That Awful Boy

by paracosim

Summary

Petunia lets slip a twenty-year-old secret, and Harry is sent to Spinner's End to study Occlumency early. Severus Snape can see no way in which this could end in catastrophe.
“What the ruddy hell are dementors?”

“They guard the wizard prison, Azkaban,” said Aunt Petunia.

Two seconds’ ringing silence followed these words and then Aunt Petunia clapped her hand over her mouth as though she had let slip a disgusting swear word. Uncle Vernon was goggling at her. Harry’s brain reeled. Mrs. Figg was one thing—but Aunt Petunia?

“How d’you know that?” he asked her, astonished.

Aunt Petunia looked quite appalled with herself. She glanced at Uncle Vernon in fearful apology, then lowered her hand slightly to reveal her horsey teeth.

“I heard—that awful Snape boy—telling her about them—years ago,” she said jerkily. (pages 31-32 of Order of the Phoenix.)

The ringing was in his ears this time; Harry felt as though he’d cracked his head on the Dursley’s window again. Working his mouth to words that refused to come, he finally croaked, “Snape… boy?”

It had been many years since they’d had a summer this hot.

His shirt seemed to have permanently cemented itself to his back, as drenched in sweat as it was. There was no hint of rain to offer a reprieve, or even a breeze; the sky was a cloudless, blinding void. Steam rose off of the streets as though someone had lit a burner beneath them. Each time he dared step outside, humidity swept across him in a sticky wave. Cooling charms were useless, fans a waste of time, and the very idea of opening a window was laughable. Severus had half a mind to dunk himself in the trash-logged river to cool down a little. He should have known skimping out on buying an actual air conditioner this year would come to bite him in the arse. As it was, he was fairly certain he’d far surpassed his personal bathing records, what with the amount of cold showers he’d taken in the last few days.

Spinner’s End had become a ghost town. Empty at the best of times, with the growing number of abandoned houses, the remaining residents had been driven into their homes by the heat, leaving the streets deserted. The town’s adolescent gang was nowhere to be found, and even the Richardsons next door were quiet. Severus supposed they were too hot to argue.

At least they didn’t have to spend the day standing over a burning stove.

Casting his umpteenth cooling charm, Severus mopped at his forehead and pushed his stringy hair back from his face. The Dark Lord couldn’t have asked for a potion at a worse time. Brewing on a
day like this — it was sure to be the hottest day of the year — was not his summer ideal. The fact that there were no papers to grade couldn’t even lift his mood. He’d take tea with Sirius Black over this.

_Ding!_

_Finally,_ he thought, sprinkling a handful of ground lacewing flies into the bubbling potion before resetting the oven timer. Unlike in the original recipe, this gave him twenty minutes to clean up while the Polyjuice simmered and turned brown. He dropped his wooden spoon onto the unused burner and flopped backward into the chair he’d pulled away from the table. Sweat slid down his face in rivulets. The mason jar he’d filled with ice earlier was now more water than anything; there was a damp ring darkening the pitted table. He took a long sip and savored the feeling of it going down his throat.

It wouldn’t be much longer before he could begin preparations for the Veritaserum the Dark Lord had demanded. He wasn’t due to have it finished for another month, but it had been a very long time since Severus had placed any faith in the patience of others; and even longer since he’d placed any faith in other people altogether.

The days following the Triwizard Shitshow had been long and bleak. It had been fourteen years since he’d stood before the Dark Lord, fourteen years since he’d so vigorously guarded his mind, and yet a part of him felt like it had been only yesterday. Like a part of him was still trapped, frozen, in that same passage of time.

At least he wasn’t teaching. There was no need to navigate through the minefield of memories Hogwarts dredged up, no grading to do, no little pustules to watch over…and no Potter. He could sleep until midday if the want arose. He didn’t have to grace the Great Hall with his presence and pretend to eat. He could catch up on the latest journals that had been published this year. Unless the Dark Lord called.

He could even finish making those changes to the Draught of Peace that he’d been fiddling with for the last month, or create another addition to Muffliato to expand its perimetal limitations and offer an increase of privacy. The possibilities were endless, really. It was summer. Summer was his time to experiment…unless the Dark Lord called.

The Dark Lord had become all too interested in his company since his return.

Just as the Headmaster had predicted after the…events of last year, he’d been lying low, making plans and gathering troops rather than making himself known to the world. This meant less Death Eater raids — or really, less excuses to make as to why he’d not attended — and more speeches, more spying, more info-gathering, and, of course, more punishments. He doled out the Cruciatius like a middle-aged woman at a shopping centre doled out free samples. Severus had spent the last month feeling like he’d clawed his way out of a settled grave. Without copious amounts of nerve regeneration potions, he would probably be on the brink of peripheral neuropathy.

“Severus?”

Perhaps he’d prefer the neuropathy.

His wards hummed, signalling the arrival of a benevolent intruder named Albus Dumbledore. Severus’s body ached in protest as he hauled himself out of his chair to meet the Headmaster. If he’d thought his body hurt, it was nothing compared to how his eyes felt as they rested upon the most blindingly yellow robes he’d ever had the misfortune to see, complete with painfully blue trim and agonizingly white stars.
Severus took one disgusted look at him, decided he was too sticky to stomach such a hideous ensemble, scoffed, “What the hell are you wearing?” and returned to the kitchen. Albus followed with what was probably a sickeningly serene smile.

“You must be aware of how busy I am, Headmaster,” he continued as the timer went off and he settled back into his potion. A curl of ice-cold air swept across the back of his neck as Dumbledore performed a cooling charm infinitely more powerful than his own had been. Severus fought back a shiver as the sweat dried on his back. “I don’t have time to play host to guests.”

“Even if you did have the time, Severus, I must admit I find myself having difficulty imagining you wanting guests over.” He could hear the smile in the Headmaster’s voice. “Alas, my visit here today isn’t of the cheery sort. Have you been reading the papers?”

Did anyone, these days?

“I skim it,” he lied, adding four measures of boomslang skin to the cauldron on his stove before moving to place bicorn horn in his mortar on the counter.

“They have not been kind to Harry Potter as of late,” Albus said quietly. Severus paused for a brief second before beginning to crush the bicorn. “Cornelius has been taking as many measures as possible to discredit the boy. I can’t imagine it’s doing wonders for Harry’s morale.”

Why do you think I care about the boy’s supposed morale? he thought, Occluding just a tad harder than before to keep the idle scathing away from Dumbledore. “And?” he pressed, personal moral failures notwithstanding.

“I fear it won’t be long before more extreme measures are taken. Whether they come from Cornelius himself, or from one of his associates, I cannot say. I’d expect nothing less from the Minister these days,” Albus said. There was a grim edge to his voice and a tightness to his eyes. “Sending somebody to, as they say, ‘finish the job’ is something I no longer consider beneath him.”

He sprinkled a measure of bicorn horn into the potion, scrutinized the color, and then added another half a measure. Then, sending a silent prayer to whatever god might have been listening, he cranked his sputtering stove on high for twenty seconds before turning it down to a simmer. Severus waved his wand sharply over the cauldron and finally stepped back to mark the time. The copper cauldron he’d chosen allowed him only eighteen hours until he needed to begin the fourth stage of the Polyjuice. “If you’re here to ask whether the Dark Lord has mentioned a plot to hire someone to kidnap the boy, posing as the Ministry, I’m afraid you’ll be sorely disappointed. He’s said nothing of the sort.”

The Headmaster was silent. Then, even more softly than he’d spoken before: “Are you sure he has no true grounds to base his suspicions on, Severus?”

He was going to need a Calming Draught if Albus insisted on having this conversation again. The Dark Lord always had his suspicions — would always have his suspicions — on where his loyalties truly lie. The fact that he was still alive was proof in his lack of evidence.

“We have discussed this. I’d rather not have a repeat of the migraine you gave me last time,” Severus muttered. He wiped down his stove and set the lacewing flies aside for later, safely enclosed in a tupperware box. Dumbledore’s beard twitched at the sight of it. Gritting his teeth, Severus shoved the box out of view and turned to face the older wizard. “You could have said all this with your head shoved through a fireplace. What do you want, Albus? It’s too hot for games.”

“As straight to the point as ever. It’s a wonder anyone ever reads your studies, my boy, what with
I am very busy,” he snarled, cutting Dumbledore off. The handle to his oven door creaked alarmingly; he let go of it as if he’d been burned, forcing his hands to unclench and drop to his sides. The cooling charm had worn off. He could feel sweat sliding down the back of his neck.

The Headmaster’s smile faded. “Harry is to be transferred to headquarters in August. His safety is far too compromised in Privet Drive. However…I cannot be certain of the Order’s continued safety, if Harry is to be stationed there. His link with Tom is growing ever more concerning. I must confess I am wary of being in the same room as him.”

There was an uproar swelling in his chest, in his throat, but Severus dissociated himself from the sensation before it could take over his body. “Do you believe he’s being possessed?” he asked, and his voice sounded foreign to his ears. What would he do, he couldn’t help but wonder, if he saw Lily’s eyes turn red with the Dark Lord’s taint? He Occluded harder.

“I am unsure. As far as I know, he has yet to show signs of possession. However…”

“It doesn’t take much effort to take control from behind the curtains. The Dark Lord is a powerful legilimens; it is safe to assume he has long since mastered the art of subtle possession. Do you wish for me to probe within the inner circle?”

If anyone would have information on the Dark Lord’s habits and schedule, it would be the inner circle. They would know if their Lord had been spending hours each day in a seeming trance.

“Cautiously. It wouldn’t do for Tom to catch you prying.” He sighed, looking to the left, out the grimy window above the sink. Suddenly aware of how much of a mess his house was, Severus felt humiliation curl deep in his gut. The heat in his face was not from the temperature of his kitchen. “That is not all. To ensure the protection of the Order, I must ask you for another favor.”

Alarm bells began to ring in his head. Narrowing his eyes, Severus leaned back against his stove before remembering his hot cauldron was there, and shifted to lean against his counter instead. The wooden spoon dug painfully into his elbow; he refused to move again. “A favor? Of what sort?”

There was an unusual hesitancy to Albus’s body language that made the alarm bells go from a ring to a screech. “You must know I would not be asking this of you if it were not of the utmost importance.”

“What is it, Albus?”

“You must teach Harry Occlumency. I had rather meant to teach him myself, but the circumstances do not currently allow for that. As it stands, Severus, you are far more equipped to teach him—you surpassed me in the art many years ago,” said the Headmaster, finally looking away from the window, through which Severus could vaguely make out the sun setting. “Do you have a second bedroom in your house?”

It took a fraction of a second for him to realize what, exactly, Dumbledore was asking of him. “No.” He spat the word out. “I refuse. What sort of joke is this?”

“Severus—”

“I said— no. Absolutely not. I am not playing host to Harry fucking Potter.” There was glass on the floor, now, but he couldn’t remember breaking anything. His hands were shaking. Lip curled back in a wordless snarl, he breathed, “Find another place for the boy.”
For the first time, Albus sounded angry. “Are you so blinded by your hatred for James that you cannot see simple fact, Severus? I have exhausted every option. Harry is not ready to be taken to Number Twelve. The Grangers cannot keep him safe without magic. And the blood wards have become unstable—so unstable that a single nudge could cause them to crumble. I believe it may have something to do with the blood he exchanged with Voldemort back in—”

“Do not say the name!”

“There is no other option. Tom is currently more focused on the prophecy than he is on killing Harry, and will not seek to have you bring the boy without knowing why his failure to murder a child persists. Harry must stay here, if only for a few weeks. It is not the end of the world.” Albus repaired the shattered mason jar and dusted it off. There was water all over the floor, trickling through the cracks in the faded linoleum. “Are you well, my boy?”

Severus ground his teeth. His limbs were still attached, and his heart was still beating. That was about as well as he ever truly got. “Don’t try to change the subject. Could he not stay with his precious werewolf?”

“I’m afraid the Ministry would be quite, ah, discontent if they knew we were allowing a child to reside with a known werewolf,” Dumbledore said delicately. “As it stands…you are the only member of the Order with housing available for the boy.”

“Have you discussed this with the boy himself?” he scoffed, forcing himself to breathe deeply for fear of his anger running rampant again. “How does your beloved ‘Chosen One’ feel about being shuffled round like a toy? I wonder how Potter might feel about staying with his most beloved professor.”

“Harry will understand.” There was no telling whether he was lying or not. “It will only be for three weeks, if not less. He may be ready to be moved to headquarters by mid-August. I will, of course, compensate you on any food expenses.” Seeing Severus’s expression, he smiled a little. “I am by no means asking you to play the part of his father. Harry is capable of taking care of his own needs, as well as entertaining himself without causing mass property destruction. Simply train him to guard his mind, and keep him safe and fed. That is all I ask. Do you accept?”

Do I really have a choice? Severus seethed. He pushed away from the counter and let the spoon clatter to the floor. Grabbing the mason jar, he stepped past the patiently waiting Headmaster to refill it with ice, slamming it onto the table to melt for a while. “Fine. Three weeks, Albus. I shan’t babysit your boy wonder any longer than that.”

He hadn’t realized, until now, just how tense Albus had been. There was a noticeable slump to his shoulders; the lines on his face eased marginally. “You have removed a great deal of weight from my mind, Severus. Three weeks. You have my word. I’ll have Harry delivered to you the evening after tomorrow. Now—as you said, you are very busy. Allow me to see myself out. Goodnight, my boy. Rest well.”

And he was alone again. Severus stood there for a time, glaring at the door, before sinking into one of his rickety chairs and putting his head in his hands.

“What the hell did I just agree to?”

Chapter End Notes
this is cross-posted on ffnet, originally posted eons ago before the rewrite, but I never go on there anymore. so now it's on here!
It had been two days.

The hours melted away like butter in sunlight, numbed by the helpless anger that had overtaken him all summer, and Harry hadn’t been able to get Aunt Petunia’s words out of his head.

That awful Snape boy.

Were there other Snapes in the Kingdom? Ones that were around his mother’s age, and wizards? It was the only theory that made sense to him. After all…Snape hated his parents. He’d always had an awful lot to say about James Potter, and none of it was any good.

His aunt refused to speak anymore on the matter, but that hadn’t been much of a surprise to him. “Don’t ask questions” was a sentence he was used to hearing. (Even though it now infuriated him.) The single outburst she’d had over that awful Snape boy had been the only information he’d been able to squeeze out of her that night, before she and Uncle Vernon had shuffled their green-faced son into the car to see the local doctor for a late-night checkup.

And then there had been silence.

They hadn’t placed the bars back on his window, but that hadn’t stopped them from locking his door and forbidding him from allowing Hedwig into his room for mail delivery. Not that it made any difference; nothing Hedwig had brought him lately was worth reading. Harry was let out only for the loo and to take quick showers. Sometimes he was made to wash the dishes before he was shunted back out of sight.

What had Aunt Petunia meant by it? Surely she hadn’t known Snape—surely his mum hadn’t, Merlin forbid, liked Snape. And…she’d said ‘boy,’ not ‘man.’ How old was his Potions professor? Hadn’t he, Sirius, and Professor Lupin been in the same year? His mum might have met Snape in school. But why would Aunt Petunia know him, if they’d met at school? Had it been some kind of ploy of his aunt’s? A way to get a rise out of him? Punish him for hurting her precious Diddykins?

Was she in contact with the magical world?

The Howler’s message joined in with the rising crescendo of Snape boy. She must have had some sort of contact with wizards, to have received a Howler and know what the message meant.

“Remember my last.” Remember what?

Why would nobody tell him anything?

Harry rolled over in bed and pressed his palms against his eyes, until the darkness burst with sparks and his temples ached. It was all so frustrating. Did they not trust him? Had he not proven his worth in that graveyard? He’d watched Cedric’s murder. He’d watched Voldemort rise again, in his new body. Didn’t that mean anything? How was he supposed to fight when he was kept in the dark? He wasn’t eleven years old anymore—he wasn’t a child. He deserved to know what was going to happen to him. Not even Ron or Hermione would tell him anything. It was all “you’ll be seeing us soon” and “just hold on a little longer, Harry.”

Harry had spent years waiting. He was done with it. He wanted answers. No more feel-good words,
no more sweet nothings, and no more false platitudes.

He almost didn’t notice signs of movement, until the sound of the doorknob turning broke through the empty haze his life had become. Turning his head to the side with what felt like a herculean effort, Harry stared dully at the door and waited for the Dursleys to make an appearance. He didn’t have long to wait; his uncle stepped into the room, wearing a suit and a smug smile.

“We’re going out,” he said.

“Sorry?”

“We—that is to say, your aunt, Dudley, and I—are going out.”

“Fine,” said Harry dully, looking back at the ceiling.

“You are not to leave your bedroom while we are away.”

“Okay.”

“You are not to touch the television, the stereo, or any of our possessions.”

“Right.”

“You are not to steal food from the fridge.”

“Okay.”

“I am going to lock your door.”

“You do that.”

Uncle Vernon glared at him suspiciously, but made no further argument, shutting the door quite hard behind him as he left. The lock clicked; he could feel the vibrations of his uncle’s steps down the stairs somewhere in his ribcage. And then, after a few minutes, the car starting. Silence pervaded immediately after.

As if it had been waiting for a moment where he’d be distracted, the dread of his oncoming hearing swept in. Golden sunlight crept across his bed as the sun began to set, but Harry could no more summon the energy to turn on his bedroom light than he could close the blinds. Rolling heavily onto his side, he closed his eyes.

There was a crash in the kitchen below.

He sat bolt upright, straining his ears and breathing hard. The Dursleys had only just left—they couldn’t be back already. There hadn’t been any sign of their car returning.

The house was quiet; Harry was ready to hesitantly believe something had simply fallen when he heard a faint creak somewhere out in the hall. There was a floorboard that squeaked at the top of the landing.

Snatching his wand up from his bedside table, he stood up, pointing his wand at the door and waiting. His heart stuttered in his chest when the door unlocked and swung open, revealing—

“Professor Lupin?”
The heat from outside hit him with the force of the Hogwarts Express. Hurrying to keep up with Lupin after his initial recoil, Harry fell into pace with his old professor, trying to look at him and make sure he didn’t trip over the kerb at the same time. He’d been Polyjuiced into a boy who vaguely resembled Ron, but with less red and more blond. Lupin had taken on the appearance of an older man with short-cropped flaxen hair and a rather magnificent beard. “What caused the change? The Dementors?” he asked, glancing down at the road as he kicked a rock. “Are we going where Snuffles is?”

“It was the Dementors, yes,” Lupin said quietly, crossing the street. He’d barely taken any time to explain before he shrunk Harry’s trunk and nudged him out of the house under the effects of a Disillusionment Charm. “Unfortunately, you’ll not be with the rest of us just yet.”

“What?” So he was still being kept out of the loop…treated like a child, shuffled about without his input. “Where am I going, then?”

“Have you ever heard of Occlumency, Harry?”

*Have you ever heard of giving a straight answer, Professor?* he thought, instantly regretting it as a mixture of fury and guilt swelled up in him, clogging his throat. Harry shook his head silently, averting his eyes. Lupin seemed to understand, because he stopped for a moment, scanning over him with barely disguised concern, before continuing without broaching the subject. “What’s Occlu—thing, then?” Harry eventually asked, voice low.

“It’s what you’ll be in charge of learning before you come to stay at headquarters. I can promise you, Harry, that it won’t be more than two or three weeks. You’ll be with the rest of us before you know it. Occlumency will help you guard your mind against Lord Voldemort—Dumbledore was very adamant that you learn to protect yourself from internal attacks before joining everyone.” They reached the Apparition point and stopped, folded in shadow near the back of the local library. It was one of the only places perfectly hidden from the road; Harry had taken advantage of this spot quite often as a child, when he was hiding from Dudley and his gang. “Here we are. We’ll be going to a little town called Cokeworth, where your Occlumency teacher lives.”

Struggling to comprehend all that was happening, Harry opened his mouth and then closed it. “I—I’m not sure I understand, Professor. So Occlumency is like, er…reading minds?”

Lupin smiled, casting a discreet Muggle repelling charm before relaxing a little. “Not quite. What you’ll be learning is to make sure nobody else reads your mind, rather than the other way around.”

So they were worried Voldemort was reading his mind. Was that why he wasn’t allowed to be with his friends, and Sirius? Because they thought he was a security risk—a bomb waiting to go off? Harry felt sick. “D’you think I’m being possessed?”

For a moment, he received no response. The sick feeling intensified. Then, with a long sigh, Lupin placed a hand on his shoulder—gingerly, as though he were afraid of spreading some terrible disease. “No. I do not. And yet the risk is still there, Harry, and it is very real. This—connection between you and Voldemort has been, according to Dumbledore, growing as the years go by. We cannot take any chances. Not when he’s recovered his body and is gathering troops and information.”

Harry wasn’t quite sure what to say. His brain was too full. Agitated, he looked around at the sun,
barely peeking over the horizon, and then back at Lupin. There was no one around. It was just them, shrouded in the fading light of dusk. Desperate for something to focus on, he asked, “Who’s my teacher? Is it Dumbledore?”

And for the first time, Lupin…hesitated. “I’m afraid not. Professor Snape is to teach you Occlumency.”

The words refused to compute in his brain for a solid minute. When realization hit, it was as if all the wind had been sucked out of his sails; Harry felt his mouth drop open. Snape? Snape (that awful boy) was going teach him? He was—he was going to Snape’s house? Staying with him? “Are you having a laugh?”

“It’s only for a few weeks, Ha—”

“No, you’re actually serious, aren’t you?” He stepped back, and then jolted forward when his arm brushed the stone of the library wall. “You’re actually sending me to live with Snape. Snape. He hates me!”

“Yes,” Lupin agreed, perhaps unwisely, “however, he’s doing you a favor. One that could potentially cost him greatly. It will only be for a few weeks. You have my word.”

“But—but he hates me!”

“And yet he is agreeing to help you shield your mind from attacks. Severus is taking you into his home and is helping to increase your safety at his own personal risk. He is asking for nothing in return.”

Harry took a massive breath, trying to think somewhat clearly, but there was no way he could look at this without it seeming like a tragedy waiting to happen. What had Dumbledore been thinking? Snape? They loathed each other—who could expect them to live together peacefully, even for a few weeks? This was a terrible idea. They’d end up killing each other by Friday. “Do you trust Snape?” he asked, folding his arms across his chest in a feeble attempt to somehow keep the unease inside, rather than allowing himself to publicly explode.

Lupin became very quiet. There was a crease between his brows. Then, firmly: “Dumbledore trusts Snape.”

“Do you trust him?”

“I trust him not to put a deadly poison into your tea, if only for three weeks,” said Lupin. He smiled, perhaps a little forcibly, before pulling out a tired old watch and sighing again. “We should have been there twenty minutes ago. Severus is expecting us now, Harry. Are you ready to go? I’ll be there to ensure you have proper sleeping arrangements before I leave, and I’ll be checking up every few days to make sure no accidents have happened.”

Couldn’t they have sent him a letter in the post, so he could’ve had time to process this? He wasn’t ready to see Snape at the best of times, let alone a month and a half earlier than he should’ve had to. “I…I s’pose. You’ll be calling in? Will anyone be writing to me?”

Would Hedwig even be able to find him? She still hadn’t returned from when he’d sent letters out to everyone informing them of the Dementor attack. Where had Lupin said they were going, again? Cokeworth? It sounded almost…familiar.

“I’ll be checking in, yes. Harry—it’s going to be fine.” Lupin briefly grasped his arm, squeezing gently. “You can always Floo to us in case of an emergency. Dumbledore would not allow you to
stay in a home where you’re in danger.”

Wouldn’t he?

“I’m ready, then, Professor,” he muttered, trying to ready himself a little. He raised a hand to try and smooth down his bed-rumpled hair.

Nodding, Lupin took his arm again, and didn’t let go.

They Disapparated.

—

They were late. But, Severus supposed, he shouldn’t have expected anything less from the likes of Remus Lupin.

The agreed-upon arrival time had passed a half hour before, with no sign of Potter; he was beginning to tentatively hope that perhaps they weren’t coming after all. Had there been a change of plans he hadn’t been made aware of? It wouldn’t have been the first time. Dumbledore tended to keep him out of the loop on matters that had to do with the boy directly. Sometimes Severus couldn’t decide if it was intelligent, or simply infuriating. Don’t keep all of your eggs in one basket, after all…but he couldn’t stand to be left out of anything.

He supposed he might as well make Potter something to eat. Apparently, the wolf was going to be snooping about to ensure the living situation was a proper one. If he cooked a decent supper, it might convince Lupin to leave a little sooner.

Retreating to the kitchen, where he absently cast another cooling charm, Severus rooted through his dingy refrigerator for something an adolescent boy would find even remotely edible. He knew Potter had a healthy appreciation for sweets, after diligently watching his every move for four years, but a treacle tart for dinner would likely raise some eyebrows. Maybe a salad? Or some soup?

Somebody knocked on the door. Cursing to whatever god had gifted him a summer of hell, Severus slammed the fridge shut and headed for the sitting room, peering through the spyhole to find an old man and a Weasley-esque boy standing on the sidewalk. So much for changed plans.

The bolt stuck as he tried to unlock it, but he wrenched it back with practiced eased and prised the creaking door open. “I don’t suppose you might just be Muggles hoping to promote the Lord,” he sneered.

“Hello, Severus,” came Lupin’s aggravating voice, from somewhere within the depths of a beard that could rival the Headmaster’s. Not-Weasley Potter simply looked nauseated. Even with the Polyjuice, he looked just like his sickening father. The way his eyes darted about to look for prey was so uncannily similar, it turned his stomach. The way his hands wrung together, like he could barely hold back the urge to snatch an invisible Snitch out of the air…

It was just his luck, Severus thought, that he would have to feel the years-old bitterness well up within him a month and a half earlier than he should have.

“Well?” he snapped, tearing his gaze away from the boy. “Are you coming in?”
The two moved forward without a word. Glaring daggers at the clock above the fireplace, Severus tried to ignore the way they both looked round. Neither of them made any effort to hide what they were doing. He couldn’t tell if he preferred it that way or not. “You’re late, Lupin.”

“Ah — yes. We had a bit of a delay,” said Lupin, in that mild-mannered tone that had always rankled his nerves. “There was a Dementor attack on Little Whinging last night. I had quite a lot of explaining to do before we set out.”

A Dementor attack? In a Muggle suburb? Had that been what Albus was talking about two days before, when he said he’d anticipated an attack of some kind? But the Dark Lord had made no mention of any plans…

Could the Minister truly be behind this after all?

“I see.” He forced any further ponderings behind a veil of apathy, locked them up tight, and swallowed the key. “What’s wrong with Potter? Scheming already?”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not there,” the boy in question suddenly snarled, red in the face with anger, chest heaving like he’d run a mile.

“Harry,” Lupin said sharply, but the yelling had already begun.

Oh, yes, Severus thought as Potter descended into one of the most passionate fits of rage he’d seen in quite some time. He could see no way in which any of this could possibly end in catastrophe.

Chapter End Notes

my two days off are nearly over now, so I'll be back to work tomorrow working long hours. I'm not sure of my posting schedule yet; but I will be updating whenever possible.

there are sections of the first few chapters that will be taken straight out of the text. I added page numbers to the first one, but none in the second one. I feel they would disrupt the reading flow. so, anything you recognize is of course JK Rowling's work!
Chapter 3

Harry’s first impression of Cokeworth was one of familiarity, of cold tinned tomatoes on equally cold toast, and damp, musty bedsheets. He’d been here before, or at least — somewhere near to it, back before Hogwarts. They’d stayed at a hotel around the area when Uncle Vernon had taken them all on the run from his letters. Had Snape really been so close, all that time? Close enough that they might have run into each other at the corner store in town, or passed each other by on the street?

His second impression was one of vague concern. The section of Cokeworth Lupin had Apparated them to had been distinctly shabby in a way that Little Whinging had never been, but as they’d traveled further on, past the town and past the little houses and playgrounds, things seemed to go from ‘shabby’ to ‘derelict.’ The river seemed to be the dividing marker. It snaked by the outskirts of the neat little family homes Harry had caught a glimpse of, trash-logged and turned brown with filth. In the distance, he could see the top of an old factory chimney, looming high above the abandoned workers’ two-up two-downs that made up the side of town he’d had the misfortune to find himself in.

Snape lived here?

“Harry,” Lupin murmured, grazing his shoulder with a barely-there touch, “try to keep close. We still have a ways to go.”

He didn’t want to know how bad the state of the houses even further in were. Had Cokeworth somehow gone untouched by the slum clearance in the 1950’s and 60’s?

The windows of nearly every house they passed were either boarded, shattered, or both. Some buildings were missing their doors. Any house they passed by with lights on inside seemed hardly better than the rest; Harry felt as though he’d stepped into a frozen passage of time, a relic that had been forgotten by the rest of the world, and left to rot alone.

“Here we are.” The words were so soft, Harry barely heard them. They’d come to a stop deep within the maze of narrow, cobbled streets, in front of a house that should have been demolished forty years prior. When Lupin raised a hand to rap on the door, Harry felt suddenly as though the hot, dirty air was suffocating him, filling his lungs until they became leaden. It was hard to breathe. Not wanting Professor Lupin to see the panic crushing his sternum, he fixed his eyes on his trainers, tracing the line where they were beginning to tear at the uppers.

The door opened. He felt his heart jolt at the sound of it.

“I don’t suppose you might just be Muggles hoping to promote the Lord,” Severus Snape said flatly, and Harry snatched the briefest glance of him from where he was leaning out the door before he locked his eyes back onto his shoelaces.

“Well? Are you coming in?”

Harry stepped into the house before his courage could fail him. The rancid smell of the river didn’t last through the doorway; Snape’s house smelled old, dusty, with the lingering sharpness of stale cigarettes and black coffee. He took a deep breath to fortify himself and looked around.
The expected green-and-silver color scheme was nowhere to be seen; the living room looked like a prison cell, with bookshelves for cages, and the scant amount of furniture was ratty, with dull, threadbare fabrics that would have been considered old twenty years ago. The only source of light was a candle-filled lamp hanging from the ceiling. Harry had expected luxury, silks and satins, and a hoard of house-elves; wasn’t Snape a rich pureblood? Wasn’t there supposed to be a fine chaise lounge, instead of a sagging sofa? A leather armchair not unlike those in Slytherin’s common room, to replace the ancient monstrosity by the hearth? He’d never paid close enough attention to his Potions Professor to truly study him, but hadn’t he always won fine, if not drab, robes? Or had he simply not noticed the fraying sleeves and aged patches he now saw clearly as though they’d appeared out of nothingness?

The room itself seemed to be made up of books. They were everywhere—on shelves, in cases, stacked on the floor and footstool, and even piled in the tattered armchair. Snape had a miniature library in his house. It was the only part of this relic of a home that fit Harry’s previously assumed impression of the man.

Then he remembered he didn’t actually give a damn what his impressions of this place or its owner were, because fury had swiftly overtaken him at the dismissive look on Snape’s face, and suddenly he was shouting.


There was no worldly payment Dumbledore could ever have given him that would make any of this worth it. As Potter continued spewing what was likely a year’s worth of adolescent frustrations, he retired to the kitchen to begin meal prep; the boy didn’t even seem to notice he’d left the room. His temper likely wouldn’t simmer down once he did notice. If somebody simply walked away while he was in the middle of a passionate rant, Severus would find himself none too pleased.

Then again…it wasn’t as if he cared about Potter’s fragile ego.

In the sitting room, the wolf was speaking in a low, soothing tone. The boy had stopped shouting, but Severus knew perfectly well it hadn’t cured anything. Teenagers rarely expended all of their hurts in one go. To expect attitude during these hellish weeks would be an understatement.

And to think, he had to teach someone like this how to control their emotions. Someone so arrogant, so open and emotionally vulnerable, that wore their heart on their sleeve… just like his father.

Supper was ready to be prepared by the time Lupin led the boy into the kitchen. He cast a withering look at them both as they began to look around. They were studying the room closely, without even attempting to be discreet about it. Gryffindors. “Listen closely, Potter,” he said, injecting as much sneer into the words as possible. “I am not made of money. Do not expect to be living in luxury during your stay here. I refuse to allow you to lounge about all day, throwing your weight round my house and expecting to be treated like royalty. There will be chores. You will be finishing your summer homework, to my satisfaction, and you will be studying all that I attempt to force into your miniscule brain.”
There was a sullen silence from behind him. Then, softly, “All right.”

“What was that?”

“Yes, sir.”

Severus heard a faint sigh from somewhere to his left. Turning his head slightly to watch the wolf creep closer, he snapped, “Do you need something, Lupin?”

“I’d like to thank you for agreeing to take in Harry and teach him Occlumency. The Order is indebted to you, Severus,” he said, for all the world seeming like he truly meant it. He was currently studying the broken handle on his silverware drawer, and the dishes in the sink, with an air of vague interest. The light on the ceiling flickered ominously; Severus shot a glare at it, daring it to go out during the inspection of his home.

“Your appreciation is neither wanted nor needed,” he dismissed, mincing the remnants of the parsley he’d found in his fridge and reaching for a ziploc bag of diced white onion. Lupin hadn’t stopped moving. He was uncomfortably close now. Goosebumps prickled along his arms at the proximity.

“Why are you coming closer? Trying to make sure I don’t poison the Boy-Who-Lived? Rest assured, werewolf — I’m currently fresh out of my quickest poisons. Even I would tire of watching Potter writhe on the floor as death slowly overtakes him.”

“D’you want me to help with dinner?” Potter suddenly asked. The offer seemed surprisingly sincere, even though it was aimed towards his disgusting trainers. The boy’s hands were twisting in his oversized shirt. Just as disrespectful as his father. “I’m a decent hand at cooking.”

“No. Sit down and be quiet.” His kitchen was too fucking tiny for this.

He could hear the telltale creak as the boy sat down in the chair closest to the back door, and then the sound of him plucking at the stuffing in the ragged seat cushion.

“What are you making?” Lupin asked mildly. “It looks quite healthy.”

Ah…and now the questioning had begun.

“An Israeli salad.” He diced two cucumbers with precision borne from years of cutting potions ingredients, and pushed the pile aside to make room for a tomato. It joined the growing pile of chopped vegetables in a matter of seconds. “Go ahead and begin the interrogation. No need to hide behind polite inquiries.”

Lupin did just that, firing off questions without preamble. Severus tipped the vegetables on the cutting board into a chipped bowl and grabbed a spoon to toss it all together.

Was he going to keep the Chosen One fed? Was there a place for him to sleep? Was his house on the verge of condemnation, or was it clean? How safe was that potion bubbling away on his stove? How old were the dishes in the sink? Did he have an outhouse, or was there a more modern bathroom attached to the house itself? Was it reasonably lacking in mildew? Was the whole building this shabby — he twitched at that one — or was it just the sitting room and kitchen? Was the house itself safe? Were there any Dark objects of any kind?

Will it ever end? he found himself wondering after the nth question. The salad was long since finished, and Lupin still hadn’t escorted himself out the door. Did he expect to be invited to eat? There wasn’t nearly enough food for three of them; he’d only made enough for Potter, using whatever odds and ends he’d been able to find in the kitchen. There would be a visit to the local shopping centre in the very near future.
“Potter,” Severus said, cutting Lupin off and turning to glare at the supposed Chosen One. The boy stared back defiantly, gripping the bottom of the chair so hard his knuckles had gone white. He was bouncing one of his legs as though ready to hex someone at a moment’s notice. Those oversized clothes were beginning to piss him off, too; and those trainers would be going into the rubbish bin outside the minute he found a newer pair among the boy’s belongings. “Lemon juice, olive oil, or tahini?”

“Er…” He stopped picking at the chair’s stuffing long enough to scratch at his nose. “Tahini?”

“Are you asking, or saying?” he demanded.

“Saying…?” the boy said slowly, trying to look up at the salad on the counter without standing. Lupin was smiling wryly at him; clearly he found the boy’s lack of decision-making skills endearing. Why he was the one being questioned for his ability to take care of a single teenager, he’d never understand. He’d been taking care of a couple hundred of the brats for over a decade now, and none of them had ever been seriously traumatized by him. The most he’d ever done was make a Hufflepuff or two cry, and that had been years ago, before he’d learned how to toe the line between deflating an ego and inducing fits of hysteria.

When he opened his refrigerator, Lupin was suddenly right there, silently studying the lack of food. “I will, of course, be going to the supermarket,” said Severus with a curl of his lip. “I have no intentions of starving Potter.”

“Glad to hear it,” the wolf smiled. “Do you have the funds to keep a teenage boy fed?”

“I don’t expect to be filing bankruptcy after he leaves for headquarters.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Obviously. Are we finished here? I wouldn’t want Potter’s healthy meal to wilt, seeing as how you seem to be planning on staying until the end of time.” Severus fixed a bland smile on his face, fully aware that it hadn’t touched his eyes. “I believe you’ve overstayed your welcome. It’s time for you to leave.”

“You’ve never been one to mince words, Severus.” Lupin’s smile was equally bland. “But, unfortunately, my visit isn’t quite finished. Would you allow me to inspect the upstairs?”

And for the first time, Severus felt an inkling of true discomfort. The upstairs? The kitchen and sitting room were one thing, but the upstairs—that was a place he allowed no one to set foot. “If you must,” he said tonelessly, Occluding hard enough to make himself feel numb inside and out. “I can assure you, Potter will be spending minimal time upstairs. In fact, the only time he will be up there at all is if he has somehow injured himself and needs my assistance during the night.”

Lupin paused and looked around. “Is there a bedroom on the ground floor that he’ll be sleeping in?”

Potter had stopped eating, Severus noticed, with his mouth full of food and his head down. “The spare bedroom upstairs has been a storage room for some time now, and isn’t currently fit for human consumption. Until I can find the time necessary to clear it out, the boy will be sleeping on the sofa. It is not uncomfortable. I will, of course, be adding copious Cushioning Charms to it, and blankets. It will be far from the beds he is no doubt used to, but it isn’t a box on the side of the road.”

“I’m glad to hear of it.” The werewolf’s expression was inscrutable, body language loose and relaxed from where he leaned lightly against the counter, illuminated in a halo by the grey light streaming in through the dirty window.
It infuriated him, really, that he couldn’t use Legilimency on werewolves. He would love to be able to crack open that mild-mannered composure and see what sort of twistedness lay within the mind of Lupin. Reading body language wasn’t difficult—it was easy, really; a talent developed early in life—but while James Potter and Sirius Black had always been open books, Remus Lupin had been another story entirely.

And Severus hated closed books.

“Come along, then,” he snapped, sweeping out of the kitchen without so much as a backwards glance to ensure the werewolf was following. The sound of footsteps was enough indication. He crossed the sitting room in a few strides, pausing only long enough to pull out the book that would trigger the shelf to jump aside, before he began the ascent up the narrow staircase. It was barely a moment later that he realized Lupin wasn’t going to be able to follow him up the deathtrap that posed as a flight of stairs. “Don’t follow me, wolf. You’ll break your worthless neck. I’ll fetch you.”

As loathe as he was to touch anyone, let alone this specific anyone, Severus knew Albus would string him up by his toes and flay him alive if he were to allow his precious werewolf to break his neck on his stairs. And so he grabbed the man roughly by the arm and marched them up to the second floor. He could feel the very cells in his body cringing away from the contact. The hairs on the back of his neck were prickling.

“These stairs seem very dangerous,” said Lupin. He seemed to be taking the rough treatment in stride, glancing about in a show of polite interest. They reached the top of the landing without incident. The moment he was certain the wolf wouldn’t fall, Severus pulled away sharply and stepped to the side. “Is there not a banister, or a light?”

He’d broken his arm in the summer before his seventh year, falling down these stairs. “All stairs are dangerous, if you’re an insufferable dunderhead who can’t be arsed to follow basic safety procedures.”

“A proper banister would most certainly follow basic safety procedures.”

He’d forgotten what a vindictive cunt Remus Lupin could be when he felt like it. A mix of hatred and vague nostalgia swelled up within him, churning together to resemble something like indigestion. “Is this enough inspection, Lupin?” he hissed, wishing desperately to hex the man and be done with it. He swept an arm out in a parody of a showing, movement nearly lost in the darkness of the landing. “Or will you not be satisfied until you’ve taken notes to bring back to Black? Would you like a camera, as well?”

Just as he’d hoped, Lupin’s composure finally cracked. There was a sharp crease between his eyebrows and his eyes seemed tight. Irritably, he said, “That’s not my intention, Severus. I only wish to ensure Harry’s safety and comfort during his stay. Making a fool of you is by no means the purpose of me coming here. Now—may I see these rooms?”

Severus was going to need a Calming Draught the minute this farce of a home inspection was complete. What was this, a raid on Malfoy Manor? Wrenching the door closest to the stairs open, he stepped back protectively in front of the room that was once his parent’s and jerked his head at his own bedroom. “There,” he snapped. “Do try to restrain yourself from disturbing anything.”

It was times like these where he was rather glad he didn’t own much in the way of furniture or clothing. His bedroom was bare to the point of looking almost entirely uninhabited—a guest room, void of personality and decoration. The bedstead was iron, with thin sheets coated in an even thinner layer of dust. One of the legs on the wardrobe was too short; it wobbled each time he opened it. His nightstand was chipped and worn, and the lamp on top was even dustier than his bedsheets.
“Is this not your room?” Lupin asked, glancing about. “It looks quite neglected.”

“What an astute observation. One might think you do, after all, possess more than one brain cell. I’ve been away, if you must know, though I would love for you to enlighten me on how it is any of your business,” he lied smoothly. The sofa was where he normally kipped down. Yet another thing Potter was going to ruin during his brief stint at Spinner’s End. “Is that all? My patience is running very thin.”

Lupin did not mention the other bedroom. Severus didn’t make any attempt at reminding him of it. The returning trek down the stairs was slower than the first, because Severus knew from experience just how dangerous said trek could be, and by the end of it his fingers felt stiff from how tightly he’d clenched the other’s shirt in his fist. They returned to the kitchen without a word.

Potter didn’t move when they entered, but Severus could see his eyes dart up to scrutinize them before returning to the remnants of his dinner. The wolf looked round one more time and finally nodded a little. “Harry”—the boy’s head shot up—“I’ll be seeing you in two days, and you will have full access to the Floo network while here, in case of an…emergency. I’m sure Ron and Hermione are writing frantic letters to you as we speak. Do you need anything before I leave?”

“Er—no, I think I’m okay,” the boy mumbled, shuffling upright in his chair from the slouch he’d sunk into. “Oh wait—could you unshrink my trunk, actually?”

Severus busied himself with preparing more potions ingredients so he wouldn’t have to look directly at either of them. He could hear the wheels on Potter’s trunk grate against his kitchen floor.

“Well, I’ll be off, then.” Lupin hesitantly placed a hand on Potter’s shoulder, like he was afraid of spreading his werewolf, and briefly exchanged goodbyes. “I’ll be here around Friday afternoon. Thank you again for this, Severus. Harry, I’ll be seeing you soon. I’ll go ahead and let myself out.”

When the front door finally closed and Lupin was finally gone, Severus deigned himself to look at the boy. “Now that your favorite werewolf is finished poking his snout into places it doesn’t belong, and you’re quite finished, you can go find something quiet to do. You have a summer assignment in my class. I would suggest you use that as a method of staying out of my way.”

Potter glowered at his fork and made no move to get up. “He’s only trying to help. Sir.”

“Be that as it may, Lupin can feel free to help elsewhere, and stay far away from my house.” Preferably forever—but, he supposed, you couldn’t always get what you wanted in life. If he could, the Marauders would have died many years ago, and he wouldn’t have had the spawn of all of his least favorite classmates foisted upon him. But then, he’d likely still be with the Dark Lord if that were true, killing innocent people, making deadly poisons, and generally making a nuisance of himself in trying to impress his fellow Death Eaters. “Are you finished eating? As I said, you won’t be throwing your weight round my house. Scrape your plate and place it in the sink.”

“D-D’you want me to do the dishes, too? Sir?” His voice was sullen.

“No. We aren’t Muggles.”

Silence. Then, just as angrily, “It was good. Thank you for the food.”

If he was going to insist on being like this all year, Severus was going to end up killing himself by November. Had he really agreed to this? Had Albus perhaps hit him with a subtle compulsion charm, or had he potentially been putting compliance potions into his coffee grounds for the last year? Maybe he’d been under the Imperius when he’d said yes.
He’d only just begun to open his mouth and fuck up whatever tentative truce they seemed to have formed, when the oven timer chimed. The Veritaserum was in its third stage. Jolting towards the stove, he rushed to begin chopping bitterroot, holding his breath to keep the rancid smell out; the boy made a gagging noise from behind him and demanded, “What the hell is that?”

“Bitterroot, as you should have known since second year. Cover your nose—I won’t have you sicking up all over my table.” It was all in, now, and he allowed himself the few seconds that it took to cast an air freshening spell before reaching for his supply of Jobberknoll feathers and dropping a single one into the brew and turning the heat on the highest setting. His stove let out a furious rumble and flickered ominously, but held steady. He’d chosen the good burner for a reason. “Summer assignment, Potter. I shan’t repeat myself again.”

Dropping a measure of moly into the potion, Severus stirred counterclockwise for twelve seconds before turning clockwise for another five, and then counter again until the potion turned neon green—the final stage before it became colorless and had to stew for a week. (He was not looking forward to the gas bill.) He mopped at his forehead with one hand and cast a cooling charm with the other before beginning to measure out a teaspoon of powdered moonstone.

“Have you begun to complete any of your summer assignments?” he asked as he stirred in alternating turns.

Potter didn’t reply, but the split second’s pause before he continued paging through his Potions book was enough of an answer.

“I shouldn’t have expected anything less. So arrogant—you’re approaching your fifth year and yet you are still expecting to glide your way through school on fame alone, rather than hard work. How will you ever hope to pass your OWLs? Will you dazzle them with your scar and ask for an O?” he went on, turning his stove down low as the green suddenly sapped away, leaving behind a concoction that resembled water. Finally…and now all he had to do was make sure the boy didn’t touch it. “Now. We have some rules to be going over.”

Harry had been waiting for the rules.

He was still seething by the time Snape finished the potion, and he knew full well that his temper was only going to become worse when the git would present him with what was sure to be a book as thick as his head, full of rules like “do not look at me when the hour is a number divisible by two,” and “refrain from bringing garlic near the premise of my property, lest I disembowel you and use your innards in a potion to power the Dark Lord.”

“Rules, sir?” he said, in a voice that he hoped to be reasonably calm, arranging his expression into something he thought might be politely quizzical. Snape pivoted on his heel and fixed him with a baleful look, but said nothing; there was an air about him that reminded Harry of the one that often radiated from him like an aura during Potions—the one that said he was such a miserable failure, there weren’t even words to describe how much of a mistake his parents had made in conceiving him. Apparently, his politely quizzical face was just as bad as his innocent one.

“Yes, Potter,” said Snape with relish. “Rules. You will follow them all, unless you’d like to scrub out my used cauldrons all summer. Do you enjoy the smell of week-old Polyjuice crustings?”
Polyjuice crustings? It had been three years since his adventure into the Slytherin common room, but the mere memory of cleaning that cauldron made him gag a little; or maybe that was the remnants of the nausea that had sprung up when Snape cut open the bitterroot.

“Would you like me to go fetch a quill, Professor?” Harry asked. “How long should my parchment be? Will twelve inches do?”

What little he could see of Snape’s eyes behind that greasy hair looked hard and cold. “Are you offering to begin lines? Already planning on breaking rules, are you?”

*That awful boy…*

He swallowed. “No.”

“No?”

“No, sir.”

Those black eyes went even colder. “Spare me your lies.” He moved suddenly, planting both hands down on the table so that he was staring down his considerable nose at Harry. “Rule one: you will not, for any reason, touch the cauldron on the stove. You will not add anything to it, you will not move it aside, you will not turn the stove off, you will not *breathe* on it…Do not touch the potion, and our weeks together will pass quite smoothly. Rule two: you will not enter either of the upstairs rooms, for any reason. I don’t care if you have an excuse that would satisfy the Dark Lord himself. You will not enter those rooms. Rule three…”

He was wrong, Harry thought, as Snape prattled on and on. Twelve inches wouldn’t be nearly enough to write all of this down.

*Chapter End Notes*

I took most of the description of Snape's house from the book, with just a few minor bits (open pathway to the kitchen in lieu of another sliding bookcase, and a few fireplace details) taken from the movie. I'm not sure if I want Severus and Remus to develop anything romantic, so for now everything will stay strictly platonic. I hope this chapter finds you all well!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn’t until Snape showed him the bathroom, which looked remarkably new compared to what he’d seen so far, that Harry realized that this was actually happening. He was staying with Snape. That toothbrush he could see sitting on the sink? That was Snape’s. Snape’s bathroom. Snape’s house.

He was staying with Snape.

*What the hell.*

The entire situation was surreal. Was this even allowed? Surely they were breaking all sorts of teacher-student rules by setting him up inside of his professor’s house. Had Dumbledore really said this was all right? “Where will I be sleeping, again?” he asked hesitantly, eyes still locked on the toothbrush. “You said—the couch, right?”

There was a long-suffering expression on Snape’s face, and his voice was just as withering when he replied. “It won’t eat you alive if you try to sleep on it. I’ll even add a cushioning charm or two, to ensure your poor neck doesn’t develop a crick. Blankets and a pillow will be supplied.”

Harry had seen the sofa during their brief sweep of the prison cell living room. It was torn in a few places, sunken deep in the center where the springs had given out, and looked rather unforgiving overall. At least it was better than the floor. And, unlike with the Dursleys, he’d have a pillow and apparently more than one blanket. “Do I have a curfew?” he asked. The word curfew was better than the word bedtime.

Snape’s lips curled a little, like he knew what Harry had been thinking. He’d always had the horrible suspicion that Snape could read minds…and all this talk about Occlumency confirmed it. Harry hastily attempted to think of nothing but clouds. Big, puffy ones.

“Be in bed by eleven. As I said before, you won’t be lazing about all summer. Your relatives might let you sleep until early afternoon, but that won’t be the case here.” He paused, and then: “Again—you will not enter my bedroom, for any reason besides a grievous injury. The doors upstairs stay closed at all times. Unfortunately, threats of a painful death don’t work on you, as evidenced by your first year, so you’ll simply have to take my word for it and *keep out.*”

“What’s wrong with the second bedroom, exactly?” Harry dared to ask, trying not to sound nervous. He’d said earlier that it was ‘unfit for human consumption.’ That could mean a lot of things. Who knew what was in there? Dead bodies, fatal poisons, evil plans…

“It’s been a storage room for the past two years. Until I can find a place for it all, it stays put. I have priceless possessions stored inside, hence the *keep out.*”

There was no telling whether Snape was lying or not, and he wasn’t about to try and find out. He wouldn’t put it past the man to slip something into his pumpkin juice once they returned to Hogwarts. Here, he would be reasonably safe, because there was nobody to humiliate him in front of; but he’d rather not be surprised once school began.

Well…that depended on whether or not he’d be expelled. The familiar anxiety of the last two days crested over him; Harry swallowed hard around a dry lump in his throat.
“Potter, are you listening to me?” Snape snapped, jolting him back into awareness.

“I…yes?” he said dazedly. His heart throbbed in his chest like it was fighting to get free. They were still standing in the doorway of the tiny bathroom off the side of the kitchen, encased in the dimmest of lights. He could barely see Snape’s face in the shadows, but he was sure the man was glaring at him. Taking a deep breath, Harry nodded quickly. “I’ll stay out. Sir.”

There was silence for a few tense seconds before Snape sighed softly and rubbed at his face. “Go to the sitting room. Do not move from that room. Wait by the sofa while I find you a pillow.”

Snape didn’t look back as he swept out of the kitchen and into the living room; Harry hurried to follow, passing through the doorway in time to see him pull a massive tome out of one of the shelves by the fireplace, and jumped a little as the bookshelf promptly slid to the side to reveal a dark stairwell. Never mind the rest of the house, he decided, watching as Snape disappeared into the gloom. That staircase was most definitely fitting.

There were faint footsteps up above his head, creaking against floorboards so old Harry was sure they could be pulled away without much difficulty. He held his breath for a moment and then cautiously began to explore, keeping close to the furniture where the floor had settled enough not to make a sound. He found the fabric of the sofa to be surprisingly soft when he passed a hand over the back during his slow trek over to the curtained front window. Sweat ran into his eyes from where his fringe had become plastered to his forehead. I might not need that blanket after all.

Daring a peek into the stairwell to check for signs of Snape, Harry turned back to the window and shifted the curtain to the side enough that he could see out into the empty street. The Polyjuice was due to wear off at any moment, but it couldn’t hurt to take a quick look.

Which house had been his mum’s, if any of them? Had this street always looked this, or had Lily Potter grown up here during a time when this place wasn’t so derelict, but instead closer to the little family homes less than twenty minutes walking distance?

That awful Snape boy.

Would Snape let him out of the house anytime during his stay? Would he be able to possibly scope out the neighborhood, as well as the surrounding ones, in an attempt to find something of his mother’s? Something untainted by Aunt Petunia, a small piece of his mum that he himself would see and know. Finding her childhood home would be the first step.

A door shut somewhere upstairs.

Harry’s breath caught in his throat. Yanking the curtain back to where it had been, he spun around and made his way back to the sofa. He was nearly there when there came a distant shout from outside and the rattling slam of a door, and his foot caught on the leg of the sofa when he turned in alarm. He was slipping—

—

Severus wrenched his parents’ door open and stole inside, closing and locking it behind him. Stepping over the old clothes on the floor and heading for the wardrobe, where he could faintly remember his mother keeping spare linens, he tugged the doors open and kicked a mothball out of his path and towards the old bedframe in the centre of the room. Surely there would be a blanket
tucked away somewhere. If all else failed, he’d simply transfigure the boy a pillow out of an old magazine, but he’d rather not have to go on a scavenger hunt for useless items to transfigure into a pile of blankets.

He leaned forward to rummage through old bedsheets, coughing a little from the mustiness. A cleaning charm would be needed to be cast before he could give them to Potter. There were three blankets of varying thickness stowed underneath a layer of tattered pillowcases; he unfolded one and looked it over skeptically.

It was as he was gathering everything up and locking the door that he heard the Richardson’s front door slam as one of their frequent arguments started, followed by a resounding thud that shook the floorboards underneath his shoes. Severus dropped the blankets and rushed down the stairs. “What happened?” he demanded, heart beating as fast as a bird’s as he looked round to find the boy sprawled on the floor by the sofa. If he managed to kill the Boy-Who-Lived in less than a day after he arrived… “Are you injured?”

“I’m all right.” Potter’s voice was muffled. A hand reached up to prod at the mess he had the audacity to call hair and came away, to Severus’s relief, unbloodied. The Polyjuice had worn off while he was upstairs. “Ouch.”

Jesus Christ. He knew the boy was accident-prone, but— “Don’t move, you blasted idiot,” he snarled, sliding the rest of the way down the stairs and stalking over to him. “You could have a concussion. Did you have the common decency to wound yourself anywhere else, or are you simply destined to lose as many brain cells as possible before you finally graduate and leave me in peace?”

“I didn’t mean to fall,” Potter said angrily, looking up at him too fast. The resulting wince was very telling. “It was the yelling outside.”

“You mean to tell me my neighbor stormed into my house and pushed you over?” he sneered, dropping down to one knee to properly inspect the idiot. “And I believe I said to stop moving. Do you want me to place a sticking charm on you?”

He had a split second’s hesitation before reaching out and carefully probing the lump on the boy’s head. Potter immediately stiffened and fell silent, which was a relief. James Potter had been a terrible patient while in the Hospital Wing; Severus had put him in there often enough, in their late school years, to know.

Finding the wound didn’t take very long. It wasn’t large, but the swelling had started up quickly enough to worry him. He knew from experience that there were rusted old nails protruding from a few of the floorboards. Had the Muggles kept the boy updated on his vaccines? “Have you had a tetanus shot recently?”

There was a graze on Potter’s arm, too, that he hadn’t felt the need to speak up about. “A what?”

“I’ll take that as a no. Tomorrow, when I make a potion for you, you will drink it,” he said. “All of it. Of course, if you’d prefer to die from a very preventable disease…”

“I thought you said your house wasn’t about to be condemned,” the boy mumbled, pulling away from him at last and shuffling himself into a sitting position. “Why would I get a disease from falling over?”

Severus gritted his teeth and nearly snapped at him, before managing to somehow school his temper into behaving and saying in a very tight voice. “Rust, Potter. Something I’m sure even your precious Muggle family cannot scrub away entirely. This is an old building, which means rust, which means a
chance of contracting tetanus. You will drink the potion.”

A grudging nod. “I’ll drink it.”

“Get off the floor so I can disinfect your arm,” Severus said, summoning the blankets he’d abandoned at the top of the landing into his arms, where he promptly dumped them onto the sofa. Neither of them spoke as they returned to the kitchen; the boy sat back down in his chair from earlier and worried a loose thread on his shirt between his fingers.

The first aid kit under the sink was starting to run low. He was going to need to brew more antiseptic, he noticed, as the remaining bit of purple potion sloshed back and forth in its vial. The local grocery carried gauze and cotton balls, but he’d never really trusted the power of Muggle wound cleansers over the abilities of ones created by himself. “Stay still,” he ordered the boy, who did exactly the opposite as he immediately began to bounce one leg. “The threat of a sticking charm still holds. Stay still.”

“I can do it myself. You don’t have to—”

“I have less faith in your abilities to take care of an injury than I do your abilities to stay on a broomstick, a hundred feet off of the ground,” he said, in the most condescending voice he could muster. “Stay. Still.”

All things considered, the injuries Potter had sustained could have been far worse. “You’ll live,” Severus decided, dabbing at the cut on his arm with more gentleness than he deserved. “I can’t say the same for your lost brain cells. Will you be cracking your skull open on a windowsill next?”

“I told you I hadn’t done it on purpose!” Potter snapped, before he drew away sharply. “I hadn’t been fancying myself a nice fall to end the day. I hadn’t wanted any of this.”

“Potter,” he said idly, stowing the first aid kit back under the sink and beginning to wash his hands, “I know this may seem like a herculean effort to someone as keen to impress as you, but keeping your mouth shut is not as arduous a task as you seem to believe it is. Are you dizzy? Nauseated?”

He was back to picking at the stuffing in the chair. At this rate, it would be gone by the end of his stay. “Why do you even care? Just send me to bed and forget about it. Or better yet, send me to where everyone else is!” the boy raged, and suddenly the anger from earlier was back, spilling out of him like an overflowing teacup. “Why can’t I be with Sirius and the others? Why am I stuck with the Dursleys, and now you, while everyone else is having a grand old time at headquarters? I’m the one that watched Voldemort return! I’m the one who watched Cedric die! Why am I being left out of everything? I don’t want to be here! I want to be with Ron and Hermione! Why can’t I go be with them instead of being trapped in your disgusting house, while Voldemort is out—”

There was a broken plate on the floor, but Severus couldn’t quite remember when it got there, or how. His hands were planted on the table, nails scraping at the old wood as his fingers struggled to clench against his palms. Potter’s pale face was barely an inch away from his. Almost too furious to speak, Severus ground out, “Do not say that name in my house.”

