to do this.”

“You understand that I am responsible for whatever happens to you here, do you not?”

Silence. Deep breathing. Another napkin. Potter hadn’t seen his shirt yet, had he? It’d be a phenomenal plot twist to get caught walking like this back to the Gryffindor Tower. A student exiting the fascist’s chambers drenched in blood. This was getting better and better.

“I know. I’m sorry. I - no. Actually, I’m not.” Potter took a deep breath. “You won’t turn the tables so you can make this be my fault. I asked you. You accepted. And you accepted this, me, knowing how bad I’m at it. If you didn’t want me here, I wouldn’t be. You wouldn’t have let me.”

Some moments passed, which Potter interpreted as agreement.

And then some more, which he took with confusion. “You want me here.” His lips were as red as they’d ever be, and reminded Severus of squashed cherries. The blood made them appear swollen; moisture lightened the right corner. “Don’t you?”

“Get your things and get out, enough with that waste of time that you are. Your lesson is over.”
He strode to his bedroom and slammed the door close. Only when he heard the boy leaving, he let a long breath escape him.

“I have an idea,” said Potter as he brushed past Severus and sat on the carpet before the hearth.

“Although I was under the impression that your mental capacity of storing your happenings into memories hadn’t been affected, I was obviously wrong. Let me repeat this once more. The next time you will knock on my door uninvited I will request your expulsion.”

Potter nodded absently and took out a notebook. “Yes. So, I was thinking. Sir, sit down. I was thinking that I couldn’t concentrate because all I think about when you cast on me is to concentrate, and then I think of all the things I must not think of, trying to remind myself to not think of them. Does that make sense? Sir. Sit down.”

Like the fool that Severus was, Severus kneeled on the carpet and looked at the notebook Potter was holding. He only managed a brief glance before Potter closed it.

“So I realised that I must think of something instead of thinking of nothing. You tell me to focus and clear my mind but I’m not Gandhi and I can’t think of nothing so I must think of something, and even you, when you clear your mind, you actually think of what you want Voldemort to see that you’re thinking, so you pretend to think of something, so you do think of something.”

Severus was aware of his head nodding, erasing half of Potter’s sentences off the way to keep the conclusion.

“You must focus on something,” he said dumbly.

“Yes!” Potter grinned. “This is it. It’s Hermione’s. Arithmancy. Boring and full of numbers and stuff. So I’ve tried to memorise a page of random numbers and I want to try and recall them in the right order while you cast Legilimency on me and see what happens.”

He was torn between insisting on tossing Potter out and slapping himself for not having thought of this earlier. Severus didn’t speak for a long time. The contemplative silence of his made Potter slightly tense, although his eyes kept looking up expectantly. Pretending to not notice the part of his consciousness screaming that this was all a mistake, he took out his wand and struggled up to his feet.

“Very well.”

The I knew you’d agree beam on Potter’s face did not help Severus’ esteem, but he packed the realisation of his quickest surrender ever away and let Potter have it his way.

Severus cast the spell. As he thought about it, he couldn’t say why he was reluctant to try this. The little bugger’s expression was beyond ridiculousness as he focused his eyes on the tip of Severus’ wand and then screwed them shut as the penetration began. The invasion, rather.

Severus found himself amused as he shrugged off the particular life saving correction and concentrated on the task at hand. Three. One. Four. It was working. It was working because it was a cheap cheat doomed to fail due to idiocy.

Who’s idiocy, he couldn’t tell.

Potter’s idiocy.

He lowered his wand as the room around him returned to his vision range. “You utterly uneducated, illiterate, ignorant sod. Random numbers? This is Archimedes’s constant of Pi.”

He could just as well have told him that in Japanese, because Potter bounced and grinned as he urged Severus to try again. “Go on! Why did you stop? I did it, admit it! I did it, right? I want to try again.”

They tried again. And it occurred to Severus that it was working better than his own delicate techniques which he had tested at length for the best part of his adult life and had preferred to follow due to their exquisite effectiveness. Potter was wrong about the paths Severus was using to fool the Dark Lord, and it would only be suicidal to let Voldemort dig into his mind long enough to read a whole mathematical constant. It was something Severus wouldn’t risk.

Something Potter was succeeding at.

Ah, but weren’t Potters always a step ahead?

Only that Potter was now also three steps closer.

“Who’s Archimedes?” Hail the hero! The young women of England were eating their hearts out for the Boy Who Lived, and Potter was standing a breath away from a Death Eater struggling to buy time with small talk. Severus glared in contempt and inwardly shuddered the disturbance away.

Pretending to not having noticed Potter’s aspirations, he glared for another moment and then strode to his cabinet. “A mathematician. Care to toast?”

“To my success?”

“To your unconventional failure. You do find new ways to amuse me, after all.”

Although the old ones worked better.

Damn.

Potter took the glass from Severus’ hand and sniffed at it before scrunching his face. Fighting the sudden impulse to scoff at him that it was elf wine, not elf piss, Severus promised himself to irritate the boy later.

They sat on the sofa and Potter opened the notebook again, making a face when he found something. “Oh, you’re right.” Of course he was. About what though? “So what does that number do?”

“Many things, of which you are likely to appreciate none.”

Potter stuck his tongue out and Severus was startled into laughter. Some of his wine splotched his thigh and he tried not to think about the consequences of this new achievement that Potter somehow mastered. What would the new excuse be for the boy to keep coming back now?

Surely he’d think of something, and for the life of his, Severus couldn’t make a sensible hypothesis of why he had allowed it to go this far anyway, especially since he’d known from the very start that it was all a façade.

On the other hand, he hadn’t done anything wrong.

He had helped a student.
As soon as he decided this, his mind trailed to all the mean remarks he should throw at Potter to make even for this slip of character. Against his better judgment, he grunted his frustration off and let the sound of the fireplace take hold of his reality.

One.

Two.

“You don’t even know that this happens, do you?”

Not even three seconds of imaginary loneliness? “What happens?”

“There is this muscle on the side of your neck that keeps throbbing when you try to relax. I think it’s a knot or something, it doesn’t look very normal.”

Severus never had anyone comment on his neck before. “It’s been there for years, I’ve learned to ignore it.”

Potter took another sip, seemingly getting used to the taste. *What have I done?* “I’m not sure, but if it’s a knot of some kind it can be untied, you know. You probably bent your head too much down when you sit on a desk. I tend to do it too.”

It occurred to him that the boy needed an immediate lesson in hiding his intentions. If he intended to show up like this in the line outside the Ministry hoping to become an Auror, with all of his sentiments shown on his face, he’d barely survive a week on duty and then he’d get himself killed by the first street junkie he’d interrogate. At this moment, Potter could just as well stand up and shout *You have a knot! I volunteer!*

“What are you snorting at?”

“Mind your business, Potter.”

Potter chewed on his lower lip for a brief moment. “Um. May I try something, sir?”

*Here we go.* “No.”

“Just a moment.”

“If you move from your seat I swear I’ll hex you.”

“No, you won’t.”

Smiling like the idiot that he was, Potter shifted closed and Severus found himself too startled to protest when two strong hands gripped his shoulders and turned him with his back on Potter. Shrugging off his terror, he attempted to stand when Potter repeated *just a moment,* and Severus sighed in irritation and waited for the blasted moment to end.

A hundred points from Slytherin.

Fifty of them for being in an unsuitable situation with a student.

Another fifty for hissing.

“I know, I found it.”

“Be quick.”
Potter’s fingertips were warm and soothing as they moved in circular motions, and Severus couldn’t remember having ever been granted with the luxury of having someone do this to him. He was only vaguely aware of a confusing déjà vu as Potter continued, but he didn’t pay any mind to it because the boy’s palms dug into his shoulders and squeezed gently as the circulation returned to nerves that had been inactive for years.

_Bliss_, thought Severus of adding to the mental list with the conditions Potter could bring him into, and was immediately stunned by the simplicity with which his body reacted to the touch. Whatever discomfort he was expecting to experience under those hateful hands was forgotten forthwith, because the pressure was firm and disciplined, and Potter’s digits dug from just upon his shoulder blades to the skin behind his ears and caused the lightest of shivers on his arms.

He was aware of someone grunting and he realised that it was he himself who had produced the traitorous sound. Certainly, Potter had found his calling. Two thumbs pressed on his nape and he figured that Potter had parted his hair for better access.

“So, what do you think?” Potter asked calmly, if not encouraged. His fingers brushed so softly against his skin that Severus had to suppress another humiliating shiver that had assuredly nothing to do with Potter himself.

Because he despised Potter.

Gravely.

"Think?” If Severus had to pick his weakest moment, he would definitely chose this one, on which his voice broke to a huff because the most disgusting fingers in the world that belonged to the most disgusting person in the world had driven him in a state of ecstasy.

This was wrong. _What am I doing?_ 

“I believe my attempts at seduction are becoming better and better,” Potter said closer to him than Severus would have liked.

“Hardly. You need work.”

Potter responded with a chuckle, and directed the conversation elsewhere. “Oh. I’m not just good at Potions anymore. I’m actually the best in the Slug Club. Had you heard?”

“In between the largest disappointments of my life, yes, I unfortunately heard that too.” He bent his head forward to expose his nape better. This was so good it just had to be a sin.

“Are you jealous?”

Afraid of moaning, he quickly forced his tongue into responding. Only it came out as a murmur. “Very. Do you want your points taken now or in class?”

“You must give me a thousand points for this. Judging by how you haven’t killed me yet I guess I must be quite good at it.”

_Yes, do be amused, boy. You forget that you will be permanently forbidden from ever coming near me or my chambers again._

_Right after you finish._

_Until you intend to do this again._
He had certainly not just thought that.

“You’d wish, Potter. Are there even any points left in Gryffindor for me to take? I head Longbottom produced a miracle while casting a charm again.”

“Are you joking? We are seventy points ahead. We’re going to win.” Potter stretched the skin he was scrubbing and pushed downwards.

Severus hummed in response.

“No, we are. And second comes Ravenclaw. You’re not below Hufflepuff, are you? You weren’t yesterday.”

“Hm.”

“You are?”

Severus’ nostrils flared and he closed his eyes. “I’ve no idea.”

“Well if you are I guess you deserve it. It’s just gross that Slytherins are treated with sympathy simply because everyone is afraid to treat them properly. You punch a Slytherin and you’re in trouble. A Slytherin punches you and it was your fault for provoking them. Doesn’t make sense. Or does it? You are a Slytherin after all but you’re not pure blood, so -”

“Do you ever shut up, Potter?”

“What? Oh.”

“Hm.”

As all his tension drifted away, he couldn’t help but bite his tongue to keep his nonsense from reeling out. Most likely I watched your mother do this to your father and fantasised of skinning his neck and hanging him on a tree near the lake did not feel exactly like a fitting comment.

If only Lily could see him now, he’d be damned for eternity for being close to her pure and beloved son. He. A murderer. Did Potter even know that officially? Or had Dumbledore managed to hush it up to announce it in another great happy event?

Potter reminded him of Lily sometimes. His eyes, of course, but his exceedingly unique personality resembled her own as well - if vividly - when he was angry or feeling lost. Lily had a sharp tongue too, as she had a passion for defending others.

Then, there was James. Like the arrogant bastard that he was, he had to overlap Lily’s perfect genetics with his own spoiled ones - and here he was. With the outcome of this tragedy rubbing a knot on his neck.

It was a good thing that he reminded Severus of James. It made the illusions go away.

It was safer this way. Potter wasn’t Lily. No one was Lily. No one could ever take Lily’s place, no one could ever remind him of her that much.

...Lily would have never tried to keep him in her life like Harry Potter was trying.

“That's enough.”

“Are you going to say something rude again and send me away?”
Yes, I was planning to, thank you. “I…”

Goddammit. He tried to remind himself that this was Harry bloody Potter, the second generation of karma’s revenge against him for simply being. Somehow it didn’t help, and he couldn’t understand why he needed a reminder of that in the first place these days. “Potter…”

Potter’s hands steeled on his shoulders.

The moment had suddenly become complicated. His breath escaped him harsh. I’m not interested, you foolish child, he thought. He had no reason to state the obvious, so he dropped it.

“Professor?” Apparently though Potter hadn’t.

“It’s late. You should go.”

“Okay.”

None of them got up. Potter’s hands started moving again, and the touches were so light and supple that Severus closed his eyes and instinctively pushed back. The fingers crept inside his hair and he thought of protesting as he tried to remember how many days ago he’d washed it and if it felt as greasy as it certainly looked. The fact that it was Potter who was caressing his hair needed another moment to kick in, and when it did his mind screamed pathetically BAD IDEA, TOLD YOU SO right in his ear.

He made a mental note to agree with it in just a moment, and wondered if it was actually gay to let a teenage boy slide his fingers from the top to the ends of his hair.

Well. It was not gay if it was just a head massage.

Severus choked on his own spit so hard that his lungs almost exploded.

“Professor? Are you alright?”

Head massage, he tried to explain, but before it reached his tongue he changed it to “Yes, it’s late. Get lost.”
“Calm yourself, Potter.”

Potter raised his fist in the air in victory and kept babbling his self applause. “You're not the only student who was given an Outstanding in Potions.”

“Just so you know sir, if you’re trying to ruin my mood, you can’t,” said Potter in the middle of an epilepsy shock that looked suspiciously like dancing.

The test in Severus’ hands was covered in Potter’s hideous handwriting, which was impossible to read without narrowed eyes. However, all the instructions for the euphoria elixir were put down in the right order, and Potter had even included some methods that Severus himself regarded as clever and rather rare for someone to think of.

Eyeing the boy skeptically, he gave him back the paper and Potter kissed it twice before sitting on the sofa. He held it before him with extended hands, tilting his head from side to side. “Do you think I should frame it? I have some empty space above my bed, needs to be covered with something. Maybe instead of the Quidditch team photo I’ll hang this.”

“You have completely lost your mind.”

Potter’s head jerked up. “Why? It’s not as if I’m going to have an O in Potions ever again. I’d given up hope last year, and guess why.”

Severus scowled but said nothing. Sitting straighter in his seat, he waited for Potter to stop his childish celebration. There was a nasty secret behind this, Severus knew it. The boy was a tragedy when it came to Potions, and Slughorn’s interest in Potter’s company was not enough to make him falsely boost his grades. After all, the answers were right indeed, which only made the mystery more irritating.

The beast that gnawed Severus’ insides had nothing to do with the possibility of someone else teaching the boy what he couldn’t. His years in Hogwarts had proved him a talented teacher despite the student’s complaints. By their graduation they all hated him, but they had learned. The clever ones, at least.

“Tell me something, Potter. If a student who has repeatedly proved himself helpless in a particular subject takes a sudden upturn in it, and has the cheek to be happy about his fabricated grades, what do you think that I, as a decent man, should assume? Especially if this student is constantly courting his teachers?”

He watched in fascination as Potter’s face slowly fell and he suppressed a scowl. “Slughorn likes to talk to me about my parents,” he said strictly, although the fragility boiling under his controlled tone was beginning to crack. “The fact that I see him outside class doesn’t mean that he’s been favouring me or that he lets me cheat. I don’t cheat. My grades in Defence are only getting lower and lower while in any other year I was doing just fine, so your theory is rubbish. Maybe you are the one who can’t keep my interest or maybe you just want to see me fail.”

The impulse to laugh at how he was, in fact, able to keep Potter’s interest without even trying, was hard to hold back. "You’re hiding something, and I’ll find what it is.”
Potter chuckled. “You’ve been saying that since Christmas, are you going to figure it out anytime soon or should we discuss it again next year?”

Little wretch. Child. At the mention of the next year, Severus shivered. The boy was still smiling, so Severus assumed that Dumbledore hadn’t slapped him with the big news yet. Oh well. As much as he’d wish to have the chance to watch Potter’s face sink in terror as he’d be told the plans the deity called Albus Dumbledore had made and twinkle-signed for him, it was probably for the best that he didn’t.

The boy would come to him for consolation, because who else would know better than him to pick up the pieces of a broken soul and stick them back together? Still. Experience had shown that he fixed better what it didn’t pain him to see broken.

“You might as well spill it out. It is wiser to confess and apologise than keep up the tale and have to strip off it a few days before the year ends. The Headmaster would show mercy on you.”

“Oh, fine. I’ll tell you,” said Potter seriously. “But you’ll have to keep it a secret.”

He wouldn’t. But what could it be? “Go on.”

“I have actually created my own kind of Legilimency. So when I see a question on a test and I don’t know the answer, I remember that you do, so I just send my mind to look for you in the castle and while you don’t even know it I push into your thoughts and see all the boring potion details you have stored in there for no good reason and I copy them. But it’s a secret,” he added.

Severus blinked. “Five points from Gryffindor for your ridiculous sense of humour. And I assure you that my thoughts are not centred around potions.”

“No? And what do you think about, then?”

What kind of question was that? “Whatever a man thinks, Potter. Things to do, things to buy, things to report, things to teach. Things.”

Potter nodded, and it occurred to him that it was rare of Potter to give a quiet response. “And what do you think about when you’re alone?”

His heart froze. Potter though was relaxed.

“No one can hear us. I can keep secrets, you know.”

He decided to not retort. Perhaps keeping his silence would be enough for Potter to understand that he was heading somewhere there was no chance in hell they were going. He will stop this. The reasoning mantra he kept repeating lost its meaning soon. He gave Potter the glare. Apparently, his silence was taken as vulnerability.

“You might think I’m mad… but when I think about… no. Forget it. I’m sorry professor, I... shouldn’t. Do you want me to leave? I’m sorry.” Regretting his stupidity, Potter stood.


Crucio, if necessary.

“Nothing, forget it. I was being stupid.”

He was certainly not going to press this. He had already asked once. While he should have none.
It’s just… sometimes I have the impression… I have this impression. I don’t think I’m wrong.”

Thank Merlin for Potter not making sense. It was a god given gift. Now he’d go away and they’d all live happily ever after.

“When I think about you, I can’t help but think that you must be thinking about me too. Sometimes you look at me… you give me that look. But then again they’re not my eyes you’re looking at.” He broke into a painful chuckle. “I’m sorry, I can’t do this. I’ve already embarrassed myself too much.”

The door closed behind the boy just in time for Severus to breathe.

Severus couldn’t tell how many tests he had corrected when the knock came.

“Come in.”

“Sir.”

The little bugger looked up nervously and Severus was taken aback. He had to stop this. “Yes?”

“Are you busy?” Uncertainty settled around his features and Severus stepped aside. Potter threw his backpack on a chair and licked his lips.

“Well?”

“He’s in the room or Requirement. I saw him getting in there almost ten minutes ago. He’s up to something.”

Severus opened his mouth to tell him that it was not his business to spy on Draco. He meant to tell him that coming to his office uninvited was as annoying as visiting his chambers. His voice was caught. “Did he see you?”

“No.” The boy had gone too far this time. Severus had agreed to help him. Agreed to overlook his dirty little secret. Agreed to teach him despite Dumbledore’s restrictions.

Dumbledore's reasonable worries.

“Twenty points from Gryffindor for spying on my students. Dismissed.” As ironic as that was and as futile as it had become to take points from a boy who’d find cliché all the possible punishments he might receive, Severus tried. Eventually, Potter would learn to behave. Quite an optimist, Severus had become.

He occupied himself by pretending to search for something in his desk drawer until Potter left.

Only he didn’t. “Excuse me?” Merlin show mercy. “I said, Malfoy is in the room or Requirement. We’re wasting time, what’s wrong with you? Should I just go to Dumbledore?”

Severus sighed and closed the drawer with a bang. His head slightly bent over his desk-work, he chose to respond with honesty. “I advise you to stay out of this, or you’ll cause greater problems to the Headmaster and yourself. What my students do is under my supervision. What you do is not, so stop informing me and stop stalking me. Is that clear?”

“He’s been spending every night in there since the term started. Isn’t that suspicious enough to you?”
And Potter had been spending every night since term started knocking on his door for company, but that was most assuredly not suspicious at all. “You are dismissed,” he said again.

“Does Dumbledore know?”

Severus inwardly promised himself that this would be the last time he’d talk to Potter outside class. Outwardly, he fumed. “Ask him. Now leave or you’ll have to apologise to your Prefects for another twenty lost points.”

“I’ll tell them you were being a jerk like always. Or should I tell them that you’re covering up Malfoy’s dirty work?”

_Your opinion on the matter could not concern me less. You yet again speak of things you know nothing about._ On second thought, “Yes, do that. And watch us all die in vain. I imagine you’ll be proud of your Gryffindor honesty then, for once.”

“I’m always proud of my honesty.”

What honesty? Professor I can’t sleep so let me stay? Was that how honesty was formed in Potter’s head? The shape’s edges were rather shaky. Or rather Slytherin-ish. “Once honesty is attained, vulnerability is next. People are never honest. Make the start and they’ll ruin you.”

“I don’t care. You’re changing the subject.” Damn himself for advising Potter. And damn Potter for not understanding.

“There is no subject. There is business, and those who force themselves into it and end up destroying it. Whatever you think that it is what you have discovered there, I’m already aware of it. The Headmaster is too. You have no news to bring me. You’re just making a fool of yourself. Has it not even occurred to you that I might already know where mister Malfoy is? Or are you so careless that you spied on him and then you came downright here for all the world to see that you are conveying to me what he does?”

Realisation hit home and Potter blushed. Severus went on. “Do you think my students don’t keep a close eye to you as well? Do you have any idea how many of my students’ parents were ranked in the Dark Lord’s circle even before you were born? What it is that you think you might do, you, a sixteen year old student, that I haven’t thought of doing already? Perhaps the Headmaster is fine with you fishing secrets out of Horace’s alcohol stinking mouth, but you will not do anything more than what you’re ordered.” He took a deep breath. “This is bigger than you.”

Potter nodded, leaning back on the wall. His eyes narrowed. “Are these our tests?” he asked.

“Ravenclaw – Hufflepuff, second years.”

Potter nodded again. Then smiled that cheeky smile. “Have you passed anyone?”

“At least two of them,” he said quite amused. “But there are more to correct. You never know.”

“Classes are supposed to have thirty or forty students.”

“They do,” Severus agreed.

Potter laughed.

Severus had long ago ceased to be startled by the sudden absence of tension between them. He should have known better. A traitorous aspect of his perception understood that Potter was still
laughing. “I hate him,” Potter admitted after he had calmed down.

A brief protest that Draco didn’t deserve anyone’s hate was successfully swallowed down and he managed a straight face as he responded strictly. “Is that all?”

“Yeah, I’ll go. Are you sure Dumbledore knows?”

Draco hadn’t taken a shit Dumbledore didn’t know about this year.

“He does.” But you shouldn’t.

Potter stared at him and nodded. He grabbed his backpack from the chair and opened the door. “See you tonight.”

Were they arranging dates too now? As soon as the door closed behind him, Severus rolled up his sleeve and with the tip of his wand pressing against his Dark Mark, he contacted Draco.

See you tonight.

He would most likely see Draco tonight instead. See him cry and shout and curse him for trying to be helpful. Or at least pretending to. Tears shed not as a sign of weakness but as a sign of a pure heart. For an instance, he was torn between admitting that he was getting accustomed to helping boys their mothers could do nothing to help anymore and damning it all and letting go.

Then again, Harry and Draco were nothing alike. And by Harry, he meant Potter. Cursing himself for this mental slip up he took a moment to study his mark and then rolled his sleeve back down. Harry Potter’s mysterious existence had been occupying the best part of his life, and he was only now vaguely reminded of a time when interacting with adolescents was only a necessary evil and most assuredly a torture.

Not that he was by any means enjoying Potter’s company. The boy was irritating, living his youthful present as darkly and randomly as he could. An emotional mess, he was, uneducated, grim, and lost somewhere between his past and future. As one grows weaker one is less susceptible to suffering. Potter was strong, although he could not tell where his strength was coming from. And he was also weak, because his strength was uninteresting to him, his magic untapped, his brain untrained.

Draco and Potter were alike. It was a wonder they hadn’t figured that out on their own already. The many layers of doubting how much Draco really wished to join the Dark Lord were rather blurry, and the only thing that mattered now was that, willingly or not, he had joined him, and could do nothing but obey him. Once ranked, what was the point of looking back anyway? What could Severus change for himself, let alone Draco? He could not help him. He could only manipulate him. For the greater good.

As a passing thought, he decided that Dumbledore was rubbing off on him. He shivered.
He couldn’t tell Snape the truth. Let alone Dumbledore. The first time Snape had seen the map in Harry’s hands had been a nightmare, and he wasn’t so sure that this time would go any better. If the Marauders’ spells on it chose the wrong moment to make fun of Snape’s nose or hair, Snape would think that Harry wanted to mock him, and he wouldn’t listen.

Snape never listened. He kept insisting on what he thought was right until the world turned upside down. Harry was spying on Malfoy, but not out of stubbornness. Even Hermione refused to understand. "You're obsessed," she said a few days ago, and it wasn't the first time.

Under his duvet, he watched as Malfoy's tiny form faded into nothingness. What was in the room or Requirement? Or, what was Malfoy doing there? He could be using the room for anything. He could be training himself to cast the unforgivable curses.

Harry rolled on his belly and propped himself up on his elbows. Harry wondered if the castle could feel that it was being used against itself. Would it prevent Malfoy from doing whatever he was doing? Was he alone in there?

He checked the Slytherin common room on the map only to see the rest of the students sleeping in their beds. Trailing his finger over the dusty paper, he found Snape’s dot as well, sleeping in peace in his chambers. Snape had fallen asleep a couple of hours ago. Harry had resisted the urge to take advantage of his generosity and spared him the happiness of keeping him company. He supposed Snape'd be rather relieved.

Harry had spent the entire evening with Dumbledore, seeing old memories and discussing his understanding of them. Going to Snape for more torture would be idiotic.

“Lumos.” He checked the clock on the bedside table. He really should go to sleep. And he would, in five minutes. “Come on,” Harry whispered. “Where are you?” He tapped his fingers nervously on the map. Malfoy had to be somewhere. He'd have to show up eventually.

The Draco Malfoy dot popped up in a random corridor and headed down the dungeons. Harry pressed his lips to a thin line. Disappointment washed over him as Malfoy went back to his bed and his dot stopped moving. He folded the map annoyed and put it under his pillow. He closed his eyes. He couldn’t sleep.

He envied the other boys, who slept easily. Their brains must be so peaceful, Harry thought. The floorboards of their skulls well swept, and all the little monsters closed up in the trunk at the foot of their beds.

When he slid out of bed and wore his shoes, he wasn’t even ashamed. How could he sleep when he laid in bed awake and replayed all these worries? How could he sleep when there was a constant danger of Malfoy harming others? Or have Snape harm others? Harry had promised himself he’d stop caring. Snape was his professor. Professor Snape, an aspect of his mind chanted. Not Severus or anything else. Severus, another aspect protested. He could not help himself anymore. There was no point in pretending.

What he was taught and knew too well, was that nothing solved insomnia like a glass of regret, depression and self-loathing.

Except Snape.
The dungeons were freezing, and too late he realised that he should be wearing something warmer than pyjamas.

Ignoring his better sense telling him that he should disappear and pretend he didn’t exist until Snape forgot he ever met him, he knocked on the door.

When a minute passed, he knocked again. And then he dropped his casualness and began a rhythmic knocking determined to get an answer.

He got one, and it wasn’t great. Snape opened the door and grabbed him by his shoulder, dragging him in and shaking him hard. “Have you completely lost your mind, you insufferable little wreck, you arrogant, insolent bugger!” Harry was torn between getting angry and suppressing a smile as Snape shook him. Snape’s hair was wild, and he was wearing a nightgown, one of those plain traditional ones professors often wore at some of the portraits by the kitchen. “You’re turning up every miserable moment of my life and eat away my days, my hours, stop laughing, Potter, and now you wake me up in the middle of the night as well!”

“I was –”

“I didn’t ask you! It’s two in the morning! Some of us have to wake up in a few hours, if we want to see a salary any time soon!”

“Alright,” Harry said. Snape’s face was pink. Harry almost pitied him.

Snape let him go and Harry fought the urge to rub the sore spot on his shoulder. Snape was about to open the door again when Harry talked.

“Can I stay? You can go to sleep if you want. I won’t make noise. I promise. I can read a book or something. I couldn’t sleep up there. I won’t stay too long.” Since he came to Hogwarts for the first time, every night he was talking with Ron. Small talk about Quidditch or girls or Ron’s family were always helpful and made him forget the things that troubled him. And if he couldn’t forget, he could share. Ron wasn’t just a friendly ear. He was a friend.

Snape raised his hands as though to cosmically question his luck and left for his bedroom. “Make a sound and I’ll kill you,” he snarled before banging the door close.

Harry took off his shoes and made himself comfortable on the couch. Taking the Prince’s book out of his robe, he read.

Harry wasn’t sure how much time had passed when he yawned. The common room suddenly seemed a hundred miles away and he had the terrible suspicion that if he started walking now he’d never maintain that sleepiness again.

Battling between taking a nap on the couch and doing what was right, he decided on the latter. Pushing away the tempting comfort of his spot on the couch, he dragged himself to the door. To find it locked.


Shrugging, he came to the conclusion that this wasn’t his fault after all. Opening the door to Snape’s bedroom, he cast Lumos and saw Snape sleeping on his stomach on a large bed. He stepped closer and poked him with his wand between his shoulder blades. “Snape. Sir.”

Snape responded with a noncommittal grunt.
“You’ve locked the door.” Snape’s back continued moving as he breathed rhythmically. “Snape. You’ve locked me in and if I stay here you’ll kill me in the morning.”

He sat on the bed and gritted his teeth. This would seem so convenient next morning. Well, if Snape wanted to lock him in, he certainly wasn’t going to sleep on the couch. He lied down. The sheets smelled of Snape and of Spinner’s End. They were soft.

It was hard to ignore how much like assaulting Snape the whole scene looked like when he covered himself with the blanket and rolled on his side. Snape’s fingers were close to his own.

“I may be insomniac,” Harry whispered, “but I love sleep. My life has the tendency to fall apart when I’m awake, you know?”

Snape’s eyelids remained closed, and Harry closed his own too.

Harry woke up before Snape, and decided that this was most likely the miracle of the day.

The damp darkness of the room was accompanied by the smell of melted candles, and maybe some sort of curious fabric freshener. He took his time to let the place sink in; it was the room of a living person - the box in which a soul slept at nights and longed for at days. The carpet, as old as time, carried the usual red and dark green patterns all rugs and curtains in Hogwarts seemed to have. Lines twisting like snake tails; stripes twirling round and round, becoming snails, becoming tears of rain and exotic elephants and clouds. Nothing had character in here, but Snape.

Some people suck the life out of places, some people give life to them; some others, plainly co-exist with space, without interfering with it, without leaving or taking bits of anything.

Harry had managed to leave the bedroom without waking Snape, and spent the early morning studying the Prince’s spells. It was then, that he decided, to always take notes on books, despite the Library’s restrictions. A book is written once; an annotated book is written twice, and carries an extra mind on it.

Sitting by the fireplace, he thought. He reached conclusions and dismissed them too. He made decisions only to dislike them moments later. At the sound of the shower’s water running, he prepared himself and hid the Prince’s book just in time for Snape to show up. He stood up quickly and saw the man, now fully dressed, giving him a nasty look from the bedroom door.

“Why didn’t you leave last night?”

“The door was locked.”

“You should have woken me up.”

“I tried to. You wouldn’t even flinch.”

“Poor you,” Snape sneered. He unlocked the door. “Leave carefully, I don’t want anyone to know of this degradation. You have less than an hour for my class and I won’t accept excuses if you’re late.”

Harry grinned. “Yes sir!” He left before Snape could take points for mocking him.

As he ran back to the Gryffindor Tower, he realised that most students hadn’t woken up yet.

He buried the Prince’s book in his trunk and changed his clothes. He washed his face and brushed his teeth. He tried not to think of having to face the man so soon again as he combed his hair and
failed miserably to make it look decent. The sun shone brilliantly when Ron stretched and pulled aside the bed’s curtains. Their eyes met and Harry’s heart skipped a bit. The colours of the morning merged into neon pink and peach as they penetrated the window.

“Good morning,” Harry tried.

Ron rolled aside and sat up. He didn’t take his eyes from Harry, but the suspicious look he was granting him with made Harry wish he hadn’t talked at all.

“Slept alright?” If you don’t want me to talk to you I’ll stop, he thought, but didn’t feel strong enough to say it out loud.

Ron didn’t respond. Harry sat with Hermione at the Great Hall and listened through all the details of how she was not going to stand Ron’s silliness and how Lavender was the most uninteresting girl in the world.

“I don’t understand why he likes her,” she said as she spread marmalade on her slice of bread. “I mean, has she ever read a book? I’ve never seen her in the library, Harry. Not once.”

“I don’t think that bothers him,” Harry pointed out.

“And why would it? He's not any better, is he?” It was fun how she struggled to seem uninterested, although she was furrowing her brows whenever she looked at the side of the table Ron was sitting at. Ron, for his part, was discussing something with Dean while they both laughed. Harry used to do that with Ron too.

“Then they deserve each other.”

“Harry!”

Harry chuckled. “Sorry.”

“Oh! I almost forgot. Do you know Kevin Entwhistle?”

Harry shook his head and Hermione leaned closer. “Right behind you, Ravenclaw table. The blond guy sitting by himself.”

Harry faked a stretching and took a quick glance. “Red shirt?”

“Yes. That's him.” Hermione smiled cleverly. He didn't really look like Hermione's type. “I saw him yesterday morning while going to class. He was left behind by the rest of the boys and he didn’t notice I was looking at him. He was checking them out.”

Harry tried not to scrunch his face defensively. “So?”

“I think he might be, you know.”

Gay.

But even Hermione could not speak the word, could she? When had gay become a more difficult word than Voldemort?

“Have you ever spoken to him? He reads with me sometimes at the library.”

“Hermione, I didn’t even know his name,” he said. It was kind of her to try and give him a breath of fresh air, so he didn’t know why he was suddenly feeling trapped.
“You should meet him,” she decided. Harry had spoken to Ron this morning. Not that he’d gotten an answer, but dating a boy would be the cherry on top for Ron to completely hate him. He would be humiliated. The whole school would know. They’d all make fun of him.

Snape would make fun of him.

“Let’s go.”

When they reached the Defence class Harry regretted having stayed awake half the night. He was so exhausted and yet he felt like he was never going to sleep again. Snape opened the door and with a sharp look ordered the students in. This time he didn’t have to wonder about Snape’s bad temper. He flung himself into the seat next to Hermione and tried to avoid thinking.

“Before we start, I shall collect your essays,” Snape said coldly. Harry scowled as he was reminded of the essay he hadn’t finished. The scrolls soared into the air and landed in a neat pile on Snape’s desk.

Harry vaguely wondered why they didn’t offer coffee at Hogwarts before classes. Hermione had already organised her things and took out her book when Harry opened his bag boringly. Insomnia at nights and this hell during the day. Why?

“Twenty four scrolls,” Snape said coldly. “It seems that someone was too busy to study.”

Harry licked his lips in a well warded despair. “Sir.”

Snape looked at him instantly. The I knew it that was hovering over Snape’s head should be visible to anyone, really.

“I’m really sorry, I didn’t have time to finish it. I’ll bring it to you tomorrow.”

“Well, well, well,” sneered Snape. “Mister Potter has provided us a reasonable excuse here. He didn’t have time. Because as it is known Potter has a different schedule from his classmates.” Harry took a deep breath and continued looking at him calmly, although his insides were boiling. Snape’s dark eyes were shining with something that once Harry was sure was hatred. He didn’t know how to call it now. Worse hatred, maybe.

“As I trust that you are all aware by now, one cannot succeed in my class if one is not submitting everything in time. That would be a T for you, I think.”

Hermione gulped and jabbed Harry’s leg below the desk. It was a warning, but Harry wasn’t going to talk back anyway.

Snape started a long monologue about the inferi and the defence against them. Harry could do little to pay attention, so he rested his cheek on his fist and watched Snape lazily. Snape didn’t look at him. He could hear other people’s quills scribbling down notes and he willed his hand to open his notebook as well. He was tired, sleepy, and a slight panic had begun to take shape inside him. He had slept. Why was he so tired?

His mind was attacked by the urge to run to Dumbledore and force him expel Malfoy. Or have him roll up his sleeves in front of everyone at the Great Hall. Hermione would have to apologise, then. Ron too. Snape too. Hagrid too. He yawned in abandonment and smudged the notebook’s corner. Snape had stopped talking. Harry looked up.

“However nice of you it is to show up in my class, Potter, you seem to be too good for this. Is my teaching boring to you, perhaps?”
Harry pressed his lips together. Snape smirked. “What is the difference between inferi and zombies?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“You don’t know,” Snape repeated.

“He was just saying that!” complained Hermione in a whispering voice.

After all, Snape was still the same bastard. And he still had to attack him every time. It used to be frustrating. It still had to be. It shouldn’t feel amusing, or a regular part of the day. “Five points from Gryffindor, Potter. If you are to be yawning in my class I suggest you leave.”

Don’t say it!

At least don’t smile while doing so.

“I’m so sorry, sir, you see, I had trouble getting comfortable in bed last night, so, you know. I couldn’t sleep well.”

Snape’s cold expression wasn’t enough to fool Harry. He saw the momentary panic in the black eyes. I won. “I don’t see how this concerns the class. Another five points.”
"Ready?"

Potter let down his glass of water and nodded.

"Focus… Legilimens!"

"You should meet him," said Hermione... Cold air pierced his skin as the Dementors reached him… Dumbledore smiled at him kindly...

Severus stopped and Potter dropped on his knees, his hands buried in his hair.

"You lost control," Severus said.

"I lost control," Potter repeated, looking up from the floor angrily. "I've been succeeding at it for the past two hours and you haven’t made a single remark, but now that I'm dizzy I lost control."

"I can lie to you if you want me to," Severus said as he dropped on the couch. "But it wouldn't do any good to you. Your self-esteem would only grow worse." Potter’s self-esteem couldn’t possibly fall lower. But it wasn't Severus’ business to know that.

Or to worry about it.

Still on the floor, Potter rested his back against the couch and nudged Severus’ knee. "Sod off."

Ah. "And that would be –"

"That would be none points from Gryffindor, because you’re not supposed to be with a student after midnight and it’d be suspicious."

When had Potter become so cheeky? Perhaps a spanking was necessary after all. He shrugged off the terrifying thought and drank the rest of Potter’s abandoned water. "Do try and remind yourself what you’ve just said tomorrow morning. I’ll take those points the moment I see you."

Potter let a laughter escape between his panting. His shirt was damp again. "You think I’m getting better?"

He knew he was. He was just fishing for compliments. "Your little trick seems to be working," Severus admitted. Utterly unsatisfied for having to do so. Silently, Severus watched the fire crackle in the dim light of the room. He needed a shower. And privacy.

"Who taught you Legilimency?"

The people he hated. The interaction between them and him on a daily basis and the need to protect himself from the stupidity of the world. Dumbledore’s request to know everything and the Dark Lord’s madness to have it all. "I’m self-taught."

Potter’s head turned and his eyes looked at him quizzically. "Really?"

"I had to. And you have to too."

"You think Dumbledore doesn’t know? That I come here?" He brought the hem of his shirt up and wiped his jaw. Facial hair was not something Potter had a few months ago. A fade line was now
beginning to take shape.

“He knows,” Severus assumed. “He loves the games people think they play behind his back. Don’t fool yourself by thinking you’re getting away. He’s not the Headmaster only for the sake of offering you lemon drops.”

Potter’s head dropped on Severus’ knee and Severus had to keep himself from flinching. Loath though he was to admit it, it became harder and harder to protest against every line Potter was crossing.

He should have stopped this long ago. And he hadn’t. Crimes already done could only be accepted.

“When are we going to practice again?”

For there was not a crime, there was not a dodge, there was not a trick, there was not a swindle, there was not a vice which did not live by secrecy. Potter was all of that. He considered the question as Potter moved even closer until his body was pressed against his leg. He certainly didn’t think the boy needed daily practice anymore. Once a week was the best they could afford in secrecy.

Once again, he cursed himself for not informing Dumbledore since they began. It would be worse if he did now. “Let’s just be pleased that you succeeded today,” he said. A sixteen year old boy should think of more insignificant things than sealing his mind. What did other boys his age think?

Sex, Severus supposed, although his own adolescence was too distant to be sure, and he certainly was not the average role model of how teenagers behaved.

On second thought, Potter had to be thinking of sex as well.

Not when he was in this room, hopefully. If Merlin was merciful enough.

An optimistic voice echoed inside his mind that Potter had already forgotten the summer madness and had moved on. The head still resting on his knee told him otherwise.

The fact that his pillow smelled like him was another reminder of the man he once was and the depraved beast he had now become.

The years of bitterness and hatred told him that if he wanted to get rid of something he could do it easily. If Potter was still clinging to his life, it was because Severus had allowed it to happen.

_I don’t want this._

He jerked his knee as though shooing away an annoying fly. “Go.” Potter stretched and stood.

“You sure?”

_What?_ Severus glared at Potter, feeling lost.

Potter chuckled and shook his head. “Never mind. ’Night, sir.”

It had become a fixed attitude. A second nature, one would assume. Potter was finding his way to his chambers more and more often. There were no excuses or apologies. He’d knock on the door and Severus would open to meet thin air and feel the swift of fabric slide past him and into his room.

The fabric of a cloak that once belonged to James Potter. James Potter, whose son was happily inviting himself over into his private space whenever he could. Harry Potter had been the Chosen
One to mercilessly skin Severus from his right mind.

He surrendered, because fighting would only make this harder. He held the door open, again and again, waiting for the boy to throw off his cloak and give him a cheeky smile. Or a sad glare. Or both. Legitimacy, he told himself strictly, was the reason the boy was here. The reason Potter’s scent was rubbing off on his carpet and his couch and his own clothes. It took a lifetime to perfect his attitude towards evil, evil had formed itself around him so slowly he had barely noticed it until he could breathe no more. Interesting how this particular evil looked nothing like the evil he’d known and fought and too long ago had adored. This was new, painfully new to him, and it came with the feel of soft grass and the warmth of the sun over his face and heart. It came with the scent he had chosen to name "Harry", although it would be wiser to name it danger, or sadness, or even loneliness or pitiful abjection.

He accepted all of it, and watched it grow around his lungs like a climbing plant with sharp spikes and poisonous roots. His hate was keeping him alive.

“I need another parchment.”

“You’ve filled the first one?”

“No. I’m going to rewrite it.”

“First drawer on the desk.”

Potter nodded and got up from the couch. He returned with two spare parchments and began writing his essay. “It’s going to be the best essay of the year, just so you know.”

“Pity I’m not going to grade it, then.” Severus turned a page of the book he was reading.

“No, I mean it. Just wait and you’ll see.”

“You may be the next Dostoyevsky for all I care. You should have turned it in two weeks ago. We are three chapters ahead of this already. I regard whatever you’re writing there already invalid.”

“Jerk.”

“Watch your tongue.”

“Yeah.”

“Insolent whelp.”

“I saw Hagrid today.”

For although there were other adults in Hogwarts absolutely willing to shoulder the Golden Boy’s angst, it was Severus who got lucky enough to actually have the honour. An unnecessarily large amount of possible explanations came to his mind and he was momentarily stunned at the assumption that Hagrid’s hideous beast collection was probably less dangerous for the boy than Severus.

“He said I’m never out of the castle anymore. And he thought I was angry with him. Because I stopped visiting him.”

“Fascinating,” sneered Severus.

There was a reason he disliked teenagers. There were full of misleading hormones, false assumptions, and wrong decisions.
Were your decisions better?

They most likely were.

He'd made up for his errors. Most of them. There were some things he could not fix, and only now he realised that they could maybe be left behind instead. He was surprised at how distant Lily’s memory had become. Potter was making him forget.

Her son.

Lily’s boy.

The creature born from her and his most hateful, worthless enemy. The proof that James had touched and kissed her and made love to her. The proof that James had managed to steal away from him the only person in the world that didn’t think low of him.

Welcome to the wonderful world of jealousy, he thought. For the price of admission, you get a splitting headache, a nearly irresistible urge to commit murder, and an inferiority complex.

He fixed his eyes on Potter who was furrowing his brows as he was writing his essay, and as hard as Severus tried to see Lily or James sitting there, at the far end of the couch, for once, he couldn’t. The pleasure of seeing Lily in those eyes and James in the horrid behaviour and cheek, the pleasure of remembering through Harry Potter had been taken from him, because there were now new things to remember. It felt like losing interest in older memories meant losing the memories themselves, as if the things he’d think of Potter in the past were less real and important.

“Fuck.”

Severus turned his head to witness the bottle of ink spilling itself onto the cushions of his couch. He gave Potter a look that hopefully promised death and stood. “Go on, Potter, destroy everything while you take advantage of my generosity, I don’t mind!”

“I know you don’t.” Potter said as he waved his wand over the mess. Severus rolled his eyes. “Do you even know how you were looking at me? You’ve been frowning and glaring at me for the best part of the last hour. It’s not my fault I got distracted.” He grinned.

And was denied an answer nevertheless.

Severus sat back down and decided that the moment his eyes would leave his book, he’d burn them. He read a page. The contents of which completely escaped him. Read it again. He felt Potter’s eyes boring into him.

“What is it?” he snapped.

Potter shook his head. “Nothing you’d like to hear.”

“Then finish your work and get lost. It’s late.”

“It’s been later.”

Yes. Do mock me. I deserve all of it.

Therein lays the problem.

“There is that guy,” Harry started. “Kevin Entwhistle. Do you know him?”
Snape waved his wand and two glasses of water landed on the small table in front of the couch. “What about him?”

Harry threw his cloak aside and pulled off his sweater. “What do you know about him?”

Snape shot him a quizzical look. “What do you want to know about him?”

“I’ve heard he’s gay.”

Snape raised his brow. “And you somehow assumed that I might be able to confirm that.” Harry opened his mouth to respond but closed it again as Snape stepped closer. “You might be surprised, but I do not gain any satisfaction by discussing sexual issues with my students. More specifically, I resent it.”

Harry could tell his cheeks were flushing red and he dropped his gaze. “Right. Shall we start?”

“You’re early. Sit down and wait.” Harry took out a random schoolbook and waited as Snape went over some exam papers. After a few minutes, the silence annoyed him.

“You think I should talk to him? I know you don’t care and I’m irritating you and stuff, but what’s your opinion? What if he isn’t gay after all? I’d look stupid.”

“My opinion is,” said Snape without looking up, “that I couldn’t care less. Bother someone else with your affairs.”

Not likely. There was a certain amount of embarrassment he could endure yearly, and this year’s peak was already sadly close. Better embarrass himself where he was accustomed to being humiliated. “He doesn’t even play Quidditch. I can’t just go and bother him.”

“You can, just like you bother me constantly.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “It’s not the same.”

Snape didn’t say anything for a few moments. Then, he carefully released his breath. “And why is that?”

“I feel more comfortable around you.” The coy smile he offered was ignored.

Snape frowned. “Your comfort equals my disquiet, I think,” Snape said. His voice was suddenly a bit hoarse.

“It’s only with you that I feel myself.” The heaviness of the truth he blurted out seemed to click something inside him, unlocking a fear of judgment he was not aware of having.

“Spare me the sentimentalism or I might vomit,” Snape spat. “You are being attached to whomever you can. Hogwarts has seen to it, no one stays lonely for a long time in here.” Well. As close to a thank you as he could get.

Harry knew what Snape was talking about. He wasn’t sure if it was the castle that was doing it, or if it had nothing to do with magic, but it seemed that there was a place for everyone and that sooner or later everybody fit. Snape had once believed that his place was with the Death Eaters. Harry briefly wondered if things would have occurred differently if Snape had been sorted in another house. It occurred to him that at some point in his life, Snape had to be proud of being a Death Eater.

He watched the pale fingers as they moved over the papers. The quill elegantly clutched between
them. The wrist covered with the long sleeve of the coat. Had Snape ever killed anyone? He unclenched his teeth and relaxed. He wouldn’t torture himself over this.

He considered Hermione’s suggestion and felt rather relieved he hadn’t accepted it. “Perhaps Kevin isn’t gay. Besides, I don’t think I'm into blonds.”

“Touché. Now let me concentrate.”

Harry snorted as he shook his head.

He considered practicing Quidditch alone right after, but the sun was still up in the sky and Harry had trouble coming all the way down here without sweating. It was a particular hot day for this early in the year. The hearth was unlit for the first time in months, and even Snape had unbuttoned the first button of his coat. It'd feel nice to ride his broom again without the pressure of the team.

He leaned over Snape’s lap to take his glass. Snape grunted and visibly held his breath until Harry sat back on his seat. It occurred to Harry that these moments were what was keeping him happy for the rest of the day. And the night.

“Are you clearing your mind?” asked Snape cautiously.

“I was actually thinking that this can’t be replaced.”

Snape blinked. “This?”

“This.” Harry waved his hand between them. “I don’t care to date someone. This is enough.”

And now Snape’s eyes were darting in panic between his own hands. Harry wondered if he had gone too far.

“Give me a minute to clear my mind.”

“You have it.” Snape cleared his throat and took out his wand.
To Be a Fool: Rumours

The water hit his skin.

A thick cloud of steam formed around him as he stood there without moving at all, the voices banging in his head. They said the same thing, over and over again, how much clearer could it be? *It's alright, Harry.*

It wasn’t. He was supposed to be a good seeker. His skin was burning from the mellow droplets morphing into sharp little blades of fire. He closed his eyes and the hot steam enveloped his body. As he washed the shampoo off him, he let his mind melt into a puddle of nothingness that hid no concerns and no fears.

He thought of Ron, who had avoided him as they practiced, and never directly talked to him. He let the thought escape him and didn’t try to retreat it. He closed his eyes against the world and everything that troubled him. He opened his eyes to the bang of the door as the last person exited the shower.

No one risked staying alone with him in the showers anymore.

When he reached the Great Hall, the dinner had begun. Hermione wasn’t pleased. “Your hair is wet. You’re going to catch a cold.” She cast a drying spell on him and went on about her day. At first, Harry was satisfied to see her on the Gryffindor table, but now she was suddenly eager to have a detailed conversation about Valentine’s Day and how Ron and Lavender were not being seen together in public lately. Harry felt rather uncomfortable discussing this, and would happily avoid it.

Foregoing the possibility of the dungeons leaving a cynical mark on him, he smiled and reassured her that it was going to be okay. As most of the students were beginning to finish up, smaller groups of people were being formed, not minding much if they were sitting at their house’s tables or not. When most of the Ravenclaw students were gone, Luna came and sat next to him.

“You look as sad as a dog with no home,” she told him, and Harry was taken aback by her blunt honesty.

“I’m just tired,” he assured her. Luna’s smile didn’t fade.

“Have you told him?” she asked Hermione. Hermione frowned just as Harry turned to look at her.

“Tell me what?”

Hermione took a deep breath. “I don’t even think it’s important anymore.”

“What?” Harry asked impatiently.

“Do you remember Romilda Vane?”

Harry nodded.

“She used to have a crush on you. Actually, she and *all* her friends had a crush on you.” No news here. He glanced at the high table and saw Snape and McGonagall getting up. “A few months ago, I heard them saying something about making you fall in love with them, you know. I think they dropped their plans when… well. They dropped them. I caught Romilda in the bathroom yesterday with another girl and she was saying that she might… that she still has plans.”
Harry gave her a “you’ve-got-to-be-joking” look. What was so important about that? Romilda hadn’t talked to him in months.

Hermione dropped the subject immediately as she spotted professor McGonagall leaving the Hall and she hurried behind her. “Professor!”

McGonagall looked at her through her square spectacles and smiled when Hermione reached her. Harry brushed his fingers against the table.

Confused, he turned to Luna. “What isn’t she telling me?”

“What’ll make you sadder,” she said casually.

Harry stared at her with a blank face. He didn’t have to say go on.

“Remember the rumour that you’ve got a Hippogriff tattooed on your chest? The new rumour has it that you don’t like girls. Romilda wants to prove that you just haven’t met the right one yet,” said Luna serenely.

He stared at her, unable to deny the rumours, unable to think of a lie, incapable of anything but clenching his jaw.

“I think it’s interesting, though,” beamed Luna. “People never say anything about me, because they don’t like me enough. A classmate asked me my name the other day.”

Harry nodded, lost in his thoughts. Luna peered at him and he sealed his mind defensively just like Snape was trying to teach him. Luna’s large eyes had always had something strange in them; a glimmer that often made people feel uncomfortable around her. If she wasn’t a mind reader, she was certainly clever. In her own way.

“This… rumour. How many people believe it?”

Luna touched his arm sympathetically. “A lie can run around the world before the truth has got its boots on, Harry. Although the truth runs pretty fast too, Dad says.”

Harry grunted in agreement but didn’t respond. His mind was racing. Didn’t this mean that he had messed everything up already? He knew what people thought of... this kind of men. He could recall what aunt Petunia thought of them. His classmates weren’t reacting any better.

“I don’t understand why they’d think that,” Harry heard himself saying defensively. Luna shrugged lightly and for a moment Harry was sure that she knew everything.

“People that criticise us are the same people that don’t know the price we paid,” she informed him.

He looked down at his hands, which he clenched and unclenched nervously, his face heating up as the shame spread inside him. After a moment, he looked up at her again, still unsure of what to say.

“I preferred the tattoo rumour, I think.”

“Girls preferred it too,” she pointed out. “Ginny is dating Dean again,” she added.

If this was supposed to make him jealous, it didn’t. His memories of kissing Ginny had been gracefully packed away from his mind and he did not plan on picking at them anytime soon. It wasn’t the lack of any physical or emotional attraction that repulsed him so much as his own ingratitude towards her.
“That’s nice. I mean, I’m glad she’s okay,” he said, which was not entirely a lie.

He needed Snape now. All these things that were going on outside his chambers could only be described as Snape chose to name them: childish. Harry didn’t feel like being with people his age anymore. Here, he was exposed to a life he didn’t care to live. Not like that. Not in this kind of unfair secrecy.

“Hermione told me that she is indeed,” she said happily. “It felt nice that Hermione told me that. It was like having a friend, even for a bit.”

Harry nodded nervously, trying not to look scared by the news. He felt hate for the way he was. No matter how hard he had tried to dismiss it though, it was only growing stronger, and he was too weak to change or fight it. An aspect of his mind knew that he didn’t really want to. How did he even know he was gay? Why was he so damn sure?

“You think my clothes are ugly?” asked Luna after a moment.

Harry blinked his panic away and looked at her. She was wearing her common Ravenclaw robes, but underneath there was a pink shirt with an “ALIENS KIDNAPPED ME” logo.

“I don’t think they’re ugly,” he said carefully. “They’re... interesting.”

Luna smiled at him in surprise. “You don’t think I should buy another shirt? I’ve been mocked a little for it today. Unfortunately though, nargles stole my wardrobe away last week. It’s the only shirt I have left.”

Harry shook his head disconcerted. “What? No, I – Luna, you wouldn’t be you if you wore something else. It’s nice.”

She beamed as he had never seen her before. “Well, thank you, Harry! I’ll be proud of it then.”

As she exited the Hall, Harry thought about it.

Then he smiled.

“They were the brightest students, Harry, the best of them!”

“Well, sir, I think you were inspiring them too,” Harry said. As they walked further and further away from the castle, the forest came alive with the layers of sounds echoing in the cold morning air. Little frogs croaked under large, broad leaves. The webs were stringed with delicate drops of morning dew, glistening in the first shards of sunlight. While the students’ laughter and shouts were fading behind them, Slughorn and Harry enjoyed the nature.

“You’re right, I was. You see, my students always liked my company. Like you, now. But only the best of them joined the Slug Club in the end. I treated all of them well, but I had to be picky,” Slughorn said softly, looking over at a singing bird. “The Club was an innovation, I dare say. Hogwarts’ rules were anachronistic, very old fashioned for my taste. It was a pity.”

“I’m sure the members of the Club felt honoured for being special to you anyway,” said Harry, reminding himself that he had to make Slughorn trust him. “Not all professors respect their students like you do. You see them for who they really are.”

Harry’s shoes were splotched as he accidentally stepped into a small puddle of mud.
“Be careful there,” said Slughorn. “Your mother was one of my favourite students, of course I
must’ve told you that already. Brilliant, she was. And a bit audacious too, if you ask me.”

Harry smiled at the mental picture of his mum talking back to a professor. “She was in the Slug
Club,” he said.

“Her talent in potions was unique. She and Severus were preoccupied, they’d always come up with
extraordinary, unique ideas. Once, I thought I caught them copying each other’s papers. They told
me they were just arguing over the name they’d give to their newest melting potion.”

Harry’s steps slowed. “I’ve heard she was friends with professor Snape.”

“The best of friends,” Slughorn said keenly. “When Lily left the Club, Severus was lost. He didn’t
know what to do with himself.”

Harry kicked a stick and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Why did she leave?”

Slughorn looked ahead and his shoulders squared a little. After a moment, he sighed. “The dark
times... they began just in time for my pension, but I did have time to witness the very start of it.
Many thought that Slytherins were not to be trusted. Stupid rumours, they were.”

Rumours, Harry thought. He remembered how his mother accused Snape of befriending Death
Eaters in the memory he had seen last year. Perhaps she didn’t want to see him at all anymore. Had
she left the Club because of him?

“How come they were so close though? I mean, they did have a fight at some point, I’ve heard.” He
wondered if it was safe to ask Slughorn such questions.

“I believe they knew each other before Hogwarts, were neighbours, family friends, something like
that – but how could I remember? It’s been years. So many years,” he added to Harry’s questioning
look. It was as though an invisible hand had twisted Harry’s intestines and held them tight.

“So, you think they were...” he trailed off, unable to finish his thought. He felt his cheeks
reddening.

Slughorn laughed. “No, no, I don’t think so. You see – back then, it was already too defiant for a
Slytherin to befriend a Gryffindor. Besides, everybody knew that Lily was in love with James
Potter.”

_In love_, Harry thought. “I thought my father had fallen in love with her first.”

Slughorn patted his back and Harry tried not to flinch. “I don’t know the details, my boy. I’m sorry.”

“You taught Tom Riddle too,” Harry found the nerve to say at last.

Harry didn’t know what normal love felt like. He loved Hogwarts, which was a castle, and he loved
Hermione and Neville and Luna, because they were his friends. He loved Ron and Ginny although
he didn’t have the right to.

He didn’t know how falling in love with a girl was like. This was something Ron would be familiar
with, especially when he kissed Lavender on the mouth and when he snogged her in the corridors.
Hermione probably knew too well what falling in love felt like as well, because if it wasn’t blunt
jealousy what he felt for Ron’s affair, Harry didn’t know what it was.

What Harry felt, had nothing to do with all that. Snape had made him open up when he didn't want
to let himself out. He'd helped Harry breathe when he was lost and confused and had helped him see that it was possible to feel accepted again.

He shivered in anticipation for his next Occlumency lesson. It was still hard for him to accept these feelings as real, and when he was away from Snape he could easily convince himself that everything was merely in his imagination.

The way his heart was beating when he knew he would finally see Snape again always told him otherwise.

They returned to the castle just in time for Harry’s next class. Harry could barely concentrate, and after giving Dumbledore a not-too-detailed report about what Slughorn had told him, Dumbledore showed him another memory of Voldemort’s past. Harry spent his evening discussing with Dumbledore and digging deeper into the past of his parents’ murderer.

“I’ll find out,” Harry promised. “I think he trusts me now.”

“He does.” Dumbledore said. "He trusts you."
“Again,” Potter said.

Severus lowered his wand. He cringed at the thought of having to do this again. He could feel an invisible whirlpool suck his vitality and slowly suffocate him with a firm hand squeezing his throat. A hand which most likely had to belong to justice.