He forced himself to back off, before he could do something he’d regret. The silence from before had returned, and this time it was so thick he’d probably been able to slice through it like butter. He drew his wand, ignoring Potter’s barely-there flinch, and jerkily cast reparo on the plate, as well as another cooling charm. His hands were shaking a little. Whether it was from anger or stress, he couldn’t tell, nor did he care.

“I’m going to make your bed,” he said as he left the kitchen. “Do not sleep on your back tonight.
There will be a headache potion waiting for you in the morning, as well as an antidote for any bacteria you might have picked up from the stairs. I will return momentarily. Stay still.”

The boy’s voice was soft. “Yes, sir.”

All things considered, Severus thought, it hadn’t been a terrible first day.

Chapter End Notes

Did you know the spell "tempus" that’s so popular in fanfictions is actually 100% fanon and was never actually used in any of the books or movies?
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Albus had made a terrible mistake in judgement by leaving the boy out of the current events. As much as Severus hated Harry Potter, the boy had never been this sullen, this angry—this prone to raging outbursts. The most he’d ever truly done...as loathe he was to admit it...was show some cheek when provoked, and go exploring after curfew. Severus had never heard rumors of the boy’s pranks. He’d not been treated to complaints of bullying by anyone other than Draco Malfoy. Potter wasn’t his kindhearted mother, but...Well. This newfound attitude, on the other hand, was right up James Potter’s alley. That infuriated him beyond all else.

The boy was asleep. There hadn’t been a sound from downstairs for more than an hour now, when before he’d heard the faint sound of shuffling, and the groaning of his ancient sofa. Now there was silence. And Severus found himself unable to drop off. Perhaps it was lack of familiarity; he often kipped down on the sofa, rather than attempting to wrestle his bed into submission. He’d nearly forgotten, by forceful repression most likely, how deeply it sunk in the center, and how painful the bedsprings were. Not even Cushioning Charms had helped much. While the couch was perfectly serviceable—and he missed it dearly, all of a sudden—his childhood bed left much to be desired.

Maybe if he took the empty bedframe from his parents’ room...He’d savaged the mattress years ago, ripped it apart until it more resembled a snowman than a mattress, but the bedframe was in decent enough shape. His father had at least slept soundly on it. He could Banish half the contents of that room, empty out the rest...Then Potter would be free to occupy that space, and he would have his couch back.

They needed to buy food, Severus remembered, pressing his palms hard against his eyes, until bright spots of color burst out through the darkness, and then he let his arms drop back to his sides with a long sigh. It would have to be tomorrow. He couldn’t so much as remember the last time he’d bought a jar of fucking peanut butter, let alone anything edible. The ingredients for last night’s salad had been a (relief) surprise.

It was raining for the first time in over a week; the sound of the river rushing past was almost soothing. The fact that the yard was most certainly going to be flooded come tomorrow couldn’t bother him. Maybe...just maybe...he’d be able to get some sleep after all...

Or not. He tossed and turned for what felt like hours, unable to find a comfortable position. The springs dug into his back; his shoulder sank deep when he laid on his side; his spine ached when he tried to roll onto his stomach. Nothing was working. Did he have an extra Dreamless Sleep lying around...? No, even if he did, it would be useless now. A full eight hours was recommended for those. It was already late now; he didn't fancy waking up in the afternoon, well rested or not. Maybe if he only took a spoonful...

Potter’s presence in his house was a hyperawareness fixed into his head. Severus could barely focus on anything else, knowing the boy lay downstairs. Not even his double-warded door, the hidden entrance to the stairs that he was sure Potter hadn’t figured out, or the fact that he was asleep could ease Severus’s anxieties—or his slowly building fury at the situation. How could Albus have talked him into this? It—it was—ridiculous, maddening even. But the anger...the so-familiar disappointment in Dumbledore’s eyes, had been...

Too much to bear.
It was somewhere near dawn when he finally dropped off, but his dreams were twisted and his sleep was shallow at best. Severus had just begun to slip into a deeper rest when there was a scraping sound from somewhere in the house. He was halfway out of bed when he realized Potter must have been awake; the bathroom door squealed below as it opened and shut. Breathing hard, Severus eased back down and dragged his fraying quilt tightly round himself. It had been a very long time, nearly twenty years, even, since anyone had so much as stayed the night at his house. Having somebody else here was… alarming. He wasn’t quite sure how to feel about it.

He could hear the pipes shuddering as the shower turned on with a roar. Severus rolled over onto his side, ignoring the way his shoulder sunk deep into the mattress, and shoved his head under his pillow in an attempt to drown out the noise. (Had he remembered to tell the boy where the towels were?)

What time was it? Fumbling for his wand on his rickety nightstand, Severus cast a hoarse *tempus* and rubbed at his eyes in disbelief. Six in the morning? What kind of teenager willingly woke up at six in the *morning*? God.

Well, he was awake now, at any rate. Stretching as best he could, Severus turned onto his back again and fumbled at his bedside for his cigarettes. He scratched at his bony hip and closed his eyes. They would have to do the shopping early, before the grocery became too busy. Sunday was the worst day to do the shopping. That meant breakfast—and now.

He could only hope Potter wasn’t the type to eat him out of house and home. He couldn’t afford to be spending £200 a week; Severus could barely afford to buy new clothes for himself. For such a bad area, Spinner’s End was shockingly expensive. It was the main reason why there were so few of them left on the street. Most of the figures of his childhood had moved on or died. His mother had been part of the former, and his father the latter. And with the way he, himself, was going…

Well. Severus would be right in with his father’s group by the end of the war. The apple never did fall far from the tree, did it?

*Breakfast can wait,* he thought sourly, knocking one of his cigarettes out against his palm and lighting up with a snap of his fingers. His throat stung from the sudden assault, so early in the morning, but the rest of him relaxed, sinking ever deeper into the mattress. They could be a few extra minutes late to get to the grocery. Breakfast could wait. Potter’s bath would be a while longer. What did fifteen-year-old boys like for breakfast? he wondered, taking another drag of his cigarette and flicking the ashes onto the floor. The better question was whether he was actually thinking about making insufferable prat James Potter’s son breakfast.

His cigarette was gone too soon. Hauling himself to his feet, Severus stumbled into his clothes, Vanished the cinders and broken stub on his nightstand, and braved the stairs to begin making something to eat.

—

“Er—good morning.” Potter’s voice was dull; there was an unhealthy pallor to his face, and dark shadows under his eyes, like bruises. Apparently the boy had a reason to be up early. He was having nightmares.

Well, unless he needed something to rile the boy up about, it was none of Severus’s business. He grunted shortly in reply, pushing an egg round his scratched frying pan. The ancient stove spluttered
out for the fifth time in a matter of minutes. Severus resisted the urge to smash something.

Casting a careful incendio—quelling the impulse to set his entire house ablaze—he relit the stove. The egg finally began to brown. “I’d ask you how many you wanted,” he said, “but I refuse to cook another.”

“It’s okay.” Potter slumped at the rickety table and began picking at the chair’s stuffing. “C-could I make some toast, maybe?”

“You’ll have to butter it yourself.”

The boy got up again and hesitantly rummaged through the fridge. “D’you have a toaster?” he asked, taking a peek round the room, and studying Severus in a way he probably thought was discreet. If he hadn’t been spying on Potter right back, he might have missed it. But that was ridiculous: Severus was always spying.

“In the corner, by the Potions journals. Don’t make a mess,” he said shortly, flipping the egg over and gritting his teeth when the stove flickered again.

Potter shuffled the decaying newspapers and Potions journals away from the decrepit toaster his mother had once bought at a yard sale. The boy seemed much more subdued this morning than he had last night, Severus thought idly. In fact, he would almost dare to say he seemed more like his usual charming self than he had since the whole Goblet of Fire fiasco. Sullenness didn’t suit this one. Arrogance, yes, of course—but the enraged little monster he’d seen arrive to his house the day previous had been as much of a stranger as someone he might have passed by on the street yesterday.

“The couch was fine.”

“What?” he muttered, sliding the egg onto a plate and depositing it at Potter’s new favorite chair, which wasn’t going to look at all like a chair soon if he continued picking at the damn thing. Maybe reparer would work on it. “If you wish to retain your rights to speak in my house at all, you had better speak up, or forever hold your silence.”

“The couch,” Potter repeated, carefully enunciating every word, “was fine. Sir.”

The toaster popped up, startling them both. “Did you find butter?”

“Yeah.”

“The knives are in the drawer to the right of the sink. Eat before your breakfast gets cold, and drink your potions.” Content to now ignore the boy, Severus began measuring coffee grounds into his coffeemaker. It was quite possibly the newest thing in his house, barring his more recent book purchases. He caught Potter snatching a glance at the coffeemaker, and said snidely, “I think your growth is stunted enough, without the added benefit of caffeine to stunt it further.”

Silence. Then, softly, the sound of butter being spread on toast. It was probably best that he kept his own silence, at this point, Severus thought, but then he’d never been able to resist goading James Potter’s terrible son. “We’ll be needing a cover story for when we go out today. I refuse to call you my child, as abhorrent as you are, so you’ll just have to be my nephew. Perhaps your parents sent their wayward son to me as to instill some obedience in him?”

“I’m not calling you uncle,” Potter said sullenly, through a mouthful of egg. Severus regarded him dispassionately. “Cousin, maybe? We look too different to be brothers.”

God forbid. “And the cover story?”
“Why not just your son? It would be more believable,” the boy went on. It was almost as if he hadn’t spoken at all. “You’re the right age, aren’t you? Professor Lupin and Sirius said you were in the same year. They’re, what, in their thirties? Forties? We even look a little similar.”

God for *bid*. “We do not look similar,” he said, “and you will never say that again. Eat your breakfast and get ready to leave. I want to be at the grocery store by eight. We need food for the week, because nothing in this house is currently fit for human consumption.”

The boy swallowed his last mouthful of toast and continued on his egg. “Why isn’t there any food? Even if you didn’t know I was coming, it’s not as though you don’t need to eat. Unless the vampire rumors are true.”

“I’ve been abroad,” Severus lied glibly. “Mind your own business. Are you quite finished?”

Potter finished scraping his plate clean and nodded, standing up to take the plate to the sink, and—begin to scrub it? “I’ll go find my shoes,” he said, setting the clean dishes on the clearest spot of counter he could see. Then, pausing in the doorway, he floundered a little and then stammered, “Er…thank you for cooking. It was good,” before vanishing.

—

“Thirty minutes,” he said in a low voice, seizing a trolley and wheeling it out in front of them. “I won’t be in here any longer. Too much risk of somebody recognizing you.”

“Why bring me at all, then?” Potter huffed, adding a belated and undoubtedly half-hearted ‘sir’ at the end. “I could’ve just stayed at the house. I wouldn’t blow it up, or anything.”

The boy sounded incredibly bitter, for whatever reason. Severus decided to just ignore it; who knew why adolescents chose such strangely specific things to sulk over? “I’m not worried about you bringing the roof down on our heads,” he said, tossing a box of cereal into the cart. Adolescent boys liked cereal. “What do you think would happen, Potter, if Lucius Malfoy decided to visit? What about Narcissa? Would you like to be alone at Spinner’s End when a Death Eater invited himself over for a spot of tea?”

Potter spluttered for a moment before settling down. Severus watched as he fiddled with a box of rice. “Yeah, okay,” the boy finally mumbled. “Sorry.”

Watching him mess with the rice was beginning to piss Snape off. “Do you want it, or not?” he asked—or, well, snapped—as he began moving towards the dairy section. “Make up your mind. What kind of milk do you want?”

“What?”

They were standing in front of the refrigerated cases now; the rice had been placed gently into the trolley. “Milk, Harry,” he forced out, intent on keeping up their cover. He was already more than fed up with this place. All he wanted to do was go home and read for two hours. “What sort of milk do you drink? Skim? Whole? Chocolate? Pick one.”

“Er…just the regular, I s’pose,” he said, pointing weakly at the half-gallon Severus had already grabbed. “I don’t mind much. What kind do you usually buy?”
Jesus, but this was tedious. He could only imagine the sort of ridiculousness they’d encounter once they got to the crisps. Sighing, he ran a hand through his limp hair and glanced round to make sure nobody was paying too close attention to them. There was an old man a few feet away that was making him anxious. “I can’t drink milk. Choose one and get on with it. We need to hurry.”

The boy eyed him strangely before shrugging. “This is fine, then. Where to next?”

“Eggs and butter. Hurry it up.”

As they moved on from the dairy section, Severus snagged a few more staples, like pasta fixings and canned beans. (They only spent a minute or two arguing over whether kidney beans or chickpeas were a better option.) Upon reaching the thankfully small crisp section, he grabbed the biggest big of whatever he saw first and tossed it into the trolley. “You can pick out one other kind. Just one.”

Of course that just one was something disgusting. Salt and vinegar? What a terrible combination. “What?” the boy said defensively, settling it into the trolley. “It’s better than chickpeas, at least.”

“Shut your mouth and find the biscuits.” Sneering at the idiot’s retreating back, he pulled his watch out of his pocket to check the time. Ten after—they needed to be checking out soon, and they weren’t even halfway done. Severus looked round again. Spending so much time out in public was murder on his nerves; he was going to be a paranoid wreck for days. This was exactly why he tended to hole himself up in his house during the hols. Teaching practically killed him every day during the school year. He didn’t need it during his time off, too. “Make it quick, we don’t have all day!”

“Sorry, sorry. There were a lot of kinds to choose from.” Potter dumped a package of Oreos into the now overflowing trolley, along with peanut butter and biscuits. “Can we get some fruit, maybe? And some vegetables. Do you eat meat? I can make a pork loin tonight if you’d like. I’m a decent hand at cooking.”

Was he really going to let James Potter’s son cook for him? Really? “I can’t eat pork. Do you know how to grill salmon? Fish is far healthier than any of those fatty meats you ingest at school. What vegetables were you thinking of?”

“Asparagus, maybe, and broccoli, if that’s all right. It would go well with fish…Do you have any herbs or seasonings at your house?” Potter was looking oddly excited. Excited to poison me, maybe. What teenager liked to cook? He’d met only a few who genuinely liked to, in all the years he’d spent breathing the same air as the little pustules.

Well…perhaps he’d be surprised. (And he had a fully stocked cabinet full of self-brewed antidotes in case he was really surprised.) “I have rosemary and basil. Maybe dill and tarragon.”

Potter nodded. “I can make those work. Let’s see if they have zucchini, or spaghetti squash. I could make a pasta with salmon on the side.”

“Find them, then, and quickly. I want to be back outside in eight minutes.”

As the boy raced about trying to gather everything, Severus suspiciously eyed a pregnant woman next to the oranges and gnawed at his thumbnail, aching for a cigarette. His nerves were completely shot; he’d be an anxious mess all night. He should have known going to the store was only going to fuck him over.

“Done,” Potter announced, arms laden with fresh produce and a salmon as long as Severus’s arm. “Is that all, then?”
“No. You need a toothbrush,” he remembered, resigning himself to at least a few more minutes in the store. “Soft bristles. Hard are bad for your teeth. Run and fetch it, before my patience officially wears thin and I decide my work benefits at Hogwarts are not worth my time and I become a mass murderer.”

Checking out was unnecessarily tense, after that.

Chapter End Notes

yayyyy two updates in one day
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The house smelled overwhelmingly like fish. Combined with the damp heat seeping in from outside, Severus felt like he wanted to die, just a little bit.

After the shopping trip had ended, they’d lugged their groceries through town (aided by a discreet Featherlight charm), heading back to Spinner’s End. He’d left the boy to sort through them and put them away in lieu of charming some of the dishes that had piled up over the last week or so, and then gathering up all of the rubbish in the house to set outside for pickup as the sink slowly emptied itself out.

Much of the day had been spent in relative silence; the boy had set to his Transfiguration homework with a reluctant determination until it was time to prepare dinner, and then he’d shuffled the contents of the refrigerator around to make room for a thawing salmon, brought out the entire contents of Severus’s spice cabinet, and gotten to cooking. Not wanting to be slipped some kind of poison, he backed out into the sitting room, and set up camp at the very end of his sofa in a prime spot for spying and trying to read.

Potter seemed to be having a grand old time. He’d dragged out more pots and pans than Severus realized he owned, and was puttering about over a large pan, adding apparently random odds and ends he’d found while sorting through their groceries. He hadn’t, Severus grudgingly decided, been lying about being a “decent hand” in the kitchen. If the trade-off for a good, hot meal was having a smelly house and vaguely suicidal inclinations…

Well, he could live with that.

The book he was reading wasn’t holding enough of his attention. He kept peaking up to check on the boy, for accidents and potential poisonings. Whenever he did manage to focus on the page in front of him, rather than just pretending to read at a leisurely pace, something would inevitably draw him back up into spying on Potter.

After their not-quite-a-disaster of a grocery trip, he’d found himself…floundering a little, for something to do that wouldn’t make him feel awkward or out of place. Usually when he was home for the holiday, Severus let himself cut loose a little. He’d sleep on the couch for eleven hours straight, eat his weight in toast, drink enough coffee to send someone into cardiac arrest, and stew in self-loathing until September rolled in and he could hate everyone else, instead. He couldn’t properly do that with the boy here. Instead, he had to keep up his Hogwarts personality. He had to sleep in that abhorrent room upstairs.

This wasn’t going to work. It wasn’t. They were going to end up murdering each other by the end of the week. If he couldn’t even manage a trip to the supermarket without teetering dangerously on the edge of a meltdown, Severus had no idea how he was going to survive three weeks—twenty-one days—five hundred and four hours —

Taking in Potter was one thing. He’d known that would happen. Being too uncomfortable to even read a damn book in his sitting room was another. It was only the second day, but Severus’s temper was rising by the hour. This simply was not going to work.

“Will I be with the rest of the Order in time for my hearing?”
“What?” Severus’s attention on his book broke entirely. Looking up to find the boy carefully turning the empty burner on his stove to high, he asked again, “What did you say?”

“My hearing. It’s on the twelfth of August. Will I be in headquarters by then? I need to get some dress clothes for it, because my ones from fourth year don’t fit anymore. Professor Lupin might take me, right? Or I could borrow something of Ron’s…” The boy trailed off and leaned against the counter, hair a mess, clothes rumpled. The dark circles under his eyes suddenly seemed more prominent than they had earlier.

Neither Albus nor the wolf had said anything about a hearing. “What the hell do you have a hearing for?” he demanded, and even to his own ears, his voice sounded harsher than it normally did. “What did you do?”

The boy’s face went red and sullen. “I don’t—”

“What did you do?” The book was on the floor now, pages askew, but he paid it no mind.

“I don’t know that Dumbledore wants me to tell anyone,” Potter said, very obviously faking his calm, innocent tone and expression.

“You are in my house, under my rules, under my protection.” Severus could feel his heartbeat in his fingertips. Every time he breathed in, he felt like he was dragging fire into his body, through his veins. “What. Did. You. Do.”

“It wasn’t my—”

“What did you do?”

“It was underage magic.” Potter’s fists were clenched at his sides, eyes bright and jaw set. “I cast the Patronus because of the Dementors. It was in front of Dudley—”

“Your cousin?”

“—and I saved him. Yeah, my cousin. He knows about magic already…even though he pretends he doesn’t,” came the unnecessary addition. Or…maybe not so necessary after all all. Even though he pretended he didn’t? “So now I have a hearing, for ‘improper use of underage magic.’ I was originally expelled—”

The arm of Severus’s chair creaked alarmingly; he let go of it like he’d been burned. “I doubt you’ll be here by the time your…hearing takes place,” he said. He was Occluding so fiercely, his voice sounded as though it were coming from the end of a very long tunnel. Had no one thought to mention this? He was going to string the werewolf up by his fucking innards during tomorrow’s visit. Better yet, he’d firecall the Headmaster. It wasn’t likely to do much, but the promise of yelling at somebody until his throat was hoarse was too great to pass up. “Put no stock into the Ministry. If that”—pile of rancid shit—“dunderhead Cornelius Fudge continues going as he is, the entire system won’t be round much longer. Focus on staying in school, and getting through your hearing. What is the date and time?”

Potter was eyeing him suspiciously, but told him without further argument. August twelfth…He had a little over a month to prepare the boy. “Tell me about that night,” he ordered, “because your wonderful Headmaster seems to have done more than spare me the grisly details. How many were there? Was there anybody accompanying them? Were—”

“Don’t talk about Dumbledore like that,” the boy spat, anger clouding his face.
“Says the child who won’t even use his proper title,” he shot back in a tone as snide and condescending as he could manage. The anger was more like a raging thunderstorm now, rather than a cloud; Severus relished the sight of it. “Just like your father…He was always so perfect, so above faults…Step one toe out of line, and he would be all over you for months, crowing over your mistakes—but apparently it was fine, as long as he and his precious little friends were doing it. Are we to hear of a name change from Harry to James anytime soon?”

“Don’t talk about my father. James Potter was a great man,” Potter forced out through gritted teeth.

“Your father was a disgusting swine incapable of basic morality.” James Potter, a great man…The very thought of that bastard sent a wave of hatred churning through him. That great man had been dead for fourteen years, but it had been too much to ask, would always be too much to ask, for his bitterness to have died with him. “We’re done here. Go back to cooking, or let me take over and go back to doing your homework.”

“I’m—”

“I said we’re done here.” The fire spreading through his veins was more of an inferno now. There was a sharp ache in his jaw from how hard he was clenching his teeth together. “Homework or cooking? Decide now.”

There was a long pause, punctured only by the sizzling of the fish in the background. Then:

Potter turned back to the stove, shoulders a tense line. “I’ll cook,” he said tersely, and as much as Severus had told him they were done, he knew the boy was nowhere near finished. Lily had been the same way.

We’re done here, he told himself forcibly, before any of the years-old grief could creep back in and officially ruin his night. Severus stood up and slotted his book back onto the shelf. “Stay in the kitchen,” he snapped at the boy, heading for his fireplace. Lighting the wood, he took a handful of Floo powder, tossing it inside and waiting impatiently for the few seconds it took for the fire to turn green. Then, dropping to his knees, he thrust his head into the fire and barked, “Dumbledore’s office.”

—

There was no possible way Harry could take three weeks of this.

Three weeks of interrogations about who what when why how, three weeks of hearing insults and potshots at his intelligence…He’d almost managed to forget, during the shopping trip earlier, who he was with and why. Bringing up the hearing had been a mistake; surely he’d be long gone by the time it came around. He could’ve just borrowed Ron’s old school robes and been done with it, rather than asking Snape, of all people.

“Stay in the kitchen,” he’d said, but the fish was doing fine and Snape had his head stuck inside of a fireplace.

The problem with Floo (ash-coated clothing notwithstanding), Harry thought, was that you couldn’t quite make out what the other person was saying when their face was being sucked into a different room. That…and all the soot that was probably in Snape’s mouth right now. That wasn’t much help either. His shoulders were a tense line, knuckles white from his crushing grip on the frame. Harry
didn’t envy Dumbledore right now; he’d been on the receiving end of Snape’s vitriol himself, and knew how vexing it could be. And if the muffled shouting coming out of the fireplace was any indication…

Well.

Harry flipped the fish with a quick flick of his wrist, leaning back before any hot oil could hit his skin. The sizzling was loud enough to nearly smother Snape’s angry voice. It wasn’t loud enough, however, to cover up the sound of something shattering; he retreated from the stove and risked a peek into the prison-cell sitting room to find his Potions professor hurling another ceramic pot to the floor, where it burst upon impact and scattered into a thousand pieces. Snape grasped at the roots of his oily hair in a fury so great he apparently couldn’t even speak.

“I thought I told you to stay in the kitchen,” the man ground out eventually, hands pressing against his face to hide whatever expression might have been on it.

“I’m still in it,” Harry protested without thinking, and winced.

“Your head isn’t. Don’t argue with me, Potter.”

“What did Dumbledore say? Did he mention anything about moving me to Headquarters soon? What about Sirius? What’s going on?” he continued, even though he knew it likely wouldn’t end well, with Snape in such a right state. He was so bloody tired of being kept in the dark about everything, and nobody was telling him a thing, just ‘you’ll see soon, Harry,’ and ‘it’s a security risk’…Even the knowledge that he was goading his nastiest professor wasn’t going to stop him.

“What did Dumbledore say? Did he mention the hearing?”

“Do not interrupt me, Potter,” Snape said sharply, hands finally back at his sides. “As I was saying… The Headmaster has more on his plate than his most precious Gryffindor. You aren’t special. Your only talent lies in the fact that criticism simply bounces right off of you. Whatever has brought you up to this moment in time can be attributed to dumb luck. Now, before the salmon can burn, return to the kitchen.”

There was a pause, likely so his professor could savor the simple pleasure insulting him had brought. Harry spared a glance at the fish still sizzling away merrily in the pan. It was probably finished cooking by now. “Fine…sir.” Turning sharply on his heel, he stormed over to the stove, turning off the heat hard enough to nearly pull the knob off.

Dinner was an awkward affair. Neither of them spoke, eating with their heads bowed. Harry could barely bring himself to eat; his hands shook each time he picked up his fork. He’d made a mistake, earlier, in allowing himself to be riled up. Snape, at least, seemed to like the food; he’d polished off half of his plate in under ten minutes, and was currently busying himself with mopping up whatever remained of the vegetables Harry had pan-fried with a slice of bread he’d gotten up to grab.

“Is—” He cut himself off, closed his mouth, and then tried again. “Is the food all right?”
Snape paused for the briefest moment before he continued chewing, eyes lowered towards his plate. “It’s not terrible,” he eventually said, before forking in another mouthful of salmon and effectively ending what could have hardly counted as a conversation.

That was better than nothing, Harry supposed.

Would Snape snap at him if he were to get some bread? It was just one slice, but…it was Snape. Weighing his options, he rubbed the fork in his hands between his pointer finger and thumb, scraping off old water stains with his nail. There was no harm in it, really—it was just some bread. It wasn’t expensive.

He reached across the table without a second thought, fingers inches from the bread—and Snape snatched his hand off the table like Harry had been about to stab a knife through it. The sound of his chair screeching back against the linoleum was deafening in the silence. Neither of them moved until Harry managed to work up the courage to finish reaching for the bread; he swallowed hard as he pulled a single slice out and slowly retreated to his plate. Beneath the cover of his eyelashes, he watched Snape settle down quickly and return to eating.

Dinner ended shortly after that. Without a word, Snape stood up, scraped the remains of his food into the rubbish bin by the back door, and disappeared into the bathroom. Harry prayed he wasn’t going to promptly sick up everything he’d just eaten, and was relieved beyond words when he heard the shower start up. Not vomiting, then. Good. Thank God.

Getting up, he washed the dishes in lukewarm water so as not to disturb Snape’s shower (and wouldn’t Ron like to hear about that). Then, without further ado, Harry headed out into the living room to find out how that staircase worked. Which book had his professor pulled out to make the bookshelf spring aside like that? It had been a large, heavy-looking one—but that could be any of them. It was astounding that Snape and Hermione didn’t get along; they both had the same taste in light reading material.

The shower shut off with a bang that rattled through the floorboards, just as Harry had finished removing half of the shelf eye-level to him. Scrambling to replace the books, he’d only just replaced the last one and scuttled over to the sofa to sit down when Snape stalked into the room in a right temper. He was wearing the same Muggle clothes as before, hair damp but just as oily as it had been ten minutes before. Harry could see him shiver, ever so slightly, as he raised his wand and jerkily cast a cooling charm.

“Work on your summer assignments until we begin our first Occlumency lesson,” Snape spat at him before yanking a book out of the shelf—which one was it? He couldn’t quite see, Snape was blocking the view—and storming up the stairs without another word. The bookshelf slid shut seconds later. He was alone.

—

The cold shower hadn’t helped the heat at all. Heaving a sigh, Severus sat heavily onto his bed and cringed a little at the sound of squealing springs. (God, but he hated the damn thing.) He reached for his cigarettes and lit one, taking a drag as he leaned back against the iron headboard. It dug painfully into his shoulder blade. He took another drag and ignored it.

Potter had been going through the shelves. He’d noticed it immediately; and even if he hadn’t caught
sight of the sudden disorganization, he’d have known it the moment he saw the boy’s shifty look and steadfast avoidance of the bookshelves.

A sneak…just like his father.

His cigarette was gone far too soon. Severus lit another and closed his eyes.

Occlumency tonight. There was no more avoiding it. He’d put off starting immediately after the boy’s arrival, but if he procrastinated any longer, he’d lose his nerve and they would never even begin. He hadn’t fully removed his Occlumency shields in years; but to teach the boy, he was going to have to. There was no conceivable way he could teach Potter to defend his mind if his shields were too hard for their minds to meld properly.

Occlumency tonight, and Lupin tomorrow. This was truly a summer of hell.

Severus stubbed out the butt of the second cigarette and gazed up at the old scorch marks on his ceiling, from where he’d missed the flies he’d once spent an hour blasting at. Then, reaching for his wand, he aimed carefully and shot it at a fly buzzing near his window. It dropped to the floor, twitching weakly. He stood up, Vanished the remnants of his smoke break. The fly stopped moving as he clicked off the light and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

—

“Sit down, Potter.”

The boy took his seat at the table without a word, but from his expression, he was feeling decidedly as though he’d just locked his own shackles into place. Severus watched impassively as his knee began to bounce, and as his hands gripped the edge of the chair tight enough that he could nearly hear the joints in Potter’s fingers creak. _He’ll have arthritis by the time he reaches fifty_, he thought idly, turning to retrieve Dumbledore’s Pensieve from the cabinet above the fridge. He could feel those greedy, curious eyes following its every movement as it drifted down to settle on the counter.

“Well, you know why we’re here,” he said flatly. “The headmaster has asked me to teach you Occlumency. I can only hope that you prove more adept at it than Potions.”

“Right,” said Potter tersely, and then dragged his hands into his lap to wring them together. His eyes were still fixed on the Pensieve.

“This may not be an ordinary class, Potter,” he continued, eyes narrowed, “but I am still your teacher and you will therefore call me ‘sir’ or ‘Professor’ at all times.”

His jaw was clenched now. Prising his teeth apart, the boy replied, “Yes… _sir._”

“No, Occlumency. No doubt you’re ignorant on the subject. Did Lupin attempt to explain to you what it is? Or was he content to leave you in the dark and gift me the unpleasant task of trying to push some semblance of learning into your brain?”

“He said it was mind-reading. _Sir._”

Typical. “A two-year-old could have said it better. As always, Lupin never fails to disappoint. Occlumency is a branch of complex magic that seals the mind against magical intrusion and
influence.”

“Why does Professor Dumbledore think I need it, sir?” he demanded, shifting forward in his seat as Severus settled himself across into the chair across from him. The boy made eye contact—possibly the last time he ever would willingly.

Shaking his head, he spat contemptuously, “Surely even you could have worked that out by now, Potter. The Dark Lord is highly skilled at Legilimency—”

“What’s that? Sir?”

“It is the ability to extract feelings and memories from another person’s mind—”

“So he can read minds?” There was a look of terror on Potter’s face, but it gave the fury rising up in him pause for only a brief second, before the anger took over again. Severus held his breath and began reciting the recipe to Wolfsbane in his head. “How far is his reach? Could he be reading my mind right now?”

“You have no subtlety, Potter,” he said in a voice that was sure to sound waspish. Six measures of monkshood, and a teaspoon of powered moonstone… “You don’t understand the fine distinctions. It’s one of the shortcomings that makes you such a lamentable potion-maker.”

He couldn’t help but pause to revel in the simple pleasures of insulting James Potter’s insipid brat. “Only Muggles talk of ‘mind reading.’ The mind is not a book, to be opened at will and examined at leisure. Thoughts are not etched on the inside of skulls, to be perused by any invader. The mind is a complex and many-layered thing…or at least, most minds are.” The corner of his mouth twitched into a smirk before dropping away again. “It is true, however, that those who have mastered Legilimency are able, under certain conditions, to delve into the minds of their victims and to interpret their findings correctly. The Dark Lord, for instance, almost always knows when somebody is lying to him. Only those skilled at Occlumency are able to shut down those feelings and memories that contradict the lie, and so utter falsehoods in his presence without detection.”

Potter was frowning now. Confused already? Severus barely suppressed a sigh.

“So—so wait,” the boy stuttered, and Snape pierced him with a steely look. “Doesn’t that—doesn’t that mean he could see this memory? And know I’m staying with you?”

“If you do as I say and study for once in your life, it will not be a problem, Potter,” he snapped. “As of right now, the Dark Lord is preoccupied with…other plans.”

“Other plans?”

“The Dark Lord is, either way, a considerable distance from my house,” Severus went on, more than content to pretend he hadn’t heard a word of what Potter had said. “Time and space matter in magic. Eye contact is often essential to Legilimency.”

“Why do I have to learn Occlumency, then?”

Severus eyed him, leaning back in his groaning chair and tracing his mouth with one long, thin finger. “The usual rules don’t seem to apply to you, Potter. The curse that failed to kill you seems to have forged some kind of connection between you and the Dark Lord. The evidence suggests that at times, when your mind is most relaxed and vulnerable—when you’re asleep, for instance—you are sharing the Dark Lord’s thoughts and emotions. The headmaster thinks it inadvisable for this to continue. He wishes me to teach you how to close your mind to the Dark Lord.”
The telltale sound of stuffing being plucked out of the seat cushion reached his ears. Potter swallowed hard, face blanched white in the dim light of the kitchen, and looked at the Pensieve again. “But why does Professor Dumbledore want to stop it?” he demanded. “I don’t like it much, but it could be useful, couldn’t it?”

He traced his upper lip before beginning to gnaw at his thumb nail. Drawing his hand away from his face, Severus began speaking, slowly, deliberating each and every word. “It appears that the Dark Lord is unaware of the connection. You are experiencing his emotions and sharing his thoughts without his being any the wiser. However…there’s no telling how long that will last. He may become aware of it at any given moment.”

“What happens if Vol—” The boy stopped in his tracks, glanced sharply at him, and went on, “…he finds out?”

“He may attempt to plant a false memory, to lure you into his grasp.” Severus’s voice sounded bored to his own ears, but he was anything but. He felt unbalanced by the nervous energy rattling his body. Drawing a quiet breath, he said, “He may—”

“A false memory? Like what?”

“Do not,” he hissed, shoulders a tense line, “interrupt me.”

Then, in a voice even more dangerous than the last: “And I told you to call me ‘sir.’”

“Yes, sir,” Potter said impatiently, edging forward until he was nearly out of his chair, “but what sort of—”

“We are wasting time sitting here. The important point is closing the connection between you and the Dark Lord. Which brings us back to Occlumency.”

The chair across from him screeched against the linoleum. Severus cast the idiot a withering look before he raised the tip of his wand to the roots of his oily hair and began drawing out memories. First of Lily…memories of James Potter and his cronies…ah, and his time of service to the Dark Lord…

He extracted shameful memory after shameful memory, until the basin was nearly full. It wasn’t enough—would never be enough—but this was…a start. Later, he would have to convince himself to stick them back in again. Potter’s eyes followed his every move, nearly glinting in their curiosity. He would need to change the Pensieve’s hiding place once they were finished. Four years of spying on the boy had only confirmed his suspicions that he was a carbon copy of his father in regards to respecting the privacy of others.

“Now,” Severus said quietly, turning to face the boy fully. His hands were shaking a little. “Stand up, Potter, and take out your wand so we can begin.”

Chapter End Notes

Much of the dialogue near the end is, of course, either ripped straight from the text or, in terms of adding in more bulk and body language, slightly modified. (Chapter is Occlumency, and I’m on mobile ebook currently so I can’t check the exact page
number. It’s page 1659 on the ebook on my phone though)
“Now,” Severus said quietly, turning to face the boy fully. His hands were shaking a little. “Stand up, Potter, and take out your wand so we can begin.”

The boy got up silently, looking faintly ill as he shuffling into the middle of the kitchen. His chest rose and fell a tad too quickly, and his knuckles were straining white against his wand. Severus couldn’t quite resist a sneer.

“You may use your wand to attempt to disarm me, or defend yourself in any other way you can think of,” he said softly.

“And what are you going to do?” the boy muttered, uneasy gaze fixed on his wand.

“I am about to attempt to break into your mind,” he replied, sizing him up. Potter had always been talented at daydreaming during class; clearing his mind of all thought and knowledge should be a simple task. After all…he did it on a regular basis. Severus had seen his vapid expression far too many times. “We are going to see how well you resist. I have been told that you have already shown aptitude at resisting the Imperius Curse…You will find that similar powers are needed for this… Brace yourself, now… Legilimens!”

And the world around them fell away.

—

“Look, Diddykins! Isn’t it lovely?”

“Atta boy, Dudley, looking just—”

“—Ripper! Ripper, stop! Stop! St—”

——A great black dragon, rearing up——

——A man and a woman waving out of a mirror and mum? dad?—

Stop, he thought fiercely, screwing his eyes up to try and stop the images, but they wouldn’t stop, they wouldn’t—wouldn’t— Stop, that’s—

“—PRIVATE!”

He was gasping for air on Snape’s dingy kitchen floor, tears blurring his vision, hair in his face. His wand clattered on the linoleum and rolled to a stop at Snape’s shoes. Harry looked up at the man, who had lowered his wand and was rubbing at his wrist. He could see a searing welt there, like Snape had pressed his arm to a hot burner and let it sizzle away at his skin.

“Did you mean to produce a Stinging Hex?” asked Snape coolly, as though he were making a casual observation.
“No,” he said bitterly, dragging himself to his feet. There was a headache starting low in the back of his neck.

“I thought not. You let me get in too far. You lost control.”

He swallowed hard past the dryness of his throat. “Did you see everything I saw?”

“Flashes of it.” There was a condescending smirk on his professor’s face; Harry forced himself to look away before his anger could get the best of him. “To whom did the dog belong?”

“My Aunt Marge.” The anger was building into all-encompassing hatred, pumping steadily through him like a slow-acting poison. Sweat dripped down his back.

“Well, for a first attempt that was not as poor as it might have been,” Snape said, raising his wand again. “You managed to stop me eventually, though you wasted time and energy shouting. You must remain focused. Repel me with your brain and you will not need to resort to your wand.”

“I’m trying,” he snapped, angrily swiping at the sweat on his face, “but you’re not telling me how!”

“Manners, Potter. Now, I want you to close your eyes…”

The second round came sooner than he’d have liked. The Sorting Hat, telling him he would do well in Slytherin, until it vanished in a sickening pull and—Hermione, the hospital wing, and her face was coated in fur—Dementors, hundreds of them, on the lake, closing in and—Cedric Diggory blank eyes blank face blank and—

“NOOOOOO!”

The world rushed back in so suddenly, Harry couldn’t even feel himself fall. His hands shook against his face. Every inch of him felt weak, achy, like he’d been beaten by ten Bludgers and then crushed by the Whomping Willow. A splinter of agony had opened in his brain; Harry dug his fingers into the side of his head and sucked in air like he was drowning.

“Get up!” Snape snarled at him. “Get up! You are not trying, you are making no effort, you are allowing me access to memories you fear, handing me weapons!”

Harry got to his feet with difficulty. Cedric’s face flickered in front of his own as he blinked. Snape always had an unhealthy pallor, but it seemed more intense than usual, and he seemed ready to commit those murders he’d talked about back at the grocery store.

“I—am—making—an—effort,” he gritted out.

“I told you to empty yourself of emotion!”

“Yeah?” He laughed, though there was no humor in the sound. “Well, I’m finding that hard at the moment!”

Snape was pacing now, positively spitting in his fury, like a cat that had been poked and prodded one too many times. “Then you will find yourself easy prey for the Dark Lord,” he said savagely. “Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions, who wallow in sad memories and allow themselves to be provoked this easily—weak people, in other words—they stand no chance against his powers! He will penetrate your mind with absurd ease, Potter!”

“I am not weak,” he said lowly, and his voice refused to raise. This was beyond anger, beyond
hatred, beyond—

“Then prove it! Master yourself! Control your anger, discipline your mind! We shall try again! Get ready, now! Legilimens!”

Uncle Vernon was hammering the letter box shut, eyes glinting with a manic sort of glee See, if they can’t deliver them they’ll just give up! and—Petrified Colin, Petrified Hermione—Aunt Petunia opening a smoking letter with a look of utmost terror

“That
—expelled from Hogwarts, never to go back—

awful
—a green-faced Dudley—

Snape
—Uncle Vernon’s astonished face—

boy”

—and Snape withdrew sharply enough to send pain bursting behind his eyes. Breathing hard, Harry realized he’d dropped to his knees again; a dull ache radiated through his legs, pulsing in time with his head and racing heartbeat. Sweat had completely saturated his shirt. His skin felt clammy. Snape, he realized with a sensation of deep foreboding, had not yet made a sound. The kitchen was quiet; Harry’s sharp inhalations were the only sound puncturing the sudden hush.

“What was that?” Snape said suddenly, in such a quiet voice, Harry nearly missed it.

“What?” he gasped out, swiping perspiration away from his stinging eyes.

“The last memory.” The words were short and clipped.

“I—I don’t—”

“Your aunt! What did she say, Potter?” Snape stormed towards him and yanked him to his unsteady feet by the back of his collar. “What—did—she—say?”

Harry went cold. Did I...show him... “I—She...‘that awful boy,’ I think?” he tried feebly. It was the wrong response; Snape appeared beyond words, lips curling back in a wordless snarl to expose his yellow, crowded teeth. He leaned back as far as the limited space could allow and hastily shifted his gaze to the floor, instead of those cold black eyes. “I dunno, I was a little...preoccupied...”

“That is not what she said!”

Were you friends with my mum?

“Get out of my sight!” Snape ordered, pointing wildly out the entranceway. “To bed! Now!”

Harry took his chance and fled.
Severus went out the back door into the cramped garden, where he promptly descended into rage-fueled hysterics. His chest heaved like he’d run five miles and his fingernails bit deep into his skin as he buried his face in his hands. “What was that,” he hissed under his breath, shaking his head, “what was that, what the fuck was that —”

He kicked ineffectively at the brick wall, trying to vent some of his fury. What had Tuney said—and oh, but she looked just the same as she had as a child, with that same sour look and those watery, envious eyes—but what had she said? ‘That awful boy?’ No, it was—‘That awful Snape boy.’ Had she said that to Potter? Had she said that to the boy?

Hazy memories of the blessings his mother would sometimes murmur during times of strife swam upwards through his memories, but he cut himself off before the first of the words could touch his lips. Suppressing a scream, he slid back against the wall before his legs could finally give out, dragging his knees towards his chest to smother himself against them. Severus didn’t move for some time. Then, after he finally found himself capable of thinking about it without having a full-blown meltdown, he lifted his head with a great gasp of air and rubbed at his sore eyes.

‘That awful Snape boy.’ That was what Petunia had said. Had there been any other details, or was it just that one slip? Had the boy even properly noticed it? Or had the words simply bounced off of him? The memory would suggest otherwise, but sometimes Legilimency could be slightly deceiving. The boy had seemed more focused on the details of his surroundings in almost all of memories.

And…And that dog. What about the dog? Chasing Potter around as he climbed a tree to hide away from a clearly enraged animal, while his family, from the extremely brief glimpse he’d snatched of him, had sat laughing.

It doesn’t matter, Severus thought angrily, shaking his head hard. That awful Snape boy. Jesus fucking …

It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter at all.

The next morning was spent in mutual silence and isolation.

Neither spoke to each other, and as far as Severus was aware, the boy hadn’t had breakfast. He himself had locked himself in his bedroom to smoke the rest of his cigarettes and wallow in self-loathing. A pile of smoked-out stubs lay next to him where he’d sprawled out across the ancient floorboards in lieu of attempting to make his bed behave. The floor would be better on his back in the long run.

‘That awful Snape boy’ was a constant echo in his head, beating against the sides of his brain in an effort to stir up the migraine from last night. It had taken a full flask of Calming Draught for him to relax enough to sleep. And here you are, you stupid cunt, he thought furiously. Now the boy is going to think you have something to hide.

He took another drag of his cigarette. His bedroom was smoggy and nearly suffocating in the heat; hopefully lung cancer or heat stroke would take him before the Dark Lord could. Severus’s stomach growled. He ignored it.
The boy was moving round downstairs. Suspicious, Severus pushed his way over to the old vent next to the radiator and pressed his ear to it. He’d used this to spy on his parents for years before their moving on. There were no words to help him decipher what Potter was up to, but he could make out the sounds of the house clearly enough. The fridge was opening…the toaster springing up…

Nothing of interest.

Wasn’t Lupin supposed to visit today? Severus remembered suddenly, rolling somewhat painfully to his feet and Vanishing the cigarette stubs. Around noon? When it was already past eleven? *Shit.*

Severus dressed and headed down the stairs without a second thought, striding into the kitchen like nothing out of the usual had happened the night before. Potter jumped a little at the sight of him. “Do you require a Pepper-Up, or a Headache Draught?”

The boy stared at him as if he were a ghost. “Er—no, I’m fine,” he mumbled eventually, turning back to his toast in an undeniable attempt to shut him out. That was all fine and good, but…

“Your werewolf will be arriving shortly. Do not answer the knock at the door when it comes. I’d rather you not open it to find Narcissa Malfoy in place of Remus Lupin.”

“Is…that a possibility?” Potter asked, movements slowing. “Sir?”

“Narcissa prefers not to set foot in Muggle dwellings,” he said coolly. “Her chances of visiting are slim to none. However, that does not mean we can allow ourselves to relax, for there remains a possibility.” He paused, and then pushed through the awkward air. “At night, you will practice Occlumency before falling asleep. You are to rid your mind of all emotion. Empty it, make it blank and calm, you understand?”

“Yes,” said Potter, who was most certainly not paying attention.

“I shall know if you’ve not practiced.”

“Right.”

Severus decided it was a lost cause for now and turned to the Pensieve on the table. He’d replaced the memories already; they tended to spoil slightly if left unattended too long. Where to put it next? Or should he leave it out for another night, to subtly show Lupin that he was doing as he’d been asked and was teaching the boy to guard his mind?

The second option, he decided as he shifted the Pensieve a little to the side, was the better one. It couldn’t hurt to rub it in the wolf’s face a bit. “Is that all you will be eating?” he asked, looking dispassionately at Potter’s meager breakfast.

“I s’pose. There’s not much food, really, and…”

“Make a bowl of cereal. I bought it for a reason.” That, and the milk was due to expire in a week.

Someone rapped on the front door. Heaving a sigh, Severus pinched at the bridge of his nose and wondered, not for the first time, what had ever possessed him to agree to any of this. “Sit still, Potter,” he ordered, sweeping out into the living room to look through the spyhole. A very pale and spindly young man stood there, scratching at his wispy hair as though worried it would blow off in a sudden gust of wind. Lupin had arrived. Annoyed, he wrenched the lock back and pried the door open to hiss, “If you insist on switching appearances each and every time you visit, it’s going to start looking as though I’m fucking hiring prostitutes.”
“Good afternoon to you too, Severus,” Lupin muttered back, edging past into the house. “I sincerely doubt your neighbors are going to think I’m a prostitute.”

“You don’t know my neighbors,” he said darkly. The sunlight cut off as he shut the door, dousing them in darkness. “How long are you intending on staying? I do not have time to play host to guests. Do what you need to do and get out.”

The wolf didn’t respond, but instead strode past him into the kitchen, where the boy was. He could hear them exchanging pleasantries; Lupin wasn’t wasting any time in beginning a fresh interrogation. Severus unashamedly eavesdropped on them as he pretended to dust his bookshelves.

“How have you been sleeping well? Is the couch comfortable?”

“It’s fine. Snape put a Cushioning Charm on it, so I’m all right.”

“Professor Snape, Harry. Have you begun Occlumency, or is this Pensieve merely for decorative purposes?”

“We had our first lesson last night. It, er…went okay.”

Jesus, but this was tedious. Severus dropped the front of cleaning and went to the kitchen. Potter took one glance at him and hastily looked back down at his plate. Avoiding him still. Good…He wasn’t going to let anything about their first lesson slip. Content for now, Severus said softly, “You must have misheard me before, Lupin…I know the rumor of werewolf super-senses are merely a myth…How long are you intending on staying?”

“Not long, Severus,” Lupin said pleasantly. “I apologize for the rudeness—I must have been so focused on Harry’s safety and well-being, I hadn’t heard your question. Now…First, I need to know if…”

It was going to be a long visit.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so, so much for the comments, kudos, etc on this fic. I hadn’t expected such an incredible reception and honestly I’m positively glowing right now. My coworkers kept thinking I was plotting a prank (I was, but not the point) because I kept grinning to myself throughout the day. I really appreciate everyone reading and enjoying this. I hope everyone has a great day, and I hope this chapter finds you all well! Also you have no idea how many times the words ‘Narcissa prefers’ tried to autocorrect to préfère and préface. I was on the verge of screaming after the fifth time.
They were ten minutes into Lupin’s visit by the time Severus officially lost patience and decided to return to his bedroom. Sweeping out of the kitchen without a word, he stormed up the stairs by the light of a Lumos and locked his bedroom door behind him.

The peace didn’t last long. He was halfway through his first cigarette when there came a knock on the door. Severus’s hand was already to his wand by the time he realized it was only the wolf. “What?” he snapped, glaring at the door as though Lupin could see his expression. Perhaps he would feel the vitriol through the tone of his voice and go back down the stairs he’d managed to scale alone. Unless— “Did you leave the boy downstairs, or are you such an abysmal failure at common sense that you decided to bring him with you?”

“It’s only me, Severus,” came Lupin’s calm voice from out in the hall. “Might I come in? There are things I need to discuss with you. Order business.”

Severus hovered in the middle of his room, torn. Then, touching the lock on the doorknob, he leaned his head against the grain of the wood and closed his eyes. He sighed and threw the door open. “I am very busy.”

Lupin looked at him, and then at the still-smoldering cigarette, with a faintly amused expression. “Yes, I can see that.”

With a creak, the door shut again.

Neither of them spoke for what seemed like an eternity. Taking a drag of his cigarette, Severus cast the wolf a baleful look and glanced out his window, at the drab streets below. Spinner’s End was as empty as always. “What do you want, then? Out with it. I don’t have time to coddle you until you learn to speak.”

“We’re having another meeting tomorrow,” the wolf said. “Will you be available for it? I know you won’t be able to bring Harry yet…Do you have arrangements made for him to stay alone? He’s not one to cause trouble, so it’s doubtful he’ll need anything special set up, but—”

“Why,” Severus snarled, “do you continue to question my ability to take care of a single teenage boy, Lupin? I have done all that you’ve asked. I’ve given Potter a place to sleep. I’ve fed him, and have filled the pantry to his needs. He has access to a shower, is hidden behind countless wards, and he will have completed his summer assignments long before September.”

His bedsprings let out an ungodly screech as he flung himself down onto the mattress, but Severus ignored it in favor of continuing his rant.

“I’ve even begun teaching him Occlumency. So why— why —do you insist on behaving as though as though I’ve been beating Potter bloody each and every night? Is this a plot you and Black have cooked up? Trying to catch me in the act, trying to trip old Snivellus up to show everyone what a Dark little creep I actually am?”

“You’ve begun Occlumency lessons?” Lupin seemed not to have heard a word of what he’d said. “How are they going?”

Chapter 8
He felt as though he was going to break his teeth if he continued clenching his jaw like this. “One lesson. It was...Hm. Well, needless to say, Potter is as much of a failure as I’d expected him to be, so there was no great disappointment to be felt. As much as I hope for at least a subtle improvement, I’m sure you’ve also noticed how like his father the boy is—and by that, I of course mean criticism simply bounces right off of him.”

There was no crack in demeanor to satisfy his craving for an argument. Instead, Lupin heaved a sigh and sat down next to him with a screech of bedsprings. “So it didn’t go well, I take it? What seems to be the problem? I can’t say I’m any good at Occlumency—I’ve never had a need to practice—but I might be able to offer a hint into Harry’s behavior.”

“The boy is less eager to learn than a flobberworm,” Severus raged, standing up again and pacing around the tiny room. “He was making no effort whatsoever to empty his mind. In fact, each time I told him to try, he appeared to be attempting the exact opposite. He is disrespectful, simple-minded, incapa—”

“Empty his mind?”

“Yes,” he snarled, “and don’t interrupt me again. Empty his mind! Don’t allow me to see the emotions and memories! He is an abysmal fucking failure!”

His cigarette had gone out without his noticing. Lighting it again, Severus sucked down the smoke like it was a lifeline, fighting back a grimace; they never did taste quite right after relighting them. “He’s—” He cut off with a cough, shaking his head. “He is making no effort. Do something about it before I send him off to headquarters, safety violation or not.”

Lupin shifted a little on the bed, hand absentmindedly stroking over the corner of his lumpy old pillow to play with a loose thread. With his back to the window, the wolf’s face was shrouded by the shadow that seemed to seep in from every corner; it was hard to read his expression. “I’ll speak with him. But please, Severus...try not to compare Harry to his father. They are very different people.”

Then, quickly: “Have things been well otherwise? You mentioned he was working on his summer assignments...excellent news. Has he been able to receive any letters? Ron and Hermione replied to him, but they’ve received no response, from what I’ve heard.”

Letters...He’d warded his house against unfamiliar owls years before. “I will see to the letters. Rest assured...I’m not intending on isolating the boy.”

“I am very glad to hear of it.”

They were quiet, both studying separate sides of the room, as Severus finished his cigarette and Banished the smell with a vague wave of his wand. There were new cinder marks on his floor. “I’ll need to be making tea soon,” he muttered, not entirely to himself.

It was very suddenly that Severus realized Lupin had long since made himself comfortable on his awful bed, and that they had been holding an actual conversation for more than a fraction of a second. The bubble popped and he came back to himself with a sickening jolt. He opened his mouth to instinctively begin insulting Lupin, to call him a filthy werewolf and force him out of the room, when his hand twitched—and a blinding, searing pain shot through his left arm.

He almost didn’t catch his automatic gasp, barely managing to restrain himself in time. Gritting his teeth, he forced his body to relax, Occluding so intensely his vision nearly greyed out. “I do believe you’ve overstayed your welcome, Lupin,” he spat, and the man seemed vaguely startled.

“If I said something wrong...” the wolf began, getting slowly to his feet, but Severus cut him off...
before he could go on.

“It’s about time for you to leave, don’t you think?” The Mark was burning white hot against his skin. There was no time to waste. Shoving past Lupin, Severus pulled his wardrobe open and yanked down the first pair of robes he saw, throwing them onto his bed without a backwards glance. The mask came next, tugged out of the depths of his wardrobe drawers, and flung to the side. “Lupin. Leave. Now.”

No response. The wolf hadn’t moved; he could feel those judgemental eyes burning into his back, searing as hot as the Mark on his arm. Gripping the roots of his hair with one hand as he pulled his potions-equipped satchel out with the other, he wheeled around and said in the most dangerous voice he could muster, “Get out of my goddamn house, werewolf.”

“Godric and Jesus—Severus, you might have thought to say something,” Lupin snapped back, looking for all the world like he was on the verge of strangling him. Good. “What will you do about Harry? Is he well-protected on his own here?”

Godric and Jesus was right. “He’s fifteen. I assure you, he knows how to open a bag of crisps. So now, for the last fucking time, get out of my house. Make yourself dubiously useful and tell the headmaster I’ve been Called.”

Lupin finally deigned himself to leave the room. Slamming it shut with a wave of his hand, he changed clothing as quickly as possible, jamming his feet into his boots and tucking the mask beneath the cover of his robes. Severus opened the door to find the wolf exactly where he’d left him. For the love of—

Gripping him by the collar, Severus dragged them both down the stairs and through the bookshelf. It was only when they reached the kitchen and he met Potter’s gobsmacked face that he realized he was still holding tightly to Lupin. “Fix yourself something to eat tonight,” he ordered the boy, stepping quickly away from Lupin and reaching towards the stove to gather up the Polyjuice he’d brewed days before. “I will be back late. Possibly, I won’t return until morning. Stay inside the house. Do not go up the stairs. Empty your mind tonight before you sleep. I repeat, do not go up the stairs. Lupin—after you.”

He spent only enough time to force the werewolf out of his house before he pulled away and Disapparated without a word.

—

It wasn’t yet dawn when Harry found himself abruptly awoken. Groggy and confused, he rubbed at his eyes, squinting into the darkness of the sitting room. He’d…heard something move. Had it been a dream? He’d been having a…very strange one…He yawned and brought his hand up to cover his mouth. Pulling his knees close to his chest, he hunkered back down into the dip of the couch where the cushions met the back, and closed his eyes—

Only to hear it again.

He sat up this time. Breathing quickly, Harry reached for his glasses on the side table and put them on. Was somebody trying to break in? Another sound, a soft scrape, and he could scarcely bring himself to move. He slowly pulled his wand out from under his pillow. Should he be expecting an
attack? Could he call Snape somehow?

Pushing the blankets away, Harry eased off the couch as soundlessly as possible, moving on silent, socked feet to the kitchen where the noise had come from. He strained his ears to listen for the slightest sound. There—by the back door. His heart was racing in his chest. Raising his wand, he inched forward until he was next to the table. The moon was on the other side of the house, he realized as he tried to scan the dark room for any sign of intruders. There would be no moonlight to guide his way. A Lumos would help, but…although a qualified wizard had been guiding him through Occlumency, Snape wasn't here, and one hearing was enough for him.

Something moved on the kitchen floor—something in all black, something—in a cloak—

Oh, hell, Snape was lying on the floor.

“Sir?” Harry sputtered, dropping to his knees beside the motionless lump masquerading as his Potions professor. “Sir, are—are you all right? Sir?”

The only response he received with a soft noise, like Snape had tried to grunt but it hadn’t quite made it past the back of his throat. What little Harry could see of his face was lax, as if he’d finally passed out. His eyes cracked open; they looked fevered, glazed over. “Potter…”

“What do you want me to do?” he demanded, hands hovering anxiously over the man. Should he help him up? Should he levitate him, or…

“…Go back to bed.”

For a moment, Harry wasn’t sure he’d heard him properly. “Er—come again?”

“Go.”

“You have no further news for me, Severus?”

His scar was prickling. How had he not noticed until now, he wondered? Snape had been at a Death Eater meeting. And Voldemort had done…

Something.

Thinking about it made his head hurt. Whatever he’d done to Snape, it hadn’t been good, else he would be his usual self instead of lying prone on his kitchen floor. “Professor, can you help me get you standing? Is there anything I can get for you? Do you need a potion of some kind?”

“Taken them. Go,” Snape said, in a voice barely heard over the sound of his labored breathing.

Harry made up his mind on an impulse. Settling his hands firmly on Snape’s shoulder—trying to ignore the violent jolt that came in retaliation—he gripped the man’s robes and heaved him a few centimetres off the floor. “Help me get you up. Help me—stop, hang on, never mind—”

There was blood on the floor, underneath Snape’s chest, though it didn’t seem to be spreading. Where was it coming from? Was it a serious wound? His arm, Harry realized when he passed a hand hesitantly over his robes. His shoulder was saturated in it. Suddenly quite desperate to get Snape talking again, he scrambled for a safe topic of conversation. Was there a safe topic of conversation, when it came to Snape? Would he even remember any of this when he came to in the morning? “Tell me how to clear my mind during Occlumency,” he ordered, before adding a hasty “sir.” Injured or not, he wasn’t in a hurry to bring Snape’s wrath down on him.
For a moment, Snape didn’t reply, and Harry’s worry began to grow. Then, faintly: “What d’you think about when you’re going to sleep?”

“Er—”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t…what?” Harry asked, now trying to roll his professor over to ease him into a sitting position.

“Don’t…think. At night. About…”

“About…” He hoisted the man up, wrapping his arms around him and tugging. Snape’s boots dragged along the floor as Harry tried to pull him out into the living room. Should he have removed them? “Professor?”

“Imagine something. A lock. An…ocean. Quiet your mind…”

“Is that what you use?” They were now by the sofa. How was he supposed to get him up onto it?

“Dunner like the ocean.”

“The lock, then?” Harry asked, but there was no reply: Snape had passed out. His head lolled back on his shoulders and his mouth parted open. If it weren’t for the trail of blood they’d left through the house, he could have been asleep. The sofa was sure to be stained come morning. That is, if he could somehow find a way to get Snape onto it.

His breath caught slightly. Not daring to hope, Harry leaned down so that he was close enough to Snape’s ear to whisper into it. “Were you friends with my mum?” he breathed, screwing his eyes up.

Snape didn’t respond. Harry tried not to feel crushed.

The sun was beginning to rise by the time he managed to get Snape onto the couch. Eyes burning as he blinked, Harry looked down at himself, at the bloodstains smeared into his shirt. It had been Dudley’s, once; not a great loss. He changed awkwardly, peeking at his silent professor as he did so. Then, looking around, his eyes settled on the chair by the fireplace. It would have to do.

Pale sunlight crept across the floor as Harry settled in. His eyes felt heavy. He curled up in the armchair, and tried to find sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter took so damn long. I’ve been working on original content, getting it ready for the querying process so I can be published. 90% of my focus has been on that all week. I hope you’re all doing well!

Now I'm going to go to sleep because it's 2am and I have work at 11am hahahaaaaaaahaaaaa........
 Severus woke to the sight of a water-stained ceiling and the smell of dust. He was on a sofa, bundled in a multitude of blankets, in a silent room streaming with light. Perspiration beaded his upper lip; his hair was in his face, obscuring his vision with lines of oily black. He blinked a few times. This was not Malfoy Manor, nor was it an alleyway—which meant he’d managed to Apparate home after the meeting without splinching the shit out of himself. Good. That was—that was good.

What had happened? His memories were hazy at best. He’d…gone to report to the Dark Lord. They’d brought out—entertainment. Interrogation fodder from the Ministry: someone high enough on the chain to know Ministry information Yaxley couldn’t provide, but too low to be considered high-profile by any means. Keep low, keep quiet. He made his report, then. The Dark Lord hadn’t been pleased with it. Not enough effort; he should have the boy by now; when should he expect the Veritaserum? Then Yaxley had made his report, and while it gone better than Severus’s, it hadn’t eased the Dark Lord’s ire. A Cruciatius for all those who’d fallen out of his good graces.

Nothing unusual.

But there was something else…something nagging at him, something like—Potter. If he’d somehow managed to find himself wrapped up on his couch, where was the boy?

Severus turned his head carefully enough not to send pain zinging through his neck, but it didn’t help the ache behind his eyes. The room was empty. Belatedly, he realized he could hear the dull roar of the shower in the background. He’d woken up blessedly alone.

Then, turning his gaze back up at the ceiling, he casually proceeded to have a violent panic attack.

Clamping his hands over his mouth to smother the mess of sound bubbling up his throat, Severus fixed his gaze on a large book on the shelf across from him, reciting the recipe for Wolfsbane over and over, until he felt calm enough not to descend straight into complete hysterics. His fingernails dug sharply into his cheeks. He was hyperventilating. Holding his breath, Severus screwed his eyes shut and forced himself to stop feeling the panic, until he was left weak and shaking, but calmer.

Then he got up and made coffee.

He had splinched himself, Severus noticed as he measured out coffee grounds. The shoulder of his robe was stiff with dried blood, and the wound reopened as he reached up to open the cupboard and find the filters. Abandoning his coffee the moment it had begun to brew, he climbed the stairs and went to his room to check the damage, snagging the first aid kit as he went. He still needed to brew more antiseptic. Essence of Dittany would have to do for now; he could treat any lingering infections later.

The wound wasn’t deep —a centimetre, at the most. It was the size that was worrying. It spanned from his collarbone to where his shoulder met his arm, bloody and swollen. The antiseptic was not an option, now. He took a deep breath and dripped it over the torn flesh, watching it sizzle and smoke. The redness round the edges of the injury receded immediately; he applied the Dittany then, and finally found relief. Severus bandaged himself and changed quickly. Then he downed a nerve regeneration potion.
He headed downstairs in time for his coffee to finish brewing. This time, the boy was there, bundling up the blankets on the sofa and setting them aside at one end, to be used again later. Their eyes met; Potter looked away quickly, shoulders tense.

“What?” he said warily, but Potter only shook his head with an indecipherable mumble. “Speak up or don’t speak at all.”

“It’s—nothing. Sir.”

And that was that. Stepping into the kitchen to make some toast, he grabbed a mug and poured himself some coffee while the toaster heated up. Potter shuffled into the kitchen after him and sat down at the table in his usual chair. He could feel the boy’s gaze on his back, burning into his spine. Why was he looking at him so oddly? He had no clear recollection of the night before, until—

“Is your arm all right?”

—and the night came rushing back to him in a whirl.

“I thought I’d told you to go to bed last,” he said softly, not bothering to turn round as he plated his toast and stirred three lumps of sugar into his coffee.

Potter didn’t respond, at first. “I couldn’t just leave you there,” the boy finally muttered, adding an even quieter ‘sir.’

“You most certainly could have. In fact, I would have preferred it.”

“Why?”

“Why, what?” He took a bite of his toast.

“Why should I have left you there?” Potter was picking at the chair; the loose leg on the table juddered against the linoleum as he bounced his knee. “Sir.”

Severus swallowed his toast too soon. It scraped its way down his throat. “I fail to see why it’s any of your business, but if you must know, your connection to the Dark Lord’s mind may potentially have been quite fresh. You had been asleep, had you not? The connection may have remained open. It wouldn’t do for the Dark Lord to see you dragging me onto the sofa. Next time, Potter, you will do as you are told and leave me there. It will do us all good.”

The boy didn’t try to argue with him, but he knew he wasn’t content. Wasn’t that a shame.

“I will be leaving at noon. For the next two hours, you will begin working on your Potions assignment, but you may have the evening free.” Severus washed down another mouthful of toast with a swig of his coffee. “I’ve been told you’re missing letters from your friends. I will take care of the problem.”

“Oh. Thanks.” Potter sounded surprised. “Could I make some toast?”

Wordlessly, he took his plate and mug and migrated to the table, leaving the space in front of the toaster clear. Potter got to his feet and pulled the bread out of the cupboard with another soft ‘thanks.’

“Were you able to make a satisfactory supper, last night?”

“Yes. Er—we’re almost out of broccoli, though. If you would give me a bit of money, I wouldn’t mind going to the store again and picking up some while you’re out. I would use my own, but I only have wizard money, and…” Stopping abruptly, the boy shrugged, saying with a sort of forced
casualty, “I doubt I’d be attacked in a Tesco.”

Severus didn’t want Potter to leave the house. As ridiculous as he knew it was, he wanted the boy inside at all times, where he was safe and warded—not outside, not even to the garden. A multitude of things could happen. Narcissa could happen to be stopping by and have a chance meeting with him on the street, he could get into an altercation with the neighborhood gang, he could be hit by a car…There was no end to the list of things Potter could get himself into. He had a knack for finding dangerous situations and placing himself in the dead center of them.

“Is broccoli a necessity?” he asked, draining his coffee and setting his dishes in the sink to wash later. In the meantime, he needed a wash himself. It had…been a while. Standing under a cold shower for five minutes only did so much.

“A necessity? I s’pose. We don’t have any other vegetables right now.”

Dammit.

“Then it’s a necessity. I won’t have you devolving back to your Hogwarts diet during your stay here. You will go straight there, and straight back. You will not make any detours. Fifteen minutes is your limit. I shall give you my house key—if you lose it, Filch’s threats will seem like flirtations after I’m finished with you. Do we need anything else?”

They put a small list together, and had it finished by the time Potter had polished off his breakfast. As the boy scrubbed the dishes, Severus headed upstairs again to find a change in clothing and a clean towel. He was going to need to do laundry tonight once he returned—only one clean towel remained, and even its freshness was dubious. He would need to dig the scrub basin out from the depths of his parents’ home. Perhaps he could force Potter to stand and watch the charms that went into it…could even teach the little pustule something.

Said pustule was standing around aimlessly when Severus returned to the kitchen, with such a hapless expression on his face, he felt a small fragment of his soul die upon sight of it. “Your summer assignment. Get to it, Potter.”

“I’ve got it out,” the boy said, waving vaguely at the new mess on the table. “I just don’t really…”

“What, pray tell, do you ‘not really’?”

“I don’t…It’s nothing.” Potter’s face was as red as a fire hydrant.

“Do you not understand the material? We went over the properties of doxy eggs for two days last term. Were you, perhaps, not paying attention?” He generally ignored the boy’s essays in favor of just giving him a flat passing grade; he knew Potter rarely did his own work, anyway. Why bother, when you had a more talented friend at your disposal to copy off of? He’d certainly copied off Lily in Charms when she’d allowed him to. “Or do you simply not want to?”

“It’s not that!” Potter stood up from his chair and began pacing, flushed and agitated. “I was paying attention.”

He cast a Cooling Charm without thinking, and Potter paused to look at him in bewilderment. Severus gritted his teeth and resisted the urge to cancel the charm out of spite. The boy knew—things, now. About his house. He had access to his personal items, and was without a doubt trying to find a way up the stairs. He’d found him last night and had gotten him to say God knows what. And as much of a Gryffindor as Potter was, content to keep secrets instead of using them as blackmail, he would most certainly giving detailed anecdotes to his little friends. Severus was not keen on any of
those anecdotes involving his personal affairs. If he were somewhat nice to the brat, he might focus
on his strange behavior, rather than the way he’d found his Potions professor sprawled half-dead on
the kitchen floor.

“Sit, Potter,” he said, pointing to the usual chair. “Do you have a quill and ink ready? Spare
parchment?”

“Er—yeah, ‘course.” Sitting heavily, Potter pulled a roll of parchment towards him, and sat with his
quill poised and a gormless expression. It didn’t take long for him to start chewing on the quill and
bouncing his foot where he had his ankle balanced on his knee. Severus swallowed down a sigh.

“Turn to page 256. You’ll be taking notes this afternoon.”

—

The heat from outside clung to him like a heavy winter robe. Wiping sweat from his forehead and
wishing desperately that he’d had a chance to take a bath earlier instead of attempting to teach Potter
something useful, Severus glared at the front door of Grimmauld Place and imagined himself setting
the whole building ablaze.

Much to his disappointment, his daydream remained just that.

The tracking spell he’d placed on Potter’s right shoe dinged softly; the boy was on the move. And
so, lamentably, was he. He opened the door and stepped inside to the same gloom that had always
permeated through his own house. The afternoon bustle outside cut off sharply in the sudden hush
that tingled its way up his spine, raising goosebumps on his arms. Deftly avoiding the umbrella stand
lying in the middle of the foyer, Severus made his way down the hall to the faint sound of whispers
from the Weasley children (badly) hidden at the top of the landing above him. The door to the
basement creaked softly as it swung open, and the murmuring of voices below halted as he
descended the narrow steps into the basement.

The fire at the far end of the room cast dancing shadows along the stone walls of the kitchen,
partially obscuring the details of the faces of those gathered in the room. The chairs scattered about
were nearly full. Dozens of eyes followed his movements as he reached the bottom of the stairs and
began to unload the potions he’d brought for the headmaster.

“Severus, I’m glad to see you’ve arrived in one piece,” Lupin greeted from the center of the table,
getting to his feet to come round the corner and greet him. “The meeting is due to begin any moment
now.”

Lupin’s true face was oddly refreshing to look upon, but it didn’t help Severus’s sudden urge to
smoke an entire pack of cigarettes at the mere sight of him.

“Where’s Albus?” he said shortly in reply, depositing the last vials of Polyjuice on the counter. The
lull of chatter had slowly begun to start up again. “I have a report to make.”

“He’s speaking with Sirius in the drawing room upstairs. They should be returning soon.” Hesitating,
Lupin shifted marginally closer to him, and Severus in turn took a step back. “Are you well? You
seem a bit…peaky.”

Peaky was one word for it, he supposed. He hadn’t applied enough Dittany; the wound had
reopened as he Apparated here. Severus would be doing laundry tonight. “As much as I so obviously enjoy you prying into my personal affairs, Lupin, I’m afraid I’m going to have to tell you to mind your own fucking business.”

The calm composure fractured, just a bit. A bit was enough. “I suppose I’ll just wait until you pass out in the middle of the meeting,” the wolf said coolly. “Tell me about the arrangements you’ve made for Harry in the meantime. I’d like to hear them before you lose consciousness.”

Fuck you, Severus thought, and the ever-present anger humming in the background roared to life. “Potter is currently in the local Tesco.”

Suddenly quite alarmed, Lupin said, “You’re letting him roam around without a guard?”

The wolf had been far too loud. The conversation in the kitchen hushed once again; Severus sneered at them all, eyes locking with a curious Tonks’s, and then he grabbed Lupin roughly by the collar and dragged him further away. “Shut up,” he hissed. “Do any of them know I’m currently playing host to the boy?”

“Some,” the werewolf muttered, quickly getting the hint to lower his voice again. “Why are you allowing Harry to go to the store alone? The child escaped an attack from rogue Dementors less than a week ago. How will you know whether he’s safe? What if a Death Eater happens upon him and decides to snatch him up, right there and then?”

“I know where the boy is at all times,” Severus said dismissively, even though he himself had begun to have second thoughts on allowing Potter out the moment he’d arrived here. “I placed a tracking spell on his belongings.”

“I…see,” said Lupin slowly, and there was a crease between his brows.

“Would you prefer I have no knowledge of his whereabouts?”

“Not as such. Harry’s safety is essential. Ah, there’s Albus.”

Albus and Potter’s insufferable godfather had finally arrived in the kitchen. Pushing past Lupin to greet the headmaster, Severus ignored Black with a faint curl of his lip to show his disdain.

“Headmaster.”

“How have you been faring? Remus has, of course, been keeping me updated on recent events, but I’ve found that hearing it from the source is far more beneficial. Is Harry settling in well?”

“The boy has not yet attempted to run away, nor has he thrown a temper tantrum beyond the one during his arrival,” he said, unable to resist a smug glance at Black, who visibly bristled but still miraculously kept his silence. Then, giving into the impulse, Severus asked softly, “How is the cleaning going, Black?”

“Albus,” Black snarled, “I’ve told you what I think about all of this. This creep isn’t suited to take care of Harry. Why you think he can watch over a fucking flobberworm, let alone my godson—”

“Seeing as how Potter and a flobberworm share an exceeding amount of qualities, I should be given a congratulations, if your words mean anything.” To his left, Severus heard Lupin groan quietly. “Unfortunately for you, your words have never meant anything—to anyone.”

Albus’s eyes were steely, and the expression on his lined face was even moreso. “Men, I will not tolerate childish squabbling. You are both allies now. As such, you will behave accordingly. Sirius,
Harry is perfectly safe with Severus. We have spoken thoroughly on the matter. I trust Severus’s ability. Harry will be at headquarters in less than three weeks; you need not wait much longer.”

“Excellent points, Albus,” said Lupin, who clearly only wanted the argument to end as soon as it had begun. “Now—the meeting?”

The meeting of the Order of the Phoenix began as it always did: with reports to be made. Mad-Eye went first, as was the norm. He’d recently been reconnecting with his old colleagues as he was reinstated from his retirement, gathering allies within the Auror branch; Kingsley had been his first recruitment. There were sure to be more on the way. He had high hopes for a man who’d been initiated into the ranks as the same time as Moody’s golden protege, Miss Tonks.

Next came Bill Weasley, with his attempts to recruit the goblins, and the absence of what should have been Hagrid’s report on the giants.

He always reported last. Severus veered violently between hating it and preferring it that way; he’d have rather make his report and leave the moment it was over, but then he would miss out on potentially crucial information. However…by the time Hestia Jones was finished speaking, he was never sure whether he wanted to kill himself, or if he wanted to kill everyone else, instead. Perhaps both. (Or, at the very least, himself and Black.)

At last, Jones finished her piece and took her seat, and Severus stood. “The Dark Lord is not pleased. His patience is quickly wearing thin, on multiple accounts. He has recently requested a multitude of potions from me, such as…”

He rattled off the full list of what the Dark Lord had demanded of him (Girding Solution, Veritaserum, Polyjuice, Drink of Despair, and others); then, detailing the full extent of Yaxley’s report from the night before of the innergoings of the corrupt Ministry, he turned to a description of Lucius Malfoy’s most recent ventures and ploys. “Josephina Thompson,” he eventually said, changing the topic without warning, after a brief time spent on the subject of the Department of Mysteries. “She is dead.”

“One of the personnel from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures?” Arthur Weasley specified, frowning. “How do you know?”

“She was the evening’s entertainment.”

He’d been unable to save her. It had been a lost cause from the start; the woman had been brought in by Macnair and Dolohov for the sole purpose of a good time, under the shoddy guise of an unneeded Ministry interrogation. Severus would have had a chance to save her had she been more than the evening fun; weaken the locks on her cell, slip her a poison…

“They brought her in under the assumption of interrogating her, but her fate was sealed from the moment they managed to capture her. Her death was quite public in the eyes of the Dark Lord’s followers; it would not cast suspicion on me if somebody were to report her as missing.” Severus opened his mouth to continue on the same vein of the Dark Lord’s impending return to the world, when his tracking spell made a soft ding and his shoulders tensed. “My report is finished.”

Potter had not returned to Spinner’s End. He’d made a detour—

The tracking spell dinged again, chiming in unison with a much older alarm, set nearly fifteen years ago.

—and that detour had led him straight to the playground.
Happy belated Valentine's Day to those who give enough of a damn to celebrate it!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The door to Number 12, Grimmauld Place slammed shut as Severus stormed out of the house.

He hadn’t waited for more than a second after the meeting was over to leave. The moment Albus had announced them finished for the night, he’d stood quickly enough to send his chair rocking precariously backwards, and strode away as fast as he could without running. He could feel Albus’s eyes on him as he damn-near fled. That stupid, insufferable, foolish —


“Don’t follow me!” Severus snarled at him, and turned on the spot without another word, Apparating to the trash-clogged riverbank of Cokeworth.

Lupin, of course, appeared only seconds after.

Ignoring him, Severus climbed the bank and ducked under a torn section of fencing, stalking out into the streets after a brief stop to Transfigure his clothing into something more appropriately Muggle. He was fucking going to kill the boy. He’d given him explicit rules—to the store and back, and only to the store and back. Trusting the idiot had been a mistake. He should have known, he should have locked Potter in the house instead of allowing himself to tentatively hope, if only for a millisecond, that he wasn’t James Potter in all but name. It was better to have been proven wrong, he thought savagely, cutting through the side of a neat little family home to head into the underbrush of trees behind their yard, weaving his way through brambles and low-hanging branches. Now he wouldn’t hold out hope of any difference.

A twig cracked behind him, close enough to give him pause. Spinning round, Severus locked eyes with the wolf, who looked faintly startled where he stood in a patch of poison ivy. “Do—not—follow—me,” he ground out, teeth bared. “This is not your concern.”

“I’m in charge of Harry’s continued well-being as long as he’s in your care,” Lupin retorted, stepping forward. “This is my concern. What has he done, Severus? Did he leave the house again?”

Severus laughed. It sounded more than a little hysterical. “Leave the house?” he repeated. “Leave the house? He never returned.”

“Where is he now?” the wolf demanded, striding past him. “We need to find him, quickly, before somebody else can.”

“He’s at the playground, the goddamn fool.” There was panic pressing at his chest, suffocating him, rising up and up with each passing second. He’d found—the playground. The playground. What if he found something else? Some remnant of his twenty-year-old friendship with Lily, some proof that she’d existed and had once cared for him when no one in his life ever had and—and what if the boy began asking questions? Dredging up old memories. Demanding details. Demanding answers. Demanding to know why he’d—killed them.

(It hadn’t been him who pulled the metaphorical trigger, but he was as much of a murderer as the Dark Lord himself was. It was his fault his fault his fault. He’d delivered that fragment of prophecy. He’d been the one to damn them all, to damn Lily, to damn that baby that now slept on his couch)
“Severus?” Lupin was barely two feet away now, hand outstretched. “Are you ill?”

“Don’t touch me,” he gasped, hands coming up to tangle in his hair. A crushing wave of humiliation and self-loathing swept over him. “I will kill you if you touch me.”

There was a wariness to the werewolf now, like he’d just discovered a hidden bomb but couldn’t quite tell when it was due to explode. “Do you know if Harry has moved yet?” he said after a few tense seconds. “Is he still at the playground?”

“He’s not moved.” He needed to—to go. Get the boy, get him out of there, get him back to Spinner’s End before he could find anything. “He’s alone.”

“We’ll find him, then, and bring him home. Let’s keep going.”

—

Harry really hadn’t meant to make a detour.

He’d been in Tesco, rushing about to gather broccoli, frozen cod, and other odds and ends, when he’d realized for what felt like the first time where exactly he was and who he was around. The people in this town—they knew the area. They knew their neighbors and the locals. That gray-haired man with the cane, there? He might have known his mother when she was young. That woman to his left? She might have been one of his mum’s classmates.

Cokeworth was a treasure trove he hadn’t even thought to consider, before.

The cod would keep awhile longer, he decided, shifting from foot to foot as he scanned the faces in the store around him, trying to pinpoint a target. He would choose someone…older. Harry couldn’t see anyone wanting to move here after their retirement; there were plenty of places to better spend their golden years in. Looking past the derelict squalor of Spinner’s End, the neat little houses dotting the roads seemed aimed more towards small families. People like the Dursleys, and ones whose families had either moved on or died, leaving them alone in the house from their prime years.

“Hello,” Harry said nervously, as he came to a stop in front of an old woman giving out samples. “Could I have one?”

The bit of chicken was tender, and he took a moment to savor the flavor of it before beginning hesitant small-talk with the woman. Bit by bit, Harry revealed that he was an orphan living with a family friend, and that he’d come to the town in hopes of finding some trace of his parents in his mother’s childhood town. The old woman pressed another sample of roast chicken on him.

Then, Harry dared to break the protocol Snape had imposed on him, and revealed his full name along with Lily Potter’s maiden name. And the woman bloomed.

“Those eyes,” she’d murmured, looking him up and down as though truly seeing him for the first time. Her arthritic fingers clasped at his upper arm and her eyes practically sparkled. “Why, those eyes—I’d recognize them anywhere, I would. The Evans girls. I watched them grow up, you see, along with that boy from across the river.”
Yeah, Harry thought dazedly, as he was showered with more information on Lily Potter than he’d ever received in his life, and a feeling that was more grief than joy rose in him. Yeah, Cokeworth was definitely a treasure trove.

Snape had been best friends with his mum. That much was absolutely certain. That he’d never said anything—that he’d never once brought her up—was enough to leave Harry shaking with helpless anger. He’d *known his mum*. Hell, Lupin and Sirius had known his mum, but at least they hadn’t been her *best friend*. Snape was the ultimate treasure trove—and he refused to be discovered. Damn greasy bat…

Harry stormed down the sidewalk back towards the river, sucking the last of the flavor out of the third bit of chicken the old woman had secreted to him, and struggled to wrap his mind around the fact that anyone had ever seriously liked Snape, let alone called him their friend. *Snape*. The greasy git of the dungeons. Snape, Potions professor, with the nasty hair and even nastier personality, whose bark was preferred to his bite. His mum had *liked* him? She’d wanted to be around him, had enjoyed seeing his great, ugly face? Had he even treated her properly?

Maybe she’d only been humoring him as kids. Maybe she’d felt pity for him. It would make sense. No one could actually *like* Snape.

He fought the urge to kick something. Chest heaving like he’d run a mile, Harry looked around and wiped sweat out of his stinging eyes. The cool dimness of the store had been so far from the wet heat sucking at his skin and clothes. Shade—he needed shade, or else he’d end up getting heat stroke. The cod would survive a bit longer. He would only take a short break.

The playground he came to smelled strongly of fresh mulch; better than smelling his own sweat. Harry sat heavily at the bottom of the slide. A tall tree crested over him from behind, and the leaves shook in the minute breeze, sending dapples of fading sunlight quivering across the ground. He closed his eyes and pulled at his t-shirt in an attempt to get air flowing between it and his chest.

*That awful Snape boy.*

Aunt Petunia hadn’t been lying, after all. It was like when he was eleven, and she’d had her great outburst over his mum leaving for Hogwarts like he had been. And…and next summer, if Snape didn’t agree to stop being such a bloody git and tell him about his mother, could he maybe coax another revealing outburst from her? What sorts of things would she say if he asked about Snape? The old woman at Tesco had been incredibly brief—the boy from Spinner’s End, never saw one without the other until one day the boy was nowhere to be found outside of the shadier bits of town—and it hadn’t been enough. Nothing anyone could tell him about his mum’s past could ever be enough.

The cod was probably past the point of return, Harry lamented as he looked down at the grocery bag on the ground next to him.

And so was he, he realized, jolting to his feet as Snape suddenly appeared in front of him, as though he were some demon that had been summoned. Lupin, behind him, looked relieved, but Snape seemed as though he was ready to cast the Killing Curse.

“Er—” Harry said by way of explanation.

“What are you doing here?” Snape demanded through clenched teeth. “Did you not *hear my orders*? Do you have cotton stuffed into your damn ears? Well? Answer me, boy!”

Righteous indignation overtook him in an instant. “It’s just a playground,” he retorted, struggling to
keep his voice level, though the pitch rose and fell wildly. “I wasn’t out causing trouble. I just went to sit down and take a break. I’m not—I’m not throwing rocks at cars, or beating up kids, or—” His fists were clenched and he’d taken a step forward, though he couldn’t quite remember when he’d done so. “I’ve been locked up for months. No news, no nothing, just—just locked up, and—”

“Have you not thought to consider there being a reason for that, Potter? Can nothing penetrate your thick skull? Oh, well, I suppose I might have to reword that.” Snape’s teeth were bared in a silent snarl, exposing his cramped, yellow teeth. “I have been able to break into your thoughts and memories with absurd ease. So tell me, Potter—why is it, in a head so simple to unlock, that basic orders cannot filter through?”

“I just—”

“‘You look just like your father.’ I’m sure you’ve heard this before. What they’ve delicately not told you, I’m afraid, is that you are also alike in personality—and James Potter was an arrogant, entitled toddler no more capable of making rational choices than you yourself are.”

“Severus—”

“Don’t talk about my father!” Harry swung about to kick at the slide as hard as he could, sending his bones and the slide rattling. “It’s not my fault he stole my mum from you, or something! It’s not my fault he—”

But Snape already looked like he’d sucked the wind straight out of his sails. Harry trailed off, baffled and more than a little furious. Snape had gone stock still; he looked entirely too pale, more than the norm.

“I…I’ve been locked up,” Harry tried, but the words were met with silence. “I—Professor Lupin, I just don’t…”

“Where did you hear that?” Snape asked quietly. “Who told you such an absurd thing?”

A quiet Snape was a dangerous Snape. Now quite alarmed, he looked around to Lupin, who slowly approached Harry and put a hand carefully on his shoulder. “A woman at the store. She told me about my mum.”

“What did you tell her? Did you blow your cover?”

And just like that—Snape was in a full rage again.

“Were you friends with my mum?” Harry demanded, instead of responding.

“That is not the point, Potter! The point is that you have exposed yourself, leaving yourself open to discovery. You have outdone yourself in the breadth of your never-ending impulsivity and stupidity! You—”

“Severus,” Lupin said sharply, and proceeded to then cut off Snape’s instantaneous ‘do not interrupt me’ to continue, “it’s getting very late, and these groceries will not keep if they’re left out for much longer. I think you’ve made your point quite clear. Harry, you need to follow the orders set for you. Severus had trusted you to do as you were told, and you decided to put yourself in danger by making it more difficult to find you and bring you back to the house. I never want to see you laugh at James and Lily’s sacrifice the way you have tonight. There is no telling what might have happened.”

“But he—” Harry protested, face flushing. He felt sick to his stomach.
“We can discuss this later, once our tempers have cooled. Severus,” Remus said, glancing at the silently fuming Potions Master and leaning down to pick up the discarded groceries. “Lead the way.”

Thoroughly chastened, Harry followed along at a trudge, digging his fingers into his palms and fighting to calm down. How had they found him? He wondered sullenly, glaring at Snape through his eyelashes. He certainly hadn’t told anyone where he was going.

“I think we can salvage the fish,” Lupin was saying to Snape, who didn’t respond. “I’ve already put in stasis, but the damage was done…if you cook it immediately after returning, it should be just fine.”

They crossed the river and headed into the run-down half of Cokeworth, Snape leading the way. Professor Lupin became very quiet until they finally passed into the dusty house on Spinner’s End and shut the door firmly behind them. The shadows dancing on the walls from the candle chandelier seemed vaguely surreal. Harry shivered as Remus cast a Cooling Charm. Snape disappeared into the kitchen and returned barely a minute later with what looked to be a Calming Draught, which he downed in one go without preamble. Then he hurled the empty vial into the fireplace.

“Godric and Jesus!” Lupin shouted, leaping backwards to shield Harry at the sound of shattering glass. “What the hell—”

Snape seized a small ceramic pot off the fireplace and threw that, too, where it burst into pieces upon hitting the floor. He was reaching for three glass figurines when Lupin jumped straight over the back of the sofa and grabbed his outstretched arm. “Do not fucking touch me, werewolf!” Snape snarled, wrenching his arm up and slamming his back into the mantle with enough force to look as if it had hurt.

“Harry is right here, goddammit! If you can’t control your temper, Severus, I’m going to have to take him away for the night and contact Albus to tell——”

“Then tell him! The fireplace is right here, Lupin! Call Albus and tell him what a terrible fucking decision this had been!”

“I can’t, because it’s all over the bloody floor, and—are you bleeding?” Lupin said quite suddenly, looking positively alarmed.

“What?” said Snape breathlessly, but Harry, where he’d pressed himself against the far wall, could now see it too. There was a stain spreading over his Potions professor’s shoulder, darkening the fabric of his Muggle jacket. “We are in no way discussing that right now, wolf. We’re talking about Potter and his inability to follow orders properly. The Floo powder is on the mantle, there—or, no…I just threw it onto the floor.”

The Calming Draught had apparently taken control by force. Snape blinked hard and swayed a little. Lupin shook his head and grabbed the man, shoving him into the armchair by the hidden staircase. “How high was the strength of that Calming Draught you just took?”

“I took two,” Snape snapped, without his usual fire, “and they were both at regular strength. Let go of me.”

“Absolutely not. If you’ve overdosed yourself, you bloody, pompous idiot…”

“Er…Should I call Dumbledore?” Harry asked, inching forward a little. “Or should I start cooking the fish?”

“Severus has destroyed the Floo powder, so you only have one option from that. Harry, I’ll join you in cooking in just a moment. And then we’ll see about sleeping arrangements. Leaving the two of
you alone tonight is not an option.” Lupin ran a hand through his hair and heaved a sigh. “I’ll be staying the night.”

“You’ll what?” Snape said, sitting up too quickly, if the hasty grab for the arm of his chair was any indication.

“Harry, to the kitchen if you will. I’ll be right there to begin making tea.” Professor Lupin looked grimly between the two of them. “We have a lot to discuss.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is pretty late, I'm sorry. I hope you all enjoy it!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Remus really, truly, wondered sometimes whether the rational thought process in Albus’s brain had somehow gone faulty over the years. Sending Harry to Grimmauld Place in spite of the ongoing security risk was one thing. But placing him with Severus Snape, Hogwarts’s most hated Professor since Phineas Nigellus himself…Well. That was a decision he personally would never have made in a thousand years.

The fish was spitting hot oil all over the counter, and for a moment Remus was worried Harry would be hurt by it, but he’d simply rolled down the sleeves of his oversized flannel and continued cooking. Remus busied himself with chopping vegetables for their soup. For a time, the kitchen was silent other than the thock of the knife on the weathered old cutting board, and the hiss of the fish in the pan. “I don’t like being locked up without news or a way to talk to my friends,” Harry said eventually. “I hadn’t meant to go anywhere but back here, but I’ve just been so sick of being stuck inside of this house. All I’ve been doing is homework. If I could talk to Ron and Hermione, or even have them over for an hour or two…But Snape wouldn’t let them come inside, would he?”

“Professor Snape, Harry,” Remus corrected. As idiotic as Severus was currently acting, he still deserved basic respect. James and Sirius had never gotten around to understanding that, but Harry had always been more like Lily than James. “And you may find yourself surprised. There’s no harm in asking after everything has calmed down again.”

Harry hummed noncommittally and continued cooking. Reaching for a container of basil that was of incredibly dubious freshness, he said, “So you’ll, er, be staying the night, then?” and glanced at him in a way that was probably meant to be discreet.

“I will,” Remus confirmed. Hence the soup, to add heaviness to an otherwise very light meal for three. He blinked hard and rolled his shoulders to pop his back. “I need to make sure the prat in there won’t die through the night, though it would serve him right. I’m sorry, Harry, I shouldn’t be saying such things in front of you…”

“S’all right,” he said, a little too quickly.

Remus didn’t need to look at him to see the smirk on Harry’s face; he could almost tangibly feel it. That had always irritated him, while teaching. Feeling the hidden smirks passed behind his back as the students mocked his shabby clothing instead of paying attention to the lesson. Hopefully, having Imposter Moody as an instructor for a time, with the eye that could see through the back of his head, had scared them straight a tad. It would be one of the only good things he’d have done for those children.

“Where will you be sleeping?” Harry asked, flipping the fish in the skillet. It was cast iron. Remus hoped it wasn’t hurting his wrist to hold it like that. “I’m still on the couch for now—it’s not bad, actually, better than my bed at the Dursley’s—and I dunno if Sn—Professor Snape has an extra bed. S’pose you could Transfigure one. But where would you put it?”

The entire house was cramped, looking at it. It suited Severus. Dark, secretive, and unkempt—just like its owner. Even if he were to Transfigure a bed out of whatever bit of rubbish he could find, there would be nowhere to put it. “I suppose I’ll take the chair.”
“It’s not bad, either. I slept on it last night. I think he’s fortified everything here with all sorts of charms.”

Something about Harry’s tone gave Remus pause. “Why did you sleep in the chair last night?” he asked, keeping his tone even and politely quizzical. “Did you fall asleep reading?”

“What? Oh, no—I doubt he’d let me touch his books, let alone read them. He came home after seeing Voldemort.” Now transferring the fish onto three plates, two of which had been chipped so long ago that the broken edges had been worn smooth again, Harry immediately started on frying eggs. He cracked each of them one-handed. “They’re about to expire. You don’t mind eggs, do you?”

“Not at all.” Stewing in Harry’s not-explanation of why he’d slept in the chair instead of on the sofa, Remus chopped the last of the vegetables and dropped them into the boiling broth on the sputtering stove, careful not to interfere with the Veritaserum simmering away next to it. “How is your schoolwork going? Are you making decent headway?”

They continued to chat quietly as they finished making tea. There was no sound from the room opposite, though Remus knew full-well Severus was listening to their every word, if not eavesdropping next to the doorway, paranoid bastard that he was. “Harry,” Remus said, cutting him off halfway through a description of a flying maneuver he’d learned before the end of term, “I’m sorry to interrupt, but would you mind watching the soup for just a moment? I need to check on Severus.”

“Yeah, I don’t mind.” Harry gave him a teenager-sneaky side glance. Nothing about it failed to hide the burning curiosity etched in his every movement.

Remus sent a wan smile his way and headed out into the living room. There had been no sudden burst in movement out by the doorway, but he could tell by the tense line of Severus’s shoulders as he flipped unconcernedly through a dusty novel, that he had most certainly been eavesdropping on their conversation. “Not dead yet, I see,” he greeted. “How are you holding up?”

“Your concern is neither wanted nor warranted.”

“That’s unfortunate, then, because I am concerned. Not only for Harry’s safety in this house, but for your safety, as well.” Remus took a moment to breathe and gather himself. Even after all these years, he’d never quite developed the skill of confrontation. Avoidance and denial was more his style. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to continue. “This can’t go on, Severus. This animosity between you and Harry is unhealthy to the extremes. He is not James. I’m both relieved and saddened to find that there is very little James in him at all, beyond his physical appearance.”

“He has been disrespectful from the start. From the very first class—”

“How much of his apparent disrespect has been your determination to see James in all that he does, and how much of it has been Lily’s cheek shining through?”

“Do not—” Severus began, before he cut himself off with what appeared to be a Herculean effort. His hands were like claws on the arms of the chair, fingers digging into the sides like he was trying to strangle Remus through sheer will. There was a vaguely unhinged look to him. Faint rustling in the kitchen was the only sign of Harry taking a turn at eavesdropping; but they both clearly heard it. Severus glared at the doorway. Then, forcefully, “You need to leave.”

Remus tried his best not to back down. It was a near thing. “Harry has more of Lily in him than you, and most everyone else, seem to think. His mother’s eyes aren’t all that he’s inherited.” And with
that, the last of his courage drained away, leaving him wearier than he’d been before. “Dinner should be nearly ready. Are you able to stand?”

“Fuck off.”

“Is that a yes?”

“It’s a get the hell out of my sodding house, Lupin. Of all the times for someone to miraculously learn how to follow orders, this would be the best. Return to the mouldering dump Black calls a house and leave me be.”

“As you wish, Severus,” Remus said in the most pleasant tone he could manage. “I’ll be leaving quite promptly…once the sun has risen and Albus has been contacted and fully debriefed on today’s events.”

If looks could kill, Severus Snape would most certainly be the first to discover how.

—

Severus couldn’t decide who he hated more.

James Potter, prat almighty, had been dead fourteen years, but even a decade and a half wasn’t enough to extinguish the hatred rooted to his soul, like a parasitic plant that had taken hold and grown thorns over his heart. His even deeper hatred for Sirius Black was one that would never die. That much had become certain from the very first days of their Hogwarts years. But Remus Lupin was someone he’d never held hatred towards in the way he had the man’s friends. The werewolf’s main sin lay in his failure to do his job as a prefect and, later, as a professor and protector of children.

Recent events were causing him to reconsider placing Lupin at the top of his ‘Die A Painful Death’ list.

The boy had been unashamedly eavesdropping throughout whatever passed for a conversation. That much was entirely obvious. It wasn’t a reason to hate him — if Potter was destined to kill the Dark Lord, he might as well learn to fight dirty—but the boy’s mere presence in his house was a good enough reason at present to satisfy him. Severus forced himself to sit upright (perhaps the second Calming Draught hadn’t been the best idea) and keep his eyes open. “Get out. I won’t say it again.”

“Glad to hear it. It should make our night together that much more pleasant. Harry”—There was a thump on the wall from the boy pressing his ear to the plaster—“would you begin plating the rest of the food? I’m sure the soup and eggs are finished cooking by now.”

Potter slowly shuffled out into the open, red-faced but generally unashamed. “Yeah, I will. Is he—all right, then?”

Severus fixed him with a baleful look until a more appropriately embarrassed expression appeared. “Yes, he is all right,” he said scathingly, and stood with a minimal amount of swaying to prove it. Neither the boy nor the werewolf looked convinced. Entirely fed up with the both of them, he swept out into the kitchen and grabbed the first plate he saw, spooning roasted vegetables onto it, and then soup into the blue bowl in the cupboard with the hairline crack running through the center. “No need to wait to serve yourselves. You’ll be dining with each other tonight. Lupin, do refrain from coming upstairs. You can fend for yourself if you truly feel the need to stay. Potter, go to bed at a reasonable
time. You were up far too late last night.”

Without another word, he left the room and headed up the stairs to his bedroom to eat alone. It was only until he’d settled himself on his bed that Severus realized he’d forgotten to grab any silverware.

—

He couldn’t sleep.

Anxiety chewed at him like a feral dog. The house was silent beyond the usual creaks and groans, but if he listened carefully enough, Severus thought he could hear the sound of joint breathing from the floor below. It brought back memories, that breathing. Memories of his—parents, and—

Severus eased out of bed carefully enough that the mattress scarcely made a sound. The touch of his bare feet against the frigid floorboards sent a shock through his system, but he worked past the involuntary shudder that wracked through him and took a step over to the patch of floor next to the nightstand, where he knew the wood had settled.

The journey down the stairs was a slow one. His feet felt like blocks of ice, throbbing in time with the pounding headache bursting through his temples, by the time he found himself skirting round the edge of the sofa, where the Potter boy lay curled on his side like a kitten. The lump on the chair that was Lupin sat prone, unmoving. Both asleep. Severus refused to allow himself to feel relieved. He made his way to the kitchen, instead, and cast Muffliato over the doorway.

It had begun to rain outside. The sound of raindrops pattering against the kitchen window became no more than soothing white noise as he got to work, pulling out the ingredients for Skele-Gro, Essence of Dittany, Blood-Replenishing Potion, Antiseptic Solution, and Pepper-Up Potion. If he was to stay awake all night long, he might as well make himself useful and begin restocking the Hogwarts Infirmary, as well as his personal first aid kit.

The sun had not yet begun to rise, and he had only just finished bottling his second vial of Dittany, when Severus realized there was now only one set of deep breathing from the room adjacent. The hairs rose on the back of his neck and goosebumps prickled along his arms. Whipping round to face the doorway, Severus locked eyes with Lupin, who’d only just entered the room. “Skulking about, I see,” he said with a sneer, blinking hard to refocus himself from whatever haze he’d fallen into during the last two hours. “Hoping to do some snooping in the light of the moon, Lupin?”

“Light of the moon?” the wolf murmured back, with a sardonic, faintly self-deprecating smile. “What moon are you seeing through those clouds, that I somehow cannot?”

Severus glared at him, setting the vial of Dittany down onto the counter with unnecessary force. He reached for a third vial.

“What are your glasses?”

“My throat is parched. Where are your glasses? I can assure you, I won’t leave a single trace of werewolf cooties. I’ll even wash the glass once I’m through with it.”

His jaw protested against the gritting of his teeth. “Don’t bother. I’ll only be throwing it away once
you’re with finished it. Above the sink, Lupin. To the right.”

“You’ve never been one to pass up a chance to be petty, Severus.” The tap of the sink opened with the usual judder and clang, and stayed running for nearly a minute as Lupin filled and refilled his glass, drinking deeply as though he’d gone without water for days. Severus had seen enough of Grimmauld Place that he’d likely agree with any who brought up the subject of potential water contamination. The sink shut off. “Thank you. Would you prefer I break the glass first, or would you like me to simply stick it in with the other bits of rubbish?”

Severus didn’t bother to look up from where he’d begun to grind fluxweed with his mortar and pestle. “Just Vanish it and save me the effort of kashering it. I don’t believe werewolves are Kosher.”

To his genuine surprise, Lupin began laughing, edging along the outskirts of the kitchen until he came to a stop to Severus’s left. Was the wolf laughing at his expense? “I wouldn’t know, but I suppose I’ll take your word for it. What are you working on, here?”

A poison to kill myself with, so I no longer have to suffer through your inane attempts at conversation. “Blood-Replenishing Potion. Do you not have anything better to do than loom over my shoulder and breathe on me?”

“I’m afraid not.” There was a smile in the wolf’s voice. “Are you feeling well? Or is there a reason behind this potion? I was hesitant to ask, earlier, what with Harry listening in, but that bloodstain didn’t seem as though it was coming from a papercut.”

Angrily, with jerky hands and clenched teeth, Severus pulled the collar of his nightshirt aside long enough to give him a glimpse of the avulsion across his shoulder. He didn’t miss the way Lupin’s eyes lingered on the sharp line of his collarbone; Severus yanked his shirt up round his neck and bent over his prep station to hide the flush that had begun creeping into his cheeks. “Nothing fatal. Moreso, nothing for you to concern yourself with.”

“Nothing to concern myself with? When did this happen? Have you disinfected it? It seems incredibly inflamed.”

And suddenly there were warm hands on him, white-hot panic burst through him like he’d been injected with liquid adrenaline, and the throbbing in his head reached a fever-pitch as Severus slammed his hips back against the counter with his arm thrown over his face. The splinters of pain opening in his lower back wasn’t enough to distract himself from the sudden pitch of his stomach. He clapped a hand over his mouth in time for bile to rise up his throat—and then vomited all over Lupin’s bare feet.

“Oh, no,” said Lupin, in such a polite, dismayed voice, that Severus couldn’t help but laugh through the gagging.

Chapter End Notes

WHEW I managed to write Remus’s pov. I rewrote that first section maybe four times before I finally got it right (aka gave up and hoped for the best). I’ve never written any pov other than Severus’s and Harry’s in HP fics, so I hope I did Remus justice! (I spent hours just rereading sections featuring him in PoA.)
Remus was up to something.

It had been hours since night had fallen, without a single sign from his oldest friend beyond a Patronus telling him not to wait up for him, but the bottle by his side and the fire smouldering in the hearth were more than enough company for Sirius right now. The Weasley children had long since been carted off to bed by their mother. Grimmauld Place was quiet.

And he was fucking suspicious.

Something was up—something to do with Snape, of all people—and Remus’s ages old soft spot for the greasy fucker had made a sudden, horrifying resurgence. Sirius hadn’t seen him so excited to see someone since Harry had been born. It was weird as all hell. Remus had always seemed to think Snape was secretly an all right bloke; it had been the one and only point of conflict for the Marauders (until James had started seriously pining after Lily, who had been an absolute cunt until seventh year, when she’d finally started growing on him like a fungal infection). But Lily was one thing. Snape? Creepy, Dark oddball whose parents had never seemed to have taught him the meaning of ‘mind your own damn business’? That was another. And now, to have Harry, his godson, staying with the bastard—

Sirius took a long draw of his whiskey and swallowed hard against the burn as it worked its way through him and warmed his belly. It was no use getting angry over it. (And he was angry. He was angry, goddammit, but Albus fucking Dumbledore wouldn’t let him go see Harry yet, let alone have him stay here where he belonged. He was angry. ) Harry was with Snape, and the apocalypse hadn’t happened yet. Harry was still somehow alive. Snape hadn’t whisked him straight off to Voldemort.

Yet.

It was only a matter of time before Snivellus tripped himself up. He’d never had a lick of goodness in him, even when he was eleven; and Lily had seen it in the end, too. They’d been some sort of ‘friends’ at first. He’d been her stepping stone into the Wizarding World, but nothing more, because Snape had never been anyone powerful or important, as much as he’d wished to be. A pebble in a lake full of boulders was all he’d ever be. Always serving, always fifth-best, spineless and untalented beyond the realm of his Potions set. A Slytherin crony. A henchman. A pebble.

And now Remus was plotting something. With him.

Sirius polished off the bottle and leaned his head back against the cushion of the couch. It was only a matter of time, he knew. Remus was good at avoiding, but he’d never been terribly good at hiding secrets. Sirius would find out what was going on.

Curiosity killed the cat, Lily had liked to say.

Sirius could only hope the saying didn’t apply to dogs, too.
The sun had begun to rise by the time Severus managed to stop puking at random intervals. Lupin hovered uselessly the entire time, obviously hesitant to touch him again, thank fucking God. He hadn’t been expecting it. He should have, really, but the sudden hands on his bare skin had—

Well, it was a bit too shocking.

And now Severus was humiliated. He hadn’t had a reaction like that in years, since he’d begun working at Hogwarts and had had to get somewhat used to Albus’s (admittedly infrequent) touches. A pat on the shoulder, a clasp of hands on occasion, fingers tracing his forearm when he’d appeared in Dumbledore’s office in a panic over the sudden darkening of the Mark…Yes. He’d gotten used to that. What he’d made the mistake of assuming was that he’d gotten used to all touch.

“I’m not about to keel over and die, Lupin,” he snapped when the wolf sent yet another worried look his way. Severus had gotten right back to work the moment he’d been capable of it and had Vanished the sick. He was cutting leeches at a rapid pace, tossing each sliver into the bubbling potion one by one, to make up for the time he’d lost vomiting. He would have the Blood-Replenishing Potion finished within the next twenty minutes if he continued at the pace he’d now set. “You can stop looking at me as though I’ll be dying.”

“Have you been ill?” the wolf asked, and he could feel eyes on him, fixed on his shoulder. “It does appear to be infected, Severus, so if you’ve fallen ill from—”

“I’m sure you’re positively glowing inside, knowing you have all sorts of gossip just waiting to be told to Black,” Severus said loudly, speaking over him to try and get him to shut up. Or start an argument. Either one would be welcome. Perhaps he could even coax Lupin into a duel. He’d even take a fistfight at this point. Anything to rid him of the sick, shivery energy coursing through his body. “What sort of things have you been discussing? Have you told him what my house looks like? What has he said? I am sure you’ve both been up late, giggling like schoolgirls over a bottle of whiskey about your old pal Snivellus.”

“I’ve not said a single thing to Sirius,” Lupin said, and this time he sounded angry, bordering on furious. “We’ve already been over this. This isn’t some sort of game I’m playing to try to undermine you. I’m here for Harry and his safety.”

“Don’t fucking act as if that isn’t something you would do,” he snarled, casting stasis on his potion so he could turn fully. “As if it isn’t something you haven’t done. You aren’t the perfect little tame wolf you pretend to be in front of everyone. I was there that night—both nights—so don’t try to pretend otherwise.”

“Do you see me pretending?” The wolf looked as though he wanted to use an Unforgivable on him. Severus ached with the need of it. “I’m not pretending to be anything I’m not. People prefer to see a docile, tame wolf—so pardon me if you find that offensive. Do you want me to terrify the people around me? Do you want to see me in a muzzle? Do—” With a shake of his head, he sighed, “I’m stopping now. There’s no use arguing.”

_Yell at me!_ he wanted to scream. _Hit me! Fight back!_ 

“Fuck you.” Severus couldn’t bring himself to turn his back on Lupin, who still had his fists clenched and his teeth bared. “Fuck you.”

“If that’s what you want,” the werewolf said sarcastically. “Try not to sick up on me as we snog.”
The fight left him as quickly as it had come, replaced instantly with mortification. Severus turned his head and fixed his gaze on the wall, feeling incredibly wrong-footed. What—what the hell was he supposed to say to *that*?

“Are you—oh, Jesus, Severus. I wasn’t serious.” Lupin took a step forward, moving into his line of sight. “I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

He was blushing. He could feel the heat in his face. Whipping back round to finish his potion, Severus removed the stasis spell he’d thrown over it and dripped billywig sting slime into the brew. His movements were too fast and jerky; he splashed some over the counter in his haste to close the bottle again.

“I really am sorry,” Lupin said quietly. “It came out without me truly thinking about it. It was incredibly inappropriate of me. I’m sorry, Severus. I’ll, ah…I’ll leave you to it, then. Goodnight. Or…good morning. I’ll go now.”

Severus clenched his teeth and didn’t respond. He didn’t stop brewing until the sun had fully risen.

—

Lupin left shortly after dawn, but Severus wasn’t downstairs to see him go. He’d holed himself up in his room, watching the wolf step out the door with one last smile and wave, and disappear down the street. There was a brief moment when he thought they’d locked eyes, that Lupin had smiled at him, too, but it was likely just his imagination. He’d always had an overactive imagination.

It was only after Severus was sure he was finally gone that he deigned to get dressed, gather toiletries, and go down to the living room, where the boy was stowing his folded blankets at the end of the sofa for later. “Have you had breakfast?” he asked disinterestedly, running a finger along the spines of the books on one of his shelves.

“Yeah, Professor Lupin made me eggs and toast.” Then: “Er…Professor, could I…”

He closed his eyes and pressed the dough of his palm against one of the novels. “What?”

“I was just wondering if…Actually, never mind, I was just wondering if maybe Hedwig had come today? Or last night?”

He turned round to find Potter twisting his oversized shirt in his hands. “She has not. I’ll remove the wards today to allow her inside, and key her signature to the house so she can come and go. I’m sure your friends have written many frantic letters plotting your imminent escape to headquarters. Will they be borrowing a flying car this time, or should I expect Arthur Weasley’s again?”

“What?” Potter said incredulously, eyes wide behind his abhorrent glasses and snarled hair. “No, that’s—that car is long gone. Sir. Don’t worry. You don’t have bars on your windows, so there won’t be any…kidnapping attempts…”

“I should hope not.” Severus paused on his way to the kitchen, whirling about to glare at the boy. “Bars on the windows? What sort of absurdity are you spouting now?”

“Nothing! Nothing. Sorry. Sir.” Potter was refusing to meet his gaze, eyes darting every which way like he was under interrogation. “I was, er, joking.”
“Refrain from doing so next time,” he snapped. “Get dressed and find your shoes. Comb your hair. We’ll be leaving in a half hour.”

“Leaving?” the boy said, moving round the sofa to get to his suitcase by the doorway. “Where are we going?”

“To find you something decent to wear. Your hearing is quickly approaching, and I won’t have you looking like a street urchin Dumbledore scooped out of an alleyway. Fudge has enough to focus on without having that as arsenal.” Eyeing the boy with a critical eye, Severus murmured, “Perhaps a haircut, as well…”

It would be out of his budget, and his monthly payment to Lucius Malfoy would have to be late in lieu of his gas bill, but…Lucius wouldn’t notice if he was a week or two behind, and he could always ask Albus for a small loan if he was truly hurting.

Well, he could worry about finances later. He needed a wash.

“Entertain yourself until I’m ready to leave,” he said, tucking his towel close and heading to the bathroom to bathe. Severus took his time, scrubbing himself slowly, lost in thought as the water pounded against the tile. Lupin had been—different—last night. For lack of a better word. Whatever had come over them both could not happen again. He wouldn’t allow it. Never again. It had been…been…something. Whatever it had been, it hadn’t been good.

Severus didn’t realize he was having a panic attack until he began shivering, water run ice cold. He turned the dial with shaking hands until the heat returned. Then, rushing to finish bathing, he half-heartedly scrubbed his hair and rinsed clean in time for the last of the hot water to drain away. He stepped out of the showering trembling but feeling infinitely better than he had in days.

Dressing quickly, he headed back into the living room to find the Potter boy curled in the armchair with a book. The sliding shelf seemed suspiciously untouched. “Are you ready?” he asked, scanning the room for any signs of disruption. He felt as though he was being watched. “Where are your shoes?”

“Oh—just a moment, they’re under the sofa…” Dropping the book onto the stool next to the chair, Potter dropped down to drag his disgusting trainers out from under the depths of the couch. “You have all sorts of things under here. Do you want me to clean it out later?”

What sorts of things did he have under there? he wondered, tense. Was there something the boy shouldn’t be seeing? He’d found his father’s Gold Star magazines, once, back in the eighties. It had decidedly not been a pleasant surprise. “No,” he snapped, and plucked at the boy’s collar to bring him back out from under the sofa. “Get out of there. We’re leaving now.”

“Right, sorry.”

The summer heat had finally died to a soggy warmth, but it was no more welcome than the burning drought had been. Severus found himself sweating almost immediately, skin clammy and cold, hair still damp and probably still hideous and stringy. Potter looked no better; he slowed down at regular intervals to wipe his fogging glasses on his shirt and wipe sweat out from under his shaggy fringe. It was a relief when they made it to the first clothing store Severus saw and stepped into the shade indoors. “Thirty minutes. That’s your limit. Do you know what your sizes are, or should we stop to measure you first?”

Potter looked at him like he’d suddenly turned bright blue. “Er…I know my sizes, I think, but—”
“But what?” he said impatiently, swiftly cutting his gaze left and right to make sure there was nobody within eavesdropping distance. “You need clothing for your hearing. You said so yourself. Find them and bring them here. The clock is ticking, P—Harry.”

Saying the boy’s given name worked like a, well, a magic trick: he sprung to life, scuttling away like Severus had threatened him with bodily injury, peeking back over his shoulder as if he was being chased. Severus leaned against the nearest wall he could find and wondered vaguely if he could smoke in the shop. Probably not. Cigarette smoke soaked into clothing.

It seemed as though he’d given up most pretenses with the boy. He’d already said ‘fuck’ in front of him now. Might as well smoke in front of him, too. (Around him. He wouldn’t stain Lily’s son’s lungs with secondhand smoke.) As long as he avoided having a meltdown in front of him, he was fine with cursing around Potter. Ron Weasley swore quite openly, on a regular basis. It wasn’t as though it would be a culture shock.

(Albus would main him if he knew he was justifying swearing around the Boy-Who-Lived.)

“I’m done,” the boy announced, reappearing next to him without warning.

“Up to the counter, then. We have business elsewhere,” Severus said, and headed for the cash register. He paid as quickly as possible, speaking minimally, and hustled them back out into the street in under five minutes. Then, crossing the street, he brought them into the used bookstore. “Two books. Pick out whatever kinds you’d like, as long as it is within a reasonable price range and isn’t something so overtly sexual I’d be embarrassed to be seen buying it.”

Potter turned red and muttered something indecipherable, and then nodded, hurrying off into the depths of the store. Severus smiled thinly and began perusing the shelves without anything particular in mind. His new plan of action, instead of ignoring the boy and setting him to schoolwork day after day, was sending him out into town to burn off his adolescent energy. He would need to wait until they returned to Spinner’s End to know if it would even work. If the plan was a success…no matter how miniscule that success was…perhaps he would allow Potter some amount of roaming freedom.

Time passed quickly enough that Severus was shocked when he checked the time and found that an hour had come and gone. He’d found a comfortable corner at some point, cracked open a book that seemed interesting, and had almost immediately lost himself within the pages. Where was the boy? Looking round at the empty aisles between dusty shelves, he straightened out of the slouch he’d fallen into and tucked the novel under his arm. “P—Harry!” he called.

“Over here!” came the response, a few shelves away.

Severus found him sitting on the floor with his knees to his chest and a book in his hands. His glasses had slipped down his nose and he was all over dust. “Having fun?” he asked, not entirely unkindly.

“Yeah, I mean—I s’pose so. You weren’t calling me, were you? Sir?” the boy stammered out, marking his place in the book with his thumb as he closed it.

“No. Have you made your decision?”

“Decision?”

“On which novel you would like to purchase.” He gestured to the small stack Potter had accumulated next to him. “Two, and two only. We can return at a later date to find more.”

“Oh. Yes, I have them both here. Is there a library in town? And could I…maybe visit it?”
Severus looked him over. The boy had seemed to have been enjoying himself, and it would be nice to have him out of the house on occasion… “As long as you don’t make a nuisance of yourself, and mind my rules for once, I don’t see why not,” he said slowly. “However—there are, of course, stipulations.”