“We’ll take a break. You may sit.”

Severus quickly disappeared from the boy’s sight to the safety of his bedroom and then his bathroom; he closed the door behind him and locked it. Opening the faucet, he let the cold water soothe his fingers. The red nail marks on his palm, caused by clutching his wand tightly for the past hour, were barely relieved.

Exhaustion never struck him so profoundly. His head ached, his eyes burned, his arms and legs were sore. Exhaustion without reward was torture. Severus knew how to deal with torture that involved a reasonable amount of death and unfairness, yet he didn’t know how to deal with this one. He splashed cold water on his face and felt his muscles twitch their tension in protest. He rubbed the bridge of his nose and wiped his face.

His eyelids were closed as he emptied his bladder and the only thing he could imagine was his bed waiting for him. And Potter waiting for their training to continue. And having too little time left to sleep well until morning.

He returned to his living room and Potter jumped up at once.

“Ten more minutes,” said Severus. “And we'll call it a night.”

Potter raised his wand at him and waited. His green eyes were fixed on him. Severus narrowed his own. “Legimimens!”

And into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Being into that abyss of sadness and abstraction again, Severus focused his eyes on Potter until the room decomposed around him and he dove into thoughts and feelings that hit him with a violence he didn’t deserve. Glimpses of Potter’s youthful heart smashed against him and he withdrew appalled.

“You’re not emptying yourself from emotion. Why must I repeat myself every time?”

Potter pulled his head up from the floor and stared at him “I am – I am trying –”

“Trying what?” he snarled. “To cause me a breakdown? You’re close.” He offered his hand and Potter took it. It occurred to him that Potter was perfectly capable of standing up by himself. He made a mental note of rewashing his hand later.

“It’s – were you seeing my thoughts? Because I think I managed to – I had control, right?”

He had, for the best part of it. It wasn’t his thoughts Severus was worried about. “Your emotions betray you. They take control of the situation when you cannot. Sharing emotions may cause greater danger than sharing thoughts.”
Potter was once again drenched in sweat, giving him that “I’ll-make-you-proud” look that Severus could only interpret as a joke. “Nice try,” Potter said. “Do you even know what emotions are?”

Severus curled his lip in nonchalance and aimed his wand. “*Legimens!*”

Emotions were a malicious curse. They could enslave one’s mind, betray one’s roots, dominate over everything a person was and turn them against their better sense for the sake of the heart. What Severus knew, was that such idiocy could only leave a heart crippled.

“Fuck!”

“Patience. Keep pushing. You’re letting me in.”

Emotions couldn’t be described by single words. Severus didn’t believe in sadness, joy, or regret. Maybe the best proof that language was problematic was that it oversimplified feelings. It made them look harmless.

“Stop!” Potter fell forward once again and Severus made a mental note of teaching him how to maintain his balance before letting him storm over to a war.

“Feeling tired, Potter?”

Potter’s glasses slipped down the bridge of his nose. “It’s not easy you know!”

“If it was you wouldn’t be here.”

Potter looked up and his eyes darted for a moment at Severus from head to toe. A look of embarrassment crossed his face and he froze in spot. Trying and failing to hide a cheeky grin, Potter got to his feet.

Resisting the impulse to ask what had just happened, he glared. “You should try harder than this. Master yourself or let your emotions destroy you.”

Potter nodded, his features a mixture of shock and holding back laughter. “I’ll try harder. Come on.”

Potter’s eyes weren’t completely focused on him. Severus cast the spell and the first sentiment that hit him was awkwardness. He was aware of Potter’s heart pumping blood with all its might.

“Are you even aware of how easily you let me in?” he snapped. He scowled in indignation at the boy’s irresponsibility. Potter gave him a look that suggested that he was trying to be serious about this. Severus doubted it. “What’s wrong?”

“Um. It’s not my fault sir – it’s – um – external. Factors.” Potter’s face was blank.

Severus, however, was close to snapping. “Then maybe I should read your mind and see what kind of external factors these are.”

Potter nodded to himself once. “Concentrate!” They tried again and Severus felt no resistance when he casted. Potter’s mind was exposed; it had no strength nor belligerence against him. The barriers were barely perceptible before they collapsed to his magic. Severus should be sleeping.

“Pathetic.”

“Sorry.” Potter stumbled back and looked anywhere but at Severus.

“Am I giving up my nights for this, then? Or is it all an excuse to you? Immature though you may be
“Don’t start, I got it. I’m bollocks at it, I’ll try harder.”

For a long moment they stared at each other, and then Potter blinked. The corner of his mouth quirked and Severus wondered what could be the excitingly humorous thing that he was missing. Severus had little faith in fools, despite his life clinging to them.

“Alright?” he asked in a low voice.

“Yes,” Potter said, suddenly too serious. “Do it.”

He did it, and then he did it again.

“If you just let me do it my own way –”

“By using tricks.”

“By thinking of something intensely! As though your ways are any better, not that you’d ever let me succeed at something you hadn’t thought of – don’t even pretend it didn’t bother you, I saw you! I do it my way and it works, I do it your way and I fuck it up because your way just sucks!”

“Talk, talk, talk: the utter and heartbreaking stupidity of words.” Severus snarled.

“Oh come on!”

“You are not trying hard enough! Your attention is easily distracted as though this is a game you can play whenever you see fit! Blushing and frowning won’t get you anywhere, I’m afraid,” he barked. “You may fail at everything you try and let all your attempts be wasted for all I care, you may even let the Dark Lord possess you and take you, but for the last time, you will not make a fool of me.”

There.

At this moment, Severus could safely admit that he was pleased with himself. His righteous sense of dignity watched from the far end of the room and slowly clapped its approval. He almost expected the words poise restored to hover above his head.

Potter rolled his eyes and with a fearless demonstration of swiftness he closed the distance between them and tugged at Severus’ belt with his fingers. Before the sheer terror could successfully sink in, and as the blood was drenched from Severus’ face and heart in an attempt to block out the grip of panic, Potter grabbed his fly with his other hand and pulled the zip up.

“Don’t leave these undone again if you want me to concentrate,” Potter said bitterly as he stepped back and started collecting his things from the couch. “See you tomorrow?”

Astonishment. No. Condemnation. Eternal. This had to be it. There he stood, Severus Snape, Death Eater, spy, professor, in his late thirties, in his right mind, in awe, and stared with giddiness at the sixteen year old brute who was constantly ridiculing him for his own sick satisfaction.

Points, his mind said.

“Points,” his mouth repeated.

“How many?” Potter asked.

Severus contemplated as the revulsion overtook him. Revulsion used to feel worse, his consciousness
commented, and he mentally slapped it away as Potter looked at him in expectation.

“A hundred.”

“Oh. My. God. Oh my God, Harry. Why did you do this? How could you? So selfish, so – so -I can’t handle this right now.” Hermione covered her face with a hand, and after releasing a breath she left the Great Hall. Harry ate silently.

“Is this your fault?” Dean barked once he saw him. “What did you do?”

“Snape caught me out of the dorm,” Harry said without looking up. “He was being a dick and I called him a jerk.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Seriously?” He looked at the high table, where Harry supposed Snape was sitting and watching with great satisfaction. “What did he tell you? You shouldn’t have talked back. He probably expected you to do so he could take points.”

“I would have panicked too,” protested Neville. “Just imagine being alone with Snape in the night. I think I’d scream.” He shuddered visibly and Harry faked a sympathetic nod.

“I’ll earn the points back,” Harry said at last. “We have the match coming up anyway. I’ll catch the snitch.”

“You’d better do so,” said Seamus. “We don’t want Hufflepuff to get us, do we?”

“A hundred points,” repeated Neville, still struggling to accept it. “Did he frighten you? Once he caught me being late for a class – it wasn’t even his own class, Harry – and he gave me that look… I thought he was going to kill me. For days and days I kept thinking that he was going to get me.” Neville’s eyes had gone wild as he recounted his traumatic experience.

Harry knew exactly which look he was talking about.

Ron mumbled something to his plate and Harry looked up. He wasn’t sure if he had said it to Harry, and he didn’t dare ask. Ron looked at him for a second and then turned to Seamus. “When’s the match?”

“Next Thursday. It was supposed to be this Friday but they changed it.”

Hermione came back and collapsed next to him. Her eyes were red. “Do you know – do you even know,” she hissed, “how many papers, how many parchments, how many tasks it took me,” she took a deep breath, “to earn a hundred points for Gryffindor? Do you have the faintest idea, Harry Potter?”

“I’m sorry and I love you?” he said, and he didn’t complain when she lightly punched his arm.

“Professor Snape is smirking at us. Just look at him. Smirking. Just look at what you’ve done to your House,” Hermione said desperately, and Harry dared a glance at Snape. He was smirking. But not for the reasons Hermione thought. It occurred to him that she would think he was mad if he tried to explain it to her. It wasn’t about points; it was about establishing the rules of who was in control and how easily control could be taken over.

Harry wasn’t really sure who had control at the moment.

“Is it funny to you?” she asked. “Or do you think it’s cool to insult a teacher?”
“I’ll fix it,” Harry assured her.

Hermione broke into low laughter. “Just look at how he’s looking at us,” she choked. “Not that he doesn’t have every right to do so. You called him a jerk, Harry?”

_Not really. Just kept gawking at his pants and then took the initiative to zip up his flies._ “Yes. Because he was. He’d take the points anyway, come to think of it.”

That seemed to calm Hermione a little. She gave him a last severe look. “Next time Harry, just don’t.”

Harry chuckled. “Yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

My heart is with all the people who admired and loved Alan Rickman for his career and personality. He was a talented actor and a great man. I had no idea he was also a feminist. How are you dealing with the sad news?
Harry spun around in midair.

Zacharias Smith gave a neat pass to Demelza and Ginny angrily swore behind him. Harry set off around the pitch for the fourth time already, scanning the skies for some sign of the golden snitch. There was no sight of it.

Ron shouted to McLaggen to move aside, and suddenly the Quaffle was in Ginny’s possession again.

“Summerby got the snitch! Hufflepuff wins!” the commentator shouted, and half the crowd cheered and clapped. Harry looked at Summerby a bit lost. The snitch was tightly clutched in his upraised hand.

They landed on the pitch and Harry kicked at the ground, tossing his broom aside. Summerby landed elegantly after a few moments and a group of younger Hufflepuff students came to hug him. A blond girl who couldn’t be older than thirteen touched the snitch and shrieked in excitement.

“Where is the Captain?” McGonagall asked as she came closer.

“Professor,” panted Ron as he pulled off his helmet.

“You did great,” she told him proudly.

“But we lost!” Ron exclaimed.

“Winning is not important. Playing fairly is,” she said. “For training hard and for having enjoyed the game, I will give fifteen points to Gryffindor.” Harry watched her dumbfounded, and she didn’t forget to give him a look too.

“Congratulations, Potter,” she said honestly as she walked past him to talk to Hooch.

Hermione ran to him and hugged him tightly. Harry couldn’t help but think that she’d love for Ron to see that. He felt a little used, but he made a mental note to tease her about it later. “It’s a miracle you didn’t end up in the Hospital wing again,” she said. “That Quaffle was crazy.”

“You weren’t concentrated,” Luna added as she approached them. Her lion hat blinked at him and growled. “I could see you were lost in your own dark thoughts.”

“Um.” More often than not, Harry did not know how to respond to Luna. He looked up at the Slytherin seats but didn’t see Snape. Not many Slytherins cared to attend the matches they didn’t participate in.

“How could you even train as a team if he won’t talk to you?” Hermione asked, her eyes darting between Harry and Ron, who was now kissing Lavender.

“Wasn’t that hard. Although he forgot himself a couple of times,” Harry added quickly. “Besides, we all know I’m a natural,” he joked.

“It was very kind of you that you offered to Ron to be Captain instead of you, Harry,” Luna said in a
round voice.

"He needed it more than I did," he responded. Also, he and Ron were still friends back then.

Promising he’d meet them again after showering, he headed off to the boy’s bathroom. The hot water washed away the dirt and the mud, and he allowed himself to relax a little.

Saying things out loud made them easier to accept. This Harry knew. Speaking of his worries or nightmares always made him feel better. He felt a bit jealous of his friends’ privilege to share theirs easily. When Hermione liked Krum, everyone knew it. No one cared.

Ron could kiss Lavender whenever he wanted and the professors barely took points anymore. Harry couldn’t speak of his secret. Hermione would think that he’d lost his mind. A part of himself didn’t want to share it at all. He wanted to keep it as his most private truth.

Cursing himself for being unable to think of anything else, he didn’t notice the door behind him open and close. He had just finished getting dressed.

Ron came in and looked at Harry coldly.

"I was just leaving," said Harry quickly.

"I was - no, you don't have to."

"It's fine. I'm done."

"You’re a good Seeker."

Harry stood still, not knowing what to say. He couldn’t remember the last time they'd talked. “Thanks, Ron.”

“You saw Smith? The bastard was carrying the Quaffle around for ages up there. Hooch was so mad.”

Harry hadn’t noticed that. “I thought Smith was one of their best.”

Ron sat on the bench and opened his bag to take out clean clothes. “He’s mental. I’d have beaten him up if he kept doing that.”

“What was he telling Ginny?” Harry asked.

Ron rolled his eyes. “He asked her if she was feeling tired. In the middle of the game. Can you even imagine? Approaching a player of the opposite team to ask that.”

Unsure, Harry sat on the bench too. “Perhaps he likes her.”

Ron made a pause. “Dunno.” He pulled off his socks, but he didn’t make any other movement. He stared ahead at the wall, and Harry, sitting beside him, felt suddenly the silence growing again.

“I just don’t get it, Harry.” And Harry realised they weren’t talking of Quidditch anymore. “I warned you. I warned you and you broke her heart.”

Harry released his breath. “I know,” he admitted, the shame burning his face once again. "I'm sorry."

"No, you're not."
"I love Ginny," he pressed. "I never wanted to deceive her, I just didn’t know what to believe of myself. I was confused, I thought – I hoped that being with her would drive this thing away."

"And why didn’t it?" Ron asked. He wasn’t exactly angry, but his voice was cold and bitter. Harry wondered if this was the only chance he’d ever have to fix things. "Why did you choose this instead of – instead of everything else? Why choose this over me? Over her? What the hell happened to you?"

Harry had never chosen this; still, all his arguments melted under the possibility of Ron being absolutely right. "I don't know. I haven’t changed. I – this is hard for me too, you know."

Ron closed his eyes and blurted out his next words fast. "Have you ever thought of me in that way? Because all these years, all these times you’ve seen me naked, for Merlin’s sake, all these times, my brothers even…"

"Never," Harry said louder than intended. "You’ve been my best friend for the past six years. I think you would have figured it out by now if I fancied you."

"And you never liked Ginny?"

"I did," Harry said. "A lot. But – not like that, as it turned out."

"And you like… men."

Harry shook his head in a “sort-of” way. It was the truth, so why was he so afraid to admit it? "I don’t know."

"Are you planning on becoming a woman or anything gross?" Ron asked.

Harry didn’t allow himself to laugh. "Ron," he said reassuringly.

Ron nodded. "I need to think about this," he admitted, and Harry was more than happy to imagine that there was still hope for their friendship. He couldn’t help but feel like he had betrayed Ron by being like this.

That night, Harry was not so eager to descend to the dungeons. Running the risk of being late for his Occlumency Lesson, however, he forced himself to go. His way was blocked by a group of girls in front of the dormitory door; one of them thrust a red box into his hands. "Chocolate Cauldrons," the girl said. "They’ve got firewhiskey in them. My gran sent them to me, but I don’t like them."

"Oh – thanks, I guess," he said.

Severus tried not to notice Potter staring up at him, eyes carefully darting between his text, the floor, and Severus. He mentally prepared himself for another silent torture caused by this boy as he moved on to the next demonstration of wand movement and the students repeated after him.

The boy’s insolence had stopped following him to class. Severus didn’t know if he should feel thankful for being granted the illusion of still having what little power he could over Potter.

There had to be an answer hiding somewhere near him, but it wasn’t obvious. His position in this school had been long ago attacked, and it wasn’t Potter who had completely broken it, but his own idiocy and unrealistic optimism. Why did he think that Potter could keep this up? The eyes peering at him during class would not be as unwelcome if they didn’t demand an acknowledgment which would only weaken Severus’ resistance in this madness. Vivid though Potter’s emotional breakdown
was, Severus had promised himself to turn a blind eye at it until there was no way around it anymore. He regarded his assistance precious, and thus he was not going to offer it unless asked. Politely.

Shutting doors and hiding was futile. Melting away and disappearing into a tiny puddle of nothingness was most likely futile too. The boy was tenacious. Well pleased that the public displays of rage had ceased, the only thing that was left for Severus to get rid of was the private expressions of emotion and the primitive instincts that came with it.

For his part, instincts like murder.

For the boy’s part... well.

He decided to stall that particular train of thought just as Potter’s eyes fell back to his textbook. It wasn’t theatrics. It was hypocrisy. The very act Potter always accused him of. Consoling himself that being nasty to his students was only natural failed to reassure the grip that painfully squeezed his stomach. But why complain about what couldn’t be altered? Lily and James Potter’s son had a crush on him. End of story. He could cry on Dumbledore’s shoulder and beg for Minerva’s assistance if he fancied, blaming them for not keeping the Golden Boy at a safe distance from his life and for letting the little brat bedraggle him. Facts however were not going to change.

As for his self resenting regarding Potter’s presence in his class, he had every right to. He had made a promise to himself, once, to never be around Potter’s son if it could be helped. And yet, the boy had defied his untold wish for peace of mind and had planted himself in Severus’ life with unprecedented ease.

A flood of composure ran over him as he was reminded of the balance he had maintained since they got back to school. Dealing with feelings that were not his own was something Severus was never asked to do, and for a beginner he had to admit that his attitude was phenomenal. He was calming Potter. He was training him. Teaching him. Keeping him from committing suicide in a sudden nervous collapse during his insomniac nights.

Severus had done nothing wrong.

“Silence,” Severus warned as a generic murmur had begun between the students. “Those who have finished may leave,” he drawled, impatient for the class to end. He felt quite certain that Potter had not the faintest idea of what he was doing to him. He mentally composed a speech filled with hatred directed especially to Potter, although he knew he’d never deliver it. I hate you, he began, the new mantra soothing his nerves down. I wholeheartedly hate you.

Severus damned himself for having a good side. Treating the boy well was an unexpected twist for which he had to often apologise to his mirror at nights. Giving him what he had hoped to find, offering him an extension of their obligational cohabitation, was an unforgivable mistake he could not see how to correct.

A twisted part of his mind was becoming anxious when the time was coming for Potter to visit, and he wished himself damnation for daring to be happy in this renewed version of not minding if what he was doing was dangerous.

Forbidden.

Oh fuck off. Slughorn had been inviting over his students since Severus was a student himself. He didn’t see why this was any different. Or suspicious. Traitorous, yes. His imaginary wiser self had worded the truth to Dumbledore countless times. He kneeled before Dumbledore’s feet and expressed his grief for his own surrender as Dumbledore accused him of leading on and taking
advantage of a confused and irrational child. Severus had imagined his confession to be humble and honest.

In real life, he still managed to lie to Dumbledore successfully, and packed away his regret for his slip of character for the time being. What for, he couldn’t tell. If only psychopaths were as sane as Potter, even in his current collapsing state. His emotional attachment to Severus was a product of a reality he could not stand. The war, his being an orphan, the loss of his useless godfather and a prophecy challenging his life were not enough to soothe his youthful desire for exploration. Severus was momentarily torn between applauding his strength of heart and pushing his limits until he eventually snapped.

There were venomous desires hiding behind those seemingly innocent green eyes, and pretending otherwise was dangerous. He reminded himself that he had privately assisted students before. Private lessons were not new to him. He had been doing this for the best part of the last two decades. Students had visited his office and his chambers numerous times. He'd talked to them and he had helped them get through untold and often horrifying situations.

They were all Slytherins. Nevertheless, his students looked up to him and didn’t need to be told that his door was always open to them. It wasn’t different because Potter belonged in another House.

Is this your best excuse? The little beast has already sexually attacked you twice.

Potter walked over to his desk and handed him a test for which he had been studying last night while sitting next to him. Severus’ heart stopped. The word inappropriate kicked him hard, and fortunately he didn’t have the energy required to squirm.

He nodded stupidly and Potter let his test on the desk, leaving hurriedly to catch up with his friends. He didn’t need to say anything, and Severus was glad for not having to retort to another cheeky or stupid comment.

They’d have all night for that. Severus vaguely regretted not having instantly believed him when the boy foolishly opened his heart to justify what Severus chose to call doesn’t-count-as-a-kiss. A fitting name, it was. If he had understood the importance of the information shared back in summer, he’d have obviously stayed away.

But you knew.

He didn’t. He thought it was a phase. He'd decided to ignore it to spare himself the restless nights of terror and irony striking him back from a past long forgotten and lost in the abyss of mistakes impossible to undo.

Lily wouldn’t want this. Lily would hate to see him near her sweet son. Loath as he was to accept it, her sweet son had another opinion on the subject.

Well. Death was a note unsaid. Death was for the dead. Severus tried hard not to think whom life was for.

Chapter End Notes

About Ron:
Even the nicest of people can be homophobic due to ignorance and age. Not everyone has the knowledge of an LGBT activist, and even gay people do blame themselves for years, sometimes, before they can finally accept who they are.

It would be easy for me to create an imaginary environment of total acceptance for Harry, but sadly, this doesn't happen in the real world, let alone back in the 90's. Keep in mind that it is not character bashing to not describe someone as entirely accepting on generally perfect.

I do love Ron's character and I believe that it would not be canon of him to be immediately accepting. Having been born in the early 80's and raised in a family with five older brothers is all the prerequisites one needs to have no idea that "gay" is not an insult.

I would still love to hear your opinions on this.
“Harder.”

Severus focused on Potter’s eyes and hardened his stare. A tremor of magic shifted around his head and his vision darkened just as a flash of Petunia's figure passed in front of his eyes. It faded out quickly; the barriers were solid again. Doing this without wands had been a bad idea, but necessary all the same. The close proximity in which they were standing left little to do with his hands, so Severus clasped them together behind his back and used his will to break in. The intensity of their practice caused Potter’s eyes to water; thankfully, it was caused by lack of blinking and not some dreadful new sentiment of injustice.

What bothered Severus, was that the boy was succeeding. He imagined the day Potter would master Occlumency and no one would know it was thanks to Severus. He’d lost his chance to be given credit when he decided to keep this a secret. An urge to slap Potter possessed him. This was the performance level he should have demonstrated since the beginning. This was what real concentration was.

A hand rested against his chest and Potter bent his head. “This is making me dizzy.”

“It requires a strong mind, I’m afraid. Those who are not as lucky must work hard.”

“Right.”

“You'd wish to stop?”

“No.” Potter looked up and Severus bore in.

Almost compulsively, Severus avoided the feelings that crushed against him every time Potter’s resistance weakened momentarily. He took the path of memories, poorly sketched into his mind and blurred by the passing of time. Childhood, he could deal with. Tom Riddle, easily.

Anything else was not acceptable.

He took the risk of shifting his eyes to Potter’s fixed jaw and the connection was lost. “You’re tensing all your muscles. Push me out without suffering next time,” Severus said dismissively as he walked passed him and collapsed on the sofa. Potter, of course, followed.

“You read minds like that all the time?”

“No.” Severus didn’t hate his life that much. People's minds was something he wasn't interested in. What people decided to spill out, was hopefully enough.

“Legilimency is not a mind reading spell. The mind has many layers, I’ve told you. Every thought of yours creates a dimension of its own. There is no fluency that can be read or shown in there.” He pointed at Potter’s head. “Merely interpretations of complex nerve actions.”

“Yes but, do you read your students’ minds?”

All in all, the defiance Potter showed to education was phenomenal.

“No. This cannot be done.”

Potter seemed to consider that. The lack of trust he'd developed over the last years was not
unexpected, and yet Potter reserved what little faith he had left to put it in Severus. The latest adult
promising to look after him in a long list of people who were now dead. Severus couldn’t bring
himself to shudder at the thought that he could be next. He spared a passing thought of how mistaken
he’d been to insist that Potter was arrogant. What he was, was far from that. Potter was clever.

Which was worse.

“But, I don’t understand. Trelawney reads people’s intentions too. Isn’t that a form of Legilimency?
Because whatever she does, it works.”

“Does it?”

"Sometimes."

"Divination is not a respectful profession, let alone talent.” Sibyl was unlucky; that was her
only talent as far as Severus was concerned. Prophecies weren’t made to be fulfilled. What people
tended to do, when explaining their actions as ones of fate, was purely justification of deeds they
could not stand to believe as their own.

“Are you friends?” Potter asked. He opened his bag to take out his notebook.

“Homework at midnight. Such a devoted student you are.”

“My day was a bit busy in case you missed it. Quidditch, you know?”

Severus smirked. “Ah, yes. Huflepuff won, I’ve heard.”

Potter scrunched his face irritatingly, but didn’t respond. Severus decided to push it a little, if only for
his own amusement, but Potter stopped him. “You think people would hate me if they knew?”

“Knew what?” choked Severus.

“That I’m –” Potter took a deep breath, and went on confidently, “gay.”

"Afraid of losing popularity, aren't we?” Severus responded after a pause.

“I don’t think I can keep it a secret for much longer. It’s suffocating me. When I’m out there I feel
like I can’t even breathe sometimes.”

“You’re here now.”

What?!

Very well. Do make him feel safe with you.

Or even worse, comfortable.

Potter fished a box of something out of his bag and opened it. It contained chocolates, and Potter
shoved one in his mouth hungrily. Did it take so little effort for Severus to calm him down these
days?

“You know,” Potter said, “I’ve really tried to... stay away. I mean, I know it's bothering you. My
being here. But I think deep down you might like it too. You're.. stern. You wouldn't let me be here
if you... yeah. Want chocolate?”

Severus eyed him dangerously but Potter’s grin only widened. The hell with it. Snape reached out
and took a chocolate. It had firewhiskey in it, and for the life of his he couldn’t remember when was the last time he tasted either.

“I’m obliged to train you.”

Potter snorted, another chocolate in his hand. “Not anymore.”

Point taken. Brilliant.

The box slid off Potter’s lap to the cushions and stayed there. “I could safely say,” Severus drawled, “that your company is as nonchalant as people say.”

Potter rolled his eyes. “You could just admit it. You like me. I can tell. People say I’m boring?”

Severus would have responded if drowsiness hadn’t struck him so profoundly. He blinked his eyes into focus and rested back against the cushions of the couch, deciding to stay there until he felt better.

“I’m not boring. Romilda Vane wants me.”

“Vane?”

“Yes. Everyone knows it. She always follows me around.”

“Hm. Could it be because of your name or because of your wealth?”

“It’s because she likes me. It can happen, you know.”

There were many desperate people in this world, undoubtedly. “You don’t stand a chance.”

“Why not?”

“You are nothing but another entitled Potter. The girl has brains, she’s not for you.”

“I should ask her out.”

Severus grunted. “This is a school, and not a beer house, I am afraid. Romilda Vane takes her education seriously, unlike you.”


She was indeed, possibly the prettiest in her class.

“Please, Potter. What is she to you, another challenge, perhaps? An achievement to brag about to your filthy friends? If I see you near her, you’ll regret it.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do.” Potter exclaimed.

Severus grabbed him by the hair and twisted.

“What the-” Potter covered Severus’ hand with his own.

“I may be interested in Romilda Vane, after all,” he said dangerously. “And you’ll stay away from her.”

“You? You are a professor. You... can’t.”
“I don’t care.” Potter was going to stay out of it or he’d pay. “Potters. Always convinced that they deserve anything they want. Full of themselves, thinking life owes them. What is your plan, then? Are you going to pretend, convince her that you’re something better than you are? Isn’t this what Potters do? Alluring girls. Taking advantage of them.”

"Have you lost your mind, Snape?"

"I am responsible for the safety of my students. If I see you around her I'll ruin you."

"I will talk to her whenever I want,” Potter said. "I will ask her out. There is nothing you can do."

“I’ll assist her,” Severus decided, plans of confessing his love already taking form inside his head. “She has so much to learn from me. You have nothing to offer her.”

“You’re hopeless,” breathed Potter, a foolish grin on his face as he made himself comfortable on the couch. “I’m the Chosen One.”

Severus ignored him. At last, he'd met a woman of elegance. A woman who knew how to charm a man.

“Hey. I’m straight.” Potter broke into a giggle that ceased suddenly a few seconds later, and Severus couldn’t help but wonder if he was drunk. “Thank God I’m straight.”

“Talk to her, and I might make an announcement at the Great Hall tomorrow morning. About a student named Kevin, perhaps. You filthy poof.”

“No. You can’t.”

Severus thought hard about this. If he was to befriend the girl it would have to be done carefully. He couldn’t afford more mistakes in his career. Let Potter believe that he was free to do what he wanted. He would come up with his own plan, and this time, he'd make sure to let the girl know that Potters were not to be trusted. “She has a will of her own. She’ll choose.”

“But what if she chooses none of us?” Potter asked.

Severus rolled his head to look at Potter’s reddened face. Their eyes met. “And what if she chooses both?”

“I saw her the other day – she was dancing in the middle of the common room – she almost crashed on me by accident,” Potter said sheepishly. “What do you mean both?”

“You will not turn her against me. Not this time. My office has already turned into a little nest for you these days – why not keep a door open for her too?”

Potter sighed. “I dunno.”

“She doesn’t care,” he said. “It’s your name that does it. Your fame. Do yourself a favour and stay away.”

Potter shook his head. “I don’t want to.”

Almost asleep, Severus adjusted himself and let his hand rest on his crotch. His fingers brushed his trapped cock softly. “I’d give her everything,” he decided. “And you dare to believe you deserve such an angel.”

“You think she’d like to marry me?” Potter asked in a hushed voice. “I’d like to marry her.”
“I’d like to fuck her,” said Severus. “And then marry her.”

“I don’t want you around once she says yes. I don’t trust you.” Potter lifted his head from the cushions, but abandoned whatever he was attempting to do and let it fall back again. “Beautiful.”

“You damned father made the same mistake. He’s dead,” Severus recalled. “If you happen to repeat his faults I will murder you myself.”

“It’s not a mistake, it’s the rightest thing,” Harry corrected.

“I’ll have to be careful.” Severus blinked into focus, but lost his concentration again. “I’ll keep her for detention. Find some time alone. Then we’ll see.”

“That’s not fair. I love her. You don’t. You can’t love.”

“Can’t I?”

“Her hair is beautiful,” Harry said. “I think I love her as much as I love you.”

Severus sighed and he looked away. “I think I love her that much too.”
Severus woke up to the assumption that he was losing his mind.

After contemplating the possibility of arranging a visit to St. Mungo to get himself mentally checked, he covered himself with his blanket and enclosed his thoughts into his execrable meditation. Absolutely certain that some kind of psychosis was beginning to take form inside him, he was relieved at the idea that it had to be a medical problem and not yet another dark curse meant to end him. It explained a lot, undoubtedly; the tension he experienced when around Potter was one of the terrors he had now solved.

To his unfortunate luck, however, his illness was now spreading to younger ages too. His mind ran through his family medical history, and after some time he chose to blame his father’s alcoholism - and why not, his own too - for the doom life had thrown upon him. As he went through his morning routine, he felt torn between accepting to take the proper medicine proudly and letting the doctors feed it to him.

He recalled the events of the last night with disbelief: confessing to a student that he was planning to assault another student. A fourteen year old one. Then dismissing Potter and immediately locking the door behind him, waiting for the boy to leave so he can jerk off over sexual fantasies concerning a little girl. A girl which he had never liked or even noticed before.

Embarrassment washed over him and he made a silent promise to never be near children again. What was wrong with him?

Unable to find a solution to his sorry situation, he dressed himself and prepared his mind for the torture of teaching that was awaiting him. He waved his wand to clean the garbage from the floor when he noticed the box of yesterday’s chocolates thrown between two pillows. Sitting on the couch, he took one between his fingers and sniffed at it cautiously.

*Of course.* Potter was dead.

Bursting into a paranoid laughter, he tossed the box in the hearth and watched it burn just as he’d burn Potter’s empty thick head once he saw him. It was unintentional, of course – who could blame Saint Potter anyway? But teaching Potter the delicate art of protecting oneself from enemies, reaching a level where his mind’s barriers could not be broken, so he can fall into a trap involving love potion?

Potter was dead. He was stupid, immature, impossible, and dead.

Severus would see to it personally. And Dark Lords be damned. As he stormed through the corridors, it occurred to him that thinking of Gryffindor as the very temple of hypocrisy barely did justice to how vicious and evil those little devils could be. If a student of his own House had poured an illegal potion down one’s throat, Severus would be immediately blamed. The staff would give him the stare for a week and Minerva would make a public point of the school’s morals and traditions.

Fuck Minerva, then. Her House was dangerous. When a Gryffindor went off wandering to the dark side there was always comprehension. It was either *oh the poor kid*, or the misled prodigal son. For Slytherins there was no excuse; Slytherins were always known as manipulative liars. For them, life was a constant attempt to prove themselves innocent.
Seeing a student dressed in Gryffindor robes coming down the stairs, he stopped. “You. Find me Romilda Vane. Tell her that she has fifteen minutes to present herself at the Headmaster’s office and confess her illegal actions against a student – she knows whom,” he snarled at the curious look. “The Headmaster does not expect her so inform her that should she lie about the reason of her visit I will know, and I will expel her myself.”

The student paled, and Severus was glad that he could still terrorise the students into doing what he ordered. He had authority. At least over some of them.

“Yes sir!”

Utterly horrified, Severus kept striding the stairs and corridors until he reached the door he was looking for. He slammed it open and was aware of a crowd of stupid faces looking up at him. Minerva looked surprised too.

Scanning the class quickly, he located Potter. “May I borrow mister Potter for a moment?” he asked, and was aware of yelps of shock coming from the back of the class.

“Yes, of course,” said Minerva, giving him a look that communicated all the questions he’d have to bear afterwards. Potter exited the class without looking at him. The door was slammed close again and Severus walked over to an empty classroom. He pointed in.

Locking the door behind them and casting a soundproof spell, he grabbed Potter by the collar and pushed him against the wall. “Why must you cause me problems?” he hissed. He clenched his fist to stop it from punching Potter’s face.

“I – I didn’t know, I swear, I woke up and –”

“You didn’t know because you are shortsighted and utterly stupid!” he barked. “What have I been teaching you the whole year, huh? Why am I wasting my time on you if you don’t care to think? Is your brain completely damaged, Potter? Has the Killing Curse broken your skull?”

Driven by impulse, Severus dug his nails in Potter’s throat. “Tell me what would have happened if you gave me a chocolate before I took it on my own. Hasn’t your sweet Horace taught you the instructions? I believe you know.”

Potter gaped, his enrage lost somewhere between controlling himself and blushing.

“Well, tell me, Potter!”

Potter looked down, then up to Severus. “You would have fallen for me for a while, because I’d have given the love potion to you.”

In other words, not a goddamned big deal.

The point Severus was trying to make was slipping further away and Potter didn’t seem to catch the severity of it. “I would have thrown myself at you,” Severus said deranged. “And I would have to resign and leave my life as I know it in the past forever. Because of you.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose! Why do you have to blame me for everything? And get your hands off me, ” he spat while pushing Severus back. Severus stepped away quickly.

“Miss Vane is already explaining herself to the Headmaster,” he informed Potter. “I’m not blaming you for consuming the potion. I am blaming you for accepting the gift in the first place. Fame, you silly boy, comes with risk. Proud though you may be of it, if you’re not careful enough it might just
“You sent her to Dumbledore?” Potter’s disbelief wasn’t exactly what he desired to see at the moment. Terror and regret would make a much better image. Tears of apology and pain for lack of thinking, even better.

“Indeed, Potter. It seems that not all Gryffindors can break the school rules and remain unpunished.”

“So you’re telling me that she went to Dumbledore and said that professor Snape wanted her to be punished for slipping me a love potion.”

“Precisely.”

“But the potion was given to me. How are you going to justify that you knew?”

Severus stared. A dim aspect of his consciousness woke up from a deep restless sleep and began to work furiously. How was he supposed to know what the girl did? He’d dug his own grave and was happily waiting to be thrown in. He’d been careless. He was startled by his own idiocy. Leaving Potter standing there, he marched off to Dumbledore’s office and found Romilda Vane wiping her eyes with a napkin. Dumbledore dismissed her and Severus took her seat on what he chose to call the Court of Injustice.

Dumbledore greeted him, and toyed with his wand as he began the game where he stared until Severus eventually snapped. Persistent though he was to push the limits on his behalf, Severus was weak at heart when it occurred to patience, and he’d damn himself before he prolonged this hell any longer.

“Potter has been visiting my chambers nearly nightly since the term’s start. I’m teaching him how to Occlude his mind. I hid it from you because you wouldn’t approve.”

“Occlumency,” Dumbledore said, unsurprised. “Is he making progress?”

“Yes. He’s fighting it without a wand now.”

Dumbledore pointed his wand at Severus, and Severus froze at spot, awaiting for a curse. An unforgivable one, definitely. Dumbledore shifted his wand again between his fingers as he kept toying with it, and Severus was left under the impression that he was being mocked.

“I was aware that he hadn’t been sleeping,” Dumbledore said calmly.

“His sleep has been problematic for a long time. I’m not at fault for it.”

“Aren’t you?” Dumbledore smiled. “The nature of your relationship is professional.”

Unlikely. But it wasn’t a question. “Absolutely.”

“Hm. What happened last night?”

Severus went on recounting the events of the previous night. He carefully left out his own arousal and whatever ungodly things he had talked about with the boy. All in all, his story had gaping holes screaming for attention, but Dumbledore didn’t poke at them.

“…He left before midnight. I didn’t know I had been poisoned until today. It wasn’t Amortentia, so I suspect it had to be from Zonko’s. As you imagine, I don’t want to see the girl in my class ever again.”
Dumbledore clasped his hands on the table. “She only knows about Harry.”

Severus nodded. A minute passed in silence and this time Severus failed to mind his tone. “Do you want me to keep him away?” The fear that croaked in his voice was a sinful sign of being human, he told himself.

"Lily herself... was willing to stay away from her own son, if that could save him. Tell me Severus, how can I let you bond with the boy when your duty is to surrender to Voldemort and kiss his feet? It’s a risk I cannot take.” Severus wanted to explain, but Dumbledore raised up a finger. “What is surprising, however, is that you don’t want to keep away from him.”

Severus stared at the profound expression of words he could not honestly disagree with. He wished Potter was here, so he could make this his fault somehow, for he was exposed to a treacherous trap in which he could merely play along. He did want to be near Potter. Denying it was an act in vain. It did not work. Whatever he did to push Potter away had only brought him closer.

“I’m teaching him,” he said stupidly.

“And he’s making progress,” Dumbledore said, the energy back on his face. “So, from now on, I believe I can take care of it myself.”

“No.” Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “I’d sooner die than hurt him. I’ve done nothing against him nor have I taken advantage of him.”

He made sure to stress out his last words. Fawkes spread his wings and flew to the other side of the room. “I trust you with my life. If you hurt him, it’ll be unintentionally, I am sure. What would young Draco think if he accidentally saw Harry coming out of your rooms? I would think he’d inform his parents of you assisting him. And I would also think Voldemort would kill you for treachery.”

“Headmaster,” he started, “give me a chance and I can do this right. He’s being careful.”

“I trust you,” repeated Dumbledore.

“Well you don’t trust me enough!” snapped Severus.

Dumbledore seemed lost in his thoughts for a moment. Then, “If it is so important to you... You may assist him once a week. Saturdays, let’s say. Never after midnight. Oh, and something else. Do read the new Witch Weekly tomorrow.”

“Why? What is it?” His stomach dropped.

“Harry made some announcements this morning.”

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It was all over the front cover: THE BOY WHO LIVED: WANDS OR CAULDRONS?

_Proud and impudent, Harry Potter could not bear to remain in the closet after so many years of lies and secrecy. Yesterday morning, in the presence of his innocent and modest classmates, Harry Potter confessed, between heartbreaking sobs, that he has been suffering from the mental illness every man fears and every woman is frustrated to meet: homosexuality._

_Vincent Crabbe, one of Harry Potter’s closest friends, admits that he had been suspecting it for a long time. At the question, “Is our global star really gay?” he responds: “He never looked normal anyway, did he?”_
Hermione Granger, his long-term girlfriend, refused to express her sorrow, although the betrayal was easy to be seen in her red, swollen eyes.

Severus cringed visibly at the paper and rolled it. “Between heartbreaking sobs,” he mumbled as he gave it back to Minerva. Minerva smiled at him in a circumspect way only she knew how to master.

She glanced at the Gryffindor table and then back to her steak. Potter was laughing about something with Granger. “Do we know what actually happened?” Severus asked.

“During breakfast, I believe he was discussing something of a personal nature with Hermione Granger. Another student heard them, asked if he’d heard right, and then the entire table was talking about it,” she said irritantly. Apparently she did not approve of her students being the little snoopers that they were. “Harry made them stop by telling them that he was, in fact, gay, and that they could stop talking to him for all he cared.”

Severus bit back a snort as he remembered his place in the world. At last, Potter was learning. “And you were so touched by his bravery that you gave, how many exactly, points to him?”

“Points?” she asked in a faked shock Severus knew too well. “About that? Absolutely none, of course. He earned his points later in class.”

Ah. Little windows for Potter to fly out of when all the doors were locked. This was what Severus loved. This talent of always winning without even wishing to do so. Potter had fallen into a cauldron of Felix Felisis long before he stepped foot in Hogwarts, and was now enjoying his shining fate. Severus made a mental note to investigate the unluckiness of people stuck with lucky little bastards.

Potter didn’t look at him as Severus observed his new joy at the weight having been lifted off his shoulders. A person without secrets always looked happier; healthier. A stabbing sensation wormed its way further into Severus as he watched the world around Potter still existing and going on, and Potter at last moving along with it. The greatest secrets were always hidden in the most unlikely places. Severus wasn’t the keeper of the dirty secret anymore. Potter’s need for someone who “understood” had solved itself out. All for the best.

The gaping hole that had been ripped open in Severus’ chest feared of what this new twist might bring. The part of him that was ready for this and had been warning him all along inwardly celebrated his wish for peace finally being fulfilled. Clinging desperately to reason, Severus ignored his sudden anger and settled down to be happy for the boy’s decision to be again part of the world.

He watched his plate in disbelief. Eating a mouthful of what tasted like ash, he settled to play along with whatever life brought him and forget the little oasis in the desert that had been forcefully shoved into his hands. Oasis? No. Prison.

“He’s a clever boy,” Minerva stated, and Severus was startled at the conversation still going on. “I wonder why you can’t see it.”

But he could, and cleverness was what he feared the most in Potter. Cheek. Desire to *be himself* in ways no polite human being would without permission. Gathering his things, he excused himself and set off to a quick pace as he strode towards his chambers. His living room was cold when he reached it, and he didn’t bother lighting the hearth as no one would visit tonight. Changing into his bedclothes he locked his door and collapsed on the bed, contemplating about a particular bottle of scotch awaiting for consumption back home. He supposed he should feel some gratitude that he’d at last sleep early. His thoughts trailed off to the other boy that needed his help and he pondered this new misery of being unable to occupy himself with anything but the adolescence from which he had graduated ages ago.
His mark irked and he rubbed his arm absently. If he'd been sober enough to hate himself for it, he would have acted properly when Potter attacked him last summer. He would have slammed the boy against a wall and beat him until he begged for forgiveness for his terrible deed. The blurry memory of that kiss didn’t thoroughly satisfy him though, and the parts he was missing were enough for him to not fully know how it had started.

Not that it mattered.

Or that he was going to think about it now.

Potter was free, Severus ought to sleep, and life went on.
He didn’t know how much more he could tolerate. He dragged the boy who stumbled behind him and mumbled nonsense with trembling lips.

“Shut up,” Severus hissed.

A sob was sucked hard and Draco snapped. “Kill— killed — them… they… killed…”


The whining protests didn’t cease. All too quickly the mere itching in Severus’ lungs escalated to pain, and he strode through the corridors with heavy steps. The dungeons were empty and silent after midnight, and he released Draco from his grip with disgust. “You shamed your father. Next time do as you’re told.”

“I – I – I couldn’t, I –”

“You could. You didn’t want to. You showed weakness.”

“How could you?” Draco screamed. He closed his eyes. “I don’t want to – I… I don’t…” Tears ran down his cheeks and Severus had to steel himself against flinching away.

“You don’t want to?” he whispered in Draco’s ear. “No one asked you if you want to, Draco.” Another choked sob and Severus had to grab the boy’s shoulders again to keep him up.

“What did you tell him when he asked to see you?” he asked as his own panting subsided.

“Nothing.”

“We cannot afford mistakes, Draco, if you tell me your plan –”

“No! He… doesn’t want anyone to know.”

Draco averted his gaze; he was lying then. “Tell me your plan and I’ll help you. Tell me and I’ll make it happen. Do you want him to see you break? Do you want him to kill your father?”

“No!”

“Then tell me. You need to have an abettor in this, you can’t play it out without a back up plan in your mind. Think! What if you fail?”

“I –”

“What if you fail, Draco? Do you want to see your mother dead? He’ll show no mercy, I am sure.”

Draco’s features twitched before he broke into another whimper. Snot and tears ran down his face. “There is that room,” he croaked. “That room, you know, it appears when – pops up and is – helpful – there’s a cabinet – it’s – it’s broken but if I can fix it – if I can fix it – have you seen… Borgin and Burkes’ Cabinet?”

Severus nodded stupidly as his mind worked over the information. “It has a twin.”
“Yes. It’s – it’s a good plan. My plan. I don’t want you in it. You must let me do it myself.”

Severus nodded, but didn’t release him. “When?”

“That’s not your concern!”

That was enough for now. “Go wash yourself before anyone sees you. Quick.” He stepped back and Draco fled to the Slytherin’s common room.

Severus was aware of his heart almost exploding as he arrived to his chambers and let his cloak fall down. He closed his eyes and the world started spinning. He opened them again and thought that the world wasn’t a place he liked to see. There were few things worth living for, fewest worth dying for, and nothing worth killing for.

Severus imagined the headlines, Death Eaters eradicate Muggle village, and, exhausted, kneeled on his carpet. He could barely focus his vision; when he did so, he saw a head hovering at the far end of the room. He gave a nonchalant grunt and willed the image away by shutting his eyes.

When he opened them again he saw blur. Potter’s flying head approached him in silence. He dropped on the floor in front of him and took off the invisibility cloak. His mouth fell open.

It occurred to Severus that he should say something. A dim part of his mind screamed that Potter had no business being here. A much more painful part wallowed in embarrassment for the state that Potter was seeing him in.

“Is that blood?” Potter whispered.

Once, Tom Riddle decided to have it all, and the world had never been the same since.

Boys like Draco were brought up in it. The tales of death were in their homes, their playgrounds, their common rooms; they were not in the newspapers that they read; they were a part of the common frenzy – but what was a life? Nothing. Life was the least sacred thing and his boys, his own students, were to be trained in this cruelty.

“Get that off,” snapped Potter, and Severus was startled.

“What are you doing here?” he croaked. “Leave.” The bitterness he’d prefer was absent from his voice. If he was to argue with Potter, he needed strength. He didn’t have it. “Leave.”

He was aware of fingers quickly unbuttoning his coat and he half raised his arms so Potter could take it off. Severus was a coward. Unless he found the courage to recognise cruelty for what it was, he was scum.

His shirt was ripped open too and Potter stopped. Severus looked down at his torso and it occurred to him that Potter was expecting to see him wounded. The wild eyes peering at him communicated that the correct realisation had just sank in. Welcome to reality. I’m a murderer.

He didn’t dare to talk. Potter stood up, too quickly perhaps, but Severus didn’t protest. The boy stepped back, and then Severus was left alone.

“You need to go to the hospital wing. There may be a certain amount of scarring, but if you take dittany immediately we might avoid even that... Come...” Draco attached himself to Severus and limbed his way to the door. “And you, Potter... You wait here for me.”
As he led Draco to the hospital wig he considered his options between killing the brat and locking him in a torture chamber until he confessed how he knew his spell. He recalled hearing that Potter was succeeding in Potions, and being suspicious but still doing nothing to investigate it any further. His irritation increased as Draco whined and panted more than necessary.

“I want him expelled! He tried to slaughter me, the filthy mudblood lover! My father is going to –”

“Your father is going to be lucky if he gets out of prison in one piece,” Severus barked as he shoved Draco into the infirmary and informed Poppy of what had happened. She nodded and soothed Draco, who insisted that a most likely nonexistent pain was tearing him apart. Severus made an effort to not roll his eyes and left to face the second part of this nightmare.

He swallowed back a venomous wave of self-loath and ignored the still audible cries of Draco that sickened him to a point that had him toy with the idea of quitting. He would have taken great pleasure in leaving this place forever. Perhaps starting a life of his own — although he wouldn’t know what to do with it.

Approximately, there had been two or three situations in his life he had failed to handle. Regret, he recalled, was something he was not willing to endure again. Not for the sake of watching Draco slip away from him to a life that once stole away the best of Severus and not for the sake of all the things he could’ve done to stop it but never did. Thoughts in vain. Stupid thoughts.

Deciding against self-redemption, he allowed the bitterness to burn his mouth and thought that maybe starting a life far away from here maybe wasn't such a bad thought after all.

Instead, “Go.” The Moaning Myrtle jumped into a stall and a splashing sound indicated that she had wormed her way into the toilet to occupy herself with another place in the castle.

“I didn’t mean it to happen,” said Potter at once when they were left alone. “I didn’t know what that spell did.”

A chill ran through Severus and he was momentarily aghast. Well. A Potter who didn’t attempt murder before graduation is not a Potter. “Apparently I underestimated you,” he said quietly. “Who would have thought you knew such Dark Magic? Who taught you that spell?”

He didn’t expect the truth. Nevertheless, either Black had spilled it out, or Potter had stolen from him again. “I — read about it somewhere.”

“Where?”

“It was — a library book. I can’t remember what it was call—”

“Liar,” Severus hissed. It took barely a moment to push himself into Potter’s mind and follow the path of his anxiety to find what he was hiding. Moments before success, Potter pushed him out and the room was solid around them again.

“Where, Potter?”

Potter darted his eyes from Severus to the bloodied floor and back. Against all reason, Severus was loath to believe this was really happening. Narcissa would be furious. Dumbledore would have a nasty comment at the tip of his tongue too. May he bite it and may he choke.

“It was written in a potions book I saw around a couple of years ago or so,” Potter said too quickly. “I tried to find it again a few months ago but I couldn’t. I suppose someone took it.”
“Someone,” he said lowly. “Not you.”

“No. Sir.”

Courtesy in the most bizarre of situations. Bravo.

The urge to feel remorseful had most assuredly not attacked Potter yet. The splitting headache that Severus had developed over the last hour was only a mere irritation at what Potter was usually doing to him.

“Should you know who has that book… you are to inform me instantly.”

“Yes sir. I don’t know who has it, sir.”

“We can only hope you’ll find out, then. And when you do, I expect you to bring it to me.”

In other words, I give you a few days to confess.

Potter fled and Severus was left in a puddle of water and blood. Ah, but it’s pure, a voice mocked inside his head. Cleaning up the mess, he thought of the foolish belief that life would eventually get better. Things were different now. He saw himself in Potter’s eyes and could not understand it. He saw himself in Draco’s eyes and felt disgust.

Myrtle was back again, and she fluttered her eyes at him. “Are you not going to use the loo?” she said glumly. “I wanted to see you.”

“You call that flirting?” he spat absently. He waved his wand towards the mess on the tiles, removing all evidence of the fight.

“Oh, I’m not flirting with you, I know,” she said.

“Know what?” Another wave of his wand and the faucet was repaired.

“Some time after I died, there were two boys that locked the bathroom door and told me to leave. I know what they did,” she said sullenly, and then grinned. “I watched them.”

Severus raised an eyebrow.

“Did you do the same with Harry?”

“Myrtle,” he said carefully. “Would you like me to bring you some incense?”

At the loud gasp of terror Severus smirked.
Dumbledore sighed. “Well done, Severus.”

“They will suspect it was me.”

The newspaper laid open on the table; a moving picture demonstrated how the infamous corner of Borgin and Burke’s was mysteriously burned to ashes last night. Under the picture, the caption claimed: “Cause, undetermined. Presumably accidental.”

“Why would they?”

“Why wouldn’t they?” Severus asked. “Bellatrix never trusted me.” He rolled up the Prophet and absently let it unfold again. “There were no witnesses, however, and the cabinet’s twin is completely destroyed.”

Dumbledore trailed his lips with a long finger. “Young Malfoy will have other things to take care of for now. If your Lords questions you, we’ll see.”

“If my Lord questions me, we won’t have time to see, I think.” Cradling his head in his hands, elbows resting on his knees, Severus tried to focus after twenty eight hours of sleep deprivation. “You should leave the castle for your own safety before the term ends.”

“There is no need to rush, Severus.”

“No need to rush? They want you dead. He told me he believes Draco to be a waste of time. You didn’t think he would rely on a teenager for this, did you? I’m next.”

Dumbledore fell into skeptical silence; they had discussed this before. “You have to convince him to postpone their plans until summer.”

“And then?”

“Then, I have a plan of my own,” Dumbledore responded simply, and the boiling rage that had been melting Severus’ brain for the last hour almost snapped. Inwardly, he was a mess. Outwardly, he was expected to still be Severus Snape.

“A plan, which I suppose I’m not trustworthy enough to know.”

Dumbledore seemed to be aware of Severus’ state of mind, but didn’t glance at him for more than a second. “In time. Has Harry agreed to his new schedule?”

“I’m following orders I know nothing about and I’m expected to agree to plans I’m not even slightly aware of? I believe I deserve to know.”

“In time.”

Severus swallowed the bitter bile of threats he couldn’t make and surrendered. “I haven’t seen Harry but in class this month. He visited my office a few weeks ago but when he realised that he’d be training an hour per week he simply stopped.”
“And he didn’t tell you why?”

“No.” He didn’t have to. “Besides, he has a life now.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Yes, although some of his peers are still struggling with the new reality. They’ll accept it, let’s hope. Eventually, he will too.”

“I imagine this comes easily from someone who never attempted so.”

“The times were different back then, Severus.”

Severus nodded.

“Harry is going to be fine. You don’t need to worry.”

“I don’t.”

“On the bright side... He brought me something important. Something I needed but had no way to access. I suspect he used Felix Felicis to get it it, and Hagrid had a rather funny story to tell me about it.”

Severus creased his brow in expectation but decided against interrupting him.

“This memory... Horace's memory... confirms my greatest theory, the one I’ve been working on for the past years – but also proves that there is so much to be done. The significance of it... it explains everything.”

“You care on expanding on that or are you just informing me of your delight?”

“I am going on a trip soon and I’ll take Harry with me. I want you to protect the school and be very careful while I’m gone.”

Severus was a spy. For whichever side it may be, he was still a spy. If the Dark Lord had done anything to keep himself from dying, it had to be Horcruxes. And if Marvolo’ ring was a Horcrux and was now destroyed, that only meant that there were more Horcruxes. In how many pieces could a human being split his soul? And would he still be a human being afterwards? If living without a soul was possible, were they still talking about humans – or was the Dark Lord an entirely different creature?

Questions he could not ask. He was expected to suspect nothing about all this. "As you wish.”

Whatever Dumbledore and Potter’s adventure was, it ended ingloriously, with Dumbledore panting his lungs out and Potter banging at Severus’ door to wake him up in the middle of the night and have him help them. He had no choice but comply, for habit was a better master than duty and Severus couldn’t tell whose arse he was currently kissing. Duty, he remembered, once meant thinking for himself. Now it was lost somewhere between thinking to himself and thinking for others.

So he followed Potter to the Astronomy Tower and managed not to scowl at Dumbledore’s poisoned form hunched over the floor. He did scowl when Potter avoided his eyes, determined to convince him that there had never been anything more between them. He did scowl when it occurred to him that this used to happen the other way around. They helped Dumbledore to a sitting position and Severus hurried to take him to his chambers, if only to avoid the tremendous ghosts and the possible wandering students. Dumbledore chuckled all along, entertaining fantasies of his future funeral and complaining that he did not need any help, he could walk perfectly well, thank you very much.
Severus didn’t speak to Potter as he closed the door to his face and Dumbledore collapsed again. He didn’t speak to Dumbledore either as he gave him a strengthening potion and a healing one. He didn’t ask where they were and what they had been doing. He casted several spells to check Dumbledore’s blood pressure and fever and went through his books to see what else he could do. Dumbledore only bothered to inform him that the cause of his fever was poison half an hour later. Severus swore and fumed, but what did it matter?

The morning came and Severus hadn’t slept. Once the sun arose, Potter stormed in uninvited and demanded to see Dumbledore. Severus waited outside, for he was not as mature and wise to swallow down crucial war information as a sixteen year old was. Dumbledore managed to walk steadily and stated that he wished to be left alone so he could prepare himself for breakfast. When Severus saw him again in the Great Hall, his face betrayed nothing.

Dumbledore seated himself at the centre of the head table and Severus decided to let McGonagall take his usual seat next to him. Having lost his appetite himself, he poked hatefully at his pancakes and glanced at the Slytherin table regularly.

Focusing on the upcoming N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s he ought to prepare, Severus blocked out both Dumbledore and Potter and occupied his mind with the simple tasks he was allowed access to: Teaching. Scheduling examinations. Keeping away from Golden Hero.

But really, how useful he was. Blessed.

His first class of the day was first-years. He had a headache by his third class, and when the sixth years came in he managed to successfully not look at Potter and not be intrigued by his insolence and fight back. He took the points he should when Potter whispered to his friends and failed to remind Gryffindors of how disgusting they were before the bell rang.

When his mark burned him, and his veins throbbed from wrist to shoulder, he hadn’t thought yet of how to postpone Dumbledore’s murder without being suspicious. He didn’t understand why Dumbledore remained here, while knowing how easy it’d be for Severus to kill him, and thus natural for the Dark Lord to ask him to. Severus dreaded the next Death Eater meeting and dreaded the Malfoys too, and Draco had yet to blame him for the twin cabinets and the fire. All in all, Severus knew nothing.

Nothing of what the Malfoys thought, or his master, or his other master. Or Potter.

Well.

Unopened gifts contained hope.

Severus clung to it.

Dumbledore’s invitation for tea that afternoon could just as well be an invitation to limbo for eternal torment under the commands of justice. He declined the tea but went to Dumbledore’s office anyway to hear what Dumbledore really wanted to say.

“My plan for the summer,” Dumbledore started, but he explained only Severus’ part in it.

When the detailed description was finished, and Dumbledore pointed out that he was planning to inform Harry soon too, Severus only hoped he would have the chance to see the boy’s face while doing so.

He did have the chance to watch Potter’s face through it, and the consolation was Severus’ to seek.
Once again, he couldn't remember having agreed to this.

“I have promised you, that I will reveal everything to you when the time comes, Harry.”

Potter glanced at Severus for a backing he wouldn’t give. He turned to Dumbledore. “But apparently that time hasn’t come and yet you still expect me to act like a coward and go hide somewhere. I don’t want that, sir. With all respect. I want to fight. I don’t like this.”

“You will fight, Harry. You are already doing so. You will only hide to protect yourself until the time comes.”

“No. I don’t even know where — this place is. I don’t get it. I want to stay here.”

“The location will be shifting - as long as you stay in the safe house, it it will be taking you with it. I wouldn't have chosen this, Harry, but you will soon be of age and your aunt’s house will fail to protect you.”