“Stipulations…”

“Your ability to roam freely throughout Cokeworth relies on two things, Harry. Firstly, you must follow the rules I set. These rules are not optional. They are for your safety and my continued sanity. Secondly, you must prove to me you are trying to learn Occlumency. Then, and only then, will you be allowed out on your own. During our lesson tonight—yes, Harry, there will be more lessons—you will prove this to me.”

The walk home after they purchased their books was a silent one. Mind full of the plot he’d become enveloped in for a mere short hour, Severus was content in the quiet. The boy appeared equally distracted. He’d nearly forgotten about his promise from earlier when he’d finally settled himself in his chair to get back to reading: he’d told Potter he would get his owl into the house. And as loathe as he was to lower his wards, even for a few minutes, he knew he had no real choice in the matter. He wasn’t intending on keeping the boy isolated.

“Potter, stay in one spot,” he ordered, pulling his wand out. “I’m lowering my wards. Your owl should be nearby, waiting.”

It took all of five minutes for the tapping at the kitchen window to begin. Severus opened the back door to let Potter’s snowy owl in; she swooped low and settled herself on Potter’s skinny shoulders, clipping his ear and nibbling at his hair. He pointed his wand at the owl and keyed her signature to his wards, raising them back up immediately after. Later, he would strengthen them.

“Sir,” the boy called as Severus opened the bookshelf and stepped onto the bottom staircase. He paused, turning to find Potter grinning with a handful of letters. “Thank you.”

He sprawled across his bed with the book from earlier, kicking his shoes off onto the floor. There was an oddly warm sensation somewhere beneath his ribcage. In the living room below, he could hear laughter.

“You’re welcome,” he muttered, cracking the book open and getting to reading.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote Sirius’s PoV! Happened a lot sooner than I thought it would, actually, and I really enjoyed it. I should write a Snack fic sometime. Work was slow af today so I just huddled in the corner in the back and wrote half of this chapter in one go. I also had to look up the history of porno mags in the UK in the 1960’s and 70’s. Gold Star Publication has a long, lewd history lol

Oh, also: I know I don’t respond to all comments for fear of cluttering it all up, but I really, really appreciate them all. I read every single one and they brighten up my entire day. Thank you all so much for your support
“Get up, Potter.”

Harry rubbed at his eyes and tried in vain to clear all thoughts and feeling from his head, getting shakily to his feet to meet the cold gaze of his Potions Professor.

“The last memory,” Snape said, in a voice as cold as his eyes. “What was it?”

“I don’t know,” Harry muttered. They’d been at it for nearly an hour, and his head had long since erupted in an insistent pounding, his scar prickling away like he’d run a hot iron over it. The memories had all started to meld together in one dizzying rush. “You mean the one where my cousin tried to make me stand in the toilet?”

Until he’d seen the memory flash by, Harry had forgotten all about that happening. The faint, cruel glint to Snape’s eyes told him that the memory wouldn’t be forgotten too quickly by its witness. “No,” Snape said softly, “I mean the one concerning the door in the hall.”

Door in the hall…Harry furrowed his brow and tried to think past the throbbing in his skull. “I think that was from a dream I had. Why?”

“A dream? Describe it,” his professor prompted, angling himself so that his hips rested against the kitchen counter. “Were you yourself standing in the corridor? Do you have any idea of where you were?”

“I…dunno,” Harry said, looking around at the kitchen. Snape’s house always looked oddly surreal after the whirl of memories. It was probably the lingering strangeness of being inside of the man’s house; sometimes he still found him struck by the reality of it all. Ron and Hermione’s letters had only helped to ground him a little. “Stone walls and a black door are all I remember. Is this place important?”

“No. It is not. But your failure to block it out is, Potter, because you should not be having strange dreams. In fact, if you were to practice, you would not remember very many of your dreams at all.” Snape’s eyes were narrowed. “Tell me: have you been clearing your mind each night before you fall asleep? Or are you content to allow the Dark Lord in? Does it make you feel important, Potter? Does it make you feel special?”

The Snape from earlier, the one who’d bought him clothing for his hearing and those books, had drained away like it had never been there at all. Harry felt slightly taken aback. That only made him angrier. “That’s not—” He shook his head furiously, glaring at a crack in the floor’s linoleum. “I’m not doing it on purpose! I’d clear my mind if only you told me how!”

“From the way you daydream through theory lessons, Potter, I suppose I’d come to assumption that you already knew how to not think,” Snape said. “Perhaps we should have a lesson on that, instead.”

“Yeah? All right,” Harry said roughly. “Teach me, then.”

To his surprise and vague dread, Snape nodded shortly and unhitched himself from the counter, stepping forward and drawing his wand again. “Clear your mind, Potter, and we’ll see where your
weak points lie. We’ll move forward from there.”

Harry backed up a pace and contemplated drawing his own wand. “I thought you were going to teach me to stop thinking.”

“Don’t be a fool. I’m not about to attack you,” he snapped back. “Prepare yourself. I’ll be breaking into your mind one last time. One, two—Legimens!”

Harry was wholly unprepared for the latest bout of Legilimency, and had barely half a second to attempt to clear his mind and empty himself of feeling before Spinner’s End vanished and a long reel of early memories he hadn’t even known he had began flying by. He was watching Dudley open toys, Dudley and his friends gathered around the TV eating ice cream while he cleaned the kitchen floor, Uncle Vernon yelling indecipherable words as Aunt Petunia spoke on the phone in the background with her lips pursed and eyes tight—the slam of his cupboard door blocking out all light, and the sound of his family eating dinner as Aunt Marge loudly gave his uncle tips on the proper technique in caning ungrateful whelps—

He only lasted a few more memories before his knees cracked against the floor and the room swam back into focus. His breathing was coming in too quickly; though it wasn’t very hot in the house, he was coated in a layer of cold sweat, shivering like he had a fever. The cupboard had felt so real. The darkness, the helplessness and desperate loneliness, the hunger, the fear and dread of what was to come…

*You’re not in the cupboard,* he told himself, as Snape’s voice pressed against his ears in what seemed like a foreign language. *You’re not on Privet Drive. You’re in Cokeworth.*

“Potter!”

“I—sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to,” Harry babbled, getting quickly to his feet from where he’d scrambled to press himself into the corner and blinking hard against the haze that was still attempting to smother him. “I didn’t—it was an accident—don’t lock me in—”

“What the hell are you going on about now?” Snape demanded.

The spell he’d found himself under broke quite suddenly, and Harry realized where he was and who he was with. Mortification prickled up his spine; he was horrified to find he had tears in his eyes, and blinked them away rapidly. He—was in Cokeworth. Cokeworth. Harry looked up to find that Snape hadn’t moved, but he had his right arm slightly outstretched, like he’d reached a hand out and then thought better of it.

“I’m not feeling too good,” Harry mumbled, unable to raise his voice out of shame. “C-could I just…”

“Yes, perhaps it’s best that we end our lesson here,” said Snape. He was watching him carefully. “To bed then, Potter. Clear your mind before you fall asleep.”

Harry found himself too achy and feverish to change into his pajamas. Toeing off his trainers, he dropped onto the sofa and dragged one of the blankets up to his chest, shivering underneath it. The sound of Snape rattling around in the other room became nothing but white noise as the pounding in his head drew him back into the haze lingering over him like a sheet. He dropped off quickly, and dreamt of a long hallway lined with torches, and a solid black door that wouldn’t open.
The door to Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, looked more forbidding than it normally did.

He didn’t want to be here. He never wanted to come here, always content to keep away from others and their mockery, but this time more than ever, he wanted to leave immediately and never return. Severus closed his eyes and leaned his head against the grain of the door with a deep sigh. He’d—made a mistake the night before. Cursing in front of the boy while there was a witness. Destroying things in front of the two of them. The goddamn Calming Draughts. Severus supposed taking Potter out to get clothing and books was as much of a way to release his energy as it was a subconscious way to potentially relieve collateral damage. Make Potter focus on his out of character niceness, and perhaps he’d ignore the outburst.

Lupin wasn’t one to be drawn in by such things, however. And that was going to be a problem.

*You’ve really fucked things up this time, you stupid cunt,* he told himself darkly, finally opening the door and stepping into the chill of the foyer.

It had been raining since late last night, and the damp had driven out whatever remained of the heatwave, leaving the sky desolate, gray, and cold. He’d worn a thicker pair of robes in anticipation for the weather. They didn’t help in the darkness of Grimmauld Place; he held back a shiver as a ghostly wind crept over him. The children whispering overhead sounded eerie. Opening the door to the basement, he swept down the stairs into the kitchen to find only a smattering of Order members milling about.

While the room had been mostly quiet before, it fell silent upon his entry, before the conversation stuttered back up like there had never been a lull at all. Severus placed his usual load of potions onto the nearest empty space of counter he could find and stepped back into the shadows to hide and spy.

The kitchen smelled warm and sugary, like homemade sweets baking in the oven. Severus inhaled the scent as discreetly as possible and swallowed back against the sudden longing pressing into his throat.

The Occlumency lesson the night before had been an absolute shitshow. It had begun normally enough, around the same as their first lesson, but it had quickly devolved into something wholly unexpected. Severus hadn’t been prepared for it in the slightest. He had no idea what had triggered the sudden change in Potter; halfway through casting Legilimency, a sort of terror had come over him, like the boy had seen someone gruesomely murdered. Severus hadn’t seen anything particularly traumatize in the whirl of memories. There hadn’t been a death, or an accident. What had brought it on? And then the…abrupt burst of apologizing…

“I didn’t mean to,” the boy had said. Didn’t meant to do what? “Don’t lock me in.”

“Good evening!” the Headmaster announced from the doorway; Severus did not startle. “Molly, my dear, what is that wonderful smell?”

“It’s for after supper, is what it is,” Molly Weasley shot back, though her smile was as warm and inviting as the pudding she was preparing. “Will you be staying, Albus?”

“Of course, if you shall have me.” Dumbledore placed a hand briefly on her shoulder, and then headed for his usual seat at the head of the table. Everyone began to join him. Hesitant to move into the open but too anxious that someone would take his usual place besides Albus—the safest seat for him in this pit of a kitchen, away from Black who always stayed at the other end—Severus sat down and pushed all thoughts of the Occlumency lesson out of his head. “I do hope you will all forgive me
for calling you in without warning…I know how busy your schedules are, so I will get to the point. Each person here has been entrusted to keep the secret of Harry’s whereabouts. A number of you have addressed your concerns to me. I believe it would be in our best interests to converse openly and lay those worries to rest, so that we may move on and continue with our duties, free of fear over Harry’s safety. Who would like to go first?”

*Oh, shit,* Severus thought, as more than half of those gathered all began to speak at once.

“How can a fifteen-year-old boy be a safety threat?”

“What sort of town is he in? Is the house safe?”

“Has he been in contact with any Dark objects?”

“My godson—”

“Is he being properly cared for?”

“Enough!” Albus ordered, and the room fell silent again. He cast a stern gaze over them all. Severus couldn’t help but wonder if he was going to be blamed for the outburst. “As I said before, this meeting is meant for us to converse openly. We are all adults. Squabbling amongst each other will get us nowhere. Now—let us try again. Who would like to go first?”

“I will, Albus,” Molly said quickly, before anyone else could speak. “Is Harry being properly cared for? He’s a growing boy who needs plenty of food and space. I’ve read many letters from my children over the years, Albus, about the cruelty of their Potions Professor—and Ron has never been quiet about Severus’s targeting of Harry during school hours. He belongs with those who care for him.”

“Molly,” Dumbledore said placatingly, hands raised, “I can assure you, Harry is being adequately provided for. Remus has been visiting every three days to ensure his living situation is a safe one.”

“He’s well-fed, Molly,” Lupin added in. “I was there just the night before, and I stayed for dinner. The refrigerator was quite full.”

“Of healthy foods?” she shot back. “Or snacks?”

“Healthy foods. Vegetables, fruits, and fish. There may have been a bag of crisps, but that was the extent of it. I promise.”

That was the extent? Had Potter eaten all of the fucking Oreos? “Were you going through the pantry, then?” Severus snapped.

The warning look the wolf sent him sent his paranoia skyrocketing. If he spoke badly to him, would Lupin reveal everything? “Harry has a place to sleep, he has unlimited access to a shower and kitchen, and Severus has promised to key his wards to allow Harry’s owl inside to deliver letters. He is not isolated or without entertainment. He’s even nearly finished with his summer assignments.”

“And the safety of the house itself?” Kingsley asked. “Is it properly warded, Severus?”

“I shall know if anyone sets foot within twenty feet of the perimetre,” he said coldly. “I have extensive wards set, and they are strengthened weekly. I have alarms set around different sections of the town. I know of Potter’s whereabouts at all times.”

That had been the wrong thing to say.
"At all times?" Black repeated, eyes narrowed into slits. "What did you do, you greasy bastard? Put a Tracker on him?"

"Is that a problem, Black?" Severus asked. His fingers curled around his wand hidden in his robes, ready to use it at a moment’s notice. He wasn’t fifteen anymore; he wouldn’t take Black’s shit lying down. Years’ knowledge of Dark spells whispered at him. The warm, sugary scent in the room smelled more sickly sweet now than anything, like Black’s very presence had soured it. "Would you rather I leave the boy unattended in my house, free to roam the streets without supervision of any kind? Or, no, I forgot—you believe a boy of fifteen should be allowed to join a war, and fight to the death."

"Are you calling me a bad godfather, Snivellus?" the mutt snarled, standing with a screech of his chair.

"Of course not," Severus said, sneering back at him. "A good godfather would know to keep a child out of an army, and would know to tell said child to focus on his safety rather than fighting, and—ah, you know, I do suppose I might be describing you after all. How is the cleaning going, Black?"

This meeting was not going well, Severus thought as he and Black pointed their wands at each other.

"That is enough!" Albus stood as well, and the air positively rippled with energy. Everyone froze, eyes fixed on him. "Severus, you have made your point. I will not see allies fighting like children. Harry is safe and well provided for. The purpose of this meeting was to ease nerves, but I can see all this is doing is fraying them."

"I want to see him," Black said swiftly, planting his hands on the table and leaning forward. "Pardon me for not believing Snivellus’s take on my godson’s safety, but—"

"Sirius," Lupin cut in, "I was there myself. Harry is doing just fine."

"Why did you feel the need to stay the night, then?"

Severus’s heart froze in his chest for a split second.

"Severus asked me to test an improved version of Wolfsbane," the wolf said, without skipping a beat. "I was sicking up all night. Trust me, Sirius—you wouldn’t want to watch me vomit green goop all night long. The color would have clashed horrifically against the carpets."

He resisted the urge to look at Lupin, Occluding against any suspicious feelings and fear. Was this some sort of blackmail? Defending him against Black—and for what reason? As an example of what things could be like if he behaved himself? What would Lupin be asking for in return? He already made Wolfsbane for him free of charge. What would it be? Money? Potions? Better behavior? Or— "If that’s what you want" —sexual favors?

Severus struggled not to get up and flee the house. He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood. Then, having sufficiently grounded himself, he tuned back in to the meeting just in time for Albus to disband it entirely. Molly immediately busied herself with pulling what he now saw to be treacle tart out of the oven. Arthur struck up a conversation with Tonks and Moody. Severus slowly stood and headed for the door.

"Severus. A word, if you will?" Albus said from behind him.

*Fuck.* "Yes, Headmaster?" he said shortly, turning round and heading right back to where he’d started. Lupin was there. Black was on the other side of the kitchen, glaring at him suspiciously, clearly only half-listening to Kingsley, who was muttering to him about something.
“Remus tells me Harry found himself in some trouble yesterday evening,” Dumbledore said quietly, expression quite serious. “Was he unharmed?”

“Quite.” Severus did not look at the wolf. “I gave him permission to go to the grocery store on his own. The boy decided to take a detour and find a place to rest for a time. The issue has been taken care of.”

“I decided to stay the night to ensure no arguments would erupt between the two of them,” Lupin said, glancing at him apologetically. “We made dinner, and that was the end of it. Harry is in no danger at Spinner’s End.”

Albus smiled at them both, though when his eyes met Severus’s, he still seemed to be searching for something. He Occluded harder and made himself empty. “And what of Occlumency, Severus? Has Harry been making decent headway?”

“We had our second session before I sent Potter off to bed and set out to join you here. He is making very little progress, Headmaster,” Severus said, and even to his own ears, his voice sounded distant. “I had mistakenly assumed the boy knew how to clear his mind. Tomorrow, I will be rectifying the problem. Potter now has incentive to work harder—I have offered him a deal. If he is to prove himself in Occlumency, he will be allow certain freedoms. Access to the local library, primarily.”

“Wonderful,” Albus said quietly. “I’m sure he’ll work hard. Now…is there anything either of you wish to tell me?”

He knew. He knew something anyway, the manipulative coot. “Not at all,” Severus dismissed, and made a show of checking the time. “Headmaster, I must be off. I have a potion that will be needing tended to.”

“Ah, Severus—just a moment.” Lupin stepped closer, and Severus could nearly feel the warmth emitting from him, even from a few feet away. He swallowed hard. “I meant to apologize to you for intruding last night. I had a hand in helping Molly make that tart, there, and I was hoping you would take some for Harry and yourself. It’s his favorite. And I was wondering if I might come over tomorrow afternoon, to work on Harry’s Charms work with him. He’d mentioned he was having slight difficulty with it.”

“Have a good night, gentlemen,” the Headmaster said with a faint quirk of his lips and a twinkle in his eye. Severus glared back and muttered an affirmative to Lupin in what he prayed wasn’t a ‘go fuck yourself’ voice. The wolf forced two slices of treacle tart on him before he was able to make his escape.

The tart, Severus grudgingly decided as he scarfed it down in the safety and silence of his dark bedroom, was delicious.

Chapter End Notes

Pottermore has confirmed that Severus was physically abused as a kid in their “why were these characters named this way?” post and obviously we all knew that, but it’s nice to have it confirmed in canon! (even though it breaks my heart hahahahahaaaaa….)
“Wake up.”

His scar was burning. Harry groaned and thrashed about, kicking at the hand prodding at his shoulder. “Get away,” he said, hissing under his breath and pressing his hand to his forehead, which felt as though it was splitting in two. “Don’t touch me.”

“Up, Potter. I shan’t say it again.” Snape jostled him just as roughly as before.

Cracking his eyes open, he breathed hard through clenched teeth, rubbing sweat off his forehead. Snape stood by the side of the couch with a sneer and an empty plate. “What time is it?” Harry said lowly. The living room was dark, with the only source of light coming from the kitchen. Why had he been woken up? Had he been yelling? He’d been in the graveyard, again, with Cedric, whose blank eyes had suddenly opened up to become a long corridor with a black door at the end. He shivered and pulled one of the blankets closer around his shoulders.

There were dark shadows under Snape’s eyes, like bruises, thrown into sharp relief by the kitchen light. “Four in the morning.”

“Did…Did I wake you up?” he asked, feeling awkward.

“No. Would I be correct in assuming you’d not cleared your mind before going to sleep, then?” said Snape.

Harry didn’t respond, pressing his palms into his eyes until bright spots of color burst in the darkness and his temples began to hurt. Then, dropping his hands back to his side, he muttered, “Sorry for disturbing you.”

Snape walked away without a word, disappearing into the kitchen with the plate in his hand. Harry rolled over and curled into the dip of the sofa. He was shivering a little. The house was silent but for a faint rattling in the other room, followed by the sound of the sink turning on and the stove rumbling to life. What little he could see of the sky through the moth-eaten curtains slowly lightened as time went on. He wrapped an arm around his pillow and dragged it down further to cushion his shoulder. The kitchen light stayed on, even as he managed to drop off again, falling into a fitful doze.

Harry woke again only a few hours later, feeling as though he’d hardly slept at all. Snape was still there, settled in his armchair with the *Daily Prophet* in hand, still fully dressed like he’d been before. He’d barely opened the paper for a second before he tossed it back down with a snort onto the little stool by the chair, shaking his head contemptuously. Curiosity peaked, Harry lifted himself up on one elbow to squint at the *Prophet*. “Has anything happened yet?” he asked, fishing his glasses out from underneath the sofa cushions and putting them on. “Or is it still silent?”

“‘Happened,’ Potter?”

“You know— happened. Has there been any big accident that Muggles can’t explain and the Ministry won’t? Strange disappearances? Has there been any sign of Voldemort yet?”

“The only sign of anything, Potter,” Snape said coldly, “is your continuous disrespect for the rules of my house. You will not say the Dark Lord’s name.”
More than a little irritated in his exhaustion, Harry waved a hand dismissively and stretched out over the edge of the sofa, making a grab for the paper—and letting out a shout when Snape swiped it away before he could do more than graze it. “Hey!”

“As I have most certainly once told you, you are nothing more than a nasty little boy who believes rules to be beneath him. Until you attempt to prove me otherwise, there will be no Prophet for you.” Snape regarded him dispassionately. “Why you would even want to read that filth rag is beyond me.”

He’d only been awake for five minutes, but Harry was already furious and ready to start throwing hexes. Swinging his legs off the sofa, he got to his feet and stormed out of the room, not trusting himself to speak. He was nearly to the bathroom when he heard his professor call, “And where do you think you are going?”

“To have a bath,” he snapped back, curling his fingers around the doorway and burrowing his nails into the softened wood, pretending it was Snape’s face he was digging into. “Is there a rule against that, too?”

He heard movement from behind the wall, and then Snape came into view out of the early-morning gloom of the living room. He looked just as angry as Harry felt. “This is my house, Potter,” he spat, pushing his hair out of his face and baring his teeth. “You will treat me with respect. If you cannot find it within you to call your professor ‘sir’ when you’re speaking to him—”

Harry stepped into the bathroom and slammed the door behind him. For a moment there was silent, and then he heard a faint, “Jesus Christ” before Snape said through the door, “We are most certainly not finished. Get out here.”

He turned on the shower, drowning out any further sound from outside of the room. The sound of Snape hitting the door made Harry jump a little, but he resolved to ignore it as he undressed and got under the spray of hot water. Although tempted to take his time and enjoy a long soak, he was more than a little leery of leaving Snape to stew in his anger for very long, so he scrubbed himself down quickly and was out in under ten minutes. Harry dressed and lingered by the door, straining his ears for any movement in the kitchen. Then, satisfied by the silence, he opened the door—and leapt at least a foot in the air at the sight of Snape standing directly in front of him with his arms crossed over his chest and a scowl on his face. “Holy shit.”

“Holy shit is correct. Out. Now.” He pointed a finger to the living room.

Slinging his used towel over his shoulder, Harry walked past him silently, stopping by the sofa. They spent a few seconds staring at each other in silence; and he was abruptly thrown back into the awkwardness of the night before, when he’d had his—fit.

He could still remember everything about the cupboard, even though it now existed for him in only his memories. It had been four years since he’d been inside of it, but he could still recall feeling the walls pressing in on him, suffocating him, as he sat in the silence and the dark—

“Potter.” Snape looked marginally less angry, but now wary. Harry wasn’t sure which was worse.

“I—yeah, sorry, I just…” He took a deep breath as quietly as possible.

“We will be having another Occlumency lesson tonight. Yes, Potter—tonight. I had thought you knew how to clear your mind,” Snape said, looking sour. “I seem to have been mistaken. We will fix this. Even if it takes all summer.”
All summer? “Sir, I can’t stay here all summer,” Harry burst out, dropping his towel onto the sofa and running a hand through his damp hair. “I have… the hearing! You can’t come to the Ministry with me.”

“Arthur Weasley will pick you up here, if it comes to that,” Snape said. He appeared almost bored, eyes roaming over his bookshelves aimlessly, posture as relaxed as it ever seemed to get.

“What about my friends?” Harry demanded. “Can’t I see them? Maybe just once? They’re all cozy together, aren’t they, listening in on everything, getting information—while I was stuck at the Dursley’s for a month!”

“Ahh, yes, poor Potter… Up to your eyes in business that isn’t yours, just like your father.” Snape sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. “Maybe, if you study Occlumency and finish your schoolwork, there might be time for a brief… brief… visit. Perhaps.”

“If you want me to get better, tell me how,” he said. “You’re not telling me anything!”

“Well perhaps if you’d—”

A knock at the door made them both stop in their tracks. Looking wildly back at the front window, Snape strode forward and twitched the curtain aside a hair, only to whip around and hiss, “Potter, stay down. Don’t move.”

“Who is it?” Harry whispered, ducking down far enough that he would be out of sight, but not so far as to miss anything. “Is it a Death Eater?”

“Worse,” Snape muttered, grabbing him by the upper arm and steering him to the sliding bookshelf. “It’s Narcissa.”

Harry discreetly watched him out of the corner of his eye as he pulled one of the books out of the shelf—so that was the one he needed to move—and then found himself floundering somewhat helplessly when Snape shoved him forward without preamble. “Er—sir—”

“Up the stairs. Climb on your hands and knees so you don’t slip. Do not fall.” Snape looked furious, lips drawn back in a silent snarl and eyes glittering. “First door, straight ahead. Do not make a sound.”

Harry was suddenly drenched in a darkness so absolute it was almost painful. Carefully, he moved one hand forward, gripped the edge of the step in front of him, and then slowly pulled himself up. The front door opened only ten feet away. There was a low murmur of voices, and the sound of the door closing again with a snap. Harry froze on his way up another step when footsteps veered a little too closely to where he was hidden. Then, inching his way up the rest of the stairs, he got to his feet and extended a hand through the darkness to find a door. He cracked it open and slipped into the room beyond.

The room looked uncomfortable at best. It was barren besides a bed, wardrobe, and nightstand, and what little furniture there was was old and rickety. Harry passed a hand over the book-covered nightstand on his way to the foggy window, and wiped dust off on his baggy jeans as he peered out the window at the street below. The seal in the window was broken; he could feel the chill from outside seeping in. Was this Snape’s room? Or was it his spare? Was he another Dudley, of sorts, unwilling to share his second bedroom in the house? Harry scowled at the bed and its mussed, tangled sheets.

It was as he was prying the wardrobe door open to peek inside that he realized he could hear Snape
and Mrs. Malfoy speaking, in tones clearer than he’d been able to hear from the stairwell. Holding his breath, he got down onto his hands and knees and leaned over the musty-smelling air vent, pressing his ear to it.

“—morrow evening,” said Narcissa Malfoy, in a voice only slightly less posh than Harry had expected. “You are, of course, invited to partake.”

“A dinner?” Snape sounded suitably disgusted at the idea of a dinner with the Malfoys. “With who? If Macnair or Greyback will be there, I’m afraid I’ll have to fall ill. Dragon Pox. So sorry to have missed it.”

“Ghastly business, so sorry to have missed you, my dear.” There was a pause, and a long exhale. “Macnair is busy with Ministry business. Greyback will not be allowed inside the Manor. If it were any other year, I would make your excuses…However, times have changed.”

“Yes.” Another exhale. “Would you like a drink?”

“You’re being unusually amiable today.”

“Would you prefer otherwise?” There was a scraping noise, like Snape had stood up and pushed his chair back, and then the sound of soft footsteps echoing up through the vent. “Is Lucius well?”

“He’s not yet realized you’ve missed your payment, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Mm.”

Payment? ‘My dear’? Eurgh. Harry leaned back, disappointed. There was nothing much to hear. The only thing of interest was how familiar, how—friendly—Snape seemed to be with Malfoy’s mum. It was fitting, he supposed, that they would be friends. They both always looked as though they had dragon dung stuck under their noses. Whose side was Snape really on? He seemed far too comfortable around Mrs. Malfoy. Curiosity rekindled anew, he leaned back over the grate, only to hear them murmuring about Draco Malfoy. Eurgh.

—

Narcissa was stressed. Severus could tell.

She didn’t show it easily. Narcissa was always presentable, always put-together in the face of the public: a flawless mask, calm and composed. He’d never known her to be otherwise.

But she was stressed.

He could see it in the line of her shoulders, which had been loose and relaxed two years ago. That unshakable confidence had been put into a blender and turned on grind. Her face was a touch too pale. Her hand, when it touched his, was very warm; Narcissa’s hands were always dry and cool. A low-grade fever, he decided, smiling thinly at her when she lit his second cigarette for him. She had come here, to his Muggle trash heap, instead of using an owl like she normally did.

Narcissa was not taking the Dark Lord’s occupation of her house well.

It was unsurprising, but no less…concerning. Lucius had not been brought back into the Dark Lord’s
good graces upon his return; the way the Malfoys had lied, swindled, and denounced had not sat well. There had been many a Crucio directed at the Malfoy patriarch recently. Lucius, Severus could give less than a rat’s arse about. He hadn’t felt anything close to friendly towards him in fifteen years. Narcissa was different. She was as close to a friend as he’d gotten in a long time. She was as much of a swindler as Lucius himself was, and could be quite merciless when she chose, but she had more of a conscience than her husband had ever claimed to have.

Narcissa was stressed. That meant Severus was too.

He could feel it, an underlying tension crackling through him, even after he waved her off down the street to Apparate out of sight. He could feel it as he ascended the stairs with a sinking feeling in his stomach, realizing the full extent what he’d done when he’d pushed the boy up the stairs and told him to go to his bedroom. And he felt it ever more keenly when he opened the door to find Potter standing in the center of the room with a badly faked expression of innocence on his face.

“Having fun?” Severus said flatly, eyes flicking over to the wardrobe. It was open slightly.

Potter seemed to realize this as he looked over, because he flushed slightly and twitched a hand out to close it. “Er…”

“Downstairs. Now.”

“Is this your spare room?” the boy asked, making no move to do as he was told.

“No. This is my bedroom.” He grit his teeth and glared, hoping to dissuade any potential gossip before school could start back up again. “Downstairs.”

“Oh. I…I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t mean to go through…your…” Potter wisely shut his fucking mouth and edged his way past him and over to the stairs, where he stopped at the top of the landing. Severus grabbed his arm and pulled him down into the living room without a word, shutting the bookshelf closed behind them before letting go with a small push. The boy stumbled forward and took a seat on the sofa.

“You now know how to go up the stairs.” It was not a question. “The rules still stand. If I should find you up there without my permission, it will not be Longbottom’s toad that’s in danger of being poisoned this time. You understand?”

“Yes,” the boy muttered.

“Good. Your pet wolf will be here soon, so you had best get ready.” Severus scanned the room for something to do and, finding none, headed for the kitchen to start on another batch of Antiseptic Solution. Potter followed him after a moment’s hesitation.

“Professor Lupin is coming over again? Why?”

“Apparently, you’ve been having difficulty with your Charms work,” Severus said with a sneer, even though Charms had never been his strong point, either. “He’ll be here to work with you on your essay. You have a gift from him. In the refrigerator.”

He said ‘gift’ like he was saying ‘cat shit,’ but it got the point across decently enough, because Potter immediately went to the fridge and pulled out his slice of treacle tart.

Treacle tart for breakfast…Molly Weasley must have been feeling as though someone had cursed her name, somewhere.
The rest of the morning was spent in silence. The boy dragged out one of his books and parked himself at the table to read and eat his pudding; Severus made a pot of coffee and proceeded to attempt to trigger cardiac arrest as he brewed and drank until his stomach felt uncomfortably full. It began to rain again outside. The heat had officially vanished, chased out by the thunderstorm raging outside.

When there was a knock at the door, Severus jerked his head irritably towards it, and Potter slowly got up to let Lupin inside. He returned with a Polyjuiced stranger, a middle-aged man with a potbelly and receding hairline. They’re going to think I’m hiring strange prostitutes. Or dealers. Severus turned back to his potion brewing on the stove, keeping his head angled enough that he could see them both to his left. He took another sip of coffee and began chopping chicken livers.

“I’m a little early…Was hoping to arrive in the afternoon, but I suppose this is close enough. Was the pudding good?” the wolf asked from behind him. “Molly and I made it from scratch last night.”

“It was fantastic. Thank you. Tell Mrs. Weasley I said hello, if you see her again soon.”

“I’ll be seeing her tonight. Do you have anything you’d like to tell your friends that can’t be said in a letter?”

“So they really are together?” Potter said, sounding well and truly pissed. “Is everyone all in the same place while I’m still stuck —”

“You would not be stuck in this dung heap if you would put even a modicum of effort into learning Occlumency, Potter,” Severus spat, unable to help himself. He’d never been able to resist goading James Potter’s son. “If you would—”

“What do you mean, put in effort? I’m trying to do it but you aren’t telling me how!” The boy stood up and swept his book off the table, where it hit the wall with a thud and dropped to the floor in a mess of pages. “I don’t know how to clear my mind or block out intrusions! You never showed me how! If you want me to learn so badly, maybe you can teach me how to do it!”

“Well maybe —”

“Stop it, both of you!” Lupin said sharply, taking Potter by the arm. He shot Severus a glare and snapped, “You aren’t helping. Both of you need to calm down and talk this through.”

The caffeine was definitely getting to him; he felt jittery and vaguely fevered. Stewing silently as the wolf calmed Potter back down again, Severus eventually went back to slicing livers, only for Lupin to move over to his right and mutter, “This is not working. If you could restrain yourself a little, Severus, and try to break through to what the problem is, everything could be resolved much sooner and Harry would no longer be trapped in, as you say, this ‘dung heap.’”

Those watery eyes and the potbelly were so beyond what he knew Remus Lupin to look like, paired with the same aggravating personality, that Severus only managed to become even more furious. He completely mangled a liver and hissed, “Didn’t you come here for a reason? Fill that purpose and leave.”

“Fine,” the wolf said coolly, giving him a long, searching look. “Harry, let’s get to work on your Charms paper, shall we?”
Severus Snape was an absolute berk. It made no sense for Remus to like him, but he did, and sometimes he hated himself for that a little.

Occlumency was most certainly not going well. He could tell even from the exchange he’d just witnessed; and what an exchange that had been. Godric and Jesus. He flipped another page of the Charms book he and Harry were perusing, eyeing Severus’s back like it held the secrets to the universe. Some universe, anyway. At least it was secretive. (Sirius would find him to be as much of a berk as Severus if he could hear his thoughts right now. He would unfortunately be correct.)

“Stop staring at me,” Severus said testily, not looking up from the potion he was brewing.

“I’m not staring at you,” Remus said without thinking, staring harder. He glanced around to find Harry looking faintly bewildered. “Harry, so this charm here is meant for…”

The day passed slowly. It was punctuated only by snappish comments from Snape, the fading of his Polyjuice, the odd quip from Harry, and later, by a break for lunch in which they all focused very hard on their meals and tried to ignore the awkwardness of dining together. It had been much of the same during dinners at Hogwarts up at the head table. Severus had almost always remained silent during those times; it was only when he was directly addressed by either Albus or Minerva that he would break his focus from his dinner and engage in conversation.

Oh, and don’t forget the Christmas dinner when Severus had for some reason been sat next to Sybill Trelawney, a match made in Hell. There had been a great deal of mutinous muttering on that side of the table.

“This is quite tasty,” Remus dared to say, breaking the spell. Harry glanced up at him and nodded, taking another bite of his sandwich, followed by a few crisps. “Thank you for preparing it, Severus.”

The man in question only grunted, glowering at the table. His hand was shaking a little as he reached for his own sandwich, free hand preoccupied by an open book. Remus studied the nearly-empty coffee pot on the counter, and the mug on the table.

“Late night?”


“That’s a lot of coffee you’ve had today.”

“Are you my caretaker, Lupin?”

“It was only an observation,” he said mildly, popping the last of his own sandwich into his mouth and washing it down with a swig of water. “Harry, what do you think it means to clear your mind?”

He’d been doing some reading of his own, taking advantage of Albus’s kind extension of the Hogwarts library for his personal use, as well as the musty old library in Grimmauld Place. With any luck, the research he’d done would be of some help to Harry. It was the least he could do to make up for some of the wrongs he’d committed during the child’s third year.

“Er, well…I s’pose just thinking about something else, instead of what you’re…really…thinking…” Harry rubbed the back of his neck and averted his gaze, flushing a little. “It sounds a bit stupid to say it out loud.”

Remus couldn’t resist a smile. “Not stupid at all, Harry. But that isn’t entirely correct. To clear your
mind isn’t to focus so strongly on one particular topic, you stop thinking about the one you’re truly invested in. Clearing your mind means letting go of those thoughts and feelings and allowing yourself to forget they exist for a time.”

“How can I just not be angry?” Harry demanded, though he didn’t look upset. “How do you just stop feeling?”

“It’s called dissociation, Potter,” Severus sighed, turning another page of his book and leaning back from his empty plate.

“No, we’re not going to make him dissociate. That’s not our goal here.” Godric and Jesus. Patience…he needed patience. Nobody liked an angry, bitter werewolf. Patience. “If anything, compartmentalization might be the better word to use.”

“Call it what you’d like. The result is the same.”

Did Severus spend his days with Voldemort in a constant state of dissociation, out of his body and unconcerned with all that was going on? This is our spy, Remus thought, feeling more concerned than he ought to have. Sirius would gag if he knew the sorts of feelings he was having right now. This is the man we trust to go to Voldemort without compromising us.

“Anyway,” he said slowly, tearing his eyes away from Severus, “Harry, if you’re finished…didn’t you mention you were nearly finished with Transfiguration? I have the rest of the day to help you. Should we work on that, too?”

“Er, yeah, I still have a bit of Transfiguration left to do…” He got up to rifflle through his trunk, pulling out his schoolbook and nearly finished essay. “I’m just missing the last inch and a half. That’ll just leave me with Potions, Herbology, and Astronomy.”

“Excellent. I’m sure Hermione will be glowing when I tell her how much work you’ve completed.” Remus smiled at him, and received a rueful grin in response. Severus raised his book higher to shield his face from view; Remus’s smile grew. He set aside their empty plates to make room for Harry’s scroll and got back to work, relishing in the feeling of being someone’s teacher once again, doing his part to educate the future of the world.

He missed being a professor.

—

Lupin had been in his house for seven hours, and Severus’s patience was beginning to run dangerously thin.

He’d even stayed for lunch. For lunch. He’d made the wolf lunch. He must’ve fallen ill without realizing. It was a good thing he’d made an extra batch of Pepper-Up, because he would most certainly be requiring a dose or two.

The sun was on its way to setting and lunch had long since been cleaned up by the time Lupin and Potter finished revising the boy’s summer assignments and ran out of conversation topics. They were deep in a discussion about Quidditch and the new move Potter had learned—dangerous and reckless, no doubt, and Severus would have to secretly stick the boy to his broom the next time he so much as thought about riding it—when the boy suddenly yawned and stretched with an audible pop of his
“Tired?” the wolf asked, moving to help gather up the mess of parchment and books on the table.

“Very.” Potter pushed his glasses up to rub at his eyes, and then yawned again. “Professor, would you mind if I took a nap before Occlumency?”

It took a few seconds for Severus to realize he was being spoken to. Lifting his head from where he’d been pretending to leisurely read the book he’d finished overnight, he looked Potter over with a critical eye. “An hour. I’ll wake you before we begin.”

Potter stood without preamble and made his quiet goodbyes to Lupin, stuffing his assignments back into his trunk—oh, Pomona hated when parchment was crumpled, she’d have a fit when she saw it—and heading into the living room to presumably collapse on the sofa for a time.

Severus waited until the room adjacent was quiet to cast Muffliato and begin his own cleanup of the counter. It was time for some answers. “Explain your reasonings for telling lies to Black and the Headmaster,” he ordered before he could change his mind, scrubbing at a stain of chicken blood on the countertop. “Name your price. What are you wanting from me?”

“Excuse me?” Lupin looked up from the book he’d started flipping through and frowned. “Name my price?”

“Don’t be thick. I saw through your scheme the instant it began. Is the dog in on it, as well? Trying to pull one over me for old time’s sake?” He curled his lip in a wordless snarl, clenching his fists tightly enough that his nails bit into his palms.

The wolf slowly set the book back down where Severus had left it and turned to face him fully. “I’m sorry, but I don’t quite understand what you’re saying.”

“Don’t you? Listen closely, Lupin, because I will only be saying this once,” Severus hissed, leaning too close for comfort in an attempt to intimidate the wolf. It was difficult not to see the way Lupin’s eyes flickered down to his mouth, and self-consciously he stopped sneering to hide his crowded teeth, knowing he was being made a joke of. “If this is some sort of blackmail, you’d best stop now, or you’ll find yourself at the wrong end of my wand. I will not be blackmailed. Tell Albus about Potter’s disobedience if you so wish, but you will not lord it over me.”

“Blackmail—” Lupin looked at him like he was staring at a stranger. “Severus, I’m not attempting to blackmail you.”

“What the hell do you call that stunt you pulled yesterday, then?” he hissed.

“What stunt?”

He raised the pitch of his voice higher, mockingly. “Oh, no, Sirius,” he sneered, enjoying the way the wolf’s lips pursed, “I was only testing a new potion! Oh, no, Albus, I have nothing to share! That stunt, Lupin! What are you trying to get out of me? Money? Are you wanting me to be Black’s servant? Sexual favors? God knows you haven’t gotten any from someone other than the mutt himself.”

“It’s not like that at all.” the werewolf said firmly, and his eyes dipped lower again.

“Isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not, because the only ‘sexual favors’ I’d want from you are ones with mutual consent and
reciprocation.”

Severus’s brain—
—stopped.

Distantly, he was aware he was still grasping the front of Lupin’s shirt like a vice, their faces barely a foot away and their bodies too close. He’d stopped breathing. Then, sucking in a large quantity of air, Severus let go and jerked away like he’d been slapped hard across the face. “You—that’s—”

“I hope this isn’t a bad time to ask,” Lupin said quickly, and Severus saw suddenly that his pupils were blown wide and dark, “but I think I’d like to—kiss you, if that would be all right.”

Severus’s entire body was screaming at him to get out now. This was a prank. This was a vicious sort of mockery that Black and Lupin had cooked up together. This wasn’t real, because no one had ever wanted to kiss him, had ever thought he was anything worth kissing, and he—

He nodded.

Lupin stepped closer, slowly, like he was approaching a dangerous animal on the verge of attacking. “The moment you’d like me to stop, or if you change your mind, I’ll stop,” he assured softly, taking hold of Severus’s wrist so gently the touch was barely there at all. His skin burned at the contact. He could feel the fingers on his hand tremble a little. Nerves, or barely suppressed laughter? “Just give me the word.”

When Lupin touched the back of his neck, he made an embarrassing noise low in his throat, and then clenched his jaw shut to keep it all down. This is a bad idea, he thought as the wolf stepped ever-closer. This is a bad idea.

Their lips brushed together, and he felt himself freeze up. “Is this all right?” Lupin murmured, leaning away a little. “We can stop.”

Torn between get the hell away from me and get the hell back here, Severus forced himself to lift his leaden arm and grasp at Lupin’s shirt, dragging him clumsily back over. He didn’t trust himself to speak. The second brush of their lips only confirmed why, because the soft sound he made was altogether embarrassing. It was only as Lupin was leaning closer, and Severus heard a faint rustle from the living room, that he came back to himself and realized where he was and what was going on.

“No.” He shoved the werewolf back without even truly meaning to. “No. We’re—done. We’re done here.”

“Severus—”

“Stay the hell away from me. Stay away.” He backed up a pace, and then at the sight of Lupin’s eyes flickering to the doorway, Severus found himself immediately enraged. “This is—a prank. A prank. You’re trying to—to—”

He blanked out for what felt like an eternity, but was only long enough for him to suddenly be outside, tripping over his own feet in his haste to get out get away. He was Apparating—

Hogsmeade was chilly and coated in a fine mist, gleaming wetly in the lamplight flickering at the front of each building. Severus spared it barely a second’s glance before he rushed into the Hog’s Head and, grabbing a handful of Floo Powder, threw it into the fire and snapped, “Headmaster Dumbledore’s office.”
His entry left a skidline of soot streaking across the fine carpet. Staggering to a stop, Severus ducked out into the office and shouted, “Send someone else!”

“I beg your pardon?” said Dumbledore, looking up from the parchment lying on his desk to peer at him over the tops of his glasses. “Is something the matter?”

“Of fucking course there’s something bloody fucking the matter! Send someone else! Your precious werewolf will never darken my doorstep again, mark my goddamn words! Send someone else from now on! Lupin is through!” His chest was heaving. His hair was in his face, obscuring his vision. Severus pushed it back and grabbed a small china pot and hurled it onto the floor.

“I never did like that piece, thank you, Severus…”


“Has something happened?” Dumbledore asked, setting his parchment down entirely to give him his full attention. “Is Harry safe?”

Severus looked at him for a moment, and then grabbed another pot and threw it into the fireplace.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took far too long to write. My home situation has gone from crappy to urgently bad, and I’ve been focusing all of my time and energy on moving out asap. I also recently made pretty much all the Harry Potter characters (Marauder’s Era) on the Sims 3 and 4 recently and while playing Voldemort on 4, I had him create the Death Eaters club which focuses on being mean to the Gryffindor and OotP clubs. Voldemort is having fun making connections but is entirely too fixated on getting Lucius Malfoy to cheat on Narcissa with him, and Lucius is entirely too reciprocative. I hope you’re all doing well, and that this longer than usual chapter makes up for the absence a little!
Two days had gone by, and Severus’s rage had been slowly stewing all the while. It had all been planned, from the start. A prank meant to humiliate him in front of everyone, including James Potter the Second. When had Black and the wolf planned it? How had they known he was to take care of the boy? Or had that only been a bonus—an excuse to get close to him? The two were likely laughing themselves sick, chuckling over a bottle of Odgen’s and regaling the rest of the Order with descriptions of his house, his personal items, the…kiss…

“I hope this isn’t a bad time to ask, but I think I’d like to—kiss you, if that would be all right.”

It was a prank. There was no other explanation. Severus would not allow himself to entertain thoughts of any other possibilities, because it was a prank, and that was all there was to it.

So he’d thrown himself into teaching Potter Occlumency. (If the boy weren’t in on the prank, and of course he was this was Potter —only this Potter had never played ‘pranks.’ This Potter had never…It was a prank. It was a prank.) They’d set their focus to breathing exercises for the time being, to relax the boy’s jittery feet and shaky hands. Whatever anxiety overtook the boy during their lessons and beyond would need to be at least somewhat remedied before they could move on to attempting proper Occlumency again. The breathing exercises might even help Potter keep focused during lessons. And, further, could potentially benefit him during his hearing tomorrow.

Severus was dreading the next Order meeting, when he would have to see Black and Lupin and have to ignore the smirks, the subtle jabs…But, most of all, he was dreading Arthur Weasley’s arrival at his house.

Albus had nearly disregarded his concerns until Severus had threatened to send the boy back to his relatives and wash his hands of the entire affair. He wouldn’t have, he supposed, in reality—Potter was a closed book, for all that his mind was open far and wide, and he wanted to know where, exactly, the boy’s anxiety was sourcing from. It was impeding his learning ability; and if he couldn’t learn Occlumency, Severus would never be rid of him. Seven days had already passed and they were no closer to reaching an acceptable level of shielding than Molly Weasley was at producing spawn that didn’t exist to give him migraines.

“You’ve lost tempo, Potter,” Severus said dully, sparing the boy only a brief glance as he continued reading the last few chapters of his new book. “Deep breaths.”

“I know,” the boy said irritably. “I’m trying.”

“What is the problem?” He had a headache, and he knew it was only going to become worse as the hours went by. He’d been agonizing over Friday’s arrival since the night Albus had switched his inspector to Arthur Weasley. His only consolation was that it was a weekday. Arthur would come during his lunch break, stay only for ten to fifteen minutes, and be out the door and off to the Ministry in time to remove a hex on a blender or a deck of Muggle playing cards. Severus was willing to provide food if it meant getting the man out of his house sooner. “Potter,” he repeated, “what is the problem?”

“I dunno. I just start—thinking, and…” With a heavy sigh, the boy stood up and stretched, and then
settled himself back on the couch, worrying a loose thread between his thumb and forefinger. “Could I go for a walk? Sir?”

Severus finally looked up from his book, blinking hard in an attempt to shake off his daze a little. “Deep breathing exercises aren’t meant to be something you need to relax from.” He eyed Potter’s nervous movements. “They’re meant to be relaxing.”

“Well, I’m not relaxed. I want to take a walk. Maybe cook something. Are you hungry?” Potter asked, already on his feet and halfway to the kitchen by the time Severus barked, “Potter!”

The boy stopped in his tracks and craned his neck to look at him. Fighting to urge to bury his face in his hands, Severus snapped, “Get back here. You’ve only been sitting there for ten minutes. That is nowhere near enough time to clear your mind. Were you focusing on relaxing thoughts and images?”

There was no response other than a sullen shuffle of feet. He gave into the impulse to put his face in his hands, exhaling long and low as if to drain the rage that had been slow cooking in him since Wednesday night. Rubbing his temples, Severus eventually looked up again and wordlessly pointed to the sofa. Potter sat down and scowled at his knobby kneecaps.

“Now. Let’s try this again, shall we? In…and out. In…and out. Your leg is bouncing. In…and out. In…and out. In…”

It took nearly an hour of instructive breathing exercises for Severus to feel as though they’d made progress. After the twenty minute mark, he’d slowly tapered off on speaking, until the room was silent and Potter was fully relaxed against the back of the couch instead of rigid and angry. It was gratifying to see. For the life of him, Severus couldn’t recall whether he’d ever seen Potter in a state of relaxation before. Had all the times he’d been Crucio’d poked holes in his memory? Or was the boy always anxious? Why?

“Don’t lock me in!”

A chill overtook him. Severus attributed it to the cooling of the temperature outside. He pressed his palms to his eyes and leaned back against his chair, falling into the rhythm of Potter’s deep, steady breathing and allowing himself to drop down into a light doze.

A knock at the door startled them both out of the peaceful trance they’d slipped into. Jolting upright, Severus cut a sharp glance at the boy, who’d rolled off the sofa and dropped into a crouch beside it, eyes fixed on the door to the stairs like he was prepared to bolt up them at a moment’s notice. “Calm yourself,” he told Potter, swallowing down a yawn and hauling himself to his feet. “It’s Arthur Weasley.”

“Mr. Weasley is here? Really? Has he brought Ron or Hermione with him?” Potter demanded, standing up straight to try and peer through the spyhole as Severus tried to shove him aside without actually touching him. “Wait--why not Professor Lupin? Was last night a full moon?”

“Yes,” he said truthfully, wrenching the door open to meet Arthur Weasley. “Inside, quickly, before somebody sees you.”

“I didn’t come Polyjuiced. I hope that’s not an issue,” Arthur said quietly, hurrying to enter the house and taking a quick look around. “Bit nippy out there today, isn’t it? Hello, Harry, how have you been?”

The comment about his neighbors thinking he was hiring prostitutes nearly escaped his lips, but Severus squashed the words before he could royally fuck up today’s visit before it could even begin.
This wasn’t Lupin. He couldn’t say such things around this inspector. He also couldn’t down two Calming Draughts at once in front of him. Or say ‘fuck.’ “Yes, I suppose it is cold,” he said after a moment’s pause, unsure if Arthur was expecting a reply. “Do you need food?”

“Pardon?” Weasley asked, spelling himself dry from the torrential rain outside. “Harry, I’ll be picking you up tomorrow for your hearing. Have you any clothes? Or do I need to bring you something of Fred or George’s?”

“Food,” Severus repeated, trying not to get angry. “Are you or are you not here on your lunch break?”

“So you didn’t bring Ron? Or Hermione?” Potter mumbled from close by, shoulders hunched inwards and eyes cast downwards. “I have clothes. Thanks, though.”

“Perhaps we should move to the kitchen, if that’s all right,” Arthur said somewhat distractedly, still looking around like he was ashamed to be doing so. “Lunch sounds excellent, Severus, thank you… You’ll be needing to wake up early tomorrow, Harry, seeing as how your hearing is scheduled for nine…”

The two continued talking as Severus led the way to the kitchen, waving an impatient hand at the table and eavesdropping on their conversation as he opened the fridge and pulled out whatever odds and ends he could find. “Do you eat egg?” he asked, interrupting them. He’d hardboiled the last of the carton the night before, knowing the remaining few wouldn’t last the next week. He and Potter would need to make another trip to Tesco.

“Egg? Yes, I do, thank you for asking. Harry, Remus tells me you’ve nearly completed your summer assignments…”

Severus washed a generous handful of spinach, paused, and then added in two more handfuls; Potter hadn’t yet eaten lunch. A meal would do him well. He’d been tightly strung like a rope ready to snap for the past day or so. It had always been the same—Potter became irritable and prone to moody outbursts when he moved off a proper eating schedule. And…if his memory served correct…Potter was always moody and sullen when returning to school each September. He was no longer the rail thin child that had originally arrived to Hogwarts in the autumn of ’91, but there had been a pinched, underfed quality to him a week ago that had only somewhat eased after a full seven days of regular meals.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to!”

Had there ever been a home inspection of the boy’s relatives? he wondered, as the realization hit for the first time. Had no one ever thought to check up on him? Or had that been strangely overlooked in the grand scheme of things? Did they really all find him so untrustworthy, so blinded by the hatred that had attached itself and rooted deep into his soul, that they believed him to be the worst possible caregiver for the boy?

Did Albus find him so untrustworthy? After all this time?

“Here.” Severus set the salads down a tad too hard, enough that he felt the reverberation of the dishes hitting the table in his wrists. “Has there been any word of the next meeting? In an hour’s time, I’ll have a freshly made batch of Veritaserum ready for the Order, and I would like to deliver it as soon as possible.”

He’d made three batches this time. One for the Dark Lord, one for the Headmaster, and one for his… personal usage. (His gas bill was bound to be obscene.)
“Yes, there should be one the day after tomorrow. I’m sure Albus will appreciate the potions. Have you been, ah, Summoned lately?”

“Not as of yet.” Severus took his own plate and retreated to the corner of the kitchen, easing his back against the edge of the counter. He took a bite of his salad and crunched down on a cashew. Struggling for something to say that wouldn’t put him in the metaphorical doghouse, he eventually snapped out, “Is it good?”

Arthur looked up from his own plate with a wan smile. He and his wife had seemed vaguely colorless lately, like someone had wrung them out and left them to dry in the cold. “It’s excellent, thank you.”

“Can I come to the meeting? It’s where everyone else is, right?” Potter asked, pushing a small pile of diced onion about on his plate. “Or is that not allowed?”

“I’m afraid not. Harry, I’m sorry. I can assure you, you’ll be there soon. Remus tells me you’ve been working hard on learning Occlumency. If you keep it up, you’ll be with us before you know it. Ron and Hermione have been asking about you. They’re quite anxious to see you again.” Arthur put a firm hand on the boy’s shoulder, squeezing gently before retreating back to his meal. Severus watched the interaction with a feeling he couldn’t quite identify.

There was a level of awkwardness to this entire affair that Severus hadn’t felt with Lupin. There had been no need to filter himself entirely while the wolf was here. He’d been able to make inappropriate comments when it was only the two of them in a room together; he and Lupin knew what each other were. Arthur, for all of his experiences with Death Eaters and his vague knowledge of Severus’s own involvement with them, had never lived amongst the lowest dregs of society like he and Lupin had. There had been, for better or for worse, some semblance of understanding between them. That didn’t exist here.

Now if only Lupin hadn’t gone and *fucked* it all up, like always. Why was *nothing* ever good enough for *anybody*? Hadn’t he been satisfied with a mutual understanding? Why couldn’t he have just left it at that? Why had he had to go and--and ki--

Severus had to take a second to try very hard not to sick up everything he’d just eaten. A prank was all it had been. That was all. Nothing more. Entertaining thoughts of anything otherwise would only make him upset.

He tried not to feel angry. He failed, as he always did at anything to do with being a good person. Pushing away from the counter, he gathered up the empty plates on the table without a word and did his best to curb the impulse to hurl them all into the sink. Weasley was here, he reminded himself, spelling them to wash themselves. He couldn’t act out. He had an audience now that wouldn’t lie to Albus for him.

“Is that all, then?” he muttered, glaring at the dishes cleaning themselves in the sink. “You’ve spoken to Potter. We are making progress with Occlumency and his summer assignments are nearly complete. Are you satisfied?”

“Actually, Severus…” Weasley frowned a little, and glanced around at the kitchen once more, eyes lingering on the broken drawer handle and the dirty, smoggy window. A screaming match erupted in the Richardson’s house next door, as if on cue. “It’s not that I distrust Remus’s testimony, but I’d rather like to see the house myself.”

The entire situation was *fucked*, Severus thought bitterly, as he grabbed hold of Arthur Weasley’s shirt and hauled him up the stairs by the light of a Lumos, and Potter lingered at the bottom in a way
he likely thought was discreet. The entire situation was fucked, and it was all Remus Lupin’s fault.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took absolutely forever. I’m so sorry! I had about 1,000 words written for a week but I didn’t have much time to write. I mentioned a bad home situation in my last A/N so for anyone wondering, I’m somewhere else now and much safer! I hope everyone is doing well. Happy belated Easter to those who celebrate, and to my fellow Jews, Chag Sameach!
“Here,” Severus snapped, his bedroom door hitting the wall with a thud as he threw it open. He couldn’t bring himself to care about the mark he’d most certainly made on the plaster; his father had loved to slam this door—one more mark wouldn’t mean a thing. “Take it in. As you can see, I do not spend my summers in luxury, unlike some.”

“Is this your room, then?” Arthur asked, frowning a little as his eyes raked over the barren walls and floor, and the dusty furniture he hadn’t yet bothered to spell clean. Severus imagined himself seizing the quill on the floor by his wardrobe and jamming it into Weasley’s eye, imagined the blood and the screams. He blinked hard to force the image to defragment and slip away like it had never been. “Or a spare? Where has Harry been sleeping?”

“Downstairs on the sofa. He has enough blankets and pillows to asphyxiate him in his sleep, and a Cushioning Charm has been placed on the sofa itself.” He needed to renew that, speaking of. “I have been very busy brewing for both the Dark Lord and for the Order, and haven’t had the time to clean out the storage room.”

That got Weasley’s attention immediately. He wished it hadn’t. “Storage room? What’s inside of the storage room?”

“Stored items. Nothing of importance,” Severus said shortly, praying he would drop the subject. “May I see it?”

Lupin hadn’t pressed him, but Severus knew Arthur certainly would. He hadn’t raided Malfoy Manor and other countless residences for nothing. If he were to refuse him the dubious honor of seeing his parents’ vacant bedroom, what would happen? Was he willing to take the risk and find out? “Very well.” He kept his voice cool and unconcerned, leading them both back out onto the landing. Severus forced himself to push past the self-loathing already gathering low in his gut and opened the door, shoving it open as wide as it could go until it pushed against a mound of musty old clothes. “Here we are. The storage room.”

It seemed, suddenly, to be more of a wreck than he was used to. There were layers of discarded clothing coating the floor like a hideous rug, bits of rubbish he’d never had the energy to clean up, books on Dark magic and potions shoved in the corner, and—the worst of it all—the tattered remnants of his parents’ mattress scattered on the floor like a wild animal had ravaged it. He’d left the wardrobe in the corner open last week; blankets and linens spilled out of it.

*I can explain this,* he wanted to say, even as he knew he could never.