“Hogwarts, then.”

“Hogwarts is not safe anymore.”

“Then nothing is!”

“We will escort your family to a safe location. Your aunt’s house should be emptied before your birthday, for their own sake.”

Potter didn't like it. And Severus found himself being less amused than he’d thought.

“Why not Grimmauld’s Place?”

“The Order will need to focus on —”

“On not protecting me. You don’t want me there so they can work on their plans without worrying about my safety. I want to be in the Order, sir — I want to be useful. I have to be useful. I’ve trained.”

Severus’ mind drifted to his past conversations with Dumbledore and searched for the parts that had been missing. Or the retouched ones. He could clearly recall this urgency for Potter to hide in a safe house for the summer as well as Dumbledore’s dilemma between taking Potter with him in his mysterious hunting and leaving him out of it for the time being.


It was impossible to understand Dumbledore’s motives. The boy should have known better.

“You will.”

“In time,” added Potter, bitterly.

Severus’ agenda, on the other hand, was simpler. All he had to do was to blissfully await for orders to finish Draco’s job, and then decide whether he’d refuse and have the Dark Lord kill him for treachery, or drop his cover, become useless, and get killed anyway.

He could always finish the job, of course.
Severus remained silent as Dumbledore kept explaining only the necessary fragments of this schedule to Potter.

“You will not be alone. Severus will teach you.”

*Severus will teach no one,* he thought. *Severus will be left alone.*

“Will you not, Severus?”

Severus mentally rose his middle finger to the man, and was positively sure that Dumbledore was wholly aware of it. He nodded.

“Sir, with all respect,” Potter said from the chair across him, “If what you say is true and a war is going to break out soon, I don’t think I can stay out of it. I refuse. Voldemort has been hunting me all my life, and now you want me to hide?”

It was curious, indeed. Severus himself could not assume much of it and it only seemed foolish to postpone a battle long ago reserved between the two. If the boy was to get himself killed anyway, the sooner the better.

“Harry...”

Potter was frightened, Severus thought. Frightened by the idea of war, the possibility of dying and the duty of killing. It occurred to him that Potter was too young for this, and yet his foolish bravery was insisting on offering himself in a sacrifice he barely understood.

“Why not now? If we let him begin a war people will die. So why not now? People will die.” Frightened and desperate.

And he did have a point so to speak. Severus arched a brow at Dumbledore, meaning that he would demand an honest explanation later. He received an imperceptible nod that only assured him that he’d be fed rubbish. If Dumbledore wanted him to do this, he’d have to confess first.

“Now, as spectacular as it would be to blow up the school this very evening, I am afraid that I have not completed my mission yet, and thus you cannot be exposed to Voldemort.”

Bollocks.

“Now, the details.”

The details of the great safe house he was going to lock Potter in for the summer did not interest Severus, and he doubted that Potter was listening either.

Severus, for his part, had yet to find why he was pinned on this blasted chair witnessing the light leave Potter’s eyes as he was slowly accepting his doom.

“And Severus will be helping you,” Dumbledore said at last. Potter left, and Severus didn’t need to be told to stay for *just a word.*

“So the boy… the boy must die?” asked Severus.

"And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential."

He didn’t want Severus to train him. He wanted to use him as a feint, to keep Potter away so he doesn’t die accidentally by some random Death Eater with a false temper. The boy was carrying a
part of the Dark Lord’s soul. A Horcrux, most likely. It all made sense now. A thread of spikes clutched around his heart and he had to suppress a choking sound that was either laughter or an Unforgivable. "I thought… all these years… that we were protecting him for her. For Lily."

Dumbledore tried to explain, going through all the details that were always there, all the hints that Severus should have seen but hadn’t, all the mistakes that had been done and couldn’t be taken back, all the truths that were just before his eyes but was refusing to see because he had never imagined that betrayal would come from the hand that was feeding him. He had the right to know. All these years, he had the right to know.

A pathetic voice inside him insisted that Potter couldn’t die. Shouldn’t. And let the world be damned. Dumbledore looked at him. Severus’s stomach had turned to ice.

“You have kept him alive so that he can die at the right moment?” He’d taught Potter to seal his mind. He’d put effort to it. It took almost a year to perfect it. “You have used me… I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you. Everything was supposed to keep him safe. Now you tell me you have been raising him like a pig for slaughter…”

His words trailed off as he recalled Potter’s trust in this man, and his trust in Severus. He would have to lie to Potter. To set up another farce, this time under the excuse of “training” while they’d wait for Potter to die.

“But this is touching, Severus. Have you grown to care for the boy, after all?”

When Lily died, Severus swore to protect Harry. How could Dumbledore even ask? How could he question it? He wasn’t going to hand Dumbledore yet another weapon against him. Dumbledore’s eyes glimmered as though he had hit a raw nerve and was waiting for the outcome.

“For him?” Severus said, not even knowing what the truth was anymore. Needing to distract Dumbledore, he drew out his wand and prayed for this to be enough. “Expecto Patronum!”

From the tip of his wand burst the silver doe. She bounced on the desk and Severus felt the warmth of her protection guarding him against the pain in his chest. Dumbledore watched her fly away, and as her silvery glow faded he turned back to Severus, tears running down his face.

“After all this time?”

Dumbledore’s words echoed in his mind. Could he really care for Harry Potter? Was it possible? The moment he saw Potter arrive to the Great Hall, eleven years old, stupid, skinny, short as an elf, dumbstruck, surrounded by other idiots, he knew he’d give his life to protect him if necessary. He knew he wouldn’t hesitate. It was for Lily, and he had loved Lily with all his heart, but when he kept saving Potter’s life again and again he was saving the life of someone whose heart was still beating.

He hadn’t started caring for Harry now.

He always cared.

“Always,” said Severus.
Explanatory Q&A:
Why is Harry being sent to a safe house? Is this canon?

As you might remember, in Wisdom (Book 1) Dumbledore was about to wear the Marvolo ring, but since he was interrupted by Snape visiting uninvited, he did not wear it, did not get cursed, and thus he is not dying.

A healthy Dumbledore, who is not about to die, would not want to sacrifice his life as he did in HBP. In HBP, Dumbledore only offered to sacrifice his life as the best possible plan because he knew he would die soon anyway. Now that he is well and healthy, I do not see how this could be an option. Moreover, this means that he will continue searching for Horcruxes, as he did when he found the Marvolo ring. Harry only inherited this mission because Dumbledore died. If Dumbledore was alive, he would be the one doing it, and he would not risk Harry's life by making him do it instead.

This also means that Harry would have to remain protected in a safe place from the beginning, instead of having to run away from his aunt's house to protect himself last minute as it happened in DH. Dumbledore knows that Harry must be the last Horcrux to die, and thus he will do everything in his power to ensure that Harry will stay alive until all the Horcruxes are found and destroyed.

This is a summarised explanation of why the safe house is introduced in this chapter. This story does not diverge from canon any more than the butterfly effect allows.
To Be a Fool: Epilogue - The Kiss

There was no problem in this world so serious that couldn’t be cured with a glass of firewhiskey.

The flames in the hearth bowed and arched as they burned the woods away. So eager they seemed, that if ran rampant, they would destroy the very things they were meant to illuminate. Embryonic bonfires, they would become, each bearing a seed of destruction so potent it could tumble cities and dash kings to their knees.

Words and phrases salved in Severus’ mind made their appearance in demand as the first bottle was emptied. Nonsense like “I will not reveal my secret keeper, but you have to trust me, Severus; your floo network shall transfer you - and only you - back and forth; it will take you to the safe house” and “be careful, my boy. You need to remain near Voldemort until the end.”

His sudden urge to sneak into the Tower and abduct Potter for good was replaced by the reasonable substitute of summoning another bottle. Which was a complete failure, for his eye focus failed to direct the bottle towards him, having it crash against the wall instead.

Here it was, the last day of classes, and modesty be damned. Why wait another day so he could drink at home when he could also drink here? The little bastard would have to die. He would never become an Auror, thank God for that. He would never see adulthood. Not that adulthood was ever promised to be a bright experience for Potter.

Well. He’d never take it up the arse, then. It occurred to Severus that two out of the three men that dominated his life were bent, and silently prayed for the Dark Lord to differ. It wouldn’t do to kill Potter and then dance around his corpse in a pink petticoat and tights. Although it would be a reasonable excuse for Severus to quit being a Death Eater. Lucius would understand.

Downing another glass filled of something that he couldn’t recall summoning, he thought of Potter’s decision to abandon effort just when he’d started improving. He was probably determined to prove Severus rubbish at teaching, no matter what.

The boy deserved to be sodomised for his audacity.

On second thought, no.

Better no.

Severus shook his head.

Was he bitter?

Absolutely.

Hurt?

Well. Everybody felt a part of their heart break at rejection. It was natural. To him, rejection triggered so much more. And what would happen if the Dark Lord insisted for Severus to kill Dumbledore? Dumbledore would flee. For how long? Who would guard the school? Another glass. Fuck the glass. Bottle.

Dumbledore wouldn’t flee. There would be no excuse for Severus not to do it. Damn. He was a dead man.
Playing in a three-bullet Russian roulette.

Somehow, he had the assuredness that all of them would wound him.

He sighed heavily. Dumbledore’s ideals for love and gratitude were not helping.

Love was making the world go round? Not at all.

Whiskey made it go round twice as fast.

He drank generously, fearing the moment it might stop.

The blissful silence of the room was interrupted by a continuous thudding against wood. Severus closed his eyes and prayed for it to go away, crossing his fingers for it to be caused by ghosts. At the reminder that ghosts didn’t knock on doors, it occurred to him that to get pissed and be left alone was apparently a vain wish. He put an effort to steady himself before unlocking the door, and shook his head into sobriety.

Potter stormed in in excitement. “I thought you were asleep.”

“What do you want?”

“Last day of classes. We’ve had a party in the common room. Everyone’s dropped asleep by now.”

Severus searched between Potter’s words to find an actual explanation of why Potter was there and failed. “And?” Be sharper. You’re failing.

“So, you know. I figured Dumbledore wouldn’t mind. Since we’re going to be together the whole summer anyway.”

This was exactly the misery Severus had been trying to forget. Alcohol worked better than Obliviation, and had proved itself much safer too. Coming to terms with himself had been going great. The process now seemed to drift away and into a mystical puddle made of all of his abandoned intentions and promises. “Has it occurred to you that I might mind?”

Potter smiled cheekily as he sat on his usual spot on the couch. “You don’t. Is that firewhiskey?” He poured himself a glass and tasted it. Severus sat back down, reminding himself that if he was to endure this again he’d have to at least make the rules. He snatched the bottle away and gave Potter a warning look. “If you want me to let you stay you will behave. This time, I mean it.”

He’d meant it all the past times too, but he’d been ignored, just as he imagined that he was going to be ignored tonight. What did it matter? The last Potter alive would soon be dead.

“You should have seen Ron. He wanted to talk to me but he was too embarrassed to do it alone. He told Hermione to tell me to go and talk to him.” Potter shook his head, an honest smile on his face as he took the bottle back from Severus.

“Fascinating, I think.”

“It is. I thought he was never going to talk to me again. Ginny told me she forgives me too. I suppose they didn’t know what to say to their family for not talking to me anyway. Things have calmed down a lot now. God, this thing sucks.”

“It’s alcohol. Therefore is good.” To make his point more obvious, he emptied his glass and let the warm liquid burn his throat. Oblivion wouldn’t come tonight, after all. If ever.
“Why don’t you arrange Slytherin parties too? You know, try and have fun, or something. All the other Houses do it.” Potter shrugged and Severus tried to remember when was the last time the boy was babbling this much. Or grinning so wildly.

“We have parties. We don’t prance about it. Slytherins, unlike you, have dignity.” It hadn’t been so long since the last time Potter had been in this room anyway. It seemed insignificant now. Severus adjusted to what he had become used to. Company, he almost called it.

“Is this your way of partying?” Potter pointed at the bottle and Severus had to suppress a sudden urge to hug it protectively. “Getting pissed in the dark every time you hate your life or something? Severus Snape. The party animal.”

Potter snorted and Severus fixed his jaw. “I don’t suppose your Gryffindor party contained alcohol, did it?”

Potter’s flushed face suggested that it did. “That would be prohibited, Professor,” he said innocently.

Severus scoffed. “Idiot.” Taking points would only embarrass him further when Minerva would give them back in dozens. He admired the darkness of his chambers. If Potter was bothered by it, Potter was free to go.

“Just idiot? Where did the insolent little wrench go? You’re losing your touch, Snape. You need to see me more often, I think.”

More often? The only place in Severus’ life Potter didn’t occupy anymore was his dreams. Then again…

Stop.

“Shut up, Potter. I keep thinking you can only embarrass yourself so much, yet you never peak.”

Potter laughed. “That’s what I meant.”

“Don’t you have things to do before we lock you up in paradise?” Severus asked after a long moment. It was a hot night, but he didn’t feel like soothing the hearth. The sparks stuck on the wood before burning out, tiny acclamations that died over and over again to be greeted by stronger ones.

“Not much. I still have to see Luna tomorrow, she wants to give me an issue of the magazine her father publishes, but there’s no rush. Besides, I thought you’d be lonely.”

Severus snorted around a satisfying gulp. He had never been lonely. He had been in a room – he had felt suicidal. He had been depressed. He had felt awful – awful beyond all – but he never felt that one other person could enter that room and cure what was bothering him, or that any number of people could enter that room.

“Speak for yourself,” he spat and immediately regretted the bluntness of his impulse to defend himself.

Potter didn’t respond.

Loneliness was something Severus had never been bothered by, because he’d always had this terrible itch for solitude. He’d never thought to go out and have the widely suggested fun. It wouldn’t help. He mentally watched the typical crowd, getting excited about it being Friday night, asking each other “what are you going to do? Where are you going to go?” and Severus felt nauseated at their lack of purpose. There was nothing out there. It was stupidity.
Stupid people mingling with stupid people. Satisfying themselves with stupidity. And that was all. He had never been lonely. He liked himself. He was the best form of entertainment he had.

“Cheers,” Severus drawled.

Their glasses clink and Potter casted a Lumos. “If you were more unhappy I think you’d become a ghost.” His face scrunched up.

“Boo, then.”

Potter’s face lit up mischievously and he let his drink on the table. “You know what, I’m not going to silently sit in the dark because you’re being weird. I’m not going to smell fresh air again for the next three months or so and who knows, I might die soon anyway. We’re going out.”

The astonishment of the truth Potter had unwittingly blurted out hit Severus first and he was unable to comprehend the rest of the sentence. Giving himself a second chance by replaying it inside his head, “You’ve lost your mind now, haven’t you?”

“Don’t start grumbles now. Come on, get up.” Potter wore his cloak, excited about his plan. As it usually happened, Severus despised plans. A bodiless head floated around the room as Potter grabbed Severus’ hand and Severus found himself being pulled up. “If you think I’m going to agree to this idiocy you’re a fool.”

“Fools win.”

“I’ve agreed with the Headmaster that this lunacy will stop. I only let you in tonight because it’s the last day and –”

“Exactly. So it doesn’t matter what you do.”

It did matter. The hand that tugged on his sleeve was suddenly too strong. Severus shook it away. “If you wish to stay, stay. I’m not going anywhere.” Why did he have to apologise for the simplest things? Why was his dominance constantly ridiculed?

“Right. Now stop yammering and be quiet. I know how to get out.”

Harry Potter. Ruthless. Unprincipled. Determined to get them both killed.

“They’ll see us, you moron! Do you forget my position or do you confuse me for your mindless rule breaking friends? Have you forgot that the castle is not inhabited by your astonishing person only?” May I drink alone please?

“No. Bent down.”

The world blurred a little as the thin fabric of the cloak covered him and he was immediately frozen in astonishment. Potter’s elbow poked at his ribs. “Now, we have to be a little close. I know you don’t like that but you’ll have to bear it. Bent a little because your feet are still visible.”

Severus complied, silently damning himself for doing so. The scent of the Potter family was suddenly all around him, and he questioned his having agreed to this while Potter led him to the corridor just as he remembered that he had not actually agreed. The ludicrous contraption was all but comfortable, and Severus inwardly appreciated the many levels of irony that had brought him under this very cloak. Sweet blasphemy, he thought to himself, taking a moment to relish into the fantasy of James Potter watching them from the world of the dead with utter sorrow.
“Careful, damn you!”

“Sorry.”

“I swear, Potter, if you step on my foot one more time I’ll –”

“Shush!” Potter’s hand came up to his own mouth and covered it as Peeves floated past them.

Severus kept his breath. Peeves looked at where they stood suspiciously. Potter looked up at Severus steadily. Severus wholeheartedly hoped that his own stare communicated I’m going to kill you. Before he had enough time to make his untold threat clear, Peeves dove in the wall behind them, passing through them. The warmth of the living was something a cloak could not hide.

“STUDENTS OUT OF THEIR BEDS! STUDENTS OUT OF THEIR BEDS! THEY’RE HERE! STUDENTS OUT OF THEIR BEDS!” Peeves yelled, excitingly jumping around in the air.

This was it, then. A very sorry end for the great Potions Master Severus Snape. And not even a Potions Master anymore. He closed his eyes awaiting for his fate. Potter tugged at his shirt. “Run! Quickly!”

Unable to protest, in terms with the upcoming reality of unemployment, he followed. What was he going to tell Dumbledore? How was he going to explain this?

All I wanted was to drink.

Or, - so very typical - I was already drunk.

Potter grunted as he pushed the Entrance Hall gate and it remained shut. He did it again, grunting furiously, and Severus had to steel himself for the task of blocking out the annoying friction and the back of Potter’s head hitting his chin again and again. “You’re a teacher, I suppose you know the spell,” whispered Potter angrily, and Severus cursed. He was about to announce that he would not reveal the staff’s locking spells for the sake of Potter’s entertainment just as Peeve’s voice seemed to be getting closer to them again.

“STUDENTS OUT OF THEIR BEDS! STUDENTS OUT OF THEIR BEDS!”

Oh for fuck’s sake. He cast the spell and recast it to lock the door just as they stepped out. Yanking the cloak off his head Severus panted hard, leaning back on the door. “You,” he said coolly, “You don’t say a word.”

“Can’t he see us now?” Potter asked, already moving further to the yard.

“He haunts the castle, he can’t get out,” Severus said, although Potter should know this. Not that it meant anything. The castle had windows. Anyone could see them. This was suicide. “Are you satisfied, now?”

“Aren’t you? Look at the sky.” Potter spread his arms and rotated around himself, his head dropped back.

“The sky,” Severus sneered. “I’m risking my position so you can take a look at the sky, as though you don’t live on a goddamn tower!” He released a sharp breath and his eyes darted around to make sure that no one was watching them.

Potter picked up his cloak from the ground and Severus watched him deranged.
“Just look at the sky.”

Severus glared at Potter hard before he gave up. He looked.

A sudden bitter cold wind howled across the landscape, and Severus recalled that he hated nights like this; caught between darkness and light; hovering endlessly on the brink of secret magic. The beauty Potter saw was invisible to him. A half-lit world full of half-kept promises offered him nothing but unwanted memories. Unable to protest, he kept to himself the useless arguments and watched the sky instead. Letting Potter’s foolish romanticism remind him of all the silliness of a world he had rejected.

“It’s mesmerising. It has stars. And you are following me back inside, where you will be escorted to your Head of House and tell her in detail how you and your classmates obtained and consumed alcohol during your so called party. You will apologise to her for breaking the rules made for your own safety and you will apologise to me too for your unspoken behaviour.”

Potter rolled his eyes. “No. Come on.”

They set off a low pace - Potter gambolling ahead stupidly while singing “a song Hagrid likes,” and Severus checking for enemies and following behind him. A very suspicious threat behind a tree ended up being a rabbit, but Severus hexed it unconscious anyway. Severus listened carefully in the quietness of the dark forest. An owl hooted in distance and the woods resembled dusky shadows, shifting and breathing under an observing eye. The more they kept walking, the more Severus believed that this was madness.

“Enough, Potter! And stay close!”

Potter stopped and looked back. “Don’t you ever have fun?”

“Don’t you ever think? The creatures of the night –”

“If the creatures of the night were dangerous in Hogwarts, Hagrid would be already dead. Lower your wand.”

Severus didn’t lower it and Potter kept disappearing as they walked. “Even Hermione has calmed down a bit. You should do it too. You can’t think of your enemies all the time, you’ll go mad.”

He had already gone mad. And if he didn’t think of his enemies, his enemies would think of him first. “I don’t see any fun in this, Potter. Perhaps you should have sneaked out with your wicked friends instead.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Potter. When the lake appeared in sight, Potter started running.

“Potter!” he shouted. And then was reminded of the absurdity of yelling Potter’s name while wanting this to remain a secret. Severus widened his steps and a sheer terror attacked him at the possibility of losing Potter out here in the night. A mental image of Dumbledore’s lips slowly mouthing “Azkaban” landed on his mind and he ran too. “Potter!”

He found him laying spread eagled by the lake, panting hard and raising a foot up to unlace a shoe. Severus panted too, his chest aching as he loomed over Potter. The boy looked ridiculous. “Do that again and I’ll Petrify you.”

Potter threw his shoes and shocks aside and chuckled, his eyes darting between Severus and the sky. “I love life,” he stated louder than necessary. Severus lacked a bitter comment so he just stared. His heart still ached from running, and he suddenly felt old.
The reflection of the moon was seen on the surface of the lake, clear as crystal, pure as a virgin blanket of snow. Dark-grey clouds loomed over the moon ominously and, suddenly, the lake was brought to despair and darkness once again.

The shrill cries of an animal broke the silence. Sharp, high-pitched sounds pierced through the night, but failed to disturb the peace. It occurred to Severus that they were part of it. On a distant tree, a night-jar made its tok-tok sound.

“I love life!” Potter shouted again, and broke into laughter as he rolled to his stomach. “Gods, I’m happy.”

Severus’s heart tightened. “You’re drunk, and you’re stupid. Don’t confuse it with happiness.”

“I’m drunk, I’m stupid, I’m happy, I love you,” Potter said cheerfully.

Touching, he meant to say. His tongue being a dry sponge did not help. “Do you know what kind of beasts inhabit these grounds at night? Anything could happen. Anything.”

“I bet you didn’t even know you could have fun,” Potter said tenaciously as he rolled back to his back.

“What makes you think I’m having fun?” Severus asked cautiously.

Potter grunted as he struggled back to his feet. “You think the water is cold?” he pulled off his shirt and tossed it aside, beginning to unzip his jeans.

“Don’t even think of it!” spat Severus. “Unless you want your head bitten off by hungry mermaids or Merlin knows what else swims in there I suggest you wear your clothes back on and follow me back to the –”

Potter landed face-first, his splattering almost completely drowned out by Severus’ curses. Potter completely disappeared from sight and Severus held his breath until Potter came up for air and gasped. He couldn’t keep that smile off his face, and his amusement definitely didn’t waver at Severus’ outrage. Potter shook the water off his hair. “It’s not even deep!” he said loudly. “Come on!”

Severus could almost feel Dumbledore’s twinkling eyes burning his nape along with Draco’s questioning ones. He dimly wondered what kind of excuse would satisfy the Dark Lord.

Severus stepped closer and the water reached his shoes. “This is dangerous!” he said, hoping against hope to be obeyed.

Potter stood up, his torso wet in the dim light of the night, wearing nothing but his muggle boxers. “Oh my god, danger behind you!” screamed Potter as he raised a hand to point at something behind Severus’ head. Severus turned around abruptly, wand in hand, and saw nothing. Potter laughed and dove in again.

“Is this how you were planning to introduce me to fun?” he yelled, even though Potter couldn’t hear him. One. Two.

Three.

Potter came up for another breath and narrowed his eyes. It occurred to Severus that he probably couldn’t see much without his glasses. Severus’ shoes had stuck into mud. “I can think of other ways,” said Potter calmly.
Severus felt his nails digging into his palms. “For the last time. Get. Out!”

He didn’t. There was a strange feeling in the pit of Severus’ stomach, and he was suddenly aware of the pitiful options remaining. It was a matter of self-respect, but Potter couldn’t defy him forever. He’d learn this lesson either he wanted it or not. Footing off his shoes, he bent down to yank his socks off and then his coat and shirt. Tossing his belt aside, he decided against taking off his trousers.

His toes curled in the soft mud; Potter picked up that annoying song again and sang it loudly. Severus stepped in the water carefully and winced at the cold. “This is unthinkable,” he muttered. The strain in his legs increased and he pushed the water in embarrassment for his sorry situation. Again.

For all his situations that included Potter were sorry.

The water came up to just below his hips and his wet trousers stuck to his skin. Potter looked up at him suspiciously. “Is that a scowl?”

It was. And Potter was apparently blind. “No. It’s a wide smile of satisfaction.”

Potter came closer and rose. For someone graduating from adolescence, development had definitely skipped him. The boy was doomed to be short. Of course, he was doomed to be worse things too.

Severus gripped Potter’s arm but Potter resisted. “Don’t be like that, I’m having fun.”

“What you’re having,” snarled Severus, “is detention for the entire next year. Out!” he tightened his grip and Potter pushed against his chest trying to be released. The water splashed around them as they both struggled against each other. There was a moment of pure anger: Severus pulled at Potter viciously. Their feet slid together as Potter planted his own in the mud stubbornly. Severus tried to stand straight, his lips tightly closed around swears he could not address to a student. The air was knocked out of him as an elbow landed on his abdomen and a knee hit his shank.

The pain had him wince, while Potter thrashed out of his grip electrified.

“You will not get away with this, Potter!” Severus barked, and the boy was cut short by Severus’ hand wrapping itself around his middle and stilling him. His own panting was suddenly the only sound Severus could hear. He was aware of baring his teeth in rage. Potter’s breath hit his chin. He hadn’t thought of which remark to make first when he parted his mouth. A tongue attacked him before he could speak. It was warm. It tasted him gracefully in a demanding way Severus wasn’t familiar with. The kiss ended as abruptly as it started, and Potter pushed at the hand around his waist. Severus pulled away as though he had been burned.

Swimming again, Potter let his head fall back on the water and watched the sky. “I’m going to miss Hogwarts,” he said quietly. “I don’t want to be alone.”

Severus at last swallowed the bile of ash that had stuck in the back of his throat. “Perhaps you should,” he croaked as he turned around to walk off the lake.

Away from Potter’s influence, he casted a drying spell on his trousers that barely managed to leave them damp and he seated himself on the grass. He looked at the goddamned horizon with the moon and the stars and the rest of the useless beauties Potter had suddenly discovered and scoffed.

His lips tasted of wetness. He forbade himself from darting his tongue out to taste it more than once. The hidden owl hooted again, loudly and sharply. Nature had never been worthy of admiration to Severus. Praising the power of the shining light and the love behind the stars was meant to be done by stupid Muggles being in love with people they barely knew. Severus had never been sentimental.
He was quite the opposite; a sentimental person thought things would last – the romantic had the desperately reasoned confidence that they wouldn’t.

Potter followed him after a while, and sat on the ground next to him, hugging his knees. He dried himself off with his shirt and didn’t bother clothing himself.

“What was that?” Severus asked, his eyes still on the lake.

“What was what?”

Severus didn’t have the strength to argue. He avoided looking at Potter even as the boy jumped back to the water, and Severus laid back to the grass in the exact same spot Lily used to sit, and James used to sit, and even Lucius and Pettigrew and Tom Riddle himself had sat at some point of their lives.

He counted the stars, quite proud of himself for being able to see them without hideous devices of glass glued on his face. He listened to Potter’s woohoo’s, and to the crazy owl, and to his own breath that didn’t seem to have calmed down.

For the best part of the last century, Hogwarts had been home to countless people who didn’t stand any chance of finding home anywhere else. Hogwarts was a sanctuary. Whoever knew how to speak to it, whoever knew how to listen to it, could learn the truth. Hogwarts did not preach learning and precepts. It preached the ancient, unconditional law of life.

The war would destroy that law. And the Dark Lord would eventually destroy Hogwarts. Severus had learnt that if one had to leave a place that he had lived in and loved, it should be done in any way except a slow one. Leave it the fastest way one can. This happened to be equally true for both places and people, but Severus didn’t want to think of that. He often looked back and thought that an hour he remembered was a better hour because it was dead. Past years seemed safe ones, vanquished ones, while the future lived in a cloud, dark and shaky.

Hogwarts wasn’t simply a home. And home was never a place for Severus. Home, for Severus, used to be Lily.

He had never been this close to Lily.

No.

Lily had never been this close to him.

The emptiness he felt at her memory was crushing. He searched for his wholehearted affection though, and failed to find it. He knew he loved her, but the simplicity of the truth, the fact that she was dead, hit him with no denial. It came to him as natural.

“Are you trying to catch a cold?” Potter asked as he approached him again, putting on his glasses.

“The water is perfect. I’m going back in. Come.”

Ah.

At least that hadn’t changed.

To Severus, home was always a person.

*End of Part Two*
Parentheses: Prologue

The Portkey dragged them violently from the void and they landed on a soft carpet. Trapped beneath him, the boy grinned at him stupidly.

Severus scowled in disgust, rose to his feet, and after a long fumbling moment Potter stood too. A long fumbling moment which would be needless had Potter balanced himself before traveling. Merlin forbid. Packing the horrifying feeling that had to be repulsion away, Severus took an observing look around at the famous and great safe house Dumbledore had prepared them for.

The famous and great safe house was a shithole.

Except for a large window that was facing a flourished hill that looked suspiciously like not being part of Britain, the place lacked exit doors and light sources. Even its absence of muggle electricity could have been overlooked if there were any torches in sight. There was nothing though, and Potter shrugged his shoulders at the realisation. Suppressing a violent urge toward fleeing, Severus gritted his teeth.

“Your magic is undetectable here. You can cast some simple spells for your comfort but don’t cross the lines if it isn’t absolutely necessary. While under supervision, you can use your magic freely. Alone, be careful.”

“Yeah,” Potter said.

“You are not to exit the wards and you may not use your owl to contact anyone. Some of your days here will come and go lonely but you will not let yourself panic even if no one appears a day or two. You will wait.”

“I’ve already heard this, Professor.” Severus watched warily as the boy kicked the foot of the bed absently and then bent down to fix his untied shoelaces. Severus placed some of his own sealing spells in the cell… room and an undetectable tracking spell on Potter before sitting on the bed.

Potter sighed and bit his lip, chewing on that spot that was beginning to redden again. It was a childish habit, he thought, and didn’t match the grim expression that haunted Potter’s face; an aged heartache over the light of discomposed youth. Severus distracted himself by placing his wand on the night table and curiously opening the drawers to find them empty too.

“It might now seem hard to cope with, but don’t let this throw you out of balance. Your emotional strength is your only friend here. It is unwise to expose yourself to sorrow that will undoubtedly weaken you. Your Godfather was also instructed to stay in and wait. It was the loneliness of the empty days that got him; he disobeyed, and the rest is history. When the war begins nothing is going to be easy, Potter,” he said at last. “But,” Severus took a calming breath to dismiss his own worries, “you must manage.”

Older men declared war. But it was the youth that should fight and die.

Potter gave a weak chuckle. “Nice speech, Professor. But this is hell.”

Severus gave a snort too, rubbing his eyes. “It is certainly part of it.”

“I’ve been in hell before. I think I’ll survive.”

Severus grunted in agreement.
“How long are you going to stay?” Potter asked casually, attempting to push open the window. After a few tugs and pushes, Severus noticed that it was nailed shut. “How — does — that thing — open?” the boy grunted as he pushed upwards again and again with all his might and huffed in frustration when the window remained unaffected. He struggled for some more and Severus smirked as Potter bent down to attempt lifting the window frame upwards. “Hedwig — ah — has to — fly — dammit, fuck!”

Raising his hand, Severus cast a wandless spell that forced the nails to pop out. Potter stared dumbly as the window swiftly reeled aside on its own. He turned to Severus and then scratched his head in awkwardness, a crooked smile on his face. “Oh. Thanks, I guess.” He only then seemed to notice the bed Severus was sitting on. “Wow, I have a double bed. I’m going to sleep here?”

Small pleasures after a life spent in a cupboard, Severus thought sourly. He was aware of the outcome the particular remark would cause, and wondered why he hadn’t said it out loud. Mentally cursing himself for his new developing weaknesses, he faintly recalled a time when insulting the boy had been enjoyable.

“Unless you prefer the floor.” The heat that rose on Potter’s face was not an expected reaction and Severus had to mentally repeat to himself how much of a kind, decent and thoughtful man he was, and how pity it would be to ruin it all on the spur of the moment by slapping the boy and making a dramatic exit from the wizarding world once and for all. His sudden urge to aberration was replaced by a less sudden insistence on patience.

“I am going to stay in this” hell “house until you unpack,” Severus informed him, redirecting the subject. “The Headmaster wishes me to confirm that you have settled down successfully and that the wards have been activated. Then I will depart to take care of the other fascinating obligations that await for my presence to torture.”

The next hour passed with an exhausting course through the most complicated curses Severus knew, which he casted at the wards to test their efficacy and to increase the strength of autonomous magic resistance of the walls. The only two doors in the room, as Severus soon figured, led to the bathroom and to a small kitchen that lacked lighting too.

Potter opened his trunk and delved into it to take out something, but he changed his mind a second after and he quickly glanced at Severus before closing his trunk and blushing. Merlin knew what kind of nasty mischief the boy was trying to cover up this time, and Severus sighed in relief at his successfully not giving a damn about it.

Sitting on the bed, Potter absently passed a hand over his face and rubbed the scar on his forehead. “Does it hurt?” Severus asked.

“Not much, it’s more of a habit to touch it these days. Just to check.” A breathy snort escaped him. “I was just wondering how long I’ll have to be dumped in here for before I completely lose it. It can’t take too long, I suppose. I had imaginary friends when I was little.” The faint smile that momentarily appeared on his face did not make his words any lighter.

“I will visit. The Headmaster will try to as well.”

“And what if I want to contact you? What if something happens? Assume I accidentally set fire on something and I just sit here and wait for someone to come and save me before I burn myself to death. First you tell me I have to be trained so I can be strong and stuff and then you leave me helpless in a prison I can’t escape. Should I thank you for it? Because I fucking hate it.”
He agreed with every word Potter spat, and made a mental note to repeat them to the loving and caring Headmaster too. “For your information, Potter, you would be staying in Grimmauld Place now if your obnoxious friends weren’t aware of the place’s mere existence. This prison as you call it is yours to blame — yours and the Order’s unbelievable decisions’, because for once in their miserable lives they couldn’t keep their mouths shut—”

“Oh don’t start—”

“And had to show off their Gryffindor nobility and have their trust based upon affection instead of critical thinking. Half the Gryffindors know about Grimmerwald’s location, Potter. The Order regarded it helpful to spread the news, isn’t it clever? What do you think?”

Potter shrugged his shoulders, kicking away a tension that only bounced to land on his face. “Only the Weasleys know, actually.”

For fuck’s sake. “The Weasleys are half the Gryffindors, Potter!”

Potter lied down and pulled the covers up his head. “Fine,” he said, his voice muffled.

Fine? “I suppose you only blame me of your current situation, then. As short—sighted and –”

A black haired mess appeared momentarily as Potter shifted under the blanket and took off his glasses. “I’m not going to fight with you right now. Shut up.” And after a moment, “Sorry.”

It was a curious wonder that Severus was stung with; unexplained and yet indecent, somehow surreal and touchable before his eyes. He was unsure. Unsure of whether it was possible for Potter to offer an honest apology for not fighting, for not pushing back at Severus when he was expected to, for taking the abuse obediently but not being wounded by it. An apology for dropping character.

And as insane as it was, Severus chose to accept it silently, wholly aware of the hole in the boy’s heart and the larger hole that was forming yet again between them. They were awaiting a fight, a struggle of souls and wands and tongues spitting swears and curses and bitter words that memory could not simply wipe away. That would be desirable. That would be expected.

Severus watched the boy slowly drift to asleep. When a fight wasn’t there to fulfil that gap, Severus was helpless, for he couldn’t imagine of any other way to mend it.

“A another day and I’d have gone mad,” said Potter.

“I was busy. Has your scar hurt?” Severus left aside the books he had brought along and damned his luck when it occurred to him that Potter was angry. He was not the right person for Potter to be angry with. He’d have to take it anyway.

“Take me to Dumbledore. Now.”

If only he could. “Potter.”

“Now! I’ve been three days here, alone! With no one to talk to! With nothing to do! Don’t you see that this is just fucking cruel? I can’t do this, I’m going crazy! I’m just losing it. I can’t do this.”

He knew. But there was nothing he could do about it. Almost nothing. “I am willing to teach you.”

“Teach me what?”

“Everything.”

Stop.

“Dark Magic, white magic, mind control, even how to cast a spell and produce another within it. I can teach you spells no living person knows. I can open a door for you that hasn’t been opened to anyone your age, ever.”

Potter swallowed, sitting down in disbelief. “I don’t think I want to learn dark magic, sir. Can’t we… avoid it?”

He wasn’t planning on teaching him any of it anyway. All he needed to do was make him believe that was he was trusted with something essential and then he’d teach him just some seventh year spells and tricks.

All he needed was time.

“Of course.”

“Are you leaving?”

Outside it had gone dark; the hill was bathed in deep blackness, pale and cold and silvery from the strands of the struggling moonlight. Everything could be seen quite plainly, resembling the daytime but with the colours missing, like a sketch unfinished and quite hurried - or like a delusion charm that wrapped itself around a dungeon to make it look like a countryside estate.

“Yes, we are done for now. Read the books I brought you, you might find them quite useful in combination with the basic theory of the spells. If you have any difficulty understanding something, make a note and we’ll look at it together. Don’t write directly on the books.”

“Got it.” Then, “You congratulated me twice today. And I did well at everything you taught me,” said Potter with narrowed eyes. It wasn’t a simple matter of fact statement, Severus knew, and he refused to acknowledge any hint of where his words were headed until spoken out loud.

He took out the Portkey to activate it, still not entirely trusting the Floo of this place. As he pointed his wand at it and gave Potter a last look of curiosity, he realised that he was being watched closely by the boy.

Then, as the conclusion had been made, Potter laughed. “It wasn’t advanced magic, was it? You didn’t teach me anything.” Potter slumped back to his bed and looked at the ceiling. “Dumbledore didn’t tell me the truth. Neither did you. Again. It’s all lies.”

Fair point, but this was out of his reach to discuss. Potter of course, wasn’t aware of it.

It was in that brief moment, as Severus watched the boy rub his face in a naïve abandonment for all his trusting role models, that he believed that Potter should have never been born. None of this was worth it, and nothing would get better for Potter during or after the war. Best case scenario, he would avoid death and he would be watched cautiously for the rest of his life as the Dark Lord’s potential revival. The Ministry would close all career doors, the Aurors would keep a close eye on his actions and half the Wizarding world would accuse him for war crimes and all the misfortunes they’d be unable to shoulder elsewhere.

“And you’re not going to tell me what’s he hiding from me, are you?”
“He hides nothing, as far as I’m aware.”

Potter chuckled. “You’re a spy, Snape. You’re supposed to be a better liar than that.”

Severus narrowed his eyes at the Portkey on the night table, as though trying to blame it for all that had happened. An object would be a better target than the boy at the moment. A cold hand curled around his own, and Severus found himself too panicked to step back. Too startled. Slow.

He met Potter’s eyes who stared right through him, piercing something inside him that had been assuredly numb for the best part of his life and had no good reason to be resurrected now. “Will you lie down for a moment? Nothing inappropriate, I promise.”

*This is unthinkable, Potter.*

*Ten points from Gryffindor.*

*Insolent little freak! I refuse to believe you even said such a thing to me, of all people. You should be ashamed of yourself.*

All these things had been told before, and it only seemed futile to repeat them. “I cannot.”

*I don't want to.*

“One moment only.”

*No.*

Carefully, Severus saw himself from a safe distance sitting down and letting Potter pull him back on the bed. When Potter came closer and brought his arms around him, Severus was too tired to push him off. Too tired of pushing him off. He reminded himself that it was only pity the reason he was allowing this to happen, and somehow the hole in his stomach only throbbed at the lie. A hand came up and he reckoned that it was his own; he looked at it as though doubting its true intentions and then saw it descend to push the fringe from Potter’s forehead softly. *I cannot.* Potter pressed his body against Severus’ for dear life; Severus almost thought that he was breathing for both of them.

“Stay here tonight.”

It was impossible. Atrocious. “Fool.”

Potter’s hair was soft and shaggy, and no one in their right mind would like the profound ugliness of this unruly hell of a head. They shared the same hair colour, Severus thought, although Potter’s was healthier, younger and thicker. He threaded his fingers through it and remembered how it felt when Potter did it to him.

Potter’s face was buried in his sternum, his breaths long and deep and unmistakably shaky. “Stay until I fall asleep. Please.”

“You’re insomniac, Potter,” Severus drawled.

Potter clutched his arm and snorted. “Not anymore.”

It was a lie, and from now on no one would hear the boy’s scream-filled nightmares. “Hm. And what changed?”

Severus felt the boy’s chest heave against his own; he could almost hear the struggle inside. “What didn’t? Oh, I know. I’m still considered a child that isn’t ready to know a damn thing about all this.
Time will come after a thousand years or so though and then you’ll tell me everything so I’m not to complain, it’d be selfish.”

Despite himself, Severus laughed.

Memories of love never pass, and this thought struck Severus like a bolt. They linger, guide, and influence long after the source of stimulation has faded. There was nothing new in this; every person who had been moved by genuine affection knew that it left enduring traces upon the human heart.

When Lily died, the major force of love had spent itself and passed away like a fire that had burned itself out. Its departure was the departure of the capacity to feel. Or so he thought.

“Stay,” repeated Potter.

He dropped his jaw to explain, a million words of denial at the tip of his tongue. He should leave. For all he knew Dumbledore could be watching them now. He barely recalled a time when he needn’t someone watching him to maintain his morals, and he cringed as he carefully packed the thought away to resurrect it when the company of whiskey would be available. He could not explain. But explanation by the tongue made most things clearer, and he knew that what was left unexplained would just wait to attack him behind the corner later. There was no sickness greater than the sickness of the heart; self-loathing aside.

Severus stayed.
Parentheses: Red and White

A punch landed on Severus’ nose, and Severus grunted in shock as he dodged another and pulled himself up to a sitting position. He pushed Potter off him and watched as the boy rolled on his belly, covered his face with an elbow and grunted.

Severus reached out to poke him in the ribs, his other hand still covering his attacked nose. “Potter.” Potter hummed in acknowledgment.

“Potter. Wake up.”

“M’ awake,” Potter complained as he yawned and stretched. He blindly raised a hand to drag Severus back down to the bed by his robes, but instead caught hold of his hair. Severus hissed in pain as his head was forced back on the pillows, and he untangled the fingers off him with disgust, scowling at the ceiling. As soon as he lied down again, a leg was draped over his own and a giddy face found its way to his neck. His heart beating in panic, Severus pushed Potter away and got up.

“What time is it?” asked Potter.

“Early morning. I’m leaving. Is there anything you need?”

Potter chuckled on his pillow. “Yeah.”

“Good morning, Potter,” Severs growled.

“Again. Focus.”

Harry nodded.

He felt Snape pushing into his mind, his dark eyes locked with his own as he consumed his magic. “Fight it.”

“I don’t even know what I’m fighting,” complained Harry in a low tone. This was more confusing than Legilimency and he felt slightly off guard.

“Then you don’t know yourself.”

What made you think I know myself in the first place? Harry searched through his own thoughts for the implanted one and failed miserably to put his finger at it. “I’m not really hungry?” he said testily.

Snape smirked. “Again.”

Harry sighed and rolled his eyes, breaking the eye contact. A cold hand grasped his chin and Snape met his eyes once more with an intensity no human being should have.

“I don’t know what it is, I quit. Spill the beans.” He gave a cheeky grin and waited for the revelation.

Apparently Snape wasn’t going to make it so easy for him though. He smirked. “Tell me what you were thinking of. In detail.”

Harry felt his heart lose a beat. Why did the man have to torture him all the time? “Um. That I was hungry. That I’ve an itch on my nose.” That you’re fucking beautiful, “That the room should be
better off painted red. Like the Gryffindor common room or Slughorn’s library, for example. The walls here are kind of sad. They remind me of my Aunt’s room. Gross. Oh, and if I ever get out of here again I’ll go blind, I mean, it’s too dark in here, I’m kind of getting used to it. And that I—” he swallowed, thinking better than to say the rest out loud. “That is all.”

Snape raised a brow. “That is all.”

“Yeah.”

Could it be this? He was pretty sure that this particular thought was his own. He felt the humiliation coming as he risked a hint. He didn’t want to lose. “And your shirt.”

“My shirt.” Snape was doing it again. That expression between panic and bursting into laughter, that only existed to serve his interaction with dumb Harry James Potter and his pathetic attempts at flirtation.

Harry returned the stare steadily as he silently accepted the fact that he had made himself twice the fool and could do nothing about it. Well. Might as well see where it’d get him. “Yes. It’s a bit tighter on you than last summer. You must have gained some weight. It suits you. And you haven’t buttoned it all the way up. I think you did that on purpose.”

Snape frowned and Harry grinned. On that, at least, he could win. He watched Snape try to put his shock under control. On second thought, not shock. Embarrassment. Offence. Some kind of bizarre surprise at Harry’s insolence. Or honesty. “Is this how you’re planning to defeat the Dark Lord, Potter?”

Harry shrugged his shoulders teasingly. “You never know. He might be charmed.”

“Tch.” Snape rolled his eyes and summoned two glasses of water.

Harry emptied his and put it aside. “So. What was it?”

“The colour red,” Snape said.

Harry frowned. “But I wasn’t thinking of the colour red.”

“You thought the room should be painted red, which would by the way be dizzying and dreadfully kitsch. The idea of painting was a subconscious interpretation of yours for your thinking of the colour red. I made you think of it, however.”

Harry couldn’t help but wonder if this was something that had happened to him before. How could he be sure that everything he thought of was deriving from his own soul? Perhaps he was being controlled like that since he was born. He’d have no way of knowing.

“The train of thought was mine,” he confirmed.

“Yes. You could have thought of anything at that moment, but it would include red either you wanted it or not. The rest of it was you.”

At least he wasn’t under the Imperius. It was something.

“Again?”

Harry nodded. He lifted his head and didn’t have time to respond because Snape had already started. He tried to relax. That shirt was really nice. Harry thought of himself as lucky to have seen Snape in
white. He supposed few people had that opportunity. It made him look healthier, more normal, and Harry had the impression that when he stood his nipples were almost visible underneath.

“Focus, Potter.”

Harry blinked into focus.

It occurred to him that Snape was having way too much fun during this. Of course, Harry could have always declined to learn this particular aspect of mind control. The silence between them though was growing too heavy to bear, and in a moment of despair he decided to offer his dignity for the sake of training.

“You didn’t find it. I’m in.”

Already? “What? How?” Harry frowned, trying to recall everything he had thought of during the last minute. “What is it?”

Snape stretched his legs and crossed his arms over his chest. “You tell me.”

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck. Harry made a mental note to build himself a statue the day he’d prove himself to be actually intelligent to the man. “Um. Nipples?”

He wished he could dissolve. Snape was momentarily stunned with an expression of utter disbelief slapped over his face and wrinkles of surprise appeared on his forehead. It lasted a second, and then the astonishment was gone. “No, Potter. Try again.”

Harry snorted, covering his face with a hand. He allowed himself a moment of laughter and then he looked at Snape through parted fingers. “White?”

“White,” agreed Snape, his features screaming NOT FUCKING NIPPLES.

“So I won then,” said Harry and jumped up. “I found it. White.”

Snape barely nodded in agreement, muttering something under his breath before summoning the sandwiches from the kitchen.

After they ate, Harry knew Snape would leave. His chest tightened at the thought of having to spend the rest of the day alone trapped inside these walls. And probably the next one too. And the next one. “Would you send a letter to Hermione if I gave it to you?” he asked cautiously, occupying himself with cleaning the bed from bread crumbs.

“I will have to ask the Headmaster for permission,” answered Snape.

“Thanks.”

Harry felt the hair on his nape stand up as he cleaned the bedclothes and took the dishes to the kitchen. Snape followed. “I take it that you have written exclusively to her, then.”

He had written to Ron too. In fact, he had been writing to Ron even when he was at the dormitory and Ron was sleeping only a bed away from him. But they were letters he knew he’d never send and didn’t have the right to compose in the first place. The worst part of it was that he knew he’d have Ron’s forgiveness if he begged bad enough, and the temptation became too much sometimes. As much as he craved to take the advantage, he had decided long ago to accept things as they were. A fitting punishment, it was.
“I’ve no one else to write to,” he said simply.

“Mister Weasley?”

Harry chewed on his lip and leaned back on the counter. He took a deep breath. Then shook his head. “Just Hermione.”

The dishes cleaned themselves under the hot water. The sound of the faucet whooshing soothed some part of his brain that screamed for attention on the subject. It occurred to him that not talking about it was probably for the best. Scratching old wounds was dangerous, but poking on recent ones was definitely just painful.

Snape seemed to understand. “I see.”

Harry snorted. “So. Is Malfoy still trying to take over Hogwarts?”

"What made you think he would ever try such a thing?"

"I'm not stupid."

"Clearly."

Harry sighed, suddenly too exhausted to fight. He shook his head and let his breath come out in a snort. “I don’t know how you do it. How you can look him in the eye and although you know everything he has done and is going to do, still obey him instead of raising your wand and killing him.”

“Are you referring to the Dark Lord or Dumbledore?” asked Snape.

Harry looked at him dumbstruck for a moment, and then he laughed. “Both.”

“Duty.”

“If he finds out... If Voldemort finds out you're helping me... He’ll kill you.”

“Yes.”

“But-”

“But we will not discuss that. Drink your tea, Potter.”
Harry delved into his trunk and pulled out his copy of Advanced Potion-Making before getting into bed. There, he turned its pages, reading random paragraphs, until he finally found an angular note of the Prince. It was written in a handwriting that wasn’t as delicate as the rest of his notes, and Harry wondered if he had been in a hurry to write it down as not to forget it.

Where the book said, *Alchemy is the art of perfecting, but historically is typically known for the creation of the fabled philosopher's stone*, the Prince had added, *Wrong. The original definition of alchemy is to use “magick” to make cheap metals into gold.*

At the mention of the Philosopher’s stone Harry’s blood ran cold; he couldn’t help but wonder if this book had anything to do with Voldemort. What if this was an implanted thought too? Perhaps he didn’t even like the book, but he thought he did because someone wanted him to carry it with him all the time. He closed it and held it to his chest.

It was confusing, but this book had somehow been a friend to him. The thought of dark magic being involved was just unnerving. Aware that what intrigued him most about it was this very mystery, he wondered again about its origin. It looked so old his owner could have easily been his grandfather. His illusions for a beautiful prince hiding behind the book weren’t affected in the slightest by the realisation.

Harry placed the book on the night table, turned off the lamp, and rolled over.

It would be interesting to try and force a thought of his own in Snape’s mind, he thought as he covered himself with the blanket. A happy one, to increase the difficulty level. Something fresh and colourful, if only to gauge the man’s reaction. His lips would curl in disgust, granted. He was probably the only living person that would be disgusted by being happy.

There was no point in denying that Harry cared, one way or another. He had all the time to deal with it and accept it. Only Snape wasn’t accepting it just as well. Maybe mind control could fix that. *Like me back. Like me back. Like me back.* He’d have to try. And if he failed… well. Chances had it likely that Harry wouldn’t live to see the end of the year. His stomach tightened at the reminder and he clutched at the worn pillow to keep himself from falling apart. *His name is Severus,* an untamed part of his mind insisted, refusing to follow the stream of consciousness to the upcoming war. Was anyone else calling him Severus except Dumbledore or Voldemort?

It was a nice name. Rare. Not that Sirius or Remus were common, but this was different. It felt different.

“Severus,” he tried it out and his voice was muffled into the pillow. He chuckled at his own misery.

His eyes slowly closing, he let his demons take him in another restless, alerted sleep.

Sometimes, surrender was right.

Harry woke up by a strong hand grabbing his ear and twisting it. He shouted, kicking at the covers in panic as he reached for his wand and glasses. The wand wasn’t there. It occurred to him that it was Snape who was twisting his ear; he wore his glasses quickly then yanked at the man’s hand.

“Snape!”
Snape’s upper lip trembled, his eyes wide in wrath as he bared his teeth and almost covered Harry’s body with his own. “Explain. Now.”

“What are you doing?” He tried to pull Snape’s index finger backwards to get him off him but Snape’s hand was curled in a tight fist around his ear. “You’re hurting me!”

“Explain yourself, Potter!”

“Explain what? Stop it!”

Snape pushed him and Harry shifted away frightened. He rubbed his ear to bring the circulation back. His fear was quickly replaced by anger. “What the fuck was that?” he shouted.

Snape pursed his lips and towered over the bed with the Advanced Potion-Making book in his hand. He threw it on Harry’s lap with force. “Congratulations. You are a true Gryffindor, after all.”

Harry gaped, snatching the book and hugging it protectively. Fully awake now, he jumped up. “You had no right!”

“I had no right? I had no right, Potter? I’ve got to hand it to you, this was beyond suspicion. Well done. On second thought, this isn’t even about Houses. You are a disgrace to Hogwarts itself.”

“And this comes from a Slytherin who was befriending murderers at my age!”

Snape half-raised a hand to slap him and then clutched it, willing it back down. “Hold your tongue, you reckless little sod.”

“Or what?”

“Where did you find this?” Snape asked. “Is this how you managed to impress Slughorn? Oh, let me guess, Dumbledore gave it to you, and of course he doesn’t mind you having it. You even have a note from him explaining it all and clarifying that I’m not to object. Is that right?”

“Dumbledore had nothing to do with it. What’s your problem? I never cheated!” Harry glanced at his wand on the floor and slowly stepped towards it.

“Don’t even think of it,” drawled Snape. “Explain.”

Snape’s pale face and deranged expression could only mean one thing: the Prince didn’t exist. He was probably just another cursed object, as Harry feared. He could only imagine in what kind of trouble he had dragged himself into this time. And now Snape was going to take the book away from him.

_Not important_, he reminded himself. Just a book of a class he didn’t even particularly like.

Harry handed the book over. Snape took it, but Harry didn’t let go. “Slughorn loaned it to me for the first week of the year because I hadn’t bought a copy of mine yet. When I got a new book I swapped the front covers and returned to him the new one instead of this. The instructions in it helped me succeed in Potions like never before. I decided to keep it.”

Snape tugged at the book. Harry kept holding it. “You improved your grades with impudent methods and abused the school’s property. Then you cursed Draco and almost killed him. He could have bled to his death because of your arrogance and yet you kept the book all the same.”

Snape looked like he had swallowed the sourest lemon on earth; Harry felt his cheeks burn. Feeling
the need to defend the himself, he quickly objected, “I didn't know what it did. The spell. I didn't think it’d be dangerous. I wanted to tell someone but I… didn’t.”

“Because you wanted to keep cheating.”

“I never cheated! It did - help me. I didn’t think it’d be dark magic. I never tried that spell again. It was just help—”

“Liar.”

“You know what, the Prince was proved to be a much better teacher than you’ll ever be. Maybe you should take a few lessons yourself.”

He expected Snape to be pissed off at this. To yell. To even grab him by the ear again and slam him back to the bed. Which on second thought wouldn’t be that bad a turn of events. What he didn’t expect, however, was the deep hoarse laughter that rushed out of Snape’s throat, raw and absolutely paranoid. Harry stared.

The book slipped from Snape’s fingers and Harry kept it to his chest, not knowing what to do. Snape’s laughter filled the room and Harry awkwardly waited for him to finish. When he did, his anger had subsided to something Harry couldn’t quite name. There was amusement in his eyes. He extended a hand.

“Give that back, Potter.”


“You… you.”

“Next time steal a vocabulary book. It might turn out quite useful too. Well?”

Harry felt his fingers go numb around the hardcover of the book. He gave it to Snape who looked at it briefly and shoved it into his robes.

“You,” repeated Harry, suddenly feeling helpless.

“Yes, Potter. I am the Half-Blood Prince.”

It took a moment for him to connect the puzzle pieces. When he did, he felt dizzy. He smiled in sympathy to himself and looked at the black eyes that watched him curiously right back.

This was fucked.

The levels of irony were too many to count. This was premeditated. It had to be. “You improved your grades with impudent methods and abused the school’s property,” he heard himself saying to the boy. “Then you cursed Draco and almost killed him. He could have bled to his death because of your arrogance and yet you kept the book all the same.”

Arrogance seemed to be the only thing Gryffindor ever produced. There were no Gryffindor virtues. The whole scam about the Gryffindors’ nobility was so easy to take apart that he never even bothered anymore. Potter was the proof that manners weren’t a matter of education but a matter of personality. He was born insolent. Insolent like his father. Insolent and naughty, like Black and Lupin and Pettigrew and like all the kind and loving Gryffindors turned out to be in the end.

“I never cheated! It did - help me.” *Has it,* Severus thought. He was suddenly interested in Potter’s
“You know what, the Prince was proved to be a much better teacher than you’ll ever be. Maybe you should take a few lessons yourself.”

He silently swore that if Potter said one more time the word Prince with that unmistakable redness over his cheeks Severus would personally see to make that blush permanent. In the form of a bruise, perhaps. He let his laughter possess him. Was young and innocent Potter fond of a mysterious prince? What kind of twisted fate was that? *Why me?* He heard his conscience complain.

Harry Potter, the saviour of the Wizarding world, holy martyr, powerful since birth, humble warrior, underprivileged hero, had a crush on Severus Snape and then he had a crush on his book.

He shook his head, reviewing the situation. Potter had a crush on him and then he had a crush on him. Twice. Oh, the destiny. Damn.

“Give that back, Potter.”

And Potter hadn’t known. As cruel as it was, it was equally satisfying to see the Chosen One fall lower and lower as his emotional health revolved around his interest for a man he ought to hate.

Potter’s eyes widened, darting from him to the book and back. “You… you.”

Ah. And the boy was appreciating the plot twist too. “Next time steal a vocabulary book. It might turn out quite useful too. Well?”

“You,” Potter said again, his voice cracking. *Spare me the melodramatics,* he thought of saying. But lest Potter had any remaining doubts, “Yes, Potter. I am the Half-Blood Prince.”

And Potter broke into a crooked smile too, the one people have just before they crack up. Irony. A hard lesson.

Potter slumped back on the bed and frowned. “How?”

Giving up on making sense of any of this, Severus sat beside him and flipped the book to the first page. “It used to be my mother’s book,” he explained, not knowing why he even bothered to. “Her name was Eileen Prince. She had written it here,” he patted his index finger on the page. “This book belongs to Prince. I enriched it.” He smiled at the memory; he’d never been proud of being half-blood. But the fact that Slughorn was forced to see it on his book every time he congratulated him for a Potion was making him be. It was the closest thing to rubbing the truth to Slughron’s fat face that he ever managed. Slughorn never believed purebloods to be equal to the rest of the students.

“You’re half-blood,” recalled Potter, frowning. “Your father.”

“Yes.”

Potter chuckled. “Why didn’t it cross my mind? It’s obvious. It was obvious. The handwriting. God, I’m stupid.”

“You are also short sighted and incredibly naive.”

Potter snorted. “Yeah. Thanks, I guess. You’ve invented all these spells yourself?”

“You haven’t attempted any of them. Have you?”
Potter frowned. Oh joy. He had. Dumbledore would be thrilled.

“Yeah. Not all of them, though. I’ve no idea what most of them do. I — tried a few, but after Malfoy I stopped. I’m sorry, just…” His eyes were stuck on the pages, turning them slowly as he struggled to connect the content of them with Severus. He mentally applauded himself for this new crossed line. May Potter break them all.

Then again, may he not.

“You are the Prince,” Potter mumbled after a minute. He looked up in disbelief. Then finally laughed, falling back on the pillows, his eyes on the ceiling. “Wow.”

Wow indeed.
**Parentheses: Disorientation**

*Hello Prince,* Harry almost sneered when Snape arrived. Instead, he nodded. “Hey.”


Harry grunted. “I want to speak with Dumbledore.”

Snape snorted. “Don’t we all.”

“No. I mean it. You’ll take me out of here. You or him, I don’t care, just do it. Just let me go.”

“And go where, Potter? The Dark Lord will find you wherever you go. Stop being ridiculous.”

Snape looked around as though searching for something indistinct, and finally sat on the bed and rubbed his eyes. These days he seemed more tired than ever, Harry thought.

Harry stood. He willed his temper down but his heartbeat thumped in frustration as soon as he thought of Voldemort again. “Then I’ll fight him. I’ll kill him. I’m not afraid of him and if you are then you should be ashamed, Professor.”

Despite Harry’s strict tone, Snape laughed. He looked up at Harry and his eyes glittered with that sick amusement that had no place being there but always was anyway. “Pull yourself together Harry, for God’s sake. If anything, study.”

Harry thought of shouting. He thought of punching and attacking. But after a moment of silent contemplation, he allowed himself a deep exhale and sat next to Snape.

Snape raised an eyebrow.

“You know, I hate Potions,” Harry admitted with an almost whispered chuckle. Snape’s eyes bore into his, and for a moment, Harry thought that his mind was completely open, unguarded for anyone to feel and see and touch his soul. He felt a shiver running down his spine and he clenched his fists to keep them still.

“Perhaps I hate them too,” Snape said.

“And you called me Harry.”

“What?”

“You called me Harry. Just now.”

“I did not.” Snape walked towards Harry’s trunk and summoned a couple of books.

“You did.”

“I did not.”

“You did. And you know it.”

“Enough.”

Harry smiled. “Not nearly enough, actually.”
Severus allowed himself a sinister grin and clapped his hands slowly. Potter took a deep breath and steeled himself against the mockery. “At least I am trying. You should be thankful I even do that.”

He was thankful. Without these tricks to pass the time, the boy would have lost his mind just like the dog had. These days, Severus was nothing more than Potter’s entertainer. He regarded it quite amusing nevertheless. “I do not see any trying. I see failing.”

“Cute,” Potter said. He sighed into his hands and nodded. “I’m ready.”

Their eyes met and Severus bore in. The green depth was easy to penetrate, and the surface of Potter’s repeatedly abused soul was torn and damaged to extents Severus had rarely seen before. Death Eaters weren’t happier cases, of course, but this was different.

Blue, Severus thought. He pushed carefully into Potter’s mind and planted the thought as easily as ever. “I’m in.”

“You’re not. I wasn’t thinking of anything.” Potter stared dumbfounded and Severus drew his stare away. He needed to take a piss and sleep, he decided. Potter was eating away his time like a worm ate its dirt; he could barely recall a time when the boy wasn’t his responsibility.

His past life now resembled loneliness, and Potter was to blame for it. Potter was to blame for everything, come to think of it. He was a parasite that had hooked its sorry existence on his neck and now Severus was forced to carry it along wherever he went.

The memory of his once better self applauded him from the safe distance of time and calmly suggested suicide.

“Death Eaters?”

Had that passed through? He’d been careful. “I’m afraid not.”

“Death Eaters. I wasn’t thinking of anything else, really.” His eyes widened. “Oh, black? The colour?”


“I wasn’t thinking of blue.”

He’d gotten used to Potter. Used to being attractive to someone. Used to talking with someone without manoeuvring everything around lies.

Well. Lies did what lies do. They saved Severus’ life. Only now they were merely saving his dignity, and he realised that even that didn’t work as it used to.

“You were.”

Potter absently scratched that horrendous scar on his forehead. “Yeah,” he mumbled. “Maybe I did.”

Of course. “And what else?”

Potter blinked. “There was more?”

Severus nodded. There wasn’t, but he wanted to know.
“There was nothing I was thinking about that you’d like to know, sir.”

The apology crossing his face was so unconvincing that was already fading to a shy smirk.

Damn.

Severus stormed to the safety of the kitchen and closed the door to his fate for the sake of a cup of tea. A million words were stuck behind his lips and for a moment he was disoriented. “I’m gay,” Potter’s voice echoed in his head and he wondered why he had ever allowed such a conversation to take place.

Stupid.

Utterly stupid.

“I’d like some tea too,” Potter yelled from the main room.


“Mint or lemon?” Fight or flight?

“Lemon.”

“What about you?” Potter asked. “You never liked a man?”

He was suddenly aware of that vein on his neck throbbing again. Well. He’d sooner cut off his own head than let Potter touch him. Flight.

He never liked a man. He never liked a boy. He only liked Lily. End of story.

The door opened and Potter extended his hand to take his cup.

He’d rot in hell, but he was curious.

He held Potter’s cup but didn’t give it. Yet. “What were you thinking about?”

Potter chuckled. “Not blue,” he assured him. “And not you.”

It is better to remain silent at the risk of being thought a fool, than to talk and remove all doubt of it.

“Ah. A first one.” Severus couldn’t bring himself to look at him. He smirked at the cup and their fingers brushed as Potter took it.

“Hm. And what are you thinking about, Professor?”

Indeed.
“It’s my birthday,” Potter said. “I’m seventeen. Of age and all. I can use magic whenever I want now, can’t I?”

“The year you were born marks only your entry into the world. Other years where you prove your worth, are the ones worth celebrating.”

Potter rolled his eyes. “In other words, ‘happy birthday, Harry.’”

“In other words, have you trained?”

“I can’t focus. It’s so boring here. Drives me crazy. Where were you?”

“Tch.” Severus pretended to listen as he let the boy go through the details of his first birthday cake, and every word he uttered added another burden to the tragedy that Severus’ job was. He vaguely recalled a time when Potter would avoid talking to him outside class at all costs, and was terrified at the realisation that he simply did not mind the brat anymore.

Oh well.

The boy would soon be dead anyway, he remembered. He decided on ignoring that fact until time came. Worrying too much would tear him apart and make him useless. The boy did not matter. The war did.

“Take out your wand and clear your mind.”

Potter looked up. “What? Today? What for?” He looked at Severus as though trying to see behind his intentions. The hilarity of his panicked face caused laughter to escape Severus, and he shook his head dismissively as he sat on the bed.

Potter crawled onto the bed too and sat cross-legged across him on the mattress.

“Legilimency isn’t something one can always master just because one succeeded once. It needs vigilance. Hard work. Training,” he added.

“I’m not going to train today,” Potter stated in a steady voice. Severus stared. Potter let out a sigh. Then he looked away.

Don’t say it.

Don’t.

You will regret it.

“Happy birthday.” As soon as he said it, he realised it was too late to take it back. Maybe some venom could make up for it. “Although you still look like a fourteen year old.”

“Oh, sod off.” Potter shrugged and came closer. Too close. Severus should have better instincts when it came to dodging attacks, he thought as Potter’s arms clutched tightly around his neck and Potter’s face was buried into Severus’ neck. Severus raised his arms as to not touch him, his mind running through the ways he could get the little bastard off his lap without any further physical contact.
Maybe a curse.

“What in Merlin’s name are you doing now?”

A chuckle warmed his neck and a hushed voice whispered, “Hugging you.”

His heart was protesting loudly at the assault. His temper throbbed and his tongue was nothing but a sponge. Despite himself, he watched as his arms finally curled around the boy who looked nothing like a fourteen year old and sighed. “This is not to be misunderstood,” he clarified. The line of misunderstanding had been crossed ages ago, and the hypocrisy of his weakness sickened him.

Sickness. That's what it was. Depravity.

Seventeen years of mourning and spying and pretending and teaching tightened around him and it occurred to him that time does not like to be embraced by mortal beings. The simple pleasure of human contact, sobriety, and peace attacked him like tingly demons that desired his death. He wished for a moment of freedom, a moment to truly satisfy himself with what he had, but he knew he couldn’t, because all he ever loved was doomed to end with death and haunt him with another death and then another.

Caring was wrong. He could not tell why he had to remind himself so often.

Another heart beat against his own and that circular emotion that surrounded him was suddenly not a hug.

It was a noose.

“I want to kiss you,” Potter said.

Severus pushed Potter away in terror. There had to be a way to move past this point. He was stuck in hell. With James Potter’s son. Gay son. Too gay. Too close. Severus sighed off his panic and stood up ready for the fight that was assuredly on the way and coming.

Why couldn’t the boy keep his mouth shut for once?

“Sorry,” Potter said. “Forget –”

“As you can see,” Severus hissed, “I do forget. And you keep on reminding me that I should have never forgotten, that I should have opted out of this… thing months ago!”

“Well sorry for being honest then! As though you don’t know that I think of it. What changed now? That I told you? I’ve told you before.”

“Yes.” And he had hoped he’d heard wrong. Hoped that Potter was confused. Wrong. Lying.

“Hypocrite.” The little idiot. What did he think he was doing? Didn’t he know that he was playing with fire? Didn’t he know that he had no right –

“We’ve had this ridiculous conversation before and let me assure you, you will fish nothing new out of it. If you are to start this again I’m leaving.”

“Coward.”

He wouldn’t slap him. He would leave.
“Where are you going? Severus!” Fingers clutched around his arm and Severus looked at the little devil that Potter was with disbelief. If he'd been keeping all his anxiety buried awaiting for a big panic attack to burn it all down, apparently this was the right time to have it.

“Don’t. Push me away. ‘Cause I won’t go. Not like that. You can’t go mad over the fact that I like you. I’m not ashamed of it. But I can’t lie to you anymore.”

*You can and you will.*

*Please.*

Severus pushed Potter’s hand away violently. Fuck Voldemort. He would kill the boy himself. “What do you want, Potter? You want me to confess my endless love to you? Drop to my knees and kiss your feet to express my wholehearted affection? Cry on your shoulder for the unfairness that life is? You’re seeking the wrong person, boy. Go find yourself another queer little Gryffindor and unify with him if that’s what you wish. I’ve nothing of the kind to offer you. I’m your Professor.”

“You –”

“None of it. Every time you throw yourself at me you’re only embarrassing yourself further. Have some dignity and keep this idiocy to yourself.”

*For your sake.*

*For mine.*

*Both, likely.*

“You expect me to believe that you abandoned your whole life to be here with me because you had to. You think I’m so stupid I won’t see that you chose this. Or are you lying to yourself too? You’re flattered.”

“It’s an obligation, you moron!”

For a moment, Potter looked like he might cry. Then he shook his head, and when he looked up, his eyes were cold. “Maybe. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's an obligation. You know, sometimes I think you're here only because you can’t get over your remorse. For what you did. You'd still be a Death Eater anyway, wouldn't you?”

“You are a child, Potter. I regret wasting my time on you.” He turned to leave, but Potter stumbled behind him and he was soon in front of him again. There was rage flickering in his eyes.

“Obligation to what? You think it’s going to change anything? Nothing will make it better, and nothing will bring you closer to her because she doesn’t exist anymore.”

There was only one kind of shock worse than the totally unexpected: the expected for which one had refused to prepare. There was a feeling of disbelief that came over him. He did what he was supposed to do, which was to listen, but in fact he was not there at all.

“You think I don’t miss my parents?” A bitter chuckle escaped Potter’s throat. “I miss them every damn day, and I don’t ever recall their faces. I can’t wallow on it. It’d be useless. It’d be stupid. I’ll never be happy for not having them in my life, but either way I have to move on.”

There was some emotion between them that made the air thick, and Severus could only name it honesty, but he was sure that honesty was not a sentiment.
“I have moved on, Potter.” Anger was useful only to a certain point, and pouring it now upon Potter would be careless. All the better. “You should be thanking me on your knees for everything I’ve done to save your skin all these years. For blindly risking my life for you, doing all I can to keep you sound and safe. I’m not weak, Potter. I’m responsible. I do what I must while you play the little fairy queen with your friends and make up ridiculous fantasies to fill your empty days.”

Potter laughed. “You do what you must to cleanse your soul from guilt. You know, if you want to protect me out of duty or - or obligation, or whatever - I don’t care. But I won’t have you protecting me out of remorse for my mother. That’s sick.”

“You believe you know it all –”

“That’s what you said to Dumbledore! He asked you if it was remorse, and then you agreed to protect me for her sake! I know what I saw Snape!”

“Careful, now.”

“No! Does anyone even know who you are? Because I’m stuck with you in this prison and sometimes I think I’ve no idea at all.”

“Why do you care?”

Harry blinked, the silence of the room ringing into his ears after the intense shouting. Why did he?

“What do you think of Voldemort? What do you really think, do you ever admire him?”

“End of discussion.”

Harry went on, but Snape didn’t answer, and instead he merely walked to the fireplace and reached for the floo powder. Harry snatched the jar from his fist violently and threw it against the wall.

“Fucking listen to me goddamn you! How can you still ask why I care? All I’m trying to say is that I love you!”

Harry’s breath came out forcefully; his forehead was covered in sweat. With a grimace of disgust Snape grabbed Harry’s shoulders and pushed him back. His teeth bared, he hissed so close to Harry’s mouth that his breath tickled his lips.

“Do so for all I care. I will not witness my life being destroyed just because of this madness. You will stop bringing it up and you’ll give up on any ridiculous hopes that concern me or I’ll Obliviate you. This absurd obsession with my person will cease. I never wished for you to be in my life, I never wished for any of this and what you’ve convinced yourself you want is nothing but a desperate cry for a family you’ve sorrowfully misinterpreted for something else in your weakened mind.”

Harry snorted. Indeed, they’d done this before. “Are you through?”

Snape’s grip tightened on his shoulders. “Quite.”

And then Harry was pressed against the wall with a strong hand around his throat and was kissed passionately; a trembling rage made his head dizzy and his heart weak. Their mouths crushed together and Harry moaned in shock as Snape bit his lower lip hard.

Snape pushed back as savagely as he had pulled close. He looked away, hiding the pained expression Harry had seen so many times before. Harry didn’t dare to talk; he waited for Snape to
begin. To leave. Or to stay.

One could always hope, after all.

But Snape never said a thing.

He didn’t have to. Harry realised he wasn’t the only one trembling.

Potter stepped closer, and with the softest of touches, began unbuttoning Severus’ shirt. Severus watched, petrified, unable to think of a protest.

He wasn’t gay. Had never been. Child molesters disgusted him. Whatever the boy was doing to him, it had to be Dark Magic. In that moment, Severus truly believed it, that the creature before him was a demon, sent to destroy him.

Potter looked at him with big eyes, as though waiting for permission. He snaked his hands under Severus’ shirt and his palms pressed against his skin. Severus shivered in something that could not be anticipation, and only when Potter’ hands rose to his shoulders in an attempt to take his shirt off, Severus’ mind snapped into reality.

“Tch.” Flinching away, he let the disgust wash over him along with dread, and he departed.
“Hey,” Potter said.

“I’m going to be busy today. This is from Dumbledore. He’ll visit soon, I suspect.” He handed him over the letter and disappeared to the kitchen. Potter followed.

“What does he mean?”

Severus arched an eyebrow before he withdrew his eyes and occupied himself by searching for a cup. Too late he realised that he didn’t want tea. “I don’t read your mail, so I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

“He says that I won’t be going back to Hogwarts this year. What does he mean? Because I’m not staying in here for a whole year. I’m not. What does he mean?”

Severus brew his tea silently. What did Dumbledore mean? Most likely nothing as noble as the current kidnapping. Most likely something Severus had no wish to know or participate in, but would have to do both anyway. The Dark Lord had little patience left. He wanted the old man dead. Dumbledore toyed with the idea of facing the threat by meeting the Dark Lord all by himself. It was startling how it had never occurred to the slimy bastard to think of a plan that would offer a chance for Severus to get out of alive. Karma was a whore.

“Severus.”

A wet whore. “Severus,” he mimicked. A venomous monster jumped in protest inside his stomach, ready to rip his skin with its teeth and slowly crawl out. What could he say? _When exactly did it become “Severus” to you, pray tell? Who gave you permission to call me that? “It’s Professor Snape to you.”_

“What does he mean?”

“I don’t know.”

He was aware of the boy fuming in an attempt to keep his rage down. “Fuck you.”

And it somehow had to be Severus’ fault again. Had he not sworn to never start a fight again, or any conversation with the boy for that matter, he would be furious. But as things were, he avoided Potter’s gaze for the best part of their time together, made a cup of tea he was not going to drink, and patiently waited for Potter to go away from the kitchen’s doorstep so he could pass and leave. His work here was done.

“I’m not a child. You tell him that. And I’m not his slave either. I’m going to fight that war either he agrees or not. It’s my war to fight. Not his. Everyone’s known that since I was a baby. I’ve only followed his plan because I chose to — if I change my mind, he can’t stop me. And I’m probably already changing my mind.”

“Write him a letter and let him know.”

What Dumbledore had decided, Dumbledore would do. Potter’s protests would only make the coercion more clear.

“Do you agree with him? Do you think it’s fine for me to be here at all? Because of him and because
of you I behave like a coward. That’s not me. I don’t want to hide.”

Unfortunately for Potter, Horcruxes didn’t walk around in London, and Horcruxes didn’t fight in battles or wars either. The pawn that Potter had the luck to have become would remain safely secured until the moment of destruction.

“I shall inform him.” Why did he bother with tea? Why ignore the luxury that whiskey offered? He made a mental note to express his love to his most precious bottle as soon as he returned home.

“I know you’re both hiding things for me,” Potter said, struggling with his own voice. “There’s no reason to.”

Despite himself, Severus laughed. It occurred to him that the hoarse laughter that escaped his throat was far too anticlimactic for Harry’s drama and it only added to the tragedy he was going to face along with his demons once Severus was gone for the day. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. They were all fucked, and for more than one reason.

And now he was doing it again. Calling him Harry inside his head. A distant part of his consciousness protested that this turn of events was so pathetically twisted that it had to be Dumbledore’s plan. Who else, but Dumbledore, would have thought of something so shockingly wrong and yet allow it happen?

Stay away from the boy. Yes, stay away from the boy, but please do check on him twice a day. For a year. But stay away.

“The truth is,” Severus said, “that we’re all doomed.”

“You know, if you wanted to pretend it never happened, you should at least behave like you always do, not run and hide.”

“Like I always do?”

“You know,” Potter said. “Stay here for more than two minutes a day and such.”

Severus tossed him the book he’d left on the wooden chair he’d brought earlier that week and seated himself. He was suddenly questioning all the possible reasons this shithole had no chairs in the first place, and found himself fuming in suspiciousness. Conspiracy theories were hardly helping.

“We’ve finished your training, which was the only reason I was staying longer.”

“You mean we dropped it.”

I mean you should drop it. “I’m drinking my tea with you now,” he drawled warningly. “Push me and this might change.”

Harry sighed and made a face at his own cup of tea. “Why tea in summer?” he asked after a pause.

Yes, why not something stronger, Severus silently agreed.

“Why not lemon juice or something? You should bring lemon juice.”

“Mm.”

“And biscuits. I miss biscuits.”
“Dogs miss biscuits. Human beings don’t.”

“I hate dogs,” Potter reminded him and smiled testily.

Severus couldn’t help but smile too. Soon, he broke into a low laughter. He covered his eyes with a hand and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “God,” he murmured.

Harry bit his lip in remorse. Then laughed again. “Sorry,” he said, not looking sorry at all. “I know.”

“You don’t,” Severus protested. You’re going to be the end of me. “You’re going to be the end of me.”

“That chair is going to be the end of you! What is it for, mummies? You look like a wooden sculpture sitting there, or, or like a Dracula who just woke up in his coffin.”

Severus looked at him between his parted fingers. “You will be pleased to know that this chair is an antique.”

“This? This is the most regular chair I’ve ever seen.”

“You have no sense of elegance. Stop talking.” The tension drifted away so slowly that Severus couldn’t exactly tell when it was completely gone. All he knew, was that he was grateful it did.

Almost.

Severus walked in to find Potter standing next to the bed, with the bed sheet covering him from head to toe. “Hullo, Professor.”

“What on earth are you doing now?”

“Becoming a ghost. You think it suits me?” Raising his hands, Potter approached him slowly as he made a boo sound that was solely capable of causing pity rather than laughter.

Severus scoffed. “Very mature of you. Years of teaching have certainly not been wasted.”

Potter stopped and dropped the sheet aside. “I was just changing the sheets. You’re no fun at all.”

“I’m not,” Severus agreed quite proudly. “And what happened to my chair?” he looked at his recently bought antique in terror as he could barely recognise it anymore. He was positively sure that the last time he’d seen it, it was respectfully dark brown. All of it. He was also sure that he had not requested it painted in the colours of the rainbow.

“It was boring. I fixed it.”

“You destroyed a rare piece of the eighteenth century,” Severus complained as he charmed it back to normal. Potter stumbled over the wrinkled sheet on the floor and kicked it aside. “This might strike you as new, but you can use magic,” Severus offered.

“I’m imprisoned in here with nothing to do all day. I don’t want to use magic.”

It was never too late to be wise. Or to be ridiculed. Severus couldn’t tell when he found himself tiptoeing on that double edged sword, and for the life of his he couldn’t figure why he wasn’t quitting. But if I quit, I’ll fall.

“Did you bring lemon juice?”
He was being toyed with. At some point of this travesty he had become the puppet of a sentiment
that felt suspiciously like intimacy, and that was now eating away the best of him.

On second thought, “Yes.” He tossed him the bottle and Potter drank from it shamelessly.

“Oh, any chance of using a glass, perhaps?”

Potter licked his lips and shook his head. “Nah.”

He couldn’t fall, for his falling wouldn’t be as soft as a snowflake’s or safe as a bird’s. He would
Crash to the ground with all the hatred and the damnation he deserved. He would lie down there, on
his broken, bloodied back, and he’d look up, and would get lost up there, watching the faces of the
dead hating him and pointing their fingers.

*I’ve already fallen. Upward. Into the abyss above me. Forgive me, Lily.*

He felt sorry for himself. His decent self suggested that common sense was something one could not
run away from. It’d occur to him sooner or later, and then he’d face the consequences of his faux
pas. His blatant self merely yanked the bottle from the boy’s hand and headed to the kitchen.

He was aware of the parasitic creature following behind him and was vaguely reminded to not close
the door to its face.

“Give it back,” Potter complained.

Fear was a mind-killer. He was most certainly not afraid of the boy. Except when he was
near him. *Self control.* He used to have that. He took a glass from the cupboard and poured himself
some juice. He drank. His palate was dry today. The sponge that his tongue was had stuck on it with
menace. He filled a second glass and handed it to Potter.

“Thanks. You okay?”

Severus nodded.

Fear was the little-death that brought total obliteration. He would face his fear for he had faced
worse. He was terrified of the Dark Lord. Once, he was terrified of Albus Dumbledore too. He
would permit it to pass over him and through him. And when it'd be over, he would breathe again.
Where the fear used to be, there would be nothing.

But the boy in a coffin. Dead from the Dark Lord’s hand. Murdered like his parents.

Like he should’ve been seventeen years ago.

And Severus would remain.

Damn. He was losing his mind.

“I’ve been sweating all night,” Potter informed him with a look that suggested that this was some
very interesting piece of information. “It’s officially summer.”

*Fascinating. My whole person is moved. Potter was sweating all night and I’m bringing him lemon
juice because he asked me to.*

“Professor.” The worry was hard to hide as the green eyes burned him.

Severus blinked. He should be thankful they didn’t have enough time left to make this even more
complicated. A ticking bomb echoed in his ears like a lullaby that presaged Harry’s death.

The *too young* that pierced his stomach was almost unbearable. He was going to throw up.

Potter blushed and then his face went blank. “If it’s because of what happened… I’m sorry. I won’t provoke you again.”

*You are not capable of provoking.*

Goddammit. Severus punched the cupboard with all his might and bared his teeth. He was becoming a monster. He shot Potter a stern look that hopefully killed all reveries. The flash of anger into those eyes was the last thing he was willing to deal with. He would give anything to be able to slap him. Hard. When had the bugger become so bloody honest?

“*Provoke,*” Severus sneered. “Let me assure you, should I ever feel provoked, it’d be by someone a little more interesting.”

“I’m afraid that this line won’t work until you truly Obliviate me, Severus.”

Receiving this kind of abuse wasn’t optional. Severus had earned it. He was supposed to say something after this. But Severus’ self-esteem had been greatly reduced over the last days. He was now wondering if molestation was working the other way around.

He decided against pushing back. His decency shuddered in defeat and joked him in the form of leaving him defenceless, staring at Harry like a fool.

His unwilling surrender made him dizzy. Harry hugged him, and all Severus could do was rest his chin on the boy’s head.
Potter attempted a polite smile, which was only delivered as a pained grimace. He clenched his fists together, his elbows resting on his knees. Dumbledore sat beside him on the bed. Severus waited.

“Why don’t you tell me how the two of you are getting along, then?” Dumbledore smiled too, in a way only Severus knew, and the warning that crept behind the loving eyes was enough for the guilt to nest inside Severus. Potter eyed him too, unsure of what to say. He stared hastily at his own hands and then back to Severus. To his intense embarrassment, Severus felt the need to protest.

*I cannot help you.*

“All is well,” Severus said at last.

“No. Nothing is. Sir — I’m going to Hogwarts. Whatever it is that you’re going to say, you can’t keep me here.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Keep you here? No, no, of course not. I regret all that you’ve been through, this summer… Disconnected from your friends, your family, must have been hard.”

“My friends are my family.”

“Wars must end,” Dumbledore continued. “But for wars to end, wars must begin. We can only prepare, Harry.”

Severus watched as Harry waved a hand through his hair and scratched his scar. “So what do we have to do?”

“I am planning to travel soon. In search of what must be found. Severus will be in charge of Hogwarts while I’m away.”

*Hosanna.* At last, the inclusive plan he'd never asked for.

“So, is that it? You’ve kept me here, teaching me Legilimency all summer, just so I can just go back to classes while you go away and do all the work by yourself?”

“Potter.” It was an impulse that made Severus interrupt them, but he had nothing to justify it with.

“Severus taught you Legilimency?”

“I only showed him the very basics,” he said fast. ”No need to fret.”

And Harry stared. At him. Realising Severus had been lying to him all summer, again. Realising Dumbledore had never asked him to teach Harry anything but Occlumency in the first place. Realising Dumbledore didn’t even know Severus’s clever trick of making Harry feel like he wasn’t entirely wasting away in here.

Dumbledore stared too. Severus waited. Wasn’t this all tremendous?

“Excuse me,” said Harry, choking on what sounded like disgust. Once the bathroom door was closed behind him, Severus turned to Dumbledore.

“Is that your final plan, then?” he sneered.
Dumbledore nodded kindly. “We have plenty of time to discuss the arrangements. I’ve spoken to Minerva — she’s the only one who knows I’ll be travelling, so far.”

He momentarily closed his eyes in concentration. “The Dark Lord — he gave me a month. He’s tired of waiting. He wants me to — take care of you, and so very conveniently you decide to leave Hogwarts now.”

“I am in search of something important, Severus.”

Severus nodded. The Horcruxes. If only he could tell Dumbledore he had figured that out. If only Dumbledore had told him everything instead of letting him figure it out anyway.

“How’s Harry?”

Severus smiled. “Well. You can imagine.”

“I can imagine, yes,” Dumbledore said lowly.

He was aware of nodding his head again but couldn’t exactly recall deciding to do so. Sleep deprivation had usually little effect on him through the years. Looking after Potter wasn’t exactly as easy.

“Second thoughts?”

“None. Tell me what I have to do.”

Severus entered the hearth only because he was obliged to do so. Were he a free man, he would go straight home and sleep. That was what a man should do at 4 am, after a cruelly prolonged Death Eater meeting. After witnessing Dolohov confess his rape attempts in between sips of wine. After having the Dark Lord pat his head in sympathy for pretending to be on Dumbledore’s side.

Or as a warning for the moment he’ll decide to stop doing so.

He was aware of his clothes smelling of cigar and mint; that soothing smell that clung onto him every time he departed from Lucius’ Manor. In the darkness of the room, he was barely aware of a hushed voice talking to him as he sat on the bed only to recall there was a chair for that.

“Sir?”

Severus inhaled slowly. He needed to be alone. Why had he come here at all? A vague part of him reminded him that Harry would be worrying himself sick if no one appeared for a day. He always faced death unaffected. He always dealt with it later.

That later was now. Potter was kicking the sheets away and a hand gripped his shoulder. Severus yanked it away.

“How’s Harry?”

The words didn’t come. Severus’ face tightened and he willed himself to relax. He was here to inform the boy that everything was alright. He would then go back to Spinner’s End and throw up the gallons of alcohol he had engulfed. The tiny devil on his shoulder whispered boldly to his ear that this explanation didn’t match with his bringing a bottle tonight with him. Here, of all places.

This was the last place on earth where alcohol should be accessible from. He tried to remember that.
"You're shaking." That too familiar sleepy voice again, that did nothing to make this night better.

Shaking was far from what he was. He was scared. Appalled. Upset.

Amazed at the steadiness of Potter’s hands as they pulled his cloak off his shoulders and tossed it aside.

"Have you told Dumbledore?"

Severus nodded his head in what he believed to be an affirmative fashion and closed his eyes. He rested his forehead on his hands and demanded away the upcoming headache.

Harry’s hands warmed his shoulders as they rubbed off his tension. He was aware of the bottle resting against his thigh being picked up and he flinched in protest.

"You don’t need this."

"You’re not to drink," Severus warned. His voice was hoarse. He wanted it back. Now.

"I won’t drink it," Harry promised. “I’m just putting it aside.”

He didn’t have a mind to protest. He could think of no good reason alcohol was denied from him. He felt like being punished.

The grip on his shoulders hardened and two rough thumbs pushed into his flesh. It occurred to him that the deplorable sound he heard was his own moaning. He exhaled sharply. His shirt was soaked in his own sweat and it stuck on him like a second skin. He needed a shower.

Harry pulled him back and he found himself resting on the soft pillows. He lied on the bed too, his forehead against Severus’s. A muscle throbbed on the side of his jaw.

"It’s okay. Just close your eyes.” whispered Harry.

Severus chose to not answer. He’d sooner top himself than have the little wrench advise him. Or soothe him.

He didn’t do soothing. He refused to receive it too.

Time healed all wounds, people said. Severus did not agree. The wounds remained. In time, the mind, protecting its sanity, covered them with scar tissue and the pain lessened. But deep down, it remained.

His pain for Lily’s death only came after she was gone. The current pain for Harry was something he could not explain. The boy was alive. For now.

A hand covered his clenched fist and forced it to loosen. He needed a drink.

“Tomorrow,” Harry said.

Had he said that aloud?

He slept.

Severus was awaken by the tapping sunlight. He moaned and wondered how long he’d slept. He blinked, shut his eyes, then blinked again. He yawned. A constant pressure on his conscience by
something he should be aware of was forbidding him to go back to sleep. Soft raven hair brushed his lips and he grunted.

Some people woke up drowsy. Some people woke up energised. Severus had just woken up dead. He untangled himself from the equally dead octopus that happened to be Harry Potter and took a moment to look at him.

Eyelids closed against the light; breathing deep and relaxed. The muscles on his face and body were at peace. Not a twitch, not a spasm, only his chest rising and falling with every intake of air. Severus felt jealousy at his oblivion. He searched for innocence, but even in this relaxed state Severus knew that the closed eyelids hid sinister eyes.

Somehow, he had fallen for this boy. And someday he’d touch him with his fingers. And he’d burn holes in his skin with his own mouth. And it’d hurt when he’d look at him. And it’d hurt when he wouldn’t. And it’d feel like someone had cut him open with a jagged piece of glass.

The sharp pain of the bleeding was almost real, already.

Too soon.

Too late.

He placed a hand on Harry’s chest. He shook him lightly. “Harry.”

Severus was happy in his sleep. He woke up with a feeling of falling apart, of cracking up from the inside and slowly falling to pieces. Harry wrinkled his nose in acknowledgment. His hand came up to where Severus’ hand was resting on his chest and touched it. It fell on the sheets right after and stayed there.

Severus’ heart jumped. Little bugger. Twisted child. What have you done to me? His skin crawled, and he was incapable of managing a single clear thought. How would it feel to lower his hand? He silently promised himself strict punishment for being, if necessary.

Necessary.

Definitely necessary.

Potter’s eyes snapped open.

Severus’ thoughts crushed to bits just as they had begun to take shape. Potter looked up at him confused.

It was the stillness between them, that tied his stomach in a hangman’s noose. It was that same deadly lack of noise that lived in the darkness of graves; the one that crept in alleys no sane man should ever know.

Harry stretched and yawned, and Severus had to mentally curse himself for thinking over the possible ways he could shut this mouth for good. His own nerve was betraying him.

“Morning,” mumbled Harry as he rolled over and hid his head under the pillow. His arse was momentarily raised up in a stretching position that looked suspiciously preplanned.

“Good morning,” said Severus. The last night’s panic had passed, but his shirt needed washing, and he most certainly needed a shower too. He decided to get rid of the boy as soon as possible. He then remembered that this was the one wish that never worked.
It will soon.

No.

“Little moments,” murmured Harry. A ridiculous grin was splashed across his face. “Waking up late and having someone gawk at you.”

He was not. Gawking. At him.

Not bloody likely.

“I was merely studying the source of my bad luck.” Was that the best you could do? “Looking at you makes me wonder if you’re even worth the trouble I’m getting into.” There.

Harry scrunched his face and with an impressively quick move he pulled the pillow from under his head and attempted to strike him. Severus dodged it before it hit him in the ribs; he hadn’t had a pillow fight in decades, and he wasn’t going to have one now. Harry giggled as he attempted to hit him again, just as Severus yanked the pillow violently from him and tossed it away. Harry was going for the other pillow when Severus curled his hand around his wrist and pinned him down. There was another moment of giggling; then Harry’s smile faded into something else.

Stupid little shit. Severus allowed himself a second of battling between leaving this prison in silence and granting Harry a last smirk of triumph. Apparently, one second was too much.

“You know I’m not buying it, and ah—” Severus tightened his grip. Potter grinned. “And I know you’ve been gawking at me. Why do you like to pretend you’re a jerk when you could just be nice to me?”

Severus smirked. “Little moments.”

“I’m not buying it,” Harry said again. Damn his impossible stubbornness. Severus let go of his hand and strode off to the bathroom. After he’d emptied his bladder and spared himself a moment to look at the mirror, he returned to the main room only to find the boy sleeping again.

“It’s almost noon,” he snarled.

And was ignored.

“Potter?” All for the best. His face was buried in the pillow again, which was now being straddled and hugged. Child.

He shrugged off his thoughts and fought off the sudden impulse to shout in the boy’s ear just to see him jump up in terror. There was a time he’d enjoy that. He’d still do.

Then, a murmur. “Come back to bed.”

Severus furrowed his brows. His heart skipped a beat and he was reminded of the reasons he learnt the Unforgivables so long ago.

His stomach lurched at the boy’s sleepy face as he struggled to focus his eyes without those damned glasses on. It occurred to him that Potter looked happy.

A chuckle was muffled against the pillow and he rolled on his back, covering his eyes with a hand. “I bet you look scared.”

He wasn’t scared.
He was nauseated. Outraged.

Late.

“I’m leaving. Do try to not spend the rest of your day lazing like a fool.”

Harry laughed. “Yeah. Have a nice day too.”

Despite himself, Severus didn’t manage to feel annoyed.
Parentheses: Deadlines

“So, how come Hedwig can fly around this place but other people can’t see it? I mean, Hedwig would deliver letters to Sirius when no one even knew where he was.”

Potter had no admiration for magic. His curiosity to know what men were not meant to know would only weaken the importance of magic to him. Knowing was impossible. They had to accept things as they were. In other words, “Magic.”

“What does magic have to do with Hedwig?”

Severus grunted as he took off his cloak and placed it on the bed. “You don’t think our owls are ordinary ones, do you?”

Potter furrowed his brows. “What do you mean?”

“Magic runs in your blood, and thus you are capable of many things Muggles are not. It works the same with animals.”

Potter seemed to consider that. “I’ve never thought of that.”

“You wouldn’t need to think of it,” Severus sneered, “if you had simply studied it in your Care of Magical Creatures class. But who am I to judge your holy decisions?” He took out his wand and checked the spells of the house once more. They were intact.

“Why don’t you teach me the things you know?” Potter asked suddenly. “You could teach me fighting spells.”

He could. And he would. If Potter wasn’t meant to lose the war. “Ask Dumbledore.”

“I’m asking you.”

“And I refuse. End of discussion.”

Potter released a sharp breath but didn’t push it. Severus was suddenly intrigued to spill the truth to Harry and get him out of here. Fuck the greater cause and fuck Dumbledore and fuck Voldemort too. He could make a plan. One of his own. He was a spy, after all; he knew more than Dumbledore thought. No one would know what happened and when they’d suspect, it’d be too late. They’d have fled.

They couldn’t.

And Severus shouldn’t be thinking like this. Might as well get over his death before it happens. Might as well.

Harry went to the bathroom for his night routine and Severus laid down on the bed, a hand covering his eyes. He should go. The fear of death never haunted Severus. He’d never been scared by the fact that he, himself, might someday die, nor had he felt any remorse for the things he wouldn’t have time to experience during his short and insignificant life. He had lived it all as a pawn, anyway; he did what he must, he obeyed, he bent his head and kept to himself whatever he ever wished or desired or hated. He never gave anything to himself. He never wished for anything for himself.

Slowly, he unbuttoned his shirt and took it off. He unbuckled his belt and let it fall next to his shoes.
Potter came out of the bathroom and looked at Severus curiously. “Sir?”

“I’m staying here tonight.”

Severus contemplated between turning his head to see Harry’s shock and remaining as he was. His tiredness won, although he couldn’t remember why he was tired, and no muscle ached tonight but his heart. He snorted. He did look like a depraved old fool. Maybe he was one.

“Um. Okay.” Harry said cautiously. Severus lied down, and soon felt the mattress sink as Harry climbed on the bed too. With the lights turned off, Severus turned on his side, grabbed Harry by the waist and dragged him closer. “Do anything stupid and I’ll leave.”

“Okay,” said Harry in a hushed voice. He felt fingers brushing his shoulders and staying there. His own fingers traitorously found their way to Harry’s hair. It was a curious thing, the death of a loved one. Everyone knew that time in this world was limited, and that eventually everybody would end up underneath some sheet, never to wake up again.

Yet it was always a surprise when it happened to someone Severus knew. Harry’s embrace was warm, and the hand that was on Severus’ shoulder now carefully wrapped itself around his waist. The sound of their hearts was all that mattered.

“What happened?” whispered Harry.

Severus shook his head after a moment. “War, I think.”

Harry chuckled. “Is this how you react to war?”

“Don’t you dare,” said Harry, and then laughed. “Don’t you dare leave this bed, ever. ‘Cause I’m not planning to.”

“The great war hero Harry Potter, aren’t you. Found heavenly sleeping after the war had ended. Was woken up to state in surprise that he didn’t notice that a war had even occurred.” Making an honest attempt to sneer was apparently being sabotaged by his hand still stroking Harry’s hair. He made a mental note to make this right tomorrow with a random nasty remark.

“Is it bad that sometimes I want just that?” The fingers making small cycles at the small of Severus’ back stopped. Wanting to live wasn’t too much to ask, Severus’ consciousness protested. His better sense argued that it was luxury. War was a symptom of man’s failure as a thinking animal. The lack of shame caused a twitch on Severus’ wand hand. If everyone fought for their own convictions there would be no war.

“You need to be brave.”

“I am. Brave. It was just a thought.”

“Hm.”

“Severus…”

“Harry. Sleep.”

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Severus glanced at Marvolo Gaunt’s ring laying on the desk before Dumbledore. Severus muttered another spell under his breath as he moved his wand over Dumbledore’s wrist. “I warned you,” he
hissed. “Why… why put it on while you knew it carried a curse? Did I not warn you?”

Dumbledore’s eyes were closed, a drop of sweat on his temper. “You told me to wait… I… waited too long…”

“Why even want to put it on?” he asked furiously as he saw his spell pass through the curse in vain. Dumbledore’s darkened fingers twitches.

The curse held a death sentence. He went through every healing spell he knew and all of them crashed on the hand and then dissolved. They were fucked. Without Dumbledore they were fucked. He’d have to use dark magic to block the curse; the best he could do was convince Dumbledore to chop off his hand and hope for the best.

“The curse is extraordinary strong; I have trapped it in one hand for the time being –”

Dumbledore raised his blackened hand and observed it. “You have done very well, Severus. How long do you think I have?”

The rage that boiled inside Severus didn’t try to express itself. He was going to be left alone to protect Harry. As a Death Eater, this was impossible. Without Dumbledore’s assistance they didn’t stand a chance surviving the war. “I cannot tell. Maybe a year. There is no halting such a spell forever. It will spread eventually, it is the sort of curse that strengthens over time.”

It would take less than a year; he wasn’t sure how much he should reveal at the moment. His fate laughed at Severus from a distance and Severus mentally kicked it away. As fate usually did, it crawled back to him and kept laughing. Dumbledore smiled. “I am fortunate, extremely fortunate, that I have you, Severus.”

But the fortune is all mine. I’m having the best fun of my life here. Hail the fortunate people of this world. May they always be blessed with such remarkable events.

“If you had only summoned me a little earlier, I might have been able to do more, buy you more time!” said Snape furiously. “If you had waited for me to examine the curse first, break it before you put it on…” This was Severus’ fault too. Leaving a powerful magical object with the greatest wizard of all times and expecting him not to use it. How thoughtless. He should have studied that ring sooner. He should have concerned himself with it months ago instead of dawdling in — Harry’s arms, for God’s sake.

Severus looked at the broken ring and the Gryffindor sword unable to draw any conclusion. Dumbledore should have known curses didn’t break that easily. “Did you think that breaking the ring would break the curse?”

“Something like that . . . I was delirious, no doubt. . . .”

The old bastard was lying. Severus was struggling to save his life and what he was receiving was yet again filthy lies. Why break the ring? Why with the Gryffindor sword? Was it a horcrux?

Dumbledore straightened himself and pointed at the chair across him. As Severus sat down, he mentally put in order the questions he wanted to ask. Time was drifting away and he couldn’t let himself watch Dumbledore die without demanding answers first. Dumbledore had to tell him everything he knew about Harry. It would be stupid to take his secrets with him as though they didn’t matter. Dumbledore cut him short before he could speak.

“Well, really, this makes matters much more straightforward. I refer to the plan Lord Voldemort is revolving around me. His plan to have the poor Malfoy boy murder me.”
Severus swallowed all his protests and waited. The feeling that this wasn’t going to be good became stronger and stronger.

“The Dark Lord does not expect Draco to succeed anymore,” said Severus. ”This is merely punishment for Lucius’s recent failures. Slow torture for Draco’s parents, while they watch him fail and pay the price. He was given an entire school year and failed miserably. By the start of the new term the Dark Lord won’t be so patient.”

"In short, the boy has had a death sentence pronounced upon him as surely as I have,” said Dumbledore. “Now, we know that the natural successor to the job, since Draco failed, is yourself.”

There was a short pause. They had already discussed this. Severus could see where this was going. “That is the Dark Lord’s plan.”

“Lord Voldemort foresees a moment in the near future when he will not need a spy at Hogwarts?”

“He believes the school will soon be in his grasp, yes.”

“And if it does fall into his grasp,” said Dumbledore, “I have your word that you will do all in your power to protect the students of Hogwarts?”

Severus nodded.

“Good. Now then. You must promise me that you will not break your cover by seeing Harry again after I’m gone, until, of course, it’s necessary.”

It was the sheer realisation of what they were discussing that turned Severus’ blood into ice. Surely Dumbledore was joking. This had to be some test. The useless hand hanging limp on Dumbledore’s side indicated otherwise. “Are you intending to let him kill you?”

“Certainly not.” Lies. Again, lies. “You must kill me.”

Oh.

His plan of kidnapping Potter and abandoning the world suddenly seemed wise.

“Would you like me to do it now?” asked Severus, close to snapping. “Or would you like a few moments to compose an epitaph?”

He had been struggling with his consciousness for the best part of the past year so he could maintain his nobility. He feared Harry Potter’s company with all his might in constant worry of what paths it might follow, he restrained himself from every little happy moment he could have and stayed loyal to the cause. What for?

“Oh, not quite yet,” said Dumbledore casually. “I believe I want to see a last opening feast first.”

“If you don’t mind dying,” sneered Severus, determined to not lose his temper now, “why not let Draco do it?”

“That boy’s soul is not yet so damaged,” said Dumbledore. “I would not have it ripped apart on my account.”

What were they talking about? Wasn’t Severus a human being? “And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?”

“You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation,”
said Dumbledore. “I ask this one great favour of you, Severus, because death is coming for me surely. I should prefer a quick, painless exit to the protracted and messy affair it will be if, for instance, Greyback is involved… Or dear Bellatrix, who likes to play with her food before she eats it,” Dumbledore said.

Severus nodded.

“You’re becoming lazier than I am,” said Harry.

Severus grimaced. “Lying down isn’t always laziness. Some people do have the ability to think and therefore use relaxation as a way of focusing on what is troubling them.”

“And what is troubling you?”

Severus didn’t answer. He saw Harry disappear to the kitchen and a part of himself followed behind him to take a better look at the boy’s ignorant calmness. The part of himself that refused to acknowledge Harry Potter’s existence kept staring at the ceiling. Even by the standards of being in love, he could not have been more wretchedly blind. Vanity had never been his folly. Murder wasn’t his kick. He couldn’t remember trying anything else whatsoever. Well. For a very long time everybody refuses and then almost without a pause almost everybody accepts. Severus supposed that he had accepted himself as a murderer long ago. This shouldn’t have to be hard.

Why would it?

The fact that he was going to kill the last person who ever showed kindness to him should not affect him.

Not the last one.

Rubbish. Harry was going to die too. All Severus could hope for was to get killed himself before any of this occurred.

He'd forced himself to follow orders, always, for her, and now he discovered a metal inside him where his heart should be.

“Want a biscuit?” A chocolate biscuit hovered above his mouth and Severus turned his head aside frowning. He grabbed the cookie nevertheless and looked at it.

“No love potion,” Harry joked. “I don’t think you need it. I’m already charming.”

“Unbearably,” sneered Severus.

Harry lied down beside him and propped himself up his elbows. “What’s bothering you?”

“Business.”

“Dumbledore.”

After a moment Severus grunted in agreement.

“What did he tell you this time?”

“Stay out of it.”

“Fine.” Harry snatched back the biscuit from Severus’ hand and ate it. Severus silently damned
Harry for still having faith in his good side. He shut his eyes against the image of the betrayal he’d cause Harry to feel and it only became clearer. He quickly glanced at the confused boy who studied him with furrowed eyebrows. The odds for Severus to save him were slim. He shut his eyes again.

“Is it that bad?”

Severus forced himself to remain stern, despite the snort that was threatening to escape him. “Has it ever been good?”

“It has,” Harry said. “Biscuit?”

Severus accepted it with a barely opened mouth, if only to make Harry shut up. And immediately regretted doing so for he was now choking on it. He abruptly sat up and coughed hard until the danger was over. He glared at Harry with what he hoped was a disapproving look and Harry grinned. When Severus lied down again, Harry suddenly became sullen. “What if Dumbledore needs our help while he’s away? What if they find him?”

Ah. You’re still there. Haven’t you heard the news? Severus didn’t know whether to tell him that this particular plan was rather cancelled or not. And how was Harry going to finish whatever business he had without Dumbledore? Who would help him? His useless friends? “We’ll see. Have you finished your exercises?”

“Yes. You want to play?”

Severus pulled himself up and Harry sat cross-legged across him. “I wasn’t aware that mind altering techniques were a game to you. Obviously, you take your education very seriously.”

His heart beat faster and he was suddenly too unwilling to keep up this act. Every word he uttered to the boy was a lie. Every hope he gave him for a better future was fake. He was keeping him alive so he could die from the hand of Lord Voldemort. He was entertaining a moribund kid who somehow loved him; trusted him. So. Severus was a heartless bastard. No news here.

He deepened his glare and Harry frowned. White, he thought, although they had done white before.

He was planning to move forward to more difficult concepts, but it now seemed fruitless. What for?

“White,” Harry said confidently.

“And now?”

Severus shifted his thoughts and watched as Harry struggled to follow. “Is it still a colour?”

Severus smirked. “I don’t know, is it?”

Harry pulled his face into a look of strict concentration and his tongue darted out to lick his lower lip. Severus focused on his eyes.

“I want a drink. Yeah, I mean - is that…?”

“Close enough. It was whiskey.”

“Don’t tell me next time until I find it.”

“And leave an eternity pass so uselessly? I doubt so.”

Harry rolled his eyes to the back of his head. “Sod off. Can I do that to you too?”
Severus couldn’t keep back his urge to laugh. The Dark Lord himself couldn’t read his thoughts. “Not in this lifetime. Focus.”

They did it again and Harry succeeded. He won, as Harry preferred to name it, a childish grin on his face every time he found the right answer. A smile for getting closer to the dream of mastering the art of Occlumency. To make Severus proud. Severus was suddenly filled with the urgency to see Harry succeed too. Another restless night was approaching and Severus stared hard as he blocked out of his mind the cold bed that awaited him back home and his mark that’d burn every time a Death Eater committed murder. Which was precisely all night long. His body went rigid at his incredulously persistent inclination to sleep here again, and he forgot to hide the worry from his face.

At the possibility of not sleeping alone, he felt his muscles relax and he inwardly wished himself death for such weakness. He’d sooner parade in the front papers cuddled in Harry’s protective arms than get used to sleeping with him. The little voice in the back of his head that used to sooth him by reminding him that he was not attracted to little boys did little to reason him anymore. Facts spoke in a clearer voice than beliefs, and whatever had been fact to him his whole life was now incompetent in explaining why he had come to a point where he could not protest when Harry was close.

He blamed his tiredness for not getting angry every time. He reasoned himself that, if he were to survive this, he had to make some kind of peace with the boy. He told himself that being close to someone wasn’t necessarily equal to being attracted to that person. He even tried to convince himself that what he felt was closer to a newly developing paternal instinct than anything else.

That last part made him so nauseous that it was quickly dismissed as purely sick.

And that alone made the even sicker truth more obvious.

He could not explain it.

He settled to not think about it.

Severus’ temples throbbed and he relaxed his jaw just in time to notice the beginning of a headache. Harry broke the eye contact first, and rubbed his own eyes with a thumb and an index finger. “Can we stop for a few minutes?”

“Yes,” Severus said much too quickly. Harry fell back on the pillows and Severus rubbed absently at his neck. To his surprise, Harry didn’t propose a massage.
Every time Severus woke with Harry’s random parts glued on him, he promised himself it would be the last time. Every time he opened his eyes to watch that face buried on the pillow next to his while a hand or a leg was entangled around Severus, he vowed to end this decadency and move forward to a happy independent life. As this was not an option, however, he watched himself falling and falling again, unable to find a good enough reason to stop this fall. Next time, he thought to himself, although he knew that he needed not another time to know that he should stop.

The fact that Harry was at last sleeping normally should not be as strong an argument. The fact that Severus himself was sleeping better when the bed wasn’t empty was outrageous.

Sometimes, the best and worst times of one’s life can coincide. It was a talent of the soul to discover the joy in pain – the bitter ache burdened Severus’ soul and he found that he didn’t know what to do with it. Until a solution presented itself, he carefully packed it away and continued obeying the boy’s desires.

Not all of them.

Shut up.

He turned to see Harry sleeping on his belly with the sheet up his neck, facing away from Severus. His breath was even; Severus’ was far from it. His mark hadn’t stopped burning, and he was to be summoned any time now; the Dark Lord had already decided that taking Hogwarts was a priority, and no one knew the school as well as Severus. The Death Eaters would have to break in.

To his defence, he was once again forced to do as he was told.

And apart from that, he was indeed going to have to betray the Order under Dumbledore’s orders. Not that Severus had any friends.

He had allies. To him, it was the same.

And now another Weasley was getting married and Harry would stubbornly want to attend. Between witnessing another Weasley wedding and killing Dumbledore, he definitely preferred the latter. And a wedding with a Veela it was, just to make sure that she’d get fucked as frequently as the tradition demanded to produce another dozen of mindless Weasleys.

Giving birth was not something to be proud of; getting married applied to that category too. Announcing one’s love and expecting to be admired for it. For having succeeded at being absolutely ordinary and having found a person amongst the billions of the earth to get along with for a reasonable amount of time. This was what animals did, and they were certainly not proud of it.

Yawning, he reached the conclusion that he was glad he’d never been married. Sharing a life with someone else was not something he wished for. Having to rely his secrets and give away his habits and desires for the sake of a brainless wife seemed to him terrifying. He could never stand not having a bed for himself.

Except he could.
He stretched and made a much too needed trip to the bathroom before washing his face and pouring himself a cup of tea. The forgotten box of biscuits from yesterday’s night laid on the mattress next to Harry’s hand, and Severus placed it on the nightstand. He sat back to the bed and took out of his robe the invitation.

Miss Fleur Delacour and Mr. Bill Weasley request the pleasure of your company at their wedding.

He stopped reading and crumpled up the paper. It seemed that they’d have to survive their wedding without him, then. Pity. It occurred to him that it must have been Molly’s insistence that they invite him. His mark itched again and he almost dropped his cup on the sheets. He winced as the pain became stronger and Harry curled to his side hissing. “Fuck.”

“Potter.”

The boy clutched at his forehead and Severus dragged him up to a sitting position. Harry pushed him away. “Let go! Ah – FUCK!”

“Focus. Push him out!” Severus’ mark throbbed. He had to go.

“AH – NO!”

“Focus!” Severus repeated. “Remember what I taught you.”

Harry’s forehead fell forward on Severus’ lap and he screamed. Not knowing what to do, Severus stroked his back awkwardly. The screaming didn’t stop. Harry’s nails dug into his scar as though trying to remove it. Severus watched in terror the connection he had heard about but had never seen this clearly before. Their souls connected. Harry was indeed the piece that had been missing from the Dark Lord’s soul. They were one.

Dark magic was Severus’ passion since he could remember himself. He was in love with its abilities and the lack of limits it provided to those who knew how to treat it. It was an art, he used to think, but it wasn’t. It was power. It amazed Severus like nothing else.

At this moment, it sickened him.

Harry let a final sob on Severus’ thigh and stopped. He helped himself to his feet and ran to the bathroom, where he closed the door and most likely retched his stomach out. Severus dressed himself and drank the rest of his tea in a gulp. When Harry came out of the bathroom Severus was ready to depart. “I left a painkiller on the kitchen table, in case you need it,” he said, taking a handful of floo powder.

“Are you going to him?” asked Harry.

Severus didn’t look at him as he threw the powder to the hearth. “Spinner’s end.”

“Where are they going to hide the boy next?”

“At the home of one of the Order,” said Severus. He ran through the details of a plan that didn’t exist and fixed his gaze with the Dark Lord’s. At the front of his mind hovered the images he wanted him to see.

“Well, Yaxley?” the Dark Lord called. “Will the Ministry have fallen by next Saturday?”

Severus knew where this was going. With the Ministry down, the next task would be to kill
Dumbledore. He kept his gaze calm, but the difficulty with which he was now keeping himself from burning the manor down and taking everyone with him had never been so intense. He listened to their plans and carefully packed them in his memory to convey to Dumbledore later.

“As long as Dumbledore is alive,” the Dark Lord stopped to look at Severus for a second, “I cannot move forward. I want him dead. He protects the boy.”

The truly scary thing about undiscovered lies was that they had a greater capacity to diminish people than exposed ones. They eroded Severus’ strength, his self-esteem, his very foundation. Looking back, he couldn’t think of a moment where he was truly himself. Violently pulled back to reality, he decided that even a tiny bit of deceit was dishonourable when used for selfish or cowardly reasons, but manipulation itself was useful after all. He trusted his instinct upon maintaining the personality the Dark Lord wanted him to have and silently wished for this to end as soon as possible.

“I have been careless, and so have been thwarted by luck and chance, those wreckers of all but the best-laid plans. But I know better now. I understand those things that I did not understand before. I must be the one to kill Harry Potter, and I shall be.”

“Are you really not going to come?”

“I see no reason why I should.” In all honesty, he saw. But this was his mere protest against Dumbledore’s grant idiocy. Keeping Harry in a cage for his protection but letting him out so he can go to a wedding. Reasonable to the very end.

“Hermione and Ron thought I should use Polyjuice, but since I’m going with Dumbledore I don’t think I’ll need it. What do you think?”

“Polyjuice, which you learnt how to brew by stealing from me.”

Harry glanced at him cheekily and put on his jacket. It occurred to Severus that he barely looked any older in it.

“Ron makes a really good effort to be alright with me. It was stupid to think he would never talk to me again.”

Severus didn’t roll his eyes. Making an effort to be alright with someone wasn’t what he had in mind when he thought of friendship. Then again, what did he know. Dumbledore apparated with a pop and smiled at Severus happily. An “I’m-so-happy-I’m-going-to-attend-a-wedding” smile. An “I-have-definitely-not-asked-you-to-murder-me-anytime-soon” smile.

Severus nodded curly and left the room just in time to save himself from the glorious scene of Dumbledore teaching Harry how to make a tie tying spell.

As soon as he stepped foot in his home he ran to the shower, to rub off him Harry’s scent and Harry’s memory and everything that could possibly remind Severus of him. Remembering his place in the world, he wore his Death Eater cloak and departed for the Malfoy Manor. He wondered about the seemingly endless row of horrors that had fallen upon him since he began… pretending to care for the boy. It was surely the most brainless decision of his; wishing for the mere courtesy of self-respect, he brought to mind how he was always being accustomed to situations despite liking them or not.

He assisted Harry Potter because it was asked of him. Nothing intriguing or interesting had him continue doing so, and so it had to be routine. Inwardly, he applauded himself for successfully keeping on hating the boy with all his heart. Outwardly, he forced his face to fall and let his
expression become blank.

After all this time of serving old greedy bastards, he finally had to care for himself, even if it was just a little. Dumbledore had been taking advantage of his love for Lily since she was murdered. Severus was expected to be unaffected, of course. He had to live without sympathy, didn’t he? He was the heartless Slytherin bastard. The dirty fascist. He'd lived up to this role and all the strangers’ expectations with no trace of sentiment slipping out. He was proud to state that he was planning to do so for the rest of his days.

But that was impossible.

People acted it to one another, all this hardness; but deep down they weren’t like that. The Dark Lord himself had desires, and thus had weaknesses. Dumbledore disagreed, but Severus believed that even the Dark Lord contained emotions.

One couldn’t be out in the cold all the time; one had to come in from the cold.

Well. Not Severus.

It occurred to Severus that this was against every theory he had developed over the past years. Not that what he believed mattered.

Severus’ job was to pry through the keyhole, and transfer information. That was what servants did.

Other people, not servants, not spies, not perplexed with inadmissible sentiments towards little disobedient children, did better. Fell in love, got married, organised weddings, and invited people like Severus, knowing far too well they’d not attend.

“Ah, Severus. Just in time.”

“My Lord.”

“The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming.”

Harry took out his wand as he looked around for Dumbledore. Hermione dragged him aside and they crouched under a table as the people started screaming and running. Ron kneeled down beside them as soon as he saw them. “Go,” Harry yelled at them. “I have to find Dumbledore. Go!”