“Those aren’t mine,” Severus managed to mutter, when he followed Weasley’s line of sight to three empty bottles gathered at the side of the cobwebbed nightstand. “As I said…the room isn’t currently fit for human consumption.”

Arthur nodded slightly, eyes still fixed on the bottles. Then, noticing the books stacked in the corner opposite, “And those? Are they yours?”

“Yes. Most of those are mine.”
“Your father…Was he, ah…” There was a crease furrowing deep into Arthur’s forehead. “Was he a follower, too, then? Of You-Know-Who?”

“He’s dead,” Severus said shortly, “so I don’t believe he’s following much of anything these days.”

There was no response to that. The two of them stood motionless for a few, horrifically uncomfortable seconds. “I have a question for you,” said Weasley finally, in a firmer but quieter voice than he’d been using so far. “About Harry. I think you’ll understand where I’m coming from with this.”

Severus glanced at the open door and hesitantly closed it. The boy had been lingering at the bottom of the stairwell last he’d seen. Whatever Weasley had to say, it couldn’t be good. “Go on.”

“Yes. Well, from my understanding…The books I’ve found in headquarters on the subject have led me to believe that when you teach Harry Occlumency, you’re capable of seeing his thoughts and memories. Is this correct?”

Where was he going with this? As much as he despised Potter, Severus wasn’t willing to parade his memories round the Order. “To a degree, yes. I see vague flashes of memories. Some more vivid than others. Why?”

“I suppose that’s what I’m hoping for. During these flashes, have you by any chance noticed anything—odd? Anything abnormal, in any way? Maybe even…” Arthur looked at the bottles again. “…familiar?”

A terrible sense of foreboding struck him, though he wasn’t entirely sure why. Perhaps it had to do with this awful room, and the hundreds of memories it sent pressing against the insides of his eyelids. “Familiar?”

“I hope I’m not intruding on your privacy, Severus, especially on such a sensitive matter, but my children have told me—things—about Harry’s family that have never sat quite right with me.”

There was a hot, shivery sensation curdling his stomach now. “Things,” Severus repeated slowly, shoulders tensing and defenses rising. “What do you mean?”

“I mean bars on his bedroom windows, starvation as a punishment…perhaps even…beatings. Of course,” Weasley said, too quickly for comfort, “this is only hearsay. I don’t have evidence of any sort. I only know the bare bones of the story. You’ve been in his memories. You’ve seen Harry’s childhood. You should…know, shouldn’t you? If there’s been any ill treatment? Any—and I hesitate to say it—any abuse?”

“You don’t have bars on your windows, so there won’t be any kidnapping attempts,” Potter had said, days before.

Bars on the windows…

“Is that a tale he tells to every adult he meets, then?” Severus sneered, glowering at the wall. “Bars on the windows? I’ve seen no such memory. The worst of it has been his cousin forcing him to stand inside of a toilet, and…”

A cold, dark room, with the walls pressing in. He could hear the tinny laughter from a television set, and the sound of cutlery scraping against china. He was hungry, so hungry, and so desperately lonely he couldn’t hardly breathe.

“You see, Vernon, when you cane the whelp, you have to hit the fleshy parts of the legs. Avoid the
“Severus?”

A cold sweat coated him and his hands were trembling. Swallowing hard, Severus Occluded the non-memory away, shaking his head.

“Did you remember something?” Arthur pressed, stepping in front of him to break his line of sight. “Is Harry safe there?”

He’d nearly lost it. It would not happen again. It could not. Looking Weasley dead in the eye, Severus said coldly, “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I believe this visit is over. Shut the door on your way out.”

—

He was bleeding. That was nothing unusual, after a Death Eater summons, so Severus found no need to pay the wounds any mind.

He limped away from Malfoy Manor and rubbed a hand down his face, squeezing his burning eyes shut for an instant before he shook himself roughly and continued down the long drive. Why Lucius needed a driveway, he’d never know, Severus thought sourly, seeing as how he had no car and never would. It made things terribly inconvenient when the Apparition point was across the boundary line of the property.

(Lucius still had not brought up the missing payment. Severus was decidedly not going to remind him.)

A feverish haze swept over him as he neared the end of the drive; he stopped in his tracks and shook himself again, but regretted it when his head spun like he was about to faint. Severus glanced round his darkened surroundings and eased himself onto the ground. The grass was wet. He could feel the cold damp sinking into the seat of his pants through his robes. Shifting position slightly, he dragged one arm of his robes through the dew and patted it into his heated face. The icy breeze stung his cheeks.

His nose was running. Sniffling, Severus leaned back a little and looked up at the sky, closing his eyes against the light patter of rain. Breathing in the scent of wet earth and grass to clear his mind and recenter himself, he eventually laid down fully and drifted for an eternity.

The rain had stopped by the time Severus came to. He cast a hoarse tempus and got to his unsteady feet, shivering violently. His clothing was soaked through. A harsh wind slammed into him, chilling him to the bone; he dried himself and muttered a quick focillo to warm his robes and hair. Then, hoping he hadn’t picked up any ticks, he continued on down the driveway, and Apparated.

London was caught in the last dregs of the rain Severus had only just escaped, and he stole inside Grimmauld Place quickly, with furtive movements. The candles on the walls of the foyer had been blown out; the darkness of the house was absolute. Severus moved down the hall quietly and opened the door to the basement without so much as a creak. Stealing down the stairs, he descended into the kitchen and scanned the room for any signs of life. Then, finding none, he made a beeline for the
sink and drank deeply from it, polluted water be damned. He’d only just begun to unload the Order’s share of Veritaserum when the fire sprung to life on the opposite side of the kitchen and Sirius Black called out from behind, “Snooping, are we, Snivellus?”

Severus’s wand was in his hand before he could register the words. Whirling round, he raised his arm with an incantation on his lips—and Black disarmed him before he could so much as open his mouth.

His wand clattered against the stone floor and rolled underneath the table.

“What do you want?” Severus snarled, edging one foot in the direction his wand had gone in.

“What do I want? I’m not the one skulking about at midnight, uninvited, while everyone is in bed asleep. What are you doing in my house?” Black demanded, stepping down fully into the kitchen.

“I fail to see how it’s any of your business—”

“Oh, fuck off, Snivellus—don’t act as though you have any right to be here.” Striding over to him, the mutt looked round suspiciously, teeth bared. “What did you do?”

“Excuse—”

“You know full-well what I mean, you greasy bastard,” Black snapped at him, stopping only a few feet away with his wand aimed unwaveringly at Severus’s chest. “What is that? In the vials? What have you brought into my house?”

Severus forced himself to remain calm. Taking as subtle a breath as possible, he said lowly, “It’s Veritaserum. The Headmaster requested it.”

“Oh? Well, should we test it, then?” The mutt reached slowly towards the counter and took hold of one of the vials, shaking it between two pinched fingers. Severus couldn’t help but twitch each time Black rolled it over in his hand. If he dropped it… “You know, Snape, you’ve been causing some issues here lately. First Harry, Merlin fucking knows how badly you’ve been mistreating him…Then Remus, because whatever you said to him, it’s had him in a goddamn slump for days now…And now Arthur. I haven’t seen him this stressed since his son disowned the family. I think we should test this potion, here, and find out exactly how effective it is. How many secrets should I have you tell me?”

“I’m leaving,” Severus said with a sneer, stepping past him and towards the table—and froze when the tips of Black’s fingers dug sharply into the spaces between his bones, grinding down like he was trying to crush Severus’s shoulder in his hand. Then, with a hard shove, he knocked Severus forward into the table and stormed off upstairs. The screaming of the portrait in the foyer started up moments...
later before it cut off sharply and the house was silent once more.

Severus wanted to collapse and sleep for twelve years, but with Lupin in the room, the most he could bring himself to do was scoop up his wand and sit down heavily at one of the chairs.

“Are you—” the wolf began, but Severus cut him off.

“Do not interfere again, Lupin. I had the situation handled.” His voice sounded hard and distant. “Your need to be a part of such things is incredibly draining.”

“Don’t try to pull one over me, Severus,” Lupin sighed, rubbing his knuckles into his temples and leaning forward on his elbows. “You sicked up on me when I just barely touched your neck a few days ago. Handled my arse.”

“Either way, the point still stands,” he muttered, keeping himself empty and faded. “Don’t do that again. I’d much rather you play the part you had while at Hogwarts.”

“What,” the wolf snapped, “the one where I just stood by and pretended nothing happened, even when they stripped you in front of half the school? I watched them sexually assault you, and—”

“Shut up,” Severus hissed, refusing to look at him. “We’re done with this topic. It’s over.”

For a moment, he thought the wolf would continue, until the fight seemed to leave him in wisps, leaving him as empty as Severus himself felt. “We do need to talk,” Lupin said eventually, as the fire began to burn low in the hearth and a slight chill began to settle in. “About…what happened.”

“We really don’t.”

“Yes, we do. Was it truly consensual, Severus? Or did you feel the need to go along with what I was asking of you, to keep me in good spirits? Did you fear I would turn on you if you rejected me?”

“What does it matter?” he demanded, keeping his voice low and he stole a glance at the empty stairwell, in case someone was listening in. “It was a mistake. A prank.”

“It wasn’t a prank, and I don’t know what to say in order to get that through to you without…” Lupin stood abruptly, and Severus couldn’t quite contain a flinch. “And now you’re—Godric and Jesus, I just…It’s not because it’s me, is it?”

He should have been angry. Instead, he could only bring himself to feel exhausted. “Don’t be such a fucking cunt, werewolf.”

“Oh, so I’m being a—” The wolf cut himself off and groaned, pressing his palms into his eyes. “Salazar and Mary. This is pointless right now, with you in this state. Have you slept? Eaten anything?”

“I’m leaving,” Severus said, getting to his feet with the barest amount of swaying. “Do not interfere with Black and I again, or you shall sorely live to regret it.” His robes felt too light around his shoulders; he should have worn his thick winter cloak. Heading for the stairs, he stopped with his foot in midair, and then turned to face Lupin. “I almost forgot…Tell Weasley his services are no longer required. He will not be returning to my house after taking the boy to his hearing. In the meantime, I’m preparing dinner myself tomorrow. Six o’clock. Do not be late. And do not come Polyjuiced, for God’s sake. The Richardsons have been giving me strange looks.”

He passed Black on his way out, standing in the shadows by the front door with a dark look on his face. Severus spared him half a glance before he opened the door and slammed it as hard as he could,
catching the very beginning of Black’s mother’s tirade before he Apparated back to Spinner’s End. Severus allowed himself a brief grin as he scrambled up the slippery bank and made his way back to his house, letting himself inside silently.

The grin faded as he looked over the dark living room and heard Potter’s soft, deep breathing from over on the sofa. Toeing his shoes off at the doorway, he pulled the deadbolt across and made his way over to the boy to ensure he wasn’t faking sleep.

The boy looked oddly…peaceful. Severus watched him for a beat too long, at his glasses dangling off one ear, the tendril of hair curled over his closed eye, and the blanket pushed down round his knees. Then, reaching out, he plucked the glasses off and placed them on the end table. The blanket he pulled up over Potter’s shoulders; he watched the boy grab hold of it and wrap it tightly round himself, like a cocoon. Severus frowned and moved to brush the hair away from his face.

His fingertips had just barely brushed Potter’s forehead when he froze, yanking his hand away. What the hell was he even doing? Severus’s head spun like he was about to faint. Jerking back, he hurried up the stairs and to his room, curling his hands into fists and clenching his jaw tightly. An idiot. That was what he was. A bloody sentimental fool.

He dragged his clothes off and threw them onto the floor angrily, hissing curses and swears under his breath as he dropped onto his bed with a screech of old springs. A fucking idiot.

Severus dropped off quickly, and descended into oddly vivid yet hazy dreams about a Lupin with his pupils blown dark, and a heat that had him sweating despite the chill of his bedroom.

*This, Severus thought, as he woke up sticky and panting, is going to be a problem.*

Chapter End Notes

Hello this update is actually vaguely fast for once and it’s pretty decently long, too! Woo
“I can’t believe you,” Remus said for what felt like the hundredth time since Severus had left in a right snit and Sirius came rushing to his aid in the kitchen. “What were you even thinking?”

“Oh, come off it, Moony,” Sirius snapped, arms crossed over his chest as he glared at the fireplace. “What, did you think I was going to let him snoop around my house in the middle of the night, doing Merlin knows what, or even attacking us? What if he was gathering information for Voldemort?”

“Well, he wouldn’t need to creep around headquarters to do that, would he?” Remus said irritably. “He hears plenty of information during the Order meetings.”

“Yes, and I’ve spoken to Albus about allowing him into those, because—”

“Padfoot, would you give it a rest?”

“Yeah, would you?” Tonks muttered from the other side of the table, where she’d been trying to work on a report for the last twenty minutes. “You’re both going to make me bloody late.”

“Sorry, Tonks,” they both said, before lowering their voices and continuing to argue over their cooling breakfast.

Remus took a gulp of his tea, even though it had long since stopped steaming. “The point stands,” he went on, ignoring the dark look that passed over Sirius’s face. “What you did last night was unacceptable. Arthur told us he might be stopping by to deliver the potions. I’d been expecting him to arrive sometime soon. What were you thinking, Sirius? Grabbing him like that after disarming him?”

“I’ve done worse, and you’ve never lifted a finger until now.” There was a very ugly glint to Sirius’s eyes that was incredibly worrying. Tearing a chunk off his cold toast, he said while chewing, “You’ve never had a problem with it before.”

“That was before,” Remus sighed, even though he’d been asking himself that same question since he’d happened to need a drink of water at midnight, and had come downstairs to find Severus on the verge of a complete meltdown, and Sirius on the verge of physically assaulting him. The look on Severus’s face…He’d caught only a glimpse of it before it had vanished like it had never been there at all, but it had been more than enough. It had been more than enough. “You were about to attack him—”

“Attack him? I wasn’t attacking him,” Sirius retorted, tossing the crust of his toast down and pushing his breakfast away. “Stop defending him. He’s a greasy bastard who doesn’t know how to keep his abnormally large nose out of others’ business. It’s making me ill to even talk about him.”

“I’m only relieved I came down when I did, because you most certainly were attacking him, and—” Remus noticed Arthur standing awkwardly in the doorway and broke off quite suddenly, leaving Sirius to look around wildly at the newcomer. “Sorry, Arthur, were you there long? Did you need something?”

“No, I only just got here, but…” Arthur seemed rather pale and drawn, like he’d received news of a terminal illness. There was a hesitation to him that sent alarm bells ringing in Remus’s head. He’d been that way since returning from Spinner’s End the day before, as if he’d narrowly dodged a
catastrophe—or had found himself suddenly directly in the middle of one. “I’m sorry to interrupt you
two of you, but Remus—before I leave to pick up Harry, there’s something we need to discuss.
Urgently.”

—

The morning rush to wake the boy up and prepare him for his hearing was what finally snapped
Severus out of his dissociative haze and allowed him to realize what, exactly, he’d said to Lupin the
night before.

*Inviting him to dinner?* he thought hysterically, peeling the last boiled egg and arranging it next to
Potter’s toast and bowl of hot cereal. Did the boy need a drink, or was this enough? *What the fuck
was I thinking?*

He’d been unable to find sleep after the uncomfortable, heated dream he’d had about Remus
goddamn Lupin of all people. Instead, he’d rolled himself out of bed, reopening half a dozen fresh
wounds as he went, and headed downstairs to begin making breakfast for Potter. His hearing was at
nine, and Arthur was due to arrive at the house for the second and last time at half past seven. It was
a good thing he’d stolen Floo Powder from Malfoy Manor last night; side-along Apparition was
always rough on the passenger, and the boy needed his wits (and stomach) about him if he was to
stand at what would undoubtedly be an obscene mockery of a court hearing for underage magic.

“Potter.” He prodded the boy’s shoulder, jostling him. “Wake up.”

The boy sighed and stretched, cracking his eyes open and patting the cushions around him for his
glasses. Severus grabbed them off the table and handed them to him. “Time is it?”

“Half past six. I have breakfast ready in the kitchen. You need to wash your hair before the hearing.
Where are the clothes you found during our outing?” he asked, dragging Potter’s trunk over to the
sofa. “Set them out now for easy access. Arthur should be here in an hour.”

He cleaned up as the boy picked at his food, gathering bits of rubbish and old newspapers to be set
out that night, and then spelled the used dishes to be washed as Potter went to bathe. Then he headed
out into the living room to see what, exactly, Potter had found and had him buy for him.

The clothing was far more suited for casual wear: an unprinted t-shirt, a pair of plain black trousers,
and a cardigan. Severus supposed it would do. It was better than nothing, at any rate, especially
when he certainly had no proper formal clothing to give to him. And it could be worn during days
spent around the house; seeing Potter strut around in oversized, ragged clothing had begun to wear
on his nerves. It was as if he had no other clothing to wear.

*Did he have any other clothing to wear?*

*Stop that,* he scolded himself, still feeling on-edge after Arthur Weasley had interrogated him and
implied that *he,* of all people, should know what Potter’s home situation was. Why would he?
Whatever went on at home was Potter’s business. It was the *family’s* business. After all… *he* hadn’t
gone spreading *his* home situation around, because in the end, it hadn’t done him any damage, and it
hadn’t killed him. He didn’t even have many scars. Unless the boy was actively in danger, there was
no need to step in.

*Was he in danger?*
Severus took a long draw of his coffee. If Potter was in danger...if Lily’s boy was in danger...there was nothing in the world that he would not do to save him. He would kill Tuney and her husband. He would do it with his bare hands, if he could. But, of course—that was only if Potter was in danger. And he was not in danger. If he was, he’d have told somebody, like one of the professors, because Potter was not one to keep such things to himself...was he?

“This is useless,” he hissed under his breath, rubbing his eyes and leaning against the counter, too anxious to sit down and keep still. “Potter,” he called over the roar of the shower, “you have twenty minutes!”

The shower shut off a few minutes later, and Potter peeked out of the steam with the look of a man heading to the gallows. “Sorry. I got lost in thought.”

“Get dressed, hurry up,” Severus ordered, shoving his bundle of clothes at him and walking away to give him privacy. “Weasley will be here at any moment.”

Did the boy have shoes to wear? He hadn’t thought about that...Severus eyed the ratty trainers by the door with disgust and went upstairs, taking the steps by two’s and three’s. Dragging his own school trunk out from under his bed, he threw it open and rummaged through it for a pair of shoes for Potter. Then, leaving his room a mess of scattered bits of clothing and old parchment, he rushed back down to the living room and thrust the pair of scuffed dress shoes he’d found at the boy. “See if these fit. I won’t have you wearing those bits of trash to a hearing.”

“They’re a little big,” Potter murmured, “but I don’t have any socks on, so they should be fine if I wear a thicker pair...”

“Keep them, then, and grow into them,” Severus told him, running a hand through his hair and tugging the curtain aside to look out the window. “Wear them at school. Minerva just might cry from happiness at the sight of them.”

“You’re acting strange today,” the boy said accusingly, looking up from his seat on the couch. “Almost—nice.”

“Am I?” Severus muttered, looking out the window again.

“Yeah. You are.”

“Hm.” Did your family ever beat you or whip you like a dog? Severus wanted to ask, but stopped himself just in time. It wouldn’t do for the boy to get upset before his hearing.

“Why are you being so nice?” Potter asked.

“Would you prefer otherwise?”

“No, I just want to know why. Is it because of my mum?”

Severus stopped. Twisting around to glare at him, he opened his mouth to snap back something undoubtedly awful, when there was a knock on the door. Perfect timing. Wrenching the deadbolt back, he jerked his head to the side and watched as Arthur hurried into the room, spouting apologizes for being late and useless pleasantries. “Use the Floo,” he said, cutting the two of them off as they murmured to each other. “Go directly to the Ministry, don’t waste time finding an Apparition point.”

It was only once they’d both left in a burst of flames that Severus managed to relax, if only incrementally. Heaving a sigh, he ran a hand through his hair again and looked around for something to do. He gathered the last of the rubbish and cleaned up the mess he’d made in his bedroom.
Then he took a shower to think things over. The kiss. The conversation. The dream he’d had. Severus stayed in there until the hot water drained away with any evidence of his frustrations, and his cheeks were so flushed he felt as though his head would burst like a bloody balloon. Turning the shower off with quivering hands, he stepped out on wobbly legs and dressed in only a shirt and pair of shorts, for easy access to the sluggishly bleeding gashes and abrasions on his arms and back. He drizzled antiseptic over each of the wounds within reach and applied Dittany, before bandaging a few that were too large to heal immediately.

Then, still feeling frustrated and confused, he went upstairs, laid in bed, and took some—time—to himself. It was only after he was sufficiently exhausted and ready to ignore everything that had happened in the last four days, that he dressed fully and left for Tesco to stock the fridge.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur. Caught up in the idea of being alone in his Muggle shit pile for the first time in over a week, Severus settled down to work on his spells, free from the fear of potentially causing an accident that would injure the boy. It was only after he checked the time and realized it was approaching noon that he began to feel concerned. Where was Potter? The hearing had been due to begin at nine…surely it would be over by now. Getting up from the table, he moved to the living room, where he checked the fireplace for any sign of disturbances and peeked out the window.

He was ready to fire call Albus when the Floo roared to life behind him, spitting Potter out onto the floor in an ashy heap.

“Well?” he demanded, clearing the soot away from the boy and rug.

“I got off!” Potter shouted, rolling to his feet with a grin. “I’m going back to Hogwarts! I haven’t been expelled! I’m going home!”

“And I expect you’ll be back to stealing from my stores in less than a month,” Severus said, taking care to keep his usual edge of cruelty out of the words. “Don’t remove your shoes. We’re going out.”

“Out? Where are we going? I already ate, Mr. Weasley got me food,” Potter said quickly. “Are we going back to the bookstore?”

“The library. You’ll have two hours to do as you please in there.” Ushering the boy out into the street, Severus locked the door and headed down the road through Spinner’s End, half-listening to Potter as he rambled on about the hearing. “They used that old bat as a witness?” he sneered when the boy brought up Arabella Figg. “Can Squibs even see Dementors?”

“She said she could. Dum—Professor Dumbledore didn’t say a word to me the entire time, though. I wonder why?”

Severus waited until they passed by a small gang of Muggles boys to reply. “If it’s not too incredibly taxing on your brain, Potter, perhaps you can think back to why you’re learning Occlumency. The answer lies within.”

“Is it because I’m a security risk?” The boy said quietly, all enthusiasm draining out of him. Severus felt an odd twinge in his chest. “What if I can’t learn Occlumency in time? What happens then?”

“Then you remain here for the rest of the summer, and we continue our lessons when we return to school. As it stands, you’ll be with the others for less than a week before you board the train.” Pulling the torn fence aside, he herded the boy through it and down to the riverbank. “Tonight, we’ll have another lesson, and we’ll see how those breathing exercises are working for you. I forgot to mention—your werewolf will be stopping by for dinner.”
“Lupin is coming back? But I thought you didn’t want him at—” Potter stopped talking, looking embarrassed. “Er…so why are we going this way?”

“Shortcut. Through here, now, and to the left.” They ducked through yet another torn section of fencing, and up the bank out onto the street in town. “If there’s ever a need to move quickly through Cokeworth, follow the riverbank. Do not follow the roads. A Death Eater would not be familiar with the area, and an adolescent boy running down the river, hidden by bushes, would be less noticeable than one running through the open streets.”

The door to the library rang with a tinkling chime, and one of the bookkeepers glanced up from behind the desk, watching them silently as they moved from the lobby to the aisles of bookshelves on the right. “How long did you say we could stay, sir?” the boy whispered over the hum of the fan on the front desk.

“Two hours,” he murmured back, brushing past him to find the science-fiction and fantasy section. “Do as you will, but do not make a mess, or a scene. Do not leave. I’ll find you when it’s time to leave.”

And with that, he set off on his own, leaving the boy behind.

—

He wanted to see the ‘storage room.’ That was irrefutable. Whether Severus would allow him to see that storage room was less certain; Arthur had said he hadn’t put up much of a fight at all, appearing almost unconcerned with the entire matter, but then Arthur had suggested…

Well.

Remus wasn’t entirely certain what the man had seen inside the room, because Arthur had been oddly unwilling to give details. “See for yourself,” he’d said, “before either of us begin to make wild claims that may not be true.”

He very much wanted to see that room, even if it meant sneaking in unseen.

“This is very good,” he said softly, swallowing a forkful of potatoes. “Did you make it yourself?”

Severus looked at him in vague disgust and continued eating without even deigning to give him a reply.

They’d retired to the bedroom, sitting in not-entirely-uncomfortable silence on opposite ends of Severus’s awful bed, leaving Harry downstairs to read and eat in peace. Remus was normally quite content with a lack of words, but tonight he felt on edge, like something big and not necessarily good was about to happen.

“Has this always been your house?” he asked, looking around at the small details of the room, from the ancient cracks in the walls, to the odd burn marks on the ceiling. “I wonder what its history is.”

“It’s my house, Lupin,” Severus said through a mouthful of salmon.

“You were raised here, then?” he pressed, gently, reading between the lines as best he could with someone so determined to keep himself a mystery.
For over two minutes, there was no response. Remus waited patiently and continued eating. He was ready to admit defeat when Severus muttered, “Yes.”

“It was as if he hadn’t seemed to realize there was something wrong with being abused, Remus,” Arthur had said urgently. “As if he believes it to be normal. How many children has he missed? How many have gone through that school, not understanding that someone had possibly realized and known all along what their home situation was like, but hadn’t said a word because he’d thought nothing of it? How many of those children could Hogwarts have saved, Remus? How many?”

How many times had Severus himself shown potential signs? Remus couldn’t help but wonder. Had he even been abused? Someone so bitter, so withdrawn from the world and full of hatred, could not have had the most ideal upbringing; but abused? Could Severus’s father have been a follower of Voldemort, as Arthur had hesitantly suggested, and filled his son up with the same animosity he himself had held? Or was there another explanation?

And if not Severus’s parents…then had it been James and Sirius? If Remus and his friends were responsible for Severus’s outlook and delusions, for the abused children he had quite possibly missed all these years—was he, too, responsible for those children’s continued plights?

Did the blame lie only with Severus?

“You look as though you’re plotting something,” the man in question said darkly, lowering his plate to his knees and setting his fork aside. “Another prank?”

“I didn’t kiss you as a prank,” Remus sighed, distracted. “I meant it seriously. I know you don’t believe me—”

“For good reason.”

“—and you don’t have to. There’s a history between us. I understand that. Just…” He held back another sigh, knowing it would make matters worse. Taking another bite of his potatoes, Remus swallowed them half-chewed and mumbled, “Just know it wasn’t a prank, and that I would gladly try again if you were willing.”

Severus looked at him with an anger Remus was starting to wonder wasn’t actually anxiety. “Do you have mashed parsnips for a brain, or do you genuinely not recall me telling you there’s no need to discuss what happened that night? It’s over. It’s done. It will not happen again, because what happened was a mistake, and should not have occurred in the first place. This—Lupin, are you even listening to me?”

“Call me Remus,” he said, without thinking.

“I should have undercooked your salmon and given you the shits,” Severus spat without missing a beat, before shoveling the last of his dinner into his mouth and setting his plate onto the dusty nightstand with a thud. “Get out of my room.”

“Of course, Severus,” Remus said, and he couldn’t help but smile.

—
Lupin was up to something.

Arthur must have said something to him, Severus supposed, because he’d never asked questions about the house itself until today. It made him regret inviting the wolf to dinner. (It made him regret not having told the world about his being a werewolf during their Hogwarts years, so that he wouldn’t have had to deal with him now, nearly twenty years later. If Remus Lupin had been executed at the age of sixteen, many of his problems would never have been.)

“So you’ve lived here all your life,” the wolf said eventually, setting aside his own plate and giving Severus his undivided attention. “And Lily lived nearby, didn’t she?”

Severus had to physically stop himself from getting up and leaving the room. “We’re not discussing her,” he said flatly. “If you know what’s good for you, you will stop now.”

To his astonishment—and even greater suspicion—Lupin nodded and changed the subject. “How has Occlumency been going?”

How much should he reveal? “We’re practicing deep breathing exercises. The boy needs to calm himself before he can learn to clear his mind, otherwise we will be getting nowhere. Is there a purpose behind this interrogation, Lupin, or has Arthur Weasley asked you to press me on whether or not Potter has been abused by his relatives?”

Lupin was an excellent liar. But even excellent liars gave themselves away, sometimes, and Lupin did so by smiling. The wolf carried a patient, almost soothing smile when he was trying to assure someone of his innocence in a situation. Severus had noticed it years ago; and it had never failed to show the truth. “That’s not the reason why I’m asking this,” he said, voice soft and lips quirked. “I ask that every time I visit, Severus. This is no different. Arthur did speak with me, yes, but that’s not the reason I’m asking now.”

Liar. “I’ve noticed nothing unusual in the boy’s memories,” he said coldly.

The matter seemed to have been dropped until he’d nearly managed to forget it had ever been brought up in the first place. Shifting slightly from where he’d fallen into a slouch, Lupin asked quietly, “What would you count as unusual?”

“What?”

“You heard me. What would you count as unusual? Locking somebody in their bedroom for days on end? Withholding meals? Belting them?” Although visibly uncomfortable, Lupin seemed oddly intent on getting an answer. “What do you think is strange in a family?”

Severus frowned and stood up. “What I think has nothing to do with this.”

“What you think has everything to do with this, because if Harry is in danger, you’re the only one who knows,” the wolf retorted, getting to his feet and following him out the door onto the landing. “Don’t walk away. We need to talk about this. What do you think is normal?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he snarled over his shoulder as he walked down the stairs and through the sliding shelf, waving a hand irritably at Potter, who looked vaguely alarmed at the sight of him. “Don’t follow me, werewolf.”

As usual, Lupin didn’t bother to listen. He shut the back door shut behind them as Severus went to the edge of the garden and lit a cigarette. “What do you think being abused constitutes?”

“What does it matter,” Severus said, “if Potter has missed a meal here and there? What does it matter
if he has bars on his window? Those are not things that put someone in danger. Unless they are being sexually inappropriate, or holding him down and beating him until he passes out, what does it really matter? You know as well as I do that a miserable childhood has never killed anybody.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think a childhood is something one should have to recover from.” Glancing back at the door, Lupin leaned back against the low wall of the garden, rubbing his thumb over a divot in the top of the crumbling brick. “What about your parents? Was that what they did to you? Beat you until you passed out?”

He didn’t respond in lieu of taking a drag of his cigarette, and then another, and another, until he hoped the question had been forgotten. What did it matter? Severus wondered. In the end, what did it matter, what his parents had or hadn’t done to him?

“What signs? What do you want me to say? That the boy’s family had talked of caning him? Do you want a sob story about my parents? Do you want me to tell you Potter’s aunt hit him with a frying pan? That he slept in a—Jesus, what the fuck even was it—a—a closet? What do you want me to say? Is any of that the sort of abnormal you’re looking for?”

“Yes!” Lupin damn-near shouted, looking wild. “Yes! It is! That is exactly the abnormal I’m talking about! There is nothing normal about that, Severus—about any of it! That is not a safe environment!”

“I sincerely doubt the boy has actually been caned,” Severus snapped, and then immediately began to doubt himself. Had the boy been caned?

(And why should he care? Why should he? It hadn’t killed Potter. What his parents had used, what they’d—done to him—hadn’t killed him. Why should he care? Why did he?)

Lupin seemed to notice his sudden doubts, because he seemed slightly less frustrated. “You know something is wrong at that house. You know there is. Even if you don’t know from experience that something is the matter, even if you won’t—or can’t—admit to it, for whatever reason, you’ve seen things in his memories. You know.”

“And what do you want me to do about it?” Severus asked. A wave of exhausted crested over him. He dropped his cigarette into the grass and ground it out into the earth. “What do you want me to say to him?”

And Lupin didn’t reply, because perhaps he didn’t know, either.
written for another. (It’s amazing I have time to write any of these honestly, because I also write original novels and work six days a week.) I’m also a little tempted to start a new fic entirely, featuring a teenage Snape. I was listening to Aquilo’s “Who Are You” while writing this btw. You should all listen because it’s a great band and an amazing song.
In the end, neither of them told the boy a thing. Severus suspected it was because neither of them wanted to.

Instead, they stayed outside far longer than necessary, leaning against the wall in silence as he dug out a new cigarette and lit up again. Severus was nearly finished smoking it when Lupin spoke up. “We’ll have to say something to Harry eventually,” he said in a low voice, tilting his head back and closing his eyes. It was an unusually clear night. In a different place—a better place—they might have been able to see the stars. “We can’t just talk about it but do nothing.”

“What I say holds weight? What the sodding fuck did that mean? Potter was not a toddler in need of coddling. He was an adolescent boy who was flippant with rules and had a habit of throwing himself headlong into danger. What Potter needed was to develop a strong common sense; he didn’t need Severus to tell him useless platitudes and assurances. Unsure of what to say in reply, he settled for an indifferent hum and inhaled a lungful of smoke.

“What you say to him holds weight. I hope you know that.”

“I know you don’t believe me,” Lupin sighed, “just as you don’t believe I wasn’t pranking you. Don’t you think Sirius would have mentioned it last night if I’d told him? He’d have lorded it over you.”

Severus did not want to believe him. “Mm,” he hummed.

“You’re not going to say anything to me, are you?”

“Mm.” He was sucking restlessly on nothing but filter at this point.

The wolf was quiet for a time, until he’d tossed the cigarette butt onto the ground next to the first and Vanished the both of them. Severus had turned to leave when Lupin murmured, “I really shouldn’t have done it at all.”

“Done what?” he asked in resignation, and hated himself for it.

“I shouldn’t have kissed you. It was—wrong of me. I should have kept my distance.” Lupin’s eyes were still fixed on the sky. Severus was abruptly reminded of the way he always touched the boy: gingerly, as though he was afraid of spreading some horrific and infectious disease. The body language which always screamed discomfort when somebody drifted too close to him during an Order meeting, and the studious way he avoided ever speaking of his affliction. “It was a mistake I
should not have made. You were right to have stopped me.”

“You’re a bigger idiot than I thought,” Severus snapped, lip curling as he turned back round to face him fully.

“How so?” Lupin said with a bitter, self-deprecating smile. “Was it even consensual, Severus?”

“Being maudlin doesn’t suit you.” He knocked a third cigarette out into his palm and lit it with a snap of his fingers. If he was to stay out here still, he might as well smoke. “Have you and Potter been comparing notes?”

“This is not a joke, Severus,” the wolf snarled, pushing away from the wall. “Was it consensual?”

“Did you or did you not see me agree to your scheme that night?” he demanded. “Had I said no?”

“An absence of a no isn’t a yes.”

“Well, it hadn’t been a no, so do us all a favor and cease and desist with this self-pitying attitude you’ve adopted.” He sucked on his cigarette like it was the last bit of oxygen on the planet. This was too much. This entire week, this entire summer, was too much. He hated Remus Lupin and Arthur Weasley. He hated Albus Dumbledore. Why had he agreed to any of this? He should never have agreed to take in Potter. Why had he? Why?

He forced himself to last until his cigarette had burned down. Vanishing it like he’d done the others, Severus muttered, “I’m going inside,” and managed to walk two full steps before there was a tug on his robe. Whirling round with an insult on his lips, Severus found himself blindsided with Lupin said softly, “If it had been consensual…then, if I were to do it again, would be still be?”

Severus’s brain short-circuited, just a bit. “I-I don’t…” he stuttered, taking a quick look at the back door again to ensure they were still alone. He yanked his robe out of the admittedly loose grip the werewolf had on him—and then realized Lupin’s eyes were very dark, and his cheeks looked rather flushed. Severus’s stomach lurched in a way that wasn’t entirely unpleasant. “I’m…going inside.”

“That’s fine,” Lupin said, looking at him with his peripheral vision, head turned away. “We don’t have to.”

Suddenly quite torn with himself, Severus snapped his gaze from side to side to check for snooping neighbors, and then seized a handful of Lupin’s clothing, tugging him too close. “Fine,” he said, trying and failing to sound irritable. “Don’t look so damn pleased.”

The memory of Lupin’s bashful grin, and the way he’d touched his shoulder like it had been spun from glass, lingered in his head long after the man had left for the night.

—

Sometimes Severus wondered whether he should be worried over the amount of sleep he’d been getting lately. He’d never slept well, likely never would, but he could count on both hands the hours he’d had in the last few days.

It was Arthur Weasley’s fault.
If he hadn’t demanded to see that fucking hellhole of a bedroom…

“During these flashes, have you by any chance noticed anything—odd? Anything abnormal, in any way? Maybe even…familiar?”

Fuck you, Severus thought bitterly, rolling over onto his side and regretting it immensely as his elbow sunk deep into the mattress and effectively trapped him until he managed to flip onto his stomach again. His back had begun to ache more and more each night he spent on this wretched thing. How had he managed to do it every night as a child?

“You don’t have bars on your windows,” Potter had said. “Don’t lock me in!”

Lock him in…the closet?

Severus felt sick, fevered and shivery. This was all wrong. Potter was supposed to be a privileged, spoilt brat. He should have been an arrogant twat like his insufferable father. But Tuney had always been…less than accepting. During the time he’d nearly hit her with a tree branch during a bout of accidental magic, he’d come to their house days later to see Lily, and Petunia had invited him in. He’d gone barely half a foot inside the house when she’d slammed the door in his face and bloodied his nose. Severus had taken great care not to use magic, accidental or otherwise, within her sight again.

But he’d been an impoverished, unkempt Jew living on the wrong side of the river, with a father who’d earned himself an unsavory reputation. Surely she wouldn’t have done such things to her own nephew. Surely.

Being their flesh and blood hadn’t stopped his parents from doing things to him, though.

That’s different, he told himself, tucking his arms under his pillow and forcing himself to close his eyes. What his parents had done to him had never put him in danger. It had just…been.

There had been a summer when a social worker had braved the streets of Spinner’s End and had paid his parents a visit. She’d asked few questions. She had not inspected the house. He supposed he could understand why; he’d not been a pleasant boy, and even at the age of thirteen, he’d rather resembled an overgrown, hideous vulture. He had not been an attractive child, and had become an even less attractive adult. People who were attractive, with money and personality—those children had a future. Those were children worth saving. Worth loving and caring for. Severus had never found out who had called the social worker in, and it hadn’t mattered; either way, his meals had been withheld from him for three days, for his audacity to parade family business round town.

His mother, most of all, had been furious. “Looks like someone decided to play Cinderella,” she’d sneered for weeks on end. ‘Cinderella boy’ had always been his least favorite nickname, even above ‘Snivellus.’ “Perhaps we should cut his hair, Tobias, before he decides to let it down like Rapunzel and run off to join the vermin in the streets.”

Now quite furious, even though the incident had been over twenty years ago, Severus sat up and looked round the room for something to break.

He’d grown to hate his mother, over time, just as he’d grown to hate near everyone else in his life. She’d been his protector in his early childhood, bearing the brunt of his father’s rage so as to save him from the same fate. That had changed as the years went on and he’d learned how to make people despise and stay away from him. It had reached its peak when he’d shown his first signs of magic at the age of six. By the time he was in his fifth year at Hogwarts, she’d begun actively lying to his father about his supposed sins, to ensure his role as the family scapegoat and keep Tobias’s
violent rages focused on him instead of her.

But that was all—different. It was different. That was just the way some families were. (He would not—could not—entertain any alternatives. It was just the way some families were. It could not be unusual, because if it was, then surely he had done something awful, terrible, to have made his parents despise him so. It had to be normal.) But Potter’s family…

Yes. There was something odd about it all. Something wrong.

And he did not like wrong.

It took what felt like an eternity for Severus to drift off, but he found no comfort in sleep, for his dreams were plagued by images of dark closets, and shadowed figures with raised fists.

—

“Snape?” Harry called, edging into the dark alcove behind the bookshelf and peering blindly up the stairs. “Are you up here? Professor?”

He’d woken to a silent house and unmade breakfast. Snape had been nowhere to be found downstairs; in fact, even at a quarter to eleven, there had been no sign of him having woken up at all. That was a bit worrying. Harry had never known Snape to not be awake and rattling about the house long before he got up. Maybe he was sick. Maybe, Ron would say, he died in his sleep!

Three years ago, he’d have been excited at the thought, but suddenly he didn’t find himself too keen on the idea of it. Harry wasn’t sure he wanted to know why that was. Although it wasn’t bad here—it was a step up from the Dursley’s, for sure—it was Snape. Snape’s house. He should have been running screaming from the premises, not…wondering if he should make breakfast for his evil bat of a Potions professor.

He would have gone outside, Harry assured himself as he gingerly touched another step and then pulled himself up, blinking rapidly as though it would somehow give him night vision. The way Snape and Lupin had found him the night he’d gone to the playground…They’d known exactly where he was. Snape would be able to find him again if he wanted to. And Harry didn’t actually have a death wish, no matter what anyone said.

Reaching the top of the stairs, he looked around blindly for any sign of Snape, and then pulled himself to his feet, shuffling towards the door ahead of him.

“What are you doing?” said Snape sharply, from directly in front of him.

Harry startled and took a step back, only to meet empty air. He gasped and had begun tipping backwards when Snape seized the front of his shirt and yanked him back onto the landing. “Thank you,” he said, breathless, “and sorry. I was just wondering if you were home.”

“Wondering if you were able to snoop around upstairs uninterrupted, you mean.” Harry could barely see his professor’s face, outlined in the faintest of light, but he knew there would be a sneer on it. “Back downstairs, Potter. Now.”

Trying not to get angry (he’d just gotten up here!), Harry carefully sat at the top of the stairs and scooted himself down one by one, Snape following behind him. He could feel watchful eyes burning
into the back of his head. He stood as he reached the bottom and slid the bookshelf aside a crack, squeezing himself through and out to the living room, which seemed altogether too bright after the darkness of the stairwell. “Is Professor Lupin okay?” he asked as Snape closed the shelf with a flick of his wand.

Are you okay? Harry wanted to ask next, because frankly, Snape looked like hell.

“What?” Snape muttered, eyes half shut against the light streaming in from the front window.

Harry, who had never seen Snape anything less than scarily alert, couldn’t help but stare a beat too long. He cleared his throat and hurriedly looked away. “Er—Lupin. Is he all right? You were both talking for a long time last night, and he seemed a bit…”

“Eloquent as always, Potter.”

“So is he?” Harry pressed. “Okay?”

“He’s fine,” came the annoyed response, as Snape abruptly moved to the kitchen without looking back. “Have you eaten?”

“I ate a bit ago.” He sat down on the sofa until the heady aroma of coffee began to fill the house. Getting to his feet, he went into the kitchen, where Snape was leaning against the counter with his eyes closed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Are you all right?” he dared to ask. “Sir?”

Snape opened his eyes and turned to him with a wordless snarl. Harry balked but didn’t step down. After what seemed like forever, he relaxed minutely, and then went back to waiting in silence.

Harry slowly walked over to the table and sat in his usual chair, hands automatically seeking out the loose bits of stuffing in the seat cushion. He’d found a small bundle of stuffing on the floor last night; by the time he left, he would probably have the entire thing flattened out. Hopefully reparo would work on it. If not…well, how difficult could sewing be?

“So,” Harry said, and then found the rest of the sentence dying in his throat when Snape glared at him. Gryffindor courage, he told himself. “Are you…hungry? I could make something…”

“Was that your job?” Snape said flatly.

“My—?”

“At your aunt’s house. Was that your job? Cooking for them?”

Harry looked around the room awkwardly. “Sometimes?” he hedged. “Aunt Petunia cooked, too, but every once in a while I was the one in charge of meals. So…sometimes.”

Unhitching himself from the counter, Snape stepped over to the coffee maker and poured himself a mug, and then added what seemed to be an almost obscene amount of sugar. Harry tried not to stare. And then he tried not to get up and leave the room when his professor sat down across from him and fixed him with another glare.

“Er…”

“Two meals,” Snape said in a cold voice. “That is all you will be allowed to cook per week. No more than that.”

“What?” he burst out, leaning forward. “Why?”
“Because I said so,” Snape snapped back.

“But that—but I like cooking!”

“And furthermore,” continued Snape, “I have told you time and time again, Potter, that you are not to go upstairs. Have I not told you this? And yet I find you scaling the stairs. Has it not occurred to you that there is a reason I have told you not to go up those stairs? Have you not seen how dangerous they are?”

Harry glowered at him. “I was careful,” he mumbled.

“You nearly fell,” Snape pointed out.

“Only because you startled me!”

Pinching the bridge of his nose again, Snape tilted his head back and sighed. He downed half of his coffee and set the mug down with a thunk. “Two meals a week, no going upstairs, and if you have eaten then we will now begin another Occlumency lesson.”

More than a little horrified at the thought, Harry began to bounce one knee. “But it’s only noon,” he protested weakly. “Why now?”

Snape grinned slightly, exposing his crowded teeth. “Because I said so. Up, Potter, so we can see how well you’ve been doing on those deep breathing exercises.”

Never mind, Harry thought as he got to his feet and began gulping down air in a decidedly unrelaxed manner. I should have run screaming from the premises.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for the comments, they help kick my ass into gear and make me productive. I may not reply to each one, but I do read them all. Hope you’re all well!

“Are You Home” by Amber Run and “Mercy” by MMX are what I was listening to while writing this. They’re my favorite bands and I really recommend them!
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Remus had arrived only thirty minutes ago, but Sirius’s slow-burning fury was already rising to a crescendo, and it was due to get worse.

“Tell me again,” he ordered through teeth ground tight, pacing back and forth. “What, exactly, did that greasy fucker say about my godson?”

The exhausted way Remus dropped his head into his hands, sighing against the table, did nothing to help Sirius’s anger. “How many times will you have me repeat myself?”

“As many as it takes for me to understand what Snivellus is playing at, here.”

It wasn’t a matter of whether Snape had been truthful; he’d heard Lily speak about her sister often enough, and James had happily regaled them with the tale of his one and only meeting with Petunia Dursley and her dull walrus of a husband. Harry’s family were not pleasant people. That was fact.

It was also fact that Snape was a manipulative, Dark creep who would swindle and sneak his way into the business of others, to use their secrets for his own gain. So…what was he hoping to gain, here, now that he’d so willingly told Remus his findings? “What does he think we should do?” he snapped out, spinning about on his heel and storming over to the fireplace, and then back around towards the end of the table where his oldest friend had slumped forward, face-down, with a groan.

“Moony, I swear to Merlin, if Snape is plotting something—”

“I think I’d prefer it if he was,” Remus muttered, turning his head sideways to look at him. “Severus doesn’t want to do anything. He wants us to keep quiet about it all.”

“I can’t help but agree with you. Severus doesn’t seem inclined to admit there’s a problem, let alone take action against it.”

They both looked up to find Arthur in the doorway, stepping off the last stair to approach them.

“Arthur,” Remus said slowly, shifting so that he was sitting upright. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were there…”

“Did you speak to him?” Arthur asked. “Does he truly not want to do anything? Have you asked him if he’d seen anything suspicious?”

Sirius turned his head towards Remus, who once again dropped his face in his hands. “Moony. Tell him.”

“Getting him to admit to anything was like trying to convince a Boggart to show you its true form,” Remus said wearily, words slightly muffled. “You were right. He doesn’t seem to find anything wrong with being withheld meals, or being locked up, or even caned—”

“They’ve caned him?” Arthur’s voice was calm, but he positively radiated fury.

“Yes,” Sirius said, even as Remus said, “Potentially.” Incredulous, Sirius shook his head and glared at the fireplace. “Yes,” he repeated, forcefully, “they have. Don’t take it like it’s some idle fucking threat, Moony. My godson — my godson — has been locked in some goddamn closet without food, Merlin knows how many times. Do you know what he said to me, the night that filthy rat went free?
He wanted to *live* with me, when a half hour before he wanted to *kill* me. And *Snivellus* —”

“Sirius—”

“*Snivellus* thinks there’s nothing wrong with that! You know he hates Harry. He was always so obsessed with James, and now he’s transferred it on over to Prongs’ kid. Of course he doesn’t think anything is wrong. Why would he? He’s probably getting off on it all.”

Arthur appeared entirely flummoxed. “I don’t…” He trailed off and then cleared his throat, firming his voice and squaring his shoulders. “I don’t quite think you understand the situation. The problem is, I don’t believe it’s my place to tell you all of the details, Sirius, I’m sorry. Remus, has he…shown you the storage room?”

“I didn’t ask to see it.” Remus closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead.

Feeling left out of the loop, Sirius gazed at the two of them, fingers curling against his palms. His nails bit deep into his skin. “If either of you are hiding something from me,” he began, “something about Harry…”

“It’s not about Harry,” Remus said, and then stood up to take a turn at pacing. There was a vexed, frustrated air to him, and he was tapping at his lips as though nudging a secret back inside. He always did that, Sirius remembered with a startling moment of years-old recollection, when he knew something he didn’t want to share.

“What storage room are you talking about?” he demanded.

“It’s not a *storage* room, by any of the regular means,” said Arthur, slowly, in a way that made Sirius think he wasn’t keen on giving details. “It’s an old bedroom.”

“I want to see it,” Sirius said immediately.

“He’s very adamant that nobody but he go inside,” Arthur said in a rush, looking at him in faint alarm. “And what’s more, should you really be going there, as things are?”

“I want to see it,” he repeated, “and Moony is going to take me there. Aren’t you?”

Remus looked very much as though he wanted to wring his neck. Not cowed in the slightest, Sirius gestured to him in a ‘well?’ motion. “It’s not a good idea,” Remus said in a low, angry voice. “I do not like this idea. It will go very wrong, Padfoot.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” Sirius said with a grin. “Where’s that owl Ron keeps, do you know? Pig-something-or-other? I think it’s time we sent a letter to old Snivelly. We should let him know he’ll be expecting a visit.”

—

Severus began to regret his decision to hold an Occlumency lesson barely a minute after he voiced it aloud. The boy was faring no better, standing and holding his wand out in a parody of self-protection. His stance was horrendous, Severus mused, eyeing the way he stood with his feet too far apart, shoulders tight and high. Though he’d never been athletically inclined, or well-coordinated in the slightest, even he could easily sweep Potter’s feet out from under him and wrestle the wand
straight out of his hands.

“Why do we have to do this so early?” Potter asked again, eyes twitching downwards as though he suspected Severus truly was about to take his wand by force. “Couldn’t we do this…I dunno…after dinner?”

“No,” he said with hints of a sneer. If he let the boy’s transgressions go unpunished for too long, the lesson would not hold. “We will do this now, to ensure you do not go upstairs without my permission again. Each time you disobey my orders, we will have an Occlumency lesson, in hopes that it will be enough to dissuade you next time.”

“So this is a punishment, then?” Looking at him incredulously, the boy shook his head. “Better than Polyjuice crustings, I s’pose…”

Severus allowed himself a thin smile. Yes, infinitely better than Polyjuice crustings. “Don’t tempt me. As I recall, I seem to have a cauldron left over from brewing Veritaserum. Would you prefer to clean that instead of having another lesson?”

For a moment, he wasn’t sure whether the boy would pick scrubbing cauldrons over Occlumency. There was a vaguely contemplating expression on Potter’s face (giving it all, Severus thought snidely). Then he shook his head quickly and fixed his eyes on the floor. Unsure whether to be relieved or disappointed, Severus sighed sharply and pulled out his wand. “Ready yourself, then. We will begin now. One, two, three…Legilimens!”

He knifed into the stream of memories, and lost himself quickly in a blur of half-recalled moments in time. Severus watched, through a haze, as Potter went rigid in front of him; he pushed the image away and focused instead on the memories, and then further in, to seek dark spaces and the sensation of hopelessness.

He was not to be disappointed. Those memories were plentiful, whirling past in a sickening rush. Peering through the grates on a door, out into a hallway—a dingy mattress on the floor—a stained blanket shoved into the corner, wrapped around prized possessions too old and broken to be considered worth anything—spiders dangling from the ceiling, twisting about in the air above his head—

A cupboard, Severus thought, pulling out sharply and rubbing at his eyes. Not a closet. A cupboard, underneath the stairs.

What he would give, in this moment, to speak to Petunia Dursley face-to-face.

“I don’t…I don’t understand,” the boy gasped from his position on the floor, pushing his sweaty fringe away from his forehead. “Were you, er—looking for something? They’re usually all different, but…”

“You’re imagining things,” Severus said coldly. “Again. Stand up.”

He made no attempt to be subtle in his goals as he kept the cupboard under the stairs swimming at the forefront of Potter’s mind. Prying deeper, he flashed through years spent in the dark; it was only at the sensation of shivering under an inadequate blanket that Severus became acutely uncomfortable, and withdrew entirely, pushing the memories—his and the boy’s—mingling about in his head, down beneath the surface of fog, down into a chest somewhere far below the surface. He locked the thoughts up tight and let the key drop deeper into the never-ending gray. It was only after he felt he’d sufficiently repressed it that he opened his eyes to find Potter slumped back against the wall, palms pressing against his face.
“I was locked in a closet once,” the boy said, in a hollow voice, “when I was little. Dudley—my cousin—pushed me inside. I was in there for a couple hours. That’s all it is. I don’t like thinking about it, so if you could just…forget about that…That’s all it is.”

Severus did not call his bluff. Instead, he reached out, hauling the boy up onto his feet by his upper arm. “Again. Prepare yourself.”

This time, as he cast *Legilimens*, he allowed himself to stray from the cupboard, instead bringing the memory of the unknown woman speaking of caning into focus.

“You see, Vernon, when you cane the whelp, you have to hit the fleshy parts of the legs. Avoid the bones—people these days have been nosing into the right to discipline ungrateful beasts. You don’t want social services called. What would the neighbors think? Bruises show at the bones. It’s the flesh that leaves little mark.”

Severus had to will himself not to violently eject himself from the boy’s head, instead doubling down on his efforts, dragging the memory of the woman’s voice out into the open. A strip of memories paraded through his mind, each as vile as the last—until they reached the end, where she miraculously—magically—happened to inflate into inhuman proportions, and take a flight through Surrey. And then there were the boy’s friends, one laughing and the other scolding, and a burst of affection surged through the connection, blindsiding him entirely as he sank into it, melting, nesting deep and warm—

The connection split into pieces, sending him staggering back at the suddenness of it. Potter stumbled into the wall but did not fall. He was wide-eyed, breathless and sweaty—but standing. He had thrown Severus out of his mind.

*Emotion. That’s Potter’s key.* Severus’s chest was heaving. Swiping his hair away from his face, he took a deep breath and forced himself to settle down. *Emotion. We can use this.* “That was,” he said slowly, still fighting to catch his breath, “not entirely reprehensible, Potter.”

The praise stopped the boy in his tracks. “Really? You’re—You’re serious?”

“No, definitely not,” Potter said cheerfully, as a grin split his face. “I’m honestly not too sure what I did to throw you out, but it worked, didn’t it?”

When had Potter stopped being intimidated, or even truly angered, by his surly responses? Severus couldn’t help but wonder, with a tinge of panic.

*Harry isn’t entirely unhappy here,* Lupin had said. And he wasn’t entirely happy here, was he?

(The problem was that Severus wasn’t entirely happy to know this. Relieved, perhaps, for it meant the boy wasn’t being a little terror anymore, but—happy? Not as such.)

“I was wrong,” Severus forced himself to say, even as the words rankled at him, and anxiety itched at him. “I was not going about your lessons the correct way. You should not be going without emotion or thought. Instead, you will learn to overwhelm any wayward intruders with an excess of emotion. Make them choke on it. The Dark Lord is an immensely powerful Legilimens, that is true, but adolescent feelings and whimsies will repel him. I will show you how to work this angle.”

“But I thought Occlumency was supposed to make you stop feeling and having dreams?”

“Yes, well, the technique we’ll be using is certainly nonstandard. Of course,” he added, unable to
resist, “nothing about you has ever been standard.”

Potter sucked his bottom lip in and chewed on it. He was frowning. “And—And you’re sure this will work?” he asked eventually. “To keep Vo— him out of my head? I’ll be able to go where Ron and Hermione are?”

Severus couldn’t help but wonder, for the first time, how these weeks were going to change things. Would they go back to how they were at school? Taking potshots at each other at every opportunity? Potter was prone to moody outbursts and overbearingly nosy, but he was no longer a complete stranger, nor was he a carbon copy of James. But he wasn’t Lily, either, Severus knew; the only thing left of her was those eyes, and the boy’s good nature. Harry Potter was an anomaly. A not-stranger.

“If this goes according to plan, and you can find it somewhere within yourself to give enough of a damn to work hard, you may find yourself at headquarters sooner than expected.” Severus pinched the bridge of his nose to stave off the headache tingling at his temples like a jackhammer.

A not-stranger with secrets, he told himself as the boy grinned and began to babble excitedly. Severus Snape did not like people keeping secrets from him.

—

“What are you making?”

“Dreamless Sleep,” Severus said shortly as he ground lavender in his mortar, crushing them into a paste. He scrutinized the color, and then added an extra sprig. “Potter.”

The sharp tone of his voice stopped the boy in his tracks, from where he was reaching out to open the door of the fridge. “Er, sorry, I was just getting some milk….”

“Calm yourself. Valerian--how much is required for a standard batch?” he asked, as he reached for the Flobberworm mucus, dropping two measures into the silver cauldron on the stove. “Well? This is a second year potion, even you should know this…”

Potter didn’t respond for a beat too long; Severus was about to give up and say it himself when the boy said in a quiet voice, “I think it’s…four?”

“Are you asking, or telling?”

“Telling. It’s four,” he said, more firmly this time.

“At what stage do you add it?”

“At the beginning, after you put in the wormwood. Are you making that for yourself?” Potter approached the stove, standing on the tips of his toes to watch Severus work. “You seem a bit peaky today.”

“Keep your concern to yourself. This is for the infirmary.” he muttered, scraping the paste he’d made from the lavender into the bubbling potion, which immediately turned purple and began to shimmer as though he’d added Sleekeazy’s to it. He opened a Ziploc bag of Sopophorous beans and crushed them with the flat side of his blade to wring out the juice, and then chopped them, dropping them into
the potion. Then, popping the lid off a tupperware box, he reached inside and took a handful of powdered asphodel petals, sprinkling it liberally over the cauldron, and with his other hand tipped a dash of nettle essence inside. He turned the heat dial back a notch to let the Dreamless Sleep brew unattended for the next seventy minutes, and stepped back to set his timer and begin clean-up.

Potter was still where he’d been before, blocking his way. “D’you brew all the potions for the Hospital Wing?” he asked, scratching at his nose.

“No, not all of them,” he said shortly, nudging the boy aside so he could get to the vial of mucus left open on the counter. “Either step aside or make yourself busy, Potter. The lavender goes back inside of the bag, and the asphodel needs a lid. Take care not to damage the lavender. Seal the bag tightly.”

They worked in silence, bagging and storing any leftover ingredients, until there came a tapping on the window. Severus looked up to find an overly excited owl twitching about outside. “Are you expecting a letter?” he asked, as Potter looked up with a frown.

“Yeah, but not for another day or two. That’s Ron’s owl, Pig. D’you want me to get him?”

“Yes. Be sure to lock the window again after he leaves.”