“No, you must come with us!” Hermione yelled back. Ron touched her arm.

“Harry!” Ron shouted as something behind him exploded. Harry felt a tight grip on his shoulder and looked up startled to see Dumbledore steeling him.

“Be careful,” Harry wanted to say to his friends, but he didn’t have time. Dumbledore apparated them away.

It took a lifetime for Harry to calm down. Dumbledore took him to the safe house and then left, promising to return soon. An hour passed and he hadn’t, while Snape was missing too. Harry took a shower and let the hot water wash away his fear and anger. He checked the fireplace as soon as he got out of the bathroom, but it hadn’t been used, and he couldn’t get out, so he had no way of knowing what was happening to the outside world. The possibility of both Snape and Dumbledore being dead ringed in his ears and made him sick. He imagined staying stuck up in this room until he died of hunger.

He could not sleep. He watched the dawn as it illuminated with its red and golden shining and was
reminded of the Gryffindor colours and Hogwarts and all the places he had no access to because he was locked up. His scar didn’t hurt. He was alone.

He drank what lemon juice was left and discovered a box of biscuits in the cupboard. His stomach was a knot and after the first biscuit he felt nauseous. When the pop of apparition was heard, Harry jumped up and saw Dumbledore carrying a tired, grim expression.

“Is everybody alright?” Harry asked at once. “Where’s Snape? Hermione and Ron –”

Dumbledore raised a hand to calm him down. “Everything is in order, Harry. Your friends are safe. They have been moved along with the rest of the Order, and as far as I’m aware we had no losses. Voldemort has taken the Ministry. Things are going to change.”

“Where’s Snape?” Harry asked again.

“Unknown.”

Harry sighed and collapsed on the bed. He rubbed his face with both hands. “He’s with Voldemort,” he muttered.

Dumbledore placed a hand on his back. “Severus can protect himself, Harry. I believe you know that.”

Harry nodded. He knew that. What he didn’t know was if he could endure losing another person. “When is he going to be back?”

“Harry…”

Dumbledore didn’t understand. No one did. Maybe he didn’t even want them to. It didn’t feel right for other people to know.

“I don’t want to discuss it, sir.”

“Severus puts his life at risk for us,” Dumbledore said calmly. “You are a man, Harry, and I feel honoured for having seen you grow up from the little boy you once were.” Harry felt a faint smile taking form on his face. “I need you to think as a man, and tell me, if it’s wise of you to be so close to someone who could be killed if anyone knew that you two are close. If… an urge, a friendship, even, is worth getting someone you care about into a bigger risk than he already is.”

Harry felt the blood freeze in his veins. “He’s a good Legilimens,” he protested.

“Every time you two ignore my warnings, he gets closer to death,” Dumbledore said, and Harry was suddenly perplexed about what to believe. If Dumbledore cared so much about Snape he wouldn’t have him spy on Voldemort. Of course, Voldemort’s death mattered above all. Harry couldn’t bring himself to argue.

He shook his head. “I don’t want anyone to die because of me ever again,” Harry said in a hushed voice, his head bowed. “Ever.”

Dumbledore patted his back. “Then be careful.”

He knew Dumbledore was right. He knew he should stop. But when Dumbledore left and when another fifteen hours passed until Snape appeared, Harry could not bring himself to stop, and he remembered how Snape always accused him of not having control over the simplest things, and like the arrogant little brat that he was to Snape, he bolted up from the bed and hugged Snape in despair,
his arms curled around his neck, his weight on his toes, his voice hoarse as he said, “Where the hell have you been all this time?”

Snape allowed the hug without protesting, and grunted only when Harry didn’t seem to have any intention of letting go. He finally pushed him away, and his black eyes peered at Harry’s as he studied him. Harry grinned. “You’re alive,” he said.

Snape creased a brow. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Right.” He couldn’t wipe that grin from his face. He could tell that Snape was appalled by it, but he didn’t care. He wanted to hug him again, tight, and never leave him. Instead, he sat back on the bed and tried to reason his stupid heart. “Since I don’t think you visited in the middle of the night to teach me Occlumency, I think you should srop trying to convince me that you’re somehow angry again and just lie down,” he said as he slid under the sheets.

Snape remained still for a long moment, as though considering his options and failing to find a window that would save him from this. At last, he went off to the bathroom and closed the door behind him. Harry wanted to wait for him to come back, but after a minute he realised that he hadn’t slept since the wedding, and the sound of Snape taking a shower or washing his face or whatever it was that he was doing was the most relaxing sound Harry had ever heard. He tried to keep his eyes open so he could sleep with the weight of Snape breathing beside him.

Unable to do so, his eyelids shut close and the last sensible thought he made was that Snape would be shocked to see him grinning even in his sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Someone mentioned my story here (https://www.instagram.com/snarry_always/) and made some amazing photo-manipulation fan art. I would like to deeply thank the person who read and suggested my story on Instagram, and please, if you make any more art, feel free to send it to me and I'll post it here. I don't have an Insta to contact the person privately, so I'm mentioning this here and I hope they'll see it.
Harry's eyes snapped open as he rolled over and crushed against something warm. Someone exhaled a nonchalant grunt and Harry looked up to see Snape giving him a disapproving glare before closing his eyes again. The darkness of the room was only interrupted by the fading moonlight, now slowly retreating behind a cloud. He looked at the clock on the nightstand; three after midnight. What woke him up?

“S’ry,” mumbled Harry. He tried to drift again to sleep, but as the seconds went by he felt more and more awake. He gently squeezed Snape’s arm, making sure he was still awake. “When the war is over,” he murmured, “I’m going to buy you a huge house –” Snape pushed him away and Harry stretched, “and I’ll constantly bother you. Can you imagine me ringing your bell every day?” Harry rubbed his eyes and put on his glasses. Outside the window, the dark sky seemed almost unreal.

A faint smile appeared on Snape’s lips and he took a deep breath as though silently accepting that this was all the sleep he would get for tonight. Snape yawned and fixed his pillow.

“Or we could live together and you’d still pretend you hate me. You’d say how much I irritate you and that I’m insolent and stuff. And every night –”

“Were you dreaming about this imbecility or are you experiencing a delirium?” Snape said hoarsely.

“I think I was dreaming about it,” Harry said honestly. “Among other things. Like, what I’m going to do once Voldemort is gone. What you’re going to do.”

“Very thoughtful. You might not know it, but romanticism is my secret kink. I’m now touched. Thank you.”

Harry chuckled. “Sod off. You need to believe it, you know. That we’re going to kill him. He can’t stay alive for ever.”

“He came back from the dead once,” Snape murmured.

“You’re a pessimist.”

“And you’re young.”

“I’m young,” Harry confirmed confidently and yawned again. “And I’m going to use all my magic to kill him if I have to.”

Snape’s lip quirked upwards at the mention of magic.

“What?”

It seemed like he wasn’t going to respond, but then he did. “When I was young, I had a passion for wild magic. My mother was studying dark spells secretly and I was trying to repeat her wand motions with my bare hand.”

“You ever made it?” Harry sat cross-legged on the duvet, suddenly interested in what Snape had to say.

“Once. Half the house was burned. Tobias was furious. He blamed my mother.”

Harry tried to hold his curiosity back, but it was stronger than him. “How did she die?”
“It doesn’t matter.”

Harry wrinkled his nose after a moment. “I’m sorry.”

“Certainly.” Snape looked at the ceiling again and nearly closed his eyes again when Harry felt the urge to direct the subject elsewhere.

“When I was six,” he recalled, “I punched my cousin in the face. He was chasing me in the backyard with his friends and I was trying to run away. Then, at some point, I couldn’t stand it anymore so I just stopped still, turned and punched him. He flew all the way back to the backdoor and he crashed against it. His cries were so loud.” He chuckled at the memory. “Aunt Petunia wasn’t happy. I didn’t know how I’d done it, so I told her maybe I had super powers. You should have seen her face.”

To his surprise, Snape did laugh at that. He reached for his wand and casted a *Lumos*, rubbing his eyes. “How is she?” Snape asked at last. “Last time I saw her she was thoroughly unhappy with her existence.”

*Says the overjoyed man*, Harry thought of saying, but decided against it. “That’s her,” he agreed. “She’s happy when Dudley gets good grades, though. Oh, and when Uncle Vernon lets her be. I don’t think they even like each other anymore.”

Snape nodded, suddenly lost in some thought or memory that had completely sucked him in. Harry grinned, as he recalled something spicy. “Two years ago I caught her having sex,” he stated simply.

Snape raised his brows warningly but Harry could see that he was struggling to remain serious. “With that fat beast?” Snape blurted out and Harry grinned wider. Snape never struck him as a gossiper.

“Yeah. I didn’t see them but I heard them when I woke up to take a piss. I was traumatised for a week.”

“I imagine so,” Snape said carefully after a moment. Then, “She was quite promiscuous back in the day.”

Harry goggled his eyes. “Who? Aunt Petunia?”

“Yes. She wasn’t the magical one. She had to find other ways to be... interesting.”

And suddenly there was more tension between them than Harry expected. The memory of his mother was almost visible, sitting on the bed with them. It occurred to Harry that Snape was holding his breath. Regretting having said that. *And what did the magical one do?*

Harry took a deep breath, determined to not let the moment ruin itself in the hands of Snape. “So what, you mean she had boyfriends and such? Because she goes to church every Sunday and blames the TV for the corruption of young people all day long, not to mention she hates the neighbour’s daughter for wearing short dresses.”

“Does she, now.”

“Her name’s Linda. And I once got the impression that Dudley likes her, which of course made aunt Petunia hate her even more. She wouldn’t want Dudley to be around, you know, this kind of girls.”

Snape smirked mischievously. “If I tell you a story,” he drawled, “you must promise me, and I mean it, Potter, I’ll know if you lie– that you will never speak a word of it.”
Harry nodded and was suddenly deadly curious. “What story?”

“Your word, boy.”

“You have my word, Professor Snape. It’s a deal.”

Snape ignored his mockery and began. “I was fourteen, she was sixteen. It was summer. I was going over to the Evans house for lunch and –”

“They used to invite you for lunch? My grandparents?” He hadn’t thought that his grandparents knew Snape, but it did make sense come to think of it. Yet he always thought they didn’t want his mum to be friends with him.

“Don’t interrupt me, Potter. Yes, I was invited, and as soon as we sat down to eat we realised Petunia was as usually late.”

“You’ve got to tell me everything you know about my grandparents right after,” said Harry impatiently.

“I told you to not interrupt me,” Snape warned, his tone far from convincing. “So. As I was saying. Lily sent me to bring her back because she knew it would piss Petunia off to have me scold her. And it also pleased Lily a great deal.” Harry snorted and Snape smiled. “I went out looking for her but she was nowhere to be seen. I looked everywhere but at the treehouse, which I thought of lastly. She was there.”

Snape made a pause and Harry suspected that he wanted to add suspense to the moment, and restrained himself from interrupting again.

“She was with a boy. Pleasuring him.”

Harry’s jaw dropped and he felt his grin slowly fall to a paining grimace. He tried very hard not to gag in protest. The very image was not coping well with his mind. He had never thought aunt Petunia capable of – of -

“You’re not serious. No, you’re joking.” He directed the wand light away from his face to hide his blushing. “And what did you do?”

Snape smirked. “What could I do? I never told anyone, but I kept proposing to her to come and play with me at the treehouse every time I’d see her alone. The blush of shame on her face was all I needed to satisfy my sick amusement. This kept her from talking Lily into breaking our friendship for the best part of my adolescence.”

“You’re evil!” choked Harry in between an impulse to retch and another impulse to break into spasmodic laughter. “What the – GAH! Why did you tell me that?”

Snape shrugged his shoulders innocently. “You asked.”

“Of all the things you could have told – no. Just no. You’re sick. No. Ghhh.” Harry shook his head in an attempt to shoo the mental image away.

Snape snorted and Harry raised up a hand. “Just – don’t tell me anything like this again. Ever.”

The faked innocence hadn’t been wiped off Snape’s face yet. “You mean you don’t want to know about what she did with the theatre usher when she was seventeen?”
“NO!” Harry covered his face in an attempt to block out the world. He felt his cheeks heating up. “If you’re so keen to talk about people’s romances why don’t you tell me about you, instead? I mean after, you know,” he added quickly.

Snape took a deep breath. “I’ve had a matchmaking once. It was Lucius’ idea and it would have been suspicious of me to refuse the date. She was rich. Pureblood. Black hair, elegant posture, twenty something back then. We stopped seeing each other when I couldn’t stand her anymore. She was the stupidest woman I’d ever met.”

Harry raised his brows. “What, that's all? Where are your dirty details?”

“Where they are supposed to be, away from your curiosity. Now, if you don’t mind, and if I have entertained you enough, I would really like to go back to sleep.”

“Yes,” hissed Harry as Snape turned on his side away from him. “And thanks for sharing my aunt’s adventures with me,” he said sarcastically. “I’m sure I’m going to have amazing dreams thanks to you.”

“I aim to please. Nox.”

It was after a long time, and Harry had almost drifted to sleep under the blanket, when he remembered to talk again.

“Severus,” he whispered. Snape was probably already nearly asleep himself when he sighed in acknowledgement. “I love you,” said Harry.

Snape didn’t answer immediately. Harry didn’t think he was going to. Then, “But not enough to let me sleep.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Hm.”

“Your books.”

Severus handed him the textbooks for his seventh year, knowing very well that he wasn’t going to need them. Harry accepted them and opened a random one to take a look.

“I’m not going to take Arithmancy,” Harry complained. “Wait, you bought these yourself? You didn’t have to.”

“The Headmaster bought them,” Severus lied. “Unless you thought I’d waste more of my time to satisfy your needs.”

Harry rolled his eyes and Severus felt a familiar anger build up inside him. He couldn’t even insult Harry anymore. He’d become useless. It occurred to Severus that the despair with which Harry was examining his new books was fairly true to the level of education Harry had received over the years. The boy’s spirit was defective by all means. Non-existent, perhaps. A mind whose doors had been closed shut because of stubbornness and bad luck.

After a minute Harry threw the books into his trunk and Severus took his wand out of his robes.

“You still have to tell me about my grandparents,” said Harry.

Severus made an effort to not cover his face with a hand at the memory of how much he had
exposed his past to the boy last night. Years of secrecy and vigilance had been erased by a mere night of weakness. At the curious look that was now piercing him, Severus barely managed to scowl. He did make however a mental note to never allow himself to have any kind or personal discussion with Harry bloody Potter ever again.

“They were Muggles,” Severus simply said.

“That's not what I asked.”

“Get up. We’ll practice.”

“How did they die? Why hasn't anyone told me anything about them?”

“Enough, Potter. Up.”

Harry stood, although annoyed. He should teach the boy how to hide his emotions after all.

“You said you’d tell me. What changed now?”

And even after all their interactions, Harry was still trusting him to tell him the truth. It was hard not to laugh. But not impossible. “I am pretty sure I would have said anything in order to have my quietness back. When an oppressive teenager pokes and kicks at me at four after midnight and develops a sudden impulse towards small talk I believe it is reasonable for me to lie.” He made a small pause to observe Harry’s features and was glad to see the embarrassment beginning to show. “Now I can simply inform you that I’m not planning to become your story teller so you’d better drop it. Ready?”

Harry dragged his feet to the middle of the room boringly. “My theory is still valid after all, you know.”

“What theory?” croaked Severus before he could help it.

Harry smiled. “You’re far more cooperative in bed.”

Severus was shocked for the space of a heartbeat; then, “Legilimens!”

“They weren’t exactly normal,” Severus heard himself say after they had eaten their sandwiches. The kitchen table was rather small, and Severus couldn’t help but think that this place had been made for dwarves. “They treated wizards with too much enthusiasm, even with lowliness sometimes.”

Were he eating with anyone else, he would have made a point of the terrible table manners as Harry dropped his fork and pushed his plate aside to concentrate on Severus. Right now, he was so taken aback by his own desire to talk that he didn’t have a mind to mention anything else. All the reasons he shouldn’t be saying any of these things to Harry Potter remained visible before him. He had, however, already began.

“They learned that Lily was a witch very early… I was the one who proved it to them. She said they didn’t believe her, so I showed them. Our wild magic was so easy for us to summon that soon enough a letter came to her home to soothe down her parents and explain to them the situation.”

They were nice memories, but Severus had little faith to nostalgia. It brought to the surface parts of himself that were easy to break. Already broken, maybe. “Petunia wanted to be like us. I was poor and unwanted, so she couldn’t understand why I had a gift she didn’t have. She grew jealous of Lily over the years, although she was smarter than that.”
“What do you mean?” Harry said doubtfully.

“Petunia was determined. She liked rules, control. Lily, instead, was wild. She knew no boundaries. Like you. She wanted to break her limits whenever she touched them. The worst thing for her was when she wasn’t allowed to do something she could. It was maddening her. That’s why she was good at Potions.” And because she was using Severus’ notes most of the times. But that needn’t be told.

“Did they like you?”

Severus smiled sadly at a particular memory of Lily’s mother telling him that Lily talked about him all the time. “I was their daughter’s best friend. I suppose they had to. When we came back from our first year at Hogwarts we spent a whole night telling them everything we had been taught. They were mesmerised. All their lives they thought magic didn’t exist, and then they were suddenly part of it. They were… happy.”

“How did they die?”

“I don’t know. I – Lily and I weren’t talking anymore when it happened.”

“Oh.” Harry’s gaze fell on the table for a second. “So you don’t know at all?”

How could he? He was a Death Eater. He would have killed them himself if he was ordered to. “I’m afraid not.”

“They liked my mum more than Aunt Petunia, didn’t they?”

They liked her power. To their eyes, they had given birth to a miracle. A demigod. Petunia was ordinary. Severus knew that, and their parents knew it too. Ordinary children were doomed to suffer, with or without magic blood in the family. It was a dichotomy between equally loving all children and secretly having a favourite one. What the Evanses were missing, was that such secrets never remain hidden. It was instinct itself that would make the truth clear. Petunia knew it. They never admitted it to themselves, but at the disdain and the jealousy on Petunia’s teenage face it was written clearly: the family loved one of them more. And it wasn’t Petunia.

“Were you three the only children in the neighbourhood?”

“I never befriended Muggles willingly, and especially back then I couldn’t see why I would want to waste my time on them.”

“Muggles are fine,” said Harry, but quickly added, “And anyway I don’t think my mum would ever avoid Muggles.”

“She was… tolerant.”

Lily was his for a few years; they spent their summers together, talking, playing, and discovering. Then she was Potter’s girl and she was suddenly inviting him over for the summer. Severus could see them sitting under the trees Severus had showed her. Reading the books Severus had given her and sharing secrets Severus didn’t know. James Potter had seen him, once. He’d raised his wand to hex Severus outside his own house – to humiliate him in front of Lily once again, of course. And she, she was tugging on Potter’s sleeve and was muttering “let’s go, leave him alone, stop,” eager to leave the scene and continue her date with Potter somewhere else. He had hated her. He had truly and wholeheartedly hated her. For a few days.

“My grandparents… were they – did they dislike… people like me? People who like…” he took a
breath, “Gay people. Did they hate them? Because my aunt does.”

Seeking acceptance from the dead. Severus would fail to see the point of it if he hadn’t fallen in the same trap when Lily died. “How would I know?” he spat irritated.

Harry snorted. “Right.”

James Potter and Sirius black, on the other hand, had a particular abhorrence for poofs as far as Severus could remember. He shut his mouth around the information before it could escape. It wouldn’t do any good. Severus suddenly came to the conclusion that he'd said enough. He went off to the main room and wore his cloak. “You might have to stay by yourself tomorrow. Don’t have a breakdown and don’t lose your nerve during my absence no matter what conjectures you might reach to pass your time. It’s an order.”

“Just bring me biscuits when you come back,” Harry said as he leaned against the door.

Severus forgot to look disgusted.
Snape folded his arms. “This has gone on long enough. What is wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Potter.”

Harry sighed and looked up. “What? Nothing’s wrong.” A lot of things were, but it wouldn’t help to discuss them. He was tired; talking about things that would remain unsolved and would just cause another fight was not something he looked forward to.

“If nothing is wrong, then why are you being continuously distracted since morning? It might surprise you but I do have better things to do. If you can’t practice today I can’t see why I am here at all.”

“Because you want to.” The words slipped out of Harry’s mouth before he could help it. “To teach me,” he added quickly. He couldn’t deal with this now. He was sick of pretending. Sick of hiding behind words.

“I can’t teach if you don’t want to be taught. And I certainly can’t teach if you look out the goddamn window when I’m talking to you!”

Harry turned to see Snape furrowing his brow and sensed the anger he was trying to avoid since Snape’s arrival coming for him. “I don’t want to practice today so you can leave if you want,” he said quickly before disappearing to the kitchen. Snape stormed behind him.

“Potter. Have you been having visions?”

“Potter,” repeated Harry as he poured himself a glass of juice he wasn’t going to drink. “You still manage to call me Potter. Even after a year of spending every single day and night with me. No one calls me Potter in Hogwarts except McGonagall, and I haven’t been in her office more than six or seven times in my life.”

Harry passed a hand through his hair to push back his fringe. Snape stared. “Is that what has been bothering you?” he said calmly after a moment. “The war awaits and you –”

“And I’m selfish, arrogant, and stupid. Yes. I’ve learnt that lesson, sir, there’s no reason to repeat it.”

A cruel sneer formed on Snape’s face and he leaned forward, eyes bearing straight into Harry’s. “However clever you think this little game is, I assure you it is not. Intimacy with students is -”

“Then why the fuck do you sleep here?!” shouted Harry. The moment the words escaped his mouth he knew he had gone too far. He glared hard. Acknowledging it would make it real. Saying it out loud would make Snape stop. Harry had already lost what little happiness he had with him anyway. He didn’t feel like shutting up now. “Tell me why I’m getting up every morning to find you looking at me and tell me why you come here every night behind Dumbledore’s back to sleep in the same bed with me! You are not being obligated to do any of that. I never asked you to.”

“Stunning though your assumptions may be you will be disappointed to know –”

“Last night,” Harry shouted, “last night, I woke up to find you sleeping half naked next to me and you hadn’t even told me you’d visit!”

Parentheses: Nightmares and Daydreams
“Another word and you’ll regret it,” Snape hissed.

“Like I did last time?” It was fun how talking about things would make him regret it but Snape never had to explain why he did them. Even if Harry wanted to get away from him, ignore him, forget him, Snape wouldn’t let him go. Snape was stuck with Harry as much as Harry was with Snape. The difference was that Snape couldn’t see it.

Snape bared his teeth. “I will not apologise for sleeping with as many clothes I feel comfortable on. I will apologise, however, for doing so in the same bed with an imbecile student of mine. I am sorry for being utterly horrified of what Dumbledore might do to me should you commit suicide during your lonely and restless nights. I assume you must make do alone from now on.”

“Fine! I’m better off alone than being with someone who doesn’t even know what he wants!” Harry’s hands twitched and he felt thankful for not carrying his wand with him at the moment.

“It might surprise you but I know far too well what I want. And what I do not.”

“Then why are you sleeping here? The truth. Tell me the truth. Because Dumbledore has nothing to do with it and that’s fucking obvious even to an imbecile like me!”

The silence that fell upon them had suddenly said too much. Harry’s glare softened as Snape said nothing, and they stood there looking at each other, the answer to Harry’s question lost somewhere between them. Harry realised that one could listen to silence and learn from it. It had a quality and a dimension of its own.

He needed to be alone. He need to ponder his shame and his despair in seclusion; to lock himself in the bathroom without this conversation having happened, face to face with himself, with only his own stupidity for company.

“You’re silence is not going to protect you,” Harry said at last. He let his anger dissolve and took a deep breath. Snape’s dumbstruck look was what Harry loved; he couldn’t help but snort. It was a rare view to catch Snape off guard. To actually see him scared or shocked or panicked. Harry looked up at him and Snape sighed. “Severus.” At Snape’s disapproving glare Harry stopped him. “Just explain it to me. Because you’re confusing me way too much.”

He wanted to call him Severus. He wanted to get used to thinking of him as Severus. He wanted for once to be called Harry regularly.

“I can’t explain it,” Snape muttered under his breath, and it occurred to Harry that this was probably the only honest thing Snape had said today. “It will stop.”

“I don’t want you to stop it. I want you to admit that you’re thinking about me more than you let out. You don’t even call me by my name and yet you like to spend your nights here. You chose it. Who do you think you’re kidding?”

Snape pressed his lips together and Harry steeled himself for whatever blow of random nastiness was about to come. Not that insults would make what he had said less real. But to Snape, they probably would.

Leaning against the wall, Snape rested his head back. “Masks can be dangerous,” he said.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I am who I pretend to be.”

Harry licked his lips in frustration. “I don’t understand.”

Snape laughed soundlessly. He shook his head. “You weren’t meant to.”

“Just explain it to me. Because you’re confusing me way too much.”

Explaining would take a dreadful amount of time and describe nothing of the situation. Life did not offer explanations. It offered moments that were absolutely, utterly, inexplicably odd.

“I can’t explain it,” Severus heard himself saying and was appalled by his own nerve to continue this conversation instead of fleeing into the safety of his masks. A professor. An adult. A Death Eater, if necessary. “It will stop,” he said instead, and the pathetic lack of vocabulary only proved that he didn’t mean it. It wouldn’t stop. He didn’t want it to stop.

“I don’t want you to stop it. I want you to admit that you’re thinking about me more than you let out. You don’t even call me by my name and yet you like to spend your nights here. You chose it. Who do you think you’re kidding?”

His storytelling conscience. His past. His present. There was nothing riskier than pretending not to care, but exposing one’s caring when it didn’t have to. There was a great deal of power in pretending. He slept here because he wanted to. Because for once in his life he took the risk of doing what he desired without thinking about it, without searching inside him for the reason he wanted it or for the meaning of it. He followed his urges. The freedom of it was ill advised and evanescent.

He was now being interrogated about it.

He rested his head back against the wall and folded his arms. Receiving kindness was an extraordinary experience. Harry caused him a silliness of sentiments he hadn’t felt since adolescence. The illusion of not having to be independent all the time had been new to him. The certainty that no matter what he did or how badly he behaved he was still desirable and as much as before. He was wanted here.

It was unspeakable that this could mean anything to Severus.

“Masks can be dangerous.” Dangerous to keep, dangerous to destroy, dangerous to trust or to distrust. They held a soul of their own. Severus couldn’t remember of a time where he didn’t have to wear one. Even with Lily, he was trying too much. He was struggling to impress her with the simplest things. It occurred to him that he hated his younger self. If he could go back, he would kill that brainless loser that he’d been. Having overflowing emotions about a girl who would talk to him about the boys she liked. Hilarious. Sickening.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

That Harry Potter didn’t stand a chance of listening to the truth. Severus didn’t know the truth. “I am who I pretend to be,” and right now I’m pretending to be your enemy.

“I don’t understand,” Harry said, his features scrunched in confusion.

Laughter escaped him as he thought of what he could become were he to pretend to be a friend. “You weren’t meant to.”

Severus was awoken by a suffocating pressure against his lungs. He opened an eye to see Harry hugging him tightly. Against his own bare chest, Harry’s torso felt sticky with sweat. The body
which he had grown accustomed to finding draped all over him now breathed hard. Severus rolled on his side. “What happened?”

“Promise me you’re not going to die.” Even in the deep darkness of the night, the green eyes glimmered in intensity.

Severus grunted. “Nightmare?”

“How can I promise you something that I don’t know?”

“Promise me!” In the silence of the room, Harry’s voice echoed desperately.

Wartime outlawed hope. Dreaming of surviving could only concern the next day. Severus didn’t approve of hope. It never concerned him, for it was the opium of emotions: it hooked fast and killed hard. It was bad news. The worst. When hope showed up, it was only a matter of time until someone was destroyed.

What Severus could promise, was that even if he died soon, Harry wouldn’t be alive to see it.

“Tell me what you saw.”

“No. Promise me. I can’t lose you. I’m not going to. I just won’t let it happen. Ever. You must promise me.”

“You’re being childish.”

“FUCK YOU!” Harry kicked at the sheets trying to get up and kneed Severus’ stomach on his way. Severus got a tight grip of a random limb, then another, and pulled down. Harry shouted and almost hit him with an elbow. He kicked around furiously as he tried to get free.

“For God’s sake, calm yourself down!”

“No! Just go away! Leave, you’re not even supposed to be here! What for? So you can die and leave me alone like Sirius did? Fuck you!”

A foot kicked him on the thigh and Severus wondered why he was even trying to calm the boy down. A hand pushed hard at him in an attempt to let go. His patience lost and his kind side suddenly dismissed, Severus pinned Harry on the sheets and squeezed his wrists above his head.

“Kick me again and I’ll break your legs. Understood?”

“No!” Severus spat again, still trying to break free from his grip.

“So it that it then?” Severus hissed against Harry’s throat. “You see Black in me, don’t you? Or is it deeper than that? Maybe all you really want is to stop missing your rotten daddy after all, going after men his age, is that it?”

Harry writhed around, shaking his head. “Don’t —”

“Unless you prefer me to drug you asleep, next time you will keep your outburst for the morning.”

“Severus —”

“And I don’t know if I’m going to die, nor do I think about it because I’s not going to help or make it any better. You can sulk in your boasting for all I care but do remember that I certainly have more important things to keep me from dying than you and your selfish reasons. Or did you think that I am merely alive to satisfy your need for company? Did you think my only motivation to survive would be your request to do so?” Is that worth waking me up clutching on me for dear life?
“Don’t –”

“Don’t what?!”

“Don’t move so much — friction — ah — fuck.” Harry closed his eyes and gasped, pushing his pelvis upwards. Severus stared. Then he felt it; first the pulsation, then the wetness against his own thigh. He bolted up suppressing a familiar urge to murder and he became aware of the boy muttering a series of apologies while awkwardly getting on the floor and searching around for his tracksuit.

Severus felt his muscles tense up and a reasoning voice in his head soothed him by recalling that teenage erections could occur at any moment without a relevant incentive in sight. His throat was clenching around a whole new outburst that had nowhere to go but back to himself. He turned around to give Harry a moment of privacy and only breathed again when he heard the bathroom door close shut.

He heard himself breathing with difficulty and it occurred to him that there should be no more sharing a bed for tonight. Beginning to dress, he decided to not react. He was too astonished to do so. Too embarrassed to care for the embarrassment of someone else’s. He clutched at his head as though keeping it from ripping open. He remembered the flash of anger in Harry’s eyes and couldn’t bring himself to feel like leaving. Things were getting worse. Closer. He couldn’t stop it. Liar.

Damn.

The simplicity of the truth never ceased to amaze him. Harry Potter did fancy him.

The fact that he was turning on the boy so much shouldn’t be new to him. It was. He'd turned a blind eye to what was happening for far too long. He was playing along. Letting a little boy make the rules. Following silently and pretending not to notice. Severus loathed himself. He truly, deeply, abhorred his very existence.

His own mortality seemed like an easy matter to solve compared to Harry’s obsessions. He fought the urge to reach and knock on the goddamn door to inform the boy that this was over, being aware of the unimportance of such declaration when he knew that he wouldn’t keep his word. His stomach lurched and he felt completely ridiculous. Dispelling the image of the boy coming that would probably haunt him again later, he put on his shoes.

The door opened. “You’re leaving.”

Severus nodded stiffly.

“I…”

“Let’s not, Harry.”

At the sound of snorting Severus managed to not look back. His jaw clenched. His stomach still burned with a form of hatred he couldn’t recall being familiar with. He could feel Harry’s glare penetrating him from behind, and he silently counted the days left for this hell of a summer to end.

When he did count them, the nausea worsened.

Not nearly enough, actually.
“Suddenly impatient for school to start, aren’t we?”

Harry turned around and rolled his eyes before tugging at his Gryffindor sweater to pull it off. “I was just trying it on. It doesn't fit me anymore. I need a new one.”

He did most likely not. Once the Dark Lord conquered Hogwarts, Harry wouldn’t have a chance continuing his education there. He’d be captured and killed the very moment he’d be seen.

Ah. But that was the plan anyway.

“Lose weight.”

“Kidding me?” Harry crawled on the bed searching for his glasses. Severus sat on his chair. “It’s too short, my stomach’s out. I need a new one.”

“Then buy one.”

“I’m locked up. Will you buy it for me?” Harry sneered. It occurred to Severus that he was trying to mimic his voice. And failing.

Severus folded his arms. “Happily. Nothing more ordinary than the Slytherin Head of House buying Gryffindor sweaters, isn’t it?”

“I can’t wait to get out of here,” Harry said. “Hermione says they almost burned the burrow down. The Death Eaters.” He looked at Severus. “Do you think Hogwarts is going to be safe?”

Certainly. As safe as always, come to think of it. Taking into account all the murderers and frauds that occasionally taught at it.

Or the werewolves.

“I trust the Headmaster.” As close to the truth as he could get. Once Dumbledore was gone, Severus would have no one. He would be lost. As much as he wanted to think about Harry’s future from then on, his own misery overtook him. Without Dumbledore, he wouldn’t know where to start from. What to do. Not a single living person would ever believe again that Severus wasn’t a traitor. And Dumbledore was blindly willing to sacrifice Severus’ soul so he could depart from the world with style. Nothing new now, was there?

“Well I don’t.” Inwardly, Severus nodded in awe at Harry’s wisdom. Outwardly... well. He drank his tea. “Why would I? He doesn’t tell me anything. I don’t know what’s happening out there and I can tell that he’s making plans for me again.”

Exquisite plans. Marvellous ones. But Harry knew more than Severus, even if he wasn’t aware of it. A fact of which Severus could take slight advantage of. “What has he told you?”

Harry sat on the bed across Severus. His eyes were focused on the floor. “Well, I was the one who brought him Slughorn’s memory, so I know about the Horcruxes. I think Dumbledore suspected it all along though, didn’t he? He just didn’t know they were seven.”

Severus was trained to deal with this kind of emergency. Facing the unbelievable, and nodding his head calmly at it. Being unable to comprehend the shock, but tucking it away for future examination.
He clutched his fingers around the mug. His brain failed to come up with a satisfying response. Seven Horcruxes. Seven parts of the same soul. Seven murders under the ritual of ripping apart one’s own psyche and shoving it to random objects for future use. Had any piece of soul remained inside him or was he now an empty shell? This was why Dumbledore insisted that the Dark Lord had no capacity of comprehending emotions.

The invisible grip that had got hold of Severus’ throat tightened dangerously and he gulped another mouthful of tea to hide his astonishment. “He’d been suspecting it, yes,” he said stiffly, keeping his frustration in check. He didn’t want to hear anything else about it. Watching a brat half his age inform him of what he should already know wasn't exactly flattering. He toyed with the idea of exposing Harry by opening a casual discussion about Horcruxes with Dumbledore. For all the new information he’d get. None at all, really.

He was loyal to Dumbledore. He respected him. He respected alcohol too. “I’d left a bottle of whiskey here,” he recalled suddenly.

Harry looked up in awkwardness. "Um. Oh. Yes. You had."

“Fetch it.” The blush that spread over the boy’s face wasn’t at all satisfying. Severus creased a brow. Harry stared.

“Why?”

What kind of question was that? “Because I want it back, you prat!”

Harry snorted and an apologetic look shadowed his features. Momentarily. Then the cheeky grin was back. “Um. I don’t have it anymore. I thought you’d forgotten about it. I’m sorry?”

That didn’t make sense. “You’ve drunk a bottle of whiskey by yourself? When?” Walking over, he grasped Harry’s chin and tilted his head back to check on him. He was sober. Harry pulled free.

“Not today! You know, all these days. Since you left it here. I didn’t drink it all at once.”

“I left it here two weeks ago. Have you been drinking daily?”

“No. And not much.”


Harry sighed. “Look, it’s nothing bad, okay? It was just making me relax when I needed to and I haven’t been drinking daily anyway. You’re drinking regularly too. It’s not bad.”

Thank gods the boy had a proper role model to look up to. Becoming cynical and starting to drink. Severus had made a bitter bastard out of him. It served him right.

Or perhaps not.

“Not that this matters to you at all, but we are not the same age, Potter.” Severus glared. Harry took the message.

And smiled. “Alright. I’m not going to drink again. Just so you know, since I’m an adult now and it’s not prohibited, every time you do this you just prove you care.”

_Or I could have simply wanted the whiskey for myself_, he silently protested. He dismissed his impulse to say it out loud when he realised that he wasn’t fooling anyone.
“What classes do I have to take to be an auror?” Harry asked. Severus’s breath was calm. His lungs, however, were burning. He rolled on his back.

“Defence, Potions, Transfiguration... You should apply to the Ministry’s courses too. Concealment, Disguise, Stealth and Tracking. You won’t be learning anything useful until they accept you to the Office, but Dumbledore makes an effort to provide preparatory courses and I’m also being paid extra to teach them.”

It occurred to him that explaining this while lying in bed with a student wasn’t exactly his idea of proper career assistance. Especially for the early morning. At the focused look on Harry’s face Severus wondered how long he’d been thinking about this. His mind intervened that he probably didn’t want to know. He was dismayed that Harry’s familiarity seeking methods were far more effective than Severus’ determination to assert himself.

“Oh. But they’re optional, right? They’re not necessary.” Harry propped himself up on one elbow. His other hand was occupied with playing with Severus’ upper arm. With his index finger, he lazily drew invisible patterns on his skin and scratched them.

“They are, if you don’t want to fail later on due to lack of basic knowledge. The classes you’ll take will be mentioned in your report as well. It’d be careless to dismiss the possibility of better future opportunities.”

The heaviness of the conversation throbbed and kicked at his insides. All this was rubbish. A consolation. A mockery. Harry would be dead long before he stepped foot in the Auror Office. Severus felt blessed for having this moving knowledge all to himself to enjoy. May as well throw a party behind Harry’s back and invite no one but Albus fucking Dumbledore to share this utter thrill. And end the party with an unforgivable. And even then Dumbledore’s corpse would laugh at him for having done everything exactly as ordered.

“My grades are not bad. I just don’t know how many classes to take. If I take too many I might get confused. I don’t want to have to drop a class because I won’t be able to cope.”

“And this concerns you at...” he looked at the clock, “seven in the morning.”

“Yes. It’s my future.”

He had no future. And death showed no pity to the dreaming youth. Dying was the easy part, and the path to it was in Severus’ hands to create. Yet again. The irony was too much. The pain...

Nowhere to be seen. Through the ringing in his ears, Severus sealed the hideous sentiment of attachment and promised himself to destroy it later when alone. Death shouldn’t be scheduled. Death was supposed to come and go in his own terms. This death, was the period in the end of a sentence. He was vaguely aware of the impatient brat next to him waiting for an answer. Blasted boy.

What advice to give?

He was caught by the admittedly right impulse to spill the truth and not give a damn about the consequences. He silently applauded himself for still having the self-control to bite back his yearning for the sake of deception. Encouraging Harry would only harm Severus. He was struck by the reassurance that he had no reason to be harmed by the boy’s upcoming murder.

“Your grades are average, and this only occurs because you are the Chosen one. Should you be any other student you would shockingly discover that you are not nearly as good as you should for the career you wish to follow. You have to exceed expectations in all your classes.”
Harry wrinkled his nose. Then frowned. “That’s impossible. Especially with you teaching Defence.”

*Wait to see how you’ll do with me being headmaster,* a voice in his head mused. Severus mentally punched it unconscious. “With me teaching Defence, you’ll get what you deserve. Try harder and you’ll be rewarded.” It occurred to Severus that this had come out wrong. Harry grinned. Severus scowled.

“Wear your glasses you stupid brat. You’re squinting.” Severus rolled his eyes as Harry reached to the nightstand. When he rolled back to where he was and crushed on Severus, Severus did not complain. Harry rested his cheek on Severus’ shoulder and placed a hand on his sternum.

*You see, he had absolutely nowhere else to go. And the rest is rust and stardust.*

“How about more private lessons then?”

Severus glared. Harry chuckled. “No, I mean it. And anyway I won’t have much to do in my free time, so. Hermione will be studying her brains off and she’ll be forcing Ron to do the same, I suspect.”

“And the possibility of studying with your friends instead of studying with me isn’t exactly exciting, is it?”

Harry blushed. “You know more than them. And it’s going to be in my report too.” With no warning, Harry bit Severus’ arm, his mouth still forming a smile while doing so.

Severus bit back a grunt as he grabbed his hair in order to pull him off. “Idiot. Behave yourself.”

Harry laughed, and as always, Severus gave up. The boy rested his head back on his shoulder and Severus found himself lazily stroking his nape with a finger.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. Hermione and Ron almost know they fancy each other now.”

“And how is that supposed to concern me or even make sense?”

“I mean, Ron was with Lavender, and Hermione was a bit annoyed at first but then she was just angry, okay? So, she dated this other guy and I was supposed to tell Ron but she didn’t really date anyone else and Ron broke up with his girlfriend because she suspected he liked Hermione more, then —”

“You’re raving, Potter. In case you have failed to notice, I don’t care.” The fact that he’d have to face in class a boy he had slept on the same bed with was already difficult enough. To regain authority over more students whose hormones he’d been aware of was at least horrifying.

“And Ginny doesn’t mind anymore. That I’m gay.”

*I do.*

“Congratulations.”

“Honestly, I think she knew before I even told her. She was trying to… do things. And I couldn’t. I let her do something to me once but… it just didn’t work.”

Exciting piece of information for the early morning. Severus couldn’t have asked for more. He was grateful. Blessed, even. “Have you read any of the books I gave you?” he said in an attempt to lead the conversation somewhere better. Anywhere else, really.
“Yes. Transfiguration is a bit difficult. And Potions have ingredients I didn’t know that even existed.”

Severus rubbed his eyes and took a reasoning breath. “Give me your Potions book.”

Harry crouched across the bed and delved into his trunk. Severus was given a few moments to change his mind and he heedlessly let them pass in vain. He found himself rushing to do this out of the same fear that he’d regret it. Harry gave him the book and Severus shifted to sit back against the pillows. He went through the pages quickly.

These chapters were known to him as much as his reflection was in the mirror; he’d taught and repeated these passages for the best part of the last seventeen years. There was nothing in there he couldn’t teach by memory. He folded various corners of pages as he flipped through the book and did not bother to check twice. He closed it and handed it back.

“Slughorn pays attention to these chapters usually. They are objectively easier than the ones I choose to give N.E.W.T students, but you will sadly have to endure a less capable professor. Make sure to know perfectly well everything what’s in there and you’ll most likely pass.” And I would have never done this were you to actually be there for your N.E.W.T examinations, he inwardly added to give his conscience a pat on the back.

Harry looked at the book dumbstruck. Then at Severus. Then at the book again. “Oh. Right. Okay.” He luckily knew better than thank Severus for it. “I just can’t imagine this going on forever. Voldemort. It must end and I know I must be the one to do it but I don’t even know how. Should I just wait for him to come and get me or should I go search for him? I don’t know. But I’m not afraid. At least I don’t think I am.”

Severus flinched as he pushed away the nightmare he was being part of. Distancing himself from it unfortunately only made it more clear. He clung to the hope that they’d never have to leave this room. He wasn’t Severus Snape here.

A not so dim aspect of himself objected that he couldn’t recall a time where he was Severus Snape more than now. But that part had to be wrong.

“You kill him or he kills you. All possibilities come down to the collapse of our world as we know it. The fact that you delude yourself over your supposed victory only proves how immature you are.” Severus stood up, impatient to get out of there.

“What’s wrong now? Where are you going?” Harry’s complaints were muffled by Severus’ inner arguments of how low he himself had fallen for the sake of this little heaven that provided nothing but pointless hope. He was quite sure he didn’t want to know where this hope was leading. The last time ruined him. Lily’s death had ruined him. He had to get out of here.

“Severus!”

A hand grabbed his arm to stop him and Severus turned and smacked the boy hard across the face before he could stop himself. The regret came even before the smack. He was aware of the boy’s stare burning his neck but he didn’t turn to look back at what he had done as he dressed. “You will not see me again until you learn to call me ‘sir,’” he said stupidly as he stepped into the hearth.

The castle’s corridors were too cold for this time of the year. It occurred to Severus that even the ghosts were missing. As he quickened his pace, the sound of his own shoes against the stone floor was the only thing he could hear. It covered the noise of his thoughts successfully. He couldn’t recall noticing the moss clinging onto the walls like this before. The air wrapped around him like a heavy
coat as he ascended the tight spiral of stairs. In the absence of flaming torches the dimness gave the impression of a winter twilight despite being only August.

He slammed the door open and was not surprised to see Dumbledore sitting on his chair. The man didn’t have anything better to do than pretend to run the school even during summer. Or he simply knew Severus was coming.

“You can’t do this,” Severus said.

Dumbledore smiled, but his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Severus?”

“You can’t. He doesn’t deserve it. You can’t let him die like that. Not so pointlessly. Not now.”

Dumbledore stood and Severs drew his wand.

“Are you going to curse me, Severus? In here?”

Severus shook his head.

“Severus…”

“Please!” He dropped his arm; his wand slipped from his fingers, fell on the carpet, it didn’t matter, nothing did — “Please.”

“You know it pains me more than anyone, yet it must be done.” Severus was shaking his head, refusing to listen, refusing to obey anymore. “I have entrusted you with the truth because I believed you would understand the importance —”

“No, no no. You entrusted me to use me, as you’ve been doing all these years — you have no remorse, no interest in his life — telling me he’d need my protection and then sending him off to die…”

“I never said it’d be easy, for any of us.”

“Harry’s all I have.” For the first time in ages, he felt his voice breaking. His eyes burned. “You owe me this. After everything I’ve done — risked my life — betrayed friends — please, please let him live.”

“Harry’s all you have?”

“Have I not pleased you enough? Have I not done anything I could to keep him safe? To keep an eye on him, always?”

“It’s impossible to avoid one’s destiny, Severus. You know this as well as I do. The boy must die. We’ve discussed this.”

His legs were too weak to support him anymore. He dropped before Dumbledore and his knees hit the floor hard. Despair consumed him. “There must be a way… please! If anyone can do something it’s you — you could save him — there must be a way! Please!” When the words stopped coming, the tears did.

Mourning for someone still alive was not supposed to feel so familiar to him. A painful déjà vu of a fate that he was doomed to relive over and over again. Mourning was supposed to be something dignified and stoic, but he cried like a child, noisily, the numbness of the loss already ripping his chest apart as hot tears ran down his face. He choked on his sobs. The pain struck him everywhere. It
was doubling him over.

He squeezed at Dumbledore’s hand and kissed it. He could save Harry. He could find a way. It wasn’t supposed to end like this. Harry had to live. “I know it’s sad, Severus… But there is no other way. Voldemort can’t be killed as long as Harry lives.”

“I don’t care about Voldemort!” A raw emptiness nibbled at his stomach like a hungry rat. A strong hand gripped at his shoulder. Severus flinched away. “SAVE HIM! I know you can! Save him… save… please…” Snot streaked from his flaring nostrils down his lips. His fists opened and closed on his lap; yearning for whatever solution could mend his pain. “You never cared… You never hesitated risking other people’s lives so you could reach your goals. The boy’s safety didn’t – never concerned you. You only wanted him to live as much as you needed him to…”

He looked up to see Dumbledore’s tired blue eyes staring back at him with pity. His features betrayed his age, and Severus was suddenly talking to a very old man, a man tired of the many years on his back, weakened and exhausted from life and its fights. The powerful wizard who held the world in his hands was nowhere to be seen.

“Do you really believe that, Severus? You believe that if there was a way for him to live I wouldn’t have chosen it? You don’t see all the things I do for Harry daily?”

“Please,” Severus said again. “Better – it’s better to kill me – we can tell — Voldemort — to kill me instead of him – I’ll take his place – this is my fault, I should pay… not him, I should pay for this! Kill me… Kill me…”

Dumbledore opened a cabinet and then a small phial was shoved into Severus’ trembling hands. Severus recognised it as some sort of calming draught. He clutched at it on his lap but didn’t drink it. He remained still as his chest trembled and his fingers shook. It was hysterical crying. He couldn’t stop himself. “Don’t let him die… don’t… he can’t… not again, please… I can’t do this… it’s not fair…please…”

“It is the only way.” The hand returned to his shoulder. “Calm down, please. You’ll understand when you do. I know how much you loved Lily, but –”

“You don’t get to talk about Lily, you killed her too… Everyone I have — ever loved — this has nothing… to do with Lily… Thought… it did… not about her…”

“Calm down, Severus.”

“I’ll lose him… I can’t… I love him more than my own life… please…”

If Dumbledore was shocked, he didn’t show it. After a small silence, he offered Severus a hand. “I believe you should rest, Severus. There are many things to be done. I need you to be strong.”

Severus snorted in between sobs. He didn’t accept the hand. The phial rolled from his thighs to the floor. “Why? Why are you doing this to me?” He didn’t know who he was talking to. He didn’t know whom to blame.

“WHY?” he shouted, and all the images he had been blocking out of his mind half his life were now vivid again; Lily’s corpse on the newspapers, Lily’s funeral which he never attended, everyone saying what a perfect couple she was with James, everyone willing to take in the Boy Who Lived, the Dark Lord telling him proudly that he was going to kill Lily and James Potter. Severus crying before an Albus Dumbledore who had done nothing to protect her. Crying before her death, sensing far too well that no one could help her once the Dark Lord wanted her dead, knowing far too well
that Dumbledore’s plans didn’t exactly include her safety or her life. Crying after her death and weeping as his soul shattered to a million pieces he did not think possible that could be glued back together again.

They had.

Only to be broken again.

“Please,” he croaked again, his voice hoarse and pathetic, and as he blinked his tears away he knew that this battle was lost. Lily was never his. Harry was. He endured this hell once, but one could only take so much.

This strike would finish him.
They did not speak.

Severus, leaning back on his chair, pretended to be reading a book. Harry, sitting on the bed, cross-legged, not facing him, not eating biscuits, was reading his new Transfiguration textbook with a strictness he’d never showed before.

Harry didn’t look at him when he arrived. He nodded firmly, a cold “hello, Sir” out of his lips and then back to his reading. Severus made himself comfortable like the fool that he was and didn’t bother talking again. He glared numerous times, but Harry didn’t notice. Or pretended not to. An eternity passed since he came here and only now it occurred to him that he should have brought the food and leave immediately. An eternity which barely counted ten minutes or so. He silently scolded himself for not leaving now.

Frozen to his chair, he closed his peripheral vision with his book and refused to think about it. He was surprised by his own immature attitude. He fought the urge to cover his face with a hand. Instead, he turned a page. It was a matter of time for Harry to break the ice. His stomach tied itself in a knot as more time passed. He sighed and then stopped. The sanctuary of his book spread before his face hadn’t been interrupted yet. And he was most certainly not going to apologise. Please, do find the courage to forgive me, boy. I have crossed the line by smacking you. As we can both agree, it was entirely unprofessional. I promise to never do it again.

His fingers clenched. So did his sternum. He withered under the expectation for a fight that, this time, did not seem like coming. Harry cleared his throat. Severus steeled himself. Nothing happened. At the sound of another page turning he had to resist the desire to smack the boy again. This time harder. He was a grown man. He was clever. He was not going to play games. He stood up to leave.

And he remembered that he had nowhere to be. He headed off to the bathroom to justify his standing up.

Someone had to put an end to this nonsense. Severus was glad to have done it first. He was out of breath before he shut the door behind him and he glared back at the mirror furiously. Abrupt changes were for the best. He could concentrate on more important tasks now. With more time on his hands, he’d keep a close eye on the Dark Lord. He’d have Bellatrix respect him again. If not trust him. He could pay a rather sadistic visit to Lucius’ cell in Azkaban just to bring up his son’s downfall after miserably failing to satisfy the Dark Lord’s wishes.

He placed his wand next to the washbasin and sighed. His to-do list was rather shifty these days; the cold hand wrapping itself around his heart was difficult to unclench.

All of a sudden, he laughed. Leaning forward to the sink, hands clenching on the porcelain, he laughed at Harry ignoring him. Impossible boy. He had broken up with him. The irony was overwhelming. He felt his face going hot from the frustration. The little authority he had over his life had been again struck down by Harry’s nonchalance. Severus should be the one making the rules. He should be the one keeping the boy at distance. He had failed at that and it was now happening because Harry had decided to do so.

Goddamn brat.

Impossible. Boy.
Forget apologising. Harry Potter would have to apologise for this. Hopefully dropped on his knees in repentance.

Then again… better not.

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Dear Harry,

Ron wrote to me and told me that they repaired the Burrow as much as they could after the attack. Mr. Weasley was very sad to discover that all his Muggle collectibles had been burned. I sent him a muggle telephone by owl so he can begin collecting again.

I was waiting for you to write to me or Ron right after the wedding and I am not pleased at all that it took you so long. I was worried, Harry! Ron had been worrying too. I hope you are allowed to discuss your whereabouts with us in detail on September 1st, because honestly, my curiosity is killing me.

Have you bought the new books yet? I went through them this morning and I’m excited. I might take some extra classes, as I can’t seem to be able to choose only twelve of them.

Write back as soon as you read this, Harry. I need to know that you’re alright!

Love,

Hermione

Harry dipped his quill in his new black ink.

---

Dear Hermione,

I am all right. I can’t tell you where I am at the moment but we’ll discuss it when we meet. Ron wrote to me about the Burrow too.

Dumbledore bought the books for me and they scared me a little bit. Advanced Runes look like Chinese. I’ll probably take only the mandatory classes for Auror Training.

See you soon,

Harry

“Will you give this to an owl? Hedwig’s not back yet.” Harry asked coldly. Snape took the letter and looked at the name written on the envelope. He shoved it in his pocket and did not comment. “Have you received the schedule yet? I think some of the classes I need are at the same time. Sir.”

He made an effort not to wince in disgust at how things had become. Snape raised his eyes from his book and Harry caught a glimpse of them before occupying himself with searching into his trunk for nothing in particular. “I have received it, yes.”

“And?”
“And I’ll inform you about it along with the other students after the beginning of the school year.”

Right. The sharp breath that escaped him was far too obvious. When Harry was left alone again, he kicked at the foot of the bed hard. He was an idiot. The too many reasons he should have known better than discuss his feelings openly now struck him violently and he found himself unable to keep his rage back.

He ripped another page from a random notebook and began writing.

_Dear Hermione._

_There are things I haven’t told you. I haven’t told Ron either but I suppose he’d be shocked to death and that’s why. I live with Snape. I spent the last summer with him and this one too. Oh. And pretty much every night of our last school year. The thing is, I’ve told you I’m gay. What I haven’t told you is how I found out. I am in love with him._

_Of course, he’s straight, and he still fancies my mum despite her being dead and stuff. I tried to ignore this and I kept throwing myself at him hoping that someday he’d discover that he was in fact gay all along and he just didn’t know it. I suppose life isn’t supposed to be easy. What troubles me, is that sometimes reality gets too close to my dreams. I wouldn’t spend every minute of my day with someone I don’t like and I certainly wouldn’t sleep in the same bed with someone I don’t find at least a little bit interesting._

_We have kissed a few times. He seems to freak out every single time. I think these are the times he truly hates me, to be honest. But then he’s back again and we can continue from where we left it. It scares me how little I know about him. Most of the times I get the impression I don’t know him at all. But then again, he kisses back. Even for a second._

_Do you think Ron would have a heart attack if I told him? I’m not sure he’ll get over it the easy way._

_Love,_

_Harry_

He read it twice before he tore it to pieces. Some things were better to remain secret. Those who didn’t know couldn’t understand.

He knew he didn’t stand a chance. He knew he was making a fool of himself every time he believed there was something more between them than tolerance. Or sufferance, for Snape’s part.

He didn’t need this. He could get over it.

_Just keep reminding that to yourself,_ Harry thought, and tossed the box of biscuits in the bin.
Parentheses: Of Small Talk And Love

“I’ve sent the letter.”

“Thanks.”

Harry was laying on the bed, apparently tired of pretending to continuously having something to do. Severus drank his tea calmly.

“How old is your cousin?”

Harry turned his head to him curiously before returning to the task of intently watching the ceiling. “Same as me. Why?”

“And he’s never shown magical signs?”

Harry furrowed his brows. Severus mentally kicked himself from not tearing his own eyes away from the boy. “No, of course not. He’s a muggle. He’s a muggle, isn’t he?”

“Yes, probably. Although some of the blood that runs in your family is magical. His children might turn out to be wizards after all.”

Obviously relaxed, Harry sighed. And that would have to be Potter. Severus could not allow slip ups this close to the school year’s start.

“And why ask me that now?”

Severus shrugged. “Just a passing thought.”

“He can make food disappear admittedly fast though.” Harry didn’t tear his eyes from the ceiling. It occurred to Severus that he wasn’t going to.

“Ah. I see.” Then again, “Petunia wrote to Dumbledore when she was young. She asked him to accept her to Hogwarts too. As a student.”

“But she hates magic.”

“Don’t be — stupid shortsighted. She is jealous of it. She desired to be part of our world once. She couldn’t, and thus she resented it.”

“Makes sense,” Harry said after a long pause. “Although she’d hate me anyway. She never wanted me. She was telling the world I was mentally ill so she could lock me up when she had guests.”

And most likely her whale of a husband agreed to this treatment. Not that it did the boy any harm. Harry had turned out as insolent as a boy could be. Discipline was unlikely to have made it any worse.

“I used to call her mum when I was little. Dudley called her mum so I thought she was mum to both of us. She didn’t mind much at first but then she probably realised that I really believed she was my mum.” Severus supposed it was only natural for an infant to think his care taker was his mother. Harry had no way of remembering Lily. “The funny thing is that she never told me to not call her mum. One day she just stopped responding when I called her that. I’d talk to her and she’d pretend she hadn’t heard. I’d call her mum again and again and she wouldn’t even flinch. Like I wasn’t there at all. It took me a while to figure how to call her.”
Severus turned his attention toward his lap and succeeded at keeping a neutral face. Thankfully, his own father only remembered Severus’ existence every time he was close to death or utter poverty. And Severus always shut the door to his face.

Your uncle was beating you, he almost blurted out, but immediately bit his tongue in determination to never show interest in the boy’s problems again. Harry would most likely never go back to Surrey anyway. He could see by Harry’s expression that some memory had sucked him up again as Harry worried his lip mercilessly. He was not going to ask. A part of the problem was that Severus was still in that room and was yet again too exposed to Harry’s psyche, he realised in annoyance.

“Don’t you have stuff to do? It’s getting late.”

And now the boy was throwing him out. It was illogical. No. It was surreal. Why hadn’t he left earlier? He supposed he had been waiting for something. An invitation to stay. A single word would be enough; a simple suggestion. A mention of a nightmare. A yawn. A look. A silence in which the tension between them would drift away instead of grow stronger. If Harry asked him to stay, Severus knew he would. But he didn’t.

Severus stood up. “I won’t visit tomorrow. If you need anything however you may tell me now.”

“I won’t,” Harry said as he rolled up his sleeves and headed to the pile of unwashed dishes in the kitchen, walking past Severus and avoiding his eyes completely. “I do have some dignity you know. Sir.”

“I fail to see how your supposed dignity has anything to do –”

“Oh sod off.”

“Potter!”

“Potter what?” Harry turned around and glared. “Potter what, after… after everything? I have respected you and I have treated you nicely because that’s how I treat people. If you think you can treat me like shit whenever you want then I don’t think we have anything more to say. Go away.”

Severus refused to betray his irritation. “Spare me the melodramatics. I have endured your idiotic attention seeking tactics for far too long and have protected you from the Headmaster’s judging eye countless times by now. Had he been informed of what really happened last summer, you would have been staying alone in a dungeon now, and not a living soul except Dumbledore –” Harry rolled his eyes, “would know where you are. You owe me, you understand?”