‘Pig’ soared into the kitchen the moment the window cracked open, but it didn’t go to Potter—instead, it made a beeline for him, perching at the edge of the hot cauldron with a chirp. Severus resisted the urge to blow the fucking thing up right then and there. Shooing it away from the stove, he grabbed it out of the air and thrust it at Potter. “Take care of the damn thing before it becomes a potions ingredient.”

“I don’t...think it’s here for me, professor,” the boy said, waving the offering aside. “I think it’s brought you a letter.”

The bird squawked in what could almost be mistaken for agreement. Regarding the thing dubiously, he reached for the letter, tearing it off the owl’s leg and unrolling the parchment with a flick of the wrist.

It was from Black, though bits of what could only be sarcastically called a letter were peppered with writing from another hand, as if Lupin had attempted to snatch it away here and there. Severus stared at the contents of the letter for less than a second. Then, snatching a quill off the table, he scribbled out a “Go fuck yourself” and reattached the crumpled parchment to the owl’s leg, before throwing it back out the window.

“Now then,” he said firmly, enjoying the way Potter had twitched in horror at the sight of him hurling an owl, “what is the purpose, Potter, of adding Flobberworm mucus to Dreamless Sleep, when the mucus itself has no sleep-aiding qualities? And don’t forget to lock the window.”

Chapter End Notes

This took so long for me to write, I'm sorryyyyyy

edit: btw, if any of you want to yell at me over taking eleven days to write a 3k word chapter cough, my discord is diluvienne#9193
Severus had never held out any hope of forgetting the old games.

It had been well over a decade since he’d sat at Narcissa’s table to swindle and manipulate with the best of them, but there was a part of him that had been trapped in time; and that part of him was thawing out, reawakening, resurrecting. At times he would turn to listen to something Lucius was saying as he sat so primly next to him, only to realize with a jolt that it had in fact been fifteen years. Everyone was older (though no more wise than they had been), with faces lined and shoulders—or guts—heavier, but they were all the same; just as petty and vapid as they’d ever been. These were the same people who he’d once admired, had found amusing, had looked up to for their clever stratagems. They, in turn, had pretended to think of him in the same respect. None if it had ever mattered in the end. He was, ultimately, just a jumped-up Half-Blood playing at equals.

Lucius’s hand touched his shoulder, sending goosebumps rushing down his arm. “Severus,” his host hissed in his ear, “you are slouching. Narcissa does not like her guests to slouch.”

He straightened back up out of the slump he’d automatically slipped into. Dragging his feet back underneath his chair from where they’d drifted out to the center of the table, Severus adjusted his robes to smooth out wrinkles, and reached again for his fork and knife. Here’s the proof, he thought bitterly, studying his proper Pureblood dinner mates through eyes shrouded by lashes. Just a jumped-up Half-Blood playing at equals.

To vent some of his anger, he slipped a diuretic into Crabbe’s drink on his right, in hopes that the man would piss himself during the meal. He added a slow-acting laxative to Lucius’s. It would only take effect after he’d left and the blame could not be pinned on him.

It had been well over an hour since he’d arrived, but the meal seemed to have no end in sight. Severus supposed he could take it as a test in patience; he would be needing much of that, in the coming days. Lupin had sent a second letter rushing along behind the first, detailing Black’s plans to gate crash and force his way into Spinner’s End. The Headmaster would have to be alerted, he knew. But first—dinner. Dinner and Occlumency.

The summons here had come at a surprise. He’d managed to bypass the one from days before, but he hadn’t had an excuse this time round. All he’d been able to do was set the boy up with a meager fare and the promise of leftovers, don his best robes, and leave immediately. Their lesson had been cut short. Of course, Severus thought, straightening up again as he began to slide downwards in his chair, perhaps that one had been for the best. He’d seen the effects the lessons had had on the boy. He’d seen the headaches, and the way Potter had rubbed a hand over his no-doubt hurting scar. This had been the first lesson that hadn’t seemed to have much effect in that way on the boy. He’d remained as upbeat as he had the day previous; and this time, it was Severus himself who’d suffered.

He felt as though someone had opened his head up and poured in too many thoughts and feelings. A headache pounded at his temples in time with the beating of his heart. Each time he looked round, a lightning bolt of pain shot down the back of his neck. Severus wanted to be at home. He wanted to be at his own table, where he could sit terribly without fear of judgement from the Potter boy, who had worse posture than he did. He didn’t want to be here. He didn’t want to listen to rich and powerful men bat squabbling words back and forth like toddlers pretending to be civilized. He did not want to play this game of peace and normalcy, as if the Dark Lord wasn’t sitting in the next room
He did not, above all, want the semi-peaceful bubble of a life he and the boy had managed to build up, to pop the moment Black descended into his rubbish heap of a house.

Severus felt strung-out. Clutching at his water goblet, he drank deeply to gather himself, and set it back down with a heaviness that made Lucius’s eyelid twitch. He vowed to set it down more heavily next time.

Something was going to have to change, with these lessons. They had only had one so far since the discovery of what may be the boy’s saving grace, but Severus was already too drained to keep up the proper appearances. It was always a constant battle to remain as prim and composed as his more civilized dinner mates, but his will had always been as strong as iron, unyielding. Tonight he was a fucking mess.

(It was Lupin’s fault, too. Giving him odd, heated dreams, and strangely whimsical thoughts that would linger in his head for hours along with the memories the wolf had given him. He had not been sleeping well in his attempts to exhaust himself so thoroughly, the thoughts would remain in a hazy fog for good.)

Yes. Something would have to change. And soon, lest Lucius murder him in cold blood the next time his feet began to slide further and further away from his chair.

Dinner passed without incident, and he and Narcissa retired together to a small chamber off the side of the dining room, settling onto a cushy chaise with cups of coffee brought by the house-elf Dipsy, whom he was much fonder of than Dobby. Severus took a sip of his coffee. “How is Draco’s independent study coming along?” he asked, keeping his tone carefully neutral. Narcissa’s eyes lit up in a way that only the sound of Draco’s name could do, but her mouth dragged down unbidden.

“He is making fine progress,” she said carefully, setting her coffee onto the spindly wood table in front of them, and folding her hands in her lap. Her fingers were clenched too tightly. “Draco is talented. The Dark Lord is pleased. He says”—and there was the slightest hint of a tremor in her voice now, undetectable to all those who did not know her like Severus did—“that Draco may take the Mark next school year.”

The carpet in this room was very fine, Severus thought as he pushed down whatever violent reaction he may have had at the thought of a sixteen-year-old schoolboy taking the Dark Mark. Very plush, a silvery gray that reminded him of Albus’s hair, and most certainly not made by humans. It was a very nice carpet.

“I see,” he said indifferently, taking another sip of his coffee. His hands did not shake. “His skills will improve. Taking the Mark is an honor, and to receive it so young…You must be proud, Narcissa. You and Lucius both.”

“Very much so.” Her voice was warm, her smile flawless, but her eyes shone. Severus fixed his gaze on the dark green silk of the chaise backing, and did not look at her. “And you, my dove—have you heard the news of what is to happen at Hogwarts this year?”

If there was another Triwizard Clusterfuck, Severus would strangle Albus with his bare hands. “I have not,” he said. “As you know, the old fool tells me nothing.”

“It is to do with the events of last year. The Triwizard Tournament raised a flurry of inquiries.”

Mother fucker —
“The Minister has told Lucius he himself will be assigning a professor to the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts this year. The school has run rampant for far too long; there will be changes this year. There are no doubts in my mind as to whether you will be permitted to remain at your post, Severus—Draco sings his praises for you in all of his letters. Dolores Umbridge is sure to take to you easily.”

“Dolores Umbridge?” he inquired, even as his heart skipped a beat. He knew that name. He was more than up-to-date on the Ministry’s position of the issue of werewolves, and her names was one that came up more often than not in the journals and articles he’d scoured on the subject. This woman was responsible for a vast majority of Lupin’s problems in life. And while he’d have found that all fine and well a month before, the thought of it now left a…sour note in his mouth. One that had nothing to do with the bitterness of the coffee he’d just finished off. A house-elf appeared without a sound to refill the tiny ceramic teacup, and vanished seconds later.

“Hogwarts has been left to its own devices in a way that has posed a danger to the students within,” he agreed, and was not altogether lying. Though it was not the chaotic war ground it had been when he himself was a student there, Hogwarts had always been a bit of a—mess. One did not see a mass murderer grow and learn inside the walls of a school that had had an eye on him for seven years, and say everything was safe and normal. Albus could not keep an eye on each student at every moment. But Dolores Umbridge? “What, do you suppose, was the Minister’s reasoning on placing his undersecretary into the position? Will he be hiring a replacement in the meantime? There is a young Slytherin woman who graduated at the end of this year, and—”

“Snape.”

They looked to the doorway, where Macnair stood leaned against the doorframe. “Yes?” Severus said coolly.

“He’s asking for you.” There was a hint of a nasty grin playing about Macnair’s smile, showing a hint of rotting, blackened teeth. “Best not make him wait.”

Severus smiled thinly. “Yes, of course. Narcissa, I’m afraid I must take my leave. Do give Lucius my regards. Supper was excellent.”

“Of course. You are always welcome in our home,” she replied, briefly clasping his hand in her own, before he stood and left the room.

—

Severus stood in the darkened hallway of the third floor, staring at the closed door in front of him. He could faintly hear the soft sound of music coming from within. Macnair had followed him silently all the way up the stairs and through the Manor, only deigning to melt back into the shadows after Severus reached the door and stopped to compose himself. He was alone.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes briefly, and knocked on the door.

“Enter.”

The doorknob was cold in his hand. The air of the library as he turned and opened it was even colder.
“You asked for me, my lord?” Severus said softly, bowing low to the man sitting in the center of the room, positioned in a high-backed armchair with a heavy tome open in his lap. Nagini lay across his shoulders, flicking her tongue against the Dark Lord’s pale ear, whispering serpentine secrets heard only by her master. The music playing from the xylophone sounded rather sinister all of a sudden.

“Come closer, Severus,” Lord Voldemort said softly, beckoning to him with a long-fingered white hand. “Do you find me so frightening?”

“No, my lord.” He moved closer, until they were barely a metre apart.

Nagini moved without warning, slithering down the side of the chair, twisting round his ankles. Severus felt her tongue flutter against the inside of his ankle. And the Dark Lord smiled.

“The Veritaserum you delivered to me,” he said, “was put to excellent use. I expect nothing less than perfection from you, Severus, and you have never failed me…until as of late. Why do we not have the boy in our grasp, Severus? Why does Harry Potter continue to elude me? You have seen him at this ‘headquarters’ Albus Dumbledore has created, have you not? So why, then, have you not brought him to me?”

“Dumbledore guards him zealously,” Severus said slowly. “He is surrounded at all times by members of the Order. Alastor Moody, Kingsley Shacklebolt—”

“These are excuses,” the Dark Lord said sharply, cutting him off. Severus bowed his head and stared at the floor, chagrined. “I do not want excuses.”

“I apologize, my—”

“I do not want apologies!” Standing abruptly, the Dark Lord took a step forward until they were a mere foot apart, and unsheathed his wand. “I regret what I must do, Severus.”

Expecting a Crucio, he felt himself go tense—and then staggered to the side as the Dark Lord slapped him hard across the face. Severus overbalanced and crashed to the floor. Stunned, he lay there for a moment to take stock of his injuries, and then rolled onto his hands and knees at the hissed, “Up,” only to be hit with the Crucius before he could so much as stand. A scream tore its way out of his throat, pain searing through him, exploding its way through his veins and bones like he was being burned alive from the inside. He couldn’t move and he was dying he was dying he was burning on fire and —

It ended as suddenly as it had begun. Severus panted into the floorboards as sweat rolled down the side of his face, hands scrabbling uselessly for purchase on the legs of the armchair. The Dark Lord tapped at him with his bare foot and tipped him onto his back so that their eyes met. He had only the barest second to prepare himself before he was no longer the only person occupying his head.

Memories of the last few weeks whipped by, tediously edited days before; snapshots of the moments spent without the boy in his house, alone. Him cooking, him smoking, him reading, him shopping, headquarters, him cooking, him brewing, brewing, brewing, supper with the Malfoys, meeting with the Dark Lord—

Severus slumped backward onto the floor as the front of his robes were released and the Dark Lord stood straight. “Stand up, Severus,” he said coldly, easing back into the armchair as Severus struggled to his feet, swaying with the effort of it. His cheek felt swollen and his shoulder throbbed in time with his heartbeat. “Let us speak of your failures.”

“My failures, my lord?” he managed to say, eyes fluttering open and closed as he fought to keep
consciousness. Severus stumbled forward to catch himself from falling.

“Why do we not have Harry Potter in this room with us tonight?”

“Because I have not wanted it enough to make it so, my lord,” he whispered. “I—apologize.”

“Correct. For all of your intelligence, you lack the drive and ambition that we—that I—need. I need Harry Potter. And you have failed in delivering him to me. I am disappointed.”

“I apologize, my lord.”

“I do not want your apologies. I want you to fix your mistakes and right your wrongs. Only then will I be satisfied.” The Dark Lord leaned back into his chair and hissed something undecipherable; Nagini entwined herself about his shoulders and lay prone, tongue flickering in the air as though searching for a lie. “Leave me, Severus. I wish to be alone. When I next summon you, I will require a potion—I am quite sure you have heard of the Drink of Despair. Bring it to me.”

Severus would not allow himself to feel relief. “Yes, my lord. Thank you, my lord.”

“Oh, and Severus?”

He turned at the door, and regretted it when he saw the wordless snarl on Lord Voldemort’s face.

“Crucio.”

—

“Leftovers,” Severus said, setting the bundle of food Dipsy had discreetly packed for him onto the coffee table with a thunk. Potter looked up from the book he’d apparently filched from the shelf nearest the kitchen and shifted so that he was sitting upright on the couch rather than sprawling across it. “You may eat in here.”

“Are—are you…” The boy gaped up at him with wide eyes. “Sir, are you all right?”

Severus sneered at him, even though the movement made the left side of his face sear in agony. “Mind your damn business, Potter. Eat your tea and go to bed.”

It took a beat too long for Potter to reach for the food on the coffee table. Unwrapping the bundle, he pulled out two plates of food hung suspended in a stasis charm, and set them carefully on the table. Excellent—he would keep those plates. Lucius and Narcissa wouldn’t even notice they were missing. “How, er…how did it go?” the boy asked hesitantly.

Tossing his mask to the side, where it landed somewhere unknown, Severus grunted in reply and collapsed backwards into the chair by the hearth. He started a fire with a flick of his wand, desperate to chase away the feverish chill wracking his body. Then he summoned a litany of potions to his lap and began downing them one by one. Nerve regeneration, to cure whatever neuropathy the Dark Lord had wrought on him. Pepper-Up. He stopped at the Calming Draught, still feeling distant and foggy; he would drink it later. Potter watched him unblinkingly all the way through. “What?” he said lowly, too tired to summon any of his usual ire.

“Nothing!” the boy blurted. Then, as the seconds passed: “Actually, could you get rid of the stasis?”
Severus removed it with another flick of his wand and tilted his head back to stare at the cobwebbed ceiling. His eyes burned when he blinked. “Give me a plate,” he mumbled, reaching a hand out blindly until Potter passed the second plate his way. He summoned silverware for them both and forced himself to sit upright so that he could eat the food he’d merely picked at earlier. Eating slowly, Severus had to shake himself awake every few bites, and finally set the food aside before he could polish it off entirely. He lurched to his feet and caught himself on the arm of the chair as he nearly toppled backwards. “Get to bed,” he said to the boy. “It’s late.”

“I will in a second. Do you need any…help…?” Potter trailed off at the sight of his face, and then squared his jaw in the familiarly stubborn way. “Professor, you look like you’re about to fall over. Let me help you upstairs. You were with V— him, weren’t you? Let me help.”

“I don’t want your help,” Severus tried to snap.

“No, but you need it. Let me help you.”

He tried not to give in. He failed. “Up the stairs, then.”

The boy sprang to his feet and approached him from the side, taking him gingerly by the arm and pulling it round his skinny shoulders. Severus tried not to lean on him too heavily. They ascended the stairs unbearably slowly, with fumbling feet and hands pressed flat against the wall, by the light of a shaky Lumos. “Downstairs,” Severus breathed as Potter helped him to his bed and stepped back to watch him warily, face illuminated oddly against the Lumos. “To bed. Now.”

“Yeah. It’s late. You er, get some rest, okay? Sorry about…Er, well, I sort of forced you to let me help you, so I…Goodnight. Sir.” Potter hurried out of the room. Severus could hear the unmistakable sound of him scooting down the stairs one by one. It was only after the bookshelf snapped shut with a click, and he’d cast a hasty Muffliato on his bedroom door, that he allowed himself to be pulled out of the haze of Occlumency and into the waiting arms of full-blown hysterics.

The sound of his hyperventilating gasps were like thunderclaps in the silence of his bedroom. Clasping his hands over his mouth, Severus screwed his eyes shut to force away the stinging sensation that had surfaced without warning, and bent double til his forehead was nearly level with his knees.

“Draco may take the Mark next school year.”

No. No, no. No, no, no, no, no no no…

Severus gagged on his own panicked breaths and forced himself to stop breathing entirely, until the pressure in his chest became too great and he had to suck in great, heaving gulps of air like a drowning man. His eyes burned and there were tears, hot and salty, on his cheeks. Draco Malfoy, to take the Dark Mark, to destroy his life before it had even fully begun—

No God please God no…

Independent studies to learn to cast the Cruciatus and Imperius and—

Next year, but he’s only fifteen and—

He gripped the vial of Calming Draught inside of his robes, wrenching the cork out with a force that made his wrist ache, and downed it all in one go. The hysteria left him in ebbs and trickled its way out of him like a drain that hadn’t been fully sealed. Severus crumbled backwards onto his bed seconds later; he had no more energy to hold himself upright than he had to take his shoes off. He toed them off onto the creaky old floor next to the empty vial and clawed helplessly at the buttons of
his robe, pulling it off with an effort that drained him even further.

The room tilted around him; Severus closed his eyes to stop the spinning, feeling sick. It took all the will he had in himself to not become suddenly, violently ill. Bile rose up in his throat, and he swallowed it down, hard. His body trembled and twitched uncontrollably with the aftershocks of the Crucius. Hot-cold shivers jolted up and down his spine. He clawed at the collar of his shirt in a vain attempt to bring in some of the cold air of the room.

What time was it? How long had he been lying here? It felt as though each time he blinked, the room got a bit lighter. His heartbeat was very loud in the static of his head.

Severus rolled onto his side and reached blindly for something to hold. Finding his pillow, he dragged it close, clutching it tightly to his chest and breathing hard like he’d run a marathon. He buried his nose into the pillow and closed his eyes, drifting deeper and deeper into an empty blackness—only to sit bolt upright when there came the sound of a scream in the night.

Chapter End Notes

Never have I ever written anything with Voldemort in it, so this was funnnnnnn. It took me so long to do it, I'm sorry! I really hope you're all doing well. My favorite band is releasing the last song from their new album on the 11th and I'm so excited oh my god

EDIT: because of this chapter, I might need to add a “graphic depictions of violence” warning. Does anyone think the second to last scene justifies that? I’m genuinely unsure and the archive faq didn’t have any answers on it tbh. I also forgot the English word for “because” for a few seconds and I’m kicking myself for it lol
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The screaming cut off barely a second after it had begun, but Severus was already out of bed in a sudden burst of energy, wand raised as he slid his way down the stairs and rushed out into the living room, poised for an attack—only to find the room empty.

Where is the boy? he thought wildly, scanning the room. The sofa was barren, sheets tangled and drooping off the sides of the cushions. Potter was nowhere to be found. The Calming Draught had worn off during the time he’d spent asleep, and the earlier hysteria was rising back up, suffocatingly heavy. “Potter?” he called, and then raised his voice when there was only silence. “Potter!”

“I’m sorry,” came a small voice from behind the sofa. Severus stumbled his way round it and found the boy pale and drawn. He was pressed up against the wall, knobby knees hugged close to his chest, and his fringe was plastered to his face with sweat. When Severus took a step forward, Potter shrank back, spouting apologies and unintelligible explanations. “Didn’t mean to wake you, I’m sorry, I was just—the—I just was—it was the graveyard and I just—I’m—sorry—”

For a moment, Severus couldn’t find the strength to move or speak. He blinked hard as the floor swam beneath him; everything felt unreal. So he did the only thing he could think to do—turn on one heel, and head for the kitchen. He didn’t turn on the lights. Making his way through the dark, Severus turned on the stove and found his old, dented tea kettle, filled it, and set it to boil. His shaking hands wrapped round the edge of the counter in a vice-like grip as he leaned forward and breathed heavily to ward off the spinning of the room. Then, too tired to do much more, he hooked his foot round the leg of the nearest chair and dragged it over, collapsing into it. He closed his eyes.

Severus hadn’t realized he’d fallen asleep until the kettle whistled and his head jerked up out of the slump it had fallen into. Looking round blearily, he reached for the stove, only to find that someone had already gotten to it first.

“I’m sorry about before,” Potter murmured, studiously avoiding his gaze as he removed the kettle and turned off the stove with a click. His eyes were fever bright and his skin was ghostly in the darkness. “I didn’t mean you wake you up. Not now, but—or, well, now as well I s’pose. But before. I didn’t…”

“Leave it,” Severus ground out, pointing vaguely at the stove when the boy turned to him, startled. He reached up to rub at his aching eyes. “Sit.”

“Okay. Sorry.”

Closing his eyes again, Severus dozed until the boy scraped a chair back, and then hauled himself to his feet and reached for two mugs. A muscle in his back protested the movement with a cramp; Severus took a moment to compose himself, wiping any signs of pain from his face before he turned back round with two mugs full of tea and stepped to the table. He set them down with a purposeful thud and fell into the only remaining chair.

“Do you need sugar?” he remembered to ask, after he’d drained half his tea in one go, burning his tongue and scalding his throat.

“Er—no, that’s okay. I can drink it straight.” But the boy made no move to take a sip, instead pulling
the mug closer to him with a grating sound that made Severus twitch a little. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” he said shortly. He still hadn’t looked in the mirror to check the damage on his face; he wasn’t altogether sure if he wanted to.

Did the boy want to talk about the nightmare he’d had? Should Severus even ask him? He’d never been one for understanding the more subtle boundaries a person might have, and didn’t trust himself not to cause a raging argument by accidentally overstepping.

“Was it the cupboard?” he heard himself ask as though someone had temporarily taken control of his mouth, immediately wishing he could take it back when Potter tensed like he was about to be whipped.

“I—I don’t know what you’re…” The boy’s eyes darted about and he looked vaguely ill in a way that screamed I’m going to sick up in about twenty seconds, conjure me a bucket. “I already told you it was a closet. And—just once.”

“The—graveyard, then?”

Stop talking. Shut the fuck up. Stop.

“No? Or, I mean, I s’pose but it—no. I think I should…maybe I should just go to bed.” Potter laughed nervously and finally took a sip of tea, slopping some down his front. “It’s late.”

Severus Occluded against any stray thoughts bumbling around in his foggy head, and took a deep breath. “Have you been clearing your mind before sleeping? It would help.”

This time, Potter merely shrugged, settling back down slowly. Neither of them spoke. Severus Summoned the kettle to the table and poured himself a second mug of tea with hands that shook no matter how hard he tried to steady them. He would take another nerve repairing potion tomorrow—a different one, to prevent addictive properties. And perhaps he would spend some time in the morning to focus on whatever disjoint had occurred between his mouth and brain. There would be other things to do, too…Fixing up a bruise salve for his face. Grocery shopping. The looming visit from Sirius Black to panic over. He would need to contact Lupin, and narrow down the exact timeframe of the visit, so that perhaps he could arrange a ‘surprise’ visit from Narcissa, or perhaps even Lucius, or—

“What was my mum like?” Potter asked.

Severus’s hand froze on the way to his mug, hanging suspended in midair a beat too long, before he managed to compose himself and take a sip of tea as though the boy hadn’t spoken.

“I know,” Potter continued, “that you probably don’t want to talk about her. Not with me, anyway. You don’t even—like me. Not like you did her. A-And you did, didn’t you? You were friends? Right?”

He bit his lip unconsciously, winced at the jolt of pain in his face, and took another sip of tea to hide his reaction.

“Professor Lupin didn’t seem surprised. That night at the playground, I mean.” The boy clutched at his mug, fingers tucked round the jagged edges where the handle had once broke off. His knuckles were white and his shoulders were tense. “So I guess he knew all along. Just like he knew my dad, and never told me…and no one ever told me about Sirius. And now you’ve been hiding this, and…and that makes me angry. Don’t I deserve to know about my parents? No one ever tells me about them. Sirius told me about my dad, a bit, but no one ever tells me about Mum. Just that I have her
eyes. I don’t…I don’t even know what her favorite color was.”

Severus took another sip of tea, and made the mistake of making eye contact; he was horrified to find there were tears in the boy’s eyes.

“Tell me about her,” Potter begged, pushing his untouched tea away. “Tell me. Please.”

“I…” He trailed off as the words died in his throat.

“Please.”

He didn’t speak. He could not.

“Please. Tell me,” Potter choked out, now wiping furiously at his eyes. “Please. Why don’t you understand how much I need this? I don’t know anything about her. Just her eyes. I don’t know what she was like. I don’t know what her handwriting looked like, or what her favorite color was, or if she liked to sing. I just know her eyes, and you won’t tell me more. I never knew what her voice sounded like until the Dementors, and it was only her dying—”

Severus pushed his own tea away, gripping the edge of the table hard enough to make his joints creak. “I’m,” he tried, but the words wouldn’t come. He forced them out, with an effort that drained him to the depths of his soul. He owed the boy that much. “I’m…right. It’s not right for me to tell you, it’s not…I’m…”

—the reason she’s dead. I’m the reason you don’t know.

And he was a coward. He’d always been a coward. Too afraid to tell the boy, too afraid to bear witness to his judgement and his rage. Too afraid to earn his hatred in the only way that truly mattered anymore. He was a failure, in all things good and just. That would become all the more apparent the moment Harry Potter discovered who had truly murdered his mother fourteen years ago.

“You were friends? Right?”

She was a friend. I was just a failure.

“You should ask Hagrid,” Severus finally managed to say, in a voice that refused to rise above a whisper. “Not me. Ask somebody else.”

“Hagrid wasn’t her best friend,” Potter ground out, rubbing a hand over his cheek. He sniffled wetly. “You were. I’m asking you. I’m not asking Sirius, or Professor Lupin, or Hagrid. I’m not asking them, because they weren’t her best friend.”

“I can give you the names of her old school friends.” He pried his fingers off of the table; they felt stiff, like he’d shoved his hands in a bucket of ice and had left them there until… “You should owl them.”

“Just forget it!” Potter stood up with a force that toppled his chair and knocked the table forward, sloshing their tea over the rims of their mugs. Severus made no move to clean it up. “Just forget it! Forget I even asked, if y-you aren’t going to t-tell me— anything —”

“Potter,” he said, or perhaps he hadn’t, because the boy had already stormed into the bathroom and slammed the door shut. Severus remained seated at the table and fought to control his unsteady breathing. He waited until the tap turned on in the bathroom to put his face in his hands.

Sometimes, he couldn’t quite help but blame Lily for this mess. It was wrong. It was wrong of him to
What was he supposed to do? What was he supposed to say to the boy, to the son she’d left behind in her sacrifice? He wasn’t a father. He wasn’t a brother, or even someone half-decent, or remotely prepared for the mess he’d found himself in. He wasn’t the sort of person Potter should have been going to for clues to his mother’s past. Not after she had so forcibly expelled him from that past twenty years before. He didn’t know any details about the years she’d spent in between fifth year and her death. He didn’t know if she’d ever found that perfect book she’d always fantasized about, if she’d still coveted stories of the Hogwarts Founders, or even if she’d still preferred to keep her hair loose and free instead of confined in a twist. He didn’t know what her favorite color had been; because what if it had changed? He didn’t know, he never would know, and…and now Harry was asking questions as if he of all people held the secrets to a universe neither of them would ever know or understand again.

What am I supposed to do?

There was no answer, but Severus had long since learned there never was.

—

Harry bent over the sink, splashing his face with cold water to rid his cheeks of the angry flush staining them, and the tear tracks he was surprised Snape hadn’t commented on. His nose was stuffed to hell and his eyes looked far too bright. Scrutinizing himself in the mirror, he leaned back down and splashed his face another few times, and then straightened and dried himself off before leaning against the closed door.

That had been a disaster. He was supposed to have gotten answers, was supposed to have finally broken Snape down and gotten him to speak to him. But it had been useless as always.

It was all because of the dream. He’d been in the graveyard, had watched Cedric die again—and his parents had appeared. They’d come to him, only their eyes were stained red, and their smiles were as cold as the Black Lake had been, back in February. But their voices…their voices. The soft timbre of his mother’s voice came rushing back to him; Harry closed his eyes against tears pricking at them. It had been the first time he’d ever heard his mother speak outside of her death.

And now Snape refused to talk about it.

Harry shut the tap off and rubbed at his eyes, sighing sharply. A lightbulb above the mirror flickered and the room dimmed before stuttering back into…well, it hadn’t been exactly bright before, either.

He twisted the doorknob slowly, until it reached the end of its rotation, and very carefully opened the door a crack—just enough to peer out for signs of an angry Snape. Harry adjusted his glasses and squinted through the gloom to find that the man hadn’t so much as stood up since he’d left the table. He was slumped forward, face buried in his hands, eyes covered and hair askew. Then, as Harry continued watching in silence, Snape stood up and stumbled to the side, catching himself on the counter before he could fall. Snape reached up briefly to touch the bruised half of his face. He vanished into the dark of the living room only a moment later; Harry edged out into the kitchen as the sound of heavy, fumbling footsteps sounded overhead and then quieted. Snape’s bedroom door creaked shut and the house began to settle back down from its momentary disturbance. And Harry, in response, was faintly unnerved to find that he found the sounds comforting. This house didn’t feel
as unfamiliar as it had at the beginning; he’d begun to learn its patterns, from how long the shower would stay hot, to the best burner on the stove. He knew how to scale the stairs without causing grievous injury. And best—or perhaps worst—of all, Harry had begun to familiarize himself with Snape’s moods and daily activities. He knew the man’s sleeping schedule, and what he suspected might be his favorite foods. He’d seen his mood even out when he’d had his morning coffee. Harry had even caught him stuffing the last of the Oreos in his mouth at once before hiding the package under a heap of rubbish. They’d had arguments that hadn’t ended with a deadly poison in his cereal the next morning. He’d completed his summer work (with a bit of help). Snape had even allowed Hedwig to deliver mail from his friends; and he hadn’t put up a fuss about it.

And now the great, ugly git was ruining it all, just because he wouldn’t tell Harry about his own mum.

Where did Snape get off on that? he wondered furiously, throwing himself down onto the sofa and shoving his feet under his tangle of blankets, kicking them back up around his knees so that he could make a grab for them and tuck them around his shoulders. Did he enjoy keeping facts about his mum to his greasy self? Harry’s mum. He’d known her. And refused to tell him anything!

He turned over in one jerky movement, and then had to readjust and pull a blanket out from under his elbow. Harry pulled his knees to his chest and scowled into the darkness. Snape was a bastard. A fucking bastard. (Snape wasn’t the only one who could use that word.)

“Was it the cupboard?”

And what had that been about? The cupboard? He’d told Snape it had just been a one-off incident. And—and all right, he wasn’t the best liar, but that should have been the end of it. The cupboard was in the past. It needed to stay in the past. What gave Snape the right to poke into his personal business, and then refuse to tell him about his mum?

Harry yawned widely and tucked his hands up under his cheek. He would just have to try again. Next time, he would wait for a moment when Snape was more vulnerable. It was Harry’s mother, after all. He deserved to know more.

All he needed to do was find an opportunity.

Chapter End Notes

This one is a bit short, but I'll have the next one up soon! Anyway, so I’d actually originally meant for this fic to only go to the end of summer, but I think I might actually either write a sequel that continues on into the actual school year, or just keep posting chapters onto this. I’m thinking a sequel honestly and I already have a general plot laid out for it. This pet project is growing and my brain is saying “uh-oh” but my heart is saying “YES!” Opinions?
Chapter Notes

I’m sorry for the month-long hiatus! I’ve been apartment hunting, working more overtime than usual, and finalizing the moving process. Things have been pretty hectic. I’ve become re-obsessed with the band Nothing But Thieves in the last few days, specifically the songs Particles, Afterlife, and Soda. Anyway, without further ado:

The chapter in which the entire gang collectively plots against Severus in multiple different ways and the author screams from the sidelines, “Everyone beat ‘im with your sticks!”

I fucked up, were the first coherent words that went through Severus’s mind as he woke up the next morning, hot and sticky and coated in a layer of sweat under his blanket. The next coherent words were a jumbled mix of swears as he tried to get out of bed and immediately regretted it when his entire body violently protested the motion. Falling backwards onto his mussed bedsheets with his legs hanging off the side, Severus stopped to take a few deep breaths, and then shoved himself off the mattress and onto his feet in one painful movement. His back popped as he did it. And his arms. And hips. Knees.

He allowed himself a few seconds’ rest, and then took a step forward, and another, until one of his legs gave out without warning. Severus caught himself on the nightstand, knocking a stack of books onto the floor. He struggled to get himself upright. Breathing hard as though he’d just finished running a mile, he took another hesitant step to test the knee that had crumpled on him. It held steady. Then, pulling himself out of the stale clothing he’d been wearing for a long enough time that he felt ashamed to even think about it, Severus tugged on a fresh set of robes and ventured downstairs to make himself something to eat before the boy could work up the nerve to poison him.

Gryffindor courage, and all that rot.

Severus found the house to be oddly silent, even at a quarter til noon; it put him on edge. He hadn’t left Potter in good spirits the night before. Had the boy run off? Was he lying in wait somewhere, watching him? The skin on the back of his neck prickled at the very thought. Allowing himself a surreptitious glance round the room, he fumbled his way to the kitchen on feet that couldn’t quite cooperate, straining his ears for any sign of life.

The bundle of blankets on the sofa moved as he neared it. His wand was in his hand before he could so much as intake breath; Severus shaped his lips round an automatic curse—and caught sight of those familiar, abhorrent glasses. His wand clattered to the floor as he forced himself to drop it, lest he do something he might regret.

“What are you doing?” he said lowly, as Potter stared at him with wide eyes, frozen in place on the sofa.

“I’m reading,” Potter replied, slowly raising a book out of the pyramid of blankets he’d created.

Severus bent to pick up his wand, even though taking his eyes off the boy made his entire body tense as though preparing for an attack. It was only Potter. Gryffindor recklessness or not, this Potter was
not wont to attack others when their back was turned.

(Admitting that did not make him feel bitter. Not at all.)

“Have you eaten?” he asked, keeping his tone cool and unconcerned as he continued on to the kitchen. Severus started a pot of coffee and dropped into the same chair at the stove from the night before.

Potter’s voice drifted in from the next room over, just barely loud enough to be heard over the coffeemaker. “Not yet. I found something that looked interesting, and I s’pose it was more interesting than I’d thought...Er—you don’t mind me reading your books, do you?”

The boy was acting suspiciously polite. Had he fallen ill? He’d looked poorly the night before, but had it only been from the apparent nightmare he’d had, or had he picked up a virus somewhere? It wouldn’t do for Potter to develop an illness on the day of the—visit from—

Severus realized the boy was still waiting for a response. Jerking out of the momentary panic he’d fallen into, he said, “I trust you not to cause property damage, if only marginally.”

“So you don’t mind?”

“Do not make me repeat myself.” Severus stood to pour himself a cuppa. He took a sip and was more than a little annoyed when he found he couldn’t taste the coffee, only to remember he’d burned his taste buds off with the tea last night, and became angrier still. He settled himself back into his chair to drink his coffee and stew in self-loathing.

Whatever progress had been made in the last eleven days seemed to have unraveled like a ball of yarn wound too loose. As morning trudged by, Severus couldn’t help but notice a dramatic decline to whatever truce he and Potter had made. They weren’t speaking beyond the necessities; questions of who was to bathe first, or whether the other wanted food yet—and no matter how blasé Potter acted, Severus could feel the tenseness between them as keenly as he felt the bruises littering his aching body.

He should have known the boy would’ve eventually asked. He should have expected an interrogation at some point during his stay here, especially after the playground incident, when that woman at Tesco had told the him God only knew what. The fact that he had been completely blindsided the night before was ultimately his own fault.

Potter had found the book from the night before and buried himself in a mound of blankets, presumably in order to have a suitable excuse to ignore Severus, but the plan had seemed to have worked a little too well. Potter had shifted in his seat, knees up past the table, book balanced on his legs as he leaned over it, absently pushing his glasses back up his nose each time they began to slip.

If Potter could only turn that single-minded focus onto his studies, Hogwarts would be a much different place.

It was past one by the time Potter emerged from his book and sat up to stretch and look round sleepily. Severus glanced up from his own book. “D’you mind if I borrow this?” the boy asked hesitantly. “I’ll give it back, but it’s big. I dunno if I can finish it by the time I leave.”

“What is it?” Severus asked, before he could stop himself.

“It’s called Snow Crash. By Neal Stephenson.”

He remembered that book. He’d bought it some years ago, at a small bookstore in London that he
couldn’t recall the name of. It hadn’t been the idea of the book that had drawn him in—a
technologically savvy mafia with a side of virtual reality and narcotics was interesting, he supposed,
but not something he had a preference for. But it was something his father would have hated.
Severus liked to buy things his father would have hated.

“Heaven forbid I discourage a Potter from reading something,” he said in the most sarcastic voice he
could muster. “I expect it back by the end of first term.”

_You’re too lenient on the boy_, a small voice in the back of his head whispered, but Severus ignored
it.

For the first time that day, Potter smiled, a faint and flickering thing before he dragged himself out of
his pyramid of blankets and stretched properly. “Thanks. Sir.”

It was only when the clock on the mantle struck two that Severus made himself get up and begin
preparing lunch. This visit from Lupin and Black was going to be horrific and potentially
traumatizing to all, but at least none of them could accuse him of starving Potter. They would even
have the pleasure of walking in as their precious godson sat down to eat.

He desperately needed to make another shopping trip, Severus realized as he pried open the fridge
and found only a head of broccoli, an inch of milk, and half a jar of pasta sauce. Hadn’t he bought
noodles some time ago? Opening the cupboards one at a time until he managed to recover an
unopened bag of pasta shells, he pulled a clean pot out from within the depths of his cabinets and set
it to boil on the stove.

“How is it, then?” he asked without truly meaning to, gesturing to the book the boy had brought with
him to the table.

“It’s great!” Potter enthused, and immediately launched into a detailed description of the plot and
characters, rambling at a speed he’d seen only previously accomplished by Ms. Granger. Severus
half-listened as he stirred noodles into the pot and Summoned a bowl and fork onto the counter. “But
my favorite is Y.T. Ron would say she’s a true Gryffindor.”

“Reckless and bordering on stupidity, then?” Severus muttered, but the boy didn’t seem to notice.

“Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon would hate this book,” he continued on, grinning widely.

Tuney had never been fond of anything that wasn’t cold, hard fact; Severus couldn’t imagine her
marrying somebody who didn’t share the same views. A book such as Snow Crash could be
considered an accessory to the antichrist in her household.

“Here,” he said, setting the bowl of pasta down in front of the boy. “Wait until you’ve finished to
continue reading. I won’t have you spilling sauce on my book.”

Potter set to devouring his pasta as Severus poured himself a second cup of coffee. Adding enough
sugar to send a toddler into the fourth dimension, he took a sip, and then grimaced when he
remembered once more that he couldn’t taste it. He downed half of it in one go and set the mug aside
with a sigh.

“S’wrong?” Potter asked through a half-chewed mouthful of noodles.

“Never you mind.”

“Did something happen when you were with Vol—_him_? Has he made plans yet? Has anything
happened? Where _is_ he, anyway?” The boy pushed his bowl aside as he talked, giving his full
attention to Severus, who rather wished he wouldn’t. “Is he at Draco’s house? Is he still in hiding? Has the Ministry—”

“Enough,” Severus snapped, shutting him up in an instant. “These are not the sorts of things you should be wondering, Potter. You are a fifteen-year-old boy and should be focusing on fifteen-year-old boy activities. It is not your job to think about war efforts.”

“But—”

“Enough, I said.” He drained the last of his coffee and reached for the pot to pour himself a third cup when there was a knock on the door. “And that should be Lupin. Late as usual, but I suppose we’ve all grown to accept that at this point.”

“Is it that day already?” Potter asked. “I thought he wasn’t supposed to be here until tomorrow.”

“There has been a change in plans. Remain seated, and eat your tea.”

Leaving the boy there, Severus ventured out into the living room and looked through the spyhole to see Lupin’s blurry visage. Sighing deeply, he wrenched the lock aside, and opened the door to find himself looking Arthur Weasley in the face.

For a split second, Severus found himself yet again blindsided, unsure of what to say. He snapped out of it quickly enough to speak before Weasley could open his mouth, saying snidely, “I do believe you have the wrong house. The Ministry is some distance away from here.”

“For the record,” Remus fucking Lupin murmured from behind Weasley, eyes averted and expression suitably ashamed, “this was in no way my idea.”

Black burst into the house without preamble, barking and yipping at a volume his neighbors had likely never heard beyond the sound of their own screaming arguments. Severus didn’t hesitate to aim a sharp kick in the mutt’s direction as he grabbed both Lupin and Weasley and yanked them inside before slamming the door shut. “Shut up!” he hissed at Potter’s disgusting godfather. “Do you want the entire town knowing you’re here?”

“Merlin forbid your neighbors think there’s a dog somewhere in this shithole,” said Black, who’d transformed the instant the door closed—only to be knocked near flat on his ass when Potter raced out from the kitchen to seize him in a hug.

“Sirius! What are you doing here?” the boy wheezed, as Black lifted him clear off the ground with a bone-crushing hug of his own. “I didn’t know you were coming!”

“I wanted to surprise you,” Black said with a grin, ruffling Potter’s hair til it stood on end. “How have you been? I’m afraid we’ve been running Ron’s owl ragged with all of our letters, and by the way, yours haven’t had much detail, you know, as if someone’s been keeping you from writing—”

“I’ve not so much as looked at the boy’s mail,” Severus snarled before he could stop himself.

“All right, let’s not start a row before we’ve even been here five minutes,” Lupin said quickly, cutting them all off. He looked uneasy; there were shadows, more prominent than usual, under his eyes. “We’re not here for a fight. Remember, Sirius? We’re here to see Harry, to check on his Occlumency progress, and ensure the situation is still going smoothly. No more than that.”

“Right, right,” Black agreed. He still had an arm round Potter’s shoulder. He looked round the room, wrinkled his nose, and nodded decisively. “Right. I want to see the storage room.”
“Of course,” Severus said without skipping a beat, “when hens grow teeth.”

“I’m not sure what hens have to do with this, Sniv, but I can arrange that if I need to.”

“Get out of my house,” he said next. “All if you. Now.”

“You spend far too much time at my mouldering pit. You can call this returning the favor, because I believe it’s time I’ve snooped around your mouldering pit.” Black ruffled Potter’s hair again, looking entirely too smug. Severus wanted to punch him in the fucking face. He resisted the temptation, just barely, and forced himself to instead focus on Lupin, who was still guiltily avoiding his gaze.

The wolf didn’t take long to cave at his glaring. “I apologize, Severus,” he said, reaching a hand out and then assumably thinking better of it as his arm dropped limply back to his side. “It hadn’t been my intention to bring anyone with me today.”

“And I’m sorry for arriving unannounced,” Arthur cut in. He was fiddling with his crooked glasses. “When Remus mentioned he was going to be visiting today, I convinced him to bring me along.”

“Is something wrong?” Potter asked suddenly. He pulled away from Black and straightened out of the sideways slump he’d fallen into while leaning into his godfather. “Why are you all here? Sorry, that was a bit rude, but…”

“We’re all just a tad concerned about some of the details we’ve heard from both Severus and Remus,” Arthur said quickly, “but Harry, there’s nothing to worry about. Everything is fine.”

If possible, Potter looked even more gormless than before. “Details? About what?”

“That’s enough,” Severus snapped. He didn’t need the boy to become fixated on the storage room—not when he knew how to go up the stairs. He would begin Warding the door if Potter showed even the slightest sign of interest. “Potter, go eat your tea.”

“But—”

“Now.”

The boy had begun to slink off to the kitchen when Black reached out an arm and grabbed Potter by the shoulder. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t order my godson around like a personal slave, Snape. You can stay if you’d like, Harry. You don’t need to leave just because Snape here wants to talk about you.”

“This is my house, and he is currently under my rules,” Severus snarled. “Potter. To the kitchen.”

“And he’s my godson. Harry, stay,” Black said with equal ferocity.

“Everyone calm down,” Arthur said firmly, stepping in between the two of them, breaking their line of sight. “We’re here to see the storage room, Sirius, and to see Harry—not to have a row with Severus. We’re not here to attack him.”

“Attack him? No one is attacking Sn—”

“What storage room?” Potter demanded, looking round wildly. “You mean the room upstairs? What’s going on? Sirius?”

“To the kitchen,” Severus ordered once again, just as Black opened his fat fucking mouth and said, “Arthur came back looking as if he’d seen a Dementor in ol’ Snivelly’s house, and I’d like to know
A boiling surge of hostility and embarrassment erupted in him, ricocheting through his entire body until Severus was no more capable of speaking than he was of turning into an elephant and crushing everyone in the room. “What—did you—tell them?” he managed to ground out after a brief struggle, hands balled into shaking fists at his sides as he fixed Weasley with the most dangerous glare he could muster.

Arthur frowned and adjusted his glasses once more. “I was very concerned, and I told Remus as such. Severus, I’ve not mentioned anything personal—”

“Then what—is—this?”

“This is a visit to check on Harry’s Occlumency progress,” Remus said loudly, before anyone else could speak. “Nothing more than that. If you were to allow me—yes, Padfoot, me, not you—to see the storage room, I would be appreciative, but it is by no means necessary. I’m only here to ensure Harry’s environment continues to be a safe one. That was the terms of our deal.”

Severus forced his breathing to steady. Though there was no doubt in his mind of whether Black would make an attempt to go up the stairs—hopefully breaking his neck in the process—knowing someone else would be there to supervise the bloody creep was…reassuring. “Occlumency is progressing,” he said shortly, once he felt capable of speaking at a normal tone. “Potter has—”

“I found out how to kick him out of my head!” Potter burst out.

“Do not interrupt—”

“Really?” Black beamed. “That’s wonderful news! You’ll be with me, where you belong, before you know it.”

He made a soft, frustrated noise without meaning to. Picking up on it, Lupin finally requested that they move to the kitchen so the boy could finally eat his lunch, shooting a pointed look at the mutt when he opened his mouth to presumably protest the motion.

*My kitchen is too fucking tiny for this,* Severus thought with a faint sense of déjà vu, leaning against the counter and holding back the multiple curses at the tip of his tongue at the sight of Black opening cupboard doors to peek inside.

“Not much to eat,” the mutt said.

“I have plans to visit the grocery today, though I fail to see how it’s any of your business.”

“Lots of dishes in the sink, too. Shabby, too.”

“And I’m sure Grimmauld Place is better.”

“I’m just saying—”

“Sirius,” Lupin snapped, running a hand roughly through his greying hair, “let it be, would you? Harry has been well-fed and has full access to the loo. He’s clean and safe. A day’s worth of dishes are not going to kill him.”

Taking a bite of his likely-cold pasta, Potter nodded and mumbled, “M’all right, Sirius. It’s not all bad here.”
Unsure whether to feel astonished or vindicated, Severus settled for feeling as though he had a nasty bout of indigestion. “Yes, Black,” he said silkily, “it is not all bad here.”

Black glowered at him from behind a curtain of hair. Flicking an errant lock away from his face, he asked, “Where’s that storage room, then?”

“Sirius—”

“You may view the storage room,” Severus said slowly, and allowed himself a twisted grin when both Black and Lupin looked round with startled expressions, “on one condition. I will not tell the boy what your plan here is—seeing as how I have no part in it, of course. If you can sufficiently explain to him what exactly you are all doing here, you may have free reign to search and snoop as you please.”

“Ah, well,” Remus said carefully, and then looked at Arthur.

“That is…”

_Gryffindors_, Severus thought bitterly, as none of them would meet his eye, and the room fell silent. _Bloody cowards, the lot of them._
“What,” Harry asked slowly, looking around at them all and finding himself bewildered when only Snape would meet his eyes, “what’s going on? Tell me what? Has something happened? Is everyone safe?”

“Everyone is safe,” Arthur assured, though his voice was subdued. “The reason why we’re here is, well…”

“These three,” Snape said suddenly, looking oddly satisfied, “believe you to be in danger, Potter.”

Harry frowned. “I’m not. I already said I wasn’t.”

“Not from me, though your precious godfather here believes otherwise. They mean Tuney and her delightful husband.” There was a sneer playing at the corners of Snape’s mouth, but his eyes were as dark and cold as the water beneath a frozen lake.

“Tun—you mean Aunt Petunia?” he spluttered, pushing his pasta aside. “She’s not nice, but—she’s not—”

“I’ve had concerns about your home life for some time now,” Mr. Weasley interrupted. Snape’s neck twisted to look at him with a speed that looked painful. Removing his lopsided glasses, Mr. Weasley began cleaning them jerkily, eyes fixed on the grimy window above the sink, where rain lashed and streamed. It seemed to echo the mood of the house. “Back in your second year was when it began. Molly told me Ron had given his excuses for rescuing you—he said they starving you, Harry, and that there had been bars placed on the window of your bedroom. When I questioned Fred and George, they agreed. Fred told me he’d had to unlock the cupboard under the stairs to retrieve your school supplies. He said…” Mr. Weasley faltered, before straightening his shoulders and taking a seat at the table. “He told me there had been a small cot inside.”

“Why are you just now saying something?” Harry asked, numb, with his fingers twisting together in his lap. He struggled not to become angry. “I’m—I’m not saying you’re right! But if you’ve been thinking this, then—then why—”

“There’s more,” Snape said harshly, arms crossed tightly over his thin chest. Snape really was rather skinny, Harry thought dazedly, now staring at the table without really seeing it. Skinny and mean—like a dog that had been starved and beaten so often it became feral. “Tell him.”

“Severus has seen—things—in your memories. Although he hasn’t told us any specifics, the little he has given away is…concerning.”

“Don’t drag me into this,” Snape warned. “I have nothing to do with it. I have stated this clearly.”

“Why now?” Harry asked again.

“We’re worried about you,” Sirius said. He took a seat at the table, swinging the chair around so that their knees touched. “When I asked you to live with me, you agreed immediately—even though you’d thought I betrayed James and Lily less than an hour before. And whatever Snape told Arthur, well…We’re here to discuss it.”
It all circled back to Snape, in the end. Looking up slowly, Harry fixed him with a glare, and couldn’t help the fury that blasted through him when Snape glared back without a word. “What did you tell them?” he demanded. “You’ve never said anything before. You don’t care about the things you see. I know you don’t. So why are you working with them?”

“I’m not,” Snape snarled, throwing his hands in the air and looking as though he was tempted to storm out of the room. “Why you all insist that I am is beyond me, however, the point stands that they believe you to be in danger. This is not my doing, Potter. You are not entirely unintelligent, though your deplorable essays suggest otherwise. You know to ask adults for help if you need it, and you know they will assist you to their greatest extent.”

Only—that wasn’t true, was it? Harry wondered. McGonagall had ignored their warnings about the Philosopher’s Stone in his first year; and Lockhart had attempted to erase his mind when he’d—er—recruited him for the journey down to the Chamber of Secrets. Moody had turned out to be a murderer attempting (and succeeding) to bring Voldemort back.

Adults had never done anything for Harry. For Snape to suggest otherwise was laughable.

And so he did laugh, shaking his head. “That’s a lie, and you know it, Snape. I’ve asked for help loads of times.”

“What about your family?” Lupin asked gently.

“No. Or, well… I s’pose, maybe once. I told Dumbledore”—Snape snorted derisively—“but he didn’t really listen.”

“You told him? That old coot?” said Snape. “And what exactly did you say?”

Harry frowned at him. “I said I didn’t want to go back there.”

It was Snape’s turn to laugh now. “Is that all, Potter? Did you neglect to regale him with tales of how your family? Did you say they put cigarettes out on the back of your neck, or drank themselves into oblivion before beating you until you couldn’t even dream of crawling away? Did you tell them about the belt? Did you tell them they caned you, or hit you with frying pans? Hit you with their car? Forced you to cook for them, only to be denied the food you made? Did you mention the cupboard under the stairs?”

Head swimming with too many thoughts and too many questions, Harry eventually managed to stutter, “U-Uncle Vernon doesn’t smoke. And he never hit me with a car. And I could always… run…”

“Yes,” said Snape silkily, eyes boring into his own, “I know. Weasley, Lupin, I have done all that I am willing to do. This is now your responsibility.”

Mr. Weasley and Professor Lupin were staring at Snape with expressions Harry couldn’t even begin to comprehend, but when Sirius moved to put a firm hand on his shoulder, the others turned their attention on him—and Harry could not help but feel like a butterfly caught in a trap of pins. He swallowed hard.

“This isn’t an interrogation, Harry,” Lupin assured him, taking the last seat at the rickety table. He smiled softly and leaned forward on his elbows. “You’re not in any trouble. We’re only worried about you. Nothing you say will be used against you. Not by me, not by Arthur, not by Sirius, and not by Severus. If you’d like, you can even choose one of us to speak to, instead of us all together. We don’t intend to make you uncomfortable or frighten you.”
He was breathing too quickly. Swallowing again, even though his mouth was too dry and all it did was make his throat sting, Harry shook his head and muttered, “It’s fine with all of you. You’d just tell each other later.”

“You’re right,” Sirius chuckled. “We would.” He sobered quickly, though, and squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “Remus is right. We’re here because we’re concerned. You’re worth our concern and our time. We only want you to be safe. You don’t need to tell us anything you don’t want to, kid. You’re in charge here.”

“You’re worth protecting. We want to help,” Mr. Weasley said.

Harry’s breath caught in his throat. Squeezing his eyes shut to stave off the pressure behind them, he inhaled sharply and nodded once. “Okay,” he breathed, and then started talking.

—

“He’s never hit me with his car,” Potter muttered, staring at his hands twisted in his lap. “And he doesn’t smoke. He does drink, but not like…And he’s never hit me until I couldn’t walk.”

“And the rest?” Weasley murmured, cleaning his glasses for a third time.

“He’s only belted me once. Never again. Just once, before second year.”

“When you say ‘he,’” Lupin said, “do you mean—?”

“Uncle Vernon.”

Severus did not want to hear any of this. He felt shaky and weak, like he’d only just begun to get over a serious bout of illness. Breathing deeply, he ran a hand through his hair and eased his hips back against the counter, gazing out the window at the rain beating against the glass. He closed his aching eyes and wished, not for the first time, that he was still capable of tuning out the world around him as he had as a child.

“And the cupboard?”

“My Hogwarts letter had my cupboard on it. They gave me Dudley’s second bedroom after that.”

“Second bedroom? The boy had two?”

“Er, it was more like a graveyard. Broken toys and televisions. I dunno why they didn’t just throw all of them out. I s’pose it was a way to keep me out of there, you know? If it was empty, then they’d have to give it to me. It was the only room of the house Aunt Petunia didn’t want kept spotless.”

“Who cleans the house?”

“Sometimes me, sometimes her. I do a lot of the work. The flower garden outside is mine, really, and I did the shopping when I was young so she could go to have her hair and nails done. I’ve done the cooking since I was young.”

“How young?”

“Maybe five. I can’t really remember.”
Severus couldn’t blame him. It all tended to blur together in the end, until one day you realized you couldn’t remember how old you’d been the first time they neglected to feed you, or the first time they’d held you down and—

It had been years since he’d even tried to make sense of the fog of his childhood; and even longer since he’d wanted to remember any of it in the first place. Sometimes it was better to have forgotten the details.

Potter would not be a happy man the day it began to return to him in his dreams. God knows he hadn’t been.

“Did they ever cane you?”

“O-Once or twice. It wasn’t them that did it much, really, but it was my Aunt Marge. Uncle Vernon’s sister; she’s not related, thank God. She’d hit me round the knees if I beat Dudley at anything. There was this one time, at his birthday party…”

Potter trailed off into a story void of many details, though what he did tell painted a grim picture. Something had felt wrong, Severus thought, and now he’d been proven correct. This was no surprise. Everything he dreaded came to pass eventually. It had only been a matter of time.

He would have to tell Albus. There was no other option.

“But she only comes around once or twice a year,” Potter finished, “so it’s not as if I see her often.”

“Has your family ever withheld food? As a punishment or otherwise?”

“A few times. They’ve never starved me, but they’ve never let me eat until I was full. In the summer before second year, they only gave me a can of soup every day, and I had to give Hedwig half of it so she could eat too.”

“That’s starvation, Harry. You don’t need to make light of this. What they’ve done to you is wrong,” Weasley said firmly. “You have done nothing to warrant this.”

“Y-Yeah, I know.”

Did he, though? Truly?

The interrogation (they could call it whatever they wished, but Severus had never believed in sugar-coating the truth) ended shortly after, when the boy simply stopped responding, choosing instead to stare hard at the table and his abandoned lunch. The occupants of the room seemed to collectively exhale and lean back. Lupin rubbed as his eyes as Weasley dabbed at the perspiration beading his brow. The mutt gingerly wrapped an arm round Potter’s shoulders and pulled him close without speaking. Severus’s eyes followed the movement as though his brain was instinctively trying to commit the idea of it to memory.

“We’ll have to talk to Albus,” Weasley said after a time, sighing. Potter’s head shot up out of its slump. “Harry, I’m sorry, but we have no choice. This is not something that can be kept to ourselves. Albus has to know. It isn’t safe for you to remain there any longer. Dumbledore will be able to arrange a new home for you.”

“He won’t let that happen,” Potter said flatly.

“And what makes you say that?” Severus snapped, tensing when they all looked round at him.
“The blood wards, remember? I have to stay with Aunt Petunia.”

“Then we’ll separate her from her husband,” he said.

“Severus, we can’t simply remove the woman from her home and separate her from her husband and child,” Lupin said, pressing his fingertips into the hollows of his eyes. “Not only because it would be morally reprehensible, but I can only imagine the level of retaliation she would turn onto Harry.”

“Aunt Petunia hates me,” the boy agreed.

*Right now, I don’t blame her.* “You are being purposely difficult,” Severus said, “and you’ve allowed your tea to go cold. We will be telling Dumbledore no matter what you say.”

“I’ve got it,” Black muttered when Potter dragged his cold pasta towards him and went to take a half-hearted bite. Tapping his wand against the bowl, he patted the boy on the back when steam quivered up out of it. “There you are—like new. Have you been getting enough food?”

Potter dug in easily this time, humming around a mouthful of food before swallowing and saying, “Yeah. He won’t let me cook anymore, though.”