Harry's eyes hardened. “I owe you nothing. I owe nothing to no one.” Severus opened his mouth to retort but Harry stopped him. “I’m not going to argue with you anymore. I guess you can be happy now because you got what you wanted. I don’t give a damn about you. Satisfied?”

Precisely.

Deeply.

Wholeheartedly.

Satisfied, not. But definitely amazed. Harry Potter did have some dignity after all indeed. And some maturity.

And suddenly, Severus had neither.
“Very well.”

Let the boy think he was a man. Facial hair didn’t make a man. If Potter wanted to avoid him it was all for the best. Obligations aside, Severus could now ignore him too. Completely.

An hour later, as he made himself comfortable in his own bed back to Spinner’s end, Severus decided that he could not be happier to have a bed all for himself again. He slept with a deep satisfaction that would most likely end up to a morning headache. Right now, he followed Harry’s way of solving things out, and decided to not give a damn.

Harry kept his eyes on the desk, nodding absently through Dumbledore’s questions of how the summer had been.

Marvellous, Severus thought of saying, in case he was asked himself.

“Auror, yes,” said Dumbledore, fishing through a drawer filled with papers to find the proper schedule. He watched as Harry examined his new year’s schedule and released his breath in satisfaction. Severus, however, held his own. “Have you talked to Minerva? She’ll assist you well, my boy.”

“I fail to see how Potter will cope with these classes,” Severus intervened. “His last year’s Defence grades simply do not qualify. Herbology will too be an issue. Perhaps he should reconsider his choice of a future career.” Which meant, Albus Dumbledore, you son of the bitch. I’ll torture you.

“Harry is a clever boy. I believe he knows what he wants.” Dumbledore glanced at Harry over his spectacles and Harry nodded. “Are your friends thinking of following the same career path, Harry?”

“No. Sir. I don’t think so. Hermione’s not that interested in being an Auror, I think. Ron is still thinking about it.”

“Seconds thoughts can be expected - it is the rest of your life after all. If you feel troubled, you can always discuss it with me. Or Severus.” Severus gritted his teeth.

“No second thoughts, sir. I can’t think of anything else I’d like to do.”

“Then we’re done for now. Minerva will give you an application form and you may submit it back to her by the end of the week.”

"Thank you sir."

It was the boy that was being tortured. And Severus. Dumbledore certainly was not. Severus watched mesmerised this new kind of sadism taking place in front of his eyes and mentally slapped away the urge to snap into laughter. He was supposed to be the sadist. Dumbledore was supposed to be the good one. Was he ever?

Harry glanced at Dumbledore’s darkened hand and Severus did not crease a brow when Harry frowned at it. Questions would follow, most likely. The burden to dodge them would fall upon Severus, of course. His own sins were yet to be punished, but karma did a great job tormenting him with the sins of others. Nevertheless. It was a start. The end was hopefully not nearing yet. Harry did not dare to look up at Severus and Dumbledore did not make any effort to hide his rotten flesh. It occurred to him that he was giving the boy a chance. A sign to recall when the job would be done.

Highly unlikely that Harry would manage to bring the pieces together.
“Anything else troubling you, then?” pressed Dumbledore.

“No, sir.”

“Severus?”

Severus looked at him expressionless.

“Very well, then.”

Too well, even. Remarkable.

“Oh, Harry! I missed you so much! Why weren’t you on the train? We’ve been looking for you! You can’t have possibly spent the summer at Hogwarts, have you? Professor Dumbledore was here too, wasn’t he? To leave you alone here –”

“Give him some space, Hermione!” Ron said.

“I arrived yesterday,” Harry explained as Hermione hugged him.

“And where were you before?” asked Hermione and Ron rolled his eyes at Harry behind her back.

Harry snorted. “Not now. Is everyone alright at the Burrow?”

Ron nodded. “Mum’s a bit crazy about Charlie leaving again. She thinks the Ministry’s watching us. Most of Dad’s colleagues don’t even talk to him anymore. Mum says he should retire before they threaten his life.”

Harry couldn’t help but think that this was his fault. The Weasleys were purebloods. The only reason they were in trouble was because they befriended Harry. “Fred and George?”

“They worry too. It’s weird to see them worry about anything,” Ron shrugged. “Fred says Hogwarts is probably going to be a really dangerous place to be by the end of the year.”

Harry wasn’t used to hearing that kind of things from Fred.

“Fred says a lot of exaggerated things,” argued Hermione.

“Yeah. He probably just wants me to be scared and stay at home so I never graduate,”

Hermione wrinkled her nose. “Chances are slim that you’ll graduate anyway, Ron.”

Ron blushed and Harry gave him a sympathetic look. They sat at the Gryffindor table and waited for the Hat’s speech to begin. The Slytherin table was quieter than usual. Harry silently wondered how many of them were already marked. The teachers were already seated at the head table around Dumbledore. Snape was muttering something to McGonagall, who looked quite pleased with whatever Snape was saying.

“So, what happened to you after Charlie’s wedding?” asked Ron after Harry had greeted the other students.

“Dumbledore took me to a safe house. That’s where I was staying. My aunt’s home wouldn’t be able to protect me anymore once I turned seventeen anyway. He took me right back there and he left to contact the Order.”
“Who’s the secret keeper?” asked Hermione.

Harry shrugged, momentarily glancing up at the head table. “I don’t know. He’s not telling me much about it.” It was probably Snape, but he couldn’t tell them that. “I didn’t want to leave the wedding without you. I felt like I left you there to…” he sighed. “His intentions are good. His actions to protect me are horrible.” And he was suddenly angry with Dumbledore all over again. “I don’t value my life more than yours,” he said, looking at both his friends. He believed it with his whole heart.

“Oh, Harry.” Hermione looked at Ron for a second. “Have you been torturing yourself with this thought since then?”

Harry snorted. “Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“I wasn’t going to leave my family, mate. I wouldn’t come anyway. It makes sense that Dumbledore wanted to protect you. You are the Chosen One, remember?” Ron joked.

Harry smiled. “I don’t want anyone to get harmed because of me.”

No one responded to that. “So, how did you spend the summer?” asked Hermione.

Fine, Harry thought. The only thing that kept me sane was that the nights I slept in the arms of a man who’ll never want me back. By the way, that man is Snape. On second thought, “Good. Lonely.”

“Is that all you have to say, Harry?” Hermione took a calming breath. “I, for example, went on holiday with my parents. Paris. It was exciting, I’ll show you photos later. Muggle ones, of course –”

“I have nothing more to say, Hermione. Really.” It occurred to him that he was going to need some time to adjust. Socialising was never a difficult part of being in Hogwarts. Not with Ron and Hermione, at least. Feeling exposed was not supposed to happen when he had his friends with him.

“I read a lot of books,” he said before Hermione could say anything. “Most days were boring. I stared at the ceiling,” and at him, “and I slept. I didn’t do anything else. Really.”

Hermione tilted her head. For a moment Harry thought she pitied him. Then realisation struck him and he knew that she hadn’t bought it at all. If he didn’t know her, he’d think she was reading his mind with the intensity she was looking at him.

“Snape teases the curse’s limits a lot lately,” Ron interrupted.

Harry blinked. “What?”

“The curse, the Defence position. Second year in a row. And still alive, the bloody bastard.”

Harry didn’t follow Ron’s look at the head table. Hermione kept looking at Harry. “I don’t think the rumour about this curse is real anyway.”

“You used to believe it was,” Ron said after a moment. “And honestly, even mum says it’s true.”

“Maybe it was. Curses can break.”

“Or he’s going to die anytime now.”

“Curses can break, Ron!”

“Let’s hope they don’t, then.”
“Harry.” Harry tensed as Hermione used that tone that suggested that she had been thinking. “Professor Snape works for the Order, right?”

Harry made an effort to look at her in the eye. “Dumbledore believes so. Why?” The smile he was granted with did not satisfy him at all. “Why?”

“Nothing, really,” she said, smiling.
“Horcruxes,” Hermione repeated, her eyes wild. Harry looked around at the empty Quidditch pitch and nodded. They were sitting on the grass, Ron’s head resting on Hermione’s lap as he stared at Harry in confusion. The weather was still nice, and the stadium looked even larger when it wasn’t being used.

“He split his soul into seven pieces,” Harry explained. “They could be anything. Dumbledore’s been searching for clues but I don’t think he’s found much. I’m not supposed to be telling you any of this.”

“And you’re going to help him? Find them?”

“And destroy them. Yes. He trusts me.” He wasn’t as sure about it as he pretended to be. But he needed to believe it.

“If you are to fight him, I’m coming with you,” Ron said. The snitch he’d been toying with slipped from his fingers and flew right above his head; he quickly caught it again.

“We’re both coming with you,” Hermione said. “I’m not even going to argue about that.”

Harry snorted. There was really no point in arguing. He never succeeded at keeping them out of his problems. “I know.”

Being with his friends was refreshing. They never thought of him as weird or an outsider. Spending so much of his time with Snape had made him accustomed to reading between the lines. It was nice to just hear what the people in his life were thinking about and not having to guess all the time. Only now he understood how much he loved them.

“Dad might retire,” Ron said abruptly. “The Ministry’s corrupted, he says. There are whispers going around, targeting, you know, blood traitors. Thickness has spies all over the place. It’s not safe anymore.”

“The Ministry is definitely corrupted. It’s one of the few things Luna was completely right about.” Hermione made a pause. "They want to eliminate us. And Hogwarts is a good place to start from because here they can find all the school records of the - muggleborns. It’s the easiest way to find them. Us. And our families.”

“I wouldn’t worry about Hogwarts as much as about the Muggle cities. Imagine if the Death Eaters attacked in London. The secrecy could break.”

It was the first time in his life that Harry felt anxious about the Dursleys’ safety. Now that the house in Surrey wasn’t protected anymore anyone could attack his uncle and aunt. He had to do something. Warn them.

“Or they could Obliviate everyone. So they’d forget they saw them,” said Ron.

Hermione snorted. “Obliviate? They wouldn’t need to. If they attack London, I don’t think there would be any survivors left to tell the story.”

“Malfoy’s one of them,” said Harry. “Don’t ask, I just know it,” he added.

Hermione furrowed her brows; she didn’t believe him. “You know it because of information or
because of accusation?"

“I know it. Many Slytherins are.” Probably even some students of other houses too. He didn’t want to think of a Gryffindor being a Death Eater, but then he was reminded of Pettigrew.

“I’m not surprised, with Snape above their heads all the time. He’s brainwashing them. I bet he gets inside their minds, having them worship You-Know-Who.” The snitch escaped Ron’s fingers again and Hermione caught it with an admittedly quick move.

“If Professor Dumbledore trusts him, I trust him,” she said. “Besides, he’s the best Defence teacher we’ve ever had.”

“How can you say that?” Ron exhaled. “Since he got the position he became a complete psychopath, ‘Mione! Qualification exams in the first day of the year and not even following the book! Who cares about the history of Unforgivables? That’s supposed to be in History class, not in Defence!”

“He wants us to learn, Ron.”

“Oh, come on. Tell me a single student who didn’t fail at that damned test. A single one.”

Hermione grinned apologetically, although her shoulders remained proudly squared. “I passed it. It was common knowledge. I can’t understand how so many students failed.”

“You don’t count as a normal student, Hermione. You’ve read every book in the world.”

Hermione sighed in an “I-wish-I-had” sort of way. “Harry passed it too,” she said. As much as Harry tried to pretend he didn’t notice her burning glare, he failed. He looked up from his lap to meet her questioning look.

“What?” he said. “It was common knowledge.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes and for the first time in ages, Harry blushed.

“Those of you who have read the syllabus may already know that your participation will be graded in company with your overall performance. N.E.W.T.s are closer than you think and you are expected to work hard.”

“If that’s what he has to say in September just imagine him in a few months,” Ron muttered. Harry snorted.

“The level of your engagement in class is essential; if you fail to turn in your scrolls in time, then you’d better take a look at Filch on your way out. The only future awaiting you is probably his.”

“Racist bastard. He speaks of squibs like –”

“Mister Weasley. Care to honour the rest of us with whichever undoubtedly wise brainstorm you were sharing with Mister Potter?” Ron didn’t speak. Harry looked up at Snape who wasn’t looking at him. “No? Very well. That will be ten points from Gryffindor.”

Ron grunted as Snape turned around to walk to his desk. “Take out your wands and stand up.”

Harry tried to remind himself just how happy he was before he found out that Snape was a human being with feelings, fears, and weak spots. And failed miserably at the reminder of Sirius’ death and Remus’ sacking and Voldemort’s return. He wondered if Snape ever regretted switching sides. Probably.
“Completely wrong, is this how you’ve been holding your wand all your life?”

Hermione looked at her hand confused. “This is how I was taught to hold it, sir.”

“And you call yourself a witch? This is the poorest performance I’ve ever seen.”

Harry loved Hermione too much to chuckle. He wanted to tell her that he didn’t mean it. That he didn’t know any other way of teaching but scolding and insulting. That he wasn’t really like that. Looking at Snape now, it occurred to him that Snape was exactly like that. There was no reason to prettify him or his intentions. This was him. This was how he treated people. In rare cases, when relaxed, when alone, when quiet, he behaved only slightly better than this and only for a bit. It used to be enough.

Harry wasn’t sure if it was anymore.

Looking up at him, Harry was unable to see a professor anymore. The authority had been erased long ago. The title had become meaningless. He’d never know this man. But in his own way, he already knew him. And maybe this was the itchy part. Snape never wanted people to understand him. It was part of his job. His real job.

When the class ended, Harry couldn’t recall having learnt anything. He could honestly admit to himself that he hadn’t paid attention at all. Not that it mattered. Most likely he was going to fail the class anyway. It was meant for the students to fail it. He’d laugh, were he alone. Or he’d have a breakdown. It was funny how everybody kept thinking Harry was going to have a breakdown and how this never happened. He’d ended up thinking of himself as weak just because everybody else did. Right now, he didn’t think he was weak. Those who couldn’t see it weren’t looking hard enough.

Harry put his wand down and shoved his book back in his bag. His classmates leaving, Harry murmured to Ron some excuse of catching up latter, and stayed. He had almost given up hope that Snape was going to even acknowledge his existence when Snape talked. “You will be sitting alone from now on. I do not permit chattering in my class and you distract the other students on purpose. Five points from Gryffindor for allowing Mister Weasley to babble at you throughout my lesson.”

“What the hell?”

“Another five.”

“What is that supposed to mean? I didn’t distract anyone. How it that my fault now?”

“I’m not discussing it with you, Mister Potter. I’m informing you of my decisions. The class is dismissed, you may go.”

“Just shut up,” Harry muttered as he got up to close his backpack.

“I beg your pardon?”

Harry sighed. The I’m tired of your shit was dangerously close to the tip of his tongue. “You’re being ridiculous.” He kept his grin back at how this was Snape’s line and how Harry had managed to use it and be right about it. “What am I supposed to do now? Call you professor and apologise?” Despite his anger, he felt a faint smile forming on his face. He restrained it.

“The majority of what you are supposed to do is rubbish, Mister Potter. Get out.”

“I told Dumbledore I don’t want our private lessons to continue anymore. He agreed.” There was a
pause at that; it broke something harsh between them and left him completely exposed all over again. Harry almost regretted saying it. He didn’t want to inform Snape like this. If at all. He’d hear it from Dumbledore anyway.

Snape collected his own things and pushed them at the far end of a drawer. He cleaned the board and it occurred to Harry that Snape was waiting for the next class to come. “Get out.”

Harry swung his backpack up onto his shoulder and nodded his head in a “see-you-soon” motion he barely believed himself. “Take care.”
Ron sank into the armchair by the fire and pulled off his tie; Harry dropped his bag and took a seat on the floor next to Neville. The rest of the boys were already in the middle of a heated conversation; it had been some time since Harry joined them for their casual chats in the Common Room. The day had been surprisingly hot, and running back from the Astronomy Tower had left him breathless and sweating.

“What’s up?” he asked as he pushed his fringe away from his eyes.

“Dean has a girlfriend,” Neville announced.

“Dean always has a girlfriend,” Harry said. "So?"

“When in Merlin’s balls did I say she’s my girlfriend, Neville?” Dean rolled his eyes. “You weren’t listening.”

“They had sex,” Seamus explained.

Dean nodded. “It happened.”

Neville looked at Harry apologetically, a blush covering his cheeks. Ron slid from his chair and sat down too. “You had sex? In here? With whom?”

“Not in here. A few weeks ago. I was telling Seamus but then Neville heard us and he wanted to hear the story too.”

“Well, go on, then,” Ron said as he pulled a pillow to his lap.

“Again?” Dean pretended to be bothered, but the smile on his face betrayed just how willing he was to share the details. “Alright. So. She was working at this pub in Bayswater and my brother took me there, you know, to spend some time together and such. The barwoman fell in love with me." In all honesty, Harry didn't know if he should trust that Dean wasn't making it all up. He dared a meaningful look at Ron who gave him a halfhearted shrug.

“Who old was she?” Neville asked.

“Late twenties, I think. She began with the usual small talk and then she wanted me to give her my telephone number but I couldn't risk my mom answering the phone, so I told her to meet up with me the next day, and she agreed. So the next day, it happened.”

Neville gaped. Seamus sniggered. Harry was numbly surprised to realise that he didn't care. He couldn’t see himself having sex anytime soon. If ever. Straight people had no problem building up their healthy and happy relationships. Harry could not recall having ever seen a gay couple in his life. Perhaps, for people like him, it would always have to be just about isolation. Perhaps it was stupid to dream of anything more.

Harry listened through the details of how exactly “it” happened and how Dean pretended to know how to wear a condom although he miserably failed to put it on.
“I almost kissed Hermione this summer,” Ron said after Dean had finished. “She stayed over for a few days before we came back and one night she helped me clean the kitchen. I was too close, but I didn’t.” He chuckled. “I was terrified she’d have kittens.”

“Why didn’t you do it, mate?” Seamus asked. "You don't really think she spends all this time with you because you're besties, do you?"

“I honestly don’t know.”

“You hadn’t told me that,” muttered Harry, but Ron didn’t hear him.

“She’s not like that. She could have slapped me,” Ron said. “I don’t know what got into me.”

“Coward,” said Dean as he punched him lightly on the arm.

Ron shook his head and smiled. “I think I respect her too much to ever do it.”

Seamus laughed cheerfully. “Either that or you're too afraid of her teeth.”

“Ron!” Hermione’s voice interrupted their chat. She stopped by the Fat Lady’s portrait to unzip her backpack and then she approached them. “Here you are. I was looking for you. You have my Transfiguration notebook, I need it back.”

Harry didn’t think he’d ever noticed how differently Ron behaved when she was around. It wasn’t always like that; but as the years went by, something different took over. He wasn’t exactly shy – but certainly not as relaxed as he was when he was with the boys. They used to feel free to be themselves when with each other, the three of them; to say everything they thought of and go through all their battles together. He couldn’t remember when things got complicated.

“What, now? I haven’t – you know.”

Hermione sighed. “I’m going to the library to study. You can ‘you know’ there with me if you must. I need the notebook.”

Ron pulled himself up and yawned. “Why not do this tomorrow, Hermione?”

“Because. Come on. Harry, are you coming?”

Harry shook his head. If the ‘you know’ was copying all of her notes to make them look like they were Ron’s, it’d take all evening. “No, it’s okay. I’ll see you later.”

“What about you?” Dean asked Harry once Ron and Hermione were gone.

“What about me?” Harry felt his smile fade as he understood what the question was about.

“For God's sake, Dean,” muttered Seamus under his breath, although Harry could hear him perfectly well. He felt stupidly exposed without Ron and Hermione. Seamus glared sideways at Dean in a way that communicated that Harry should be probably kept out of the conversation.

“Right. Sorry,” Dean said to him, grinning. His eyes didn’t focus on him.

“Harry is a good person,” intervened Neville. The confidence in his voice didn’t soothe Harry’s annoyance.

“Obviously, Neville,” said Seamus. “Harry, no offence. We're cool, right?”
Harry nodded. Cool. Of course they were. "I wouldn't share anything with you even if you wanted me to, Seamus. No offence."

"There are things to share?" Dean exclaimed. "What the hell Harry."

"Just because you... announced it it doesn't mean you can't take it back," Seamus went on. "I mean it did make sense at first, but it was obviously a phase, right?"

It wasn't the fact that he felt naked, completely exposed or betrayed; it was something else that made the lump in his throat hurt. "What do you mean it made sense?"

"You just need to solve this out. It's disgusting to even think about it, you're better than that. You shouldn't be doing this to yourself."

"What do you mean it made sense Seamus?"

"You know what I mean."

"And yet I don't."

"You wouldn't be calling yourself -- gay -- if you... look, dad says - boys need a father. I know it's not your fault, we all love you, it's just a matter of guidance--"

Perhaps it was the fact that Neville grabbed his robes and pulled him back; perhaps it was that he himself was for a second terrified of his own anger. Someone pulled him off Seamus and only then he stopped punching him, not even remembering when he'd started, not knowing when the tears on his face firstly appeared or why they were even there.

"Well," Professor McGonagall began. "You intend to explain?"

On one chair, Harry was tightly clenching his fists, arms crossed over his chest, leg shaking, eyes on the floor. On the other chair, Seamus was pressing a folded napkin over his face.

"Mister Potter. Is it true that you attacked mister Finnigan?"

"He did not," Seamus interrupted.

"Were you not attacked in front of..." McGonagall turned a page on her notebook, "seven other students who can confirm that they saw mister Potter attack you?"

"No."

"Mister Potter, would you be interested in kindly offering an insight to the course of events that led to your classmate's swollen face?"

"I punched him."

"And why did you do that?"

Silence. McGonagall sighed. "How do you expect me to help you if you do not share the problem? This behaviour has never been and never will be acceptable in Gryffindor. We do not use violence to resolve our disagreements. Mister Potter, you and your friends have broken more rules than I can count, and yet this may be the only incident I completely fail to justify."

"I insulted him first. I'm sorry," Seamus said. "I'm really sorry."
McGonagall stared at his covered eye. "Obviously."

Harry looked away. "You will have to forgive me, mister Potter, if I fail to regard insulting to be a satisfying excuse for physically attacking another student. I will have to remove points for the behaviour of the both of you. It is of little importance, who began, who insulted whom, and who is sorry. Regretfully -- fifty points from Gryffindor. You have both shamed your House, tonight. It is high time you learn to coexist respectfully despite your differences."

Harry didn't bother explaining. At least he knew someone who'd be thrilled with Gryffindor's lost points.

“Very well. Ten points to Slytherin.”

Severus waved his wand at the haunted box on his desk. It gargled loudly and vibrated angrily before stilling. “Should you ever come across a haunted item, I trust you would know better than touch it with your bare hands before examining it. History has proven the deadly consequences of stupidity many times; the curses that may possess an object vary from slightly uncomfortable to murderous. The Dark Arts are more often than not, unpredictable. Men have trusted them and men have died.”

At the corner of his vision, a continuous motion of a raised hand was distracting him.

“Sir!”

“Miss Granger. I imagine you failed to notice that I haven’t given you permission to speak. Five points from Gryffindor.”

“Sir. I have a question.”

“Is it relevant?”

“Yes sir.”

Severus motioned in a “go-on” fashion and damned his luck for this marvellous life he had been granted with.

“On page thirty five it is stated that haunted objects differ from possessed ones not only in the strength of the curse but also in the perception of it. If an object is possessed by a ghost, or, as the example on page thirty six demonstrates, the soul of a dead person, does the object carry a living soul or is it just a fragment of it, like ghosts and portraits?”

Severus sneered and Granger looked at him expectantly. He had once promised himself to someday resign. His own personal masochism barely allowed him to take control of the situation just now. Little idiots interrupted his teaching and blurted out sophisticated bullshit which he was obviously going to explain in the future lessons anyway.

“Miss Granger. We are on page thirty one. If you cannot follow the class’s flow I must ask you to leave. Make the mistake to interrupt me again and I’ll personally see that you’re never welcome in my class again. Page thirty one. All of you.”

He was much too used to this to be annoyed. He chose the dignified route of continuing his speech. It occurred to him that the blasted boy was not paying attention and for the millionth time this week he cursed himself for noticing. He reasoned himself by remembering that he'd always kept an eye on Potter anyway. This shouldn't seem any different. It somehow was.
His hate for the boy had increased, it seemed. If Potter thought he could get away by sleeping in his
class, he’d been terribly mistaken. Then again, he was startled at the sudden realisation that he did
not dare to provoke the boy in front of others. A quarrel with anyone as troubled as Potter was not
exactly desirable. The boy’s tongue had a dangerous arrogance for one to tease.

Not that Severus was afraid of it.

He tapped his quill at Potter’s desk twice and Potter looked up startled. Hopefully, Severus’ eyes
communicated nothing. He already knew that Potter wasn’t going to pay attention, but he
nevertheless made an effort to behave professionally. It occurred to him that Potter had yet to shave
his face this week. It also occurred to him that this was entirely irrelevant.

He placed his book on the desk and coughed back the venomous resentment that threatened to take
over. The nonsensical anger that the Dark Lord’s request invoked had been carefully packed away
for overall examination when alone. The fact that both the Dark Lord and Dumbledore agreed to this
murder had ceased maddening him not so long ago, and the lack of proper planning from his part did
nothing to calm his burning conscience.

“Miss Parkinson,” he snapped. “Am I interrupting your socialising back there?”

“I’m sorry, sir. He just asked me if I had a second quill.”

Severus glared for a moment before diving into the task of explaining how a haunted item could be
destroyed. A far better lesson would be to psychoanalyse the intelligence of great wizards playing
with haunted items like an infant would. Come to think of it, he should write a book. The true faces
of Heroes, he would name it. Chapter one: the stupidity of dying by septicaemia and madness.
Chapter two: Boys who survived the killing curse only to dream about cocks.

It would certainly cause some conflict.

“Miss Parkinson!” Pansy giggled as she tried to maintain her seriousness. Right next to her, Draco
didn’t look as sullen as one would have expected. “Get out. The both of you. Ten points from
Slytherin.”

At the dumbstruck look on their faces he approached their desk and slammed his hand down. “Out!”

They bolted up simultaneously. Just before slamming the door behind them, Draco gave him a filthy
look, looking betrayed.

“That will teach you to not take advantage of tolerance,” he snarled to the rest of the students. His
mark burned him and he gritted his teeth against the pain. Harry had fallen asleep on his desk again.
Had he even been sleeping at nights? His sleeping during classes had become a matter of discussion
amongst his colleagues last year but he’d never done it in Severus’ class until now.

He didn’t know what bothered him more. Was it the fact that he could jump up from a vision and
have all his classmates hear him screaming the Dark Lord’s name or was it the fact that Harry did not
care anymore?

You wanted him to not care.

Of course he did.

He was stunned to get his wishes come true for once in his otherwise miserable life. It struck him that
strange things conspired when one tried to cheat fate.
Severus thankfully believed he did not have one.

“Come in, Severus. You look exhausted.”

Severus glared hard as he kneeled before Dumbledore’s armchair. He did not flinch as Dumbledore pulled up his robe sleeve with a trembling hand. The curse’s effect was stable. “Does it hurt?”

“Not much. My fingers were rather numb today.”

“Clench them.” He gripped at Dumbledore’s wrist and squeezed. “Can you feel this?”

Dumbledore shook his head, not looking much concerned about it. “I’m afraid not.”

Severus sighed as he drew his wand and muttered a few spells. His stomach dropped at the not so thrilling prospect of becoming the healer of his soon to be victim. He fixed his jaw after every spell and made a silent promise to himself to never distrust his better sense again. For the first time, he inwardly envied his father’s life.

“How long do I have?”

“I don’t know, how long does Harry have?” Severus raised a brow.

Dumbledore smiled. “More than I do, certainly.”

“Tch.” His commitment to doing the right thing was suddenly choking him. He hid his disgust under another healing spell. “Your bloodstream doesn’t reach your fingertips. You will begin to experience sharp pain soon. You should consider having your fingers mutilated.”

“And be unable to play the piano? What a shame.” Severus winced and Dumbledore chuckled. He opened his mouth to retort but stopped when Dumbledore placed a hand on his shoulder. “I have given Harry a task. You must see to his protection until this task is finished.”

“How will I know when it's finished?”

“Voldemort will keep his pet close. He’ll fear for her life.”

Was the snake a Horcrux? “And then you wish me to tell Harry the truth.”

“Yes.”

Severus nodded. “You don’t have a fever but you might feel weaker as the days go by. If you experience dizziness summon me immediately.”

“Has young Draco thought of anything interesting lately, perhaps?”

“He has not. The Dark Lord refused to save his father’s skin and I suspect only after Hogwarts’ fall Lucius might have a chance to break free. On the other hand, I have thought of something.”

“To break the wards?”

“To get you out of them. Hogsmeade.”

“Brilliant idea, Severus. A Hogsmeade weekend. Of course, yes.” The determination in Dumbledore’s voice froze Severus’ heart and he pushed back his feelings to focus on business. “Less students are going to be in danger too, that way,” Dumbledore added. “When?”
Never, preferably.

But it wasn’t a real question, was it?

“I am going to inform the Dark Lord of my idea. You surely do not expect me to propose to him an attack.”

Dumbledore didn't answer. Severus pushed the tip of his wand to a vein on Dumbledore’s wrist and muttered another spell. “So... I imagine the task you gave Harry will require his presence elsewhere.”

"That is correct.”

"And how am I to protect him if he’s not here?"

“You’ll find a way, Severus. I trust you.”

“If you told me what you have asked of him – I am skilful, I can help him, he doesn’t have to do it alone –”

“Do you trust me?”

“Snatchers are everywhere – let alone the Death Eaters, everybody is being recruited, my mark... burns all the time. He doesn’t stand a chance out there alone. It'd be suicide.”

“Do you trust me?”

Severus stared. His stomach kicked painfully.

Yes, my Lord, would probably be the wrong answer.

“Do you trust me?”

Severus stared. His stomach kicked painfully. Yes, my Lord, would probably be the wrong answer. “I trust you,” he said.

“Fuck!”

The familiar searing pain attacked him suddenly and his muscles quivered.

“Harry? What’s wrong?”

Harry rolled on his belly and buried his head deeper in the pillow. He clutched at the blanket tightly. He felt a hand on his back as Ron tried to straighten him up. “Is it your scar?”

Harry nodded, the pain blurring his vision. He growled again and punched the pillow furiously. “It never stops anymore!” he shouted. He dug his nails in his forehead and panted harshly. When the pain subsided, he gave himself a moment and then he rolled on his back, pressing the heels of his palms to his eyes.

“Alright, mate?”

Harry grunted. He wasn’t sure how he was going to explain the fear he felt every time his scar hurt. “It’s just – he’s not angry anymore. He’s – I think he’s happy. Sort of.”

Satisfied, was the right word. He put on his glasses and blinked into focus - then he let out a sigh of relief and threw his head back to the pillow. “Do you ever have the kind of nightmares where you remember nothing about them when you wake up but the terror remains?”

Ron tilted his head as he thought it over. “Once I dreamt of a dinosaur that wanted to eat mum, and as it was chasing us I discovered that the dinosaur was actually Fred, but he had transformed into a dinosaur to scare me, and his real wish was to eat me,” he said. “I don’t remember the end of the
dream but it scarred me.”

Harry snorted. “I’m sure it did, Ron.”

Ron yawned as he slumped back to his own bed. “Are you going to be fine?”

“Yeah. Sorry I woke you up.”

Ron didn’t answer and soon he was snoring.

Hours later, Harry was almost asleep again, and reality seemed but an illusion; the pain of Voldemort being somewhere out there, killing, plotting, raging, barely reached him. Everybody dies, he thought, and the goal was not to live forever. People were afraid of themselves, of their own reality – the one they had built and inhabited and customised with their personal terrors and wishes. Thinking of something did not make it true. Wishing for something would not make it happen. Harry had learnt that lesson too well over the last year.

There would be pain. Despair, war, and who knew what else. But Voldemort was not going to win. Harry promised that to himself as he drifted again to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Some (probably unnecessary) inside information:

The reason I named this chapter "Families" is because I felt like there was a balance shifting aspect in every family and House in this chapter, somehow all happening at once. McGonagall had to take points from her own house, and was also disappointed in her own students. Then Snape removed points from Slytherin as well because Pansy and Draco were interrupting the lesson. It was also the fact that even after all the problems they went through, Ron and Harry ended up being friends again, and Ron was undoubtedly the first decent family Harry ever had. At the same time Ron's friendship with Hermione is slowly shifting and becoming something else. Even the fact that Harry's sexuality was wrongfully "blamed" on his not having parents was a reference to family ties too. I didn't do any of this intentionally, I realised it just now while I was trying to come up with a chapter title, and I thought it'd be fitting.
There was nothing like the scam of obedience to numb the mind.

Severus sealed the bottle of a healing potion he had brewed for Dumbledore and left to wash his hands.

He wondered, perhaps, if Severus was actually meant to secretly discover everything he had over the past months about the horcruxes. Perhaps it wasn’t really a secret. It appeared as though he had been given the smallest bits of information he could get, if only to play his part right. It took him a moment to thoroughly clear his mind and when he did he cursed himself for even bothering.

He somehow finished his endless work and made it to his chambers; the cold spread across his skin as he undressed and he mentally applauded himself for not having lost his nerve since the term started. Especially with the boy slumping on his desk during classes. Hopefully a few more detentions with Filch would teach him that he wasn’t going to continue like this.

Resting back against the pillows that felt oddly uncomfortable, he shot a hard glare at his left forearm and shut his eyes. The taunting in his mind never stopped and his breath was caught at the new sharp pain on his mark. The dubiously protective instinct he had senselessly developed towards Harry was now slowly turning into a hungry beast that yearned for all the negative interaction they had established since they first met. Severus looked forward to it.

In the dim light of the room, all coming from a single torch, he felt completely ridiculous for denying himself sleep so he could think of this. He should have gone to Dumbledore. After the very first time he noticed the boy developing this strange bond with him. He should have gone to Dumbledore and stopped it. But he hadn’t noticed until it was too late.

Neither Dumbledore nor the Dark Lord would have been able to save him from this. Why was he even thinking of this now? To become present, meant accepting the risk of absence. The absence of Harry now should be pleasant.

It is, he thought stubbornly. He shook his head as though trying to shoo away an irritating fly. Unimportant things were occupying his mind too much lately. He had helped Harry because he was asked to. He’d held back his rage and pretended to be kind to the boy because sentimental breakdowns disgusted him and he was entirely unwilling to witness one.

He couldn’t decide whether the last part was true or not.

He didn’t know what force compelled him to care about the fact that the boy would most assuredly witness him murder the last father figure he had left in the world, but he did. He stopped as he mentally watched the boy’s features falling in shock just as Severus would lower his wand. Not that Harry’s feelings mattered. They never did.

Another dead Potter and another funeral Severus wouldn’t be welcome to attend to. He suspected that Harry had yet to realise how important to the world he was. Symbols never died. It was the trace people left behind after they were gone. Harry’s memory would be a symbol, whether they won the war or not.

What am I going to do with a symbol? He bitterly thought. He looked at the Dark Mark again. He snorted before tugging to pull down his sleeve.

Carry it on him, he supposed.
Severus leaned against his desk, folded his arms, and stared at Potter. Loath as he was to admit it, he didn’t know what to do with the boy anymore. The class was dismissed five minutes ago; nevertheless, Harry didn’t seem willing to leave. He silently sat where he was, staring at the book laying open before him, his backpack on the chair his friend was previously occupying. Expected as it’d be of Severus to remind Harry that the class had been dismissed and he should be leaving, it occurred to him that repeating the same vicious circle of pointless conversations would only waste his time and have him damn himself for even trying to take the boy seriously.

He vaguely wondered how he managed such self-composure under the most immature of situations and he stopped when he did not recognise the look in the green eyes. “Yes?”

“I’ve got a question.”

“Go ahead.”

“What you said about shielding a place with protection charms… I don’t understand if it has to do with who owns a place or who lives in it –”

“You may ask this again next time,” Severus cut him short and averted his eyes from the boy to check the time. He mentally slapped himself for believing Harry was going to ask anything important or even relevant.

Relevant to what?

Harry looked up long enough to certainly see the warning glare Severus gave him.

“Sir,” the boy’s voice was steady. It startled him. Harry took a deep breath and for a moment Severus could see the fury in his eyes. “I’m only asking because you said you will examine us. The book doesn’t explain it very well. Please.”

Severus was torn between believing that the little brat was being honest and being cautious to avoid falling into yet another trap. The damned boy never wavered. He felt himself going pale at the possibility of making peace with Harry and having to comfort him all over again for demons that were not going to go away. A part of himself insisted that being professional did not include avoiding problematic students. Another part threatened to insist on torturous suicide should he go near the boy again. A shiver ran through him as he approached the desk and pushed the backpack to the floor. He sat next to Harry and motioned at him to start. Harry slid his book to the middle of the desk and turned a few pages.

Listening through the questions Harry had, he witnessed himself nodding stupidly and briefly going through clarifications in between. Harry never raised his voice as he talked; Severus could tell by his expression that he had no intention of leading the subject elsewhere.

Harry wasn’t aware of his exquisite future, but he was certainly aware of his pathetic present. Why he was choosing to waste his break by talking to Severus instead of gossiping with his friends was beyond him. But then again, wasn’t this madness always beyond any sense?

Severus restrained himself from making a nasty remark. “Advanced magic shouldn’t worry you yet.”

Harry’s eyes found his; Severus turned his attention back to the book and nodded at Harry to pay attention. “If you cast a spell while at the same time fearing it’s going to be weak, or not exactly the spell you wished it’d be, it will be doomed to fail. Exactly like conjuring a Patronus, or casting an unforgivable. You need to mean it.”
“So if I want to hide a secret and I’ve no one to make my secret keeper, what do I do?” Harry tilted his head.

“If you have no one to trust enough to keep your secret and you have no one in your life to care to do so?”

Harry nodded.

“Then you don’t need to hide it. No one cares.”

A rather large brick settled in Severus’ stomach and he resisted the urge to flee the scene. Harry nodded again and Severus discovered that he weighted a million pounds and was unable to stand up.

His last words scurried across his mind and he maliciously reminded himself that only recently they didn’t have to starve the elephant in the room to exchange a couple of words. The distance they had established since the beginning of the year seemed annoyingly meaningless now.

As much as Severus chased away these familiar urges, his sitting here felt normal to him. To sacrifice his own fifteen-minute break between classes and postpone relieving his bladder for another hour so he could stupidly watch Potter express his sudden desire for knowledge was surreal, and most importantly, old.

He fixed his expression before giving Harry’s book back to him. “Is that all?”

Harry nodded.

“Hogwarts is protected by numerous ancient spells, Severus. That shouldn’t worry you for now.”

“And what about… after?”

“The magic of the castle will grow stronger once the attack begins. I am not worried about the castle itself, but for the students. Protect them. Make sure they don’t suffer.”

“Shouldn’t we hide the muggle-borns?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “It would be dangerous. And it would raise suspicions.”

Severus cleared his throat and looked at the Hogwarts map laying on the table. He trailed a finger upon it. “The boy owns a bewitched map. His father’s, undoubtedly. It could be used as a tracker.”

Dumbledore seemed to consider that. Severus’ heart raced through the ways of preparing everything in time and he shifted impatiently. He could feel Dumbledore’s eyes examining his every movement. “We can’t… It is crucial for Harry to keep it. The portraits will remain loyal to you, they will guide you and inform you of everything that happens in the castle.”

“The portraits! They’d never trust me. You leave me no options, no way to escape should my cover gets blown and I don’t even have a say to any of this. Let me take his map.” He pressed his finger against the Slytherin common room on the regular map and tapped. “I need to know what they’re up to.”

“Do you need a bewitched map to know what your own students do, Severus?”

Severus pressed his lips stubbornly. To be trapped within a castle that would most likely compress until it choked him was not his ideal way of dying.
“Some rooms in my chambers are permanently locked. They are to remain that way. You will have to move in nevertheless; the Headmaster cannot sleep in the dungeons.”

Dumbledore smiled fondly, but Severus could see the remorse behind it.

“Is that all you have to say?” When a long moment passed, Severus snapped. “How do you expect me to do what I’m told when I barely know what the plan is? Am I supposed to read your mind? Study the stars for clues?”

“Severus…”

“No. Perhaps you take too much for granted, Dumbledore. Perhaps I don’t want to do this anymore.”

He only realised he had jumped up from his chair when he heard it clang against the floor. His insides had gone cold. This was exactly the conversation he had expected when he came here this evening. It was unbearable all the same.

“Sit down.”

Indeed. Severus picked up the chair and slumped back to it. The man was not going to tell him anything. He was fed up with this shite that was supposed to be loyalty when it was merely submission. He had to promise to stay here and make sure the world would not fall apart after Dumbledore’s death.

But it would.

He was suddenly attacked by the memory of a body sleeping next to him, pressed against him. The steady breath warming the side of his neck and his arm going numb from the weight on it. He was startled by the absurdity to recall such a memory here, now. He shook it away and dragged the map closer. “What is this?”

“You know what this is, Severus.”

“Is it still accessible, then?” he asked, fixing his jaw. “You lied to me.” Not that it surprised him. But to leave the tunnel open for anyone to use after all these years, to endanger people’s lives like this – “You told me it was pulled down.”

“You were a student, and a very curious one. I wouldn’t want you to put yourself or anyone else in danger by trying to figure out where Remus was going.”

He knew what Remus was doing. He knew all along. Suspected even before Potter and Black attempted to murder him. And after twenty years, the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack was still reachable, for anyone to use and run away to during the night. No wonder no one cared when Severus insisted countless times through the years that Harry did now follow the rules. Apparently no one in this school was meant to.

“And Minerva?”

“She knows nothing. We’ll keep it that way.”

“The rest of the Order?”

“No one must know, Severus. Especially Harry.”

Severus nodded.
“Voldemort will undoubtedly desire to bring new teachers once the school has been taken over; I expect you to do everything in your power to protect the current staff. If sacrifices have to be made, make them. The children must be your only priority.”

He was aware he had been nodding all along when Dumbledore passed him an envelope.

“These are some things Aberforth may need to know should you have to prove to him that you are still loyal to me. You are not to give him this unless things have gone terribly wrong.”

Severus took the envelope and Dumbledore stopped him. “Don’t open it. It’s for him.”

“What about Grimmauld Place?”

“The Order will need it. Don’t make them have to change their location.”

“I’ll stay away.”

“Thank you, Severus.”

A dark bony hand covered his own and squeezed lightly. Despite everything, Severus appreciated it. He looked at their connected hands with a melancholy that was suddenly achingly heavy. For a moment, he held his breath. He swallowed back a bile and rose from his chair, pulling his hand away.

Dumbledore stood; Severus did too. It was Dumbledore the one who came closer, so close Severus thought they would hug, but it never happened.

“Goodnight, Severus. Thank you.”

It was a pleasure meeting you, then. You’ve been my only friend. “Goodnight.”

At the cold silence of the corridor, Severus leaned against a wall and carefully spelled the letter open. Inside there was nothing but a single piece of paper.

I’ve found it, my brother. Remember how you insisted that it didn’t exist? I’ve found it. And yet! It didn’t work. I thought — I hoped — that it would bring her back. What a foolish old man I am! How silly of me! Your prediction that someday I was going to pay, especially for this, was right. She’s not coming back. But thankfully, I shall meet her soon.

AD

Confused, Severus read it twice, and then a third time. It didn’t make sense. Shaking his head in annoyance for yet another thing he was not aware of, he put it back in the envelope and closed it shut.
Severus learned long ago that old sins always came home to roost. Bonds were made of material solid, and the remorse alone was too insignificant to dismiss the demons inhabiting one’s soul. In times like these, only the traitors and the lucky ones survived.

The rest of them would have to kindly fuck themselves. Or switch sides. Because in time like these, people were willing to do what they normally wouldn’t.

And so in times like these, Severus always chose to be wasted.

One thing was always certain: Severus’ sins never gave up on him.

So, when he heard a knock on his door, just a bit after midnight, he wasn’t surprised. And however habitual it was, he couldn’t help but wonder as he opened the door and glared at the incredulous brat looking up at him confidently.

“You.” His astonishment lasted a moment; then, it was all natural again. “What do you want?”

“Can I come in?” Damn him. Somehow this was Severus’ fault.

“What for?”

“Can I come in first?” Unlikely. Ironic how Harry chose this particular night for his new debut, though.

Severus was deranged at what the mechanisms people cruelly called fate withheld. Right now, he was sure a math problem was hiding behind it. One he wouldn’t care to solve even if he had the time.

“Look, even if you’re going to take points or report me. Just for my bothering to walk all the way down here you should at least hear me out first.”

He should not do a goddamn fucking thing. He had no obligations to anyone and there was not a single little reason he should do anything for Harry Potter. In this room, Severus had the right to decide and declare that nothing existed.

But Severus was not sober enough to tell him so.

Scanning the corridor with his eyes, he moved his head in a ‘get-in’ fashion and secured the door behind them.

Harry needn’t be told where to sit. He looked up nervously from the couch and Severus refused to sneer at the hypocritical modesty Harry had grown to show off over the past month.

He had come back. Severus would have grunted were he not afraid a shit ton of whiskey would emerge from his mouth.

Harry eyed the bottles on the table, but didn’t comment on them. For his own good. Severus returned to the couch and leaned back, waiting for the next performance of vain terrors to begin.

“Talk.”

“Look, I wouldn’t have annoyed you if it wasn’t important. I promise, this is the last time I’m
knocking on your door. I just want to tell you a few things and then I won’t bother you again.”

Severus nodded impatiently for him to continue. He mentally crossed his fingers, hoping he would sober up before dawn. Otherwise he would have to explain to Dumbledore that he had failed to kill him for he had gotten pissed while trying to forget that he was going to.

It occurred to him that the boy was talking and he tried to catch up. Too late.

“…So, for that, I’m sorry.”

He waited for a few moments and then realised that he had probably missed the whole part of what seemed to be a rather extended apology. Harry looked at him expectantly and Severus was startled by his sudden impulse to laugh. He successfully bit it down, watching Harry struggle to figure out what Severus was thinking about the matter.

Sadism wasn’t that bad, after all. And as he couldn’t bring himself to care enough to request a repetition of the speech, he grunted. “Is that all?”

“You’re drunk, aren’t you?”

Not nearly enough. A sharp breath escaped him and he helplessly looked around for a glass to avoid drinking straight from the bottle as he’d been doing all night.

“I thought you’d at least say something.”

“Five points from everywhere. There. Get lost.”

“Fine. I don’t suppose anything I say ever matters to you, but you should get help. You can’t continue like this. You’re drinking too much. You’re becoming exactly what you say you despise.”

_No shit. “Is that all, Potter?”_

“No, not really.” Bugger. This couldn’t get worse, could it? “To be honest... the reason I came is to say goodbye.” Or it could.

“Why, are you leaving?” There was a sharp pain on Severus’ temple and he felt the dizziness overtake him. He noticed his bottle being suspiciously out of reach again, but he couldn’t recall Harry moving it.

“I came to end this. To tell you you can live in peace now, you don’t have to worry. I’ll stay away. It just felt like — I had to tell you. I should have never pushed you, and I — I didn’t understand. I shouldn’t have. I have this stupid habit, right? Following my heart. And yet all I’ve accomplished is lengthen the list of people who died because they were standing in the way to me. I understand why you did everything you did, I understand you made a promise to protect me, but if you care, even a little bit, I want you to stop protecting me.”

Fumbling through his cloak, he fished out a folded piece of paper. It was a Daily Prophet page, and Severus could guess exactly which one. _Death Eater Attack Targets Muggles._

“If anything happens to you…” Harry shook his head. “I’ll leave you alone. I can’t risk anything happening to anyone again because of me, not if I can stop it. So please stop trying to protect me or to look after me, and stay away too.”

Teenage drama had suddenly gotten too much. “Get out of here, for God’s sake.”
He clumped his mouth shut just in time to stop his rage and immediately realised he needed to vomit. The boy was still somehow talking, so Severus motioned at him to go and hurried to his bedroom to reach his private bathroom. He banged the door close and collapsed next to the toilet; closing his eyes was pretty much another rollercoaster to hell.

_I came to say goodbye. To tell you to stop protecting me._ Lies. He wasn’t here for that. He wasn’t here for any of these absurdities. He’d have visited during his office hours if that was ever the case. His stomach contracted so violently he spat blood too; he rested his elbows on the toilet lid and breathed hard.

It wasn’t strange that Harry had wormed his way into these rooms again. But it was unnerving. Where was the Gryffindor honesty now? Crouched behind goodbyes. Dumbledore hadn’t accepted to see him earlier either.

Severus wanted to talk to him — about what, he didn’t know – just one more time, one last time — but apparently Dumbledore didn’t find it necessary. So this was it. He had nothing to care about losing anymore. And he would never talk to Dumbledore again. He would never talk to this foolish boy again either.

He washed his face and mouth, letting the cold water sober him up as he fumbled through his cabinet for any potion that would mend the vertigo. When he was sure he could balance his weight again, he walked to his bedroom, only to find Harry waiting for him.

“Why are you still here?”

“Are you feeling sick? What’s wrong?”

“Most things, I believe.”

“Severus.”

“Why are you here, Harry?”

“I told you. I came to ask you —”

“Liar.” Harry was taken aback at that, and Severus crossed the distance between them slowly. “Why are you really here? What the hell do you want from me?”

“Right. I should leave you alone.”

Severus grabbed his arm before he could reach the door. “You should have left me alone years ago. I believe it’s a little too late now.”

His last thread of self-control snapped. Severus leaned down. His throat burned, and he moved so fast that he hardly had time to close his eyes before pulling Harry close and kissing him until he thought he was going to die.

When they broke apart again, it was only for a moment. He pulled Harry to him again and felt him yield a little under the shock. He mentally sneered at the warmth spreading inside him as Harry moaned against his mouth. _You. You have caused to my life complete and utterly chaos_, he distantly thought as all his doubts trailed down to nothing and his hand locked at Harry’s nape.

In the thunderous silence of the dimly lit room, Harry grunted in frustration against his mouth and Severus hurried to continue the kiss, pushing him back to the bed and then pinning him down with his own body.
A hand pushed hard against his chest and Severus squeezed at the wrist firmly, stilling it. When Harry failed to free his hand, he broke the kiss and glared up darkly. “You’re drunk.”

“I’m drunk. I’m stupid. I’m happy. I love you,” Severus murmured, hoping Harry would remember those were his words.

Finally, Harry yanked his hand away; he pushed Severus aside and straddled him, kissing back. His hushed moans struggled to come out, and Severus raised his arms to hold him close again.

Looking back, Severus could safely say that he had never lived. From now on, his life was doomed to be as miserable and futile as it had been until now. He didn’t have time. If he was to live, to get a glimpse of what life was, what freedom was, this was his only chance.

He kissed Harry’s neck and bit down hard, digging his teeth into random spots of skin as his tongue darted out to taste it. Harry grasped a handful of his hair and pulled. It was the taste of nemesis, he was sure. Harry’s temporary state of embarrassment faded too soon, and Severus allowed himself to abandon every resistance as Harry’s hands worked on the buttons of his shirt.

He couldn’t bring himself to care of what was supposed to happen next. Hurrying to pretend that nothing ever happened, Severus had never noticed how relaxed Harry’s face seemed when flushed like that.

His hand dropped to Harry’s leg, stroking from knee to inner thigh and back. Somehow, this wasn’t new to him. A strange form of déjà vu, or of being close to a truth that could not be ignored anymore. What that truth was, he didn’t know. He figured that he didn’t mind. It fitted him right to never actually grasp reality until it was gone, and this shouldn’t be any different.

His tongue stopped moving as he felt Harry’s tentative fingers press against his cock over his trousers. Severus hummed softly as Harry kneeled up to hurriedly unzip his own jeans. He avoided Severus’ eyes, and Severus couldn’t blame him. Eye contact now would bring realisation.

Fooling themselves that it wasn’t already there was their only analgesic. Harry pulled his tee shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor. Severus adjusted his pillows and rested back again, surrendering; soft lips were sucking on his collarbone as a hand was finding its way to his cock again. Severus’s throat gave an involuntary moan of approval. Madness, it was. Wrong. Good. Absolutely forbidden.

Harry unbuckled Severus’ trousers slowly, loosing his belt and moving on to the buttons. Severus spread his fingers over Harry’s naked waist and kept kissing him deeply; the skin felt perfect against his palms. The pressure of Harry’s stomach against his, the low groans as Severus’s fingers gripped tightly on Harry’s back - everything was divine. A sudden feeling of self-loathing and a contradicting feeling of anticipation came to Severus at the fact that this was actually happening. The self-loathing was quickly pulled out of him with a grunt. The anticipation consumed him as Harry slipped his hand into his shorts.

The affection between two human beings couldn’t be measured by the number of words they had exchanged. It is the war that bonds men like a magnet. The function of this very moment, was to not exchange a word; for whoever said that yesterday was history and tomorrow was a fantasy had obviously not seen his past cruelly repeating itself day after day. To roll an immense boulder up a hill only to watch it roll back down. It is the war that repels them like a magnet too.

He wanted to stop it. He wanted to.

He couldn’t.
He kissed Harry’s jawline; his chin, his throat, his shoulders. He dug his nails wherever he could. He scratched. Hard. When Harry shifted back and unmounted him, Severus felt the heat being ripped off his body. Dropping aside his jeans and shoes, Harry leaned over him, his hand still stroking Severus’ cock. And as much as Severus wanted to stop it, he also wanted more. He merely had time to gasp and drop his head back as Harry took his cock into his mouth.

Warm and wet, Harry moved his mouth awkwardly over him, stopping several times to cough, covering his teeth quite unsuccessfully, and stroking him with a hand while swirling a tongue over the head. Severus looked down and their eyes met.

Someday, Severus would manage to explain this to himself. He’d blame the alcohol and the boy’s youthfulness. He’d blame Dumbledore and the castle. Right now, he all but pushed the boy away by the hair until his cock popped out of his mouth. Harry panted up at him, and it took a mere “come here” for Harry to quickly return to his lap, completely naked and with a horny grin across his face.

Reaching between them, he touched Harry; but Harry’s hand covered his own and stopped him. Harry pulled his hand away from his cock and guided it lower, beneath his balls. Severus’ finger brushed against his arse and he stopped. He shouldn't go that far. He shouldn't. Nevertheless. He pushed carefully, but the puckered hole was impossible to penetrate, and no matter how much he tried, only his fingertip dipped in. Barely. He pushed harder and Harry winced.

“D’you have oil?” Harry’s hoarse voice vibrated right in his mouth.

Severus hurriedly looked into his drawers; the only thing he had was a hand cream. Better than nothing, still. He opened the jar and knelt between Harry’s legs. Harry’s breath hitched as Severus’ middle finger pressed behind his balls and slowly slid deeper.

Every sound that Severus evoked to come out of Harry’s mouth fed the arousal coiling in his own abdomen. His cock dripped; he couldn’t tell if it was precome or Harry’s spit. It didn’t matter. He was swept up in this lunacy and was impatient to experience it with all his senses. Nothing else mattered.

Jolted back to some vague reality that had nothing to do with him, he applauded himself for being responsible enough to raise his wand and cast a Muffliato on the door. Dipping his fingers to the jar again hastily, he put it aside and was entirely indifferent to the damage when it slipped from the pillow and was spilled onto the mattress. His finger breached the tight entrance harder, and at Harry’s hiss against his ear he was reminded again of all the reasons he shouldn’t be doing this.

He released his anxiety into Harry’s mouth, and whatever resolve he was searching for, was suddenly nonsensical and unbearably distant. He pushed his finger deeper and he wasn’t nearly as disgusted as he should be. Harry pressed up firmly against him and pulled Severus’ shirt off his shoulders.

His lower lip being mercilessly bitten to wear off untold insecurities, Harry snatched the jar and turned it upside down over Severus’ cock. Severus briefly wondered if any of them was going to live long enough to tell the story.

To whom?

He wanted to feel concerned, but an intangible force coming from either the eternal universe or the raving excitement beneath his navel wouldn’t let him. He couldn’t speak. Or breathe. Harry pulled away from his fingers and Severus took a moment to gather enough sobriety to calm this passion that he scarcely thought was possible anymore.
He was pushed to lie on his back again; Harry straddled him again and shifted forward. His fingers spread on Severus’ chest, and a moment of complete silence followed; then Harry slowly eased himself down.

_No foolish meditations between what is right and what is wrong. For what is neither, is divine._

Severus gripped at Harry’s hips and pulled down hard, the heat and the tightness around him forcing a groan out of his throat. Harry grunted too, his thighs trembling as he tried to keep himself up. Severus’ cock head slipped in entirely and Harry hissed. He threw his head back, mouth open around some choked inaudible sound.

Severus carefully thrust up, but nothing happened. It seemed like there wasn’t any deeper to go. Harry rested his palms on either side of Severus’ face and concentrated — eyes closed, brow furrowing, fingers tangling in Severus’ hair. Very slowly, he managed to slide lower and take more.

When half his cock was in, Severus realised this was all he was going to get. Silently damning the innocence he was brazenly fracturing, he guided Harry up and down until they caught up a rhythm. A painfully slow one.

They should have focused on preparation more.

They shouldn’t be doing it so carelessly, so recklessly, without the necessary time in their hands to make it not hurt and make it not feel rushed.

They shouldn’t be doing it.

“Stop,” Severus whispered. He stillled Harry with both hands and rolled on top of him, pinning him again under him and covering his body with his own.

Spreading Harry’s legs, he positioned himself again, lining up his cock and thrusting forward into the mesmerising heat.

He tried not to be savage with the boy. To go easy on him. But in moments of insanity, one could rarely understand what he has doing. He supported his weight on his forearms and buried his nose in the curve of Harry’s neck. It wasn’t disgusting. It wasn’t sick. He tried to remember a time where this moment occupied his worst nightmares and failed.

“Severus… fuck… Severus…ah…”

Nails clawed at his back and his own breath came out in curt hisses. He felt sweat dripping from his hairline to his temper. He was only vaguely aware of Harry muttering something between his moans as his lips brushed against his throat. It sounded like “hurts,” and Severus’ heart froze. “Don’t stop,” Harry added softly.

So Severus fucked him harder, with all his might. “Is this how you want to get fucked?” he whispered. “You want it to hurt, hm? You want me to hurt you?”

It occurred to him that he was the closest person to Harry. He should’ve been aware of it by now, but he hadn’t. Hearing it wasn’t knowing it. Right now this was his only truth.

His heart pounded as he hustled off the edge of pleasure, releasing a life’s worth of sexual tension with a final thrust.

After an eternity, Severus breathed again, collapsed onto Harry, exhausted and still. He laid there panting, never wanting to move again. He wished he didn’t have to. Ridiculous. All of this, entirely
ridiculous. A hand came up to Severus’ waist and stayed there. Severus closed his eyes as he rested his forehead on the bed. For the space of a heartbeat, he was in love.

“Are you alright?”

He was most assuredly not old enough to be asked that after sex. “Hm.”

His mind toyed with the idea of starting to think. Of kicking the boy out furiously. Instead, he remained there, not wanting their bodies to part, not wanting the moment to ever end. Not wanting tomorrow to come.

Emotions were the lowest form of consciousness. Severus abhorred them. Emotional actions were the most contracted, narrowing, dangerous form of behaviour. Romance made men blind to the fact that all things end. Even muggles agreed to that. Beware of emotions. Even children agreed to that.

Severus never trusted anyone who came on emotional.

Harry shouldn’t have either.

“Severus.” It seemed that the boy’s ability to speak had aggravated significantly over the last hour.

“I need a moment,” Severus choked, his forehead still on the bed. Maybe he was that old. His blood seemed to have left his body completely in order to gather into his head.

After a thousand years and a successful victory over a heart attack, he pulled his head up and allowed Harry to place a soft kiss on his lips. To taste the waters, he supposed. To see if Severus had changed his mind.

He hadn’t.

He should. Or he shouldn’t.

Too tired to make a decision now, he rolled off Harry and rested back on the pillows. There was a tiny blood stain on the sheets; had he hurt Harry that much?

“You like pain,” he commented, his gaze on the ceiling.

Harry snorted, but didn’t reply. He rested his head on Severus’ shoulder and draped an arm over his chest. “Are you going to freak out? Because if you freak out after this I think I’ll kill you.”

Despite himself, Severus laughed. His fingers toyed with Harry’s dark locks lazily. “I will not… regret this. Be that as it may, it remains a mistake.”

“Why?”

“Someday you’ll understand.”

“Have you done it before?”

Severus snorted. “You think I haven’t?”

“I mean, with a man.”

“No.” And Harry was barely a man himself. “I never believed I would. My father…” — Harry’s gaze pierced him, but Severus refused to move his eyes from the ceiling — “my father once said, I would either end up a poof, or a spiteful drunk like him. In any case, it seems he was right.”
“Was he always like that?”

"A drunk?"

"Yeah."

Severus thought about it. “They were happy for a while. Then he discovered my mother was a witch and… it changed everything. He believed magic would fix his problems, poverty, unemployment… When it didn’t, he despised it. He became depressed, angry — hated me for being like her too — then picked up drinking to forget. My mother had been disowned for marrying a muggle, so she had nowhere to go. Even when he became violent, she stayed.”

“Severus.”

“Hm.”

“I love you.” And Severus stared dumbly, like the old fool that he was. “Why sleep with me now?”

Severus considered it. “Because the world is mad. We might as well be too.”

Harry slept in his arms shortly after; Severus kissed his forehead, his eyes, his hands, and kept him close — so close their heartbeats soon became one.

Harry was awaken by a hand kindly shaking his shoulder. “Harry.”

He grunted faintly and covered his eyes with an arm. “Mm.”

“You have to leave. Wake up.”

“Time?” He murmured, fumbling around for his glasses. Severus pushed them in his hand.

“It’s four. You should be back to the tower before anyone notices.”

“I can go in the morning.”

“It is morning.”

“Mm.”

“Potter.”

“You just called me Harry a moment ago.”

The blanket was violently pulled away from him and the chilling cold of the dungeons attacked him. “Hey! Oh — fuck — ouch!”

“Only you…” drawled Severus, “could manage to fall from the bed at the age of seventeen.”

“It doesn’t even count, you pushed me!”

“Did not,” insisted Severus as he headed to the bathroom. Harry looked at the mess they had made last night, still having trouble believing everything that had happened.

Harry hurried to his feet and picked up his clothes. He dressed slowly, all the while fighting the temptation to lay back and sleep again.
“It’s Saturday,” he pointed out when Severus returned. “We don’t have any classes, everyone’s gonna wake up late.”

“Everyone will be awake in less three hours. Hogsmeade trip.”

“Oh. Right. I don’t think I’ll go. I can barely keep my eyes open.”

“You will participate. You are the one who claimed this would never affect anything. Prove it.”

Harry nodded, still wanting to sleep. Severus placed his cloak around his shoulders and pushed him to the door.

“Have you changed your mind?” Harry asked at last.

Severus sighed. “Multiple times in my life, yes.”

They kissed; Snape’s hands firmly held his head in place as Harry wrapped an arm around Snape’s neck.

“Goodbye,” Severus whispered.

“See you,” said Harry.

It occurred to Severus, that he liked being a person. He remained still, arms folded over his chest, back leaning against the wall, and watched as Harry buttoned his shirt and zipped up his pants. If love was to destroy, to be loved was to be the one destroyed.

“I don’t think I’ll go. I can barely keep my eyes open.”

“You will participate. You are the one who claimed this would never affect anything. Prove it.”

Severus held his breath and damned himself for having said that. He couldn’t have done otherwise. If Harry was trapped in Hogwarts during the attack he would have no way to escape. He needed to be somewhere he could apparate, if needed.

“Have you changed your mind?” Harry asked at last, his eyes fixed on the floor for a moment. Embarrassment kicking in, at last.

“Multiple times in my life, yes.”

There was a deep kiss, and then nothing.

When the door closed behind Harry, Severus knew he had lost him.
“Money?”
“Check.”

“Permissions?”
“Check.”

“My notebook?”

“What do we need that for, Hermione?”

“To study, Ron! I’m not going to waste all my day buying sweets. In case you haven’t noticed these is a test –”
“Check.”

“Scarfs?”

“She’s mental,” Ron muttered to Harry before turning to Hermione and nodding. Hermione folded her list of everything they’d need for the excursion and shrank the bag Ron was holding. “Let’s go.”

“Hey, Neville. Wanna join us?” asked Harry as they descended from the dormitory.

Neville nodded at them behind the stack of books on the table. It was strange, seeing Neville studying so often, but then again everyone was under pressure this year. “Yeah, sure. See you downstairs?”

“Perfect.” As soon as they were out of the Common Room, Harry challenged Ron to a running contest which had them both panting and pushing each other when they reached the gate. Hermione rolled her eyes and talked with Ginny, obviously determined to convince herself that she had nothing to do with them. Ron, on the other hand, kept an eye on her even as they waited for McGonagall’s Sensory Charm to check that they all had permissions with them and that they did not carry any prohibited items.

Harry watched as Ron’s eyes darted from Hermione to the ground. “Want me to leave you two alone when we get there?” Harry asked at last.

Ron shook his head. “Course not. She’s not going to notice anyway,” he snorted.

Harry snorted too, his hands on his knees as he tried to calm his breath. “She does, you know. The problem is that she’s just as stubborn as you are.”

“She’s not stubborn. She’s dangerous. And Ginny’s corrupting her with stories about her love life.” He pointed his head at them and Harry laughed.

“Shouldn’t you be more worried about other girls corrupting your sister than the other way around?”

Ron merely had time to frown in confusion before Hermione interrupted them. “Are you two finished behaving like vulgar tramps?” She said, the scowl on her face fading as they stepped outside
“You shouldn’t speak like that to the Chosen One and his chosen friend.” Harry joked.

“In all honesty, Harry. You deserve it. And look at your shirt, you’re going to catch a cold. Ron, you too.”

Walking to Hogsmeade was more than enjoyable. Hermione forced a scarf around Harry’s neck, and it almost choked him as she adjusted it.

The road to the village was full of students screaming and laughing, and Harry found himself looking around for what was missing. “Where’s Snape?” he asked suddenly, the question falling out of his lips before he could help it.

“Who knows? He assigned Slughorn to supervise Slytherin today. You should see the students’ face when they heard it.” Ron chuckled and Harry shrugged.

“Professor Snape needs to prepare our tests, probably,” Hermione suggested, but Harry was not convinced. *He’s freaked out,* was all he could think of.

“It’s just that – you know. Dumbledore announced that the Heads of Houses would come. It’s a bit weird,” he pressed. More than weird, it was, and Harry suspected that he knew the answer. It was possible that Snape had already hated himself by now. Again. Somehow, he couldn’t bring himself to worry. Whatever seizure Snape had experienced because of him this time, they’d solve it out.

“All for the best,” Ron exclaimed. “Hogsmeade’s going to look a prettier without him.”

Harry smiled at his feet, his fists tightly clutched in his pockets. The wind was quite bearable as they walked. The shops were all open, and the trio hurried into Honeydukes to buy their first candies of the year. Hermione didn’t forget to remind them how her parents disapproved of sweets, eventually giving up and sharing with them a colourful nougat decorated with tiny chocolate toads.

They had a laugh at how Hermione did like the toads but refused to admit it, and she finally bought a bag of her own before leaving the shop. When Ron asked her where she wanted to go next, she chose the Three Broomsticks.

“Why do we always argue about where we’re going to sit and then we always end up here?” Ron asked as he pulled at his scarf and sat on a chair. The cosy atmosphere of the inn was something Harry had quite missed, and they chose a table in the far corner of the room to stay warm.

“You are the one who always insists that we sit here,” Harry said as he made himself comfortable.

“Because it’s the best pub in Hogsmeade, isn’t it?”

“And not because of Madam Rosmerta’s light clothing,” Hermione muttered. Ron smiled at her, but didn’t respond. Harry ordered Butterbeer for his friends and a glass of foaming gillywater for himself.

“What happened to you?” Hermione narrowed her eyes as she drank her Butterbeer. “You used to hate gillywater.”

“Actually,” Harry said, ready to swallow a large sip of it, “I’ve never tried it before. And I’m curious to do so.” Gulping the strange green liquid down, he maintained his dignity for a few seconds and then he grimaced in disgust. He could feel his throat glistering and his tongue going numb, but he beamed as Hermione took it from his hands and rolled her eyes before trying it out too.
“It’s… tolerable,” she said after a moment in an unconvincingly casual voice.

“It’s awesome, actually. If you’re an octopus, or something. It’s probably the Squid’s favourite drink.” Harry passed it to Ron, who eyed it suspiciously.

“You’re remarkably cheerful today, mate,” Ron said as he smelled the content of the glass.

Harry felt suddenly warm around the ears and neck, and in the light of the morning he knew that he had turned bright red. He hastily gulped his drink and shrugged, looking at everywhere but Ron.

“And why not? I mean, it’s our first trip of the year.”

Soon, the professors came into the pub too, and were divided into small groups. It was Hagrid who came to greet them first, before sitting with Dumbledore and McGonagall by the window, at the other end of the room. Flitwick and Sprout sat together, saving a seat for Slughorn, who ignored them ostentatiously and sat with a group of sixth year students.

“You think Zonko’s might open again?” asked Ron when the pub was almost full.

“I doubt it,” Hermione said. “It’s the first sign of war, quite literally. They don’t want people to laugh.”

“Fred and George are doing a great job with the shop. You should see mum’s face when they first showed her their brochure.”

“They should be careful with it. The Ministry has little tolerance towards mockery these days.” Hermione glanced at Dumbledore, and Harry followed her stare to see him show something to McGonagall on a newspaper. They were too far away for him to take a glance of it, but it couldn’t be anything but the Prophet. Hagrid banged his hand at the table as they talked, obviously furious about something.

“Muggle disappearances, again,” Ron guessed.

“It’s unnerving how everybody is painfully aware of what’s happening but no one can actually protect them,” Hermione said. “Even Blair knows.”

“He can’t tell them anything, can he? They’d think he’s mental.”

“They should at least inform people that there is some kind of danger out there. Even if they can’t tell them the details. The Statute of Secrecy is supposed to protect both sides, not only wizards.”

“The Statute was signed merely for our benefit, I think,” Ron told her. “I mean, we are the ones burdened with the truth. A war is going on and they’re ignorant.”

“And unprotected,” Hermione added, her hands tightly clutched around her beer.

Harry shrugged at the thought, but another concern was nagging the back of his mind. “There’s something I need to tell you.” He blurted it out quickly, and was shocked at his own silly happiness that still prevented him from successfully keeping secrets from his friends. “But I don’t know how you’re going to react,” he added.

Hermione gave him a sudden look of deep concern, which Harry knew too well, and didn’t want to think about what was behind it. The fact that his news were always miserable should make it expected that his friends feared for the worse at every beginning of an announcement.
And to top it all, he didn’t even know how to begin. Or if he even wanted to share it with them. Somehow, he managed to feel jealousy at the thought of other people knowing what was going on between him and Snape. As though knowing it would mean that people would try to take it away from him.

“What is it, Harry?” Ron asked.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, no. It’s just that…” he rubbed his forehead with a hand, “it’s about... my summers. Do you remember how… I mean, after Sirius - died, I…” He took a deep breath, determined to stop babbling. “Yesterday night, I –”

A loud bang was heard as the sky darkened; there was a scream, and then a group of students entered the front door panting, wands at hand. There was another shattering sound that followed as Madam Rosmerta dropped the beers she was holding, her jaw dropped in shock, and Dumbledore stood up immediately.

"The Dark Mark," a student gasped. "It's above us."

For a moment, there was silence; then someone screamed, and a small crowd of people pushed its way out of the pub hurriedly. A table was toppled off, and Madam Rosmerta took out her wand. Harry stood up immediately, taking out his wand too just as Ron and Hermione did the same.

“Professor!” yelled Harry, pushing aside the people running to get to Dumbledore. Dumbledore didn’t seem to notice him. He turned to McGonagall. “I want the students to return to the castle instantly. Shield the gates and prepare for the attack. Filius, Pomona, gather your students too.”

Striding out of the pub, Dumbledore cast the Amplifying Charm on his throat and took a deep breath. “Students of Hogwarts, please keep your composure. Please follow your teachers back to the castle.”

Drawing the wand from his neck, he finally turned to Harry. “Harry.” His blue eyes studied him for a moment. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” Harry said at once.

“You need to protect yourself then, Harry. You won't be safe here. I need you to go. Now.”

Before Harry had time to argue, someone gripped him by his arm and pulled him aside, just in time for a curse to pass right next to him. “Harry, come on!” Hermione screamed. At the sound of continuous apparitions, Harry shook his head and threw himself into the crowd. He couldn’t leave while everyone was going to fight. He couldn’t let more people die because of –

“Harry!” Hermione followed behind him, her wand out as the first Death Eaters began to make their appearance. The crowd screamed, and a younger student clutched at Harry’s shirt, yelling about something Harry could not hear. “Find McGonagall!” Harry yelled back, pushing the hand away as he looked around for Ron.

“Where did he go?” he said to Hermione just as a bombarding sound pierced his ears and he covered them with both hands. He turned to see a small building explode and he dropped to his knees, pushing Hermione down too.

“He was right here! I – I –”
“We’ll find him,” Harry told her, bolting up to his feet again and dodging a stream of light that pulled up dirt and smoke.

“Harry!” Ron caught his arm and Hermione hugged him the moment Harry spotted Dumbledore.

“Come on!” Harry shouted at them. The descending Death Eaters were countless; Harry thought they had no chance when they finally reached Dumbledore. Harry raised his wand too, seeing the Dark Mark spreading over the sky and making the morning turn into a strange, frightening night. He had no time to count the students lying unconscious on the ground, nor the unforgivable curses he had heard – but when he caught sight of the other teachers leading the students back to the castle he felt a small momentary relief wash over him. Slughorn stood there with Dumbledore, wand raised and mouth continuously muttering curses, but Hagrid was nowhere to be seen.

“I told you to leave! It’s an order!” shouted Dumbledore, the line between his brows darkened in concentration, but Harry shook his head and stormed forward.

“Harry!” Hermione screamed at him.

“No,” he muttered, knowing she couldn’t hear him, knowing she couldn’t understand why it was important to stay – to fight – this was happening because of him – Sirius had died because of him –

He crashed on Greyback face first, and looked up at the lunatic face, the “Stupefy!” falling out of his mouth but failing to find its aim. Harry steeled himself as he was violently thrown back, and Slughorn attacked Greyback again, using a curse Harry didn’t know, buying him time, while more Death Eaters apparated and aimed for the students. Harry didn’t know how much time had passed when the students began to back down. He could see most of them running in groups, breaking the protective shield in order to run free and return to the castle.

Dumbledore shouted something to Slughorn, and Harry couldn’t hear what it was, but Slughorn gathered the rest of the students and tried to lead them away. The Death Eaters were twice as many as them, and it couldn’t be more than ten or fifteen students that had been left behind by now. When the last protective charm exploded to pieces, a sudden silence prevailed. The last thing that Harry heard was Hermione’s small gasp.

It was Snape who stepped forward with his wand raised – expressionless and with firm, quiet steps. Behind them, the Three Broomsticks collapsed in ashes just as Dumbledore attempted to cast a spell and was disarmed. Time didn’t exist for a moment; the students stepped back as Snape moved closer, his eyes cold and empty.

“Severus… Please,” Dumbledore said.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Green light shot from the tip of Snape’s wand and hit Dumbledore at once. Someone screamed desperately, just as Dumbledore’s body swayed and hit the ground. It was an inhuman, paranoid scream of despair that had no place in this world; it rang in his ears and covered every other sound. It must have been coming from his own throat, for Snape turned to him and watched, and there was nothing but hatred on his pale face. Their eyes met for a moment, and then someone shouted “Potter is here!” before a hand grasped his own and squeezed. The world went black and Harry’s breath left him.

Darkness pressed upon him as he was squeezed through time and space; then he dropped on his knees and gasped.
“Get up,” Hermione hissed. “Get up, quickly, we need to move.”

“Where are we?” Ron asked, and then Harry was walking, his throat clenching around his voice as someone’s hand was still tugging and pulling on him. They stopped in a narrow alleyway, and Hermione leaned against the wall, suddenly bursting into tears. She covered her mouth and nose with a hand, closing her eyes.

“Oh my god,” she choked. “Oh my god.”

“What the fuck just happened?” yelled Ron. “Did he – did Snape –”

“It’s over,” sobbed Hermione, taking deep breaths. “It’s – oh my god, my parents, I need to –”

“Where are we?” asked Harry, barely above a whisper. He was surprised they heard him, and he fixed his eyes on the wall as though it held the meaning of life.

“Muggle London,” said Hermione. “We need to move though, we –”

“Get us back,” Harry said.

“We can’t! They probably –”

“Get us back, Hermione.”

There was another protest coming from her and then there was nothing, and at the same time there was everything, and Harry could barely hear himself screaming his lungs out, get us back, get us back, getusbackgetusbackgetusback, Dumbledore's dead, dead, dead, get us back, fuck you, damn you all, get us back --

Ron pushed him against the wall, trying to keep him still, keep him from going – going - “DUBLEDOR’S DEAD!” There were tears on his face, and there was blood, blood on his fists, was he punching the ground, get us back, please get us back, "HE KILLED HIM! HE – I DON’T – LET ME GO BACK AND KILL HIM GODDAMN YOU ALL! FUCK! FUCK YOU!”

“Oh my god,” she choked. “Oh my god.”

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“Calm down, Harry!”

He pushed Ron away and fell forward, landing hard on his hands and knees. “No, no, no, traitor – you – all along – YOU FUCKING COWARD! NO!” He screamed and screamed, his pain burning his chest and heart as he played the scene in his head again, his nails scrapping at the pavement, his tears forming small puddles on his glasses. “He’s dead,” he said to himself, feeling close to losing his mind. “No, no...”

“We need to find Ginny,” Ron said, his hands on his head.

“We can’t – it’d be madness – Hogwarts is theirs now –”

“She’s my sister, Hermione! I can’t leave her there!”

“Ginny is strong. We have to trust her. She'll be fine. The one they’re looking for is here.”

“The bloody snake!” Ron yelled. “Did you see him? What the hell did he –”

“No.” Harry shook his head, pulling himself up and lurching to lean against the wall. He needed to go back. Somehow, he could change this. Perhaps all of this was a misunderstanding. All he needed to do was find Snape. Severus. Dumbledore was alive. This had to be some kind of sick joke. He’d find them and they’d explain it to him – this couldn’t have happened – Severus couldn’t have
betrayed him – “I need to talk to Dumbledore,” he choked, struggling to figure a way to solve this out. “I – if we get back…”

“Dumbledore’s dead, Harry! Didn't you see what just happened? It's over!” Ron punched the wall hard before looking away. He had tears in his eyes too, his mouth tightly clenched.

Harry wanted to vomit, but instead he closed his eyes, feeling his legs tremble again. “GET US BACK HERMIONE! NOW!”

His voice was hoarse and sounded strange to his ears; the confusion that he felt failed to numb the pain spreading over his chest. It was impossible to comprehend what had happened, and even more to believe that Dumbledore was dead – that Snape had done it. Polyjuice Potion, it had to be. Someone was impersonating him. It was a joke. A trap. It was unreal.

“Grimmauld place?” Hermione asked, and Ron seized Harry’s shaky hand.

“Snape knows how to get there,” Ron protested.

“We’ll shield the building.”

Ron nodded, and Harry let them take him wherever they wanted, for it didn’t matter anymore, and even if it did, it shouldn’t.

Albus Dumbledore was dead and the world was yet to end. The absence of remorse failed to convince Severus that he would somehow get over this unaffected. The unforgivable curse burned his fingers as an invisible knife tore all the way up his arm and sliced his heart. It was over. Whatever was left on Severus’ supposedly good side, had officially reached its end. Everything that had voluntarily built its way into his life was now dismissed. Destroyed. Forgotten.

Not forgotten.

Severus could safely state that not a single person on earth gave a damn about him at the moment. In the glimpse of a second, he had sacrificed everything, and he was startled at the realisation that he had anything to sacrifice in the first place.

The boy was there, and looked at him with terrified, wide eyes – refusing to acknowledge the obvious, forgetting to protect himself and run, for orders never meant anything to him – and the last part of Harry Potter’s innocence had finally been destroyed.

Idiotic thing that it was.
“Is he throwing up again?”

“You should talk to him.”

“He won’t listen to me, I’ve tried.”

“You don’t think he’d do anything stupid, do you?”

Harry slammed the bathroom door open to find his friends standing right outside. “I’m fine. And I’d be even better if you didn’t talk about me behind my back.”

“Well, is it bad that we worry now?” Ron said.

For a moment Harry was determined to not answer, but then he shook his head. “No.”

“We all loved Dumbledore,” Hermione said calmly. “You’re not alone. We’re together in this.”

The bitter snort that was caught in his throat burned his skin raw; the isolating pain in his chest was pulling him away from the world. He didn’t feel like talking. He didn’t have anything to say. It was unexplainable, how a pain that wasn’t physical could be so intense, how it could rip apart a person’s soul and have it rot and stink of humiliation and self-disgust.

Putting on a brave face, he folded his arms on his chest and leaned against the wall. “I suspect… that Dumbledore feared this might happen,” he said, voicing his thoughts after almost a week. “The fall of Hogwarts, I mean. I must continue what he began, or else his death was pointless. I believe he disclosed so much last year exactly because he suspected I would have to continue without him, eventually.”

“Horcruxes?” Ron asked. Harry nodded.

“We’re with you,” Hermione said.

He needed to do something. Anything, to get these thoughts out of his head. To stop his whole body from aching and making him dizzy, reminding him how stupid he’d been. Fool, a voice said in his mind over and over again, and it was his voice, and Harry could do nothing but listen to it and agree, because he was the greatest fool he’d ever known. He never thought he’d be able to hate himself this much. The blinding hate he felt when he stood before the mirror was something he couldn’t deal with. He needed to move on.

“I don’t want you risking your lives for me. I should –”

“And what are we going to do then? Go back to Hogwarts?” Hermione asked. She clutched the small book she had received from Kingsley in her hands, her digits going white.

“Any progress with that?”

Hermione handed him the book, and suddenly Harry was too tired take it. He wanted to sleep.

“I’m afraid not. Kingsley placed some strong wards around the house before he left this morning, in case Snape tries to break in. You should have talked to him. He expected to see you.”

What for? To have him confirm that what he saw was real? To rub facts on his face? Sleeping was
better. Locking himself in Sirius’ old room was better. “He opened Dumbledore’s will before the news were even out, you know. It’s a miracle he managed to find it so quickly. An hour later and he’d been killed.”

“Great job, tell him. A book, a snitch, and a lighter.”

“And we need to get the sword too. It belongs to you now.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, his voice suddenly broken. He could feel the lump on his throat expand and choke him, but he didn’t care. Nothing seemed important anymore. The only thing that mattered now, was to kill Voldemort.

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione said, but Harry bolted away as she approached him. Realising too late that she had developed an entirely unwanted sympathy towards him, he didn’t know how to avoid her hugs and pats on the back anymore. Rudely, it seemed to be the only way out of it. He didn’t need anyone’s pity. No one understood. No one was going to. And all Harry needed was to be left alone.

“Let go,” he muttered before rushing to his room.

“You shouldn’t have talked to him like that.”

“He deserved it.”

“What he deserved was gratitude! He was trying to help and you insulted him.”

“He regretted marrying Tonks, isn’t that what he said?” Harry brought the teapot to the table and poured some hot chocolate to Hermione’s mug. He filled Ron’s and his own too, taking a seat next to them. Spelling the pantry close, Ron left his wand next to Harry’s and tasted his chocolate.

“You think he doesn’t love her?” Ron blurted out at last. The worry that shadowed his face was quite heavy for something that didn’t directly concern him; then again, it seemed that it was these small things that made them believe there was still something to fight for out there.

After Remus had slammed the door behind him and left Grimmauld Place, offended and entirely hurt because they wouldn’t reveal to him what Dumbledore had been searching for, Harry was torn between caring a little too much and not giving a damn about Tonks and their marriage. Still, the very fact that she was pregnant and Remus was openly willing to follow Harry instead of keeping her safe, somehow wounded his view of this world even more.

His parents had died so Harry could live.

Harry wished they hadn’t.

“I don’t know, honestly,” he said to his mug. Chocolate just didn’t taste the same anymore, and he vaguely wondered if the house elves back at Hogwarts made it still as good as they used to. He imagined them slipping poison into the foods in order to kill their new master, and he shivered at how much the thought pleased and disturbed him at the same time. “My Dad and Sirius wouldn’t want Remus to abandon his wife and child to look after me, though. And I’m not going to let him do it either. Besides, we can't take him with us. My promise to Dumbledore was to tell no one what I am going to do.”

Hermione nodded, crestfallen as Harry had never seen her before.

“People are in a hurry to get married for all the wrong reasons,” Ron said suddenly, and shrugged his
shoulders at the suspicious look Hermione gave him. “Mum says so,” he added.

“I’ve seen how people have treated Remus in the past,” Harry admitted. “People avoiding to touch him in the streets, or – to even look at him. I’ve seen him extending his hand to greet someone and then just standing there. He’s been an outcast for too long. What if this is nothing but an opportunity for him to belong? Or… I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“That’s mean,” Ron said. “And we’re all outcasts here, aren’t we?”

“I… Yeah,” Harry said stupidly, not knowing how to take back all the awful things he’d told Remus. He wondered if the man would even want to talk to him again. “Yeah.”

“You were stressed,” Hermione reassured him. “He’ll understand. Just owl him soon,” she said, snorting faintly.

“I’ve owled the Burrow,” Ron said, as though suddenly reminded of it. “They’re safe. For the time being.” Harry took another sip of his chocolate and it tasted like boiled water and dirt. “Mum and Dad want Ginny out of Hogwarts but it’d be risky to try now. Snape would only target her further.”

It was an unnatural silence the one that followed. It gnawed Harry’s insides and he yearned for something to be told, anything - so he emptied his mug in an attempt to drink his secrets away and make them disappear once and for all. The air was thick with dust, reminding him once again that Kreacher was too old to take care of the house; shafts of light burst through gaps in the boarded up window and hit the velvet curtains. The sudden humming of the refrigerator relieved Harry strangely, dragging him away from his stillness.

“I must visit my parents,” Hermione announced, her shoulders squared. “There’s something I need to do and it can’t wait. I’m going alone.” She stood up a little too quick, and before Harry could ask her what it was that couldn’t wait, she was gone.

The Prophet floated across the room and Harry only closed his eyes when he heard it drop into the bin. He was a worm on a hook, waiting to be eaten alive by Voldemort’s men and their apprentices. All over the front page, his photo, his name, his life. Incriminated for Dumbledore’s death for fuck’s sake. As though there weren’t other people there to tell what had happened. As though the Ministry didn’t know that it was Snape who’d done it. There were so many things to do, few places to hide, and he didn’t know how to respond to Ron and Hermione’s questioning looks every time they asked about Dumbledore’s plan. The only truth was that he didn’t have a goddamn clue about it. Deep down, he wasn’t even sure if Dumbledore had a plan.

For the greater good, whatever that was, Harry was willing to kill and die. He wasn’t ready for it. He doubted that he ever would. Icy wind brushed his face and he closed the window loudly, the wooden casement creaking against its lock. He breathed out a sigh, and pretended to not hear Ron telling Hermione jokes downstairs. Though it bothered him deep down, he couldn’t tell why. He let it go soon, and he noticed that Umbridge’s marking on his hand had grown blood red again. It used to happen when he was really cold, and he wished they had some woods for the fireplace. He found it difficult to sleep in a room of his own, away from the dormitory and his classmates’ voices, so he seated himself on the window ledge and took in the sight of the sullen town that lied before him.

The night was awfully stretched, and as Hedwig hooted next to him, he decided to not think about the Safe House. He let the moments pass as the wind outside became wilder, just like Hermione’s laughter caused by whatever Ron was telling her. Harry had been silent all afternoon, careful to not distract them, but now the fact that they hadn’t asked him to join them left him a bit hollow and confused. He knew that their most important weapon was that they could trust each other. But Harry
wasn’t sure he could trust anyone anymore. The mere fact that he had second thoughts about his own friends, the best friends he could ever ask for, caused his stomach to swirl mercilessly.

He never seemed to focus on the fact that people had deceived Dumbledore before, and looking back now he was almost sure that Dumbledore was a stupid man after all. After Quirell and Crouch, why not Snape too?

Why?

His body was stiff, but he was too tired to move. He finally closed his eyes, and at the sound of another loud laughter, he knew he would be getting no sleep tonight.

“You have become rather predictable, Minerva. You may leave,” Severus said as he approached the bed Minerva was sitting on. In her arms, a small girl was cringing visibly, tears running down her face. Poppy hurried to them as soon as she saw him, shoving a small phial into the girl’s trembling hands.

“I’m afraid I won’t, Severus. It seems that apparently my new colleagues have an entirely different teaching approach in mind.” Her total disregard of his warning to keep herself out of it was not something he could fight; when Severus had begun his sorry career at Hogwarts, sixteen years ago, he was happy to disappoint them all. To sneer back at their sneers, to turn his back to their disbelief and open distrust, to mentally raise his middle finger to them as he pretended to like them and as he reported his unsociability to Dumbledore at nights. Raising an eyebrow at Minerva now, who used to scold and advise him since when he was barely a teenager himself, required a mental strength that left his chest rather empty from any emotion but shame.

Thankfully, no one could tell.

“What happened?” he asked, entirely aware that he’d prefer to not know. He glared and Minerva narrowed her eyes, her chin higher than usual, her soothing arm squeezing the child protectively.

“Your newest additions to the curriculum had the older students train on the Unforgivables upon first years. Advanced Dark Arts, you call it now, is that it?”

 Severus didn’t move and Minerva stood up, helping the girl lie down on the bed. He was aware of movement around him as Poppy pulled the bed curtains close, and didn’t spare him a single look as she returned to her paperwork.

“I want you to stay out of it,” he said coldly once Poppy was busy and couldn’t hear them. The terrifying humming of the girl's shivering and crying was piercing his brain.

“Am I not allowed to escort my own students to the infirmary?” she asked casually, and Severus didn’t remember to respond dismissively to it. More people putting themselves in danger while they shouldn’t. More old friends to silently wish his death while more students were being tortured and traumatised for life because of him and his delirious commitment to follow the dead bastard’s impossible orders.

Keeping an expressionless face while killing wasn’t meant to be that easy. Breaking into childish sobs right after, locked in a bathroom stall, with a nosy ghost crying somewhere nearby too, wasn’t meant to be so painful either. This, now, was the worst of it all. His fingers, which he hadn’t been aware were clutched mercilessly behind his back, relaxed as his mind worked over the damage control he was yet again required to inflict.

“You are not, and I don’t wish to see you here again without my permission. Poppy is fully capable
of taking care of her patients without your undoubtedly considerable assistance.” He took a step closer, and he could see Minerva’s shoulders tensing up, despite the proud glare she was granting him with. “This is the last time I’m asking you kindly. There are other ways of enforcing discipline and I won’t hesitate to use them if necessary. Is that clear?”

Her eyes narrowed momentarily at that, and there was a sparkle of pure hatred in them before her nodding once. “This has been perfectly clear already, Severus, yes.”

“We all report to someone,” he said stupidly, having no idea why he continued this farce instead of leaving.

“Some of us to our conscience,” Minerva said, ignoring him completely and taking a seat next to the bed.

“Very well. You shall face the consequences, then.”

The ‘go ahead’ nod of her head was enough to have him stride out of the infirmary, gritting his teeth and mentally cursing her to pieces as he made his way to his new office. The portraits were spelled asleep as soon as he slammed the door behind him, leaving conscious only the one next to the dark medieval desk.

“Everything okay, Severus?”

Severus slumped onto the chair, kicking at the inside of the desk with all his might before resting his head on his hand. Okay didn’t begin to describe it. Brilliant, it was. Mesmerising. Clearing his mind from all thoughts, he focused on the curious carved pattern on the desk until his eyes closed against that too. The worried voice called him again and for a moment he was disoriented. It wasn’t physical dizziness, he reminded himself, and his patience swept away like dust.

“The Carrows are forcing the students to use the Unforgivables on each other,” he stated simply. His tongue was tied on the back of his throat, swelling like an overly large sponge that threatened to choke him. It felt dry all the same, and at the sight of the stack of letters the parents had sent him, his stomach only swirled worse. It wasn’t hate mail, as he had firstly suspected, nor howlers. Why would they be? They were the kindest of letters; all of them polite, pleading, wishing a good start and not forgetting to mention the names of their children and that they really looked up to him and his Lord’s work. All of them lies, and all of them constructed by parents who feared for their children’s lives.

“Any losses?” Dumbledore asked from his portrait.

“None yet,” Severus snapped. The question was asked with detached curiosity, and Severus was shocked to realise that he could still be angry over a dead man. The very fact that he had every right to, didn’t matter. His brain rushed to form a new ground rule that would guarantee the students’ safety and failed. He decided to rely on Minerva’s resistance until even she was unable to help anymore.

“I believe you should find a way to sack them, then. The sooner the better.”

Most of the time, Severus couldn’t bring himself to look up to that damned portrait. He only endured its presence so far because it was necessary, and right now he doubted his submission to someone else’s cause more than ever. He felt his eyes narrowed as he peered at Dumbledore. “Oh, I don’t know. Why don’t you find a way to sack them then, if you think that’s what should be done?”

“I wish I could. But you are in control now.” Dumbledore and his brilliant ideas had always had a
unique impact on Severus’ self-disgust. The increasing amount of surprise he reserved only for these fascinating plans of taking monstrosities down by enforcing new ones was now transforming into a horror he highly doubted he could manage. Being pleased with nonexistent progress towards nothing in particular was not his thing, but this did most likely not matter.

It was driving him mad. It was what made him look like a fool when he avoided his own reflection in the mirror and when he couldn’t meet the eyes of the people he’d spent all his life with. Damning his breathlessness every time a student broke down before him or a colleague avoided to acknowledge his presence in the room. And to think that all of these people had seen at some point of their pointless lives Dumbledore’s cursed hand was just beyond him. Uneducated, all of them. Wholly and entirely stupid.

“Any news from Harry?”

At the mention of the name Severus’ heart skipped a beat; he choked on his self-reproach and he pressed his mouth shut to keep himself from swearing. There was spite in his chest and resentment. The two most obvious clues that Harry bloody Potter had rubbed off on him. “There are rumours that he broke into the Ministry. I can’t know for sure. He’s most likely alive.” And then he couldn’t keep it back anymore, thereby stripping himself from the mask of the heartless bastard everyone accused him to be and Dumbledore had forced him to become. “You should have kept him out of this.”

“We’ve discussed this –”

“Yes.” And where did it lead them? Or, when had his say been taken seriously? Not once.

“He’s not alone, Severus.”

Of course he was. But the evil he had inflicted upon the boy by taking away his last bits of trust and happiness was not something he could share. The ‘it just happened’ that soothed him at times of sleeplessness had gone numb inside his mind, and the fact that he hardly regretted laying his hands on him was not making it any better. He vaguely wondered for the millionth time if Harry’s pain would have been any less had Severus kept a respectful distance until the end. If he hadn’t gone as far as to love him.

He’d do it all over again, if he could. And he’d change nothing. He’d go back and fuck Harry senseless, in every possible position, until both of them collapsed and lost their minds out of exhaustion. He’d do it sooner. He would have never let him walk out of his chambers that night. He snorted to himself, shaking his head at how he had become a dirty old man and at how he regretted wishing to put a stop at this more than he regretted having not. The world was collapsing around him and he still thought of that damned boy. He’d lost his mind.

Suddenly, being concerned about the well-being of someone who was doomed to die young and betrayed was too melodramatic for him to cope with. He released his breath and opened a long drawer, taking out a feather and a scroll.

“One would have expected you to have less requests of me once in the afterlife,” Severus muttered to Dumbledore as he dipped his quill in a shiny bottle of dark ink.

*Regulations and Restrictions, written and signed by Headmaster Severus Snape*, he wrote.
Severus heard the sound of steps fading away.

A panic began swirling where his lungs used to be. He didn’t want to have to punish anyone. Not like that. Why hadn’t he asked the Dark Lord to let him do this alone? Then he wouldn’t have to stroll through the corridors nightly to ensure that no one was being harmed. A dim aspect of his mind noted that the Carrows weren’t here to keep an eye on the students, but on him. His anger towards them wasn’t nearly enough for them to realise, and he felt grateful and guilty at the same time for their open distrust to him.

“Amicus,” he said casually, the cold disinterest of his voice enough to disrupt whatever meditation the man had fallen into. The balcony was a rather small one, but the view from up here was strangely calming. It reminded him of brooms and snitches, yet he couldn’t tell why that was a calming thought at all instead of overly upsetting. The moon was full.

“Severus.” Amicus turned, giving him a greeting nod. Severus stared at the school grounds extending into the dark. A group of dementors hovered at a safe distance, floating through the air like dizzied jellyfish.

“Your shift has ended, I believe.” In a single day, he had managed to derange the Dark Lord, hurt Trelawney, and have a Carrow defy him more than once. A second Carrow doing whatever the hell he pleased under his nose was not something he wished to deal with. And the very fact that hurting Trelawney had any impact on him proved his weaknesses well enough. As though the cow couldn’t keep away from his students. As though she didn’t know a Slytherin would hex her if she asked for it despite her being a professor. As though she didn’t know Severus would have to punish her if she stepped out of line.

No. He wouldn’t think about that.

“Who would’ve imagined…” Amicus said, his gaze steady on the horizon. The dim lights of Hogsmeade indicated that there was still life, somewhere out there. “…that we’d have Hogwarts someday, huh?”

“As far as I’m concerned, you don’t have anything.”

“And you do? Come on Severus. I know you. You want more than that. Whatever you ask, he’s going to give it to you. Not now, but after this,” he gestured around, “after it’s done, you’ll get whatever you ask for, probably.”

It wasn’t a compliment. It was a request. “And you’d like to take the castle, then.”

Amicus snorted. “Why wouldn’t I? This place is shit. Needs to be fixed.”

“We’ll see.”

“I mean, what’s the purpose of keeping the forest as it is when we could expand the castle? Imagine a tower, just there. And a bulwark by the lake going all the way north.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “You have quite the plans for something entirely hypothetical, I think.”

“I am capable of forecasting,” Amicus said.
“Wishful thinking.” Severus offered an indulgent smile. “Unless you’ve already asked the Dark Lord.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Amycus snapped. “Not now.”

Not ever, Severus thought. Even Carrow was clever enough to not ask from the Dark Lord more than he deserved. “Hogwarts is going to need a new Headmaster eventually. I may be moved soon,” he lied.

It was better to make himself seem useful to Amycus than having to deal with him as an enemy. “I shall inform the Dark Lord of your wishes then.”

Amycus stared for a moment and then nodded. “Good.”

“You don’t trust me,” Severus said, as a matter of fact. “You don’t need to,” he added to cut off Amycus’ objection. “I would most definitely advise you to trust no one. I have no intention to stay and rot in this damned place forever, and since you don’t mind doing so, you will. I’m not doing you a favour. I’m using you to break free.”

It was a believable explanation, and, all things considered, it would numb any dreams of killing Severus to take his place for a while. The Carrows weren’t a real threat; they were troublesome, however, and a fight with them would be a heated one. Better delay it for the time being.

Amycus shook his head as though something had suddenly occurred to him. “You think those little mudbloods are planning a resistance? Shouldn’t we be doing something?”

Severus smiled calmly. He took pleasure in the man’s hopeful expression and he was vaguely grateful that he couldn’t clearly see Severus’ face in the dark. “They are kids. Are you distressed because of kids?”

“You know who gives them orders? That bitch the Potter boy fucks. Red hair, pureblood. Seen her?”

“They are kids,” Severus repeated. “Foolish, yes. But harmless. The Dark Lord wishes us to be respectful toward wizard blood.”

Amycus chuckled. “Yes, well, I think, in that case, of course. But I would like to know a little bit more about what he’s planning to do with all those filthy shits we have here.”

“We don’t need to know. We need to comply.” And that pretty much summed up the idiocy that it was to follow their Lord. He tensed, expecting to give another restrained display. It should come natural after so many times he’d done it. It never did.

“You think it’d be wrong to just push them a little bit, then? Because I don’t think it’s wrong. Give me an hour with the girl and she’ll spill it all out. I give you my word. One hour.”

Severus sneered at the first snowflake that hit his hand. He brushed it away. “No. It would cause a fuss. Do what you're here for and leave the rest to me. If we scare the parents now we’ll have to shut the school down. We’re continuing normally.”

Amycus sighed, daring to be offended about his canceled plans. Which meant that he had really been planning to interrogate the Weasley girl. As usual, life ignored Severus’ despair. He should be ashamed of how much he enjoyed controlling these men just like the Dark Lord and Dumbledore controlled him. It was a power game, really; and if he ever recovered from it, he’d probably not know what to do with himself. He was used to hierarchy. He couldn’t recall having any experiences
of equality.

Almost.

His thoughts of the boy were slowly shifting to something darker, burning and wild. He thought it was hate, until he noticed it was shame. And then it became curiosity. For all the things they had never discussed and all the things they never would.

Pity.

“So. That means that I should postpone my little party after all.”

Severus raised an eyebrow.

“You know. Avery and Nott are having a few days free. I was thinking of inviting them to pay a visit, see the castle again, how we rule it, the Slytherins, and all. I imagined it’d be fun if we had a few of the girls entertain us.”

He was too sickened to make any remark right away. Stunned, he searched into his mind for the proper response. Of course, there wasn’t one. “Impossible. The Dark Lord forbids unjustifiable violence against wizards if it can be helped. You know that.”

“We have mudbloods too,” Amycus pressed.

“We don’t touch filth, Amycus, but only to eliminate it. Is that clear?”

It wasn’t, but the humiliation managed to kick in before any morals could. “Yes. Yes, of course.”

“Harry!” Hermione shouted, shaking his arm. Harry bolted upright and gasped, squinting his eyes in confusion.

“What is it?” he snapped, fumbling around for his glasses.

“You were having a nightmare, I suppose. You were screaming.”

Harry grunted, fighting the urge to slump back to the mattress. Feeling his damp shirt stuck on him, he turned around to wear his shoes and mentally willed Hermione away. Ron seemed to be sleeping soundly at the other bed of the small room; the rain was falling mercilessly outside the tent, the wind shaking the fabric maniacally. Cold weather was something they’d all experienced before, but never this intimately.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered.

“What did you see?” She made a motion of sitting beside him, but Harry stood quickly. He pulled off his shirt to wear a dry one, looking away from her, and coughed roughly. Another febrifuge potion would do. Or another blanket.

“I don’t remember,” he lied. “It was probably nothing.”

“You think it’s him, doing this to you?” she whispered.

“Vol —”

“Don’t say his name,” she warned him.
Harry sighed. “It’s not him. Get some sleep. I’m going out.”

“Out?” Hermione furrowed her brows. “You’re running a fever, Harry! What for?”

“Fresh air.”

There was a long pause filled with the sound of the rain hammering and thundering, in which Hermione looked dangerously skeptical. Then, she nodded. “I’m coming with you.”

There was no point in arguing. Wearing their jackets, they carefully stepped out of the tent and into the mud. Harry gritted his teeth against shivering. They hadn’t walked but for a few minutes when Harry leaned against a tree and closed his eyes.

“This is stupid,” Hermione muttered. “You’re going to get really sick. Let’s go back.”

Harry shook his head. “You go.”

“Where are you going?” she asked, and a bitter laughter escaped Harry, hoarse and strange.

“I don’t know, Hermione. I don’t have a fucking idea. No clue. No…” he coughed again, “fucking clue.”

She knew what that meant; and the grim expression on her face was the one Harry was fearing to see all along. “I trust Dumbledore,” she said firmly. “You shouldn’t lose faith to him. None of us should.”

“It’s not about Dumbledore. I… I would… We could have done so much more if he’d told me everything, that’s all.”

They were doing nothing. The war was going on, people were being murdered, and they were simply in hiding. What was their plan? What could they do? Nothing. Absolutely fucking nothing.

“He didn’t have time, Harry,” Hermione said. “This was something no one expected. Not even Dumbledore.”

“Well, he should have,” Harry snapped. “He should have known better than trust him!”

Harry had warned Dumbledore. He had expressed his thoughts of distrust numerous times over the years. Instead of making Dumbledore see the truth, though, it had gone the other way around. Harry had been blinded too.

“You’d think, if we knew everything, if we had a proper weapon against Vol –”

“Harry!”

“Against him, we wouldn’t be going in circles around nothing, would we? And you know, the Ministry isn’t going to stop until they find us. It’s not like they’re going to grow bored of looking for us!”

“The Ministry?” scoffed Hermione. “We’re past that, aren’t we? What should worry us now is only the locket.”

“Well thank God then that we have so many plans about that!” He coughed again, bringing his fist to his mouth.

Hermione laughed. “You really are thick sometimes, aren’t you?” She shook her head. “We’re
together in this. That’s not going to change, so deal with it. We’re your friends.”

“I’m not sure that’s what Ron thinks,” Harry said. “He’s been acting strangely.”

“It’s the Horcrux,” Hermione said. “It’s not him. He gets all angry when he wears the locket, but you know he loves you, Harry.”

Harry snorted. “Does he? I was under the impression that he loves you.”

Under the fading moonlight, Hermione’s blush was precious. She seized his arm and placed her head on his shoulder. “Let’s go back.”

“You know nothing about him!” shouted Harry.

“Well what do you know about him, then? What the hell is wrong with you?” Ron shouted back.

“What is wrong with me, is that I’m sick of listening to your shit all day long!”

“You’ve lost your mind, haven’t you? As though following you –”

“I’m sick of this! We have the radio telling us everything that we don’t need to hear already, don’t we? Can’t you just shut up about it?”

“Well I can’t, can I? Maybe I’m too stupid for this. Not everybody is as clever as the Chosen One, after all,” Ron hissed.

Harry gave a soundless laugh. “Is this the best you can do? Call me the Chosen One? How original,” he sneered. He was clutching his wand, but he wasn’t planning on raising it.

Ron licked his lips, as if trying to let go of the tension. His voice was calmer when he talked again. “You’re defending that snake and you expect me to simply ignore it. Ginny’s with him. He could do anything he wanted to her and he’d get away with it. I don’t suppose you care.”

There was a sudden kick in Harry’s heart; by the pain of it, Harry felt his own anger subside. “I didn’t defend him. I just can’t — keep having to talk about it. Isn’t it enough that we watched him do it?”

Ron shook his head. “Ginny’s with him –”

“Ginny is with the rest of the Gryffindors. And no one is going to harm her. McGonagall is there. She’d kick Snape’s arse if he went near a Gryffindor.”

He didn’t believe half of what he was saying, but Ron needed to believe it. All Harry could do was hope that McGonagall would be indeed capable of protecting the students. And herself.

“Just like Dumbledore did?” Ron asked. “Do you want to know what I think, Harry? I think Dumbledore was the one we shouldn’t have trusted. I think if he was stupid enough to have a traitor under his nose the whole time, perhaps the rest of his plans were just as shitty too. Perhaps he didn’t even have a plan. Perhaps he was so lost he didn’t dare tell the Order that he failed. And that’s why I don’t trust you.”

For a moment, Harry just stared. Then nodded. “Fine. You don’t trust me. No one keeps you here, you know.”

“I know,” Ron said, as a matter of fact, and then there was nothing more to say.
When Hermione came back from her walk, there was a strange stillness around them, for which Harry was grateful. She didn’t seem to have realised that there had been a fight between them while she was out, but the tension was still tangible on the air.

“I saw a squirrel,” she said, and it was the hushed tone of her voice that startled him more than the fact that she pulled the squirrel’s tiny corpse out of her jacket. “Anyone hungry?”

She unzipped her jacket and pulled off her gloves. Somewhere far away, a wolf howled desperately, and its cry resembled Remus’ so much that Harry shivered. The fresh snow on Hermione’s hair hadn’t melted yet, and she brushed it off fast.

They roasted the squirrel in silence; as the skinned body of the animal slowly transformed to something admittedly more edible, Harry tried not to think of how Snape was probably getting off knowing that he used him. He tried not to size up the chances that he had told the other Death Eaters, or even Voldemort himself. He tried to dismiss the probability that, for all he knew, whatever he had ever felt for Snape could have been implanted. But no. That wasn’t true.

The degradation he was feeling now, at least, – the anger – was entirely his own. Repulsion was digging inside him at nights, making it impossible for him to clear his mind as he had been telling him to do all along.

_Hate_, he thought, when Hermione eased the fire and placed a small bite of meat against Ron’s lips. _Hate_, when his scar didn’t hurt, for Voldemort knew how to give nothing away anymore, and when the damned flies stuck on their skin due to their self-abandonment and general filth.

Later that night, when he clutched at the torn blanket tightly, his knuckles going numb, his eyes fixed up at the absolute darkness that their tent was drenched in, and when the first tears of the night began to tickle his temples traitorously, he was sure it was hate.
“Now, Severus, the sword! Do not forget that it must be taken under conditions of need and valour — and he must not know that you give it! If Voldemort should read Harry’s mind and see you acting for him — ”

“I know,” Severus cut him.

He approached Dumbledore’s portrait and pulled it aside; the sword of Gryffindor was there, cold and heavy. He held it in his hands and for a moment he feared it’d burn him. He’d deserve it.

Phineas was watching carefully from his own portrait; Severus considered turning the sword to himself and ending it all. Pointless thoughts. Sacrifices were foolish, and for once, the boy wasn’t. None of the portraits interrupted his silent hesitations. None of them needed to.

“And you still aren’t going to tell me why it’s so important to give Harry the sword?”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Dumbledore. “He will know what to do with it. And be careful, Severus…”

“Don’t worry, Dumbledore,” he said coolly. “I have a plan.”

“The blood traitor has left them,” Phineas’ portrait interrupted. “Good for him, good…”

Severus stayed tense for a brief moment. He turned to Dumbledore. “Weasley.”

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “Young Weasley will find his way back.”

“How?” Severus spat as he pulled on his travelling cloak. The weight of responsibility pressing his chest was suddenly cutting its way out. His heart pounded with a familiar panic. “How do you know? How do you even know any of this is going to work?”

Dumbledore smiled. “Look again behind my portrait.”

He should have seen this coming. He should have known better than not have a plan of his own. At the far end of the cabinet, there was a strange silver device that resembled a lighter. Severus picked it up.

“What you’re holding in your hands is a very powerful object... I have designed only two, and I dare say they are unique.”

“What does it do?”

“Its twin is quite harmless – removes and restores light, mostly. This one, can turn its twin into a portkey with a click.”

Severus listened carefully.

“If you light it, it immediately transfers the owner of its twin to you. Do you understand?”

“Harry.”
“No, not Harry. But if Harry finds himself in danger tonight, I want you to light it and then disappear.”

“Weasley, then.”

“Severus, please.”

For a long moment Severus was afraid he wouldn’t do it. Then he lowered his eyes to the sword. “You expect me to follow all these orders without a hint of honesty.”

Phineas laughed. “Headmaster, now, you should know better than that! You shouldn't be wasting your time with these kids...”

“We appreciate your concerns, Phineas,” Dumbledore said. “Harry’s friends are loyal to him,” he continued, looking at Severus. “Harry must not see you tonight.”

“I'll take care of it.”

Later that night, Severus did as he was told. Amongst the tall trees of the forest, he saw Harry, and his heart jumped in pain, and at how much he had missed him. *Forgive me,* he thought, but he remained hidden.

“Just look at the sky,” Harry said. Severus did; the dark mark was hovering there, above their heads, between thick clouds of smoke.

“It’s dangerous here,” Severus told him. “Go.”

Harry laughed. “Do you ever have fun? Do you? Ever?”

Severus jumped up panting and grabbed his wand before he realised he had been dreaming. He let the wand fall on the duvet and covered his face with a hand. Outside his chambers, someone was crying in pain. It must have been what woke him up. He wore his robe and emerged to his door, only to find another wounded first year trembling in fear.

The child was clutching his arm tightly, seeming lost in the endless corridors of the dungeons. And of course, he was a Gryffindor. *The joy never ends.*

“What happened?”

The kid shook his head. “I was just — heading — dorms, sir.”

Severus pointed at the bloodied arm. “Who did this to you?”

Silence. Sobbing.

“Do you know how to find your way to the infirmary?”

“I — no.”

“Wait for me here.”

As he dressed himself, Severus thought of the looks he’d get, bringing yet another hurt child to the hospital wing in the middle of the night. He hadn’t signed up for this. Hogwarts was out of his control.
Harry had not expected Hermione to still have that book, so he was surprised when he saw her reading it. “It’s pure rubbish,” he kept saying to her, but nonetheless she was determined to read all of it. In times of despair, even Skeeter’s twisted assumptions were a distraction.

“...Albus Dumbledore, of course, was always the weakest of the two,” Hermione read. “Unfortunately, his brilliance was not enough to overpower Gellert Grindelwald; the friendship in question ended mysteriously just in time for Dumbledore to rise. History claims that Dumbledore was the noble one; the one who meant no harm. But history is always narrated by the winner, and the other side of the story still remains unknown.”

Harry rolled on his back and stared at her incredulously. She sat straighter on her seat and returned the look. “I know. She makes him look evil.”

“No,” Harry said. “She makes him look stupid. If Dumbledore wanted to harm people he’d have done so. Like, years ago.”

“You think it’s true, though?” Ron asked. “That he lied about what really happened? They were friends, how come he killed him with no remorse at all?”

Harry shrugged. “We won’t find out from Skeeter, Ron.”

Ron laughed. “Yeah. Probably.”

Harry laughed too. As much as he couldn’t keep this cloud of vague sadness out of his mind, the appearance of the mysterious doe, the recovery of Gryffindor’s sword, and above all, Ron’s return, made Harry so happy that he could barely keep a straight face.

“It’s getting worse,” Hermione warned. “In 1945, just before the tragic events surrounding the death of Grindelwald…’ I can’t believe she calls this duel tragic. One of the most –”

“Go on, we know she’s horrible,” Ron said.

“In 1945,” she repeated, “fourteen murders of muggle individuals were reported. After Grindelwald’s death, he was blamed for them all. It would be convenient to believe that Dumbledore’s testimony helped the system of justice close the case. One could assume, by testifying, he helped himself too.”

“What is that?” Ron asked.

“She’s saying Dumbledore was killing muggles and blamed it on Grindelwald later on,” said Harry.

“Since Grindelwald wasn’t alive anymore to claim otherwise,” Hermione added. “It can’t be true. It’s outraging. Ridiculous.”

“Reasonable,” Harry said. “What? We can’t know for sure, can we?”

Hermione’s expression changed. “You can’t believe Dumbledore would do this.”

“No. Yes. I… I don’t now what to believe anymore, actually.”

“You think he killed people?” asked Hermione.

Harry didn’t respond. Dumbledore had certainly killed people. Harry wasn’t sure if anyone deserved
to die, even in times of war. “We know he did.”

“Have you found anything that’s actually important?” Ron asked.

Hermione nodded. “Rumours, mostly. But they add to his profile like missing pieces of a puzzle. Dumbledore was a famous man. People tended to talk about him a lot. It’s not like she proves anything, but she does provide names of people who knew him.”

“That’s all?” Ron asked.

“Yes. Oh, and… well. She does imply some other stuff as well. But that’s just… about him and Grindelwald. That… they were - romantically involved.”


“Skeeter is twisted,” Harry spat. “I don’t get how they allowed her to publish that. Someone should sue her.” It took a moment for realisation to hit, and for Harry to be reminded that they were in the middle of a war; suing someone over rumours wasn’t a priority. All of them laughed; the laughter filled the room like warmth.
“Good evening, Dumbledore,” said Severus.

The blue eyes sparkled with hatred as the old man got to his feet and left the plate he was cleaning aside; Severus thought he saw fear too; in the next blink, it was gone. “You... You dare come here. What do you want? Get out!”

“You assume I left the castle in the middle of the night because I missed you and your filthy pig pub? I’m afraid I had to.” The men behind Severus had already their wands out. Without being ordered to do so.

“Rowle, tell your men to keep their excitement to themselves. We’re not here to kill.”

Severus looked around to make sure that they were alone. There were no customers in sight. Thick dust was covering the bar and the tables. “The Hog’s Head isn’t a very honourable place any more, is it?” He slid a finger across the wood testily.

“And what do you know about honour, Snape?”

What he knew, in the silence that followed, was that honour was only what a man knew about himself. Aberforth Dumbledore would once step in fire to guarantee that Severus was loyal to his brother. But this wasn’t important now.

“There are rumours,” Severus said instead. “I’ve heard... stories about my students. From my students. And it is my duty to look after their safety, you see.”

Aberforth shook his head with a scoff. “Congratulations. I hope you do so, then.”

“You don’t, actually.” Severus gave him a cold smile. “It has been reported that you have been assisting a rebellious group of Gryffindors who wish to flee the castle, Aberforth.”

“He’s a Gryffindor piece of shit himself, why wouldn’t he?” Rowle spat.

“Silence,” Severus said in a low voice. Then, turning to Aberforth again, “Well?”

“Well, your rumours can’t be true, I’m afraid, because Gryffindors would never flee the castle like cowards. I think the right question would be if I’m helping them fight you.”

Severus nodded impatiently. “So, do you?”

Aberforth stared steadily for a moment. Then, “no.”

It ran in the family; there was no doubt. The Dumbledore gene was meant to fuck with him and ridicule his entire being again and again. For ever.

“You lead a resistance, and you think you can do it behind my back and get out of it alive? You are a fool, like your brother. You wish to have the same end?”

“Who knows? Maybe I do. My brother did have dignity and courage until his last breath, after all.”

“And you see how his courage helped him!” another Death Eater said between laughs. Aberforth never took his eyes from Severus’.

Parentheses: Aberforth Dumbledore
The circumstances weren’t extraordinary. Severus would rather be sleeping and fighting his familiar nightmares than being here, trying to protect yet another irresponsible Dumbledore. The sudden anger made him squint. “I am here to warn you, you fool. I wouldn’t be so calm if I were you, sitting here and enjoying this charade. Should a coup happen in Hogwarts you’d be the first to blame, along with the these stupid children who have no idea what they’re doing!”

“A coup has already happened in Hogwarts, you murderer.”

A burning sensation pierced Severus’ shoulder before he could raise his own wand. He only understood that he was bleeding when the warmth spread on his skin inside his cloak. Aberforth attacked him with another unspoken spell, and then another. Severus stepped back and pointed his wand at Dumbledore’s face but said nothing. He clutched his shoulder. The steps behind him came closer and he heard the other Death Eaters drawing their wands.

“If any of you casts a curse on this man I will kill you myself,” he warned. “I have orders,” he lied. “Search everything.”