“That’s good,” Lupin said, and though his tone was mild and as unreadable as ever, he looked vaguely contemplative.

“I like cooking, though.”

“It still shouldn’t be your job. You’re a child under Severus’s care. You’re not supposed to take care of him.”

Was that the core of Potter’s problems? Severus suddenly realized, looking up from the crack in the linoleum he’d been studying. His recklessness, his tendency to jump into danger at the first sign of it, without any regard to his own health or safety—his insistence on helping him up the stairs after a summoning, or to cook for him—did it all stem from the role of caretaker that had been thrust upon him from an early age? *Maybe five,* the boy had said. Had he grown up under the assumption that the needs of others were more important, and that his own were to be neglected and forgotten? How far did the roots go? How much of Harry’s Gryffindor heroics were his personality, and how much of it had merely been hammered into him from childhood?

“Do you enjoy cooking?” he asked, too quietly; his question took a moment to register. “Or do you have to?”

“I like it,” Potter insisted. “Really. I dunno why that’s so hard for everyone to understand.”

“I will be holding you to the new rule, either way,” Severus said. “Two meals a week. No more, no less.”

Any calm he’d managed to dredge up seemed to drain away the moment he looked away from the boy, and realized Weasley and Lupin were staring intently at him. Severus’s heart stuttered in his chest. “What?” he muttered, itching for a cigarette.

“Severus.” Lupin seemed entirely too grim, too quiet, and too fucking pitying. “We held up our end of the deal. The storage room, please. I’d like to see it.”

He should have made himself feel more empathy during the boy’s interrogation, Severus thought as all eyes in the room turned onto him like burning spotlights. He felt like a specimen pinned down for study. Resisting a reflexive swallow, he forced himself to nod and turn out of the room to lead them
up the stairs, as envy for Potter burned even deeper than the eyes on him had—because no one had ever comforted him, and he should have stopped wanting it years ago.

Chapter End Notes

I've been playing Sims 4 Seasons and reading nonstop for days now. It's been nice. The books "Ink" by Alice Broadway, and "The Hazel Wood" by Melissa Albert are gorgeous books with even more gorgeous covers, and I highly recommend reading them!
July, 1974

It was hot. The sun was baking the sidewalk under his bare feet, burning his soles like the asphalt was tattooing markings into his skin. Severus swiped his hair out of his eyes and raised himself up onto his toes to avoid the heat, shoes swinging in his free hand.

He was running late. He’d been due at the playground a half hour before, but Mum hadn’t let him leave without an argument. Lily would be worrying. (Not that she didn’t always, when he came late.) After a moment’s hesitation, he dropped back down from his toes and quickened his pace, keen on getting there before Lily lost patience and left. She never had before, but Severus could feel a change in her lately. They weren’t as close as before.

It was that fucking Potter’s fault, was what it was. Potter and his stupid friends. Lily acted like she hated the pompous prick, but Severus knew better; he’d seen them bantering at their House table at dinner, when Lily thought he wouldn’t notice. He’d seen.

She was getting tired of him.

And if he wasn’t careful, Severus reminded himself, she was going to tire of waiting for him. He gripped his shoes tighter—he’d left in such a rush, there hadn’t been time to shove them on—and broke into a light jog; enough to shorten the distance, but not enough to draw the attention of the owners of the neat little houses lining the streets. They already didn’t like him. He saw the way they squinted at him suspiciously from behind their drapes. Severus saw all of it. He had to be aware.

Better to see a slap coming and brace yourself, than to be caught off guard.

He took a shortcut through an underbrush of leaves, snagging his coat on thorns as he forced his way through. The playground was in sight now, and—there was Lily, looking round like he would materialize out of the early morning mist at any moment. “Lily!” he called, waving his shoes in the air.

“Sev, you’re late!” she shouted back, jumping off her swing and racing towards him. They met in the middle of the playground, panting in the heat. Gesturing to him, she asked, “What was it, your parents again?”

“No,” he lied, dropping to the ground to tug on his shoes. She settled herself in the grass next to him. “I overslept.”

“Oh, but I thought—” And she stopped, suddenly, with her hand halfway raised in the air. “Sev, your eye…”

Severus twitched his hair in front of his face, like a curtain, and rummaged through his pockets for a cigarette so that he could turn away from her to smoke it. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not—nothing, Sev, that looks really bad. What happened?”

They weren’t as close as they used to be, and Severus could feel her withdrawing further and further as they aged. Best friend or not, this was not something he could tell her about—tell anyone about—
because he knew what it would do. It would not help. It would only push her further away.

They weren’t… close like they used to be.

He breathed in slowly and deeply, forcing his worries and fears to sink deep down, and detach themselves from him into a world of fog. Severus smiled at Lily. It felt almost real. “Nothing happened. Don’t worry about me. Now, you were going to tell me what Tuney said to you yesterday…”

—

“Here,” Severus muttered, shoving the door open as far as it would go, automatically switching to breathing through his mouth so that he wouldn’t have to smell the musty stench of mothballs that always seeped from the room. The others lacked the foresight; Black’s disgusted expression was almost enough to make him smile, if not for the anxious thoughts racing through his head, pushing out all else. “Feel free to explore to your heart’s content, so long as you don’t destroy anything.”

“What the bloody hell is this?” Black said, looking round with a grimace. “I thought you said this was a storage room.”

“And I did not lie,” he said flatly, throwing a jerky gesture at the books in the corner. “There is my storage.”

“Did Harry follow us here?” Lupin asked suddenly.

Potter had managed to edge his way in behind the group before the bookshelf had snapped shut; Severus could see the faint outline of him at the bottom of the stairs. Waving his wand, he shut the door with a sense of foreboding and cast a silent *Muffliato*. “Unless he knows to listen through the venting, he won’t hear you.”

“I want him out of that house,” Weasley stated without preamble. “His relatives aren’t fit to raise a child of any kind, let alone a magical one.”

“And where do you propose we send him?” Lupin said, and though his voice was weary, his eyes were nothing but alert, studying each crevice of the room like he was peeling away at an ancient mystery. Severus’s skin crawled at the sight of it. He wished suddenly, desperately, that he’d had the forethought to Banish most of the room’s contents before they’d come to interrogate him.

“The boy is correct in that there aren’t many places to put him,” Severus said as slowly as he dared, hoping to keep their attention focused on Potter’s plight as long as he could. “The blood wards are —”

“Fuck the blood wards,” Black spat. “My godson is more important than some goddamn blood wards.”

“Those ‘goddamn blood wards’ are the only thing keeping your precious godson safe,” Severus snarled back.

“All we’re doing is riling ourselves up,” Lupin sighed, looking round again, as if searching for someplace to sit. “But I suppose that can’t be helped. Severus, we need to talk. I know you don’t want to, but this can no longer be avoided.”
“There’s nothing for us to discuss,” he said dismissively, staring at the linens spilling out of the wardrobe to join the rest of the mess on the floor.

“This was your childhood home,” the werewolf continued like he hadn’t said a word. “I know that much. Did it always look like this? Or has this been a recent development?”

Looking at him incredulously, Severus said derisively, “No, this used to be a vast palace. It was only after I turned thirty that it split apart like Pangaea and attracted all sorts of unsavory families. In fact, the Richardsons next door are merely a figment of your imagination. I’ve Confunded you all. Welcome to Snape Manor.”

“Pangaea?” Weasley muttered under his breath, brows furrowed.

“So it looked the same as it does now, if not worse,” Lupin said, raising an eyebrow. “Is that right? That doesn’t sound like the sort of environment a child should be raised in.”

“It seems as though we have very different ideas on the sorts of environments a child should be raised in.”

“Are you implying Harry is fine with his relatives?” Black spoke up, looking thunderous. “They’ve beaten and starved him, Snivellus, and you’re saying there’s nothing wrong with that? This is exactly what I was fucking trying to tell Albus, Remus—he couldn’t give a damn about Harry. I know these two think you’ve turned a new leaf, but I haven’t forgotten who you are. They think you know what Harry has been through, but I know better.”

“Sirius,” Lupin said warningly, but Severus interrupted before he could go on.

“What the boy has been through has not killed him,” he said, clearing his mind to rid himself of the sick, shaky feeling in his gut. He’d long since ground his cigarette to a pulp between his fingers. “Missing a meal once or twice has never killed a child, and a single beating will not destroy his life. He’ll recover from this. Potter is resilient, if nothing else.”

Black shook his head. “You’re sick. Are you saying he deserved it, then? And if he hasn’t told us the truth, and it happened more than once?”

“You,” Severus ground out, “are twisting my words. Get out of my house. We’re done.”

“Everybody calm down,” Weasley ordered, stepping forward to put himself between the two of them. “We’re accomplishing nothing here. Severus, I know full well you see this as an invasion of your privacy, but truthfully, Remus and I are worried there are other children at Hogwarts who have shown signs of abuse but haven’t gotten the help they need. And seeing as how you spend more time with them than any of us, and have first-hand experience in the matter—”

“First-hand experience?” Severus said softly, stepping uncomfortably close to Arthur. “Would you care to elaborate, Weasley?”

“They think the poor prat unfortunate enough to sire you was a Voldemort supporter,” Black said.

“Do not say the name,” Severus burst out, flexing his left hand.

“As for me,” the mutt said airily, waving a dismissive hand at him, “I think you jumped at the chance to join your master, if only to keep Lucius near so you could continue sucking his cock.”

Severus’s wand was out in a flash; Lupin grabbed his arm before he could fire off any spells, wrestling it back down to his side with mortifying ease. “Don’t,” the wolf muttered in his ear when
he made an embarrassing noise in the back of his throat, and attempted to wrench himself free.  
“Don’t do it. Calm down, now.”

“We’re getting nowhere with you here. Sirius, go comfort Harry.” Weasley mopped at his forehead with an old handkerchief and pinched the bridge of his nose. “He’s likely worrying about us, and you’re wasting time spent with him while you’re here with us.”

Severus waited until Black stormed out of the room and down the stairs to yank his arm free. He rubbed his shoulder forcefully. “Don’t fucking touch me,” he snarled when Lupin reached for him again. “I’ll curse your tongue from your mouth if you so much as *look* at me again, werewolf.”

“Would you rather our visit become an outright brawl?” the wolf snapped back.

He’d dropped his cigarette somewhere in the carpet of old clothes. Itching to break something, Severus nudged at a pile of stale-smelling sweaters and didn’t respond. He was breathing as heavily as if he’d just run a kilometer.

“I know you don’t like this.” Lupin ran a hand through his greying hair and lowered his voice. “Neither do we. It’s an invasion of your privacy. Upsetting you isn’t my intention.”

“I’m not *upset,*” Severus muttered, though he was, even through the slate-gray mist of Occlumency shielding him.

“All right, then I don’t like *angering* you. Though I’m not as uncomfortable as I’m sure you are, I’m not enjoying myself in the slightest.”

“Why must you insist on doing this?” he demanded, pushing at another mound of clothing to reveal the scuffed floorboards beneath. The neck of an old bottle glinted out at him, caught in a ray of light; he covered it back up again. “Haven’t you had enough?”

Lupin was too close. Their shoulders brushed together. He could feel the heat radiating off of him, raising goosebumps on his arms and the hairs on the back of his neck. “Harry might not be the only one you’ve missed, Severus. There may be other students.”

“Would you like a detailed account of each bruise and scraped knee I’ve seen in the years I’ve worked there?” He shifted away from the pressure of their shoulders touching. “Or would a simple list of names do?”

“Can…you make one? A list of names, that is?” Weasley asked haltingly. He leaned carefully against the empty bedframe, putting his full weight against the post once he seemed to decide it wouldn’t crack under pressure. “How many are there, Severus?”

“None so severe that they need to be removed from their homes.”

“And what, for you, would constitute a home removal?” Lupin asked in a low voice.

Severus didn’t respond. He stared hard at the wall opposite. Then, when the silence stretched long enough that he almost couldn’t bear it, he managed to say, “Sexual inappropriateness. Overt starvation. Beatings that result in a child being unable to crawl away to save themselves. Internal damage. Physical disfigurement.”

“Do you think you should have been removed from your house, as a child?” Weasley pressed.

“My parents never disfigured me,” Severus scoffed. He rummaged through his pockets to find a new cigarette. It was unlikely he would ever find the last one, if he even bothered to look.
“And the others?” one of them said, though he wasn’t sure which; he’d stared at the wall for so long, he could no longer make out their faces in his peripheral vision, or distinguish their voices. Remus’s shoulder brushing against his with each breath was all that kept him tethered to his body.

He took so long gathering his foggy, fragmented thoughts that whoever had spoken decided to move on and hopefully forget that they’d ever asked at all.

“What would you consider to be physical disfigurement?”

“I consider this conversation to be over,” Severus said tonelessly, breaking his gaze away from the crack on the wall. He pointed to the door. “You’ve all overstayed your welcome. Our deal was that you could see the storage room, and you have seen it. Get out.”

“Thank you for showing us.” Lupin was smiling, but it didn’t reach his eyes, which were tired and pitying. A surge of anger erupted in Severus’s chest at the sight, ricocheting up and down his body like a burning firecracker.

“I don’t need your thanks or your pity, werewolf. Get out of my fucking house, you disgusting, pathetic, fucking monster,” he forced out between great gasps of air. He clenched his hands so hard his nails bit at his palms. “And you”—He swung his arm out to point his wand wildly at Weasley, who lifted his empty hands in the air—“you goddamn spineless Muggle-loving cunt, making your sickening assumptions, all sticking your noses where they do not belong —”

“Severus—”

“What does it matter!” he shouted, slashing his wand at the remnants of the mattress on the floor. It exploded into a blizzard of cotton and fluff. “What does it matter what they did! You will tell nobody what you saw here! Nobody!”

For a second time in under an hour, Lupin seized him in a vice-like grip, pinning his arms to his sides and wrestling his wand from his stiff fingers. Severus yanked at the hands on him, hyperventilating, digging his nails deeper until his skin gave way. “Calm down. You’re going to hurt somebody.”

“Get off of me,” he gasped out, tugging uselessly at his arms. “Don’t—touch me.”

“I don’t have any choice. I’m sorry, Severus, but somebody is going to get hurt if you continue on.” Then, raising his voice, Lupin said, “Arthur, I think it’s time to leave. Go ahead and take Sirius back with you. I’m going to stay awhile longer. I’ll send a message if I find myself running late.”

“Be careful,” Weasley replied (like he was a fucking savage animal) before slipping out the door. It closed behind him, leaving only Severus and the werewolf in the room.

“Breathe with me,” Lupin said softly, as the arms around him suddenly became less of a restraint, and more of an embrace. “In and out.”

“Let go.” Each inhalation sounded like a thundercrack in the quiet. Choking back the mess of sound bubbling up his throat, Severus thrashed again, with his hair in his stinging eyes and blood slicking his palms. He wanted—he needed—to hide, to get—away, far away, cover his eyes and his mouth and stop breathing be quiet — “Let go of me.”

“In and out. Severus, you’re safe. You’re in your house. Nobody is here to hurt you. In and out. Do you feel my chest moving? Copy me. In and out. The others have left. It’s only the two of us.”

Severus bit the inside of his cheek until iron burst on his tongue. Grounding himself with the sensation, he sucked in a shaky breath to imitate Lupin’s, and then another, until he was breathing
normally and the rage-fueled panic subsided. The wolf continued restraining him until he finally went limp and pliant. Then, loosening his grip, Lupin leaned in to murmur, “Breathe with me. In and out. Can you hear me? Do you need a Calming Draught?”

“M’fine,” Severus muttered, closing his eyes without meaning to. His heart stuttered like he was having palpitations. “Don’t need it.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Off,” he said, too exhausted to elaborate further. He felt Lupin nod against the back of his neck. The arms released him. His wand was pressed into his hand. Stowing it away, Severus took a step forward to lean against the wall, mortification pooling low in his stomach. He was suddenly relieved he hadn’t eaten anything recently. “Tell nobody.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Lupin said. “This stays between us.”

“Harry will need dinner soon.” He could feel a headache building behind his eyes. Squeezing them shut to stave off the pain, he exhaled sharply and said, “Stay the night, if you can. I am not…not able…”

“I’ll stay for as long as you need me. I’ll send a Patronus off to the others to let them know I’ll be here for the night.”

“I have no spare bed…”

“I think I can survive a night in your armchair. Severus—” Lupin put a tentative hand on his arm, fingers wrapping round to feel his shuddering pulse. “Breathe. It’s fine. Everything is all right.”

And as much as he wanted to disagree, Severus couldn’t quite help but believe him, if only a little.

Chapter End Notes

So I guess my fic has been getting recc’d on sites like tumblr, by some really prominent Snape fan base folks, and I’m sort of reeling honestly. I reaaaaally hadn’t expected the sort of reception I’ve gotten for this fic. It’s honestly made my entire year. Anyway, sorry for the lateness of the update! I was in another state on vacation for a week and the Internet there was literal shit. I hope you’re all well!
True to his word, Lupin didn’t leave. Severus was both horrified and relieved by this; and when the realization of what he’d done came crashing in, he became more horrified still.

“To your room, then?” Lupin murmured as they limped out onto the landing, oblivious to his renewed anxiety. “Or downstairs?”

“My room.” Severus wouldn’t—couldn’t—face Arthur and Black. Not now. Not yet. For Potter’s benefit, in case the boy was still listening in, he said, “Lock the storage room behind you.”

Lupin’s eyes grazed over the plain doorknob, void of any keyhole, but didn’t call his bluff. “Of course. Can you walk?”

The musk of old clothing faded away when the door snapped shut. Severus wished he could snap his mind shut with it. Whatever grasp he normally had over his thoughts was slipping away, turned to sand and escaping through his fingers. Do you think they’ve left yet? he wanted to ask, and only just managed to stop himself from doing so. Taking a deep breath, hopefully unnoticed in the dark, he muttered, “I’m fine.”

They entered Severus’s bedroom, and the decades old stench of his parents’ room was replaced by the familiar smell of cigarettes. Lupin helped maneuver him to the bed, where Severus promptly collapsed. He supposed the stress of the last two weeks had finally begun to catch up with him; he ached in places he hadn’t even known could ache, and when he forced himself to sit up, even his fucking thighs shook from the effort. None of his was lost on Lupin, whose eyes lingered on said thighs before continuing on to settle on his face.

“What?” Severus muttered, feeling suddenly rather twitchy.

“Nothing,” the wolf said mildly. “Are you all right here by yourself? I don’t know if the others have left yet, but if they’re still around, I’d like to let them know I’ll be staying.”

“You don’t need to ask my permission.” The very thought was laughable. This wasn’t Hogwarts, and Lupin wasn’t one of his dunderhead students.

“I wasn’t,” Lupin assured him, reaching for the door. “I won’t be long.”

It took a while for Lupin to make it down the stairs, though it wasn’t as if Severus was paying any attention. He pulled his legs onto the bed alongside the rest of him, leaning back until he met his lumpy pillow. His shoulder dug sharply into a bedspring. He tugged the pillow down to ease the discomfort and tucked his hands up close to his neck, wishing he’d had the forethought to grab his blanket before lying down. Through his too-thin mattress and the too-thin building foundation, he could hear Black speaking a floor below, as loud and obnoxious as ever. Severus blinked slowly. The front door shut only a moment later, and there was silence. And Severus closed his eyes.
When Severus next opened his eyes, it was to find that night had fallen sometime in the span of what had felt like five minutes, and Lupin was gingerly shaking him awake.

“Dinner is ready,” the wolf said, before he could so much as sit up in his panic. “I made something you can eat. Harry is downstairs. I believe he’s…concerned. About you.”

“The only thing Potter is concerned about is whether I’ve finally kicked it,” he ground out past an incredibly dry throat. He sat up too quickly and was treated to a few seconds’ worth of his vision blacking out. Blinking away the spots in front of his eyes, Severus reached blindly something to haul himself to his feet with, and was greeted by Lupin’s fever-warm arm. He gripped the man’s wrist and pulled himself up. Unlike that morning, which now felt like one long and surreal dream, this time his knee held steady. He took a step, and then another, before he felt comfortable enough to let go of the arm holding him upright.

“How long was I asleep?”

“Six hours, give or take. I thought you needed it, so I left you to it. You look…”

“What?”

“Refreshed,” Lupin finished lamely.

Like I’m no longer a walking skeleton, more like, Severus thought sourly. He led the way down the stairs and into the living room, where Potter was waiting. He skidded to a stop mid-pace and turned to look at them, announcing without preamble, “We made dinner. It’s chicken and potatoes this time. We roasted it, because I know you think the school chicken is unhealthy. Did you know you have a slow cooker? We found it in a cabinet. If it’s still too heavy for you, we bought oats and fruit, so you could make porridge. Or we could for you.”

“You did the shopping?” was all Severus could think to say after all that.

“A little. Not a lot of it. Professor Lupin wanted to talk to me some more, and no one pays attention to you while you’re shopping.”

Worried I was eavesdropping? Severus sat down and breathed in the smell of the food cooking away in front of him. Somebody had already set the table; most certainly the boy, who’d apparently tried to fold the napkins properly but had given up halfway and left them in crumpled messes. Narcissa would cry at the sight of them. “Whose money did you use? For the shopping?”

“Mine,” Lupin said, in a tone as pleasant and unconcerned as ever. He began to serve the food.

“I tried to tell him not to, but he insisted,” Potter mumbled.

There was a jumble of feelings surging forward, none of them identifiable to Severus. “How much was it?” he demanded, when really he meant, You can’t bloody afford that.

“Severus—”

“How. Much?”

With a put-upon sigh, Lupin pulled a wrinkled receipt out of the pocket of his cardigan and handed it over. Severus looked it over and tucked it away. He’d already put aside enough funds to pay Lucius back, and would send the payment off to Narcissa at the next available moment…This was affordable enough.
“Tomorrow, I will return your money. Dumbledore is, as he said, footing the bill, so this won’t be Galleons out of my pocket.” Severus pulled his plate closer and gestured to the boy in a silent order for him to eat his tea.

Dinner was as silent and uncomfortable as ever, but Severus was more than used to that. Lupin avoided his gaze each time he looked round at him, but Severus was used to that, too. Only Potter seemed to be at ease. He’d polished off his chicken at record speed and had already gone back for seconds’ before either of the other two had finished their first plate. Favorite food? he wondered, tucking the information away to be used at a later date. Or an excuse to keep his mouth full and not speak?

“I’m done,” the boy announced, shooting up out of his seat like a rocket. “Thank you, Professor Lupin. It was great.”

“Clear your plate!” Severus shouted after him as he bounded from the room as though chased by hellhounds.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Lupin called at the same time. Severus shot him a positively filthy look. Abandoning the remains of his dinner, he stood slowly and began to clear the table, packing away the leftovers into tupperware. The werewolf sat and watched him with his forehead creased in a frown.

“What?” he sighed.

“I could have helped.”

“I am just as aware as you are that this house has not once seen a guest in the last two decades, but I also am aware that guests don’t help. Sit there and be quiet. You are testing my patience.”

“I made the food and used your dishes,” Lupin said, in a way that was very much not fucking quiet. “I want to help.”

“And I want you to sit down and shut up.”

“I’ll take care of the dishes.”

“You will take care of nothing.”

“I’m going——”

“Could—could I open the window?” Potter said from the doorway, looking between the two of them like he was afraid they’d both explode at a moment’s notice. “I want to send some letters. I dunno if you want me to open the door to do it…”

Realizing he’d begun to make a scene in front of a witness, Severus forced himself to take a deep breath, and then another. He jerked his head towards the window. The boy bustled over with his owl, helped it outside with a parting murmur and head rub, and then closed the window and locked the latch behind it.

The kitchen was enveloped in what may have been the most awkward silence Severus had ever encountered. Lupin broke it with a smile and pleasant, “I’m sure Ron and Hermione will be glad to hear from you.”

“Ron thinks Professor Snape is going to secretly poison me,” Potter said, “but Hermione thinks I
should get private tutoring. And find out what our first pieces of schoolwork will be so she can get a headstart."

*Of course she does,* Severus thought sourly, already feeling the ghosts of the impending headaches Ms. Granger was going to bring him this year. “Moonstones,” he said shortly, lying with ease. “Tell her to prepare well.”

“But I already sent the letter!” Potter lamented, as Severus suddenly had to struggle not to smile.

—

“You may end up doing more harm than good,” Severus said as he dug through his refrigerator to find spare potions ingredients.

“Pardon?” Lupin looked up from the dishes he’d strong-armed his way into washing, Muggle-style, with his arms deep in soapy water and his sleeves rolled up to bare more skin than Severus was comfortable with. He tore his gaze away from the curve of the wolf’s bicep and turned his focus back on finding the Ashwinder eggs he’d stored away however many months before.

“The list you’re all wanting,” he said, “may wind up causing more harm than good. It doesn’t always help to step into a situation where you’re unwanted. Sometimes, what appears to be a cry for help is not as such.”

Lupin was silent for a time. Then, setting a stack of plates out to dry, he murmured, “I trust your judgement in the matter.”

“And if I’m wrong? What happens, Lupin, if you decide to step in, and make the matter infinitely worse for the child in need? What will you do then?”

“Then we remove the child from the premise and go forth from there.”

“And if your accusations are entirely baseless?”

Wearily, the wolf turned to him and said, “These are nothing but ‘what if’s,’ Severus. I would rather step in than stand by. If anything, the child would at least know they have somebody on their side, watching over them. I feel it would help to boost their morale.”

Having a social worker sic’d on his family had done nothing helpful to him. That woman would not have cared if his father had seized him round the neck in front of her. If the one who’d called social services had truly given a damn, they’d have left him to it, and let him sort things out himself, whether that meant sticking through to the end, or running away. No, that social visit had done nothing but prove to his parents that he’d been nothing but a fucking Cinderella boy, an ugly Rapunzel letting down his hair in a desperate hope that somebody would notice him.

“I know you’ve already mentioned it, but…You said you could make us a list,” Lupin said, “of children in Hogwarts. Ones that you’ve…noticed. Is this true, then? Could you truly make one?”

“That depends.”

“On what?” Lupin said.
Resigning himself to a night of hell, Severus ran a hand through his hair and tried to focus his thoughts. It was true that there were students—in multiple Houses—that he’d noticed. *Signs* that he’d noticed. Bruises where they shouldn’t have been; hollowed cheeks and darkened eyes that couldn’t have come from a single night’s lack of sleep; and he’d had more than one Slytherin come to him at the start of term, bearing injuries too severe to handle themselves. But none of them had ever outright asked for help. None of them had ever appeared to have been in grave enough danger that he’d ever felt the need to tell somebody. To…overstep his bounds. It was none of his business. It was the family’s business. If he were to force himself into the situation, it would only make things worse for the child. “What are you expecting me to look for?”

“Bruises, children that are too thin, those who flinch when others come near, an unusual amount of Howlers…” Lupin sighed. “It could be anything as simple as behavioral problems. Students who flout the rules a little too often, or use physical or magical violence to get themselves through even the most unassuming social situation. Bullies like…well, Sirius.”

Severus’s thoughts were moving as fast and light as fairydust. Finally, after a beat too long, he said, “I will make a list.”

A smile broke out on Lupin’s face. “You have no idea how relieved I am to hear this, Severus. Arthur will be ecstatic. The moment you write it up, I’ll personally deliver it to Albus. We can leave your name out of everything. You’ll have no formal part in this.”

*Good,* Severus thought dazedly, *because I want no part in this.*

“If this blows up in your face, Lupin, I will not be round to say ‘I told you so,’ because I have potions to brew,” he said shortly, hoping to end the conversation before it could go any further. “Such as the one I have in front of me now. Stay or go, I do not care.”

As he had earlier, Lupin chose to stay. Severus couldn’t quite tell if that unnerved him or not. “What are you preparing these for?” the wolf asked, eyeing the slugs on the counter, and the zip-loc bag stuffed full of frozen Ashwinder eggs. “A love potion?”

“Yes, it’s for Black. I want to see how easily he could snap out of an infatuation for a bitch in heat. Don’t be absurd, werewolf,” Severus snorted, slicing each of the slugs down the middle. “This potion grants the drinker a half hour of fire resistance.”

He’d just finished preparations and turned the stove on when Lupin said quietly, “Was your father a follower of…You-Know-Who?”

Severus warred between feeling grateful of the wolf’s avoidance of the name, and furious at the sudden turn in conversation. “No,” he said, in a tone that he prayed would signal the end of it. “He wasn’t.”

“Then…your mother…?”

“My father was a Muggle,” he ground out, “and my mother is content to be no better than one, for whatever peace that’s brought her.”

The potion he’d only just begun to brew bubbled and hissed, spilling over the top of his cauldron. Severus turned the temperature on the stove down with tense, jerky movements, and then accidentally shut it off entirely. Fixing his mistake, he slammed his stirring wand down on the counter and tugged the Ashwinder eggs over.

“For whatever peace…Your father didn’t like magic?” Lupin asked softly.
Severus clenched his jaw. “He didn’t like anything, much.”

“You were raised Muggle, then. Is that why you and Lily got on so well?”

Sometimes, when he was feeling maudlin, Severus couldn’t help but wonder if Lily would have given him the time of day if he’d been nothing but a local Muggle boy. If she’d have looked twice at him if he hadn’t been able to give her something she wanted, and offered her a stepping stone into a world that had always welcomed her more than it had him.

Severus didn’t allow himself to feel maudlin very often. He preferred feeling angry. It was better for digestion.

“There were a variety of reasons,” he muttered. Mainly his unwillingness to allow the only good thing that had ever happened to him go away. “None of them mean much now.”

“If you were as good as friends as she’d sometimes lead me to believe, then it means more than you’d think.” Lupin edged closer to the stove and their arms touched. Severus tried not to jump at the cold wetness of his skin.

“Did you forget to dry your hands, wolf, or do you believe such things to be below you?” he snapped without meaning to.

Lupin didn’t take it as an insult. Instead, he stepped away with a smile and reached for a dubiously clean dish towel. He didn’t come back over, leaving Severus’s arm feeling colder than it had when he’d touched it.

“How did she…” He’d stopped brewing. “How did she lead you to believe we were friends?”

There was no response, and the silence went on long enough that Severus began to wonder whether he’d accidentally called the wolf out on a bluff. Then, quietly, “She would defend you in the common room. Once or twice, she went to one of the professors, though I don’t know if anything ever came of it. She would disappear for hours at a time and ignore her friends in favor of these secret meetings of hers. She nearly lost a friend because of it, back in our third year.”

Severus swallowed hard and began to brew again, working himself at a punishing pace to make up for the time he’d lost.

“I’m surprised Mary never confronted you over it. We all knew it was you she was meeting. It used to drive James mad.” Lupin laughed, almost to himself.

If the Slytherins had all known, it was only fitting that the Gryffindors had, as well. Nothing in Hogwarts was kept a secret for long. Had that been another reason for their drifting apart? Pressure from both sides? ‘Nearly’ lost a friend over ‘ignoring’ them was plenty ambiguous, but Severus could read between the lines. He had never been popular in school. Not even in his own crowd.

Lupin eased his way back round the kitchen to press their arms together. He leaned over the stove to peek at the bubbling potion. “What will this be used for?”

Unwilling to admit he’d only begun brewing it to discourage conversation, Severus muttered, “For the Dark Lord.”

“Ah.”

The conversation ended, just as he’d hoped, but Lupin’s movements did not. A hand crept steadily across his spine and dipped low; he sighed and rocked his hips forward without meaning to. The
hand stopped, resting fever-hot at the small of his back.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine,” he said shortly, dropping twelve slivers of slug into the potion, which roiled thickly and turned as red as he knew his face must have been.

“Are you okay with this?” Lupin asked. His breath against Severus’s face was as warm as his hand, contrasting sharply with the night’s chill.

He glanced down at the potion, nearly complete, and then cut a sharp look over to Lupin. *Fuck it,* he thought, the words as clear and bright as the moon, even though the rest of his brain felt like soup. Severus bit down on his lower lip and turned his head to meet Lupin’s gaze before hooking an arm round his waist and dragging him in. “You want this,” he forced out through a sudden surge of embarrassment, and Lupin’s eyes grew wide. “I know you do.”

“Do you?” Lupin countered. He didn’t move away.

There was no use lying about it. “Yes.”

“But—Severus, your potion—”

“Forget about the fucking potion,” he said, and grabbed Remus’s shirt to pull him down for a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Oh god I'm sorry this took so long for me to write. Work has been fucking insane and I haven't had time to sleep, let alone write. It took me a little bit to get back into the characterization so I'm sorry if the first section seems a little stiff. The last half was where I really lost myself a bit and (sat for four hours typing away on three different projects) started getting super into it. Anyway, I finally bought my favorite movie on DVD and have already watched it seven times in the last month, so if you haven't seen *The Grand Budapest Hotel*...stop reading this immediately and go watch it. It's phenomenal.
Soapy water soaked into the back of Severus’s cloak as Lupin pushed him against the sink and leaned down to kiss him, but he barely paid it any mind. They fumbled together for a moment, lips too chapped and hands too jittery, until Lupin pulled away to wet his lips and returned with renewed confidence. Severus let him lead the way. He’d never heard rumors of any schoolboy escapades between Lupin and any other student, but he was sure to be at least somewhat more experienced than he himself was.

His clothes were clinging to the damp of his skin, even through the chill of the night, but Lupin didn’t seem to mind how his palms had suddenly gone clammy. He grabbed him round the waist and slotted their hips together. Severus exhaled sharply and tilted his head back, and then jolted it forward when Lupin decided to fucking latch onto his neck and suck, hard.

Their foreheads knocked together.

“Sorry,” he gasped.

“You’re fine.” There was a smile in Remus’s voice. He tugged on the clasps of Severus’s cloak, releasing a few—just enough for him to push a hand inside and pull his shirt up. He pressed a hand to his stomach, fingers splaying wide, and Severus moaned like it had been punched out of him. Then, when Lupin ran his free hand through his hair, grabbed a fistful, and tugged, he moaned even louder.

He’d only begun to fully enjoy himself, as Lupin rolled their hips together and dipped under the waistband of his pants, when someone made a soft “oh!” in the doorway and sent the world crashing back down upon him.

“Oh holy shit, I—I’m sorry, I didn’t—I didn’t mean to— holy shit. ” Potter made eye contact with him over Lupin’s shoulder, and Severus felt a small fraction of his soul wither and die. The boy clapped a hand over his reddening face and backed away, still spluttering unintelligibly with his glasses now askew. “Oh, shit, I really didn’t…I just needed the—the er—the toilet. Before bed. Sorry. D’you think I could—?”

Jerking back from the shellshocked Lupin like he’d been burned, Severus turned away. He yanked his robe shut and covered his eyes in horror. An eternity seemed to pass before any of them dared speak.

“Go ahead,” Lupin said in a voice that seemed unnaturally high.

The boy stumbled his way to the loo and slammed the door shut behind him. And both Severus and Lupin exhaled as one.

“I’m sorry,” the wolf said, just as Severus blurted out, “Forgot he was awake.”

They spoke at the same time, and then stopped again. “You first,” Lupin said.

“I forgot he was awake.” What a fucking idiot he was, doing something like that well before midnight, when the boy was sure to be up and about.

“Are you worried he’ll tell somebody?” Remus ran a hand through his hair and squeezed his eyes
shut. “Dammit, this is all my fault…We could make our excuses. Tell him he saw wrong. That I was, ah…”

“Picking something out of my eye?” Severus finished sarcastically. “I was the one that started it, and I don’t give a damn that anyone knows about— us, werewolf. That is not my concern.”

“I suppose that’s nice to know. Thank you, Severus. Do you not want him to know his evil Potions professor has a sex life just like everyone else, then? Either way, this should not have happened…I don’t know what came over me. Harry should not have been put in a situation like that.”

He finished straightening himself (turning round again to adjust his trousers), and stepped over to the stove to check on his abandoned potion. Severus stirred listlessly at the congealed grey mass inside the cauldron. It was as thick and gritty as wet concrete. Useless. He evanesco’d the mess and tossed the used cauldron in the sink. “I wouldn’t quite call it a sex life,” he muttered, blasting the sink on high and reaching in to attack the remains of the concrete potion with a sponge.

Remus joined him back at the sink, but with the bubble of tension sufficiently popped, it felt more comradely than anything. “Have you…ever?” he said eventually, lowering his voice and glancing towards the bathroom door.

“Ever what?” Whatever eldritch horror he’d managed to create, it was stuck to the sides…He was going to need a new sponge after this.

“Had sex.” He scrubbed viciously at the cauldron, grating the tops of his bitten-down fingernails on the inside in a way that was sure to leave a mark, and kept his mouth shut. Remus waited patiently beside him. Finally, warring with himself, Severus said, “No. Never got round to it.”

“I’m glad we stopped, then,” came the immediate reply, “because I’m not going to take your virginity in a godforsaken kitchen. Salazar and Mary, Severus, you should have said something.”

“So you can shower me in rose petals? I’m not a blushing maiden, wolf. There is no need to wine and dine me before whisking me off to a cottage in a mystical forest. I am not the adult version of Little Red Riding Hood.” He glared vaguely in Remus’s direction. Then, shifting his glare to the bathroom door, he said, “He’s taking quite the long time.”

“Flushing his eyes out, perhaps,” the werewolf muttered. “He has…horrendous timing.”

“‘Horrendous’ is one way to phrase it, yes.” ‘Walked in on his evil git of a professor about to be getting fucked against a kitchen sink’ was another. Potter had always had tremendously bad timing. He was a magnet for all things unhealthy and potentially dangerous. This was simply one of the worst examples he had to date. Given time, however, Potter would surely manage to outdo himself. Severus gave up on the cauldron, tossed it back into the sink with a clunk, and stalked out of the room before Potter could come back out and ruin everything.

Lupin followed him. (Of course he did.)

“Go to bed at a reasonable time, Potter,” he shouted down the stairs when the telltale screech of the bathroom door sounded. Then, to the man scaling the stairs behind him, “You are not sleeping up here. My bed would collapse underneath us. And break your spine.”

“I won’t be up long,” the wolf said. He was frowning; Severus could only just make it out in the barest of light. “I need to apologize to Harry before he goes to sleep.”
“Feeling guilty?” he said scathingly, even though he was, as well. He should not have let things get so out of hand. He’d gotten caught up in every heated feeling he’d been pressing down, and he’d let it burst out as if he was an adolescent boy, too focused on his fucking hormones to think reasonably. And now the boy had walked in on his lack of self-control. It was disgusting, humiliating, degrading…

“I am. We should have waited until he was in bed. The blame doesn’t lie solely on you, Severus. I certainly wasn’t complaining or telling you to stop.” He heaved a sigh as they came at a stop on the landing. “This should not have happened.”

“Having second thoughts?” Severus asked, even more scathingly than before.

“No. Godric, no. I’ve been wanting this since we were young, Severus. I’ve already gone through any second thoughts I might have had,” he laughed. “Believe me on that.”

Since they were young? “Pardon me if I have trouble believing that,” he said coldly. In the complete blackness, he could no longer see any hint of Lupin, but he could easily imagine the look on his face.

“You don’t have to believe it. It doesn’t make it any less true.” Lupin became rather quiet. Then, in a voice as soft as his expression surely was, he murmured, “I’m off to bed, and to speak with Harry. Goodnight, Severus. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Lupin pressed a kiss to his temple, and Severus was suddenly rather grateful for the darkness.

“Goodnight,” he said dazedly, and nearly fell into his bedroom, closing the door with a snap and leaning against it to listen to the sound of Remus making his careful way down the stairs. Severus managed to haul himself upright and walk to his bed, sneaking a quick peek in the mirror as he went. He was horrified to find that there was a lurid purple bruise developing on his neck. Concealment charm, he thought swiftly. Concealment charm.

Then he pulled out the last of his cigarettes and smoked them, one after the other.

The next morning, he woke before either of the others, and made his way downstairs to start on an early breakfast. By the sink was his cauldron, scrubbed until it shone, with the rest of the clean dishes on the counter.

—

That afternoon found Severus in one of the most uncomfortable situations he’d ever found himself in, even after counting all that had occurred in the past twelve days.

He and the boy were not speaking. What he’d walked into the night before seemed to have been the straw to break the camel’s back; not even the promising premise of an argument could rouse the boy out of the stony silence he’d fallen into. This pissed Severus off, though for what reason, he couldn’t quite tell.

Drastic measures would have to be taken.

Severus stood over the boy at noon, waiting for the moment where Potter would deign to look up from his book at him, and waited a beat longer to see how uncomfortable he could make him. Then, forcing the words out from the depths of what remained of his soul, Severus gritted, “I owe you an
apology.”

This made Potter set his book down. “An…apology,” he repeated, blinking once, and then twice. “Is this for the—thing that—the thing where you and Professor Lupin—er.”

“Eloquent as always, Potter.” He closed his eyes briefly. “Yes. This is for the ‘thing that, the thing where Lupin and I.’ I had not intended for you to witness any of it, and the fact that you did lies solely upon me.”

“Professor Lupin said the same thing, actually. That it was all his fault.”

“Lupin is a self-sacrificing fool who would willingly take blame for the bubonic plague if it so suited him. What you saw last night was my fault. I’m sorry.” Severus was surprised to find that he meant it, even though it left him feeling drained in ways he couldn’t even begin to name.

Nodding slowly, Potter frowned at the book in his hands. “Oh. Well…thanks. Professor.”

And that was that. Severus pulled a book of his own out of the shelf closest to him and settled down in the armchair Lupin had slept in the night previous, trying to imagine that he could still feel a vestige of whatever warmth had been left behind. He’d no sooner cracked his book open than Potter decided to open his mouth and ruin fucking everything, as per usual.

“So…you and Lupin?” he said slowly, avoiding eye contact like his life depended on it. He was gripping Snow Crash tightly to his chest.

“No. We are not discussing this.” Severus tried again to focus on reading.

Potter did not back down. Severus could see him grinning a little out of the corner of his eye, though he still looked supremely uncomfortable. “You and Lupin. Are you…together? Or just… snogging…?”

“No. Shut up.” Severus shoved down a vision of himself strangling the boy.

“Should we expect a happy announcement soon?”

“Shut up, Potter, or you will find Ashwinder eggs in your cereal tomorrow.”

Harry snorted and shifted position on the sofa, lying across it like it was a throne. Severus hated him. “You wouldn’t do that. Those are expensive.”

*Of all the information to retain from class, that of course would be one of them. “Cease and desist, Potter, or I will force-feed them to you right now, expenses be damned.”*

“You really are together!”

When had he lost all power of intimidation over this boy? Severus gaped at him, and then snapped his mouth shut, returning to his book with a sharp sigh.

“Don’t worry, Professor. I’m not going to tell anybody.”

He studiously ignored the muttered, “not that they’d believe me anyway,” that came after. “I personally don’t give a damn,” he said coolly, “but the same cannot be said for your werewolf. If this were to come out to the public, Lupin’s ever-decreasing job prospects would plummet further. Unfortunate though it may be, I am forcing myself to trust your discretion in the matter. Do not reveal this. To anybody. Not even your friends, Potter. This stays between us.”
Children enjoyed being told secrets. With any luck, this child was ordinary enough to fit the mold. It would hopefully be enough to placate him.

“I won’t tell anyone,” Harry said quietly. “I think it would hurt you, too, Professor, if people found out. Some of the parents wouldn’t like it. D’you think Dumbledore would be able to help after that?”

“Dumbledore has an immeasurable amount of power over many things,” Severus said, “but not even he holds much sway over societal views. People will believe what they want to believe. Until their generation dies out and we are all free of them.”

“You know, until that last bit, that almost sounded nice.” The boy smiled and opened his book again. “For you, anyway.”

“The promise of the Ashwinder eggs still holds true, Potter. I also may or may not have a secret photograph of you sucking your thumb in your sleep. Tread wisely.”

“What?” The boy sat up and spluttered, “I don’t suck my thumb! You—you don’t even have a camera!”

“I live in a Muggle town,” Severus shot back, “so do not be so sure.”

“You wouldn’t show anyone, even if you had a picture.”

“Would you like to test that?”

“Professor!”

Chapter End Notes

When I was a disgusting, hormone-ridden little freak (a fourteen-year-old boy), I wrote a fanfic that was just as disgustinglly hormone-ridden as I was, and it was probably the most explicit smut I’d ever seen or wrote. (I used to read some really sick shit on ffnet so this is saying something. If anyone knows anything about the creepy fic where Hermione fucks herself with a lit candle in the Restricted Section at night while imagining the Gryffindor Quidditch team pissing on her, please contact me on tumblr at paracosim, because my memory of that one feels like a fever dream and I need answers.) Anyway, so I wrote something truly horrifying…and then I accidentally printed it. To the family printer downstairs in the kitchen. Then I thought I hadn’t, because nothing had been spat out, and WHEW APOCALYPSE AVOIDED…until three days later when my dad, bless his heart, printed out something for work and had to read the monstrosity his evil child had created. He still mentions it to this day, eight years later, and it’s the root of my mental illnesses. Anyway this is a roundabout way of saying that I spent two hours struggling to write something that wasn’t hideously bad, or that would need an Explicit rating. Enjoy.
Remus was a fool.

He had never held a very high opinion of himself, but if there was anything he’d ever prided himself on, it would be his strong common sense. James had never entirely grasped it, though not for lack of trying in the years before his death, and Sirius had never even attempted at it. Remus had settled into the role of “level-headed one” the moment they’d welcomed into the fold.

This was not common sense. This was ridiculous, and ludicrous, and…stupid.

He’d removed the entirety of his wardrobe and draped it over every available surface in his room at Grimmauld Place; if anyone were to come in, he would be hard-pressed to explain what he was doing. “Decorating” wouldn’t appease Molly, let alone Sirius. God forbid one of the children come in to speak with him. That would begin a line of questioning he wasn’t sure he would ever be prepared to answer.

And if they discovered he was making an attempt at dressing up in anticipation of seeing Severus…

He was a goddamn fool.

Heaving a sigh, Remus lifted his least threadbare jumper and scrutinized it for holes and stains. Severus’s clothing was in no better shape than his own, but…

There came a knock on the door, and Remus threw himself at his wand, twisting around on his bed to send everything shooting back into the wardrobe. “Yes?” he called as he straightened up and attempted to look innocent.

The door creaked open to reveal Sirius. Neither of them spoke, but the stony expression on Sirius’s face said more than enough. For what felt like an eternity, he scanned the room as if searching for something— and whatever he found seemed to steel his resolve, for he said grimly, “Moony, we need to talk.”

—

Severus told Albus what the boy had confessed.

He regretted it the moment he attached the letter to Potter’s owl alongside the litany of others and sent it off into the open sky. Closing the window with a snap, he briefly contemplated using accio to bring the owl straight back and send the damning letter into the hearth, or tear it to shreds; perhaps even to Banish the remains into nothingness— anything to rid himself of the swell of dread starting in the pit of his stomach. Instead he stepped back and watched the owl grow smaller in the distance, until she faded from sight and he was left to watch a storm roll in.

Potter had only five days left in Spinner’s End. Five days until Albus came to ship him off to Grimmauld Place, where instead of strengthening his mind, disorganizing Severus’s bookshelves,
and cooking painfully elaborate meals, he would spend his days rubbing shoulders with Sirius Black and the Weasleys. And then they would both be off to Hogwarts—and everything would go back to how it had been.

Severus didn’t want it to end.

He was a selfish fucking prick. Potter belonged with his friends and godfather. Cokeworth was not a home to the boy. This town was a prison, a dead-end for those who’d ended up here, and a graveyard for those who were unfortunate enough to be born in it. Potter would amount to more than this. He would amount to more than Severus ever had, and even more than his long-dead mother, who’d never been given the chance to reach the vast potential she’d had in life.

Pressing his palms to his eyes until stars burst like fireworks, Severus leaned against the sink and tried in vain to stave off the headache threatening to overtake him. It wasn’t even noon and yet he was already acting like a maudlin fool.

His mother had always despised that about him. He was too much like his father; too Muggle, too angry, and with a tendency towards wallowing in self-pity. He’d been a nervous and pessimistic child—the kind any parent would hate—and had grown up to become an anxious and hateful adult. Whatever social life she’d had before conceiving him had flown out the window the moment he’d been capable of expressing wishes to remain tucked away indoors; invitations to the sorry excuses for parties at the neighbors’ houses had dwindled, day trips to the museum across town became far and few between until they ceased entirely, and by the time he’d grown old enough to tramp about Cokeworth by himself, Eileen had grown bitter and reclusive, content to hide herself away in their rotting two-up two-down while her husband drowned himself in whiskey at the pub.

It was just as well that she’d never accepted his invitations out to lunch over the years; she would have hated him more now, more than she ever had before. It had been over a year since they’d so much as written. The last time they’d spoken, it had been in the form of three words scrawled on the back of his unopened letter: Don’t waste parchment.

He’d stopped trying after that, and she’d never made much of an effort with him either way.

“I finished the book,” Potter announced from the doorway, where he’d been hovering for some time, half-shrouded in shadow like it would turn him invisible.

Severus peeled his hands away from his eyes and squinted at him. “Snow Crash?”

“Yeah. I stayed up late to finish it, because everything started happening at once and I couldn’t just stop reading. S’pose I won’t need to take it to school with me, after all.” He shuffled from foot to foot. “Thanks for letting me borrow it.”

“There’s another book,” he said, remembering very suddenly. “I’d not bothered to buy it. The Steel Age, or something similar.”

“I’ll have to find a bookstore the next time I go to Diagon Alley. They’ll have plenty of them in London.”

Keep the book, Severus nearly said, and covered his eyes again so that he wouldn’t have to look at the boy and devolve into overly sentimental mush. I’ve gone fucking mad.

After a moment, he straightened his spine and pushed himself away from the sink to begin rummaging through the boxes he’d dragged out of the storage room, pulling out old scrolls and ratty composition notebooks. Here was one he’d spilled tea on, years ago; and that scroll there had fallen
in the sink while he’d brushed his teeth. It was crusted over with toothpaste. Severus aimed it towards the rubbish bin and then stopped, looked it back over, and shoved it back inside its box. Perhaps he’d need it one day…

The boy still hadn’t left the kitchen, but Severus couldn’t bring himself to muster up any anger over his disobedience. “What is it?” he said dully, flipping through layers of unfinished potions experiments in an effort to find one that piqued his interest.

“What?” Potter said, startled.

“You’re still here. What are you wanting?”

There was no response, and for a moment Severus felt a swell of ever-present rage—until Potter said, “What’s going to happen after all this?” and the irritation vanished like somebody had blown out a candle and left him cold.

He tossed aside another scroll. “Explain yourself,” he said, even though he knew exactly what the boy meant.

“What’ll happen after I leave?”

He took a deep breath. “You will be escorted to headquarters, where you will remain with your friends and godfather until you return to school.”

“And after that?”

“After that, I would presume lessons will resume as normal and you will, I would hope, study and work hard.” Severus moved to throw aside another scroll, and then paused, pulling it back open to skim through the contents. On the margins were half-finished sketches and abandoned scribbles, useless, but the experiment itself…He let it roll closed with a snap and shoved it off to the side. Stuffing the rest of the scrolls back inside their box, he reached up to put them away at the top of the cupboard over the sink. He began to pull ingredients out, opening tupperware and plastic bags, and set his cauldron up on the stove next to a roll of mostly-empty parchment and a quill. When he unrolled the scroll and pressed it flat, he took care to cover a smudged drawing of an intricately shaded bluebell, lest Potter see it and make up embarrassing theories. The stove hissed when he turned it on high. And all the while, the boy did not move an inch. “You’re still here.”

“What about us?”

“Us?” he sighed.

“Us. This—er…”

“If you dare call us friends, I will not hesitate to sick up, Potter,” he said scathingly, picking up his quill and finishing one of the drawings he’d done near the top of the scroll, this one of a frog. “Say your piece or leave. I’m tired of you dithering about like a fool.”

Potter shifted from foot to foot, worrying his lip between his teeth. “Well, I just meant… us. You can’t—you can’t deny that things have changed. A lot. Sir.”

Severus didn’t respond. Instead, he dropped his quill and began chopping salamanders, shoulders hunched and hair swinging low to hide his face.

He wasn’t an idiot. He’d noticed the change between them. It would have taken someone truly thick to have let it go unnoticed. But to have it brought out in the open…
“You’ve seen, haven’t you? The change?” Potter pressed. “We couldn’t even have a conversation until recently.”

He would hardly call any of this a conversation. Unskilled though he was at anything social, Severus was fairly certain a conversation was two-sided. “What do you want?” he said eventually, running a hand through his hair. “What are you expecting to accomplish here?”

“I dunno. I’d expected you to start yelling by now, actually,” the boy said to the floor.

“Nothing has changed between us.” Severus didn’t have to look at him to know Potter was now watching him raptly. “When we return to Hogwarts, we will proceed as usual, unchanged.”

“But…I thought…”

“Did you expect otherwise?” Setting down his knife, he turned round and braced a hand against the counter, eyes boring into the boy’s. “You are not a fool, but you are certainly acting like one. Things have not changed. We cannot exchange social niceties in the halls. We cannot discuss books in the classroom, or sit down to eat together. We cannot go shopping or visit the library. We cannot have conversations, Potter, unless you would like Draco Malfoy to write to his father and get us all killed. This, whatever you believe this is, will end. There is nothing for you here. There has never been, and will never be, anything for you here. You are Harry Potter. You cannot be seen with somebody like me.”

Every word came out of him as easily as drawing water from a rock; but even as Potter’s face fell and shoulders slumped, even as his chest tightened and his hands tried to draw into fists, Severus knew it had to be done. This could not last.

“But I don’t want it to end,” Potter said.

“It has to. This cannot continue.”

“But—”

“It has to stop!” The sentence ended on a yell. “This will end! None of this has meant anything, and you’re a—bigger idiot than I thought if you’ve convinced yourself that is does!”

The boy didn’t speak. He’d made himself very small against the wall, gripping the ends of his over-long sleeves like they were a shield. The kitchen was silent. Next door, the Richardsons were having a row; muffled crashes rattled the window. The sound of it put him on edge. Severus held his breath, hoping to slow his pounding heart.

“It’s meant something to me,” Potter said angrily, “even if you don’t care about any of it. I care.”

This has to end, Severus told himself, but even his head he sounded more desperate than anything. He tightened his grip on the edge of the counter, scratching at it with his nails. It has to end.

“I don’t want this to end. Even if we can’t talk in person, we could—exchange notes, or…or send owls, or—”

“Or have our letters intercepted by the Ministry?” he said breathlessly, shaking his head. “Or receive gossip rags about Harry Potter’s secret lover because you have begun sending a ridiculous amount of letters detailing each and every last plot device used in a book? If Ms. Granger’s support during the Tournament was enough to send Rita Skeeter crawling out from her gutter, I dread to imagine the shit she’d dream up once she received word of mysterious letters. The entire Wizarding London would be scrambling for answers, and no doubt Fudge would begin raving about a conspiracy. We
can’t go on like this. It will end."

Potter looked dreadfully unhappy, with his brows drawn close and lips pursed, but Severus decided he didn’t care. “You think the Ministry is intercepting owls?” he asked.

“I would be hard-pressed to believe they aren’t.”

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“Fudge has allowed power to go to his head. He is no longer concerned with rules and laws—he wants power, and he wants control. Intercepted mail is hardly a trivial matter, but compared to anything else he will soon find himself capable of, it is the least of your worries now.” He ran a hand through his hair again and tried not to think about how oily it had already gotten. Before he could stop to think about what he was saying, Severus muttered, “We need to discuss Wednesday’s visit.”

This triggered an instantaneous reaction. “What’s there to talk about?” Potter demanded, wringing the hem of his jumper in his hands. “We already did that. We talked about everything.”

“Well, not all of it,” Severus shot back. “There’s more.”

“More? I told you everything!”

“Do not lie! The others may be content to believe you’ve given every last detail, but I know better. There is more. There is always more.”

Potter was breathing hard, edging backward until Severus held up a hand in a silent order to stop. “What would you know?” the boy snapped. “How would you know I haven’t told everything? Why would you care? You just said we can’t be—friends, or whatever. So why should you care?”

I don’t care, he wanted to say, but somehow couldn’t bring himself to lie. He’d done too much already by entangling himself in this mess—especially when he’d insisted, on multiple occasions, that he wanted no part in it. Riling the boy up would only serve to make matters worse. “I’m a professor. I’ve seen cases like you.”

Potter laughed without humor. “So I’m a ‘case’ now? D’you mean a mystery, or a head case, like the Prophet says? Wait, no, this is you we’re talking about—you mean both.”

“You’re behaving like a toddler,” Severus said flatly. And like your godfather. “Where in that sentence did I suggest I so much as read the Daily Prophet? And—you’re sidetracking, but it won’t work. There is more to the story and you will tell me.”

“No,” the boy said, “I won’t.”

“Then you would prefer to stay with them?” Severus ground out. “You prefer the belt and the cane, and being withheld meals? Do you enjoy being locked in your bedroom? In a cupboard under the stairs? Does it make you feel special?”

“No! I want to be normal! I don’t want to be treated like a freak, or have everyone hate me for a month before changing their minds because the Ministry’s decided I’m evil again. I don’t want Voldemort trying to kill me, or Uncle Vernon treating me like furniture, or…anything!” He flung himself down at the table, burying his face in his hands. “I hate being famous for my parents dying. I hate this scar.”

Uncertain of what to do over such a sudden outpour of emotion, Severus weighed empathetic sentences and pitying words in his mind before eventually deciding on, “Don’t say the Dark Lord’s
name.”

Potter made a sound behind his hands, but it was too muffled to tell whether it was a laugh or something along the lines of *fuck off.* “There isn’t anything more,” he mumbled. “Dunno why you think there is, but there isn’t. I’ve told everything.”

“There’s *always* more,” he insisted. There was always more that went on behind closed doors. Beatings were one thing, but in houses like…Potter’s, there were always secrets. There was always *more,* even if, or especially if one parent was left in the dark.

“D’you want an essay on the way my family’s brains work?” The boy snorted. “I don’t know much about psychology. Sorry, Professor.”

At a loss for words, and more than a little nauseated, Severus moved back until his hips met the counter again. “No secrets?” he asked again, one last time. “Something your aunt doesn’t know about? Or your uncle?”

Looking at him strangely now, in a way that made his stomach twist and his palms sweat, Potter shook his head and said, “Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon tell each other everything. They don’t have secrets. Aunt Petunia even told him about magic before my mum died. They’re happy together for a reason, I s’pose. They don’t keep secrets.”

(Was it not normal, then? Was it unnatural to keep secrets with one parent and leave the other in the dark, even if it made you feel slimy and wrong inside? The boy was wrong. There were secrets. There were *always* secrets. Always more to the story.)

“I see,” Severus said, letting his shields slam into place and take away whatever tormented thoughts had stirred up within him. His voice sounded distant. “That was all there was to discuss. Do you feel up to an Occlumency lesson? Or would you rather eat lunch first?”

And the moment passed as though it had never been.

They ate lunch in silence. Neither looked up from their food, intent on ignoring the tension in the air. When the boy stood to clean his plate, Severus made no move to get up from where he’d been merely pushing his own food about, knowing he’d only trigger his dyspepsia if he tried choking anything down.