The men rushed upstairs and behind the bar, opening drawers and smashing doors. When no one was paying attention to them anymore, Severus stopped pushing at the wound to look at his bloodied hand. “You will regret this,” he said bitterly.

“I’m sure I will,” Aberforth said confidentially. “What are you going to do to me, Headmaster?”

Aberforth crossed his arms over his chest, his wand still visible under the long beard. Severus shook his head. “You think I’m the worst thing that can happen to you? The Dark Lord sent me here, you stupid old man. The rumours spread and grow and they’re all against you. All of them. I demand to know what you’re doing. I demand to know how. How you communicate with them. The castle is being guarded day and night. The Dark Lord has provided his best defences.”

The blue eyes smiled in a painfully familiar way. “Then I suppose his best defences are not good enough.”

“Azkaban or death. That is your fate. Do you care?”

“We share the same fate, I see,” Aberforth said, his voice entirely calm.

Severus’ hand remained steady on his own shoulder. He gritted his teeth to keep his himself from wincing.

“Who was the woman Albus couldn’t save?” The words were blurted out of his mouth before he could help it. Curiosity killed the cat; it kept Severus alive only to torture him further.

The old man furrowed his brows in disbelief, and then his eyes widened.

“Nothing,” Selwyn said, descending the staircase with quick steps. He gave a nasty look to Aberforth and then turned to Severus. “Maybe the grandpa here needs a little push to spill out his secrets.” He raised his wand.

“Or maybe we shouldn’t waste our time on another fool,” Severus stopped him. “He and his lot will get what they deserve, sooner or later.” He approached Aberforth, his own wand lowered. “This is the first and the last warning. You cannot win this war. Stay away from the children.”

“Children,” Aberforth repeated, his eyes still wide. “Three of these children have managed to escape the Malfoy manor, break into the world’s safest bank and steal from the Ministry in a single year. These children are greater than you’ll ever be, Snape.”
They are, Severus silently agreed.
Severus’s blood froze as the Dark Mark burned intensely and made him skip a breath. A young Slytherin boy opened his bedroom’s door without knocking, his face pale and panicked. He spoke the words Severus feared the most:

“Harry Potter is in the castle.”

No one had ever told Severus that it was fear that resembled stillness more than grief. The boy’s grey eyes were wide as he stood at the doorframe; war was something people always sensed like the worms sense earthquakes.

And what could a worm do to prevent an earthquake?

He changed into his robes quickly, and with every moment he spent ignoring the Dark Lord’s demands his arm hurt more. His fingers didn’t tremble as he buckled his belt nor as he slipped into his shoes. Dragging the box that was hidden under his bed, he opened it quickly and looked at the old photo with the torn corners. A young Severus Snape smiled at him, as Lily Evans pulled at his dark green scarf and hugged him.

“Inferio,” he whispered without the slightest hesitation. All evidence against him should be destroyed.

The castle was silent as he strode to the tower. When Severus was a student, it was believed that the castle could whisper. Well. Hogwarts couldn’t whisper, but all the people inside it whispered, alive or dead. Always. They never stopped.

He raced into the corridor until he heard the familiar rustle of a long dressing gown. He stopped short, his fingers clenching around his wand.

“Who’s there?” Minerva’s voice echoed.

Severus kept his voice low as he stepped forward. “It is I,” he said. Minerva’s eyes darted to her left before she raised her chin and stared at him steadily.

“Where are the Carrows?” he asked in the same tone.

“Wherever you told them to be, I expect, Severus.”

They weren’t alone. The sudden impulse to reach out and pull that sodding cloak off Harry’s head was suppressed by the reasoning reminder that he’d be forced to turn him to the Dark Lord if he encountered him in front of witnesses. Maybe he should risk it. The time had come. Harry would die tonight. Severus’ job was to educate him on all the crucial details that proved just that.

And there was still a role to play.

“I was under the impression,” he said, “that Alecto had apprehended an intruder.”

“Really?” Minerva was a clever woman. If Dumbledore had trusted her more… “And what gave you that impression?”

His arm’s muscles twitched as the Mark burned him again.

“Oh, but naturally,” Minerva said, her face colder than ever, “You Death Eaters have your own
private means of communication, I forgot.”

Severus pretended to not have heard her. He wasn’t beyond stupefying her if that’s what it’d take for him to stay alone with Harry. He’d have to take him to his office. Dumbledore’s portrait would verify the truth. But Potter was still wearing the cloak, or had slipped away from them already.

“I did not know that it was your night to patrol the corridors, Minerva,” he tried.

“You have some objection?”

“I wonder what could have brought you out of you bed at this hour?” he pressed.

“I thought I heard a disturbance.”

“Really? But all seems calm.” Severus looked into her eyes. “Have you seen Harry Potter, Minerva? Because if you have, I must insist—”

Minerva’s wand slashed through the air and for a split second Severus was caught off guard. The Shielding Charm was the first he could throw speechlessly. He looked around for Harry even as he fought a fire that rose from a torch and surrounded him. The flames roared at him like a dragon before attacking again. Harry, he had to find Harry…

The fire descended and rose again even higher, changing within seconds to become a swarm of pursuing daggers. Severus dodged them by instantly crouching before jumping up to mouth another spell. The pain of the wound Aberforth gave him a week ago made him skip a heartbeat at the new contact with fire.

Then Slughorn and Filius and Sprout were there too, pointing their wands at him from different directions, looking at him with pride and defiance. He could eliminate them with a single spell, if he wanted to; he blocked their spells however with the most careful of defences. Harry was nowhere to be seen.

“No!” squeaking Filius, raising his wand and stepping forward. “You’ll do no more murder at Hogwarts!”

It all happened at once: The Armour suit behind Severus burst to life and fell unto him; Severus pushed it back with all his strength and watched it as it bounced on thin air before crashing on the wall. Harry was here. It was useless. He would never manage to approach him without killing them all. It wasn’t the right moment. There is never going to be a right moment to announce to a young child that he has to die. Feeling the spells crashing on his back, he managed a last attack and ran to the nearest classroom. Breaking the window with a simple spell, he flew away.

“Fuck,” Severus murmured as he unbuttoned his coat to see the new wounds forming on his skin. He repeated the word on purpose, preferring talking to himself to biting his tongue. The healing spells stung more than he remembered; he’d never mastered the art of healing with spells, and his potions were far away now. The tree on which he was resting against was older than time; it looked exactly the same as all the trees around him.

The Slytherins loved the Forbidden Forest; it was the perfect place for illegal magic and mischievous practices. It was also a good place for the loners to spend time in during the hot days of summer. Severus knew this place well. He knew every bit of Hogwarts as well as his own face. It was the finest of ironies that this spot, the one he particularly liked, the one he particularly enjoyed sitting at, was destined to become Albus Fucking Dumbledore’s last home.
Carefully, he healed every scar on his body and stopped the bleeding from a wound on his leg that seemed to be deeper than the rest. The wound on his left arm remained. It throbbed repeatedly, begging to be respected, begging to be obeyed. Rolling his sleeve up, he pressed his wand on the Mark and closed his eyes.

He opened them again as a maddening pain attacked his head, making him roll on the side. The Dark Lord’s voice echoed in his head loud and clear, so clear it could be coming from his own mouth.

*Give me Harry Potter, and you will be rewarded. You have until midnight.*

The words were repeated again and again, until the splitting pain stopped and the silence of the forest swallowed him. When his head stopped spinning, he steadied himself and looked at the tomb before him with the same coldness it stared back at him.

“This isn’t the best you could have done,” he whispered. “This is shit.”

With these last words, he waved his wand firmly and flew further into the woods, in a cave no one could find unless they knew what they were looking for. Severus marched in without wasting any time; it took him only a few minutes to encounter the creatures he had heard so much about but had never seen with his own eyes. The terror he should be feeling wasn’t there. It was saving itself for something worse.

“In the name of the Dark Lord, I command you to fight for your one true Master,” he said coldly. The huge spider looked at him. “Fight for him, and you will be given everything you wish. Fight against him and you will face your fate. By dawn, Hogwarts will belong to him.”

For a moment nothing happened, and Severus wasn’t even sure that the animal had understood. Then, slowly, the spider spoke. “We will fight for Hogwarts.”

And Severus would fight to keep the Dark Lord’s trust, with any cost. “*Avada Kedavra,*” he said silky, his wand at hand. He watched as a dozen of smaller spiders rolled on their backs and stayed still. He turned to their leader. “Fight for the Dark Lord, or face your fate,” he repeated.

After a moment, the spider started walking obediently. Countless hairy spiders behind it followed. “To the yard,” Severus instructed.

The giant spiders were climbing over the edge of the castle, pushing themselves through broken windows and collapsed walls. Severus fired a stunning spell and he fell to his knees as the ground vibrated by a loud explosion. The curses fell all over around him as the wild creatures and giants made their way through the ruins.

“Severus!”

A hand grabbed on his shoulder and helped him unto his feet. Severus grabbed Avery’s cloak and shook him. “Where is Potter? Did you – did you see him?”

“No one has,” Avery screamed to be heard over the loud noise of the curses. Severus dodged the curses that were meant to hit him reflexively. They walked backwards until they turned behind a wall.

“If you see the boy, summon me. It is important, I must be the one to take him to the Dark Lord, you understand?”

“Why so, Severus? *Crucio!*”
A young boy screamed and collapsed on the grass. “I have orders,” Severus shouted. It wasn’t important for his lies to be careful now. No one would check or ask the Dark Lord for verification in the middle of a battle. “I have orders, you understand? Find me Potter, the boy must be found alive – if you find him summon me and only me!”

Avery nodded absent-mindedly before surging back to the battlefield. Severus broke the house elves’s door with a spell and crouched down to pass through it. The castle was on fire. The smoke was thick and caused his eyes to sting as he hurried to check everything that was in sight. Spiders were running to all directions, passing over unmoving bodies and leaving the sticky glue of their web on everything they touched. Someone crashed on Severus and Severus stooped low again, seizing her and clenching his fingers around the student’s arm.

“Have you seen Harry Potter?”

The girl shook her head frantically. Her face was wet; her eyes red. Severus let her go. He climbed up the closest stairs, his wand pointed at his every step as more giants broke in and more walls collapsed. Stunning spells flew over him, knocking down whoever they reached. The fire was so close that Severus felt his own hair burning. His Patronus would find Harry before he would. If he found an empty room, an apothecary, anything to cast it without being seen…

“Move, move!” a familiar voice called. Severus squinted his eyes to see Slughorn leading a group of students to the exit. Their eyes met; Severus ran.

“Alecto!” Severus raised his wand with determination to fight another curse that almost landed between his eyes. Alecto sprinted off towards him as soon as she saw him. He coughed hard against his fist and steadied himself against the wall at the vibration of another explosion. “Where is Potter?”

“Here,” she said loudly to his ear. “He was in the Ravenclaw Tower. He was looking for something, Merlin knows what!”

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know! Someone opened the Chamber of Secrets, you heard that? The –” she coughed hard too, before casting a curse at someone, “the bathroom is not accessible anymore. It has to be him, yes?”

Severus nodded.

“Avada Kedavra!” she screamed, rising to her feet in excitement. Severus didn’t turn to see who had been killed. He wiped his face on his sleeve and blinked rapidly against the clouds of dust as he ran to the girls’ bathroom. He had to be alive – he had to be alive fighting somewhere in the castle – he could not allow himself to think that something had happened – not yet –

“Harry!” he shouted, stopping short and looking around at all the dead people and all the people that would soon be dead too. Nothing would satisfy his need for revenge now. Nothing but killing the Dark Lord with his own hands. These were his students. He’d taught them things. He should have never been mean to defenceless children. He pushed the tiny body before him with his boot and it rolled on its back. The brown eyes stared at the ceiling in the same way they once looked at Severus as they were crying with shame. He had humiliated this kid, more than once. He had humiliated all these kids more than once. And now, this seemed the most idiotic thing in the world. Potions. Who the hell cared if this boy couldn’t master a potion?

You did.
Severus shot again, this time aiming at a Death Eater who had his back turned at him. He hurtled down as the Death Eater fell unconscious to the ground. Unable to control the speed of the curses that were attacking him, Severus hustled into the corridor and blocked the curses that thundered past. There were members of the Order here, as well; he stood there unmoving for a second, not daring to throw curses at these particular people. And then he did.

“Expulso!”

The ground shook under his feet and he crashed against the wall. “Sectumsempra!”

Tonks passed right in front of him, following someone who was running to the other end of the corridor. She appeared to not have noticed him. A masked Death Eater punched him lightly on the shoulder. The shoulder that would need massive healing once all this was over.

“Where’s your mask?” the Death Eater asked.

Severus shook his head. If he had any chance to make Harry listen to him, he’d lose it completely if he went after him wearing a Death Eater mask. “I lost it.”

“You all right?”

Severus nodded again. “Have you seen Potter?”

“He was at the front doors, Yaxley almost had him. Then he put that thing on and disappeared.”

If he had casted his Patronus already this would have been solved out. He had to get out of Hogwarts. Go somewhere safe and send the doe to bring him Harry. He’d followed it once; he’d follow it again if he saw it now.

There were more Death Eaters over the stairs and outside the Great Hall. Where the tables used to be, now there was only death and grief. In the courtyard, duellers could be seen even as far as the lake; and right there, in front of him, the body of Remus Lupin was lying on the mudded grass. Tonks hugged him tightly, her arms clutched around him as she cried and cried, her wand recklessly abandoned aside. His mark burned him so deeply he thought his bones would shatter. He twitched his arm and almost fell backwards by another curse.

“Severus, Severus wait!”

Lucius panted heavily as he dragged him behind a tree. “Where’s Draco?”

Severus looked at him aghast as the new terror sank in. “I thought he was with you.”

“He’s not, have you seen him? Severus, please.”

Severus shook his head. “I haven’t. I thought you’d have the mind to keep him away from this.”

Lucius seemed lunatic. He nodded to himself, looking at his own feet, then bit his lip and shook his head. “The Dark Lords wishes to see you.”

“What? Now?”

“Now, he sent me to bring you to him. Now.”

“I can’t leave the battle now. I’ll find Potter first and then I’ll—”

Lucius grabbed him by the collar and pushed him against the tree. “Listen to me, Severus, I’m not
going to lose my son tonight, you understand? He says he wants to see you, so you go and see what he wants! It is my job to make this clear to you and if I don’t he’ll — let Draco — die — I can’t — do you understand? Do you understand?’”

Despite his hatred, Lucius’ eyes were glistening with tears.

“I’ll find Potter first, and then I’ll bring him to him. Tell him that,” Severus insisted.

“Are we not friends, Severus? Do you want Draco to die? He’ll never let me search for him, I have to, you have to understand…”

Severus opened his mouth to retort, but Lucius pushed him back again. “Please! Please, I’ll search for Potter too. I’ll summon you if I find him. I’ll… I’ll let you have the honour of saying that you were the one who caught him, it doesn’t matter.”

He wouldn’t search for Harry. He would only search for Draco. And Draco was another boy who didn’t deserve to die but would most likely have to. If he was quick with whatever the Dark Lord wanted, he’d have the chance to flee the battle now and find a quiet place to cast his Patronus. Then he’d wait for Harry to come to him and he’d explain everything to him. He’d tell him that Dumbledore had been cursed and that Harry carried Tom Riddle’s soul inside him. He’d tell him what he’d have to do.

“Where is he now?” Severus asked.


“My Lord,” murmured Severus as he dropped on his knees and kissed the hem of the Dark Lord’s robes. “You requested my presence?”

“Yes, Severus. Rise.” Severus stood, trying to not be distracted by the huge snake that was swirling and hissing as it hovered over their heads in a magical sphere.

“Do you care for Hogwarts, my friend?” the Dark Lord asked. His red eyes looked directly at Severus’.

“I… respect the castle, my Lord. Salazar Slytherin has taken care of –”

“Yes, yes, I am aware of history. I wish to know the nature of your feelings now, that the castle is being destroyed.”

Severus allowed himself a moment of silence. He then smiled. “My Lord, the castle can be rebuilt after your victory. This victory shall come even if, along with the old ideas, an old castle must collapse.”

“Hm.” The Dark Lord seemed satisfied with his answer. “You are clever, Severus. You have always been. Tell me, what did you do every time you were in need of help, so far?”

“I came to you, my Lord.”

“Why?”

“Where else would I go, my Lord?”

“Where did you go tonight, when you needed help, Severus?”
For a teetering second, Severus hesitated. “To the Forbidden Forest, my Lord. I commanded the spiders to fight for you.”

“You were seen near Dumbledore’s tomb. Why did you go there?”

“I passed by it. I had to make a stop to heal a wound. It was only a coincidence that I stopped there.”

“He took you in, once.”

Severus’ answer was already at the tip of his tongue. “You took me in twice.” Then, “My Lord, why did you call me here? I would be more useful to you in the battle, and I can promise to bring you Potter alive, just let me…”

“This isn’t the right moment, no.”

“Please, my Lord, the resistance is crumbling –”

“— and it is doing so without your help. Skilled wizard though you are, Severus, I do not think you will make much difference now. We are almost there… almost.”

He was wasting time. “Let me find the boy. Let me bring you Potter. I know I can find him, my Lord. Please.”

If another Death Eater found him first, they’d torture him. They’d kill him right there and then. He’d promised Dumbledore to not fail at this. All these deaths couldn’t have been for nothing.

The Dark Lord stood up, his hands stroking the Elder Wand elegantly. “I have a problem, Severus,” he said.

“My Lord?”

The Dark Lord clenched his fingers around the wand as he raised it up and showed it to Severus.

“Why doesn’t it work for me, Severus?”

The snake hissed from its sphere, as though repeating the question.

“My — my lord?” muttered Severus. “I do not understand. You have performed extraordinary magic with that wand.”

“No. I have performed my usual magic. I am extraordinary, but this wand… no. It has not revealed the wonders it has promised. I feel no difference between this wand and the one I procured from Ollivander all those years ago. No difference,” he repeated.

He had to get out of here. He had to find Harry. He’d been trapped like a mouse. Not now, not after everything he had done to gain the trust of this monster, not after all the sacrifices…

“I have thought long and hard, Severus… do you know why I have called you back from the battle?”

Severus didn’t speak. Didn’t think of how he had to find Harry. Didn’t feel the terror, the shame of failing, the pain of never seeing Harry again. The only thing that was in his mind, was the truth.

*I’m going to die.*

“No, my Lord, but I beg you will let me return. Let me find Potter,” he said.
The Dark Lord laughed; the sound of it wasn’t different that the snake’s hissing. “You sound like Lucius. Neither of you understands Potter as I do. He does not need finding. Potter will come to me. I know his weakness you see, his one great flaw. He will hate watching the others struck down around him, knowing that it is for him that it happens. He will want to stop it at any cost. He will come.”

If he had casted the Patronus while he was in the forest, if he had thought about it earlier… “But my Lord, he might be killed accidentally by someone other than yourself—”

“My instructions to the Death Eaters have been perfectly clear. Capture Potter. Kill his friends — the more, the better — but do not kill him. But it is of you that I wished to speak, Severus, not Harry Potter. You have been very valuable to me. Very valuable.”

Severus took a calming breath. It didn’t calm him. “My Lord knows I seek only to serve him. But — let me go and find the boy, my Lord. Let me bring him to you. I know I can—”

“I have told you, no! My concern at the moment, Severus, is what will happen when I finally meet the boy!”

“My Lord, there can be no question, surely—?”

“—but there is a question, Severus. There is. Why did both the wands I have used fail when directed at Harry Potter?”

“I — I cannot answer that, my Lord,” he said. He’d been caught lying. The Dark Lord knew. He had figured it out.

“Can’t you? My wand of yew did everything of which I asked it, Severus, except to kill Harry Potter. Twice it failed. Ollivander told me under torture of the twin cores, told me to take another’s wand. I did so, but Lucius’s wand shattered upon meeting Potter’s.”

“I — I have no explanation, my Lord.”

Severus looked at the snake, and it looked back at him with the anger the Dark Lord was hiding. He thought of Harry, because he could not think of anything else. The stupid snake seemed to understand, somehow; it attacked the solid sphere again and again with its teeth.

“I sought a third wand, Severus,” the Dark Lord continued. Severus didn’t have to hear the rest. He knew it. He could foresee every single word.

“The Elder Wand cannot serve me properly, Severus, because I am not its true master. The Elder Wand belongs to the wizard who killed its last owner. You killed Albus Dumbledore. While you live, Severus, the Elder Wand cannot truly be mine.”

“My Lord!” Severus spat at last, as he raised his wand.

“It cannot be any other way,” the Dark Lord said naturally. “I must master the wand, Severus. Master the wand, and I master Potter at last.”

Then the Dark Lord waved the Elder Wand and with a single motion the snake’s cage began rolling toward him, still hovering in midair; before he knew it his own head was trapped in the rolling sphere and he dropped his wand, trying to push it with his hands, stepping back, shouting — the teeth sank deep in his throat, and his screams could no longer be heard. He fell to the ground and gave in to the pain, the sphere filling with his own blood, reaching up to his chin as the snake clenched its jaw tightly. The world faded to the darkest terror he had ever imagined; Severus closed his eyes.
Stay conscious, he told himself, don’t die, as he pressed his fingers against his neck. He could hear the sound of steps approaching him, and he prepared himself for the last curse that was in store for him. When he opened them, he saw Harry. He tried to talk, but the only sound that came out of his throat was the gargling in his own thick blood. Severus tried to touch his face, but he failed, and he at last grabbed on his shirt. He pulled him close, but he wanted closer, closer…

Using all the strength he had left, he forced his memories to come out of his mind. He knew it wasn’t perfect, there were random memories coming out as well, memories he’d never want Harry to see, but they didn’t have time, he didn’t –

“Take it… Take it…”

Harry did, looking curiously at him, his face betrayed once again, the pain in his eyes unbearable for Severus to watch. Kiss me, he wanted to say, but he didn’t deserve to, and he’d meet Harry again soon anyway, as there was surely a place in hell reserved especially for all the people who were foolish enough to place a war above themselves and upon love.

I only loved you as much as a traitor can love, he thought. I would have loved you more, if I had sat in that small room, listening to your nonsense more carefully. But I didn’t. And I still loved you more than anything. Forgive me.

“Look… at… me…” he choked out instead, for they didn’t have time – they never had, never – and there were still things to be done more important than him and Harry. The bright green eyes looked at him, lost, terrified, crying. You are beautiful, Severus thought. Have I ever told you? He should now, but he was tired, and he closed his eyes shut against the face that had somehow become his whole world, resting into the only embrace he had ever loved.
Time, Harry thought, was like walking backward away from something — say, from a kiss. First there’d be the kiss; then the stepping back, and the eyes filling up his vision, then the eyes framed in the face as he’d step further away; the face then would be part of a body, then the body would be framed in a doorway, and then, the doorway would be too framed in the trees beside it.

The path would grow longer and the door smaller, the trees filling up his sight and the door would be lost — then the path would be lost in the woods too and the woods would be lost in the hills.

And somewhere in the centre, there would still be the kiss.

_This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter, and I shall find you, and I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour._

The voice spoke directly in Harry’s head. Harry couldn’t care less.

Another voice added something else, and he had the impression that he knew that voice well, and then Ron’s face was in front of him and was blocking the face he really wanted to see. “Get lost, Ron!” he screamed. “Go, go!”

“Harry…” Hermione started.

“Leave! Both of you,” he croaked. “I want to be alone.”

It was only when the Shack’s door closed behind him, that he pushed at the chest of the lifeless body before him with all his might. The sobs he had been holding back all evening bursted out desperately, drowning his lungs in a grief he never thought possible. “No, no…” he repeated again and again, the useless tears running down his face and chin. He passed his hand through Snape’s bloodied hair, looking at his pale face. “No…” He was unable to speak, unable to breath, but he kept pushing at Snape’s chest, begging to sense a heartbeat, praying to hear a breath. Nothing happened.

Harry wanted to lie down, to hug him and tell him that he was sorry. He didn’t know what for. He didn’t know anything. The loneliness sucked him up and choked him. He couldn’t leave him here. Snape wouldn’t have left him. But this wasn’t true, because Snape had betrayed him, and killed Dumbledore, and worshiped Voldemort until the end. He would turn Harry to Voldemort. He would be proud of having done so. “Stop it!” he cried out, gasping with every word. “Stop it, I’m sorry, stop, stop…”

He cried like his heart had been shredded to pieces. “You promised!” he yelled, and before he knew it, there were hands touching him from behind, and Hermione’s voice saying something, and he flinched away as he closed his eyes and tried to will the image of a dead Severus Snape away. “You promised! You promised!” he kept crying.

No one answered.

If someone asked him, Harry wouldn’t have been able to recall how he found himself at the Great Hall, nor how he managed to get himself out of the Shrieking Shack and stop his tongue from spilling everything out to his friends right there and then. He stared at the bodies of Remus and
Tonks with apathy, and he watched as Molly Weasley held her dead son in her arms. All these deaths had happened because of him, and there was nothing he could do to change it.

A numbness at the back of his mind denied it all; like a tiny voice, it seemed, that was trying to convince him that none of this was real. He almost expected the corpses to start breathing again; to see all of them standing and clapping and announcing that everything was just a sick joke. Everyone was unnaturally silent. The dead lay in a row and the living didn’t dare to grieve them. Grieving would mean acceptance. Remus was dead. Tonks was dead. Fred was dead too.

And Severus… Severus…

Harry ran to the marble staircase, wishing to escape everything, hoping to never have to stop running unless he’d gotten so far that none of this would hold any importance to him anymore. The corridors were empty but the torches were lit; not a single ghost was in sight as Harry stopped before the Gargoyle guarding the Headmaster’s office.

“Password?”

“Dumbledore!” said Harry in despair, but he didn’t have the strength to feel thankful when the stone shifted and revealed the familiar staircase. The walls of the office were empty; everything seemed to have remained untouched from the battle that had half the castle collapse. The Pensieve was were it had always been; not a single trace of dust was covering it. Harry leaned over it and poured inside the memories Severus had given him.

He had to know, whatever Severus thought he should leave behind for Harry to see. No matter what it was, it was Severus’s, and much to Harry’s self hatred, that still meant something.

The memories swirled, and Harry dived.

He found himself in a green park; a young red-haired girl was sitting on the grass, her back resting against a tall tree as she was reading a book. Behind another tree, a dark haired boy with saggy clothes and pale skin was watching her. The boy stepped on a twig and the girl jumped up at the sound.

“Who’s there?”

The boy squared his shoulders, and after a moment of hesitation he revealed himself. “I’m sorry – I – I saw you were here and wanted to say hi.”

“You’re the boy from yesterday. You were watching me and Tuney and now you’re doing it again.”

“No, no,” said the boy, slightly panicked. “I was only watching you.”

The girl’s eyebrows rose before she burst to laughter. “You’re weird. What do you want?”

“You’re Lily.”

She smiled. “And you’re a Snape. Mummy says I shouldn’t be talking to boys she doesn’t know.”

“I’m Severus,” the boy said simply.

“I told her what you said about me. That I’m a witch. She laughed.”

“But… but you are.”

Lily shrugged her shoulders before sitting back down. Snape followed, sitting cross-legged across
her. Lily gave him the book she was holding. “You know the story of the Princess and the frog? She kisses the frog and it becomes a prince.”

“Yes?” Snape opened the book curiously. “That means the prince was an Animagus. It’s a very difficult thing to achieve; it requires powerful magic. I’m sure you could manage it, though. Your magic seems strong.”

Lily laughed loudly; Snape blushed and lowered his eyes.

The scene dissolved and reformed; Snape seemed slightly older in this memory; Lily was sitting on a bed dressed in pink sheets, braiding Snape’s hair with deep concentration.

“There,” she said proudly.

Snape looked at the mirror with abandonment. “I look like a girl.”

“You look like a proper gentleman, I think.”

Snape didn’t seem to like it, but the struggle was visible on his face to not disappoint her. “My dad says long hair is for girls.”

“He’s wrong. Your hair looks amazing. Don’t cut it, ever.”

“Wizards have long hair, sometimes. My mum says so.”

“Do you know many wizards?”

“No, not really. We used to, I mean – my mom had friends. But my dad… you know. It’s been a long time since we had people over.”

“How’s he doing with the new job?”

Snape glanced at the window, then made a face. “They fired him. Again.”

“I’m so sorry, Sev.” Then, with a smile on her face, “Tell me about Hogwarts Express again.”

Snape’s face lit up immediately, as he started narrating all the magical details.

The memory changed, and now they were in a snowy garden; Petunia, Lily and Snape were having a snowball fight. Lily and Petunia giggled; Petunia hit Snape with a snowball, but Snape responded with a rock that hit her shoulder.

Lily screamed as she ran by Petunia’s side, who cried louder than necessary.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Sev?” Lily shouted.

“I didn’t –”

“Didn’t what? Why would you do that – for Christ’s sake!”

Lily and Petunia went inside, closing the door without looking back. Snape stayed there, watching.

The scene changed again. Snape was watching Lily and Petunia arguing at King’s Cross; “Freak!” Petunia shrieked at Lily — and then they were off to their way to Hogwarts, squeezed in a tiny compartment, in which Snape met Harry’s dad and Sirius for the first time.
“If you’d rather be brawny than brainy—”

“Where’re you hoping to go, seeing as you’re neither?” interrupted Sirius.

James laughed; Lily sat up, looking at both James and Sirius with despise.

“Come on, Severus, let’s find another compartment.”

“Ooooooo…”

James tried to trip Snape as he passed; Sirius tried to leave a shoe mark on his robe.

“See ya, Snivellus!” a voice called, before Lily slammed the compartment door close. They found an empty compartment, and sat there.

“Cross your fingers for Slytherin,” Snape said as soon as they closed the door.

“Why? What’s Slytherin?”

“It’s the best Hogwarts house. You’re a – muggle born, so the Hat might want to put you elsewhere. You never know though. Just cross your fingers for the best one.”

“Okay.” Lily smiled and raised her hand to show her crossed fingers.

Snape smiled too; in the next memory though, Lily was sorted into Gryffindor, and then everything dissolved once more.

This time Snape was older; a few years seemed to have passed since the last memory. Snape was in the Slytherin Common Room, his wand pointed at two other boys who had their wands out as well.

“You have no respect for Slytherin, Snape.”

“Is she worth the disgrace you bring to your house?” the second boy added. “Is she at least any good?”

“Sect…” Snape’s voice trailed off before he could finish the curse, as though he had changed his mind. His expression seemed insecure, hesitating. He was about to cast something else when one of the boys turned to the other and laughed.

“I told you. He’s trying to come up with his own spells. Who do you think you are, Snape? Are you Merlin himself? Can you make us some spells here, please?”

“Is that how you’re keeping the mudblood around, under your spells?”

“Lily’s — just a friend — from back home. I’m only being kind to her because I’ve known her all my life. We’re not together,” said Snape.

“Lies.”

“True,” the other boy argued. “Not even a mudblood would be interested in your face, Snape.”

Trying to avoid their disarming spells, he back sided to the door, and as soon as he was out of the Common Room, he ran upstairs. Harry followed him to the yard; there, he saw his dad, standing up and passing a hand through his hair as he noticed that Snape was there too. Snape hadn’t noticed him yet.
Please don’t, thought Harry.

Please, just ignore him.

“Snape,” James called. Snape didn’t turn around until James’ hand was on his shoulder. Snape jerked away as though he’d been electrified.

His hand was close to his pocket, ready to grab his wand. “What do you want?”

“Just wanted to thank you.” He passed his hand though his hair again, this time making a face to himself, as though annoyed that his hair wouldn’t stay down.

“Thank me,” Snape repeated.

“Yeah. Lily told me how you think I fancy her. Funny how she never noticed before. Thanks to you, now she does.”

The mean smile on his dad’s face made Harry think for a moment that their features were nothing alike.

Then Snape and Lily were alone in an empty classroom, and Lily was rolling up Snape’s sleeve. His arm was covered by red cuts.

“You have to stop this, people will notice.”

“They won’t, I know how to hide them.”

“You’re hurting yourself, Sev. There is no excuse for that.”

“I’m not hurting myself. I’m just trying to perfect my spell.”

“You mean your curse,” Lily corrected.

“Sectumsebra –” Snape looked around cautiously, “Sectumsebra could be extremely useful as a defensive spell too. At the moment it can merely cause scratches, but if I perfect it – they won’t look down on me again, no one would dare.”

“You use it on yourself when you’re upset. I know you. I know what you’re doing.”

“So, what? Who cares if I have a few scars anyway? It’s not a big deal.”

“I care. I thought you knew that.”

“Oh, I know that,” Snape spat. “It really felt like it last night when you were holding hands with Potter.”

“That has nothing to do with—”

“Perhaps I should test my spell on him, then, no? I could just slash his throat next time he tries to attack me, what do you think, Lily?” His voice was drenched in poison, and Lily looked disgusted.

“And perhaps you should cover these scars with the Dark Mark, then. It’d suit you great,” she spat.

Harry knew the next memory too well; he watched as Snape was bullied by his dad and Sirius — undressed and humiliated in front of their classmates. The word mudblood that spurted out of Snape’s mouth, along with his shame and self-hatred, had Harry grit his teeth. He knew what that
meant. He knew it had already happened, and couldn’t be changed; he knew Snape’s fate after that very day and he didn’t think there’d be anything good for him to see from now on.

Then, Snape and Lily were outside the Gryffindor Common Room. Snape apologised, again and again, but it was futile.

“I can’t pretend anymore. You’ve chosen your way, I’ve chosen mine,” Lily said.

The memory changed again, and they were back in Spinner’s End.

Harry recognised Tobias, pulling on a woman’s hair violently as the woman screamed.

“I said no fucking gibberish around the house, for fuck’s sake, do you get it now or do you want me to fucking repeat it until I get sick of you and your fucking stupidity?”

He shoved her away and she steadied herself against the wall. Her lips were torn; her hand trembled as she brought it up to clean the blood. Snape was watching from the other side of the room; not a single emotion could be seen on his face. He seemed calm, as though he was observing an empty room. He couldn’t be older than seventeen. Harry wondered if after his fight with Lily he had no excuse left to leave his home on summers; he wondered if he was forced to watch incidents like this often.

“You’re driving her crazy,” Snape said lowly. “Let her use her magic or she’ll snap.”

“Magic. Magic! Can you make cash, honey?” Tobias grabbed his wife’s chin, but she refused to look up. “Can you, Severus? Why use magic if you can’t fucking take a quid and make it a hundred? Huh? Fucking charlatans…”

Tobias left her room and Snape approached his mother. “You won’t leave him.” It wasn’t a question.

She shook her head.

“Then you’ve chosen your fate,” Snape said, and his voice was dipped in disgust.

The scene dissolved. Snape was walking in Diagon Alley, when Harry’s parents appeared walking in the opposite direction. Lily’s belly was swollen. Snape didn’t stop walking, but held James’ gaze until they walked past each other. Only when they couldn’t see him anymore he stopped, about to turn his head and take another look. He didn’t.

The street disappeared; “Sectumsebra,” Snape said lowly. They were in Spinner’s End’s living room. A deep cut appeared on Tobias’s arm, then another on his chest. Tobias stepped back in terror, hands on his wounds. “Leave,” said Snape. “Never come back. Or I’ll kill you. Sectumsebra,” he cast again, another slash ripping open Tobias’ thigh.

The memories that came next were familiar to Harry; Snape begging Dumbledore to save Lily’s life; Snape crying in despair at the realisation that Lily was dead because of him. Then there were memories of Snape protecting Harry, first from Quirell, then by pushing Karkaroff for information, from year to year, always there, always protecting him…

Dumbledore was sitting on the headmaster’s chair and Snape was pacing before him.

"He will be asking questions, Dumbledore. Questions I do not wish to answer. What have I ever done that gave you the impression that I enjoy the company of children?"

"This little cooperation of yours could turn out for the best. Do try and see him for who he really is.
You might be surprised."

Snape exhaled hard before he nodded. "I'm not doing this for you, Dumbledore."

"Thank Merlin you’re not, my boy."

The scene dissolved and re-formed around him fast.

Dumbledore and Snape were walking toward the lake; the sun was so bright Harry could feel the warmth hit his face.

"He’s arrogant, insufferable, weak –"

"What about his strengths?"

The dark line between Snape’s brows deepened. “He doesn’t have any strengths. I want him out of my house as soon as possible. If we postponed this tutoring for the Autumn –”

“Impossible, Severus. Be patient.”

Snape sighed and the next moment he was watching himself trying to drag Snape up the stairs to his bedroom.

“I’m taking you back to your room, can you walk?"

“I’m not crippled.”

“Be cooperative now.”

“Sod off.”

Snape fell on top of him on the bed, and Harry pushed him off him.

“Suffocating,” Snape complained, tugging at his collar.

“Snape?”

“Yes.”

“Should I owl Dumbledore?”

Then Harry was leaning forward to fix the pillows; Snape pulled Harry’s head lower, and they kissed. There were details missing from the memory, and Harry assumed the drunkenness had erased them away – the kiss, however, was intact.

The next memory dragged him back to Dumbledore’s office once again.

“Don’t you get it, Severus? He’s young. Confused. Intrigued, perhaps.”

Snape seemed ready to explode. "I hate to break it to you, Headmaster, but Harry Potter isn't the first teenager to break through to this world nor the first one to be intrigued or confused. I fail to see how these undeniably shattering virtues of his have to be my concern.”

"They have not,” Dumbledore agreed. “And this is why it is time for you to distance yourself from Harry now. It would be preferable if you kept your interactions outside class to the minimum, for the time being. As you can barely stand the boy, I can imagine you'll agree.”
Snape looked at Dumbledore with determination. “And what if I don't?”

The room changed; Snape was in his Hogwarts chambers, staring at the dancing flames of the hearth as a sound of knuckles against wood could be distantly heard.

“Snape!” a voice called, and Harry realised it was his own. “I know you’re in there, stop pretending!”

Snape’s lips whitened as he clenched his jaw; he squeezed at the glass, but didn’t move.

“Professor? Professor!”

Then Snape stood abruptly, hurried to the door — and did nothing. His fingers hovered over the doorknob, motionless. At the sound of steps fading away, Snape released a long breath of relief and closed his eyes.

The scene changed…

Harry was covering himself with the duvet in Snape’s chambers. Turning on his side, he looked at Snape, who appeared to be sleeping.

“I may be insomniac, but I love sleep. My life has the tendency to fall apart when I'm awake, you know?”

Harry watched himself shut his eyes close, quickly falling asleep. In the cold darkness of the room, Snape’s own eyes emitted a strange light as they opened. He hadn’t been asleep at all.

“That’s because you’re a moron,” he whispered smiling — but Harry was already asleep.

Another change; now they were sitting on Snape’s couch, and Harry was talking. A few months had passed since the last memory.

“I was actually thinking… that this can’t be replaced.”

“This?”

“This. I don’t care to date someone. This is enough.”

But Snape looked away in panic and the memory shifted again…

“I don’t think I can keep it a secret for much longer,” Harry was saying this time. “It’s suffocating me. When I’m out there I feel like I can’t even breathe sometimes.”

Snape observed him, and now Harry saw something he hadn’t noticed before: Snape smiling to himself as he was listening.

“You’re here now.”

Then it was twilight, and Snape was strolling along with Dumbledore toward the lake.

“Is Harry still persuading you to open your chambers for him at nights?”

“He’s not persuading me,” Snape retorted. “What are you doing with him all these evenings you spend together in your office?”

“I was about to ask you just the same, Severus.”
“You trust him… You do not trust me.”

“And yet he trusts you,” Dumbledore said. “Do not think I underestimate what you have done so far, Severus. To risk your life on a daily basis by lying to Voldemort, giving him information that has to seem valuable and yet be untrue… this is a task I could entrust only you with.”

“Yet you cannot entrust me with what you share with him.”

“Has he tried to approach you in an inappropriate way again?” Dumbledore asked.

“No.”

“He wants to.”

“I know.”

“Do you want to?”

In the darkness of the night, Severus eyes glistened in disbelief. “No,” he said, in an offended tone.

“He’s almost seventeen now. Isn’t that tempting, to you? That his wishes will soon be permissible?”

The silence that followed made Harry hold his breath. “His wishes will never be permissible,” Snape said dismissively.

The memory changed, then Dumbledore was talking again, his voice grave.

“…Should anything happen to me, you need to be the one to tell him that on the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill him, when Lily cast her own life between them as a shield, the Killing Curse rebounded upon Lord Voldemort, and a fragment of Voldemort’s soul was blasted apart from the whole, and latched itself onto the only living soul left in that collapsed building. Part of Lord Voldemort lives inside Harry, and it is that which gives him the power of speech with snakes, and a connection with Lord Voldemort’s mind that he has never understood. And while that fragment of soul, unmissed by Voldemort, remains attached to and protected by Harry, Lord Voldemort cannot die.”

“So the boy…the boy must die?” asked Snape quite calmly.

“And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential.”

"I thought… all these years… that we were protecting him for her. For Lily."

“We have protected him because it has been essential to teach him, to raise him, to let him try his strength,” said Dumbledore, his eyes still tight shut. “Meanwhile, the connection between them grows ever stronger, a parasitic growth. Sometimes I have thought he suspects it himself. If I know him, he will have arranged matters so that when he does set out to meet his death, it will truly mean the end of Voldemort.”

"You have kept him alive so that he can die at the right moment?…” Harry had never seen such terror in Snape’s eyes before. “You have used me… I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you. Everything was supposed to keep him safe. Now you tell me you have been raising him like a pig for slaughter…”

“But this is touching, Severus. Have you grown to care for the boy, after all?”

“For him?” Snape spat. “*Expecto Patronum!*”
From the tip of his wand burst the silver doe. She jumped on the desk and soared out of the window. Dumbledore watched it carefully, and when he turned to Snape there were tears on his eyes.

“After all this time?”

“Always.”

Then the memory changed again, and Hogwarts’ lake took its place.

Harry saw himself wrestling with Snape in the water, trying to get free of his grip. Then they kissed; hastily, angrily — passionately.

The moment dissolved to mists and formed into the kitchen of Grimmauld Place. There were members of the Order sitting around, and there was an argument going on; Snape was leaning over the table, looking down at Remus who was standing up too.

“What can you do to protect Harry that none of us can?”

“Questioning Dumbledore –”

“Why can’t he stay here? This is a safe house for God’s sake and you –”

“Questioning Dumbledore will lead you nowhere,” Snape said silkily. “The decision has been made. There is a safe house specifically constructed for this. I will be visiting.”

“Oh good. Then I should just shut my mouth and let you abuse him in private as well.”

Mrs. Weasley stood up too. “I think this is enough. Remus,” she pointed her eyes at the chair and Remus sat down.

Snape didn’t seem willing to follow. “Perhaps you should beat some common sense into your jealousy, Lupin. Only a madman would trust the boy with a wolf.”

Remus’ frustrated expression turned to blank at once. Harry could almost feel how much that comment hurt.

“Severus, enough.” Mrs. Weasley said. Moody tapped his wand against the table impatiently. Severus at last dropped to his chair.

“I am not here to be questioned. If you don’t approve of Dumbledore’s decisions then by all means, walk out Molly. And you too,” he glared at Remus.

“Severus is right,” Moody said, and Remus looked at him in surprise. “He couldn’t care less for Harry’s softness. That will make him a good mentor. All of you are dangerously attached to him. Severus isn’t. It can work.”

“What softness? Is caring a shame now?” Remus asked. “Should I pretend I’m not worried? Quite literally, Harry is all I have.”

“Then you should’ve taken better care of your dog,” spat Snape. Before Harry knew it, all of them had jumped off their chairs at once; Remus was pointing his wand at Snape, who was pointing at him his own. The rest of them aimed at the duo to block any possible curses.

“Get out, Severus,” Remus said dangerously. “You don’t deserve to be in this house.”

“And you think you do?” Snape retorted silkily, but he lowered his wand and left.
The scene dissolved again. Severus was in Regulus’ old room, and someone was climbing up the stairs. The room had been transformed to what seemed to be a small potions lab. Harry recognised the ingredients for Polyjuice laying on the counter as Snape worked. Remus came in leaned against the wall, observing Snape silently.

“I shouldn’t have disputed you in front of the Order. I’m sorry.”

“Perhaps you missed the hint, Lupin, but the reason I’m not still downstairs is because I wanted privacy.”

Remus snorted. “If you’re going to lock Harry up in a safe house only you can enter I need to know that at least you’re going to be nice to him. It isn’t your loyalty I don’t trust. It’s your temper.”

“He’s not a child. He’ll manage.”

“I don’t think he’s a child.”

“No. You think he’s his father.”


Snape remained silent, filling a line of bottles with something dense.

“Harry is –”

“Harry is not what you think he is,” Snape interrupted.

“Severus… look. Whatever animosity you may have had toward James, you don’t have to drag Harry into it. That’s all I’m trying to say. And I’d like to visit. Let’s say, once a week. Dumbledore might allow it if you guide me through a Portkey, I won’t know where the Safe House is, I have no desire to know. I only want to be there for him. I am the closest relative he has.”

“Relative? How?”

“He doesn’t have anyone else. Please. He needs someone whom he can trust.”

“And why should he trust you, I wonder? Your company bears the weight of very ambiguous actions, after all, Lupin. You almost killed me….” Snape ignored Lupin’s attempt to interrupt him, “You almost killed me because your gang thought it’d be fun. What was it exactly? Ah. A joke.”

“You’re trying to isolate him. Like you tried to isolate Lily.”

At that, Snape stopped. He placed the cauldron on the counter, wiping his hands and turning to stare at Lupin. “I beg your pardon?”

“Haven’t you learned yet Severus that you can’t keep the people you care for to yourself? Haven’t you learned that you can’t control everything?”

Snape stared hard at him, lips pressed together tightly, and the scene changed again.

It was most likely the last day of the school year, for the students were all outside, dragging their trunks to the carriages. Dumbledore was leaning close to Snape, who didn’t seem to enjoy himself at all.

“All these children – unique, in so many ways – every year they’re getting brighter, I think.”
“You think,” Snape agreed.

“Harry is skeptical about the safe house.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“His magic is getting stronger.”

“Yes, I’ve been watching his magic,” Snape said lowly. “It’s different now. I’ve been… observing it for a while.”

“My child,” Dumbledore said in surprise, a hint of amusement in his voice, “I’d swear I’ve heard you say these exact words before. Last time you were observing someone’s magic… it was before you arrived to Hogwarts as a student, yes?”

At Snape’s shocked look, Dumbledore shook a hand dismissively. “Doesn’t matter, it was a long time ago…”

The yard swirled and Harry was back in the Headmaster’s office. Snape was kneeling before Dumbledore, examining his darkened hand.

“I warned you. Why… why put it on while you knew it carried a curse? Did I not warn you?”

“You told me to wait… I… waited too long…”

“Why even want to put it on?”

The ring lay cracked on the wooden surface of the desk; Snape was casting spells furiously.

“The curse is extraordinary strong; I have trapped it in one hand for the time being –”

“You have done very well, Severus. How long do you think I have?”

Snape shook his head. “I cannot tell. Maybe a year. There is no halting such a spell forever. It will spread eventually, it is the sort of curse that strengthens over time.”

“I am fortunate, extremely fortunate, that I have you, Severus.”

“If you had only summoned me a little earlier, I might have been able to do more, buy you more time!” said Snape furiously. “If you had waited for me to examine the curse first, break it before you put it on… Did you think that breaking the ring would break the curse?”

“Something like that… I was delirious, no doubt… Well, really, this makes matters much more straightforward. I refer to the plan Lord Voldemort is revolving around me. His plan to have the poor Malfoy boy murder me.” Dumbledore straightened himself in his chair.

“The Dark Lord does not expect Draco to succeed anymore,” Snape said. “This is merely punishment for Lucius’s recent failures. Slow torture for Draco’s parents, while they watch him fail and pay the price. He was given a whole school year and failed miserably. By the start of the new term the Dark Lord won’t be so patient.”

“In short, the boy has had a death sentence pronounced upon him as surely as I have,” he added. “Now, I should have thought the natural successor to the job, once Draco fails, is yourself?”

There was a short pause. “That, I think, is the Dark Lord’s plan.”
“Lord Voldemort foresees a moment in the near future when he will not need a spy at Hogwarts?”

“He believes the school will soon be in his grasp, yes.”

“And if it does fall into his grasp, I have your word that you will do all in your power to protect the students of Hogwarts?”

Snape nodded.

“Good. Now then. You must promise me that you will not break your cover by seeing Harry again after I’m gone, until, of course, it’s necessary.”

Snape’s discomfort was obvious. “Are you intending to let him kill you?”

“Certainly not. You must kill me.”

There was a short pause in which Harry expected Snape to burst into laughter; the familiar one he’d reserve for moments he absolutely despised but could not avoid by any costs. “Would you like me to do it now? Or would you like a few moments to compose an epitaph?”

“Oh, not quite yet,” said Dumbledore casually. “I believe I want to see a last opening feast first.”

“If you don’t mind dying, why not let Draco do it?”

“That boy’s soul is not yet so damaged,” Dumbledore explained. “I would not have it ripped apart on my account.”

“And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?”

The room changed again, and now Snape was marching on a long white corridor while a short nurse followed him with quick steps. She opened a door for him and Harry managed to follow inside just before the nurse locked it behind them. Harry recognised the place immediately; it hadn’t been long since he’d visited St. Mungo’s with Mr. Weasley.

At the corner of the small room, there was a single bed with white covers and blue pillows; on the bed was sitting a woman, who didn’t seem to notice that Snape was there. Snape dragged a chair close and sat by her. Harry didn’t think he’d seen his face this sad before.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Mum?”

The woman seemed to awake from deep sleep at his words, although her eyes were open all along. She turned her head to him slowly, as though noticing him for the first time since he came in. “Severus?”

Snape smiled, and it was the saddest smile Harry had ever seen. The woman’s hair was as white as everything else in the room; Snape pushed her wild fringe aside and tucked it behind her ear before bending forward to kiss her forehead. “How are you?”

The minutes passed and no answer came. The silence didn’t seem to surprise Snape, nor annoy him. He looked at her with a patience he had never demonstrated in class. “How are you?” he repeated at last, and this time his mother smiled.

“I’m good,” she said in a loud voice that suggested a very strange sudden positivity. She nodded to herself at the words.

“Albus sends his regards. He expected me to visit you some time ago, but I’ve been… busy.”
“I expected you to visit some time ago,” she said calmly.

Snape’s stare was fixed at the wall. “It’s safer here. You surely know… you get the newspapers, do you not? You see,” said Snape, “the darkness is spreading. He’s getting stronger, day by day, he has an army now, bigger than before – you wouldn’t imagine – bigger than ever.”

“He’s getting stronger,” she repeated dully. “He doesn’t like your magic, Sev. I’ve told you that.”

At that Snape laughed loudly, a burst of laughter so sudden and deep that made Harry jump back. “Never mind.”

“It’s your fault, Sev. You’re making him fear you. All he wanted was some peace and you attacked him like a vicious monster.”

“I’m sorry,” Snape said. His voice came out deep and gravelly. The woman looked at him nervously, as though she didn’t know whether she should believe him or not. “Things have changed,” he added, looking at his own spread fingers. “Do you recall, how you’d always call me exceptionally foolish? All my life, I tried to prove you wrong… But you’re right.”

She looked affronted, but Harry couldn’t tell why. At the dim light coming from the tiny window above them, Harry could see the similarities on their faces clearly.

“He asks of things I cannot do. He wants me to be in charge if Draco fails him. Draco’s a child.” Snape clutched at the fabric of his cloak as though it’d provide him the greatest safety in the world. “And Dumbledore is simply sitting there, enjoying the suspense.”

Harry wondered whether there was a ritual here; was Snape seeing his mum often? Did he share everything with her because he knew that no one would believe her even if she spilled his secrets? What did Tobias do to her, to make her lose her mind like this? Why had Snape told Harry his mum was dead?

“And then, there’s Harry.”

At the mention of his name, Harry stepped closer. He stood in anticipation, noticing how Snape was frowning intensely.

“Is it selfish… is it selfish of me, that I don’t want him to hate me? For the rest of them, I hardly care, but…” It was evident from the tone of his voice that he was talking more to himself than to his mother. “Snapes aren’t capable of feeling love, you used to say.”

At that she nodded confidently; it was obviously the only thing that had gotten her attention.

“Would you mind if I was gay?” The question was blurted out unexpectedly.

“Snapes hate women anyway, Sev. All of them.”

The scenery changed.

“…spying on me, and now you expect me to accept be interrogated as well!”

“It was a simple question, Severus…”

“Well you know the answer very well.”

It was midnight. Snape was standing in front of the fire hearth in Spinner’s End, his fingers clutching around a handful of floo powder.
“You were going to Harry. Why?” asked Dumbledore.

“And here I thought you’d never lurk about in my own house. Why?” retorted Snape. “It is my duty to look after him. You made it my duty. You told me to visit him daily.”

“Not nightly, however.”

“When you took me back…” Snape looked at him hatefully, “I thought I’d have a chance to forgive myself. I only ended up blaming myself more.”

“You were young. There is no need to blame anyone.”

“No. There isn’t. And I’ll do the job. I’ll obey. But don’t tell me how often to visit him, and don’t ask me if I care about him, because clearly, I don’t have the privilege to!”

Through Snape’s fingers, the floo powder slipped and piled on the carpet.

“Harry’s fate is not on you, Severus. Neither was Lily’s.”

With his back turned, Snape shook his head. Grabbing another handful of powder, he threw it into the hearth. “If you need me, you know where to find me,” Snape said, and stepped into the flames.

In the next scene, it was morning; Harry saw himself sleeping on his back, his limbs entangled with the sheets in the most impossible way. Snape was trying to disentangle himself from Harry without waking him up. After failing to do so, he dropped his head back on the pillow and rubbed his eyes. The sleeping Harry was lying on top of Snape’s arm too, Harry noticed. Snape’s fingers twitched repeatedly, most likely in an attempt to not go numb. Harry couldn’t help but smile sadly at what he was seeing.

Snape rolled on his side, his face inches from Harry’s.

“Potter. Wake up.” He pushed gently at Harry’s shoulder. “Potter.”

His other hand came up and pushed Harry’s fringe away to reveal his face. Snape’s fingers followed the red mark the pillow had left on Harry’s cheek and reached his lips. He brushed them slightly for a second, and then he took his hand away.

Snape was now kneeling before Dumbledore, kissing his hand as tears ran down his face.

“There must be a way… please! If anyone can do something it’s you… you could save him…there must be a way! Please!”

Snape was a mess; he sobbed and whimpered in despair.

“I know it’s sad, Severus… But there is no other way. Voldemort can’t be killed as long as Harry lives.”

“SAVE HIM! I know you can! Save him… save… please… You never cared… You never hesitated risking other people’s lives so you could reach your goals. The boy’s safety didn’t – never - concerned you… You only wanted him to live for as long as you needed him to…”

“Do you really believe that, Severus? You believe that if there was a way for him to live I wouldn’t have chosen it? You don’t see all the things I do for Harry daily?”

“Please,” Snape begged. “Better – it’s better to kill me – we can tell — Voldemort — to kill me instead of him – I’ll take his place – this is my fault, I should pay… not him, I should pay for this!”
Dumbledore opened a cabinet and shoved a Calming Draught into Snape’s hands. “Don’t let him die… don’t… he can’t… not again, please… I can’t do this… it’s not fair… please…”

“It is the only way. Calm down, please. You’ll understand when you do. I know how much you loved Lily, but—”

“You don’t get to talk about Lily, you killed her too… Everyone I have — ever loved — this has nothing… to do with Lily… Thought… it did… not about her…”

“Calm down, Severus.”

“I’ll lose him…I can’t… I love him more than my own life… please…”

Harry was pulled into mists again. They were back at Grimmauld’s Place, and Remus was sitting across Snape at the kitchen table. Remus was clutching his head in his hands, his elbows on the table. Outside the window, the moon was almost full.

“Drink it all,” Snape said, emptying his own goblet.

Remus laughed bitterly. “You’re drinking wine in front of me while I have to drink this.”

Snape took another sip quietly. Remus gulped the wolfsbane and shrugged.

“Damn my fate, Severus,” Remus muttered.

“Damn fate,” Snape agreed quickly. His cheeks were flushed; it was obvious that he’d been drinking for some time. “And damn Potters and their blasted curiosity to dig into things,” Snape pressed, but it was obvious that Remus was in so much pain he could barely hear him, “dig into secrets, dig into lives.”

The moonlight was now in the middle of the sky, and Remus squeezed his eyes shut. “Leave Harry out of it,” he mumbled.

“Damn Harry Potter for growing up,” Snape insisted, his voice louder. “And damn him for ever being a child,” he added.

Remus grunted, his forehead now touching the table. Despite his pain, he chuckled. “You’re obsessed, Severus.”

Snape chuckled too. He raised his glass, and the scene dissolved…

Snape was alone back in the Safe House, and none of Harry’s belongings were there. The mattress was pulled slightly aside, and Snape was sitting on it, reading a torn piece of Harry’s letter to Hermione. It only carried a few words.

*It scares me how little I know about him. Most of the times I get the impression I don’t know him at all. But then again he kisses back. Even for a second.*

Snape tucked the paper inside his robes…

Harry blinked and he was back to the Headmaster’s office. Dumbledore’s portrait was talking to Snape.

“Now, Severus, the sword! Do not forget that it must be taken under conditions of need and valour
— and he must not know that you give it! If Voldemort should read Harry’s mind and see you acting for him—"

“I know.”

Pulling aside the portrait, Snape revealed the Gryffindor sword. “And you still aren’t going to tell me why it’s so important to give Potter the sword?”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Dumbledore. “He will know what to do with it. And be careful, Severus…”

“Don’t worry, Dumbledore. I have a plan…”

Snape was hiding behind a tree in a dark forest, a huge scarf tightly wrapped around his neck. His cloak waved in the cold wind. Harry was there too, barely visible in sight. Snape watched as Harry undressed and jumped into the lake. The doe bounced on the snow and returned to Snape, rubbing her forehead on his thigh.

Snape seemed to be murmuring something, as though he was counting. The wind blew his hair and he closed his eyes against it as he pulled a Deluminator out of his pocket. He clicked it, but no light came out. Instead, there was a loud cracking sound and then Ron popped out of nowhere, looking around in confusion. He couldn’t see Snape, but the doe ran to the lake and Ron followed it.

Snape remained behind the tree, watching.

The moment sank into darkness, and Harry was back in the Headmaster’s office.

“Is it done?”

Snape’s travelling cloak was covered in snow. “Yes. The boy has the sword. Now leave,” He turned to the other portraits, “all of you.”

“Why?” Dumbledore asked.

“I think I saw… something. I have to check something.”

The portraits emptied — all but Dumbledore’s. Snape locked the door, and took out his wand. He looked at it curiously, and then cast the spell.

“Expecto Patronum!”

From the tip of Snape’s wand, burst the silver doe. Snape paced around it, observing it with wide eyes. On the top of her head, two barely visible horns had sprung up.

“Impossible…”

“Severus? What is it?”

Snape kneeled down, petting the deer’s head, his fingers slipping through it.

“Severus?”

“I slept with the boy,” Snape said abruptly. “The night before I took your life.”

“I am aware,” said Dumbledore quietly.
Snape blinked, and a tear fell down his face; his fingers clutched at the deer’s substance, and the animal bumped its head on his chest lovingly.

“I love him,” Snape continued, as if only now realising how much he meant it. “I love him.”

Harry rose out of the Pensieve, and seconds later he was kneeling on the carpeted floor, on the same spot the deer was standing only a moment ago. He almost expected Snape to pull him up and kiss him.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter to go! Please share your thoughts and let me know what you think.

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