“D’you want to do it now?” Potter asked quietly, without turning away from the sink. “Occlumency, I mean.”

He wasn’t about to eat anymore of his lunch. “If you’re prepared.”

“Yeah. I’m ready.”

Severus retrieved the Pensieve and began his usual removal of incriminating memories, taking care to remove the ones that had been building too close to the surface of his mind; there would be no use in the boy seeing anything from his childhood, let alone anything involving his mother.

They took their usual positions by the table once he’d finished, breathing deeply in tandem. “One… two…three… *Legilimens.*”

The now-familiar rush of memories overtook him, blurring out all hints of the kitchen around them. Severus fixated immediately on the boy’s family, digging their faces out of the stream, and his mind exploded with sound. Not allowing himself to become lost in the sensory overload, he pulled out whatever hint of abuse he could find. Potter gasped as if from a long way away.
Before he could look too closely, he was assaulted with a burst of anger, overriding anything in front of him—and he was ejected forcefully from the boy’s head.

They both staggered back, panting and sweaty. “Why do you keep doing that?” Potter hissed, rubbing his eyes.

“What?” Severus said coldly.

“Looking for my uncle! You’ve been doing it for weeks!”

“You are deluding yourself,” he said. “Up, Potter. Again.”

And he was back in the stream. Focusing instead on the boy’s aunt, he dredged up her voice, and the familiar-unfamiliar face. *Hair has darkened face longer,* he thought before cutting himself off, and Petunia’s face slipped away, back into the flow of memories. *Cousin.*

Images of a large blond boy burst into view; running from him, getting punched in the face by him; “*The toilet might get sick*—” and pig on hind-legs and—pig’s tail, Hagrid, a birthday cake—and a surge of affection rose at the sound of Hagrid’s voice, blinding him against all else.

Severus stumbled back and nearly fell, gripping his head with a groan. The kitchen swam back into focus. Shooting an arm out to grab at the counter, he hauled himself upright and turned to look at the boy, who hadn’t even been knocked back. “Good,” he panted, squinting through the grey light coming through the window. “That was…good.”

“It’s getting easier,” Potter said breathlessly. He had his hands on his knees.

“Yes. Again.” He cleared his throat and gathered himself. “One, two—”

From the next room over, the Floo roared to life. Severus spun round in alarm. “Severus?” came Albus’s fire-crackly voice. “Are you there?”

He released the breath he’d been holding and took a step towards the doorway. “I’m coming!” he called, and then stopped, turning to look at the boy. “Stay here. This should not take long. I’ll return momentarily.”

“Yes, sir,” Potter said, taking a seat at the table.

Severus left him there and hurried to the fireplace, dropping to his knees in the scattered ash. “Albus,” he said to the head floating in the hearth, “I trust you’ve received my letter. May I come through so we can discuss the contents?”

—

“Something’s going on between you and Snape,” Sirius said.

They’d secluded themselves in the drawing room with the Black family tapestry, far away from the Weasleys and the rest of the Order, so that no one would listen in on a potentially sensitive conversation. Though Remus found the room unsavory at the best of times, it now gave him a feeling of decided unease. “*Going on*?” he said dryly, running his fingertips along the mantle over the hearth, polishing away the dust and leaving streaks. “What do you mean?”
“You know what I mean, Moony. This—fucking weird infatuation you have for him, whatever it is—that’s what I mean. Listen,” he sighed, turning around so that they were face-to-face, “I know you like him. You always have, even back at Hogwarts. Why you like the greasy creep—”

“Sirius,” he said, exasperated, but was cut off before he could continue.

“Let me finish. Why you like the—don’t give me that look… fine —why you like him , is that better? It’s mad, is what I’m trying to say. Snape isn’t someone you want to be around. He never has been. He’s not the sort of bloke you take home to meet your parents.” There was no hint of a smile on Sirius’s gaunt face, nor any sign of an incoming joke; and suddenly Remus couldn’t decide whether or not he’d prefer one. Pranks and jokes were easy. Do it now, without thinking deeply about your actions, and regret later. Simple.

This was not simple.

“If you would only try to get to know him,” Remus said, even as he knew the words would fall on deaf ears, “I’m sure you would change your mind. He’s not the demon we’ve always made him out to be.”

“Not the demon we’ve made him out to be? Remus, he’s a Death Eater. For Voldemort. This isn’t a fucking Ministry official who’s taken bribes or made Fudge sympathizing statements to the Daily Prophet. Snape has killed people, and he’ll do it again the second Voldemort—his master—tells him to. He treats Harry like utter shit—”

“From what I’ve witnessed, he’s on his way to treating Harry much more kindly than he has before.”

“He terrorizes the students and, according to Hermione, has tormented one boy enough to make him their Boggart!”

“What Neville is afraid of is figures of authority, more than any one person. Severus had just left the room and was fresh in the mind. He’d mentioned himself that it could have been his grandmother.”

Sirius shook his head wordlessly, lips parted and eyes wide. “Are you even listening to yourself?” he hissed. “This is mad! Are you Confunded? Under the Imperius? Snape is an oily little slimeball who tortures children for a living and kills Muggles on the side. Moony, we’ve known this since we were kids. Nothing has changed. I know you like to see the good in people, but this? James would’ve thought you’d gone off your rocker. Fuck, I think you’ve gone off your rocker.”

“Don’t bring James into this,” Remus snapped, turning back to the hearth. Sirius grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him back around.

“And you don’t try to push me out. Moony, I’m serious about this. Don’t get involved with Snape. I know you like blokes—I like blokes, I could hardly give a fuck if you do too—but Snape? You could have…anyone else. Anyone. I could set you up with somebody, or Tonks could…anyone but Snape.”

“You said the same thing to James about Lily, and we all saw how that turned out,” he said, voice heavy with irony.

“Lily wasn’t a genocidal maniac!”

“And neither is Severus!”

“Are you shagging him?” Sirius demanded.
“I don’t see how it’s any of your business—”

“You’re my best mate, of course it’s my—”

“But no! No, I am not,” he said firmly. “I’m not shagging him. I don’t know that he would even want that, honestly. I don’t know what he wants at all.”

“So you admit he could be playing the long game, waiting for your guard to drop, and then—”

“I’m not admitting to anything, Padfoot, but—”

They both jolted back from each other when a flash of light burst in the room, illuminating the burns on the family tapestry and the streaks Remus had made across the mantle. “That’s a doe,” he said dumbly, staring at the Patronus standing silently by the door. Sirius gaped at it, the dark of his eyes leached of all color in the ghostly light. “Lily—?”

“The meeting tonight is cancelled,” came Snape’s voice, drifting out of the Patronus as distantly as if it were coming from the end of a long tunnel. “Do not come. You will be turned away. The boy is safe.”

The Patronus faded away; Remus had to force his arm back to his side before he could reach for it, and he studiously ignored the way Sirius’s hand rose to touch the light before it could vanish entirely.

The drawing room seemed very cold and very dark, all of a sudden.

Sirius sucked in air like he’d been drowning, stepping back and blinking hard. “Meeting?” he breathed.

Just as softly, Remus said, “I was supposed to check on Harry tonight.”

“Something’s happened.” Sirius wet his lips and his eyes, which had been so lost, steeled. “Remus, something’s wrong. We need to call Dumbledore.”

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY HALLOWEEN! My roommate, his girlfriend, and I were setting up those word streamers for our party and it included a few extra letters, so it says "Happy Halalloween" instead. If you haven’t gotten your flu shot, please get it asap. The flu is absolutely horrendous this year and I’ve been sick for weeks. Every day off work has been spent lying on the couch sleeping and feeling like shit. Anyway, this fic has reached 10k hits and I’m honestly pretty hyped. This extra-long chapter is sponsored by Ella, my cat, who is lying between me and my laptop and won’t stop snatching my hands away from the keyboard so she can kiss them.

EDIT: This fic is not finished yet! I still have 2-3 chapters left to write. I’ve been seeing people unsubscribe now that I’ve added this to be part one of a series. That’s just because I’m going to forget to do that otherwise lol. This IS going to have a sequel, though, that takes place after they return to Hogwarts. I’ve already outlined the gist of it so I can have a basic plot to follow instead of leaving it up to fate and whimsy like this fic. (I don't outline oops I'm winging 99% of this.)
Severus didn’t bother dusting the soot from his robes as he emerged from Albus’s fireplace. Instead, he strode up to the desk and planted his hands on the surface, leaving streaks of ash, and demanded, “Did you receive my letter?”

“How very nice to see you, Severus,” Albus said serenely, leaning back in his chair as though waiting patiently for him to sit down and have a cuppa. “I trust you’ve been well?”

“You can trust I’m impatient to know whether you’ve received my letter,” he said.

“I have,” Albus said, “and I do believe there is much to discuss.”

“And did you read it?” He pushed away from the desk and began pacing, grinding his shoes into the ancient axminster like it had offended him. “Don’t offer me false platitudes or tell me everything will be taken care of. Did you read it?”

Dumbledore watched him patiently, expression calm and posture relaxed. “I can assure you I have. Dobby,” he said suddenly, and a House-Elf cracked into existence. Severus only just managed not to startle. “Please bring a breakfast arrangement for Professor Snape. Something light and easy for digestion, yes, thank you. Severus—sit.”

He sat, arms crossed over his chest and legs stretched out in front of him so that if Albus were to move his feet, he would be forced to work round an obstacle. When the elf returned with a tray laden with porridge, toast, and an assortment of freshly cut fruits, he eyed it with disgust before grudgingly taking a slice of toast and nibbling at the crust. “You cannot distract me forever, Albus,” he said, tearing the toast into pieces before stuffing it all into his mouth at once.

“I would imagine not. I am not trying to distract you, my boy, but rather supply fortification. You have been looking rather poorly.” From around the desk, the elf began stoking the fire and dusting the knick knacks in the room. Sighing deeply, Albus said softly, “That will be all. Thank you, Dobby. You are dismissed.”

The elf disappeared with another crack. Before Albus could speak, Severus said swiftly, “You told me the blood wards had begun to fail.”

“Yes. Severus—”

“Is it because the boy doesn’t think of the house as his home?” he demanded, leaning forward in his chair and reaching for another slice of toast. He wolfed it down and reached for a third.

The Headmaster didn’t respond for a time. When he did, his voice was solemn. “You must know, first and foremost,” he said, “that I was not aware of the extent of Harry’s abuse.”

Severus dragged the bowl of porridge over and fixed his attention on it, giving the Headmaster whatever time he may need to compose himself. “You knew?” he prompted between bites, after the silence had gone on too long. “All this time?”

“I knew he was unhappy there. Arabella Figg has told me about the chores he does around the house. I was also aware that Vernon and Petunia Dursley did not take kindly to magic. I had not,
however, expected them to take things further.” Dumbledore sighed again. “Your letter came as a surprise to me. I can assure you, Severus: I was not aware.”

A tension he hadn’t realized he’d been carrying drained away. Severus ate the last of his porridge and swallowed down a belch and its accompanying surge of acid reflux. Giving himself a moment, he turned back to the toast and polished off the last of the stack. He hadn’t known he was hungry until the food had been laid out before him. “Will he remain there?”

“I will see to other arrangements. However, if I cannot find suitable shelter…”

“You can’t possibly mean to send him back,” Severus said lowly, looking up to meet Albus’s eyes. “Headmaster, the boy cannot remain in that house. I won’t allow it.”

Dumbledore looked very old and very tired. “I may have no other options, Severus. But, if I may be so bold, I would like to hear your ideas. I am all ears, my boy. I know you have Harry’s best interests at heart. In the meantime, provide me with whatever details you may have on his upbringing. We have much to talk about.”

The next hour was spent batting ideas back and forth and writing down potential shelters for Potter. It was only after Severus checked the time and remembered he’d told the boy he would be back shortly that he stood up to leave. Albus stood with him and grasped his hands briefly.

“I enjoy our visits,” he said, “and it releases a great burden on my shoulders to know you’re looking after Harry. There is no one I would trust more in this endeavor. Thank you, my boy. I will see you soon.”

He left Hogwarts in reluctantly good spirits, throwing a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace and saying, “Spinner’s End,” before stepping through and closing his eyes against the sickening whirl of sitting rooms round the county. The Floo spat him back out without preamble, spewing ash out across the floor. He Vanished it with a wordless gesture, shaking out his robes and ruffling his hair. Then, taking a second to compose himself, he strode into the kitchen—and stopped dead at the sight that met him there.

Potter had heeded his instructions. He had not left. But Severus—Severus had left something: the Pensieve, filled to the brim with every last detail of his past, every detail of his parents and his best friend, and details of the Dark Lord. Details of Albus’s long-reaching plans.

And Potter had dove straight in to view them.

*What have I done?* were the only cohesive words in his mind, rattling round his brain. He inhaled sharply and gripped the doorframe, pressing splinters into his palm. *What have I done?*

In an instant, the emptiness in his head was overtaken by a surge of rage. Fury ricocheted through his organs, swelling up in his body and oozing from his pores until he shook from the force of it. Biting down on every gasp of breath cutting at his lungs, he took a step, and then another, and another—until, half-blind, he reached for the boy and gripped him hard by the arm.

Daring a glimpse at the Pensieve, he looked away immediately, bile rising in his throat. As if it had drifted up from the memory itself, the words “I don’t need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her” shot through him. He gagged and used his free hand to gather his robes tightly round him, pressing down against the layers and buttons to reassure himself they were still there. Then, turning back to the boy, he dragged him from the memory.

Potter’s glazed expression took a few seconds to clear, but Severus was already speaking. “Having
fun?” he managed to choke out. The boy’s eyes widened, jaw dropping from his blanching face.

“Professor,” he mouthed, but whatever voice he might have had died on the way out.

“So,” Severus said, tightening his grip on Potter’s arm, hard enough that his joints creaked. “So … been enjoying yourself, Potter?”

“N-no…” Tugging at his arm, the boy shook his head frantically and made an aborted step backward.

He could feel his chest heaving, breath too quick and shallow, but it was from a long way off; Severus could no more stop himself from speaking than he could calm the roaring in his ears, or the frantic pounding in his lungs heart hands— “Amusing man, your father, wasn’t he?” he bit out, jostling the boy so hard his head jolted back and his glasses slipped loose. “Amusing.”

“I—didn’t—”

Unable to bear the warmth in his hands, the heat of another body, he threw Potter aside with all the strength left in him. The boy fell hard against the table, knocking his shoulder on the corner before scrambling back against the linoleum.

“You will not tell anybody what you saw!” he bellowed, clenching his fists until he drew blood. “Nobody!”

“No—no, of course I w—”

“Get out!” he cried, seizing the first object he could find and hurling it in the boy’s direction. “Out! Get out! I don’t want to see you in this house ever again!”

The boy rolled to his knees and made for the door. Severus threw another jar at him; it burst against the wall, splattering green sludge, and was immediately followed by a bottle, and then the cauldron itself, which shot backwards from the doorway and caught him with a glancing blow across the forehead. Staggering backward, he reached for his wand and slashed at the cauldron on the floor with \textit{Septumsempra} on his lips, lashing again and again at the linoleum until it resembled ribbons more than it did a floor. He threw down his wand. Screaming hard enough to gag himself, he gripped one of the chairs and hurled it to the floor, splintering one of the legs and sending bits of wood flying. He bent double and coughed until he felt he’d lose a lung. Blood ran into his eye, blinding him, but he ignored it in favor of turning round and vomiting into the sink.

His hands shook where he gripped the counter. Spitting stomach acid and half-digested food down the drain, Severus racked and wheezed, breath rattling in his chest. He slammed a fist down against the side of the sink, using the pain to ground himself back to reality, and then slammed it down twice more, until something cracked and he came rushing back to himself. He gripped at his hair with fingers that could no longer unbend and coughed out a sob.

\textit{What have I done?} he thought, screwing his eyes shut. His knees wobbled. The boy—

Had left. Door slammed shut, empty house, silent. Him, alone.

The boy —

Shoving away from the sink and picking his wand off the floor, he ran out of the kitchen and to the door, fumbling with the knob until it finally opened, nearly up-ending him into the street. Severus only just remembered to close it behind him before he set off in a sprint, begging his legs to hold him up just a while longer.
“Expecto Patronum!” he gasped, drawing old memories close and foregoing the Statute of Secrecy entirely as he hurtled round a corner and skidded to a stop at the torn section of fencing by the river. Lily’s doe erupted from his wand and stood close by his side, a lifejacket in a stormy sea. Severus clung to it desperately. “Deliver a message,” he ordered, swallowing back as much emotion as he could to force his voice into some semblance of normality. “The meeting is cancelled. Do not come. You will be turned away. The boy”—His voice faltered for the briefest moment before he steeled it back into a careful monotone—“is safe.

He ducked through the fence without waiting for it to fade away and stumbled down the riverbank. Shoe slipping on a patch of moss, he fell before he could catch himself; his momentum carried him into the yellow water. Spitting curses, Severus forced himself to his feet and renewed his race to the playground, where he hoped the boy would be headed. When he attempted to locate him by way of the tracking spell, it led him back to Spinner’s End; and in a sudden moment of clarity, Severus remembered seeing the boy’s shoes sitting by the door.

“If there’s ever a need to move quickly through Cokeworth,” he’d told the boy only eight days ago, though it felt like an eternity, “follow the riverbank.”

The boy had taken his advice; there were fresh footprints, made by bare feet, in the mud.

“Potter!” he dared to shout. “Potter!”

The trees were silent. Where did he go? The trees? Playground? Did he leave? Knightbus?

If Potter had left…if he had lost him…if he’d…And what if he landed in the arms of a Death Eater? It would be—his fault. His fault.

Severus dragged to a stop against a tree, trying to catch his breath. His head was still bleeding, mingling with the salt stinging his eyes, and he wiped at it angrily. “Homenum revelio,” he whispered, pulling out his wand, but nothing happened. The boy was already gone.

He would try the playground. Then, if that failed to turn up results, he would try the library, or another shop in town. And if that failed…

Albus would never forgive him. Even if he managed to find Potter, he’d done the boy physical damage; there was no excuse for it, especially not one Albus would accept. And when he told Lupin what he’d done, whatever they’d built would be gone. It would be over. There would be no forgiveness found in what he’d done.

“Damn it,” he bit out, putting his head in his hands and trying to tune out an insistent chime tinkling in his ears. “Damn it.”

The chime sounded again, pulling him back out of his self-pity. Severus looked up from his bloodied hands and sighed deeply. Potter had made it to the playground at last.

He walked the rest of the way, ducking beneath branches and tearing his robes on thorn bushes. And when he emerged from the trees, the boy was there, settled at the bottom of the rusted slide. Severus went to him slowly. It was only when he was less than a meter away that Potter looked up, staring at him with wide, red-rimmed eyes.

Neither of them spoke, though Severus knew he must have been a sight, all torn robes, wet shoes, and a bloody face. The boy was no better: his hair was plastered to his face with sweat and his feet were filthy.

Potter didn’t move, even when Severus settled himself in the yellowed grass beside him, but he
shifted his weight away and exhaled loudly.

The sky hadn’t yet darkened. There was still time for local families to plan a trip to the playground. And if one of those families happened across them, he would need to take drastic measures to ensure they would remain unseen—or forgotten. He would need to work quickly to get the boy back to Spinner’s End.

“I’m sorry,” he said finally. “I should not have…It was wrong. And I’m sorry.”

“I’m sick of people keeping secrets from me,” Potter said, glaring at the trees in front of them. “I’m sick of being kept in the dark, when even Ron and Hermione won’t tell me what’s going on. I hate being stuck at the Dursleys while everyone else is fighting V— him. I’m sick of being angry all the time, Snape. It never ends. And you still won’t tell me anything. You want me to tell you everything—everything about my uncle, about my aunt—but you won’t tell me about my mum.”

Pulling his legs closer to his chest, he chewed the inside of his cheek and avoided the boy’s gaze.

“Why’d you call her that?”

He stared at the line of trees, at the bushes and the sky, and kept his mouth shut.

Severus heard the boy move next to him. Their knees brushed; he didn’t quite manage not to wrench his leg away. “Tell me.” When he failed to respond, Potter said angrily, “Tell me, or I’ll never come back to the house again. Not ever.”

Worrying though the implication that he’d ever return to Spinner’s End after this month was, Severus elected to ignore it in favor of clenching his hands together. A splinter of pain twisted down into his wrist, radiating from his broken fingers, but Severus ignored that, too.


“You are behaving like a child,” Severus said, voice low and waspish.

“Yeah?” Potter raised his eyebrows. “That’s funny. So are you. Tell me.”

He had never cared for Harry Potter, but he had been the one to set the death of his parents in stone. It was his fault the boy was an orphan, and it was his fault that the only one able to watch what Lily’s love had brought grow up, was him. He owed him for the uprooting of his life, and all that had happened since. Severus owed this boy everything.

And he had a debt to pay.

Severus swallowed hard, gathered up the very last of his courage, and talked. “She smiled,” he said, almost too quietly to be heard, “and I knew it was over.”

“She…” This time, when their knees brushed, Severus pulled away entirely. “You mean…”

“Your mother.”

In the years after, he’d thought he’d been mistaken—that he’d lashed out senselessly, called his friend a slur, and destroyed the only friendship he’d ever had because of a delusion. It had only been after he’d used Albus’s Pensieve that he’d learned the truth, but it had been hollow. He hadn’t destroyed their friendship. It had already been over.

Calling her a Mudblood had just been the proof she’d needed—proof that he’d changed, that he’d
become someone dark and foreign and wrong.

“Did you say sorry?” Potter asked. Severus dared a glance at him, but he was looking down at his feet, using his toes to push dirt round.

“I stood outside her common room for hours to apologize.” He paused to wet his lips. “I’d have slept there if she hadn’t come out, though it made no difference either way.”

“Even though my dad and Sirius were in there?” the boy asked, looking up. “If they’d seen you were out there…wouldn’t they have…”

Severus turned his face away. “I didn’t care.”

Frowning, Harry ran a hand through his hair and went back to staring at the dirt. “Did you ever see her again? After Hogwarts?”

“Once. The day before she took you under the Fidelius.” He’d had to know. Had to know she was still alive, even without the protection, and that she hadn’t disappeared without a trace. She’d looked frightened, but she’d been alive.

The fear he’d seen in her eyes haunted his dreams.

“Did she—?”

“She didn’t see me.” He was going to break the rest of his fingers if he didn’t stop twisting them. “And that was for the best.”

“You never said…goodbye, then.”

He couldn’t find the energy to speak, all of a sudden.

“Why would my mum have married him if she’d hated him?” Potter asked. “She loathed him. Loathed him. And he was…he was awful. You were right. He and Sirius were just…awful. Why would she marry him if he was so terrible?”

Severus sighed but didn’t respond.

“D’you…d’you think he…No. No, never mind,” the boy said firmly. “He wouldn’t have…”

“Lily was no more Imperius’d then than you are now.” Of all the things James Potter had done, feeding Lily a love potion or taking her by way of imperio was not one of them—of that, Severus was certain.

“Then why?” Potter whispered. “How could she marry him? And how could she have smiled when you were friends?”

“We weren’t. Not anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Professor.”

“Don’t. It’s nothing to do with you.”

“No, I mean…I’m sorry,” the boy said, hugging himself. “I shouldn’t have gone inside the Pensieve. I knew it was wrong, but I did it anyway. I thought I’d see something about the war, not…”

“I should not have left it there. I knew better than to leave you with it.” He scratched at the drying
blood on his face and chewed his thumbnail, craving a cigarette.

“Why *did you leave*?” the boy asked, pushing his legs out and leaning back against the curve of the slide. “I know Dumbledore was there, but—”

“I told him,” Severus said, and Potter shot back upright.

“What?”

“I told him everything.”

“You—you told him—”

“I am duty-bound as a professor to tell the Headmaster when a student needs removed from their current residence.” Often, during the few examples where he’d intervened, Dumbledore would leave him to his own devices unless there was a need for legal advice or someone with higher power in a political setting. Severus could count on one hand the number of times he’d asked the Headmaster for help with a student; and though Albus had never been anything less than gracious and accommodating, he still loathed to request his aid in anything.

“I don’t need *removed, *” Potter said angrily, “and I don’t need you telling people about the Dursleys. What, have you also sent a letter to Draco Malfoy, telling him I hate small spaces?”

“Don’t be absurd,” he snapped back. “Would you prefer I keep it to myself and allow you to rot away in Surrey? Did you *not* just tell me, boy, that you were tired of being kept in the dark during the summer holidays?”

“Don’t call me *boy,* ” Potter ground out, getting to his feet. “My *name is* Harry. And for your information, *Snape,* I’d prefer you to not spread my business around for everyone to hear about. First Sirius and Professor Lupin, and now Dumbledore? Who’s next? Am I going to read about it in the *Prophet* tomorrow? Why do you even *care,* anyway? You’ve never given a damn about me. The blood wards—”

“Are failing, Potter, because apparently you consider your aunt and uncle as family as much as they do you—that is to say, not at all.”

“The blood wards are failing?” Potter’s voice dropped into something quieter; he sat back down on the slide and wound his arms round his knees. “What’s going to happen if they fail? I’ll still go back next year, won’t I? D’you think they’ll hold out until then? Are the Dursleys safe?”

He chewed the inside of his cheek and weighed his responses. “That remains to be seen,” he said eventually. If he had his way about it, the boy would never return. The Dark Lord, and to an extent Albus, were his only obstacles.

“I thought you didn’t want to be involved,” the b—Potter said. “That’s what you told Mr. Weasley.”

“I don’t want any part in this, no.” He grabbed a handful of grass with his unbroken hand and crumpled it in his fist, letting it stain his palm green and flutter back to the ground.

“What changed?”

He ripped up another handful of grass and didn’t respond.

“Your parents…”
“No,” he said sharply, staring out towards the swings.

Potter showed no sign of having heard of him, pressing on obliviously. “Were they like the Dursleys?”

“Enlighten me on how this has anything to do with your impending home removal,” Severus hissed. He pulled up more dirt than grass in his next handful; it stuck deep under his fingernails, darkening them until his hand looked more earth than skin and bone.

Potter glowered at him. “I just want to know why you’re so interested, all of a sudden, after you told everyone you weren’t. Mr. Weasley made it sound like you knew—”

“We are done here,” he snarled, standing and walking away. “We’re going back to the house. Move along, Potter. We’re finished.”

“You never tell me anything!” Potter shouted after him. “What, do you not want to admit we’re alike? Do you hate me that much?”

“What my parents did to me does not matter.” He was breathing hard, unable to turn round to face the boy. “It has never mattered, and it never will matter. We are not alike, Potter, and you are deluding yourself if you think we are.”

“If your parents treated you like the Dursleys treat me, then we are alike! Hogwarts is our home. Not back there. Right? Why wouldn’t that make us the same?”

“Because I deserved it!” The moment the words came out, Severus wished he could take them back. There was a ringing silence unlike any he’d heard before; the birds seemed to stop singing, the wind ceased to blow, and even the distant roll of thunder died away. Or perhaps they were drowned out by the rushing in his ears, and the pounding of his heart beating a tattoo against his sternum. Severus closed his eyes and contemplated Obliviating the boy.

“I don’t think you deserved it,” Potter said quietly from behind him.

“You don’t know what sort of person I am,” he managed to say, though the words were almost too quiet to be heard. “You don’t know what sort of person I once was. You dislike me now? You think I’m cruel? That I’m mean and bitter? You have no idea who I’ve been or what I’ve done. I was—I am—a Death Eater.”

A shock of lightning flared in the distance, but Severus hardly noticed. The boy was silent.

“How old were you?” Harry asked. “I mean…if you remember.”

He shook his head without saying anything. It began to rain.

“So you were a kid. Right? I don’t think you were an awful person if you were just a kid. My mum liked you, didn’t see? And she wasn’t an awful person. Just because you’ve done…things…now—it doesn’t mean you deserved it back then. That wouldn’t make any sense.”

“It’s time to go back,” Severus said, glancing up at the sky. Though it wasn’t even evening yet, it looked closer to night than it did day. “I have an antiseptic for your feet and a salve for bruises at the house.”

Standing up, Potter approached him cautiously and stopped a good meter away. “I thought you said I couldn’t come back to the house.”
“I have not spent the past four years trying, in vain, to heard you back to safety just to leave you to the wilderness and allow you to join the neighborhood gang,” he muttered, debating whether it was too damp now for a cigarette. He was going to need one when they returned. Or two. Or ten.
“Though I have a feeling you’d prefer it.”

“How many points are you going to deck because of this?” Harry asked. When Severus glanced at him, it was to find him grinning ruefully. “A hundred?”

A fucking thousand would be more fitting.

“Do not tempt me. Minerva would have my arse if I put Gryffindor into the negatives before term could even begin.” They made their way out of the playground and back into the underbrush. The boy snuck looks his way every so often, frowning and looking self-pitying. Severus hated him. “Is there a problem?” he said as they walked along the bank of the river.

“No,” the boy said quickly, and then immediately added, “Well, yes.”

“And?”

“Sir?”

“What is it?”

“Right. I just don’t think anyone deserves to be…” Rubbing the back of his neck, Potter shrugged and lowered his gaze. “I dunno. Hit, I s’pose, but you didn’t say anything about…But you didn’t deserve it. It wasn’t your fault.”

Severus felt suddenly, irrationally angry, but he managed to repress it before he could make a scene. “Potter,” he said sharply, stopping in his tracks. Harry slowed next to him. “You will not speak of this again. Never. Not about the Pensieve, and not about—whatever else I told you. You will not breathe a word of this to anyone.”

Through the rain and faint light, he watched the boy’s expression twist before settling into something oddly indiscernible. “What about…Professor Lupin?”

He paused and said, “Only under the most dire of circumstances. Otherwise, not a soul.”

“Okay. I won’t, Professor.”

“Promise me,” he ordered, staring him down.

“I promise. I won’t tell anyone.”

And that was that.

—

When they returned to the house, it was to find it bright and alive.

The neighbors made no attempt to shield their curiosity. Blinds and curtains were pulled aside, doors and windows had been cracked open to better hear the commotion coming from inside the house, and a few did a double-take as they went by. Severus resigned himself to Obliviating them all later.
For now, he had more important things to worry about.

Lupin had not heeded his warning; and in hindsight, Severus suspected the Patronus had only made things worse. In any case, he now had a group of busybodies to answer to.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded, storming into the house and cutting them all off mid-sentence. He slammed the door shut and cast a hasty Muffliato. “Lupin, you abysmal fool, I told you to stay away. That was not an invitation for a mob of dunderheads to storm my house.”

“Harry!” Black jumped over the back of the sofa to meet them, gathering the boy up in a hug.

Potter wriggled his arms out of Black’s grip and wound them round the mutt’s shoulders, burying his face in the man’s hair. “Sirius?” His voice was muffled. “What are you doing here? What’s going on?”

“What are we doing here? Where were you?”

“Godric and Jesus, what’s happened to you two?” Lupin stared wide-eyed at him, pulling his attention away from Black’s frantic questions of “are you all right?” and “are you injured?” and back to the wolf. “Are you concussed? Who attacked you? Why didn’t you send for any of us?”

Not for the first time, Severus contemplated lying. It would be simple—pathetically so, in fact. With the state he was in, there would be no doubt someone had attacked; and though Albus would likely suspect a falsehood when given the news, Severus knew the boy would play along and help fill any holes in the story, if only to slither his way out of taking responsibility for his own wrongdoings.

He’d only just thought up a realistic tale when Potter opened his mouth and fucking ruined everything.

“Attacked? We weren’t attacked,” he said, bewildered, before stiffening underneath the drape of Black’s arm and throwing a frown Severus’s way. “Er—” he stuttered, and Severus could only imagine what sort of expression was on his face, judging by the way Potter paled. “Er—I mean—”

Damn you, he thought, and knew the message went through when Potter looked away entirely.

“What the devil is going on here?” Weasley muttered, looking between them like they were strangers. “I left work early to respond to a distress signal, Remus, and Fudge will not look kindly on that. If this is all a misunderstanding—”

“I apologize, Arthur,” Lupin said, sounding like he meant it truly meant it. “I’m no longer sure myself if there was any reason to come at all. But you can’t deny something has gone wrong.”

So many things had gone wrong during the boy’s stint at Spinner’s End that such a statement was almost humorous, but Severus wasn’t in a joking sort of mood. “As Potter said, there was no attack. The boy has come to no grievous harm. In other words, werewolf, you can take your parade out of my house now and heed my message next time instead of blundering in like an idiot.”

“What about your injuries?” Weasley pressed, gesturing to him. “Harry may not be hurt, but you certainly are. Where have they come from?”

Severus regarded him coolly and said, in a voice as dismissive as humanly possible, “Unrelated.”

“Unrelated—Remus, this is utter shit,” Black burst out. “Harry, tell me what’s going on, right now. I want answers.”
They all started in on the boy, who looked as though he wished he’d remained at the playground, after all. Taking his chance, Severus edged his way round the group and turned to head into the decimated kitchen, only to be met with a chilling sight: Albus Dumbledore stood in the doorway, framed by the light streaming in from the window, and on his face was a look of abject disappointment. “Albus,” he said quickly, and then stopped, unsure whether to continue. The Headmaster’s eyes were like ice. Slowly, he swept out an arm to reveal the ruins of the kitchen. Mortification swelled in Severus, followed by a surge of self-loathing. He pulled his sticky, matted hair forward to hide his face and cut the line of contact.

“You disgust me,” an old memory whispered, drifting up from his subconscious like a ghost that had never been put to rest.

“I must confess,” Albus said, as the room fell silent behind them, “that I, too, am rather interested in the details of today’s events, Severus.”

—

Harry had no idea what was going on.

Dumbledore had taken Snape upstairs to speak privately, leaving him alone with the others, who hadn’t hesitated to turn on him and begin interrogating.

Why are they here? he wondered, fumbling his way through vague responses and shoddy assurances, unsure of how much to give away. Would Snape want them to cover up all that had happened? Would Dumbledore be angry with Snape for throwing him out? Would Dumbledore be angry with him? He hadn’t seemed to mind when Harry went into the Pensieve last year, but now Dumbledore wouldn’t even look him in the eye or answer him directly. There was no telling how he’d react to what he might consider a breach in security.

Wringing the hem of his shirt in his hands, Harry craned his neck around Sirius’s arm—more like a ball and chain now that they’d begun their questioning—to sneak a peek at the kitchen. (It had not looked like that before he’d run out.) He stared at the gashes in the linoleum, gulped, and said, “I went into his Pensieve without asking.”

Mr. Weasley trailed off mid-question, leaving his mouth parted and eyes wide. “His—?”

“Harry,” Lupin breathed, shaking his head. He covered his face with one scarred hand and pointed at the kitchen with the other. In a muffled voice, he said, “And that would explain the kitchen.”

“What did you see in the Pensieve?” Sirius asked casually, sweeping his long, dark hair out of his eyes. Harry glanced at him in bewilderment and was more than a little alarmed at the oddly hard look on Sirius’s face.

“Sirius—”

“No, Moony, let him talk. What did you see, Harry?”

“Well,” he said hesitantly, looking between the three of them, “I saw—you, actually. You and Lupin. And…my dad.”

Professor Lupin had gone very still, but Sirius didn’t skip a beat before asking, “You saw James?”
Harry didn’t allow himself to become too embarrassed. He plunged into a vague story of what he’d seen in the Pensieve, giving as little detail as possible; he kept any mention of his mum out, made no mention of what sort of spells he’d seen, and all the while stole glances at the bookshelf in front of the staircase. Snape could be back at any moment, and he knew he wouldn’t like him telling the others what he’d done. Especially because he’d promised—but this was a dire circumstance, wasn’t it? They thought he’d been in danger but instead he’d gone and mucked things up again. And, after all, it was Lupin and Sirius. They’d been there, after all. They already knew it all.

When he finished, nobody spoke for a moment. Then, quietly, Lupin said, “I wouldn’t like you to judge your father on what you saw there, Harry. He was only a teenager—”

“I’m a teenager!” Harry said heatedly.

“Look, Harry,” Sirius said placatingly, “James and Snape hated each other from the moment they set eyes on each other. It was just one of those things, you can understand that, can’t you? I think James was everything Snape wanted to be—he was popular, he was good at Quidditch, good at pretty much everything.”

And he had my mum, Harry thought, frowning at his muddy feet. Snape’s best friend.

“And Snape was just this little oddball who was up to his eyes in the Dark Arts and James—whatever else he may have appeared to you, Harry—always hated the Dark Arts.”

“Yeah,” he said, shrugging half-heartedly, “but he just attacked Snape for no good reason, just because—well, just because you said you were bored.”

“I’m not proud of it,” Sirius said quickly.

“I would very well hope not, Sirius,” Mr. Weasley cut in. Harry looked over to where he’d sat down on the sofa. “I know my boys get into trouble I could only dream of, but none of my children have ever attacked another student unprovoked. Not out of maliciousness.”

Harry very carefully arranged his expression into one of agreement, just in case Mr. Weasley remembered the incident with Dudley again.

“Arthur, we were kids,” Sirius sighed. “We were arrogant little berks.”

“He kept messing up his hair,” Harry said under his breath.

Both Sirius and Lupin laughed. “I’d forgotten he used to do that.”

“When we return to headquarters, I’d like to have a word,” Mr. Weasley said. “In the meantime… Harry, what you did was wrong. Very wrong. You had no right to view Severus’s memories, whether he left you alone with them or not. If I had caught Ron invading someone’s privacy so thoroughly…”

“I know it was wrong,” he said miserably, scraping mud off his toes. “I thought I’d see something about Voldemort. I just want answers. I didn’t think I’d see something like—like that, and by the time I was there I’d seen my dad, so I couldn’t just leave… I wish I’d stopped looking. I know it was wrong.”

“Dumbledore has his reasons for not telling you about the war.” Mr. Weasley got to his feet and moved close, putting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing. “You will get the answers you’re looking for. I promise you. But you need to learn how to be patient, Harry. Running headlong into danger isn’t something you can do anymore. It’s worked for you in the past, but you need to rely on
“I have Ron and Hermione—”

“Ron and Hermione are children,” Arthur said forcefully. “You are a child. You are in no way equipped to handle You-Know-Who alone, no matter what anyone would have you believe. A single boy of fifteen cannot go up against an army by himself. You are not invincible. You don’t have to carry these burdens alone. The adults in your life need to take responsibility and shoulder that burden with you. You’ve been left alone with it for far too long and that needs to change, now.”

Harry swallowed hard around a lump in his throat, clenching his hands into fists at his sides. “But one of you could—get hurt. Mr. Weasley—”

“We joined the Order knowing we might die, Harry. We’ve accepted the consequences. Any one of us would be willing to give our lives to the cause,” Lupin said.

“And we’ll take out as many Death Eaters as we can as it happens,” Sirius added, bringing him in for another hug. “You’re not alone. This fight isn’t just yours anymore.”

Harry took a deep breath and squeezed his eyes shut. A tear managed to break free; he wiped it away with his sleeve and tried to muffle a sniffle against his arm.

“Come here,” Mr. Weasley said, voice as gentle as his eyes, and Harry went to him willingly, burying his face in the crook of his shoulder. “We’re here for you. Whenever you need help, we’ll be there. I promise.”

“Just let go now. It’s all right,” Lupin murmured. “Let go.”

And Harry had to.

Chapter End Notes

Whatever sentences you recognize in the last part are basically just ripped straight from the text. Slightly edited, sometimes, but mostly they’re the same.

So I’ve been getting new fanfic ideas featuring a young Snape ever since I bought my favorite movie, Les Choristes, on DVD and have been watching it over and over. Ce film est parfait sous tous rapports ! It’s about a failed musician who becomes a prefect at a boarding school for troubled and criminal boys, only to discover that the worst of the lot has the voice of an angel, so he does what any decent musician would do and turns them into his personal choir. It’s very heartwarming and the music is stunning. I have so many ideas because of this movie. I also kind of want to write a Coraline AU. I have about 5-6 other fic ideas, some partly written, but there are so many more that I want to write, I can hardly choose between them.

Anyway, the artist elenianz on tumblr has the most perfect Snape drawings I have ever seen. They fit in 100% with my mental image of him, and what he’s looked like to me personally since I was a child. Seeing her work is so awesome and I highly recommend checking her out!
“Do you require a Healer, Severus?”

It was beyond humiliating, having the Headmaster see his bedroom.

They’d sequestered themselves upstairs, away from the others, and Severus had cast a *Muffliato* the moment the door had closed, leaving them alone. And although the quiet felt blissful to his pounding head, Severus wouldn’t— *couldn’t*—allow himself to sink into a false sense of ease. He had fucked up royally, no doubt looked to be on his deathbed, and the boy…Well. The boy. Potter.

This was an interrogation. There was no use sugarcoating it.

“What are the extent of your injuries?” Albus said quietly, hands clasped at his front, eyes somewhere off to the right, towards the window. “Severus?”

He set his jaw and didn’t respond, working up the last vestiges of strength from some hidden reserve inside his body. It took some time. “Did you ever stop to think that perhaps, Headmaster, there was a reason I’d told Lupin not to come?” he said eventually, voice flat and hard. He took a turn at looking out the window to the empty street below, unwilling to meet Albus’s piercing gaze. “Do you not have faith in my ability to keep Potter safe? Do you not find me capable? Trustworthy?”

“Severus…”

“Did any of you stop to wonder whether you’d be storming in on a visit from the Malfoys? From Dolohov? Macnair? The Dark Lord himself?”

“I am quite certain there were measures taken to prevent any such thing from happening.”

“Are you?” he said scathingly, uncrossing his arms and unbitching himself from where he’d been leaning against the wall. A bolt of sciatic pain shot down his leg, irritated by the day’s events. He would need a nerve-calming potion. *Valerian and St. John’s Wort for the neuropathy…a sprig of peppermint to soothe the palate…* “Forgive me for not having any faith in Black’s ability to think ahead. *I’m* certain he burst into the house, wand at the ready, with a curse on his lips and his pet werewolf in tow, prepared for a grand brawl he could tell the children about later.”

“I believe you are concussed,” Albus said, and his eyes were like ice. “Your injuries, Severus. Where have they come from? Do you require a visit to Madame Pomfrey?”

Wrenching his broken fingers as he twisted them in his matted hair, Severus burst out, “I don’t need a fucking visit to bloody *fucking* Pomfrey! I want them out! I want you out! You have always—taken his side! *Their* side!”

With the body language of a man approaching a wounded animal, Albus wrapped a cool hand round Severus’s wrist. He could feel his pulse fluttering under the Headmaster’s fingertips, too rapid, almost fevered. He felt—nauseated. Like he was boiling in his skin. The room tilted on its axis, and black spots bloomed in his vision like he was about to lose consciousness. Before he could fall, Albus led him to his bed. He sat heavily, with a screech from the rusted bedsprings. “He went into my—your—the Pensieve,” Severus said breathlessly, blinking the spots away. Carefully, as he realized for the first time how purple his hand was, he put his hand in his hands. He was…so tired,
all of a sudden.

He couldn’t see Dumbledore’s expression, but a certain stillness came over him.

“As far as I know,” he continued, eyes burning from exhaustion, “the boy—Potter—saw a single memory. One that wasn’t incriminating to the Order. No doubt you’re still worried about the Dark Lord using Potter as an information sieve.”

Thunderclouds had crept in so quickly, his room was shrouded in gloom, even though he knew it couldn’t be past five. If not for an unfortunate knowledge of the sort of colors Albus preferred, Severus might have looked at him and assumed his robes were gray, washed of all color in the dark of the storm.

“Harry will need to be moved,” Albus said after a time, and the words were heavy, like it pained him to say them.

What? He lifted his head too quickly and was rewarded with a throb of pain that shot down the back of his neck and pooled at the center of his spine. “Moved, Headmaster?” he repeated. “But he has...” —five more days, he thought, too mortified to say it aloud. What did he care, that the b—Potter had five more days? This entire month had been a clusterfuck on level with the Triwizard Shitshow. He should be ecstatic Potter was leaving early. It was a dream come true. Hanukkah in August. Christmas in September, without the bankruptcy.

“I will speak to Harry after he arrives at Hogwarts,” the Headmaster said. Gently, he touched Severus’s shoulder, grounding him. “I must admit, Severus, that when Remus called for me, I’d feared the worst—that they had arrived to a harrowing sight and sent for help. The scene I was met with certainly suggested something had happened. I will speak to Harry about his trespassing and breach of privacy. I know you have lacked faith in me in the past, but I’m asking you to put faith in me once more. I will take this seriously. However...what has occurred here tonight, no matter the cause, can never be repeated again. I will not allow it. I would not like to see these injuries again.”

“I wouldn’t injure him,” Severus said furiously, trying to stand, but Dumbledore eased him back down. “I would never!”

“Quiet, now. You say you would never harm him, Severus, but what of yourself?” He gestured to him, lingering on the gash on his head. “You may not take your anger out on others in ways that show physical wounds, but you’ve been known to turn your pain towards yourself, instead. This cannot happen again.”

My pain? he thought, clenching his jaw. Struggling to decide whether any of what Albus had said was worth getting angry over, Severus eventually ground out, “When?”

“Hm?”

“When will he be moved?”

“Arrangements will need to be made,” Albus said, pulling his watch out and studying it. Severus swallowed a groan at the sight of it. Dumbledore’s pocket watch confused him at the best of times, but seeing it now made him feel vaguely nauseated. “Currently, Harry is safe here. Uprooting him from Spinner’s End will only serve to upset him. Allow me two more days, my boy, and your duties will be relieved. I’ll have Arthur pick him up on Tuesday morning.”

Tuesday? It’s already Sunday evening, Severus thought wildly, putting his head in his hands again. “I can’t feed the boy, Albus. My kitchen...”
"I will take care of it, as well as your—ah—guests.” With a sigh, Albus straightened his back and said, “Tuesday morning. I know you do not wish to hear this, but I do hope you realize how much this has meant to Harry. Remus has kept me updated on the situation. I expect you to do the same, Severus, once you return to Hogwarts. I will require a full report of today’s events. But for now, rest. Allow me to take care of the rest.”

“Mind the stairs,” Severus managed to say as Dumbledore left the room, and laid down. Two days. Not even that. Two more days, and a retelling of his day.

Two more days.

It was over.

—

On Tuesday, Severus woke up early, before the sun could rise.

Silver light crept across the floor, bathing his bed in monochromatic gray. He rolled onto his side with a squeal of rusted bedsprings, breaking the early morning stillness, and pulled his legs to his chest, breathing deeply. Somewhere outside a cat was yowling. The refrigerator hummed in the kitchen below. Sleep dragged at his eyelids, and for a time he drifted in and out of a light doze, until the light outside was tinged with yellow and he forced himself out of bed.

He slipped down the stairs with practiced ease, moving on silent feet through the living room. Harry was curled in a ball on the sofa, blankets twisted round his knees. Severus paused to tug them back up to his chin before picking his way over to the bookshelf by the hearth. Squinting through the gloom, he ran his fingers along the spines of his books nearest to his face, and then along the ones below, until he found what he’d been looking for.

Potter’s trunk was a mess of old parchment and broken quill nubs. Severus took advantage of it, sifting the layers of rubbish until he found the bottom. He placed the book inside and buried it in wrinkled scrolls and too-small jumpers. Then, closing the trunk again, he climbed to his feet and scaled the stairs again. The room was still, his bed held no trace of warmth, and his bedsheets were as scratchy as ever, but he burrowed in anyway and tried not to overthink his actions. The sun glowed on the horizon and tinged his walls orange. Harry woke downstairs, shuffling about until the shower roared to life. And Severus closed his eyes.

—

“This is it, then?”

Breakfast was a mournful affair. Severus had roused himself somewhere round nine and gone down to make a decent meal for them both, but Potter merely picked at his food. His toast had a corner nibbled off, the eggs had become sodden in ketchup and been left to bleed, and his milk was nearly untouched. If his own plate hadn’t been similarly full, Severus would have made a scathing comment. As it was, he couldn’t find the will.
“Arthur will be here in an hour,” he confirmed, stirring his coffee even though the sugar was sure to have dissolved by now. He took a sip and burned his freshly healed taste buds. More sugar, then. Severus dumped in another three tablespoons before he caught himself and pushed the pot away. Potter tracked his movements and grimaced in disgust when he took another gulp.

“You’re not really going to drink that, are you?” he said. Severus drained the rest of the mug just to spite him. He’d pay with indigestion later, but Potter didn’t need to know that.

It wasn’t as if he would know that either way, seeing as he’d be gone and the house would be empty once again. Empty and quiet. Peaceful at last.

Severus poured himself another cuppa and tried to chase away any melancholy thoughts. He was a maudlin fucking fool. This wasn’t goodbye; he had two years left with the little cretin. Eight days alone at Spinner’s End would not kill him. And eight days at Grimmauld Place would not kill the boy. They would live to aggravate each other again.

“You’ll be back at school before you know it,” he said, both to himself and Harry, who was looking decidedly sullen. “Do you have everything? Your socks? Homework? Robes?”

“Yes,” Potter sighed.

“Books? Your scarf?”

“Yes, for the last time! We already went through this last night. What, d’you think I emptied out my entire trunk this morning looking for my favorite quill?”

“Did you?” he shot back, and then restrained himself with a herculean effort when the boy turned to him with a thunderous expression, hands clenched into fists on top of the table. With an even greater effort, Severus gritted, “Never mind. Gather your things and find your shoes.”

As Potter clattered about in the next room over, Severus cleared the table and set the dishes to clean themselves. He leaned against the counter and rubbed his eyes, trying to wipe away his weariness.

The boy hadn’t taken the news well. After Albus and the others had left, Harry had slipped back into the sulking rage that had nearly oozed from him during his first days at Spinner’s End—the rage Severus hadn’t realized had left him until it came back, this time with a vengeance.

It wasn’t right. None of it was. He should have jumped at the chance to go to Grimmauld Place three days early, but instead he was stirring up rows and ignoring questions. He wasn’t attempting to strongarm his way into the kitchen to fix a meal, he wasn’t tearing through Severus’s books like they were his own personal library, and he hadn’t mentioned Snow Crash in days.

“It’s not all bad here,” he’d said, and Severus hadn’t realized just how truthful Potter had been until he was due to leave.

(This was wrong. This was a problem, and one day he would need to dissuade the boy from the ridiculous delusion he seemed to have to been taken in by, because it would not do for him to think of Spinner’s End as a place where dreams came true and friends were made. It was wrong. He was wrong.)

It has to stop, he thought, pressing the dough of his palms against his eyes. This has to end.

“I’m ready, Professor,” Harry said from the doorway.

“Did you remember your—”
Yes.”

There was a knock on the door, and they both turned to glare in its general direction. “He’s early,” Severus said darkly.

“Er—” The boy stepped in front of him as he made for the entryway, barring his path. “I just wanted to say—thanks. For everything. I know you don’t really like me, but this…wasn’t bad. Not really.”

“Spare me,” Severus said, giving him a withering look. He tried to sidestep him, but Harry danced right back in front of him.

“No, really!” he said, as Arthur knocked again, more insistently this time. “We’re coming!” Potter called, and then turned back round, eerily comfortable in Severus’s home. “Thank you. I, er…had a good time, mostly.”

“Good,” Severus said after an indecisive pause, for lack of anything better to say.

Potter fidgeted with a curl near the top of his head, twisting it into a ringlet round his finger, and then smiled tremulously, like he was fighting back tears. Severus felt himself blanch. “See you in a few days, Professor.”

The next few minutes passed in a whirlwind, leaving him more than a little dazed, and it wasn’t until the door had closed and the house fell truly silent for the first time in a month that Severus came back to himself with a snap. He sat down at the table, staring at the boy’s empty chair. “See you in a few days, Harry,” he said, and then stood back up to begin brewing.

—

It took nearly an hour for Harry to catch a moment alone with Ron and Hermione.

Grimmauld Place was dank and quiet, looming in the sort of darkness that coated everything like a blanket. Candles only served to lengthen the shadows, lamps made the corners of the rooms twitch like arms about to reach out and snag you into an abyss, and the great fire in the kitchen gave the room an oddly wet appearance, like the light was made of oil. And when Harry ascended the stairs behind Mrs. Weasley, he could almost swear the elf heads on the wall were watching. Waiting for him to slip.

It was all very different from Snape’s house, which was all grays and browns, like the dreariness of the town had leached much of the color out of the house and its single occupant. Singular, because Harry was no longer there, and Snape’s sofa would probably go cold without him tonight. His chair at the kitchen table—newly restuffed, after Dumbledore had set the room back to rights—would be empty, cushioned once more.

“Try to keep up, Harry, dear,” Mrs. Weasley whispered, and he realized he’d stopped on a landing.

“Er—sorry,” he said, hurrying to catch up. They climbed another flight of stairs and emerged out onto a floor that looked identical to the last, save that the wallpaper might have been green once. (Or it was just coated in a healthy layer of mold.)

“Here you are. In you go. Supper will be ready in an hour. Remus should be joining us tonight, and no doubt you’ll be seeing Tonks. Harry—” She stopped, eyes tight at the corners like she was
worried, and pressed her lips together. Mrs. Weasley was too pale, hair lighter than it had been a year ago, and she’d lost a noticeable amount of weight. She looked like she’d been crying. “It’s good to see you, dear.”

They parted ways with a hug that lingered, and Harry was left alone to face his friends alone.

He opened the door to a vast amount of bushy brown hair. Alarmed, he lifted his arms and gingerly patted the hair, and Hermione with it. “Harry! Ron, he’s here, Harry’s here! We didn’t hear you arrive! Oh, how are you? We heard you were with Professor Snape, of all people, and—oh, Harry, are you angry with us? I bet you are, I know our letters were useless—but we couldn’t tell you anything, Dumbledore made us swear we wouldn’t, oh, we’ve got so much to tell you, and you’ve got to tell us—Snape—and the—the dementors! When we heard—and the Ministry hearing—it’s just outrageous, I’ve looked it all up, they can’t have expelled you even if they wanted to, there’s a provision in the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Sorcery for the use of magic in life-threatening situations—”

“Let him breathe, Hermione. He already had the hearing, he’s fine,” Ron said with a grin, closing the door with a quiet snap. He was taller than he had been the last time Harry had seen him, gangly and awkward. His jeans were too short. His nose was as long as ever, though, and he was as freckly as he’d been a few months before.

Hermione let go of him, but before she could speak, Hedwig glided over to him and perched herself on his shoulder, talons pricking through the sleeve of his shirt.

“Hedwig,” he exclaimed, more relieved than he’d thought he’d be. She hadn’t returned after sending his last letter, and that had been days ago. Ages ago.

“She’s been in a right state,” said Ron. “Pecked us half to death after the whole dementor thing. Look at this—”

“Oh, yeah,” Harry said as Ron showed him a new scar on his finger. “I…forgot about that. Sorry. I just wanted answers, you know, and…”

“We wanted to give them to you, mate,” Ron said. Hermione nodded, smile fading. “Hermione was going spare, she kept saying you’d do something stupid if you were stuck all on your own without news, but Dumbledore…And then you were stuck with Snape, so it wasn’t like we could tell you anything then. ”

For weeks, Harry had thought he’d be angry at the mere sight of them, but the rage he’d expected wasn’t there. He’d been…and maybe still was…a safety threat. Lupin had said it. Snape had said it. He couldn’t put Ron and Hermione in danger. Harry didn’t want any of them hurt because of him.

“It’s all right,” he said, surprised to find he meant it. Hermione wrung the hem of her shirt, biting her lip, and Ron frowned. “Really. It’s fine. I’m not angry. I was at first—sorry, Ron, I didn’t think she’d peck that hard—but I’m not anymore. Not very much.”

“That’s better,” Ron said, grinning again. “If you’d said you weren’t angry at all, I’d have thought someone was Polyjuicing you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ron,” Hermione said dryly, sitting on one of the beds. “I’m sure Professor Dumbledore checked when he got here.”

“What is this place, anyway?” Harry asked, dragging his trunk over to the bed nearest the door. “Is this that headquarters Snape kept mentioning?”
“Yeah, it’s the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix,” Ron said at once.

“And that is…”


He opened his trunk and pulled out a handful of half-heartedly folded clothes, dumping them onto the floor. “Who’s in it?”

“Quite a few people—”

“—we’ve met about twenty of them, but we think there are more…” Ron trailed off, eyes on the floor, and then offered a weak, “Snape’s in it.”

Harry fought back a grin, ducking over a pile of socks to hide his face from view. “Fine,” he said, unable to disguise a snort. “What do you want to know?”

“Oh, Harry, _everything!_ What was it like? Professor Lupin said you were studying Occlumency, I’ve read about that, you know! How were the lessons? Have you finished your schoolwork?”

“Does he skip the shampoo all year round, or does he save it for Hogwarts?” Ron cut in, and stepped to the side when Hermione aimed a kick at him. “Hermione, I’m only joking,” he snapped, before winking in Harry’s direction.

“My homework is done!” Harry laughed. “Snape made me do it all first thing. And yes, Ron, he washed his hair.”

“That’s revolting,” Ron said, but Hermione’s quick, “I want to look it over before we go back to classes,” overshadowed him.

They began to fall over themselves with a steady flow of questions, until Harry could hardly keep track, let alone get a single word in edgewise.

“Well, he—” he tried, before Hermione shot off another stream of conscious, punctuated by Ron. Each question seemed to circle back to a central _What Was He Like?_ “I didn’t really—well—he wasn’t—”

“ _Hermione._ ” With a heavy sigh, Ron held up his hands until she slowed to a stop. “Let him breathe. He won’t be able to answer you if you keep talking. Right, Harry? Harry?”

He’d been sifting through his trunk to find his homework, but at the sight of a book near the bottom, Harry found himself transfixed. Running his hands over the front and along the title, he opened it, flipping through the pages before stopping at the end. His eyes caught on a small line of print inside the back cover. _Property of Harry James Potter._ He smiled slowly. “I don’t even know where to begin,” he told Ron and Hermione, and held Snow Crash to his chest.

Chapter End Notes

So, this fic is (fucking finally) finished. The reason the last chapter took so long to post was because my laptop suddenly broke. Like, would not turn on without freezing 5-20 times when I tried using it, even for simple things like google. Then, after it froze so
many times, it would blue screen and restart. But the holidays are over, I’m no longer entirely swamped at work outside of processing 300+lbs of cabbage every goddamn day to appease the masses, and I have a new laptop that is much better! The bad news is that I lost around 10k words. This (original) chapter and the first two chapters of the sequel are gone and it sort of killed my will to work on TAB for a while. But I’m back! And I’m here to stay! Dumbledore used the spell from HBP to restore Severus’s kitchen to its rightful glory, so we can continue having weirdly passionate moments in that room because for some reason I love to write them there! So happy new year, everyone, and you’ll be seeing Snape and Harry back at school soon...once I figure out a good title, that is. Thank you for all the love and support. 2018 was a very crazy year for me that changed my life for the better, and I hope 2019 brings even better changes my way. <3

small edit: in case any of you want to follow me on any social media, my instagram is diluvienne, my tumblr is paracosim, and I’m faeryfloss on twitter! Let me know who you are so I can follow back.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!